

## CHAPTER VIII.

The inspiring appointment which had led Grace Melbury to indulge in a six-candle illumination for the arrangement of her attire, carried her over the ground the next morning with a springy tread. Her sense of being properly appreciated on her own native soil seemed to brighten the atmosphere and herbage around her, as the glowworm's lamp irradiates the grass. Thus she moved along, a vessel of emotion going to empty itself on she knew not what.

Twenty minutes' walking through copses, over a stile, and along an upland lawn brought her to the verge of a deep glen, at the bottom of which Hintock House appeared immediately beneath her eye. To describe it as standing in a hollow would not express the situation of the manor-house; it stood in a hole, notwithstanding that the hole was full of beauty. From the spot which Grace had reached a stone could easily have been thrown over or into, the birds'-nested chimneys of the mansion. Its walls were surmounted by a battlemented parapet; but the gray lead roofs were quite visible behind it, with their gutters, laps, rolls, and skylights, together with incised letterings and shoe-patterns cut by idlers thereon.

The front of the house exhibited an ordinary manorial presentation of Elizabethan windows, mullioned and hooded, worked in rich snuff-colored freestone from local quarries. The ashlar of the walls, where not overgrown with ivy and other creepers, was coated with lichen of every

shade, intensifying its luxuriance with its nearness to the ground, till, below the plinth, it merged in moss.

Above the house to the back was a dense plantation, the roots of whose trees were above the level of the chimneys. The corresponding high ground on which Grace stood was richly grassed, with only an old tree here and there. A few sheep lay about, which, as they ruminated, looked quietly into the bedroom windows. The situation of the house, prejudicial to humanity, was a stimulus to vegetation, on which account an endless shearing of the heavy-armed ivy was necessary, and a continual lopping of trees and shrubs. It was an edifice built in times when human constitutions were damp-proof, when shelter from the boisterous was all that men thought of in choosing a dwelling-place, the insidious being beneath their notice; and its hollow site was an ocular reminder, by its unfitness for modern lives, of the fragility to which these have declined. The highest architectural cunning could have done nothing to make Hintock House dry and salubrious; and ruthless ignorance could have done little to make it unpicturesque. It was vegetable nature's own home; a spot to inspire the painter and poet of still life--if they did not suffer too much from the relaxing atmosphere--and to draw groans from the gregariously disposed. Grace descended the green escarpment by a zigzag path into the drive, which swept round beneath the slope. The exterior of the house had been familiar to her from her childhood, but she had never been inside, and the approach to knowing an old thing in a new way was a lively experience. It was with a little flutter that she was shown in; but

she recollected that Mrs. Charmond would probably be alone. Up to a few days before this time that lady had been accompanied in her comings, stayings, and goings by a relative believed to be her aunt; latterly, however, these two ladies had separated, owing, it was supposed, to a quarrel, and Mrs. Charmond had been left desolate. Being presumably a woman who did not care for solitude, this deprivation might possibly account for her sudden interest in Grace.

Mrs. Charmond was at the end of a gallery opening from the hall when Miss Melbury was announced, and saw her through the glass doors between them. She came forward with a smile on her face, and told the young girl it was good of her to come.

"Ah! you have noticed those," she said, seeing that Grace's eyes were attracted by some curious objects against the walls. "They are man-traps. My husband was a connoisseur in man-traps and spring-guns and such articles, collecting them from all his neighbors. He knew the histories of all these--which gin had broken a man's leg, which gun had killed a man. That one, I remember his saying, had been set by a game-keeper in the track of a notorious poacher; but the keeper, forgetting what he had done, went that way himself, received the charge in the lower part of his body, and died of the wound. I don't like them here, but I've never yet given directions for them to be taken away." She added, playfully, "Man-traps are of rather ominous significance where a person of our sex lives, are they not?"

Grace was bound to smile; but that side of womanliness was one which her inexperience had no great zest in contemplating.

"They are interesting, no doubt, as relics of a barbarous time happily past," she said, looking thoughtfully at the varied designs of these instruments of torture--some with semi-circular jaws, some with rectangular; most of them with long, sharp teeth, but a few with none, so that their jaws looked like the blank gums of old age.

"Well, we must not take them too seriously," said Mrs. Charmond, with an indolent turn of her head, and they moved on inward. When she had shown her visitor different articles in cabinets that she deemed likely to interest her, some tapestries, wood-carvings, ivories, miniatures, and so on--always with a mien of listlessness which might either have been constitutional, or partly owing to the situation of the place--they sat down to an early cup of tea.

"Will you pour it out, please? Do," she said, leaning back in her chair, and placing her hand above her forehead, while her almond eyes--those long eyes so common to the angelic legions of early Italian art--became longer, and her voice more languishing. She showed that oblique-mannered softness which is perhaps most frequent in women of darker complexion and more lymphatic temperament than Mrs. Charmond's was; who lingeringly smile their meanings to men rather than speak them, who inveigle rather than prompt, and take advantage of currents rather than steer.

"I am the most inactive woman when I am here," she said. "I think sometimes I was born to live and do nothing, nothing, nothing but float about, as we fancy we do sometimes in dreams. But that cannot be really my destiny, and I must struggle against such fancies."

"I am so sorry you do not enjoy exertion--it is quite sad! I wish I could tend you and make you very happy."

There was something so sympathetic, so appreciative, in the sound of Grace's voice, that it impelled people to play havoc with their customary reservations in talking to her. "It is tender and kind of you to feel that," said Mrs. Charmond. "Perhaps I have given you the notion that my languor is more than it really is. But this place oppresses me, and I have a plan of going abroad a good deal. I used to go with a relative, but that arrangement has dropped through."

Regarding Grace with a final glance of criticism, she seemed to make up her mind to consider the young girl satisfactory, and continued: "Now I am often impelled to record my impressions of times and places. I have often thought of writing a 'New Sentimental Journey.' But I cannot find energy enough to do it alone. When I am at different places in the south of Europe I feel a crowd of ideas and fancies thronging upon me continually, but to unfold writing-materials, take up a cold steel pen, and put these impressions down systematically on cold, smooth paper--that I cannot do. So I have thought that if I always could have somebody at my elbow with whom I am in sympathy, I might dictate any

ideas that come into my head. And directly I had made your acquaintance the other day it struck me that you would suit me so well. Would you like to undertake it? You might read to me, too, if desirable. Will you think it over, and ask your parents if they are willing?"

"Oh yes," said Grace. "I am almost sure they would be very glad."

"You are so accomplished, I hear; I should be quite honored by such intellectual company."

Grace, modestly blushing, deprecated any such idea.

"Do you keep up your lucubrations at Little Hintock?"

"Oh no. Lucubrations are not unknown at Little Hintock; but they are not carried on by me."

"What--another student in that retreat?"

"There is a surgeon lately come, and I have heard that he reads a great deal--I see his light sometimes through the trees late at night."

"Oh yes--a doctor--I believe I was told of him. It is a strange place for him to settle in."

"It is a convenient centre for a practice, they say. But he does not confine his studies to medicine, it seems. He investigates theology and metaphysics and all sorts of subjects."

"What is his name?"

"Fitzpiers. He represents a very old family, I believe, the Fitzpierses of Buckbury-Fitzpiers--not a great many miles from here."

"I am not sufficiently local to know the history of the family. I was never in the county till my husband brought me here." Mrs. Charmond did not care to pursue this line of investigation. Whatever mysterious merit might attach to family antiquity, it was one which, though she herself could claim it, her adaptable, wandering weltburgerliche nature had grown tired of caring about--a peculiarity that made her a contrast to her neighbors. "It is of rather more importance to know what the man is himself than what his family is," she said, "if he is going to practise upon us as a surgeon. Have you seen him?"

Grace had not. "I think he is not a very old man," she added.

"Has he a wife?"

"I am not aware that he has."

"Well, I hope he will be useful here. I must get to know him when I

come back. It will be very convenient to have a medical man--if he is clever--in one's own parish. I get dreadfully nervous sometimes, living in such an outlandish place; and Sherton is so far to send to. No doubt you feel Hintock to be a great change after watering-place life."

"I do. But it is home. It has its advantages and its disadvantages." Grace was thinking less of the solitude than of the attendant circumstances.

They chatted on for some time, Grace being set quite at her ease by her entertainer. Mrs. Charmond was far too well-practised a woman not to know that to show a marked patronage to a sensitive young girl who would probably be very quick to discern it, was to demolish her dignity rather than to establish it in that young girl's eyes. So, being violently possessed with her idea of making use of this gentle acquaintance, ready and waiting at her own door, she took great pains to win her confidence at starting.

Just before Grace's departure the two chanced to pause before a mirror which reflected their faces in immediate juxtaposition, so as to bring into prominence their resemblances and their contrasts. Both looked attractive as glassed back by the faithful reflector; but Grace's countenance had the effect of making Mrs. Charmond appear more than her full age. There are complexions which set off each other to great advantage, and there are those which antagonize, the one killing or



damaging its neighbor unmercifully. This was unhappily the case here. Mrs. Charmond fell into a meditation, and replied abstractedly to a cursory remark of her companion's. However, she parted from her young friend in the kindest tones, promising to send and let her know as soon as her mind was made up on the arrangement she had suggested.

When Grace had ascended nearly to the top of the adjoining slope she looked back, and saw that Mrs. Charmond still stood at the door, meditatively regarding her.

Often during the previous night, after his call on the Melburys, Winterborne's thoughts ran upon Grace's announced visit to Hintock House. Why could he not have proposed to walk with her part of the way? Something told him that she might not, on such an occasion, care for his company.

He was still more of that opinion when, standing in his garden next day, he saw her go past on the journey with such a pretty pride in the event. He wondered if her father's ambition, which had purchased for her the means of intellectual light and culture far beyond those of any other native of the village, would conduce to the flight of her future interests above and away from the local life which was once to her the movement of the world.

Nevertheless, he had her father's permission to win her if he could;

and to this end it became desirable to bring matters soon to a crisis, if he ever hoped to do so. If she should think herself too good for him, he could let her go and make the best of his loss; but until he had really tested her he could not say that she despised his suit. The question was how to quicken events towards an issue.

He thought and thought, and at last decided that as good a way as any would be to give a Christmas party, and ask Grace and her parents to come as chief guests.

These ruminations were occupying him when there became audible a slight knocking at his front door. He descended the path and looked out, and beheld Marty South, dressed for out-door work.

"Why didn't you come, Mr. Winterborne?" she said. "I've been waiting there hours and hours, and at last I thought I must try to find you."

"Bless my soul, I'd quite forgot," said Giles.

What he had forgotten was that there was a thousand young fir-trees to be planted in a neighboring spot which had been cleared by the wood-cutters, and that he had arranged to plant them with his own hands. He had a marvellous power of making trees grow. Although he would seem to shovel in the earth quite carelessly, there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on, so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days.

When, on the other hand, any of the journeymen planted, although they seemed to go through an identically similar process, one quarter of the trees would die away during the ensuing August.

Hence Winterborne found delight in the work even when, as at present, he contracted to do it on portions of the woodland in which he had no personal interest. Marty, who turned her hand to anything, was usually the one who performed the part of keeping the trees in a perpendicular position while he threw in the mould.

He accompanied her towards the spot, being stimulated yet further to proceed with the work by the knowledge that the ground was close to the way-side along which Grace must pass on her return from Hintock House.

"You've a cold in the head, Marty," he said, as they walked. "That comes of cutting off your hair."

"I suppose it do. Yes; I've three headaches going on in my head at the same time."

"Three headaches!"

"Yes, a rheumatic headache in my poll, a sick headache over my eyes, and a misery headache in the middle of my brain. However, I came out, for I thought you might be waiting and grumbling like anything if I was not there."

The holes were already dug, and they set to work. Winterborne's fingers were endowed with a gentle conjuror's touch in spreading the roots of each little tree, resulting in a sort of caress, under which the delicate fibres all laid themselves out in their proper directions for growth. He put most of these roots towards the south-west; for, he said, in forty years' time, when some great gale is blowing from that quarter, the trees will require the strongest holdfast on that side to stand against it and not fall.

"How they sigh directly we put 'em upright, though while they are lying down they don't sigh at all," said Marty.

"Do they?" said Giles. "I've never noticed it."

She erected one of the young pines into its hole, and held up her finger; the soft musical breathing instantly set in, which was not to cease night or day till the grown tree should be felled--probably long after the two planters should be felled themselves.

"It seems to me," the girl continued, "as if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest--just as we be."

"Just as we be?" He looked critically at her. "You ought not to feel like that, Marty."

Her only reply was turning to take up the next tree; and they planted on through a great part of the day, almost without another word. Winterborne's mind ran on his contemplated evening-party, his abstraction being such that he hardly was conscious of Marty's presence beside him. From the nature of their employment, in which he handled the spade and she merely held the tree, it followed that he got good exercise and she got none. But she was an heroic girl, and though her out-stretched hand was chill as a stone, and her cheeks blue, and her cold worse than ever, she would not complain while he was disposed to continue work. But when he paused she said, "Mr. Winterborne, can I run down the lane and back to warm my feet?"

"Why, yes, of course," he said, awakening anew to her existence.

"Though I was just thinking what a mild day it is for the season. Now I warrant that cold of yours is twice as bad as it was. You had no business to chop that hair off, Marty; it serves you almost right. Look here, cut off home at once."

"A run down the lane will be quite enough."

"No, it won't. You ought not to have come out to-day at all."

"But I should like to finish the--"

"Marty, I tell you to go home," said he, peremptorily. "I can manage to keep the rest of them upright with a stick or something."

She went away without saying any more. When she had gone down the orchard a little distance she looked back. Giles suddenly went after her.

"Marty, it was for your good that I was rough, you know. But warm yourself in your own way, I don't care."

When she had run off he fancied he discerned a woman's dress through the holly-bushes which divided the coppice from the road. It was Grace at last, on her way back from the interview with Mrs. Charmond. He threw down the tree he was planting, and was about to break through the belt of holly when he suddenly became aware of the presence of another man, who was looking over the hedge on the opposite side of the way upon the figure of the unconscious Grace. He appeared as a handsome and gentlemanly personage of six or eight and twenty, and was quizzing her through an eye-glass. Seeing that Winterborne was noticing him, he let his glass drop with a click upon the rail which protected the hedge, and walked away in the opposite direction. Giles knew in a moment that this must be Mr. Fitzpiers. When he was gone, Winterborne pushed through the hollies, and emerged close beside the interesting object of their contemplation.