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FIVE CENTS

THE SACK



By Owen Oliver

**All His Life Had Been a Sack Race—
And Yet He Chose to Come Back
To It and to His Burden!**

THE surgeon rather advised against the operation; but he left it to Greatorex and his friends to decide. "My head is a lump of wood," Greatorex told him. "Get them to settle it."

It seemed to the surgeon that most of the friends thought more of themselves than of Greatorex. So he committed the decision to the one who thought more of Greatorex than of herself. He had no doubt that she did. No one had.

"There is just a chance that it might save his life," he stated; "but it isn't very likely that the life would be worth living. To him, I mean. Of course, there is the question of those who are more or less dependent on him. I don't mean merely for money."

"Do just what is best for him," she decided at once, "without taking account of any one else."

The surgeon nodded; put his hand on her shoulder.

"I shan't operate," he told her. "He will go quietly and without much pain. God bless you!"

"Thank you. You are very kind. You will let me be with him as much as possible?"

"Of course," the specialist promised. "Of course. Yes, yes!"

Greatorex rallied when the surgeon told him the decision; found some of his keen wits for a few minutes.

"Who settled it?" he muttered.

"I consulted Miss Mason. She left it to me to do what is best for you."

Ah! For me! She would, of course. But, you see, I should reckon her. A man isn't just his own chattel. Doctor, settle it as I should if my old head would work."

The surgeon's mouth twisted for a moment. He had taken a liking to Greatorex.

"I think she'd miss you a good bit," he said.

"You would weigh that in; weigh it more than you ought, I expect. However, you are you! I'll see if I can pull it off, old man. We'll say tomorrow morning. That won't leave the little lady long to worry."

"You've got my point of view all right," Greatorex told him. He smiled faintly. "Thanks, my dear chap."

When Greatorex took the anaesthetic he thought he was preparing for death; and then all at once he found himself preparing for life instead; standing somewhere just beyond the beginning of things, getting ready to start in a race.

His schoolfellows were there, too. They had all grown young again, just as he had; those who had died as well as those who, like himself, had come to be oldish men. They were all forming up in line to toe a great white mark. Johnnie Reeves was playing the fool as usual; and as usual Harry Kane was late and kept them waiting for him. Teddie Burns' little white dog ran in front of the line and had to be driven away. They all laughed at that. Laughter had not felt so spontaneous for many years.

There was a broken, hilly country in front of them; and far across it, upon a wooded rise, there was a queer shaped white column for the goal. Greatorex resolved confidently—it was a long time since he had been so cheerfully confident—that he would reach it first. He was sure he would. He felt so overbrimmingly strong and active and light; so light that he knew he would just skim the ground when he ran.

Some one called to him to be ready to start. It sounded like the voice of the old headmaster. Greatorex stooped with his fingers touching the ground, ready for the first spring. The starter's pistol gave such a terrific bang that it confused him and everything swam round for a moment. (That was when the operation began.)

"He's not very deep," the surgeon growled.

"Well, his heart!" the anaesthetist protested; also rather testily. "I'll give him some more, if I must, but—"

"No, I'll try what I can do—I'm pretty keen on this case, Smith. I don't mean anything if I'm snappy, you know."

"That's all right, chief. Rather a forlorn hope, isn't it?"

"Yes. Sharp with the clips, Stevens."

Greatorex seemed to bound into confused space at the cannonlike report of the pistol. Then after, some lost moments, he saw things again, and found himself running hard across a green field. The other boys were running hard, too. He was level with the foremost, when they reached a long hurdle, which, somehow or other, he thought of as a "form." He caught his heel upon the top rail, when he leaped it, and fell. Some one picked him up, and pushed him forward. Why, it was the head! The same foxy-looking little man, wearing that same brown suit. Just the same after 40-odd years.

But the old man was 20 years dead. How did he come here? Greatorex pondered, and then suddenly understood. He was running his life race over again. That was it. Of course that was it. Didn't Evelyn say that he ought to!

"You have run a sack race all your life, dear; always carrying the burdens of others. If you could run it again without the sack. O! I wish you could!"

And he was running it again; and without the sack. Good! Good!

"Now, laddie!" the head cried. "Now! You'll do it yet!"

Greatorex clenched his hands and vowed to catch the lads who were now in front of him. He was gaining . . . gaining. One caught and passed. Another. Another. He was in front. Heavens! There was a great ditch to jump. He'd never do it. He hadn't wind enough left; and his legs felt like lead. He almost stopped; and then he saw some one frantically beckoning forward.

"Good gracious!" he cried. "Why, the old head's there now!"

Yes. It was the head. He stood on the far side of the ditch, waving his red silk handkerchief. ("The same old

rag," Greatorex thought.) Suddenly the handkerchief changed to the red-covered algebra. "Simplify first!" That was what the old man was calling. He always said that when he took the algebra class. No, he said, "Come on, Greatorex!"

He seemed to fly up in the air at his old master's call, and to be looking down at the water from a long way above. Then he lost things. Presently he found himself across the ditch, lying on the ground, panting and panting.

"Now you're in the upper school, laddie, you must make a man of yourself! And I'll make a great scholar of you some day."

That was what the head said, when he won. When he won? What was it that he won? Lower School Exhibition. That was it. He had won it again; but he couldn't

head again! He was running again! He was running and puffing and as excited as Greatorex himself.

"This way, my boy," he called. "This way! Catch hold of my coat, in this dark place. Keep close to me. I know it. Ah-ha! I know it! There's the way out. See!"

He pointed to a slit of light ahead.

Greatorex ran to the light, and through it, and found himself out on a white road, with a wood on one side, and a green field on the other, sloping down to a brook. He was running like a mad creature. He heard the head behind him, clapping his hands, and talking to some one.

"He'll have an open scholarship, too, mark my words. Brilliant boy! Best I've turned out."

Why! That was what the head told his father, just before his father died. "There isn't very much, except what he'd set aside for your education." He heard the old lawyer telling him that; noticed that the queer little man was watching him curiously. Then he was running again. Then he was back in the lawyer's little office. Mr. Grimes sent for him to come and have a talk. Yes, that was how he got there.

And old Grimes was talking again. "Heavy losses of late. They will fall upon the provision he had intended for your mother. She is a delicate woman, my boy! A delicate woman."

He lost the lawyer again—he seemed to go in a flash—and was running his race once more, on the hard white road, under the wood; but round the corner he came upon his mother; the same little mother. (Ah! Mothers do not change much!) She was in widow's weeds, crying and wringing her hands. She urged him to leave her and go on.

"You have such a future before you, Harry," she cried. "Father left enough to complete your education. I shall manage somehow. I shall manage, dear. You go on."

She tried to smile and picked up a big bundle, and was walking another way with it. And then Greatorex noticed something lying in the road. It was a great sack. And somehow he knew that the burdens of his life would go in it.

His eyes blinked for a moment; but he picked it up without hesitation.

"I've got to run a sack race after all," he said. "Poor old Evelyn! She'll be so sorry!"

He took the bundle from his little mother, and put it in the sack, and slung that over his shoulder. "Why, you tiny little mammy!" he laughed. "It's nothing to me; and, if you're naughty, I'll carry you, too!"

He kissed his mother, and danced her round. He always thought she was such a pretty little mother, he remembered.

"I shan't feel it," he declared.

Then he started running again, turning twice to wave his hand to her.

It was hard work with the sack upon his back, he soon discovered. He had been well ahead of his rivals before he stopped and picked it up; but now he could hear footsteps behind. Nearer. Nearer. Just as one of his pursuers was at his elbow—Archie Green. Yes, it was old Archie—he caught a glimpse of the white goal through some trees. He must drop his burden—and then "little ments he gained; but his heart felt as if it would burst. He must drop his burden—and then "little mammy" would come and pick it up—or he must give up the race. He came to a dark wood. Renunciation, it was called, wasn't it? He thought the head named it that. Yes, renunciation. He dropped out of the race there. And then he fainted or fell asleep.

"He won't stand any more," the anaesthetist cried. He wiped his forehead. "In fact, I don't know that he'll stand this."

"Best for him if he doesn't, perhaps," the surgeon muttered. "Well, I'd better finish the job, anyhow. He's breathing, I suppose?"

"Just breathing! A little better now. Great vitality; must have been a very strong man once."

Greatorex had a faint notion of feeling sick and staggering blindly through dark places; but he knew nothing distinctly, till he found himself out of the woods, running on a very rough road; still carrying the sack. He did not know where he was going, only that he had grown into a young man and was running a young man's race. He caught several who had been ahead of him, and passed them. There was a big red house afar on a hill. He knew that was the new goal, and he believed that he would reach it first. Then some one stopped him. Why, it was his young brother, Jim! Jim was crying at having to carry some weighty bundles.

Greatorex felt in his heart that Jim was a bit of a coward, and ought to carry them without any fuss; but he remembered what "little mammy" said, before she died. Ah! little mammy. Dead! Dead! "Be his mammy for me, Harry. You are so brave and strong, and he's only a little chap." Only a little chap. Little mammy's baby boy.

Greatorex shook his head at Jim and his parcels; but he took half of them and put them in his sack.

"That's all right," he said, "boy Jim. I can manage. See you after the race! And you buck up, you young scamp, and don't whine!"

He ran on, but now he couldn't move very fast. The sackload was too great a handicap. There were footsteps behind, and they were gaining upon him. He ran harder—still gaining. The house was quite near, though. He would manage it, he thought, in spite of the sack. He could just last out. He made a furious spurt.

"I believe we'll pull it off after all," the surgeon exulted. "The 'op' looks like its coming out all right, if only he can stand the shock."

"His heart?" the anaesthetist doubted. He knelt down to listen to it. "He's making a great fight. Wonderful constitution."

"Good enough for two men," the surgeon muttered. "but he's been trying to do the work of three or four all his life. I've nearly finished, Smith. Keep him alive somehow, man; only keep him alive. It's coming out much better than I expected."

Greatorex thought that he would be the first to the red house, after all; but just as he could almost touch it,



"I shall not operate," he told her.

get his breath; not enough breath. He didn't think he could go on.

"Here!" the surgeon raged. "What the devil! Keep it open, man! Keep it open."

"Doing my best. You said you must have him deep."

"I know, I know! I don't like his breathing, Smith."

The surgeon paused, instruments in hand.

"He's all right now. How does it look?"

"Pretty bad! Well, here goes."

Greatorex did not remember getting his breath and starting off again; but he found himself running once more. The new race was through close country. He had to push his way among the brambles and bushes. There was one very thick clump which he thought he would never get out of. Oratio Obliqua, he fancied it was called. But the head came and showed him just where the opening was, and he got through so easily that they both laughed.

Next he had to mount a steep slope covered with loose stones. He thought that place had a name, too, but he couldn't remember it. "Science," perhaps. He was never good at science. He kept slipping back; but Forbes shouted to him from above. Forbes was fifth form master then; but he died a missionary in China, he recollected. Well, he had come back again; and he looked just as jolly and fat as ever. He threw down a rope, and Greatorex got up by clinging to it. There was a fine view from the top of the slope, and Forbes chuckled, "You've got to get outside things to see them!" He was always saying that.

Some way further Greatorex entered a huge maze; a maze that was all turns and had several paths to choose between at every turning. The sides were close thick yew hedges that one could not see through. The head used to talk about "the maze of learning." That must be it. And he was lost in it, helplessly lost. Ah! Here was the old