

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

When her husband's letter reached Grace's hands, bearing upon it the postmark of a distant town, it never once crossed her mind that Fitzpiers was within a mile of her still. She felt relieved that he did not write more bitterly of the quarrel with her father, whatever its nature might have been; but the general frigidity of his communication quenched in her the incipient spark that events had kindled so shortly before.

From this centre of information it was made known in Hintock that the doctor had gone away, and as none but the Melbury household was aware that he did not return on the night of his accident, no excitement manifested itself in the village.

Thus the early days of May passed by. None but the nocturnal birds and animals observed that late one evening, towards the middle of the month, a closely wrapped figure, with a crutch under one arm and a stick in his hand, crept out from Hintock House across the lawn to the shelter of the trees, taking thence a slow and laborious walk to the nearest point of the turnpike-road. The mysterious personage was so disguised that his own wife would hardly have known him. Felice Charmond was a practised hand at make-ups, as well she might be; and she had done her utmost in padding and painting Fitzpiers with the old materials of her art in the recesses of the lumber-room.

In the highway he was met by a covered carriage, which conveyed him to Sherton-Abbas, whence he proceeded to the nearest port on the south coast, and immediately crossed the Channel.

But it was known to everybody that three days after this time Mrs. Charmond executed her long-deferred plan of setting out for a long term of travel and residence on the Continent. She went off one morning as unostentatiously as could be, and took no maid with her, having, she said, engaged one to meet her at a point farther on in her route. After that, Hintock House, so frequently deserted, was again to be let. Spring had not merged in summer when a clinching rumor, founded on the best of evidence, reached the parish and neighborhood. Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers had been seen together in Baden, in relations which set at rest the question that had agitated the little community ever since the winter.

Melbury had entered the Valley of Humiliation even farther than Grace. His spirit seemed broken.

But once a week he mechanically went to market as usual, and here, as he was passing by the conduit one day, his mental condition expressed largely by his gait, he heard his name spoken by a voice formerly familiar. He turned and saw a certain Fred Beaucock--once a promising lawyer's clerk and local dandy, who had been called the cleverest fellow in Sherton, without whose brains the firm of solicitors employing him would be nowhere. But later on Beaucock had fallen into

the mire. He was invited out a good deal, sang songs at agricultural meetings and burgesses' dinners; in sum, victualled himself with spirits more frequently than was good for the clever brains or body either. He lost his situation, and after an absence spent in trying his powers elsewhere, came back to his native town, where, at the time of the foregoing events in Hintock, he gave legal advice for astonishingly small fees--mostly carrying on his profession on public-house settles, in whose recesses he might often have been overheard making country-people's wills for half a crown; calling with a learned voice for pen-and-ink and a halfpenny sheet of paper, on which he drew up the testament while resting it in a little space wiped with his hand on the table amid the liquid circles formed by the cups and glasses. An idea implanted early in life is difficult to uproot, and many elderly tradespeople still clung to the notion that Fred Beaucock knew a great deal of law.

It was he who had called Melbury by name. "You look very down, Mr. Melbury--very, if I may say as much," he observed, when the timber-merchant turned. "But I know--I know. A very sad case--very. I was bred to the law, as you know, and am professionally no stranger to such matters. Well, Mrs. Fitzpiers has her remedy."

"How--what--a remedy?" said Melbury.

"Under the new law, sir. A new court was established last year, and under the new statute, twenty and twenty-one Vic., cap. eighty-five,

unmarrying is as easy as marrying. No more Acts of Parliament necessary; no longer one law for the rich and another for the poor. But come inside--I was just going to have a nibleykin of rum hot--I'll explain it all to you."

The intelligence amazed Melbury, who saw little of newspapers. And though he was a severely correct man in his habits, and had no taste for entering a tavern with Fred Beaucock--nay, would have been quite uninfluenced by such a character on any other matter in the world--such fascination lay in the idea of delivering his poor girl from bondage, that it deprived him of the critical faculty. He could not resist the ex-lawyer's clerk, and entered the inn.

Here they sat down to the rum, which Melbury paid for as a matter of course, Beaucock leaning back in the settle with a legal gravity which would hardly allow him to be conscious of the spirits before him, though they nevertheless disappeared with mysterious quickness.

How much of the exaggerated information on the then new divorce laws which Beaucock imparted to his listener was the result of ignorance, and how much of dupery, was never ascertained. But he related such a plausible story of the ease with which Grace could become a free woman that her father was irradiated with the project; and though he scarcely wetted his lips, Melbury never knew how he came out of the inn, or when or where he mounted his gig to pursue his way homeward. But home he found himself, his brain having all the way seemed to ring sonorously

as a gong in the intensity of its stir. Before he had seen Grace, he was accidentally met by Winterborne, who found his face shining as if he had, like the Law-giver, conversed with an angel.

He relinquished his horse, and took Winterborne by the arm to a heap of rendlewood--as barked oak was here called--which lay under a privet-hedge.

"Giles," he said, when they had sat down upon the logs, "there's a new law in the land! Grace can be free quite easily. I only knew it by the merest accident. I might not have found it out for the next ten years. She can get rid of him--d'ye hear?--get rid of him. Think of that, my friend Giles!"

He related what he had learned of the new legal remedy. A subdued tremulousness about the mouth was all the response that Winterborne made; and Melbury added, "My boy, you shall have her yet--if you want her." His feelings had gathered volume as he said this, and the articulate sound of the old idea drowned his sight in mist.

"Are you sure--about this new law?" asked Winterborne, so disquieted by a gigantic exultation which loomed alternately with fearful doubt that he evaded the full acceptance of Melbury's last statement.

Melbury said that he had no manner of doubt, for since his talk with Beaucock it had come into his mind that he had seen some time ago in

the weekly paper an allusion to such a legal change; but, having no interest in those desperate remedies at the moment, he had passed it over. "But I'm not going to let the matter rest doubtful for a single day," he continued. "I am going to London. Beaucock will go with me, and we shall get the best advice as soon as we possibly can. Beaucock is a thorough lawyer--nothing the matter with him but a fiery palate. I knew him as the stay and refuge of Sherton in knots of law at one time."

Winterborne's replies were of the vaguest. The new possibility was almost unthinkable by him at the moment. He was what was called at Hintock "a solid-going fellow;" he maintained his abeyant mood, not from want of reciprocity, but from a taciturn hesitancy, taught by life as he knew it.

"But," continued the timber-merchant, a temporary crease or two of anxiety supplementing those already established in his forehead by time and care, "Grace is not at all well. Nothing constitutional, you know; but she has been in a low, nervous state ever since that night of fright. I don't doubt but that she will be all right soon....I wonder how she is this evening?" He rose with the words, as if he had too long forgotten her personality in the excitement of her previsioned career.

They had sat till the evening was beginning to dye the garden brown, and now went towards Melbury's house, Giles a few steps in the rear of his old friend, who was stimulated by the enthusiasm of the moment to

outstep the ordinary walking of Winterborne. He felt shy of entering Grace's presence as her reconstituted lover--which was how her father's manner would be sure to present him--before definite information as to her future state was forthcoming; it seemed too nearly like the act of those who rush in where angels fear to tread.

A chill to counterbalance all the glowing promise of the day was prompt enough in coming. No sooner had he followed the timber-merchant in at the door than he heard Grammer inform him that Mrs. Fitzpiers was still more unwell than she had been in the morning. Old Dr. Jones being in the neighborhood they had called him in, and he had instantly directed them to get her to bed. They were not, however, to consider her illness serious--a feverish, nervous attack the result of recent events, was what she was suffering from, and she would doubtless be well in a few days.

Winterborne, therefore, did not remain, and his hope of seeing her that evening was disappointed. Even this aggravation of her morning condition did not greatly depress Melbury. He knew, he said, that his daughter's constitution was sound enough. It was only these domestic troubles that were pulling her down. Once free she would be blooming again. Melbury diagnosed rightly, as parents usually do.

He set out for London the next morning, Jones having paid another visit and assured him that he might leave home without uneasiness, especially on an errand of that sort, which would the sooner put an end to her

suspense.

The timber-merchant had been away only a day or two when it was told in Hintock that Mr. Fitzpiers's hat had been found in the wood. Later on in the afternoon the hat was brought to Melbury, and, by a piece of ill-fortune, into Grace's presence. It had doubtless lain in the wood ever since his fall from the horse, but it looked so clean and uninjured--the summer weather and leafy shelter having much favored its preservation--that Grace could not believe it had remained so long concealed. A very little of fact was enough to set her fevered fancy at work at this juncture; she thought him still in the neighborhood; she feared his sudden appearance; and her nervous malady developed consequences so grave that Dr. Jones began to look serious, and the household was alarmed.

It was the beginning of June, and the cuckoo at this time of the summer scarcely ceased his cry for more than two or three hours during the night. The bird's note, so familiar to her ears from infancy, was now absolute torture to the poor girl. On the Friday following the Wednesday of Melbury's departure, and the day after the discovery of Fitzpiers's hat, the cuckoo began at two o'clock in the morning with a sudden cry from one of Melbury's apple-trees, not three yards from the window of Grace's room.

"Oh, he is coming!" she cried, and in her terror sprang clean from the bed out upon the floor.

These starts and frights continued till noon; and when the doctor had arrived and had seen her, and had talked with Mrs. Melbury, he sat down and meditated. That ever-present terror it was indispensable to remove from her mind at all hazards; and he thought how this might be done.

Without saying a word to anybody in the house, or to the disquieted Winterborne waiting in the lane below, Dr. Jones went home and wrote to Mr. Melbury at the London address he had obtained from his wife. The gist of his communication was that Mrs. Fitzpiers should be assured as soon as possible that steps were being taken to sever the bond which was becoming a torture to her; that she would soon be free, and was even then virtually so. "If you can say it AT ONCE it may be the means of averting much harm," he said. "Write to herself; not to me."

On Saturday he drove over to Hintock, and assured her with mysterious pacifications that in a day or two she might expect to receive some assuring news. So it turned out. When Sunday morning came there was a letter for Grace from her father. It arrived at seven o'clock, the usual time at which the toddling postman passed by Hintock; at eight Grace awoke, having slept an hour or two for a wonder, and Mrs. Melbury brought up the letter.

"Can you open it yourself?" said she.

"Oh yes, yes!" said Grace, with feeble impatience. She tore the

envelope, unfolded the sheet, and read; when a creeping blush tintured her white neck and cheek.

Her father had exercised a bold discretion. He informed her that she need have no further concern about Fitzpiers's return; that she would shortly be a free woman; and therefore, if she should desire to wed her old lover--which he trusted was the case, since it was his own deep wish--she would be in a position to do so. In this Melbury had not written beyond his belief. But he very much stretched the facts in adding that the legal formalities for dissolving her union were practically settled. The truth was that on the arrival of the doctor's letter poor Melbury had been much agitated, and could with difficulty be prevented by Beaucock from returning to her bedside. What was the use of his rushing back to Hintock? Beaucock had asked him. The only thing that could do her any good was a breaking of the bond. Though he had not as yet had an interview with the eminent solicitor they were about to consult, he was on the point of seeing him; and the case was clear enough. Thus the simple Melbury, urged by his parental alarm at her danger by the representations of his companion, and by the doctor's letter, had yielded, and sat down to tell her roundly that she was virtually free.

"And you'd better write also to the gentleman," suggested Beaucock, who, scenting notoriety and the germ of a large practice in the case, wished to commit Melbury to it irretrievably; to effect which he knew that nothing would be so potent as awakening the passion of Grace for

Winterborne, so that her father might not have the heart to withdraw from his attempt to make her love legitimate when he discovered that there were difficulties in the way.

The nervous, impatient Melbury was much pleased with the idea of "starting them at once," as he called it. To put his long-delayed reparative scheme in train had become a passion with him now. He added to the letter addressed to his daughter a passage hinting that she ought to begin to encourage Winterborne, lest she should lose him altogether; and he wrote to Giles that the path was virtually open for him at last. Life was short, he declared; there were slips betwixt the cup and the lip; her interest in him should be reawakened at once, that all might be ready when the good time came for uniting them.