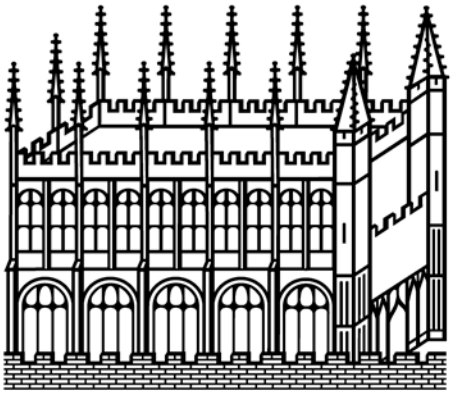


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THE WOODLANDERS.

VOL. III.



THE WOODLANDERS

BY

THOMAS HARDY

IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE WOODLANDERS.

CHAPTER I.

It was at the beginning of April, a few days after the meeting between Grace and Mrs. Charmond in the wood, that Fitzpiers, just returned from London, was travelling from Sherton Abbas to Hintock in a hired carriage. In his eye there was a doubtful light, and the lines of his refined face showed a vague disquietude. He appeared now like one of those who strike the beholder as having suffered wrong in being born.

His position was in truth gloomy, and to his impressible mind it seemed even gloomier than it was. His practice had been slowly dwindling of late, and now threatened to die out altogether, the undaunted old Dr. Jones capturing patients up to Fitzpiers's very door. Fitzpiers knew only too well the latest and greatest cause of his unpopularity; and yet, so illogical is man, the second branch of his sadness grew out of a remedial measure proposed for the first—a letter from Felice Charmond imploring him not to see her again. To bring about their severance still more effectually, she added, she had decided during his absence upon almost immediate departure for the Continent.

The time was that dull interval in a woodlander's life which coincides with great activity in the life of the woodland itself—a period following the close of the winter

tree-cutting, and preceding the barking season, when the saps are just beginning to heave with the force of hydraulic lifts inside all the trunks of the forest.

Winterborne's contract was completed, and the plantations were deserted. It was dusk: there were no leaves as yet: the nightingales would not begin to sing for a fortnight; and the Mother of the Months was in her most attenuated phase—starved and bent to a mere bowed skeleton, which glided along behind the bare twigs in Fitzpiers's company.

When he reached home he went straight up to his wife's sitting-room. He found it deserted, and without a fire. He had mentioned no day for his return: nevertheless he wondered why she was not there waiting to receive him.

On descending to the other wing of the house and inquiring of Mrs. Melbury he

learnt with much surprise that Grace had gone on a visit to an acquaintance at Shottsford-Forum, three days earlier: that tidings had on this morning reached her father of her being very unwell there, in consequence of which he had ridden over to see her.

Fitzpiers went up stairs again, and the little drawing-room, now lighted by a solitary candle, was not rendered more cheerful by the entrance of Grammer Oliver with an apron full of wood which she threw on the hearth while she raked out the grate and rattled about the fire-irons, with a view to making things comfortable. Fitzpiers considered that Grace ought to have let him know her plans more accurately before leaving home in a freak like this. He went desultorily to the window, the blind of which had not been pulled down, and looked out at the thin, fast-sinking moon,

and at the tall stalk of smoke rising from the top of Suke Damson's chimney, signifying that the young woman had just lit her fire to prepare supper.

He became conscious of a discussion in progress on the opposite side of the court. Somebody had looked over the wall to talk to the sawyers, and was telling them in a loud voice news in which the name of Mrs. Charmond soon arrested his ears.

"Grammer, don't make so much noise with that grate," said the surgeon: at which Grammer reared herself upon her knees and held the fuel suspended in her hand, while Fitzpiers half opened the window.

"She is off to foreign lands again at last —hev made up her mind quite sudden-like —and it is thoughted she'll leave in a day or two. She's been all as if her mind were low for some days past—with a sort of sorrow in her face, as if she reproached her own soul

She's the wrong sort of woman for Hintock —hardly knowing a beech from a woak— that I own. But I don't care who the man is, she's been a very kind friend to me."

"Well—the day after to-morrow is the Sabbath day, and without charity we are but tinkling simples; but this I do say, that her going will be a blessed thing for a certain married couple who remain."

The fire was lighted, and Fitzpiers sat down in front of it, restless as the last leaf upon a tree. "A sort of sorrow in her face, as if she reproached her own soul." Poor, poor Felice!

How her frame must be pulsing under the conditions of which he had just heard the caricature; how her fair temples must ache; what a mood of wretchedness she must be in! But for this mixing up of his name with hers, and her determination to sunder their too close acquaintance on that

account, she would probably have sent for him professionally. She was now sitting alone, suffering, perhaps wishing she had not forbidden him to come again.

Unable to remain in this lonely room any longer, or to wait for the meal which was in course of preparation, he made himself ready for riding, descended to the yard, stood by the stable-door while Darling was being saddled, and rode off down the lane. He would have preferred walking, but was weary with his day's travel.

As he approached the door of Marty South's cottage, which it was necessary to pass on his way, she came from the porch as if she had been awaiting him, and met him in the middle of the road, holding up a letter. Fitzpiers took it without stopping, and asked over his shoulder from whom it came.

Marty hesitated. "From me," she said shyly, though with noticeable firmness.

This letter contained, in fact, Marty's declaration that she was the original owner of Mrs. Charmond's supplementary locks, and inclosed a sample from the native stock, which had grown considerably by this time. It was her long contemplated apple of discord, and much her hand trembled as she handed the document up to him.

But it was impossible on account of the gloom for Fitzpiers to read it then, while he had the curiosity to do so; and he put it in his pocket. His imagination having already centred itself on Hintock House, in his pocket the letter remained unopened and forgotten, all the while that Marty was hopefully picturing its excellent weaning effect upon him.

He was not long in reaching the precincts of the manor-house. He drew rein under a group of dark oaks commanding a view of the front, and reflected a while. His entry would not be altogether unnatural in the cir-

cumstances of her possible indisposition ; but upon the whole he thought it best to avoid riding up to the door. By silently approaching he could retreat unobserved in the event of her not being alone. He dismounted, hitched Darling to a stray bough hanging a little below the general browsing line of the trees, and proceeded to the door on foot.

In the meantime Melbury had returned from Shottsford-Forum. The great court or quadrangle of the timber-merchant's house, divided from the shady lane by an ivy-covered wall, was entered by two white gates, one standing near each extremity of the wall. It had so happened that at the moment when Fitzpiers was riding out at the lower gate on his way to the manor-house, Melbury was approaching the upper gate to enter it. Fitzpiers being in front of Melbury was seen by the latter, but the surgeon, never turning his head, did not observe his father-in-law,

ambling up slowly and silently under the trees, though his horse too was a grey one.

"How is Grace?" said his wife, as soon as he entered.

Melbury looked gloomy. "She is not at all well," he said. "I don't like the looks of her at all. I couldn't bear the notion of her staying away in a strange place any longer, and I begged her to let me get her home. At last she agreed to it, but not till after much persuading. I was then sorry that I rode over instead of driving; but I have hired a nice comfortable carriage—the easiest-going I could get—and she'll be here in a couple of hours or less: I rode on ahead to tell you to get her room ready; but I see her husband has come back."

"Yes," said Mrs. Melbury. She expressed her concern that her husband had hired a carriage all the way from Shottsford. "What it will cost!" she said.

"I don't care what it costs!" he exclaimed testily. "I was determined to get her home. Why she went away I can't think! She acts in a way that is not at all likely to mend matters as far as I can see." Grace had not told her father of her interview with Mrs. Charmond, and the disclosure that had been whispered in her startled ear.

"Since Edred is come," he continued, "he might have waited in till I got back, to ask me how she was, if only for a compliment. I saw him go out: where is he gone?"

Mrs. Melbury did not know positively; but she told her husband that there was not much doubt about the place of his first visit after an absence. She had, in fact, seen Fitzpiers take the direction of the manor-house.

Melbury said no more. It was exasperating to him that just at this moment, when there was every reason for Fitzpiers to stay in doors, or at any rate to ride along the

Shottsford road to meet his ailing wife, he should be doing despite to her by going elsewhere. The old man went out of doors again ; and, his horse being hardly unsaddled as yet, he told Upjohn to re-tighten the girths ; he again mounted, and rode off at the heels of the surgeon.

By the time that Melbury reached the park he was prepared to go any lengths in combating this rank and reckless errantry of his daughter's husband. He would fetch home Edred Fitzpiers to-night by some means, rough or fair : in his view there could come of his interference nothing worse than what existed at present. And yet to every bad there is a worse.

He had entered by the bridle-gate which admitted to the park on this side, and cantered over the soft turf almost in the tracks of Fitzpiers's horse, till he reached the clump of trees under which his pre-

cursor had halted. The whitish object that was indistinctly visible here in the gloom of the boughs he found to be Darling, as left by Fitzpiers.

"D—— him! why did he not ride up to the house in an honest way?" said Melbury.

He profited by Fitzpiers's example: dismounting, he tied his horse under an adjoining tree, and went on to the house on foot, as the other had done. He was no longer disposed to stick at trifles in his investigation, and did not hesitate to gently open the front door without ringing.

The large square hall, with its oak floor, staircase, and wainscot, was lighted by a dim lamp hanging from a beam. Not a soul was visible. He went into the corridor and listened at a door which he knew to be that of the drawing-room; there was no sound, and on turning the handle he found the room

empty. A fire burning low in the grate was the sole light of the apartment: its beams flashed mockingly on the somewhat showy Versaillese furniture and gilding here, in style as unlike that of the structural parts of the building as it was possible to be, and probably introduced by Felice to counteract the fine old English gloom of the place. Disappointed in his hope of confronting his son-in-law here, he went on to the dining-room, which was without light or fire, and pervaded by a cold atmosphere, which signified that she had not dined there that day.

By this time Melbury's mood had a little mollified. Everything here was so pacific, so unaggressive in its repose, that he was no longer incited to provoke a collision with Fitzpiers or with anybody. The comparative stateliness of the apartments influenced him to an emotion, rather than to a belief, that where all was outwardly so good and proper

there could not be quite that delinquency within which he had suspected. It occurred to him, too, that even if his suspicion were justified, his abrupt, if not unwarrantable, entry into the house might end in confounding its inhabitant at the expense of his daughter's dignity and his own. Any ill result would be pretty sure to hit Grace hardest in the long run. He would, after all, adopt the more rational course, and plead with Fitzpiers privately, as he had pleaded with Mrs. Charmond.

He accordingly retreated as silently as he had come. Passing the door of the drawing-room anew he fancied that he heard a noise within, which was not the crackling of the fire. Melbury gently re-opened the door to a distance of a few inches, and saw at the opposite window two figures in the act of stepping out—a man and a woman—in whom he recognised the lady of the house

and his son-in-law. In a moment they had disappeared amid the gloom of the lawn.

He returned into the hall, and let himself out by the carriage-entrance door, coming round to the lawn-front in time to see the two figures parting at the railing which divided the precincts of the house from the open park.

Mrs. Charmond turned to hasten back immediately that her lover had left her side; and Fitzpiers going onward was speedily absorbed into the duskiness of the trees.

Melbury waited till Mrs. Charmond had re-entered the drawing-room, and then followed after Fitzpiers. He would allow the latter to mount and ride ahead a little way before overtaking him, and giving him a piece of his mind. His son-in-law might possibly see the second horse near his own; but that would do him no harm, and might prepare him for what he was to expect.

The event however, was different from the plan. . On plunging into the thick shade of the clump of oaks, he could not perceive his horse Blossom anywhere; but feeling his way carefully along, he by and by discerned Fitzpiers's mare Darling still standing as before under the adjoining tree. For a moment Melbury thought that his own horse, being young and strong, had broken away from her fastening; but on listening intently he could hear her ambling comfortably along a little way ahead, and a creaking of the saddle, which showed that she had a rider. Walking on as far as the small gate in the corner of the park, he met a labourer who, in reply to Melbury's inquiry if he had seen any person on a grey horse, said that he had only met Dr. Fitzpiers.

It was just what Melbury had begun to suspect: Fitzpiers had mounted the mare which did not belong to him in mistake for

his own—an oversight easily explicable, in a man ever unwitting in horse-flesh, by the darkness of the spot, and the near similarity of the animals in appearance, though Melbury's was readily enough seen to be the greyer horse by day.

He hastened back, and did what seemed best in the circumstances—got upon old Darling, and rode rapidly after Fitzpiers.

Melbury had just entered the wood, and was winding along the cart-way which led through it, channelled deep in the leaf-mould with large ruts that were formed by the timber-waggons in fetching the spoil of the plantations, when all at once he descried in front, at a point where the road took a turning round a large chestnut tree, the form of his own horse Blossom. Melbury quickened Darling's pace, thinking to come up with Fitzpiers.

Nearer view revealed that the horse had

no rider. At Melbury's approach it galloped friskily away under the trees in a homeward direction. Thinking something was wrong, the timber-merchant dismounted as soon as he reached the chestnut, and after feeling about for a minute or two discovered Fitzpiers lying on the ground.

"Here—help!" cried the latter as soon as he felt Melbury's touch; "I have been thrown off. . . . But there's not much harm done, I think."

Since Melbury could not now very well read the younger man the lecture he had intended, and as friendliness would be hypocrisy, his instinct was to speak not a single word to his son-in-law. He raised Fitzpiers into a sitting posture, and found that he was a little stunned and stupefied, but, as he had said, not otherwise hurt. How this fall had come about was readily onjecturable: Fitzpiers, imagining there was

only old Darling under him, had been taken unawares by the younger horse's sprightliness.

Melbury was a traveller of the old-fashioned sort: having just come from Shottsford-Forum, he still had in his pocket the pilgrim's flask of rum which he always carried on journeys exceeding a dozen miles, though he seldom drank much of it. He poured it down the surgeon's throat, with such effect that he quickly revived. Melbury got him on his legs; but the question was what to do with him. He could not walk more than a few steps, and the other horse had gone away.

With great exertion Melbury contrived to get him astride Darling, mounting himself behind, and holding Fitzpiers round his waist with one arm. Darling being broad, straight-backed, and high in the withers, was well able to carry double, at any rate as far as Hintock, and at a gentle pace.

CHAPTER II.

THE mare paced along with firm and cautious tread through the copse where Winterborne had worked, and into the heavier soil where the oaks grew: past Great Willy, the largest oak in the wood, and thence towards Tutcombe Bottom, intensely dark now with overgrowth, and popularly supposed to be haunted by the spirits of the fratricides exorcised from Hintock House.

By this time Fitzpiers had quite recovered his physical strength. But he had eaten nothing since making a hasty breakfast in

London that morning, his anxiety about Felice having hurried him away from home before dining: as a consequence the old rum administered by his father-in-law flew to the young man's head and loosened his tongue, without his ever having recognised who it was that had lent him a kindly hand. He began to speak in desultory sentences, Melbury still supporting him.

"I've come all the way from London to-day," said Fitzpiers. "Ah, that's the place to meet your equals. I live at Hintock—worse, at Little Hintock!—and I am quite lost there. There's not a man within ten miles of Hintock who can comprehend me. . . . I tell you, Farmer What's-your-name, that I'm a man of education. I know several languages: the poets and I are familiar friends: I used to read more in metaphysics than anybody within fifty miles; and since I gave that up there's nobody can

match me in the whole county of Wessex as a scientist. . . . Yet I am doomed to live with tradespeople in a miserable little hole like Hintock!"

"Indeed!" muttered Melbury.

Here Fitzpiers, with alcoholic energy, reared himself up suddenly from the bowed posture he had hitherto held, thrusting his shoulders so violently against Melbury's breast as to make it difficult for the old man to keep a hold on the reins.

"People don't appreciate me here!" the surgeon exclaimed; then, lowering his voice, he added softly and slowly, "except one—except one! . . . A passionate soul, as warm as she is clever, as beautiful as she is warm, and as rich as she is beautiful. I say, old fellow, those claws of yours clutch me rather tight—rather like the eagle's, you know, that ate out the liver of Pro—Pre—, the man on Mount Caucasus. . . . People don't

appreciate me, I say, except *her!* . . . Ah, gods, I am an unlucky man! She would have been mine, she would have taken my name; but unfortunately it cannot be so! I stooped to mate beneath me; and now I rue it."

The position was becoming a very trying one for Melbury, corporeally and mentally. He was obliged to steady Fitzpiers with his left arm, and he began to hate the contact. He hardly knew what to do. It was useless to remonstrate with Fitzpiers, in his intellectual confusion from the rum and from the fall. He remained silent, his hold upon his companion, however, being stern rather than compassionate.

"You hurt me a little, farmer!—though I am much obliged to you for your kindness. . . . People don't appreciate me, I say. Between ourselves, I am losing my practice here; and why? Because I see matchless

attraction where matchless attraction is, both in person and position.—I mention no names, so nobody will be the wiser. . . . But I have lost her,—in a legitimate sense, that is. If I were a free man now, things have come to such a pass between us that she could not refuse me; while with her fortune (which I don't covet for itself) I should have a chance of satisfying an honourable ambition —a chance I have never had yet! . . . and now never, never shall have probably!"

Melbury, his heart throbbing against the other's backbone, and his brain on fire with indignation, ventured to mutter huskily, "Why?"

The horse ambled on some steps before Fitzpiers replied. "Because I am tied and bound to another by law, as tightly as I am to you by your arm—not that I complain of your arm—I thank you for helping me. Well, where are we? Not nearly home

yet? . . . Home, say I. It *is* a home! When I might have been at the other house over there." In a stupefied way he flung his hand in the direction of the park. "I was just two months too early in committing myself. Had I only seen the other first——"

Here the old man's arm gave Fitzpiers a convulsive shake.

"What are you doing?" continued the latter. "Keep still, please, or put me down. . . . I was saying that I lost her by a mere little two months! There is no chance for me now in this world, and it makes me reckless — reckless! Unless, indeed, anything should happen to the other one. She is amiable enough; but if anything should happen to her—and I hear she is ill—well, if it *should*, I should be free—and my fame, my happiness, would be insured!"

These were the last words that Fitzpiers

uttered in his seat in front of the timber-merchant. Unable longer to master himself, Melbury whipped away his spare arm from Fitzpiers's waist, and seized him by the collar.

"You heartless villain—after all that we have done for ye!" he cried with a quivering lip. "And the money of hers that you've had, and the roof we've provided to shelter ye!—It is to me, George Melbury, that you dare to talk like that!" The exclamation was accompanied by a powerful swing from the shoulder, which flung the young man headlong into the road.

Fitzpiers fell with a heavy thud upon the stumps of some undergrowth which had been cut during the winter preceding. Darling continued her walk for a few paces further, and stopped.

"God forgive me!" Melbury murmured, repenting of what he had done. "He tried

me too sorely; and now perhaps I've murdered him!"

He turned round in the saddle, and looked towards the spot on which Fitzpiers had fallen. To his great surprise he beheld the surgeon rise to his feet with a bound, as if unhurt, and walk away rapidly under the trees.

Melbury listened till the rustle of Fitzpiers's footsteps died away. "It might have been a crime, but for the mercy of Providence in providing leaves for his fall;" he said to himself. And then his mind reverted to the words of Fitzpiers, and his indignation so mounted within him that he almost wished the fall had put an end to the surgeon there and then.

He had not ridden far when he discerned his own grey mare standing under some bushes. Leaving Darling for a moment, Melbury went forward and easily caught the younger animal, now disheartened at its

freak. He made the pair of them fast to a tree, and turning back endeavoured to find some trace of Fitzpiers, feeling pitifully that, after all, he had gone further than he intended with the offender. But though he threaded the wood hither and thither, his toes ploughing layer after layer of the little horny scrolls that had once been leaves, he could not find him. He stood still, listening and looking round. The breeze was oozing through the net-work of boughs as through a strainer; the trunks and larger branches stood against the light of the sky in the forms of writhing men, gigantic candelabra, pikes, halberds, lances, and whatever else the fancy chose to make of them. Giving up the search, Melbury came back to the horses, and walked slowly homeward leading one in each hand.

It happened that on the selfsame evening

a boy had been returning from Great to Little Hintock about the time of Fitzpiers's passage home along that route. A horse-collar, that had been left at the harness-mender's to be repaired, was required for use at five o'clock next morning, and in consequence the boy had to fetch it over-night. He put his head through the collar, and accompanied his walk by whistling the one tune he knew, as an antidote to fear.

The boy suddenly became aware of a horse trotting rather friskily along the track behind him, and not knowing whether to expect friend or foe, prudence suggested that he should cease his whistling and retreat among the trees till the horse and his rider had gone by, a course to which he was still more inclined when he found how noiselessly they approached, and saw that the horse looked pale, and remembered what he had read about Death in the Revelation. He

therefore deposited the collar by a tree, and hid himself behind it. The horseman came on, and the youth, whose eyes were as keen as telescopes, to his great relief recognised the doctor.

As Melbury surmised, Fitzpiers had in the darkness taken Blossom for Darling, and he had not discovered his mistake when he came up opposite the boy, though he was somewhat surprised at the liveliness of his usually placid mare. The only other pair of eyes on the spot whose vision was keen as the young carter's were those of the horse; and, with that strongly conservative objection to the unusual which animals show, Blossom, on eyeing the collar under the tree — quite invisible to Fitzpiers — exercised none of the patience of the older horse, but shied sufficiently to unseat so second-rate an equestrian as the surgeon.

He fell, and did not move, lying as

Melbury afterwards found him. The boy ran away, salving his conscience for the desertion by thinking how vigorously he would spread the alarm of the accident when he got to Hintock—which he uncompromisingly did, incrusting the skeleton event with a load of dramatic horrors.

Grace had returned, and the fly hired on her account, though not by her husband, at the Crown Hotel, Shottsford-Forum, had been paid for and dismissed. The long drive had somewhat revived her, her illness being a feverish intermittent nervousness which had more to do with mind than body, and she walked about her sitting-room in something of a hopeful mood. Mrs. Melbury had told her as soon as she arrived that her husband had returned from London. He had gone out, she said, to see a patient as she supposed, and he must soon be back, since he had had no dinner or tea. Grace

would not allow her mind to harbour any suspicion of his whereabouts, and her step-mother said nothing of Mrs. Charmond's rumoured sorrows and plans of departure.

So the young wife sat by the fire, waiting silently. She had left Hintock in a turmoil of aversion to her husband, after the revelation of Mrs. Charmond, and had intended not to be at home when he returned. But she had thought the matter over, and had allowed her father's influence to prevail and bring her back; and now somewhat regretted that Edred's arrival had preceded hers.

By and by Mrs. Melbury came up stairs with a slight air of flurry and abruptness.

"I have something to tell—some bad news," she said. "But you must not be alarmed, as it is not so bad as it might have been. Edred has been thrown off his horse. We don't think he is hurt much. It happened

in the wood the other side of Tutcombe Bottom, where 'tis said the ghosts of the Brothers walk."

She went on to give a few of the particulars, but none of the invented horrors, that had been communicated by the boy. "I thought it better to tell you at once," she added, "in case he should not—be very well able to walk home, and somebody should bring him."

Mrs. Melbury really thought matters much worse than she represented, and Grace knew that she thought so. She sat down dazed for a few minutes, returning a negative to her stepmother's inquiry if she could do anything for her.

"Ah—yes—please go into the bedroom," Grace said on second thoughts, "and see if all is ready there—in case it is serious." Mrs. Melbury thereupon called Grammer, and they did as directed, supplying the room

with everything they could think of for the accommodation of an injured man.

Nobody was left in the lower part of the house. Not many minutes had passed when Grace heard a knock at the door—a single knock, not loud enough to reach the ears of those in the bedroom.

She went to the top of the stairs, and said faintly, "Come up," knowing that the door stood, as usual in such houses, wide open. Retreating into the gloom of the broad landing she saw rise up the stairs a woman whom at first she did not recognise, till her voice revealed her to be Suke Damson, in great fright and sorrow. A streak of light from the partially closed door of Grace's room fell upon her face as she came forward, and it was drawn and pale.

"Oh, Miss Melbury—I would say Mrs. Fitzpiers," she said, wringing her hands. "This terrible news—is he dead? Is he

hurted very bad? Tell me; I couldn't help coming — please forgive me, Miss Melbury—Mrs. Fitzpiers, I would say!"

Grace sank down on the oak chest which stood on the landing, and put her hands to her now flushed face and head. Ought she not to order Suke Damson down stairs and out of the house? Her husband might be brought in at any moment, and what would happen? But could she order this genuinely grieved woman away?

There was a dead silence of half a minute or so, till Suke said, "Why don't ye speak? Is he here? Is he dead? If so, why can't I see him—would it be so very wrong?"

Before Grace had answered somebody else came to the door below—a footfall light as a roe's. There was a hurried tapping upon the panel, as if with the impatient tips of fingers whose owner thought not whether a knocker were there or no. Without a pause and

possibly guided by the stray beam of light on the landing, the new-comer ascended the staircase as the first had done. Grace started: it was a lady. Grace was sufficiently visible, and the lady came to her side.

"I could make nobody hear down stairs," said Felice Charmond, with lips whose dryness could almost be heard, and panting, as she stood like one ready to sink on the floor with distress. "What is—the matter—tell me the worst! Can he live?"

She looked at Grace imploringly, without perceiving poor Suke, who, dismayed at such a presence, had shrunk away into the shade. Mrs. Charmond's little feet were covered with mud: she was quite unconscious of her appearance now.

"I have heard such a dreadful report," she went on; "I came to ascertain the truth of it. Is he—killed?"

"She won't tell us—he's dying—he's in that room!" burst out Suke, regardless of consequences, as she heard the distant movements of Mrs. Melbury and Grammer in the bedroom at the end of the passage.

"Where?" said Mrs. Charmond; and on Suke pointing out the direction she made as if to go thither.

Grace barred the way.

"He is not there," she said. "I have not seen him any more than you. I have heard a report only—not so bad as you think. It must have been exaggerated to you."

"Please do not conceal anything—let me know all!" said Felice doubtingly.

"You shall know all I know; and indeed you have a perfect right to go in there; who can have a better than either of you?" said Grace with a delicate sting which was lost upon them now, as, ceasing to obstruct the way, she led on to the chamber door, and

flung it open. "I repeat, I have only heard a less alarming account than you have heard; how much it means, and how little, I cannot say. I pray God that it means not much—in common humanity. You probably pray the same—*for other reasons.*"

Then she regarded them both there in the dim light a while, as they stood dumb in their trouble, staring at the empty bed; not stinging back at her, not heeding her mood. A tenderness spread over Grace like a dew. It was well enough, conventionally, to address either one of them in the wife's regulation terms of virtuous sarcasm, as woman, creature, or thing. But life, what was it, and who was she? She had, like the singer of the Psalm of Asaph, been plagued and chastened all the day long; but could she, by retributive words, in order to please herself, the individual, "offend against the generation," as he would not?

"He is dying, perhaps!" blubbered Suke Damson, putting her apron to her eyes.

In their gestures and faces there were anxieties, affection, agony of heart—all for a man who had wronged them—had never really behaved towards either of them anyhow but selfishly. Neither one but would have well-nigh sacrificed half her life to him, even now. The tears which his possibly critical situation could not bring to her eyes surged over at the contemplation of these fellow-women. She turned to the balustrade, bent herself upon it, and wept.

Thereupon Felice began to cry also, without using her handkerchief, letting the tears run down silently. While these three poor women stood together thus, pitying another though most to be pitied themselves, the pacing of a horse or horses became audible in the court, and in a moment Melbury's voice was heard calling to his stableman.

Grace at once started up, ran down the stairs, and out into the quadrangle as her father crossed it towards the door. "Father, what is the matter with him?" she cried.

"Who, Edred?" said Melbury abruptly. "Matter? Nothing. What, my dear, and have you got home safe? Why, you are better already! But you ought not to be out in the air like this."

"But he has been thrown off his horse!"

"I know; I know. I saw it. He got up again, and walked off as well as ever. A fall on the leaves didn't hurt a spry fellow like him. He did not come this way," he added significantly. "I suppose he went to look for his horse. I tried to find him, but could not. But after seeing him go away under the trees I found the horse, and have led it home for safety. So he must walk. Now, don't you stay out here in this night air."

She returned to the house with her father.

When she had again ascended to the landing and to her own rooms beyond, it was a great relief to her to find that both Petticoat the First and Petticoat the Second of her *bien-aimé* had silently disappeared. They had, in all probability, heard the words of her father, and departed, with their anxieties relieved.

Presently her parents came up to Grace, and busied themselves to see that she was comfortable. Perceiving soon that she would prefer to be left alone they went away.

Grace waited on. The clock raised its voice now and then, but her husband did not return. At her father's usual hour for retiring he again came in to see her. "Do not stay up," she said, as soon as he entered. "I am not at all tired. I will sit up for him."

"I think it will be useless, Grace," said Melbury, slowly.

"Why?"

"I have had a bitter quarrel with him. And on that account I hardly think he will return to-night."

"A quarrel? Was that after the fall seen by the boy?"

Melbury nodded an affirmative—without taking his eyes off the candle.

"Yes; it was as we were coming home together," he said.

Something had been swelling up in Grace while her father was speaking. "How could you want to quarrel with him?" she cried suddenly. "Why could you not let him come home quietly, if he were inclined to? He is my husband; and now you have married me to him surely you need not provoke him unnecessarily. First you induce me to accept him, and then you do things that divide us more than we should naturally be divided!"

"How can you speak so unjustly to me, Grace?" said Melbury, with indignant sorrow. "*I* divide you from your husband, indeed! You little think—"

He was inclined to say more—to tell her the whole story of the encounter, and that the provocation he had received had lain entirely in hearing her despised. But it would have greatly distressed her, and he forebore.

"You had better lie down. You are tired," he said soothingly. "Good-night."

The household went to bed, and a silence fell upon the dwelling, broken only by the occasional skirr of a halter in Melbury's stables. Despite her father's advice Grace still waited up. But nobody came.

It was a critical time in Grace's emotional life, that night. She thought of her husband a good deal, and for the nonce forgot Winterborne.

"How these unhappy women must have

admired Edred!" she said to herself. "How attractive he must be to everybody; and, indeed, he is attractive." The possibility is that, piqued by rivalry, these ideas might have been transmuted into their corresponding emotions by a show of the least reciprocity in Fitzpiers. There was, in truth, a love-bird yearning to fly from her heart; and it wanted a lodging badly.

But no husband came. The fact was that Melbury had been much mistaken about the condition of Fitzpiers. People do not fall headlong on stumps of underwood with impunity. Had the old man been able to watch Fitzpiers narrowly enough he would have observed that, on rising and walking into the thicket, he dropped blood as he went; that he had not proceeded fifty yards before he showed signs of being dizzy, and, raising his hands to his head, reeled and fell.

CHAPTER III.

GRACE was not the only one who watched and meditated in Hintock that night. Felice Charmond was in no mood to retire to rest at a customary hour; and over her drawing-room fire at the manor-house she sat as motionless and in as deep a reverie as Grace in her little chamber at the homestead.

Having caught ear of Melbury's intelligence while she had stood on the landing at his house, and been eased of much of her mental distress, her sense of personal decorum had returned upon her with a

rush. She descended the stairs and left the door like a ghost, keeping close to the walls of the building till she got round to the gate of the quadrangle, through which she noiselessly passed almost before Grace and her father had finished their discourse. Suke Damson had thought it well to imitate her superior in this respect, and, descending the back stairs as Felice descended the front, went out at the side door and home to her cottage.

Once outside Melbury's gates Mrs. Charmond ran with all her speed to the manor-house, without stopping or turning her head. She entered her own dwelling as she had emerged from it—by the drawing-room window. Everything was just as she had left it: she had been gone about three-quarters of an hour by the clock, and nobody seemed to have discovered her absence. Tired in body but tense in mind

she sat down, palpitating, round-eyed, bewildered at what she had done.

She had been betrayed by affrighted love into a visit which, now that the emotion instigating it had calmed down under her belief that Fitzpiers was in no danger, was the saddest surprise to her. This was how she had set about doing her best to escape her passionate bondage to him! Somehow, in declaring to Grace and to herself the unseemliness of her infatuation, she had grown a convert to its irresistibility.

If Heaven would only give her strength; but Heaven never did! One thing was indispensable: she must go away from Hintock if she meant to withstand further temptation. The struggle was too wearying, too hopeless, while she remained. It was but a continual capitulation of conscience to what she dared not name.

By degrees, as she sat on and on, Felice's

mind—helped perhaps by the anti-climax of supposing that her lover was unharmed after all her fright about him—grew wondrously strong in wise resolve. For the moment she was in a mood, in the words of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, "to run mad with discretion"; and was so persuaded that discretion lay in departure that she wished to set about going that very minute. Jumping up from her seat she began to gather together some small personal knick-knacks scattered about the room, to feel that preparations were really in train.

While moving here and there she fancied that she heard a slight noise out of doors, and stood still. Surely it was a tapping at the window. A thought entered her mind, and burnt her cheek. He had come to that window before; yet was it possible that he should dare to do so now! All the servants were in bed, and in the ordinary

course of affairs she would have retired also. Then she remembered that on stepping in by the casement and closing it, she had not fastened the window-shutter, so that a streak of light from the interior of the room might have revealed her vigil to an observer on the lawn. How all things conspired against her keeping faith with Grace!

The tapping recommenced, light as from the bill of a little bird: her illegitimate hope overcame her discretion: she went and pulled back the shutter, determining however to shake her head at him, and keep the casement securely closed.

What she saw outside might have struck terror into a heart stouter than a helpless woman's at midnight. In the centre of the lowest pane of the window, close to the glass, was a human face, which she barely recognised as the face of Fitzpiers. It was

surrounded with the darkness of the night without, corpse-like in its pallor, and covered with blood. As disclosed in the square area of the pane it met her frightened eyes like a replica of the Sudarium of St. Veronica.

He moved his lips, and looked at her imploringly. Her rapid mind pieced together in an instant a possible concatenation of events which might have led to this tragical issue. She unlatched the casement with a terrified hand, and bending down to where he was crouching pressed her face to his with passionate solicitude. She assisted him into the room without a word, to do which it was almost necessary to lift him bodily.

Quickly closing the window and fastening the shutters she bent over him breathlessly.

"Are you hurt much, much?" she cried faintly. "Oh, oh, how is this!"

"Rather much—but don't be frightened,"

he answered in a difficult whisper, and turning himself to obtain an easier position if possible. "A little water, please."

She ran across into the dining-room, and brought a bottle and glass, from which he eagerly drank. He could then speak much better, and with her help got upon the nearest couch.

"Are you dying, Edred?" she said. "Do speak to me!"

"I am half dead," said Fitzpiers. "But perhaps I shall get over it. . . . It is chiefly loss of blood."

"But I thought your fall did not hurt you?" said she. "Who did this?"

"Felice—my father-in-law! . . . I have crawled to you more than a mile on my hands and knees—God, I thought I should never have got here! . . . I have come to you—because you are the only friend—I have in the world now. . . . I can never

go back to Hintock—never—to the roof of the Melburys! Not poppy nor mandragora will ever medicine this bitter feud! . . . If I were only well again—"

"Let me bind your head, now that you have rested."

"Yes—but wait a moment—it has stopped bleeding, fortunately, or I should be a dead man before now. While in the wood I managed to make a tourniquet of some halfpence and my handkerchief, as well as I could in the dark. . . . But listen, dear Felice! Can you hide me till I am well? Whatever comes, I can be seen in Hintock no more. My practice is nearly gone you know—and after this I would not care to recover it if I could."

By this time Felice's tears began to blind her. Where were now her discreet plans for sundering their lives for ever? To administer to him in his pain, and trouble,

and poverty, was her single thought. The first step was to hide him, and she asked herself where. A place occurred to her mind.

She got him some wine from the dining-room, which strengthened him much. Then she managed to remove his boots, and, as he could now keep himself upright by leaning upon her on one side and a walking-stick on the other, they went thus in slow march out of the room and up the stairs. At the top she took him along a gallery, pausing whenever he required rest, and thence up a smaller staircase to the least used part of the house, where she unlocked a door. Within was a lumber-room, containing abandoned furniture of all descriptions, built up in piles which obscured the light of the windows, and formed between them nooks and lairs in which a person would not be discerned even should an eye

gaze in at the door. The articles were mainly those that had belonged to the previous owner of the house, and had been bought in by the late Mr. Charmond at the auction; but changing fashion, and the tastes of a young wife, had caused them to be relegated to this dungeon.

Here Fitzpiers sat on the floor against the wall till she had hauled out materials for a bed, which she spread on the floor in one of the aforesaid nooks. She obtained water and a basin, and washed the dried blood from his face and hands; and when he was comfortably reclining fetched food from the larder. While he ate, her eyes lingered anxiously on his face, following its every movement with such loving-kindness as only a fond woman can show.

He was now in better condition, and discussed his position with her.

"What I fancy I said to Melbury must

have been enough to enrage any man, if uttered in cold blood, and with knowledge of his presence. But I did not know him, and I was stupefied by what he had given me, so that I hardly was aware of what I said. Well—the veil of that temple is rent in twain! . . . As I am not going to be seen again in Hintock, my first efforts must be directed to allay any alarm that may be felt at my absence, before I am able to get clear away. Nobody must suspect that I have been hurt, or there will be a country talk about me. Felice, I must at once concoct a letter to check all search for me. I think if you can bring me a pen and paper I may be able to do it now. I could rest better if it were done. Poor thing! how I tire her with running up and down!"

She fetched writing materials, and held up the blotting-book as a support to his hand,

while he penned a brief note to his nominal wife.

"The animosity shown towards me by your father," he wrote in this coldest of marital epistles, "is such that I cannot return again to a roof which is his, even though it shelters you. A parting is unavoidable, as you are sure to be on his side in this division. I am starting on a journey which will take me a long way from Hintock, and you must not expect to see me there again for some time."

He then gave her a few directions bearing upon his professional engagements and other practical matters, concluding without a hint of his destination, or a notion of when she would see him again. He offered to read the note to Felice before he closed it up; but she would not hear or see it: that side of his obligations distressed her beyond endurance. She turned away from Fitzpiers, and sobbed bitterly.

"If you can get this posted at a place some miles away," he whispered, exhausted by the effort of writing, "at Shottsford, or Port-Bredy, or still better, Budmouth, it will divert all suspicion from this house as the place of my refuge."

"I will drive to one or other of the places myself—anything to keep it unknown," she murmured, her voice weighted with vague foreboding, now that the excitement of helping him had passed away.

Fitzpiers told her that there was yet one thing more to be done. "In creeping over the fence on to the lawn," he said, "I made the rail bloody, and it shows rather too plainly on the white paint—I could see it in the dark. At all hazards it should be washed off. Could you do that also, Felice?"

What will not women do on such devoted occasions? Weary as she was she went—all the way down the rambling staircases to

the ground floor, then to search for a lantern, which she lighted and hid under her cloak; then for a wet sponge, and next forth into the night. The white railing stared out in the darkness at her approach, and a ray from the enshrouded lantern fell upon the blood—just where he had told her it would be found. She shuddered. It was almost too much to bear in one day; but with a shaking hand she sponged the rail clean, and returned to the house.

The time occupied by these several proceedings was not much less than two hours. When all was done, and she had smoothed his extemporised bed, and placed everything within his reach that she could think of, she took her leave of him, and locked him in.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN her husband's letter reached Grace's hands, bearing upon it the postmark of a distant town, it never once crossed her mind that Fitzpiers was within a mile of her still. She felt relieved that he did not write more bitterly of the quarrel with her father, whatever its nature might have been; but the general frigidity of his communication quenched in her the incipient spark that events had kindled so shortly before.

From this centre of information it was made known in Hintock that the doctor had gone away, and as none but the Mel-

bury household was aware that he did not return on the night of his accident, no excitement manifested itself in the village.

Thus the early days of May passed by. None but the nocturnal birds and animals observed that late one evening, towards the middle of the month, a closely wrapped figure, with a crutch under one arm and a stick in his hand, crept out from Hintock House across the lawn to the shelter of the trees, taking thence a slow and laborious walk to the nearest point of the turnpike road.

The mysterious personage was so disguised that his own wife would hardly have known him. Felice Charmond was a practised hand at such work, as well she might be; and she had done her utmost in padding and painting Fitzpiers with the old materials of her art in the recesses of that lumber-room.

In the highway he was met by a covered carriage, which conveyed him to Sherton Abbas, whence he proceeded to the nearest port on the south coast, and immediately crossed the Channel.

But it was known to everybody that three days after this time Mrs. Charmond executed her often-deferred plan of setting out for a long term of travel and residence on the Continent. She went off one morning as unostentatiously as could be, and took no maid with her, having, she said, engaged one to meet her at a point further on in her route. After that, Hintock House, so frequently deserted, was again to be let. Spring had not merged in summer when a clinching rumour, founded on the best of evidence, reached the parish and neighbourhood. Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers had been seen together in Baden, in relations which set at rest the question that had

agitated the little community ever since the winter.

Melbury had entered the Valley of Humiliation even further than Grace. His spirit seemed broken.

But once a week he mechanically went to market as usual, and here, as he was passing by the conduit one day, his mental condition expressed largely by his gait, he heard his name spoken by a voice formerly familiar. He turned and saw a certain Fred Beaucock—once a promising lawyer's clerk and local dandy, who had been called the cleverest fellow in Sherton, without whose brains the firm of solicitors employing him would be nowhere. But later on Beaucock had fallen into the mire. He was invited out a good deal, sang songs at agricultural meetings and burgesses' dinners: in sum, victualled himself with spirits more frequently than was good for the clever brains

or body either. He lost his situation, and after an absence spent in trying his powers elsewhere came back to his native town, where, at the time of the foregoing events in Hintock, he gave legal advice for astonishingly small fees—mostly carrying on his profession on public-house settles, in whose recesses he might often have been overheard making country-people's wills for half-a-crown, calling with a learned voice for pen and ink and a halfpenny sheet of paper, on which he drew up the testament, while resting it in a little space wiped with his hand on the table amid the liquid circles formed by the cups and glasses. An idea implanted early in life is difficult to uproot, and many elderly tradespeople still clung to the notion that Fred Beaucock knew a great deal of law.

It was he who had called Melbury by name.

"You look very down, Mr. Melbury—very, if I may say as much," he observed, when the timber-merchant turned. "But I know—I know. A very sad case—very. I was bred to the law, as you know, and am professionally no stranger to such matters. Well, Mrs. Fitzpiers has her remedy."

"How—what—a remedy?" said Melbury.

"Under the new law, sir. A new court was established last year, and under the new statute, twenty and twenty-one Vic., cap. eighty-five, unmarrying is as easy as marrying. No more Acts of Parliament necessary: no longer one law for the rich and another for the poor. But come inside—I was just going to have a nibleykin of rum hot—I'll explain it all to you."

The intelligence amazed Melbury, who saw little of newspapers. And though he was a severely correct man in his habits, and had no taste for entering a tavern with

Fred Beaucock—nay, would have been quite uninfluenced by such a character on any other matter in the world—such fascination lay in the idea of delivering his poor girl from bondage, that it deprived him of the critical faculty. He could not resist the ex-lawyer's clerk, and entered the inn.

Here they sat down to the rum, which Melbury paid for as a matter of course, Beaucock leaning back on the settle with a legal gravity which would hardly allow him to be conscious of the spirits before him; though they nevertheless disappeared with mysterious quickness.

How much of the exaggerated information on the then new divorce laws which Beaucock imparted to his listener was the result of ignorance, and how much of dupery, was never ascertained. But he related such a plausible story of the ease with which Grace could become a free woman that her

father was irradiated with the project; and, though he scarcely wetted his lips, Melbury never knew how he came out of the inn, or when or where he mounted his gig to pursue his way homeward.

But home he found himself, his brain having all the way seemed to ring sonorously as a gong in the intensity of its stir. Before he had seen Grace, he was accidentally met by Winterborne, who found his face shining as if he had, like the Lawgiver, conversed with an angel.

He relinquished his horse, and took Winterborne by the arm to a heap of rendle-wood—as barked oak was here called—which lay under a privet hedge.

"Giles," he said, when they had sat down upon the logs, "there's a new law in the land! Grace can be free quite easily. I only knew it by the merest accident. I might not have found it out for the next

ten years. She can get rid of him—d'ye hear—get rid of him. Think of that, my friend Giles!"

He related what he had learnt of the new legal remedy. A subdued tremulousness about the mouth was all the response that Winterborne made; and Melbury added, "My boy, you shall have her yet—if you want her." His feelings had gathered volume as he said this, and the articulate sound of the old idea drowned his sight in mist.

"Are you sure—about this new law?" asked Winterborne, so disquieted by a gigantic exultation which loomed alternately with fearful doubt, that he evaded the full acceptance of Melbury's last statement.

Melbury said that he had no manner of doubt, for since his talk with Beaucock it had come into his mind that he had seen some time ago in the weekly paper an

allusion to such a legal change ; but, having no interest in those desperate remedies at the moment, he had passed it over.

" But I'm not going to let the matter rest doubtful for a single day," he continued. " I am going to London. Beaucock will go with me, and we shall get the best advice as soon as we possibly can. Beaucock is a thorough lawyer—nothing the matter with him but a fiery palate. I knew him as the stay and refuge of Sherton in knots of law at one time."

Winterborne's replies were of the vaguest. The new possibility was almost unthinkable at the moment. He was what was called at Hintock " a solid-going fellow " ; he maintained his abeyant mood, not from want of reciprocity, but from a taciturn hesitancy, taught by life as he knew it.

" But," continued the timber-merchant, a temporary crease or two of anxiety supple-

menting those already established in his forehead by time, "Grace is not at all well. Nothing constitutional, you know; but she has been in a low nervous state ever since that night of fright. I don't doubt but that she will be all right soon. . . . I wonder how she is this evening?" He rose with the words, as if he had too long forgotten her personality in the excitement of her previsioned career.

They had sat till the evening was beginning to dye the garden brown, and now went towards Melbury's house, Giles a few steps in the rear of his old friend, who was stimulated by the enthusiasm of the moment to outstep the more ordinary pace of Winterborne. He felt shy of entering Grace's presence as her reconstituted lover—which was how her father's manner would be sure to present him—before definite information as to her future state was forth-

coming: it seemed too nearly like the act of those who rush in where angels fear to tread.

A chill to counterbalance all the glowing promise of the day was prompt enough in coming. No sooner had he followed the timber-merchant in at the door than he heard Grammer inform him that Mrs. Fitzpiers was still more unwell than she had been in the morning. Old Dr. Jones being in the neighbourhood they had called him in, and he had instantly directed them to get her to bed. They were not, however, to consider her illness serious—a feverish, nervous attack, the result of recent events, was what she was suffering from—and she would doubtless be well in a few days.

Winterborne therefore did not remain, and his hope of seeing her that evening was disappointed.

Even this aggravation of her morning

condition did not greatly depress Melbury. He knew, he said, that his daughter's constitution was sound enough. It was only these domestic troubles that were pulling her down. Once free she would be blooming again. Melbury diagnosed rightly, as parents usually do.

He set out for London the next morning, Jones having paid another visit and assured him that he might leave home without uneasiness, especially on an errand of that sort, which would the sooner put an end to her suspense.

The timber-merchant had been away only a day or two when it was told in Hintock that Mr. Fitzpiers's hat had been found in the wood. Later on in the afternoon the hat was brought to Melbury's, and, by a piece of ill-fortune, into Grace's presence. It had doubtless lain in the wood ever since his fall from the horse; but it

looked so clean and uninjured—the summer weather and leafy shelter having much favoured its preservation—that Grace could not believe it had remained so long concealed. A very little fact was enough to set her fevered fancy at work at this juncture—she thought him still in the neighbourhood, she feared his sudden appearance; and her nervous malady developed consequences so grave that Dr. Jones began to look serious, and the household was alarmed.

It was the beginning of June, and the cuckoo at this time of the summer scarcely ceased his cry for more than two or three hours during the night. The bird's note, so familiar to her ears from infancy, was now absolute torture to the poor girl. On the Friday following the Wednesday of Melbury's departure, and the day after the discovery of Fitzpiers's hat, the cuckoo began

at two o'clock in the morning with a sudden cry from one of Melbury's apple-trees, not three yards from the window of Grace's room.

"Oh—he is coming!" she cried, and in her terror sprang clean out from the bed upon the floor.

These starts and frights continued till noon; and when the doctor had arrived and had seen her, and had talked with Mrs. Melbury, he sat down and meditated. That ever-present terror it was indispensable to remove from her mind at all hazards; and he thought how this might be done.

Without saying a word to anybody in the house, or to the disquieted Winterborne waiting in the lane below, Dr. Jones went home and wrote to Mr. Melbury at the address in London he had obtained from his wife. The gist of his communication was that Mrs. Fitzpiers should be assured

as soon as possible that steps were taken to sever the bond which was becoming a torture to her; that she would soon be free; and was even then virtually so. "If you can say it *at once* it may be the means of averting much harm," he said. "Write to herself; not to me."

On Saturday he drove over to Hintock, and assured her with mysterious pacifications that in a day or two she might expect to receive some good news.

So it turned out. When Sunday morning came there was a letter for Grace from her father. It arrived at seven o'clock, the usual time at which the toddling postman passed by Hintock: at eight Grace awoke, having slept an hour or two for a wonder, and Mrs. Melbury brought up the letter.

"Can you open it yourself?" said she.

"Oh, yes, yes!" said Grace with feeble impatience. She tore the envelope, un-

folded the sheet, and read; when a creeping blush tinctured her white neck and cheek.

Her father had exercised a bold discretion. He informed her that she need have no further concern about Fitzpiers's return; that she would shortly be a free woman; and therefore if she should desire to wed her old lover—which he trusted was the case, since it was his own deep wish—she would be in a position to do so. In this Melbury had not written beyond his belief. But he very much stretched the facts in adding that the legal formalities for dissolving her union were practically settled.

The truth was that on the arrival of the doctor's letter poor Melbury had been much agitated, and could with difficulty be prevented by Beaucock from returning to her bedside. What was the use of his rushing back to Hintock? Beaucock had asked him. The only thing that could do her any good

was a breaking of the bond. Though he had not as yet had an interview with the eminent solicitor they were about to consult, he was on the point of seeing him; and the case was clear enough. Thus the simple Melbury, urged by his parental alarm at her danger, by the representations of his companion, and by the doctor's letter, had yielded, and sat down to tell her roundly that she was virtually free.

"And you'd better write also to the gentleman," suggested Beaucock, who, scenting fame and the germ of a large practice in the case, wished to commit Melbury to it irretrievably: to effect which he knew that nothing would be so potent as awakening the passion of Grace for Winterborne, so that her father might not have the heart to withdraw from his attempt to make her love legitimate when he discovered that there were difficulties in the way.

The nervous, impatient Melbury was much pleased with the idea of "starting them at once," as he called it. To put his long-delayed reparative scheme in train had become a passion with him now. He added to the letter addressed to his daughter a passage hinting that she ought to begin to encourage Winterborne, lest she should lose him altogether; and he wrote to Giles that the path was virtually open for him at last. Life was short, he declared; he, her father, was getting old; there were slips betwixt the cup and the lip; her interest in him should be reawakened at once, that all might be ready when the good time came for uniting them.

CHAPTER V.

At these warm words Winterborne was much moved. The novelty of the avowal rendered what it carried with it inapprehensible by him all at once. Only a few short months ago completely estranged from this family—beholding Grace going to and fro in the distance, clothed with the alienating radiance of obvious superiority, the wife of the then popular and fashionable Fitzpiers, hopelessly outside his social boundary down to so recent a time that flowers then folded were hardly faded yet—he was now asked by that jealously-guarding father of hers to

take courage; to get himself ready for the day when he should be able to claim her.

The old times came back to him in dim procession. How he had been snubbed: how Melbury had despised his Christmas party: how that sweet, coy Grace herself had looked down upon him and his household arrangements, and poor Creedle's contrivances!

Well, he could not believe it. Surely the adamantine barrier of marriage with another could not be pierced like this! It did violence to custom. Yet a new law might do anything. But was it at all within the bounds of probability that a woman who, over and above her own attainments, had been accustomed to those of a cultivated professional man, could ever be the wife of such as he? Since the date of his rejection he had almost grown to see the reasonableness of that treatment. He had said to

himself again and again that her father was right: that the ceorl, Giles Winterborne, would never have been able to make such a dainty girl happy. Yet now that she had stood in a position further removed from his own than at first, he was asked to prepare to woo her. He was full of doubt.

Nevertheless, it was not in him to show backwardness. To act so promptly as Melbury desired him to act seemed, indeed, scarcely wise, because of the uncertainty of events. Giles knew nothing of legal procedure; but he did know that for him to step up to Grace as a lover before the bond which bound her was actually dissolved was simply an extravagant dream of her father's overstrained mind. He pitied Melbury for his almost childish enthusiasm, and saw that the ageing man must have suffered acutely to be weakened to this unreasoning desire.

Winterborne was far too magnanimous to

harbour any cynical conjecture that the timber-merchant, in his intense affection for Grace, was courting him now because that young lady, when disunited, would be left in an anomalous position, to escape which a bad husband was better than none. He felt quite sure that his old friend was simply on tenterhooks of anxiety to repair the almost irreparable error of dividing two whom nature had striven to join together in earlier days, and that in his ardour to do this he was oblivious of formalities. The cautious supervision of his past years had overleapt itself at last. Hence Winterborne perceived that, in this new beginning, the necessary care not to compromise Grace by too early advances must be exercised by himself.

There is no such thing as a stationary love: men are either loving more or loving less; but Giles recognised no decline in his

sense of her dearness. He had been labouring ever since his rejection and her marriage to reduce his former passion to a docile friendship, out of pure regard to its expediency ; but hitherto he had experienced no great success in his attempt.

A week and more passed, and there was no further news of Melbury. But the effect of the intelligence he had already transmitted upon the elastic-nerved daughter of the woods had been much as the old surgeon Jones had surmised. It had soothed her perturbed spirit better than all the opiates in the pharmacopœia. She had slept unbrokenly a whole night and a day. The "new law" was to her a mysterious, beneficent, god-like entity, lately descended upon earth, that would make her as she once had been without trouble or annoyance. Her position fretted her, its abstract features rousing an aversion which was greater than her aversion to the

personality of him who had caused it. It was mortifying, productive of slights, undignified. Him she could forget: her circumstances she had always with her.

She saw nothing of Winterborne during the days of her recovery; and perhaps on that account her fancy wove about him a more romantic tissue than it could have done if he had stood before her with all the specks and flaws inseparable from concrete humanity. He rose upon her memory as the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation: sometimes leafy and smeared with green lichen, as she had seen him amongst the sappy boughs of the plantations: sometimes cider-stained and starred with apple-pips, as she had met him on his return from cider-making in White-Hart Vale, with his vats and presses beside him. In her secret heart she approximated to her father's enthusiasm in wishing to show Giles once for all how she still regarded him.

The question whether the future would indeed bring them together for life was a standing wonder with her. She knew that it could not with any propriety do so just yet. But reverently believing in her father's sound judgment and knowledge, as good girls are wont to do, she remembered what he had written about her giving a hint to Winterborne lest there should be risk in delay, and her feelings were not averse to such a step, so far as it could be done without danger at this early stage of the proceedings.

From being a frail phantom of her former equable self she returned in bounds to a condition of passable philosophy. She bloomed again in the face in the course of a few days, and was well enough to go about as usual.

One day Mrs. Melbury proposed that for a change she should be driven in the gig to Sherton market, whither Melbury's man was

going on other errands. Grace had no business whatever in Sherton ; but it crossed her mind that Winterborne would probably be there, and this made the thought of such a drive interesting.

On the way she saw nothing of him ; but when the horse was walking slowly through the obstructions of Sheep Street, she discerned the young man on the pavement. She thought of that time when he had been standing under his apple-tree on her return from school, and of the tender opportunity then missed through her fastidiousness. Her heart rose in her throat. She abjured all such fastidiousness now. Nor did she forget the last occasion on which she had beheld him in that town, making cider in the courtyard of the Earl of Wessex Hotel, while she was figuring as a fine lady in the balcony above.

Grace directed the man to set her down

there in the midst, and immediately went up to her lover. Giles had not before observed her, and his eyes now suppressedly looked his pleasure, without, perhaps, quite so much embarrassment as had formerly marked him at such meetings.

When a few words had been spoken, she said invitingly, "I have nothing to do. Perhaps you are deeply engaged?"

"I? Not a bit. My business now at the best of times is small, I am sorry to say."

"Well, then—I am going into the Abbey. Come along with me."

The proposition had suggested itself as a quick escape from publicity, for many eyes were regarding her. She had hoped that sufficient time had elapsed for the extinction of curiosity; but it was quite otherwise. The people looked at her with tender interest as the deserted girl-wife—without obtrusiveness,

and without vulgarity; but she was ill-prepared for scrutiny in any shape.

They walked about the Abbey aisles, and presently sat down. Not a soul was in the building save themselves. She regarded a stained window, with her head sideways, and tentatively asked him if he remembered the last time they were in that town alone.

He remembered it perfectly, and remarked, "You were a proud damsel then, and as dainty as you were high. Perhaps you are now?"

Grace slowly shook her head. "Affliction has taken all that out of me," she answered impressively. "Perhaps I am too far the other way now." As there was something lurking in this that she could not explain, she added so quickly as not to allow him time to think of it, "Has my father written to you at all?"

"Yes," said Winterborne.

She glanced ponderingly up at him. "Not about me?"

"Yes."

She saw that he had been bidden to take the hint as to the future which she had been bidden to give, and the discovery sent a scarlet pulsation through her for the moment. However it was only Giles who stood there, of whom she had no fear; and her self-possession returned.

"He said I was to sound you with a view to—what you will understand, if you care to," continued Winterborne in a low voice. Having been put on this track by herself, he was not disposed to abandon it in a hurry.

They had been children together, and there was between them that familiarity as to personal affairs which only such acquaintance-ship can give. "You know, Giles," she answered, speaking in a very practical tone,

"that that is all very well; but I am in a very anomalous position at present, and I cannot say anything to the point about such things as those."

"No?" he said, with a stray air as regarded the subject. He was looking at her with a curious consciousness of discovery.

He had not been imagining that their renewed intercourse would show her to him thus. For the first time he realised an unexpectedness in her, which after all should not have been unexpected. She before him was not the girl, Grace Melbury, whom he had used to know. Of course, he might easily have prefigured as much; but it had never occurred to him. She was a woman who had been married; she had moved on; and without having lost her girlish modesty, she had lost her girlish shyness. The inevitable change, though known to him, had not been heeded; and it struck him into a

momentary fixity. The truth was that he had never come into close comradeship with her since her engagement to Fitzpiers, with the brief exception of the evening encounter on Rubdon Hill, when she met him with his cider apparatus ; and that interview had been of too cursory a kind for insight.

Winterborne had advanced, too. Shy though he was, he could criticise her somewhat. Times had been when to criticise a single trait in Grace Melbury would have lain as far beyond his powers as to criticise a deity. And this thing was sure as a result of his criticism : it was a new woman in many ways whom he had come out to see : a creature of more ideas, more dignity, and, above all, more assurance, than the original Grace had been capable of. He could not at first decide whether he were pleased or displeased at this. But upon the whole the novelty attracted him.

She was so sweet and sensitive that she feared his silence betokened something in his brain of the nature of an enemy to her.

"What are you thinking of that makes those lines come in your forehead?" she asked. "I did not mean to offend you by speaking of the time being premature as yet."

Touched by the genuine loving-kindness which had lain at the foundation of these words, and much moved, Winterborne turned his face aside, as he took her by the hand. He was grieved that he had criticised her.

"You are very good, dear Grace," he said in a low voice. "You are better, much better, than you used to be."

"How?"

He could not very well tell her how, and said with an evasive smile, "You are

prettier;" which was not what he really had meant. He then remained still holding her right hand in his own right, so that they faced in opposite ways; and, as he did not let go, she ventured upon a tender remonstrance.

"I think we have gone as far as we ought to go at present—and far enough to satisfy my poor father that we are the same as ever. You see, Giles, my case is not settled yet, and if—Oh, suppose I *never* get free!—there should be any hitch or informality!"

She drew a catching breath, and turned pale. The dialogue had been affectionate comedy up to this point. The gloomy atmosphere of the past, and the still gloomy horizon of the present, had been for the interval forgotten. Now, the whole environment came back; the due balance of shade among the light was restored.

"It is sure to be all right, I trust," she resumed in uneasy accents. "What did my father say the solicitor had told him?"

"Oh—that all is sure enough. The case is so clear—nothing could be clearer. But the legal part is not yet quite done and finished, as is natural."

"Oh, no,—of course not," she said, sunk in meek thought. "But father said it was *almost*—did he not? Do you know anything about the new law that makes these things so easy?"

"Nothing—except the general fact that it enables ill-assorted husbands and wives to part in a way they could not formerly do without an Act of Parliament."

"Have you to sign a paper, or swear anything? Is it something like that?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"How long has it been introduced?"

"About six months or a year, the lawyer said, I think."

To hear these two poor Arcadian innocents talk of imperial law would have made a humane person weep who should have known what a dangerous structure they were building up on their supposed knowledge. They remained in thought, like children in the presence of the incomprehensible.

"Giles," she said at last, "it makes me quite weary when I think how serious my situation is, or has been. Shall we not go out from here now, as it may seem rather fast of me—our being so long together, I mean—if anybody were to see us? I am almost sure," she added uncertainly, "that I ought not to let you hold my hand yet, knowing that the documents—or whatever it may be—have not been signed; so that I—am still as married as ever—or almost. My dear father has forgotten himself. Not

that I feel morally bound to any one else, after what has taken place—no woman of spirit could—now, too, that several months have passed. But I wish to keep the proprieties as well as I can."

"Yes, yes. Still, your father reminds me that life is short. I myself feel that it is; that is why I wished to understand you in this that we have begun. At times, dear Grace, since receiving your father's letter, I am as uneasy and fearful as a child at what he said. If one of us were to die before the formal signing and sealing that is to release you have been done—if we should drop out of the world and never have made the most of this little, short, but real opportunity, I should think to myself as I sank down dying, 'Would to my God that I had spoken out my whole heart—given her one poor little kiss when I had the chance to give it! But I never did,

although she had promised to be mine some day; and now I never can.' That's what I should think."

She had begun by watching the words from his lips with a mournful regard, as though their passage were visible; but as he went on she dropped her glance.

"Yes," she said, "I have thought that, too. And, because I have thought it, I by no means meant, in speaking of the proprieties, to be reserved and cold to you who loved me so long ago, or to hurt your heart as I used to do at that thoughtless time. Oh, not at all, indeed! But—ought I to allow you—Oh, it is too quick—surely!" Her eyes filled with tears of bewildered, alarmed emotion.

Winterborne was too straightforward to influence her further against her better judgment. "Yes—I suppose it is," he said repentantly. "I'll wait till all is settled.

What has your father said in his letters to you?"

He meant about his progress with the petition; but she, mistaking him, frankly spoke of the personal part. "He says—what I have implied. Should I tell more plainly?"

"Oh, no—don't, if it is a secret."

"Not at all. I will tell every word, straight out, Giles, if you wish. He says I am to encourage you. There. But I cannot obey him further to-day. Come, let us go now." She gently slid her hand from his, and went in front of him out of the Abbey.

"I was thinking of getting some dinner," said Winterborne, changing to the prosaic as they walked. "And you, too, must require something. Do let me take you to a place I know."

Grace was almost without a friend in the

world outside her father's house: her life with Fitzpiers had brought her no society; had sometimes, indeed, brought her deeper solitude than any she had ever known before. Hence it was a treat to her to find herself again the object of thoughtful care. But she questioned if to go publicly to dine alone with Giles Winterborne were not a proposal due rather to his unsophistication than to his prudence. She said gently, that she would much prefer his ordering her lunch at some place, and then coming to tell her it was ready, while she remained in the Abbey porch. Giles saw her secret reasoning, thought how hopelessly blind to propriety he was beside her, and went to do as she wished.

He was not absent more than ten minutes, and found Grace where he had left her.

"It will be quite ready by the time you get there," he said, and told her the name

of the inn at which the meal had been ordered, which was one that she had never heard of.

"I'll find it by inquiry," said Grace, setting out.

"And shall I see you again?"

"Oh, yes—come to me there. It will not be like going together. I shall want you to find my father's man and the gig for me."

He waited on some ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, till he thought her lunch ended, and that he might fairly take advantage of her invitation to start her on her way home. He went straight to The Three Tuns—a little tavern in a side street, scrupulously clean, but humble and inexpensive. On his way he had an occasional misgiving as to whether the place had been elegant enough for her; and as soon as he entered it, and saw her ensconced there, he perceived that he had blundered.

Grace was seated in the only dining-room that the simple old hostelry could boast of, which was also a general parlour on market days: a long, low apartment, with a sanded floor herring-boned with a broom: a wide, red-curtained window to the street, and another to the garden. Grace had retreated to the end of the room looking out upon the latter, the front part being full of a mixed company of dairymen and butchers which had, to be just to him, dropped in since he was there.

She was in a mood of the greatest depression. On arriving, and seeing what the tavern was like, she had been taken by surprise; but having gone too far to retreat, she had heroically entered and sat down on the well-scrubbed settle, opposite the narrow table, with its knives and steel forks, tin pepper-boxes, blue salt-cellars, and posters advertising the sale of bullocks

against the wall. The last time that she had taken any meal in a public place it had been with Fitzpiers at the dignified Earl of Wessex Hotel in that town, after a two months' roaming and sojourning at the gigantic hotels of the Continent.

How could she have expected any other kind of accommodation in present circumstances than such as Giles had provided? And yet how unprepared she was for this change! The tastes that she had acquired from Fitzpiers had been imbibed so subtly that she hardly knew she possessed them till confronted by this contrast. The elegant Fitzpiers, in fact, at that very moment owed a long bill at the above-mentioned hotel for the luxurious style in which he used to put her up there whenever they drove to Sherton. But such is social sentiment, that she had been quite comfortable under those debt-impending conditions,

whilst she felt humiliated by her present situation, which Winterborne had paid for honestly on the nail.

He had noticed in a moment that she shrank from her position, and all his pleasure was gone. It was the same susceptibility over again which had spoiled his Christmas party long ago.

But he did not know that this recrudescence was only the casual result of Grace's apprenticeship to what she was determined to learn it spite of it—a consequence of one of those sudden surprises which confront everybody bent upon turning over a new leaf. She had finished her lunch, which he saw had been a very mincing performance; and he brought her out of the house as soon as he could.

"Now," he said, with great sad eyes, "you have not finished at all well, I know! Come round to the Earl of Wessex. I'll

order a tea there. I did not remember that what was good enough for me was not good enough for you."

Her face faded into an aspect of deep distress when she saw what had happened. "Oh, no, Giles," she said with extreme earnestness: "certainly not. Why do you —say that, when you know better? You *ever* will misunderstand me."

"Indeed, that's not so, Mrs. Fitzpiers. Can you deny that you felt out of place at The Three Tuns?"

"I don't know! . . . Well, since you make me speak, I do not deny it."

"And yet I have felt at home there these twenty years. Your husband used always to take you to the Earl of Wessex, did he not?"

"Yes," she reluctantly admitted. How could she explain in the street of a market-town that it was her superficial and transitory

taste which had been offended, and not her nature or her affection ?

Fortunately, or unfortunately, at that moment they saw Melbury's man driving vacantly along the street in search of her, the hour having passed at which he had been told to take her up. Winterborne hailed him, and she was powerless then to prolong the discourse. She entered the vehicle sadly, and the horse trotted away.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL night did Winterborne think over that unsatisfactory ending of a pleasant time, forgetting the pleasant time itself. He feared anew that they could never be happy together, even should she be free to choose him. She was accomplished: he was unrefined. It was the original difficulty, which he was too sensitive to recklessly ignore, as some men would have done in his place.

He was one of those silent, unobtrusive beings who want little from others in the way of favour or condescension, and perhaps

on that very account scrutinise those others' behaviour too closely. He was not versatile, but one in whom a hope or belief which had once had its rise, meridian, and decline, seldom again exactly recurred, as in the breasts of more sanguine mortals. He had once worshipped her, laid out his life to suit her, wooed her, and lost her. Though it was with almost the same zest, it was with not quite the same hope, that he had begun to tread the old tracks again, and had allowed himself to be so charmed with her that day.

Move another step towards her he would not. He would even repulse her—as a tribute to conscience. It would be sheer sin to let her prepare a pitfall for her happiness not much smaller than the first by inveigling her into a union with such as he. Her poor father was now blind to these subtleties, which he had formerly

beheld as in noontide light. It was his own duty to declare them — for her dear sake.

Grace, too, had a very uncomfortable night, and her solicitous embarrassment was not lessened the next morning when another letter from her father was put into her hands. Its tenour was an intenser strain of the one that had preceded it.

After stating how extremely glad he was to hear that she was better, and able to get out of doors, he went on:

"This is a wearisome business, the solicitor we have come to see being out of town. I do not know when I shall get home. My great anxiety in this delay is still lest you should lose Giles Winterborne. I cannot rest at night for thinking that while our business is hanging fire he may become estranged, or in his shyness go away from the neighbourhood. I have set my heart upon seeing him your husband, if you ever have another. Do then, Grace, give him some temporary encouragement, even though it is over-early. For when I consider the past I do think God will forgive me and you for being a little forward. I have another reason for this,

my dear. I feel myself going rapidly down hill, and late affairs have still further helped me that way. And until this thing is done I cannot rest in peace."

He added a postscript :

"I have just heard that the solicitor is to be seen to-morrow. Possibly, therefore, I shall return in the evening after you get this.

The paternal longing ran on all fours with her own desire ; and yet in forwarding it yesterday she had been on the brink of giving offence. While craving to be a country girl again, just as her father requested ; to put off the old Eve, the fastidious miss — or rather madam — completely, her first attempt had been beaten by the unexpected vitality of that fastidiousness. Her father on returning and seeing the trifling coolness of Giles would be sure to say that the same perversity which had led her to make difficulties about marrying

Fitzpiers was now prompting her to blow hot and cold with poor Winterborne.

If the latter had been the most subtle hand at touching the stops of her delicate soul instead of one who had just bound himself to let her drift away from him again (if she would) on the wind of her estranging education, he could not have acted more seductively than he did that day. He chanced to be superintending some temporary work in a field opposite her windows. She could not discover what he was doing, but she read his mood keenly and truly: she could see in his coming and going an air of determined abandonment of the whole landscape that lay in her direction.

Oh, how she longed to make it up with him! Her father coming in the evening —which meant, she supposed, that all formalities would be in train, her marriage

virtually annulled, and she be free to be won again — how could she look him in the face if he should see them estranged thus ?

It was a fair green afternoon in June. She was seated in the garden, in the rustic chair which stood under the laurel-bushes, made of peeled oak branches that came to Melbury's premises as refuse after barking-time. The mass of full-juiced leafage on the heights around her was just swayed into faint gestures by a nearly spent wind which, even in its enfeebled state, did not reach her shelter. All day she had expected Giles to call—to inquire how she had got home, or something or other; but he had not come. And he still tantalised her by going athwart and across that orchard opposite. She could see him as she sat.

A slight diversion was presently created by Creedle bringing him a letter. She knew

from this that Creedle had just come from Sherton, and had called as usual at the post-office for anything that had arrived by the afternoon post, of which there was no delivery at Hintock. She pondered on what the letter might contain—particularly whether it were a second refresher for Winterborne from her father, like her own of the morning.

But it appeared to have no bearing upon herself whatever. Giles read its contents; and almost immediately turned away to a gap in the hedge of the orchard—if that could be called a hedge which, owing to the drippings of the trees, was little more than a bank with a bush upon it here and there. He entered the plantation, and was no doubt going that way homeward to the mysterious hut he occupied on the other side of the woodland.

The sad sands were running swiftly

through Time's glass; she had often felt it in these latter days; and, like Giles, she felt it doubly now after the solemn and pathetic reminder in her father's communication. Her freshness would pass, the long-suffering devotion of Giles might suddenly end—might end that very hour. Men were so strange. The thought took away from her all her former reticence, and made her action bold. She started from her seat. If the little breach, quarrel, or whatever it might be called, of yesterday, was to be healed up it must be done by her on the instant, She crossed into the orchard, and clambered through the gap after Giles, just as he was diminishing to a faunlike figure under the green canopy and over the brown floor.

Grace had been wrong—very far wrong—in assuming that the letter had no reference to herself because Giles had turned away

into the wood after its perusal. It was, sad to say, because the missive had so much reference to herself that he had thus turned away. He feared that his grieved discomfiture might be observed.

The letter was from Beaucock, written a few hours later than Melbury's to his daughter. It announced failure.

Giles had once done that thriftless man a good turn, and now was the moment when Beaucock had chosen to remember it, in his own way. During his absence in town with Melbury, the lawyer's clerk had naturally heard a great deal of the timber-merchant's family scheme of justice to Giles, and his communication was to inform Winterborne at the earliest possible moment that their attempt had failed, in order that the young man should not place himself in a false position towards Grace in the belief of its coming success. The news was, in sum,

that Fitzpiers's conduct had not been sufficiently cruel to Grace to enable her to snap the bond. She was apparently doomed to be his wife till the end of the chapter.

Winterborne quite forgot his superficial differences with the poor girl under the warm rush of deep and distracting love for her which the almost tragical information engendered.

To renounce her for ever—that was then the end of it for him, after all. There was no longer any question about suitability, or room for tiffs on petty tastes. The curtain had fallen again between them. She could not be his. The cruelty of their late revived hope was now terrible. How could they all have been so simple as to suppose this thing could be done ?

It was at this moment that, hearing some one coming behind him, he turned and saw her hastening on between the thickets. He

perceived in an instant that she did not know the blighting news.

"Giles, why didn't you come across to me?" she asked with arch reproach. "Didn't you see me sitting there ever so long?"

"Oh, yes," he said in unprepared, provisional tones, for her unexpected presence caught him without the slightest plan of behaviour in the conjuncture. His manner made her think that she had been too chiding in her speech; and a mild scarlet wave passed over her as she resolved to soften it.

"I have had another letter from my father," she hastened to continue. "He thinks he may come home this evening. And—in view of his hopes—it will grieve him if there is any little difference between us, Giles."

"There is none," he said, sadly regarding

her from the face downwards as he pondered how to lay the cruel truth bare.

"Still—I fear you have not quite forgiven me about my being uncomfortable at the inn."

"I have, I'm sure."

"But you speak in quite an unhappy way," she returned, coming up quite close to him with the most winning of the many pretty airs that appertained to her. "Don't you think you will ever be happy, Giles?"

He did not reply for some instants. "When the sun shines on the north front of Sherton Abbey—that's when my happiness will come to me!" said he, staring as it were into the earth.

"But—then that means that there is something more than my offending you in not liking The Three Tuns. If it is because I—did not like to let you kiss me in the Abbey—well, you know, Giles, that it was not on account of my cold feelings, but because I

did certainly, just then, think it was rather premature, in spite of my poor father. That was the true reason—the sole one. But I do not want to be hard—God knows I do not," she said, her voice fluctuating. "And perhaps—as I am on the verge of freedom—I am not right, after all, in thinking there is any harm in your kissing me."

"Oh, Heaven!" groaned Winterborne to himself. His head was turned askance as he still resolutely regarded the ground. For the last several minutes he had seen this great temptation approaching him in regular siege; and now it had come. The wrong, the social sin, of now taking advantage of the offer of her lips, had a magnitude, in the eyes of one whose life had been so primitive, so ruled by purest household laws as Giles's, which can hardly be explained.

"Did you say anything?" she asked timidly.

"Oh, no—only that——"

"You mean that it must *be* settled, since my father is coming home?" she said gladly.

"Ah—yes."

"Then why don't you do what you want to?" She was almost pouting at his hesitation.

Winterborne, though fighting valiantly against himself all this while—though he would have protected Grace's good repute as the apple of his eye, was a man; and, as Desdemona said, men are not gods. In face of the agonising seductiveness shown by her, in her unenlightened school-girl simplicity about the laws and ordinances, he betrayed a man's weakness. Since it was so—since it had come to this, that Grace, deeming herself free to do it, was virtually asking him to demonstrate that he loved her—since he could demonstrate it only too truly—since life was short and love was strong—he gave

way to the temptation, notwithstanding that he perfectly well knew her to be wedded irrevocably to Fitzpiers. Indeed, he cared for nothing past or future, simply accepting the present and what it brought, deciding once in his life to clasp in his arms her he had watched over and loved so long.

She started back suddenly from his embrace, influenced by a sort of inspiration. "Oh, I suppose," she stammered, "that I am really free?—that this is right? Is there *really* a new law? Father cannot have been too sanguine in saying——"

He did not answer, and a moment afterwards Grace burst into tears in spite of herself. "Oh, why does not my father come home and explain!" she sobbed, "and let me know clearly what I am! It is too trying, this, to ask me to—and then to leave me so long in so vague a state that I do not know what to do, and perhaps do wrong!"

Winterborne felt like a very Cain, over and above his previous sorrow. How he had sinned against her in not telling her what he knew! He turned aside: the feeling of his cruelty mounted higher and higher. How could he have dreamt of kissing her? He could hardly refrain from tears. Surely nothing more pitiable had ever been known than the condition of this poor young thing, now as heretofore the victim of her father's well-meant but blundering policy.

Even in the hour of Melbury's greatest assurance Winterborne had harboured a suspicion that no law, new or old, could undo Grace's marriage without her appearance in public; though he was not sufficiently sure of what might have been enacted to destroy by his own words her pleasing idea that a mere dash of the pen, on her father's testimony, was going to be sufficient. But he

had never suspected the sad fact that the position was irremediable.

Poor Grace, perhaps feeling that she had indulged in too much fluster for a mere kiss, even though it had been prolonged an unconscionable time, calmed herself at finding how grave he was.

"I am glad we are friends again anyhow," she said, smiling through her tears. "Giles, if you had only shown half the boldness before I married that you show now, you would have carried me off for your own, first instead of second. If we do marry I hope you will never think badly of me for encouraging you a little, but my father is *so* impatient, you know, as his years and infirmities increase, that he will wish to see us a little advanced when he comes. That is my only excuse."

To Winterborne all this was sadder than it was sweet. How could she so trust her

father's conjectures? He did not know how to tell her the truth and shame himself. And yet he felt that it must be done.

To hasten the revelation, however, was beyond even him. What had been begun between them was repeated as they walked, and the afternoon was far advanced before he could actually set about opening her eyes.

"We may have been wrong," he began, almost fearfully, "in supposing that it can all be carried out whilst we stay here at Hintock. I am not sure but that people may have to appear in a public court even under the new Act; and if there should be any difficulty and we cannot marry after all——"

Her cheeks became slowly bloodless. "Oh, Giles," she said, grasping his arm, "you have heard something! What—cannot my father conclude it there and now? Surely, he has done it? Oh, Giles, Giles, don't deceive me. After letting you

go on like this—what terrible position am I in?"

He could not tell her, try as he would. The sense of her implicit trust in his honour absolutely disabled him. "I cannot inform you," he murmured, his voice as husky as that of the leaves under foot. "Your father will soon be here. Then we shall know. I will take you home."

Inexpressibly dear as she was to him he offered her his arm with the most reserved air, as he added correctingly, "I will take you at any rate into the drive.

Thus they walked on together, Grace vibrating between happiness and misgiving. It was only a few minutes' walk to where the drive ran, and they had hardly descended into it when they heard a voice behind them cry, "Take out that arm!"

For a moment they did not heed, and the voice repeated more loudly and hoarsely:

"Take out that arm!"

It was Melbury's. He had returned sooner than they expected and now came up to them. Grace's hand had been withdrawn like lightning on her hearing the second command.

"I don't blame you, I don't blame you," he said, in the weary cadence of one broken down with scourgings. "But you two must walk together no more — I have been surprised—I have been cruelly deceived—Giles, don't say anything to me; but go away!"

He was evidently not aware that Winterborne had known the truth before he brought it; and Giles would not stay to discuss it with him then. When the young man had gone, Melbury took his daughter indoors to the room he used as his office. There he sat down, and bent over the slope of the bureau, her bewildered gaze fixed upon him.

When Melbury had recovered a little he said, "You are now as ever Fitzpiers's wife. I was deluded. He has not done you *enough* harm. You are still subject to his beck and call."

"Then let it be, and never mind, father," she said with dignified sorrow. "I can bear it. It is your trouble that grieves me most!" She stooped over him, and put her arm round his neck, which distressed Melbury still more.

"I don't mind at all what comes to me," Grace continued; "whose wife I am, or whose I am not. I do love Giles: I cannot help that; and I have gone farther with him than I should have done if I had known exactly how things were. But I do not reproach you."

"Then Giles did not tell you?" said Melbury.

"No," said she. "He could not have

known it. His behaviour to me proved that he did not know."

Her father said nothing more, and Grace went away to the solitude of her chamber.

Her heavy disquietude had many shapes; and for a time she put aside the dominant fact to think of her too free conduct towards Giles. His love-making had been brief as it was sweet; but would he on reflection contemn her for forwardness? How could she have been so simple as to suppose she was in a position to behave as she had done! Thus she mentally blamed her ignorance; and yet in the centre of her heart she blessed it a little for what it had momentarily brought her.

CHAPTER VII.

LIFE among the people involved in these events seemed to be suppressed and hide-bound for a while. Grace seldom showed herself outside the house, never outside the garden; for she feared she might encounter Giles Winterborne; and that she could not bear.

This pensive intramural existence of the self-constituted nun appeared likely to continue for an indefinite time. She had learnt that there was one possibility in which her formerly imagined position might become real and only one; that her husband's

absence should continue long enough to amount to positive desertion. But she never allowed her mind to dwell much upon the thought; still less did she deliberately hope for such a result. Her regard for Winterborne had been rarefied by the shock which followed its avowal into an ethereal emotion that had little to do with living and doing.

As for Giles he was lying—or rather sitting—ill at his hut. A feverish indisposition which had been hanging about him for sometime, the result of a chill caught the previous winter, seemed to acquire virulence with the prostration of his hopes. But not a soul knew of his languor, and he did not think the case serious enough to send for a medical man. After a few days he was better again, and crept about his home in a great-coat, attending to his simple wants as usual with his own hands.

So matters stood when the limpid inertion of Grace's pool-like existence was disturbed as by a geyser. She received a letter from Fitzpiers.

Such a startling letter it was in its import, though couched in the gentlest language. In his absence Grace had grown to regard him with toleration, and her relation to him with equanimity, till she had almost forgotten how trying his presence would be. He wrote briefly and unaffectedly: he made no excuses, but informed her that he was living quite alone, and had been led to think that they ought to be together, if she would make up her mind to forgive him. He therefore purposed to cross the Channel to Budmouth by the steamer on a day he named, which she found to be three days after the time of her present reading.

He said that he could not come to Hintock

for obvious reasons, which her father would understand even better than herself. As the only alternative, she was to be on the quay to meet the steamer when it arrived from the opposite coast, probably about half an hour before midnight, bringing with her any luggage she might require; join him there, and pass with him into the twin vessel, which left immediately the other entered the harbour; returning thus with him to his Continental dwelling-place, which he did not name. He had no intention of showing himself on land at all.

The troubled Grace took the letter to her father, who now continued for long hours by the fireless summer chimney-corner, as if he thought it were winter, the pitcher of cider standing beside him, mostly untasted, and coated with a film of dust. After reading it he looked up.

"You sha'n't go," said he.

"I had felt I would not," she answered. "But I did not know what you would say."

"If he comes and lives in England, not too near here, and in a respectable way, and wants you to come to him, I'm not sure that I'll oppose him in wishing it," muttered Melbury. "I'd stint myself to keep you both in a genteel and seemly style. But go abroad you never shall with my consent."

There the question rested that day. Grace was unable to reply to her husband in the absence of an address, and the morrow came, and the next day, and the evening on which he had requested her to meet him. Throughout the whole of it she remained within the four walls of her room.

The sense of her harassment, carking doubt of what might be impending, hung like a cowl of blackness over the Melbury household. They spoke almost in whispers,

and wondered what Fitzpiers would do next. It was the hope of every one that, finding she did not arrive, he would return again to France; and as for Grace, she was willing to write to him on the most kindly terms if he would only keep away.

The night passed, Grace lying tense and wide awake, and her relatives, in great part, likewise. When they met the next morning they were pale and anxious, though neither speaking of the subject which occupied all their thoughts. The day passed as quietly as the previous ones, and she began to think that in the rank caprice of his moods he had abandoned the idea of getting her to join him as quickly as it was formed.

All on a sudden, some person who had just come from Sherton entered the house with the news that Mr. Fitzpiers was on his way home to Hintock. He had been

seen hiring a carriage at the Earl of Wessex Hotel.

Her father and Grace were both present when the intelligence was announced.

"Now," said Melbury, "we must make the best of what has been a very bad matter. The man is repenting: the partner of his folly, I hear, is gone away from him to Switzerland, so that chapter of his life is probably over. If he chooses to make a home for ye I think you should not say him nay, Grace. Certainly he cannot very well live at Hintock without a blow to his pride; but if he can bear that, and likes Hintock best, why, there's the empty wing of the house as it was before."

"Oh, father!" said Grace, turning white with dismay.

"Why not?" said he, a little of his former doggedness returning. He was, in truth, disposed to somewhat more leniency

towards her husband just now than he had shown formerly, from a conviction that he had treated him over roughly in his anger.

"Surely it is the most respectable thing to do?" he continued. "I don't like this state that you are in—neither married nor single. It hurts me, and it hurts you, and it will always be remembered against us in Hintock. There has never been any scandal like it in the family before."

"He will be here in less than an hour," murmured Grace.

The twilight of the room prevented her father seeing the despondent misery of her face. The one intolerable condition, the condition she had deprecated above all others, was that of Fitzpiers's reinstatement there. "Oh, I won't, I won't see him," she said, sinking down. She was almost hysterical.

"Try if you cannot," he returned moodily.

"Oh, yes, I will, I will," she went on inconsequently: "I'll try;" and jumping up suddenly she left the room.

In the darkness of the apartment to which she flew nothing could have been seen during the next half hour; but from a corner a quick breathing was audible from this impressible creature, who combined modern nerves with primitive emotions, and was doomed by such co-existence to be numbered among the distressed, and to take her scourgings to their exquisite extremity.

The window was open. On this quiet, late summer evening, whatever sound arose in so secluded a district—the chirp of a bird, a call from a voice, the turning of a wheel —extended over bush and tree to unwonted distances. Very few sounds did arise. But as Grace invisibly breathed in the brown glooms of the chamber, the small remote noise of light wheels came into her,

accompanied by the trot of a horse on the turnpike road. There seemed to be a sudden hitch or pause in the progress of the vehicle, which was what first drew her attention to it. She knew the point whence the sound proceeded—the hill-top over which travellers passed on their way hitherward from Sherton Abbas—the place at which she had emerged from the wood with Mrs. Charmond. Grace slid along the floor, and bent her head over the window-sill, listening with open lips. The carriage had stopped, and she heard a man use exclamatory words. Then another said, "What the devil is the matter with the horse?" She recognised the voice as her husband's.

The accident, such as it had been, was soon remedied, and the carriage could be heard descending the hill on the Hintock side, soon to turn into the lane leading out of the highway, and then into the "drong"

which led out of the lane to the house where she was.

A spasm passed through Grace. The Daphnean instinct, exceptionally strong in her as a girl, had been revived by her widowed seclusion ; and it was not lessened by her affronted sentiments towards the comer, and her regard for another man. She opened some little ivory tablets that lay on the dressing-table, scribbled in pencil on one of them, "I am gone to visit one of my school-friends," gathered a few toilet necessaries into a hand-bag, and, not three minutes after that voice had been heard, her slim form, hastily wrapped up from observation, might have been seen passing out of the back door of Melbury's house. Thence she skimmed up the garden-path, through the gap in the hedge, and into the mossy cart-track under the trees which led into the depth of the woods.

The leaves overhead were now in their latter green—so opaque, that it was darker at some of the densest spots than in winter time, scarce a crevice existing by which a ray could get down to the ground. But in open places she could see well enough. Summer was ending: in the daytime singing insects hung in every sunbeam: vegetation was heavy nightly with globes of dew; and after showers creeping damps and twilight chills came up from the hollows.

The plantations were always weird at this hour of eve—more spectral far than in the leafless season, when there were fewer masses and more minute lineality. The smooth surfaces of glossy plants came out like weak, lidless eyes: there were strange faces and figures from expiring lights that had somehow wandered into the canopied obscurity; while now and then low peeps of the sky between the trunks were like sheeted

shapes, and on the tips of boughs sat faint cloven tongues.

But Grace's fear just now was not imaginative or spiritual; and she heeded these impressions but little. She went on as silently as she could, avoiding the hollows wherein leaves had accumulated, and stepping upon soundless moss and grass-tufts. She paused breathlessly once or twice, and fancied that she could hear, above the sound of her strumming pulse, the vehicle containing Fitzpiers turning in at the gate of her father's premises. She hastened on again.

The Hintock woods owned by Mrs. Charmond were presently left behind, and those into which she next plunged were divided from the latter by a bank, from whose top the hedge had long ago perished—starved for want of sun. It was with some caution that Grace now walked, though she was quite free from any of the commonplace

timidities of her ordinary pilgrimages to such posts. She feared no lurking harms, but that her effort would be all in vain, and her return to the house rendered imperative.

She had walked between three and four miles when that prescriptive comfort and relief to wanderers in woods — a distant light — broke at last upon her searching eyes. It was so very small as to be almost sinister to a stranger, but to her it was what she sought. She pushed forward, and the dim outline of a dwelling was disclosed.

The house was a square cot of one story only, sloping up on all sides to a chimney in the midst. It had formerly been the home of a charcoal-burner, in times when that fuel was still used in the county-houses. Its only appurtenance was a paled inclosure, there being no garden, the shade of the trees preventing the growth of vegetables. She advanced to the window whence the

rays of light proceeded, and the shutters being as yet unclosed, she could survey the whole interior through the panes.

The room within was kitchen, parlour, and scullery all in one: the natural sandstone floor was worn into hills and dales by long treading, so that none of the furniture stood level, and the table slanted like a desk. A fire burnt on the hearth, in front of which revolved the skinned carcase of a very small rabbit, suspended by a string from a nail. Leaning with one arm on the mantel-shelf stood Winterborne, his eyes on the roasting animal, his face so rapt that speculation could build nothing on it concerning his thoughts, more than that they were not with the scene before him. She thought his features had changed a little since she saw them last. The firelight did not enable her to perceive that they were positively haggard.

Grace's throat emitted a gasp of relief at finding the result so nearly as she had hoped. She went to the door and tapped lightly.

He seemed to be accustomed to the noises of woodpeckers, squirrels, and such small creatures, for he took no notice of her tiny signal, and she knocked again. This time he came and opened the door.

When the light of the room fell upon her face he started; and, hardly knowing what he did, crossed the threshold to her, placing his hands upon her two arms, while surprise, joy, alarm, sadness, chased through him by turns. With Grace it was the same; even in this stress there was the fond fact that they had met again.

Thus they stood,

> "Long tears upon their faces, waxen white
> With extreme sad delight,"

till he broke the silence by saying in a whisper, "Come in."

"No, no, Giles!" she answered hurriedly stepping yet further back from the door. "I am passing by—and I have called on you—I won't enter. Will you help me? I am afraid. I want to get by a roundabout way to Sherton, and so to Exbury. I have a school-fellow there—but I cannot get to Sherton alone. Oh, if you will only accompany me a little way! Don't condemn me, Giles, and be offended! I was obliged to come to you because I have no other help here. Three months ago you were my lover: now you are only my friend. The law has stepped in, and forbidden what we thought of. It must not be. But we can act honestly, and yet you can be my friend for one little hour! I have no other—"

She could get no further. Covering her

eyes with one hand, by an effort of repression she wept silent tears, without a sigh or sob. Winterborne took her other hand in both his.

"What has happened?" he said.

"He has come."

There was a stillness as of death, till Winterborne asked, "You mean this, Grace — that I am to help you to get away?"

"Yes," said she. "Appearance is no matter, when the reality is right. I have said to myself, I can trust you."

Giles knew from this that she did not suspect his treachery—if it could be called such—earlier in the summer, when they met for the last time as lovers; and in the intensity of his contrition for that tender wrong, he determined to deserve her faith now at least, and so wipe out that reproach from his conscience.

"I'll come at once," he said. "I'll light a lantern."

He unhooked a dark lantern from a nail under the eaves, and she did not notice how his hand shook with the slight strain, or dream that in making this offer he was taxing a convalescence which could ill afford such self-sacrifice. The lantern was lit and they started.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE first hundred yards of their course lay under motionless trees, whose upper foliage began to hiss with falling drops of rain. By the time that they emerged upon a glade it rained heavily.

"This is awkward!" said Grace, with a forced little laugh to hide her concern.

Winterborne stopped, "Gracie," he said, preserving a strictly business manner which belied him; "you cannot go to Sherton to-night."

"But I must!"

"Why? It is nine miles from here. It is almost an impossibility in this rain."

"True—*why*," she replied mournfully at the end of a silence. "What is reputation to me?"

"Now hearken," said Giles. "You won't —go back to your—"

"No, no, no! Don't make me!" she cried piteously.

"Then let us turn." They slowly retraced their steps, and again stood before his door. "Now this house from this moment is yours, and not mine," he said deliberately. "I have a place near by where I can stay very well."

Her face had drooped. "Oh," she murmured as she saw the dilemma. "What have I done!"

There was a smell of something burning within, and he looked through the window. The young rabbit that he had been cooking to coax a weak appetite was beginning to char. "Please go in and attend to it," he said. "Do what you like. Now I leave.

You will find everything about the hut that is necessary."

"But, Giles—your supper," she exclaimed. "An outhouse would do for me—anything—till to-morrow at daybreak!"

He signified a negative. "I tell you to go in—you may catch agues out here in your delicate state. You can give me my supper through the window, if you feel well enough. I'll wait a while."

He gently urged her to pass the doorway, and was relieved when he saw her within the room sitting down. Without so much as crossing the threshold himself he closed the door upon her, and turned the key in the lock. Tapping at the window he signified that she should open the casement, and when she had done this he handed in the key to her.

"You are locked in," he said; "and your own mistress."

Even in her trouble she could not refrain from a faint smile at his scrupulousness, as she took the door-key.

"Do you feel better?" he went on. "If so, and you wish to give me some of your supper, please do. If not it is of no importance. I can get some elsewhere."

The grateful sense of his kindness stirred her to action, though she only knew half what that kindness really was. At the end of some ten minutes she again came to the window, pushed it open, and said in a whisper "Giles!" He at once emerged from the shade, and saw that she was preparing to hand him his share of the meal upon a plate.

"I don't like to treat you so hardly," she murmured with deep regret in her words as she heard the rain pattering on the leaves. "But—I suppose it is best to arrange like this?"

"Oh yes," he said quickly.

"I feel that I could never have reached Sherton."

"It was impossible."

"Are you sure you have a snug place out there?" (With renewed misgiving.)

"Quite. Have you found everything you want? I am afraid it is rather rough accommodation."

"Can I notice defects? I have long passed that stage, and you know it, Giles, or you ought to."

His eyes sadly contemplated her face as its pale responsiveness modulated through a crowd of expressions that showed only too clearly to what a pitch she was strung. If ever Winterborne's heart chafed his bosom it was at this sight of a perfectly defenceless creature conditioned by such harsh circumstances. He forgot his own agony in the satisfaction of having at least found her a shelter. He took his plate and cup from

her hands, saying, "Now I'll push the shutter to, and you will find an iron pin on the inside, which you must fix into the bolt. Do not stir in the morning till I come and call you."

She expressed an alarmed hope that he would not go very far away.

"Oh, no—I shall be quite within hail," said Winterborne.

She bolted the window as directed, and he retreated. His "snug place" proved to be a wretched little shelter of the roughest kind, formed of four hurdles thatched with brake-fern. Underneath were dry sacks, hay, and other litter of the sort, upon which he sat down; and there in the dark tried to eat his meal. But his appetite was quite gone. He pushed the plate aside, and shook up the hay and sacks, so as to form a rude couch, on which he flung himself down to sleep, for it was getting late.

But sleep he could not, for many reasons, of which not the least was thought of his charge. He sat up, and looked towards the cot through the damp obscurity. With all its external features the same as usual, he could scarcely believe that it contained the dear friend—he would not use a warmer name—who had come to him so unexpectedly and, he could not help admitting, so rashly.

He had not ventured to ask her any particulars; but the position was pretty clear without them. Though social law had negatived for ever their opening paradise of the previous June, it was not without stoical pride that he accepted the present trying conjuncture. There was one man on earth in whom she believed absolutely, and he was that man. That this crisis could end in nothing but sorrow was a view for a moment effaced by this tri-

umphant thought of her trust in him; and the purity of the affection with which he responded to that trust rendered him more than proof against any frailty that besieged him in relation to her.

The rain, which had never ceased, now drew his attention by beginning to drop through the meagre screen that covered him. He rose to attempt some remedy for this discomfort, but the trembling of his knees and the throbbing of his pulse told him that in his weakness he was unable to fence against the storm, and he lay down to bear it as best he might. He was angry with himself for his feebleness—he who had been so strong. It was imperative that she should know nothing of his present state, and to do that she must not see his face by daylight, for its thinness would inevitably betray him.

The next morning, accordingly, when it

was hardly light, he rose and dragged his stiff limbs about the precincts, preparing for her everything she could require for getting breakfast within. On the bench outside the window-sill he placed water, wood, and other necessaries, writing with a piece of chalk beside them, "It is best that I should not see you. Put my breakfast on the bench."

At seven o'clock he tapped at her window as he had promised, retreating at once that she might not catch sight of him. But from his shelter under the boughs he could see her very well, when, in response to his signal, she opened the window and the light fell upon her face. The languid largeness of her eyes showed that her sleep had been little more than his own, and the pinkness of their lids, that her waking hours had not been free from tears.

She read the writing, seemed, he thought,

disappointed, but took up the materials he had provided, evidently thinking him some way off. Giles waited on, assured that a girl who, in spite of her culture, knew what country life was, would find no difficulty in the simple preparation of their food.

Within the cot it was all very much as he conjectured, though Grace had slept much longer than he. After the loneliness of the night she would have been glad to see him; but appreciating his feeling when she read the request, she made no attempt to recall him. She found abundance of provisions laid in, his plan being to replenish his buttery weekly, and this being the day after the victualling-van had called from Sherton. When the meal was ready, she put what he required outside, as she had done with the supper; and, notwithstanding her longing to see him, withdrew from the window promptly, and left him to himself.

It had been a leaden dawn, and the rain now steadily renewed its fall. As she heard no more of Winterborne, she concluded that he had gone away to his daily work, and forgotten that he had promised to accompany her to Sherton ; an erroneous conclusion, for he remained all day, by force of his condition, within fifty yards of where she was.

The morning wore on ; and in her doubt when to start, and how to travel, she lingered yet ; keeping the door carefully bolted lest an intruder should discover her. Locked in this place she was comparatively safe, at any rate, and doubted if she would be safe elsewhere.

The humid gloom of an ordinary wet day was doubled by the shade and drip of the leafage. Autumn, this year, was coming in with rains. Gazing, in her enforced idleness, from the one window of the living room, she could see various small members of the

animal community that lived unmolested there—creatures of hair, fluff, and scale; the toothed kind and the billed kind; underground creatures jointed and ringed—circumambulating the hut, under the impression that, Giles having gone away, nobody was there; and eying it inquisitively with a view to winter quarters. Watching these neighbours, who knew neither law nor sin, distracted her a little from her trouble; and she managed to while away some portion of the afternoon by putting Giles's home in order, and making little improvements which she deemed that he would value when she was gone.

Once or twice she fancied that she heard a faint noise amid the trees, resembling a cough; but as it never came any nearer she concluded that it was a squirrel or a bird.

At last the daylight lessened, and she made up a larger fire, for the evenings were

chilly. As soon as it was too dark—which was comparatively early—to discern the human countenance in this place of shadows, there came to the window, to her great delight, a tapping which she knew from its method to be Giles's.

She opened the casement instantly, and put out her hand to him, though she could only just perceive his outline. He clasped her fingers, and she noticed the heat of his palm, and its shakiness.

"He has been walking fast, in order to get here quickly," she thought. How could she know that he had just crawled out from the straw of the shelter hard by; and that the heat of his hand was feverishness?

"My dear, good Giles!" she burst out impulsively.

"Anybody would have done it for you," replied Winterborne, with as much matter-of-fact as he could summon.

"About my getting to Exbury?" she said.

"I have been thinking," responded Giles, with tender deference, "that you had better stay where you are for the present, if you wish not to be caught. I need not tell you that the place is yours as long as you like; and perhaps in a day or two, finding you absent, he will go away. At any rate, in two or three days, I could do anything to assist—such as make inquiries, or go a great way towards Sherton-Abbas with you; for the cider season will soon be coming on, and I want to run down to the Vale to see how the crops are, and I shall go by the Sherton road. But for a day or two I am busy here." He was hoping that by the time mentioned he would be strong enough to engage himself actively on her behalf. "I hope you do not feel over-much melancholy in being a prisoner?"

She declared that she did not mind it; but she sighed.

From long acquaintance they could read each other's heart-symptoms like books of large type. "I fear you are sorry you came," said Giles, "and that you think I should have advised you more firmly than I did not to stay."

"Oh, no! dear, dear friend," answered Grace, with a heaving bosom. "Don't think that that is what I regret. What I regret is my enforced treatment of you—dislodging you, excluding you from your own house. Why should I not speak out? You know what I feel for you—what I have felt for no other living man, what I shall never feel for a man again! But as I have vowed myself to somebody else than you, and cannot be released, I must behave as I do behave, and keep that vow. I am not bound to him by any divine law, after what he

has done; but I have promised, and I will pay."

The rest of the evening was passed in his handing her such things as she would require the next day, and casual remarks thereupon, an occupation which diverted her mind to some degree from pathetic views of her attitude towards him, and of her life in general. The only infringement—if infringement it could be called—of his predetermined bearing towards her was an involuntary pressing of her hand to his lips when she put it through the casement to bid him good-night. He knew she was weeping, though he could not see her tears.

She again entreated his forgiveness for so selfishly appropriating the cottage. But it would only be for a day or two more, she thought, since go she must.

He yearningly replied "I—I don't like you to go away!"

"Oh, Giles," said she, "I know — I know! But—I am a woman, and you are a man. I cannot speak more plainly. 'Whatsoever things are pure'—you know what is in my mind, because you know me so well."

"Yes, Gracie, yes. I do not at all mean that the question between us has not been settled by your marriage turning out hopelessly unalterable. I mearly meant —well, a feeling—no more."

"In a week, at the outside, I should be discovered if I stayed here; and I think that by law he could compel me to return to him."

"Yes; perhaps you are right. Go when you wish, dear Grace."

His last words that evening were a hopeful remark that all might be well with her yet; that Mr. Fitzpiers would not intrude upon her life, if he found that his presence cost her so much pain. Then the window

was closed, the shutters folded, and the rustle of his footsteps died away.

No sooner had she retired to rest that night than the wind began to rise, and after a few prefatory blasts to be accompanied by rain. The wind grew more violent, and as the storm went on it was difficult to believe that no opaque body, but only an invisible colourless thing, was trampling and climbing over the roof, making branches creak, springing out of the trees upon the chimney, popping its head into the flue, and shrieking and blaspheming at every corner of the walls. As in the grisly story, the assailant was a spectre which could be felt but not seen. She had never before been so struck with the devilry of a gusty night in a wood, because she had never been so entirely alone in spirit as she was now. She seemed almost to be apart from herself—a vacuous duplicate only. The recent self of physical

animation and clear intentions was not there.

Sometimes a bough from an adjoining tree was swayed so low as to smite the roof in the manner of a gigantic hand smiting the mouth of an adversary, to be followed by a trickle of rain, as blood from the wound. To all this weather Giles must be more or less exposed; how much, she did not know.

At last Grace could hardly endure the idea of such a hardship in relation to him. Whatever he was suffering, it was she who had caused it; he had vacated his house on account of her. She was not worth such self-sacrifice; she should not have accepted it of him. And then, as her anxiety increased with increasing thought, there returned upon her mind some incidents of her late intercourse with him, which she had heeded but little at the time. The look of his face—what had there been about his face

which seemed different from its appearance of yore? Was it not thinner, less rich in hue, less like that of ripe Autumn's brother to whom she had formerly compared him? And his voice; she had distinctly noticed a change in tone. And his gait; surely it had been feebler, stiffer, more like the gait of a weary man. That slight occasional noise she had heard in the day, and attributed to squirrels; it might have been his cough after all.

Thus conviction took root in her perturbed mind that Winterborne was unwell, or had been so, and that he had carefully concealed his condition from her that she might have no scruples about accepting a hospitality which by the nature of the case expelled her entertainer.

"My own, own, true l—— my dear kind friend!" she cried to herself. "Oh, it shall not be—it shall not be!"

She hastily wrapped herself up, and obtained a light, with which she entered the adjoining room, the cot possessing only one floor. Setting down the candle on the table here she went to the door with the key in her hand, and placed it in the lock. Before turning it she paused, her fingers still clutching it; and pressing her other hand to her forehead she fell into agitating thought.

A tattoo on the window, caused by the tree-droppings blowing against it, brought her indecision to a close. She turned the key, and opened the door.

The darkness was intense, seeming to touch her pupils like a substance. She only now became aware how heavy the rainfall had been and was: the dripping of the eaves splashed like a fountain. She stood listening with parted lips, and holding the door in one hand, till her eyes growing accustomed to the obscurity, discerned the wild brandishing

of their arms by the adjoining trees. At last she cried loudly with an effort: "Giles! you may come in!"

There was no answer to her cry, and overpowered by her own temerity, Grace retreated quickly, shut the door, and stood looking on the floor with flushed cheeks. Perhaps he was very well after all. But this mood was not for long. She again lifted the latch, and with far more determination than at first.

"Giles, Giles!" she cried, with the full strength of her voice, and without any of the shamefacedness that had characterised her first cry. "Oh, come in—come in! Where are you? I have been wicked—I have thought too much of myself! Do you hear? I don't want to keep you out any longer. I cannot bear that you should suffer so. Gi-i-iles!"

A reply? It was a reply! Through the

darkness and wind a voice reached her, floating upon the weather as though a part of it.

"Here I am—all right! Don't trouble about me."

"Don't you want to come in? Are you not wet? *I don't mind what they say, or what they think any more.*"

"I am all right," he repeated. "It is not necessary for me to come. Good night! good night!"

Grace sighed, turned, and shut the door slowly. Could she have been mistaken about his health? Perhaps, after all, she had perceived a change in him because she had not seen him for so long. Time sometimes did his ageing work in jerks, as she knew. Well, she had done all she could. He would not come in. She retired to rest again.

CHAPTER IX.

THE next morning Grace was at the window early. She felt determined to see him somehow that day, and prepared his breakfast eagerly. Eight o'clock struck, and she then remembered that he had not come to arouse her by a knocking as usual, her own anxiety having caused her to stir.

The breakfast was set in its place without. But he did not appear to take it; and she waited on. Nine o'clock arrived, and the breakfast was cold; and still there was no Giles. A thrush, who had been repeating himself a good deal on an opposite bush

for some time, came and took a morsel from the plate, bolted it, waited, looked around, and took another. At ten o'clock she drew in the tray, and sat down to her own solitary meal. He must have been called away on business early, the rain having cleared off.

Yet she would have liked to assure herself, by thoroughly exploring the precincts of the hut, that he was nowhere in its vicinity; but as the day was comparatively fine the dread lest some stray passenger or woodman should encounter her in such a reconnoitre paralysed her wish. The solitude was further accentuated to-day by the stopping of the clock for want of winding, and the fall into the chimney-corner of flakes of soot loosened by the rains. At noon she heard a slight rustling outside the window, and found that it was caused by an eft which had crept out of the leaves to bask in the last

sun-rays that would be worth having till the following May.

She continually peeped out through the lattice but could see little. In front lay the brown leaves of last year, and upon them some yellowish-green ones of this season that had been prematurely blown down by the gale. Above stretched an old beech, with vast arm-pits, and great pocket-holes in its sides where branches had been removed in past times; a black slug was trying to climb it. Dead boughs were scattered about like ichthyosauri in a museum, and beyond them were perishing woodbine stems resembling old ropes.

From the other window all she could see were more trees, in jackets of lichen and stockings of moss. At their roots were stemless yellow fungi like lemons and apricots, and tall fungi with more stem than stool. Next were more trees close together,

wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbours that she had heard in the night. Beneath them were the rotting stumps of those of the group that had been vanquished long ago, rising from their mossy setting like black teeth from green gums. Further on were other tufts of moss in islands divided by the shed leaves—variety upon variety, dark green and pale green; moss like little fir-trees, like plush, like malachite stars; like nothing on earth except moss.

The strain upon Grace's mind in various ways was so great on this the most desolate day she had passed there that she felt it would be well-nigh impossible to spend another in such circumstances. The evening came at last; the sun, when its chin was on the earth, found an opening through which

to pierce the shade, and stretched irradiated gauzes across the damp atmosphere, making the wet trunks shine, and throwing splotches of such ruddiness on the leaves beneath the beech that they were turned to gory hues. When night at last arrived, and with it the time for his return, she was nearly broken down with suspense.

The simple evening meal, partly tea, partly supper, which Grace had prepared, stood waiting upon the hearth; and yet Giles did not come. It was now nearly twenty-four hours since she had seen him. As the room grew darker, and only the fire-light broke against the gloom of the walls, she was convinced that it would be beyond her staying power to pass the night without hearing from him or from somebody. Yet eight o'clock drew on, and his form at the window did not appear.

The meal remained untasted. Suddenly

rising from before the hearth of smouldering embers, where she had been crouching with her hands clasped over her knees, she crossed the room, unlocked the door, and listened. Every breath of wind had ceased with the decline of day, but the rain had resumed the steady dripping of the night before. Grace might have stood there five minutes when she fancied she heard that old sound, a cough, at no great distance; and it was presently repeated. If it were Winterborne's he must be near her; why, then, had he not visited her?

A horrid misgiving that he could not visit her took possession of Grace, and she looked up anxiously for the lantern, which was hanging above her head. To light it and go in the direction of the sound would be the obvious way to solve the dread problem; but the conditions made her hesitate, and in a moment a cold sweat pervaded her at further sounds from the same quarter.

They were low mutterings; at first like persons in conversation, but gradually resolving themselves into varieties of one voice. It was an endless monologue, like that we sometimes hear from inanimate nature in deep secret places where water flows, or where ivy leaves flap against stones; but by degrees she was convinced that the voice was Winterborne's. Yet who could be his listener, so mute and so patient? for though he argued rapidly and persistently nobody replied.

A dreadful enlightenment spread through the mind of Grace. "Oh," she cried in her anguish as she hastily prepared herself to go out; "how selfishly correct I am always—too, too correct! Can it be that cruel propriety is killing the dearest heart that ever woman clasped to her own!"

While speaking thus to herself she had lit the lantern, and hastening out without further

thought took the direction whence the mutterings had proceeded. The course was marked by a little path, which ended at a distance of about forty yards in a small erection of hurdles, not much larger than a shock of corn, such as were frequent in the woods and copses when the cutting season was going on. It was too slight even to be called a hovel, and was not high enough to stand upright in; appearing, in short, to be erected for the temporary shelter of fuel. The side towards Grace was open, and turning the light upon the interior she beheld what her prescient fear had pictured in snatches all the way thither.

Upon the hay within her lover lay in his clothes, just as she had seen him during the whole of her stay here, except that his hat was off, and his hair matted and wild.

Both his clothes and the hay were saturated with rain. His arms were flung over his

head; his face was flushed to an unnatural crimson. His eyes had a burning brightness, and, though they met her own, she perceived that he did not recognise her.

"Oh, my Giles," she cried, "what have I done to you!"

But she stopped no longer even to reproach herself. She saw that the first thing to be thought of was to get him indoors.

How Grace performed that labour she never could have exactly explained. But by dint of clasping her arms round him, rearing him into a sitting posture and straining her strength to the uttermost, she put him on one of the hurdles that was loose alongside, and taking the end of it in both her hands, dragged him along the path to the entrance of the hut, and, after a pause for breath, in at the doorway.

It was somewhat singular that Giles in his semi-conscious state acquiesced unresist-

ingly in all that she did. But he never for a moment recognised her; continuing his rapid conversation to himself, and seeming to look upon her as some angel or other supernatural creature of the visionary world in which he was mentally living. The undertaking occupied her more than ten minutes; but by that time, to her great thankfulness, he was in the inner room lying in the bed, his damp outer clothing removed.

Then the unhappy Grace regarded him by the light of the candle. There was something in his look which agonised her, in the rush of his thoughts, accelerating their speed from minute to minute. His soul seemed to be passing through the universe of ideas like a comet: erratic, inapprehensible, untraceable.

Grace's distraction was almost as great as his. In a few moments she firmly

believed he was dying. Unable to withstand her impulse, she knelt down beside him, kissed his hands, and his face, and his hair, moaning in a low voice, "How could I? How could I?"

Her timid morality had, indeed, underrated his chivalry till now, though she knew him so well. The purity of his nature, his freedom from the grosser passions, his scrupulous delicacy, had never been fully understood by Grace till this strange self-sacrifice in lonely juxtaposition to her own person was revealed. The perception of it added something that was little short of reverence to the deep affection for him of a woman who, herself, had more of Artemis than of Aphrodite in her constitution.

All that a tender nurse could do, Grace did; and the power to express her solicitude in action, unconscious though the sufferer was, brought her mournful satisfac-

tion. She bathed his hot head, clasped his twitching hands, moistened his lips, cooled his fiery eyelids, sponged his heated skin, and administered whatever she could find in the house that the imagination could conceive as likely to be in any way alleviating. That she might have been the cause, or partially the cause, of all this, interfused misery with her sorrow.

Six months before this date a scene, almost similar in its mechanical parts, had been enacted at Hintock House. It was between a pair of persons most intimately connected in their lives with these. Outwardly like as it had been, it was yet infinite in spiritual difference; though a woman's devotion had been common to both.

Grace rose from her attitude of affection, and, bracing her energies, saw that something practical must immediately be done.

Much as she would have liked, in the emotion of the moment, to keep him entirely to herself, medical assistance was necessary whilst there remained a possibility of preserving him alive. Such assistance was fatal to her own concealment; but even had the chance of benefiting him been less than it was, she would have run the hazard for his sake. The question was, where should she get a medical man, competent and near?

There was one such man, and only one, within accessible distance: a man who, if it were possible to save Winterborne's life, had the brain most likely to do it. If human pressure could bring him, that man ought to be brought to the sick Giles's side. Though completely stultifying her flight, the attempt should be made.

Yet she dreaded to leave her patient, and the minutes raced past, and still she

postponed her departure. At last, when it was after eleven o'clock, Winterborne fell into a fitful sleep, and it seemed to afford her an opportunity.

She hastily made him as comfortable as she could, put on her things, cut a new candle from the bunch hanging in the cupboard, and having set it up, and placed it so that the light did not fall upon his eyes, she closed the door and started, there being now no rain.

The spirit of Winterborne seemed to keep her company and banish all sense of darkness from her mind. The rains had imparted a phosphorescence to the pieces of touchwood and rotting leaves that lay about her path, which, as scattered by her feet, spread abroad like spilt milk. She would not run the hazard of losing her way by plunging into any short, unfrequented track through the denser parts of the woodland, but

followed a more open course, which eventually brought her to the highway. Once here, she ran along with great speed, animated by a devoted purpose which had much about it that was stoical; and it was with scarcely any faltering of spirit that, after an hour's progress, she passed over Rubdon Hill, and onward towards that same Hintock, and that same house, out of which she had fled a few days before in irresistible alarm. But that had happened which, above all other things of chance and change, could make her deliberately frustrate her plan of flight, and sink all regard of personal consequences.

One speciality of Fitzpiers was respected by Grace as much as ever: his professional skill. In this she was right. Had his persistence equalled his insight, instead of being the spasmodic and fitful thing it was, fame and fortune need never have remained

a wish with him. His freedom from conventional errors and crusted prejudices had indeed been such as to retard rather than accelerate his advance in Hintock and its neighbourhood, where people could not believe that Nature herself effected cures, and that the doctor's business was only to smooth the way.

It was past midnight when Grace arrived opposite her father's house, now again temporarily occupied by her husband, unless he had already gone away. Ever since her emergence from the denser plantations about Winterborne's residence, a pervasive lightness had hung in the damp autumn sky, in spite of the vault of cloud, signifying that a moon of some age was shining above its arch. The two white gates were distinct, and the white balls on the pillars: and the puddles and damp ruts left by the recent rain had a cold, corpse-eyed luminousness.

She entered by the lower gate, and crossed the quadrangle to the wing wherein the apartments that had been hers since her marriage were situate, till she stood under a window which, if her husband were in the house, gave light to his bed-chamber.

She faltered, and paused with her hand on her heart, in spite of herself. Could she call to her presence the very cause of all her foregoing troubles? Alas!—old Jones was seven miles off; Giles was possibly dying—what else could she do?

It was in a perspiration, wrought even more by consciousness than by exercise, that she picked up some gravel, threw it at the panes, and waited to see the result. The night-bell which had been fixed when Fitzpiers first took up his residence there still remained; but as it had fallen into disuse with the collapse of his practice, and his elopement, she did not venture to pull it now.

Whoever slept in the room had heard her signal, slight as it was. In half a minute the window was opened, and a voice said "Yes?" inquiringly. Grace recognised her husband in the speaker at once. Her effort was now to disguise her own accents.

"Doctor," she said, in as unusual a tone as she could command, "a man is dangerously ill in One-Chimney Hut, out towards Delborough, and you must go to him at once—in all mercy!"

"I will, readily."

The alacrity, surprise, and pleasure expressed in his reply amazed her for a moment. But, in truth, they denoted the sudden relief of a man who, having got back in a mood of contrition from erratic abandonment to doubtful joys, found the soothing routine of professional practice unexpectedly opening anew to him. The highest desire of his soul just now was for

a respectable life of painstaking. If this, his first summons since his return, had been to attend upon a cat or dog, he would scarcely have refused it in the circumstances.

"Do you know the way?" she asked.

"Yes," said he.

"One-Chimney Hut," she repeated. "And —immediately!"

"Yes, yes," said Fitzpiers.

Grace remained no longer. She passed through the white gate without slamming it, and hastened on her way back. Her husband, then, had re-entered her father's house. How he had been able to effect a reconciliation with the old man, what were the terms of the treaty between them, she could not so much as conjecture. Some sort of truce must have been entered into, that was all she could say. But close as the question lay to her own life, there was a more urgent one which banished it; and

she traced her steps quickly along the meandering trackways.

Meanwhile, Fitzpiers was preparing to leave the house. The state of his mind, over and above his professional zeal, was peculiar. At Grace's first remark he had not recognised or suspected her presence; but as she went on, he was awakened to the great resemblance of the speaker's voice to his wife's. He had taken in such good faith the statement of the household on his arrival, that she had gone on a visit for a time because she could not at once bring her mind to be reconciled to him, that he could not quite believe this neighbour to be she. It was one of the features of Fitzpiers's repentant humour at this date that, on receiving the explanation of her absence, he had made no attempt to outrage her feelings by following her; though nobody had informed him how very shortly her departure

had preceded his entry, and of all that might have been inferred from her precipitancy.

Melbury, after much alarm and consideration, had decided not to follow her either. He sympathised with her flight, much as he deplored it; moreover the tragic colour of the antecedent events that he had been a great means of creating checked his instinct to interfere. He prayed and trusted that she had got into no danger on her way (as he supposed) to Sherton, and thence to Exbury, if that were the place she had gone to, forbearing all inquiry which the strangeness of her departure would have made natural. A few months before this time a performance by Grace of one-tenth the magnitude of this would have aroused him to unwonted investigation.

It was in the same spirit that he had tacitly assented to Fitzpiers's domicilation there. The two men had not met face to

face, but Mrs. Melbury had proposed herself as an intermediary, who made the surgeon's re-entrance comparatively easy to him. Everything was provisional, and nobody asked questions. Fitzpiers had come in the performance of a plan of penitence which had originated in circumstances hereafter to be explained; his self-humiliation to the very bass-string was deliberate; and as soon as a voice reached him from the bedside of a dying man his desire was to set to work and do as much good as he could with the least possible fuss or show. He therefore refrained from calling up a stableman to get ready any horse or gig, and set out for One-Chimney Hut on foot as Grace had done.

CHAPTER X.

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 immolated 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 her lover'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 devoted 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 asked.

"Grace!" said Fitzpiers in an indescribable whisper—more than invocating—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 had its run 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 asked 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 for ever.

"But it cannot be! He was well a week ago."

"Not well I suspect. This seems like what we call a sequel, which has followed some previous disorder—possibly typhoid—it may have been months ago, or recently."

"Ah—he was ill last year—you are right. And he must have been 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?" he said.

Grace was wild with sorrow—bitter 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 awhile; 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 which that cost me without flinching, because I have felt I deserved humiliation. But is there a yet greater humiliation in store for me? You say you have been living here—that he was 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 slights 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 hope 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 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 downwards 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 his.

"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, amongst 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 careworn 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 demeanour 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?"

"No."

"Then what brought you here?"

"I come this way sometimes. I have got to go to the further side of the wood this time of the year, and am obliged to get there before four o'clock in the morn-

ing, 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 in 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 countenanced. They had hardly ended when new and more numerous foot-falls were audible; also persons in conver-

sation, one of whom Grace recognised 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 talked to Marty.

"Yes," said Melbury.

"And you know all that has happened? I will let my husband think the worst, but not you."

"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 tender, 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 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 Melbury. "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 nobody 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 direc-

tion 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 favour him, 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 Edred 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 care 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 stepmother, 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 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 parlour while her stepmother went to Fitzpiers.

The prompt obedience to her wishes which the surgeon showed did honour to him, if anything could. Before Mrs. Melbury had returned to the room, Grace, who was sitting on the parlour 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 filled his place; now she had banished him.

CHAPTER XI.

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 his true complement 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 of 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.

"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 outdoor 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 an innocent woman whose pique had for the moment 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 gross 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 neighbourhood 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 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 I 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-coloured 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 Grace. "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.

CHAPTER XII.

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.

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 slight 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. There was a rumour that her death had resulted less from the shot than from the effect of fright upon her personal condition at the time; but this was never verified. Fitzpiers had had a marvellous escape from being dragged into the inquiry which followed the catastrophe, 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—a letter reached Mrs. Fitzpiers, which had been mentally promised her for that particular day a long time before.

Her husband announced that he was living at some midland town, where he had obtained a temporary practice as assistant to a 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 honour you at this present moment. What you told me in the pride and naughtiness 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 turtle-dove, 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 fine 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. F."

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 Rubdon Hill, the second that he would not object to Marty South accompanying her.

Whatever art, 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 for ever 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 recognised 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 Rubdon 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-bye," said Fitzpiers; "I may not see you again." He shook hands with Tim and turned to the bride. "Good-bye, 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. "Hullo! 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-grey 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, particularising 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 favour. 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 slily.

"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 staunchly.

"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 for ever. 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 intreated 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 bo-peep. 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.

CHAPTER XIII.

The woods were uninteresting, and Grace stayed indoors 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 snowdrops, 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 inclosures, abutted

into the wood. A slight footpath 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 tranquillise 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 complaisance 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 candour 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 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 can-

not," 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 inclosure 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 *innamorato* 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 for ever.

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 favourite 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 arbour 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 indoors, 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 gamekeeper. 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 cob-webbed 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.

CHAPTER XIV.

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 neighbourhood. 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 behoved 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 each 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 tree 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 Edred 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 gentle woman 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 ironwork 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 recognised 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 accessories 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 Edred!" 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 backwards 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 realise the whole ghastliness of the possibility. "Oh, Edred, 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. 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 depart-

ing 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, Edred. I am not in the least afraid. I recognise 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-bye."

"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!"

CHAPTER XV.

ALL the evening Melbury had been coming to his door saying, "I wonder where in the world that girl is! Never in all my born days did I know her bide out like this! She surely said she was going into the garden to get some parsley."

Melbury searched the garden, the parsley-bed, and the orchard, but could find no trace of her, and then he made inquiries at the cottages of such of his workmen as had not gone to bed, avoiding Tangs's because he knew the young people were to rise early to leave. In these inquiries one of the men's wives somewhat incautiously

let out the fact that she had heard a scream in the wood, though from which direction she could not say.

This set Melbury's fears on end. He told the men to light lanterns, and headed by himself they started, Creedle following at the last moment with quite a burden of grapnels and ropes which he could not be persuaded to leave behind, the company being joined by the hollow-turner and Cawtree who kept the cider-house as they went along.

They explored the precincts of the village, and in a short time lighted upon the man-trap. Its discovery simply added an item of fact without helping their conjectures; but Melbury's indefinite alarm was greatly increased when, holding a candle to the ground, he saw in the teeth of the instrument some frayings from Grace's clothing. No intelligence of any kind was gained till they met a woodman of Delborough, who

said that he had seen a lady answering to the description her father gave of Grace, walking through the wood on a gentleman's arm in the direction of Sherton.

"Was he clutching her tight?" said Melbury.

"Well—rather," said the man.

"Did she walk lame?"

"Well 'tis true her head hung over towards him a bit."

Creedle groaned tragically.

Melbury, not suspecting the presence of Fitzpiers, coupled this account with the man-trap and the scream; he could not understand what it all meant, but the sinister event of the trap made him follow on. Accordingly, they bore away towards the town, shouting as they went, and in due course emerged upon the highway.

Nearing Sherton Abbas, the previous information was confirmed by other strollers, though the gentleman's supporting arm had

disappeared from these later accounts. At last they were so near Sherton that Melbury informed his faithful followers that he did not wish to drag them further at so late an hour, since he could go on alone and inquire if the woman who had been seen were really Grace. But they would not leave him alone in his anxiety, and trudged onward till the lamplight from the town began to illuminate their fronts. At the entrance to the High Street they got fresh scent of the pursued, but coupled with the new condition that the lady in the costume described had been going up the street alone.

"Faith—I believe she's mesmerised, or walking in her sleep!" said Melbury.

However, the identity of this woman with Grace was by no means certain; but they plodded along the street. Percomb the hair-dresser, who had despoiled Marty of her tresses, was standing at his door, and they duly put inquiries to him.

"Ah—how's Little Hintock folk by now!" he said before replying. "Never have I been over there since one winter night some three year ago—and then I lost myself finding it. How can ye live in such a one-eyed place? Great Hintock is bad enough—but Little Hintock—the bats and owls would drive me melancholy-mad! It took two days to raise my sperrits to their true pitch again after that night I went there. Mr. Melbury, sir, as a man that's put by money, why not retire and live here, and see something of the world?"

The responses at last given by him to their queries guided them to the building that offered the best accommodation in Sherton—having been enlarged contemporaneously with the construction of the railway—namely, the Earl of Wessex Hotel.

Leaving the others without, Melbury made prompt inquiry here. His alarm was lessened, though his perplexity was increased,

when he received a brief reply that such a lady was in the house.

"Do you know if it is my daughter?" asked Melbury.

The waiter did not.

"Do you know the lady's name?"

Of this, too, the household was ignorant, the hotel having been taken by brand-new people from a distance. They knew the gentleman very well by sight, and had not thought it necessary to ask him to enter his name.

"Oh, the gentleman appears again now," said Melbury to himself. "Well, I want to see the lady," he declared.

A message was taken up, and after some delay the shape of Grace appeared descending round the bend of the staircase, looking as if she lived there, but in other respects rather guilty and frightened.

"Why — what the name—" began her father. "I thought you went out to get parsley!"

"Oh, yes—I did—but it is all right," said Grace in a flurried whisper. "I am not alone here. I am here with Edred. It is entirely owing to an accident, father."

"Edred! An accident! How does he come here? I thought he was two hundred mile off."

"Yes; so he is—I mean he has got a beautiful practice two hundred miles off: he has bought it with his own money, some that came to him. But he travelled here, and I was nearly caught in a man-trap, and that's how it is I am here. We were just thinking of sending a messenger to let you know."

Melbury did not seem to be particularly enlightened by this explanation.

"You were caught in a man-trap?"

"Yes; my dress was. That's how it arose. Edred is up stairs in his own sitting-room," she went on. "He would not mind seeing you, I am sure."

"Oh, faith, I don't want to see him! I

have seen him too often a'ready. I'll see him another time, perhaps, if 'tis to oblige 'ee."

"He came to see me; he wanted to con sult me about this large partnership I speak of, as it is very promising."

"Oh, I am glad to hear it," said Melbury drily.

A pause ensued, during which the inquiring faces and whitey-brown clothes of Melbury's companions appeared in the doorway.

"Then baint you coming home with us?" he asked.

"I—I think not," said Grace, blushing.

"H'm—very well—you are your own mistress," he returned in tones which seemed to assert otherwise. "Good-night;" and Melbury retreated towards the door.

"Don't be angry, father," she said, following him a few steps. "I have done it for the best."

"I am not angry, though it is true I have been a little misled in this. However, good-night. I must get home along."

He left the hotel, not without relief, for to be under the eyes of strangers while he conversed with his lost child had embarrassed him much. His search-party, too, had looked awkward there, having rushed to the task of investigation—some in their shirt-sleeves, others in their leather aprons, and all much stained—just as they had come from their work of barking, and not in their Sherton marketing attire; while Creedle, with his ropes and grapnels and air of impending tragedy, had added melancholy to gawkiness.

"Now, neighbours," said Melbury, on joining them, "as it is getting late we'll leg it home again as fast as we can. I ought to tell you that there has been some mistake—some arrangement entered into between Mr. and Mrs. Fitzpiers which I didn't quite understand—an important practice in the

Midland counties has come to him, which made it necessary for her to join him to-night —so she says. That's all it was—and I'm sorry I dragged you out."

"Well," said the hollow-turner, "here be we six mile from home, and night-time, and not a hoss or four-footed creeping thing to our name. I say, we'll have a mossel and a drop o' summat to strengthen our nerves afore we vamp all the way back again? My throat's as dry as a kex. What d'ye say so's?"

They all concurred in the need for this course, and proceeded to the antique and lampless back street in which the red curtain of the Three Tuns was the only radiant object. As soon as they had stumbled down into the room Melbury ordered them to be served, when they made themselves comfortable by the long table, and stretched out their legs upon the herring-boned sand of the floor. Melbury himself, restless as usual,

walked to the door while he waited for them, and looked up and down the street.

"I'd gie her a good shaking if she were my maid; pretending to go out in garden, and leading folk a twelve-mile traipse that have got to get up at five o'clock to-morrow," said a bark-ripper; who, not working regularly for Melbury, could afford to indulge in strong opinions.

"I don't speak so warm as that," said the hollow-turner, "but if 'tis right for couples to make a country talk about their separating, and excite the neighbours, and then make fools of 'em like this, why, I haven't stood upon one leg for five-and-twenty year."

All his listeners knew that when he alluded to his foot-lathe in these enigmatic terms, the speaker meant to be impressive; and Creedle chimed in with, "Ah, young women do wax wanton in these days! Why couldn't she ha' bode with her father, and been faith-

ful." Poor Creedle was thinking of his old employer.

"But this deceiving of folks is nothing unusual in matrimony," said Farmer Cawtree. "I knowed a man and wife—faith, I don't mind owning as there's no strangers here, that the pair were my own relations—they'd be at it that hot one hour that you'd hear the poker, and the tongs, and the bellows, and the warming-pan, flee across the house with the movements of their vengeance; and the next hour you'd hear 'em singing 'The Spotted Cow' together as peaceable as two holy twins; yes—and very good voices they had, and would strike in like professional ballet-singers to one another's support in the high notes."

"And I knowed a woman, and the husband o' her went away for four-and-twenty year," said the bark-ripper. "And one night he came home when she was sitting by the fire, and thereupon he sat down himself on the other side of the chimney-corner. 'Well,'

says she, 'have ye got any news?' 'Don't know as I have,' says he; 'have you?' 'No,' says she, 'except that my daughter by my second husband was married last month, which was a year after I was made a widow by him.' 'Oh! Anything else?' he says. 'No,' says she. And there they sat, one on each side of that chimney-corner, and were found by the neighbours sound asleep in their chairs, not having known what to talk about at all."

"Well, I don't care who the man is," said Creedle, "they required a good deal to talk about, and that's true. It won't be the same with these."

"No. He is such a projick, you see. And she is a wonderful scholar too!"

"What women do know nowadays!" observed the hollow-turner. "You can't deceive 'em as you could in my time."

"What they knowed then was not small," said John Upjohn. "Always a good deal

more than the men! Why, when I went courting my wife that is now, the skilfulness that she would show in keeping me on her pretty side as she walked was beyond all belief. Perhaps you've noticed that she's got a pretty side to her face as well as a plain one?"

"I can't say I've noticed it particular much," said the hollow-turner blandly.

"Well," continued Upjohn, not disconcerted, "she has. All women under the sun be prettier one side than t'other. And, as I was saying, the pains she would take to make me walk on the pretty side were unending! I warrant that whether we were going with the sun or against the sun, uphill or downhill, in wind or in lewth, that wart of hers was always towards the hedge, and that dimple towards me. There was I, too simple to see her wheelings and turnings; and she so artful, though two years younger, that she could lead me with

a cotton thread, like a blind ram; for that was in the third climate of our courtship . . . . No; I don't think the women have got cleverer, for they was never otherwise."

"How many climates may there be in courtship, Mr. Upjohn?" inquired a youth —the same who had assisted at Winterborne's Christmas party.

"Five—from the coolest to the hottest—leastwise there was five in mine."

"Can ye give us the chronicle of 'em, Mr. Upjohn?"

"Yes—I could. I could certainly. But 'tis quite unnecessary. They'll come to ye by nater, young man, too soon for your good."

"At present Mrs. Fitzpiers can lead the doctor as your mis'ess could lead you," the hollow-turner remarked. "She's got him quite tame. But how long 'twill last I can't say. I happened to be setting a wire on the top of my garden one night when he met her

on the other side of the hedge ; and the way she queened it, and fenced, and kept that poor feller at a distance was enough to freeze yer blood. I should never have supposed it of such a girl."

Melbury now returned to the room, and the men having declared themselves refreshed, they all started on the homeward journey, which was by no means cheerless under the rays of the high moon. Having to walk the whole distance they came by a footpath rather shorter than the highway, though difficult except to those who knew the country well. This brought them by way of Great Hintock ; and passing the churchyard they observed as they talked a motionless figure standing by the gate.

" I think it was Marty South," said the hollow-turner parenthetically.

" I think 'twas ; 'a was always a lonely maid," said Upjohn. And they passed on homeward, and thought of the matter no more.

It was Marty, as they had supposed. That evening had been the particular one of the week upon which Grace and herself had been accustomed to privately deposit flowers on Giles's grave, and this was the first occasion since his death eight months earlier on which Grace had failed to keep her appointment. Marty had waited in the road just outside Little Hintock, where her fellow-pilgrim had been wont to join her, till she was weary; and at last, thinking that Grace had missed her and gone on alone, she followed the way to Great Hintock, but saw no Grace in front of her. It got later, and Marty continued her walk till she reached the churchyard gate; but still no Grace. Yet her sense of comradeship would not allow her to go on to the grave alone, and, still thinking the delay had been unavoidable, she stood there with her little basket of flowers in her clasped hands, and her feet chilled by the damp ground, till more than

two hours had passed. She then heard the footsteps of Melbury's men, who presently passed on their return from the search. In the silence of the night Marty could not help hearing fragments of their conversation, from which she acquired a general idea of what had occurred, and where Mrs. Fitzpiers then was.

Immediately they had dropped down the hill she entered the churchyard, going to a secluded corner behind the bushes, where rose the unadorned stone that marked the last bed of Giles Winterborne. As this solitary and silent girl stood there in the moonlight, a straight slim figure, clothed in a plaitless gown, the contours of womanhood so undeveloped as to be scarcely perceptible, the marks of poverty and toil effaced by the misty hour, she touched sublimity at points, and looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism.

She stooped down and cleared away the withered flowers that Grace and herself had laid there the previous week, and put her fresh ones in their place.

"Now, my own own love," she whispered, "you are mine, and on'y mine; for she has forgot 'ee at last, although for her you died. But I—whenever I get up I'll think of 'ee, and whenever I lie down I'll think of 'ee. Whenever I plant the young larches I'll think that none can plant as you planted; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider wring, I'll say none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven! . . . . . But no, no, my love, I never can forget 'ee; for you was a *good* man, and did good things!"

THE END.

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