Summary

She owed it to him, in every sense of decency. A man had died, and out of whatever he felt for her John Thornton had diverted the attention from her brief involvement. He was a man who never lied, no matter what came out of his mouth he did not intend to deceive, and he had lied for her.

Notes

I ordered the book today after marathoning the 2004 BBC series twice in the last three days, will read it later. Until then, here we go.

This is set when Thornton goes to visit Margaret to speak with her a little more after he saves her from appearing before the inquest. Because a conversation like this was just inches from happening. So yeah.

Enjoy!

~Sil
dearly loved as what was morally just. She owed this to him, by all that was right in the world.

“Mr. Thornton, what you think of me…would you please—“ he paused midway through his turn to leave “—would you please give me a moment to enlighten you?”

“And where might we have this enlightening moment, Miss Hale? Please do not take offense that I would rather not walk out with you at the moment.” Margaret bit her lips just once, knowing that the pain she felt must be something akin to his own. He loved her, and he thought—he thought that…

“My father avoids my mother’s rooms, we can take a few minutes in her sitting room. If that doesn’t offend.”

“It…does not.” She could see him cursing himself for his curiosity even as he gave into it. He followed her up the stairs after she asked Dixon to prepare them some tea. Her mother’s rooms, hardly cold almost since her death, were silent and still. They would soon smell of dust but instead her mother’s long illness was the main scent. If Mr. Thornton noticed he gave no sign as he made himself at home at her bidding.

“It was in the papers, I don’t know if it reached Milton or if you cared if it did. A ships’ crew conspiring a mutiny, the mutineers rounded up to hang or fleeing to escape Her Majesty’s Navy. Please tell me you heard of it so I do not have to go to the beginning.”

“I heard of it.” She nodded, glad that she did not have to relive the entire tale. She did not wish to tell Mr. Thornton how horrible it was to lose her closest friend and her only brother in the manner she had. If he listened, and they became friends, then he would be privy to that knowledge. But he had not earned that yet.

“My brother, it has long been decided by others, was the ringleader. I will not tell you where he is, you cannot make me even if you were to raise a hand towards my face, but I—I wrote to him when I knew that Mother would not survive long enough to see him exonerated. He came here at my urging, in deepest secrecy.”

He stared at her and as she looked on him she saw a muscle relax in his jaw which had been tense since she’d rejected his proposal. Something inside her relaxed as well, telling her that this was right. He needed to know this because he loved her. Whatever he might say, he loved her as much as it caused him agony. It hurt her as well to think that she was causing him such daily pain.

“He left the night after Mother died. On the night train. What are the chances of it that someone, someone from—” she felt her eyes redden with tears that she refused to let fall “—from Helstone would see us at the boarding of the night train in Milton of all places.” The police had made inquiries, and she was sure that it would have also eventually come out that the dead man had ties to the place she’d grown up in. Mr. Thornton would surely know of this, either already or soon.

The changes on his face were terrifying and gratifying to watch. He was putting everything together—he was wickedly quick, always had been.

“He just shoved him—Mr. Thornton—it was just—a—he—“ her voice was beginning to raise just a little with every stuttered word, and though she did not feel faint her urge to break down crying intensified. She would never see her brother again, and that embrace that Mr. Thornton had seen was the last she would ever see of him, the last she would ever touch him—it was to have been hers. It was the last danger they would permit themselves, and then he would go back to Cadiz in safety. And yet—here she was, telling a magistrate of his very escape.

She couldn’t bear it, looking down at her lap to hide her tears. She heard the chair creak as he
stood up, and his steps—he was a man of morals, despite his business, and a man was dead so that Frederick might live. Of course he would be leaving, to get his police inspector and the law. And then the impossible happened as Mr. Thornton took her hands as he knelt next to her.

“You do not love some man from your past, then?” she sobbed out a short laugh. The idea of her with a lover was ridiculous. Half of Milton’s society thought her unworthy of pursuit, and the other half bowed in deference to Mr. Thornton’s attachment to her family. Not a one of them believed her to actually be even friends with the millworkers as she was.

“Not in the manner you do me, Sir,” she said softly, trying to sniff back her tears without actually sniffling. His grip tightened just slightly as she acknowledged that he loved her, as he’d admitted on that disastrous day after the riot. He did love her, as crazy as that made him. She turned her hand over so she could wrap her fingers around his.

“I know that it is passed now and I do not hint at longing for a renewal for I know there will be none,” she tried not to sound too watery from her brief tears, “but I am not familiar with refusal because such a question was only asked of me once, and in the most backwards way possible. By my cousin’s brother-in-law, who took in my conversation something of a hint where there was none.”

“Much as I—“

“No!” That hushed him, and she finally looked into his eyes, close to her face as they had been a few times. “You love, Mr. Thornton. I will not do you the disservice to deny that—but this other man knew me only through a few shared teas. A dance. I would speak his Christian name simply because my cousin is more my sister than anything which made him a brother in my eyes. He thought me a prize, a pretty addition. A pair of brothers married to a pair of cousins, all just quaint and tidy.”

“You do not think he loved you? That your…refusal caused him no pain?”

She smiled, a breath of a laugh escaping her as she moved her hands so that she held his rather than the other way around. He let her, still and staring as he knelt next to her chair. He had a speck of cotton clinging to the tip of his ear, reminding her that there was more pain in her refusal of him than simple rejection. He believed himself unworthy—that she had men lined out the door that she would take over agreeing to give her hand to him. Her aunt would have agreed with him, as would her cousin.

“He did not shout his love when it seemed I would dissuade him, and he did not show any temper which might match my own when he understood my intent to refuse him. No Mr. Thornton, he did not love. At least not in a way which could grow any love to reciprocate him in my heart.” A spasm went through his hand at that, and it seemed his breath was stolen clean away from him as he stared steadily at her. And then he was standing, holding fast to her hands as he did and bringing her to her feet as well.

“Miss Hale—would you allow—would,” he stilled once again, their hands still linked as he took time to organize his thoughts, “would you allow me to better show the love for you which has grown in me?”

Margaret smiled then, as widely as she could.

“I’d like less the man explaining his case beneath glass ceilings to those who pass by, and more the man who would roll up his sleeves to do a bit of work. With me, I think you might avail yourself of gardening.” That brought out a reluctant but hopeful smile on his face. “The soil is already seeded, you’ll find, and the plants which will grow are of hardy stock.” The smile settled a
little more forcefully on his face, and Margaret couldn't help but smile back at him.

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