CHAPTER XII.

It was a day of rather bright weather for the season. Miss Melbury went out for a morning walk, and her ever-regardful father, having an hour's leisure, offered to walk with her. The breeze was fresh and quite steady, filtering itself through the denuded mass of twigs without swaying them, but making the point of each ivy-leaf on the trunks scratch its underlying neighbor restlessly. Grace's lips sucked in this native air of hers like milk. They soon reached a place where the wood ran down into a corner, and went outside it towards comparatively open ground. Having looked round about, they were intending to re-enter the copse when a fox quietly emerged with a dragging brush, trotted past them tamely as a domestic cat, and disappeared amid some dead fern. They walked on, her father merely observing, after watching the animal, "They are hunting somewhere near."

Farther up they saw in the mid-distance the hounds running hither and thither, as if there were little or no scent that day. Soon divers members of the hunt appeared on the scene, and it was evident from their movements that the chase had been stultified by general puzzle-headedness as to the whereabouts of the intended victim. In a minute a farmer rode up to the two pedestrians, panting with acteonic excitement, and Grace being a few steps in advance, he addressed her, asking if she had seen the fox.

"Yes," said she. "We saw him some time ago--just out there."

"Did you cry Halloo?"

"We said nothing."

"Then why the d---- didn't you, or get the old buffer to do it for you?" said the man, as he cantered away.

She looked rather disconcerted at this reply, and observing her father's face, saw that it was quite red.

"He ought not to have spoken to ye like that!" said the old man, in the tone of one whose heart was bruised, though it was not by the epithet applied to himself. "And he wouldn't if he had been a gentleman. 'Twas not the language to use to a woman of any niceness. You, so well read and cultivated--how could he expect ye to know what tom-boy field-folk are in the habit of doing? If so be you had just come from trimming swedes or mangolds--joking with the rough work-folk and all that--I could have stood it. But hasn't it cost me near a hundred a year to lift you out of all that, so as to show an example to the neighborhood of what a woman can be? Grace, shall I tell you the secret of it? 'Twas because I was in your company. If a black-coated squire or pa'son had been walking with you instead of me he wouldn't have spoken so."

"No, no, father; there's nothing in you rough or ill-mannered!"

"I tell you it is that! I've noticed, and I've noticed it many times, that a woman takes her color from the man she's walking with. The woman who looks an unquestionable lady when she's with a polished-up fellow, looks a mere tawdry imitation article when she's hobbing and nobbing with a homely blade. You sha'n't be treated like that for long, or at least your children sha'n't. You shall have somebody to walk with you who looks more of a dandy than I--please God you shall!"

"But, my dear father," she said, much distressed, "I don't mind at all. I don't wish for more honor than I already have!"

"A perplexing and ticklish possession is a daughter," according to Menander or some old Greek poet, and to nobody was one ever more so than to Melbury, by reason of her very dearness to him. As for Grace, she began to feel troubled; she did not perhaps wish there and then to unambitiously devote her life to Giles Winterborne, but she was conscious of more and more uneasiness at the possibility of being the social hope of the family.

"You would like to have more honor, if it pleases me?" asked her father, in continuation of the subject.

Despite her feeling she assented to this. His reasoning had not been without its weight upon her.

"Grace," he said, just before they had reached the house, "if it costs me my life you shall marry well! To-day has shown me that whatever a young woman's niceness, she stands for nothing alone. You shall marry well."

He breathed heavily, and his breathing was caught up by the breeze, which seemed to sigh a soft remonstrance.

She looked calmly at him. "And how about Mr. Winterborne?" she asked. "I mention it, father, not as a matter of sentiment, but as a question of keeping faith."

The timber-merchant's eyes fell for a moment. "I don't know--I don't know," he said. "'Tis a trying strait. Well, well; there's no hurry. We'll wait and see how he gets on."

That evening he called her into his room, a snug little apartment behind the large parlor. It had at one time been part of the bakehouse, with the ordinary oval brick oven in the wall; but Mr. Melbury, in turning it into an office, had built into the cavity an iron safe, which he used for holding his private papers. The door of the safe was now open, and his keys were hanging from it.

"Sit down, Grace, and keep me company," he said. "You may amuse yourself by looking over these." He threw out a heap of papers before her.

"What are they?" she asked.

"Securities of various sorts." He unfolded them one by one. "Papers worth so much money each. Now here's a lot of turnpike bonds for one thing. Would you think that each of these pieces of paper is worth two hundred pounds?"

"No, indeed, if you didn't say so."

"'Tis so, then. Now here are papers of another sort. They are for different sums in the three-per-cents. Now these are Port Breedy Harbor bonds. We have a great stake in that harbor, you know, because I send off timber there. Open the rest at your pleasure. They'll interest ye."

"Yes, I will, some day," said she, rising.

"Nonsense, open them now. You ought to learn a little of such matters. A young lady of education should not be ignorant of money affairs altogether. Suppose you should be left a widow some day, with your husband's title-deeds and investments thrown upon your hands--"

"Don't say that, father--title-deeds; it sounds so vain!"

"It does not. Come to that, I have title-deeds myself. There, that

piece of parchment represents houses in Sherton Abbas."

"Yes, but--" She hesitated, looked at the fire, and went on in a low voice: "If what has been arranged about me should come to anything, my sphere will be quite a middling one."

"Your sphere ought not to be middling," he exclaimed, not in passion, but in earnest conviction. "You said you never felt more at home, more in your element, anywhere than you did that afternoon with Mrs. Charmond, when she showed you her house and all her knick-knacks, and made you stay to tea so nicely in her drawing-room--surely you did!"

"Yes, I did say so," admitted Grace.

"Was it true?"

"Yes, I felt so at the time. The feeling is less strong now, perhaps."

"Ah! Now, though you don't see it, your feeling at the time was the right one, because your mind and body were just in full and fresh cultivation, so that going there with her was like meeting like. Since then you've been biding with us, and have fallen back a little, and so you don't feel your place so strongly. Now, do as I tell ye, and look over these papers and see what you'll be worth some day. For they'll all be yours, you know; who have I got to leave 'em to but you? Perhaps when your education is backed up by what these papers

represent, and that backed up by another such a set and their owner, men such as that fellow was this morning may think you a little more than a buffer's girl."

So she did as commanded, and opened each of the folded representatives of hard cash that her father put before her. To sow in her heart cravings for social position was obviously his strong desire, though in direct antagonism to a better feeling which had hitherto prevailed with him, and had, indeed, only succumbed that morning during the ramble.

She wished that she was not his worldly hope; the responsibility of such a position was too great. She had made it for herself mainly by her appearance and attractive behavior to him since her return. "If I had only come home in a shabby dress, and tried to speak roughly, this might not have happened," she thought. She deplored less the fact than the sad possibilities that might lie hidden therein.

Her father then insisted upon her looking over his checkbook and reading the counterfoils. This, also, she obediently did, and at last came to two or three which had been drawn to defray some of the late expenses of her clothes, board, and education.

"I, too, cost a good deal, like the horses and wagons and corn," she said, looking up sorrily.

"I didn't want you to look at those; I merely meant to give you an idea

of my investment transactions. But if you do cost as much as they, never mind. You'll yield a better return."

"Don't think of me like that!" she begged. "A mere chattel."

"A what? Oh, a dictionary word. Well, as that's in your line I don't forbid it, even if it tells against me," he said, good-humoredly. And he looked her proudly up and down.

A few minutes later Grammer Oliver came to tell them that supper was ready, and in giving the information she added, incidentally, "So we shall soon lose the mistress of Hintock House for some time, I hear, Maister Melbury. Yes, she's going off to foreign parts to-morrow, for the rest of the winter months; and be-chok'd if I don't wish I could do the same, for my wynd-pipe is furred like a flue."

When the old woman had left the room, Melbury turned to his daughter and said, "So, Grace, you've lost your new friend, and your chance of keeping her company and writing her travels is quite gone from ye!"

Grace said nothing.

"Now," he went on, emphatically, "'tis Winterborne's affair has done this. Oh yes, 'tis. So let me say one word. Promise me that you will not meet him again without my knowledge."

"I never do meet him, father, either without your knowledge or with it."

"So much the better. I don't like the look of this at all. And I say it not out of harshness to him, poor fellow, but out of tenderness to you. For how could a woman, brought up delicately as you have been, bear the roughness of a life with him?"

She sighed; it was a sigh of sympathy with Giles, complicated by a sense of the intractability of circumstances.

At that same hour, and almost at that same minute, there was a conversation about Winterborne in progress in the village street, opposite Mr. Melbury's gates, where Timothy Tangs the elder and Robert Creedle had accidentally met.

The sawyer was asking Creedle if he had heard what was all over the parish, the skin of his face being drawn two ways on the matter--towards brightness in respect of it as news, and towards concern in respect of it as circumstance.

"Why, that poor little lonesome thing, Marty South, is likely to lose her father. He was almost well, but is much worse again. A man all skin and grief he ever were, and if he leave Little Hintock for a better land, won't it make some difference to your Maister Winterborne, neighbor Creedle?"

"Can I be a prophet in Israel?" said Creedle. "Won't it! I was only shaping of such a thing yesterday in my poor, long-seeing way, and all the work of the house upon my one shoulders! You know what it means? It is upon John South's life that all Mr. Winterborne's houses hang. If so be South die, and so make his decease, thereupon the law is that the houses fall without the least chance of absolution into HER hands at the House. I told him so; but the words of the faithful be only as wind!"