

A woman with dark hair styled in a bun, wearing a yellow off-the-shoulder Victorian dress with a full skirt and a corset back. She is standing in a grand hall with classical columns and a high ceiling. The lighting is warm and golden.

One London Eve

A VICTORIAN ROMANCE
TRUDY BRASURE

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Dedicated to all those who have fallen in love with Gaskell's beautiful story.

Chapter One

Mr. Thornton watched his London hosts lead their partners to the dance floor. The straight black forms of the stronger sex stood in rigid contrast to the voluminous effusion of ruffles, lace, and ribbons of delicate colors that adorned the shapely figures of the fairer sex. Never were the lines of distinction between the great divide of humanity more apparent than on such occasions when men and women assumed the elegant costumes and postures designated for their particular roles, assigned to them from the aggregate social traditions of their progenitors since the days of their birth.

Crimson drapes covered the windows of the long ballroom, preventing the feebler light of man's making from seeping out into the darkness that covered the city and providing a theatrical backdrop to the movements of all the human players captured within this gilded scene. Mirrored walls reflected glittering chandeliers and gold-embossed panels in the private ballroom of one of London's elite families.

Left in solitude for a moment, Mr. Thornton slid a gloved finger under his stiff collar and tugged at the white cravat binding his throat on this warm June evening. He expelled a silent sigh. It would be a relief to return to the privacy of his hotel room where he could dispense with the obtrusive layers of formal attire.

He felt certain that the cloth orders he had sought to secure were now in hand. The London business owners he had traveled to meet had been easily impressed with Marlborough Mills' excellent reputation for quality and

swiftness of filling orders. He had only to attend one last meeting on the morrow, where he suspected the contract that had been discussed that day in the smoky, dark-paneled rooms of the gentlemen's club would be signed and handed into his personal care. It had been impossible to elude the invitation to this evening's event; such events Mr. Thornton accounted as necessary to endure as part of his obligation to the social tradition his position required.

The Milton manufacturer was thus involved in the speculative calculations of his success when a stout-chested gentleman with a graying mustache and impeccable dress sidled up to him in specter-like silence.

"Pardon me, sir," the officious stranger began with a reserve of caution, noting the startled swivel of the gentleman's head in his direction, "But if I may suggest ... there is a lady without a partner," he relayed, pointing a pertinent gaze to a place some distance beyond them.

Mr. Thornton nodded in polite acquiescence, even as a twinge of dread belied the smile he proffered. "Of course," he returned in an easy manner, although an uncommon sense of embarrassed annoyance rose up at the thought of being directed to attend to social dignities which he had inadvertently neglected.

It was of no consequence, he mused, shrugging off his resistance in order to square himself for the task at hand. He had countless times been obliged to dance with girls who could only by the most generous appraisal be considered comely, he reasoned as he turned his gaze in the direction indicated.

His eyes rested upon the solitary figure of a young lady in a pale gold gown. Standing near a Romanesque column with her back angled toward him, she appeared at first glance lost and forlorn by the humanity swirling around this glorified setting.

Unable to glimpse her face, he examined every detail of her bearing and appearance as he approached undetected. Her dress clung delicately to her shapely form from shoulder to waist and then draped in full resplendency to the floor as current fashion dictated. Yet there was a refined simplicity to her attire. A few well-placed silk rosettes and ribbons adorned her garment with far more effective grace and beauty than the exorbitant layers of flounces and dripping ornamentation that seemed *de rigueur* for feminine presentation at such events and in which his sister, Fanny, exalted.

The skirts, too, of the woman before him were not contrived to the ridiculous circumference within which many of the ladies present navigated. He thought he liked this display of independent taste and smiled inwardly at the thought of his own abhorrence to the weak-mindedness of those who followed the caprice of fads and fancies.

But perhaps she could not afford the latest novelties. He entertained this sudden notion for a fleeting moment, for as he drew closer he observed the unmistakable dignity of her bearing. With her chin held slightly aloft and her bare shoulders squared in serene confidence, she seemed set apart from all she surveyed. There was no restless searching for company or telltale sign of anxiety in fidgeting. Heedless of her abandoned status, she was as still and composed as a statue. Glimpsing only a partial view of her unmoving profile, he had the strong impression that her mind dwelt on scenes beyond the boundaries of this assembly.

All this he gleaned in a matter of seconds, and it changed his demeanor so that, upon reaching her, the conviction of duty that had first impelled him had all but vanished and he felt his approach to be an intrusion upon her exalted private sphere.

“Forgive me...” he heard himself pronounce with a sincerity that he knew he had never expressed before in similar circumstances.

At his utterance, she whirled around.

Arrested by the clear intelligence that emanated from soft blue eyes, he could not speak. Nor was his incapacity alleviated in any regard as his eyes roved over the soft, pink lips that parted in surprise, the gentle curve of chin and nose, and the fine curls of chestnut-colored hair that fell at her temples and caressed the translucent skin of her cheeks. How she could have been left unattended he could not fathom.

“Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?” he spoke at last with a crease of his brow, all at once uncertain of her reply.

“With pleasure, sir,” she replied with practiced civility, deigning him a restrained smile as her eyes flashed to catch the retiring figure whom she suspected had arranged this match.

Mr. Thornton noted her wariness as he took her gloved hand and led her to the dance floor. Black coattails and voluminous shapes of tarlatan and tulle spun in rhythmic mass as couples moved to the opening bars of a slow-paced waltz. The Milton manufacturer silently breathed a word of

thanks for his mother's insistence that he be proficient in all social graces that an English gentleman would possess.

He raised one hand and placed the other at the back of her slender waist. He could not help feeling a hint of satisfaction as she settled into compliant form against him, with her small hand in his and her arm perched gently upon his coat sleeve.

She followed his lead with alacrity and grace, but he felt the stiffened posture of her arms as a signal of her reluctance to have relinquished her preferred solitude to dance with a stranger.

"I believe I intruded upon your quiet reflections. Perhaps you wished to be elsewhere?" he suggested, half in jest.

"No. No, I..." Startled by his frank inquiry, she struggled for a polite response until she gleaned the amusement written upon his face. "Oh, dear... am I so readable?" she replied with a smile of her own as she felt the weight of formality drop from her with relief.

"I believe we are well matched in that regard. I confess that I am more comfortable with my books and papers than at such events," he answered. Dimples appeared in her cheeks at his ready admission, and he thought he had never before seen a face so beautifully illumined.

"I'm also fond of books. They make very serviceable and quiet companions. I'm not at all as fond of the din and distraction of balls as my cousin is," she admitted, conscious of the odd impulse to express herself freely to this stranger.

The curve of his mouth erupted into a wide grin as they spun in synchronized unison amid countless other couples. Margaret liked his smile and the way his eyes shone with earnest zeal. His expression, so unlike the affected mannerisms of most Londoners, bore an honest exuberance which was disarming in its resemblance to the innocent, wholly natural joy of children. She grasped his arm with more relaxed ease.

Mr. Thornton reveled in his fortune at having found such a dancing partner. Far beyond the pale of the common retinue of society-instructed females, this girl seemed to glow with a glory all her own. Self-assured and elegant in posture and manner, she could not be above twenty but manifested inherent maturity beyond her years.

What little they had spoken thus far had been pleasant. With some surprise, he realized that, far from being an arduous trial, conversation with her took no concentrated effort. With each moment he held her in his grasp,

the questions filling his mind mounted. What manner of life did she have? How would her hair shine in the sunlight? What talents did she possess? What type of people did she live with? And who received her affectionate attention?

“You live here...in London?” he asked with little doubt of the answer, although he could not help but feel a pang of pity she should be situated so far from his world.

“Yes...and no. I live here with my aunt and cousin most of the year, but my home is in Hampshire. My father has a country vicarage.”

This knowledge only added to her intriguing charm. He could at once envision her in the perfect tranquility of a pastoral setting, with the beauty of nature surrounding her, accentuating and enlivening that spirit of confident goodness and purity that seemed to animate her. He observed with fresh insight the yellow rosebud nestled in her hair at her temple.

“I am to go home next Thursday,” she continued with the wistful eagerness of a child. “So, you see, I have been a little preoccupied with the thought of it,” she explained with a tinge of guilt at the remembrance of his earlier remark.

“And I imagine there are no grand balls *there* to distract one,” he added, raising a brow in mock accusation.

A soft burst of laughter bubbled up from her throat and caused her lips to part in undisguised gaiety. “No...indeed!”

A stab of potent feeling charged through Mr. Thornton’s body. The sound of her spontaneous joy was clear, sonorous, and vibrant. He thought it was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard and fought the urge to pull her closer and tighten his grasp.

“You’re not from London,” she conjectured, averting her gaze as a warm blush rose to her face under his close scrutiny.

“No, I’m from the North. I’ve come here on business,” he answered in faint amusement that his Darkshire accent should so easily distinguish him from the crowd.

“I’ve not been north. Is there much beauty in the landscapes of your home?” she asked with a casual air, endeavoring to ignore the quickening patter of her heart at the warm clasp of their gloved hands and the forced intimacy of his possessive hold at her waist.

A wry smile twisted his lips. “There are rolling fields and a few streams in the surrounding countryside, which are very pleasant in the spring and

summer. However, I'm afraid I dwell among the structures and scenery of an industrial town, which is not recommended for its beauty."

"Oh," she replied, faintly bewildered at his reply. She could not imagine that anyone would choose to live where there was nothing of nature's wonders to brighten and inspire the spirit.

The lilting music and matching rhythm of their synchronized steps spun a spell of enchanted intimacy as they continued to dance in silence. Both lamented the impending notes of the gentle *rallentando* and reluctantly brought their patterned motions to a halt as the final sustained scrape of the violin's bow signaled the concluding note.

Mr. Thornton bowed to his partner and offered his arm to her with perfect propriety. Distinctly pleased to feel her gentle grasp on his sleeve, he escorted her through the crowd toward the column where he had first found her. The girl at his side proclaimed the sight of her cousin, and he followed her indicated gaze, leading them closer to a fair-haired beauty swathed in an elaborate and delicate gown of white tulle and lace.

Swarmed by a gathering milieu of hopeful suitors, Edith took no notice of her country relation's approach. Upon the estranged couple's arrival at the scene, Margaret's small hand withdrew from her escort's arm. Mr. Thornton felt at once a cold emptiness as their connection was severed.

"I thank you for the privilege of a dance," he uttered with a proper bow, and she inclined her head in acknowledgment with a flustered smile.

He hesitated. A scattering array of half-formed sentences and urgent inquiries hung on his tongue, but he closed his lips firmly, dropped his gaze, and forced himself to turn and leave. His limbs moved with an awkward weight of reluctance as he pressed through the tangled throngs of elegant vanity.

He rejoined the company of his hosts and entered once again into the atmosphere of superficial conversation. He smiled and nodded as others did. To all outward appearances, he remained unchanged. No one engaging him in light banter suspected the current of distraction that swept through his silent thoughts.

Never before had he been roused to pay such attention to a woman. He chided himself for being so swayed by the pull of feminine allure. The novelty of the sensation coursing through him was pleasantly unnerving, confounding him with contradictory pulses of reasoned dismissal of this intrigue and the startlingly potent desire to know with every breath where

she was and to whom she would next give her attention. He was resolved, however, not to fall to impulse. With concentrated effort, he refrained from turning his head to search for a glimpse of her.

For Margaret, the entire atmosphere of the room had changed. A fascinating energy charged the air now that she knew he was present. She paid scant attention to the small crowd attending her cousin while she waited for Edith to notice her. A fluttering in her stomach rose to quicken her heartbeat as she dared to dart her eyes about in search of him.

There he was! Even from afar, he seemed to exude a natural confidence. A flicker of some restless emotion made her eyes gleam as she watched him converse with an attractive woman with apparent pleasure.

“Oh, there you are, Margaret!” Edith declared, brushing past her admirers to lay a gloved hand on Margaret’s arm. “Such a headache as I have, you cannot imagine,” she uttered in whispered tones of self-pitying gravity. “Let us depart at once. Will you call for the coach?”



As the carriage jerked forward, Edith sank back into the velvet cushions with the wearied manner of a monarch. “Ned Harrelson has tested me beyond endurance with his provoking manners and affectation to be my preferred suitor. I shall not want to go to dinner at Helen Gibson’s if he will be lurking about,” she announced with emphatic annoyance.

Margaret smiled vaguely at her cousin’s complaint and turned her face to the window, assured that Edith’s distress would be remarkably alleviated by the time they reached Harley Street. Edith’s continued mutterings faded into a distant drone as Margaret gazed with familiar solitude at the passing scenery of the city.

A full moon painted doors and iron-guarded mansions in shadowed blue light. She pondered the gloom of her own discontent as her eye caught fleeting glints of light from paneled windows where sleeping occupants lay oblivious to the night’s celestial display.

On any other evening, she would have been glad of the opportunity to escape the tedious hours of well-ordered elegance and relegated gaiety. What was it that would have kept her there tonight?

Her thoughts riveted on the answer. She recalled the brilliance of her last dance partner’s smile as she had answered his forthright inquiries. But the

image of him conversing with another with satisfied ease rose to mar the temporal pleasure of her musings. He might dance with scores of others that evening with the same finesse and dignity. How foolish it was to imagine that he had treated her with any special consideration.

She lifted her eyes to the moon, which had doffed its common appearance for one altogether radiant and gloriously transcendent. Its steady mystery recalled her to childhood comforts and the memory of walking in moonlit freedom on the meadows surrounding the vicarage. She smiled in hopeful tranquility as she turned her thoughts to Helstone—to home.



Mr. Thornton tugged off his starched shirt, eager to doff the last remnant of society's restrictive clothing in the humid air of the small room he had rented for his lodgings. Bending to scoop scented basin water in both hands, he lingered in the luxury of bathing his face in the refreshing coolness. Careless of the dripping water that traced paths over the contours of his chest as he stood up, he wiped the excess dampness off his brow and set the towel down.

He snuffed out the light, and turned to the wide bed that filled the simple, uncluttered room. Casting aside the layers of bed coverings, he settled himself upon the cotton sheets and let out his breath in the dim silence.

Lying on his back, with his hands restfully folded across his midriff, he waited with closed eyes for sleep to take him as it usually did within minutes of his lying down for this much-deserved rest.

But rest would not come. The silent stillness exacerbated the restless sense of disappointment he had quietly wrestled with for the past few hours.

Robbed of his peace, he opened his eyes. A faint glow of blue-tinged light illuminated the room. His gaze travelled to the window where brilliant moonlight shone through sheer curtains.

He did not wish to dwell on any chimerical fantasy that would be extinguished by the unrelenting rays of daylight's reality. He had pushed aside the temptation to linger over her image and had persistently quelled the urge to examine the flickering feelings that troubled his breast.

He rose from the bed, swinging his feet to the floor in perturbed response to the moon's persistent beckon, and stepped up to the open window to cast aside the sheer curtains. Resting his hands on the wooden sill, he gazed in

mute wonder at the glory of the unreachable, luminescent sphere high above the sweltering earth.

Transfigured by the iridescent light that bathed his skin in ghostly hues, he felt himself relinquishing his determined self-control. He wondered, with a derisive huff, if perhaps centuries of lore contained some mysterious kernel of truth—that the moon in its full array cast some kind of power over the earthly creatures in its beams.

He thought of her then, allowing his mind to wander the paths he had so stringently tried to avoid. He had proudly controlled himself for a time, dancing dutifully with a few more of the London ladies presented to him. But when he had finally allowed himself to scan the ballroom for the vision he kept at bay, she had disappeared.

A current of warm air stirred the translucent curtains for a moment before its energy was absorbed in the torpid atmosphere of the room. A heavy pulse of dread sank his heart as he remembered the quickening sense of desperation that had roused him to search even the outer halls of the venue, to no avail. She had vanished.

Why had he cared to find her? Merely that all that seemed to him lovely, noble, and worthy of worship had come together in female form. And he had held it, dancing in his grasp, for a moment.

A faint smile crept over his face as he recalled how her laughing gaze had met his at his jest. The sound of her voice still echoed in his mind. She had seemed perfectly at ease in his company.

But his smile swiftly faded as logic rose to deprecate his momentary indulgence. Surely, it was folly to think that she felt any similar stirrings. Many men would seek and court a girl of that beauty and stature. She had probably danced and would dance with countless others.

Her place was among more refined and gentle circles of London and Hampshire, a league apart from the strife and toil of his life in Milton. It was very likely that he would never see her again. And it was best if he let this brief fascination rest, to fade as naturally as the full moon. This conclusion he felt with a meager measure of conviction, for he was not one given to romantic dreaming.

However, he frowned as an unhealed hollowness tugged at something deep within. Reason could not erase the intrigue that had been born, nor quiet the dissatisfaction that had unsettled him.

The sound of voices scattered across the still, oppressive air from the windows across from the hotel. Indistinct, but varied in tone and tenor, this intrusion of sound broke the spell of reverie.

Mr. Thornton drew a deep breath and expelled it in a heavy sigh. Withdrawing from the window, he returned to his bed, resigned to a sleepless night.

Chapter Two

Heavy brocade draperies and a thick Persian carpet of rich-toned colors created a silent space in the back drawing room of Edith's London home. No evidence of any other wakeful occupant in the Harley Street house could be heard as Margaret sat at a mahogany secretary. It had become a favorite morning site for quiet reflection. Here, the first beams of the sun angled in through the scrubbed panes of glass to illuminate the objects confined within four walls. Sunlight spilled across the pages of the book laid open before her. Outside, a sparrow chirped greetings to its companions.

"There you are," Edith announced as she swept through paneled doors to invade the sacred stillness.

Margaret placed a leather marker in the crevice between pages of her reading and lifted her face to regard her cousin. "Good morning, Edith," she replied brightly, although she knew well that her time for peaceful solitude was now at an end.

"Do you wish me to decline our engagement to dine at Helen's tomorrow evening?" Margaret inquired, pulling out the tray of stationery used to attend to the constant flurry of her cousin's social correspondence.

"Whatever for?" Edith's face was a picture of innocent puzzlement.

Margaret smiled inwardly to see how easily the despair of the previous evening was utterly forgotten. "I thought you wished to avoid the company of a certain gentleman," she reminded her companion gently, as she pushed the retrieved tray back in its place.

“What? Oh, no. Ned Harrelson is an annoyance to be certain, but it doesn’t signify that I shall ruin my own plans for entertainment. I was a little tired last evening. There was no one of particular interest in attendance. Only some balls are a delight, and others are more tedious. It cannot be helped, I suppose...oh!” she exhaled this last sound as her countenance revealed her sudden consternation at having caught her words working contrary to her forthcoming purpose.

“The next dance will be far more entertaining, I expect,” she added quickly with a winsome smile. “Margaret, are you certain you will not stay for the whole of our very first season? You could delay your return home. There are only a few gala events remaining for us to attend before everyone abandons the city.”

Although Margaret was commonly swayed to submit to her cousin’s childish imploring, this time the Helstone-born girl held firmly to her own will. “The arrangements have all been made, and I will not have them changed. I believe you know how much I relish the summer at home.”

“But there is no opportunity of meeting gentlemen in such a remote place. You need but stay a trifle longer and then you could come away to the seaside with us. The air will be refreshing there, perhaps even more so than in your country hamlet. And one meets so many people on such a sojourn.”

Margaret smiled at her cousin’s hints. Edith could not comprehend Margaret’s negligence in attracting a husband, nor would she ever understand the grand freedom that could be gained in roaming the forest alone and surveying the open heather with unscheduled abandon.

“There will be time enough to meet new people. I shall be away for merely two months. Besides, you know how it was that my parents were first introduced to each other. The most fortuitous circumstances are often not the device of human planning,” the country girl of eighteen offered with a sagacious air.

Edith sighed in reluctant acquiescence. “You must do as you see fit. But perhaps next summer you can accompany us.” Margaret only blinked in reply, as she maintained her pleasant composure in the face of her cousin’s pleading.

“Now I have quite forgotten...there was another reason I sought you,” Edith muttered aloud. “Oh, yes. Will you dash a letter to Verity Chattleworth for me? Tell her I will ride with her on Tuesday. I would write it myself, but I must go show Newton which gown to prepare for

tomorrow's dinner. And I must dress before Laura comes to call." Her request made known, she exited the room as swiftly as she had entered it.

Margaret bore no ill regard toward her cousin's hasty manners but was rather bemused by them. Pulling out the japan tray of fine paper, she prepared the desktop for writing the requested social missive. The quill in her hand remained still for a moment, however, as she considered the conversation that had just ensued.

There was no hesitation on her part about her choice to go home to Helstone for the summer. Nothing could prevail upon her to give up her one chance of living the idyl of beauty and freedom for a season. The longing to roam the shaded forest paths and pass through sunny, open fields of endless green called to the inmost chambers of her soul with a power she could scarcely explain to a city-dweller.

She would not miss attending any forthcoming balls—except for the possibility of encountering once more the tall, sympathetic man from the North.

The flitting image of him distracted her train of thought as she remembered the pleasing elements of the previous evening's last dance.

There was no one of particular interest in attendance. A secretive smile slowly curved on Margaret's lips as she recalled Edith's casual summary. Her cousin's commendations and attention to personages were often as whimsical as her loyalty to a new dress. Wealth, display, social charm, and privilege seemed the high marks of her cousin's standard. She could hardly be expected to note the stranger of no consequence who had garnered Margaret's attention.

It was a singular happenstance to have taken such a curious interest in someone whom she would likely never meet again. Margaret relished the lingering pleasant remembrance of the chance exchange but knew it would serve no purpose to dwell upon it for any length of time.

She shook her head at the uselessness of all Edith's social contrivances. Margaret considered herself a practical girl, and held no grand illusions concerning the ways in which men and women sought and selected their life-match. However much Edith might wrap herself in the tangled web of eligibility and aggrandized hopes for finding a perfect husband, Margaret brushed aside such belabored designs and set her faith on God's ways.

Her aunt's marriage to the aging but wealthy General Shaw had been carefully arranged and could not be counted in any way an affair of the

heart, but it had bestowed upon her aunt the life of luxury and ease she and her daughter now took for granted.

Margaret much preferred to trust Providence to secure circumstances leading to the sacred bond of marriage. As she turned her gaze to a twittering pair of wrens perched outside her window, she thought of her parents' unlikely match.

As the young new Helstone vicar, her father had traveled north to Rutlandshire to bolster a fellow Oxford scholar in his new capacity as curate of Oakham. Seldom away from his beloved country parish before or since, her father had taken this opportunity to aid a friend and see more of the English countryside.

Returning home on foot from a spring picnic, her mother had stopped to rest upon a low stone wall while the remainder of her company had flocked to admire a blossoming garden nearby. Set apart from the rest and looking the very picture of delicate feminine beauty—so her father had always said—the young Maria Beresford had attracted the attention of the handsome Rev. Hale, who had been enjoying a solitary walk through the verdant grounds near the Oakham church.

Thinking her quite abandoned, her father had approached the lone girl to inquire if she was well, and offered her water from his canteen upon hearing her reply that she was weary.

It was the kindness in his eyes and the warmth of his honest smile, her mother had told her, that had won the belle of Rutlandshire's affection from the start. That warm June afternoon, the pair had fallen into pleasant conversation for a short time until Miss Beresford was reclaimed by her parting company. Rev. Hale had found himself invited to dinner at Sir John Beresford's estate before the week had passed, and the destiny of the couple had been thereby sealed.

The memory of a particular smile stole again into Margaret's mind with a glowing trace of renewed pleasure. This morning, she felt she could better comprehend her mother's attraction to such a simple gesture. Surely it is possible, Margaret believed, to discern the essence of a person's character in a matter of moments from the internal light (or darkness) emanating from his or her nature.

She knew it must have been so in her parents' case, although she was certain no further parallels could be drawn between her mother's history and the incidental encounter she had experienced at last night's ball. The

brief exchange with the kind gentleman from the North merely proved to her that hearts and minds of a similar bend would naturally illuminate with revitalizing and comforting joy upon recognizing a fellow soul among the countless earthly wanderers.

The cherished story of how her own parents met reinvigorated her belief that love found its own way to proper ends, and this naturally instilled a lingering, childlike faith for her own future.

The sunlight that now bathed the room further encouraged her cheerful and calm mood. She set her quill to paper to begin her task, with the glad recognition that her days in the city were numbered.



The hum of machinery could be heard through the open windows of the drawing room overlooking Milton's largest cotton mill. Hannah Thornton plied her nimble fingers to her embroidery as she waited for her son's expected return from London. The rhythmic drone of the looms that supported her present lofty position of stature and comfort was a melodious refrain to her son's character and power. The consistent bursts of sound from work being accomplished across the yard only served to swell her heart with a fierce pride in remembrance of all the years of hardship and unrelenting toil and discipline John had endured to earn his success.

She glanced across the room to where her well-attired daughter picked at her own sewing with less finesse and devotion to detail. No such similar strains of thinking were employing Fanny's mind.

"This summer heat is so detestable when we are forced to open our windows and listen to such noise all the day long," Fanny wailed. "I don't understand why we could not find a more suitable house—far from this dirty and noisy mill."

Mrs. Thornton opened her mouth to make some kind of reply, but stopped as her ears caught the first familiar sound of footsteps climbing the stairs. Her face softened, and her eyes lit with proud affection as her son walked through the doorway.

"You're home early," she remarked, lifting her face to better receive his welcoming kiss.

"My business was conducted swiftly enough," he answered as he took a comfortable seat.

“You obtained a contract from Millard’s?” she asked but saw at once the answer in his expression. “The terms are agreeable?”

“Very agreeable. The mill will run at full capacity for many months. I find it well worth the trouble of my time to engage with these men of business myself instead of hiring an agent. Even if it is at some inconvenience to my regular schedule.” He paused before continuing.

“I must thank you, Mother, for ensuring that my traveling wardrobe included my coattails. I was compelled to attend a ball last evening, which I believe helped secure the contract I desired.”

“Such a hardship, to be certain, to be forced to attend a London ball,” Fanny remarked, mocking his choice of words. “Was there anyone of significance in attendance?” she asked, looking to her brother eagerly for a morsel of social consequence from the center of the English universe.

“I believe you know I am not predisposed to take notice of such things, Fanny,” he answered drily.

“I’m glad to see you acknowledge the merit in learning the social graces that will uphold your position in society. Your lessons in dancing were not wasted, then,” his mother remarked.

Fanny let out a huff of incredulity. “He can’t even tell us who was there. I’d say his dancing lessons were of no use at all! Why, he probably only danced with the wives of his boring business contacts and a few desperately plain merchant’s daughters.”

Mr. Thornton cast an irritated glance toward his sister. “Not all I danced with were of such kind. There was a girl...” he answered somewhat absently as the whole tenor of his countenance seemed to shift into light.

Hannah Thornton’s gaze sharpened upon her son at his reply.

“Who is she? A duchess, or perhaps a marchioness?” Fanny asked, her expression alight with attentive curiosity.

“No, the girl I speak of is a vicar’s daughter from Hampshire,” he answered plainly, eager now to end the conversation.

Fanny rolled her eyes. “I do not see why we should not all go on your visits to London. The opportunities and privileges of such a stay are utterly wasted on you!” Fanny exclaimed with a churlish pout as she dismissed her brother and took up her sewing with an exaggerated flourish.

“What of this girl?” Hannah pressed after a moment of silence, careful to appear somewhat indifferent to his answer as she bent her head to resume her own needlework.

“There is nothing to relate, I suppose. Only that I thought her...unlike the rest,” he said, searching for a sufficient explanation of his thoughts even as he endeavored to brush off any further contemplation of her image.

“In any regard, I’m glad to be back home,” he said, standing near his mother and placing his hand on the back of her chair.

A slender hand, still strong although showing the sinewy lines of years of trial, reached up to clasp his own. The pair exchanged a look of mutual affection.

“And now, if you will excuse me, I have much to attend to,” he announced before heading toward the mill.

The breadth of details entailed in preparing for the newly obtained order soon consumed Mr. Thornton’s attention, sweeping away the lingering pangs of unsettled, fresh remembrances that had attempted to haunt him on the train.

He soon fell into the worn patterns of his life with a certain relief at having banished the uncomfortable thoughts that had pressed him so strongly in London. The memory of the girl in gold seldom came to mind during the course of his daily routine. However, it was with some discomfiture that Mr. Thornton recognized that certain sights or sounds—the glow of yellow flowers in a vase or on a hillside, a feminine laugh, the mystical light of a full moon—brought to mind at unexpected moments all the loveliness and enchanting allure of the woman he had once held in his grasp.

Although he attempted to disregard it, it was with a shadow of unease that he became aware that he moved in social circles with a new consciousness of women. Where before he would have paid no regard to allusions and pregnant glances made by the gentler sex toward his person, Mr. Thornton was chagrined to find himself conscious of the manner in which eligible Milton maidens batted their eyelashes and simpered sweetly in his presence. None could compare to the idol of soulful beauty and honest, innocent comportment that he had found in the vicar’s daughter from Hampshire. And he grew even more averse to the occasions when society demanded polite conversation between gentlemen and ladies.

These moments had weighed little in Mr. Thornton’s consideration for the better part of his existence, and he would not be distracted now. He threw his concentration with vigor upon the operations and schedules of his

thriving mill through the long days of the summer into the dark evenings of winter.

Chapter Three

Candles burned mid-day to provide cheering light that the sun failed to supply on a dismal November day in London. Beyond the window panes in the Harley Street house, all was gray and indistinct as rain attempted to wash away mankind's accumulated grime and soot from the layered bricks and stones of the city landscape.

The steady sound of pelting rain outside gave the dry, opulent drawing room a peaceful feeling. Margaret loved the rain. No respecter of persons, it fell on the meek and the mighty alike.

The gliding strains of piano music that filled the atmosphere with calm exuberance ceased abruptly. Margaret raised her gaze from the pages of the book in her hand as Edith swiftly rose from the piano and crossed to the nearest window.

"This dreadful rain! I shan't be able to wear my new dress," she muttered at the paned glass.

"Perhaps it will clear up in time," Margaret offered, with little conviction.

"I won't have my violet gown spattered with mud. And if I cannot wear that, then I won't go at all!" Edith declared, folding her arms across her chest in defiance of the rain's disregard for her plans.

"You could wear your best blue gown, the brocaded silk with gold trim. Save your new gown for another occasion," Margaret proposed, knowing her cousin only needed a little coddling to soothe her agitation. An appeal to the wide variety of beautiful garments from which she could choose

often steered her thoughts more happily down endless paths of vain adornment.

“Hmm,” was all she received in reply, a sound edged with faltering resistance.

Edith continued to threaten the abandonment of her scheduled soirée, but when the time for the dinner approached, she could not deny the stronger impulse to be seen and admired. She was determined to wear her violet dress; the weather would not ruin her pleasure in displaying the glory of her beautifully crafted new gown. Margaret watched the footman and houseboy as they contrived—in the pelting rain—to lay a plank over the puddles that covered the brick pathway to the carriage. Careful maneuvers with several umbrellas and a handful of attending servants kept Edith’s fetching attire from any offending dampness. Aunt Shaw accompanied her with only one umbrella to protect her broad skirts before she climbed into the dry coach.

Margaret let out a contented sigh as the carriage trundled away and was swallowed by the darkness beyond the gas-lit street lamp. She was glad that she had not been invited to the dinner party. She would enjoy taking her meal on a tray in her room much more than partaking of lavish courses and tedious conversation amidst a select gathering of men and women whose only care centered upon their own amusement. It would be well enough to join the party later, when there was more freedom to move around and join the various circles of conversation and activity.

At nine o’clock, Margaret climbed into the carriage wearing a deep burgundy dress trimmed with velvet ribbons and cream lace. Only a few drops of rain fell from the sky, the clouds having expended their efforts in their daylong tirade.

Margaret wished the carriage windows were open. Fresh bursts of wind blew the branches of barren trees, and the smell of damp earth and stone filled the chilly night air. She thought of how warm and comfortable it would be at home in Helstone on such a night, with a glowing hearth in the drawing room; her father would be reading a book in his favorite chair, and her mother sewing while the wind buffeted the windows outside. All would be serene, and picturesque in the morning light.

Lost in her reverie of home, she was unprepared for the gentle halting of the horses at the gate of a tall brick mansion. She alighted with the aid of the ready footman, and he escorted her to the door, casting his wide

umbrella over her. Hastening to put on her gloves, one fell from her beaded reticule onto the wet cobblestones below.

She stopped, but had not even time to declare her loss when a gentleman stooped to retrieve the fallen article. Her heartbeat quickened as she thought he might be the northern stranger.

The man stood, and she saw at once that he was not.

“Allow me,” a well-dressed man said, offering her the glove in a graceful gesture.

This gallant action took Margaret aback. She accorded her thanks with a nod, her lips still parted in surprise. The kind smile that met her gaze dislodged the appropriate words from her throat. “Thank you,” she whispered, holding the dampened glove in her outstretched hand.

“It was my pleasure,” came the easy reply, and, with a faint bow of his head, he turned to stride up the dark walkway to the heavy doors of the house.

The faint sound of music and the murmur of voices wafted through the air as the doors opened to receive him. As Margaret moved to follow in his footsteps, she took a long breath of the cool air. Tall windows cast light on the sculpted shrubs outside, which glittered with raindrops. She lingered a moment in the quiet semi-darkness before the doors burst open again and she was ushered into the midst of the gay commotion of society, ablaze with light and color.

Margaret had long since stopped searching crowded halls and anterooms for the figure she knew lived far from London. The hopeful sense, however illogical, that had previously made her scan every social venue had faded over the passing months. She looked now instead for the familiar faces of her family, and swiftly found the full figure of her Aunt Shaw, who appeared more engrossed in the gossip of the plumed and ruffled ladies surrounding her than in the game of cards set out on the table before them.

Following the strains of a delicately played piano piece, Margaret wandered into the next room. There was Edith at the center of an admiring contingent as her fingers worked their well-trained magic over the ivory keyboard. She was a perfect picture of beauty and grace and had captured the particular attention of a gentleman who stood near her. Margaret studied with curious interest how a tall, earnest man in crimson regimental attire gazed at her cousin with mesmerized intensity.

When the last measure was played, Edith looked to him first for his approval and was rewarded with words that made her dip her head and smile. A rare blush colored her cheeks. She alighted brightly, however, when she saw Margaret and swept past the small gathering to greet her cousin, the young man in uniform close behind.

“Margaret! I would like to introduce you to Captain Lennox, who has just recently returned from Crimea, or some such place,” she added with a flustered look to the towering gentleman by her side. “This is Margaret Hale, the cousin of whom I have spoken,” she finished, smiling with satisfaction at this meeting.

Both parties bowed and offered their proper greetings. Margaret was introduced to a few others who surrounded their group, and joined in the polite inquiries and trivial conversations required in such circumstances. The chatter of the small gathering continued for several minutes until Capt. Lennox interrupted it with an enthusiastic exclamation. “Henry!” he called out with a broad smile, looking beyond the closed circle.

Margaret turned to see who it was that deserved such an earnest welcome. Her eyes caught those of the gentleman approaching, and she recognized at once the man who had retrieved her fallen glove.

“Allow me to introduce you to my brother, Henry Lennox. Henry, this is Edith Shaw and her cousin, Margaret Hale,” Capt. Lennox announced with constrained eagerness.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” the newcomer replied, bowing to both ladies.

Margaret smiled at the sparkle in his eyes, which acknowledged the humor of their previous encounter.

“Henry has come to London to study and practice law,” Capt. Lennox continued. “He is perfectly satisfied to surround himself with books and to be kept within the confines of an office.”

“Your calling is to serve in body, while I do so in mind,” Henry gently retorted.

“Indeed,” Margaret agreed, “One of you has chosen to defend and expand the empire in Her Majesty’s army. The other has dedicated himself to upholding and defining the great law of this land. Both are important in strengthening the glory of England under God’s rule.”

“Indeed, they are,” Henry answered, studying her with increasing interest. “And may I ask what your father does...for the glory of England?” he

added with smiling emphasis on her own vaulted words.

A warm smile spread over Margaret's face, in part for the deep satisfaction she always felt at the mention of her father as well as for the friendly challenge to answer a quick-witted inquiry in kind. "My father surpasses you both in glory and honor, I'm afraid. For he serves God and the Church. And there can be no higher calling than that."

"I am sufficiently abased," Henry answered with a sardonic lift of an eyebrow. "I hope you will allow me to meet your distinguished parent."

"He is not here. Uncle's parish is in the Hampshire countryside," Edith interjected. "Margaret cannot wait to go home every summer. I'm half persuaded that she prefers her quiet hamlet to our dear city."

Henry saw the confirmation of this conjecture in Margaret's downcast gaze and pressed lips. "I'm sure it must be very beautiful there," he suggested. "And much more peaceful."

His reply was soundly rewarded with a gaze of appreciation from Margaret's eyes.

"It is," she answered, with the calm assurance of one who knew both worlds.



"It was a perfectly lovely evening, despite the weather," Edith declared much later, as the carriage drove through the darkened streets toward home. "As I've always said, so much depends upon the company. There were such interesting people there tonight."

That Edith had almost denied herself the occasion to meet the handsome Captain Lennox was not lost upon Margaret, who could not refrain from smiling to herself at the remembrance of her cousin's former display of childish petulance at the uncompromising rain.

Whether this new acquaintance would capture Edith's attention for longer than a few weeks or months, Margaret was not altogether certain. She studied her cousin's face. Even in the shadowy darkness, a light gleamed in her expression. Her eyes had a new depth of vibrancy, and a smile lingered upon her lips. Perhaps this acquaintance was something different from the rest.

Chapter Four

March in Milton-Northern can drain the spirits of the hardiest inhabitants to the dregs. Winter clings to the landscape with a tenacious jealousy as springtide's gentle rebirth slowly wends its way up from southern shores. Here, where men and women proudly profess an ancestry forged in these granite hills, mortals are forced to endure the caprice of the gods who seem to cast the dice to determine the weather from day to day, as one warming afternoon raises the hope for winter's final banishment, only to be dashed when frigid winds return to mock such hopes for spring's reprieve.

Prepared for the dark days of bitter weather that cause human creatures to huddle near glowing hearths, the northern breed waits for the change of seasons with wise patience that eludes those born in more temperate climes. But even the hardest endurance wanes as the weeks pass and the merciless cold, gray clouds make people yearn for the sun's rays.

Work at Marlborough Mills continued through the varying onslaught of winter's barrage of snow, sleet, and bitter wind. Spinners, carders, and weavers from rougher corners of the town rose well before dawn to put on their thickest woolen coats and shawls and left their cold, gaunt homes to traverse the streets and passageways covered with snow or frozen mud. Shivered greetings were brief as fellow workers converged at the shelter of the giant factory, where blazing furnace fires kept cotton threads supple and human bodies warm. The whirl and clank of machinery went on apace as the dim morning sky brightened and the toilers within were glad of the warmth, camaraderie, and wages.

On one such gloomy afternoon, Mr. Thornton scribbled his signature on the last page of a long document and set his quill in its holder. He turned his gaze from the papers on his desk to the mill yard outside his window, where a few flakes of snow fell lazily from the heights of mottled gray that covered the sky. He watched as a solitary snowflake swirled and danced as it passed the pane before him, an innocent harbinger of winter's stubborn tenacity.

A shout, the crack of a whip, and the sound of splintering wood broke his momentary reverie. He looked just in time to see the corner of a heavily loaded cart collapse to the ground, toppling a mountain of cotton bales onto two waiting workers. He bolted for the nearest door, weaving past the obstacles in his path with determination as others rushed to the windows at the sound of the chaos outdoors.

He ran, taking care not to slip or stumble over ice-encrusted mud tracks that scored the yard's terrain. "Help them!" he barked to one who stood gaping in shock.

Those closest at hand had already heaved bales off one hapless worker who had been caught under the falling load. But there was yet another who still needed aid.

Shouts and grunts filled the air as the Master joined the group of men ferociously hauling bales away to find the trapped victim. Mr. Thornton's bellowed directives punctuated the frenzied scene, swiftly turning anarchy into organized motion. Seconds later, they uncovered a gray lifeless form.

Lying on his side, unconscious, the young man looked as pale and still as death.

"It's Jem Daugherty!" one cried out.

"Call a doctor!" Mr. Thornton instructed one of the standing onlookers as he himself bent over the unmoving worker.

"His wife, Jenny, is a spinner," a fellow hand blurted out in fear.

"Fetch her," the Master allowed, uncertain how gravely injured the laborer was. With trepidation, he reached out to check for a pulse at the victim's neck and let out a breath of relief as he felt the rhythm of life coursing within.

A few men gently maneuvered the hurt man onto his back while others ran for blankets and a cot as their master ordered.

Mr. Thornton studied the condition of the man who lay at his side. A small trickle of blood streaked down from tousled brown hair to the high

cheekbone of a thin face. He could not be above five and twenty, Mr. Thornton mused, as he noted the smooth youthfulness of the skin about the closed eyes. A tiny crystal of snow landed on the still face, melting instantly. Other drifting snowflakes lazily stuck to the threadbare woolen coat, heedless of any human drama—claiming all objects as nature's canvas.

The boyish innocence of the face struck Mr. Thornton, and he wondered, for a moment, how much harshness this young life had endured. With a feeling of sympathy and some bitter pride, he recalled the hardships he himself had faced at a young age.

A sudden rush of pounding footsteps broke his thoughtful trance. He looked up to see the frantic approach of a figure who slipped and clambered over frozen ground, holding her skirts out of the way of her fast-moving clogs while her informants trailed behind her perilous clip.

"Jem!" Her panicked cry cut through the solemn yard, halting the men who were now leading the horses away from the broken wreckage.

Mr. Thornton stood up from his crouched vigil, mesmerized by the sight of the approaching girl. No shawl protected her from the bitter cold. Cotton lint clung to her drab calico dress. Underneath the head cloth that covered her hair, her face was contorted with terror. Fear flashed in her eyes as her glance scarcely acknowledged the Master and fastened instead on the fallen figure on the ground.

"He's alive," Mr. Thornton declared helplessly, stepping away as she rushed forward to take her place at her husband's side. She dropped to her knees and took the beloved face into her hands, calling his name over and over, entreating him to wake. Then, continuing to caress his face with one hand, she moved the other to cradle her swollen belly.

A flush rose to the master's face as he recognized she was with child, and he turned from intruding upon such a tender scene between the young lovers.

"Jem! Oh, Jem!"

A cry of joy from the girl made the Master turn again. He let out his breath in relief to see the fallen man's eyes flutter open and his hands stir. The bent-over figure covered her husband's face with fervent kisses.

"Jenny," the injured man acknowledged in a feeble voice. He winced in pain as he raised a hand to touch her.

For this sign of his devotion, the adoring wife planted a fervent kiss on his lips, as heedless of any observer as if they two alone existed in all the world.

Mr. Thornton looked away, feeling a faint creep of embarrassment stain his cheeks at the thought of the intimate nature of their relationship. He murmured a word of gratitude to see the swift approach of the doctor and Williams, the overseer.

He gave orders to be informed of the doctor's report and retraced his steps back to the mill. Only now did he feel the biting air, which chilled his bare forearms and whipped through the thin cotton of his billowing white sleeves.

He attempted to resume his day and gave little thought to the injured man until Williams entered the master's office to report that Daugherty had a bruised rib and possible concussion and that the doctor had prescribed at least two weeks of rest and a careful watch over his head injury for the next few days.

Alone again in his private space, Mr. Thornton looked out at the scene of the mishap where the desperate girl and her young husband had been. Before he left for home, he gave instructions to his clerk that Jem Daugherty be paid two weeks' wages while he recovered from his injuries and his wife be given two days' pay to tend to him. If chance had sovereignty to deal a blow on the hapless, then he would counter it with a stroke of reasoned mercy. Nobody would deny his own authority to do as he saw fit under any circumstance.



"It's so dim and cold in here! Couldn't we light a few more candles and put on more coal?" Fanny shivered in her seat to show her discomfort as a servant placed a covered dish of potatoes and stewed lamb on the immaculately set table that evening.

"You might see fit to wear your woollens or a warm shawl at present until the weather turns. We must economize during the long winter months, just as we always have," her mother returned.

"I don't see why we can't make ourselves more comfortable when we're rich enough to do so! The Hampers certainly do. Henrietta's drawing room is equal to ours, and yet it is always warm there when I go to call."

“And so we, too, always accommodate our guests by laying more coal on the fire, Fanny,” her mother calmly insisted.

More annoyed by her mother’s placid tone than the logical rebuff, Fanny huffed in response. “Well, I don’t want to host my friends here. There’s always so much noise outside that I’m embarrassed to have them know what I must endure daily. Why today there arose such shrieks from the yard that I lost all concentration on my piano piece!”

“I’m sorry if you were inconvenienced, but a half ton of cotton overturned into the yard and a man was badly hurt today,” her brother retorted with cool sarcasm as he took up his fork.

“How badly hurt?” his mother asked, knowing her son was proud that accidents seldom occurred at his mill.

“The doctor believes he will recover well. But he will not be able to work for several weeks.”

“There are plenty enough to take his place,” Mrs. Thornton casually reasoned.

“But his position, or a better, I will have for him when he is recovered. It was no fault of his that he was temporarily put out. His wife is expecting a child—“

“These people and their misfortunes. It is all such dreary talk,” Fanny declared peevishly.

“If the subject is so disagreeable to you, Fan, I will not discuss it further,” her brother returned in clipped tones. “However, I hoped you would appreciate that the mill is the means of our good fortune and that I have little else to occupy my thoughts.”

“I am well aware of it! But I don’t see why we must live so very close to all of it. When I marry, you can be certain my house will not be so close to any factory,” Fanny announced with an upward jerk of her chin.

Fanny’s behavior vexed Mr. Thornton’s peace of mind the rest of the evening. Her contemptuous dismissal of the people who worked in his mill touched a vein of sympathy he had long practiced burying under the constant press of duty. If her heart was hardening, his was showing signs of thawing from an unnatural hibernation. But he did not recognize this tug at his conscience for its deeper significance. He thought himself mildly perturbed by the unfortunate turn of events, which had broken the day’s productive routine.

When silence at last engulfed the house that evening, Mr. Thornton stood alone in his bedchamber. The feeble light of a single candle lit only a portion of the wide bed behind him. Darkness crept into the corners of the expansive room, where all the outlines of his life lay in patient order for his use.

He undressed with the swift efficiency of years of living in stark routine, exposing his skin for only a brief moment to the chilled air of the dark, unheated room. Snuffing the candle out, he climbed into bed and pulled the thick counterpane of patterned gold brocade over the cotton and woolen layers that would keep him warm through the night. He closed his eyes as soon as his head settled on his pillow. A gust of wind whistled outside over the barren mill yard, reminding him to be grateful for his present comfort and safety.

Through his work as a magistrate, he had seen the wide range of human habitats in Milton. He knew that some families huddled together in straw beds through bitter nights like this.

He wondered how Jem Daugherty was faring this evening and if his home were warm enough for his comfort. He had no doubt his wife was tending to his every need with alacrity.

The stillness of the hour stirred deeper channels of his mind, and the vivid image that he had resolutely pushed away for hours swept into the forefront of his wandering thoughts. He let himself remember how fervently the pregnant girl had pressed her mouth to her waking husband. Never before had he witnessed such a kiss between a man and a woman. The vision of it had been spellbinding. There was a raw power—a fierce devotion and tenderness in the girl's affection for her husband.

The married pair would even now be sweetly huddled together in a shared bed. He was almost envious of the injured laborer. All the man's sufferings—now and evermore—would be assuaged by gentle caresses and the comforting, intimate touch of a lover's care.

What would it feel like to be tended to in such a manner? The vision of the girl from Hampshire slipped naturally into his mind. And even as reason cautioned against the temptation, the thought of her—lying next to him—rushed into his imagination with compelling force.

He struggled to cast off the pleasant imagery now sweeping through his thoughts. His heart beat fervently, alarmed and tantalized by the powerful feelings the memory of her evoked in him.

What was it about the girl from the London ball that haunted him even now? He had never given much thought to any woman before. He had spent many years disdaining every luxury or pleasure that other men pursued, pressing himself to the work of building a secure future for his family. It had not occurred to him to take a wife, for it seemed to him only another burden of responsibility.

But now he grasped something of the advantages marriage might bring. It was a revelation to him. Heretofore, he had thought of marriage as little more than a social obligation, an inconvenience for which he had no time. He had not considered that it could be a bonding of souls—a soothing balm of affection, a passionate caring for another, a shared life between two similar persons that would chase away the gloom of this harsh world.

In the solitude of his bedchamber, the pleasant image of one particular woman tantalized his drifting thoughts. And for the first time in his thirty-odd years, Mr. Thornton considered what his life might be like to have a wife.

Chapter Five

The day of Edith's wedding had finally arrived. Margaret sat at the vanity table in her London room, reflecting on the time she had spent in this house. For eight years she had lived with her cousin. They had grown up together almost as sisters, and now this chapter of their lives was at an end. She would miss her dear cousin, and all her light-hearted ways. But Margaret was also eager to return to her childhood home, where she had spent joyously free summers.

She stared at herself in the mirror with a measure of bemused approval, happy her present duties required only her concentrated stillness after the many weeks of busy preparations for this day. She smiled at the tiny blossoms nestled in her hair as the last curl was made and tucked into her elaborate coiffure by the attending lady's maid.

"There," announced the woman in the crisp black and white attire of her station.

Margaret rose from her seat to cast her eyes over the full splendor of her appearance, the rustling of her voluminous gown an auspicious sound after so long a time in silent contemplation.

"Pardon, Miss," the call intruded into the room as one of the young daily servants appeared at the doorway. "But Mr. Henry Lennox has called for Miss Margaret."

Margaret made her way down the staircase with concerned curiosity. "Is everything well? I thought you should be at the church by now," she asked

as soon as she saw Mr. Lennox, who stood below in the grand hall in an elegant morning coat.

“I’m on my way there right now. All is well. I’m sorry to give you any alarm.” Henry watched her continued descent with an appreciative eye. Her natural beauty and gracefulness were only enhanced by the grandeur of her embellished dress and elaborately styled hair. He was certain she would look well in whatever she wore.

“I was sent to ensure all is well here at Harley Street,” he explained as she arrived in front of him. “My brother insisted I come here first. He is not at all calm this morning, as you may gather,” he added with a grin, a glimmer of humor in his eyes.

Margaret smiled in return. “I suppose it is only to be expected. Edith has also been in quite a flurry this morning. So many preparations have gone into this day!” she exclaimed softly with a wearied shake of her head. “I wonder if it is worth all the worry. I believe I should like nothing more than to have a simple wedding, with only a few dear people in attendance. But you will think I am just feeling contrary after all the trouble I have been put to these past weeks.”

“No...no,” he stammered, captivated by the inquiring look in her eyes and pleasantly startled by her confiding such a wish with him. “A simpler affair accords with your character,” he returned, his voice warm with admiration. He felt the veil of friendship slipping from his practiced conduct.

Margaret cast her eyes downward. “I should go,” she mumbled, eager to escape the sudden uneasiness she felt under his gaze.

Before he could reply, they heard a high-pitched call from the upper halls. “Margaret?”

A look of shared sympathy passed between them at the sound of Edith’s anxious tone, and a knowing smile crept over each of their faces.

Henry nodded before his departure, and Margaret lifted her skirts to hurry up the stairs to attend to her cousin on her day of all days.



The front drawing room at ninety-six Harley Street had been transformed into an elegant dance hall for the occasion. Spritely, cheerful music animated a host of young couples in the glittering light of chandeliers.

Heaps of delicately colored roses in wide crystal vases graced every available surface, and an impressive tiered cake stood at the back of the room, ready to mark the end of the festivities.

Henry Lennox had escaped the rounds of dancing for a time to divert himself more satisfactorily with conversation. He was eager to speak more with the country vicar he had been introduced to just this morning. He was pleasantly surprised to find that Reverend Hale was more able to discuss modern subjects of the day than he had readily expected of a man so secluded from the world.

Henry took a sip from the glass of champagne in his hand before directing the conversation to a matter of his own personal curiosity. "I have heard much about your pastoral village. Is it truly a small parish?" he asked the Helstone vicar while his gaze strayed to the dancing figure of the vicar's daughter across the peopled room.

"Indeed, it is," Mr. Hale answered. His brow creased with some internal anxiety, and he let out a long breath of contained wistfulness. "It's an excellent place for a man to think, although I suppose those who enjoy city life may find it dull." He gestured at the crowded room. "But there's no denying that it is beautiful. As precious a piece of God's earth as you could find anywhere in England."

And thus beauty breeds beauty, thought Henry as he continued to watch Margaret dance with another gentleman. The solemnity of attending his brother's wedding had pressed his mind to the consideration of choosing his own wife. However uncomfortable he was with romantic notions, he found his interest settling more and more on one person.

Margaret returned to her father's side, her face flushed from dancing.

"You look well pleased," Henry remarked, a tug of jealousy straining his smile. "You must now acknowledge that your weeks of scurrying about making all the arrangements have been worth your effort."

"For Edith's sake, yes. However, I believe my mind has been set against grand weddings. I will be very glad to return to the quiet of country life, where I shall not be obliged to spend an afternoon at the haberdashers or the drapers. It's very peaceful at home, isn't it, papa?"

Mr. Hale gave his daughter a smile in response, but, strangely enough, he avoided meeting her gaze.

"I find it hard to imagine how you shall spend your days in the country," Henry said, studying Margaret with a grin. "Surely you have some

entertainment and society. Will you play croquet or bocce? Or have picnic gatherings?"

Margaret smiled politely, but shook her head. "There exist none of those activities of which you speak, yet I am never bored. Simply taking a walk is always pleasant, and then of course there are many duties to fulfill in caring for the cottagers. I don't believe you can understand until you were to come see it for yourself," she added, seeing the look of doubt on his face.

His brow lifted in surprise at her last words, and hope rushed in to send his thoughts racing along byways of the future. He would make certain to visit Helstone before the year passed.



Margaret shed a few tears as the newlyweds' carriage rolled away. Edith's effusive waving and Aunt Shaw's tearful response stirred within her the deep affection and appreciation she held for the years she had spent with her aunt and her cousin in their home.

As Margaret lay down to sleep that night, an air of finality permeated her thoughts as she fondly glanced around the room. She remembered with a bittersweet lurch of her heart how she had cried herself to sleep those first few nights when she had been brought to Harley Street.

She slept well, with the deep peace that follows the accomplishment of a long season's work. And as the new day dawned, she awoke with a fresh energy of anticipation to return home.

Her father's demeanor was not cheery, Margaret noted as they rode the train to Southampton. He stared vacantly out the window, his features sullen and still. He did not smile unless he caught her studying him.

The lines on his face were etched deeper than she recalled, and his hair now had hints of white throughout the gray. But it was the manner in which his face seemed to sag in perpetual weariness that concerned Margaret the most as she watched him sleep, his head back against the carriage wall. He had aged more than she had remembered. But youth is never alert to the telltale signs of time, and she knew she had been unaware of its steady gain.

Perhaps there is some additional concern over her brother Frederick, she thought, which made her long all the more to be told the details concerning his permanent exile. She wondered, too, if there lurked any darker reason for her mother's absence at the wedding other than having no appropriate

attire for the occasion. Whatever the reason for her father's weariness, she was glad she was coming home for good, so that she might be a comfort to her parents. She turned her mind from any discomforting subjects and looked to absorb the beauty of the endless undulating green hillsides as the train pulled them ever farther from London.

Margaret was eager to disembark when they arrived at Southampton and took deep breaths of the salty air as someone loaded their baggage onto the coach that would take them on to Helstone. This was her favorite part of the journey. A rising sense of peace and happiness swelled within her as she recognized the various landmarks that heralded her arrival home: the giant oak by the bend in the road, a glimpse of the brook, the first outlying cottage of her father's parish. And when at last they arrived at the vicarage, Margaret could not contain a smile of wonder as she marveled anew at the glorious profusion of colors bursting from the gardens as she walked up the path to the old brick house which was itself only a sturdy centerpiece for nature's display, enveloped as it was with blooming honeysuckle vines.

She was happy to see her mother was well, and after a brief embrace, was sent upstairs to wash up, it being nearly time for tea. Margaret set her carpetbag upon the homespun eyelet counterpane and gazed fondly around the yellowed walls of her girlhood room. The embroidered seat of the corner chair, the pressed flowers framed above her bed, and the simple honey-colored wood of the matching chest of drawers and vanity table were a welcome change from the dark mahogany and cold marble of her room in London. She was delighted most with the deep-set window seat, where sunlight spilled onto the faded cushion and the chintz curtains gently swayed with every breath of summer breeze. She crossed the room to gaze out at the familiar view, all the wild and deep serenity of the garden, the fields and forests in the distance—the boundless beauty she had known all her childhood, beckoning to be enjoyed one day at a time.

At tea, Mrs. Hale apologized to her daughter for the layout and fare, remarking that it could not compare to what she had enjoyed in London. As she replied, Margaret noticed her father's frown.

"I love it all," Margaret responded, "the scalloped table linen, these cottage chairs with the cane seats, the view of the garden out the window. And these flowered dishes—the only ones I remember. The pattern is dainty, not heavy or ornate, and I know that the serving dish has just the tiniest chip on the rim—but it is *our* china, which makes it even more dear."

Her small speech elicited only a rueful smile from her mother, who found it difficult to believe any person who had just come from the elegance of Harley Street could find her country dining room at all remarkable. Margaret was pleased that her words had cheered her father. He smiled at her across the table as her mother fussed about where to place the crystal decanter of water on the table.

In the days that followed, Margaret was eager to make the Parish visits she so enjoyed in her role as the vicar's daughter. She read to old Mrs. Beecham; she brought broth and sweets to Susan Curtis' house when the girl was ailing, and she tended to Mrs. Gilford's baby to let the new mother rest.

The glorious, carefree days of summer extended for months. As the days grew shorter, the trees shed their common green finery for their most audacious autumnal display, setting the countryside ablaze with the colors of fire. It was on one of these days that Margaret grasped her bonnet and stepped out with no object in mind but to exult in the beauty of the forest.

"Margaret," her mother called out from among the roses she was clipping as her daughter walked by. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going for a walk, mamma. The sunshine is so warm today."

"Do remember to put your bonnet on, dear. I know we are seldom out in society, but you mustn't ruin your complexion. I'm certain that you're turning into a woodland girl, and all your years in London will be wasted," she chastised with a sigh.

"Never fear, mamma," Margaret answered, duly tying on her bonnet. "I have two faces, like Janus. I can be Margaret of the New Forest at my leisure, but I can also be Margaret, the refined London girl whenever necessary," she gently teased with a broad smile.

"I wonder if we shouldn't invite the Gormons to tea sometime, although they live in Southampton," Mrs. Hale went on as if her daughter had not spoken, remembering that the Gormons had a rather handsome son.

Margaret's smile faded. "The family that manufactures coaches?"

"Yes, and it has done them very well, I should say. Coaches are respectable things to make. Just think what we should do without them," she added, seeing her daughter's look of doubtful disdain.

"I suppose so. But they are tradesmen all the same. I don't really like that class of people. They're always thinking and speaking of money."

“Well, I’m sure they are very proper and know how to carry on interesting conversations,” her mother returned. “I see now you have learned to be a little too prejudiced, my dear. In London you may pick your associations very well, but out here we have very few options for company.”

“Invite them, mamma, if it pleases you,” Margaret answered sweetly, brushing aside any further interest—much to her mother’s annoyance. “I can be London Margaret for a time,” she reassured her with a smile. And with that, she resumed her way down the garden path.

She turned to take the fairway through the hamlet and walked along the oak-shaded road until the glow of a sunny field beckoned her. She dropped there to sit among the tall grass and feel the warmth of the sun, gazing at everything surrounding her with the wonder and joy of a child. She felt at peace here—on the ground of this vibrant meadow. She was at this moment, just one of the many creatures who dwelled in the New Forest.

She tugged off her bonnet and lay down, closing her eyes to absorb every sound. As she listened to the rustle of grass, the buzz of insects, and the chirps and calls of birds—she fell asleep.

Chapter Six

Henry Lennox glanced up from his newspaper as the southbound train steamed through gently rounded expanses of grassy fields and golden-hued trees. A low stone wall or straight line of hedge here and there marked the only signs of human existence.

The London barrister felt his structured moorings slipping away. Staring at his newspaper, he found he could no longer concentrate. He folded the paper and put it away, the crinkling noise drawing the attention of the lad across from him. He flashed the boy a cursory smile of acknowledgement, although there was no genuine warmth in the gesture. He eyed the parents briefly. More than a few years older than him, they were each traveling in their own world of thought although sitting undefined close to each other—the husband reading his paper and the wife thumbing through the pictures in some ladies' journal.

He felt his eagerness deflate and turned again to the window. All marriages that begin with fluttering hearts end in a calm complacency, he told himself. It's a perfectly natural process of experience and maturity.

It was precisely the quickening stabs of anxiety that disturbed Mr. Lennox, for he counted the uncontrolled swell of feelings as a sign of the foolish romanticism of youth. He prided himself on his reliance on reason and his habitual steady comportment.

Was he truly ready to put his plan into motion? His income as a barrister was not yet sufficient to carry a family in the style he would like, but he had no doubts that in a few short years his talents would be well rewarded. Of

course, there was also the question of her resources. There was no rush to these ends. It might even be a few years before all was arranged. So why then was he on a train going to see her? It was only wise to secure his future; he told himself. As with all other planning, the earlier the lines were laid down, the better. It would merely be a matter of timing—when to arrange it.

As for his choice, he had no doubt about his discerning taste. He liked her intelligence. She was a sensible girl, a skilled conversationalist, and she could be very witty—even biting at times. Her only drawbacks were her tendency to moralize and her over-fondness of the country. He could tolerate the first—she was a vicar’s daughter after all—and he could mitigate the latter. He would take her to the country from time to time, and she would be grateful to him for it.

He was proud of his decision and thought himself especially fortunate. Although his brother had carried away a bride of significant wealth and unquestionable beauty, Henry believed Margaret was in some ways a more refined treasure. She had a piercing mind for a female and had her own distinguished beauty. She was more robust, with a flare of Roman temper that attracted him. She was no delicate flower, like Edith. Margaret Hale’s hardier frame would likely bear him many heirs. He smiled and cleared his throat at this thought. He glanced over at the boy again before returning his attention to the passing scenery.



The coach driver announced they had arrived in Helstone. Somewhat perplexed, Henry looked ahead for any sign of a cluster of homes, but saw only the road continue on through a small copse of trees.

They had passed only two cottages thus far. Perhaps Helstone was truly a hamlet, and not a tiny village as he had surmised despite her claims. He was glad he had asked for an announcement of their arrival, for now he felt the impulse to walk—to gain a more intimate sense of the place, he told himself. If truth be told, he wished for a few more unhurried moments to prepare his mind.

Once on foot, he passed the bend in the road through a gathering of oaks. The way opened up on one side to a great open meadow. His gaze fastened on a figure lying on the grass, and his heart thumped more quickly as he

imagined he knew the form. He allowed, however, that he could be mistaken. But as he drew nearer, he knew his first impulse had been correct.

He quickened his pace in the sudden alarm that she might have fallen or was hurt, but as he approached, it grew ever clearer that it was a scene of perfect tranquility. He arrived at her side, his concern turned to wonder as he gazed at her. She was asleep, her hand cast over her head in careless freedom as if the grass were her natural pillow. Her bonnet was tossed aside, and sunshine poured down upon her face, which bore a trace of a smile. Adoration stunned him into silence—Margaret of Helstone was more beautiful than Miss Hale of London.

He feasted upon the vision for just a moment more until the vague uneasiness of finding himself a voyeur prompted him to speak. “Margaret?” he ventured softly and watched with fascination as the sleeping angel stirred and came to life.

“Mr. Lennox!” she exclaimed as soon as the drowsy fog had lifted enough for her to recognize him. She sat up, hastily, snatching up her bonnet. A faint blush warmed her cheeks.

“Is Edith all right?” she asked as she rose from her grassy bed, suddenly recalling that he had accompanied the newlywed couple to Scotland.

“Yes. Yes, of course. I have come for my own pleasure. To see this wonderful Helstone which you suggested I should see for myself,” he answered, amused at her bewilderment. “As to your cousin, I have a letter which I promised to deliver,” he added, pulling the folded paper from a coat pocket.

Margaret took the letter with a word of thanks. There was nothing to do but ask him to the house for lunch. She took a moment to tie her bonnet, tucking in a few stray strands of loose hair before leading him through the wooded path toward her home.

He delighted in walking with her. He was more interested in the shape of her figure and the lilting sound of her voice than in any passing scenery she pointed out.

The vicarage was larger than he had imagined. It was very probably the grandest house in the hamlet, he supposed with satisfaction. Ancient creeping vines reached to the very roof of the structure, and towering wild rose bushes surrounded the front perimeter, crowding the pathway to the door. It looked the very centerpiece of centuries of customs as ancient as nature’s order, far from any disturbance of the modern-day world.

“I don’t believe papa is home at present, but I’m sure he will be back for dinner,” Margaret said as she pressed the latch and opened the heavy oak door. Henry stepped over the threshold to follow her into the dim parlor.

“I’ll tell mamma that you’re here,” she announced before disappearing through another doorway.

Hat in hand, Henry surveyed the vicar’s drawing room. A dusty beam of sunlight revealed the ragged edges of the patterned carpet. The furniture reflected the occupant’s position: sturdy and simple, reminiscent of centuries of tradition. There was a certain country elegance to the embellishments, but nothing particularly grand or of the latest fashion. The chintz curtains had faded, and the lace draped over the back of the sofa did nothing to hide the threadbare condition of the seat cushions.

He estimated the value of the furniture in his sight and sighed at this brief assessment. He swiftly reminded himself that he would surely make up for any deficiency in wealth. It would not deter him from his plan, but only delay the process. He now knew he could expect very little in the way of a dowry.

He smiled at the quaint setting as he realized how well she rose above it all. He had well noted how she moved among London society. At all the various social functions she attended in her cousin’s circles, she always maintained perfect poise and grace—even a regal air, which belied her humble origins. She would do very well as a London bride.

Mrs. Hale came out with Margaret to greet their guest and invite him to dinner. When she had retreated from the room, Margaret proposed her plans for the intervening time. “I thought we might draw. It’s a very clear sky today, and I wanted to capture some of the season’s views,” she explained. “Will you join me?”

“I would be delighted to,” he replied, happily following her back into the sunshine of the day.

They occupied themselves for a few hours. Margaret’s work was left unfinished, for she abandoned her artwork when she saw one of the old cottagers and went to speak with him—unaware that Henry thoroughly enjoyed adding her into his penciled landscape from afar.

It seemed too soon to Henry when Margaret announced that they should return to the cottage to dine. And as they walked back to the house, his mind was full of calculations of when he might begin the conversation that would change their lives.

Margaret, however, could only wonder if her mother had sufficiently calmed her agitation over this sudden visitor from London. Dixon and Charlotte would be busy fulfilling her mother's anxious requests to set up as impressive a table as could be managed under the time and circumstances.

Mr. Hale greeted them at the gate and led them to the back garden, where a table had been set out for their dinner. Margaret knew at a glance that the outdoor setting had been her father's idea, for she saw the harried look behind her mother's smile. But all was prettily arranged, and the simple lunch was perfectly suited for the occasion. Such a pleasant day in October was not a time to be wasted indoors.

Margaret watched with proud fondness as her father fell into easy conversation with Mr. Lennox. She admired her father's sincere attentiveness and ability to relate to any individual. She was pleased too to see that he enjoyed himself, realizing with a pang of sorrow how much her mother's complaints regularly entered their daily dinner conversations.

Mr. Hale was indeed in fair spirits to be free for a time from his concerns. Second to his love of books was his great enjoyment of God's handiwork in nature. He sat back from his repast with contentment and eyed the pear trees along the far wall. "What would finish this meal to perfection is one of those golden pears," he mused aloud.

"I'll get one for you, papa," Margaret said, taking up a basket for the task.

"I'll accompany you," Mr. Lennox added eagerly.

The better part of the tree's bounty had already been picked; the pears that remained were not as easily acquired. Margaret set right to the task at hand, searching out the best fruit within her sight.

Henry watched her as she twisted to reach among the branches of fruit. She was a Greek goddess or some wood nymph in her natural realm of beauty and bounty. He almost felt a pang of guilt for wishing to pluck such a creature from its environment. But the time was ripe for making the way clear for his future—their future—in this private setting.

Seeing Margaret tiptoe to pluck a pear among the higher boughs, he hurried to her side to gallantly retrieve it for her. The look of earnestness in his eyes as he handed it to her made Margaret glance away. She was suddenly afraid of the purpose of his visit.

"I understand now why you are happy here. It is all quite idyllic and serene," he began in steady, low tones, which somehow made Margaret wish to be anywhere else but alone with him.

“I had hoped...I had hoped you would miss London. And that you would be happy to return there.” At this, he placed his hand over hers as she put another pear in her basket. “That you might be happy to return there someday...as my wife.”

She wrested her hand from his grasp. Her body froze in agonized distress—nearly anger—that a friendship was now ruined. She saw the hurt and confusion on his face, but there was nothing to be done about it. She did not love him.

How she knew this in an instant, she could not describe. Only she knew that in Henry’s presence she had never felt a thrill of hope or any flutter of devoted affection. She had only ever thought of him as a friend, bound in the same family circle.

“Of course, there is no haste—“

“Please...don’t,” she pleaded. Oh, if she could turn back time and make it so that this unfortunate scene had never happened!

“You needn’t answer so swiftly. I’m fully prepared to wait a year or two. Margaret! Won’t you even think about it?” he demanded at last when she turned her back to him.

She stared at the crevices in the old garden wall as she tried to discern how she felt. Could she love him? She searched for the truth within her heart. She did not believe love in marriage was a thing to be trained or coaxed into reciprocation. She imagined that love should come about in some extraordinary way, with strong natural attraction from both sides.

She had witnessed Edith succumbing to a whirlwind of blushing affection for the Captain; had seen how captivated with wonder and admiration she had been in his presence. Were these not the true symptoms of falling in love? Margaret believed so. And she had felt a tinge of what that breathless, mesmerizing sensation might be like. She had felt her heart flutter in attraction once—one London evening. It had never done so for Henry. Although she had truly enjoyed his company better than any other London acquaintance, it was only as a sympathetic, teasing friend.

She could not make any reply that would make him happy. She must cause him pain in her very honesty, and felt the sting of remorse that this terrible, awful moment had been thrust upon her.

“Is there someone else?” he blurted out, confounded by her silence, his brow furrowing at the thought of an unknown rival.

“No!...I...no, there is no one else,” she faltered as she slowly turned back again, her face bowed to the ground.

“Then can you not give me hope...for the future?”

Her heart twisted inside, for his very pressing of the question made her recognize she could never take Henry Lennox as her husband. “Henry, I...” she faltered, lifting her pitying eyes.

“I see. Then I must apologize for troubling you with such an unpleasant offer,” he clipped, his voice now cold. “You invited me to visit here. I was under the impression that you had a favorable opinion of me...”

“I am fond of you...but I’m afraid only as a friend. If we could only continue to be friends,” she offered pleadingly, but he scowled and whipped around, retracing the path to the house.

Margaret trailed behind him miserably, handing her father the basket of treasure that had cost her so much trouble. He took no note of the price paid for the desired fruit.

“Ah...and now you see, Mr. Lennox,” he said, taking two pears out of the basket and giving one to their guest, “how we enjoy ourselves here. Our surroundings are not only beautiful, but provide us with such treats as this.”

“Yes, you must pity us Londoners. We must attempt to find comparable beauty in marble, stone, and iron while we find enjoyment in culture, conversation, and art. Alas, we cannot all live in the country. We are forced to find what we want at the market,” Mr. Lennox answered with dry sarcasm.

Margaret saw the startled look on her father’s face at this rather cutting reply. A flare of anger rose in her breast at Henry’s callous sophistication. It was moments like this, when Henry’s clever sarcasm ruled over others, that annoyed Margaret and made her feel the great disparity between them.

Realizing how incompatible they were, she assured herself that her decision was sound. How could he be so cold and condescending when he had only moments ago spoken of that which should be the most holy of subjects in his heart? Sorrow touched her as she saw his deep weakness.

Oh, she would wait to find a deeper love—a love beyond pride and self-concern! She would never marry for anything less.

As she silently made this vow, the memory of the gentleman from the North came to mind.

She kept her head bent low as Henry conversed with her father in a terse manner that confused the vicar. But Mr. Lennox did not linger for long and

soon made an excuse for taking his leave.

Margaret walked him down the garden path to the road. With his hand on the gate, he turned to speak. She saw the clouds of hurt and regret on his face.

“Do not think harshly of me, Margaret! I know I have been utterly contemptuous just now. My pride lashes out when wounded. My heart—yes, even barristers have one, you know—my heart is stubborn once fastened on a subject. It has not been trained in the battering whimsies of romantic feelings. In spite of all of this trouble, I do love you, Margaret. I do. Farewell!” Then he turned away from her and marched down the path without looking back.

His parting speech distressed her, for she felt acutely the pain she had caused him.

Returning to the house, Margaret longed only to escape to her room, where she might be unhappy without alarming anyone. However, she put on a calm visage and kept to her custom of sitting in the drawing room with her mother, who commented on all the trouble taken in preparing an adequate table for their unexpected guest.

Daylight was fading when her father entered the room. “Margaret, are you very busy, my dear? I have something important to discuss. Would you come into my study?”

Weary as she was, there was something in his eyes that expressed his desperation. “Of course, papa,” she returned and dutifully followed him into the room where he spent so much of his time reading and thinking



That same evening—far from the pleasant hillsides of Hampshire—Mr. Thornton sat at the long dining table in his home, reading his correspondence while his mother and sister sewed in the adjoining room. The darkened mill outside the tall windows was silent. All was peaceful.

“Mother, I have here a predicament to which you may know the answer better than I,” Mr. Thornton said, turning to her with an open letter in his hand. “In which Milton districts could a gentleman of modest means find a suitable home for a family? Whiteside, Crampton?”

“Whiteside is a fair deal gentler and cleaner than Crampton, although neither would be suitable for a true gentleman, if you ask *me*,” Fanny

declared with a proud flick of her blond curls.

Hannah Thornton gave a sidelong glance at her daughter before addressing her son. “For what purpose do you ask?”

“Mr. Bell has a friend who is giving up his living as a vicar in the south country to come to Milton.”

“Giving up his living? What will he do here?” she asked.

“He means to make a living as a tutor. There’s a good many here who might pay to catch up on their knowledge of the classics and the ancient languages. I am myself interested in studying with him.”

“I don’t see why Mr. Bell should prevail upon you to look for this man’s housing—as if you have naught else to do!” she huffed, annoyed beyond measure that anyone would treat her son as a clerk of some kind. “And I should think you’d have your mind too much on building the future to spend time studying the books of the ancients.”

“You know well that I admire any man who will give up his comforts and defy society’s censure to live by his principles. I am happy to assist Mr. Bell in this case, even though it costs me a portion of my attention,” he returned calmly.

A disapproving look was all he received in reply.

“In any case—beyond my taking up the classics—their arrival here will not affect us,” he said, returning to his work.

Chapter Seven

Soft morning light filtered through the thin curtains, erasing night's shadows with the innocent glow of hope and newness. The yellowed walls of her childhood room seemed especially warm—as something pure and sacred. She drank in the vision with desperation as the cold reality of yesterday's awful events surged into her thoughts.

Had it all been a dream? She fervently wished it could be so, but the memory of what had happened after dinner was too vivid, and her swollen eyes reminded her of how hard she had cried last night.

Her father had led her to his study, where she had feared he would ask about Henry. But as the slanted sunbeams of approaching twilight had lingered upon the books on her father's desk, something much worse had occurred: he had told her he was leaving the Church. And she had stood immobile and mute with shock as the most unimaginable words had tumbled from her father's lips.

Oh, never would she understand how he could leave the Church he had loved so long! She had felt—at that horrible, dark moment—her entire world collapsing under her feet.

They would be cast out of Paradise in a matter of weeks, just when she had finally come home to enjoy it. There would be no more carefree ramblings through the forest, no rose garden, no cottagers to visit and care for, and no more proudly listening to her father's sermons in the beloved ancient church.

Her poor father! Her heart was sick to consider his downfall. All his books—those ancient philosophers and questioning minds—had turned him off the straight and narrow way. Oh, how he must have struggled alone in his conflicted meditations! And oh, how she loved him for his honest and fervent search for truth! But she feared for his soul from his lack of faith in the Church, and was terrified that she would be eternally separated from him—her own gentle-hearted father.

She pulled back the curtains to look out at the garden and hills beyond. The sun-dappled scene that had filled her with joy yesterday now brought tides of pain.

As her eyes roved over the vine-covered wall and pear trees, she winced at the once-beautiful portion of the garden, which would now always remind her of that terrible awkwardness in rejecting Mr. Lennox. Her stomach lurched at the memory of his keen disappointment. So intense and all-consuming had been the devastating news of her father's departure from the Church that Henry's proposal had sunk into the background of her suffering. Poor Henry! She hoped he would soon come to realize it was for the best.

Life as she had known it had been torn from her in one afternoon.

And as if this were not enough for a girl of her age to bear, another horrible day was set before her. She moaned aloud, wanting nothing more but to pull the covers over her head and stay in bed all morning—to disappear from the world for a day.

But she had promised papa that she would break the terrible news to her mother, a duty her father just could not face. It would be the most odious task she had ever committed herself to.

For her father's sake, she tugged aside the bedcovers and rose to dress for the day.

After breakfast, Mr. Hale got up from the table and announced that he would be out all day, returning home at seven for dinner. He gave Margaret a furtive, pleading glance, and she gave a weak nod in reply.

Margaret hung her head in despair. She could not bear the weight of this terrible secret for any length of time. What she must do, must be done quickly—before she lost all resolve to carry through on her promise.

"Mamma, why don't we take a short stroll in the garden? The sun is out just now," she proposed.

Mrs. Hale fetched her basket to gather flowers, and the two set out.

Walking the familiar paths through the rows of flowers—most of which had faded with the summer—tears came to her eyes as she realized she would not see them bloom again in the spring.

Nature had always been solace and contentment for Margaret. But now, the serenity and beauty of this fading October garden was a piercing pain. She struggled mightily with her silent grief for a few moments while her mother busied herself clipping roses.

“Papa is leaving the Church,” Margaret blurted out at last.

Mrs. Hale’s hands stilled. She turned to give a disapproving look to her daughter. “Of course he isn’t. Why would you say such a thing, dear?”

“Mamma, papa has given notice to the bishop. He cannot in good conscience reaffirm his vows as the new bishop has required of him.”

“Whatever do you mean? There must be a misunderstanding. Who told you this?” She demanded, her brow creased in angry confusion.

“Papa did. Last night in his study...do you recall my going there? I know it is all a terrible shock. It was for me as well. But he asked me to tell you. He could not bear to tell you, mamma.”

Mrs. Hale sat down on the garden bench, her face pale and her eyes vacant as her head drooped.

“But how can this be? He never told me he had doubts.” Her head snapped up suddenly. “Where will we go?” she asked, her eyes alert now with fright as she looked to her daughter for answers.

“To Milton-Northern.”

“Milton-Northern! So far away and with all those smoky factories! What shall we do there?”

“Papa intends to find work as a tutor. Mr. Bell says there are many who may want a tutor.”

“A tutor? Among the factory people? I can’t imagine he shall find enough pupils there.”

“Don’t forget that there will be factory owners and bankers. Papa is corresponding with one of the cotton mill owners there. This man is held in some esteem in his society—as you have esteemed the Gormans, mamma. There will be more society living in a town,” she reflected, attempting to soften the harsh blow of drastic change.

“What, among factory people?” her mother retorted in pained derision.

“No, I’m quite certain we shall not have anything to do with the factory workers. But papa may teach some of the sons of these manufacturers,

bankers, and shopkeepers.”

“Oh, I don’t know what’s to become of us, Margaret! It’s a hard burden your father has placed upon us—and to give us no warning at all. I’m sure I cannot bear it. To think of leaving all of this!” She gestured with a toss of her arm to their garden and then covered her face with her hands, her handkerchief at the ready.

Margaret spent the rest of the day tending to her mother’s fits of despair, moments of disbelief, and bouts of crying with words of encouragement that she yearned to believe herself.

As the sun began to reach the horizon and the sky turned rosy and orange, the front door at last opened and Mr. Hale stepped in. The drooping shoulders and frightened look of guilt in his eyes tore at his wife’s heart, and she ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Oh, Richard, Richard! Why did you not tell me?” she sobbed as he held her in his arms.

Margaret flew upstairs to her room and flung herself upon her bed to let tears long held back flow freely.



Having spent all his anguished courage in making one momentous turn, Mr. Hale could not exert himself to take up the ceaseless trail of decisions left in the wake of uprooting a life of twenty-odd years. Mrs. Hale grew only more frail and fretful, taking to her bed in despair of an odious future, her moans now giving Helstone its due.

Dixon did nothing to ease matters with her constant mutterings against the master of the house, who, she was convinced, was leading them all into social perdition and shame.

So it was that the burden of moving the household—all the planning, coordinating and the execution thereof—fell to Margaret. And although she bravely wore a face of calm composure for her parents’ sake, her whole soul cried out against being forced to leave her home and she foolishly clung to a wild, desperate hope her father would change his mind and all would be restored.

Melancholy increased as the day of departure approached, and she tended to the sad and exhausting task of packing all their belongings to be carried away to an unknown future. Yet amid this burden, she escaped her duties to

cherish every moment out of doors that she could, wandering the garden paths and flitting away to steal a few moments on the still forest floor.



The low but piercing call of a steam-whistle resounded over Marlborough Mills, sending the factory workers spilling out into the yard at the lunch hour.

A young woman with the tired garb of a factory worker clasped a baby to her chest as she walked with a wavering boldness down the unfamiliar passageway that led to the Master's office.

A door opened, and a clerk emerged with hat in hand. He frowned as he caught sight of the approaching figure. "What are you searching for, miss? The dispensary for the sick is for workers only."

"I'm looking fo' to see the Master," the woman replied firmly, lifting her chin.

"The Master's busy. He can't—"

At that moment, the door across the way opened, and Mr. Thornton strode through.

"Master! If I could 'ave but a moment of yo' time," she called out eagerly as she stepped forward. "M' name's Jen Daugherty. Yo' helped us when my husband coudna' work for being crushed by the bales o' cotton."

Her words brought the memory of that day flooding back to him. Mr. Thornton recognized her at once.

"I'm not asking fo' naught. It's us that owe yo' thanks for gettin' Jem his wages when he couldna work. The others say the masters is all the same and greedy, but I know yo've a heart. Yo' knowed better than to throw a poor family to the streets for a mishap that weren't any of their doin'."

She took a step closer to her benefactor to show him the babe in arms. "We named 'im after yo'...in part: James Thornton Daugherty."

The corners of Mr. Thornton's mouth lifted in response. "He looks to be a healthy lad."

"Aye, that 'e is," she answered proudly, kissing the little head in confirmation.

She babbled on about her babe for a moment before stopping herself. "Not that yo' would know about such things... not yet anyhow. I 'ope to wish yo' happy someday, when yo'r gettin' yo'r own son."

The master was speechless.

“I’ll not take any more of yo’ time. I came only to tell yo’ that Jem and me thank yo’ for yo’r kindness.”

“I’m glad he is well...that your family is well,” Mr. Thornton returned.

She nodded, pleased to have accomplished her mission, and turned to leave the master to his important matters.

Mr. Thornton’s reasonable self would have briskly turned and continued on his way. But he stood rooted to the ground as he watched the young mother’s retreating figure. He was struck by her tender determination to show him the child that was so precious to her. Until this moment, he had never thought of holding a child of his own in his arms. Instantly came the vision of the girl from Hampshire holding his babe.

He swung around and strode toward the baling house, trying to shake off the images that filtered into his distracted mind. He was determined to guard his thoughts more diligently. It would do no good to dream about what would never come to pass.

Chapter Eight

Margaret closed her eyes, lulled by the steady sway of the train as it headed north. She would much rather have remained at the seaside town where they had spent the past several days. The plan to give her mother a brief holiday had worked very well. Margaret was certain the change of scenery and the sea air had lifted her mother's spirits, even if it were only for a short time. Margaret had pushed away the thought of what lay ahead and had enjoyed the brief freedom from responsibilities—until now.

She had dreaded this day, when she must accompany her father to Milton to find a suitable housing arrangement. Margaret endeavored to hide her downcast spirit, for she saw her father was eager to set foot in the town he had chosen to begin life anew. Her spirit chafed against the binding helplessness of being torn away from Helstone to be planted in one of England's busiest mill towns. Try as she might, she could not imagine a pleasant existence in the northern mill town where they were headed.

She pondered for a moment the life she might have had if she had accepted Henry Lennox. As much as her heart longed for stability at present, she knew she would not find true contentment in the shadows of Edith's social circles and Henry's worldly ambitions. Henry would see her father's break from the Church as an embarrassment. She frowned at the realization, setting her jaw in defense of the gentle gray-haired man seated next to her. It was just as well she had rejected the London barrister.

The thought of Henry summoned images from a recent dream into her mind:

She was in Helstone on a perfect sunny day, happily walking among the wildflowers and tall grasses along a meadow path. Nearing her home, she glimpsed from afar a man sitting precariously on a high bough of the old elm tree. As she drew closer, she saw it was Henry Lennox! He was reaching out for her bonnet, which had caught among the thin outer branches.

Just as she rushed forward to save him from falling—a firm hand grasped her arm and held her firmly back.

It was the man from the North! He took her hand, and they began walking together as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He smiled at her in that honest and childlike way that warmed her heart.

She looked down at her feet. They were walking on yellow rose petals, strewn before them on the path by a pair of beaming girls with baskets.

Then she noticed her own attire—she was wearing a pretty gown of white lace and ribbons. The church bells were pealing.

She was on the way to her own wedding!

That was all she remembered. She had woken perplexed and uneasy that morning, while at the same time there had been a faint strain of pleasure in thinking about it. She had lain in bed for some time, absorbing the lingering emotions that had seemed so real. The dream was unsettling and yet comforting at the same time. How strange dreams are!

As she thought about it again, it unnerved her how swiftly Henry had been forgotten when the man from the North had appeared.

The dream still mystified her. She could not dismiss the memory of how she had felt, walking with him to the church. She had been happy—in a deep, peaceful way that had felt so warm. It was the kind of happiness she had not experienced in some time. And something in her mind or heart clung to it. It was unexplainable, of course—dreams always were—but she remembered how holding the stranger's hand had felt like home.

Margaret looked at her hands, marveling at how vivid the sensation of holding his hand had been. The press of his skin against hers had been enthralling. How could sleeping imaginations seem so real?

She had had the dream the morning before they had left Helstone. Surely, such outlandish imaginings were born of the turbulent emotions of being

wrenched away from her beloved home.

“I believe we’re approaching Milton-Northern,” her father announced sometime later, waking Margaret from a drowsy state of semi-consciousness.

She glanced out the window, and her heart sank low as she saw in the distance a stark black forest of tall chimneys spewing forth their contribution to the looming gray cloud above them.

The vision was so unlike her cheery childhood home, her lip quivered, and she suppressed a sob of despair. How would her mother ever be content in such an ominous setting? She thought also of herself. Where would she take walks? Would there be no beauty to rescue her dispirited moods?

She recalled something of what the stranger in London had confessed about his town and decided that he was right; there was no beauty to recommend it. If this were Milton, she might have to search to find anything good in it.



Mr. Thornton gazed at the scribbled notes he had made for the tasks and appointments to be accomplished that day. He unfolded the letter he had received from Mr. Hale concerning his expected arrival this morning and let out a long breath as he thought of the inconvenience this would require on his part. It would be far easier just to send a message. Nevertheless, he must go himself. Mr. Hale knew not a soul in Milton and deserved a proper visit from him to settle the arrangements of his lodging.

A few hours later, Mr. Thornton shrugged on his coat and snatched his hat to walk up the high street to his destination, unaware of how many storefront shoppers noted the prosperous young mill master passing by.

The pretty and fashionable Violet Grayson and her mother were on their way to the haberdasher when they saw Mr. Thornton approaching, with his usual serious countenance and focused gaze. Mrs. Grayson sized up the opportunity at once and straightened her posture as she put on her best social smile and tossed out her greeting loudly enough to catch the attention of the businessman. “Mr. Thornton!” she nodded, stepping back to allow her daughter to be displayed.

“Mrs. Grayson, Miss Grayson,” he greeted in return, grasping the brim of his tall hat in hurried respect. He continued his brisk walk with a measure of

relief, for the demure look the calico printer's daughter had given him had made him uneasy—a feeling he had experienced before when he had met her at a concert months ago.

Pleased that his busy schedule excused him from any but the briefest social encounters, he counted himself grateful he was not married, for it seemed to him that all women (his mother excepted) thrived on an indulgence of conversation and, should he marry, he would be obliged to curtail his current habits to accommodate a wife's more frivolous needs. He deduced all this in a matter of a few seconds and then turned his thoughts to the concerns of his mill and the arrangement of the day's allotted time.

Violet Grayson's mind was not as easily turned to other subjects. Her thoughts were subsumed in a whirlwind of conjecture and feeling at the impromptu sighting of the rather handsome and wealthy cotton mill master. For the remainder of the day, the calico printer's daughter wondered if her smile had been winsome enough or if the bonnet she had worn was indeed her most fetching. Surely, it was unfortunate that the weather had been so blustery that morning, for she was certain her face might have been a shade too ruddy.

Mr. Thornton rounded the last corner of his journey and crossed the street to the Clarendon Hotel. The concierge recognized at once the prominent Milton manufacturer. "Mr. Thornton, sir. I'm sorry, but you've just missed Mr. Hale. He promised to be back in one hour."

Mr. Thornton returned promptly at the appointed time, but Mr. Hale had not yet returned, so he was ushered up to Hales' sitting room to wait. The third-floor room was neat but sparsely furnished. A few comfortable chairs and a low table were set in front of the fireplace. A writing desk and chair sat against the back wall. Mr. Thornton crossed an expanse of carpet to the tall bay windows overlooking the town. He glanced out to locate his factory's chimney among the many on the horizon and then pulled out his pocket watch to note the time.

He would wait ten minutes. He could afford no more.



"This is the last house on our list, and it appears to have the most space," Mr. Hale declared, standing in the upstairs drawing room of an empty row

house. “Besides the rather unpleasant wallpaper, I should think it will do. What do you say, Margaret?”

“Yes, I believe so. Mother shall have a sitting room. And you won’t mind that your study is rather small, papa?”

“Not at all. As long as your mother is well-situated, I can be satisfied with whatever space is allotted me.”

“Oh, but that garish wallpaper—in the drawing room nonetheless, where we cannot hide it! Perhaps you could ask the landlord to change it?”

Mr. Hale promised he would do so. Pleased to have decided upon a place, he was eager to set out at once to see Mr. Donkin, the man who would be their landlord.

“You look tired, my dear. Now that we are finished, why don’t we go back to our hotel? You can rest while I go to speak to the landlord. We’ll order lunch when I get back.”

Margaret found no joy in walking along the dirty streets as they made their way to the hotel. Everyone seemed in a haste to be somewhere else or were selling or carting wares for sale. There was neither a tree nor a patch of grass to be seen. All was hay-strewn cobblestone, packed dirt, and crowded buildings of brick. She dared not dwell on how dismal it would appear to her mother—and Dixon.

Mr. Hale departed quickly once he had escorted his daughter inside the hotel. Margaret was relieved to be away from her father’s sight for a time. Weary thoughts pressed down upon her. She had done her duty for the day and was eager now for some quiet rest.

She began to climb the stairway, but a porter stopped her.

“Pardon, Miss, but the gentleman left so quickly, I couldn’t relay the message. Mr. Thornton is here to see your father. He’s waiting in your sitting room this minute.”

“My father will be back directly, thank you.”

She sighed as she resumed her course up the stairs, reminding herself that this Mr. Thornton had been kind to her father and was due the proper courtesy from her. She only hoped her father would not be long.

Pausing at the door, she took a deep breath, steadying her resolve to meet the waiting guest with the social grace she had learned well in London.

She stepped into the room and saw a tall, dark figure at the far window. He spun about at her entry.

The jolt of recognition sent a tremor through her frame. Her mouth fell open. Her eyes widened. All her fine comportment vanished.

“You!” she breathed, unable to utter another sound.

Mr. Thornton was stunned, his feet rooted to the floor. His lips parted as if to speak, but no words formed as he stared in confusion at the face he had imagined a hundred times. How was it possible she was here?

She had recognized him! Struck by this realization, a spark of elation ignited a fire in his veins, for he had long ago told himself she would never think of him again. He moved closer to her.

“I looked for you, but you had gone,” he explained, as if their encounter had happened mere days ago. He fastened his eyes on her, scarcely believing she was truly standing before him.

Margaret’s heart skittered at his confession. *He had searched for her?* She dropped her gaze from his inquiring stare. “Edith...my cousin...had a headache and we left,” she stammered, daring to flash her eyes at him for only a moment.

“I am sorry for it. I had wished to dance again.” His straightforward reply, spoken in a low and tender manner, sent a shiver through her.

She could not speak.

The compulsion to elicit from her that frank, independent manner he had witnessed before made him close the distance between them. He flung aside all reason and common mannerisms. He longed only to make that connection between them that had beguiled him ever since.

“Do you remember?” He raised his arms in invitation to waltz with him. Beckoning her to come within his grasp again. As she had been once before.

It wouldn’t be proper, and in a clear state of mind she would have demurred, but she was mesmerized by the gentle earnestness in his eyes.

When their hands—no longer gloved—touched, a frisson of warmth flowed through her. She was stunned to find how instantly she was swept into that same dizzying spell by his touch.

She felt her cheeks burn and could not look at him. Her smile grew wider as she kept pace with his soundless lead, turning them to avert skimming the back wall in this closed space. She glanced down at their feet. The sight of her dusty walking boots made her laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

He pulled her to a stop at the sound.

She looked up in surprise; her face still aglow with silly glee.

Deep within him, something twisted and ached. He knew at once that this was what he wanted.

“Marry me,” he rasped in dead earnest, his hand still clasping hers.

Their eyes locked for a moment of sacred searching.

Then she tore herself away, turning to hide her confusion. Her face was aflame, and her heart pounded, for some part of her wanted to answer ‘yes’!

“You do not even know my name!” she exclaimed, reasoning away the impulse that alarmed her. The dream she had of him—had it been a sign from heaven?

“Will you not tell me?” he uttered with gentle persuasiveness. “I have longed to know it.”

His soft tone eased the tension in her stance, and she turned slowly, keeping her gaze lowered. “Margaret... Margaret Hale,” she answered, glancing up briefly to meet his gaze at this introduction.

“Margaret,” he repeated—almost whispered—in reverent wonder.

A shiver ran through her body at the caressing warmth of his voice. No one had ever spoken her name in that way.

She knew not what to say. A thousand different emotions chased through her mind and heart. The tone of his voice set her sensibilities in disarray—by the shock of seeing him once again—by the words he had spoken!

Mr. Thornton studied the down-turned blushing face. The wave of passionate impulse now passed, his trembling hope gave way to self-condemnation. How could he have done this?

“Forgive me. I...spoke too hastily. I will not ask for a reply. I only hope you will consider me...”

She blushed furiously as he stepped closer. “I know nothing about you!” she protested.

“Then we should become better acquainted,” came the calm entreaty.

His gentle, persuasive tone gave her the courage to look up into his face.

She could not explain the magnetic power that held them in silence for an infinite moment. His face drew nearer hers, and she offered no resistance.

A shuffling sound broke the trance. Margaret sprang back as the door swung open.

“Father!” she exclaimed shakily, a new blush spreading over her face.

“Mr. Hale,” Mr. Thornton began, trying to recover himself from the thrumming intensity of possibility of the moment before.

Mr. Hale glanced in bewilderment at the pair before him, endeavoring to decipher the meaning of the awkward tension between them.

Mr. Thornton stepped forward with a wry smile at the vicar's confusion, and explained, "I believe your daughter and I have already met."

Chapter Nine

Margaret stared vacantly at the white table linen in front of her as her father read the menu card in the high-ceilinged dining room of the hotel. The room smelled of bread and some kind of savory broth. A twitter of laughter reached her ears from the far end of the room, where a trio of young travelers sat. It was incomprehensible to Margaret that there were people going on as if it were an ordinary day.

She could not speak. All she had known of life seemed overturned and discarded. Nothing could ever be the same again. The shock of what had just happened crashed over her anew, sending all her thoughts into disarray.

Her father had talked to Mr. Thornton for above a quarter hour while she had awkwardly stood apart by the window, pretending to take great interest in the view outside. All the while, her heart had pounded in trepidation that she might be called to speak, and that in doing so their eyes would meet.

Even now, her muscles were taut with the tension of strong surprise and the reverberation of a thousand conflicting emotions. Every word he had spoken echoed in her mind. And the manner in which he had spoken them—with such vehemence of feeling! The memory of it caused a trembling throughout.

“Mr. Thornton seems a very respectable fellow,” she heard her father say through the haze of her confusion.

“I believe I shall enjoy taking up the classics with him,” he continued. “Imagine you having met him before in London! He very probably travels

there often enough. Mr. Bell says he's very much admired here in Milton, and that members of Parliament dine at the Thornton's house."

She muttered a weak acknowledgment, grateful that her father's mind was too zealous of his meeting with Mr. Thornton to take any account of her own reaction.

Mr. Thornton had been kind to her father. In fact, she had been surprised at how easily and naturally they had conversed. Papa had even invited him to dine with them here at the hotel! But, of course, papa had no inkling of what had transpired before he had entered the room. She was relieved when Mr. Thornton stated he had to return to his work.

What had happened in those few moments before her father had come, Margaret could scarcely believe. It was not possible. They had met only once before. And had not even known each other's names!

"I think I shall just have the pork pie." Her father's voice interrupted her thoughts again. "Margaret?"

She had not so much as glanced at her menu. "I shall have the same."

He gave their order to the server standing by and then turned to Margaret with a satisfied smile. "We can rest awhile after this and then catch the late afternoon train back. We've accomplished our venture in one visit! And I have my first pupil!"

She was pleased that her father was happy. Mr. Thornton had seemed sincere in his interest in taking lessons from her father. Would that mean he would come to their home? Her heart thumped at the thought of it.



They returned to their hotel room afterwards to rest before taking the train back to their seaside accommodations. Margaret doubted she could rest now. But some quiet time to think would be much appreciated.

As she lay across the bed while her father stretched himself out on the sitting room sofa, Margaret could not stop the endless stream of images and voices in her mind that made her relive every moment of the encounter.

Her chest rose and fell more quickly as she recalled how her heart had pounded at his nearness. She had never been spoken to with such an air of intensity in her life! How was it he, truly a stranger to her, evoked such conflicting tremors of anticipation and fascination—when Henry or any other man had never moved her thus?

And to think he was a manufacturer! The tinge of distaste this provoked she used to quell the disturbance in her breast. He was not even a gentleman, but worked in the clash and expediency of markets and chasing money.

He had confessed to working in an industrial city upon their first meeting. What should she have expected him to be? Why, she had never expected to see him again! And now—now she was thrust into his world.

What kind of man he was, she didn't really know. Or did she? Was it possible to know the essence of someone upon one brief encounter—or two?



Mr. Thornton walked brusquely through the streets, the world around him a blur. *What had he done?*

He castigated himself for frightening her with his urgency. What had made him take leave of his senses to demand such an answer from her? Had he ruined all his hopes of gaining her interest?

He slowed his pace. He fought the impulse to turn back and find some reason to return to the Hales—to see in her face what she might think of him. But he knew it would be casting away all prudence. And what he needed most right now was to take deliberate and well-considered action to repair what damage he might have done.

Ah, but she had recognized him! She had put her hand in his to dance. And she had laughed once again in his arms. These remembrances lit the hope in his breast afire. She had felt a connection to him, had she not?

Between burning hope and bitter despair, Mr. Thornton was thrown into a cataclysm of pulsating emotion as he navigated his way to Mr. Donkin's house to give him the details on his new tenants. And to demand that he tear down the garish wallpaper.



Upon the voyagers' return to their seaside escape, Mrs. Hale was full of curiosity, and Margaret bent her efforts towards shining a hopeful light on the prospects of their new home. There was nothing to be done about it, but

Mrs. Hale must be prepared for their arrival at Milton. Margaret could scarcely think about aught else, albeit for altogether different reasons.

“There is a great deal of energy in Milton, with people everywhere. We shall not lack human contact. And with so many of the working kind about, I’m certain it won’t be difficult to find help,” Margaret told her.

“It is true that the skies are smoky and there is much dirt in the streets and stubborn soot on the buildings, but we shall keep our little place spic and span. And though we may not see much greenery, you will have a pleasant little sitting room on the third floor, where if one looks out the window, the canal can be seen in the distance with a hint of pastures beyond.”

“And what of this manufacturing man your father has been corresponding with? What did you make of him?” Mrs. Hale asked.

“Mr. Thornton was very cordial, a great help to us,” Mr. Hale replied. “I liked him very much.” He looked to Margaret for her corroboration.

The mention of his name sent Margaret’s composed thoughts askew and her insides quavered. “He was very kind to us,” was all she could muster to say at the moment.

“But what is he like?” Mrs. Hale persisted.

“He’s a very distinguished man in his community, I should say,” Mr. Hale answered. “He runs the largest cotton mill in Milton. He is an efficient man, as a man of business should be. He appears not to waste his words but to get straight to the point. And one feels he is sincere. “Did you not find him so, Margaret?” her father asked, giving her a smile in expectation of her agreement.

Margaret opened her mouth but had no words. Her father could never have known why his assessment struck her dumb. The few words Mr. Thornton had spoken with her were indeed full of the deepest sincerity and efficiency!

“He is very sincere,” she mumbled, attempting to smile amid her discombobulation.

Her awkwardness stirred her father’s memory.

“Ah! Margaret has not told you all, Maria,” he began. “Under extraordinary circumstances, Margaret has met Mr. Thornton once before—at a ball in London, with Edith.”

“Yes,” Margaret acknowledged, gaining command of herself again and smiling prettily for her mother.

“Why Margaret! How extraordinary indeed! And one would hardly expect these manufacturing men to attend a refined ball such as Edith would attend. Does he know how to dance?”

Margaret felt her face color. “Yes, he does,” she answered in a quavering voice, remembering again the press of his hand upon her back, and the feel of her hand in his.

“Well, I suppose there is hope of finding some culture and society in Milton after all. I am glad of it,” her mother replied, her shoulders relaxing a little. Behind her, Dixon disagreed with the sentiment, shaking her head in silent dismay.

“How old is Mr. Thornton? What does he look like?” Mrs. Hale continued, much to Margaret’s discomfiture.

“I should say about thirty. A very commanding stature, a tall frame, not ungainly. Dark hair and a serious mien. Although a very pleasant smile,” Mr. Hale offered, and then looked to Margaret.

“He was very plainly dressed, but that would suit his work, I suppose. His presence has a power—one can feel his strong intentions. He would not be a man to trifle with, I imagine. Although he was very kind to us, as papa said.”

“And Mr. Thornton will be my first student, as he is eager to learn the classics,” Mr. Hale said, beaming at his wife.

“Well then, I suppose there is something to be said of this class of manufacturers,” she returned with cautious approval.



At the close of the evening in the Thornton house, family and staff gathered round to listen to the mistress of the house read a few passages from the Bible. After the gathered servants departed for bed, Mr. Thornton remained, walking back and forth in the dark shadows of the room.

“What can you be pondering, John? Is there any unfortunate news?” his mother asked, watching him warily.

Her question stopped his pacing. *Could she see it?* he wondered. Of course, she would have seen how occupied his thoughts were. He knew not how to tell her, or whether he should say anything at all. But he did not know how to contain the magnitude of what had happened entirely to himself.

“Mr. Hale, the vicar from the South, arrived in town today,” he began.

Mrs. Thornton’s lips tightened into a thin line. “I wish Mr. Bell would not involve you in such extraneous affairs. Your attention should be focused on more important things!”

Mr. Thornton let out a silent sigh. “As you know, I find Mr. Hale’s case worthy enough to lend my help if I am able. Besides, he is not alone; he has a wife and daughter he must care for. His daughter accompanied him today...here, to Milton.” He staggered again that she had come straight to him.

“A daughter? Surely he would not have brought a child,” his mother chided.

“She’s a young lady, mother. Not a child,” he replied, turning away to hide any hint his face might reveal of his feelings.

His mother’s gaze sharpened at his tone. “Be careful, John. A country girl from the South may be looking for a rich husband to give her a life of ease.”

He turned to her with a pained expression. “She has not come to Milton for that. It is her father that....” He stopped speaking at the sight of his mother’s penetrating look. He hung his head for a moment, letting a long breath out, and then paced to the fireplace to escape her gaze.

“Do you remember the ball I attended in London the summer of the year past?” he began. “I told you about a girl that I thought...differed from the rest.”

“Yes,” she answered with feigned disinterest, her hands stilled from her needlework.

“She was from Hampshire; her father was a vicar.” He looked up to catch his mother’s confused face. “She is here, Mother. Mr. Hale’s daughter is the girl. She has come to Milton.” A smile broke across his face at this declaration.

Her stomach clenched to see his boyish grin. She was speechless, for she had convinced herself that this day would never come—that her son was above being caught in any girl’s web of attraction. It had not happened in the many years thus far. But now....

His mother’s silence gave him more confidence. Walking up behind her, he laid his hands on the back of her chair. Only the ticking of the clock on the mantel could be heard.

“I only tell you this...” His voice was low and earnest. She must know something of what may come to pass. “I believe it right to tell you of my

interest in Miss Hale,” he breathed. Never would she know what he had already made plain to Miss Hale that very afternoon!

“Interest? You hardly know her!” Mrs. Thornton retorted, surprised at her own vehement response.

Mr. Thornton sighed inwardly and left his mother’s side to walk to the windows. He stared out at the dark forms barely visible in the clouded moonlight. He could not explain anything more to his mother. He hardly knew himself what had moved him to speak to Miss Hale today as he had.

But it was done, and he would do what he could to keep himself in favor with her.

“In any regard,” he said, breaking the silence. “The Hales will be new to town, in a place unfamiliar to them. And they know no one.”

He approached his mother again. “Once they are settled, I should like you to call on Mrs. Hale and her daughter.”

“I?” she countered, aghast at his request.

“Yes, and Fanny as well. As I said, they will be in need of good company.”

“I should hardly know what we will discuss. People from the South live entirely different lives than those of us in town.”

“Then you will be helpful by telling them what may make them more comfortable with our Milton ways,” he suggested.

Mrs. Thornton opened her mouth to protest yet again, but then sat back in silence. Averse as she was to all formal social obligations, her ire at his request began to fade as her curiosity to see this southern girl grew.

Satisfied with his mother’s quiet acquiescence, Mr. Thornton informed her of one more confidence. “I will be taking up the classics with Mr. Hale on Thursdays. I have long intended to return to more expansive study, Mother,” he explained before she could object. “My head has been full of business, machinery, and matters of money these past many years. My work has given us a fairly secure life for some time. I now have the opportunity to turn some of my attention to intellectual matters. This is, after all, a town of great motion and change. We cannot expect to remain the same.”

Chapter Ten

On the day that the Hale family was to arrive in Milton, Mr. Thornton found his thoughts drifting to Outwood Station instead of to the details at hand at Marlborough Mills. He had seen to it that the furniture and crates containing their belongings, which had come earlier that day on a freight car, were already being carried into the house in Crampton.

What more he could do, he could not fathom. Although impulse continuously bade him leave his office and take to the streets, he firmly refused to let such niggling move him. It was not his business or his right to intrude himself upon their lives. His work for them was done. He would, after all, see Mr. Hale before the fortnight.

All such reasoning was well and good. However, when the whistle blew for the noon break and his mill hands spilled out from the imposing factory, a new thought struck him and wiped all such constraints away.

The Hales' pantry would be barren of fruit or vegetables. He could have fresh fruit sent—no, he would select it himself. And leave a basket of food for them with a welcoming note.

He was out the door within a few moments and headed for the High Street grocer.



As Margaret had foreseen, the noise and distress of arriving in a strange city wore heavily on Mrs. Hale. That it was a dismally gray November day did

nothing to aid this transition. As their cab carried them along the streets towards tall, blackened brick row houses, Mrs. Hale's eyes reflected her distress. Boys and men were still carrying crates of their belongings inside when they arrived at their new home.

"Ho, what's this?" Mr. Hale said as he took his first steps into the front parlor, his family following him.

Margaret saw the brimming basket of fruit left on a small table. Underneath lay a bag of potatoes, flour, butter, and other sundries for the pantry. Her heart beat a little faster. She knew who had sent these before her father read the accompanying note.

"Why, Mr. Thornton! How very thoughtful. At least we know we have one friend in town, eh Margaret?"

She nodded with a tentative smile.

Amid the overwhelming disarray of moving in, with furniture and crates and hay strewn all about, the basket of fruit left on a table by the front window stood as a calm beacon of hope.

This kind token of welcome did much to soften Mrs. Hale's heart—if not to this noisy, smoky town, then to the cotton manufacturer who lived in it.

The days that followed were filled with unpacking and arranging the house and with the comings and goings of delivery boys of all kinds, bringing the butcher's order, the coal delivery, and market purchases. Every jangle of the doorbell sent a wave of tension through Margaret, anxious that it might be Mr. Thornton. She fastidiously avoided being near the door when Dixon or her father opened it.



Mr. Thornton went to his first lesson the following week. His hope of being let in by Mr. Hale's daughter was dashed as a burly maid opened the door. She looked him over with a superior air, apparently none too pleased to show him to Mr. Hale's study.

His tutor's greeting, however, was hearty, sweeping away his annoyance at the servant's attitude. Crates of books still stood in stacks around a desk and a few chairs in the small room. Bookcases had been partly filled, and a painting of a shepherd and his flock was propped along the top.

"How is your family? Are you settling in well enough?" Mr. Thornton asked as he sat down in the chair Mr. Hale had pulled into place for him.

“We are fairly well. Mrs. Hale has caught a cold, I’m afraid. The damp fogs here are not what we are used to. I’m sure she will improve before long,” he replied with a smile.

“Our winters are cold. If I can be a help in any way...I’m certain there are many things we do a bit differently here in Milton.”

“Indeed, it is nothing at all like Helstone. I thank you for your kind offer. You have been a great help already, thank you. Wait now, there was something Mrs. Hale was saying...oh yes! We will need more help here. Our cook and char girl did not come with us.”

“I’ll ask my mother about it,” Mr. Thornton said.

Mr. Hale enthused about the Greek sages and their works, and Mr. Thornton listened with interest, the only distraction being the occasional creaking of the floorboards above, which made him think of who dwelt close at hand. When he left, he had Plato’s *Republic* tucked under his arm.

Arriving home, Mr. Thornton paced about, gazing out the windows of the candle-lit drawing room of his home. He could not bring himself to sit and read the paper as he customarily would.

His mother watched until her patience wore thin. “You’ll have the carpet worn by Christmas, John. What is it that occupies your mind? If these lessons are distracting—“

“No, the lessons suit me well. I was thinking of the Hales. Mr. Hale made mention that they will need to hire help.”

Mrs. Thornton pressed her lips together. “I don’t see how that is our concern.”

“I would like you and Fanny to visit Mrs. Hale and her daughter next week,” he said with decision, ignoring her remark. “You will know how they might find a girl to hire. They are unfamiliar with the way of things here. Perhaps we could lend Martha a few days a week.”

That her son made this command to her again irritated her, although she was now more intrigued than ever to see this girl. “If you wish, John. I don’t know how we can help, but if you believe it will do some good, we will go.”

“Thank you, Mother,” was all he said, sitting down and picking up the paper.

Mrs. Thornton let out a sigh to see the power these Hales had over him. She began to dislike Miss Hale, despite not having laid eyes upon her. Who was she among womankind, to catch the attention of her wonderful son?



Fanny twisted her mouth in a recalcitrant pout as she and her mother trundled through the streets in their carriage toward Crampton. She was certain she would find little in common to talk about with a country vicar's daughter. What made her brother press them so in going to pay an afternoon call to the family of his tutor? John's motives were a mystery to her. She would not bend her mind to discover his meaning. She pressed her face almost against the window as they passed a window display of dresses and then tugged at her own voluminous skirts in satisfaction that she could at least enjoy showing her latest fashionable acquisition of brightly colored plaid with lace and ribboned trimmings.

Margaret scurried about all morning to arrange the upstairs drawing room for their visitors. Their rooms were yet to be fully settled with all the sundries and bric-a-brac that make a house a home. She'd been surprised to receive Mrs Thornton's calling card informing her family of their intended arrival hours earlier.

Dixon was overwrought in her extended role as cook, thrusting pans of apple cake in the oven and rolling out dough for scones. Margaret went down to help her at intervals and volunteered to dust the banister and sweep the front hall.

Mrs. Hale rested, as she was still recovering from the ordeal of moving to a less desirable part of England, with closer quarters, no fresh air, and no society. She was uncertain what to make of Mrs. Thornton's social standing in Milton, as the mother of one of the great manufacturers of the town.

The scones were still hot from the oven when the front doorbell rang. Margaret could not help feeling a tug of apprehension as she shrugged off her apron and went to answer the door in Dixon's stead.

Mrs. Thornton raised her eyebrows as the comely girl who led them inside introduced herself as Margaret Hale. So this was the young woman her son found so fascinating! She appraised the girl with a critical eye, noting her simple but tasteful skirt and blouse. She took note that Miss Hale bore no shame in having to usher them in as a servant should have done. Instead, she moved with a queenly grace that seemed at once careless and utterly natural.

As the two guests were introduced to her mother, Margaret glanced at the wallpaper, grateful once again that the glaring gold and blue papers had been replaced by a delicate pattern of ivory and mauve.

“Do you play the piano?” Fanny asked after the common preliminary conversations about the weather and how the Hales found their new home were exhausted.

“I’m afraid I play rather poorly, although I had lessons while in London. My cousin plays very well,” Margaret answered.

“London!” Fanny enthused. “How long were you in London? I’ve so longed to go there!”

“I lived with my cousin for nearly eight years. It was my second home,” she replied, giving her mother an appreciative glance.

“Oh, I can’t imagine you’re very happy to have moved here, then,” Fanny blurted, dismissing the silent glare from her mother.

“I imagine it’s always good to see new places and meet new people,” Margaret offered.

Mrs. Thornton approved of her answer. “Have you seen any of our great warehouses and factories, Miss Hale? To know Milton is to know its manufacturing power. Here is where England is becoming the envy of the world in industry.”

“I have seen them on my walks, but I’ve not seen inside them.” And nor would I really wish to, she thought, although she had a certain curiosity as to the kind of world in which Mrs. Thornton’s son moved.

“I suppose it must be a very great change to come here from your home in the South,” Mrs. Thornton remarked to Mrs. Hale.

“Oh yes! In Helstone, we had a spacious vicarage and extensive gardens. The rooms here are smaller, but we’ve managed to find places for most of our furniture,” Mrs. Hale replied. “I do wonder, however, how you manage to keep your house clean here. There is so much soot in the very air, it appears we will be required to scrub our windows and wash our curtains every fortnight.”

“It is a very dirty, smoky place,” Fanny agreed.

“We have a cleaning schedule and staff to accommodate the conditions of living in town,” Mrs. Thornton replied, her rigid posture a great contrast to Mrs. Hale’s sunken appearance.

“We have only Dixon with us for help at present. Charlotte and Cook we had to leave behind,” Mrs. Hale said.

“It can be difficult to find help when work at the factory is always available,” Mrs. Thornton pointed out. “But we have a girl whom we could send to you two days a week if that would be of any assistance,” she offered with reluctance, her son’s wishes in mind.

“How very thoughtful!” Mrs. Hale enthused, her face brightening. “I’m sure it would be a great help. I’m much obliged.”

An awkward silence ensued, which Margaret ventured to break with an eager question. “Do you have a garden?”

A huff of derision erupted from Fanny’s throat.

“I suppose that’s what I miss most,” Margaret explained hesitantly. “Even in London, there were roses in the back courtyard.”

Mrs. Thornton studied the girl’s soft, clear complexion and the delicate way her slender white hands were folded. She saw in the girl’s face that youthful expectation that all things be pleasant and beautiful.

“Our house sits across from my son’s factory. We have no garden to speak of,” she answered, letting the newcomer know they no longer lived among the flowers and trees, but in the midst of brick, stone, and glass.

“There are hills behind the canal that we can see from some of our windows,” Margaret continued in a hopeful tone, swallowing her disappointment at such a curt answer.

“Yes, you may enjoy taking yourselves there from time to time, if you wish to escape our structured landscape,” Mrs. Thornton replied with an air of disdain, looking directly at Margaret.



“It was very kind of Mrs. Thornton to offer to lend us one of their servants,” Mrs. Hale mused aloud after the visitors had gone. “One wouldn’t expect such a kindness to look at her. I mean to say that she holds herself rather aloof and is not easily given to smiling. But it is a lesson, Margaret, not to set your opinions on first impressions.”

“Yes,” Margaret agreed rather absently, thinking of someone else.

“Her daughter reminds me a little of your cousin Edith with her flaxen hair...and an apparent interest in fashion,” Mrs. Hale remarked, raising her eyebrows at the last observation.

Margaret laughed. Fanny’s dress had been altogether too vibrant plaid with wide-hooped skirts. “It must be all the rage in the shop windows,”

Margaret replied, to which her mother smiled in shared amusement.

Outside in the carriage, a similar appraisal of the morning call was underway.

“Well, we have done with our duty. John must be pleased,” Mrs. Thornton said, settling into her seat. “Mrs. Hale looks to be the frail type. Neither of them, I fear, is suited for Milton living. Miss Hale is already longing for the countryside.”

“Did you see what she was wearing? Such a plain skirt for receiving callers! I should think having lived in London she would have acquired better habiliments,” Fanny remarked, smoothing the fabric of her own new dress.

Mrs. Thornton glanced at her daughter, a disquieting sense rising as she compared Fanny to the young woman they had just seen. The fact that Miss Hale did not endeavor to impress with fashionable clothing was a point in her favor.

Miss Hale seemed a sensible girl, unlike her own daughter, who fussed and fidgeted about what she wore and what other people said and did. It was a sore spot in Mrs. Thornton’s soul that she could not admire her own daughter, however much she outwardly doted on her. She could not help it, for she had an inherent contempt for weakness in a person’s character.

Her son, she could adore, for he embodied all that was truly admirable: honesty, strength, self-discipline, courage, and determination. Which made Fanny all the more pitiable next to her brother. It was just not in the girl to be like him.

All this went through Mrs. Thornton’s mind in a moment, which led her to ponder next why her son took such an interest in Miss Hale. Why could not he have chosen a Milton girl? Miss Hale seemed amiable enough, but something in the way she held herself apart agitated Mrs. Thornton’s pride. Southern persons could always be expected to put on airs, she mused.

Born and bred in the lassitude of a country parsonage and brought up in London society, Miss Hale would hardly withstand the turbulent turns and trials of living where market forces could sink whole industries overnight, and the threat of violence between men and masters always brewed under the surface. It was better for John to find a bride of sturdy character if he was to marry.

She hoped John might soon tire of his fascination with Miss Hale. He was not accustomed to courting women. It unsettled her to think how easily he

had formed an attachment to Miss Hale—after just one dance with her. He had no experience with love, and she did not wish to see him suffer any heartbreak.

Chapter Eleven

It was not many days later that the Hales received an invitation to tea at the Thornton's residence. Mrs. Hale was intrigued at once.

"This would be a very good opportunity, I dare say, to see how these great manufacturers live," she told her daughter. "I'm curious to know what kind of grand house they might live in, amongst all of this...dreariness," she said, waving a dismissive hand toward the windows.

"I think you'll find that it is a very different grandness from what we would expect in Hampshire or in London. The most impressive buildings here seem to be the gigantic factories," Margaret remarked, thinking of what she had seen of the town thus far on her walks. "I suppose it's to be expected in a town like this."

"Hmm...I wonder how many servants they have and how large their rooms are. And I should especially like to see what they serve for tea here."

Margaret took this reply as an indication that her mother would go. "Will papa come with us?" she asked, hoping that he would. The more people to diffuse attention from herself, the better. She was already feeling uncomfortable at the prospect of entering Mr. Thornton's home.

Father did indeed want to go, and they set out in a cab together, Mr. Hale tucking a blanket around his wife in the frigid January air. Dixon had shaken her head at Mrs. Hale's insistence on going, as Mrs. Hale had begun to take to her bed more often since arriving in Milton.

Margaret was glad her mother was settled between them, for then she had less opportunity to really see the passing scenery. However, as they drew

closer to Marlborough Mills and passed through the tall, open gates, her eyes grew wide. "This is where they live?" she asked incredulously.

"Remember, mamma, what Mrs. Thornton said about living across from her son's factory," Margaret said.

"It is a great convenience for Mr. Thornton to live near his mill," her father added.

Mrs. Hale craned her neck to try to determine the height of the looming factory across the mill yard. "Near it! Why, they must live in the very shadow of it!" she exclaimed.

Margaret was fascinated by the scene, however stark. The factory walls were massive, and the clacking noise seemed to pour out through the bricks into the empty dirt yard. The stone house they pulled up to was neat and surprisingly clean, being so close to the source of so much smoke and dirt.

Mr. Hale helped his wife up the stairs as Margaret turned to take in the view from the portico, above the yard below. Everything within sight was stone, brick, iron, dull gray and brown. There was nothing of nature to gaze upon but the sky above, and even that was clouded over with the perpetual haze of the chimneys' exhalations.

The size of the factory at this proximity was impressive. Although Margaret attempted to resist attributing this industrial glory to any one person, she could not help feeling a growing wonder and admiration for the power one must have to command such an enterprise.

A maid ushered them into a large, airy drawing room and left to call Mrs. Thornton to her guests. Every surface seemed polished to glimmer in the light. A massive table gleamed in the anteroom. Shades of dim green covered the walls and the patterns of the upholstery. The atmosphere was still, despite the muffled noise invading from the mill. All was perfection and order, but without warmth. Glass domes covered dried flowers. Not a thing showed that any living was done here.

It inevitably passed through Margaret's mind that she would dislike living in such a home. It expressed precisely the inhabitants' excessive attention to order and efficiency, and particularly reflected Mrs. Thornton's cool temperament. She shuddered to think of being encased in such an environment.

The three of them turned to the long windows overlooking the mill yard, marveling at the sound of activity beyond the brick walls of the mill.

Mrs. Thornton entered with a rustling of her black bombazine skirts, and Fanny followed in a pale blue dress with layered ruffles and lace, her smile tenuous, like her mother's.

Mr. Hale was introduced to the Thornton women, and they all took a seat. Two neatly dressed servants brought in the tea trays. Mrs. Hale eagerly examined with approval all the delicacies offered: almond cake with dusted sugar, custard tarts, finger sandwiches of several kinds, and the obligatory scones with clotted cream and jam. The odor of sugary sweets mingled with the aroma of the steaming tea.

"Forgive me for asking, but I've always lived in more country settings. Do all the manufacturers live so very close to their places of industry?" Mrs. Hale asked, settling her skirts around her.

"I can't say what other manufacturers do, I can only say that it is a very fine convenience for my son to live where he can watch carefully over all his operations," Mrs. Thornton answered.

"Yes, I'm sure it must be so," Mrs. Hale agreed, looking furtively at Margaret. "However, do you not find the noise to be...distracting?" she asked as she chose a few sandwiches for her plate.

"It is indeed a terrible distraction," Fanny piped up, ignoring her mother's frown. "In the summer, we must keep our windows open, and the clanking continues from dawn to dusk. Mr. Hamper has a very nice house just outside town, although he runs a cotton mill."

"I find the industrious tenor here invigorating," Mr. Hale interjected, uncomfortable with the strain developing in the conversation. "And there is a spirit of constant moving; the future is at one's feet here," he said, taking the teacup Mrs. Thornton offered him.

"Exactly so," Mrs. Thornton answered, her chin lifting as she appraised the old vicar. "My son is involved in forwarding the future of England. It is not all leisure and beauty here, I grant, but what the scale of production has accomplished here is the envy of the world. The sound of the working mill is a pleasure to me, for it reminds me of the great work being done."

Mrs. Hale glanced at her daughter with a doubtful face, but Margaret accepted the words spoken as possible truth for such a proud mother.

"I must say I am impressed that a busy man such as Mr. Thornton makes the time to learn the classics." Mr. Hale enthused. "I thoroughly enjoy our discussions."

“I know he also enjoys it. However, I will confess that I did not approve of his taking up lessons when he should have only one focus: to maintain and grow his enterprise and its reputation around the world,” Mrs. Thornton returned.

Mr. Hale and Margaret exchanged a dubious glance before Mr. Hale bit into his scone.

“I see you doubt my statement, but you would hardly be expected to know that in faraway places, my son’s name is known and respected,” Mrs. Thornton coolly explained.

“Well, at any rate, I am pleased he comes. In my opinion, it is good for the intellect and the soul to attend to the vigor of philosophy and moral conscience. One can’t always be fixated on business,” he replied somewhat cautiously, with an encouraging smile.

Mrs. Thornton appeared unmoved.

Mr. Hale cleared his throat. “I hope Mr. Thornton will continue to make it to his lessons with me. I’m sorry he could not make it this week. I hope he will be able to come next Thursday?” he ended with a query, setting his empty teacup down.

Mrs. Thornton reached for the silver teapot to refill her guest’s cup. “My son’s time is valuable, and his priority is the running of the mill. There have been developments in the cotton market that require his attention. Disturbances regarding the possible extension of slavery in America to other states have caused many here to call for curtailing our connection to American suppliers,” she answered. “You see now how John is not merely overseeing matters here in Milton, but must necessarily be involved in far-reaching connections of worldwide importance,” she asserted, sitting even straighter in her chair.

“Yes, I see,” Mr. Hale responded. “And I assume that a change in cotton supply may likely increase the cost of cotton,” he posed.

“Indeed, and higher costs mean lower profits and possibly lower wages for the workers. And then there will be threats of strikes, the masses wanting to take control and overthrow the masters in their ignorance,” Mrs. Thornton stated, her face stony in her vehemence.

“Strikes?” Margaret said with surprise, setting her teacup down with a gentle clink. “But are not strikes prone to violent outbreaks? I have heard talk of their danger in London.”

Mrs. Thornton smiled with grim pleasure at the girl's distressed tone. "Yes, Miss Hale. You must be brave and strong to live in Milton, where the battle between masters and men is ongoing. I myself witnessed a strike in my earlier years in which men threw stones."

"Oh, how horrible!" Mrs. Hale exclaimed, shrinking from the very thought of such a scene.

Mr. Hale, too, was alarmed. "Well, I hope men of good conscience can avert such a strike from happening."

"The workers are all ungrateful beasts, always demanding more than what they're given," Fanny added. She was taking tiny bites of almond cake with her fork.

"Have you lived all your life here in Milton, Mrs. Thornton?" Mrs. Hale inquired.

"Except for a few years after my husband's death, I have indeed lived here and seen the rise of this town to greatness."

The sound of footsteps alerted them to the entrance of Mr. Thornton.

"I'm sorry to intrude. I cannot stay, but I wished to welcome you to our home." His eyes met Margaret's for a moment. Her heart thumped, and her cheeks grew warm.

Mr. Hale introduced his wife to his pupil, and Mrs. Hale's eyes shone approvingly as she took in the measure of the tall manufacturer. "I must thank you, Mr. Thornton, for the basket of food you left for us as a welcoming gesture. How very thoughtful," she said.

"It was no trouble at all," he answered quietly, a hint of color coming to his face as his mother glanced at him.

"I hope the wallpaper in your drawing room meets your approval," he added, as his mother poured tea into his cup. At this remark, both his mother and sister looked at him in surprise.

Margaret also lifted her eyes to observe Mr. Thornton's kind appeal to her mother.

"It is pleasant, thank you. It reminds one of country flowers, which is just what I like."

"I can't imagine country life," Fanny began. "Although I suppose it would be quiet, there would hardly be anyone to meet and no events to attend. I should like to know, Miss Hale, how you like Milton, since you have now lived in the country and in London."

Margaret hesitated to answer, uncomfortably aware of all eyes upon her. "I don't know. I expect I cannot give Milton any true estimation when I have not yet made any friends and have attended no events. I will agree with papa that there is an energy here that is new to me. You must allow me to favor my country home, however. I have a great fondness for nature, which is terribly lacking here."

Mrs. Thornton glanced at her son to see if her remark dissuaded him.

"Did you attend soirées and balls in London?" Fanny pressed, unable to comprehend that anyone would prefer trees and open fields to concert halls and ballrooms.

"Yes, I did," she answered, her face again growing warm as she imagined the gaze of Mr. Thornton upon her.

"I'm certain you will find Milton cannot compare with London if you are seeking continual gaiety and social amusement," Mrs. Thornton interjected.

"But there is a very marked interest in culture and learning here," Mr. Hale interposed. "I hear there will soon be a new library where all classes of people will be welcome to borrow. The Lyceum is already open for lectures of all kinds. I believe there is also a music hall."

"Yes, there is," Fanny said. "Although they let anyone in. There were far too many people at the piano concert a week ago," she sighed.

"Miss Hale has told me she had seen none of our factories here in Milton as of yet. Have you been inside one of our factories, Mr. Hale?" Mrs. Thornton asked, directing her gaze to Mr. Hale and then to Margaret.

"I have not, although I should be very interested to see how the modern machinery works," Mr. Hale answered, holding his teacup aloft.

"We can arrange a tour next week, if that suits you," Mr. Thornton offered.

"Yes, let us arrange it. I'm sure Margaret would like to come along," the older man said, smiling at his daughter. "She has been curious about all that goes on in Milton."

Mr. Thornton looked to Margaret to ascertain if this was true, hope rising in his chest that she should find an interest in his town.

Margaret again felt consternation at the conversation having pivoted to her opinions. She merely smiled weakly at her father's remark, acutely aware of Mrs. Thornton's appraising stare.

Mr. Thornton soon made his apologies and left the company to finish their tea.

The rigid tension in Margaret's posture relaxed, and her interest in the conversation waned. The room was emptier now, and her mind wandered to the yard outside.



Mr. Thornton glanced back at his home as he crossed the icy yard. The chilly air nipped at his face and bare hands, but he felt warmth crawl through his veins, thinking of who was inside those walls. It had been a stinging pleasure to enter his drawing room to see her sitting there, in surroundings so familiar to him.

Did she truly take an interest in the new world around her? Could she ever learn to be happy here? These questions concerning her future happiness never strayed far from his mind. Doubts plagued him as he looked about him through her eyes. The dirt yard, the towering brick factory, the house of gray stone that was his home—nothing could be further from the world that she had come from.

What did he have to offer her? He had worked for years—years of self-denial and unyielding adherence to his principles—to create the comfort his mother and sister now enjoyed. But he did not own the land, nor his house or factory. Security he could never offer her, for there lurked always the danger that all he had worked for could come to naught through forces beyond his control: a swing of the market, a damaging fire, or a loss of business because of a sustained strike. All these must ever be a danger.

He strode through the wide corridor towards his office, where stray cotton fibers drifted along the floor even there. The thunderous sound of more than a hundred working looms was muffled in this separate section for his clerks, but there was always the distant noise of the main weaving shed. He closed the door behind him and sat down at his desk.

He remembered the first time he had seen her. She had been aloof from the whirl of activity around her—as one apart. Yet, she was not in the least disturbed by her solitude. Instead, she seemed to carry herself with an air of regal grace.

Even now, as she had sat in his own drawing room—the movements of her lips, the slow turning of her head, her confident posture—bore an elegant manner that was effortless to her. Could one such as she accept the life of a manufacturer's wife?

He could not claim to be a gentleman, whatever that antiquated distinction was worth. He was far too engaged in matters of trade and profit-making for that. And he would never concern himself with titles or terms that held little meaning in discerning the heart of a man. He knew what he was and what he wasn't. He did not need society's approval to know his value.

He was a man of strong convictions. And once his heart and mind were set upon a clear purpose, he would follow through with unwavering intention. He could not offer her a peaceful life on a country estate. But what he could offer was his deep devotion. He was certain that no man could love her as he did. He could not bear to think of her belonging to another.

And so there was nothing to be done but to continue to make himself a better man—as he had always striven to do. And to hope her affection for him—for he had seen the spark of such, hadn't he?—might grow with time.

Chapter Twelve

The scheduled visit to Mr. Thornton's factory took place on a late winter day. Mr. Hale and his daughter left Mrs. Hale to the comfort of her sitting room and headed out into the dreary cold.

Margaret had often accompanied her father on his way to the Lyceum when he was scheduled to give a lecture on ancient architecture or philosophy. She was now more familiar with the walk to town, which was about two miles of byways and paths.

On the rise of a hill just before they reached the center of town, the wind blew in gusts, and Margaret was glad her bonnet was tied on. She liked the view from this vantage point, however, and recalled how she had wondered aloud to her father weeks ago which imposing chimney in the skyline below was from Mr. Thornton's mill.

"From what I understand, Mr. Thornton's mill is the largest in the town," her father had replied, and they had guessed which chimney might be the most imposing.

They had seen the towering structure of his mill, of course, when they had visited his home, but now they would enter the very core of Milton's volcanic power—to see the mystery of its inner workings. Both father and daughter were curious to see the great factory to which Mr. Thornton's life was tied.

The visitors reached Marlborough Street at last and walked through the tall, open gates into the mill yard. Margaret glanced cautiously at the upper windows of the grand stone house standing to one side. A smile crept to her

face as she imagined Mrs. Thornton spending a portion of each day just standing there to admire her son's empire. But a "Halloo!" from a burly man coming to meet them brought her attention to their purpose.

"Mr. Hale? The name's Williams. I'm the overseer. Mr. Thornton sent me to bring you along." He turned back toward the building, and they dutifully followed.

He led them into a door, and they walked through a hallway into a great room where bits of cotton fluff floated in the air. A giant wheel on the far wall drew in much of the floating cotton 'snow.' At the center of the room was a massive machine with turning cylinders of some kind that creaked. The roar and clank of heavier machinery could be heard in the distance.

A few girls were working in the room, their hair bound inside headscarves. One of the girls looked up from her work to notice the visitors, but the others kept their heads down.

"This here is the carding room. Mr. Thornton should be here shortly. I'll tell him you're here." Mr. Williams announced before opening another door and disappearing.

Margaret had, of course, seen cottagers spinning cotton into thread and making cloth. But she'd never seen it done on such a scale. Her father took an interest in the machinery, while Margaret wondered about the lives of these girls.

"Hello," Margaret ventured kindly when the girl glanced at her again. "Have you been working here for long?" she asked.

"Only a few months," she answered shyly. "My father got me work here at Thornton's because it were better for my health. I worked at Hamper's afore that."

"How is this mill better than any other?" Margaret asked, intrigued.

"Mr. Thornton put in a wheel undefined here to clear away cotton fluff. So there's less fluff floatin' around to get in yo'r lungs," she explained, casting curious glances at Margaret as she tended to her work.

Margaret listened solemnly. That other mill owners might not take any care for the health of their workers shocked her. Was Mr. Thornton different from the rest?

"My name is Margaret Hale. May I ask your name?"

The girl stared at her for a moment. "Bessy Higgins," she replied. Seldom did women such as her come and look at all their doings. And never would such a one speak to a factory girl so kindly.

Margaret smiled, and Bessy couldn't help smiling in return.

"Do you like working here?" Margaret asked, but Bessy snapped her attention to her work, her visage hardened.

"Mr. Hale, Miss Hale." The familiar Darkshire voice made her heart skip a beat.

Margaret whipped around to find herself under Mr. Thornton's gaze. She colored, wondering if he had heard her question.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. But I see you have made the time useful," he remarked. "This is the carding room. The carding machines work like a comb, straightening knotted fibers into long ropes we call 'slivers.' These cotton ropes are collected in cans that are taken to the next station."

Mr. Thornton led them to the next door. Margaret glanced back before following, exchanging a last glance with the factory girl. Had Bessy been frightened by Mr. Thornton's presence? She wondered if he was stern and unforgiving in the treatment of his workers.

They moved through a brief corridor, and the Master stopped before the next door.

"The next room is our spinning shed. Each machine, which we call mules, has over a thousand spindles. The cotton is twisted and stretched to make yarn. It is important that the temperature is warm enough here that the cotton will not break," Mr. Thornton explained before opening the door to let them in.

Heavy mechanical mules slowly rolled back and forth over the floor, pulling long threads.

Margaret's eye caught a flash of movement, and she turned to stare aghast at two young children scrambling beneath the long strands to gather the cotton that had fallen. Their bare feet were smudged with mud, and their breeches were worn and ragged. She guessed them to be about eight years of age and marveled that they should be scurrying so near the massive moving machinery.

Mr. Thornton then shepherded them through another corridor before stopping before a massive wooden door on an iron track. He explained that the weaving shed would be very loud as each power loom shuttles warp and weft threads across the width of the cloth two hundred times a minute.

He heaved aside the heavy door on rails to reveal a cavernous space filled with rows upon rows of clattering and clacking machinery. Mr. Hale

watched the arms and looms in their monotony of motion, while Margaret noticed the living humans whose daily labor was to tend to these monstrosities. The noise was deafening.

After gaining a full view of this cavernous room and all the cacophonous operations therein, she studied the Master. He walked with head erect, surveying his realm as a sovereign—as he rightly was in this place. And she saw the cautious looks from the workers that he garnered as he passed by.

She could not help but admire how commanding his figure appeared amid this seeming chaos. He was a man of power, and he knew it. But her awe was tempered by a sense of uncertain dismay at his apparent control over so many lives. How did he treat those who worked for him?

He walked his guests to the far side of the vast weaving shed, when Mr. Williams hurried to his side to inform him of something unheard by the visitors.

Mr. Thornton then begged apologies for the abruptness of his coming and going, but added that he hoped they had enjoyed seeing how cotton was made into cloth in his mill, and explained that he was obliged to leave them.

The overseer who had first met them, now led them to an exit near the great steam engine that powered the entire factory. Margaret looked up at the high-reaching chimney and the plumes of smoke dissolving into the mottled gray winter sky.

A boy, not yet a man, with a soot-stained face and blackened gloves shoveled coal into an opening in the brick wall, his breath visible as puffs of gray in the frigid cold.

Margaret shivered and drew her coat close around her. Inside the factory had been warm, and she realized how the mill might offer many people inside their warmest hours of the day.

Mr. Hale wondered at the magnificence of such an operation as they hurried home—while Margaret remarked upon how many lives were affected by their daily work there. The sight of so many women at work made her wonder who was tending their homes? It was all a far cry from the cottage life in Helstone, where hearth and home were central. Here, work for pay consumed the better part of the day. And to think that they worked six days from dawn to dusk. She was glad to think that the winter hours were shorter, for the early coming of dark allowed these workers more time to be home with their families.



Home life in Milton followed less invigorating and engaging patterns for Mr. Hale's family. Without parishioners to look after, Mrs. Hale and Margaret were left with much less to occupy their days. Margaret read to her mother most mornings, and noticed with not a little anxiety that her mother languished much more often than not. She was glad that Dixon could be a companion of sorts for her mother, but Dixon had grown bitter with all the housework and cooking that fell upon her, for they had found it difficult to hire enough suitable help. The girls they had seen demanded more pay and were less willing to live under Dixon's strict rules.

Margaret missed the solace and joy of taking walks in the fields and moors of her childhood hamlet. She needed to feel a part of the larger world and escaped the confines of her home nearly every afternoon to take long walks and observe all she could in her new surroundings.

Free to go where she would, she was glad her mother put no strictures on her roaming as her Aunt Shaw had done in London. She had sometimes felt a prisoner in her cousin's grand home. How astounded Aunt Shaw would be to know that Margaret walked the streets of Milton alone.

Her soul found beauty in the streaming life on these streets. The energy of brisk movement and people engaged in purposeful activity lifted her flagging spirits on days when her home seemed desultory and empty. Here, there was always hope for the future, a decided air of reaching for progress.

But progress appeared a sham in the boroughs where poverty was mired in the dregs left by those most successful in seeking their own profits. How could such disparity live side by side?

Margaret looked up at the tall chimneys that cluttered the skyline. All these towering factories proclaimed to play a part in making England renown. But what of all the hundreds of workers who toiled long days, stationed at the mechanical marvels that made other men wealthy? Were these people not worthy of taking part in the country's splendid success? It disturbed her to think of how unfairly the balance of justice hung, when so very few seemed to enjoy the benefits.

The spacious, perfectly furnished drawing room at the Thorntons'—with thick brocade curtains, glistening mahogany, and pristine ornamentations—

contrasted sharply with the harsh environment of the factory that sat across from such comfortable luxury.

Her jaw tightened to imagine that the Thorntons never gave a thought to their mode of living, and how it compared to the lives of the workers who made their wealth.



In the evenings, it seemed to Margaret that Mr. Thornton was a frequent topic of conversation at dinner. She knew that although her father had acquired a few other students, Mr. Thornton remained his favorite. And her father's fascination with all he was learning about Milton led him to share something Mr. Thornton had told him.

"Were you aware that Mr. Thornton is a magistrate?" he asked his family as he buttered his bread one evening. "I was surprised to hear it from one of my new students. Although perhaps it ought not to be so surprising. He certainly has a very fine capacity for discernment and logical reasoning, and I believe his sense of moral justice is firmly fixed to carry such a role in the town very well. I can only imagine how busy he must be if he works all day overseeing his mill and is called to cases occasionally," he said, taking a bite of roast.

"He's rather young for a magistrate, is he not?" Mrs. Hale wondered, still in the process of sipping her soup.

"I should say so. I don't think we have quite understood the standing he has in this town. I'm very glad to have him come to me for his learning. It is an honor for me to call him my pupil."

Mrs. Hale's expression was one of confusion. "But you are the Oxford scholar," she returned.

"Yes, but how one is esteemed in society is different here. Accomplishments in business account for a great deal in Milton society."

"Would Mr. Thornton then be considered something comparable to a gentleman in Milton?" Mrs. Hale queried in some astonishment.

"In some regards, I believe so," her husband answered.

Margaret followed the conversation in silence. Conflicting opinions rose and fell within her as she considered how much esteem Mr. Thornton should be given.

Chapter Thirteen

When March arrived, the weather fluctuated greatly between winter chill and a gentler tease of spring. On one of these warmer days, Margaret put on her bonnet and wool shawl for a walk, leaving her mother napping while Dixon made bread in the kitchen.

Beckoned to walk farther on such a day by the beautiful weather, she strolled through the graveyard knoll rising above the town. Ahead she recognized a lone girl standing at the top of the grassy hill as the carder she had spoken with at Mr. Thornton's mill.

She quickened her step to reach the girl and called out to her as she approached, "Hello, I believe we met—at Thornton's mill?"

The girl raised her head, clutching her faded shawl close about her. A look of confusion melted into a measure of amazement as she recognized the lady speaking to her.

"If you remember me, I'm Margaret Hale," the newcomer to Milton said, a little out of breath from her haste.

"Yes, I remember," Bessy returned. A man twice her age, wearing the loose-fitting clothes and cap of a working man, sidled up and took her arm. "This is my father," she explained.

"Hello, I'm Margaret Hale. I met your daughter a few weeks ago at Marlborough Mills. I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name," she said, directing her apology to the girl.

"The name's Nicholas Higgins," the man replied. "This is Bessy." Father and daughter exchanged a knowing glance. "Yo' must be the newcomer

who took a tour through Thornton's mill. Bess told me as much."

"I am new to Milton, yes. Do you also work at Marlborough Mills?" Margaret asked.

"Father works at Hamper's. And so happens today is to be my last day at Thornton's. Father's worried about my health and says I'm too sick to work anymore," Bessy said.

"Oh, but you will recover, surely," Margaret returned hopefully.

Bessy shook her head. "There's too much fluff in me lungs," she said and began coughing as if to verify this assessment. Her father laid a gentle hand on her back until she stopped her coughing.

"Please, if you'll tell me where you live, I could visit you," Margaret pleaded.

Mr. Higgins cocked his head, narrowing his eyes. "For what purpose? To drop your pity upon us and give my daughter false hope?"

"I meant no disrespect. I thought I might bring a basket—"

"We care for our own here," he interrupted.

Bessy glanced at her father with cautious pleading.

"We live two doors north of the Goulden Dragon, in the Princeton district," he conceded. "And whereabouts do *you* live?" he asked with a rebellious twist of a smile.

"Why, we live at the end of Stoughton Road in Crampton," Margaret replied, a little taken aback at his boldness.

"I'll not ask to visit yo', but yo' may come visit my Bess if yo' like," he answered.

Bessy gave Margaret a hopeful look as her father took her arm and led them towards their home.

Perplexed, Margaret watched them for a moment before turning to follow the path toward her own home.



A few days later, Margaret wound her way through the dingy and cluttered alleyways that constituted the byways of the Princeton District. She had learned since her meeting with Bessy and Mr. Higgins that this area of Milton was where many of the mill workers lived.

Children in ragged clothing, some with bare feet, crouched against walls and over sodden alleys to play jacks or marbles. Others with long faces

were washing laundry. A small girl with a dirt-streaked face held her hand out expectantly as Margaret approached her. Margaret hesitated, calculating that to offer a coin would cause a rush of requests.

She hurried past, saddened by the sight. Aunt Shaw would be appalled to know Margaret walked into such areas of town alone. Edith would have been horrified.

The Goulden Dragon was a squalled pub, marked only by a painted image on a wooden sign. Counting the doors from the pub, she knocked on the door she hoped was Bessy's. Another girl of about the same age as Bessy, this one with darker hair and a bigger frame, answered.

"I'm sorry, I was looking for Bessy Higgins?" Margaret inquired.

The girl said nothing, only bowed her head in deference and held the door open for Margaret to step in.

"Yo've come! Father said yo' wouldn't," Bessy declared, rising from a straw mattress on a simple wooden frame placed near the kitchen.

Through the darkness inside the dwelling, Margaret saw Bessy's face alight with wonder.

"I brought a few gifts. I hope it will not offend," Margaret said, setting a basket on a table near the open hearth.

"Don't mind Father. His mind is full of the battle set between men of means and those with little," Bessy said as the other girl began taking the items out of the basket and storing them.

"This here is my sister Mary. She doesn't talk much, but she's a good lass," Bessy said.

"Does your mother work at a factory?"

"She had done. She died o'er three years ago now. Which is why I were sent to work. Father wanted to keep Mary in her schooling."

"I'm sorry," Margaret said quietly.

"And now that I'm ill, Mary will need to find work. She's not o'er bright, but she can work hard when put to a task."

"You've been working in the mills for three years. How old are you?" Margaret asked.

"Nineteen this past month."

"I too, am nineteen," Margaret answered with a sad smile as she looked on Bessy's pale face.

"Tell me where yo're from. I'm tired of thinking on this place," Bessy requested, leaning back in the bed.

“I’m from the South. My father was a vicar in a country hamlet of beautiful gardens, and fields and forests.”

“It sounds heavenly,” Bessy said. “I wished I could go there now, and get away from all this brick and smoke and fighting,” she added with a long sigh. “What brought you to Milton? I’d never have left such a place as you described.”

“My father had a change of conscience and decided to leave the Church to teach the classics to such as might want to learn them,” Margaret answered, looking down at her hands.

“There is lots of learning here, to be sure. Father goes to lectures and such whenever he can. And many of us who work in the mills can read. And those that can’t, Father tells them of their rights. Father is a Union leader. For all his rough ways, he’s got a heart to help others. He bands the mill workers together to fight against the masters for better wages.”

“Why cannot the masters and workers come to terms? Does your father not meet with the masters?” Margaret asked sincerely, her brow creased with confusion.

Bessy looked at her strangely and then laughed, which quickly turned into a fit of coughing.

Margaret petted Bessy’s shoulders and back, then smoothed her arms until the fit was over.

When she had recovered, Bessy replied, “Yo’ve no notion of how it is. Masters set the rules and that’s the way of it.”

“But are all the masters the same?” Margaret asked.

Bessy studied Margaret with a growing suspicion. “How is it yo’ came to see Thornton’s mill? Do yo’ have some connection?”

“No...I mean...yes,” she stuttered. “Mr. Thornton takes lessons from my father,” she answered, hoping Bessy could not see the warmth coming to her face.

Bessy grinned. “I saw the way he looked at yo’ that day—“

“Whatever do you mean?” Margaret protested. Mary snorted from across the room.

“Ah, come now! There’s no shame in admitting it. Every girl in Milton would give their right arm to catch Thornton’s eye! There’s many that has put their plans on him. Violet Grayson is one of ’em, they say.”

“They’d be chasing him for his money, I suppose?” Margaret asked, still bewildered that a manufacturer could be the highest prize in town. It would

never be so in London.

Bessy cast a sidelong glance at her sister, and they both erupted into chortling laughter. Calming herself quickly, so as not to begin coughing again, Bessy studied Margaret as if she were some foreign creature. “The money ain’t bad, to be sure, but he’s not one to make yo’r eyes sore either!”

Margaret blushed at their teasing, silently realizing that the man who had asked her to marry him was sought after as a handsome bachelor.

“Yo’d know he’s the best of the lot if yo’d see the rest of them that are masters,” Bessy added. Mary nodded her agreement.

“I know I’m very new here,” Margaret began. “And perhaps it will seem strange to you, but a manufacturer is not thought of so highly in more genteel places in England.” Here, Margaret’s voice twisted into a tone of disdain. “I have a strong distaste for those whose primary aim is to make money for themselves. I’m certain he never thinks about the privileges that must have enabled him to hold such a position over others.”

“Ah, but yo’ don’t know him! They say he worked his way up to his role as Master,” Bessy countered, and then leaned forward with a mischievous grin. “Rumor has it that there’s some dark secret about his past,” Bessy said in a whisper.

She leaned back against her pillows again, satisfied to see Margaret’s expression blanch.

“Makes him even more mysterious, I should say!” Bessy declared, darting her gaze to see her sister smile.

Margaret stayed to talk with her new friend for a while longer, but her thoughts were distracted by the tumble of conjectures running through her mind as to what “dark secret” could be lurking in Mr. Thornton’s past.

The door latch clacked, and Nicholas Higgins entered his home. He stopped in his tracks at the sight of the visitor. The room went still, waiting for his reaction. He met the eyes of his ailing daughter. “Yo’ were right. I didn’t think she’d come.”

“Now here’s the wonder,” he went on, surveying the newcomer with cautious doubt. “If she’ll come again, or if she’s here just to lay pity on us and satisfy herself with having done her deed of charity.”

Bessy looked to Margaret with a yearning to know if her father’s words were too harsh, or if they spoke the truth.

Margaret would not be cowed. She looked him straight in the eye. “If you’ll allow it, I should like to be a friend to your daughter. As I have said,

I've recently come from the South and have made no friends myself to speak of," she stated with a polite firmness.

"Mayhap yo' speak the truth, so yo' can visit my Bess if it'll give her some comfort. But mind yo' don't fill her head with your religious notions. She has enough of God and heaven and all the like with her Methodist ways. And I'll believe in God again when the masters who sit in their churches and call themselves Christian see fit to have a heart for the suffering of the poor in this town."

"Father's always angry 'gainst the masters," Bessy explained, seeing the stricken look on Margaret's face. "Don't mind him. Yo' haven't done anything wrong but be a gentleman's daughter. Which is no crime," she said defiantly, glancing at her father.

"Yo'll come back, as yo' said," Bessy pleaded as Margaret stood up to take her leave.

"I will," Margaret promised, giving her new friend a reassuring smile.



The visit with Bessy Higgins was still very much on Margaret's mind at mealtime that evening.

She missed having a window that overlooked a garden as they ate. In fact, there were no windows at all in their town dining room. The old oak table that was perfectly sized for the airy vicarage in Helstone filled the closed space so that the cane-seat chairs nearly bumped the papered walls when they pulled them out to seat themselves and to leave the table. Candles in wall sconces and on the table lit the shadowy room.

"I've invited Mr. Thornton to tea," Mr. Hale announced after saying a prayer of thanks for the food. He took a bite of the boiled potatoes in front of him.

Mrs. Hale put down her fork. "When?" she asked in some alarm.

"Tuesday next," her husband answered.

"Well, then, we shall have time to prepare," she replied with relief.

Margaret stared at her plate, a rush of nervousness flooding through her to think of receiving Mr. Thornton as their guest. She had not seen him since the tour of the mill.

That evening, in the quiet hours after her mother had gone to bed, Margaret approached her father's study. She lingered in the doorway of the

dimly lit room for a moment before Mr. Hale noticed her presence and took off his reading glasses to address her.

“What is it, my dear?” he asked.

Margaret entered the room and sat in the chair opposite him, where Mr. Thornton sat for his lessons. Discomforted as she was by her purpose in coming to him, her burning curiosity was stronger, and she took only a moment to strangle her hesitation.

“I have a question to ask about Mr. Thornton,” she began, looking down at her hands.

Relieved this was not about his wife’s delicate health, Mr. Hale’s shoulders relaxed. Confusion crossed his brow at his daughter’s solemnity.

“The Higgins girl I told you about at dinner tonight...Bessy. Well, we talked a bit about Mr. Thornton, and she said that he had worked hard to reach his position as master. And she said...”

Margaret felt again the reluctance to share common gossip with her father, but she must discover if her father knew anything to validate such a claim.

“She talked of a rumor that there was some manner of a dark secret about Mr. Thornton’s past.”

“Ah,” her father replied, settling back in his chair as if preparing for one of his teaching sessions. “There is truth to it, although said in such a way implies something ominous on Mr. Thornton’s part, which could not be further from the truth.”

Now it was Margaret’s turn to look the picture of confusion.

“I will tell you what your godfather, Mr. Bell, told me. You must grant that Mr. Bell may not know all the details, but I expect he knows well enough to give a sufficient understanding of what happened. Mr. Thornton’s father was caught up in some kind of speculation that turned out very badly, and he became deeply indebted. Unable to endure the shame, he killed himself.”

“Oh!” The quiet exclamation from Margaret escaped unconsciously.

“Yes,” Mr. Hale agreed with her reaction. “A very horrible affair, to be sure.” He continued, “This left his son, our Mr. Thornton, to become the head of his family when he was still in school—perhaps a lad of fifteen or sixteen. Too proud to take charity, the family moved to a surrounding village where John took work as a shop boy. Remember that he had a small sister to keep as well as his mother. Somehow they managed to save a

portion of his modest wages to pay back the father's debts. And when he reached young manhood, he set about personally to begin making these payments to the men his father owed."

Margaret was stunned. A pang of compassion rose from deep within her as she imagined Mr. Thornton as a young lad working in a draper's shop.

Mr. Hale continued on. "His indefatigable will and moral principles impressed one of these creditors and brought him into the cotton industry, setting him up to succeed him. And so here he is today, the master of Milton's largest mill."

"What say you, Margaret?" he prodded after some silence.

"I hardly know what to say," she replied, still absorbing the surprising history of his rise to power.

"Is it not commendable? Hardly a dark secret," he rejoined, observing her quiet reaction with interest. Proud of his pupil, he was eager for Margaret to approve of him.

"It is very fine indeed," she admitted, "only I find it a shame such a strong character should belong to a mere manufacturer."

"Whatever do you mean?" her father asked, nonplussed.

"Oh, only that he should have made a fine gentleman in some other respectable calling. To waste such character on counting figures and seeking profits—I can't seem to think very highly of this class of persons."

Mr. Hale smiled reflectively at his daughter. "You see things through traditional eyes, which I'm sure your Aunt Shaw and Edith would do. But coming here has helped me change my views. At the very least, I have learned that the world is changing, and Milton is in the thick of it." He continued, "These manufacturing men are pushing and pulling all of us into the future, whether we like it or not, I dare say. And who is to say it is more worthy for a man to own land or to own the machinery that is making England an industrial triumph? In any case, you agree that Mr. Thornton has quite a commendable character. That should speak for itself," he concluded.

Margaret nodded her agreement. His words turned over in her mind as a gentle rebuke. Her independent nature resisted his reasoning, but she would reflect upon it that night.

Chapter Fourteen

As she sat up in bed, Margaret swept aside her curtain to see the landscape below and the sky above were as bleak as ever. She longed for Helstone mostly in the quiet mornings, when beams of sunlight had angled through her windows to cast a yellow glow to her room and birds chirruped merrily to greet the day.

The signs of coming rain could not be gathered as readily here as they could at home, for the sky in Milton was never-ending gray. But as she gazed at the clouds above in her melancholy mood, they seemed darker than ever, casting deeper shadows in the crevices and moldings of the buildings across the street.

She lingered in bed, not wanting to start the long day ahead of her. Even with Martha's help today, Margaret would likely be called to assist in preparing for Mr. Thornton's arrival this evening. The thought of him coming was enough to create a disquieting stir within, which she hoped would be quelled by keeping mind and body occupied with the tasks of cleaning, ironing, or baking. And all the while, her mother must be entertained and tended to.

Margaret's anxious thoughts turned to her mother's welfare. Ever since they had arrived in Milton, her mother had fallen to one ailment after another. Margaret had at first attributed this distressed condition to a natural sullenness at being brought to a place she did not relish. But as the weeks went by, her mother slipped deeper into a lassitude and feebleness that worried her.

If her father had perceived this concerning decline, he had not spoken of it. And she knew that even if he had noticed, he would likely push it far from his mind—telling himself that she would improve as the weather grew kinder. Perhaps he was right.

Margaret sighed, sweeping aside these depressing thoughts as she pushed her bedcovers aside and swung her legs to the floor. She would make the best of it, for all their sakes.



Mr. Thornton set his ledger aside, weary of studying the numbers on the page. In truth, his calculating powers had lost their luster today. He looked up at the grand clock on the brick wall of his office, a testament to the superlative value he placed on time efficiency.

But time was his enemy on this particular day. From the minute he had woken this morning to the moment he walked into his workspace, the thought of his engagement with the Hales that evening conjured distracting images to mind. The anticipation of being in her presence was pure pleasure, but the eagerness to know how she would receive him was the torture that kept his jaw set and made him unable to stay in his chair for any great length of time.

If the workers noticed that the Master made the rounds of his factory more often than was his custom, no one would ever wager the reason.

At last, when the whistle sounded at the end of the day and the workers streamed from their workaday home, Mr. Thornton grasped his own coat and headed out in their wake.

Mrs. Thornton heard her son's quick footsteps before he entered the room. She kept to her embroidery work.

"Remember that I am to take tea at the Hales' tonight, Mother," he told her.

She put her work down onto her lap, catching the tone of eagerness in his voice with a sense of dread. She still did not see what attraction Miss Hale held over him and worried that the girl did not appreciate who it was who was paying attention to her. "Yes, I remember it well, as Martha was lent to them this day for your visit."

"I must go dress. It is nearly six o'clock."

“Surely you don’t need to dress for a country parson,” she returned, wishing he would not let his intentions toward this family show so much.

“You know well why I must,” he replied, unable to keep a shy smile from lightening his face as he bent to kiss her cheek.

Mrs. Thornton sighed as she watched his figure disappear into the darkness. She resented Miss Hale for having disturbed their steady pattern of life. Now, a ripple of uncertainty unsettled the atmosphere of their home. This was uncharted territory; she felt the possibility of lurking danger to her son’s heart.

It would have been better for John to have taken an interest in some Milton girl, such as Violet Grayson, who would have surely known the honor it would be to be chosen as his wife.

She prayed this evening tea would turn out well—for John’s sake.

As for herself, she began to wish these Hales had never come to Milton.



Rain pattered on Mr. Thornton’s hat as he briskly weaved his way through the throng of people rushing to their destinations. Nothing would dissuade him, however, from walking the remaining mile to the Crampton row house. Nor would a little rain wipe away the trace of a smile on his face as he headed closer to the place he most wanted to be.

This would be the first time he would see her in her own surroundings, for she never appeared when he came for his lessons on Thursdays—although each time he hoped he would catch a glimpse of her.

And now, he would be at leisure to converse at length with her to see how she was finding Milton—if she could be satisfied to make her home here, far from the calm and beauty of the countryside which she had known all her life.

Arriving at last at their doorstep, his ringing of the bell brought not the object of his attraction but the lumbering maid, who ushered him in and took his dripping hat and overcoat.

“They’re expecting you upstairs, in the drawing room—if you please,” Dixon said, directing him with a gesture to the stairs as she hung his things in the hallway.

His anticipation of a pleasant evening rose uncontrollably as he ascended the creaking stairs of their simple home.

Mr. Hale welcomed him into the warm room, where a crackling fire cast shadows on the walls. The smell of sugary sweetness and candle wax filled the air. The curtains were not drawn closed, perhaps a country habit left unaltered by their new location.

Margaret was busy at the tea table. Their eyes met briefly, but she turned quickly back to her teacups, and he smiled to notice her cheeks turning pink. He was so fascinated by the way a tendril of hair brushed her cheek as she leaned to pour that he scarcely understood what Mrs. Hale was saying to him.

Mrs. Hale mentioned the inclement weather, and he replied politely about his hardiness. But his attention returned to Margaret, who was now serving her father tea. In a gesture that must have been a playful custom between them, Mr. Hale took his daughter's hand in his and used her forefinger and thumb as his tongs to pick up a sugar cube. The look of love and laughter she gave to him made Mr. Thornton's whole being pulse with a deep yearning to earn such a look from her.

Next, she poured for him. Their eyes met again, and he took in the full measure of her beauty, her full lips just parted and the lithe neck, the soft curve of her nose and the shapely form of her figure. He took pains to refrain from touching her as she handed him his tea, but her own finger brushed his by chance, and he heard the quick intake of breath at her surprise at this briefest of contact.

He could not help imagining her pouring tea in his own home, with the right to reach up and sweep his thumb across the delicate skin of her cheek to brush that tendril of hair back.

A question Mr. Hale had asked him about machinery jolted him back to the present situation.

"My looms are new. I invested in the latest advances to be prepared for the future. If the American market will not flood ours, we will be in a position to do very well," he answered, stepping into a discussion of business with alacrity. "Of course, there is always risk involved in any business enterprise, and I may just as well find myself deposed of all my hard labor if circumstances abruptly change the market. Such is the natural cycle of markets," he continued.

"If I may ask," Mrs. Hale began, "How did you come to be in the cotton-making business? Did your father run the mill before you?" she innocently asked.

Mr. Hale shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Margaret looked up from her teacup to study Mr. Thornton, who only smiled calmly at the question.

“My father was a clerk. He died when I was still in school. And so I was left to provide for my family.”

“Mr. Bell says you learned your trade from the Master before you at your mill,” Margaret interjected, meeting his eyes a moment to signal her awareness of the deeper story.

“Yes,” he answered slowly, comprehending her desire to keep the conversation on a lighter strain for her mother’s sake.

“I am sorry you had such trouble,” Mrs. Hale offered with an expression of sympathy.

“Thank you. However, grave circumstances give men an opportunity to strive to better themselves. My mother was a rock for me at this time, giving me a path forward in practicing diligence, self-control, and determination with such efficiency as to enable me to take hold of the position of power which I now possess. Had I had a life of relative ease, I would not be where I am today,” he explained.

“I can see that you present a model for others to follow, where they may look to you for how to conduct their own lives,” Mr. Hale added.

“This is exactly so. And I do not mean to suggest that I possess abilities beyond the common man, but I propose to be only proof that any man might utilize his own natural capacity to govern himself in such a way as to adhere to the strict principles which may free him from the destructive paths of careless ease, self-indulgence, and aimless purpose,” Mr. Thornton replied in earnestness.

“But not every man, surely, can rise to become a master as you have,” Margaret countered. Something in her rose up against his confident testament of how success could be gained. “There are hundreds, nay thousands, of common laborers here. Do you imply that they have found themselves in such roles by their lack of principles and self-government?”

A shadow crossed his face at her rebuke. “For some, I do believe they have created their own lot. I maintain only that a man can be master of himself, which is the highest attainment one can gain in this world, which will ultimately lead to betterment of some manner,” he answered uncomfortably, watching her downcast, doubtful gaze.

“I am certain you understand that there must be many who work for you who are struggling to lift themselves from circumstances they have little control over. I should think that those with power over so many lives would take a greater concern over the moral obligation that their position carries,” she replied.

“I don’t believe I understand you. I am honest and deal with my workers openly, and pay them what the forces of the market will allow me to pay. I don’t see what other obligations I might have. They are responsible for their own conduct outside my mill. I cannot govern them beyond my purview.”

Mr. Hale looked at his daughter with some alarm, fearing her reply at the burgeoning argument.

“I confess I know nothing of business, but you must allow me to have religious convictions that make me believe we are here on earth to improve the lives of others, and must find a way to do so. You have a great deal of power over several hundred people—which affects their families: women and children. And speaking of children, can you tell me what the children in your factory are doing, scrabbling underneath moving machinery to gather up fragments?” she asked pointedly.

Mrs. Hale now also wore an expression of some surprise at her daughter’s bold questioning.

Mr. Thornton tried to repress his frustration in explaining himself, the sharp pain of discord wrenching away the contented air he had enjoyed upon his first arrival. “I am an employer. I have no further obligation to them than this. As I said, I deal fairly and honestly with my workers. That is my responsibility. As to the children working on the factory floors, the law allows children above the age of nine to work—in order to keep their family warm and fed.”

“I am glad there is such a law. However, it would be best if these children were in school and not needed to help support their families.”

“And in the South, in your farmers’ fields, no children are working to support their families?” he retorted, his brow creased.

Margaret bowed her head in reluctant acquiescence, and he continued.

“I’m certain that when we have created a Utopia, all will be well balanced between rich and poor, and we will see such hardships behind us. For now, I am forced to work in the world as it exists, with all its injustices and inequities. You must excuse me for not being able to end the war between masters and hands.”

“Margaret, I believe, is merely taking an interest in the workers’ point of view since she has become friends with some of them—a Mr. Higgins and his daughters, is that right, Margaret?” Mr. Hale interjected, trying to diffuse the discordant atmosphere.

Mr. Thornton frowned, glancing at Margaret, but she did not look up from her teacup.

“They have a right to their view, but their eagerness to condemn the masters comes from their ignorance of what the masters must contend with,” Mr. Thornton answered, vexed beyond measure to think she should be hearing the spite and anger against him from her new associates.

“If they are ignorant,” Margaret began, “then perhaps you should explain —”

“There now, let us talk of something else, shall we? I don’t believe we shall solve all Milton’s troubles in one evening,” Mr. Hale gently suggested.

And so they turned the conversation to more palatable subjects such as the northern climate, the coming Great Exhibition in London, and the immense change in England resulting from the number of trains now connecting the nation.

But all the while, Mr. Thornton chafed under the oppressive weight of being misunderstood. He was equally glad and distraught to take his leave at the end of the evening. He shook hands with Mr. Hale and bowed to Mrs. Hale, who remained seated.

Margaret stood to signal her goodbye.

“You must forgive me, Miss Hale, if I have defended myself with any force of feeling that may disturb you. I am aware that we masters are often misunderstood. And I am, after all, but an uncouth Milton manufacturer,” Mr. Thornton apologized, his face a stern mask.

“Certainly,” she answered, with polite sweetness. “It is all so different here, and I am still learning these northern ways,” she added, giving him a parting smile.

He nodded and turned to leave in some confusion, her bright face and gentler reply having melted away some of his disgruntled feeling.

“Margaret!” her father chastised as soon as Mr. Thornton had descended the stairs. “I believe you caused Mr. Thornton some offense in your questioning.”

“I’m sorry if I have offended your friend, papa. Is it not right that I should try to understand these things?” she replied.

“Being a little less forthcoming in stating your opinions would be more comely, my dear,” her mother admonished wearily. “At any rate, I am tired. Will someone help me to my bed?” She received immediate help from her husband, who took her arm in his and led her out of the room.



Mrs. Thornton sat in the darkened room with a single candle lit beside her. She hated to waste the wax and would have normally gone to bed at this hour, but she waited until John was home.

Her thoughts had wandered uncertain bypaths all evening, imagining how all would be changed when John married. She had given it thought years ago, but as time had gone on, it had slipped more and more to the edges of her mind until she had no longer thought of it much at all.

She knew he ought to have a son to carry on the Thornton name if nothing else. But she had grown accustomed to being his confidante and companion in lieu of a wife, so that the idea now of giving up her position as first in his heart tore at her own sorely.

But she would make any sacrifice for John, come what may. If he wanted a wife, it was his natural right to marry. If only she could believe that any girl was worthy of him and would do all in her power to make him happy.

What she dreaded most, beyond having to step aside for another to take her place, was that he might choose a girl who would want pampering and spend frivolously what wealth John worked so hard to create.

But such a worry was useless, because John would be wise to the ways of such a girl, knowing so well the hapless ways of his own sister. He would certainly not be attracted to the likes of one who fretted over fashions and social callers.

And yet, she knew that love could strike all sensibility from a man. And that some women knew their feminine power and wielded it cunningly. But Miss Hale hardly seemed the type to play such games. She seemed sensible enough, a girl of solid upbringing, no doubt, and a gentleman's daughter.

Thus Mrs. Thornton endeavored to succor her spirits in favor of the girl. It seemed that, for all her worrying, John had made his choice, and now she must come to terms with any forthcoming changes.

She should take an inventory of their bed linens and prepare to set up the upstairs rooms in such a way that a wife of John's standing would require.

The sound of approaching footsteps halted her scattered musings. She swiftly picked up the sewing in her lap and listened to the slowing steps as he entered the room.

“You’re still up?” he queried with some surprise.

“I was not tired. So, I sat to see you home again,” she replied casually, bending over her work in pretense of being long engaged thus. “The Hales are well?”

“Yes.”

She turned instantly to examine him, wholly unprepared for such a brief, deflated reply.

“Only, it seems Miss Hale has befriended a mill worker, and has taken to heart all manner of accusations against me,” he explained in response to his mother’s searching gaze.

Her mother’s pride rebelled against the girl at once. “Well! What could she truly understand of your responsibilities? Those from the South are too swift to disparage those who lead industry and will listen to anyone but the masters themselves!” Her outburst cleared her anxieties, her heart lightening to find her place in her son’s affections unmoved.

“It’s best you discover what Miss Hale is predisposed to think of you—“

“Please.” He raised his hand to stop her. “I don’t wish to hear any more about it. I have had enough for tonight.” He smiled weakly at her in apology for his curtness. She could not know how deeply her remarks cut him.

“Good night, Mother,” he said gently, before turning to go upstairs, leaving his mother to watch him disappear into the shadows.



Margaret lay in her bed in the dark, a trace of light from the window allowing her to discern only the blackened shape of her footboard.

She had lain there for perhaps an hour, unable to stop her mind from turning over all that had been said, and especially what had not been said. She recalled every tone of his voice and every expression of pleasure and discomfiture upon his face.

She pondered most of all over how she had caused him pain and chastised herself for feeling pangs of guilt. Why should she care about how her words affected him? She did not owe him any loyalty or particular concern, she

reasoned in rebellion. It was entirely his fault if he expected anything from her.

She told herself she was glad to have discovered the disparity in their views of the world so early in their acquaintance. It clearly indicated that she had been correct all along to dismiss any thought of accepting his offer to become his wife.

Chapter Fifteen

The sodden ground and gloomy skies did naught to lift Mr. Thornton's mood the following morning. He threw his mind into work and was short with his words. It was nothing out of the ordinary to see the Master with a stern face and quick step. However, the underlying cause of such demeanor was entirely different on this day.

Feeling keenly Miss Hale's disapproval, he was determined to dismiss this cantankerous disturbance to his peace of mind and carried on a mental defense of his principles, knowing full well that Miss Hale could have no understanding of the factors over which he had no control. Nor did she comprehend the reason he must act as an autocrat in his position. There was no other way.

However, all his justifications offered no salve to the wound, which still festered from her verbal blows at his moral stance.

When Williams entered his office, he asked about a name that kept troubling him.

"Do you know anything about the Higgins family? A mill worker—I'm not certain at which mill."

Williams thought for a moment. "Higgins?" Then his brow creased as it crossed his mind. "I believe Higgins is one those Union fellows, a rabble rouser. Not one of ours, though. Is there some trouble?" he asked.

"No," the Master answered, letting out a low sigh. "I've only just recently heard of him. I was only curious."

“Best to watch out for that kind. They’ll be up to no good, and that’s for certain,” Williams replied.

Mr. Thornton gave him a nod that was at once a reply and a dismissal.

Left alone, he sank his forehead into his hands. How was it possible Miss Hale befriended not just a common hand, but a man bound to promote the most incendiary claims against him?



Margaret longed to get out of the house and go see Bessy Higgins. She wished to hear more about Bessy’s life and what her father would say about the fight between masters and men. But her mother was feeling ill that day and for a few days afterwards, so Margaret dropped her own wishes to be available to attend to her mother’s.

She did not mind spending this time with her mother, as she had spent so many years apart from her parents in London, seeing her mother only in the summer. Now, she had the opportunity to draw closer to her mother, as she had longed to do.

On one of these occasions, she had the courage to ask her mother about her brother, Frederick. It was something they never spoke about, and Frederick had left for the Navy when she was only about nine years of age. She had never understood exactly what had happened that kept him from returning to England.

“Frederick?” Mrs. Hale said the name with a tremor of sorrow.

“Yes, mamma. I was in London at the time it all happened and was perhaps too young to be told. I never knew what took place. If it won’t pain you overmuch to tell me,” Margaret pleaded.

“No, I shall have no shame in talking about my boy. Fetch me the letters from my bureau just there,” Mrs. Hale directed, pointing to a lower drawer. She untied the ribbon that held the stack of letters and began to tell her daughter about her brother’s exile from England.

“You see, it all started with an unfortunate assignment to a ship that was captained by a rival of his, a cruel young man, Reid was his name, who never liked Frederick. This Captain Reid made an impossible order to his men to manage the ropes high upon the masts in which the last man at his task would get a flogging. Attempting to avoid this punishment, a young man made a desperate leap to the next mast, but fell and later died.”

“Frederick was so incensed by this needless loss—you know, dear Margaret, how impassioned your brother was—that he rose against the captain and swiftly organized a mutiny.”

“Captain Reid was put out on a skiff, but was—rather unfortunately for Frederick’s sake—picked up by a passing freighter. Frederick was identified by Reid as the leader of the mutiny, and it was published in the newspapers that he was a blackened traitor. Your brother, who only wanted justice for those with no power! It makes me angry to this day!”

“Oh, Mother!” Margaret breathed. “I have never been so proud of my brother as I am now. Why, he was only trying to depose a ruthless man. Couldn’t he argue his case against this Captain Reid?”

“Never. It would never do. The Navy requires strict obedience, no matter what the directives. They would never listen to justice. Some of the other men caught in the mutiny tried to present such a case—but they were hanged, Margaret.” Mrs. Hale’s eyes began to fill with tears. “I couldn’t bear to see him end up as those men did. And so I’m glad he is far away—although I so long to see him!”

“Perhaps if we took a trip abroad. He is in Spain, is he not? It’s not so far —“

“No. No, it is too late. I’m not well enough for travel now,” Mrs. Hale moaned, but a glance at her daughter’s concerned face made her hurry on, “Forgive me, darling. I’m feeling very discouraged this week. Do not fret about me.”

But Margaret fretted about her mother from that time forward. She worried that her mother might suffer from some ailment that should not be dismissed lightly. Asking Dixon about it later gave her even more cause for concern, as the loyal maid insisted that Margaret take no thought about it or worry her father.

One afternoon shortly afterward, Margaret slipped out of the house to walk with her father to the Lyceum, where he sometimes gave lectures.

Happy to be out of doors, even in the sooty town of Milton, Margaret’s spirits lifted with the warmer weather. It appeared the people walking about also enjoyed the change of seasons. No longer were their heads bent down or arms crossed to keep their coverings close about them as they moved briskly to get out of the cold. The pace of the town slowed just a mite, and now faces could be discerned and arms were free to hang down.

Just before they reached the imposing granite building at the town center, Mr. Hale surprised Margaret with a gentle request.

“I should very much like for you to sit in on my discussions with Mr. Thornton occasionally on Thursdays—when you are not busy with your mother, of course. I believe you’ve quite misunderstood Mr. Thornton’s character. In any regard,” he continued, seeing her resistance in the straight line of her mouth, “I think you’d be very interested to hear our discussions of Plato’s *Republic*.”

This he finished saying as they arrived. He gave her a smile, proud of his daughter’s interest in intellectual moral wrestling.

“I will try, papa,” she answered, swayed by his loving countenance.



Later that week, as Margaret padded quietly down the hallway, her father’s voice became clearer as she neared his study. She paused at the sound of the replying Darkshire voice, confused and a trifle annoyed that Mr. Thornton’s voice should cause an unbidden flutter within.

She raised her head, took a breath, and walked into the room with her sewing basket.

Her father smiled at her entrance. “I thought Margaret might like to listen to our discussions from time to time, if you don’t mind,” he announced to his pupil.

“Not at all,” Mr. Thornton replied with a warmth that surprised her.

Sitting by the back wall, Margaret met his eyes for a moment and saw the hopeful sincerity that so unnerved her. She had a right to her own views, and would rebuff any feeling that she ought to repent and sweetly submit to his perspective.

Truth be told, she wished she were not under his scrutiny tonight and would have gathered her things and departed were it not for her father.

“As I was saying,” Mr. Hale continued, “there are very strict rules and few pleasures for the guardians of society, as Plato has outlined. They must remain devoted to their purpose for the benefit of the community.”

“I believe that indicates the crux of the matter regarding the setup of human governments: the balance between individual freedom and the responsibility to society,” Mr. Thornton replied. “While, in theory, I should like for every man to be free to make his own choices, at our present stage

of development, a large portion of society seems not ready for self-government and is better served to follow the dictates of those who have earned a place of authority through knowledge and experience.”

Margaret bristled at his talk of putting most men under authority. “And who will choose which men deserve to be these figures of authority?” Margaret interjected.

“We have many lines of authority in our own government, Margaret,” her father answered. “Do you suppose Captain Lennox doubts the authority of his commanders?”

Who is this Captain Lennox? Mr. Thornton wondered, the disquieting suggestion that Miss Hale might have other suitors sweeping away his concentration from the discussion at hand.

“I suppose there are places where lines of authority must be in order, but I still believe authority cannot be accepted wholesale if it is used to subjugate others unfairly. There must always be recourse for those who may be trodden down,” she posed, thinking of her brother.

“Which is why, I believe, Plato argues that the guardians of society must be those who have grown into higher moral standing through long experience and training of self-denial and self-discipline. They must prove their moral character first before becoming leaders. It is not a haphazard authority,” Mr. Thornton endeavored to explain.

Margaret made a movement of her head, which he took to be reluctant acquiescence, and took up her needlework again. She remained quiet for the rest of the lesson, still feeling a resistance to Mr. Thornton’s comfortable assurance that most men needed authority figures—as if they were children!

When the hour had passed, Mr. Thornton stood to leave, giving a smiling nod to Mr. Hale and turning to glance cautiously at Margaret.

As he passed by her, she remembered her intention to ask him about a doctor.

“Mr. Thornton,” she called out softly, trailing after him down the stairs. He turned around, the hope in his breast brimming to the full at her calling. The soft skin of her cheeks and neck glowed in the shadowed hallway.

“Does your family know of a reputable doctor?”

“Are you ill?” he asked, his face immediately stricken.

“No, no. It is my mother,” she answered, almost in a whisper as she glanced up to ensure her father was not listening.

“I’m sorry to hear she is not well. I will find the name of the doctor my mother calls for Fanny,” he replied in a lower voice, detecting her want of secrecy.

“Thank you. I did not want to trouble you—“ she began, wringing her hands.

“Please,” he insisted with such deep imploring, she was forced to look up and was arrested by his expression of tender concern. “If I can be of any help, you must call on me.”

“Yes, thank you,” she muttered, nonplussed by this unexpected show of kindness after her condemning remarks.

“Good evening, Miss Hale,” he finished, setting his hat on his head and taking a last glance at her before heading out the door.

Chapter Sixteen

The next day, Margaret went to the Princeton District to visit Bessy Higgins.

Bessy was groggy from napping when Mary let Margaret in. “Aye! I thought yo’d forgot me. Father said I’d not see yo’ again. That yo’d only come once to lighten your own conscience in giving the likes of us a little comfort,” she said. Her tone was laced with a touch of doubtful accusation, but her searching gaze on Margaret held to hope.

“I see your father has taken to doubt everyone who isn’t of his own class. But I’ll forgive him for it,” she said, giving Bessy a reassuring smile. “You can tell him I couldn’t come because my mother was ill. You see, we all have our sorrows and troubles to humble us,” the visitor explained, seating herself on the stool next to Bessy’s bed.

“I didna mean to doubt yo’, but father is—“

“I understand. Don’t fret about it. I’m here now. How are you feeling?” Margaret asked, taking Bessy’s hand and patting it.

“Some days are better than others, and yo’ve come on a better day. Your mother is better? There’s nothing terrible wrong, is there?”

The question disturbed Margaret more than she let show, for she herself was wondering the same thing. “She’s better. I believe she’s all right,” she answered with a forced smile.

“What I wouldn’t give to have my mother back again,” Bessy said with a sad sigh.

She twisted suddenly to look at Margaret, her eyes hardened. "Sometimes I could scream at yo' and scratch your pretty skin for all that yo've been given such a pretty life and I'm set with naught but suffering!"

Margaret drew back a moment, but then eased and took the girl's arm to her chest. "I am not God to know why our lives have been so different. But I am here to offer you kindness from my heart. I wish I could take all your suffering away—I truly do!" she pleaded.

Bessy's features grew soft again. "Forgive me for my sin against yo'! Only, I don't know how to go on but for faith that the next world will do me better than this one," she cried.

"The Lord knows our hearts, and will reward us accordingly. Even through our darkest trials, He is there for us. And you will be comforted for all your pain. Revelation says 'There will be no more tears, neither sorrow nor crying.' Do you believe, Bessy?"

"I must believe, for I have naught else," she answered. "Revelation is my favorite part o' the Bible, for it gives me such hope."

"Shall I read to you then?" Margaret asked, thinking this would calm her friend's fevered unrest.

"I'd like that, thank ye," was the reply.



When Margaret returned home, there was a letter from Edith waiting for her.

My dear Margaret,

We are now home in London again, and I believe I shall always miss the warm and breezy climate in Corfu. Oh, it was so very beautiful there! I wished you could have seen it.

But I am glad to be back so that our dear little one will be born a proper English boy (or girl). It was a tiresome ocean journey with me close to my confinement already!

Will you come and visit me if Auntie can spare you? I'm sure you would be glad to escape that awful northern town that Uncle moved you to. You could help me set up the nursery for baby.

I can't help but feel worried about my sweet cousin, surrounded by all those noisy factories and swarms of mill workers. I know you love your

father, but I shall never understand how he could move you to such a place!

Don't tell me not to worry, for it shan't work. When I think of you, unmarried and stuck where there are no prospective matches to speak of, I try to imagine some scheme to get you back here. I'm sure Henry would be pleased to see you again; you and he were such good friends.

I'm sorry to write such a short letter, but I'm getting drowsy. You will understand someday when you are in the same condition.

Do think of coming to visit. Baby isn't due for three months yet. Give Aunt and Uncle my love.

Ever your favorite cousin,

Edith

Margaret could only smile wryly at her cousin's missive. Edith's life ran in perfect cycles of comfort and ease, and she couldn't imagine anyone she was fond of falling beyond these outlines of contentment.

It amused Margaret that Edith and all the other girls in their social circle in London had spent so much of their attention finding a husband. She herself had only thought of returning home to the quiet but useful life in Helstone, where she was free to wander and to be of help to those who truly needed it.

Edith's worrying on her account was merely sweet affection, and Margaret set these concerns aside. There was too much else in this turbulent place to set her thoughts upon.



A few weeks later, Margaret came again to sit quietly and work on her embroidery as her father and Mr. Thornton spoke of Plato's vision of philosopher kings. She wondered how Mr. Thornton could say a great deal on the vital need for moral principles and yet appear not to see how his very lifework in some ways seemed to put it all at odds.

She half-listened to what they were discussing, her thoughts often drifting to Edith and her forthcoming baby. It seemed an incredible thing to Margaret that her dear cousin, who had nearly been a sister to her and was the same age, should be a mother soon! As she dwelt upon it, she looked up to see Mr. Thornton's strong profile as he absorbed her father's reasonings.

Having a child with Mr. Thornton sprang into her mind unbidden, and she gasped aloud. Mr. Thornton turned to look at her.

“It is nothing,” she assured, coloring deeply. “I...pricked my finger,” she lied with a faltering smile. She marveled at how swift and outlandish the imagination could be. She vowed to put the image out of her mind, although the disquieting surprise of it lingered.

Later, as Mr. Thornton stood to leave, he glanced at Margaret before turning to her father.

“Perhaps you have already heard that our first free library in Milton is to open next week. Charles Dickens is coming to speak. Since he is well known to advocate for the common man, I thought you...and Miss Hale... might like to hear him.”

“I would very much like to hear him speak, thank you,” Mr. Hale replied. “Margaret?”

Both men looked to Margaret, who had laid aside her sewing and stood by the door. She smiled and nodded her answer.

“Very well,” Mr. Thornton concluded, “I shall bring a carriage for you at half-past six next Tuesday.”

Outside, as he began his walk home, Mr. Thornton smiled. He remained still hopeful that he and Miss Hale could better understand one another.



On the evening of the event, Margaret dressed in a simple gown of deep blue. She was tying on her bonnet when she heard the carriage’s arrival outside. She called out to her father upstairs with a calmness that belied the nervous tingling in her body at the thought of being in such close confinement with the man who had once asked her to marry him.

Mr. Thornton was all gentility coming to the door and in helping them alight into his family’s carriage. Margaret was surprised to find herself pleased to be afforded the luxury of riding through the streets of this town. It had been many months since she had taken a cab of any kind.

She was pleased, too, that the Thorntons’ coach was not an opulent ride, but reflected well the ideals of his mother and himself in its simple but perfect order and comfort.

Her father was in good spirits, enjoying conversation with his favorite pupil. In fact, Margaret had readily noticed that her father seemed happiest

in the company of Mr. Thornton. Although a twinge of jealousy arose in this awareness, it was submerged by a stronger wave of warm gratitude that her father had found a fellow intellectual companion.

While she smiled at this consideration, she caught the gaze of Mr. Thornton and felt that familiar jolt of heat spread through her. She glanced at her hands and kept her face averted from him, all the while feeling his nearness with every passing moment.

Carriages lined the street as they neared the great Hall of Science, where the books would be housed, in the center of town. A fine rain began, creating a shimmer on the cobblestones and sleek coaches.

Mr. Hale took his daughter's arm in his, and Mr. Thornton walked with them on her other side.

Entering the pillared portico, Margaret marveled at the mix of people coming to this opening. There were ladies with their feathers and pearls, and gentlemen with top hats. But more plainly dressed persons, with calico dresses and wool caps, also entered.

All the concerts and plays Margaret had been to in London were filled with only those in finer social circles. Edith and Aunt Shaw had largely attended only to be seen and to trade the latest gossip. Margaret had never been to a lecture before. Seeing the crowd composed of nearly every level of society was fascinating. There was an air of excitement in witnessing the broadening of opportunity for all. It seemed to Margaret a heartening show of how Milton men did indeed embrace the future.

As she observed all this, she noticed Nicholas Higgins in a group of working men, huddling nearby in discussion. He glimpsed her as she approached and gave her a cursory nod, which she returned with a smile.

But her smile vanished as she watched Higgins' eyes narrow as he stared at the cotton mill master at her side. All the men surrounding the union leader grew still as Mr. Thornton walked by.

The Milton manufacturer led them forward, through the throngs of people. Mr. Thornton stopped frequently as various citizens of the town hailed him. Many glances made their way to Margaret, and she shied uncomfortably from their silent curiosity about her relationship to the respected mill owner.

Mr. Thornton led them toward the front, where seats were reserved for donors of the new library. Before they sat, someone sought Mr. Thornton

again. A man of apparent significance, with a head of curled locks and fleshy cheeks, thrust out his hand to the Master of Marlborough Mills.

“Mr. Thornton, so very glad to see you here tonight. I thank you for your generous contributions to our endeavor,” the man began.

“The more avenues through which men may raise themselves up, the better,” Mr. Thornton replied, as he shook the man’s hand heartily. “Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Hale, an Oxford scholar, and his daughter, who have recently moved here from the South. This is our mayor, Mr. John Potter, who has been a key supporter of the free library,” Mr. Thornton said in formal introduction.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I hope you are bedazzled by all the commotion of our great town,” the mayor enthused. “Although we are not Oxford, you must see how very much interested we are in education here. Welcome indeed!” he said as he shook both of their hands before moving on to greet other attendees.

Margaret was silenced in wonderment of Mr. Thornton’s easy, confident rapport with men of power in this town. She had never seen him in such dignified command of himself. He knew well his power and place here, but without a trace of arrogance or wish to impress. She began to see why some of the well-dressed ladies of her age were giving her scorching looks.

They took their seats, Margaret between her father and Mr. Thornton. Margaret’s pulse quickened whenever Mr. Thornton leaned over her to hear something her father remarked upon.

Swarms of people filled the hall. Those in finer attire took seats closer to the front, while the working classes crowded the back, standing to see. The din of hundreds of voices reverberated in the large stone hall before the master of ceremonies silenced the room to begin the event.

Several speeches were made to explain the system that made the library free to all before Mr. Dickens appeared. When he did, the famed storyteller spoke with a passion for his subject that made the room fall silent under his spell.

“It’s an honor to speak to you tonight on this grand occasion. Men and women of Milton should be proud of this day, when you open our nation’s first free library. You lead England with this step towards lifting all men. You understand that the opportunity to improve oneself through reading—by pursuing knowledge and understanding—must be made available to all

who play a part in the production of this country's great wealth and famous ingenuity.

"There are fine merchants in this town who have helped support this endeavor, who prefer not to employ thoughtless brutes, but intelligent men of supple minds."

"There still exist those men—incomprehensible to me—who will say 'a little learning is a dangerous thing.' Why, there should not be a man in all of England who would deny the rise of any other man. For, has not every man the natural right to improve himself?"

"We can never deny a man his dignity, and is not the desire to learn and to understand the very nature of humanity? It does not matter one whit what a man's station in life should be; he has a natural desire to better himself. The Creator has given him self-respect and curiosity to shake off his ignorance."

"And we believe he should have the means wherewith to educate himself, to learn, to expand his mind—no matter what his daily drudgery requires of him. Although he works with muscle and machine all day to feed his family, he now has access to thousands of books which may feed his mind and give flavor to his soul."

The audience clapped; whistles from the crowd in the back pierced the air. The thrill of being part of something new and historic vibrated through this gathering of humanity.

There was no sight of Higgins or the other men at the close of the evening as the crowds in the front section overtook Margaret's view of the rear.

Within the carriage as they returned home, the silent privacy was a welcome escape from the barrage of sound and sights of the last hours. Margaret was content to gaze out the window while her father and Mr. Thornton commented on the speeches. A flicker of pride for Milton rose within her as she thought of what she'd heard and seen. The eagerness to advance was palpable here, and she thought it far more interesting than the search for entertainment that seemed the purpose of London society.

The words of Dickens rang in her mind, giving her hope that there truly was a common desire to create a better society here in Milton, and that steps could be taken to make the lives of others a little less locked in despair and discontent. She could not help feeling proud that Mr. Thornton had apparently donated a significant sum to this cause.

When they arrived at the Hales' home, Mr. Thornton walked them to their door. Before he turned to go, he slipped a folded piece of paper into Margaret's hand, giving her a cogent look.

Rather discomfited, she smiled and thanked him for the evening again, her heart beating faster from this secret exchange.

She muttered good night to her father as they parted ways in the upper hallway, and she hurried to her room. Her mind raced with anxiety about what the note she held in her hand might contain. Had he written an entreaty of affection? Did he want to meet with her privately? She lit a candle, her hand trembling slightly.

Afraid to open it, she hesitated a few moments before bravely unfolding it.

She smiled and then laughed when she saw what was written: *Dr. Donaldson, 305 Stratford St.*

Her anxiety melted into a pleasant sense of appreciation for his attention to her request. She studied the handwriting closer, wondering if it was his handwriting or his mother's. The bold lines could be the signature of either.

As she lay in bed that evening, her thoughts concerning Mr. Thornton were in turmoil, for she felt her esteem for him inevitably rise as she recalled his comportment and the many citizens who honored his regard. Yet, she still could not fathom his sometimes indifferent attitude to the scores of human beings that worked in his own mill. How was it that he remained such a perplexity?



In the silent stone house across from Milton's largest mill, Mr. Thornton extinguished the candle in his bedchamber and situated himself in the wide bed he had slept in for years. A satisfied smile formed as he thought again, for the hundredth time, of the way Margaret's cheeks had flushed when he had caught her studying him during Dickens' speech.

The evening had gone very well, and he had hopes that someday he would not have to sleep alone.

Chapter Seventeen

The next day, Mr. Hale bored his wife with the details of the event as he sat with her on the blue velvet sofa in her pale yellow sitting room. His chosen mate had never matched his enthusiasm for education, in particular for reading. Maria Hale had dissuaded him from reading aloud to her early in their marriage. Such a disparity of interests had long prevented a closer harmony between them over the years.

Margaret saw that her father's love of learning indeed thrived here, whereas her mother was withering from a lack of purpose. Taken from her role as a vicar's wife who helped poor parishioners, her only occupation of late seemed to be lamenting her situation and her frail health.

As Margaret went into the hallway, contemplating what the forthcoming doctor's visit might reveal, their new servant girl, Martha, appeared.

The sight of the girl sparked Margaret's curiosity. How well did she really know Mr. Thornton? For she had been surprised to discover that he had given generously to the new library.

"Martha, if I may ask," she began, halting the girl from her purpose a moment, "how do you find working with the Thorntons? You could have taken work at the mill instead."

"Oh no, Miss Margaret! I owe the Thorntons my very life. If it were not for them—"

"Whatever do you mean?" Margaret asked, taken aback at the impassioned response.

“My father knew the elder Mr. Thornton. They worked together and were friends many years ago. When my parents took sick and died a few years ago, my sister and I were left behind. I was gravely ill from the same fever that took them. We had no one to turn to, no relatives in town. But somehow Mrs. Thornton and the Master found out and took us both in. They nursed me, so kindly and patiently, back to health.”

“You mean Mrs. Thornton nursed you,” Margaret endeavored to correct her.

“No, I mean the pair of them. Mr. Thornton took care I had everything I needed and watched over me a time or two. He’s not at all what they might say of him in the streets. They don’t know him as I do!” she said, her emotion rising in his defense.

“And that is why I am honored to serve them. I dare not think of what would have happened to me were it not for their kindness,” Martha said more softly.

Realizing the sordid path Martha’s life could have taken as an orphan made Margaret shudder. “Thank you, Martha. That is all.”

Margaret stood in silent wonder for a moment, endeavoring to match the image of Mr. Thornton as a gentle caretaker to the memory of his stony face when talking of his workers.



Eager to hear what Nicholas Higgins had to say about the new library, Margaret made her way to Bessy’s house as soon as her mother lay down for her afternoon nap.

Margaret knocked but had to let herself in, for Mary was gone—she had found work.

“I thought we were right friends,” Bessy playfully accused, as soon as Margaret took a seat on the slatted wooden chair next to the ailing girl. “Yo’ could have told me yo’ were going to the grand opening with the Master. Some as said you even rode in the Thornton carriage with ’im.”

“Mr. Thornton invited my father and me. It wasn’t anything to note,” Margaret answered defensively, aghast at the intimation.

Bessy grinned. “Yo’ can deny it all yo’ like, but to be seen with ’im makes you the Master’s girl.”

“I am no such thing!” Margaret exclaimed, although a strange thrill quickened her pulse.

“Ah, yo’ didna know how fast one can become the tittle-tattle of Milton. Yo’ ought to be honored, I’d say. He’s never showed a liking to any girl in Milton before. There’s many as said he’d be an old bachelor. Married to his mill... or his own mother!” At this last remark they both had to laugh.

Margaret quickly grew solemn again. The knowledge that she was the subject of gossip made her stomach churn.

“I wish I were there to see yo’. What did you wear?” Bessy asked. “You didn’t wear that old dress, did yo’?”

“No, I did not!” Margaret answered with pretended affront. “I’ll have you know I have several nice gowns to choose from which I acquired during my years in London. I wore a midnight blue dress with black lace trim.”

Voices sounded outside before the door swung open. Nicholas and a weary-looking man entered.

Higgins halted, noting Margaret with suspicion.

“She’s only here to visit me, she’ll bring no trouble,” Bessy said, imploring her father to listen.

“I dunno,” he replied, keeping a steely gaze on Margaret. “She were sitting with the Master.”

“Mr. Thornton takes lessons from my father...to study the classics. He invited us both to attend the lecture as we are still new in town,” Margaret answered his accusatory stare with defiant calm.

“Tell him to learn something about democracy from the Greeks. Workers ought to have a say in what goes on. It’s our work as well as theirs, and ours even more so in numbers.”

“I will agree that you should have a voice. Doesn’t your Union meet with the masters? Don’t they let you air your grievances?” Margaret asked.

“Ha! They only tell us what they’ve decided. Tell us what to do with no questions asked of us. That’s what they think of us—as no more than children to be obedient to their orders.”

“Well, I could advocate for you, but as I said, Mr. Thornton’s connection is to my father, not to me. What I say can matter very little to him,” she replied with naïve confidence.

Father and daughter shared a doubtful glance.

“What would you tell him if you could?” Margaret asked with sincere interest.

A thin man behind Higgins hollered his answer, his face contorted with fierce anger. "I'd tell 'im to increase our wages! A man can't feed his family on sixteen pence a week!"

"Boucher has eight children," Bessy explained.

"And none of 'em old enough to work yet," the young father answered. "How am I supposed to feed them? I work all day, and my wife must be caring for the children."

"I've told yo' that we'll keep yo'r family fed, even if I have to share my own bread," Higgins told the man. "You can't keep working at the mill if the Union decides to strike. We all must make sacrifices to make our demands heard. The only way to communicate with them is to strike!"

"I don't understand," Margaret said. "Why must you strike? What is that you are demanding?"

Higgins studied her for a moment, assessing whether to bother explaining himself. "We've not been given an increase in wages in six years! And now there's rumors that the masters plan to cut our wages instead of increasing them. How would you react to that? We work week after week to make them their profits, and this is how we are rewarded!"

Margaret sympathized with their outrage, but she wanted to believe there was a reason for the masters' stance. "Perhaps the master cannot pay more. There may be reasons—"

"Blast their reasons! We'll understand their reasons better when we're assured of food in our bellies. They don't have a worry about their own children going without a meal," Higgins answered, his fist punching the air in his vehemence.

"Perhaps if you talked to Mr. Thornton—" Margaret suggested.

"Thornton?" Higgins exclaimed, his voice rising. "Talking to Thornton is like talking to that wall. He won't budge an inch once he's made his decision."

Margaret was shaken at his assessment. "Is he truly so stubborn?" she dared to ask. "I had hoped better of him."

Higgins observed her downcast expression before saying grudgingly, "He's not the worst of them, I'll give him that. He says what he means, and he won't play his cards to trick us into thinking he'll change his mind, as Henderson and Slickson have done. No, Thornton lays down his position as clear as day."

Margaret nodded, although this further knowledge did little to alleviate the sinking feeling in her stomach at the enmity between these men.



Margaret walked home from Bessy's house much disturbed. It was preposterous to her that the workers and master—those whose lives were so dependent one on the other!—should be in such a state of perpetual opposition. There must be some way to ameliorate the deep distrust. Why could they not communicate civilly with one another?

These questions consumed her thoughts as she passed the section of town where Marlborough Mills stood behind a row of houses. She regarded all the factory chimneys cluttering the skyline. Perhaps it was her purpose to be a connection to both workers and their employers, to find some way to bridge the gulf between them. She halted her steps, pondered her impulse, and strode towards the mill.



Marlborough Mills shut down half an hour before sunset. The massive clacking looms now lay still and silent in the weaving shed that comprised the bulk of the factory. The Master's office, and those of his clerks, were in a separate section, away from the daily commotion of industry.

The growing heat of summer made every enclosed space less comfortable, and the Master sat at his desk with his cotton shirtsleeves rolled up past his elbows. He rubbed his eyes and closed his ledger for the day, tired of looking at figures, doubly tired of drawing up contingency plans for if—or more than likely—when there would be a strike.

He let out an exasperated sigh. When would the workers ever learn to trust his judgment? It irritated him they could believe him to be withholding pay merely for cruel sport or for his own ungodly gain. They did not know the dangers involved in managing such an enterprise when the market was unstable in America. In their minds, it was all so simple, and the masters were ogres for keeping wages steady for years.

Well, they would learn that he could not and would not meet their demands for a five percent increase in wages. It would put the entire

enterprise at risk of closure. If they would strike, then he would look for other hands to fill their places. It was his right.

His thoughts were caught up in such furious justification when there was a knock on his door. “Yes,” he clipped without turning in his chair. He did not wish to answer any more questions.

“A Miss Hale for you,” one of his clerks announced.

Mr. Thornton turned and stood immediately, his face softened with hope. “Miss Hale,” he repeated, his heart thudding with pleasure that she had sought him out. “What can I do for you? Is it your mother?” he asked, his voice at once full of concern.

“No. No, thank you. I have come to speak about something else that troubles me,” she began, her courage waning now that she was standing in front of him.

“Will you sit—“

“No, I won’t stay long. I came only to speak to you for a moment. I know you must have much to attend to,” she babbled, lowering her gaze to the floor, away from the sight of his strong, sinewy forearms. Heat flooded through her veins to be alone with him when he was so casually appeared.

He waited curiously as she gathered herself.

“I beg you to forgive me for my ignorance in such things, but I have heard talk of a strike today, which I know you must wish to avoid. I cannot stand by and watch such a drastic measure be taken if there is no need for it. I thought perhaps if you could meet with Nicholas Higgins, you could explain to him your position,” she pleaded. “He is a Union leader—“

“I know who he is,” he snapped, his face hardening as he realized she had come on another man’s behalf. He felt a fool to feel a twinge of jealousy at her utterance of this man’s Christian name, when she had never spoken his own or advocated for his cause.

“You are sorely mistaken if you think a mere conversation will appease these men,” he continued. “If they want to usurp my authority and make the decisions, then I invite them to become master for a time to see what presses me to refuse their ignorant demands!” he practically shouted.

She set her jaw firmly in response to his rebuff. “But don’t you see that is exactly why you should talk? They know nothing about what you are facing. If you told them—“

“If I told them, they wouldn’t believe me. They think they know it all already, and that I am making myself rich at their expense,” he shot back,

barely controlling his pent-up rage.

She stood her ground, her chest heaving at his rebuke. "I see, then, that coming to you is fruitless. I expected you to be reasonable, but I am mistaken," she said, keeping her voice even with a shaky deliberation. She pressed her lips together as she studied him. "You are just as stubborn in your views as you say these men are," she added. She swiftly turned to go.

He lunged forward and grasped her arm, spinning her back to face him.

Her eyes went wide, and her lips—not far from his now—were parted in surprise. He hesitated, every nerve ending burning with the desire to capture that bold mouth of hers with his.

He loosened his hold of her and stepped back from his overbearing position.

"Forgive me," he said, looking to the floor in disgust at what he had done. "I had no right to..." He could not finish.

He met her frightened gaze, his anger tempered now by guilt at his recklessness. "I will attempt to meet with this Higgins...for your sake. But I make no promises beyond that."

"I thank you," she replied in a breathless voice, and quickly left the room.

He stood, running his fingers through his hair, as remorse overtook all other emotions. What kind of brute was he, to handle her that way? What she must think of him!

He agonized over the reasonable answer: that she must now see him for what he truly was—an uncouth and rough man, who was not worthy of her affections.

He drew his hands into fists at his own stupidity, at letting violent passion overthrow his self-control. What was the power she held over him, to undo all his careful restraint?

She would never see him as a suitor now. Why should he torture himself by pursuing her further? It tore his heart to reason thus, but it was of no use. He still wanted her.

That she had dared to come to him at all made him want her all the more. And she had come—she with her pure heart, full of compassion—and proved herself unafraid to stand against him for what she believed.

She made him doubt himself again and again. She drove him to madness in wanting to prove himself to her.

Nevertheless, he wanted her as his wife. And there would be no cure for his yearning until she was in his home, and in his bed.

Chapter Eighteen

Margaret stepped shakily from the confines of the mill and burst into the mill yard, heading quickly toward the street. Everything that had happened raced through her mind: their heated words, his bare arms, the look of fire in his eyes! She could still feel the strong imprint of his grip on her arm. Her breath came more rapidly still as she thought of that suspended moment when his face was close to hers as he held her captive. She tried to shake off the vision as she rounded a corner.

Tears stung her eyes as she rushed to the tall stone houses toward her home. His sharp words had made her feel foolish for believing she could help in some way. Well! It was best to discover now what manner of man he was when his business was at risk. A gentleman would never have treated her in such a manner. It would be madness to consider marrying him!

She dashed a tear away with the back of her hand, glad for the darkening sky.



Mr. Thornton did not come to his lesson that week. He wrote to Mr. Hale to say that he was too busy at present and that it might be some time before he could resume his lessons.

Margaret wondered how much truth was in his statement, or if she was the real reason he did not come. Was he still angry with her for insisting that he take action according to her sense of things?

She hardly knew what to think of him of late. One moment her pride rose in indignation at how he had chastised her. After all, she had come to him with good intent! But the next moment, her whole body stilled, and her heart beat fervently as she remembered how close their bodies had been. The way he had looked at her filled her head with wild images. How would it feel to be pressed against him in a tight embrace—to be caught in his arms as his wife?

She endeavored to chase such notions from her mind.



Mr. Thornton muttered a curse to himself when he thought of the promise he had made to attempt to communicate with the union leader. He had far too many decisions to make daily with the threat of a strike looming. He would be hard-pressed to keep the flow of production going if his workers joined the strike.

But he took time enough to make inquiries about Higgins, gathering an account of his role in the Union as well as where he lived.

Long after the throng of workers had emptied from his factory to go home to their dinners, the Master of Marlborough Mills made his way to the Princeton District where many of his mill workers lived.

His tall, imposing figure was a mere shadow in the dark alleyways. He was glad to come at this time, when most of the inhabitants would be inside their dwellings for the evening, instead of cluttering the walkways as they eyed him as an intruder to their realm.

Only the drunkards were out, lying on the sides of the passageways. And as he passed by the Goulde Dragon, he heard the bawdy laughter and clinking of mugs within the drinking hole. His hatred of such places could hardly be described. He had seen many lives wasted away by such a snare, and had a deep disgust for the weak-minded who entered there of their free will.

The second door down from the left was his destination, and he knocked with the swift decisiveness and purpose that had become his life habit.

The heavy wooden door creaked open. A middle-aged man with a stout frame, dressed in a loose shirt and no necktie, peered at him with no umbrage as to their differing statuses.

“Are you Nicholas Higgins?” The Master started.

“I am. What brings you here, Thornton? I’ve done naught against the law.”

Mr. Thornton took a long breath. “I’ve not come as a magistrate. I’ve come to speak to you man to man, if you will allow it.”

Higgins studied him for a moment and then opened the door wider.

A single lamp burned on a sturdy table that served as the centerpiece of the room. A girl with dark hair stood stirring a pot over a small fire against the side wall. Another girl, with fairer hair, lay in bed on the other side of the dwelling.

Bessy gasped when the stranger’s face was finally revealed as he stepped closer to the lamp.

“You’ve not yet eaten,” Mr. Thornton noted, seeing three bowls and spoons stacked on the table. “I didn’t mean to disturb you,” he apologized.

Higgins nodded to indicate that his guest should take a seat while he himself sat in the hard kitchen chair across from him.

The dark-haired girl came to the guest’s side in an awkward rush, motioning to take the top hat in his hand. She promptly set it on a hook by the door and went back to her pot.

“Who sent yo’ here?” Higgins asked, scrutinizing the Master with caution. “Hamper? Slickson?”

“I’m not a dog to be ordered about by such as they. I play no tricks or underhanded schemes, as well you should know,” Mr. Thornton answered with unmoved gravity. “I made a promise to come here. I believe we are both acquainted with someone.”

“Miss Margaret!” Bessy blurted out the name without thinking and shrunk in embarrassment as the Master turned to look at her.

“That’s my Bess,” Nicholas explained. “Miss Margaret has been a friend to her since she saw her working in yo’r own mill.”

Mr. Thornton remembered her now. Miss Hale had been bold enough to converse with the workers in the carding room at the beginning of her tour of his factory.

“Bess worked over two years at Hamper’s mill, afore the cotton fluff got in her lungs and made her ill. She worked a bit in yo’r mill then,” Higgins explained. “She’ll work no more now,” he said in a low, somber voice.

He looked directly at the mill master. “Her life will be one of those sacrificed to make the likes of yo’ comfortable in your fine houses and

fancy clothes. While we eat stew with a bit o' grizzle day after day!" His words stung with the force of years of bitterness.

"Father!" Bessy called out to stop his tirade, but her outcry was too much for her lungs and she began coughing.

Higgins rushed to comfort his daughter, feeling a twinge of guilt that his outrage should disturb her health.

Mr. Thornton was touched by the scene, recognizing that Bess looked to be near the same age as his own sister, Fanny. The disparity between these two girls' lives could not be more apparent.

As her coughing and gasping subsided, Mr. Thornton stood. "I won't take up more of your time. I came only to explain why we masters cannot meet your demands."

"Yo' could 'ave saved yo'self the trouble of coming here. I know the reason you won't pay more," the Union leader clipped, his anger reigniting. "Yo' like to keep us at yo'r mercy, giving us just enough as to scrape by but not enough to give us the chance to better ourselves and build a life above what is fit for a dog!"

"I was told I might find you to be a reasonable man," Mr. Thornton replied, his voice tight with his own rising anger. "But I see that I was right to believe it would do no good to come." He turned to leave, but then pivoted to address Higgins a final time.

"I know you think me a heartless man, but I've known hunger and how to live on sixteen pence a week with three mouths to feed. Do you think I've forgotten? Do you think I want to keep your wages low to watch you suffer? Has it not occurred to you that we have bills to pay and markets to watch so that we can keep the machines in operation? We know when we can afford to pay the workers more and when we cannot. You cannot make your demands and expect us to oblige when doing so might shut down the mill. Then where would you be? How would you feed your family?"

Higgins narrowed his eyes, his arms crossed over his wide chest in defiance. "We are men, and deserve to be treated like men. We've not been paid an increase in five years while you earn your profits and eat very well. And you wish us to believe that a five percent increase will shutter your mills?"

"You may believe what you like, I only tell you the truth of the matter. We shall not meet your demands, because it puts the mill at risk," the

Master answered through clenched teeth. “I’ll leave you to your supper, and wish your daughter well,” he added in a level voice, and left.

The swell of righteous indignation still swirled in his thoughts as he shut the door behind him. Such men as Higgins refused to see reason! It was much simpler for them to paint the masters as monsters. It struck him sorely that all his diligence, efficiency, and directness should be disparaged as nothing but greed. Did these men not owe their livelihoods to the mills?

His temper dissipated as he trod along the dark alleyways. Heading toward his spacious and comfortable home, he thought of the cramped and barren dwelling he had just visited. They had shelter and food—although perhaps not hearty or varied sustenance. He passed many similar doorways, all testament to the great many inhabitants of this town who toiled daily to survive.

He thought of the girl and her violent coughing. A flare of condemning disgust rose in him as he thought of how Hamper had chosen not to install the apparatus in his mill that would diminish the cotton fluff floating in the air. Hamper had chosen to save himself the 700 pound expense, laughing that the workers wanted to eat the fibers to fill their empty bellies.

His anger turned to pain as he remembered that the Higgins girl was Margaret’s friend, and that Bessy would likely die within the year. There was no cure for brown lung, but it might be alleviated to some degree with proper care.

As he bounded up the stairs of his own home, he knew the course of action he would take.

Chapter Nineteen

Dr. Donaldson came to the house in Crampton during this time. Margaret was saddened and worried that her mother wanted only Dixon to attend her during this visit.

Although shut out, she lingered near the door, for she could not think of attending to anything else when her mother might be given a dreadful diagnosis. She thought she heard her mother moan. The mumbling of the doctor's voice was indistinct, and she decided there and then that she would not be kept out of any secret concerning her mother's health.

Hearing the scrape of a chair and sounds indicating that the visit was over, Margaret descended the stairs.

"Dr. Donaldson, please. If I may speak with you," she said, approaching him as he headed towards the door.

He stopped to listen and assess, wondering what type of girl this might be, for there were two kinds: the ones who shrieked and wailed and made a scene of things, or the more solid type who quietly took in the meaning of things.

"I am Mrs. Hale's only daughter, and I would like to know what you have found today regarding my mother's health," she requested with determination, standing erect.

"My dear, I'm not at liberty to tell you. You must ask Miss Dixon—"

"Dixon is a servant, and I am her daughter," she said with firmness. "I demand that you tell me! I need time to prepare my father if it is something serious, for it would be a very harsh blow for him. I have enough strength to

hear the truth, and the truth is what I shall hear from you!" she commanded, her eyes imploring and defiant as she steadfastly met his.

Now, this was a girl after his own heart, a stalwart lass who would carry any burden with endurance. A beauty too, he noted, concluding that it would take a mighty man to match her power.

He stepped closer to reveal his prognosis solemnly. "We will do our best to mitigate the pain, but there will be no recovery," he began as gently as possible.

"Oh! What is it?" Margaret exclaimed, her hand flying to cover her mouth.

"A tumor, my dear. She may have periods of relative ease, but it will not abate. At best, she will be with you a year, but no more."

"My mother!" she whispered, her face paled and her eyes dampened with tears.

He watched as the quivering lips clamped together, and she raised herself to her full height.

"Thank you for telling me. I can bear it now that I know what lies ahead."

He had no doubt about it. "You must let your father notice things of his own accord. He will eventually come to his own conclusion."

"Yes" was all she could mutter.

"I shall come every fortnight. That will be an indication to your father that it is more than a passing trifle."

She agreed, and he bid her goodbye, bounding down the stairs outside to meet with the next patient on his list.

When he reached the center of town, he saw the tall mill master walking nearby. "Mr. Thornton!" he hailed him, and the younger man drew closer. "I've seen the factory girl you sent me to. You're quite right. There is nothing that can be done for her, I'm afraid. Now, as to that new patient you sent me: I met with the daughter afterward—a fine girl if I may say so. I'm sorry to say, however, that she will probably be without a mother within the year."

A stab of icy dread nearly staggered the strong businessman. "Mrs. Hale?" he asked, his voice tremulous.

"Yes. You are acquainted with the family? They are new to Milton, I gathered."

"Mr. Hale is my friend," Mr. Thornton answered in a daze as he attempted to absorb the implications. "You will do everything you can for

her. Spare no expense,” he instructed, with sudden intensity. “I will pay whatever may bring her comfort beyond what Hale can afford. But let him believe your regular fee covers all.”

“Of course,” the doctor answered, more than happy to accommodate the wishes of the wealthy manufacturer.

“Is there anything I can do? Anything that she might need?” Mr. Thornton asked, his earnestness touching the old physician’s heart.

“Let me think...eating fruit may do her good,” he replied.

“Fruit? Of any particular kind?”

“Whatever fresh fruit may be had,” was the reply.

Mr. Thornton set out to find the finest fruit as soon as they parted company.

Dr. Donaldson went on a few steps, reflecting upon Mr. Thornton’s reaction to the news and how he was certainly a dear friend to Mrs. Hale’s husband. A new thought struck him, which halted his gait. Perhaps Thornton was interested in the daughter. He turned around to study the mill master once more, but he had vanished.

“Well!” thought he, “I suppose that Mr. Thornton would be an excellent match for a girl of her robust character! Yes, I quite like the thought,” he decided as he continued down the street.



Margaret stood in the hallway the doctor had vacated, tears staining her cheeks, when she heard a door open upstairs and Dixon’s heavy footsteps. She wiped her tears away and met her mother’s servant as she descended the stairs.

“I have spoken with Dr. Donaldson, Dixon,” she began, asserting her authority at once. “He has told me the truth.”

“It was not his truth to tell! Your mother wished to keep it secret, to protect you,” Dixon exclaimed in a loud whisper.

“Do not blame the doctor; I forced him to tell me. And as you can see, I am not a child who needs protection. You ought to know me better than that.”

Dixon studied the girl with admiration for her hardiness at such a time. “I may have mistaken you for a weaker girl, and you have my apology. But your father is sure to take it very badly,” she argued.

Margaret's head drooped, and she sighed aloud. "Oh Dixon! Is it really true?" she blurted out in despair, searching Dixon's expression for the truth. "How is my mother doing?" she pleaded to know all.

Dixon's face softened with tender sympathy. "She has her days of pain and weakness, and sometimes days of only mild sensation. Don't you go see her right now," she said as Margaret made a move to ascend the stairs. "She is taking a rest. Let me tell her what has happened, and you can come to her in the afternoon as you usually do."

"Alright," Margaret agreed quietly.

Dixon gave her a sympathetic look and then continued on her way to the kitchen.

When the doorbell rang many moments later, Margaret was still standing near the stairs in a daze. Wakening enough to realize Dixon was not there to answer it, she went herself.

Opening the door, she was surprised to find Mr. Thornton standing there with his arms around a great basket full of fresh fruit. She could not muster even a polite smile as she stared at the offering in confusion.

"I happened to meet Dr. Donaldson at the market place. He told me your mother might benefit from eating fruit, so I took the liberty of selecting some for her," he explained, studying the somber face and wishing he could drop the basket and enfold her in his arms.

"Oh...thank you," she said, almost smiling, with some effort.

"If you will allow me, I can carry it to where you'd like," he offered, straining to withhold himself from speaking any string of sympathetic words that would reveal what he knew.

Putting his gift down on the table in the front parlor as she indicated, he turned to leave. "I'm sorry your mother is unwell," he said softly.

Margaret nodded, fighting back the tears the tenderness in his voice evoked.

He saw her struggle and hesitated a moment, but then moved to take his leave.

She followed him. "Thank you again," she called out after him as he stepped out the door. "It was kind of you," she said as he turned around. This time, a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"If I can be of any service," he returned, tipping his hat politely before continuing his way down the stairs to the street.

He took reluctant strides away, taming the impulse to go back and comfort her somehow. But it was not his role to do so. And perhaps it might never be, he told himself. But underneath such reasoning, his heart still beat strong with hope.



Margaret's heart was full as she tended to her mother that afternoon. She withheld her tears for her mother's sake, as Mrs. Hale was yet displeased that her plans for a longer period of secrecy had been denied her.

"I don't want to see you become somber and sad on my account, darling," Mrs. Hale explained. "You are young and ought to be enjoying your youth," she smiled, patting her daughter's hand.

"And father?" Margaret asked.

Her mother's expression grew wistful and tender. "Your father has such a gentle heart. He could never bear to see people suffer. I don't know how to tell him. He will blame himself terribly," she said, her voice trembling.

Margaret lifted her mother's hand up to kiss it. "He will see...slowly. We must let him discover the truth little by little. I will help, mama."

Mrs. Hale breathed a little easier. "I know he has his faults, but I also have mine. He has been good to me, and I...I fear I have been ungrateful," she confided.

"Shhh now," Margaret comforted, giving her hand a squeeze.

"I hope you will find a husband as gentle as your father. I confess I was a little surprised you did not find a match for yourself in London."

Margaret smiled weakly, but her body tensed at the memory of the fervent "Marry me!" she had received in Milton the very day she'd ever stepped foot there.

Would Mr. Thornton make a gentle husband? He was so very different from her father. Mr. Thornton was a man of great power, who took decisive action and spoke without equivocation. Their arguing had been vehement. He had grasped her arm in her attempt to leave!

And yet, today, there was no trace of the hard-willed man. He was all tenderness and compassion. He had taken the effort to ease suffering in bringing his gift. And out of his busy day too!

"I think today I should like you to read to me a little from Psalms," her mother said, returning Margaret's attention to the present moment.

Margaret read, endeavoring to remain as encouraging as possible. She tried to be as attentive and gentle as ever, but cherished the hours together as never before.



Mr. Thornton came home that evening to find Fanny and his mother addressing the invitations for their annual dinner party. He took up his evening paper, but instead of reading, sidled up to the table where the women were working, Fanny setting the seal on the folded parchments.

Everyone in Milton knew the Thorntons hosted a grand dinner party each year for the town's most powerful manufacturing men. It was the one occasion on which Mrs. Thornton set aside her proclivity to economize and served a banquet that would reflect her son's position in society.

"All our traditional guests will receive invitations?" he asked, looking over his mother's shoulder to see what names she had written.

"Yes, of course, John," his mother answered, with a trace of annoyance.

"You will invite the Hales?" he prodded, having mentioned his interest in including them to her a few days before.

Fanny spoke up instead. "They are on the list. But I don't see why we should invite these Hales, as they will have nothing in common with the people at our dinner party," she remarked.

Her brother bristled at her arrogant tone. "It will be a great opportunity for them to integrate with Milton people. Mr. Hale is very interested in all the workings of power here," he answered.

He lowered his voice. "Mrs. Hale may not attend, however. She has been ill."

"The dinner party is yet six weeks hence, perhaps she may improve," Mrs. Thornton reasoned, herself not patient with women who proclaimed themselves forever ailing with some kind of trouble or other.

Mr. Thornton remained silent.

"At any rate, they should count themselves honored to be invited. I can think of a few others I should rather have had come," Fanny went on.

Fanny's remarks irritated her brother. He caught the cautious glance of his mother, who knew much more about his interest in the Hales. She would know that of all their guests, there was one person whom he wished to be there above all.

Chapter Twenty

As the longer days of June progressed, the lace curtains in her mother's sitting room waved in the breeze of open windows. Margaret had found some beautiful pink and white peonies at the market and brought them home to sit in a wide vase for her mother's pleasure. The flowers made Margaret long to be in Helstone, where the vicarage garden would be blooming and the wildflowers would cover the landscape of her childhood home.

She did not let such yearnings fill her mind for too long, for there were challenges enough in Milton that needed her full attention. Pining for the past did her no good in the present. She must take courage to meet each day with as happy a disposition as possible.

One of her pleasures at this time was to walk across town to visit Bessy. As she became more familiar with the parts of town she crossed—the high street markets, the mills, and the neighborhoods of row houses and lodgings—she began to feel she was a part of this teeming town. Having a connection to the Higgins family gave her a heartfelt interest in the people who made the town what it was.

Arriving at Bessy's one afternoon, she was pleased to find her friend sitting up and smiling from ear to ear.

"Yo'll not guess who has been to visit us the other night," Bessy prodded.

"Why, I'm afraid I don't know many other people here. Who?" Margaret answered, perplexed at Bessy's apparent eagerness.

"The Master—that's who!" she announced triumphantly.

“The Master?... Mr. Thornton?” Margaret stammered.

Bessy took pleasure in witnessing her surprise. “He came the other night to speak with father. “He as much as said he’d made a promise to yo’ to do it,” she said, excited to tell the story she’d finally waited days to tell.

Margaret was speechless, so Bessy continued, “He didn’t stay long. Father’s temper put him in a mood to take his leave.” She sighed heavily.

“What did Mr. Thornton say?” Margaret demanded.

“He tried to explain why he couldn’t pay more wages, but Father wouldn’t hear it.”

They were silent for a moment. “I am glad he came, nonetheless,” Margaret remarked. “I had not expected—“

“I’ve not told you all,” Bessy interrupted, a smile again appearing on her face. “While he were here, I had one of my coughing spells. He wished me well when he left. But that’s not the end of it...” She could scarcely contain her wonder over what she would reveal next. “He sent a doctor to see me yesterday. A doctor!” she repeated, still incredulous.

Bessy’s head drooped and she grew somber. “Of course, he said I had the cotton lung, which we all knew. And that there wasn’t any cure for it. But he gave me this bottle of laudanum to take if the pain gets bad,” she said, holding the brown bottle in her hand as some precious relic.

She looked up at Margaret with an expression of amazement. “Imagine, such as me gettin’ a doctor to come and see me. And this...” she held the bottle up, “he gave to me and said there was no charge.”

Margaret’s eyes filled with tears to see Bessy so affected by this simple act of care.

Bessy studied her friend for a moment. “He must think a good deal of yo’ to come as he did. None of the other masters would have done it.”

Margaret looked down, feeling a blush rise to her face. “I asked him to try talking to your father in hopes that all this talk of striking might be quelled. But perhaps Mr. Thornton is right, and I don’t understand.”

“But you tried to get these men to see reason,” Bessy reassured her, laying her hand on Margaret’s arm. “Sometimes I think they’re all fools. I’m so tired of all their fighting.”

Margaret’s mouth quirked in a wry smile. “Now,” she exclaimed in a brighter tone, breaking the sullen strain of conversation. “I have not told *you* all,” she said with a secretive smile. “My family has been invited to dinner at the Thorntons.”

“Oh! But it’s for the masters and the like. And sometimes the mayor or a parliament member will attend,” the Milton girl replied.

“So you think I am not worthy to attend?” Margaret teased her friend.

“Ah no, but I’m telling yo’ that as yo’r father is no master or dignitary, yo’re getting invited must count for something else,” Bessy said, giving Margaret a knowing look. “I knew he had eyes for yo’, that day in mill. Yo’ll marry him if he asks yo’, won’t yo’?”

“Bessy!” Margaret protested, her heartbeat quickening. If only Bessy knew that he had already asked as much.

“I long to end my suffering here and think on how it will be in the life everlasting, but it would make me happy to see yo’ marry the master before I go!” Bessy lay back in her bed and looked dreamily at the ceiling, imagining it. She propped herself up on her elbows. “What will you wear to the dinner?” she asked.

Margaret was glad to drop the subject of marriage. “I told you I have several nice dresses from London. I’ve not chosen what to wear yet, but you shouldn’t worry about that,” she mock scolded.

“Aye, but other girls there will dress to catch Mr. Thornton’s eye, and yo’ must carry over all.”

“Bessy! You are truly scandalous!” Margaret exclaimed. “I’ve not said if I would marry him.”

“But why wouldn’t yo’?” Bessy was perplexed. “I can see now how he might bend more to the workers if yo’re to be his wife,” she said.

“I doubt a man like Mr. Thornton would be influenced by any woman, let alone me, who is a southern-bred woman with little knowledge of how this town runs.”

“But he’s already come to talk to Father, hasn’t he? The likes of Slickson or Hamper would never have come as Thornton did. And after all Father’s insults he still took pains to send a doctor to me.”

Margaret was struck by Bessy’s words. She wondered how much influence she could hope to have over Mr. Thornton’s attitude toward his workers.

She had been wrong to assume Nicholas would be receptive to Mr. Thornton’s explanations. Perhaps she was wrong to assume Mr. Thornton was unmovable in his opinions and practices.

Margaret was still pondering everything Bessy had said when she arrived home much later. Her mother was awake when she came in and called for

her. Ever since they had received the invitation to the Thornton dinner party, the idea of attending had animated Mrs. Hale.

“Just think, Margaret,” she had enthused, “we haven’t been invited to a proper dinner in years! Oh, but I have nothing to wear!” she suddenly recalled, with a corresponding frown.

“You can wear one of my dresses, mamma. We can shorten the skirts, and take in the bodice a little,” Margaret had suggested brightly.

Her mother then wanted Margaret to parade in front of her in the dresses Margaret herself might wear, so that they could choose which would suit best for the occasion.

Although she was a trifle tired from her walk, Margaret cheerfully obliged, giving a twirl and curtsy with each frock for her mother’s amusement. And with Dixon’s added opinions, it was decided that Mrs. Hale would have the pink dress altered for herself while Margaret would wear the gown of pale green satin.

“Do you think it may be too much for a Milton dinner party?” Margaret queried, standing in the off-the-shoulder dress that had elicited praise from her mother and the family servant.

“No, my dear. It is just what a young woman should wear to an elegant evening affair,” her mother assured her. “Now, I wonder what necklace I might have that would set it off perfectly.”

Margaret gave an agreeing smile, but the thought of presenting herself in such a gown before Mr. Thornton made her insides churn with apprehension. A dress of this fashion was meant to capture the attention of men, and she was certain it would accomplish its task in attracting Mr. Thornton’s notice. What she still could not decipher, however, was whether she truly wished to secure his interest in her.



Mr. Hale told Margaret at dinner that evening that Mr. Thornton would come to his lesson on Thursday. The thought of seeing him again made her muscles tense as a flood of conflicting emotions coursed through her. She had not yet spoken to him about his meeting with Nicholas.

She had sent him on a fool’s errand, and he would be displeased with her. She wondered if his interest in her would wane because of her meddling. A discomforting feeling pressed down on her. She tried to will it away by

telling herself that she would not be affected at the change of his affections, for she had not been certain of her own.

Thursday evening came on the heels of a warm day. The windows and doors of the Hales' row house were open to let air circulate. Upstairs with her mother and Dixon, Margaret was distracted by the expectation of Mr. Thornton's arrival.

When the doorbell rang, she listened intently for sounds from below—the muffled voice of her father's welcome and the deeper tones of a reply.

She stayed upstairs with some impatience, giving short replies to Dixon's commentary on how the weather in Milton differed from that in Hampshire.

When it was time for Dixon to brush her mother's hair, Margaret escaped to her father's study on the first floor.

She stepped quietly through the doorway as they talked. The discourse halted, and both men looked up at her entrance. A lantern lit the center of the book-filled room, leaving the perimeter in shadows. Her father smiled his welcome, but Margaret could not read the expression on Mr. Thornton's face. His glance swept over her entire form with a glint in his eye, his lips almost a smile.

He had taken off his frock coat, and was wearing only his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, as she had seen him in the mill. A wave of warmth spread through her to see him thus, and she almost turned to leave. But she falteringly took a seat by the door as they resumed their discussion. Her father had also taken off his frock coat this warm evening.

Margaret kept her head bowed over her needlework, occasionally taking surreptitious glances at Mr. Thornton's profile—the way his dark hair brushed behind the white collar of his shirt, and the mesmerizing form of his arms that could be seen through the billowy cotton sleeves in lamp light.

When Mr. Thornton stood to leave, Margaret swiftly put her work into her basket and stood, ready to see him out as he put his coat on. Student and tutor shook hands, and Margaret walked the short distance behind her father's pupil to the front door.

"Bessy tells me that you talked with her father. I am sorry Nicholas was not more agreeable, but I am glad you went to see him nonetheless," she said as he gathered his hat from the hook on the wall and gave it to him.

He turned to study her deferential manner, the folded hands in front of her, the bowed head and faint blush on her cheeks.

"I must apologize for my rough manner—" he began.

“No, I was too forward in coming to you. Let us not speak of it,” she returned, wringing her hands and lowering her eyes from his gaze.

He was silent.

“It was good of you to send the doctor to see Bessy,” she began again. “It did her much good just to be visited, I am certain.”

“I am sorry your friend is suffering. Hamper cares nothing about the health of his workers. If she had only worked at my mill from the start, she might have been spared such trouble,” he said with a creased brow. “How is your mother?” he asked.

“She is fairly well at present, thank you. Although there are other times when she is put out. She likes to sit by her window where she can see some wildflowers beyond the canal.”

“Would she like to go to them?” he asked.

“It is too far—“

“I should be happy to take her there—to take your family there sometime when she is well enough to enjoy it. Would she enjoy a carriage ride to the meadows beyond?” he offered.

Margaret blinked her surprise, unable to speak for a moment. “Why yes, I believe that would be very fine. But please do not go to any trouble over—“

“It is no trouble at all. If you believe it would do her good,” he insisted.

“Yes, I believe it would. Thank you,” she replied.

He hesitated a moment, hat in hand, as if to say something else, but then changed his mind and nodded goodbye before heading out.

She stood in the darkened hallway for several moments, contemplating his kind offer. How was it that he always surprised her? She had long relegated his kind to a category of men she could not admire. Yet he continued to wrest from her the satisfaction of dismissing him as an unworthy suitor.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mr. Thornton arranged to bring a carriage to the Hales' home one Sunday afternoon to take the family for a drive in the country.

Margaret stood in front of her wardrobe, a flutter of anxiety in her stomach, as she searched for what to wear for a summer outing. The sun was piercing through the patchy sky overhead, and the air was warm.

Eager to once again be surrounded by green hills and fields of wildflowers, her spirits were light. She took out a favorite walking dress of spun yellow cambric with a blue satin sash and laid it across her bed. The memory of the pathway in Helstone from their front garden to the southern hills immediately came to mind, and she smiled. She had not worn it since.

She hastened to dress and put up her hair in pins herself, for she resolved Dixon should not become overwrought and disturb her mother's happiness. As soon as she had readied herself, she crossed the narrow hallway to her mother's room—just in time to calm the fretting Dixon, who had mislaid the Missus' hairbrush at such a crucial time.

Mr. Hale soon called from the bottom of the stairs to announce the arrival of their ride, and Margaret stepped to the top of the stairway. The sound of the bell jolted her, even though she knew to expect it. She halted a moment to collect herself as her father opened the door and greeted their outing's host.

Her father glanced in Margaret's direction.

"I don't know if mamma is quite ready yet," Margaret offered.

“I will fetch her, shall I? Margaret, you can keep Mr. Thornton company for a few moments,” he said as he started up the stairs to ensure his wife was still feeling well enough for the day’s plans.

Margaret kept her focus on her steps, her bonnet in one hand and the other on the banister, as she came down the stairs. She felt Mr. Thornton’s gaze on her in these silent moments, which made a warmth spread over her face.

“My mother has been looking forward to this outing,” Margaret said brightly as she reached the floor and bravely lifted her eyes to see the man standing a few steps in front of her.

All her pretended indifference vanished as she took in the sight of him. In place of his usual workday clothes of black cravat and waistcoat, he wore a gray worsted waistcoat and burgundy cravat which softened his appearance and gave him an air of casual elegance. His lips curved into a smile, and the way his eyes appraised her made her heart skip a beat.

“I am glad the weather took care not to spoil our plans today,” she said, trying to hide the fluster of confusion his presence always aroused in her as she began fitting her bonnet on.

“It is a perfect day,” he answered, and she felt he spoke not solely about the weather.

“Do you not take your sister and mother out for a drive often?” Margaret asked, endeavoring to make conversation.

“Fanny more likely wants to shop in town and be seen, rather than to enjoy the lonely landscapes of nature. My mother is happy to stay home,” he replied. He did not share that his mother still thought it an unnecessary expense to rent horses for pleasure.

Margaret was saved from making any more comments as her parents appeared and made their way downstairs.

“It was very kind of you to offer us this day out, Mr. Thornton,” Mrs. Hale enthused. “I have only seen a hint of the hills beyond my sitting-room window.”

“Then I am happy to bring you to them,” he replied.

Margaret was surprised to see a gleaming open barouche waiting for them, which she knew Mr. Thornton must have hired solely for this occasion. Mr. Hale helped his wife to her seat and then joined her. Mr. Thornton assisted Margaret to her seat and took his place next to her.

Margaret averted her eyes from Mr. Thornton's direction, keeping her attention focused on the sights surrounding her, although she remained keenly aware of his proximity. His shoulder was only inches from hers, and her skirts brushed against his legs.

She smiled to see her mother and father enjoying the leisurely drive even before they left the city. Mr. Hale held his wife's hand as they absorbed the passing scenery.

The patches of blue sky expanded as they moved farther from the mill town. Margaret took a deep breath of the fresh air and rejoiced to smell the scent of warm grass and the sweet fragrance of flowers. Daisies, buttercups, and blue cornflowers covered the rolling hills they passed through.

"Oh look, foxgloves!" Mrs. Hale exclaimed. "Do let's stop and pick a few."

The carriage stopped along the roadside, and the men stepped out to assist the ladies. Mr. Hale helped his wife alight and accompanied her as she stepped a few paces to smell the wildflowers within her range.

Taking her husband's hand, Mrs. Hale took a few steps onto the meadow and stopped. She took a full breath of the clean air and felt the sun on her face. The undulating grasses and flowers, and the green hills that disappeared into the horizon exuded such an expanse of heavenly beauty that her gaze blurred with tears. It reminded her of Helstone. How she had taken all those years in quiet beauty for granted!

And now she would take this glimpse of God's glory for what it was: a gift, and a reminder of all that she had been given in her life.

She began to feel weak and turned to find Mr. Thornton arriving behind them with an armful of things he had brought for the occasion. He set down an overturned crate and placed an embroidered pillow upon it for her to sit.

"Oh! Thank you. You have thought of everything!" she declared, as her husband helped her sit comfortably on her temporary throne.

Mr. Hale spread out a woolen blanket and sat next to his wife so they might enjoy the sunny view together.

Margaret stood apart, looking out over the distant scene when Mr. Thornton appeared by her side.

"Do you like the view? My father used to take us here occasionally. We would have a picnic on the grass," he told her.

"That is very fine," she answered. She looked over to see him staring out as she had just been. He was an altogether different man standing here in

this open space with nothing but God's green earth and the sky around and above him. A breeze moved the dark hair on his forehead.

He was no longer a hardened master of men, but merely a man who had once been a boy. A boy who had lost his father and who had struggled through darker days than she.

They began walking to a patch of wildflowers farther away. Margaret stooped here and there to pick a few flowers.

"I'm sorry you lost your father," she heard herself say. "Do you still think about him?"

"In some ways, he is always there—in the back of my mind—a reminder that a kind and trusting heart must be tempered with an awareness of what others' intentions are. My father was a good man, but was led to disaster by those who took advantage of his nature."

Margaret was silent, absorbing what he had shared with her.

"You must miss your country home," he said, turning to more pleasant conversation.

"I suppose I shall always miss Helstone," she admitted, looking down at the wildflowers grasped in her hand. "It was my childhood home. I never wanted to leave it. My mother sent me to London every year since I was nine—she thought it best for me, of course. There was little society in our hamlet, to be sure. But I was always happiest when summer came, and papa came to bring me home."

The words spilled out of her, and she suddenly realized she had never confided this feeling to anyone before.

"I should like to see Helstone someday. What is it like?" he asked.

She looked up at him to see if he truly meant it or if he was just making conversation. His return gaze was direct, inquisitive. How had she not noticed how blue his eyes were? Had she only seen him before in dim lighting? The clear sky and brilliant sun made everything around them seem a dream, compared to the grayness of Milton.

"I'm afraid Helstone is everything Milton is not. I can hardly describe it, but it is the dearest spot on earth to me."

As they ambled along, he observed the glow of sunlight on her cheeks, the way her supple lips moved as she talked, the sway of her skirts, and the shapely form of her figure. The soft yellow fabric of her dress rippled in the breeze. She was gentleness and beauty. She, like the flowers dappling the surrounding field, belonged here—a part of nature's indescribable glory.

A pang of longing to possess her as his own ripped through every part of his being. To him, she was all things luminous, while he—he lived in the dark and enclosed world of machinery and brick. What right had he to entrap her in his world?

He imagined she must yearn to escape his town. “Will you visit your cousin...Edith, I believe you said...in London?”

Margaret smiled at the mention of her cousin, surprised he had remembered her name. “Edith is married now,” she said with a faint blush. “She’s been away with her husband in Corfu, and they’ve recently returned to London. She has invited me to come visit, but I cannot leave my mother at present.”

He watched the smile fade from her lips.



Far behind them, Mrs. Hale smiled as she closed her eyes again, lifting her face to the sun. Birds chirped, and a gentle breeze kissed her face. At this very moment, she was happy, all her worries faded into nothing at all.

She opened her eyes to gaze at the endless waving grasses and flowers. This feeling of transcendent contentedness brought to her mind another place and time. “Do you remember, Richard, the first time we met?” she asked her husband, who was reclining with his head upon his folded coat.

“You were a picture of such serene beauty. Just as you are now, my dear,” he said, sitting up to take her hand in his.

“I remember you gave me a drink from your canteen,” she continued.

“Did I? I don’t remember that. I only recall only that I was surprised that such a lovely woman should be abandoned by her party,” he returned.

“You were so very kind to me. You always have been,” she said, looking at him with more gratitude than she had in years past.

“Have I?” he asked, his voice wavering in uncertainty. He had struggled with unrelenting doubts about his past decisions, condemning himself mightily for bringing her to this northern town.

“It was wrong of me to bring you here, Maria,” he said, gently squeezing the pale hand still in his grasp. “I did not foresee how much it would hurt you—“

“Milton is not where I should have chosen to live, to be sure. But we lived in a lovely home for years, and I am sorry I was not more grateful for

it,” she replied, her voice softening as she cast her eyes to the ground with somber regret.

She glanced up then, spotting Margaret and Mr. Thornton afar off, their silhouettes pasted on a blue horizon. As they drew closer, she observed their leisurely gait, pleased to see them apparently engaged in harmonious conversation.

An idea dawned on her that had not occurred to her before. “Perhaps it was just the right thing to move to Milton, dear,” she said, her eyes fixed on the approaching couple. “Look, Richard,” she continued, indicating the direction of their daughter and her companion.

“What is it, Maria?” he replied, bewildered as to what he was missing.

“I begin to think Mr. Thornton might be interested in our Margaret. And I believe it would be a good match, do you not agree?” she asked, still engaged in closely watching the couple as they drew nearer.

The cloud of confusion on Mr. Hale’s face did not disperse. “Mr. Thornton may be so inclined, but I believe Margaret is very much opposed to these manufacturing men. Do you not recall how they have argued?” he returned, squinting in the sun to see for himself what his wife saw.

“Well, I have a strong impression that there may be a connection blossoming between them. And I, for one, would be very happy to see her accept him. He has been very kind to us,” she remarked.

“Indeed, he has,” he agreed, although still doubtful of his wife’s premonition.

The more Mrs. Hale mused on the possibility, the more she liked it. And although she said not a word to her husband, she hoped she would live to see her daughter married and her future secured.



“I believe my mother looks happy,” Margaret noted as they drew nearer to her parents.

“Then I am glad we came today,” he said.

“My mother tells me you will come to our dinner party next month,” he began. “May I have the honor of escorting you in to dinner?” he asked, having wanted to claim this privilege since the plans were underway.

Surprised, she gazed up at him for a moment. “Yes. Yes, of course,” she answered, flustered by his request.



Mr. Thornton could not contain the smile that spread upon his face as the barouche jostled over cobblestones toward his home. The day had been everything he could have wished for. He re-lived every moment they had spent together, savoring the memory of her happiness, and recalling how innocent and beautiful she had looked standing in the sunshine, with the breeze kissing her face.

With a deep swell of yearning, he remembered how transfixed he had been as he had watched her descend the staircase in her home. She seemed to radiate the freshness and loveliness of nature. Indeed, she was the very picture of loveliness. And he had felt a tug of pain to imagine her descending the stairs in his own home and coming eagerly into his arms, where she belonged.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Addy Boucher woke in the black of night to the cry of the baby lying next to her. With her husband's back pressed against her, she fumbled to help the babe find her breast. He clawed frantically as he suckled for a few moments and then drew back and let out a weakened wail.

Tears slid down Addy's cheeks as she tried to shush the child. On a mattress on the floor nearby, a little girl whimpered.

Her husband stirred but did not get up or speak.

Addy continued to sob silently as she got the baby to suckle again. She knew her milk would not offer the nourishment he needed. She had had little enough to eat these past two weeks. Bread and broth were all they had eaten for supper, and a scant pot of porridge for the morning. Divided carefully amongst her eight young'uns, her husband, and herself, she gave herself the smallest portions.

Her children were hungry. She hated putting them to bed with the little ones' pleas for a little more bread. She hated the masters for not paying her husband more. She hated the Union for their strict rules which forbade her husband from going to work during the strike. She hated this world that made her family struggle so. It was not meant to be this way, she was sure of it.

She remembered the sweet days when she was only seventeen and she and John had stolen kisses on their way home from the mill. Those days seemed like another lifetime ago. She did not regret having the children. She and John loved them all, and they were his joy to come home to.

If she had been born into a better situation, she might have had servants and all the food they wanted. It was not the children themselves that wore her out. It was worrying and scraping to keep all fed and clothed. The struggle never stopped, and the only hope was that the oldest child would soon be old enough to work. Although she hated to send him to work, they needed the money desperately.

The little one nestled against her and fell asleep. She took a deep breath of temporary relief. However, sleep eluded her, despite her weariness. Her stomach was an empty pit, but it was not hunger that troubled her. In the dark, where fears festered and grew, she felt a creeping fear that something bad would happen.



It was already past dawn when Margaret rose from her bed. It was the day of the dinner party at the Thorntons', and the thought of it stole into her mind before her feet touched the woven rug on the wood plank floor.

She sat at her vanity table and looked in the mirror as she carefully brushed her hair—a morning ritual she had kept since girlhood. She thought at first that she dreaded going to such a formal affair where there would be no one she would know, save the hosts. But as the date approached, she recognized with some surprise that the tug at her stomach she felt when contemplating the event was not entirely antipathy, but a well-hidden tremor of excitement.

It was not that Mr. Thornton would be there, she told herself, but that she would learn more of the vital forces that formed the soul of Milton by mingling among those whose actions and decisions pulled the levers of power here.

It seemed strange that she should find herself juxtaposed between Bessy Higgins' world and that of the Thorntons. She had never experienced such a strong feeling of disparate classes in Helstone. She could not remember any cottager in her father's parish openly disparaging his lot as a farmer. There had been no reason for someone like Nicholas Higgins to rise from the land.

Margaret often thought how Bessy's life might have fared better if she had lived in Helstone. Perhaps she would be married, and happy enough. She might meet calamity or illness—as anyone might, no matter their lot—but she would certainly not be dying of cotton in the lungs.

A wave of anger passed over her whenever she thought of the countless others who had died and those who were now ill with a sickness that could have been prevented.



Nicholas Higgins paced the confines of his house, not wanting to leave Bess alone, but unable to stay still while doubts and fears plagued him. He wanted nothing more than to go to the Goulden Dragon and escape the torture of his circuitous pattern of worry.

The Union had given the masters a week's warning to meet their demand for a five percent pay raise. And when the week had concluded with only contemptuous replies from the masters, the Union had executed its plan. Every mill worker in Milton had stopped their work and had walked out exactly an hour before the whistle blew at the end of the day. They had sent an unmistakable sign to the masters that the strike had begun.

That had been two weeks ago.

He studied the face of his daughter, peaceful in sleep—her only respite from the constriction of her lungs, which would eventually cast her into eternal sleep. By God, he would fight for her sake!—and for all those like her whose lives were cut short by the greed of the masters. She had not asked for this life, and he was almost sorry he had brought her into this suffering world. And yet, he loved her. Would love her. She had been a light for him, keeping him steady when his wife had died. He didn't know how he would manage when she was gone.

A knock at the door made him wince. He was weary of men and women coming to tell of their hardships—as if the strike were not for their sakes! He glanced to see Bess stirring as he went to answer the door.

“Oh, it's yo',” he said at the sight of Margaret. He was glad but embarrassed to see that she had brought a basket with some food. He wondered how she had arrived at their door without having been begged dry of her goods.

He put a finger to his lips and tipped his head towards the sleeper.

Margaret's lips formed a silent ‘O’ and she whispered she would come back later.

“No, don't go,” Bessy's wobbly voice called out.

Margaret went to her bedside. "I can come back later, if you need to rest," she offered gently.

"No, please," the weakened girl answered, as she propped herself up. "Seeing your bonny face is a bit o' cheering I could sorely use."

Having seen his daughter taken care of, Nicholas took his leave of the place.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Bessy spoke. "Father can hardly stand the suffering. Everyone comes by to tell 'im to break the strike, or to give 'em something to feed their wee ones. The strike were supposed to last a week, but the masters have not made a move to meet the Union demands. I'm afraid he'll go drink to ease his pain, as it were."

Margaret glanced back at the door with a flood of sympathy both for the weight of responsibility Nicholas must be bearing, and for the daughter's fear that her father would fall into sin.

"But let's not talk of the strike. I'm sick of such things," Bessy pleaded. "Tonight is the Thornton dinner, isn't it? Have you got your dress ready?" she asked, her face brightening in her excitement.

"Yes, of course. I should be in great trouble if I declined to go now, for you would be vastly disappointed!" she teased, giving Bessy's hand a squeeze.

"It's the only hopeful thing I have to think on these days," she answered. "I wished I could see yo' there with all those masters and their wives. Yo'll be a fresh wind in their sails."

"If you can find your way to our house this evening, you could see me in my dress and let me know if it passes muster for Milton," Margaret invited with a warm smile.

"If yo' wore it in London, I 'spect it will be fine enough for this smoky town. Oh! But I don't know if I can walk as far as that. Perhaps father can find a way; he knows everyone," she posed with a tinge of hope.

"I know what I'd wear if I could go," Bessy continued, "a dress of pure blue silk, with ribbons at the shoulders and ruffled lace at the hem. Like the one I saw once in the window at the draper's shop," she mused dreamily, picturing it in her mind.

"Blue would suit you," Margaret agreed with a pleasant tone that belied the tug of melancholy Bessy's longing wrought in her. It seemed unfair that her friend would never wear such a dress or go to a fancy dinner such as she was attending that night.

“It’s said Thornton’s mother wears naught but black, no matter the occasion. But I wonder if ‘tis true even for such a night. Yo’ll tell me if she dons some color that no one has ever seen her wear in the streets,” Bessy begged to know.

Margaret had to grin at Mrs. Thornton’s solemn reputation. “We shall see. It is true. I’ve not seen her in anything but mourning dress. I fear she is not one to break solid patterns of decision.”

“I suppose that’s where the Master gets his stubborn nature. Father calls him the ol’ bulldog. He won’t be swayed to change his mind once he’s made his will clear,” Bessy said.

This comment sobered Margaret, for it was exactly Mr. Thornton’s headstrong will that often troubled her when she found herself thinking of him.

“But what father doesn’t see,” Bessy continued, “is that he can be just as stubborn, grabbing hold of his ideas of what’s to be done without letting anyone’s complaints get in the way. It’s this that gets everything so muddled. And all I want is some peace. This world is too full of fighting,” she said with a long sigh. “Which is why I’m not afraid to go to heaven. ‘Twill be a better place.”

Her father returned, looking just as downhearted as before. “There’s not anywhere I can go without getting an earful of suffering and weakness. I’ve told ‘em a thousand times that it would be hard, but we must hold firm. The masters must give in soon. I know there are orders that lie undone.” He spoke to the room, gesturing with flailing hands. The girls watched him silently.

A rapping at the door made him hunch over with his hands on his thighs as he braced himself for what would surely be more of the same complaints. Then he straightened himself and went to the door.

Addy Boucher burst into the room as soon as he opened it. Her thin brown hair hung loosely down her dusty calico dress; her eyes glinted with a wild pain, and her jaw was firmly set with a deep frown.

“My John must return to his work. We cannot abide the strike one more day!” Her adamant request rose into a desperate outcry. She let out a great sob and collapsed to the floor weeping, the outburst of rage having drained her energy.

“Addy! Addelaide” her husband called out for her before he swept into the room through the open doorway. John Boucher clutched his infant son

to his chest. The child made pitiful sounds, unable to make the full-throated cries of a well-fed babe.

“You see what you’ve done to my wife—to my children!” John Boucher shouted, holding out the writhing baby as proof of their misery. “You told us it would be two weeks. Two weeks! And it’s coming on three now. And what are we to do with your blasted Union rules? I told you I couldn’t abide your plan, but you forced it on all of us!”

He crouched down to help his wife up from the floor. “It were all we could do to feed our eight children when I had work. And now...this is what we’ve become! My wife is near about crazy with worry and crying. You’d be the same if you heard the wails and whimpering from our children night and day.” At this outburst, his wife began to sob, clinging to her husband’s arm.

Margaret’s stomach clenched tight as she watched this scene unfold.

Nicholas Higgins lowered his head and clutched the table as if gathering the strength to answer. “And I told you we must be in this all together or not at all. The Union pays to cover some of your needs for the duration. And if some need more to get by, by God, I’ll give my own over to make it right! Here!” he said, tipping a few coins from a tin cup on the shelf behind him into his hand and offering them to the struggling parents.

John Boucher grabbed the coins, but spat out his rebuke of this meager aid. “I’ve eight children at home! Eight! And they’re all layin’ abed for weakness. And for what? We were getting by afore this damned strike, which I ne’er wanted to join! And now my family is to die for it? I curse you and your Union for what yo’ve done!”

“Get out of my house!” Higgins growled, thrusting his arm towards the open door.

“Stop it! I can’t stand it anymore!” Bessy cried out, covering her ears in great distress.

“I’ll not have anyone disturb my girl no more! I’ll give yo’ what I can, but don’t bring your wailing here!” Higgins warned as he bade the Bouchers leave.

Bessy rocked back and forth in her bed as Margaret rubbed her back to soothe her.

Nicholas observed the care Margaret gave his daughter, and his heart swelled with a bittersweet pain. “I’ll not forget yo’r kindness to my daughter,” he said softly in the silence after the tumultuous scene.

Margaret nodded her acknowledgment of his words but kept her attention on the pitiful girl at her side. "They're gone now, Bessy. I'll have my father send the Bouchers a basket of food. Do not trouble yourself with worry. I'm certain the strike must be over soon," she said hopefully, coaxing Bessy to lie down again. Nicholas retired to a corner of the house for some quiet.

"Shall I read you some Scripture?" Margaret offered, reaching for the worn leather book on a wooden chair.

"Aye," Bessy sighed, folding her hands to rest on her stomach. "I like to think on the new heaven and earth promised in Revelation. I'm sorely tired of this old world."

So the vicar's daughter read from the back pages of that old familiar book, as she had done many a time in Helstone with cottagers who needed comfort. After a time, she closed the book quietly in her lap when she saw that Bessy was asleep. She studied the peaceful face of the girl whose life had been filled with hardship. Her heart twisted with deep affection and sorrow.

Gently shutting the door behind her, Margaret set off toward home, a heavy sadness in her breast which was not alleviated by the haggard faces she met along the dusty pathways in the Princeton district. Men and women sat on the ground outside their doors to commiserate and escape the stilted and gloomy air of their dwellings.

She passed by outstretched hands with a weak smile. She had given all she had to the Higgins.

She walked more briskly to avoid the plaintive looks until she reached the hill that led closer to her own area of town. She stopped to take in the expansive view of rooftops, steeples, and chimneys that reached into the sky, but without their usual black offering. From up here, all seemed peaceful. But she knew that below, there was a great mass of humanity that seethed with fomenting anger, resentment, and desperate fear.

How could she dress up in fine clothes tonight and be served a lavish meal when there was so much suffering here?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Arriving home from her melancholy walk, Margaret entered the house to find her father sitting in the front parlor with a lithe, gray-headed man who smiled at her as if she ought to know him. She recognized him as someone who had visited their home in Helstone years ago.

“Mr. Bell!” she declared with a warming smile. Mr. Bell had been the groomsman at her parents’ wedding; a friend of her father’s from his days at Oxford College. She was pleased to see him, remembering his jovial manner—which she hoped would be an antidote of cheer to the somber pall currently cast over the town.

Mr. Bell stood, taking her hand fondly between both of his. “Ah, so you’ve remembered me!” he said.

“You have not changed much, to my recollection,” Margaret replied.

“Indeed, I was an old codger when I last saw you, and here I am again, the very same! But you, my dear, have absolutely transformed!” he told her with his contagious smile.

“I say, Richard, you didn’t tell me what a handsome girl your Pearl has become. The last time I saw her, she was quite excited to show me the toad she had found!” Mr. Bell enthused.

Taken aback by his bold compliment, Margaret knew not how to reply. She saw the twinkle in his eye and smiled. “What brings you to Milton?” she asked, still bewildered by his sudden presence.

“What brings me to Milton, she asks. Why, you and your family, of course! I received an invitation to the Thornton dinner party as I usually do,

being their landlord. But instead of offering my excuses, I thought it an excellent opportunity to stop and see how my old friend Hale was faring in the town of my childhood.”

“You are from Milton?” Margaret asked.

“Look how she is surprised, Richard! ‘Are you from Milton?’ she asks. I have finally wrested myself from any appearance of belonging to this place. I’ll take that as a compliment, my dear. And yes, I was born here. But I must say it is an altogether a different place from what I knew. The place where Thornton’s mill sits was my father’s orchard.”

“Oh,” was all she could reply, unable to imagine how such a transformation could be made in a few decades.

“Margaret has made friends with some of the mill workers. I believe that is where she has just been this morning,” Mr. Hale told his old friend.

“Has she?” he answered, taking a more comprehensive and approving look at the young woman standing before him. “Fascinating. I suppose theirs is not a very happy state at present with the prolonged strike.”

“Indeed. I took a basket of food, but of course it is only a small gesture when so many children are starving. It’s a terrible situation with both sides adamant to outlast the other,” Margaret replied.

“Yes, I am never happier to live far from Milton than when there is yet another strike. I don’t suppose masters and men will ever learn to come to terms, eh?” Mr. Bell posed.

“And I don’t see why they shouldn’t sit down together, man to man, and find a way to understand each other!” Margaret exclaimed, her fresh anger with the suffering she had seen breaking to the surface.

Mr. Bell raised his eyebrows at her vehemence. He glanced at his old friend before returning his gaze to Margaret. “I see that you have some of your father’s blood in you,” he declared. He then regaled her with how the quiet Mr. Hale, known for his soft-spoken, reticent ways, had once burst into an angry tirade against the treatment of one of their fellow students, who was obviously from a poorer, Welsh family.

Margaret watched her father smile at this memory. Stories like this filled Margaret’s heart with pride for the unshakable compassion that was at the core of her father’s heart. He surely ‘hated iniquity and every evil way.’

Mr. Bell continued on. “It struck a deep chord in me at the time—and has ever since, I might add—so that we became friends. I have always admired his moral strength.”

“It was only the right thing to do,” Mr. Hale demurred, embarrassed by too much praise.

“It was, but none other of us had the courage to do something about it,” Mr. Bell replied.

He turned his focus to Margaret again. “And now here you are, about to go ‘once more into the breach’ to dine with the enemy, so to speak. I suppose these masters could use a good crack on the skull now and then! Men in positions of power are apt to grow full of themselves, you know. But say,” he said, his tone turning more serious, “haven’t you found Mr. Thornton a rather reasonable fellow?”

“Indeed, very reasonable,” Mr. Hale answered for his daughter, who bowed her head at the mention of Mr. Thornton’s name.

“He has been very kind to us,” Margaret quietly conceded, still averting her gaze. “I only wish he could exert more of his tenacious efforts to find a way to communicate with his workers, so that such suffering might be avoided,” she stated more forcefully.

Mr. Bell studied her posture, detecting a tone of wistfulness in her utterance. A startling possibility crossed his mind, which he determined to test carefully for its veracity.

“I’m pleased you have come to visit,” Margaret began more brightly, wanting to shake off the sudden awkwardness she felt. “Will you be staying with us?”

“Certainly not! I would not trouble you at a time such as this. And in any case, I’m very stuck in my ways and must have things done precisely as I like. I shall stay at the Clarendon Hotel, which will serve me well for that.”

“Very well,” she replied. “I will leave you now to resume your conversation with father. I must go check on mamma to see if she needs me. I will see you this evening.”



Mrs. Hale was resting, having spent the better part of the day reclining to save her fortitude for the formal dinner affair that had occupied her mind for weeks. Although her body was in repose, she had been contriving to imagine every detail of the evening—wondering aloud about what would be served, how the people would be dressed, and how Mrs. Thornton would manage the entire affair. Dixon was glad to see Margaret come into the

room, for she could leave her mistress for a time to do the ironing while Miss Margaret absorbed her mother's audible musings.

"When I was Miss Beresford, I attended many dinners and balls. I didn't think there would be such things in this town, but I am glad for your sake there is some culture and society here. Why, I truly don't recall the last time I attended a formal affair," Mrs. Hale exclaimed to her daughter.

Margaret kept silent about the fact that her mother had chosen not to attend Edith's wedding—quite a gala affair—simply because she did not think any of her dresses would suit the occasion. Perhaps it was that her mother did not want to appear dowdy in her own sister's London opulence.

Now, with Margaret's attention to her mother's desires, Mrs. Hale had agreed to have one of Margaret's dresses altered for herself. It was the next best thing to having a new dress, for Margaret's gowns had been purchased by Aunt Shaw in London within the last two years. Mrs. Hale had fussed that it wasn't right to take one of her daughter's dresses away from her, but Margaret had insisted she didn't need them all, and her mother's yearning to go had won over her initial objections.

"I'm happy, mamma, that you are to go tonight. I don't think I should have gone if you were not."

"Nonsense, my dear! I should want you to go. You are young and need such entertainment. And besides, I should have wanted to know all about it. It is very trying to be bound most days as an invalid of sorts. This invitation has already given me much needed distraction and interest."

"I am glad, then, that we were invited. But it will be hard for me to forget the suffering I have seen today while I partake of the extravagance of the masters," she sighed.

"Oh, I hope this terrible strike business is put to an end soon. What have you seen today to put you out so?" she asked, her brows contracted in worry.

Margaret told her mother what she had seen at the Higgins house, and how the Bouchers suffered. She regretted dousing her mother's enthusiasm with this tale of woe, but it lifted some of the burden Margaret felt to share it with a sympathetic heart.

The knowledge that little children had nothing to eat indeed troubled Mrs. Hale. "We must send them food tomorrow first thing," she insisted. The role of a vicar's wife revived in her at once.

"I am sorry to have told you—"

“No indeed, my darling. It was right to mention it. We must do what we can whenever we know a family is in need.”

It was not long before Dixon returned, and it was time for the women of the house to begin their preparations for the evening ahead.

With pin curls still in her hair, Margaret swept into her mother’s room later to have Dixon fasten the hooks at the back of her gown.

“Oh Margaret! It does me good to see you dressed in such finery,” her mother enthused from her perch upon the seat at her dressing table. Mrs. Hale herself was wearing a youthful pink taffeta gown with tulle rosettes adorning a modest neckline.

“Indeed, she’s turned out very well. She’s sure to be more than a match for any Milton girl there,” Dixon remarked. “I’ll come do your hair, Miss Margaret, as soon as I finish with the Missus here,” she added, picking up the hairbrush again after fastening Margaret’s dress.

“Thank you, Dixon. I can manage setting it up, but I need help with the final touches,” Margaret answered before returning to her room.

As she set to work on putting her thick curls up, her emotions swirled in a mix of dispirited trepidation and curious anticipation. Her stomach tightened when her thoughts fell upon Mr. Thornton. As she studied her reflection in the mirror, noting her fashionably low neckline and bare shoulders, she realized Mr. Thornton had not seen her in formal attire since they had met in London—was it two years ago now?

But in between such quickening contemplations, the doleful image of Mrs. Boucher and her mewling baby haunted her, pulling her mouth into a frown.

“You’ll not accompany your mother with such a mournful look!” Dixon instructed Margaret some time later as she stood behind the somber-looking girl, training her curls into their proper place.

“No...no, of course not,” Margaret answered, trying on a smile. She would be careful to present herself content in her mother’s presence.

“That’s much better,” Dixon approved. “You know how the Missus has talked of naught else for weeks. She was meant to live where there was more society,” she added with a sad shake of her head.

Margaret kept silent after this remark. She knew well that her mother had longed for a different life—to be seen and known in a larger town, but she herself could never regret living in Helstone. The thought of Helstone brought a pang of longing, as it always did since she had moved here.

She endeavored to prevent herself from sliding into somberness. Searching for an uplifting thought, she grasped that perhaps her mother's disappointment held a lesson: to find good in whatever place one is situated. How much of life was wasted yearning to be somewhere else?

This sudden insight helped calm her restlessness. There was suffering here, to be sure, but perhaps God had placed her in Milton for some good purpose.

She was contemplating this when the doorbell rang.

"Who is calling at this hour? It's not time for the carriage to arrive!" Dixon muttered, securing the last pin in Margaret's coiffure.

"I will get the door, Dixon. Go tend to mamma," Margaret responded.

But Mr. Hale, passing through the hallway, called out that he would get the door, not wanting the ladies of the house to be interrupted at such a time.

"Papa," Margaret called out to him as he descended the stairs, "it may be Bessy Higgins. She wished to see me in my dress."

Indeed, it was Bessy and Nicholas. Margaret could hear her father welcoming them in kindly. She was glad it was her father who had received them, for Dixon would have been reluctant to allow factory workers through the front door as guests.

Mr. Hale invited the ailing girl to recline on the sofa and then excused himself to leave the room.

Bessy exhaled a long "Ooh," transfixed with wonder as Margaret approached. The pale green satin dress fit Margaret snugly at the bodice, with a full skirt flowing to the floor. Her hair was piled on her head with pearl-tipped pins. The low neckline, adorned with satin rosettes, revealed an ample portion of her silky skin.

"You're a vision from heaven! An angel. I've seen yo' something like it in my dreams, I have. Mayhap I'm dreaming now," Bessy said, reaching out her thin hand towards the dress to see if it was an apparition or not.

"I'll not stay to hear of such talk," Nicholas interjected, looking every bit uncomfortable to be standing in their pretty home with his dusty boots.

"And I cannot abide to think on your grand party. If you care a whit for my Bess, you'll give those masters an earful while you're there. Tell Thornton to give us our five percent, and seven hundred workers will be at his machines by Monday morn. I'll wait outside for Bess."

"How did you come all this way?" Margaret asked her friend.

“Father borrowed a cart from a muffin seller to carry me. It were a bumpy ride and none too soft on my bones, but it were worth the trouble to come just to see yo’ like so.”

“I’m sorry for all your trouble to come, but I’m glad you approve,” Margaret answered with a smile.

Bessy’s eyes glowed with admiration as she kept staring at Margaret in her dress. “I wish I could be a specter hovering there tonight, to see how Thornton looks at yo’ in your finery.”

Margaret’s cheeks reddened. “I’m sure there will be many fine-looking ladies there.”

“But none will interest him but yo’, I’ll wager,” Bessy said with firm conviction. “I had my doubts before, with yo’ in your drab-colored calico. But look at yo’ now—as if yo’ never knew how to wear aught but fine satin!”

“I told you I lived in London for years. But I am pleased you have seen my transformation to a Milton lady,” Margaret teased.

Bessy smiled and sank back against the sofa pillows with a faraway look in her eyes. “I can see it all now. Mayhap yo’ve been sent by heaven to this place to help sort out this endless battling between the masters and men.”

“I don’t understand. How can I help? I’ve no power—“

“Don’t be daft now, you’ll have the Master’s ear when yo’re his wife.”

“Bessy, don’t talk such nonsense!”

“You can’t be such a fool not to know he fancies yo’,” Bessy said, shaking her head. “Why, he’s been courting yo’ hasn’t he?”

“He has not,” Margaret insisted.

“He took yo’ to that library opening back a ways, and yo’re going to dinner at his house tonight when your father is not in trade or in any such power.”

Margaret turned away, considering her words.

“Yo’ll marry the master if he asks yo’ won’t yo’?” Bessy pleaded again with a sudden forceful energy.

“Bessy, please,” Margaret said, turning back around to face her. “I cannot answer such a question at present. There are too many things to consider. To decide to marry is something one must consider deeply in one’s heart.”

“Well, I’d not turn away the likes of him, and no one with a head of sense would either!” Bessy declared. Then her shoulders sank in defeat, and her expression became more plaintive. “Yo’ll not speak too rough with

Thornton will yo'? Never mind what father says. Mayhap yo' can use yo' words to bring a touch of softness into his heart."

Margaret opened her mouth but could not think of how to reply.

At this moment, Mr. Hale came back from the kitchen, where he had gathered a few items of food to give to the Higgins.

As the time to leave for the dinner party drew closer, Mr. Higgins was brought back in, and Margaret promised Bessy she would come and tell all about the dinner party the next day.

Chapter Twenty-Four

For Mr. Thornton, the day of the dinner party entailed making a stream of crucial arrangements to set his mill in motion again. He would not wait to act. He did not intend to let the masses' ignorance ruin the business he had worked so hard to improve.

At the first threat of a strike, he had looked into the steps that would be required to hire Irish hands and bring them to Milton. All his planning was now coming to full fruition. He had not stopped all day in finalizing details. He had talked to the railroad station manager, the head of police, and to Father Grady about getting the immigrant Catholics fed.

It was a great inconvenience that their annual dinner party should take place amid such upheaval, and he sorely regretted they had sent out the invitations. Yet, though his mind swarmed with the list of concerns to be dealt with, his heart beat with an eagerness to see Margaret again. At scattered moments throughout the day, the thought that she would come to his home that evening lifted his stern bent with a swell of hopeful anticipation.

When he finally arrived home just under an hour before guests would arrive, his mother stopped her hasty instructions to the household staff as he strode through the newly arranged drawing room. "You've hardly any time to wash and change your dress," she admonished.

"There is still time. There was much to discuss with Father Grady," he replied, halting his rush to speak to her.

“Is everything arranged?” she asked. He saw his own anxious trepidation reflected in her eyes.

“I have finished everything for today.” Tomorrow we prepare the upper floors of the mill and await the train in the evening.”

She nodded, trusting her son’s decision, but wary of the danger it might bring. “The water basin in your room is freshly filled,” she said, and then she returned to her tasks.

In the quiet space of his room, he undressed and washed away the perspiration of the day before putting on his dinner attire. As he did so, his business concerns receded as his focus turned to the hours ahead.

As he thrust his arms into his silk brocade waistcoat, he wondered what she would wear tonight. His anticipation increased as he remembered how she had looked in the gold-colored ball gown when he had first seen her in London.

It would be a great pleasure to see her arrayed in her finest attire, smiling to imagine the vision. He warned himself against allowing his gaze to drift to her all evening. But of all the difficulties he had endured today, this seemed a pleasant challenge.



Sunlight still lit the sky on this warm summer evening, but long shadows from the row houses cast the streets into darkness. As the coach carrying the Hales turned to enter the tall, open gates into the mill yard on Marlborough Street, Margaret stared up at the massive brick structure that stood empty and still. How many of his workers would have little to eat tonight while she dined on fine china with the masters?

As their party climbed the broad oak stairway, apprehension flooded Margaret’s veins. Her father’s punctuality made them the first to arrive. But she was pleased to find, upon her father’s asking, that Mr. Thornton was not come down yet as he had been long involved in matters concerning the strike all day.

The grand drawing room glittered with candles. The furniture had been moved out or arranged to enable conversation in groups.

Fanny drew near Margaret to make polite conversation, while Margaret’s parents talked with Mrs. Thornton. “I hope your mother is improving,”

Fanny commented. “Does she have a water bed? I find it a great comfort when I am suffering.”

“A water bed?” Margaret asked.

“Oh yes, it’s the latest luxury for those inclined to fall ill. You might borrow ours for a time to try it,” she offered.

Other guests arrived, and Mrs. Thornton, in her black silk gown and obsidian necklace, greeted them with apparent pride. Fanny introduced a few couples to the Hales. Mr. Bell arrived and came to Margaret’s side to keep her company for a time until he stepped aside to speak to a few others.

While Margaret was alone again, gazing around the room, she heard Mr. Thornton’s name called out in greeting. The tingling awareness of his presence changed the atmosphere of the room at once. She turned to look.

He wore tails, a gold waistcoat and a deep blue cravat. She watched him shake hands with the small crowd around him. Why had she never noticed the small dimple in his cheeks when he smiled?

He greeted a strikingly beautiful young woman with light hair, who wore a snugly fitted gown of dark violet. An uncomfortable feeling poisoned Margaret’s mood as she watched the woman simper and tilt her head at his friendly greeting.

In a few moments, he moved through the group and caught Margaret’s gaze. The intensity of his blue eyes, which were fastened on her, riveted her. A ripple of sensation flowed through her body as he made his way toward her. He looked truly magnificent. It was not just his strong jawline and tall, firm form—it was the inestimable mystery of his very nature: a figure of power and unalterable decision who yet held somehow a tenderness that revealed itself in surprising ways.

He shook hands with her as he did with all his guests, but she felt his attention as if she were the only one in the room.

“I’m glad your mother could come,” he said, his tone deep and gentle. His eyes dropped for just a moment to take in the shapely sight she presented.

“Yes, she is pleased to be here,” Margaret replied, feeling the familiar blush come to her face. “She is fond of such gatherings.”

Mr. Slickson, another cotton mill owner, sidled up to Mr. Thornton. “Pardon,” he said to Margaret before directing his attention to the host. “May I speak to you?”

“Excuse me a moment,” Mr. Thornton said to Margaret, a look of pained annoyance on his face at the interruption.

Mr. Slickson drew his colleague aside. “Hamper says you are hiring Irish help. Have you considered the terrible risks?” he asked in hushed urgency.

“All the risk is mine. I have made arrangements with the police,” Mr. Thornton answered.

Margaret strained to hear this exchange while Mrs. Slickson introduced herself and asked if Margaret were new in town.

“Indeed, we moved here last November from Hampshire. My father is a tutor to those seeking to continue their learning.”

“Ah, and is Mr. Thornton one of his pupils?”

“Yes, he is.”

The plump, middle-aged mill owner’s wife leaned closer. “Take care if you have taken any interest in Mr. Thornton,” she whispered. “Violet Grayson has set her sights on him for the past year.” With a glance, the older woman indicated the flaxen-haired girl Margaret had noticed before, who was now smilingly engaged in conversation with Fanny.

Margaret recoiled from the rude presumption and false camaraderie as she offered a polite smile. “I’m aware that some people are more attracted to wealth than to the substance of the heart. I’m looking for the latter,” she replied, satisfied to see the older woman’s smug expression fade before turning to find other company.

“Ah, Margaret!” Mr. Bell appeared next to her, much to her relief. “I hope you are enjoying the privilege of mingling with Milton’s cadre of power. Now you see the other side of life here. What do you make of it?”

“I’ve been to many luxurious social affairs in London, so I am accustomed to all that attends them. I’m afraid I’m far more comfortable and interested in the lives of the poorer classes. There is more honesty and humbleness of purpose in a simple life,” she answered.

He introduced her to a few other masters and their wives, and she engaged in the casual talk required in such circumstances. If she was not entirely attentive to every speaker, she at least played the part of taking interest. All the while, she was aware of just where Mr. Thornton was in the room, hearing his voice or catching a sidelong glimpse of his movement from one group to another.

She at last gravitated to where her parents were, who were happily seated on one of the green damask couches pushed to the wall, talking with Mr.

Henderson and his wife.

When they announced dinner, Margaret watched Mr. Thornton say a few more words to the guests, turn to find her, and walk toward her with resolution. She drew in a slow breath as he approached, still in some measure of amazement that he remembered his request to escort her.

“Miss Hale,” he said with that genuine smile that had first attracted her to him. She took his offered arm with the grace taught her in London.

In the next few moments, as he escorted her down to dinner, she walked in a haze of wonder and jumbled feelings. Her heart fluttered to be so close to him—to be so openly paired with him. She felt every second of their physical contact, the gentle press of her arm resting on his. He was so near she could smell the scent of sandalwood on him. Perhaps the scent of his soap? The thought of him in so personal an occupation as bathing made her feel lightheaded.

Her step wobbled a moment on the stairs. His other hand instantly reached to steady her.

Mrs. Slickson elbowed her husband and tossed her chin to draw his attention to who Mr. Thornton was escorting to dinner. Her husband lifted an eyebrow and grinned.

The watched couple continued to descend the grand stairway. Mr. Thornton was asking Margaret if their Milton occasion passed muster and she replied, hardly knowing what she was saying.

When he finally led her to her seat, she pulled her arm from his, feeling surprisingly bereft at this parting.

Margaret sat several people away from Mr. Thornton, who sat at the head of the table, while Mrs. Thornton sat at the other end. The fare was opulent, for Mrs. Thornton spared no expense for this yearly dinner party. Mrs. Hale would later talk of the quantity of oysters, pheasant, various cheeses and puddings served, but all Margaret could think of at present was what would be done with all the uneaten quantities of food. The memory of the Boucher family’s desperation was never far from her mind.

Conversation turned to topics relevant to the manufacturing men in attendance. They talked of the growing turbulence in America over slavery, Commodore Perry’s venture to Japan, and the progress of growing cotton in India.

These men discussed national and global events as participants, and not merely as spectators and judges as they did in London.

Although he was clearly the younger mill owner, it appeared to Margaret that the balding and graying heads around the table looked to Mr. Thornton as the one with superior knowledge and strategies. She studied him when she thought no one would notice.

The place of honor he held in this room mesmerized her. He, the shop-boy who had suffered great tragedy and suffered years of poverty. And now—he could revel in his victory over all that would have crushed others to the ground. His commanding presence set him apart from all the rest. And deep inside her, something quivered at the thought of becoming his wife.

Was she in love with him? She could not know for certain. Bessy's talk of marriage had stirred her to examine her feelings. As she studied him again while he talked to others, noting the curve of his mouth, the flash of a brilliant smile, the intelligent furrow of his brow, she realized no one else in this entire town—in this whole empire—would ever fascinate her as he did.

She stayed in dazed realization of this for a moment until a chortle from Mr. Henderson at her elbow interrupted her reverie.

The conversation inevitably turned to the strike. Mr. Horsfield, a dignitary of some sort who was visiting Milton, asked how long the masters supposed it would last.

Mr. Slickson gave a sidelong glance to Mr. Thornton before offering his presumption. "It will be over in a matter of a few days, mark my words."

"I imagine their bellies are fairly empty by now," Mr. Hamper added, with a triumphant tone. "Two weeks is a long time to get by on whatever pittance their Union can give them. Hunger is our best weapon. A man's stubborn intentions grow weak when his stomach is growling."

Grunts and hums of agreement followed.

Margaret was appalled. "But what about their children?" she burst out.

The room fell silent. Eyebrows raised as diners glanced at each other across the table. Mr. Bell smirked in admiration, while her parents wore cautious expressions.

All eyes fastened first on Margaret and then upon the dinner's host.

Mr. Thornton set the glass he held in his hand down before meeting Margaret's eyes with pained deliberation. "Their parents are at liberty to return to work at any time. We stand by ready to pay wages for men who will work," he replied with smooth coolness.

"Hear, hear!" agreed Mr. Hamper while others noised their approval.

“But do you not see that they are the ones who suffer most? They are innocent, and yet they are caught up in this...this game of stubborn refusal to come to terms with one another!” she countered in exasperation before bowing her head to gain control of herself, her chest heaving.

A flare of conscience—or was it pain?—made Mr. Thornton lower his eyes. His expression hardened, his mouth a tight straight line, while everyone looked to him for his reply.

His voice was low and even as he made his reply. “The hands decided to strike, knowing perfectly well it would entail suffering of some kind. We are not obligated to comply with their demands.”

Margaret gave him a quick glare in response.

“I’m certain we all hope a resolution will quickly end the strike,” Mr. Hale offered, trying to shift the conversation to more positive topics.

Mr. Thornton glanced at Margaret as general conversation resumed, but she kept her gaze lowered.

The rest of the dinner was torture for Margaret. She ate in silence and moved to the upstairs drawing room with the rest of the ladies afterwards, but stood aloof from their gossip and boasts. Her mother, however, was happy to engage in such frivolous talk.

Margaret’s stomach tightened as the men rejoined them. Mr. Thornton caught her eye, and she watched him say a few words in passing to others as he made his way to where she stood, aloof from the others.

“You are not enjoying the conversation here?” he asked, in a bemused estimation of her boredom.

“If only I were interested in Mrs. Hamper’s new parlor curtains or what Bertha Simmonds wore to church last Sunday, I should be enraptured,” she returned with a smile, relieved to engage in a light-hearted manner with him.

She noticed a few glances from others directed their way.

“I suppose I’m more interested in subjects of far more importance, such as the ones that were discussed at dinner,” she continued.

His expression grew solemn. “I’m sorry our talk of the strike disturbed you. You must understand that our position is based upon the logic of our calculations—in order to keep the mills in operation. We are not responsible for how the workers will respond to our decisions.”

Margaret drew herself up, her soul rebelling against his cold reasoning when speaking of his workers. “But it is everyone’s moral responsibility to

take care of children who are starving. And I believe that as one having so much power over others, you have a responsibility to find a way to communicate with them as human beings, not as some extension of your machinery to be ignored.”

Some distance away, Mrs. Thornton’s eyes grew wide in alarm as she observed Miss Hale take on a sparring stance with her son from afar.

“What would you have me do?” he retorted with barely controlled vehemence, leaning closer to keep their conversation private.

“Well, I certainly would not hire replacements, as I believe I overheard you are planning to do. These workers toil in your factories for years, and yet you treat them as nothing and give their work to others!”

“I will not stand by while my mill goes to ruin—“

“Yet you will stand by and allow children to go hungry and their parents to go mad with desperation. I saw such a family today, whose infant can no longer cry normally for starvation—all while you pile delicacies in front of your fellow masters!” she returned, her blood hot in righteous fury.

Their raised voices caused heads to turn in their direction.

Embarrassed to be caught thus, they softened their hardened postures, and Mr. Thornton turned to engage in conversation with others.

Mr. Bell came to Margaret’s side to deflect scrutiny. He himself had seen their private arguing. It had struck him they had appeared as husband and wife, so intense seemed their connection in their apparent bickering. The possibility of such a match intrigued him greatly.

Margaret’s subdued mood thereafter made it difficult for her to smile politely the rest of the evening. When it was time to take their leave, she said goodbye with scarcely a glance at Mr. Thornton. She was certain that others noticed the unresolved tension between them.

Settled in the coach, Margaret felt tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. Conflicting flares of anger and disappointment troubled her heart.

Riding with them to his hotel, Mr. Bell divined the reason for her somber expression and gave her a crooked smile of compassion.

As they rode through the streets in the dark, Margaret began thinking out loud. “Mr. Bell, if you are Mr. Thornton’s landlord, he does not own his land, or the factory?”

“I own the land and the buildings, including his home. He owns the machinery and all that may be within,” he answered.

Margaret was silent for a moment as she digested this. "If Mr. Thornton must pay for use of the property, that will affect his profits," she reasoned.

"Indeed, my dear. He must balance his profits against a host of costs: cotton, coal, machinery, and of course the wages of his workers. I don't envy the man's work at all. The computation of all the figures involved would have my head spinning," he explained.

"Yes, I see," Margaret quietly replied, still considering the magnitude of what Mr. Thornton must be responsible for.

A new conjecture entered her mind. "But who will own the land when you are gone?" she blurted out, realizing as soon as the words came out how indelicate the query was. "I'm sorry, I was only thinking that since you have not married—"

"Yes, yes. I see your point. But do not hurry me to my grave!" he teased. "As I have no progeny, it would only be natural to wonder who should inherit old Adam Bell's wealth. I suppose now is as good a time as any to reveal my intentions. My holdings will be given over to you, my dear," he stated, looking straight at Margaret.

A huff of incredulity escaped her throat. She smiled broadly at his jest until she caught the seriousness in his demeanor. "You cannot mean..."

"Indeed, I mean to do so, and have intended such for some time. And now that I have seen the scampering little girl all grown up, I am more certain than ever of my decision."

"Oh, Mr. Bell!" Mrs. Hale exclaimed. "You are too kind!"

"Nothing of the sort. It is a very practical decision. I must delineate an heir, and I have chosen the nearest of kin that I have," he stated, not wanting a shower of effusion poured upon him.

The thought of Bessy's prediction that she should be an instrument in bringing some kind of peace between masters and men recurred to Margaret. Perhaps it would happen differently than Bessy had imagined. For if she owned Marlborough Mills, she might have influence in its operations in that way. Marriage to Mr. Thornton would not be the sole avenue to such ends.

This reasoning did nothing, however, to relieve an underlying discontent that weighed upon her. What was it that disturbed her so? She told herself it was the masters' stubborn indifference to the conditions of their workers. But there was more than this that upset her.

She could not discern the precise reason a few tears trickled down her cheeks in the darkness; she only felt that everything had turned out wrong. Happiness seemed always out of reach here.



Mr. Thornton gruffly tugged at his cravat in the dim candlelight of his bedchamber. The evening had started with so much promise—only to turn into more impassioned arguing between them! He cast off his waistcoat and pulled off his shirt impatiently.

She refused to understand his position, taking only the view of the workers from her contact with that Higgins man. He paced from his wardrobe to the dressing table for a few moments with his fists curled tightly.

He stopped to stoop and splash some cool water on his face, taking a measure to soothe himself. As he patted the moisture with a towel, his thought traveled back to the moment he had first glimpsed her this evening. He had expected to admire her beauty, but he had not expected to be stricken by it.

He had seen her in an evening gown once before, but this time an intoxicating ripple of desire coursed through him every time he looked at her. The way her dress clung to her voluptuous form, her lithe throat, the exposed shoulders, the teasing curve of her breasts—called to him as a Siren.

When he had taken her down to dinner, he had exulted in every moment of their pairing. The touch of her arm on his was a scintillating pleasure. All else around them was naught but the two of them. All was as it should be.

Until she had spoken against him concerning the workers' children.

He remembered how those intelligent eyes had flashed fire at him as they had argued after dinner. And even as she challenged him—perhaps more so because of it—her bare shoulders and the soft flesh of her bosom drove him almost to distraction. He had wanted nothing more than to sweep her into his arms and carry her upstairs right then and there.

He hung his head, gripping the bureau in front of him at this onslaught of this torturous yearning to make her his own. He wondered whether he was mad. Surely, it would not be rational to want her when she did not return his

love. But all his reasonings did nothing to assuage the constant ache that plagued him and that only she could cure.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mrs. Thornton sat at breakfast promptly at six, the white linen cloth spread over the round table in just the manner she instructed. Her son would appear at any moment, ready to continue his preparations for getting the mill running again. The stupidity of the strikers would not put him out of business, she was sure of that. If they lost their jobs to the Irish, they had only themselves to blame.

She supposed Miss Hale would not approve. But what should a chit of a girl have to say about how her son ran his business? Mrs. Thornton's ire flared as she recalled Miss Hale's behavior last evening. The audacity she had to speak up against her son as she sat at his table!

John entered the room just then, greeted his mother, and sat down in his customary place. Martha appeared almost immediately with his eggs and toast, and a bowl of sweetened porridge for the Missus. His mother poured tea for him. The aromatic scent of Darjeeling spices wafted from the steaming cup.

"I'm glad our party is over now, so that you can focus solely on your plans. I expect all the other masters have discovered what you intend to do?" Mrs. Thornton asked, taking a sip of her tepid tea.

"Mr. Slickson knows, so no doubt all the others do as well," he said blandly, dipping his toast into the yellow yolk.

His mother watched him closely. His manner was short and grave. No doubt, it was because of the risks involved in what he was about to do. Still, she wondered if Miss Hale's insolence had affected him overmuch.

“I had my misgivings about inviting the Hales,” she said, tilting her chin up. “It’s incomprehensible to me that Miss Hale would give you such a dressing down in front of—“

“Miss Hale is at liberty to express her opinion on any matter. She is a vicar’s daughter after all, and has a care for the lower classes,” he argued in a firm but tired tone. “It is in her nature to have compassion for others.”

But apparently not for you, his mother thought. His defense of the girl vexed her. It confirmed her forebodings that he still held an interest in the girl. They ate in silence together.

“I have much to do. Good day, Mother,” he said after his last bite, then rose from his empty plate to begin his work.



At about the same time, two miles away in the Hales’ home, Dixon shook Margaret awake.

“Miss Margaret!” Dixon urged the sleeper to wake.

“Hmmm,” the drowsy girl rolled to her side.

“Miss Margaret!” the panicked servant urged more loudly, giving the girl’s shoulder another shake. “It’s your mother. She’s in a terrible state. You need to fetch the doctor!”

Margaret opened bleary eyes and pushed herself up. “What is it? What has happened?” she asked, a growing sense of dread clearing away her drowsiness.

Dixon wrung her hands, fear written all over her face. “She’s gone into convulsions. She woke several times during the night in pain. I fear the dinner party was too much for her frail system. You must go get Dr. Donaldson!”

Margaret was already tossing off her nightdress and pulling on her shift as Dixon frantically explained. She put on her day dress, forgoing her corset, and hurriedly thrust her toes into her stockings. Her mind raced with horrific images. Her heart drummed with fear.

Having laced her boots, she threw open a bedside drawer to rummage for the piece of paper with the doctor’s address. Would he still be home? Or would he already be out the door on his rounds?

She raced down the stairs, though with as light footsteps as possible in her flight. It would do no good to wake her father at such a time.

Her legs were wobbly as she walked nearly at a running pace, realizing much too late that she had forgotten her bonnet. She asked directions from several people as she went until at last she climbed the steps of the good doctor's house and rang the bell.

Relief poured over her as Dr. Donaldson himself appeared within a few moments.

"My mother!" she said, still catching her breath from her chase.

He understood at once, seeing her disheveled state, and disappeared to fetch his bag for only a few seconds before they both dashed on.

When they arrived at the house, Mr. Hale was crouched by his wife's bedside, clutching her limp hand.

"How could you keep such a thing from me?" he wailed, accusing both the doctor and his daughter of their knowledge. Dixon had been obliged to tell him all.

"We felt it best to allow you to come to your conclusions slowly," the doctor answered for them both as he attended to his unconscious patient. "However, occasionally a bout of convulsions will show the seriousness of the condition well before the final decline."

The words, although spoken soothingly to explain, sounded as a death knell to Mr. Hale. He began weeping silently. "I should not have taken you from Helstone. It is all my fault," he mumbled.

Margaret's heart bled to see her father so stricken, and gently coaxed him to a chair in the far corner to allow the doctor to examine his patient.

The atmosphere of the room was heavy with fear. Silence pervaded as they waited for the doctor's pronouncement. The shivering sigh from Mr. Hale and a "hmm" from the doctor being the only sounds for many minutes.

At last he stood and faced the onlookers. "The worst is past. The spasms were bad, but the opiates I have given her will let her sleep. She will rally this time."

"This time?" Mr. Hale cried out. "I cannot bear it. Perhaps you are yet mistaken?" he asked in desperation. His pitiful hope caused the old doctor to sigh.

"I'm afraid not. You must take it like a man and prepare yourself, although you may yet have many months. Do not overburden her with your grief, sir," the doctor advised.

They spent the day watching over the sleeping patient. Margaret insisted poor Dixon sleep while her mistress slept. Mr. Hale stayed by his wife's

side, his vigil vacillating between prayer and penitent grief.

The routines of normal life vanished, and time was meaningless as interminable waiting stole every thought. Margaret performed tasks as a shadow of herself, moribund and dulled to all other concerns. The dinner party, the terrible poverty of the Bouchers, her clashing with Mr. Thornton—all faded into a far-away distance. Fear of a motherless future consumed her. And the terrible duty of keeping her father from collapsing into uselessness fell heavy upon her soul.

She thought of writing Edith to tell her of what would eventually come to pass. Aunt Shaw should be told.

Oh, was it only a year ago that Edith had married? It was painful to consider how much had changed since then. Last summer, Margaret had returned to Helstone with no care in the world, roaming her forest and delighting in its gardens. How hard life had been since father had moved us to this town!

And yet, she could not wholly wish she had never come to this place. It had opened her eyes to other worlds and people she would have never met in Helstone.

Toward dusk, Margaret was carrying a tray of tea upstairs when her father appeared above, his eyes alight with urgency. “I believe she’s waking!”

When Mrs. Hale opened her eyes at last, the hovering faces surrounding her bed perplexed her. “What is it?” she asked of them.

Her husband smiled, unable to contain his joy at seeing her so unaffected. It was as if it had all just been a dream.

“You were ill, mamma,” Margaret answered gently, offering nothing more. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, I suppose I am. My head feels a bit muddled. How long have I been sleeping?”

“Most of the day, Mum,” Dixon answered, “now don’t you worry about anything. The doctor said you’ll be better now.”

“The doctor? He was here?”

“My darling,” Mr. Hale said, holding her hand to his heart, “we are happy you have recovered.”

The dark cloud had passed, and the house fell into a more peaceful mode. The tired watchers could get proper rest that evening.

In the morning, Dr. Donaldson came again to check on his patient. Mrs. Hale was to rest that day, and then the next day she could go to her sitting

room if she felt better. She was still uncomfortable in certain positions.

“Is there anything more we can do to ease her discomfort?” Margaret asked him as he stood in the hallway.

“A water bed may help give her a better night’s sleep. I believe the Thorntons have one you may borrow.”

“Yes, Fanny spoke of it once to me. I will go ask about it this afternoon.”

Margaret was glad to be given a useful errand. She yearned to get out of the house. After she went to the Thorntons’, perhaps she would go see Bessy.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Without the incessant smoke from the mills blackening the sky, the summer sun beat down on roofs and awnings, iron gates and brick paths as Margaret made her way to the Thorntons' home. It was a hot July day, and the air was thick with an oppressive stillness. Only people who had to be outside were on the streets.

A few young men raced past her, then a few more, but her thoughts were consumed with worry about her mother's suffering and her father's reactions. She stared only at the ground ahead of her, watching her footsteps. Thus it was that as she walked down Marlborough Street, she was not conscious of the distant buzzing noise of a hundred angry men.

At last, the growing sound of shouts broke her sad trance as she drew closer. She looked up to see a raucous crowd gathered far ahead. She halted, fear beginning to build in the pit of her stomach. Were they going to Marlborough Mills? She was not near enough to be certain.

The inner voice of wisdom told her to turn and flee, but fear of violence was not as strong as her need to know what would happen. She hurried forward, her eyes growing wide and heart hammering with foreboding as she saw teams of men and women, angry strikers, pressing and pounding against the tall wooden doors that were the gateway to Marlborough Mills.

She watched in horror as the masses heaved in unison and, at last, a tremendous splintering crack heralded their success. Streams of haggard-looking men and women streamed into the yard, stamping down the broken doors. Their whoops and hollers sent a chill over Margaret's skin.

Drawn like a magnet to the danger, she drew even closer, standing back from the broken entryway to avoid being trampled by those still coming to the fray. She stretched her neck to see what they would do, her heart thumping in her chest. Would they break into the mill or try to enter the house?

Forgetting herself, she stood mesmerized by the perilous situation unfolding before her, but she was not invisible to John Boucher as he ran to join the others.

“That’s the Master’s girl!” he shouted, pointing to the statue-still onlooker. Only those closest to him heard.

“Bring her along!” one said, leaping toward her. Others instantly followed.

“Let Thornton come get his prize!” shouted another as they surrounded her, grabbing her arms to force her along with them.

“Let me go!” She twisted and pulled mightily to free herself, but there was no use. They only laughed at her.

“Come along, Missy!” they taunted with a surge of glee at their luck. “Let’s see your beau rescue yo’!”

“Aye, she’s a fiery lass, this one!” one of them said as Margaret continued to writhe and resist desperately.

Terror overtook Margaret as they pulled her into the yard among the throng, shouting out about the prize they’d caught.

“Make way! We’ve got the Master’s girl. Let’s see him come save her!”



Upstairs in the Thornton house, the terrific noise of the gate’s destruction and the onslaught of a hundred threatening cries that followed sent Fanny into hysterics.

“They’re coming to kill us! They’ll kill us all!” she screamed, her hands shaking and eyes wild with fright. “We’re going to die!” She began to cry and wail piteously.

“Mother, take Fan. Stay in the back of the house,” Mr. Thornton directed, his manner urgent but controlled.

“When will the police come?” his mother asked, her tone matching his calm, but her eyes revealed her growing panic.

“They will be here soon,” he assured her. “Take care of Fan,” he said, and shut them safely behind the dividing doors of the large drawing room.

He rushed to the window to scan the scene below. Masses of men poured into the long-still mill yard. Some raced to find entrance to the mill where they had worked. His heart thumped harder with another jolt of anxiety. He had securely barred every door, yet these men were desperate.

Mr. Thornton glanced at the upper floors, where he had put the Irish men and women for safekeeping. His every nerve pulsed with the strange thrill of danger. He had knowingly risked provoking their anger so much as this. Let them do their best, he thought defiantly. They will soon find out they cannot win this war.

At that moment, his eyes noticed the developing scene below. Wide berth was being made for a few men coming to the front, dragging with them a woman against her will.

All the energy of arrogant triumph drained from his body as he recognized her. A terror he had never known paralyzed him.

“Margaret!” he whispered, frozen in place only for a fleeting moment before flying down the stairs to the front doors. His hands quaked as he fumbled hastily to remove the bar he had put in place to bolt it shut. At last, he threw open the doors with a great thud.

“Let her go!” he bellowed from the portico above the crowd.

An unholy roar rose from the mob. Fists shot into the air. The spectacle they wanted had begun.

Hoorahs filled the yard to see the Master in a rage as he raced down the stone stairs. The rowdy mob moved out of his way as he ran straight toward Margaret’s captors.

“Let her GO!” he thundered, his face so darkly menacing as he lunged closer that some loosened their hold on her and she wrested free.

He opened his arms to her, and she threw herself into them, wrapping her own arms tightly around his middle, her cheek pressed against his chest. She began sobbing.

He held her close with one arm as he unleashed the ferocity of his anger on them. “Are you proud of yourselves now?” he shouted. The mob quieted down. “Taking an innocent woman prisoner! For what end?” His voice cracked with vehement fury.

“To call you out of your hiding!” someone hollered.

“Here I am! What will you do now?” he challenged them.

No answer was given, for at that moment the first whistles were heard of the mounted police. They galloped into the yard, swinging their batons to disperse the mob. The crowd scattered to escape, shouts and screams mixed with the clatter of hoofbeats.

The tension coursing through Mr. Thornton's veins eased. He released his hold on Margaret as she pulled away. "Are you hurt?" he asked, looking over her earnestly for cuts or bruises as chaos surrounded them on all sides.

"No...only a little..." she stammered in dazed confusion. Embarrassed now for clinging to him, she stepped away from him.

"Margaret!" he called out, reaching to pull her back. But it was too late.

A man fleeing the horses whizzed by, knocking her to the ground.

The Master crouched down to help her up, terror welling up in him when she did not move. "Margaret!" he called out, his voice hoarse with fear. He swiftly scooped her up into his arms, carrying her away from the stampede, up the stairs to his house. He saw blood trickle from a slight wound on her head near her temple. Panic filled him as she lay limp in his arms. She was so close to him he could smell the scent of rosewater.

"Mother!" he shouted as he carried his burden up the grand stairway. He called for help once more before he gently laid Miss Hale down onto the sofa. Crouching by her side, he placed a hand on her cheek, then pressed to feel for a pulse at her neck and heaved an audible sigh to find it.

"Oh, Margaret, I thought I had lost you!" he murmured, his body quaking with a surge of emotion. He cradled her head in his hands, willing her to wake to witness his passion. As he worriedly studied her unmoving face, he brushed a trembling thumb over her lips—those lips that had spoken so vehemently against him at dinner days ago. "There will never be another woman like you. I love you," he told her in fervent, hushed tones.

Approaching footsteps sounded on the stairs. He stood up quickly, a faint stain of crimson coloring his cheeks.

"Heavens!" Mrs. Thornton exclaimed, rushing to him. "Whatever happened? How is Miss Hale here?" She kneeled to examine the girl.

"She was knocked to the ground. The rioters took her captive," he feebly explained, pacing the floor in agitation.

Fanny screamed to see Miss Hale's lifeless form. "Is she dead?" she asked, hovering a distance away, her hands over her mouth.

"Shush! She is not dead. But she's received quite a blow," her mother answered.

Mr. Thornton heard the note of serious concern in her voice. "I'll fetch the doctor at once," he announced and turned to go, his head buzzing with desperate fear.

"John!" she called him back, giving him a wary look. It unnerved her to see him half out of his senses. "You must go down to meet with the police. And see to the Irish. I will take care of Miss Hale."

He hesitated, then nodded and left to do what he knew he must. But his legs plodded heavily in their resistance to leave her. He used every ounce of deliberation to resist the powerful urge to stay where his every hope of happiness lay.

"Fanny, get Jane down here at once," Mrs. Thornton commanded, as soon as her son had gone.

When the maid appeared, she received orders to go fetch the doctor. "But Ma'am, the streets are too dangerous," she insisted, wringing her hands.

"For pity's sake! I'll go myself, then," the older woman said. "Try giving Miss Hale some smelling salts, and take care no blood gets on the sofa," she directed as she hurried out of the room.

Jane went for the smelling salts while Fanny approached Miss Hale. "There, there," she soothed the unconscious girl, "the doctor is coming."

"Did you see what happened?" Jane asked when she returned.

"No! What?" Fanny's eyes opened wide, ready to absorb every tidbit of gossip.

"Martha saw everything from the top corner window. She was so worried about the Master," Jane began, her voice somewhat hushed. She glanced slyly at the prone figure before them before continuing with eagerness.

"The rioters kidnapped her—"

"Kidnapped! How?"

"We don't know, but they carried her to the front of the crowd—their dirty hands holding her like a prisoner. Martha says it was to bring the Master out to save her."

"And he did, didn't he?" Fanny knew her brother was stupid enough to put himself in danger for another.

"That he did. But you won't believe what happened next." Jane looked again to see if Margaret might be waking. "She threw herself into his arms—clung to the Master for all to see!"

"No!" Fanny was incredulous.

“Indeed, and then the police came. That’s when she was knocked to the ground, in all the scrambling to escape.”

“Why, he’ll have to marry her!” Fanny exclaimed, piecing together the outcome of such a scandal. “No doubt she’ll rejoice in that. Any girl in town would. But my brother has never wanted to marry. He’s never been interested in anyone. He’s only interested in his business and his books.”

While they spoke thus, the injured girl stirred, and the two gossipers remembered to administer the smelling salts. Margaret turned her head and groaned. Her eyes fluttered open, but her vision was blurry. Pain emanated from her head. “Where am I?” she said and propped herself up.

“Oh no, Miss Hale!” Fanny said in alarm, gently guiding her to lay back down. “You are hurt. You’re safe now at our house. Mother has gone to get the doctor.” She patted Margaret’s hand.

A vague remembrance of what had happened returned to Margaret’s befogged mind. There’d been piercing whistles, the sickening thud of police batons hitting people, the screams of the fleeing men. But she had been safe a moment before that. She had felt safe in powerful arms.

“Mr. Thornton. Where is he? Is he hurt?” she mumbled as she attempted to sit up again.

“Calm yourself, Miss,” Jane now comforted her. The maid threw a knowing glance at Fanny. “Mr. Thornton was not hurt. He’s taking care of business matters.”

She lay down on the pillow and closed her eyes. A fuller recognition of all that had taken place slowly dawned on Margaret. She shuddered to remember the grip of hands holding her against her will, using her to draw Mr. Thornton into danger. And he had come. And she—oh, she had propelled herself into his arms!—she who would never make such a public display of herself!

The distress of humiliation sent her sensibilities into disarray.

“I mustn’t stay here,” she said, this time more determined to rise.

“Oh no, no!” Fanny fluttered in a panic before catching sight of her mother, who was returning. “Mother, Miss Hale is trying to leave!”

The stern widow came quickly to the sofa. “Miss Hale, you are in no state to leave just yet. I’ve sent a boy to get the doctor. You must wait and let him examine you.”

“Here he comes now,” Jane announced, because she was looking out the window.

Margaret relented and lay down. Her head was reeling from the effort of sitting up.

“My goodness,” said Dr. Donaldson, as he strode to his patient. “I did not mean to send you off into danger when I sent you to get that water bed.”

“You sent her here?” Mrs. Thornton asked, her brow contracted in confusion.

“In a manner of speaking,” he replied, taking a seat on the chair Jane brought over. He began checking his patient. “I told her she might borrow your water bed—for her mother.”

“My dear, you have taken quite a bump,” he said to Margaret. “But it looks worse than it truly is,” he announced. “Here now, sit up just a little to see how you’re feeling.”

She did so. After determining that she was not nauseous and could see clearly, Dr. Donaldson was satisfied that she would recover well and that she should rest but not sleep for several hours.

Mrs. Thornton was relieved. “There is a spare bedroom upstairs—”

“I cannot stay here,” Margaret repeated, a panic rising in her to get away.

“You must stay and rest as the doctor says,” Mrs. Thornton insisted with a matter-of-fact tone.

Margaret turned to Dr. Donaldson with desperation in her eyes. “You know I cannot stay here. I don’t wish to worry my mother. I believe I can walk home,” she said, standing up to prove it. The doctor steadied her wobbly stance.

“Certainly not,” Mrs. Thornton was adamant.

Dr. Donaldson spoke up. “I can help her get home in a cab. She’s right about her mother. It will do no good to trouble Mrs. Hale in her present state.”

“Very well,” Mrs. Thornton replied with great misgivings, although she was secretly glad to be rid of the girl. She had certainly stirred up great trouble for her son of late.



Margaret breathed deeply once seated in the cab, away from that house—away from all that suffocating reproach. The outside air helped to clear her head, although she wondered if what had happened was not just a horrible dream.

As she rode along, she could not stop thinking of those brief moments when she was pressed so closely against Mr. Thornton's chest that she could feel his strong heartbeat. And when he had shouted—she did not know what he had said—the vibration of his voice pulsed through his chest and into her own body. He had smelled of wool and smoke.

His arm had pressed her closer. And she had never felt so safe.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Mr. Thornton stared out the window, past the policeman whose words flowed over him. Had it all really happened? Mere minutes ago, the yard had been a scene of deadly peril and commotion. In that dusty spot over there—she had broken free from those half-crazed men and rushed into his arms. She had clung to him, her arms wrapped around him tightly.

In the pulsing fear of those moments, he had not wholly recognized the enormity of her embrace. He felt it now—relived it constantly—could think of nothing else. Her soft form had pressed willingly against him. His whole body now ached to feel her in his arms again.

“Mr. Thornton?” the police officer prompted, aware that the mill owner was distracted. He allowed it was understandable even a man like Mr. Thornton might be dazed from his brush with such a violent uprising. “I asked if you knew the names of the men who held Miss Hale captive?”

The Master shook his head, returning his attention to the matter at hand. “I’m not one to know the hands by name,” he answered, receiving a nod in return.

He would press charges against the aggressors who had the gall to treat her ill—if they could be named. Anger and the touch of fear rose in him every time he thought of what might have happened to her.

In her fear, she had rushed to him—to *him*—for protection. She would find no safer place. He would give his very life to keep her safe.

It took tremendous self-control to remain where he was when every fiber of his being wanted to rush back home to Miss Hale, to be certain she was

recovering well. But he must finish his business with the police and take himself to check on his Irish, who were still cowering from the threat of the mob.

He forced himself to talk calmly but firmly with the poor frightened Irish, telling them they would be safe now. He sent for Father Grady to help. Many of the women were crying to be sent back, and he had half a mind to do so. Perhaps causing this riot would be their true usefulness to him, despite all the trouble and cost of bringing them. For now, the strike would surely be over. They had shown themselves to be animals, and could no longer sway public opinion.

All this he surmised as he quieted the people he had brought to save his mill, reminding them that the police would guard the premises through the night. Racing in the back of his mind were questions that would not be quelled: Had she displayed her true feelings for him? Would she accept him as her husband now? Did she see clearly now the depths to which he would go to protect her?

He would go to her as soon as he had an opportunity.



While her son was gone and the drawing room was blessedly still once again, Hannah Thornton sat in the straight-backed chair at the dining table, her Bible laid out before her. She turned to the Psalm she knew well already, having turned to it almost daily after her husband had hung himself.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,
He leadeth me beside the still waters...*

The tremor of change had begun. She could feel the tension of fear coiling about her heart. It made her hands tremble.

After Miss Hale had gone—such a strong-willed girl!—Fanny had told her what had happened. How Miss Hale had been taken hostage and forced to the front to make John come out and save her.

And he had done so. It was not this that disturbed her. Although the risk to his life had been great, he proved himself to be brave in facing their foolish taunts with immediate action. What else could he do?

No, he was no coward. Not him. Her mother's heart beat proudly because of him.

It was what *she* had done—wrapped her arms around her son—in front of so many pairs of eyes! This was the act that could not be undone—that would be all their undoing.

Nothing would be the same now. Miss Hale had thrust herself into their lives for good. He must offer his hand to her in some haste to save her reputation.

Miss Hale would become mistress of this home. Mrs. Thornton's shoulders drooped to consider it. No longer would she decide how to order the house, what to hang on the walls, when to dine, and what economies to make. After all these many years, she would have no purpose but to stand aside and watch him build a new life.

She chided herself for such selfish thoughts, but they flowed into every crevice of her sorrowing heart at present. The time had come at last. She must give him up to another.

She heard his footsteps coming. She straightened her back and pretended to be reading the Scriptures.

John strode into the room. "Where is she?" he asked, seeing the empty sofa. It irritated him to find his mother placidly reading as if no kind of catastrophe had occurred.

"She's gone home," his mother replied calmly, repressing her own irritation at his abruptness.

"Home?" he repeated incredulously. "She was gravely injured—"

Mrs. Thornton gave a short huff. "She was taken care of as best we could. Dr. Donaldson examined her and took her home in a cab."

She saw the glint of doubt in his eyes.

"Honestly, John. She's such a headstrong girl! I insisted she stay here to recover herself, but she was bound and determined to go home. How do you expect such a girl to submit to your will?"

"Submit to my will?" he repeated, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"As your wife, she must learn to—"

"My wife?" The word struck deep into his core as he voiced it. "Did she speak of marriage?" he asked, a sudden flood of hope coursing through him. He had asked her once. Was she ready now to reply?

"Certainly not. But she must know what such a public scene must come to," she said with a tight voice. "I am merely speaking of what must now

take place.”

What must now take place. Was it a certainty then? Stubborn rational thought battled the rush of emotions that swept in. He did not wish her to marry him because society told her to. He needed to know if she would marry him because she cared for him.

“You know what happened then,” he said, his voice low.

“Martha saw it all from the attic window and told Fanny.”

“Did Miss Hale speak? Did she say how she came to be taken up by the strikers?” he asked, his breath quickening.

“She was coming to borrow the water bed for her mother,” she answered. “I don’t know any details beyond that.”

He was silent for a moment, gathering his thoughts as he stared vacantly about. “I must go see her,” he announced.

Mrs. Thornton flinched. “Surely not right now. She will need her rest. And you must have other pressing obligations to finish.”

“No, not now,” he agreed reluctantly as he began pacing the room, combing his fingers through his hair in his distracted state. “I must go to the police station and will need to speak to Hamper and the rest.”

He stopped and turned to look directly into his mother’s eyes. “But I will go see her this evening when I return.”

She saw his intent, and her heart sank at his haste to secure the future she wished to push away. “I’m sure tomorrow would be soon enough—“

“No,” he said with decision, shaking his head. “I must know if she will accept me. I cannot wait.”

His powerful emotions unnerved her. She stared at him warily as some unfamiliar creature from her steady and self-controlled son. Miss Hale had stolen his ability to see reason.

“Accept you? Of course, she should accept you! Did not she cling to you in front of all that unruly mob? Do you not think that it will become the tittle-tattle of all Milton by tomorrow?”

The mere mention of Miss Hale’s clinging to him sent again a surge of fierce passion through his every nerve ending.

“She did cling to me...but she was frightened,” he stammered, doubt clouding his face. “I cannot be certain she cares for me in that way....”

“Cares for you? Why, she has ensnared you with her southern wiles from the start. She has kept you at arm’s length and thrown out arguments against

you only to keep you fascinated with her ways. Now that she has won you, I pray she knows your true worth.”

Mr. Thornton startled at this assessment. “It is not in her nature, Mother, to make designs on men. You do not know her.”

Mrs. Thornton opened her mouth, but pressed her lips closed and shook her head in dismay. She could not open his eyes to the ways of women. Miss Hale had entranced him somehow from the very start. She silently scoffed at his certainty of knowing her.

“Very well, John, but you needn’t doubt her intention to accept you,” she said, hoping with all her might that Miss Hale would make him happy. Mrs. Thornton was certain enough that she didn’t deserve him.



When at last he had done with all that was necessary, Mr. Thornton made his way to the Crampton home.

His entire frame thrummed with the need to feel her body against his again. He would claim her as his own; nothing could now stop what the force of heaven had done yet again to put her in his arms. He allowed the light of happiness to burn within him more brightly, imagining how she would blush and fall into his arms again—where she belonged.

The last glow of light in the western skies dimmed as he strode the paths and byways to the side of town where all his desire lay. The darkness only enhanced his fevered thoughts as all reality faded from sight and the realm of dreams played on the blank canvas of night.

The heat of the day still lingered. A bead of sweat trickled down his spine as he kept up his desperate pace.

At the crest of one hill, he saw the gas-lit lamps and shapes of the rows and rows of buildings below. In that moment, with all of Milton below and behind him, the swell of triumph filled his breast at the glorious life he envisioned ahead of him.

Nearly breathless as he arrived at the steps of the Crampton house, he stopped to gulp the air and let his heartbeat slow. Then, with all his hopes brimming, he bounded up the steps and rang the bell.

The portly maid answered, giving him a wary look.

“I’ll tell Mr. Hale you’re here,” Dixon said, already turning to go.

“Please,” he halted her. “I would speak to Miss Hale,” he said, tempering his voice to a calmness he could not feel.

An eyebrow rose on the proud servant’s face. She frowned, raising her chin before announcing that she would see if Miss Hale could see him at such an hour.



Margaret was grateful to be alone in her room to ponder all that had happened hours before, having at last left her mother’s room for the evening. She had not dared to tell her parents what had taken place that afternoon, hiding the slight cut and bruise above her temple with her hair.

She sat on her bed, allowing her mind to wander through the images of the day—the potent feelings she had kept at bay for hours now broke through the barriers she had resolutely erected.

The cold rush of fear returned as she recalled how terrifying it had been to be pulled along and roughly held. Her terror had magnified when she realized what they intended—to make Mr. Thornton risk his life to save her.

And he had saved her with such ferocious passion—

A knock on her door interrupted her thoughts.

“Mr. Thornton is in the parlor, Miss Margaret,” Dixon announced upon stepping into the room. “He’s asked to speak to you. But at such an hour, I as much as told him you may not be available.”

“No...no, I will go,” she murmured despite the sudden humming in her ears, and a pattering heartbeat. “Thank you, Dixon.”

Dixon frowned her disapproval, but dutifully retreated and closed the door.

Margaret gripped the back of her writing chair for support. How could she face him again—so soon? She felt a rush of shame at the memory of how she had held on to him so tightly—in front of all those people, too! She had tried to brush away the trail of thoughts that led to the consequences of that public act.

She stood erect, straightening her back, drawing the courage to face him. There was nothing to be ashamed of in what she had done. She had been terribly frightened—surely everyone would comprehend that.

At any rate, she refused to let society dictate her future.

Despite her strengthening will, her legs trembled as she took the stairs down to meet him.



Mr. Thornton could not stay still. He walked from one end of the room to another as he waited for her to arrive. So absorbed was he in his visions of happiness that he didn't hear Margaret enter the room. He stopped mid-stride to notice her.

She appeared all softness and delicate beauty in the shadowy glow of the lantern that Dixon had lit in the darkening room. He ached to reach out and take her into his arms—to comfort her from any lingering distress.

"Are you well? You were hurt," he said, deep concern etched into his contracted brow as he crossed the room to see for himself.

"Only a little. I am recovered," she said with a meager smile, averting her eyes. She quivered within at his approach.

He did not like how easily she dismissed her own care. "You were badly hurt. You should have stayed where you were, as you were told," he said firmly.

"And am I a child that must do as I am told?" she returned, the spark of resistance flaring up in her, making her square her shoulders. "Is this how you would treat a wife?" she accused him, her chin jutting into the air.

"I have no wish to control my wife as a child. But it will be my duty to take any means to protect her!" he answered in rising vehemence, agog to be arguing with her once again.

He shut his eyes and bowed his head for a moment.

"I did not come to argue," he began, his voice low and deliberate.

Margaret stilled, her heart battering in her chest.

"I came..." he hesitated, searching for the words he had practiced on the footpaths to her home. He stepped closer, staring at her down-turned face and the folded hands lying upon her skirts.

"I came to tell you I love you. I have thought of no one but you since we first met."

She could not look up. Her breathing quickened as his words overwhelmed her with the familiar deep-lying passion he had unleashed upon her so suddenly months before.

Her silence bade him continue. “Surely you must know my feelings have remained the same—nay, they have grown despite all our differences. I made it plain months ago that I wished you to be my wife. And now I ask you again—will you marry me? I hope—I believe you may have some measure of feeling for me—“

“And you must know that I have misgivings in attaching myself to someone who would send the police to beat poor starving people!”

“I was protecting my family and my mill!” he answered, his voice rising again.

“If you had not brought the Irish to take their jobs—“

“I was saving my business from financial ruin!”

The door to the room swung open. “Here now, what is all this?” Mr. Hale exclaimed, his face contorted in alarm. “Your mother is sleeping,” he said, chastising his daughter.

“John?” he said, looking to his favorite student for any explanation.

“Accept my apologies for my intrusion. I will take my leave,” Mr. Thornton said, ducking his head from any scrutiny as he strode hastily from the room.

“Margaret?” her father asked, bewildered by Mr. Thornton’s gruff departure.

“Please, I cannot speak about it now,” she said, turning her face away and rushing past him in a rustle of her skirts.

Behind the closed door of her room, Margaret stood in the darkness. The pain of anguish pulled at the pit of her stomach. Her eyes pricked with tears. What had she done? What was it that made her treat him so cruelly?

He had spoken of love. The fervent depth of his emotion had wound its possessive tendrils about her. And she had resisted—frightened to be owned, to be swallowed up in this unknown power.

She dropped herself onto the bed and sobbed softly into her pillow.



Mr. Thornton fairly staggered down the stairs he had so eagerly climbed only moments before. He halted as he stepped into the street. He knew not where to turn or how to proceed.

The enveloping darkness of the town matched the blackness of his desolation. He followed the light of the gas-lit lamps, his vision blurry from

the sting of tears in his eyes.

Had a mere torrent of words between them obliterated his every hope of a happy future? It could not be, and yet he had opened his heart to her, and she had cast off his love as an insult to her character. She refused to give him any approval or honor for his life's work.

He was not good enough for her. He had known it from the start. And still he had blundered on with the desperate hope of winning her. What a fool he had been to think she would care for him!

He stepped off the street to head up the path of the cemetery hill, dashing his hand across his face to wipe unwonted tears from his eyes.

Clouds moved like phantoms across the sky. The moon crept from obscurity to shine its meager light on his misery.

He wished with all his might he could turn his love into hate. With a rising swell of anger against her, he attempted to hurl his heart to safer shores of disdain or dismissal. But he could not hate her, even in her rejection of him.

How magnificent she had looked in her righteous fury! With her upturned face, so close to his, she had defied him with her glorious confidence and glowing compassion.

No, there would never be any woman like Margaret. And oh!—he knew how passionately she would love if ever there was a man who deserved to receive it from her. Pain tore through his chest to know he was not that man.

How cruel Providence had been to set her in his path not once but twice—only to make him suffer the lesson of unrequited love. For he knew he would never love like this again. He would love her despite the agony it inflicted upon his soul.

He went up and down the streets aimlessly, unaware of his surroundings. He walked; the cadence and exertion of motion allayed the despair he feared would crush him to stay still.

At last, as his feet grew weary, he headed for his home.

As he crossed the dark mill yard, visions from the riot played in his head. The door he now unlatched and swung open was the same door he had thrown open to save her earlier this day.

He climbed the stairs with heavy steps, dreading his mother's notice. She was there. A single candle burned on the table where she sat sewing. She did not look up as he approached.

“Is it all settled then?” she asked in a pleasant tone that masked the sorrow she was battling.

“I don’t wish to speak of it,” he answered, walking past her to go to his private quarters.

“What? She has refused you?” She could not fathom it.

Her shock halted him. He slumped to lean his frame against the fireplace mantel as the pain of her rejection struck him anew.

“She does not care for me, Mother. I am not good enough,” he said.

Mrs. Thornton stood, nearly dizzy with such jarring news, and tottered over to comfort him. She laid a hand on his arm, infinitely gentle with her son as her anger exploded against the girl. “Not good enough? Was all sense knocked out of the girl? She cannot mean to reject you! Not after what she did.”

He recovered himself enough to stand erect again, although his head hung in his sorrow. “She refuses to understand me. I can never do right in her eyes.”

Mrs. Thornton huffed. “And who is she to know you and all you have worked for? Foolish girl! I’d like to see her find a better man than my son! It serves you well she has refused you—“

“Mother, please,” he half-moaned. “I love her still. I will not hear your words against her.”

Mrs. Thornton pressed her lips together, excoriating the girl in her mind for the pain she caused her son.

“Let us not speak of it, please. I will be better in the morning,” he pleaded.

His mother nodded, and he turned to head upstairs to his bedchamber, wishing only to find relief from this torture in unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

In luxuriant and simple parlors where ladies met, at the grocer's and in the streets, in kitchens where servants gathered for meals, and in the more squalid homes of the factory workers—townspeople prattled and whispered about the young lady who had thrown herself into Mr. Thornton's arms. Riot or no riot, many supposed the lady must have set her sights on the Master beforehand to act so scandalously. People passionately argued whether Mr. Thornton had saved a lover from danger, or if an audacious girl had merely forced him into marriage.

Fanny had helped to spread the word of what had happened, having swiftly carried herself to call on Violet Grayson to tell her of her brother's fate.

Jane had also taken every opportunity to tell everyone she met at the marketplace that morning. Martha said not a word, for she would not deign to know whether Mr. Thornton was in favor of marrying Miss Hale or not. It was not her place to express an opinion on such a matter.

As the course of gossip wound its way through the town, Margaret was at home reading to her mother. It had been days—it seemed weeks—since Margaret had seen Bessy. Now that her mother was feeling better, Margaret was eager to see her friend after the uproar of the riot. So, as soon as she saw her mother was fairly comfortable (Mrs. Hale said the water bed was an improvement), she stole away to the Princeton District.

Along the way, as Margaret traveled the byways of the crowded living areas of the mill workers, she noticed she was an object of interest. A few

people pointed at her, directing others to look her way.

She was relieved to be out of the public view when she arrived at the Higgins' dwelling and Nicholas let her in.

"Were it yo' they're talking about?—at the riot?" he asked straightaway with urgency. "Were it yo' they got to make the Master come out?" His face was worn with care, but his question marked a new crease of concern.

Margaret's face turned pale, and she bowed her head. "Yes," she said, shuddering at the awful memory.

"I'd like to take the lot of them who put their hands on yo' and give them a thrashing," he growled beneath his breath. "Yo' see now how dangerous it is to mix with the masters?"

"Don't listen to him. He's terrible put out about the riot," Bessy called out from her reclined position in bed.

Margaret went to her, as Nicholas followed with more questions.

"Did they hurt yo'? Did they cause you injury?" His tone was both tender and fierce.

"They treated me very roughly, but I've no injury on their account," she answered, wishing to be done with any re-living of yesterday's events.

"I'm glad of that, to be sure. But a price must be paid for what they did to yo'. It's said that Boucher's the one that saw yo' and called yo' out. Were it him?" he persisted, eager to fix his fury on some solid entity.

"Yes—but don't hurt him for my sake!" she called out as he stormed towards the door. "He's had enough trouble," she added fervently, but he was already gone.

Margaret turned back to Bessy with a pained expression.

"Father is like to only hurl fiery words. I don't believe he'll hurt a waif of a man such as Boucher," Bessy said. "He has no patience for those who broke the strike by running to cause trouble at Thornton's. Now that they've lost the strike, all the work the Union has done this past year is for naught."

Bessy studied Margaret for any sign of yesterday's inflictions. "Yo' look as if naught has happened! I knew if it were true—if it were really yo' who was there in the middle of it all—that you'd be brave. Yo've more courage than most men I've seen."

Margaret made a noise in protest.

"But now, yo' must tell me all," Bessy said, "for they say Thornton came out of his house right away to save yo' and they saw you in the Master's arms."

Margaret buried her face in her hands. “Oh, has it truly become the talk of the town?”

“It’s true then,” Bessy whispered with a sense of wonder.

“I was frightened...and I ran to him...I felt safe there,” Margaret stammered, showing her face again and looking to Bessy with imploring eyes.

The sickly girl moved to comfort her friend’s distress, covering Margaret’s hand with her own. “Yo’ were afraid and ran to safety—as anyone would.”

“But now...what will people think?”

“There’s no need to fret over that. The Master will surely come and ask yo’ to marry him,” Bessy said to assure her.

Margaret dropped her head.

Bessy saw the guilty look on Margaret’s face when she looked up again. “Yo’ll not be telling me yo’ve turned him away!” Bessy exclaimed.

Margaret moaned and buried her face in her hands again. “Oh! I don’t know what came over me. He saved me that day, and I argued with him. I spoke to him so coldly.”

Bessy studied her friend’s penitent position for a moment. “Do yo’ care for him?” she asked gently.

“I don’t know!” Margaret burst out. “My heart flutters whenever he is near me, but we can never seem to agree.” She looked to Bessy for understanding.

Bessy saw the glisten of tears in her friend’s eyes and recognized the truth of the matter. “There’s time enough ahead for agreeing. Yo’ said ‘twas a thing to be considered with the heart. Then yo’ ought to listen to it.”

Bessy searched her noggin for what to say to her—to shine a light on what she was certain lay underneath. “What if those that got hold of yo’ had succeeded in their plan? What if they’d hurt Thornton? You’d be happy never to see him again?”

The question struck Margaret like a sudden blow.



Mr Thornton threw himself into his work to cover the bitterness that darkened his soul. Hundreds of hands would begin showing up to regain their jobs.

As he entered the meeting hall later that morning to consult with the other cotton mill masters, Mr. Slickson put a hand on his shoulder.

“Congratulations, Thornton, on ending the strike! Your move in hiring the Irish has worked to free all of us to start our mills working again.”

“And I hear congratulations are in order—you’ll be getting married! My wife says it’s the girl you escorted to dinner who got caught up in the riot. Incredible turn of events! You’ll have your hands full with that one, but you’ve picked a beauty!” Grunts and hums of agreement came from the others.

Mr. Thornton rankled at his assumptions. “I came to discuss business, gentlemen. I’m not ready to talk about personal matters,” he said.

His colleagues exchanged glances, their curiosity piqued at his curt manner.

Mr. Hamper cleared his throat. “I’m taking measures to prevent the Union from meddling with my operations. Any man who wants to work for me, must swear they are not members of the Union.”

“Good thinking,” Mr. Henderson agreed, and the others nodded except for Mr. Thornton.

They looked to him for his response.

“I despise the Union as much as the rest of you for what they’ve done, giving men false hope in making demands that can’t be met. But I’ll not make liars of men. They’ll make their promises to you, but many will not break from the Union.”

“It’s their word broken, not mine. I’ll wager some will be scared enough to break from the Union,” Hamper replied.

Throughout the rest of their meeting, Mr. Thornton noticed the wary glances made in his direction, but he did not care a whit for their opinions on either his business or his relationship with Miss Hale. He never smiled, for although the others were elated to start up their mills again, he himself found little to claim great triumph. He had the Irish hands to deal with, while the orders for cloth were nearing their contract date with no hope of timely fulfillment. The strike had cost him dearly, and it would be all he could do to bring his mill to a level of profit again.

He was relieved to escape their scrutiny when their planning concluded. As he walked along the street to return to the privacy of his office, his mind at first whirled with tasks and priorities of his business. But as he went on,

the vision of Margaret in that dim parlor would rise to send him into an agony of despair.

When he arrived, he closed the door to sit in his chair, his open ledger and the contract documents arrayed before him on the desk.

He allowed his thoughts to drift to his sore heart. Although he attempted to forget her condemnatory words, they still stung. How could she expect him to keep the strikers from starving? He had responsibilities only to those who were working for him. When they were not in his employ, he had no moral purview over them.

Her concern about their lack of sufficient food lodged in his mind. How was he to solve such a problem? It was preposterous to consider he should pay his workers in food, or have their mid-day meal delivered to the mill for some kind of daily provision. He paid them a fair wage, and they fed themselves and their families with it.

But as he contemplated the matter, an idea formed in his head that roused him to think again. Not because it would please her to consider it, but because it seemed a possibility that might benefit both men and masters. He would not toy with philanthropic measures. He had a business to run.



Dixon dropped the proper amount of coins into the hand of Mrs. MacLean for the flour and treacle in her basket.

“Have you heard about Mr. Thornton?” the grocer asked, putting the coins away.

“Of Marlborough Mills?”

“The very one. There was a riot yesterday, a mob of striking workers that broke down the doors to his yard.”

“No!” was the response.

“Yes, and that’s not the half of it. Those ruffians got hold of a girl—they say she was the Master’s girl—and made the Master come out into the mob to save her,” Mrs. MacLean said, satisfied to see she had sufficiently shocked her listener.

“Did they give a name to the girl?” Dixon pressed, her skin tingling with apprehension at her own guess.

“No one gave any. Do you know who it might be?” the grocer asked with great interest.

“I may or may not. But I’d not sully the girl’s name all about town,” Dixon huffed and turned to go. She nearly stumbled over the cobblestones in her haste to return home, bumping into one poor lad who did not make way swiftly enough for the wide-sized servant.

Out of breath and red-faced, Dixon descended the stairs to the kitchen to unburden herself of the basket she’d been carrying when she saw Martha there, washing dishes.

“Where is Miss Margaret?” Dixon asked between heaving breaths.

“She’s not yet come back from going out,” was the dutiful reply, her back turned to the inquirer.

“Then you must tell me—you were at Thornton’s yesterday, were you not?” Dixon asked.

Martha went still. “Yes,” she answered feebly.

Dixon pulled out a stool and sat on it. “Come now, and dry your hands. You must tell me what happened. I’ve heard rumors of a riot and a girl—Lord, have mercy!” Dixon exclaimed, seeing Martha’s guilty countenance.

“It was Miss Margaret, wasn’t it?” Dixon declared.

Martha nodded.

“Gracious, my lass! Why did you not tell me or the mistress? Oh, the mistress! She’ll be struck with fear. Why, she’ll fret about ever letting Miss Margaret out on the streets of this terrible town.”

“What happened? You must tell me all,” Dixon insisted.

And so Martha told her all she had seen from the Thornton’s window while Dixon muttered pleas to her Creator.

When all had been told, Dixon stared at the cold flagstone floor in disbelief. Then, she looked straight into Martha’s eyes. “Miss Margaret must marry the Master.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Dixon shook her head at the sad predicament involving the young miss. As she climbed the stairs, she fretted about how to tell the Missus that her daughter was involved in a scandal.

There was no way to present the facts pleasantly. She only hoped it would not cause the suffering invalid to have a relapse.

“Ah, there you are,” Mrs. Hale said, upon Dixon stepping into the sitting room. The mistress of the house was reclining on the couch with a fair amount of pillows. “Could you bring me that fan over there? It is getting warm,” she said without looking up.

“Mum,” Dixon answered, her voice thick with the weight of the news she brought.

“Dixon, what is it?” Mrs. Hale asked, stricken now by the look of the longtime maid’s somber countenance.

“There’s a bit of gossip rattling all over town. And you’ll need to know it,” Dixon said, coming closer.

“Why? Is it about me? Mr. Hale? Margaret?” when she had reached the answer by Dixon’s voiceless signals, she sank back further into her pillows. “Oh dear, what has happened?”

And so the faithful Dixon told her mistress all that she had heard. Mrs. Hale sat up at the first mention of the riot and exclaimed throughout as the tale was told. She threw her hands up to cover her mouth at the revelation that Margaret had held on to Mr. Thornton in front of hundreds of people.

“Is she hurt? Why didn’t she say so?” Mrs. Hale exclaimed upon finding out her daughter had not only been swept up into danger, she had been injured and had not told a soul.

“I suppose the doctor thought she was recovered well enough. The poor girl likely thought to save you from worry. You know she’s a dear girl, always thinking of others,” Dixon answered.

“Oh, but to know what everyone in town must think of her!” Mrs. Hale replied. She was silent for a moment, staring vacantly as she wove the threads of fate for her daughter in her mind. She reached its conclusion before long.

“Why, Mr. Thornton must make an offer for her. It’s the only way to save her reputation. And I must say I am fond of such a match, although this precipitous situation is not at all how I should have liked it to come about.”

She looked up into Dixon’s face. “I’m surprised Mr. Thornton did not come last evening to make his offer. I’m sure he must also know—”

“He did come last night,” Dixon replied, just now realizing herself the likely reason for his visit.



Margaret shut the front door of her home behind her. She was taking off her bonnet when Dixon appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Your mother wishes to speak to you.”

The tone of this relayed request roused Margaret’s suspicion. Had the rumors spread this far? She climbed the stairs warily.

“Yes, mamma?” Margaret said, stepping into the room. She knew instantly that her mother had heard by the pained look on her pale face.

“My dear, I have heard such things about what happened to you yesterday that I can scarcely believe it,” she stretched out her hand to her daughter, who moved forward to take it. “Is it all true?”

Margaret stared at the floor, her face blooming with shame and guilt. “Yes, mamma.”

“Come, let me look at you. You were hurt. Let me see.”

Her mother’s worried attentions brought tears to Margaret’s eyes. She sat next to her mother and showed her the area near her temple that she had covered.

“You should have told us, my darling. I can’t imagine how frightening it all must have been. And to think you were on an errand for me.”

“I didn’t want to worry you, mamma. Not after you had been so ill.”

“I know it. You have been very good to me. Now there is something we must talk about,” Mrs. Hale said, patting her hand.

Margaret cast her eyes down again, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

“Are you aware of the rumors spreading throughout the town—about what happened between you and Mr. Thornton?”

Margaret nodded, unable to look her mother in the eye.

Mrs. Hale let out a sigh. She looked at Dixon, who nodded to encourage her mistress to go on. “Dixon says Mr. Thornton was here last night. Did he...it would be only proper that he make an offer of marriage to you after such a scene. Did he make such an offer?” she asked as delicately as she could, her hope rising that all was resolved already.

Mrs. Hale startled as Margaret stood up suddenly and took a few paces away.

“He came...but I...we crossed words again. I spoke too harshly...” Her hands covered her face, her back turned to the onlookers.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hale murmured. “Well, perhaps your father can speak to him and make things turn out all right,” she offered with gentle brightness.

“Margaret?” her mother called to her.

Margaret turned towards her mother again. Mrs. Hale was astonished to see that she was crying.

“Oh, my dear, what is it? This is all terribly upsetting, to be sure. Your reputation is at stake, and there is only one way to secure it from all these coarse rumors. I know you have your differences with Mr. Thornton, but he is a very respectable man. You must be willing to accept him. After all, he has been nothing but kind to us, you must agree.”

“Yes, mamma,” Margaret whispered through her tears.



Dinner at the Hales’ home that evening was somber and silent.

Husband and wife shared poignant glances in the candle-lit room as Margaret kept her eyes on the plate in front of her, eating little.

Mrs. Hale had appraised her husband of Margaret’s situation as soon as he had come home from his lecture. And although he hated very much to be

pressed to force any kind of measure upon Mr. Thornton, Mr. Hale promised his wife he would request to speak with him tomorrow. He would do whatever Maria asked of him—whatever was in his power—to make her days as pleasant as possible.



At the other end of town, Mr. Thornton made his way through the darkening alleys of the Princeton District and rapped on the door of the Higgins' home.

Nicholas Higgins opened the door a crack and held it there when he saw who it was. "I've naught to do with the riot. I'd give yo' the name of every bastard who did yo' any damage if I could."

"I didn't come about that, but I'll hear what you have to say. I've come to talk to you about a concept I've been turning over in my mind. If you'll let me in," the Master answered.

Higgins hesitated only a moment before opening the door to let such an unexpected visitor enter his home.

Mr. Thornton swept his hat off his head before entering.

Higgins gestured to the wooden chair at the kitchen table.

"Your daughter. How is she?" Mr. Thornton asked, eyeing the inert form of the girl lying in a bed nearby. He took a seat, laying his hat on the table.

"She's no better. She sleeps most of the day," was the solemn answer.

"I'm sorry for your troubles," Mr. Thornton uttered quietly before getting to his point. "I've come to see if the scheme I've dreamed up is worth attempting. It's possible I've been wasting my time pondering it, but I thought I'd put it to for your opinion."

"Why me?" Higgins' face clouded with suspicion.

"You're a leader of your kind, are you not? I'm not acquainted with any others."

"I thought I was a leader, but I reckon it did no good. I couldn't stop them from turning to violence, although I warned them not to raise trouble. I'd like to see the whole lot of them that ran to your mill be thrown from the Union."

Higgins' vehemence roused Bessy from her sleep. "Father, who is it?" she called out groggily from the shadows.

“It’s the Master that’s come before. Come to talk to me a while,” her father answered.

“Oh! Yo’ must tell him about Boucher,” she sat up in her excitement, which brought on a coughing spell.

“Easy now, Bess,” her father said, his chair scraping the floor as he moved to lay a soothing hand on her.

The coughing ceased at last, and she continued her plea. “Miss Margaret says not to send Boucher or the like to jail. His family has suffered enough trouble since he never wanted to be in the Union.”

“Yo’ve said your piece. Now you can lie back down,” Higgins said. “The Master has not come about that affair, so mind yo’ to keep quiet a spell.”

The Union leader sat back down to face the mill master.

“Your Union asked for increased wages,” Mr. Thornton began, “but we could not pay more at this time. Stay... let me finish,” he said as Higgins rose from his seat impatiently. The working man crossed his arms in defiance, but stood still to hear him out.

“If I can’t pay my workers more in wages, that’s the end of it—so I thought. If men need more to feed their families, there’s naught that I can do about it. But as I thought about it a bit more, there might be a way to economize on food if it’s bought wholesale in significant quantities.”

“I don’t understand,” Higgins said, frowning and half wondering if the Master had been hit in the head himself.

“If we built a kitchen and a dining hall at the mill, men might eat a hot meal there at mid-day for a pittance and save some money.”

Higgins was unconvinced. “And how do you benefit from such a scheme? I’m not a chap to believe yo’ve suddenly changed to give your worldly goods to the poor.”

“The kitchen or dining hall—whatever we call it—would not run as a charity. It would be self-operating, with no profit. The purchase of food comes from the workers who pay to eat. My benefit is that my workers will be healthier—they’d be better workers for me.”

Higgins sat down again. “Where would this kitchen be? And who will cook it, or set about buying goods?”

“There’s a storage building in the back that is often unused. We’d hire a cook. And I’ll need someone to manage the operation.”

“Who will do all this?”

“You will,” Mr. Thornton answered, a smile creeping over his face at the other man’s surprise.

“But I’m a weaver, not some kitchen wench.”

“You’re a man who can calculate figures and talk to people. You have connections.”

“Take it, father!” Bessy called out.

Higgins startled at her outburst, forgetting she was there.

There was silence for a few moments as the Union leader considered his pride in taking work from the man who had hired knobsticks. “I’ll take work from yo’, to care for my Bess, but I’ll not swear off the Union as it’s said Hamper is making men do.”

“I’ll not ask men to make empty promises. But I will expect you’ll make no trouble for me at my mill. I’ll be honest with you and expect you to be the same with me. Or out you go.”

Mr. Thornton held out his hand, and with only a moment’s hesitation, Higgins clasped it.

Chapter Thirty

The very next morning, Mr. Hale sent a message to his favorite pupil, requesting that he come that evening to discuss an urgent matter. It pained Mr. Hale to use more forceful language than was his nature, but he would follow his wife's urging at nearly any cost now.



Fanny bustled into the room where her mother was sewing and thinking. "Why hasn't Johnny asked Miss Hale to marry him yet? I cannot bear to suffer the looks I got this morning when I went to Jenny Foster's house. It's all over town about what happened, and people are asking me about his wedding! Doesn't he know what he is doing to the family?" she whined.

Mrs. Thornton heaved a silent sigh. Although she had no compunction to save Miss Hale's reputation—let the girl find her own way out of the muddle she had created for herself—Mrs. Thornton had a powerful impulse to save her own son's pride by keeping what had transpired secret. Perhaps Miss Hale would see the predicament she was truly in and come to her senses, God help us all.

"It's all very well for others to speculate on John's affairs. They have not considered how much he has to manage at this time with the Irish and the number of hands wanting to return to their work. He's not had time to consider other matters," she answered, which she told herself was mostly the truth.

“It’s just like John not to understand how crucial it is to abide by the rules of society! He’s shown no interest in courting Violet or any other of my friends. His every thought is on the mill, always the mill and never anything else. I half wonder if he does not realize what everyone is saying,” Fanny complained.

“It is a very delicate matter, Fanny. Marriage is a very serious consideration, not merely a venture of social standing. You must give your brother grace to resolve this situation on his own terms,” Mrs. Thornton answered, uncertain what else she could say.

“Well, he ought to know that Miss Hale’s reputation will be ruined and he will be ridiculed forever if he does not make an offer for her!” Fanny exclaimed with finality before quitting the room as swiftly as she had entered it.

Mrs. Thornton dropped her needlework in her lap and bowed her head in despair. There was no good end to the present dilemma. If Miss Hale changed her mind and married her son, there would be no returning to the old ways of life. And if Miss Hale never consented to marry John, the social scars would land more directly on the girl. What Mrs. Thornton feared most was the scarring of her son’s heart. To be rejected by the one woman he had built his intentions upon would be—was—painful for him. And she would always curse the girl if he never wholly recovered from it.

She sighed again, hoping that a solution would present itself to put an end to the matter. The rumors be damned, she only wished peace for her son again, however it might come.



At mid-morning, Mr. Thornton sat at his desk, staring at the note in his hand. A pall of dread fell over him. He well knew what Mr. Hale wished to discuss. But Margaret had already decided, hadn’t she? He had no desire to present himself to her again. The thought of her complying to marry him against her will was detestable to him. If she did not want him, he would walk away. He would not constrain her. He could never live like that.

He inhaled deeply and let out an inaudible sigh. Out of respect for Mr. Hale, he would go tonight. But he would steel his heart against any hope that she would change her estimation of him.



After he had seen to all the preparations necessary to begin the mill's operations on the morrow, Mr. Thornton yet had one more pressing meeting to attend. He changed his clothes after dinner and made ready to leave the house. "Where are you going?" Mrs. Thornton inquired of her son, surprised so see him leaving the house again after a long day's work. It was not Thursday, when he usually headed out for his lesson with Mr. Hale.

"Mr. Hale has requested to speak to me tonight...on an urgent matter." He gave her a pointed look.

She understood at once.

"I'll hear Mr. Hale out, but I'll not force Miss Hale against her wishes," he continued.

Mrs. Thornton clamped her mouth shut. *Force her?* It galled her to think of the upstart southerner needing to be forced into marrying her son. Why, any other girl in Milton would exalt in their fortune to be chosen by him!

"You have done what is honorable," she told him. "Rumors will pass, but your honor will remain. You have no further obligation. Miss Hale makes her own choices," she advised him, her voice tight with the enmity she held against the girl.

"I will hold to my principles, as I have always done," he assured her. "I am the same John Thornton, despite all these troubles," he said, giving her a faint smile before he left.

It wrenched her heart to see him suffer so. She determined never to forgive Miss Hale for what she had done.



Margaret stood by the parlor window, staring out over the street below in the faded light of a late summer evening. It was nearly eight o'clock, and Mr. Thornton would soon be here to meet with her father. The flutter of nerves inside her made her breath come quickly.

She had come here at her father's instruction, after he had spoken with her in his study. He had explained what her mother wished regarding marrying Mr. Thornton, all the while his countenance revealing how much of a strain it was to discuss such things. His tone had been firm as he

advised her to reconsider accepting Mr. Thornton, and had begun quickly enumerating his many good qualities. But then, his stern mask had dropped, and he had taken her hand in both of his to tell her he only wished her to be happy and that he would trust her good instincts to do what was right.

She loved him dearly for his underlying gentleness. She knew how much he hated any kind of discord. His mind and soul gravitated toward a deep faith in goodness, that all must work out for the best.

And now she waited, herself still wondering what was right—still desperately searching for the truth in her heart. There were fleeting moments when the impulse swept over her to accept him, but then it would be snatched away by a haunting fear that his intransigent will and immense power would stifle her freedom forever.

She was consumed in a whirlwind of such anxious thoughts when she glimpsed Mr. Thornton approaching on the street. She took a step back, holding her breath, and studied him. His gait was steady, his bent head down. His solemn face was just visible under the brim of his top hat. It pained her to see him look so grim, knowing she was the cause of it.

Within a few moments, she heard the low timbre of his voice through the door and was at once transported to the moment he had clasped her close—when the rumbling fervor of his voice had reverberated from his chest to her own. *He was her home*. She knew instantly there would never be another like him—that she loved him. It had been love all along, and she had not known it!

The influx of emotion was overwhelming as this new realization swept away all faltering fears and doubts. She loved him mightily for his steadfast devotion to doing what he believed was right. He did not boast or strive for wealth, but moved with decision and order to lead hundreds into useful work. And the power of his purpose had built him his outstanding success.

And yet, underneath all his magnified authority and dominion, there lay a tenderness that had shown itself time and again: in his care for her mother, his friendship with her gentle father, his regard for Bessy, and Martha.

And oh, how she had hurt him in this very room last evening when he had proclaimed his love for her! She thought of how hard his life had been since his father's death with pangs of compassion and guilt, and resolved that if he still wanted her, she would shower him with tenderness every day of his life.



In the paneled room lined with books across the hall, Mr. Hale stood with Mr. Thornton, distinctly uncomfortable with his purpose, but determined to fulfill it. "Thank you for coming, John. I know you are a very busy man these days," he began, his hands in restless motion. "I believe you may know the reason I've called you here." He glanced at his student and continued on. "Maria is concerned that the rumors concerning Margaret and you be...rectified. You know, of course, I would be delighted to call you my son-in-law."

Here Mr. Thornton opened his mouth to make some explanation, but Mr. Hale held up his hand. He wished to finish his speech before he lost all vigor in carrying it out.

"I am aware," the older man said, "that Margaret did not...that she..."

The sharp remembrance of her rejection brought a stain of shame to Mr. Thornton's cheeks. The urge to escape this torture and leave at once made his legs twitch.

The former vicar suddenly looked earnestly at his pupil, his lecturing posture deflated. "John, if you will only try her again, I believe she is amenable now. I have spoken with her."

Mr. Thornton's heart leaped with a flash of hope, but he swiftly suppressed it. He would not be made a fool twice.

Mr. Hale was done with his duty and led Mr. Thornton to the parlor door. He cleared his throat upon opening it. "Mr. Thornton is here, Margaret," he announced. "I've spoken a few words to him."

Margaret remained turned to the window, silent.

"I'll leave you both to settle the rest," Mr. Hale mumbled. "May those who love the Lord seek to do His will," he pronounced in an awkward benediction before hastily withdrawing from the room, closing the door upon them.

All that Mr. Thornton longed for stood in front of him. Being in her presence was still a searing pleasure. As he gazed upon her, he admired every aspect of her graceful form even as indignation rose in him. Was he so repulsive to her she could not look upon him?

He resolved to explain himself quickly and leave at once. "I know this must be difficult for you—"

“You know nothing of my feelings,” she interrupted, her back still turned to him.

His brow creased in consternation at how brusquely she tossed his words away with hers. And yet they had been softly spoken. He waited, suspended in guarded expectation to hear what she would say.

She turned and flashed sorrowing eyes at him before bowing her head. “I have been foolish.”

His very breath stilled, and every muscle tensed. He could not move for fear he would break the spell of her contrition.

“You must forgive me. I spoke to you cruelly yesterday. You saved me from danger, putting yourself at risk, and I never thanked you.”

He stepped forward to speak.

“No!...please...let me finish.” She glanced at him briefly before returning her gaze to the floor.

“When we first met in London...for weeks afterwards whenever I went to a soiree or dinner party...I would look for you. Although I knew very well you lived far away,” she confessed haltingly.

She had looked for him? A rush of hope flowed through his veins, quickening his pulse.

“And when we met again here, in Milton, I was frightened...” she peeked at him from under her lashes with blushing cheeks.

“I was frightened because a part of me wished to say yes.”

He waited no longer, but swept forward, snaking his arms around her waist and drawing her close. “You will marry me...because you care for me?” he asked in a hoarse whisper, searching her face desperately for her answer.

Her mouth curved into a smile, her face inches from his. “Yes,” she uttered breathlessly.

Piercing joy charged through every part of his body, obliterating all his wounded pride. The change from his previous misery was so profound, that he blinked away the onset of tears.

He studied her face hungrily, incredulous that every curve of her cheeks, and chin, and lips was his to adore. He brought up a hand to cradle her face as some precious possession, caressing her cheek with his thumb as she trembled beneath his touch.

He brought his lips to hers, kissing her with an aching gentleness at first, then more desperately as her sweet submission to him flamed the fire of his

desire.

He broke from her to place her arms around him as she had done the day before and clasped her close.

“Your father will be pleased,” he said, their noses almost touching.

“And your mother?” she taunted, her face still flushed from their delicious silence.

“My mother will approve of you, if you are pleasant enough to me,” he teased, unable to contain a wide smile.

“And what if I am saucy or contentious?” she asked, jutting her chin upward in mock defiance.

Her brazen playfulness ignited his burning passion. He pulled her body tight against his. “Then she will discover the truth—that you govern me completely.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Margaret opened her eyes to the morning light. She glanced around at the walls, the framed pressed flowers from Helstone, and her childhood furniture. All these things were the same, and yet—everything had changed. She smiled at the recollection of all that had taken place the previous evening. She closed her eyes again to remember the tingling magic of his tender kisses.

All the darkness of her time here seemed swept away. She could not help but smile today. Her future was secure. An exuberance of hope and promise filled her spirit.

Eager to share her news, she sat at her old secretary and dipped her pen in ink to write her cousin.

Dear Edith,

This will come as a great surprise to you, but I am to be married. You will doubtless wonder how I could find a suitable husband in such a place. You expressed just such thoughts in one of your letters to me once, do you recall?

His name is John Thornton, and he is a manufacturer of cotton in Milton's grandest factory. Although it will not seem an entirely respectable and meritorious position to you as a Londoner, Mr. Thornton is esteemed here in Milton.

Why should I stoop so low as to marry a manufacturer, you and Aunt may wonder? And I understand your sentiment, as I too once thought tradesmen

beneath my station. But I have since realized that it is far too easy to ascribe unkind attributes to an entire class of persons without truly knowing them at all.

Yes, I have been acquainted with men and women who have lived wholly different lives than mine or yours. I have come to know the manufacturing class of men, who are building the industries for which England is lauded. Are they not worthy of consideration for their own accomplishments and great responsibilities in advancing our nation?

I have also befriended a girl who worked in the factories until her health was compromised. This girl, my friend Bessy, had to quit her schooling when her mother died and take work so that her family could eat. Bessy is my age, and she has spent her short life longing for a better world, which I am certain she will inhabit in the time to come.

I have strayed from my original intention. Let me tell you about Mr. Thornton so that you and Aunt can put your minds at ease about my forthcoming marriage.

And now I will tell you a secret I have kept from you! I met Mr. Thornton at a ball we attended the summer before you met Capt. Lennox. I danced with Mr. Thornton, not knowing at all who he was, only knowing that he was from the North. He left an impression of feeling on me I carried for many months. I even hoped that I might see him at other events that season, even though I knew he did not live in London. I thought my fascination was of no consequence.

But now I believe Providence placed us together there that evening so that we would meet. And you must admit that you did not need to worry about me, and that no human contrivances were needed to find my match. It was indeed heaven's hand that brought us together. It is too incredible a coincidence to be anything else.

I hope you will come to my wedding, although I will understand if you cannot, for little Sholto must be your first concern. Is he already two months old? I should love to see him, if you come.

Please share my news with Aunt and your Captain, of course. Tell them I am very happy.

*Affectionately,
Margaret*



The very next day in London, Edith bolted from her silk damask chair with the letter in hand. “Ma-ma!” she exclaimed, holding the parchment aloft as her skirts swished in her attempt to search for her mother.

Mrs. Shaw was in her usual spot, reclining on the sofa in the elaborate front parlor, petting her toy dog Tiny.

“Ma-ma, Margaret is to be married!”

“Nonsense!” she replied, exerting herself to sit upright. “There can hardly be anyone suitable for her in that place,” she affirmed as fact.

“But I believe she has found a good match, Ma-ma. Oh, but she has been so secretive! She says she met him here in London at one of our balls. And she never told me!” It was a thing incomprehensible to Edith that one should keep a feeling of attachment to oneself for so long.

“I don’t know whether to be hurt that she never said a word to me,” she considered aloud.

“Well, who is he? You must let me know all,” she demanded, helping her pet to the floor to scamper off.

“He is a manufacturer—“

“A manufacturer! Oh, I knew that moving to that town would not end well.”

“But Ma-ma, you must read the letter yourself. He runs the largest mill in Milton and is respected in their town,” she explained.

“A great deal can be overlooked if he is wealthy, to be sure. But I must still wonder at his breeding,” the long-time widow demurred. Mrs. Shaw herself had married General Shaw, an older man, for his status and wealth.

“I think it’s romantic!” Edith effused, beginning to feel excited for her cousin. “Here, read it for yourself,” she said, handing the letter to her mother.

“Well,” she said, looking up after a few moments of silent reading, “I suppose we shall take a journey to Milton.”



On the day the Master of Marlborough Mills married, the church filled with eager spectators of all classes of people who had come to see for themselves

the conclusion to the rumors that had spread all over town weeks before.

Those closest to the couple sat in the front to witness the union. Mr. Bell was there, sitting next to the bride's father. He had suspected this would be a good match since the night of the dinner party. He grinned to imagine Thornton's shock at the present he was giving them: the deed to the property.

Mrs. Hale wore a new gown of lavender silk. She watched all the proceedings with tears in her eyes, grateful to gain this glimpse of her daughter's future. How she wished Frederick could be with them!

Mr. Hale was moved even more than he had imagined he would be. Memories of his own wedding streamed into view before him, and he looked to his wife with misty eyes and held her hand tighter. He had been proud to give his daughter to John. He could not imagine a better man for his Margaret. It erased much of his pain and guilt to see that coming to Milton had filled a greater purpose for his daughter and his dear friend.

Mrs. Thornton's lips quivered as her son made his vows to his bride. Her heart beat strong with the hope her son's marriage would be happy, as hers had been, before its tragic end.

Her chin lifted at the thought of the streams of people who had come to see her son married. He was the pride of Milton in her estimation. Every dignitary in this town respected and admired him.

She wore a dress of dove gray silk for this occasion, surprising her daughter, who had never seen her in anything but black.

Fanny was amused that her brother, so serious and secretive, seemed to be truly affectionate with Margaret. She watched the whole ceremony with a mind to how she would have *her* wedding, and judged every lady's taste in what they wore.

Edith beamed as Margaret's attendant. She had seen at once why Margaret's Mr. Thornton had fascinated her and was overjoyed to see her cousin smitten in love.

Aunt Shaw sat next to her sister Maria, with Edith's husband on her other side. Mrs. Shaw was impressed with the large number of people in the church. Mr. Thornton was indeed a great man in this town. However, she still took some pity on Margaret, who was now installed in such a place.

The Higgins family was there, very near the front, as Margaret desired. Mr. Thornton bought Bessy a blue dress for the occasion, such as she had always dreamed of. Mary, too, was given a dress to wear.

Bessy, sitting in a wheelchair near her father, glowed with contentment at the sight before her, satisfied her prescient glimpse of a better peace among men and masters now had a foothold in this town. She was filled with spiritual happiness, beyond her own misfortunes.

Nearby, Mary cried at the beauty and peace around her. She had never seen the like and believed she might never know such a heavenly scene again.

Nicholas still held his doubts about how much could be improved between workers and masters, but for the first time in his long life he carried more hope in his heart. And it was the couple being married before his eyes that had brought such a change in his attitude. If this was the work of the divine hand, he would be grateful for it and try to have more faith that good could prevail.

In the back where the lower classes congregated, Jem and Jenny Daugherty were there, and John Boucher, who had been given work at Thornton's mill instead of being sent to prison.

Everyone in attendance agreed that the bride and groom looked exuberant indeed. Many commented that they'd never seen such a smile on the Master's face before—or perhaps had never seen him smile before at all!

The only undercurrent of sorrow present was the silent disappointment of several young ladies who saw their dreams of pursuing Mr. Thornton at an end.

The church bells chimed gaily, their deep resonance echoing off the stone church to announce joy throughout the town. The newlywed couple emerged from the church with beaming smiles. Hand in hand, they stepped onto the flower petals strewn on their path.

Margaret looked up into her husband's face and smiled brightly. She was home.

Epilogue

Summer roses, peonies, and foxgloves of mixed colors filled a wide silver vase at the center of the long elaborately set dinner table where invited guests sat. New wallpaper of pale yellow with slender floral vines gave the grand room a warmer, gentler tone. Indeed, the entire atmosphere of the Thornton dinner party was much lighter than that of the year before.

The same people attended, with one fresh addition—the Thorntons had invited Nicholas Higgins to join them, to allow a different perspective to sit at the table. The other mill owners were surprised to see him there, but they kept their opinions to themselves. They assumed the new mistress of the house impelled this change. Indeed, she seemed also to be mistress of Mr. Thornton himself.

When conversation at the table lulled a moment, and the clinking of silver on fine china was the only sound, Mr. Hamper spoke up. “How has your experiment in creating a workers’ dining hall fared thus far?” he asked the host at the head of the table. “I imagine it comes at quite a cost to you,” he added, giving a knowing glance around the table at his colleagues.

“The initial investments such as cooking equipment, tables, and dishes have indeed been costly. But I’m not running a charity. The workers pay for their mid-day meal with us, and it will eventually cover all costs,” Mr. Thornton explained.

“But if there’s no profit in it, why go to all that trouble?” Mr. Slickson asked, with hums and nods of agreement from many of the others.

“There’s more than monetary profit to be had, gentlemen. I’ll let my friend Higgins here give you an idea of what I mean,” Mr. Thornton answered.

The newcomer cleared his throat; himself surprised to be sitting among these men. He had bought used apparel in town that he thought would pass muster for the occasion.

“Yo’ ask if there’s any profit in helping a man find a decent meal while he’s spending long hours at your mill. Mayhap it doesn’t fill your coffers to set up a dining hall. But it fills a worker’s belly for a decent price and keeps your workers sharp and alert instead o’ dreaming of his supper with a grumbling stomach. It gives men a space to gather and enjoy the company of others for a time.”

“And when the Master comes a time or two to eat with us, it helps to knock down that wall of distrust between us. We see each other as humans, each of us with our own concerns—all of us needing to eat.”

“Given a place to eat good food for a good deal while at work, the workers see their needs being met. Men are less apt to grumble, to be careless in their work. They begin to take pride in their work. The profit is in making a man feel that he counts for something.”

There was silence in the space after his speech.

Hannah Thornton looked around at the other masters’ stony faces. She herself still wasn’t thoroughly convinced a workers’ kitchen was worth the extra effort and upkeep. And she wasn’t certain she approved of the influence Margaret appeared to have over her son. But she *was* certain about one thing: her son was happy, and she was glad his marriage to Margaret had thus far been more successful than she had imagined. It satisfied her greatly whenever she caught her daughter-in-law gazing at her husband with adoration.

Seated at the other end of the long table, Margaret Thornton smiled admiringly at her husband. It was not only that he had developed a friendly fellowship with Nicholas and other workers that made her heart sing with joyful gratitude that he was her husband. It was also how much he had been a strong comfort to her in the great sorrows that had befallen them since they had married—when Bessy had died, and later when her mother had also died.

He had given up his position as magistrate to better accommodate his future role as a family man, he had said. But he had done so to avoid the

moral conflict of keeping her brother Frederick's visit a secret when he had come to see his mother one last time.

John had been her father's greatest friend and comfort when her mother died. She owed everything to her husband's gentle ways with her father. John had insisted that her father move in with them right away. That her father was sitting with them tonight and could smile, she attributed to the time her husband had spent with him during those first few months of darkest grief.



After the dinner party was over, the young married couple retreated to their bedchamber. This was John's favorite time of the day, when the two of them alone shared a private space to talk and indulge in the various forms of physical touch and connection which he so craved.

Margaret stood still in the candle-lit room while her husband unfastened the hooks at the back of her evening gown.

"Did you see Slickson's face when he saw Higgins was here?" John asked, recalling the vision with great mirth as his fingers nimbly unclasped the tiny hooks.

Margaret laughed gleefully. "And Mrs. Slickson! I thought they both might turn and leave."

He chortled in response.

"I believe it was good for them all to hear him speak," Margaret said more seriously as he continued to unhook her dress.

"Not one of them will follow my lead," he answered.

"No, but perhaps his words will come to mind occasionally. Anything that might soften their hearts towards their workers will do."

Finished with his task, John couldn't help leaning down to kiss the curve of her neck—where he had longed to kiss her all evening.

A shiver of delight ran up Margaret's spine. She sighed approvingly as he pulled her body to his and wrapped his arms around her from behind. The prickle of his roughened cheek brushed against her own soft cheek.

His hands moved to envelop gently the slight swell of her belly. She had told him merely weeks before. It was incredible to him that the passion that they shared in this very room had created new life within her. The utter joy and contentment that filled his soul at this moment surpassed all he had ever

dreamed of happiness. If mortals could attain bliss this side of heaven, then this was it.

“I must go to London soon on business; will you come with me?” he murmured near her ear. He could not bear to be away from her for even one night.

She turned around in his arms to face him. “I don’t know,” she said, her brow creased in mock seriousness. “I once had to dance with a stranger from the North at a ball in London. It happened that he was a manufacturer from a smoky factory town.”

“And you were foolish enough to marry the brute?” he teased with a wide grin.

“I was...and I will never regret it,” she answered, looking straight into his eyes, all her playfulness vanished.

Something deep within him twisted and ached, and he leaned down to crush his lips to hers—to show her his love.

The End



For more of John and Margaret, read [Through Darkened Clouds](#)

Author's Note

Manchester (Milton) was the first city in England to open a rate-supported public lending library under the Free Libraries Act of 1850.

Lord Mayor John Potter invited Charles Dickens to speak at the opening of the library in September 1852. Dickens accepted the invitation with the following words:

Sir, I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your obliging letter and to assure you that I take great pleasure in accepting the invitation of the committee of the Manchester Free Library. My engagements are very numerous but the occasion is too important and the example too noble to admit of hesitation.

*Very faithfully yours,
Charles Dickens*

I modeled Dickens' words in my story after a speech Dickens gave at the Manchester Athenaeum in 1843.

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I'm grateful also to fellow author Nancy Klein, who was the first to encourage my writing and continues to support me as an editor, beta reader, and friend.

About the Author

Trudy fell in love with Elizabeth Gaskell's Victorian novel, *North and South*, shortly after happening upon the BBC's film adaptation of it. Unable to get the story out of her mind, she imagined her own version of events and eventually began writing it all down.



Her personal romance story started with a whirlwind courtship, followed by sweet honeymoon years in a picturesque colonial town on the coast of Massachusetts. Now, with the addition of three children and a small menagerie of pets, she lives in a quiet valley of Vermont and loves to garden, bake, hike, and (of course!) read and write historical fiction.

Explore her blog about *North and South* at: www.MoreThanThornton.com