

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 is 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 told the anaesthetist 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 barked 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 skin the ground where he ran.

Someone 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.

How did he come here? He 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. Oh, 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. Heaven! 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!"

"Now that you're in the upper school, laddie, you must make a man of your-



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

self! 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 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.

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." This must be it. And he was lost in it, helplessly lost. Ah! Here was the old head 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 someone.

"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 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 little tiny mamma!" 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 footstep 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 made a mighty effort. For a few moments 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, Smith?"

"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.

There was a big red house afar on a hill. He knew that that was the new goal, and he believed that he would reach it first. Then someone stopped him. Why, it was his young brother Jim! Jim was crying at having to carry some weighty parcels.

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

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 spur.

"I believe we'll pull it off after all," the surgeon exclaimed. "The 'op' looks like 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 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.

And one laid upon him a burden that was heavier than all the rest; heavier than any but 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.

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.

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.

"A weaker man, but not a worse," he told himself. "Please go, 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 his 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. The little woman laughed gaily at his speech.

"I'll tell you what, boys," 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 lot between us. Come on—old slowcoach, aren't you? All of them, mind, boy. You're not to keep the tiniest, weeniest sack! That's right, 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.

"Let's forget all about our troubles, boy," she would say, "and 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.

They were happy days—until they came to the great white crossroads; the roads where one of two 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 her 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 have ever returned to tell.

"Perhaps, dear," she comforted 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 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 round 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?

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 the veins on his forehead stood out.

"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.

"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."

"Yes—o. 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 fought madly with the hands, and 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 burden 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. O, 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's 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 which 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 how. 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! Near, but yet seeming far off.

"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."