

CHAPTER XXI.

When the general stampede occurred Winterborne had also been looking on, and encountering one of the girls, had asked her what caused them all to fly.

She said with solemn breathlessness that they had seen something very different from what they had hoped to see, and that she for one would never attempt such unholy ceremonies again. "We saw Satan pursuing us with his hour-glass. It was terrible!"

This account being a little incoherent, Giles went forward towards the spot from which the girls had retreated. After listening there a few minutes he heard slow footsteps rustling over the leaves, and looking through a tangled screen of honeysuckle which hung from a bough, he saw in the open space beyond a short stout man in evening-dress, carrying on one arm a light overcoat and also his hat, so awkwardly arranged as possibly to have suggested the "hour-glass" to his timid observers--if this were the person whom the girls had seen. With the other hand he silently gesticulated and the moonlight falling upon his bare brow showed him to have dark hair and a high forehead of the shape seen oftener in old prints and paintings than in real life. His curious and altogether alien aspect, his strange gestures, like those of one who is rehearsing a scene to himself, and the unusual place and hour, were sufficient to account for any trepidation among the Hintock daughters at encountering him.

He paused, and looked round, as if he had forgotten where he was; not observing Giles, who was of the color of his environment. The latter advanced into the light. The gentleman held up his hand and came towards Giles, the two meeting half-way.

"I have lost my way," said the stranger. "Perhaps you can put me in the path again." He wiped his forehead with the air of one suffering under an agitation more than that of simple fatigue.

"The turnpike-road is over there," said Giles

"I don't want the turnpike-road," said the gentleman, impatiently. "I came from that. I want Hintock House. Is there not a path to it across here?"

"Well, yes, a sort of path. But it is hard to find from this point. I'll show you the way, sir, with great pleasure."

"Thanks, my good friend. The truth is that I decided to walk across the country after dinner from the hotel at Sherton, where I am staying for a day or two. But I did not know it was so far."

"It is about a mile to the house from here."

They walked on together. As there was no path, Giles occasionally

stepped in front and bent aside the underboughs of the trees to give his companion a passage, saying every now and then when the twigs, on being released, flew back like whips, "Mind your eyes, sir." To which the stranger replied, "Yes, yes," in a preoccupied tone.

So they went on, the leaf-shadows running in their usual quick succession over the forms of the pedestrians, till the stranger said,

"Is it far?"

"Not much farther," said Winterborne. "The plantation runs up into a corner here, close behind the house." He added with hesitation, "You know, I suppose, sir, that Mrs. Charmond is not at home?"

"You mistake," said the other, quickly. "Mrs. Charmond has been away for some time, but she's at home now."

Giles did not contradict him, though he felt sure that the gentleman was wrong.

"You are a native of this place?" the stranger said.

"Yes."

"Well, you are happy in having a home. It is what I don't possess."

"You come from far, seemingly?"

"I come now from the south of Europe."

"Oh, indeed, sir. You are an Italian, or Spanish, or French gentleman, perhaps?"

"I am not either."

Giles did not fill the pause which ensued, and the gentleman, who seemed of an emotional nature, unable to resist friendship, at length answered the question.

"I am an Italianized American, a South Carolinian by birth," he said.

"I left my native country on the failure of the Southern cause, and have never returned to it since."

He spoke no more about himself, and they came to the verge of the wood. Here, striding over the fence out upon the upland sward, they could at once see the chimneys of the house in the gorge immediately beneath their position, silent, still, and pale.

"Can you tell me the time?" the gentleman asked. "My watch has stopped."

"It is between twelve and one," said Giles.

His companion expressed his astonishment. "I thought it between nine and ten at latest! Dear me--dear me!"

He now begged Giles to return, and offered him a gold coin, which looked like a sovereign, for the assistance rendered. Giles declined to accept anything, to the surprise of the stranger, who, on putting the money back into his pocket, said, awkwardly, "I offered it because I want you to utter no word about this meeting with me. Will you promise?"

Winterborne promised readily. He thereupon stood still while the other ascended the slope. At the bottom he looked back dubiously. Giles would no longer remain when he was so evidently desired to leave, and returned through the boughs to Hintock.

He suspected that this man, who seemed so distressed and melancholy, might be that lover and persistent wooer of Mrs. Charmond whom he had heard so frequently spoken of, and whom it was said she had treated cavalierly. But he received no confirmation of his suspicion beyond a report which reached him a few days later that a gentleman had called up the servants who were taking care of Hintock House at an hour past midnight; and on learning that Mrs. Charmond, though returned from abroad, was as yet in London, he had sworn bitterly, and gone away without leaving a card or any trace of himself.

The girls who related the story added that he sighed three times before he swore, but this part of the narrative was not corroborated. Anyhow, such a gentleman had driven away from the hotel at Sherton next day in a carriage hired at that inn.