CHAPTER XIV.

The encounter with the carriages having sprung upon Winterborne's mind the image of Mrs. Charmond, his thoughts by a natural channel went from her to the fact that several cottages and other houses in the two Hintocks, now his own, would fall into her possession in the event of South's death. He marvelled what people could have been thinking about in the past to invent such precarious tenures as these; still more, what could have induced his ancestors at Hintock, and other village people, to exchange their old copyholds for life-leases. But having naturally succeeded to these properties through his father, he had done his best to keep them in order, though he was much struck with his father's negligence in not insuring South's life.

After breakfast, still musing on the circumstances, he went upstairs, 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 said lord. They had come into his father's possession chiefly through his mother, who was a South.

Pinned to the parchment 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. Giles Winterborne, senior, 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. The likelihood was that death alone had hindered him in the execution of his project, as it surely was, 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 labor," 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 type than usual. "There is Doctor Fitzpiers again," she said, and descended. Presently his tread was heard on the naked stairs.

Mr. Fitzpiers entered the sick-chamber just as a doctor is more or less wont to do on such occasions, and pre-eminently when the room is that of a humble cottager, looking round towards the patient with that preoccupied gaze which so plainly reveals that he has wellnigh forgotten all about the case and the whole circumstances since he dismissed them from his mind at his last exit from the same apartment. He nodded to Winterborne, with whom he was already a little acquainted, recalled the case to his thoughts, and went leisurely on to where South sat.

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, practical eye, sharp for the

surface of things and for nothing beneath it, he had not. But whether his apparent depth of vision was 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 doing in marble by any sculptor not over-busy, and was hence devoid of those knotty irregularities which often mean power; while the double-cyma or classical curve of his mouth was not without a looseness in its close. Nevertheless, either from his readily appreciative mien, or his reflective manner, or the instinct towards profound things which was said to possess him, his presence bespoke the philosopher rather than the dandy or macaroni--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, might have 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. "If so, as she is gone away, I must speak to her agent."

"Oh--never mind whose tree it is--what's a tree beside a life! Cut it down. I have not the honor of knowing Mrs. Charmond as yet, but I am disposed to risk that much with her."

"'Tis timber," rejoined Giles, more scrupulous than he would have been had not his own interests stood so closely involved. "They'll never fell a stick about here without it 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 then departed, and they waited till the evening. When it was dusk, and the curtains drawn, Winterborne directed a couple of woodmen to bring a crosscut-saw, and the tall, threatening tree was soon nearly off at its base. He would not fell it completely then, on account of the possible crash, but 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 by-standers 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 paralyzed by amazement. They were thunder-struck 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.