CHAPTER XXXIII.

There was agitation to-day in the lives of all whom these matters concerned. It was not till the Hintock dinner-time--one o'clock--that Grace discovered her father's absence from the house after a departure in the morning under somewhat unusual conditions. By a little reasoning and inquiry she was able to come to a conclusion on his destination, and to divine his errand.

Her husband was absent, and her father did not return. He had, in truth, gone on to Sherton after the interview, but this Grace did not know. In an indefinite dread that something serious would arise out of Melbury's visit by reason of the inequalities of temper and nervous irritation to which he was subject, something possibly that would bring her much more misery than accompanied her present negative state of mind, she left the house about three o'clock, and took a loitering walk in the woodland track by which she imagined he would come home. This track under the bare trees and over the cracking sticks, screened and roofed in from the outer world of wind and cloud by a net-work of boughs, led her slowly on till in time she had left the larger trees behind her and swept round into the coppice where Winterborne and his men were clearing the undergrowth.

Had Giles's attention been concentrated on his hurdles he would not have seen her; but ever since Melbury's passage across the opposite

glade in the morning he had been as uneasy and unsettled as Grace herself; and her advent now was the one appearance which, since her father's avowal, could arrest him more than Melbury's return with his tidings. Fearing that something might be the matter, he hastened up to her.

She had not seen her old lover for a long time, and, too conscious of the late pranks of her heart, she could not behold him calmly. "I am only looking for my father," she said, in an unnecessarily apologetic intonation.

"I was looking for him too," said Giles. "I think he may perhaps have gone on farther."

"Then you knew he was going to the House, Giles?" she said, turning her large tender eyes anxiously upon him. "Did he tell you what for?"

Winterborne glanced doubtingly at her, and then softly hinted that her father had visited him the evening before, and that their old friendship was quite restored, on which she guessed the rest.

"Oh, I am glad, indeed, that you two are friends again!" she cried. And then they stood facing each other, fearing each other, troubling each other's souls. Grace experienced acute misery at the sight of these wood-cutting scenes, because she had estranged herself from them, craving, even to its defects and inconveniences, that homely sylvan

life of her father which in the best probable succession of events would shortly be denied her.

At a little distance, on the edge of the clearing, Marty South was shaping spar-gads to take home for manufacture during the evenings. While Winterborne and Mrs. Fitzpiers stood looking at her in their mutual embarrassment at each other's presence, they beheld approaching the girl a lady in a dark fur mantle and a black hat, having a white veil tied picturesquely round it. She spoke to Marty, who turned and courtesied, and the lady fell into conversation with her. It was Mrs. Charmond.

On leaving her house, Mrs. Charmond had walked on and onward under the fret and fever of her mind with more vigor than she was accustomed to show in her normal moods--a fever which the solace of a cigarette did not entirely allay. Reaching the coppice, she listlessly observed Marty at work, threw away her cigarette, and came near. Chop, chop, chop, went Marty's little billhook with never more assiduity, till Mrs. Charmond spoke.

"Who is that young lady I see talking to the woodman yonder?" she asked.

"Mrs. Fitzpiers, ma'am," said Marty.

"Oh," said Mrs. Charmond, with something like a start; for she had not recognized Grace at that distance. "And the man she is talking to?"

"That's Mr. Winterborne."

A redness stole into Marty's face as she mentioned Giles's name, which Mrs. Charmond did not fail to notice informed her of the state of the girl's heart. "Are you engaged to him?" she asked, softly.

"No, ma'am," said Marty. "SHE was once; and I think--"

But Marty could not possibly explain the complications of her thoughts on this matter--which were nothing less than one of extraordinary acuteness for a girl so young and inexperienced--namely, that she saw danger to two hearts naturally honest in Grace being thrown back into Winterborne's society by the neglect of her husband. Mrs. Charmond, however, with the almost supersensory means to knowledge which women have on such occasions, quite understood what Marty had intended to convey, and the picture thus exhibited to her of lives drifting away, involving the wreck of poor Marty's hopes, prompted her to more generous resolves than all Melbury's remonstrances had been able to stimulate.

Full of the new feeling, she bade the girl good-afternoon, and went on over the stumps of hazel to where Grace and Winterborne were standing. They saw her approach, and Winterborne said, "She is coming to you; it is a good omen. She dislikes me, so I'll go away." He accordingly retreated to where he had been working before Grace came, and Grace's

formidable rival approached her, each woman taking the other's measure as she came near.

"Dear--Mrs. Fitzpiers," said Felice Charmond, with some inward turmoil which stopped her speech. "I have not seen you for a long time."

She held out her hand tentatively, while Grace stood like a wild animal on first confronting a mirror or other puzzling product of civilization. Was it really Mrs. Charmond speaking to her thus? If it was, she could no longer form any guess as to what it signified.

"I want to talk with you," said Mrs. Charmond, imploringly, for the gaze of the young woman had chilled her through. "Can you walk on with me till we are quite alone?"

Sick with distaste, Grace nevertheless complied, as by clockwork and they moved evenly side by side into the deeper recesses of the woods. They went farther, much farther than Mrs. Charmond had meant to go; but she could not begin her conversation, and in default of it kept walking.

"I have seen your father," she at length resumed. "And--I am much troubled by what he told me."

"What did he tell you? I have not been admitted to his confidence on anything he may have said to you."

"Nevertheless, why should I repeat to you what you can easily divine?"

"True--true," returned Grace, mournfully. "Why should you repeat what we both know to be in our minds already?"

"Mrs. Fitzpiers, your husband--" The moment that the speaker's tongue touched the dangerous subject a vivid look of self-consciousness flashed over her, in which her heart revealed, as by a lightning gleam, what filled it to overflowing. So transitory was the expression that none but a sensitive woman, and she in Grace's position, would have had the power to catch its meaning. Upon her the phase was not lost.

"Then you DO love him!" she exclaimed, in a tone of much surprise.

"What do you mean, my young friend?"

"Why," cried Grace, "I thought till now that you had only been cruelly flirting with my husband, to amuse your idle moments--a rich lady with a poor professional gentleman whom in her heart she despised not much less than her who belongs to him. But I guess from your manner that you love him desperately, and I don't hate you as I did before."

"Yes, indeed," continued Mrs. Fitzpiers, with a trembling tongue, "since it is not playing in your case at all, but REAL. Oh, I do pity you, more than I despise you, for you will s-s-suffer most!"

Mrs. Charmond was now as much agitated as Grace. "I ought not to allow myself to argue with you," she exclaimed. "I demean myself by doing it. But I liked you once, and for the sake of that time I try to tell you how mistaken you are!" Much of her confusion resulted from her wonder and alarm at finding herself in a sense dominated mentally and emotionally by this simple school-girl. "I do not love him," she went on, with desperate untruth. "It was a kindness--my making somewhat more of him than one usually does of one's doctor. I was lonely; I talked--well, I trifled with him. I am very sorry if such child's playing out of pure friendship has been a serious matter to you. Who could have expected it? But the world is so simple here."

"Oh, that's affectation," said Grace, shaking her head. "It is no use--you love him. I can see in your face that in this matter of my husband you have not let your acts belie your feelings. During these last four or six months you have been terribly indiscreet; but you have not been insincere, and that almost disarms me."

"I HAVE been insincere--if you will have the word--I mean I HAVE coquetted, and do NOT love him!"

But Grace clung to her position like a limpet. "You may have trifled with others, but him you love as you never loved another man."

"Oh, well--I won't argue," said Mrs. Charmond, laughing faintly. "And you come to reproach me for it, child."

"No," said Grace, magnanimously. "You may go on loving him if you like--I don't mind at all. You'll find it, let me tell you, a bitterer business for yourself than for me in the end. He'll get tired of you soon, as tired as can be--you don't know him so well as I--and then you may wish you had never seen him!"

Mrs. Charmond had grown quite pale and weak under this prophecy. It was extraordinary that Grace, whom almost every one would have characterized as a gentle girl, should be of stronger fibre than her interlocutor. "You exaggerate--cruel, silly young woman," she reiterated, writhing with little agonies. "It is nothing but playful friendship--nothing! It will be proved by my future conduct. I shall at once refuse to see him more--since it will make no difference to my heart, and much to my name."

"I question if you will refuse to see him again," said Grace, dryly, as with eyes askance she bent a sapling down. "But I am not incensed against you as you are against me," she added, abandoning the tree to its natural perpendicular. "Before I came I had been despising you for wanton cruelty; now I only pity you for misplaced affection. When Edgar has gone out of the house in hope of seeing you, at seasonable hours and unseasonable; when I have found him riding miles and miles across the country at midnight, and risking his life, and getting covered with mud, to get a glimpse of you, I have called him a foolish man--the plaything of a finished coquette. I thought that what was

getting to be a tragedy to me was a comedy to you. But now I see that tragedy lies on YOUR side of the situation no less than on MINE, and more; that if I have felt trouble at my position, you have felt anguish at yours; that if I have had disappointments, you have had despairs. Heaven may fortify me--God help you!"

"I cannot attempt to reply to your raving eloquence," returned the other, struggling to restore a dignity which had completely collapsed. "My acts will be my proofs. In the world which you have seen nothing of, friendships between men and women are not unknown, and it would have been better both for you and your father if you had each judged me more respectfully, and left me alone. As it is I wish never to see or speak to you, madam, any more."

Grace bowed, and Mrs. Charmond turned away. The two went apart in directly opposite courses, and were soon hidden from each other by their umbrageous surroundings and by the shadows of eve.

In the excitement of their long argument they had walked onward and zigzagged about without regarding direction or distance. All sound of the woodcutters had long since faded into remoteness, and even had not the interval been too great for hearing them they would have been silent and homeward bound at this twilight hour. But Grace went on her course without any misgiving, though there was much underwood here, with only the narrowest passages for walking, across which brambles hung. She had not, however, traversed this the wildest part of the

wood since her childhood, and the transformation of outlines had been great; old trees which once were landmarks had been felled or blown down, and the bushes which then had been small and scrubby were now large and overhanging. She soon found that her ideas as to direction were vague--that she had indeed no ideas as to direction at all. If the evening had not been growing so dark, and the wind had not put on its night moan so distinctly, Grace would not have minded; but she was rather frightened now, and began to strike across hither and thither in random courses.

Denser grew the darkness, more developed the wind-voices, and still no recognizable spot or outlet of any kind appeared, nor any sound of the Hintocks floated near, though she had wandered probably between one and two hours, and began to be weary. She was vexed at her foolishness, since the ground she had covered, if in a straight line, must inevitably have taken her out of the wood to some remote village or other; but she had wasted her forces in countermarches; and now, in much alarm, wondered if she would have to pass the night here. She stood still to meditate, and fancied that between the soughing of the wind she heard shuffling footsteps on the leaves heavier than those of rabbits or hares. Though fearing at first to meet anybody on the chance of his being a friend, she decided that the fellow night-rambler, even if a poacher, would not injure her, and that he might possibly be some one sent to search for her. She accordingly shouted a rather timid "Hoi!"

The cry was immediately returned by the other person; and Grace running at once in the direction whence it came beheld an indistinct figure hastening up to her as rapidly. They were almost in each other's arms when she recognized in her vis-a-vis the outline and white veil of her whom she had parted from an hour and a half before--Mrs. Charmond.

"I have lost my way, I have lost my way," cried that lady. "Oh--is it indeed you? I am so glad to meet you or anybody. I have been wandering up and down ever since we parted, and am nearly dead with terror and misery and fatigue!"

"So am I," said Grace. "What shall we, shall we do?"

"You won't go away from me?" asked her companion, anxiously.

"No, indeed. Are you very tired?"

"I can scarcely move, and I am scratched dreadfully about the ankles."

Grace reflected. "Perhaps, as it is dry under foot, the best thing for us to do would be to sit down for half an hour, and then start again when we have thoroughly rested. By walking straight we must come to a track leading somewhere before the morning."

They found a clump of bushy hollies which afforded a shelter from the wind, and sat down under it, some tufts of dead fern, crisp and dry,

that remained from the previous season forming a sort of nest for them. But it was cold, nevertheless, on this March night, particularly for Grace, who with the sanguine prematureness of youth in matters of dress, had considered it spring-time, and hence was not so warmly clad as Mrs. Charmond, who still wore her winter fur. But after sitting a while the latter lady shivered no less than Grace as the warmth imparted by her hasty walking began to go off, and they felt the cold air drawing through the holly leaves which scratched their backs and shoulders. Moreover, they could hear some drops of rain falling on the trees, though none reached the nook in which they had ensconced themselves.

"If we were to cling close together," said Mrs. Charmond, "we should keep each other warm. But," she added, in an uneven voice, "I suppose you won't come near me for the world!"

"Why not?"

"Because--well, you know."

"Yes. I will--I don't hate you at all."

They consequently crept up to one another, and being in the dark, lonely and weary, did what neither had dreamed of doing beforehand, clasped each other closely, Mrs. Charmond's furs consoling Grace's cold face, and each one's body as she breathed alternately heaving against

that of her companion.

When a few minutes had been spent thus, Mrs. Charmond said, "I am so wretched!" in a heavy, emotional whisper.

"You are frightened," said Grace, kindly. "But there is nothing to fear; I know these woods well."

"I am not at all frightened at the wood, but I am at other things."

Mrs. Charmond embraced Grace more and more tightly, and the younger woman could feel her neighbor's breathings grow deeper and more spasmodic, as though uncontrollable feelings were germinating.

"After I had left you," she went on, "I regretted something I had said. I have to make a confession--I must make it!" she whispered, brokenly, the instinct to indulge in warmth of sentiment which had led this woman of passions to respond to Fitzpiers in the first place leading her now to find luxurious comfort in opening her heart to his wife. "I said to you I could give him up without pain or deprivation--that he had only been my pastime. That was untrue--it was said to deceive you. I could not do it without much pain; and, what is more dreadful, I cannot give him up--even if I would--of myself alone."

"Why? Because you love him, you mean."

Felice Charmond denoted assent by a movement.

"I knew I was right!" said Grace, exaltedly. "But that should not deter you," she presently added, in a moral tone. "Oh, do struggle against it, and you will conquer!"

"You are so simple, so simple!" cried Felice. "You think, because you guessed my assumed indifference to him to be a sham, that you know the extremes that people are capable of going to! But a good deal more may have been going on than you have fathomed with all your insight. I CANNOT give him up until he chooses to give up me."

"But surely you are the superior in station and in every way, and the cut must come from you."

"Tchut! Must I tell verbatim, you simple child? Oh, I suppose I must! I shall eat away my heart if I do not let out all, after meeting you like this and finding how guileless you are." She thereupon whispered a few words in the girl's ear, and burst into a violent fit of sobbing.

Grace started roughly away from the shelter of the fur, and sprang to her feet.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, thunderstruck at a revelation transcending her utmost suspicion. "Can it be--can it be!"

She turned as if to hasten away. But Felice Charmond's sobs came to her ear: deep darkness circled her about, the funereal trees rocked and chanted their diriges and placebos around her, and she did not know which way to go. After a moment of energy she felt mild again, and turned to the motionless woman at her feet.

"Are you rested?" she asked, in what seemed something like her own voice grown ten years older.

Without an answer Mrs. Charmond slowly rose.

"You mean to betray me!" she said from the bitterest depths of her soul. "Oh fool, fool I!"

"No," said Grace, shortly. "I mean no such thing. But let us be quick now. We have a serious undertaking before us. Think of nothing but going straight on."

They walked on in profound silence, pulling back boughs now growing wet, and treading down woodbine, but still keeping a pretty straight course. Grace began to be thoroughly worn out, and her companion too, when, on a sudden, they broke into the deserted highway at the hill-top on which the Sherton man had waited for Mrs. Dollery's van. Grace recognized the spot as soon as she looked around her.

"How we have got here I cannot tell," she said, with cold civility.

"We have made a complete circuit of Little Hintock. The hazel copse is quite on the other side. Now we have only to follow the road."

They dragged themselves onward, turned into the lane, passed the track to Little Hintock, and so reached the park.

"Here I turn back," said Grace, in the same passionless voice. "You are quite near home."

Mrs. Charmond stood inert, seeming appalled by her late admission.

"I have told you something in a moment of irresistible desire to unburden my soul which all but a fool would have kept silent as the grave," she said. "I cannot help it now. Is it to be a secret--or do you mean war?"

"A secret, certainly," said Grace, mournfully. "How can you expect war from such a helpless, wretched being as I!"

"And I'll do my best not to see him. I am his slave; but I'll try."

Grace was naturally kind; but she could not help using a small dagger now.

"Pray don't distress yourself," she said, with exquisitely fine scorn. "You may keep him--for me." Had she been wounded instead of mortified

she could not have used the words; but Fitzpiers's hold upon her heart was slight.

They parted thus and there, and Grace went moodily homeward. Passing Marty's cottage she observed through the window that the girl was writing instead of chopping as usual, and wondered what her correspondence could be. Directly afterwards she met people in search of her, and reached the house to find all in serious alarm. She soon explained that she had lost her way, and her general depression was attributed to exhaustion on that account.

Could she have known what Marty was writing she would have been surprised.

The rumor which agitated the other folk of Hintock had reached the young girl, and she was penning a letter to Fitzpiers, to tell him that Mrs. Charmond wore her hair. It was poor Marty's only card, and she played it, knowing nothing of fashion, and thinking her revelation a fatal one for a lover.