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 with others of its kind 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, cottage-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 arrangement that

they might have been laid out by a Dutch designer of the time of William and Mary. In a low, dense hedge, cut to wedge-shape, 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 parlor window was a swing-gate leading into a field, across which there ran a footpath. The swing-gate had just been repainted, and on one fine afternoon, before the paint was dry, and while gnats were still dying thereon, the surgeon was standing in his sitting-room abstractedly looking out at the different pedestrians who passed and repassed 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 woman with her skirts tucked up and her hair uncombed. 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 recognized 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 the felling of a tree which had caused her parent's death and Winterborne's losses. She walked and thought, and not recklessly; but her preoccupation led her to grasp unsuspectingly 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 almost 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 being ignorant of that fact by forgetting it in a general pensiveness. She approached the gate. To let such a creature touch it even with a 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 stopped, 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 till she had passed out of sight, recognizing 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 seen or heard 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 that Grace had been walking, it having happened that her mind had run on Mrs. Charmond that day, and she had walked to the brow of a hill whence the house could be seen, returning by another route.

Fitzpiers in his turn 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 carcass 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 position 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, a serious 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, the fact of 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, all the trees of a species alike in one respect, and no two of them alike in another. 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 there 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 neighborhood--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 accessaries. With a wary grimness, partly in his character, partly 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."

Fitzpiers concluded from this that Winterborne had not seen him looking over the hedge. "It might have been," he said. "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 apostrophized 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 consummate charm of the lines seemed to Winterborne, though he divined that they were a quotation, 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 {Greek word: irony} 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 it 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 way-side 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 life-holds by the death of South?"

"I did. I lost 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 road-side 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, as he thought to himself, "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 does she come there?"

"In the most natural way in the world. It is her home. Mr. Melbury is her father."

"Oh, indeed--indeed--indeed! How comes he to have a daughter of that stamp?"

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 to me."

From this ambiguous expression of the reticent woodlander's, Dr. Fitzpiers inferred that Giles disliked Miss Melbury because of 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.