

CHAPTER XV.

When Melbury heard what had happened he seemed much moved, and walked

thoughtfully about the premises. On South's own account he was genuinely sorry; and on Winterborne's he was the more grieved in that this catastrophe had so closely followed the somewhat harsh dismissal of Giles as the betrothed of his daughter.

He was quite angry with circumstances for so heedlessly inflicting on Giles a second trouble when the needful one inflicted by himself was all that the proper order of events demanded. "I told Giles's father when he came into those houses not to spend too much money on lifehold property held neither for his own life nor his son's," he exclaimed. "But he wouldn't listen to me. And now Giles has to suffer for it."

"Poor Giles!" murmured Grace.

"Now, Grace, between us two, it is very, very remarkable. It is almost as if I had foreseen this; and I am thankful for your escape, though I am sincerely sorry for Giles. Had we not dismissed him already, we could hardly have found it in our hearts to dismiss him now. So I say, be thankful. I'll do all I can for him as a friend; but as a pretender to the position of my son-in law, that can never be thought of more."

And yet at that very moment the impracticability to which poor

Winterborne's suit had been reduced was touching Grace's heart to a warmer sentiment on his behalf than she had felt for years concerning him.

He, meanwhile, was sitting down alone in the old familiar house which had ceased to be his, taking a calm if somewhat dismal survey of affairs. The pendulum of the clock bumped every now and then against one side of the case in which it swung, as the muffled drum to his worldly march. Looking out of the window he could perceive that a paralysis had come over Creedle's occupation of manuring the garden, owing, obviously, to a conviction that they might not be living there long enough to profit by next season's crop.

He looked at the leases again and the letter attached. There was no doubt that he had lost his houses by an accident which might easily have been circumvented if he had known the true conditions of his holding. The time for performance had now lapsed in strict law; but might not the intention be considered by the landholder when she became aware of the circumstances, and his moral right to retain the holdings for the term of his life be conceded?

His heart sank within him when he perceived that despite all the legal reciprocities and safeguards prepared and written, the upshot of the matter amounted to this, that it depended upon the mere caprice--good or ill--of the woman he had met the day before in such an unfortunate way, whether he was to possess his houses for life or no.

While he was sitting and thinking a step came to the door, and Melbury appeared, looking very sorry for his position. Winterborne welcomed him by a word and a look, and went on with his examination of the parchments. His visitor sat down.

"Giles," he said, "this is very awkward, and I am sorry for it. What are you going to do?"

Giles informed him of the real state of affairs, and how barely he had missed availing himself of his chance of renewal.

"What a misfortune! Why was this neglected? Well, the best thing you can do is to write and tell her all about it, and throw yourself upon her generosity."

"I would rather not," murmured Giles.

"But you must," said Melbury.

In short, he argued so cogently that Giles allowed himself to be persuaded, and the letter to Mrs. Charmond was written and sent to Hintock House, whence, as he knew, it would at once be forwarded to her.

Melbury feeling that he had done so good an action in coming as almost to extenuate his previous arbitrary conduct to nothing, went home; and

Giles was left alone to the suspense of waiting for a reply from the divinity who shaped the ends of the Hintock population. By this time all the villagers knew of the circumstances, and being wellnigh like one family, a keen interest was the result all round.

Everybody thought of Giles; nobody thought of Marty. Had any of them looked in upon her during those moonlight nights which preceded the burial of her father, they would have seen the girl absolutely alone in the house with the dead man. Her own chamber being nearest the stairs, the coffin had been placed there for convenience; and at a certain hour of the night, when the moon arrived opposite the window, its beams streamed across the still profile of South, sublimed by the august presence of death, and onward a few feet farther upon the face of his daughter, lying in her little bed in the stillness of a repose almost as dignified as that of her companion--the repose of a guileless soul that had nothing more left on earth to lose, except a life which she did not overvalue.

South was buried, and a week passed, and Winterborne watched for a reply from Mrs. Charmond. Melbury was very sanguine as to its tenor; but Winterborne had not told him of the encounter with her carriage, when, if ever he had heard an affronted tone on a woman's lips, he had heard it on hers.

The postman's time for passing was just after Melbury's men had assembled in the spar-house; and Winterborne, who when not busy on his

own account would lend assistance there, used to go out into the lane every morning and meet the post-man at the end of one of the green rides through the hazel copse, in the straight stretch of which his laden figure could be seen a long way off. Grace also was very anxious; more anxious than her father; more, perhaps, than Winterborne himself. This anxiety led her into the spar-house on some pretext or other almost every morning while they were awaiting the reply.

Fitzpiers too, though he did not personally appear, was much interested, and not altogether easy in his mind; for he had been informed by an authority of what he had himself conjectured, that if the tree had been allowed to stand, the old man would have gone on complaining, but might have lived for twenty years.

Eleven times had Winterborne gone to that corner of the ride, and looked up its long straight slope through the wet grays of winter dawn. But though the postman's bowed figure loomed in view pretty regularly, he brought nothing for Giles. On the twelfth day the man of missives, while yet in the extreme distance, held up his hand, and Winterborne saw a letter in it. He took it into the spar-house before he broke the seal, and those who were there gathered round him while he read, Grace looking in at the door.

The letter was not from Mrs. Charmond herself, but her agent at Sherton. Winterborne glanced it over and looked up.

"It's all over," he said.

"Ah!" said they altogether.

"Her lawyer is instructed to say that Mrs. Charmond sees no reason for disturbing the natural course of things, particularly as she contemplates pulling the houses down," he said, quietly.

"Only think of that!" said several.

Winterborne had turned away, and said vehemently to himself, "Then let her pull 'em down, and be d--d to her!"

Creedle looked at him with a face of seven sorrows, saying, "Ah, 'twas that sperrit that lost 'em for ye, maister!"

Winterborne subdued his feelings, and from that hour, whatever they were, kept them entirely to himself. There could be no doubt that, up to this last moment, he had nourished a feeble hope of regaining Grace in the event of this negotiation turning out a success. Not being aware of the fact that her father could have settled upon her a fortune sufficient to enable both to live in comfort, he deemed it now an absurdity to dream any longer of such a vanity as making her his wife, and sank into silence forthwith.

Yet whatever the value of taciturnity to a man among strangers, it is

apt to express more than talkativeness when he dwells among friends. The countryman who is obliged to judge the time of day from changes in external nature sees a thousand successive tints and traits in the landscape which are never discerned by him who hears the regular chime of a clock, because they are never in request. In like manner do we use our eyes on our taciturn comrade. The infinitesimal movement of muscle, curve, hair, and wrinkle, which when accompanied by a voice goes unregarded, is watched and translated in the lack of it, till virtually the whole surrounding circle of familiars is charged with the reserved one's moods and meanings.

This was the condition of affairs between Winterborne and his neighbors after his stroke of ill-luck. He held his tongue; and they observed him, and knew that he was discomposed.

Mr. Melbury, in his compunction, thought more of the matter than any one else, except his daughter. Had Winterborne been going on in the old fashion, Grace's father could have alluded to his disapproval of the alliance every day with the greatest frankness; but to speak any further on the subject he could not find it in his heart to do now. He hoped that Giles would of his own accord make some final announcement that he entirely withdrew his pretensions to Grace, and so get the thing past and done with. For though Giles had in a measure acquiesced in the wish of her family, he could make matters unpleasant if he chose to work upon Grace; and hence, when Melbury saw the young man approaching along the road one day, he kept friendliness and frigidity

exactly balanced in his eye till he could see whether Giles's manner was presumptive or not.

His manner was that of a man who abandoned all claims. "I am glad to meet ye, Mr. Melbury," he said, in a low voice, whose quality he endeavored to make as practical as possible. "I am afraid I shall not be able to keep that mare I bought, and as I don't care to sell her, I should like--if you don't object--to give her to Miss Melbury. The horse is very quiet, and would be quite safe for her."

Mr. Melbury was rather affected at this. "You sha'n't hurt your pocket like that on our account, Giles. Grace shall have the horse, but I'll pay you what you gave for her, and any expense you may have been put to for her keep."

He would not hear of any other terms, and thus it was arranged. They were now opposite Melbury's house, and the timber-merchant pressed Winterborne to enter, Grace being out of the way.

"Pull round the settle, Giles," said the timber-merchant, as soon as they were within. "I should like to have a serious talk with you."

Thereupon he put the case to Winterborne frankly, and in quite a friendly way. He declared that he did not like to be hard on a man when he was in difficulty; but he really did not see how Winterborne could marry his daughter now, without even a house to take her to.

Giles quite acquiesced in the awkwardness of his situation. But from a momentary feeling that he would like to know Grace's mind from her own lips, he did not speak out positively there and then. He accordingly departed somewhat abruptly, and went home to consider whether he would seek to bring about a meeting with her.

In the evening, while he sat quietly pondering, he fancied that he heard a scraping on the wall outside his house. The boughs of a monthly rose which grew there made such a noise sometimes, but as no wind was stirring he knew that it could not be the rose-tree. He took up the candle and went out. Nobody was near. As he turned, the light flickered on the whitewashed rough case of the front, and he saw words written thereon in charcoal, which he read as follows:

"O Giles, you've lost your dwelling-place,
And therefore, Giles, you'll lose your Grace."

Giles went in-doors. He had his suspicions as to the scrawler of those lines, but he could not be sure. What suddenly filled his heart far more than curiosity about their authorship was a terrible belief that they were turning out to be true, try to see Grace as he might. They decided the question for him. He sat down and wrote a formal note to Melbury, in which he briefly stated that he was placed in such a position as to make him share to the full Melbury's view of his own and

his daughter's promise, made some years before; to wish that it should be considered as cancelled, and they themselves quite released from any obligation on account of it.

Having fastened up this their plenary absolution, he determined to get it out of his hands and have done with it; to which end he went off to Melbury's at once. It was now so late that the family had all retired; he crept up to the house, thrust the note under the door, and stole away as silently as he had come.

Melbury himself was the first to rise the next morning, and when he had read the letter his relief was great. "Very honorable of Giles, very honorable," he kept saying to himself. "I shall not forget him. Now to keep her up to her own true level."

It happened that Grace went out for an early ramble that morning, passing through the door and gate while her father was in the spar-house. To go in her customary direction she could not avoid passing Winterborne's house. The morning sun was shining flat upon its white surface, and the words, which still remained, were immediately visible to her. She read them. Her face flushed to crimson. She could see Giles and Creedle talking together at the back; the charred spar-gad with which the lines had been written lay on the ground beneath the wall. Feeling pretty sure that Winterborne would observe her action, she quickly went up to the wall, rubbed out "lose" and inserted "keep" in its stead. Then she made the best of her way home

without looking behind her. Giles could draw an inference now if he chose.

There could not be the least doubt that gentle Grace was warming to more sympathy with, and interest in, Giles Winterborne than ever she had done while he was her promised lover; that since his misfortune those social shortcomings of his, which contrasted so awkwardly with her later experiences of life, had become obscured by the generous revival of an old romantic attachment to him. Though mentally trained and tilled into foreignness of view, as compared with her youthful time, Grace was not an ambitious girl, and might, if left to herself, have declined Winterborne without much discontent or unhappiness. Her feelings just now were so far from latent that the writing on the wall had thus quickened her to an unusual rashness.

Having returned from her walk she sat at breakfast silently. When her step-mother had left the room she said to her father, "I have made up my mind that I should like my engagement to Giles to continue, for the present at any rate, till I can see further what I ought to do."

Melbury looked much surprised.

"Nonsense," he said, sharply. "You don't know what you are talking about. Look here."

He handed across to her the letter received from Giles.

She read it, and said no more. Could he have seen her write on the wall? She did not know. Fate, it seemed, would have it this way, and there was nothing to do but to acquiesce.

It was a few hours after this that Winterborne, who, curiously enough, had NOT perceived Grace writing, was clearing away the tree from the front of South's late dwelling. He saw Marty standing in her door-way, a slim figure in meagre black, almost without womanly contours as yet. He went up to her and said, "Marty, why did you write that on my wall last night? It WAS you, you know."

"Because it was the truth. I didn't mean to let it stay, Mr. Winterborne; but when I was going to rub it out you came, and I was obliged to run off."

"Having prophesied one thing, why did you alter it to another? Your predictions can't be worth much."

"I have not altered it."

"But you have."

"No."

"It is altered. Go and see."

She went, and read that, in spite of losing his dwelling-place, he would KEEP his Grace. Marty came back surprised.

"Well, I never," she said. "Who can have made such nonsense of it?"

"Who, indeed?" said he.

"I have rubbed it all out, as the point of it is quite gone."

"You'd no business to rub it out. I didn't tell you to. I meant to let it stay a little longer."

"Some idle boy did it, no doubt," she murmured.

As this seemed very probable, and the actual perpetrator was unsuspected, Winterborne said no more, and dismissed the matter from his mind.

From this day of his life onward for a considerable time, Winterborne, though not absolutely out of his house as yet, retired into the background of human life and action thereabout--a feat not particularly difficult of performance anywhere when the doer has the assistance of a lost prestige. Grace, thinking that Winterborne saw her write, made no further sign, and the frail bark of fidelity that she had thus timidly launched was stranded and lost.