

CHAPTER XIII.

The news was true. The life--the one fragile life--that had been used as a measuring-tape of time by law, was in danger of being frayed away. It was the last of a group of lives which had served this purpose, at the end of whose breathings the small homestead occupied by South himself, the larger one of Giles Winterborne, and half a dozen others that had been in the possession of various Hintock village families for the previous hundred years, and were now Winterborne's, would fall in and become part of the encompassing estate.

Yet a short two months earlier Marty's father, aged fifty-five years, though something of a fidgety, anxious being, would have been looked on as a man whose existence was so far removed from hazardous as any in the parish, and as bidding fair to be prolonged for another quarter of a century.

Winterborne walked up and down his garden next day thinking of the contingency. The sense that the paths he was pacing, the cabbage-plots, the apple-trees, his dwelling, cider-cellar, wring-house, stables, and weathercock, were all slipping away over his head and beneath his feet, as if they were painted on a magic-lantern slide, was curious. In spite of John South's late indisposition he had not anticipated danger. To inquire concerning his health had been to show less sympathy than to remain silent, considering the material interest he possessed in the woodman's life, and he had, accordingly,

made a point of avoiding Marty's house.

While he was here in the garden somebody came to fetch him. It was Marty herself, and she showed her distress by her unconsciousness of a cropped poll.

"Father is still so much troubled in his mind about that tree," she said. "You know the tree I mean, Mr. Winterborne? the tall one in front of the house, that he thinks will blow down and kill us. Can you come and see if you can persuade him out of his notion? I can do nothing."

He accompanied her to the cottage, and she conducted him upstairs. John South was pillowed up in a chair between the bed and the window exactly opposite the latter, towards which his face was turned.

"Ah, neighbor Winterborne," he said. "I wouldn't have minded if my life had only been my own to lose; I don't value it in much of itself, and can let it go if 'tis required of me. But to think what 'tis worth to you, a young man rising in life, that do trouble me! It seems a trick of dishonesty towards ye to go off at fifty-five! I could bear up, I know I could, if it were not for the tree--yes, the tree, 'tis that's killing me. There he stands, threatening my life every minute that the wind do blow. He'll come down upon us and squat us dead; and what will ye do when the life on your property is taken away?"

"Never you mind me--that's of no consequence," said Giles. "Think of yourself alone."

He looked out of the window in the direction of the woodman's gaze. The tree was a tall elm, familiar to him from childhood, which stood at a distance of two-thirds its own height from the front of South's dwelling. Whenever the wind blew, as it did now, the tree rocked, naturally enough; and the sight of its motion and sound of its sighs had gradually bred the terrifying illusion in the woodman's mind that it would descend and kill him. Thus he would sit all day, in spite of persuasion, watching its every sway, and listening to the melancholy Gregorian melodies which the air wrung out of it. This fear it apparently was, rather than any organic disease which was eating away the health of John South.

As the tree waved, South waved his head, making it his flugel-man with abject obedience. "Ah, when it was quite a small tree," he said, "and I was a little boy, I thought one day of chopping it off with my hook to make a clothes-line prop with. But I put off doing it, and then I again thought that I would; but I forgot it, and didn't. And at last it got too big, and now 'tis my enemy, and will be the death o' me. Little did I think, when I let that sapling stay, that a time would come when it would torment me, and dash me into my grave."

"No, no," said Winterborne and Marty, soothingly. But they thought it possible that it might hasten him into his grave, though in another way

than by falling.

"I tell you what," added Winterborne, "I'll climb up this afternoon and shroud off the lower boughs, and then it won't be so heavy, and the wind won't affect it so."

"She won't allow it--a strange woman come from nobody knows where--she won't have it done."

"You mean Mrs. Charmond? Oh, she doesn't know there's such a tree on her estate. Besides, shrouding is not felling, and I'll risk that much."

He went out, and when afternoon came he returned, took a billhook from the woodman's shed, and with a ladder climbed into the lower part of the tree, where he began lopping off--"shrouding," as they called it at Hintock--the lowest boughs. Each of these quivered under his attack, bent, cracked, and fell into the hedge. Having cut away the lowest tier, he stepped off the ladder, climbed a few steps higher, and attacked those at the next level. Thus he ascended with the progress of his work far above the top of the ladder, cutting away his perches as he went, and leaving nothing but a bare stem below him.

The work was troublesome, for the tree was large. The afternoon wore on, turning dark and misty about four o'clock. From time to time Giles cast his eyes across towards the bedroom window of South, where, by the

flickering fire in the chamber, he could see the old man watching him, sitting motionless with a hand upon each arm of the chair. Beside him sat Marty, also straining her eyes towards the skyey field of his operations.

A curious question suddenly occurred to Winterborne, and he stopped his chopping. He was operating on another person's property to prolong the years of a lease by whose termination that person would considerably benefit. In that aspect of the case he doubted if he ought to go on. On the other hand he was working to save a man's life, and this seemed to empower him to adopt arbitrary measures.

The wind had died down to a calm, and while he was weighing the circumstances he saw coming along the road through the increasing mist a figure which, indistinct as it was, he knew well. It was Grace Melbury, on her way out from the house, probably for a short evening walk before dark. He arranged himself for a greeting from her, since she could hardly avoid passing immediately beneath the tree.

But Grace, though she looked up and saw him, was just at that time too full of the words of her father to give him any encouragement. The years-long regard that she had had for him was not kindled by her return into a flame of sufficient brilliancy to make her rebellious. Thinking that she might not see him, he cried, "Miss Melbury, here I am."

She looked up again. She was near enough to see the expression of his face, and the nails in his soles, silver-bright with constant walking. But she did not reply; and dropping her glance again, went on.

Winterborne's face grew strange; he mused, and proceeded automatically with his work. Grace meanwhile had not gone far. She had reached a gate, whereon she had leaned sadly, and whispered to herself, "What shall I do?"

A sudden fog came on, and she curtailed her walk, passing under the tree again on her return. Again he addressed her. "Grace," he said, when she was close to the trunk, "speak to me." She shook her head without stopping, and went on to a little distance, where she stood observing him from behind the hedge.

Her coldness had been kindly meant. If it was to be done, she had said to herself, it should be begun at once. While she stood out of observation Giles seemed to recognize her meaning; with a sudden start he worked on, climbing higher, and cutting himself off more and more from all intercourse with the sublunary world. At last he had worked himself so high up the elm, and the mist had so thickened, that he could only just be discerned as a dark-gray spot on the light-gray sky: he would have been altogether out of notice but for the stroke of his billhook and the flight of a bough downward, and its crash upon the hedge at intervals.

It was not to be done thus, after all: plainness and candor were best. She went back a third time; he did not see her now, and she lingeringly gazed up at his unconscious figure, loath to put an end to any kind of hope that might live on in him still. "Giles-- Mr. Winterborne," she said.

He was so high amid the fog that he did not hear. "Mr. Winterborne!" she cried again, and this time he stopped, looked down, and replied.

"My silence just now was not accident," she said, in an unequal voice. "My father says it is best not to think too much of that--engagement, or understanding between us, that you know of. I, too, think that upon the whole he is right. But we are friends, you know, Giles, and almost relations."

"Very well," he answered, as if without surprise, in a voice which barely reached down the tree. "I have nothing to say in objection--I cannot say anything till I've thought a while."

She added, with emotion in her tone, "For myself, I would have married you--some day--I think. But I give way, for I see it would be unwise."

He made no reply, but sat back upon a bough, placed his elbow in a fork, and rested his head upon his hand. Thus he remained till the fog and the night had completely enclosed him from her view.

Grace heaved a divided sigh, with a tense pause between, and moved onward, her heart feeling uncomfortably big and heavy, and her eyes wet. Had Giles, instead of remaining still, immediately come down from the tree to her, would she have continued in that filial acquiescent frame of mind which she had announced to him as final? If it be true, as women themselves have declared, that one of their sex is never so much inclined to throw in her lot with a man for good and all as five minutes after she has told him such a thing cannot be, the probabilities are that something might have been done by the appearance of Winterborne on the ground beside Grace. But he continued motionless and silent in that gloomy Niflheim or fog-land which involved him, and she proceeded on her way.

The spot seemed now to be quite deserted. The light from South's window made rays on the fog, but did not reach the tree. A quarter of an hour passed, and all was blackness overhead. Giles had not yet come down.

Then the tree seemed to shiver, then to heave a sigh; a movement was audible, and Winterborne dropped almost noiselessly to the ground. He had thought the matter out, and having returned the ladder and billhook to their places, pursued his way homeward. He would not allow this incident to affect his outer conduct any more than the danger to his leaseholds had done, and went to bed as usual. Two simultaneous troubles do not always make a double trouble; and thus it came to pass that Giles's practical anxiety about his houses, which would have been

enough to keep him awake half the night at any other time, was displaced and not reinforced by his sentimental trouble about Grace Melbury. This severance was in truth more like a burial of her than a rupture with her; but he did not realize so much at present; even when he arose in the morning he felt quite moody and stern: as yet the second note in the gamut of such emotions, a tender regret for his loss, had not made itself heard.

A load of oak timber was to be sent away that morning to a builder whose works were in a town many miles off. The proud trunks were taken up from the silent spot which had known them through the buddings and sheddings of their growth for the foregoing hundred years; chained down like slaves to a heavy timber carriage with enormous red wheels, and four of the most powerful of Melbury's horses were harnessed in front to draw them.

The horses wore their bells that day. There were sixteen to the team, carried on a frame above each animal's shoulders, and tuned to scale, so as to form two octaves, running from the highest note on the right or off-side of the leader to the lowest on the left or near-side of the shaft-horse. Melbury was among the last to retain horse-bells in that neighborhood; for, living at Little Hintock, where the lanes yet remained as narrow as before the days of turnpike roads, these sound-signals were still as useful to him and his neighbors as they had ever been in former times. Much backing was saved in the course of a year by the warning notes they cast ahead; moreover, the tones of all

the teams in the district being known to the carters of each, they could tell a long way off on a dark night whether they were about to encounter friends or strangers.

The fog of the previous evening still lingered so heavily over the woods that the morning could not penetrate the trees till long after its time. The load being a ponderous one, the lane crooked, and the air so thick, Winterborne set out, as he often did, to accompany the team as far as the corner, where it would turn into a wider road.

So they rumbled on, shaking the foundations of the roadside cottages by the weight of their progress, the sixteen bells chiming harmoniously over all, till they had risen out of the valley and were descending towards the more open route, the sparks rising from their creaking skid and nearly setting fire to the dead leaves alongside.

Then occurred one of the very incidents against which the bells were an endeavor to guard. Suddenly there beamed into their eyes, quite close to them, the two lamps of a carriage, shorn of rays by the fog. Its approach had been quite unheard, by reason of their own noise. The carriage was a covered one, while behind it could be discerned another vehicle laden with luggage.

Winterborne went to the head of the team, and heard the coachman telling the carter that he must turn back. The carter declared that this was impossible.

"You can turn if you unhitch your string-horses," said the coachman.

"It is much easier for you to turn than for us," said Winterborne.

"We've five tons of timber on these wheels if we've an ounce."

"But I've another carriage with luggage at my back."

Winterborne admitted the strength of the argument. "But even with that," he said, "you can back better than we. And you ought to, for you could hear our bells half a mile off."

"And you could see our lights."

"We couldn't, because of the fog."

"Well, our time's precious," said the coachman, haughtily. "You are only going to some trumpery little village or other in the neighborhood, while we are going straight to Italy."

"Driving all the way, I suppose," said Winterborne, sarcastically.

The argument continued in these terms till a voice from the interior of the carriage inquired what was the matter. It was a lady's.

She was briefly informed of the timber people's obstinacy; and then

Giles could hear her telling the footman to direct the timber people to turn their horses' heads.

The message was brought, and Winterborne sent the bearer back to say that he begged the lady's pardon, but that he could not do as she requested; that though he would not assert it to be impossible, it was impossible by comparison with the slight difficulty to her party to back their light carriages. As fate would have it, the incident with Grace Melbury on the previous day made Giles less gentle than he might otherwise have shown himself, his confidence in the sex being rudely shaken.

In fine, nothing could move him, and the carriages were compelled to back till they reached one of the sidings or turnouts constructed in the bank for the purpose. Then the team came on ponderously, and the clanging of its sixteen bells as it passed the discomfited carriages, tilted up against the bank, lent a particularly triumphant tone to the team's progress--a tone which, in point of fact, did not at all attach to its conductor's feelings.

Giles walked behind the timber, and just as he had got past the yet stationary carriages he heard a soft voice say, "Who is that rude man? Not Melbury?" The sex of the speaker was so prominent in the voice that Winterborne felt a pang of regret.

"No, ma'am. A younger man, in a smaller way of business in Little

Hintock. Winterborne is his name."

Thus they parted company. "Why, Mr. Winterborne," said the wagoner, when they were out of hearing, "that was She--Mrs. Charmond! Who'd ha' thought it? What in the world can a woman that does nothing be cock-watching out here at this time o' day for? Oh, going to Italy--yes to be sure, I heard she was going abroad, she can't endure the winter here."

Winterborne was vexed at the incident; the more so that he knew Mr. Melbury, in his adoration of Hintock House, would be the first to blame him if it became known. But saying no more, he accompanied the load to the end of the lane, and then turned back with an intention to call at South's to learn the result of the experiment of the preceding evening.

It chanced that a few minutes before this time Grace Melbury, who now rose soon enough to breakfast with her father, in spite of the unwontedness of the hour, had been commissioned by him to make the same inquiry at South's. Marty had been standing at the door when Miss Melbury arrived. Almost before the latter had spoken, Mrs. Charmond's carriages, released from the obstruction up the lane, came bowling along, and the two girls turned to regard the spectacle.

Mrs. Charmond did not see them, but there was sufficient light for them to discern her outline between the carriage windows. A noticeable

feature in her tournure was a magnificent mass of braided locks.

"How well she looks this morning!" said Grace, forgetting Mrs. Charmond's slight in her generous admiration. "Her hair so becomes her worn that way. I have never seen any more beautiful!"

"Nor have I, miss," said Marty, dryly, unconsciously stroking her crown.

Grace watched the carriages with lingering regret till they were out of sight. She then learned of Marty that South was no better. Before she had come away Winterborne approached the house, but seeing that one of the two girls standing on the door-step was Grace, he suddenly turned back again and sought the shelter of his own home till she should have gone away.

