

CHAPTER XXXIX.

All night did Winterborne think over that unsatisfactory ending of a pleasant time, forgetting the pleasant time itself. He feared anew that they could never be happy together, even should she be free to choose him. She was accomplished; he was unrefined. It was the original difficulty, which he was too sensitive to recklessly ignore, as some men would have done in his place.

He was one of those silent, unobtrusive beings who want little from others in the way of favor or condescension, and perhaps on that very account scrutinize those others' behavior too closely. He was not versatile, but one in whom a hope or belief which had once had its rise, meridian, and decline seldom again exactly recurred, as in the breasts of more sanguine mortals. He had once worshipped her, laid out his life to suit her, wooed her, and lost her. Though it was with almost the same zest, it was with not quite the same hope, that he had begun to tread the old tracks again, and allowed himself to be so charmed with her that day.

Move another step towards her he would not. He would even repulse her--as a tribute to conscience. It would be sheer sin to let her prepare a pitfall for her happiness not much smaller than the first by inveigling her into a union with such as he. Her poor father was now blind to these subtleties, which he had formerly beheld as in noontide light. It was his own duty to declare them--for her dear sake.

Grace, too, had a very uncomfortable night, and her solicitous embarrassment was not lessened the next morning when another letter from her father was put into her hands. Its tenor was an intenser strain of the one that had preceded it. After stating how extremely glad he was to hear that she was better, and able to get out-of-doors, he went on:

"This is a wearisome business, the solicitor we have come to see being out of town. I do not know when I shall get home. My great anxiety in this delay is still lest you should lose Giles Winterborne. I cannot rest at night for thinking that while our business is hanging fire he may become estranged, or go away from the neighborhood. I have set my heart upon seeing him your husband, if you ever have another. Do, then, Grace, give him some temporary encouragement, even though it is over-early. For when I consider the past I do think God will forgive me and you for being a little forward. I have another reason for this, my dear. I feel myself going rapidly downhill, and late affairs have still further helped me that way. And until this thing is done I cannot rest in peace."

He added a postscript:

"I have just heard that the solicitor is to be seen to-morrow. Possibly, therefore, I shall return in the evening after you get this."

The paternal longing ran on all fours with her own desire; and yet in forwarding it yesterday she had been on the brink of giving offence. While craving to be a country girl again just as her father requested; to put off the old Eve, the fastidious miss--or rather madam--completely, her first attempt had been beaten by the unexpected vitality of that fastidiousness. Her father on returning and seeing the trifling coolness of Giles would be sure to say that the same perversity which had led her to make difficulties about marrying Fitzpiers was now prompting her to blow hot and cold with poor Winterborne.

If the latter had been the most subtle hand at touching the stops of her delicate soul instead of one who had just bound himself to let her drift away from him again (if she would) on the wind of her estranging education, he could not have acted more seductively than he did that day. He chanced to be superintending some temporary work in a field opposite her windows. She could not discover what he was doing, but she read his mood keenly and truly: she could see in his coming and going an air of determined abandonment of the whole landscape that lay in her direction.

Oh, how she longed to make it up with him! Her father coming in the evening--which meant, she supposed, that all formalities would be in train, her marriage virtually annulled, and she be free to be won

again--how could she look him in the face if he should see them estranged thus?

It was a fair green evening in June. She was seated in the garden, in the rustic chair which stood under the laurel-bushes--made of peeled oak-branches that came to Melbury's premises as refuse after barking-time. The mass of full-juiced leafage on the heights around her was just swayed into faint gestures by a nearly spent wind which, even in its enfeebled state, did not reach her shelter. All day she had expected Giles to call--to inquire how she had got home, or something or other; but he had not come. And he still tantalized her by going athwart and across that orchard opposite. She could see him as she sat.

A slight diversion was presently created by Creedle bringing him a letter. She knew from this that Creedle had just come from Sherton, and had called as usual at the post-office for anything that had arrived by the afternoon post, of which there was no delivery at Hintock. She pondered on what the letter might contain--particularly whether it were a second refresher for Winterborne from her father, like her own of the morning.

But it appeared to have no bearing upon herself whatever. Giles read its contents; and almost immediately turned away to a gap in the hedge of the orchard--if that could be called a hedge which, owing to the drippings of the trees, was little more than a bank with a bush upon it

here and there. He entered the plantation, and was no doubt going that way homeward to the mysterious hut he occupied on the other side of the woodland.

The sad sands were running swiftly through Time's glass; she had often felt it in these latter days; and, like Giles, she felt it doubly now after the solemn and pathetic reminder in her father's communication. Her freshness would pass, the long-suffering devotion of Giles might suddenly end--might end that very hour. Men were so strange. The thought took away from her all her former reticence, and made her action bold. She started from her seat. If the little breach, quarrel, or whatever it might be called, of yesterday, was to be healed up it must be done by her on the instant. She crossed into the orchard, and clambered through the gap after Giles, just as he was diminishing to a faun-like figure under the green canopy and over the brown floor.

Grace had been wrong--very far wrong--in assuming that the letter had no reference to herself because Giles had turned away into the wood after its perusal. It was, sad to say, because the missive had so much reference to herself that he had thus turned away. He feared that his grieved discomfiture might be observed. The letter was from Beaucock, written a few hours later than Melbury's to his daughter. It announced failure.

Giles had once done that thriftless man a good turn, and now was the

moment when Beaucock had chosen to remember it in his own way. During his absence in town with Melbury, the lawyer's clerk had naturally heard a great deal of the timber-merchant's family scheme of justice to Giles, and his communication was to inform Winterborne at the earliest possible moment that their attempt had failed, in order that the young man should not place himself in a false position towards Grace in the belief of its coming success. The news was, in sum, that Fitzpiers's conduct had not been sufficiently cruel to Grace to enable her to snap the bond. She was apparently doomed to be his wife till the end of the chapter.

Winterborne quite forgot his superficial differences with the poor girl under the warm rush of deep and distracting love for her which the almost tragical information engendered.

To renounce her forever--that was then the end of it for him, after all. There was no longer any question about suitability, or room for tiffs on petty tastes. The curtain had fallen again between them. She could not be his. The cruelty of their late revived hope was now terrible. How could they all have been so simple as to suppose this thing could be done?

It was at this moment that, hearing some one coming behind him, he turned and saw her hastening on between the thickets. He perceived in an instant that she did not know the blighting news.

"Giles, why didn't you come across to me?" she asked, with arch reproach. "Didn't you see me sitting there ever so long?"

"Oh yes," he said, in unprepared, extemporized tones, for her unexpected presence caught him without the slightest plan of behavior in the conjuncture. His manner made her think that she had been too chiding in her speech; and a mild scarlet wave passed over her as she resolved to soften it.

"I have had another letter from my father," she hastened to continue.

"He thinks he may come home this evening. And--in view of his hopes--it will grieve him if there is any little difference between us, Giles."

"There is none," he said, sadly regarding her from the face downward as he pondered how to lay the cruel truth bare.

"Still--I fear you have not quite forgiven me about my being uncomfortable at the inn."

"I have, Grace, I'm sure."

"But you speak in quite an unhappy way," she returned, coming up close to him with the most winning of the many pretty airs that appertained to her. "Don't you think you will ever be happy, Giles?"

He did not reply for some instants. "When the sun shines on the north front of Sherton Abbey--that's when my happiness will come to me!" said he, staring as it were into the earth.

"But--then that means that there is something more than my offending you in not liking The Three Tuns. If it is because I--did not like to let you kiss me in the Abbey--well, you know, Giles, that it was not on account of my cold feelings, but because I did certainly, just then, think it was rather premature, in spite of my poor father. That was the true reason--the sole one. But I do not want to be hard--God knows I do not," she said, her voice fluctuating. "And perhaps--as I am on the verge of freedom--I am not right, after all, in thinking there is any harm in your kissing me."

"Oh God!" said Winterborne within himself. His head was turned askance as he still resolutely regarded the ground. For the last several minutes he had seen this great temptation approaching him in regular siege; and now it had come. The wrong, the social sin, of now taking advantage of the offer of her lips had a magnitude, in the eyes of one whose life had been so primitive, so ruled by purest household laws, as Giles's, which can hardly be explained.

"Did you say anything?" she asked, timidly.

"Oh no--only that--"

"You mean that it must BE settled, since my father is coming home?" she said, gladly.

Winterborne, though fighting valiantly against himself all this while--though he would have protected Grace's good repute as the apple of his eye--was a man; and, as Desdemona said, men are not gods. In face of the agonizing seductiveness shown by her, in her unenlightened school-girl simplicity about the laws and ordinances, he betrayed a man's weakness. Since it was so--since it had come to this, that Grace, deeming herself free to do it, was virtually asking him to demonstrate that he loved her--since he could demonstrate it only too truly--since life was short and love was strong--he gave way to the temptation, notwithstanding that he perfectly well knew her to be wedded irrevocably to Fitzpiers. Indeed, he cared for nothing past or future, simply accepting the present and what it brought, desiring once in his life to clasp in his arms her he had watched over and loved so long.

She started back suddenly from his embrace, influenced by a sort of inspiration. "Oh, I suppose," she stammered, "that I am really free?--that this is right? Is there REALLY a new law? Father cannot have been too sanguine in saying--"

He did not answer, and a moment afterwards Grace burst into tears in spite of herself. "Oh, why does not my father come home and explain," she sobbed, "and let me know clearly what I am? It is too trying, this,

to ask me to--and then to leave me so long in so vague a state that I do not know what to do, and perhaps do wrong!"

Winterborne felt like a very Cain, over and above his previous sorrow. How he had sinned against her in not telling her what he knew. He turned aside; the feeling of his cruelty mounted higher and higher. How could he have dreamed of kissing her? He could hardly refrain from tears. Surely nothing more pitiable had ever been known than the condition of this poor young thing, now as heretofore the victim of her father's well-meant but blundering policy.

Even in the hour of Melbury's greatest assurance Winterborne had harbored a suspicion that no law, new or old, could undo Grace's marriage without her appearance in public; though he was not sufficiently sure of what might have been enacted to destroy by his own words her pleasing idea that a mere dash of the pen, on her father's testimony, was going to be sufficient. But he had never suspected the sad fact that the position was irremediable.

Poor Grace, perhaps feeling that she had indulged in too much fluster for a mere kiss, calmed herself at finding how grave he was. "I am glad we are friends again anyhow," she said, smiling through her tears. "Giles, if you had only shown half the boldness before I married that you show now, you would have carried me off for your own first instead of second. If we do marry, I hope you will never think badly of me for encouraging you a little, but my father is SO impatient, you know, as

his years and infirmities increase, that he will wish to see us a little advanced when he comes. That is my only excuse."

To Winterborne all this was sadder than it was sweet. How could she so trust her father's conjectures? He did not know how to tell her the truth and shame himself. And yet he felt that it must be done. "We may have been wrong," he began, almost fearfully, "in supposing that it can all be carried out while we stay here at Hintock. I am not sure but that people may have to appear in a public court even under the new Act; and if there should be any difficulty, and we cannot marry after all--"

Her cheeks became slowly bloodless. "Oh, Giles," she said, grasping his arm, "you have heard something! What--cannot my father conclude it there and now? Surely he has done it? Oh, Giles, Giles, don't deceive me. What terrible position am I in?"

He could not tell her, try as he would. The sense of her implicit trust in his honor absolutely disabled him. "I cannot inform you," he murmured, his voice as husky as that of the leaves underfoot. "Your father will soon be here. Then we shall know. I will take you home."

Inexpressibly dear as she was to him, he offered her his arm with the most reserved air, as he added, correctly, "I will take you, at any rate, into the drive."

Thus they walked on together. Grace vibrating between happiness and misgiving. It was only a few minutes' walk to where the drive ran, and they had hardly descended into it when they heard a voice behind them cry, "Take out that arm!"

For a moment they did not heed, and the voice repeated, more loudly and hoarsely,

"Take out that arm!"

It was Melbury's. He had returned sooner than they expected, and now came up to them. Grace's hand had been withdrawn like lightning on her hearing the second command. "I don't blame you--I don't blame you," he said, in the weary cadence of one broken down with scourgings. "But you two must walk together no more--I have been surprised--I have been cruelly deceived--Giles, don't say anything to me; but go away!"

He was evidently not aware that Winterborne had known the truth before he brought it; and Giles would not stay to discuss it with him then.

When the young man had gone Melbury took his daughter in-doors to the room he used as his office. There he sat down, and bent over the slope of the bureau, her bewildered gaze fixed upon him.

When Melbury had recovered a little he said, "You are now, as ever, Fitzpiers's wife. I was deluded. He has not done you ENOUGH harm. You are still subject to his beck and call."

"Then let it be, and never mind, father," she said, with dignified sorrow. "I can bear it. It is your trouble that grieves me most." She stooped over him, and put her arm round his neck, which distressed Melbury still more. "I don't mind at all what comes to me," Grace continued; "whose wife I am, or whose I am not. I do love Giles; I cannot help that; and I have gone further with him than I should have done if I had known exactly how things were. But I do not reproach you."

"Then Giles did not tell you?" said Melbury.

"No," said she. "He could not have known it. His behavior to me proved that he did not know."

Her father said nothing more, and Grace went away to the solitude of her chamber.

Her heavy disquietude had many shapes; and for a time she put aside the dominant fact to think of her too free conduct towards Giles. His love-making had been brief as it was sweet; but would he on reflection condemn her for forwardness? How could she have been so simple as to suppose she was in a position to behave as she had done! Thus she mentally blamed her ignorance; and yet in the centre of her heart she blessed it a little for what it had momentarily brought her.