

CHAPTER XI.

"'Tis a pity--a thousand pities!" her father kept saying next morning at breakfast, Grace being still in her bedroom.

But how could he, with any self-respect, obstruct Winterborne's suit at this stage, and nullify a scheme he had labored to promote--was, indeed, mechanically promoting at this moment? A crisis was approaching, mainly as a result of his contrivances, and it would have to be met.

But here was the fact, which could not be disguised: since seeing what an immense change her last twelve months of absence had produced in his daughter, after the heavy sum per annum that he had been spending for several years upon her education, he was reluctant to let her marry Giles Winterborne, indefinitely occupied as woodsman, cider-merchant, apple-farmer, and what not, even were she willing to marry him herself.

"She will be his wife if you don't upset her notion that she's bound to accept him as an understood thing," said Mrs. Melbury. "Bless ye, she'll soon shake down here in Hintock, and be content with Giles's way of living, which he'll improve with what money she'll have from you.

'Tis the strangeness after her genteel life that makes her feel uncomfortable at first. Why, when I saw Hintock the first time I thought I never could like it. But things gradually get familiar, and stone floors seem not so very cold and hard, and the hooting of the

owls not so very dreadful, and loneliness not so very lonely, after a while."

"Yes, I believe ye. That's just it. I KNOW Grace will gradually sink down to our level again, and catch our manners and way of speaking, and feel a drowsy content in being Giles's wife. But I can't bear the thought of dragging down to that old level as promising a piece of maidenhood as ever lived--fit to ornament a palace wi'--that I've taken so much trouble to lift up. Fancy her white hands getting redder every day, and her tongue losing its pretty up-country curl in talking, and her bounding walk becoming the regular Hintock shail and wamble!"

"She may shail, but she'll never wamble," replied his wife, decisively.

When Grace came down-stairs he complained of her lying in bed so late; not so much moved by a particular objection to that form of indulgence as discomposed by these other reflections.

The corners of her pretty mouth dropped a little down. "You used to complain with justice when I was a girl," she said. "But I am a woman now, and can judge for myself....But it is not that; it is something else!" Instead of sitting down she went outside the door.

He was sorry. The petulance that relatives show towards each other is in truth directed against that intangible Causality which has shaped the situation no less for the offenders than the offended, but is too

elusive to be discerned and cornered by poor humanity in irritated mood. Melbury followed her. She had rambled on to the paddock, where the white frost lay, and where starlings in flocks of twenties and thirties were walking about, watched by a comfortable family of sparrows perched in a line along the string-course of the chimney, preening themselves in the rays of the sun.

"Come in to breakfast, my girl," he said. "And as to Giles, use your own mind. Whatever pleases you will please me."

"I am promised to him, father; and I cannot help thinking that in honor I ought to marry him, whenever I do marry."

He had a strong suspicion that somewhere in the bottom of her heart there pulsed an old simple indigenous feeling favorable to Giles, though it had become overlaid with implanted tastes. But he would not distinctly express his views on the promise. "Very well," he said.

"But I hope I sha'n't lose you yet. Come in to breakfast. What did you think of the inside of Hintock House the other day?"

"I liked it much."

"Different from friend Winterborne's?"

She said nothing; but he who knew her was aware that she meant by her silence to reproach him with drawing cruel comparisons.

"Mrs. Charmond has asked you to come again--when, did you say?"

"She thought Tuesday, but would send the day before to let me know if it suited her." And with this subject upon their lips they entered to breakfast.

Tuesday came, but no message from Mrs. Charmond. Nor was there any on Wednesday. In brief, a fortnight slipped by without a sign, and it looked suspiciously as if Mrs. Charmond were not going further in the direction of "taking up" Grace at present.

Her father reasoned thereon. Immediately after his daughter's two indubitable successes with Mrs. Charmond--the interview in the wood and a visit to the House--she had attended Winterborne's party. No doubt the out-and-out joviality of that gathering had made it a topic in the neighborhood, and that every one present as guests had been widely spoken of--Grace, with her exceptional qualities, above all. What, then, so natural as that Mrs. Charmond should have heard the village news, and become quite disappointed in her expectations of Grace at finding she kept such company?

Full of this post hoc argument, Mr. Melbury overlooked the infinite throng of other possible reasons and unreasons for a woman changing her mind. For instance, while knowing that his Grace was attractive, he quite forgot that Mrs. Charmond had also great pretensions to beauty.

In his simple estimate, an attractive woman attracted all around.

So it was settled in his mind that her sudden mingling with the villagers at the unlucky Winterborne's was the cause of her most grievous loss, as he deemed it, in the direction of Hintock House.

"'Tis a thousand pities!" he would repeat to himself. "I am ruining her for conscience' sake!"

It was one morning later on, while these things were agitating his mind, that, curiously enough, something darkened the window just as they finished breakfast. Looking up, they saw Giles in person mounted on horseback, and straining his neck forward, as he had been doing for some time, to catch their attention through the window. Grace had been the first to see him, and involuntarily exclaimed, "There he is--and a new horse!"

On their faces as they regarded Giles were written their suspended thoughts and compound feelings concerning him, could he have read them through those old panes. But he saw nothing: his features just now were, for a wonder, lit up with a red smile at some other idea. So they rose from breakfast and went to the door, Grace with an anxious, wistful manner, her father in a reverie, Mrs. Melbury placid and inquiring. "We have come out to look at your horse," she said.

It could be seen that he was pleased at their attention, and explained

that he had ridden a mile or two to try the animal's paces. "I bought her," he added, with warmth so severely repressed as to seem indifference, "because she has been used to carry a lady."

Still Mr. Melbury did not brighten. Mrs. Melbury said, "And is she quiet?"

Winterborne assured her that there was no doubt of it. "I took care of that. She's five-and-twenty, and very clever for her age."

"Well, get off and come in," said Melbury, brusquely; and Giles dismounted accordingly.

This event was the concrete result of Winterborne's thoughts during the past week or two. The want of success with his evening party he had accepted in as philosophic a mood as he was capable of; but there had been enthusiasm enough left in him one day at Sherton Abbas market to purchase this old mare, which had belonged to a neighboring parson with several daughters, and was offered him to carry either a gentleman or a lady, and to do odd jobs of carting and agriculture at a pinch. This obliging quadruped seemed to furnish Giles with a means of reinstating himself in Melbury's good opinion as a man of considerateness by throwing out future possibilities to Grace.

The latter looked at him with intensified interest this morning, in the mood which is altogether peculiar to woman's nature, and which, when

reduced into plain words, seems as impossible as the penetrability of matter--that of entertaining a tender pity for the object of her own unnecessary coldness. The imperturbable poise which marked Winterborne in general was enlivened now by a freshness and animation that set a brightness in his eye and on his cheek. Mrs. Melbury asked him to have some breakfast, and he pleurably replied that he would join them, with his usual lack of tactical observation, not perceiving that they had all finished the meal, that the hour was inconveniently late, and that the note piped by the kettle denoted it to be nearly empty; so that fresh water had to be brought in, trouble taken to make it boil, and a general renovation of the table carried out. Neither did he know, so full was he of his tender ulterior object in buying that horse, how many cups of tea he was gulping down one after another, nor how the morning was slipping, nor how he was keeping the family from dispersing about their duties.

Then he told throughout the humorous story of the horse's purchase, looking particularly grim at some fixed object in the room, a way he always looked when he narrated anything that amused him. While he was still thinking of the scene he had described, Grace rose and said, "I have to go and help my mother now, Mr. Winterborne."

"H'm!" he ejaculated, turning his eyes suddenly upon her.

She repeated her words with a slight blush of awkwardness; whereupon Giles, becoming suddenly conscious, too conscious, jumped up, saying,

"To be sure, to be sure!" wished them quickly good-morning, and bolted out of the house.

Nevertheless he had, upon the whole, strengthened his position, with her at least. Time, too, was on his side, for (as her father saw with some regret) already the homeliness of Hintock life was fast becoming effaced from her observation as a singularity; just as the first strangeness of a face from which we have for years been separated insensibly passes off with renewed intercourse, and tones itself down into simple identity with the lineaments of the past.

Thus Mr. Melbury went out of the house still unreconciled to the sacrifice of the gem he had been at such pains in mounting. He fain could hope, in the secret nether chamber of his mind, that something would happen, before the balance of her feeling had quite turned in Winterborne's favor, to relieve his conscience and preserve her on her elevated plane.

He could not forget that Mrs. Charmond had apparently abandoned all interest in his daughter as suddenly as she had conceived it, and was as firmly convinced as ever that the comradeship which Grace had shown with Giles and his crew by attending his party had been the cause.

Matters lingered on thus. And then, as a hoop by gentle knocks on this side and on that is made to travel in specific directions, the little touches of circumstance in the life of this young girl shaped the

curves of her career.