CHAPTER III.

The lights in the village went out, house after house, till there only remained two in the darkness. One of these came from a residence on the hill-side, of which there is nothing to say at present; the other shone from the window of Marty South. Precisely the same outward effect was produced here, however, by her rising when the clock struck ten and hanging up a thick cloth curtain. The door it was necessary to keep ajar in hers, as in most cottages, because of the smoke; but she obviated the effect of the ribbon of light through the chink by hanging a cloth over that also. She was one of those people who, if they have to work harder than their neighbors, prefer to keep the necessity a secret as far as possible; and but for the slight sounds of wood-splintering which came from within, no wayfarer would have perceived that here the cottager did not sleep as elsewhere.

Eleven, twelve, one o'clock struck; the heap of spars grew higher, and the pile of chips and ends more bulky. Even the light on the hill had now been extinguished; but still she worked on. When the temperature of the night without had fallen so low as to make her chilly, she opened a large blue umbrella to ward off the draught from the door. The two sovereigns confronted her from the looking-glass in such a manner as to suggest a pair of jaundiced eyes on the watch for an opportunity. Whenever she sighed for weariness she lifted her gaze towards them, but withdrew it quickly, stroking her tresses with her fingers for a moment, as if to assure herself that they were still

secure. When the clock struck three she arose and tied up the spars she had last made in a bundle resembling those that lay against the wall.

She wrapped round her a long red woollen cravat and opened the door. The night in all its fulness met her flatly on the threshold, like the very brink of an absolute void, or the antemundane Ginnung-Gap believed in by her Teuton forefathers. For her eyes were fresh from the blaze, and here there was no street-lamp or lantern to form a kindly transition between the inner glare and the outer dark. A lingering wind brought to her ear the creaking sound of two over-crowded branches in the neighboring wood which were rubbing each other into wounds, and other vocalized sorrows of the trees, together with the screech of owls, and the fluttering tumble of some awkward wood-pigeon ill-balanced on its roosting-bough.

But the pupils of her young eyes soon expanded, and she could see well enough for her purpose. Taking a bundle of spars under each arm, and guided by the serrated line of tree-tops against the sky, she went some hundred yards or more down the lane till she reached a long open shed, carpeted around with the dead leaves that lay about everywhere. Night, that strange personality, which within walls brings ominous introspectiveness and self-distrust, but under the open sky banishes such subjective anxieties as too trivial for thought, inspired Marty South with a less perturbed and brisker manner now. She laid the spars on the ground within the shed and returned for more, going to and fro

till her whole manufactured stock were deposited here.

This erection was the wagon-house of the chief man of business hereabout, Mr. George Melbury, the timber, bark, and copse-ware merchant for whom Marty's father did work of this sort by the piece. It formed one of the many rambling out-houses which surrounded his dwelling, an equally irregular block of building, whose immense chimneys could just be discerned even now. The four huge wagons under the shed were built on those ancient lines whose proportions have been ousted by modern patterns, their shapes bulging and curving at the base and ends like Trafalgar line-of-battle ships, with which venerable hulks, indeed, these vehicles evidenced a constructed spirit curiously in harmony. One was laden with sheep-cribs, another with hurdles, another with ash poles, and the fourth, at the foot of which she had placed her thatching-spars was half full of similar bundles.

She was pausing a moment with that easeful sense of accomplishment which follows work done that has been a hard struggle in the doing, when she heard a woman's voice on the other side of the hedge say, anxiously, "George!" In a moment the name was repeated, with "Do come indoors! What are you doing there?"

The cart-house adjoined the garden, and before Marty had moved she saw enter the latter from the timber-merchant's back door an elderly woman sheltering a candle with her hand, the light from which cast a moving thorn-pattern of shade on Marty's face. Its rays soon fell upon a man

whose clothes were roughly thrown on, standing in advance of the speaker. He was a thin, slightly stooping figure, with a small nervous mouth and a face cleanly shaven; and he walked along the path with his eyes bent on the ground. In the pair Marty South recognized her employer Melbury and his wife. She was the second Mrs. Melbury, the first having died shortly after the birth of the timber-merchant's only child.

"'Tis no use to stay in bed," he said, as soon as she came up to where he was pacing restlessly about. "I can't sleep--I keep thinking of things, and worrying about the girl, till I'm quite in a fever of anxiety." He went on to say that he could not think why "she (Marty knew he was speaking of his daughter) did not answer his letter. She must be ill--she must, certainly," he said.

"No, no. 'Tis all right, George," said his wife; and she assured him that such things always did appear so gloomy in the night-time, if people allowed their minds to run on them; that when morning came it was seen that such fears were nothing but shadows. "Grace is as well as you or I," she declared.

But he persisted that she did not see all--that she did not see as much as he. His daughter's not writing was only one part of his worry. On account of her he was anxious concerning money affairs, which he would never alarm his mind about otherwise. The reason he gave was that, as she had nobody to depend upon for a provision but himself, he wished

her, when he was gone, to be securely out of risk of poverty.

To this Mrs. Melbury replied that Grace would be sure to marry well, and that hence a hundred pounds more or less from him would not make much difference.

Her husband said that that was what she, Mrs. Melbury, naturally thought; but there she was wrong, and in that lay the source of his trouble. "I have a plan in my head about her," he said; "and according to my plan she won't marry a rich man."

"A plan for her not to marry well?" said his wife, surprised.

"Well, in one sense it is that," replied Melbury. "It is a plan for her to marry a particular person, and as he has not so much money as she might expect, it might be called as you call it. I may not be able to carry it out; and even if I do, it may not be a good thing for her. I want her to marry Giles Winterborne."

His companion repeated the name. "Well, it is all right," she said, presently. "He adores the very ground she walks on; only he's close, and won't show it much."

Marty South appeared startled, and could not tear herself away.

Yes, the timber-merchant asserted, he knew that well enough.

Winterborne had been interested in his daughter for years; that was what had led him into the notion of their union. And he knew that she used to have no objection to him. But it was not any difficulty about that which embarrassed him. It was that, since he had educated her so well, and so long, and so far above the level of daughters thereabout, it was "wasting her" to give her to a man of no higher standing than the young man in question.

"That's what I have been thinking," said Mrs. Melbury.

"Well, then, Lucy, now you've hit it," answered the timber-merchant, with feeling. "There lies my trouble. I vowed to let her marry him, and to make her as valuable as I could to him by schooling her as many years and as thoroughly as possible. I mean to keep my vow. I made it because I did his father a terrible wrong; and it was a weight on my conscience ever since that time till this scheme of making amends occurred to me through seeing that Giles liked her."

"Wronged his father?" asked Mrs. Melbury.

"Yes, grievously wronged him," said her husband.

"Well, don't think of it to-night," she urged. "Come indoors."

"No, no, the air cools my head. I shall not stay long." He was silent a while; then he told her, as nearly as Marty could gather, that his

first wife, his daughter Grace's mother, was first the sweetheart of Winterborne's father, who loved her tenderly, till he, the speaker, won her away from him by a trick, because he wanted to marry her himself. He sadly went on to say that the other man's happiness was ruined by it; that though he married Winterborne's mother, it was but a half-hearted business with him. Melbury added that he was afterwards very miserable at what he had done; but that as time went on, and the children grew up, and seemed to be attached to each other, he determined to do all he could to right the wrong by letting his daughter marry the lad; not only that, but to give her the best education he could afford, so as to make the gift as valuable a one as it lay in his power to bestow. "I still mean to do it," said Melbury.

"Then do," said she.

"But all these things trouble me," said he; "for I feel I am sacrificing her for my own sin; and I think of her, and often come down here and look at this."

"Look at what?" asked his wife.

He took the candle from her hand, held it to the ground, and removed a tile which lay in the garden-path. "'Tis the track of her shoe that she made when she ran down here the day before she went away all those months ago. I covered it up when she was gone; and when I come here and look at it, I ask myself again, why should she be sacrificed to a

poor man?"

"It is not altogether a sacrifice," said the woman. "He is in love with her, and he's honest and upright. If she encourages him, what can you wish for more?"

"I wish for nothing definite. But there's a lot of things possible for her. Why, Mrs. Charmond is wanting some refined young lady, I hear, to go abroad with her--as companion or something of the kind. She'd jump at Grace."

"That's all uncertain. Better stick to what's sure."

"True, true," said Melbury; "and I hope it will be for the best. Yes, let me get 'em married up as soon as I can, so as to have it over and done with." He continued looking at the imprint, while he added, "Suppose she should be dying, and never make a track on this path any more?"

"She'll write soon, depend upon't. Come, 'tis wrong to stay here and brood so."

He admitted it, but said he could not help it. "Whether she write or no, I shall fetch her in a few days." And thus speaking, he covered the track, and preceded his wife indoors.

Melbury, perhaps, was an unlucky man in having within him the sentiment which could indulge in this foolish fondness about the imprint of a daughter's footstep. Nature does not carry on her government with a view to such feelings, and when advancing years render the open hearts of those who possess them less dexterous than formerly in shutting against the blast, they must suffer "buffeting at will by rain and storm" no less than Little Celandines.

But her own existence, and not Mr. Melbury's, was the centre of Marty's consciousness, and it was in relation to this that the matter struck her as she slowly withdrew.

"That, then, is the secret of it all," she said. "And Giles Winterborne is not for me, and the less I think of him the better."

She returned to her cottage. The sovereigns were staring at her from the looking-glass as she had left them. With a preoccupied countenance, and with tears in her eyes, she got a pair of scissors, and began mercilessly cutting off the long locks of her hair, arranging and tying them with their points all one way, as the barber had directed. Upon the pale scrubbed deal of the coffin-stool table they stretched like waving and ropy weeds over the washed gravel-bed of a clear stream.

She would not turn again to the little looking-glass, out of humanity to herself, knowing what a deflowered visage would look back at her,

and almost break her heart; she dreaded it as much as did her own ancestral goddess Sif the reflection in the pool after the rape of her locks by Loke the malicious. She steadily stuck to business, wrapped the hair in a parcel, and sealed it up, after which she raked out the fire and went to bed, having first set up an alarum made of a candle and piece of thread, with a stone attached.

But such a reminder was unnecessary to-night. Having tossed till about five o'clock, Marty heard the sparrows walking down their long holes in the thatch above her sloping ceiling to their orifice at the eaves; whereupon she also arose, and descended to the ground-floor again.

It was still dark, but she began moving about the house in those automatic initiatory acts and touches which represent among housewives the installation of another day. While thus engaged she heard the rumbling of Mr. Melbury's wagons, and knew that there, too, the day's toil had begun.

An armful of gads thrown on the still hot embers caused them to blaze up cheerfully and bring her diminished head-gear into sudden prominence as a shadow. At this a step approached the door.

"Are folk astir here yet?" inquired a voice she knew well.

"Yes, Mr. Winterborne," said Marty, throwing on a tilt bonnet, which completely hid the recent ravages of the scissors. "Come in!"

The door was flung back, and there stepped in upon the mat a man not particularly young for a lover, nor particularly mature for a person of affairs. There was reserve in his glance, and restraint upon his mouth. He carried a horn lantern which hung upon a swivel, and wheeling as it dangled marked grotesque shapes upon the shadier part of the walls.

He said that he had looked in on his way down, to tell her that they did not expect her father to make up his contract if he was not well. Mr. Melbury would give him another week, and they would go their journey with a short load that day.

"They are done," said Marty, "and lying in the cart-house."

"Done!" he repeated. "Your father has not been too ill to work after all, then?"

She made some evasive reply. "I'll show you where they be, if you are going down," she added.

They went out and walked together, the pattern of the air-holes in the top of the lantern being thrown upon the mist overhead, where they appeared of giant size, as if reaching the tent-shaped sky. They had no remarks to make to each other, and they uttered none. Hardly anything could be more isolated or more self-contained than the lives of these

two walking here in the lonely antelucan hour, when gray shades, material and mental, are so very gray. And yet, looked at in a certain way, their lonely courses formed no detached design at all, but were part of the pattern in the great web of human doings then weaving in both hemispheres, from the White Sea to Cape Horn.

The shed was reached, and she pointed out the spars. Winterborne regarded them silently, then looked at her.

"Now, Marty, I believe--" he said, and shook his head.

"What?"

"That you've done the work yourself."

"Don't you tell anybody, will you, Mr. Winterborne?" she pleaded, by way of answer. "Because I am afraid Mr. Melbury may refuse my work if he knows it is mine."

"But how could you learn to do it? 'Tis a trade."

"Trade!" said she. "I'd be bound to learn it in two hours."

"Oh no, you wouldn't, Mrs. Marty." Winterborne held down his lantern, and examined the cleanly split hazels as they lay. "Marty," he said, with dry admiration, "your father with his forty years of practice

never made a spar better than that. They are too good for the thatching of houses--they are good enough for the furniture. But I won't tell. Let me look at your hands--your poor hands!"

He had a kindly manner of a quietly severe tone; and when she seemed reluctant to show her hands, he took hold of one and examined it as if it were his own. Her fingers were blistered.

"They'll get harder in time," she said. "For if father continues ill, I shall have to go on wi' it. Now I'll help put 'em up in wagon."

Winterborne without speaking set down his lantern, lifted her as she was about to stoop over the bundles, placed her behind him, and began throwing up the bundles himself. "Rather than you should do it I will," he said. "But the men will be here directly. Why, Marty!--whatever has happened to your head? Lord, it has shrunk to nothing--it looks an apple upon a gate-post!"

Her heart swelled, and she could not speak. At length she managed to groan, looking on the ground, "I've made myself ugly--and hateful--that's what I've done!"

"No, no," he answered. "You've only cut your hair--I see now.

"Then why must you needs say that about apples and gate-posts?"

"Let me see."

"No, no!" She ran off into the gloom of the sluggish dawn. He did not attempt to follow her. When she reached her father's door she stood on the step and looked back. Mr. Melbury's men had arrived, and were loading up the spars, and their lanterns appeared from the distance at which she stood to have wan circles round them, like eyes weary with watching. She observed them for a few seconds as they set about harnessing the horses, and then went indoors.