

## CHAPTER XXXV.

The mare paced along with firm and cautious tread through the copse where Winterborne had worked, and into the heavier soil where the oaks grew; past Great Willy, the largest oak in the wood, and thence towards Nellcombe Bottom, intensely dark now with overgrowth, and popularly supposed to be haunted by the spirits of the fratricides exorcised from Hintock House.

By this time Fitzpiers was quite recovered as to physical strength. But he had eaten nothing since making a hasty breakfast in London that morning, his anxiety about Felice having hurried him away from home before dining; as a consequence, the old rum administered by his father-in-law flew to the young man's head and loosened his tongue, without his ever having recognized who it was that had lent him a kindly hand. He began to speak in desultory sentences, Melbury still supporting him.

"I've come all the way from London to-day," said Fitzpiers. "Ah, that's the place to meet your equals. I live at Hintock--worse, at Little Hintock--and I am quite lost there. There's not a man within ten miles of Hintock who can comprehend me. I tell you, Farmer What's-your-name, that I'm a man of education. I know several languages; the poets and I are familiar friends; I used to read more in metaphysics than anybody within fifty miles; and since I gave that up there's nobody can match me in the whole county of Wessex as a

scientist. Yet I am doomed to live with tradespeople in a miserable little hole like Hintock!"

"Indeed!" muttered Melbury.

Fitzpiers, increasingly energized by the alcohol, here reared himself up suddenly from the bowed posture he had hitherto held, thrusting his shoulders so violently against Melbury's breast as to make it difficult for the old man to keep a hold on the reins. "People don't appreciate me here!" the surgeon exclaimed; lowering his voice, he added, softly and slowly, "except one--except one!...A passionate soul, as warm as she is clever, as beautiful as she is warm, and as rich as she is beautiful. I say, old fellow, those claws of yours clutch me rather tight--rather like the eagle's, you know, that ate out the liver of Pro--Pre--the man on Mount Caucasus. People don't appreciate me, I say, except HER. Ah, gods, I am an unlucky man! She would have been mine, she would have taken my name; but unfortunately it cannot be so. I stooped to mate beneath me, and now I rue it."

The position was becoming a very trying one for Melbury, corporeally and mentally. He was obliged to steady Fitzpiers with his left arm, and he began to hate the contact. He hardly knew what to do. It was useless to remonstrate with Fitzpiers, in his intellectual confusion from the rum and from the fall. He remained silent, his hold upon his companion, however, being stern rather than compassionate.

"You hurt me a little, farmer--though I am much obliged to you for your kindness. People don't appreciate me, I say. Between ourselves, I am losing my practice here; and why? Because I see matchless attraction where matchless attraction is, both in person and position. I mention no names, so nobody will be the wiser. But I have lost her, in a legitimate sense, that is. If I were a free man now, things have come to such a pass that she could not refuse me; while with her fortune (which I don't covet for itself) I should have a chance of satisfying an honorable ambition--a chance I have never had yet, and now never, never shall have, probably!"

Melbury, his heart throbbing against the other's backbone, and his brain on fire with indignation, ventured to mutter huskily, "Why?"

The horse ambled on some steps before Fitzpiers replied, "Because I am tied and bound to another by law, as tightly as I am to you by your arm--not that I complain of your arm--I thank you for helping me. Well, where are we? Not nearly home yet?...Home, say I. It is a home! When I might have been at the other house over there." In a stupefied way he flung his hand in the direction of the park. "I was just two months too early in committing myself. Had I only seen the other first--"

Here the old man's arm gave Fitzpiers a convulsive shake. "What are you doing?" continued the latter. "Keep still, please, or put me down. I was saying that I lost her by a mere little two months! There is no

chance for me now in this world, and it makes me reckless--reckless! Unless, indeed, anything should happen to the other one. She is amiable enough; but if anything should happen to her--and I hear she is ill--well, if it should, I should be free--and my fame, my happiness, would be insured."

These were the last words that Fitzpiers uttered in his seat in front of the timber-merchant. Unable longer to master himself, Melbury, the skin of his face compressed, whipped away his spare arm from Fitzpiers's waist, and seized him by the collar.

"You heartless villain--after all that we have done for ye!" he cried, with a quivering lip. "And the money of hers that you've had, and the roof we've provided to shelter ye! It is to me, George Melbury, that you dare to talk like that!" The exclamation was accompanied by a powerful swing from the shoulder, which flung the young man head-long into the road, Fitzpiers fell with a heavy thud upon the stumps of some undergrowth which had been cut during the winter preceding. Darling continued her walk for a few paces farther and stopped.

"God forgive me!" Melbury murmured, repenting of what he had done. "He tried me too sorely; and now perhaps I've murdered him!"

He turned round in the saddle and looked towards the spot on which Fitzpiers had fallen. To his great surprise he beheld the surgeon rise to his feet with a bound, as if unhurt, and walk away rapidly under the

trees.

Melbury listened till the rustle of Fitzpiers's footsteps died away.

"It might have been a crime, but for the mercy of Providence in providing leaves for his fall," he said to himself. And then his mind reverted to the words of Fitzpiers, and his indignation so mounted within him that he almost wished the fall had put an end to the young man there and then.

He had not ridden far when he discerned his own gray mare standing under some bushes. Leaving Darling for a moment, Melbury went forward and easily caught the younger animal, now disheartened at its freak.

He then made the pair of them fast to a tree, and turning back, endeavored to find some trace of Fitzpiers, feeling pitifully that, after all, he had gone further than he intended with the offender.

But though he threaded the wood hither and thither, his toes ploughing layer after layer of the little horny scrolls that had once been leaves, he could not find him. He stood still listening and looking round. The breeze was oozing through the network of boughs as through a strainer; the trunks and larger branches stood against the light of the sky in the forms of writhing men, gigantic candelabra, pikes, halberds, lances, and whatever besides the fancy chose to make of them. Giving up the search, Melbury came back to the horses, and walked slowly homeward, leading one in each hand.

It happened that on this self-same evening a boy had been returning from Great to Little Hintock about the time of Fitzpiers's and Melbury's passage home along that route. A horse-collar that had been left at the harness-mender's to be repaired was required for use at five o'clock next morning, and in consequence the boy had to fetch it overnight. He put his head through the collar, and accompanied his walk by whistling the one tune he knew, as an antidote to fear.

The boy suddenly became aware of a horse trotting rather friskily along the track behind him, and not knowing whether to expect friend or foe, prudence suggested that he should cease his whistling and retreat among the trees till the horse and his rider had gone by; a course to which he was still more inclined when he found how noiselessly they approached, and saw that the horse looked pale, and remembered what he had read about Death in the Revelation. He therefore deposited the collar by a tree, and hid himself behind it. The horseman came on, and the youth, whose eyes were as keen as telescopes, to his great relief recognized the doctor.

As Melbury surmised, Fitzpiers had in the darkness taken Blossom for Darling, and he had not discovered his mistake when he came up opposite the boy, though he was somewhat surprised at the liveliness of his usually placid mare. The only other pair of eyes on the spot whose vision was keen as the young carter's were those of the horse; and, with that strongly conservative objection to the unusual which animals

show, Blossom, on eying the collar under the tree--quite invisible to Fitzpiers--exercised none of the patience of the older horse, but shied sufficiently to unseat so second-rate an equestrian as the surgeon.

He fell, and did not move, lying as Melbury afterwards found him. The boy ran away, salving his conscience for the desertion by thinking how vigorously he would spread the alarm of the accident when he got to Hintock--which he uncompromisingly did, incrusting the skeleton event with a load of dramatic horrors.

Grace had returned, and the fly hired on her account, though not by her husband, at the Crown Hotel, Shottsford-Forum, had been paid for and dismissed. The long drive had somewhat revived her, her illness being a feverish intermittent nervousness which had more to do with mind than body, and she walked about her sitting-room in something of a hopeful mood. Mrs. Melbury had told her as soon as she arrived that her husband had returned from London. He had gone out, she said, to see a patient, as she supposed, and he must soon be back, since he had had no dinner or tea. Grace would not allow her mind to harbor any suspicion of his whereabouts, and her step-mother said nothing of Mrs. Charmond's rumored sorrows and plans of departure.

So the young wife sat by the fire, waiting silently. She had left Hintock in a turmoil of feeling after the revelation of Mrs. Charmond, and had intended not to be at home when her husband returned. But she had thought the matter over, and had allowed her father's influence to

prevail and bring her back; and now somewhat regretted that Edgar's arrival had preceded hers.

By-and-by Mrs. Melbury came up-stairs with a slight air of flurry and abruptness.

"I have something to tell--some bad news," she said. "But you must not be alarmed, as it is not so bad as it might have been. Edgar has been thrown off his horse. We don't think he is hurt much. It happened in the wood the other side of Nellcombe Bottom, where 'tis said the ghosts of the brothers walk."

She went on to give a few of the particulars, but none of the invented horrors that had been communicated by the boy. "I thought it better to tell you at once," she added, "in case he should not be very well able to walk home, and somebody should bring him."

Mrs. Melbury really thought matters much worse than she represented, and Grace knew that she thought so. She sat down dazed for a few minutes, returning a negative to her step-mother's inquiry if she could do anything for her. "But please go into the bedroom," Grace said, on second thoughts, "and see if all is ready there--in case it is serious." Mrs. Melbury thereupon called Grammer, and they did as directed, supplying the room with everything they could think of for the accommodation of an injured man.



Nobody was left in the lower part of the house. Not many minutes passed when Grace heard a knock at the door--a single knock, not loud enough to reach the ears of those in the bedroom. She went to the top of the stairs and said, faintly, "Come up," knowing that the door stood, as usual in such houses, wide open.

Retreating into the gloom of the broad landing she saw rise up the stairs a woman whom at first she did not recognize, till her voice revealed her to be Suke Damson, in great fright and sorrow. A streak of light from the partially closed door of Grace's room fell upon her face as she came forward, and it was drawn and pale.

"Oh, Miss Melbury--I would say Mrs. Fitzpiers," she said, wringing her hands. "This terrible news. Is he dead? Is he hurted very bad? Tell me; I couldn't help coming; please forgive me, Miss Melbury--Mrs. Fitzpiers I would say!"

Grace sank down on the oak chest which stood on the landing, and put her hands to her now flushed face and head. Could she order Suke Damson down-stairs and out of the house? Her husband might be brought in at any moment, and what would happen? But could she order this genuinely grieved woman away?

There was a dead silence of half a minute or so, till Suke said, "Why don't ye speak? Is he here? Is he dead? If so, why can't I see him--would it be so very wrong?"

Before Grace had answered somebody else came to the door below--a foot-fall light as a roe's. There was a hurried tapping upon the panel, as if with the impatient tips of fingers whose owner thought not whether a knocker were there or no. Without a pause, and possibly guided by the stray beam of light on the landing, the newcomer ascended the staircase as the first had done. Grace was sufficiently visible, and the lady, for a lady it was, came to her side.

"I could make nobody hear down-stairs," said Felice Charmond, with lips whose dryness could almost be heard, and panting, as she stood like one ready to sink on the floor with distress. "What is--the matter--tell me the worst! Can he live?" She looked at Grace imploringly, without perceiving poor Suke, who, dismayed at such a presence, had shrunk away into the shade.

Mrs. Charmond's little feet were covered with mud; she was quite unconscious of her appearance now. "I have heard such a dreadful report," she went on; "I came to ascertain the truth of it. Is he--killed?"

"She won't tell us--he's dying--he's in that room!" burst out Suke, regardless of consequences, as she heard the distant movements of Mrs. Melbury and Grammer in the bedroom at the end of the passage.

"Where?" said Mrs. Charmond; and on Suke pointing out the direction,

she made as if to go thither.

Grace barred the way. "He is not there," she said. "I have not seen him any more than you. I have heard a report only--not so bad as you think. It must have been exaggerated to you."

"Please do not conceal anything--let me know all!" said Felice, doubtfully.

"You shall know all I know--you have a perfect right to know--who can have a better than either of you?" said Grace, with a delicate sting which was lost upon Felice Charmond now. "I repeat, I have only heard a less alarming account than you have heard; how much it means, and how little, I cannot say. I pray God that it means not much--in common humanity. You probably pray the same--for other reasons."

She regarded them both there in the dim light a while.

They stood dumb in their trouble, not stinging back at her; not heeding her mood. A tenderness spread over Grace like a dew. It was well, very well, conventionally, to address either one of them in the wife's regulation terms of virtuous sarcasm, as woman, creature, or thing, for losing their hearts to her husband. But life, what was it, and who was she? She had, like the singer of the psalm of Asaph, been plagued and chastened all the day long; but could she, by retributive words, in order to please herself--the individual--"offend against the

generation," as he would not?

"He is dying, perhaps," blubbered Suke Damson, putting her apron to her eyes.

In their gestures and faces there were anxieties, affection, agony of heart, all for a man who had wronged them--had never really behaved towards either of them anyhow but selfishly. Neither one but would have wellnigh sacrificed half her life to him, even now. The tears which his possibly critical situation could not bring to her eyes surged over at the contemplation of these fellow-women. She turned to the balustrade, bent herself upon it, and wept.

Thereupon Felice began to cry also, without using her handkerchief, and letting the tears run down silently. While these three poor women stood together thus, pitying another though most to be pitied themselves, the pacing of a horse or horses became audible in the court, and in a moment Melbury's voice was heard calling to his stableman. Grace at once started up, ran down the stairs and out into the quadrangle as her father crossed it towards the door. "Father, what is the matter with him?" she cried.

"Who--Edgar?" said Melbury, abruptly. "Matter? Nothing. What, my dear, and have you got home safe? Why, you are better already! But you ought not to be out in the air like this."

"But he has been thrown off his horse!"

"I know; I know. I saw it. He got up again, and walked off as well as ever. A fall on the leaves didn't hurt a spry fellow like him. He did not come this way," he added, significantly. "I suppose he went to look for his horse. I tried to find him, but could not. But after seeing him go away under the trees I found the horse, and have led it home for safety. So he must walk. Now, don't you stay out here in this night air."

She returned to the house with her father. When she had again ascended to the landing and to her own rooms beyond it was a great relief to her to find that both Petticoat the First and Petticoat the Second of her Bien-aime had silently disappeared. They had, in all probability, heard the words of her father, and departed with their anxieties relieved.

Presently her parents came up to Grace, and busied themselves to see that she was comfortable. Perceiving soon that she would prefer to be left alone they went away.

Grace waited on. The clock raised its voice now and then, but her husband did not return. At her father's usual hour for retiring he again came in to see her. "Do not stay up," she said, as soon as he entered. "I am not at all tired. I will sit up for him."

"I think it will be useless, Grace," said Melbury, slowly.

"Why?"

"I have had a bitter quarrel with him; and on that account I hardly think he will return to-night."

"A quarrel? Was that after the fall seen by the boy?"

Melbury nodded an affirmative, without taking his eyes off the candle.

"Yes; it was as we were coming home together," he said.

Something had been swelling up in Grace while her father was speaking.

"How could you want to quarrel with him?" she cried, suddenly. "Why could you not let him come home quietly if he were inclined to? He is my husband; and now you have married me to him surely you need not provoke him unnecessarily. First you induce me to accept him, and then you do things that divide us more than we should naturally be divided!"

"How can you speak so unjustly to me, Grace?" said Melbury, with indignant sorrow. "I divide you from your husband, indeed! You little think--"

He was inclined to say more--to tell her the whole story of the encounter, and that the provocation he had received had lain entirely

in hearing her despised. But it would have greatly distressed her, and he forbore. "You had better lie down. You are tired," he said, soothingly. "Good-night."

The household went to bed, and a silence fell upon the dwelling, broken only by the occasional skirr of a halter in Melbury's stables. Despite her father's advice Grace still waited up. But nobody came.

It was a critical time in Grace's emotional life that night. She thought of her husband a good deal, and for the nonce forgot Winterborne.

"How these unhappy women must have admired Edgar!" she said to herself. "How attractive he must be to everybody; and, indeed, he is attractive." The possibility is that, piqued by rivalry, these ideas might have been transformed into their corresponding emotions by a show of the least reciprocity in Fitzpiers. There was, in truth, a love-bird yearning to fly from her heart; and it wanted a lodging badly.

But no husband came. The fact was that Melbury had been much mistaken about the condition of Fitzpiers. People do not fall headlong on stumps of underwood with impunity. Had the old man been able to watch Fitzpiers narrowly enough, he would have observed that on rising and walking into the thicket he dropped blood as he went; that he had not proceeded fifty yards before he showed signs of being dizzy, and, raising his hands to his head, reeled and fell down.