

To Tie the Knot

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Characters

William Payne - a sailor and Emily's sweetheart

Emily Hopkins - a girl ready to be wed

Samuel Hopkins - Emily's father

Thomas Collins - a haberdasher's clerk

Setting

Colonial Chestertown. Stage left is set as a pier with some crates and boxes. Stage right is furnished like a parlor. One, maybe two chairs, and a small table.

At rise WILLIAM is standing SL, the pier, gazing out across the audience as if he is looking out over the river. EMILY enters SL, rushes to WILLIAM, and grabs his arm as she begins to speak. It looks as if she's about to cry.

EMILY (worried): William, I must speak to you before you leave again. It's a matter of great importance. (tears begin to well)

WILLIAM: We will talk, dear Emily, please don't cry. (he pulls out a handkerchief and dabs at her eyes) Why, we're speaking now, aren't we? Tell me what's bothering you?

EMILY: It's father. He spoke of marriage again.

WILLIAM: Why is that worrying you? He knows that I love you and that I will marry you as soon as I return from this sail. You know this trip will secure our future.

EMILY: But you don't understand, he doesn't want me to marry you. (WILLIAM looks confused by her words, so EMILY continues, speaking hurriedly) I'll be a poor sailor's wife until you return, but do not make me wait to take my vows. Father is pushing the matter and he has another match in mind for me. If you don't go to him with your intentions soon he'll make me marry Thomas Collins.

WILLIAM: Thomas Collins? The haberdasher's clerk?

EMILY: The same. Please William, go speak to father about this. About us.

WILLIAM (contemplative): Thomas? It's true he's not a bad fellow, but he's ill suited for you, Emily.

EMILY: Every man save you is ill suited for me. I know it to be true because you say it every time I broach this subject. But you need to show father your intent, prove to him you are as invested in this match as I am. I love you William, but not even that love will forestall father now that his sight is set on Thomas.

WILLIAM: Has Thomas agreed to this marriage yet?

EMILY: I do not know but...

WILLIAM (interrupting): Then we still have time. (he grows serious) Dearest Emily, have I ever let you down?

EMILY: Never.

WILLIAM: Then worry not. I promise we will go to speak to your father before the end of the day. I'm sure once we all talk about this he'll see that we are ideally suited for one another. Now, tell me what irks him so.

EMILY: He hates the fact that you're a sailor. He just doesn't understand your pension for travel.

WILLIAM (puts and arm and EMILY and gestures): How can I not have a pension for sailing when the Chester is so lovely; the river is perfect for sailing this time a year. It's calling to me again, Emily. And when the river calls the sailors have to answer. This is the first step to adventure, you know.

EMILY (forlorn): I know.

WILLIAM: And adventure leads to great riches. Just think of all the treasures I will be looking for! Spanish gold, silks from the Orient, spices and pearls and so many other things you'll feel like a queen.

EMILY: I'd like that. But it's more than that. What I want more is for you to be here to share it all with me.

WILLIAM (taking her hand): Don't fret, my poppet. I shan't stay away long. Nothing, not even the call of the sea, can keep me away from you for a prolonged length of time. And when I come back from this sail I will have enough money to marry you and give you a comfortable life.

EMILY: I don't care about riches, William. I only want you.

WILLIAM: You have love, you have me.

(WILLIAM leads EMILY, by the hand, off SL as the lights go down. Lights up on SR as SAMUEL enters the parlor followed by THOMAS. The former is serious and confident. The latter is unsure).

SAMUEL: It is a good match and it will benefit everyone in the end.

THOMAS: If you say so sir. Emily is a charming girl but...

SAMUEL (narrowing his eyes): But what?

THOMAS: Nothing sir, it's nothing. Only... Emily is quite taken with William Payne.

SAMUEL: The sailor; believe me I am quite aware of that and I intend to change her mind by showing her what she really needs in life.

THOMAS: And what is that, sir?

SAMUEL: Stability, of course. Let us compare you and William for a moment.

THOMAS (looking away): There's not to compare.

SAMUEL: My point exactly. You have a stable job in the office of one of my oldest friends. A job that not only assures that you stay here in Chestertown, but also puts you in a position to rise in the ranks of your trade. That is more than I can say for William.

THOMAS: But he's a good man.

SAMUEL: That may be true, but he is a sailor. Sailors can never stay in one place; they go where the wind sends them. How many times a year will he leave my Emily alone to sail the seas? And when, *if*, they have children, he'll abandon them as well, running off to his first love. No, it's better that she has a small heartbreak now instead of a bigger one in later years.

THOMAS: If you are sure sir...

SAMUEL: I am very sure. And there is something else to consider as well. (THOMAS looks back at him, but doesn't interrupt). A man that is always traveling has, by default, a wandering eye. A man sailing from port to port will see many women who are there simply to tempt a man who's been at sea. There is no guarantee that William would remain faithful to my daughter.

THOMAS (slowly): I don't think, sir, that it is fair to judge William so harshly.

SAMUEL: Any man who claims to be in love with my daughter deserves to be judged as I see fit. Remember that, Thomas.

THOMAS: Yes sir. (eager to be gone) I should be going, I need to get back to work.

SAMUEL: Of course you should get back. Give my regards to John, will you?

THOMAS (backing for the door): Yes, of course, sir.

SAMUEL: Emily and I will call on you soon to begin making the plans. Good day Thomas.

THOMAS: Good day sir. (He turns to leave and almost walks into WILLIAM and EMILY as they enter SR) I'm sorry William. Good day Emily. If you'll excuse me. (quickly exits)

WILLIAM (calling after him): Good day, Thomas.

EMILY: Father?

SAMUEL: I have good news for you, Emily. Thomas and I were just discussing your marriage.

EMILY: But I haven't agreed to wed him!

SAMUEL: It's for the best Emily, you'll see.

WILLIAM: But I wish to marry Emily, sir. I'm very much in love with your daughter and want nothing more than to see her happy.

SAMUEL: I am sorry, but you're too late, William. My mind is made up.

EMILY: Father, you cannot make me marry someone I don't love.

SAMUEL: My girl, marriage isn't about love, it's about being secure and making a home with children and a man who can support you.

WILLIAM: I can assure you, sir, all the money I make will go into making a good and proper home.

SAMUEL (off handedly): A home with a missing husband who, god forbid, could leave Emily a young widow if your ship gets caught up in a bad enough storm.

EMILY (temper rising): So you would rather see me married to Thomas and be secure and unhappy as opposed to William whom I love?

SAMUEL (looks between them): In a word: Yes.

EMILY: I will not go through with this.

WILLIAM: Perhaps I should leave...

(The two should speak at the same time) EMILY: No! / SAMUEL: Yes!

EMILY: Please don't go, William. I will marry none but you.

SAMUEL: Emily, that is enough. William, you may go now.

WILLIAM (starts to walk off): Yes sir. Good day.

EMILY (forlorn): William...

SAMUEL (smugly): What did I tell you? He doesn't love you, he's abandoning you as we speak.

(WILLIAM has stopped but keeps his back turned. He noticeably bristles as SAMUEL continues to berate him)

SAMUEL: If he truly cared he would fight for you instead of simply conceding. This proves his intentions were less than reputable to begin with. Now Thomas...

EMILY (interrupting): You cannot make me marry Thomas. I will not assent to the vows.

SAMUEL: You are just as stubborn as your mother, god rest her soul.

EMILY: And you loved her!

SAMUEL: I learned to love her, just as you will learn to love Thomas. He is a good man and there is no sound reason to turn down this match. (EMILY purses her lips, forcing herself to remain silent as she watches her father pace) I realize that you are blinded by love, but once your head is clear you will see that I am right in this.

EMILY: Never.

SAMUEL: Stubborn girl...

WILLIAM (turns around and walks toward EMILY, taking her hand in his): I cannot stand by and allow you speak to Emily this way. It's true she is stubborn, but so am I. And as long as I am alive I will love your daughter and I swear to you she will be my wife.

SAMUEL: And I told you to leave. Your manners leave something to be desired, boy. This discussion is between my daughter and myself.

WILLIAM: Why should I go when it's obvious you'll berate me behind my back? I might as well stay here and get insulted to my face.

SAMUEL: This is an argument you'll never win.

EMILY: Please don't do this.

SAMUEL: What do you truly have to offer, William? What tricks do you have that will insure my daughter's happiness?

WILLIAM: I don't need tricks to win your daughter's hand, I hold her heart with simple, old fashioned love

SAMUEL (gets an idea): Maybe you do need to win her hand.

WILLIAM: I beg your pardon?

EMILY: Father?

SAMUEL: What if... what if we have a skill contest in something both young men are adept at? The winner, whichever man it should be, will be your bridegroom, Emily.

WILLIAM: You want me to compete with Thomas?

SAMUEL: To win my daughter's hand, yes. You swore she'd be your wife, so let's see if you truly mean what you say.

WILLIAM: What shall the contest be?

SAMUEL (thinks for a moment): Knot tying. That is very fair and most appropriate, wouldn't you say?

WILLIAM: Aye...

EMILY: Aye, most appropriate. But... (SAMUEL eyes her, but doesn't speak. Instead he gestures for her to continue) It seems Thomas may have an advantage, with spending his day doing not but tying ribbons and wrapping packages.

SAMUEL (smartly): But surely your sailor must also be proficient in knot tying, yes? He should be able to tie up a boat in short order, so it would make sense that he'd frequently practice knotting.

WILLIAM: There's no need to speak of me as if I'm not present. It is fair offer and I accept. And, with that decided, I shall take me leave. Until tomorrow, Poppet. (he kisses EMILY'S hand and exits SR)

EMILY (turns to her father and eyes him suspiciously): If you detest William so why are you suddenly willing to give him this chance?

SAMUEL: Because what I think of him is irrelevant. It's you who I care for, you that I love. I want to know that you are well taken care of and I believe that Thomas is the type of man we can depend on to see this through. But because I love you I am willing to give William this second chance.

EMILY: You never gave him a first chance!

SAMUEL: Emily...

EMILY (still not convinced): I want your word that If William wins you will allow us to wed without complaint?

SAMUEL: I'll give you my word if you promise the same if Thomas wins.

(EMILY and SAMUEL eye each other for a long moment.)

EMILY: I promise.

SAMUEL: Good. I'll speak to Thomas and we'll all meet upon the morrow down at the pier.

(Lights down on SR. SAMUEL and EMILY cross to the other side of the stage during the black out and lights come up on the pier. WILLIAM and THOMAS enter SL, each carrying an identical length of twine.)

SAMUEL: Good day gentlemen, I see you've both come prepared. I trust we need not tarry with pleasantries? I'm sure you can both agree that we should get to the competition straight away.

(The men shake their heads in agreement)

SAMUEL: Then let's agree on the rules. The one of you that bests the other in this knot tying contest shall wed my daughter.

WILLIAM: Aye.

THOMAS: Aye.

SAMUEL: Emily?

EMILY: Yes Father, but how will you judge them fairly?

SAMUEL: As I count to 50 your suitors will both tie knots in their twine. Whomever can tie the most in the allotted time will win. Any qualms?

(Neither man speaks up and SAMUEL gestures for the men to sit. They each choose a crate and ready themselves.)

SAMUEL: Ready then? And... begin. One, two, three, four...

(SAMUEL will count out loud for the duration of the 50 seconds under any other dialogue, and sometimes his counting will be the only thing heard. THOMAS immediately starts tying overhand knots while WILLIAM simply casts hitches over his thumb in a maddening and deliberate way. EMILY grows pale as she watches this.)

THOMAS (half to himself): I'm beginning to wonder if any girl is worth this much effort. Then again she is pretty and I do want a wife...

SAMUEL: ...twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty eight...

THOMAS (looks over and sees WILLIAM'S lack of progress): I thought you wanted to win, old fellow. Are you giving up already?

(WILLIAM smirks, but ignores THOMAS as he continues casting hitches)

EMILY (growing worried): William please hurry! Soon you won't be able to catch up to him!

THOMAS (stating a fact): I may run out of line before he ties one knot. Come on William, I thought you loved her, at least put up some effort.

(SAMUEL smiles but doesn't lose pace with his timing. EMILY is almost in tears)

SAMUEL: ...forty-five, forty-six...(by now the hitches should completely cover WILLIAM'S thumb) ...forty-seven...

(WILLIAM carefully tucks the lower end of his string up through the center of the tier of hitches, which he has, by now, shifted from his thumb)

SAMUEL: ...forty-eight, forty-nine...

(WILLIAM pulls the end of the rope through)

SAMUEL: FIFTY!

WILLIAM (hold up his twine and there are a large number of little knots evenly space on it.): I believe I've won.

(EMILY begins tearing up out of relief. She rushes to WILLIAM and throws her arms around him.)

SAMUEL (wipes his brow with a handkerchief): Well let's not get ahead of ourselves here. I should count both just to be sure. (SAMUEL takes THOMAS' twine and counts the knots, to himself, in full view of the audience.

THOMAS: So you did have a trick up your sleeve.

WILLIAM: It got the job done, didn't it? (he hands his twine to SAMUEL)

THOMAS: Indeed. You know, for all your talk about love and commitment I was worried you were just going to give Emily up. I was almost offended on her behalf.

WILLIAM (playfully slaps him on the back): I knew you were a good man.

(SAMUEL clears his throat)

EMILY: Father?

SAMUEL (sighs out, frustrated): William is the winner.

EMILY: So we have your blessing then?

SAMUEL (relenting): Yes Emily, you have my blessing.

EMILY (hugging him): Thank you father.

THOMAS: Good show William. I hope the two of you will be happy.

(WILLIAM shakes THOMAS' hand and then THOMAS tips his hat to EMILY)

EMILY: Thank you, Thomas.

(THOMAS nods and exits SL. WILLIAM offers his hand to SAMUEL)

WILLIAM: Sir?

SAMUEL (shakes the offered hand but speaks stiffly): Welcome to the family. Now, if you'll excuse me. (he exits SL)

EMILY (hugs WILLIAM): Oh William, I'm so happy! I'm so sorry I ever doubted you.

WILLIAM: It's like I told you before, Poppet, Thomas is a good, hard-working man, as this contest proved. He'll make a good husband to someone, someday...just not you. But he'll always do his best to succeed in his efforts. As for you and I, we were meant to be together.

EMILY: I know.

WILLIAM (smiling softly): Just remember Emily, even when it looks like I'm faltering, don't lose faith. Because even if my means are not conventional, no matter what, I will always come through for you when it truly matters.

EMILY: Oh William.....

(WILLIAM leans in and kisses EMILY as the lights go down)