

## CHAPTER XXII.

The sunny, leafy week which followed the tender doings of Midsummer Eve brought a visitor to Fitzpiers's door; a voice that he knew sounded in the passage. Mr. Melbury had called. At first he had a particular objection to enter the parlor, because his boots were dusty, but as the surgeon insisted he waived the point and came in.

Looking neither to the right nor to the left, hardly at Fitzpiers himself, he put his hat under his chair, and with a preoccupied gaze at the floor, he said, "I've called to ask you, doctor, quite privately, a question that troubles me. I've a daughter, Grace, an only daughter, as you may have heard. Well, she's been out in the dew--on Midsummer Eve in particular she went out in thin slippers to watch some vagary of the Hintock maids--and she's got a cough, a distinct hemming and hacking, that makes me uneasy. Now, I have decided to send her away to some seaside place for a change--"

"Send her away!" Fitzpiers's countenance had fallen.

"Yes. And the question is, where would you advise me to send her?"

The timber-merchant had happened to call at a moment when Fitzpiers was at the spring-tide of a sentiment that Grace was a necessity of his existence. The sudden pressure of her form upon his breast as she came headlong round the bush had never ceased to linger with him, ever since

he adopted the manoeuvre for which the hour and the moonlight and the occasion had been the only excuse. Now she was to be sent away. Ambition? it could be postponed. Family? culture and reciprocity of tastes had taken the place of family nowadays. He allowed himself to be carried forward on the wave of his desire.

"How strange, how very strange it is," he said, "that you should have come to me about her just now. I have been thinking every day of coming to you on the very same errand."

"Ah!--you have noticed, too, that her health----"

"I have noticed nothing the matter with her health, because there is nothing. But, Mr. Melbury, I have seen your daughter several times by accident. I have admired her infinitely, and I was coming to ask you if I may become better acquainted with her--pay my addresses to her?"

Melbury was looking down as he listened, and did not see the air of half-misgiving at his own rashness that spread over Fitzpiers's face as he made this declaration.

"You have--got to know her?" said Melbury, a spell of dead silence having preceded his utterance, during which his emotion rose with almost visible effect.

"Yes," said Fitzpiers.

"And you wish to become better acquainted with her? You mean with a view to marriage--of course that is what you mean?"

"Yes," said the young man. "I mean, get acquainted with her, with a view to being her accepted lover; and if we suited each other, what would naturally follow."

The timber-merchant was much surprised, and fairly agitated; his hand trembled as he laid by his walking-stick. "This takes me unawares," said he, his voice wellnigh breaking down. "I don't mean that there is anything unexpected in a gentleman being attracted by her; but it did not occur to me that it would be you. I always said," continued he, with a lump in his throat, "that my Grace would make a mark at her own level some day. That was why I educated her. I said to myself, 'I'll do it, cost what it may;' though her mother-law was pretty frightened at my paying out so much money year after year. I knew it would tell in the end. 'Where you've not good material to work on, such doings would be waste and vanity,' I said. 'But where you have that material it is sure to be worth while.'"

"I am glad you don't object," said Fitzpiers, almost wishing that Grace had not been quite so cheap for him.

"If she is willing I don't object, certainly. Indeed," added the honest man, "it would be deceit if I were to pretend to feel anything

else than highly honored personally; and it is a great credit to her to have drawn to her a man of such good professional station and venerable old family. That huntsman-fellow little thought how wrong he was about her! Take her and welcome, sir."

"I'll endeavor to ascertain her mind."

"Yes, yes. But she will be agreeable, I should think. She ought to be."

"I hope she may. Well, now you'll expect to see me frequently."

"Oh yes. But, name it all--about her cough, and her going away. I had quite forgot that that was what I came about."

"I assure you," said the surgeon, "that her cough can only be the result of a slight cold, and it is not necessary to banish her to any seaside place at all."

Melbury looked unconvinced, doubting whether he ought to take Fitzpiers's professional opinion in circumstances which naturally led him to wish to keep her there. The doctor saw this, and honestly dreading to lose sight of her, he said, eagerly, "Between ourselves, if I am successful with her I will take her away myself for a month or two, as soon as we are married, which I hope will be before the chilly weather comes on. This will be so very much better than letting her go

now."

The proposal pleased Melbury much. There could be hardly any danger in postponing any desirable change of air as long as the warm weather lasted, and for such a reason. Suddenly recollecting himself, he said, "Your time must be precious, doctor. I'll get home-along. I am much obliged to ye. As you will see her often, you'll discover for yourself if anything serious is the matter."

"I can assure you it is nothing," said Fitzpiers, who had seen Grace much oftener already than her father knew of.

When he was gone Fitzpiers paused, silent, registering his sensations, like a man who has made a plunge for a pearl into a medium of which he knows not the density or temperature. But he had done it, and Grace was the sweetest girl alive.

As for the departed visitor, his own last words lingered in Melbury's ears as he walked homeward; he felt that what he had said in the emotion of the moment was very stupid, ungentle, and unsuited to a dialogue with an educated gentleman, the smallness of whose practice was more than compensated by the former greatness of his family. He had uttered thoughts before they were weighed, and almost before they were shaped. They had expressed in a certain sense his feeling at Fitzpiers's news, but yet they were not right. Looking on the ground, and planting his stick at each tread as if it were a flag-staff, he

reached his own precincts, where, as he passed through the court, he automatically stopped to look at the men working in the shed and around. One of them asked him a question about wagon-spokes.

"Hey?" said Melbury, looking hard at him. The man repeated the words.

Melbury stood; then turning suddenly away without answering, he went up the court and entered the house. As time was no object with the journeymen, except as a thing to get past, they leisurely surveyed the door through which he had disappeared.

"What maggot has the gaffer got in his head now?" said Tangs the elder.

"Sommit to do with that chiel of his! When you've got a maid of yer own, John Upjohn, that costs ye what she costs him, that will take the squeak out of your Sunday shoes, John! But you'll never be tall enough to accomplish such as she; and 'tis a lucky thing for ye, John, as things be. Well, he ought to have a dozen--that would bring him to reason. I see 'em walking together last Sunday, and when they came to a puddle he lifted her over like a halfpenny doll. He ought to have a dozen; he'd let 'em walk through puddles for themselves then."

Meanwhile Melbury had entered the house with the look of a man who sees a vision before him. His wife was in the room. Without taking off his hat he sat down at random.

"Luce--we've done it!" he said. "Yes--the thing is as I expected. The

spell, that I foresaw might be worked, has worked. She's done it, and done it well. Where is she--Grace, I mean?"

"Up in her room--what has happened!"

Mr. Melbury explained the circumstances as coherently as he could. "I told you so," he said. "A maid like her couldn't stay hid long, even in a place like this. But where is Grace? Let's have her down. Here--Gra-a-ace!"

She appeared after a reasonable interval, for she was sufficiently spoiled by this father of hers not to put herself in a hurry, however impatient his tones. "What is it, father?" said she, with a smile.

"Why, you scamp, what's this you've been doing? Not home here more than six months, yet, instead of confining yourself to your father's rank, making havoc in the educated classes."

Though accustomed to show herself instantly appreciative of her father's meanings, Grace was fairly unable to look anyhow but at a loss now.

"No, no--of course you don't know what I mean, or you pretend you don't; though, for my part, I believe women can see these things through a double hedge. But I suppose I must tell ye. Why, you've flung your grapnel over the doctor, and he's coming courting forthwith."

"Only think of that, my dear! Don't you feel it a triumph?" said Mrs. Melbury.

"Coming courting! I've done nothing to make him," Grace exclaimed.

"'Twasn't necessary that you should, 'Tis voluntary that rules in these things....Well, he has behaved very honorably, and asked my consent. You'll know what to do when he gets here, I dare say. I needn't tell you to make it all smooth for him."

"You mean, to lead him on to marry me?"

"I do. Haven't I educated you for it?"

Grace looked out of the window and at the fireplace with no animation in her face. "Why is it settled off-hand in this way?" said she, coquettishly. "You'll wait till you hear what I think of him, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, of course. But you see what a good thing it will be."

She weighed the statement without speaking.

"You will be restored to the society you've been taken away from," continued her father; "for I don't suppose he'll stay here long."



She admitted the advantage; but it was plain that though Fitzpiers exercised a certain fascination over her when he was present, or even more, an almost psychic influence, and though his impulsive act in the wood had stirred her feelings indescribably, she had never regarded him in the light of a destined husband. "I don't know what to answer," she said. "I have learned that he is very clever."

"He's all right, and he's coming here to see you."

A premonition that she could not resist him if he came strangely moved her. "Of course, father, you remember that it is only lately that Giles--"

"You know that you can't think of him. He has given up all claim to you."

She could not explain the subtleties of her feeling as he could state his opinion, even though she had skill in speech, and her father had none. That Fitzpiers acted upon her like a dram, exciting her, throwing her into a novel atmosphere which biassed her doings until the influence was over, when she felt something of the nature of regret for the mood she had experienced--still more if she reflected on the silent, almost sarcastic, criticism apparent in Winterborne's air towards her--could not be told to this worthy couple in words.

It so happened that on this very day Fitzpiers was called away from Hintock by an engagement to attend some medical meetings, and his visits, therefore, did not begin at once. A note, however, arrived from him addressed to Grace, deploring his enforced absence. As a material object this note was pretty and superfine, a note of a sort that she had been unaccustomed to see since her return to Hintock, except when a school friend wrote to her--a rare instance, for the girls were respecters of persons, and many cooled down towards the timber-dealer's daughter when she was out of sight. Thus the receipt of it pleased her, and she afterwards walked about with a reflective air.

In the evening her father, who knew that the note had come, said, "Why be ye not sitting down to answer your letter? That's what young folks did in my time."

She replied that it did not require an answer.

"Oh, you know best," he said. Nevertheless, he went about his business doubting if she were right in not replying; possibly she might be so mismanaging matters as to risk the loss of an alliance which would bring her much happiness.

Melbury's respect for Fitzpiers was based less on his professional position, which was not much, than on the standing of his family in the county in by-gone days. That implicit faith in members of

long-established families, as such, irrespective of their personal condition or character, which is still found among old-fashioned people in the rural districts reached its full intensity in Melbury. His daughter's suitor was descended from a family he had heard of in his grandfather's time as being once great, a family which had conferred its name upon a neighboring village; how, then, could anything be amiss in this betrothal?

"I must keep her up to this," he said to his wife. "She sees it is for her happiness; but still she's young, and may want a little prompting from an older tongue."