

CHAPTER XXXI.

As February merged in March, and lighter evenings broke the gloom of the woodmen's homeward journey, the Hintocks Great and Little began to have ears for a rumor of the events out of which had grown the timber-dealer's troubles. It took the form of a wide sprinkling of conjecture, wherein no man knew the exact truth. Tantalizing phenomena, at once showing and concealing the real relationship of the persons concerned, caused a diffusion of excited surprise. Honest people as the woodlanders were, it was hardly to be expected that they could remain immersed in the study of their trees and gardens amid such circumstances, or sit with their backs turned like the good burghers of Coventry at the passage of the beautiful lady.

Rumor, for a wonder, exaggerated little. There were, in fact, in this case as in thousands, the well-worn incidents, old as the hills, which, with individual variations, made a mourner of Ariadne, a by-word of Vashti, and a corpse of the Countess Amy. There were rencounters accidental and contrived, stealthy correspondence, sudden misgivings on one side, sudden self-reproaches on the other. The inner state of the twain was one as of confused noise that would not allow the accents of calmer reason to be heard. Determinations to go in this direction, and headlong plunges in that; dignified safeguards, undignified collapses; not a single rash step by deliberate intention, and all against judgment.

It was all that Melbury had expected and feared. It was more, for he had overlooked the publicity that would be likely to result, as it now had done. What should he do--appeal to Mrs. Charmond himself, since Grace would not? He bethought himself of Winterborne, and resolved to consult him, feeling the strong need of some friend of his own sex to whom he might unburden his mind.

He had entirely lost faith in his own judgment. That judgment on which he had relied for so many years seemed recently, like a false companion unmasked, to have disclosed unexpected depths of hypocrisy and speciousness where all had seemed solidity. He felt almost afraid to form a conjecture on the weather, or the time, or the fruit-promise, so great was his self-abasement.

It was a rimy evening when he set out to look for Giles. The woods seemed to be in a cold sweat; beads of perspiration hung from every bare twig; the sky had no color, and the trees rose before him as haggard, gray phantoms, whose days of substantiality were passed. Melbury seldom saw Winterborne now, but he believed him to be occupying a lonely hut just beyond the boundary of Mrs. Charmond's estate, though still within the circuit of the woodland. The timber-merchant's thin legs stalked on through the pale, damp scenery, his eyes on the dead leaves of last year; while every now and then a hasty "Ay?" escaped his lips in reply to some bitter proposition.

His notice was attracted by a thin blue haze of smoke, behind which

arose sounds of voices and chopping: bending his steps that way, he saw Winterborne just in front of him. It just now happened that Giles, after being for a long time apathetic and unemployed, had become one of the busiest men in the neighborhood. It is often thus; fallen friends, lost sight of, we expect to find starving; we discover them going on fairly well. Without any solicitation, or desire for profit on his part, he had been asked to execute during that winter a very large order for hurdles and other copse-ware, for which purpose he had been obliged to buy several acres of brushwood standing. He was now engaged in the cutting and manufacture of the same, proceeding with the work daily like an automaton.

The hazel-tree did not belie its name to-day. The whole of the copse-wood where the mist had cleared returned purest tints of that hue, amid which Winterborne himself was in the act of making a hurdle, the stakes being driven firmly into the ground in a row, over which he bent and wove the twigs. Beside him was a square, compact pile like the altar of Cain, formed of hurdles already finished, which bristled on all sides with the sharp points of their stakes. At a little distance the men in his employ were assisting him to carry out his contract. Rows of copse-wood lay on the ground as it had fallen under the axe; and a shelter had been constructed near at hand, in front of which burned the fire whose smoke had attracted him. The air was so dank that the smoke hung heavy, and crept away amid the bushes without rising from the ground.

After wistfully regarding Winterborne a while, Melbury drew nearer, and briefly inquired of Giles how he came to be so busily engaged, with an undertone of slight surprise that Winterborne could seem so thriving after being deprived of Grace. Melbury was not without emotion at the meeting; for Grace's affairs had divided them, and ended their intimacy of old times.

Winterborne explained just as briefly, without raising his eyes from his occupation of chopping a bough that he held in front of him.

"'Twill be up in April before you get it all cleared," said Melbury.

"Yes, there or thereabouts," said Winterborne, a chop of the billhook jerking the last word into two pieces.

There was another interval; Melbury still looked on, a chip from Winterborne's hook occasionally flying against the waistcoat and legs of his visitor, who took no heed.

"Ah, Giles--you should have been my partner. You should have been my son-in-law," the old man said at last. "It would have been far better for her and for me."

Winterborne saw that something had gone wrong with his former friend, and throwing down the switch he was about to interweave, he responded only too readily to the mood of the timber-dealer. "Is she ill?" he

said, hurriedly.

"No, no." Melbury stood without speaking for some minutes, and then, as though he could not bring himself to proceed, turned to go away.

Winterborne told one of his men to pack up the tools for the night and walked after Melbury.

"Heaven forbid that I should seem too inquisitive, sir," he said, "especially since we don't stand as we used to stand to one another; but I hope it is well with them all over your way?"

"No," said Melbury--"no." He stopped, and struck the smooth trunk of a young ash-tree with the flat of his hand. "I would that his ear had been where that rind is!" he exclaimed; "I should have treated him to little compared with what he deserves."

"Now," said Winterborne, "don't be in a hurry to go home. I've put some cider down to warm in my shelter here, and we'll sit and drink it and talk this over."

Melbury turned unresistingly as Giles took his arm, and they went back to where the fire was, and sat down under the screen, the other woodmen having gone. He drew out the cider-mug from the ashes and they drank together.

"Giles, you ought to have had her, as I said just now," repeated Melbury. "I'll tell you why for the first time."

He thereupon told Winterborne, as with great relief, the story of how he won away Giles's father's chosen one--by nothing worse than a lover's cajoleries, it is true, but by means which, except in love, would certainly have been pronounced cruel and unfair. He explained how he had always intended to make reparation to Winterborne the father by giving Grace to Winterborne the son, till the devil tempted him in the person of Fitzpiers, and he broke his virtuous vow.

"How highly I thought of that man, to be sure! Who'd have supposed he'd have been so weak and wrong-headed as this! You ought to have had her, Giles, and there's an end on't."

Winterborne knew how to preserve his calm under this unconsciously cruel tearing of a healing wound to which Melbury's concentration on the more vital subject had blinded him. The young man endeavored to make the best of the case for Grace's sake.

"She would hardly have been happy with me," he said, in the dry, unimpassioned voice under which he hid his feelings. "I was not well enough educated: too rough, in short. I couldn't have surrounded her with the refinements she looked for, anyhow, at all."

"Nonsense--you are quite wrong there," said the unwise old man,

doggedly. "She told me only this day that she hates refinements and such like. All that my trouble and money bought for her in that way is thrown away upon her quite. She'd fain be like Marty South--think o' that! That's the top of her ambition! Perhaps she's right. Giles, she loved you--under the rind; and, what's more, she loves ye still--worse luck for the poor maid!"

If Melbury only had known what fires he was recklessly stirring up he might have held his peace. Winterborne was silent a long time. The darkness had closed in round them, and the monotonous drip of the fog from the branches quickened as it turned to fine rain.

"Oh, she never cared much for me," Giles managed to say, as he stirred the embers with a brand.

"She did, and does, I tell ye," said the other, obstinately. "However, all that's vain talking now. What I come to ask you about is a more practical matter--how to make the best of things as they are. I am thinking of a desperate step--of calling on the woman Charmond. I am going to appeal to her, since Grace will not. 'Tis she who holds the balance in her hands--not he. While she's got the will to lead him astray he will follow--poor, unpractical, lofty-notioned dreamer--and how long she'll do it depends upon her whim. Did ye ever hear anything about her character before she came to Hintock?"

"She's been a bit of a charmer in her time, I believe," replied Giles,

with the same level quietude, as he regarded the red coals. "One who has smiled where she has not loved and loved where she has not married. Before Mr. Charmond made her his wife she was a play-actress."

"Hey? But how close you have kept all this, Giles! What besides?"

"Mr. Charmond was a rich man, engaged in the iron trade in the north, twenty or thirty years older than she. He married her and retired, and came down here and bought this property, as they do nowadays."

"Yes, yes--I know all about that; but the other I did not know. I fear it bodes no good. For how can I go and appeal to the forbearance of a woman in this matter who has made cross-loves and crooked entanglements her trade for years? I thank ye, Giles, for finding it out; but it makes my plan the harder that she should have belonged to that unstable tribe."

Another pause ensued, and they looked gloomily at the smoke that beat about the hurdles which sheltered them, through whose weavings a large drop of rain fell at intervals and spat smartly into the fire. Mrs. Charmond had been no friend to Winterborne, but he was manly, and it was not in his heart to let her be condemned without a trial.

"She is said to be generous," he answered. "You might not appeal to her in vain."

"It shall be done," said Melbury, rising. "For good or for evil, to Mrs. Charmond I'll go."