

CHAPTER XXIV.

He left her at the door of her father's house. As he receded, and was clasped out of sight by the filmy shades, he impressed Grace as a man who hardly appertained to her existence at all. Cleverer, greater than herself, one outside her mental orbit, as she considered him, he seemed to be her ruler rather than her equal, protector, and dear familiar friend.

The disappointment she had experienced at his wish, the shock given to her girlish sensibilities by his irreverent views of marriage, together with the sure and near approach of the day fixed for committing her future to his keeping, made her so restless that she could scarcely sleep at all that night. She rose when the sparrows began to walk out of the roof-holes, sat on the floor of her room in the dim light, and by-and-by peeped out behind the window-curtains. It was even now day out-of-doors, though the tones of morning were feeble and wan, and it was long before the sun would be perceptible in this overshadowed vale. Not a sound came from any of the out-houses as yet. The tree-trunks, the road, the out-buildings, the garden, every object wore that aspect of mesmeric fixity which the suspensive quietude of daybreak lends to such scenes. Outside her window helpless immobility seemed to be combined with intense consciousness; a meditative inertness possessed all things, oppressively contrasting with her own active emotions. Beyond the road were some cottage roofs and orchards; over these roofs and over the apple-trees behind, high up the slope, and backed by the

plantation on the crest, was the house yet occupied by her future husband, the rough-cast front showing whitely through its creepers. The window-shutters were closed, the bedroom curtains closely drawn, and not the thinnest coil of smoke rose from the rugged chimneys.

Something broke the stillness. The front door of the house she was gazing at opened softly, and there came out into the porch a female figure, wrapped in a large shawl, beneath which was visible the white skirt of a long loose garment. A gray arm, stretching from within the porch, adjusted the shawl over the woman's shoulders; it was withdrawn and disappeared, the door closing behind her.

The woman went quickly down the box-edged path between the raspberries and currants, and as she walked her well-developed form and gait betrayed her individuality. It was Suke Damson, the affianced one of simple young Tim Tangs. At the bottom of the garden she entered the shelter of the tall hedge, and only the top of her head could be seen hastening in the direction of her own dwelling.

Grace had recognized, or thought she recognized, in the gray arm stretching from the porch, the sleeve of a dressing-gown which Mr. Fitzpiers had been wearing on her own memorable visit to him. Her face fired red. She had just before thought of dressing herself and taking a lonely walk under the trees, so coolly green this early morning; but she now sat down on her bed and fell into reverie. It seemed as if hardly any time had passed when she heard the household moving briskly

about, and breakfast preparing down-stairs; though, on rousing herself to robe and descend, she found that the sun was throwing his rays completely over the tree-tops, a progress of natural phenomena denoting that at least three hours had elapsed since she last looked out of the window.

When attired she searched about the house for her father; she found him at last in the garden, stooping to examine the potatoes for signs of disease. Hearing her rustle, he stood up and stretched his back and arms, saying, "Morning t'ye, Gracie. I congratulate ye. It is only a month to-day to the time!"

She did not answer, but, without lifting her dress, waded between the dewy rows of tall potato-green into the middle of the plot where he was.

"I have been thinking very much about my position this morning--ever since it was light," she began, excitedly, and trembling so that she could hardly stand. "And I feel it is a false one. I wish not to marry Mr. Fitzpiers. I wish not to marry anybody; but I'll marry Giles Winterborne if you say I must as an alternative."

Her father's face settled into rigidity, he turned pale, and came deliberately out of the plot before he answered her. She had never seen him look so incensed before.

"Now, hearken to me," he said. "There's a time for a woman to alter

her mind; and there's a time when she can no longer alter it, if she has any right eye to her parents' honor and the seemliness of things. That time has come. I won't say to ye, you SHALL marry him. But I will say that if you refuse, I shall forever be ashamed and a-weary of ye as a daughter, and shall look upon you as the hope of my life no more. What do you know about life and what it can bring forth, and how you ought to act to lead up to best ends? Oh, you are an ungrateful maid, Grace; you've seen that fellow Giles, and he has got over ye; that's where the secret lies, I'll warrant me!"

"No, father, no! It is not Giles--it is something I cannot tell you of--"

"Well, make fools of us all; make us laughing-stocks; break it off; have your own way."

"But who knows of the engagement as yet? how can breaking it disgrace you?"

Melbury then by degrees admitted that he had mentioned the engagement to this acquaintance and to that, till she perceived that in his restlessness and pride he had published it everywhere. She went dismally away to a bower of laurel at the top of the garden. Her father followed her.

"It is that Giles Winterborne!" he said, with an upbraiding gaze at her.

"No, it is not; though for that matter you encouraged him once," she said, troubled to the verge of despair. "It is not Giles, it is Mr. Fitzpiers."

"You've had a tiff--a lovers' tiff--that's all, I suppose

"It is some woman--"

"Ay, ay; you are jealous. The old story. Don't tell me. Now do you bide here. I'll send Fitzpiers to you. I saw him smoking in front of his house but a minute by-gone."

He went off hastily out of the garden-gate and down the lane. But she would not stay where she was; and edging through a slit in the garden-fence, walked away into the wood. Just about here the trees were large and wide apart, and there was no undergrowth, so that she could be seen to some distance; a sylph-like, greenish-white creature, as toned by the sunlight and leafage. She heard a foot-fall crushing dead leaves behind her, and found herself reconnoitered by Fitzpiers himself, approaching gay and fresh as the morning around them.

His remote gaze at her had been one of mild interest rather than of rapture. But she looked so lovely in the green world about her, her pink cheeks, her simple light dress, and the delicate flexibility of her movement acquired such rarity from their wild-wood setting, that

his eyes kindled as he drew near.

"My darling, what is it? Your father says you are in the pouts, and jealous, and I don't know what. Ha! ha! ha! as if there were any rival to you, except vegetable nature, in this home of recluses! We know better."

"Jealous; oh no, it is not so," said she, gravely. "That's a mistake of his and yours, sir. I spoke to him so closely about the question of marriage with you that he did not apprehend my state of mind."

"But there's something wrong--eh?" he asked, eying her narrowly, and bending to kiss her. She shrank away, and his purposed kiss miscarried.

"What is it?" he said, more seriously for this little defeat.

She made no answer beyond, "Mr. Fitzpiers, I have had no breakfast, I must go in."

"Come," he insisted, fixing his eyes upon her. "Tell me at once, I say."

It was the greater strength against the smaller; but she was mastered less by his manner than by her own sense of the unfairness of silence.

"I looked out of the window," she said, with hesitation. "I'll tell you by-and-by. I must go in-doors. I have had no breakfast."

By a sort of divination his conjecture went straight to the fact. "Nor I," said he, lightly. "Indeed, I rose late to-day. I have had a broken night, or rather morning. A girl of the village--I don't know her name--came and rang at my bell as soon as it was light--between four and five, I should think it was--perfectly maddened with an aching tooth. As no-body heard her ring, she threw some gravel at my window, till at last I heard her and slipped on my dressing-gown and went down. The poor thing begged me with tears in her eyes to take out her tormentor, if I dragged her head off. Down she sat and out it came--a lovely molar, not a speck upon it; and off she went with it in her handkerchief, much contented, though it would have done good work for her for fifty years to come."

It was all so plausible--so completely explained. Knowing nothing of the incident in the wood on old Midsummer-eve, Grace felt that her suspicions were unworthy and absurd, and with the readiness of an honest heart she jumped at the opportunity of honoring his word. At the moment of her mental liberation the bushes about the garden had moved, and her father emerged into the shady glade. "Well, I hope it is made up?" he said, cheerily.

"Oh yes," said Fitzpiers, with his eyes fixed on Grace, whose eyes were shyly bent downward.

"Now," said her father, "tell me, the pair of ye, that you still mean

to take one another for good and all; and on the strength o't you shall have another couple of hundred paid down. I swear it by the name."

Fitzpiers took her hand. "We declare it, do we not, my dear Grace?" said he.

Relieved of her doubt, somewhat overawed, and ever anxious to please, she was disposed to settle the matter; yet, womanlike, she would not relinquish her opportunity of asking a concession of some sort. "If our wedding can be at church, I say yes," she answered, in a measured voice. "If not, I say no."

Fitzpiers was generous in his turn. "It shall be so," he rejoined, gracefully. "To holy church we'll go, and much good may it do us."

They returned through the bushes indoors, Grace walking, full of thought between the other two, somewhat comforted, both by Fitzpiers's ingenious explanation and by the sense that she was not to be deprived of a religious ceremony. "So let it be," she said to herself. "Pray God it is for the best."

From this hour there was no serious attempt at recalcitration on her part. Fitzpiers kept himself continually near her, dominating any rebellious impulse, and shaping her will into passive concurrence with all his desires. Apart from his lover-like anxiety to possess her, the few golden hundreds of the timber-dealer, ready to hand, formed a warm

background to Grace's lovely face, and went some way to remove his uneasiness at the prospect of endangering his professional and social chances by an alliance with the family of a simple countryman.

The interim closed up its perspective surely and silently. Whenever Grace had any doubts of her position, the sense of contracting time was like a shortening chamber: at other moments she was comparatively blithe. Day after day waxed and waned; the one or two woodmen who sawed, shaped, spokeshaved on her father's premises at this inactive season of the year, regularly came and unlocked the doors in the morning, locked them in the evening, supped, leaned over their garden-gates for a whiff of evening air, and to catch any last and farthest throb of news from the outer world, which entered and expired at Little Hintock like the exhausted swell of a wave in some innermost cavern of some innermost creek of an embayed sea; yet no news interfered with the nuptial purpose at their neighbor's house. The sappy green twig-tips of the season's growth would not, she thought, be appreciably woodier on the day she became a wife, so near was the time; the tints of the foliage would hardly have changed. Everything was so much as usual that no itinerant stranger would have supposed a woman's fate to be hanging in the balance at that summer's decline.

But there were preparations, imaginable readily enough by those who had special knowledge. In the remote and fashionable town of Sandbourne something was growing up under the hands of several persons who had

never seen Grace Melbury, never would see her, or care anything about her at all, though their creation had such interesting relation to her life that it would enclose her very heart at a moment when that heart would beat, if not with more emotional ardor, at least with more emotional turbulence than at any previous time.

Why did Mrs. Dollery's van, instead of passing along at the end of the smaller village to Great Hintock direct, turn one Saturday night into Little Hintock Lane, and never pull up till it reached Mr. Melbury's gates? The gilding shine of evening fell upon a large, flat box not less than a yard square, and safely tied with cord, as it was handed out from under the tilt with a great deal of care. But it was not heavy for its size; Mrs. Dollery herself carried it into the house. Tim Tangs, the hollow-turner, Bawtree, Suke Damson, and others, looked knowing, and made remarks to each other as they watched its entrance. Melbury stood at the door of the timber-shed in the attitude of a man to whom such an arrival was a trifling domestic detail with which he did not condescend to be concerned. Yet he well divined the contents of that box, and was in truth all the while in a pleasant exaltation at the proof that thus far, at any rate, no disappointment had supervened. While Mrs. Dollery remained--which was rather long, from her sense of the importance of her errand--he went into the out-house; but as soon as she had had her say, been paid, and had rumbled away, he entered the dwelling, to find there what he knew he should find--his wife and daughter in a flutter of excitement over the wedding-gown, just arrived from the leading dress-maker of Sandbourne watering-place aforesaid.

During these weeks Giles Winterborne was nowhere to be seen or heard of. At the close of his tenure in Hintock he had sold some of his furniture, packed up the rest--a few pieces endeared by associations, or necessary to his occupation--in the house of a friendly neighbor, and gone away. People said that a certain laxity had crept into his life; that he had never gone near a church latterly, and had been sometimes seen on Sundays with unblackened boots, lying on his elbow under a tree, with a cynical gaze at surrounding objects. He was likely to return to Hintock when the cider-making season came round, his apparatus being stored there, and travel with his mill and press from village to village.

The narrow interval that stood before the day diminished yet. There was in Grace's mind sometimes a certain anticipative satisfaction, the satisfaction of feeling that she would be the heroine of an hour; moreover, she was proud, as a cultivated woman, to be the wife of a cultivated man. It was an opportunity denied very frequently to young women in her position, nowadays not a few; those in whom parental discovery of the value of education has implanted tastes which parental circles fail to gratify. But what an attenuation was this cold pride of the dream of her youth, in which she had pictured herself walking in state towards the altar, flushed by the purple light and bloom of her own passion, without a single misgiving as to the sealing of the bond, and fervently receiving as her due

"The homage of a thousand hearts; the fond, deep love of one."

Everything had been clear then, in imagination; now something was undefined. She had little carking anxieties; a curious fatefulness seemed to rule her, and she experienced a mournful want of some one to confide in.

The day loomed so big and nigh that her prophetic ear could, in fancy, catch the noise of it, hear the murmur of the villagers as she came out of church, imagine the jangle of the three thin-toned Hintock bells. The dialogues seemed to grow louder, and the ding-ding-dong of those three crazed bells more persistent. She awoke: the morning had come.

Five hours later she was the wife of Fitzpiers.