

With a Little Help from my Hands

'We'll leave it in God's hands.' Jean smiled and rose wearily. 'I'll just go and see if auntie wants a cup.' She left me with my tea in the farm kitchen beside a crackling Aga. Auntie was just another in a long line of frail and ageing relatives who assumed that the family farmstead was the right place to end their days, and that Jean was the obvious choice of carer to look after their needs. She was, of course. Gentle and kind by nature, nothing was too much bother for Jean, though she had just admitted to me she hoped auntie would be the last.

The farm had been Jean's home since she was a child. This kitchen, with its low beamed ceiling, bottle glass windows and flag stone floors, where smells of baking and wet washing were true memory-sparks, was everything she knew. Births and deaths, anniversaries and parties, laughter and tears - all life had touched this room.

Jean would be the first to confirm that most of her memories were happy ones. Caring had been her life and she had enjoyed it. This small farm had never provided more than a living, but they had managed, and given the girls a good start in life. Of course there had been sacrifices and hardship but in every difficult situation - fastidious old relatives to fractious teen-agers, Jean had clung to the straight-forward faith she had discovered in a mission meeting at the village chapel when she was just a young woman. Life, she believed, was all about doing one's best for other people and for God, and for the rest, 'leaving it all in God's hands.'

We had heard her say that do many times, and even now as she prepared, tiredly and not so enthusiastically, to look after auntie, she said once again, 'We'll leave it in his hands.' Jean would tell you that 'leaving things in God's hands' was a faith she had learned from her earliest years with Tom. Tom could still be good fun. He and Jean had worked and laughed together, and had joy in seeing their youngsters grow up with them as a family.

Tom's problem was the alcohol. He was not a great drinker, though there were occasions when Jean had found him sleeping it off in the lane between The Dog and home. The drinking had only become a problem when the girls left home and Tom seemed to miss his son more than ever. Mark had only been an infant when he died, and Jean left him in God's hands. Now Tom lost interest in a farm without a future. He would work well enough through a morning, but by lunchtime he was ready for a sandwich and a pint at The Dog. Jean took on a lot of the farm work. There were not many acres of land but the work was growing heavier, and 'leaving it in God's hands' did not make it any lighter. Some would say that Jean's attitude was fatalistic, but then they would not know how often she had put something in God's hands, but managed to keep her own hands on it too! It was like giving God a hand when necessary. A close friend and neighbour of Jean told me of one such occasion.....

It was harvest. The hay was lying cut and baled in the field. They only made enough for their two cows and the sheep, but it was hands on work. Together they would lift bales on to the sledge and haul them across to the barn in the corner of the field nearest the house. That particular morning Jean had watched clouds building up in a mottled sky. 'There's rain on the way,' she said to Tom as he left for The Dog. 'We have to get them bales in this afternoon.'

An hour and a half later Tom had not returned. Clouds now lay heavy and darkening across the mountains. The best of the sunshine was fast declining. In the past there had been the girls to run down to The Dog. Jean struggled desperately with a bale. 'Put it in his hands', must have gone through her mind, but black clouds were building up faster than prayers seemed to be getting answered. She went back into the house to exchange wellies for shoes before striding purposely down the lane, past the chapel, to The Dog.

The neighbour who told me this tale was at the bar when Jean appeared at the open door, clutching the apron she had hastily pulled off on the way. He said her face was more thunderous than the clouds which came later that evening. The whole company at the bar fell silent. This was a different Jean to the quiet, gentle farmer's wife they thought they knew. Jean had rarely seen the inside of the pub. She took a moment to get her bearings before setting her gaze firmly on Tom. She said nothing, but walked across the room to where Tom was sitting with an empty glass on the table in front of him. Calmly, she picked up the glass and carried it across to the bar. No-one was sure if her hand slipped, or if she was making a forceful and out of character gesture, but the glass shattered on the bar.

Without a look or a word to anyone, Jean strode out of The Dog, head high. Meanwhile Tom, head down, pulled on his cap and followed her meekly, almost at a run. He walked a few paces behind Jean all the way to their hay field.

I never told Jean I knew about that episode, but I am sure she would have said, 'I left it in God's hands. But sometimes he needs a bit of help and puts it back into mine.' Then with a smile she would be bound to suggest a fresh pot of tea!