

CHAPTER XX.

The leaves over Hintock grew denser in their substance, and the woodland seemed to change from an open filigree to a solid opaque body of infinitely larger shape and importance. The boughs cast green shades, which hurt the complexion of the girls who walked there; and a fringe of them which overhung Mr. Melbury's garden dripped on his seed-plots when it rained, pitting their surface all over as with pock-marks, till Melbury declared that gardens in such a place were no good at all. The two trees that had creaked all the winter left off creaking, the whir of the night-jar, however, forming a very satisfactory continuation of uncanny music from that quarter. Except at mid-day the sun was not seen complete by the Hintock people, but rather in the form of numerous little stars staring through the leaves.

Such an appearance it had on Midsummer Eve of this year, and as the hour grew later, and nine o'clock drew on, the irradiation of the daytime became broken up by weird shadows and ghostly nooks of indistinctness. Imagination could trace upon the trunks and boughs strange faces and figures shaped by the dying lights; the surfaces of the holly-leaves would here and there shine like peeping eyes, while such fragments of the sky as were visible between the trunks assumed the aspect of sheeted forms and cloven tongues. This was before the moonrise. Later on, when that planet was getting command of the upper heaven, and consequently shining with an unbroken face into such open

glades as there were in the neighborhood of the hamlet, it became apparent that the margin of the wood which approached the timber-merchant's premises was not to be left to the customary stillness of that reposeful time.

Fitzpiers having heard a voice or voices, was looking over his garden gate--where he now looked more frequently than into his books--fancying that Grace might be abroad with some friends. He was now irretrievably committed in heart to Grace Melbury, though he was by no means sure that she was so far committed to him. That the Idea had for once completely fulfilled itself in the objective substance--which he had hitherto deemed an impossibility--he was enchanted enough to fancy must be the case at last. It was not Grace who had passed, however, but several of the ordinary village girls in a group--some steadily walking, some in a mood of wild gayety. He quietly asked his landlady, who was also in the garden, what these girls were intending, and she informed him that it being Old Midsummer Eve, they were about to attempt some spell or enchantment which would afford them a glimpse of their future partners for life. She declared it to be an ungodly performance, and one which she for her part would never countenance; saying which, she entered her house and retired to bed.

The young man lit a cigar and followed the bevy of maidens slowly up the road. They had turned into the wood at an opening between Melbury's and Marty South's; but Fitzpiers could easily track them by their voices, low as they endeavored to keep their tones.

In the mean time other inhabitants of Little Hintock had become aware of the nocturnal experiment about to be tried, and were also sauntering stealthily after the frisky maidens. Miss Melbury had been informed by Marty South during the day of the proposed peep into futurity, and, being only a girl like the rest, she was sufficiently interested to wish to see the issue. The moon was so bright and the night so calm that she had no difficulty in persuading Mrs. Melbury to accompany her; and thus, joined by Marty, these went onward in the same direction.

Passing Winterborne's house, they heard a noise of hammering. Marty explained it. This was the last night on which his paternal roof would shelter him, the days of grace since it fell into hand having expired; and Giles was taking down his cupboards and bedsteads with a view to an early exit next morning. His encounter with Mrs. Charmond had cost him dearly.

When they had proceeded a little farther Marty was joined by Grammer Oliver (who was as young as the youngest in such matters), and Grace and Mrs. Melbury went on by themselves till they had arrived at the spot chosen by the village daughters, whose primary intention of keeping their expedition a secret had been quite defeated. Grace and her step-mother paused by a holly-tree; and at a little distance stood Fitzpiers under the shade of a young oak, intently observing Grace, who was in the full rays of the moon.

He watched her without speaking, and unperceived by any but Marty and Grammer, who had drawn up on the dark side of the same holly which sheltered Mrs. and Miss Melbury on its bright side. The two former conversed in low tones.

"If they two come up in Wood next Midsummer Night they'll come as one," said Grammer, signifying Fitzpiers and Grace. "Instead of my skellington he'll carry home her living carcass before long. But though she's a lady in herself, and worthy of any such as he, it do seem to me that he ought to marry somebody more of the sort of Mrs. Charmond, and that Miss Grace should make the best of Winterborne."

Marty returned no comment; and at that minute the girls, some of whom were from Great Hintock, were seen advancing to work the incantation, it being now about midnight.

"Directly we see anything we'll run home as fast as we can," said one, whose courage had begun to fail her. To this the rest assented, not knowing that a dozen neighbors lurked in the bushes around.

"I wish we had not thought of trying this," said another, "but had contented ourselves with the hole-digging to-morrow at twelve, and hearing our husbands' trades. It is too much like having dealings with the Evil One to try to raise their forms."

However, they had gone too far to recede, and slowly began to march

forward in a skirmishing line through the trees towards the deeper recesses of the wood. As far as the listeners could gather, the particular form of black-art to be practised on this occasion was one connected with the sowing of hemp-seed, a handful of which was carried by each girl. At the moment of their advance they looked back, and discerned the figure of Miss Melbury, who, alone of all the observers, stood in the full face of the moonlight, deeply engrossed in the proceedings. By contrast with her life of late years they made her feel as if she had receded a couple of centuries in the world's history. She was rendered doubly conspicuous by her light dress, and after a few whispered words, one of the girls--a bouncing maiden, plighted to young Timothy Tangs--asked her if she would join in. Grace, with some excitement, said that she would, and moved on a little in the rear of the rest.

Soon the listeners could hear nothing of their proceedings beyond the faintest occasional rustle of leaves. Grammer whispered again to Marty: "Why didn't ye go and try your luck with the rest of the maids?"

"I don't believe in it," said Marty, shortly.

"Why, half the parish is here--the silly hussies should have kept it quiet. I see Mr. Winterborne through the leaves, just come up with Robert Creedle. Marty, we ought to act the part o' Providence sometimes. Do go and tell him that if he stands just behind the bush at the bottom of the slope, Miss Grace must pass down it when she comes

back, and she will most likely rush into his arms; for as soon as the clock strikes, they'll bundle back home--along like hares. I've seen such larries before."

"Do you think I'd better?" said Marty, reluctantly.

"Oh yes, he'll bless ye for it."

"I don't want that kind of blessing." But after a moment's thought she went and delivered the information; and Grammer had the satisfaction of seeing Giles walk slowly to the bend in the leafy defile along which Grace would have to return.

Meanwhile Mrs. Melbury, deserted by Grace, had perceived Fitzpiers and Winterborne, and also the move of the latter. An improvement on Grammer's idea entered the mind of Mrs. Melbury, for she had lately discerned what her husband had not--that Grace was rapidly fascinating the surgeon. She therefore drew near to Fitzpiers.

"You should be where Mr. Winterborne is standing," she said to him, significantly. "She will run down through that opening much faster than she went up it, if she is like the rest of the girls."

Fitzpiers did not require to be told twice. He went across to Winterborne and stood beside him. Each knew the probable purpose of the other in standing there, and neither spoke, Fitzpiers scorning to

look upon Winterborne as a rival, and Winterborne adhering to the off-hand manner of indifference which had grown upon him since his dismissal.

Neither Grammer nor Marty South had seen the surgeon's manoeuvre, and, still to help Winterborne, as she supposed, the old woman suggested to the wood-girl that she should walk forward at the heels of Grace, and "tole" her down the required way if she showed a tendency to run in another direction. Poor Marty, always doomed to sacrifice desire to obligation, walked forward accordingly, and waited as a beacon, still and silent, for the retreat of Grace and her giddy companions, now quite out of hearing.

The first sound to break the silence was the distant note of Great Hintock clock striking the significant hour. About a minute later that quarter of the wood to which the girls had wandered resounded with the flapping of disturbed birds; then two or three hares and rabbits bounded down the glade from the same direction, and after these the rustling and crackling of leaves and dead twigs denoted the hurried approach of the adventurers, whose fluttering gowns soon became visible. Miss Melbury, having gone forward quite in the rear of the rest, was one of the first to return, and the excitement being contagious, she ran laughing towards Marty, who still stood as a hand-post to guide her; then, passing on, she flew round the fatal bush where the undergrowth narrowed to a gorge. Marty arrived at her heels just in time to see the result. Fitzpiers had quickly stepped forward

in front of Winterborne, who, disdainingly to shift his position, had turned on his heel, and then the surgeon did what he would not have thought of doing but for Mrs. Melbury's encouragement and the sentiment of an eve which effaced conventionality. Stretching out his arms as the white figure burst upon him, he captured her in a moment, as if she had been a bird.

"Oh!" cried Grace, in her fright.

"You are in my arms, dearest," said Fitzpiers, "and I am going to claim you, and keep you there all our two lives!"

She rested on him like one utterly mastered, and it was several seconds before she recovered from this helplessness. Subdued screams and struggles, audible from neighboring brakes, revealed that there had been other lurkers thereabout for a similar purpose. Grace, unlike most of these companions of hers, instead of gasping and writhing, said in a trembling voice, "Mr. Fitzpiers, will you let me go?"

"Certainly," he said, laughing; "as soon as you have recovered."

She waited another few moments, then quietly and firmly pushed him aside, and glided on her path, the moon whitening her hot blush away. But it had been enough--new relations between them had begun.

The case of the other girls was different, as has been said. They

wrestled and tittered, only escaping after a desperate struggle. Fitzpiers could hear these enactments still going on after Grace had left him, and he remained on the spot where he had caught her, Winterborne having gone away. On a sudden another girl came bounding down the same descent that had been followed by Grace--a fine-framed young woman with naked arms. Seeing Fitzpiers standing there, she said, with playful effrontery, "May'st kiss me if 'canst catch me, Tim!"

Fitzpiers recognized her as Suke Damson, a hoydenish damsel of the hamlet, who was plainly mistaking him for her lover. He was impulsively disposed to profit by her error, and as soon as she began racing away he started in pursuit.

On she went under the boughs, now in light, now in shade, looking over her shoulder at him every few moments and kissing her hand; but so cunningly dodging about among the trees and moon-shades that she never allowed him to get dangerously near her. Thus they ran and doubled, Fitzpiers warming with the chase, till the sound of their companions had quite died away. He began to lose hope of ever overtaking her, when all at once, by way of encouragement, she turned to a fence in which there was a stile and leaped over it. Outside the scene was a changed one--a meadow, where the half-made hay lay about in heaps, in the uninterrupted shine of the now high moon.

Fitzpiers saw in a moment that, having taken to open ground, she had placed herself at his mercy, and he promptly vaulted over after her.

She flitted a little way down the mead, when all at once her light form disappeared as if it had sunk into the earth. She had buried herself in one of the hay-cocks.

Fitzpiers, now thoroughly excited, was not going to let her escape him thus. He approached, and set about turning over the heaps one by one. As soon as he paused, tantalized and puzzled, he was directed anew by an imitative kiss which came from her hiding-place, and by snatches of a local ballad in the smallest voice she could assume:

"O come in from the foggy, foggy dew."

In a minute or two he uncovered her.

"Oh, 'tis not Tim!" said she, burying her face.

Fitzpiers, however, disregarded her resistance by reason of its mildness, stooped and imprinted the purposed kiss, then sunk down on the next hay-cock, panting with his race.

"Whom do you mean by Tim?" he asked, presently.

"My young man, Tim Tangs," said she.

"Now, honor bright, did you really think it was he?"

"I did at first."

"But you didn't at last?"

"I didn't at last."

"Do you much mind that it was not?"

"No," she answered, slyly.

Fitzpiers did not pursue his questioning. In the moonlight Suke looked very beautiful, the scratches and blemishes incidental to her out-door occupation being invisible under these pale rays. While they remain silent the coarse whir of the eternal night-jar burst sarcastically from the top of a tree at the nearest corner of the wood. Besides this not a sound of any kind reached their ears, the time of nightingales being now past, and Hintock lying at a distance of two miles at least. In the opposite direction the hay-field stretched away into remoteness till it was lost to the eye in a soft mist.