

CHAPTER XLI.

The first hundred yards of their course lay under motionless trees, whose upper foliage began to hiss with falling drops of rain. By the time that they emerged upon a glade it rained heavily.

"This is awkward," said Grace, with an effort to hide her concern.

Winterborne stopped. "Grace," he said, preserving a strictly business manner which belied him, "you cannot go to Sherton to-night."

"But I must!"

"Why? It is nine miles from here. It is almost an impossibility in this rain."

"True--WHY?" she replied, mournfully, at the end of a silence. "What is reputation to me?"

"Now hearken," said Giles. "You won't--go back to your--"

"No, no, no! Don't make me!" she cried, piteously.

"Then let us turn." They slowly retraced their steps, and again stood before his door. "Now, this house from this moment is yours, and not mine," he said, deliberately. "I have a place near by where I can stay

very well."

Her face had drooped. "Oh!" she murmured, as she saw the dilemma.

"What have I done!"

There was a smell of something burning within, and he looked through the window. The rabbit that he had been cooking to coax a weak appetite was beginning to char. "Please go in and attend to it," he said. "Do what you like. Now I leave. You will find everything about the hut that is necessary."

"But, Giles--your supper," she exclaimed. "An out-house would do for me--anything--till to-morrow at day-break!"

He signified a negative. "I tell you to go in--you may catch agues out here in your delicate state. You can give me my supper through the window, if you feel well enough. I'll wait a while."

He gently urged her to pass the door-way, and was relieved when he saw her within the room sitting down. Without so much as crossing the threshold himself, he closed the door upon her, and turned the key in the lock. Tapping at the window, he signified that she should open the casement, and when she had done this he handed in the key to her.

"You are locked in," he said; "and your own mistress."

Even in her trouble she could not refrain from a faint smile at his scrupulousness, as she took the door-key.

"Do you feel better?" he went on. "If so, and you wish to give me some of your supper, please do. If not, it is of no importance. I can get some elsewhere."

The grateful sense of his kindness stirred her to action, though she only knew half what that kindness really was. At the end of some ten minutes she again came to the window, pushed it open, and said in a whisper, "Giles!" He at once emerged from the shade, and saw that she was preparing to hand him his share of the meal upon a plate.

"I don't like to treat you so hardly," she murmured, with deep regret in her words as she heard the rain pattering on the leaves. "But--I suppose it is best to arrange like this?"

"Oh yes," he said, quickly.

"I feel that I could never have reached Sherton."

"It was impossible."

"Are you sure you have a snug place out there?" (With renewed misgiving.)

"Quite. Have you found everything you want? I am afraid it is rather rough accommodation."

"Can I notice defects? I have long passed that stage, and you know it, Giles, or you ought to."

His eyes sadly contemplated her face as its pale responsiveness modulated through a crowd of expressions that showed only too clearly to what a pitch she was strung. If ever Winterborne's heart fretted his bosom it was at this sight of a perfectly defenceless creature conditioned by such circumstances. He forgot his own agony in the satisfaction of having at least found her a shelter. He took his plate and cup from her hands, saying, "Now I'll push the shutter to, and you will find an iron pin on the inside, which you must fix into the bolt. Do not stir in the morning till I come and call you."

She expressed an alarmed hope that he would not go very far away.

"Oh no--I shall be quite within hail," said Winterborne.

She bolted the window as directed, and he retreated. His snug place proved to be a wretched little shelter of the roughest kind, formed of four hurdles thatched with brake-fern. Underneath were dry sticks, hay, and other litter of the sort, upon which he sat down; and there in the dark tried to eat his meal. But his appetite was quite gone. He pushed the plate aside, and shook up the hay and sacks, so as to form a

rude couch, on which he flung himself down to sleep, for it was getting late.

But sleep he could not, for many reasons, of which not the least was thought of his charge. He sat up, and looked towards the cot through the damp obscurity. With all its external features the same as usual, he could scarcely believe that it contained the dear friend--he would not use a warmer name--who had come to him so unexpectedly, and, he could not help admitting, so rashly.

He had not ventured to ask her any particulars; but the position was pretty clear without them. Though social law had negatived forever their opening paradise of the previous June, it was not without stoical pride that he accepted the present trying conjuncture. There was one man on earth in whom she believed absolutely, and he was that man. That this crisis could end in nothing but sorrow was a view for a moment effaced by this triumphant thought of her trust in him; and the purity of the affection with which he responded to that trust rendered him more than proof against any frailty that besieged him in relation to her.

The rain, which had never ceased, now drew his attention by beginning to drop through the meagre screen that covered him. He rose to attempt some remedy for this discomfort, but the trembling of his knees and the throbbing of his pulse told him that in his weakness he was unable to fence against the storm, and he lay down to bear it as best he might.

He was angry with himself for his feebleness--he who had been so strong. It was imperative that she should know nothing of his present state, and to do that she must not see his face by daylight, for its color would inevitably betray him.

The next morning, accordingly, when it was hardly light, he rose and dragged his stiff limbs about the precincts, preparing for her everything she could require for getting breakfast within. On the bench outside the window-sill he placed water, wood, and other necessaries, writing with a piece of chalk beside them, "It is best that I should not see you. Put my breakfast on the bench."

At seven o'clock he tapped at her window, as he had promised, retreating at once, that she might not catch sight of him. But from his shelter under the boughs he could see her very well, when, in response to his signal, she opened the window and the light fell upon her face. The languid largeness of her eyes showed that her sleep had been little more than his own, and the pinkness of their lids, that her waking hours had not been free from tears.

She read the writing, seemed, he thought, disappointed, but took up the materials he had provided, evidently thinking him some way off. Giles waited on, assured that a girl who, in spite of her culture, knew what country life was, would find no difficulty in the simple preparation of their food.

Within the cot it was all very much as he conjectured, though Grace had slept much longer than he. After the loneliness of the night, she would have been glad to see him; but appreciating his feeling when she read the writing, she made no attempt to recall him. She found abundance of provisions laid in, his plan being to replenish his buttery weekly, and this being the day after the victualling van had called from Sherton. When the meal was ready, she put what he required outside, as she had done with the supper; and, notwithstanding her longing to see him, withdrew from the window promptly, and left him to himself.

It had been a leaden dawn, and the rain now steadily renewed its fall. As she heard no more of Winterborne, she concluded that he had gone away to his daily work, and forgotten that he had promised to accompany her to Sherton; an erroneous conclusion, for he remained all day, by force of his condition, within fifty yards of where she was. The morning wore on; and in her doubt when to start, and how to travel, she lingered yet, keeping the door carefully bolted, lest an intruder should discover her. Locked in this place, she was comparatively safe, at any rate, and doubted if she would be safe elsewhere.

The humid gloom of an ordinary wet day was doubled by the shade and drip of the leafage. Autumn, this year, was coming in with rains. Gazing, in her enforced idleness, from the one window of the living-room, she could see various small members of the animal community that lived unmolested there--creatures of hair, fluff, and

scale, the toothed kind and the billed kind; underground creatures, jointed and ringed--circumambulating the hut, under the impression that, Giles having gone away, nobody was there; and eying it inquisitively with a view to winter-quarters. Watching these neighbors, who knew neither law nor sin, distracted her a little from her trouble; and she managed to while away some portion of the afternoon by putting Giles's home in order and making little improvements which she deemed that he would value when she was gone.

Once or twice she fancied that she heard a faint noise amid the trees, resembling a cough; but as it never came any nearer she concluded that it was a squirrel or a bird.

At last the daylight lessened, and she made up a larger fire for the evenings were chilly. As soon as it was too dark--which was comparatively early--to discern the human countenance in this place of shadows, there came to the window to her great delight, a tapping which she knew from its method to be Giles's.

She opened the casement instantly, and put out her hand to him, though she could only just perceive his outline. He clasped her fingers, and she noticed the heat of his palm and its shakiness.

"He has been walking fast, in order to get here quickly," she thought. How could she know that he had just crawled out from the straw of the shelter hard by; and that the heat of his hand was feverishness?

"My dear, good Giles!" she burst out, impulsively.

"Anybody would have done it for you," replied Winterborne, with as much matter-of-fact as he could summon.

"About my getting to Exbury?" she said.

"I have been thinking," responded Giles, with tender deference, "that you had better stay where you are for the present, if you wish not to be caught. I need not tell you that the place is yours as long as you like; and perhaps in a day or two, finding you absent, he will go away. At any rate, in two or three days I could do anything to assist--such as make inquiries, or go a great way towards Sherton-Abbas with you; for the cider season will soon be coming on, and I want to run down to the Vale to see how the crops are, and I shall go by the Sherton road. But for a day or two I am busy here." He was hoping that by the time mentioned he would be strong enough to engage himself actively on her behalf. "I hope you do not feel over-much melancholy in being a prisoner?"

She declared that she did not mind it; but she sighed.

From long acquaintance they could read each other's heart-symptoms like books of large type. "I fear you are sorry you came," said Giles, "and that you think I should have advised you more firmly than I did not to

stay."

"Oh no, dear, dear friend," answered Grace, with a heaving bosom.

"Don't think that that is what I regret. What I regret is my enforced treatment of you--dislodging you, excluding you from your own house. Why should I not speak out? You know what I feel for you--what I have felt for no other living man, what I shall never feel for a man again! But as I have vowed myself to somebody else than you, and cannot be released, I must behave as I do behave, and keep that vow. I am not bound to him by any divine law, after what he has done; but I have promised, and I will pay."

The rest of the evening was passed in his handing her such things as she would require the next day, and casual remarks thereupon, an occupation which diverted her mind to some degree from pathetic views of her attitude towards him, and of her life in general. The only infringement--if infringement it could be called--of his predetermined bearing towards her was an involuntary pressing of her hand to his lips when she put it through the casement to bid him good-night. He knew she was weeping, though he could not see her tears.

She again entreated his forgiveness for so selfishly appropriating the cottage. But it would only be for a day or two more, she thought, since go she must.

He replied, yearningly, "I--I don't like you to go away."

"Oh, Giles," said she, "I know--I know! But--I am a woman, and you are a man. I cannot speak more plainly. 'Whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are of good report'--you know what is in my mind, because you know me so well."

"Yes, Grace, yes. I do not at all mean that the question between us has not been settled by the fact of your marriage turning out hopelessly unalterable. I merely meant--well, a feeling no more."

"In a week, at the outside, I should be discovered if I stayed here: and I think that by law he could compel me to return to him."

"Yes; perhaps you are right. Go when you wish, dear Grace."

His last words that evening were a hopeful remark that all might be well with her yet; that Mr. Fitzpiers would not intrude upon her life, if he found that his presence cost her so much pain. Then the window was closed, the shutters folded, and the rustle of his footsteps died away.

No sooner had she retired to rest that night than the wind began to rise, and, after a few prefatory blasts, to be accompanied by rain. The wind grew more violent, and as the storm went on, it was difficult to believe that no opaque body, but only an invisible colorless thing, was trampling and climbing over the roof, making branches creak,

springing out of the trees upon the chimney, popping its head into the flue, and shrieking and blaspheming at every corner of the walls. As in the old story, the assailant was a spectre which could be felt but not seen. She had never before been so struck with the devilry of a gusty night in a wood, because she had never been so entirely alone in spirit as she was now. She seemed almost to be apart from herself--a vacuous duplicate only. The recent self of physical animation and clear intentions was not there.

Sometimes a bough from an adjoining tree was swayed so low as to smite the roof in the manner of a gigantic hand smiting the mouth of an adversary, to be followed by a trickle of rain, as blood from the wound. To all this weather Giles must be more or less exposed; how much, she did not know.

At last Grace could hardly endure the idea of such a hardship in relation to him. Whatever he was suffering, it was she who had caused it; he vacated his house on account of her. She was not worth such self-sacrifice; she should not have accepted it of him. And then, as her anxiety increased with increasing thought, there returned upon her mind some incidents of her late intercourse with him, which she had heeded but little at the time. The look of his face--what had there been about his face which seemed different from its appearance as of yore? Was it not thinner, less rich in hue, less like that of ripe autumn's brother to whom she had formerly compared him? And his voice; she had distinctly noticed a change in tone. And his gait; surely it

had been feebler, stiffer, more like the gait of a weary man. That slight occasional noise she had heard in the day, and attributed to squirrels, it might have been his cough after all.

Thus conviction took root in her perturbed mind that Winterborne was ill, or had been so, and that he had carefully concealed his condition from her that she might have no scruples about accepting a hospitality which by the nature of the case expelled her entertainer.

"My own, own, true l---, my dear kind friend!" she cried to herself.

"Oh, it shall not be--it shall not be!"

She hastily wrapped herself up, and obtained a light, with which she entered the adjoining room, the cot possessing only one floor. Setting down the candle on the table here, she went to the door with the key in her hand, and placed it in the lock. Before turning it she paused, her fingers still clutching it; and pressing her other hand to her forehead, she fell into agitating thought.

A tattoo on the window, caused by the tree-droppings blowing against it, brought her indecision to a close. She turned the key and opened the door.

The darkness was intense, seeming to touch her pupils like a substance. She only now became aware how heavy the rainfall had been and was; the dripping of the eaves splashed like a fountain. She stood listening

with parted lips, and holding the door in one hand, till her eyes, growing accustomed to the obscurity, discerned the wild brandishing of their boughs by the adjoining trees. At last she cried loudly with an effort, "Giles! you may come in!"

There was no immediate answer to her cry, and overpowered by her own temerity, Grace retreated quickly, shut the door, and stood looking on the floor. But it was not for long. She again lifted the latch, and with far more determination than at first.

"Giles, Giles!" she cried, with the full strength of her voice, and without any of the shamefacedness that had characterized her first cry. "Oh, come in--come in! Where are you? I have been wicked. I have thought too much of myself! Do you hear? I don't want to keep you out any longer. I cannot bear that you should suffer so. Gi-i-iles!"

A reply! It was a reply! Through the darkness and wind a voice reached her, floating upon the weather as though a part of it.

"Here I am--all right. Don't trouble about me."

"Don't you want to come in? Are you not ill? I don't mind what they say, or what they think any more."

"I am all right," he repeated. "It is not necessary for me to come. Good-night! good-night!"

Grace sighed, turned and shut the door slowly. Could she have been mistaken about his health? Perhaps, after all, she had perceived a change in him because she had not seen him for so long. Time sometimes did his ageing work in jerks, as she knew. Well, she had done all she could. He would not come in. She retired to rest again.