

## CHAPTER XLII.

The next morning Grace was at the window early. She felt determined to see him somehow that day, and prepared his breakfast eagerly. Eight o'clock struck, and she had remembered that he had not come to arouse her by a knocking, as usual, her own anxiety having caused her to stir.

The breakfast was set in its place without. But he did not arrive to take it; and she waited on. Nine o'clock arrived, and the breakfast was cold; and still there was no Giles. A thrush, that had been repeating itself a good deal on an opposite bush for some time, came and took a morsel from the plate and bolted it, waited, looked around, and took another. At ten o'clock she drew in the tray, and sat down to her own solitary meal. He must have been called away on business early, the rain having cleared off.

Yet she would have liked to assure herself, by thoroughly exploring the precincts of the hut, that he was nowhere in its vicinity; but as the day was comparatively fine, the dread lest some stray passenger or woodman should encounter her in such a reconnoitre paralyzed her wish. The solitude was further accentuated to-day by the stopping of the clock for want of winding, and the fall into the chimney-corner of flakes of soot loosened by the rains. At noon she heard a slight rustling outside the window, and found that it was caused by an eft which had crept out of the leaves to bask in the last sun-rays that would be worth having till the following May.

She continually peeped out through the lattice, but could see little. In front lay the brown leaves of last year, and upon them some yellowish-green ones of this season that had been prematurely blown down by the gale. Above stretched an old beech, with vast armpits, and great pocket-holes in its sides where branches had been amputated in past times; a black slug was trying to climb it. Dead boughs were scattered about like ichthyosauri in a museum, and beyond them were perishing woodbine stems resembling old ropes.

From the other window all she could see were more trees, jacketed with lichen and stockinged with moss. At their roots were stemless yellow fungi like lemons and apricots, and tall fungi with more stem than stool. Next were more trees close together, wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbors that she had heard in the night. Beneath them were the rotting stumps of those of the group that had been vanquished long ago, rising from their mossy setting like decayed teeth from green gums. Farther on were other tufts of moss in islands divided by the shed leaves--variety upon variety, dark green and pale green; moss-like little fir-trees, like plush, like malachite stars, like nothing on earth except moss.

The strain upon Grace's mind in various ways was so great on this the most desolate day she had passed there that she felt it would be well-nigh impossible to spend another in such circumstances. The

evening came at last; the sun, when its chin was on the earth, found an opening through which to pierce the shade, and stretched irradiated gauzes across the damp atmosphere, making the wet trunks shine, and throwing splotches of such ruddiness on the leaves beneath the beech that they were turned to gory hues. When night at last arrived, and with it the time for his return, she was nearly broken down with suspense.

The simple evening meal, partly tea, partly supper, which Grace had prepared, stood waiting upon the hearth; and yet Giles did not come. It was now nearly twenty-four hours since she had seen him. As the room grew darker, and only the firelight broke against the gloom of the walls, she was convinced that it would be beyond her staying power to pass the night without hearing from him or from somebody. Yet eight o'clock drew on, and his form at the window did not appear.

The meal remained untasted. Suddenly rising from before the hearth of smouldering embers, where she had been crouching with her hands clasped over her knees, she crossed the room, unlocked the door, and listened. Every breath of wind had ceased with the decline of day, but the rain had resumed the steady dripping of the night before. Grace might have stood there five minutes when she fancied she heard that old sound, a cough, at no great distance; and it was presently repeated. If it were Winterborne's, he must be near her; why, then, had he not visited her?

A horrid misgiving that he could not visit her took possession of

Grace, and she looked up anxiously for the lantern, which was hanging above her head. To light it and go in the direction of the sound would be the obvious way to solve the dread problem; but the conditions made her hesitate, and in a moment a cold sweat pervaded her at further sounds from the same quarter.

They were low mutterings; at first like persons in conversation, but gradually resolving themselves into varieties of one voice. It was an endless monologue, like that we sometimes hear from inanimate nature in deep secret places where water flows, or where ivy leaves flap against stones; but by degrees she was convinced that the voice was Winterborne's. Yet who could be his listener, so mute and patient; for though he argued so rapidly and persistently, nobody replied.

A dreadful enlightenment spread through the mind of Grace. "Oh," she cried, in her anguish, as she hastily prepared herself to go out, "how selfishly correct I am always--too, too correct! Cruel propriety is killing the dearest heart that ever woman clasped to her own."

While speaking thus to herself she had lit the lantern, and hastening out without further thought, took the direction whence the mutterings had proceeded. The course was marked by a little path, which ended at a distance of about forty yards in a small erection of hurdles, not much larger than a shock of corn, such as were frequent in the woods and copses when the cutting season was going on. It was too slight even to be called a hovel, and was not high enough to stand upright in;

appearing, in short, to be erected for the temporary shelter of fuel. The side towards Grace was open, and turning the light upon the interior, she beheld what her prescient fear had pictured in snatches all the way thither.

Upon the straw within, Winterborne lay in his clothes, just as she had seen him during the whole of her stay here, except that his hat was off, and his hair matted and wild.

Both his clothes and the straw were saturated with rain. His arms were flung over his head; his face was flushed to an unnatural crimson. His eyes had a burning brightness, and though they met her own, she perceived that he did not recognize her.

"Oh, my Giles," she cried, "what have I done to you!"

But she stopped no longer even to reproach herself. She saw that the first thing to be thought of was to get him indoors.

How Grace performed that labor she never could have exactly explained. But by dint of clasping her arms round him, rearing him into a sitting posture, and straining her strength to the uttermost, she put him on one of the hurdles that was loose alongside, and taking the end of it in both her hands, dragged him along the path to the entrance of the hut, and, after a pause for breath, in at the door-way.

It was somewhat singular that Giles in his semi-conscious state acquiesced unresistingly in all that she did. But he never for a moment recognized her--continuing his rapid conversation to himself, and seeming to look upon her as some angel, or other supernatural creature of the visionary world in which he was mentally living. The undertaking occupied her more than ten minutes; but by that time, to her great thankfulness, he was in the inner room, lying on the bed, his damp outer clothing removed.

Then the unhappy Grace regarded him by the light of the candle. There was something in his look which agonized her, in the rush of his thoughts, accelerating their speed from minute to minute. He seemed to be passing through the universe of ideas like a comet--erratic, inapprehensible, untraceable.

Grace's distraction was almost as great as his. In a few moments she firmly believed he was dying. Unable to withstand her impulse, she knelt down beside him, kissed his hands and his face and his hair, exclaiming, in a low voice, "How could I? How could I?"

Her timid morality had, indeed, underrated his chivalry till now, though she knew him so well. The purity of his nature, his freedom from the grosser passions, his scrupulous delicacy, had never been fully understood by Grace till this strange self-sacrifice in lonely juxtaposition to her own person was revealed. The perception of it added something that was little short of reverence to the deep

affection for him of a woman who, herself, had more of Artemis than of Aphrodite in her constitution.

All that a tender nurse could do, Grace did; and the power to express her solicitude in action, unconscious though the sufferer was, brought her mournful satisfaction. She bathed his hot head, wiped his perspiring hands, moistened his lips, cooled his fiery eyelids, sponged his heated skin, and administered whatever she could find in the house that the imagination could conceive as likely to be in any way alleviating. That she might have been the cause, or partially the cause, of all this, interfused misery with her sorrow.

Six months before this date a scene, almost similar in its mechanical parts, had been enacted at Hintock House. It was between a pair of persons most intimately connected in their lives with these. Outwardly like as it had been, it was yet infinite in spiritual difference, though a woman's devotion had been common to both.

Grace rose from her attitude of affection, and, bracing her energies, saw that something practical must immediately be done. Much as she would have liked, in the emotion of the moment, to keep him entirely to herself, medical assistance was necessary while there remained a possibility of preserving him alive. Such assistance was fatal to her own concealment; but even had the chance of benefiting him been less than it was, she would have run the hazard for his sake. The question was, where should she get a medical man, competent and near?

There was one such man, and only one, within accessible distance; a man who, if it were possible to save Winterborne's life, had the brain most likely to do it. If human pressure could bring him, that man ought to be brought to the sick Giles's side. The attempt should be made.

Yet she dreaded to leave her patient, and the minutes raced past, and yet she postponed her departure. At last, when it was after eleven o'clock, Winterborne fell into a fitful sleep, and it seemed to afford her an opportunity.

She hastily made him as comfortable as she could, put on her things, cut a new candle from the bunch hanging in the cupboard, and having set it up, and placed it so that the light did not fall upon his eyes, she closed the door and started.

The spirit of Winterborne seemed to keep her company and banish all sense of darkness from her mind. The rains had imparted a phosphorescence to the pieces of touchwood and rotting leaves that lay about her path, which, as scattered by her feet, spread abroad like spilt milk. She would not run the hazard of losing her way by plunging into any short, unfrequented track through the denser parts of the woodland, but followed a more open course, which eventually brought her to the highway. Once here, she ran along with great speed, animated by a devoted purpose which had much about it that was stoical; and it was with scarcely any faltering of spirit that, after an hour's progress,



she passed over Rubdown Hill, and onward towards that same Hintock, and that same house, out of which she had fled a few days before in irresistible alarm. But that had happened which, above all other things of chance and change, could make her deliberately frustrate her plan of flight and sink all regard of personal consequences.

One speciality of Fitzpiers's was respected by Grace as much as ever--his professional skill. In this she was right. Had his persistence equalled his insight, instead of being the spasmodic and fitful thing it was, fame and fortune need never have remained a wish with him. His freedom from conventional errors and crusted prejudices had, indeed, been such as to retard rather than accelerate his advance in Hintock and its neighborhood, where people could not believe that nature herself effected cures, and that the doctor's business was only to smooth the way.

It was past midnight when Grace arrived opposite her father's house, now again temporarily occupied by her husband, unless he had already gone away. Ever since her emergence from the denser plantations about Winterborne's residence a pervasive lightness had hung in the damp autumn sky, in spite of the vault of cloud, signifying that a moon of some age was shining above its arch. The two white gates were distinct, and the white balls on the pillars, and the puddles and damp ruts left by the recent rain, had a cold, corpse-eyed luminousness. She entered by the lower gate, and crossed the quadrangle to the wing wherein the apartments that had been hers since her marriage were situate, till she

stood under a window which, if her husband were in the house, gave light to his bedchamber.

She faltered, and paused with her hand on her heart, in spite of herself. Could she call to her presence the very cause of all her foregoing troubles? Alas!--old Jones was seven miles off; Giles was possibly dying--what else could she do?

It was in a perspiration, wrought even more by consciousness than by exercise, that she picked up some gravel, threw it at the panes, and waited to see the result. The night-bell which had been fixed when Fitzpiers first took up his residence there still remained; but as it had fallen into disuse with the collapse of his practice, and his elopement, she did not venture to pull it now.

Whoever slept in the room had heard her signal, slight as it was. In half a minute the window was opened, and a voice said "Yes?" inquiringly. Grace recognized her husband in the speaker at once. Her effort was now to disguise her own accents.

"Doctor," she said, in as unusual a tone as she could command, "a man is dangerously ill in One-chimney Hut, out towards Delborough, and you must go to him at once--in all mercy!"

"I will, readily."

The alacrity, surprise, and pleasure expressed in his reply amazed her for a moment. But, in truth, they denoted the sudden relief of a man who, having got back in a mood of contrition, from erratic abandonment to fearful joys, found the soothing routine of professional practice unexpectedly opening anew to him. The highest desire of his soul just now was for a respectable life of painstaking. If this, his first summons since his return, had been to attend upon a cat or dog, he would scarcely have refused it in the circumstances.

"Do you know the way?" she asked.

"Yes," said he.

"One-chimney Hut," she repeated. "And--immediately!"

"Yes, yes," said Fitzpiers.

Grace remained no longer. She passed out of the white gate without slamming it, and hastened on her way back. Her husband, then, had re-entered her father's house. How he had been able to effect a reconciliation with the old man, what were the terms of the treaty between them, she could not so much as conjecture. Some sort of truce must have been entered into, that was all she could say. But close as the question lay to her own life, there was a more urgent one which banished it; and she traced her steps quickly along the meandering track-ways.

Meanwhile, Fitzpiers was preparing to leave the house. The state of his mind, over and above his professional zeal, was peculiar. At Grace's first remark he had not recognized or suspected her presence; but as she went on, he was awakened to the great resemblance of the speaker's voice to his wife's. He had taken in such good faith the statement of the household on his arrival, that she had gone on a visit for a time because she could not at once bring her mind to be reconciled to him, that he could not quite actually believe this comer to be she. It was one of the features of Fitzpiers's repentant humor at this date that, on receiving the explanation of her absence, he had made no attempt to outrage her feelings by following her; though nobody had informed him how very shortly her departure had preceded his entry, and of all that might have been inferred from her precipitancy.

Melbury, after much alarm and consideration, had decided not to follow her either. He sympathized with her flight, much as he deplored it; moreover, the tragic color of the antecedent events that he had been a great means of creating checked his instinct to interfere. He prayed and trusted that she had got into no danger on her way (as he supposed) to Sherton, and thence to Exbury, if that were the place she had gone to, forbearing all inquiry which the strangeness of her departure would have made natural. A few months before this time a performance by Grace of one-tenth the magnitude of this would have aroused him to unwonted investigation.

It was in the same spirit that he had tacitly assented to Fitzpiers's domiciliation there. The two men had not met face to face, but Mrs. Melbury had proposed herself as an intermediary, who made the surgeon's re-entrance comparatively easy to him. Everything was provisional, and nobody asked questions. Fitzpiers had come in the performance of a plan of penitence, which had originated in circumstances hereafter to be explained; his self-humiliation to the very bass-string was deliberate; and as soon as a call reached him from the bedside of a dying man his desire was to set to work and do as much good as he could with the least possible fuss or show. He therefore refrained from calling up a stableman to get ready any horse or gig, and set out for One-chimney Hut on foot, as Grace had done.