

CHAPTER XLIII.

She re-entered the hut, flung off her bonnet and cloak, and approached the sufferer. He had begun anew those terrible mutterings, and his hands were cold. As soon as she saw him there returned to her that agony of mind which the stimulus of her journey had thrown off for a time.

Could he really be dying? She bathed him, kissed him, forgot all things but the fact that lying there before her was he who had loved her more than the mere lover would have loved; had martyred himself for her comfort, cared more for her self-respect than she had thought of caring. This mood continued till she heard quick, smart footsteps without; she knew whose footsteps they were.

Grace sat on the inside of the bed against the wall, holding Giles's hand, so that when her husband entered the patient lay between herself and him. He stood transfixed at first, noticing Grace only. Slowly he dropped his glance and discerned who the prostrate man was. Strangely enough, though Grace's distaste for her husband's company had amounted almost to dread, and culminated in actual flight, at this moment her last and least feeling was personal. Sensitive femininity was eclipsed by self-effacing purpose, and that it was a husband who stood there was forgotten. The first look that possessed her face was relief; satisfaction at the presence of the physician obliterated thought of the man, which only returned in the form of a sub-consciousness that

did not interfere with her words.

"Is he dying--is there any hope?" she cried.

"Grace!" said Fitzpiers, in an indescribable whisper--more than invoking, if not quite deprecatory.

He was arrested by the spectacle, not so much in its intrinsic character--though that was striking enough to a man who called himself the husband of the sufferer's friend and nurse--but in its character as the counterpart of one that had its hour many months before, in which he had figured as the patient, and the woman had been Felice Charmond.

"Is he in great danger--can you save him?" she cried again.

Fitzpiers aroused himself, came a little nearer, and examined Winterborne as he stood. His inspection was concluded in a mere glance. Before he spoke he looked at her contemplatively as to the effect of his coming words.

"He is dying," he said, with dry precision.

"What?" said she.

"Nothing can be done, by me or any other man. It will soon be all over. The extremities are dead already." His eyes still remained

fixed on her; the conclusion to which he had come seeming to end his interest, professional and otherwise, in Winterborne forever.

"But it cannot be! He was well three days ago."

"Not well, I suspect. This seems like a secondary attack, which has followed some previous illness--possibly typhoid--it may have been months ago, or recently."

"Ah--he was not well--you are right. He was ill--he was ill when I came."

There was nothing more to do or say. She crouched down at the side of the bed, and Fitzpiers took a seat. Thus they remained in silence, and long as it lasted she never turned her eyes, or apparently her thoughts, at all to her husband. He occasionally murmured, with automatic authority, some slight directions for alleviating the pain of the dying man, which she mechanically obeyed, bending over him during the intervals in silent tears.

Winterborne never recovered consciousness of what was passing; and that he was going became soon perceptible also to her. In less than an hour the delirium ceased; then there was an interval of somnolent painlessness and soft breathing, at the end of which Winterborne passed quietly away.

Then Fitzpiers broke the silence. "Have you lived here long?" said he.

Grace was wild with sorrow--with all that had befallen her--with the cruelties that had attacked her--with life--with Heaven. She answered at random. "Yes. By what right do you ask?"

"Don't think I claim any right," said Fitzpiers, sadly. "It is for you to do and say what you choose. I admit, quite as much as you feel, that I am a vagabond--a brute--not worthy to possess the smallest fragment of you. But here I am, and I have happened to take sufficient interest in you to make that inquiry."

"He is everything to me!" said Grace, hardly heeding her husband, and laying her hand reverently on the dead man's eyelids, where she kept it a long time, pressing down their lashes with gentle touches, as if she were stroking a little bird.

He watched her a while, and then glanced round the chamber where his eyes fell upon a few dressing necessaries that she had brought.

"Grace--if I may call you so," he said, "I have been already humiliated almost to the depths. I have come back since you refused to join me elsewhere--I have entered your father's house, and borne all that that cost me without flinching, because I have felt that I deserved humiliation. But is there a yet greater humiliation in store for me?"

You say you have been living here--that he is everything to you. Am I to draw from that the obvious, the extremest inference?"

Triumph at any price is sweet to men and women--especially the latter. It was her first and last opportunity of repaying him for the cruel contumely which she had borne at his hands so docilely.

"Yes," she answered; and there was that in her subtly compounded nature which made her feel a thrill of pride as she did so.

Yet the moment after she had so mightily belied her character she half repented. Her husband had turned as white as the wall behind him. It seemed as if all that remained to him of life and spirit had been abstracted at a stroke. Yet he did not move, and in his efforts at self-control closed his mouth together as a vice. His determination was fairly successful, though she saw how very much greater than she had expected her triumph had been. Presently he looked across at Winterborne.

"Would it startle you to hear," he said, as if he hardly had breath to utter the words, "that she who was to me what he was to you is dead also?"

"Dead--SHE dead?" exclaimed Grace.

"Yes. Felice Charmond is where this young man is."

"Never!" said Grace, vehemently.

He went on without heeding the insinuation: "And I came back to try to make it up with you--but--"

Fitzpiers rose, and moved across the room to go away, looking downward with the droop of a man whose hope was turned to apathy, if not despair. In going round the door his eye fell upon her once more. She was still bending over the body of Winterborne, her face close to the young man's.

"Have you been kissing him during his illness?" asked her husband.

"Yes."

"Since his fevered state set in?"

"Yes."

"On his lips?"

"Yes."

"Then you will do well to take a few drops of this in water as soon as possible." He drew a small phial from his pocket and returned to offer

it to her.

Grace shook her head.

"If you don't do as I tell you you may soon be like him."

"I don't care. I wish to die."

"I'll put it here," said Fitzpiers, placing the bottle on a ledge beside him. "The sin of not having warned you will not be upon my head at any rate, among my other sins. I am now going, and I will send somebody to you. Your father does not know that you are here, so I suppose I shall be bound to tell him?"

"Certainly."

Fitzpiers left the cot, and the stroke of his feet was soon immersed in the silence that pervaded the spot. Grace remained kneeling and weeping, she hardly knew how long, and then she sat up, covered poor Giles's features, and went towards the door where her husband had stood. No sign of any other comer greeted her ear, the only perceptible sounds being the tiny cracklings of the dead leaves, which, like a feather-bed, had not yet done rising to their normal level where indented by the pressure of her husband's receding footsteps. It reminded her that she had been struck with the change in his aspect; the extremely intellectual look that had always been in his face was

wrought to a finer phase by thinness, and a care-worn dignity had been superadded. She returned to Winterborne's side, and during her meditations another tread drew near the door, entered the outer room, and halted at the entrance of the chamber where Grace was.

"What--Marty!" said Grace.

"Yes. I have heard," said Marty, whose demeanor had lost all its girlishness under the stroke that seemed almost literally to have bruised her.

"He died for me!" murmured Grace, heavily.

Marty did not fully comprehend; and she answered, "He belongs to neither of us now, and your beauty is no more powerful with him than my plainness. I have come to help you, ma'am. He never cared for me, and he cared much for you; but he cares for us both alike now."

"Oh don't, don't, Marty!"

Marty said no more, but knelt over Winterborne from the other side.

"Did you meet my hus--Mr. Fitzpiers?"

"Then what brought you here?"

"I come this way sometimes. I have got to go to the farther side of the wood this time of the year, and am obliged to get there before four o'clock in the morning, to begin heating the oven for the early baking. I have passed by here often at this time."

Grace looked at her quickly. "Then did you know I was here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you tell anybody?"

"No. I knew you lived in the hut, that he had gied it up to ye, and lodged out himself."

"Did you know where he lodged?"

"No. That I couldn't find out. Was it at Delborough?"

"No. It was not there, Marty. Would it had been! It would have saved--saved--" To check her tears she turned, and seeing a book on the window-bench, took it up. "Look, Marty, this is a Psalter. He was not an outwardly religious man, but he was pure and perfect in his heart. Shall we read a psalm over him?"

"Oh yes--we will--with all my heart!"

Grace opened the thin brown book, which poor Giles had kept at hand mainly for the convenience of whetting his pen-knife upon its leather covers. She began to read in that rich, devotional voice peculiar to women only on such occasions. When it was over, Marty said, "I should like to pray for his soul."

"So should I," said her companion. "But we must not."

"Why? Nobody would know."

Grace could not resist the argument, influenced as she was by the sense of making amends for having neglected him in the body; and their tender voices united and filled the narrow room with supplicatory murmurs that a Calvinist might have envied. They had hardly ended when now and more numerous foot-falls were audible, also persons in conversation, one of whom Grace recognized as her father.

She rose, and went to the outer apartment, in which there was only such light as beamed from the inner one. Melbury and Mrs. Melbury were standing there.

"I don't reproach you, Grace," said her father, with an estranged manner, and in a voice not at all like his old voice. "What has come upon you and us is beyond reproach, beyond weeping, and beyond wailing. Perhaps I drove you to it. But I am hurt; I am scourged; I am astonished. In the face of this there is nothing to be said."

Without replying, Grace turned and glided back to the inner chamber. "Marty," she said, quickly, "I cannot look my father in the face until he knows the true circumstances of my life here. Go and tell him--what you have told me--what you saw--that he gave up his house to me."

She sat down, her face buried in her hands, and Marty went, and after a short absence returned. Then Grace rose, and going out asked her father if he had met her husband.

"Yes," said Melbury.

"And you know all that has happened?"

"I do. Forgive me, Grace, for suspecting ye of worse than rashness--I ought to know ye better. Are you coming with me to what was once your home?"

"No. I stay here with HIM. Take no account of me any more."

The unwonted, perplexing, agitating relations in which she had stood to Winterborne quite lately--brought about by Melbury's own contrivance--could not fail to soften the natural anger of a parent at her more recent doings. "My daughter, things are bad," he rejoined.

"But why do you persevere to make 'em worse? What good can you do to Giles by staying here with him? Mind, I ask no questions. I don't

inquire why you decided to come here, or anything as to what your course would have been if he had not died, though I know there's no deliberate harm in ye. As for me, I have lost all claim upon you, and I make no complaint. But I do say that by coming back with me now you will show no less kindness to him, and escape any sound of shame.

"But I don't wish to escape it."

"If you don't on your own account, cannot you wish to on mine and hers? Nobody except our household knows that you have left home. Then why should you, by a piece of perverseness, bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave?"

"If it were not for my husband--" she began, moved by his words. "But how can I meet him there? How can any woman who is not a mere man's creature join him after what has taken place?"

"He would go away again rather than keep you out of my house."

"How do you know that, father?"

"We met him on our way here, and he told us so," said Mrs. Melbury.

"He had said something like it before. He seems very much upset altogether."

"He declared to her when he came to our house that he would wait for

time and devotion to bring about his forgiveness," said her husband.

"That was it, wasn't it, Lucy?"

"Yes. That he would not intrude upon you, Grace, till you gave him absolute permission," Mrs. Melbury added.

This antecedent considerateness in Fitzpiers was as welcome to Grace as it was unexpected; and though she did not desire his presence, she was sorry that by her retaliatory fiction she had given him a different reason for avoiding her. She made no further objections to accompanying her parents, taking them into the inner room to give Winterborne a last look, and gathering up the two or three things that belonged to her. While she was doing this the two women came who had been called by Melbury, and at their heels poor Creedle.

"Forgive me, but I can't rule my mourning nohow as a man should, Mr. Melbury," he said. "I ha'n't seen him since Thursday se'night, and have wondered for days and days where he's been keeping. There was I expecting him to come and tell me to wash out the cider-barrels against the making, and here was he-- Well, I've knowed him from table-high; I knowed his father--used to bide about upon two sticks in the sun afore he died!--and now I've seen the end of the family, which we can ill afford to lose, wi' such a scanty lot of good folk in Hintock as we've got. And now Robert Creedle will be nailed up in parish boards 'a b'lieve; and noboby will glutch down a sigh for he!"

They started for home, Marty and Creedle remaining behind. For a time Grace and her father walked side by side without speaking. It was just in the blue of the dawn, and the chilling tone of the sky was reflected in her cold, wet face. The whole wood seemed to be a house of death, pervaded by loss to its uttermost length and breadth. Winterborne was gone, and the copses seemed to show the want of him; those young trees, so many of which he had planted, and of which he had spoken so truly when he said that he should fall before they fell, were at that very moment sending out their roots in the direction that he had given them with his subtle hand.

"One thing made it tolerable to us that your husband should come back to the house," said Melbury at last--"the death of Mrs. Charmond."

"Ah, yes," said Grace, arousing slightly to the recollection, "he told me so."

"Did he tell you how she died? It was no such death as Giles's. She was shot--by a disappointed lover. It occurred in Germany. The unfortunate man shot himself afterwards. He was that South Carolina gentleman of very passionate nature who used to haunt this place to force her to an interview, and followed her about everywhere. So ends the brilliant Felice Charmond--once a good friend to me--but no friend to you."

"I can forgive her," said Grace, absently. "Did Edgar tell you of

this?"

"No; but he put a London newspaper, giving an account of it, on the hall table, folded in such a way that we should see it. It will be in the Sherton paper this week, no doubt. To make the event more solemn still to him, he had just before had sharp words with her, and left her. He told Lucy this, as nothing about him appears in the newspaper. And the cause of the quarrel was, of all people, she we've left behind us."

"Do you mean Marty?" Grace spoke the words but perfunctorily. For, pertinent and pointed as Melbury's story was, she had no heart for it now.

"Yes. Marty South." Melbury persisted in his narrative, to divert her from her present grief, if possible. "Before he went away she wrote him a letter, which he kept in his pocket a long while before reading. He chanced to pull it out in Mrs. Charmond's, presence, and read it out loud. It contained something which teased her very much, and that led to the rupture. She was following him to make it up when she met with her terrible death."

Melbury did not know enough to give the gist of the incident, which was that Marty South's letter had been concerning a certain personal adornment common to herself and Mrs. Charmond. Her bullet reached its billet at last. The scene between Fitzpiers and Felice had been sharp,

as only a scene can be which arises out of the mortification of one woman by another in the presence of a lover. True, Marty had not effected it by word of mouth; the charge about the locks of hair was made simply by Fitzpiers reading her letter to him aloud to Felice in the playfully ironical tones of one who had become a little weary of his situation, and was finding his friend, in the phrase of George Herbert, a "flat delight." He had stroked those false tresses with his hand many a time without knowing them to be transplanted, and it was impossible when the discovery was so abruptly made to avoid being finely satirical, despite her generous disposition.

That was how it had begun, and tragedy had been its end. On his abrupt departure she had followed him to the station but the train was gone; and in travelling to Baden in search of him she had met his rival, whose reproaches led to an altercation, and the death of both. Of that precipitate scene of passion and crime Fitzpiers had known nothing till he saw an account of it in the papers, where, fortunately for himself, no mention was made of his prior acquaintance with the unhappy lady; nor was there any allusion to him in the subsequent inquiry, the double death being attributed to some gambling losses, though, in point of fact, neither one of them had visited the tables.

Melbury and his daughter drew near their house, having seen but one living thing on their way, a squirrel, which did not run up its tree, but, dropping the sweet chestnut which it carried, cried chut-chut-chut, and stamped with its hind legs on the ground. When the

roofs and chimneys of the homestead began to emerge from the screen of boughs, Grace started, and checked herself in her abstracted advance.

"You clearly understand," she said to her step-mother some of her old misgiving returning, "that I am coming back only on condition of his leaving as he promised? Will you let him know this, that there may be no mistake?"

Mrs. Melbury, who had some long private talks with Fitzpiers, assured Grace that she need have no doubts on that point, and that he would probably be gone by the evening. Grace then entered with them into Melbury's wing of the house, and sat down listlessly in the parlor, while her step-mother went to Fitzpiers.

The prompt obedience to her wishes which the surgeon showed did honor to him, if anything could. Before Mrs. Melbury had returned to the room Grace, who was sitting on the parlor window-bench, saw her husband go from the door under the increasing light of morning, with a bag in his hand. While passing through the gate he turned his head. The firelight of the room she sat in threw her figure into dark relief against the window as she looked through the panes, and he must have seen her distinctly. In a moment he went on, the gate fell to, and he disappeared. At the hut she had declared that another had displaced him; and now she had banished him.