CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was at the beginning of April, a few days after the meeting between Grace and Mrs. Charmond in the wood, that Fitzpiers, just returned from London, was travelling from Sherton-Abbas to Hintock in a hired carriage. In his eye there was a doubtful light, and the lines of his refined face showed a vague disquietude. He appeared now like one of those who impress the beholder as having suffered wrong in being born.

His position was in truth gloomy, and to his appreciative mind it seemed even gloomier than it was. His practice had been slowly dwindling of late, and now threatened to die out altogether, the irrepressible old Dr. Jones capturing patients up to Fitzpiers's very door. Fitzpiers knew only too well the latest and greatest cause of his unpopularity; and yet, so illogical is man, the second branch of his sadness grew out of a remedial measure proposed for the first--a letter from Felice Charmond imploring him not to see her again. To bring about their severance still more effectually, she added, she had decided during his absence upon almost immediate departure for the Continent.

The time was that dull interval in a woodlander's life which coincides with great activity in the life of the woodland itself--a period following the close of the winter tree-cutting, and preceding the barking season, when the saps are just beginning to heave with the force of hydraulic lifts inside all the trunks of the forest.

Winterborne's contract was completed, and the plantations were deserted. It was dusk; there were no leaves as yet; the nightingales would not begin to sing for a fortnight; and "the Mother of the Months" was in her most attenuated phase--starved and bent to a mere bowed skeleton, which glided along behind the bare twigs in Fitzpiers's company.

When he reached home he went straight up to his wife's sitting-room. He found it deserted, and without a fire. He had mentioned no day for his return; nevertheless, he wondered why she was not there waiting to receive him. On descending to the other wing of the house and inquiring of Mrs. Melbury, he learned with much surprise that Grace had gone on a visit to an acquaintance at Shottsford-Forum three days earlier; that tidings had on this morning reached her father of her being very unwell there, in consequence of which he had ridden over to see her.

Fitzpiers went up-stairs again, and the little drawing-room, now lighted by a solitary candle, was not rendered more cheerful by the entrance of Grammer Oliver with an apronful of wood, which she threw on the hearth while she raked out the grate and rattled about the fire-irons, with a view to making things comfortable. Fitzpiers considered that Grace ought to have let him know her plans more accurately before leaving home in a freak like this. He went desultorily to the window, the blind of which had not been pulled down,

and looked out at the thin, fast-sinking moon, and at the tall stalk of smoke rising from the top of Suke Damson's chimney, signifying that the young woman had just lit her fire to prepare supper.

He became conscious of a discussion in progress on the opposite side of the court. Somebody had looked over the wall to talk to the sawyers, and was telling them in a loud voice news in which the name of Mrs. Charmond soon arrested his ears.

"Grammer, don't make so much noise with that grate," said the surgeon; at which Grammer reared herself upon her knees and held the fuel suspended in her hand, while Fitzpiers half opened the casement.

"She is off to foreign lands again at last--hev made up her mind quite sudden-like--and it is thoughted she'll leave in a day or two. She's been all as if her mind were low for some days past--with a sort of sorrow in her face, as if she reproached her own soul. She's the wrong sort of woman for Hintock--hardly knowing a beech from a woak--that I own. But I don't care who the man is, she's been a very kind friend to me.

"Well, the day after to-morrow is the Sabbath day, and without charity we are but tinkling simples; but this I do say, that her going will be a blessed thing for a certain married couple who remain."

The fire was lighted, and Fitzpiers sat down in front of it, restless

as the last leaf upon a tree. "A sort of sorrow in her face, as if she reproached her own soul." Poor Felice. How Felice's frame must be pulsing under the conditions of which he had just heard the caricature; how her fair temples must ache; what a mood of wretchedness she must be in! But for the mixing up of his name with hers, and her determination to sunder their too close acquaintance on that account, she would probably have sent for him professionally. She was now sitting alone, suffering, perhaps wishing that she had not forbidden him to come again.

Unable to remain in this lonely room any longer, or to wait for the meal which was in course of preparation, he made himself ready for riding, descended to the yard, stood by the stable-door while Darling was being saddled, and rode off down the lane. He would have preferred walking, but was weary with his day's travel.

As he approached the door of Marty South's cottage, which it was necessary to pass on his way, she came from the porch as if she had been awaiting him, and met him in the middle of the road, holding up a letter. Fitzpiers took it without stopping, and asked over his shoulder from whom it came.

Marty hesitated. "From me," she said, shyly, though with noticeable firmness.

This letter contained, in fact, Marty's declaration that she was the original owner of Mrs. Charmond's supplementary locks, and enclosed a

sample from the native stock, which had grown considerably by this time. It was her long contemplated apple of discord, and much her hand trembled as she handed the document up to him.

But it was impossible on account of the gloom for Fitzpiers to read it then, while he had the curiosity to do so, and he put it in his pocket. His imagination having already centred itself on Hintock House, in his pocket the letter remained unopened and forgotten, all the while that Marty was hopefully picturing its excellent weaning effect upon him.

He was not long in reaching the precincts of the Manor House. He drew rein under a group of dark oaks commanding a view of the front, and reflected a while. His entry would not be altogether unnatural in the circumstances of her possible indisposition; but upon the whole he thought it best to avoid riding up to the door. By silently approaching he could retreat unobserved in the event of her not being alone. Thereupon he dismounted, hitched Darling to a stray bough hanging a little below the general browsing line of the trees, and proceeded to the door on foot.

In the mean time Melbury had returned from Shottsford-Forum. The great court or quadrangle of the timber-merchant's house, divided from the shady lane by an ivy-covered wall, was entered by two white gates, one standing near each extremity of the wall. It so happened that at the moment when Fitzpiers was riding out at the lower gate on his way to the Manor House, Melbury was approaching the upper gate to enter it.

Fitzpiers being in front of Melbury was seen by the latter, but the surgeon, never turning his head, did not observe his father-in-law, ambling slowly and silently along under the trees, though his horse too was a gray one.

"How is Grace?" said his wife, as soon as he entered.

Melbury looked gloomy. "She is not at all well," he said. "I don't like the looks of her at all. I couldn't bear the notion of her biding away in a strange place any longer, and I begged her to let me get her home. At last she agreed to it, but not till after much persuading. I was then sorry that I rode over instead of driving; but I have hired a nice comfortable carriage--the easiest-going I could get--and she'll be here in a couple of hours or less. I rode on ahead to tell you to get her room ready; but I see her husband has come back."

"Yes," said Mrs. Melbury. She expressed her concern that her husband had hired a carriage all the way from Shottsford. "What it will cost!" she said.

"I don't care what it costs!" he exclaimed, testily. "I was determined to get her home. Why she went away I can't think! She acts in a way that is not at all likely to mend matters as far as I can see." (Grace had not told her father of her interview with Mrs. Charmond, and the disclosure that had been whispered in her startled ear.) "Since Edgar is come," he continued, "he might have waited in till I got home, to

ask me how she was, if only for a compliment. I saw him go out; where is he gone?"

Mrs. Melbury did not know positively; but she told her husband that there was not much doubt about the place of his first visit after an absence. She had, in fact, seen Fitzpiers take the direction of the Manor House.

Melbury said no more. It was exasperating to him that just at this moment, when there was every reason for Fitzpiers to stay indoors, or at any rate to ride along the Shottsford road to meet his ailing wife, he should be doing despite to her by going elsewhere. The old man went out-of-doors again; and his horse being hardly unsaddled as yet, he told Upjohn to retighten the girths, when he again mounted, and rode off at the heels of the surgeon.

By the time that Melbury reached the park, he was prepared to go any lengths in combating this rank and reckless errantry of his daughter's husband. He would fetch home Edgar Fitzpiers to-night by some means, rough or fair: in his view there could come of his interference nothing worse than what existed at present. And yet to every bad there is a worse.

He had entered by the bridle-gate which admitted to the park on this side, and cantered over the soft turf almost in the tracks of Fitzpiers's horse, till he reached the clump of trees under which his

precursor had halted. The whitish object that was indistinctly visible here in the gloom of the boughs he found to be Darling, as left by Fitzpiers.

"D--n him! why did he not ride up to the house in an honest way?" said Melbury.

He profited by Fitzpiers's example; dismounting, he tied his horse under an adjoining tree, and went on to the house on foot, as the other had done. He was no longer disposed to stick at trifles in his investigation, and did not hesitate to gently open the front door without ringing.

The large square hall, with its oak floor, staircase, and wainscot, was lighted by a dim lamp hanging from a beam. Not a soul was visible. He went into the corridor and listened at a door which he knew to be that of the drawing-room; there was no sound, and on turning the handle he found the room empty. A fire burning low in the grate was the sole light of the apartment; its beams flashed mockingly on the somewhat showy Versaillese furniture and gilding here, in style as unlike that of the structural parts of the building as it was possible to be, and probably introduced by Felice to counteract the fine old-English gloom of the place. Disappointed in his hope of confronting his son-in-law here, he went on to the dining-room; this was without light or fire, and pervaded by a cold atmosphere, which signified that she had not dined there that day.

By this time Melbury's mood had a little mollified. Everything here was so pacific, so unaggressive in its repose, that he was no longer incited to provoke a collision with Fitzpiers or with anybody. The comparative stateliness of the apartments influenced him to an emotion, rather than to a belief, that where all was outwardly so good and proper there could not be quite that delinquency within which he had suspected. It occurred to him, too, that even if his suspicion were justified, his abrupt, if not unwarrantable, entry into the house might end in confounding its inhabitant at the expense of his daughter's dignity and his own. Any ill result would be pretty sure to hit Grace hardest in the long-run. He would, after all, adopt the more rational course, and plead with Fitzpiers privately, as he had pleaded with Mrs. Charmond.

He accordingly retreated as silently as he had come. Passing the door of the drawing-room anew, he fancied that he heard a noise within which was not the crackling of the fire. Melbury gently reopened the door to a distance of a few inches, and saw at the opposite window two figures in the act of stepping out--a man and a woman--in whom he recognized the lady of the house and his son-in-law. In a moment they had disappeared amid the gloom of the lawn.

He returned into the hall, and let himself out by the carriage-entrance door, coming round to the lawn front in time to see the two figures parting at the railing which divided the precincts of the house from

the open park. Mrs. Charmond turned to hasten back immediately that Fitzpiers had left her side, and he was speedily absorbed into the duskiness of the trees.

Melbury waited till Mrs. Charmond had re-entered the drawing-room, and then followed after Fitzpiers, thinking that he would allow the latter to mount and ride ahead a little way before overtaking him and giving him a piece of his mind. His son-in-law might possibly see the second horse near his own; but that would do him no harm, and might prepare him for what he was to expect.

The event, however, was different from the plan. On plunging into the thick shade of the clump of oaks, he could not perceive his horse Blossom anywhere; but feeling his way carefully along, he by-and-by discerned Fitzpiers's mare Darling still standing as before under the adjoining tree. For a moment Melbury thought that his own horse, being young and strong, had broken away from her fastening; but on listening intently he could hear her ambling comfortably along a little way ahead, and a creaking of the saddle which showed that she had a rider. Walking on as far as the small gate in the corner of the park, he met a laborer, who, in reply to Melbury's inquiry if he had seen any person on a gray horse, said that he had only met Dr. Fitzpiers.

It was just what Melbury had begun to suspect: Fitzpiers had mounted the mare which did not belong to him in mistake for his own--an oversight easily explicable, in a man ever unwitting in horse-flesh, by

the darkness of the spot and the near similarity of the animals in appearance, though Melbury's was readily enough seen to be the grayer horse by day. He hastened back, and did what seemed best in the circumstances--got upon old Darling, and rode rapidly after Fitzpiers.

Melbury had just entered the wood, and was winding along the cart-way which led through it, channelled deep in the leaf-mould with large ruts that were formed by the timber-wagons in fetching the spoil of the plantations, when all at once he descried in front, at a point where the road took a turning round a large chestnut-tree, the form of his own horse Blossom, at which Melbury quickened Darling's pace, thinking to come up with Fitzpiers.

Nearer view revealed that the horse had no rider. At Melbury's approach it galloped friskily away under the trees in a homeward direction. Thinking something was wrong, the timber-merchant dismounted as soon as he reached the chestnut, and after feeling about for a minute or two discovered Fitzpiers lying on the ground.

"Here--help!" cried the latter as soon as he felt Melbury's touch; "I have been thrown off, but there's not much harm done, I think."

Since Melbury could not now very well read the younger man the lecture he had intended, and as friendliness would be hypocrisy, his instinct was to speak not a single word to his son-in-law. He raised Fitzpiers into a sitting posture, and found that he was a little stunned and

stupefied, but, as he had said, not otherwise hurt. How this fall had come about was readily conjecturable: Fitzpiers, imagining there was only old Darling under him, had been taken unawares by the younger horse's sprightliness.

Melbury was a traveller of the old-fashioned sort; having just come from Shottsford-Forum, he still had in his pocket the pilgrim's flask of rum which he always carried on journeys exceeding a dozen miles, though he seldom drank much of it. He poured it down the surgeon's throat, with such effect that he quickly revived. Melbury got him on his legs; but the question was what to do with him. He could not walk more than a few steps, and the other horse had gone away.

With great exertion Melbury contrived to get him astride Darling, mounting himself behind, and holding Fitzpiers round his waist with one arm. Darling being broad, straight-backed, and high in the withers, was well able to carry double, at any rate as far as Hintock, and at a gentle pace.