

"Greater Love"

by

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We was just standin' here at about eleven in the evenin', an' the moon was beginnin' to rise. We could see the little patch of light growin' bigger an' bigger, just as it is now, an' we knew that before many moments the light would be up over the sea. My back was to the sea, an' Bill was leanin' agin' the handrail, just like you now.

It ain't much, sir, after all; leastwise to you; but it was, aye, an' it is, a deal to me, for it has all my life in it, such as it is. There's a deal of poetry an' story-tellin' in books; but, Lor' bless ye, if ye could see the heart right through of even such men as me, you'd have no need o' books when you wanted poetry and romance. I often think that them chaps in them don't feel a bit more nor we do when things is happenin'; it's only when they're

written down that they become heroes an' martyrs, an' suchlike. Why, Bill was as big a hero as any of them. I often wished as how I could write, that I might tell all about him.

Howsumdever, if I can't write, I can talk, an' if you're not in a hurry, an'll wait till I tell you all, I'll be proud. It does me good to talk about Bill.

Well, when I turned round an' faced Bill I see his eyes with the light in 'em, an' they was glistenin'. Bill gives a big gulp, an' says to me:

"Joe, the world's a big place, big enough for you an' me to live in without quarrelin'. An', mayhap, the same God as made one woman would make another, an' we might both live an' be happy. You an' me has been comrades for long, an' God knows that, next to Mary, I'd be sad to see you die, so whatever comes, we won't quarrel or think hard of one another, sure we won't, Joe."

He put out his hand, an' I took it sudden. We held hands for a long time. I thought he was in low spirits, and I wished to cheer him, so I says:

"Why, Bill, who talks o' dyin' that's as hearty as we?"

He shook his head sadly, an' says he:

"Joe, I don't vally my life at a pin's head, an' I ain't afraid to die. For her sake or for yours - aye, even for her pleasure - I'd - No matter. Just see if I turn coward if I ever get the chance to do her a service."

Well, we stood there for a long time. Neither of us said a word, for I didn't like to speak, although I would several times have liked to ask him a question. An' then I gave up wishin' to speak, an' began to think, like him.

I thought of all the time Bill an' me had been friends an' comrades, an' how fond we were both of Mary, an' she of us. Ye see, when we was all children, the little thing took such a fancy for both of us that we couldn't help likin' her for it, and so we became, in course of time, like big brothers to her. She would come down on the shore with Bill an' me an' sit quiet all the day an' never say a word or do anything to annoy us or put us out. Sometimes we'd go out sailin', an' then she would come an' sit beside whoever was steerin' till he'd ask her to come up an' sit on his knee. Then she'd put up her little arms round his neck an' kiss him, an' would stay as quiet as a mouse till she'd have to change her place. That was the way, sir, that we both came to be so fond of her.

An', sure enough, when she began to grow up, Bill an' me wanted none other but her. An' the more she grew, the prouder we were of her, till at last we found out that we were both of us in love with her. But we never told her so, or let her see it; an' she had grown up so amongst us that she never suspected it. She said so long after.

Then Bill an' me held a kind of council about what was to be done, an' so we came to be talkin' on the bridge that night. Mary was growin' into a young woman, an' we feared that some other chap might take her fancy, if one of us didn't get her at once. Bill was very serious, far more serious than me, for I had somehow got the idea into my head as how Mary cared for me, an' as long as I felt that I couldn't feel either unhappy or downhearted.

All at once Bill's face grew brighter, an' there was a soft look in his eyes.

"Joe," he says, "whatever happens, Mary must never hang her head. The lass is tender-hearted, and she likes both of us, we know; an' as she can only love one of us, it might pain her to think that when she was marryin' one man she was leavin' a hole in the life of his comrade. So she must never know as how we both love her, if we can prevent it."

When we got that far, I began to grow uneasy. I began to distrust Bill - God forgive me for it - an' to think that maybe he was fixin' some plan for to cut me out. I must have been jealous, that was it. But I was punished for my distrust when he went on:

"Joe, old lad, we both love her an' we love each other; an' God knows I'd go away, an' willin', an' leave her to you, but who knows that mayhap she'd like me better of the two. Women is queer creatures in lettin' a fellow see their hearts till they see his first."

Then he stayed quiet, an' so I says to him:

"How are we to manage to do that, Bill? If we tell her, won't she know that we both love her? An' you said you wouldn't like her to do that."

"That's just what I was thinkin' of," he says. "An' I see how we may do it. One of us must go to her an' find out if she loves him, an' if she does, the other will say nothin'."

I felt feared, so I asked him:

"Who is to go, Bill?"

He came over an' took me by the shoulder, an' says he:

"Joe, so far as I can see, the lass cares for you the most; you must go first an' find out."

I tried not to appear joyful, an' I says:

"Bill, that isn't fair; whoever goes first has the best chance. Why won't you go, or why not draw lots?" I've had a many hard tussles in my time, both with men an' things, but I never had such a struggle as I had to say them words.

"Joe," says Bill, "you must do all you can to win her yourself, an' don't let any thoughts of me hinder you. I'll be best pleased by seein' her an' you happy, if so be she loves you." Then he stood up from leaning on the rail, an' says he:

"Joe, give me your hand before we go, an' mind, I charge you on your honor as a man, never while I'm livin', to let Mary know as how I loved her, in case she chooses you." So I promised. I felt Bill's hand grip like a vice, an' then we turned an' walked away home an' never spoke another word that night, either of us.

I didn't sleep much that night, and when it began to get to mornin' I got up an' went down to the sea an' had a swim, an' that freshened me up somewhat. I wasn't much of a swimmer myself, but I could manage to keep myself up pretty well. That was the point where I envied Bill most of all. He was the finest swimmer I ever see. He did a many things well, an' no lad in this county could come near him in anything he chose to do; but in swimmin' none could come anigh him at all. An' many's the time it stood to others as well as himself.

Well, when I had had my bathe, I went up toward Mary's home, an' found myself goin' in to ask her straight off to marry me. Then I began to think it was too early for Mary to be up; so I stole away on tiptoe, an' walked round the house. Then I thought I'd go an' look up Bill, an' came anigh his house. But when I came to the door, as I didn't like to knock, I thought I'd speer in, an' see if he was asleep. So I stole to the window an' looked in.

I never shall forget to my dyin' day what I saw then. I wasn't a bad fellow, thank God, at any time, but I couldn't be a bad fellow or do anything I thought very wrong after that. There was Bill, just as I had left him the night before. He had never changed his clothes, an' the candle was flickerin' down in the socket, unheeded. He was kneelin' down by the bed, with his arms stretched out before him, an' his face down on the quilt. That was thirty-seven year ago, but it seems like yesterday. I thought at first he was sleepin', but I saw from a movement he made that he was awake. So I stole away, guiltylike, an' went down an' stood beside the sea. I took off my hat, an' let the wind blow about my forehead, for somehow it felt burnin', an' I looked out over the sea for long. Somehow my heart beat like as if it was lead, an' I felt half choked. I dunno how long I would have stayed there only for Bill. He came behind me, and put his hand on my shoulder and said, sudden:

"Why, Joe, what are you doin' here?"

I turned, startled, an' saw that he was smilin'. I was so thunderstruck at seein' the change, that for a moment I said nothin'. He says to me again:

"Joe, I thought you'd have more to do than think of eatin' this mornin', an' it's bad to court on an empty stomach! So come up to my place; I've got breakfast for the both of us."

I couldn't realize that this hearty chap was the man I saw prayin' after the long night. I looked at him keenly, but could see no sign of his actin' a part in his face. He was gayer an' livelier than ever, an' in such good spirits that he made me gay, too. I couldn't forget how I'd seen him a short while since; but I laid the thought by, an' didn't let it trouble me. I went up to his place. It was clean an' tidy as ever, an' the breakfast was ready. He made me eat some, an' when I was done, he brushed me up an' tidied me, an' says he:

"Go in an' win, old lad. God bless ye!" I went away toward Mary's house; but before I lost sight of Bill, I turned, an' he waved his hand to me with a kind smile an' went in an' shut the door.

I went on toward Mary's; but the farther I went the slower I got. An' when I got to the garden gate I stopped altogether. I stayed moonin' about there for a while, till at last Mary sees me an' comes out. I don't know how to tell you what took place then. I ain't more bashfuller than a man of my years ought to be, but somehow it comes rough on a man to tell this kind of ting. Oh, no; it ain't that I don't remember it all; for I do, well. But, ye see - ye won't laugh at me? I know'd ye wouldn't; I ax yer pardon. Well, to prove it to ye, I'll say what I never said yet to mortal, except Mary - an' that only once.

Mary comes out to me, runnin' like a little girl, with her face all dimplin' over with pleasure, an' she says:

"Why, Joe, what brings you here at this hour? Come in, Joe! Mother, here's Joe! Have you had your breakfast, Joe? Come in!"

I felt that I would never have courage to speak out before her mother if I went into the cottage, so I stayed beside the gate an' let her talk on. As I looked at her then, I could hardly believe what I was come for; it seemed like doin' something wrong to try to change her from what she was. She looked so lovely an' so bright that it seemed a pity ever to wish her to be aught else - even my own wife. An', beside, the thought came an' hit me hard, that mayhap she wouldn't have me, after all. I tried to think on that; but, Lor' bless ye, I couldn't. It seemed somethin' so terrible that I couldn't think it. However, I stood still, sayin' nothin', till she began to notice. I wasn't used to be sheepish before Mary or any one else; so when she had done her talkin' she looked at me sudden, an' then her eyes fell, an', after a moment, she blushed up to the roots of her hair an' says:

"Joe, what's the matter with you? You don't look as usual."

I blurted out all in a moment:

"No, Mary; nor I ain't the same as usual, for I'm in trouble."

She came close to me before I could say any more - she wasn't lookin' down or blushin' then - an' she says:

"Oh, Joe, I'm sorry for that." An' she put her arm on my shoulder. Then she went on, in a kind o' tender voice:

"Did you tell Bill?"

"Yes," I says.

"And what did he say?"

"He told me to come to you!"

"To me, Joe?" she says, an' looked puzzled.

"Yes," I says, in despair like. "I'm in trouble, Mary, for I want you to marry me."

"Oh, Joe!" she says, an' drew away a little. Then she says to me, with a queer look on her face:

"Joe, run an' tell Bill I want to see him - to come as soon as he can."

Well, them words went through me like so many knives, an' if ever I could have hated Bill, it would have been then. What could she want Bill for, I thinks to myself, but to find out if he loves her, too - an' to have him? I thinks how mad a woman would be to have me when she could get a man like Bill. I was afraid to say anything, so I set off smart for him, for I feared I wouldn't be able to tell him if I didn't go at once. I tried not to think while I was goin' down the road; but I couldn't get her words out of my head. They seemed to keep time with my feet, an' I heard them over an' over again:

"Tell - Bill - I - want - to - see - him! Tell - Bill - I - want - to - see - him!"

At last I got to the house, an' found Bill inside, mendin' a net that hung agin' the wall. He turned round quickly when I came in, an' his heart began to beat so hard that I could see it thumpin' inside his guernsey. He saw I wasn't lookin' pleased, so he came near an' put his two hands on my shoulders an' looked me in the face.

"What cheer, Joe?" he says, an' I could see that he was tryin' to control himself. When I told him the message, he began tremblin' all over, an' got as white as a sheet. Then he says to me in a thick kind o' voice:

"Joe, how did she look when she said it?"

I tried to tell him, an' asked him to hurry on.

"In a minute," says he, an' went into the other room.

When he came back I turned round, expectin' to see him got up a bit; but there he was just as he went in, in his old workin' clothes. But he was quiet lookin', an' had a smile on his face.

"Bill, old lad," I says, "aren't ye goin' to tidy up a bit? Mayhap Mary'd like to see ye neat."

"No," he says; "I'll go as I am. If it be as it may be, she won't like me none the worse for comin' quick; an' if it don't be - Come on, Joe, an' don't keep her waitin'."

Well, we walked up the road without sayin' a word. When we came in sight of Mary's cottage it seemed darker to me than it had been.

Mary came out of the gate to meet us, an' when she spoke to Bill I dropped behind. They two went into the arbor that we had built for her. They sat talkin' for a few minutes - I could see them through the hedge - an' at last I saw Bill bend down his head an' kiss her. She put her arms round his neck an' kissed him. An' at that the whole of the light seemed to go out of the sky, an' I wished I was dead.

I would have gone away, but I could hardly stir. I leaned up against the hedge, an' didn't mind any more till I heard Bill's voice callin' me. I came in at the gate, puttin' on as good a face as I could, an' came into the arbor.

Bill an' Mary was standin' up, an' Bill's face looked beamin', while Mary's was red as a rose.

Bill beckoned me over, an' when I came near, he says:

"Well, Mary, shall I tell him now?"

"Yes, Bill," she says, in a kind of a whisper; so he says to me:

"Joe, I give her to you! She wouldn't let none do it but me; for she says she loves me like as a brother. Take her, Joe, an' love her well, an' God bless ye both!"

He put her in my arms, an' she clung to me.

I was bewildered, an' could hardly see; but when I came to look about there was Mary in my arms, with her face buried in my breast, an' her arms round my neck.

Bill was makin' down the road, upright an' steady as ever. Even then, for a moment, I couldn't think of Mary, for my thoughts went back to when I saw Bill kneelin' beside his bed, with his arms stretched out, an' I felt - if you'll believe me - more sorrow than joy. I know now that Bill had wrestled with the devil that night, an' threw him, if ever a man did. Poor Bill! Poor Bill!

I suppose I needn't tell you what Mary an' me said? It wouldn't sound much, at any rate, altho' it pleased us. When I felt that she loved me I forgot even Bill, an' we was happier than tongue could tell.

Well, the time went on for a month or two, an' we was thinkin' of gettin' married soon. I was gettin' my cottage ready an' spendin' some of the money I had saved to make it bright for Mary. Bill worked with me early an' late, but it wasn't only his time that he gave to me. He would often go into the town to buy the things I wanted, an' I'm sure he never got them for what he told me. I said nothin', for I knew that it would only hurt him, an' it was little enough that I could do for Bill to let him help if he chose. I used to watch him to see if he wasn't unhappy, but I never seed a sign of sorrow on him. He always looked happy an' bright, an' he worked harder than ever, an' was kinder to all around him. I knew he didn't forget - for how could he forget Mary? - an' I feared at times lest he might fret in secret. But I never seed him grieve. I could hardly imagine, when I would think on it, how Mary came to take me or love me when Bill was nigh her.

Well, the time wasn't long goin' by, for we was happy, an' had all our lives before us, an', at length, the day came round before we was to be married. It was Easter Sunday we was to be married on, an' all the people as knew Mary an' me - an' that was all the village - was goin' to have a grand holiday. We was to go an' have a feast out on the island, an' we was gettin' the boats cleaned an' nice an' smart for the occasion. In coorse, everybody had to bring their own dinners; but we was to join them all together an' make a grand feast. We had got a cask o' beer, an' we was to have great doin's an' a dance on the grass. There's the finest sod for dancin' in the countryside out yonder on the island, an' we'd got Mike Wheeler to bring his fiddle, with an extra set of strings. We weren't to come home till evenin' when the tide turned, an' then we would have a race home.

Well, Bill an' me, we both took tea at Mary's house that evenin', an' when we came home Bill asked me to go into his house for awhile an' have a quiet talk. We lit our pipes, drew up our chairs, an' sat down by the fire an' puffed away, without sayin' a word for some time, an' then Bill says to me:

"Well, Joe, there won't be a man in the church to-morrow that won't envy you - except myself."

I thought of him kneelin' down by the bedside that mornin' when he says that, so I thought to tell him. I put down my pipe an' came an' put my arms on his shoulder, as I used to do when we was boys together, an' told him all I knew. He just shook hands with me, an' says he:

"Joe, it was a hard fight, but, thank God, I won. I've crushed out all the old love now. Why, lad, to-morrow she'll be your wife, an' I'll care for her no more than any other woman - as a sweetheart, I mean, for I'm a brother to her now as long as we live - an' to you, Joe. It ain't that I think less of her, for I'd walk into the fire for her this minute, but - I can't explain it, Joe. You know what I mean."

"Bill," I says, "you've been a true friend to me an' Mary, an' I hope we'll always be able to show how much we both love you. May God judge me hard when I die if ever I have a hard thought of you as long as I live!"

We said no more after that. I went out, but came back in a minute to tell Bill to be sure to come an' wake me if he was up first; but when I was passin' the window I see him hangin' a coat up over it. It wasn't that he thought I'd spy on him again that he did that. I saw that in his face; but he feared I might see him again somehow, and that it might pain me.

Well, I woke in the mornin' as soon as it was daylight, an' went down an' had a swim, an' then came home an' brushed my new clothes an' laid out the shirt that Mary had worked for me herself, an' washed as white as snow. Then Bill came down to me. He was to take his breakfast with me that mornin', an' he came all dressed for the weddin' in a new suit of clothes. He was a real handsome, fine fellow at any time, but he looked like a gentleman that mornin'. Then I thought that Mary must have done right to choose a laborin' man like me rather than a chap like Bill, that was above all of us, except in his heart.

We went off to the church an' waited till Mary an' her mother came. All the people was there outside the porch, an' some of the gentlefolks was inside. The squire's family was in their pew, for, ye see, Mary was a favorite with them all, an' they came early to church to see her married. I felt very solemn then, but I could hardly feel as how Mary was goin' to marry me. There she was, as lovely as an angel, an' blushin' like a rose. I said my "I will" in a low voice, for it seemed awkward to me to say it loud; but Mary said hers out in a clear, sweet voice, an' then the parson blessed us, an' spoke to us so solemn that we both cried, an' Mary nestled up close to me. When it came to kiss the bride, Bill was first, an' claimed the kiss, so the other lads had to give up. Bill bent down an' took her pretty face between his two hands an' kissed her on the forehead.

Agin the weddin' was over, it was time for service, so we all went to our seats - an' I never felt solemn in my life than I did then; nor did Mary, either.

When the service was over we all came out; an' the people stood by on both sides to let Mary an' me walk down the churchyard together an' go first out of the gate.

We all went down to the beach, where the boats was ready on the shore. Some of them was freshly painted, an' a couple had bright ribbons tied about them. Bill's boat was the one that Mary an' me was to go in, an' Bill himself was to pull stroke oar in her. He had got for a crew three of the young fellows we knew best, an' who was the cracks at rowin', an' we was determined to race all the other boats to the island. The lads had all run on before us, an' when we came down to the beach the boats was all ready, an' the baskets with the dinner put in them, so we all got on board, an' off we started.

Mary an' me, we held the rudder together, an' Bill an' his lads bent to their oars, an' away we flew, an' in a quarter of an hour came to the island, leading the others by a

hundred yards. We all got out, an' the lads carried up the baskets to the slope up yonder, where you see the moonlight shine on the island, where there was a fine, level place on the edge of the cliff.

The grass there was short an' as smooth as a table; an' when you stood on the edge of the cliff the water was straight below you, for the rock went sheer some forty feet. Mary an' me stood there on the edge while the lads an' the girls got ready the feast, for they wouldn't let us put hand to anything; an' we looked at the water hurryin' by under us. The tide had turned, an' the water was runnin' like a mill race down away past the island, an' runnin' straight away for the head off there as far as you can see. The currents is very contrary here, so you'd better not get caught in them when you're sailin' or swimmin'.

We all sat down, an' if we didn't enjoy our dinner, all of us, it was a queer thing; an' after dinner was over the girls insisted on havin' a dance. We got the things all cleared off an' danced away for some time, an' then some one proposed blind man's buff. One young fellow was blinded, an' we all stood round; an' then the fun began. The young chap - Mark Somers by name - used to make wild rushes to try an' get some one, an' then the girls yelled out, an' they all scurried away as quick as they could, an' the fun grew greater an' greater. At last he made a dive over to the place where Mary was standin' near the brink of the cliff. We all yelled to her to take care where she was goin'; but I suppose she thought it was merely our fun, for she laughed an' screamed out like the others - an' stepped backward. Before any one could stop her, she went over the edge of the cliff an' disappeared. I was sittin' up on a rock, an' when I saw her fall over the edge I gave a cry that you might have heard a mile away an' jumped down an' ran across the grass.

But a better man than me was there before me. Bill had pulled off his jacket an' kicked off his shoes, an' was at the edge before me. Before he jumped, he cried out:

"Joe, run for the boats, quick! I'll keep her up till you come. I can swim stronger nor you."

I didn't wait a second, but ran down to where the boats was drawn up on the beach. Some of the chaps came with me as hard as they could run, an' we shoved down the nearest boat. But in spite of all our efforts - an' we was so mad with excitement that not one of us but had the strength of ten - it took us a couple of minutes to get out fair on the water.

Well, when we was fair started I pulled so hard that I broke my oar, an' we had to stop to get another; an' then we had to row all the way round the spur of the rocks out there before we could even see whereabouts Mary an' Bill should be. The men an' women on the rocks screamed out to us an' pointed in their direction, an' the boat flew along at every stroke. But the current was mortal strong, an' they had been for nigh five minutes in the water before we caught sight of them. An' it seemed to me to be years before we came anigh them at all. Mary was weighed down with her clothes, an' Bill with his; an', in spite of what a swimmer I knew Bill was, I feared lest we should come too late.

At last we began to close on them. I could see over my shoulder as we rowed. I could only see Mary's face, but that was beacon enough for me. I called to one of the men to slip into my place an' row, an' he did, an' I got out into the bows. There was Mary with her face all white an' her eyes closed, as if she was dead; her hair was all draggin' in the water, an' as the current rolled her along, her dress moved as if it was some strange fish under the water. I could see nothin' of Bill; but I hadn't need to think, for I knew that where Mary was there was Bill somewhere anigh to her. When we came nearer I saw where Bill was.

Look here, he was down under the water, an' with his last breath he was keepin' her afloat till we came. I saw his two hands rise up out of the water, holdin' her up by the hair; but that was all. Many's the time since then that, in spite of all I loved Mary, I was tempted to be cross with her - for we laborin' men is only rough folk, after all, an' we have a deal o' hardship to bear at times. But whenever I was tempted to say a hard word, or even to think hard of her, them two hands of Bill's seemed to rise up between me an' her, and I could no more think or say a hard word than I could stand quiet an' see another man strike her. An' I wouldn't be like for to do that!

Well, we took them into the boat an' came home. Mary recovered, for she had only had the shock of her fall; but when we took in Bill, it was only -

He kept his word that he spoke to me that night; he gave up his life for hers! You'll see that on his tomb in the churchyard that we all put up to him:

"Greater Love Hath No Man Than This:
That a Man Shall Give Up His Life For His Friend."

There's no more left like Bill. An' Mary thinks it, too, as well as me.