

CHAPTER XXV.

The chief hotel at Sherton-Abbas was an old stone-fronted inn with a yawning arch, under which vehicles were driven by stooping coachmen to back premises of wonderful commodiousness. The windows to the street were mullioned into narrow lights, and only commanded a view of the opposite houses; hence, perhaps, it arose that the best and most luxurious private sitting-room that the inn could afford over-looked the nether parts of the establishment, where beyond the yard were to be seen gardens and orchards, now bossed, nay incrustated, with scarlet and gold fruit, stretching to infinite distance under a luminous lavender mist. The time was early autumn,

"When the fair apples, red as evening sky,
Do bend the tree unto the fruitful ground,
When juicy pears, and berries of black dye,
Do dance in air, and call the eyes around."

The landscape confronting the window might, indeed, have been part of the identical stretch of country which the youthful Chatterton had in his mind.

In this room sat she who had been the maiden Grace Melbury till the finger of fate touched her and turned her to a wife. It was two months after the wedding, and she was alone. Fitzpiers had walked out to see

the abbey by the light of sunset, but she had been too fatigued to accompany him. They had reached the last stage of a long eight-weeks' tour, and were going on to Hintock that night.

In the yard, between Grace and the orchards, there progressed a scene natural to the locality at this time of the year. An apple-mill and press had been erected on the spot, to which some men were bringing fruit from divers points in mawn-baskets, while others were grinding them, and others wringing down the pomace, whose sweet juice gushed forth into tubs and pails. The superintendent of these proceedings, to whom the others spoke as master, was a young yeoman of prepossessing manner and aspect, whose form she recognized in a moment. He had hung his coat to a nail of the out-house wall, and wore his shirt-sleeves rolled up beyond his elbows, to keep them unstained while he rammed the pomace into the bags of horse-hair. Fragments of apple-rind had alighted upon the brim of his hat--probably from the bursting of a bag--while brown pips of the same fruit were sticking among the down upon his fine, round arms.

She realized in a moment how he had come there. Down in the heart of the apple country nearly every farmer kept up a cider-making apparatus and wring-house for his own use, building up the pomace in great straw "cheeses," as they were called; but here, on the margin of Pomona's plain, was a debatable land neither orchard nor sylvan exclusively, where the apple produce was hardly sufficient to warrant each proprietor in keeping a mill of his own. This was the field of the

travelling cider-maker. His press and mill were fixed to wheels instead of being set up in a cider-house; and with a couple of horses, buckets, tubs, strainers, and an assistant or two, he wandered from place to place, deriving very satisfactory returns for his trouble in such a prolific season as the present.

The back parts of the town were just now abounding with apple-gatherings. They stood in the yards in carts, baskets, and loose heaps; and the blue, stagnant air of autumn which hung over everything was heavy with a sweet cidery smell. Cakes of pomace lay against the walls in the yellow sun, where they were drying to be used as fuel. Yet it was not the great make of the year as yet; before the standard crop came in there accumulated, in abundant times like this, a large superfluity of early apples, and windfalls from the trees of later harvest, which would not keep long. Thus, in the baskets, and quivering in the hopper of the mill, she saw specimens of mixed dates, including the mellow countenances of streaked-jacks, codlins, costards, stubbards, ratheripes, and other well-known friends of her ravenous youth.

Grace watched the head-man with interest. The slightest sigh escaped her. Perhaps she thought of the day--not so far distant--when that friend of her childhood had met her by her father's arrangement in this same town, warm with hope, though diffident, and trusting in a promise rather implied than given. Or she might have thought of days earlier yet--days of childhood--when her mouth was somewhat more ready to

receive a kiss from his than was his to bestow one. However, all that was over. She had felt superior to him then, and she felt superior to him now.

She wondered why he never looked towards her open window. She did not know that in the slight commotion caused by their arrival at the inn that afternoon Winterborne had caught sight of her through the archway, had turned red, and was continuing his work with more concentrated attention on the very account of his discovery. Robert Creedle, too, who travelled with Giles, had been incidentally informed by the hostler that Dr. Fitzpiers and his young wife were in the hotel, after which news Creedle kept shaking his head and saying to himself, "Ah!" very audibly, between his thrusts at the screw of the cider-press.

"Why the deuce do you sigh like that, Robert?" asked Winterborne, at last.

"Ah, maister--'tis my thoughts--'tis my thoughts!...Yes, ye've lost a hundred load o' timber well seasoned; ye've lost five hundred pound in good money; ye've lost the stone-windered house that's big enough to hold a dozen families; ye've lost your share of half a dozen good wagons and their horses--all lost!--through your letting slip she that was once yer own!"

"Good God, Creedle, you'll drive me mad!" said Giles, sternly. "Don't speak of that any more!"

Thus the subject had ended in the yard. Meanwhile, the passive cause of all this loss still regarded the scene. She was beautifully dressed; she was seated in the most comfortable room that the inn afforded; her long journey had been full of variety, and almost luxuriously performed--for Fitzpiers did not study economy where pleasure was in question. Hence it perhaps arose that Giles and all his belongings seemed sorry and common to her for the moment--moving in a plane so far removed from her own of late that she could scarcely believe she had ever found congruity therein. "No--I could never have married him!" she said, gently shaking her head. "Dear father was right. It would have been too coarse a life for me." And she looked at the rings of sapphire and opal upon her white and slender fingers that had been gifts from Fitzpiers.

Seeing that Giles still kept his back turned, and with a little of the above-described pride of life--easily to be understood, and possibly excused, in a young, inexperienced woman who thought she had married well--she said at last, with a smile on her lips, "Mr. Winterborne!"

He appeared to take no heed, and she said a second time, "Mr. Winterborne!"

Even now he seemed not to hear, though a person close enough to him to see the expression of his face might have doubted it; and she said a third time, with a timid loudness, "Mr. Winterborne! What, have you

forgotten my voice?" She remained with her lips parted in a welcoming smile.

He turned without surprise, and came deliberately towards the window. "Why do you call me?" he said, with a sternness that took her completely unawares, his face being now pale. "Is it not enough that you see me here moiling and muddling for my daily bread while you are sitting there in your success, that you can't refrain from opening old wounds by calling out my name?"

She flushed, and was struck dumb for some moments; but she forgave his unreasoning anger, knowing so well in what it had its root. "I am sorry I offended you by speaking," she replied, meekly. "Believe me, I did not intend to do that. I could hardly sit here so near you without a word of recognition."

Winterborne's heart had swollen big, and his eyes grown moist by this time, so much had the gentle answer of that familiar voice moved him. He assured her hurriedly, and without looking at her, that he was not angry. He then managed to ask her, in a clumsy, constrained way, if she had had a pleasant journey, and seen many interesting sights. She spoke of a few places that she had visited, and so the time passed till he withdrew to take his place at one of the levers which pulled round the screw.

Forgotten her voice! Indeed, he had not forgotten her voice, as his

bitterness showed. But though in the heat of the moment he had reproached her keenly, his second mood was a far more tender one--that which could regard her renunciation of such as he as her glory and her privilege, his own fidelity notwithstanding. He could have declared with a contemporary poet--

"If I forget,
The salt creek may forget the ocean;
If I forget
The heart whence flows my heart's bright motion,
May I sink meanlier than the worst
Abandoned, outcast, crushed, accurst,
If I forget.

"Though you forget,
No word of mine shall mar your pleasure;
Though you forget,
You filled my barren life with treasure,
You may withdraw the gift you gave;
You still are queen, I still am slave,
Though you forget."

She had tears in her eyes at the thought that she could not remind him of what he ought to have remembered; that not herself but the pressure of events had dissipated the dreams of their early youth. Grace was

thus unexpectedly worsted in her encounter with her old friend. She had opened the window with a faint sense of triumph, but he had turned it into sadness; she did not quite comprehend the reason why. In truth it was because she was not cruel enough in her cruelty. If you have to use the knife, use it, say the great surgeons; and for her own peace Grace should have contemned Winterborne thoroughly or not at all. As it was, on closing the window an indescribable, some might have said dangerous, pity quavered in her bosom for him.

Presently her husband entered the room, and told her what a wonderful sunset there was to be seen.

"I have not noticed it. But I have seen somebody out there that we know," she replied, looking into the court.

Fitzpiers followed the direction of her eyes, and said he did not recognize anybody.

"Why, Mr. Winterborne--there he is, cider-making. He combines that with his other business, you know."

"Oh--that fellow," said Fitzpiers, his curiosity becoming extinct.

She, reproachfully: "What, call Mr. Winterborne a fellow, Edgar? It is true I was just saying to myself that I never could have married him; but I have much regard for him, and always shall."

"Well, do by all means, my dear one. I dare say I am inhuman, and supercilious, and contemptibly proud of my poor old ramshackle family; but I do honestly confess to you that I feel as if I belonged to a different species from the people who are working in that yard."

"And from me too, then. For my blood is no better than theirs."

He looked at her with a droll sort of awakening. It was, indeed, a startling anomaly that this woman of the tribe without should be standing there beside him as his wife, if his sentiments were as he had said. In their travels together she had ranged so unerringly at his level in ideas, tastes, and habits that he had almost forgotten how his heart had played havoc with his principles in taking her to him.

"Ah YOU--you are refined and educated into something quite different," he said, self-assuringly.

"I don't quite like to think that," she murmured with soft regret. "And I think you underestimate Giles Winterborne. Remember, I was brought up with him till I was sent away to school, so I cannot be radically different. At any rate, I don't feel so. That is, no doubt, my fault, and a great blemish in me. But I hope you will put up with it, Edgar."

Fitzpiers said that he would endeavor to do so; and as it was now getting on for dusk, they prepared to perform the last stage of their

journey, so as to arrive at Hintock before it grew very late.

In less than half an hour they started, the cider-makers in the yard having ceased their labors and gone away, so that the only sounds audible there now were the trickling of the juice from the tightly screwed press, and the buzz of a single wasp, which had drunk itself so tipsy that it was unconscious of nightfall. Grace was very cheerful at the thought of being soon in her sylvan home, but Fitzpiers sat beside her almost silent. An indescribable oppressiveness had overtaken him with the near approach of the journey's end and the realities of life that lay there.

"You don't say a word, Edgar," she observed. "Aren't you glad to get back? I am."

"You have friends here. I have none."

"But my friends are yours."

"Oh yes--in that sense."

The conversation languished, and they drew near the end of Hintock Lane. It had been decided that they should, at least for a time, take up their abode in her father's roomy house, one wing of which was quite at their service, being almost disused by the Melburys. Workmen had been painting, papering, and whitewashing this set of rooms in the

wedded pair's absence; and so scrupulous had been the timber-dealer that there should occur no hitch or disappointment on their arrival, that not the smallest detail remained undone. To make it all complete a ground-floor room had been fitted up as a surgery, with an independent outer door, to which Fitzpiers's brass plate was screwed--for mere ornament, such a sign being quite superfluous where everybody knew the latitude and longitude of his neighbors for miles round.

Melbury and his wife welcomed the twain with affection, and all the house with deference. They went up to explore their rooms, that opened from a passage on the left hand of the staircase, the entrance to which could be shut off on the landing by a door that Melbury had hung for the purpose. A friendly fire was burning in the grate, although it was not cold. Fitzpiers said it was too soon for any sort of meal, they only having dined shortly before leaving Sherton-Abbas. He would walk across to his old lodging, to learn how his locum tenens had got on in his absence.

In leaving Melbury's door he looked back at the house. There was economy in living under that roof, and economy was desirable, but in some way he was dissatisfied with the arrangement; it immersed him so deeply in son-in-lawship to Melbury. He went on to his former residence. His deputy was out, and Fitzpiers fell into conversation with his former landlady.

"Well, Mrs. Cox, what's the best news?" he asked of her, with cheery

weariness.

She was a little soured at losing by his marriage so profitable a tenant as the surgeon had proved to be duling his residence under her roof; and the more so in there being hardly the remotest chance of her getting such another settler in the Hintock solitudes. "'Tis what I don't wish to repeat, sir; least of all to you," she mumbled.

"Never mind me, Mrs. Cox; go ahead."

"It is what people say about your hasty marrying, Dr. Fitzpiers. Whereas they won't believe you know such clever doctrines in physic as they once supposed of ye, seeing as you could marry into Mr. Melbury's family, which is only Hintock-born, such as me."

"They are kindly welcome to their opinion," said Fitzpiers, not allowing himself to recognize that he winced. "Anything else?"

"Yes; SHE'S come home at last."

"Who's she?"

"Mrs. Charmond."

"Oh, indeed!" said Fitzpiers, with but slight interest. "I've never seen her."

"She has seen you, sir, whether or no."

"Never."

"Yes; she saw you in some hotel or street for a minute or two while you were away travelling, and accidentally heard your name; and when she made some remark about you, Miss Ellis--that's her maid--told her you was on your wedding-tower with Mr. Melbury's daughter; and she said, 'He ought to have done better than that. I fear he has spoiled his chances,' she says."

Fitzpiers did not talk much longer to this cheering housewife, and walked home with no very brisk step. He entered the door quietly, and went straight up-stairs to the drawing-room extemporized for their use by Melbury in his and his bride's absence, expecting to find her there as he had left her. The fire was burning still, but there were no lights. He looked into the next apartment, fitted up as a little dining-room, but no supper was laid. He went to the top of the stairs, and heard a chorus of voices in the timber-merchant's parlor below, Grace's being occasionally intermingled.

Descending, and looking into the room from the door-way, he found quite a large gathering of neighbors and other acquaintances, praising and congratulating Mrs. Fitzpiers on her return, among them being the dairyman, Farmer Bawtree, and the master-blacksmith from Great Hintock;

also the cooper, the hollow-turner, the exciseman, and some others, with their wives, who lived hard by. Grace, girl that she was, had quite forgotten her new dignity and her husband's; she was in the midst of them, blushing, and receiving their compliments with all the pleasure of old-comradeship.

Fitzpiers experienced a profound distaste for the situation. Melbury was nowhere in the room, but Melbury's wife, perceiving the doctor, came to him. "We thought, Grace and I," she said, "that as they have called, hearing you were come, we could do no less than ask them to supper; and then Grace proposed that we should all sup together, as it is the first night of your return."

By this time Grace had come round to him. "Is it not good of them to welcome me so warmly?" she exclaimed, with tears of friendship in her eyes. "After so much good feeling I could not think of our shutting ourselves up away from them in our own dining-room."

"Certainly not--certainly not," said Fitzpiers; and he entered the room with the heroic smile of a martyr.

As soon as they sat down to table Melbury came in, and seemed to see at once that Fitzpiers would much rather have received no such demonstrative reception. He thereupon privately chid his wife for her forwardness in the matter. Mrs. Melbury declared that it was as much Grace's doing as hers, after which there was no more to be said by that

young woman's tender father. By this time Fitzpiers was making the best of his position among the wide-elbowed and genial company who sat eating and drinking and laughing and joking around him; and getting warmed himself by the good cheer, was obliged to admit that, after all, the supper was not the least enjoyable he had ever known.

At times, however, the words about his having spoiled his opportunities, repeated to him as those of Mrs. Charmond, haunted him like a handwriting on the wall. Then his manner would become suddenly abstracted. At one moment he would mentally put an indignant query why Mrs. Charmond or any other woman should make it her business to have opinions about his opportunities; at another he thought that he could hardly be angry with her for taking an interest in the doctor of her own parish. Then he would drink a glass of grog and so get rid of the misgiving. These hitches and quaffings were soon perceived by Grace as well as by her father; and hence both of them were much relieved when the first of the guests to discover that the hour was growing late rose and declared that he must think of moving homeward. At the words Melbury rose as alertly as if lifted by a spring, and in ten minutes they were gone.

"Now, Grace," said her husband as soon as he found himself alone with her in their private apartments, "we've had a very pleasant evening, and everybody has been very kind. But we must come to an understanding about our way of living here. If we continue in these rooms there must be no mixing in with your people below. I can't stand it, and that's

the truth."

She had been sadly surprised at the suddenness of his distaste for those old-fashioned woodland forms of life which in his courtship he had professed to regard with so much interest. But she assented in a moment.

"We must be simply your father's tenants," he continued, "and our goings and comings must be as independent as if we lived elsewhere."

"Certainly, Edgar--I quite see that it must be so."

"But you joined in with all those people in my absence, without knowing whether I should approve or disapprove. When I came I couldn't help myself at all."

She, sighing: "Yes--I see I ought to have waited; though they came unexpectedly, and I thought I had acted for the best."

Thus the discussion ended, and the next day Fitzpiers went on his old rounds as usual. But it was easy for so super-subtle an eye as his to discern, or to think he discerned, that he was no longer regarded as an extrinsic, unfathomed gentleman of limitless potentiality, scientific and social; but as Mr. Melbury's compeer, and therefore in a degree only one of themselves. The Hintock woodlanders held with all the strength of inherited conviction to the aristocratic principle, and as

soon as they had discovered that Fitzpiers was one of the old Buckbury Fitzpierses they had accorded to him for nothing a touching of hat-brims, promptness of service, and deference of approach, which Melbury had to do without, though he paid for it over and over. But now, having proved a traitor to his own cause by this marriage, Fitzpiers was believed in no more as a superior hedged by his own divinity; while as doctor he began to be rated no higher than old Jones, whom they had so long despised.

His few patients seemed in his two months' absence to have dwindled considerably in number, and no sooner had he returned than there came to him from the Board of Guardians a complaint that a pauper had been neglected by his substitute. In a fit of pride Fitzpiers resigned his appointment as one of the surgeons to the union, which had been the nucleus of his practice here.

At the end of a fortnight he came in-doors one evening to Grace more briskly than usual. "They have written to me again about that practice in Budmouth that I once negotiated for," he said to her. "The premium asked is eight hundred pounds, and I think that between your father and myself it ought to be raised. Then we can get away from this place forever."

The question had been mooted between them before, and she was not unprepared to consider it. They had not proceeded far with the discussion when a knock came to the door, and in a minute Grammer ran

up to say that a message had arrived from Hintock House requesting Dr. Fitzpiers to attend there at once. Mrs. Charmond had met with a slight accident through the overturning of her carriage.

"This is something, anyhow," said Fitzpiers, rising with an interest which he could not have defined. "I have had a presentiment that this mysterious woman and I were to be better acquainted."

The latter words were murmured to himself alone.

"Good-night," said Grace, as soon as he was ready. "I shall be asleep, probably, when you return."

"Good-night," he replied, inattentively, and went down-stairs. It was the first time since their marriage that he had left her without a kiss.