

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, that would have given me more pain than pleasure to do, no matter what the reward. And one was to covet my neighbor's goods, and another was to break my word.

At 25 I was outdoor man at "The Coach and Four," a little public on the Plymouth road out Velverton 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 husses, especially in winter, when hounds met at our place pretty often.

My father was coachman at Eylesbarrow Manor till he went home, and he'd had but one brother and 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 dare say she stood three inches taller than me, for at 22, which was her age when we first met, she'd rose to her full growth, and nobody ever saw a finer woman with a deeper bosom, or bigger shoulders, or stronger arms. She was high colored and she had blue eyes and a proper mane of wonderful hair that kept the bar warm on the coldest day. 'Twas like a burning fiery furnace, most times, with that sort, you get 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 cleanest creature that ever washed time washing herself, her temper was sweet and she'd got it well under control.

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 muddled-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 direction had overtaken me; but then all of a sudden I found my 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 out with Jack Codd, my fellow-worker, to look after my job that Thursday afternoon, and me and Jane footed it up to Princetown 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 that I'd fallen in love with her; and the astonishment of it tied my tongue to such an extent that I dare say I didn't speak more'n once in 500 yards. But she made up for that, and I soon saw she was a 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.

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 as sure as death she was 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.

Then, after six months, which didn't cool our fine affection nor yet bring marriage a day nearer by the looks 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 pounds I'd saved had to be all eat up to keep me going. 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 had 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 Bir-



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

mingham, I wrote and told Jane that things were 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 staring you in the face again be a great shock, I'm sure.

I was a good bit put about, though Jane had grown a little faint to my mind's eye by that time; but I wrote to my old master for her address, and he sent a postcard saying that Jane Blight had been gone from the "Coach" for six months and he didn't know more'n the dead where she was got to, or what she was doing.

I felt it a good deal for an hour or so, and then I went out and axed a friend of mine at Birmingham what I ought to do in such a case. She was a young person in a tobacconist's shop, and I was drawn to her because she came from Devon—a Devonport woman, born and bred in the Three Towns. We'd seen a good bit of each other, chiefly of a Sunday, and she understood my nature and I understood her very well, indeed. Aggie Bassett her name was, and she had a nice, stand-off manner and well knew what she owed to herself.

We were both homesick and her hope and prayer, like mine, was to get back to Devon some day.

On the subject of Jane I found Aggie not too helpful.

I thought to advertise, but remembering that Jane had no use for newspapers and seldom opened such a thing, I doubted if that would not be to throw away good money. And Aggie feared so, too. She reckoned that Jane was probably in Plymouth at her trade and wondered if I could get a list of the public houses and send a postcard to each of 'em. We was turning over that and other project for a few weeks, when I made the shameful discovery that I'd pretty near forgot Jane and was now fallen in love with Aggie; and then, crushing in upon this, there came the second and greatest adventure of my life.

A letter arrived to me from my old home—North Tawton village, where my father and mother had lived all their days. It was from a lawyer, and it had been sent to "The Coach and Four," and, along of me having written the year previous to ax for news of Jane Blight, my old master knew where I was and sent the letter after me. And I got it.

The lawyer wrote that my father's brother was dead at the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, so my father was wrong after all about where he'd gone to, but the amazing thing followed. Uncle Geoffrey had left my father all his money, and, father and mother being dead, the money was mine. Five thousand pounds he had saved, though whether such a huge sum had been honestly come by or who shall say? There it was, however, and when I took the news to my friend at the tobacco shop she congratulated me and said that no man ever deserved a fortune better.

"Five thousand pounds is two hundred and fifty pounds a year at 5 per cent, Noah," she said, "and don't try to get no more."

"And what shall I do first, I wonder?"

I axed her, and, like the Christian woman she was, she made answer.

"Find your Jane, I should think," said Aggie Bassett.

Needless to say the words struck me dumb, for Jane was no more sweetheart of mine, even though the solemn promise remained. The spell was properly broke after all these years, and I didn't want to marry her, nor yet even see her again if I could help it.

Aggie somehow knew, despite all my sad silence, what was moving in my mind. "You can't tell how you'll feel about it till you find her," she said. "So like as not when you do, if God wills for you to join her once more, the old feeling may blaze up in you again, Noah, and then you'll see how Providence watches over the sparrow."

"Yes," I said, "and I hope Providence have got my own views, and what that is nobody knows better than you."

"I won't pretend I don't," she answered, "but we needn't think so far ahead. Something tells me as you'll find Jane, if you honestly look for her; and if you wasn't honest about it then no doubt your sin would find you out."

"Sin" is too big a word, I told her; "but, be it as it will, I shall seek around

APPLES REACH EUROPE LIKE THEY LEAVE THE TREE

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Liverpool, London, Southampton, Glasgow and Copenhagen are the prime European markets and they know northwest fruit and welcome it. The game, as far as they are concerned, even though limited, is a success. With the present huge car shortage the plea is to build refrigerator ships and many firms who want to get in the trade are hoping for the passage of the ship subsidy bill, with its \$125,000,000 available for loans at 2 per cent for the purpose of building ships. Great corporations, such as the United Fruit company, with their vast traffic in tropical fruits, have shown the possibilities in an importing way. Now the chance is to work it out the other way round, to export American products and create new markets. To do this is possible only when first-class stuff is placed on the foreign market, and the fruit must be properly heated, chilled and ripened to be at maximum efficiency.

Instead of making the fruit game a gamble, the aim of the producer, who now is organizing in the northwest, is to place it on a stable basis. Brokers along the Atlantic coast will place orders in advance for carload consignments, and would increase their orders were they certain of saving a few cents a box in freight tariffs and the receipt of the fruit in splendid condition. There seems no end to the possibilities of the water-dispatch system. The fruit must be landed at protected piers in consumer districts and the government is understood to have offered space at Norfolk, Va., where it might be possible to work out a solution of marketing zones for trans-shipment. Another way of stimulating the trade is suggested of sending emissaries to new districts, such as those in South America, in charge of tea-car consignments; the emissary charged with the duty of marketing this sample shipment and taking

sharp as a needle for a fortnight, and if we don't meet, then I'll advertise in the Western Morning News, and, though she'll never see it, for she's no scholar, somebody that knows her may perhaps do so. And even that's going too far, in my opinion."

We left it so, and when we got to North Road station, Aggie changed for her aunt at Devonport and I went on. I knew her address and she granted me permission to come to tea after I'd hunted for a week.

And then it was, just after lighting up time, that my great trial and temptation fell upon me, for half way to the office of the newspaper to hand in the advertisement about Jane I came across the woman herself!

I see a great, big creature, built much like a pointer pigeon, looking into a shop where they sold women's stays; and I couldn't help feeling with her generous build, no doubt stays interested her so much as anything. And then she turned and I saw Jane Blight.

'Twas the Jane I'd known, yet changed and grown from bud to blossom, you might say. She'd drawn the beam at eleven stone six when we kept company; but now, to my eye, she looked every ounce of thirteen stone, if not more. The fat had rose up to her face also and her high color hadn't got no fainter and her hair fairly jumped at you. Life to some men, no doubt, such a woman, but death to me.

"My God! To live with that mountainous woman!" I thought; and then I put everything but duty away from me and everted her.

"You'll be Miss Jane Blight," I said, lifting my hat to her, and for a moment she didn't see who 'twas; and then she did, and stood still. Her face turned several shades paler and she put her hand to her heart and heaved, like a jelly, down to her boots. For a moment I thought she was going to faint and make a scene and block the sidewalk; but she gave a deep breath and it steadied her a lot. Then she put her great hands on my shoulders and said:

"You're Noah Scobhill, or else his ghost."

"The living man, Jane. And I've been looking for you a fortnight, and I was going to advertise in the paper for you next Munday. It's in my pocket this moment. You've given me a lot of work you never did ought to have given me, Jane, and made a mystery where there was none. However, we must let bygones be bygones."

"You wanted me, then? You still

wanted me, Noah?" she asked, and tears came in her eyes when she done so.

"Duty's duty and a promise is a promise—when I make it, Jane," I replied. "The truth lies in a nutshell. I've come into a bit of money—very near three hundred a year, I shouldn't wonder—and I remember my solemn word to you, though you have forgot yours to me seemingly; and, when I heard from 'The Coach' as you was gone and nobody could tell where, I thought that fifty to one you was in Plymouth, at your old business and looking after your mother as before. And I was right, I suppose."

"My mother's dead," she answered, "and I ain't looking after nobody but myself. And my home, so to call it, be the sea nowadays. I'm a stewardess on the Weston-Smerdon packet boat Ladybird that trades across from Plymouth to Havre."

"That accounts for your marine appearance, then," I said.

"It do," she replied, brightening up. "I'm a born sailor, Noah."

"So did I ought to be," with a name like mine," I answered, striking a light note, though I didn't feel it; "but I hate the deep and was never on it but once, going round Portland Bill; and never again for me."

She thought a moment and then got an idea.

"If we go down to the 'Sextant' on the Barbican you can give me a glass of sherry wine," she said, "and we can talk."

I followed her and she went pretty fast and said but little on the way. What was to come I did not know, but so far I couldn't disguise from myself that Jane had a good bit on her mind besides me. And I wondered why she'd chose the "Sextant," which was merely a sailors' public house somewhere down on the quay.

"You don't seem too pleased about our money, Jane," I said—just to break the silence, which was growing a bit unnatural between lovers joined again after three years and more.

"I'm very pleased indeed about it," she answered. "And never a man deserved a bit of luck better; and I shall be terrible interested to hear how you came by such a dollop of cash—an unlucky sort of chap like you."

"You're leaving Providence out," I said. "It was my Uncle Geoffrey, who left it to my father; and, father and mother being dead, I get the lot—five thousand of the best, by all accounts."

"Fancy! Somehow I never thought you Uncle Geoffrey was a real man," replied Jane.

I said no more.

The "Sextant" was a small house on the Barbican, and Jane appeared to be well known there. We went into a little sitting room off the private bar—her leading—and then I ordered a glass of sherry wine and a biscuit for her and a half of stout for myself. She said a word to the maiden that served us and I overheard it, though she didn't mean for me to do so.

"Has Mr. K. been in?" she asked, and the girl shook her head.

With that we sat down and she took off her white thread gloves and cooled her face with a handkerchief.

"You've given me a turn, Noah," she confessed. "They talk about the wonders of the deep, but I reckon the sea's tame compared to the shore."

"And when do you sail next, if I may ask?" I inquired.

"Munday night at half after nine," she answered.

"What if I forbid it, Jane?"

"She finished her sherry wine at a gulp. 'I'll have one more,' she said, 'and you can't forbid it—we're going to sea. I'm under orders and have signed on.'"

"How soon can you sign off, then?" I asked, and rang the bell.

Jane began to shake again and decided for a small brandy when the maiden answered me.

"I'm a wicked woman," she began, when we was alone again.

"Since when?" I asked.

"To think of you, so patient and faithful, and never forgetting me! To think

all that time you could remember a poor soul like me! And now, shameful though it may sound to you, my dear man—"

What she was going to say I can't be certain, but she didn't say it, for at that moment a lumping, great seafaring chap blew in smoking a pipe. He was by way of being some sort of officer from his rig, and he knew Jane. In fact, 'twas clear he expected her; but equally clear he didn't expect me.

"Hello, Jane!" he said. "Who the hell—?"

She introduced us.

"This is Mr. Sam Kitchen, Noah, the second engineer of the 'Ladybird'; and this be Mr. Noah Scobhill, Sam—him— you remember."

"By jakes!" said the second engineer. "And what do he want down in these parts?"

"He wants me," said Jane, firmly enough, but not as if it gave her any great pleasure to mention it.

Mr. Kitchen was a six foot man, with muscle and bone to match, and you could see that he breathed in a good bit of oil along of his profession. A big creation every way—big face, big beard, big voice.

"I'm hearing things," he said. "Perhaps you'll throw a ray of light, Jane."

"It's like this, Sam," she said. "Noah's the soul of honesty and a straighter man never lived and never will. All these years, while I'd thought that he'd forgot all about me and imagined that I was a free woman, he'd done no such thing; but, on the contrary, always meant to keep me to my word, as soon as ever he was in a position to give me a home. And now a rich uncle of his, what I never much believed in, has gone and died, and left him a keg of beans; and the first thing he thought of was me. And he's been wearing out his boots for weeks tramping Plymouth on the chance of meeting me; and he was just off to advertise for me when he comes fall steam upon my weather-bow—me anchored afore a shop window at this time."

Mr. Kitchen rumped his great beard; then he spat into a spittoon, knocked out his pipe, and began to load it again.

"You'll have one with me now, Stout! Lucky man! I wish I could drink it; but me and Jane daren't touch malt liquor. 'Twould be lingering death to a beamy pair like us."

"Go on," I said. "Why for do you talk about you and Jane Blight as a pair?"

"That's the whole bitter truth," he explained. "When first I asked this woman to marry me—it was on her second voyage in the 'Ladybird'—she told me your story and I gave it all due weight. But in my judgment you were fairly ruled out by passage of time, and I told her so, and she was thankful to God, because, as she said—being the soul of truth, as you no doubt know—that what she felt for you at the best, compared to what she now feels for me, is bligs to ram."

Therefore I put it to you that if you was to think to keep her to her first engagement you'd be doing two things. You'd be breaking her heart—and I shouldn't reckon you was the kind of man who'd like to do that—and you'd be striking up a quarrel with me that would be very bad for your health afore it had gone far."

I now hesitated between two courses. I could either tell 'em the truth and say they'd let in light in my darkness and saved my soul alive, or else I could pretend I was going to make a great sacrifice for Jane's sake and give her up and live on with all the salt out of my life. And very like I should have done that, just for the pleasure of hearing 'em thank me—if it hadn't been for another and a deeper thought. There was Aggie Bassett to be considered, and I felt pretty sure that when I told her I'd found Jane engaged to a marine engineer and 'not wishful to come back to me or my fortune, she'd want proofs. Because, on the face of it, the second in the 'Ladybird's' engine room weren't much to put against a gentleman at large with his thousands at the bank.

So I don't accord and owned up.

"Well," I said, "then that lets me out, my dears, and I'm very glad for you and I'm very glad for myself. Love's love every time," I said, "and if Jane here feels that I'm no better than bligs to your sum, Mr. Kitchen, then there ain't going to be no bloodshed between you and me, I do assure you. I came for duty, not pleasure; and, though I shall always feel a very good friend to Jane, as I hope she will to me, still there's another woman; I won't say she fills my eye better than Jane, because Jane would make two of her; but I will say that I'd a long sight sooner marry her little finger than Jane's whole body. And now I've done my duty, I shall go to my reward."

I there both much interested at this speech, and Samuel Kitchen went so far as to say he'd never met with a higher minded man than me.

"'Twas a very fine thing to hunt for Jane under their circumstances," he said, "and I'm proud to know you, and I hope we shall be friends. And I wish you luck with your young woman, and so do Jane, I'm sure."

"That I do," promised Jane, "and I'd much like to meet her. I hope some day I shall, because I can tell her a few good things about me, Noah, you'd never tell her yourself."

"If you'll do that you can meet her tomorrow," I said. "And if you and your second engineer will take your dinner with me, she shall be there. And we'll all drink to Providence, I'm sure. And now I shall cast about for a house out Mannedam way. If there's any there to let; and so soon as Aggie Bassett can free of her tobacconist's I shall certainly take her."

And it happened just so within the year; and better friends to us than Kitchen and his wife never was known.

Jane would have her first born called "Noah," after me, because I gave 'em a nice little wedding present of money; I may tell you; and when Aggie, after two girls, had a very fine boy, we called him Samuel, after the second engineer. The man be first in a big cargo boat nowadays; but Jane have long since left the merchant marine and lives in a house down Stonehouse way.