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The Honesty of Noah



By Eden Phillpotts

He Was So Honest That It Hurt; But Duty Is Duty and Must Be Performed, No Matter What the Cost.

If any man had told me I should ever find it hard to be honest he'd have had the rough edge of my tongue without a doubt; for, along of my parents and schooling, not to mention my own particular nice bent of mind, there were some things, even as a young man, would have given me more pain than pleasure to do, no matter what the reward. And one was to covet my neighbors' goods and another was to break my word.

As for what belonged to other folk, I never did feel tempted in that direction; but life so fell out with me that once, and only once, I caught myself terrible sore about a solemn promise. It related to the most awful undertak-

her temper was sweet and she'd got it well under control. Bright as a lark she was and a rare one for a bit of fun, and proper glad to feel alive, but being the eldest of nine had broke her in something amazing, and she was patient with the fools and never gave a sharp answer to man or woman, though her natural good wits must have often tempted her to do so.

In fact, Miss Blight stood long ways ahead of any female that I'd ever come across, and whereas until she appeared, no girl had struck me as a very interesting object, with her the case was entirely altered and she set me thinking very serious and roused in me a sort of muddle headed and bitter-sweet frame of mind as I hadn't felt before. Months passed and it got worse, and still I couldn't understand what distraction had overlook me; but then all of a sudden I found 'twas Jane awoke these queer sensations and I axed her to go for a walk on her afternoon out, little thinking she'd consent to it. In fact, so foggy be the beginnings of love that when she said she'd come I was half sorry I'd spoke. But it would have been a rude thing to back out of it after she'd agreed to walk, so I fixed with Jack Codd,

going to take me. For, such is my modest nature, that I don't believe I could have axed if my love-quickened senses hadn't made me see that she'd be down my throat the moment I did.

Though a thought undersized, I was a good looking man, no doubt, with very nice black hair and rather big eyes and a mustache that looked well over a sound lot of large, white teeth; but such things as that wouldn't have decided her; it was my high-minded nature and my way of like she liked most. As a matter of truth, she had no use for dark colored men, and, as I found after, my hair and blue chin had stood against me; but my nature made these things of small account and, in a word, we felt ourselves to be built for each other, body and soul, and was tokened accordingly in the face of the nation.

But then came reality, and I told Jane frankly that on a pound a week marriage weren't in sight for me; and she saw that very clear indeed and said we must be patient and bide our time. There weren't no inclination on my master's part to raise her money, nor yet mine, when the engagement came to his ears. In fact, the boss was a bit vexed behind



"I knew that I'd fallen in love with her."

ing that can be made between one human to another, and that is the promise to marry; so I thought no small shame on myself that even for an instant I felt a cruel hankering to go back on my word. Yet so it was.

Two great adventures I have had in my life and that's all. And both belong to this tale. But nothing out of the common tremendous have ever happened since, and I hope for the rest of my days to creep along without no more shocks till there comes the Call. Life's a very interesting thing taking it all around, and I'm fairly glad that I was born, but I shall have had quite enough of it come I get to 70, or thereabout, and won't want no more.

At 25 I was outdoor man at "The Coach and Four," a little public on the Plymouth road out Yelverton way, and, though a small house, it had a lot of custom and there was plenty of work for me with the traffic and the fosses, especially in winter, when hounds met at our place pretty often.

Small money I had, but, so far, the thought of money never troubled my mind. My chances to spend it if I got it were small, for I was an orphan man by then, with no calls upon me and no particular need to save. I'd been an only one and my relations were all dead so far as I knew, and I never had very many at any time. My father was coachman at Eylesbarrow Manor till he went home, and he'd had but one brother and one sister. Aunt Sarah died in a lunatic asylum, poor soul—the first in our family ever known to be foolish—and Uncle Geoffrey, he'd gone to Canada, or else Australia, in his young days. My father never could call home which it was, and it didn't matter, for us heard of him no more and he was only a name to me.

But then happened the first of my two adventures, and after Jane Blight came in the bar of "The Coach and Four" I was a lost man. I darsay she stood three inches taller than me, for at 22, which was her age when first we met, she'd rose to her full growth and nobody ever saw a finer woman with a doosier bosom, or bigger shoulders, or stronger arms. She was high colored and she had blue eyes and a rouser mane of wonderful hair that kept the bar warm on the coldest day. 'Twas like a burning, fiery furnace. Most times, with that out, you got a temper to match the flame, and a bustling way and sometimes rather a high hand; but though Jane was a tower for work and the elegant creature that ever washed than washing herself,

my fellow workers, as soon as my job that Thursday afternoon, and me and Jane footed it up to Princeton on Dartmoor, and she consented to take a cup of tea at "The Three Feathers" in that place.

Well, I hadn't gone above a mile beside the woman when I knew I'd fallen in love with her; and the astonishment of it tied my tongue to such an extent that I darsay I didn't speak more'n once in 500 yards. But she made up for that and I soon saw she was friendly disposed, and found herself very comfortable in my company. She told me about her family and how she had to send most of her money to her mother and father, him being out of work. And she drew rather a sorrowful picture of their position, but she weren't in the least sorrowful herself, being far too clever and cheerful to whine over what couldn't be helped by her.

And I listened in wonder, for I'd never guessed a woman could be so sensible. In fact, such a witty way of looking at life made me think better of females in general, because till then I'd never met one with the sense of a woodhouse.

She made a very good tea, and when we started for home she said:

"Now, Mr. Scobhill, you've heard all about me, so 'tis your turn to talk, and I won't walk quite so fast going backalong, please, because I'm a heavyweight and up a hill I'm not too clever."

"You're the cleverest woman ever I met," I said. "Up a hill, or down a hill either. And I hope you'll call me 'Noah' in future, same as my other friends do. I wouldn't have given myself the name of 'Noah,' I may tell you, because there's a lot about that famous character I don't hold with; but my parents, being quite unable to decide the question, my father opened the Book with his eyes shut, and my mother stuck a pin into the holy page; and 'Noah' it was."

After that we got on very well and I unfolded my feelings and found Jane to be as good a listener as a talker, which seldom happens; and before we reached "The Coach," we'd ordained to take another walk in a week or two. She was very fond of the sea, I found, which be rather an uncommon taste with women, I believe.

The friendship got red hot in six weeks, and just after Christmas, or it might have been New Year's Day, I offered for her, but not afore I felt so sure as death she was

our backs, as I heard from Jack Codd, though too decent a sort of man to make any wordsabout it. But he reckoned that if I loved Jane it wouldn't make me any more useful out of doors, and if she loved me there might be a drop of whisky slip over the bar sometimes, or perhaps a half pint, that weren't paid for in the ordinary way.

But he didn't know me, for anything like that I would rather have gone thirsty than do; and no straighter and honest woman than Jane Blight ever pulled a cork or lever.

Then, after six months, which didn't cool our fine affection nor yet bring marriage a day nearer by the look of it, I got an offer from a gentleman fishing on Dartmoor and stopping at "The Coach and Four." He liked me and reckoned I might be worth 30 bob a week to him, so I talked it over with Jane, and though she felt the sting of the parting a good deal, she knew this was a useful step along the road to better times, and agreed that I should accept and give notice.

Then my troubles began, for after two months with my new master he had a sad disaster and lost all his money and didn't want me no more. And they wouldn't take me back at the "Coach" neither, because my place was filled. I was on my beam ends for a bit and the £20 I'd saved had to be all eat up to keep me going. Then I found work again, but not at 30 bob. I fell to a pound, and after six months of that got another offer and rose to 25 shillings. I was in the Midlands now and hated 'em and would have given the boots off my feet to be back in Devonshire again. We wrote to each other, Jane and me, but her letters were scarcer than mine, because pens and ink was always pain and grief to her, and then I dried up, too, for a bit, for my new master died very sudden, and I was out in the world again, and didn't want to make my future wife sorrowful about it.

For a matter of three years we did keep in touch and then I lost her. I'd not wrote for six months, but presently my conscience spoke, and, being with good work once more, at a big hotel in Birmingham, I wrote and told Jane that things was looking up and I hoped, if I could get a few days off at the end of the autumn, to come down to the west and see her.

But the letter was returned to me marked "Not known," and to get a letter you've wrote to another person come back starting you in the face again be a great shock, I'm sure. I was a good bit put about, though Jane had grown a