CHAPTER XLV.

Weeks and months of mourning for Winterborne had been passed by Grace in the soothing monotony of the memorial act to which she and Marty had devoted themselves. Twice a week the pair went in the dusk to Great Hintock, and, like the two mourners in Cymbeline, sweetened his sad grave with their flowers and their tears. Sometimes Grace thought that it was a pity neither one of them had been his wife for a little while, and given the world a copy of him who was so valuable in their eyes. Nothing ever had brought home to her with such force as this death how little acquirements and culture weigh beside sterling personal character. While her simple sorrow for his loss took a softer edge with the lapse of the autumn and winter seasons, her self-reproach at having had a possible hand in causing it knew little abatement.

Little occurred at Hintock during these months of the fall and decay of the leaf. Discussion of the almost contemporaneous death of Mrs. Charmond abroad had waxed and waned. Fitzpiers had had a marvellous escape from being dragged into the inquiry which followed it, through the accident of their having parted just before under the influence of Marty South's letter--the tiny instrument of a cause deep in nature.

Her body was not brought home. It seemed to accord well with the fitful fever of that impassioned woman's life that she should not have found a native grave. She had enjoyed but a life-interest in the estate, which, after her death, passed to a relative of her

husband's--one who knew not Felice, one whose purpose seemed to be to blot out every vestige of her.

On a certain day in February--the cheerful day of St. Valentine, in fact--a letter reached Mrs. Fitzpiers, which had been mentally promised her for that particular day a long time before.

It announced that Fitzpiers was living at some midland town, where he had obtained a temporary practice as assistant to some local medical man, whose curative principles were all wrong, though he dared not set them right. He had thought fit to communicate with her on that day of tender traditions to inquire if, in the event of his obtaining a substantial practice that he had in view elsewhere, she could forget the past and bring herself to join him.

There the practical part ended; he then went on--

"My last year of experience has added ten years to my age, dear Grace and dearest wife that ever erring man undervalued. You may be absolutely indifferent to what I say, but let me say it: I have never loved any woman alive or dead as I love, respect, and honor you at this present moment. What you told me in the pride and haughtiness of your heart I never believed [this, by the way, was not strictly true]; but even if I had believed it, it could never have estranged me from you. Is there any use in telling you--no, there is not--that I dream of your

ripe lips more frequently than I say my prayers; that the old familiar rustle of your dress often returns upon my mind till it distracts me? If you could condescend even only to see me again you would be breathing life into a corpse. My pure, pure Grace, modest as a turtledove, how came I ever to possess you? For the sake of being present in your mind on this lovers' day, I think I would almost rather have you hate me a little than not think of me at all. You may call my fancies whimsical; but remember, sweet, lost one, that 'nature is one in love, and where 'tis fine it sends some instance of itself.' I will not intrude upon you further now. Make me a little bit happy by sending back one line to say that you will consent, at any rate, to a short interview. I will meet you and leave you as a mere acquaintance, if you will only afford me this slight means of making a few explanations, and of putting my position before you. Believe me, in spite of all you may do or feel,

Your lover always (once your husband),

"E."

It was, oddly enough, the first occasion, or nearly the first on which Grace had ever received a love-letter from him, his courtship having taken place under conditions which rendered letter-writing unnecessary. Its perusal, therefore, had a certain novelty for her. She thought that, upon the whole, he wrote love-letters very well. But the chief

rational interest of the letter to the reflective Grace lay in the chance that such a meeting as he proposed would afford her of setting her doubts at rest, one way or the other, on her actual share in Winterborne's death. The relief of consulting a skilled mind, the one professional man who had seen Giles at that time, would be immense. As for that statement that she had uttered in her disdainful grief, which at the time she had regarded as her triumph, she was quite prepared to admit to him that his belief was the true one; for in wronging herself as she did when she made it, she had done what to her was a far more serious thing, wronged Winterborne's memory.

Without consulting her father, or any one in the house or out of it, Grace replied to the letter. She agreed to meet Fitzpiers on two conditions, of which the first was that the place of meeting should be the top of Rubdown Hill, the second that he would not object to Marty South accompanying her.

Whatever part, much or little, there may have been in Fitzpiers's so-called valentine to his wife, he felt a delight as of the bursting of spring when her brief reply came. It was one of the few pleasures that he had experienced of late years at all resembling those of his early youth. He promptly replied that he accepted the conditions, and named the day and hour at which he would be on the spot she mentioned.

A few minutes before three on the appointed day found him climbing the well-known hill, which had been the axis of so many critical movements

in their lives during his residence at Hintock.

The sight of each homely and well-remembered object swelled the regret that seldom left him now. Whatever paths might lie open to his future, the soothing shades of Hintock were forbidden him forever as a permanent dwelling-place.

He longed for the society of Grace. But to lay offerings on her slighted altar was his first aim, and until her propitiation was complete he would constrain her in no way to return to him. The least reparation that he could make, in a case where he would gladly have made much, would be to let her feel herself absolutely free to choose between living with him and without him.

Moreover, a subtlist in emotions, he cultivated as under glasses strange and mournful pleasures that he would not willingly let die just at present. To show any forwardness in suggesting a modus vivendi to Grace would be to put an end to these exotics. To be the vassal of her sweet will for a time, he demanded no more, and found solace in the contemplation of the soft miseries she caused him.

Approaching the hill-top with a mind strung to these notions, Fitzpiers discerned a gay procession of people coming over the crest, and was not long in perceiving it to be a wedding-party.

Though the wind was keen the women were in light attire, and the

flowered waistcoats of the men had a pleasing vividness of pattern. Each of the gentler ones clung to the arm of her partner so tightly as to have with him one step, rise, swing, gait, almost one centre of gravity. In the buxom bride Fitzpiers recognized no other than Suke Damson, who in her light gown looked a giantess; the small husband beside her he saw to be Tim Tangs.

Fitzpiers could not escape, for they had seen him; though of all the beauties of the world whom he did not wish to meet Suke was the chief. But he put the best face on the matter that he could and came on, the approaching company evidently discussing him and his separation from Mrs. Fitzpiers. As the couples closed upon him he expressed his congratulations.

"We be just walking round the parishes to show ourselves a bit," said Tim. "First we het across to Delborough, then athwart to here, and from here we go to Rubdown and Millshot, and then round by the cross-roads home. Home says I, but it won't be that long! We be off next month."

"Indeed. Where to?"

Tim informed him that they were going to New Zealand. Not but that he would have been contented with Hintock, but his wife was ambitious and wanted to leave, so he had given way.

"Then good-by," said Fitzpiers; "I may not see you again." He shook hands with Tim and turned to the bride. "Good-by, Suke," he said, taking her hand also. "I wish you and your husband prosperity in the country you have chosen." With this he left them, and hastened on to his appointment.

The wedding-party re-formed and resumed march likewise. But in restoring his arm to Suke, Tim noticed that her full and blooming countenance had undergone a change. "Holloa! me dear--what's the matter?" said Tim.

"Nothing to speak o'," said she. But to give the lie to her assertion she was seized with lachrymose twitches, that soon produced a dribbling face.

"How--what the devil's this about!" exclaimed the bridegroom.

"She's a little wee bit overcome, poor dear!" said the first bridesmaid, unfolding her handkerchief and wiping Suke's eyes.

"I never did like parting from people!" said Suke, as soon as she could speak.

"Why him in particular?"

"Well--he's such a clever doctor, that 'tis a thousand pities we

sha'n't see him any more! There'll be no such clever doctor as he in New Zealand, if I should require one; and the thought o't got the better of my feelings!"

They walked on, but Tim's face had grown rigid and pale, for he recalled slight circumstances, disregarded at the time of their occurrence. The former boisterous laughter of the wedding-party at the groomsman's jokes was heard ringing through the woods no more.

By this time Fitzpiers had advanced on his way to the top of the hill, where he saw two figures emerging from the bank on the right hand. These were the expected ones, Grace and Marty South, who had evidently come there by a short and secret path through the wood. Grace was muffled up in her winter dress, and he thought that she had never looked so seductive as at this moment, in the noontide bright but heatless sun, and the keen wind, and the purplish-gray masses of brushwood around.

Fitzpiers continued to regard the nearing picture, till at length their glances met for a moment, when she demurely sent off hers at a tangent and gave him the benefit of her three-quarter face, while with courteous completeness of conduct he lifted his hat in a large arc. Marty dropped behind; and when Fitzpiers held out his hand, Grace touched it with her fingers.

"I have agreed to be here mostly because I wanted to ask you something

important," said Mrs. Fitzpiers, her intonation modulating in a direction that she had not quite wished it to take.

"I am most attentive," said her husband. "Shall we take to the wood for privacy?"

Grace demurred, and Fitzpiers gave in, and they kept the public road.

At any rate she would take his arm? This also was gravely negatived, the refusal being audible to Marty.

"Why not?" he inquired.

"Oh, Mr. Fitzpiers--how can you ask?"

"Right, right," said he, his effusiveness shrivelled up.

As they walked on she returned to her inquiry. "It is about a matter that may perhaps be unpleasant to you. But I think I need not consider that too carefully."

"Not at all," said Fitzpiers, heroically.

She then took him back to the time of poor Winterborne's death, and related the precise circumstances amid which his fatal illness had come upon him, particularizing the dampness of the shelter to which he had

betaken himself, his concealment from her of the hardships that he was undergoing, all that he had put up with, all that he had done for her in his scrupulous considerateness. The retrospect brought her to tears as she asked him if he thought that the sin of having driven him to his death was upon her.

Fitzpiers could hardly help showing his satisfaction at what her narrative indirectly revealed, the actual harmlessness of an escapade with her lover, which had at first, by her own showing, looked so grave, and he did not care to inquire whether that harmlessness had been the result of aim or of accident. With regard to her question, he declared that in his judgment no human being could answer it. He thought that upon the whole the balance of probabilities turned in her favor. Winterborne's apparent strength, during the last months of his life, must have been delusive. It had often occurred that after a first attack of that insidious disease a person's apparent recovery was a physiological mendacity.

The relief which came to Grace lay almost as much in sharing her knowledge of the particulars with an intelligent mind as in the assurances Fitzpiers gave her. "Well, then, to put this case before you, and obtain your professional opinion, was chiefly why I consented to come here to-day," said she, when he had reached the aforesaid conclusion.

"For no other reason at all?" he asked, ruefully.

"It was nearly the whole."

They stood and looked over a gate at twenty or thirty starlings feeding in the grass, and he started the talk again by saying, in a low voice, "And yet I love you more than ever I loved you in my life."

Grace did not move her eyes from the birds, and folded her delicate lips as if to keep them in subjection.

"It is a different kind of love altogether," said he. "Less passionate; more profound. It has nothing to do with the material conditions of the object at all; much to do with her character and goodness, as revealed by closer observation. 'Love talks with better knowledge, and knowledge with dearer love.'"

"That's out of 'Measure for Measure,'" said she, slyly.

"Oh yes--I meant it as a citation," blandly replied Fitzpiers. "Well, then, why not give me a very little bit of your heart again?"

The crash of a felled tree in the remote depths of the wood recalled the past at that moment, and all the homely faithfulness of Winterborne. "Don't ask it! My heart is in the grave with Giles," she replied, stanchly.

"Mine is with you--in no less deep a grave, I fear, according to that."

"I am very sorry; but it cannot be helped."

"How can you be sorry for me, when you wilfully keep open the grave?"

"Oh no--that's not so," returned Grace, quickly, and moved to go away from him.

"But, dearest Grace," said he, "you have condescended to come; and I thought from it that perhaps when I had passed through a long state of probation you would be generous. But if there can be no hope of our getting completely reconciled, treat me gently--wretch though I am."

"I did not say you were a wretch, nor have I ever said so."

"But you have such a contemptuous way of looking at me that I fear you think so."

Grace's heart struggled between the wish not to be harsh and the fear that she might mislead him. "I cannot look contemptuous unless I feel contempt," she said, evasively. "And all I feel is lovelessness."

"I have been very bad, I know," he returned. "But unless you can really love me again, Grace, I would rather go away from you forever. I don't want you to receive me again for duty's sake, or anything of

that sort. If I had not cared more for your affection and forgiveness than my own personal comfort, I should never have come back here. I could have obtained a practice at a distance, and have lived my own life without coldness or reproach. But I have chosen to return to the one spot on earth where my name is tarnished--to enter the house of a man from whom I have had worse treatment than from any other man alive--all for you!"

This was undeniably true, and it had its weight with Grace, who began to look as if she thought she had been shockingly severe.

"Before you go," he continued, "I want to know your pleasure about me--what you wish me to do, or not to do."

"You are independent of me, and it seems a mockery to ask that. Far be it from me to advise. But I will think it over. I rather need advice myself than stand in a position to give it."

"YOU don't need advice, wisest, dearest woman that ever lived. If you did--"

"Would you give it to me?"

"Would you act upon what I gave?"

"That's not a fair inquiry," said she, smiling despite her gravity. "I

don't mind hearing it--what you do really think the most correct and proper course for me."

"It is so easy for me to say, and yet I dare not, for it would be provoking you to remonstrances."

Knowing, of course, what the advice would be, she did not press him further, and was about to beckon Marty forward and leave him, when he interrupted her with, "Oh, one moment, dear Grace--you will meet me again?"

She eventually agreed to see him that day fortnight. Fitzpiers expostulated at the interval, but the half-alarmed earnestness with which she entreated him not to come sooner made him say hastily that he submitted to her will--that he would regard her as a friend only, anxious for his reform and well-being, till such time as she might allow him to exceed that privilege.

All this was to assure her; it was only too clear that he had not won her confidence yet. It amazed Fitzpiers, and overthrew all his deductions from previous experience, to find that this girl, though she had been married to him, could yet be so coy. Notwithstanding a certain fascination that it carried with it, his reflections were sombre as he went homeward; he saw how deep had been his offence to produce so great a wariness in a gentle and once unsuspicious soul.

He was himself too fastidious to care to coerce her. To be an object of misgiving or dislike to a woman who shared his home was what he could not endure the thought of. Life as it stood was more tolerable.

When he was gone, Marty joined Mrs. Fitzpiers. She would fain have consulted Marty on the question of Platonic relations with her former husband, as she preferred to regard him. But Marty showed no great interest in their affairs, so Grace said nothing. They came onward, and saw Melbury standing at the scene of the felling which had been audible to them, when, telling Marty that she wished her meeting with Mr. Fitzpiers to be kept private, she left the girl to join her father. At any rate, she would consult him on the expediency of occasionally seeing her husband.

Her father was cheerful, and walked by her side as he had done in earlier days. "I was thinking of you when you came up," he said. "I have considered that what has happened is for the best. Since your husband is gone away, and seems not to wish to trouble you, why, let him go, and drop out of your life. Many women are worse off. You can live here comfortably enough, and he can emigrate, or do what he likes for his good. I wouldn't mind sending him the further sum of money he might naturally expect to come to him, so that you may not be bothered with him any more. He could hardly have gone on living here without speaking to me, or meeting me; and that would have been very unpleasant on both sides."

These remarks checked her intention. There was a sense of weakness in following them by saying that she had just met her husband by appointment. "Then you would advise me not to communicate with him?" she observed.

"I shall never advise ye again. You are your own mistress--do as you like. But my opinion is that if you don't live with him, you had better live without him, and not go shilly-shallying and playing bopeep. You sent him away; and now he's gone. Very well; trouble him no more."

Grace felt a guiltiness--she hardly knew why--and made no confession.