

CHAPTER XLVI.

The woods were uninteresting, and Grace stayed in-doors a great deal. She became quite a student, reading more than she had done since her marriage. But her seclusion was always broken for the periodical visit to Winterborne's grave with Marty, which was kept up with pious strictness, for the purpose of putting snow-drops, primroses, and other vernal flowers thereon as they came.

One afternoon at sunset she was standing just outside her father's garden, which, like the rest of the Hintock enclosures, abutted into the wood. A slight foot-path led along here, forming a secret way to either of the houses by getting through its boundary hedge. Grace was just about to adopt this mode of entry when a figure approached along the path, and held up his hand to detain her. It was her husband.

"I am delighted," he said, coming up out of breath; and there seemed no reason to doubt his words. "I saw you some way off--I was afraid you would go in before I could reach you."

"It is a week before the time," said she, reproachfully. "I said a fortnight from the last meeting."

"My dear, you don't suppose I could wait a fortnight without trying to get a glimpse of you, even though you had declined to meet me! Would it make you angry to know that I have been along this path at dusk three

or four times since our last meeting? Well, how are you?"

She did not refuse her hand, but when he showed a wish to retain it a moment longer than mere formality required, she made it smaller, so that it slipped away from him, with again that same alarmed look which always followed his attempts in this direction. He saw that she was not yet out of the elusive mood; not yet to be treated presumingly; and he was correspondingly careful to tranquillize her.

His assertion had seemed to impress her somewhat. "I had no idea you came so often," she said. "How far do you come from?"

"From Exbury. I always walk from Sherton-Abbas, for if I hire, people will know that I come; and my success with you so far has not been great enough to justify such overtness. Now, my dear one--as I MUST call you--I put it to you: will you see me a little oftener as the spring advances?"

Grace lapsed into unwonted sedateness, and avoiding the question, said, "I wish you would concentrate on your profession, and give up those strange studies that used to distract you so much. I am sure you would get on."

"It is the very thing I am doing. I was going to ask you to burn--or, at least, get rid of--all my philosophical literature. It is in the bookcases in your rooms. The fact is, I never cared much for abstruse

studies."

"I am so glad to hear you say that. And those other books--those piles of old plays--what good are they to a medical man?"

"None whatever!" he replied, cheerfully. "Sell them at Sherton for what they will fetch."

"And those dreadful old French romances, with their horrid spellings of 'filz' and 'ung' and 'ilz' and 'mary' and 'ma foy?'"

"You haven't been reading them, Grace?"

"Oh no--I just looked into them, that was all."

"Make a bonfire of 'em directly you get home. I meant to do it myself. I can't think what possessed me ever to collect them. I have only a few professional hand-books now, and am quite a practical man. I am in hopes of having some good news to tell you soon, and then do you think you could--come to me again?"

"I would rather you did not press me on that just now," she replied, with some feeling. "You have said you mean to lead a new, useful, effectual life; but I should like to see you put it in practice for a little while before you address that query to me. Besides--I could not live with you."

"Why not?"

Grace was silent a few instants. "I go with Marty to Giles's grave. We swore we would show him that devotion. And I mean to keep it up."

"Well, I wouldn't mind that at all. I have no right to expect anything else, and I will not wish you to keep away. I liked the man as well as any I ever knew. In short, I would accompany you a part of the way to the place, and smoke a cigar on the stile while I waited till you came back."

"Then you haven't given up smoking?"

"Well--ahem--no. I have thought of doing so, but--"

His extreme complacency had rather disconcerted Grace, and the question about smoking had been to effect a diversion. Presently she said, firmly, and with a moisture in her eye that he could not see, as her mind returned to poor Giles's "frustrate ghost," "I don't like you--to speak lightly on that subject, if you did speak lightly. To be frank with you--quite frank--I think of him as my betrothed lover still. I cannot help it. So that it would be wrong for me to join you."

Fitzpiers was now uneasy. "You say your betrothed lover still," he rejoined. "When, then, were you betrothed to him, or engaged, as we

common people say?"

"When you were away."

"How could that be?"

Grace would have avoided this; but her natural candor led her on. "It was when I was under the impression that my marriage with you was about to be annulled, and that he could then marry me. So I encouraged him to love me."

Fitzpiers winced visibly; and yet, upon the whole, she was right in telling it. Indeed, his perception that she was right in her absolute sincerity kept up his affectionate admiration for her under the pain of the rebuff. Time had been when the avowal that Grace had deliberately taken steps to replace him would have brought him no sorrow. But she so far dominated him now that he could not bear to hear her words, although the object of her high regard was no more.

"It is rough upon me--that!" he said, bitterly. "Oh, Grace--I did not know you--tried to get rid of me! I suppose it is of no use, but I ask, cannot you hope to--find a little love in your heart for me again?"

"If I could I would oblige you; but I fear I cannot!" she replied, with illogical ruefulness. "And I don't see why you should mind my having had one lover besides yourself in my life, when you have had so many."

"But I can tell you honestly that I love you better than all of them put together, and that's what you will not tell me!"

"I am sorry; but I fear I cannot," she said, sighing again.

"I wonder if you ever will?" He looked musingly into her indistinct face, as if he would read the future there. "Now have pity, and tell me: will you try?"

"To love you again?"

"Yes; if you can."

"I don't know how to reply," she answered, her embarrassment proving her truth. "Will you promise to leave me quite free as to seeing you or not seeing you?"

"Certainly. Have I given any ground for you to doubt my first promise in that respect?"

She was obliged to admit that he had not.

"Then I think that you might get your heart out of that grave," said he, with playful sadness. "It has been there a long time."

She faintly shook her head, but said, "I'll try to think of you more--if I can."

With this Fitzpiers was compelled to be satisfied, and he asked her when she would meet him again.

"As we arranged--in a fortnight."

"If it must be a fortnight it must!"

"This time at least. I'll consider by the day I see you again if I can shorten the interval."

"Well, be that as it may, I shall come at least twice a week to look at your window."

"You must do as you like about that. Good-night."

"Say 'husband.'"

She seemed almost inclined to give him the word; but exclaiming, "No, no; I cannot," slipped through the garden-hedge and disappeared.

Fitzpiers did not exaggerate when he told her that he should haunt the precincts of the dwelling. But his persistence in this course did not

result in his seeing her much oftener than at the fortnightly interval which she had herself marked out as proper. At these times, however, she punctually appeared, and as the spring wore on the meetings were kept up, though their character changed but little with the increase in their number.

The small garden of the cottage occupied by the Tangs family--father, son, and now son's wife--aligned with the larger one of the timber-dealer at its upper end; and when young Tim, after leaving work at Melbury's, stood at dusk in the little bower at the corner of his enclosure to smoke a pipe, he frequently observed the surgeon pass along the outside track before-mentioned. Fitzpiers always walked loiteringly, pensively, looking with a sharp eye into the gardens one after another as he proceeded; for Fitzpiers did not wish to leave the now absorbing spot too quickly, after travelling so far to reach it; hoping always for a glimpse of her whom he passionately desired to take to his arms anew.

Now Tim began to be struck with these loitering progresses along the garden boundaries in the gloaming, and wondered what they boded. It was, naturally, quite out of his power to divine the singular, sentimental revival in Fitzpiers's heart; the fineness of tissue which could take a deep, emotional--almost also an artistic--pleasure in being the yearning inamorato of a woman he once had deserted, would have seemed an absurdity to the young sawyer. Mr. and Mrs. Fitzpiers were separated; therefore the question of affection as between them was

settled. But his Suke had, since that meeting on their marriage-day, repentantly admitted, to the urgency of his questioning, a good deal concerning her past levities. Putting all things together, he could hardly avoid connecting Fitzpiers's mysterious visits to this spot with Suke's residence under his roof. But he made himself fairly easy: the vessel in which they were about to emigrate sailed that month; and then Suke would be out of Fitzpiers's way forever.

The interval at last expired, and the eve of their departure arrived. They were pausing in the room of the cottage allotted to them by Tim's father, after a busy day of preparation, which left them weary. In a corner stood their boxes, crammed and corded, their large case for the hold having already been sent away. The firelight shone upon Suke's fine face and form as she stood looking into it, and upon the face of Tim seated in a corner, and upon the walls of his father's house, which he was beholding that night almost for the last time.

Tim Tangs was not happy. This scheme of emigration was dividing him from his father--for old Tangs would on no account leave Hintock--and had it not been for Suke's reputation and his own dignity, Tim would at the last moment have abandoned the project. As he sat in the back part of the room he regarded her moodily, and the fire and the boxes. One thing he had particularly noticed this evening--she was very restless; fitful in her actions, unable to remain seated, and in a marked degree depressed.

"Sorry that you be going, after all, Suke?" he said.

She sighed involuntarily. "I don't know but that I be," she answered.

"'Tis natural, isn't it, when one is going away?"

"But you wasn't born here as I was."

"No."

"There's folk left behind that you'd fain have with 'ee, I reckon?"

"Why do you think that?"

"I've seen things and I've heard things; and, Suke, I say 'twill be a good move for me to get 'ee away. I don't mind his leavings abroad, but I do mind 'em at home."

Suke's face was not changed from its aspect of listless indifference by the words. She answered nothing; and shortly after he went out for his customary pipe of tobacco at the top of the garden.

The restlessness of Suke had indeed owed its presence to the gentleman of Tim's suspicions, but in a different--and it must be added in justice to her--more innocent sense than he supposed, judging from former doings. She had accidentally discovered that Fitzpiers was in the habit of coming secretly once or twice a week to Hintock, and knew

that this evening was a favorite one of the seven for his journey. As she was going next day to leave the country, Suke thought there could be no great harm in giving way to a little sentimentality by obtaining a glimpse of him quite unknown to himself or to anybody, and thus taking a silent last farewell. Aware that Fitzpiers's time for passing was at hand she thus betrayed her feeling. No sooner, therefore, had Tim left the room than she let herself noiselessly out of the house, and hastened to the corner of the garden, whence she could witness the surgeon's transit across the scene--if he had not already gone by.

Her light cotton dress was visible to Tim lounging in the arbor of the opposite corner, though he was hidden from her. He saw her stealthily climb into the hedge, and so ensconce herself there that nobody could have the least doubt her purpose was to watch unseen for a passer-by.

He went across to the spot and stood behind her. Suke started, having in her blundering way forgotten that he might be near. She at once descended from the hedge.

"So he's coming to-night," said Tim, laconically. "And we be always anxious to see our dears."

"He IS coming to-night," she replied, with defiance. "And we BE anxious for our dears."

"Then will you step in-doors, where your dear will soon jine 'ee? We've

to mouster by half-past three to-morrow, and if we don't get to bed by eight at latest our faces will be as long as clock-cases all day."

She hesitated for a minute, but ultimately obeyed, going slowly down the garden to the house, where he heard the door-latch click behind her.

Tim was incensed beyond measure. His marriage had so far been a total failure, a source of bitter regret; and the only course for improving his case, that of leaving the country, was a sorry, and possibly might not be a very effectual one. Do what he would, his domestic sky was likely to be overcast to the end of the day. Thus he brooded, and his resentment gathered force. He craved a means of striking one blow back at the cause of his cheerless plight, while he was still on the scene of his discomfiture. For some minutes no method suggested itself, and then he had an idea.

Coming to a sudden resolution, he hastened along the garden, and entered the one attached to the next cottage, which had formerly been the dwelling of a game-keeper. Tim descended the path to the back of the house, where only an old woman lived at present, and reaching the wall he stopped. Owing to the slope of the ground the roof-eaves of the linhay were here within touch, and he thrust his arm up under them, feeling about in the space on the top of the wall-plate.

"Ah, I thought my memory didn't deceive me!" he lipped silently.

With some exertion he drew down a cobwebbed object curiously framed in iron, which clanked as he moved it. It was about three feet in length and half as wide. Tim contemplated it as well as he could in the dying light of day, and raked off the cobwebs with his hand.

"That will spoil his pretty shins for'n, I reckon!" he said.

It was a man-trap.