

CHAPTER XXVII.

The doctor's professional visit to Hintock House was promptly repeated the next day and the next. He always found Mrs. Charmond reclining on a sofa, and behaving generally as became a patient who was in no great hurry to lose that title. On each occasion he looked gravely at the little scratch on her arm, as if it had been a serious wound.

He had also, to his further satisfaction, found a slight scar on her temple, and it was very convenient to put a piece of black plaster on this conspicuous part of her person in preference to gold-beater's skin, so that it might catch the eyes of the servants, and make his presence appear decidedly necessary, in case there should be any doubt of the fact.

"Oh--you hurt me!" she exclaimed one day.

He was peeling off the bit of plaster on her arm, under which the scrape had turned the color of an unripe blackberry previous to vanishing altogether. "Wait a moment, then--I'll damp it," said Fitzpiers. He put his lips to the place and kept them there till the plaster came off easily. "It was at your request I put it on," said he.

"I know it," she replied. "Is that blue vein still in my temple that used to show there? The scar must be just upon it. If the cut had been a little deeper it would have spilt my hot blood indeed!"

Fitzpiers examined so closely that his breath touched her tenderly, at which their eyes rose to an encounter--hers showing themselves as deep and mysterious as interstellar space. She turned her face away suddenly. "Ah! none of that! none of that--I cannot coquet with you!" she cried. "Don't suppose I consent to for one moment. Our poor, brief, youthful hour of love-making was too long ago to bear continuing now. It is as well that we should understand each other on that point before we go further."

"Coquet! Nor I with you. As it was when I found the historic gloves, so it is now. I might have been and may be foolish; but I am no trifler. I naturally cannot forget that little space in which I flitted across the field of your vision in those days of the past, and the recollection opens up all sorts of imaginings."

"Suppose my mother had not taken me away?" she murmured, her dreamy eyes resting on the swaying tip of a distant tree.

"I should have seen you again."

"And then?"

"Then the fire would have burned higher and higher. What would have immediately followed I know not; but sorrow and sickness of heart at last."

"Why?"

"Well--that's the end of all love, according to Nature's law. I can give no other reason."

"Oh, don't speak like that," she exclaimed. "Since we are only picturing the possibilities of that time, don't, for pity's sake, spoil the picture." Her voice sank almost to a whisper as she added, with an incipient pout upon her full lips, "Let me think at least that if you had really loved me at all seriously, you would have loved me for ever and ever!"

"You are right--think it with all your heart," said he. "It is a pleasant thought, and costs nothing."

She weighed that remark in silence a while. "Did you ever hear anything of me from then till now?" she inquired.

"Not a word."

"So much the better. I had to fight the battle of life as well as you. I may tell you about it some day. But don't ever ask me to do it, and particularly do not press me to tell you now."

Thus the two or three days that they had spent in tender acquaintance on the romantic slopes above the Neckar were stretched out in

retrospect to the length and importance of years; made to form a canvas for infinite fancies, idle dreams, luxurious melancholies, and sweet, alluring assertions which could neither be proved nor disproved. Grace was never mentioned between them, but a rumor of his proposed domestic changes somehow reached her ears.

"Doctor, you are going away," she exclaimed, confronting him with accusatory reproach in her large dark eyes no less than in her rich cooing voice. "Oh yes, you are," she went on, springing to her feet with an air which might almost have been called passionate. "It is no use denying it. You have bought a practice at Budmouth. I don't blame you. Nobody can live at Hintock--least of all a professional man who wants to keep abreast of recent discovery. And there is nobody here to induce such a one to stay for other reasons. That's right, that's right--go away!"

"But no, I have not actually bought the practice as yet, though I am indeed in treaty for it. And, my dear friend, if I continue to feel about the business as I feel at this moment--perhaps I may conclude never to go at all."

"But you hate Hintock, and everybody and everything in it that you don't mean to take away with you?"

Fitzpiers contradicted this idea in his most vibratory tones, and she lapsed into the frivolous archness under which she hid passions of no

mean strength--strange, smouldering, erratic passions, kept down like a stifled conflagration, but bursting out now here, now there--the only certain element in their direction being its unexpectedness. If one word could have expressed her it would have been Inconsequence. She was a woman of perversities, delighting in frequent contrasts. She liked mystery, in her life, in her love, in her history. To be fair to her, there was nothing in the latter which she had any great reason to be ashamed of, and many things of which she might have been proud; but it had never been fathomed by the honest minds of Hintock, and she rarely volunteered her experiences. As for her capricious nature, the people on her estates grew accustomed to it, and with that marvellous subtlety of contrivance in steering round odd tempers, that is found in sons of the soil and dependants generally, they managed to get along under her government rather better than they would have done beneath a more equable rule.

Now, with regard to the doctor's notion of leaving Hintock, he had advanced further towards completing the purchase of the Budmouth surgeon's good-will than he had admitted to Mrs. Charmond. The whole matter hung upon what he might do in the ensuing twenty-four hours. The evening after leaving her he went out into the lane, and walked and pondered between the high hedges, now greenish-white with wild clematis--here called "old-man's beard," from its aspect later in the year.

The letter of acceptance was to be written that night, after which his

departure from Hintock would be irrevocable. But could he go away, remembering what had just passed? The trees, the hills, the leaves, the grass--each had been endowed and quickened with a subtle charm since he had discovered the person and history, and, above all, mood of their owner. There was every temporal reason for leaving; it would be entering again into a world which he had only quitted in a passion for isolation, induced by a fit of Achillean moodiness after an imagined slight. His wife herself saw the awkwardness of their position here, and cheerfully welcomed the purposed change, towards which every step had been taken but the last. But could he find it in his heart--as he found it clearly enough in his conscience--to go away?

He drew a troubled breath, and went in-doors. Here he rapidly penned a letter, wherein he withdrew once for all from the treaty for the Budmouth practice. As the postman had already left Little Hintock for that night, he sent one of Melbury's men to intercept a mail-cart on another turnpike-road, and so got the letter off.

The man returned, met Fitzpiers in the lane, and told him the thing was done. Fitzpiers went back to his house musing. Why had he carried out this impulse--taken such wild trouble to effect a probable injury to his own and his young wife's prospects? His motive was fantastic, glowing, shapeless as the fiery scenery about the western sky. Mrs. Charmond could overtly be nothing more to him than a patient now, and to his wife, at the outside, a patron. In the unattached bachelor days of his first sojourning here how highly proper an emotional reason for

lingering on would have appeared to troublesome dubiousness.

Matrimonial ambition is such an honorable thing.

"My father has told me that you have sent off one of the men with a late letter to Budmouth," cried Grace, coming out vivaciously to meet him under the declining light of the sky, wherein hung, solitary, the folding star. "I said at once that you had finally agreed to pay the premium they ask, and that the tedious question had been settled. When do we go, Edgar?"

"I have altered my mind," said he. "They want too much--seven hundred and fifty is too large a sum--and in short, I have declined to go further. We must wait for another opportunity. I fear I am not a good business-man." He spoke the last words with a momentary faltering at the great foolishness of his act; for, as he looked in her fair and honorable face, his heart reproached him for what he had done.

Her manner that evening showed her disappointment. Personally she liked the home of her childhood much, and she was not ambitious. But her husband had seemed so dissatisfied with the circumstances hereabout since their marriage that she had sincerely hoped to go for his sake.

It was two or three days before he visited Mrs. Charmond again. The morning had been windy, and little showers had sowed themselves like grain against the walls and window-panes of the Hintock cottages. He went on foot across the wilder recesses of the park, where slimy

streams of green moisture, exuding from decayed holes caused by old amputations, ran down the bark of the oaks and elms, the rind below being coated with a lichenous wash as green as emerald. They were stout-trunked trees, that never rocked their stems in the fiercest gale, responding to it entirely by crooking their limbs. Wrinkled like an old crone's face, and antlered with dead branches that rose above the foliage of their summits, they were nevertheless still green--though yellow had invaded the leaves of other trees.

She was in a little boudoir or writing-room on the first floor, and Fitzpiers was much surprised to find that the window-curtains were closed and a red-shaded lamp and candles burning, though out-of-doors it was broad daylight. Moreover, a large fire was burning in the grate, though it was not cold.

"What does it all mean?" he asked.

She sat in an easy-chair, her face being turned away. "Oh," she murmured, "it is because the world is so dreary outside. Sorrow and bitterness in the sky, and floods of agonized tears beating against the panes. I lay awake last night, and I could hear the scrape of snails creeping up the window-glass; it was so sad! My eyes were so heavy this morning that I could have wept my life away. I cannot bear you to see my face; I keep it away from you purposely. Oh! why were we given hungry hearts and wild desires if we have to live in a world like this? Why should Death only lend what Life is compelled to borrow--rest?"

Answer that, Dr. Fitzpiers."

"You must eat of a second tree of knowledge before you can do it,
Felice Charmond."

"Then, when my emotions have exhausted themselves, I become full of fears, till I think I shall die for very fear. The terrible insinceries of society--how severe they are, and cold and inexorable--ghastly towards those who are made of wax and not of stone. Oh, I am afraid of them; a stab for this error, and a stab for that--correctives and regulations framed that society may tend to perfection--an end which I don't care for in the least. Yet for this, all I do care for has to be stunted and starved."

Fitzpiers had seated himself near her. "What sets you in this mournful mood?" he asked, gently. (In reality he knew that it was the result of a loss of tone from staying in-doors so much, but he did not say so.)

"My reflections. Doctor, you must not come here any more. They begin to think it a farce already. I say you must come no more. There--don't be angry with me;" and she jumped up, pressed his hand, and looked anxiously at him. "It is necessary. It is best for both you and me."

"But," said Fitzpiers, gloomily, "what have we done?"

"Done--we have done nothing. Perhaps we have thought the more.

However, it is all vexation. I am going away to Middleton Abbey, near Shottsford, where a relative of my late husband lives, who is confined to her bed. The engagement was made in London, and I can't get out of it. Perhaps it is for the best that I go there till all this is past.

When are you going to enter on your new practice, and leave Hintock behind forever, with your pretty wife on your arm?"

"I have refused the opportunity. I love this place too well to depart."

"You HAVE?" she said, regarding him with wild uncertainty.

"Why do you ruin yourself in that way? Great Heaven, what have I done!"

"Nothing. Besides, you are going away."

"Oh yes; but only to Middleton Abbey for a month or two. Yet perhaps I shall gain strength there--particularly strength of mind--I require it. And when I come back I shall be a new woman; and you can come and see me safely then, and bring your wife with you, and we'll be friends--she and I. Oh, how this shutting up of one's self does lead to indulgence in idle sentiments. I shall not wish you to give your attendance to me after to-day. But I am glad that you are not going away--if your remaining does not injure your prospects at all."

As soon as he had left the room the mild friendliness she had preserved in her tone at parting, the playful sadness with which she had

conversed with him, equally departed from her. She became as heavy as lead--just as she had been before he arrived. Her whole being seemed to dissolve in a sad powerlessness to do anything, and the sense of it made her lips tremulous and her closed eyes wet. His footsteps again startled her, and she turned round.

"I returned for a moment to tell you that the evening is going to be fine. The sun is shining; so do open your curtains and put out those lights. Shall I do it for you?"

"Please--if you don't mind."

He drew back the window-curtains, whereupon the red glow of the lamp and the two candle-flames became almost invisible with the flood of late autumn sunlight that poured in. "Shall I come round to you?" he asked, her back being towards him.

"No," she replied.

"Why not?"

"Because I am crying, and I don't want to see you."

He stood a moment irresolute, and regretted that he had killed the rosy, passionate lamplight by opening the curtains and letting in garish day.

"Then I am going," he said.

"Very well," she answered, stretching one hand round to him, and patting her eyes with a handkerchief held in the other.

"Shall I write a line to you at--"

"No, no." A gentle reasonableness came into her tone as she added, "It must not be, you know. It won't do."

"Very well. Good-by." The next moment he was gone.

In the evening, with listless adroitness, she encouraged the maid who dressed her for dinner to speak of Dr. Fitzpiers's marriage.

"Mrs. Fitzpiers was once supposed to favor Mr. Winterborne," said the young woman.

"And why didn't she marry him?" said Mrs. Charmond.

"Because, you see, ma'am, he lost his houses."

"Lost his houses? How came he to do that?"

"The houses were held on lives, and the lives dropped, and your agent

wouldn't renew them, though it is said that Mr. Winterborne had a very good claim. That's as I've heard it, ma'am, and it was through it that the match was broke off."

Being just then distracted by a dozen emotions, Mrs. Charmond sunk into a mood of dismal self-reproach. "In refusing that poor man his reasonable request," she said to herself, "I foredoomed my rejuvenated girlhood's romance. Who would have thought such a business matter could have nettled my own heart like this? Now for a winter of regrets and agonies and useless wishes, till I forget him in the spring. Oh! I am glad I am going away."

She left her chamber and went down to dine with a sigh. On the stairs she stood opposite the large window for a moment, and looked out upon the lawn. It was not yet quite dark. Half-way up the steep green slope confronting her stood old Timothy Tangs, who was shortening his way homeward by clambering here where there was no road, and in opposition to express orders that no path was to be made there. Tangs had momentarily stopped to take a pinch of snuff; but observing Mrs. Charmond gazing at him, he hastened to get over the top out of hail. His precipitancy made him miss his footing, and he rolled like a barrel to the bottom, his snuffbox rolling in front of him.

Her indefinite, idle, impossible passion for Fitzpiers; her constitutional cloud of misery; the sorrowful drops that still hung upon her eyelashes, all made way for the incursive mood started by the

spectacle. She burst into an immoderate fit of laughter, her very gloom of the previous hour seeming to render it the more uncontrollable. It had not died out of her when she reached the dining-room; and even here, before the servants, her shoulders suddenly shook as the scene returned upon her; and the tears of her hilarity mingled with the remnants of those engendered by her grief.

She resolved to be sad no more. She drank two glasses of champagne, and a little more still after those, and amused herself in the evening with singing little amatory songs.

"I must do something for that poor man Winterborne, however," she said.