

CHAPTER XLIV.

Fitzpiers had hardly been gone an hour when Grace began to sicken. The next day she kept her room. Old Jones was called in; he murmured some statements in which the words "feverish symptoms" occurred. Grace heard them, and guessed the means by which she had brought this visitation upon herself.

One day, while she still lay there with her head throbbing, wondering if she were really going to join him who had gone before, Grammer Oliver came to her bedside. "I don't know whe'r this is meant for you to take, ma'am," she said, "but I have found it on the table. It was left by Marty, I think, when she came this morning."

Grace turned her hot eyes upon what Grammer held up. It was the phial left at the hut by her husband when he had begged her to take some drops of its contents if she wished to preserve herself from falling a victim to the malady which had pulled down Winterborne. She examined it as well as she could. The liquid was of an opaline hue, and bore a label with an inscription in Italian. He had probably got it in his wanderings abroad. She knew but little Italian, but could understand that the cordial was a febrifuge of some sort. Her father, her mother, and all the household were anxious for her recovery, and she resolved to obey her husband's directions. Whatever the risk, if any, she was prepared to run it. A glass of water was brought, and the drops

dropped in.

The effect, though not miraculous, was remarkable. In less than an hour she felt calmer, cooler, better able to reflect--less inclined to fret and chafe and wear herself away. She took a few drops more. From that time the fever retreated, and went out like a damped conflagration.

"How clever he is!" she said, regretfully. "Why could he not have had more principle, so as to turn his great talents to good account? Perhaps he has saved my useless life. But he doesn't know it, and doesn't care whether he has saved it or not; and on that account will never be told by me! Probably he only gave it to me in the arrogance of his skill, to show the greatness of his resources beside mine, as Elijah drew down fire from heaven."

As soon as she had quite recovered from this foiled attack upon her life, Grace went to Marty South's cottage. The current of her being had again set towards the lost Giles Winterborne.

"Marty," she said, "we both loved him. We will go to his grave together."

Great Hintock church stood at the upper part of the village, and could be reached without passing through the street. In the dusk of the late September day they went thither by secret ways, walking mostly in silence side by side, each busied with her own thoughts. Grace had a

trouble exceeding Marty's--that haunting sense of having put out the light of his life by her own hasty doings. She had tried to persuade herself that he might have died of his illness, even if she had not taken possession of his house. Sometimes she succeeded in her attempt; sometimes she did not.

They stood by the grave together, and though the sun had gone down, they could see over the woodland for miles, and down to the vale in which he had been accustomed to descend every year, with his portable mill and press, to make cider about this time.

Perhaps Grace's first grief, the discovery that if he had lived he could never have claimed her, had some power in softening this, the second. On Marty's part there was the same consideration; never would she have been his. As no anticipation of gratified affection had been in existence while he was with them, there was none to be disappointed now that he had gone.

Grace was abased when, by degrees, she found that she had never understood Giles as Marty had done. Marty South alone, of all the women in Hintock and the world, had approximated to Winterborne's level of intelligent intercourse with nature. In that respect she had formed the complement to him in the other sex, had lived as his counterpart, had subjoined her thought to his as a corollary.

The casual glimpses which the ordinary population bestowed upon that

wondrous world of sap and leaves called the Hintock woods had been with these two, Giles and Marty, a clear gaze. They had been possessed of its finer mysteries as of commonplace knowledge; had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing; to them the sights and sounds of night, winter, wind, storm, amid those dense boughs, which had to Grace a touch of the uncanny, and even the supernatural, were simple occurrences whose origin, continuance, and laws they foreknew. They had planted together, and together they had felled; together they had, with the run of the years, mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which, seen in few, were of runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet. From the light lashing of the twigs upon their faces, when brushing through them in the dark, they could pronounce upon the species of the tree whence they stretched; from the quality of the wind's murmur through a bough they could in like manner name its sort afar off. They knew by a glance at a trunk if its heart were sound, or tainted with incipient decay, and by the state of its upper twigs, the stratum that had been reached by its roots. The artifices of the seasons were seen by them from the conjuror's own point of view, and not from that of the spectator's.

"He ought to have married YOU, Marty, and nobody else in the world!" said Grace, with conviction, after thinking somewhat in the above strain.

Marty shook her head. "In all our out-door days and years together, ma'am," she replied, "the one thing he never spoke of to me was love;

nor I to him."

"Yet you and he could speak in a tongue that nobody else knew--not even my father, though he came nearest knowing--the tongue of the trees and fruits and flowers themselves."

She could indulge in mournful fancies like this to Marty; but the hard core to her grief--which Marty's had not--remained. Had she been sure that Giles's death resulted entirely from his exposure, it would have driven her well-nigh to insanity; but there was always that bare possibility that his exposure had only precipitated what was inevitable. She longed to believe that it had not done even this.

There was only one man whose opinion on the circumstances she would be at all disposed to trust. Her husband was that man. Yet to ask him it would be necessary to detail the true conditions in which she and Winterborne had lived during these three or four critical days that followed her flight; and in withdrawing her original defiant announcement on that point, there seemed a weakness she did not care to show. She never doubted that Fitzpiers would believe her if she made a clean confession of the actual situation; but to volunteer the correction would seem like signalling for a truce, and that, in her present frame of mind, was what she did not feel the need of.

It will probably not appear a surprising statement, after what has been

already declared of Fitzpiers, that the man whom Grace's fidelity could not keep faithful was stung into passionate throbs of interest concerning her by her avowal of the contrary.

He declared to himself that he had never known her dangerously full compass if she were capable of such a reprisal; and, melancholy as it may be to admit the fact, his own humiliation and regret engendered a smouldering admiration of her.

He passed a month or two of great misery at Exbury, the place to which he had retired--quite as much misery indeed as Grace, could she have known of it, would have been inclined to inflict upon any living creature, how much soever he might have wronged her. Then a sudden hope dawned upon him; he wondered if her affirmation were true. He asked himself whether it were not the act of a woman whose natural purity and innocence had blinded her to the contingencies of such an announcement. His wide experience of the sex had taught him that, in many cases, women who ventured on hazardous matters did so because they lacked an imagination sensuous enough to feel their full force. In this light Grace's bold avowal might merely have denoted the desperation of one who was a child to the realities of obliquity.

Fitzpiers's mental sufferings and suspense led him at last to take a melancholy journey to the neighborhood of Little Hintock; and here he hovered for hours around the scene of the purest emotional experiences

that he had ever known in his life. He walked about the woods that surrounded Melbury's house, keeping out of sight like a criminal. It was a fine evening, and on his way homeward he passed near Marty South's cottage. As usual she had lighted her candle without closing her shutters; he saw her within as he had seen her many times before.

She was polishing tools, and though he had not wished to show himself, he could not resist speaking in to her through the half-open door.

"What are you doing that for, Marty?"

"Because I want to clean them. They are not mine." He could see, indeed, that they were not hers, for one was a spade, large and heavy, and another was a bill-hook which she could only have used with both hands. The spade, though not a new one, had been so completely burnished that it was bright as silver.

Fitzpiers somehow divined that they were Giles Winterborne's, and he put the question to her.

She replied in the affirmative. "I am going to keep 'em," she said, "but I can't get his apple-mill and press. I wish could; it is going to be sold, they say."

"Then I will buy it for you," said Fitzpiers. "That will be making you a return for a kindness you did me." His glance fell upon the girl's rare-colored hair, which had grown again. "Oh, Marty, those locks of

yours--and that letter! But it was a kindness to send it, nevertheless," he added, musingly.

After this there was confidence between them--such confidence as there had never been before. Marty was shy, indeed, of speaking about the letter, and her motives in writing it; but she thanked him warmly for his promise of the cider-press. She would travel with it in the autumn season, as he had done, she said. She would be quite strong enough, with old Creedle as an assistant.

"Ah! there was one nearer to him than you," said Fitzpiers, referring to Winterborne. "One who lived where he lived, and was with him when he died."

Then Marty, suspecting that he did not know the true circumstances, from the fact that Mrs. Fitzpiers and himself were living apart, told him of Giles's generosity to Grace in giving up his house to her at the risk, and possibly the sacrifice, of his own life. When the surgeon heard it he almost envied Giles his chivalrous character. He expressed a wish to Marty that his visit to her should be kept secret, and went home thoughtful, feeling that in more than one sense his journey to Hintock had not been in vain.

He would have given much to win Grace's forgiveness then. But whatever he dared hope for in that kind from the future, there was nothing to be done yet, while Giles Winterborne's memory was green. To wait was

imperative. A little time might melt her frozen thoughts, and lead her to look on him with toleration, if not with love.