CHAPTER XLVII.

Were the inventors of automatic machines to be ranged according to the excellence of their devices for producing sound artistic torture, the creator of the man-trap would occupy a very respectable if not a very high place.

It should rather, however, be said, the inventor of the particular form of man-trap of which this found in the keeper's out-house was a specimen. For there were other shapes and other sizes, instruments which, if placed in a row beside one of the type disinterred by Tim, would have worn the subordinate aspect of the bears, wild boars, or wolves in a travelling menagerie, as compared with the leading lion or tiger. In short, though many varieties had been in use during those centuries which we are accustomed to look back upon as the true and only period of merry England--in the rural districts more especially--and onward down to the third decade of the nineteenth century, this model had borne the palm, and had been most usually followed when the orchards and estates required new ones.

There had been the toothless variety used by the softer-hearted landlords--quite contemptible in their clemency. The jaws of these resembled the jaws of an old woman to whom time has left nothing but gums. There were also the intermediate or half-toothed sorts, probably devised by the middle-natured squires, or those under the influence of their wives: two inches of mercy, two inches of cruelty,

two inches of mere nip, two inches of probe, and so on, through the whole extent of the jaws. There were also, as a class apart, the bruisers, which did not lacerate the flesh, but only crushed the bone.

The sight of one of these gins when set produced a vivid impression that it was endowed with life. It exhibited the combined aspects of a shark, a crocodile, and a scorpion. Each tooth was in the form of a tapering spine, two and a quarter inches long, which, when the jaws were closed, stood in alternation from this side and from that. When they were open, the two halves formed a complete circle between two and three feet in diameter, the plate or treading-place in the midst being about a foot square, while from beneath extended in opposite directions the soul of the apparatus, the pair of springs, each one being of a stiffness to render necessary a lever or the whole weight of the body when forcing it down.

There were men at this time still living at Hintock who remembered when the gin and others like it were in use. Tim Tangs's great-uncle had endured a night of six hours in this very trap, which lamed him for life. Once a keeper of Hintock woods set it on the track of a poacher, and afterwards, coming back that way, forgetful of what he had done, walked into it himself. The wound brought on lockjaw, of which he died. This event occurred during the thirties, and by the year 1840 the use of such implements was well-nigh discontinued in the neighborhood. But being made entirely of iron, they by no means disappeared, and in almost every village one could be found in some

nook or corner as readily as this was found by Tim. It had, indeed, been a fearful amusement of Tim and other Hintock lads--especially those who had a dim sense of becoming renowned poachers when they reached their prime--to drag out this trap from its hiding, set it, and throw it with billets of wood, which were penetrated by the teeth to the depth of near an inch.

As soon as he had examined the trap, and found that the hinges and springs were still perfect, he shouldered it without more ado, and returned with his burden to his own garden, passing on through the hedge to the path immediately outside the boundary. Here, by the help of a stout stake, he set the trap, and laid it carefully behind a bush while he went forward to reconnoitre. As has been stated, nobody passed this way for days together sometimes; but there was just a possibility that some other pedestrian than the one in request might arrive, and it behooved Tim to be careful as to the identity of his victim.

Going about a hundred yards along the rising ground to the right, he reached a ridge whereon a large and thick holly grew. Beyond this for some distance the wood was more open, and the course which Fitzpiers must pursue to reach the point, if he came to-night, was visible a long way forward.

For some time there was no sign of him or of anybody. Then there shaped itself a spot out of the dim mid-distance, between the masses of

brushwood on either hand. And it enlarged, and Tim could hear the brushing of feet over the tufts of sour-grass. The airy gait revealed Fitzpiers even before his exact outline could be seen.

Tim Tangs turned about, and ran down the opposite side of the hill, till he was again at the head of his own garden. It was the work of a few moments to drag out the man-trap, very gently--that the plate might not be disturbed sufficiently to throw it--to a space between a pair of young oaks which, rooted in contiguity, grew apart upward, forming a V-shaped opening between; and, being backed up by bushes, left this as the only course for a foot-passenger. In it he laid the trap with the same gentleness of handling, locked the chain round one of the trees, and finally slid back the guard which was placed to keep the gin from accidentally catching the arms of him who set it, or, to use the local and better word, "toiled" it.

Having completed these arrangements, Tim sprang through the adjoining hedge of his father's garden, ran down the path, and softly entered the house.

Obedient to his order, Suke had gone to bed; and as soon as he had bolted the door, Tim unlaced and kicked off his boots at the foot of the stairs, and retired likewise, without lighting a candle. His object seemed to be to undress as soon as possible. Before, however, he had completed the operation, a long cry resounded without--penetrating, but indescribable.

"What's that?" said Suke, starting up in bed.

"Sounds as if somebody had caught a hare in his gin."

"Oh no," said she. "It was not a hare, 'twas louder. Hark!"

"Do 'ee get to sleep," said Tim. "How be you going to wake at half-past three else?"

She lay down and was silent. Tim stealthily opened the window and listened. Above the low harmonies produced by the instrumentation of the various species of trees around the premises he could hear the twitching of a chain from the spot whereon he had set the man-trap. But further human sound there was none.

Tim was puzzled. In the haste of his project he had not calculated upon a cry; but if one, why not more? He soon ceased to essay an answer, for Hintock was dead to him already. In half a dozen hours he would be out of its precincts for life, on his way to the antipodes. He closed the window and lay down.

The hour which had brought these movements of Tim to birth had been operating actively elsewhere. Awaiting in her father's house the minute of her appointment with her husband, Grace Fitzpiers deliberated

on many things. Should she inform her father before going out that the estrangement of herself and Edgar was not so complete as he had imagined, and deemed desirable for her happiness? If she did so she must in some measure become the apologist of her husband, and she was not prepared to go so far.

As for him, he kept her in a mood of considerate gravity. He certainly had changed. He had at his worst times always been gentle in his manner towards her. Could it be that she might make of him a true and worthy husband yet? She had married him; there was no getting over that; and ought she any longer to keep him at a distance? His suave deference to her lightest whim on the question of his comings and goings, when as her lawful husband he might show a little independence, was a trait in his character as unexpected as it was engaging. If she had been his empress, and he her thrall, he could not have exhibited a more sensitive care to avoid intruding upon her against her will.

Impelled by a remembrance she took down a prayer-book and turned to the marriage-service. Reading it slowly through, she became quite appalled at her recent off-handedness, when she rediscovered what awfully solemn promises she had made him at those chancel steps not so very long ago.

She became lost in long ponderings on how far a person's conscience might be bound by vows made without at the time a full recognition of their force. That particular sentence, beginning "Whom God hath joined together," was a staggerer for a gentlewoman of strong devotional

sentiment. She wondered whether God really did join them together. Before she had done deliberating the time of her engagement drew near, and she went out of the house almost at the moment that Tim Tangs retired to his own.

The position of things at that critical juncture was briefly as follows.

Two hundred yards to the right of the upper end of Tangs's garden Fitzpiers was still advancing, having now nearly reached the summit of the wood-clothed ridge, the path being the actual one which further on passed between the two young oaks. Thus far it was according to Tim's conjecture. But about two hundred yards to the left, or rather less, was arising a condition which he had not divined, the emergence of Grace as aforesaid from the upper corner of her father's garden, with the view of meeting Tim's intended victim. Midway between husband and wife was the diabolical trap, silent, open, ready.

Fitzpiers's walk that night had been cheerful, for he was convinced that the slow and gentle method he had adopted was promising success. The very restraint that he was obliged to exercise upon himself, so as not to kill the delicate bud of returning confidence, fed his flame. He walked so much more rapidly than Grace that, if they continued advancing as they had begun, he would reach the trap a good half-minute before she could reach the same spot.

But here a new circumstance came in; to escape the unpleasantness of

being watched or listened to by lurkers--naturally curious by reason of their strained relations--they had arranged that their meeting for to-night should be at the holm-tree on the ridge above named. So soon, accordingly, as Fitzpiers reached the tree he stood still to await her.

He had not paused under the prickly foliage more than two minutes when he thought he heard a scream from the other side of the ridge. Fitzpiers wondered what it could mean; but such wind as there was just now blew in an adverse direction, and his mood was light. He set down the origin of the sound to one of the superstitious freaks or frolicsome scrimmages between sweethearts that still survived in Hintock from old-English times; and waited on where he stood till ten minutes had passed. Feeling then a little uneasy, his mind reverted to the scream; and he went forward over the summit and down the embowered incline, till he reached the pair of sister oaks with the narrow opening between them.

Fitzpiers stumbled and all but fell. Stretching down his hand to ascertain the obstruction, it came in contact with a confused mass of silken drapery and iron-work that conveyed absolutely no explanatory idea to his mind at all. It was but the work of a moment to strike a match; and then he saw a sight which congealed his blood.

The man-trap was thrown; and between its jaws was part of a woman's clothing--a patterned silk skirt--gripped with such violence that the iron teeth had passed through it, skewering its tissue in a score of

places. He immediately recognized the skirt as that of one of his wife's gowns--the gown that she had worn when she met him on the very last occasion.

Fitzpiers had often studied the effect of these instruments when examining the collection at Hintock House, and the conception instantly flashed through him that Grace had been caught, taken out mangled by some chance passer, and carried home, some of her clothes being left behind in the difficulty of getting her free. The shock of this conviction, striking into the very current of high hope, was so great that he cried out like one in corporal agony, and in his misery bowed himself down to the ground.

Of all the degrees and qualities of punishment that Fitzpiers had undergone since his sins against Grace first began, not any even approximated in intensity to this.

"Oh, my own--my darling! Oh, cruel Heaven--it is too much, this!" he cried, writhing and rocking himself over the sorry accessaries of her he deplored.

The voice of his distress was sufficiently loud to be audible to any one who might have been there to hear it; and one there was. Right and left of the narrow pass between the oaks were dense bushes; and now from behind these a female figure glided, whose appearance even in the gloom was, though graceful in outline, noticeably strange.

She was in white up to the waist, and figured above. She was, in short, Grace, his wife, lacking the portion of her dress which the gin retained.

"Don't be grieved about me--don't, dear Edgar!" she exclaimed, rushing up and bending over him. "I am not hurt a bit! I was coming on to find you after I had released myself, but I heard footsteps; and I hid away, because I was without some of my clothing, and I did not know who the person might be."

Fitzpiers had sprung to his feet, and his next act was no less unpremeditated by him than it was irresistible by her, and would have been so by any woman not of Amazonian strength. He clasped his arms completely round, pressed her to his breast, and kissed her passionately.

"You are not dead!--you are not hurt! Thank God--thank God!" he said, almost sobbing in his delight and relief from the horror of his apprehension. "Grace, my wife, my love, how is this--what has happened?"

"I was coming on to you," she said as distinctly as she could in the half-smothered state of her face against his. "I was trying to be as punctual as possible, and as I had started a minute late I ran along the path very swiftly--fortunately for myself. Just when I had passed

between these trees I felt something clutch at my dress from behind with a noise, and the next moment I was pulled backward by it, and fell to the ground. I screamed with terror, thinking it was a man lying down there to murder me, but the next moment I discovered it was iron, and that my clothes were caught in a trap. I pulled this way and that, but the thing would not let go, drag it as I would, and I did not know what to do. I did not want to alarm my father or anybody, as I wished nobody to know of these meetings with you; so I could think of no other plan than slipping off my skirt, meaning to run on and tell you what a strange accident had happened to me. But when I had just freed myself by leaving the dress behind, I heard steps, and not being sure it was you, I did not like to be seen in such a pickle, so I hid away."

"It was only your speed that saved you! One or both of your legs would have been broken if you had come at ordinary walking pace."

"Or yours, if you had got here first," said she, beginning to realize the whole ghastliness of the possibility. "Oh, Edgar, there has been an Eye watching over us to-night, and we should be thankful indeed!"

He continued to press his face to hers. "You are mine--mine again now."

She gently owned that she supposed she was. "I heard what you said when you thought I was injured," she went on, shyly, "and I know that a man who could suffer as you were suffering must have a tender regard for me. But how does this awful thing come here?"

"I suppose it has something to do with poachers." Fitzpiers was still so shaken by the sense of her danger that he was obliged to sit awhile, and it was not until Grace said, "If I could only get my skirt out nobody would know anything about it," that he bestirred himself.

By their united efforts, each standing on one of the springs of the trap, they pressed them down sufficiently to insert across the jaws a billet which they dragged from a faggot near at hand; and it was then possible to extract the silk mouthful from the monster's bite, creased and pierced with many holes, but not torn. Fitzpiers assisted her to put it on again; and when her customary contours were thus restored they walked on together, Grace taking his arm, till he effected an improvement by clasping it round her waist.

The ice having been broken in this unexpected manner, she made no further attempt at reserve. "I would ask you to come into the house," she said, "but my meetings with you have been kept secret from my father, and I should like to prepare him."

"Never mind, dearest. I could not very well have accepted the invitation. I shall never live here again--as much for your sake as for mine. I have news to tell you on this very point, but my alarm had put it out of my head. I have bought a practice, or rather a partnership, in the Midlands, and I must go there in a week to take up permanent residence. My poor old great-aunt died about eight months

ago, and left me enough to do this. I have taken a little furnished house for a time, till we can get one of our own."

He described the place, and the surroundings, and the view from the windows, and Grace became much interested. "But why are you not there now?" she said.

"Because I cannot tear myself away from here till I have your promise. Now, darling, you will accompany me there--will you not? To-night has settled that."

Grace's tremblings had gone off, and she did not say nay. They went on together.

The adventure, and the emotions consequent upon the reunion which that event had forced on, combined to render Grace oblivious of the direction of their desultory ramble, till she noticed they were in an encircled glade in the densest part of the wood, whereon the moon, that had imperceptibly added its rays to the scene, shone almost vertically. It was an exceptionally soft, balmy evening for the time of year, which was just that transient period in the May month when beech-trees have suddenly unfolded large limp young leaves of the softness of butterflies' wings. Boughs bearing such leaves hung low around, and completely enclosed them, so that it was as if they were in a great green vase, which had moss for its bottom and leaf sides.

The clouds having been packed in the west that evening so as to retain the departing glare a long while, the hour had seemed much earlier than it was. But suddenly the question of time occurred to her.

"I must go back," she said; and without further delay they set their faces towards Hintock. As they walked he examined his watch by the aid of the now strong moonlight.

"By the gods, I think I have lost my train!" said Fitzpiers.

"Dear me--whereabouts are we?" said she.

"Two miles in the direction of Sherton."

"Then do you hasten on, Edgar. I am not in the least afraid. I recognize now the part of the wood we are in and I can find my way back quite easily. I'll tell my father that we have made it up. I wish I had not kept our meetings so private, for it may vex him a little to know I have been seeing you. He is getting old and irritable, that was why I did not. Good-by."

"But, as I must stay at the Earl of Wessex to-night, for I cannot possibly catch the train, I think it would be safer for you to let me take care of you."

"But what will my father think has become of me? He does not know in

the least where I am--he thinks I only went into the garden for a few minutes."

"He will surely guess--somebody has seen me for certain. I'll go all the way back with you to-morrow."

"But that newly done-up place--the Earl of Wessex!"

"If you are so very particular about the publicity I will stay at the Three Tuns."

"Oh no--it is not that I am particular--but I haven't a brush or comb or anything!"