CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

North and South

Elizabeth Gaskell · *1854–1855 · original English text*

Margaret Hale is taken from a southern parsonage to the cotton town of Milton, where masters and men are at odds and a proud manufacturer, John Thornton, will not be condescended to. Gaskell writes a novel of industrial conflict, duty, and a slow education in sympathy: neither the drawing-room nor the mill is allowed the last word.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can pride and justice, North and South, a master and a minister's daughter, learn to understand one another without either side surrendering the truth it holds?

"I know you despise me; allow me to say, it is because you do not understand me."

John Thornton · Chapter 24 (Mistakes Cleared Up?)

Thornton is right that Margaret does not yet understand him, and wrong if he thinks her courage at the mill-gate was only "innate sense of oppression." Each must give up a false picture of the other. The strike, the riot, Boucher's death, and Mr. Hale's tender conscience force a larger justice than either pride first allowed. By the end they can speak, and he will not claim her against her will.

KEY CHARACTERS

Margaret Hale
A clergyman's daughter, proud, dutiful, and slow to see that she can be wrong

John Thornton
Master of Marlborough Mills: harsh in speech, just in habit, capable of tenderness

Mr. Hale
A gentle clergyman who leaves his pulpit rather than say what he no longer believes

Mrs. Hale
A southern gentlewoman, homesick and failing in the Milton smoke

Hannah Thornton
John's mother, fierce in love and in class suspicion

Nicholas Higgins
A Milton workman and Union man, who can also honor a promise to a dead man's children

Bessy Higgins
His daughter, dying, whose faith and weariness instruct Margaret

Frederick Hale
The exiled brother, the occasion of Margaret's lie

UNDERSTANDING, AND A CLAIM NOT FORCED

> *"I know you despise me; allow me to say, it is because you do not understand me."*
>
> **John Thornton** · Chapter 24

> *"Take care.—If you do not speak—I shall claim you as my own in some strange presumptuous way.—Send me away at once, if I must go;—Margaret!—""*
>
> **John Thornton** · Chapter 52

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 Helstone to Milton

CHAPTERS I–IX

A crisis of conscience uproots a family, and a southern girl meets a northern town.

- Margaret, after a London season with the wealthy Shaws, returns to the New Forest parsonage at Helstone
- Mr. Hale, unable in conscience to remain in the Church of England, resigns his living and takes the family to Milton-Northern
- Mrs. Hale mourns the South; Margaret must be the strong one
- They meet John Thornton, a mill-owner who has risen by hard work, and his formidable mother

02 Masters and Men

CHAPTERS X–XXII

Margaret learns the look of the mills, and takes a dying family into her care.

- Thornton dines with the Hales and defends the masters' independence; Margaret is chilled by his hardness
- She befriends Nicholas Higgins, a Union man, and his daughter Bessy, who is dying of mill-dust
- A strike is coming; each side talks past the other
- Mrs. Hale's health fails; Margaret bears more of the household than anyone knows

03 The Riot and the Refusal

CHAPTERS XXIII–XXVI

Margaret stands between Thornton and an angry crowd, and then refuses him.

- Thornton has brought in Irish hands; the strikers storm the mill
- Margaret, there by chance, faces the crowd and is struck; she has tried to keep him from being killed
- Thornton proposes, taking her action for love; she refuses, angry at the liberty
- He tells her he knows she despises him because she does not understand him

> *"I know you despise me; allow me to say, it is because you do not understand me."*
>
> **John Thornton** · Chapter 24

04 A Lie and a Death

CHAPTERS XXVII–XLI

Margaret's brother comes in secret; a lie to a magistrate costs her her own good opinion.

- Frederick Hale, a naval officer in exile after a mutiny Margaret believes just, comes to see his dying mother
- At the station a man who could betray him is thrown, and dies; Margaret denies to the police that she was there
- Thornton, the magistrate, recognizes her and holds his peace—an unspoken act of justice and of love
- Bessy dies; Boucher, a desperate striker, drowns himself; Higgins asks Thornton for work, and a new kind of dealing begins

05 If You Do Not Speak

CHAPTERS XLII–LII

Losses on both sides clear the way for a freer word.

- Mr. Hale dies; Margaret inherits from Mr. Bell and becomes, without at first meaning to, able to help the mill
- Thornton's business fails in a bad season; he will not be less honest for it
- Margaret offers the help as a business partnership; pride and delicacy almost silence them both
- He kneels and says that if she does not speak, he shall claim her as his own; she does not send him away

> *"Take care.—If you do not speak—I shall claim you as my own in some strange presumptuous way.—Send me away at once, if I must go;—Margaret!—""*
>
> **John Thornton** · Chapter 52 (Pack Clouds Away)

Pride and Humility · Justice in Work · Conscience · Courage · Home and Exile · Understanding

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Thornton's "you do not understand me" is spoken in wounded pride, and it is also true. Margaret's education in Milton is the book's other plot.
2. Mr. Hale's resignation is a crisis of conscience, not a loss of faith only. The cost to his family is not hidden.
3. The lie about Frederick is a real fault. Margaret judges herself for it; Thornton's silence is mercy, not blindness.
4. Higgins and Thornton learning to speak to one another is as important as the love story. Gaskell will not solve the mills by a marriage alone.
5. The last scene is a claim offered, not taken. "Send me away at once, if I must go" keeps her freedom intact.
6. The hosted text is Gaskell's original English (Project Gutenberg #4276).

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #4276, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/north-and-south/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.