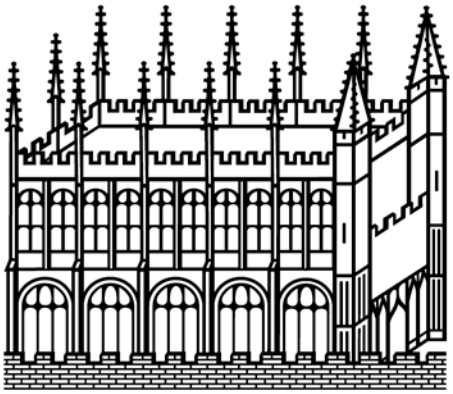


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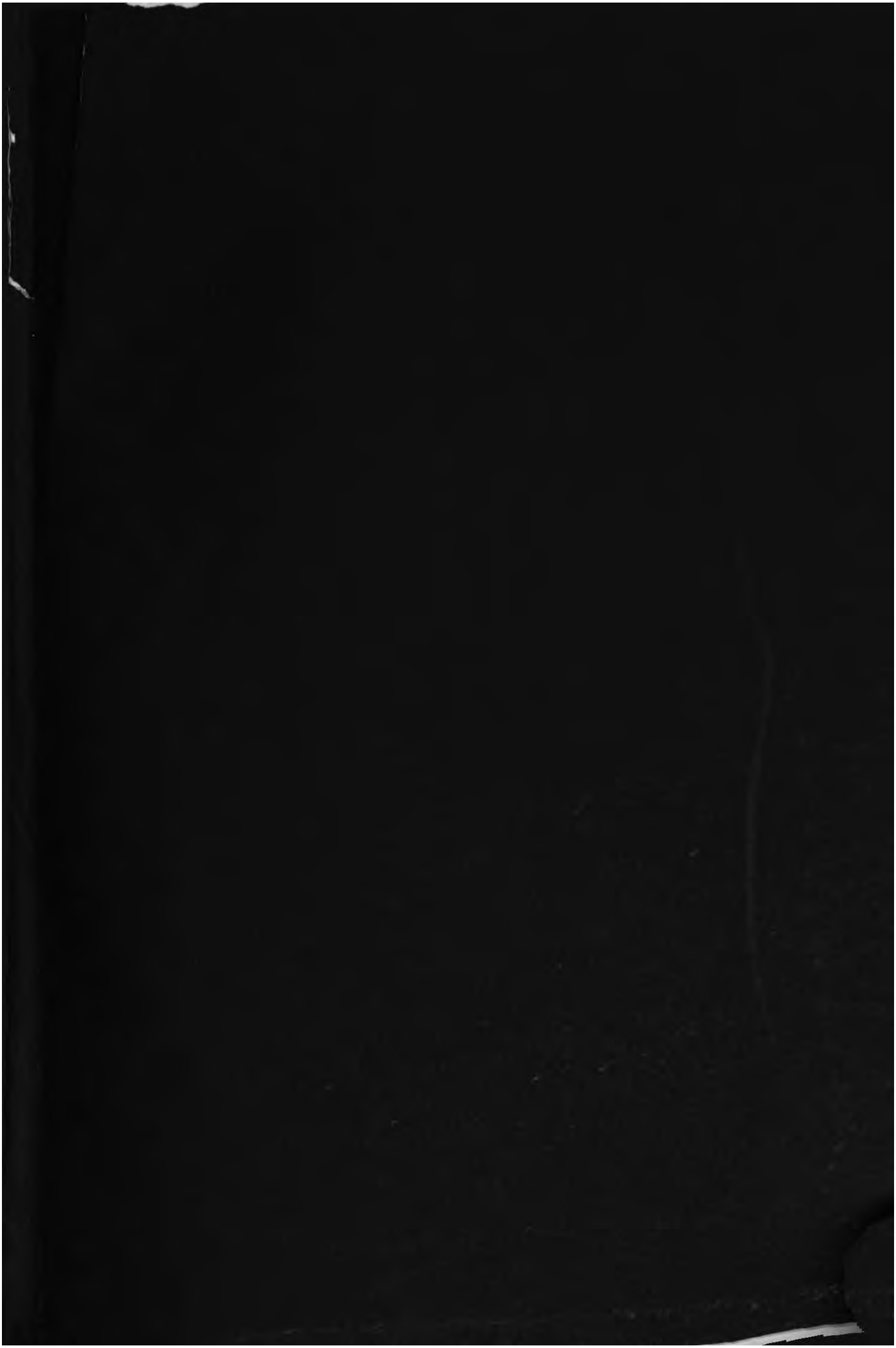
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THE WOODLANDERS.

VOL. I.



THE WOODLANDERS

BY

THOMAS HARDY

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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RICHARD CLAY AND SONS,
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THE WOODLANDERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE rambler who, for old association's sake, should trace the forsaken coach-road running almost in a meridional line from Bristol to the south shore of England, would find himself during the latter half of his journey in the vicinity of some extensive woodlands, interspersed with apple-orchards. Here the trees, timber or fruit-bearing as the case may be, make the wayside hedges ragged by their drip and shade, their lower limbs stretching in level repose over the

road, as though reclining on the insubstantial air. At one place, where Rubdon Hill is crossed, a bank slopes up to the trees on the left hand, while on the right spreads a deep and silent vale. The spot is lonely, and when the days are darkening the many gay ones now perished who have rolled over the hill, the blistered soles that have trodden it, and the tears that have wetted it, return upon the mind of the loiterer.

The physiognomy of a deserted highway expresses solitude to a degree that is not reached by mere dales or downs, and bespeaks a tomb-like stillness more emphatic than that of glades and pools. The contrast of what is with what might be, probably accounts for this. To step, for instance, at the place under notice, from the edge of the plantation into the adjoining pale thoroughfare, and pause amid its emptiness for a moment, was to exchange by the act of a

single stride the simple absence of human companionship for an incubus of the forlorn.

At this spot, on the lowering evening of a by-gone winter's day, there stood a man who had thus indirectly entered upon the scene from a stile hard by, and was temporarily influenced by some such feeling of being suddenly more alone than before he had emerged upon the highway.

It could be seen by a glance at his rather finical style of dress that he did not belong to the country proper; and from his air, after a while, that though there might be a sombre beauty in the scenery, music in the breeze, and a wan procession of coaching ghosts in the sentiment of this old turnpike-road, he was mainly puzzled about the way.

He looked north and south, and mechanically prodded the ground with his walking-stick. A closer glance at his face corroborated the testimony of his clothes. Nothing

irradiated it; the expression enthroned there was absolute submission to and belief in a little assortment of forms and habitudes.

At first not a soul appeared who could enlighten him as he desired, or seemed likely to appear that night. But presently a slight noise of labouring wheels, and the steady dig of a horse's shoe-tips became audible; and there loomed, in the notch of hill and plantation that the road formed here, a carrier's van drawn by a single horse.

The vehicle was half full of passengers, mostly women. He held up his stick at its approach, and the woman who was driving drew rein.

"I've been trying to find a short way to Little Hintock this last half hour, Mrs. Dollery," he said. "But though I've been to Great Hintock and Hintock House half a dozen times, I am at fault about the small village. You can help me, I dare say?"

She assured him that she could—that as she went to Great Hintock her van passed near it—that it was only up the lane branching out of the road into which she was about to turn. "Though," continued Mrs. Dollery, "'tis such a little small place that, as a town gentleman, you'd need have a candle and lantern to find it if ye don't know where 'tis. Bedad! I wouldn't live there if they'd pay me to. Now at Great Hintock you do see the world a bit."

He mounted and sat beside her, with his feet outwards, where they were ever and anon brushed over by the horse's tail.

This van was rather a movable attachment of the roadway than an extraneous object, to those who knew it well. The old horse, whose hair was of the roughness and colour of heather, whose leg-joints, shoulders, and hoofs were distorted by harness and drudgery from colthood—though if all had their

rights he ought, symmetrical in outline, to have been picking the herbage of some Eastern plain instead of tugging here—had trodden this road almost daily for twenty years. Even his subjection was not made congruous throughout, for, the harness being too short, his tail was not drawn through the crupper, so that the breeching slipped awkwardly to one side. He knew every subtle incline of the six or seven miles of ground between Hintock and Sherton Abbas —the market town to which he journeyed —as accurately as any surveyor could have learnt it by a Dumpy level.

The vehicle had a square black tilt which nodded with the motion of the wheels, and at a point in it over the driver's head was a hook to which the reins were hitched at times, forming a catenary curve from the horse's shoulders. Somewhere about the axles was a loose chain, whose only known

purpose was to clink as it went. Mrs. Dollery, having to hop up and down many times in the service of her passengers, wore, especially in windy weather, short leggings under her gown for modesty's sake; and instead of a bonnet a felt hat tied down with a handkerchief, to guard against an ear-ache to which she was frequently subject. In the rear of the van was a glass window which she cleaned with her pocket-hand kerchief every market-day before starting. Looking at the van from the back, the spectator could thus see, through its interior, a square piece of the same sky and land scape that he saw without, but intruded on by the profiles of the seated passengers, who, as they rumbled onward, their lips moving and heads nodding in animated private converse, remained in happy unconsciousness that their mannerisms and facial peculiarities were sharply defined to the public eye.

This hour of coming home from market was the happy one, if not the happiest, of the week for them. Snugly ensconced under the tilt they could forget the sorrows of the world without, and survey life and recapitulate the incidents of the day with placid smiles.

The passengers in the back part formed a group to themselves, and while the newcomer spoke to the proprietress, they indulged in a confidential chat about him as about other people, which the noise of the van rendered inaudible to himself and Mrs. Dollery sitting forward.

"'Tis Barber Percomb—he that's got the waxen woman in his window," said one "What business can bring him out here at this time, and not a journeyman hair-cutter, but a master-barber that's left off his pole because 'tis not genteel?"

They listened to his conversation, but

the barber, though he had nodded and spoken genially, seemed indisposed to gratify the curiosity that he had aroused; and the unrestrained flow of ideas which had animated the inside of the van before his arrival was checked thenceforward.

Thus they rode on till they turned into a half-invisible little lane, whence, as it reached the verge of an eminence, could be discerned in the dusk, about half a mile to the right, gardens and orchards sunk in a concave, and, as it were, snipped out of the woodland. From this self-contained place rose in stealthy silence tall stems of smoke, which the eye of imagination could trace downward to their root on quiet hearthstones, festooned overhead with hams and flitches. It was one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than medita-

tion; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premisses, and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where, from time to time, no less than in other places, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein.

This place was the Little Hintock of the master-barber's search. The coming night gradually obscured the smoke of the chimneys, but the position of the wood-environed community could still be distinguished by a few faint lights, winking more or less ineffectually through the leafless boughs and the undiscernible songsters they bore, in the form of balls of feathers, at roost among them.

Out of the lane followed by the van branched a yet smaller lane, at the corner of which the barber alighted, Mrs. Dollery's van going on to the larger village, whose

superiority to the despised smaller one as an exemplar of the world's movements was not particularly apparent in its means of approach.

"A very clever and learned young doctor, who, they say, is in league with the devil, lives in the place you be going to—not because there's anybody for'n to cure there, but because 'tis the middle of his district."

The observation was flung at the barber by one of the women at parting, as a last attempt to get at his errand that way.

But he made no reply, and without further pause plunged towards the umbrageous nook, and paced cautiously over the dead leaves which nearly buried the road or street of the hamlet. As very few people except themselves passed this way after dark, a majority of the denizens of Little Hintock deemed window-curtains unnecessary; and on this account their visitor made it his business to

stop opposite the casements of each cottage that he came to, with a demeanour which showed that he was endeavouring to conjecture, from the persons and things he observed within, the whereabouts of somebody or other who resided here.

Only the smaller dwellings interested him; one or two houses, whose size, antiquity, and rambling appurtenances signified that notwithstanding their remoteness they must formerly have been, if they were not still, inhabited by people of a certain social standing, being neglected by him entirely. Smells of pomace, and the hiss of fermenting cider, which reached him from the back quarters of other tenements, revealed the recent occupation of some of the inhabitants, and joined with the scent of decay from the perishing leaves under foot.

Half a dozen dwellings were passed without result. The next, which stood opposite a tall

tree, was in an exceptional state of radiance, the flickering brightness from the inside shining up the chimney and making a luminous mist of the emerging smoke. The interior, as seen through the window, caused him to draw up with a terminative air and watch. The house was rather large for a cottage, and the door, which opened immediately into the living-room, stood ajar, so that a riband of light fell through the opening into the dark atmosphere without. Every now and then a moth, decrepit from the late season, would flit for a moment across the outcoming rays and disappear again into the night.

CHAPTER II.

In the room from which this cheerful blaze proceeded he beheld a girl seated on a willow chair, and busily working by the light of the fire, which was ample and of wood. With a bill-hook in one hand, and a leather glove, much too large for her, on the other, she was making spars, such as are used by thatchers, with great rapidity. She wore a leather apron for this purpose, which was also much too large for her figure. On her left hand lay a bundle of the straight, smooth hazel rods called spar-gads—the raw material of her manufacture; on her right a heap of

chips and ends—the refuse—with which the fire was maintained; in front, a pile of the finished articles. To produce them she took up each gad, looked critically at it from end to end, cut it to length, split it into four, and sharpened each of the quarters with dexterous blows, which brought it to a triangular point precisely resembling that of a bayonet.

Beside her, in case she might require more light, a brass candlestick stood on a little round table, curiously formed of an old coffin-stool, with a deal top nailed on, the white surface of the latter contrasting oddly with the black carved oak of the substructure. The social position of the household in the past was almost as definitively shown by the presence of this article as that of an esquire or nobleman by his old helmets or shields. It had been customary for every well-to-do villager, whose tenure

was by copy of court-roll, or in any way more permanent than that of the mere cotter, to keep a pair of these stools for the use of his own dead; but changes had led to the discontinuance of the custom, and the stools were frequently made use of in the manner described.

The young woman laid down the bill-hook for a moment and examined the palm of her right hand, which, unlike the other, was ungloved, and showed little hardness or roughness about it. The palm was red and blistering, as if this present occupation were not frequent enough with her to subdue it to what it worked in. As with so many right hands born to manual labour, there was nothing in its fundamental shape to bear out the physiological conventionalism that gradations of birth, gentle or mean, show themselves primarily in the form of this member. Nothing but a cast

of the die of destiny had decided that the girl should handle the tool; and the fingers which clasped the heavy ash haft might have skilfully guided the pencil or swept the string, had they only been set to do it in good time.

Her face had the usual fulness of expression which is developed by a life of solitude. Where the eyes of a multitude continuously beat like waves upon a countenance they seem to wear away its individuality; but in the still water of privacy every tentacle of feeling and sentiment shoots out in visible luxuriance, to be interpreted as readily as a printed book by an intruder. In years she was no more than nineteen or twenty, but the necessity of taking thought at a too early period of life had forced the provisional curves of her childhood's face to a premature finality. Thus she had but little pretension to beauty, save in one prominent particular—her hair. Its abundance

made it almost unmanageable; its colour was, roughly speaking, and as seen here by firelight, brown; but careful notice, or an observation by day, would have revealed that its true shade was a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut.

On this one bright gift of Time to the particular victim of his now before us the newcomer's eyes were fixed; meanwhile the fingers of his right hand mechanically played over something sticking up from his waist-coat pocket—the bows of a pair of scissors, whose polish made them feebly responsive to the light from within the house. In her present beholder's mind the scene formed by the girlish spar-maker composed itself into an impression-picture of extremest type, wherein the girl's hair alone, as the focus of observation, was depicted with intensity and distinctness, while her face, shoulders, hands, and figure in general,

were a blurred mass of unimportant detail, lost in haze and obscurity.

He hesitated no longer, but tapped at the door and entered. The young woman turned at the crunch of his boots on the sanded floor, and exclaiming, "Oh, Mr. Percomb, how you frightened me!" quite lost her colour for a moment.

He replied, "You should shut your door—then you'd hear folk open it."

"I can't," she said; "the chimney smokes so. Mr. Percomb, you look as unnatural away from your wigs as a canary in a thorn-hedge. Surely you have not come out here on my account—for—"

"Yes—to have your answer about this." He touched her hair with his cane, and she winced. "Do you agree?" he continued. "It is necessary that I should know at once, as the lady is soon going away, and it takes time to make up."

"Don't press me—it worries me. I was in hopes you had thought no more of it. I can *not* part with it—so there!"

"Now look here, Marty," said the other, sitting down on the coffin-stool table. "How much do you get for making these spars?"

"Hush—father's up stairs awake, and he don't know that I am doing his work."

"Well, now tell me," said the man more softly. "How much do you get?"

"Eighteenpence a thousand," she said reluctantly.

"Who are you making them for?"

"Mr. Melbury, the timber-dealer, just below here."

"And how many can you make in a day?"

"In a day and half the night, three bundles —that's a thousand and a half."

"Two and threepence." Her visitor

paused. "Well, look here," he continued, with the remains of a computation in his tone, which computation had been to fix the probable sum of money necessary to outweigh her present resources, and her women's love of comeliness, "here's a sovereign—a gold sovereign, almost new." He held it out between his finger and thumb. "That's as much as you'd earn in a week and a half at that rough man's-work, and it's yours for just letting me snip off what you've got too much of."

The girl's bosom moved a very little. "Why can't the lady send to some other girl who don't value her hair—not to me?" she exclaimed.

"Why, simpleton, because yours is the exact shade of her own, and 'tis a shade you can't match by dyeing. But you are not going to refuse me now I've come all the way from Sherton on purpose?"

"I say I won't sell it—to you or anybody."

"Now listen," and he drew up a little closer beside her. "The lady is very rich, and won't be particular to a few shillings; so I will advance to this on my own responsibility —I'll make the one sovereign two, rather than go back empty-handed."

"No, no, no!" she cried, beginning to be much agitated. "You are a tempting me. You go on like the Devil to Dr. Faustus in the penny book. But I don't want your money, and won't agree. Why did you come? I said when you got me into your shop and urged me so much that I didn't mean to sell my hair!" The speaker was hot and stern.

"Marty, now hearken. The lady that wants it wants it badly. And, between you and me, you'd better let her have it. 'Twill be bad for you if you don't."

"Bad for me? Who is she then?"

The wig-maker held his tongue, and the girl repeated the question.

"I am not at liberty to tell you. And as she is going abroad soon it makes no difference who she is at all."

"She wants it to go abroad wi'?" He assented by a nod.

The girl regarded him reflectively. "Now, Mr. Percomb," she said, "I know who 'tis. 'Tis she at the House—Mrs. Charmond!"

"That's my secret. However, if you agree to let me have it, I'll tell you in confidence."

"I'll certainly not let you have it unless you tell me the truth. It is Mrs. Charmond."

The man dropped his voice. "Well—it is. You sat in front of her in church the other day, and she noticed how exactly your hair matches her own. Ever since then she's been hankering for it, to help out hers, and at last decided to get it. As she won't wear it till she goes off abroad, she knows nobody

will recognise the change. I'm commissioned to get it for her, and then it is to be made up. I shouldn't have vamped all these miles for any less important employer. Now, mind—'tis as much as my business with her is worth if it should be known that I've let out her name; but honour between us two, Marty, and you'll say nothing that would injure me?"

"I don't wish to tell upon her," said Marty coolly. "But my hair is my own, and I'm going to keep it."

"Now that's not fair, after what I've told you," said the nettled emissary. "You see, Marty, as you are in the same parish, and in one of this lady's cottages, and your father is ill, and wouldn't like to turn out, it would be as well to oblige her. I say that as a friend. But I won't press you to make up your mind to-night. You'll be coming to market to-morrow, I dare say, and you can call then. If you think it

over you'll be inclined to bring what I want, I know."

"I've nothing more to say," she answered.

Her companion saw from her manner that it was useless to urge her further by speech. "As you are a trusty young woman," he said, "I'll put these sovereigns up here, for ornament, that you may see how handsome they are. Bring the article to-morrow, or return the sovereigns." He stuck them edgewise into the frame of a small mantel looking-glass. "I hope you'll bring it; for your sake and mine. I should have thought she could have suited herself elsewhere; but as it's her fancy it must be indulged if possible. If you cut it off yourself mind how you do it, so as to keep all the locks one way." He showed her how this was to be done.

"But I sha'n't," she replied with laconic indifference. "I value my looks too much

to spoil 'em. She wants my curls to get another lover with; though if stories are true she's broke the heart of many a noble gentleman already."

"Lord, it's wonderful how you guess things, Marty," said the barber. "I've had it from those that know that there certainly is some foreign gentleman in her eye. However, mind what I ask."

"She's not going to get him through me."

Percomb had retired as far as the door; he came back, planted his cane on the coffin-stool, and looked her in the face. "Marty South," he said with deliberate emphasis, "*you've got a lover yourself*, and that's why you won't let it go!"

She reddened so intensely as to pass the mild blush that suffices to heighten beauty; she put the yellow leather glove on one hand, took up the hook with the other, and sat down doggedly to her work without

turning her face to him again. He regarded her head for a moment, went to the door, and with one look back at her departed on his way homeward.

Marty pursued her occupation for a few minutes; then suddenly laying down the bill-hook, she jumped up and went to the back of the room, where she opened a door which disclosed a staircase so whitely scrubbed that the grain of the wood was well-nigh sodden away by cleansing. At the top she gently approached a bedroom, and without entering said, "Father, do you want anything?"

A weak voice inside answered in the negative, adding, "I should be all right by to-morrow if it were not for the tree!"

"The tree again—always the tree! Oh, father, don't worry so about that. You know it can do you no harm."

"Who have ye had talking to ye down stairs?"

"A Sherton man called—nothing to trouble about," she said soothingly. "Father," she went on, "can Mrs. Charmond turn us out of our house if she's minded to?"

"Turn us out? No. Nobody can turn us out till my poor soul is turned out of my body. 'Tis lifehold, like Giles Winterborne's. But when my life drops 'twill be hers—not till then." His words on this subject so far had been rational and firm enough. But now he lapsed into his moaning strain: "And the tree will do it—that tree will soon be the death of me."

"Nonsense, you know better. How can it be?" She refrained from further speech, and descended to the ground floor again.

"Thank Heaven, then," she said to herself, "what belongs to me I keep."

CHAPTER III.

THE lights in the village went out, house after house, till there only remained two in the darkness. One of these came from a residence on the hill-side, of which there is something to be said later on; the other shone from the window of Marty South. Precisely the same extinguished effect was produced here, however, by her rising when the clock struck ten and hanging up a thick cloth curtain. The door it was necessary to keep ajar in hers as in most cottages, because of the smoke; but she obviated the effect of the riband of light through the chink by

hanging a cloth over that also. She was one of those people who, if they have to work harder than their neighbours, prefer to keep the necessity a secret as far as possible; and, but for the slight sounds of wood-splintering which came from within, no wayfarer would have perceived that here the cottager did not sleep as elsewhere.

Eleven, twelve, one o'clock struck; the heap of spars grew higher, and the pile of chips and ends more bulky. Even the light on the hill had now been extinguished; but still she worked on. When the temperature of the night without had fallen so low as to make her chilly, she opened a large blue umbrella to ward off the draught from the door. The two sovereigns confronted her from the looking-glass in such a manner as to suggest a pair of jaundiced eyes on the watch for an opportunity. Whenever she sighed for weariness she lifted her gaze

towards them, but withdrew it quickly, stroking her tresses for a moment, as if to assure herself that they were still secure. When the clock struck three she arose and tied up the spars she had last made in a bundle resembling those that lay against the wall.

She wrapped round her a long red woollen cravat, and opened the door. The night in all its fulness met her flatly on the threshold, like the very brink of an absolute void, or the ante-mundane Ginnung-Gap believed in by her Teuton forefathers. For her eyes were fresh from the blaze, and here there was no street lamp or lantern to form a kindly transition between the inner glare and the outer dark. A lingering wind brought to her ear the creaking sound of two over-crowded branches in the neighbouring wood, which were rubbing each other into wounds, and other vocalised sorrows of the trees,

together with the screech of owls, and the fluttering tumble of some awkward wood-pigeon ill-balanced on its roosting bough.

But the pupils of her young eyes soon expanded, and she could see well enough for her purpose. Taking a bundle of spars under each arm, and guided by the serrated line of tree-tops against the sky, she went some hundred yards or more down the lane till she reached a long open shed, carpeted around with the dead leaves that lay about everywhere. Night, that strange personality, which within walls brings ominous introspectiveness and self-distrust, but under the open sky banishes such subjective anxieties as too trivial for thought, gave to Marty South a less perturbed and brisker manner now. She laid the spars on the ground within the shed and returned for more, going to and fro till her whole manufactured stock was deposited here.

This erection was the waggon-house of the chief man of business hereabout, Mr. George Melbury, the timber, bark, and copse-ware merchant for whom Marty's father did work of this sort by the piece. It formed one of the many rambling outhouses which surrounded his dwelling, an equally irregular block of building, whose immense chimneys could just be discerned even now. The four huge waggons under the shed were built on those ancient lines whose proportions have been ousted by modern patterns, their shapes bulging and curving at the base and ends like Trafalgar line-of-battle ships, with which venerable hulks, indeed, these vehicles evidenced a constructive spirit curiously in harmony. One was laden with sheep-cribs, another with hurdles, another with ash-poles, and the fourth, at the foot of which she had placed her thatching-spars, was half full of similar bundles.

She was pausing a moment with that easeful sense of accomplishment which follows work done that has been a hard struggle in the doing, when she heard a woman's voice on the other side of the hedge say anxiously, "George!"

In a moment the name was repeated, with "Do come indoors! What are you doing there?"

The cart-house adjoined the garden, and before Marty had moved she saw enter the latter from the timber-merchant's back door an elderly woman sheltering a candle with her hand, the light from which cast a moving thorn-pattern of shade on Marty's face. Its rays soon fell upon a man whose clothes were carelessly thrown on, standing in advance of the speaker. He was a thin, slightly stooping figure, with a small nervous mouth, and a face cleanly shaven; and he walked along the path with his eyes bent

on the ground. In the pair Marty South recognised her employer Melbury and his wife. She was the second Mrs. Melbury, the first having died shortly after the birth of the timber-merchant's only child.

"'Tis no use to stay in bed!" he said as soon as she came up to where he was pacing restlessly about. "I can't sleep. I keep thinking of things."

"What things?"

He did not answer.

"The lady at the Great House?"

"No."

"The turnpike bonds?"

"No. Though I wish I hadn't got 'em."

"The ghosts of the Two Brothers?"

He shook his head.

"Not about Grace?"

"Yes. 'Tis she."

(Grace was the speaker's only daughter.)

"Why worry about her?"

"First, I cannot think why she doesn't answer my letter. She must be ill."

"No, no. Things only appear so gloomy in the night-time."

"Second, I have not invested any money specially for her, to put her out of the reach of poverty if my affairs fail."

"They are safe. Besides, she is sure to marry well."

"You are wrong. That's my third trouble. I have a plan in my head about her, and according to my plan she won't marry well."

"A plan for her not to marry well?" said his wife, surprised.

"In one sense. It is a plan for her to marry a particular person, and he is poor. It is Giles Winterborne."

"Giles Winterborne? Well, it is all right. Love will make up for his want of

money. He adores the very ground she walks on."

(Marty South started, and could not tear herself away.)

"Yes," said the timber-merchant; "I know that well. There will be no lack of that with him. But since I have educated her so well, and so long, and so far above the level of the daughters hereabout, it is *wasting her* to give her to a man of no higher standing than he."

"Then why do it?" she asked.

"Ah!—now you've hit it! Lucy, it is in obedience to a solemn resolve I made . . . . I made it because I did his father a terrible wrong; and it has been a weight on my conscience ever since that time, till this scheme of making amends occurred to me through seeing that Giles liked her."

"Wronged his father?" asked Mrs. Melbury.

"Yes, grievously wronged him," said her husband.

"Well, don't think of it to-night," she urged. "Come indoors."

"No, no; the air cools my head. I shall not stay long."

He was silent awhile; then he told her that his first wife, his daughter's mother, was first the promised of Winterborne's father, who loved her tenderly, till he, the speaker, won her away from him by a trick, because he wanted to marry her himself. He went on to say that the other man's happiness was ruined by it; that though he married Winterborne's mother, it was but a half-hearted business with him. Melbury added that he was afterwards very miserable at what he had done; but that as time went on, and the children grew up, and seemed to be attached to each other, he determined to do all he could to right

the wrong by letting his daughter marry the lad; not only that, but to give her the best education he could afford, so as to make the gift as valuable a one as it lay in his power to bestow. "I still mean to do it," said Melbury.

"Then do," said she.

"But all these things trouble me," said he; "for I feel I am sacrificing her for my own sin; and I think of her, and often come down here and look at this."

"Look at what?" asked his wife.

He took the candle from her hand, held it to the ground, and removed a tile which lay in the garden-path. "'Tis the track of her shoe that she made when she ran down here the day before she went away all those months ago. I covered it up when she was gone; and when I come here and look at it, I ask myself again, why should she be sacrificed to a poor man?"

"It is not altogether a sacrifice," said the woman. "He is in love with her, and he's honest and upright. If she encourages him, what can you wish for more?"

"I wish for nothing definite. But there's a lot of things possible for her. Why, Mrs. Charmond is wanting some refined young lady, I hear, to go abroad with her—as companion or something of the kind. She'd jump at Grace."

"That's all uncertain. Better stick to what's sure."

"True, true," said Melbury; "and I hope it will be for the best. Yes, let me get 'em married up as soon as I can, so as to have it over and done with." He continued looking at the imprint, while he added, "Suppose she should be dying, and never make a track on this path any more?"

"She'll write soon, depend upon't. Come, 'tis wrong to stay here and brood so."

He admitted it, but said he could not help it. "Whether she write or no, I shall fetch her in a few days." And thus speaking he covered the track, and preceded his wife indoors.

Melbury perhaps was an unlucky man in having within him the sentiment which could indulge in this foolish fondness about the imprint of a daughter's footstep. Nature does not carry on her government with a view to such feelings; and when advancing years render the opened hearts of those who possess them less dexterous than formerly in shutting against the blast, they must suffer "buffeting at will by rain and storm" no less than little celandines.

But her own existence, and not Mr. Melbury's, was the centre of Marty's consciousness, and it was in relation to this that the matter struck her as she slowly withdrew.

"That, then, is the secret of it all," she said. "And Giles Winterborne is not for me, and the less I think of him the better."

She returned to her cottage. The sovereigns were staring at her from the looking-glass as she had left them. With a preoccupied countenance, and with tears in her eyes, she got a pair of scissors, and began mercilessly cutting off the long locks of her hair, arranging and tying them with their points all one way, as the barber had directed. Upon the pale scrubbed deal of the coffin-stool table they stretched like waving and ropy weeds over the washed white bed of a stream.

She would not turn again to the little looking-glass out of humanity to herself, knowing what a deflowered visage would look back at her, and almost break her heart; she dreaded it as much as did her own ancestral goddess the reflection in the

pool after the rape of her locks by Loke the Malicious. She steadily stuck to business, wrapped the hair in a parcel, and sealed it up; after which she raked out the fire and went to bed, having first set up an alarum made of a candle and piece of thread, with a stone attached

But such a reminder was unnecessary to-night. Having tossed about till five o'clock, Marty heard the sparrows walking down their long holes in the thatch above her sloping ceiling to their exits at the eaves; whereupon she also arose, and descended to the ground floor again.

It was still dark, but she began moving about the house in those automatic initiatory acts and touches which represent among housewives the installation of another day. While thus engaged she heard the rumbling of Mr. Melbury's waggons, and knew that there, too, the day's toil had begun.

An armful of gads thrown on the still hot embers caused them to blaze up cheerfully, and bring her diminished head-gear into sudden prominence as a shadow. At this a step approached the door.

"Are folk astir here yet?" inquired a voice she knew well.

"Yes, Mr. Winterborne," said Marty, throwing on a tilt bonnet, which completely hid the recent ravages of the scissors. "Come in!"

The door was flung back, and there stepped in upon the mat a man, not particularly young for a lover, nor particularly mature for a person of affairs—each of which functions he in some degree discharged. There was reserve in his glance, and restraint upon his mouth. He carried a horn lantern which hung upon a swivel, and, wheeling as it dangled, marked grotesque shapes upon the shadier part of the walls.

He said that he had looked in on his way down, to tell her that they did not expect her father to make up his contract if he was not well. Mr. Melbury would give him another week, and they would go their journey with a short load that day.

"They are done," said Marty, "and lying in the cart-house."

"Done?" he repeated. "Your father has not been too ill to work after all, then?"

She made some evasive reply. "I'll show you where they be, if you are going down," she added.

They went out and walked together, the pattern of the air-holes in the top of the lantern being thrown upon the mist overhead, where they appeared of giant size, as if reaching the tent-shaped sky. They had no remarks to make to each other, and they uttered none. Hardly anything could be more isolated or more self-contained than the

lives of these two walking here in the lonely hour before day, when grey shades, material and mental, are so very grey. And yet, looked at in a certain way, their lonely courses formed no detached design at all, but were part of the pattern in the great web of human doings then weaving in both hemispheres, from the White Sea to Cape Horn.

The shed was reached, and she pointed out the spars. Winterborne regarded them silently, then looked at her.

"Now, Marty, I believe——" he said, and shook his head.

"What?"

"That you've done the work yourself."

"Don't you tell anybody, will you, Mr. Winterborne?" she pleaded by way of answer. "Because I am afraid Mr. Melbury may refuse my work if he knows it is mine."

"But how could you learn to do it? 'Tis a trade."

"Trade!" said she. "I'd be bound to learn it in two hours."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't, Mrs. Marty." Winterborne held down his lantern, and examined the cleanly split hazels as they lay "Marty," he said with dry admiration, "your father with his forty years of practice never made a spar better than that. They are too good for the thatching of houses; they are good enough for the furniture. But I won't tell. Let me look at your hands—your poor hands!"

He had a kindly manner of a quietly severe tone; and when she seemed reluctant to show her hands he took hold of one and examined it as if it were his own. Her fingers were blistered.

"They'll get harder in time," she said. "For if father continues ill I shall have to go on wi' it. Now I'll help put 'em up in waggon."

Winterborne without speaking set down his lantern, lifted her like a doll as she was about to stoop over the bundles, placed her behind him, and began throwing up the bundles himself. "Rather than you should do it I will," he said. "But the men will be here directly. Why, Marty—whatever has happened to your head? Lord, it has shrunk to nothing—it looks like an apple upon a gate-post!"

Her heart swelled, and she could not speak. At length she managed to groan, looking on the ground, "I've made myself ugly—and hateful—that's what I've done!"

"No, no," he answered, "You've only cut your hair—I see now."

"Then why must you needs say that about apples and gate-posts?"

"Let me see!"

For answer she ran off into the gloom of the sluggish dawn. He did not attempt to

follow her. When she reached her father's door she stood on the step and looked back. Mr. Melbury's men had arrived, and were loading up the spars; and their lanterns appeared from the distance at which she stood to have wan circles round them, like eyes weary with watching. She observed them for a few seconds as they set about harnessing the horses, and then went indoors.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was now a distinct manifestation of morning in the air, and presently the bleared white visage of a sunless winter day emerged like a dead-born child. The woodlanders everywhere had already bestirred themselves, rising at this time of the year at the far less dreary hour of absolute darkness. It had been above an hour earlier, before a single bird had untucked his head, that twenty lights were struck in as many bedrooms, twenty pairs of shutters opened, and twenty pairs of eyes stretched to the sky to forecast the weather for the day.

Owls that had been catching mice in the outhouses, rabbits that had been eating the winter-greens in the gardens, and stoats that had been sucking the blood of the rabbits, discerning that their human neighbours were on the move, discreetly withdrew from publicity, and were seen and heard no more till nightfall.

The daylight revealed the whole of Mr. Melbury's homestead, of which the waggon-sheds had been an out-lying erection. It formed three sides of an open quadrangle, and consisted of all sorts of buildings, the largest and central one being the dwelling itself. The fourth side of the quadrangle was the public road.

It was a dwelling-house of respectable, roomy, almost dignified aspect, which, taken with the fact that there were the remains of other such buildings hereabout, indicated that Little Hintock had at some time or

other been of greater importance than now, as its old name of Hintock St. Osmond also testified. The house was of no marked antiquity; yet of well-advanced age; older than a stale novelty, but no canonised antique; faded, not hoary; looking at you from the still distinct middle-distance of the early Georgian time, and awakening on that account the instincts of reminiscence more decidedly than the remoter, and far grander, memorials which have to speak from the misty reaches of mediævalism. The faces, dress, passions, gratitudes, and revenges of the great-great-grandfathers and grandmothers who had been the first to gaze from those rectangular windows, and had stood under that keystoned doorway, could be divined and measured by homely standards of to-day. It was a house in whose reverberations queer old personal tales were yet audible if properly listened for; and not, as with those of the

castle and cloister, silent beyond the possibility of echo.

The garden-front remained much as it had always been, and there was a porch and entrance that way. But the principal house-door opened on the square yard or quadrangle towards the road, formerly a regular carriage entrance; though the middle of the area was now made use of for stacking timber, faggots, bundles, and other products of the wood. It was divided from the lane by a lichen-coated wall, in which hung a pair of gates, flanked by piers out of the perpendicular, with a round white ball on the top of each.

The building on the left of the inclosure was a long-backed erection, now used for spar-making, sawing, crib-framing, and copse-ware manufacture in general. Opposite were the waggon-sheds where Marty had deposited her spars.

Here Winterborne had remained after the girl's abrupt departure, to see that the loads were properly made up. Winterborne was connected with the Melbury family in various ways. In addition to the sentimental relationship which arose from his father having been the first Mrs. Melbury's lover, Winterborne's aunt had married and emigrated with the brother of the timber-merchant many years before—an alliance that was sufficient to place Winterborne, though the poorer, on a footing of social intimacy with the Melburys. As in most villages so secluded as this, intermarriages were of Hapsburgian frequency among the inhabitants, and there were hardly two houses in Little Hintock unrelated by some matrimonial tie or other.

For this reason a curious kind of partnership existed between Melbury and the younger man—a partnership based upon an

unwritten code, by which each acted in the way he thought fair towards the other, on a give-and-take principle. Melbury, with his timber and copse-ware business, found that the weight of his labour came in winter and spring. Winterborne was in the apple and cider trade, and his requirements in cartage and other work came in the autumn of each year. Hence horses, waggons, and in some degree men, were handed over to him when the apples began to fall; he in return, lending his assistance to Melbury in the busiest wood-cutting season, as now.

Before he had left the shed a boy came from the house to ask him to remain till Mr. Melbury had seen him. Winterborne thereupon crossed over to the spar-house where some journeymen were already at work, two of them being travelling spar-makers from White-Hart Lane, who, when the fall of the leaf began, made their appearance regularly,

and when winter was over disappeared in silence till the season came again.

Firewood was the one thing abundant in Little Hintock; and a blaze of gad-ends made the outhouse gay with its light, which vied with that of the day as yet. In the hollow shades of the roof could be seen pale dangling arms of ivy which had crept through the joints of the tiles and were groping in vain for some support, their leaves being dwarfed and sickly for want of sunlight; others were pushing in with such force at the eaves as to lift from their supports the shelves that were fixed there.

Besides the itinerant journey-workers there were also present John Upjohn, Melbury's regular man; a neighbour engaged in the hollow-turnery trade; Old Timothy Tangs and young Timothy Tangs, top and bottom sawyers at work in Mr. Melbury's pit outside; Farmer Cawtree, who kept the

cider-house, and Robert Creedle, an old man who worked for Winterborne, and stood warming his hands ; these latter having been enticed in by the ruddy blaze, though they had no particular business there. None of them call for any remark, except perhaps Creedle. To have completely described him it would have been necessary to write a military memoir, for he wore under his smock-frock a cast-off soldier's jacket that had seen hot service, its collar showing just above the flap of the frock ; also a hunting memoir, to include the top-boots that he had picked up by chance ; also chronicles of voyaging and shipwreck, for his pocket-knife had been given him by a weather-beaten sailor. But Creedle carried about with him on his uneventful rounds these silent testimonies of war, sport, and adventure, and thought nothing of their associations or their stories.

Copse-work, as it was called, being an occupation which the secondary intelligence of the hands and arms could carry on without requiring the sovereign attention of the head, the minds of its professors wandered considerably from the objects before them; hence the tales, chronicles, and ramifications of family history which were recounted here were of a very exhaustive kind.

Winterborne, seeing that Melbury had not arrived, stepped back again outside the door; and the conversation interrupted by his momentary presence flowed anew, reaching his ears as an accompaniment to the regular dripping of the fog from the plantation boughs around.

The topic at present handled was a highly popular and frequent one—the personal character of Mrs. Charmond, the owner of the surrounding woods and groves.

"My brother-in-law told me, and I have

no reason to doubt it," said Creedle, "that she'd sit down to her dinner with a frock hardly higher than her elbows. 'Oh, you wicked woman!' he said to himself when he first see her, 'you go to your church, and sit, and kneel, as if your knee-jints were greased with very saint's anointment, and tell off your hear-us-good-Lords as pat as a business man counting money; and yet you can eat your victuals such a figure as that!' Whether she's a reformed character by this time I can't say; but I don't care who the man is, that's how she went on when my brother-in-law lived there."

"Did she do it in her husband's time?

"That I don't know—hardly, I should think, considering his temper. Ah——!" Here Creedle threw grieved remembrance into physical form by slowly resigning his head to obliquity and letting his eyes water. "That man! 'Not if the angels of heaven

come down, Creedle,' he said, 'shall you do another day's work for me!' Yes—he would as soon take a winged creature's name in vain as yours or mine! Well, now I must get these spars home-along, and to-morrow, thank God, I must see about using 'em."

An old woman now entered upon the scene. She was Mr. Melbury's servant, and passed a great part of her time in crossing the yard between the house-door and the spar-shed, whither she had come now for fuel. She had two facial aspects—one, of a soft and flexible kind, which she used indoors; the other, with stiff lines and corners, which she assumed when bustling among the men outside.

"Ah, Grammer Oliver," said John Upjohn, "it do do my heart good to see a old woman like you so dapper and stirring, when I bear in mind that, after fifty, one

year counts as two did afore! But your smoke didn't rise this morning till twenty minutes past seven by my beater; and that's late, Grammer Oliver."

"If you was a full-sized man, John, I might take notice of your scornful meanings. But really a woman couldn't feel hurt if such smallness were to spit fire and brimstone itself at her. Here," she added, holding out a spar-gad to one of the workmen, from which dangled a long black-pudding, "here's something for thy breakfast, and if you want tea you must fetch it from indoors."

"Mr. Melbury is late this morning," said the bottom-sawyer.

"Yes. 'Twas a dark dawn," said Mrs. Oliver. "Even when I opened the door, so late as I was, you couldn't have told poor men from gentlemen, or John from a reasonable-sized object. And I don't think

maister's slept at all well to-night. He's anxious about his daughter; and I know what that is, for I've cried bucketfuls for my own."

When the old woman had gone Creedle said :—

"He'll fret his heart green if he don't soon hear from that maid of his. Well, learning is better than houses and lands. But to keep a maid at school till she is taller out of pattens than her mother was in 'em—'tis tempting Providence."

"It seems no time ago that she was a little playward girl," said young Timothy Tangs.

"I can mind her mother," said the hollow-turner. "Alway a teuny, delicate piece; her touch upon your hand was as soft as wind. She was inoculated for the small-pox and had it beautifully fine, just about the time that I was out of my apprenticeship—ay,

and a long apprenticeship 'twas. I served that master of mine six years and three hundred and fourteen days."

The hollow-turner pronounced the days with emphasis, as if, considering their number, they were a rather more remarkable fact than the years.

"Mr. Winterborne's father walked with her at one time," said old Timothy Tangs. "But Mr. Melbury won her. She was a child of a woman, and would cry like rain if so be he huffed her. Whenever she and her husband came to a puddle in their walks together he'd take her up like a half-penny doll and put her over without dirting her a speck. And if he keeps the daughter so long at boarding school he'll make her as nesh as her mother was. But here he comes."

Just before this moment Winterborne had seen Melbury crossing the court from his

door. He was carrying an open letter in his hand, and came straight to Winterborne. His gloom of the preceding night had quite gone.

"I'd no sooner made up my mind, Giles, to go and see why Grace didn't come or write than I get a letter from her—'My dear father,' says she, 'I'm coming home to-morrow (that's to-day), but I didn't think it worth while to write long beforehand.' The little rascal, and didn't she! Now, Giles, as you are going to Sherton market to-day with your apple-trees, why not join me and Grace there, and we'll drive home all together?"

He made the proposal with cheerful energy; he was hardly the same man as the man of the small dark hours. Even among the moodiest, the tendency to be cheered is stronger than the tendency to be cast down; and a soul's specific gravity stands

permanently less than that of the sea of troubles into which it is thrown.

Winterborne, though not demonstrative, replied to this suggestion with alacrity. There was not much doubt that Marty's grounds for cutting off her hair were substantial enough, if this man's eyes had been a reason for keeping it on. As for the timber-merchant, it was plain that his invitation had been given solely in pursuance of his scheme for uniting the pair. He had made up his mind to the course as a duty, and was strenuously bent upon following it out.

Accompanied by Winterborne he now turned towards the door of the spar-house, when his footsteps were heard by the men as aforesaid.

"Well, John, and Robert," he said, nodding, as he entered. "A rimy morning."

"'Tis, sir," said Creedle, energetically, for not having as yet been able to summon

force sufficient to go away and begin work he felt the necessity of throwing some into his speech. "I don't care who the man is, 'tis the rimiest morning we've had this fall."

"I heard you wondering why I've kept my daughter so long at boarding-school," resumed Mr. Melbury, looking up from the letter which he was reading anew by the fire, and turning to them with the suddenness that was a trait in him. "Hey?" he asked with affected shrewdness. "But you did, you know. Well now, though it is my own business more than anybody else's, I'll tell ye. When I was a boy another boy—the pa'son's son—along with a lot of others, asked me, 'Who dragged Whom round the walls of What?' and I said, 'Sam Barrett, who dragged his wife in a chair round the tower when she went to be churched.' They laughed at me so much that I went home

ashamed, and couldn't sleep for shame ; and I cried that night till my pillow was wet ; till I thought to myself—' They may laugh at me for my ignorance, but that was father's fault, and none o' my making, and I must bear it. But they shall never laugh at my children, if I have any : I'll starve first ! ' Thank God I've been able to keep her at school at the figure of near a hundred a year ; and her scholarship is such that she has stayed on as governess for a time. Let 'em laugh now if they can : Mrs. Charmond herself is not better informed than my girl Grace."

There was something between high indifference and humble emotion in his delivery, which made it difficult for them to reply. Winterborne's interest was of a kind which did not show itself in words ; listening, he stood by the fire, mechanically stirring the embers with a spar-gad.

"You'll be, then, ready, Giles?" Melbury continued, awaking from a reverie. "Well, what was the latest news at Shottsford yesterday, Mr. Cawtree?"

"Oh, well, Shottsford is Shottsford still —you can't victual your carcase there unless you've got money; and you can't buy a cup of genuine there, whether or no. . . . But as the saying is 'Go abroad and you'll hear news of home.' It seems that our new neighbour, this young Doctor What's-his-name, is a strange, deep, perusing gentleman; and there's good reason for supposing he has sold his soul to the wicked one."

"'Od name it all," murmured the timber-merchant, unimpressed by the news, but reminded of other things by the subject of it; "I've got to meet a gentleman this very morning, and yet I've planned to go to Sherton Abbas for the maid."

"I won't praise the doctor's wisdom till

I hear what sort of bargain he's made," said the top-sawyer.

"'Tis only an old woman's tale," said Cawtree. "But it seems that he wanted certain books on some mysterious black art, and in order that the people hereabout should not know anything about them, he ordered 'em direct from London, and not from the Sherton bookseller. The parcel was delivered by mistake at the pa'son's, and as he wasn't at home his wife opened it, and went into hysterics when she read 'em, thinking her husband had turned heathen, and 'twould be the ruin of the children. But when he came he knew no more about 'em than she; and found they were this Mr. Fitzpiers's property. So he wrote 'Beware!' outside, and sent 'em on by the sexton."

"He must be a curious young man," mused the hollow-turner.

"He must," said Timothy Tangs.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Melbury, authoritatively, "he's only a gentleman fond of science, and philosophy, and poetry, and, in fact, every kind of knowledge; and being lonely here he passes his time in making such matters his hobby."

"Well," said old Timothy, "'tis a strange thing about doctors that the worse they be the better they be. I mean that if you hear anything of this sort about 'em, ten to one they can cure ye as nobody else can."

"True," said Cawtree, emphatically. "And for my part I shall take my custom from old Jones and go to this one directly I've anything the matter inside me. That last medicine old Jones gave me had no taste in it at all."

Mr. Melbury, as became a well-informed man, did not listen to these recitals, being, moreover, preoccupied with the business appointment which had come into his head.

He walked up and down, looking on the floor—his usual custom when undecided. That stiffness about the arm, hip, and knee-joint, which was apparent when he walked, was the net product of the divers sprains and over-exertions that had been required of him in handling trees and timber when a young man, for he was of the sort called self-made, and had worked hard. He knew the origin of every one of these cramps; that in his left shoulder had come of carrying a pollard, unassisted, from Tutcombe Bottom home; that in one leg was caused by the crash of an elm against it when they were felling; that in the other was from lifting a bole. On many a morrow after wearying himself by these prodigious muscular efforts, he had risen from his bed fresh as usual; and confident in the recuperative power of his youth, he had repeated the strains anew. But treacherous Time had been only hiding

ill results when they could be guarded against, for greater effect when they could not. Now in his declining years the store had been unfolded in the form of rheumatisms, pricks, and spasms, in every one of which Melbury recognised some act, which, had its consequence been contemporaneously made known, he would wisely have abstained from repeating.

On a summons by Grammer Oliver to breakfast he went to the kitchen, where the family breakfasted in winter to save house-labour; and sitting down by the fire looked a long time at the pair of dancing shadows cast by each fire-iron and dog-knob on the whitewashed chimney-corner —a yellow one from the window, and a blue one from the fire.

"I don't quite know what to do to-day," he said to his wife at last. "I've recollected that I promised to meet Mrs. Charmond's

steward in Round Wood at twelve o'clock, and yet I want to go for Grace."

"Why not let Giles fetch her by himself? 'Twill bring 'em together all the quicker."

"I could do that—but I always have gone, without fail, every time hitherto, and perhaps she'll be disappointed if I stay away."

"You may be disappointed, but I don't think she will, if you send Giles," said Mrs. Melbury drily.

"Very well—I'll send him."

Melbury was often persuaded by the quietude of his wife's words when strenuous argument would have had no effect. This second Mrs. Melbury was a placid woman, who had been nurse to his child Grace after her mother's death. Little Grace had clung to the nurse with much affection; and ultimately Melbury, in dread lest the only woman who cared for the girl should

be induced to leave her, persuaded the mild Lucy to marry him. The arrangement—for it was little more—had worked satisfactorily enough; Grace had thriven, and Melbury had not repented.

He returned to the spar-house and found Giles near at hand, to whom he explained the change of plan. "As she won't arrive till five o'clock, you can get your business very well over in time to receive her," said Melbury. "The green gig will do for her; you'll spin along quicker with that, and won't be late upon the road. Her boxes can be called for by one of the waggons."

Winterborne, knowing nothing of the timber-merchant's restitutory aims, quietly thought all this to be a kindly chance. Wishing, even more than her father, to despatch his apple-tree business in the market before Grace's arrival, he prepared to start at once.

Melbury was careful that the turn-out should be seemly. The gig-wheels, for instance, were not always washed during winter-time before a journey, the muddy roads rendering that labour useless; but they were washed to-day. The harness was blacked, and when the grey horse had been put in, and Winterborne was in his seat ready to start, Mr. Melbury stepped out with a blacking-brush and with his own hands touched over the yellow hoofs of the animal.

"You see, Giles," he said as he blacked, "coming from a fashionable school she might feel shocked at the homeliness of home; and 'tis these little things that catch a dainty woman's eye if they are neglected. We, living here alone, don't notice how the whitey-brown creeps out of the earth over us; but she, fresh from a city—why, she'll notice everything!"

"That she will," said Giles.

"And scorn us if we don't mind."

"Not scorn us."

"No, no, no—that's only words. She's too good a girl to do that. But when we consider what she knows, and what she has seen since she last saw us, 'tis as well to meet her views. Why, 'tis a year since she was in this old place, owing to her going abroad in the summer; and naturally we shall look small, just at first —I only say just at first."

Mr. Melbury's tone evinced a certain exultation in the very sense of that inferiority he affected to deplore; for this advanced and refined being, was she not his own all the time? Not so Giles; he felt doubtful. He looked at his clothes with misgiving; but said nothing.

It was his custom during the planting season to carry a specimen apple-tree to

market with him as an advertisement of what he dealt in. This had been tied across the gig; and mounting in front he drove away, the twigs nodding with each step of the horse. Melbury went indoors. Before the gig had passed out of sight Mr. Melbury reappeared and shouted after—

"Here, Giles," he said, breathlessly following with some wraps, "it may be very chilly to-night, and she may want something extra about her. And Giles," he added, when the young man put the horse in motion once more; "tell her that I should have come myself, but I had particular business with Mrs. Charmond's agent which prevented me. Don't forget."

He watched Winterborne out of sight under the boughs, where cobwebs glistened in the now clearing air, lengthening and shortening their shine like elastic needles; he saw the woodpigeons rise as Giles drove

past them ; and said to himself with a jerk —a shape into which emotion with him often resolved itself—" There now, I hope the two will bring it to a point, and have done with it! 'Tis a pity to let such a girl throw herself away upon him — a thousand pities! . . . And yet 'tis my duty, for his father's sake."

CHAPTER V.

WINTERBORNE sped on his way to Sherton Abbas without elation and without discomposure. Had he regarded his inner self spectacularly, as lovers are now daily more wont to do, he might have felt pride in the discernment of a somewhat rare power in him—that of keeping not only judgment but emotion suspended in difficult cases. But he noted it not.

Arrived at the entrance to a long flat lane, which had taken the spirit out of many a pedestrian in times when, with the majority, to travel meant to walk, he saw

before him the trim figure of a young woman in pattens, journeying with that steadfast concentration which means purpose and not pleasure. He was soon near enough to see that she was Marty South. Click, click, click, went the pattens; and she did not turn her head.

Yet she had seen him, and shrank from being overtaken by him thus; but as it was inevitable, she braced herself up for his inspection by closing her lips so as to make her mouth quite unemotional, and by throwing an additional firmness into her tread.

"Why do you wear pattens, Marty? The turnpike is clean enough although the lanes are muddy."

"They save my boots."

"But twelve miles in pattens—'twill twist your feet off. Come, get up and ride with me."

She hesitated, removed her pattens, knocked the gravel out of them against the wheel, and mounted in front of the nodding specimen apple-tree. She had so arranged her bonnet with a full border and trimmings that her lack of long hair did not much injure her appearance; though Giles of course saw that it was gone, and may have guessed her motive in parting with it, such sales though infrequent being not unheard of in that locality.

But nature's adornment was still hard by, in fact, within two feet of him. In Marty's basket was a brown-paper packet, and in the packet the chestnut locks, which, by reason of the barber's request for secrecy, she had not ventured to intrust to other hands.

Giles asked, with some hesitation, how her father was getting on.

He was better, she said; he would be

able to work in a day or two; he would be quite well but for his craze about the tree falling on him.

"You know why I don't ask for him so often as I might, I suppose?" said Winterborne. "Or don't you know?"

"I think I do."

"Because of the houses?"

She nodded.

"Yes. I am afraid it may seem that my anxiety is about those houses which I should lose by his death, more than about him. Marty, I do feel anxious about the houses, since half my income depends upon them; but I do likewise care for him; and it almost seems wrong that houses should be leased for lives, so as to lead to such mixed feelings."

"After father's death they will be Mrs. Charmond's?"

"They'll be hers."

"They are going to keep company with my hair," she thought.

Thus talking they reached the town. By no pressure would she ride up the street with him. "That's the right of another woman," she said with playful malice as she put on her pattens. "I wonder what you are thinking of! Thank you for the lift in that handsome gig. Good-bye."

He blushed a little, shook his head at her, and drove on ahead into the streets; the churches, the abbey, and other buildings on this clear bright morning having the linear distinctness of architectural drawings, as if the original dream and vision of the conceiving master-mason were for a few minutes flashed down through the centuries to an unappreciative age. Giles saw their eloquent look on this day of transparency, but could not construe it. He turned into the inn-yard.

Marty, following the same track, marched promptly to the hairdresser's. Percomb was the chief of his trade in Sherton Abbas. He had the patronage of such county offshoots as had been obliged to seek the shelter of small houses in that ancient town, of the local clergy, and so on; for some of whom he had made wigs, while others among them had compensated for neglecting him in their lifetime by patronising him when they were dead, and letting him shave their corpses. On the strength of all this he had taken down his pole, and called himself "Perruquier to the aristocracy."

Nevertheless this sort of support did not quite fill his children's mouths, and they had to be filled. So behind his house there was a little yard reached by a passage from the back street, and in that yard was a pole, and under the pole a shop of quite another description than the ornamental one in the

front street. Here on Saturday nights from seven till ten he took an almost innumerable succession of twopences from the farm-labourers who flocked thither in crowds from the country. And thus he lived.

Marty, of course, went to the front shop, and handed her packet to him silently.

"Thank you," said the barber quite joyfully. "I hardly expected it after what you said last night."

She turned aside, while a tear welled up and stood in each eye at this reminder.

"Nothing of what I told you," he whispered. "But I can trust you, I see."

She had now reached the end of this distressing business; and went listlessly along the street to attend to other errands. These occupied her till four o'clock, at which time she re-crossed the market-place. It was impossible to avoid re-discovering Winterborne every time she passed that

way, for standing, as he always did at this season of the year, with his specimen apple-tree in the midst, the boughs rose above the heads of the farmers, and brought a delightful suggestion of orchards into the heart of the town.

When her eye fell upon him for the last time he was standing somewhat apart, holding the tree like an ensign, and looking on the ground instead of pushing his produce as he ought to have been doing. He was, in fact, not a very successful seller either of his trees or of his cider, his habit of speaking his mind when he spoke at all militating against this branch of his business.

While she regarded him he lifted his eyes in a direction away from Marty, and his face kindled with recognition and surprise. She followed his gaze, and saw walking across to him a flexible young creature in whom she perceived the features of her she had

known as Miss Grace Melbury, but now looking glorified and refined to much above her former level. Winterborne, being fixed to the spot by his apple-tree, could not advance to meet her: he held out his spare hand with his hat in it, and with some embarrassment beheld her coming on tip-toe through the mud to the middle of the square where he stood.

Miss Melbury, as Marty could see, had not been expected by Giles so early. Indeed, her father had named five o'clock as her probable time, for which reason that hour had been looming out all the day in his forward perspective, like an important edifice on a dull plain. Now here she was come, he knew not how, and his arranged welcome stultified.

His face became gloomy at her necessity for stepping into the road, and more still at the little look of embarrassment she showed

at having to perform the meeting with him under an apple-tree ten feet high in the middle of the market-place. Having had occasion to take off the new gloves she had bought to come home in, she held out to him a hand graduating from pink at the tips of the fingers to white at the palm; and the reception formed a scene, with the tree over their heads, which was not by any means an ordinary one in Sherton Abbas streets.

Nevertheless the greeting in her looks and on her lips had a restrained shape, which perhaps was not unnatural. For true it was that Giles Winterborne, though well-attired and well-mannered for a yeoman, looked rough beside her. It had sometimes dimly occurred to him, in his ruminating silences at Little Hintock, that external phenomena —such as the lowness or height or colour of a hat, the fold of a coat, the make of a boot, or the chance attitude or occupation of

a limb at the instant of view—may have a great influence upon feminine opinion of a man's worth, so frequently founded on non-essentials; but a certain causticity of mental tone towards himself and the world in general had prevented to-day, as always, any enthusiastic action on the strength of that reflection, and her momentary instinct of reserve at first sight of him was the penalty he paid for his laxness.

He gave away the tree to a bystander, as soon as he could find one who would accept the cumbersome gift, and the twain moved on towards the inn at which he had put up. Marty made as if to step forward for the pleasure of being recognised by Miss Melbury; but abruptly checking herself she glided behind a carrier's van, saying dryly, "No; I baint wanted there;" and critically regarded Winterborne's companion.

It would have been very difficult to describe

Grace Melbury with precision, either then or at any time. Nay, from the highest point of view, to precisely describe a human being, the focus of a universe, how impossible! But, apart from transcendentalism, there never probably lived a person who was in herself more completely a *reductio ad absurdum* of attempts to appraise a woman, even externally, by items of face and figure.

Speaking generally, it may be said that she was sometimes beautiful, at other times not beautiful, according to the state of her health and spirits.

In simple corporeal presentment she was of a fair and clear complexion, rather pale than pink, slim in build and elastic in movement. Her look expressed a tendency to wait for others' thoughts before uttering her own: possibly also to wait for others' deeds before her own doing. In her small, delicate mouth, which had hardly settled down to its

matured curves, there was a gentleness that might hinder sufficient self-assertion for her own good. She had well-formed eyebrows which, had her portrait been painted, would probably have been done in Prout's or Vandyke brown.

There was nothing remarkable in her dress just now, beyond a natural fitness, and a style that was recent for the streets of Sherton. But, had it been the reverse, and quite striking, it would have meant just as little. For there can be hardly anything less connected with a woman's personality than drapery which she has neither designed, manufactured, cut, sewed, nor even seen, except by a glance of approval when told that such and such a shape and colour must be had because it has been decided by others as imperative at that particular time.

What people therefore saw of her in a cursory view was very little; in truth, mainly

something that was not she. The woman herself was a shadowy conjectural creature who had little to do with the outlines presented to Sherton eyes: a shape in the gloom, whose true quality could only be approximated by putting together a movement now and a glance then, in that patient attention which nothing but watchful loving-kindness ever troubles to give.

There was a little delay in their setting out from the town, and Marty South took advantage of it to hasten forward, with the view of escaping them on the way, lest they should feel compelled to spoil their *tête-à-tête* by asking her to ride. She walked fast, and one-third of the journey was done, and the evening rapidly darkening, before she perceived any sign of them behind her. Then, while ascending a hill, she dimly saw their vehicle drawing near the lowest part of the

incline, their heads slightly bent towards each other, drawn together, no doubt, by their souls; as the heads of a pair of horses well in hand are drawn in by the rein. She walked still faster.

But between these and herself there was a carriage, apparently a brougham, coming in the same direction, with lighted lamps. When it overtook her—which was not soon on account of her pace—the scene was much darker, and the lights glared in her eyes sufficiently to hide the details of the equipage.

It occurred to Marty that she might take hold behind this carriage and so keep along with it, to save herself from the patronage of being overtaken and picked up for pity's sake by the coming pair. Accordingly, as the carriage drew abreast of her in climbing the long ascent, she walked close to the wheels, the rays of the nearest lamp pene-

trating her very pores. She had only just dropped behind when the carriage stopped, and to her surprise the coachman asked her, over his shoulder, if she would ride. What made the question more surprising was that it came in obedience to an order from the interior of the vehicle.

Marty gladly assented, for she was weary, very weary, after working all night and keeping afoot all day. She mounted beside the coachman, wondering why this good fortune had happened to her. He was rather a great man in aspect, and she did not like to inquire of him for some time.

At last she said, "Who has been so kind as to ask me to ride?"

"Mrs. Charmond," replied her statuesque companion.

Marty was stirred at the name, so closely connected with her last night's experiences. "Is this her carriage?" she whispered.

"Yes; she's inside."

Marty reflected, and perceived that Mrs. Charmond must have recognised her plodding up the hill under the blaze of the lamp; recognised, probably, her stubbly poll (since she had kept away her face), and thought that those stubbles were the result of her own desire.

Marty South was not so very far wrong. Inside the carriage a pair of bright eyes looked from a ripe handsome face, and though behind those bright eyes was a mind of unfathomed mysteries, beneath them there beat a heart capable of quick, extempore warmth—a heart which could indeed be passionately and imprudently warm on certain occasions. At present, after recognising the girl, she had acted on a mere impulse, possibly feeling gratified at the denuded appearance which signified the success of her agent in obtaining what she had required.

"'Tis wonderful that she should ask ye,"

observed the magisterial coachman presently. "I have never known her do it before, for as a rule she takes no interest in the village folk at all."

Marty said no more, but occasionally turned her head to see if she could get a glimpse of the Olympian creature who, as the coachman had truly observed, hardly ever descended from her clouds into the Tempe-vale of the parishioners. But she could discern nothing of the lady. She also looked for Miss Melbury and Winterborne. The nose of their horse sometimes came quite near the back of Mrs. Charmond's carriage. But they never attempted to pass it till the latter conveyance turned towards the park gate, when they sped by. Here the carriage drew up that the gate might be opened; and in the momentary silence Marty heard a gentle oral sound, soft as a breeze.

"What's that?" she whispered.

"Mis'ess yawning."

"Why should she yawn?"

"Oh, because she's been used to such wonderful good life, and finds it dull here. She'll soon be off again on account of it."

"So rich and so powerful, and yet to yawn!" the girl murmured. "Then things don't fay with she any more than with we!"

Marty now alighted; the lamp again shone upon her, and as the carriage rolled on, a voice said to her from the interior, "Good night."

"Good night, ma'am," said Marty. But she had not been able to see the woman who began so greatly to interest her—the second person of her own sex who had operated strongly on her mind that day.

CHAPTER VI.

MEANWHILE Winterborne and Grace Melbury had also undergone their little experiences.

As he drove off with her out of the town the glances of people fell upon them, the younger thinking that Mr. Winterborne was in a pleasant place, and wondering in what relation he stood towards her. Winterborne himself was unconscious of this. Occupied solely with the idea of having her in charge, he did not notice much with outward eye.

Their conversation was in briefest phrase

for some time, Grace being somewhat disconcerted, through not having understood till they were about to start that Giles was to be her sole conductor, in place of her father. When they were in the open country he spoke.

"Don't Brownley's farm-buildings look strange to you, now they have been moved bodily from the hollow where the old ones stood to the top of the hill?"

She admitted that they did, though she should not have seen any difference in them if he had not pointed it out.

"They had a good crop of bitter-sweets, they couldn't grind them all"—nodding towards an orchard where some heaps of apples had been left lying ever since the ingathering.

She said "Yes," but looking at another orchard.

"Why, you are looking at John-apple-

trees! You know bitter-sweets—you used to well enough?"

"I am afraid I have forgotten, and it is getting too dark to distinguish."

Winterborne did not continue. It seemed as if the knowledge and interests which had formerly moved Grace's mind had quite died away from her. He wondered whether the special attributes of his image in the past had evaporated like these other things.

However that might be, the fact at present was merely this, that where he was seeing John-apples and farm-buildings she was beholding a much contrasting scene: a broad lawn in the fashionable suburb of a fast city, the evergreen leaves shining in the evening sun, amid which bounding girls, gracefully clad in artistic arrangements of blue, brown, red, and white, were playing at games, with laughter and chat,

in all the pride of life, the notes of piano and harp trembling in the air from the open windows adjoining. Moreover they were girls—and this was a fact which Grace Melbury's delicate femininity could not lose sight of—whose parents Giles would have addressed with a deferential Sir or Madam. Beside this visioned scene the homely farmsteads did not quite hold their own from her present twenty-year point of survey. For all his woodland sequestration Giles knew the primitive simplicity of the subject he had started, and now sounded a deeper note.

"'Twas very odd what we said to each other years ago; I often think of it. I mean our saying that if we still liked each other when you were twenty and I twenty-five, we'd——"

"It was child's tattle."

"H'm?" said Giles suddenly.

"I mean we were young," said she more considerately. That abrupt manner of his in making inquiries reminded her that he was unaltered.

"Yes . . . I beg your pardon, Miss Melbury; your father *sent* me to meet you to-day."

"I know it, and I am glad of it." And she looked at him affectionately.

He seemed satisfied with her and went on—"At that time you were sitting beside me at the back of your father's covered car, when we were coming home from gipsying, all the party being squeezed in together as tight as sheep in an auction-pen. It got darker and darker, and I said—I forget the exact words—but I put my arm round your waist, and there you let it stay till your father, sitting in front, suddenly stopped telling his story to Farmer Bollen, to light his pipe. The flash shone

into the car, and showed us all up distinctly ; my arm flew from your waist like lightning, yet not so quickly but that some of 'em had seen, and laughed at us. Yet your father, to our amazement, instead of being angry, was mild as milk, and seemed quite pleased. Have you forgot all that, or haven't you ? "

She owned that she remembered it very well, now that he mentioned the circumstances. " But I must have been in short frocks," she said slily.

" Come now, Miss Melbury, that won't do ! Short frocks indeed ! You know better as well as I."

Grace thereupon declared that she would not argue with an old friend she valued so highly as she valued him, but if it were as he said, then she was virtually no less than an old woman now, so far did the time seem removed from her present.

"But old feelings come to life again in some people," she added softly.

"And in others they have never died!" said he.

"Ah—they are Love's very *ownest* and best, I suppose! I don't pretend to rank so high as they."

"It's not a they—it's a he."

Grace sighed.

"Shall I tell you all about Bath or Cheltenham, or places on the Continent that I visited last summer?" she said.

"With all my heart."

She then described places and persons, avoiding, however, what he most wished to hear—everything specially appertaining to her own existence. When she had done she said gaily, "Now do you tell me in return what has happened in Hintock since I have been away."

"Anything to keep the conversation

away from her and me," said Giles within him.

It was true; cultivation had so far advanced in the soil of Miss Melbury's mind as to lead her to talk of anything save of that she knew well, and had the greatest interest in developing—herself. She had fallen from the good old Hintock ways.

He had not proceeded far with his somewhat bald narration when they drew near a carriage that had been preceding them for some time in the dusk. Miss Melbury inquired if he knew whose carriage it was.

Winterborne, although he had seen it, had not taken it into account. On examination he said it was Mrs. Charmond's.

Grace watched the vehicle and its easy roll, and seemed to feel more nearly akin to it than to the one she was in.

"Pooh—we can polish off the mileage as well as they, come to that," said Winter-

borne, reading her mind; and rising to emulation at what it bespoke he whipped on the horse. This it was which had brought the nose of Mr. Melbury's old grey close to the back of Mrs. Charmond's much eclipsing vehicle.

"There's Marty South sitting up with the coachman," said he, discerning her by her dress.

"Ah, poor Marty! I must ask her to come to see me this very evening. How does she happen to be riding there?"

"I don't know. It is very singular."

Thus these people with converging destinies went along the road together, till Winterborne, leaving the track of the carriage, turned into Little Hintock, where almost the first house was the timber-merchant's. Pencils of light streamed out of the windows sufficiently to show the white laurestinus flowers, and glance against

the polished leaves of laurel. The interior of the rooms could be seen distinctly, warmed up by the fire-flames, which in the parlour were reflected from the pictures and book-case, and in the kitchen from the utensils and ware.

"Let us look at the dear place for a moment before we call them," she said.

In the kitchen dinner was preparing; for though Melbury dined at one o'clock at other times, to-day the meal had been kept back for Grace. A rickety old spit was in motion, its end being fixed in the fire-dog, and the whole kept going by means of a cord conveyed over pulleys along the ceiling to a large stone suspended in a corner of the room. Old Grammer Oliver came and wound it up with a rattle like that of a mill.

In the parlour a colossal shade of Mrs. Melbury's head fell on the wall and ceiling;

but before the girl had regarded this room many moments their presence was discovered, and her father and stepmother came out to welcome her.

The character of the Melbury family was of that kind which evinces some shyness in showing strong emotion among each other; a trait frequent in rural households, and one curiously inverse to most of the peculiarities distinguishing villagers from the people of towns. Thus hiding their warmer feelings under commonplace talk all round, Grace's reception produced no extraordinary demonstrations. But that more was felt than was enacted appeared from the fact that her father, in taking her indoors, quite forgot the presence of Giles without, as did also Grace herself.

He said nothing; but took the gig round to the yard and called out from the sparhouse the man who attended to these

matters, when there was no conversation among the spar-makers to particularly engage him. Winterborne then returned to the door with the intention of entering the house.

The family had gone into the parlour, and were still absorbed in themselves. The fire was as before the only light, and it irradiated Grace's face and hands so as to make them look wondrously smooth and fair beside those of the two elders; shining also through the loose hair about her temples as sunlight through a brake. Her father was surveying her in a dazed conjecture, so much had she developed and progressed in manner and stature since he last had set eyes on her.

Observing these things Winterborne remained dubious by the door, mechanically tracing with his fingers certain time-worn letters carved in the jambs,—initials of

bygone generations of householders who had lived and died there.

No, he declared to himself, he would not enter and join the family; they had forgotten him, and it was enough for to-day that he had brought her home. Still, he was a little surprised that her father's eagerness to send him for Grace should have resulted in such indifference as this.

He walked softly away into the lane towards his own house, looking back when he reached the turning, from which he could get a last glimpse of the timber-merchant's roof. He hazarded guesses as to what Grace was saying just at that moment, and murmured with some self-derision, "nothing about me!" He looked also in the other direction, and saw against the sky the thatched hip and solitary chimney of Marty's cottage, and thought of her too, struggling bravely along under

that humble shelter, among her spar-gads and pots and skimmers.

At the timber-merchant's, in the meantime, conversation flowed; and as Giles Winterborne had rightly enough deemed, on subjects in which he had no share. Among the excluding matters there was, as chief, the effect upon Mr. Melbury of the womanly mien and manners of his daughter, which took him so much unawares that it thrust the image of her conductor homeward back into quite the obscurest cellarage of his brain.

Another was his interview with Mrs. Charmond's agent that morning, at which the lady herself had been present for a few minutes. Melbury had purchased some standing timber from her a long time before, and now that the date had come for felling it he was left to pursue almost

his own course. This was what the household were actually talking of during Giles's cogitation without.

"So thoroughly does she trust me," said Melbury, "that I might fell, top, or lop, on my own judgment, any stick o' timber whatever in her wood, and fix the price o't, and settle the matter. But name it all, I wouldn't do such a thing. However, it may be useful to have this good understanding with her. . . . I wish she took more interest in the place, and stayed here all the year round."

"I am afraid 'tis not her regard for you, but her dislike of Hintock, that makes her so easy about the trees," said Mrs. Melbury.

When dinner was over, Grace took a candle and began to ramble pleasurably through the rooms of her old home, from which she had latterly become well-nigh

an alien. Each nook and each object revived a memory, and simultaneously modified it. The chambers seemed lower than they had appeared on any previous occasion of her return, the surfaces of both walls and ceilings standing in such near relations to the eye that it could not avoid taking microscopic note of their irregularities and old fashion. Her own bedroom wore at once a look more familiar than when she had left it, and yet a face estranged. The world of little things therein gazed at her in helpless stationariness, as though they had tried and been unable to make any progress without her presence. Over the place where her candle had been accustomed to stand, when she had used to read in bed till the midnight hour, there was still the brown spot of smoke. She did not know that her father had taken especial care to keep it from being cleaned off.

Having concluded her perambulation of this now uselessly commodious edifice, Grace began to feel that she had come a long journey since the morning; and when her father had been up himself, as well as his wife, to see that her room was comfortable and the fire burning, she prepared to retire for the night.

No sooner, however, was she in bed than her momentary sleepiness took itself off, and she wished she had stayed up longer. She amused herself by listening to the old familiar noises that she could hear to be still going on down stairs, and by looking towards the window as she lay. The blind had been drawn up, as she used to have it when a girl, and she could just discern the dim tree-tops against the sky on the neighbouring hill. Beneath this meeting-line of light and shade nothing was visible save one solitary point of light,

which blinked as the tree-twigs waved to and fro before its beams.

From its position it seemed to radiate from the window of a house on the hill-side. The house had been empty when she was last at home, and she wondered who inhabited the place now.

Her conjectures, however, were not intently carried on, and she was watching the light quite idly, when it gradually changed colour, and at length shone blue as sapphire. Thus it remained several minutes, and then it passed through violet to red.

Her curiosity was so widely awakened by the phenomenon that she sat up in bed, and stared steadily at the shine. An appearance of this sort, sufficient to excite attention anywhere, was no less than a marvel in Hintock, as Grace had known the hamlet. Almost every diurnal and nocturnal effect

in that woodland place had hitherto been the direct result of the regular terrestrial roll which produced the season's changes; but here was something dissociated from these normal sequences, and foreign to local knowledge.

It was about this moment that Grace heard the household below preparing to retire, the most emphatic noise in the proceeding being that of her father bolting the doors. Then the stairs creaked, and her father and mother passed her chamber. The last to come was Grammer Oliver.

Grace slid out of bed, ran across the room, and lifting the latch said, "I am not asleep, Grammer. Come in and talk to me."

Before the old woman had entered Grace was again under the bedclothes. Grammer set down her candlestick, and seated herself on the edge of Miss Melbury's coverlet.

"I want you to tell me what light that is I see on the hill-side," said Grace.

Mrs. Oliver looked across. "Oh, that," she said, "is from the doctor's. He's often doing things of that sort. Perhaps you don't know that we've a doctor living here now—Mr. Fitzpiers by name?"

Grace admitted that she had not heard of him.

"Well then, miss, he's come here to get up a practice. Though he belongs to the oldest, ancientest family in the county, he's stooped to make hisself useful like any common genius. I know him very well, through going there to help 'em scrub sometimes, which your father said I might do if I wanted to in my spare time. Being a bachelor-man he've only lodgings. Oh, yes, I know him very well. Sometimes he'll talk to me as if I were his own mother."

"Indeed."

"Yes. 'Grammer,' he said one day when I asked him why he came here where there's hardly anybody living, 'I'll tell you why I came here. I took a map, and I marked on it where Dr. Jones's practice ends to the north of this district, and where Mr. Taylor's ends on the south, and little Jimmy Green's on the east, and somebody else's to the west. Then I took a pair of compasses, and found the exact middle of the country that was left between these bounds, and that middle was Little Hintock; so here I am.' . . . . But, Lord, there: poor young man!"

"Why?"

"He said, 'Grammer Oliver, I've been here three months, and although there are a good many people in the Hintocks and the villages round, and a scattered practice is often a very good one, I don't seem to get many patients. And there's no society

at all; and I'm pretty near melancholy mad,' he said, with a great yawn. 'I should be quite if it were not for my books, and my lab—laboratory, and what not. Grammer, I was made for higher things.' And then he'd yawn and yawn again."

"Was he really made for higher things, do you think? Is he clever?"

"Well, no. How can he be clever? He may be able to jine up a broken man or woman after a fashion, and put his finger upon an ache if you tell him nearly where 'tis; but these young men—they should live to my time of life, and then they'd see how clever they were at five-and-twenty! And yet he's a projick, a real projick, and says the oddest of rozums. 'Ah, Grammer,' he said at another time, 'Let me tell you that Everything is Nothing. There's only Me and Not Me in the whole world.' And he told me that no man's hands could help

what they did, any more than the hands of a clock. . . . . Yes, he's a man of strange meditations, and his eyes seem to see as far as the north star."

"He will soon go away, no doubt."

"I don't think so."

Grace did not say "Why?" and Grammer hesitated. At last she went on, "Don't tell your father or mother, miss, if I let you know a secret?"

Grace gave the required promise.

"Well, he talks of buying me; so he won't go away just yet."

"Buying you—how?"

"Not my soul—my body, when I'm dead. One day when I was there cleaning, he said, 'Grammer, you've a large brain—a very large organ of brain,' he said. 'A woman's is usually four ounces less than a man's; but yours is man's size.' Well, then —hee, hee!—after he'd flattered me a bit

like that, he said he'd give me ten pounds to have me as a natomy after my death. Well, knowing I'd no chick nor chiel left, and nobody with any interest in me, I thought, faith, if I can be of any use to my fellow-creatures after I'm gone they are welcome to me; so I said I'd think it over, and would most likely agree and take the ten pounds. Now this is a secret, miss, between us two. The money would be very useful to me; and I see no harm in it."

"Of course there's no harm. But oh, Grammer—how can you think to do it? I wish you hadn't told me."

"I wish I hadn't—if you don't like to know it, miss. But you needn't mind. Lord, hee, hee! I shall keep him waiting many a year yet, bless ye!"

"I hope you will, I am sure."

The girl thereupon fell into such deep reflection that conversation languished, and

Grammer Oliver taking her candle wished Miss Melbury good-night.

The latter's eyes rested on the distant glimmer, around which she allowed her reasoning fancy to play in vague eddies that shaped the doings of the philosopher behind that light on the lines of intelligence just received. It was strange to her to come back from the world to Little Hintock and find in one of its nooks, like a tropical plant in a hedgerow, a nucleus of advanced ideas and practices which had nothing in common with the life around. Chemical experiments, anatomical projects, and metaphysical conceptions had found a strange home here.

Thus she remained thinking, the imagined pursuits of the man behind the light intermingling with conjectural sketches of his personality, till her eyes fell together with their own heaviness, and she slept.

CHAPTER VII.

KALEIDOSCOPIC dreams of a weird alchemist-surgeon, Grammer Oliver's skeleton, and the face of Giles Winterborne, brought Grace Melbury to the morning of the next day. It was fine. A north wind was blowing—that not unacceptable compromise between the atmospheric cutlery of the eastern blast and the spongy gales of the west quarter. She looked from her window in the direction of the light of the previous evening, and could just discern through the trees the shape of the surgeon's house. Somehow, in the broad, practical daylight,

that unknown and lonely gentleman seemed to be shorn of much of the interest which had invested his personality and pursuits in the hours of darkness, and as Grace's dressing proceeded he faded from her mind.

Meanwhile Winterborne, though half-assured of her father's favour, was rendered a little restless by Miss Melbury's behaviour. Despite his shy self-control, he could not help looking continually from his own door towards the timber-merchant's in the probability of somebody's emergence therefrom.

His attention was at length justified by the appearance of two figures, that of Mr. Melbury himself, and Grace beside him. They stepped out in a direction towards the densest quarter of the wood, and Winterborne walked contemplatively behind them, till all three were soon under the trees.

Although the time of bare boughs had now set in, there were sheltered hollows

amid the Hintock plantations and copses in which a more tardy leave-taking than on windy summits was the rule with the foliage. This caused here and there an apparent mixture of the seasons; so that in some of the dells they passed by holly-berries in full red growing beside oak and hazel whose leaves were as yet not far removed from green, and brambles whose verdure was rich and deep as in the month of August. To Grace these well-known peculiarities were as an old painting restored.

Now could be beheld that change from the handsome to the curious which the features of a wood undergo at the ingress of the winter months. Angles were taking the place of curves, and reticulations of surfaces—a change constituting a sudden lapse from the ornate to the primitive on Nature's canvas, and comparable to a retrogressive step from the art of an advanced

school of painting to that of the Pacific Islander.

Winterborne followed, and kept his eye upon the two figures as they threaded their way through these sylvan masses. Mr. Melbury's long legs, his gaiters drawn in to the bone at the ankles, his slight stoop, his habit of getting lost in thought and arousing himself with an exclamation of "Hah!" accompanied with an upward jerk of the head, composed a personage recognisable by his neighbours as far as he could be seen. It seemed as if the squirrels and birds knew him. One of the former would occasionally run from the path to hide behind the arm of some tree, which the little animal carefully edged round *pari passu* with Melbury and his daughter's movement onward, assuming a mock manner, as though he were saying, "Ho, ho; you are only a timber-merchant, and carry no gun!"

They went noiselessly over mats of starry moss, rustled through interspersed tracts of leaves, skirted trunks with spreading roots, whose mossed rinds made them like hands wearing green gloves; elbowed old elms and ashes with great forks, in which stood pools of water that overflowed on rainy days, and ran down their stems in green cascades. On older trees still than these huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling.

They dived amid beeches under which nothing grew, the younger boughs still retaining their hectic leaves, that rustled in

the breeze with a sound almost metallic, like the sheet-iron foliage of the fabled Jarnvid wood. Some flecks of white in Grace's drapery had enabled Giles to keep her and her father in view till this time; but now he lost sight of them, and was obliged to follow by ear—no difficult matter, for on the line of their course every wood-pigeon rose from its perch with a continued clash, dashing its wings against the branches with well-nigh force enough to break every quill. By taking the track of this noise he soon came to a stile.

Was it worth while to go further? He examined the doughy soil at the foot of the stile, and saw amongst the large sole-and-heel tracks an impression of a slighter kind, from a boot that was obviously not local, for Winterborne knew all the cobblers' patterns in that district, because they were very few to know. The mud-picture was enough

to make him swing himself over and proceed.

The character of the woodland now changed. The bases of the smaller trees were nibbled bare by rabbits, and at divers points heaps of fresh-made chips, and the newly-cut stool of a tree, stared white through the undergrowth. There had been a large fall of timber this year, which explained the meaning of some sounds that soon reached him.

A voice was shouting intermittently in a sort of human bark, reminding Giles that there was a sale of trees and faggots that very day. Melbury would naturally be present. Thereupon Winterborne remembered that he himself wanted a few faggots, and entered upon the scene.

A large group of buyers stood round the auctioneer, or followed him when, between his pauses, he wandered on from one lot of

plantation produce to another, like some philosopher of the Peripatetic school delivering his lectures in the shady groves of the Lyceum. His companions were timber-dealers, yeomen, farmers, villagers, and others; mostly woodland men, who on that account could afford to be curious in their walking-sticks, which consequently exhibited various monstrosities of vegetation, the chief being corkscrew shapes in black and white thorn, brought to that pattern by the slow torture of an encircling woodbine during their growth, as the Chinese have been said to mould human beings into grotesque toys by continued compression in infancy. Two women, wearing men's jackets on their gowns, conducted in the rear of the halting procession a pony-cart containing bread and cheese, with a barrel of strong ale for the select, and cider in milking-pails, into which anybody dipped who chose.

The auctioneer adjusted himself to circumstances by using his walking-stick as a hammer, and knocked down the lot on any convenient object that took his fancy, such as the crown of a little boy's head, or the shoulders of a bystander who had no business there except to taste the brew; a proceeding which would have been deemed humorous but for the air of stern rigidity which the auctioneer's face preserved, tending to show that the eccentricity was a result of that absence of mind which is engendered by the press of affairs, and no freak of fancy at all.

Mr. Melbury stood slightly apart from the rest of the Peripatetics, and Grace beside him, clinging closely to his arm; her modern attire looking almost odd where everything else was old-fashioned, and throwing over the familiar garniture of the trees a homeliness that seemed to demand improvement

by the addition of a few contemporary novelties also. Grace seemed to regard the selling with the interest which attaches to memories revived after an interval of obliviousness.

Winterborne went and stood close to them; the timber-merchant spoke, and continued his buying; Grace merely smiled. To justify his presence there Winterborne began bidding for timber and faggots that he did not want, pursuing the occupation in an abstracted mood, in which the auctioneer's voice seemed to become one of the natural sounds of the woodland.

A few flakes of snow descended, at the sight of which a robin, alarmed at these signs of imminent winter, and seeing that no offence was meant by the human invasion, came and perched on the tip of the faggots that were being sold, and looked into the auctioneer's face, whilst waiting for some

chance crumb from the bread-basket. Standing a little behind Grace, Winterborne observed how one flake would sail downward and settle on a curl of her hair, and how another would choose her shoulder, and another the edge of her bonnet, which took up so much of his attention that his biddings proceeded incoherently; and when the auctioneer said every now and then, with a nod towards him, "Yours, Mr. Winterborne," he had no idea whether he had bought faggots, poles, or log-wood.

He regretted that her father should show such inequalities of temperament as to keep Grace tightly on his arm to-day, when he had quite lately seemed anxious to recognise their betrothal as a fact. And thus musing, and joining in no conversation with other buyers except when directly addressed, he followed the assemblage hither and thither till the end of the auction, when Giles for

the first time realised what his purchases had been. Hundreds of faggots, and divers lots of timber, had been set down to him, when all he had required had been a few bundles of spray for his man Robert Creedle's use in baking and lighting fires.

Business being over, he turned to speak to the timber-merchant. But Melbury's manner was short and distant; and Grace too looked vexed and reproachful. Winterborne then discovered that he had been unwittingly bidding against her father, and picking up his favourite lots in spite of him. With a very few words they left the spot, and pursued their way homeward.

Giles was extremely blank at what he had done, and remained standing under the trees, all the other men having strayed silently away. He saw Melbury and his daughter pass down a glade without looking back. While they moved slowly through it a lady

appeared on horseback in the middle distance, the line of her progress converging upon that of Melbury's. They met, Melbury took off his hat, and she reined in her horse. A conversation was evidently in progress between Grace and her father and this equestrian, in whom he was almost sure that he recognised Mrs. Charmond, less by her outline than by the livery of the groom who had halted some yards off.

The interlocutors did not part till after a prolonged pause, during which much seemed to be said. When Melbury and Grace resumed their walk it was with something of a lighter tread than before.

Winterborne then pursued his own course homeward. He was unwilling to let coldness grow up between himself and the Melburys for any trivial reason, and in the evening he went to their house. On drawing near the gate his attention was attracted by the sight

of one of the bedrooms blinking into a state of illumination. In it stood Grace lighting several candles, her right hand elevating the taper, her left hand on her bosom, her face thoughtfully fixed on each wick as it kindled, as if she saw in every flame's growth the rise of a life to maturity. He wondered what such unusual brilliancy could mean to-night.

On getting indoors he found her father and stepmother in a state of suppressed excitement, which at first he could not comprehend.

"I am sorry about my biddings to-day," said Giles. "I don't know what I was doing. I have come to say that any of the lots you may require are yours."

"Oh, never mind—never mind," replied the timber merchant with a slight wave of his hand. "I have so much else to think of that I nearly had forgot it. Just now, too, there are matters of a different kind

from trade to attend to, so don't let it concern ye."

As the timber-merchant spoke, as it were, down to him from a higher plane than his own, Giles turned to Mrs. Melbury.

"Grace is going to the House to-morrow," she said quietly. "She is looking out her things now. I dare say she is wanting me this minute to assist her." Thereupon Mrs. Melbury left the room.

Nothing is more remarkable than the independent personality of the tongue now and then. Mr. Melbury knew that his words had been a sort of boast. He decried boasting, particularly to Giles; yet whenever the subject was Grace, his judgment resigned the ministry of speech in spite of him.

Winterborne felt surprise, pleasure, and also a little apprehension at the news. He repeated Mrs. Melbury's words.

"Yes," said paternal pride, not sorry to

have dragged out of him what he could not in any circumstances have kept in. "Coming home from the woods this afternoon we met Mrs. Charmond out for a ride. She spoke to me on a little matter of business and then got acquainted with Grace. 'Twas wonderful how she took to Grace in a few minutes; that freemasonry of education made 'em close at once. Naturally enough she was amazed that such an article—ha—ha!—could come out of my house. At last it led on to Mis'ess Grace being asked to the House. So she's busy hunting up her frills and furbelows to go in." As Giles remained in thought without responding, Melbury continued: "But I'll call her down stairs?"

"No, no; don't do that, since she's busy," said Winterborne.

Melbury, feeling from the young man's manner that his own talk had been too much

at Giles and too little to him, repented at once. His face changed, and he said, in lower tones, with an effort: "She's yours, Giles, as far as I am concerned."

"Thanks—my best thanks, sir. But I think, since it is all right between us about the biddings, that I'll not interrupt her now. I'll step homeward, and call another time."

On leaving the house he looked up at the bedroom again. Grace, surrounded by a sufficient number of candles to answer all purposes of self-criticism was standing before a cheval glass that her father had lately bought expressly for her use; she was bonneted, cloaked, and gloved, and glanced over her shoulder into the mirror, estimating her aspect. Her face was lit with the natural elation of a young girl hoping to inaugurate on the morrow an intimate acquaintance with a new, interesting, and powerful friend.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE inspiriting appointment which had led Grace Melbury to indulge in a six-candle illumination for the arrangement of her attire carried her over the ground the next morning with a springy tread. Her sense of being properly appreciated on her own native soil seemed to brighten the atmosphere and herbage around her, as the glow-worm's lamp irradiates the grass. Thus she moved along, avessel of emotion, going to empty itself on she knew not what.

Twenty minutes' walking through copses, over a stile, and along an upland lawn,

brought her to the verge of a deep glen, in which Hintock House appeared, immediately beneath her eye. To describe it as standing in a hollow would not express the situation of the manor-house; it stood in a hole. But the hole was full of beauty. From the spot which Grace had reached, a stone could easily have been thrown over or into the birds'-nested chimneys of the mansion. Its walls were surmounted by a battlemented parapet; but the grey lead roofs were quite visible behind it, with their gutters, laps, rolls, and skylights, together with incised letterings and shoe-patterns cut by idlers thereon.

The front of the house was an ordinary manorial presentation of Elizabethan windows, mullioned and hooded, worked in rich snuff-coloured freestone from local quarries. The ashlar of the walls, where not overgrown with ivy and other creepers, was coated

with lichen of every shade, intensifying its luxuriance with its nearness to the ground till, below the plinth, it merged in moss.

Above the house to the back was a dense plantation, the roots of whose trees were above the level of the chimneys. The corresponding high ground on which Grace stood was richly grassed, with only an old tree here and there. A few sheep lay about, which as they ruminated looked quietly into the bedroom windows.

The situation of the house, prejudicial to humanity, was a stimulus to vegetation, on which account an endless shearing of the heavy-armed ivy went on, and a continual lopping of trees and shrubs. It was an edifice built in times when human constitutions were damp-proof, when shelter from the boisterous was all that men thought of in choosing a dwelling-place, the insidious being beneath their notice; and its hollow site was an ocular

reminder by its unfitness for modern lives of the fragility to which these have declined.

The highest architectural cunning could have done nothing to make Hintock House dry and salubrious; and ruthless ignorance could have done little to make it unpicturesque. It was vegetable nature's own home; a spot to inspire the painter and poet of still life—if they did not suffer too much from the relaxing atmosphere—and to draw groans from the gregariously disposed.

Grace descended the green escarpment by a zigzag path into the drive, which swept round beneath the slope. The exterior of the house had been familiar to her from her childhood, but she had never been inside, and the approach to knowing an old thing in a new way was a lively experience.

It was with a little flutter that she was shown in; but she recollected that Mrs. Charmond would probably be alone. Up to

a few days before this time that lady had been accompanied in her comings, stayings, and goings by a relative, believed to be her aunt; latterly, however, these two ladies had separated, owing, it was supposed, to a quarrel; and Mrs. Charmond had been left desolate. Being presumably a woman who did not care for solitude, this deprivation might possibly account for her sudden interest in Grace.

Mrs. Charmond was at the end of a gallery opening from the hall when Miss Melbury was announced, and saw her through the glass doors between them. She came forward with a smile on her face, and told the young girl it was good of her to come.

"Ah! you have noticed those," she said, seeing that Grace's eyes were attracted by some curious objects against the walls. "They are man-traps. My husband was a connoisseur in man-traps and spring-guns and such articles, collecting them from all his

neighbours. He knew the histories of all these—which gin had broken a man's leg which gun had killed a man. I don't like them here; but I've never yet given directions for them to be taken away." She added playfully, "Man-traps are of rather ominous significance where a person of our sex lives, are they not?"

Grace was bound to smile; but that side of womanliness was one which her inexperience had no great zest in contemplating.

"They are interesting, no doubt, as relics of a barbarous time happily past," she said, looking thoughtfully at the varied designs of the instruments.

"Well, we must not take them too seriously," said Mrs. Charmond with an indolent turn of her head, and they moved on inwards.

When she had shown her visitor different articles in cabinets that she deemed likely to

interest her, some tapestries, wood carvings, ivories, miniatures, and so on—always with a mien of listlessness which might either have been constitutional, or partly owing to the situation of the place—they sat down to an early cup of tea.

"Will you pour it out, please? Do," she said, leaning back in her chair, and placing her hand above her forehead, while her almond eyes—those long eyes so common to the angelic legions of early Italian art—became longer, and her voice more languishing. She showed that oblique-mannered softness which is perhaps most frequent in women of darker complexion and more lymphatic temperament than Mrs. Charmond's was; women who lingeringly smile their meanings to men rather than speak them, who inveigle rather than prompt, and take advantage of currents rather than steer.

"I am the most inactive woman when I

am here," she said. "I think sometimes I was born to live and do nothing, nothing, nothing but float about, as we fancy we do sometimes in dreams. But that cannot be really my destiny, and I must struggle against such fancies."

"I am so sorry you do not enjoy exertion —it is quite sad! I wish I could tend you and make you very happy."

There was something so sympathetic, so responsive in the sound of Grace's voice, that it impelled people to play havoc with their customary reservations in talking to her. "It is tender and kind of you to feel that," said Mrs. Charmond. "Perhaps I have given you the notion that my languor is more than it really is. But this place oppresses me, and I have a plan of going abroad a good deal. I used to go with a relative, but that arrangement has dropped through."

Regarding Grace with a final glance of criticism she seemed to make up her mind to consider the young girl satisfactory, and continued :

"Now I am often impelled to record my impressions of times and places. I have often thought of writing a *New Sentimental Journey.* But I cannot find energy enough to do it alone. When I am at different places in the south of Europe I feel a crowd of ideas and fancies thronging upon me continually ; but to unfold writing materials, take up a cold steel pen, and put these impressions down systematically on cold smooth paper—that I cannot do. So I have thought that if I always could have somebody at my elbow with whom I am in sympathy, I might dictate any ideas that come into my head. And directly I had made your acquaintance the other day it struck me that you would suit me so well. Would you like to undertake it?

You might read to me, too, if desirable. Will you think it over, and ask your parents if they are willing?"

"Oh, yes," said Grace. "I am almost sure they would be very glad."

"You are so accomplished, I hear; I should be quite honoured by such intellectual company."

Grace, modestly blushing, deprecated any such idea.

"Do you keep up your lucubrations at Little Hintock?"

"Oh, no . . . Lucubrations are not unknown at Little Hintock; but they are not carried on by me."

"What—another student in that retreat?"

"There is a surgeon lately come, and I have heard that he reads a great deal—I see his light sometimes through the trees late at night."

"Oh, yes—a doctor—I believe I was told

of him. It is a strange place for him to settle in."

"It is a convenient centre for a practice, they say. But he does not confine his studies to medicine, it seems. He investigates theology, and metaphysics, and all sorts of subjects."

"What is his name?"

"Fitzpiers. He represents a very old family, I believe, the Fitzpierses of Buckbury-Fitzpiers—not a great many miles from here."

"I am not sufficiently local to know the history of the family. I was never in the country till my husband brought me here."

Mrs. Charmond did not care to pursue this line of investigation. Whatever mysterious merit might attach to family antiquity, it was one which her adaptable, wandering, *weltbürgerliche* nature had grown tired of

caring about—a peculiarity that made her a contrast to her neighbours.

"It is of rather more importance to know what the man is himself than what his family is," she said, "if he is going to practise upon us as a surgeon. Heaven send him skill! Have you seen him?"

Grace had not. "I think he is not a very old man," she added.

"Has he a wife?"

"I am not aware that he has."

"Well, I hope he will be useful here. I must get to know him when I come back. It will be very convenient to have a medical man—if he is clever—in one's own parish. I get dreadfully nervous sometimes, living in such an outlandish place; and Sherton is so far to send to. No doubt you feel Hintock to be a great change after watering-place life."

"I do. But it is home. It has its

advantages and its disadvantages." Grace was thinking less of the solitude than of the attendant circumstances.

They chatted on for some time, Grace being set quite at her ease by her entertainer. Mrs. Charmond was far too well-practised a woman not to know that to show a marked patronage to a sensitive young girl who would probably be very quick to discern it was to demolish her dignity rather than to establish it in that young girl's eyes. So being violently possessed with her idea of making use of this gentle acquaintance, ready and waiting at her own door, she took great pains to win her confidence at starting.

Just before Grace's departure the two chanced to pause before a mirror which reflected their faces in immediate juxta-position, so as to bring into prominence their resemblances and their contrasts. Both looked attractive as glassed back by

the faithful reflector ; but Grace's countenance had the effect of making Mrs. Charmond appear more than her full age. There are complexions which set off each other to great advantage, and there are those which antagonise, the one killing or damaging its neighbour unmercifully.

This was unhappily the case here. Mrs. Charmond fell into a meditation, and replied abstractedly to a cursory remark of her companion's. However she parted from her young friend in the kindliest tones, promising to send and let her know as soon as her mind was made up on the arrangement she had suggested.

When Grace had ascended nearly to the top of the adjoining slope she looked back, and saw that Mrs. Charmond still stood at the door meditatively regarding her.

Often during the previous night, after his

call on the Melburys, Winterborne's thoughts had run upon Grace's announced visit to Hintock House. Why had he not proposed to walk with her part of the way? Something told him that she might not, on such an occasion, have cared for his company.

He was still more of that opinion when, standing in his garden next day, he saw her go past on the journey with such a pretty pride in the event. He wondered if her father's ambition, which had purchased for her the means of intellectual light and culture far beyond those of any other native of the village, would conduce to the flight of her future interests above and away from the local life which was once to her movement of the the world.

Nevertheless, he had her father's permission to win her if he could; and to this end it became desirable to bring matters soon to a crisis. If she should think herself too

good for him, he must let her go, and make the best of his loss. The question was how to quicken events towards an issue.

He thought and thought, and at last decided that as good a way as any would be to give a Christmas party, and ask Grace and her parents to come as chief guests.

These ruminations were occupying him when there became audible a slight knocking at his front door. He descended the path, and looked out, and beheld Marty South, dressed for out-door work.

"Why didn't you come, Mr. Winterborne?" she said. "I've been waiting there hours and hours, and at last I thought I must try to find you."

"Bless my soul, I'd quite forgot," said Giles.

What he had forgotten was that there were a thousand young fir-trees to be planted in a neighbouring spot which had been cleared

by the woodcutters, and that he had arranged to plant them with his own hands. He had a marvellous power of making trees grow. Although he would seem to shovel in the earth quite carelessly there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on ; so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days. When, on the other hand, any of the journeymen planted, although they seemed to go through an identically similar process, one quarter of the trees would die away during the ensuing August.

Hence Winterborne found delight in the work even when, as at present, he contracted to do it on portions of the woodland in which he had no personal interest. Marty, who turned her hand to anything, was usually the one who performed the part of keeping the trees in a perpendicular position whilst he threw in the mould.

He accompanied her towards the spot, being stimulated yet further to proceed with the work by the knowledge that the ground was close to the wayside along which Grace must pass on her return from Hintock House.

"You've a cold in the head, Marty," he said as they walked. "That comes of cutting off your hair."

"I suppose it do. Yes; I've three headaches going on in my head at the same time."

"Three headaches!"

"Yes, Mr. Winterborne; a rheumatic headache in my poll, a sick headache over my eyes, and a misery headache in the middle of my brain. However, I came out, for I thought you might be waiting and grumbling like anything if I was not there."

The holes were already dug, and they set to work. Winterborne's fingers were endowed with a gentle conjuror's touch in

spreading the roots of each little tree, resulting in a sort of caress under which the delicate fibres all laid themselves out in their proper directions for growth. He put most of these roots towards the south-west; for, he said, in forty years' time, when some great gale is blowing from that quarter, the trees will require the strongest holdfast on that side to stand against it and not fall.

"How they sigh directly we put 'em upright, though while they are lying down they don't sigh at all," said Marty.

"Do they?" said Giles. "I've never noticed it."

She erected one of the young pines into its hole, and held up her finger; the soft musical breathing instantly set in which was not to cease night or day till the grown tree should be felled—probably long after the two planters should be felled themselves.

"It seems to me," the girl continued, "as

if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be."

"Just as we be?" He looked critically at her. "You ought not to feel like that, Marty."

Her only reply was turning to take up the next tree; and they planted on through a great part of the day, almost without another word. Winterborne's mind ran on his contemplated evening-party, his abstraction being such that he hardly was conscious of Marty's presence beside him.

From the nature of their employment, in which he handled the spade and she merely held the tree, it followed that he got good exercise and she got none. But she was a heroic girl, and though her outstretched hand was chill as a stone, and her cheeks blue, and her cold worse than ever, she would not complain whilst he was disposed to continue work. But when he paused she said, "Mr.

Winterborne, can I run down the lane and back to warm my feet?"

"Why, yes, of course," he said, awakening anew to her existence. "Though I was just thinking what a mild day it is for the season. Now I warrant that cold of yours is twice as bad as it was. You had no business to chop that hair off, Marty; it serves you almost right. Look here, cut off home at once."

"A run down the lane will be quite enough."

"No it won't. You ought not to have come out to-day at all."

"But I should like to finish the——"

"Marty, I tell you to go home," said he peremptorily. "I can manage to keep the rest of them upright with a stick or something."

She went away without saying any more. When she had gone down the orchard a

little distance she looked back. Giles suddenly went after her.

"Marty, it was for your good that I was rough, you know. But warm yourself in your own way, I don't care."

When she had run off he fancied he discerned a woman's dress through the holly bushes which divided the coppice from the road. It was Grace at last, on her way back from the interview with Mrs. Charmond. He threw down the tree he was planting, and was about to break through the belt of holly when he suddenly became aware of the presence of another man, who was looking over the hedge on the opposite side of the way upon the figure of the unconscious Grace.

The stranger appeared as a handsome and gentlemanly personage of six or eight and twenty, and he was quizzing her through an eyeglass. Seeing that Winterborne was

noticing him he let his glass drop with a click upon the rail which protected the hedge, and walked away in the opposite direction.

Giles knew in a moment that this must be Mr. Fitzpiers. When he was gone Winterborne pushed through the holly, and emerged close beside the interesting object of their contemplation.

CHAPTER IX.

"I HEARD the bushes move long before I saw you," she began. "I said first, 'it is some terrible beast'; next, 'it is a poacher'; next, 'it is a friend!'"

He regarded her with a slight smile, weighing, not her speech, but the question whether he should tell her that she had been flatteringly watched by a gentleman. He decided in the negative.

"You have been to the House?" he said. "But I need not ask." The fact was that there shone upon Miss Melbury's face a species of exaltation, which saw no

environing details ; not even Giles's occupation ; only his bare presence.

"Why need you not ask ?"

"Your face is like the face of Moses when he came down from the Mount."

She reddened a little and said, "How can you be so profane, Giles Winterborne ?"

"How can you think so much of that class of people ? Well, I beg pardon, I didn't mean to speak so freely. How do you like her house and her ?"

"Exceedingly. I had not been inside the walls since I was a child, when it used to be let to strangers, before Mrs. Charmond's late husband bought the property. She is *so* nice!" And Grace fell into such an abstracted gaze at the mental image of Mrs. Charmond and her niceness that it almost conjured up a vision of that lady to Giles himself.

"She has only been here a month or two

it seems, and cannot stay much longer, because she finds it so lonely and damp in winter. She is going abroad. Only think, she would like me to go with her!"

Giles's features stiffened a little at the news. "Indeed; what for? But I won't keep you standing here. Hoi, Robert!" he cried to a swaying collection of old clothes in the distance, which composed the figure of Creedle, his man. "Go on filling in there till I come back."

"I'm a coming, sir; I'm a coming."

"Well, the reason is this," continued she as they went on together, "Mrs. Charmond has a delightful side to her character—a desire to record her impressions of travel, like Alexandre Dumas and Méry, and Sterne and others. But she cannot find energy enough to do it herself." And Grace proceeded to explain Mrs. Charmond's proposal at large. "My notion is that Méry's style

will suit her best, because he writes in that soft, emotional, luxurious way she has," Grace said musingly.

"Indeed!" said Winterborne, sighing. "Suppose you talk over my head a little longer, Miss Grace Melbury."

"Oh, I didn't mean it!" she said repentantly looking into his eyes. "And as for myself, I hate French books. And I love dear old Hintock, *and the people in it*, fifty times better than all the Continent. But the scheme; I think it an enchanting notion, don't you, Giles?"

"It is well enough in one sense, but it will take you away," said he, mollified.

"Only for a short time. We should return in May."

"Well, Miss Melbury; it is a question for your father."

Winterborne walked with her nearly to

her house. He had awaited her coming, mainly with the view of mentioning to her his proposal to have a Christmas party; but homely Christmas gatherings in the jovial Hintock style seemed so primitive and uncouth beside the lofty matters of her converse that he refrained.

As soon as she was gone he turned back towards the scene of his planting, and could not help saying to himself as he walked, that this engagement of his was a very unpromising business. Her outing to-day had not improved it. A woman who could go to Hintock House, and be friendly with its mistress; enter into the views of its mistress, talk like her, and dress not much unlike her: why, she would hardly be contented with him, a yeoman, immersed in tree planting, even though he planted them well. "And yet she's a true-hearted girl," he said, thinking of her words about Hintock.

"I must bring matters to a point, and there's an end of it."

When he reached the place of work he found that Marty had come back, and dismissing Creedle he went on planting silently with the girl as before.

"Suppose, Marty," he said after a while, looking at her extended arm, upon which old scratches from briars showed themselves purple in the cold wind, "Suppose you know a person, and want to bring that person to a good understanding with you, do you think a Christmas party of some sort is a warming-up thing, and likely to be useful in hastening on the matter?"

"Is there to be dancing?"

"There might be, certainly."

"Will He dance with Her?"

"Well, yes."

"Then it might bring things to a head,

one way or the other, I won't be the maid to say which."

"It shall be done," said Winterborne, not to her, though he spoke the words quite loudly. And as the day was nearly ended, he added, "Here, Marty, I'll send up a man to plant the rest to-morrow. I've other things to think of just now."

She did not inquire what other things, for she had seen him walking with Grace Melbury. She looked towards the western sky, which was now aglow like some vast foundry wherein new worlds were being cast. Across it the bare bough of a tree stretched horizontally, revealing every twig against the evening fire, and showing in dark profile every beck and movement of three pheasants that were settling themselves down on it in a row to roost.

"It will be fine to-morrow," said Marty, observing them with the vermilion light

of the sun in the pupils of her eyes, "for they are a-croupied down nearly at the end of the bough. If it were going to be stormy they'd squeeze close to the trunk. The weather is almost all they have to think of, isn't it, Mr. Winterborne? and so they must be lighter-hearted than we."

"I dare say they are," said Winterborne.

Before taking a single step in the preparations, Winterborne, with no great hopes, went across that evening to the timber-merchant's to ascertain if Grace and her parents would honour him with their presence. Having first to set his nightly gins in the garden, to catch the rabbits that ate his winter-greens, his call was delayed till just after the rising of the moon, whose rays reached the Hintock houses but fitfully as yet, on account of the trees. Melbury was crossing his yard

on his way to call on some one at the larger village, but he readily turned and walked up and down with the young man.

Giles, in his self-deprecatory sense of living on a much smaller scale than the Melburys did, would not for the world imply that his invitation was to a gathering of any importance. So he put it in the mild form of "Can you come in for an hour when you have done business, the day after to-morrow; and Mrs. and Miss Melbury, if they have nothing more pressing to do?"

Melbury would give no answer at once. "No, I can't tell you to-day," he said. "I must talk it over with the women. As far as I am concerned, my dear Giles, you know I'll come with pleasure. But how do I know what Grace's notions may be? You see, she has been away amongst cultivated folks a good while; and now this acquaint-

ance with Mrs. Charmond—well, I'll ask her. I can say no more."

When Winterborne was gone the timber-merchant went on his way. He knew very well that Grace, whatever her own feelings, would either go or not go, according as he suggested; and his instinct was, for the moment, to suggest staying at home. His errand took him near the church, and the way to his destination was equally easy across the churchyard or outside it. For some reason or other he chose the former way.

The moon was faintly lighting up the grave-stones, and the path, and the front of the building. Suddenly Mr. Melbury paused, turned in upon the grass, and approached a particular headstone, where he read, "In memory of John Winterborne," with the subjoined date and age. It was the grave of Giles's father.

The timber-merchant laid his hand upon the stone, and was humanised. "Jack, my wronged friend!" he said, "I'll be faithful to my plan of making amends to thee."

When he reached home that evening, he said to Grace and Mrs. Melbury, who were working at a little table by the fire, "Giles wants us to go down and spend an hour with him the day after to-morrow; and I'm thinking, that as 'tis Giles who asks us, we'll go."

They assented without demur; and the timber-merchant sent Giles the next morning an answer in the affirmative.

Winterborne, in his modesty, had mentioned no particular hour in his invitation to the Melburys, though he had to the inferior guests, therefore Mr. Melbury and his family, expecting no other people, chose their own time, which chanced to be rather early

in the afternoon, by reason of the somewhat quicker despatch than usual of the timber-merchant's business that day.

They showed their sense of the unimportance of the occasion by walking quite slowly to the house, as if they were merely out for a ramble, and going to nothing special at all; or at most intending to pay a casual call and take a cup of tea.

At this hour stir and bustle pervaded the interior of Winterborne's domicile from cellar to apple-loft. He had planned an elaborate high tea for six o'clock or thereabouts, and a good roaring supper to come on about eleven. Being a bachelor of rather retiring habits, the whole of the preparations devolved upon himself and his trusty man and familiar Robert Creedle, who did everything that required doing, from making Giles's bed to catching moles in his field. He was a survival from the days when

Giles's father held the homestead, and Giles was a playing boy.

These two, with a certain dilatoriness which appertained to both, were now in the heat of preparation in the bakehouse, expecting nobody before six o'clock. Winterborne was standing before the brick oven in his shirt-sleeves, tossing in thorn sprays, and stirring about the blazing mass with a long-handled, three-pronged, Beelzebub kind of fork, the heat shining out upon his streaming face and making his eyes like furnaces; the thorns crackling and sputtering; while Creedle, having ranged the pastry dishes in a row on the table till the oven should be ready, was pressing out the crust of a final apple-pie with a rolling-pin. A great pot boiled on the fire; and through the open door of the back-kitchen a boy was seen seated on the fender, emptying the snuffers and scouring the candle-

sticks, a row of the latter standing upside down on the hob to melt out the grease.

Looking up from the rolling-pin, Creedle saw passing the window first the timber-merchant, in his second-best suit, next Mrs. Melbury in her best silk, and behind them Grace in the fashionable attire which, lately brought home with her from the Continent, she had worn on her visit to Mrs. Charmond's. The eyes of the three had been attracted through the window to the proceedings within by the fierce illumination which the oven threw out upon the operators and their utensils.

"Lord, Lord; if they baint come a'ready!" said Creedle.

"No—hey?" said Giles, looking round aghast; while the boy in the back-ground waved a reeking candlestick in his delight.

As there was no help for it Winterborne

hastily rolled down his shirt-sleeves and went to meet them in the doorway.

"My dear Giles, I see we have made a mistake in the time," said the timber-merchant's wife, her face lengthening with concern.

"Oh, it is not much difference. I hope you'll come in."

"But this means a regular randyvoo!" said Mr. Melbury accusingly, as he glanced round and pointed towards the viands in the bakehouse with his stick.

"Well, yes," said Giles.

"And—not Great Hintock band, and dancing, surely?"

"I told three of 'em they might drop in if they'd nothing else to do," Giles mildly admitted.

"Now, why the name didn't ye tell us afore that 'twas going to be a bouncing kind of thing? How should I know what folk

mean if they don't say? Now, shall we come in, or shall we go home, and come back-along in a couple of hours?"

"I hope you'll stay, if you'll be so good as not to mind, now you are here! I shall have it all right and tidy in a very little time. I ought not to have been so backward; but Creedle is rather slow."

Giles spoke quite anxiously for one of his undemonstrative temperament; for he feared that if the Melburys once were back in their own house they would not be disposed to turn out again.

"'Tis we ought not to have been so forward; that's what 'tis," said Mr. Melbury testily. "Don't keep us here in your best sitting-room; lead on to the bakehouse, man. Now we are here we'll help ye get ready for the rest. Here, mis'ess, take off your things, and help him out in his baking, or he won't get done to-night. I'll finish heating the

oven, and set you free to go and skiver up them ducks." His eye had passed with pitiless directness of criticism into yet remoter recesses of Winterborne's awkwardly built premises, where the aforesaid birds were hanging.

"And I'll help finish the tarts," said Grace cheerfully.

"I don't know about that," said her father. "'Tisn't quite so much in your line as it is in your mother-law's and mine."

"Of course I couldn't let you, Grace!" said Giles, with some distress.

"I'll do it, of course," said Mrs. Melbury, taking off her silk train, hanging it up to a nail, carefully rolling back her sleeves, pinning them to her shoulders, and stripping Giles of his apron for her own use.

So Grace pottered idly about while her father and his wife helped on the pre-

parations. A kindly pity of his household management, which Winterborne saw in her eyes whenever he caught them, depressed him much more than her contempt would have done.

Creedle met Giles at the pump after a while, when each of the others was absorbed in the difficulties of a *cuisine* based on utensils, cupboards, and provisions that were strange to them. He groaned to the young man in a whisper, "This is a bruckle het, maister, I'm much afeard! Who'd ha' thought they'd ha' come so soon!"

The bitter placidity of Winterborne's look hinted the misgivings he did not care to express. "Have you got the celery ready?" he asked quickly.

"Now, that's a thing I never could mind; no, not if you'd pay me in silver and gold!" said Creedle. "And I don't care who the man is, I says that a stick of celery that

isn't scrubbed with the scrubbing-brush, is not clean."

"*Very* well, very well! I'll attend to it. You go and get 'em comfortable indoors."

He hastened to the garden, and soon returned, tossing the stalks to Creedle, who was still in a tragic mood. "If ye'd ha' married, d'ye see, maister," he murmured, "this calamity couldn't have happened to us!"

Everything being at last under way, the oven set, and all done that could insure the supper turning up ready at some time or other, Giles and his friends entered the parlour, where the Melburys again dropped into position as guests, though the room was not nearly so warm and cheerful as the blazing bakehouse. Others now arrived, among them Farmer Cawtree, and the hollow-turner, and tea went off very well.

Grace's disposition to make the best of everything, and to wink at deficiencies in

Winterborne's way of living, was so uniform and persistent that he suspected her of seeing even more deficiencies than he was aware of. That suppressed sympathy which had showed in her face ever since her arrival told him as much too plainly.

"This muddling style of housekeeping is what you've not lately been used to, I suppose?" he said when they were a little apart.

"No; but I like it; it reminds me so pleasantly that everything here in dear old Hintock is just as it used to be. The oil is —not quite nice; but everything else is."

"The oil?"

"On the chairs, I mean; because it gets on one's dress. Still, mine is not a new one."

Giles found that the boy, in his zeal to make things look bright, had smeared the chairs with some greasy furniture-polish, and

refrained from rubbing it dry in order not to diminish the mirror-like effect that the mixture produced as laid on. Giles apologised and scolded the boy; but he felt that the fates were against him.

CHAPTER X.

SUPPER-TIME came, and with it the hot-baked meats from the oven, laid on a snowy cloth fresh from the press, and reticulated with folds as in Flemish Last-Suppers. Creedle and the boy fetched and carried with amazing alacrity; the latter, to mollify his superior, and make things pleasant, expressing his admiration of Creedle's cleverness when they were alone.

"I s'pose the time when you learnt all these knowing things, Mr. Creedle, was when you was in the militia?"

"Well, yes. I seed the world that year

somewhat, certainly, and mastered many arts of strange dashing life. Not but that Giles has worked hard in helping me to bring things to such perfection to-day. 'Giles,' says I, though he's maister. Not that I should call'n maister by rights, for his father growed up side by side with me, as if one mother had twinned us and been our nourishing."

"I s'pose your memory can reach a long way back into history, Mr. Creedle?"

"Oh, yes. Ancient days, when there was battles, and famines, and hang-fairs, and other pomps, seem to me as yesterday. Ah, many's the patriarch I've seed come and go in this parish! There, he's calling for more plates. Lord, why can't 'em turn their plates bottom upward for pudding, as we bucks used to do in former days!"

Meanwhile in the adjoining room Giles was presiding in a half unconscious state.

He could not get over the initial failures in his scheme for advancing his suit; and hence he did not know that he was eating mouthfuls of bread and nothing else, and continually snuffing the two candles next him till he had reduced them to mere glimmers drowned in their own grease. Creedle now appeared with a specially prepared dish, which he served by elevating the little three-legged pot that contained it, and tilting the contents into a platter, exclaiming simultaneously, "Draw back, gentlemen and ladies, please!"

A splash followed. Grace gave a quick involuntary nod and blink, and put her handkerchief to her face.

"Good heavens, what did you do that for, Creedle?" said Giles, sternly, jumping up.

"'Tis how I do it when they baint here, maister," mildly expostulated Creedle, in an aside audible to all the company.

"Well yes—but—" replied Giles. He went over to Grace, and hoped none of it had gone into her eye.

"Oh, no," she said. "Only a sprinkle on my face. It was nothing."

"Kiss it and make it well," gallantly observed Mr. Cawtree.

Miss Melbury blushed.

The timber-merchant replied quickly, "Oh, it is nothing! She must bear these little mishaps." But there could be discerned in his face something which said, "I ought to have foreseen all this, and kept her away."

Giles himself, since the untoward beginning of the feast, had not quite liked to see Grace present. He wished he had not asked such people as Cawtree and the hollow-turner. He had done it, in dearth of other friends, that the room might not appear empty. In his mind's

eye, before the event, they had been the mere background or padding of the scene; but somehow in the reality they were the most prominent personages there.

After supper they played cards; Cawtree and the hollow-turner monopolising the new packs for an interminable game, in which a lump of chalk was incessantly used—a game those two always played wherever they were, taking a solitary candle and going to a private table in a corner with the mien of persons bent on weighty matters. The rest of the company on this account were obliged to put up with old packs for their round game, that had been lying by in a drawer ever since the time that Giles's grandmother was alive. Each card had a great stain in the middle of its back, produced by the touch of generations of damp and excited thumbs, now fleshless in the grave; and the kings

and queens wore a decayed expression of feature, as if they were rather an impecunious dethroned race of monarchs hiding in obscure slums than real regal characters. Every now and then the comparatively few remarks of the players at the round game were harshly intruded on by the measured jingle of Farmer Cawtree and the hollow-turner from the back of the room:—

'And I' will hold' a wa'-ger with you'
That all' these marks' are thirt'-y-two!"

accompanied by rapping strokes with the chalk on the table; then an exclamation, an argument, a dealing of the cards; then the commencement of the rhymes anew.

The timber-merchant showed his feelings by talking with a reserved weight in his words, and by praising the party in a patronising tone, when Winterborne

expressed his fear that he and his were not enjoying themselves.

"Oh yes, yes; pretty much. What handsome glasses those are! I didn't know you had such glasses in the house. Now, Lucy [to his wife], you ought to get some like them for ourselves." And when they had abandoned cards, and Winterborne was talking to Melbury by the fire, it was the timber-merchant who stood with his back to the mantel in a proprietary attitude; from which post of vantage he critically regarded Giles's person, rather as a superficies than as a solid with ideas and feelings inside it; saying, "What a splendid coat that one is you have on, Giles. I can't get such coats. You dress better than I."

After supper there was a dance, the bandsmen from Great Hintock having arrived some time before. Grace had been

away from home so long, and was so drilled in new dances, that she had forgotten the old figures, and hence did not join in the movement. Then Giles felt that all was over. As for her, she was thinking, as she watched the gyrations, of a very different measure that she had been accustomed to tread with a bevy of sylph-like creatures in muslin, in the music-room of a large house, most of whom were now moving in scenes widely removed from this, both as regarded place and character.

A woman she did not know came and offered to tell her fortune with the abandoned cards. Grace assented to the proposal, and the woman told her tale unskilfully, for want of practice, as she declared.

Mr. Melbury was standing by, and exclaimed contemptuously, "Tell her

fortune, indeed! Her fortune has been told by men of science—what do you call 'em? Phrenologists. You can't teach her anything new. She's been too far among the wise ones to be astonished at anything she can hear among us folks in Hintock."

At last the time came for breaking up, Melbury and his family being the earliest to leave, the two card-players still pursuing their game doggedly in the corner, where they had completely covered Giles's mahogany table with chalk scratches. The Melburys walked home, the distance being short and the night clear.

"Well, Giles is a very good fellow," said Mr. Melbury, as they struck down the lane under boughs which formed a black filigree in which the stars seemed set.

"Certainly he is," said Grace, quickly, and in such a tone as to show that he

stood no lower, if no higher, in her regard than he had stood before.

When they were opposite an opening through which, by day, the doctor's house could be seen, they observed a light in one of his rooms, although it was now about two o'clock.

"The doctor is not abed yet," said Mrs. Melbury.

"Hard study, no doubt," said her husband.

"One would think that, as he seems to have nothing to do about here by day, he could at least afford to go to bed early at night. 'Tis astonishing how little we see of him."

Melbury's mind seemed to turn with much relief to the contemplation of Mr. Fitzpiers after the scenes of the evening. "It is natural enough," he replied. "What can a man of that sort find to interest him in Hintock? I don't expect he'll stay here long."

His thoughts then reverted to Giles's party, and when they were nearly home he spoke again, his daughter being a few steps in advance: "It is hardly the line of life for a girl like Grace, after what she's been accustomed to. I didn't foresee that, in sending her to boarding-school, and letting her travel, and what not, to make her a good bargain for Giles, I should be really spoiling her for him. Ah 'tis a thousand pities! But he ought to have her—he ought!"

At this moment the two exclusive, chalk-mark men, having at last really finished their play, could be heard coming along in the rear, vociferously singing a song to march-time, and keeping vigorous step to the same in far-reaching strides—

"She may go, oh!
She may go, oh!
She may go to the devil for me!"

The timber-merchant turned indignantly to Mrs. Melbury. "That's the sort of society we've been asked to meet," he said. "For us old folk it didn't matter; but for Grace—Giles should have known better!"

Meanwhile, in the empty house from which the guests had just cleared out, the subject of their discourse was walking from room to room surveying the general displacement of furniture with no ecstatic feeling; rather the reverse, indeed. At last he entered the bakehouse, and found there Robert Creedle sitting over the embers, also lost in contemplation. Winterborne sat down beside him.

"Well, Robert, you must be tired. You'd better get on to bed."

"Ay, ay, Giles—what do I call ye? Maister, I would say. But 'tis well

to think the day *is* done, when 'tis done."

Winterborne had abstractedly taken the poker, and with a wrinkled forehead was ploughing abroad the wood-embers on the wide hearth, till it was like a vast scorching Sahara, with red-hot boulders lying about everywhere. "Do you think it went off well, Creedle?" he asked.

"The victuals did; that I know. And the drink did; that I steadfastly believe, from the holler sound of the barrels. Good honest drink 'twere, the headiest mead I ever brewed; and the best wine that berries could rise to; and the briskest Horner-and-Cleeves cider ever wrung down, leaving out the spice and sperrits I put into it, while that egg-flip would ha' passed through muslin, so little criddled 'twere. 'Twas good enough to make any king's heart merry—ay, to make his whole carcase smile! Still, I don't deny

I'm afeard some things didn't go well with He and his." Creedle nodded in a direction which signified where the Melburys lived.

"I'm afraid, too, that it was a failure there!"

"If so, 'twere doomed to be so. Not but what that snail might as well have come upon anybody else's plate as hers."

"What snail?"

"Well, maister, there was a little small one upon the edge of her plate when I brought it out; and so it must have been in her few leaves of winter-green."

"How the deuce did a snail get there?"

"That I don't know no more than the dead; but there my gentleman was."

"But, Robert, of all places, that was where he shouldn't have been."

"Well, 'twas his native home, come to that; and where else could we expect him to be? I don't care who the man is, snails and

caterpillars always will lurk in close to the stump of cabbages in that tantalising way."

"He wasn't alive, I suppose?" said Giles, with a shudder on Grace's account.

"Oh, no. He was well boiled. I warrant him well boiled. God forbid that a *live* snail should be seed on any plate of victuals that's served by Robert Creedle. . . . But Lord, there; I don't mind 'em myself—them green ones; for they were born on cabbage, and they've lived on cabbage, so they must be made of cabbage. But she, the close-mouthed little lady, she didn't say a word about it; though 'twould have made good small conversation as to the nater of such creatures; especially as wit ran short among us sometimes."

"Oh, yes—'tis all over!" murmured Giles to himself, shaking his head over the glooming plain of embers, and lining his forehead more than ever. "Do you know, Robert,"

he said, "that she's been accustomed to servants and everything superfine these many years? How, then, could she stand our ways?"

"Well, all I can say is, then, that she ought to hob-and-nob elsewhere. They shouldn't have schooled her so monstrous high, or else bachelor-men shouldn't give randys, or if they do give 'em, only to their own race."

"Perhaps that's true," said Winterborne, rising and yawning a sigh.

CHAPTER XI.

"'Tis a pity—a thousand pities!" her father kept saying next morning at breakfast, Grace being still in her bedroom.

Here was the fact, which could not be disguised: since seeing what an immense change her last twelve months of absence had produced in his daughter, after the heavy sum per annum that he had been spending for several years upon her education, he was reluctant to let her marry Giles Winterborne, indefinitely occupied as woodsman, cider-merchant, apple-farmer, and

what-not, even were she willing to marry him herself.

But how could he, with any self-respect, obstruct Winterborne's suit at this stage, and nullify a scheme he had laboured to promote—was, indeed, mechanically promoting at this moment? A crisis was approaching, mainly as a result of his contrivances; and it would have to be met.

"She will be his wife, if you don't upset her notion that she's bound to accept him as an understood thing," said Mrs. Melbury. "Bless you, she'll soon shake down here in Hintock and be content with Giles's way of living, which he'll improve with what money she'll have from you. 'Tis the strangeness after her genteel life that makes her feel uncomfortable at first. Why, when *I* saw Hintock the first time I thought I never could like it. But things gradually get familiar, and stone floors seem not so very

cold and hard, and the hooting of owls not so very dreadful, and loneliness not so very lonely, after a while."

"Yes, I believe ye. That's just it. I *know* Grace will gradually sink down to our level again, and catch our manners and way of speaking, and feel a drowsy content in being Giles's wife. But I can't bear the thought of dragging down to that old level as promising a piece of maidenhood as ever lived—fit to ornament a palace wi', that I've taken so much trouble to lift up. Fancy her white hands getting redder every day, and her tongue losing its pretty up-country curl in talking, and her bounding walk becoming the regular Hintock shail-and-wamble."

"She may shail; but she'll never wamble," replied his wife decisively.

When Grace came down stairs he complained of her lying in bed so late; not so much moved by a particular objection to that

form of indulgence as discomposed by these other reflections.

The corners of her pretty mouth dropped a little down. "You used to complain with justice when I was a girl," she said; "but I am a woman now, and can judge for myself. . . . . But it is not that; it is something else!" Instead of sitting down she went outside the door.

He was sorry. The petulance that relatives show towards each other is in truth directed against that intangible Cause which has shaped the situation no less for the offenders than the offended, but is too elusive to be discerned and cornered by poor humanity in irritated mood. Melbury followed her. She had rambled on to the paddock, where the white frost lay, making the grass rustle like paper-shavings under their feet; and where starlings in flocks of twenties and thirties were walking about,

watched by a comfortable family of sparrows perched in a line along the string-course of the chimney, and preening themselves in the rays of the sun.

"Come in to breakfast, my girl," he said. "And as to Giles, use your own mind. Whatever pleases you will please me."

"I am promised to him, father; and I cannot help thinking that in honour I ought to marry him, whenever I do marry."

He had a strong suspicion that somewhere in the bottom of her heart there pulsed an old simple indigenous feeling favourable to Giles, though it had become overlaid with implanted tastes. "Very well," he said. "But I hope I sha'n't lose you yet. Come in to breakfast. What did you think of the inside of Hintock House the other day?"

"I liked it much."

"Different from friend Winterborne's?"

She said nothing; but he who knew her

was aware that she meant by her silence to reproach him with drawing cruel comparisons.

"Mrs. Charmond has asked you to come again—when, did you say?"

"She thought Tuesday; but would send the day before to let me know if it suited her." And with this subject upon their lips they entered to breakfast.

Tuesday came, but no message from Mrs. Charmond. Nor was there any on Wednesday. In brief, a fortnight slipped by without a sign, and it looked suspiciously as if Mrs. Charmond was not going further in the direction of "taking up" Grace at present.

Her father reasoned thereon. Immediately after his daughter's two indubitable successes with Mrs. Charmond—the interview in the wood and the visit to the House—she had attended Winterborne's party. No doubt

the out-and-out joviality of that gathering had made it a topic in the neighbourhood, and that every one present as guests had been widely spoken of—Grace, with her exceptional qualities, above all. What then so natural as that Mrs. Charmond should have heard the village news, and become quite disappointed in her expectations of Grace at finding she kept such company?

Full of this *post hoc* argument, Mr. Melbury overlooked the infinite throng of other possible reasons and unreasons for a woman changing her mind. For instance, while knowing that his Grace was attractive, he quite forgot that Mrs. Charmond had also great pretensions to beauty.

So it was settled in his mind that her sudden mingling with the villagers at the unlucky Winterborne's was the cause of her most grievous loss, as he deemed it, in the direction of Hintock House.

"'Tis a great sacrifice!" he would repeat to himself. "I am ruining her for conscience' sake!"

It was one morning later on, while these things were agitating his mind, that something darkened the window just as they finished breakfast. Looking up they saw Giles in person, mounted on horseback, and straining his neck forward, as he had been doing for some time, to catch their attention through the window. Grace had been the first to see him, and involuntarily exclaimed, "There he is—and a new horse!"

On their faces, as they regarded Giles, were written their suspended thoughts and compound feelings concerning him, could he have read them through those old panes. But he saw nothing: his features just now were, for a wonder, lit up with a red smile at some other idea. So they rose from breakfast and went to the door, Grace with

an anxious, wistful manner, her father in a reverie, Mrs. Melbury placid and inquiring.

"We have come out to look at your horse," she said.

It could be seen that he was pleased at their attention, and explained that he had ridden a mile or two to try the animal's paces. "I bought her," he added, with warmth so severely repressed as to seem indifference, "because she has been used to carry a lady."

Still Mr. Melbury did not brighten. Mrs. Melbury said, "And is she quiet?"

Winterborne assured her that there was no doubt of it. "I took care of that. She's fifteen, and very clever for her age."

"Well, get off and come in," said Melbury brusquely; and Giles dismounted accordingly.

This event was the concrete result of Winterborne's thoughts during the past week or two. The want of success with his

evening-party he had accepted in as philosophic a mood as he was capable of; but there had been enthusiasm enough left in him one day at Sherton Abbas market to purchase this mare, which had belonged to a neighbouring parson with several daughters, and was offered him to carry either a gentleman or a lady, and to do odd jobs of carting and agriculture at a pinch. This obliging quadruped seemed to furnish Giles with a means of reinstating himself in Melbury's good opinion as a man of considerateness, by throwing out equestrian possibilities to Grace.

The latter looked at him with intensified interest this morning, in the mood which is altogether peculiar to woman's nature, and which, when reduced into plain words, seems as impossible as the penetrability of matter —that of entertaining a tender pity for the object of her own unnecessary coldness.

The imperturbable poise which marked Winterborne in general was enlivened now by a freshness and animation that set a brightness in his eye and on his cheek. Mrs. Melbury asked him to have some breakfast, and he pleasurably replied that he would join them, not perceiving that they had all finished the meal, and that the note piped by the kettle denoted it to be nearly empty; so that fresh water had to be brought in, and a general renovation of the table carried out. Neither did he know, so full was he of his tender ulterior object in buying that horse, how the morning was slipping away, nor how he was keeping the family from dispersing about their duties.

Then he told throughout the humorous story of the horse's purchase, looking particularly grim at some fixed object in the room, a way he always looked when he narrated anything that amused him. While

he was still thinking of the scene he had described, Grace rose and said, "I have to go and help my mother now, Mr. Winterborne."

"H'm?" he ejaculated, turning his eyes suddenly upon her.

She repeated her words with a slight blush of awkwardness; whereupon Giles, becoming suddenly conscious, too conscious, jumped up, saying, "To be sure, to be sure!" and wished them quickly good morning.

Nevertheless he had upon the whole strengthened his position, with her at least. Time, too, was on his side, for (as her father saw with some regret) already the homeliness of Hintock life was fast becoming effaced from her observation as a singularity; as the momentary strangeness of a face from which we have for years been separated insensibly passes off with renewed

intercourse, and tones itself down into identity with the lineaments of the past.

Thus Mr. Melbury went out of the house still unreconciled to the sacrifice of the gem he had been at such pains in mounting. He fain could hope, in the secret nether chamber of his mind, that something would happen, before the balance of her feeling had quite turned in Winterborne's favour, to relieve his conscience and preserve her on her elevated plane.

CHAPTER XII.

It was a day of rather bright weather for the season. Miss Melbury went out for a morning walk, and her ever-regardful father, having an hour's leisure, offered to walk with her.

The breeze was fresh and quite steady, filtering itself through the denuded mass of twigs without swaying them, but making the point of each ivy-leaf on the trunks scratch its underlying neighbour restlessly. Grace's lips sucked in this native air of hers like milk. They soon reached a place where the wood ran down into a corner,

and went outside it towards comparatively open ground. Having looked round about, they were intending to re-enter the copse when a fox quietly emerged with a dragging brush, trotted past them tamely as a domestic cat, and disappeared amid some dead fern. They walked on, her father merely observing, after watching the animal, "They are hunting somewhere near."

Further up they saw in the mid-distance the hounds running hither and thither, as if the scent lay cold that day. Soon divers members of the hunt appeared on the scene, and it was evident from their movements that the chase had been stultified by general puzzle-headedness as to the whereabouts of the intended victim. In a minute a gentleman farmer panting with Actæonic excitement, rode up to the two pedestrians, and Grace being a few steps in advance he addressed her, asking if she had seen the fox.

"Yes," said she. "I saw him some time ago—just out there."

"Did you cry Halloo?"

"I said nothing."

"Then why the devil didn't you, or get the old buffer to do it for you?" said the man as he cantered away.

She looked rather disconcerted at this reply, and observing her father's face saw that it was quite red.

"He ought not to have spoken to ye like that!" said the old man in the tone of one whose heart was bruised, though it was not by the epithet applied to himself. "And he wouldn't if he had been a gentleman. 'Twas not the language to use to a woman of any niceness. You so well read and cultivated—how could he expect ye to go shouting a view-halloo like a farm tomboy! Hasn't it cost me near a hundred a year to lift you out of all that, so as to show an example to the

neighbourhood of what a woman can be? Grace, shall I tell you the secret of it? 'Twas because *I* was in your company. If a black-coated squire or pa'son had been walking with you instead of me he wouldn't have spoken so."

"No, no, father; there's nothing in you rough or ill-mannered!"

"I tell you it is that! I've noticed, and I've noticed it many times, that a woman takes her colour from the man she's walking with. The woman who looks an unquestionable lady when she's with a polished-up fellow, looks a tawdry imitation article when she's hobbing and nobbing with a homely blade. You sha'n't be treated like that for long, or at least your children sha'n't. You shall have somebody to walk with you who looks more of a dandy than I—please God you shall!"

"But, my dear father," she said, much

distressed, "I don't mind at all. I don't wish for more honour than I already have!"

"A perplexing and ticklish possession is a daughter," according to a Greek poet, and to nobody was one ever more so than to Melbury. As for Grace, she began to feel troubled; she did not perhaps wish, there and then, to unambitiously devote her life to Giles Winterborne, but she was more and more uneasy at being the social hope of the family.

"You would like to have more honour, if it pleases me?" asked her father in continuation of the subject.

Despite her feeling she assented to this. His reasoning had been not without weight upon her.

"Grace," he said, just before they had reached the house, "if it costs me my life you shall marry well! To-day has shown me that whatever a young woman's niceness,

she stands for nothing alone. You shall marry well."

He breathed heavily, and his breathing was caught up by the breeze, which seemed to sigh a soft remonstrance.

She looked calmly at him. "And how about Mr. Winterborne?" she asked. "I mention it, father, not as a matter of sentiment, but as a question of keeping faith."

The timber-merchant's eyes fell for a moment. "I don't know—I don't know," he said. "'Tis a trying strait. Well, well; there's no hurry. We'll wait and see how he gets on."

That evening he called her into his room, a snug little apartment behind the large parlour. It had at one time been part of the bakehouse, with the ordinary oval brick oven in the wall; but Mr. Melbury in turning it into an office had built into the cavity an iron

safe, which he used for holding his private papers. The door of the safe was now open, and his keys were hanging from it.

"Sit down, Grace, and keep me company," he said. "You may amuse yourself by looking over these." He threw out a heap of papers before her.

"What are they?" she asked.

"Securities of various sorts." He unfolded them one by one. "Papers worth so much money each. Now here's a lot of turnpike bonds, for one thing. Would you think that each of these pieces of paper is worth two hundred pounds?"

"No, indeed, if you didn't say so."

"'Tis so then. Now here are papers of another sort. They are for different sums in the three per cents. Now these are Port-Breedy Harbour bonds. We have a great stake in that harbour, you know, because I send off timber there. Open

the rest at your pleasure. They'll interest ye."

"Yes, I will, some day," said she rising.

"Nonsense, open them now. You ought to learn a little of such matters. A young lady of education should not be ignorant of money affairs altogether. Suppose you should be left a widow some day, with your husband's title deeds and investments thrown upon your hands——"

"Don't say that, father. Title deeds; it sounds so vain!"

"It does not. Come to that, I have title deeds myself. There, that piece of parchment represents houses in Sherton Abbas."

"Yes, but—" She hesitated, looked at the fire, and went on in a low voice, "If what has been arranged about me should come to anything, my sphere will be quite a middling one."

"Your sphere ought not to be middling,"

he exclaimed. "You said you never felt more at home, more in your element, anywhere than you did that afternoon with Mrs. Charmond, when she showed you her house, and all her knick-knacks, and made you stay to tea so nicely in her drawing-room, surely you did!"

"Yes, I did say so," admitted Grace.

"Was it true?"

"Yes, I felt so at the time. The feeling is less strong now, perhaps."

"Ah! Now, though you don't see it, your feeling at the time was the right one, because your mind and body were just in full and fresh cultivation, so that going there with her was like meeting like. Since then you've been staying with us, and have fallen back a little, and so you don't feel your place so strongly. Now do as I tell you, and look over these papers, and see what you'll be worth some day. For they'll all be yours, you

know; who have I got to leave 'em to but you? Perhaps when your education is backed up by what these papers represent, and that backed up by another such a set and their owner, men such as that fellow was this morning may think you a little more than a buffer's girl."

So she did as commanded, and opened each of the folded representatives of hard cash that her father put before her. To sow in her heart cravings for social position was obviously his strong desire, though in direct antagonism to a better feeling which had hitherto prevailed with him, and had, indeed, only succumbed that morning during the ramble.

She wished that she was not his worldly hope; the responsibility of such a position was too great. She had made it for herself mainly by her appearance and attractive behaviour to him since her return. "If I

had only come home in a shabby dress, and tried to speak roughly, this might not have happened," she thought. She deplored less the fact, however, than the contingencies.

Her father then insisted upon her looking over his cheque book and reading the counterfoils. This also she obediently did, and at last came to two or three which had been drawn to defray some of the late expenses of her clothes, board, and education.

"I, too, cost a good deal, like the horses and waggons and corn!" she said, looking up sorrily.

"I didn't want you to look at those; I merely meant to give you an idea of my investment transactions. But if you do cost as much as they, never mind. You'll yield a better return."

"Don't think of me like that!" she begged. "A mere chattel."

"A what? Oh, a dictionary word. Well,

as that's in your line I don't forbid it, even if it tells against me," he said good-humouredly. And he looked her proudly up and down.

A few minutes later Grammer Oliver came to tell them that supper was ready, and in giving the information she added incidentally, "So we shall soon lose the mistress of Hintock House for some time, I hear, Maister Melbury. Yes, she's going off to foreign parts to-morrow, for the rest of the winter months; and be-chok'd if I don't wish I could do the same, for my wind-pipe is furred like a flue."

When the old woman had left the room, Melbury turned to his daughter and said, "So, Grace, you've lost your new friend, and your chance of keeping her company and writing her travels is quite gone from ye!"

Grace said nothing.

"Now," he went on emphatically, "'tis

Winterborne's affair has done this. Oh yes, 'tis. So let me say one word. Promise me that you will not meet him again without my knowledge."

"I never do meet him, father, either without your knowledge or with it."

"So much the better. I don't like the look of this at all. And I say it not out of harshness to him, poor fellow, but out of tenderness to you. For how could a woman, brought up delicately as you have been, bear the roughness of a life with him?"

She sighed; it was a sigh of sympathy with Giles, complicated by a sense of the intractability of circumstances.

At that same hour, and almost at that same minute, there was a conversation about Winterborne in progress in the village street, opposite Mr. Melbury's gates, where

Timothy Tangs the elder and Robert Creedle had accidentally met.

The sawyer was asking Creedle if he had heard what was all over the parish, the skin of his face being drawn two ways on the matter—towards brightness in respect of it as news, and towards concern in respect of its bearings.

"Why that poor little lonesome thing, Marty South, is likely to lose her father. He was almost well, but is much worse again; a man all skin and grief he ever were; and if he leave Little Hintock for a better land, won't it make some difference to your good man Winterborne, neighbour Creedle?"

"Can I be a prophet in Hintock?" said Creedle. "I was only shaping of such a thing yesterday in my poor long-seeing way! It is upon John South's life that all Mr. Winterborne's houses hang. If so be

South die and so make his decease, thereupon the law ordains that the houses fall without the least chance of absolution into Her hands at the House. I told him so; but the words of the faithful be only as wind!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE news was true. The life—the one fragile life — that had been used as a measuring-tape of time by law, was in danger of being frayed away. It was the last of a group of lives which had served this purpose, at the end of whose breathings the small homestead occupied by South himself, the larger one of Giles Winterborne, and half a dozen others that had been in the possession of various Hintock village families for the previous hundred years, and were now Winterborne's, would fall in and become part of the encompassing estate.

Winterborne walked up and down his garden next day thinking of the contingency. The sense that the paths he was pacing, the cabbage-plots, the apple-trees, his dwelling, cider-cellar, wring-house, stables, weather-cock, were all slipping away over his head and beneath his feet as if they were painted on a magic lantern slide, was curious. In spite of John South's late indisposition he had not anticipated danger.

Whilst he was here in the garden somebody came to fetch him. It was Marty herself, and she showed her distress by her unconsciousness of a cropped poll.

"Father is still so much troubled in his mind about that tree," she said. "You know the tree I mean, Mr. Winterborne? the tall one in front of the house that he thinks will blow down and kill us. Can you come and see if you can persuade him out of his notion? I can do nothing."

He accompanied her to the cottage, and she conducted him up stairs. John South was pillowed up in a chair between the bed and the window, exactly opposite the latter, towards which his face was turned.

"Ah, neighbour Winterborne," he said. "I wouldn't have minded if my life had only been my own to lose; I don't vallie it in much of itself, and can let it go if 'tis required of me. But to think what 'tis worth to you, a young man rising in life, that do trouble me! It seems a trick of dishonesty towards ye to go off at fifty-five! I could bear up, I know I could, if it were not for the tree—yes, the tree 'tis that's killing me. There he stands, threatening my life every minute that the wind do blow. He'll come down upon us, and squat us dead; and what will ye do when the life on your property is taken away!"

"Never you mind me—that's of no

consequence," said Giles. "Think of yourself alone."

He looked out of the window in the direction of the woodman's gaze. The tree was a tall elm, familiar to him from childhood, which stood at a distance of two-thirds its own height from the front of South's dwelling. Whenever the wind blew, as it did now, the tree rocked, naturally enough; and the sight of its motion, and sound of its sighs, had gradually bred the terrifying illusion in the woodman's mind. Thus he would sit all day, in spite of persuasion, watching its every sway, and listening to the melancholy Gregorian melodies which the air wrung out of it. This fear it apparently was, rather than any organic disease, which was eating away the health of John South.

As the tree waved South waved his head, making it his fugleman with abject obedi-

ence. "Ah, when it was quite a small tree," he said, "and I was a little boy, I thought one day of chopping it off with my hook to make a clothes-line prop with. But I put off doing it, and then I again thought that I would; but I forgot it, and didn't. And at last it got too big, and now 'tis my enemy, and will be the death of me. Little did I think, when I let that sapling stay, that a time would come when it would torment me, and dash me into my grave."

"No, no," said Winterborne and Marty soothingly. But they thought it possible that it might hasten him into his grave, though in another way than by falling.

"I tell you what," added Winterborne; "I'll climb up this afternoon, and shroud off the lower boughs, and then it won't be so heavy, and the wind won't affect it so."

"She won't allow it—a strange woman

come from nobody knows where—she won't have it done."

"You mean Mrs. Charmond? Oh, she doesn't know there's such a tree on her estate. Besides, shrouding is not felling, and I'll risk that much."

He went out, and when afternoon came he returned, took a bill-hook from the shed, and with a ladder climbed into the lower part of the tree, where he began lopping off—"shrouding" as they called it at Hintock—the lowest boughs. Each of these quivered under his attack, bent, cracked, and fell into the hedge. Having cut away the lowest tier he stepped off the ladder, climbed a few steps higher, and attacked those at the next level. Thus he ascended with the progress of his work far above the top of the ladder, cutting away his perches as he went, and leaving nothing but a bare stem below him.

The work was troublesome, for the tree was large. The afternoon wore on, turning dark and misty about four o'clock. From time to time Giles cast his eyes across towards the bedroom-window of South, where, by the flickering fire in the chamber, he could see the old man watching him, sitting motionless with a hand upon each arm of the chair. Beside him sat Marty, also straining her eyes towards the skyey field of his operations.

A curious question suddenly occurred to Winterborne, and he stopped his chopping. He was operating on another person's property to prolong the years of a lease by whose termination that person would considerably benefit. In that aspect of the case he doubted if he ought to go on. On the other hand he was working to save a man's life, and this seemed to empower him to adopt arbitrary measures.

The wind had died down to a calm, and while he was weighing the circumstances he saw coming along the road through the increasing mist a figure which, indistinct as it was, he knew well. It was Grace Melbury, on her way out from the house, probably for a short evening walk before dark. He arranged himself for a greeting from her, since she could hardly avoid passing immediately beneath the tree.

But Grace, though she looked up and saw him, was just at that time too full of the words of her father to give him any encouragement. The years-long regard that she had had for him was not kindled by her return into a flame of sufficient brilliancy to make her rebellious. Thinking that she might not see him, he cried, "Miss Melbury, here I am."

She turned up her head again. She

was near enough to see the expression of his face, and the nails in his soles, silver-bright with constant walking. But she did not reply; and dropping her glance again went on.

Winterborne's face grew strange; he mused, and proceeded automatically with his work. Grace meanwhile had not gone far. She had reached a gate, whereon she had leant sadly, and whispered to herself, "What shall I do?"

A sudden fog came on, and she curtailed her walk, passing under the tree again on her return. Again he addressed her. "Grace," he said, when she was close to the trunk, "speak to me." She gazed straight up, shook her head without stopping, and went on to a little distance, where she stood observing him from behind the hedge.

Her coldness had been kindly meant.

If it was to be done, she had said to herself, it should be begun at once. While she stood out of observation Giles seemed to recognise her meaning; with a sudden start he worked on, climbing higher into the sky, and cutting himself off more and more from all intercourse with the sublunary world. At last he had worked himself so high up the elm, and the mist had so thickened, that he could only just be discerned as a dark grey spot on the light grey zenith; he would have been altogether out of notice but for the stroke of his bill-hook, and the flight of a bough downward, and its crash upon the hedge at intervals.

It was not to be done thus, after all: plainness and candour were best. She went back a third time; he did not see her now, and she lingeringly gazed up at his unconscious figure, loth to put an end

to any kind of hope that might live on in him still.

"Giles—Mr. Winterborne," she said.

His work so rustled the boughs that he did not hear.

"Mr. Winterborne!" she cried again, and this time he stopped, looked down, and replied.

"My silence just now was not accident," she said in an unequal voice. "My father says it is better for us not to think too much of that—engagement, or understanding, between us, that you know of. I, too, think that upon the whole he is right. But we are friends, you know, Giles, and almost relations."

"Very well," he answered, in an enfeebled voice which barely reached down the tree. "I have nothing to say, Grace—I cannot say anything till I've thought a while!"

She added, with emotion in her tone, "For myself I would have married you—some day—I think. But I give way, for I see it would be unwise."

He made no reply, but sat back upon a bough, placed his elbow in a fork, and rested his head upon his hand. Thus he remained till the fog and the night had completely inclosed him from her view.

Grace heaved a divided sigh, with a tense pause between, and moved onward, her heart feeling uncomfortably big and heavy, and her eyes wet. Had Giles, instead of remaining still, immediately come down from the tree to her, would she have continued in that filial, acquiescent frame of mind which she had announced to him as final? If it be true, as women themselves have declared, that one of their sex is never so much inclined to throw in her lot with a man for good and

all as five minutes after she has told him such a thing cannot be, the probabilities are that something might have been done by the appearance of Winterborne on the ground beside Grace. But he continued motionless and silent in that gloomy Niflheim or fog-land which involved him, and she proceeded on her way.

The spot seemed now to be quite deserted. The light from South's window made rays on the fog, but did not reach the tree. A quarter of an hour passed, and all was blackness overhead. Giles had not yet come down.

Then the tree seemed to shiver, then to heave a sigh: a movement was audible, and Winterborne dropped almost noiselessly to the ground. He had thought the matter out; and having returned the ladder and bill-hook to their places, pursued his way homeward. He would not allow this

incident to affect his outer conduct any more than the danger to his leaseholds had done, and went to bed as usual.

Two simultaneous troubles do not always make a double trouble; and thus it came to pass that Giles's practical anxiety about his houses, which would have been enough to keep him awake half the night at any other time, was displaced and not reinforced by his sentimental trouble about Grace Melbury. This severance was in truth more like a burial of her than a rupture with her, but he did not realise so much at present; even when he arose in the morning he felt quite moody and stern; as yet the second note in the gamut of such emotions, a distracting regret for his loss, had not made itself heard.

A load of oak timber was to be sent away that morning to a builder whose works were in a town many miles off. The trunks

were chained down to a heavy timber carriage with enormous red wheels, and four of the most powerful of Melbury's horses were harnessed in front to draw them.

The horses wore their bells that day. There were sixteen to the team, carried on a frame above each animal's shoulders, and tuned to scale, so as to form two octaves, running from the highest note on the right or off-side of the leader to the lowest on the left or near-side of the shaft-horse. Melbury was among the last to retain horse-bells in that neighbourhood; for living at Little Hintock, where the lanes yet remained as narrow as before the days of turnpike roads, these sound-signals were still as useful to him and his neighbours as they had ever been in former times. Much backing was saved in the course of a year by the warning notes they cast ahead; moreover the tones of all the teams in the district being known

to the carters of each, they could tell a long way off on a dark night whether they were about to encounter friends or strangers.

The fog of the previous evening still lingered so heavily over the woods that the morning could not penetrate the trees till long after its time. The load being a ponderous one, the lane crooked, and the air so thick, Winterborne set out, as he often did, to accompany the team as far as the corner, where it would turn into a wider road.

So they rumbled on, shaking the foundations of the roadside cottages by the weight of their progress, the sixteen bells chiming harmoniously over all, till they had risen out of the valley and were descending towards the more open route, the sparks rising from their creaking skid and nearly setting fire to the dead leaves alongside.

Then occurred one of the very incidents

against which the bells were an endeavour to guard. Suddenly there beamed into their eyes, quite close to them, the two lamps of a carriage, haloed by the fog. Its approach had been quite unheard by reason of their own noise. The carriage was a covered one, while behind it could be discerned another vehicle laden with luggage.

Winterborne went to the head of the team, and heard the coachman telling the carter that he must turn back. The carter declared that this was impossible.

"You can turn if you unhitch your string-horses," said the coachman.

"It is much easier for you to turn than for us," said Winterborne. "We've five ton of timber on these wheels if we've an ounce."

"But I've another carriage with luggage at my back."

Winterborne admitted the strength of the

argument. "But even with that," he said, "you can back better than we. And you ought to, for you could hear our bells half a mile off."

"And you could see our lights."

"We couldn't, because of the fog."

"Well, our time's precious," said the coachman haughtily. "You are only going to some trumpery little village or other in the neighbourhood, while we are going straight to Italy."

"Driving all the way, I suppose?" said Winterborne sarcastically.

The contention continued in these terms till a voice from the interior of the carriage inquired what was the matter. It was a lady's voice.

She was briefly informed of the timber people's obstinacy; and then Giles could hear her telling the footman to direct the timber people to turn their horses' heads.

The message was brought, and Winterborne sent the bearer back to say that he begged the lady's pardon, but that he could not do as she requested; that though he would not assert it to be impossible, it was impossible by comparison with the slight difficulty to her party to back their light carriages. As fate would have it, the incident with Grace Melbury on the previous day made Giles less gentle than he might otherwise have shown himself, his confidence in the sex being rudely shaken.

In fine, nothing could move him, and the carriages were compelled to back till they reached one of the sidings or turn-outs constructed in the bank for the purpose. Then the team came on ponderously, and the clanging of its sixteen bells as it passed the discomfited carriages tilted up against the bank, lent a particularly triumphant tone to the team's progress—a tone which, in

point of fact, did not at all attach to its conductor's feelings.

Giles walked behind the timber, and just as he had got past the yet stationary carriages he heard a soft voice say, "Who is that rude man? Not Melbury?" The sex of the speaker was so prominent in the voice that Winterborne felt a pang of regret.

"No, ma'am. A younger man, in a smaller way of business in Little Hintock. Winterborne is his name."

Thus they parted company. "Why, Mr. Winterborne," said the waggoner when they were out of hearing, "that was she—Mrs. Charmond! Who'd ha' thought it? What in the world can a woman that does nothing be cock-watching out here at this time o' day for? Oh, going to Italy—yes, to be sure, I heard she was going abroad. She can't endure the winter here."

Winterborne was vexed at the incident; the more so that he knew Mr. Melbury, in his adoration of Hintock House, would be the first to blame him, if it became known. He accompanied the load to the end of the lane, and then turned back with an intention to call at South's to learn the result of the experiment of the preceding evening.

It chanced that a few minutes before this time Grace Melbury, who now rose soon enough to breakfast with her father, in spite of the unwontedness of the hour, had been commissioned by him to make the same inquiry at South's. Marty had been standing at the door when Miss Melbury arrived. Almost before the latter had spoken, Mrs. Charmond's carriages, released from the obstruction up the lane, came bowling along, and the two girls turned to regard the spectacle.

Mrs. Charmond did not see them, but

there was sufficient light for them to discern her outline between the carriage windows. A noticeable feature in her *tournure* was a magnificent mass of braided locks.

"How well she looks this morning!" said Grace, forgetting Mrs. Charmond's slight in her generous admiration. "Her hair so becomes her worn that way. I have never seen any more beautiful!"

"Nor have I, miss," said Marty drily, and unconsciously stroking her crown.

Grace watched the carriages with lingering regret till they were out of sight. She then learnt of Marty that South was no better. Before she had come away Winterborne approached the house, but seeing that one of the two girls standing on the door-step was Grace he suddenly turned back again, and sought the shelter of his own home till she should have gone away.

CHAPTER XIV.

The encounter with the carriages forced Winterborne's mind back again to the houses of his which would fall into Mrs. Charmond's possession in the event of South's death. He marvelled what could have induced his ancestors at Hintock, and other village people, to exchange their old copyholds for life-leases. And he was much struck with his father's negligence in not insuring South's life.

After breakfast he went up stairs, turned over his bed, and drew out a flat canvas bag which lay between the mattress and

the sacking. In this he kept his leases, which had remained there unopened ever since his father's death. It was the usual hiding-place among rural lifeholders for such documents. Winterborne sat down on the bed, and looked them over. They were ordinary leases for three lives, which a member of the South family, some fifty years before this time, had accepted of the lord of the manor in lieu of certain copyholds and other rights, in consideration of having the dilapidated houses rebuilt by the said lord. They had come into his father's possession chiefly through his mother, who was a South.

Pinned to the corner of one of the indentures was a letter, which Winterborne had never seen before. It bore a remote date, the handwriting being that of some solicitor or agent, and the signature the landholder's. It was to the effect that at

any time before the last of the stated lives should drop Mr. John Winterborne, or his representative, should have the privilege of adding his own and his son's life to the life remaining on payment of a merely nominal sum ; the concession being in consequence of the elder Winterborne's consent to demolish one of the houses and relinquish its site, which stood at an awkward corner of the lane, and impeded the way.

The house had been pulled down years before. Why Giles's father had not taken advantage of his privilege to insert his own and his son's lives it was impossible to say. In all likelihood death alone had hindered him in the execution of that project, the elder Winterborne having been a man who took much pleasure in dealing with house property, in his small way.

Since one of the Souths still survived there was not much doubt that Giles could

do what his father had left undone, as far as his own life was concerned. This possibility cheered him much; for by those houses hung many things. Melbury's doubt of the young man's fitness to be the husband of Grace had been based not a little on the precariousness of his holdings in Little and Great Hintock. He resolved to attend to the business at once, the fine for renewal being a sum that he could easily muster.

His scheme, however, could not be carried out in a day; and meanwhile he would run up to South's as he had intended to do, to learn the result of the experiment with the tree.

Marty met him at the door. "Well, Marty," he said; and was surprised to read in her face that the case was not so hopeful as he had imagined.

"I am sorry for your labour," she said.

"It is all lost. He says the tree seems taller than ever."

Winterborne looked round at it. Taller the tree certainly did seem, the gauntness of its now naked stem being more marked than before.

"It quite terrified him when he first saw what you had done to it this morning," she added. "He declares it will come down upon us and cleave us, like 'the sword of the Lord and of Gideon.'"

"Well; can I do anything else?" asked he.

"The doctor says the tree ought to be cut down."

"Oh—you've had the doctor?"

"I didn't send for him. Mrs. Charmond before she left heard that father was ill, and told him to attend him at her expense."

"That was very good of her. And he says it ought to be cut down. We mustn't

cut it down without her knowledge, I suppose."

He went up stairs. There the old man sat, staring at the now gaunt tree as if his gaze were frozen on to its trunk. Unluckily the tree waved afresh by this time, a wind having sprung up and blown the fog away; and his eyes turned with its wavings.

They heard footsteps—a man's, but of a lighter weight than usual. "There is Dr. Fitzpiers again," she said, and descended. Presently his tread was heard on the naked stairs.

Mr. Fitzpiers entered the sick chamber as a doctor is wont to do on such occasions, and pre-eminently when the room is that of the humble cottager; looking round towards the patient with that preoccupied gaze which so plainly reveals that he has well-nigh forgotten all about the case and the circumstances since he dismissed them

from his mind at his last exit from the same apartment. He nodded to Winterborne, who had not seen him since his peep over the hedge at Grace, recalled the case to his thoughts, and went leisurely on to where South sat.

Edred Fitzpiers was, on the whole, a finely formed, handsome man. His eyes were dark and impressive, and beamed with the light either of energy or of susceptivity —it was difficult to say which; it might have been a little of both. That quick, glittering, empirical eye, sharp for the surface of things if for nothing beneath, he had not. But whether his apparent depth of vision were real, or only an artistic accident of his corporeal moulding, nothing but his deeds could reveal.

His face was rather soft than stern, charming than grand, pale than flushed; his nose—if a sketch of his features be *de*

rigueur for a person of his pretensions—was artistically beautiful enough to have been worth modelling by any sculptor not over busy, and was hence devoid of those knotty irregularities which often mean power; while the classical curve of his mouth was not without a looseness in its close. Either from his readily appreciative mien, or his reflective manner, his presence bespoke the philosopher rather than the dandy—an effect which was helped by the absence of trinkets or other trivialities from his attire, though this was more finished and up to date than is usually the case among rural practitioners.

Strict people of the highly respectable class, knowing a little about him by report, said that he seemed likely to err rather in the possession of too many ideas than too few; to be a dreamy 'ist of some sort, or too deeply steeped in some false kind of

ism. However this may be, it will be seen that he was undoubtedly a somewhat rare kind of gentleman and doctor to have descended, as from the clouds, upon Little Hintock.

"This is an extraordinary case," he said at last to Winterborne, after examining South by conversation, look, and touch, and learning that the craze about the elm was stronger than ever. "Come down stairs and I'll tell you what I think."

They accordingly descended, and the doctor continued, "The tree must be cut down, or I won't answer for his life."

"'Tis Mrs. Charmond's tree; and I suppose we must get permission?" said Giles.

"Oh—never mind whose tree it is—what's a tree beside a life! Cut it down. I have not the honour of knowing Mrs. Charmond as yet; but I am disposed to risk that much with her."

"'Tis timber," rejoined Giles. "They never fell a stick about here without its being marked first, either by her or the agent."

"Then we'll inaugurate a new era forthwith. How long has he complained of the tree?" asked the doctor of Marty.

"Weeks and weeks, sir. The shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave. Others have been like it afore in Hintock."

They could hear South's voice up stairs. "Oh, he's rocking this way; he must come! And then my poor life, that's worth houses upon houses, will be squashed out o' me. Oh! Oh!"

"That's how he goes on," she added. "And he'll never look anywhere else but

out of the window, and scarcely have the curtains drawn."

"Down with it, then, and hang Mrs. Charmond," said Mr. Fitzpiers. "The best plan will be to wait till the evening, when it is dark, or early in the morning before he is awake, so that he doesn't see it fall, for that would terrify him worse than ever. Keep the blind down till I come, and then I'll assure him, and show him that his trouble is over."

The doctor departed, and they waited till the evening. When it was dusk, and the curtains drawn, Winterborne directed a couple of woodmen to bring a cross-cut saw; and the tall threatening tree was soon nearly off at its base. Next morning, before South was awake, they went and lowered it cautiously, in a direction away from the cottage. It was a business difficult to do quite silently, but it was done at last, and

the elm of the same birth-year as the woodman's lay stretched upon the ground. The weakest idler that passed could now set foot on marks formerly made in the upper forks by the shoes of adventurous climbers only; once inaccessible nests could be examined microscopically; and on swaying extremities where birds alone had perched the bystanders sat down.

As soon as it was broad daylight the doctor came, and Winterborne entered the house with him. Marty said that her father was wrapped up and ready, as usual, to be put into his chair. They ascended the stairs, and soon seated him. He began at once to complain of the tree, and the danger to his life, and Winterborne's house property in consequence.

The doctor signalled to Giles, who went and drew back the printed cotton curtains. "'Tis gone, see," said Mr. Fitzpiers.

As soon as the old man saw the vacant patch of sky in place of the branched column so familiar to his gaze, he sprang up, speechless; his eyes rose from their hollows till the whites showed all round, he fell back, and a bluish whiteness overspread him.

Greatly alarmed they put him on the bed. As soon as he came a little out of his fit, he gasped, "Oh, it is gone!—where—where?"

His whole system seemed paralysed by amazement. They were thunderstruck at the result of the experiment, and did all they could. Nothing seemed to avail. Giles and Fitzpiers went and came, but uselessly. He lingered through the day, and died that evening as the sun went down.

"D——d if my remedy hasn't killed him!" murmured the doctor.

Dismissing the subject he went down

stairs. When going out of the house he turned suddenly to Giles and said, "Who was that young lady we looked at over the hedge the other day?"

Giles shook his head, as if he did not remember.

CHAPTER XV.

When Melbury heard what had happened he seemed much moved, and walked thoughtfully about the premises. On South's own account he was genuinely sorry; and on Winterborne's he was the more grieved in that this catastrophe had so closely followed the somewhat harsh suggestion to Giles to draw off from his daughter.

He was quite angry with circumstances for so heedlessly inflicting on Giles a second trouble when the needful one inflicted by himself was all that the proper order of events demanded. "I told Giles's father

when he came into those houses not to spend too much money on lifehold property held neither for his own life nor his son's," he exclaimed; "but he wouldn't listen to me. And now Giles has to suffer for it."

"Poor Giles!" murmured Grace.

"Now, Grace, between us two, it is very, very remarkable. It is almost as if I had foreseen this; and I am thankful for your escape, though I am sincerely sorry for Giles. Had we not dismissed him already we could hardly have found it in our hearts to dismiss him now. So I say, be thankful. I'll do all I can for him as a friend; but as a pretender to the position of my son-in-law, that can never be thought of more."

And yet at that very moment the impracticability to which poor Winterborne's suit had been reduced was touching Grace's heart to a warmer sentiment on his behalf than she had felt for years concerning him.

He, meanwhile, was sitting down alone in the familiar house which had ceased to be his; taking a calm if somewhat dismal survey of affairs. The pendulum of the clock bumped every now and then against one side of the case in which it swung, as the muffled drum to his worldly march. Looking out of the window he could perceive that a paralysis had come over Creedle's occupation of manuring the garden, owing, obviously, to a conviction that they might not be living there long enough to profit by next season's crop.

He looked at the leases again and the letter attached. There was no doubt that he had lost his houses by an accident which might easily have been circumvented if he had known the true conditions of his holding. The time for performance had now lapsed in strict law; but why should not the intention be considered by the landholder when

she became aware of the circumstances, and his moral right to retain the holdings for the term of his life be conceded?

His heart sank within him when he perceived that, despite all the legal reciprocities and safeguards prepared and written, the upshot of the matter was that it depended upon the mere caprice of the woman he had met the day before in such an unfortunate way, whether he was to possess his houses for life or no.

While he was sitting and thinking a step came to the door, and Melbury appeared, looking very sorry for his position. Winterborne welcomed him by a word and a nod and went on with his examination of the parchments. His visitor sat down.

"Giles," he said, "this is very awkward, and I am sorry for it. What are you going to do?"

Giles informed him of the real state of

affairs, and how barely he had missed availing himself of his chance of renewal.

"What a misfortune! Why was this neglected? Well, the best thing you can do is to write and tell her all about it, and throw yourself upon her generosity."

"I would rather not," murmured Giles.

"But you must," said Melbury.

In short, he argued so cogently that Giles allowed himself to be persuaded, and the letter to Mrs. Charmond was written and sent to Hintock House, whence, as he knew, it would at once be forwarded to her.

Melbury, feeling that he had done so good an action in coming as to extenuate his previous arbitrary conduct, went home; and Giles was left alone to the suspense of waiting for a reply from the divinity who shaped the ends of the Hintock population. By this time all the villagers knew of the ircumstances, and being well-nigh like one

family a keen interest was the result all round.

Everybody thought of Giles; nobody thought of Marty. Had any of them looked in upon her during those moonlight nights which preceded the burial of her father they would have seen the girl absolutely alone in the house with the dead man. Her own chamber being nearest the stairs, the coffin had been placed there for convenience; and at a certain hour of the night, when the moon arrived opposite the window, its beams streamed across the still profile of South, sublimed by the august presence of death, and onward a few feet further upon the face of his daughter, lying in her little bed in the stillness of a repose almost as dignified as that of her companion—the repose of a guileless soul that had nothing more left on earth to lose, except a life which she did not over-value.

South was buried, and a week passed, and Winterborne watched for a reply from Mrs. Charmond. Melbury was very sanguine as to its tenour; but Winterborne had not told him of the encounter with her carriage, when, if ever he had heard an affronted tone on a woman's lips, he had heard it on hers.

The postman's time for passing was just after Melbury's men had assembled in the spar-house; and Winterborne, who when not busy on his own account would lend assistance there, used to go out into the lane every morning and meet the postman at the end of one of the green rides through the hazel-copse, in the straight stretch of which his laden figure could be seen a long way off. Grace also was very anxious; more anxious than her father, more perhaps than Winterborne himself. This anxiety led her into the spar-house on some pretext

or other almost every morning whilst they were awaiting the answer.

Eleven times had Winterborne gone to that corner of the ride, and looked up its long straight slope through the wet greys of winter dawn. But though the postman's bowed figure loomed in view pretty regularly, he brought nothing for Giles. On the twelfth day the man of missives, while yet in the extreme distance, held up his hand, and Winterborne saw a letter in it. He took it into the spar-house before he broke the seal, and those who were there gathered round him while he read, Grace looking in at the door.

The letter was not from Mrs. Charmond herself, but from her agent at Sherton. Winterborne glanced it over and looked up.

"It's all over," he said.

"Ah!" said they all together.

"Her lawyer is instructed to say that Mrs.

Charmond sees no reason for disturbing the natural course of things, particularly as she contemplates pulling the houses down," he said quietly.

"Only think of that!" said several.

Winterborne had turned away, and said vehemently to himself, "Then let her pull 'em down, and be d——d to her!"

Creedle looked at him with a face of seven sorrows, saying, "Ah, 'twas that sperrit that lost 'em for ye, maister!"

Winterborne subdued his feelings, and from that hour, whatever they were, kept them entirely to himself. Yet whatever the value of taciturnity to a man among strangers, it is apt to express more than talkativeness when he dwells among friends. The countryman, who is obliged to judge the time of day from changes in external nature, sees a thousand successive tints and traits in the landscape which are never discerned by him

who hears the regular chime of a clock, because they are never in request. In like manner do we use our eyes on our taciturn comrade. The infinitesimal movement of muscle, curve, hair, and wrinkle, which when accompanied by a voice goes unregarded, is watched and translated in the lack of it, till virtually the whole surrounding circle of familiars is charged with the reserved one's moods and meanings.

So with Winterborne and his neighbours after his stroke of ill-luck. He held his tongue; and they observed him, and knew that he was discomposed.

Encountering Melbury one day, his manner was that of a man who abandoned all claims. "I am glad to meet ye, Mr. Melbury," he said, in a low voice, whose quality he endeavoured to make as practical as possible. "I am afraid I shall not after this be able to keep that mare I bought for the use of—a

possible wife, and as I don't care to sell her, I should like, if you don't object, to give her to Miss Melbury. The horse is very quiet, and would be quite safe for her."

Mr. Melbury was rather affected at this. "You sha'n't hurt your pocket like that on our account, Giles. Grace shall have the horse, but I'll pay you what you gave for her, and any expense you may have been put to for her keep."

He would not hear of any other terms, and thus it was arranged. They were now opposite Melbury's house, and the timber-merchant pressed Winterborne to enter, Grace being out of the way.

"Pull round the settle, Giles," said the timber-merchant as soon as they were within. "I should like to have a serious talk with you."

Thereupon he put the case to Winterborne frankly, and in quite a friendly way. He

declared that he did not like to be hard on a man when he was in difficulty ; but he really did not see how Winterborne could marry his daughter now, without even a house to take her to.

Giles quite acquiesced in the awkwardness of his situation, but from a momentary gasp of hope—a feeling that he would like to know Grace's mind from her own lips, he did not speak out positively even then. He accordingly departed somewhat abruptly, and went home to consider whether he would seek to bring about a meeting with her.

In the evening while he sat quietly pondering he fancied that he heard a scraping on the wall outside his house. The boughs of a monthly rose which grew there made such a noise sometimes, but as no wind was stirring he knew that it could not be the rose-tree. He took up the candle and went out. Nobody was near. As he turned the light

flickered on the whitewashed rough-cast of the front, and he saw words written thereon in charcoal, which he read as follows :—

"Oh, Giles, you've lost your dwelling-place,
And therefore, Giles, you'll lose your Grace."

Giles went indoors. He had his suspicions as to the scrawler of those lines, but he could not be sure. What filled his heart far more than curiosity about their authorship was a terrible belief that they were turning out to be true, try to regain Grace as he might. They decided the question for him. He sat down and wrote a formal note to Melbury, stating that he shared to the full Melbury's view of his own and his daughter's promise, made some years before ; he wished that it should be considered as cancelled, and they themselves quite released from any obligation on account of it.

Having fastened up this their plenary

absolution, he determined to get it out of his hands, and have done with it; to which end he went off to Melbury's at once. It was now so late that the family had all retired; he crept up to the house, thrust the note under the door, and stole away as silently as he had come.

Melbury himself was the first to rise the next morning, and when he had read the letter his relief was great, for he knew that Giles could have made matters unpleasant if he had chosen to work upon Grace. "Very honourable of Giles, very honourable," he kept saying to himself. "I shall not forget him. Now to keep her up to her own true level."

It happened that Grace went out for an early ramble that morning, and to go in her customary direction she could not avoid passing Winterborne's house. The morning sun was shining flat upon its white surface, and

the words, which still remained, were immediately visible to her. She read them. Her face flushed to crimson. She could see Giles and Creedle talking together at the back; the charred spar-gad with which the lines had been written lay on the ground beneath the wall. Feeling pretty sure that Winterborne would observe her action, she quickly went up to the wall, rubbed out "lose" and inserted "keep" in its stead. Then she made the best of her way home without looking behind her. Giles could draw an inference now if he chose.

There could not be the least doubt that gentle Grace was warming to more sympathy with, and interest in, Winterborne than ever she had done while he was her promised lover; that since his misfortune those social shortcomings of his, which contrasted so awkwardly with her later experiences of life, had become obscured by the generous

revival of an old romantic attachment to him. Though mentally trained and tilled into foreignness of view, as compared with her youthful time, Grace was not an ambitious girl, and might, if left to herself, have declined upon Winterborne without much discontent. Her feelings just now were so far from latent that the writing on the wall had quickened her to an unusual rashness.

Having returned from her walk she sat at breakfast silently. When her stepmother had left the room she said to her father, "I have made up my mind that I should like my engagement to Giles to continue."

Melbury looked much surprised.

"Nonsense," he said sharply. "You don't know what you are talking about. Look here."

He handed across to her the letter received from Giles.

She read it and said no more. Could he have seen her write on the wall? She did not know. Fate, it seemed, would have it this way, and there was nothing to do but to acquiesce.

It was a few hours after this that Winterborne who, curiously enough, had *not* perceived Grace writing, was clearing away the tree from the front of South's late dwelling. He saw Marty standing in her doorway, a slim figure in meagre black, almost without womanly contours as yet. He went up to her and said:

"Marty, why did you write that on my wall last night? It *was* you, you know."

"Because it was the truth."

"Having prophesied one thing, why did you alter it to another? Your predictions can't be worth much."

"I have not altered it."

"But you have."

"No."

"It is altered. Go and see."

She went, and read that in spite of losing his dwelling-place he would *keep* his Grace. Marty came back surprised.

"Well," she said. "Who can have made such nonsense of it?"

"Who indeed?" said he.

"I have rubbed it all out, as the point of it is quite gone."

"You'd no business to rub it out; I meant to let it stay a little longer."

"Some idle boy altered it no doubt," she murmured.

As this seemed very probable Winterborne said no more, and dismissed the matter from his mind.

From this day of his life onward for a considerable time Winterborne, though not absolutely out of his house as yet, retired into the background of human life and

action thereabout—a feat not particularly difficult of performance anywhere when the doer has the assistance of a lost prestige. Grace, thinking that Winterborne saw her write, made no further sign, and the frail barque of fidelity that she had thus timidly launched was stranded and lost.

CHAPTER XVI.

Dr. Fitzpiers lived on the slope of the hill, in a house of much less pretension, both as to architecture and as to magnitude, than the timber merchant's. The latter had without doubt been once the manorial residence appertaining to the snug and modest domain of Little Hintock, of which the boundaries were now lost by its absorption into the adjoining estate of Mrs. Charmond. Though the Melburys themselves were unaware of the fact, there was every reason to believe—at least so the parson said—that the owners of that little

manor had been Melbury's own ancestors, the family name occurring in numerous documents relating to transfers of land about the time of the civil wars.

Mr. Fitzpiers's dwelling, on the contrary, was small, box-like, and comparatively modern. It had been occupied, and was in part occupied still, by a retired farmer and his wife, who, on the surgeon's arrival in quest of a home, had accommodated him by receding from their front rooms into the kitchen quarter, whence they administered to his wants, and emerged at regular intervals to receive from him a not unwelcome addition to their income.

The cottage and its garden were so regular in their plan that they might have been laid out by a Dutch designer of the time of William and Mary. In a low, dense hedge was a door, over which the hedge formed an arch, and from the inside of the

door a straight path, bordered with clipped box, ran up the slope of the garden to the porch, which was exactly in the middle of the house-front, with two windows on each side. Right and left of the path were first a bed of gooseberry-bushes; next of currant; next of raspberry; next of strawberry; next of old-fashioned flowers; at the corners opposite the porch being spheres of box resembling a pair of school globes. Over the roof of the house could be seen the orchard on yet higher ground, and behind the orchard the forest-trees, reaching up to the crest of the hill.

Opposite the garden door and visible from the parlour window was a swing-gate leading into a field, across which there ran a footpath. The swing-gate had just been re-painted, and on one fine afternoon, before the paint was dry, and while gnats stuck dying thereon, the surgeon was standing in

his room abstractedly looking out at the different pedestrians who passed along that route. Being of a philosophical stamp he perceived that the character of each of these travellers exhibited itself in a somewhat amusing manner by his or her method of handling the gate.

As regarded the men there was not much variety: they gave the gate a kick and passed through. The women were more contrasting. To them the sticky wood work was a barricade, a disgust, a menace, a treachery, as the case might be.

The first that he noticed was a bouncing young woman with her skirts tucked up and her hair wild. Fitzpiers knew her as Suke Damson. She grasped the gate without looking, giving it a supplementary push with her shoulder, when the white imprint drew from her an exclamation in language not too refined. She went to the green bank,

sat down and rubbed herself in the grass, cursing the while.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the doctor.

The next was a girl with her hair cropped short, in whom the surgeon recognised the daughter of his late patient, the woodman South. Moreover a black bonnet that she wore by way of mourning unpleasantly reminded him that he had ordered a tree felling which had caused her parent's death. She walked in thought, and not recklessly; but her preoccupation led her to grasp without suspicion the bar of the gate, and touch it with her arm. Fitzpiers felt sorry that she should have soiled that new black frock, poor as it was, for it was probably her only one. She looked at her hand and arm, seemed but little surprised, wiped off the disfigurement with an unmoved face, and as if without abandoning her original thoughts. Thus she went on her way.

Then there came over the green quite a different sort of personage. She walked as delicately as if she had been bred in town, and as firmly as if she had been bred in the country; she seemed one who dimly knew her appearance to be attractive, but who retained some of the charm of ignorance by forgetting self in a general pensiveness. She approached the gate.

To let such a creature touch it even with the tip of her glove was to Fitzpiers almost like letting her proceed to tragical self-destruction. He jumped up and looked for his hat, but was unable to find the right one; glancing again out of the window he saw that he was too late. Having come up she looked at the gate, picked up a little stick, and using it as a bayonet pushed open the obstacle without touching it at all.

He steadily watched her out of sight, recognising her as the very young lady

whom he had seen once before and been unable to identify. Whose could that emotional face be? All the others he had seen in Hintock as yet oppressed him with their crude rusticity; the contrast offered by this suggested that she hailed from elsewhere.

Precisely these thoughts had occurred to him at the first time of seeing her; but he now went a little further with them, and considered that as there had been no carriage lately in that spot she could not have come a very long distance. She must be somebody staying at Hintock House—possibly Mrs. Charmond, of whom he had heard so much—at any rate an inmate; and this probability was sufficient to set a mild radiance in the surgeon's somewhat dull sky.

Fitzpiers sat down to the book he had been perusing. It happened to be that of a German metaphysician, for the doctor was

not a practical man, except by fits, and much preferred the ideal world to the real, and the discovery of principles to their application. The young lady remained in his thoughts. He might have followed her; but he was not constitutionally active, and preferred a conjectural pursuit. However, when he went out for a ramble just before dusk he insensibly took the direction of Hintock House, which was the way Grace had been walking, her mind having run on Mrs. Charmond that day; though she had returned long since by another route.

Fitzpiers reached the edge of the glen, overlooking the manor-house. The shutters were shut, and only one chimney smoked. The mere aspect of the place was enough to inform him that Mrs. Charmond had gone away, and that nobody else was staying there. Fitzpiers felt a vague disappointment that the young lady was not

Mrs. Charmond, of whom he had heard so much; and without pausing longer to gaze at a carcase from which the spirit had flown he bent his steps homeward.

Later in the evening Fitzpiers was summoned to visit a cottage-patient about two miles distant. Like the majority of young practitioners in his vicinity he was far from having assumed the dignity of being driven his rounds by a servant in a brougham that flashed the sunlight like a mirror; his way of getting about was by means of a gig which he drove himself, hitching the rein of the horse to the gate-post, shutter-hook, or garden-paling of the domicile under visitation, or giving pennies to little boys to hold the animal during his stay—pennies which were well earned when the cases to be attended were of a certain cheerful kind that wore out the patience of the little boys.

On this account of travelling alone the night-journeys which Fitzpiers had frequently to take were dismal enough, an apparent perversity in nature ruling that whenever there was to be a birth in a particularly inaccessible and lonely place that event should occur in the night. The surgeon, having been of late years a town man, hated the solitary midnight woodland He was not altogether skilful with the reins, and it often occurred to his mind that if in some remote depths of the trees an accident were to happen, his being alone might be the death of him. Hence he made a practice of picking up any countryman or lad whom he chanced to pass by, and under the disguise of treating him to a nice drive obtained his companionship on the journey, and his convenient assistance in opening gates.

The doctor had started on his way out

of the village on the night in question when the light of his lamps fell upon the musing form of Winterborne, walking leisurely along, as if he had no object in life. Winterborne was a better class of companion than the doctor usually could get, and he at once pulled up and asked him if he would like a drive through the wood that fine night.

Giles seemed rather surprised at the doctor's friendliness, but said that he had no objection, and accordingly mounted beside Mr. Fitzpiers.

They drove along under the black boughs which formed a network upon the stars. Looking up as they passed under a horizontal bough they sometimes saw objects like large tadpoles lodged diametrically across it, which Giles explained to be pheasants at roost; and they sometimes heard the report of a gun, which reminded

him that others knew what those tadpole shapes represented as well as he.

Presently the doctor said what he had been going to say for some time:

"Is there a young lady staying in this neighbourhood—a very attractive girl—with a little white boa round her neck, and white fur round her gloves?"

Winterborne, of course, knew in a moment that Grace, whom he had caught the doctor peering at, was represented by these accessories. With a wary grimness induced by the circumstances, he evaded an answer by saying, "I saw a young lady talking to Mrs. Charmond the other day; perhaps it was she."

"It might have been," said Fitzpiers. "She is quite a gentlewoman—the one I mean. She cannot be a permanent resident in Hintock, or I should have seen her before. Nor does she look like one."

"She is not staying at Hintock House?"

"No; it is closed."

"Then perhaps she is staying at one of the cottages, or farmhouses?"

"Oh no—you mistake. She was a different sort of girl altogether." As Giles was nobody Fitzpiers treated him accordingly, and rhapsodised to the night in continuation:

"She moved upon this earth a shape of brightness,
A power, that from its objects scarcely drew
One impulse of her being—in her lightness
Most like some radiant cloud of morning dew,
Which wanders through the waste air's pathless blue,
To nourish some far desert: she did seem
Beside me, gathering beauty as she grew,
Like the bright shade of some immortal dream
Which walks, when tempests sleep, the wave of life's dark stream."

The charm of the lines seemed to Winterborne to be somehow the result of his lost Love's charms upon Fitzpiers.

"You seem to be mightily in love with

her, sir," he said, with a sensation of heart-sickness, and more than ever resolved not to mention Grace by name.

"Oh, no—I am not that, Winterborne; people living insulated, as I do by the solitude of this place, get charged with emotive fluid like a Leyden jar with electric, for want of some conductor at hand to disperse it. Human love is a subjective thing—the essence itself of man, as that great thinker Spinoza the philosopher says—*ipsa hominis essentia*—it is joy accompanied by an idea which we project against any suitable object in the line of our vision, just as the rainbow iris is projected against an oak, ash, or elm tree indifferently. So that if any other young lady had appeared instead of the one who did appear, I should have felt just the same interest in her, and have quoted precisely the same lines from Shelley about

her, as about this one I saw. Such miserable creatures of circumstance are we all!"

"Well, it is what we call being in love down in these parts, whether or no," said Winterborne.

"You are right enough if you admit that I am in love with something in my own head, and no thing-in-itself outside it at all."

"Is it part of a country doctor's duties to learn that view of things, may I ask, sir?" said Winterborne, adopting the Socratic εἰρώνεια with such well-assumed simplicity that Fitzpiers answered readily—

"Oh, no. The real truth is, Winterborne, that medical practice in places like this is a very rule of thumb matter; a bottle of bitter stuff for this and that old woman — the bitterer the better — compounded from a few simple stereotyped

prescriptions; occasional attendance at births, where mere presence is almost sufficient, so healthy and strong are the people; and a lance for an abscess now and then. Investigation and experiment cannot be carried on without more appliances than one has here—though I have attempted a little."

Giles did not enter into this view of the case; what he had been struck with was the curious parallelism between Mr. Fitzpiers's manner and Grace's, as shown by the fact of both of them straying into a subject of discourse so engrossing to themselves that it made them forget it was foreign to him.

Nothing further passed between himself and the doctor in relation to Grace till they were on their way back. They had stopped at a wayside inn for a glass of brandy-and-cider hot, and when they

were again in motion Fitzpiers, possibly a little warmed by the liquor, resumed the subject by saying, "I should like very much to know who that young lady was."

"What difference can it make, if she's only the tree your rainbow falls on?"

"Ha, ha! True."

"You have no wife, sir?"

"I have no wife; and no idea of one. I hope to do better things than marry and settle in Hintock. Not but that it is well for a medical man to be married; and sometimes, begad, 'twould be pleasant enough in this place, with the wind roaring round the house, and the rain and the boughs beating against it. I hear that you lost your lifeholds by the death of South?"

"I did. I lost by that in more ways than one."

They had reached the top of Hintock

Lane or Street, if it could be called such where three-quarters of the roadside consisted of copse and orchard. One of the first houses to be passed was Melbury's. A light was shining from a bedroom window facing lengthwise of the lane. Winterborne glanced at it, and saw what was coming. He had withheld an answer to the doctor's inquiry, to hinder his knowledge of Grace. But "who hath gathered the wind in his fists? who hath bound the waters in a garment?"—he could not hinder what was doomed to arrive, and might just as well have been outspoken. As they came up to the house Grace's figure was distinctly visible, drawing the two white curtains together which were used here instead of blinds.

"Why, there she is!" said Fitzpiers. "How in the name of Heaven does she come there?"

"In the most natural way in the world. It is her home. Mr. Melbury is her father."

"Indeed—indeed—indeed! How comes he to have a daughter of that sort?"

Winterborne laughed coldly. "Won't money do anything," he said, "if you've promising material to work upon? Why shouldn't a Hintock girl, taken early from home, and put under proper instruction, become as finished as any other young lady, if she's got brains and good looks to begin with?"

"No reason at all why she shouldn't, murmured the surgeon with reflective disappointment. "Only I didn't anticipate quite that kind of origin for her."

"And you think an inch or two less of her now." There was a little tremor in Winterborne's voice as he spoke.

"Well," said the doctor with recovered

warmth; "I am not so sure that I think less of her. At first it was a sort of blow; but dammy, I'll stick up for her. She's charming, every inch of her!"

"So she is," said Winterborne. . . . "But not for me!"

From this ambiguous expression of the reticent woodlander, Dr. Fitzpiers inferred that Giles disliked Miss Melbury, possibly for some haughtiness in her bearing towards him, and had, on that account, withheld her name. The supposition did not tend to diminish his admiration for her.

END OF VOL. I.

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