

## CHAPTER XVII.

Grace's exhibition of herself, in the act of pulling-to the window-curtains, had been the result of an unfortunate incident in the house that day--nothing less than the illness of Grammer Oliver, a woman who had never till now lain down for such a reason in her life. Like others to whom unbroken years of health has made the idea of keeping their bed almost as repugnant as death itself, she had continued on foot till she literally fell on the floor; and though she had, as yet, been scarcely a day off duty, she had sickened into quite a different personage from the independent Grammer of the yard and spar-house. Ill as she was, on one point she was firm. On no account would she see a doctor; in other words, Fitzpiers.

The room in which Grace had been discerned was not her own, but the old woman's. On the girl's way to bed she had received a message from Grammer, to the effect that she would much like to speak to her that night.

Grace entered, and set the candle on a low chair beside the bed, so that the profile of Grammer as she lay cast itself in a keen shadow upon the whitened wall, her large head being still further magnified by an enormous turban, which was, really, her petticoat wound in a wreath round her temples. Grace put the room a little in order, and approaching the sick woman, said, "I am come, Grammer, as you wish. Do let us send for the doctor before it gets later."

"I will not have him," said Grammer Oliver, decisively.

"Then somebody to sit up with you."

"Can't abear it! No; I wanted to see you, Miss Grace, because 'ch have something on my mind. Dear Miss Grace, I TOOK THAT MONEY OF THE DOCTOR, AFTER ALL!"

"What money?"

"The ten pounds."

Grace did not quite understand.

"The ten pounds he offered me for my head, because I've a large brain. I signed a paper when I took the money, not feeling concerned about it at all. I have not liked to tell ye that it was really settled with him, because you showed such horror at the notion. Well, having thought it over more at length, I wish I hadn't done it; and it weighs upon my mind. John South's death of fear about the tree makes me think that I shall die of this....'Ch have been going to ask him again to let me off, but I hadn't the face."

"Why?"

"I've spent some of the money--more'n two pounds o't. It do wherrit me terribly; and I shall die o' the thought of that paper I signed with my holy cross, as South died of his trouble."

"If you ask him to burn the paper he will, I'm sure, and think no more of it."

"'Ch have done it once already, miss. But he laughed cruel like. 'Yours is such a fine brain, Grammer, 'er said, 'that science couldn't afford to lose you. Besides, you've taken my money.'...Don't let your father know of this, please, on no account whatever!"

"No, no. I will let you have the money to return to him."

Grammer rolled her head negatively upon the pillow. "Even if I should be well enough to take it to him, he won't like it. Though why he should so particular want to look into the works of a poor old woman's head-piece like mine when there's so many other folks about, I don't know. I know how he'll answer me: 'A lonely person like you, Grammer,' er woll say. 'What difference is it to you what becomes of ye when the breath's out of your body?' Oh, it do trouble me! If you only knew how he do chevy me round the chimner in my dreams, you'd pity me. How I could do it I can't think! But 'ch was always so rackless!...If I only had anybody to plead for me!"

"Mrs. Melbury would, I am sure."

"Ay; but he wouldn't hearken to she! It wants a younger face than hers to work upon such as he."

Grace started with comprehension. "You don't think he would do it for me?" she said.

"Oh, wouldn't he!"

"I couldn't go to him, Grammer, on any account. I don't know him at all."

"Ah, if I were a young lady," said the artful Grammer, "and could save a poor old woman's skellington from a heathen doctor instead of a Christian grave, I would do it, and be glad to. But nobody will do anything for a poor old familiar friend but push her out of the way."

You are very ungrateful, Grammer, to say that. But you are ill, I know, and that's why you speak so. Now believe me, you are not going to die yet. Remember you told me yourself that you meant to keep him waiting many a year."

"Ay, one can joke when one is well, even in old age; but in sickness one's gayety falters to grief; and that which seemed small looks large; and the grim far-off seems near."

Grace's eyes had tears in them. "I don't like to go to him on such an errand, Grammer," she said, brokenly. "But I will, to ease your mind."

It was with extreme reluctance that Grace cloaked herself next morning for the undertaking. She was all the more indisposed to the journey by reason of Grammer's allusion to the effect of a pretty face upon Dr. Fitzpiers; and hence she most illogically did that which, had the doctor never seen her, would have operated to stultify the sole motive of her journey; that is to say, she put on a woollen veil, which hid all her face except an occasional spark of her eyes.

Her own wish that nothing should be known of this strange and grewsome proceeding, no less than Grammer Oliver's own desire, led Grace to take every precaution against being discovered. She went out by the garden door as the safest way, all the household having occupations at the other side. The morning looked forbidding enough when she stealthily opened it. The battle between frost and thaw was continuing in mid-air: the trees dripped on the garden-plots, where no vegetables would grow for the dripping, though they were planted year after year with that curious mechanical regularity of country people in the face of hopelessness; the moss which covered the once broad gravel terrace was swamped; and Grace stood irresolute. Then she thought of poor Grammer, and her dreams of the doctor running after her, scalpel in hand, and the possibility of a case so curiously similar to South's ending in the same way; thereupon she stepped out into the drizzle.

The nature of her errand, and Grammer Oliver's account of the compact she had made, lent a fascinating horror to Grace's conception of Fitzpiers. She knew that he was a young man; but her single object in seeking an interview with him put all considerations of his age and social aspect from her mind. Standing as she stood, in Grammer Oliver's shoes, he was simply a remorseless Jove of the sciences, who would not have mercy, and would have sacrifice; a man whom, save for this, she would have preferred to avoid knowing. But since, in such a small village, it was improbable that any long time could pass without their meeting, there was not much to deplore in her having to meet him now.

But, as need hardly be said, Miss Melbury's view of the doctor as a merciless, unwavering, irresistible scientist was not quite in accordance with fact. The real Dr. Fitzpiers was a man of too many hobbies to show likelihood of rising to any great eminence in the profession he had chosen, or even to acquire any wide practice in the rural district he had marked out as his field of survey for the present. In the course of a year his mind was accustomed to pass in a grand solar sweep through all the zodiacal signs of the intellectual heaven. Sometimes it was in the Ram, sometimes in the Bull; one month he would be immersed in alchemy, another in poesy; one month in the Twins of astrology and astronomy; then in the Crab of German literature and metaphysics. In justice to him it must be stated that he took such studies as were immediately related to his own profession in turn with the rest, and it had been in a month of anatomical ardor without the possibility of a subject that he had proposed to Grammer Oliver the

terms she had mentioned to her mistress.

As may be inferred from the tone of his conversation with Winterborne, he had lately plunged into abstract philosophy with much zest; perhaps his keenly appreciative, modern, unpractical mind found this a realm more to his taste than any other. Though his aims were desultory, Fitzpiers's mental constitution was not without its admirable side; a keen inquirer he honestly was, even if the midnight rays of his lamp, visible so far through the trees of Hintock, lighted rank literatures of emotion and passion as often as, or oftener than, the books and materiel of science.

But whether he meditated the Muses or the philosophers, the loneliness of Hintock life was beginning to tell upon his impressionable nature. Winter in a solitary house in the country, without society, is tolerable, nay, even enjoyable and delightful, given certain conditions, but these are not the conditions which attach to the life of a professional man who drops down into such a place by mere accident. They were present to the lives of Winterborne, Melbury, and Grace; but not to the doctor's. They are old association--an almost exhaustive biographical or historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer's horizon. He must know all about those invisible ones of the days gone by, whose feet have traversed the fields which look so gray from his windows; recall whose creaking plough has turned those sods from time to time; whose hands planted the trees that form a crest to the opposite hill; whose horses

and hounds have torn through that underwood; what birds affect that particular brake; what domestic dramas of love, jealousy, revenge, or disappointment have been enacted in the cottages, the mansion, the street, or on the green. The spot may have beauty, grandeur, salubrity, convenience; but if it lack memories it will ultimately pall upon him who settles there without opportunity of intercourse with his kind.

In such circumstances, maybe, an old man dreams of an ideal friend, till he throws himself into the arms of any impostor who chooses to wear that title on his face. A young man may dream of an ideal friend likewise, but some humor of the blood will probably lead him to think rather of an ideal mistress, and at length the rustle of a woman's dress, the sound of her voice, or the transit of her form across the field of his vision, will enkindle his soul with a flame that blinds his eyes.

The discovery of the attractive Grace's name and family would have been enough in other circumstances to lead the doctor, if not to put her personality out of his head, to change the character of his interest in her. Instead of treasuring her image as a rarity, he would at most have played with it as a toy. He was that kind of a man. But situated here he could not go so far as amative cruelty. He dismissed all reverential thought about her, but he could not help taking her seriously.

He went on to imagine the impossible. So far, indeed, did he go in this futile direction that, as others are wont to do, he constructed dialogues and scenes in which Grace had turned out to be the mistress of Hintock Manor-house, the mysterious Mrs. Charmond, particularly ready and willing to be wooed by himself and nobody else. "Well, she isn't that," he said, finally. "But she's a very sweet, nice, exceptional girl."

The next morning he breakfasted alone, as usual. It was snowing with a fine-flaked desultoriness just sufficient to make the woodland gray, without ever achieving whiteness. There was not a single letter for Fitzpiers, only a medical circular and a weekly newspaper.

To sit before a large fire on such mornings, and read, and gradually acquire energy till the evening came, and then, with lamp alight, and feeling full of vigor, to pursue some engrossing subject or other till the small hours, had hitherto been his practice. But to-day he could not settle into his chair. That self-contained position he had lately occupied, in which the only attention demanded was the concentration of the inner eye, all outer regard being quite gratuitous, seemed to have been taken by insidious stratagem, and for the first time he had an interest outside the house. He walked from one window to another, and became aware that the most irksome of solitudes is not the solitude of remoteness, but that which is just outside desirable company.

The breakfast hour went by heavily enough, and the next followed, in

the same half-snowy, half-rainy style, the weather now being the inevitable relapse which sooner or later succeeds a time too radiant for the season, such as they had enjoyed in the late midwinter at Hintock. To people at home there these changeful tricks had their interests; the strange mistakes that some of the more sanguine trees had made in budding before their month, to be incontinently glued up by frozen thawings now; the similar sanguine errors of impulsive birds in framing nests that were now swamped by snow-water, and other such incidents, prevented any sense of wearisomeness in the minds of the natives. But these were features of a world not familiar to Fitzpiers, and the inner visions to which he had almost exclusively attended having suddenly failed in their power to absorb him, he felt unutterably dreary.

He wondered how long Miss Melbury was going to stay in Hintock. The season was unpropitious for accidental encounters with her out-of-doors, and except by accident he saw not how they were to become acquainted. One thing was clear--any acquaintance with her could only, with a due regard to his future, be casual, at most of the nature of a flirtation; for he had high aims, and they would some day lead him into other spheres than this.

Thus desultorily thinking he flung himself down upon the couch, which, as in many draughty old country houses, was constructed with a hood, being in fact a legitimate development from the settle. He tried to read as he reclined, but having sat up till three o'clock that morning,

the book slipped from his hand and he fell asleep.