

CHAPTER XXXII.

At nine o'clock the next morning Melbury dressed himself up in shining broadcloth, creased with folding and smelling of camphor, and started for Hintock House. He was the more impelled to go at once by the absence of his son-in-law in London for a few days, to attend, really or ostensibly, some professional meetings. He said nothing of his destination either to his wife or to Grace, fearing that they might entreat him to abandon so risky a project, and went out unobserved. He had chosen his time with a view, as he supposed, of conveniently catching Mrs. Charmond when she had just finished her breakfast, before any other business people should be about, if any came. Plodding thoughtfully onward, he crossed a glade lying between Little Hintock Woods and the plantation which abutted on the park; and the spot being open, he was discerned there by Winterborne from the copse on the next hill, where he and his men were working. Knowing his mission, the younger man hastened down from the copse and managed to intercept the timber-merchant.

"I have been thinking of this, sir," he said, "and I am of opinion that it would be best to put off your visit for the present."

But Melbury would not even stop to hear him. His mind was made up, the appeal was to be made; and Winterborne stood and watched him sadly till he entered the second plantation and disappeared.

Melbury rang at the tradesmen's door of the manor-house, and was at once informed that the lady was not yet visible, as indeed he might have guessed had he been anybody but the man he was. Melbury said he would wait, whereupon the young man informed him in a neighborly way that, between themselves, she was in bed and asleep.

"Never mind," said Melbury, retreating into the court, "I'll stand about here." Charged so fully with his mission, he shrank from contact with anybody.

But he walked about the paved court till he was tired, and still nobody came to him. At last he entered the house and sat down in a small waiting-room, from which he got glimpses of the kitchen corridor, and of the white-capped maids flitting jauntily hither and thither. They had heard of his arrival, but had not seen him enter, and, imagining him still in the court, discussed freely the possible reason of his calling. They marvelled at his temerity; for though most of the tongues which had been let loose attributed the chief blame-worthiness to Fitzpiers, these of her household preferred to regard their mistress as the deeper sinner.

Melbury sat with his hands resting on the familiar knobbed thorn walking-stick, whose growing he had seen before he enjoyed its use. The scene to him was not the material environment of his person, but a tragic vision that travelled with him like an envelope. Through this vision the incidents of the moment but gleamed confusedly here and

there, as an outer landscape through the high-colored scenes of a stained window. He waited thus an hour, an hour and a half, two hours. He began to look pale and ill, whereupon the butler, who came in, asked him to have a glass of wine. Melbury roused himself and said, "No, no. Is she almost ready?"

"She is just finishing breakfast," said the butler. "She will soon see you now. I am just going up to tell her you are here."

"What! haven't you told her before?" said Melbury.

"Oh no," said the other. "You see you came so very early."

At last the bell rang: Mrs. Charmond could see him. She was not in her private sitting-room when he reached it, but in a minute he heard her coming from the front staircase, and she entered where he stood.

At this time of the morning Mrs. Charmond looked her full age and more. She might almost have been taken for the typical femme de trente ans, though she was really not more than seven or eight and twenty. There being no fire in the room, she came in with a shawl thrown loosely round her shoulders, and obviously without the least suspicion that Melbury had called upon any other errand than timber. Felice was, indeed, the only woman in the parish who had not heard the rumor of her own weaknesses; she was at this moment living in a fool's paradise in respect of that rumor, though not in respect of the weaknesses

themselves, which, if the truth be told, caused her grave misgivings.

"Do sit down, Mr. Melbury. You have felled all the trees that were to be purchased by you this season, except the oaks, I believe."

"Yes," said Melbury.

"How very nice! It must be so charming to work in the woods just now!"

She was too careless to affect an interest in an extraneous person's affairs so consummately as to deceive in the manner of the perfect social machine. Hence her words "very nice," "so charming," were uttered with a perfunctoriness that made them sound absurdly unreal.

"Yes, yes," said Melbury, in a reverie. He did not take a chair, and she also remained standing. Resting upon his stick, he began: "Mrs. Charmond, I have called upon a more serious matter--at least to me--than tree-throwing. And whatever mistakes I make in my manner of speaking upon it to you, madam, do me the justice to set 'em down to my want of practice, and not to my want of care."

Mrs. Charmond looked ill at ease. She might have begun to guess his meaning; but apart from that, she had such dread of contact with anything painful, harsh, or even earnest, that his preliminaries alone were enough to distress her. "Yes, what is it?" she said.

"I am an old man," said Melbury, "whom, somewhat late in life, God thought fit to bless with one child, and she a daughter. Her mother was a very dear wife to me, but she was taken away from us when the child was young, and the child became precious as the apple of my eye to me, for she was all I had left to love. For her sake entirely I married as second wife a homespun woman who had been kind as a mother to her. In due time the question of her education came on, and I said, 'I will educate the maid well, if I live upon bread to do it.' Of her possible marriage I could not bear to think, for it seemed like a death that she should cleave to another man, and grow to think his house her home rather than mine. But I saw it was the law of nature that this should be, and that it was for the maid's happiness that she should have a home when I was gone; and I made up my mind without a murmur to help it on for her sake. In my youth I had wronged my dead friend, and to make amends I determined to give her, my most precious possession, to my friend's son, seeing that they liked each other well. Things came about which made me doubt if it would be for my daughter's happiness to do this, inasmuch as the young man was poor, and she was delicately reared. Another man came and paid court to her--one her equal in breeding and accomplishments; in every way it seemed to me that he only could give her the home which her training had made a necessity almost. I urged her on, and she married him. But, ma'am, a fatal mistake was at the root of my reckoning. I found that this well-born gentleman I had calculated on so surely was not stanch of heart, and that therein lay a danger of great sorrow for my daughter. Madam, he saw you, and

you know the rest....I have come to make no demands--to utter no threats; I have come simply as a father in great grief about this only child, and I beseech you to deal kindly with my daughter, and to do nothing which can turn her husband's heart away from her forever. Forbid him your presence, ma'am, and speak to him on his duty as one with your power over him well can do, and I am hopeful that the rent between them may be patched up. For it is not as if you would lose by so doing; your course is far higher than the courses of a simple professional man, and the gratitude you would win from me and mine by your kindness is more than I can say."

Mrs. Charmond had first rushed into a mood of indignation on comprehending Melbury's story; hot and cold by turns, she had murmured, "Leave me, leave me!" But as he seemed to take no notice of this, his words began to influence her, and when he ceased speaking she said, with hurried, hot breath, "What has led you to think this of me? Who says I have won your daughter's husband away from her? Some monstrous calumnies are afloat--of which I have known nothing until now!"

Melbury started, and looked at her simply. "But surely, ma'am, you know the truth better than I?"

Her features became a little pinched, and the touches of powder on her handsome face for the first time showed themselves as an extrinsic film. "Will you leave me to myself?" she said, with a faintness which suggested a guilty conscience. "This is so utterly unexpected--you

obtain admission to my presence by misrepresentation--"

"As God's in heaven, ma'am, that's not true. I made no pretence; and I thought in reason you would know why I had come. This gossip--"

"I have heard nothing of it. Tell me of it, I say."

"Tell you, ma'am--not I. What the gossip is, no matter. What really is, you know. Set facts right, and the scandal will right of itself. But pardon me--I speak roughly; and I came to speak gently, to coax you, beg you to be my daughter's friend. She loved you once, ma'am; you began by liking her. Then you dropped her without a reason, and it hurt her warm heart more than I can tell ye. But you were within your right as the superior, no doubt. But if you would consider her position now--surely, surely, you would do her no harm!"

"Certainly I would do her no harm--I--" Melbury's eye met hers. It was curious, but the allusion to Grace's former love for her seemed to touch her more than all Melbury's other arguments. "Oh, Melbury," she burst out, "you have made me so unhappy! How could you come to me like this! It is too dreadful! Now go away--go, go!"

"I will," he said, in a husky tone.

As soon as he was out of the room she went to a corner and there sat and writhed under an emotion in which hurt pride and vexation mingled

with better sentiments.

Mrs. Charmond's mobile spirit was subject to these fierce periods of stress and storm. She had never so clearly perceived till now that her soul was being slowly invaded by a delirium which had brought about all this; that she was losing judgment and dignity under it, becoming an animated impulse only, a passion incarnate. A fascination had led her on; it was as if she had been seized by a hand of velvet; and this was where she found herself--overshadowed with sudden night, as if a tornado had passed by.

While she sat, or rather crouched, unhinged by the interview, lunch-time came, and then the early afternoon, almost without her consciousness. Then "a strange gentleman who says it is not necessary to give his name," was suddenly announced.

"I cannot see him, whoever he may be. I am not at home to anybody."

She heard no more of her visitor; and shortly after, in an attempt to recover some mental serenity by violent physical exercise, she put on her hat and cloak and went out-of-doors, taking a path which led her up the slopes to the nearest spur of the wood. She disliked the woods, but they had the advantage of being a place in which she could walk comparatively unobserved.