Northern Lights

by Owlkin

Summary

A series of one-shots that will look to find the lighthearted moments in the BBC series and beyond. They will not be in order and will pop up as they come. Requests are welcome.

Notes

This is my first foray into North and South and thus, I am still feeling out the setting, language, and characters. I own nothing.
John Thornton tiredly unwound the tight neckcloth that seemed to be stifling him in the heavy air as he leaned against a bale of raw cotton in the open yard.

With one shift over and another beginning, he had not eaten since that morning and now glanced the fairly new kitchen with a considering eye. A large crowd had already started their way in that direction, many pulling along their children for an afternoon meal.

It was a far sight different from a year ago. There had been no smiling faces then, no skip in the children’s step as they left the workroom.

He still ran a business though, not a charity, and it was with this consideration that he had allowed Higgins to draw up the plans. If it eventually paid for itself, and the workers were happy, then it was keen business sense to allow it. If the other masters now scoffed at his supposed softness, he no longer allowed it to bother him.

John’s eyes flitted up to the window of his sitting room and gave a small private grin to his wife, who yawned tiredly and gave him a sweet smile in return. Her hands went to rest on the growing curve of her belly.

She tired easily now, and despite her feeble protests that she had the energy to come out to the floor, she was often found napping on their bed or the sitting room settee, waiting for his return.

Margaret was a face that was easily missed around the mill, for hers was a positive sort of energy that almost never failed to bring a smile to most faces. It was known though not overly discussed that the young miss had given the master her hand and the fortune that came with it. In a way, she was their salvation as much as the master’s.

John smiled again and tilted his head in slight chastisement as he gazed at her leaning against the windowpane. She playfully rolled her eyes, and gave a small wave of her hand as she disappeared from view.

More than one worker had seen the small exchange, more than delighted that the mistress seemed to soften the rough edges of the Master of Marlborough Mills. Even on his best days, he had not always been overly personable.

Nicholas Higgins had smiled fondly at the couple during their brief interlude and now approached John with little Tommy Boucher in hand. The young lad looked upon the master with a serious mien as he clutched a well loved reader to his chest. John stood and nodded genially to Nicholas before offering Tommy a gentle smile.

Tommy ducked his head but tentatively offered John a small hand as they walked towards the kitchen. John held the delicate hand in his much larger one and marveled at its size. Tommy held up the book proudly for John's inspection who asked gently, "Was this a gift from Margaret?"

The little lad smiled bashfully and nodded, his eyes flitting to the same sitting room window as they strolled away. John turned mid-stride to glance back but the curtains only stirred ever so
slightly. His countenance softened before he looked back down at Tommy, "Perhaps you can show me how far ye've gotten after supper then?"

Tommy gave a rare grin and almost dragged John to the kitchen door, Nicholas following at a more sedate pace with no small amount of chuckling.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bessie does not get enough screen time. And she is an excellent wing-woman. I took some liberties with this conversation and added to it. The attraction is there, underneath the exasperation... irritation... And perceived dislike.

Margaret comfortably settled her skirts around her as she sat on the simple wooden chair in the Higgins kitchen. It truly was a blessing to have a friend her own age, for despite the difference in circumstances, they were remarkably well tuned to the other.

Bessie quietly bustled around the fire as she prepared the kettle for tea, but she caught the little half smile on Margaret's face and grinned back, "Come on now, what brought that on?"

Margaret shrugged one shoulder delicately, "I am thinking how happy I am to have these visits with you."

Bessie lowered herself onto another chair and lightly huffed in amusement, "Aye, well I thought you'd be thinkin' on something else entirely."

Margaret gave her a puzzled look, "Whatever can you mean?"

"I hear you paid the mill a visit today, had a talk with the old battle axe herself," Bessie prompted.

Flushing slightly, Margaret inclined her head, "Yes, well I did not stay long after I sought my answers, but as I left she stood hovering over the yard like a big angry black crow, warily watching me exchange a few words with Mr. Thornton, as if-"

"--you had designs on 'er son?" Bessie finished knowingly.

Margaret scoffed, "As if I would ever consider it."

"Well, he does have loads of girls after him," Bessie replied thoughtfully, "So you would definitely have to get some smarter clothes if you wanted to mix in with Marlborough Mills."

"I'll have you know that this gown was new last year," Margaret replied in mock indignation, "But truly, I have no desire to further any sort of a relationship with that man."

Bessie stood to retrieve the kettle and pour the contents into a simple earthenware brown teapot, "And why is that? Does his fine figure not please you?"

Margaret turned a light shade of scarlet and sputtered, "I am sure that many would consider him attractive..."

Bessie bit down on her lip to stifle a laugh, "Are you saying that you 'aven't looked? For most girls, a glance into those eyes would cause a swoon."

Margaret looked away down at the floor as her blush became more pronounced, "I am sure I have never felt such an inclination, for those eyes often look at me in anger or exasperation."
"Ah but you haven't caught those fine eyes staring at you quiet like, when he thinks you aren't lookin'," Bessie teased.

Margaret's head quickly turned back to regard her friend with large eyes, "Surely not. He does not think much of me and my southern ways."

Bessie shrugged and poured two fragrant cups of tea, handing one to Margaret and holding her own close to her chest as she blew away tendrils of steam.

"Well-," she started with nonchalance, "I suppose there are plenty of other young eligible ladies who are willin' to take him on. For as stern as he is, he's a fair one and seems more straightforward than most. Fine figure and property aside, he's got character."

She took a sip of tea and shrugged, "Not manys a worker who can say that about their master."

"But the day I arrived, he beat that man so savagely, how can you say what he did was fair and just?"

Margaret scowled ever so slightly, a delicate furrow appearing between her brows, "We all know the risks of fire in the mills, he did the right thing by all of us by teaching a hard lesson to Stevens. He had been warned before," she murmured darkly.

Margaret looked a cross between irritated and conflicted, but she said nothing as she stared into her cup.

Bessie took in the look on her face and sighed, "He is a passionate sort, and does nothing by halves. Any woman would be lucky to have him," she finished.

Margaret stayed silent but she now stared absently out the window with a look of consternation, biting her lip as she no doubt argued in her mind the merits of disagreeing with Bessie and her assessment of the mill owner.

But the tell tale blush lingered on her cheeks and Bessie contently sat back in her chair with a pleased smile.
Dinner Party

Chapter Summary

John Thornton's thoughts on one Miss Margaret Hale.

Chapter Notes

So this one is not verbatim from the show, but still picture the faces and setting. I have no idea if the Latimers were at the party. I sincerely hope Anne was stuck over by the buffet.

N&S feels a bit easier to write with the practice. John, I feel, has his "master" face out in the real world so if his thoughts seem a little more lighthearted, well, we all saw him at the end of the series. See? Happy man.

True to her word, his mother had spared no expense for the night they chose to host.

The table setting were immaculate and the rooms shone with the soft glow of candlelight that sparkled in the cut glass chandelier. But he keenly felt the silence from the mill, which echoed louder than the polite chatter that filled the elegant parlor. A tiny furrow appeared in John's brow as he glanced out the window into the courtyard.

So empty and desolate.

A voice called him gently from his musings. He turned to regard his mother as she solemnly looked out the window with him. "You are neglecting your guests," she reprimanded him, just out of earshot of the Latimers.

He inclined his head, hiding a sigh as he turned around to brace himself for another round of perfunctory greetings. Only a slight grimace passed over his features as he shook hands and quickly moved away before any one lady could engage him in conversation. Their hopeful faces looked more than a little crestfallen as the striking mill master glided away, his attention brought to another lady by one his peers.

"Thornton, who is that fine young lady over there?"

John's eyes flit up to reach the clear blue-green eyes of Miss Hale and felt an unexpected lightness as he made his way to her. In her light colored gown, she stood out in a sober sea of midnight black, indigo, and burgundy. Her hair held no ornaments save a scattering of pearl pins, the mass of curls secured in a coiffure at the base of her neck. But in her elegant simplicity, she was undeniably lovely and managed to make the other ladies in the room appear overdone with their layers of lace and starched petticoats.

She smiled graciously and promptly offered her hand, eliciting a genuine albeit small grin to turn up the corners of his mouth as he gently grasped her fingers. "See? I am learning Milton ways, Mr. Thornton," she said softly.
Her small hand was not adorned with silk gloves or fine rings, but was unbelievably soft to the touch of his roughened hands.

John blinked once as his mind scrambled for an appropriate response. She was not the sort to smile coyly and pretend to be pleased with just anything that came out of his mouth. For that he was grateful, although it had caused him more than one headache in their acquaintance.

Holding her earnest gaze, he offered, "I am sorry your mother could not join us this evening."

She dipped her head and both allowed their hands to drop to their sides, John with more than a little reluctance.

Yet again, a voice called for his attention, but this time there was more than a hint of urgency about Slickson as he nervously cast a look about him in the corner he inhabited. With an apologetic look towards Miss Hale and a quiet, "Excuse me," he moved towards Slickson and bent his head to listen to the man's frantic queries.

His mind once again occupied with the mill's troubles, he almost did not notice as his long time acquaintance and landlord, Mr. Bell, swoop in and loudly proclaim John's own callousness at leaving such a beautiful woman alone.

John cast an almost mournful look up as he watched Mr. Bell offer his arm to Miss Hale and escort her further into the room. She turned at one point, to cast an uncertain glance over her shoulder, meeting his eyes in what he guessed was wariness. The almost brusque manner of the north, he guessed, was more than a little disquieting for one with more gentile manners. But a small voice in his head offered that perhaps, she was just as sorry to end their conversation as he had been.

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They had started off well enough that night. Had managed at least two civil sentences between themselves, he lamented.

But when she had thrown her perception of his cruelty in his face, his temper had boiled to the surface. And things had taken their course . . . .

It probably had not helped that Fanny had brought her charity to light, or that he had publicly, SLIGHTLY, humiliated her by denouncing her actions as harmful rather than helpful.

Next time, he ought to limit his conversation to the weather. Or books. Books were fairly safe.

John sighed and sat down heavily on the edge of his bed, his mind bringing back the memory of the fire in her eyes as she verbally sparred with him in front of the Milton elite. Strong feelings arose in her presence and in a strange sequence. Attraction, irritation, admiration, and ultimately some sort of angry respect in that that she still continued to challenge him.

Lord, but she was a handful. In the privacy of his room, he cracked a full smile and moved to extinguish the lone candle in the room.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The clueless lovers meet again . . .

Chapter Notes

More of a drabble that was promised. And this individual pointed out that John Thornton rarely voices his thoughts and we just get cryptic looks. Boo faces. Whatever.

"I have a better opinion of you at the moment, than you do of me, I feel . . . " Margaret tapered off quietly.

John stared back at her with a look that an observer might declare as troubled or irritated, but in reality, he was more than a little bit confused at her declaration. Her soft words and saddened looks did nothing for state of mind, for first and foremost he wished to comfort her. And she had stated plainly that she had no interest in his doing so.

Thus, the contrite looks and almost pleading eyes of the young woman in front of him baffled him.

Confounding woman.

Before he could open his mouth and potentially make an utter fool of himself, yet again, he turned on his heel and strode towards the stairs of the Hale home. He tried not to feel her gaze upon his back as he left her presence but he quickly came to the conclusion that the months of avoiding the Hales had done little to dissipate the strong emotion that welled in him when he looked upon her countenance.

Almost woodenly, he climbed the stairs and sat down with Mr. Hale to discuss yet another chapter of Plato. But his mind wandered, and almost embarrassingly, he did not attend when Mr. Hale asked him a question. Blinking, he apologized and bid his tutor to ask again, but he was not thinking of philosophy as he stared down at the text in his hand.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Mr. Thornton doesn't walk away from the station that night . . . .

Chapter Notes

One shot as requested by Deb.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They crept up the stairs to the platform, both casting anxious looks about them as they reached the train.

John had positioned himself by the depot entrance, leaning against a post for support as he waited for a London associate to arrive on the northbound train. At first, he did not believe his eyes as he observed the slight figure and her escort arrive to Outwood Station, but the dim lantern light had glinted in that familiar auburn hair and a heavy weight dropped onto his chest.

Margaret.

Was this one of the suitors that she had alluded to? His face quickly clouded as he took in the plain clothes and average height of the man. With the man's back to him, he could not see any features, but John supposed that he perhaps sported the soft effeminate countenance that apparently ladies desired. And what sort of man was he to have her out at this time of night? Where any number of individuals could see her and subsequently cast the worst sort of judgment and slander upon her character?

The man who held Margaret's arm whispered a few words to her, then warmly embraced her, tucking his face over the curve of her shoulder. Margaret in turn clutched him tightly with her eyes shut, seemingly distraught over the man's departure.

John audibly gritted his teeth and squared his shoulders, striding up the small flight of stairs and directly into Margaret's line of sight. Precisely at the moment he reached them, her eyes opened and she gasped.

The man released her and spun around, pushing Margaret behind him as he took in the angry visage of the tall mill master. John clenched his fists in an effort to quell the rage growing inside of him as he snarled, "What business do you have here at this time of night?"

The man, so young that he could still be considered a boy, trembled for an instant before drawing himself up and replied icily in a softer accent, "Our business is our own sir, you have no right to question us."

John arched a sardonic brow as he glanced back at Margaret and her pale countenance, "Oh? I think I do. As the magistrate of this district I have every right to inquire why a respectable young lady is out after dark with a strange man."
This drew Margaret out of her silence, "As you have stated before Mr. Thornton, it is the norm for those in the north to value their independence. There is no crime in traveling to a train station, this man is no stranger and I was just seeing him off," she challenged with a rise of her chin.

John blinked as he took in the almost identical expressions of self righteous indignation. A closer look revealed that the young man closely resembled someone he knew, or thought he knew. The warm brown eyes and longer jawline were familiar, but he could not place them. He looked at Margaret, who still clutched the man's rough jacket, "And why is it," he bit out, "-you felt the need to travel at eleven in the evening when there were at least two southbound trains available earlier in the day?"

Margaret flushed red and refused to answer, but the man had no such quandaries, "I will only say it one more time, sir, what me and my kin do is our own business-	"

John interrupted brusquely, "Kin?"

The man blanched and looked worriedly at Margaret who tugged on his arm and tried to lead him away. John's brow furrowed as his mind scrambled for answers. The accent, the features . . . He felt more than a little bit slow for not being able to grasp the answer in front of him.

A rough voice loudly sounded across the platform, tinged with the excesses of alcohol as he slurred, "Hale? It is you, isn't it?"

Three heads whipped towards the sound of the voice, with the young man and woman turning white with horror. John's eyes widened a fraction as he took in the scene and strode a few steps away to call for the station master.

The drunk man stumbled forward, "And look at you, I thought I recognized you. What's all this then?"

The young man stuttered, "I-I'm not Hale-

His words will abruptly cut off as he was grabbed by the lapels of his coat, Margaret let loose a distressing cry, and roughly thrown against the nearby train carriage. Gulping in huge amounts of air, he tried to shout, "Get off! Get off!"

John came at a run back around the corner, having heard Margaret's cries and quickly came up to haul the drunk man off of the boy and toss him aside. The drunkard uneasily rolled away and hauled himself up on a railing dazedly, staggering down the platform steps and out of sight.

"You must go now, Fred," Margaret cried, "GO!"

The young man, Fred, quickly jumped into an open carriage door with his luggage while Margaret bodily stepped in front of John with her hands held up in a placating gesture.

John, for the most part, watched in bemusement as the train slowly left the platform and looked down into Miss Hale's tear streaked face. "Who is this Fred Hale?" he demanded lowly.

Margaret shook her head mournfully, "He is my brother . . ."

John's mouth gaped open in an uncharacteristic manner. In any other circumstances, the face would have amused Margaret but in that moment, she was truly afraid. It was as her mother had said, perhaps there was some merit to being uprooted and friendless, for there was a chance that he had not heard of the mutiny and that Fred would have a chance to escape the country.
John voiced the question that was first and foremost in his mind, "Why would your father not tell me he had a son?"

She looked up at him beseechingly, "First, you must give me your word that this will not go beyond us."

The look of utter distress on her face prompted him to do exactly that as he took her elbow and drew her away from the platform. They sat on a bench as she accepted a proffered handkerchief and looked around her nervously. After she had gathered herself appropriately, she haltingly started, "We never speak of him because . . . He is wanted by the law."

John's eyebrows rose to his hairline, but she was quick to interject, "He has been wrongly accused but the warrant for his arrest still stands. You see, he left for the Navy when I was still a young girl, and subsequently was accused of mutiny when the ship's crew removed an insane captain from his position."

John blew out a breath, "Was he here for your mother?"

Margaret nodded sadly and wiped at her eyes. "You are a close friend of my father's, perhaps one of the few he has left in the world, but he would never compromise your position as a magistrate."

"You do realize that your own position has been compromised by being seen here tonight?"

Margaret sighed, "All that I ask is that you do nothing to impede my brother's escape. I think my reputation already had a stain upon it before this night."

The sharp whistle of the station master brought their attention to a pair of station guards, quickly advancing upon them. She apprehensively stood and looked at John with a measure of fear in her eyes.

The stockier guard addressed them,"Mr. Thornton sir, you indicated an altercation on the platform? Is all well?"

John stood decisively, "Miss Hale and her cousin Hale were accosted by a man who seemed to be mistaken in his identity of Mr. Hale. Her cousin boarded the train safely, and the man in question left a few minutes ago by the main stairs."

The guards tipped their caps and headed in that direction, leaving John and Margaret alone again.

"Thank you . . . " she whispered, looking down at her hands.

"Don't thank me yet," he muttered, "This is still a right mess, but for now, let us see you home." John offered her his arm and placed his top hat back on as he passed a pair of curious onlookers on their way out the station. He stiffened and murmured down to her, "Would you like me to inform your father of what happened? Or would you prefer to do so?"

Margaret unconsciously tightened her grip on his arm, "I think it should be you, but I wish to be present."

John guided her into a hackney and quietly replied, "Then I will call upon you tomorrow afternoon."

She gave him a wan upturning of her lips and turned to poke her head out of the open side as the cab rolled away. He breathed deeply and turned on his heel to walk back towards Marlborough Mills, wondering if he needed a drink or just a sound night's sleep. Perhaps both.
Chapter End Notes

Margaret was a bit out of character for revealing Fred but I decided since I made Thornton ask precisely who Fred Hale was, she had to give him some answer.
The nice warm feeling you get in winter time . . . under the covers . . . and you are taking your time to wake up . . .

It was not truly morning yet, not in her estimation. It was still pitch black outside, and there was still a bit of glow left from the fire. The chilliness of the air caused her to burrow her nose underneath the covers and wiggle closer to the body next to her.

Her husband's long frame was pressed up against her back and his arm was still resting loosely over her hip. As fall had progressed into winter, they were having more nights like this, tightly wrapped in each other's arms underneath the quilts as the embers burned low in the grate.

He murmured in his sleep and nestled his face in her tangled mane of hair, sighing as he fell back into a deeper sleep.

Margaret smiled sleepily and stroked the bare arm that had tightened about her waist. During these cold nights, as long as they slept close with enough blankets, nightclothes were more of an option that they didn't use in their marriage.

It might have scandalized others, especially if they knew that the Master of Marlborough Mills shared a bedroom with his wife every single night, but as John readily pointed out, it was no one's business but theirs. And after but a week of proscribing to society's norms, with hardly any sleep for either of them, Margaret had slipped through the door that connected their rooms and eagerly burrowed into his much larger, and comfortable bed.

It was entirely logical in her mind, to use the master bed with it's large bed curtains and plush mattress. Her bed was all well and good, but whether by design or not, it did not accommodate John's long limbs if he wished to stay the night.

After four months of marriage, she had shed her maidenly modesty rather quickly and was comfortable seeing her husband in his skin as she was being seen in hers. It was a very odd feeling to still turn pink when Dixon assisted her out of her bath, but not even bat an eyelash if John casually stripped out of his clothes to get ready for bed.
If they were not locked in a passionate embrace, as often was the case, they were both completely unconscious in blissful sleep. John remarked wryly that it was the best sleep he had experienced since he was a small boy.

"You're thinking too loudly," he said with a groggy whisper.

"My mind seems to wake me in these few moments before you must get up," she whispered back, emitting a small yawn.

His other free arm slipped under her pillow and head, "I gather I have a few minutes left before the maid comes in to build up the fire."

"You do not fancy dressing in the cold," she teased.

"No," was his dry reply, as he felt her body shake with a giggle, "Now go back to sleep, love."

Margaret turned her body and pressed her face into the hollow of his throat, throwing her leg over his, and giving a content sigh as he readjusted his arms about her. She closed her eyes and followed him back into the realm of Nod.

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