

CHAPTER XXIX.

She walked up the soft grassy ride, screened on either hand by nut-bushes, just now heavy with clusters of twos and threes and fours. A little way on, the track she pursued was crossed by a similar one at right angles. Here Grace stopped; some few yards up the transverse ride the buxom Suke Damson was visible--her gown tucked up high through her pocket-hole, and no bonnet on her head--in the act of pulling down boughs from which she was gathering and eating nuts with great rapidity, her lover Tim Tangs standing near her engaged in the same pleasant meal.

Crack, crack went Suke's jaws every second or two. By an automatic chain of thought Grace's mind reverted to the tooth-drawing scene described by her husband; and for the first time she wondered if that narrative were really true, Susan's jaws being so obviously sound and strong. Grace turned up towards the nut-gatherers, and conquered her reluctance to speak to the girl who was a little in advance of Tim.

"Good-evening, Susan," she said.

"Good-evening, Miss Melbury" (crack).

"Mrs. Fitzpiers."

"Oh yes, ma'am--Mrs. Fitzpiers," said Suke, with a peculiar smile.

Grace, not to be daunted, continued: "Take care of your teeth, Suke. That accounts for the toothache."

"I don't know what an ache is, either in tooth, ear, or head, thank the Lord" (crack).

"Nor the loss of one, either?"

"See for yourself, ma'am." She parted her red lips, and exhibited the whole double row, full up and unimpaired.

"You have never had one drawn?"

"Never."

"So much the better for your stomach," said Mrs. Fitzpiers, in an altered voice. And turning away quickly, she went on.

As her husband's character thus shaped itself under the touch of time, Grace was almost startled to find how little she suffered from that jealous excitement which is conventionally attributed to all wives in such circumstances. But though possessed by none of that feline wildness which it was her moral duty to experience, she did not fail to know that she had made a frightful mistake in her marriage. Acquiescence in her father's wishes had been degradation to herself.

People are not given premonitions for nothing; she should have obeyed her impulse on that early morning, and steadfastly refused her hand.

Oh, that plausible tale which her then betrothed had told her about Suke--the dramatic account of her entreaties to him to draw the aching enemy, and the fine artistic touch he had given to the story by explaining that it was a lovely molar without a flaw!

She traced the remainder of the woodland track dazed by the complications of her position. If his protestations to her before their marriage could be believed, her husband had felt affection of some sort for herself and this woman simultaneously; and was now again spreading the same emotion over Mrs. Charmond and herself conjointly, his manner being still kind and fond at times. But surely, rather than that, he must have played the hypocrite towards her in each case with elaborate completeness; and the thought of this sickened her, for it involved the conjecture that if he had not loved her, his only motive for making her his wife must have been her little fortune. Yet here Grace made a mistake, for the love of men like Fitzpiers is unquestionably of such quality as to bear division and transference. He had indeed, once declared, though not to her, that on one occasion he had noticed himself to be possessed by five distinct infatuations at the same time. Therein it differed from the highest affection as the lower orders of the animal world differ from advanced organisms, partition causing, not death, but a multiplied existence. He had loved her sincerely, and had by no means ceased to love her now. But such

double and treble barrelled hearts were naturally beyond her conception.

Of poor Suke Damson, Grace thought no more. She had had her day.

"If he does not love me I will not love him!" said Grace, proudly. And though these were mere words, it was a somewhat formidable thing for Fitzpiers that her heart was approximating to a state in which it might be possible to carry them out. That very absence of hot jealousy which made his courses so easy, and on which, indeed, he congratulated himself, meant, unknown to either wife or husband, more mischief than the inconvenient watchfulness of a jaundiced eye.

Her sleep that night was nervous. The wing allotted to her and her husband had never seemed so lonely. At last she got up, put on her dressing-gown, and went down-stairs. Her father, who slept lightly, heard her descend, and came to the stair-head.

"Is that you, Grace? What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing more than that I am restless. Edgar is detained by a case at Owlscombe in White Hart Vale."

"But how's that? I saw the woman's husband at Great Hintock just afore bedtime; and she was going on well, and the doctor gone then."

"Then he's detained somewhere else," said Grace. "Never mind me; he

will soon be home. I expect him about one."

She went back to her room, and dozed and woke several times. One o'clock had been the hour of his return on the last occasion; but it passed now by a long way, and Fitzpiers did not come. Just before dawn she heard the men stirring in the yard; and the flashes of their lanterns spread every now and then through her window-blind. She remembered that her father had told her not to be disturbed if she noticed them, as they would be rising early to send off four loads of hurdles to a distant sheep-fair. Peeping out, she saw them bustling about, the hollow-turner among the rest; he was loading his wares--wooden-bowls, dishes, spigots, spoons, cheese-vats, funnels, and so on--upon one of her father's wagons, who carried them to the fair for him every year out of neighborly kindness.

The scene and the occasion would have enlivened her but that her husband was still absent; though it was now five o'clock. She could hardly suppose him, whatever his infatuation, to have prolonged to a later hour than ten an ostensibly professional call on Mrs. Charmond at Middleton; and he could have ridden home in two hours and a half. What, then, had become of him? That he had been out the greater part of the two preceding nights added to her uneasiness.

She dressed herself, descended, and went out, the weird twilight of advancing day chilling the rays from the lanterns, and making the men's faces wan. As soon as Melbury saw her he came round, showing his alarm.

"Edgar is not come," she said. "And I have reason to know that he's not attending anybody. He has had no rest for two nights before this. I was going to the top of the hill to look for him."

"I'll come with you," said Melbury.

She begged him not to hinder himself; but he insisted, for he saw a peculiar and rigid gloom in her face over and above her uneasiness, and did not like the look of it. Telling the men he would be with them again soon, he walked beside her into the turnpike-road, and partly up the hill whence she had watched Fitzpiers the night before across the Great White Hart or Blackmoor Valley. They halted beneath a half-dead oak, hollow, and disfigured with white tumors, its roots spreading out like accipitrine claws grasping the ground. A chilly wind circled round them, upon whose currents the seeds of a neighboring lime-tree, supported parachute-wise by the wing attached, flew out of the boughs downward like fledglings from their nest. The vale was wrapped in a dim atmosphere of unnaturalness, and the east was like a livid curtain edged with pink. There was no sign nor sound of Fitzpiers.

"It is no use standing here," said her father. "He may come home fifty ways...why, look here!--here be Darling's tracks--turned homeward and nearly blown dry and hard! He must have come in hours ago without your seeing him."

"He has not done that," said she.

They went back hastily. On entering their own gates they perceived that the men had left the wagons, and were standing round the door of the stable which had been appropriated to the doctor's use. "Is there anything the matter?" cried Grace.

"Oh no, ma'am. All's well that ends well," said old Timothy Tangs.

"I've heard of such things before--among workfolk, though not among your gentle people--that's true."

They entered the stable, and saw the pale shape of Darling standing in the middle of her stall, with Fitzpiers on her back, sound asleep.

Darling was munching hay as well as she could with the bit in her month, and the reins, which had fallen from Fitzpiers's hand, hung upon her neck.

Grace went and touched his hand; shook it before she could arouse him.

He moved, started, opened his eyes, and exclaimed, "Ah, Felice!...Oh, it's Grace. I could not see in the gloom. What--am I in the saddle?"

"Yes," said she. "How do you come here?"

He collected his thoughts, and in a few minutes stammered, "I was riding along homeward through the vale, very, very sleepy, having been up so much of late. When I came opposite Holywell spring the mare

turned her head that way, as if she wanted to drink. I let her go in, and she drank; I thought she would never finish. While she was drinking, the clock of Owlscombe Church struck twelve. I distinctly remember counting the strokes. From that moment I positively recollect nothing till I saw you here by my side."

"The name! If it had been any other horse he'd have had a broken neck!" murmured Melbury.

"'Tis wonderful, sure, how a quiet hoss will bring a man home at such times!" said John Upjohn. "And what's more wonderful than keeping your seat in a deep, slumbering sleep? I've knowed men drowze off walking home from randies where the mead and other liquors have gone round well, and keep walking for more than a mile on end without waking. Well, doctor, I don't care who the man is, 'tis a mercy you wasn't a drowneded, or a splintered, or a hanged up to a tree like Absalom--also a handsome gentleman like yerself, as the prophets say."

"True," murmured old Timothy. "From the soul of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him."

"Or leastwise you might ha' been a-wownded into tatters a'most, and no doctor to jine your few limbs together within seven mile!"

While this grim address was proceeding, Fitzpiers had dismounted, and taking Grace's arm walked stiffly in-doors with her. Melbury stood

staring at the horse, which, in addition to being very weary, was spattered with mud. There was no mud to speak of about the Hintocks just now--only in the clammy hollows of the vale beyond Owlscombe, the stiff soil of which retained moisture for weeks after the uplands were dry. While they were rubbing down the mare, Melbury's mind coupled with the foreign quality of the mud the name he had heard unconsciously muttered by the surgeon when Grace took his hand--"Felice." Who was Felice? Why, Mrs. Charmond; and she, as he knew, was staying at Middleton.

Melbury had indeed pounced upon the image that filled Fitzpiers's half-awakened soul--wherein there had been a picture of a recent interview on a lawn with a capriciously passionate woman who had begged him not to come again in tones whose vibration incited him to disobey. "What are you doing here? Why do you pursue me? Another belongs to you. If they were to see you they would seize you as a thief!" And she had turbulently admitted to his wringing questions that her visit to Middleton had been undertaken less because of the invalid relative than in shamefaced fear of her own weakness if she remained near his home. A triumph then it was to Fitzpiers, poor and hampered as he had become, to recognize his real conquest of this beauty, delayed so many years. His was the selfish passion of Congreve's Millamont, to whom love's supreme delight lay in "that heart which others bleed for, bleed for me."

When the horse had been attended to Melbury stood uneasily here and

there about his premises; he was rudely disturbed in the comfortable views which had lately possessed him on his domestic concerns. It is true that he had for some days discerned that Grace more and more sought his company, preferred supervising his kitchen and bakehouse with her step-mother to occupying herself with the lighter details of her own apartments. She seemed no longer able to find in her own hearth an adequate focus for her life, and hence, like a weak queen-bee after leading off to an independent home, had hovered again into the parent hive. But he had not construed these and other incidents of the kind till now.

Something was wrong in the dove-cot. A ghastly sense that he alone would be responsible for whatever unhappiness should be brought upon her for whom he almost solely lived, whom to retain under his roof he had faced the numerous inconveniences involved in giving up the best part of his house to Fitzpiers. There was no room for doubt that, had he allowed events to take their natural course, she would have accepted Winterborne, and realized his old dream of restitution to that young man's family.

That Fitzpiers could allow himself to look on any other creature for a moment than Grace filled Melbury with grief and astonishment. In the pure and simple life he had led it had scarcely occurred to him that after marriage a man might be faithless. That he could sweep to the heights of Mrs. Charmond's position, lift the veil of Isis, so to speak, would have amazed Melbury by its audacity if he had not

suspected encouragement from that quarter. What could he and his simple Grace do to countervail the passions of such as those two sophisticated beings--versed in the world's ways, armed with every apparatus for victory? In such an encounter the homely timber-dealer felt as inferior as a bow-and-arrow savage before the precise weapons of modern warfare.

Grace came out of the house as the morning drew on. The village was silent, most of the folk having gone to the fair. Fitzpiers had retired to bed, and was sleeping off his fatigue. She went to the stable and looked at poor Darling: in all probability Giles Winterborne, by obtaining for her a horse of such intelligence and docility, had been the means of saving her husband's life. She paused over the strange thought; and then there appeared her father behind her. She saw that he knew things were not as they ought to be, from the troubled dulness of his eye, and from his face, different points of which had independent motions, twitchings, and tremblings, unknown to himself, and involuntary.

"He was detained, I suppose, last night?" said Melbury.

"Oh yes; a bad case in the vale," she replied, calmly.

"Nevertheless, he should have stayed at home."

"But he couldn't, father."

Her father turned away. He could hardly bear to see his whilom truthful girl brought to the humiliation of having to talk like that.

That night carking care sat beside Melbury's pillow, and his stiff limbs tossed at its presence. "I can't lie here any longer," he muttered. Striking a light, he wandered about the room. "What have I done--what have I done for her?" he said to his wife, who had anxiously awakened. "I had long planned that she should marry the son of the man I wanted to make amends to; do ye mind how I told you all about it, Lucy, the night before she came home? Ah! but I was not content with doing right, I wanted to do more!"

"Don't raft yourself without good need, George," she replied. "I won't quite believe that things are so much amiss. I won't believe that Mrs. Charmond has encouraged him. Even supposing she has encouraged a great many, she can have no motive to do it now. What so likely as that she is not yet quite well, and doesn't care to let another doctor come near her?"

He did not heed. "Grace used to be so busy every day, with fixing a curtain here and driving a tin-tack there; but she cares for no employment now!"

"Do you know anything of Mrs. Charmond's past history? Perhaps that

would throw some light upon things. Before she came here as the wife of old Charmond four or five years ago, not a soul seems to have heard aught of her. Why not make inquiries? And then do ye wait and see more; there'll be plenty of opportunity. Time enough to cry when you know 'tis a crying matter; and 'tis bad to meet troubles half-way."

There was some good-sense in the notion of seeing further. Melbury resolved to inquire and wait, hoping still, but oppressed between-whiles with much fear.