

## CHAPTER VI.

Meanwhile, Winterborne and Grace Melbury had also undergone their little experiences of the same homeward journey.

As he drove off with her out of the town the glances of people fell upon them, the younger thinking that Mr. Winterborne was in a pleasant place, and wondering in what relation he stood towards her.

Winterborne himself was unconscious of this. Occupied solely with the idea of having her in charge, he did not notice much with outward eye, neither observing how she was dressed, nor the effect of the picture they together composed in the landscape.

Their conversation was in briefest phrase for some time, Grace being somewhat disconcerted, through not having understood till they were about to start that Giles was to be her sole conductor in place of her father. When they were in the open country he spoke.

"Don't Brownley's farm-buildings look strange to you, now they have been moved bodily from the hollow where the old ones stood to the top of the hill?"

She admitted that they did, though she should not have seen any difference in them if he had not pointed it out.

"They had a good crop of bitter-sweets; they couldn't grind them all"

(nodding towards an orchard where some heaps of apples had been left lying ever since the ingathering).

She said "Yes," but looking at another orchard.

"Why, you are looking at John-apple-trees! You know bitter-sweets--you used to well enough!"

"I am afraid I have forgotten, and it is getting too dark to distinguish."

Winterborne did not continue. It seemed as if the knowledge and interest which had formerly moved Grace's mind had quite died away from her. He wondered whether the special attributes of his image in the past had evaporated like these other things.

However that might be, the fact at present was merely this, that where he was seeing John-apples and farm-buildings she was beholding a far remoter scene--a scene no less innocent and simple, indeed, but much contrasting--a broad lawn in the fashionable suburb of a fast city, the evergreen leaves shining in the evening sun, amid which bounding girls, gracefully clad in artistic arrangements of blue, brown, red, black, and white, were playing at games, with laughter and chat, in all the pride of life, the notes of piano and harp trembling in the air from the open windows adjoining. Moreover, they were girls--and this was a fact which Grace Melbury's delicate femininity could not lose sight

of--whose parents Giles would have addressed with a deferential Sir or Madam. Beside this visioned scene the homely farmsteads did not quite hold their own from her present twenty-year point of survey. For all his woodland sequestration, Giles knew the primitive simplicity of the subject he had started, and now sounded a deeper note.

"'Twas very odd what we said to each other years ago; I often think of it. I mean our saying that if we still liked each other when you were twenty and I twenty-five, we'd--"

"It was child's tattle."

"H'm!" said Giles, suddenly.

"I mean we were young," said she, more considerately. That gruff manner of his in making inquiries reminded her that he was unaltered in much.

"Yes....I beg your pardon, Miss Melbury; your father SENT me to meet you to-day."

"I know it, and I am glad of it."

He seemed satisfied with her tone and went on: "At that time you were sitting beside me at the back of your father's covered car, when we were coming home from gypsying, all the party being squeezed in

together as tight as sheep in an auction-pen. It got darker and darker, and I said--I forget the exact words--but I put my arm round your waist and there you let it stay till your father, sitting in front suddenly stopped telling his story to Farmer Bollen, to light his pipe. The flash shone into the car, and showed us all up distinctly; my arm flew from your waist like lightning; yet not so quickly but that some of 'em had seen, and laughed at us. Yet your father, to our amazement, instead of being angry, was mild as milk, and seemed quite pleased. Have you forgot all that, or haven't you?"

She owned that she remembered it very well, now that he mentioned the circumstances. "But, goodness! I must have been in short frocks," she said.

"Come now, Miss Melbury, that won't do! Short frocks, indeed! You know better, as well as I."

Grace thereupon declared that she would not argue with an old friend she valued so highly as she valued him, saying the words with the easy elusiveness that will be polite at all costs. It might possibly be true, she added, that she was getting on in girlhood when that event took place; but if it were so, then she was virtually no less than an old woman now, so far did the time seem removed from her present. "Do you ever look at things philosophically instead of personally?" she asked.

"I can't say that I do," answered Giles, his eyes lingering far ahead upon a dark spot, which proved to be a brougham.

"I think you may, sometimes, with advantage," said she. "Look at yourself as a pitcher drifting on the stream with other pitchers, and consider what contrivances are most desirable for avoiding cracks in general, and not only for saving your poor one. Shall I tell you all about Bath or Cheltenham, or places on the Continent that I visited last summer?"

"With all my heart."

She then described places and persons in such terms as might have been used for that purpose by any woman to any man within the four seas, so entirely absent from that description was everything specially appertaining to her own existence. When she had done she said, gayly, "Now do you tell me in return what has happened in Hintock since I have been away."

"Anything to keep the conversation away from her and me," said Giles within him.

It was true cultivation had so far advanced in the soil of Miss Melbury's mind as to lead her to talk by rote of anything save of that she knew well, and had the greatest interest in developing--that is to say, herself.

He had not proceeded far with his somewhat bald narration when they drew near the carriage that had been preceding them for some time.

Miss Melbury inquired if he knew whose carriage it was.

Winterborne, although he had seen it, had not taken it into account.

On examination, he said it was Mrs. Charmond's.

Grace watched the vehicle and its easy roll, and seemed to feel more nearly akin to it than to the one she was in.

"Pooh! We can polish off the mileage as well as they, come to that," said Winterborne, reading her mind; and rising to emulation at what it bespoke, he whipped on the horse. This it was which had brought the nose of Mr. Melbury's old gray close to the back of Mrs. Charmond's much-eclipsing vehicle.

"There's Marty South sitting up with the coachman," said he, discerning her by her dress.

"Ah, poor Marty! I must ask her to come to see me this very evening. How does she happen to be riding there?"

"I don't know. It is very singular."

Thus these people with converging destinies went along the road

together, till Winterborne, leaving the track of the carriage, turned into Little Hintock, where almost the first house was the timber-merchant's. Pencils of dancing light streamed out of the windows sufficiently to show the white laurestinus flowers, and glance over the polished leaves of laurel. The interior of the rooms could be seen distinctly, warmed up by the fire-flames, which in the parlor were reflected from the glass of the pictures and bookcase, and in the kitchen from the utensils and ware.

"Let us look at the dear place for a moment before we call them," she said.

In the kitchen dinner was preparing; for though Melbury dined at one o'clock at other times, to-day the meal had been kept back for Grace. A rickety old spit was in motion, its end being fixed in the fire-dog, and the whole kept going by means of a cord conveyed over pulleys along the ceiling to a large stone suspended in a corner of the room. Old Grammer Oliver came and wound it up with a rattle like that of a mill.

In the parlor a large shade of Mrs. Melbury's head fell on the wall and ceiling; but before the girl had regarded this room many moments their presence was discovered, and her father and stepmother came out to welcome her.

The character of the Melbury family was of that kind which evinces some shyness in showing strong emotion among each other: a trait frequent in

rural households, and one which stands in curiously inverse relation to most of the peculiarities distinguishing villagers from the people of towns. Thus hiding their warmer feelings under commonplace talk all round, Grace's reception produced no extraordinary demonstrations. But that more was felt than was enacted appeared from the fact that her father, in taking her in-doors, quite forgot the presence of Giles without, as did also Grace herself. He said nothing, but took the gig round to the yard and called out from the spar-house the man who particularly attended to these matters when there was no conversation to draw him off among the copse-workers inside. Winterborne then returned to the door with the intention of entering the house.

The family had gone into the parlor, and were still absorbed in themselves. The fire was, as before, the only light, and it irradiated Grace's face and hands so as to make them look wondrously smooth and fair beside those of the two elders; shining also through the loose hair about her temples as sunlight through a brake. Her father was surveying her in a dazed conjecture, so much had she developed and progressed in manner and stature since he last had set eyes on her.

Observing these things, Winterborne remained dubious by the door, mechanically tracing with his fingers certain time-worn letters carved in the jambs--initials of by-gone generations of householders who had lived and died there.

No, he declared to himself, he would not enter and join the family;



they had forgotten him, and it was enough for to-day that he had brought her home. Still, he was a little surprised that her father's eagerness to send him for Grace should have resulted in such an anticlimax as this.

He walked softly away into the lane towards his own house, looking back when he reached the turning, from which he could get a last glimpse of the timber-merchant's roof. He hazarded guesses as to what Grace was saying just at that moment, and murmured, with some self-derision, "nothing about me!" He looked also in the other direction, and saw against the sky the thatched hip and solitary chimney of Marty's cottage, and thought of her too, struggling bravely along under that humble shelter, among her spar-gads and pots and skimmers.

At the timber-merchant's, in the mean time, the conversation flowed; and, as Giles Winterborne had rightly enough deemed, on subjects in which he had no share. Among the excluding matters there was, for one, the effect upon Mr. Melbury of the womanly mien and manners of his daughter, which took him so much unawares that, though it did not make him absolutely forget the existence of her conductor homeward, thrust Giles's image back into quite the obscurest cellarage of his brain. Another was his interview with Mrs. Charmond's agent that morning, at which the lady herself had been present for a few minutes. Melbury had purchased some standing timber from her a long time before, and now that the date had come for felling it he was left to pursue almost his own course. This was what the household were actually talking of

during Giles's cogitation without; and Melbury's satisfaction with the clear atmosphere that had arisen between himself and the deity of the groves which enclosed his residence was the cause of a counterbalancing mistiness on the side towards Winterborne.

"So thoroughly does she trust me," said Melbury, "that I might fell, top, or lop, on my own judgment, any stick o' timber whatever in her wood, and fix the price o't, and settle the matter. But, name it all! I wouldn't do such a thing. However, it may be useful to have this good understanding with her....I wish she took more interest in the place, and stayed here all the year round."

"I am afraid 'tis not her regard for you, but her dislike of Hintock, that makes her so easy about the trees," said Mrs. Melbury.

When dinner was over, Grace took a candle and began to ramble pleurably through the rooms of her old home, from which she had latterly become wellnigh an alien. Each nook and each object revived a memory, and simultaneously modified it. The chambers seemed lower than they had appeared on any previous occasion of her return, the surfaces of both walls and ceilings standing in such relations to the eye that it could not avoid taking microscopic note of their irregularities and old fashion. Her own bedroom wore at once a look more familiar than when she had left it, and yet a face estranged. The world of little things therein gazed at her in helpless stationariness, as though they had tried and been unable to make any progress without her presence.

Over the place where her candle had been accustomed to stand, when she had used to read in bed till the midnight hour, there was still the brown spot of smoke. She did not know that her father had taken especial care to keep it from being cleaned off.

Having concluded her perambulation of this now uselessly commodious edifice, Grace began to feel that she had come a long journey since the morning; and when her father had been up himself, as well as his wife, to see that her room was comfortable and the fire burning, she prepared to retire for the night. No sooner, however, was she in bed than her momentary sleepiness took itself off, and she wished she had stayed up longer. She amused herself by listening to the old familiar noises that she could hear to be still going on down-stairs, and by looking towards the window as she lay. The blind had been drawn up, as she used to have it when a girl, and she could just discern the dim tree-tops against the sky on the neighboring hill. Beneath this meeting-line of light and shade nothing was visible save one solitary point of light, which blinked as the tree-twigs waved to and fro before its beams. From its position it seemed to radiate from the window of a house on the hill-side. The house had been empty when she was last at home, and she wondered who inhabited the place now.

Her conjectures, however, were not intently carried on, and she was watching the light quite idly, when it gradually changed color, and at length shone blue as sapphire. Thus it remained several minutes, and then it passed through violet to red.

Her curiosity was so widely awakened by the phenomenon that she sat up in bed, and stared steadily at the shine. An appearance of this sort, sufficient to excite attention anywhere, was no less than a marvel in Hintock, as Grace had known the hamlet. Almost every diurnal and nocturnal effect in that woodland place had hitherto been the direct result of the regular terrestrial roll which produced the season's changes; but here was something dissociated from these normal sequences, and foreign to local habit and knowledge.

It was about this moment that Grace heard the household below preparing to retire, the most emphatic noise in the proceeding being that of her father bolting the doors. Then the stairs creaked, and her father and mother passed her chamber. The last to come was Grammer Oliver.

Grace slid out of bed, ran across the room, and lifting the latch, said, "I am not asleep, Grammer. Come in and talk to me."

Before the old woman had entered, Grace was again under the bedclothes. Grammer set down her candlestick, and seated herself on the edge of Miss Melbury's coverlet.

"I want you to tell me what light that is I see on the hill-side," said Grace.

Mrs. Oliver looked across. "Oh, that," she said, "is from the

doctor's. He's often doing things of that sort. Perhaps you don't know that we've a doctor living here now--Mr. Fitzpiers by name?"

Grace admitted that she had not heard of him.

"Well, then, miss, he's come here to get up a practice. I know him very well, through going there to help 'em scrub sometimes, which your father said I might do, if I wanted to, in my spare time. Being a bachelor-man, he've only a lad in the house. Oh yes, I know him very well. Sometimes he'll talk to me as if I were his own mother."

"Indeed."

"Yes. 'Grammer,' he said one day, when I asked him why he came here where there's hardly anybody living, 'I'll tell you why I came here. I took a map, and I marked on it where Dr. Jones's practice ends to the north of this district, and where Mr. Taylor's ends on the south, and little Jimmy Green's on the east, and somebody else's to the west. Then I took a pair of compasses, and found the exact middle of the country that was left between these bounds, and that middle was Little Hintock; so here I am....' But, Lord, there: poor young man!"

"Why?"

"He said, 'Grammer Oliver, I've been here three months, and although there are a good many people in the Hintocks and the villages round,

and a scattered practice is often a very good one, I don't seem to get many patients. And there's no society at all; and I'm pretty near melancholy mad,' he said, with a great yawn. 'I should be quite if it were not for my books, and my lab--laboratory, and what not. Grammer, I was made for higher things.' And then he'd yawn and yawn again."

"Was he really made for higher things, do you think? I mean, is he clever?"

"Well, no. How can he be clever? He may be able to jine up a broken man or woman after a fashion, and put his finger upon an ache if you tell him nearly where 'tis; but these young men--they should live to my time of life, and then they'd see how clever they were at five-and-twenty! And yet he's a projick, a real projick, and says the oddest of rozums. 'Ah, Grammer,' he said, at another time, 'let me tell you that Everything is Nothing. There's only Me and not Me in the whole world.' And he told me that no man's hands could help what they did, any more than the hands of a clock....Yes, he's a man of strange meditations, and his eyes seem to see as far as the north star."

"He will soon go away, no doubt."

"I don't think so." Grace did not say "Why?" and Grammer hesitated. At last she went on: "Don't tell your father or mother, miss, if I let you know a secret."

Grace gave the required promise.

"Well, he talks of buying me; so he won't go away just yet."

"Buying you!--how?"

"Not my soul--my body, when I'm dead. One day when I was there cleaning, he said, 'Grammer, you've a large brain--a very large organ of brain,' he said. 'A woman's is usually four ounces less than a man's; but yours is man's size.' Well, then--hee, hee!--after he'd flattered me a bit like that, he said he'd give me ten pounds to have me as a natomy after my death. Well, knowing I'd no chick nor chiel left, and nobody with any interest in me, I thought, faith, if I can be of any use to my fellow-creatures after I'm gone they are welcome to my services; so I said I'd think it over, and would most likely agree and take the ten pounds. Now this is a secret, miss, between us two. The money would be very useful to me; and I see no harm in it."

"Of course there's no harm. But oh, Grammer, how can you think to do it? I wish you hadn't told me."

"I wish I hadn't--if you don't like to know it, miss. But you needn't mind. Lord--hee, hee!--I shall keep him waiting many a year yet, bless ye!"

"I hope you will, I am sure."

The girl thereupon fell into such deep reflection that conversation languished, and Grammer Oliver, taking her candle, wished Miss Melbury good-night. The latter's eyes rested on the distant glimmer, around which she allowed her reasoning fancy to play in vague eddies that shaped the doings of the philosopher behind that light on the lines of intelligence just received. It was strange to her to come back from the world to Little Hintock and find in one of its nooks, like a tropical plant in a hedgerow, a nucleus of advanced ideas and practices which had nothing in common with the life around. Chemical experiments, anatomical projects, and metaphysical conceptions had found a strange home here.

Thus she remained thinking, the imagined pursuits of the man behind the light intermingling with conjectural sketches of his personality, till her eyes fell together with their own heaviness, and she slept.