

he had finished, and then John spoke in a sudden harsh voice that shivered the stillness of the little room.

"And you call that a just will?" he said.

"Yes, I do," said George firmly. "Nobody asked him to make it, and nobody said nothing about what he put in it."

"That may be," returned John, "I don't say as it is, and I don't say as it isn't; but one thing I do say, and that is as it ain't just for a man to leave everything away from his own flesh and blood. You can call it law if you like, I call it thievin'!"

He struck his stick fiercely on the ground as he spoke, and Mrs. Marsh gave a little sob of fright, but her husband was not to be shaken; he was unready of speech but his opinions were firm, and when he felt that right was on his side he feared no one.

"A man may do what he likes with his own," he said in his slow way, "you can't call that thievin'."

"But I do call it thievin'!" retorted John, while Jonas nodded a chorus of approval. "Kin is kin, you can't deny that, and a man's kin have got the right to his property when he's gone; what's the meaning of kin if it ain't that?"

Marsh glanced up and down uneasily; he wished himself anywhere but where he was, for strong as he felt his case to be, he was a man who hated "unpleasantness."

But Mrs. Marsh was cast in a different mould; nervous and alarmed as she was, her very terror gave her tongue, and she no sooner saw her husband at fault than she rose from her seat and came to his side.

"I'll tell you what kin was made for," she said, her voice vibrating with her mingled stress of feelings and her mild eyes gathering fire. "'Twas God as made kin, and He made it so as there should always be love in the world. 'Twas He who put the little ones in families and called them brothers, and let them go playing in the fields together and set them round one table to eat their daily bread; 'twas He put a feeling in their hearts and a thought in their minds to keep them from forgetting, so as they should be brothers all their lives till the time come for them to lie down to die."

She paused to take breath, and John and Jonas sat staring at her as though some prophetic of old had flamed out of the darkness upon their astonished gaze. Nor was George Marsh less bewildered, such sudden eloquence on the part of his domestic companion was as strange a phenomenon as though some dumb household creature had turned upon him in sudden speech. But it is the occasion that proves the nature; the present moment was the most dramatic that Mrs. Marsh had ever known and an unsuspected quality of soul rushed forth to meet it.

"I'll tell you what kin was made for," she went on, gathering fresh courage as she saw the helpless amazement of her audience.

"God made it so as folks might help one another when troubles come upon them; He knew as bad luck must come sometimes as well as good, and He meant as there should be always someone to take our part, someone as wouldn't turn a cold shoulder on us when things was going contrary like, but 'ud say, 'Well, after all he's the same flesh and blood as me and I ain't going to cast him off now."

There's some as have got a soft heart for other folks' troubles, as always have a hand in the pocket for any poor soul in need, and when their own hard time comes who should they look to but their own kin, what God gave them when they were born, to see to them a bit and help them on. 'Twas all very well as long as Job had got strength to go out to his work and bring back his bit o' money, but when he couldn't go no more, then was the time for his kin to come and make a home for him."

She scathed the brothers with her glance as she spoke, and Jonas shifted uncomfortably on his seat and looked at John in the hope that he would put a stop to this unaccountable woman whose words made you feel as "queasy" as the parson's when he took to letting fly at a man's faults and failings in the face of the congregation.

John caught the look and nerved himself to the combat.

"That's strange doctrine, that is," he said sulkily. "A man's to waste his money how he likes and then look to his kin to keep him from starvin'!"

George threw an uneasy glance at his wife, for this seemed to him an incontrovertible argument, but Mrs. Marsh was not to be daunted.

"There ain't no talk of starvin' as I knows of," she said; "Job had got his little bit laid by same as another; he could pay a shilling or two to keep a roof over his head and buy the bit o' victual he ate."

"Ah! I always knew you made a tidy lot out o' him!" said John with a sneer.

"Yes, we did," cried Mrs. Marsh; "you're right there."

A look of surprise went over the faces of her three auditors, for the answer was unexpected.

"Two shillings a week he paid," she went on, "and you may see for yourself what we got out of that when I'd cooked his food and done his washing for him. But we made a lot by him all the same, and I'll tell you how we done it. I ain't got no father alive, and George he ain't got one neither, and when Master Foster come to lodge in our house it seemed just like old days come back again. It was rare an' good to feel as there was always someone sitting in the chimney corner watching for us, and he'd a way of saying 'thank you,' as made your heart warm. Many and many's the night as my man 'ud turn out in the cold just because he thought maybe the poor old chap wanted something extry over him, and times and times he's gone without his bit o' bacon so as Job should have it when he couldn't relish his bread and cheese."

George shifted uneasily from one foot to the other while his virtues were thus unfolded, and looked as red and foolish as if he were being accused of some deed of shame; but Mrs. Marsh went on ruthlessly.

"There was nothing he liked so well as the old man's pottering after him when he was doing the garden. Job 'ud sit on the bench by the hour together and watch him weeding and watering; and he'd laugh as pleased as anything when Johnnie ran to show him the pertaters what his daddy dug up. He used to fret cruel sometimes when he thought of his own kin what acted so hard to him. 'I seed 'em to-day, Mrs. Marsh,' he used to say, 'and

they wouldn't, so much as pass the time o' day with me; but we wouldn't have parted with him, not if you'd made all the world of him; our place won't seem like itself without him, and that's a fact."

She wiped her eyes on her apron as she spoke, and John hailed the sign of weakness.

"Ay, ay," he said, "all that's well enough; but we ain't talkin' about them sort o' things, we're talkin' about property. Job hadn't got no call to act like he did, and if he'd lived with honest folk they'd never have let him do it."

Marsh's eyes flashed fire, but before he could hurl back the insinuation in his accuser's teeth, his wife was by the side of the coffin and had turned back the sheet.

"If you're going to say such words as that," she cried, "you shall say them to his face!"

An awestruck silence followed her words. There, on his last pillow, lay Job Foster in the calm majesty of death, the lines smoothed out of his wrinkled cheeks, a smile resting on his lips, and that indefinable look of youth which comes back to the face when cares and toils have taken their flight. He was no longer the bowed and meagre labourer who had excited their scorn and anger as he crossed their daily path; he was once more the brother of their childhood whose voice had mingled with theirs at their mother's knee, and who had shared their boyish pleasures in open-hearted happiness.

It was a vision of their past, and it startled them as much as a vision of their future might have done. John could not take his eyes from the face which drew him with a kind of fascination, and Jonas felt an unaccustomed lump come up in his throat. Step by step the two men drew nearer to the coffin, and at last their eyes met as they stood beside their long-lost brother.

"I never meant no harm to him, John," said Jonas, in a low tone.

"Nor I neither," said John; "I've spoken sore about him times an' times, but if I was to have the chance over again I'd take it all back."

"And I've spoken sore to him, and that's worse," said Jonas; "but he didn't bear no malice, for he had it wrote down as he'd forgave us."

"And may God forgive us all," said John solemnly, with uplifted hand.

Mrs. Marsh was weeping quietly behind her apron; her exaltation of spirit had departed, and she was once more a feeble, frightened woman; but her work was done and there was no need of further speech. The echo of John's brief prayer died away in the stillness, and for a moment or two no one moved, then, going up to Marsh, he held out his hand.

"If you let us know the time o' the buryin'," he said, "his kin shall foller him to the grave, and as for the will, I'll never say another word about it for one!"

"Nor won't I," added Jonas; "and what's more, I hope I'll have as good folks as you and your missus to see to me when it comes to my turn to go."

So, bowing their grey heads as they passed the coffin, the two brothers went out into the darkness, their long-cherished feud healed for ever by the Angel of death, who had come bringing with him not a sword but peace.

