Indiscretion

by sfiddy

Summary

John Thornton sees Miss Hale embracing a man at night in a train station. His jealousy and confusion is a thing of wonder.

Notes

I am entranced by John's potential brain scrambling that occurs after the train station scene. Here's one way it might have gone...

See the end of the work for more notes

Glaring down at the parcel as if it had bit him, Mr. John Thornton deposited the thing directly to the stationmaster. With the mills in the state they were in, Thornton no longer entrusted his correspondence to the delivery boys. Any information regarding the mill, his family, or the finances of either was delivered by his own hand in the dead of night with a handsome reminder of why the stationmaster should slip it into the post himself, unmolested.

It made for a long day, one that was already frustrated by massive backlogs, partial deliveries, rising material costs, equipment repairs, and the shrill exclamations of his sister as she flipped through swatches of the finest fabrics his hard labor could afford.

She didn’t even bother looking at the cottons.
Thornton blocked out his sister’s voice. He’d begun to crave a softer tone, lower and sweeter; warmed as if by the southern sun and as carefully measured as his sister’s drapery orders. Even more so.

When had it all started? Would it ever end, this need? Was he a glutton for the punishment she meted out? He would take what she gave, little as it was. He needed little to sustain him, evidenced by his loose collar since the strike began. He worked from dawn until long after dark, dribbling hot wax over his hand as he worked and burning through at least three candles before even considering rest.

And it was no use. It was a convenient distraction, and it failed utterly every single night, for once he collapsed into bed (on the nights he did not sleep at his desk) his mind invariably drifted to her proud neck and unbowed head. Nothing could break her, and he was desperate to smash himself against her stones and reform as something more refined.

Thornton thought of the mealy fare that trotted for his elbow. The ladies his mother thought suitable bore more resemblance to over-sopped toast than women who he could talk to and, in them, find an equal.

He’d break for her. If only she would allow him the chance.

Steam curled from under the train and scattered feeble light from the sole gas lamp on the platform. Footsteps commanded Thornton’s attention but only so much as to leave as quickly as possible—the purpose of his errand was for privacy. He wanted nothing more than to return home to his achingly empty rooms and drink only enough to fog his mind for sleep.

He meant to turn and leave. He meant to return to Marlborough and get on with whatever it was he did that kept him too busy to live but not busy enough to forget, but there was a cadence to the steps that he knew. Damn him, he knew that walk.

And he knew it was her before she pushed back the hood, for only she could stand proud under the press and burden of so much misery.

But it could not be her, because… because…

Mr. John Thornton felt the night chill as he never did, for it ate through his coat and shoes like a gnawing animal and clawed through to his veins. He turned fast and knew his steps echoed behind him.

So Miss Hale had chosen indiscretion over his suit. Who could this cad be? What manner of man could compel Margaret Hale to appear in a station late at night and embrace?

But this was not mere jealousy.

Thornton was furious. In a mere dozen steps the ice in his veins was swiftly exchanging for embers.

If Miss Hale had a lover, then so be it; the world was full of people and why not choose one over him? His rage, however, was centered over the unfathomable lack of passion belied by the embrace they’d shared. Surely, if one was leaving a lover at the station, you fashioned those moments into ones that etched the mind, graven into the soul and onto the very bones.

If Margaret had taken a lover, then the bastard should make indiscretion worth the risk. Any lover of hers should burn for her. No less was acceptable because, even in his rejection, he gasped at the very thought of her. How could a man sample her touch and not ache for the press of her arms, the warmth of her embrace, and the sweet brush of her half-tamed hair, straining against the coils as she no doubt strained against all conformity forced upon her.
Damn the man, and damn his pathetic touch. Were he to have her favor, and left under cover of night, he’d find a dark corner and stroke the tears from her cheeks. He’d taste the salt of them through kisses on her soft lips. God, how he’d thought of her lips. They could press into silence when he sought her words or release a storm of unconsidered judgement when he likely needed it the most. Rarely, as rare as flowers in Milton and more precious, they curved into smiles. He wanted to capture every one of those smiles with his own mouth and hold the feeling.

The gates of Marlborough opened for the master and he strode past without a word and the men expected none.

His top hat was flung to the sideboard and the coat left on a chair. The stack of papers was taller than when he left and all the more depressing with Fanny’s bills for her latest purchases right alongside the expense reports for the repair work. His sister could keep a fair home but only at shocking expense.

Miss Hale kept a fair home, too, and it must have been on the slenderest of budgets. Thornton paid for his lessons, but it was hardly a handsome sum. His betterment was at a bargain.

And she had lovely lips. Lips ripe for indiscretion.

With one swipe, the intricate stacks, overlaid notes, and carefully organized columns splattered across the floor with an unsatisfying spray and flutter of quills and blotting paper.

Damn the man. Thornton envied even the pitiful hold he’d seen. If he had held her at the station, god help him, he would have not hesitated with a quick touch. He would not have hidden away like a thief with her. Damn them all, he would kiss her in the midst of a crowd and dared anyone to protest the display. He’d run his hands over her hair and have his fill of her and then do it again.

And damn the man. Whatever milk-faced fool could be so close to her and then leave was no man. Unworthy of her and her affection. If she’d seen him to the station, he’d have thrown the ticket in the window and stayed, for no power on earth could convince him that, once sampled, he would be able to walk away from her. She may be the wind, free to come and go, but he was the cotton fluff that flew at her command.

John Thornton glared at the mess of his affairs. He’d not give her up so easily, not like the man who held her and let her go so effortlessly. He’d make sure she knew the scorch marks she left on him with every word and whisper of touch.

A book was open on the floor, and it pained him that it was from Mr. Hale’s collection. Thornton ignored the papers on the floor and took up the book. He would continue his betterment and sharpen his mind until it could cleave the connection the other man held on her, or cut her away from his heart. His mother may prefer the latter, but it was sure to leave him bleeding.

And so, Mr. John Thornton stayed up late into the night, unable to comprehend perfect forms unless he fashioned them to the only perfection of which he was aware, and then dreamt fitfully of train stations and indiscretion.

End Notes

Thanks, Sluggie. Now this is all up in my head.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!