

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was at this time that Grace approached the house. Her knock, always soft in virtue of her nature, was softer to-day by reason of her strange errand. However, it was heard by the farmer's wife who kept the house, and Grace was admitted. Opening the door of the doctor's room the housewife glanced in, and imagining Fitzpiers absent, asked Miss Melbury to enter and wait a few minutes while she should go and find him, believing him to be somewhere on the premises. Grace acquiesced, went in, and sat down close to the door.

As soon as the door was shut upon her she looked round the room, and started at perceiving a handsome man snugly ensconced in the couch, like the recumbent figure within some canopied mural tomb of the fifteenth century, except that his hands were by no means clasped in prayer. She had no doubt that this was the doctor. Awaken him herself she could not, and her immediate impulse was to go and pull the broad ribbon with a brass rosette which hung at one side of the fireplace. But expecting the landlady to re-enter in a moment she abandoned this intention, and stood gazing in great embarrassment at the reclining philosopher.

The windows of Fitzpiers's soul being at present shuttered, he probably appeared less impressive than in his hours of animation; but the light abstracted from his material presence by sleep was more than counterbalanced by the mysterious influence of that state, in a

stranger, upon the consciousness of a beholder so sensitive. So far as she could criticise at all, she became aware that she had encountered a specimen of creation altogether unusual in that locality. The occasions on which Grace had observed men of this stamp were when she had been far removed away from Hintock, and even then such examples as had met her eye were at a distance, and mainly of coarser fibre than the one who now confronted her.

She nervously wondered why the woman had not discovered her mistake and returned, and went again towards the bell-pull. Approaching the chimney her back was to Fitzpiers, but she could see him in the glass. An indescribable thrill passed through her as she perceived that the eyes of the reflected image were open, gazing wonderingly at her, and under the curious unexpectedness of the sight she became as if spellbound, almost powerless to turn her head and regard the original. However, by an effort she did turn, when there he lay asleep the same as before.

Her startled perplexity as to what he could be meaning was sufficient to lead her to precipitately abandon her errand. She crossed quickly to the door, opened and closed it noiselessly, and went out of the house unobserved. By the time that she had gone down the path and through the garden door into the lane she had recovered her equanimity. Here, screened by the hedge, she stood and considered a while.

Drip, drip, drip, fell the rain upon her umbrella and around; she had

come out on such a morning because of the seriousness of the matter in hand; yet now she had allowed her mission to be stultified by a momentary tremulousness concerning an incident which perhaps had meant nothing after all.

In the mean time her departure from the room, stealthy as it had been, had roused Fitzpiers, and he sat up. In the reflection from the mirror which Grace had beheld there was no mystery; he had opened his eyes for a few moments, but had immediately relapsed into unconsciousness, if, indeed, he had ever been positively awake. That somebody had just left the room he was certain, and that the lovely form which seemed to have visited him in a dream was no less than the real presentation of the person departed he could hardly doubt.

Looking out of the window a few minutes later, down the box-edged gravel-path which led to the bottom, he saw the garden door gently open, and through it enter the young girl of his thoughts, Grace having just at this juncture determined to return and attempt the interview a second time. That he saw her coming instead of going made him ask himself if his first impression of her were not a dream indeed. She came hesitatingly along, carrying her umbrella so low over her head that he could hardly see her face. When she reached the point where the raspberry bushes ended and the strawberry bed began, she made a little pause.

Fitzpiers feared that she might not be coming to him even now, and hastily quitting the room, he ran down the path to meet her. The nature of her errand he could not divine, but he was prepared to give her any amount of encouragement.

"I beg pardon, Miss Melbury," he said. "I saw you from the window, and fancied you might imagine that I was not at home--if it is I you were coming for."

"I was coming to speak one word to you, nothing more," she replied. "And I can say it here."

"No, no. Please do come in. Well, then, if you will not come into the house, come as far as the porch."

Thus pressed she went on to the porch, and they stood together inside it, Fitzpiers closing her umbrella for her.

"I have merely a request or petition to make," she said. "My father's servant is ill--a woman you know--and her illness is serious."

"I am sorry to hear it. You wish me to come and see her at once?"

"No; I particularly wish you not to come."

"Oh, indeed."

"Yes; and she wishes the same. It would make her seriously worse if you were to come. It would almost kill her....My errand is of a peculiar and awkward nature. It is concerning a subject which weighs on her mind--that unfortunate arrangement she made with you, that you might have her body--after death."

"Oh! Grammer Oliver, the old woman with the fine head. Seriously ill, is she!"

"And SO disturbed by her rash compact! I have brought the money back--will you please return to her the agreement she signed?" Grace held out to him a couple of five-pound notes which she had kept ready tucked in her glove.

Without replying or considering the notes, Fitzpiers allowed his thoughts to follow his eyes, and dwell upon Grace's personality, and the sudden close relation in which he stood to her. The porch was narrow; the rain increased. It ran off the porch and dripped on the creepers, and from the creepers upon the edge of Grace's cloak and skirts.

"The rain is wetting your dress; please do come in," he said. "It really makes my heart ache to let you stay here."

Immediately inside the front door was the door of his sitting-room; he

flung it open, and stood in a coaxing attitude. Try how she would, Grace could not resist the supplicatory mandate written in the face and manner of this man, and distressful resignation sat on her as she glided past him into the room--brushing his coat with her elbow by reason of the narrowness.

He followed her, shut the door--which she somehow had hoped he would leave open--and placing a chair for her, sat down. The concern which Grace felt at the development of these commonplace incidents was, of course, mainly owing to the strange effect upon her nerves of that view of him in the mirror gazing at her with open eyes when she had thought him sleeping, which made her fancy that his slumber might have been a feint based on inexplicable reasons.

She again proffered the notes; he awoke from looking at her as at a piece of live statuary, and listened deferentially as she said, "Will you then reconsider, and cancel the bond which poor Grammer Oliver so foolishly gave?"

"I'll cancel it without reconsideration. Though you will allow me to have my own opinion about her foolishness. Grammer is a very wise woman, and she was as wise in that as in other things. You think there was something very fiendish in the compact, do you not, Miss Melbury? But remember that the most eminent of our surgeons in past times have entered into such agreements."

"Not fiendish--strange."

"Yes, that may be, since strangeness is not in the nature of a thing, but in its relation to something extrinsic--in this case an unessential observer."

He went to his desk, and searching a while found a paper, which he unfolded and brought to her. A thick cross appeared in ink at the bottom--evidently from the hand of Grammer. Grace put the paper in her pocket with a look of much relief.

As Fitzpiers did not take up the money (half of which had come from Grace's own purse), she pushed it a little nearer to him. "No, no. I shall not take it from the old woman," he said. "It is more strange than the fact of a surgeon arranging to obtain a subject for dissection that our acquaintance should be formed out of it."

"I am afraid you think me uncivil in showing my dislike to the notion. But I did not mean to be."

"Oh no, no." He looked at her, as he had done before, with puzzled interest. "I cannot think, I cannot think," he murmured. "Something bewilders me greatly." He still reflected and hesitated. "Last night I sat up very late," he at last went on, "and on that account I fell into a little nap on that couch about half an hour ago. And during my few minutes of unconsciousness I dreamed--what do you think?--that you

stood in the room."

Should she tell? She merely blushed.

"You may imagine," Fitzpiers continued, now persuaded that it had, indeed, been a dream, "that I should not have dreamed of you without considerable thinking about you first."

He could not be acting; of that she felt assured.

"I fancied in my vision that you stood there," he said, pointing to where she had paused. "I did not see you directly, but reflected in the glass. I thought, what a lovely creature! The design is for once carried out. Nature has at last recovered her lost union with the Idea! My thoughts ran in that direction because I had been reading the work of a transcendental philosopher last night; and I dare say it was the dose of Idealism that I received from it that made me scarcely able to distinguish between reality and fancy. I almost wept when I awoke, and found that you had appeared to me in Time, but not in Space, alas!"

At moments there was something theatrical in the delivery of Fitzpiers's effusion; yet it would have been inexact to say that it was intrinsically theatrical. It often happens that in situations of unrestraint, where there is no thought of the eye of criticism, real feeling glides into a mode of manifestation not easily distinguishable from rodomontade. A veneer of affectation overlies a bulk of truth,

with the evil consequence, if perceived, that the substance is estimated by the superficialities, and the whole rejected.

Grace, however, was no specialist in men's manners, and she admired the sentiment without thinking of the form. And she was embarrassed: "lovely creature" made explanation awkward to her gentle modesty.

"But can it be," said he, suddenly, "that you really were here?"

"I have to confess that I have been in the room once before," faltered she. "The woman showed me in, and went away to fetch you; but as she did not return, I left."

"And you saw me asleep," he murmured, with the faintest show of humiliation.

"Yes--IF you were asleep, and did not deceive me."

"Why do you say if?"

"I saw your eyes open in the glass, but as they were closed when I looked round upon you, I thought you were perhaps deceiving me.

"Never," said Fitzpiers, fervently--"never could I deceive you."

Foreknowledge to the distance of a year or so in either of them might

have spoiled the effect of that pretty speech. Never deceive her! But they knew nothing, and the phrase had its day.

Grace began now to be anxious to terminate the interview, but the compelling power of Fitzpiers's atmosphere still held her there. She was like an inexperienced actress who, having at last taken up her position on the boards, and spoken her speeches, does not know how to move off. The thought of Grammer occurred to her. "I'll go at once and tell poor Grammer of your generosity," she said. "It will relieve her at once."

"Grammer's a nervous disease, too--how singular!" he answered, accompanying her to the door. "One moment; look at this--it is something which may interest you."

He had thrown open the door on the other side of the passage, and she saw a microscope on the table of the confronting room. "Look into it, please; you'll be interested," he repeated.

She applied her eye, and saw the usual circle of light patterned all over with a cellular tissue of some indescribable sort. "What do you think that is?" said Fitzpiers.

She did not know.

"That's a fragment of old John South's brain, which I am investigating."

She started back, not with aversion, but with wonder as to how it should have got there. Fitzpiers laughed.

"Here am I," he said, "endeavoring to carry on simultaneously the study of physiology and transcendental philosophy, the material world and the ideal, so as to discover if possible a point of contrast between them; and your finer sense is quite offended!"

"Oh no, Mr. Fitzpiers," said Grace, earnestly. "It is not so at all. I know from seeing your light at night how deeply you meditate and work. Instead of condemning you for your studies, I admire you very much!"

Her face, upturned from the microscope, was so sweet, sincere, and self-forgetful in its aspect that the susceptible Fitzpiers more than wished to annihilate the lineal yard which separated it from his own. Whether anything of the kind showed in his eyes or not, Grace remained no longer at the microscope, but quickly went her way into the rain.