CHAPTER XIX.

Instead of resuming his investigation of South's brain, which perhaps was not so interesting under the microscope as might have been expected from the importance of that organ in life, Fitzpiers reclined and ruminated on the interview. Grace's curious susceptibility to his presence, though it was as if the currents of her life were disturbed rather than attracted by him, added a special interest to her general charm. Fitzpiers was in a distinct degree scientific, being ready and zealous to interrogate all physical manifestations, but primarily he was an idealist. He believed that behind the imperfect lay the perfect; that rare things were to be discovered amid a bulk of commonplace; that results in a new and untried case might be different from those in other cases where the conditions had been precisely similar. Regarding his own personality as one of unbounded possibilities, because it was his own--notwithstanding that the factors of his life had worked out a sorry product for thousands--he saw nothing but what was regular in his discovery at Hintock of an altogether exceptional being of the other sex, who for nobody else would have had any existence.

One habit of Fitzpiers's--commoner in dreamers of more advanced age than in men of his years--was that of talking to himself. He paced round his room with a selective tread upon the more prominent blooms of the carpet, and murmured, "This phenomenal girl will be the light of my life while I am at Hintock; and the special beauty of the situation is

that our attitude and relations to each other will be purely spiritual. Socially we can never be intimate. Anything like matrimonial intentions towards her, charming as she is, would be absurd. They would spoil the ethereal character of my regard. And, indeed, I have other aims on the practical side of my life."

Fitzpiers bestowed a regulation thought on the advantageous marriage he was bound to make with a woman of family as good as his own, and of purse much longer. But as an object of contemplation for the present, as objective spirit rather than corporeal presence, Grace Melbury would serve to keep his soul alive, and to relieve the monotony of his days.

His first notion--acquired from the mere sight of her without converse--that of an idle and vulgar flirtation with a timber-merchant's pretty daughter, grated painfully upon him now that he had found what Grace intrinsically was. Personal intercourse with such as she could take no lower form than intellectual communion, and mutual explorations of the world of thought. Since he could not call at her father's, having no practical views, cursory encounters in the lane, in the wood, coming and going to and from church, or in passing her dwelling, were what the acquaintance would have to feed on.

Such anticipated glimpses of her now and then realized themselves in the event. Rencounters of not more than a minute's duration, frequently repeated, will build up mutual interest, even an intimacy, in a lonely place. Theirs grew as imperceptibly as the tree-twigs

budded. There never was a particular moment at which it could be said they became friends; yet a delicate understanding now existed between two who in the winter had been strangers.

Spring weather came on rather suddenly, the unsealing of buds that had long been swollen accomplishing itself in the space of one warm night. The rush of sap in the veins of the trees could almost be heard. The flowers of late April took up a position unseen, and looked as if they had been blooming a long while, though there had been no trace of them the day before yesterday; birds began not to mind getting wet. In-door people said they had heard the nightingale, to which out-door people replied contemptuously that they had heard him a fortnight before.

The young doctor's practice being scarcely so large as a London surgeon's, he frequently walked in the wood. Indeed such practice as he had he did not follow up with the assiduity that would have been necessary for developing it to exceptional proportions. One day, book in hand, he walked in a part of the wood where the trees were mainly oaks. It was a calm afternoon, and there was everywhere around that sign of great undertakings on the part of vegetable nature which is apt to fill reflective human beings who are not undertaking much themselves with a sudden uneasiness at the contrast. He heard in the distance a curious sound, something like the quack of a duck, which, though it was common enough here about this time, was not common to him.

Looking through the trees Fitzpiers soon perceived the origin of the

noise. The barking season had just commenced, and what he had heard was the tear of the ripping tool as it ploughed its way along the sticky parting between the trunk and the rind. Melbury did a large business in bark, and as he was Grace's father, and possibly might be found on the spot, Fitzpiers was attracted to the scene even more than he might have been by its intrinsic interest. When he got nearer he recognized among the workmen the two Timothys, and Robert Creedle, who probably had been "lent" by Winterborne; Marty South also assisted.

Each tree doomed to this flaying process was first attacked by Creedle. With a small billhook he carefully freed the collar of the tree from twigs and patches of moss which incrusted it to a height of a foot or two above the ground, an operation comparable to the "little toilet" of the executioner's victim. After this it was barked in its erect position to a point as high as a man could reach. If a fine product of vegetable nature could ever be said to look ridiculous it was the case now, when the oak stood naked-legged, and as if ashamed, till the axe-man came and cut a ring round it, and the two Timothys finished the work with the crosscut-saw.

As soon as it had fallen the barkers attacked it like locusts, and in a short time not a particle of rind was left on the trunk and larger limbs. Marty South was an adept at peeling the upper parts, and there she stood encaged amid the mass of twigs and buds like a great bird, running her tool into the smallest branches, beyond the farthest points to which the skill and patience of the men enabled them to

proceed--branches which, in their lifetime, had swayed high above the bulk of the wood, and caught the latest and earliest rays of the sun and moon while the lower part of the forest was still in darkness.

"You seem to have a better instrument than they, Marty," said Fitzpiers.

"No, sir," she said, holding up the tool--a horse's leg-bone fitted into a handle and filed to an edge--"'tis only that they've less patience with the twigs, because their time is worth more than mine."

A little shed had been constructed on the spot, of thatched hurdles and boughs, and in front of it was a fire, over which a kettle sung. Fitzpiers sat down inside the shelter, and went on with his reading, except when he looked up to observe the scene and the actors. The thought that he might settle here and become welded in with this sylvan life by marrying Grace Melbury crossed his mind for a moment. Why should he go farther into the world than where he was? The secret of quiet happiness lay in limiting the ideas and aspirations; these men's thoughts were conterminous with the margin of the Hintock woodlands, and why should not his be likewise limited--a small practice among the people around him being the bound of his desires?

Presently Marty South discontinued her operations upon the quivering boughs, came out from the reclining oak, and prepared tea. When it was ready the men were called; and Fitzpiers being in a mood to join, sat down with them.

The latent reason of his lingering here so long revealed itself when the faint creaking of the joints of a vehicle became audible, and one of the men said, "Here's he." Turning their heads they saw Melbury's gig approaching, the wheels muffled by the yielding moss.

The timber-merchant was on foot leading the horse, looking back at every few steps to caution his daughter, who kept her seat, where and how to duck her head so as to avoid the overhanging branches. They stopped at the spot where the bark-ripping had been temporarily suspended; Melbury cursorily examined the heaps of bark, and drawing near to where the workmen were sitting down, accepted their shouted invitation to have a dish of tea, for which purpose he hitched the horse to a bough. Grace declined to take any of their beverage, and remained in her place in the vehicle, looking dreamily at the sunlight that came in thin threads through the hollies with which the oaks were interspersed.

When Melbury stepped up close to the shelter, he for the first time perceived that the doctor was present, and warmly appreciated Fitzpiers's invitation to sit down on the log beside him.

"Bless my heart, who would have thought of finding you here," he said, obviously much pleased at the circumstance. "I wonder now if my daughter knows you are so nigh at hand. I don't expect she do."

He looked out towards the gig wherein Grace sat, her face still turned in the opposite direction. "She doesn't see us. Well, never mind: let her be."

Grace was indeed quite unconscious of Fitzpiers's propinquity. She was thinking of something which had little connection with the scene before her--thinking of her friend, lost as soon as found, Mrs. Charmond; of her capricious conduct, and of the contrasting scenes she was possibly enjoying at that very moment in other climes, to which Grace herself had hoped to be introduced by her friend's means. She wondered if this patronizing lady would return to Hintock during the summer, and whether the acquaintance which had been nipped on the last occasion of her residence there would develop on the next.

Melbury told ancient timber-stories as he sat, relating them directly to Fitzpiers, and obliquely to the men, who had heard them often before. Marty, who poured out tea, was just saying, "I think I'll take out a cup to Miss Grace," when they heard a clashing of the gig-harness, and turning round Melbury saw that the horse had become restless, and was jerking about the vehicle in a way which alarmed its occupant, though she refrained from screaming. Melbury jumped up immediately, but not more quickly than Fitzpiers; and while her father ran to the horse's head and speedily began to control him, Fitzpiers was alongside the gig assisting Grace to descend. Her surprise at his appearance was so great that, far from making a calm and independent descent, she was very nearly lifted down in his arms. He relinquished

her when she touched ground, and hoped she was not frightened.

"Oh no, not much," she managed to say. "There was no danger--unless he had run under the trees where the boughs are low enough to hit my head."

"Which was by no means an impossibility, and justifies any amount of alarm."

He referred to what he thought he saw written in her face, and she could not tell him that this had little to do with the horse, but much with himself. His contiguity had, in fact, the same effect upon her as on those former occasions when he had come closer to her than usual--that of producing in her an unaccountable tendency to tearfulness. Melbury soon put the horse to rights, and seeing that Grace was safe, turned again to the work-people. His daughter's nervous distress had passed off in a few moments, and she said quite gayly to Fitzpiers as she walked with him towards the group, "There's destiny in it, you see. I was doomed to join in your picnic, although I did not intend to do so."

Marty prepared her a comfortable place, and she sat down in the circle, and listened to Fitzpiers while he drew from her father and the bark-rippers sundry narratives of their fathers', their grandfathers', and their own adventures in these woods; of the mysterious sights they had seen--only to be accounted for by supernatural agency; of white witches and black witches; and the standard story of the spirits of the

two brothers who had fought and fallen, and had haunted Hintock House till they were exorcised by the priest, and compelled to retreat to a swamp in this very wood, whence they were returning to their old quarters at the rate of a cock's stride every New-year's Day, old style; hence the local saying, "On New-year's tide, a cock's stride."

It was a pleasant time. The smoke from the little fire of peeled sticks rose between the sitters and the sunlight, and behind its blue veil stretched the naked arms of the prostrate trees The smell of the uncovered sap mingled with the smell of the burning wood, and the sticky inner surface of the scattered bark glistened as it revealed its pale madder hues to the eye. Melbury was so highly satisfied at having Fitzpiers as a sort of guest that he would have sat on for any length of time, but Grace, on whom Fitzpiers's eyes only too frequently alighted, seemed to think it incumbent upon her to make a show of going; and her father thereupon accompanied her to the vehicle.

As the doctor had helped her out of it he appeared to think that he had excellent reasons for helping her in, and performed the attention lingeringly enough.

"What were you almost in tears about just now?" he asked, softly.

"I don't know," she said: and the words were strictly true.

Melbury mounted on the other side, and they drove on out of the grove,

their wheels silently crushing delicate-patterned mosses, hyacinths, primroses, lords-and-ladies, and other strange and ordinary plants, and cracking up little sticks that lay across the track. Their way homeward ran along the crest of a lofty hill, whence on the right they beheld a wide valley, differing both in feature and atmosphere from that of the Hintock precincts. It was the cider country, which met the woodland district on the axis of this hill. Over the vale the air was blue as sapphire--such a blue as outside that apple-valley was never seen. Under the blue the orchards were in a blaze of bloom, some of the richly flowered trees running almost up to where they drove along. Over a gate which opened down the incline a man leaned on his arms, regarding this fair promise so intently that he did not observe their passing.

"That was Giles," said Melbury, when they had gone by.

"Was it? Poor Giles," said she.

"All that blooth means heavy autumn work for him and his hands. If no blight happens before the setting the apple yield will be such as we have not had for years."

Meanwhile, in the wood they had come from, the men had sat on so long that they were indisposed to begin work again that evening; they were paid by the ton, and their time for labor was as they chose. They placed the last gatherings of bark in rows for the curers, which led

them farther and farther away from the shed; and thus they gradually withdrew as the sun went down.

Fitzpiers lingered yet. He had opened his book again, though he could hardly see a word in it, and sat before the dying fire, scarcely knowing of the men's departure. He dreamed and mused till his consciousness seemed to occupy the whole space of the woodland around, so little was there of jarring sight or sound to hinder perfect unity with the sentiment of the place. The idea returned upon him of sacrificing all practical aims to live in calm contentment here, and instead of going on elaborating new conceptions with infinite pains, to accept quiet domesticity according to oldest and homeliest notions. These reflections detained him till the wood was embrowned with the coming night, and the shy little bird of this dusky time had begun to pour out all the intensity of his eloquence from a bush not very far off.

Fitzpiers's eyes commanded as much of the ground in front as was open. Entering upon this he saw a figure, whose direction of movement was towards the spot where he sat. The surgeon was quite shrouded from observation by the recessed shadow of the hut, and there was no reason why he should move till the stranger had passed by. The shape resolved itself into a woman's; she was looking on the ground, and walking slowly as if searching for something that had been lost, her course being precisely that of Mr. Melbury's gig. Fitzpiers by a sort of divination jumped to the idea that the figure was Grace's; her nearer

approach made the guess a certainty.

Yes, she was looking for something; and she came round by the prostrate trees that would have been invisible but for the white nakedness which enabled her to avoid them easily. Thus she approached the heap of ashes, and acting upon what was suggested by a still shining ember or two, she took a stick and stirred the heap, which thereupon burst into a flame. On looking around by the light thus obtained she for the first time saw the illumined face of Fitzpiers, precisely in the spot where she had left him.

Grace gave a start and a scream: the place had been associated with him in her thoughts, but she had not expected to find him there still. Fitzpiers lost not a moment in rising and going to her side.

"I frightened you dreadfully, I know," he said. "I ought to have spoken; but I did not at first expect it to be you. I have been sitting here ever since."

He was actually supporting her with his arm, as though under the impression that she was quite overcome, and in danger of falling. As soon as she could collect her ideas she gently withdrew from his grasp, and explained what she had returned for: in getting up or down from the gig, or when sitting by the hut fire, she had dropped her purse.

"Now we will find it," said Fitzpiers.

He threw an armful of last year's leaves on to the fire, which made the flame leap higher, and the encompassing shades to weave themselves into a denser contrast, turning eve into night in a moment. By this radiance they groped about on their hands and knees, till Fitzpiers rested on his elbow, and looked at Grace. "We must always meet in odd circumstances," he said; "and this is one of the oddest. I wonder if it means anything?"

"Oh no, I am sure it doesn't," said Grace in haste, quickly assuming an erect posture. "Pray don't say it any more."

"I hope there was not much money in the purse," said Fitzpiers, rising to his feet more slowly, and brushing the leaves from his trousers.

"Scarcely any. I cared most about the purse itself, because it was given me. Indeed, money is of little more use at Hintock than on Crusoe's island; there's hardly any way of spending it."

They had given up the search when Fitzpiers discerned something by his foot. "Here it is," he said, "so that your father, mother, friend, or ADMIRER will not have his or her feelings hurt by a sense of your negligence after all."

"Oh, he knows nothing of what I do now."

"The admirer?" said Fitzpiers, slyly.

"I don't know if you would call him that," said Grace, with simplicity. "The admirer is a superficial, conditional creature, and this person is quite different."

"He has all the cardinal virtues."

"Perhaps--though I don't know them precisely."

"You unconsciously practise them, Miss Melbury, which is better. According to Schleiermacher they are Self-control, Perseverance, Wisdom, and Love; and his is the best list that I know."

"I am afraid poor--" She was going to say that she feared Winterborne--the giver of the purse years before--had not much perseverance, though he had all the other three; but she determined to go no further in this direction, and was silent.

These half-revelations made a perceptible difference in Fitzpiers. His sense of personal superiority wasted away, and Grace assumed in his eyes the true aspect of a mistress in her lover's regard.

"Miss Melbury," he said, suddenly, "I divine that this virtuous man you mention has been refused by you?"

She could do no otherwise than admit it.

"I do not inquire without good reason. God forbid that I should kneel in another's place at any shrine unfairly. But, my dear Miss Melbury, now that he is gone, may I draw near?"

"I--I can't say anything about that!" she cried, quickly. "Because when a man has been refused you feel pity for him, and like him more than you did before."

This increasing complication added still more value to Grace in the surgeon's eyes: it rendered her adorable. "But cannot you say?" he pleaded, distractedly.

"I'd rather not--I think I must go home at once."

"Oh yes," said Fitzpiers. But as he did not move she felt it awkward to walk straight away from him; and so they stood silently together. A diversion was created by the accident of two birds, that had either been roosting above their heads or nesting there, tumbling one over the other into the hot ashes at their feet, apparently engrossed in a desperate quarrel that prevented the use of their wings. They speedily parted, however, and flew up, and were seen no more.

"That's the end of what is called love!" said some one.

The speaker was neither Grace nor Fitzpiers, but Marty South, who approached with her face turned up to the sky in her endeavor to trace the birds. Suddenly perceiving Grace, she exclaimed, "Oh, Miss Melbury! I have been following they pigeons, and didn't see you. And here's Mr. Winterborne!" she continued, shyly, as she looked towards Fitzpiers, who stood in the background.

"Marty," Grace interrupted. "I want you to walk home with me--will you? Come along." And without lingering longer she took hold of Marty's arm and led her away.

They went between the spectral arms of the peeled trees as they lay, and onward among the growing trees, by a path where there were no oaks, and no barking, and no Fitzpiers--nothing but copse-wood, between which the primroses could be discerned in pale bunches. "I didn't know Mr. Winterborne was there," said Marty, breaking the silence when they had nearly reached Grace's door.

"Nor was he," said Grace.

"But, Miss Melbury, I saw him."

"No," said Grace. "It was somebody else. Giles Winterborne is nothing to me."