CHAPTER XXX.

Examine Grace as her father might, she would admit nothing. For the present, therefore, he simply watched.

The suspicion that his darling child was being slighted wrought almost a miraculous change in Melbury's nature. No man so furtive for the time as the ingenuous countryman who finds that his ingenuousness has been abused. Melbury's heretofore confidential candor towards his gentlemanly son-in-law was displaced by a feline stealth that did injury to his every action, thought, and mood. He knew that a woman once given to a man for life took, as a rule, her lot as it came and made the best of it, without external interference; but for the first time he asked himself why this so generally should be so. Moreover, this case was not, he argued, like ordinary cases. Leaving out the question of Grace being anything but an ordinary woman, her peculiar situation, as it were in mid-air between two planes of society, together with the loneliness of Hintock, made a husband's neglect a far more tragical matter to her than it would be to one who had a large circle of friends to fall back upon. Wisely or unwisely, and whatever other fathers did, he resolved to fight his daughter's battle still.

Mrs. Charmond had returned. But Hintock House scarcely gave forth signs of life, so quietly had she reentered it. He went to church at Great Hintock one afternoon as usual, there being no service at the smaller village. A few minutes before his departure, he had casually

heard Fitzpiers, who was no church-goer, tell his wife that he was going to walk in the wood. Melbury entered the building and sat down in his pew; the parson came in, then Mrs. Charmond, then Mr. Fitzpiers.

The service proceeded, and the jealous father was quite sure that a mutual consciousness was uninterruptedly maintained between those two; he fancied that more than once their eyes met. At the end, Fitzpiers so timed his movement into the aisle that it exactly coincided with Felice Charmond's from the opposite side, and they walked out with their garments in contact, the surgeon being just that two or three inches in her rear which made it convenient for his eyes to rest upon her cheek. The cheek warmed up to a richer tone.

This was a worse feature in the flirtation than he had expected. If she had been playing with him in an idle freak the game might soon have wearied her; but the smallest germ of passion--and women of the world do not change color for nothing--was a threatening development. The mere presence of Fitzpiers in the building, after his statement, was wellnigh conclusive as far as he was concerned; but Melbury resolved yet to watch.

He had to wait long. Autumn drew shiveringly to its end. One day something seemed to be gone from the gardens; the tenderer leaves of vegetables had shrunk under the first smart frost, and hung like faded linen rags; then the forest leaves, which had been descending at leisure, descended in haste and in multitudes, and all the golden

colors that had hung overhead were now crowded together in a degraded mass underfoot, where the fallen myriads got redder and hornier, and curled themselves up to rot. The only suspicious features in Mrs. Charmond's existence at this season were two: the first, that she lived with no companion or relative about her, which, considering her age and attractions, was somewhat unusual conduct for a young widow in a lonely country-house; the other, that she did not, as in previous years, start from Hintock to winter abroad. In Fitzpiers, the only change from his last autumn's habits lay in his abandonment of night study--his lamp never shone from his new dwelling as from his old.

If the suspected ones met, it was by such adroit contrivances that even Melbury's vigilance could not encounter them together. A simple call at her house by the doctor had nothing irregular about it, and that he had paid two or three such calls was certain. What had passed at those interviews was known only to the parties themselves; but that Felice Charmond was under some one's influence Melbury soon had opportunity of perceiving.

Winter had come on. Owls began to be noisy in the mornings and evenings, and flocks of wood-pigeons made themselves prominent again. One day in February, about six months after the marriage of Fitzpiers, Melbury was returning from Great Hintock on foot through the lane, when he saw before him the surgeon also walking. Melbury would have overtaken him, but at that moment Fitzpiers turned in through a gate to one of the rambling drives among the trees at this side of the wood,

which led to nowhere in particular, and the beauty of whose serpentine curves was the only justification of their existence. Felice almost simultaneously trotted down the lane towards the timber-dealer, in a little basket-carriage which she sometimes drove about the estate, unaccompanied by a servant. She turned in at the same place without having seen either Melbury or apparently Fitzpiers. Melbury was soon at the spot, despite his aches and his sixty years. Mrs. Charmond had come up with the doctor, who was standing immediately behind the carriage. She had turned to him, her arm being thrown carelessly over the back of the seat. They looked in each other's faces without uttering a word, an arch yet gloomy smile wreathing her lips. Fitzpiers clasped her hanging hand, and, while she still remained in the same listless attitude, looking volumes into his eyes, he stealthily unbuttoned her glove, and stripped her hand of it by rolling back the gauntlet over the fingers, so that it came off inside out. He then raised her hand to his month, she still reclining passively, watching him as she might have watched a fly upon her dress. At last she said, "Well, sir, what excuse for this disobedience?"

"I make none."

"Then go your way, and let me go mine." She snatched away her hand, touched the pony with the whip, and left him standing there, holding the reversed glove.

Melbury's first impulse was to reveal his presence to Fitzpiers, and

upbraid him bitterly. But a moment's thought was sufficient to show him the futility of any such simple proceeding. There was not, after all, so much in what he had witnessed as in what that scene might be the surface and froth of--probably a state of mind on which censure operates as an aggravation rather than as a cure. Moreover, he said to himself that the point of attack should be the woman, if either. He therefore kept out of sight, and musing sadly, even tearfully--for he was meek as a child in matters concerning his daughter--continued his way towards Hintock.

The insight which is bred of deep sympathy was never more finely exemplified than in this instance. Through her guarded manner, her dignified speech, her placid countenance, he discerned the interior of Grace's life only too truly, hidden as were its incidents from every outer eye.

These incidents had become painful enough. Fitzpiers had latterly developed an irritable discontent which vented itself in monologues when Grace was present to hear them. The early morning of this day had been dull, after a night of wind, and on looking out of the window Fitzpiers had observed some of Melbury's men dragging away a large limb which had been snapped off a beech-tree. Everything was cold and colorless.

"My good Heaven!" he said, as he stood in his dressing-gown. "This is life!" He did not know whether Grace was awake or not, and he would not

turn his head to ascertain. "Ah, fool," he went on to himself, "to clip your own wings when you were free to soar!...But I could not rest till I had done it. Why do I never recognize an opportunity till I have missed it, nor the good or ill of a step till it is irrevocable!...I fell in love....Love, indeed!--

"'Love's but the frailty of the mind
When 'tis not with ambition joined;
A sickly flame which if not fed, expires,
And feeding, wastes in self-consuming fires!'

Ah, old author of 'The Way of the World,' you knew--you knew!" Grace moved. He thought she had heard some part of his soliloquy. He was sorry--though he had not taken any precaution to prevent her.

He expected a scene at breakfast, but she only exhibited an extreme reserve. It was enough, however, to make him repent that he should have done anything to produce discomfort; for he attributed her manner entirely to what he had said. But Grace's manner had not its cause either in his sayings or in his doings. She had not heard a single word of his regrets. Something even nearer home than her husband's blighted prospects--if blighted they were--was the origin of her mood, a mood that was the mere continuation of what her father had noticed when he would have preferred a passionate jealousy in her, as the more natural.

She had made a discovery--one which to a girl of honest nature was

almost appalling. She had looked into her heart, and found that her early interest in Giles Winterborne had become revitalized into luxuriant growth by her widening perceptions of what was great and little in life. His homeliness no longer offended her acquired tastes; his comparative want of so-called culture did not now jar on her intellect; his country dress even pleased her eye; his exterior roughness fascinated her. Having discovered by marriage how much that was humanly not great could co-exist with attainments of an exceptional order, there was a revulsion in her sentiments from all that she had formerly clung to in this kind: honesty, goodness, manliness, tenderness, devotion, for her only existed in their purity now in the breasts of unvarnished men; and here was one who had manifested them towards her from his youth up.

There was, further, that never-ceasing pity in her soul for Giles as a man whom she had wronged--a man who had been unfortunate in his worldly transactions; while, not without a touch of sublimity, he had, like Horatio, borne himself throughout his scathing

"As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing."

It was these perceptions, and no subtle catching of her husband's murmurs, that had bred the abstraction visible in her.

When her father approached the house after witnessing the interview between Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond, Grace was looking out of her sitting-room window, as if she had nothing to do, or think of, or care for. He stood still.

"Ah, Grace," he said, regarding her fixedly.

"Yes, father," she murmured.

"Waiting for your dear husband?" he inquired, speaking with the sarcasm of pitiful affection.

"Oh no--not especially. He has a great many patients to see this afternoon."

Melbury came quite close. "Grace, what's the use of talking like that, when you know--Here, come down and walk with me out in the garden, child."

He unfastened the door in the ivy-laced wall, and waited. This apparent indifference alarmed him. He would far rather that she had rushed in all the fire of jealousy to Hintock House, regardless of conventionality, confronted and attacked Felice Charmond unguibus et rostro, and accused her even in exaggerated shape of stealing away her husband. Such a storm might have cleared the air.

She emerged in a minute or two, and they went inside together. "You know as well as I do," he resumed, "that there is something threatening mischief to your life; and yet you pretend you do not. Do you suppose I don't see the trouble in your face every day? I am very sure that this quietude is wrong conduct in you. You should look more into matters."

"I am quiet because my sadness is not of a nature to stir me to action."

Melbury wanted to ask her a dozen questions--did she not feel jealous? was she not indignant? but a natural delicacy restrained him. "You are very tame and let-alone, I am bound to say," he remarked, pointedly.

"I am what I feel, father," she repeated.

He glanced at her, and there returned upon his mind the scene of her offering to wed Winterborne instead of Fitzpiers in the last days before her marriage; and he asked himself if it could be the fact that she loved Winterborne, now that she had lost him, more than she had ever done when she was comparatively free to choose him.

"What would you have me do?" she asked, in a low voice.

He recalled his mind from the retrospective pain to the practical matter before them. "I would have you go to Mrs. Charmond," he said.

"Go to Mrs. Charmond--what for?" said she.

"Well--if I must speak plain, dear Grace--to ask her, appeal to her in the name of your common womanhood, and your many like sentiments on things, not to make unhappiness between you and your husband. It lies with her entirely to do one or the other--that I can see."

Grace's face had heated at her father's words, and the very rustle of her skirts upon the box-edging bespoke hauteur. "I shall not think of going to her, father--of course I could not!" she answered.

"Why--don't 'ee want to be happier than you be at present?" said Melbury, more moved on her account than she was herself.

"I don't wish to be more humiliated. If I have anything to bear I can bear it in silence."

"But, my dear maid, you are too young--you don't know what the present state of things may lead to. Just see the harm done a'ready! Your husband would have gone away to Budmouth to a bigger practice if it had not been for this. Although it has gone such a little way, it is poisoning your future even now. Mrs. Charmond is thoughtlessly bad, not bad by calculation; and just a word to her now might save 'ee a peck of woes."

"Ah, I loved her once," said Grace, with a broken articulation, "and she would not care for me then! Now I no longer love her. Let her do

her worst: I don't care."

"You ought to care. You have got into a very good position to start with. You have been well educated, well tended, and you have become the wife of a professional man of unusually good family. Surely you ought to make the best of your position."

"I don't see that I ought. I wish I had never got into it. I wish you had never, never thought of educating me. I wish I worked in the woods like Marty South. I hate genteel life, and I want to be no better than she."

"Why?" said her amazed father.

"Because cultivation has only brought me inconveniences and troubles. I say again, I wish you had never sent me to those fashionable schools you set your mind on. It all arose out of that, father. If I had stayed at home I should have married--" She closed up her mouth suddenly and was silent; and he saw that she was not far from crying.

Melbury was much grieved. "What, and would you like to have grown up as we be here in Hintock--knowing no more, and with no more chance of seeing good life than we have here?"

"Yes. I have never got any happiness outside Hintock that I know of, and I have suffered many a heartache at being sent away. Oh, the

misery of those January days when I had got back to school, and left you all here in the wood so happy. I used to wonder why I had to bear it. And I was always a little despised by the other girls at school, because they knew where I came from, and that my parents were not in so good a station as theirs."

Her poor father was much hurt at what he thought her ingratitude and intractability. He had admitted to himself bitterly enough that he should have let young hearts have their way, or rather should have helped on her affection for Winterborne, and given her to him according to his original plan; but he was not prepared for her deprecation of those attainments whose completion had been a labor of years, and a severe tax upon his purse.

"Very well," he said, with much heaviness of spirit. "If you don't like to go to her I don't wish to force you."

And so the question remained for him still: how should he remedy this perilous state of things? For days he sat in a moody attitude over the fire, a pitcher of cider standing on the hearth beside him, and his drinking-horn inverted upon the top of it. He spent a week and more thus composing a letter to the chief offender, which he would every now and then attempt to complete, and suddenly crumple up in his hand.