

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

At these warm words Winterborne was not less dazed than he was moved in heart. The novelty of the avowal rendered what it carried with it inapprehensible by him in its entirety.

Only a few short months ago completely estranged from this family--beholding Grace going to and fro in the distance, clothed with the alienating radiance of obvious superiority, the wife of the then popular and fashionable Fitzpiers, hopelessly outside his social boundary down to so recent a time that flowers then folded were hardly faded yet--he was now asked by that jealously guarding father of hers to take courage--to get himself ready for the day when he should be able to claim her.

The old times came back to him in dim procession. How he had been snubbed; how Melbury had despised his Christmas party; how that sweet, coy Grace herself had looked down upon him and his household arrangements, and poor Creedle's contrivances!

Well, he could not believe it. Surely the adamant barrier of marriage with another could not be pierced like this! It did violence to custom. Yet a new law might do anything. But was it at all within the bounds of probability that a woman who, over and above her own attainments, had been accustomed to those of a cultivated professional man, could ever be the wife of such as he?

Since the date of his rejection he had almost grown to see the reasonableness of that treatment. He had said to himself again and again that her father was right; that the poor ceorl, Giles Winterborne, would never have been able to make such a dainty girl happy. Yet, now that she had stood in a position farther removed from his own than at first, he was asked to prepare to woo her. He was full of doubt.

Nevertheless, it was not in him to show backwardness. To act so promptly as Melbury desired him to act seemed, indeed, scarcely wise, because of the uncertainty of events. Giles knew nothing of legal procedure, but he did know that for him to step up to Grace as a lover before the bond which bound her was actually dissolved was simply an extravagant dream of her father's overstrained mind. He pitied Melbury for his almost childish enthusiasm, and saw that the aging man must have suffered acutely to be weakened to this unreasoning desire.

Winterborne was far too magnanimous to harbor any cynical conjecture that the timber-merchant, in his intense affection for Grace, was courting him now because that young lady, when disunited, would be left in an anomalous position, to escape which a bad husband was better than none. He felt quite sure that his old friend was simply on tenterhooks of anxiety to repair the almost irreparable error of dividing two whom Nature had striven to join together in earlier days, and that in his ardor to do this he was oblivious of formalities. The cautious

supervision of his past years had overleaped itself at last. Hence, Winterborne perceived that, in this new beginning, the necessary care not to compromise Grace by too early advances must be exercised by himself.

Perhaps Winterborne was not quite so ardent as heretofore. There is no such thing as a stationary love: men are either loving more or loving less. But Giles himself recognized no decline in his sense of her dearness. If the flame did indeed burn lower now than when he had fetched her from Sherton at her last return from school, the marvel was small. He had been laboring ever since his rejection and her marriage to reduce his former passion to a docile friendship, out of pure regard to its expediency; and their separation may have helped him to a partial success.

A week and more passed, and there was no further news of Melbury. But the effect of the intelligence he had already transmitted upon the elastic-nerved daughter of the woods had been much what the old surgeon Jones had surmised. It had soothed her perturbed spirit better than all the opiates in the pharmacopoeia. She had slept unbrokenly a whole night and a day. The "new law" was to her a mysterious, beneficent, godlike entity, lately descended upon earth, that would make her as she once had been without trouble or annoyance. Her position fretted her, its abstract features rousing an aversion which was even greater than her aversion to the personality of him who had caused it. It was mortifying, productive of slights, undignified. Him she could forget;

her circumstances she had always with her.

She saw nothing of Winterborne during the days of her recovery; and perhaps on that account her fancy wove about him a more romantic tissue than it could have done if he had stood before her with all the specks and flaws inseparable from corporeity. He rose upon her memory as the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation; sometimes leafy, and smeared with green lichen, as she had seen him among the sappy boughs of the plantations; sometimes cider-stained, and with apple-pips in the hair of his arms, as she had met him on his return from cider-making in White Hart Vale, with his vats and presses beside him. In her secret heart she almost approximated to her father's enthusiasm in wishing to show Giles once for all how she still regarded him. The question whether the future would indeed bring them together for life was a standing wonder with her. She knew that it could not with any propriety do so just yet. But reverently believing in her father's sound judgment and knowledge, as good girls are wont to do, she remembered what he had written about her giving a hint to Winterborne lest there should be risk in delay, and her feelings were not averse to such a step, so far as it could be done without danger at this early stage of the proceedings.

From being a frail phantom of her former equable self she returned in bounds to a condition of passable philosophy. She bloomed again in the face in the course of a few days, and was well enough to go about as usual. One day Mrs. Melbury proposed that for a change she should be

driven in the gig to Sherton market, whither Melbury's man was going on other errands. Grace had no business whatever in Sherton; but it crossed her mind that Winterborne would probably be there, and this made the thought of such a drive interesting.

On the way she saw nothing of him; but when the horse was walking slowly through the obstructions of Sheep Street, she discerned the young man on the pavement. She thought of that time when he had been standing under his apple-tree on her return from school, and of the tender opportunity then missed through her fastidiousness. Her heart rose in her throat. She abjured all such fastidiousness now. Nor did she forget the last occasion on which she had beheld him in that town, making cider in the court-yard of the Earl of Wessex Hotel, while she was figuring as a fine lady in the balcony above.

Grace directed the man to set her down there in the midst, and immediately went up to her lover. Giles had not before observed her, and his eyes now suppressedly looked his pleasure, without the embarrassment that had formerly marked him at such meetings.

When a few words had been spoken, she said, archly, "I have nothing to do. Perhaps you are deeply engaged?"

"I? Not a bit. My business now at the best of times is small, I am sorry to say."

"Well, then, I am going into the Abbey. Come along with me."

The proposition had suggested itself as a quick escape from publicity, for many eyes were regarding her. She had hoped that sufficient time had elapsed for the extinction of curiosity; but it was quite otherwise. The people looked at her with tender interest as the deserted girl-wife--without obtrusiveness, and without vulgarity; but she was ill prepared for scrutiny in any shape.

They walked about the Abbey aisles, and presently sat down. Not a soul was in the building save themselves. She regarded a stained window, with her head sideways, and tentatively asked him if he remembered the last time they were in that town alone.

He remembered it perfectly, and remarked, "You were a proud miss then, and as dainty as you were high. Perhaps you are now?"

Grace slowly shook her head. "Affliction has taken all that out of me," she answered, impressively. "Perhaps I am too far the other way now." As there was something lurking in this that she could not explain, she added, so quickly as not to allow him time to think of it, "Has my father written to you at all?"

"Yes," said Winterborne.

She glanced ponderingly up at him. "Not about me?"

"Yes."

His mouth was lined with character which told her that he had been bidden to take the hint as to the future which she had been bidden to give. The unexpected discovery sent a scarlet pulsation through Grace for the moment. However, it was only Giles who stood there, of whom she had no fear; and her self-possession returned.

"He said I was to sound you with a view to--what you will understand, if you care to," continued Winterborne, in a low voice. Having been put on this track by herself, he was not disposed to abandon it in a hurry.

They had been children together, and there was between them that familiarity as to personal affairs which only such acquaintanceship can give. "You know, Giles," she answered, speaking in a very practical tone, "that that is all very well; but I am in a very anomalous position at present, and I cannot say anything to the point about such things as those."

"No?" he said, with a stray air as regarded the subject. He was looking at her with a curious consciousness of discovery. He had not been imagining that their renewed intercourse would show her to him thus. For the first time he realized an unexpectedness in her, which, after all, should not have been unexpected. She before him was not the

girl Grace Melbury whom he used to know. Of course, he might easily have prefigured as much; but it had never occurred to him. She was a woman who had been married; she had moved on; and without having lost her girlish modesty, she had lost her girlish shyness. The inevitable change, though known to him, had not been heeded; and it struck him into a momentary fixity. The truth was that he had never come into close comradeship with her since her engagement to Fitzpiers, with the brief exception of the evening encounter on Rubdown Hill, when she met him with his cider apparatus; and that interview had been of too cursory a kind for insight.

Winterborne had advanced, too. He could criticise her. Times had been when to criticise a single trait in Grace Melbury would have lain as far beyond his powers as to criticise a deity. This thing was sure: it was a new woman in many ways whom he had come out to see; a creature of more ideas, more dignity, and, above all, more assurance, than the original Grace had been capable of. He could not at first decide whether he were pleased or displeased at this. But upon the whole the novelty attracted him.

She was so sweet and sensitive that she feared his silence betokened something in his brain of the nature of an enemy to her. "What are you thinking of that makes those lines come in your forehead?" she asked. "I did not mean to offend you by speaking of the time being premature as yet."

Touched by the genuine loving-kindness which had lain at the foundation of these words, and much moved, Winterborne turned his face aside, as he took her by the hand. He was grieved that he had criticised her.

"You are very good, dear Grace," he said, in a low voice. "You are better, much better, than you used to be."

"How?"

He could not very well tell her how, and said, with an evasive smile, "You are prettier;" which was not what he really had meant. He then remained still holding her right hand in his own right, so that they faced in opposite ways; and as he did not let go, she ventured upon a tender remonstrance.

"I think we have gone as far as we ought to go at present--and far enough to satisfy my poor father that we are the same as ever. You see, Giles, my case is not settled yet, and if--Oh, suppose I NEVER get free!--there should be any hitch or informality!"

She drew a catching breath, and turned pale. The dialogue had been affectionate comedy up to this point. The gloomy atmosphere of the past, and the still gloomy horizon of the present, had been for the interval forgotten. Now the whole environment came back, the due balance of shade among the light was restored.

"It is sure to be all right, I trust?" she resumed, in uneasy accents.

"What did my father say the solicitor had told him?"

"Oh--that all is sure enough. The case is so clear--nothing could be clearer. But the legal part is not yet quite done and finished, as is natural."

"Oh no--of course not," she said, sunk in meek thought. "But father said it was ALMOST--did he not? Do you know anything about the new law that makes these things so easy?"

"Nothing--except the general fact that it enables ill-assorted husbands and wives to part in a way they could not formerly do without an Act of Parliament."

"Have you to sign a paper, or swear anything? Is it something like that?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"How long has it been introduced?"

"About six months or a year, the lawyer said, I think."

To hear these two poor Arcadian innocents talk of imperial law would

have made a humane person weep who should have known what a dangerous structure they were building up on their supposed knowledge. They remained in thought, like children in the presence of the incomprehensible.

"Giles," she said, at last, "it makes me quite weary when I think how serious my situation is, or has been. Shall we not go out from here now, as it may seem rather fast of me--our being so long together, I mean--if anybody were to see us? I am almost sure," she added, uncertainly, "that I ought not to let you hold my hand yet, knowing that the documents--or whatever it may be--have not been signed; so that I--am still as married as ever--or almost. My dear father has forgotten himself. Not that I feel morally bound to any one else, after what has taken place--no woman of spirit could--now, too, that several months have passed. But I wish to keep the proprieties as well as I can."

"Yes, yes. Still, your father reminds us that life is short. I myself feel that it is; that is why I wished to understand you in this that we have begun. At times, dear Grace, since receiving your father's letter, I am as uneasy and fearful as a child at what he said. If one of us were to die before the formal signing and sealing that is to release you have been done--if we should drop out of the world and never have made the most of this little, short, but real opportunity, I should think to myself as I sunk down dying, 'Would to my God that I

had spoken out my whole heart--given her one poor little kiss when I had the chance to give it! But I never did, although she had promised to be mine some day; and now I never can.' That's what I should think."

She had begun by watching the words from his lips with a mournful regard, as though their passage were visible; but as he went on she dropped her glance. "Yes," she said, "I have thought that, too. And, because I have thought it, I by no means meant, in speaking of the proprieties, to be reserved and cold to you who loved me so long ago, or to hurt your heart as I used to do at that thoughtless time. Oh, not at all, indeed! But--ought I to allow you?--oh, it is too quick--surely!" Her eyes filled with tears of bewildered, alarmed emotion.

Winterborne was too straightforward to influence her further against her better judgment. "Yes--I suppose it is," he said, repentantly. "I'll wait till all is settled. What did your father say in that last letter?"

He meant about his progress with the petition; but she, mistaking him, frankly spoke of the personal part. "He said--what I have implied. Should I tell more plainly?"

"Oh no--don't, if it is a secret."

"Not at all. I will tell every word, straight out, Giles, if you wish."

He said I was to encourage you. There. But I cannot obey him further to-day. Come, let us go now." She gently slid her hand from his, and went in front of him out of the Abbey.

"I was thinking of getting some dinner," said Winterborne, changing to the prosaic, as they walked. "And you, too, must require something. Do let me take you to a place I know."

Grace was almost without a friend in the world outside her father's house; her life with Fitzpiers had brought her no society; had sometimes, indeed, brought her deeper solitude and inconsideration than any she had ever known before. Hence it was a treat to her to find herself again the object of thoughtful care. But she questioned if to go publicly to dine with Giles Winterborne were not a proposal, due rather to his unsophistication than to his discretion. She said gently that she would much prefer his ordering her lunch at some place and then coming to tell her it was ready, while she remained in the Abbey porch. Giles saw her secret reasoning, thought how hopelessly blind to propriety he was beside her, and went to do as she wished.

He was not absent more than ten minutes, and found Grace where he had left her. "It will be quite ready by the time you get there," he said, and told her the name of the inn at which the meal had been ordered, which was one that she had never heard of.

"I'll find it by inquiry," said Grace, setting out.

"And shall I see you again?"

"Oh yes--come to me there. It will not be like going together. I shall want you to find my father's man and the gig for me."

He waited on some ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, till he thought her lunch ended, and that he might fairly take advantage of her invitation to start her on her way home. He went straight to The Three Tuns--a little tavern in a side street, scrupulously clean, but humble and inexpensive. On his way he had an occasional misgiving as to whether the place had been elegant enough for her; and as soon as he entered it, and saw her ensconced there, he perceived that he had blundered.

Grace was seated in the only dining-room that the simple old hostelry could boast of, which was also a general parlor on market-days; a long, low apartment, with a sanded floor herring-boned with a broom; a wide, red-curtained window to the street, and another to the garden. Grace had retreated to the end of the room looking out upon the latter, the front part being full of a mixed company which had dropped in since he was there.

She was in a mood of the greatest depression. On arriving, and seeing what the tavern was like, she had been taken by surprise; but having gone too far to retreat, she had heroically entered and sat down on the

well-scrubbed settle, opposite the narrow table with its knives and steel forks, tin pepper-boxes, blue salt-cellars, and posters advertising the sale of bullocks against the wall. The last time that she had taken any meal in a public place it had been with Fitzpiers at the grand new Earl of Wessex Hotel in that town, after a two months' roaming and sojourning at the gigantic hotels of the Continent. How could she have expected any other kind of accommodation in present circumstances than such as Giles had provided? And yet how unprepared she was for this change! The tastes that she had acquired from Fitzpiers had been imbibed so subtly that she hardly knew she possessed them till confronted by this contrast. The elegant Fitzpiers, in fact, at that very moment owed a long bill at the above-mentioned hotel for the luxurious style in which he used to put her up there whenever they drove to Sherton. But such is social sentiment, that she had been quite comfortable under those debt-impending conditions, while she felt humiliated by her present situation, which Winterborne had paid for honestly on the nail.

He had noticed in a moment that she shrunk from her position, and all his pleasure was gone. It was the same susceptibility over again which had spoiled his Christmas party long ago.

But he did not know that this recrudescence was only the casual result of Grace's apprenticeship to what she was determined to learn in spite of it--a consequence of one of those sudden surprises which confront everybody bent upon turning over a new leaf. She had finished her

lunch, which he saw had been a very mincing performance; and he brought her out of the house as soon as he could.

"Now," he said, with great sad eyes, "you have not finished at all well, I know. Come round to the Earl of Wessex. I'll order a tea there. I did not remember that what was good enough for me was not good enough for you."

Her face faded into an aspect of deep distress when she saw what had happened. "Oh no, Giles," she said, with extreme pathos; "certainly not. Why do you--say that when you know better? You EVER will misunderstand me."

"Indeed, that's not so, Mrs. Fitzpiers. Can you deny that you felt out of place at The Three Tuns?"

"I don't know. Well, since you make me speak, I do not deny it."

"And yet I have felt at home there these twenty years. Your husband used always to take you to the Earl of Wessex, did he not?"

"Yes," she reluctantly admitted. How could she explain in the street of a market-town that it was her superficial and transitory taste which had been offended, and not her nature or her affection? Fortunately, or unfortunately, at that moment they saw Melbury's man driving vacantly along the street in search of her, the hour having passed at which he

had been told to take her up. Winterborne hailed him, and she was powerless then to prolong the discourse. She entered the vehicle sadly, and the horse trotted away.