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FOR THE SAKE OF A WOMAN

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(Author of "Phra the Phoenician," etc.)

A TAWNY yellow tideway with the dimness of a busy town beyond, a grey sky overhead with packs of fleecy clouds hurrying down it towards the great sullen sea, whose black expanses were just visible in the west. A wet jetty whence a party of emigrants were putting off to the big steamer that lay a few hundred yards away out on the stream. A squally wind and biting rainstorms that stung and splashed those too busy and too careless to shelter themselves—such were the outlines of the picture.

For filling in there was one group of two men and a woman in the foreground more noteworthy than all the rest. Even as they stood together, damp and commonplace, amongst those dingy surroundings, they caught the attention, but none even of those who looked at them with strange curiosity could guess the strange drama of love and envy which was gathering to their midst. It was the men obviously who were going away, good looking fellows both of them, while the woman who had come to see them off was not less pleasant to look at, a fair English girl, over whose face tenderness and grief passed like the shadow of clouds over an April country as she turned first to one of those two and then to the other, saying confident and happy things with lips that trembled in spite of herself, and eyes too truthful for their task, until presently the moment of parting came, and putting a hand into each of theirs, "Good-bye, dear John!" she said, "—good-bye, Ralph. 'Tis but a little voyage in a strong ship, and the time will go quickly until you send for me. See! I am so confident and certain that all will be well, that I will not cry one single tear—" and with an effort the brave girl choked down the grief within her. And before those three met again there was played between them the cruellest chance that treachery could plan or honest simplicity suffer by!

From their earliest years the girl and he whom she first addressed had been the happiest of playmates. The father of John Barton had tried for the best part of a long life to coax a living out of a couple of hundred stony Shropshire acres, and each year had failed more signally in the attempt. At last when those flinty fields of his seemed incapable of supporting for another twelve months even such a modest household as himself, his son, and adopted daughter, the old man died suddenly; and John Barton and his playmate Margaret Thane were in an hour thrown face to face with a new order of things. They had grown up together in a mutual companionship which had ripened as they became man and woman into an affection of such depth as neither of them guessed its measure until its measure was brought to the test by that sudden catastrophe. To Margaret, handsome Barton with his broad shoulders, and dauntless heart that knew nothing of fear or weariness, was a hero, one who was as necessary to her life, she thought, as rain to the meadows, and the strong September sunshine to the apple orchards.

Barton in his turn loved that friendless little waif whom the winds of misfortune cast many years ago into his father's charge, with a deep if silent affection. Her sunny, never-failing smile had become light and life to him, her presence, as they grew up, the one saving clause that made disaster and misfortune tolerable. And then in a day those two were suddenly cast upon their own resources, the presence gone

which had made their close deep friendship natural and unquestionable, while for maintenance there was that upon their hands which was in fact but a stony debt from which not even Barton's skill and courage could extract enough for them to live upon.

They talked it over while the old man was lying, more silent than ever, upstairs under the little mullioned window looking out over the barren lands he had wrestled with so long, and they talked it over again on the settle by the great hearthplace after the funeral, and always it seemed to them that for him nothing held out a promise, but that new world over seas, crying for strong arms and stout hearts—and for Margaret!—but they never quite knew what Margaret was to do.

That question was still unsettled, John had gone back to the farm, and the girl had taken a village woman in to keep her in countenance, when help came from an unexpected quarter. About three miles away over the low grass hills there lived a young farmer, Ralph Standish, who, though better off than Barton, had nevertheless felt the pinch of hard times and sat no less lightly to an unproductive holding. Standish, a long admired Margaret, he had nursed that admiration as young men will into love, and now at this sudden turn of her fate he had gone over to the homestead, never dreaming of a rival in John Barton, to find out how matters stood; what share the girl had in the old man's will, and if fortune smiled to disclose a love which handsome Ralph could not but believe Margaret would willingly listen to.

He had ridden over on the day after the funeral, and finding the pair in close talk in the low-ceilinged, grey-flagged kitchen, it was only natural he should be admitted to their council. To put the matter briefly, before those three rose again it was decided that Standish should join his resources to Barton's, that the latter should sell his farm, and from the proceeds give Margaret enough to live on for the time in the home of a poor kinswoman in a neighboring town, while the two men should try the unknown wonders of the South. So far the arrangement was open enough, but to each it had occurred as they faced each other how it would gild the plan if he were to marry at once, and presently to call out to the new land, this beautiful, sad-faced girl, who stood over against them, courageously giving her approval to schemes that condemned her indefinite loneliness!

So the matter was settled, and the very next day when Barton came in dusty and tired from work he threw himself down upon a bench, and after staring a minute out of the little mullioned window, suddenly faced round to where the brown-haired Margaret was wiping the old pewter plates and dishes before she set them in shining rows upon the dresser, and,

"Margaret!" he said, without preface, "Margaret, will you marry me?"

And that lady, though her heart stood still within her in shy delight, answered not less briefly, "Yes, John!—if you wish it!" So that was all right, and a fortnight later on they drove without a word to anyone into the nearest town, and were married—John Barton afterwards driving her home in the cool of the evening just as the dew was falling, and the scent of the meadow-sweet began to rise heavy and soft from the river pastures and the hedge-roses were gleaming out pale and white in the evening twilight.

It was a drive through fairyland to Margaret, and she would have been well

content could it have lasted for ever. But presently the familiar gateway was reached, and while her husband—how strange and sweet that word sounded as it trembled on her tongue—while he led the horse round to the stables she walked slowly up under the nut bushes through the sweet-scented, unkempt garden, every nook and corner, every flower and twig of which was familiar to her, thinking thoughts of unlimited happiness on the brink of catastrophe. And there in the shadiest part, where a gable fall of the house and the last of the hazels made it too dark to more than distinguish the outline of a familiar figure, Standish himself sprang up from the log upon which he had been sitting waiting for her.

"This is a happy chance, Miss Thane," he said, "to meet you thus! I heard you had been out and thought by staying here, I might see you alone when you come back—"

"And I," said the girl extending her pretty hand, "am glad indeed to see you; but why wait for me here, come in and have supper with us, for John and I have something to tell you which may alter those plans we thought out yesterday."

"No, no!" he cried, trying to keep in his those soft fingers whose touch filled him with strange fire—"not in to supper yet—come down the garden with me for but five minutes, and no further than the gate—Margaret let me beg it as a favour—I have ridden over only on the chance of seeing you like this, and indeed I have that to say which may alter those same plans of ours more than anything yourself or Barton can tell me."

"Then come in an say it," laughed Margaret lightly, holding back, still too happy and full of her own fancies to guess what the other meant. "You know how John loves to talk our prospects over; anything you have to say he will be pleased to hear—see! old Janet lights the candles and supper waits—"

"It is always 'John now, Miss Thane,'" retorted Ralph letting go her hand, and slyly flicking with his riding-whip at the dusky heads of the poppies in the border, "he has been with you all day, I warrant, and can I not have a single moment in the evening?" Whereon the lady gave a merry bashful little laugh, she was so light of heart, and answered: "And who is it likelier I should have been with to-day of all days! Only to think you do not know our secret—oh, I could laugh outright if it were not unkind; to think you do not know—"

"What should I know?" asked jealous Ralph, scenting a mystery which all lovers dread.

"What should you know! why then that—that, in fact, since you will not wait, John asked me of myself but a few days back—and I could not say no! He drove me into yonder town this very morning, and—and we were married not six hours gone by!"

"Were what?" gasped Standish step-

ping back a pace, "married! Oh, impossible!"

"Come in," laughed that gleeful bride, "and ask John if it be impossible"—and waiting not for any further talk she fled blushing through the shadows, and left the other to follow at his leisure.

Thereafter followed a busy week for Barton and his wife, during which plain hard work and radiant romance went hand-in-hand; after which the inevitable hour of parting came, a parting Barton told the tearful girl, who clung to him, should be but for a day; until he had taken off the hard edges of the new life and made a home—even though it were but a bark slanty under a gum tree—to shelter her, and thus finally, after half a dozen of the shortest days, those two believed in their hearts, that ever man and woman had lived together, they parted at the quay.

At the end of a year Margaret had got to the very bottom of her slender store of money, and out in Australia the hope of Barton had at last fructified into reality; things had gone well during the last six months with him who toiled fiercely night and day to abridge the patience of the sweet wife waiting patiently at home—at last it seemed the period of separation was almost over. One day the happy fellow turned to Standish as the latter sat upon a log outside their door; "Standish!" he said in his honest way, "I have been thinking over many things, and especially about my Madge, and the holiday you told me a few days back you wished to take to England. Well, comrade," laughed Barton, clapping his hand upon the shoulder of the other, "why not kill two birds with one stone? why not get off at once, have your outing, and bring back Margaret with you—she'll feel all the better for an escort!"

"Can you wait so long for her?" Barton stood thoughtful for a minute, then he said, "It will not be so very long. I suppose a month would do for you in England?"

"Quite well."

"Why, then, I can manage to wait so long."

"And if I go and take your errand will you write to her—to your wife to say I am coming."

Not I, Ralph. You shall just do the whole thing yourself; I have hardly written to her twice since we came out, and she knows why; she knows I hate ink and paper at the best of times, and when it comes to getting all I would say to her down a pen point 'tis like driving five thousand sheep over a one-plank bridge. No! you just go and tell her, Ralph—tell her, comrade, from me, that all my heart is wrapped up in her, say that the love I thought had got as big as any mortal love could do when we parted has grown hour by hour since then—say that every minute is dull and vacant till she comes, every place is void and lonely to me—" and Barton moved by his own emotion turned his face away and stared over his sheep hills while that man in whom he trusted sat silent and thoughtful by the door.

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