

The Lie

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

Published: 1914



THOMAS HANLEY HAD ALWAYS considered himself, and been considered by others, as a man without a heart. Firm, cold, entrenched behind the rigid morality of a Puritan conscience, he had lived wisely but not well.

He was the least loved and the most respected man in Burrton. As the result of unremitting toil and unfailing energy, he had come to be the owner of the lumber mill in which he had begun as a day laborer, and in it was all his life.

No man was so just, and none so entirely without mercy. No man had so fairly earned all that he possessed, nor held it with a stronger hand.

Strength, however, is admirable, and may be forgiven; but with it he had an idea. He hated shams, he hated politeness, he hated compromises, and, above all, he hated a lie. His strict and literal veracity was not a matter of pride to him; it was too natural. If one saw the sun rise at six o'clock, one still might doubt; one's watch might be wrong; but if Thomas Hanley said the sun rose at six o'clock it was so. It is something to have acquired such an authority.

So extreme a practice of so stern a virtue excluded the lighter ones. One neither expected nor received generosity or sympathy at the hands of Thomas Hanley. He had reached the age of forty without ever having performed one act of injustice or one act of kindness, hating nothing but a lie and loving no one.

The town had already begun to amuse itself by conjectures as to the future owner of the lumber mill. There was no one in Burrton who had reason to entertain any hopes of the legacy; Hanley despised charitable institutions, and there was certainly no chance of his marrying.

Jim Blood declared it to be his firm belief that Hanley would burn the mill down and himself with it before he would allow it to pass into the hands of anyone else. When a man's native town begins to jest about his death he might as well die.

And then, on a certain May evening, the inhabitants of Burrton experienced a shock from which they never recovered. The news traveled from one end of the town to the other as swiftly as the whirling of the great wheels in Hanley's lumber mill. It was amazing, unprecedented, unbelievable. Thomas Hanley had walked home with Marie Barber.

Burrton was prepared for the worst, and it came speedily. The courtship was a curious one. That Hanley was in love no one was willing to believe. He even half doubted it himself. But he knew that he wanted Marie more than he had ever wanted anything in all his life, and he set about the accomplishment of his purpose in his own stern and forceful manner.

Marie was pretty, young, and popular. At Hanley's first advances she was half frightened and half amused, then complacent. She never really loved him perhaps, but the devoted attention of a man who ignored the whole world beside was flattering to her vanity. In addition, she had a mother, and he owned the best business in Burrton. The combination proved irresistible; in September they were married.

Marie soon found that she need expect no gaiety or pleasure in her new home. Hanley loved as he had lived, sternly and honestly. Unsocial by nature and morose by habit, he would have found it impossible to enter into the little interests and frivolities that were Marie's chief delight, even if he had cared to try. He grudged her nothing and allowed her all the freedom she could ask, but held himself aloof from the idle and harmless pleasures which she had learned to enjoy.

The effect of this was exactly the opposite from that predicted by the good people of Burrton. Marie, whether from the mere pleasure of novelty, or from a genuine affection for her husband, began seriously to occupy herself with the task of making his home pleasant and his life agreeable.

She gradually dropped or neglected her large circle of friends and acquaintances, spent more and more of her time at home or at her mother's, assumed active care of the somewhat elaborate household Hanley had provided for her, and bade fair to become as severe a recluse and as rigid a moralist as himself.

Hanley regarded this change in his wife's attitude toward life with a sort of grim humor; otherwise with indifference. He had never either asked or expected anyone else to practice his own stern code of existence, least of all Marie, who had been spoiled.

The strict censorship which he maintained over his own tongue and actions was not extended to others; he simply ignored them. He loved Marie with an intensity

which he kept locked in his own breast; he asked of her only that she be a faithful wife, and annoyed her with no eager demonstrations of his affection or curious inquisition of her conduct.

Marie, who was fast acquiring a philosophy of her own, had no inkling of the fire and passion that was hidden by this outward reserve. Consequently, when she returned one evening from a visit to her mother and whispered in her husband's ear the sweetest secret a wife may have, she was surprised at the fierce tenderness of his embraces and caresses.

Hanley recovered himself shortly and sat down to discuss the coming event with the seriousness it deserved. Marie answered his businesslike questions as well as possible, and when he was finished crossed over to his chair and put her arms round his neck.

„Dear,“ she whispered, „don't you hope it will be a little girl?“

Her eyes were moist with tears and her voice trembled with an anticipative tenderness.

Hanley rose to his feet.

„Why, certainly not,“ he answered; „it must be a boy.“

And he passed out of the room and upstairs to his own chamber.

Marie sat down on the chair he had left and wept for the first time since her wedding. Afterward she was surprised at her own weakness. Why, she thought, should she expect Thomas Hanley to be otherwise than brutal? Since he had no feeling, she should not be surprised that he showed none.

Another man might at least have pretended to sympathize with her desire; but not Thomas Hanley, who had never lied even to himself. She remembered that her mother had warned her not to expect any tenderness from her husband, and she reflected somewhat bitterly that he was probably even now reproaching himself for the transient emotion he had exhibited in the first surprise at her announcement.

The months passed rapidly. Autumn disappeared, its bright reds and sober browns giving way regretfully to bare branches and dreary nakedness; the cold silences of winter came with the melancholy of their long nights and the false brilliance of their days, and in their turn were superseded by the sharp winds and muddy thaws of March; and then the world once more awoke to the glad call of spring.

How sweet the air! How green the grass! With what joyous notes did the birds salute the return of life, and how the little twigs with their fresh opening buds trembled with innocent delight!

Marie heard and saw this ever-recurring call of nature, and found an answering voice within her. In the first few months of her marriage, repelled by Hanley's coldness and tired of the idle amusements she had previously enjoyed, she had sometimes wondered what she had been born for. Now she knew.

As she sat by an open window, embroidering a tiny little dress that certainly was not intended for herself, she closed her eyes dreamily to hide from the world outside the wave of exquisite emotion that swept over her.

Marie, like the spoiled child that she was, was attempting to dictate to nature. These little garments spread about in delightful confusion were every one trimmed in blue. Blue ribbon was just now at a premium in Burrton; Marie was

extravagant. She had even gone so far as to embroider a name on the little under slips that were safely tucked away in the bureau drawer. The name was Dorothy.

Hanley—I had almost said poor Hanley—was experiencing some difficulty in maintaining his stern indifference. He was, indeed, inclined to give up the whole thing as a bad job. When he came home of an evening to find Marie busily engaged on her endless task of love, when he saw the look of inexpressible tenderness with which she regarded every little indication of his cognizance of the expected arrival, he longed to take her in his arms and keep her there forever.

But the habits of a lifetime are not to be lightly shaken off, especially when they are fortified by all the strength of a stubborn will. Hanley forced himself to be satisfied with surrounding his wife with all possible comfort and care; and, indeed, believed he was doing well. He had ever found his own mind thoroughly capable of supporting itself, and could not realize the existence of a soul that required to be fed from without.

He was more or less irritated at Marie's insistence on what he considered a childish whim.

Though he avoided any further discussion of the subject, he could not understand how she could fail to realize the necessity that there should be a son and heir to perpetuate his name and carry on his business. Many times, on having her own preference intimated before him by some slight incident, he held his tongue with an effort.

The event which they both awaited with anxiety—Marie with a frank and tender eagerness, Hanley with a seeming coldness—came unexpectedly and almost without warning. It was an evening in June. Hanley, after an unusually hard day's work, had retired early and, as was his custom, had fallen asleep instantly. Awakened by the maid, he heard voices murmuring outside his door.

„What is it?“ he asked, still half asleep.

„Mrs. Hanley wants you,“ answered the maid.

Hanley sat up. „Is it—“ he asked.

„Yes.“

The maid hurried out of the room, and Hanley dressed himself as quickly as possible and followed her. In the hall he found the cook and the laundress, whispering excitedly in a corner. All the rooms were lighted up. The door leading to Marie's room was open.

„What are you doing up here?“ Hanley demanded. „Where's Simmons?“

They started at the sound of his voice.

„He's gone after the doctor and Mrs. Barber,“ the cook said. „We—we—can stay out here in the hall?“

Marie's voice sounded from her room, faint and sweet.

„Of course you may stay,“ she called. „Come here, Maggie.“

The cook's homely face broke into a smile, and her eyes filled with tears. Sometimes even Maggies are wonderful.

„Can I?“ she appealed to Hanley.

Without answering, Hanley passed through the hall and down the stairs. Hearing a noise in the kitchen, he went out to find the maid standing on a chair searching among the bottles on the top shelf of the cupboard.

„Why didn't you call me sooner?“ Hanley demanded.

The maid continued her search without looking at him.

„Because we were busy,“ she answered.

Hanley watched her for a minute or two, then walked through the dining room out into the front hall. Why he did not go to Marie he could not possibly have told. Perhaps because of a fear of the tumultuous emotion he felt struggling within him; perhaps because she had not asked for him. Thomas Hanley found himself in the strange position of jealousy toward the cook.

Turning to go upstairs, his eye lighted on the telephone on its stand in the corner. He took up the receiver and called the number of Dr. Perkins's residence.

Dr. Perkins, he was told, had already left and could be expected to arrive any minute. Then he called up the Barbers. Mrs. Barber was dressing, and would be over shortly. Hanley hung up the receiver and proceeded upstairs to his own room. As he passed over to a chair by the window and sat down he heard the outer door open below and the doctor's voice sounded from the hall.

The minutes passed slowly. Through the wall Hanley could hear the voices of the doctor and the maid in Marie's room. Later, that of Mrs. Barber was joined to them. It seemed that they would never get through talking.

„Why don't they do something?“ Hanley growled.

Finally, when he could bear it no longer, he crossed to the door and opened it just in time to see the maid disappearing into the room opposite Marie's with a little white bundle in her arms. The doctor, following her into the hall, saw Hanley approaching, and leading him back into his own room, closed the door after him.

„Well?“ said Hanley.

„You have a son,“ said the doctor. „A fine boy. But—“

„Well?“ repeated Hanley impatiently.

„I am afraid it has killed your wife,“ the doctor said bluntly. One expected Thomas Hanley to bear anything.

Hanley's hands closed on the doctor's shoulders like grips of steel.

„Is she dead?“ he asked calmly.

„No.“ The doctor winced under Hanley's grasp. „But I can give you little hope. I shall do my best.“

Hanley turned without a word and passed to Marie's room. She was lying with her head propped up by a pillow, her face deathly pale, her eyes closed. Mrs. Barber sat on the edge of the bed, holding her daughter's hand. As Hanley entered she looked up and placed her fingers to her lips to enjoin silence.

Hanley crossed over to the bedside and stood looking down at his wife, his lips sternly compressed, his hands twitching nervously. Marie's eyes opened as though with an effort, and, seeing her husband, she tried to sit up. Mrs. Barber gently pressed her back on the pillow. Marie held out her hand, and Hanley awkwardly took it in his.

„Thomas,“ said Marie faintly; and then, with a shudder: „How I hate that name!“

„I—I don't like it very well myself,“ said Hanley.

„I want—you—to—tell me—something,“ said Marie. The words came with difficulty. „I know you—wouldn't lie. Mother told me it is a little girl, but she looked so queer, and she wouldn't let me—“

Her voice died away, but she kept her eyes on Hanley's face in mute appeal.

Hanley bent over to kiss the hand he held and saw Mrs. Barber's eyes full of tears. Then:

„It is a little girl,“ he said. „A little blue-eyed girl.“

Marie sighed long and happily and closed her eyes, and as Hanley turned to leave the room Mrs. Barber caught his hand and kissed it. The doctor, meeting him at the door, asked him not to return till he was called, saying that Marie required absolute quiet. Hanley nodded and sought his own room.

Five, ten minutes passed. As before, the sound of voices came faintly through the wall. Would they never cease? He passed his hand across his brow and found it wet.

It is a painful thing to find one's heart at forty, and delightful. Of course, Marie would live. Hanley found himself making plans for the future with a boyish fancy. What would he not do for her? It would be pretty hard, he reflected grimly, for Thomas Hanley to learn how to play, but it was for Marie. She would be disappointed to find a son instead of a daughter, but still he would make her happy.

Then the present recurred to his mind and filled him with a redoubled fear. He listened; the voices in her room had ceased and he thought he heard someone sobbing. He could bear it no longer; he must go to her.

The doctor met him at the door of Marie's room. Hanley asked with his eyes. The doctor, who again felt that there was no need of gentleness with Thomas Hanley, used none.

„She is dead,“ he said simply.

Hanley stared at him, unbelieving. Then he walked over to the bed and, kneeling by it, gazed steadily at the pallor of death on the face resting heavily against the pillow.

„Mrs. Barber,“ he said, „I have killed your daughter. I have killed Marie.“ And again, as he rose to his feet: „I have killed Marie.“

The doctor, not understanding, protested.

Hanley leaped toward him. The floodgates that had been closed for a lifetime burst suddenly.

„Curse you!“ he screamed. „Don't you lie to me! I tell you I killed her with a lie! Because I lied, God has killed her! I killed her!“

He threw himself on the bed and took Marie's head to his breast in a wild embrace, sobbing like a woman.

Through the window came the breath of spring. Mrs. Barber was kneeling by the bed, weeping silently. From the hall came the sound of Maggie sniffing in the corner where Marie had said she could stay.

