

## CHAPTER IX.

"I heard the bushes move long before I saw you," she began. "I said first, 'it is some terrible beast;' next, 'it is a poacher;' next, 'it is a friend!'"

He regarded her with a slight smile, weighing, not her speech, but the question whether he should tell her that she had been watched. He decided in the negative.

"You have been to the house?" he said. "But I need not ask." The fact was that there shone upon Miss Melbury's face a species of exaltation, which saw no environing details nor his own occupation; nothing more than his bare presence.

"Why need you not ask?"

"Your face is like the face of Moses when he came down from the Mount."

She reddened a little and said, "How can you be so profane, Giles Winterborne?"

"How can you think so much of that class of people? Well, I beg pardon; I didn't mean to speak so freely. How do you like her house and her?"

"Exceedingly. I had not been inside the walls since I was a child,

when it used to be let to strangers, before Mrs. Charmond's late husband bought the property. She is SO nice!" And Grace fell into such an abstracted gaze at the imaginary image of Mrs. Charmond and her niceness that it almost conjured up a vision of that lady in mid-air before them.

"She has only been here a month or two, it seems, and cannot stay much longer, because she finds it so lonely and damp in winter. She is going abroad. Only think, she would like me to go with her."

Giles's features stiffened a little at the news. "Indeed; what for? But I won't keep you standing here. Hoi, Robert!" he cried to a swaying collection of clothes in the distance, which was the figure of Creedle his man. "Go on filling in there till I come back."

"I'm a-coming, sir; I'm a-coming."

"Well, the reason is this," continued she, as they went on together--"Mrs. Charmond has a delightful side to her character--a desire to record her impressions of travel, like Alexandre Dumas, and Mery, and Sterne, and others. But she cannot find energy enough to do it herself." And Grace proceeded to explain Mrs. Charmond's proposal at large. "My notion is that Mery's style will suit her best, because he writes in that soft, emotional, luxurious way she has," Grace said, musingly.

"Indeed!" said Winterborne, with mock awe. "Suppose you talk over my head a little longer, Miss Grace Melbury?"

"Oh, I didn't mean it!" she said, repentantly, looking into his eyes.

"And as for myself, I hate French books. And I love dear old Hintock, AND THE PEOPLE IN IT, fifty times better than all the Continent. But the scheme; I think it an enchanting notion, don't you, Giles?"

"It is well enough in one sense, but it will take you away," said he, mollified.

"Only for a short time. We should return in May."

"Well, Miss Melbury, it is a question for your father."

Winterborne walked with her nearly to her house. He had awaited her coming, mainly with the view of mentioning to her his proposal to have a Christmas party; but homely Christmas gatherings in the venerable and jovial Hintock style seemed so primitive and uncouth beside the lofty matters of her converse and thought that he refrained.

As soon as she was gone he turned back towards the scene of his planting, and could not help saying to himself as he walked, that this engagement of his was a very unpromising business. Her outing to-day had not improved it. A woman who could go to Hintock House and be friendly with its mistress, enter into the views of its mistress, talk

like her, and dress not much unlike her, why, she would hardly be contented with him, a yeoman, now immersed in tree-planting, even though he planted them well. "And yet she's a true-hearted girl," he said, thinking of her words about Hintock. "I must bring matters to a point, and there's an end of it."

When he reached the plantation he found that Marty had come back, and dismissing Creedle, he went on planting silently with the girl as before.

"Suppose, Marty," he said, after a while, looking at her extended arm, upon which old scratches from briars showed themselves purple in the cold wind--"suppose you know a person, and want to bring that person to a good understanding with you, do you think a Christmas party of some sort is a warming-up thing, and likely to be useful in hastening on the matter?"

"Is there to be dancing?"

"There might be, certainly."

"Will He dance with She?"

"Well, yes."

"Then it might bring things to a head, one way or the other; I won't be

the one to say which."

"It shall be done," said Winterborne, not to her, though he spoke the words quite loudly. And as the day was nearly ended, he added, "Here, Marty, I'll send up a man to plant the rest to-morrow. I've other things to think of just now."

She did not inquire what other things, for she had seen him walking with Grace Melbury. She looked towards the western sky, which was now aglow like some vast foundery wherein new worlds were being cast. Across it the bare bough of a tree stretched horizontally, revealing every twig against the red, and showing in dark profile every beck and movement of three pheasants that were settling themselves down on it in a row to roost.

"It will be fine to-morrow," said Marty, observing them with the vermilion light of the sun in the pupils of her eyes, "for they are a-crouped down nearly at the end of the bough. If it were going to be stormy they'd squeeze close to the trunk. The weather is almost all they have to think of, isn't it, Mr. Winterborne? and so they must be lighter-hearted than we."

"I dare say they are," said Winterborne.

Before taking a single step in the preparations, Winterborne, with no

great hopes, went across that evening to the timber-merchant's to ascertain if Grace and her parents would honor him with their presence. Having first to set his nightly gins in the garden, to catch the rabbits that ate his winter-greens, his call was delayed till just after the rising of the moon, whose rays reached the Hintock houses but fitfully as yet, on account of the trees. Melbury was crossing his yard on his way to call on some one at the larger village, but he readily turned and walked up and down the path with the young man.

Giles, in his self-deprecatory sense of living on a much smaller scale than the Melburys did, would not for the world imply that his invitation was to a gathering of any importance. So he put it in the mild form of "Can you come in for an hour, when you have done business, the day after to-morrow; and Mrs. and Miss Melbury, if they have nothing more pressing to do?"

Melbury would give no answer at once. "No, I can't tell you to-day," he said. "I must talk it over with the women. As far as I am concerned, my dear Giles, you know I'll come with pleasure. But how do I know what Grace's notions may be? You see, she has been away among cultivated folks a good while; and now this acquaintance with Mrs. Charmond--Well, I'll ask her. I can say no more."

When Winterborne was gone the timber-merchant went on his way. He knew very well that Grace, whatever her own feelings, would either go or not

go, according as he suggested; and his instinct was, for the moment, to suggest the negative. His errand took him past the church, and the way to his destination was either across the church-yard or along-side it, the distances being the same. For some reason or other he chose the former way.

The moon was faintly lighting up the gravestones, and the path, and the front of the building. Suddenly Mr. Melbury paused, turned ill upon the grass, and approached a particular headstone, where he read, "In memory of John Winterborne," with the subjoined date and age. It was the grave of Giles's father.

The timber-merchant laid his hand upon the stone, and was humanized. "Jack, my wronged friend!" he said. "I'll be faithful to my plan of making amends to 'ee."

When he reached home that evening, he said to Grace and Mrs. Melbury, who were working at a little table by the fire,

"Giles wants us to go down and spend an hour with him the day after to-morrow; and I'm thinking, that as 'tis Giles who asks us, we'll go."

They assented without demur, and accordingly the timber-merchant sent Giles the next morning an answer in the affirmative.

Winterborne, in his modesty, or indifference, had mentioned no particular hour in his invitation; and accordingly Mr. Melbury and his family, expecting no other guests, chose their own time, which chanced to be rather early in the afternoon, by reason of the somewhat quicker despatch than usual of the timber-merchant's business that day. To show their sense of the unimportance of the occasion, they walked quite slowly to the house, as if they were merely out for a ramble, and going to nothing special at all; or at most intending to pay a casual call and take a cup of tea.

At this hour stir and bustle pervaded the interior of Winterborne's domicile from cellar to apple-loft. He had planned an elaborate high tea for six o'clock or thereabouts, and a good roaring supper to come on about eleven. Being a bachelor of rather retiring habits, the whole of the preparations devolved upon himself and his trusty man and familiar, Robert Creedle, who did everything that required doing, from making Giles's bed to catching moles in his field. He was a survival from the days when Giles's father held the homestead, and Giles was a playing boy.

These two, with a certain dilatoriousness which appertained to both, were now in the heat of preparation in the bake-house, expecting nobody before six o'clock. Winterborne was standing before the brick oven in his shirt-sleeves, tossing in thorn sprays, and stirring about the blazing mass with a long-handled, three-pronged Beelzebub kind of fork,

the heat shining out upon his streaming face and making his eyes like furnaces, the thorns crackling and sputtering; while Creedle, having ranged the pastry dishes in a row on the table till the oven should be ready, was pressing out the crust of a final apple-pie with a rolling-pin. A great pot boiled on the fire, and through the open door of the back kitchen a boy was seen seated on the fender, emptying the snuffers and scouring the candlesticks, a row of the latter standing upside down on the hob to melt out the grease.

Looking up from the rolling-pin, Creedle saw passing the window first the timber-merchant, in his second-best suit, Mrs. Melbury in her best silk, and Grace in the fashionable attire which, in part brought home with her from the Continent, she had worn on her visit to Mrs. Charmond's. The eyes of the three had been attracted to the proceedings within by the fierce illumination which the oven threw out upon the operators and their utensils.

"Lord, Lord! if they baint come a'ready!" said Creedle.

"No--hey?" said Giles, looking round aghast; while the boy in the background waved a reeking candlestick in his delight. As there was no help for it, Winterborne went to meet them in the door-way.

"My dear Giles, I see we have made a mistake in the time," said the timber-merchant's wife, her face lengthening with concern.

"Oh, it is not much difference. I hope you'll come in."

"But this means a regular randyvoo!" said Mr. Melbury, accusingly, glancing round and pointing towards the bake-house with his stick.

"Well, yes," said Giles.

"And--not Great Hintock band, and dancing, surely?"

"I told three of 'em they might drop in if they'd nothing else to do," Giles mildly admitted.

"Now, why the name didn't ye tell us 'twas going to be a serious kind of thing before? How should I know what folk mean if they don't say? Now, shall we come in, or shall we go home and come back along in a couple of hours?"

"I hope you'll stay, if you'll be so good as not to mind, now you are here. I shall have it all right and tidy in a very little time. I ought not to have been so backward." Giles spoke quite anxiously for one of his undemonstrative temperament; for he feared that if the Melburys once were back in their own house they would not be disposed to turn out again.

"'Tis we ought not to have been so forward; that's what 'tis," said Mr. Melbury, testily. "Don't keep us here in the sitting-room; lead on to

the bakehouse, man. Now we are here we'll help ye get ready for the rest. Here, mis'ess, take off your things, and help him out in his baking, or he won't get done to-night. I'll finish heating the oven, and set you free to go and skiver up them ducks." His eye had passed with pitiless directness of criticism into yet remote recesses of Winterborne's awkwardly built premises, where the aforesaid birds were hanging.

"And I'll help finish the tarts," said Grace, cheerfully.

"I don't know about that," said her father. "'Tisn't quite so much in your line as it is in your mother-law's and mine."

"Of course I couldn't let you, Grace!" said Giles, with some distress.

"I'll do it, of course," said Mrs. Melbury, taking off her silk train, hanging it up to a nail, carefully rolling back her sleeves, pinning them to her shoulders, and stripping Giles of his apron for her own use.

So Grace pottered idly about, while her father and his wife helped on the preparations. A kindly pity of his household management, which Winterborne saw in her eyes whenever he caught them, depressed him much

more than her contempt would have done.

Creedle met Giles at the pump after a while, when each of the others

was absorbed in the difficulties of a cuisine based on utensils, cupboards, and provisions that were strange to them. He groaned to the young man in a whisper, "This is a bruckle het, maister, I'm much afeared! Who'd ha' thought they'd ha' come so soon?"

The bitter placidity of Winterborne's look adumbrated the misgivings he did not care to express. "Have you got the celery ready?" he asked, quickly.

"Now that's a thing I never could mind; no, not if you'd paid me in silver and gold. And I don't care who the man is, I says that a stick of celery that isn't scrubbed with the scrubbing-brush is not clean."

"Very well, very well! I'll attend to it. You go and get 'em comfortable in-doors."

He hastened to the garden, and soon returned, tossing the stalks to Creedle, who was still in a tragic mood. "If ye'd ha' married, d'ye see, maister," he said, "this caddle couldn't have happened to us."

Everything being at last under way, the oven set, and all done that could insure the supper turning up ready at some time or other, Giles and his friends entered the parlor, where the Melburys again dropped into position as guests, though the room was not nearly so warm and cheerful as the blazing bakehouse. Others now arrived, among them Farmer Bawtree and the hollow-turner, and tea went off very well.

Grace's disposition to make the best of everything, and to wink at deficiencies in Winterborne's menage, was so uniform and persistent that he suspected her of seeing even more deficiencies than he was aware of. That suppressed sympathy which had showed in her face ever since her arrival told him as much too plainly.

"This muddling style of house-keeping is what you've not lately been used to, I suppose?" he said, when they were a little apart.

"No; but I like it; it reminds me so pleasantly that everything here in dear old Hintock is just as it used to be. The oil is--not quite nice; but everything else is."

"The oil?"

"On the chairs, I mean; because it gets on one's dress. Still, mine is not a new one."

Giles found that Creedle, in his zeal to make things look bright, had smeared the chairs with some greasy kind of furniture-polish, and refrained from rubbing it dry in order not to diminish the mirror-like effect that the mixture produced as laid on. Giles apologized and called Creedle; but he felt that the Fates were against him.