CHAPTER X.

Supper-time came, and with it the hot-baked from the oven, laid on a snowy cloth fresh from the press, and reticulated with folds, as in Flemish "Last Suppers." Creedle and the boy fetched and carried with amazing alacrity, the latter, to mollify his superior and make things pleasant, expressing his admiration of Creedle's cleverness when they were alone.

"I s'pose the time when you learned all these knowing things, Mr. Creedle, was when you was in the militia?"

"Well, yes. I seed the world at that time somewhat, certainly, and many ways of strange dashing life. Not but that Giles has worked hard in helping me to bring things to such perfection to-day. 'Giles,' says I, though he's maister. Not that I should call'n maister by rights, for his father growed up side by side with me, as if one mother had twinned us and been our nourishing."

"I s'pose your memory can reach a long way back into history, Mr. Creedle?"

"Oh yes. Ancient days, when there was battles and famines and hang-fairs and other pomps, seem to me as yesterday. Ah, many's the patriarch I've seed come and go in this parish! There, he's calling for

more plates. Lord, why can't 'em turn their plates bottom upward for pudding, as they used to do in former days?"

Meanwhile, in the adjoining room Giles was presiding in a half-unconscious state. He could not get over the initial failures in his scheme for advancing his suit, and hence he did not know that he was eating mouthfuls of bread and nothing else, and continually snuffing the two candles next him till he had reduced them to mere glimmers drowned in their own grease. Creedle now appeared with a specially prepared dish, which he served by elevating the little three-legged pot that contained it, and tilting the contents into a dish, exclaiming, simultaneously, "Draw back, gentlemen and ladies, please!"

A splash followed. Grace gave a quick, involuntary nod and blink, and put her handkerchief to her face.

"Good heavens! what did you do that for, Creedle?" said Giles, sternly, and jumping up.

"'Tis how I do it when they baint here, maister," mildly expostulated Creedle, in an aside audible to all the company.

"Well, yes--but--" replied Giles. He went over to Grace, and hoped none of it had gone into her eye.

"Oh no," she said. "Only a sprinkle on my face. It was nothing."

"Kiss it and make it well," gallantly observed Mr. Bawtree.

Miss Melbury blushed.

The timber-merchant said, quickly, "Oh, it is nothing! She must bear these little mishaps." But there could be discerned in his face something which said "I ought to have foreseen this."

Giles himself, since the untoward beginning of the feast, had not quite liked to see Grace present. He wished he had not asked such people as Bawtree and the hollow-turner. He had done it, in dearth of other friends, that the room might not appear empty. In his mind's eye, before the event, they had been the mere background or padding of the scene, but somehow in reality they were the most prominent personages there.

After supper they played cards, Bawtree and the hollow-turner monopolizing the new packs for an interminable game, in which a lump of chalk was incessantly used--a game those two always played wherever they were, taking a solitary candle and going to a private table in a corner with the mien of persons bent on weighty matters. The rest of the company on this account were obliged to put up with old packs for their round game, that had been lying by in a drawer ever since the time that Giles's grandmother was alive. Each card had a great stain

in the middle of its back, produced by the touch of generations of damp and excited thumbs now fleshless in the grave; and the kings and queens wore a decayed expression of feature, as if they were rather an impecunious dethroned race of monarchs hiding in obscure slums than real regal characters. Every now and then the comparatively few remarks of the players at the round game were harshly intruded on by the measured jingle of Farmer Bawtree and the hollow-turner from the back of the room:

"And I' will hold' a wa'-ger with you'
That all' these marks' are thirt'-y two!"

accompanied by rapping strokes with the chalk on the table; then an exclamation, an argument, a dealing of the cards; then the commencement of the rhymes anew.

The timber-merchant showed his feelings by talking with a satisfied sense of weight in his words, and by praising the party in a patronizing tone, when Winterborne expressed his fear that he and his were not enjoying themselves.

"Oh yes, yes; pretty much. What handsome glasses those are! I didn't know you had such glasses in the house. Now, Lucy" (to his wife), "you ought to get some like them for ourselves." And when they had abandoned cards, and Winterborne was talking to Melbury by the fire, it was the timber-merchant who stood with his back to the mantle in a proprietary

attitude, from which post of vantage he critically regarded Giles's person, rather as a superficies than as a solid with ideas and feelings inside it, saying, "What a splendid coat that one is you have on, Giles! I can't get such coats. You dress better than I."

After supper there was a dance, the bandsmen from Great Hintock having arrived some time before. Grace had been away from home so long that she had forgotten the old figures, and hence did not join in the movement. Then Giles felt that all was over. As for her, she was thinking, as she watched the gyrations, of a very different measure that she had been accustomed to tread with a bevy of sylph-like creatures in muslin, in the music-room of a large house, most of whom were now moving in scenes widely removed from this, both as regarded place and character.

A woman she did not know came and offered to tell her fortune with the abandoned cards. Grace assented to the proposal, and the woman told her tale unskilfully, for want of practice, as she declared.

Mr. Melbury was standing by, and exclaimed, contemptuously, "Tell her fortune, indeed! Her fortune has been told by men of science--what do you call 'em? Phrenologists. You can't teach her anything new. She's been too far among the wise ones to be astonished at anything she can hear among us folks in Hintock."

At last the time came for breaking up, Melbury and his family being the

earliest to leave, the two card-players still pursuing their game doggedly in the corner, where they had completely covered Giles's mahogany table with chalk scratches. The three walked home, the distance being short and the night clear.

"Well, Giles is a very good fellow," said Mr. Melbury, as they struck down the lane under boughs which formed a black filigree in which the stars seemed set.

"Certainly he is," said Grace, quickly, and in such a tone as to show that he stood no lower, if no higher, in her regard than he had stood before.

When they were opposite an opening through which, by day, the doctor's house could be seen, they observed a light in one of his rooms, although it was now about two o'clock.

"The doctor is not abed yet," said Mrs. Melbury.

"Hard study, no doubt," said her husband.

"One would think that, as he seems to have nothing to do about here by day, he could at least afford to go to bed early at night. 'Tis astonishing how little we see of him."

Melbury's mind seemed to turn with much relief to the contemplation of

Mr. Fitzpiers after the scenes of the evening. "It is natural enough," he replied. "What can a man of that sort find to interest him in Hintock? I don't expect he'll stay here long."

His mind reverted to Giles's party, and when they were nearly home he spoke again, his daughter being a few steps in advance: "It is hardly the line of life for a girl like Grace, after what she's been accustomed to. I didn't foresee that in sending her to boarding-school and letting her travel, and what not, to make her a good bargain for Giles, I should be really spoiling her for him. Ah, 'tis a thousand pities! But he ought to have her--he ought!"

At this moment the two exclusive, chalk-mark men, having at last really finished their play, could be heard coming along in the rear, vociferously singing a song to march-time, and keeping vigorous step to the same in far-reaching strides--

"She may go, oh!
She may go, oh!
She may go to the d---- for me!"

The timber-merchant turned indignantly to Mrs. Melbury. "That's the sort of society we've been asked to meet," he said. "For us old folk it didn't matter; but for Grace--Giles should have known better!"

Meanwhile, in the empty house from which the guests had just cleared out, the subject of their discourse was walking from room to room surveying the general displacement of furniture with no ecstatic feeling; rather the reverse, indeed. At last he entered the bakehouse, and found there Robert Creedle sitting over the embers, also lost in contemplation. Winterborne sat down beside him.

"Well, Robert, you must be tired. You'd better get on to bed."

"Ay, ay, Giles--what do I call ye? Maister, I would say. But 'tis well to think the day IS done, when 'tis done."

Winterborne had abstractedly taken the poker, and with a wrinkled forehead was ploughing abroad the wood-embers on the broad hearth, till it was like a vast scorching Sahara, with red-hot bowlders lying about everywhere. "Do you think it went off well, Creedle?" he asked.

"The victuals did; that I know. And the drink did; that I steadfastly believe, from the holler sound of the barrels. Good, honest drink 'twere, the headiest mead I ever brewed; and the best wine that berries could rise to; and the briskest Horner-and-Cleeves cider ever wrung down, leaving out the spice and sperrits I put into it, while that egg-flip would ha' passed through muslin, so little curdled 'twere. 'Twas good enough to make any king's heart merry--ay, to make his whole carcass smile. Still, I don't deny I'm afeared some things didn't go

well with He and his." Creedle nodded in a direction which signified where the Melburys lived.

"I'm afraid, too, that it was a failure there!"

"If so, 'twere doomed to be so. Not but what that snail might as well have come upon anybody else's plate as hers."

"What snail?"

"Well, maister, there was a little one upon the edge of her plate when I brought it out; and so it must have been in her few leaves of wintergreen."

"How the deuce did a snail get there?"

"That I don't know no more than the dead; but there my gentleman was."

"But, Robert, of all places, that was where he shouldn't have been!"

"Well, 'twas his native home, come to that; and where else could we expect him to be? I don't care who the man is, snails and caterpillars always will lurk in close to the stump of cabbages in that tantalizing way."

"He wasn't alive, I suppose?" said Giles, with a shudder on Grace's

account.

"Oh no. He was well boiled. I warrant him well boiled. God forbid that a LIVE snail should be seed on any plate of victuals that's served by Robert Creedle....But Lord, there; I don't mind 'em myself--them small ones, for they were born on cabbage, and they've lived on cabbage, so they must be made of cabbage. But she, the close-mouthed little lady, she didn't say a word about it; though 'twould have made good small conversation as to the nater of such creatures; especially as wit ran short among us sometimes."

"Oh yes--'tis all over!" murmured Giles to himself, shaking his head over the glooming plain of embers, and lining his forehead more than ever. "Do you know, Robert," he said, "that she's been accustomed to servants and everything superfine these many years? How, then, could she stand our ways?"

"Well, all I can say is, then, that she ought to hob-and-nob elsewhere. They shouldn't have schooled her so monstrous high, or else bachelor men shouldn't give randys, or if they do give 'em, only to their own race."

"Perhaps that's true," said Winterborne, rising and yawning a sigh.