

The Storyteller.

JOHN MARSHALL'S MOTTO.

(In three parts by ANNA T. SADLER.)

PART I.

THE house stood in a cluster of trees, embowered so closely that the summer sunshine scarcely got through and only sent in stray beams here and there, to fall upon the dark-stained floors, and creep up the walls, and crossbar the ceiling. It was an old, almost rickety house, yet it was an ideal dwelling-place for a lover of nature and of solitude. The apple-orchard was at the side; the maple-trees stood in tall rows in front of the door. There was a lawn and an unpretentious flower-garden; the latter had been suffered to run to waste of late. The house was only a story and a half in height, but it had a veranda all around it, and curious little windows and the quaintest of doors, which rejoiced in a huge knocker. A couple of steps led up to it, which were the resort, in the warm weather, of a couple of great dogs, who stretched their limbs there and yawned, or panted after a run in the heat of the noon. They always seemed to watch, and with some appearance of discrimination, the various shadows which the tall trees made upon the paths below, till at last they nodded off asleep and the stillness of the spot was unbroken. Outside the house was a tranquil rustic road, traversed by a few wayfarers. In the near distance was a mountain, one of a chain, solemn, blue, erect, only at times assuming a state-dress of purple or a gala-costume of tawny gold. The house always regarded this mountain as its principal neighbour; the other was a quiet, inoffensive lake, with many lillies resting on its calm surface and the figures of many trees mirrored in its depths. There was a peculiar quiet in all the region. There was some foolish old legend about it, about the house on the hill chiefly and the lake. They were credited both with the presence of a restless spirit, who by night, and by night only, especially when the moon was full came back to revisit the earth. Little wonder that a restless spirit should come hither, where all was peace. Inside the house were rooms on either side of the door—first a little room, with dark-stained floor, walls painted dark, and bare except for two pictures that hung there; a couple of straw chairs cushioned, a lounge, a table, some books, a student-lamp, and that is all. A door opened from this room into a second; it had shelves—rude deal shelves—all around it, filled with books, and civilised curtains of dull red; a small table with writing materials upon it, and a chair, were the only furniture. But there was a window, broad and low—for it had been made so—and from this window such a view! It opened almost directly upon the lake—that is, the great strip of water was far enough only to gain something by distance. The wild luxuriance of its shores, varied by beds of simple buttercups and dandelions, showed a superabundant growth of ferns and a strange disorder of weeds and grasses. Nearer the house there was just a sloping grassy lawn and old, gnarled trees, some of which offered seats in their boughs and a great twittering of birds, and a very large collection of nests, as if, like some persecuted race, they had come to found a colony where persecution was at an end and peace reigned supreme. In the house, on the other side of the hall, was a bedroom, as simply appointed as possible, and a dressing-room. In the house were two inmates. The one was a servant—a man-servant. The other was the proprietor. To become aware of his life and purpose, the house, its location, its solitude, give the cue. Had he a definite aim or object he would never have chosen his home so far from the abode of men. His character and disposition gained a light from a simple phrase engraved on a golden ground: *Plus qu'il connaît les hommes, plus il aime les chiens!* This legend hinted at reverse of fortune, perhaps ill-health, want of personal attractions, old age, or what not. What was the truth? John Marshall, as he sat among his books that breezy June morning, near the broad, open window, in view of the lake and in view of the mountains, was young—at least he was only thirty-five. His hair, originally of a nondescript brown, was sprinkled with gray. His eyes were gray, too—a deep gray, bordering on hazel. From being near-sighted they had a peculiar expression. His features were good: many might have called the face handsome, many more would have thought it plain. The majority would have declared it interesting. He was lithe, active, alert. Clearly neither old age nor any physical deformity had made him shun the society of men. Yet, in a face and figure which should have been, which were meant by nature to be, energetic, there was an all-pervading weariness that savoured of languor. Perhaps it best explained his voluntary retirement and the legend on the golden ground. Satiety! Life had wearied him. It was the old story, except that his early and voluntary retirement from ease, wealth, fashion, society, the very weariness it had inspired, proved his capability for nobler aims and purposes. It proved that he had wasted another heritage than that which his father had left him at his death. Out of all the chaos of acquaintanceship, friendships, companionships, travel, excitement, adventure, he had brought two dogs, and his man-servant, and his books. He had lived three years in the solitude, and fancied that he had at last found absolute rest. There was a flaw in his experience somewhere, or he would not have thought that. He would have known that all this rich, tangled, glorious wilderness of nature, that sweet, silent sunshine, those voices of the birds and hum of insects more quiet than silence even, that dark, shadow-hung stream, the stillness of those hills, could not give rest—not as long as human thought must go on in its untiring circle of motion. Now he was very much disquieted, and for a trivial matter. He had to leave the solitude and go into the city. What was there in that? He was going for three days, five days, a week. Not into a great, smoky Babylon either, but into a medium-sized, sober, sedate city, where trade, commerce, human life all ran in moderate channels, without hurry or bustle or rush, where the streets were shaded with trees.

There was a mountain observable from his window, and passing glimpses, here and there, of a great, broad, busy river. He thought of the life and bustle on that river with a shudder; thought of the crowded streets, the vehicles blocking each other, the dust and heat and glare, as if he had never spent contented months and years in human whirlpools, in comparison with which the tumult of this town was but as ripples on his tranquil lake. It was a foolish fear, an absurd shrinking, and yet he dreaded to leave his quiet nook, as if he were never to return again, as if the inevitable law of circumstances was driving him thence for ever. But nature asserted her rights; she had meant him to be energetic, and once she had bade him accomplish a certain thing she gave him no rest till he obeyed her at once. He called his man-servant.

"Get my things together; I am going to town to-morrow."

"For long, sir?"

"Probably a week. I shall take as little luggage as possible."

This was inevitable. The fatal words had been spoken. In the afternoon John Marshall went out, followed by his two great dogs. He went with them in the direction of the lake, and threw himself down to reflect again upon the decision he had taken. The dogs lay near him on the grass, sedately, contemplatively, with more than human gravity in their gray-brown eyes and grizzled noses. John Marshall played mechanically with the long, silken ears of the animal nearest him. The other moved uneasily, rose, and came nearer for its share of notice. John Marshall laughed.

"Even you, old Plato," he said, "are not free from this weakness of human nature. You must thrust yourself forward, fidget, worry, till you have gained equal share of note with your fellows or ousted them from their vantage-ground."

He pushed the dog away with a curious, half-angry impatience, and the creature, divining that something was amiss, but unconscious of wrong, lay down resignedly at a little distance, with a sigh, and was soon asleep.

"More philosophical than man, you perceive the uselessness of your efforts; you give up the struggle and you go to sleep, to wake when a new opportunity offers."

John Marshall put his arms under his head and lay full length in the shade of a tree, looking up at the sky.

"Here am I, moralizing and dreaming with the fool's wisdom men call philosophy, year in and year out, and I have not found fortitude enough to bear up against the petty trial of having to go to town to-morrow."

He rose at last, with an impatient shaking of himself, to indulge in one of his long delightful strolls in and out through lanes and byways, along between the hedgerows or in the great green meadows or fragrant hay-fields, till he lost himself at last in a wood—one of those shady, leafy, mossy haunts where, more than anywhere else, there is the sense of being alone with Nature and drinking in her utmost sweetness. Birds, toads, squirrels, giant spiders all busied themselves at their various callings, and the grasshoppers, like street musicians, went piping about; while the upper air insects, with all the manner of a concert room about them, buzzed to and fro and gave solos and quartets and choruses. All these meistersingers and trouvères, singing in their various tongues, were delightful to John Marshall. He cared not whether they used the *langue d'or* or the *langue d'ail*, or whether they used any language at all. It was all restful, infinitely sweet and delightful to him. Nor did the inhabitants of this new Eden resent his presence amongst them if only he had not brought his dogs. These latter monsters, revelling after their own fashion in the scene, unrelenting pursued every passing squirrel, every inoffensive toad, every bird who had strayed to earth. Nay, they pawed up the ground at the roots of trees, as if in search of prey which was yet invisible, and they audibly snuffed among the last year's leaves that were lying there, to betoken their suspicion of a hostile presence.

Human nature again, mused John Marshall, standing on a rough wooden plank bridging the rivulet and observing them. "Like man, your masters, you cannot come into this fair and peaceful place without seeking to make havoc here; without invading peaceful homes like that of yonder toad, without interfering with someone's business as in the case of that passing squirrel, who is hastening, no doubt, to the fulfilment of some duty, or snapping at some fellow-being, as you have both done, Plato and Socrates, to that innocent bluebottle fly which buzzed past you, taking pleasure after his own fashion. Why did you snap at him, you dumb imitators of our race? Simply for the pleasure of snapping! Because his mode of enjoyment did not chance to be yours."

He made this soliloquy to his brute companions, who had returned to his side, and, with wagging tails and faces converted into notes of interrogation, were asking him what next he intended to do.

"I beg of you not to question me now," he said, looking down at them with whimsical earnestness; "that is another of the troublesome human habits you have acquired. We are drifting, my good friends; we have no aim nor purpose. Ask that wasp over there what he is going to do next."

The dogs seemed disappointed, and, catching his eye, looked down with sudden gravity, as if they withdrew their question, and stood quite still for a moment or two.

"Go on, my friends," said John, again addressing them. "I do not in the least wish to interfere with your enjoyment. I was wont to resent very bitterly any cavilling at my own."

He took up mechanically a handful of pebbles as he spoke, and began to throw them one by one into the stream.

"My aim," he went on—"what was it? As idle as purposeless as futile as this my present employment."

When he had exhausted the stones he turned impatiently, rapidly, and walked on, the dogs following with many a divergence from the path; for, undeterred by his grumbling, they still pursued whatever chance game came in their way.

At night, when he had had his supper, at which the dogs assisted, John Marshall made some few arrangements for his journey, smoked his solitary pipe and went to bed with a sigh because of the morrow.