

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Grace was not the only one who watched and meditated in Hintock that night. Felice Charmond was in no mood to retire to rest at a customary hour; and over her drawing-room fire at the Manor House she sat as motionless and in as deep a reverie as Grace in her little apartment at the homestead.

Having caught ear of Melbury's intelligence while she stood on the landing at his house, and been eased of much of her mental distress, her sense of personal decorum returned upon her with a rush. She descended the stairs and left the door like a ghost, keeping close to the walls of the building till she got round to the gate of the quadrangle, through which she noiselessly passed almost before Grace and her father had finished their discourse. Suke Damson had thought it well to imitate her superior in this respect, and, descending the back stairs as Felice descended the front, went out at the side door and home to her cottage.

Once outside Melbury's gates Mrs. Charmond ran with all her speed to the Manor House, without stopping or turning her head, and splitting her thin boots in her haste. She entered her own dwelling, as she had emerged from it, by the drawing-room window. In other circumstances she

would have felt some timidity at undertaking such an unpremeditated excursion alone; but her anxiety for another had cast out her fear for herself.

Everything in her drawing-room was just as she had left it--the candles still burning, the casement closed, and the shutters gently pulled to, so as to hide the state of the window from the cursory glance of a servant entering the apartment. She had been gone about three-quarters of an hour by the clock, and nobody seemed to have discovered her absence. Tired in body but tense in mind, she sat down, palpitating, round-eyed, bewildered at what she had done.

She had been betrayed by affrighted love into a visit which, now that the emotion instigating it had calmed down under her belief that Fitzpiers was in no danger, was the saddest surprise to her. This was how she had set about doing her best to escape her passionate bondage to him! Somehow, in declaring to Grace and to herself the unseemliness of her infatuation, she had grown a convert to its irresistibility. If Heaven would only give her strength; but Heaven never did! One thing was indispensable; she must go away from Hintock if she meant to withstand further temptation. The struggle was too wearying, too hopeless, while she remained. It was but a continual capitulation of conscience to what she dared not name.

By degrees, as she sat, Felice's mind--helped perhaps by the anticlimax of learning that her lover was unharmed after all her fright about

him--grew wondrously strong in wise resolve. For the moment she was in a mood, in the words of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, "to run mad with discretion;" and was so persuaded that discretion lay in departure that she wished to set about going that very minute. Jumping up from her seat, she began to gather together some small personal knick-knacks scattered about the room, to feel that preparations were really in train.

While moving here and there she fancied that she heard a slight noise out-of-doors, and stood still. Surely it was a tapping at the window. A thought entered her mind, and burned her cheek. He had come to that window before; yet was it possible that he should dare to do so now! All the servants were in bed, and in the ordinary course of affairs she would have retired also. Then she remembered that on stepping in by the casement and closing it, she had not fastened the window-shutter, so that a streak of light from the interior of the room might have revealed her vigil to an observer on the lawn. How all things conspired against her keeping faith with Grace!

The tapping recommenced, light as from the bill of a little bird; her illegitimate hope overcame her vow; she went and pulled back the shutter, determining, however, to shake her head at him and keep the casement securely closed.

What she saw outside might have struck terror into a heart stouter than a helpless woman's at midnight. In the centre of the lowest pane of

the window, close to the glass, was a human face, which she barely recognized as the face of Fitzpiers. It was surrounded with the darkness of the night without, corpse-like in its pallor, and covered with blood. As disclosed in the square area of the pane it met her frightened eyes like a replica of the Sudarium of St. Veronica.

He moved his lips, and looked at her imploringly. Her rapid mind pieced together in an instant a possible concatenation of events which might have led to this tragical issue. She unlatched the casement with a terrified hand, and bending down to where he was crouching, pressed her face to his with passionate solicitude. She assisted him into the room without a word, to do which it was almost necessary to lift him bodily. Quickly closing the window and fastening the shutters, she bent over him breathlessly.

"Are you hurt much--much?" she cried, faintly. "Oh, oh, how is this!"

"Rather much--but don't be frightened," he answered in a difficult whisper, and turning himself to obtain an easier position if possible.

"A little water, please."

She ran across into the dining-room, and brought a bottle and glass, from which he eagerly drank. He could then speak much better, and with her help got upon the nearest couch.

"Are you dying, Edgar?" she said. "Do speak to me!"

"I am half dead," said Fitzpiers. "But perhaps I shall get over it....It is chiefly loss of blood."

"But I thought your fall did not hurt you," said she. "Who did this?"

"Felice--my father-in-law!...I have crawled to you more than a mile on my hands and knees--God, I thought I should never have got here!...I have come to you--be-cause you are the only friend--I have in the world now....I can never go back to Hintock--never--to the roof of the Melburys! Not poppy nor mandragora will ever medicine this bitter feud!...If I were only well again--"

"Let me bind your head, now that you have rested."

"Yes--but wait a moment--it has stopped bleeding, fortunately, or I should be a dead man before now. While in the wood I managed to make a tourniquet of some half-pence and my handkerchief, as well as I could in the dark....But listen, dear Felice! Can you hide me till I am well? Whatever comes, I can be seen in Hintock no more. My practice is nearly gone, you know--and after this I would not care to recover it if I could."

By this time Felice's tears began to blind her. Where were now her discreet plans for sundering their lives forever? To administer to him in his pain, and trouble, and poverty, was her single thought. The

first step was to hide him, and she asked herself where. A place occurred to her mind.

She got him some wine from the dining-room, which strengthened him much. Then she managed to remove his boots, and, as he could now keep himself upright by leaning upon her on one side and a walking-stick on the other, they went thus in slow march out of the room and up the stairs. At the top she took him along a gallery, pausing whenever he required rest, and thence up a smaller staircase to the least used part of the house, where she unlocked a door. Within was a lumber-room, containing abandoned furniture of all descriptions, built up in piles which obscured the light of the windows, and formed between them nooks and lairs in which a person would not be discerned even should an eye gaze in at the door. The articles were mainly those that had belonged to the previous owner of the house, and had been bought in by the late Mr. Charmond at the auction; but changing fashion, and the tastes of a young wife, had caused them to be relegated to this dungeon.

Here Fitzpiers sat on the floor against the wall till she had hauled out materials for a bed, which she spread on the floor in one of the aforesaid nooks. She obtained water and a basin, and washed the dried blood from his face and hands; and when he was comfortably reclining, fetched food from the larder. While he ate her eyes lingered anxiously on his face, following its every movement with such loving-kindness as only a fond woman can show.

He was now in better condition, and discussed his position with her.

"What I fancy I said to Melbury must have been enough to enrage any man, if uttered in cold blood, and with knowledge of his presence. But I did not know him, and I was stupefied by what he had given me, so that I hardly was aware of what I said. Well--the veil of that temple is rent in twain!...As I am not going to be seen again in Hintock, my first efforts must be directed to allay any alarm that may be felt at my absence, before I am able to get clear away. Nobody must suspect that I have been hurt, or there will be a country talk about me. Felice, I must at once concoct a letter to check all search for me. I think if you can bring me a pen and paper I may be able to do it now. I could rest better if it were done. Poor thing! how I tire her with running up and down!"

She fetched writing materials, and held up the blotting-book as a support to his hand, while he penned a brief note to his nominal wife.

"The animosity shown towards me by your father," he wrote, in this coldest of marital epistles, "is such that I cannot return again to a roof which is his, even though it shelters you. A parting is unavoidable, as you are sure to be on his side in this division. I am starting on a journey which will take me a long way from Hintock, and you must not expect to see me there again for some time."

He then gave her a few directions bearing upon his professional

engagements and other practical matters, concluding without a hint of his destination, or a notion of when she would see him again. He offered to read the note to Felice before he closed it up, but she would not hear or see it; that side of his obligations distressed her beyond endurance. She turned away from Fitzpiers, and sobbed bitterly.

"If you can get this posted at a place some miles away," he whispered, exhausted by the effort of writing--"at Shottsford or Port-Bredy, or still better, Budmouth--it will divert all suspicion from this house as the place of my refuge."

"I will drive to one or other of the places myself--anything to keep it unknown," she murmured, her voice weighted with vague foreboding, now that the excitement of helping him had passed away.

Fitzpiers told her that there was yet one thing more to be done. "In creeping over the fence on to the lawn," he said, "I made the rail bloody, and it shows rather much on the white paint--I could see it in the dark. At all hazards it should be washed off. Could you do that also, Felice?"

What will not women do on such devoted occasions? weary as she was she went all the way down the rambling staircases to the ground-floor, then to search for a lantern, which she lighted and hid under her cloak; then for a wet sponge, and next went forth into the night. The white railing stared out in the darkness at her approach, and a ray

from the enshrouded lantern fell upon the blood--just where he had told her it would be found. She shuddered. It was almost too much to bear in one day--but with a shaking hand she sponged the rail clean, and returned to the house.

The time occupied by these several proceedings was not much less than two hours. When all was done, and she had smoothed his extemporized bed, and placed everything within his reach that she could think of, she took her leave of him, and locked him in.