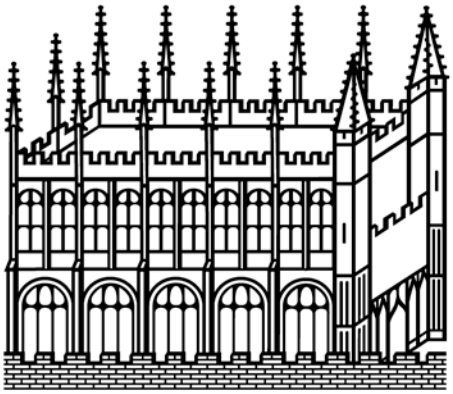


Bodleian Libraries

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

This book is part of the collection held by the Bodleian Libraries and scanned by Google, Inc. for the Google Books Library Project.

For more information see:

http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dbooks



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) licence.





THE WOODLANDERS.

VOL. II.



THE WOODLANDERS

BY

THOMAS HARDY

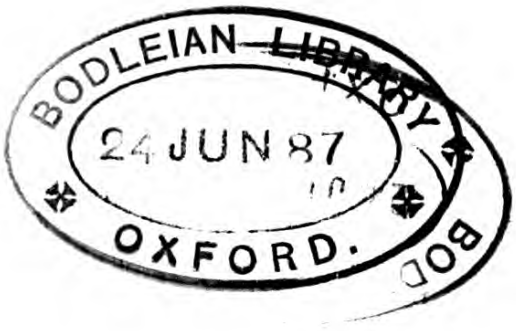
IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK
1887

The Right of Translation and Reproduction is Reserved.

256. e.



RICHARD CLAY AND SONS,
LONDON AND BUNGAY.

THE WOODLANDERS.

CHAPTER I.

GRACE'S exhibition of herself, in the act of pulling-to the window curtains, had been the result of an unfortunate incident in the house that day—nothing less than the illness of Grammer Oliver, a woman who had never, till now, lain down for such a reason in her life. Like others, to whom an unbroken career of health has made the idea of keeping their bed almost as repugnant as death itself, she had continued on foot till she literally fell on the floor ; and though

she had, as yet, been scarcely a day off duty, she had sickened into quite a different personage from the independent Grammer of the yard and spar-house. Ill as she was, on one point she was firm. On no account would she see a doctor; in other words, Fitzpiers.

The room in which Grace had been discerned was not her own but the old woman's. On the girl's way to bed she had received a message from Grammer, to the effect that she would much like to speak to her that night.

Grace entered, and set the candle on a low chair beside the bed, so that the profile of Grammer, as she lay, cast itself in a coal-black shadow upon the whitened wall, her large head being still further magnified by an enormous turban, which was really her petticoat wound in a wreath round her temples. Grace put the room

a little in order, and approaching the sick woman said,

"I am come, Grammer, as you wish. Do let us send for the doctor before it gets later."

"'Ch will not have him!" said Grammer Oliver decisively.

"Then somebody to sit up with you?"

"Can't abear it! No. I wanted to see you, Miss Grace, because 'ch have something on my mind. Dear Miss Grace, *I took that money of the doctor, after all!*"

"What money?"

"The ten pounds."

Grace did not quite understand.

"The ten pounds he offered me for my head, because I've a large organ of brain. I signed a paper when I took the money, not feeling concerned about it at all. I have not liked to tell ye that it was really settled with him, because you showed such

horror at the notion. Well, having thought it over more at length, I wish I hadn't done it; and it weighs upon my mind. John South's death of fear about the tree makes me think that I shall die of this. . . . 'Ch have been going to ask him again to let me off, but I hadn't the face."

"Why?"

"I've spent some of the money—more'n two pounds o't! It do wherrit me terribly; and I shall die o' the thought of that paper I signed with my holy cross, as South died of his trouble!"

"If you ask him to burn the paper he will, I'm sure, and think no more of it."

"'Ch have done it once already, miss. But he laughed cruel-like. 'Yours is such a fine brain, Grammer,' er said, 'that science couldn't afford to lose you. Besides, you've taken my money.' . . . Don't let

your father know of this, please, on no account whatever!"

"No, no. I will let you have the money to return to him."

Grammer rolled the head in question negatively upon the pillow. "Even if I should be well enough to take it to him he won't like it. Though why he should so particular want to look into the works of a poor old woman's head-piece like mine, when there's so many other folks about, I don't know. I know how he'll answer me: 'A lonely person like you, Grammer,' er woll say; 'what difference is it to you what becomes of ye when the breath's out of your body?' Oh, it do trouble me! If you only knew how he do chevy me round the chimmer in my dreams you'd pity me. How I could do it I can't think! But 'ch was always so rackless! . . . If I only had anybody to plead for me!"

"Mrs. Melbury would, I am sure."

"Ay; but he wouldn't hearken to she! It wants a younger face than hers to work upon such as he."

Grace started with comprehension. "You don't think he would do it for me?" she said.

"Oh, wouldn't he!"

"I couldn't go to him, Grammer, on any account. I don't know him at all."

"Ah, if I were a young lady," said the artful Grammer, "and could save a poor old woman's skellington from a heathen's chopper, to rest in a Christian grave, I would do it, and be glad to. But nobody will do anything for a poor old woman but push her out of the way!"

"You are very ungrateful, Grammer, to say that. But you are ill, I know, and that's why you speak so. Now believe me you are not going to die yet. Remember

you told me yourself that you meant to keep him waiting many a year."

"Ay, one can joke when one is well, even in old age; but in sickness one's gaiety falters; and that which seemed small looks large; and the grim far-off seems near."

Grace's eyes had tears in them. "I don't like to go to him on such an errand, Grammer," she said brokenly. "But I will, if I must, to ease your mind!"

It was with extreme reluctance that Grace cloaked herself next morning for the undertaking. She was all the more indisposed to the journey by reason of Grammer's allusion to the effect of a pretty face upon Dr. Fitzpiers; and hence she most illogically did that which, had the doctor never seen her, would have operated to stultify the sole motive of her journey; that is to say, she put on a woollen veil

which hid all her face except an occasional spark of her eyes.

Her own wish that nothing should be known of this strange and gruesome proceeding, no less than Grammer Oliver's own desire, led Grace to take every precaution against being discovered. She went out by the garden-door as the safest way, all the household having occupations at the other side. The morning looked forbidding enough when she stealthily edged forth. The battle between frost and thaw was continuing in mid-air: the trees dripped on the garden-plots, where no vegetables would grow for the dripping, though they were planted year after year with that curious mechanical regularity of country people in the face of hopelessness; the moss which covered the once broad gravel terrace was swamped; and Grace stood irresolute. Then she thought of

poor Grammer, and her dreams of the doctor running after her scalpel in hand, and the possibility of a case so curiously similar to South's ending in the same way; thereupon she stepped out into the drizzle.

The nature of her errand, and Grammer Oliver's account of the compact she had made, lent a fascinating horror to Grace's conception of Fitzpiers. She knew that he was a young man; but her single object in seeking an interview with him put all considerations of his age and social aspect from her mind. Standing, as she stood, in Grammer Oliver's shoes, he was simply a remorseless Jehovah of the sciences, who would not have mercy, and would have sacrifice; a man whom, save for this, she would have preferred to avoid knowing. But since, in such a small village, it was improbable that any long time could pass without their meeting, there was not much

to deplore in her having to meet him now.

But, as need hardly be said, Miss Melbury's view of the doctor as a merciless, unwavering, irresistible scientist, was not quite in accordance with fact. The real Dr. Fitzpiers was a man of too many hobbies to show likelihood of rising to any great eminence in the profession he had chosen, or even to acquire any wide practice in the rural district he had marked out as his field of survey for the present. In the course of a year his mind was accustomed to pass in a grand solar sweep throughout the zodiac of the intellectual heaven. Sometimes it was in the Ram, sometimes in the Bull ; one month he would be immersed in alchemy, another in poesy ; one month in the Twins of astrology and astronomy ; then in the Crab of German literature and metaphysics. In justice to him it must be

stated that he took such studies as were immediately related to his own profession in turn with the rest, and it had been in a month of anatomical ardour without the possibility of a subject that he had proposed to Grammer Oliver the terms she had mentioned to her mistress.

As may be inferred from the tone of his conversation with Winterborne, he had lately plunged into abstract philosophy with much zest; perhaps his keenly appreciative, modern, unpractical mind found this a realm more to his taste than any other. Though his aims were desultory, Fitzpiers's mental constitution was not without its admirable side; a real inquirer he honestly was; even if the midnight rays of his lamp, visible so far through the trees of Hintock, lighted rank literatures of emotion and passion as often as, or oftener than, the books and *matériel* of science.

But whether he meditated the Muses or the philosophers, the loneliness of Hintock life was beginning to tell upon his impressionable nature. Winter in a solitary house in the country, without society, is tolerable, nay, even enjoyable and delightful, given certain conditions; but these are not the conditions which attach to the life of a professional man who drops down into such a place by mere accident. They were present to the lives of Winterborne, Melbury, and Grace; but not to the doctor's. They are old association—an almost exhaustive biographical or historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer's horizon. He must know all about those invisible ones of the days gone by, whose feet have traversed the fields which look so grey from his windows; recall whose creaking plough has turned those sods from time to time; whose hands planted

the trees that form a crest to the opposite hill; whose horses and hounds have torn through that underwood; what birds affect that particular brake; what bygone domestic dramas of love, jealousy, revenge, or disappointment, have been enacted in the cottages, the mansions, the street, or on the green. The spot may have beauty, grandeur, salubrity, convenience; but if it lack memories it will ultimately pall upon him who settles there without opportunity of intercourse with his kind.

In such circumstances, maybe, an old man dreams of an ideal friend, till he throws himself into the arms of any impostor who chooses to wear that title on his face. A young man may dream of an ideal friend likewise, but some humour of the blood will probably lead him to think rather of an ideal mistress, and at length the rustle of a woman's dress, the sound of her voice, or

the transit of her form across the field of his vision will enkindle his soul with a flame that blinds his eyes.

The discovery of the attractive Grace's name and family would have been enough in other circumstances to lead the doctor, if not to put her personality out of his head, to change the character of his interest in her. Instead of treasuring her image as a rarity he would at most have played with her as a toy. He was that kind of man. But situated here he could not go so far as amative cruelty. He dismissed all deferential thought about her, but he could not help taking her somewhat seriously.

He went on to imagine the impossible. So far, indeed, did he go in this futile direction that, as others are wont to do, he constructed dialogues and scenes in which Grace had turned out to be the mistress of Hintock Manor-house, the mysterious Mrs.

Charmond, particularly ready and willing to be wooed by himself and nobody else.

"Well, she isn't that," he said finally. "But she's a very sweet, nice, exceptional girl."

The next morning he breakfasted alone, as usual. It was snowing with a fine-flaked desultoriness just sufficient to make the woodland grey, without ever achieving whiteness. There was not a single letter for Fitzpiers, only a medical circular and a weekly newspaper.

To sit before a large fire on such mornings, and read, and gradually acquire energy till the evening came, and then, with lamp alight, and feeling full of vigour, to pursue some engrossing subject or other till the small hours, had hitherto been his practice since arriving here. But to-day he could not settle into his chair. That self-contained position he had lately occupied, in which his

whole attention was given to objects of the inner eye, all outer regard being quite disdainful, seemed to have been taken by insidious stratagem, and for the first time he had an interest without the house. He walked from one window to another, and became aware that the most irksome of solitudes is not the solitude of remoteness, but that which is just outside desirable company.

The breakfast hour went by heavily enough, and the next followed, in the same half-snowy, half-rainy style, the weather now being the inevitable relapse which sooner or later succeeds a time too radiant for the season, such as they had enjoyed in the late mid-winter at Hintock. To people at home there these changeful tricks had their interests; the strange mistakes that some of the more sanguine trees had made in budding before their month, to be incontinently glued up by frozen thawings

now ; the similar sanguine errors of impulsive birds in framing nests that were swamped by snow-water, and other such incidents, prevented any sense of wearisomeness in the minds of the natives. But these were features of a world not familiar to Fitzpiers, and the inner visions to which he had almost exclusively attended having suddenly failed in their power to absorb him he felt unutterably dreary.

He wondered how long Miss Melbury was going to stay in Hintock. The season was unpropitious for accidental encounters with her out of doors, and except by accident he saw not how they were to become acquainted. One thing was clear—any acquaintance with her could only, with a due regard to his future, be casual, at most of the nature of a mild flirtation ; for he had high aims, and they would some day lead him into other spheres than this.

Thus desultorily thinking he flung himself down upon the couch, which, as in many draughty old country houses, was constructed with a hood, being in fact a legitimate development from the settle. He tried to read as he reclined, but having sat up till three o'clock that morning, the book slipped from his hand and he fell asleep.

CHAPTER II.

GRACE approached the house. Her knock, always soft in virtue of her nature, was softer to-day by reason of her strange errand. However, it was heard by the farmer's wife who kept the house, and Grace was admitted. Opening the door of the doctor's room the housewife glanced in, and imagining Fitzpiers absent, asked Miss Melbury to enter and wait a few minutes whilst she should go and find him, believing him to be somewhere on the premises. Grace acquiesced, went in and sat down close to the door.

As soon as the door was shut upon her she

looked round the room, and started at perceiving a handsome man snugly ensconced on the couch, like a recumbent figure within some canopied mural tomb of the fifteenth century, except that his hands were not exactly clasped in prayer. She had no doubt that this was the doctor.

Awaken him herself she could not, and her immediate impulse was to go and pull the broad riband with a brass rosette which hung at one side of the fireplace. But expecting the landlady to re-enter in a moment she abandoned this intention, and stood gazing in great embarrassment at the reclining philosopher.

The windows of Fitzpiers's soul being at present shuttered he probably appeared less impressive than in his hours of animation; but the light abstracted from his material features by sleep was more than counterbalanced by the mysterious influence of that

state, in a stranger, upon the consciousness of a beholder so sensitive. So far as she could criticise at all, she became aware that she had encountered a specimen of creation altogether unusual in that locality. The occasions on which Grace had observed men of this stamp were when she had been far away from Hintock, and even then such examples as had met her eye were at a distance, and mainly of commoner fibre than the one who now confronted her.

She nervously wondered why the woman had not discovered her mistake and returned, and went again towards the bell-pull. Approaching the chimney her back was to Fitzpiers, but she could see him in the glass. An indescribable thrill passed through her as she perceived that the eyes of the reflected image were open, gazing wonderingly at her. Under the curious unexpectedness of the sight she became as if spell-bound, almost

powerless to turn her head and regard the original. However, by an effort she did turn, when there he lay asleep the same as before.

Her startled perplexity as to what he could be meaning was sufficient to lead her to precipitately abandon her errand. She crossed quickly to the door, opened and closed it noiselessly, and went out of the house unobserved. By the time that she had gone down the path and through the garden-door into the lane she had recovered her equanimity. Here, screened by the hedge, she stood and considered a while.

Drip, drip, drip, fell the rain upon her umbrella and around; she had come out on such a morning because of the seriousness of the matter in hand; yet now she had allowed her mission to be stultified by a momentary tremulousness concerning an incident which perhaps had meant nothing after all.

In the meantime her departure from the room, stealthy as it had been, had roused Fitzpiers; and he sat up. In the reflection from the mirror which Grace had beheld there was no mystery; he had opened his eyes for a few moments, but had immediately relapsed into unconsciousness, if indeed he had ever been positively awake. That somebody had just left the room he was certain, and that the lovely form which seemed to have visited him in a dream was no less than the real presentation of the person departed he could hardly doubt.

Looking out of the window a few minutes later, down the box-edged gravel-path which led to the bottom, he saw the garden-door gently open, and through it enter the young girl of his thoughts, Grace having just at this juncture determined to return and attempt the interview a second time. That he saw her coming instead of going made him ask

himself if his first impression of her were not a dream indeed. She came hesitatingly along, carrying her umbrella so low over her head that he could hardly see her face. When she reached the point where the raspberry-bushes ended and the strawberry-bed began she made a little pause.

Fitzpiers feared that she might not be coming to him even now, and hastily quitting the room he ran down the path to meet her. The nature of her errand he could not divine, but he was prepared to give her any amount of encouragement.

"I beg pardon, Miss Melbury," he said. "I saw you from the window, and fancied you might imagine that I was not at home—if it is I you were coming for?"

"I was coming to speak one word to you, nothing more," she replied. "And I can say it here."

"No, no. Please do come in. Well then,

if you will not come into the house, come so far as the porch!"

Thus pressed she went on to the porch, and they stood together inside it, Fitzpiers closing her umbrella for her.

"I have merely a request or petition to make," she said. "My father's servant is ill—a woman you know—and her illness is serious."

"I am sorry to hear it. You wish me to come and see her at once?"

"No, I particularly wish you not to come."

"Oh, indeed."

"Yes; and she wishes the same. It would make her seriously worse if you were to come. It would almost kill her. . . . My errand is of a peculiar and awkward nature. It is concerning a subject which weighs on her mind — that unfortunate arrangement she made with you, that you might have her body——after death."

"Oh, Grammer Oliver, the old woman with the fine head. Seriously ill, is she!"

"And *so* disturbed by her rash compact! I have brought the money back—will you please return to her the agreement she signed?" Grace held out to him a couple of five-pound notes which she had kept ready tucked in her glove.

Without replying or considering the notes Fitzpiers allowed his thoughts to follow his eyes and dwell upon Grace's personality, and the sudden close relation in which he stood to her. The porch was narrow; the rain increased. It ran off the porch and dripped on the creepers, and from the creepers upon the edge of Grace's cloak and skirts.

"The rain is wetting your dress; please do come in," he said. "It really makes my heart ache to let you stay here."

Immediately inside the front door was the door of his sitting-room; he flung it open,

and stood in a coaxing attitude. Try how she would Grace could not resist the supplicatory mandate written in the face and manner of this man, and distressful resignation sat on her as she glided past him into the room—brushing his coat with her elbow because of the narrowness.

He followed her, shut the door—which she somehow had hoped he would leave open—and placing a chair for her sat down.

The concern which Grace felt at the development of these commonplace incidents was, of course, mainly owing to the strange effect upon her nerves of that view of him in the mirror gazing at her with open eyes when she had thought him sleeping, which made her fancy that his slumber might have been a feint based on inexplicable reasons.

She again proffered the notes; he awoke from looking at her as at a piece of live

statuary, and listened deferentially as she said, "Will you then reconsider, and cancel the bond which poor Grammer Oliver so foolishly gave?"

"I'll cancel it without reconsideration. Though you will allow me to have my own opinion about her foolishness. Grammer is a very wise woman, and she was as wise in that as in other things. You think there was something very fiendish in the compact, do you not, Miss Melbury? But remember that the most eminent of our surgeons in past times have entered into such agreements."

"Not fiendish—strange."

"Yes, that may be, since strangeness is not in the nature of a thing, but in its relation to something extrinsic—in this case an unessential observer."

He went to his desk, and searching awhile found a paper, which he unfolded and

brought to her. A thick cross appeared in ink at the bottom—evidently from the hand of Grammer. Grace put the paper in her pocket with a look of much relief.

As Fitzpiers did not take up the money (half of which had come from Grace's own purse), she pushed it a little nearer to him. "No, no. I shall not take it from the old woman," he said. "It is more strange than the fact of a surgeon arranging to obtain a subject for dissection that our acquaintance should be formed out of it."

"I am afraid you think me uncivil in showing my dislike to the notion. But I did not mean to be."

"Oh, no, no."

He looked at her, as he had done before, with puzzled interest. "I cannot think, I cannot think," he murmured. "Something bewilders me greatly." He still reflected and hesitated. "Last night I sat up very

late," he at last went on, "and on that account I fell into a little nap on that couch about half an hour ago. And during my few minutes of unconsciousness I dreamt—what do you think ?—that you stood in the room."

Should she tell ? She merely blushed.

"You may imagine," Fitzpiers continued, now persuaded that it had indeed been a dream, "that I should not have dreamt of you without considerable thinking about you first."

He could not be acting ; of that she felt assured.

"I fancied in my vision that you stood there," he said, pointing to where she had paused. "I did not see you directly, but reflected in the glass. I thought, what a lovely creature ! The design is for once carried out. Nature has at last recovered her lost union with the Idea ! My thoughts ran in that direction because I had been

reading the work of a transcendental philosopher last night; and I dare say it was the dose of Idealism that I received from it that made me scarcely able to distinguish between reality and fancy. I almost wept when I awoke, and found that you had appeared to me in Time, but not in Space, alas!"

At moments there was something theatrical in the delivery of Fitzpiers's effusion; yet it would have been inexact to say that it was intrinsically theatrical. It often happens that in situations of unrestraint, where there is no thought of the eye of criticism, real feeling glides into a mode of manifestation not easily distinguishable from rodomontade. A veneer of affectation overlies a bulk of truth, with the evil consequence, if perceived, that the substance is estimated by the superficies, and the whole rejected.

Grace, however, was no specialist in men's

manners, and she admired the sentiment without thinking of the form. And she was embarrassed; "lovely creature" made explanation awkward to her gentle modesty.

"But can it be," said he suddenly, "that you really were here?"

"I have to confess that I have been in the room once before," faltered she. "The woman showed me in, and went away to fetch you; but as she did not return, I left."

"And you saw me asleep," he murmured, with the faintest show of humiliation.

"Yes—*if* you were asleep, and did not deceive me."

"Why do you say if?"

"I saw your eyes open in the glass, but as they were closed when I looked round upon you, I thought you were perhaps deceiving me."

"Never," said Fitzpiers fervently. "Never could I deceive you."

Foreknowledge to the distance of a year or so, in either of them, might have spoilt the effect of that pretty speech. Never deceive her! But they knew nothing, and the phrase had its day.

Grace began now to be anxious to terminate the interview, but the compelling power of Fitzpiers's atmosphere still held her there. She was like an inexperienced actress who, having at last taken up her position on the boards, and spoken her speeches, does not know how to move off. The thought of Grammer occurred to her. "I'll go at once and tell poor Grammer of your generosity," she said. "It will relieve her at once."

"Grammer's is a nervous disease, too—singular," he answered, accompanying how her to the door. "One moment: look at this—it is something which may interest you."

He had thrown open the door on the other side of the passage, and she saw a microscope on the table of the confronting room. "Look into it, please; you'll be interested," he repeated.

She applied her eye, and saw the usual circle of light patterned all over with a cellular tissue of some indescribable sort. "What do you think that is?" said Fitzpiers.

She did not know.

"That's a fragment of old John South's brain, which I am investigating."

She started back, not with aversion, but with wonder as to how it should have got there. Fitzpiers laughed.

"Here am I," he said, "endeavouring to carry on simultaneously the study of physiology and transcendental philosophy, the material world and the ideal, so as to discover if possible a point of contact

between them; and your finer sense is quite offended!"

"Oh, no, Mr. Fitzpiers," said Grace earnestly; "it is not so at all. I know from seeing your light at night how deeply you meditate and work. Instead of condemning you for your studies I admire you very much!"

Her face, upturned from the microscope, was so sweet, sincere, and self-forgetful in its aspect that the susceptible Fitzpiers more than wished to annihilate the lineal yard which separated it from his own. Whether anything of the kind showed in his eyes or not, Grace remained no longer at the microscope, but quickly went her way into the rain.

CHAPTER III.

INSTEAD of resuming his investigation of South's brain (which perhaps was not so interesting under the microscope as might have been expected from the importance of that organ in life) Fitzpiers reclined and ruminated on the interview. Grace's curious susceptibility to his presence, though it was as if the currents of her life were disturbed rather than attracted by him, added a special interest to her general charm.

Fitzpiers was in a distinct degree scientific, being ready and zealous to interrogate all physical manifestations, but primarily he

was an idealist. He believed that behind the imperfect lay the perfect; that rare things were to be discovered amidst a bulk of commonplace; that results in a new and untried case might be different from those in other cases where the material conditions had been precisely similar. Regarding his own personality as one of unbounded possibilities, because it was his own (notwithstanding that the factors of his life had worked out a sorry product for thousands), he saw a grand speciality in his discovery at Hintock of an altogether exceptional being of the other sex.

One habit of Fitzpiers's, commoner in dreamers of more advanced age than in men of his years, was that of talking to himself. He paced round his room with a selective tread upon the more prominent blooms of the carpet, and murmured: "This phenomenal girl will be the light of my life while

I am at Hintock; and the special beauty of the situation is that our attitude and relations to each other will be purely casual. Socially we can never be intimate. Anything like matrimonial intentions towards her, charming as she is, would be absurd. They would spoil the recreative character of such acquaintance. And, indeed, I have other aims on the practical side of my life."

Fitzpiers bestowed a regulation thought on the advantageous marriage he was bound to make with a woman of family as good as his own, and of purse much longer. But as an object of contemplation for the present, Grace Melbury would serve to keep his soul alive, and to relieve the monotony of his days.

His first notion (acquired from the mere sight of her without converse)—that of an idle and vulgar intimacy with a timber-

merchant's pretty daughter, grated painfully upon him now that he had found what Grace intrinsically was. Personal intercourse with such as she could take no lower form than seemly communion, mutual explorations of the world of fancy. Since he could not call at her father's, having no practical views, cursory encounters in the lane, in the wood, coming and going to and from church, or in passing her dwelling, were what the acquaintance would have to feed on.

Such anticipated glimpses of her realised themselves in the event. Rencounters of not more than a minute's duration, frequently repeated, will build up mutual interest, even warm confidence, in a lonely place. Theirs grew as imperceptibly as the twigs budded on the trees. There never was a particular moment at which it could be said they became friends; yet a delicate understand-

ing now existed between two who in the winter had been strangers.

Spring weather came on rather suddenly, the unsealing of buds that had long been swollen accomplishing itself in the space of one warm night. The rush of sap in the veins of the trees could almost be heard. The flowers of late April took up a position unseen, and looked as if they had been blooming a long while, though there had been no trace of them the day before yesterday ; birds began not to mind getting wet. In-door people said they had heard the nightingale, to which out-door people replied contemptuously that they had heard him a fortnight before.

The young doctor's practice being scarcely so large as a London surgeon's, he frequently walked in the wood. Indeed such practice as he had he did not follow up with the assiduity that would have been

necessary for developing it to exceptional proportions. One day, book in hand, he went to a part of the wood where the trees were mainly oaks. It was a calm afternoon, and there was everywhere around that sign of great undertakings on the part of vegetable nature which is apt to fill reflective human beings who are not undertaking much themselves with a sudden uneasiness at the contrast. He heard in the distance a curious sound, something like the quack of a duck, which, though it was common enough here about this time, was not common to him.

Looking through the trees Fitzpiers soon perceived the origin of the noise. The barking season had just commenced, and what he had heard was the tear of the ripping-tool as it ploughed its way along the sticky parting between the trunk and the rind. Melbury did a large business in bark, and as he was Grace's father, and

possibly might be found on the spot, Fitzpiers was attracted to the scene even more than he might have been by its intrinsic interest. When he got nearer he recognised among the workmen John Upjohn, the two Timothys, and Robert Creedle, who probably had been "lent" by Winterborne; Marty South also assisted. A milking-pail of cider stood near, a half-pint cup floating on it, with which they dipped and drank whenever they passed the pail.

Each tree doomed to the flaying process was first attacked by Upjohn. With a small bill-hook he carefully freed the collar of the tree from twigs and patches of moss which encrusted it to a height of a foot or two above the ground, an operation comparable to the "little toilette" of the executioner's victim. After this it was barked in its erect position to a point as high as a man could reach. If a fine product of

vegetable nature could ever be said to look ridiculous it was the case now, when the oak stood naked-legged, and as if ashamed, till the axe-man came and cut a ring round it, and the two Timothys finished the work with the cross-cut saw.

As soon as it had fallen the barkers attacked it like locusts, and in a short time not a particle of rind was left on the trunk and larger limbs. Marty South was an adept at peeling the upper parts ; and there she stood encaged amid the mass of twigs and buds like a great bird, running her tool into the smallest branches, beyond the furthest points to which the skill and patience of the men enabled them to proceed—branches which, in their lifetime, had swayed high above the bulk of the wood, and caught the earliest rays of the sun and moon while the lower part of the forest was still in darkness.

"You seem to have a better instrument than they, Marty," said Fitzpiers.

"No, sir," she said, holding up the tool, a horse's leg-bone fitted into a handle and filed to an edge; "'tis only that they've less patience with the twigs, because their time is worth more than mine."

A little shed had been constructed on the spot, of thatched hurdles and boughs, and in front of it was a fire, over which a kettle sang. Fitzpiers sat down inside the shelter, and went on with his reading, except when he looked up to observe the scene and the actors.

The thought that he might settle here and become welded in with this sylvan life by marrying Grace Melbury crossed his mind for a moment. Why should he go further into the world than where he was? The secret of quiet happiness lay in limiting the aspirations; these men's thoughts were

conterminous with the margin of the Hintock woodlands, and why should not his be likewise limited—a small practice among the people around him being the bound of his desires ?

Presently Marty South discontinued her operations upon the quivering boughs, came out from the reclining oak, and prepared tea. When it was ready the men were called ; and Fitzpiers, being in a mood to join, sat down with them.

The latent reason of his lingering here so long revealed itself when the faint creaking of the joints of a vehicle became audible, and one of the men said, "Here's he." Turning their heads they saw Melbury's gig approaching, the wheels muffled by the yielding moss.

The timber-merchant was on foot leading the horse, looking back at every few steps to caution his daughter, who kept her seat, where

and how to duck her head so as to avoid the overhanging branches. They stopped at the spot where the bark-ripping had been temporarily suspended; Melbury cursorily examined the heaps of bark, and drawing near to where the workmen were sitting down, accepted their shouted invitation to have a dish of tea, for which purpose he hitched the horse to a bough.

Grace declined to take any of their beverage, and remained in her place in the vehicle, looking dreamily at the sunlight that came in thin threads through the hollies with which the oaks were interspersed.

When Melbury stepped up close to the shelter, he for the first time perceived that the doctor was present, and warmly appreciated Fitzpiers's invitation to sit down on the log beside him.

"Bless my heart, who would have

thought of finding you here," he said, obviously much pleased at the circumstance. "I wonder now if my daughter knows you are so nigh at hand? I don't expect she do."

He looked out towards the gig wherein Grace sat, her face still turned sunward in the opposite direction.

"She doesn't see us," said Melbury. "Well, never mind; let her be."

Grace was indeed quite unconscious of Fitzpiers's propinquity. She was thinking of something which had little connection with the scene before her—thinking of her friend, lost as soon as found, Mrs. Charmond; of her capricious conduct, and of the contrasting scenes she was possibly enjoying at that very moment in other climes, to which Grace herself had hoped to be introduced by her friend's means. She wondered if this patronising lady would return to

Hintock during the summer, and whether the acquaintance which had been nipped on the last occasion of her residence there would develop on the next.

Melbury told ancient timber-stories as he sat, relating them directly to Fitzpiers, and obliquely to the men, who had heard them often before. Marty, who poured out tea, was just saying, "I think I'll take out a cup to Miss Grace," when they heard a clashing of the gig-harness, and turning round Melbury saw that the horse had become restless, and was jerking about the vehicle in a way which alarmed its occupant, though she refrained from screaming. Melbury jumped up immediately, but not more quickly than Fitzpiers; and while her father ran to the horse's head and speedily began to control him, Fitzpiers was alongside the gig assisting Grace to descend

Her surprise at his appearance was so great that, far from making a calm and independent descent, she was very nearly lifted down in his arms. He relinquished her when she touched ground, and hoped she was not frightened.

"Oh, no, not much," she managed to say. "There was no danger—unless the mare had run under the trees where the boughs are low enough to hit my head."

"Which was by no means an impossibility, and justifies any amount of alarm."

He referred to what he thought he saw written in her face, and she could not tell him that this had little to do with the horse, but much with himself. His contiguity had, in fact, the same effect upon her as on those former occasions when he had come closer to her than usual—that of producing in her an unaccountable tendency to tearfulness. Melbury soon put the horse

to rights, and seeing that Grace was safe, turned again to the work-people.

His daughter's nervous distress had passed off in a few moments, and she said quite gaily to Fitzpiers as she walked with him towards the group, "There's destiny in it, you see. I was doomed to join in your picnic, although I did not intend to do so."

Marty prepared her a comfortable place, and she sat down in the circle, and listened to Fitzpiers while he drew from her father and the bark-rippers sundry narratives of their fathers', their grandfathers', and their own adventures in these woods; of the mysterious sights they had seen—only to be accounted for by supernatural agency; of white witches and black witches; and the standard story of the spirits of the Two Brothers who had fought and fallen, and had haunted Hintock House till they were

exorcised by the priest, and compelled to retreat to a swamp in this very wood, whence they were returning to their old quarters at the rate of a cock's stride every New Year's Day, Old Style; hence the local saying, "On new-year's tide, a cock's stride."

It was a pleasant time. The smoke from the little fire of peeled sticks rose between the sitters and the sunlight, and behind its blue films stretched the naked arms of the prostrate trees. The smell of the uncovered sap mingled with the smell of the burning wood, and the sticky inner surface of the scattered bark glistened as it revealed its pale madder hues to the eye. Melbury was so highly satisfied at having Fitzpiers as a sort of guest that he would have sat on for any length of time, but Grace, on whom Fitzpiers's eyes only too frequently alighted, seemed to think it

incumbent upon her to make a show of going; and her father thereupon accompanied her to the gig.

As the doctor had helped her out of it he appeared to think that he had excellent reasons for helping her in, and performed the attention lingeringly enough.

"What were you almost in tears about just now?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," she said; and the words were strictly true.

Melbury mounted on the other side, and they drove on out of the grove, their wheels silently crushing delicate-patterned mosses, hyacinths, primroses, lords-and-ladies, and other strange and common plants, and cracking up little sticks that lay across the track. Their way homeward ran along the crest of Rubdon Hill, whence on the left they beheld a wide valley, differing both in feature and atmo-

sphere from that of the Hintock precincts. It was the cider country, which met the woodland district on the axis of this hill. Over the vale the air was blue as sapphire —such a blue as outside that apple-valley was never seen. Under the blue the orchards were in a blaze of pink bloom, some of the richly flowered trees running almost up to where they drove along. At a gate, which opened down the incline, a man leant on his arms, regarding this fair promise so intently that he did not observe their passing.

"That was Giles," said Melbury when they had gone by.

"Was it? Poor Giles," said she.

"All that apple-blooth means heavy autumn work for him and his hands. If no blight happens before the setting, the cider yield will be such as we have not had for years."

Meanwhile, in the wood they had come from, the men had sat on so long that they were indisposed to begin work again that evening; they were paid by the ton, and their time for labour was as they chose. They placed the last gatherings of bark in rows for the curers, which led them further and further away from the shed; and thus they gradually withdrew homeward as the sun went down.

Fitzpiers lingered yet. He had opened his book again, though he could hardly see a word in it, and sat before the dying fire, scarcely knowing of the men's departure. He dreamed and mused till his consciousness seemed to occupy the whole space of the woodland round, so little was there of jarring sight or sound to hinder perfect mental unity with the sentiment of the place. The idea returned upon him of sacrificing all practical aims to live in calm contentment here, and

instead of going on elaborating new conceptions with infinite pains, to accept quiet domesticity according to oldest and homeliest notions. These reflections detained him till the wood was embrowned with the coming night, and the shy little bird of this dusky time had begun to pour out all the intensity of his eloquence from a bush not very far off.

Fitzpiers's eyes commanded as much of the ground in front as was open. Entering upon this he saw a figure, whose direction of movement was towards the spot where he sat. The surgeon was quite shrouded from observation by the recessed shadow of the hurdle-screen, and there was no reason why he should move till the stranger had passed by.

The shape resolved itself into a woman's; she was looking on the ground, and walking slowly as if searching for something that had

been lost, her course being precisely that of Mr. Melbury's gig. Fitzpiers by a sort of divination jumped to the idea that the figure was Grace's; her nearer approach made the guess a certainty.

Yes, she was looking for something; and she came round by the prostrate trees that would have been invisible but for their white nakedness, which enabled her to avoid them easily. Thus she approached the heap of ashes, and acting upon what was suggested by a still shining ember or two she took a stick and stirred the heap, which thereupon burst into a flame. On looking around by the light thus obtained she for the first time saw the illumined face of Fitzpiers, precisely in the spot where she had left him.

Grace gave a start and a scream; she had not the least expected to find him there still. Fitzpiers lost not a moment in rising and going to her side.

"I frightened you dreadfully, I know," he said. "I ought to have spoken; but I did not at first expect it to be you. I have been sitting here ever since."

He was actually supporting her with his arm as though under the impression that she was quite overcome and in danger of falling. As soon as she could collect her ideas she gently withdrew from his grasp, and explained what she had returned for: in getting up or down from the gig, or when sitting by the hut fire, she had dropped her purse.

"Now we will find it," said Fitzpiers.

He threw an armful of last year's leaves on to the fire, which made the flame leap higher, and the encompassing shades to weave themselves into a blacker contrast, turning eve into night in a moment. By this radiance they groped about on their hands and knees, till Fitzpiers rested on his elbow, and looked at Grace.

"We almost always meet in odd circumstances," he said; "and this is one of the oddest. I wonder if it means anything?"

"Oh, no, I am sure it doesn't," said Grace in haste, quickly assuming an erect posture. "Pray don't say it any more."

"I hope there was not much money in the purse," said Fitzpiers, rising to his feet more slowly, and brushing the leaves from his trousers.

"Scarcely any. I cared most about the purse itself, because it was given me. Indeed, money is of little more use at Hintock than on Crusoe's island; there's hardly any way of spending it."

They had given up the search when Fitzpiers discerned something by his foot. "Here it is!" he said. "So that your father, mother, friend, or *admirer* will not have his or her feelings hurt by a sense of your negligence after all."

"Oh, he knows nothing of what I do now."

"The admirer?" said Fitzpiers slyly.

"I don't know if you would call him that," said Grace with simplicity. "The admirer is a superficial, conditional creature, and this person is quite different."

"He has all the cardinal virtues?"

"Perhaps—though I don't know them precisely."

"You unconsciously practise them, Miss Melbury, which is better. According to Schleiermacher they are Self-control, Perseverance, Wisdom, and Love; and his is the best list that I know."

"I am afraid poor—" She was going to say that she feared Winterborne, the giver of the purse years before, had not much perseverance, though he had all the other three; but she determined to go no further in this direction, and was silent.

These half-revelations made a perceptible difference in Fitzpiers. His sense of personal superiority wasted away, and Grace assumed in his eyes the true aspect of a mistress in her lover's regard.

"Miss Melbury," he said suddenly; "I divine that this virtuous man you mention has been refused by you?"

She could do no otherwise than admit it.

"I did not inquire without good reason. God forbid that I should kneel in another's place at any shrine unfairly. But, my dear Miss Melbury, now that he is gone from the temple, may I draw near?"

"I—I can't say anything about that!" she cried quickly. "Because when a man has been refused you feel pity for him, and like him more than you did before."

This increasing complication added still more value to Grace in the surgeon's eyes:

it rendered her adorable. "But cannot you say?" he pleaded distractedly.

"I'd rather not—I think I must go home at once."

"Oh, yes," said Fitzpiers.

But as he did not move she felt it awkward to walk straight away from him; and so they stood silently together. A diversion was created by the accident of two birds, that had either been roosting above their heads or nesting there, tumbling one over the other into the hot ashes at their feet, apparently engrossed in a desperate quarrel that prevented the use of their wings. They speedily parted, however, and flew up, with a singed smell, and were seen no more.

"That's the end of what is called love," said some one.

The speaker was neither Grace nor Fitzpiers, but Marty South, who approached

with her face turned up to the sky in her endeavour to trace the birds. Suddenly perceiving Grace she exclaimed, "Oh—Miss Melbury!—I have been following they pigeons, and didn't see you. And here's Mr. Winterborne!" she continued shyly, as she looked towards Fitzpiers, who stood in the background.

"Marty," Grace interrupted; "I want you to walk home with me—will you? Come along." And without lingering longer she took hold of Marty's arm and led her away.

They went between the spectral arms of the peeled trees as they lay, and onward among the growing trees, by a path where there were no oaks, and no barking, and no Fitzpiers—nothing but copse wood, between which the primroses could be discerned in pale bunches.

"I — didn't know Mr. Winterborne

was there," said Marty, breaking the silence when they had nearly reached Grace's door.

"Nor was he," said Grace.

"But, Miss Melbury—I saw him."

"No," said Grace. "It was somebody else. Giles Winterborne is nothing to me."

CHAPTER IV.

THE leaves over Hintock unrolled their creased tissues, and the woodland seemed to change from an open filigree to a solid opaque body of infinitely larger shape and importance. The boughs cast green shades, which disagreed with the complexion of the girls who walked there; and a fringe of them which overhung Mr. Melbury's garden dripped on his seed-plots when it rained, pitting their surface all over as with pock-marks, till Melbury declared that gardens in such a place were no good at all. The two trees that had creaked all the winter

left off creaking, the whirr of the night-hawk, however, forming a very satisfactory continuation of uncanny music from that quarter. Except at midday the sun was not seen complete by the Hintock people, but rather in the form of numerous little stars staring through the leaves.

Such an appearance it had on Midsummer eve of this year, and as the hour grew later, and nine o'clock drew on, the irradiation of the day-time became broken up by weird shadows and ghostly nooks of indistinctness. Imagination could trace amid the trunks and boughs swarthy faces and funereal figures. This was before the moon rose. Later on, when that planet was getting command of the upper heaven, and consequently shining with an unbroken face into such open glades as there were in the neighbourhood of the hamlet, it became apparent that the margin of the wood which

approached the timber-merchant's premises was not to be left to the customary stillness of that reposeful time.

Fitzpiers having heard a voice or voices, was looking over his garden gate (where he now looked more frequently than into his books) fancying that Grace might be abroad with some friends. He was irretrievably committed in heart to Grace Melbury, though he was by no means sure that she was so far committed to him. That the Idea had for once completely fulfilled itself in the objective substance (which he had hitherto deemed an impossibility) he was enchanted enough to fancy must be the case at last.

It was not Grace who had passed, however, but several of the ordinary village girls in a group; some steadily walking, some in a mood of wild gaiety. He quietly asked his landlady, who was also in the garden, what these girls were intending, and she informed

him that it being old Midsummer eve, they were about to attempt some spell or enchantment which would afford them a glimpse of their future partners for life. She declared it to be an ungodly performance, and one that she for her part would never countenance; saying which she entered her house and retired to bed.

The young man lit a cigar, and followed the bevy of maidens slowly up the road. They had turned into the wood at an opening between Melbury's and Marty South's; but Fitzpiers could easily track them by their voices, low as they endeavoured to keep their tones.

In the meantime other inhabitants of Little Hintock had become aware of the nocturnal experiment about to be tried, and were also sauntering stealthily after the frisky maidens. Miss Melbury had been informed by Marty South during the day of

the proposed peep into futurity, and, being only a girl like the rest, she was sufficiently interested to wish to see the issue. The moon was so bright and the night so calm that she had no difficulty in persuading Mrs. Melbury to accompany her; and thus, joined by Marty, these went onward in the same direction.

Passing Winterborne's house they heard a noise of hammering. Marty explained it. This was the last night on which his paternal roof would shelter him, the days of grace since it fell into hand having expired; and Giles was taking down his cupboards and bedsteads with a view to an early exit next morning. His encounter with Mrs. Charmond had cost him dearly.

When they had proceeded a little further Marty was joined by Grammer Oliver (who was as young as the youngest in such matters), and Grace and Mrs. Melbury went

on by themselves till they had arrived at the spot chosen by the village daughters, whose primary intention of keeping their expedition a secret had been quite defeated. Grace and her stepmother paused by a holly tree ; and at a little distance stood Fitzpiers under the shade of a young oak, intently observing Grace, who was in the full rays of the moon.

He watched her without speaking, and unperceived by any but Marty and Grammer, who had drawn up on the dark side of the same holly which sheltered Mrs. and Miss Melbury on its bright side. The two former conversed in low tones.

"If they two come up in wood next Midsummer night they'll come as one," said Grammer, signifying Fitzpiers and Grace. "Instead of my skellinton he'll carry home her living carcase before long. But though she's a lady in herself, and

worthy of any such as he, it do seem to me that he ought to marry somebody more of the sort of Mrs. Charmond, and that Miss Grace should make the best of Winterborne."

Marty returned no comment; and at that minute the girls, some of whom were from Great Hintock, were seen advancing to work the incantation, it being now about midnight.

"Directly we see anything we'll run home as fast as we can," said one, whose courage had begun to fail her. To this the rest assented, not knowing that a dozen neighbours lurked in the bushes around.

"I wish we had not thought of trying this," said another, "but had contented ourselves with the hole-digging to-morrow at twelve, and hearing our husband's trades. It is too much like having dealings with the evil one to try to raise their forms."

However, they had gone too far to recede,

and slowly began to march forward in a skirmishing line through the trees, each intending to plunge alone into the deeper recesses of the wood. As far as the listeners could gather, the particular form of black art to be practised on this occasion was one connected with the sowing of hemp-seed, a handful of which was carried by each girl.

At the moment of their advance they looked back, and discerned the figure of Miss Melbury who, alone of all the observers, stood in the full face of the moonlight, deeply engrossed in the proceedings. By contrast with her life of late years they made her feel as if she had receded a couple of centuries in the world's history. She was rendered doubly conspicuous by her light dress, and after a few whispered words, one of the girls (a bouncing maiden, plighted to young Timothy Tangs) asked her if she would

join in, Grace with some excitement said that she would, and moved on a little in the rear of the rest.

Soon the listeners could hear nothing of their proceedings beyond the faintest occasional rustle of leaves. Grammer whispered again to Marty: "Why didn't ye go and try your luck with the rest of the maids?"

"I don't believe in it!" said Marty shortly.

"Why, half the parish is here; the silly hussies should have kept it quiet. I see Mr. Winterborne through the leaves, just come up with Robert Creedle. Marty, we ought to act the part o' Providence sometimes. Do go and tell him that if he stands just behind the bush at the bottom of the slope, Miss Grace must pass down it when she comes back, and she will most likely rush into his arms; for as soon as the clock strikes they'll bundle

back home along like hares. I've seen such larries before."

"Do you think I'd better?" said Marty reluctantly.

"Oh yes, he'll bless ye for it."

"I don't want that kind of blessing!"

But after a moment's thought she went, and delivered the information; and Grammer had the satisfaction of seeing Giles walk slowly to the bend in the leafy defile along which Grace would have to return.

Meanwhile Mrs. Melbury, deserted by Grace, had perceived Fitzpiers and Winterborne, and also the move of the latter. An improvement on Grammer's idea entered the mind of Mrs. Melbury, for she had lately discerned what her husband had not, that Grace was rapidly fascinating the surgeon. She therefore drew near to Fitzpiers.

"You should be where Mr. Winterborne is standing," she said to him significantly. "She will run down through that opening much faster than she went up it, if she is like the rest of the girls."

Fitzpiers did not require to be told twice. He went across to Winterborne, and stood beside him. Each knew the probable purpose of the other in standing there, and neither spoke, Fitzpiers scorning to look upon Winterborne as a rival, and Winterborne adhering to the off-hand manner of indifference which had grown upon him since his dismissal.

Neither Grammer nor Marty South had seen the surgeon's manœuvre, and still to help Winterborne, as she supposed, the old woman suggested to the wood-girl that she should walk forward at the heels of Grace, and "tole" her down the required way if she showed a tendency

to run in another direction. Poor Marty, always doomed to sacrifice desire to obligation, walked forward accordingly, and waited as a beacon, still and silent, for the retreat of Grace and her giddy companions, now quite out of hearing.

The first sound to break the silence was the distant note of Great Hintock clock striking the significant hour. About a minute later that quarter of the wood to which the girls had wandered resounded with the flapping of disturbed birds; then two or three hares and rabbits bounded down the glade from the same direction, and after these the rustling and crackling of leaves and dead twigs denoted the hurried approach of the adventurers, whose fluttering gowns soon became visible.

Miss Melbury, having gone forward quite in the rear of the rest, was one of the first to return, and the excitement

being contagious, she ran laughing towards Marty, who still stood as a handpost to guide her; then, passing on, she flew round the fatal bush where the undergrowth narrowed to a gorge. Marty arrived at her heels just in time to see the result. Fitzpiers had quickly stepped forward in front of Winterborne, who disdaining to shift his position had turned on his heel, and then the surgeon did what he would not have thought of doing but for Mrs. Melbury's encouragement and the sentiment of an eve which effaced conventionality. Stretching out his arms as the white figure burst upon him, he captured her in a moment, as if she had been a bird.

"Oh!" cried Grace in her fright.

"You are in my arms, dearest," said Fitzpiers; "and I am going to claim you, and keep you there all our two lives!"

She rested on him like one utterly mastered; and it was several seconds before she recovered from this helplessness. Subdued screams and struggles, audible from neighbouring brakes, revealed that there had been other lurkers thereabout for a similar purpose. Grace, unlike most of these companions of hers, instead of giggling and writhing, said in a trembling voice, "Mr. Fitzpiers, will you let me go?"

"Certainly," he said laughing; "as soon as you have recovered."

She waited another few moments, then quietly and firmly pushed him aside, and glided on her path, the moon whitening her hot blush away. But it had been enough; new relations between them had begun.

The case of the other girls was different, as has been said. They wrestled and

tittered, only escaping after a desperate struggle. Fitzpiers could hear these enactments still going on after Grace had left him, and he remained on the spot where he had caught her, Winterborne having gone away. On a sudden another girl came bounding down the same descent that had been followed by Grace; a fine-framed young woman, with bare arms. Seeing Fitzpiers standing there, she said with playful effrontery: "May'st kiss me if 'canst catch me, Tim!"

Fitzpiers recognised her as Suke Damson, a hoydenish maiden of the hamlet, who was plainly mistaking him for her lover. He was impulsively disposed to profit by her error, and as soon as she began racing away he started in pursuit.

On she went under the boughs, now in light, now in shade, looking over her shoulder at him every few moments and

kissing her hand ; but so cunningly dodging about among the trees and moon-shades that she never allowed him to get dangerously near her. Thus they ran and doubled, Fitzpiers warming with the chase, till the sound of their companions had quite died away.

He began to lose hope of ever overtaking her, when all at once, by way of encouragement, she turned to a fence in which there was a stile, and leapt over it. Outside, the scene was a changed one ; a meadow, where the half-made hay lay about in heaps, in the uninterrupted shine of the now high moon.

Fitzpiers saw in a moment that, having taken to open ground, she had placed herself at his mercy, and he promptly vaulted over after her. She flitted a little way down the mead, when all at once her elusive form disappeared, as if it had sunk

into the earth. She had buried herself in one of the hay-cocks.

Fitzpiers, now thoroughly excited, was not going to let her escape him thus. He approached, and set about turning over the heaps one by one. As soon as he paused, tantalised and puzzled, he was directed anew by an imitative kiss which came from her hiding-place, and by snatches of a local ballad, in the smallest voice she could assume :—

"Oh, come in from the foggy, foggy dew."

In a minute or two he uncovered her.

"Oh—'tis not Tim!" said she, burying her face.

Fitzpiers, however, disregarded her resistance by reason of its mildness, stooped, and imprinted the purposed kiss, then sank down on the next hay-cock, panting with his race.

"Whom do you mean by Tim?" he asked presently.

"My young man, Tim Tangs," said she.

"Now, honour bright, did you really think it was he?"

"I did at first."

"But you didn't at last."

"I didn't at last."

"Do you much mind that it is not?"

"No," she answered slyly.

Fitzpiers kissed her again.

He did not pursue his questioning. In the moonlight Suke looked very beautiful, the scratches and blemishes incidental to her outdoor occupation being invisible under these pale rays. While they remained silent the coarse whirr of the eternal night-hawk burst sarcastically from the top of a tree at the nearest corner of the wood. Besides this not a sound of any kind

reached their ears, the time of nightingales being now past, and Hintock lying at a distance of two miles at least. In the opposite direction the hay-field stretched away into remoteness till it was lost to the eye in a soft mist.

It was daybreak before Fitzpiers and Suke Damson re-entered Little Hintock.

CHAPTER V.

When the general stampede occurred Winterborne had also been looking on, and encountering one of the girls had asked her what caused them all to fly.

She said with solemn breathlessness that they had seen something very different from what they had hoped to see, and that she for one would never attempt such unholy ceremonies again. "We saw Satan pursuing us with his hour-glass. It was terrible!"

This account being a little mixed Giles went forward towards the spot from which

the girls had retreated. After listening there a few minutes he heard slow footsteps rustling over the leaves, and looking through a tangled screen of honeysuckle which hung from a bough he saw in the open space beyond a short stout man in evening dress, carrying on one arm a light overcoat and also his hat, so awkwardly arranged as possibly to have suggested the "hour-glass" to his timid observers—if this were the person whom the girls had seen. With the other hand he silently gesticulated, and the moonlight falling upon his bare brow showed him to have dark hair and a high forehead of the shape seen oftener in old prints and paintings than in real life. His curious and altogether alien aspect, his strange gestures, like those of one who is rehearsing a scene to himself, and the unusual place and hour, were sufficient to account for any trepidation

among the Hintock daughters at encountering him.

He paused, and looked round, as if he had forgotten where he was; not observing Giles, who was of the colour of his environment. The latter advanced into the light. The gentleman held up his hand and came towards Giles, the two meeting half way.

"I have lost my way," said the stranger. "Perhaps you can put me in the path again." He wiped his forehead with the air of one suffering under an agitation more than that of simple fatigue.

"The turnpike-road is over there," said Giles.

"I don't want the turnpike-road," said the gentleman impatiently. "I came from that. I want Hintock House. Is there not a path to it across here?"

'Well, yes, a sort of path. But it is

hard to find from this point. I'll show you the way, sir, with great pleasure."

"Thanks, my good friend. The truth is that I decided to walk across the country after dinner from the hotel at Sherton, where I am staying for a day or two. But I did not know it was so far."

"It is about a mile to the house from here."

They walked on together. As there was no path Giles occasionally stepped in front and bent aside the under-boughs of the trees to give his companion a passage, saying every now and then when the twigs, on being released, flew back like whips, "Mind your eyes, sir." To which the stranger replied, "Yes, yes," in a preoccupied tone.

So they went on, the leaf-shadows running in their usual quick succession over the forms of the pedestrians till the stranger said—

"Is it far?"

"Not much farther," said Winterborne. "The plantation runs up into a corner here, close behind the house." He added with hesitation, "You know, I suppose, sir, that Mrs. Charmond is not at home?"

"You mistake," said the other shortly. "Mrs. Charmond has been away for some time, but she's at home now."

Giles did not contradict him, though he felt sure that the gentleman was wrong.

"You are a native of this place?" the stranger said.

"Yes."

"You are happy in having a home. It is what I don't possess."

"You come from far, seemingly?"

"I come now from the south of Europe."

"Oh, indeed, sir. You are an Italian, or Spanish, or French gentleman, perhaps?"

"I am not either."

Giles did not fill the pause which ensued, and the gentleman, who seemed of an emotional nature, unable to resist friendship, at length answered the question.

"I am an Italianised American; a South Carolinian by birth," he said. "I left my native country on the failure of the Southern cause, and have never returned to it since."

He spoke no more about himself, and they came to the verge of the wood. Here, striding over the fence out upon the upland sward, they could at once see the chimneys of the house in the gorge immediately beneath their position, silent, still, and pale.

"Can you tell me the time?" the gentleman asked. "My watch has stopped."

"It is between twelve and one," said Giles.

His companion expressed his astonish-

ment. "I thought it between nine and ten at latest! Dear me—dear me!"

He now begged Giles to return, and offered him a gold coin, which looked like a sovereign, for the assistance rendered. Giles declined to accept anything, to the surprise of the stranger, who, on putting the money back into his pocket, said awkwardly, "I thought it was the custom over here. I offered it because I want you to utter no word about this meeting with me. Will you promise?"

Winterborne promised readily. He stood still whilst the other descended the slope. At the bottom the stranger look back mistrustfully. Giles would no longer remain when he was so evidently desired to leave, and returned through the boughs to Little Hintock.

He suspected that this man, who seemed so distressed and melancholy, might be

that lover and persistent wooer of Mrs. Charmond whom he had heard so frequently spoken of, and whom it was said she had treated cavalierly. But he received no confirmation of his suspicion beyond a report which reached him a few days later that a gentleman had called up the servants who were taking care of Hintock House at an hour past midnight; and on learning that Mrs. Charmond, though returned from abroad, was as yet in London, he had sworn bitterly, and gone away without leaving a card or any trace of himself.

The girls who related the story added that he sighed three times before he swore, but this part of the narrative was not corroborated. Anyhow such a gentleman drove away from Sherton next day in a carriage hired at the inn.

CHAPTER VI.

THE sunny, leafy week which followed the tender doings of Midsummer eve brought a visitor to Fitzpiers's door; a voice that he knew sounded in the passage. Mr. Melbury had called.

At first he had a particular objection to enter the parlour, because his boots were dusty, but as the surgeon insisted he waived the point and came in.

Looking neither to the right nor to the left, hardly at Fitzpiers himself, he put his hat under his chair and with a preoccupied gaze at the floor said, "I've called to ask

you, doctor, quite privately, a question that troubles me. I've a daughter, Grace, an only daughter as you may have heard. Well, she's been out in the dew; on Midsummer eve in particular she went out in thin slippers to watch some vagary of the Hintock maids; and she's got a cough, a distinct hemming and hacking, that makes me uneasy. Now I have decided to send her away to some seaside place for a change—"

"Send her away!" Fitzpiers's countenance had fallen.

"Yes. And the question is, where would you advise me to send her?"

The timber-merchant had happened to call at a moment when Fitzpiers was at the spring-tide of a sentiment that Grace was a necessity of his existence. The sudden pressure of her form upon his breast as she came headlong round the

bush had never ceased to linger with him since he adopted the manœuvre for which the hour and the moonlight and the occasion had been the only excuse. Now she was to be sent away.

Ambition? — it could be postponed. Family?—a common culture and reciprocity of tastes had taken the place of family parallels nowadays. He allowed himself to be carried forward on the wave of his desire.

"How strange, how very strange it is," he said, "that you should have come to me about her just now. I have been thinking every day of coming to you on the very same errand."

"Ah? You have noticed, too, that her health——"

"I have noticed nothing the matter with her health, because there is nothing. But, Mr. Melbury, I have seen your daughter

several times by accident. I have admired her infinitely, and I was coming to ask you if I may become better acquainted with her —pay my addresses to her?"

Melbury was looking down as he listened, and did not see the air of half-misgiving at his own rashness that spread over Fitzpiers's face as he made this declaration.

"You have—got to know her?" said Melbury, a spell of dead silence having preceded his utterance, during which his emotion rose with almost visible effect.

"Yes," said Fitzpiers.

"And you wish to become better acquainted with her? You mean with a view to marriage—is that what you mean?"

"Yes," said the young man. "I mean, get acquainted with her, with a view to being her accepted lover; and if we suited each other, what would naturally follow."

The timber-dealer was much surprised,

and fairly agitated; his hand trembled as he laid by his walking-stick.

"This takes me unawares," said he, his voice well-nigh breaking down. "I don't mean that there is anything unexpected in a gentleman being attracted by her; but it did not occur to me that it would be you. I always said," continued he, with a lump in his throat, "that my Grace would make a mark at her own level some day. That was why I educated her. I said to myself, 'I'll do it, cost what it may'; though her mother-in-law was pretty frightened at my paying out so much money year after year. I knew it would tell in the end. 'Where you've not good material to work on, such doings would be waste and vanity,' I said. 'But where you have that material, it is sure to be worth while.'"

"I am glad you don't object," said Fitz-

piers, almost wishing that Grace had not been quite so cheap for him.

"If she is willing I don't object, certainly. Indeed," added the honest man, "it would be deceit if I were to pretend to feel anything else than highly honoured personally; and it is a great credit to her to have drawn to her a man of such good professional station and venerable old family. That huntsman-fellow little thought how wrong he was about her! Take her and welcome, sir."

"I'll endeavour to ascertain her mind."

"Yes, yes. But she will be agreeable, I should think. She ought to be."

"I hope she may. Well, now you'll expect to see me frequently."

"Oh, yes. But, name it all—about her cough, and her going away? I had quite forgot that that was what I came about."

"I assure you," said the surgeon, "that

her cough can only be the result of a slight cold, and it is not necessary to banish her to any seaside place at all."

Melbury looked unconvinced, doubting whether he ought to take Fitzpiers's professional opinion in circumstances which naturally led him to wish to keep her by him. The doctor saw this, and honestly dreading to lose sight of her, he said eagerly, "Between ourselves, if I am successful with her I will take her away myself for a month or two, as soon as we are married, which I hope will be before the chilly weather comes on. This will be so very much better than letting her go now."

The proposal pleased Melbury much. There could be hardly any danger in postponing any desirable change of air as long as the warm weather lasted, and for such a reason.

Suddenly recollecting himself he said,

"Your time must be precious, doctor. I'll get home-along. I am much obliged to ye. As you will see her often, you'll discover for yourself if anything serious is the matter."

"I can assure you it is nothing," said Fitzpiers, who had seen Grace much oftener already than her father knew of.

When he was gone Fitzpiers paused, silent, registering his sensations, like a man who has made a plunge for a pearl into a medium of which he knows neither the density nor temperature. But he had done it, and Grace was the sweetest girl alive.

As for the departed visitor, his own last words lingered in Melbury's ears as he walked homeward; he felt that what he had said in the emotion of the moment was very stupid, ungenteel, and unsuited to a dialogue with an educated gentleman, the

smallness of whose practice was more than compensated by the former greatness of his family. He had uttered thoughts before they were weighed, and almost before they were shaped. They had expressed in a certain sense his feeling at Fitzpiers's news, but yet they were not right. Looking on the ground, and planting his stick at each tread as if it were a flagstaff, he reached his own precincts, where, as he passed through the court, he automatically stopped to look at the men working in the shed and around. One of them asked him a question about waggon-spokes.

"Hey?" said Melbury, looking hard at him. The man repeated the words.

Melbury stood; then turning suddenly away without answering, he went up the court and entered the house.

As time was no object with the journeymen, except as a thing to get passed, they

leisurely surveyed the door through which he had disappeared.

"What maggot has the gaffer got in his head now?" said Tangs the elder. "Sommit to do with that chiel of his! When you've got a maid of yer own, John Upjohn, that costs ye what she costs him, that will take the squeak out of your Sunday shoes, John! But you'll never be tall enough to accomplish such as she; and 'tis a lucky thing for ye, John, as things be. Well, he ought to have a dozen—that would bring him to reason, I see 'em walking together last Sunday, and when they came to a puddle he lifted her over like a halfpenny doll. He ought to have a dozen; he'd let 'em walk through puddles for themselves then."

Meanwhile Melbury had entered the house with the look of a man who sees a vision before him. His wife was in the

room. Without taking off his hat he sat down at random.

"Luce—we've done it!" he said. "Yes—the thing is as I expected. The spell, that I foresaw might be worked, has worked. She's done it, and done it well. Where is she—Grace, I mean?"

"Up in her room: what has happened?"

Mr. Melbury explained the circumstances as coherently as he could. "I told you so," he said. "A maid like her couldn't stay hid long, even in a place like this. But where is Grace? Let's have her down. Here—Gra-a-ace!"

She appeared after a reasonable interval, for she was sufficiently spoilt by this father of hers not to put herself in a hurry, however impatient his tones. "What is it, father?" said she, with a smile.

"Why, you scamp, what's this you've been doing? Not home here more than

six months, yet instead of confining yourself to your father's rank making havoc in the educated classes!"

Though accustomed to show herself instantly appreciative of her father's meanings, Grace was fairly unable to look anyhow but at a loss now.

"No, no; of course you don't know what I mean, or you pretend you don't. Though for my part I believe women can see these things through a double hedge. But I suppose I must tell ye. Why, you've flung your grapnel over the doctor, and he's coming courting forthwith."

"Only think of that, my dear! Don't you feel it a triumph?" said Mrs. Melbury.

"Coming courting—I've done nothing to make him!" Grace exclaimed.

"'Twasn't necessary that you should: 'tis voluntary that rules in these things. Well, he has behaved very honourably,

and asked my consent. You'll know what to do when he gets here, I dare say. I needn't tell you to make it all smooth for him."

"You mean, to lead him on to marry me?"

"I do. Haven't I educated you for it?"

Grace looked out of the window, and at the fireplace, with no animation in her face. "Why is it settled off-hand in this way?" said she coquettishly. "You'll wait till you hear what I think of him, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, of course. But you see what a good thing it will be."

She weighed the statement without speaking.

"You will be restored to the society you've been taken away from," continued her father; "for I don't suppose he'll stay here long."

She admitted the advantage; but it was plain that though Fitzpiers when he was present exercised a certain fascination over her, or even more, an almost psychic influence, as it is called, and though his impulsive act in the wood had stirred her feelings indescribably, she had never regarded him in the light of a destined husband. "I don't know what to answer," she said. "I have learnt that he is very clever."

"He's all right, and he's coming here to see you."

A premonition that she could not resist him if he came strangely moved her. "Of course, father, you remember that it is only lately that Giles—"

"You know that you can't think of him, He has given up all claim to you."

She could not explain the subtleties of her feeling as clearly as he could state his

opinion, even though she had skill in speech, and her father had none. That Fitzpiers acted upon her like a dram, exciting her, throwing her into a novel atmosphere which biassed her doings until the influence was over, when she felt something of the nature of regret for the mood she had experienced—could not be told to this worthy couple in words.

It so happened that on this very day Fitzpiers was called away from Hintock by an engagement to attend some medical meetings, and his visits therefore did not begin at once. A note, however, arrived from him addressed to Grace, deploring his enforced absence. As a material object this note was pretty and superfine, a note of a sort that she had been unaccustomed to see since her return to Hintock, except when a school friend wrote to her—a rare instance, for the girls were respecters of

persons, and many cooled down towards the timber-dealer's daughter when she was out of sight. Thus the receipt of it pleased her, and she afterwards walked about with a reflective air.

In the evening her father, who knew that the note had come, said, "Why be ye not sitting down to answer your letter? That's what young folks did in my time."

She replied that it did not require an answer.

"Oh, you know best," he said. Nevertheless he went about his business doubting if she were right in not replying; possibly she might be so mismanaging matters as to risk the loss of an alliance which would bring her much happiness.

Melbury's respect for Fitzpiers was based less on his professional position, which was not much, than on the standing of his family in the county in bygone days.

That touching faith in members of long-established families as such, irrespective of their personal condition or character, which is still found among old-fashioned people in the rural districts, reached its full perfection in Melbury. His daughter's suitor was descended from a line he had heard of in his grandfather's time as being once among the greatest, a family which had conferred its name upon a neighbouring village; how then could anything be amiss in this betrothal?

"I must keep her up to this," he said to his wife. "She sees it is for her happiness; but still she's young, and may want a little prompting from an older tongue."

CHAPTER VII.

WITH this in view Melbury took her out for a walk, a custom of his when he wished to say anything specially impressive. Their way was over the top of that lofty ridge dividing their woodland from the cider district, whence they had in the spring beheld the miles of apple-trees in bloom. All was now deep green.

The spot recalled to Grace's mind the last occasion of her presence there, and she said, "The promise of an enormous apple-crop is fulfilling itself, is it not? I suppose Giles is getting his mills and presses ready."

This was just what her father had not come there to talk about. Without replying he raised his arm and moved his finger till he fixed it at a point.

"There," he said. "You see that plantation reaching over the hill like a great slug, and just behind the hill a particularly green sheltered bottom? That's where Mr. Fitzpiers's family were lords of the manor for I don't know how many hundred years, and there stands the village of Buckbury Fitzpiers. A wonderful property 'twas—wonderful!"

"But they are not lords of the manor there now."

"Why, no. But good and great folk fall as well as humble and foolish. The only ones representing the family now, I believe are our doctor and a maiden lady living I don't know where. You can't help being happy, Grace, in allying yourself with such

a romantical family. You'll feel as if you've stepped into history."

"We've been at Hintock as long as they were at Buckbury; is it not so? You say our name occurs in old deeds continually."

"Oh, yes—as yeomen, copyholders, and such like. But think how much better this will be for 'ee. You'll be living a high, perusing life, such as has now become natural to you; and though the doctor's practice is small here he'll no doubt go to a dashing town when he's got his hand in, and keep a stylish carriage, and you'll be brought to know a good many ladies of excellent society. If you should ever meet me then, Grace, you can drive past me, looking the other way. I shouldn't expect you to speak to me, or wish such a thing—unless it happened to be in some lonely private place where 'twouldn't lower ye at all. Don't think such men as neighbour

Giles your equal. He and I shall be good friends enough, but he's not for the like of you. He's lived our rough and homely life here, and his wife's life must be rough and homely likewise."

So much pressure could not but produce some displacement. As Grace was left very much to herself, she took advantage of one fine day before Fitzpiers's return to drive into the aforesaid vale where stood the village of Buckbury Fitzpiers. Leaving her father's man at the inn with the horse and gig, she rambled onwards to the ruins of a castle, which stood in a field hard by. She had no doubt that it represented the ancient stronghold of the Fitzpiers family.

The remains were few, and consisted mostly of remnants of the lower vaulting, supported on low stout columns surmounted by the *crochet* capital of the period. The two or three arches of these vaults that were

still in position had been utilised by the adjoining farmer as shelter for his calves, the floor being spread with straw, amid which the young creatures rustled, cooling their thirsty tongues by licking the quaint Norman carving, which glistened with the moisture. It was a degradation of even such a rude form of art as this to be treated so grossly, she thought, and for the first time the family of Fitzpiers assumed in her imagination the hues of a melancholy romanticism.

It was soon time to drive home, and she traversed the distance with a preoccupied mind. The idea of so modern a man in science and æsthetics as the young surgeon springing out of relics so ancient was a kind of novelty she had never before experienced. The combination lent him a social and intellectual interest which she dreaded, so much weight did it add to the strange influence he

exercised upon her whenever he came near her.

In an excitement which was not love, not ambition, rather a fearful consciousness of hazard in the air, she awaited his return.

Meanwhile her father was awaiting him also. In his house there was an old work on medicine, published towards the end of the last century, and to put himself in harmony with events Melbury spread this work on his knees when he had done his day's business, and read about Galen, Hippocrates, and Herophilus; of the dogmatic, the empiric, the hermetical, and other sects of practitioners that have arisen in history; and thence proceeded to the classification of maladies and the rules for their treatment, as laid down in this valuable book with absolute precision. Melbury regretted that the treatise was so old, fearing that he might in consequence be unable to

hold as complete a conversation as he could wish with Mr. Fitzpiers, primed, no doubt, with more recent discoveries.

The day of Fitzpiers's return arrived, and he sent to say that he would call immediately. In the little time that was afforded for putting the house in order the sweeping of Melbury's parlour was as the sweeping of the parlour at the Interpreter's which well-nigh choked the Pilgrim. At the end of it Mrs. Melbury sat down, folded her hands and lips, and waited. Her husband restlessly walked in and out from the timber-yard, stared at the interior of the room, jerked out "ay, ay," and retreated again.

Between four and five Fitzpiers arrived, hitching his horse to the hook outside the door.

As soon as he had walked in and perceived that Grace was not in the room, he seemed to have a misgiving.

Nothing less than her actual presence could long keep him to the level of this impassioned enterprise, and that lacking he appeared as one who wished to retrace his steps.

He mechanically talked at what he considered a woodland matron's level of thought till a rustling was heard on the stairs, and Grace came in. Fitzpiers was for once as agitated as she. Over and above the genuine emotion which she raised in his heart there hung the sense that he was casting a die by impulse which he might not have thrown by judgment.

Mr. Melbury was not in the room at the moment. Having to attend to matters in the yard, he had delayed putting on his afternoon coat and waistcoat till the doctor's appearance, when, not wishing to be backward in receiving him, he entered the

parlour hastily buttoning up those garments. Grace's fastidiousness was a little distressed that Fitzpiers should see by this action the strain his visit was putting upon her father; and to make matters worse for her just then, old Grammer seemed to have a passion for incessantly pumping in the back kitchen, leaving the doors open so that the banging and splashing were distinct above the parlour conversation.

Whenever the chat over the tea sank into pleasant desultoriness Mr. Melbury broke in with speeches of laboured precision on very remote topics, as if he feared to let Fitzpiers's mind dwell critically on the subject nearest the hearts of all. In truth a constrained manner was natural enough in Melbury just now, for the greatest interest of his life was reaching its crisis. Could the real have been beheld instead of the corporeal merely, the corner of the room

in which he sat would have been filled with a form typical of anxious suspense, large-eyed, tight-lipped, awaiting the issue. That paternal hopes and fears so intense should be bound up in the person of one child so peculiarly circumstanced, and not have dispersed themselves over the larger field of a whole family, involved dangerous risks to future happiness.

Fitzpiers did not stay more than an hour, but that time had apparently advanced his sentiments towards Grace, once and for all, from a vaguely liquescent to an organic shape. She would not have accompanied him to the door, in response to his whispered "Come!" if her mother had not said in a matter-of-fact way, "Of course, Grace; go to the door with Mr. Fitzpiers." Accordingly Grace went, both her parents remaining in the room.

When the young pair were in the

great brick-floored hall the lover took the girl's hand in his, drew it under his arm, and thus led her on to the front door, where he stealthily put his lips to her own.

She broke from him trembling, blushed, and turned aside, hardly knowing how things had advanced to this. Fitzpiers drove off, kissing his hand to her, and waving it to Melbury, who was visible through the window. Her father returned the surgeon's action with a great flourish of his own hand, and a satisfied smile.

The intoxication that Fitzpiers had, as usual, produced in Grace's brain during the visit passed off somewhat with his withdrawal. She felt like a woman who did not know what she had been doing for the previous hour; but supposed with trepidation that the afternoon's proceedings, though vague, had amounted to an engage-

ment between herself and the handsome, coercive, irresistible Fitzpiers.

This visit was a type of many which followed it during the long summer days of that year. Grace was borne along upon a stream of reasonings, arguments, and persuasions, supplemented, it must be added, by inclinations of her own at times. No woman is without aspirations, which may be innocent enough within certain limits; and Grace had been so trained socially and educated intellectually, as to see clearly enough a pleasure in the position of wife to such a man as Fitzpiers. His material standing of itself, either present or future, had little in it to give her ambition, but the possibilities of a refined and cultivated inner life, of subtle psychological intercourse, had their charm. It was this rather than any vulgar idea of marrying well which caused

her to float with the current, and to yield to the immense influence which Fitzpiers exercised over her whenever she shared his society.

Any observer would shrewdly have prophesied that whether or not she loved him as yet in the ordinary sense, she was pretty sure to do so in time.

One evening just before dusk they had taken a rather long walk together, and for a short cut homeward passed through the shrubberies of Hintock House—still deserted, and still blankly confronting with its sightless shuttered windows the surrounding foliage and slopes.

Grace was tired, and they approached the wall, and sat together on one of the stone sills—still warm with the sun that had been pouring its rays upon them all the afternoon

"This place would just do for us, would

it not, dearest?" said her betrothed, as they sat, turning and looking idly at the old façade.

"Oh, yes," said Grace, plainly showing that no such fancy had ever crossed her mind. "She is away from home still," Grace added in a minute, rather sadly, for she could not forget that she had somehow lost the valuable friendship of the lady of this bower.

"Who is?—oh, you mean Mrs. Charmond. Do you know, dear, that at one time I thought *you* lived here?"

"Indeed," said Grace. "How was that?"

He explained, as far as he could do so without mentioning his disappointment at finding it was otherwise; and then went on: "Well, never mind that. Now I want to ask you something. There is one detail of our wedding which I am sure you will leave

to me. My inclination is not to be married at the horrid little church here, with all the yokels staring round at us, and a droning parson reading."

"Where then can it be? At a church in town?"

"No. Not a church at all. At a registry office. It is a quieter, snugger, and more convenient place in every way."

"Oh," said she with real distress. "How can I be married except at church, and with all my dear friends round me!"

"Yeoman Winterborne among them."

"Yes—why not? You know there was nothing serious between him and me."

"You see, dear, a noisy, bell-ringing marriage at church has this objection in our case; it would be a thing of report a long way round. Now I would gently, as gently as possible, indicate to you how inadvisable such publicity would be if we

leave Hintock, and I purchase the practice that I contemplate purchasing at Budmouth —hardly more than twenty miles off. Forgive my saying that it will be far better if nobody there knows where you come from, nor anything about your parents. Your beauty and knowledge and manners will carry you anywhere if you are not hampered by such retrospective criticism."

"But could it not be a quiet ceremony, even at church?" she pleaded.

"I don't see the necessity of going there!" he said a trifle impatiently. "Marriage is a civil contract, and the shorter and simpler it is made the better. People don't go to church when they take a house, or even when they make a will."

"Oh, Edred—I don't like to hear you speak like that."

"Well, well—I didn't mean to. But I have mentioned as much to your father,

who has made no objection; and why should you?"

She deemed the point one on which she ought to allow sentiment to give way to policy —if there were indeed policy in his plan. But she was indefinably depressed as they walked homeward.

CHAPTER VIII.

He left her at the door of her father s house. As he receded, and was clasped out of sight by the filmy shades, he impressed Grace as a man who hardly appertained to her existence at all. Cleverer, greater than herself, one outside her mental orbit, as she considered him, he seemed to be her ruler rather than her equal, protector, and dear familiar friend.

The disappointment she had experienced at his wish, the shock given to her girlish sensibilities by his irreverent views of marriage, together with the sure and near

approach of the day fixed for committing her future to his keeping, made her so restless that she could scarcely sleep at all that night. She rose when the sparrows began to walk out of the roof-holes, sat on the floor of her room in the dim light, and by and by peeped out behind the window curtains.

It was even now day out of doors, though the tones of morning were feeble and wan, and it was long before the sun would be perceptible in this overshadowed vale. Not a sound came from any of the outhouses as yet. The tree-trunks, the road, the out-buildings, the garden, every object, wore that aspect of mesmeric fixity which the suspensive quietude of daybreak lends to such scenes. Helpless immobility seemed to be combined with intense consciousness; a meditative inertness possessed all things, oppressively contrasting with her own active

emotions. Beyond the road were some cottage roofs and orchards; over these roofs and over the apple-trees behind, high up the slope, and backed by the plantation on the crest, was the house yet occupied by her future husband, the rough-cast front showing whitely through its creepers. The window-shutters were closed, the bedroom curtains closely drawn, and not the thinnest coil of smoke rose from the rugged chimneys.

Something broke the stillness. The front-door of the house she was gazing at opened softly, and there came out into the porch a female figure, wrapped in a large shawl, beneath which was visible the white skirt of a long loose garment. A grey arm, stretching from within the porch, adjusted the shawl over the woman's shoulders; it was withdrawn and disappeared, the door closing behind her.

The woman went quickly down the box-

edged path between the raspberries and currants, and as she walked her well-developed form and gait betrayed her individuality. It was Suke Damson, the affianced one of simple young Tim Tangs. At the bottom of the garden she entered the shelter of the tall hedge, and only the top of her head could be seen hastening in the direction of her own dwelling.

Grace had recognised, or thought she recognised, in the grey arm stretching from the porch, the sleeve of a dressing-gown which Mr. Fitzpiers had been wearing on her own memorable visit to him. Her face fired red. She had just before thought of dressing herself and taking a lonely walk under the trees, so coolly green this early morning; but she now sat down on her bed and fell into reverie.

It seemed as if hardly any time had passed when she heard the household moving briskly

about, and breakfast preparing down stairs; though, on rousing herself to robe and descend, she found that the sun was throwing his rays completely over the tree-tops, a progress in the diurnal turn denoting that at least three hours had elapsed since she last looked out of the window.

When attired she searched about the house for her father; she found him at last in the garden, stooping to examine the potatoes for signs of disease. Hearing her rustle he stood up and stretched his back and arms, saying, "Morning t'ye, Gracie. I congratulate ye. It is only a month to-day to the time!"

She did not answer, but, without lifting her dress, waded between the dewy rows of tall potato-green into the middle of the plot where he was.

"I have been thinking very much about my position this morning—ever since it was

light," she began excitedly, and trembling so that she could hardly stand. "And I feel it is a false one. I wish not to marry Mr. Fitzpiers. I wish not to marry anybody; but I'll marry Giles Winterborne if you say I must as an alternative."

Her father's face settled into rigidity, he turned pale, and came deliberately out of the plot before he answered her. She had never seen him look so incensed before.

"Now, hearken to me," he said. "There's a time for a woman to alter her mind; and there's a time when she can no longer alter it, if she has any right eye to her parents' honour and the seemliness of things. That time has come. I won't say to ye, you *shall* marry him. But I will say, that if you refuse, I shall for ever be ashamed and a weary of ye as a daughter, and shall look upon you as the hope of my life no more. What do you know about life and what it can bring

forth, and how you ought to act to lead up to best ends? Oh, you are an ungrateful maid, Grace; you've seen that fellow Giles, and he has got over ye; that's where the secret lies, I'll warrant me!"

"No, father, no! It is not Giles—it is something I cannot tell you of—"

"Well, make fools of us all; make us laughing-stocks; break it off; have your own way!"

"But who knows of the engagement as yet; how can breaking it disgrace you?"

Melbury then by degrees admitted that he had mentioned the engagement to this acquaintance and to that, till she perceived that in his restlessness and pride he had published it everywhere. She went dismally away to a bower of laurel at the top of the garden. Her father followed her.

"It is that Giles Winterborne!" he said with an upbraiding gaze at her.

"No, it is not; though for that matter you encouraged him once!" she said, troubled to the verge of despair. "It is not Giles, it is Mr. Fitzpiers."

"You've had a tiff—a lovers' tiff—that's all, I suppose?"

"It is some woman—"

"Ay, ay; you are jealous. The old story. Don't tell me. Now do you bide here. I'll send Fitzpiers to you. I saw him smoking in front of his house but a minute bygone."

He went off hastily out of the garden-gate and down the lane. But she would not stay where she was; and edging through a slit in the garden fence walked away into the wood.

Just about here the trees were large and wide apart, and there was no undergrowth, so that she could be seen to some distance; a sylph-like greenish-white creature, as

toned by the sunlight and leafage. She heard a footfall crushing dead leaves behind her, and turning hastily found herself reconnoitred by Fitzpiers himself, approaching gay and fresh as the morning around them.

His remote gaze at her had been one of mild interest rather than of rapture. But she looked so lovely in the green world about her; her pink cheeks, her simple light dress, and the delicate flexibility of her movements acquired such rarity from their wild-wood setting, that his eyes kindled as he drew near.

"My darling, what is it? Your father says you are in the pouts, and jealous, and I don't know what. Ha! ha! ha! as if there were any rival to you, except vegetable nature, in this home of recluses? We know better."

"Jealous; oh, no, it is not so," said she gravely. "That's a mistake of his

and yours, sir. I spoke to him so closely about the question of marriage with you that he did not apprehend my state of mind."

"But there's something wrong—eh?" he asked, eyeing her narrowly, and bending to kiss her.

She shrank away, and his purposed kiss miscarried.

"What is it?" he said, more seriously for this little defeat.

She made no answer beyond, "Mr. Fitzpiers, I have had no breakfast, I must go in."

"Come," he insisted, fixing his eyes upon her. "Tell me at once, I say."

It was the greater strength against the smaller; but she was mastered less by his manner than by her own sense of the unfairness of silence.

"I looked out of the window," she said

with hesitation. "I'll tell you by and by. I must go indoors. I have had no breakfast."

By a sort of divination his conjecture went straight to the fact. "Nor I," said he lightly. "Indeed, I rose late to-day. I have had a broken night, or rather morning. A girl of the village—I don't know her name—came and rang at my bell as soon as it was light—between four and five I should think it was—perfectly maddened with an aching tooth. As nobody heard her ring she threw some gravel at my window, till at last I heard her and slipped on my dressing-gown and went down. The poor thing begged me with tears in her eyes to take out her tormentor, if I dragged her head off. Down she sat and out it came; a lovely molar, not a speck upon it; and off she went with it in her handkerchief, much contented, though it

would have done good work for her for fifty years to come."

It was all so plausible—so completely explained. Knowing nothing of the incident in the wood on old Midsummer eve, Grace felt that her suspicions were unworthy and absurd, and with the readiness of an honest heart she jumped at the opportunity of honouring his word. At the moment of her mental libration the bushes about the garden had moved, and her father emerged into the shady glade.

"Well, I hope it is made up?" he said cheerily.

"Oh yes," said Fitzpiers, with his eyes fixed on Grace, whose eyes were shyly bent downwards.

"Now," said her father, "tell me, the pair of ye, that you still mean to take one another for good and all; and on the strength o't you shall have another

couple of hundred paid down. I swear it by the Name."

Fitzpiers took her hand. "We declare it, do we not, my dear Grace?" said he.

Relieved of her doubt, somewhat over-awed, and ever anxious to please, she was disposed to settle the matter. Yet, woman-like, she would not relinquish her opportunity of asking a concession of some sort, "If our wedding can be at church, I say yes," she answered in a measured voice. "If not, I say no."

Fitzpiers was generous in his turn. "It shall be so," he rejoined gracefully. "To holy church we'll go—and much good may it do us."

They returned through the bushes indoors, Grace walking, full of thought, between the other two, somewhat comforted both by Fitzpiers's ingenious explanation and by the

sense that she was not to be deprived of a religious ceremony. "So let it be," she said to herself. "Pray God it is for the best."

From this hour there was no serious recalcitration on her part. Fitzpiers kept himself continually near her, dominating any rebellious impulse, and shaping her will into passive concurrence with all his desires. Apart from his lover-like anxiety to possess her, the few golden hundreds of the timber-dealer, ready to hand, formed a warm background to Grace's lovely face, and went some way to remove his uneasiness at the prospect of endangering his professional and social chances by an alliance with the family of a simple countryman.

The interim closed up its perspective surely and silently. Whenever Grace had any doubts of her position the sense of

contracting time was like a shortening chamber: at other moments she was comparatively blithe.

Day after day waxed and waned; the one or two woodmen who sawed, shaped, spokeshaved on her father's premises at this inactive season of the year, regularly came and unlocked the doors in the morning, locked them in the evening, supped, leant over their garden-gates for a whiff of evening air, and to catch any last and furthest throb of news from the outer world, which entered and expired at Little Hintock like the exhausted swell of a wave in some innermost cavern of some innermost creek of an embayed sea; yet no news interfered with the nuptial purpose at their neighbour's house.

The sappy green twig-tips of the season's growth would not, she thought, be appreciably woodier on the day she became a

wife, so near was the time; the tints of the foliage would hardly have changed. Everything was so much as usual that no itinerant stranger would have supposed a woman's fate to be hanging in the balance at that summer's decline.

But there were preparations, imaginable enough by those who had special knowledge. In the remote and fashionable city of Exbury something was growing up under the hands of several persons who had never seen Grace Melbury, never would see her, or care anything about her at all; though their creation had such interesting relation to her life that it would inclose her very heart at a moment when that heart would beat, if not with more emotional ardour, at least with more emotional turbulence than at any previous time.

Why did Mrs. Dollery's van, instead of passing along at the end of the smaller

village to Great Hintock direct, turn one Saturday night into Little Hintock Lane, and never pull up till it reached Mr. Melbury's gates? The gilding sheen of evening fell upon a large flat box, not less than a yard square and safely tied with cord, as it was handed out from under the tilt with a great deal of care. But it was not heavy for its size; Mrs. Dollery herself carried it into the house. Tim Tangs, the hollow-turner, Cawtree, Suke Damson, and others, looked knowing and made remarks to each other as they watched its entrance. Melbury stood at the door of the timber-shed in the attitude of a man to whom such an arrival was a trifling domestic detail with which he did not condescend to be concerned. Yet he well divined the contents of that box, and was in truth all the while in a pleasant exaltation at the proof that thus far, at any rate, no disappointment had

supervened. While Mrs. Dollery remained —which was rather long, from her sense of the importance of her errand—he went into the outhouse; but as soon as she had had her say, been paid, and had rumbled away, he entered the dwelling, to find there what he knew he should find — his wife and daughter in a flutter of excitement over the wedding-gown, just arrived from the leading dressmaker of Exbury city aforesaid.

During these weeks Giles Winterborne was nowhere to be seen or heard of. At the close of his tenure in Hintock he had sold some of his furniture, packed up the rest—a few pieces endeared by associations, or necessary to his occupation—in the house of a friendly neighbour, and gone away. People said that a certain laxity had crept into his life; that he had never gone near a church latterly, and had been sometimes

seen on Sundays with unblacked boots, lying on his elbow under a tree, with a cynical gaze at surrounding objects. He was likely to return to Hintock when the cider-making season came round, his apparatus being stored there, and travel with his mill and press from village to village.

The narrow interval that stood before the day diminished yet. There was in Grace's mind sometimes a certain anticipative satisfaction, the satisfaction of feeling that she would be the heroine of an hour; moreover, she was proud, as a cultivated woman, to be the wife of a cultivated man. It was an opportunity denied very frequently to young women in her position, nowadays not a few; those in whom parental discovery of the value of education has implanted tastes which parental circles fail to gratify. But what an attenuation this cold pride was of the dream of her youth, in

which she had pictured herself walking in state towards the altar, flushed by the purple light and bloom of her own passion, without a single misgiving as to the sealing of the bond, and fervently receiving as her due

"The homage of a thousand hearts; the fond deep love of one."

Everything had been clear then, in imagination; now something was undefined. She had little carking anxieties; a curious fatefulness seemed to rule her, and she experienced a mournful want of some one to confide in.

The day loomed so big and nigh that her prophetic ear could in fancy catch the noise of it, hear the murmur of the villagers as she came out of church, imagine the jangle of the three thin-toned Hintock bells. The dialogues seemed to grow louder, and the

ding-ding-dong of those three crazed bells more persistent. She awoke: the morning had come.

Five hours later she was the wife of Fitzpiers.

CHAPTER IX.

THE chief hotel at Sherton Abbas was the Earl of Wessex—a large stone-fronted inn with a yawning arch, under which vehicles were driven by stooping coachmen to back premises of wonderful commodiousness. The windows to the street were mullioned into narrow lights, and only commanded a view of the opposite houses; hence perhaps it arose that the best and most luxurious private sitting-room that the inn could afford overlooked the nether parts of the establishment, where beyond the yard were to be seen gardens and orchards, now

bossed, nay encrusted, with scarlet and gold fruit, stretching to infinite distance under a luminous lavender mist. The time was early autumn,

> "When the fair apples, red as evening sky,
> Do bend the tree unto the fruitful ground,
> When juicy pears, and berries of black dye
> Do dance in air, and call the eyes around."

The landscape confronting the window might indeed have been part of the identical stretch of country which the youthful Chatterton had in his mind.

In this room sat she who had been the maiden Grace Melbury till the finger of fate touched her and turned her to a wife. It was two months after the wedding, and she was alone. Fitzpiers had walked out to see the abbey by the light of sunset, but she had been too fatigued to accompany him. They had reached the last

stage of a long eight-weeks' tour, and were going on to Hintock that night.

In the yard between Grace and the orchards there progressed a scene natural to the locality at this time of the year. An apple-mill and press had been erected on the spot, to which some men were bringing fruit from divers points in mawn-baskets, while others were grinding them, and others wringing down the pomace, whose sweet juice gushed forth into tubs and pails. The superintendent of these proceedings, to whom the others spoke as master, was a young yeoman of prepossessing manner and aspect, whose form she recognised in a moment. He had hung his coat to a nail of the outhouse wall, and wore his shirt-sleeves rolled up beyond his elbows, to keep them unstained while he rammed the pomace into the bags of horsehair. Fragments of apple-rind had alighted upon

the brim of his hat—probably from the bursting of a bag—while brown pips of the same fruit were sticking among the down upon his fine round arms, and in his beard.

She realised in a moment how he had come there. Down in the heart of the apple-country nearly every farmer kept up a cider-making apparatus and wring-house for his own use, building up the pomace in great straw "cheeses," as they were called; but here, on the margin of Pomona's plain, was a debateable land neither orchard nor sylvan exclusively, where the apple-produce was hardly sufficient to warrant each proprietor in keeping a mill of his own. This was the field of the travelling cider-maker. His press and mill were fixed to wheels instead of being set up in a cider-house; and with a couple of horses, buckets, tubs, strainers,

and an assistant or two, he wandered from place to place, deriving very satisfactory returns for his trouble in such a prolific season as the present.

The back parts of the town were just now abounding with apple-gatherings. They stood in the yards in carts, baskets, and loose heaps; and the blue stagnant air of autumn which hung over everything was heavy with a sweet cidery smell. Cakes of pomace lay against the walls in the yellow sun, where they were drying to be used as fuel. Yet it was not the great make of the year as yet; before the standard crop came in there accumulated, in abundant times like this, a large superfluity of early apples, and windfalls from the trees of later harvest, which would not keep long. Thus in the baskets, and quivering in the hopper of the mill, she saw specimens of mixed dates, including the

mellow countenances of streaked-jacks, codlins, costards, stubbards, ratheripes, and other well-known friends of her ravenous youth.

Grace watched the head man with interest. The slightest sigh escaped her. Perhaps she thought of the day—not so far distant—when that friend of her childhood had met her by her father's arrangement in this same town, warm with hope, though diffident, and trusting in a promise rather implied than given. Or she might have thought of days earlier yet—days of childhood—when her mouth was somewhat more ready to receive a kiss from his than was his to bestow one. However, all that was over. She had felt superior to him then, and she felt superior to him now.

She wondered why he never looked towards her open window. She did not know that in the slight commotion caused

by their arrival at the inn that afternoon Winterborne had caught sight of her through the archway, had turned red, and was continuing his work with more concentrated attention on the very account of his discovery. Robert Creedle, too, who travelled with Giles, had been incidentally informed by the ostler that Dr. Fitzpiers and his young wife were in the hotel; after which news Creedle kept shaking his head and saying to himself, "Ah!" very audibly, between his thrusts at the screw of the cider-press.

"Why the deuce do you sigh like that, Robert?" asked Winterborne at last.

"Ah, maister—'tis my thoughts—'tis my thoughts! . . . . Yes, ye've lost a hundred load o' timber well seasoned; ye've lost five hundred pound in good money; ye've lost the stone-windered house that's big enough to hold a dozen families; ye've lost your share of half a dozen good waggons and their

horses ;—all lost !—through your letting slip she that was once yer own !"

"Good God, Creedle! you'll drive me mad !" said Giles sternly. "Don't speak of that any more !"

Thus the subject had ended in the yard. Meanwhile, the passive cause of all this loss still regarded the scene. She was beautifully dressed ; she was seated in the most comfortable room that the inn afforded ; her long journey had been full of variety, and almost luxuriously performed, for Fitzpiers did not study economy where pleasure was in question. Hence it perhaps arose that Giles and all his belongings seemed sorry and common to her for the moment—moving in a groove so far removed from her own of late that she could scarcely believe she had ever found congruity therein.

"No—I could never have married him !" she said, gently shaking her head. "Dear

father was right. It would have been too rough a life for me." And she looked at the rings of sapphire and opal upon her white and slender fingers that had been gifts from Fitzpiers.

Seeing that Giles still kept his back turned, and with a little of the above-described pride of life—easily to be understood, and possibly excused, in a young, inexperienced woman who thought she had married well—she said at last, with a smile on her lips, "Mr. Winterborne!"

He appeared to take no heed, and she said a second time, "Mr. Winterborne!"

Even now he seemed not to hear, though a person close enough to him to see the expression of his face might have doubted it; and she said a third time, with a timid loudness, "Mr. Winterborne! What, have you forgotten my voice?" She remained with her lips parted in a welcoming smile.

He turned without surprise, and came deliberately towards the window.

"Why do you call me?" he said, with a sternness that took her completely unawares, his face being now pale. "Is it not enough that you see me here moiling and muddling for my daily bread while you are sitting there in your success, that you can't refrain from opening old wounds by calling out my name?"

She flushed, and was struck dumb for some moments; but she forgave his unreasoning anger, knowing so well in what it had its root.

"I am sorry I offended you by speaking, Giles," she replied. "Believe me, I did not intend to do that. I could hardly sit here so near you without a word of recognition."

Winterborne's heart had swollen big and his eyes grown moist by this time, so much had the gentle answer of that familiar voice

moved him. He assured her hurriedly, and without looking at her, that he was not angry. He then managed to ask her, in a clumsy, constrained way, if she had had a pleasant journey, and seen many interesting sights. She spoke of a few places that she had visited, and so the time passed till he withdrew to take his place at one of the levers which pulled round the screw.

Forgotten her voice! Indeed, he had not forgotten her voice, as his bitterness showed. But though in the heat of the moment he had reproached her keenly, his second mood was a far more tender one—that which could regard her renunciation of such as he as her glory and her privilege, his own fidelity notwithstanding. He could have declared with a contemporary poet—

"If I forget,
The salt creek may forget the ocean;
If I forget
The heart whence flows my heart's bright motion,

May I sink meanlier than the worst,
Abandoned, outcast, crushed, accurst,—
If I forget.

"Though you forget,
No word of mine shall mar your pleasure;
Though you forget,—
You filled my barren life with treasure;
You may withdraw the gift you gave,
You still are queen, I still am slave,
Though you forget."

She had tears in her eyes at the thought that she could not remind him of what he ought to have remembered; that not herself but the pressure of events had dissipated the dreams of their early youth.

Grace was thus unexpectedly worsted in her encounter with her old friend. She had opened the window with a faint sense of triumph, but he had turned it into sadness; she did not quite comprehend the reason why. In truth it was because she was not cruel enough in her cruelty. If you have to use the knife, use it, say the great surgeons;

and for her own peace Grace should have handled Winterborne thoroughly or not at all. As it was, on closing the window an indescribable—some might have said dangerous—pity quavered in her bosom for him.

Presently her husband entered the room, and told her what a wonderful sunset there was to be seen.

"I have not noticed it. But I have seen somebody out there that we know," she replied, looking into the court.

Fitzpiers followed the direction of her eyes, and said he did not recognise anybody.

"Why, Mr. Winterborne—there he is cider-making. He combines that with his other business, you know."

"Oh—that fellow," said Fitzpiers, his curiosity becoming extinct.

She, reproachfully: "What, call Mr. Winterborne a fellow, Edred? It is true I was just saying to myself that I never

could have married him ; but I have much regard for him, and always shall."

"Well, do by all means, my dear one. I dare say I am inhuman, and supercilious, and contemptibly proud of my poor old ramshackle family ; but I do honestly confess to you that I feel as if I belonged to a different species from the people who are working in that yard."

"And from me, too, then. For my blood is no better than theirs."

He looked at her with a droll sort of awakening. It was, indeed, a startling anomaly that this woman of the tribe without should be standing there beside him as his wife, if his sentiments were as he had said. In their travels together she had ranged so unerringly at his level in ideas, tastes, and habits, that he had almost forgotten how his heart had played havoc with his principles in taking her to him.

"Ah, *you*—you are refined and educated into something quite different," he said self-assuringly.

"I don't quite like to think that," she murmured with soft regret. "And I think you under-estimate Giles Winterborne. Remember I was brought up with him till I was sent away to school, so I cannot be radically different. At any rate I don't feel so. That is no doubt my fault, and a great blemish in me. But I hope you will put up with it, Edred."

Fitzpiers said that he would endeavour to do so, and as it was now getting on for dusk they prepared to perform the last stage of their journey, so as to arrive at Hintock before it grew very late.

In less than half an hour they started, the cider-makers in the yard having ceased their labours and gone away, so that the only sounds audible there now were the

trickling of the juice from the tightly-screwed press, and the buzz of a single wasp, which had drunk itself so tipsy that it was unconscious of nightfall.

Grace was very cheerful at the thought of being soon in her sylvan home; but Fitzpiers sat beside her almost silent. An indescribable oppressiveness had overtaken him with the near approach of the journey's end and the realities of life that lay there. It was two months since he married her.

"You don't say a word, Edred," she observed. "Aren't you glad to get back? I am."

"You have friends here. I have none."

"But my friends are yours."

"Oh, yes—in that sense."

The conversation languished, and they drew near the end of Hintock Lane. It had been decided that they should, at least for a time, take up their abode in her

father's roomy house, one wing of which was quite at their service, being almost disused by the Melburys. Workmen had been painting, papering, and white-washing this set of rooms in the wedded pair's absence: and so scrupulous had been the timber-dealer that there should occur no hitch or disappointment on their arrival that not the smallest detail remained undone. To make it all complete a ground-floor room had been fitted up as a surgery, with an independent outer door, to which Fitzpiers's brass plate was screwed—for mere ornament, such a sign being quite superfluous where everybody knew the latitude and longitude of his neighbours for miles round.

Melbury and his wife welcomed the twain with affection, and all the house showed them deference. They went up to explore their rooms, that opened from a passage on the left hand of the staircase, the entrance

to which could be shut off on the landing by a door that Melbury had hung for the purpose. A friendly fire was burning in the grate, although it was not cold. Fitzpiers said it was too soon for any sort of meal, they only having dined shortly before leaving Sherton Abbas; he would walk across to his old lodging to learn how his deputy had got on in his absence.

In leaving Melbury's door he looked back at the house. There was economy in living under that roof—and economy was desirable; but in some way he was dissatisfied with the arrangement; it immersed him so deeply in son-in-lawship to Melbury. He went on to his former residence,; his *locum tenens* was out, and Fitzpiers fell into conversation with his old landlady.

"Well, Mrs. Cox; what's the best news?" he asked of her with cheery weariness.

She was a little soured at losing by his marriage so profitable a tenant as the surgeon had proved to be during his residence under her roof; and the more so in there being hardly the remotest chance of her getting such another settler in the Hintock solitudes. "'Tis what I don't wish to repeat, sir; least of all to you," she mumbled.

"Never mind me, Mrs. Cox; go ahead."

"It is what people say about your hasty marrying, Dr. Fitzpiers. Whereas they won't believe you know such clever doctrines in physic as they once supposed of ye, seeing as you could marry into Mr. Melbury's family, which is only Hintock-born, such as me."

"They are kindly welcome to their opinion," said Fitzpiers, not allowing himself to recognise that he winced. "Any thing else?"

"Yes; *she's* come home at last."

"Who's she?"

"Mrs. Charmond."

"Oh, indeed," said Fitzpiers, with but slight interest. "I've never seen her."

"She has seen you, sir, whether or no."

"Never."

"Yes. She saw you in some hotel or street for a minute or two whilst you were away travelling, and accidentally heard your name; and when she made some remark about you, Miss Ellis—that's her maid—told her you was on your wedding tower with Mr. Melbury's daughter; and she said, 'He ought to have done better than that. I fear he has spoilt his chances,' she says."

Fitzpiers did not talk much longer to this cheering housewife, and walked home with no very brisk step. He entered the door quietly, and went straight up stairs to

the drawing-room extemporised for their use by Melbury in his and his bride's absence, expecting to find her there as he had left her.

The fire was burning still, but there were no lights; he looked into the next apartment fitted up as a little dining-room, but no supper was laid. He went to the top of the stairs, and heard a chorus of voices inthe timber-merchant's parlour below, Grace's being occasionally intermingled.

Descending, and looking into the room from the doorway, he found quite a large gathering of neighbours and other acquaintances, praising and congratulating Mrs. Fitzpiers on her return, among them being the dairyman, Farmer Cawtree, and the relieving-officer from Great Hintock; also the road contractor, the master tanner, the exciseman, and some others with their wives. Grace—girl that she was—had

quite forgotten her new dignity, and her husband's; she was in the midst of them, blushing and receiving their compliments with all the pleasures of old comradeship.

Fitzpiers experienced a profound distaste for the situation. Melbury was nowhere in the room, but Melbury's wife, perceiving the doctor, came to him.

"We thought, Grace and I," she said, "that as they have called, hearing you were come, we could do no less than ask them to supper; and then Grace proposed that we should all sup together as it is the first night of your return."

By this time Grace had come round to him. "Is it not good of them to welcome me so warmly!" she exclaimed, with tears of friendship in her eyes. "After so much good feeling I could not think of our shutting ourselves up away from them in our own dining-room."

"Certainly not—certainly not," said Fitzpiers. And he entered the room with the heroic smile of a martyr.

As soon as they sat down to table Melbury came in, and seemed to see at once that Fitzpiers would much rather have received no such demonstrative reception. He thereupon privately chid his wife for her forwardness in the matter. Mrs. Melbury declared that it was as much Grace's doing as hers, after which there was no more to be said by that young woman's tender father.

By this time Fitzpiers was making the best of his position among the wide-elbowed and genial company who sat eating and drinking, laughing and joking around him; and, getting warmed himself by the good cheer, he was obliged to admit that, after all, the supper was not the least enjoyable he had ever known.

At times, however, the words about his having spoiled his opportunities, repeated to him as coming from Mrs. Charmond, haunted him like a handwriting on the wall. Then his manner would become suddenly abstracted. At one moment he would mentally put an indignant query why Mrs. Charmond or any other woman should make it her business to have opinions about his opportunities; at another he thought that he could hardly be angry with her for taking an interest in the doctor of her own parish. Then he would drink a glass of grog and so get rid of the misgiving.

These hitches and quaffings were soon perceived by Grace as well as by her father; and hence both of them were much relieved when the first of the guests to discover that the hour was growing late rose and declared that he must think of moving homewards.

At the words Melbury rose as alertly as if lifted by a spring; and in ten minutes they were gone.

"Now, Grace," said her husband as soon as he found himself alone with her in their private apartments, "we've had a very pleasant evening, and everybody has been very kind. But we must come to an understanding about our way of living here. If we continue in these rooms there must be no mixing in with your people below. I can't stand it, and that's the truth."

She had been sadly surprised at the suddenness of his distaste for those old-fashioned woodland forms of life which in his courtship he had professed to regard with so much interest. But she assented in a moment.

"We must be simply your father's tenants," he continued, "and our goings and

comings must be as independent as if we lived elsewhere."

"Certainly, Edred—I quite see that it must be so."

"But you joined in with all those people in my absence, without knowing whether I should approve or disapprove. When I came I couldn't help myself at all."

She, sighing: "Yes—I see I ought to have waited; though they came unexpectedly, and I thought I had acted for the best."

Thus the discussion ended, and the next day Fitzpiers went on his old rounds as usual. But it was easy for so supersubtle an eye as his to discern, or to think he discerned, that he was no longer regarded as an extrinsic, unfathomed gentleman of limitless potentiality, scientific and social; but as Mr. Melbury's compeer, and therefore in a degree only one of themselves.

The Hintock woodlanders held with all the strength of inherited conviction to the aristocratic principle, and as soon as they had discovered that Fitzpiers was one of the old Buckbury Fitzpierses they had accorded to him for nothing a touching of hat-brims, promptness of service, and deference of approach, which Melbury had to do without though he paid for it over and over. But now, having proved a traitor to his own cause by this marriage, Fitzpiers was believed in no more as a superior hedged by his own divinity; while as doctor he began to be rated no higher than old Jones whom they had so long despised.

His few patients seemed in his two months' absence to have dwindled considerably in number, and no sooner had he returned than there came to him from the Board of Guardians a complaint that a pauper had been neglected by his substi-

tute. In a fit of pride Fitzpiers resigned his appointment as one of the surgeons to the Union, which had been the nucleus of his practice here.

At the end of a fortnight he came in doors one evening to Grace, more briskly than usual. "They have written to me again about that practice in Budmouth that I once negotiated for," he said to her. "The premium asked is eight hundred pounds, and I think that between your father and myself it ought to be raised. Then we can get away from this place for ever."

The question had been mooted between them before, and she was not unprepared to consider it. They had not proceeded far with the discussion when a knock came to the door, and in a minute Grammer ran up to say that a message had arrived from Hintock House requesting Dr. Fitzpiers

to attend there at once. Mrs. Charmond had met with a slight accident through the overturning of her carriage.

"This is something, anyhow," said Fitzpiers, rising with an interest which he could not have defined. "I have had a presentiment that this mysterious woman and I were to be better acquainted."

The latter words were murmured to himself alone.

"Good-night," said Grace as soon as he was ready. "I shall be asleep probably when you return."

"Good-night," he replied inattentively, and went down stairs. It was the first time since their marriage that he had left her without a kiss.

CHAPTER X.

WINTERBORNE had given up his house. On this account his face was seen but fitfully in Hintock; and he would probably have disappeared from the place altogether but for his slight business connected with Melbury, on whose premises Giles kept his cider-making apparatus now that he had no place of his own to stow it in.

Coming here one afternoon on his way to a hut beyond the wood, where he now slept, he noticed that the familiar brown-thatched pinion of his paternal roof had vanished from its site, and that the walls

were levelled. In present circumstances he had a feeling for the spot that might have been called morbid, and when he had supped in the hut aforesaid he made use of the spare hour before bedtime to return to Little Hintock in the twilight, and ramble over the patch of ground on which he had first seen the day.

He repeated this evening visit on several like occasions. Even in the gloom he could trace where the different rooms had stood; could mark the shape of the kitchen chimney-corner in which he had roasted apples and potatoes in his boyhood, cast his bullets, and burnt his initials on articles that did and did not belong to him. The apple trees still remained to show where the garden had been, the oldest of them even now retaining the crippled slant to north-east given them by the great November gale of 1824 which carried a brig bodily over

the Chesil Bank. They were at present bent to still greater obliquity by the heaviness of their produce. Apples bobbed against his head, and in the grass beneath he crunched scores of them as he walked. There was nobody to gather them now.

It was on the evening under notice that, half sitting, half leaning against one of these inclined trunks, Winterborne became lost in his thoughts as usual, till one little star after another had taken up a position in the piece of sky which now confronted him where his walls and chimneys had formerly raised their outlines. The house had jutted awkwardly into the road, and the opening caused by its absence was very distinct.

In the silence the trot of horses and the spin of carriage wheels became audible; the vehicle soon shaped itself against the blank sky, bearing down upon him with

the bend in the lane which here occurred, and of which the house had been the cause. He could discern the figure of a woman high up on the driving-seat of a phaeton, a groom being just visible behind.

Presently there was a slight scrape, then a scream. Winterborne went across to the spot, and found the phaeton half overturned, its driver sitting on the heap of rubbish which had once been his dwelling, and the man seizing the horses' heads. The equipage was Mrs. Charmond's, and the unseated charioteer that lady herself.

To his inquiry if she were hurt she made some incoherent reply to the effect that she did not know. The damage in other respects was little or none; the phaeton was righted, Mrs. Charmond placed in it, and the reins given to the servant. It appeared that she had been deceived by the removal of the house, imagining the

gap caused by the demolition to be the opening of the road, so that she turned in upon the ruins instead of at the bend a few yards further on.

"Drive home—drive home!" she cried impatiently; and they started on their way.

They had not however gone many paces when, the air being still, Winterborne heard her say, "Stop; tell that man to call the doctor—Mr. Fitzpiers—and send him on to the House. I find I am hurt more seriously than I thought."

The seriousness seemed ludicrous to Winterborne; but he took the message from the groom, and proceeded to the doctor's at once. Having delivered it he stepped back into the darkness, and waited till he had seen Fitzpiers leave the door. He stood for a few minutes looking at the window which, by its light, revealed the

room where Grace was sitting; and went away under the gloomy trees.

Fitzpiers duly arrived at Hintock House, whose doors he now saw open for the first time. Contrary to his expectation there was visible no sign of that confusion or alarm which a grave accident to the mistress of the abode would have occasioned. He was shown into a room at the top of the staircase, cosily and femininely draped, where by the light of the shaded lamp he saw a woman of full round figure reclining upon a couch in such a position as not to disturb a pile of magnificent hair on the crown of her head. A deep purple dressing-gown formed an admirable foil to the peculiarly rich brown of her hair-plaits; her left arm, which was naked nearly up to the shoulder, was thrown upwards, and between the fingers of her right hand she held a

cigarette, while she idly breathed from her plump lips a thin stream of smoke towards the ceiling.

The doctor's first feeling was a sense of his exaggerated prevision in having brought appliances for a serious case; the next, something more curious. While the scene and the moment were new to him and unanticipated, the sentiment and essence of the moment were indescribably familiar. What could be the cause of it? Probably a dream.

Mrs. Charmond did not move more than to raise her eyes to him, and he came and stood by her. She glanced up at his face across her brows and forehead, and then he observed a blush creep slowly over her decidedly handsome cheeks. Her eyes, which had lingered upon him with an inquiring conscious expression, were hastily withdrawn, and she mechanically applied the cigarette again to her lips.

For a moment he forgot his errand, till suddenly arousing himself he addressed her, formally condoled with her, and made the usual professional inquiries about what had happened to her, and where she was hurt.

"That's what I want you to tell me," she murmured in tones of indefinable reserve. "I quite believe in you, for I know you are very accomplished, because you study so hard."

"I'll do my best to justify your good opinion," said the young man bowing. "And none the less that I am happy to find the accident has not been serious."

"I am very much shaken," she said.

"Oh yes," he replied; and completed his examination, which convinced him that there was really nothing the matter with her, and more than ever puzzled him as to why he had been summoned, since she did not appear to be a timid woman. "You

must rest awhile; and I'll send something," he said.

"Oh, I forgot," she returned. "Look here." And she showed him a little scrape on her arm—the full round arm that was exposed. "Put some court-plaster on that, please."

He obeyed. "And now, doctor," she said, "before you go I want to put a question to you. Sit round there in front of me, on that low chair, and bring the candles, or one, to the little table. Do you smoke? Yes? That's right—I am learning. Take one of these; and here's a light." She threw a match-box across.

Fitzpiers caught it, and having lit up regarded her from his new position which, with the shifting of the candles, for the first time afforded him a full view of her face.

"How many years have passed since first we met?" she resumed, in a voice which she

endeavoured to maintain at its former pitch of composure, and eyeing him with daring bashfulness.

"*We* met, do you say?"

She nodded. "I saw you recently at an hotel in London, when you were passing through, I suppose, with your bride, and I recognised you as one I had met in my girlhood. Do you remember, when you were studying at Heidelberg, an English family that was staying there, who used to walk—"

"And the young lady who wore a long tail of rare-coloured hair—ah, I see it before my eyes!—who lost her gloves on the Great Terrace—who was going back in the dusk to find them—to whom I said, 'I'll go for them,' and who answered, 'Oh, they are not worth coming all the way up again for.' I *do* remember, and how very long we stayed talking there! I went next morning whilst

the dew was on the grass: there they lay—the little fingers sticking out damp and thin. I see them now! I picked them up, and then . . . ."

"Well?"

"I kissed them," he rejoined, rather shamefacedly.

"But you had hardly ever seen me except in the dusk?"

"Never mind. I was young then, and I kissed them. I wondered how I could make the most of my *trouvaille*, and decided that I would call at your hotel with them that afternoon. It rained, and I waited till next day. I called, and you were gone."

"Yes," answered she with dry melancholy. "My mother, knowing my face was my only fortune, said she had no wish for such a chit as me to go falling in love with an impecunious student, and spirited me away to Baden. As it is all over and past, I'll

tell you one thing; I should have sent you a line had I known your name. That name I never knew till my maid said as you passed up the hotel stairs a month ago, 'There's Dr. Fitzpiers.'"

"Good heaven," said Fitzpiers musingly. "How the time comes back to me! The evening, the morning, the dew, the spot. When I found that you really were gone it was as if a cold iron had been passed down my back. I went up to where you had stood when I last saw you—I flung myself on the grass, and—being not much more than a boy—my eyes were literally blinded with tears. Nameless, unknown to me as you were, I couldn't forget your voice."

"For how long?"

"Oh—ever so long. Days and days."

"Days and days! *Only* days and days? Oh, the heart of a man! Days and days!'

"But, my dear madam, I had not known

you more than a day or two. It was not a full-blown love—it was the merest bud—red, fresh, vivid, but small. It was a colossal passion in embryo. It never matured."

"So much the better perhaps."

"Perhaps. But see how powerless is the human will against predestination. We were prevented meeting; we have met. One feature of the case remains the same amid many changes. While you have grown rich, I am still poor. Better than that, you have (judging by your last remark) outgrown the foolish impulsive passions of your early girlhood. I have not outgrown mine."

"I beg your pardon," said she with vibrations of strong feeling in her words. "I have been placed in a position which hinders such outgrowings. Besides, I don't believe that the genuine subjects of emotion do outgrow them; I believe that the older such

people get the worse they are. Possibly at ninety or a hundred they may feel they are cured; but a mere threescore and ten won't do it—at least for me, if I live so long."

He gazed at her in undisguised admiration. Here was a soul of souls!

"You speak truly," he exclaimed. "But you speak sadly as well. Why is that?"

"I always am sad when I come here,' she said, dropping to a low tone with a sense of having been too demonstrative.

"Then may I inquire why you came?"

"A man brought me. Women are always carried about like corks upon the waves of masculine desires. . . . I hope I have not alarmed you; but Hintock has the curious effect of bottling up the emotions till one can no longer hold them; I am often obliged to fly away and discharge my sentiments somewhere, or I should die outright."

"There is very good society in the county, I suppose, for those who have the privilege of entering it."

"Perhaps so. But the misery of remote country life is that your neighbours have no toleration for difference of opinion and habit. My neighbours think I am an atheist, except those who think I am a Roman Catholic; and when I speak disrespectfully of the weather or the crops they think I am a blasphemer."

She broke into a low musical laugh at the idea.

"You don't wish me to stay any longer?" he inquired, when he found that she remained musing.

"No—I think not."

"Then tell me that I am to be gone."

"Why? Cannot you go without?"

"I may consult my own feelings only, if left to myself."

"Well, if you do, what then? Do you suppose you'll be in my way?"

"I feared it might be so."

"Then fear no more. But good-night. Come to-morrow and see if I am going on right. This renewal of acquaintance touches me. I have already a friendship for you."

"If it depends upon myself it shall last for ever."

"My best hopes that it may. Good-bye."

Fitzpiers went down the stairs absolutely unable to decide whether she had sent for him in the natural alarm which might have followed her mishap, or with the single view of making herself known to him as she had done, for which the capsize had afforded excellent opportunity.

Outside the house he mused over the spot under the light of the stars. It seemed very strange that he should have come there more than once when its inhabitant was absent,

and observed the house with a nameless interest; that he should have assumed off-hand before he knew Grace that it was here she lived; that, in short, at sundry times and seasons the individuality of Hintock House should have forced itself upon him as appertaining to some existence with which he was concerned.

The intersection of his temporal orbit with Mrs. Charmond's for a day or two in the past had created a sentimental interest in her at the time, but it had been so evanescent that in the ordinary onward roll of affairs he would scarce ever have recalled it again. To find her here, however, in these somewhat romantic circumstances, magnified that bygone and transitory tenderness to indescribable proportions.

On entering Little Hintock he found himself regarding that hamlet in a new way—from the Hintock House point of

view rather than from his own and the Melburys'. The household had all gone to bed. As he went up stairs he heard the snore of the timber-merchant from his quarter of the building, and turned into the passage communicating with his own rooms in a strange access of sadness.

A light was burning for him in the chamber; but Grace, though in bed was not asleep. In a moment her sympathetic voice came from behind the curtains.

"Edred, is she very seriously hurt?"

Fitzpiers had so entirely lost sight of Mrs. Charmond as a patient that he was not on the instant ready with a reply.

"Oh, no," he said. "There are no bones broken, but she is shaken. I am going again to-morrow."

Another inquiry or two, and Grace said—

"Did she ask for me?"

"Well, I think she did—I don't quite

remember ; but I am under the impression that she spoke of you."

"Cannot you recollect at all what she said ?"

"I cannot, just this minute."

"At any rate, she did not talk much about me ?" said Grace with disappointment.

"Oh, no."

"But you did, perhaps," she added, innocently fishing for a compliment.

"Oh, yes—you may depend upon that!" replied he warmly, though scarcely thinking of what he was saying, so vividly was there present to his mind the personality of Mrs. Charmond.

CHAPTER XI.

THE doctor's professional visit to Hintock House was promptly repeated the next day and the next. He always found Mrs. Charmond reclining on a sofa, and behaving generally as became a patient who was in no great hurry to lose that title. On each occasion he looked gravely at the little scratch on her arm, as if it had been a serious wound.

He had also, to his further satisfaction, found a slight scar on her temple, and it was very convenient to put a piece of black plaster on this conspicuous part of her

person in preference to gold-beater's skin, so that it might catch the eyes of the servants, and make his presence appear decidedly necessary, in case there should be any doubt of the fact.

"Oh—you hurt me!" she exclaimed one day.

He was peeling off the bit of plaster on her arm, under which the scrape had turned the colour of an unripe blackberry previous to vanishing altogether.

"Wait a moment, then—I'll damp it," said Fitzpiers. He put his lips to the place and kept them there, without any objecting on her part, till the plaster came off easily. "It was at your request I put it on," said he.

"I know it," she replied. "Is that blue vein still in my temple that used to show there? The scar must be just upon it. If the cut had been a little

deeper it would have spilt my hot blood indeed !"

Fitzpiers examined so closely that his breath touched her tenderly, at which their eyes rose to an encounter—hers showing themselves as deep and mysterious as interstellar space. She turned her face away suddenly.

"Ah ! none of that ! none of that—I cannot coquet with you !" she cried. "Don't suppose I consent to for one moment. Our poor, brief, youthful hour of love-making was too long ago to bear continuing now. It is as well that we should understand each other on that point before we go further."

"Coquet ! Nor I with you. As it was when I found the historic gloves, so it is now. I might have been and may be foolish ; but I am no trifler. I naturally cannot forget that little space in which I flitted across the field of your vision in

those days of the past, and the recollection opens up all sorts of imaginings."

"Suppose my mother had not taken me away?" she murmured, her dreamy eyes resting on the swaying tip of a distant tree.

"I should have seen you again."

"And then?"

"Then the fire would have burnt higher and higher. What would have immediately followed I know not; but sorrow and sickness of heart at last."

"Why?"

"Well—that's the end of all love, according to Nature's law. I can give no other reason."

"Oh, don't speak like that!" she exclaimed. "Since we are only picturing the possibilities of that time, don't for pity's sake spoil the picture." Her voice sank almost to a whisper as she added, with an incipient pout upon her full lips, "Let me

think at least that if you had really loved me at all seriously, you would have loved me for ever and ever!"

"You are right—think it with all your heart," said he. "It is a pleasant thought, and costs nothing."

She weighed that remark in silence awhile. "Did you ever hear anything of me from then till now?" she inquired.

"Not a word."

"So much the better. I had to fight the battle of life as well as you. I may tell you about it some day. But don't ever ask me to do it, and particularly do not press me to tell you now."

Thus the two or three days that they had spent in tender acquaintance on the romantic slopes above the Neckar were stretched out in retrospect to the length and importance of years; made to form a canvas for infinite fancies, idle dreams,

luxurious melancholies, and pretty, alluring assertions which could neither be proved nor disproved.

Grace was never mentioned between them, but a rumour of his contemplated removal from the neighbourhood somehow reached Mrs. Charmond's ears.

"Doctor, you are going away," she exclaimed, confronting him with accusatory reproach in her large dark eyes no less than in her cooing voice. "Oh yes, you are," she went on, springing to her feet with an air which might almost have been called passionate. "It is no use denying it! You have bought a practice at Budmouth. I don't blame you. Nobody can live at Hintock — least of all a professional man who wants to keep abreast of recent discovery. And there is nobody here to induce such a one to stay for other reasons. That's right, that right's—go away!"

"But no—I have not actually bought the practice as yet, though I am indeed in treaty for it. And, my dear friend, if I continue to feel about the business as I feel at this moment—perhaps I may conclude never to go at all."

"But you hate Hintock, and everything and everybody in it that you don't mean to take away with you?"

Fitzpiers contradicted this idea in his most vibratory tones, and she lapsed into the frivolous archness under which she hid passions of no mean strength — strange, smouldering, erratic passions, kept down like a stifled conflagration, but bursting out now here, now there — the only certain element in their direction being its unexpectedness.

If one word could have expressed Felice Charmond it would have been Inconsequence. She was a woman of perversities,

delighting in piquant contrasts. She liked mystery, in her life, in her love, in her history. To be fair to her, there was nothing in these which she had any great reason to be ashamed of, and many things of which she might have been proud; but her past had never been fathomed by the honest minds of Hintock, and she rarely volunteered her experiences. As for her capricious nature the people on her estates grew accustomed to it, and with that marvellous subtlety of contrivance in steering round odd tempers that is found in sons of the soil and dependents generally, they managed to get along under her government rather better than they would have done beneath a more equable rule.

Now, with regard to the doctor's notion of leaving Hintock, he had advanced further towards completing the purchase of the Budmouth surgeon's goodwill than he had

admitted to Mrs. Charmond. The whole matter hung upon what he might do in the ensuing twenty-four hours. The evening after leaving her he went out into the lane, and walked and pondered between the high hedges, now greenish-white with wild clematis — here called "old-man's-beard" from its aspect later in the year.

The letter of acceptance was to be written that night, after which his departure from Hintock would be irrevocable. But could he go away, remembering what had just passed? The trees, the hills, the leaves, the grass—each had been endowed and quickened with a subtle charm since he had discovered the person and history and, above all, the mood of their owner. There was every temporal reason for leaving: it would be entering again into a world which he had only quitted in a passion for isolation, induced by a fit of

Achillean moodiness after an imagined slight. His wife herself saw the awkwardness of their position here, and cheerfully welcomed the purposed change, towards which every step had been taken but the last. But could he find it in his heart—as he found it clearly enough in his conscience—to go away? No.

He drew a troubled breath, and went indoors. Here he rapidly penned a letter, wherein he withdrew, once for all, from the treaty for the Budmouth practice. As the postman had already left Little Hintock for that night he sent one of Melbury's men to intercept a mail-cart on another turnpike-road, and so got the letter off.

The man returned, met Fitzpiers in the lane, and told him the thing was done. Fitzpiers went back to his house musing. Why had he carried out this impulse—taken such wild trouble to effect a probable

injury to his own and his young wife's prospects? His motive was fantastic, glowing, shapeless as the fiery scenery about the western sky. Mrs. Charmond could overtly be nothing more to him than a patient now, and to his wife, at the outside, a patron. Yet in the unattached bachelor days of his first sojourn here how highly proper an emotional reason for lingering on would have appeared to troublesome dubiousness. Matrimonial ambition is such an honourable thing!

"My father has told me that you have sent off one of the men with a late letter to Budmouth," cried Grace, coming out vivaciously to meet him under the declining light of the sky, wherein hung, solitary, the folding star. "I said at once that you had finally agreed to pay the premium they ask, and that the tedious question had been settled. When do we go, Edred?"

"I have changed my mind," said he. "They want too much—seven hundred and fifty is too large a sum,—and in short I have declined to go further. We must wait for another opportunity. I fear I am not a good business-man."

He spoke the last words with a momentary faltering at the great foolishness of his act; and as he looked in her fair and honourable face his heart reproached him for what he had done.

Her manner that evening showed her disappointment. Personally she liked the home of her childhood much, and she was not ambitious. But her husband had seemed so dissatisfied with the circumstances hereabout since their marriage that she had sincerely hoped to go for his sake.

It was two or three days before he visited Mrs. Charmond again. The morn-

ing had been windy, and little showers had sowed themselves like grain against the walls and window-panes of the Hintock cottages. He went on foot across the wilder recesses of the park, where slimy streams of fresh moisture, exuding from decayed holes caused by old amputations, ran down the bark of the oaks and elms, the rind below being coated with a lichenous wash as green as emerald. They were stout-trunked trees, that never rocked their stems in the fiercest gale, responding to it entirely by crooking their limbs. Wrinkled like an old crone's face, and antlered with dead branches that rose above the foliage of their summits, they were nevertheless still green—though yellow had invaded the leaves of other trees.

She was in a little boudoir or writing-room on the first floor, and Fitzpiers was much surprised to find that the window-

curtains were closed and a red-shaded lamp and candles burning, though out of doors it was broad daylight. Moreover a large fire was burning in the grate, though it was not cold.

"What does it all mean?" he asked.

She sat in an easy chair, her face being turned away. "Oh," she murmured, "it is because the world is so dreary outside. Sorrow and bitterness in the sky, and floods of agonised tears beating against the panes. I lay awake last night, and I could hear the scrape of snails creeping up the window glass; it was so sad! My eyes were so heavy this morning that I could have wept my life away. I cannot bear you to see my face; I keep it away from you purposely. Oh! why were we given hungry hearts and wild desires if we have to live in a world like this? Why should Death alone lend what Life

is compelled to borrow — rest? Answer that, Dr. Fitzpiers."

"You must eat of a second tree of knowledge before *you* can do it, Felice Charmond."

"Then, when my emotions have exhausted themselves, I become full of fears, till I think I shall die for very fear. The terrible insistencies of society—how severe they are, and cold, and inexorable—ghastly towards those who are made of wax and not of stone. Oh, I am afraid of them; a stab for this error, and a stab for that—correctives and regulations pretendedly framed that society may tend to perfection—an end which I don't care for in the least. Yet for this all I do care for has to be stunted and starved."

Fitzpiers had seated himself near her. "What sets you in this mournful mood?" he asked gently. In reality he thought

that it was the result of a loss of tone from staying indoors so much, but he did not say so.

"My reflections. Doctor, you must not come here any more. They begin to think it a farce already. I say you must come no more. There—don't be angry with me!"—and she jumped up, pressed his hand, and looked anxiously at him. "It is necessary. It is best for both you and me."

"But," said Fitzpiers gloomily, "what have we done?"

"Done—we have done nothing. Perhaps we have thought the more. However, it is all vexation. I am going away to Middleton Abbey, near Shottsford, where a relative of my late husband lives, who is confined to her bed. The engagement was made in London, and I can't get out of it. Perhaps it is for the best that I go

there till all this is past. When are you going to enter on your new practice, and leave Hintock behind for ever, with your pretty wife on your arm?"

"I have refused the opportunity. I love this place too well to depart."

"You *have?*" she said, regarding him with wild uncertainty. "Why do you ruin yourself in that way? Great heaven, what have I done!"

"Nothing. Besides you are going away."

"Oh, yes; but only to Middleton Abbey for a month or two. Yet perhaps I shall gain strength there—particularly strength of mind—I require it. And when I come back I shall be a new woman; and you can come and see me safely then, and bring your wife with you, and we'll be friends—she and I. Oh, how this shutting up of one's self does lead to indulgence in idle sentiments! I shall not wish you

to give your attendance to me after to-day. But I am glad that you are not going away—if your remaining does not injure your prospects at all."

As soon as he had left the room the mild friendliness she had preserved in her tone at parting, the playful sadness with which she had conversed with him, equally departed from her. She became as heavy as lead—just as she had been before he arrived. Her whole being seemed to dissolve in a sad powerlessness to do anything, and the sense of it made her lips tremulous and her closed eyes wet.

His footsteps again startled her, and she turned round.

"I return for a moment to tell you that the evening is going to be fine. The sun is shining, so do open your curtains and put out those lights. Shall I do it for you?"

"Please—if you don't mind."

He drew back the window-curtains, whereupon the red glow of the lamp and the two candle flames became almost invisible under the flood of late autumn sunlight that poured in.

"Shall I come round to you?" he asked, her back being towards him.

"No," she replied.

"Why not?"

"Because I am crying, and I don't want to see you."

He stood a moment irresolute, and regretted that he had killed the rosy passionate lamplight by opening the curtains and letting in garish day.

"Then I am going," he said.

"Very well," she answered, stretching one hand round to him, and patting her eyes with a handkerchief held in the other.

"Shall I write a line to you at——?"

"No, no." A gentle reasonableness came

into her tone as she added, "It must not be, you know. It won't do."

"Very well. Good-bye." The next moment he was gone.

In the evening with listless adroitness she encouraged the maid who dressed her for dinner to speak of Dr. Fitzpiers's marriage.

"Mrs Fitzpiers was once supposed to favour Mr. Winterborne," said the young woman.

"And why didn't she marry him?" said Mrs. Charmond.

"Because you see, ma'am, he lost his houses."

"Lost his houses? How came he to do that?"

"The houses were held on lives, and the lives dropped, and your agent wouldn't renew them, though it is said that Mr. Winterborne had a very good claim. That's

as I've heard it, ma'am, and it was through it that the match was broke off."

Being just then distracted by a dozen emotions, Mrs. Charmond sank into a mood of dismal self-reproach. "In refusing that poor man his reasonable request," she said to herself, "I fore-doomed my revived girlhood's romance. Who would have thought such a business matter could have nettled my own heart like this! Now for a winter of regrets and agonies and useless wishes, till I forget him in the spring. Oh! I am glad I am going away."

She left her chamber, and went down to dine, with a sigh. On the stairs she stood opposite the large window for a moment, and looked out upon the lawn. It was not yet quite dark. Half-way up the steep green slope confronting her stood old Timothy Tangs, who was shortening his way homeward by clambering here where there

was no road, and in opposition to express orders that no path was to be made there. Tangs had momentarily stopped to take a pinch of snuff, but observing Mrs. Charmond gazing at him he hastened to get over the top out of hail. His precipitancy made him miss his footing, and he rolled like a barrel to the bottom, his snuff box rolling in front of him.

Her indefinite idle impossible passion for Fitzpiers; her constitutional cloud of misery, the sorrowful drops that still hung upon her eyelashes, all made way for the impulse started by the spectacle. She burst into an immoderate fit of laughter; her very gloom of the previous hour seeming to render it the more uncontrollable. It had not died out of her when she reached the dining-room; and even here, before the servants, her shoulders suddenly shook as the scene returned

upon her; and the tears of her risibility mingled with the remnants of those engendered by her grief.

She resolved to be sad no more. She drank two glasses of champagne, and a little more still after those; and amused herself in the evening with singing little amatory songs.

"I must do something for that poor man Winterborne, however," she said.

CHAPTER XII.

A WEEK had passed, and Mrs. Charmond had left Hintock House. Middleton Abbey, the place of her sojourn, was about twenty miles distant by road, eighteen by bridle-paths and footways.

Grace observed, for the first time, that her husband was restless, that at moments he even was disposed to avoid her. The scrupulous civility of mere acquaintance-ship crept into his manner; yet, when sitting at meals, he seemed hardly to hear her remarks. Her little doings interested him no longer, whilst towards her father

his bearing was not far from supercilious. It was plain that his mind was entirely outside her life, whereabouts outside it she could not tell; in some region of science possibly, or of psychological literature. But her hope that he was again immersing himself in those lucubrations which before her marriage had made his light a landmark in Hintock, was founded simply on the slender fact that he often sat up late.

One day she discovered him leaning over a gate on Rubdon Hill, the gate at which Winterborne had once been standing, and which opened on the brink of a declivity, slanting down directly into White-Hart Vale, extending beneath the eye at this point to a distance of many miles. His attention was fixed on the landscape far away, and Grace's approach was so noiseless that he did not hear her. When she came close she could see his lips

moving unconsciously, as to some impassioned visionary theme.

She spoke, and Fitzpiers started. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

"Oh! I was contemplating our old place of Buckbury, in my idle way," he said.

It had seemed to her that he was looking much to the right of that cradle and tomb of his ancestral dignity; but she made no further observation, and taking his arm walked home beside him almost in silence. She did not know that Middleton Abbey lay in the direction of his gaze.

"Are you going to have out Darling this afternoon?" she asked presently.

Darling, the light-grey mare which Winterborne had bought for Grace, Fitzpiers now constantly used, the animal having turned out a wonderful bargain in

combining a perfect docility with an almost human intelligence; moreover, she was not too young. Fitzpiers was unfamiliar with horses, and he valued these qualities.

"Yes," he replied, "but not to drive. I am riding her. I practise crossing a horse as often as I can now, for I find that I can take much shorter cuts on horseback."

He had, in fact, taken these riding exercises for about a week, only since Mrs. Charmond's absence; his universal practice hitherto having been to drive.

Some few days later, Fitzpiers started on the back of this horse to see a patient in the aforesaid Vale. It was about five o'clock in the evening when he went away, and at bedtime he had not reached home. There was nothing very singular in this, though she was not aware that he had any patient more than five or six miles

distant in that direction. The clock had struck one before Fitzpiers entered the house, and he came to his room softly, as if anxious not to disturb her.

The next morning she was stirring considerably earlier than he. In the yard there was a conversation going on about the mare; the man who attended to the horses, Darling included, insisted that the latter was "hag-rid"; for when he had arrived at the stable that morning, she was in such a state as no horse could be in by honest riding. It was true that the doctor had stabled her himself when he got home, so that she was not looked after as she would have been if the speaker had groomed and fed her; but that did not account for the appearance she presented, if Mr. Fitzpiers's journey had been only where he had stated. The phenomenal exhaustion of Darling, as thus related, was sufficient to develop a whole

series of tales about equestrian witches and demons, the narration of which occupied a considerable time.

Grace returned indoors. In passing through the outer room she picked up her husband's overcoat which he had carelessly flung down across a chair. A turnpike ticket fell out of the breast-pocket, and she saw that it had been issued at Middleton Gate. He had therefore visited Middleton the previous night, a distance of at least five-and-thirty miles on horseback, there and back.

During the day she made some inquiries, and learnt for the first time that Mrs. Charmond was staying at Middleton Abbey. She could not resist an inference—strange as that inference was.

A few days later he prepared to start again, at the same time and in the same direction. She knew that the state of the

cottager who lived that way was a mere pretext; she was quite sure he was going to Mrs. Charmond.

Grace was amazed at the mildness of the anger which the suspicion engendered in her. She was but little excited, and her jealousy was languid even to death. It told tales of the nature of her affection for him. In truth, her ante-nuptial regard for Fitzpiers had been rather of the quality of awe towards a superior being than of tender solicitude for a lover. It had been based upon mystery and strangeness—the mystery of his past, of his knowledge, of his professional skill, of his beliefs. When this structure of ideals was demolished by the intimacy of common life, and she found him as merely human as the Hintock people themselves, a new foundation was in demand for an enduring and staunch affection—a sympathetic inter-dependence, wherein mutual

weaknesses are made the grounds of a defensive alliance. Fitzpiers had furnished none of that single-minded confidence and truth out of which alone such a second union could spring; hence it was with a controllable emotion that she now watched the mare brought round.

"I'll walk with you to the hill if you are not in a great hurry," she said, rather loth, after all, to let him go.

"Do; there's plenty of time," replied her husband.

Accordingly he led along the horse, and walked beside her, impatient enough nevertheless. Thus they proceeded to the turnpike road, and ascended Rubdon Hill to the gate he had been leaning over when she surprised him ten days before. This was the end of her excursion. Fitzpiers bade her adieu with affection, even with tenderness, and she observed that he looked weary-eyed.

"Why do you go to-night?" she said. "You have been called up two nights in succession already."

"I must go," he answered, almost gloomily. "Don't wait up for me." With these words he mounted his horse, passed through the gate which Grace held open for him, and ambled down the steep bridle-track to the valley.

She closed the gate and watched his descent, and then his journey onward. His way was east, the evening sun which stood behind her back beaming full upon him as soon as he got out from the shade of the hill. Notwithstanding this untoward proceeding she was determined to be loyal if he proved true; and the determination to love one's best will carry a heart a long way towards making that best an ever-growing thing.

The conspicuous coat of the active though

blanching mare made horse and rider easy objects for the vision. Though Darling had been chosen with such pains by Winterborne for Grace, she had never ridden the sleek creature; but her husband had found the animal exceedingly convenient, particularly now that he had taken to the saddle, plenty of staying power being left in Darling yet. Fitzpiers, like others of his character, while despising Melbury and his station, did not at all disdain to spend Melbury's money, or appropriate to his own use the horse which belonged to Melbury's daughter.

And so the infatuated surgeon went along through the gorgeous autumn landscape of White-Hart Vale, surrounded by orchards lustrous with the reds of apple-crops, berries, and foliage, the whole intensified by the gilding of the declining sun. The earth this year had been prodigally bountiful, and now was the supreme moment of her bounty. In

the poorest spots the hedges were bowed with haws and blackberries; acorns cracked underfoot, and the burst husks of chestnuts lay exposing their auburn contents as if arranged by anxious sellers in a fruit-market. In all this proud show some kernels were unsound as her own situation, and she wondered if there were one world in the universe where the fruit had no worm, and marriage no sorrow.

Her Tannhäuser still moved on, his plodding steed rendering him distinctly visible yet. Could she have heard Fitzpiers's voice at that moment she would have found it murmuring,

> "—Towards the load-star of my one desire
> I flitted, like a dizzy moth, whose flight
> Is as a dead leaf's in the owlet light."

But he was a silent spectacle to her. Soon he rose out of the valley, and skirted a high plateau of the chalk formation on his

right, which rested abruptly upon the fruity district of deep loam, the character and herbage of the two formations being so distinct that the calcareous upland appeared but as a deposit of a few years' antiquity upon the level vale.

He kept along the edge of this high, uninclosed country, and the sky behind him being deep violet she could still see white Darling in relief upon it—a mere speck now—a Wouvermans eccentricity reduced to microscopic dimensions. Upon this high ground he gradually disappeared.

Thus she had beheld the pet animal purchased for her own use, in pure love of her, by one who had always been true, impressed to convey her husband away from her to the side of a new-found idol. While she was musing on the vicissitudes of horses and wives, she discerned shapes moving up the valley towards her, quite near at hand,

though till now hidden by the hedges. Surely they were Giles Winterborne, with two horses and a cider-apparatus, conducted by Robert Creedle. Up, upward they crept, a stray beam of the sun alighting every now and then like a star on the blades of the pomace-shovels, which had been converted to steel mirrors by the action of the malic acid. She opened the gate when he came close, and the panting horses rested as they achieved the ascent.

"How do you do, Giles?" said she, under a sudden impulse to be familiar with him.

He replied with much more reserve. "You are going for a walk, Mrs. Fitzpiers?" he added. "It is pleasant just now."

"No, I am returning," said she.

The vehicles passed through, the gate slammed, and Winterborne walked by her side in the rear of the apple-mill.

He looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his sleeves and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider which at its first return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. Her heart rose from its late sadness like a released spring; her senses revelled in the sudden lapse back to nature unadorned. The consciousness of having to be genteel because of her husband's profession, the veneer of artificiality which she had acquired at the fashionable schools, were thrown off, and she became the crude country girl of her latent earliest instincts.

Nature was bountiful, she thought. No sooner had she been starved off by Edred

Fitzpiers than another being, impersonating bare and undiluted manliness, had arisen out of the earth ready to hand. This was an excursion of the imagination which she did not encourage, and she said suddenly, to disguise the confused regard which had followed her thoughts, "Did you meet my husband?"

Winterborne, with some hesitation: "Yes."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At Calfhay Cross. I come from Middleton Abbey; I have been making there for the last week."

"Haven't they a mill of their own?"

"Yes, but it's out of repair."

"I think—I heard that Mrs. Charmond had gone there to stay?"

"Yes, I have seen her at the windows once or twice."

Grace waited an interval before she went

on: "Did Mr. Fitzpiers take the way to Middleton?"

"Yes . . . I met him on Darling." As she did not reply, he added with a gentler inflection, "You know why the mare was called that?"

"Oh yes—of course," she answered quickly.

They had risen so far over the crest of the hill that the whole west sky was revealed. Between the broken clouds they could see far into the recesses of heaven, the eye journeying on under a species of golden arcades, and past fiery obstructions, fancied cairns, logan-stones, stalactites and stalagmite of topaz. Deeper than this their gaze passed thin flakes of incandescence, till it plunged into a bottomless medium of soft green fire.

Her abandonment to the luscious time after her sense of ill-usage, her revolt for

the nonce against social law, her passionate desire for primitive life may have showed in her face. Winterborne was looking at her, his eyes lingering on a flower that she wore in her bosom. Almost with the abstraction of a somnambulist he stretched out his hand and gently caressed the flower.

She drew back. "What are you doing, Giles Winterborne!" she exclaimed, with a look of severe surprise.

The evident absence of all premeditation from the act, however, speedily led her to think that it was not necessary to stand upon her dignity here and now. "You must bear in mind, Giles," she said kindly, "that we are not as we were; and some people might have said that what you did was taking a liberty."

It was more than she need have told him; his action of forgetfulness had made

him so angry with himself that he flushed through his tan.

"I don't know what I am coming to!" he exclaimed savagely. "Ah—I was not once like this!" Tears of vexation were in his eyes.

"No, now—it was nothing! I was too reproachful."

"It would not have occurred to me if I had not seen something like it done elsewhere—at Middleton lately," he said thoughtfully after a while.

"By whom?"

"Don't ask it."

She scanned him narrowly. "I know quite well enough," she returned indifferently. "It was by my husband, and the woman was Mrs. Charmond. Association of ideas reminded you when you saw me. . . . Giles—tell me all you know about that—please do, Giles! But no—I won't hear it.

Let the subject cease. And as you are my friend say nothing to my father."

They reached a place where their ways divided. Winterborne continued along the highway which kept outside the copse, and Grace opened a gate that entered it.

CHAPTER XIII.

She walked up the soft grassy ride, screened on either hand by nut-bushes just now heavy with clusters of twos and threes and fours. A little way on the track she pursued was crossed by a similar one at right angles. Here Grace stopped; some few yards up the transverse ride the buxom Suke Damson was visible—her gown tucked up high through her pocket-hole, and no bonnet on her head—in the act of pulling down boughs from which she was gathering and eating nuts with great rapidity, her lover Tim Tangs standing near her engaged in the same pleasant meal.

Crack, crack, went Suke's jaws every second or two. By an automatic chain of thought Grace's mind reverted to the tooth-drawing scene described by her husband; and for the first time she wondered if that narrative were really true, Susan's jaws being so obviously sound and strong. Grace turned up towards the nut-gatherers, and conquered her reluctance to speak to the girl, who was a little in advance of Tim. "Good evening, Susan," she said.

"Good evening, Miss Melbury," (crack).

"Mrs. Fitzpiers."

"Oh yes, ma'am—Mrs. Fitzpiers," said Suke with a peculiar curtsey.

Grace, not to be daunted, continued, "Take care of your teeth, Suke. That accounts for the toothache."

"I don't know what an ache is, either in tooth, ear, or head, thank the Lord," (crack).

"Nor the loss of one, either?"

"See for yourself, ma'am." She parted her red lips, and exhibited the whole double row, full up and unimpaired.

"You have never had one drawn?"

"Never."

"So much the better for your stomach," said Mrs. Fitzpiers in an altered voice. And turning away quickly she went on.

As her husband's character thus shaped itself under the touch of time, Grace was almost startled to find how little she suffered from that jealous excitement which is conventionally attributed to all wives in such circumstances. But though possessed by none of the feline wildness which it was her moral duty to experience, she did not fail to suspect that she had made a frightful mistake in her marriage. Acquiescence in her father's wishes had been degradation

to herself. People are not given premonitions for nothing; she should have obeyed her impulse on that early morning when she peeped from her window, and have steadfastly refused her hand.

Oh, that plausible tale which her then betrothed had told her about Suke—the dramatic account of her entreaties to him to draw the aching enemy, and the fine artistic touch he had given to the story by explaining that it was a lovely molar without a flaw!

She traced the remainder of the woodland track, dazed by the complications of her position. If his protestations to her before their marriage could be believed, her husband had felt affection of some sort for herself and this woman simultaneously; and was now again spreading the same emotion over Mrs. Charmond and herself conjointly, his manner being still kind and

fond at times. But surely, rather than that, he must have played the hypocrite towards her in each case with elaborate completeness; and the thought of this sickened her, for it involved the conjecture that if he had not loved her his only motive for making her his wife must have been her little fortune.

Yet here Grace made a mistake, for the love of men like Fitzpiers is unquestionably of such quality as to bear division and transference. He had indeed once declared, though not to her, that on one occasion he had noticed himself to be possessed by five distinct infatuations at the same time. If this were true, his differed from the highest affection as the lower orders of the animal world differ from advanced organisms, partition causing not death but a multiplied existence. He had loved her sincerely, and had by no means ceased to love her now.

But such double and treble-barrelled hearts were naturally beyond her conception.

Of poor Suke Damson Grace thought no more. She had had her day.

"If he does not love me I will not love him!" said Grace proudly.

And though these were mere words, it was a somewhat formidable thing for Fitzpiers that her heart was approximating to a state in which it might be possible to carry them out. That very absence of hot jealousy which made his courses so easy, and on which, indeed, he congratulated himself, meant, unknown to either wife or husband, more mischief than the inconvenient watchfulness of a jaundiced eye.

Her sleep that night was nervous. The wing allotted to her and her husband had never seemed so lonely. At last she got up, put on her dressing-gown, and went down stairs. Her father, who slept lightly,

heard her descend, and came to the stair-head.

"Is that you, Grace? What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing more than that I am restless. Edred is detained by a case at Owlscombe in White-Hart Vale."

"But how's that? I saw the woman's husband at Great Hintock just afore bed-time; and she was going on well, and the doctor gone then."

"Then he's detained somewhere else," said Grace. "Never mind me; he will soon be home. I expect him about one."

She went back to her room, and dozed and woke several times. One o'clock had been the hour of his return on the last occasion; but it had passed now by a long way, and still Fitzpiers did not come. Just before dawn she heard the men stirring in the yard, and the flashes of their lanterns

spread every now and then through her window-blind. She remembered that her father had told her not to be disturbed if she noticed them, as they would be rising early to send off four loads of hurdles to a distant sheep fair. Peeping out she saw them bustling about, the hollow-turner among the rest; he was loading his wares—wooden bowls, dishes, spigots, spoons, cheese-vats, funnels and so on—upon one of her father's waggons, who carried them to the fair for him every year out of neighbourly kindness.

The scene and the occasion would have enlivened her but that her husband was still absent, though it was now five o'clock. She could hardly suppose him, whatever his infatuation, to have prolonged to a later hour than ten an ostensibly professional call on Mrs. Charmond at Middleton; and he could have ridden home in two hours and a half. What then had become of him? That he

had been out the greater part of the two preceding nights added to her uneasiness.

She dressed herself, descended, and went out, the weird twilight of advancing day chilling the rays from the lanterns, and making the men's faces wan. As soon as Melbury saw her he came round, showing his alarm.

"Edred is not come," she said. "And I have reason to know that he's not attending anybody. He has had no rest for two nights before this. I was going to the top of the hill to look for him."

"I'll come with you," said Melbury.

She begged him not to hinder himself; but he insisted, for he saw a peculiar and rigid gloom in her face over and above her uneasiness, and did not like the look of it. Telling the men he would be with them again soon he walked beside her into the turnpike road, and partly up the hill whence

she had watched Fitzpiers the night before across the Great White-Hart Valley.

They halted beneath a half-dead oak, hollow, and disfigured with white tumours, its roots spreading out like claws grasping the ground. A chilly wind circled round them, upon whose currents the seeds of a neighbouring lime-tree, supported parachute-wise by the wing attached, flew out of the boughs downward like fledglings from their nest. The vale was wrapped in a dim atmosphere of unnaturalness, and the east was like a livid curtain edged with pink. There was no sign nor sound of Fitzpiers.

"It is no use standing here," said her father. "He may come home fifty ways. . . . why, look here—here be Darling's tracks—turned homeward and nearly blown dry and hard! He must have come in hours ago without your seeing him."

"He has not done that," said she.

They went back hastily. On entering their own gates they perceived that the men had left the waggons, and were standing round the door of the stable which had been appropriated to the doctor's use.

"Is there anything the matter?" cried Grace.

"Oh, no, ma'am. All's well that ends well," said old Timothy Tangs. "I've heard of such things before—amongst workfolk, though not amongst your gentlepeople—that's true."

They entered the stable, and saw the pale shape of Darling standing in the middle of her stall, with Fitzpiers on her back, sound asleep. Darling was munching hay as well as she could with the bit in her mouth, and the reins, which had fallen from Fitzpiers's hand, hung upon her neck.

Grace went and touched his hand; shook it, before she could arouse him. He moved,

started, opened his eyes, and exclaimed, "Ah, Felice. . . . Oh, it's Grace. I could not see in the gloom. What—am I in the saddle!"

"Yes," said she. "How do you come here?"

He collected his thoughts, and in a few minutes stammered as he began dismounting: "I was riding along homeward through the Vale, very, very sleepy, having been up so much of late. When I came opposite Holy Spring the mare turned her head that way as if she wanted to drink. I let her go in, and she drank; I thought she would never finish. While she was drinking the clock of Owlscombe church struck twelve. I distinctly remember counting the strokes. From that moment I positively recollect nothing till I saw you here by my side."

"The name! If it had been any other

horse he'd have had a broken neck!" murmured Melbury.

"'Tis wonderful, sure, how a quiet hoss will bring a man home at such times!" said John Upjohn. "And—what's more wonderful than keeping your seat in a deep slumbering sleep—I've knowed men drowze off walking home from randies where the mead and other liquors have gone round well, and keep walking for more than a mile on end without waking. Well, doctor, 'tis a mercy you wasn't a drownded, or a splintered, or a hanged up to a tree like Absalont—also a handsome gentleman like yerself, as the prophets say."

"True," murmured old Timothy piously, "from the sole of his boots to the crown of his hat there was no blemish in him!"

"Or leastwise you might ha' been a wownded into tatters a'most, and no brother-

tradesman to jine your few limbs together within seven mile!"

Whilst this address was proceeding Fitzpiers had dismounted, and taking Grace's arm walked stiffly indoors with her. Melbury stood staring at the horse which, in addition to being very weary, was spattered with mud. There was no mud to speak of about the Hintocks just now—only in the clammy hollows of the Vale beyond Owlscombe, the stiff soil of which retained moisture for weeks after the uplands were dry. Whilst they were rubbing down the mare Melbury's mind coupled with the foreign quality of the mud the name he had heard unconsciously muttered by the surgeon when Grace took his hand—"Felice." Who was Felice? Why, Mrs. Charmond; and she, as he knew, was staying at Middleton.

Melbury had indeed pounced upon the image that filled Fitzpiers's half-awakened

soul—wherein there had been a picture of a recent interview on a starlit lawn with a capriciously-passionate woman, who had begged him not to come again in tones whose modulations incited him to disobey. "What are you doing here? Why do you pursue me? Another belongs to you. If they were to see you they would seize you as a thief!" And she had turbulently admitted to his wringing questions that her visit to Middleton had been undertaken less because of the invalid relative than in shamefaced fear of her own weakness if she remained near his home. A triumph then it was to Fitzpiers, poor and hampered as he had become, to recognise his real conquest of this beauty, delayed so many years. His was the passion of Congreve's Millimant, to whom love's supreme delight lay in seeing "that heart which others bleed for, bleed for me."

When the horse had been attended to Melbury stood uneasily here and there about his premises; he was rudely disturbed in the comfortable views which had lately possessed him on his domestic concerns. It is true that he had for some days discerned that Grace more and more sought his company, preferred supervising his kitchen and bake-house with her step-mother to occupying herself with the lighter details of her own apartments. She seemed no longer able to find in her own hearth an adequate focus for her life, and hence, like a weak queen-bee after leading off to an independent home, had hovered again into the parent hive. But he had not construed these and other incidents of the kind till now.

Something was wrong in the dovecote. A ghastly sense beset him that he alone would be responsible for whatever unhappi-

ness should be brought upon her for whom he almost solely lived; whom to retain under his roof he had faced the numerous inconveniences involved in giving up the best part of his house to Fitzpiers. There was no room for doubt that, had he allowed events to take their natural course, she would have accepted Winterborne, and realised his old dream of restitution to that young man's family.

That Fitzpiers could allow himself to look for a moment on any other creature than Grace filled Melbury with grief and astonishment. In the pure and simple life he had led it had scarcely occurred to him that after marriage a man might be faithless. That he could sweep to the heights of Mrs. Charmond's position, lift the veil of Isis, so to speak, would have amazed Melbury by its audacity if he had not suspected encouragement from that quarter.

What could he and his simple Grace do to countervail the passions of such as those two sophisticated beings — versed in the world's ways, armed with every apparatus for victory? In such an encounter the homely timber-dealer felt as inferior as a savage with his bow and arrows to the precise weapons of modern warfare.

Grace came out of the house as the morning drew on. The village was silent, most of the folk having gone to the fair. Fitzpiers had retired to bed, and was sleeping off his fatigue. She went to the stable and looked at poor Darling: in all probability Giles Winterborne, by obtaining for her a horse of such intelligence and docility, had been the means of saving her husband's life. She paused over the strange thought; and then there appeared her father behind her.

She saw that he knew things were not

as they ought to be, from the troubled dulness of his eye, and from his face, different points of which had independent motions, twitchings, and tremblings, unknown to himself, and involuntary.

"He was detained, I suppose, last night?" said Melbury.

"Oh, yes; a bad case in the Vale," she replied calmly.

"Nevertheless he should have stayed at home."

"But he couldn't, father."

Her father turned away. He could hardly bear to see his whilom truthful girl brought to the humiliation of having to talk like that.

That night carking care sat beside Melbury's pillow, and his stiff limbs tossed at its presence.

"I can't lie here any longer," he muttered. Striking a light he wandered

about the room. "What have I done, what have I done for her?" he said to his wife who had anxiously awakened. "I had long planned that she should marry the son of the man I wanted to make amends to; do ye mind how I told you all about it, Lucy, the night before she came home? Ah! but I was not content with doing right, I wanted to do more!"

"Don't raft yourself without good need, George," she replied. "I won't quite believe that things are so much amiss. I won't believe that Mrs. Charmond has encouraged him. Even supposing she has encouraged a great many, she can have no motive to do it now. What so likely as that she is not yet quite well, and doesn't care to let another doctor come near her?"

He did not heed. "Grace used to be so busy every day, with fixing a curtain

here and driving a tin-tack there; but she cares for no employment now!"

"Do you know anything of Mrs. Charmond's past history? Perhaps that would throw some light upon things. Before she came here as the wife of old Charmond four or five years ago, not a soul seems to have heard aught of her. Why not make inquiries? And then do ye wait and see more; there'll be plenty of opportunity. Time enough to cry when you know 'tis a crying matter; 'tis bad to meet troubles half-way."

There was some good sense in the notion of seeing further. Melbury resolved to inquire and wait, hoping still, but oppressed between whiles with much fear.

CHAPTER XIV.

EXAMINE Grace as her father might, she would admit nothing. For the present, therefore, he simply watched.

The suspicion that his darling child was being slighted wrought almost a miraculous change in Melbury's nature. No man so furtive for the time as the ingenuous countryman who finds that his ingenuousness has been abused. Melbury's heretofore confidential candour towards his gentlemanly son-in-law was displaced by a feline stealth that did injury to his every action, thought, and mood.

He knew that a woman once given to a man for life took, as a rule, her lot as it came, and made the best of it, without external interference; but for the first time he asked himself why this so generally should be done. Besides, this case was not, he argued, like ordinary cases. Leaving out the question of Grace being anything but an ordinary woman, her peculiar situation, as it were in mid-air between two stories of society, together with the loneliness of Hintock, made a husband's neglect a far more tragical matter to her than it would be to one who had a large circle of friends to fall back upon. Wisely or unwisely, and whatever other fathers did, he resolved to fight his daughter's battle still.

Mrs. Charmond had returned. But Hintock House scarcely gave forth signs of life, so quietly had she re-entered it. Autumn drew shiveringly to its end. One

day something seemed to be gone from the gardens; the tenderer leaves of vegetables had shrunk under the first smart frost, and hung like faded linen rags; then the forest leaves, which had been descending at leisure, descended in haste and in multitudes, and all the golden colours that had hung overhead were now crowded together in a degraded mass underfoot, where the fallen myriads got redder and hornier, and curled themselves up to rot. The only suspicious features in Mrs. Charmond's existence at this season were two; the first, that she lived with no companion or relative about her, which, considering her age and attractions, was somewhat unusual conduct for a young widow in a lonely country house; the other, that she did not, as in previous years, start from Hintock to winter abroad. In Fitzpiers, the only change from his last autumn's habits lay in his abandon-

ment of night study; his lamp never shone from his new dwelling as from his old.

If the suspected ones met it was by such adroit contrivances that even Melbury's vigilance could not encounter them together. A simple call at her house by the doctor had nothing irregular about it, and that he had paid two or three such calls was certain. What had passed at those interviews was known only to the parties themselves; but that Felice Charmond was under some one's influence Melbury soon had opportunity of perceiving.

Winter had come on. Owls began to be noisy in the mornings and evenings, and flocks of wood-pigeons made themselves prominent again. On a day in February, about six months after the marriage of Fitzpiers, Melbury was returning from Great Hintock on foot through the lane, when he saw before him the surgeon also

walking. Melbury would have overtaken him, but at that moment Fitzpiers turned in through a gate to one of the rambling drives among the trees at this side of the wood, which led to nowhere in particular, and the beauty of whose serpentine curves was the only justification of their existence. Felice almost simultaneously trotted down the lane towards the timber-dealer, in a little basket-carriage which she sometimes drove about the estate, unaccompanied by a servant. She turned in at the same place without having seen either Melbury or, apparently, Fitzpiers.

Melbury was soon at the spot, despite his aches and his sixty years. Mrs. Charmond had come up with the doctor, who was standing immediately behind the carriage. She had turned to him, her arm being thrown carelessly over the back of the seat.

They looked in each other's faces without

uttering a word, an arch yet gloomy smile wreathing her lips. Fitzpiers clasped her hanging hand, and, while she still remained in the same listless attitude, looking volumes into his eyes, he stealthily unbuttoned her glove, and stripped her hand of it by rolling back the gauntlet over the fingers, so that it came off inside out. He then raised her hand to his mouth, she still reclining passively, watching him as she might have watched a fly upon her dress. At last she said, "Well, sir, what excuse for this disobedience?"

"I make none."

"Then go your way, and let me go mine." She snatched away her hand, touched the pony with the whip, and left him standing there, holding the reversed glove.

Melbury's first impulse was to reveal his presence to Fitzpiers, and upbraid him

bitterly. But a moment's thought was sufficient to show him the futility of any such simple proceeding. There was not, after all, so much in what he had witnessed as in what that scene might be the surface and froth of—probably a state of mind which censure aggravates rather than cures. Moreover, he said to himself that the point of attack should be the woman, if either. He therefore kept out of sight, and musing sadly, even tearfully—for he was meek as a child in matters concerning his daughter—continued his walk towards Hintock.

The insight which is bred of deep sympathy was never more finely exemplified than in this instance. Through her guarded manner, her dignified speech, her placid countenance, he discerned the interior of Grace's life only too truly, hidden as were its incidents from every outer eye.

These incidents had become painful

enough. Fitzpiers had latterly developed an irritable discontent, which vented itself in monologues when Grace was present to hear them. The early morning of this day had been dull, after a night of wind, and on looking out of the window in the grey grim dawn Fitzpiers had observed some of Melbury's men dragging away a large limb which had been snapped off a beech tree. Everything was cold and colourless.

"My good God!" he said as he stood in his dressing-gown. "This is life!"

He did not know whether Grace was awake or not, and he would not turn his head to ascertain. "Ah, fool," he went on to himself, "to clip your own wings when you were free to soar! . . . But I could not rest till I had done it. Why do I never recognise an opportunity till I have missed it, nor the good or ill of a step till it is irrevocable? . . . I fell in love!"

Grace moved. He thought she had heard some part of his soliloquy. He was sorry —though he had not taken any precaution to prevent her.

He expected a scene at breakfast, but she only exhibited an extreme reserve. It was enough, however, to make him repent that he should have done anything to produce discomfort; for he attributed her manner entirely to what he had said. But Grace's manner had not its cause either in his sayings or in his doings. She had not heard a single word of his regrets. Something even nearer home than her husband's blighted prospects—if blighted they were —was the origin of her mood.

She had made a discovery—one which to a girl of honest nature was almost appalling. She had looked into her heart, and found that her early interest in Giles Winterborne had become revitalised into

luxuriant growth by her widening perceptions of what was great and little in life. His homeliness no longer offended her acquired tastes; his comparative want of so-called culture did not now jar on her intellect; his country dress even pleased her eye; his exterior roughness fascinated her. Having discovered by marriage how much that was humanly not great could co-exist with attainments of an exceptional order, there was a revulsion in her sentiments from all that she had formerly clung to in this kind. Honesty, goodness, manliness, tenderness, devotion, for her only existed in their purity now in the breasts of unvarnished men; and here was one who had manifested such towards her from his youth up.

There was, further, that never-ceasing pity in her soul for Giles as a man whom she had wronged—a man who had been unfortunate

in his worldly transactions; one who, notwithstanding these things, had, like Hamlet's friend, borne himself throughout his scathing

"As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,"

investing himself thereby with a real touch of sublimity. It was these perceptions, and no subtle catching of her husband's murmurs, that had bred the abstraction visible in her.

When her father approached the house after witnessing the interview between Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond, Grace was looking out of her sitting-room window, as if she had nothing to do, or think of, or care for. He stood still.

"Ah, Grace," he said, regarding her fixedly.

"Yes, father," she murmured.

"Waiting for your dear husband?" he inquired, speaking with the sarcasm of pitiful affection.

"Oh no—not especially. He has a great many patients to see this afternoon."

Melbury came quite close. "Grace, what's the use of talking like that when you know——? Here, come down and walk with me out in the garden, child."

He unfastened the door in the ivy-laced wall, and waited. This apparent indifference alarmed him. He would far rather that she had rushed in all the fire of jealousy to Hintock House, regardless of conventionality, confronted and attacked Felice Charmond *unguibus et rostro*, and accused her even in exaggerated shape of stealing away her husband. Such a storm might have cleared the air.

She emerged in a minute or two, and they went into the garden together. "You know as well as I do," he resumed, "that there is something threatening mischief to your life, and yet you pretend you do not. Do

you suppose I don't see the trouble in your face every day? I am very sure that this quietude is wrong conduct in you. You should look more into matters."

"I am quiet because my sadness is not of a nature to stir me to action."

Melbury wanted to ask her a dozen questions—did she not feel jealous? was she not indignant?—but a natural delicacy restrained him. "You are very tame and let-alone, I am bound to say," he remarked pointedly.

"I am what I feel, father," she repeated.

He glanced at her, and there returned upon his mind the scene of her offering to wed Winterborne instead of Fitzpiers in the last days before her marriage; and he asked himself if it could be the fact that she loved Winterborne now that she had lost him more than she had ever done when she was comparatively free to choose him.

"What would you have me do?" she asked in a low voice.

He recalled his mind from the retrospective pain to the practical matter before them. "I would have you go to Mrs. Charmond," he said.

"Go to Mrs. Charmond—what for?" said she.

"Well—if I must speak plain, dear Grace—to ask her, appeal to her in the name of your common womanhood, and your many like sentiments on things, not to make unhappiness between you and your husband. It lies with her entirely to do one or the other—that I can see."

Grace's face had heated at her father's words, and the very rustle of her skirts upon the box-edging bespoke disdain. "I shall not think of going to her, father—of course, I could not!" she answered.

"Why—don't 'ee want to be happier than

you be at present?" said Melbury, more moved on her account than she was herself.

"I don't wish to be more humiliated. If I have anything to bear I can bear it in silence."

"But, my dear maid, you are too young—you don't know what the present state of things may lead to. Just see the harm done a'ready! Your husband would have gone away to Budmouth to a bigger practice if it had not been for this. Although it has gone such a little way it is poisoning your future even now. Mrs. Charmond is thoughtlessly bad, not bad by calculation; and just a word to her now might save 'ee a peck of woes."

"Ah, I loved her once," said Grace with a broken articulation, "and she would not care for me then! Now I no longer love her. Let her do her worst: I don't care."

"You ought to care. You have got into

a very good position to start with. You have been well educated, well tended, and you have become the wife of a professional man of unusually good family. Surely you ought to make the best of your position."

"I don't see that I ought. I wish I had never got into it. I wish you had never, never thought of educating me. I wish I worked in the woods like Marty South! I hate genteel life, and I want to be no better than she!"

"Why?" said her amazed father.

"Because cultivation has only brought me inconveniences and troubles. I say again, I wish you had never sent me to those fashionable schools you set your mind on. It all arose out of that, father. If I had stayed at home I should have married——'

She closed up her mouth suddenly and was silent; and he saw that she was not far from crying.

Melbury was much grieved. "What, and would you like to have grown up as we be here in Hintock—knowing no more, and with no more chance of seeing good life than we have here?"

"Yes. I have never got any happiness outside Hintock that I know of, and I have suffered many a heartache at being sent away. Oh, the misery of those January days when I had got back to school, and left you all here in the wood so happy! I used to wonder why I had to bear it. And I was always a little despised by the other girls at school, because they knew where I a me from, and that my parents were not in so good a station as theirs."

Her poor father was much hurt at what he thought her ingratitude and intractability. He had admitted to himself bitterly enough that he should have let young hearts have their way, or rather should have

helped on her affection for Winterborne, and given her to him according to his original plan; but he was not prepared for her deprecating those attainments whose completion had been a labour of years, and a severe tax upon his purse.

"Very well," he said with much heaviness of spirit. "If you don't like to go to her I don't wish to force you."

And so the question remained for him still: how should he remedy this perilous state of things? For days he sat in a moody attitude over the fire, a pitcher of cider standing on the hearth beside him, and his drinking-horn inverted upon the top of it. He spent a week and more thus, composing a letter to the chief offender, which he would every now and then attempt to complete, and suddenly crumple up in his hand.

CHAPTER XV.

As February merged in March, and lighter evenings broke the gloom of the woodmen's homeward journey, the Hintocks Great and Little began to have ears for a rumour of the events out of which had grown the timber-dealer's troubles.

It took the form of a wide sprinkling of conjecture, wherein no man knew the exact truth. Tantalising phenomena, at once showing and concealing the real relationship of the persons concerned, caused a diffusion of excited surprise. Honest people as the woodlanders were, it was

hardly to be expected that they could remain immersed in the study of their trees and gardens amid such circumstances, or sit with their backs turned like the good burghers of Coventry at the passage of the beautiful lady.

Rumour, for a wonder, exaggerated little. There threatened, in fact, in Grace's case as in thousands, the domestic disaster, old as the hills, which, with more or less variation, made a mourner of Ariadne, a by-word of Vashti, and a corpse of Amy Dudley. The incidents were rencounters accidental and contrived, stealthy correspondence, sudden misgivings on one side, sudden self-reproaches on the other. The inner state of the twain was one as of confused noise that would not allow the accents of politic reason to be heard. Determination to go in this direction, and headlong plunges in that; dignified safeguards, undignified

collapses; not a single rash step by deliberate intention, and all against judgment.

It was all that Melbury had expected and feared. It was more, for he had overlooked the publicity that would be likely to result, as it now had done. What should he do? Appeal to Mrs. Charmond himself, since Grace would not? He bethought himself of Winterborne, and resolved to consult him, feeling the strong need of some friend of his own sex to whom he might unburden his mind.

He had entirely lost faith in his own judgment. That judgment on which he had relied for so many years seemed recently, like a false companion unmasked, to have disclosed unexpected depths of hypocrisy and speciousness where all had seemed solidity. He felt almost afraid to form a conjecture on the weather, or the time, or the fruit-promise, so great was his self-mistrust.

It was a rimy evening when he set out to look for Giles. The woods seemed to be in a cold sweat; beads of perspiration hung from every bare twig; the sky had no colour, and the trees rose before him as haggard, grey phantoms, whose days of substantiality were passed. Melbury seldom saw Winterborne now, but he believed him to be occupying a lonely hut just beyond the boundary of Mrs. Charmond's estate, though still within the circuit of the woodland. The timber-merchant's thin legs stalked on through the pale damp scenery, his eyes declining on the dead leaves of last year; while every now and then a hasty "ay!" escaped his lips in reply to some bitter mental proposition.

His notice was attracted by a thin blue haze of smoke, behind which arose sounds of voices and chopping: bending his steps that way he saw Winterborne just in front of him.

Though few knew of it, Giles had had a serious illness during the winter; but it just now happened that after being for a long time apathetic and unemployed on that account, he had become one of the busiest men in the neighbourhood. It is often thus; fallen friends, lost sight of, we expect to find starving; we discover them going on fairly well. Without any solicitation, or desire for profit on his part, he had been asked to execute a very large order for hurdles and other copseware, for which purpose he had been obliged to buy several acres of brushwood standing. He was now engaged in the cutting and manufacture of the same, proceeding with the work daily like an automaton.

The hazel-tree did not belie its name to-day. The whole of the copse-wood where the mist had cleared returned purest tints of that hue, amid which Winterborne him-

self was in the act of making a hurdle, the stakes being driven firmly into the ground in a row, over which he bent and wove the twigs. Beside him was a square, compact pile like the altar of Cain, formed of hurdles already finished, which bristled on all sides with the sharp points of their stakes. At a little distance the men in his employ were assisting him to carry out his contract. Rows of brushwood lay on the ground as it had fallen under the axe; and a shelter had been constructed near at hand, in front of which burnt the fire whose smoke had attracted Melbury. The air was so dank that the smoke hung heavily, and crept away amid the bushes without rising from the ground.

After wistfully regarding the scene a while, Melbury drew nearer, and briefly inquired of Giles how he came to be so busily engaged, with an undertone of slight surprise that

Winterborne could recommence thriving, even to this degree, after being deprived of Grace. Melbury was not without emotion at the meeting, for Grace's affairs had divided them, and ended their intimacy of old times.

Winterborne explained just as briefly, without raising his eyes from his occupation of chopping a bough that he held in front of him.

"'Twill be up in April before you get it all cleared," said Melbury.

"Yes, there or thereabouts," said Winterborne, a chop of the bill-hook jerking the last word into two pieces.

There was another interval; Melbury still looked on, a chip from Winterborne's hook occasionally flying against the waistcoat and legs of his visitor, who took no heed.

"Ah, Giles, you should have been my partner. You should have been my son-in-

law," the old man said at last. "It would have been far better for her and for me!"

Winterborne saw that something had gone wrong with his former friend, and, throwing down the switch he was about to interweave, he responded only too readily to the mood of the timber-dealer. "Is she ill?" he said hurriedly.

"No, no." Melbury stood without speaking for some minutes, and then, as though he could not bring himself to proceed, turned to go away.

Winterborne told one of his men to pack up the tools for the night, and walked after Melbury.

"Heaven forbid that I should seem too inquisitive, sir," he said, "especially since we don't stand as we used to stand to one another; but I hope it is well with them all over your way?"

"No," said Melbury, "no."

He stopped, and struck the smooth trunk of a young ash-tree with the flat of his hand. "I would that his ear had been where that rind is!" he exclaimed; "I should have treated him to little compared wi' what he deserves."

"Now," said Winterborne, "don't be in a hurry to go home. I've put some mead down to warm in my shelter here, and we'll sit and drink it and talk this over."

Melbury turned unresistingly as Giles took his arm, and they went back to where the fire was, and sat down under the screen, the other woodmen having gone. He drew out the mead-cup from the ashes, and they drank together.

"Giles, you ought to have had her, as I said just now," repeated Melbury. "I'll tell you why for the first time."

He thereupon told Winterborne, as with great relief, the story of how he won away

Giles's father's chosen one—by nothing worse than a lover's cajoleries, it is true; but by means which, except in love, would certainly have been pronounced cruel and unfair. He explained how he had always intended to make reparation to Winterborne the father by giving Grace to Winterborne the son; till the devil tempted him in the person of Fitzpiers and he broke his virtuous vow.

"How highly I thought of that man, to be sure! Who'd have supposed he'd have been so weak and wrong-headed as this! You ought to have had her, Giles, and there's an end on't."

Winterborne knew how to preserve his calm under this unconsciously cruel tearing of a healing wound, to which Melbury's concentration on the more vital subject had blinded him. The young man endeavoured to make the best of the case, for Grace's sake.

"She would hardly have been happy with me," he said, in the dry, unimpassioned voice under which he hid his feelings. "I was not well enough educated: too rough in short. I couldn't have surrounded her with the refinements she looked for, anyhow at all."

"Nonsense—you are quite wrong there," said the unwise old man doggedly. "She told me only this day that she hates refinements and such like. All that my trouble and money bought for her in that way is thrown away upon her quite. She'd fain be like Marty South—think o' that! That's the top of her ambition! Perhaps she's right. Giles, she loved you—under the rind; and what's more she loves ye still—worse luck for the poor maid!"

If Melbury only had known what fires he was recklessly stirring up he might have held his peace. Winterborne was silent a

long time. The darkness had closed in round them, and the monotonous drip of the fog from the branches quickened as it turned to fine rain.

"Oh, she never cared much for me," Giles managed to say as he stirred the embers with a brand.

"She did, and does, I tell ye," said the other obstinately. "However, all that's vain talking now. What I come to ask you about is a more practical matter—how to make the best of things as they are. I am thinking of a desperate step—of calling on the woman Charmond. I am going to appeal to her, since Grace will not. 'Tis she who holds the balance in her hands—not he. While she's got the will to lead him astray he will follow —poor unpractical lofty-notioned dreamer— and how long she'll do it depends upon her whim. Did ye ever hear anything about her character before she came to Hintock?"

"She's been a bit of a charmer in her time, I believe," replied Giles, with the same level quietude, as he regarded the red coals. "One who has smiled where she has not loved, and loved where she has not married. Before Mr. Charmond made her his wife she was a play-actress."

"Hey? But how close you have kept all this, Giles! What besides?"

"Mr. Charmond was a rich man engaged in the iron trade in the north—twenty or thirty years older than she. He married her, and retired, and came down here and bought this property."

"Yes, yes—I know all about that. But the other I did not know. I fear it bodes no good. For how can I go and appeal to the forbearance of a woman in this matter who has made cross-loves and crooked entanglements her trade for years? I thank ye, Giles, for finding it out; but it makes my plan the

harder that she should have belonged to that unstable tribe!"

Another pause ensued, and they looked gloomily at the smoke that beat about the roof of hurdles through whose weavings a large drop of rain fell at intervals and spat smartly into the fire. Mrs. Charmond had been no friend to Winterborne, but he was manly, and it was not in his heart to let her be condemned without a trial.

"She is said to be generous," he answered. "You might not appeal to her in vain."

"It shall be done," said Melbury, rising. "For good, or for evil, to Mrs. Charmond I'll go."

CHAPTER XVI.

At nine o'clock the next morning Melbury dressed himself up in shining broadcloth, creased with folding and smelling of camphor, and started for Hintock House. He was the more impelled to go at once by the absence of his son-in-law in London for a few days, to attend, really or ostensibly, some professional meetings.

He said nothing of his destination either to his wife or to Grace, fearing that they might entreat him to abandon so risky a project; and went out unobserved. He had chosen his time with a view, as he sup-

posed, of conveniently catching Mrs. Charmond when she had just finished her breakfast, before any other business people should be about, if any came. Plodding thoughtfully onward he crossed a glade lying between Little Hintock Woods and the plantation which abutted on the park. The spot being open he was discerned there by Winterborne from the copse on the next hill, where he and his men were working. Knowing his mission the younger man hastened down from the copse and managed to intercept the timber-merchant.

"I have been thinking of this, sir," he said, "and I am of opinion that it would be best to put off your visit for the present."

But Melbury would not even stop to hear him. His mind was fixed, the appeal was to be made; and Winterborne stood and watched him sadly till he entered the second plantation and disappeared.

Melbury rang at the tradesmen's door of the manor-house, and was at once informed that the lady was not yet visible, as indeed he might have guessed had he been anybody but the man he was. Melbury said he would wait, whereupon the young page informed him in a neighbourly way that, between themselves, she was in bed and asleep.

"Never mind," said Melbury, retreating into the court, "I'll stand about here." Charged so fully with his mission he shrank from contact with anybody.

But he walked about the paved court till he was tired, and nobody came to him. He entered the house, and sat down in a small waiting-room, from which he got glimpses of the kitchen-corridor, and of the white-capped maids flitting jauntily hither and thither. They had heard of his arrival, but had not seen him enter, and, imagining

him still in the court, discussed freely the possible reason of his calling. They marvelled at his temerity; for though most of the tongues which had been let loose attributed the chief blame to Fitzpiers, these of her household preferred to regard their mistress as the deeper sinner.

Melbury sat with his hands resting on the familiar knobbed thorn walking-stick, whose growing he had seen before he enjoyed its use. The scene to him was not the material environment of his person, but a tragic vision that travelled with him like an envelope. Through this vision the incidents of the moment but gleamed confusedly here and there, as an outer landscape through the high-coloured scenes of a stained window.

He waited thus an hour, an hour and a half, two hours. He began to look pale and ill, whereupon the butler, who came

in, asked him to have a glass of wine.

Melbury roused himself, and said "No, no. Is she almost ready?"

"She is just finishing breakfast," said the butler. "She will soon see you now. I am just going up to tell her you are here."

"What, haven't you told her before?" said Melbury.

"Oh, no," said the other. "You see you came so very early."

At last the bell rang: Mrs. Charmond could see him. She was not in her private sitting-room when he reached it, but in a minute he heard her coming from the front staircase, and she entered where he stood.

At this time of the morning Mrs. Charmond looked her full age and more. She might almost have been taken for the typical *femme de trente ans*, though she was really not more than seven or eight

and twenty. But the *édition définitive* of her beauty had been reached, even if it were not a little worn.

There being no fire in the room she came in with a shawl thrown loosely round her shoulders, and obviously without the least suspicion that Melbury had called upon any other errand than timber. Felice was, indeed, the only woman in the parish who had not heard the rumour of her own weaknesses; she was at this moment living in a fool's paradise in respect of that rumour, though not in respect of the weaknesses themselves, which, if the truth be told, caused her grave misgivings.

"Do sit down, Mr. Melbury. You have felled all the trees that were to be purchased by you this season, except the oaks, I believe?"

"Yes, yes," said Melbury in a reverie.

He did not take a chair, and she also

remained standing. Resting upon his stick he began: "Mrs. Charmond, I have called upon a more serious matter—at least to me—than tree-throwing. And whatever mistakes I make in my manner of speaking upon it to you, madam, do me the justice to set 'em down to my want of practice, and not to my want of care."

Mrs. Charmond looked ill at ease. She might have begun to guess his meaning; but apart from that she had such dread of contact with anything painful, harsh, or even earnest, that his preliminaries alone were enough to distress her.

"Yes, what is it?" she said quickly.

"I am an old man," said Melbury, "whom, somewhat late in life, God thought fit to bless with one child, and she a daughter. Her mother was a very dear wife to me; but she was taken away from us when the child was young; and the child became

precious as the apple of my eye to me, for she was all I had left to love. For her sake entirely I married as second wife a homespun woman who had been kind as a mother to her. In due time the question of her education came on; and I said, 'I will educate the maid well, if I live upon bread to do it.' Of her possible marriage I could not bear to think, for it seemed like a death that she should cleave to another man, and grow to think his house her home rather than mine. But I saw it was the law of nature that this should be, and that it was for the maid's happiness that she should have a home when I was gone; and I made up my mind without a murmur to help it on for her sake. In my youth I had wronged my dead friend, and to make amends I determined to give her, my most precious possession, to my friend's son, seeing that they liked each other well. Things came about which made

me doubt if it would be for my daughter's happiness to do this, inasmuch as the young man was poor, and she was delicately reared. Another man came and paid court to her—one her equal in breeding and accomplishments; in every way it seemed to me that he only could give her the home which her training had made a necessity almost. I urged her on, and she married him. But, ma'am, a fatal mistake was at the root of my reckoning: I found that this well-born gentleman I had calculated on so surely was not staunch of heart, and that therein lay a danger of great sorrow for my daughter. Madam, he saw you, and you know the rest. . . . I have come to make no demands —to utter no threats; I have come simply as a father in great grief about his only child, and I beseech you to deal kindly with my daughter and to do nothing which can turn her husband's heart away from her for ever!

Forbid him your presence, ma'am, and speak to him on his duty, as one with your power over him well can do: and I am hopeful that the rent between them may be patched up. For it is not as if you would lose by so doing; your course is far higher than the courses of a professional man; and the gratitude you would win from me and mine by your kindness is more than I can say."

Mrs. Charmond had first rushed into a mood of indignation, on comprehending Melbury's story: hot and cold by turns she had murmured, "Leave me, leave me!" But, as he seemed to take no notice of this, his words began to influence her, and when he ceased speaking she said with hurried breath, "What has led you to think this of me? Who says I have won your daughter's husband away from her? Some monstrous calumnies are afloat—of which I have known nothing until now!"

Melbury started, and looked at her simply: "But surely, ma'am, you know the truth better than I?"

Her features became a little pinched, and the touches of powder on her handsome face for the first time showed themselves as an extrinsic film.

"Will you leave me to myself?" she said with a faintness which suggested a guilty conscience. "This is so utterly unexpected —you obtain admission to my presence by misrepresentation—"

"As God's in heaven, ma'am, that's not true. I made no pretence; and I thought in reason you would know why I had come. This gossip—"

"I have heard nothing of it. Tell me the gist of it, pray!"

"Tell you, ma'am—not I. What the gossip is, no matter. What really is, you know. Set facts right, and the scandal

will right of itself. But pardon me—I speak roughly ; and I came to speak gently, to coax you, beg you to be my daughter's friend. She loved you once, ma'am ; you began by liking her. Then you dropped her without a reason, and it hurt her warm heart more than I can tell ye. But you were within your right as the superior, no doubt. But if you would consider her position now—surely, surely, you would do her no harm!"

"Certainly I would do her no harm—I—"

Melbury's eye met hers. It was curious, but the allusion to Grace's former love for her seemed to touch her more than all Melbury's other arguments. "Oh, Melbury," she burst out, "you have made me so unhappy! How could you come to me like this! It is too dreadful! Now go away—go, go!"

"I will, and leave you to think," he said, in a husky tone.

As soon as he was out of the room she went to a corner and there sat and writhed, under an emotion in which hurt pride and vexation mingled with better sentiments.

Mrs. Charmond's mobile spirit was subject to these fierce periods of high tide and storm. She had never so clearly perceived till now that her soul was being slowly invaded by a delirium which had brought about all this; that she was losing judgment and dignity under it, becoming an animated impulse only, a passion incarnate. A fascination had led her on; it was as if she had been seized by a hand of velvet; and this was where she found herself—overshadowed with sudden night, as if a tornado had passed.

While she sat, or rather crouched, unhinged by the interview, lunch-time came, and then the early afternoon, almost without her con-

sciousness. Then "a strange gentleman who says it is not necessary to give his name," was suddenly announced.

Felice knew who the strange gentleman was—that Continental follower on whom she had once smiled. But to meet another lover now—the thought made her sick.

"I cannot see him, whoever he may be. I am not at home to anybody."

She heard no more of her visitor; and shortly after, in an attempt to recover some mental serenity by violent physical exercise, she put on her hat and cloak and went out of doors, taking a path which led her up the slopes to the nearest spur of the wood. She disliked the woods, but they had the advantage of being a place in which she could walk comparatively unobserved.

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE was agitation that day in the lives of all whom these matters concerned. It was not till the Hintock dinner-time—one o'clock—that Grace discovered her father's absence from the house after a departure in the morning under somewhat unusual conditions. By a little reasoning and inquiry she was able to divine his errand.

Her husband was absent, and her father did not return. He had, in truth, gone on to Sherton after the interview, but this Grace did not know. In an indefinite dread that something serious would arise

out of Melbury's visit by reason of the inequalities of temper and nervous irritation to which he was subject, something possibly that would bring her much more misery than accompanied her present negative state of mind, she left the house about three o'clock, and took a loitering walk in the woodland track by which she imagined he would come home. This track under the bare trees and over the cracking sticks, screened and roofed in from the outer world of wind by a network of boughs, led her slowly on till in time she had left the larger trees behind her and swept round into the coppice where Winterborne and his men were clearing the undergrowth.

Had Giles's attention been concentrated on his hurdles he would not have seen her, but ever since Melbury's passage across the opposite glade in the morning he had been as uneasy and unsettled as

Grace herself; and her advent now was the one appearance which, since her father's avowal, could arrest him more than Melbury's return with his tidings. Fearing that something might be the matter he hastened up to her.

She had not seen her old lover for a long time, and too conscious of the late pranks of her heart she could not behold him calmly. "I am only looking for my father," she said in an unnecessary tone of apology.

"I was looking for him too," said Giles. "I think he may perhaps have gone on further."

"Then you knew he was going to the House, Giles?" she said, turning her large tender eyes anxiously upon him. "Did he tell you what for?"

Winterborne glanced doubtingly at her, and then softly hinted that her father had visited him the evening before, and that their old friendship was quite restored; on which she guessed the rest.

"Oh, I am glad indeed that you two are friends again!" she cried.

And then they stood facing each other, fearing each other, troubling each other's souls. Grace experienced acute regret at the sight of these wood-cutting scenes, because she had estranged herself from them; craving, even to its defects and inconveniences, that homely sylvan life of her father which in the best probable succession of events would shortly be denied her.

At a little distance, on the edge of the clearing, Marty South was shaping spar-gads to take home for manufacture during the evenings. Winterborne and Mrs. Fitzpiers stood looking at her in their mutual embarrassment at each other's presence, and while doing so they beheld, approaching the girl, a lady in a dark fur mantle and black hat, having a white veil tied picturesquely round it. She spoke to Marty, who turned and curtsied, and the lady fell

into conversation with her. It was Mrs. Charmond.

On leaving her house, Mrs. Charmond had walked on under the fret and fever of her mind with more vigour than she was accustomed to show in her normal moods —a fever which the solace of a cigarette did not entirely allay. Reaching the coppice, she had listlessly observed Marty at work, when she threw away her cigarette, and drew near. Chop, chop, chop, went Marty's little bill-hook with never more assiduity, till Mrs. Charmond spoke.

"Who is that young lady I see talking to the woodman yonder?" she asked.

"Mrs. Fitzpiers, ma'am," said Marty.

"Oh," said Mrs. Charmond, with something like a start; for she had not recognised Grace at that distance. "And the man she is talking to?"

"That's Mr. Winterborne."

A redness stole into Marty's face as she

mentioned Giles's name, which Mrs. Charmond did not fail to notice. "Are you engaged to him?" she asked softly.

"No, ma'am," said Marty. "*She* was once; and I think—"

But Marty could not possibly explain the complications of her thought on this matter —which was nothing less than one of extraordinary acuteness for a girl so young and inexperienced—namely, that she saw danger to two hearts, naturally honest, in Grace being thrown back into Winterborne's society by the neglect of her husband. Mrs. Charmond, however, with the almost supersensory means to knowledge which women have on such occasions, quite understood what Marty had intended to convey; and the picture thus exhibited to her of lives drifting awry, involving the wreck of poor Marty's hopes, prompted her to more generous resolves than all Melbury's remonstrances had been able to stimulate.

Full of the new feeling she bade the girl good afternoon, and went on over the stumps of hazel to where Grace and Winterborne were standing. They saw her approach, and Winterborne said, "She is coming to you; it is a good omen. She dislikes me, so I'll go away."

He accordingly retreated to where he had been working before Grace came, and Grace's formidable rival approached her, each woman taking the other's measure as she drew near.

"Dear — Mrs. Fitzpiers!" said Felice Charmond with some inward turmoil which stopped her speech. "I have not seen you for a long time."

She held out her hand tentatively, while Grace stood like a wild animal on first confronting a mirror or other puzzling product of civilisation. Was it really Mrs. Charmond speaking to her thus? If it was she could no longer form any guess as to what life signified.

"I want to talk to you," said Mrs. Charmond sensitively, for the gaze of the young woman had chilled her through. "Can you walk on with me till we are quite alone?"

Sick with distaste Grace nevertheless complied, as by clockwork, and they moved evenly side by side into the deeper recesses of the woods. They went further, much further than Mrs. Charmond had meant to go; but mental indiscipline hindered her from beginning her conversation, and in default of it she kept walking.

"I have seen your father," she at length resumed. "And—I am much troubled by what he told me."

"What did he tell you? I have not been admitted to his confidence on anything he may have said to you."

"Nevertheless, why should I repeat to you what you can easily divine?"

"True—true," returned Grace mournfully.

"Why should you repeat what we both know to be in our minds already?"

"Mrs. Fitzpiers, your husband—"

The moment that the speaker's tongue touched the dangerous subject a vivid look of self-consciousness flashed over her; in which her heart revealed, as by a lightning gleam, what filled it to overflowing. So transitory was the expression that none but a quick-sensed woman, and she in Grace's position, would have had the power to catch its meaning. Upon her the phase was not lost.

"Then you *do* love him!" she exclaimed in a tone of much surprise.

"What do you mean, my young friend?"

"Why," cried Grace, "I thought till now that you had only been cruelly flirting with my husband to amuse your idle moments—a rich lady with a poor professional gentleman whom in her heart she despised not much less than her who belongs to him.

But I guess from your manner that you love him desperately; and I don't hate you as I did before. . . . . Yes, indeed," continued Mrs. Fitzpiers, with a trembling tongue, "since it is not playing in your case at all, but *real*—oh, I do pity you, more than I despise you! For *you* will s-s-suffer most!"

Mrs. Charmond was now as much agitated as Grace. "I ought not to allow myself to argue with you!" she exclaimed. "I demean myself by doing it. But I liked you once, and for the sake of that time I try to tell you how mistaken you are!"

Much of her confusion resulted from her wonder and alarm at finding herself, in a sense, dominated mentally and emotionally by this simple schoolgirl. "I do not love him!" she went on with desperate untruth. "It was a kindness—my making somewhat more of him than one usually does of one's doctor. I was lonely; I talked—well, I trifled with him. I am very sorry if such child's

play, out of pure friendship, has been a serious matter to you. Who could have expected it? But the world is so simple here!"

"Oh, that's affectation," said Grace shaking her head. "It is no use—you *love* him. I can see in your face that in this matter of my husband you have not let your acts belie your feelings. During these last four or six months you have been terribly indiscreet, but you have not been insincere; and that almost disarms me."

"I *have* been insincere—if you will have the word—I mean I *have* coquetted, and do *not* love him!"

But Grace clung to her position like a limpet. "You may have trifled with others; but him you love as you never loved another man."

"Oh, well—I won't argue," said Mrs. Charmond, laughing faintly. "And you come to reproach me for it, child?"

"No," said Grace magnanimously. "You

may go on loving him if you like—I don't mind at all. You'll find it, let me tell you, a bitterer business for yourself than for me in the end. He'll get tired of you soon, as tired as can be—you don't know him so well as I!—and then you may wish you had never seen him!"

Mrs. Charmond had grown quite pale and weak under this prophecy. It was extraordinary that Grace, whom almost every one would have characterised as a gentle girl, should be of tougher fibre than her interlocutor.

"You exaggerate — cruel, silly young woman," she reiterated, writhing with little agonies. "It is nothing but playful friendship—nothing! It will be proved by my future conduct. I shall at once refuse to see him more—since it will make no difference to my heart, and much to my name."

"I question if you will refuse to see

him again," said Grace dryly, as she bent a sapling down. "But I am not incensed against you as you are against me," she added, abandoning the tree to its natural perpendicular. "Before I came I had been despising you for wanton cruelty; now I only pity you for misplaced affection. When Edred has gone out of the house in hope of seeing you, at seasonable hours and unseasonable; when I have found him riding miles and miles across the country at midnight, and risking his life, and getting covered with mud, to get a glimpse of you, I have called him a foolish man—the plaything of a finished coquette. I thought that what was getting to be a tragedy to me was a comedy to you. But now I see that tragedy lies on your side of the situation no less than on mine, and more; that if I have felt trouble at my position you have felt anguish at yours; that if I have had disappointments you have had despairs.

Heaven may fortify me — God help you!"

"I cannot attempt to reply to your ravings," returned the other, struggling to restore a dignity which had completely collapsed. "My acts will be my proofs. In the world which you have seen nothing of, friendships between men and women are not unknown; and it would have been better both for you and your father if you had each judged me more respectfully, and left me alone. As it is, I wish never, never to see or speak to you, madam, any more."

Grace bowed, and Mrs. Charmond turned away. The two went apart in directly opposite courses, and were soon hidden from each other by their umbrageous surroundings and by the shadows of eve.

In the excitement of their long argument they had walked onward and zigzagged about without regarding direction or distance. All

sound of the woodcutters had long since faded into remoteness, and even had not the interval been too great for hearing them they would have been silent and homeward bound at this twilight hour.

But Grace went on her course without any misgiving, though there was much underwood here with only the narrowest passages for walking, across which brambles hung. She had not, however, traversed this, the wildest, part of the wood since her childhood, and the transformation of outlines had been great; old trees which once were landmarks had been felled or blown down, and the bushes which then had been small and scrubby were now large and overhanging. She soon found that her ideas as to direction were vague—that she had indeed no ideas as to direction at all. If the evening had not been growing so dark, and the wind had not put on its night-moan so distinctly, Grace would not have minded; but she

was rather frightened now, and began to strike across hither and thither in random courses.

Denser grew the darkness, more developed the wind-voices, and still no recognisable spot or outlet of any kind appeared, nor any sound of the Hintocks floated near, though she had wandered probably between one and two hours, and began to be weary. She was vexed at her foolishness, since the ground she had covered, if in a straight line, must inevitably have taken her out of the wood to some remote village or other; but she had wasted her forces in countermarches; and now, in much alarm, wondered if she would have to pass the night here.

She stood still to meditate, and fancied that between the soughing of the wind she heard shuffling footsteps on the leaves heavier than those of rabbits or other startled "beasts of beating heart" who lived there. Though fearing at first to meet anybody on

the chance of his being a friend, she decided that her fellow-noctambulist, even if a poacher, would not injure her, and that he might possibly be some one sent to search for her. She accordingly shouted a rather timid "Hoi!"

The cry was immediately returned by the other person; and Grace running at once in the direction whence it came beheld an indistinct figure hastening up to her as rapidly. They were almost in each other's arms before she recognised the outline and white veil of her whom she had parted from an hour and a half before—Mrs. Charmond.

"I have lost my way, I have lost my way," cried the latter. "Oh—is it indeed you? I am so glad to meet you or anybody. I have been wandering up and down ever since we parted, and am nearly dead with terror and misery and fatigue!"

"So am I," said Grace. "What shall we do?"

"You won't go away from me?" asked her companion anxiously.

"No, indeed. Are you very tired?"

"I can scarcely move, and I am scratched dreadfully about the ankles."

Grace reflected. "Perhaps, as it is dry under foot, the best thing for us to do would be to sit down for half an hour, and then start again when we have thoroughly rested. By walking straight we must come to a track leading somewhere, before the morning."

They found a clump of bushy hollies which afforded a shelter from the wind, and sat down under it, some tufts of dead fern, crisp and dry, that remained from the previous season, forming a sort of nest for them. But it was cold, nevertheless, on this March night, particularly for Grace, who, with the sanguine prematureness of youth in matters of dress, had considered it spring-time, and hence was not so warmly

clad as Mrs. Charmond, who still wore her winter furs.

But after sitting awhile the latter lady shivered no less than Grace as the warmth imparted by her hasty walking began to go off; and they felt the cold air drawing through the holly leaves which scratched their backs and shoulders. Moreover they could hear some drops of rain falling on the trees, though none reached the nook in which they had ensconced themselves.

"If we were to cling close together," said Mrs. Charmond, "we should keep each other warm. But," she added in an uneven voice, "I suppose you won't come near me for the world!"

"Why not?"

"Because—well, you know."

"Yes I will—I don't hate you at all."

They consequently crept up to one another, and being in the dark, lonely, and weary, did what neither had dreamed

of doing beforehand—clasped each other closely. Mrs. Charmond's furs consoled Grace's cold face; and each one's body, as she breathed, alternately heaved against that of her companion; while the funereal trees rocked, and chanted dirges unceasingly.

When a few minutes had been spent thus Mrs. Charmond said—"I am so wretched!" in a heavy emotional whisper.

"You are frightened," said Grace kindly. "But there is nothing to fear; I know these woods well."

"I am not at all frightened at the wood; but I am at other things."

Mrs. Charmond embraced Grace more and more tightly, and bowed her head upon that of her companion. The younger woman could feel her neighbour's breathings grow deeper and more spasmodic, as though uncontrollable feelings were germinating.

"After I had left you," Felice went on, "I regretted something I had said. I have

to make a confession—I must make it!" she whispered brokenly, the instinct to indulge in warmth of sentiment which had led this woman of passions to respond to Fitzpiers in the first place leading her now to find luxurious comfort in opening her heart to his wife. "I said to you I could give him up without pain or deprivation—that he had only been my pastime. That was absolutely untrue—it was said to deceive you. I could not do it without much pain; and what is more dreadful I cannot give him up—even if I would—of myself alone."

"Why? Because you love him, you mean."

Felice Charmond denoted assent by a movement.

"I knew I was right!" said Grace exaltedly. "But that should not deter you," she presently added in a moral tone. "Oh, do struggle against it, and you will conquer!"

"You are so simple, so simple!" cried

Felice. "You think, because you guessed my assumed indifference to him to be a sham, that you know the extremes that people are capable of going to! But a good deal more may have been going on than you have fathomed with all your insight. I *cannot* give him up until he chooses to give up me."

"But surely you are the superior in station and in every way, and the cut must come from you."

"Tchut! Must I tell verbatim, you simple child? Oh, I suppose I must! It will eat away my heart if I do not let out all, after meeting you like this and finding how guileless you are!"

She thereupon whispered a few words in the girl's ear, and burst into a violent fit of sobbing.

Grace started roughly away from the shelter of the furs, and sprang to her feet.

"Oh, my great heaven!" she exclaimed

thunderstruck at a revelation transcending her utmost suspicion. "Can it be—can it be!"

She turned as if to hasten away. But Felice Charmond's sobs came to her ear: deep darkness circled her about, the cold lips of the wind kissed her where Mrs. Charmond's warm fur had been, and she did not know which way to go. After the moment of energy she felt mild again, and turned to the motionless woman at her feet.

"Are you rested?" she asked, in what seemed her own voice grown ten years older.

Without an answer Mrs. Charmond slowly rose.

"You mean to betray me!" she said out of the bitterest depths of her soul. "Oh, fool, fool I!"

"No," said Grace shortly. "I mean no such thing. But let us be quick now. We have a serious undertaking before us. Think of nothing but going straight on."

They walked on in profound silence,

pulling back boughs now growing wet, and treading down woodbine, but still keeping a pretty straight course. Grace began to be thoroughly worn out, and her companion too, when, on a sudden, they broke into the deserted highway at the hill-top, on which the Sherton man had waited for Mrs. Dollery's van. Grace recognised the spot as soon as she looked around her.

"How we have got here I cannot tell," she said with cold civility. "We have made a complete circuit of Little Hintock. The hazel copse is quite on the other side. Now we have only to follow the road."

They dragged themselves onward, turned into the lane, passed the track to Little Hintock, and so reached the park.

"Here I turn back," said Grace in the same passionless voice. "You are quite near home."

Mrs. Charmond stood inert, seeming appalled by her late admission.

"I have told you something in a moment of irresistible desire to unburden my soul, which all but a fool would have kept silent as the grave," she said. "I cannot help it now. Is it to be a secret, or do you mean war?"

"A secret, certainly," said Grace mournfully. "How can you expect war from such a helpless, wretched being as I!"

"And I'll do my best not to see him. I am his slave; but I'll try."

Grace was naturally kind, but she could not help using a small dagger now.

"Pray don't distress yourself," she said with exquisitely fine scorn. "You may see him as much as you like—for me." Had she been wounded instead of mortified she could not have used the words; but Fitzpiers's hold upon her heart just now was slight.

They parted thus and there, and Grace went moodily homeward. Passing Marty's cottage she observed through the window that the girl was writing instead of chopping

as usual, and wondered what her correspondence could be. Directly afterwards she met people in search of her, and reached the house to find all in serious alarm. She soon explained that she had lost her way, and her general depression was attributed to exhaustion on that account.

Could she have known what Marty was writing she would have been surprised.

The rumour which agitated the other folk of Hintock had reached the young girl, and she was penning a letter to Fitzpiers, to tell him that Mrs. Charmond's magnificent pile of hair was made up of the writer's more largely than of her own. It was poor Marty's only card, and she played it, knowing nothing of fashion, and thinking her revelation a fatal one for a lover.

END OF VOL. II.

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LONDON AND BUNGAY.

