CHAPTER XXIII.

With this in view he took her out for a walk, a custom of his when he wished to say anything specially impressive. Their way was over the top of that lofty ridge dividing their woodland from the cider district, whence they had in the spring beheld the miles of apple-trees in bloom. All was now deep green. The spot recalled to Grace's mind the last occasion of her presence there, and she said, "The promise of an enormous apple-crop is fulfilling itself, is it not? I suppose Giles is getting his mills and presses ready."

This was just what her father had not come there to talk about. Without replying he raised his arm, and moved his finger till he fixed it at a point. "There," he said, "you see that plantation reaching over the hill like a great slug, and just behind the hill a particularly green sheltered bottom? That's where Mr. Fitzpiers's family were lords of the manor for I don't know how many hundred years, and there stands the village of Buckbury Fitzpiers. A wonderful property 'twas--wonderful!"

"But they are not lords of the manor there now."

"Why, no. But good and great things die as well as little and foolish. The only ones representing the family now, I believe, are our doctor and a maiden lady living I don't know where. You can't help being happy, Grace, in allying yourself with such a romantical family. You'll feel as if you've stepped into history."

"We've been at Hintock as long as they've been at Buckbury; is it not so? You say our name occurs in old deeds continually."

"Oh yes--as yeomen, copyholders, and such like. But think how much better this will be for 'ee. You'll be living a high intellectual life, such as has now become natural to you; and though the doctor's practice is small here, he'll no doubt go to a dashing town when he's got his hand in, and keep a stylish carriage, and you'll be brought to know a good many ladies of excellent society. If you should ever meet me then, Grace, you can drive past me, looking the other way. I shouldn't expect you to speak to me, or wish such a thing, unless it happened to be in some lonely, private place where 'twouldn't lower ye at all. Don't think such men as neighbor Giles your equal. He and I shall be good friends enough, but he's not for the like of you. He's lived our rough and homely life here, and his wife's life must be rough and homely likewise."

So much pressure could not but produce some displacement. As Grace was left very much to herself, she took advantage of one fine day before Fitzpiers's return to drive into the aforesaid vale where stood the village of Buckbury Fitzpiers. Leaving her father's man at the inn with the horse and gig, she rambled onward to the ruins of a castle, which stood in a field hard by. She had no doubt that it represented the ancient stronghold of the Fitzpiers family.

The remains were few, and consisted mostly of remnants of the lower vaulting, supported on low stout columns surmounted by the crochet capital of the period. The two or three arches of these vaults that were still in position were utilized by the adjoining farmer as shelter for his calves, the floor being spread with straw, amid which the young creatures rustled, cooling their thirsty tongues by licking the quaint Norman carving, which glistened with the moisture. It was a degradation of even such a rude form of art as this to be treatad so grossly, she thought, and for the first time the family of Fitzpiers assumed in her imagination the hues of a melancholy romanticism.

It was soon time to drive home, and she traversed the distance with a preoccupied mind. The idea of so modern a man in science and aesthetics as the young surgeon springing out of relics so ancient was a kind of novelty she had never before experienced. The combination lent him a social and intellectual interest which she dreaded, so much weight did it add to the strange influence he exercised upon her whenever he came near her.

In an excitement which was not love, not ambition, rather a fearful consciousness of hazard in the air, she awaited his return.

Meanwhile her father was awaiting him also. In his house there was an old work on medicine, published towards the end of the last century, and to put himself in harmony with events Melbury spread this work on his knees when he had done his day's business, and read about Galen,

Hippocrates, and Herophilus--of the dogmatic, the empiric, the hermetical, and other sects of practitioners that have arisen in history; and thence proceeded to the classification of maladies and the rules for their treatment, as laid down in this valuable book with absolute precision. Melbury regretted that the treatise was so old, fearing that he might in consequence be unable to hold as complete a conversation as he could wish with Mr. Fitzpiers, primed, no doubt, with more recent discoveries.

The day of Fitzpiers's return arrived, and he sent to say that he would call immediately. In the little time that was afforded for putting the house in order the sweeping of Melbury's parlor was as the sweeping of the parlor at the Interpreter's which wellnigh choked the Pilgrim. At the end of it Mrs. Melbury sat down, folded her hands and lips, and waited. Her husband restlessly walked in and out from the timber-yard, stared at the interior of the room, jerked out "ay, ay," and retreated again. Between four and five Fitzpiers arrived, hitching his horse to the hook outside the door.

As soon as he had walked in and perceived that Grace was not in the room, he seemed to have a misgiving. Nothing less than her actual presence could long keep him to the level of this impassioned enterprise, and that lacking he appeared as one who wished to retrace his steps.

He mechanically talked at what he considered a woodland matron's level

of thought till a rustling was heard on the stairs, and Grace came in. Fitzpiers was for once as agitated as she. Over and above the genuine emotion which she raised in his heart there hung the sense that he was casting a die by impulse which he might not have thrown by judgment.

Mr. Melbury was not in the room. Having to attend to matters in the yard, he had delayed putting on his afternoon coat and waistcoat till the doctor's appearance, when, not wishing to be backward in receiving him, he entered the parlor hastily buttoning up those garments. Grace's fastidiousness was a little distressed that Fitzpiers should see by this action the strain his visit was putting upon her father; and to make matters worse for her just then, old Grammer seemed to have a passion for incessantly pumping in the back kitchen, leaving the doors open so that the banging and splashing were distinct above the parlor conversation.

Whenever the chat over the tea sank into pleasant desultoriness Mr. Melbury broke in with speeches of labored precision on very remote topics, as if he feared to let Fitzpiers's mind dwell critically on the subject nearest the hearts of all. In truth a constrained manner was natural enough in Melbury just now, for the greatest interest of his life was reaching its crisis. Could the real have been beheld instead of the corporeal merely, the corner of the room in which he sat would have been filled with a form typical of anxious suspense, large-eyed, tight-lipped, awaiting the issue. That paternal hopes and fears so intense should be bound up in the person of one child so peculiarly

circumstanced, and not have dispersed themselves over the larger field of a whole family, involved dangerous risks to future happiness.

Fitzpiers did not stay more than an hour, but that time had apparently advanced his sentiments towards Grace, once and for all, from a vaguely liquescent to an organic shape. She would not have accompanied him to the door in response to his whispered "Come!" if her mother had not said in a matter-of-fact way, "Of course, Grace; go to the door with Mr. Fitzpiers." Accordingly Grace went, both her parents remaining in the room. When the young pair were in the great brick-floored hall the lover took the girl's hand in his, drew it under his arm, and thus led her on to the door, where he stealthily kissed her.

She broke from him trembling, blushed and turned aside, hardly knowing how things had advanced to this. Fitzpiers drove off, kissing his hand to her, and waving it to Melbury who was visible through the window. Her father returned the surgeon's action with a great flourish of his own hand and a satisfied smile.

The intoxication that Fitzpiers had, as usual, produced in Grace's brain during the visit passed off somewhat with his withdrawal. She felt like a woman who did not know what she had been doing for the previous hour, but supposed with trepidation that the afternoon's proceedings, though vague, had amounted to an engagement between herself and the handsome, coercive, irresistible Fitzpiers.

This visit was a type of many which followed it during the long summer days of that year. Grace was borne along upon a stream of reasonings, arguments, and persuasions, supplemented, it must be added, by inclinations of her own at times. No woman is without aspirations, which may be innocent enough within certain limits; and Grace had been so trained socially, and educated intellectually, as to see clearly enough a pleasure in the position of wife to such a man as Fitzpiers. His material standing of itself, either present or future, had little in it to give her ambition, but the possibilities of a refined and cultivated inner life, of subtle psychological intercourse, had their charm. It was this rather than any vulgar idea of marrying well which caused her to float with the current, and to yield to the immense influence which Fitzpiers exercised over her whenever she shared his society.

Any observer would shrewdly have prophesied that whether or not she loved him as yet in the ordinary sense, she was pretty sure to do so in time.

One evening just before dusk they had taken a rather long walk together, and for a short cut homeward passed through the shrubberies of Hintock House--still deserted, and still blankly confronting with its sightless shuttered windows the surrounding foliage and slopes. Grace was tired, and they approached the wall, and sat together on one of the stone sills--still warm with the sun that had been pouring its

rays upon them all the afternoon.

"This place would just do for us, would it not, dearest," said her betrothed, as they sat, turning and looking idly at the old facade.

"Oh yes," said Grace, plainly showing that no such fancy had ever crossed her mind. "She is away from home still," Grace added in a minute, rather sadly, for she could not forget that she had somehow lost the valuable friendship of the lady of this bower.

"Who is?--oh, you mean Mrs. Charmond. Do you know, dear, that at one time I thought you lived here."

"Indeed!" said Grace. "How was that?"

He explained, as far as he could do so without mentioning his disappointment at finding it was otherwise; and then went on: "Well, never mind that. Now I want to ask you something. There is one detail of our wedding which I am sure you will leave to me. My inclination is not to be married at the horrid little church here, with all the yokels staring round at us, and a droning parson reading."

"Where, then, can it be? At a church in town?"

"No. Not at a church at all. At a registry office. It is a quieter, snugger, and more convenient place in every way."

"Oh," said she, with real distress. "How can I be married except at church, and with all my dear friends round me?"

"Yeoman Winterborne among them."

"Yes--why not? You know there was nothing serious between him and me."

"You see, dear, a noisy bell-ringing marriage at church has this objection in our case: it would be a thing of report a long way round. Now I would gently, as gently as possible, indicate to you how inadvisable such publicity would be if we leave Hintock, and I purchase the practice that I contemplate purchasing at Budmouth--hardly more than twenty miles off. Forgive my saying that it will be far better if nobody there knows where you come from, nor anything about your parents. Your beauty and knowledge and manners will carry you anywhere if you are not hampered by such retrospective criticism."

"But could it not be a quiet ceremony, even at church?" she pleaded.

"I don't see the necessity of going there!" he said, a trifle impatiently. "Marriage is a civil contract, and the shorter and simpler it is made the better. People don't go to church when they take a house, or even when they make a will."

"Oh, Edgar--I don't like to hear you speak like that."

"Well, well--I didn't mean to. But I have mentioned as much to your father, who has made no objection; and why should you?"

She gave way, deeming the point one on which she ought to allow sentiment to give way to policy--if there were indeed policy in his plan. But she was indefinably depressed as they walked homeward.