



JOB FOSTER was dead. Summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, frost and heat, had done their work upon his frame, and at three score years and ten he had laid down his weather-beaten head and gone home to take his wages. No wife and no child had Job to mourn him, no daughter had bent over his pillow with words of love, no son had held his dying hand in a tender grasp; Job had never thought much of matrimony, women were a poor lot in his opinion, and he preferred to have little to do with them.

And yet in his last hours Job had not been untended by a woman's gentleness. The young people in whose house he lodged had a kindness for him, and in the slow decline of his strength he had wanted for nothing, while his ailments and infirmities were carefully nursed. Not that Job was without relations; his two brothers lived in Melton, only the length of the street dividing them from the Marshes' cottage; but Job and his brothers did not "speak," and his nephews and nieces ignored him when he tottered past on his stick.

How the quarrel had arisen none exactly knew, perhaps not even the Fosters themselves; the feud, whatever it was, dated from the dim distance of the past; but though the facts were forgotten, the feelings they had evoked were as vivid as ever.

"Don't you ever let me catch you speakin' to him!" said John and Jonas to their children, and the boys and girls passed him by as though he had been a leper or an outcast. But now Job was dead, and instantly the whole aspect of the case was altered; blood is blood and kin is kin all the world over, and no sooner was the breath out of his body than John and Jonas felt their interest in him revive.

"So he's gone at last, poor chap!" said the elder brother as he leaned over the paling that divided Jonas's house from his own.

"Yes, he's gone, sure enough," said Jonas. "Seems odd too, to think as we shall never see him no more."

"It'll be nice to have some 'ut to remember him by," said John reflectively; "he'd got a few sticks o' furniture, as far as I can make out."

"Ah! that he had," said Jonas. "He told me so one day when I says to him as he'd have to go into the House. And he'd a sight o' clothes too and a watch and chain made o' silver."

"Well, I doubt we shan't quarrel over the things," said John; "it's poor work quarrelling over the dead. Let bygones be bygones, that's what I say."

In this amiable frame of mind the two brothers walked down to Marsh's cottage that night that they might make their arrangements, but on the way they were met by an unexpected piece of news. Mr. Brown, the village shop-keeper, was taking the air on his doorstep and he gave them good evening as they went by.

"So your poor brother's dead," he said. "I can't say I'm surprised, for he seemed dreadful tottery the night I went in to witness his will."

John looked at Jonas and Jonas looked at John; the rustic mind is slow to take in ideas, but there was a word in this speech which would have roused the dullest yokel in a moment. Job's will! How had he come to make a will and what dark intention lay behind such a deed? It was all very well for rich folks to play tricks with their property, but when poor men took to meddling with law, mischief was sure to follow; what strange freak could have possessed him?

The shop-keeper watched their faces with interest; he saw at once that the existence of the will was news to them, and it gave a touch of drama to the matter which he relished strongly. Life was dull in Melton as a general rule, and Mr. Brown felt that his diplomatic talents lacked opportunity.

"Yes," he said, rubbing his hands complacently, "it's better than a week ago since Mrs. Marsh's Johnnie ran down and asked me to see 'grandpa,' as he called him. 'There's a gentleman come to see him,' he says, 'and he wants you to come too.' I slipped on my Sunday coat and was off in a twinkling, but when I got there who should it be but the schoolmaster. 'Now, Mr. Brown,' he says, 'all you've got to do is to sign your name at the bottom of this paper, and then Mr. Maples is to sign his.'"

"What, Maples the sexton?" asked John, breaking into the voluble narrative for the first time.

"Yes, Maples the sexton. He was sitting there, quite at home as you may say, with his hat between his knees, and when I'd signed my name he got up and signed his with a flourish just for all the world as if he was signing it in the church registers."

"But what was in the will?" asked Jonas, who had been listening to these irrelevant details with some impatience.

"Ah! there you go beyond me," said Mr. Brown, who, like most people, objected to being asked questions that he could not answer. "But I mustn't stop talking any longer," and so saying he hid his discomfiture by beating a hasty retreat.

Left to themselves the two brothers stood looking at one another in utter perplexity; some information they were determined to get, but to whom could they apply? George Marsh was naturally the first person to suggest himself to their minds, but he had been included in their quarrel with Job from the fact of his having given the offender a shelter under his roof, and therefore they turned their steps to the house of the schoolmaster, Mr. Hawkins. Here, however, an unexpected difficulty presented itself, for Mr. Hawkins declared himself bound in honour not to reveal his client's secrets.

"Then I'll make Marsh tell me!" muttered John between his teeth.

Jonas looked at his brother admiringly. "Ah, you've got the right sort of spirit in you, you have!" he said.

Mr. Hawkins did not seem to be equally impressed however.

"I don't see why you want to be so inquisitive!" he said bluntly. "Of course it's no business of mine, but you ought to wait at any rate till after the funeral."

"Seems as if he wanted to put us off like," said Jonas as they turned away.

"So it do," said John; "but I'm not going to stand that, I know! Put it off, indeed! Who knows what knave's tricks he means by that? We'll go round to Marsh's now."

So, while the twilight gathered and fell, the two men made their way to the threshold across which their feet had never passed, and knocked solemnly at the door.

The reserves of life cannot be practised by the poor; but this need not in any sense detract from its reverences.

Marsh and his wife sat by the fire—by a paper, and she with her mending—while at the other end of the room the dead man lay in his coffin. But, shocked as some refined minds might have been by such a spectacle, the spotless sheet and the handful of flowers that lay upon it were eloquent proof that there was no want of respect.

Marsh rose from his seat at the sound of the knock and went to the door.

"Can we come in?" asked John in a

tone which concealed a considerable amount of nervousness.

"Come in," said Marsh, and the two men entered and stood awkwardly in the middle of the room.

"Won't you sit down?" said Mrs. Marsh, who, womanlike, was the least embarrassed of the party.

"Thank you," said John. "We can't come to stay; but we thought as we'd look round and say what we'd like done about our poor brother's bits o' things."

Jonas looked at his brother with greater admiration than ever. This was taking the wind out of the enemy's sails with a vengeance. Anybody might dispute the contents of a will, but to put the whole question of the will aside with a wave of the hand, as one might say, was a masterpiece of which John alone would have been capable.

But Marsh did not see the matter in the same light. He had been prepared for some move on the part of Job's brothers, but he had not expected it so soon.

"I think it 'ud have been more decent like to wait till he was buried," he said.

"Oh, you do, do you?" snarled John.

"Well, then, I'll tell you some 'ut, George Marsh. I think as it 'ud have been a deal more decent if there'd been no talk o' makin' o' wills. I don't hold with lawing, and I never did; and, what's more, it's a thing as no honest person has got any need of. If there wasn't some 'ut in this will as there didn't ought to be, folks wouldn't be so wonderful set on keepin' us out of the knowledge of it. I'll trouble you to read it to us, or else you'll find as law is a game as two can play at."

He fully expected to see Marsh quail before him, but he was disappointed.

"If you wish to hear it before the day of the funeral," he said, "I've no sort of objection. Mr. Hawkins knows what's in it, and he'll bear witness as it's Master Foster's own wishes. It was wrote down for him just as he said it, him being no scholar himself."

He turned towards the cupboard as he spoke and took a sheet of paper from between the leaves of the big family Bible.

John and Jonas sat forward on their chairs and leaned their hard horny hands upon their sticks. Their eyes gleamed ominously from under their bushy grey eyebrows as they prepared to listen, and Mrs. Marsh shivered a little as she watched them.

George Marsh stood opposite to them, his broad shoulders squared, and his head thrown back as if in defiance of their opinion, while his muscular hand grasped the paper firmly.

"This is the last will and testament of me, Job Foster," he began in his strong young voice, "the first will as ever I made, and, please God, it'll be the last. What I've got to leave ain't much, but I'll leave it to them as have been son and daughter to me and have treated me kind ever since I come under their roof. My clothes I leave to George Marsh; I don't know whether he'll find 'em a bit, but I know as his wife's a rare good one with her needle, and I doubt she'll better 'em somehow. And my bits o' furniture I leave to his wife, Anne Marsh, because she's a good woman, and I think she must be like my mother was, though I can't justly remember her now. And my silver watch and chain I leaves to her little Johnnie, what comes and stands by my chair and calls me grandpa, and I hope he'll think o' me sometimes when I'm dead and gone. And I've no more to leave, so I will now conclude, first saying as I forgive all them what have got any grudge against me as I hope to be forgive'd, and you can tell my brothers I said so."

"Witness my hand, this 20th day of March."

"JOB FOSTER."

There was silence for a few moments when