

The Inglenook.

"A Woman of Grace."

BY BEN CRAVEN.

"Aye, dear, I wish to goodness I'd married a woman of grace, that I do, to be sure; and the Lord knows it, too!"

"H'm!" said Aunt Bek between her lips. "To hear you talk such blasphemy 'gainst prayer," went on her husband, "is enough to bring down God's curse on yer—that it is? If ye'd been a Rachael, which yer not, and I was a Joseph, even then I'd have to say it, that I would; and I'll say it again, I will, I wish to goodness I'd married a woman of grace."

"If you go on at this rate, Jim, you'll tire yourself and have to stay home till dinner," calmly answered Aunt Bek. "But while you rest yourself, I'll have a turn at talking. It's true enough you're not a Joseph, 'cause you'll remember Joseph served fourteen years for Rachael." The emphasis on the word "served" was very marked and it was noticeable. Jim just then began to stir his coffee very vigorously. "I'm not a bit afraid," Aunt Bek went on, "of God's curse, for He knows I've never blasphemed 'gainst prayer; it 'ud be a funny thing if I did, seeing how I set store by it. But shall I tell you again what it is that riles me, and what it really is you say I blaspheme about?" Here she went and stood by the little round breakfast-table, resting the tips of her forefingers on it and trying to look into her husband's face. "It's laziness—yes, laziness; it's that that riles me. As if God's going to do everything for you simply because you ask Him! I tell you praying won't build a new chapel for ye without working as well. You've got to work hard too, and a lot more just like you has got to work too."

"And don't I work?" snapped Jim.

"Yes, but it wouldn't hurt you to do some more. There's that fowl house tumbled into a regular heap. Why can't yer of nights build it up so that we could keep a nice lot of poultry, and give the profit to the building fund? Then if you'd get up at six, as most men do, you could dig up that plot of ground at the back, and set——"

"Goodness me, Bek, what a tongue you've got! It's a mighty good thing for you I'm a man of grace or there'd be thunder and lightning in this yer house."

"Thunderstorms clear the air," drily remarked Aunt Bek. Here the little shop bell rang and she went away to attend to a customer, and Jim, after swallowing his last drop of coffee and brushing his hair in the scullery, calmly sauntered away to work.

"I've given him a pill to swallow," mused Aunt Bek when she returned, "that I have! 'A woman of grace!' That sounds nice, that it does! Now, if I'm not a woman of grace, I wonder what I am then! And if I'm not a woman of grace, I wonder how I could be! Poor old Jim! If only I could stir him up somehow—put a grain or two of ambition into him—what a man he'd be, to be sure! But there, he was made to go on easy lines, I suppose, and there's no doubt he has got more grace than I have. But his talk about grace has just made me make up my mind: *I'll do it*, that I will. He shall see, if I haven't grace, I've got something else."

Lifting up her skirt an old-fashioned white linen pocket was exposed to view, and from this she drew a thin green book. Resting it on the table, she added up some accounts it contained.

"One hundred and fifty! Yes, that will do it," she said in a little whisper to herself. And then this "graceless" woman knelt down and prayed.

What her prayer was we shall find out afterwards.

When Jim came home at twelve o'clock to dinner Aunt Bek was gone. A neighbour's daughter was in charge of the shop, and on the table, placed on an extra white cloth, was some cold meat, bread, cheese, spring onions, a bunch of wallflowers, and a breakfast cup containing cocoa, ready mixed; and as the kettle by the fire was already boiling, there was evidently no reason why a hungry man should not have a good meal.

"Where's she gone gadding to now?" he asked, but the girl could supply no information.

"Well, these are hard lines, to be sure," he muttered, as he sank into his cushioned chair. "When I married her, if I didn't get grace along with her, I thought I did at least have"—but he couldn't think of a suitable word. "Love," was the word he had intended to say, but the sight of the dainty little table seemed to make that word out of place. He knew very well he had got love in spite of her straight speech.

When the time came to return to work he had still failed to find the right word, but when evening came, he thought he had got it—"dutifulness"—but the sight of a tempting hot supper made that word unsuitable.

"And where do you think you've been all day?" he exclaimed, as he got seated.

"I'm in no doubt about that," she answered.

"Well, may I know?"

"Yes, you may know."

"Well, tell me; don't be exasperating."

"I've been in search of it."

"In search of what?"

"In search of what you said I hadn't got."

"What's that? Don't be so exasperating I tell you!"

"You don't mean to say you've forgotten?"

"Get on with yer! I shall lose my patience directly."

"Well, I'll tell you, if you won't get cross. But before Aunt Bek could get on any further, she had to sit down and laugh.

"Well," said Jim, solemnly, "I did think you had got sense if even you hadn't grace."

"You did—did you? Well, to be sure, how good you are! It was grace I went in search of."

Jim did not answer: he felt he was getting the worst of it, and presently went out to attend a sites committee.

Mrs. Rebecca Byles—or, as she was generally called, having quite a colony of nephews and nieces, Aunt Bek—was, although somewhat uneducated, a splendid business woman, shrewd, far seeing, and with the necessary speculative strain. Four miles from the village where she lived an unusually long tunnel was being bored in connection with a long line of railway. Great gangs of men were about to commence operations at once, and the very day her hus-

band informed her of her "graceless" condition she paid a deposit for the purchase of a strip of meadow land close by these new works. Each week day, for a long time afterwards, she was absent from home for several hours. The girl who had minded the shop on the first occasion proving herself very capable, was engaged permanently, her duties including assistance in housework.

Aunt Bek's capital was entirely what she had saved before her marriage. She had barely sufficient for all her plans, but managed, however, to erect a little wooden shop on the strip of land and stock it with articles the men would be sure to require. Then the difficulty arose as to who could manage the business, but Aunt Bek soon got over that by securing the services of a capable widow who had one big lad able to help in the evenings.

The business was commenced, and each day grew owing to fair prices, civility, and good value. The next step was to erect a big room at the back, where for the payment of one penny a night the men could sit and smoke, read, and purchase a cup of tea or coffee.

The two businesses kept Aunt Bek fairly busy, especially as it took some manoeuvring to keep the second one a secret, and only to be absent when it would not provoke suspicion.

One evening when she was assisting in the new premises, thinking Jim was safely at home learning a new tune on his violin, she suddenly saw him pass the window. Quick as lightning she darted below the counter, which fortunately happened to be a temporary erection, but screened at the side where the customers stood. In walked Jim. Seeing no attendant he knocked on the counter and in came the widow. Catching sight of Aunt Bek under the counter, with finger on lip, while her husband was rapping on the counter above, was too much for the good woman's gravity, and she had to come to a sudden standstill while she regained her composure; something like a laugh, a scream and a cough, blended together, escaping from her lips meanwhile.

"Good evening," said Jim, in his very best manner, never quick to notice anything peculiar. "I've heard say as you have got a nicish room at the back of this place, and we've wondered if you'd let it us to hold a gospel meeting in of a Sunday night for the men as is working here!"

"I can't say; the place isn't mine."

"Oh, I heard it was owned by a woman, so I thought maybe it was yours."

"No, it isn't mine."

"Some rich woman's then maybe, whose started it to do good amongst the men! Well, may God bless her then, for I've heard it's kept many from the drink. What a blessing it is there's women in the world who have grace enough in their hearts to do such things."

The counter fairly trembled, but whether this was through Jim leaning on it, or from some other cause, cannot be determined.

"Well," said Jim, "would you mind asking? Of course we'll pay all expenses and be answerable for anything that might get broken. As for rent, perhaps if she's really a good woman she might do without that."

"She'd not be hard on that point, I'm sure," said the attendant; "I quite think she'll let you have it." Which of course she did, and the first night it was opened Jim asked Aunt Bek to go over with him, but she declined, whereupon he remarked he hoped some day she'd think more of how she might do a little good in the world, and how he was thankful the owner of the shop wasn't