

CHAPTER IV.

There was now a distinct manifestation of morning in the air, and presently the bleared white visage of a sunless winter day emerged like a dead-born child. The villagers everywhere had already bestirred themselves, rising at this time of the year at the far less dreary hour of absolute darkness. It had been above an hour earlier, before a single bird had untucked his head, that twenty lights were struck in as many bedrooms, twenty pairs of shutters opened, and twenty pairs of eyes stretched to the sky to forecast the weather for the day.

Owls that had been catching mice in the out-houses, rabbits that had been eating the wintergreens in the gardens, and stoats that had been sucking the blood of the rabbits, discerning that their human neighbors were on the move, discreetly withdrew from publicity, and were seen and heard no more that day.

The daylight revealed the whole of Mr. Melbury's homestead, of which the wagon-sheds had been an outlying erection. It formed three sides of an open quadrangle, and consisted of all sorts of buildings, the largest and central one being the dwelling itself. The fourth side of the quadrangle was the public road.

It was a dwelling-house of respectable, roomy, almost dignified aspect; which, taken with the fact that there were the remains of other such buildings thereabout, indicated that Little Hintock had at some time or

other been of greater importance than now, as its old name of Hintock St. Osmond also testified. The house was of no marked antiquity, yet of well-advanced age; older than a stale novelty, but no canonized antique; faded, not hoary; looking at you from the still distinct middle-distance of the early Georgian time, and awakening on that account the instincts of reminiscence more decidedly than the remoter and far grander memorials which have to speak from the misty reaches of mediaevalism. The faces, dress, passions, gratitudes, and revenues of the great-great-grandfathers and grandmothers who had been the first to gaze from those rectangular windows, and had stood under that key-stoned doorway, could be divined and measured by homely standards of to-day. It was a house in whose reverberations queer old personal tales were yet audible if properly listened for; and not, as with those of the castle and cloister, silent beyond the possibility of echo.

The garden-front remained much as it had always been, and there was a porch and entrance that way. But the principal house-door opened on the square yard or quadrangle towards the road, formerly a regular carriage entrance, though the middle of the area was now made use of for stacking timber, fagots, bundles, and other products of the wood. It was divided from the lane by a lichen-coated wall, in which hung a pair of gates, flanked by piers out of the perpendicular, with a round white ball on the top of each.

The building on the left of the enclosure was a long-backed erection, now used for spar-making, sawing, crib-framing, and copse-ware

manufacture in general. Opposite were the wagon-sheds where Marty had deposited her spars.

Here Winterborne had remained after the girl's abrupt departure, to see that the wagon-loads were properly made up. Winterborne was connected with the Melbury family in various ways. In addition to the sentimental relationship which arose from his father having been the first Mrs. Melbury's lover, Winterborne's aunt had married and emigrated with the brother of the timber-merchant many years before--an alliance that was sufficient to place Winterborne, though the poorer, on a footing of social intimacy with the Melburys. As in most villages so secluded as this, intermarriages were of Hapsburgian frequency among the inhabitants, and there were hardly two houses in Little Hintock unrelated by some matrimonial tie or other.

For this reason a curious kind of partnership existed between Melbury and the younger man--a partnership based upon an unwritten code, by which each acted in the way he thought fair towards the other, on a give-and-take principle. Melbury, with his timber and copse-ware business, found that the weight of his labor came in winter and spring. Winterborne was in the apple and cider trade, and his requirements in cartage and other work came in the autumn of each year. Hence horses, wagons, and in some degree men, were handed over to him when the apples began to fall; he, in return, lending his assistance to Melbury in the busiest wood-cutting season, as now.

Before he had left the shed a boy came from the house to ask him to remain till Mr. Melbury had seen him. Winterborne thereupon crossed over to the spar-house where two or three men were already at work, two of them being travelling spar-makers from White-hart Lane, who, when this kind of work began, made their appearance regularly, and when it was over disappeared in silence till the season came again.

Firewood was the one thing abundant in Little Hintock; and a blaze of gad-cuds made the outhouse gay with its light, which vied with that of the day as yet. In the hollow shades of the roof could be seen dangling etiolated arms of ivy which had crept through the joints of the tiles and were groping in vain for some support, their leaves being dwarfed and sickly for want of sunlight; others were pushing in with such force at the eaves as to lift from their supports the shelves that were fixed there.

Besides the itinerant journey-workers there were also present John Upjohn, engaged in the hollow-turnery trade, who lived hard by; old Timothy Tangs and young Timothy Tangs, top and bottom sawyers, at work in Mr. Melbury's pit outside; Farmer Bawtree, who kept the cider-house, and Robert Creedle, an old man who worked for Winterborne, and stood warming his hands; these latter being enticed in by the ruddy blaze, though they had no particular business there. None of them call for any remark except, perhaps, Creedle. To have completely described him it would have been necessary to write a military memoir, for he wore under his smock-frock a cast-off soldier's jacket that had seen hot

service, its collar showing just above the flap of the frock; also a hunting memoir, to include the top-boots that he had picked up by chance; also chronicles of voyaging and shipwreck, for his pocket-knife had been given him by a weather-beaten sailor. But Creedle carried about with him on his uneventful rounds these silent testimonies of war, sport, and adventure, and thought nothing of their associations or their stories.

Copse-work, as it was called, being an occupation which the secondary intelligence of the hands and arms could carry on without requiring the sovereign attention of the head, the minds of its professors wandered considerably from the objects before them; hence the tales, chronicles, and ramifications of family history which were recounted here were of a very exhaustive kind, and sometimes so interminable as to defy description.

Winterborne, seeing that Melbury had not arrived, stepped back again outside the door; and the conversation interrupted by his momentary presence flowed anew, reaching his ears as an accompaniment to the regular dripping of the fog from the plantation boughs around.

The topic at present handled was a highly popular and frequent one--the personal character of Mrs. Charmond, the owner of the surrounding woods and groves.

"My brother-in-law told me, and I have no reason to doubt it," said

Creedle, "that she'd sit down to her dinner with a frock hardly higher than her elbows. 'Oh, you wicked woman!' he said to himself when he first see her, 'you go to your church, and sit, and kneel, as if your knee-jints were greased with very saint's anointment, and tell off your Hear-us-good-Lords like a business man counting money; and yet you can eat your victuals such a figure as that!' Whether she's a reformed character by this time I can't say; but I don't care who the man is, that's how she went on when my brother-in-law lived there."

"Did she do it in her husband's time?"

"That I don't know--hardly, I should think, considering his temper. Ah!" Here Creedle threw grieved remembrance into physical form by slowly resigning his head to obliquity and letting his eyes water.

"That man! 'Not if the angels of heaven come down, Creedle,' he said, 'shall you do another day's work for me!' Yes--he'd say anything--anything; and would as soon take a winged creature's name in vain as yours or mine! Well, now I must get these spars home-along, and to-morrow, thank God, I must see about using 'em."

An old woman now entered upon the scene. She was Mr. Melbury's servant, and passed a great part of her time in crossing the yard between the house-door and the spar-shed, whither she had come now for fuel. She had two facial aspects--one, of a soft and flexible kind, she used indoors when assisting about the parlor or upstairs; the other, with stiff lines and corners, when she was bustling among the

men in the spar-house or out-of-doors.

"Ah, Grammer Oliver," said John Upjohn, "it do do my heart good to see a old woman like you so dapper and stirring, when I bear in mind that after fifty one year counts as two did afore! But your smoke didn't rise this morning till twenty minutes past seven by my beater; and that's late, Grammer Oliver."

"If you was a full-sized man, John, people might take notice of your scornful meanings. But your growing up was such a scrimped and scanty business that really a woman couldn't feel hurt if you were to spit fire and brimstone itself at her. Here," she added, holding out a spar-gad to one of the workmen, from which dangled a long black-pudding--"here's something for thy breakfast, and if you want tea you must fetch it from in-doors."

"Mr. Melbury is late this morning," said the bottom-sawyer.

"Yes. 'Twas a dark dawn," said Mrs. Oliver. "Even when I opened the door, so late as I was, you couldn't have told poor men from gentlemen, or John from a reasonable-sized object. And I don't think maister's slept at all well to-night. He's anxious about his daughter; and I know what that is, for I've cried bucketfuls for my own."

When the old woman had gone Creedle said,

"He'll fret his gizzard green if he don't soon hear from that maid of his. Well, learning is better than houses and lands. But to keep a maid at school till she is taller out of pattens than her mother was in 'em--'tis tempting Providence."

"It seems no time ago that she was a little playward girl," said young Timothy Tangs.

"I can mind her mother," said the hollow-turner. "Always a teuny, delicate piece; her touch upon your hand was as soft and cool as wind. She was inoculated for the small-pox and had it beautifully fine, just about the time that I was out of my apprenticeship--ay, and a long apprenticeship 'twas. I served that master of mine six years and three hundred and fourteen days."

The hollow-turner pronounced the days with emphasis, as if, considering their number, they were a rather more remarkable fact than the years.

"Mr. Winterborne's father walked with her at one time," said old Timothy Tangs. "But Mr. Melbury won her. She was a child of a woman, and would cry like rain if so be he huffed her. Whenever she and her husband came to a puddle in their walks together he'd take her up like a half-penny doll and put her over without dirtying her a speck. And if he keeps the daughter so long at boarding-school, he'll make her as nesh as her mother was. But here he comes."

Just before this moment Winterborne had seen Melbury crossing the court from his door. He was carrying an open letter in his hand, and came straight to Winterborne. His gloom of the preceding night had quite gone.

"I'd no sooner made up my mind, Giles, to go and see why Grace didn't come or write than I get a letter from her--'Clifton: Wednesday. My dear father,' says she, 'I'm coming home to-morrow' (that's to-day), 'but I didn't think it worth while to write long beforehand.' The little rascal, and didn't she! Now, Giles, as you are going to Sherton market to-day with your apple-trees, why not join me and Grace there, and we'll drive home all together?"

He made the proposal with cheerful energy; he was hardly the same man as the man of the small dark hours. Ever it happens that even among the moodiest the tendency to be cheered is stronger than the tendency to be cast down; and a soul's specific gravity stands permanently less than that of the sea of troubles into which it is thrown.

Winterborne, though not demonstrative, replied to this suggestion with something like alacrity. There was not much doubt that Marty's grounds for cutting off her hair were substantial enough, if Ambrose's eyes had been a reason for keeping it on. As for the timber-merchant, it was plain that his invitation had been given solely in pursuance of his scheme for uniting the pair. He had made up his mind to the course as a duty, and was strenuously bent upon following it out.

Accompanied by Winterborne, he now turned towards the door of the spar-house, when his footsteps were heard by the men as aforesaid.

"Well, John, and Lot," he said, nodding as he entered. "A rimy morning."

"'Tis, sir!" said Creedle, energetically; for, not having as yet been able to summon force sufficient to go away and begin work, he felt the necessity of throwing some into his speech. "I don't care who the man is, 'tis the rimiest morning we've had this fall."

"I heard you wondering why I've kept my daughter so long at boarding-school," resumed Mr. Melbury, looking up from the letter which he was reading anew by the fire, and turning to them with the suddenness that was a trait in him. "Hey?" he asked, with affected shrewdness. "But you did, you know. Well, now, though it is my own business more than anybody else's, I'll tell ye. When I was a boy, another boy--the pa'son's son--along with a lot of others, asked me 'Who dragged Whom round the walls of What?' and I said, 'Sam Barrett, who dragged his wife in a chair round the tower corner when she went to be churched.' They laughed at me with such torrents of scorn that I went home ashamed, and couldn't sleep for shame; and I cried that night till my pillow was wet: till at last I thought to myself there and then--'They may laugh at me for my ignorance, but that was father's fault, and none o' my making, and I must bear it. But they shall never

laugh at my children, if I have any: I'll starve first! Thank God, I've been able to keep her at school without sacrifice; and her scholarship is such that she stayed on as governess for a time. Let 'em laugh now if they can: Mrs. Charmond herself is not better informed than my girl Grace."

There was something between high indifference and humble emotion in his delivery, which made it difficult for them to reply. Winterborne's interest was of a kind which did not show itself in words; listening, he stood by the fire, mechanically stirring the embers with a spar-gad.

"You'll be, then, ready, Giles?" Melbury continued, awaking from a reverie. "Well, what was the latest news at Shottsford yesterday, Mr. Bawtree?"

"Well, Shottsford is Shottsford still--you can't victual your carcass there unless you've got money; and you can't buy a cup of genuine there, whether or no....But as the saying is, 'Go abroad and you'll hear news of home.' It seems that our new neighbor, this young Dr. What's-his-name, is a strange, deep, perusing gentleman; and there's good reason for supposing he has sold his soul to the wicked one."

"'Od name it all," murmured the timber-merchant, unimpressed by the news, but reminded of other things by the subject of it; "I've got to meet a gentleman this very morning? and yet I've planned to go to Sherton Abbas for the maid."

"I won't praise the doctor's wisdom till I hear what sort of bargain he's made," said the top-sawyer.

"'Tis only an old woman's tale," said Bawtree. "But it seems that he wanted certain books on some mysterious science or black-art, and in order that the people hereabout should not know anything about his dark readings, he ordered 'em direct from London, and not from the Sherton book-seller. The parcel was delivered by mistake at the pa'son's, and he wasn't at home; so his wife opened it, and went into hysterics when she read 'em, thinking her husband had turned heathen, and 'twould be the ruin of the children. But when he came he said he knew no more about 'em than she; and found they were this Mr. Fitzpier's property. So he wrote 'Beware!' outside, and sent 'em on by the sexton."

"He must be a curious young man," mused the hollow-turner.

"He must," said Timothy Tangs.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Melbury, authoritatively, "he's only a gentleman fond of science and philosophy and poetry, and, in fact, every kind of knowledge; and being lonely here, he passes his time in making such matters his hobby."

"Well," said old Timothy, "'tis a strange thing about doctors that the worse they be the better they be. I mean that if you hear anything of

this sort about 'em, ten to one they can cure ye as nobody else can."

"True," said Bawtree, emphatically. "And for my part I shall take my custom from old Jones and go to this one directly I've anything the matter with me. That last medicine old Jones gave me had no taste in it at all."

Mr. Melbury, as became a well-informed man, did not listen to these recitals, being moreover preoccupied with the business appointment which had come into his head. He walked up and down, looking on the floor--his usual custom when undecided. That stiffness about the arm, hip, and knee-joint which was apparent when he walked was the net product of the divers sprains and over-exertions that had been required of him in handling trees and timber when a young man, for he was of the sort called self-made, and had worked hard. He knew the origin of every one of these cramps: that in his left shoulder had come of carrying a pollard, unassisted, from Tutcombe Bottom home; that in one leg was caused by the crash of an elm against it when they were felling; that in the other was from lifting a bole. On many a morrow after wearying himself by these prodigious muscular efforts, he had risen from his bed fresh as usual; his lassitude had departed, apparently forever; and confident in the recuperative power of his youth, he had repeated the strains anew. But treacherous Time had been only hiding ill results when they could be guarded against, for greater accumulation when they could not. In his declining years the store had been unfolded in the form of rheumatisms, pricks, and spasms, in every

one of which Melbury recognized some act which, had its consequence been contemporaneously made known, he would wisely have abstained from repeating.

On a summons by Grammer Oliver to breakfast, he left the shed. Reaching the kitchen, where the family breakfasted in winter to save house-labor, he sat down by the fire, and looked a long time at the pair of dancing shadows cast by each fire-iron and dog-knob on the whitewashed chimney-corner--a yellow one from the window, and a blue one from the fire.

"I don't quite know what to do to-day," he said to his wife at last.

"I've recollected that I promised to meet Mrs. Charmond's steward in Round Wood at twelve o'clock, and yet I want to go for Grace."

"Why not let Giles fetch her by himself? 'Twill bring 'em together all the quicker."

"I could do that--but I should like to go myself. I always have gone, without fail, every time hitherto. It has been a great pleasure to drive into Sherton, and wait and see her arrive; and perhaps she'll be disappointed if I stay away."

"Yon may be disappointed, but I don't think she will, if you send Giles," said Mrs. Melbury, dryly.

"Very well--I'll send him."

Melbury was often persuaded by the quietude of his wife's words when strenuous argument would have had no effect. This second Mrs. Melbury was a placid woman, who had been nurse to his child Grace before her mother's death. After that melancholy event little Grace had clung to the nurse with much affection; and ultimately Melbury, in dread lest the only woman who cared for the girl should be induced to leave her, persuaded the mild Lucy to marry him. The arrangement--for it was little more--had worked satisfactorily enough; Grace had thriven, and Melbury had not repented.

He returned to the spar-house and found Giles near at hand, to whom he explained the change of plan. "As she won't arrive till five o'clock, you can get your business very well over in time to receive her," said Melbury. "The green gig will do for her; you'll spin along quicker with that, and won't be late upon the road. Her boxes can be called for by one of the wagons."

Winterborne, knowing nothing of the timber-merchant's restitutory aims, quietly thought all this to be a kindly chance. Wishing even more than her father to despatch his apple-tree business in the market before Grace's arrival, he prepared to start at once.

Melbury was careful that the turnout should be seemly. The gig-wheels, for instance, were not always washed during winter-time before a

journey, the muddy roads rendering that labor useless; but they were washed to-day. The harness was blacked, and when the rather elderly white horse had been put in, and Winterborne was in his seat ready to start, Mr. Melbury stepped out with a blacking-brush, and with his own hands touched over the yellow hoofs of the animal.

"You see, Giles," he said, as he blacked, "coming from a fashionable school, she might feel shocked at the homeliness of home; and 'tis these little things that catch a dainty woman's eye if they are neglected. We, living here alone, don't notice how the whitey-brown creeps out of the earth over us; but she, fresh from a city--why, she'll notice everything!"

"That she will," said Giles.

"And scorn us if we don't mind."

"Not scorn us."

"No, no, no--that's only words. She's too good a girl to do that. But when we consider what she knows, and what she has seen since she last saw us, 'tis as well to meet her views as nearly as possible. Why, 'tis a year since she was in this old place, owing to her going abroad in the summer, which I agreed to, thinking it best for her; and naturally we shall look small, just at first--I only say just at first."

Mr. Melbury's tone evinced a certain exultation in the very sense of that inferiority he affected to deplore; for this advanced and refined being, was she not his own all the time? Not so Giles; he felt doubtful--perhaps a trifle cynical--for that strand was wound into him with the rest. He looked at his clothes with misgiving, then with indifference.

It was his custom during the planting season to carry a specimen apple-tree to market with him as an advertisement of what he dealt in. This had been tied across the gig; and as it would be left behind in the town, it would cause no inconvenience to Miss Grace Melbury coming home.

He drove away, the twigs nodding with each step of the horse; and Melbury went in-doors. Before the gig had passed out of sight, Mr. Melbury reappeared and shouted after--

"Here, Giles," he said, breathlessly following with some wraps, "it may be very chilly to-night, and she may want something extra about her. And, Giles," he added, when the young man, having taken the articles, put the horse in motion once more, "tell her that I should have come myself, but I had particular business with Mrs. Charmond's agent, which prevented me. Don't forget."

He watched Winterborne out of sight, saying, with a jerk--a shape into which emotion with him often resolved itself--"There, now, I hope the

two will bring it to a point and have done with it! 'Tis a pity to let
such a girl throw herself away upon him--a thousand pities!...And yet
'tis my duty for his father's sake."