

CHAPTER XXVI.

Winterborne's house had been pulled down. On this account his face had been seen but fitfully in Hintock; and he would probably have disappeared from the place altogether but for his slight business connection with Melbury, on whose premises Giles kept his cider-making apparatus, now that he had no place of his own to stow it in. Coming here one evening on his way to a hut beyond the wood where he now slept, he noticed that the familiar brown-thatched pinion of his paternal roof had vanished from its site, and that the walls were levelled. In present circumstances he had a feeling for the spot that might have been called morbid, and when he had supped in the hut aforesaid he made use of the spare hour before bedtime to return to Little Hintock in the twilight and ramble over the patch of ground on which he had first seen the day.

He repeated this evening visit on several like occasions. Even in the gloom he could trace where the different rooms had stood; could mark the shape of the kitchen chimney-corner, in which he had roasted apples and potatoes in his boyhood, cast his bullets, and burned his initials on articles that did and did not belong to him. The apple-trees still remained to show where the garden had been, the oldest of them even now retaining the crippled slant to north-east given them by the great November gale of 1824, which carried a brig bodily over the Chesil Bank. They were at present bent to still greater obliquity by the heaviness of their produce. Apples bobbed against his head, and in the

grass beneath he crunched scores of them as he walked. There was nobody to gather them now.

It was on the evening under notice that, half sitting, half leaning against one of these inclined trunks, Winterborne had become lost in his thoughts, as usual, till one little star after another had taken up a position in the piece of sky which now confronted him where his walls and chimneys had formerly raised their outlines. The house had jutted awkwardly into the road, and the opening caused by its absence was very distinct.

In the silence the trot of horses and the spin of carriage-wheels became audible; and the vehicle soon shaped itself against the blank sky, bearing down upon him with the bend in the lane which here occurred, and of which the house had been the cause. He could discern the figure of a woman high up on the driving-seat of a phaeton, a groom being just visible behind. Presently there was a slight scrape, then a scream. Winterborne went across to the spot, and found the phaeton half overturned, its driver sitting on the heap of rubbish which had once been his dwelling, and the man seizing the horses' heads. The equipage was Mrs. Charmond's, and the unseated charioteer that lady herself.

To his inquiry if she were hurt she made some incoherent reply to the effect that she did not know. The damage in other respects was little or none: the phaeton was righted, Mrs. Charmond placed in it, and the

reins given to the servant. It appeared that she had been deceived by the removal of the house, imagining the gap caused by the demolition to be the opening of the road, so that she turned in upon the ruins instead of at the bend a few yards farther on.

"Drive home--drive home!" cried the lady, impatiently; and they started on their way. They had not, however, gone many paces when, the air being still, Winterborne heard her say "Stop; tell that man to call the doctor--Mr. Fitzpiers--and send him on to the House. I find I am hurt more seriously than I thought."

Winterborne took the message from the groom and proceeded to the doctor's at once. Having delivered it, he stepped back into the darkness, and waited till he had seen Fitzpiers leave the door. He stood for a few minutes looking at the window which by its light revealed the room where Grace was sitting, and went away under the gloomy trees.

Fitzpiers duly arrived at Hintock House, whose doors he now saw open for the first time. Contrary to his expectation there was visible no sign of that confusion or alarm which a serious accident to the mistress of the abode would have occasioned. He was shown into a room at the top of the staircase, cosily and femininely draped, where, by the light of the shaded lamp, he saw a woman of full round figure reclining upon a couch in such a position as not to disturb a pile of

magnificent hair on the crown of her head. A deep purple dressing-gown formed an admirable foil to the peculiarly rich brown of her hair-plaits; her left arm, which was naked nearly up to the shoulder, was thrown upward, and between the fingers of her right hand she held a cigarette, while she idly breathed from her plump lips a thin stream of smoke towards the ceiling.

The doctor's first feeling was a sense of his exaggerated prevision in having brought appliances for a serious case; the next, something more curious. While the scene and the moment were new to him and unanticipated, the sentiment and essence of the moment were indescribably familiar. What could be the cause of it? Probably a dream.

Mrs. Charmond did not move more than to raise her eyes to him, and he came and stood by her. She glanced up at his face across her brows and forehead, and then he observed a blush creep slowly over her decidedly handsome cheeks. Her eyes, which had lingered upon him with an inquiring, conscious expression, were hastily withdrawn, and she mechanically applied the cigarette again to her lips.

For a moment he forgot his errand, till suddenly arousing himself he addressed her, formally condoled with her, and made the usual professional inquiries about what had happened to her, and where she was hurt.

"That's what I want you to tell me," she murmured, in tones of indefinable reserve. "I quite believe in you, for I know you are very accomplished, because you study so hard."

"I'll do my best to justify your good opinion," said the young man, bowing. "And none the less that I am happy to find the accident has not been serious."

"I am very much shaken," she said.

"Oh yes," he replied; and completed his examination, which convinced him that there was really nothing the matter with her, and more than ever puzzled him as to why he had been fetched, since she did not appear to be a timid woman. "You must rest a while, and I'll send something," he said.

"Oh, I forgot," she returned. "Look here." And she showed him a little scrape on her arm--the full round arm that was exposed. "Put some court-plaster on that, please."

He obeyed. "And now," she said, "before you go I want to put a question to you. Sit round there in front of me, on that low chair, and bring the candles, or one, to the little table. Do you smoke? Yes? That's right--I am learning. Take one of these; and here's a light." She threw a matchbox across.

Fitzpiers caught it, and having lit up, regarded her from his new position, which, with the shifting of the candles, for the first time afforded him a full view of her face. "How many years have passed since first we met!" she resumed, in a voice which she mainly endeavored to maintain at its former pitch of composure, and eying him with daring bashfulness.

"WE met, do you say?"

She nodded. "I saw you recently at an hotel in London, when you were passing through, I suppose, with your bride, and I recognized you as one I had met in my girlhood. Do you remember, when you were studying at Heidelberg, an English family that was staying there, who used to walk--"

"And the young lady who wore a long tail of rare-colored hair--ah, I see it before my eyes!--who lost her gloves on the Great Terrace--who was going back in the dusk to find them--to whom I said, 'I'll go for them,' and you said, 'Oh, they are not worth coming all the way up again for.' I DO remember, and how very long we stayed talking there! I went next morning while the dew was on the grass: there they lay--the little fingers sticking out damp and thin. I see them now! I picked them up, and then--"

"Well?"

"I kissed them," he rejoined, rather shamefacedly.

"But you had hardly ever seen me except in the dusk?"

"Never mind. I was young then, and I kissed them. I wondered how I could make the most of my *trouvaille*, and decided that I would call at your hotel with them that afternoon. It rained, and I waited till next day. I called, and you were gone."

"Yes," answered she, with dry melancholy. "My mother, knowing my disposition, said she had no wish for such a chit as me to go falling in love with an impecunious student, and spirited me away to Baden. As it is all over and past I'll tell you one thing: I should have sent you a line passing warm had I known your name. That name I never knew till my maid said, as you passed up the hotel stairs a month ago, 'There's Dr. Fitzpiers.'"

"Good Heaven!" said Fitzpiers, musingly. "How the time comes back to me! The evening, the morning, the dew, the spot. When I found that you really were gone it was as if a cold iron had been passed down my back. I went up to where you had stood when I last saw you--I flung myself on the grass, and--being not much more than a boy--my eyes were literally blinded with tears. Nameless, unknown to me as you were, I couldn't forget your voice."

"For how long?"

"Oh--ever so long. Days and days."

"Days and days! ONLY days and days? Oh, the heart of a man! Days and days!"

"But, my dear madam, I had not known you more than a day or two. It was not a full-blown love--it was the merest bud--red, fresh, vivid, but small. It was a colossal passion in posse, a giant in embryo. It never matured."

"So much the better, perhaps."

"Perhaps. But see how powerless is the human will against predestination. We were prevented meeting; we have met. One feature of the case remains the same amid many changes. You are still rich, and I am still poor. Better than that, you have (judging by your last remark) outgrown the foolish, impulsive passions of your early girl-hood. I have not outgrown mine."

"I beg your pardon," said she, with vibrations of strong feeling in her words. "I have been placed in a position which hinders such outgrowings. Besides, I don't believe that the genuine subjects of emotion do outgrow them; I believe that the older such people get the worse they are. Possibly at ninety or a hundred they may feel they are cured; but a mere threescore and ten won't do it--at least for me."

He gazed at her in undisguised admiration. Here was a soul of souls!

"Mrs. Charmond, you speak truly," he exclaimed. "But you speak sadly as well. Why is that?"

"I always am sad when I come here," she said, dropping to a low tone with a sense of having been too demonstrative.

"Then may I inquire why you came?"

"A man brought me. Women are always carried about like corks upon the waves of masculine desires....I hope I have not alarmed you; but Hintock has the curious effect of bottling up the emotions till one can no longer hold them; I am often obliged to fly away and discharge my sentiments somewhere, or I should die outright."

"There is very good society in the county for those who have the privilege of entering it."

"Perhaps so. But the misery of remote country life is that your neighbors have no toleration for difference of opinion and habit. My neighbors think I am an atheist, except those who think I am a Roman Catholic; and when I speak disrespectfully of the weather or the crops they think I am a blasphemer."

She broke into a low musical laugh at the idea.

"You don't wish me to stay any longer?" he inquired, when he found that she remained musing.

"No--I think not."

"Then tell me that I am to be gone."

"Why? Cannot you go without?"

"I may consult my own feelings only, if left to myself."

"Well, if you do, what then? Do you suppose you'll be in my way?"

"I feared it might be so."

"Then fear no more. But good-night. Come to-morrow and see if I am going on right. This renewal of acquaintance touches me. I have already a friendship for you."

"If it depends upon myself it shall last forever."

"My best hopes that it may. Good-by."

Fitzpiers went down the stairs absolutely unable to decide whether she

had sent for him in the natural alarm which might have followed her mishap, or with the single view of making herself known to him as she had done, for which the capsizing had afforded excellent opportunity. Outside the house he mused over the spot under the light of the stars. It seemed very strange that he should have come there more than once when its inhabitant was absent, and observed the house with a nameless interest; that he should have assumed off-hand before he knew Grace that it was here she lived; that, in short, at sundry times and seasons the individuality of Hintock House should have forced itself upon him as appertaining to some existence with which he was concerned.

The intersection of his temporal orbit with Mrs. Charmond's for a day or two in the past had created a sentimental interest in her at the time, but it had been so evanescent that in the ordinary onward roll of affairs he would scarce ever have recalled it again. To find her here, however, in these somewhat romantic circumstances, magnified that by-gone and transitory tenderness to indescribable proportions.

On entering Little Hintock he found himself regarding it in a new way--from the Hintock House point of view rather than from his own and the Melburys'. The household had all gone to bed, and as he went up-stairs he heard the snore of the timber-merchant from his quarter of the building, and turned into the passage communicating with his own rooms in a strange access of sadness. A light was burning for him in the chamber; but Grace, though in bed, was not asleep. In a moment her sympathetic voice came from behind the curtains.

"Edgar, is she very seriously hurt?"

Fitzpiers had so entirely lost sight of Mrs. Charmond as a patient that he was not on the instant ready with a reply.

"Oh no," he said. "There are no bones broken, but she is shaken. I am going again to-morrow."

Another inquiry or two, and Grace said,

"Did she ask for me?"

"Well--I think she did--I don't quite remember; but I am under the impression that she spoke of you."

"Cannot you recollect at all what she said?"

"I cannot, just this minute."

"At any rate she did not talk much about me?" said Grace with disappointment.

"Oh no."

"But you did, perhaps," she added, innocently fishing for a compliment.

"Oh yes--you may depend upon that!" replied he, warmly, though scarcely thinking of what he was saying, so vividly was there present to his mind the personality of Mrs. Charmond.