

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A week had passed, and Mrs. Charmond had left Hintock House. Middleton Abbey, the place of her sojourn, was about twenty miles distant by road, eighteen by bridle-paths and footways.

Grace observed, for the first time, that her husband was restless, that at moments he even was disposed to avoid her. The scrupulous civility of mere acquaintanceship crept into his manner; yet, when sitting at meals, he seemed hardly to hear her remarks. Her little doings interested him no longer, while towards her father his bearing was not far from supercilious. It was plain that his mind was entirely outside her life, whereabouts outside it she could not tell; in some region of science, possibly, or of psychological literature. But her hope that he was again immersing himself in those lucubrations which before her marriage had made his light a landmark in Hintock, was founded simply on the slender fact that he often sat up late.

One evening she discovered him leaning over a gate on Rub-Down Hill, the gate at which Winterborne had once been standing, and which opened on the brink of a steep, slanting down directly into Blackmoor Vale, or the Vale of the White Hart, extending beneath the eye at this point to a distance of many miles. His attention was fixed on the landscape far away, and Grace's approach was so noiseless that he did not hear her. When she came close she could see his lips moving unconsciously, as to some impassioned visionary theme.

She spoke, and Fitzpiers started. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

"Oh! I was contemplating our old place of Buckbury, in my idle way," he said.

It had seemed to her that he was looking much to the right of that cradle and tomb of his ancestral dignity; but she made no further observation, and taking his arm walked home beside him almost in silence. She did not know that Middleton Abbey lay in the direction of his gaze. "Are you going to have out Darling this afternoon?" she asked, presently. Darling being the light-gray mare which Winterborne had bought for Grace, and which Fitzpiers now constantly used, the animal having turned out a wonderful bargain, in combining a perfect docility with an almost human intelligence; moreover, she was not too young. Fitzpiers was unfamiliar with horses, and he valued these qualities.

"Yes," he replied, "but not to drive. I am riding her. I practise crossing a horse as often as I can now, for I find that I can take much shorter cuts on horseback."

He had, in fact, taken these riding exercises for about a week, only since Mrs. Charmond's absence, his universal practice hitherto having been to drive.

Some few days later, Fitzpiers started on the back of this horse to see a patient in the aforesaid Vale. It was about five o'clock in the evening when he went away, and at bedtime he had not reached home. There was nothing very singular in this, though she was not aware that he had any patient more than five or six miles distant in that direction. The clock had struck one before Fitzpiers entered the house, and he came to his room softly, as if anxious not to disturb her.

The next morning she was stirring considerably earlier than he.

In the yard there was a conversation going on about the mare; the man who attended to the horses, Darling included, insisted that the latter was "hag-rid;" for when he had arrived at the stable that morning she was in such a state as no horse could be in by honest riding. It was true that the doctor had stabled her himself when he got home, so that she was not looked after as she would have been if he had groomed and fed her; but that did not account for the appearance she presented, if Mr. Fitzpiers's journey had been only where he had stated. The phenomenal exhaustion of Darling, as thus related, was sufficient to develop a whole series of tales about riding witches and demons, the narration of which occupied a considerable time.

Grace returned in-doors. In passing through the outer room she picked up her husband's overcoat which he had carelessly flung down across a chair. A turnpike ticket fell out of the breast-pocket, and she saw that it had been issued at Middleton Gate. He had therefore visited

Middleton the previous night, a distance of at least five-and-thirty miles on horseback, there and back.

During the day she made some inquiries, and learned for the first time that Mrs. Charmond was staying at Middleton Abbey. She could not resist an inference--strange as that inference was.

A few days later he prepared to start again, at the same time and in the same direction. She knew that the state of the cottager who lived that way was a mere pretext; she was quite sure he was going to Mrs. Charmond. Grace was amazed at the mildness of the passion which the suspicion engendered in her. She was but little excited, and her jealousy was languid even to death. It told tales of the nature of her affection for him. In truth, her antenuptial regard for Fitzpiers had been rather of the quality of awe towards a superior being than of tender solicitude for a lover. It had been based upon mystery and strangeness--the mystery of his past, of his knowledge, of his professional skill, of his beliefs. When this structure of ideals was demolished by the intimacy of common life, and she found him as merely human as the Hintock people themselves, a new foundation was in demand for an enduring and stanch affection--a sympathetic interdependence, wherein mutual weaknesses were made the grounds of a defensive alliance. Fitzpiers had furnished none of that single-minded confidence and truth out of which alone such a second union could spring; hence it was with a controllable emotion that she now watched the mare brought round.

"I'll walk with you to the hill if you are not in a great hurry," she said, rather loath, after all, to let him go.

"Do; there's plenty of time," replied her husband. Accordingly he led along the horse, and walked beside her, impatient enough nevertheless. Thus they proceeded to the turnpike road, and ascended Rub-Down Hill to the gate he had been leaning over when she surprised him ten days before. This was the end of her excursion. Fitzpiers bade her adieu with affection, even with tenderness, and she observed that he looked weary-eyed.

"Why do you go to-night?" she said. "You have been called up two nights in succession already."

"I must go," he answered, almost gloomily. "Don't wait up for me." With these words he mounted his horse, passed through the gate which Grace held open for him, and ambled down the steep bridle-track to the valley.

She closed the gate and watched his descent, and then his journey onward. His way was east, the evening sun which stood behind her back beaming full upon him as soon as he got out from the shade of the hill. Notwithstanding this untoward proceeding she was determined to be loyal if he proved true; and the determination to love one's best will carry a heart a long way towards making that best an ever-growing thing. The

conspicuous coat of the active though blanching mare made horse and rider easy objects for the vision. Though Darling had been chosen with such pains by Winterborne for Grace, she had never ridden the sleek creature; but her husband had found the animal exceedingly convenient, particularly now that he had taken to the saddle, plenty of staying power being left in Darling yet. Fitzpiers, like others of his character, while despising Melbury and his station, did not at all disdain to spend Melbury's money, or appropriate to his own use the horse which belonged to Melbury's daughter.

And so the infatuated young surgeon went along through the gorgeous autumn landscape of White Hart Vale, surrounded by orchards lustrous with the reds of apple-crops, berries, and foliage, the whole intensified by the gilding of the declining sun. The earth this year had been prodigally bountiful, and now was the supreme moment of her bounty. In the poorest spots the hedges were bowed with haws and blackberries; acorns cracked underfoot, and the burst husks of chestnuts lay exposing their auburn contents as if arranged by anxious sellers in a fruit-market. In all this proud show some kernels were unsound as her own situation, and she wondered if there were one world in the universe where the fruit had no worm, and marriage no sorrow.

Herr Tannhauser still moved on, his plodding steed rendering him distinctly visible yet. Could she have heard Fitzpiers's voice at that moment she would have found him murmuring--

"...Towards the loadstar of my one desire
I flitted, even as a dizzy moth in the owlet light."

But he was a silent spectacle to her now. Soon he rose out of the valley, and skirted a high plateau of the chalk formation on his right, which rested abruptly upon the fruity district of loamy clay, the character and herbage of the two formations being so distinct that the calcareous upland appeared but as a deposit of a few years' antiquity upon the level vale. He kept along the edge of this high, unenclosed country, and the sky behind him being deep violet, she could still see white Darling in relief upon it--a mere speck now--a Wouvermans eccentricity reduced to microscopic dimensions. Upon this high ground he gradually disappeared.

Thus she had beheld the pet animal purchased for her own use, in pure love of her, by one who had always been true, impressed to convey her husband away from her to the side of a new-found idol. While she was musing on the vicissitudes of horses and wives, she discerned shapes moving up the valley towards her, quite near at hand, though till now hidden by the hedges. Surely they were Giles Winterborne, with his two horses and cider-apparatus, conducted by Robert Creedle. Up, upward they crept, a stray beam of the sun alighting every now and then like a star on the blades of the pomace-shovels, which had been converted to steel mirrors by the action of the malic acid. She opened the gate when he came close, and the panting horses rested as they achieved the

ascent.

"How do you do, Giles?" said she, under a sudden impulse to be familiar with him.

He replied with much more reserve. "You are going for a walk, Mrs. Fitzpiers?" he added. "It is pleasant just now."

"No, I am returning," said she.

The vehicles passed through, the gate slammed, and Winterborne walked by her side in the rear of the apple-mill.

He looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-color, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his boots and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider which at its first return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. Her heart rose from its late sadness like a released spring; her senses revelled in the sudden lapse back to nature unadorned. The consciousness of having to be genteel because of her husband's profession, the veneer of artificiality which she had acquired at the fashionable schools, were thrown off, and she became the crude, country girl of her latent, earliest instincts.

Nature was bountiful, she thought. No sooner had she been starved off by Edgar Fitzpiers than another being, impersonating bare and undiluted manliness, had arisen out of the earth, ready to hand. This was an excursion of the imagination which she did not encourage, and she said suddenly, to disguise the confused regard which had followed her thoughts, "Did you meet my husband?"

Winterborne, with some hesitation, "Yes."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At Calfhay Cross. I come from Middleton Abbey; I have been making there for the last week."

"Haven't they a mill of their own?"

"Yes, but it's out of repair."

"I think--I heard that Mrs. Charmond had gone there to stay?"

"Yes. I have seen her at the windows once or twice."

Grace waited an interval before she went on: "Did Mr. Fitzpiers take the way to Middleton?"

"Yes...I met him on Darling." As she did not reply, he added, with a

gentler inflection, "You know why the mare was called that?"

"Oh yes--of course," she answered, quickly.

They had risen so far over the crest of the hill that the whole west sky was revealed. Between the broken clouds they could see far into the recesses of heaven, the eye journeying on under a species of golden arcades, and past fiery obstructions, fancied cairns, logan-stones, stalactites and stalagmite of topaz. Deeper than this their gaze passed thin flakes of incandescence, till it plunged into a bottomless medium of soft green fire.

Her abandonment to the luscious time after her sense of ill-usage, her revolt for the nonce against social law, her passionate desire for primitive life, may have showed in her face. Winterborne was looking at her, his eyes lingering on a flower that she wore in her bosom. Almost with the abstraction of a somnambulist he stretched out his hand and gently caressed the flower.

She drew back. "What are you doing, Giles Winterborne!" she exclaimed, with a look of severe surprise. The evident absence of all premeditation from the act, however, speedily led her to think that it was not necessary to stand upon her dignity here and now. "You must bear in mind, Giles," she said, kindly, "that we are not as we were; and some people might have said that what you did was taking a liberty."

It was more than she need have told him; his action of forgetfulness had made him so angry with himself that he flushed through his tan. "I don't know what I am coming to!" he exclaimed, savagely. "Ah--I was not once like this!" Tears of vexation were in his eyes.

"No, now--it was nothing. I was too reproachful."

"It would not have occurred to me if I had not seen something like it done elsewhere--at Middleton lately," he said, thoughtfully, after a while.

"By whom?"

"Don't ask it."

She scanned him narrowly. "I know quite well enough," she returned, indifferently. "It was by my husband, and the woman was Mrs. Charmond. Association of ideas reminded you when you saw me....Giles--tell me all you know about that--please do, Giles! But no--I won't hear it. Let the subject cease. And as you are my friend, say nothing to my father."

They reached a place where their ways divided. Winterborne continued along the highway which kept outside the copse, and Grace opened a gate that entered it.