

## CHAPTER XL.

Life among the people involved in these events seemed to be suppressed and hide-bound for a while. Grace seldom showed herself outside the house, never outside the garden; for she feared she might encounter Giles Winterborne; and that she could not bear.

This pensive intramural existence of the self-constituted nun appeared likely to continue for an indefinite time. She had learned that there was one possibility in which her formerly imagined position might become real, and only one; that her husband's absence should continue long enough to amount to positive desertion. But she never allowed her mind to dwell much upon the thought; still less did she deliberately hope for such a result. Her regard for Winterborne had been rarefied by the shock which followed its avowal into an ethereal emotion that had little to do with living and doing.

As for Giles, he was lying--or rather sitting--ill at his hut. A feverish indisposition which had been hanging about him for some time, the result of a chill caught the previous winter, seemed to acquire virulence with the prostration of his hopes. But not a soul knew of his languor, and he did not think the case serious enough to send for a medical man. After a few days he was better again, and crept about his home in a great coat, attending to his simple wants as usual with his own hands. So matters stood when the limpid inertion of Grace's

pool-like existence was disturbed as by a geyser. She received a letter from Fitzpiers.

Such a terrible letter it was in its import, though couched in the gentlest language. In his absence Grace had grown to regard him with toleration, and her relation to him with equanimity, till she had almost forgotten how trying his presence would be. He wrote briefly and unaffectedly; he made no excuses, but informed her that he was living quite alone, and had been led to think that they ought to be together, if she would make up her mind to forgive him. He therefore purported to cross the Channel to Budmouth by the steamer on a day he named, which she found to be three days after the time of her present reading.

He said that he could not come to Hintock for obvious reasons, which her father would understand even better than herself. As the only alternative she was to be on the quay to meet the steamer when it arrived from the opposite coast, probably about half an hour before midnight, bringing with her any luggage she might require; join him there, and pass with him into the twin vessel, which left immediately the other entered the harbor; returning thus with him to his continental dwelling-place, which he did not name. He had no intention of showing himself on land at all.

The troubled Grace took the letter to her father, who now continued for long hours by the fireless summer chimney-corner, as if he thought it

were winter, the pitcher of cider standing beside him, mostly untasted, and coated with a film of dust. After reading it he looked up.

"You sha'n't go," said he.

"I had felt I would not," she answered. "But I did not know what you would say."

"If he comes and lives in England, not too near here and in a respectable way, and wants you to come to him, I am not sure that I'll oppose him in wishing it," muttered Melbury. "I'd stint myself to keep you both in a genteel and seemly style. But go abroad you never shall with my consent."

There the question rested that day. Grace was unable to reply to her husband in the absence of an address, and the morrow came, and the next day, and the evening on which he had requested her to meet him. Throughout the whole of it she remained within the four walls of her room.

The sense of her harassment, carking doubt of what might be impending, hung like a cowl of blackness over the Melbury household. They spoke almost in whispers, and wondered what Fitzpiers would do next. It was the hope of every one that, finding she did not arrive, he would return again to France; and as for Grace, she was willing to write to him on the most kindly terms if he would only keep away.

The night passed, Grace lying tense and wide awake, and her relatives, in great part, likewise. When they met the next morning they were pale and anxious, though neither speaking of the subject which occupied all their thoughts. The day passed as quietly as the previous ones, and she began to think that in the rank caprice of his moods he had abandoned the idea of getting her to join him as quickly as it was formed. All on a sudden, some person who had just come from Sherton entered the house with the news that Mr. Fitzpiers was on his way home to Hintock. He had been seen hiring a carriage at the Earl of Wessex Hotel.

Her father and Grace were both present when the intelligence was announced.

"Now," said Melbury, "we must make the best of what has been a very bad matter. The man is repenting; the partner of his shame, I hear, is gone away from him to Switzerland, so that chapter of his life is probably over. If he chooses to make a home for ye I think you should not say him nay, Grace. Certainly he cannot very well live at Hintock without a blow to his pride; but if he can bear that, and likes Hintock best, why, there's the empty wing of the house as it was before."

"Oh, father!" said Grace, turning white with dismay.

"Why not?" said he, a little of his former doggedness returning. He

was, in truth, disposed to somewhat more leniency towards her husband just now than he had shown formerly, from a conviction that he had treated him over-roughly in his anger. "Surely it is the most respectable thing to do?" he continued. "I don't like this state that you are in--neither married nor single. It hurts me, and it hurts you, and it will always be remembered against us in Hintock. There has never been any scandal like it in the family before."

"He will be here in less than an hour," murmured Grace. The twilight of the room prevented her father seeing the despondent misery of her face. The one intolerable condition, the condition she had deprecated above all others, was that of Fitzpiers's reinstatement there. "Oh, I won't, I won't see him," she said, sinking down. She was almost hysterical.

"Try if you cannot," he returned, moodily.

"Oh yes, I will, I will," she went on, inconsequently. "I'll try;" and jumping up suddenly, she left the room.

In the darkness of the apartment to which she flew nothing could have been seen during the next half-hour; but from a corner a quick breathing was audible from this impressible creature, who combined modern nerves with primitive emotions, and was doomed by such coexistence to be numbered among the distressed, and to take her scourgings to their exquisite extremity.

The window was open. On this quiet, late summer evening, whatever sound arose in so secluded a district--the chirp of a bird, a call from a voice, the turning of a wheel--extended over bush and tree to unwonted distances. Very few sounds did arise. But as Grace invisibly breathed in the brown glooms of the chamber, the small remote noise of light wheels came in to her, accompanied by the trot of a horse on the turnpike-road. There seemed to be a sudden hitch or pause in the progress of the vehicle, which was what first drew her attention to it. She knew the point whence the sound proceeded--the hill-top over which travellers passed on their way hitherward from Sherton Abbas--the place at which she had emerged from the wood with Mrs. Charmond. Grace slid along the floor, and bent her head over the window-sill, listening with open lips. The carriage had stopped, and she heard a man use exclamatory words. Then another said, "What the devil is the matter with the horse?" She recognized the voice as her husband's.

The accident, such as it had been, was soon remedied, and the carriage could be heard descending the hill on the Hintock side, soon to turn into the lane leading out of the highway, and then into the "drong" which led out of the lane to the house where she was.

A spasm passed through Grace. The Daphnean instinct, exceptionally strong in her as a girl, had been revived by her widowed seclusion; and it was not lessened by her affronted sentiments towards the comer, and her regard for another man. She opened some little ivory tablets that

lay on the dressing-table, scribbled in pencil on one of them, "I am gone to visit one of my school-friends," gathered a few toilet necessaries into a hand-bag, and not three minutes after that voice had been heard, her slim form, hastily wrapped up from observation, might have been seen passing out of the back door of Melbury's house. Thence she skimmed up the garden-path, through the gap in the hedge, and into the mossy cart-track under the trees which led into the depth of the woods.

The leaves overhead were now in their latter green--so opaque, that it was darker at some of the densest spots than in winter-time, scarce a crevice existing by which a ray could get down to the ground. But in open places she could see well enough. Summer was ending: in the daytime singing insects hung in every sunbeam; vegetation was heavy nightly with globes of dew; and after showers creeping damp and twilight chills came up from the hollows. The plantations were always weird at this hour of eve--more spectral far than in the leafless season, when there were fewer masses and more minute lineality. The smooth surfaces of glossy plants came out like weak, lidless eyes; there were strange faces and figures from expiring lights that had somehow wandered into the canopied obscurity; while now and then low peeps of the sky between the trunks were like sheeted shapes, and on the tips of boughs sat faint cloven tongues.

But Grace's fear just now was not imaginative or spiritual, and she heeded these impressions but little. She went on as silently as she

could, avoiding the hollows wherein leaves had accumulated, and stepping upon soundless moss and grass-tufts. She paused breathlessly once or twice, and fancied that she could hear, above the beat of her strumming pulse, the vehicle containing Fitzpiers turning in at the gate of her father's premises. She hastened on again.

The Hintock woods owned by Mrs. Charmond were presently left behind, and those into which she next plunged were divided from the latter by a bank, from whose top the hedge had long ago perished--starved for want of sun. It was with some caution that Grace now walked, though she was quite free from any of the commonplace timidities of her ordinary pilgrimages to such spots. She feared no lurking harms, but that her effort would be all in vain, and her return to the house rendered imperative.

She had walked between three and four miles when that prescriptive comfort and relief to wanderers in woods--a distant light--broke at last upon her searching eyes. It was so very small as to be almost sinister to a stranger, but to her it was what she sought. She pushed forward, and the dim outline of a dwelling was disclosed.

The house was a square cot of one story only, sloping up on all sides to a chimney in the midst. It had formerly been the home of a charcoal-burner, in times when that fuel was still used in the county houses. Its only appurtenance was a paled enclosure, there being no garden, the shade of the trees preventing the growth of vegetables.



She advanced to the window whence the rays of light proceeded, and the shutters being as yet unclosed, she could survey the whole interior through the panes.

The room within was kitchen, parlor, and scullery all in one; the natural sandstone floor was worn into hills and dales by long treading, so that none of the furniture stood level, and the table slanted like a desk. A fire burned on the hearth, in front of which revolved the skinned carcass of a rabbit, suspended by a string from a nail. Leaning with one arm on the mantle-shelf stood Winterborne, his eyes on the roasting animal, his face so rapt that speculation could build nothing on it concerning his thoughts, more than that they were not with the scene before him. She thought his features had changed a little since she saw them last. The fire-light did not enable her to perceive that they were positively haggard.

Grace's throat emitted a gasp of relief at finding the result so nearly as she had hoped. She went to the door and tapped lightly.

He seemed to be accustomed to the noises of woodpeckers, squirrels, and such small creatures, for he took no notice of her tiny signal, and she knocked again. This time he came and opened the door. When the light of the room fell upon her face he started, and, hardly knowing what he did, crossed the threshold to her, placing his hands upon her two arms, while surprise, joy, alarm, sadness, chased through him by turns. With Grace it was the same: even in this stress there was the fond fact that

they had met again. Thus they stood,

"Long tears upon their faces, waxen white

With extreme sad delight."

He broke the silence by saying in a whisper, "Come in."

"No, no, Giles!" she answered, hurriedly, stepping yet farther back from the door. "I am passing by--and I have called on you--I won't enter. Will you help me? I am afraid. I want to get by a roundabout way to Sherton, and so to Exbury. I have a school-fellow there--but I cannot get to Sherton alone. Oh, if you will only accompany me a little way! Don't condemn me, Giles, and be offended! I was obliged to come to you because--I have no other help here. Three months ago you were my lover; now you are only my friend. The law has stepped in, and forbidden what we thought of. It must not be. But we can act honestly, and yet you can be my friend for one little hour? I have no other--"

She could get no further. Covering her eyes with one hand, by an effort of repression she wept a silent trickle, without a sigh or sob. Winterborne took her other hand. "What has happened?" he said.

"He has come."

There was a stillness as of death, till Winterborne asked, "You mean this, Grace--that I am to help you to get away?"

"Yes," said she. "Appearance is no matter, when the reality is right. I have said to myself I can trust you."

Giles knew from this that she did not suspect his treachery--if it could be called such--earlier in the summer, when they met for the last time as lovers; and in the intensity of his contrition for that tender wrong, he determined to deserve her faith now at least, and so wipe out that reproach from his conscience. "I'll come at once," he said. "I'll light a lantern."

He unhooked a dark-lantern from a nail under the eaves and she did not notice how his hand shook with the slight strain, or dream that in making this offer he was taxing a convalescence which could ill afford such self-sacrifice. The lantern was lit, and they started.