

# The Sack

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By Owen Oliver

he collapsed. He imagined that he fainted and that he was in the faint for a long while, because he seemed considerably older when he became conscious again. He was running once more; always running, whenever he knew anything; and the sack was always weighing him down. It grew heavier and heavier, because people kept putting things on it. There was Jim again; that trouble over his debts; and there was Harry Kane's bill that he backed. Harry paid it, back in after years though. Good chap, Harry. And Archie Green's widow; poor consumptive girl. He had to help her, of course. And Jim again. A good job little mammy didn't live, perhaps. Then there was poor old Rogers. So many of them. Somehow they all seemed to unload their burdens onto him, and none ever stayed to help him bear the sack; never one for a time that seemed very long; perhaps years. O, yes! It must be years.

And one laid upon him a burden that was heavier than all the rest; heavier than any that he knew. He never spoke of that burden to anyone, and he would not have it written of, so no more can be said than this.

There were times when he stumbled, and times when he fell by the way; but he always got up and struggled on again. He could not travel so fast as those who bore no burden; and many a younger man went by him easily, and with a look of scorn; many a man whom he could have beaten easily on equal terms; but he rarely complained, and he seldom harbored malice; and he never rested. So he caught some of them again, as they made merry in wayside inns, or lay under the cool hedges asleep, or when they grew fat after easy living.

After many years—well, they felt to him like years—there came a time when he found that the bearing of burdens had made him very strong. In those days he reached several little country places, where there were humble little races; and, even with his burden on his back he won some of these.

There is much to tell of this long time; but it is bound up with things that he never told, he would not have told; things that are in the story of the burden of which he never spoke to any then, and only to one afterwards. He was always a man to whom none denied his right hand, and to whom women trusted, and to whom little children ran! Let us leave it at that.

One day he strode out into a fresh country; a powerful man, but no longer a young man; one who seldom ran, but walked stoutly and uprightly, carrying his huge sack over his shoulder. While he walked bravely and strongly and smilingly—though smiling rather sadly—the sun went down. Suddenly he felt very tired, and stopped in his walking; and his doctor's voice—he remembered the voice—called out from the darkness.

"Rest!" it ordered sternly. "A long rest!"

"No," he cried, "no! I will go on. I must go on. Doctor, I've nothing but my work; nothing but my work!"

He struggled on a little way farther. Then his limbs failed him; and he staggered and cried out a great cry.

"It is enough! he groaned; and his legs gave way under him; and again for a time he knew no more. That was "when he was ill." Yes, that was the time. He came to, remembering that.

It was night, and very cold and very dark. There was no light except a few twinkling stars. He felt faint and listless; and yet somehow purified.

"A weaker man, but not a worse," he told himself. "Please God, I'll go on a bit yet."

He raised the sack on his shoulder, and stumbled forward into the darkness. He felt glad to be moving forward again, even slowly; tried to laugh a little, even tried to sing. His laugh did not sound very good, but the voice—"still a good bit of the old voice," he told himself. Some people had liked to hear him sing, and he liked to hear himself. It was his one vanity; and it was mostly only great love for music. The singing cheered him on for a little while; but the sack seemed so heavy. Or was it only that he was weaker?

"I'm not the man I was," he groaned. "Not the man I was. It is more than I can bear."

And just then—just when first his brave heart faltered—some one stepped to his side. He could not see her face for the darkness but she was a woman; a small woman; scarcely up to his big shoulder. She seemed to be a very fragile little creature. Nevertheless she put her weak shoulder under the great sack and lifted energetically

to help him; gasped little gasps that she tried to pass off for laughs. But that was like—why like a wonderful woman called—called Evelyn.

His heart seemed to swell in him and make him a strong, brave man again. He laughed and opened his sack.

"In with your troubles," he offered. "It's what I'm in this funny old world for; to carry for people. But I think chiefly I was meant to carry for you!"

Greatorex suddenly recollected that he had said something like this to Evelyn. Evelyn Mason! Yes, that was the name. His Evelyn. Could this be she?

The little woman laughed gayly at his speech.

"I'll tell you what, boy," she said—surely she was Evelyn, no one else would call him that, now that he was a worn old man. "Put yours in, too; and then we'll carry the

roads; the roads where one goes on alone, and one stays. The one who goes leaves burdens; and other things, other things.

The signpost said that he was the one to go.

She held to him awhile and kissed him. Then she set his feet upon the broad, smooth, white road; the road for the one who is done with burdens. They say there is a great guest house at the end; but none has ever returned to tell.

"Perhaps, dear," she confronted him, "it is for the best. You see, you will be free from the sack that you have borne so bravely for so long. Ah! I know! The great unknown is surely not to fear; not for a good man like you."

"Why!" he cried in astonishment, "I have never been good."

"You have been very, very good to every one," she declared, "and you have been all the world to me! God keep you, dear, in the Great

"I will not die," he said. "I will not die!"

"My God!" the anaesthetist cried. "He's gone!"

The surgeon dropped the instrument he was about to hand to his assistant, and it rattled on the floor.

"His heart!" he groaned. "His heart. And"—he almost sobbed—"the operation was going to be a success."

"You've done your best," his assistant tried to comfort him. "Your wonderful best."

"Are you sure he's gone?" the surgeon asked. The hands which had been so steady shook, and he tore the India rubber glove which he was pulling off.

"Not quite sure. You listen, chief. A strychnine capsule, Tomlinson. Sharp! Eh, chief?"

"Yes. Give it to him. What a constitution he must have had. It's fighting still!"

The surgeon knelt down with his head to Greatorex's heart.

"What do you think?" the assistant asked.

"I don't know. . . . Not actually dead yet, but dying, and won't die without a fight. He was a chap like that. He can't last long. I shan't tell her that the operation would have succeeded. It would only make her feel worse."

"Her?"

"There's always some one—if you find her. He did. Thank God for that."

"O! The little, pale, middle-aged lady that—"

"You may call her that. There's a faint beat, Smith."

"Ye-es. Reflex action, I expect?"

"Finish the dressing, boys, and get him covered up. Make him look comfortable. If he revives for a second, I shall have her in. Smith, I believe the heart is going. There's quite a chance he may be conscious for a moment. Go and fetch Miss Mason, sister. Mind you give her your arm to hold."

But the sister held the "little pale, middle-aged lady"—she never looked like that to Greatorex—right round the waist.

When Greatorex found that he could not leap into the chasm, he ran along the edge, to keep Evelyn in sight, and in the hope of eluding the unseen hands which guarded him from the chasm.

He could not escape them; and the chasm grew wider; and Evelyn's path sloped away from it. He shouted to her to stay, but she did not hear; or perhaps she could not stop. "The wheels of life always turn on." Somebody said that once. "Evelyn!" he shouted. "Evelyn!"

He fought madly with the hands, and he seemed to be drawing away from them; but, all at once, a noble, white angel stood in front of him, holding up a hand. Greatorex thought that the angel was old and wise, though in face he was young. Along the great white road of infinity they never grow old, he had heard, and never carried burdens. But he would rather be old and burdened with Evelyn.

"Friend," the angel said, "do not be afraid to die. The after life is not to fear."

Greatorex stared at him.

"I wasn't thinking of that," he stated.

He pointed to Evelyn staggering along the bitter path of the one who is left.

"She's so little," he pleaded, "and not strong. She was never very strong after she was ill that time; and the sack—the great sack! I want to carry it for her."

"In life," the angel told him, "we have all our own burdens to bear."

"I used to bear some of hers," Greatorex claimed.

"Yes. You bore some of the burdens of many. Therefore there will be forgiveness for other things; even reward."

"I do not want reward," Greatorex declared. "I want her."

"In time," the angel assured him, "she will come here, to you. She has not been judged yet; but she is a good woman; very good as living women go. Oh, yes! I have no doubt that she will come to you; but she has to bear her burden in life for a while yet."

"It is more," Greatorex cried, "than she can bear."

"No," the angel denied. "It is never that. When it is too great it is taken away. As yours has been."

"You mean I am dead?"

"There is no death. The nearest to it is what you call life. You are upon the threshold of your new being. It is a greater life than any dreamed of by you. Come with me, and you shall learn."

"I don't want anything greater than Evelyn," Greatorex declared.

"I think she will be part of the greatness, some day. You can ask to wait for her. It will be granted, I think. You loved her and love is the greatest thing in what you called life; the part of life which is most alive. You shall

ask the reward you most wish for the good which you have done. The ill shall be blotted out."

"Can I ask here?" Greatorex cried.

The angel looked at him thoughtfully; seemed to read his mind.

"You can ask here," he said, "but—well, you can ask."

"I ask," Greatorex said firmly, "to go back to life—"

"It isn't life. This is."

"I mean I want to go to her. That is the reward I ask for; to go back to—whatever you call it—to be with Evelyn; and carry the sack for her."

The angel drew a deep breath, and shook his head; but, Greatorex thought, not entirely in disapproval.

"You would not be quite what you were," he warned Greatorex; "not able to carry as much as you did. You would never be a strong man again; and you would suffer sometimes."

Greatorex wiped his forehead. "I'll put up with that," he said, "but—should I be only a burden to her?"

"No," the angel told him. "Not that. Sometimes a burden to yourself, perhaps."

"O! Greatorex found himself smiling. "That! Well, that's the reward I ask. To carry for her!"

The angel bowed, and pointed to the great chasm.

"It is called suffering," he announced. "There is no other way to go to her."

"Thank you," Greatorex acknowledged. "If you'll tell these hands to let go?"

"God will bless you, Greatorex," the angel said.

The unseen hands released him. He leaped. The first thing he knew again was pain.

"Don't be too hopeful, dear lady," the surgeon warned her. "He may be half conscious for a little while—even that is not certain—but the chance that he will live is very, very small. I will not say there is none. I have learned not to limit God's mercy. Give him a little morphia, Smith. There is likely to be some pain. Yes, you may hold him. It must be very gently. But it would be—he may be able to hear now. Speak to him."

"Harry! Harry, darling! Harry!"

The second thing which Greatorex knew was that the pain lulled.

The third thing was that somewhere Evelyn was calling. He rallied to the voice as a soldier to his flag.

The fourth thing was that he saw her face for one instant—the loved face! Naar, but yet seeming far off.

He lost the sight directly. His eyelids seemed to fall with a noise, as if they were heavy lids of big boxes. But he heard her cry out; felt her kiss him. He gathered himself together for a great effort to speak. He wanted to tell her that it was "all right," that he would carry the burden.

"He has opened his eyes. The One Who Loved Him cried, "Harry! Harry, my darling. It is Evelyn!"

A slow, slow smile began to spread faintly over his face.

"Chief!" The anaesthetist clutched the surgeon's arm. "Upon my word, I believe—"

"The greatest 'op' that ever was!" the assistant cried enthusiastically. "Good old chief!"

The sister clasped her hands and lifted a laughing face to heaven; a laughing face with tears running down it!

"Who," the surgeon said, "shall limit the mercy of God?"

Greatorex opened his eyes again for half a second. Presently he found a faint voice and muttered.

"The—sack!" he said. His fingers clutched for life's burden to take up again—found Evelyn's hand. He sighed contentedly and fell asleep.

"He will live, my dear," the surgeon announced. He put his hand on Evelyn's shoulder. "And whatever he has to bear—not so much, I hope; not so much as I feared—you will lighten the load for him. Now let him sleep. Yes, yes! It is only sleep."

Greatorex slept and dreamed; dreamed that he was still running the race; and still bearing a burden. But it did not feel very heavy. There was a pale little woman who ran beside him and her brave little shoulder was under a corner of the sack.

People will call the story an allegory; but, thank God, it is truer than that!

## Black Dog Captured.

Gillette, Wyo., July 8.—In capturing his 16th wolf in the Pumpkin Butte country, A. G. Hanson of the United States biological survey bagged "Black Dog," a notorious wolf that has ravaged range herds in that section for several years.



But the sister held the "little, pale, middle-aged lady"—she never looked like that to Greatorex—right around the waist.

lot between us. Come on—old slowcoach, aren't you? All of them, mind, boy. You're not to keep the tiniest, weeniest back! That's dight. I'll have my shoulder under this corner."

"Why?" he asked.

He did not quite understand the little woman. He recollected that he never quite understood Evelyn—not quite; but very nearly.

"Why?" he asked again.

"Because it's the corner that your troubles are in," she explained.

And then he knew quite certainly that she was Evelyn.

He traveled happily and through pleasant country for many days after that. He grew strong again, and he won several more humble races at the country fairs, when she would let him run; but sometimes she would not, for she was very, very careful of him; and that, perhaps, was why he was stronger; and why the sack did not hinder him nearly so much. It was heavy still, and wearisome; but he threw out some of his troubles to lighten her corner of the burden, and she threw out some of hers to lighten him. And often she would make him put the sack down for awhile, and rest in some pleasant place of the journey.

"Let's forget all about our troubles, boy," she would say, "laugh for a little while; because I have you, and you have me."

They laughed a good deal together, though to other people they seemed a serious woman and a serious man.

"I keep the laughing side for you," she told him.

Greatorex had some recollection that the Evelyn who had helped him in another race—a race that he was resting from—had said that, too; but she kept her serious side for him as well. Ah! There was never any one like Evelyn.

They were happy days—until they came to the great white cross

Beyond. Some day I shall travel this road. If there is nothing upon it, we shall rest. And if there is—I wonder—we shall find each other somehow. O, yes! We shall find each other. The infinite cannot be ridiculous. It cannot be that! Anyhow, it is best for you, dear. You see, you will leave the sack. I am glad for that, though—though—I've helped you all I could, haven't I?"

She hung around his neck for a long time. Then she took the sack from him, and gently pushed him upon the lonely road.

He tried to turn back to her; but there was a fierce flash and when it was gone a great chasm had opened between them. Across the chasm he saw her sobbing and holding out piteous hands. He called and called, but she did not seem to see him or hear. It was the chasm, he thought, which they called The Great Divide. And one way none can see across it; and the other—who knows? Who knows?

Presently she wiped her eyes, and tried to smile. O! It was such a pitiful smile.

"I ought to be glad," she murmured. "I ought to be very glad. He hasn't to bear it any more, not any more, my dear!"

She picked up the great sack—the corner where her troubles were bulged so now—and put it over her shoulder, and staggered into a stony, thorny lane; the pathway of the One Who Is Left. It was such a big burden and such a little bearer. He tried to leap into the chasm toward her; but unseen hands held him back—kind hands, they seemed; but so strong. Yet they could not restrain him entirely. When they could, he thought, he would be dead; but he was not quite dead yet. No, not dead, so long as he could struggle to get back to Evelyn. He struggled till his veins on his forehead stood out.