

The Novels of Thomas Hardy - Volume 2

Thomas Hardy

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FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

Far from the Madding Crowd (1874) is Hardy's fourth novel and his first major literary success. It originally appeared as a monthly serial in Cornhill Magazine, where it gained a wide readership with a mostly positive response. Now it is considered to be one of his greatest literary achievements.

The story concerns Gabriel Oak, a young shepherd, who falls in love with a newcomer eight years his junior, Bathsheba Everdene, a proud beauty. The novel then details her various admirers and the resulting tragic complications, before an eventual happy ending.

Hardy, 1890

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FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

PREFACE

In reprinting this story for a new edition I am reminded that it was in the chapters of "Far from the Madding Crowd," as they appeared month by month in a popular magazine, that I first ventured to adopt the word "Wessex" from the pages of early English history, and give it a fictitious significance as the existing name of the district once included in that extinct kingdom. The series of novels I projected being mainly of the kind called local, they seemed to require a territorial definition of some sort to lend unity to their scene. Finding that the area of a single county did not afford a canvas large enough for this purpose, and that there were objections to an invented name, I disinterred the old one. The press and the public were kind enough to welcome the fanciful plan, and willingly joined me in the anachronism of imagining a Wessex population living under Queen Victoria; — a modern Wessex of railways, the penny post, mowing and reaping machines, union workhouses, lucifer matches, labourers who could read and write, and National school children. But I believe I am correct in stating that, until the existence of this contemporaneous Wessex was announced in the present story, in 1874, it had never been heard of, and that the expression, "a Wessex peasant," or "a Wessex custom," would theretofore have been taken to refer to nothing later in date than the Norman Conquest.

I did not anticipate that this application of the word to a modern use would extend outside the chapters of my own chronicles. But the name was soon taken up elsewhere as a local designation. The first to do so was the now defunct Examiner, which, in the impression bearing date July 15, 1876, entitled one of its articles "The Wessex Labourer," the article turning out to be no dissertation on farming during the Heph-tarchy, but on the modern peasant of the south-west counties, and his presentation in these stories.

Since then the appellation which I had thought to reserve to the horizons and landscapes of a merely realistic dream-country, has become more and more popular as a practical definition; and the dream-country has, by degrees, solidified into a utilitarian region which people can go to, take a house in, and write to the papers from. But I ask all good and gentle readers to be so kind as to forget this, and to refuse steadfastly to believe that there are any inhabitants of a Victorian Wessex outside the pages of this and the companion volumes in which they were first discovered.

Moreover, the village called Weatherbury, wherein the scenes of the present story of the series are for the most part laid, would perhaps be hardly discernible by the explorer, without help, in any existing place nowadays; though at the time, comparatively recent, at which the tale was written, a sufficient reality to meet the descriptions, both of backgrounds and personages, might have been traced easily enough. The church remains, by great good fortune, unrestored and intact, and a few of the old houses;

but the ancient malt-house, which was formerly so characteristic of the parish, has been pulled down these twenty years; also most of the thatched and dormered cottages that were once lifeholds. The game of prisoner's base, which not so long ago seemed to enjoy a perennial vitality in front of the worn-out stocks, may, so far as I can say, be entirely unknown to the rising generation of schoolboys there. The practice of divination by Bible and key, the regarding of valentines as things of serious import, the shearing-supper, and the harvest-home, have, too, nearly disappeared in the wake of the old houses; and with them have gone, it is said, much of that love of fuddling to which the village at one time was notoriously prone. The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humours, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which has led to a break of continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folk-lore, close inter-social relations, and eccentric individualities. For these the indispensable conditions of existence are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation.

T. H.

February 1895

CHAPTER I

Description of Farmer Oak — An Incident

When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun.

His Christian name was Gabriel, and on working days he was a young man of sound judgment, easy motions, proper dress, and general good character. On Sundays he was a man of misty views, rather given to postponing, and hampered by his best clothes and umbrella: upon the whole, one who felt himself to occupy morally that vast middle space of Laodicean neutrality which lay between the Communion people of the parish and the drunken section, — that is, he went to church, but yawned privately by the time the congregation reached the Nicene creed, and thought of what there would be for dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon. Or, to state his character as it stood in the scale of public opinion, when his friends and critics were in tantrums, he was considered rather a bad man; when they were pleased, he was rather a good man; when they were neither, he was a man whose moral colour was a kind of pepper-and-salt mixture.

Since he lived six times as many working-days as Sundays, Oak's appearance in his old clothes was most peculiarly his own — the mental picture formed by his neighbours in imagining him being always dressed in that way. He wore a low-crowned felt hat, spread out at the base by tight jamming upon the head for security in high winds,

and a coat like Dr. Johnson's; his lower extremities being encased in ordinary leather leggings and boots emphatically large, affording to each foot a roomy apartment so constructed that any wearer might stand in a river all day long and know nothing of damp — their maker being a conscientious man who endeavoured to compensate for any weakness in his cut by unstinted dimension and solidity.

Mr. Oak carried about him, by way of watch, what may be called a small silver clock; in other words, it was a watch as to shape and intention, and a small clock as to size. This instrument being several years older than Oak's grandfather, had the peculiarity of going either too fast or not at all. The smaller of its hands, too, occasionally slipped round on the pivot, and thus, though the minutes were told with precision, nobody could be quite certain of the hour they belonged to. The stopping peculiarity of his watch Oak remedied by thumps and shakes, and he escaped any evil consequences from the other two defects by constant comparisons with and observations of the sun and stars, and by pressing his face close to the glass of his neighbours' windows, till he could discern the hour marked by the green-faced timekeepers within. It may be mentioned that Oak's fob being difficult of access, by reason of its somewhat high situation in the waistband of his trousers (which also lay at a remote height under his waistcoat), the watch was as a necessity pulled out by throwing the body to one side, compressing the mouth and face to a mere mass of ruddy flesh on account of the exertion required, and drawing up the watch by its chain, like a bucket from a well.

But some thoughtful persons, who had seen him walking across one of his fields on a certain December morning — sunny and exceedingly mild — might have regarded Gabriel Oak in other aspects than these. In his face one might notice that many of the hues and curves of youth had tarried on to manhood: there even remained in his remoter crannies some relics of the boy. His height and breadth would have been sufficient to make his presence imposing, had they been exhibited with due consideration. But there is a way some men have, rural and urban alike, for which the mind is more responsible than flesh and sinew: it is a way of curtailing their dimensions by their manner of showing them. And from a quiet modesty that would have become a vestal, which seemed continually to impress upon him that he had no great claim on the world's room, Oak walked unassumingly and with a faintly perceptible bend, yet distinct from a bowing of the shoulders. This may be said to be a defect in an individual if he depends for his valuation more upon his appearance than upon his capacity to wear well, which Oak did not.

He had just reached the time of life at which "young" is ceasing to be the prefix of "man" in speaking of one. He was at the brightest period of masculine growth, for his intellect and his emotions were clearly separated: he had passed the time during which the influence of youth indiscriminately mingles them in the character of impulse, and he had not yet arrived at the stage wherein they become united again, in the character of prejudice, by the influence of a wife and family. In short, he was twenty-eight, and a bachelor.

The field he was in this morning sloped to a ridge called Norcombe Hill. Through a spur of this hill ran the highway between Emminster and Chalk-Newton. Casually glancing over the hedge, Oak saw coming down the incline before him an ornamental spring waggon, painted yellow and gaily marked, drawn by two horses, a waggoner walking alongside bearing a whip perpendicularly. The waggon was laden with household goods and window plants, and on the apex of the whole sat a woman, young and attractive. Gabriel had not beheld the sight for more than half a minute, when the vehicle was brought to a standstill just beneath his eyes.

"The tailboard of the waggon is gone, Miss," said the waggoner.

"Then I heard it fall," said the girl, in a soft, though not particularly low voice. "I heard a noise I could not account for when we were coming up the hill."

"I'll run back."

"Do," she answered.

The sensible horses stood — perfectly still, and the waggoner's steps sank fainter and fainter in the distance.

The girl on the summit of the load sat motionless, surrounded by tables and chairs with their legs upwards, backed by an oak settle, and ornamented in front by pots of geraniums, myrtles, and cactuses, together with a caged canary — all probably from the windows of the house just vacated. There was also a cat in a willow basket, from the partly-opened lid of which she gazed with half-closed eyes, and affectionately surveyed the small birds around.

The handsome girl waited for some time idly in her place, and the only sound heard in the stillness was the hopping of the canary up and down the perches of its prison. Then she looked attentively downwards. It was not at the bird, nor at the cat; it was at an oblong package tied in paper, and lying between them. She turned her head to learn if the waggoner were coming. He was not yet in sight; and her eyes crept back to the package, her thoughts seeming to run upon what was inside it. At length she drew the article into her lap, and untied the paper covering; a small swing looking-glass was disclosed, in which she proceeded to survey herself attentively. She parted her lips and smiled.

It was a fine morning, and the sun lighted up to a scarlet glow the crimson jacket she wore, and painted a soft lustre upon her bright face and dark hair. The myrtles, geraniums, and cactuses packed around her were fresh and green, and at such a leafless season they invested the whole concern of horses, waggon, furniture, and girl with a peculiar vernal charm. What possessed her to indulge in such a performance in the sight of the sparrows, blackbirds, and unperceived farmer who were alone its spectators, — whether the smile began as a factitious one, to test her capacity in that art, — nobody knows; it ended certainly in a real smile. She blushed at herself, and seeing her reflection blush, blushed the more.

The change from the customary spot and necessary occasion of such an act — from the dressing hour in a bedroom to a time of travelling out of doors — lent to the idle deed a novelty it did not intrinsically possess. The picture was a delicate one.

Woman's prescriptive infirmity had stalked into the sunlight, which had clothed it in the freshness of an originality. A cynical inference was irresistible by Gabriel Oak as he regarded the scene, generous though he fain would have been. There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to signify that any such intention had been her motive in taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind, her thoughts seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part — vistas of probable triumphs — the smiles being of a phase suggesting that hearts were imagined as lost and won. Still, this was but conjecture, and the whole series of actions was so idly put forth as to make it rash to assert that intention had any part in them at all.

The waggoner's steps were heard returning. She put the glass in the paper, and the whole again into its place.

When the waggon had passed on, Gabriel withdrew from his point of espial, and descending into the road, followed the vehicle to the turnpike-gate some way beyond the bottom of the hill, where the object of his contemplation now halted for the payment of toll. About twenty steps still remained between him and the gate, when he heard a dispute. It was a difference concerning twopence between the persons with the waggon and the man at the toll-bar.

"Mis'ess's niece is upon the top of the things, and she says that's enough that I've offered ye, you great miser, and she won't pay any more." These were the waggoner's words.

"Very well; then mis'ess's niece can't pass," said the turnpike-keeper, closing the gate.

Oak looked from one to the other of the disputants, and fell into a reverie. There was something in the tone of twopence remarkably insignificant. Threepence had a definite value as money — it was an appreciable infringement on a day's wages, and, as such, a higgling matter; but twopence — "Here," he said, stepping forward and handing twopence to the gatekeeper; "let the young woman pass." He looked up at her then; she heard his words, and looked down.

Gabriel's features adhered throughout their form so exactly to the middle line between the beauty of St. John and the ugliness of Judas Iscariot, as represented in a window of the church he attended, that not a single lineament could be selected and called worthy either of distinction or notoriety. The red-jacketed and dark-haired maiden seemed to think so too, for she carelessly glanced over him, and told her man to drive on. She might have looked her thanks to Gabriel on a minute scale, but she did not speak them; more probably she felt none, for in gaining her a passage he had lost her her point, and we know how women take a favour of that kind.

The gatekeeper surveyed the retreating vehicle. "That's a handsome maid," he said to Oak.

"But she has her faults," said Gabriel.

"True, farmer."

“And the greatest of them is — well, what it is always.”

“Beating people down? ay, ‘tis so.”

“O no.”

“What, then?”

Gabriel, perhaps a little piqued by the comely traveller’s indifference, glanced back to where he had witnessed her performance over the hedge, and said, “Vanity.”

CHAPTER II

NIGHT — THE FLOCK — AN INTERIOR — ANOTHER INTERIOR

It was nearly midnight on the eve of St. Thomas’s, the shortest day in the year. A desolating wind wandered from the north over the hill whereon Oak had watched the yellow waggon and its occupant in the sunshine of a few days earlier.

Norcombe Hill — not far from lonely Toller-Down — was one of the spots which suggest to a passer-by that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth. It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil — an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion, when far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices topple down.

The hill was covered on its northern side by an ancient and decaying plantation of beeches, whose upper verge formed a line over the crest, fringing its arched curve against the sky, like a mane. To-night these trees sheltered the southern slope from the keenest blasts, which smote the wood and floundered through it with a sound as of grumbling, or gushed over its crowning boughs in a weakened moan. The dry leaves in the ditch simmered and boiled in the same breezes, a tongue of air occasionally ferreting out a few, and sending them spinning across the grass. A group or two of the latest in date amongst the dead multitude had remained till this very mid-winter time on the twigs which bore them and in falling rattled against the trunks with smart taps.

Between this half-wooded half-naked hill, and the vague still horizon that its summit indistinctly commanded, was a mysterious sheet of fathomless shade — the sounds from which suggested that what it concealed bore some reduced resemblance to features here. The thin grasses, more or less coating the hill, were touched by the wind in breezes of differing powers, and almost of differing natures — one rubbing the blades heavily, another raking them piercingly, another brushing them like a soft broom. The instinctive act of humankind was to stand and listen, and learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chaunted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir; how hedges and other shapes to leeward then caught the note, lowering it to the tenderest sob; and how the hurrying gust then plunged into the south, to be heard no more.

The sky was clear — remarkably clear — and the twinkling of all the stars seemed to be but throbs of one body, timed by a common pulse. The North Star was directly in the wind's eye, and since evening the Bear had swung round it outwardly to the east, till he was now at a right angle with the meridian. A difference of colour in the stars — oftener read of than seen in England — was really perceptible here. The sovereign brilliancy of Sirius pierced the eye with a steely glitter, the star called Capella was yellow, Aldebaran and Betelgueux shone with a fiery red.

To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects, which is perceptible in a few minutes of stillness, or by the better outlook upon space that a hill affords, or by the wind, or by the solitude; but whatever be its origin, the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding. The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilised mankind, who are dreamwapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre it is hard to get back to earth, and to believe that the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame.

Suddenly an unexpected series of sounds began to be heard in this place up against the sky. They had a clearness which was to be found nowhere in the wind, and a sequence which was to be found nowhere in nature. They were the notes of Farmer Oak's flute.

The tune was not floating unhindered into the open air: it seemed muffled in some way, and was altogether too curtailed in power to spread high or wide. It came from the direction of a small dark object under the plantation hedge — a shepherd's hut — now presenting an outline to which an uninitiated person might have been puzzled to attach either meaning or use.

The image as a whole was that of a small Noah's Ark on a small Ararat, allowing the traditionary outlines and general form of the Ark which are followed by toy-makers — and by these means are established in men's imaginations among their firmest, because earliest impressions — to pass as an approximate pattern. The hut stood on little wheels, which raised its floor about a foot from the ground. Such shepherds' huts are dragged into the fields when the lambing season comes on, to shelter the shepherd in his enforced nightly attendance.

It was only latterly that people had begun to call Gabriel "Farmer" Oak. During the twelvemonth preceding this time he had been enabled by sustained efforts of industry and chronic good spirits to lease the small sheep-farm of which Norcombe Hill was a portion, and stock it with two hundred sheep. Previously he had been a bailiff for a short time, and earlier still a shepherd only, having from his childhood assisted his father in tending the flocks of large proprietors, till old Gabriel sank to rest.

This venture, unaided and alone, into the paths of farming as master and not as man, with an advance of sheep not yet paid for, was a critical juncture with Gabriel Oak, and he recognised his position clearly. The first movement in his new progress was the lambing of his ewes, and sheep having been his speciality from his youth, he wisely refrained from deputing the task of tending them at this season to a hireling or a novice.

The wind continued to beat about the corners of the hut, but the flute-playing ceased. A rectangular space of light appeared in the side of the hut, and in the opening the outline of Farmer Oak's figure. He carried a lantern in his hand, and closing the door behind him, came forward and busied himself about this nook of the field for nearly twenty minutes, the lantern light appearing and disappearing here and there, and brightening him or darkening him as he stood before or behind it.

Oak's motions, though they had a quiet-energy, were slow, and their deliberateness accorded well with his occupation. Fitness being the basis of beauty, nobody could have denied that his steady swings and turns in and about the flock had elements of grace. Yet, although if occasion demanded he could do or think a thing with as mercurial a dash as can the men of towns who are more to the manner born, his special power, morally, physically, and mentally, was static, owing little or nothing to momentum as a rule.

A close examination of the ground hereabout, even by the wan starlight only, revealed how a portion of what would have been casually called a wild slope had been appropriated by Farmer Oak for his great purpose this winter. Detached hurdles thatched with straw were stuck into the ground at various scattered points, amid and under which the whitish forms of his meek ewes moved and rustled. The ring of the sheep-bell, which had been silent during his absence, recommenced, in tones that had more mellowness than clearness, owing to an increasing growth of surrounding wool. This continued till Oak withdrew again from the flock. He returned to the hut, bringing in his arms a new-born lamb, consisting of four legs large enough for a full-grown sheep, united by a seemingly inconsiderable membrane about half the substance of the legs collectively, which constituted the animal's entire body just at present.

The little speck of life he placed on a wisp of hay before the small stove, where a can of milk was simmering. Oak extinguished the lantern by blowing into it and then pinching the snuff, the cot being lighted by a candle suspended by a twisted wire. A rather hard couch, formed of a few corn sacks thrown carelessly down, covered half the floor of this little habitation, and here the young man stretched himself along, loosened his woollen cravat, and closed his eyes. In about the time a person unaccustomed to bodily labour would have decided upon which side to lie, Farmer Oak was asleep.

The inside of the hut, as it now presented itself, was cosy and alluring, and the scarlet handful of fire in addition to the candle, reflecting its own genial colour upon whatever it could reach, flung associations of enjoyment even over utensils and tools. In the corner stood the sheep-crook, and along a shelf at one side were ranged bottles and canisters of the simple preparations pertaining to ovine surgery and physic; spirits of

wine, turpentine, tar, magnesia, ginger, and castor-oil being the chief. On a triangular shelf across the corner stood bread, bacon, cheese, and a cup for ale or cider, which was supplied from a flagon beneath. Beside the provisions lay the flute, whose notes had lately been called forth by the lonely watcher to beguile a tedious hour. The house was ventilated by two round holes, like the lights of a ship's cabin, with wood slides.

The lamb, revived by the warmth began to bleat, and the sound entered Gabriel's ears and brain with an instant meaning, as expected sounds will. Passing from the profoundest sleep to the most alert wakefulness with the same ease that had accompanied the reverse operation, he looked at his watch, found that the hour-hand had shifted again, put on his hat, took the lamb in his arms, and carried it into the darkness. After placing the little creature with its mother, he stood and carefully examined the sky, to ascertain the time of night from the altitudes of the stars.

The Dog-star and Aldebaran, pointing to the restless Pleiades, were half-way up the Southern sky, and between them hung Orion, which gorgeous constellation never burnt more vividly than now, as it soared forth above the rim of the landscape. Castor and Pollux with their quiet shine were almost on the meridian: the barren and gloomy Square of Pegasus was creeping round to the north-west; far away through the plantation Vega sparkled like a lamp suspended amid the leafless trees, and Cassiopeia's chair stood daintily poised on the uppermost boughs.

"One o'clock," said Gabriel.

Being a man not without a frequent consciousness that there was some charm in this life he led, he stood still after looking at the sky as a useful instrument, and regarded it in an appreciative spirit, as a work of art superlatively beautiful. For a moment he seemed impressed with the speaking loneliness of the scene, or rather with the complete abstraction from all its compass of the sights and sounds of man. Human shapes, interferences, troubles, and joys were all as if they were not, and there seemed to be on the shaded hemisphere of the globe no sentient being save himself; he could fancy them all gone round to the sunny side.

Occupied thus, with eyes stretched afar, Oak gradually perceived that what he had previously taken to be a star low down behind the outskirts of the plantation was in reality no such thing. It was an artificial light, almost close at hand.

To find themselves utterly alone at night where company is desirable and expected makes some people fearful; but a case more trying by far to the nerves is to discover some mysterious companionship when intuition, sensation, memory, analogy, testimony, probability, induction — every kind of evidence in the logician's list — have united to persuade consciousness that it is quite in isolation.

Farmer Oak went towards the plantation and pushed through its lower boughs to the windy side. A dim mass under the slope reminded him that a shed occupied a place here, the site being a cutting into the slope of the hill, so that at its back part the roof was almost level with the ground. In front it was formed of board nailed to posts and covered with tar as a preservative. Through crevices in the roof and side spread streaks and dots of light, a combination of which made the radiance that had

attracted him. Oak stepped up behind, where, leaning down upon the roof and putting his eye close to a hole, he could see into the interior clearly.

The place contained two women and two cows. By the side of the latter a steaming bran-mash stood in a bucket. One of the women was past middle age. Her companion was apparently young and graceful; he could form no decided opinion upon her looks, her position being almost beneath his eye, so that he saw her in a bird's-eye view, as Milton's Satan first saw Paradise. She wore no bonnet or hat, but had enveloped herself in a large cloak, which was carelessly flung over her head as a covering.

"There, now we'll go home," said the elder of the two, resting her knuckles upon her hips, and looking at their goings-on as a whole. "I do hope Daisy will fetch round again now. I have never been more frightened in my life, but I don't mind breaking my rest if she recovers."

The young woman, whose eyelids were apparently inclined to fall together on the smallest provocation of silence, yawned without parting her lips to any inconvenient extent, whereupon Gabriel caught the infection and slightly yawned in sympathy.

"I wish we were rich enough to pay a man to do these things," she said.

"As we are not, we must do them ourselves," said the other; "for you must help me if you stay."

"Well, my hat is gone, however," continued the younger. "It went over the hedge, I think. The idea of such a slight wind catching it."

The cow standing erect was of the Devon breed, and was encased in a tight warm hide of rich Indian red, as absolutely uniform from eyes to tail as if the animal had been dipped in a dye of that colour, her long back being mathematically level. The other was spotted, grey and white. Beside her Oak now noticed a little calf about a day old, looking idiotically at the two women, which showed that it had not long been accustomed to the phenomenon of eyesight, and often turning to the lantern, which it apparently mistook for the moon, inherited instinct having as yet had little time for correction by experience. Between the sheep and the cows Lucina had been busy on Norcombe Hill lately.

"I think we had better send for some oatmeal," said the elder woman; "there's no more bran."

"Yes, aunt; and I'll ride over for it as soon as it is light."

"But there's no side-saddle."

"I can ride on the other: trust me."

Oak, upon hearing these remarks, became more curious to observe her features, but this prospect being denied him by the hooding effect of the cloak, and by his aerial position, he felt himself drawing upon his fancy for their details. In making even horizontal and clear inspections we colour and mould according to the wants within us whatever our eyes bring in. Had Gabriel been able from the first to get a distinct view of her countenance, his estimate of it as very handsome or slightly so would have been as his soul required a divinity at the moment or was ready supplied with one. Having for some time known the want of a satisfactory form to fill an increasing void within

him, his position moreover affording the widest scope for his fancy, he painted her a beauty.

By one of those whimsical coincidences in which Nature, like a busy mother, seems to spare a moment from her unremitting labours to turn and make her children smile, the girl now dropped the cloak, and forth tumbled ropes of black hair over a red jacket. Oak knew her instantly as the heroine of the yellow waggon, myrtles, and looking-glass: prosily, as the woman who owed him twopence.

They placed the calf beside its mother again, took up the lantern, and went out, the light sinking down the hill till it was no more than a nebula. Gabriel Oak returned to his flock.

CHAPTER III

A GIRL ON HORSEBACK — CONVERSATION

The sluggish day began to break. Even its position terrestrially is one of the elements of a new interest, and for no particular reason save that the incident of the night had occurred there Oak went again into the plantation. Lingered and musing here, he heard the steps of a horse at the foot of the hill, and soon there appeared in view an auburn pony with a girl on its back, ascending by the path leading past the cattle-shed. She was the young woman of the night before. Gabriel instantly thought of the hat she had mentioned as having lost in the wind; possibly she had come to look for it. He hastily scanned the ditch and after walking about ten yards along it found the hat among the leaves. Gabriel took it in his hand and returned to his hut. Here he ensconced himself, and peeped through the loophole in the direction of the rider's approach.

She came up and looked around — then on the other side of the hedge. Gabriel was about to advance and restore the missing article when an unexpected performance induced him to suspend the action for the present. The path, after passing the cowshed, bisected the plantation. It was not a bridle-path — merely a pedestrian's track, and the boughs spread horizontally at a height not greater than seven feet above the ground, which made it impossible to ride erect beneath them. The girl, who wore no riding-habit, looked around for a moment, as if to assure herself that all humanity was out of view, then dexterously dropped backwards flat upon the pony's back, her head over its tail, her feet against its shoulders, and her eyes to the sky. The rapidity of her glide into this position was that of a kingfisher — its noiselessness that of a hawk. Gabriel's eyes had scarcely been able to follow her. The tall lank pony seemed used to such doings, and ambled along unconcerned. Thus she passed under the level boughs.

The performer seemed quite at home anywhere between a horse's head and its tail, and the necessity for this abnormal attitude having ceased with the passage of the plantation, she began to adopt another, even more obviously convenient than the first. She had no side-saddle, and it was very apparent that a firm seat upon the

smooth leather beneath her was unattainable sideways. Springing to her accustomed perpendicular like a bowed sapling, and satisfying herself that nobody was in sight, she seated herself in the manner demanded by the saddle, though hardly expected of the woman, and trotted off in the direction of Tewnell Mill.

Oak was amused, perhaps a little astonished, and hanging up the hat in his hut, went again among his ewes. An hour passed, the girl returned, properly seated now, with a bag of bran in front of her. On nearing the cattle-shed she was met by a boy bringing a milking-pail, who held the reins of the pony whilst she slid off. The boy led away the horse, leaving the pail with the young woman.

Soon soft spirts alternating with loud spirts came in regular succession from within the shed, the obvious sounds of a person milking a cow. Gabriel took the lost hat in his hand, and waited beside the path she would follow in leaving the hill.

She came, the pail in one hand, hanging against her knee. The left arm was extended as a balance, enough of it being shown bare to make Oak wish that the event had happened in the summer, when the whole would have been revealed. There was a bright air and manner about her now, by which she seemed to imply that the desirability of her existence could not be questioned; and this rather saucy assumption failed in being offensive because a beholder felt it to be, upon the whole, true. Like exceptional emphasis in the tone of a genius, that which would have made mediocrity ridiculous was an addition to recognised power. It was with some surprise that she saw Gabriel's face rising like the moon behind the hedge.

The adjustment of the farmer's hazy conceptions of her charms to the portrait of herself she now presented him with was less a diminution than a difference. The starting-point selected by the judgment was her height. She seemed tall, but the pail was a small one, and the hedge diminutive; hence, making allowance for error by comparison with these, she could have been not above the height to be chosen by women as best. All features of consequence were severe and regular. It may have been observed by persons who go about the shires with eyes for beauty, that in Englishwoman a classically-formed face is seldom found to be united with a figure of the same pattern, the highly-finished features being generally too large for the remainder of the frame; that a graceful and proportionate figure of eight heads usually goes off into random facial curves. Without throwing a Nymphean tissue over a milkmaid, let it be said that here criticism checked itself as out of place, and looked at her proportions with a long consciousness of pleasure. From the contours of her figure in its upper part, she must have had a beautiful neck and shoulders; but since her infancy nobody had ever seen them. Had she been put into a low dress she would have run and thrust her head into a bush. Yet she was not a shy girl by any means; it was merely her instinct to draw the line dividing the seen from the unseen higher than they do it in towns.

That the girl's thoughts hovered about her face and form as soon as she caught Oak's eyes conning the same page was natural, and almost certain. The self-consciousness shown would have been vanity if a little more pronounced, dignity if a little less. Rays of male vision seem to have a tickling effect upon virgin faces in rural districts; she

brushed hers with her hand, as if Gabriel had been irritating its pink surface by actual touch, and the free air of her previous movements was reduced at the same time to a chastened phase of itself. Yet it was the man who blushed, the maid not at all.

"I found a hat," said Oak.

"It is mine," said she, and, from a sense of proportion, kept down to a small smile an inclination to laugh distinctly: "it flew away last night."

"One o'clock this morning?"

"Well — it was." She was surprised. "How did you know?" she said.

"I was here."

"You are Farmer Oak, are you not?"

"That or thereabouts. I'm lately come to this place."

"A large farm?" she inquired, casting her eyes round, and swinging back her hair, which was black in the shaded hollows of its mass; but it being now an hour past sunrise the rays touched its prominent curves with a colour of their own.

"No; not large. About a hundred." (In speaking of farms the word "acres" is omitted by the natives, by analogy to such old expressions as "a stag of ten.")

"I wanted my hat this morning," she went on. "I had to ride to Tewnell Mill."

"Yes you had."

"How do you know?"

"I saw you."

"Where?" she inquired, a misgiving bringing every muscle of her lineaments and frame to a standstill.

"Here — going through the plantation, and all down the hill," said Farmer Oak, with an aspect excessively knowing with regard to some matter in his mind, as he gazed at a remote point in the direction named, and then turned back to meet his colloquist's eyes.

A perception caused him to withdraw his own eyes from hers as suddenly as if he had been caught in a theft. Recollection of the strange antics she had indulged in when passing through the trees was succeeded in the girl by a nettled palpitation, and that by a hot face. It was a time to see a woman redden who was not given to reddening as a rule; not a point in the milkmaid but was of the deepest rose-colour. From the Maiden's Blush, through all varieties of the Provence down to the Crimson Tuscany, the countenance of Oak's acquaintance quickly graduated; whereupon he, in considerateness, turned away his head.

The sympathetic man still looked the other way, and wondered when she would recover coolness sufficient to justify him in facing her again. He heard what seemed to be the flitting of a dead leaf upon the breeze, and looked. She had gone away.

With an air between that of Tragedy and Comedy Gabriel returned to his work.

Five mornings and evenings passed. The young woman came regularly to milk the healthy cow or to attend to the sick one, but never allowed her vision to stray in the direction of Oak's person. His want of tact had deeply offended her — not by seeing what he could not help, but by letting her know that he had seen it. For, as without

law there is no sin, without eyes there is no indecorum; and she appeared to feel that Gabriel's espial had made her an indecorous woman without her own connivance. It was food for great regret with him; it was also a contretemps which touched into life a latent heat he had experienced in that direction.

The acquaintanceship might, however, have ended in a slow forgetting, but for an incident which occurred at the end of the same week. One afternoon it began to freeze, and the frost increased with evening, which drew on like a stealthy tightening of bonds. It was a time when in cottages the breath of the sleepers freezes to the sheets; when round the drawing-room fire of a thick-walled mansion the sitters' backs are cold, even whilst their faces are all aglow. Many a small bird went to bed supperless that night among the bare boughs.

As the milking-hour drew near, Oak kept his usual watch upon the cowshed. At last he felt cold, and shaking an extra quantity of bedding round the yearling ewes he entered the hut and heaped more fuel upon the stove. The wind came in at the bottom of the door, and to prevent it Oak laid a sack there and wheeled the cot round a little more to the south. Then the wind spouted in at a ventilating hole — of which there was one on each side of the hut.

Gabriel had always known that when the fire was lighted and the door closed one of these must be kept open — that chosen being always on the side away from the wind. Closing the slide to windward, he turned to open the other; on second thoughts the farmer considered that he would first sit down leaving both closed for a minute or two, till the temperature of the hut was a little raised. He sat down.

His head began to ache in an unwonted manner, and, fancying himself weary by reason of the broken rests of the preceding nights, Oak decided to get up, open the slide, and then allow himself to fall asleep. He fell asleep, however, without having performed the necessary preliminary.

How long he remained unconscious Gabriel never knew. During the first stages of his return to perception peculiar deeds seemed to be in course of enactment. His dog was howling, his head was aching fearfully — somebody was pulling him about, hands were loosening his neckerchief.

On opening his eyes he found that evening had sunk to dusk in a strange manner of unexpectedness. The young girl with the remarkably pleasant lips and white teeth was beside him. More than this — astonishingly more — his head was upon her lap, his face and neck were disagreeably wet, and her fingers were unbuttoning his collar.

"Whatever is the matter?" said Oak, vacantly.

She seemed to experience mirth, but of too insignificant a kind to start enjoyment.

"Nothing now," she answered, "since you are not dead. It is a wonder you were not suffocated in this hut of yours."

"Ah, the hut!" murmured Gabriel. "I gave ten pounds for that hut. But I'll sell it, and sit under thatched hurdles as they did in old times, and curl up to sleep in a lock of

straw! It played me nearly the same trick the other day!" Gabriel, by way of emphasis, brought down his fist upon the floor.

"It was not exactly the fault of the hut," she observed in a tone which showed her to be that novelty among women — one who finished a thought before beginning the sentence which was to convey it. "You should, I think, have considered, and not have been so foolish as to leave the slides closed."

"Yes I suppose I should," said Oak, absently. He was endeavouring to catch and appreciate the sensation of being thus with her, his head upon her dress, before the event passed on into the heap of bygone things. He wished she knew his impressions; but he would as soon have thought of carrying an odour in a net as of attempting to convey the intangibilities of his feeling in the coarse meshes of language. So he remained silent.

She made him sit up, and then Oak began wiping his face and shaking himself like a Samson. "How can I thank 'ee?" he said at last, gratefully, some of the natural rusty red having returned to his face.

"Oh, never mind that," said the girl, smiling, and allowing her smile to hold good for Gabriel's next remark, whatever that might prove to be.

"How did you find me?"

"I heard your dog howling and scratching at the door of the hut when I came to the milking (it was so lucky, Daisy's milking is almost over for the season, and I shall not come here after this week or the next). The dog saw me, and jumped over to me, and laid hold of my skirt. I came across and looked round the hut the very first thing to see if the slides were closed. My uncle has a hut like this one, and I have heard him tell his shepherd not to go to sleep without leaving a slide open. I opened the door, and there you were like dead. I threw the milk over you, as there was no water, forgetting it was warm, and no use."

"I wonder if I should have died?" Gabriel said, in a low voice, which was rather meant to travel back to himself than to her.

"Oh no!" the girl replied. She seemed to prefer a less tragic probability; to have saved a man from death involved talk that should harmonise with the dignity of such a deed — and she shunned it.

"I believe you saved my life, Miss — I don't know your name. I know your aunt's, but not yours."

"I would just as soon not tell it — rather not. There is no reason either why I should, as you probably will never have much to do with me."

"Still, I should like to know."

"You can inquire at my aunt's — she will tell you."

"My name is Gabriel Oak."

"And mine isn't. You seem fond of yours in speaking it so decisively, Gabriel Oak."

"You see, it is the only one I shall ever have, and I must make the most of it."

"I always think mine sounds odd and disagreeable."

"I should think you might soon get a new one."

"Mercy! — how many opinions you keep about you concerning other people, Gabriel Oak."

"Well, Miss — excuse the words — I thought you would like them. But I can't match you, I know, in mapping out my mind upon my tongue. I never was very clever in my inside. But I thank you. Come, give me your hand."

She hesitated, somewhat disconcerted at Oak's old-fashioned earnest conclusion to a dialogue lightly carried on. "Very well," she said, and gave him her hand, compressing her lips to a demure impassivity. He held it but an instant, and in his fear of being too demonstrative, swerved to the opposite extreme, touching her fingers with the lightness of a small-hearted person.

"I am sorry," he said the instant after.

"What for?"

"Letting your hand go so quick."

"You may have it again if you like; there it is." She gave him her hand again.

Oak held it longer this time — indeed, curiously long. "How soft it is — being winter time, too — not chapped or rough or anything!" he said.

"There — that's long enough," said she, though without pulling it away. "But I suppose you are thinking you would like to kiss it? You may if you want to."

"I wasn't thinking of any such thing," said Gabriel, simply; "but I will — "

"That you won't!" She snatched back her hand.

Gabriel felt himself guilty of another want of tact.

"Now find out my name," she said, teasingly; and withdrew.

CHAPTER IV

GABRIEL'S RESOLVE — THE VISIT — THE MISTAKE

The only superiority in women that is tolerable to the rival sex is, as a rule, that of the unconscious kind; but a superiority which recognizes itself may sometimes please by suggesting possibilities of capture to the subordinated man.

This well-favoured and comely girl soon made appreciable inroads upon the emotional constitution of young Farmer Oak.

Love, being an extremely exacting usurer (a sense of exorbitant profit, spiritually, by an exchange of hearts, being at the bottom of pure passions, as that of exorbitant profit, bodily or materially, is at the bottom of those of lower atmosphere), every morning Oak's feelings were as sensitive as the money-market in calculations upon his chances. His dog waited for his meals in a way so like that in which Oak waited for the girl's presence, that the farmer was quite struck with the resemblance, felt it lowering, and would not look at the dog. However, he continued to watch through the hedge for her regular coming, and thus his sentiments towards her were deepened without any corresponding effect being produced upon herself. Oak had nothing finished and ready

to say as yet, and not being able to frame love phrases which end where they begin; passionate tales —

— Full of sound and fury,

— Signifying nothing —

he said no word at all.

By making inquiries he found that the girl's name was Bathsheba Everdene, and that the cow would go dry in about seven days. He dreaded the eighth day.

At last the eighth day came. The cow had ceased to give milk for that year, and Bathsheba Everdene came up the hill no more. Gabriel had reached a pitch of existence he never could have anticipated a short time before. He liked saying "Bathsheba" as a private enjoyment instead of whistling; turned over his taste to black hair, though he had sworn by brown ever since he was a boy, isolated himself till the space he filled in the public eye was contemptibly small. Love is a possible strength in an actual weakness. Marriage transforms a distraction into a support, the power of which should be, and happily often is, in direct proportion to the degree of imbecility it supplants. Oak began now to see light in this direction, and said to himself, "I'll make her my wife, or upon my soul I shall be good for nothing!"

All this while he was perplexing himself about an errand on which he might consistently visit the cottage of Bathsheba's aunt.

He found his opportunity in the death of a ewe, mother of a living lamb. On a day which had a summer face and a winter constitution — a fine January morning, when there was just enough blue sky visible to make cheerfully-disposed people wish for more, and an occasional gleam of silvery sunshine, Oak put the lamb into a respectable Sunday basket, and stalked across the fields to the house of Mrs. Hurst, the aunt — George, the dog walking behind, with a countenance of great concern at the serious turn pastoral affairs seemed to be taking.

Gabriel had watched the blue wood-smoke curling from the chimney with strange meditation. At evening he had fancifully traced it down the chimney to the spot of its origin — seen the hearth and Bathsheba beside it — beside it in her out-door dress; for the clothes she had worn on the hill were by association equally with her person included in the compass of his affection; they seemed at this early time of his love a necessary ingredient of the sweet mixture called Bathsheba Everdene.

He had made a toilet of a nicely-adjusted kind — of a nature between the carefully neat and the carelessly ornate — of a degree between fine-market-day and wet-Sunday selection. He thoroughly cleaned his silver watch-chain with whiting, put new lacing straps to his boots, looked to the brass eyelet-holes, went to the inmost heart of the plantation for a new walking-stick, and trimmed it vigorously on his way back; took a new handkerchief from the bottom of his clothes-box, put on the light waistcoat patterned all over with sprigs of an elegant flower uniting the beauties of both rose and lily without the defects of either, and used all the hair-oil he possessed upon his usually dry, sandy, and inextricably curly hair, till he had deepened it to a splendidly

novel colour, between that of guano and Roman cement, making it stick to his head like mace round a nutmeg, or wet seaweed round a boulder after the ebb.

Nothing disturbed the stillness of the cottage save the chatter of a knot of sparrows on the eaves; one might fancy scandal and rumour to be no less the staple topic of these little coteries on roofs than of those under them. It seemed that the omen was an unpropitious one, for, as the rather untoward commencement of Oak's overtures, just as he arrived by the garden gate, he saw a cat inside, going into various arched shapes and fiendish convulsions at the sight of his dog George. The dog took no notice, for he had arrived at an age at which all superfluous barking was cynically avoided as a waste of breath — in fact, he never barked even at the sheep except to order, when it was done with an absolutely neutral countenance, as a sort of Commination-service, which, though offensive, had to be gone through once now and then to frighten the flock for their own good.

A voice came from behind some laurel-bushes into which the cat had run:

"Poor dear! Did a nasty brute of a dog want to kill it; — did he, poor dear!"

"I beg your pardon," said Oak to the voice, "but George was walking on behind me with a temper as mild as milk."

Almost before he had ceased speaking, Oak was seized with a misgiving as to whose ear was the recipient of his answer. Nobody appeared, and he heard the person retreat among the bushes.

Gabriel meditated, and so deeply that he brought small furrows into his forehead by sheer force of reverie. Where the issue of an interview is as likely to be a vast change for the worse as for the better, any initial difference from expectation causes nipping sensations of failure. Oak went up to the door a little abashed: his mental rehearsal and the reality had had no common grounds of opening.

Bathsheba's aunt was indoors. "Will you tell Miss Everdene that somebody would be glad to speak to her?" said Mr. Oak. (Calling one's self merely Somebody, without giving a name, is not to be taken as an example of the ill-breeding of the rural world: it springs from a refined modesty, of which townspeople, with their cards and announcements, have no notion whatever.)

Bathsheba was out. The voice had evidently been hers.

"Will you come in, Mr. Oak?"

"Oh, thank 'ee," said Gabriel, following her to the fireplace. "I've brought a lamb for Miss Everdene. I thought she might like one to rear; girls do."

"She might," said Mrs. Hurst, musingly; "though she's only a visitor here. If you will wait a minute, Bathsheba will be in."

"Yes, I will wait," said Gabriel, sitting down. "The lamb isn't really the business I came about, Mrs. Hurst. In short, I was going to ask her if she'd like to be married."

"And were you indeed?"

"Yes. Because if she would, I should be very glad to marry her. D'ye know if she's got any other young man hanging about her at all?"

"Let me think," said Mrs. Hurst, poking the fire superfluously... "Yes — bless you, ever so many young men. You see, Farmer Oak, she's so good-looking, and an excellent scholar besides — she was going to be a governess once, you know, only she was too wild. Not that her young men ever come here — but, Lord, in the nature of women, she must have a dozen!"

"That's unfortunate," said Farmer Oak, contemplating a crack in the stone floor with sorrow. "I'm only an every-day sort of man, and my only chance was in being the first comer ... Well, there's no use in my waiting, for that was all I came about: so I'll take myself off home-along, Mrs. Hurst."

When Gabriel had gone about two hundred yards along the down, he heard a "hoi-hoi!" uttered behind him, in a piping note of more treble quality than that in which the exclamation usually embodies itself when shouted across a field. He looked round, and saw a girl racing after him, waving a white handkerchief.

Oak stood still — and the runner drew nearer. It was Bathsheba Everdene. Gabriel's colour deepened: hers was already deep, not, as it appeared, from emotion, but from running.

"Farmer Oak — I — " she said, pausing for want of breath pulling up in front of him with a slanted face and putting her hand to her side.

"I have just called to see you," said Gabriel, pending her further speech.

"Yes — I know that," she said panting like a robin, her face red and moist from her exertions, like a peony petal before the sun dries off the dew. "I didn't know you had come to ask to have me, or I should have come in from the garden instantly. I ran after you to say — that my aunt made a mistake in sending you away from courting me — "

Gabriel expanded. "I'm sorry to have made you run so fast, my dear," he said, with a grateful sense of favours to come. "Wait a bit till you've found your breath."

" — It was quite a mistake — aunt's telling you I had a young man already," Bathsheba went on. "I haven't a sweetheart at all — and I never had one, and I thought that, as times go with women, it was such a pity to send you away thinking that I had several."

"Really and truly I am glad to hear that!" said Farmer Oak, smiling one of his long special smiles, and blushing with gladness. He held out his hand to take hers, which, when she had eased her side by pressing it there, was prettily extended upon her bosom to still her loud-beating heart. Directly he seized it she put it behind her, so that it slipped through his fingers like an eel."

"I have a nice snug little farm," said Gabriel, with half a degree less assurance than when he had seized her hand.

"Yes; you have."

"A man has advanced me money to begin with, but still, it will soon be paid off, and though I am only an every-day sort of man, I have got on a little since I was a boy." Gabriel uttered "a little" in a tone to show her that it was the complacent form of

“a great deal.” He continued: “When we be married, I am quite sure I can work twice as hard as I do now.”

He went forward and stretched out his arm again. Bathsheba had overtaken him at a point beside which stood a low stunted holly bush, now laden with red berries. Seeing his advance take the form of an attitude threatening a possible enclosure, if not compression, of her person, she edged off round the bush.

“Why, Farmer Oak,” she said, over the top, looking at him with rounded eyes, “I never said I was going to marry you.”

“Well — that is a tale!” said Oak, with dismay. “To run after anybody like this, and then say you don’t want him!”

“What I meant to tell you was only this,” she said eagerly, and yet half conscious of the absurdity of the position she had made for herself — “that nobody has got me yet as a sweetheart, instead of my having a dozen, as my aunt said; I hate to be thought men’s property in that way, though possibly I shall be had some day. Why, if I’d wanted you I shouldn’t have run after you like this; ‘twould have been the forwardest thing! But there was no harm in hurrying to correct a piece of false news that had been told you.”

“Oh, no — no harm at all.” But there is such a thing as being too generous in expressing a judgment impulsively, and Oak added with a more appreciative sense of all the circumstances — “Well, I am not quite certain it was no harm.”

“Indeed, I hadn’t time to think before starting whether I wanted to marry or not, for you’d have been gone over the hill.”

“Come,” said Gabriel, freshening again; “think a minute or two. I’ll wait a while, Miss Everdene. Will you marry me? Do, Bathsheba. I love you far more than common!”

“I’ll try to think,” she observed, rather more timorously; “if I can think out of doors; my mind spreads away so.”

“But you can give a guess.”

“Then give me time.” Bathsheba looked thoughtfully into the distance, away from the direction in which Gabriel stood.

“I can make you happy,” said he to the back of her head, across the bush. “You shall have a piano in a year or two — farmers’ wives are getting to have pianos now — and I’ll practise up the flute right well to play with you in the evenings.”

“Yes; I should like that.”

“And have one of those little ten-pound gigs for market — and nice flowers, and birds — cocks and hens I mean, because they be useful,” continued Gabriel, feeling balanced between poetry and practicality.

“I should like it very much.”

“And a frame for cucumbers — like a gentleman and lady.”

“Yes.”

“And when the wedding was over, we’d have it put in the newspaper list of marriages.”

“Dearly I should like that!”

"And the babies in the births — every man jack of 'em! And at home by the fire, whenever you look up, there I shall be — and whenever I look up there will be you."

"Wait, wait, and don't be improper!"

Her countenance fell, and she was silent awhile. He regarded the red berries between them over and over again, to such an extent, that holly seemed in his after life to be a cypher signifying a proposal of marriage. Bathsheba decisively turned to him.

"No; 'tis no use," she said. "I don't want to marry you."

"Try."

"I have tried hard all the time I've been thinking; for a marriage would be very nice in one sense. People would talk about me, and think I had won my battle, and I should feel triumphant, and all that, But a husband — "

"Well!"

"Why, he'd always be there, as you say; whenever I looked up, there he'd be."

"Of course he would — I, that is."

"Well, what I mean is that I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding, if I could be one without having a husband. But since a woman can't show off in that way by herself, I shan't marry — at least yet."

"That's a terrible wooden story!"

At this criticism of her statement Bathsheba made an addition to her dignity by a slight sweep away from him.

"Upon my heart and soul, I don't know what a maid can say stupider than that," said Oak. "But dearest," he continued in a palliative voice, "don't be like it!" Oak sighed a deep honest sigh — none the less so in that, being like the sigh of a pine plantation, it was rather noticeable as a disturbance of the atmosphere. "Why won't you have me?" he appealed, creeping round the holly to reach her side.

"I cannot," she said, retreating.

"But why?" he persisted, standing still at last in despair of ever reaching her, and facing over the bush.

"Because I don't love you."

"Yes, but — "

She contracted a yawn to an inoffensive smallness, so that it was hardly ill-mannered at all. "I don't love you," she said.

"But I love you — and, as for myself, I am content to be liked."

"Oh Mr. Oak — that's very fine! You'd get to despise me."

"Never," said Mr Oak, so earnestly that he seemed to be coming, by the force of his words, straight through the bush and into her arms. "I shall do one thing in this life — one thing certain — that is, love you, and long for you, and keep wanting you till I die." His voice had a genuine pathos now, and his large brown hands perceptibly trembled.

"It seems dreadfully wrong not to have you when you feel so much!" she said with a little distress, and looking hopelessly around for some means of escape from her moral dilemma. "How I wish I hadn't run after you!" However she seemed to have a short cut

for getting back to cheerfulness, and set her face to signify archness. "It wouldn't do, Mr Oak. I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know."

Oak cast his eyes down the field in a way implying that it was useless to attempt argument.

"Mr. Oak," she said, with luminous distinctness and common sense, "you are better off than I. I have hardly a penny in the world — I am staying with my aunt for my bare sustenance. I am better educated than you — and I don't love you a bit: that's my side of the case. Now yours: you are a farmer just beginning; and you ought in common prudence, if you marry at all (which you should certainly not think of doing at present), to marry a woman with money, who would stock a larger farm for you than you have now."

Gabriel looked at her with a little surprise and much admiration.

"That's the very thing I had been thinking myself!" he naïvely said.

Farmer Oak had one-and-a-half Christian characteristics too many to succeed with Bathsheba: his humility, and a superfluous moiety of honesty. Bathsheba was decidedly disconcerted.

"Well, then, why did you come and disturb me?" she said, almost angrily, if not quite, an enlarging red spot rising in each cheek.

"I can't do what I think would be — would be — "

"Right?"

"No: wise."

"You have made an admission now, Mr. Oak," she exclaimed, with even more hauteur, and rocking her head disdainfully. "After that, do you think I could marry you? Not if I know it."

He broke in passionately. "But don't mistake me like that! Because I am open enough to own what every man in my shoes would have thought of, you make your colours come up your face, and get crabbed with me. That about your not being good enough for me is nonsense. You speak like a lady — all the parish notice it, and your uncle at Weatherbury is, I have heard, a large farmer — much larger than ever I shall be. May I call in the evening, or will you walk along with me o' Sundays? I don't want you to make-up your mind at once, if you'd rather not."

"No — no — I cannot. Don't press me any more — don't. I don't love you — so 'twould be ridiculous," she said, with a laugh.

No man likes to see his emotions the sport of a merry-go-round of skittishness. "Very well," said Oak, firmly, with the bearing of one who was going to give his days and nights to Ecclesiastes for ever. "Then I'll ask you no more."

CHAPTER V

DEPARTURE OF BATHSHEBA — A PASTORAL TRAGEDY

The news which one day reached Gabriel, that Bathsheba Everdene had left the neighbourhood, had an influence upon him which might have surprised any who never suspected that the more emphatic the renunciation the less absolute its character.

It may have been observed that there is no regular path for getting out of love as there is for getting in. Some people look upon marriage as a short cut that way, but it has been known to fail. Separation, which was the means that chance offered to Gabriel Oak by Bathsheba's disappearance, though effectual with people of certain humours, is apt to idealise the removed object with others — notably those whose affection, placid and regular as it may be, flows deep and long. Oak belonged to the even-tempered order of humanity, and felt the secret fusion of himself in Bathsheba to be burning with a finer flame now that she was gone — that was all.

His incipient friendship with her aunt had been nipped by the failure of his suit, and all that Oak learnt of Bathsheba's movements was done indirectly. It appeared that she had gone to a place called Weatherbury, more than twenty miles off, but in what capacity — whether as a visitor, or permanently, he could not discover.

Gabriel had two dogs. George, the elder, exhibited an ebony-tipped nose, surrounded by a narrow margin of pink flesh, and a coat marked in random splotches approximating in colour to white and slaty grey; but the grey, after years of sun and rain, had been scorched and washed out of the more prominent locks, leaving them of a reddish-brown, as if the blue component of the grey had faded, like the indigo from the same kind of colour in Turner's pictures. In substance it had originally been hair, but long contact with sheep seemed to be turning it by degrees into wool of a poor quality and staple.

This dog had originally belonged to a shepherd of inferior morals and dreadful temper, and the result was that George knew the exact degrees of condemnation signified by cursing and swearing of all descriptions better than the wickedest old man in the neighbourhood. Long experience had so precisely taught the animal the difference between such exclamations as "Come in!" and "D—— ye, come in!" that he knew to a hair's breadth the rate of trotting back from the ewes' tails that each call involved, if a staggerer with the sheep crook was to be escaped. Though old, he was clever and trustworthy still.

The young dog, George's son, might possibly have been the image of his mother, for there was not much resemblance between him and George. He was learning the sheep-keeping business, so as to follow on at the flock when the other should die, but had got no further than the rudiments as yet — still finding an insuperable difficulty in distinguishing between doing a thing well enough and doing it too well. So earnest and yet so wrong-headed was this young dog (he had no name in particular, and answered with perfect readiness to any pleasant interjection), that if sent behind the flock to help them on, he did it so thoroughly that he would have chased them across the whole county with the greatest pleasure if not called off or reminded when to stop by the example of old George.

Thus much for the dogs. On the further side of Norcombe Hill was a chalk-pit, from which chalk had been drawn for generations, and spread over adjacent farms. Two

hedges converged upon it in the form of a V, but without quite meeting. The narrow opening left, which was immediately over the brow of the pit, was protected by a rough railing.

One night, when Farmer Oak had returned to his house, believing there would be no further necessity for his attendance on the down, he called as usual to the dogs, previously to shutting them up in the outhouse till next morning. Only one responded — old George; the other could not be found, either in the house, lane, or garden. Gabriel then remembered that he had left the two dogs on the hill eating a dead lamb (a kind of meat he usually kept from them, except when other food ran short), and concluding that the young one had not finished his meal, he went indoors to the luxury of a bed, which latterly he had only enjoyed on Sundays.

It was a still, moist night. Just before dawn he was assisted in waking by the abnormal reverberation of familiar music. To the shepherd, the note of the sheep-bell, like the ticking of the clock to other people, is a chronic sound that only makes itself noticed by ceasing or altering in some unusual manner from the well-known idle twinkle which signifies to the accustomed ear, however distant, that all is well in the fold. In the solemn calm of the awakening morn that note was heard by Gabriel, beating with unusual violence and rapidity. This exceptional ringing may be caused in two ways — by the rapid feeding of the sheep bearing the bell, as when the flock breaks into new pasture, which gives it an intermittent rapidity, or by the sheep starting off in a run, when the sound has a regular palpitation. The experienced ear of Oak knew the sound he now heard to be caused by the running of the flock with great velocity.

He jumped out of bed, dressed, tore down the lane through a foggy dawn, and ascended the hill. The forward ewes were kept apart from those among which the fall of lambs would be later, there being two hundred of the latter class in Gabriel's flock. These two hundred seemed to have absolutely vanished from the hill. There were the fifty with their lambs, enclosed at the other end as he had left them, but the rest, forming the bulk of the flock, were nowhere. Gabriel called at the top of his voice the shepherd's call:

“Ovey, ovey, ovey!”

Not a single bleat. He went to the hedge; a gap had been broken through it, and in the gap were the footprints of the sheep. Rather surprised to find them break fence at this season, yet putting it down instantly to their great fondness for ivy in winter-time, of which a great deal grew in the plantation, he followed through the hedge. They were not in the plantation. He called again: the valleys and farthest hills resounded as when the sailors invoked the lost Hylas on the Mysian shore; but no sheep. He passed through the trees and along the ridge of the hill. On the extreme summit, where the ends of the two converging hedges of which we have spoken were stopped short by meeting the brow of the chalk-pit, he saw the younger dog standing against the sky — dark and motionless as Napoleon at St. Helena.

A horrible conviction darted through Oak. With a sensation of bodily faintness he advanced: at one point the rails were broken through, and there he saw the footprints

of his ewes. The dog came up, licked his hand, and made signs implying that he expected some great reward for signal services rendered. Oak looked over the precipice. The ewes lay dead and dying at its foot — a heap of two hundred mangled carcasses, representing in their condition just now at least two hundred more.

Oak was an intensely humane man: indeed, his humanity often tore in pieces any politic intentions of his which bordered on strategy, and carried him on as by gravitation. A shadow in his life had always been that his flock ended in mutton — that a day came and found every shepherd an arrant traitor to his defenseless sheep. His first feeling now was one of pity for the untimely fate of these gentle ewes and their unborn lambs.

It was a second to remember another phase of the matter. The sheep were not insured. All the savings of a frugal life had been dispersed at a blow; his hopes of being an independent farmer were laid low — possibly for ever. Gabriel's energies, patience, and industry had been so severely taxed during the years of his life between eighteen and eight-and-twenty, to reach his present stage of progress that no more seemed to be left in him. He leant down upon a rail, and covered his face with his hands.

Stupors, however, do not last for ever, and Farmer Oak recovered from his. It was as remarkable as it was characteristic that the one sentence he uttered was in thankfulness:

“Thank God I am not married: what would she have done in the poverty now coming upon me!”

Oak raised his head, and wondering what he could do, listlessly surveyed the scene. By the outer margin of the Pit was an oval pond, and over it hung the attenuated skeleton of a chrome-yellow moon which had only a few days to last — the morning star dogging her on the left hand. The pool glittered like a dead man's eye, and as the world awoke a breeze blew, shaking and elongating the reflection of the moon without breaking it, and turning the image of the star to a phosphoric streak upon the water. All this Oak saw and remembered.

As far as could be learnt it appeared that the poor young dog, still under the impression that since he was kept for running after sheep, the more he ran after them the better, had at the end of his meal off the dead lamb, which may have given him additional energy and spirits, collected all the ewes into a corner, driven the timid creatures through the hedge, across the upper field, and by main force of worrying had given them momentum enough to break down a portion of the rotten railing, and so hurled them over the edge.

George's son had done his work so thoroughly that he was considered too good a workman to live, and was, in fact, taken and tragically shot at twelve o'clock that same day — another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion, and attempt perfectly consistent conduct in a world made up so largely of compromise.

Gabriel's farm had been stocked by a dealer — on the strength of Oak's promising look and character — who was receiving a percentage from the farmer till such time

as the advance should be cleared off. Oak found that the value of stock, plant, and implements which were really his own would be about sufficient to pay his debts, leaving himself a free man with the clothes he stood up in, and nothing more.

CHAPTER VI

THE FAIR — THE JOURNEY — THE FIRE

Two months passed away. We are brought on to a day in February, on which was held the yearly statute or hiring fair in the county-town of Casterbridge.

At one end of the street stood from two to three hundred blithe and hearty labourers waiting upon Chance — all men of the stamp to whom labour suggests nothing worse than a wrestle with gravitation, and pleasure nothing better than a renunciation of the same. Among these, carters and waggoners were distinguished by having a piece of whip-cord twisted round their hats; thatchers wore a fragment of woven straw; shepherds held their sheep-crooks in their hands; and thus the situation required was known to the hirers at a glance.

In the crowd was an athletic young fellow of somewhat superior appearance to the rest — in fact, his superiority was marked enough to lead several ruddy peasants standing by to speak to him inquiringly, as to a farmer, and to use “Sir” as a finishing word. His answer always was, —

“I am looking for a place myself — a bailiff’s. Do ye know of anybody who wants one?”

Gabriel was paler now. His eyes were more meditative, and his expression was more sad. He had passed through an ordeal of wretchedness which had given him more than it had taken away. He had sunk from his modest elevation as pastoral king into the very slime-pits of Siddim; but there was left to him a dignified calm he had never before known, and that indifference to fate which, though it often makes a villain of a man, is the basis of his sublimity when it does not. And thus the abasement had been exaltation, and the loss gain.

In the morning a regiment of cavalry had left the town, and a sergeant and his party had been beating up for recruits through the four streets. As the end of the day drew on, and he found himself not hired, Gabriel almost wished that he had joined them, and gone off to serve his country. Weary of standing in the market-place, and not much minding the kind of work he turned his hand to, he decided to offer himself in some other capacity than that of bailiff.

All the farmers seemed to be wanting shepherds. Sheep-tending was Gabriel’s speciality. Turning down an obscure street and entering an obscurer lane, he went up to a smith’s shop.

“How long would it take you to make a shepherd’s crook?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“How much?”

"Two shillings."

He sat on a bench and the crook was made, a stem being given him into the bargain.

He then went to a ready-made clothes' shop, the owner of which had a large rural connection. As the crook had absorbed most of Gabriel's money, he attempted, and carried out, an exchange of his overcoat for a shepherd's regulation smock-frock.

This transaction having been completed, he again hurried off to the centre of the town, and stood on the kerb of the pavement, as a shepherd, crook in hand.

Now that Oak had turned himself into a shepherd, it seemed that bailiffs were most in demand. However, two or three farmers noticed him and drew near. Dialogues followed, more or less in the subjoined form: —

"Where do you come from?"

"Norcombe."

"That's a long way."

"Fifteen miles."

"Who's farm were you upon last?"

"My own."

This reply invariably operated like a rumour of cholera. The inquiring farmer would edge away and shake his head dubiously. Gabriel, like his dog, was too good to be trustworthy, and he never made advance beyond this point.

It is safer to accept any chance that offers itself, and extemporize a procedure to fit it, than to get a good plan matured, and wait for a chance of using it. Gabriel wished he had not nailed up his colours as a shepherd, but had laid himself out for anything in the whole cycle of labour that was required in the fair. It grew dusk. Some merry men were whistling and singing by the corn-exchange. Gabriel's hand, which had lain for some time idle in his smock-frock pocket, touched his flute which he carried there. Here was an opportunity for putting his dearly bought wisdom into practice.

He drew out his flute and began to play "Jockey to the Fair" in the style of a man who had never known moment's sorrow. Oak could pipe with Arcadian sweetness, and the sound of the well-known notes cheered his own heart as well as those of the loungers. He played on with spirit, and in half an hour had earned in pence what was a small fortune to a destitute man.

By making inquiries he learnt that there was another fair at Shottsford the next day.

"How far is Shottsford?"

"Ten miles t'other side of Weatherbury."

Weatherbury! It was where Bathsheba had gone two months before. This information was like coming from night into noon.

"How far is it to Weatherbury?"

"Five or six miles."

Bathsheba had probably left Weatherbury long before this time, but the place had enough interest attaching to it to lead Oak to choose Shottsford fair as his next field of inquiry, because it lay in the Weatherbury quarter. Moreover, the Weatherbury folk

were by no means uninteresting intrinsically. If report spoke truly they were as hardy, merry, thriving, wicked a set as any in the whole county. Oak resolved to sleep at Weatherbury that night on his way to Shottsford, and struck out at once into the high road which had been recommended as the direct route to the village in question.

The road stretched through water-meadows traversed by little brooks, whose quivering surfaces were braided along their centres, and folded into creases at the sides; or, where the flow was more rapid, the stream was pied with spots of white froth, which rode on in undisturbed serenity. On the higher levels the dead and dry carcasses of leaves tapped the ground as they bowled along helter-skelter upon the shoulders of the wind, and little birds in the hedges were rustling their feathers and tucking themselves in comfortably for the night, retaining their places if Oak kept moving, but flying away if he stopped to look at them. He passed by Yalbury Wood where the game-birds were rising to their roosts, and heard the crack-voiced cock-pheasants "cu-uck, cuck," and the wheezy whistle of the hens.

By the time he had walked three or four miles every shape in the landscape had assumed a uniform hue of blackness. He descended Yalbury Hill and could just discern ahead of him a waggon, drawn up under a great over-hanging tree by the roadside.

On coming close, he found there were no horses attached to it, the spot being apparently quite deserted. The waggon, from its position, seemed to have been left there for the night, for beyond about half a truss of hay which was heaped in the bottom, it was quite empty. Gabriel sat down on the shafts of the vehicle and considered his position. He calculated that he had walked a very fair proportion of the journey; and having been on foot since daybreak, he felt tempted to lie down upon the hay in the waggon instead of pushing on to the village of Weatherbury, and having to pay for a lodging.

Eating his last slices of bread and ham, and drinking from the bottle of cider he had taken the precaution to bring with him, he got into the lonely waggon. Here he spread half of the hay as a bed, and, as well as he could in the darkness, pulled the other half over him by way of bed-clothes, covering himself entirely, and feeling, physically, as comfortable as ever he had been in his life. Inward melancholy it was impossible for a man like Oak, introspective far beyond his neighbours, to banish quite, whilst conning the present untoward page of his history. So, thinking of his misfortunes, amorous and pastoral, he fell asleep, shepherds enjoying, in common with sailors, the privilege of being able to summon the god instead of having to wait for him.

On somewhat suddenly awaking, after a sleep of whose length he had no idea, Oak found that the waggon was in motion. He was being carried along the road at a rate rather considerable for a vehicle without springs, and under circumstances of physical uneasiness, his head being dandled up and down on the bed of the waggon like a kettledrum-stick. He then distinguished voices in conversation, coming from the forpart of the waggon. His concern at this dilemma (which would have been alarm, had he been a thriving man; but misfortune is a fine opiate to personal terror) led him to peer cautiously from the hay, and the first sight he beheld was the stars above

him. Charles's Wain was getting towards a right angle with the Pole star, and Gabriel concluded that it must be about nine o'clock — in other words, that he had slept two hours. This small astronomical calculation was made without any positive effort, and whilst he was stealthily turning to discover, if possible, into whose hands he had fallen.

Two figures were dimly visible in front, sitting with their legs outside the waggon, one of whom was driving. Gabriel soon found that this was the waggoner, and it appeared they had come from Casterbridge fair, like himself.

A conversation was in progress, which continued thus: —

"Be as 'twill, she's a fine handsome body as far's looks be concerned. But that's only the skin of the woman, and these dandy cattle be as proud as a lucifer in their insides."

"Ay — so 'a do seem, Billy Smallbury — so 'a do seem." This utterance was very shaky by nature, and more so by circumstance, the jolting of the waggon not being without its effect upon the speaker's larynx. It came from the man who held the reins.

"She's a very vain feymell — so 'tis said here and there."

"Ah, now. If so be 'tis like that, I can't look her in the face. Lord, no: not I — heh-heh-heh! Such a shy man as I be!"

"Yes — she's very vain. 'Tis said that every night at going to bed she looks in the glass to put on her night-cap properly."

"And not a married woman. Oh, the world!"

"And 'a can play the peanner, so 'tis said. Can play so clever that 'a can make a psalm tune sound as well as the merriest loose song a man can wish for."

"D'ye tell o't! A happy time for us, and I feel quite a new man! And how do she pay?"

"That I don't know, Master Poorgrass."

On hearing these and other similar remarks, a wild thought flashed into Gabriel's mind that they might be speaking of Bathsheba. There were, however, no grounds for retaining such a supposition, for the waggon, though going in the direction of Weatherbury, might be going beyond it, and the woman alluded to seemed to be the mistress of some estate. They were now apparently close upon Weatherbury and not to alarm the speakers unnecessarily, Gabriel slipped out of the waggon unseen.

He turned to an opening in the hedge, which he found to be a gate, and mounting thereon, he sat meditating whether to seek a cheap lodging in the village, or to ensure a cheaper one by lying under some hay or corn-stack. The crunching jangle of the waggon died upon his ear. He was about to walk on, when he noticed on his left hand an unusual light — appearing about half a mile distant. Oak watched it, and the glow increased. Something was on fire.

Gabriel again mounted the gate, and, leaping down on the other side upon what he found to be ploughed soil, made across the field in the exact direction of the fire. The blaze, enlarging in a double ratio by his approach and its own increase, showed him as he drew nearer the outlines of ricks beside it, lighted up to great distinctness. A rick-yard was the source of the fire. His weary face now began to be painted over with a

rich orange glow, and the whole front of his smock-frock and gaiters was covered with a dancing shadow pattern of thorn-twigs — the light reaching him through a leafless intervening hedge — and the metallic curve of his sheep-crook shone silver-bright in the same abounding rays. He came up to the boundary fence, and stood to regain breath. It seemed as if the spot was unoccupied by a living soul.

The fire was issuing from a long straw-stack, which was so far gone as to preclude a possibility of saving it. A rick burns differently from a house. As the wind blows the fire inwards, the portion in flames completely disappears like melting sugar, and the outline is lost to the eye. However, a hay or a wheat-rick, well put together, will resist combustion for a length of time, if it begins on the outside.

This before Gabriel's eyes was a rick of straw, loosely put together, and the flames darted into it with lightning swiftness. It glowed on the windward side, rising and falling in intensity, like the coal of a cigar. Then a superincumbent bundle rolled down, with a whisking noise; flames elongated, and bent themselves about with a quiet roar, but no crackle. Banks of smoke went off horizontally at the back like passing clouds, and behind these burned hidden pyres, illuminating the semi-transparent sheet of smoke to a lustrous yellow uniformity. Individual straws in the foreground were consumed in a creeping movement of ruddy heat, as if they were knots of red worms, and above shone imaginary fiery faces, tongues hanging from lips, glaring eyes, and other impish forms, from which at intervals sparks flew in clusters like birds from a nest.

Oak suddenly ceased from being a mere spectator by discovering the case to be more serious than he had at first imagined. A scroll of smoke blew aside and revealed to him a wheat-rick in startling juxtaposition with the decaying one, and behind this a series of others, composing the main corn produce of the farm; so that instead of the straw-stack standing, as he had imagined comparatively isolated, there was a regular connection between it and the remaining stacks of the group.

Gabriel leapt over the hedge, and saw that he was not alone. The first man he came to was running about in a great hurry, as if his thoughts were several yards in advance of his body, which they could never drag on fast enough.

"O, man — fire, fire! A good master and a bad servant is fire, fire! — I mane a bad servant and a good master. Oh, Mark Clark — come! And you, Billy Smallbury — and you, Maryann Money — and you, Jan Coggan, and Matthew there!" Other figures now appeared behind this shouting man and among the smoke, and Gabriel found that, far from being alone he was in a great company — whose shadows danced merrily up and down, timed by the jiggling of the flames, and not at all by their owners' movements. The assemblage — belonging to that class of society which casts its thoughts into the form of feeling, and its feelings into the form of commotion — set to work with a remarkable confusion of purpose.

"Stop the draught under the wheat-rick!" cried Gabriel to those nearest to him. The corn stood on stone staddles, and between these, tongues of yellow hue from the burning straw licked and darted playfully. If the fire once got under this stack, all would be lost.

"Get a tarpaulin — quick!" said Gabriel.

A rick-cloth was brought, and they hung it like a curtain across the channel. The flames immediately ceased to go under the bottom of the corn-stack, and stood up vertical.

"Stand here with a bucket of water and keep the cloth wet," said Gabriel again.

The flames, now driven upwards, began to attack the angles of the huge roof covering the wheat-stack.

"A ladder," cried Gabriel.

"The ladder was against the straw-rick and is burnt to a cinder," said a spectre-like form in the smoke.

Oak seized the cut ends of the sheaves, as if he were going to engage in the operation of "reed-drawing," and digging in his feet, and occasionally sticking in the stem of his sheep-crook, he clambered up the beetling face. He at once sat astride the very apex, and began with his crook to beat off the fiery fragments which had lodged thereon, shouting to the others to get him a bough and a ladder, and some water.

Billy Smallbury — one of the men who had been on the waggon — by this time had found a ladder, which Mark Clark ascended, holding on beside Oak upon the thatch. The smoke at this corner was stifling, and Clark, a nimble fellow, having been handed a bucket of water, bathed Oak's face and sprinkled him generally, whilst Gabriel, now with a long beech-bough in one hand, in addition to his crook in the other, kept sweeping the stack and dislodging all fiery particles.

On the ground the groups of villagers were still occupied in doing all they could to keep down the conflagration, which was not much. They were all tinged orange, and backed up by shadows of varying pattern. Round the corner of the largest stack, out of the direct rays of the fire, stood a pony, bearing a young woman on its back. By her side was another woman, on foot. These two seemed to keep at a distance from the fire, that the horse might not become restive.

"He's a shepherd," said the woman on foot. "Yes — he is. See how his crook shines as he beats the rick with it. And his smock-frock is burnt in two holes, I declare! A fine young shepherd he is too, ma'am."

"Whose shepherd is he?" said the equestrian in a clear voice.

"Don't know, ma'am."

"Don't any of the others know?"

"Nobody at all — I've asked 'em. Quite a stranger, they say."

The young woman on the pony rode out from the shade and looked anxiously around.

"Do you think the barn is safe?" she said.

"D'ye think the barn is safe, Jan Coggan?" said the second woman, passing on the question to the nearest man in that direction.

"Safe-now — leastwise I think so. If this rick had gone the barn would have followed. 'Tis that bold shepherd up there that have done the most good — he sitting on the top o' rick, whizzing his great long-arms about like a windmill."

"He does work hard," said the young woman on horseback, looking up at Gabriel through her thick woollen veil. "I wish he was shepherd here. Don't any of you know his name."

"Never heard the man's name in my life, or seed his form afore."

The fire began to get worsted, and Gabriel's elevated position being no longer required of him, he made as if to descend.

"Maryann," said the girl on horseback, "go to him as he comes down, and say that the farmer wishes to thank him for the great service he has done."

Maryann stalked off towards the rick and met Oak at the foot of the ladder. She delivered her message.

"Where is your master the farmer?" asked Gabriel, kindling with the idea of getting employment that seemed to strike him now.

"'Tisn't a master; 'tis a mistress, shepherd."

"A woman farmer?"

"Ay, 'a b'lieve, and a rich one too!" said a bystander. "Lately 'a came here from a distance. Took on her uncle's farm, who died suddenly. Used to measure his money in half-pint cups. They say now that she've business in every bank in Casterbridge, and thinks no more of playing pitch-and-toss sovereign than you and I do pitch-halfpenny — not a bit in the world, shepherd."

"That's she, back there upon the pony," said Maryann; "wi' her face a-covered up in that black cloth with holes in it."

Oak, his features smudged, grimy, and undiscoverable from the smoke and heat, his smock-frock burnt into holes and dripping with water, the ash stem of his sheep-crook charred six inches shorter, advanced with the humility stern adversity had thrust upon him up to the slight female form in the saddle. He lifted his hat with respect, and not without gallantry: stepping close to her hanging feet he said in a hesitating voice, —

"Do you happen to want a shepherd, ma'am?"

She lifted the wool veil tied round her face, and looked all astonishment. Gabriel and his cold-hearted darling, Bathsheba Everdene, were face to face.

Bathsheba did not speak, and he mechanically repeated in an abashed and sad voice,

—
"Do you want a shepherd, ma'am?"

CHAPTER VII

RECOGNITION — A TIMID GIRL

Bathsheba withdrew into the shade. She scarcely knew whether most to be amused at the singularity of the meeting, or to be concerned at its awkwardness. There was room for a little pity, also for a very little exultation: the former at his position, the

latter at her own. Embarrassed she was not, and she remembered Gabriel's declaration of love to her at Norcombe only to think she had nearly forgotten it.

"Yes," she murmured, putting on an air of dignity, and turning again to him with a little warmth of cheek; "I do want a shepherd. But — "

"He's the very man, ma'am," said one of the villagers, quietly.

Conviction breeds conviction. "Ay, that 'a is," said a second, decisively.

"The man, truly!" said a third, with heartiness.

"He's all there!" said number four, fervidly.

"Then will you tell him to speak to the bailiff," said Bathsheba.

All was practical again now. A summer eve and loneliness would have been necessary to give the meeting its proper fulness of romance.

The bailiff was pointed out to Gabriel, who, checking the palpitation within his breast at discovering that this Ashtoreth of strange report was only a modification of Venus the well-known and admired, retired with him to talk over the necessary preliminaries of hiring.

The fire before them wasted away. "Men," said Bathsheba, "you shall take a little refreshment after this extra work. Will you come to the house?"

"We could knock in a bit and a drop a good deal freer, Miss, if so be ye'd send it to Warren's Malthouse," replied the spokesman.

Bathsheba then rode off into the darkness, and the men straggled on to the village in twos and threes — Oak and the bailiff being left by the rick alone.

"And now," said the bailiff, finally, "all is settled, I think, about your coming, and I am going home-along. Good-night to ye, shepherd."

"Can you get me a lodging?" inquired Gabriel.

"That I can't, indeed," he said, moving past Oak as a Christian edges past an offertory-plate when he does not mean to contribute. "If you follow on the road till you come to Warren's Malthouse, where they are all gone to have their snap of victuals, I daresay some of 'em will tell you of a place. Good-night to ye, shepherd."

The bailiff who showed this nervous dread of loving his neighbour as himself, went up the hill, and Oak walked on to the village, still astonished at the reencounter with Bathsheba, glad of his nearness to her, and perplexed at the rapidity with which the unpractised girl of Norcombe had developed into the supervising and cool woman here. But some women only require an emergency to make them fit for one.

Obliged, to some extent, to forgo dreaming in order to find the way, he reached the churchyard, and passed round it under the wall where several ancient trees grew. There was a wide margin of grass along here, and Gabriel's footsteps were deadened by its softness, even at this indurating period of the year. When abreast of a trunk which appeared to be the oldest of the old, he became aware that a figure was standing behind it. Gabriel did not pause in his walk, and in another moment he accidentally kicked a loose stone. The noise was enough to disturb the motionless stranger, who started and assumed a careless position.

It was a slim girl, rather thinly clad.

"Good-night to you," said Gabriel, heartily.

"Good-night," said the girl to Gabriel.

The voice was unexpectedly attractive; it was the low and dulcet note suggestive of romance; common in descriptions, rare in experience.

"I'll thank you to tell me if I'm in the way for Warren's Malthouse?" Gabriel resumed, primarily to gain the information, indirectly to get more of the music.

"Quite right. It's at the bottom of the hill. And do you know — " The girl hesitated and then went on again. "Do you know how late they keep open the Buck's Head Inn?" She seemed to be won by Gabriel's heartiness, as Gabriel had been won by her modulations.

"I don't know where the Buck's Head is, or anything about it. Do you think of going there to-night?"

"Yes — " The woman again paused. There was no necessity for any continuance of speech, and the fact that she did add more seemed to proceed from an unconscious desire to show unconcern by making a remark, which is noticeable in the ingenuous when they are acting by stealth. "You are not a Weatherbury man?" she said, timorously.

"I am not. I am the new shepherd — just arrived."

"Only a shepherd — and you seem almost a farmer by your ways."

"Only a shepherd," Gabriel repeated, in a dull cadence of finality. His thoughts were directed to the past, his eyes to the feet of the girl; and for the first time he saw lying there a bundle of some sort. She may have perceived the direction of his face, for she said coaxingly, —

"You won't say anything in the parish about having seen me here, will you — at least, not for a day or two?"

"I won't if you wish me not to," said Oak.

"Thank you, indeed," the other replied. "I am rather poor, and I don't want people to know anything about me." Then she was silent and shivered.

"You ought to have a cloak on such a cold night," Gabriel observed. "I would advise 'ee to get indoors."

"O no! Would you mind going on and leaving me? I thank you much for what you have told me."

"I will go on," he said; adding hesitatingly, — "Since you are not very well off, perhaps you would accept this trifle from me. It is only a shilling, but it is all I have to spare."

"Yes, I will take it," said the stranger gratefully.

She extended her hand; Gabriel his. In feeling for each other's palm in the gloom before the money could be passed, a minute incident occurred which told much. Gabriel's fingers alighted on the young woman's wrist. It was beating with a throb of tragic intensity. He had frequently felt the same quick, hard beat in the femoral artery of his lambs when overdriven. It suggested a consumption too great of a vitality which, to judge from her figure and stature, was already too little.

"What is the matter?"

“Nothing.”

“But there is?”

“No, no, no! Let your having seen me be a secret!”

“Very well; I will. Good-night, again.”

“Good-night.”

The young girl remained motionless by the tree, and Gabriel descended into the village of Weatherbury, or Lower Longpuddle as it was sometimes called. He fancied that he had felt himself in the penumbra of a very deep sadness when touching that slight and fragile creature. But wisdom lies in moderating mere impressions, and Gabriel endeavoured to think little of this.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MALTHOUSE — THE CHAT — NEWS

Warren’s Malthouse was enclosed by an old wall inwrapped with ivy, and though not much of the exterior was visible at this hour, the character and purposes of the building were clearly enough shown by its outline upon the sky. From the walls an overhanging thatched roof sloped up to a point in the centre, upon which rose a small wooden lantern, fitted with louvre-boards on all the four sides, and from these openings a mist was dimly perceived to be escaping into the night air. There was no window in front; but a square hole in the door was glazed with a single pane, through which red, comfortable rays now stretched out upon the ivied wall in front. Voices were to be heard inside.

Oak’s hand skimmed the surface of the door with fingers extended to an Elymas-the-Sorcerer pattern, till he found a leathern strap, which he pulled. This lifted a wooden latch, and the door swung open.

The room inside was lighted only by the ruddy glow from the kiln mouth, which shone over the floor with the streaming horizontality of the setting sun, and threw upwards the shadows of all facial irregularities in those assembled around. The stone-flag floor was worn into a path from the doorway to the kiln, and into undulations everywhere. A curved settle of unplanned oak stretched along one side, and in a remote corner was a small bed and bedstead, the owner and frequent occupier of which was the maltster.

This aged man was now sitting opposite the fire, his frosty white hair and beard overgrowing his gnarled figure like the grey moss and lichen upon a leafless apple-tree. He wore breeches and the laced-up shoes called ankle-jacks; he kept his eyes fixed upon the fire.

Gabriel’s nose was greeted by an atmosphere laden with the sweet smell of new malt. The conversation (which seemed to have been concerning the origin of the fire) immediately ceased, and every one ocularly criticised him to the degree expressed by contracting the flesh of their foreheads and looking at him with narrowed eyelids, as

if he had been a light too strong for their sight. Several exclaimed meditatively, after this operation had been completed: —

“Oh, ‘tis the new shepherd, ‘a b’lieve.”

“We thought we heard a hand pawing about the door for the bobbin, but weren’t sure ‘twere not a dead leaf blowed across,” said another. “Come in, shepherd; sure ye be welcome, though we don’t know yer name.”

“Gabriel Oak, that’s my name, neighbours.”

The ancient maltster sitting in the midst turned at this — his turning being as the turning of a rusty crane.

“That’s never Gable Oak’s grandson over at Norcombe — never!” he said, as a formula expressive of surprise, which nobody was supposed for a moment to take literally.

“My father and my grandfather were old men of the name of Gabriel,” said the shepherd, placidly.

“Thought I knowed the man’s face as I seed him on the rick! — thought I did! And where be ye trading o’t to now, shepherd?”

“I’m thinking of biding here,” said Mr. Oak.

“Knowed yer grandfather for years and years!” continued the maltster, the words coming forth of their own accord as if the momentum previously imparted had been sufficient.

“Ah — and did you!”

“Knowed yer grandmother.”

“And her too!”

“Likewise knowed yer father when he was a child. Why, my boy Jacob there and your father were sworn brothers — that they were sure — weren’t ye, Jacob?”

“Ay, sure,” said his son, a young man about sixty-five, with a semi-bald head and one tooth in the left centre of his upper jaw, which made much of itself by standing prominent, like a milestone in a bank. “But ‘twas Joe had most to do with him. However, my son William must have knowed the very man afore us — didn’t ye, Billy, afore ye left Norcombe?”

“No, ‘twas Andrew,” said Jacob’s son Billy, a child of forty, or thereabouts, who manifested the peculiarity of possessing a cheerful soul in a gloomy body, and whose whiskers were assuming a chinchilla shade here and there.

“I can mind Andrew,” said Oak, “as being a man in the place when I was quite a child.”

“Ay — the other day I and my youngest daughter, Liddy, were over at my grandson’s christening,” continued Billy. “We were talking about this very family, and ‘twas only last Purification Day in this very world, when the use-money is gied away to the second-best poor folk, you know, shepherd, and I can mind the day because they all had to traypse up to the vestry — yes, this very man’s family.”

“Come, shepherd, and drink. ‘Tis gape and swaller with us — a drap of sommit, but not of much account,” said the maltster, removing from the fire his eyes, which

were vermilion-red and bleared by gazing into it for so many years. "Take up the God-forgive-me, Jacob. See if 'tis warm, Jacob."

Jacob stooped to the God-forgive-me, which was a two-handled tall mug standing in the ashes, cracked and charred with heat: it was rather furred with extraneous matter about the outside, especially in the crevices of the handles, the innermost curves of which may not have seen daylight for several years by reason of this encrustation thereon — formed of ashes accidentally wetted with cider and baked hard; but to the mind of any sensible drinker the cup was no worse for that, being incontestably clean on the inside and about the rim. It may be observed that such a class of mug is called a God-forgive-me in Weatherbury and its vicinity for uncertain reasons; probably because its size makes any given toper feel ashamed of himself when he sees its bottom in drinking it empty.

Jacob, on receiving the order to see if the liquor was warm enough, placidly dipped his forefinger into it by way of thermometer, and having pronounced it nearly of the proper degree, raised the cup and very civilly attempted to dust some of the ashes from the bottom with the skirt of his smock-frock, because Shepherd Oak was a stranger.

"A clane cup for the shepherd," said the maltster commandingly.

"No — not at all," said Gabriel, in a reproving tone of considerateness. "I never fuss about dirt in its pure state, and when I know what sort it is." Taking the mug he drank an inch or more from the depth of its contents, and duly passed it to the next man. "I wouldn't think of giving such trouble to neighbours in washing up when there's so much work to be done in the world already." continued Oak in a moister tone, after recovering from the stoppage of breath which is occasioned by pulls at large mugs.

"A right sensible man," said Jacob.

"True, true; it can't be gainsaid!" observed a brisk young man — Mark Clark by name, a genial and pleasant gentleman, whom to meet anywhere in your travels was to know, to know was to drink with, and to drink with was, unfortunately, to pay for.

"And here's a mouthful of bread and bacon that mis'ess have sent, shepherd. The cider will go down better with a bit of victuals. Don't ye chaw quite close, shepherd, for I let the bacon fall in the road outside as I was bringing it along, and may be 'tis rather gritty. There, 'tis clane dirt; and we all know what that is, as you say, and you bain't a particular man we see, shepherd."

"True, true — not at all," said the friendly Oak.

"Don't let your teeth quite meet, and you won't feel the sandiness at all. Ah! 'tis wonderful what can be done by contrivance!"

"My own mind exactly, neighbour."

"Ah, he's his grandfer's own grandson! — his grandfer were just such a nice unparticular man!" said the maltster.

"Drink, Henry Fray — drink," magnanimously said Jan Coggan, a person who held Saint-Simonian notions of share and share alike where liquor was concerned, as the vessel showed signs of approaching him in its gradual revolution among them.

Having at this moment reached the end of a wistful gaze into mid-air, Henry did not refuse. He was a man of more than middle age, with eyebrows high up in his forehead, who laid it down that the law of the world was bad, with a long-suffering look through his listeners at the world alluded to, as it presented itself to his imagination. He always signed his name "Henery" — strenuously insisting upon that spelling, and if any passing schoolmaster ventured to remark that the second "e" was superfluous and old-fashioned, he received the reply that "H-e-n-e-r-y" was the name he was christened and the name he would stick to — in the tone of one to whom orthographical differences were matters which had a great deal to do with personal character.

Mr. Jan Coggan, who had passed the cup to Henery, was a crimson man with a spacious countenance and private glimmer in his eye, whose name had appeared on the marriage register of Weatherbury and neighbouring parishes as best man and chief witness in countless unions of the previous twenty years; he also very frequently filled the post of head godfather in baptisms of the subtly-jovial kind.

"Come, Mark Clark — come. Ther's plenty more in the barrel," said Jan.

"Ay — that I will, 'tis my only doctor," replied Mr. Clark, who, twenty years younger than Jan Coggan, revolved in the same orbit. He secreted mirth on all occasions for special discharge at popular parties.

"Why, Joseph Poorgrass, ye han't had a drop!" said Mr. Coggan to a self-conscious man in the background, thrusting the cup towards him.

"Such a modest man as he is!" said Jacob Smallbury. "Why, ye've hardly had strength of eye enough to look in our young mis'ess's face, so I hear, Joseph?"

All looked at Joseph Poorgrass with pitying reproach.

"No — I've hardly looked at her at all," simpered Joseph, reducing his body smaller whilst talking, apparently from a meek sense of undue prominence. "And when I seed her, 'twas nothing but blushes with me!"

"Poor feller," said Mr. Clark.

"'Tis a curious nature for a man," said Jan Coggan.

"Yes," continued Joseph Poorgrass — his shyness, which was so painful as a defect, filling him with a mild complacency now that it was regarded as an interesting study. "'Twere blush, blush, blush with me every minute of the time, when she was speaking to me."

"I believe ye, Joseph Poorgrass, for we all know ye to be a very bashful man."

"'Tis a' awkward gift for a man, poor soul," said the maltster. "And how long have ye have suffered from it, Joseph?" [a]

"Oh, ever since I was a boy. Yes — mother was concerned to her heart about it — yes. But 'twas all nought."

"Did ye ever go into the world to try and stop it, Joseph Poorgrass?"

"Oh ay, tried all sorts o' company. They took me to Greenhill Fair, and into a great gay jerry-go-nimble show, where there were women-folk riding round — standing upon horses, with hardly anything on but their smocks; but it didn't cure me a morsel. And then I was put errand-man at the Women's Skittle Alley at the back of the Tailor's

Arms in Casterbridge. 'Twas a horrible sinful situation, and a very curious place for a good man. I had to stand and look ba'dy people in the face from morning till night; but 'twas no use — I was just as bad as ever after all. Blushes hev been in the family for generations. There, 'tis a happy providence that I be no worse."

"True," said Jacob Smallbury, deepening his thoughts to a profounder view of the subject. "'Tis a thought to look at, that ye might have been worse; but even as you be, 'tis a very bad affliction for 'ee, Joseph. For ye see, shepherd, though 'tis very well for a woman, dang it all, 'tis awkward for a man like him, poor feller?"

"'Tis — 'tis," said Gabriel, recovering from a meditation. "Yes, very awkward for the man."

"Ay, and he's very timid, too," observed Jan Coggan. "Once he had been working late at Yalbury Bottom, and had had a drap of drink, and lost his way as he was coming home-along through Yalbury Wood, didn't ye, Master Poorgrass?"

"No, no, no; not that story!" expostulated the modest man, forcing a laugh to bury his concern.

" — And so 'a lost himself quite," continued Mr. Coggan, with an impassive face, implying that a true narrative, like time and tide, must run its course and would respect no man. "And as he was coming along in the middle of the night, much afeared, and not able to find his way out of the trees nohow, 'a cried out, 'Man-a-lost! man-a-lost!' A owl in a tree happened to be crying 'Whoo-whoo-whoo!' as owls do, you know, shepherd" (Gabriel nodded), "and Joseph, all in a tremble, said, 'Joseph Poorgrass, of Weatherbury, sir!'"

"No, no, now — that's too much!" said the timid man, becoming a man of brazen courage all of a sudden. "I didn't say sir. I'll take my oath I didn't say 'Joseph Poorgrass o' Weatherbury, sir.' No, no; what's right is right, and I never said sir to the bird, knowing very well that no man of a gentleman's rank would be hollering there at that time o' night. 'Joseph Poorgrass of Weatherbury,' — that's every word I said, and I shouldn't ha' said that if 't hadn't been for Keeper Day's metheglin... There, 'twas a merciful thing it ended where it did."

The question of which was right being tacitly waived by the company, Jan went on meditatively: —

"And he's the fearfulest man, bain't ye, Joseph? Ay, another time ye were lost by Lambing-Down Gate, weren't ye, Joseph?"

"I was," replied Poorgrass, as if there were some conditions too serious even for modesty to remember itself under, this being one.

"Yes; that were the middle of the night, too. The gate would not open, try how he would, and knowing there was the Devil's hand in it, he kneeled down."

"Ay," said Joseph, acquiring confidence from the warmth of the fire, the cider, and a perception of the narrative capabilities of the experience alluded to. "My heart died within me, that time; but I kneeled down and said the Lord's Prayer, and then the Belief right through, and then the Ten Commandments, in earnest prayer. But no, the gate wouldn't open; and then I went on with Dearly Beloved Brethren, and, thinks I,

this makes four, and 'tis all I know out of book, and if this don't do it nothing will, and I'm a lost man. Well, when I got to Saying After Me, I rose from my knees and found the gate would open — yes, neighbours, the gate opened the same as ever."

A meditation on the obvious inference was indulged in by all, and during its continuance each directed his vision into the ashpit, which glowed like a desert in the tropics under a vertical sun, shaping their eyes long and liny, partly because of the light, partly from the depth of the subject discussed.

Gabriel broke the silence. "What sort of a place is this to live at, and what sort of a mis'ess is she to work under?" Gabriel's bosom thrilled gently as he thus slipped under the notice of the assembly the inner-most subject of his heart.

"We d' know little of her — nothing. She only showed herself a few days ago. Her uncle was took bad, and the doctor was called with his world-wide skill; but he couldn't save the man. As I take it, she's going to keep on the farm.

"That's about the shape o't, 'a b'lieve," said Jan Coggan. "Ay, 'tis a very good family. I'd as soon be under 'em as under one here and there. Her uncle was a very fair sort of man. Did ye know en, shepherd — a bachelor-man?"

"Not at all."

"I used to go to his house a-courting my first wife, Charlotte, who was his dairymaid. Well, a very good-hearted man were Farmer Everdene, and I being a respectable young fellow was allowed to call and see her and drink as much ale as I liked, but not to carry away any — outside my skin I mane of course."

"Ay, ay, Jan Coggan; we know yer maning."

"And so you see 'twas beautiful ale, and I wished to value his kindness as much as I could, and not to be so ill-mannered as to drink only a thimbleful, which would have been insulting the man's generosity — "

"True, Master Coggan, 'twould so," corroborated Mark Clark.

" — And so I used to eat a lot of salt fish afore going, and then by the time I got there I were as dry as a lime-basket — so thorough dry that that ale would slip down — ah, 'twould slip down sweet! Happy times! Heavenly times! Such lovely drunks as I used to have at that house! You can mind, Jacob? You used to go wi' me sometimes."

"I can — I can," said Jacob. "That one, too, that we had at Buck's Head on a White Monday was a pretty tippie."

"'Twas. But for a wet of the better class, that brought you no nearer to the horned man than you were afore you begun, there was none like those in Farmer Everdene's kitchen. Not a single damn allowed; no, not a bare poor one, even at the most cheerful moment when all were blindest, though the good old word of sin thrown in here and there at such times is a great relief to a merry soul."

"True," said the maltster. "Nater requires her swearing at the regular times, or she's not herself; and unholy exclamations is a necessity of life."

"But Charlotte," continued Coggan — "not a word of the sort would Charlotte allow, nor the smallest item of taking in vain... Ay, poor Charlotte, I wonder if she had the

good fortune to get into Heaven when 'a died! But 'a was never much in luck's way, and perhaps 'a went downwards after all, poor soul."

"And did any of you know Miss Everdene's father and mother?" inquired the shepherd, who found some difficulty in keeping the conversation in the desired channel.

"I knew them a little," said Jacob Smallbury; "but they were townsfolk, and didn't live here. They've been dead for years. Father, what sort of people were mis'ess' father and mother?"

"Well," said the maltster, "he wasn't much to look at; but she was a lovely woman. He was fond enough of her as his sweetheart."

"Used to kiss her scores and long-hundreds o' times, so 'twas said," observed Coggan.

"He was very proud of her, too, when they were married, as I've been told," said the maltster. "Ay," said Coggan. "He admired her so much that he used to light the candle three times a night to look at her."

"Boundless love; I shouldn't have supposed it in the universe!" murmured Joseph Poorgrass, who habitually spoke on a large scale in his moral reflections.

"Well, to be sure," said Gabriel.

"Oh, 'tis true enough. I knowed the man and woman both well. Levi Everdene — that was the man's name, sure. 'Man,' saith I in my hurry, but he were of a higher circle of life than that — 'a was a gentleman-tailor really, worth scores of pounds. And he became a very celebrated bankrupt two or three times."

"Oh, I thought he was quite a common man!" said Joseph.

"Oh no, no! That man failed for heaps of money; hundreds in gold and silver."

The maltster being rather short of breath, Mr. Coggan, after absently scrutinising a coal which had fallen among the ashes, took up the narrative, with a private twirl of his eye: —

"Well, now, you'd hardly believe it, but that man — our Miss Everdene's father — was one of the ficklest husbands alive, after a while. Understand? 'a didn't want to be fickle, but he couldn't help it. The pore feller were faithful and true enough to her in his wish, but his heart would rove, do what he would. He spoke to me in real tribulation about it once. 'Coggan,' he said, 'I could never wish for a handsomer woman than I've got, but feeling she's ticketed as my lawful wife, I can't help my wicked heart wandering, do what I will.' But at last I believe he cured it by making her take off her wedding-ring and calling her by her maiden name as they sat together after the shop was shut, and so 'a would get to fancy she was only his sweetheart, and not married to him at all. And as soon as he could thoroughly fancy he was doing wrong and committing the seventh, 'a got to like her as well as ever, and they lived on a perfect picture of mutel love."

"Well, 'twas a most ungodly remedy," murmured Joseph Poorgrass; "but we ought to feel deep cheerfulness that a happy Providence kept it from being any worse. You see, he might have gone the bad road and given his eyes to unlawfulness entirely — yes, gross unlawfulness, so to say it."

"You see," said Billy Smallbury, "The man's will was to do right, sure enough, but his heart didn't chime in."

"He got so much better, that he was quite godly in his later years, wasn't he, Jan?" said Joseph Poorgrass. "He got himself confirmed over again in a more serious way, and took to saying 'Amen' almost as loud as the clerk, and he liked to copy comforting verses from the tombstones. He used, too, to hold the money-plate at Let Your Light so Shine, and stand godfather to poor little come-by-chance children; and he kept a missionary box upon his table to nab folks unawares when they called; yes, and he would box the charity-boys' ears, if they laughed in church, till they could hardly stand upright, and do other deeds of piety natural to the saintly inclined."

"Ay, at that time he thought of nothing but high things," added Billy Smallbury. "One day Parson Thirdly met him and said, 'Good-Morning, Mister Everdene; 'tis a fine day!' 'Amen' said Everdene, quite absent-like, thinking only of religion when he seed a parson. Yes, he was a very Christian man."

"Their daughter was not at all a pretty chiel at that time," said Henery Fray. "Never should have thought she'd have growed up such a handsome body as she is."

"'Tis to be hoped her temper is as good as her face."

"Well, yes; but the baily will have most to do with the business and ourselves. Ah!" Henery gazed into the ashpit, and smiled volumes of ironical knowledge.

"A queer Christian, like the Devil's head in a cowl, as the saying is," volunteered Mark Clark.

"He is," said Henery, implying that irony must cease at a certain point. "Between we two, man and man, I believe that man would as soon tell a lie Sundays as working-days — that I do so."

"Good faith, you do talk!" said Gabriel.

"True enough," said the man of bitter moods, looking round upon the company with the antithetic laughter that comes from a keener appreciation of the miseries of life than ordinary men are capable of. "Ah, there's people of one sort, and people of another, but that man — bless your souls!"

Gabriel thought fit to change the subject. "You must be a very aged man, malter, to have sons growed mild and ancient," he remarked.

"Father's so old that 'a can't mind his age, can ye, father?" interposed Jacob. "And he's growed terrible crooked too, lately," Jacob continued, surveying his father's figure, which was rather more bowed than his own. "Really one may say that father there is three-double."

"Crooked folk will last a long while," said the maltster, grimly, and not in the best humour.

"Shepherd would like to hear the pedigree of yer life, father — wouldn't ye, shepherd?"

"Ay that I should," said Gabriel with the heartiness of a man who had longed to hear it for several months. "What may your age be, malter?"

The maltster cleared his throat in an exaggerated form for emphasis, and elongating his gaze to the remotest point of the ashpit, said, in the slow speech justifiable when the importance of a subject is so generally felt that any mannerism must be tolerated in getting at it, "Well, I don't mind the year I were born in, but perhaps I can reckon up the places I've lived at, and so get it that way. I bode at Upper Longpuddle across there" (nodding to the north) "till I were eleven. I bode seven at Kingsbere" (nodding to the east) "where I took to malting. I went therefrom to Norcombe, and malted there two-and-twenty years, and two-and-twenty years I was there turnip-hoeing and harvesting. Ah, I knowed that old place, Norcombe, years afore you were thought of, Master Oak" (Oak smiled sincere belief in the fact). "Then I malted at Durnover four year, and four year turnip-hoeing; and I was fourteen times eleven months at Millpond St. Jude's" (nodding north-west-by-north). "Old Twills wouldn't hire me for more than eleven months at a time, to keep me from being chargeable to the parish if so be I was disabled. Then I was three year at Mellstock, and I've been here one-and-thirty year come Candlemas. How much is that?"

"Hundred and seventeen," chuckled another old gentleman, given to mental arithmetic and little conversation, who had hitherto sat unobserved in a corner.

"Well, then, that's my age," said the maltster, emphatically.

"O no, father!" said Jacob. "Your turnip-hoeing were in the summer and your malting in the winter of the same years, and ye don't ought to count-both halves, father."

"Chok' it all! I lived through the summers, didn't I? That's my question. I suppose ye'll say next I be no age at all to speak of?"

"Sure we shan't," said Gabriel, soothingly.

"Ye be a very old aged person, malter," attested Jan Coggan, also soothingly. "We all know that, and ye must have a wonderful talented constitution to be able to live so long, mustn't he, neighbours?"

"True, true; ye must, malter, wonderful," said the meeting unanimously.

The maltster, being now pacified, was even generous enough to voluntarily disparage in a slight degree the virtue of having lived a great many years, by mentioning that the cup they were drinking out of was three years older than he.

While the cup was being examined, the end of Gabriel Oak's flute became visible over his smock-frock pocket, and Henery Fray exclaimed, "Surely, shepherd, I seed you blowing into a great flute by now at Casterbridge?"

"You did," said Gabriel, blushing faintly. "I've been in great trouble, neighbours, and was driven to it. I used not to be so poor as I be now."

"Never mind, heart!" said Mark Clark. "You should take it careless-like, shepherd, and your time will come. But we could thank ye for a tune, if ye bain't too tired?"

"Neither drum nor trumpet have I heard since Christmas," said Jan Coggan. "Come, raise a tune, Master Oak!"

"Ay, that I will," said Gabriel, pulling out his flute and putting it together. "A poor tool, neighbours; but such as I can do ye shall have and welcome."

Oak then struck up "Jockey to the Fair," and played that sparkling melody three times through, accenting the notes in the third round in a most artistic and lively manner by bending his body in small jerks and tapping with his foot to beat time.

"He can blow the flute very well — that 'a can," said a young married man, who having no individuality worth mentioning was known as "Susan Tall's husband." He continued, "I'd as lief as not be able to blow into a flute as well as that."

"He's a clever man, and 'tis a true comfort for us to have such a shepherd," murmured Joseph Poorgrass, in a soft cadence. "We ought to feel full o' thanksgiving that he's not a player of ba'dy songs instead of these merry tunes; for 'twould have been just as easy for God to have made the shepherd a loose low man — a man of iniquity, so to speak it — as what he is. Yes, for our wives' and daughters' sakes we should feel real thanksgiving."

"True, true, — real thanksgiving!" dashed in Mark Clark conclusively, not feeling it to be of any consequence to his opinion that he had only heard about a word and three-quarters of what Joseph had said.

"Yes," added Joseph, beginning to feel like a man in the Bible; "for evil do thrive so in these times that ye may be as much deceived in the cleanest shaved and whitest shirted man as in the raggedest tramp upon the turnpike, if I may term it so."

"Ay, I can mind yer face now, shepherd," said Henery Fray, criticising Gabriel with misty eyes as he entered upon his second tune. "Yes — now I see 'ee blowing into the flute I know 'ee to be the same man I see play at Casterbridge, for yer mouth were scrimped up and yer eyes a-staring out like a strangled man's — just as they be now."

"'Tis a pity that playing the flute should make a man look such a scarecrow," observed Mr. Mark Clark, with additional criticism of Gabriel's countenance, the latter person jerking out, with the ghastly grimace required by the instrument, the chorus of "Dame Durden:" —

'Twas Moll' and Bet', and Doll' and Kate',
And Dor'-othy Drag'-gle Tail'.

"I hope you don't mind that young man's bad manners in naming your features?" whispered Joseph to Gabriel.

"Not at all," said Mr. Oak.

"For by nature ye be a very handsome man, shepherd," continued Joseph Poorgrass, with winning sauvity.

"Ay, that ye be, shepard," said the company.

"Thank you very much," said Oak, in the modest tone good manners demanded, thinking, however, that he would never let Bathsheba see him playing the flute; in this resolve showing a discretion equal to that related to its sagacious inventress, the divine Minerva herself.

"Ah, when I and my wife were married at Norcombe Church," said the old maltster, not pleased at finding himself left out of the subject, "we were called the handsomest couple in the neighbourhood — everybody said so."

"Danged if ye bain't altered now, malter," said a voice with the vigour natural to the enunciation of a remarkably evident truism. It came from the old man in the background, whose offensiveness and spiteful ways were barely atoned for by the occasional chuckle he contributed to general laughs.

"O no, no," said Gabriel.

"Don't ye play no more shepherd" said Susan Tall's husband, the young married man who had spoken once before. "I must be moving and when there's tunes going on I seem as if hung in wires. If I thought after I'd left that music was still playing, and I not there, I should be quite melancholy-like."

"What's yer hurry then, Laban?" inquired Coggan. "You used to bide as late as the latest."

"Well, ye see, neighbours, I was lately married to a woman, and she's my vocation now, and so ye see — " The young man halted lamely.

"New Lords new laws, as the saying is, I suppose," remarked Coggan.

"Ay, 'a b'lieve — ha, ha!" said Susan Tall's husband, in a tone intended to imply his habitual reception of jokes without minding them at all. The young man then wished them good-night and withdrew.

Henery Fray was the first to follow. Then Gabriel arose and went off with Jan Coggan, who had offered him a lodging. A few minutes later, when the remaining ones were on their legs and about to depart, Fray came back again in a hurry. Flourishing his finger ominously he threw a gaze teeming with tidings just where his eye alighted by accident, which happened to be in Joseph Poorgrass's face.

"O — what's the matter, what's the matter, Henery?" said Joseph, starting back.

"What's a-brewing, Henery?" asked Jacob and Mark Clark.

"Baily Pennyways — Baily Pennyways — I said so; yes, I said so!"

"What, found out stealing anything?"

"Stealing it is. The news is, that after Miss Everdene got home she went out again to see all was safe, as she usually do, and coming in found Baily Pennyways creeping down the granary steps with half a a bushel of barley. She fled at him like a cat — never such a tomboy as she is — of course I speak with closed doors?"

"You do — you do, Henery."

"She fled at him, and, to cut a long story short, he owned to having carried off five sack altogether, upon her promising not to persecute him. Well, he's turned out neck and crop, and my question is, who's going to be baily now?"

The question was such a profound one that Henery was obliged to drink there and then from the large cup till the bottom was distinctly visible inside. Before he had replaced it on the table, in came the young man, Susan Tall's husband, in a still greater hurry.

"Have ye heard the news that's all over parish?"

"About Baily Pennyways?"

"But besides that?"

"No — not a morsel of it!" they replied, looking into the very midst of Laban Tall as if to meet his words half-way down his throat.

"What a night of horrors!" murmured Joseph Poorgrass, waving his hands spasmodically. "I've had the news-bell ringing in my left ear quite bad enough for a murder, and I've seen a magpie all alone!"

"Fanny Robin — Miss Everdene's youngest servant — can't be found. They've been wanting to lock up the door these two hours, but she isn't come in. And they don't know what to do about going to bed for fear of locking her out. They wouldn't be so concerned if she hadn't been noticed in such low spirits these last few days, and Maryann d' think the beginning of a crowner's inquest has happened to the poor girl."

"Oh — 'tis burned — 'tis burned!" came from Joseph Poorgrass's dry lips.

"No — 'tis drowned!" said Tall.

"Or 'tis her father's razor!" suggested Billy Smallbury, with a vivid sense of detail.

"Well — Miss Everdene wants to speak to one or two of us before we go to bed. What with this trouble about the baily, and now about the girl, mis'ess is almost wild."

They all hastened up the lane to the farmhouse, excepting the old maltster, whom neither news, fire, rain, nor thunder could draw from his hole. There, as the others' footsteps died away he sat down again and continued gazing as usual into the furnace with his red, bleared eyes.

From the bedroom window above their heads Bathsheba's head and shoulders, robed in mystic white, were dimly seen extended into the air.

"Are any of my men among you?" she said anxiously.

"Yes, ma'am, several," said Susan Tall's husband.

"To-morrow morning I wish two or three of you to make inquiries in the villages round if they have seen such a person as Fanny Robin. Do it quietly; there is no reason for alarm as yet. She must have left whilst we were all at the fire."

"I beg yer pardon, but had she any young man courting her in the parish, ma'am?" asked Jacob Smallbury.

"I don't know," said Bathsheba.

"I've never heard of any such thing, ma'am," said two or three.

"It is hardly likely, either," continued Bathsheba. "For any lover of hers might have come to the house if he had been a respectable lad. The most mysterious matter connected with her absence — indeed, the only thing which gives me serious alarm — is that she was seen to go out of the house by Maryann with only her indoor working gown on — not even a bonnet."

"And you mean, ma'am, excusing my words, that a young woman would hardly go to see her young man without dressing up," said Jacob, turning his mental vision upon past experiences. "That's true — she would not, ma'am."

"She had, I think, a bundle, though I couldn't see very well," said a female voice from another window, which seemed that of Maryann. "But she had no young man about here. Hers lives in Casterbridge, and I believe he's a soldier."

"Do you know his name?" Bathsheba said.

“No, mistress; she was very close about it.”

“Perhaps I might be able to find out if I went to Casterbridge barracks,” said William Smallbury.

“Very well; if she doesn’t return to-morrow, mind you go there and try to discover which man it is, and see him. I feel more responsible than I should if she had had any friends or relations alive. I do hope she has come to no harm through a man of that kind... And then there’s this disgraceful affair of the bailiff — but I can’t speak of him now.”

Bathsheba had so many reasons for uneasiness that it seemed she did not think it worth while to dwell upon any particular one. “Do as I told you, then,” she said in conclusion, closing the casement.

“Ay, ay, mistress; we will,” they replied, and moved away.

That night at Coggan’s, Gabriel Oak, beneath the screen of closed eyelids, was busy with fancies, and full of movement, like a river flowing rapidly under its ice. Night had always been the time at which he saw Bathsheba most vividly, and through the slow hours of shadow he tenderly regarded her image now. It is rarely that the pleasures of the imagination will compensate for the pain of sleeplessness, but they possibly did with Oak to-night, for the delight of merely seeing her effaced for the time his perception of the great difference between seeing and possessing.

He also thought of plans for fetching his few utensils and books from Norcombe. The Young Man’s Best Companion, The Farrier’s Sure Guide, The Veterinary Surgeon, Paradise Lost, The Pilgrim’s Progress, Robinson Crusoe, Ash’s Dictionary, and Walkingame’s Arithmetic, constituted his library; and though a limited series, it was one from which he had acquired more sound information by diligent perusal than many a man of opportunities has done from a furlong of laden shelves.

CHAPTER IX

THE HOMESTEAD — A VISITOR — HALF-CONFIDENCES

By daylight, the bower of Oak’s new-found mistress, Bathsheba Everdene, presented itself as a hoary building, of the early stage of Classic Renaissance as regards its architecture, and of a proportion which told at a glance that, as is so frequently the case, it had once been the memorial hall upon a small estate around it, now altogether effaced as a distinct property, and merged in the vast tract of a non-resident landlord, which comprised several such modest demesnes.

Fluted pilasters, worked from the solid stone, decorated its front, and above the roof the chimneys were panelled or columnar, some coped gables with finials and like features still retaining traces of their Gothic extraction. Soft brown mosses, like faded velvet, formed cushions upon the stone tiling, and tufts of the houseleek or sengreen sprouted from the eaves of the low surrounding buildings. A gravel walk leading from the door to the road in front was encrusted at the sides with more moss — here it

was a silver-green variety, the nut-brown of the gravel being visible to the width of only a foot or two in the centre. This circumstance, and the generally sleepy air of the whole prospect here, together with the animated and contrasting state of the reverse façade, suggested to the imagination that on the adaptation of the building for farming purposes the vital principle of the house had turned round inside its body to face the other way. Reversals of this kind, strange deformities, tremendous paralyses, are often seen to be inflicted by trade upon edifices — either individual or in the aggregate as streets and towns — which were originally planned for pleasure alone.

Lively voices were heard this morning in the upper rooms, the main staircase to which was of hard oak, the balusters, heavy as bed-posts, being turned and moulded in the quaint fashion of their century, the handrail as stout as a parapet-top, and the stairs themselves continually twisting round like a person trying to look over his shoulder. Going up, the floors above were found to have a very irregular surface, rising to ridges, sinking into valleys; and being just then uncarpeted, the face of the boards was seen to be eaten into innumerable vermiculations. Every window replied by a clang to the opening and shutting of every door, a tremble followed every bustling movement, and a creak accompanied a walker about the house, like a spirit, wherever he went.

In the room from which the conversation proceeded Bathsheba and her servant-companion, Liddy Smallbury, were to be discovered sitting upon the floor, and sorting a complication of papers, books, bottles, and rubbish spread out thereon — remnants from the household stores of the late occupier. Liddy, the maltster's great-granddaughter, was about Bathsheba's equal in age, and her face was a prominent advertisement of the light-hearted English country girl. The beauty her features might have lacked in form was amply made up for by perfection of hue, which at this winter-time was the softened ruddiness on a surface of high rotundity that we meet with in a Terburg or a Gerard Douw; and, like the presentations of those great colourists, it was a face which kept well back from the boundary between comeliness and the ideal. Though elastic in nature she was less daring than Bathsheba, and occasionally showed some earnestness, which consisted half of genuine feeling, and half of mannerliness superadded by way of duty.

Through a partly-opened door the noise of a scrubbing-brush led up to the charwoman, Maryann Money, a person who for a face had a circular disc, furrowed less by age than by long gazes of perplexity at distant objects. To think of her was to get good-humoured; to speak of her was to raise the image of a dried Normandy pippin.

"Stop your scrubbing a moment," said Bathsheba through the door to her. "I hear something."

Maryann suspended the brush.

The tramp of a horse was apparent, approaching the front of the building. The paces slackened, turned in at the wicket, and, what was most unusual, came up the mossy path close to the door. The door was tapped with the end of a crop or stick.

"What impertinence!" said Liddy, in a low voice. "To ride up the footpath like that! Why didn't he stop at the gate? Lord! 'Tis a gentleman! I see the top of his hat."

"Be quiet!" said Bathsheba.

The further expression of Liddy's concern was continued by aspect instead of narrative.

"Why doesn't Mrs. Coggan go to the door?" Bath-sheba continued.

Rat-tat-tat-tat resounded more decisively from Bath-sheba's oak.

"Maryann, you go!" said she, fluttering under the onset of a crowd of romantic possibilities.

"Oh ma'am — see, here's a mess!"

The argument was unanswerable after a glance at Maryann.

"Liddy — you must," said Bathsheba.

Liddy held up her hands and arms, coated with dust from the rubbish they were sorting, and looked imploringly at her mistress.

"There — Mrs. Coggan is going!" said Bathsheba, exhaling her relief in the form of a long breath which had lain in her bosom a minute or more.

The door opened, and a deep voice said —

"Is Miss Everdene at home?"

"I'll see, sir," said Mrs. Coggan, and in a minute appeared in the room.

"Dear, what a thirtover place this world is!" continued Mrs. Coggan (a wholesome-looking lady who had a voice for each class of remark according to the emotion involved; who could toss a pancake or twirl a mop with the accuracy of pure mathematics, and who at this moment showed hands shaggy with fragments of dough and arms encrusted with flour). "I am never up to my elbows, Miss, in making a pudding but one of two things do happen — either my nose must needs begin tickling, and I can't live without scratching it, or somebody knocks at the door. Here's Mr. Boldwood wanting to see you, Miss Everdene."

A woman's dress being a part of her countenance, and any disorder in the one being of the same nature with a malformation or wound in the other, Bathsheba said at once —

"I can't see him in this state. Whatever shall I do?"

Not-at-homes were hardly naturalised in Weatherbury farmhouses, so Liddy suggested — "Say you're a fright with dust, and can't come down."

"Yes — that sounds very well," said Mrs. Coggan, critically.

"Say I can't see him — that will do."

Mrs. Coggan went downstairs, and returned the answer as requested, adding, however, on her own responsibility, "Miss is dusting bottles, sir, and is quite a object — that's why 'tis."

"Oh, very well," said the deep voice indifferently. "All I wanted to ask was, if anything had been heard of Fanny Robin?"

"Nothing, sir — but we may know to-night. William Smallbury is gone to Casterbridge, where her young man lives, as is supposed, and the other men be inquiring about everywhere."

The horse's tramp then recommenced and retreated, and the door closed.

"Who is Mr. Boldwood?" said Bathsheba.

"A gentleman-farmer at Little Weatherbury."

"Married?"

"No, miss."

"How old is he?"

"Forty, I should say — very handsome — rather stern-looking — and rich."

"What a bother this dusting is! I am always in some unfortunate plight or other," Bathsheba said, complainingly. "Why should he inquire about Fanny?"

"Oh, because, as she had no friends in her childhood, he took her and put her to school, and got her her place here under your uncle. He's a very kind man that way, but Lord — there!"

"What?"

"Never was such a hopeless man for a woman! He's been courted by sixes and sevens — all the girls, gentle and simple, for miles round, have tried him. Jane Perkins worked at him for two months like a slave, and the two Miss Taylors spent a year upon him, and he cost Farmer Ives's daughter nights of tears and twenty pounds' worth of new clothes; but Lord — the money might as well have been thrown out of the window."

A little boy came up at this moment and looked in upon them. This child was one of the Coggans, who, with the Smallburys, were as common among the families of this district as the Avons and Derwents among our rivers. He always had a loosened tooth or a cut finger to show to particular friends, which he did with an air of being thereby elevated above the common herd of afflictionless humanity — to which exhibition people were expected to say "Poor child!" with a dash of congratulation as well as pity.

"I've got a pen-nee!" said Master Coggan in a scanning measure.

"Well — who gave it you, Teddy?" said Liddy.

"Mis-terr Bold-wood! He gave it to me for opening the gate."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Where are you going, my little man?' and I said, 'To Miss Everdene's please,' and he said, 'She is a staid woman, isn't she, my little man?' and I said, 'Yes.'"

"You naughty child! What did you say that for?"

"'Cause he gave me the penny!"

"What a pucker everything is in!" said Bathsheba, discontentedly when the child had gone. "Get away, Maryann, or go on with your scrubbing, or do something! You ought to be married by this time, and not here troubling me!"

"Ay, mistress — so I did. But what between the poor men I won't have, and the rich men who won't have me, I stand as a pelican in the wilderness!"

"Did anybody ever want to marry you miss?" Liddy ventured to ask when they were again alone. "Lots of 'em, I daresay?"

Bathsheba paused, as if about to refuse a reply, but the temptation to say yes, since it was really in her power was irresistible by aspiring virginity, in spite of her spleen at having been published as old.

"A man wanted to once," she said, in a highly experienced tone, and the image of Gabriel Oak, as the farmer, rose before her.

"How nice it must seem!" said Liddy, with the fixed features of mental realisation. "And you wouldn't have him?"

"He wasn't quite good enough for me."

"How sweet to be able to disdain, when most of us are glad to say, 'Thank you!' I seem I hear it. 'No, sir — I'm your better.' or 'Kiss my foot, sir; my face is for mouths of consequence.' And did you love him, miss?"

"Oh, no. But I rather liked him."

"Do you now?"

"Of course not — what footsteps are those I hear?"

Liddy looked from a back window into the courtyard behind, which was now getting low-toned and dim with the earliest films of night. A crooked file of men was approaching the back door. The whole string of trailing individuals advanced in the completest balance of intention, like the remarkable creatures known as Chain Salpæ, which, distinctly organized in other respects, have one will common to a whole family. Some were, as usual, in snow-white smock-frocks of Russia duck, and some in whitey-brown ones of drabbet — marked on the wrists, breasts, backs, and sleeves with honeycomb-work. Two or three women in pattens brought up the rear.

"The Philistines be upon us," said Liddy, making her nose white against the glass.

"Oh, very well. Maryann, go down and keep them in the kitchen till I am dressed, and then show them in to me in the hall."

CHAPTER X

MISTRESS AND MEN

Half-an-hour later Bathsheba, in finished dress, and followed by Liddy, entered the upper end of the old hall to find that her men had all deposited themselves on a long form and a settle at the lower extremity. She sat down at a table and opened the time-book, pen in her hand, with a canvas money-bag beside her. From this she poured a small heap of coin. Liddy chose a position at her elbow and began to sew, sometimes pausing and looking round, or, with the air of a privileged person, taking up one of the half-sovereigns lying before her and surveying it merely as a work of art, while strictly preventing her countenance from expressing any wish to possess it as money.

"Now before I begin, men," said Bathsheba, "I have two matters to speak of. The first is that the bailiff is dismissed for thieving, and that I have formed a resolution to have no bailiff at all, but to manage everything with my own head and hands."

The men breathed an audible breath of amazement.

"The next matter is, have you heard anything of Fanny?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

"Have you done anything?"

"I met Farmer Boldwood," said Jacob Smallbury, "and I went with him and two of his men, and dragged Newmill Pond, but we found nothing."

"And the new shepherd have been to Buck's Head, by Yalbury, thinking she had gone there, but nobody had seed her," said Laban Tall.

"Hasn't William Smallbury been to Casterbridge?"

"Yes, ma'am, but he's not yet come home. He promised to be back by six."

"It wants a quarter to six at present," said Bathsheba, looking at her watch. "I daresay he'll be in directly. Well, now then" — she looked into the book — "Joseph Poorgrass, are you there?"

"Yes, sir — ma'am I mane," said the person addressed. "I be the personal name of Poorgrass."

"And what are you?"

"Nothing in my own eye. In the eye of other people — well, I don't say it; though public thought will out."

"What do you do on the farm?"

"I do do carting things all the year, and in seed time I shoots the rooks and sparrows, and helps at pig-killing, sir."

"How much to you?"

"Please nine and ninepence and a good halfpenny where 'twas a bad one, sir — ma'am I mane."

"Quite correct. Now here are ten shillings in addition as a small present, as I am a new comer."

Bathsheba blushed slightly at the sense of being generous in public, and Henery Fray, who had drawn up towards her chair, lifted his eyebrows and fingers to express amazement on a small scale.

"How much do I owe you — that man in the corner — what's your name?" continued Bathsheba.

"Matthew Moon, ma'am," said a singular framework of clothes with nothing of any consequence inside them, which advanced with the toes in no definite direction forwards, but turned in or out as they chanced to swing.

"Matthew Mark, did you say? — speak out — I shall not hurt you," inquired the young farmer, kindly.

"Matthew Moon, mem," said Henery Fray, correctly, from behind her chair, to which point he had edged himself.

"Matthew Moon," murmured Bathsheba, turning her bright eyes to the book. "Ten and twopence halfpenny is the sum put down to you, I see?"

"Yes, mis'ess," said Matthew, as the rustle of wind among dead leaves.

"Here it is, and ten shillings. Now the next — Andrew Randle, you are a new man, I hear. How come you to leave your last farm?"

"P-p-p-p-pl-pl-pl-pl-l-l-l-l-ease, ma'am, p-p-p-p-pl-pl-pl-pl-please, ma'am-please'm-please'm — "

“‘A’s a stammering man, mem,” said Henery Fray in an undertone, “and they turned him away because the only time he ever did speak plain he said his soul was his own, and other iniquities, to the squire. ‘A can cuss, mem, as well as you or I, but ‘a can’t speak a common speech to save his life.”

“Andrew Randle, here’s yours — finish thanking me in a day or two. Temperance Miller — oh, here’s another, Soberness — both women I suppose?”

“Yes’m. Here we be, ‘a b’lieve,” was echoed in shrill unison.

“What have you been doing?”

“Tending thrashing-machine and wimbling haybonds, and saying ‘Hoosh!’ to the cocks and hens when they go upon your seeds, and planting Early Flourballs and Thompson’s Wonderfals with a dibble.”

“Yes — I see. Are they satisfactory women?” she inquired softly of Henery Fray.

“Oh mem — don’t ask me! Yielding women — as scarlet a pair as ever was!” groaned Henery under his breath.

“Sit down.”

“Who, mem?”

“Sit down.”

Joseph Poorgrass, in the background twitched, and his lips became dry with fear of some terrible consequences, as he saw Bathsheba summarily speaking, and Henery slinking off to a corner.

“Now the next. Laban Tall, you’ll stay on working for me?”

“For you or anybody that pays me well, ma’am,” replied the young married man.

“True — the man must live!” said a woman in the back quarter, who had just entered with clicking pattens.

“What woman is that?” Bathsheba asked.

“I be his lawful wife!” continued the voice with greater prominence of manner and tone. This lady called herself five-and-twenty, looked thirty, passed as thirty-five, and was forty. She was a woman who never, like some newly married, showed conjugal tenderness in public, perhaps because she had none to show.

“Oh, you are,” said Bathsheba. “Well, Laban, will you stay on?”

“Yes, he’ll stay, ma’am!” said again the shrill tongue of Laban’s lawful wife.

“Well, he can speak for himself, I suppose.”

“Oh Lord, not he, ma’am! A simple tool. Well enough, but a poor gawkhammer mortal,” the wife replied.

“Heh-heh-heh!” laughed the married man with a hideous effort of appreciation, for he was as irrepressibly good-humoured under ghastly snubs as a parliamentary candidate on the hustings.

The names remaining were called in the same manner.

“Now I think I have done with you,” said Bathsheba, closing the book and shaking back a stray twine of hair. “Has William Smallbury returned?”

“No, ma’am.”

"The new shepherd will want a man under him," suggested Henery Fray, trying to make himself official again by a sideway approach towards her chair.

"Oh — he will. Who can he have?"

"Young Cain Ball is a very good lad," Henery said, "and Shepherd Oak don't mind his youth?" he added, turning with an apologetic smile to the shepherd, who had just appeared on the scene, and was now leaning against the doorpost with his arms folded.

"No, I don't mind that," said Gabriel.

"How did Cain come by such a name?" asked Bathsheba.

"Oh you see, mem, his pore mother, not being a Scripture-read woman, made a mistake at his christening, thinking 'twas Abel killed Cain, and called en Cain, meaning Abel all the time. The parson put it right, but 'twas too late, for the name could never be got rid of in the parish. 'Tis very unfortunate for the boy."

"It is rather unfortunate."

"Yes. However, we soften it down as much as we can, and call him Cainy. Ah, pore widow-woman! she cried her heart out about it almost. She was brought up by a very heathen father and mother, who never sent her to church or school, and it shows how the sins of the parents are visited upon the children, mem."

Mr. Fray here drew up his features to the mild degree of melancholy required when the persons involved in the given misfortune do not belong to your own family.

"Very well then, Caineey Ball to be under-shepherd. And you quite understand your duties? — you I mean, Gabriel Oak?"

"Quite well, I thank you, Miss Everdene," said Shepherd Oak from the doorpost. "If I don't, I'll inquire." Gabriel was rather staggered by the remarkable coolness of her manner. Certainly nobody without previous information would have dreamt that Oak and the handsome woman before whom he stood had ever been other than strangers. But perhaps her air was the inevitable result of the social rise which had advanced her from a cottage to a large house and fields. The case is not unexampled in high places. When, in the writings of the later poets, Jove and his family are found to have moved from their cramped quarters on the peak of Olympus into the wide sky above it, their words show a proportionate increase of arrogance and reserve.

Footsteps were heard in the passage, combining in their character the qualities both of weight and measure, rather at the expense of velocity.

(All.) "Here's Billy Smallbury come from Casterbridge."

"And what's the news?" said Bathsheba, as William, after marching to the middle of the hall, took a handkerchief from his hat and wiped his forehead from its centre to its remoter boundaries.

"I should have been sooner, miss," he said, "if it hadn't been for the weather." He then stamped with each foot severely, and on looking down his boots were perceived to be clogged with snow.

"Come at last, is it?" said Henery.

"Well, what about Fanny?" said Bathsheba.

"Well, ma'am, in round numbers, she's run away with the soldiers," said William.

"No; not a steady girl like Fanny!"

"I'll tell ye all particulars. When I got to Casterbridge Barracks, they said, 'The Eleventh Dragoon-Guards be gone away, and new troops have come.' The Eleventh left last week for Melchester and onwards. The Route came from Government like a thief in the night, as is his nature to, and afore the Eleventh knew it almost, they were on the march. They passed near here."

Gabriel had listened with interest. "I saw them go," he said.

"Yes," continued William, "they pranced down the street playing 'The Girl I Left Behind Me,' so 'tis said, in glorious notes of triumph. Every looker-on's inside shook with the blows of the great drum to his deepest vitals, and there was not a dry eye throughout the town among the public-house people and the nameless women!"

"But they're not gone to any war?"

"No, ma'am; but they be gone to take the places of them who may, which is very close connected. And so I said to myself, Fanny's young man was one of the regiment, and she's gone after him. There, ma'am, that's it in black and white."

"Did you find out his name?"

"No; nobody knew it. I believe he was higher in rank than a private."

Gabriel remained musing and said nothing, for he was in doubt.

"Well, we are not likely to know more to-night, at any rate," said Bathsheba. "But one of you had better run across to Farmer Boldwood's and tell him that much."

She then rose; but before retiring, addressed a few words to them with a pretty dignity, to which her mourning dress added a soberness that was hardly to be found in the words themselves.

"Now mind, you have a mistress instead of a master. I don't yet know my powers or my talents in farming; but I shall do my best, and if you serve me well, so shall I serve you. Don't any unfair ones among you (if there are any such, but I hope not) suppose that because I'm a woman I don't understand the difference between bad goings-on and good."

(All.) "No'm!"

(Liddy.) "Excellent well said."

"I shall be up before you are awake; I shall be afield before you are up; and I shall have breakfasted before you are afield. In short, I shall astonish you all."

(All.) "Yes'm!"

"And so good-night."

(All.) "Good-night, ma'am."

Then this small thesmothete stepped from the table, and surged out of the hall, her black silk dress licking up a few straws and dragging them along with a scratching noise upon the floor. Liddy, elevating her feelings to the occasion from a sense of grandeur, floated off behind Bathsheba with a milder dignity not entirely free from travesty, and the door was closed.

CHAPTER XI

OUTSIDE THE BARRACKS — SNOW — A MEETING

For dreariness nothing could surpass a prospect in the outskirts of a certain town and military station, many miles north of Weatherbury, at a later hour on this same snowy evening — if that may be called a prospect of which the chief constituent was darkness.

It was a night when sorrow may come to the brightest without causing any great sense of incongruity: when, with impressible persons, love becomes solicitousness, hope sinks to misgiving, and faith to hope: when the exercise of memory does not stir feelings of regret at opportunities for ambition that have been passed by, and anticipation does not prompt to enterprise.

The scene was a public path, bordered on the left hand by a river, behind which rose a high wall. On the right was a tract of land, partly meadow and partly moor, reaching, at its remote verge, to a wide undulating upland.

The changes of the seasons are less obtrusive on spots of this kind than amid woodland scenery. Still, to a close observer, they are just as perceptible; the difference is that their media of manifestation are less trite and familiar than such well-known ones as the bursting of the buds or the fall of the leaf. Many are not so stealthy and gradual as we may be apt to imagine in considering the general torpidity of a moor or waste. Winter, in coming to the country hereabout, advanced in well-marked stages, wherein might have been successively observed the retreat of the snakes, the transformation of the ferns, the filling of the pools, a rising of fogs, the embrowning by frost, the collapse of the fungi, and an obliteration by snow.

This climax of the series had been reached to-night on the aforesaid moor, and for the first time in the season its irregularities were forms without features; suggestive of anything, proclaiming nothing, and without more character than that of being the limit of something else — the lowest layer of a firmament of snow. From this chaotic skyful of crowding flakes the mead and moor momentarily received additional clothing, only to appear momentarily more naked thereby. The vast arch of cloud above was strangely low, and formed as it were the roof of a large dark cavern, gradually sinking in upon its floor; for the instinctive thought was that the snow lining the heavens and that encrusting the earth would soon unite into one mass without any intervening stratum of air at all.

We turn our attention to the left-hand characteristics; which were flatness in respect of the river, verticality in respect of the wall behind it, and darkness as to both. These features made up the mass. If anything could be darker than the sky, it was the wall, and if any thing could be gloomier than the wall it was the river beneath. The indistinct summit of the facade was notched and pronged by chimneys here and there, and upon its face were faintly signified the oblong shapes of windows, though only in the upper part. Below, down to the water's edge, the flat was unbroken by hole or projection.

An indescribable succession of dull blows, perplexing in their regularity, sent their sound with difficulty through the fluffy atmosphere. It was a neighbouring clock striking ten. The bell was in the open air, and being overlaid with several inches of muffling snow, had lost its voice for the time.

About this hour the snow abated: ten flakes fell where twenty had fallen, then one had the room of ten. Not long after a form moved by the brink of the river.

By its outline upon the colourless background, a close observer might have seen that it was small. This was all that was positively discoverable, though it seemed human.

The shape went slowly along, but without much exertion, for the snow, though sudden, was not as yet more than two inches deep. At this time some words were spoken aloud: —

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five.”

Between each utterance the little shape advanced about half a dozen yards. It was evident now that the windows high in the wall were being counted. The word “Five” represented the fifth window from the end of the wall.

Here the spot stopped, and dwindled smaller. The figure was stooping. Then a morsel of snow flew across the river towards the fifth window. It smacked against the wall at a point several yards from its mark. The throw was the idea of a man conjoined with the execution of a woman. No man who had ever seen bird, rabbit, or squirrel in his childhood, could possibly have thrown with such utter imbecility as was shown here.

Another attempt, and another; till by degrees the wall must have become pimpled with the adhering lumps of snow. At last one fragment struck the fifth window.

The river would have been seen by day to be of that deep smooth sort which races middle and sides with the same gliding precision, any irregularities of speed being immediately corrected by a small whirlpool. Nothing was heard in reply to the signal but the gurgle and cluck of one of these invisible wheels — together with a few small sounds which a sad man would have called moans, and a happy man laughter — caused by the flapping of the waters against trifling objects in other parts of the stream.

The window was struck again in the same manner.

Then a noise was heard, apparently produced by the opening of the window. This was followed by a voice from the same quarter.

“Who’s there?”

The tones were masculine, and not those of surprise. The high wall being that of a barrack, and marriage being looked upon with disfavour in the army, assignations and communications had probably been made across the river before to-night.

“Is it Sergeant Troy?” said the blurred spot in the snow, tremulously.

This person was so much like a mere shade upon the earth, and the other speaker so much a part of the building, that one would have said the wall was holding a conversation with the snow.

“Yes,” came suspiciously from the shadow. “What girl are you?”

“Oh, Frank — don’t you know me?” said the spot. “Your wife, Fanny Robin.”

"Fanny!" said the wall, in utter astonishment.

"Yes," said the girl, with a half-suppressed gasp of emotion.

There was something in the woman's tone which is not that of the wife, and there was a manner in the man which is rarely a husband's. The dialogue went on:

"How did you come here?"

"I asked which was your window. Forgive me!"

"I did not expect you to-night. Indeed, I did not think you would come at all. It was a wonder you found me here. I am orderly to-morrow."

"You said I was to come."

"Well — I said that you might."

"Yes, I mean that I might. You are glad to see me, Frank?"

"Oh yes — of course."

"Can you — come to me!"

My dear Fan, no! The bugle has sounded, the barrack gates are closed, and I have no leave. We are all of us as good as in the county gaol till to-morrow morning."

"Then I shan't see you till then!" The words were in a faltering tone of disappointment.

"How did you get here from Weatherbury?"

"I walked — some part of the way — the rest by the carriers."

"I am surprised."

"Yes — so am I. And Frank, when will it be?"

"What?"

"That you promised."

"I don't quite recollect."

"O you do! Don't speak like that. It weighs me to the earth. It makes me say what ought to be said first by you."

"Never mind — say it."

"O, must I? — it is, when shall we be married, Frank?"

"Oh, I see. Well — you have to get proper clothes."

"I have money. Will it be by banns or license?"

"Banns, I should think."

"And we live in two parishes."

"Do we? What then?"

"My lodgings are in St. Mary's, and this is not. So they will have to be published in both."

"Is that the law?"

"Yes. O Frank — you think me forward, I am afraid! Don't, dear Frank — will you — for I love you so. And you said lots of times you would marry me, and — and — I — I — "

"Don't cry, now! It is foolish. If I said so, of course I will."

"And shall I put up the banns in my parish, and will you in yours?"

"Yes"

"To-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow. We'll settle in a few days."

"You have the permission of the officers?"

"No, not yet."

"O — how is it? You said you almost had before you left Casterbridge."

"The fact is, I forgot to ask. Your coming like this is so sudden and unexpected."

"Yes — yes — it is. It was wrong of me to worry you. I'll go away now. Will you come and see me to-morrow, at Mrs. Twills's, in North Street? I don't like to come to the Barracks. There are bad women about, and they think me one."

"Quite, so. I'll come to you, my dear. Good-night." "Good-night, Frank — good-night!"

And the noise was again heard of a window closing. The little spot moved away. When she passed the corner a subdued exclamation was heard inside the wall.

"Ho — ho — Sergeant — ho — ho!" An expostulation followed, but it was indistinct; and it became lost amid a low peal of laughter, which was hardly distinguishable from the gurgle of the tiny whirlpools outside.

CHAPTER XII

FARMERS — A RULE — AN EXCEPTION

The first public evidence of Bathsheba's decision to be a farmer in her own person and by proxy no more was her appearance the following market-day in the cornmarket at Casterbridge.

The low though extensive hall, supported by beams and pillars, and latterly dignified by the name of Corn Exchange, was thronged with hot men who talked among each other in twos and threes, the speaker of the minute looking sideways into his auditor's face and concentrating his argument by a contraction of one eyelid during delivery. The greater number carried in their hands ground-ash saplings, using them partly as walking-sticks and partly for poking up pigs, sheep, neighbours with their backs turned, and restful things in general, which seemed to require such treatment in the course of their peregrinations. During conversations each subjected his sapling to great varieties of usage — bending it round his back, forming an arch of it between his two hands, overweighting it on the ground till it reached nearly a semicircle; or perhaps it was hastily tucked under the arm whilst the sample-bag was pulled forth and a handful of corn poured into the palm, which, after criticism, was flung upon the floor, an issue of events perfectly well known to half-a-dozen acute town-bred fowls which had as usual crept into the building unobserved, and waited the fulfilment of their anticipations with a high-stretched neck and oblique eye.

Among these heavy yeomen a feminine figure glided, the single one of her sex that the room contained. She was prettily and even daintily dressed. She moved between them as a chaise between carts, was heard after them as a romance after sermons, was

felt among them like a breeze among furnaces. It had required a little determination — far more than she had at first imagined — to take up a position here, for at her first entry the lumbering dialogues had ceased, nearly every face had been turned towards her, and those that were already turned rigidly fixed there.

Two or three only of the farmers were personally known to Bathsheba, and to these she had made her way. But if she was to be the practical woman she had intended to show herself, business must be carried on, introductions or none, and she ultimately acquired confidence enough to speak and reply boldly to men merely known to her by hearsay. Bathsheba too had her sample-bags, and by degrees adopted the professional pour into the hand — holding up the grains in her narrow palm for inspection, in perfect Casterbridge manner.

Something in the exact arch of her upper unbroken row of teeth, and in the keenly pointed corners of her red mouth when, with parted lips, she somewhat defiantly turned up her face to argue a point with a tall man, suggested that there was potentiality enough in that lithe slip of humanity for alarming exploits of sex, and daring enough to carry them out. But her eyes had a softness — invariably a softness — which, had they not been dark, would have seemed mistiness; as they were, it lowered an expression that might have been piercing to simple clearness.

Strange to say of a woman in full bloom and vigor, she always allowed her interlocutors to finish their statements before rejoining with hers. In arguing on prices, she held to her own firmly, as was natural in a dealer, and reduced theirs persistently, as was inevitable in a woman. But there was an elasticity in her firmness which removed it from obstinacy, as there was a naïveté in her cheapening which saved it from meanness.

Those of the farmers with whom she had no dealings (by far the greater part) were continually asking each other, “Who is she?” The reply would be —

“Farmer Everdene’s niece; took on Weatherbury Upper Farm; turned away the baily, and swears she’ll do everything herself.”

The other man would then shake his head.

“Yes, ‘tis a pity she’s so headstrong,” the first would say. “But we ought to be proud of her here — she lightens up the old place. ‘Tis such a shapely maid, however, that she’ll soon get picked up.”

It would be ungallant to suggest that the novelty of her engagement in such an occupation had almost as much to do with the magnetism as had the beauty of her face and movements. However, the interest was general, and this Saturday’s début in the forum, whatever it may have been to Bathsheba as the buying and selling farmer, was unquestionably a triumph to her as the maiden. Indeed, the sensation was so pronounced that her instinct on two or three occasions was merely to walk as a queen among these gods of the fallow, like a little sister of a little Jove, and to neglect closing prices altogether.

The numerous evidences of her power to attract were only thrown into greater relief by a marked exception. Women seem to have eyes in their ribbons for such matters

as these. Bathsheba, without looking within a right angle of him, was conscious of a black sheep among the flock.

It perplexed her first. If there had been a respectable minority on either side, the case would have been most natural. If nobody had regarded her, she would have taken the matter indifferently — such cases had occurred. If everybody, this man included, she would have taken it as a matter of course — people had done so before. But the smallness of the exception made the mystery.

She soon knew thus much of the recusant's appearance. He was a gentlemanly man, with full and distinctly outlined Roman features, the prominences of which glowed in the sun with a bronze-like richness of tone. He was erect in attitude, and quiet in demeanour. One characteristic pre-eminently marked him — dignity.

Apparently he had some time ago reached that entrance to middle age at which a man's aspect naturally ceases to alter for the term of a dozen years or so; and, artificially, a woman's does likewise. Thirty-five and fifty were his limits of variation — he might have been either, or anywhere between the two.

It may be said that married men of forty are usually ready and generous enough to fling passing glances at any specimen of moderate beauty they may discern by the way. Probably, as with persons playing whist for love, the consciousness of a certain immunity under any circumstances from that worst possible ultimate, the having to pay, makes them unduly speculative. Bathsheba was convinced that this unmoved person was not a married man.

When marketing was over, she rushed off to Liddy, who was waiting for her beside the yellow gig in which they had driven to town. The horse was put in, and on they trotted — Bathsheba's sugar, tea, and drapery parcels being packed behind, and expressing in some indescribable manner, by their colour, shape, and general lineaments, that they were that young lady-farmer's property, and the grocer's and draper's no more.

"I've been through it, Liddy, and it is over. I shan't mind it again, for they will all have grown accustomed to seeing me there; but this morning it was as bad as being married — eyes everywhere!"

"I knowed it would be," Liddy said. "Men be such a terrible class of society to look at a body."

"But there was one man who had more sense than to waste his time upon me." The information was put in this form that Liddy might not for a moment suppose her mistress was at all piqued. "A very good-looking man," she continued, "upright; about forty, I should think. Do you know at all who he could be?"

Liddy couldn't think.

"Can't you guess at all?" said Bathsheba with some disappointment.

"I haven't a notion; besides, 'tis no difference, since he took less notice of you than any of the rest. Now, if he'd taken more, it would have mattered a great deal."

Bathsheba was suffering from the reverse feeling just then, and they bowled along in silence. A low carriage, bowling along still more rapidly behind a horse of unimpeachable breed, overtook and passed them.

"Why, there he is!" she said.

Liddy looked. "That! That's Farmer Boldwood — of course 'tis — the man you couldn't see the other day when he called."

"Oh, Farmer Boldwood," murmured Bathsheba, and looked at him as he outstripped them. The farmer had never turned his head once, but with eyes fixed on the most advanced point along the road, passed as unconsciously and abstractedly as if Bathsheba and her charms were thin air.

"He's an interesting man — don't you think so?" she remarked.

"O yes, very. Everybody owns it," replied Liddy.

"I wonder why he is so wrapt up and indifferent, and seemingly so far away from all he sees around him."

"It is said — but not known for certain — that he met with some bitter disappointment when he was a young man and merry. A woman jilted him, they say."

"People always say that — and we know very well women scarcely ever jilt men; 'tis the men who jilt us. I expect it is simply his nature to be so reserved."

"Simply his nature — I expect so, miss — nothing else in the world."

"Still, 'tis more romantic to think he has been served cruelly, poor thing! Perhaps, after all, he has!"

"Depend upon it he has. Oh yes, miss, he has! I feel he must have."

"However, we are very apt to think extremes of people. I shouldn't wonder after all if it wasn't a little of both — just between the two — rather cruelly used and rather reserved."

"Oh dear no, miss — I can't think it between the two!"

"That's most likely."

"Well, yes, so it is. I am convinced it is most likely. You may take my word, miss, that that's what's the matter with him."

CHAPTER XIII

SORTES SANCTORUM — THE VALENTINE

It was Sunday afternoon in the farmhouse, on the thirteenth of February. Dinner being over, Bathsheba, for want of a better companion, had asked Liddy to come and sit with her. The mouldy pile was dreary in winter-time before the candles were lighted and the shutters closed; the atmosphere of the place seemed as old as the walls; every nook behind the furniture had a temperature of its own, for the fire was not kindled in this part of the house early in the day; and Bathsheba's new piano, which was an old one in other annals, looked particularly sloping and out of level on the warped floor before night threw a shade over its less prominent angles and hid the unpleasantness.

Liddy, like a little brook, though shallow, was always rippling; her presence had not so much weight as to task thought, and yet enough to exercise it.

On the table lay an old quarto Bible, bound in leather. Liddy looking at it said, —

“Did you ever find out, miss, who you are going to marry by means of the Bible and key?”

“Don’t be so foolish, Liddy. As if such things could be.”

“Well, there’s a good deal in it, all the same.”

“Nonsense, child.”

“And it makes your heart beat fearful. Some believe in it; some don’t; I do.”

“Very well, let’s try it,” said Bathsheba, bounding from her seat with that total disregard of consistency which can be indulged in towards a dependent, and entering into the spirit of divination at once. “Go and get the front door key.”

Liddy fetched it. “I wish it wasn’t Sunday,” she said, on returning. “Perhaps ‘tis wrong.”

“What’s right week days is right Sundays,” replied her mistress in a tone which was a proof in itself.

The book was opened — the leaves, drab with age, being quite worn away at much-read verses by the forefingers of unpractised readers in former days, where they were moved along under the line as an aid to the vision. The special verse in the Book of Ruth was sought out by Bathsheba, and the sublime words met her eye. They slightly thrilled and abashed her. It was Wisdom in the abstract facing Folly in the concrete. Folly in the concrete blushed, persisted in her intention, and placed the key on the book. A rusty patch immediately upon the verse, caused by previous pressure of an iron substance thereon, told that this was not the first time the old volume had been used for the purpose.

“Now keep steady, and be silent,” said Bathsheba.

The verse was repeated; the book turned round; Bathsheba blushed guiltily.

“Who did you try?” said Liddy curiously.

“I shall not tell you.”

“Did you notice Mr. Boldwood’s doings in church this morning, miss?” Liddy continued, adumbrating by the remark the track her thoughts had taken.

“No, indeed,” said Bathsheba, with serene indifference.

“His pew is exactly opposite yours, miss.”

“I know it.”

“And you did not see his goings on!”

“Certainly I did not, I tell you.”

Liddy assumed a smaller physiognomy, and shut her lips decisively.

This move was unexpected, and proportionately disconcerting. “What did he do?” Bathsheba said perforce.

“Didn’t turn his head to look at you once all the service.”

"Why should he?" again demanded her mistress, wearing a nettled look. "I didn't ask him to."

"Oh no. But everybody else was noticing you; and it was odd he didn't. There, 'tis like him. Rich and gentlemanly, what does he care?"

Bathsheba dropped into a silence intended to express that she had opinions on the matter too abstruse for Liddy's comprehension, rather than that she had nothing to say.

"Dear me — I had nearly forgotten the valentine I bought yesterday," she exclaimed at length.

"Valentine! who for, miss?" said Liddy. "Farmer Boldwood?"

It was the single name among all possible wrong ones that just at this moment seemed to Bathsheba more pertinent than the right.

"Well, no. It is only for little Teddy Coggan. I have promised him something, and this will be a pretty surprise for him. Liddy, you may as well bring me my desk and I'll direct it at once."

Bathsheba took from her desk a gorgeously illuminated and embossed design in post-octavo, which had been bought on the previous market-day at the chief stationer's in Casterbridge. In the centre was a small oval enclosure; this was left blank, that the sender might insert tender words more appropriate to the special occasion than any generalities by a printer could possibly be.

"Here's a place for writing," said Bathsheba. "What shall I put?"

"Something of this sort, I should think," returned Liddy promptly: —

"The rose is red,
The violet blue,
Carnation's sweet,
And so are you."

"Yes, that shall be it. It just suits itself to a chubby-faced child like him," said Bathsheba. She inserted the words in a small though legible handwriting; enclosed the sheet in an envelope, and dipped her pen for the direction.

"What fun it would be to send it to the stupid old Boldwood, and how he would wonder!" said the irrepressible Liddy, lifting her eyebrows, and indulging in an awful mirth on the verge of fear as she thought of the moral and social magnitude of the man contemplated.

Bathsheba paused to regard the idea at full length. Boldwood's had begun to be a troublesome image — a species of Daniel in her kingdom who persisted in kneeling eastward when reason and common sense said that he might just as well follow suit with the rest, and afford her the official glance of admiration which cost nothing at all. She was far from being seriously concerned about his nonconformity. Still, it was faintly depressing that the most dignified and valuable man in the parish should withhold his eyes, and that a girl like Liddy should talk about it. So Liddy's idea was at first rather harassing than piquant.

"No, I won't do that. He wouldn't see any humour in it."

"He'd worry to death," said the persistent Liddy.

"Really, I don't care particularly to send it to Teddy," remarked her mistress. "He's rather a naughty child sometimes."

"Yes — that he is."

"Let's toss as men do," said Bathsheba, idly. "Now then, head, Boldwood; tail, Teddy. No, we won't toss money on a Sunday, that would be tempting the devil indeed."

"Toss this hymn-book; there can't be no sinfulness in that, miss."

"Very well. Open, Boldwood — shut, Teddy. No; it's more likely to fall open. Open, Teddy — shut, Boldwood."

The book went fluttering in the air and came down shut.

Bathsheba, a small yawn upon her mouth, took the pen, and with off-hand serenity directed the missive to Boldwood.

"Now light a candle, Liddy. Which seal shall we use? Here's a unicorn's head — there's nothing in that. What's this? — two doves — no. It ought to be something extraordinary, ought it not, Liddy? Here's one with a motto — I remember it is some funny one, but I can't read it. We'll try this, and if it doesn't do we'll have another."

A large red seal was duly affixed. Bathsheba looked closely at the hot wax to discover the words.

"Capital!" she exclaimed, throwing down the letter frolicsomenly. "'Twould upset the solemnity of a parson and clerke too."

Liddy looked at the words of the seal, and read —

"Marry Me."

The same evening the letter was sent, and was duly sorted in Casterbridge post-office that night, to be returned to Weatherbury again in the morning.

So very idly and unreflectingly was this deed done. Of love as a spectacle Bathsheba had a fair knowledge; but of love subjectively she knew nothing.

CHAPTER XIV

EFFECT OF THE LETTER — SUNRISE

At dusk, on the evening of St. Valentine's Day, Boldwood sat down to supper as usual, by a beaming fire of aged logs. Upon the mantel-shelf before him was a time-piece, surmounted by a spread eagle, and upon the eagle's wings was the letter Bathsheba had sent. Here the bachelor's gaze was continually fastening itself, till the large red seal became as a blot of blood on the retina of his eye; and as he ate and drank he still read in fancy the words thereon, although they were too remote for his sight —

"Marry Me."

The pert injunction was like those crystal substances which, colourless themselves, assume the tone of objects about them. Here, in the quiet of Boldwood's parlour, where everything that was not grave was extraneous, and where the atmosphere was that of a Puritan Sunday lasting all the week, the letter and its dictum changed their tenor from

the thoughtlessness of their origin to a deep solemnity, imbibed from their accessories now.

Since the receipt of the missive in the morning, Boldwood had felt the symmetry of his existence to be slowly getting distorted in the direction of an ideal passion. The disturbance was as the first floating weed to Columbus — the contemptibly little suggesting possibilities of the infinitely great.

The letter must have had an origin and a motive. That the latter was of the smallest magnitude compatible with its existence at all, Boldwood, of course, did not know. And such an explanation did not strike him as a possibility even. It is foreign to a mystified condition of mind to realise of the mystifier that the processes of approving a course suggested by circumstance, and of striking out a course from inner impulse, would look the same in the result. The vast difference between starting a train of events, and directing into a particular groove a series already started, is rarely apparent to the person confounded by the issue.

When Boldwood went to bed he placed the valentine in the corner of the looking-glass. He was conscious of its presence, even when his back was turned upon it. It was the first time in Boldwood's life that such an event had occurred. The same fascination that caused him to think it an act which had a deliberate motive prevented him from regarding it as an impertinence. He looked again at the direction. The mysterious influences of night invested the writing with the presence of the unknown writer. Somebody's — some woman's — hand had travelled softly over the paper bearing his name; her unrevealed eyes had watched every curve as she formed it; her brain had seen him in imagination the while. Why should she have imagined him? Her mouth — were the lips red or pale, plump or creased? — had curved itself to a certain expression as the pen went on — the corners had moved with all their natural tremulousness: what had been the expression?

The vision of the woman writing, as a supplement to the words written, had no individuality. She was a misty shape, and well she might be, considering that her original was at that moment sound asleep and oblivious of all love and letter-writing under the sky. Whenever Boldwood dozed she took a form, and comparatively ceased to be a vision: when he awoke there was the letter justifying the dream.

The moon shone to-night, and its light was not of a customary kind. His window admitted only a reflection of its rays, and the pale sheen had that reversed direction which snow gives, coming upward and lighting up his ceiling in an unnatural way, casting shadows in strange places, and putting lights where shadows had used to be.

The substance of the epistle had occupied him but little in comparison with the fact of its arrival. He suddenly wondered if anything more might be found in the envelope than what he had withdrawn. He jumped out of bed in the weird light, took the letter, pulled out the flimsy sheet, shook the envelope — searched it. Nothing more was there. Boldwood looked, as he had a hundred times the preceding day, at the insistent red seal: "Marry me," he said aloud.

The solemn and reserved yeoman again closed the letter, and stuck it in the frame of the glass. In doing so he caught sight of his reflected features, wan in expression, and insubstantial in form. He saw how closely compressed was his mouth, and that his eyes were wide-spread and vacant. Feeling uneasy and dissatisfied with himself for this nervous excitability, he returned to bed.

Then the dawn drew on. The full power of the clear heaven was not equal to that of a cloudy sky at noon, when Boldwood arose and dressed himself. He descended the stairs and went out towards the gate of a field to the east, leaning over which he paused and looked around.

It was one of the usual slow sunrises of this time of the year, and the sky, pure violet in the zenith, was leaden to the northward, and murky to the east, where, over the snowy down or ewe-lease on Weatherbury Upper Farm, and apparently resting upon the ridge, the only half of the sun yet visible burnt rayless, like a red and flameless fire shining over a white hearthstone. The whole effect resembled a sunset as childhood resembles age.

In other directions, the fields and sky were so much of one colour by the snow, that it was difficult in a hasty glance to tell whereabouts the horizon occurred; and in general there was here, too, that before-mentioned preternatural inversion of light and shade which attends the prospect when the garish brightness commonly in the sky is found on the earth, and the shades of earth are in the sky. Over the west hung the wasting moon, now dull and greenish-yellow, like tarnished brass.

Boldwood was listlessly noting how the frost had hardened and glazed the surface of the snow, till it shone in the red eastern light with the polish of marble; how, in some portions of the slope, withered grass-bents, encased in icicles, bristled through the smooth wan coverlet in the twisted and curved shapes of old Venetian glass; and how the footprints of a few birds, which had hopped over the snow whilst it lay in the state of a soft fleece, were now frozen to a short permanency. A half-muffled noise of light wheels interrupted him. Boldwood turned back into the road. It was the mail-cart — a crazy, two-wheeled vehicle, hardly heavy enough to resist a puff of wind. The driver held out a letter. Boldwood seized it and opened it, expecting another anonymous one — so greatly are people's ideas of probability a mere sense that precedent will repeat itself.

"I don't think it is for you, sir," said the man, when he saw Boldwood's action. "Though there is no name, I think it is for your shepherd."

Boldwood looked then at the address —

To the New Shepherd,
Weatherbury Farm,
Near Casterbridge

"Oh — what a mistake! — it is not mine. Nor is it for my shepherd. It is for Miss Everdene's. You had better take it on to him — Gabriel Oak — and say I opened it in mistake."

At this moment, on the ridge, up against the blazing sky, a figure was visible, like the black snuff in the midst of a candle-flame. Then it moved and began to bustle about vigorously from place to place, carrying square skeleton masses, which were riddled by the same rays. A small figure on all fours followed behind. The tall form was that of Gabriel Oak; the small one that of George; the articles in course of transit were hurdles.

“Wait,” said Boldwood. “That’s the man on the hill. I’ll take the letter to him myself.”

To Boldwood it was now no longer merely a letter to another man. It was an opportunity. Exhibiting a face pregnant with intention, he entered the snowy field.

Gabriel, at that minute, descended the hill towards the right. The glow stretched down in this direction now, and touched the distant roof of Warren’s Malthouse — whither the shepherd was apparently bent: Boldwood followed at a distance.

CHAPTER XV

A MORNING MEETING — THE LETTER AGAIN

The scarlet and orange light outside the malthouse did not penetrate to its interior, which was, as usual, lighted by a rival glow of similar hue, radiating from the hearth.

The maltster, after having lain down in his clothes for a few hours, was now sitting beside a three-legged table, breakfasting off bread and bacon. This was eaten on the plateless system, which is performed by placing a slice of bread upon the table, the meat flat upon the bread, a mustard plaster upon the meat, and a pinch of salt upon the whole, then cutting them vertically downwards with a large pocket-knife till wood is reached, when the severed lump is impaled on the knife, elevated, and sent the proper way of food.

The maltster’s lack of teeth appeared not to sensibly diminish his powers as a mill. He had been without them for so many years that toothlessness was felt less to be a defect than hard gums an acquisition. Indeed, he seemed to approach the grave as a hyperbolic curve approaches a straight line — less directly as he got nearer, till it was doubtful if he would ever reach it at all.

In the ashpit was a heap of potatoes roasting, and a boiling pipkin of charred bread, called “coffee”, for the benefit of whomsoever should call, for Warren’s was a sort of clubhouse, used as an alternative to the inn.

“I say, says I, we get a fine day, and then down comes a snapper at night,” was a remark now suddenly heard spreading into the malthouse from the door, which had been opened the previous moment. The form of Henery Fray advanced to the fire, stamping the snow from his boots when about half-way there. The speech and entry had not seemed to be at all an abrupt beginning to the maltster, introductory matter being often omitted in this neighbourhood, both from word and deed, and the maltster having the same latitude allowed him, did not hurry to reply. He picked up a fragment of cheese, by pecking upon it with his knife, as a butcher picks up skewers.

Henery appeared in a drab kerseymere great-coat, buttoned over his smock-frock, the white skirts of the latter being visible to the distance of about a foot below the coat-tails, which, when you got used to the style of dress, looked natural enough, and even ornamental — it certainly was comfortable.

Matthew Moon, Joseph Poorgrass, and other carters and waggoners followed at his heels, with great lanterns dangling from their hands, which showed that they had just come from the cart-horse stables, where they had been busily engaged since four o'clock that morning.

"And how is she getting on without a baily?" the maltster inquired. Henery shook his head, and smiled one of the bitter smiles, dragging all the flesh of his forehead into a corrugated heap in the centre.

"She'll rue it — surely, surely!" he said. "Benjy Pennyways were not a true man or an honest baily — as big a betrayer as Judas Iscariot himself. But to think she can carr' on alone!" He allowed his head to swing laterally three or four times in silence. "Never in all my creeping up — never!"

This was recognized by all as the conclusion of some gloomy speech which had been expressed in thought alone during the shake of the head; Henery meanwhile retained several marks of despair upon his face, to imply that they would be required for use again directly he should go on speaking.

"All will be ruined, and ourselves too, or there's no meat in gentlemen's houses!" said Mark Clark.

"A headstrong maid, that's what she is — and won't listen to no advice at all. Pride and vanity have ruined many a cobbler's dog. Dear, dear, when I think o' it, I sorrows like a man in travel!"

"True, Henery, you do, I've heard ye," said Joseph Poorgrass in a voice of thorough attestation, and with a wire-drawn smile of misery.

"'Twould do a martel man no harm to have what's under her bonnet," said Billy Smallbury, who had just entered, bearing his one tooth before him. "She can spaik real language, and must have some sense somewhere. Do ye foller me?"

"I do, I do; but no baily — I deserved that place," wailed Henery, signifying wasted genius by gazing blankly at visions of a high destiny apparently visible to him on Billy Smallbury's smock-frock. "There, 'twas to be, I suppose. Your lot is your lot, and Scripture is nothing; for if you do good you don't get rewarded according to your works, but be cheated in some mean way out of your recompense."

"No, no; I don't agree with'ee there," said Mark Clark. "God's a perfect gentleman in that respect."

"Good works good pay, so to speak it," attested Joseph Poorgrass.

A short pause ensued, and as a sort of entr'acte Henery turned and blew out the lanterns, which the increase of daylight rendered no longer necessary even in the malt-house, with its one pane of glass.

"I wonder what a farmer-woman can want with a harpsichord, dulcimer, pianner, or whatever 'tis they d'call it?" said the maltster. "Liddy saith she've a new one."

"Got a pianner?"

"Ay. Seems her old uncle's things were not good enough for her. She've bought all but everything new. There's heavy chairs for the stout, weak and wiry ones for the slender; great watches, getting on to the size of clocks, to stand upon the chimbley-piece."

"Pictures, for the most part wonderful frames."

"And long horse-hair settles for the drunk, with horse-hair pillows at each end," said Mr. Clark. "Likewise looking-glasses for the pretty, and lying books for the wicked."

A firm loud tread was now heard stamping outside; the door was opened about six inches, and somebody on the other side exclaimed —

"Neighbours, have ye got room for a few new-born lambs?"

"Ay, sure, shepherd," said the conclave.

The door was flung back till it kicked the wall and trembled from top to bottom with the blow. Mr. Oak appeared in the entry with a steaming face, hay-bands wound about his ankles to keep out the snow, a leather strap round his waist outside the smock-frock, and looking altogether an epitome of the world's health and vigour. Four lambs hung in various embarrassing attitudes over his shoulders, and the dog George, whom Gabriel had contrived to fetch from Norcombe, stalked solemnly behind.

"Well, Shepherd Oak, and how's lambing this year, if I mid say it?" inquired Joseph Poorgrass.

"Terrible trying," said Oak. "I've been wet through twice a-day, either in snow or rain, this last fortnight. Cainy and I haven't tined our eyes to-night."

"A good few twins, too, I hear?"

"Too many by half. Yes; 'tis a very queer lambing this year. We shan't have done by Lady Day."

"And last year 'twere all over by Sexajessamine Sunday," Joseph remarked.

"Bring on the rest Cain," said Gabriel, "and then run back to the ewes. I'll follow you soon."

Cainy Ball — a cheery-faced young lad, with a small circular orifice by way of mouth, advanced and deposited two others, and retired as he was bidden. Oak lowered the lambs from their unnatural elevation, wrapped them in hay, and placed them round the fire.

"We've no lambing-hut here, as I used to have at Norcombe," said Gabriel, "and 'tis such a plague to bring the weakly ones to a house. If 'twasn't for your place here, malter, I don't know what I should do i' this keen weather. And how is it with you to-day, malter?"

"Oh, neither sick nor sorry, shepherd; but no younger."

"Ay — I understand."

"Sit down, Shepherd Oak," continued the ancient man of malt. "And how was the old place at Norcombe, when ye went for your dog? I should like to see the old familiar spot; but faith, I shouldn't know a soul there now."

"I suppose you wouldn't. 'Tis altered very much."

"Is it true that Dicky Hill's wooden cider-house is pulled down?"

"Oh yes — years ago, and Dicky's cottage just above it."

"Well, to be sure!"

"Yes; and Tompkins's old apple-tree is rooted that used to bear two hogsheads of cider; and no help from other trees."

"Rooted? — you don't say it! Ah! stirring times we live in — stirring times."

"And you can mind the old well that used to be in the middle of the place? That's turned into a solid iron pump with a large stone trough, and all complete."

"Dear, dear — how the face of nations alter, and what we live to see nowadays! Yes — and 'tis the same here. They've been talking but now of the mis'ess's strange doings."

"What have you been saying about her?" inquired Oak, sharply turning to the rest, and getting very warm.

"These middle-aged men have been pulling her over the coals for pride and vanity," said Mark Clark; "but I say, let her have rope enough. Bless her pretty face — shouldn't I like to do so — upon her cherry lips!" The gallant Mark Clark here made a peculiar and well known sound with his own.

"Mark," said Gabriel, sternly, "now you mind this! none of that dalliance-talk — that smack-and-coddle style of yours — about Miss Everdene. I don't allow it. Do you hear?"

"With all my heart, as I've got no chance," replied Mr. Clark, cordially.

"I suppose you've been speaking against her?" said Oak, turning to Joseph Poorgrass with a very grim look.

"No, no — not a word I — 'tis a real joyful thing that she's no worse, that's what I say," said Joseph, trembling and blushing with terror. "Matthew just said — "

"Matthew Moon, what have you been saying?" asked Oak.

"I? Why ye know I wouldn't harm a worm — no, not one underground worm?" said Matthew Moon, looking very uneasy.

"Well, somebody has — and look here, neighbours," Gabriel, though one of the quietest and most gentle men on earth, rose to the occasion, with martial promptness and vigour. "That's my fist." Here he placed his fist, rather smaller in size than a common loaf, in the mathematical centre of the maltster's little table, and with it gave a bump or two thereon, as if to ensure that their eyes all thoroughly took in the idea of fistiness before he went further. "Now — the first man in the parish that I hear prophesying bad of our mistress, why" (here the fist was raised and let fall as Thor might have done with his hammer in assaying it) — "he'll smell and taste that — or I'm a Dutchman."

All earnestly expressed by their features that their minds did not wander to Holland for a moment on account of this statement, but were deploring the difference which gave rise to the figure; and Mark Clark cried "Hear, hear; just what I should ha' said." The dog George looked up at the same time after the shepherd's menace, and though he understood English but imperfectly, began to growl.

"Now, don't ye take on so, shepherd, and sit down!" said Henery, with a deprecating peacefulness equal to anything of the kind in Christianity.

"We hear that ye be a extraordinary good and clever man, shepherd," said Joseph Poorgrass with considerable anxiety from behind the maltster's bedstead, whither he had retired for safety. "'Tis a great thing to be clever, I'm sure," he added, making movements associated with states of mind rather than body; "we wish we were, don't we, neighbours?"

"Ay, that we do, sure," said Matthew Moon, with a small anxious laugh towards Oak, to show how very friendly disposed he was likewise.

"Who's been telling you I'm clever?" said Oak.

"'Tis blowed about from pillar to post quite common," said Matthew. "We hear that ye can tell the time as well by the stars as we can by the sun and moon, shepherd."

"Yes, I can do a little that way," said Gabriel, as a man of medium sentiments on the subject.

"And that ye can make sun-dials, and prent folks' names upon their waggons almost like copper-plate, with beautiful flourishes, and great long tails. A excellent fine thing for ye to be such a clever man, shepherd. Joseph Poorgrass used to prent to Farmer James Everdene's waggons before you came, and 'a could never mind which way to turn the J's and E's — could ye, Joseph?" Joseph shook his head to express how absolute was the fact that he couldn't. "And so you used to do 'em the wrong way, like this, didn't ye, Joseph?" Matthew marked on the dusty floor with his whip-handle

"And how Farmer James would cuss, and call thee a fool, wouldn't he, Joseph, when 'a seed his name looking so inside-out-like?" continued Matthew Moon with feeling.

"Ay — 'a would," said Joseph, meekly. "But, you see, I wasn't so much to blame, for them J's and E's be such trying sons o' witches for the memory to mind whether they face backward or forward; and I always had such a forgetful memory, too."

"'Tis a very bad afiction for ye, being such a man of calamities in other ways."

"Well, 'tis; but a happy Providence ordered that it should be no worse, and I feel my thanks. As to shepherd, there, I'm sure mis'ess ought to have made ye her baily — such a fitting man for't as you be."

"I don't mind owning that I expected it," said Oak, frankly. "Indeed, I hoped for the place. At the same time, Miss Everdene has a right to be her own baily if she choose — and to keep me down to be a common shepherd only." Oak drew a slow breath, looked sadly into the bright ashpit, and seemed lost in thoughts not of the most hopeful hue.

The genial warmth of the fire now began to stimulate the nearly lifeless lambs to bleat and move their limbs briskly upon the hay, and to recognize for the first time the fact that they were born. Their noise increased to a chorus of baas, upon which Oak pulled the milk-can from before the fire, and taking a small tea-pot from the pocket of his smock-frock, filled it with milk, and taught those of the helpless creatures which were not to be restored to their dams how to drink from the spout — a trick they acquired with astonishing aptitude.

"And she don't even let ye have the skins of the dead lambs, I hear?" resumed Joseph Poorgrass, his eyes lingering on the operations of Oak with the necessary melancholy.

"I don't have them," said Gabriel.

"Ye be very badly used, shepherd," hazarded Joseph again, in the hope of getting Oak as an ally in lamentation after all. "I think she's took against ye — that I do."

"Oh no — not at all," replied Gabriel, hastily, and a sigh escaped him, which the deprivation of lamb skins could hardly have caused.

Before any further remark had been added a shade darkened the door, and Boldwood entered the malthouse, bestowing upon each a nod of a quality between friendliness and condescension.

"Ah! Oak, I thought you were here," he said. "I met the mail-cart ten minutes ago, and a letter was put into my hand, which I opened without reading the address. I believe it is yours. You must excuse the accident please."

"Oh yes — not a bit of difference, Mr. Boldwood — not a bit," said Gabriel, readily. He had not a correspondent on earth, nor was there a possible letter coming to him whose contents the whole parish would not have been welcome to peruse.

Oak stepped aside, and read the following in an unknown hand: —

Dear Friend, — I do not know your name, but I think these few lines will reach you, which I wrote to thank you for your kindness to me the night I left Weatherbury in a reckless way. I also return the money I owe you, which you will excuse my not keeping as a gift. All has ended well, and I am happy to say I am going to be married to the young man who has courted me for some time — Sergeant Troy, of the 11th Dragoon Guards, now quartered in this town. He would, I know, object to my having received anything except as a loan, being a man of great respectability and high honour — indeed, a nobleman by blood.

I should be much obliged to you if you would keep the contents of this letter a secret for the present, dear friend. We mean to surprise Weatherbury by coming there soon as husband and wife, though I blush to state it to one nearly a stranger. The sergeant grew up in Weatherbury. Thanking you again for your kindness,

I am, your sincere well-wisher,
Fanny Robin.

"Have you read it, Mr. Boldwood?" said Gabriel; "if not, you had better do so. I know you are interested in Fanny Robin."

Boldwood read the letter and looked grieved.

"Fanny — poor Fanny! the end she is so confident of has not yet come, she should remember — and may never come. I see she gives no address."

"What sort of a man is this Sergeant Troy?" said Gabriel.

"H'm — I'm afraid not one to build much hope upon in such a case as this," the farmer murmured, "though he's a clever fellow, and up to everything. A slight romance attaches to him, too. His mother was a French governess, and it seems that a secret attachment existed between her and the late Lord Severn. She was married to a poor medical man, and soon after an infant was born; and while money was forthcoming

all went on well. Unfortunately for her boy, his best friends died; and he got then a situation as second clerk at a lawyer's in Casterbridge. He stayed there for some time, and might have worked himself into a dignified position of some sort had he not indulged in the wild freak of enlisting. I have much doubt if ever little Fanny will surprise us in the way she mentions — very much doubt. A silly girl! — silly girl!"

The door was hurriedly burst open again, and in came running Cainy Ball out of breath, his mouth red and open, like the bell of a penny trumpet, from which he coughed with noisy vigour and great distension of face.

"Now, Cain Ball," said Oak, sternly, "why will you run so fast and lose your breath so? I'm always telling you of it."

"Oh — I — a puff of mee breath — went — the — wrong way, please, Mister Oak, and made me cough — hok — hok!"

"Well — what have you come for?"

"I've run to tell ye," said the junior shepherd, supporting his exhausted youthful frame against the doorpost, "that you must come directly. Two more ewes have twinned — that's what's the matter, Shepherd Oak."

"Oh, that's it," said Oak, jumping up, and dismissing for the present his thoughts on poor Fanny. "You are a good boy to run and tell me, Cain, and you shall smell a large plum pudding some day as a treat. But, before we go, Cainy, bring the tarpot, and we'll mark this lot and have done with 'em."

Oak took from his illimitable pockets a marking iron, dipped it into the pot, and imprinted on the buttocks of the infant sheep the initials of her he delighted to muse on — "B. E.," which signified to all the region round that henceforth the lambs belonged to Farmer Bathsheba Everdene, and to no one else.

"Now, Cainy, shoulder your two, and off. Good morning, Mr. Boldwood." The shepherd lifted the sixteen large legs and four small bodies he had himself brought, and vanished with them in the direction of the lambing field hard by — their frames being now in a sleek and hopeful state, pleasantly contrasting with their death's-door plight of half an hour before.

Boldwood followed him a little way up the field, hesitated, and turned back. He followed him again with a last resolve, annihilating return. On approaching the nook in which the fold was constructed, the farmer drew out his pocket-book, unfastened it, and allowed it to lie open on his hand. A letter was revealed — Bathsheba's.

"I was going to ask you, Oak," he said, with unreal carelessness, "if you know whose writing this is?"

Oak glanced into the book, and replied instantly, with a flushed face, "Miss Everdene's."

Oak had coloured simply at the consciousness of sounding her name. He now felt a strangely distressing qualm from a new thought. The letter could of course be no other than anonymous, or the inquiry would not have been necessary.

Boldwood mistook his confusion: sensitive persons are always ready with their "Is it I?" in preference to objective reasoning.

"The question was perfectly fair," he returned — and there was something incongruous in the serious earnestness with which he applied himself to an argument on a valentine. "You know it is always expected that privy inquiries will be made: that's where the — fun lies." If the word "fun" had been "torture," it could not have been uttered with a more constrained and restless countenance than was Boldwood's then.

Soon parting from Gabriel, the lonely and reserved man returned to his house to breakfast — feeling twinges of shame and regret at having so far exposed his mood by those fevered questions to a stranger. He again placed the letter on the mantelpiece, and sat down to think of the circumstances attending it by the light of Gabriel's information.

CHAPTER XVI

ALL SAINTS' AND ALL SOULS'

On a week-day morning a small congregation, consisting mainly of women and girls, rose from its knees in the mouldy nave of a church called All Saints', in the distant barrack-town before-mentioned, at the end of a service without a sermon. They were about to disperse, when a smart footstep, entering the porch and coming up the central passage, arrested their attention. The step echoed with a ring unusual in a church; it was the clink of spurs. Everybody looked. A young cavalry soldier in a red uniform, with the three chevrons of a sergeant upon his sleeve, strode up the aisle, with an embarrassment which was only the more marked by the intense vigour of his step, and by the determination upon his face to show none. A slight flush had mounted his cheek by the time he had run the gauntlet between these women; but, passing on through the chancel arch, he never paused till he came close to the altar railing. Here for a moment he stood alone.

The officiating curate, who had not yet doffed his surplice, perceived the new-comer, and followed him to the communion-space. He whispered to the soldier, and then beckoned to the clerk, who in his turn whispered to an elderly woman, apparently his wife, and they also went up the chancel steps.

"'Tis a wedding!" murmured some of the women, brightening. "Let's wait!"

The majority again sat down.

There was a creaking of machinery behind, and some of the young ones turned their heads. From the interior face of the west wall of the tower projected a little canopy with a quarter-jack and small bell beneath it, the automaton being driven by the same clock machinery that struck the large bell in the tower. Between the tower and the church was a close screen, the door of which was kept shut during services, hiding this grotesque clockwork from sight. At present, however, the door was open, and the egress of the jack, the blows on the bell, and the mannikin's retreat into the nook again, were visible to many, and audible throughout the church.

The jack had struck half-past eleven.

"Where's the woman?" whispered some of the spectators.

The young sergeant stood still with the abnormal rigidity of the old pillars around. He faced the south-east, and was as silent as he was still.

The silence grew to be a noticeable thing as the minutes went on, and nobody else appeared, and not a soul moved. The rattle of the quarter-jack again from its niche, its blows for three-quarters, its fussy retreat, were almost painfully abrupt, and caused many of the congregation to start palpably.

"I wonder where the woman is!" a voice whispered again.

There began now that slight shifting of feet, that artificial coughing among several, which betrays a nervous suspense. At length there was a titter. But the soldier never moved. There he stood, his face to the south-east, upright as a column, his cap in his hand.

The clock ticked on. The women threw off their nervousness, and titters and giggling became more frequent. Then came a dead silence. Every one was waiting for the end. Some persons may have noticed how extraordinarily the striking of quarters seems to quicken the flight of time. It was hardly credible that the jack had not got wrong with the minutes when the rattle began again, the puppet emerged, and the four quarters were struck fitfully as before. One could almost be positive that there was a malicious leer upon the hideous creature's face, and a mischievous delight in its twitchings. Then followed the dull and remote resonance of the twelve heavy strokes in the tower above. The women were impressed, and there was no giggle this time.

The clergyman glided into the vestry, and the clerk vanished. The sergeant had not yet turned; every woman in the church was waiting to see his face, and he appeared to know it. At last he did turn, and stalked resolutely down the nave, braving them all, with a compressed lip. Two bowed and toothless old almsmen then looked at each other and chuckled, innocently enough; but the sound had a strange weird effect in that place.

Opposite to the church was a paved square, around which several overhanging wood buildings of old time cast a picturesque shade. The young man on leaving the door went to cross the square, when, in the middle, he met a little woman. The expression of her face, which had been one of intense anxiety, sank at the sight of his nearly to terror.

"Well?" he said, in a suppressed passion, fixedly looking at her.

"Oh, Frank — I made a mistake! — I thought that church with the spire was All Saints', and I was at the door at half-past eleven to a minute as you said. I waited till a quarter to twelve, and found then that I was in All Souls'. But I wasn't much frightened, for I thought it could be to-morrow as well."

"You fool, for so fooling me! But say no more."

"Shall it be to-morrow, Frank?" she asked blankly.

"To-morrow!" and he gave vent to a hoarse laugh. "I don't go through that experience again for some time, I warrant you!"

"But after all," she expostulated in a trembling voice, "the mistake was not such a terrible thing! Now, dear Frank, when shall it be?"

"Ah, when? God knows!" he said, with a light irony, and turning from her walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE MARKET-PLACE

On Saturday Boldwood was in Casterbridge market house as usual, when the disturber of his dreams entered and became visible to him. Adam had awakened from his deep sleep, and behold! there was Eve. The farmer took courage, and for the first time really looked at her.

Material causes and emotional effects are not to be arranged in regular equation. The result from capital employed in the production of any movement of a mental nature is sometimes as tremendous as the cause itself is absurdly minute. When women are in a freakish mood, their usual intuition, either from carelessness or inherent defect, seemingly fails to teach them this, and hence it was that Bathsheba was fated to be astonished to-day.

Boldwood looked at her — not slily, critically, or understandingly, but blankly at gaze, in the way a reaper looks up at a passing train — as something foreign to his element, and but dimly understood. To Boldwood women had been remote phenomena rather than necessary complements — comets of such uncertain aspect, movement, and permanence, that whether their orbits were as geometrical, unchangeable, and as subject to laws as his own, or as absolutely erratic as they superficially appeared, he had not deemed it his duty to consider.

He saw her black hair, her correct facial curves and profile, and the roundness of her chin and throat. He saw then the side of her eyelids, eyes, and lashes, and the shape of her ear. Next he noticed her figure, her skirt, and the very soles of her shoes.

Boldwood thought her beautiful, but wondered whether he was right in his thought, for it seemed impossible that this romance in the flesh, if so sweet as he imagined, could have been going on long without creating a commotion of delight among men, and provoking more inquiry than Bathsheba had done, even though that was not a little. To the best of his judgement neither nature nor art could improve this perfect one of an imperfect many. His heart began to move within him. Boldwood, it must be remembered, though forty years of age, had never before inspected a woman with the very centre and force of his glance; they had struck upon all his senses at wide angles.

Was she really beautiful? He could not assure himself that his opinion was true even now. He furtively said to a neighbour, "Is Miss Everdene considered handsome?"

"Oh yes; she was a good deal noticed the first time she came, if you remember. A very handsome girl indeed."

A man is never more credulous than in receiving favourable opinions on the beauty of a woman he is half, or quite, in love with; a mere child's word on the point has the weight of an R.A.'s. Boldwood was satisfied now.

And this charming woman had in effect said to him, "Marry me." Why should she have done that strange thing? Boldwood's blindness to the difference between approving of what circumstances suggest, and originating what they do not suggest, was well matched by Bathsheba's insensibility to the possibly great issues of little beginnings.

She was at this moment coolly dealing with a dashing young farmer, adding up accounts with him as indifferently as if his face had been the pages of a ledger. It was evident that such a nature as his had no attraction for a woman of Bathsheba's taste. But Boldwood grew hot down to his hands with an incipient jealousy; he trod for the first time the threshold of "the injured lover's hell." His first impulse was to go and thrust himself between them. This could be done, but only in one way — by asking to see a sample of her corn. Boldwood renounced the idea. He could not make the request; it was debasing loveliness to ask it to buy and sell, and jarred with his conceptions of her.

All this time Bathsheba was conscious of having broken into that dignified stronghold at last. His eyes, she knew, were following her everywhere. This was a triumph; and had it come naturally, such a triumph would have been the sweeter to her for this piquing delay. But it had been brought about by misdirected ingenuity, and she valued it only as she valued an artificial flower or a wax fruit.

Being a woman with some good sense in reasoning on subjects wherein her heart was not involved, Bathsheba genuinely repented that a freak which had owed its existence as much to Liddy as to herself, should ever have been undertaken, to disturb the placidity of a man she respected too highly to deliberately tease.

She that day nearly formed the intention of begging his pardon on the very next occasion of their meeting. The worst features of this arrangement were that, if he thought she ridiculed him, an apology would increase the offence by being disbelieved; and if he thought she wanted him to woo her, it would read like additional evidence of her forwardness.

CHAPTER XVIII

Boldwood in Meditation — Regret

Boldwood was tenant of what was called Little Weatherbury Farm, and his person was the nearest approach to aristocracy that this remoter quarter of the parish could boast of. Genteel strangers, whose god was their town, who might happen to be compelled to linger about this nook for a day, heard the sound of light wheels, and prayed to see good society, to the degree of a solitary lord, or squire at the very least, but it was only Mr. Boldwood going out for the day. They heard the sound of wheels yet

once more, and were re-animated to expectancy: it was only Mr. Boldwood coming home again.

His house stood recessed from the road, and the stables, which are to a farm what a fireplace is to a room, were behind, their lower portions being lost amid bushes of laurel. Inside the blue door, open half-way down, were to be seen at this time the backs and tails of half-a-dozen warm and contented horses standing in their stalls; and as thus viewed, they presented alternations of roan and bay, in shapes like a Moorish arch, the tail being a streak down the midst of each. Over these, and lost to the eye gazing in from the outer light, the mouths of the same animals could be heard busily sustaining the above-named warmth and plumpness by quantities of oats and hay. The restless and shadowy figure of a colt wandered about a loose-box at the end, whilst the steady grind of all the eaters was occasionally diversified by the rattle of a rope or the stamp of a foot.

Pacing up and down at the heels of the animals was Farmer Boldwood himself. This place was his almonry and cloister in one: here, after looking to the feeding of his four-footed dependants, the celibate would walk and meditate of an evening till the moon's rays streamed in through the cobwebbed windows, or total darkness enveloped the scene.

His square-framed perpendicularity showed more fully now than in the crowd and bustle of the market-house. In this meditative walk his foot met the floor with heel and toe simultaneously, and his fine reddish-fleshed face was bent downwards just enough to render obscure the still mouth and the well-rounded though rather prominent and broad chin. A few clear and thread-like horizontal lines were the only interruption to the otherwise smooth surface of his large forehead.

The phases of Boldwood's life were ordinary enough, but his was not an ordinary nature. That stillness, which struck casual observers more than anything else in his character and habit, and seemed so precisely like the rest of inanition, may have been the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces — positives and negatives in fine adjustment. His equilibrium disturbed, he was in extremity at once. If an emotion possessed him at all, it ruled him; a feeling not mastering him was entirely latent. Stagnant or rapid, it was never slow. He was always hit mortally, or he was missed.

He had no light and careless touches in his constitution, either for good or for evil. Stern in the outlines of action, mild in the details, he was serious throughout all. He saw no absurd sides to the follies of life, and thus, though not quite companionable in the eyes of merry men and scoffers, and those to whom all things show life as a jest, he was not intolerable to the earnest and those acquainted with grief. Being a man who read all the dramas of life seriously, if he failed to please when they were comedies, there was no frivolous treatment to reproach him for when they chanced to end tragically.

Bathsheba was far from dreaming that the dark and silent shape upon which she had so carelessly thrown a seed was a hotbed of tropic intensity. Had she known Boldwood's moods, her blame would have been fearful, and the stain upon her heart

ineradicable. Moreover, had she known her present power for good or evil over this man, she would have trembled at her responsibility. Luckily for her present, unluckily for her future tranquillity, her understanding had not yet told her what Boldwood was. Nobody knew entirely; for though it was possible to form guesses concerning his wild capabilities from old floodmarks faintly visible, he had never been seen at the high tides which caused them.

Farmer Boldwood came to the stable-door and looked forth across the level fields. Beyond the first enclosure was a hedge, and on the other side of this a meadow belonging to Bathsheba's farm.

It was now early spring — the time of going to grass with the sheep, when they have the first feed of the meadows, before these are laid up for mowing. The wind, which had been blowing east for several weeks, had veered to the southward, and the middle of spring had come abruptly — almost without a beginning. It was that period in the vernal quarter when we may suppose the Dryads to be waking for the season. The vegetable world begins to move and swell and the saps to rise, till in the completest silence of lone gardens and trackless plantations, where everything seems helpless and still after the bond and slavery of frost, there are bustlings, strainings, united thrusts, and pulls-all-together, in comparison with which the powerful tugs of cranes and pulleys in a noisy city are but pigmy efforts.

Boldwood, looking into the distant meadows, saw there three figures. They were those of Miss Everdene, Shepherd Oak, and Cainy Ball.

When Bathsheba's figure shone upon the farmer's eyes it lighted him up as the moon lights up a great tower. A man's body is as the shell, or the tablet, of his soul, as he is reserved or ingenuous, overflowing or self-contained. There was a change in Boldwood's exterior from its former impassibleness; and his face showed that he was now living outside his defences for the first time, and with a fearful sense of exposure. It is the usual experience of strong natures when they love.

At last he arrived at a conclusion. It was to go across and inquire boldly of her.

The insulation of his heart by reserve during these many years, without a channel of any kind for disposable emotion, had worked its effect. It has been observed more than once that the causes of love are chiefly subjective, and Boldwood was a living testimony to the truth of the proposition. No mother existed to absorb his devotion, no sister for his tenderness, no idle ties for sense. He became surcharged with the compound, which was genuine lover's love.

He approached the gate of the meadow. Beyond it the ground was melodious with ripples, and the sky with larks; the low bleating of the flock mingling with both. Mistress and man were engaged in the operation of making a lamb "take," which is performed whenever an ewe has lost her own offspring, one of the twins of another ewe being given her as a substitute. Gabriel had skinned the dead lamb, and was tying the skin over the body of the live lamb, in the customary manner, whilst Bathsheba was holding open a little pen of four hurdles, into which the Mother and foisted lamb

were driven, where they would remain till the old sheep conceived an affection for the young one.

Bathsheba looked up at the completion of the manœuvre and saw the farmer by the gate, where he was overhung by a willow tree in full bloom. Gabriel, to whom her face was as the uncertain glory of an April day, was ever regardful of its faintest changes, and instantly discerned thereon the mark of some influence from without, in the form of a keenly self-conscious reddening. He also turned and beheld Boldwood.

At once connecting these signs with the letter Boldwood had shown him, Gabriel suspected her of some coquettish procedure begun by that means, and carried on since, he knew not how.

Farmer Boldwood had read the pantomime denoting that they were aware of his presence, and the perception was as too much light turned upon his new sensibility. He was still in the road, and by moving on he hoped that neither would recognize that he had originally intended to enter the field. He passed by with an utter and overwhelming sensation of ignorance, shyness, and doubt. Perhaps in her manner there were signs that she wished to see him — perhaps not — he could not read a woman. The cabala of this erotic philosophy seemed to consist of the subtlest meanings expressed in misleading ways. Every turn, look, word, and accent contained a mystery quite distinct from its obvious import, and not one had ever been pondered by him until now.

As for Bathsheba, she was not deceived into the belief that Farmer Boldwood had walked by on business or in idleness. She collected the probabilities of the case, and concluded that she was herself responsible for Boldwood's appearance there. It troubled her much to see what a great flame a little wildfire was likely to kindle. Bathsheba was no schemer for marriage, nor was she deliberately a trifler with the affections of men, and a censor's experience on seeing an actual flirt after observing her would have been a feeling of surprise that Bathsheba could be so different from such a one, and yet so like what a flirt is supposed to be.

She resolved never again, by look or by sign, to interrupt the steady flow of this man's life. But a resolution to avoid an evil is seldom framed till the evil is so far advanced as to make avoidance impossible.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SHEEP-WASHING — THE OFFER

Boldwood did eventually call upon her. She was not at home. "Of course not," he murmured. In contemplating Bathsheba as a woman, he had forgotten the accidents of her position as an agriculturist — that being as much of a farmer, and as extensive a farmer, as himself, her probable whereabouts was out-of-doors at this time of the year. This, and the other oversights Boldwood was guilty of, were natural to the mood, and still more natural to the circumstances. The great aids to idealization in love were present here: occasional observation of her from a distance, and the absence of social

intercourse with her — visual familiarity, oral strangeness. The smaller human elements were kept out of sight; the pettinesses that enter so largely into all earthly living and doing were disguised by the accident of lover and loved-one not being on visiting terms; and there was hardly awakened a thought in Boldwood that sorry household realities appertained to her, or that she, like all others, had moments of commonplace, when to be least plainly seen was to be most prettily remembered. Thus a mild sort of apotheosis took place in his fancy, whilst she still lived and breathed within his own horizon, a troubled creature like himself.

It was the end of May when the farmer determined to be no longer repulsed by trivialities or distracted by suspense. He had by this time grown used to being in love; the passion now startled him less even when it tortured him more, and he felt himself adequate to the situation. On inquiring for her at her house they had told him she was at the sheepwashing, and he went off to seek her there.

The sheep-washing pool was a perfectly circular basin of brickwork in the meadows, full of the clearest water. To birds on the wing its glassy surface, reflecting the light sky, must have been visible for miles around as a glistening Cyclops' eye in a green face. The grass about the margin at this season was a sight to remember long — in a minor sort of way. Its activity in sucking the moisture from the rich damp sod was almost a process observable by the eye. The outskirts of this level water-meadow were diversified by rounded and hollow pastures, where just now every flower that was not a buttercup was a daisy. The river slid along noiselessly as a shade, the swelling reeds and sedge forming a flexible palisade upon its moist brink. To the north of the mead were trees, the leaves of which were new, soft, and moist, not yet having stiffened and darkened under summer sun and drought, their colour being yellow beside a green — green beside a yellow. From the recesses of this knot of foliage the loud notes of three cuckoos were resounding through the still air.

Boldwood went meditating down the slopes with his eyes on his boots, which the yellow pollen from the buttercups had bronzed in artistic gradations. A tributary of the main stream flowed through the basin of the pool by an inlet and outlet at opposite points of its diameter. Shepherd Oak, Jan Coggan, Moon, Poorgrass, Cain Ball, and several others were assembled here, all dripping wet to the very roots of their hair, and Bathsheba was standing by in a new riding-habit — the most elegant she had ever worn — the reins of her horse being looped over her arm. Flagons of cider were rolling about upon the green. The meek sheep were pushed into the pool by Coggan and Matthew Moon, who stood by the lower hatch, immersed to their waists; then Gabriel, who stood on the brink, thrust them under as they swam along, with an instrument like a crutch, formed for the purpose, and also for assisting the exhausted animals when the wool became saturated and they began to sink. They were let out against the stream, and through the upper opening, all impurities flowing away below. Cainy Ball and Joseph, who performed this latter operation, were if possible wetter than the rest; they resembled dolphins under a fountain, every protuberance and angle of their clothes dribbling forth a small rill.

Boldwood came close and bade her good morning, with such constraint that she could not but think he had stepped across to the washing for its own sake, hoping not to find her there; more, she fancied his brow severe and his eye slighting. Bathsheba immediately contrived to withdraw, and glided along by the river till she was a stone's throw off. She heard footsteps brushing the grass, and had a consciousness that love was encircling her like a perfume. Instead of turning or waiting, Bathsheba went further among the high sedges, but Boldwood seemed determined, and pressed on till they were completely past the bend of the river. Here, without being seen, they could hear the splashing and shouts of the washers above.

"Miss Everdene!" said the farmer.

She trembled, turned, and said "Good morning." His tone was so utterly removed from all she had expected as a beginning. It was lowness and quiet accentuated: an emphasis of deep meanings, their form, at the same time, being scarcely expressed. Silence has sometimes a remarkable power of showing itself as the disembodied soul of feeling wandering without its carcase, and it is then more impressive than speech. In the same way, to say a little is often to tell more than to say a great deal. Boldwood told everything in that word.

As the consciousness expands on learning that what was fancied to be the rumble of wheels is the reverberation of thunder, so did Bathsheba's at her intuitive conviction.

"I feel — almost too much — to think," he said, with a solemn simplicity. "I have come to speak to you without preface. My life is not my own since I have beheld you clearly, Miss Everdene — I come to make you an offer of marriage."

Bathsheba tried to preserve an absolutely neutral countenance, and all the motion she made was that of closing lips which had previously been a little parted.

"I am now forty-one years old," he went on. "I may have been called a confirmed bachelor, and I was a confirmed bachelor. I had never any views of myself as a husband in my earlier days, nor have I made any calculation on the subject since I have been older. But we all change, and my change, in this matter, came with seeing you. I have felt lately, more and more, that my present way of living is bad in every respect. Beyond all things, I want you as my wife."

"I feel, Mr. Boldwood, that though I respect you much, I do not feel — what would justify me to — in accepting your offer," she stammered.

This giving back of dignity for dignity seemed to open the sluices of feeling that Boldwood had as yet kept closed.

"My life is a burden without you," he exclaimed, in a low voice. "I want you — I want you to let me say I love you again and again!"

Bathsheba answered nothing, and the horse upon her arm seemed so impressed that instead of cropping the herbage she looked up.

"I think and hope you care enough for me to listen to what I have to tell!"

Bathsheba's momentary impulse at hearing this was to ask why he thought that, till she remembered that, far from being a conceited assumption on Boldwood's part,

it was but the natural conclusion of serious reflection based on deceptive premises of her own offering.

"I wish I could say courteous flatteries to you," the farmer continued in an easier tone, "and put my rugged feeling into a graceful shape: but I have neither power nor patience to learn such things. I want you for my wife — so wildly that no other feeling can abide in me; but I should not have spoken out had I not been led to hope."

"The valentine again! O that valentine!" she said to herself, but not a word to him.

"If you can love me say so, Miss Everdene. If not — don't say no!"

"Mr. Boldwood, it is painful to have to say I am surprised, so that I don't know how to answer you with propriety and respect — but am only just able to speak out my feeling — I mean my meaning; that I am afraid I can't marry you, much as I respect you. You are too dignified for me to suit you, sir."

"But, Miss Everdene!"

"I — I didn't — I know I ought never to have dreamt of sending that valentine — forgive me, sir — it was a wanton thing which no woman with any self-respect should have done. If you will only pardon my thoughtlessness, I promise never to —"

"No, no, no. Don't say thoughtlessness! Make me think it was something more — that it was a sort of prophetic instinct — the beginning of a feeling that you would like me. You torture me to say it was done in thoughtlessness — I never thought of it in that light, and I can't endure it. Ah! I wish I knew how to win you! but that I can't do — I can only ask if I have already got you. If I have not, and it is not true that you have come unwittingly to me as I have to you, I can say no more."

"I have not fallen in love with you, Mr. Boldwood — certainly I must say that." She allowed a very small smile to creep for the first time over her serious face in saying this, and the white row of upper teeth, and keenly-cut lips already noticed, suggested an idea of heartlessness, which was immediately contradicted by the pleasant eyes.

"But you will just think — in kindness and condescension think — if you cannot bear with me as a husband! I fear I am too old for you, but believe me I will take more care of you than would many a man of your own age. I will protect and cherish you with all my strength — I will indeed! You shall have no cares — be worried by no household affairs, and live quite at ease, Miss Everdene. The dairy superintendence shall be done by a man — I can afford it well — you shall never have so much as to look out of doors at haymaking time, or to think of weather in the harvest. I rather cling to the chaise, because it is the same my poor father and mother drove, but if you don't like it I will sell it, and you shall have a pony-carriage of your own. I cannot say how far above every other idea and object on earth you seem to me — nobody knows — God only knows — how much you are to me!"

Bathsheba's heart was young, and it swelled with sympathy for the deep-natured man who spoke so simply.

"Don't say it! don't! I cannot bear you to feel so much, and me to feel nothing. And I am afraid they will notice us, Mr. Boldwood. Will you let the matter rest now? I cannot think collectedly. I did not know you were going to say this to me. Oh, I

am wicked to have made you suffer so!" She was frightened as well as agitated at his vehemence.

"Say then, that you don't absolutely refuse. Do not quite refuse?"

"I can do nothing. I cannot answer."

"I may speak to you again on the subject?"

"Yes."

"I may think of you?"

"Yes, I suppose you may think of me."

"And hope to obtain you?"

"No — do not hope! Let us go on."

"I will call upon you again to-morrow."

"No — please not. Give me time."

"Yes — I will give you any time," he said earnestly and gratefully. "I am happier now."

"No — I beg you! Don't be happier if happiness only comes from my agreeing. Be neutral, Mr. Boldwood! I must think."

"I will wait," he said.

And then she turned away. Boldwood dropped his gaze to the ground, and stood long like a man who did not know where he was. Realities then returned upon him like the pain of a wound received in an excitement which eclipses it, and he, too, then went on.

CHAPTER XX

PERPLEXITY — GRINDING THE SHEARS — A QUARREL

"He is so disinterested and kind to offer me all that I can desire," Bathsheba mused.

Yet Farmer Boldwood, whether by nature kind or the reverse to kind, did not exercise kindness, here. The rarest offerings of the purest loves are but a self-indulgence, and no generosity at all.

Bathsheba, not being the least in love with him, was eventually able to look calmly at his offer. It was one which many women of her own station in the neighbourhood, and not a few of higher rank, would have been wild to accept and proud to publish. In every point of view, ranging from politic to passionate, it was desirable that she, a lonely girl, should marry, and marry this earnest, well-to-do, and respected man. He was close to her doors: his standing was sufficient: his qualities were even supererogatory. Had she felt, which she did not, any wish whatever for the married state in the abstract, she could not reasonably have rejected him, being a woman who frequently appealed to her understanding for deliverance from her whims. Boldwood as a means to marriage was unexceptionable: she esteemed and liked him, yet she did not want him. It appears that ordinary men take wives because possession is not possible without marriage, and that ordinary women accept husbands because marriage is not possible without possession;

with totally differing aims the method is the same on both sides. But the understood incentive on the woman's part was wanting here. Besides, Bathsheba's position as absolute mistress of a farm and house was a novel one, and the novelty had not yet begun to wear off.

But a disquiet filled her which was somewhat to her credit, for it would have affected few. Beyond the mentioned reasons with which she combated her objections, she had a strong feeling that, having been the one who began the game, she ought in honesty to accept the consequences. Still the reluctance remained. She said in the same breath that it would be ungenerous not to marry Boldwood, and that she couldn't do it to save her life.

Bathsheba's was an impulsive nature under a deliberative aspect. An Elizabeth in brain and a Mary Stuart in spirit, she often performed actions of the greatest temerity with a manner of extreme discretion. Many of her thoughts were perfect syllogisms; unluckily they always remained thoughts. Only a few were irrational assumptions; but, unfortunately, they were the ones which most frequently grew into deeds.

The next day to that of the declaration she found Gabriel Oak at the bottom of her garden, grinding his shears for the sheep-shearing. All the surrounding cottages were more or less scenes of the same operation; the scurr of whetting spread into the sky from all parts of the village as from an armoury previous to a campaign. Peace and war kiss each other at their hours of preparation — sickles, scythes, shears, and pruning-hooks, ranking with swords, bayonets, and lances, in their common necessity for point and edge.

Cainy Ball turned the handle of Gabriel's grindstone, his head performing a melancholy see-saw up and down with each turn of the wheel. Oak stood somewhat as Eros is represented when in the act of sharpening his arrows: his figure slightly bent, the weight of his body thrown over on the shears, and his head balanced side-ways, with a critical compression of the lips and contraction of the eyelids to crown the attitude.

His mistress came up and looked upon them in silence for a minute or two; then she said —

"Cain, go to the lower mead and catch the bay mare. I'll turn the winch of the grindstone. I want to speak to you, Gabriel."

Cain departed, and Bathsheba took the handle. Gabriel had glanced up in intense surprise, quelled its expression, and looked down again. Bathsheba turned the winch, and Gabriel applied the shears.

The peculiar motion involved in turning a wheel has a wonderful tendency to benumb the mind. It is a sort of attenuated variety of Ixion's punishment, and contributes a dismal chapter to the history of gaols. The brain gets muddled, the head grows heavy, and the body's centre of gravity seems to settle by degrees in a leaden lump somewhere between the eyebrows and the crown. Bathsheba felt the unpleasant symptoms after two or three dozen turns.

"Will you turn, Gabriel, and let me hold the shears?" she said. "My head is in a whirl, and I can't talk."

Gabriel turned. Bathsheba then began, with some awkwardness, allowing her thoughts to stray occasionally from her story to attend to the shears, which required a little nicety in sharpening.

"I wanted to ask you if the men made any observations on my going behind the sedge with Mr. Boldwood yesterday?"

"Yes, they did," said Gabriel. "You don't hold the shears right, miss — I knew you wouldn't know the way — hold like this."

He relinquished the winch, and inclosing her two hands completely in his own (taking each as we sometimes slap a child's hand in teaching him to write), grasped the shears with her. "Incline the edge so," he said.

Hands and shears were inclined to suit the words, and held thus for a peculiarly long time by the instructor as he spoke.

"That will do," exclaimed Bathsheba. "Loose my hands. I won't have them held! Turn the winch."

Gabriel freed her hands quietly, retired to his handle, and the grinding went on.

"Did the men think it odd?" she said again.

"Odd was not the idea, miss."

"What did they say?"

"That Farmer Boldwood's name and your own were likely to be flung over pulpit together before the year was out."

"I thought so by the look of them! Why, there's nothing in it. A more foolish remark was never made, and I want you to contradict it! that's what I came for."

Gabriel looked incredulous and sad, but between his moments of incredulity, relieved.

"They must have heard our conversation," she continued.

"Well, then, Bathsheba!" said Oak, stopping the handle, and gazing into her face with astonishment.

"Miss Everdene, you mean," she said, with dignity.

"I mean this, that if Mr. Boldwood really spoke of marriage, I bain't going to tell a story and say he didn't to please you. I have already tried to please you too much for my own good!"

Bathsheba regarded him with round-eyed perplexity. She did not know whether to pity him for disappointed love of her, or to be angry with him for having got over it — his tone being ambiguous.

"I said I wanted you just to mention that it was not true I was going to be married to him," she murmured, with a slight decline in her assurance.

"I can say that to them if you wish, Miss Everdene. And I could likewise give an opinion to 'ee on what you have done."

"I daresay. But I don't want your opinion."

"I suppose not," said Gabriel bitterly, and going on with his turning, his words rising and falling in a regular swell and cadence as he stooped or rose with the winch, which

directed them, according to his position, perpendicularly into the earth, or horizontally along the garden, his eyes being fixed on a leaf upon the ground.

With Bathsheba a hastened act was a rash act; but, as does not always happen, time gained was prudence insured. It must be added, however, that time was very seldom gained. At this period the single opinion in the parish on herself and her doings that she valued as sounder than her own was Gabriel Oak's. And the outspoken honesty of his character was such that on any subject, even that of her love for, or marriage with, another man, the same disinterestedness of opinion might be calculated on, and be had for the asking. Thoroughly convinced of the impossibility of his own suit, a high resolve constrained him not to injure that of another. This is a lover's most stoical virtue, as the lack of it is a lover's most venial sin. Knowing he would reply truly she asked the question, painful as she must have known the subject would be. Such is the selfishness of some charming women. Perhaps it was some excuse for her thus torturing honesty to her own advantage, that she had absolutely no other sound judgment within easy reach.

"Well, what is your opinion of my conduct," she said, quietly.

"That it is unworthy of any thoughtful, and meek, and comely woman."

In an instant Bathsheba's face coloured with the angry crimson of a Danby sunset. But she forbore to utter this feeling, and the reticence of her tongue only made the loquacity of her face the more noticeable.

The next thing Gabriel did was to make a mistake.

"Perhaps you don't like the rudeness of my reprimanding you, for I know it is rudeness; but I thought it would do good."

She instantly replied sarcastically —

"On the contrary, my opinion of you is so low, that I see in your abuse the praise of discerning people!"

"I am glad you don't mind it, for I said it honestly and with every serious meaning."

"I see. But, unfortunately, when you try not to speak in jest you are amusing — just as when you wish to avoid seriousness you sometimes say a sensible word."

It was a hard hit, but Bathsheba had unmistakably lost her temper, and on that account Gabriel had never in his life kept his own better. He said nothing. She then broke out —

"I may ask, I suppose, where in particular my unworthiness lies? In my not marrying you, perhaps?"

"Not by any means," said Gabriel quietly. "I have long given up thinking of that matter."

"Or wishing it, I suppose," she said; and it was apparent that she expected an unhesitating denial of this supposition.

Whatever Gabriel felt, he coolly echoed her words —

"Or wishing it either."

A woman may be treated with a bitterness which is sweet to her, and with a rudeness which is not offensive. Bathsheba would have submitted to an indignant chastisement

for her levity had Gabriel protested that he was loving her at the same time; the impetuosity of passion unrequited is bearable, even if it stings and anathematizes — there is a triumph in the humiliation, and a tenderness in the strife. This was what she had been expecting, and what she had not got. To be lectured because the lecturer saw her in the cold morning light of open-shuttered disillusion was exasperating. He had not finished, either. He continued in a more agitated voice: —

“My opinion is (since you ask it) that you are greatly to blame for playing pranks upon a man like Mr. Boldwood, merely as a pastime. Leading on a man you don’t care for is not a praiseworthy action. And even, Miss Everdene, if you seriously inclined towards him, you might have let him find it out in some way of true loving-kindness, and not by sending him a valentine’s letter.”

Bathsheba laid down the shears.

“I cannot allow any man to — to criticise my private conduct!” she exclaimed. “Nor will I for a minute. So you’ll please leave the farm at the end of the week!”

It may have been a peculiarity — at any rate it was a fact — that when Bathsheba was swayed by an emotion of an earthly sort her lower lip trembled: when by a refined emotion, her upper or heavenward one. Her nether lip quivered now.

“Very well, so I will,” said Gabriel calmly. He had been held to her by a beautiful thread which it pained him to spoil by breaking, rather than by a chain he could not break. “I should be even better pleased to go at once,” he added.

“Go at once then, in Heaven’s name!” said she, her eyes flashing at his, though never meeting them. “Don’t let me see your face any more.”

“Very well, Miss Everdene — so it shall be.”

And he took his shears and went away from her in placid dignity, as Moses left the presence of Pharaoh.

CHAPTER XXI

TROUBLES IN THE FOLD — A MESSAGE

Gabriel Oak had ceased to feed the Weatherbury flock for about four-and-twenty hours, when on Sunday afternoon the elderly gentlemen Joseph Poorgrass, Matthew Moon, Fray, and half-a-dozen others, came running up to the house of the mistress of the Upper Farm.

“Whatever is the matter, men?” she said, meeting them at the door just as she was coming out on her way to church, and ceasing in a moment from the close compression of her two red lips, with which she had accompanied the exertion of pulling on a tight glove.

“Sixty!” said Joseph Poorgrass.

“Seventy!” said Moon.

“Fifty-nine!” said Susan Tall’s husband.

“ — Sheep have broke fence,” said Fray.

“ — And got into a field of young clover,” said Tall.

“ — Young clover!” said Moon.

“ — Clover!” said Joseph Poorgrass.

“And they be getting blasted,” said Henery Fray.

“That they be,” said Joseph.

“And will all die as dead as nits, if they bain’t got out and cured!” said Tall.

Joseph’s countenance was drawn into lines and puckers by his concern. Fray’s forehead was wrinkled both perpendicularly and crosswise, after the pattern of a portcullis, expressive of a double despair. Laban Tall’s lips were thin, and his face was rigid. Matthew’s jaws sank, and his eyes turned whichever way the strongest muscle happened to pull them.

“Yes,” said Joseph, “and I was sitting at home, looking for Ephesians, and says I to myself, ‘Tis nothing but Corinthians and Thessalonians in this danged Testament,’ when who should come in but Henery there: ‘Joseph,’ he said, ‘the sheep have blasted themselves — “

With Bathsheba it was a moment when thought was speech and speech exclamation. Moreover, she had hardly recovered her equanimity since the disturbance which she had suffered from Oak’s remarks.

“That’s enough — that’s enough! — oh, you fools!” she cried, throwing the parasol and Prayer-book into the passage, and running out of doors in the direction signified. “To come to me, and not go and get them out directly! Oh, the stupid numskulls!”

Her eyes were at their darkest and brightest now. Bathsheba’s beauty belonging rather to the demonian than to the angelic school, she never looked so well as when she was angry — and particularly when the effect was heightened by a rather dashing velvet dress, carefully put on before a glass.

All the ancient men ran in a jumbled throng after her to the clover-field, Joseph sinking down in the midst when about half-way, like an individual withering in a world which was more and more insupportable. Having once received the stimulus that her presence always gave them they went round among the sheep with a will. The majority of the afflicted animals were lying down, and could not be stirred. These were bodily lifted out, and the others driven into the adjoining field. Here, after the lapse of a few minutes, several more fell down, and lay helpless and livid as the rest.

Bathsheba, with a sad, bursting heart, looked at these primest specimens of her prime flock as they rolled there —

Swoln with wind and the rank mist they drew.

Many of them foamed at the mouth, their breathing being quick and short, whilst the bodies of all were fearfully distended.

“Oh, what can I do, what can I do!” said Bathsheba, helplessly. “Sheep are such unfortunate animals! — there’s always something happening to them! I never knew a flock pass a year without getting into some scrape or other.”

“There’s only one way of saving them,” said Tall.

“What way? Tell me quick!”

"They must be pierced in the side with a thing made on purpose."

"Can you do it? Can I?"

"No, ma'am. We can't, nor you neither. It must be done in a particular spot. If ye go to the right or left but an inch you stab the ewe and kill her. Not even a shepherd can do it, as a rule."

"Then they must die," she said, in a resigned tone.

"Only one man in the neighbourhood knows the way," said Joseph, now just come up. "He could cure 'em all if he were here."

"Who is he? Let's get him!"

"Shepherd Oak," said Matthew. "Ah, he's a clever man in talents!"

"Ah, that he is so!" said Joseph Poorgrass.

"True — he's the man," said Laban Tall.

"How dare you name that man in my presence!" she said excitedly. "I told you never to allude to him, nor shall you if you stay with me. Ah!" she added, brightening, "Farmer Boldwood knows!"

"O no, ma'am" said Matthew. "Two of his store ewes got into some vetches t'other day, and were just like these. He sent a man on horseback here post-haste for Gable, and Gable went and saved 'em. Farmer Boldwood hev got the thing they do it with. 'Tis a holler pipe, with a sharp pricker inside. Isn't it, Joseph?"

"Ay — a holler pipe," echoed Joseph. "That's what 'tis."

"Ay, sure — that's the machine," chimed in Henery Fray, reflectively, with an Oriental indifference to the flight of time.

"Well," burst out Bathsheba, "don't stand there with your 'ayes' and your 'sures' talking at me! Get somebody to cure the sheep instantly!"

All then stalked off in consternation, to get somebody as directed, without any idea of who it was to be. In a minute they had vanished through the gate, and she stood alone with the dying flock.

"Never will I send for him — never!" she said firmly.

One of the ewes here contracted its muscles horribly, extended itself, and jumped high into the air. The leap was an astonishing one. The ewe fell heavily, and lay still.

Bathsheba went up to it. The sheep was dead.

"Oh, what shall I do — what shall I do!" she again exclaimed, wringing her hands. "I won't send for him. No, I won't!"

The most vigorous expression of a resolution does not always coincide with the greatest vigour of the resolution itself. It is often flung out as a sort of prop to support a decaying conviction which, whilst strong, required no enunciation to prove it so. The "No, I won't" of Bathsheba meant virtually, "I think I must."

She followed her assistants through the gate, and lifted her hand to one of them. Laban answered to her signal.

"Where is Oak staying?"

"Across the valley at Nest Cottage!"

“Jump on the bay mare, and ride across, and say he must return instantly — that I say so.”

Tall scrambled off to the field, and in two minutes was on Poll, the bay, bare-backed, and with only a halter by way of rein. He diminished down the hill.

Bathsheba watched. So did all the rest. Tall cantered along the bridle-path through Sixteen Acres, Sheeplands, Middle Field, The Flats, Cappel’s Piece, shrank almost to a point, crossed the bridge, and ascended from the valley through Springmead and Whitepits on the other side. The cottage to which Gabriel had retired before taking his final departure from the locality was visible as a white spot on the opposite hill, backed by blue firs. Bathsheba walked up and down. The men entered the field and endeavoured to ease the anguish of the dumb creatures by rubbing them. Nothing availed.

Bathsheba continued walking. The horse was seen descending the hill, and the wearisome series had to be repeated in reverse order: Whitepits, Springmead, Cappel’s Piece, The Flats, Middle Field, Sheeplands, Sixteen Acres. She hoped Tall had had presence of mind enough to give the mare up to Gabriel, and return himself on foot. The rider neared them. It was Tall.

“Oh, what folly!” said Bathsheba.

Gabriel was not visible anywhere.

“Perhaps he is already gone!” she said.

Tall came into the inclosure, and leapt off, his face tragic as Morton’s after the battle of Shrewsbury.

“Well?” said Bathsheba, unwilling to believe that her verbal *lettre-de-cachet* could possibly have miscarried.

“He says beggars mustn’t be choosers,” replied Laban.

“What!” said the young farmer, opening her eyes and drawing in her breath for an outburst. Joseph Poorgrass retired a few steps behind a hurdle.

“He says he shall not come onless you request en to come civilly and in a proper manner, as becomes any ‘ooman begging a favour.”

“Oh, oh, that’s his answer! Where does he get his airs? Who am I, then, to be treated like that? Shall I beg to a man who has begged to me?”

Another of the flock sprang into the air, and fell dead.

The men looked grave, as if they suppressed opinion.

Bathsheba turned aside, her eyes full of tears. The strait she was in through pride and shrewishness could not be disguised longer: she burst out crying bitterly; they all saw it; and she attempted no further concealment.

“I wouldn’t cry about it, miss,” said William Smallbury, compassionately. “Why not ask him softer like? I’m sure he’d come then. Gable is a true man in that way.”

Bathsheba checked her grief and wiped her eyes. “Oh, it is a wicked cruelty to me — it is — it is!” she murmured. “And he drives me to do what I wouldn’t; yes, he does! — Tall, come indoors.”

After this collapse, not very dignified for the head of an establishment, she went into the house, Tall at her heels. Here she sat down and hastily scribbled a note between the small convulsive sobs of convalescence which follow a fit of crying as a ground-swell follows a storm. The note was none the less polite for being written in a hurry. She held it at a distance, was about to fold it, then added these words at the bottom: —

“Do not desert me, Gabriel!”

She looked a little redder in refolding it, and closed her lips, as if thereby to suspend till too late the action of conscience in examining whether such strategy were justifiable. The note was despatched as the message had been, and Bathsheba waited indoors for the result.

It was an anxious quarter of an hour that intervened between the messenger’s departure and the sound of the horse’s tramp again outside. She could not watch this time, but, leaning over the old bureau at which she had written the letter, closed her eyes, as if to keep out both hope and fear.

The case, however, was a promising one. Gabriel was not angry: he was simply neutral, although her first command had been so haughty. Such imperiousness would have damned a little less beauty; and on the other hand, such beauty would have redeemed a little less imperiousness.

She went out when the horse was heard, and looked up. A mounted figure passed between her and the sky, and drew on towards the field of sheep, the rider turning his face in receding. Gabriel looked at her. It was a moment when a woman’s eyes and tongue tell distinctly opposite tales. Bathsheba looked full of gratitude, and she said:

“Oh, Gabriel, how could you serve me so unkindly!”

Such a tenderly-shaped reproach for his previous delay was the one speech in the language that he could pardon for not being commendation of his readiness now.

Gabriel murmured a confused reply, and hastened on. She knew from the look which sentence in her note had brought him. Bathsheba followed to the field.

Gabriel was already among the turgid, prostrate forms. He had flung off his coat, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and taken from his pocket the instrument of salvation. It was a small tube or trochar, with a lance passing down the inside; and Gabriel began to use it with a dexterity that would have graced a hospital surgeon. Passing his hand over the sheep’s left flank, and selecting the proper point, he punctured the skin and rumen with the lance as it stood in the tube; then he suddenly withdrew the lance, retaining the tube in its place. A current of air rushed up the tube, forcible enough to have extinguished a candle held at the orifice.

It has been said that mere ease after torment is delight for a time; and the countenances of these poor creatures expressed it now. Forty-nine operations were successfully performed. Owing to the great hurry necessitated by the far-gone state of some of the flock, Gabriel missed his aim in one case, and in one only — striking wide of the mark, and inflicting a mortal blow at once upon the suffering ewe. Four had died; three re-

covered without an operation. The total number of sheep which had thus strayed and injured themselves so dangerously was fifty-seven.

When the love-led man had ceased from his labours, Bathsheba came and looked him in the face.

“Gabriel, will you stay on with me?” she said, smiling winningly, and not troubling to bring her lips quite together again at the end, because there was going to be another smile soon.

“I will,” said Gabriel.

And she smiled on him again.

CHAPTER XXII

THE GREAT BARN AND THE SHEEP-SHEARERS

Men thin away to insignificance and oblivion quite as often by not making the most of good spirits when they have them as by lacking good spirits when they are indispensable. Gabriel lately, for the first time since his prostration by misfortune, had been independent in thought and vigorous in action to a marked extent — conditions which, powerless without an opportunity as an opportunity without them is barren, would have given him a sure lift upwards when the favourable conjunction should have occurred. But this incurable loitering beside Bathsheba Everdene stole his time ruinously. The spring tides were going by without floating him off, and the neap might soon come which could not.

It was the first day of June, and the sheep-shearing season culminated, the landscape, even to the leanest pasture, being all health and colour. Every green was young, every pore was open, and every stalk was swollen with racing currents of juice. God was palpably present in the country, and the devil had gone with the world to town. Flossy catkins of the later kinds, fern-sprouts like bishops' croziers, the square-headed moschatel, the odd cuckoo-pint, — like an apoplectic saint in a niche of malachite, — snow-white ladies'-smocks, the toothwort, approximating to human flesh, the enchanter's night-shade, and the black-petaled doleful-bells, were among the quainter objects of the vegetable world in and about Weatherbury at this teeming time; and of the animal, the metamorphosed figures of Mr. Jan Coggan, the master-shearer; the second and third shearers, who travelled in the exercise of their calling, and do not require definition by name; Henery Fray the fourth shearer, Susan Tall's husband the fifth, Joseph Poorgrass the sixth, young Cain Ball as assistant-shearer, and Gabriel Oak as general supervisor. None of these were clothed to any extent worth mentioning, each appearing to have hit in the matter of raiment the decent mean between a high and low caste Hindoo. An angularity of lineament, and a fixity of facial machinery in general, proclaimed that serious work was the order of the day.

They sheared in the great barn, called for the nonce the Shearing-barn, which on ground-plan resembled a church with transepts. It not only emulated the form of the

neighbouring church of the parish, but vied with it in antiquity. Whether the barn had ever formed one of a group of conventual buildings nobody seemed to be aware; no trace of such surroundings remained. The vast porches at the sides, lofty enough to admit a waggon laden to its highest with corn in the sheaf, were spanned by heavy-pointed arches of stone, broadly and boldly cut, whose very simplicity was the origin of a grandeur not apparent in erections where more ornament has been attempted. The dusky, filmed, chestnut roof, braced and tied in by huge collars, curves, and diagonals, was far nobler in design, because more wealthy in material, than nine-tenths of those in our modern churches. Along each side wall was a range of striding buttresses, throwing deep shadows on the spaces between them, which were perforated by lancet openings, combining in their proportions the precise requirements both of beauty and ventilation.

One could say about this barn, what could hardly be said of either the church or the castle, akin to it in age and style, that the purpose which had dictated its original erection was the same with that to which it was still applied. Unlike and superior to either of those two typical remnants of mediævalism, the old barn embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time. Here at least the spirit of the ancient builders was at one with the spirit of the modern beholder. Standing before this abraded pile, the eye regarded its present usage, the mind dwelt upon its past history, with a satisfied sense of functional continuity throughout — a feeling almost of gratitude, and quite of pride, at the permanence of the idea which had heaped it up. The fact that four centuries had neither proved it to be founded on a mistake, inspired any hatred of its purpose, nor given rise to any reaction that had battered it down, invested this simple grey effort of old minds with a repose, if not a grandeur, which a too curious reflection was apt to disturb in its ecclesiastical and military compeers. For once mediævalism and modernism had a common stand-point. The lanceolate windows, the time-eaten archstones and chamfers, the orientation of the axis, the misty chestnut work of the rafters, referred to no exploded fortifying art or worn-out religious creed. The defence and salvation of the body by daily bread is still a study, a religion, and a desire.

To-day the large side doors were thrown open towards the sun to admit a bountiful light to the immediate spot of the shearers' operations, which was the wood threshing-floor in the centre, formed of thick oak, black with age and polished by the beating of flails for many generations, till it had grown as slippery and as rich in hue as the state-room floors of an Elizabethan mansion. Here the shearers knelt, the sun slanting in upon their bleached shirts, tanned arms, and the polished shears they flourished, causing these to bristle with a thousand rays strong enough to blind a weak-eyed man. Beneath them a captive sheep lay panting, quickening its pants as misgiving merged in terror, till it quivered like the hot landscape outside.

This picture of to-day in its frame of four hundred years ago did not produce that marked contrast between ancient and modern which is implied by the contrast of date. In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen's Then is the rustic's Now. In London, twenty or thirty-years ago are old times; in Paris ten years,

or five; in Weatherbury three or four score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set a mark on its face or tone. Five decades hardly modified the cut of a gaiter, the embroidery of a smock-frock, by the breadth of a hair. Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase. In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only old; his old times are still new; his present is futurity.

So the barn was natural to the shearers, and the shearers were in harmony with the barn.

The spacious ends of the building, answering ecclesiastically to nave and chancel extremities, were fenced off with hurdles, the sheep being all collected in a crowd within these two enclosures; and in one angle a catching-pen was formed, in which three or four sheep were continuously kept ready for the shearers to seize without loss of time. In the background, mellowed by tawny shade, were the three women, Maryann Money, and Temperance and Soberness Miller, gathering up the fleeces and twisting ropes of wool with a wimble for tying them round. They were indifferently well assisted by the old maltster, who, when the malting season from October to April had passed, made himself useful upon any of the bordering farmsteads.

Behind all was Bathsheba, carefully watching the men to see that there was no cutting or wounding through carelessness, and that the animals were shorn close. Gabriel, who flitted and hovered under her bright eyes like a moth, did not shear continuously, half his time being spent in attending to the others and selecting the sheep for them. At the present moment he was engaged in handing round a mug of mild liquor, supplied from a barrel in the corner, and cut pieces of bread and cheese.

Bathsheba, after throwing a glance here, a caution there, and lecturing one of the younger operators who had allowed his last finished sheep to go off among the flock without re-stamping it with her initials, came again to Gabriel, as he put down the luncheon to drag a frightened ewe to his shear-station, flinging it over upon its back with a dexterous twist of the arm. He lopped off the tresses about its head, and opened up the neck and collar, his mistress quietly looking on.

"She blushes at the insult," murmured Bathsheba, watching the pink flush which arose and overspread the neck and shoulders of the ewe where they were left bare by the clicking shears — a flush which was enviable, for its delicacy, by many queens of coteries, and would have been creditable, for its promptness, to any woman in the world.

Poor Gabriel's soul was fed with a luxury of content by having her over him, her eyes critically regarding his skilful shears, which apparently were going to gather up a piece of the flesh at every close, and yet never did so. Like Guildenstern, Oak was happy in that he was not over happy. He had no wish to converse with her: that his bright lady and himself formed one group, exclusively their own, and containing no others in the world, was enough.

So the chatter was all on her side. There is a loquacity that tells nothing, which was Bathsheba's; and there is a silence which says much: that was Gabriel's. Full of

this dim and temperate bliss, he went on to fling the ewe over upon her other side, covering her head with his knee, gradually running the shears line after line round her dewlap; thence about her flank and back, and finishing over the tail.

"Well done, and done quickly!" said Bathsheba, looking at her watch as the last snip resounded.

"How long, miss?" said Gabriel, wiping his brow.

"Three-and-twenty minutes and a half since you took the first lock from its forehead. It is the first time that I have ever seen one done in less than half an hour."

The clean, sleek creature arose from its fleece — how perfectly like Aphrodite rising from the foam should have been seen to be realised — looking startled and shy at the loss of its garment, which lay on the floor in one soft cloud, united throughout, the portion visible being the inner surface only, which, never before exposed, was white as snow, and without flaw or blemish of the minutest kind.

"Cain Ball!"

"Yes, Mister Oak; here I be!"

Cainy now runs forward with the tar-pot. "B. E." is newly stamped upon the shorn skin, and away the simple dam leaps, panting, over the board into the shirtless flock outside. Then up comes Maryann; throws the loose locks into the middle of the fleece, rolls it up, and carries it into the background as three-and-a-half pounds of unadulterated warmth for the winter enjoyment of persons unknown and far away, who will, however, never experience the superlative comfort derivable from the wool as it here exists, new and pure — before the unctuousness of its nature whilst in a living state has dried, stiffened, and been washed out — rendering it just now as superior to anything woollen as cream is superior to milk-and-water.

But heartless circumstance could not leave entire Gabriel's happiness of this morning. The rams, old ewes, and two-shear ewes had duly undergone their stripping, and the men were proceeding with the shear-lings and hogs, when Oak's belief that she was going to stand pleasantly by and time him through another performance was painfully interrupted by Farmer Boldwood's appearance in the extremest corner of the barn. Nobody seemed to have perceived his entry, but there he certainly was. Boldwood always carried with him a social atmosphere of his own, which everybody felt who came near him; and the talk, which Bathsheba's presence had somewhat suppressed, was now totally suspended.

He crossed over towards Bathsheba, who turned to greet him with a carriage of perfect ease. He spoke to her in low tones, and she instinctively modulated her own to the same pitch, and her voice ultimately even caught the inflection of his. She was far from having a wish to appear mysteriously connected with him; but woman at the impressionable age gravitates to the larger body not only in her choice of words, which is apparent every day, but even in her shades of tone and humour, when the influence is great.

What they conversed about was not audible to Gabriel, who was too independent to get near, though too concerned to disregard. The issue of their dialogue was the

taking of her hand by the courteous farmer to help her over the spreading-board into the bright June sunlight outside. Standing beside the sheep already shorn, they went on talking again. Concerning the flock? Apparently not. Gabriel theorized, not without truth, that in quiet discussion of any matter within reach of the speakers' eyes, these are usually fixed upon it. Bathsheba demurely regarded a contemptible straw lying upon the ground, in a way which suggested less ovine criticism than womanly embarrassment. She became more or less red in the cheek, the blood wavering in uncertain flux and reflux over the sensitive space between ebb and flood. Gabriel sheared on, constrained and sad.

She left Boldwood's side, and he walked up and down alone for nearly a quarter of an hour. Then she reappeared in her new riding-habit of myrtle green, which fitted her to the waist as a rind fits its fruit; and young Bob Coggan led on her mare, Boldwood fetching his own horse from the tree under which it had been tied.

Oak's eyes could not forsake them; and in endeavouring to continue his shearing at the same time that he watched Boldwood's manner, he snipped the sheep in the groin. The animal plunged; Bathsheba instantly gazed towards it, and saw the blood.

"Oh, Gabriel!" she exclaimed, with severe remonstrance, "you who are so strict with the other men — see what you are doing yourself!"

To an outsider there was not much to complain of in this remark; but to Oak, who knew Bathsheba to be well aware that she herself was the cause of the poor ewe's wound, because she had wounded the ewe's shearer in a still more vital part, it had a sting which the abiding sense of his inferiority to both herself and Boldwood was not calculated to heal. But a manly resolve to recognize boldly that he had no longer a lover's interest in her, helped him occasionally to conceal a feeling.

"Bottle!" he shouted, in an unmoved voice of routine. Cainy Ball ran up, the wound was anointed, and the shearing continued.

Boldwood gently tossed Bathsheba into the saddle, and before they turned away she again spoke out to Oak with the same dominative and tantalising graciousness.

"I am going now to see Mr. Boldwood's Leicesters. Take my place in the barn, Gabriel, and keep the men carefully to their work."

The horses' heads were put about, and they trotted away.

Boldwood's deep attachment was a matter of great interest among all around him; but, after having been pointed out for so many years as the perfect exemplar of thriving bachelorship, his lapse was an anticlimax somewhat resembling that of St. John Long's death by consumption in the midst of his proofs that it was not a fatal disease.

"That means matrimony," said Temperance Miller, following them out of sight with her eyes.

"I reckon that's the size o't," said Coggan, working along without looking up.

"Well, better wed over the mixen than over the moor," said Laban Tall, turning his sheep.

Henery Fray spoke, exhibiting miserable eyes at the same time: "I don't see why a maid should take a husband when she's bold enough to fight her own battles, and

don't want a home; for 'tis keeping another woman out. But let it be, for 'tis a pity he and she should trouble two houses."

As usual with decided characters, Bathsheba invariably provoked the criticism of individuals like Henery Fray. Her emblazoned fault was to be too pronounced in her objections, and not sufficiently overt in her likings. We learn that it is not the rays which bodies absorb, but those which they reject, that give them the colours they are known by; and in the same way people are specialised by their dislikes and antagonisms, whilst their goodwill is looked upon as no attribute at all.

Henery continued in a more complaisant mood: "I once hinted my mind to her on a few things, as nearly as a battered frame dared to do so to such a froward piece. You all know, neighbours, what a man I be, and how I come down with my powerful words when my pride is boiling wi' scorn?"

"We do, we do, Henery."

"So I said, 'Mistress Everdene, there's places empty, and there's gifted men willing; but the spite' — no, not the spite — I didn't say spite — 'but the villainy of the contrarikind,' I said (meaning womankind), 'keeps 'em out.' That wasn't too strong for her, say?"

"Passably well put."

"Yes; and I would have said it, had death and salvation overtook me for it. Such is my spirit when I have a mind."

"A true man, and proud as a lucifer."

"You see the artfulness? Why, 'twas about being baily really; but I didn't put it so plain that she could understand my meaning, so I could lay it on all the stronger. That was my depth! ... However, let her marry an she will. Perhaps 'tis high time. I believe Farmer Boldwood kissed her behind the spear-bed at the sheep-washing t'other day — that I do."

"What a lie!" said Gabriel.

"Ah, neighbour Oak — how'st know?" said, Henery, mildly.

"Because she told me all that passed," said Oak, with a pharisaical sense that he was not as other shearers in this matter.

"Ye have a right to believe it," said Henery, with dudgeon; "a very true right. But I mid see a little distance into things! To be long-headed enough for a baily's place is a poor mere trifle — yet a trifle more than nothing. However, I look round upon life quite cool. Do you heed me, neighbours? My words, though made as simple as I can, mid be rather deep for some heads."

"O yes, Henery, we quite heed ye."

"A strange old piece, goodmen — whirled about from here to yonder, as if I were nothing! A little warped, too. But I have my depths; ha, and even my great depths! I might gird at a certain shepherd, brain to brain. But no — O no!"

"A strange old piece, ye say!" interposed the maltster, in a querulous voice. "At the same time ye be no old man worth naming — no old man at all. Yer teeth bain't half gone yet; and what's a old man's standing if so be his teeth bain't gone? Weren't I

stale in wedlock afore ye were out of arms? 'Tis a poor thing to be sixty, when there's people far past four-score — a boast weak as water."

It was the unvarying custom in Weatherbury to sink minor differences when the maltster had to be pacified.

"Weak as water! yes," said Jan Coggan. "Malter, we feel ye to be a wonderful veteran man, and nobody can gainsay it."

"Nobody," said Joseph Poorgrass. "Ye be a very rare old spectacle, malter, and we all admire ye for that gift."

"Ay, and as a young man, when my senses were in prosperity, I was likewise liked by a good-few who knowed me," said the maltster.

"'Ithout doubt you was — 'ithout doubt."

The bent and hoary man was satisfied, and so apparently was Henery Fray. That matters should continue pleasant Maryann spoke, who, what with her brown complexion, and the working wrapper of rusty linsey, had at present the mellow hue of an old sketch in oils — notably some of Nicholas Poussin's: —

"Do anybody know of a crooked man, or a lame, or any second-hand fellow at all that would do for poor me?" said Maryann. "A perfect one I don't expect to get at my time of life. If I could hear of such a thing twould do me more good than toast and ale."

Coggan furnished a suitable reply. Oak went on with his shearing, and said not another word. Pestilent moods had come, and teased away his quiet. Bathsheba had shown indications of anointing him above his fellows by installing him as the bailiff that the farm imperatively required. He did not covet the post relatively to the farm: in relation to herself, as beloved by him and unmarried to another, he had coveted it. His readings of her seemed now to be vapoury and indistinct. His lecture to her was, he thought, one of the absurdest mistakes. Far from coquetting with Boldwood, she had trifled with himself in thus feigning that she had trifled with another. He was inwardly convinced that, in accordance with the anticipations of his easy-going and worse-educated comrades, that day would see Boldwood the accepted husband of Miss Everdene. Gabriel at this time of his life had out-grown the instinctive dislike which every Christian boy has for reading the Bible, perusing it now quite frequently, and he inwardly said, "I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets!" "This was mere exclamation — the froth of the storm. He adored Bathsheba just the same.

"We workfolk shall have some lordly junketing to-night," said Cainy Ball, casting forth his thoughts in a new direction. "This morning I see 'em making the great puddens in the milking-pails — lumps of fat as big as yer thumb, Mister Oak! I've never seed such splendid large knobs of fat before in the days of my life — they never used to be bigger then a horse-bean. And there was a great black crock upon the brandish with his legs a-sticking out, but I don't know what was in within."

"And there's two bushels of biffins for apple-pies," said Maryann.

“Well, I hope to do my duty by it all,” said Joseph Poorgrass, in a pleasant, masticating manner of anticipation. “Yes; victuals and drink is a cheerful thing, and gives nerves to the nerveless, if the form of words may be used. ‘Tis the gospel of the body, without which we perish, so to speak it.”

CHAPTER XXIII

EVENTIDE — A SECOND DECLARATION

For the shearing-supper a long table was placed on the grass-plot beside the house, the end of the table being thrust over the sill of the wide parlour window and a foot or two into the room. Miss Everdene sat inside the window, facing down the table. She was thus at the head without mingling with the men.

This evening Bathsheba was unusually excited, her red cheeks and lips contrasting lustroously with the mazy skeins of her shadowy hair. She seemed to expect assistance, and the seat at the bottom of the table was at her request left vacant until after they had begun the meal. She then asked Gabriel to take the place and the duties appertaining to that end, which he did with great readiness.

At this moment Mr. Boldwood came in at the gate, and crossed the green to Bathsheba at the window. He apologized for his lateness: his arrival was evidently by arrangement.

“Gabriel,” said she, “will you move again, please, and let Mr. Boldwood come there?”

Oak moved in silence back to his original seat.

The gentleman-farmer was dressed in cheerful style, in a new coat and white waistcoat, quite contrasting with his usual sober suits of grey. Inwardly, too, he was blithe, and consequently chatty to an exceptional degree. So also was Bathsheba now that he had come, though the uninvited presence of Pennyways, the bailiff who had been dismissed for theft, disturbed her equanimity for a while.

Supper being ended, Coggan began on his own private account, without reference to listeners: —

I’ve lost my love, and I care not,
I’ve lost my love, and I care not;
I shall soon have another
That’s better than t’other;
I’ve lost my love, and I care not.

This lyric, when concluded, was received with a silently appreciative gaze at the table, implying that the performance, like a work by those established authors who are independent of notices in the papers, was a well-known delight which required no applause.

“Now, Master Poorgrass, your song!” said Coggan.

“I be all but in liquor, and the gift is wanting in me,” said Joseph, diminishing himself.

"Nonsense; wou'st never be so ungrateful, Joseph — never!" said Coggan, expressing hurt feelings by an inflection of voice. "And mistress is looking hard at ye, as much as to say, 'Sing at once, Joseph Poorgrass.'"

"Faith, so she is; well, I must suffer it! ... Just eye my features, and see if the tell-tale blood overheats me much, neighbours?"

"No, yer blushes be quite reasonable," said Coggan.

"I always tries to keep my colours from rising when a beauty's eyes get fixed on me," said Joseph, differently; "but if so be 'tis willed they do, they must."

"Now, Joseph, your song, please," said Bathsheba, from the window.

"Well, really, ma'am," he replied, in a yielding tone, "I don't know what to say. It would be a poor plain ballet of my own composure."

"Hear, hear!" said the supper-party.

Poorgrass, thus assured, trilled forth a flickering yet commendable piece of sentiment, the tune of which consisted of the key-note and another, the latter being the sound chiefly dwelt upon. This was so successful that he rashly plunged into a second in the same breath, after a few false starts: —

I sow2-ed th2-e ...

I sow2-ed ...

I sow2-ed th2-e seeds2 of2 love2,

I-it was2 all2 i2-in the2-e spring2,

I-in A2-pril2, Ma2-ay, a2-nd sun2-ny2 June2,

When sma2-all bi2-irds they2 do2 sing.

"Well put out of hand," said Coggan, at the end of the verse. "'They do sing' was a very taking paragraph."

"Ay; and there was a pretty place at 'seeds of love.' and 'twas well heaved out. Though 'love' is a nasty high corner when a man's voice is getting crazed. Next verse, Master Poorgrass."

But during this rendering young Bob Coggan exhibited one of those anomalies which will afflict little people when other persons are particularly serious: in trying to check his laughter, he pushed down his throat as much of the tablecloth as he could get hold of, when, after continuing hermetically sealed for a short time, his mirth burst out through his nose. Joseph perceived it, and with hectic cheeks of indignation instantly ceased singing. Coggan boxed Bob's ears immediately.

"Go on, Joseph — go on, and never mind the young scamp," said Coggan. "'Tis a very catching ballet. Now then again — the next bar; I'll help ye to flourish up the shrill notes where yer wind is rather wheezy: —

"Oh the wi2-il-lo2-ow tree2 will2 twist2,

And the wil2-low2 tre2-ee wi2-ill twine2."

But the singer could not be set going again. Bob Coggan was sent home for his ill manners, and tranquility was restored by Jacob Smallbury, who volunteered a ballad as inclusive and interminable as that with which the worthy toper old Silenus amused

on a similar occasion the swains Chromis and Mnasyllus, and other jolly dogs of his day.

It was still the beaming time of evening, though night was stealthily making itself visible low down upon the ground, the western lines of light raking the earth without alighting upon it to any extent, or illuminating the dead levels at all. The sun had crept round the tree as a last effort before death, and then began to sink, the shearers' lower parts becoming steeped in embrowning twilight, whilst their heads and shoulders were still enjoying day, touched with a yellow of self-sustained brilliancy that seemed inherent rather than acquired.

The sun went down in an ochreous mist; but they sat, and talked on, and grew as merry as the gods in Homer's heaven. Bathsheba still remained enthroned inside the window, and occupied herself in knitting, from which she sometimes looked up to view the fading scene outside. The slow twilight expanded and enveloped them completely before the signs of moving were shown.

Gabriel suddenly missed Farmer Boldwood from his place at the bottom of the table. How long he had been gone Oak did not know; but he had apparently withdrawn into the encircling dusk. Whilst he was thinking of this, Liddy brought candles into the back part of the room overlooking the shearers, and their lively new flames shone down the table and over the men, and dispersed among the green shadows behind. Bathsheba's form, still in its original position, was now again distinct between their eyes and the light, which revealed that Boldwood had gone inside the room, and was sitting near her.

Next came the question of the evening. Would Miss Everdene sing to them the song she always sang so charmingly — "The Banks of Allan Water" — before they went home?

After a moment's consideration Bathsheba assented, beckoning to Gabriel, who hastened up into the coveted atmosphere.

"Have you brought your flute?" she whispered.

"Yes, miss."

"Play to my singing, then."

She stood up in the window-opening, facing the men, the candles behind her, Gabriel on her right hand, immediately outside the sash-frame. Boldwood had drawn up on her left, within the room. Her singing was soft and rather tremulous at first, but it soon swelled to a steady clearness. Subsequent events caused one of the verses to be remembered for many months, and even years, by more than one of those who were gathered there: —

For his bride a soldier sought her,
And a winning tongue had he:
On the banks of Allan Water
None was gay as she!

In addition to the dulcet piping of Gabriel's flute, Boldwood supplied a bass in his customary profound voice, uttering his notes so softly, however, as to abstain entirely from making anything like an ordinary duet of the song; they rather formed a rich unexplored shadow, which threw her tones into relief. The shearers reclined against each other as at suppers in the early ages of the world, and so silent and absorbed were they that her breathing could almost be heard between the bars; and at the end of the ballad, when the last tone loitered on to an inexpressible close, there arose that buzz of pleasure which is the attar of applause.

It is scarcely necessary to state that Gabriel could not avoid noting the farmer's bearing to-night towards their entertainer. Yet there was nothing exceptional in his actions beyond what appertained to his time of performing them. It was when the rest were all looking away that Boldwood observed her; when they regarded her he turned aside; when they thanked or praised he was silent; when they were inattentive he murmured his thanks. The meaning lay in the difference between actions, none of which had any meaning of itself; and the necessity of being jealous, which lovers are troubled with, did not lead Oak to underestimate these signs.

Bathsheba then wished them good-night, withdrew from the window, and retired to the back part of the room, Boldwood thereupon closing the sash and the shutters, and remaining inside with her. Oak wandered away under the quiet and scented trees. Recovering from the softer impressions produced by Bathsheba's voice, the shearers rose to leave, Coggan turning to Pennyways as he pushed back the bench to pass out:

"I like to give praise where praise is due, and the man deserves it — that 'a do so," he remarked, looking at the worthy thief, as if he were the masterpiece of some world-renowned artist.

"I'm sure I should never have believed it if we hadn't proved it, so to allude," hiccupped Joseph Poorgrass, "that every cup, every one of the best knives and forks, and every empty bottle be in their place as perfect now as at the beginning, and not one stole at all."

"I'm sure I don't deserve half the praise you give me," said the virtuous thief, grimly.

"Well, I'll say this for Pennyways," added Coggan, "that whenever he do really make up his mind to do a noble thing in the shape of a good action, as I could see by his face he did to-night afore sitting down, he's generally able to carry it out. Yes, I'm proud to say, neighbours, that he's stole nothing at all."

"Well, 'tis an honest deed, and we thank ye for it, Pennyways," said Joseph; to which opinion the remainder of the company subscribed unanimously.

At this time of departure, when nothing more was visible of the inside of the parlour than a thin and still chink of light between the shutters, a passionate scene was in course of enactment there.

Miss Everdene and Boldwood were alone. Her cheeks had lost a great deal of their healthful fire from the very seriousness of her position; but her eye was bright with the

excitement of a triumph — though it was a triumph which had rather been contemplated than desired.

She was standing behind a low arm-chair, from which she had just risen, and he was kneeling in it — inclining himself over its back towards her, and holding her hand in both his own. His body moved restlessly, and it was with what Keats daintily calls a too happy happiness. This unwonted abstraction by love of all dignity from a man of whom it had ever seemed the chief component, was, in its distressing incongruity, a pain to her which quenched much of the pleasure she derived from the proof that she was idolized.

“I will try to love you,” she was saying, in a trembling voice quite unlike her usual self-confidence. “And if I can believe in any way that I shall make you a good wife I shall indeed be willing to marry you. But, Mr. Boldwood, hesitation on so high a matter is honourable in any woman, and I don’t want to give a solemn promise to-night. I would rather ask you to wait a few weeks till I can see my situation better.

“But you have every reason to believe that then — ”

“I have every reason to hope that at the end of the five or six weeks, between this time and harvest, that you say you are going to be away from home, I shall be able to promise to be your wife,” she said, firmly. “But remember this distinctly, I don’t promise yet.”

“It is enough; I don’t ask more. I can wait on those dear words. And now, Miss Everdene, good-night!”

“Good-night,” she said, graciously — almost tenderly; and Boldwood withdrew with a serene smile.

Bathsheba knew more of him now; he had entirely bared his heart before her, even until he had almost worn in her eyes the sorry look of a grand bird without the feathers that make it grand. She had been awe-struck at her past temerity, and was struggling to make amends without thinking whether the sin quite deserved the penalty she was schooling herself to pay. To have brought all this about her ears was terrible; but after a while the situation was not without a fearful joy. The facility with which even the most timid women sometimes acquire a relish for the dreadful when that is amalgamated with a little triumph, is marvellous.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SAME NIGHT — THE FIR PLANTATION

Among the multifarious duties which Bathsheba had voluntarily imposed upon herself by dispensing with the services of a bailiff, was the particular one of looking round the homestead before going to bed, to see that all was right and safe for the night. Gabriel had almost constantly preceded her in this tour every evening, watching her affairs as carefully as any specially appointed officer of surveillance could have done; but this tender devotion was to a great extent unknown to his mistress, and as much

as was known was somewhat thanklessly received. Women are never tired of bewailing man's fickleness in love, but they only seem to snub his constancy.

As watching is best done invisibly, she usually carried a dark lantern in her hand, and every now and then turned on the light to examine nooks and corners with the coolness of a metropolitan policeman. This coolness may have owed its existence not so much to her fearlessness of expected danger as to her freedom from the suspicion of any; her worst anticipated discovery being that a horse might not be well bedded, the fowls not all in, or a door not closed.

This night the buildings were inspected as usual, and she went round to the farm paddock. Here the only sounds disturbing the stillness were steady munchings of many mouths, and stentorian breathings from all but invisible noses, ending in snores and puffs like the blowing of bellows slowly. Then the munching would recommence, when the lively imagination might assist the eye to discern a group of pink-white nostrils, shaped as caverns, and very clammy and humid on their surfaces, not exactly pleasant to the touch until one got used to them; the mouths beneath having a great partiality for closing upon any loose end of Bathsheba's apparel which came within reach of their tongues. Above each of these a still keener vision suggested a brown forehead and two staring though not unfriendly eyes, and above all a pair of whitish crescent-shaped horns like two particularly new moons, an occasional stolid "moo!" proclaiming beyond the shade of a doubt that these phenomena were the features and persons of Daisy, Whitefoot, Bonny-lass, Jolly-O, Spot, Twinkle-eye, etc., etc. — the respectable dairy of Devon cows belonging to Bathsheba aforesaid.

Her way back to the house was by a path through a young plantation of tapering firs, which had been planted some years earlier to shelter the premises from the north wind. By reason of the density of the interwoven foliage overhead, it was gloomy there at cloudless noontide, twilight in the evening, dark as midnight at dusk, and black as the ninth plague of Egypt at midnight. To describe the spot is to call it a vast, low, naturally formed hall, the plummy ceiling of which was supported by slender pillars of living wood, the floor being covered with a soft dun carpet of dead spikelets and mildewed cones, with a tuft of grass-blades here and there.

This bit of the path was always the crux of the night's ramble, though, before starting, her apprehensions of danger were not vivid enough to lead her to take a companion. Slipping along here covertly as Time, Bathsheba fancied she could hear footsteps entering the track at the opposite end. It was certainly a rustle of footsteps. Her own instantly fell as gently as snowflakes. She reassured herself by a remembrance that the path was public, and that the traveller was probably some villager returning home; regretting, at the same time, that the meeting should be about to occur in the darkest point of her route, even though only just outside her own door.

The noise approached, came close, and a figure was apparently on the point of gliding past her when something tugged at her skirt and pinned it forcibly to the ground. The instantaneous check nearly threw Bathsheba off her balance. In recovering she struck against warm clothes and buttons.

"A rum start, upon my soul!" said a masculine voice, a foot or so above her head. "Have I hurt you, mate?"

"No," said Bathsheba, attempting to shrink away.

"We have got hitched together somehow, I think."

"Yes."

"Are you a woman?"

"Yes."

"A lady, I should have said."

"It doesn't matter."

"I am a man."

"Oh!"

Bathsheba softly tugged again, but to no purpose.

"Is that a dark lantern you have? I fancy so," said the man.

"Yes."

"If you'll allow me I'll open it, and set you free."

A hand seized the lantern, the door was opened, the rays burst out from their prison, and Bathsheba beheld her position with astonishment.

The man to whom she was hooked was brilliant in brass and scarlet. He was a soldier. His sudden appearance was to darkness what the sound of a trumpet is to silence. Gloom, the genius loci at all times hitherto, was now totally overthrown, less by the lantern-light than by what the lantern lighted. The contrast of this revelation with her anticipations of some sinister figure in sombre garb was so great that it had upon her the effect of a fairy transformation.

It was immediately apparent that the military man's spur had become entangled in the gimp which decorated the skirt of her dress. He caught a view of her face.

"I'll unfasten you in one moment, miss," he said, with new-born gallantry.

"Oh no — I can do it, thank you," she hastily replied, and stooped for the performance.

The unfastening was not such a trifling affair. The rowel of the spur had so wound itself among the gimp cords in those few moments, that separation was likely to be a matter of time.

He too stooped, and the lantern standing on the ground betwixt them threw the gleam from its open side among the fir-tree needles and the blades of long damp grass with the effect of a large glowworm. It radiated upwards into their faces, and sent over half the plantation gigantic shadows of both man and woman, each dusky shape becoming distorted and mangled upon the tree-trunks till it wasted to nothing.

He looked hard into her eyes when she raised them for a moment; Bathsheba looked down again, for his gaze was too strong to be received point-blank with her own. But she had obliquely noticed that he was young and slim, and that he wore three chevrons upon his sleeve.

Bathsheba pulled again.

"You are a prisoner, miss; it is no use blinking the matter," said the soldier, drily. "I must cut your dress if you are in such a hurry."

"Yes — please do!" she exclaimed, helplessly.

"It wouldn't be necessary if you could wait a moment," and he unwound a cord from the little wheel. She withdrew her own hand, but, whether by accident or design, he touched it. Bathsheba was vexed; she hardly knew why.

His unravelling went on, but it nevertheless seemed coming to no end. She looked at him again.

"Thank you for the sight of such a beautiful face!" said the young sergeant, without ceremony.

She coloured with embarrassment. "'Twas unwillingly shown," she replied, stiffly, and with as much dignity — which was very little — as she could infuse into a position of captivity.

"I like you the better for that incivility, miss," he said.

"I should have liked — I wish — you had never shown yourself to me by intruding here!" She pulled again, and the gathers of her dress began to give way like liliputian musketry.

"I deserve the chastisement your words give me. But why should such a fair and dutiful girl have such an aversion to her father's sex?"

"Go on your way, please."

"What, Beauty, and drag you after me? Do but look; I never saw such a tangle!"

"Oh, 'tis shameful of you; you have been making it worse on purpose to keep me here — you have!"

"Indeed, I don't think so," said the sergeant, with a merry twinkle.

"I tell you you have!" she exclaimed, in high temper. "I insist upon undoing it. Now, allow me!"

"Certainly, miss; I am not of steel." He added a sigh which had as much archness in it as a sigh could possess without losing its nature altogether. "I am thankful for beauty, even when 'tis thrown to me like a bone to a dog. These moments will be over too soon!"

She closed her lips in a determined silence.

Bathsheba was revolving in her mind whether by a bold and desperate rush she could free herself at the risk of leaving her skirt bodily behind her. The thought was too dreadful. The dress — which she had put on to appear stately at the supper — was the head and front of her wardrobe; not another in her stock became her so well. What woman in Bathsheba's position, not naturally timid, and within call of her retainers, would have bought escape from a dashing soldier at so dear a price?

"All in good time; it will soon be done, I perceive," said her cool friend.

"This trifling provokes, and — and —"

"Not too cruel!"

" — Insults me!"

"It is done in order that I may have the pleasure of apologizing to so charming a woman, which I straightway do most humbly, madam," he said, bowing low.

Bathsheba really knew not what to say.

"I've seen a good many women in my time," continued the young man in a murmur, and more thoughtfully than hitherto, critically regarding her bent head at the same time; "but I've never seen a woman so beautiful as you. Take it or leave it — be offended or like it — I don't care."

"Who are you, then, who can so well afford to despise opinion?"

"No stranger. Sergeant Troy. I am staying in this place. — There! it is undone at last, you see. Your light fingers were more eager than mine. I wish it had been the knot of knots, which there's no untying!"

This was worse and worse. She started up, and so did he. How to decently get away from him — that was her difficulty now. She sidled off inch by inch, the lantern in her hand, till she could see the redness of his coat no longer.

"Ah, Beauty; good-bye!" he said.

She made no reply, and, reaching a distance of twenty or thirty yards, turned about, and ran indoors.

Liddy had just retired to rest. In ascending to her own chamber, Bathsheba opened the girl's door an inch or two, and, panting, said —

"Liddy, is any soldier staying in the village — sergeant somebody — rather gentlemanly for a sergeant, and good looking — a red coat with blue facings?"

"No, miss ... No, I say; but really it might be Sergeant Troy home on furlough, though I have not seen him. He was here once in that way when the regiment was at Casterbridge."

"Yes; that's the name. Had he a moustache — no whiskers or beard?"

"He had."

"What kind of a person is he?"

"Oh! miss — I blush to name it — a gay man! But I know him to be very quick and trim, who might have made his thousands, like a squire. Such a clever young dandy as he is! He's a doctor's son by name, which is a great deal; and he's an earl's son by nature!"

"Which is a great deal more. Fancy! Is it true?"

"Yes. And, he was brought up so well, and sent to Casterbridge Grammar School for years and years. Learnt all languages while he was there; and it was said he got on so far that he could take down Chinese in shorthand; but that I don't answer for, as it was only reported. However, he wasted his gifted lot, and listed a soldier; but even then he rose to be a sergeant without trying at all. Ah! such a blessing it is to be high-born; nobility of blood will shine out even in the ranks and files. And is he really come home, miss?"

"I believe so. Good-night, Liddy."

After all, how could a cheerful wearer of skirts be permanently offended with the man? There are occasions when girls like Bathsheba will put up with a great deal of

unconventional behaviour. When they want to be praised, which is often, when they want to be mastered, which is sometimes; and when they want no nonsense, which is seldom. Just now the first feeling was in the ascendant with Bathsheba, with a dash of the second. Moreover, by chance or by devilry, the ministrant was antecedently made interesting by being a handsome stranger who had evidently seen better days.

So she could not clearly decide whether it was her opinion that he had insulted her or not.

“Was ever anything so odd!” she at last exclaimed to herself, in her own room. “And was ever anything so meanly done as what I did — to skulk away like that from a man who was only civil and kind!” Clearly she did not think his barefaced praise of her person an insult now.

It was a fatal omission of Boldwood’s that he had never once told her she was beautiful.

CHAPTER XXV

THE NEW ACQUAINTANCE DESCRIBED

Idiosyncrasy and vicissitude had combined to stamp Sergeant Troy as an exceptional being.

He was a man to whom memories were an incumbrance, and anticipations a superfluity. Simply feeling, considering, and caring for what was before his eyes, he was vulnerable only in the present. His outlook upon time was as a transient flash of the eye now and then: that projection of consciousness into days gone by and to come, which makes the past a synonym for the pathetic and the future a word for circumspection, was foreign to Troy. With him the past was yesterday; the future, to-morrow; never, the day after.

On this account he might, in certain lights, have been regarded as one of the most fortunate of his order. For it may be argued with great plausibility that reminiscence is less an endowment than a disease, and that expectation in its only comfortable form — that of absolute faith — is practically an impossibility; whilst in the form of hope and the secondary compounds, patience, impatience, resolve, curiosity, it is a constant fluctuation between pleasure and pain.

Sergeant Troy, being entirely innocent of the practice of expectation, was never disappointed. To set against this negative gain there may have been some positive losses from a certain narrowing of the higher tastes and sensations which it entailed. But limitation of the capacity is never recognized as a loss by the loser therefrom: in this attribute moral or æsthetic poverty contrasts plausibly with material, since those who suffer do not mind it, whilst those who mind it soon cease to suffer. It is not a denial of anything to have been always without it, and what Troy had never enjoyed he did not miss; but, being fully conscious that what sober people missed he enjoyed, his capacity, though really less, seemed greater than theirs.

He was moderately truthful towards men, but to women lied like a Cretan — a system of ethics above all others calculated to win popularity at the first flush of admission into lively society; and the possibility of the favour gained being transitory had reference only to the future.

He never passed the line which divides the spruce vices from the ugly; and hence, though his morals had hardly been applauded, disapproval of them had frequently been tempered with a smile. This treatment had led to his becoming a sort of regreter of other men's gallantries, to his own aggrandizement as a Corinthian, rather than to the moral profit of his hearers.

His reason and his propensities had seldom any reciprocating influence, having separated by mutual consent long ago: thence it sometimes happened that, while his intentions were as honourable as could be wished, any particular deed formed a dark background which threw them into fine relief. The sergeant's vicious phases being the offspring of impulse, and his virtuous phases of cool meditation, the latter had a modest tendency to be oftener heard of than seen.

Troy was full of activity, but his activities were less of a locomotive than a vegetative nature; and, never being based upon any original choice of foundation or direction, they were exercised on whatever object chance might place in their way. Hence, whilst he sometimes reached the brilliant in speech because that was spontaneous, he fell below the commonplace in action, from inability to guide incipient effort. He had a quick comprehension and considerable force of character; but, being without the power to combine them, the comprehension became engaged with trivialities whilst waiting for the will to direct it, and the force wasted itself in useless grooves through unheeding the comprehension.

He was a fairly well-educated man for one of middle class — exceptionally well educated for a common soldier. He spoke fluently and unceasingly. He could in this way be one thing and seem another: for instance, he could speak of love and think of dinner; call on the husband to look at the wife; be eager to pay and intend to owe.

The wondrous power of flattery in passados at woman is a perception so universal as to be remarked upon by many people almost as automatically as they repeat a proverb, or say that they are Christians and the like, without thinking much of the enormous corollaries which spring from the proposition. Still less is it acted upon for the good of the complementary being alluded to. With the majority such an opinion is shelved with all those trite aphorisms which require some catastrophe to bring their tremendous meanings thoroughly home. When expressed with some amount of reflectiveness it seems co-ordinate with a belief that this flattery must be reasonable to be effective. It is to the credit of men that few attempt to settle the question by experiment, and it is for their happiness, perhaps, that accident has never settled it for them. Nevertheless, that a male dissembler who by deluging her with untenable fictions charms the female wisely, may acquire powers reaching to the extremity of perdition, is a truth taught to many by unsought and wringing occurrences. And some profess to have attained to

the same knowledge by experiment as aforesaid, and jauntily continue their indulgence in such experiments with terrible effect. Sergeant Troy was one.

He had been known to observe casually that in dealing with womankind the only alternative to flattery was cursing and swearing. There was no third method. "Treat them fairly, and you are a lost man." he would say.

This person's public appearance in Weatherbury promptly followed his arrival there. A week or two after the shearing, Bathsheba, feeling a nameless relief of spirits on account of Boldwood's absence, approached her hayfields and looked over the hedge towards the haymakers. They consisted in about equal proportions of gnarled and flexuous forms, the former being the men, the latter the women, who wore tilt bonnets covered with nankeen, which hung in a curtain upon their shoulders. Coggan and Mark Clark were mowing in a less forward meadow, Clark humming a tune to the strokes of his scythe, to which Jan made no attempt to keep time with his. In the first mead they were already loading hay, the women raking it into cocks and windrows, and the men tossing it upon the waggon.

From behind the waggon a bright scarlet spot emerged, and went on loading unconcernedly with the rest. It was the gallant sergeant, who had come haymaking for pleasure; and nobody could deny that he was doing the mistress of the farm real knight-service by this voluntary contribution of his labour at a busy time.

As soon as she had entered the field Troy saw her, and sticking his pitchfork into the ground and picking up his crop or cane, he came forward. Bathsheba blushed with half-angry embarrassment, and adjusted her eyes as well as her feet to the direct line of her path.

CHAPTER XXVI

SCENE ON THE VERGE OF THE HAY-MEAD

"Ah, Miss Everdene!" said the sergeant, touching his diminutive cap. "Little did I think it was you I was speaking to the other night. And yet, if I had reflected, the 'Queen of the Corn-market' (truth is truth at any hour of the day or night, and I heard you so named in Casterbridge yesterday), the 'Queen of the Corn-market.' I say, could be no other woman. I step across now to beg your forgiveness a thousand times for having been led by my feelings to express myself too strongly for a stranger. To be sure I am no stranger to the place — I am Sergeant Troy, as I told you, and I have assisted your uncle in these fields no end of times when I was a lad. I have been doing the same for you to-day."

"I suppose I must thank you for that, Sergeant Troy," said the Queen of the Corn-market, in an indifferently grateful tone.

The sergeant looked hurt and sad. "Indeed you must not, Miss Everdene," he said. "Why could you think such a thing necessary?"

"I am glad it is not."

"Why? if I may ask without offence."

"Because I don't much want to thank you for anything."

"I am afraid I have made a hole with my tongue that my heart will never mend. O these intolerable times: that ill-luck should follow a man for honestly telling a woman she is beautiful! 'Twas the most I said — you must own that; and the least I could say — that I own myself."

"There is some talk I could do without more easily than money."

"Indeed. That remark is a sort of digression."

"No. It means that I would rather have your room than your company."

"And I would rather have curses from you than kisses from any other woman; so I'll stay here."

Bathsheba was absolutely speechless. And yet she could not help feeling that the assistance he was rendering forbade a harsh repulse.

"Well," continued Troy, "I suppose there is a praise which is rudeness, and that may be mine. At the same time there is a treatment which is injustice, and that may be yours. Because a plain blunt man, who has never been taught concealment, speaks out his mind without exactly intending it, he's to be snapped off like the son of a sinner."

"Indeed there's no such case between us," she said, turning away. "I don't allow strangers to be bold and impudent — even in praise of me."

"Ah — it is not the fact but the method which offends you," he said, carelessly. "But I have the sad satisfaction of knowing that my words, whether pleasing or offensive, are unmistakably true. Would you have had me look at you, and tell my acquaintance that you are quite a common-place woman, to save you the embarrassment of being stared at if they come near you? Not I. I couldn't tell any such ridiculous lie about a beauty to encourage a single woman in England in too excessive a modesty."

"It is all pretence — what you are saying!" exclaimed Bathsheba, laughing in spite of herself at the sly method. "You have a rare invention, Sergeant Troy. Why couldn't you have passed by me that night, and said nothing? — that was all I meant to reproach you for."

"Because I wasn't going to. Half the pleasure of a feeling lies in being able to express it on the spur of the moment, and I let out mine. It would have been just the same if you had been the reverse person — ugly and old — I should have exclaimed about it in the same way."

"How long is it since you have been so afflicted with strong feeling, then?"

"Oh, ever since I was big enough to know loveliness from deformity."

"'Tis to be hoped your sense of the difference you speak of doesn't stop at faces, but extends to morals as well."

"I won't speak of morals or religion — my own or anybody else's. Though perhaps I should have been a very good Christian if you pretty women hadn't made me an idolater."

Bathsheba moved on to hide the irrepressible dimplings of merriment. Troy followed, whirling his crop.

"But — Miss Everdene — you do forgive me?"

"Hardly."

"Why?"

"You say such things."

"I said you were beautiful, and I'll say so still; for, by — so you are! The most beautiful ever I saw, or may I fall dead this instant! Why, upon my — "

"Don't — don't! I won't listen to you — you are so profane!" she said, in a restless state between distress at hearing him and a penchant to hear more.

"I again say you are a most fascinating woman. There's nothing remarkable in my saying so, is there? I'm sure the fact is evident enough. Miss Everdene, my opinion may be too forcibly let out to please you, and, for the matter of that, too insignificant to convince you, but surely it is honest, and why can't it be excused?"

"Because it — it isn't a correct one," she femininely murmured.

"Oh, fie — fie! Am I any worse for breaking the third of that Terrible Ten than you for breaking the ninth?"

"Well, it doesn't seem quite true to me that I am fascinating," she replied evasively.

"Not so to you: then I say with all respect that, if so, it is owing to your modesty, Miss Everdene. But surely you must have been told by everybody of what everybody notices? And you should take their words for it."

"They don't say so exactly."

"Oh yes, they must!"

"Well, I mean to my face, as you do," she went on, allowing herself to be further lured into a conversation that intention had rigorously forbidden.

"But you know they think so?"

"No — that is — I certainly have heard Liddy say they do, but — " She paused.

Capitulation — that was the purport of the simple reply, guarded as it was — capitulation, unknown to herself. Never did a fragile tailless sentence convey a more perfect meaning. The careless sergeant smiled within himself, and probably too the devil smiled from a loop-hole in Tophet, for the moment was the turning-point of a career. Her tone and mien signified beyond mistake that the seed which was to lift the foundation had taken root in the chink: the remainder was a mere question of time and natural changes.

"There the truth comes out!" said the soldier, in reply. "Never tell me that a young lady can live in a buzz of admiration without knowing something about it. Ah, well, Miss Everdene, you are — pardon my blunt way — you are rather an injury to our race than otherwise."

"How — indeed?" she said, opening her eyes.

"Oh, it is true enough. I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb (an old country saying, not of much account, but it will do for a rough soldier), and so I will speak my mind, regardless of your pleasure, and without hoping or intending to get your pardon. Why, Miss Everdene, it is in this manner that your good looks may do more harm than good in the world." The sergeant looked down the mead in critical abstraction.

“Probably some one man on an average falls in love with each ordinary woman. She can marry him: he is content, and leads a useful life. Such women as you a hundred men always covet — your eyes will bewitch scores on scores into an unavailing fancy for you — you can only marry one of that many. Out of these say twenty will endeavour to drown the bitterness of despised love in drink; twenty more will mope away their lives without a wish or attempt to make a mark in the world, because they have no ambition apart from their attachment to you; twenty more — the susceptible person myself possibly among them — will be always draggling after you, getting where they may just see you, doing desperate things. Men are such constant fools! The rest may try to get over their passion with more or less success. But all these men will be saddened. And not only those ninety-nine men, but the ninety-nine women they might have married are saddened with them. There’s my tale. That’s why I say that a woman so charming as yourself, Miss Everdene, is hardly a blessing to her race.”

The handsome sergeant’s features were during this speech as rigid and stern as John Knox’s in addressing his gay young queen.

Seeing she made no reply, he said, “Do you read French?”

“No; I began, but when I got to the verbs, father died,” she said simply.

“I do — when I have an opportunity, which latterly has not been often (my mother was a Parisienne) — and there’s a proverb they have, *Qui aime bien châtie bien* — ‘He chastens who loves well.’ Do you understand me?”

“Ah!” she replied, and there was even a little tremulousness in the usually cool girl’s voice; “if you can only fight half as winningly as you can talk, you are able to make a pleasure of a bayonet wound!” And then poor Bathsheba instantly perceived her slip in making this admission: in hastily trying to retrieve it, she went from bad to worse. “Don’t, however, suppose that I derive any pleasure from what you tell me.”

“I know you do not — I know it perfectly,” said Troy, with much hearty conviction on the exterior of his face: and altering the expression to moodiness; “when a dozen men are ready to speak tenderly to you, and give the admiration you deserve without adding the warning you need, it stands to reason that my poor rough-and-ready mixture of praise and blame cannot convey much pleasure. Fool as I may be, I am not so conceited as to suppose that!”

“I think you — are conceited, nevertheless,” said Bathsheba, looking askance at a reed she was fitfully pulling with one hand, having lately grown feverish under the soldier’s system of procedure — not because the nature of his cajolery was entirely unperceived, but because its vigour was overwhelming.

“I would not own it to anybody else — nor do I exactly to you. Still, there might have been some self-conceit in my foolish supposition the other night. I knew that what I said in admiration might be an opinion too often forced upon you to give any pleasure, but I certainly did think that the kindness of your nature might prevent you judging an uncontrolled tongue harshly — which you have done — and thinking badly of me and wounding me this morning, when I am working hard to save your hay.”

"Well, you need not think more of that: perhaps you did not mean to be rude to me by speaking out your mind: indeed, I believe you did not," said the shrewd woman, in painfully innocent earnest. "And I thank you for giving help here. But — but mind you don't speak to me again in that way, or in any other, unless I speak to you."

"Oh, Miss Bathsheba! That is too hard!"

"No, it isn't. Why is it?"

"You will never speak to me; for I shall not be here long. I am soon going back again to the miserable monotony of drill — and perhaps our regiment will be ordered out soon. And yet you take away the one little ewe-lamb of pleasure that I have in this dull life of mine. Well, perhaps generosity is not a woman's most marked characteristic."

"When are you going from here?" she asked, with some interest.

"In a month."

"But how can it give you pleasure to speak to me?"

"Can you ask Miss Everdene — knowing as you do — what my offence is based on?"

"If you do care so much for a silly trifle of that kind, then, I don't mind doing it," she uncertainly and doubtingly answered. "But you can't really care for a word from me? you only say so — I think you only say so."

"That's unjust — but I won't repeat the remark. I am too gratified to get such a mark of your friendship at any price to cavil at the tone. I do, Miss Everdene, care for it. You may think a man foolish to want a mere word — just a good morning. Perhaps he is — I don't know. But you have never been a man looking upon a woman, and that woman yourself."

"Well."

"Then you know nothing of what such an experience is like — and Heaven forbid that you ever should!"

"Nonsense, flatterer! What is it like? I am interested in knowing."

"Put shortly, it is not being able to think, hear, or look in any direction except one without wretchedness, nor there without torture."

"Ah, sergeant, it won't do — you are pretending!" she said, shaking her head. "Your words are too dashing to be true."

"I am not, upon the honour of a soldier."

"But why is it so? — Of course I ask for mere pastime."

"Because you are so distracting — and I am so distracted."

"You look like it."

"I am indeed."

"Why, you only saw me the other night!"

"That makes no difference. The lightning works instantaneously. I loved you then, at once — as I do now."

Bathsheba surveyed him curiously, from the feet upward, as high as she liked to venture her glance, which was not quite so high as his eyes.

"You cannot and you don't," she said demurely. "There is no such sudden feeling in people. I won't listen to you any longer. Hear me, I wish I knew what o'clock it is — I am going — I have wasted too much time here already!"

The sergeant looked at his watch and told her. "What, haven't you a watch, miss?" he inquired.

"I have not just at present — I am about to get a new one."

"No. You shall be given one. Yes — you shall. A gift, Miss Everdene — a gift."

And before she knew what the young man was intending, a heavy gold watch was in her hand.

"It is an unusually good one for a man like me to possess," he quietly said. "That watch has a history. Press the spring and open the back."

She did so.

"What do you see?"

"A crest and a motto."

"A coronet with five points, and beneath, *Cedit amor rebus* — 'Love yields to circumstance.' It's the motto of the Earls of Severn. That watch belonged to the last lord, and was given to my mother's husband, a medical man, for his use till I came of age, when it was to be given to me. It was all the fortune that ever I inherited. That watch has regulated imperial interests in its time — the stately ceremonial, the courtly assignation, pompous travels, and lordly sleeps. Now it is yours."

"But, Sergeant Troy, I cannot take this — I cannot!" she exclaimed, with round-eyed wonder. "A gold watch! What are you doing? Don't be such a dissembler!"

The sergeant retreated to avoid receiving back his gift, which she held out persistently towards him. Bathsheba followed as he retired.

"Keep it — do, Miss Everdene — keep it!" said the erratic child of impulse. "The fact of your possessing it makes it worth ten times as much to me. A more plebeian one will answer my purpose just as well, and the pleasure of knowing whose heart my old one beats against — well, I won't speak of that. It is in far worthier hands than ever it has been in before."

"But indeed I can't have it!" she said, in a perfect simmer of distress. "Oh, how can you do such a thing; that is if you really mean it! Give me your dead father's watch, and such a valuable one! You should not be so reckless, indeed, Sergeant Troy!"

"I loved my father: good; but better, I love you more. That's how I can do it," said the sergeant, with an intonation of such exquisite fidelity to nature that it was evidently not all acted now. Her beauty, which, whilst it had been quiescent, he had praised in jest, had in its animated phases moved him to earnest; and though his seriousness was less than she imagined, it was probably more than he imagined himself.

Bathsheba was brimming with agitated bewilderment, and she said, in half-suspicious accents of feeling, "Can it be! Oh, how can it be, that you care for me, and so suddenly! You have seen so little of me: I may not be really so — so nice-looking as I seem to you. Please, do take it; Oh, do! I cannot and will not have it. Believe me,

your generosity is too great. I have never done you a single kindness, and why should you be so kind to me?"

A factitious reply had been again upon his lips, but it was again suspended, and he looked at her with an arrested eye. The truth was, that as she now stood — excited, wild, and honest as the day — her alluring beauty bore out so fully the epithets he had bestowed upon it that he was quite startled at his temerity in advancing them as false. He said mechanically, "Ah, why?" and continued to look at her.

"And my workfolk see me following you about the field, and are wondering. Oh, this is dreadful!" she went on, unconscious of the transmutation she was effecting.

"I did not quite mean you to accept it at first, for it was my one poor patent of nobility," he broke out, bluntly; "but, upon my soul, I wish you would now. Without any shamming, come! Don't deny me the happiness of wearing it for my sake? But you are too lovely even to care to be kind as others are."

"No, no; don't say so! I have reasons for reserve which I cannot explain."

"Let it be, then, let it be," he said, receiving back the watch at last; "I must be leaving you now. And will you speak to me for these few weeks of my stay?"

"Indeed I will. Yet, I don't know if I will! Oh, why did you come and disturb me so!"

"Perhaps in setting a gin, I have caught myself. Such things have happened. Well, will you let me work in your fields?" he coaxed.

"Yes, I suppose so; if it is any pleasure to you."

"Miss Everdene, I thank you."

"No, no."

"Good-bye!"

The sergeant brought his hand to the cap on the slope of his head, saluted, and returned to the distant group of haymakers.

Bathsheba could not face the haymakers now. Her heart erratically flitting hither and thither from perplexed excitement, hot, and almost tearful, she retreated homeward, murmuring, "Oh, what have I done! What does it mean! I wish I knew how much of it was true!"

CHAPTER XXVII

HIVING THE BEES

The Weatherbury bees were late in their swarming this year. It was in the latter part of June, and the day after the interview with Troy in the hayfield, that Bathsheba was standing in her garden, watching a swarm in the air and guessing their probable settling place. Not only were they late this year, but unruly. Sometimes throughout a whole season all the swarms would alight on the lowest attainable bough — such as part of a currant-bush or espalier apple-tree; next year they would, with just the same unanimity, make straight off to the uppermost member of some tall, gaunt costard,

or quarrenden, and there defy all invaders who did not come armed with ladders and staves to take them.

This was the case at present. Bathsheba's eyes, shaded by one hand, were following the ascending multitude against the unexplorable stretch of blue till they ultimately halted by one of the unwieldy trees spoken of. A process somewhat analogous to that of alleged formations of the universe, time and times ago, was observable. The bustling swarm had swept the sky in a scattered and uniform haze, which now thickened to a nebulous centre: this glided on to a bough and grew still denser, till it formed a solid black spot upon the light.

The men and women being all busily engaged in saving the hay — even Liddy had left the house for the purpose of lending a hand — Bathsheba resolved to hive the bees herself, if possible. She had dressed the hive with herbs and honey, fetched a ladder, brush, and crook, made herself impregnable with armour of leather gloves, straw hat, and large gauze veil — once green but now faded to snuff colour — and ascended a dozen rungs of the ladder. At once she heard, not ten yards off, a voice that was beginning to have a strange power in agitating her.

"Miss Everdene, let me assist you; you should not attempt such a thing alone."

Troy was just opening the garden gate.

Bathsheba flung down the brush, crook, and empty hive, pulled the skirt of her dress tightly round her ankles in a tremendous flurry, and as well as she could slid down the ladder. By the time she reached the bottom Troy was there also, and he stooped to pick up the hive.

"How fortunate I am to have dropped in at this moment!" exclaimed the sergeant.

She found her voice in a minute. "What! and will you shake them in for me?" she asked, in what, for a defiant girl, was a faltering way; though, for a timid girl, it would have seemed a brave way enough.

"Will I!" said Troy. "Why, of course I will. How blooming you are to-day!" Troy flung down his cane and put his foot on the ladder to ascend.

"But you must have on the veil and gloves, or you'll be stung fearfully!"

"Ah, yes. I must put on the veil and gloves. Will you kindly show me how to fix them properly?"

"And you must have the broad-brimmed hat, too, for your cap has no brim to keep the veil off, and they'd reach your face."

"The broad-brimmed hat, too, by all means."

So a whimsical fate ordered that her hat should be taken off — veil and all attached — and placed upon his head, Troy tossing his own into a gooseberry bush. Then the veil had to be tied at its lower edge round his collar and the gloves put on him.

He looked such an extraordinary object in this guise that, flurried as she was, she could not avoid laughing outright. It was the removal of yet another stake from the palisade of cold manners which had kept him off.

Bathsheba looked on from the ground whilst he was busy sweeping and shaking the bees from the tree, holding up the hive with the other hand for them to fall into. She

made use of an unobserved minute whilst his attention was absorbed in the operation to arrange her plumes a little. He came down holding the hive at arm's length, behind which trailed a cloud of bees.

"Upon my life," said Troy, through the veil, "holding up this hive makes one's arm ache worse than a week of sword-exercise." When the manoeuvre was complete he approached her. "Would you be good enough to untie me and let me out? I am nearly stifled inside this silk cage."

To hide her embarrassment during the unwonted process of untying the string about his neck, she said: —

"I have never seen that you spoke of."

"What?"

"The sword-exercise."

"Ah! would you like to?" said Troy.

Bathsheba hesitated. She had heard wondrous reports from time to time by dwellers in Weatherbury, who had by chance sojourned awhile in Casterbridge, near the barracks, of this strange and glorious performance, the sword-exercise. Men and boys who had peeped through chinks or over walls into the barrack-yard returned with accounts of its being the most flashing affair conceivable; accoutrements and weapons glistening like stars — here, there, around — yet all by rule and compass. So she said mildly what she felt strongly.

"Yes; I should like to see it very much."

"And so you shall; you shall see me go through it."

"No! How?"

"Let me consider."

"Not with a walking-stick — I don't care to see that. It must be a real sword."

"Yes, I know; and I have no sword here; but I think I could get one by the evening. Now, will you do this?"

Troy bent over her and murmured some suggestion in a low voice.

"Oh no, indeed!" said Bathsheba, blushing. "Thank you very much, but I couldn't on any account."

"Surely you might? Nobody would know."

She shook her head, but with a weakened negation. "If I were to," she said, "I must bring Liddy too. Might I not?"

Troy looked far away. "I don't see why you want to bring her," he said coldly.

An unconscious look of assent in Bathsheba's eyes betrayed that something more than his coldness had made her also feel that Liddy would be superfluous in the suggested scene. She had felt it, even whilst making the proposal.

"Well, I won't bring Liddy — and I'll come. But only for a very short time," she added; "a very short time."

"It will not take five minutes," said Troy.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HOLLOW AMID THE FERNS

The hill opposite Bathsheba's dwelling extended, a mile off, into an uncultivated tract of land, dotted at this season with tall thickets of brake fern, plump and diaphanous from recent rapid growth, and radiant in hues of clear and untainted green.

At eight o'clock this midsummer evening, whilst the bristling ball of gold in the west still swept the tips of the ferns with its long, luxuriant rays, a soft brushing-by of garments might have been heard among them, and Bathsheba appeared in their midst, their soft, feathery arms caressing her up to her shoulders. She paused, turned, went back over the hill and half-way to her own door, whence she cast a farewell glance upon the spot she had just left, having resolved not to remain near the place after all.

She saw a dim spot of artificial red moving round the shoulder of the rise. It disappeared on the other side.

She waited one minute — two minutes — thought of Troy's disappointment at her non-fulfilment of a promised engagement, till she again ran along the field, clambered over the bank, and followed the original direction. She was now literally trembling and panting at this her temerity in such an errant undertaking; her breath came and went quickly, and her eyes shone with an infrequent light. Yet go she must. She reached the verge of a pit in the middle of the ferns. Troy stood in the bottom, looking up towards her.

"I heard you rustling through the fern before I saw you," he said, coming up and giving her his hand to help her down the slope.

The pit was a saucer-shaped concave, naturally formed, with a top diameter of about thirty feet, and shallow enough to allow the sunshine to reach their heads. Standing in the centre, the sky overhead was met by a circular horizon of fern: this grew nearly to the bottom of the slope and then abruptly ceased. The middle within the belt of verdure was floored with a thick flossy carpet of moss and grass intermingled, so yielding that the foot was half-buried within it.

"Now," said Troy, producing the sword, which, as he raised it into the sunlight, gleamed a sort of greeting, like a living thing, "first, we have four right and four left cuts; four right and four left thrusts. Infantry cuts and guards are more interesting than ours, to my mind; but they are not so swashing. They have seven cuts and three thrusts. So much as a preliminary. Well, next, our cut one is as if you were sowing your corn — so." Bathsheba saw a sort of rainbow, upside down in the air, and Troy's arm was still again. "Cut two, as if you were hedging — so. Three, as if you were reaping — so. Four, as if you were threshing — in that way. Then the same on the left. The thrusts are these: one, two, three, four, right; one, two, three, four, left." He repeated them. "Have 'em again?" he said. "One, two — "

She hurriedly interrupted: "I'd rather not; though I don't mind your twos and fours; but your ones and threes are terrible!"

“Very well. I’ll let you off the ones and threes. Next, cuts, points and guards altogether.” Troy duly exhibited them. “Then there’s pursuing practice, in this way.” He gave the movements as before. “There, those are the stereotyped forms. The infantry have two most diabolical upward cuts, which we are too humane to use. Like this — three, four.”

“How murderous and bloodthirsty!”

“They are rather deathly. Now I’ll be more interesting, and let you see some loose play — giving all the cuts and points, infantry and cavalry, quicker than lightning, and as promiscuously — with just enough rule to regulate instinct and yet not to fetter it. You are my antagonist, with this difference from real warfare, that I shall miss you every time by one hair’s breadth, or perhaps two. Mind you don’t flinch, whatever you do.”

“I’ll be sure not to!” she said invincibly.

He pointed to about a yard in front of him.

Bathsheba’s adventurous spirit was beginning to find some grains of relish in these highly novel proceedings. She took up her position as directed, facing Troy.

“Now just to learn whether you have pluck enough to let me do what I wish, I’ll give you a preliminary test.”

He flourished the sword by way of introduction number two, and the next thing of which she was conscious was that the point and blade of the sword were darting with a gleam towards her left side, just above her hip; then of their reappearance on her right side, emerging as it were from between her ribs, having apparently passed through her body. The third item of consciousness was that of seeing the same sword, perfectly clean and free from blood held vertically in Troy’s hand (in the position technically called “recover swords”). All was as quick as electricity.

“Oh!” she cried out in affright, pressing her hand to her side. “Have you run me through? — no, you have not! Whatever have you done!”

“I have not touched you,” said Troy, quietly. “It was mere sleight of hand. The sword passed behind you. Now you are not afraid, are you? Because if you are I can’t perform. I give my word that I will not only not hurt you, but not once touch you.”

“I don’t think I am afraid. You are quite sure you will not hurt me?”

“Quite sure.”

“Is the Sword very sharp?”

“O no — only stand as still as a statue. Now!”

In an instant the atmosphere was transformed to Bathsheba’s eyes. Beams of light caught from the low sun’s rays, above, around, in front of her, well-nigh shut out earth and heaven — all emitted in the marvellous evolutions of Troy’s reflecting blade, which seemed everywhere at once, and yet nowhere specially. These circling gleams were accompanied by a keen rush that was almost a whistling — also springing from all sides of her at once. In short, she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and of sharp hisses, resembling a sky-full of meteors close at hand.

Never since the broadsword became the national weapon had there been more dexterity shown in its management than by the hands of Sergeant Troy, and never had he been in such splendid temper for the performance as now in the evening sunshine among the ferns with Bathsheba. It may safely be asserted with respect to the closeness of his cuts, that had it been possible for the edge of the sword to leave in the air a permanent substance wherever it flew past, the space left untouched would have been almost a mould of Bathsheba's figure.

Behind the luminous streams of this aurora militaris, she could see the hue of Troy's sword arm, spread in a scarlet haze over the space covered by its motions, like a twanged harpstring, and behind all Troy himself, mostly facing her; sometimes, to show the rear cuts, half turned away, his eye nevertheless always keenly measuring her breadth and outline, and his lips tightly closed in sustained effort. Next, his movements lapsed slower, and she could see them individually. The hissing of the sword had ceased, and he stopped entirely.

"That outer loose lock of hair wants tidying," he said, before she had moved or spoken. "Wait: I'll do it for you."

An arc of silver shone on her right side: the sword had descended. The lock dropped to the ground.

"Bravely borne!" said Troy. "You didn't flinch a shade's thickness. Wonderful in a woman!"

"It was because I didn't expect it. Oh, you have spoilt my hair!"

"Only once more."

"No — no! I am afraid of you — indeed I am!" she cried.

"I won't touch you at all — not even your hair. I am only going to kill that caterpillar settling on you. Now: still!"

It appeared that a caterpillar had come from the fern and chosen the front of her bodice as his resting place. She saw the point glisten towards her bosom, and seemingly enter it. Bathsheba closed her eyes in the full persuasion that she was killed at last. However, feeling just as usual, she opened them again.

"There it is, look," said the sergeant, holding his sword before her eyes.

The caterpillar was spitted upon its point.

"Why, it is magic!" said Bathsheba, amazed.

"Oh no — dexterity. I merely gave point to your bosom where the caterpillar was, and instead of running you through checked the extension a thousandth of an inch short of your surface."

"But how could you chop off a curl of my hair with a sword that has no edge?"

"No edge! This sword will shave like a razor. Look here."

He touched the palm of his hand with the blade, and then, lifting it, showed her a thin shaving of scarf-skin dangling therefrom.

"But you said before beginning that it was blunt and couldn't cut me!"

"That was to get you to stand still, and so make sure of your safety. The risk of injuring you through your moving was too great not to force me to tell you a fib to escape it."

She shuddered. "I have been within an inch of my life, and didn't know it!"

"More precisely speaking, you have been within half an inch of being pared alive two hundred and ninety-five times."

"Cruel, cruel, 'tis of you!"

"You have been perfectly safe, nevertheless. My sword never errs." And Troy returned the weapon to the scabbard.

Bathsheba, overcome by a hundred tumultuous feelings resulting from the scene, abstractedly sat down on a tuft of heather.

"I must leave you now," said Troy, softly. "And I'll venture to take and keep this in remembrance of you."

She saw him stoop to the grass, pick up the winding lock which he had severed from her manifold tresses, twist it round his fingers, unfasten a button in the breast of his coat, and carefully put it inside. She felt powerless to withstand or deny him. He was altogether too much for her, and Bathsheba seemed as one who, facing a reviving wind, finds it blow so strongly that it stops the breath. He drew near and said, "I must be leaving you."

He drew nearer still. A minute later and she saw his scarlet form disappear amid the ferny thicket, almost in a flash, like a brand swiftly waved.

That minute's interval had brought the blood beating into her face, set her stinging as if aflame to the very hollows of her feet, and enlarged emotion to a compass which quite swamped thought. It had brought upon her a stroke resulting, as did that of Moses in Horeb, in a liquid stream — here a stream of tears. She felt like one who has sinned a great sin.

The circumstance had been the gentle dip of Troy's mouth downwards upon her own. He had kissed her.

CHAPTER XXIX

PARTICULARS OF A TWILIGHT WALK

We now see the element of folly distinctly mingling with the many varying particulars which made up the character of Bathsheba Everdene. It was almost foreign to her intrinsic nature. Introduced as lymph on the dart of Eros, it eventually permeated and coloured her whole constitution. Bathsheba, though she had too much understanding to be entirely governed by her womanliness, had too much womanliness to use her understanding to the best advantage. Perhaps in no minor point does woman astonish her helpmate more than in the strange power she possesses of believing cajoleries that she knows to be false — except, indeed, in that of being utterly sceptical on strictures that she knows to be true.

Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance. When a strong woman recklessly throws away her strength she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away. One source of her inadequacy is the novelty of the occasion. She has never had practice in making the best of such a condition. Weakness is doubly weak by being new.

Bathsheba was not conscious of guile in this matter. Though in one sense a woman of the world, it was, after all, that world of daylight coteries and green carpets wherein cattle form the passing crowd and winds the busy hum; where a quiet family of rabbits or hares lives on the other side of your party-wall, where your neighbour is everybody in the tything, and where calculation is confined to market-days. Of the fabricated tastes of good fashionable society she knew but little, and of the formulated self-indulgence of bad, nothing at all. Had her utmost thoughts in this direction been distinctly worded (and by herself they never were), they would only have amounted to such a matter as that she felt her impulses to be pleasanter guides than her discretion. Her love was entire as a child's, and though warm as summer it was fresh as spring. Her culpability lay in her making no attempt to control feeling by subtle and careful inquiry into consequences. She could show others the steep and thorny way, but "reck'd not her own rede."

And Troy's deformities lay deep down from a woman's vision, whilst his embellishments were upon the very surface; thus contrasting with homely Oak, whose defects were patent to the blindest, and whose virtues were as metals in a mine.

The difference between love and respect was markedly shown in her conduct. Bathsheba had spoken of her interest in Boldwood with the greatest freedom to Liddy, but she had only communed with her own heart concerning Troy.

All this infatuation Gabriel saw, and was troubled thereby from the time of his daily journey a-field to the time of his return, and on to the small hours of many a night. That he was not beloved had hitherto been his great sorrow; that Bathsheba was getting into the toils was now a sorrow greater than the first, and one which nearly obscured it. It was a result which paralleled the oft-quoted observation of Hippocrates concerning physical pains.

That is a noble though perhaps an unpromising love which not even the fear of breeding aversion in the bosom of the one beloved can deter from combating his or her errors. Oak determined to speak to his mistress. He would base his appeal on what he considered her unfair treatment of Farmer Boldwood, now absent from home.

An opportunity occurred one evening when she had gone for a short walk by a path through the neighbouring cornfields. It was dusk when Oak, who had not been far a-field that day, took the same path and met her returning, quite pensively, as he thought.

The wheat was now tall, and the path was narrow; thus the way was quite a sunken groove between the embowing thicket on either side. Two persons could not walk abreast without damaging the crop, and Oak stood aside to let her pass.

"Oh, is it Gabriel?" she said. "You are taking a walk too. Good-night."

"I thought I would come to meet you, as it is rather late," said Oak, turning and following at her heels when she had brushed somewhat quickly by him.

"Thank you, indeed, but I am not very fearful."

"Oh no; but there are bad characters about."

"I never meet them."

Now Oak, with marvellous ingenuity, had been going to introduce the gallant sergeant through the channel of "bad characters." But all at once the scheme broke down, it suddenly occurring to him that this was rather a clumsy way, and too barefaced to begin with. He tried another preamble.

"And as the man who would naturally come to meet you is away from home, too — I mean Farmer Boldwood — why, thinks I, I'll go," he said.

"Ah, yes." She walked on without turning her head, and for many steps nothing further was heard from her quarter than the rustle of her dress against the heavy corn-ears. Then she resumed rather tartly —

"I don't quite understand what you meant by saying that Mr. Boldwood would naturally come to meet me."

I meant on account of the wedding which they say is likely to take place between you and him, miss. Forgive my speaking plainly."

"They say what is not true." she returned quickly. "No marriage is likely to take place between us."

Gabriel now put forth his unobscured opinion, for the moment had come. "Well, Miss Everdene," he said, "putting aside what people say, I never in my life saw any courting if his is not a courting of you."

Bathsheba would probably have terminated the conversation there and then by flatly forbidding the subject, had not her conscious weakness of position allured her to palter and argue in endeavours to better it.

"Since this subject has been mentioned," she said very emphatically, "I am glad of the opportunity of clearing up a mistake which is very common and very provoking. I didn't definitely promise Mr. Boldwood anything. I have never cared for him. I respect him, and he has urged me to marry him. But I have given him no distinct answer. As soon as he returns I shall do so; and the answer will be that I cannot think of marrying him."

"People are full of mistakes, seemingly."

"They are."

The other day they said you were trifling with him, and you almost proved that you were not; lately they have said that you be not, and you straightway begin to show —

"That I am, I suppose you mean."

"Well, I hope they speak the truth."

"They do, but wrongly applied. I don't trifle with him; but then, I have nothing to do with him."

Oak was unfortunately led on to speak of Boldwood's rival in a wrong tone to her after all. "I wish you had never met that young Sergeant Troy, miss," he sighed.

Bathsheba's steps became faintly spasmodic. "Why?" she asked.

"He is not good enough for 'ee."

"Did any one tell you to speak to me like this?"

"Nobody at all."

"Then it appears to me that Sergeant Troy does not concern us here," she said, intractably. "Yet I must say that Sergeant Troy is an educated man, and quite worthy of any woman. He is well born."

"His being higher in learning and birth than the ruck o' soldiers is anything but a proof of his worth. It show's his course to be down'ard."

"I cannot see what this has to do with our conversation. Mr. Troy's course is not by any means downward; and his superiority is a proof of his worth!"

"I believe him to have no conscience at all. And I cannot help begging you, miss, to have nothing to do with him. Listen to me this once — only this once! I don't say he's such a bad man as I have fancied — I pray to God he is not. But since we don't exactly know what he is, why not behave as if he might be bad, simply for your own safety? Don't trust him, mistress; I ask you not to trust him so."

"Why, pray?"

"I like soldiers, but this one I do not like," he said, sturdily. "His cleverness in his calling may have tempted him astray, and what is mirth to the neighbours is ruin to the woman. When he tries to talk to 'ee again, why not turn away with a short 'Good day'; and when you see him coming one way, turn the other. When he says anything laughable, fail to see the point and don't smile, and speak of him before those who will report your talk as 'that fantastical man,' or 'that Sergeant What's-his-name.' 'That man of a family that has come to the dogs.' Don't be unmannerly towards en, but harmless-uncivil, and so get rid of the man."

No Christmas robin detained by a window-pane ever pulsed as did Bathsheba now.

"I say — I say again — that it doesn't become you to talk about him. Why he should be mentioned passes me quite!" she exclaimed desperately. "I know this, th-th-that he is a thoroughly conscientious man — blunt sometimes even to rudeness — but always speaking his mind about you plain to your face!"

"Oh."

"He is as good as anybody in this parish! He is very particular, too, about going to church — yes, he is!"

"I am afeard nobody saw him there. I never did, certainly."

"The reason of that is," she said eagerly, "that he goes in privately by the old tower door, just when the service commences, and sits at the back of the gallery. He told me so."

This supreme instance of Troy's goodness fell upon Gabriel ears like the thirteenth stroke of crazy clock. It was not only received with utter incredulity as regarded itself, but threw a doubt on all the assurances that had preceded it.

Oak was grieved to find how entirely she trusted him. He brimmed with deep feeling as he replied in a steady voice, the steadiness of which was spoilt by the palpableness of his great effort to keep it so: —

“You know, mistress, that I love you, and shall love you always. I only mention this to bring to your mind that at any rate I would wish to do you no harm: beyond that I put it aside. I have lost in the race for money and good things, and I am not such a fool as to pretend to ‘ee now I am poor, and you have got altogether above me. But Bathsheba, dear mistress, this I beg you to consider — that, both to keep yourself well honoured among the workfolk, and in common generosity to an honourable man who loves you as well as I, you should be more discreet in your bearing towards this soldier.”

“Don’t, don’t, don’t!” she exclaimed, in a choking voice.

“Are ye not more to me than my own affairs, and even life!” he went on. “Come, listen to me! I am six years older than you, and Mr. Boldwood is ten years older than I, and consider — I do beg of ‘ee to consider before it is too late — how safe you would be in his hands!”

Oak’s allusion to his own love for her lessened, to some extent, her anger at his interference; but she could not really forgive him for letting his wish to marry her be eclipsed by his wish to do her good, any more than for his slighting treatment of Troy.

“I wish you to go elsewhere,” she commanded, a paleness of face invisible to the eye being suggested by the trembling words. “Do not remain on this farm any longer. I don’t want you — I beg you to go!”

“That’s nonsense,” said Oak, calmly. “This is the second time you have pretended to dismiss me; and what’s the use o’ it?”

“Pretended! You shall go, sir — your lecturing I will not hear! I am mistress here.”

“Go, indeed — what folly will you say next? Treating me like Dick, Tom and Harry when you know that a short time ago my position was as good as yours! Upon my life, Bathsheba, it is too barefaced. You know, too, that I can’t go without putting things in such a strait as you wouldn’t get out of I can’t tell when. Unless, indeed, you’ll promise to have an understanding man as bailiff, or manager, or something. I’ll go at once if you’ll promise that.”

“I shall have no bailiff; I shall continue to be my own manager,” she said decisively.

“Very well, then; you should be thankful to me for biding. How would the farm go on with nobody to mind it but a woman? But mind this, I don’t wish ‘ee to feel you owe me anything. Not I. What I do, I do. Sometimes I say I should be as glad as a bird to leave the place — for don’t suppose I’m content to be a nobody. I was made for better things. However, I don’t like to see your concerns going to ruin, as they must if you keep in this mind... I hate taking my own measure so plain, but, upon my life, your provoking ways make a man say what he wouldn’t dream of at other times! I own to being rather interfering. But you know well enough how it is, and who she is that I like too well, and feel too much like a fool about to be civil to her!”

It is more than probable that she privately and unconsciously respected him a little for this grim fidelity, which had been shown in his tone even more than in his words. At any rate she murmured something to the effect that he might stay if he wished. She said more distinctly, "Will you leave me alone now? I don't order it as a mistress — I ask it as a woman, and I expect you not to be so uncourteous as to refuse."

"Certainly I will, Miss Everdene," said Gabriel, gently. He wondered that the request should have come at this moment, for the strife was over, and they were on a most desolate hill, far from every human habitation, and the hour was getting late. He stood still and allowed her to get far ahead of him till he could only see her form upon the sky.

A distressing explanation of this anxiety to be rid of him at that point now ensued. A figure apparently rose from the earth beside her. The shape beyond all doubt was Troy's. Oak would not be even a possible listener, and at once turned back till a good two hundred yards were between the lovers and himself.

Gabriel went home by way of the churchyard. In passing the tower he thought of what she had said about the sergeant's virtuous habit of entering the church unperceived at the beginning of service. Believing that the little gallery door alluded to was quite disused, he ascended the external flight of steps at the top of which it stood, and examined it. The pale lustre yet hanging in the north-western heaven was sufficient to show that a sprig of ivy had grown from the wall across the door to a length of more than a foot, delicately tying the panel to the stone jamb. It was a decisive proof that the door had not been opened at least since Troy came back to Weatherbury.

CHAPTER XXX

HOT CHEEKS AND TEARFUL EYES

Half an hour later Bathsheba entered her own house. There burnt upon her face when she met the light of the candles the flush and excitement which were little less than chronic with her now. The farewell words of Troy, who had accompanied her to the very door, still lingered in her ears. He had bidden her adieu for two days, which were, so he stated, to be spent at Bath in visiting some friends. He had also kissed her a second time.

It is only fair to Bathsheba to explain here a little fact which did not come to light till a long time afterwards: that Troy's presentation of himself so aptly at the roadside this evening was not by any distinctly preconcerted arrangement. He had hinted — she had forbidden; and it was only on the chance of his still coming that she had dismissed Oak, fearing a meeting between them just then.

She now sank down into a chair, wild and perturbed by all these new and fevering sequences. Then she jumped up with a manner of decision, and fetched her desk from a side table.

In three minutes, without pause or modification, she had written a letter to Boldwood, at his address beyond Casterbridge, saying mildly but firmly that she had well considered the whole subject he had brought before her and kindly given her time to decide upon; that her final decision was that she could not marry him. She had expressed to Oak an intention to wait till Boldwood came home before communicating to him her conclusive reply. But Bathsheba found that she could not wait.

It was impossible to send this letter till the next day; yet to quell her uneasiness by getting it out of her hands, and so, as it were, setting the act in motion at once, she arose to take it to any one of the women who might be in the kitchen.

She paused in the passage. A dialogue was going on in the kitchen, and Bathsheba and Troy were the subject of it.

"If he marry her, she'll gie up farming."

"'Twill be a gallant life, but may bring some trouble between the mirth — so say I."

"Well, I wish I had half such a husband."

Bathsheba had too much sense to mind seriously what her servitors said about her; but too much womanly redundance of speech to leave alone what was said till it died the natural death of unminded things. She burst in upon them.

"Who are you speaking of?" she asked.

There was a pause before anybody replied. At last Liddy said frankly, "What was passing was a bit of a word about yourself, miss."

"I thought so! Maryann and Liddy and Temperance — now I forbid you to suppose such things. You know I don't care the least for Mr. Troy — not I. Everybody knows how much I hate him. — Yes," repeated the froward young person, "hate him!"

"We know you do, miss," said Liddy; "and so do we all."

"I hate him too," said Maryann.

"Maryann — Oh you perjured woman! How can you speak that wicked story!" said Bathsheba, excitedly. "You admired him from your heart only this morning in the very world, you did. Yes, Maryann, you know it!"

"Yes, miss, but so did you. He is a wild scamp now, and you are right to hate him."

"He's not a wild scamp! How dare you to my face! I have no right to hate him, nor you, nor anybody. But I am a silly woman! What is it to me what he is? You know it is nothing. I don't care for him; I don't mean to defend his good name, not I. Mind this, if any of you say a word against him you'll be dismissed instantly!"

She flung down the letter and surged back into the parlour, with a big heart and tearful eyes, Liddy following her.

"Oh miss!" said mild Liddy, looking pitifully into Bathsheba's face. "I am sorry we mistook you so! I did think you cared for him; but I see you don't now."

"Shut the door, Liddy."

Liddy closed the door, and went on: "People always say such foolery, miss. I'll make answer hencefor'ard, 'Of course a lady like Miss Everdene can't love him'; I'll say it out in plain black and white."

Bathsheba burst out: "O Liddy, are you such a simpleton? Can't you read riddles? Can't you see? Are you a woman yourself?"

Liddy's clear eyes rounded with wonderment.

"Yes; you must be a blind thing, Liddy!" she said, in reckless abandonment and grief. "Oh, I love him to very distraction and misery and agony! Don't be frightened at me, though perhaps I am enough to frighten any innocent woman. Come closer — closer." She put her arms round Liddy's neck. "I must let it out to somebody; it is wearing me away! Don't you yet know enough of me to see through that miserable denial of mine? O God, what a lie it was! Heaven and my Love forgive me. And don't you know that a woman who loves at all thinks nothing of perjury when it is balanced against her love? There, go out of the room; I want to be quite alone."

Liddy went towards the door.

"Liddy, come here. Solemnly swear to me that he's not a fast man; that it is all lies they say about him!"

"But, miss, how can I say he is not if — "

"You graceless girl! How can you have the cruel heart to repeat what they say? Unfeeling thing that you are... But I'll see if you or anybody else in the village, or town either, dare do such a thing!" She started off, pacing from fireplace to door, and back again.

"No, miss. I don't — I know it is not true!" said Liddy, frightened at Bathsheba's unwonted vehemence.

"I suppose you only agree with me like that to please me. But, Liddy, he cannot be bad, as is said. Do you hear?"

"Yes, miss, yes."

"And you don't believe he is?"

"I don't know what to say, miss," said Liddy, beginning to cry. "If I say No, you don't believe me; and if I say Yes, you rage at me!"

"Say you don't believe it — say you don't!"

"I don't believe him to be so bad as they make out."

"He is not bad at all... My poor life and heart, how weak I am!" she moaned, in a relaxed, desultory way, heedless of Liddy's presence. "Oh, how I wish I had never seen him! Loving is misery for women always. I shall never forgive God for making me a woman, and dearly am I beginning to pay for the honour of owning a pretty face." She freshened and turned to Liddy suddenly. "Mind this, Lydia Smallbury, if you repeat anywhere a single word of what I have said to you inside this closed door, I'll never trust you, or love you, or have you with me a moment longer — not a moment!"

"I don't want to repeat anything," said Liddy, with womanly dignity of a diminutive order; "but I don't wish to stay with you. And, if you please, I'll go at the end of the harvest, or this week, or to-day... I don't see that I deserve to be put upon and stormed at for nothing!" concluded the small woman, bigly.

"No, no, Liddy; you must stay!" said Bathsheba, dropping from haughtiness to entreaty with capricious inconsequence. "You must not notice my being in a taking just

now. You are not as a servant — you are a companion to me. Dear, dear — I don't know what I am doing since this miserable ache of my heart has weighted and worn upon me so! What shall I come to! I suppose I shall get further and further into troubles. I wonder sometimes if I am doomed to die in the Union. I am friendless enough, God knows!"

"I won't notice anything, nor will I leave you!" sobbed Liddy, impulsively putting up her lips to Bathsheba's, and kissing her.

Then Bathsheba kissed Liddy, and all was smooth again.

"I don't often cry, do I, Liddy? but you have made tears come into my eyes," she said, a smile shining through the moisture. "Try to think him a good man, won't you, dear Liddy?"

"I will, miss, indeed."

"He is a sort of steady man in a wild way, you know. That's better than to be as some are, wild in a steady way. I am afraid that's how I am. And promise me to keep my secret — do, Liddy! And do not let them know that I have been crying about him, because it will be dreadful for me, and no good to him, poor thing!"

"Death's head himself shan't wring it from me, mistress, if I've a mind to keep anything; and I'll always be your friend," replied Liddy, emphatically, at the same time bringing a few more tears into her own eyes, not from any particular necessity, but from an artistic sense of making herself in keeping with the remainder of the picture, which seems to influence women at such times. "I think God likes us to be good friends, don't you?"

"Indeed I do."

"And, dear miss, you won't harry me and storm at me, will you? because you seem to swell so tall as a lion then, and it frightens me! Do you know, I fancy you would be a match for any man when you are in one o' your takings."

"Never! do you?" said Bathsheba, slightly laughing, though somewhat seriously alarmed by this Amazonian picture of herself. "I hope I am not a bold sort of maid — mannish?" she continued with some anxiety.

"Oh no, not mannish; but so almighty womanish that 'tis getting on that way sometimes. Ah! miss," she said, after having drawn her breath very sadly in and sent it very sadly out, "I wish I had half your failing that way. 'Tis a great protection to a poor maid in these illegit'mate days!"

CHAPTER XXXI

BLAME — FURY

The next evening Bathsheba, with the idea of getting out of the way of Mr. Boldwood in the event of his returning to answer her note in person, proceeded to fulfil an engagement made with Liddy some few hours earlier. Bathsheba's companion, as a gauge of their reconciliation, had been granted a week's holiday to visit her sister, who

was married to a thriving hurdler and cattle-crib-maker living in a delightful labyrinth of hazel copse not far beyond Yalbury. The arrangement was that Miss Everdene should honour them by coming there for a day or two to inspect some ingenious contrivances which this man of the woods had introduced into his wares.

Leaving her instructions with Gabriel and Maryann, that they were to see everything carefully locked up for the night, she went out of the house just at the close of a timely thunder-shower, which had refined the air, and daintily bathed the coat of the land, though all beneath was dry as ever. Freshness was exhaled in an essence from the varied contours of bank and hollow, as if the earth breathed maiden breath; and the pleased birds were hymning to the scene. Before her, among the clouds, there was a contrast in the shape of lairs of fierce light which showed themselves in the neighbourhood of a hidden sun, lingering on to the farthest north-west corner of the heavens that this midsummer season allowed.

She had walked nearly two miles of her journey, watching how the day was retreating, and thinking how the time of deeds was quietly melting into the time of thought, to give place in its turn to the time of prayer and sleep, when she beheld advancing over Yalbury hill the very man she sought so anxiously to elude. Boldwood was stepping on, not with that quiet tread of reserved strength which was his customary gait, in which he always seemed to be balancing two thoughts. His manner was stunned and sluggish now.

Boldwood had for the first time been awakened to woman's privileges in tergiversation even when it involves another person's possible blight. That Bathsheba was a firm and positive girl, far less inconsequent than her fellows, had been the very lung of his hope; for he had held that these qualities would lead her to adhere to a straight course for consistency's sake, and accept him, though her fancy might not flood him with the iridescent hues of uncritical love. But the argument now came back as sorry gleams from a broken mirror. The discovery was no less a scourge than a surprise.

He came on looking upon the ground, and did not see Bathsheba till they were less than a stone's throw apart. He looked up at the sound of her pit-pat, and his changed appearance sufficiently denoted to her the depth and strength of the feelings paralyzed by her letter.

"Oh; is it you, Mr. Boldwood?" she faltered, a guilty warmth pulsing in her face.

Those who have the power of reproaching in silence may find it a means more effective than words. There are accents in the eye which are not on the tongue, and more tales come from pale lips than can enter an ear. It is both the grandeur and the pain of the remoter moods that they avoid the pathway of sound. Boldwood's look was unanswerable.

Seeing she turned a little aside, he said, "What, are you afraid of me?"

"Why should you say that?" said Bathsheba.

"I fancied you looked so," said he. "And it is most strange, because of its contrast with my feeling for you."

She regained self-possession, fixed her eyes calmly, and waited.

"You know what that feeling is," continued Boldwood, deliberately. "A thing strong as death. No dismissal by a hasty letter affects that."

"I wish you did not feel so strongly about me," she murmured. "It is generous of you, and more than I deserve, but I must not hear it now."

"Hear it? What do you think I have to say, then? I am not to marry you, and that's enough. Your letter was excellently plain. I want you to hear nothing — not I."

Bathsheba was unable to direct her will into any definite groove for freeing herself from this fearfully awkward position. She confusedly said, "Good evening," and was moving on. Boldwood walked up to her heavily and dully.

"Bathsheba — darling — is it final indeed?"

"Indeed it is."

"Oh, Bathsheba — have pity upon me!" Boldwood burst out. "God's sake, yes — I am come to that low, lowest stage — to ask a woman for pity! Still, she is you — she is you."

Bathsheba commanded herself well. But she could hardly get a clear voice for what came instinctively to her lips: "There is little honour to the woman in that speech." It was only whispered, for something unutterably mournful no less than distressing in this spectacle of a man showing himself to be so entirely the vane of a passion enervated the feminine instinct for punctilios.

"I am beyond myself about this, and am mad," he said. "I am no stoic at all to be supplicating here; but I do supplicate to you. I wish you knew what is in me of devotion to you; but it is impossible, that. In bare human mercy to a lonely man, don't throw me off now!"

"I don't throw you off — indeed, how can I? I never had you." In her noon-clear sense that she had never loved him she forgot for a moment her thoughtless angle on that day in February.

"But there was a time when you turned to me, before I thought of you! I don't reproach you, for even now I feel that the ignorant and cold darkness that I should have lived in if you had not attracted me by that letter — valentine you call it — would have been worse than my knowledge of you, though it has brought this misery. But, I say, there was a time when I knew nothing of you, and cared nothing for you, and yet you drew me on. And if you say you gave me no encouragement, I cannot but contradict you."

"What you call encouragement was the childish game of an idle minute. I have bitterly repented of it — ay, bitterly, and in tears. Can you still go on reminding me?"

"I don't accuse you of it — I deplore it. I took for earnest what you insist was jest, and now this that I pray to be jest you say is awful, wretched earnest. Our moods meet at wrong places. I wish your feeling was more like mine, or my feeling more like yours! Oh, could I but have foreseen the torture that trifling trick was going to lead me into, how I should have cursed you; but only having been able to see it since, I cannot do that, for I love you too well! But it is weak, idle drivelling to go on like this... Bathsheba, you are the first woman of any shade or nature that I have ever looked at

to love, and it is the having been so near claiming you for my own that makes this denial so hard to bear. How nearly you promised me! But I don't speak now to move your heart, and make you grieve because of my pain; it is no use, that. I must bear it; my pain would get no less by paining you."

"But I do pity you — deeply — O, so deeply!" she earnestly said.

"Do no such thing — do no such thing. Your dear love, Bathsheba, is such a vast thing beside your pity, that the loss of your pity as well as your love is no great addition to my sorrow, nor does the gain of your pity make it sensibly less. O sweet — how dearly you spoke to me behind the spear-bed at the washing-pool, and in the barn at the shearing, and that dearest last time in the evening at your home! Where are your pleasant words all gone — your earnest hope to be able to love me? Where is your firm conviction that you would get to care for me very much? Really forgotten? — really?"

She checked emotion, looked him quietly and clearly in the face, and said in her low, firm voice, "Mr. Boldwood, I promised you nothing. Would you have had me a woman of clay when you paid me that furthest, highest compliment a man can pay a woman — telling her he loves her? I was bound to show some feeling, if I would not be a graceless shrew. Yet each of those pleasures was just for the day — the day just for the pleasure. How was I to know that what is a pastime to all other men was death to you? Have reason, do, and think more kindly of me!"

"Well, never mind arguing — never mind. One thing is sure: you were all but mine, and now you are not nearly mine. Everything is changed, and that by you alone, remember. You were nothing to me once, and I was contented; you are now nothing to me again, and how different the second nothing is from the first! Would to God you had never taken me up, since it was only to throw me down!"

Bathsheba, in spite of her mettle, began to feel unmistakable signs that she was inherently the weaker vessel. She strove miserably against this femininity which would insist upon supplying unbidden emotions in stronger and stronger current. She had tried to elude agitation by fixing her mind on the trees, sky, any trivial object before her eyes, whilst his reproaches fell, but ingenuity could not save her now.

"I did not take you up — surely I did not!" she answered as heroically as she could. "But don't be in this mood with me. I can endure being told I am in the wrong, if you will only tell it me gently! O sir, will you not kindly forgive me, and look at it cheerfully?"

"Cheerfully! Can a man fooled to utter heart-burning find a reason for being merry? If I have lost, how can I be as if I had won? Heavens you must be heartless quite! Had I known what a fearfully bitter sweet this was to be, how I would have avoided you, and never seen you, and been deaf of you. I tell you all this, but what do you care! You don't care."

She returned silent and weak denials to his charges, and swayed her head desperately, as if to thrust away the words as they came showering about her ears from the lips of the trembling man in the climax of life, with his bronzed Roman face and fine frame.

"Dearest, dearest, I am wavering even now between the two opposites of recklessly renouncing you, and labouring humbly for you again. Forget that you have said No, and let it be as it was! Say, Bathsheba, that you only wrote that refusal to me in fun — come, say it to me!"

"It would be untrue, and painful to both of us. You overrate my capacity for love. I don't possess half the warmth of nature you believe me to have. An unprotected childhood in a cold world has beaten gentleness out of me."

He immediately said with more resentment: "That may be true, somewhat; but ah, Miss Everdene, it won't do as a reason! You are not the cold woman you would have me believe. No, no! It isn't because you have no feeling in you that you don't love me. You naturally would have me think so — you would hide from me that you have a burning heart like mine. You have love enough, but it is turned into a new channel. I know where."

The swift music of her heart became hubbub now, and she throbbed to extremity. He was coming to Troy. He did then know what had occurred! And the name fell from his lips the next moment.

"Why did Troy not leave my treasure alone?" he asked, fiercely. "When I had no thought of injuring him, why did he force himself upon your notice! Before he worried you your inclination was to have me; when next I should have come to you your answer would have been Yes. Can you deny it — I ask, can you deny it?"

She delayed the reply, but was too honest to withhold it. "I cannot," she whispered.

"I know you cannot. But he stole in in my absence and robbed me. Why didn't he win you away before, when nobody would have been grieved? — when nobody would have been set tale-bearing. Now the people sneer at me — the very hills and sky seem to laugh at me till I blush shamefully for my folly. I have lost my respect, my good name, my standing — lost it, never to get it again. Go and marry your man — go on!"

"Oh sir — Mr. Boldwood!"

"You may as well. I have no further claim upon you. As for me, I had better go somewhere alone, and hide — and pray. I loved a woman once. I am now ashamed. When I am dead they'll say, Miserable love-sick man that he was. Heaven — heaven — if I had got jilted secretly, and the dishonour not known, and my position kept! But no matter, it is gone, and the woman not gained. Shame upon him — shame!"

His unreasonable anger terrified her, and she glided from him, without obviously moving, as she said, "I am only a girl — do not speak to me so!"

"All the time you knew — how very well you knew — that your new freak was my misery. Dazzled by brass and scarlet — Oh, Bathsheba — this is woman's folly indeed!"

She fired up at once. "You are taking too much upon yourself!" she said, vehemently. "Everybody is upon me — everybody. It is unmanly to attack a woman so! I have nobody in the world to fight my battles for me; but no mercy is shown. Yet if a thousand of you sneer and say things against me, I will not be put down!"

"You'll chatter with him doubtless about me. Say to him, 'Boldwood would have died for me.' Yes, and you have given way to him, knowing him to be not the man for you. He has kissed you — claimed you as his. Do you hear — he has kissed you. Deny it!"

The most tragic woman is cowed by a tragic man, and although Boldwood was, in vehemence and glow, nearly her own self rendered into another sex, Bathsheba's cheek quivered. She gasped, "Leave me, sir — leave me! I am nothing to you. Let me go on!"

"Deny that he has kissed you."

"I shall not."

"Ha — then he has!" came hoarsely from the farmer.

"He has," she said, slowly, and, in spite of her fear, defiantly. "I am not ashamed to speak the truth."

"Then curse him; and curse him!" said Boldwood, breaking into a whispered fury. "Whilst I would have given worlds to touch your hand, you have let a rake come in without right or ceremony and — kiss you! Heaven's mercy — kiss you! ... Ah, a time of his life shall come when he will have to repent, and think wretchedly of the pain he has caused another man; and then may he ache, and wish, and curse, and yearn — as I do now!"

"Don't, don't, oh, don't pray down evil upon him!" she implored in a miserable cry. "Anything but that — anything. Oh, be kind to him, sir, for I love him true!"

Boldwood's ideas had reached that point of fusion at which outline and consistency entirely disappear. The impending night appeared to concentrate in his eye. He did not hear her at all now.

"I'll punish him — by my soul, that will I! I'll meet him, soldier or no, and I'll horsewhip the untimely stripling for this reckless theft of my one delight. If he were a hundred men I'd horsewhip him — " He dropped his voice suddenly and unnaturally. "Bathsheba, sweet, lost coquette, pardon me! I've been blaming you, threatening you, behaving like a churl to you, when he's the greatest sinner. He stole your dear heart away with his unfathomable lies! ... It is a fortunate thing for him that he's gone back to his regiment — that he's away up the country, and not here! I hope he may not return here just yet. I pray God he may not come into my sight, for I may be tempted beyond myself. Oh, Bathsheba, keep him away — yes, keep him away from me!"

For a moment Boldwood stood so inertly after this that his soul seemed to have been entirely exhaled with the breath of his passionate words. He turned his face away, and withdrew, and his form was soon covered over by the twilight as his footsteps mixed in with the low hiss of the leafy trees.

Bathsheba, who had been standing motionless as a model all this latter time, flung her hands to her face, and wildly attempted to ponder on the exhibition which had just passed away. Such astounding wells of fevered feeling in a still man like Mr. Boldwood were incomprehensible, dreadful. Instead of being a man trained to repression he was — what she had seen him.

The force of the farmer's threats lay in their relation to a circumstance known at present only to herself: her lover was coming back to Weatherbury in the course of the very next day or two. Troy had not returned to his distant barracks as Boldwood and others supposed, but had merely gone to visit some acquaintance in Bath, and had yet a week or more remaining to his furlough.

She felt wretchedly certain that if he revisited her just at this nick of time, and came into contact with Boldwood, a fierce quarrel would be the consequence. She panted with solicitude when she thought of possible injury to Troy. The least spark would kindle the farmer's swift feelings of rage and jealousy; he would lose his self-mastery as he had this evening; Troy's blitheness might become aggressive; it might take the direction of derision, and Boldwood's anger might then take the direction of revenge.

With almost a morbid dread of being thought a gushing girl, this guileless woman too well concealed from the world under a manner of carelessness the warm depths of her strong emotions. But now there was no reserve. In her distraction, instead of advancing further she walked up and down, beating the air with her fingers, pressing on her brow, and sobbing brokenly to herself. Then she sat down on a heap of stones by the wayside to think. There she remained long. Above the dark margin of the earth appeared foreshores and promontories of coppery cloud, bounding a green and pellucid expanse in the western sky. Amaranthine glosses came over them then, and the unresting world wheeled her round to a contrasting prospect eastward, in the shape of indecisive and palpitating stars. She gazed upon their silent throes amid the shades of space, but realised none at all. Her troubled spirit was far away with Troy.

CHAPTER XXXII

NIGHT — HORSES TRAMPING

The village of Weatherbury was quiet as the graveyard in its midst, and the living were lying well-nigh as still as the dead. The church clock struck eleven. The air was so empty of other sounds that the whirr of the clock-work immediately before the strokes was distinct, and so was also the click of the same at their close. The notes flew forth with the usual blind obtuseness of inanimate things — flapping and rebounding among walls, undulating against the scattered clouds, spreading through their interstices into unexplored miles of space.

Bathsheba's crannied and mouldy halls were to-night occupied only by Maryann, Liddy being, as was stated, with her sister, whom Bathsheba had set out to visit. A few minutes after eleven had struck, Maryann turned in her bed with a sense of being disturbed. She was totally unconscious of the nature of the interruption to her sleep. It led to a dream, and the dream to an awakening, with an uneasy sensation that something had happened. She left her bed and looked out of the window. The paddock abutted on this end of the building, and in the paddock she could just discern by the uncertain gray a moving figure approaching the horse that was feeding there.

The figure seized the horse by the forelock, and led it to the corner of the field. Here she could see some object which circumstances proved to be a vehicle, for after a few minutes spent apparently in harnessing, she heard the trot of the horse down the road, mingled with the sound of light wheels.

Two varieties only of humanity could have entered the paddock with the ghostlike glide of that mysterious figure. They were a woman and a gipsy man. A woman was out of the question in such an occupation at this hour, and the comer could be no less than a thief, who might probably have known the weakness of the household on this particular night, and have chosen it on that account for his daring attempt. Moreover, to raise suspicion to conviction itself, there were gipsies in Weatherbury Bottom.

Maryann, who had been afraid to shout in the robber's presence, having seen him depart had no fear. She hastily slipped on her clothes, stumped down the disjointed staircase with its hundred creaks, ran to Coggan's, the nearest house, and raised an alarm. Coggan called Gabriel, who now again lodged in his house as at first, and together they went to the paddock. Beyond all doubt the horse was gone.

"Hark!" said Gabriel.

They listened. Distinct upon the stagnant air came the sounds of a trotting horse passing up Longpuddle Lane — just beyond the gipsies' encampment in Weatherbury Bottom.

"That's our Dainty — I'll swear to her step," said Jan.

"Mighty me! Won't mis'ess storm and call us stupids when she comes back!" moaned Maryann. "How I wish it had happened when she was at home, and none of us had been answerable!"

"We must ride after," said Gabriel, decisively. "I'll be responsible to Miss Everdene for what we do. Yes, we'll follow."

"Faith, I don't see how," said Coggan. "All our horses are too heavy for that trick except little Poppet, and what's she between two of us? — If we only had that pair over the hedge we might do something."

"Which pair?"

"Mr. Boldwood's Tidy and Moll."

"Then wait here till I come hither again," said Gabriel. He ran down the hill towards Farmer Boldwood's.

"Farmer Boldwood is not at home," said Maryann.

"All the better," said Coggan. "I know what he's gone for."

Less than five minutes brought up Oak again, running at the same pace, with two halters dangling from his hand.

"Where did you find 'em?" said Coggan, turning round and leaping upon the hedge without waiting for an answer.

"Under the eaves. I knew where they were kept," said Gabriel, following him. "Coggan, you can ride bare-backed? there's no time to look for saddles."

"Like a hero!" said Jan.

"Maryann, you go to bed," Gabriel shouted to her from the top of the hedge.

Springing down into Boldwood's pastures, each pocketed his halter to hide it from the horses, who, seeing the men empty-handed, docilely allowed themselves to be seized by the mane, when the halters were dexterously slipped on. Having neither bit nor bridle, Oak and Coggan extemporized the former by passing the rope in each case through the animal's mouth and looping it on the other side. Oak vaulted astride, and Coggan clambered up by aid of the bank, when they ascended to the gate and galloped off in the direction taken by Bathsheba's horse and the robber. Whose vehicle the horse had been harnessed to was a matter of some uncertainty.

Weatherbury Bottom was reached in three or four minutes. They scanned the shady green patch by the roadside. The gipsies were gone.

"The villains!" said Gabriel. "Which way have they gone, I wonder?"

"Straight on, as sure as God made little apples," said Jan.

"Very well; we are better mounted, and must overtake em", said Oak. "Now on at full speed!"

No sound of the rider in their van could now be discovered. The road-metal grew softer and more clayey as Weatherbury was left behind, and the late rain had wetted its surface to a somewhat plastic, but not muddy state. They came to cross-roads. Coggan suddenly pulled up Moll and slipped off.

"What's the matter?" said Gabriel.

"We must try to track 'em, since we can't hear 'em," said Jan, fumbling in his pockets. He struck a light, and held the match to the ground. The rain had been heavier here, and all foot and horse tracks made previous to the storm had been abraded and blurred by the drops, and they were now so many little scoops of water, which reflected the flame of the match like eyes. One set of tracks was fresh and had no water in them; one pair of ruts was also empty, and not small canals, like the others. The footprints forming this recent impression were full of information as to pace; they were in equidistant pairs, three or four feet apart, the right and left foot of each pair being exactly opposite one another.

"Straight on!" Jan exclaimed. "Tracks like that mean a stiff gallop. No wonder we don't hear him. And the horse is harnessed — look at the ruts. Ay, that's our mare sure enough!"

"How do you know?"

"Old Jimmy Harris only shod her last week, and I'd swear to his make among ten thousand."

"The rest of the gipsies must ha' gone on earlier, or some other way," said Oak. "You saw there were no other tracks?"

"True." They rode along silently for a long weary time. Coggan carried an old pinch-beck repeater which he had inherited from some genius in his family; and it now struck one. He lighted another match, and examined the ground again.

"'Tis a canter now," he said, throwing away the light. "A twisty, rickety pace for a gig. The fact is, they over-drove her at starting; we shall catch 'em yet."

Again they hastened on, and entered Blackmore Vale. Coggan's watch struck one. When they looked again the hoof-marks were so spaced as to form a sort of zigzag if united, like the lamps along a street.

"That's a trot, I know," said Gabriel.

"Only a trot now," said Coggan, cheerfully. "We shall overtake him in time."

They pushed rapidly on for yet two or three miles. "Ah! a moment," said Jan. "Let's see how she was driven up this hill. 'Twill help us." A light was promptly struck upon his gaiters as before, and the examination made.

"Hurrah!" said Coggan. "She walked up here — and well she might. We shall get them in two miles, for a crown."

They rode three, and listened. No sound was to be heard save a millpond trickling hoarsely through a hatch, and suggesting gloomy possibilities of drowning by jumping in. Gabriel dismounted when they came to a turning. The tracks were absolutely the only guide as to the direction that they now had, and great caution was necessary to avoid confusing them with some others which had made their appearance lately.

"What does this mean? — though I guess," said Gabriel, looking up at Coggan as he moved the match over the ground about the turning. Coggan, who, no less than the panting horses, had latterly shown signs of weariness, again scrutinized the mystic characters. This time only three were of the regular horseshoe shape. Every fourth was a dot.

He screwed up his face and emitted a long "Whew-w-w!"

"Lame," said Oak.

"Yes. Dainty is lamed; the near-foot-afore," said Coggan slowly, staring still at the footprints.

"We'll push on," said Gabriel, remounting his humid steed.

Although the road along its greater part had been as good as any turnpike-road in the country, it was nominally only a byway. The last turning had brought them into the high road leading to Bath. Coggan recollected himself.

"We shall have him now!" he exclaimed.

"Where?"

"Sherton Turnpike. The keeper of that gate is the sleepest man between here and London — Dan Randall, that's his name — knowed en for years, when he was at Casterbridge gate. Between the lameness and the gate 'tis a done job."

They now advanced with extreme caution. Nothing was said until, against a shady background of foliage, five white bars were visible, crossing their route a little way ahead.

"Hush — we are almost close!" said Gabriel.

"Amble on upon the grass," said Coggan.

The white bars were blotted out in the midst by a dark shape in front of them. The silence of this lonely time was pierced by an exclamation from that quarter.

"Hoy-a-hoy! Gate!"

It appeared that there had been a previous call which they had not noticed, for on their close approach the door of the turnpike-house opened, and the keeper came out half-dressed, with a candle in his hand. The rays illumined the whole group.

"Keep the gate close!" shouted Gabriel. "He has stolen the horse!"

"Who?" said the turnpike-man.

Gabriel looked at the driver of the gig, and saw a woman — Bathsheba, his mistress.

On hearing his voice she had turned her face away from the light. Coggan had, however, caught sight of her in the meanwhile.

"Why, 'tis mistress — I'll take my oath!" he said, amazed.

Bathsheba it certainly was, and she had by this time done the trick she could do so well in crises not of love, namely, mask a surprise by coolness of manner.

"Well, Gabriel," she inquired quietly, "where are you going?"

"We thought — " began Gabriel.

"I am driving to Bath," she said, taking for her own use the assurance that Gabriel lacked. "An important matter made it necessary for me to give up my visit to Liddy, and go off at once. What, then, were you following me?"

"We thought the horse was stole."

"Well — what a thing! How very foolish of you not to know that I had taken the trap and horse. I could neither wake Maryann nor get into the house, though I hammered for ten minutes against her window-sill. Fortunately, I could get the key of the coach-house, so I troubled no one further. Didn't you think it might be me?"

"Why should we, miss?"

"Perhaps not. Why, those are never Farmer Boldwood's horses! Goodness mercy! what have you been doing — bringing trouble upon me in this way? What! mustn't a lady move an inch from her door without being dogged like a thief?"

"But how was we to know, if you left no account of your doings?" expostulated Coggan, "and ladies don't drive at these hours, miss, as a jeneral rule of society."

"I did leave an account — and you would have seen it in the morning. I wrote in chalk on the coach-house doors that I had come back for the horse and gig, and driven off; that I could arouse nobody, and should return soon."

"But you'll consider, ma'am, that we couldn't see that till it got daylight."

"True," she said, and though vexed at first she had too much sense to blame them long or seriously for a devotion to her that was as valuable as it was rare. She added with a very pretty grace, "Well, I really thank you heartily for taking all this trouble; but I wish you had borrowed anybody's horses but Mr. Boldwood's."

"Dainty is lame, miss," said Coggan. "Can ye go on?"

"It was only a stone in her shoe. I got down and pulled it out a hundred yards back. I can manage very well, thank you. I shall be in Bath by daylight. Will you now return, please?"

She turned her head — the gateman's candle shimmering upon her quick, clear eyes as she did so — passed through the gate, and was soon wrapped in the embowering

shades of mysterious summer boughs. Coggan and Gabriel put about their horses, and, fanned by the velvety air of this July night, retraced the road by which they had come.

"A strange vagary, this of hers, isn't it, Oak?" said Coggan, curiously.

"Yes," said Gabriel, shortly.

"She won't be in Bath by no daylight!"

"Coggan, suppose we keep this night's work as quiet as we can?"

"I am of one and the same mind."

"Very well. We shall be home by three o'clock or so, and can creep into the parish like lambs."

Bathsheba's perturbed meditations by the roadside had ultimately evolved a conclusion that there were only two remedies for the present desperate state of affairs. The first was merely to keep Troy away from Weatherbury till Boldwood's indignation had cooled; the second to listen to Oak's entreaties, and Boldwood's denunciations, and give up Troy altogether.

Alas! Could she give up this new love — induce him to renounce her by saying she did not like him — could no more speak to him, and beg him, for her good, to end his furlough in Bath, and see her and Weatherbury no more?

It was a picture full of misery, but for a while she contemplated it firmly, allowing herself, nevertheless, as girls will, to dwell upon the happy life she would have enjoyed had Troy been Boldwood, and the path of love the path of duty — inflicting upon herself gratuitous tortures by imagining him the lover of another woman after forgetting her; for she had penetrated Troy's nature so far as to estimate his tendencies pretty accurately, but unfortunately loved him no less in thinking that he might soon cease to love her — indeed, considerably more.

She jumped to her feet. She would see him at once. Yes, she would implore him by word of mouth to assist her in this dilemma. A letter to keep him away could not reach him in time, even if he should be disposed to listen to it.

Was Bathsheba altogether blind to the obvious fact that the support of a lover's arms is not of a kind best calculated to assist a resolve to renounce him? Or was she sophistically sensible, with a thrill of pleasure, that by adopting this course for getting rid of him she was ensuring a meeting with him, at any rate, once more?

It was now dark, and the hour must have been nearly ten. The only way to accomplish her purpose was to give up her idea of visiting Liddy at Yalbury, return to Weatherbury Farm, put the horse into the gig, and drive at once to Bath. The scheme seemed at first impossible: the journey was a fearfully heavy one, even for a strong horse, at her own estimate; and she much underrated the distance. It was most venturesome for a woman, at night, and alone.

But could she go on to Liddy's and leave things to take their course? No, no; anything but that. Bathsheba was full of a stimulating turbulence, beside which caution vainly prayed for a hearing. She turned back towards the village.

Her walk was slow, for she wished not to enter Weatherbury till the cottagers were in bed, and, particularly, till Boldwood was secure. Her plan was now to drive to Bath

during the night, see Sergeant Troy in the morning before he set out to come to her, bid him farewell, and dismiss him: then to rest the horse thoroughly (herself to weep the while, she thought), starting early the next morning on her return journey. By this arrangement she could trot Dainty gently all the day, reach Liddy at Yalbury in the evening, and come home to Weatherbury with her whenever they chose — so nobody would know she had been to Bath at all. Such was Bathsheba's scheme. But in her topographical ignorance as a late comer to the place, she misreckoned the distance of her journey as not much more than half what it really was.

This idea she proceeded to carry out, with what initial success we have already seen.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN THE SUN — A HARBINGER

A week passed, and there were no tidings of Bathsheba; nor was there any explanation of her Gilpin's rig.

Then a note came for Maryann, stating that the business which had called her mistress to Bath still detained her there; but that she hoped to return in the course of another week.

Another week passed. The oat-harvest began, and all the men were a-field under a monochromatic Lammas sky, amid the trembling air and short shadows of noon. Indoors nothing was to be heard save the droning of blue-bottle flies; out-of-doors the whetting of scythes and the hiss of tressy oat-ears rubbing together as their perpendicular stalks of amber-yellow fell heavily to each swath. Every drop of moisture not in the men's bottles and flagons in the form of cider was raining as perspiration from their foreheads and cheeks. Drought was everywhere else.

They were about to withdraw for a while into the charitable shade of a tree in the fence, when Coggan saw a figure in a blue coat and brass buttons running to them across the field.

"I wonder who that is?" he said.

"I hope nothing is wrong about mistress," said Maryann, who with some other women was tying the bundles (oats being always sheafed on this farm), "but an unlucky token came to me indoors this morning. I went to unlock the door and dropped the key, and it fell upon the stone floor and broke into two pieces. Breaking a key is a dreadful bodement. I wish mis'ess was home."

"'Tis Cain Ball," said Gabriel, pausing from whetting his reaphook.

Oak was not bound by his agreement to assist in the corn-field; but the harvest month is an anxious time for a farmer, and the corn was Bathsheba's, so he lent a hand.

"He's dressed up in his best clothes," said Matthew Moon. "He hev been away from home for a few days, since he's had that felon upon his finger; for 'a said, since I can't work I'll have a hollerday."

"A good time for one — a' excellent time," said Joseph Poorgrass, straightening his back; for he, like some of the others, had a way of resting a while from his labour on such hot days for reasons preternaturally small; of which Cain Ball's advent on a week-day in his Sunday-clothes was one of the first magnitude. "Twas a bad leg allowed me to read the Pilgrim's Progress, and Mark Clark learnt All-Fours in a whitlow."

"Ay, and my father put his arm out of joint to have time to go courting," said Jan Coggan, in an eclipsing tone, wiping his face with his shirt-sleeve and thrusting back his hat upon the nape of his neck.

By this time Cainy was nearing the group of harvesters, and was perceived to be carrying a large slice of bread and ham in one hand, from which he took mouthfuls as he ran, the other being wrapped in a bandage. When he came close, his mouth assumed the bell shape, and he began to cough violently.

"Now, Cainy!" said Gabriel, sternly. "How many more times must I tell you to keep from running so fast when you be eating? You'll choke yourself some day, that's what you'll do, Cain Ball."

"Hok-hok-hok!" replied Cain. "A crumb of my victuals went the wrong way — hok-hok! That's what 'tis, Mister Oak! And I've been visiting to Bath because I had a felon on my thumb; yes, and I've seen — ahok-hok!"

Directly Cain mentioned Bath, they all threw down their hooks and forks and drew round him. Unfortunately the erratic crumb did not improve his narrative powers, and a supplementary hindrance was that of a sneeze, jerking from his pocket his rather large watch, which dangled in front of the young man pendulum-wise.

"Yes," he continued, directing his thoughts to Bath and letting his eyes follow, "I've seed the world at last — yes — and I've seed our mis'ess — ahok-hok-hok!"

"Bother the boy!" said Gabriel. "Something is always going the wrong way down your throat, so that you can't tell what's necessary to be told."

"Ahok! there! Please, Mister Oak, a gnat have just fled into my stomach and brought the cough on again!"

"Yes, that's just it. Your mouth is always open, you young rascal!"

"'Tis terrible bad to have a gnat fly down yer throat, pore boy!" said Matthew Moon.

"Well, at Bath you saw — " prompted Gabriel.

"I saw our mistress," continued the junior shepherd, "and a sojer, walking along. And bymeby they got closer and closer, and then they went arm-in-crook, like courting complete — hok-hok! like courting complete — hok! — courting complete — " Losing the thread of his narrative at this point simultaneously with his loss of breath, their informant looked up and down the field apparently for some clue to it. "Well, I see our mis'ess and a soldier — a-ha-a-wk!"

"Damn the boy!" said Gabriel.

“‘Tis only my manner, Mister Oak, if ye’ll excuse it,” said Cain Ball, looking reproachfully at Oak, with eyes drenched in their own dew.

“Here’s some cider for him — that’ll cure his throat,” said Jan Coggan, lifting a flagon of cider, pulling out the cork, and applying the hole to Cainy’s mouth; Joseph Poorgrass in the meantime beginning to think apprehensively of the serious consequences that would follow Cainy Ball’s strangulation in his cough, and the history of his Bath adventures dying with him.

“For my poor self, I always say ‘please God’ afore I do anything,” said Joseph, in an unboastful voice; “and so should you, Cain Ball. ‘Tis a great safeguard, and might perhaps save you from being choked to death some day.”

Mr. Coggan poured the liquor with unstinted liberality at the suffering Cain’s circular mouth; half of it running down the side of the flagon, and half of what reached his mouth running down outside his throat, and half of what ran in going the wrong way, and being coughed and sneezed around the persons of the gathered reapers in the form of a cider fog, which for a moment hung in the sunny air like a small exhalation.

“There’s a great clumsy sneeze! Why can’t ye have better manners, you young dog!” said Coggan, withdrawing the flagon.

“The cider went up my nose!” cried Cainy, as soon as he could speak; “and now ‘tis gone down my neck, and into my poor dumb felon, and over my shiny buttons and all my best cloze!”

“The poor lad’s cough is terrible unfortunate,” said Matthew Moon. “And a great history on hand, too. Bump his back, shepherd.”

“‘Tis my nater,” mourned Cain. “Mother says I always was so excitable when my feelings were worked up to a point!”

“True, true,” said Joseph Poorgrass. “The Balls were always a very excitable family. I knowed the boy’s grandfather — a truly nervous and modest man, even to genteel refinery. ‘Twas blush, blush with him, almost as much as ‘tis with me — not but that ‘tis a fault in me!”

“Not at all, Master Poorgrass,” said Coggan. “‘Tis a very noble quality in ye.”

“Heh-heh! well, I wish to noise nothing abroad — nothing at all,” murmured Poorgrass, diffidently. “But we be born to things — that’s true. Yet I would rather my trifle were hid; though, perhaps, a high nater is a little high, and at my birth all things were possible to my Maker, and he may have begrudged no gifts... But under your bushel, Joseph! under your bushel with ‘ee! A strange desire, neighbours, this desire to hide, and no praise due. Yet there is a Sermon on the Mount with a calendar of the blessed at the head, and certain meek men may be named therein.”

“Cainy’s grandfather was a very clever man,” said Matthew Moon. “Invented a’ apple-tree out of his own head, which is called by his name to this day — the Early Ball. You know ‘em, Jan? A Quarrenden grafted on a Tom Putt, and a Rathe-ripe upon top o’ that again. ‘Tis trew ‘a used to bide about in a public-house wi’ a ‘ooman in a way he had no business to by rights, but there — ‘a were a clever man in the sense of the term.”

"Now then," said Gabriel, impatiently, "what did you see, Cain?"

"I seed our mis'ess go into a sort of a park place, where there's seats, and shrubs and flowers, arm-in-crook with a sojer," continued Cainy, firmly, and with a dim sense that his words were very effective as regarded Gabriel's emotions. "And I think the sojer was Sergeant Troy. And they sat there together for more than half-an-hour, talking moving things, and she once was crying a'most to death. And when they came out her eyes were shining and she was as white as a lily; and they looked into one another's faces, as far-gone friendly as a man and woman can be."

Gabriel's features seemed to get thinner. "Well, what did you see besides?"

"Oh, all sorts."

"White as a lily? You are sure 'twas she?"

"Yes."

"Well, what besides?"

"Great glass windows to the shops, and great clouds in the sky, full of rain, and old wooden trees in the country round."

"You stun-poll! What will ye say next?" said Coggan.

"Let en alone," interposed Joseph Poorgrass. "The boy's meaning is that the sky and the earth in the kingdom of Bath is not altogether different from ours here. 'Tis for our good to gain knowledge of strange cities, and as such the boy's words should be suffered, so to speak it."

"And the people of Bath," continued Cain, "never need to light their fires except as a luxury, for the water springs up out of the earth ready boiled for use."

"'Tis true as the light," testified Matthew Moon. "I've heard other navigators say the same thing."

"They drink nothing else there," said Cain, "and seem to enjoy it, to see how they swaller it down."

"Well, it seems a barbarian practice enough to us, but I daresay the natives think nothing o' it," said Matthew.

"And don't victuals spring up as well as drink?" asked Coggan, twirling his eye.

"No — I own to a blot there in Bath — a true blot. God didn't provide 'em with victuals as well as drink, and 'twas a drawback I couldn't get over at all."

"Well, 'tis a curious place, to say the least," observed Moon; "and it must be a curious people that live therein."

"Miss Everdene and the soldier were walking about together, you say?" said Gabriel, returning to the group.

"Ay, and she wore a beautiful gold-colour silk gown, trimmed with black lace, that would have stood alone 'ithout legs inside if required. 'Twas a very winsome sight; and her hair was brushed splendid. And when the sun shone upon the bright gown and his red coat — my! how handsome they looked. You could see 'em all the length of the street."

"And what then?" murmured Gabriel.

"And then I went into Griffin's to hae my boots hobbled, and then I went to Riggs's batty-cake shop, and asked 'em for a penneth of the cheapest and nicest stales, that were all but blue-mouldy, but not quite. And whilst I was chawing 'em down I walked on and seed a clock with a face as big as a baking trendle — "

"But that's nothing to do with mistress!"

"I'm coming to that, if you'll leave me alone, Mister Oak!" remonstrated Cainy. "If you excites me, perhaps you'll bring on my cough, and then I shan't be able to tell ye nothing."

"Yes — let him tell it his own way," said Coggan.

Gabriel settled into a despairing attitude of patience, and Cainy went on: —

"And there were great large houses, and more people all the week long than at Weatherbury club-walking on White Tuesdays. And I went to grand churches and chapels. And how the parson would pray! Yes; he would kneel down and put up his hands together, and make the holy gold rings on his fingers gleam and twinkle in yer eyes, that he'd earned by praying so excellent well! — Ah yes, I wish I lived there."

"Our poor Parson Thirdly can't get no money to buy such rings," said Matthew Moon, thoughtfully. "And as good a man as ever walked. I don't believe poor Thirdly have a single one, even of humblest tin or copper. Such a great ornament as they'd be to him on a dull afternoon, when he's up in the pulpit lighted by the wax candles! But 'tis impossible, poor man. Ah, to think how unequal things be."

"Perhaps he's made of different stuff than to wear 'em," said Gabriel, grimly. "Well, that's enough of this. Go on, Cainy — quick."

"Oh — and the new style of parsons wear moustaches and long beards," continued the illustrious traveller, "and look like Moses and Aaron complete, and make we fokes in the congregation feel all over like the children of Israel."

"A very right feeling — very," said Joseph Poorgrass.

"And there's two religions going on in the nation now — High Church and High Chapel. And, thinks I, I'll play fair; so I went to High Church in the morning, and High Chapel in the afternoon."

"A right and proper boy," said Joseph Poorgrass.

"Well, at High Church they pray singing, and worship all the colours of the rainbow; and at High Chapel they pray preaching, and worship drab and whitewash only. And then — I didn't see no more of Miss Everdene at all."

"Why didn't you say so afore, then?" exclaimed Oak, with much disappointment.

"Ah," said Matthew Moon, "she'll wish her cake dough if so be she's over intimate with that man."

"She's not over intimate with him," said Gabriel, indignantly.

"She would know better," said Coggan. "Our mis'ess has too much sense under they knots of black hair to do such a mad thing."

"You see, he's not a coarse, ignorant man, for he was well brought up," said Matthew, dubiously. "'Twas only wildness that made him a soldier, and maids rather like your man of sin."

"Now, Cain Ball," said Gabriel restlessly, "can you swear in the most awful form that the woman you saw was Miss Everdene?"

"Cain Ball, you be no longer a babe and suckling," said Joseph in the sepulchral tone the circumstances demanded, "and you know what taking an oath is. 'Tis a horrible testament mind ye, which you say and seal with your blood-stone, and the prophet Matthew tells us that on whomsoever it shall fall it will grind him to powder. Now, before all the work-folk here assembled, can you swear to your words as the shepherd asks ye?"

"Please no, Mister Oak!" said Cainy, looking from one to the other with great uneasiness at the spiritual magnitude of the position. "I don't mind saying 'tis true, but I don't like to say 'tis damn true, if that's what you mane."

"Cain, Cain, how can you!" asked Joseph sternly. "You be asked to swear in a holy manner, and you swear like wicked Shimei, the son of Gera, who cursed as he came. Young man, fie!"

"No, I don't! 'Tis you want to squander a pore boy's soul, Joseph Poorgrass — that's what 'tis!" said Cain, beginning to cry. "All I mane is that in common truth 'twas Miss Everdene and Sergeant Troy, but in the horrible so-help-me truth that ye want to make of it perhaps 'twas somebody else!"

"There's no getting at the rights of it," said Gabriel, turning to his work.

"Cain Ball, you'll come to a bit of bread!" groaned Joseph Poorgrass.

Then the reapers' hooks were flourished again, and the old sounds went on. Gabriel, without making any pretence of being lively, did nothing to show that he was particularly dull. However, Coggan knew pretty nearly how the land lay, and when they were in a nook together he said —

"Don't take on about her, Gabriel. What difference does it make whose sweetheart she is, since she can't be yours?"

"That's the very thing I say to myself," said Gabriel.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOME AGAIN — A TRICKSTER

That same evening at dusk Gabriel was leaning over Coggan's garden-gate, taking an up-and-down survey before retiring to rest.

A vehicle of some kind was softly creeping along the grassy margin of the lane. From it spread the tones of two women talking. The tones were natural and not at all suppressed. Oak instantly knew the voices to be those of Bathsheba and Liddy.

The carriage came opposite and passed by. It was Miss Everdene's gig, and Liddy and her mistress were the only occupants of the seat. Liddy was asking questions about the city of Bath, and her companion was answering them listlessly and unconcernedly. Both Bathsheba and the horse seemed weary.

The exquisite relief of finding that she was here again, safe and sound, overpowered all reflection, and Oak could only luxuriate in the sense of it. All grave reports were forgotten.

He lingered and lingered on, till there was no difference between the eastern and western expanses of sky, and the timid hares began to limp courageously round the dim hillocks. Gabriel might have been there an additional half-hour when a dark form walked slowly by. "Good-night, Gabriel," the passer said.

It was Boldwood. "Good-night, sir," said Gabriel.

Boldwood likewise vanished up the road, and Oak shortly afterwards turned indoors to bed.

Farmer Boldwood went on towards Miss Everdene's house. He reached the front, and approaching the entrance, saw a light in the parlour. The blind was not drawn down, and inside the room was Bathsheba, looking over some papers or letters. Her back was towards Boldwood. He went to the door, knocked, and waited with tense muscles and an aching brow.

Boldwood had not been outside his garden since his meeting with Bathsheba in the road to Yalbury. Silent and alone, he had remained in moody meditation on woman's ways, deeming as essentials of the whole sex the accidents of the single one of their number he had ever closely beheld. By degrees a more charitable temper had pervaded him, and this was the reason of his sally to-night. He had come to apologize and beg forgiveness of Bathsheba with something like a sense of shame at his violence, having but just now learnt that she had returned — only from a visit to Liddy, as he supposed, the Bath escapade being quite unknown to him.

He inquired for Miss Everdene. Liddy's manner was odd, but he did not notice it. She went in, leaving him standing there, and in her absence the blind of the room containing Bathsheba was pulled down. Boldwood augured ill from that sign. Liddy came out.

"My mistress cannot see you, sir," she said.

The farmer instantly went out by the gate. He was unforgiven — that was the issue of it all. He had seen her who was to him simultaneously a delight and a torture, sitting in the room he had shared with her as a peculiarly privileged guest only a little earlier in the summer, and she had denied him an entrance there now.

Boldwood did not hurry homeward. It was ten o'clock at least, when, walking deliberately through the lower part of Weatherbury, he heard the carrier's spring van entering the village. The van ran to and from a town in a northern direction, and it was owned and driven by a Weatherbury man, at the door of whose house it now pulled up. The lamp fixed to the head of the hood illuminated a scarlet and gilded form, who was the first to alight.

"Ah!" said Boldwood to himself, "come to see her again."

Troy entered the carrier's house, which had been the place of his lodging on his last visit to his native place. Boldwood was moved by a sudden determination. He hastened home. In ten minutes he was back again, and made as if he were going to call upon

Troy at the carrier's. But as he approached, some one opened the door and came out. He heard this person say "Good-night" to the inmates, and the voice was Troy's. This was strange, coming so immediately after his arrival. Boldwood, however, hastened up to him. Troy had what appeared to be a carpet-bag in his hand — the same that he had brought with him. It seemed as if he were going to leave again this very night.

Troy turned up the hill and quickened his pace. Boldwood stepped forward.

"Sergeant Troy?"

"Yes — I'm Sergeant Troy."

"Just arrived from up the country, I think?"

"Just arrived from Bath."

"I am William Boldwood."

"Indeed."

The tone in which this word was uttered was all that had been wanted to bring Boldwood to the point.

"I wish to speak a word with you," he said.

"What about?"

"About her who lives just ahead there — and about a woman you have wronged."

"I wonder at your impertinence," said Troy, moving on.

"Now look here," said Boldwood, standing in front of him, "wonder or not, you are going to hold a conversation with me."

Troy heard the dull determination in Boldwood's voice, looked at his stalwart frame, then at the thick cudgel he carried in his hand. He remembered it was past ten o'clock. It seemed worth while to be civil to Boldwood.

"Very well, I'll listen with pleasure," said Troy, placing his bag on the ground, "only speak low, for somebody or other may overhear us in the farmhouse there."

"Well then — I know a good deal concerning your Fanny Robin's attachment to you. I may say, too, that I believe I am the only person in the village, excepting Gabriel Oak, who does know it. You ought to marry her."

"I suppose I ought. Indeed, I wish to, but I cannot."

"Why?"

Troy was about to utter something hastily; he then checked himself and said, "I am too poor." His voice was changed. Previously it had had a devil-may-care tone. It was the voice of a trickster now.

Boldwood's present mood was not critical enough to notice tones. He continued, "I may as well speak plainly; and understand, I don't wish to enter into the questions of right or wrong, woman's honour and shame, or to express any opinion on your conduct. I intend a business transaction with you."

"I see," said Troy. "Suppose we sit down here."

An old tree trunk lay under the hedge immediately opposite, and they sat down.

"I was engaged to be married to Miss Everdene," said Boldwood, "but you came and —"

"Not engaged," said Troy.

"As good as engaged."

"If I had not turned up she might have become engaged to you."

"Hang might!"

"Would, then."

"If you had not come I should certainly — yes, certainly — have been accepted by this time. If you had not seen her you might have been married to Fanny. Well, there's too much difference between Miss Everdene's station and your own for this flirtation with her ever to benefit you by ending in marriage. So all I ask is, don't molest her any more. Marry Fanny. I'll make it worth your while."

"How will you?"

"I'll pay you well now, I'll settle a sum of money upon her, and I'll see that you don't suffer from poverty in the future. I'll put it clearly. Bathsheba is only playing with you: you are too poor for her as I said; so give up wasting your time about a great match you'll never make for a moderate and rightful match you may make to-morrow; take up your carpet-bag, turn about, leave Weatherbury now, this night, and you shall take fifty pounds with you. Fanny shall have fifty to enable her to prepare for the wedding, when you have told me where she is living, and she shall have five hundred paid down on her wedding-day."

In making this statement Boldwood's voice revealed only too clearly a consciousness of the weakness of his position, his aims, and his method. His manner had lapsed quite from that of the firm and dignified Boldwood of former times; and such a scheme as he had now engaged in he would have condemned as childishly imbecile only a few months ago. We discern a grand force in the lover which he lacks whilst a free man; but there is a breadth of vision in the free man which in the lover we vainly seek. Where there is much bias there must be some narrowness, and love, though added emotion, is subtracted capacity. Boldwood exemplified this to an abnormal degree: he knew nothing of Fanny Robin's circumstances or whereabouts, he knew nothing of Troy's possibilities, yet that was what he said.

"I like Fanny best," said Troy; "and if, as you say, Miss Everdene is out of my reach, why I have all to gain by accepting your money, and marrying Fan. But she's only a servant."

"Never mind — do you agree to my arrangement?"

"I do."

"Ah!" said Boldwood, in a more elastic voice. "Oh, Troy, if you like her best, why then did you step in here and injure my happiness?"

"I love Fanny best now," said Troy. "But Bathsh — Miss Everdene inflamed me, and displaced Fanny for a time. It is over now."

"Why should it be over so soon? And why then did you come here again?"

"There are weighty reasons. Fifty pounds at once, you said!"

"I did," said Boldwood, "and here they are — fifty sovereigns." He handed Troy a small packet.

"You have everything ready — it seems that you calculated on my accepting them," said the sergeant, taking the packet.

"I thought you might accept them," said Boldwood.

"You've only my word that the programme shall be adhered to, whilst I at any rate have fifty pounds."

"I had thought of that, and I have considered that if I can't appeal to your honour I can trust to your — well, shrewdness we'll call it — not to lose five hundred pounds in prospect, and also make a bitter enemy of a man who is willing to be an extremely useful friend."

"Stop, listen!" said Troy in a whisper.

A light pit-pat was audible upon the road just above them.

"By George — 'tis she," he continued. "I must go on and meet her."

"She — who?"

"Bathsheba."

"Bathsheba — out alone at this time o' night!" said Boldwood in amazement, and starting up. "Why must you meet her?"

"She was expecting me to-night — and I must now speak to her, and wish her good-bye, according to your wish."

"I don't see the necessity of speaking."

"It can do no harm — and she'll be wandering about looking for me if I don't. You shall hear all I say to her. It will help you in your love-making when I am gone."

"Your tone is mocking."

"Oh no. And remember this, if she does not know what has become of me, she will think more about me than if I tell her flatly I have come to give her up."

"Will you confine your words to that one point? — Shall I hear every word you say?"

"Every word. Now sit still there, and hold my carpet bag for me, and mark what you hear."

The light footstep came closer, halting occasionally, as if the walker listened for a sound. Troy whistled a double note in a soft, fluty tone.

"Come to that, is it!" murmured Boldwood, uneasily.

"You promised silence," said Troy.

"I promise again."

Troy stepped forward.

"Frank, dearest, is that you?" The tones were Bathsheba's.

"O God!" said Boldwood.

"Yes," said Troy to her.

"How late you are," she continued, tenderly. "Did you come by the carrier? I listened and heard his wheels entering the village, but it was some time ago, and I had almost given you up, Frank."

"I was sure to come," said Frank. "You knew I should, did you not?"

"Well, I thought you would," she said, playfully; "and, Frank, it is so lucky! There's not a soul in my house but me to-night. I've packed them all off so nobody on earth will know of your visit to your lady's bower. Liddy wanted to go to her grandfather's to tell him about her holiday, and I said she might stay with them till to-morrow — when you'll be gone again."

"Capital," said Troy. "But, dear me, I had better go back for my bag, because my slippers and brush and comb are in it; you run home whilst I fetch it, and I'll promise to be in your parlour in ten minutes."

"Yes." She turned and tripped up the hill again.

During the progress of this dialogue there was a nervous twitching of Boldwood's tightly closed lips, and his face became bathed in a clammy dew. He now started forward towards Troy. Troy turned to him and took up the bag.

"Shall I tell her I have come to give her up and cannot marry her?" said the soldier, mockingly.

"No, no; wait a minute. I want to say more to you — more to you!" said Boldwood, in a hoarse whisper.

"Now," said Troy, "you see my dilemma. Perhaps I am a bad man — the victim of my impulses — led away to do what I ought to leave undone. I can't, however, marry them both. And I have two reasons for choosing Fanny. First, I like her best upon the whole, and second, you make it worth my while."

At the same instant Boldwood sprang upon him, and held him by the neck. Troy felt Boldwood's grasp slowly tightening. The move was absolutely unexpected.

"A moment," he gasped. "You are injuring her you love!"

"Well, what do you mean?" said the farmer.

"Give me breath," said Troy.

Boldwood loosened his hand, saying, "By Heaven, I've a mind to kill you!"

"And ruin her."

"Save her."

"Oh, how can she be saved now, unless I marry her?"

Boldwood groaned. He reluctantly released the soldier, and flung him back against the hedge. "Devil, you torture me!" said he.

Troy rebounded like a ball, and was about to make a dash at the farmer; but he checked himself, saying lightly —

"It is not worth while to measure my strength with you. Indeed it is a barbarous way of settling a quarrel. I shall shortly leave the army because of the same conviction. Now after that revelation of how the land lies with Bathsheba, 'twould be a mistake to kill me, would it not?"

"'Twould be a mistake to kill you," repeated Boldwood, mechanically, with a bowed head.

"Better kill yourself."

"Far better."

"I'm glad you see it."

"Troy, make her your wife, and don't act upon what I arranged just now. The alternative is dreadful, but take Bathsheba; I give her up! She must love you indeed to sell soul and body to you so utterly as she has done. Wretched woman — deluded woman — you are, Bathsheba!"

"But about Fanny?"

"Bathsheba is a woman well to do," continued Boldwood, in nervous anxiety, and, Troy, she will make a good wife; and, indeed, she is worth your hastening on your marriage with her!"

"But she has a will — not to say a temper, and I shall be a mere slave to her. I could do anything with poor Fanny Robin."

"Troy," said Boldwood, imploringly, "I'll do anything for you, only don't desert her; pray don't desert her, Troy."

"Which, poor Fanny?"

"No; Bathsheba Everdene. Love her best! Love her tenderly! How shall I get you to see how advantageous it will be to you to secure her at once?"

"I don't wish to secure her in any new way."

Boldwood's arm moved spasmodically towards Troy's person again. He repressed the instinct, and his form drooped as with pain.

Troy went on —

"I shall soon purchase my discharge, and then — "

"But I wish you to hasten on this marriage! It will be better for you both. You love each other, and you must let me help you to do it."

"How?"

"Why, by settling the five hundred on Bathsheba instead of Fanny, to enable you to marry at once. No; she wouldn't have it of me. I'll pay it down to you on the wedding-day."

Troy paused in secret amazement at Boldwood's wild infatuation. He carelessly said, "And am I to have anything now?"

"Yes, if you wish to. But I have not much additional money with me. I did not expect this; but all I have is yours."

Boldwood, more like a somnambulist than a wakeful man, pulled out the large canvas bag he carried by way of a purse, and searched it.

"I have twenty-one pounds more with me," he said. "Two notes and a sovereign. But before I leave you I must have a paper signed — "

"Pay me the money, and we'll go straight to her parlour, and make any arrangement you please to secure my compliance with your wishes. But she must know nothing of this cash business."

"Nothing, nothing," said Boldwood, hastily. "Here is the sum, and if you'll come to my house we'll write out the agreement for the remainder, and the terms also."

"First we'll call upon her."

"But why? Come with me to-night, and go with me to-morrow to the surrogate's."

"But she must be consulted; at any rate informed."

"Very well; go on."

They went up the hill to Bathsheba's house. When they stood at the entrance, Troy said, "Wait here a moment." Opening the door, he glided inside, leaving the door ajar.

Boldwood waited. In two minutes a light appeared in the passage. Boldwood then saw that the chain had been fastened across the door. Troy appeared inside, carrying a bedroom candlestick.

"What, did you think I should break in?" said Boldwood, contemptuously.

"Oh, no, it is merely my humour to secure things. Will you read this a moment? I'll hold the light."

Troy handed a folded newspaper through the slit between door and doorpost, and put the candle close. "That's the paragraph," he said, placing his finger on a line.

Boldwood looked and read —

Marriages.

On the 17th inst., at St. Ambrose's Church, Bath, by the Rev. G. Mincing, B.A., Francis Troy, only son of the late Edward Troy, Esq., M.D., of Weatherbury, and sergeant with Dragoon Guards, to Bathsheba, only surviving daughter of the late Mr. John Everdene, of Casterbridge.

"This may be called Fort meeting Feeble, hey, Boldwood?" said Troy. A low gurgle of derisive laughter followed the words.

The paper fell from Boldwood's hands. Troy continued —

"Fifty pounds to marry Fanny. Good. Twenty-one pounds not to marry Fanny, but Bathsheba. Good. Finale: already Bathsheba's husband. Now, Boldwood, yours is the ridiculous fate which always attends interference between a man and his wife. And another word. Bad as I am, I am not such a villain as to make the marriage or misery of any woman a matter of huckster and sale. Fanny has long ago left me. I don't know where she is. I have searched everywhere. Another word yet. You say you love Bathsheba; yet on the merest apparent evidence you instantly believe in her dishonour. A fig for such love! Now that I've taught you a lesson, take your money back again."

"I will not; I will not!" said Boldwood, in a hiss.

"Anyhow I won't have it," said Troy, contemptuously. He wrapped the packet of gold in the notes, and threw the whole into the road.

Boldwood shook his clenched fist at him. "You juggler of Satan! You black hound! But I'll punish you yet; mark me, I'll punish you yet!"

Another peal of laughter. Troy then closed the door, and locked himself in.

Throughout the whole of that night Boldwood's dark form might have been seen walking about the hills and downs of Weatherbury like an unhappy Shade in the Mournful Fields by Acheron.

CHAPTER XXXV

AT AN UPPER WINDOW

It was very early the next morning — a time of sun and dew. The confused beginnings of many birds' songs spread into the healthy air, and the wan blue of the heaven was here and there coated with thin webs of incorporeal cloud which were of no effect in obscuring day. All the lights in the scene were yellow as to colour, and all the shadows were attenuated as to form. The creeping plants about the old manor-house were bowed with rows of heavy water drops, which had upon objects behind them the effect of minute lenses of high magnifying power.

Just before the clock struck five Gabriel Oak and Coggan passed the village cross, and went on together to the fields. They were yet barely in view of their mistress's house, when Oak fancied he saw the opening of a casement in one of the upper windows. The two men were at this moment partially screened by an elder bush, now beginning to be enriched with black bunches of fruit, and they paused before emerging from its shade.

A handsome man leaned idly from the lattice. He looked east and then west, in the manner of one who makes a first morning survey. The man was Sergeant Troy. His red jacket was loosely thrown on, but not buttoned, and he had altogether the relaxed bearing of a soldier taking his ease.

Coggan spoke first, looking quietly at the window.

"She has married him!" he said.

Gabriel had previously beheld the sight, and he now stood with his back turned, making no reply.

"I fancied we should know something to-day," continued Coggan. "I heard wheels pass my door just after dark — you were out somewhere." He glanced round upon Gabriel. "Good heavens above us, Oak, how white your face is; you look like a corpse!"

"Do I?" said Oak, with a faint smile.

"Lean on the gate: I'll wait a bit."

"All right, all right."

They stood by the gate awhile, Gabriel listlessly staring at the ground. His mind sped into the future, and saw there enacted in years of leisure the scenes of repentance that would ensue from this work of haste. That they were married he had instantly decided. Why had it been so mysteriously managed? It had become known that she had had a fearful journey to Bath, owing to her miscalculating the distance: that the horse had broken down, and that she had been more than two days getting there. It was not Bathsheba's way to do things furtively. With all her faults, she was candour itself. Could she have been entrapped? The union was not only an unutterable grief to him: it amazed him, notwithstanding that he had passed the preceding week in a suspicion that such might be the issue of Troy's meeting her away from home. Her quiet return with Liddy had to some extent dispersed the dread. Just as that imperceptible

motion which appears like stillness is infinitely divided in its properties from stillness itself, so had his hope undistinguishable from despair differed from despair indeed.

In a few minutes they moved on again towards the house. The sergeant still looked from the window.

"Morning, comrades!" he shouted, in a cheery voice, when they came up.

Coggan replied to the greeting. "Bain't ye going to answer the man?" he then said to Gabriel. "I'd say good morning — you needn't spend a hapenny of meaning upon it, and yet keep the man civil."

Gabriel soon decided too that, since the deed was done, to put the best face upon the matter would be the greatest kindness to her he loved.

"Good morning, Sergeant Troy," he returned, in a ghastly voice.

"A rambling, gloomy house this," said Troy, smiling.

"Why — they may not be married!" suggested Coggan. "Perhaps she's not there."

Gabriel shook his head. The soldier turned a little towards the east, and the sun kindled his scarlet coat to an orange glow.

"But it is a nice old house," responded Gabriel.

"Yes — I suppose so; but I feel like new wine in an old bottle here. My notion is that sash-windows should be put throughout, and these old wainscoted walls brightened up a bit; or the oak cleared quite away, and the walls papered."

"It would be a pity, I think."

"Well, no. A philosopher once said in my hearing that the old builders, who worked when art was a living thing, had no respect for the work of builders who went before them, but pulled down and altered as they thought fit; and why shouldn't we? 'Creation and preservation don't do well together,' says he, 'and a million of antiquarians can't invent a style.' My mind exactly. I am for making this place more modern, that we may be cheerful whilst we can."

The military man turned and surveyed the interior of the room, to assist his ideas of improvement in this direction. Gabriel and Coggan began to move on.

"Oh, Coggan," said Troy, as if inspired by a recollection "do you know if insanity has ever appeared in Mr. Boldwood's family?"

Jan reflected for a moment.

"I once heard that an uncle of his was queer in his head, but I don't know the rights o't," he said.

"It is of no importance," said Troy, lightly. "Well, I shall be down in the fields with you some time this week; but I have a few matters to attend to first. So good-day to you. We shall, of course, keep on just as friendly terms as usual. I'm not a proud man: nobody is ever able to say that of Sergeant Troy. However, what is must be, and here's half-a-crown to drink my health, men."

Troy threw the coin dexterously across the front plot and over the fence towards Gabriel, who shunned it in its fall, his face turning to an angry red. Coggan twirled his eye, edged forward, and caught the money in its ricochet upon the road.

“Very well — you keep it, Coggan,” said Gabriel with disdain and almost fiercely. “As for me, I’ll do without gifts from him!”

“Don’t show it too much,” said Coggan, musingly. “For if he’s married to her, mark my words, he’ll buy his discharge and be our master here. Therefore ‘tis well to say ‘Friend’ outwardly, though you say ‘Troublehouse’ within.”

“Well — perhaps it is best to be silent; but I can’t go further than that. I can’t flatter, and if my place here is only to be kept by smoothing him down, my place must be lost.”

A horseman, whom they had for some time seen in the distance, now appeared close beside them.

“There’s Mr. Boldwood,” said Oak. “I wonder what Troy meant by his question.”

Coggan and Oak nodded respectfully to the farmer, just checked their paces to discover if they were wanted, and finding they were not stood back to let him pass on.

The only signs of the terrible sorrow Boldwood had been combating through the night, and was combating now, were the want of colour in his well-defined face, the enlarged appearance of the veins in his forehead and temples, and the sharper lines about his mouth. The horse bore him away, and the very step of the animal seemed significant of dogged despair. Gabriel, for a minute, rose above his own grief in noticing Boldwood’s. He saw the square figure sitting erect upon the horse, the head turned to neither side, the elbows steady by the hips, the brim of the hat level and undisturbed in its onward glide, until the keen edges of Boldwood’s shape sank by degrees over the hill. To one who knew the man and his story there was something more striking in this immobility than in a collapse. The clash of discord between mood and matter here was forced painfully home to the heart; and, as in laughter there are more dreadful phases than in tears, so was there in the steadiness of this agonized man an expression deeper than a cry.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WEALTH IN JEOPARDY — THE REVEL

One night, at the end of August, when Bathsheba’s experiences as a married woman were still new, and when the weather was yet dry and sultry, a man stood motionless in the stockyard of Weatherbury Upper Farm, looking at the moon and sky.

The night had a sinister aspect. A heated breeze from the south slowly fanned the summits of lofty objects, and in the sky dashes of buoyant cloud were sailing in a course at right angles to that of another stratum, neither of them in the direction of the breeze below. The moon, as seen through these films, had a lurid metallic look. The fields were sallow with the impure light, and all were tinged in monochrome, as if beheld through stained glass. The same evening the sheep had trailed homeward head to tail, the behaviour of the rooks had been confused, and the horses had moved with timidity and caution.

Thunder was imminent, and, taking some secondary appearances into consideration, it was likely to be followed by one of the lengthened rains which mark the close of dry weather for the season. Before twelve hours had passed a harvest atmosphere would be a bygone thing.

Oak gazed with misgiving at eight naked and unprotected ricks, massive and heavy with the rich produce of one-half the farm for that year. He went on to the barn.

This was the night which had been selected by Sergeant Troy — ruling now in the room of his wife — for giving the harvest supper and dance. As Oak approached the building the sound of violins and a tambourine, and the regular jigging of many feet, grew more distinct. He came close to the large doors, one of which stood slightly ajar, and looked in.

The central space, together with the recess at one end, was emptied of all incumbrances, and this area, covering about two-thirds of the whole, was appropriated for the gathering, the remaining end, which was piled to the ceiling with oats, being screened off with sail-cloth. Tufts and garlands of green foliage decorated the walls, beams, and extemporized chandeliers, and immediately opposite to Oak a rostrum had been erected, bearing a table and chairs. Here sat three fiddlers, and beside them stood a frantic man with his hair on end, perspiration streaming down his cheeks, and a tambourine quivering in his hand.

The dance ended, and on the black oak floor in the midst a new row of couples formed for another.

“Now, ma’am, and no offence I hope, I ask what dance you would like next?” said the first violin.

“Really, it makes no difference,” said the clear voice of Bathsheba, who stood at the inner end of the building, observing the scene from behind a table covered with cups and viands. Troy was lolling beside her.

“Then,” said the fiddler, “I’ll venture to name that the right and proper thing is ‘The Soldier’s Joy’ — there being a gallant soldier married into the farm — hey, my sonnies, and gentlemen all?”

“It shall be ‘The Soldier’s Joy,’” exclaimed a chorus.

“Thanks for the compliment,” said the sergeant gaily, taking Bathsheba by the hand and leading her to the top of the dance. “For though I have purchased my discharge from Her Most Gracious Majesty’s regiment of cavalry the 11th Dragoon Guards, to attend to the new duties awaiting me here, I shall continue a soldier in spirit and feeling as long as I live.”

So the dance began. As to the merits of “The Soldier’s Joy,” there cannot be, and never were, two opinions. It has been observed in the musical circles of Weatherbury and its vicinity that this melody, at the end of three-quarters of an hour of thunderous footing, still possesses more stimulative properties for the heel and toe than the majority of other dances at their first opening. “The Soldier’s Joy” has, too, an additional charm, in being so admirably adapted to the tambourine aforesaid — no mean instrument in the hands of a performer who understands the proper convulsions, spasms, St.

Vitus's dances, and fearful frenzies necessary when exhibiting its tones in their highest perfection.

The immortal tune ended, a fine DD rolling forth from the bass-viol with the sonorousness of a cannonade, and Gabriel delayed his entry no longer. He avoided Bathsheba, and got as near as possible to the platform, where Sergeant Troy was now seated, drinking brandy-and-water, though the others drank without exception cider and ale. Gabriel could not easily thrust himself within speaking distance of the sergeant, and he sent a message, asking him to come down for a moment. The sergeant said he could not attend.

"Will you tell him, then," said Gabriel, "that I only stepped ath'art to say that a heavy rain is sure to fall soon, and that something should be done to protect the ricks?"

"Mr. Troy says it will not rain," returned the messenger, "and he cannot stop to talk to you about such fidgets."

In juxtaposition with Troy, Oak had a melancholy tendency to look like a candle beside gas, and ill at ease, he went out again, thinking he would go home; for, under the circumstances, he had no heart for the scene in the barn. At the door he paused for a moment: Troy was speaking.

"Friends, it is not only the harvest home that we are celebrating to-night; but this is also a Wedding Feast. A short time ago I had the happiness to lead to the altar this lady, your mistress, and not until now have we been able to give any public flourish to the event in Weatherbury. That it may be thoroughly well done, and that every man may go happy to bed, I have ordered to be brought here some bottles of brandy and kettles of hot water. A treble-strong goblet will be handed round to each guest."

Bathsheba put her hand upon his arm, and, with upturned pale face, said imploringly, "No — don't give it to them — pray don't, Frank! It will only do them harm: they have had enough of everything."

"True — we don't wish for no more, thank ye," said one or two.

"Pooh!" said the sergeant contemptuously, and raised his voice as if lighted up by a new idea. "Friends," he said, "we'll send the women-folk home! 'Tis time they were in bed. Then we cockbirds will have a jolly carouse to ourselves! If any of the men show the white feather, let them look elsewhere for a winter's work."

Bathsheba indignantly left the barn, followed by all the women and children. The musicians, not looking upon themselves as "company," slipped quietly away to their spring waggon and put in the horse. Thus Troy and the men on the farm were left sole occupants of the place. Oak, not to appear unnecessarily disagreeable, stayed a little while; then he, too, arose and quietly took his departure, followed by a friendly oath from the sergeant for not staying to a second round of grog.

Gabriel proceeded towards his home. In approaching the door, his toe kicked something which felt and sounded soft, leathery, and distended, like a boxing-glove. It was a large toad humbly travelling across the path. Oak took it up, thinking it might be better to kill the creature to save it from pain; but finding it uninjured, he placed

it again among the grass. He knew what this direct message from the Great Mother meant. And soon came another.

When he struck a light indoors there appeared upon the table a thin glistening streak, as if a brush of varnish had been lightly dragged across it. Oak's eyes followed the serpentine sheen to the other side, where it led up to a huge brown garden-slug, which had come indoors to-night for reasons of its own. It was Nature's second way of hinting to him that he was to prepare for foul weather.

Oak sat down meditating for nearly an hour. During this time two black spiders, of the kind common in thatched houses, promenaded the ceiling, ultimately dropping to the floor. This reminded him that if there was one class of manifestation on this matter that he thoroughly understood, it was the instincts of sheep. He left the room, ran across two or three fields towards the flock, got upon a hedge, and looked over among them.

They were crowded close together on the other side around some furze bushes, and the first peculiarity observable was that, on the sudden appearance of Oak's head over the fence, they did not stir or run away. They had now a terror of something greater than their terror of man. But this was not the most noteworthy feature: they were all grouped in such a way that their tails, without a single exception, were towards that half of the horizon from which the storm threatened. There was an inner circle closely huddled, and outside these they radiated wider apart, the pattern formed by the flock as a whole not being unlike a vandyked lace collar, to which the clump of furze-bushes stood in the position of a wearer's neck.

This was enough to re-establish him in his original opinion. He knew now that he was right, and that Troy was wrong. Every voice in nature was unanimous in bespeaking change. But two distinct translations attached to these dumb expressions. Apparently there was to be a thunder-storm, and afterwards a cold continuous rain. The creeping things seemed to know all about the later rain, but little of the interpolated thunder-storm; whilst the sheep knew all about the thunder-storm and nothing of the later rain.

This complication of weathers being uncommon, was all the more to be feared. Oak returned to the stack-yard. All was silent here, and the conical tips of the ricks jutted darkly into the sky. There were five wheat-ricks in this yard, and three stacks of barley. The wheat when threshed would average about thirty quarters to each stack; the barley, at least forty. Their value to Bathsheba, and indeed to anybody, Oak mentally estimated by the following simple calculation: —

$$5 \times 30 = 150 \text{ quarters} = 500 \text{ L.}$$

$$3 \times 40 = 120 \text{ quarters} = 250 \text{ L.}$$

Total . . 750 L.

|
Seven hundred and fifty pounds in the divinest form that money can wear — that of necessary food for man and beast: should the risk be run of deteriorating this bulk

of corn to less than half its value, because of the instability of a woman? "Never, if I can prevent it!" said Gabriel.

Such was the argument that Oak set outwardly before him. But man, even to himself, is a palimpsest, having an ostensible writing, and another beneath the lines. It is possible that there was this golden legend under the utilitarian one: "I will help to my last effort the woman I have loved so dearly."

He went back to the barn to endeavour to obtain assistance for covering the ricks that very night. All was silent within, and he would have passed on in the belief that the party had broken up, had not a dim light, yellow as saffron by contrast with the greenish whiteness outside, streamed through a knot-hole in the folding doors.

Gabriel looked in. An unusual picture met his eye.

The candles suspended among the evergreens had burnt down to their sockets, and in some cases the leaves tied about them were scorched. Many of the lights had quite gone out, others smoked and stank, grease dropping from them upon the floor. Here, under the table, and leaning against forms and chairs in every conceivable attitude except the perpendicular, were the wretched persons of all the work-folk, the hair of their heads at such low levels being suggestive of mops and brooms. In the midst of these shone red and distinct the figure of Sergeant Troy, leaning back in a chair. Coggan was on his back, with his mouth open, huzzing forth snores, as were several others; the united breathings of the horizontal assemblage forming a subdued roar like London from a distance. Joseph Poorgrass was curled round in the fashion of a hedge-hog, apparently in attempts to present the least possible portion of his surface to the air; and behind him was dimly visible an unimportant remnant of William Smallbury. The glasses and cups still stood upon the table, a water-jug being overturned, from which a small rill, after tracing its course with marvellous precision down the centre of the long table, fell into the neck of the unconscious Mark Clark, in a steady, monotonous drip, like the dripping of a stalactite in a cave.

Gabriel glanced hopelessly at the group, which, with one or two exceptions, composed all the able-bodied men upon the farm. He saw at once that if the ricks were to be saved that night, or even the next morning, he must save them with his own hands.

A faint "ting-ting" resounded from under Coggan's waistcoat. It was Coggan's watch striking the hour of two.

Oak went to the recumbent form of Matthew Moon, who usually undertook the rough thatching of the home-stead, and shook him. The shaking was without effect.

Gabriel shouted in his ear, "where's your thatching-beetle and rick-stick and spars?"

"Under the staddles," said Moon, mechanically, with the unconscious promptness of a medium.

Gabriel let go his head, and it dropped upon the floor like a bowl. He then went to Susan Tall's husband.

"Where's the key of the granary?"

No answer. The question was repeated, with the same result. To be shouted to at night was evidently less of a novelty to Susan Tall's husband than to Matthew Moon. Oak flung down Tall's head into the corner again and turned away.

To be just, the men were not greatly to blame for this painful and demoralising termination to the evening's entertainment. Sergeant Troy had so strenuously insisted, glass in hand, that drinking should be the bond of their union, that those who wished to refuse hardly liked to be so unmannerly under the circumstances. Having from their youth up been entirely unaccustomed to any liquor stronger than cider or mild ale, it was no wonder that they had succumbed, one and all, with extraordinary uniformity, after the lapse of about an hour.

Gabriel was greatly depressed. This debauch boded ill for that wilful and fascinating mistress whom the faithful man even now felt within him as the embodiment of all that was sweet and bright and hopeless.

He put out the expiring lights, that the barn might not be endangered, closed the door upon the men in their deep and oblivious sleep, and went again into the lone night. A hot breeze, as if breathed from the parted lips of some dragon about to swallow the globe, fanned him from the south, while directly opposite in the north rose a grim misshapen body of cloud, in the very teeth of the wind. So unnaturally did it rise that one could fancy it to be lifted by machinery from below. Meanwhile the faint cloudlets had flown back into the south-east corner of the sky, as if in terror of the large cloud, like a young brood gazed in upon by some monster.

Going on to the village, Oak flung a small stone against the window of Laban Tall's bedroom, expecting Susan to open it; but nobody stirred. He went round to the back door, which had been left unfastened for Laban's entry, and passed in to the foot of the staircase.

"Mrs. Tall, I've come for the key of the granary, to get at the rick-cloths," said Oak, in a stentorian voice.

"Is that you?" said Mrs. Susan Tall, half awake.

"Yes," said Gabriel.

"Come along to bed, do, you drawlatching rogue — keeping a body awake like this!"

"It isn't Laban — 'tis Gabriel Oak. I want the key of the granary."

"Gabriel! What in the name of fortune did you pretend to be Laban for?"

"I didn't. I thought you meant — "

"Yes you did! What do you want here?"

"The key of the granary."

"Take it then. 'Tis on the nail. People coming disturbing women at this time of night ought — "

Gabriel took the key, without waiting to hear the conclusion of the tirade. Ten minutes later his lonely figure might have been seen dragging four large water-proof coverings across the yard, and soon two of these heaps of treasure in grain were covered snug — two cloths to each. Two hundred pounds were secured. Three wheat-stacks remained open, and there were no more cloths. Oak looked under the staddles and

found a fork. He mounted the third pile of wealth and began operating, adopting the plan of sloping the upper sheaves one over the other; and, in addition, filling the interstices with the material of some untied sheaves.

So far all was well. By this hurried contrivance Bathsheba's property in wheat was safe for at any rate a week or two, provided always that there was not much wind.

Next came the barley. This it was only possible to protect by systematic thatching. Time went on, and the moon vanished not to reappear. It was the farewell of the ambassador previous to war. The night had a haggard look, like a sick thing; and there came finally an utter expiration of air from the whole heaven in the form of a slow breeze, which might have been likened to a death. And now nothing was heard in the yard but the dull thuds of the beetle which drove in the spars, and the rustle of thatch in the intervals.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE STORM — THE TWO TOGETHER

A light flapped over the scene, as if reflected from phosphorescent wings crossing the sky, and a rumble filled the air. It was the first move of the approaching storm.

The second peal was noisy, with comparatively little visible lightning. Gabriel saw a candle shining in Bathsheba's bedroom, and soon a shadow swept to and fro upon the blind.

Then there came a third flash. Manœuvres of a most extraordinary kind were going on in the vast firmamental hollows overhead. The lightning now was the colour of silver, and gleamed in the heavens like a mailed army. Rumbles became rattles. Gabriel from his elevated position could see over the landscape at least half-a-dozen miles in front. Every hedge, bush, and tree was distinct as in a line engraving. In a paddock in the same direction was a herd of heifers, and the forms of these were visible at this moment in the act of galloping about in the wildest and maddest confusion, flinging their heels and tails high into the air, their heads to earth. A poplar in the immediate foreground was like an ink stroke on burnished tin. Then the picture vanished, leaving the darkness so intense that Gabriel worked entirely by feeling with his hands.

He had stuck his ricking-rod, or poniard, as it was indifferently called — a long iron lance, polished by handling — into the stack, used to support the sheaves instead of the support called a groom used on houses. A blue light appeared in the zenith, and in some indescribable manner flickered down near the top of the rod. It was the fourth of the larger flashes. A moment later and there was a smack — smart, clear, and short. Gabriel felt his position to be anything but a safe one, and he resolved to descend.

Not a drop of rain had fallen as yet. He wiped his weary brow, and looked again at the black forms of the unprotected stacks. Was his life so valuable to him after all? What were his prospects that he should be so chary of running risk, when important and urgent labour could not be carried on without such risk? He resolved to stick to

the stack. However, he took a precaution. Under the staddles was a long tethering chain, used to prevent the escape of errant horses. This he carried up the ladder, and sticking his rod through the clog at one end, allowed the other end of the chain to trail upon the ground. The spike attached to it he drove in. Under the shadow of this extemporized lightning-conductor he felt himself comparatively safe.

Before Oak had laid his hands upon his tools again out leapt the fifth flash, with the spring of a serpent and the shout of a fiend. It was green as an emerald, and the reverberation was stunning. What was this the light revealed to him? In the open ground before him, as he looked over the ridge of the rick, was a dark and apparently female form. Could it be that of the only venturesome woman in the parish — Bathsheba? The form moved on a step: then he could see no more.

“Is that you, ma’am?” said Gabriel to the darkness.

“Who is there?” said the voice of Bathsheba.

“Gabriel. I am on the rick, thatching.”

“Oh, Gabriel! — and are you? I have come about them. The weather awoke me, and I thought of the corn. I am so distressed about it — can we save it anyhow? I cannot find my husband. Is he with you?”

“He is not here.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Asleep in the barn.”

“He promised that the stacks should be seen to, and now they are all neglected! Can I do anything to help? Liddy is afraid to come out. Fancy finding you here at such an hour! Surely I can do something?”

“You can bring up some reed-sheaves to me, one by one, ma’am; if you are not afraid to come up the ladder in the dark,” said Gabriel. “Every moment is precious now, and that would save a good deal of time. It is not very dark when the lightning has been gone a bit.”

“I’ll do anything!” she said, resolutely. She instantly took a sheaf upon her shoulder, clambered up close to his heels, placed it behind the rod, and descended for another. At her third ascent the rick suddenly brightened with the brazen glare of shining majolica — every knot in every straw was visible. On the slope in front of him appeared two human shapes, black as jet. The rick lost its sheen — the shapes vanished. Gabriel turned his head. It had been the sixth flash which had come from the east behind him, and the two dark forms on the slope had been the shadows of himself and Bathsheba.

Then came the peal. It hardly was credible that such a heavenly light could be the parent of such a diabolical sound.

“How terrible!” she exclaimed, and clutched him by the sleeve. Gabriel turned, and steadied her on her aerial perch by holding her arm. At the same moment, while he was still reversed in his attitude, there was more light, and he saw, as it were, a copy of the tall poplar tree on the hill drawn in black on the wall of the barn. It was the shadow of that tree, thrown across by a secondary flash in the west.

The next flare came. Bathsheba was on the ground now, shouldering another sheaf, and she bore its dazzle without flinching — thunder and all — and again ascended with the load. There was then a silence everywhere for four or five minutes, and the crunch of the spars, as Gabriel hastily drove them in, could again be distinctly heard. He thought the crisis of the storm had passed. But there came a burst of light.

“Hold on!” said Gabriel, taking the sheaf from her shoulder, and grasping her arm again.

Heaven opened then, indeed. The flash was almost too novel for its inexpressibly dangerous nature to be at once realised, and they could only comprehend the magnificence of its beauty. It sprang from east, west, north, south, and was a perfect dance of death. The forms of skeletons appeared in the air, shaped with blue fire for bones — dancing, leaping, striding, racing around, and mingling altogether in unparalleled confusion. With these were intertwined undulating snakes of green, and behind these was a broad mass of lesser light. Simultaneously came from every part of the tumbling sky what may be called a shout; since, though no shout ever came near it, it was more of the nature of a shout than of anything else earthly. In the meantime one of the grisly forms had alighted upon the point of Gabriel’s rod, to run invisibly down it, down the chain, and into the earth. Gabriel was almost blinded, and he could feel Bathsheba’s warm arm tremble in his hand — a sensation novel and thrilling enough; but love, life, everything human, seemed small and trifling in such close juxtaposition with an infuriated universe.

Oak had hardly time to gather up these impressions into a thought, and to see how strangely the red feather of her hat shone in this light, when the tall tree on the hill before mentioned seemed on fire to a white heat, and a new one among these terrible voices mingled with the last crash of those preceding. It was a stupefying blast, harsh and pitiless, and it fell upon their ears in a dead, flat blow, without that reverberation which lends the tones of a drum to more distant thunder. By the lustre reflected from every part of the earth and from the wide domical scoop above it, he saw that the tree was sliced down the whole length of its tall, straight stem, a huge riband of bark being apparently flung off. The other portion remained erect, and revealed the bared surface as a strip of white down the front. The lightning had struck the tree. A sulphurous smell filled the air; then all was silent, and black as a cave in Hinnom.

“We had a narrow escape!” said Gabriel, hurriedly. “You had better go down.”

Bathsheba said nothing; but he could distinctly hear her rhythmical pants, and the recurrent rustle of the sheaf beside her in response to her frightened pulsations. She descended the ladder, and, on second thoughts, he followed her. The darkness was now impenetrable by the sharpest vision. They both stood still at the bottom, side by side. Bathsheba appeared to think only of the weather — Oak thought only of her just then. At last he said —

“The storm seems to have passed now, at any rate.”

“I think so too,” said Bathsheba. “Though there are multitudes of gleams, look!”

The sky was now filled with an incessant light, frequent repetition melting into complete continuity, as an unbroken sound results from the successive strokes on a gong.

"Nothing serious," said he. "I cannot understand no rain falling. But Heaven be praised, it is all the better for us. I am now going up again."

"Gabriel, you are kinder than I deserve! I will stay and help you yet. Oh, why are not some of the others here!"

"They would have been here if they could," said Oak, in a hesitating way.

"O, I know it all — all," she said, adding slowly: "They are all asleep in the barn, in a drunken sleep, and my husband among them. That's it, is it not? Don't think I am a timid woman and can't endure things."

"I am not certain," said Gabriel. "I will go and see."

He crossed to the barn, leaving her there alone. He looked through the chinks of the door. All was in total darkness, as he had left it, and there still arose, as at the former time, the steady buzz of many snores.

He felt a zephyr curling about his cheek, and turned. It was Bathsheba's breath — she had followed him, and was looking into the same chink.

He endeavoured to put off the immediate and painful subject of their thoughts by remarking gently, "If you'll come back again, miss — ma'am, and hand up a few more; it would save much time."

Then Oak went back again, ascended to the top, stepped off the ladder for greater expedition, and went on thatching. She followed, but without a sheaf.

"Gabriel," she said, in a strange and impressive voice.

Oak looked up at her. She had not spoken since he left the barn. The soft and continual shimmer of the dying lightning showed a marble face high against the black sky of the opposite quarter. Bathsheba was sitting almost on the apex of the stack, her feet gathered up beneath her, and resting on the top round of the ladder.

"Yes, mistress," he said.

"I suppose you thought that when I galloped away to Bath that night it was on purpose to be married?"

"I did at last — not at first," he answered, somewhat surprised at the abruptness with which this new subject was broached.

"And others thought so, too?"

"Yes."

"And you blamed me for it?"

"Well — a little."

"I thought so. Now, I care a little for your good opinion, and I want to explain something — I have longed to do it ever since I returned, and you looked so gravely at me. For if I were to die — and I may die soon — it would be dreadful that you should always think mistakenly of me. Now, listen."

Gabriel ceased his rustling.

"I went to Bath that night in the full intention of breaking off my engagement to Mr. Troy. It was owing to circumstances which occurred after I got there that — that we were married. Now, do you see the matter in a new light?"

"I do — somewhat."

"I must, I suppose, say more, now that I have begun. And perhaps it's no harm, for you are certainly under no delusion that I ever loved you, or that I can have any object in speaking, more than that object I have mentioned. Well, I was alone in a strange city, and the horse was lame. And at last I didn't know what to do. I saw, when it was too late, that scandal might seize hold of me for meeting him alone in that way. But I was coming away, when he suddenly said he had that day seen a woman more beautiful than I, and that his constancy could not be counted on unless I at once became his... And I was grieved and troubled — " She cleared her voice, and waited a moment, as if to gather breath. "And then, between jealousy and distraction, I married him!" she whispered with desperate impetuosity.

Gabriel made no reply.

"He was not to blame, for it was perfectly true about — about his seeing somebody else," she quickly added. "And now I don't wish for a single remark from you upon the subject — indeed, I forbid it. I only wanted you to know that misunderstood bit of my history before a time comes when you could never know it. — You want some more sheaves?"

She went down the ladder, and the work proceeded. Gabriel soon perceived a languor in the movements of his mistress up and down, and he said to her, gently as a mother

"I think you had better go indoors now, you are tired. I can finish the rest alone. If the wind does not change the rain is likely to keep off."

"If I am useless I will go," said Bathsheba, in a flagging cadence. "But O, if your life should be lost!"

"You are not useless; but I would rather not tire you longer. You have done well."

"And you better!" she said, gratefully. "Thank you for your devotion, a thousand times, Gabriel! Goodnight — I know you are doing your very best for me."

She diminished in the gloom, and vanished, and he heard the latch of the gate fall as she passed through. He worked in a reverie now, musing upon her story, and upon the contradictoriness of that feminine heart which had caused her to speak more warmly to him to-night than she ever had done whilst unmarried and free to speak as warmly as she chose.

He was disturbed in his meditation by a grating noise from the coach-house. It was the vane on the roof turning round, and this change in the wind was the signal for a disastrous rain.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

RAIN — ONE SOLITARY MEETS ANOTHER

It was now five o'clock, and the dawn was promising to break in hues of drab and ash.

The air changed its temperature and stirred itself more vigorously. Cool breezes coursed in transparent eddies round Oak's face. The wind shifted yet a point or two and blew stronger. In ten minutes every wind of heaven seemed to be roaming at large. Some of the thatching on the wheat-stacks was now whirled fantastically aloft, and had to be replaced and weighted with some rails that lay near at hand. This done, Oak slaved away again at the barley. A huge drop of rain smote his face, the wind snarled round every corner, the trees rocked to the bases of their trunks, and the twigs clashed in strife. Driving in spars at any point and on any system, inch by inch he covered more and more safely from ruin this distracting impersonation of seven hundred pounds. The rain came on in earnest, and Oak soon felt the water to be tracking cold and clammy routes down his back. Ultimately he was reduced well-nigh to a homogeneous sop, and the dyes of his clothes trickled down and stood in a pool at the foot of the ladder. The rain stretched obliquely through the dull atmosphere in liquid spines, unbroken in continuity between their beginnings in the clouds and their points in him.

Oak suddenly remembered that eight months before this time he had been fighting against fire in the same spot as desperately as he was fighting against water now — and for a futile love of the same woman. As for her — But Oak was generous and true, and dismissed his reflections.

It was about seven o'clock in the dark leaden morning when Gabriel came down from the last stack, and thankfully exclaimed, "It is done!" He was drenched, weary, and sad, and yet not so sad as drenched and weary, for he was cheered by a sense of success in a good cause.

Faint sounds came from the barn, and he looked that way. Figures stepped singly and in pairs through the doors — all walking awkwardly, and abashed, save the foremost, who wore a red jacket, and advanced with his hands in his pockets, whistling. The others shambled after with a conscience-stricken air: the whole procession was not unlike Flaxman's group of the suitors tottering on towards the infernal regions under the conduct of Mercury. The gnarled shapes passed into the village, Troy, their leader, entering the farmhouse. Not a single one of them had turned his face to the ricks, or apparently bestowed one thought upon their condition.

Soon Oak too went homeward, by a different route from theirs. In front of him against the wet glazed surface of the lane he saw a person walking yet more slowly than himself under an umbrella. The man turned and plainly started; he was Boldwood.

"How are you this morning, sir?" said Oak.

"Yes, it is a wet day. — Oh, I am well, very well, I thank you; quite well."

"I am glad to hear it, sir."

Boldwood seemed to awake to the present by degrees. "You look tired and ill, Oak," he said then, desultorily regarding his companion.

"I am tired. You look strangely altered, sir."

"I? Not a bit of it: I am well enough. What put that into your head?"

"I thought you didn't look quite so topping as you used to, that was all."

"Indeed, then you are mistaken," said Boldwood, shortly. "Nothing hurts me. My constitution is an iron one."

"I've been working hard to get our ricks covered, and was barely in time. Never had such a struggle in my life... Yours of course are safe, sir."

"Oh yes," Boldwood added, after an interval of silence: "What did you ask, Oak?"

"Your ricks are all covered before this time?"

"No."

"At any rate, the large ones upon the stone staddles?"

"They are not."

"Them under the hedge?"

"No. I forgot to tell the thatcher to set about it."

"Nor the little one by the stile?"

"Nor the little one by the stile. I overlooked the ricks this year."

"Then not a tenth of your corn will come to measure, sir."

"Possibly not."

"Overlooked them," repeated Gabriel slowly to himself. It is difficult to describe the intensely dramatic effect that announcement had upon Oak at such a moment. All the night he had been feeling that the neglect he was labouring to repair was abnormal and isolated — the only instance of the kind within the circuit of the county. Yet at this very time, within the same parish, a greater waste had been going on, uncomplained of and disregarded. A few months earlier Boldwood's forgetting his husbandry would have been as preposterous an idea as a sailor forgetting he was in a ship. Oak was just thinking that whatever he himself might have suffered from Bathsheba's marriage, here was a man who had suffered more, when Boldwood spoke in a changed voice — that of one who yearned to make a confidence and relieve his heart by an outpouring.

"Oak, you know as well as I that things have gone wrong with me lately. I may as well own it. I was going to get a little settled in life; but in some way my plan has come to nothing."

"I thought my mistress would have married you," said Gabriel, not knowing enough of the full depths of Boldwood's love to keep silence on the farmer's account, and determined not to evade discipline by doing so on his own. "However, it is so sometimes, and nothing happens that we expect," he added, with the repose of a man whom misfortune had inured rather than subdued.

"I daresay I am a joke about the parish," said Boldwood, as if the subject came irresistibly to his tongue, and with a miserable lightness meant to express his indifference.

"Oh no — I don't think that."

“ — But the real truth of the matter is that there was not, as some fancy, any jilting on — her part. No engagement ever existed between me and Miss Everdene. People say so, but it is untrue: she never promised me!” Boldwood stood still now and turned his wild face to Oak. “Oh, Gabriel,” he continued, “I am weak and foolish, and I don’t know what, and I can’t fend off my miserable grief! ... I had some faint belief in the mercy of God till I lost that woman. Yes, He prepared a gourd to shade me, and like the prophet I thanked Him and was glad. But the next day He prepared a worm to smite the gourd and wither it; and I feel it is better to die than to live!”

A silence followed. Boldwood aroused himself from the momentary mood of confidence into which he had drifted, and walked on again, resuming his usual reserve.

“No, Gabriel,” he resumed, with a carelessness which was like the smile on the countenance of a skull: “it was made more of by other people than ever it was by us. I do feel a little regret occasionally, but no woman ever had power over me for any length of time. Well, good morning; I can trust you not to mention to others what has passed between us two here.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

COMING HOME — A CRY

On the turnpike road, between Casterbridge and Weatherbury, and about three miles from the former place, is Yalbury Hill, one of those steep long ascents which pervade the highways of this undulating part of South Wessex. In returning from market it is usual for the farmers and other gig-gentry to alight at the bottom and walk up.

One Saturday evening in the month of October Bathsheba’s vehicle was duly creeping up this incline. She was sitting listlessly in the second seat of the gig, whilst walking beside her in a farmer’s marketing suit of unusually fashionable cut was an erect, well-made young man. Though on foot, he held the reins and whip, and occasionally aimed light cuts at the horse’s ear with the end of the lash, as a recreation. This man was her husband, formerly Sergeant Troy, who, having bought his discharge with Bathsheba’s money, was gradually transforming himself into a farmer of a spirited and very modern school. People of unalterable ideas still insisted upon calling him “Sergeant” when they met him, which was in some degree owing to his having still retained the well-shaped moustache of his military days, and the soldierly bearing inseparable from his form and training.

“Yes, if it hadn’t been for that wretched rain I should have cleared two hundred as easy as looking, my love,” he was saying. “Don’t you see, it altered all the chances? To speak like a book I once read, wet weather is the narrative, and fine days are the episodes, of our country’s history; now, isn’t that true?”

“But the time of year is come for changeable weather.”

"Well, yes. The fact is, these autumn races are the ruin of everybody. Never did I see such a day as 'twas! 'Tis a wild open place, just out of Budmouth, and a drab sea rolled in towards us like liquid misery. Wind and rain — good Lord! Dark? Why, 'twas as black as my hat before the last race was run. 'Twas five o'clock, and you couldn't see the horses till they were almost in, leave alone colours. The ground was as heavy as lead, and all judgment from a fellow's experience went for nothing. Horses, riders, people, were all blown about like ships at sea. Three booths were blown over, and the wretched folk inside crawled out upon their hands and knees; and in the next field were as many as a dozen hats at one time. Ay, Pimpernel regularly stuck fast, when about sixty yards off, and when I saw Policy stepping on, it did knock my heart against the lining of my ribs, I assure you, my love!"

"And you mean, Frank," said Bathsheba, sadly — her voice was painfully lowered from the fulness and vivacity of the previous summer — "that you have lost more than a hundred pounds in a month by this dreadful horse-racing? O, Frank, it is cruel; it is foolish of you to take away my money so. We shall have to leave the farm; that will be the end of it!"

"Humbug about cruel. Now, there 'tis again — turn on the waterworks; that's just like you."

"But you'll promise me not to go to Budmouth second meeting, won't you?" she implored. Bathsheba was at the full depth for tears, but she maintained a dry eye.

"I don't see why I should; in fact, if it turns out to be a fine day, I was thinking of taking you."

"Never, never! I'll go a hundred miles the other way first. I hate the sound of the very word!"

"But the question of going to see the race or staying at home has very little to do with the matter. Bets are all booked safely enough before the race begins, you may depend. Whether it is a bad race for me or a good one, will have very little to do with our going there next Monday."

"But you don't mean to say that you have risked anything on this one too!" she exclaimed, with an agonized look.

"There now, don't you be a little fool. Wait till you are told. Why, Bathsheba, you have lost all the pluck and sauciness you formerly had, and upon my life if I had known what a chicken-hearted creature you were under all your boldness, I'd never have — I know what."

A flash of indignation might have been seen in Bathsheba's dark eyes as she looked resolutely ahead after this reply. They moved on without further speech, some early-withered leaves from the trees which hooded the road at this spot occasionally spinning downward across their path to the earth.

A woman appeared on the brow of the hill. The ridge was in a cutting, so that she was very near the husband and wife before she became visible. Troy had turned towards the gig to remount, and whilst putting his foot on the step the woman passed behind him.

Though the overshadowing trees and the approach of eventide enveloped them in gloom, Bathsheba could see plainly enough to discern the extreme poverty of the woman's garb, and the sadness of her face.

"Please, sir, do you know at what time Casterbridge Union-house closes at night?"

The woman said these words to Troy over his shoulder.

Troy started visibly at the sound of the voice; yet he seemed to recover presence of mind sufficient to prevent himself from giving way to his impulse to suddenly turn and face her. He said, slowly —

"I don't know."

The woman, on hearing him speak, quickly looked up, examined the side of his face, and recognized the soldier under the yeoman's garb. Her face was drawn into an expression which had gladness and agony both among its elements. She uttered an hysterical cry, and fell down.

"Oh, poor thing!" exclaimed Bathsheba, instantly preparing to alight.

"Stay where you are, and attend to the horse!" said Troy, peremptorily throwing her the reins and the whip. "Walk the horse to the top: I'll see to the woman."

"But I — "

"Do you hear? Clk — Poppet!"

The horse, gig, and Bathsheba moved on.

"How on earth did you come here? I thought you were miles away, or dead! Why didn't you write to me?" said Troy to the woman, in a strangely gentle, yet hurried voice, as he lifted her up.

"I feared to."

"Have you any money?"

"None."

"Good Heaven — I wish I had more to give you! Here's — wretched — the merest trifle. It is every farthing I have left. I have none but what my wife gives me, you know, and I can't ask her now."

The woman made no answer.

"I have only another moment," continued Troy; "and now listen. Where are you going to-night? Casterbridge Union?"

"Yes; I thought to go there."

"You shan't go there; yet, wait. Yes, perhaps for to-night; I can do nothing better — worse luck! Sleep there to-night, and stay there to-morrow. Monday is the first free day I have; and on Monday morning, at ten exactly, meet me on Grey's Bridge just out of the town. I'll bring all the money I can muster. You shan't want — I'll see that, Fanny; then I'll get you a lodging somewhere. Good-bye till then. I am a brute — but good-bye!"

After advancing the distance which completed the ascent of the hill, Bathsheba turned her head. The woman was upon her feet, and Bathsheba saw her withdrawing from Troy, and going feebly down the hill by the third milestone from Casterbridge. Troy then came on towards his wife, stepped into the gig, took the reins from her

hand, and without making any observation whipped the horse into a trot. He was rather agitated.

"Do you know who that woman was?" said Bathsheba, looking searchingly into his face.

"I do," he said, looking boldly back into hers.

"I thought you did," said she, with angry hauteur, and still regarding him. "Who is she?"

He suddenly seemed to think that frankness would benefit neither of the women.

"Nothing to either of us," he said. "I know her by sight."

"What is her name?"

"How should I know her name?"

"I think you do."

"Think if you will, and be — " The sentence was completed by a smart cut of the whip round Poppet's flank, which caused the animal to start forward at a wild pace. No more was said.

CHAPTER XL

ON CASTERBRIDGE HIGHWAY

For a considerable time the woman walked on. Her steps became feebler, and she strained her eyes to look afar upon the naked road, now indistinct amid the penumbrae of night. At length her onward walk dwindled to the merest totter, and she opened a gate within which was a haystack. Underneath this she sat down and presently slept.

When the woman awoke it was to find herself in the depths of a moonless and starless night. A heavy unbroken crust of cloud stretched across the sky, shutting out every speck of heaven; and a distant halo which hung over the town of Casterbridge was visible against the black concave, the luminosity appearing the brighter by its great contrast with the circumscribing darkness. Towards this weak, soft glow the woman turned her eyes.

"If I could only get there!" she said. "Meet him the day after to-morrow: God help me! Perhaps I shall be in my grave before then."

A manor-house clock from the far depths of shadow struck the hour, one, in a small, attenuated tone. After midnight the voice of a clock seems to lose in breadth as much as in length, and to diminish its sonorousness to a thin falsetto.

Afterwards a light — two lights — arose from the remote shade, and grew larger. A carriage rolled along the toad, and passed the gate. It probably contained some late diners-out. The beams from one lamp shone for a moment upon the crouching woman, and threw her face into vivid relief. The face was young in the groundwork, old in the finish; the general contours were flexuous and childlike, but the finer lineaments had begun to be sharp and thin.

The pedestrian stood up, apparently with revived determination, and looked around. The road appeared to be familiar to her, and she carefully scanned the fence as she slowly walked along. Presently there became visible a dim white shape; it was another milestone. She drew her fingers across its face to feel the marks.

"Two more!" she said.

She leant against the stone as a means of rest for a short interval, then bestirred herself, and again pursued her way. For a slight distance she bore up bravely, afterwards flagging as before. This was beside a lone copsewood, wherein heaps of white chips strewn upon the leafy ground showed that woodmen had been faggoting and making hurdles during the day. Now there was not a rustle, not a breeze, not the faintest clash of twigs to keep her company. The woman looked over the gate, opened it, and went in. Close to the entrance stood a row of faggots, bound and un-bound, together with stakes of all sizes.

For a few seconds the wayfarer stood with that tense stillness which signifies itself to be not the end, but merely the suspension, of a previous motion. Her attitude was that of a person who listens, either to the external world of sound, or to the imagined discourse of thought. A close criticism might have detected signs proving that she was intent on the latter alternative. Moreover, as was shown by what followed, she was oddly exercising the faculty of invention upon the speciality of the clever Jacquet Droz, the designer of automatic substitutes for human limbs.

By the aid of the Casterbridge aurora, and by feeling with her hands, the woman selected two sticks from the heaps. These sticks were nearly straight to the height of three or four feet, where each branched into a fork like the letter Y. She sat down, snapped off the small upper twigs, and carried the remainder with her into the road. She placed one of these forks under each arm as a crutch, tested them, timidly threw her whole weight upon them — so little that it was — and swung herself forward. The girl had made for herself a material aid.

The crutches answered well. The pat of her feet, and the tap of her sticks upon the highway, were all the sounds that came from the traveller now. She had passed the last milestone by a good long distance, and began to look wistfully towards the bank as if calculating upon another milestone soon. The crutches, though so very useful, had their limits of power. Mechanism only transfers labour, being powerless to supersede it, and the original amount of exertion was not cleared away; it was thrown into the body and arms. She was exhausted, and each swing forward became fainter. At last she swayed sideways, and fell.

Here she lay, a shapeless heap, for ten minutes and more. The morning wind began to boom dully over the flats, and to move afresh dead leaves which had lain still since yesterday. The woman desperately turned round upon her knees, and next rose to her feet. Steadying herself by the help of one crutch, she essayed a step, then another, then a third, using the crutches now as walking-sticks only. Thus she progressed till descending Mellstock Hill another milestone appeared, and soon the beginning of an

iron-railed fence came into view. She staggered across to the first post, clung to it, and looked around.

The Casterbridge lights were now individually visible, It was getting towards morning, and vehicles might be hoped for, if not expected soon. She listened. There was not a sound of life save that acme and sublimation of all dismal sounds, the bark of a fox, its three hollow notes being rendered at intervals of a minute with the precision of a funeral bell.

"Less than a mile!" the woman murmured. "No; more," she added, after a pause. "The mile is to the county hall, and my resting-place is on the other side Casterbridge. A little over a mile, and there I am!" After an interval she again spoke. "Five or six steps to a yard — six perhaps. I have to go seventeen hundred yards. A hundred times six, six hundred. Seventeen times that. O pity me, Lord!"

Holding to the rails, she advanced, thrusting one hand forward upon the rail, then the other, then leaning over it whilst she dragged her feet on beneath.

This woman was not given to soliloquy; but extremity of feeling lessens the individuality of the weak, as it increases that of the strong. She said again in the same tone, "I'll believe that the end lies five posts forward, and no further, and so get strength to pass them."

This was a practical application of the principle that a half-feigned and fictitious faith is better than no faith at all.

She passed five posts and held on to the fifth.

"I'll pass five more by believing my longed-for spot is at the next fifth. I can do it."

She passed five more.

"It lies only five further."

She passed five more.

"But it is five further."

She passed them.

"That stone bridge is the end of my journey," she said, when the bridge over the From was in view.

She crawled to the bridge. During the effort each breath of the woman went into the air as if never to return again.

"Now for the truth of the matter," she said, sitting down. "The truth is, that I have less than half a mile." Self-beguilement with what she had known all the time to be false had given her strength to come over half a mile that she would have been powerless to face in the lump. The artifice showed that the woman, by some mysterious intuition, had grasped the paradoxical truth that blindness may operate more vigorously than prescience, and the short-sighted effect more than the far-seeing; that limitation, and not comprehensiveness, is needed for striking a blow.

The half-mile stood now before the sick and weary woman like a stolid Juggernaut. It was an impassive King of her world. The road here ran across Durnover Moor, open to the road on either side. She surveyed the wide space, the lights, herself, sighed, and lay down against a guard-stone of the bridge.

Never was ingenuity exercised so sorely as the traveller here exercised hers. Every conceivable aid, method, stratagem, mechanism, by which these last desperate eight hundred yards could be overpassed by a human being unperceived, was revolved in her busy brain, and dismissed as impracticable. She thought of sticks, wheels, crawling — she even thought of rolling. But the exertion demanded by either of these latter two was greater than to walk erect. The faculty of contrivance was worn out. Hopelessness had come at last.

“No further!” she whispered, and closed her eyes.

From the stripe of shadow on the opposite side of the bridge a portion of shade seemed to detach itself and move into isolation upon the pale white of the road. It glided noiselessly towards the recumbent woman.

She became conscious of something touching her hand; it was softness and it was warmth. She opened her eye’s, and the substance touched her face. A dog was licking her cheek.

He was a huge, heavy, and quiet creature, standing darkly against the low horizon, and at least two feet higher than the present position of her eyes. Whether Newfoundland, mastiff, bloodhound, or what not, it was impossible to say. He seemed to be of too strange and mysterious a nature to belong to any variety among those of popular nomenclature. Being thus assignable to no breed, he was the ideal embodiment of canine greatness — a generalization from what was common to all. Night, in its sad, solemn, and benevolent aspect, apart from its stealthy and cruel side, was personified in this form. Darkness endows the small and ordinary ones among mankind with poetical power, and even the suffering woman threw her idea into figure.

In her reclining position she looked up to him just as in earlier times she had, when standing, looked up to a man. The animal, who was as homeless as she, respectfully withdrew a step or two when the woman moved, and, seeing that she did not repulse him, he licked her hand again.

A thought moved within her like lightning. “Perhaps I can make use of him — I might do it then!”

She pointed in the direction of Casterbridge, and the dog seemed to misunderstand: he trotted on. Then, finding she could not follow, he came back and whined.

The ultimate and saddest singularity of woman’s effort and invention was reached when, with a quickened breathing, she rose to a stooping posture, and, resting her two little arms upon the shoulders of the dog, leant firmly thereon, and murmured stimulating words. Whilst she sorrowed in her heart she cheered with her voice, and what was stranger than that the strong should need encouragement from the weak was that cheerfulness should be so well stimulated by such utter dejection. Her friend moved forward slowly, and she with small mincing steps moved forward beside him, half her weight being thrown upon the animal. Sometimes she sank as she had sunk from walking erect, from the crutches, from the rails. The dog, who now thoroughly understood her desire and her incapacity, was frantic in his distress on these occasions; he would tug at her dress and run forward. She always called him back, and it was

now to be observed that the woman listened for human sounds only to avoid them. It was evident that she had an object in keeping her presence on the road and her forlorn state unknown.

Their progress was necessarily very slow. They reached the bottom of the town, and the Casterbridge lamps lay before them like fallen Pleiads as they turned to the left into the dense shade of a deserted avenue of chestnuts, and so skirted the borough. Thus the town was passed, and the goal was reached.

On this much-desired spot outside the town rose a picturesque building. Originally it had been a mere case to hold people. The shell had been so thin, so devoid of excrescence, and so closely drawn over the accommodation granted, that the grim character of what was beneath showed through it, as the shape of a body is visible under a winding-sheet.

Then Nature, as if offended, lent a hand. Masses of ivy grew up, completely covering the walls, till the place looked like an abbey; and it was discovered that the view from the front, over the Casterbridge chimneys, was one of the most magnificent in the county. A neighbouring earl once said that he would give up a year's rental to have at his own door the view enjoyed by the inmates from theirs — and very probably the inmates would have given up the view for his year's rental.

This stone edifice consisted of a central mass and two wings, whereon stood as sentinels a few slim chimneys, now gurgling sorrowfully to the slow wind. In the wall was a gate, and by the gate a bellpull formed of a hanging wire. The woman raised herself as high as possible upon her knees, and could just reach the handle. She moved it and fell forwards in a bowed attitude, her face upon her bosom.

It was getting on towards six o'clock, and sounds of movement were to be heard inside the building which was the haven of rest to this wearied soul. A little door by the large one was opened, and a man appeared inside. He discerned the panting heap of clothes, went back for a light, and came again. He entered a second time, and returned with two women.

These lifted the prostrate figure and assisted her in through the doorway. The man then closed the door.

"How did she get here?" said one of the women.

"The Lord knows," said the other.

"There is a dog outside," murmured the overcome traveller. "Where is he gone? He helped me."

"I stoned him away," said the man.

The little procession then moved forward — the man in front bearing the light, the two bony women next, supporting between them the small and supple one. Thus they entered the house and disappeared.

CHAPTER XLI

SUSPICION — FANNY IS SENT FOR

Bathsheba said very little to her husband all that evening of their return from market, and he was not disposed to say much to her. He exhibited the unpleasant combination of a restless condition with a silent tongue. The next day, which was Sunday, passed nearly in the same manner as regarded their taciturnity, Bathsheba going to church both morning and afternoon. This was the day before the Budmouth races. In the evening Troy said, suddenly —

“Bathsheba, could you let me have twenty pounds?”

Her countenance instantly sank. “Twenty pounds?” she said.

“The fact is, I want it badly.” The anxiety upon Troy’s face was unusual and very marked. It was a culmination of the mood he had been in all the day.

“Ah! for those races to-morrow.”

Troy for the moment made no reply. Her mistake had its advantages to a man who shrank from having his mind inspected as he did now. “Well, suppose I do want it for races?” he said, at last.

“Oh, Frank!” Bathsheba replied, and there was such a volume of entreaty in the words. “Only such a few weeks ago you said that I was far sweeter than all your other pleasures put together, and that you would give them all up for me; and now, won’t you give up this one, which is more a worry than a pleasure? Do, Frank. Come, let me fascinate you by all I can do — by pretty words and pretty looks, and everything I can think of — to stay at home. Say yes to your wife — say yes!”

The tenderest and softest phases of Bathsheba’s nature were prominent now — advanced impulsively for his acceptance, without any of the disguises and defences which the wariness of her character when she was cool too frequently threw over them. Few men could have resisted the arch yet dignified entreaty of the beautiful face, thrown a little back and sideways in the well known attitude that expresses more than the words it accompanies, and which seems to have been designed for these special occasions. Had the woman not been his wife, Troy would have succumbed instantly; as it was, he thought he would not deceive her longer.

“The money is not wanted for racing debts at all,” he said.

“What is it for?” she asked. “You worry me a great deal by these mysterious responsibilities, Frank.”

Troy hesitated. He did not now love her enough to allow himself to be carried too far by her ways. Yet it was necessary to be civil. “You wrong me by such a suspicious manner,” he said. “Such strait-waistcoating as you treat me to is not becoming in you at so early a date.”

“I think that I have a right to grumble a little if I pay,” she said, with features between a smile and a pout.

“Exactly; and, the former being done, suppose we proceed to the latter. Bathsheba, fun is all very well, but don’t go too far, or you may have cause to regret something.”

She reddened. "I do that already," she said, quickly.

"What do you regret?"

"That my romance has come to an end."

"All romances end at marriage."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that. You grieve me to my soul by being smart at my expense."

"You are dull enough at mine. I believe you hate me."

"Not you — only your faults. I do hate them."

"'Twould be much more becoming if you set yourself to cure them. Come, let's strike a balance with the twenty pounds, and be friends."

She gave a sigh of resignation. "I have about that sum here for household expenses. If you must have it, take it."

"Very good. Thank you. I expect I shall have gone away before you are in to breakfast to-morrow."

"And must you go? Ah! there was a time, Frank, when it would have taken a good many promises to other people to drag you away from me. You used to call me darling, then. But it doesn't matter to you how my days are passed now."

"I must go, in spite of sentiment." Troy, as he spoke, looked at his watch, and, apparently actuated by non lucendo principles, opened the case at the back, revealing, snugly stowed within it, a small coil of hair.

Bathsheba's eyes had been accidentally lifted at that moment, and she saw the action and saw the hair. She flushed in pain and surprise, and some words escaped her before she had thought whether or not it was wise to utter them. "A woman's curl of hair!" she said. "Oh, Frank, whose is that?"

Troy had instantly closed his watch. He carelessly replied, as one who cloaked some feelings that the sight had stirred. "Why, yours, of course. Whose should it be? I had quite forgotten that I had it."

"What a dreadful fib, Frank!"

"I tell you I had forgotten it!" he said, loudly.

"I don't mean that — it was yellow hair."

"Nonsense."

"That's insulting me. I know it was yellow. Now whose was it? I want to know."

"Very well — I'll tell you, so make no more ado. It is the hair of a young woman I was going to marry before I knew you."

"You ought to tell me her name, then."

"I cannot do that."

"Is she married yet?"

"No."

"Is she alive?"

"Yes."

"Is she pretty?"

"Yes."

"It is wonderful how she can be, poor thing, under such an awful affliction!"

"Affliction — what affliction?" he inquired, quickly.

"Having hair of that dreadful colour."

"Oh — ho — I like that!" said Troy, recovering himself. "Why, her hair has been admired by everybody who has seen her since she has worn it loose, which has not been long. It is beautiful hair. People used to turn their heads to look at it, poor girl!"

"Pooh! that's nothing — that's nothing!" she exclaimed, in incipient accents of pique. "If I cared for your love as much as I used to I could say people had turned to look at mine."

"Bathsheba, don't be so fitful and jealous. You knew what married life would be like, and shouldn't have entered it if you feared these contingencies."

Troy had by this time driven her to bitterness: her heart was big in her throat, and the ducts to her eyes were painfully full. Ashamed as she was to show emotion, at last she burst out: —

"This is all I get for loving you so well! Ah! when I married you your life was dearer to me than my own. I would have died for you — how truly I can say that I would have died for you! And now you sneer at my foolishness in marrying you. O! is it kind to me to throw my mistake in my face? Whatever opinion you may have of my wisdom, you should not tell me of it so mercilessly, now that I am in your power."

"I can't help how things fall out," said Troy; "upon my heart, women will be the death of me!"

"Well you shouldn't keep people's hair. You'll burn it, won't you, Frank?"

Frank went on as if he had not heard her. "There are considerations even before my consideration for you; reparations to be made — ties you know nothing of. If you repent of marrying, so do I."

Trembling now, she put her hand upon his arm, saying, in mingled tones of wretchedness and coaxing, "I only repent it if you don't love me better than any woman in the world! I don't otherwise, Frank. You don't repent because you already love somebody better than you love me, do you?"

"I don't know. Why do you say that?"

"You won't burn that curl. You like the woman who owns that pretty hair — yes; it is pretty — more beautiful than my miserable black mane! Well, it is no use; I can't help being ugly. You must like her best, if you will!"

"Until to-day, when I took it from a drawer, I have never looked upon that bit of hair for several months — that I am ready to swear."

"But just now you said 'ties'; and then — that woman we met?"

"'Twas the meeting with her that reminded me of the hair."

"Is it hers, then?"

"Yes. There, now that you have wormed it out of me, I hope you are content."

"And what are the ties?"

"Oh! that meant nothing — a mere jest."

"A mere jest!" she said, in mournful astonishment. "Can you jest when I am so wretchedly in earnest? Tell me the truth, Frank. I am not a fool, you know, although I am a woman, and have my woman's moments. Come! treat me fairly," she said, looking honestly and fearlessly into his face. "I don't want much; bare justice — that's all! Ah! once I felt I could be content with nothing less than the highest homage from the husband I should choose. Now, anything short of cruelty will content me. Yes! the independent and spirited Bathsheba is come to this!"

"For Heaven's sake don't be so desperate!" Troy said, snappishly, rising as he did so, and leaving the room.

Directly he had gone, Bathsheba burst into great sobs — dry-eyed sobs, which cut as they came, without any softening by tears. But she determined to repress all evidences of feeling. She was conquered; but she would never own it as long as she lived. Her pride was indeed brought low by despairing discoveries of her spoliation by marriage with a less pure nature than her own. She chafed to and fro in rebelliousness, like a caged leopard; her whole soul was in arms, and the blood fired her face. Until she had met Troy, Bathsheba had been proud of her position as a woman; it had been a glory to her to know that her lips had been touched by no man's on earth — that her waist had never been encircled by a lover's arm. She hated herself now. In those earlier days she had always nourished a secret contempt for girls who were the slaves of the first good-looking young fellow who should choose to salute them. She had never taken kindly to the idea of marriage in the abstract as did the majority of women she saw about her. In the turmoil of her anxiety for her lover she had agreed to marry him; but the perception that had accompanied her happiest hours on this account was rather that of self-sacrifice than of promotion and honour. Although she scarcely knew the divinity's name, Diana was the goddess whom Bathsheba instinctively adored. That she had never, by look, word, or sign, encouraged a man to approach her — that she had felt herself sufficient to herself, and had in the independence of her girlish heart fancied there was a certain degradation in renouncing the simplicity of a maiden existence to become the humbler half of an indifferent matrimonial whole — were facts now bitterly remembered. Oh, if she had never stooped to folly of this kind, respectable as it was, and could only stand again, as she had stood on the hill at Norcombe, and dare Troy or any other man to pollute a hair of her head by his interference!

The next morning she rose earlier than usual, and had the horse saddled for her ride round the farm in the customary way. When she came in at half-past eight — their usual hour for breakfasting — she was informed that her husband had risen, taken his breakfast, and driven off to Casterbridge with the gig and Poppet.

After breakfast she was cool and collected — quite herself in fact — and she rambled to the gate, intending to walk to another quarter of the farm, which she still personally superintended as well as her duties in the house would permit, continually, however, finding herself preceded in forethought by Gabriel Oak, for whom she began to entertain the genuine friendship of a sister. Of course, she sometimes thought of him in the light of an old lover, and had momentary imaginings of what life with him as a

husband would have been like; also of life with Boldwood under the same conditions. But Bathsheba, though she could feel, was not much given to futile dreaming, and her musings under this head were short and entirely confined to the times when Troy's neglect was more than ordinarily evident.

She saw coming up the road a man like Mr. Boldwood. It was Mr. Boldwood. Bathsheba blushed painfully, and watched. The farmer stopped when still a long way off, and held up his hand to Gabriel Oak, who was in a footpath across the field. The two men then approached each other and seemed to engage in earnest conversation.

Thus they continued for a long time. Joseph Poorgrass now passed near them, wheeling a barrow of apples up the hill to Bathsheba's residence. Boldwood and Gabriel called to him, spoke to him for a few minutes, and then all three parted, Joseph immediately coming up the hill with his barrow.

Bathsheba, who had seen this pantomime with some surprise, experienced great relief when Boldwood turned back again. "Well, what's the message, Joseph?" she said.

He set down his barrow, and, putting upon himself the refined aspect that a conversation with a lady required, spoke to Bathsheba over the gate.

"You'll never see Fanny Robin no more — use nor principal — ma'am."

"Why?"

"Because she's dead in the Union."

"Fanny dead — never!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What did she die from?"

"I don't know for certain; but I should be inclined to think it was from general neshness of constitution. She was such a limber maid that 'a could stand no hardship, even when I knowed her, and 'a went like a candle-snoff, so 'tis said. She was took bad in the morning, and, being quite feeble and worn out, she died in the evening. She belongs by law to our parish; and Mr. Boldwood is going to send a waggon at three this afternoon to fetch her home here and bury her."

"Indeed I shall not let Mr. Boldwood do any such thing — I shall do it! Fanny was my uncle's servant, and, although I only knew her for a couple of days, she belongs to me. How very, very sad this is! — the idea of Fanny being in a workhouse." Bathsheba had begun to know what suffering was, and she spoke with real feeling... "Send across to Mr. Boldwood's, and say that Mrs. Troy will take upon herself the duty of fetching an old servant of the family... We ought not to put her in a waggon; we'll get a hearse."

"There will hardly be time, ma'am, will there?"

"Perhaps not," she said, musingly. "When did you say we must be at the door — three o'clock?"

"Three o'clock this afternoon, ma'am, so to speak it."

"Very well — you go with it. A pretty waggon is better than an ugly hearse, after all. Joseph, have the new spring waggon with the blue body and red wheels, and wash it very clean. And, Joseph — "

"Yes, ma'am."

"Carry with you some evergreens and flowers to put upon her coffin — indeed, gather a great many, and completely bury her in them. Get some boughs of laurustinus, and variegated box, and yew, and boy's-love; ay, and some bunches of chrysanthemum. And let old Pleasant draw her, because she knew him so well."

"I will, ma'am. I ought to have said that the Union, in the form of four labouring men, will meet me when I gets to our churchyard gate, and take her and bury her according to the rites of the Board of Guardians, as by law ordained."

"Dear me — Casterbridge Union — and is Fanny come to this?" said Bathsheba, musing. "I wish I had known of it sooner. I thought she was far away. How long has she lived there?"

"On'y been there a day or two."

"Oh! — then she has not been staying there as a regular inmate?"

"No. She first went to live in a garrison-town t'other side o' Wessex, and since then she's been picking up a living at seampstering in Melchester for several months, at the house of a very respectable widow-woman who takes in work of that sort. She only got handy the Union-house on Sunday morning 'a b'lieve, and 'tis supposed here and there that she had traipsed every step of the way from Melchester. Why she left her place, I can't say, for I don't know; and as to a lie, why, I wouldn't tell it. That's the short of the story, ma'am."

"Ah-h!"

No gem ever flashed from a rosy ray to a white one more rapidly than changed the young wife's countenance whilst this word came from her in a long-drawn breath. "Did she walk along our turnpike-road?" she said, in a suddenly restless and eager voice.

"I believe she did... Ma'am, shall I call Liddy? You bain't well, ma'am, surely? You look like a lily — so pale and fainty!"

"No; don't call her; it is nothing. When did she pass Weatherbury?"

"Last Saturday night."

"That will do, Joseph; now you may go."

"Certainly, ma'am."

"Joseph, come hither a moment. What was the colour of Fanny Robin's hair?"

"Really, mistress, now that 'tis put to me so judge-and-jury like, I can't call to mind, if ye'll believe me!"

"Never mind; go on and do what I told you. Stop — well no, go on."

She turned herself away from him, that he might no longer notice the mood which had set its sign so visibly upon her, and went indoors with a distressing sense of faintness and a beating brow. About an hour after, she heard the noise of the waggon and went out, still with a painful consciousness of her bewildered and troubled look. Joseph, dressed in his best suit of clothes, was putting in the horse to start. The shrubs and flowers were all piled in the waggon, as she had directed; Bathsheba hardly saw them now.

"Whose sweetheart did you say, Joseph?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, ma'am, quite sure."

"Sure of what?"

"I'm sure that all I know is that she arrived in the morning and died in the evening without further parley. What Oak and Mr. Boldwood told me was only these few words. 'Little Fanny Robin is dead, Joseph,' Gabriel said, looking in my face in his steady old way. I was very sorry, and I said, 'Ah! — and how did she come to die?' 'Well, she's dead in Casterbridge Union,' he said, 'and perhaps 'tisn't much matter about how she came to die. She reached the Union early Sunday morning, and died in the afternoon — that's clear enough.' Then I asked what she'd been doing lately, and Mr. Boldwood turned round to me then, and left off spitting a thistle with the end of his stick. He told me about her having lived by seampstering in Melchester, as I mentioned to you, and that she walked therefrom at the end of last week, passing near here Saturday night in the dusk. They then said I had better just name a hint of her death to you, and away they went. Her death might have been brought on by bidding in the night wind, you know, ma'am; for people used to say she'd go off in a decline: she used to cough a good deal in winter time. However, 'tisn't much odds to us about that now, for 'tis all over."

"Have you heard a different story at all?" She looked at him so intently that Joseph's eyes quailed.

"Not a word, mistress, I assure 'ee!" he said. "Hardly anybody in the parish knows the news yet."

"I wonder why Gabriel didn't bring the message to me himself. He mostly makes a point of seeing me upon the most trifling errand." These words were merely murmured, and she was looking upon the ground.

"Perhaps he was busy, ma'am," Joseph suggested. "And sometimes he seems to suffer from things upon his mind, connected with the time when he was better off than 'a is now. 'A's rather a curious item, but a very understanding shepherd, and learned in books."

"Did anything seem upon his mind whilst he was speaking to you about this?"

"I cannot but say that there did, ma'am. He was terrible down, and so was Farmer Boldwood."

"Thank you, Joseph. That will do. Go on now, or you'll be late."

Bathsheba, still unhappy, went indoors again. In the course of the afternoon she said to Liddy, who had been informed of the occurrence, "What was the colour of poor Fanny Robin's hair? Do you know? I cannot recollect — I only saw her for a day or two."

"It was light, ma'am; but she wore it rather short, and packed away under her cap, so that you would hardly notice it. But I have seen her let it down when she was going to bed, and it looked beautiful then. Real golden hair."

"Her young man was a soldier, was he not?"

"Yes. In the same regiment as Mr. Troy. He says he knew him very well."

“What, Mr. Troy says so? How came he to say that?”

“One day I just named it to him, and asked him if he knew Fanny’s young man. He said, ‘Oh yes, he knew the young man as well as he knew himself, and that there wasn’t a man in the regiment he liked better.’”

“Ah! Said that, did he?”

“Yes; and he said there was a strong likeness between himself and the other young man, so that sometimes people mistook them — ”

“Liddy, for Heaven’s sake stop your talking!” said Bathsheba, with the nervous petulance that comes from worrying perceptions.

CHAPTER XLII

JOSEPH AND HIS BURDEN — BUCK’S HEAD

A wall bounded the site of Casterbridge Union-house, except along a portion of the end. Here a high gable stood prominent, and it was covered like the front with a mat of ivy. In this gable was no window, chimney, ornament, or protuberance of any kind. The single feature appertaining to it, beyond the expanse of dark green leaves, was a small door.

The situation of the door was peculiar. The sill was three or four feet above the ground, and for a moment one was at a loss for an explanation of this exceptional altitude, till ruts immediately beneath suggested that the door was used solely for the passage of articles and persons to and from the level of a vehicle standing on the outside. Upon the whole, the door seemed to advertise itself as a species of Traitor’s Gate translated to another sphere. That entry and exit hereby was only at rare intervals became apparent on noting that tufts of grass were allowed to flourish undisturbed in the chinks of the sill.

As the clock over the South-street Alms-house pointed to five minutes to three, a blue spring waggon, picked out with red, and containing boughs and flowers, passed the end of the street, and up towards this side of the building. Whilst the chimes were yet stammering out a shattered form of “Malbrook,” Joseph Poorgrass rang the bell, and received directions to back his waggon against the high door under the gable. The door then opened, and a plain elm coffin was slowly thrust forth, and laid by two men in fustian along the middle of the vehicle.

One of the men then stepped up beside it, took from his pocket a lump of chalk, and wrote upon the cover the name and a few other words in a large scrawling hand. (We believe that they do these things more tenderly now, and provide a plate.) He covered the whole with a black cloth, threadbare, but decent, the tail-board of the waggon was returned to its place, one of the men handed a certificate of registry to Poorgrass, and both entered the door, closing it behind them. Their connection with her, short as it had been, was over for ever.

Joseph then placed the flowers as enjoined, and the evergreens around the flowers, till it was difficult to divine what the waggon contained; he smacked his whip, and the rather pleasing funeral car crept down the hill, and along the road to Weatherbury.

The afternoon drew on apace, and, looking to the right towards the sea as he walked beside the horse, Poorgrass saw strange clouds and scrolls of mist rolling over the long ridges which girt the landscape in that quarter. They came in yet greater volumes, and indolently crept across the intervening valleys, and around the withered papery flags of the moor and river brinks. Then their dank spongy forms closed in upon the sky. It was a sudden overgrowth of atmospheric fungi which had their roots in the neighbouring sea, and by the time that horse, man, and corpse entered Yalbury Great Wood, these silent workings of an invisible hand had reached them, and they were completely enveloped, this being the first arrival of the autumn fogs, and the first fog of the series.

The air was as an eye suddenly struck blind. The waggon and its load rolled no longer on the horizontal division between clearness and opacity, but were imbedded in an elastic body of a monotonous pallor throughout. There was no perceptible motion in the air, not a visible drop of water fell upon a leaf of the beeches, birches, and firs composing the wood on either side. The trees stood in an attitude of intentness, as if they waited longingly for a wind to come and rock them. A startling quiet overhung all surrounding things — so completely, that the crunching of the waggon-wheels was as a great noise, and small rustles, which had never obtained a hearing except by night, were distinctly individualised.

Joseph Poorgrass looked round upon his sad burden as it loomed faintly through the flowering laurustinus, then at the unfathomable gloom amid the high trees on each hand, indistinct, shadowless, and spectre-like in their monochrome of grey. He felt anything but cheerful, and wished he had the company even of a child or dog. Stopping the horse, he listened. Not a footstep or wheel was audible anywhere around, and the dead silence was broken only by a heavy particle falling from a tree through the evergreens and alighting with a smart rap upon the coffin of poor Fanny. The fog had by this time saturated the trees, and this was the first dropping of water from the overbrimming leaves. The hollow echo of its fall reminded the waggoner painfully of the grim Leveller. Then hard by came down another drop, then two or three. Presently there was a continual tapping of these heavy drops upon the dead leaves, the road, and the travellers. The nearer boughs were beaded with the mist to the greyiness of aged men, and the rusty-red leaves of the beeches were hung with similar drops, like diamonds on auburn hair.

At the roadside hamlet called Roy-Town, just beyond this wood, was the old inn Buck's Head. It was about a mile and a half from Weatherbury, and in the meridian times of stage-coach travelling had been the place where many coaches changed and kept their relays of horses. All the old stabling was now pulled down, and little remained besides the habitable inn itself, which, standing a little way back from the

road, signified its existence to people far up and down the highway by a sign hanging from the horizontal bough of an elm on the opposite side of the way.

Travellers — for the variety tourist had hardly developed into a distinct species at this date — sometimes said in passing, when they cast their eyes up to the sign-bearing tree, that artists were fond of representing the signboard hanging thus, but that they themselves had never before noticed so perfect an instance in actual working order. It was near this tree that the waggon was standing into which Gabriel Oak crept on his first journey to Weatherbury; but, owing to the darkness, the sign and the inn had been unobserved.

The manners of the inn were of the old-established type. Indeed, in the minds of its frequenters they existed as unalterable formulæ: e.g. —

Rap with the bottom of your pint for more liquor.

For tobacco, shout.

In calling for the girl in waiting, say, “Maid!”

Ditto for the landlady, “Old Soul!” etc., etc.

It was a relief to Joseph’s heart when the friendly signboard came in view, and, stopping his horse immediately beneath it, he proceeded to fulfil an intention made a long time before. His spirits were oozing out of him quite. He turned the horse’s head to the green bank, and entered the hostel for a mug of ale.

Going down into the kitchen of the inn, the floor of which was a step below the passage, which in its turn was a step below the road outside, what should Joseph see to gladden his eyes but two copper-coloured discs, in the form of the countenances of Mr. Jan Coggan and Mr. Mark Clark. These owners of the two most appreciative throats in the neighbourhood, within the pale of respectability, were now sitting face to face over a three-legged circular table, having an iron rim to keep cups and pots from being accidentally elbowed off; they might have been said to resemble the setting sun and the full moon shining vis-à-vis across the globe.

“Why, ‘tis neighbour Poorgrass!” said Mark Clark. “I’m sure your face don’t praise your mistress’s table, Joseph.”

“I’ve had a very pale companion for the last four miles,” said Joseph, indulging in a shudder toned down by resignation. “And to speak the truth, ‘twas beginning to tell upon me. I assure ye, I ha’n’t seed the colour of victuals or drink since breakfast time this morning, and that was no more than a dew-bit afield.”

“Then drink, Joseph, and don’t restrain yourself!” said Coggan, handing him a hooped mug three-quarters full.

Joseph drank for a moderately long time, then for a longer time, saying, as he lowered the jug, “‘Tis pretty drinking — very pretty drinking, and is more than cheerful on my melancholy errand, so to speak it.”

“True, drink is a pleasant delight,” said Jan, as one who repeated a truism so familiar to his brain that he hardly noticed its passage over his tongue; and, lifting the cup, Coggan tilted his head gradually backwards, with closed eyes, that his expectant soul might not be diverted for one instant from its bliss by irrelevant surroundings.

"Well, I must be on again," said Poorgrass. "Not but that I should like another nip with ye; but the parish might lose confidence in me if I was seed here."

"Where be ye trading o't to to-day, then, Joseph?"

"Back to Weatherbury. I've got poor little Fanny Robin in my waggon outside, and I must be at the churchyard gates at a quarter to five with her."

"Ay — I've heard of it. And so she's nailed up in parish boards after all, and nobody to pay the bell shilling and the grave half-crown."

"The parish pays the grave half-crown, but not the bell shilling, because the bell's a luxury: but 'a can hardly do without the grave, poor body. However, I expect our mistress will pay all."

"A pretty maid as ever I see! But what's yer hurry, Joseph? The pore woman's dead, and you can't bring her to life, and you may as well sit down comfortable, and finish another with us."

"I don't mind taking just the least thimbleful ye can dream of more with ye, sonnies. But only a few minutes, because 'tis as 'tis."

"Of course, you'll have another drop. A man's twice the man afterwards. You feel so warm and glorious, and you whop and slap at your work without any trouble, and everything goes on like sticks a-breaking. Too much liquor is bad, and leads us to that horned man in the smoky house; but after all, many people haven't the gift of enjoying a wet, and since we be highly favoured with a power that way, we should make the most o't."

"True," said Mark Clark. "'Tis a talent the Lord has mercifully bestowed upon us, and we ought not to neglect it. But, what with the parsons and clerks and school-people and serious tea-parties, the merry old ways of good life have gone to the dogs — upon my carcase, they have!"

"Well, really, I must be onward again now," said Joseph.

"Now, now, Joseph; nonsense! The poor woman is dead, isn't she, and what's your hurry?"

"Well, I hope Providence won't be in a way with me for my doings," said Joseph, again sitting down. "I've been troubled with weak moments lately, 'tis true. I've been drinky once this month already, and I did not go to church a-Sunday, and I dropped a curse or two yesterday; so I don't want to go too far for my safety. Your next world is your next world, and not to be squandered offhand."

"I believe ye to be a chapelmember, Joseph. That I do."

"Oh, no, no! I don't go so far as that."

"For my part," said Coggan, "I'm staunch Church of England."

"Ay, and faith, so be I," said Mark Clark.

"I won't say much for myself; I don't wish to," Coggan continued, with that tendency to talk on principles which is characteristic of the barley-corn. "But I've never changed a single doctrine: I've stuck like a plaster to the old faith I was born in. Yes; there's this to be said for the Church, a man can belong to the Church and bide in his cheerful old inn, and never trouble or worry his mind about doctrines at all. But to be a meetinger,

you must go to chapel in all winds and weathers, and make yerself as frantic as a skit. Not but that chapel members be clever chaps enough in their way. They can lift up beautiful prayers out of their own heads, all about their families and shipwrecks in the newspaper."

"They can — they can," said Mark Clark, with corroborative feeling; "but we Churchmen, you see, must have it all printed aforehand, or, dang it all, we should no more know what to say to a great gaffer like the Lord than babes unborn."

"Chapelfolk be more hand-in-glove with them above than we," said Joseph, thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Coggan. "We know very well that if anybody do go to heaven, they will. They've worked hard for it, and they deserve to have it, such as 'tis. I bain't such a fool as to pretend that we who stick to the Church have the same chance as they, because we know we have not. But I hate a feller who'll change his old ancient doctrines for the sake of getting to heaven. I'd as soon turn king's-evidence for the few pounds you get. Why, neighbours, when every one of my taties were frosted, our Parson Thirdly were the man who gave me a sack for seed, though he hardly had one for his own use, and no money to buy 'em. If it hadn't been for him, I shouldn't hae had a tatie to put in my garden. D'ye think I'd turn after that? No, I'll stick to my side; and if we be in the wrong, so be it: I'll fall with the fallen!"

"Well said — very well said," observed Joseph. — "However, folks, I must be moving now: upon my life I must. Pa'son Thirdly will be waiting at the church gates, and there's the woman a-biding outside in the waggon."

"Joseph Poorgrass, don't be so miserable! Pa'son Thirdly won't mind. He's a generous man; he's found me in tracts for years, and I've consumed a good many in the course of a long and shady life; but he's never been the man to cry out at the expense. Sit down."

The longer Joseph Poorgrass remained, the less his spirit was troubled by the duties which devolved upon him this afternoon. The minutes glided by uncounted, until the evening shades began perceptibly to deepen, and the eyes of the three were but sparkling points on the surface of darkness. Coggan's repeater struck six from his pocket in the usual still small tones.

At that moment hasty steps were heard in the entry, and the door opened to admit the figure of Gabriel Oak, followed by the maid of the inn bearing a candle. He stared sternly at the one lengthy and two round faces of the sitters, which confronted him with the expressions of a fiddle and a couple of warming-pans. Joseph Poorgrass blinked, and shrank several inches into the background.

"Upon my soul, I'm ashamed of you; 'tis disgraceful, Joseph, disgraceful!" said Gabriel, indignantly. "Coggan, you call yourself a man, and don't know better than this."

Coggan looked up indefinitely at Oak, one or other of his eyes occasionally opening and closing of its own accord, as if it were not a member, but a dozy individual with a distinct personality.

“Don’t take on so, shepherd!” said Mark Clark, looking reproachfully at the candle, which appeared to possess special features of interest for his eyes.

“Nobody can hurt a dead woman,” at length said Coggan, with the precision of a machine. “All that could be done for her is done — she’s beyond us: and why should a man put himself in a tearing hurry for lifeless clay that can neither feel nor see, and don’t know what you do with her at all? If she’d been alive, I would have been the first to help her. If she now wanted victuals and drink, I’d pay for it, money down. But she’s dead, and no speed of ours will bring her to life. The woman’s past us — time spent upon her is throwed away: why should we hurry to do what’s not required? Drink, shepherd, and be friends, for to-morrow we may be like her.”

“We may,” added Mark Clark, emphatically, at once drinking himself, to run no further risk of losing his chance by the event alluded to, Jan meanwhile merging his additional thoughts of to-morrow in a song: —

To-mor-row, to-mor-row!

And while peace and plen-ty I find at my board,

With a heart free from sick-ness and sor-row,

With my friends will I share what to-day may af-ford,

And let them spread the ta-ble to-mor-row.

To-mor-row’, to-mor —

“Do hold thy horning, Jan!” said Oak; and turning upon Poorgrass, “as for you, Joseph, who do your wicked deeds in such confoundedly holy ways, you are as drunk as you can stand.”

“No, Shepherd Oak, no! Listen to reason, shepherd. All that’s the matter with me is the affliction called a multiplying eye, and that’s how it is I look double to you — I mean, you look double to me.”

“A multiplying eye is a very bad thing,” said Mark Clark.

“It always comes on when I have been in a public-house a little time,” said Joseph Poorgrass, meekly. “Yes; I see two of every sort, as if I were some holy man living in the times of King Noah and entering into the ark... Y-y-y-yes,” he added, becoming much affected by the picture of himself as a person thrown away, and shedding tears; “I feel too good for England: I ought to have lived in Genesis by rights, like the other men of sacrifice, and then I shouldn’t have b-b-been called a d-d-drunkard in such a way!”

“I wish you’d show yourself a man of spirit, and not sit whining there!”

“Show myself a man of spirit? ... Ah, well! let me take the name of drunkard humbly — let me be a man of contrite knees — let it be! I know that I always do say ‘Please God’ afore I do anything, from my getting up to my going down of the same, and I be willing to take as much disgrace as there is in that holy act. Hah, yes! ... But not a man of spirit? Have I ever allowed the toe of pride to be lifted against my hinder parts without groaning manfully that I question the right to do so? I inquire that query boldly?”

“We can’t say that you have, Hero Poorgrass,” admitted Jan.

“Never have I allowed such treatment to pass unquestioned! Yet the shepherd says in the face of that rich testimony that I be not a man of spirit! Well, let it pass by, and death is a kind friend!”

Gabriel, seeing that neither of the three was in a fit state to take charge of the waggon for the remainder of the journey, made no reply, but, closing the door again upon them, went across to where the vehicle stood, now getting indistinct in the fog and gloom of this mildewy time. He pulled the horse’s head from the large patch of turf it had eaten bare, readjusted the boughs over the coffin, and drove along through the unwholesome night.

It had gradually become rumoured in the village that the body to be brought and buried that day was all that was left of the unfortunate Fanny Robin who had followed the Eleventh from Casterbridge through Melchester and onwards. But, thanks to Boldwood’s reticence and Oak’s generosity, the lover she had followed had never been individualised as Troy. Gabriel hoped that the whole truth of the matter might not be published till at any rate the girl had been in her grave for a few days, when the interposing barriers of earth and time, and a sense that the events had been somewhat shut into oblivion, would deaden the sting that revelation and invidious remark would have for Bathsheba just now.

By the time that Gabriel reached the old manor-house, her residence, which lay in his way to the church, it was quite dark. A man came from the gate and said through the fog, which hung between them like blown flour —

“Is that Poorgrass with the corpse?”

Gabriel recognized the voice as that of the parson.

“The corpse is here, sir,” said Gabriel.

“I have just been to inquire of Mrs. Troy if she could tell me the reason of the delay. I am afraid it is too late now for the funeral to be performed with proper decency. Have you the registrar’s certificate?”

“No,” said Gabriel. “I expect Poorgrass has that; and he’s at the Buck’s Head. I forgot to ask him for it.”

“Then that settles the matter. We’ll put off the funeral till to-morrow morning. The body may be brought on to the church, or it may be left here at the farm and fetched by the bearers in the morning. They waited more than an hour, and have now gone home.”

Gabriel had his reasons for thinking the latter a most objectionable plan, notwithstanding that Fanny had been an inmate of the farm-house for several years in the lifetime of Bathsheba’s uncle. Visions of several unhappy contingencies which might arise from this delay flitted before him. But his will was not law, and he went indoors to inquire of his mistress what were her wishes on the subject. He found her in an unusual mood: her eyes as she looked up to him were suspicious and perplexed as with some antecedent thought. Troy had not yet returned. At first Bathsheba assented with a mien of indifference to his proposition that they should go on to the church at once with their burden; but immediately afterwards, following Gabriel to the gate, she

swerved to the extreme of solicitousness on Fanny's account, and desired that the girl might be brought into the house. Oak argued upon the convenience of leaving her in the waggon, just as she lay now, with her flowers and green leaves about her, merely wheeling the vehicle into the coach-house till the morning, but to no purpose. "It is unkind and unchristian," she said, "to leave the poor thing in a coach-house all night."

"Very well, then," said the parson. "And I will arrange that the funeral shall take place early to-morrow. Perhaps Mrs. Troy is right in feeling that we cannot treat a dead fellow-creature too thoughtfully. We must remember that though she may have erred grievously in leaving her home, she is still our sister: and it is to be believed that God's uncovenanted mercies are extended towards her, and that she is a member of the flock of Christ."

The parson's words spread into the heavy air with a sad yet unperturbed cadence, and Gabriel shed an honest tear. Bathsheba seemed unmoved. Mr. Thirdly then left them, and Gabriel lighted a lantern. Fetching three other men to assist him, they bore the unconscious truant indoors, placing the coffin on two benches in the middle of a little sitting-room next the hall, as Bathsheba directed.

Every one except Gabriel Oak then left the room. He still indecisively lingered beside the body. He was deeply troubled at the wretchedly ironical aspect that circumstances were putting on with regard to Troy's wife, and at his own powerlessness to counteract them. In spite of his careful manœuvring all this day, the very worst event that could in any way have happened in connection with the burial had happened now. Oak imagined a terrible discovery resulting from this afternoon's work that might cast over Bathsheba's life a shade which the interposition of many lapsing years might but indifferently lighten, and which nothing at all might altogether remove.

Suddenly, as in a last attempt to save Bathsheba from, at any rate, immediate anguish, he looked again, as he had looked before, at the chalk writing upon the coffin-lid. The scrawl was this simple one, "Fanny Robin and child." Gabriel took his handkerchief and carefully rubbed out the two latter words, leaving visible the inscription "Fanny Robin" only. He then left the room, and went out quietly by the front door.

CHAPTER XLIII

FANNY'S REVENGE

"Do you want me any longer ma'am?" inquired Liddy, at a later hour the same evening, standing by the door with a chamber candlestick in her hand and addressing Bathsheba, who sat cheerless and alone in the large parlour beside the first fire of the season.

"No more to-night, Liddy."

"I'll sit up for master if you like, ma'am. I am not at all afraid of Fanny, if I may sit in my own room and have a candle. She was such a childlike, nesh young thing that her spirit couldn't appear to anybody if it tried, I'm quite sure."

"Oh no, no! You go to bed. I'll sit up for him myself till twelve o'clock, and if he has not arrived by that time, I shall give him up and go to bed too."

"It is half-past ten now."

"Oh! is it?"

"Why don't you sit upstairs, ma'am?"

"Why don't I?" said Bathsheba, desultorily. "It isn't worth while — there's a fire here, Liddy." She suddenly exclaimed in an impulsive and excited whisper, "Have you heard anything strange said of Fanny?" The words had no sooner escaped her than an expression of unutterable regret crossed her face, and she burst into tears.

"No — not a word!" said Liddy, looking at the weeping woman with astonishment. "What is it makes you cry so, ma'am; has anything hurt you?" She came to Bathsheba's side with a face full of sympathy.

"No, Liddy — I don't want you any more. I can hardly say why I have taken to crying lately: I never used to cry. Good-night."

Liddy then left the parlour and closed the door.

Bathsheba was lonely and miserable now; not lonelier actually than she had been before her marriage; but her loneliness then was to that of the present time as the solitude of a mountain is to the solitude of a cave. And within the last day or two had come these disquieting thoughts about her husband's past. Her wayward sentiment that evening concerning Fanny's temporary resting-place had been the result of a strange complication of impulses in Bathsheba's bosom. Perhaps it would be more accurately described as a determined rebellion against her prejudices, a revulsion from a lower instinct of uncharitableness, which would have withheld all sympathy from the dead woman, because in life she had preceded Bathsheba in the attentions of a man whom Bathsheba had by no means ceased from loving, though her love was sick to death just now with the gravity of a further misgiving.

In five or ten minutes there was another tap at the door. Liddy reappeared, and coming in a little way stood hesitating, until at length she said, "Maryann has just heard something very strange, but I know it isn't true. And we shall be sure to know the rights of it in a day or two."

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing connected with you or us, ma'am. It is about Fanny. That same thing you have heard."

"I have heard nothing."

"I mean that a wicked story is got to Weatherbury within this last hour — that —" Liddy came close to her mistress and whispered the remainder of the sentence slowly into her ear, inclining her head as she spoke in the direction of the room where Fanny lay.

Bathsheba trembled from head to foot.

"I don't believe it!" she said, excitedly. "And there's only one name written on the coffin-cover."

“Nor I, ma’am. And a good many others don’t; for we should surely have been told more about it if it had been true — don’t you think so, ma’am?”

“We might or we might not.”

Bathsheba turned and looked into the fire, that Liddy might not see her face. Finding that her mistress was going to say no more, Liddy glided out, closed the door softly, and went to bed.

Bathsheba’s face, as she continued looking into the fire that evening, might have excited solicitousness on her account even among those who loved her least. The sadness of Fanny Robin’s fate did not make Bathsheba’s glorious, although she was the Esther to this poor Vashti, and their fates might be supposed to stand in some respects as contrasts to each other. When Liddy came into the room a second time the beautiful eyes which met hers had worn a listless, weary look. When she went out after telling the story they had expressed wretchedness in full activity. Her simple country nature, fed on old-fashioned principles, was troubled by that which would have troubled a woman of the world very little, both Fanny and her child, if she had one, being dead.

Bathsheba had grounds for conjecturing a connection between her own history and the dimly suspected tragedy of Fanny’s end which Oak and Boldwood never for a moment credited her with possessing. The meeting with the lonely woman on the previous Saturday night had been unwitnessed and unspoken of. Oak may have had the best of intentions in withholding for as many days as possible the details of what had happened to Fanny; but had he known that Bathsheba’s perceptions had already been exercised in the matter, he would have done nothing to lengthen the minutes of suspense she was now undergoing, when the certainty which must terminate it would be the worst fact suspected after all.

She suddenly felt a longing desire to speak to some one stronger than herself, and so get strength to sustain her surmised position with dignity and her lurking doubts with stoicism. Where could she find such a friend? nowhere in the house. She was by far the coolest of the women under her roof. Patience and suspension of judgement for a few hours were what she wanted to learn, and there was nobody to teach her. Might she but go to Gabriel Oak! — but that could not be. What a way Oak had, she thought, of enduring things. Boldwood, who seemed so much deeper and higher and stronger in feeling than Gabriel, had not yet learnt, any more than she herself, the simple lesson which Oak showed a mastery of by every turn and look he gave — that among the multitude of interests by which he was surrounded, those which affected his personal well-being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes. Oak meditatively looked upon the horizon of circumstances without any special regard to his own standpoint in the midst. That was how she would wish to be. But then Oak was not racked by incertitude upon the inmost matter of his bosom, as she was at this moment. Oak knew all about Fanny that he wished to know — she felt convinced of that. If she were to go to him now at once and say no more than these few words, “What is the truth of the story?” he would feel bound in honour to tell her. It would

be an inexpressible relief. No further speech would need to be uttered. He knew her so well that no eccentricity of behaviour in her would alarm him.

She flung a cloak round her, went to the door and opened it. Every blade, every twig was still. The air was yet thick with moisture, though somewhat less dense than during the afternoon, and a steady smack of drops upon the fallen leaves under the boughs was almost musical in its soothing regularity. It seemed better to be out of the house than within it, and Bathsheba closed the door, and walked slowly down the lane till she came opposite to Gabriel's cottage, where he now lived alone, having left Coggan's house through being pinched for room. There was a light in one window only, and that was downstairs. The shutters were not closed, nor was any blind or curtain drawn over the window, neither robbery nor observation being a contingency which could do much injury to the occupant of the domicile. Yes, it was Gabriel himself who was sitting up: he was reading. From her standing-place in the road she could see him plainly, sitting quite still, his light curly head upon his hand, and only occasionally looking up to snuff the candle which stood beside him. At length he looked at the clock, seemed surprised at the lateness of the hour, closed his book, and arose. He was going to bed, she knew, and if she tapped it must be done at once.

Alas for her resolve! She felt she could not do it. Not for worlds now could she give a hint about her misery to him, much less ask him plainly for information on the cause of Fanny's death. She must suspect, and guess, and chafe, and bear it all alone.

Like a homeless wanderer she lingered by the bank, as if lulled and fascinated by the atmosphere of content which seemed to spread from that little dwelling, and was so sadly lacking in her own. Gabriel appeared in an upper room, placed his light in the window-bench, and then — knelt down to pray. The contrast of the picture with her rebellious and agitated existence at this same time was too much for her to bear to look upon longer. It was not for her to make a truce with trouble by any such means. She must tread her giddy distracting measure to its last note, as she had begun it. With a swollen heart she went again up the lane, and entered her own door.

More fevered now by a reaction from the first feelings which Oak's example had raised in her, she paused in the hall, looking at the door of the room wherein Fanny lay. She locked her fingers, threw back her head, and strained her hot hands rigidly across her forehead, saying, with a hysterical sob, "Would to God you would speak and tell me your secret, Fanny! ... Oh, I hope, hope it is not true that there are two of you! ... If I could only look in upon you for one little minute, I should know all!"

A few moments passed, and she added, slowly, "And I will."

Bathsheba in after times could never gauge the mood which carried her through the actions following this murmured resolution on this memorable evening of her life. She went to the lumber-closet for a screw-driver. At the end of a short though undefined time she found herself in the small room, quivering with emotion, a mist before her eyes, and an excruciating pulsation in her brain, standing beside the uncovered coffin of the girl whose conjectured end had so entirely engrossed her, and saying to herself in a husky voice as she gazed within —

"It was best to know the worst, and I know it now!"

She was conscious of having brought about this situation by a series of actions done as by one in an extravagant dream; of following that idea as to method, which had burst upon her in the hall with glaring obviousness, by gliding to the top of the stairs, assuring herself by listening to the heavy breathing of her maids that they were asleep, gliding down again, turning the handle of the door within which the young girl lay, and deliberately setting herself to do what, if she had anticipated any such undertaking at night and alone, would have horrified her, but which, when done, was not so dreadful as was the conclusive proof of her husband's conduct which came with knowing beyond doubt the last chapter of Fanny's story.

Bathsheba's head sank upon her bosom, and the breath which had been bated in suspense, curiosity, and interest, was exhaled now in the form of a whispered wail: "Oh-h-h!" she said, and the silent room added length to her moan.

Her tears fell fast beside the unconscious pair in the coffin: tears of a complicated origin, of a nature indescribable, almost indefinable except as other than those of simple sorrow. Assuredly their wonted fires must have lived in Fanny's ashes when events were so shaped as to chariot her hither in this natural, unobtrusive, yet effectual manner. The one feat alone — that of dying — by which a mean condition could be resolved into a grand one, Fanny had achieved. And to that had destiny subjoined this reencounter to-night, which had, in Bathsheba's wild imagining, turned her companion's failure to success, her humiliation to triumph, her lucklessness to ascendancy; it had thrown over herself a garish light of mockery, and set upon all things about her an ironical smile.

Fanny's face was framed in by that yellow hair of hers; and there was no longer much room for doubt as to the origin of the curl owned by Troy. In Bathsheba's heated fancy the innocent white countenance expressed a dim triumphant consciousness of the pain she was retaliating for her pain with all the merciless rigour of the Mosaic law: "Burning for burning; wound for wound: strife for strife."

Bathsheba indulged in contemplations of escape from her position by immediate death, which, thought she, though it was an inconvenient and awful way, had limits to its inconvenience and awfulness that could not be overpassed; whilst the shames of life were measureless. Yet even this scheme of extinction by death was but tamely copying her rival's method without the reasons which had glorified it in her rival's case. She glided rapidly up and down the room, as was mostly her habit when excited, her hands hanging clasped in front of her, as she thought and in part expressed in broken words: "O, I hate her, yet I don't mean that I hate her, for it is grievous and wicked; and yet I hate her a little! Yes, my flesh insists upon hating her, whether my spirit is willing or no! ... If she had only lived, I could have been angry and cruel towards her with some justification; but to be vindictive towards a poor dead woman recoils upon myself. O God, have mercy! I am miserable at all this!"

Bathsheba became at this moment so terrified at her own state of mind that she looked around for some sort of refuge from herself. The vision of Oak kneeling down

that night recurred to her, and with the imitative instinct which animates women she seized upon the idea, resolved to kneel, and, if possible, pray. Gabriel had prayed; so would she.

She knelt beside the coffin, covered her face with her hands, and for a time the room was silent as a tomb. Whether from a purely mechanical, or from any other cause, when Bathsheba arose it was with a quieted spirit, and a regret for the antagonistic instincts which had seized upon her just before.

In her desire to make atonement she took flowers from a vase by the window, and began laying them around the dead girl's head. Bathsheba knew no other way of showing kindness to persons departed than by giving them flowers. She knew not how long she remained engaged thus. She forgot time, life, where she was, what she was doing. A slamming together of the coach-house doors in the yard brought her to herself again. An instant after, the front door opened and closed, steps crossed the hall, and her husband appeared at the entrance to the room, looking in upon her.

He beheld it all by degrees, stared in stupefaction at the scene, as if he thought it an illusion raised by some fiendish incantation. Bathsheba, pallid as a corpse on end, gazed back at him in the same wild way.

So little are instinctive guesses the fruit of a legitimate induction that, at this moment, as he stood with the door in his hand, Troy never once thought of Fanny in connection with what he saw. His first confused idea was that somebody in the house had died.

"Well — what?" said Troy, blankly.

"I must go! I must go!" said Bathsheba, to herself more than to him. She came with a dilated eye towards the door, to push past him.

"What's the matter, in God's name? who's dead?" said Troy.

"I cannot say; let me go out. I want air!" she continued.

"But no; stay, I insist!" He seized her hand, and then volition seemed to leave her, and she went off into a state of passivity. He, still holding her, came up the room, and thus, hand in hand, Troy and Bathsheba approached the coffin's side.

The candle was standing on a bureau close by them, and the light slanted down, distinctly enkindling the cold features of both mother and babe. Troy looked in, dropped his wife's hand, knowledge of it all came over him in a lurid sheen, and he stood still.

So still he remained that he could be imagined to have left in him no motive power whatever. The clashes of feeling in all directions confounded one another, produced a neutrality, and there was motion in none.

"Do you know her?" said Bathsheba, in a small enclosed echo, as from the interior of a cell.

"I do," said Troy.

"Is it she?"

"It is."

He had originally stood perfectly erect. And now, in the well-nigh congealed immobility of his frame could be discerned an incipient movement, as in the darkest night

may be discerned light after a while. He was gradually sinking forwards. The lines of his features softened, and dismay modulated to illimitable sadness. Bathsheba was regarding him from the other side, still with parted lips and distracted eyes. Capacity for intense feeling is proportionate to the general intensity of the nature, and perhaps in all Fanny's sufferings, much greater relatively to her strength, there never was a time she suffered in an absolute sense what Bathsheba suffered now.

What Troy did was to sink upon his knees with an indefinable union of remorse and reverence upon his face, and, bending over Fanny Robin, gently kissed her, as one would kiss an infant asleep to avoid awakening it.

At the sight and sound of that, to her, unendurable act, Bathsheba sprang towards him. All the strong feelings which had been scattered over her existence since she knew what feeling was, seemed gathered together into one pulsation now. The revulsion from her indignant mood a little earlier, when she had meditated upon compromised honour, forestalment, eclipse in maternity by another, was violent and entire. All that was forgotten in the simple and still strong attachment of wife to husband. She had sighed for her self-completeness then, and now she cried aloud against the severance of the union she had deplored. She flung her arms round Troy's neck, exclaiming wildly from the deepest deep of her heart —

"Don't — don't kiss them! O, Frank, I can't bear it — I can't! I love you better than she did: kiss me too, Frank — kiss me! You will, Frank, kiss me too!"

There was something so abnormal and startling in the childlike pain and simplicity of this appeal from a woman of Bathsheba's calibre and independence, that Troy, loosening her tightly clasped arms from his neck, looked at her in bewilderment. It was such an unexpected revelation of all women being alike at heart, even those so different in their accessories as Fanny and this one beside him, that Troy could hardly seem to believe her to be his proud wife Bathsheba. Fanny's own spirit seemed to be animating her frame. But this was the mood of a few instants only. When the momentary surprise had passed, his expression changed to a silencing imperious gaze.

"I will not kiss you!" he said pushing her away.

Had the wife now but gone no further. Yet, perhaps, under the harrowing circumstances, to speak out was the one wrong act which can be better understood, if not forgiven in her, than the right and politic one, her rival being now but a corpse. All the feeling she had been betrayed into showing she drew back to herself again by a strenuous effort of self-command.

"What have you to say as your reason?" she asked, her bitter voice being strangely low — quite that of another woman now.

"I have to say that I have been a bad, black-hearted man," he answered.

"And that this woman is your victim; and I not less than she."

"Ah! don't taunt me, madam. This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be. If Satan had not tempted me with that face of yours, and those cursed coquetries, I should have married her. I never had another thought till you came in my way. Would to God that I had; but it is all too late!" He turned to

Fanny then. "But never mind, darling," he said; "in the sight of Heaven you are my very, very wife!"

At these words there arose from Bathsheba's lips a long, low cry of measureless despair and indignation, such a wail of anguish as had never before been heard within those old-inhabited walls. It was the $\infty \mu \tilde{A} \mu \gg \mu \tilde{A} \tilde{A} \pm^1$ [b] of her union with Troy.

"If she's — that, — what — am I?" she added, as a continuation of the same cry, and sobbing pitifully: and the rarity with her of such abandonment only made the condition more dire.

"You are nothing to me — nothing," said Troy, heartlessly. "A ceremony before a priest doesn't make a marriage. I am not morally yours."

A vehement impulse to flee from him, to run from this place, hide, and escape his words at any price, not stopping short of death itself, mastered Bathsheba now. She waited not an instant, but turned to the door and ran out.

CHAPTER XLIV

UNDER A TREE — REACTION

Bathsheba went along the dark road, neither knowing nor caring about the direction or issue of her flight. The first time that she definitely noticed her position was when she reached a gate leading into a thicket overhung by some large oak and beech trees. On looking into the place, it occurred to her that she had seen it by daylight on some previous occasion, and that what appeared like an impassable thicket was in reality a brake of fern now withering fast. She could think of nothing better to do with her palpitating self than to go in here and hide; and entering, she lighted on a spot sheltered from the damp fog by a reclining trunk, where she sank down upon a tangled couch of fronds and stems. She mechanically pulled some armfuls round her to keep off the breezes, and closed her eyes.

Whether she slept or not that night Bathsheba was not clearly aware. But it was with a freshened existence and a cooler brain that, a long time afterwards, she became conscious of some interesting proceedings which were going on in the trees above her head and around.

A coarse-throated chatter was the first sound.

It was a sparrow just waking.

Next: "Chee-weeze-weeze-weeze!" from another retreat.

It was a finch.

Third: "Tink-tink-tink-tink-a-chink!" from the hedge.

It was a robin.

"Chuck-chuck-chuck!" overhead.

A squirrel.

Then, from the road, "With my ra-ta-ta, and my rum-tum-tum!"

It was a ploughboy. Presently he came opposite, and she believed from his voice that he was one of the boys on her own farm. He was followed by a shambling tramp of heavy feet, and looking through the ferns Bathsheba could just discern in the wan light of daybreak a team of her own horses. They stopped to drink at a pond on the other side of the way. She watched them flouncing into the pool, drinking, tossing up their heads, drinking again, the water dribbling from their lips in silver threads. There was another flounce, and they came out of the pond, and turned back again towards the farm.

She looked further around. Day was just dawning, and beside its cool air and colours her heated actions and resolves of the night stood out in lurid contrast. She perceived that in her lap, and clinging to her hair, were red and yellow leaves which had come down from the tree and settled silently upon her during her partial sleep. Bathsheba shook her dress to get rid of them, when multitudes of the same family lying round about her rose and fluttered away in the breeze thus created, "like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing."

There was an opening towards the east, and the glow from the as yet unrisen sun attracted her eyes thither. From her feet, and between the beautiful yellowing ferns with their feathery arms, the ground sloped downwards to a hollow, in which was a species of swamp, dotted with fungi. A morning mist hung over it now — a fulsome yet magnificent silvery veil, full of light from the sun, yet semi-opaque — the hedge behind it being in some measure hidden by its hazy luminousness. Up the sides of this depression grew sheaves of the common rush, and here and there a peculiar species of flag, the blades of which glistened in the emerging sun, like scythes. But the general aspect of the swamp was malignant. From its moist and poisonous coat seemed to be exhaled the essences of evil things in the earth, and in the waters under the earth. The fungi grew in all manner of positions from rotting leaves and tree stumps, some exhibiting to her listless gaze their clammy tops, others their oozing gills. Some were marked with great splotches, red as arterial blood, others were saffron yellow, and others tall and attenuated, with stems like macaroni. Some were leathery and of richest browns. The hollow seemed a nursery of pestilences small and great, in the immediate neighbourhood of comfort and health, and Bathsheba arose with a tremor at the thought of having passed the night on the brink of so dismal a place.

There were now other footsteps to be heard along the road. Bathsheba's nerves were still unstrung: she crouched down out of sight again, and the pedestrian came into view. He was a schoolboy, with a bag slung over his shoulder containing his dinner, and a book in his hand. He paused by the gate, and, without looking up, continued murmuring words in tones quite loud enough to reach her ears.

"'O Lord, O Lord, O Lord, O Lord, O Lord': — that I know out o' book. 'Give us, give us, give us, give us, give us': — that I know. 'Grace that, grace that, grace that, grace that': — that I know." Other words followed to the same effect. The boy was of the dunce class apparently; the book was a psalter, and this was his way of learning the collect. In the worst attacks of trouble there appears to be always a superficial

film of consciousness which is left disengaged and open to the notice of trifles, and Bathsheba was faintly amused at the boy's method, till he too passed on.

By this time stupor had given place to anxiety, and anxiety began to make room for hunger and thirst. A form now appeared upon the rise on the other side of the swamp, half-hidden by the mist, and came towards Bathsheba. The woman — for it was a woman — approached with her face askance, as if looking earnestly on all sides of her. When she got a little further round to the left, and drew nearer, Bathsheba could see the newcomer's profile against the sunny sky, and knew the wavy sweep from forehead to chin, with neither angle nor decisive line anywhere about it, to be the familiar contour of Liddy Smallbury.

Bathsheba's heart bounded with gratitude in the thought that she was not altogether deserted, and she jumped up. "Oh, Liddy!" she said, or attempted to say; but the words had only been framed by her lips; there came no sound. She had lost her voice by exposure to the clogged atmosphere all these hours of night.

"Oh, ma'am! I am so glad I have found you," said the girl, as soon as she saw Bathsheba.

"You can't come across," Bathsheba said in a whisper, which she vainly endeavoured to make loud enough to reach Liddy's ears. Liddy, not knowing this, stepped down upon the swamp, saying, as she did so, "It will bear me up, I think."

Bathsheba never forgot that transient little picture of Liddy crossing the swamp to her there in the morning light. Iridescent bubbles of dank subterranean breath rose from the sweating sod beside the waiting-maid's feet as she trod, hissing as they burst and expanded away to join the vapoury firmament above. Liddy did not sink, as Bathsheba had anticipated.

She landed safely on the other side, and looked up at the beautiful though pale and weary face of her young mistress.

"Poor thing!" said Liddy, with tears in her eyes, "Do hearten yourself up a little, ma'am. However did — "

"I can't speak above a whisper — my voice is gone for the present," said Bathsheba, hurriedly. "I suppose the damp air from that hollow has taken it away. Liddy, don't question me, mind. Who sent you — anybody?"

"Nobody. I thought, when I found you were not at home, that something cruel had happened. I fancy I heard his voice late last night; and so, knowing something was wrong — "

"Is he at home?"

"No; he left just before I came out."

"Is Fanny taken away?"

"Not yet. She will soon be — at nine o'clock."

"We won't go home at present, then. Suppose we walk about in this wood?"

Liddy, without exactly understanding everything, or anything, in this episode, assented, and they walked together further among the trees.

"But you had better come in, ma'am, and have something to eat. You will die of a chill!"

"I shall not come indoors yet — perhaps never."

"Shall I get you something to eat, and something else to put over your head besides that little shawl?"

"If you will, Liddy."

Liddy vanished, and at the end of twenty minutes returned with a cloak, hat, some slices of bread and butter, a tea-cup, and some hot tea in a little china jug.

"Is Fanny gone?" said Bathsheba.

"No," said her companion, pouring out the tea.

Bathsheba wrapped herself up and ate and drank sparingly. Her voice was then a little clearer, and trifling colour returned to her face. "Now we'll walk about again," she said.

They wandered about the wood for nearly two hours, Bathsheba replying in monosyllables to Liddy's prattle, for her mind ran on one subject, and one only. She interrupted with —

"I wonder if Fanny is gone by this time?"

"I will go and see."

She came back with the information that the men were just taking away the corpse; that Bathsheba had been inquired for; that she had replied to the effect that her mistress was unwell and could not be seen.

"Then they think I am in my bedroom?"

"Yes." Liddy then ventured to add: "You said when I first found you that you might never go home again — you didn't mean it, ma'am?"

"No; I've altered my mind. It is only women with no pride in them who run away from their husbands. There is one position worse than that of being found dead in your husband's house from his ill usage, and that is, to be found alive through having gone away to the house of somebody else. I've thought of it all this morning, and I've chosen my course. A runaway wife is an encumbrance to everybody, a burden to herself and a byword — all of which make up a heap of misery greater than any that comes by staying at home — though this may include the trifling items of insult, beating, and starvation. Liddy, if ever you marry — God forbid that you ever should! — you'll find yourself in a fearful situation; but mind this, don't you flinch. Stand your ground, and be cut to pieces. That's what I'm going to do."

"Oh, mistress, don't talk so!" said Liddy, taking her hand; "but I knew you had too much sense to bide away. May I ask what dreadful thing it is that has happened between you and him?"

"You may ask; but I may not tell."

In about ten minutes they returned to the house by a circuitous route, entering at the rear. Bathsheba glided up the back stairs to a disused attic, and her companion followed.

"Liddy," she said, with a lighter heart, for youth and hope had begun to reassert themselves; "you are to be my confidante for the present — somebody must be — and I choose you. Well, I shall take up my abode here for a while. Will you get a fire lighted, put down a piece of carpet, and help me to make the place comfortable. Afterwards, I want you and Maryann to bring up that little stump bedstead in the small room, and the bed belonging to it, and a table, and some other things... What shall I do to pass the heavy time away?"

"Hemming handkerchiefs is a very good thing," said Liddy.

"Oh no, no! I hate needlework — I always did."

"Knitting?"

"And that, too."

"You might finish your sampler. Only the carnations and peacocks want filling in; and then it could be framed and glazed, and hung beside your aunt's ma'am."

"Samplers are out of date — horribly countrified. No Liddy, I'll read. Bring up some books — not new ones. I haven't heart to read anything new."

"Some of your uncle's old ones, ma'am?"

"Yes. Some of those we stowed away in boxes." A faint gleam of humour passed over her face as she said: "Bring Beaumont and Fletcher's Maid's Tragedy, and the Mourning Bride, and — let me see — Night Thoughts, and the Vanity of Human Wishes."

"And that story of the black man, who murdered his wife Desdemona? It is a nice dismal one that would suit you excellent just now."

"Now, Liddy, you've been looking into my books without telling me; and I said you were not to! How do you know it would suit me? It wouldn't suit me at all."

"But if the others do — "

"No, they don't; and I won't read dismal books. Why should I read dismal books, indeed? Bring me *Love in a Village*, and *Maid of the Mill*, and *Doctor Syntax*, and some volumes of the *Spectator*."

All that day Bathsheba and Liddy lived in the attic in a state of barricade; a precaution which proved to be needless as against Troy, for he did not appear in the neighbourhood or trouble them at all. Bathsheba sat at the window till sunset, sometimes attempting to read, at other times watching every movement outside without much purpose, and listening without much interest to every sound.

The sun went down almost blood-red that night, and a livid cloud received its rays in the east. Up against this dark background the west front of the church tower — the only part of the edifice visible from the farm-house windows — rose distinct and lustrous, the vane upon the summit bristling with rays. Hereabouts, at six o'clock, the young men of the village gathered, as was their custom, for a game of Prisoners' base. The spot had been consecrated to this ancient diversion from time immemorial, the old stocks conveniently forming a base facing the boundary of the churchyard, in front of which the ground was trodden hard and bare as a pavement by the players. She could see the brown and black heads of the young lads darting about right and left,

their white shirt-sleeves gleaming in the sun; whilst occasionally a shout and a peal of hearty laughter varied the stillness of the evening air. They continued playing for a quarter of an hour or so, when the game concluded abruptly, and the players leapt over the wall and vanished round to the other side behind a yew-tree, which was also half behind a beech, now spreading in one mass of golden foliage, on which the branches traced black lines.

"Why did the base-players finish their game so suddenly?" Bathsheba inquired, the next time that Liddy entered the room.

"I think 'twas because two men came just then from Casterbridge and began putting up a grand carved tombstone," said Liddy. "The lads went to see whose it was."

"Do you know?" Bathsheba asked.

"I don't," said Liddy.

CHAPTER XLV

TROY'S ROMANTICISM

When Troy's wife had left the house at the previous midnight his first act was to cover the dead from sight. This done he ascended the stairs, and throwing himself down upon the bed dressed as he was, he waited miserably for the morning.

Fate had dealt grimly with him through the last four-and-twenty hours. His day had been spent in a way which varied very materially from his intentions regarding it. There is always an inertia to be overcome in striking out a new line of conduct — not more in ourselves, it seems, than in circumscribing events, which appear as if leagued together to allow no novelties in the way of amelioration.

Twenty pounds having been secured from Bathsheba, he had managed to add to the sum every farthing he could muster on his own account, which had been seven pounds ten. With this money, twenty-seven pounds ten in all, he had hastily driven from the gate that morning to keep his appointment with Fanny Robin.

On reaching Casterbridge he left the horse and trap at an inn, and at five minutes before ten came back to the bridge at the lower end of the town, and sat himself upon the parapet. The clocks struck the hour, and no Fanny appeared. In fact, at that moment she was being robed in her grave-clothes by two attendants at the Union poor-house — the first and last tiring-women the gentle creature had ever been honoured with. The quarter went, the half hour. A rush of recollection came upon Troy as he waited: this was the second time she had broken a serious engagement with him. In anger he vowed it should be the last, and at eleven o'clock, when he had lingered and watched the stone of the bridge till he knew every lichen upon their face and heard the chink of the ripples underneath till they oppressed him, he jumped from his seat, went to the inn for his gig, and in a bitter mood of indifference concerning the past, and recklessness about the future, drove on to Budmouth races.

He reached the race-course at two o'clock, and remained either there or in the town till nine. But Fanny's image, as it had appeared to him in the sombre shadows of that Saturday evening, returned to his mind, backed up by Bathsheba's reproaches. He vowed he would not bet, and he kept his vow, for on leaving the town at nine o'clock in the evening he had diminished his cash only to the extent of a few shillings.

He trotted slowly homeward, and it was now that he was struck for the first time with a thought that Fanny had been really prevented by illness from keeping her promise. This time she could have made no mistake. He regretted that he had not remained in Casterbridge and made inquiries. Reaching home he quietly unharnessed the horse and came indoors, as we have seen, to the fearful shock that awaited him.

As soon as it grew light enough to distinguish objects, Troy arose from the coverlet of the bed, and in a mood of absolute indifference to Bathsheba's whereabouts, and almost oblivious of her existence, he stalked downstairs and left the house by the back door. His walk was towards the churchyard, entering which he searched around till he found a newly dug unoccupied grave — the grave dug the day before for Fanny. The position of this having been marked, he hastened on to Casterbridge, only pausing and musing for a while at the hill whereon he had last seen Fanny alive.

Reaching the town, Troy descended into a side street and entered a pair of gates surmounted by a board bearing the words, "Lester, stone and marble mason." Within were lying about stones of all sizes and designs, inscribed as being sacred to the memory of unnamed persons who had not yet died.

Troy was so unlike himself now in look, word, and deed, that the want of likeness was perceptible even to his own consciousness. His method of engaging himself in this business of purchasing a tomb was that of an absolutely unpractised man. He could not bring himself to consider, calculate, or economize. He waywardly wished for something, and he set about obtaining it like a child in a nursery. "I want a good tomb," he said to the man who stood in a little office within the yard. "I want as good a one as you can give me for twenty-seven pounds."

It was all the money he possessed.

"That sum to include everything?"

"Everything. Cutting the name, carriage to Weatherbury, and erection. And I want it now, at once."

"We could not get anything special worked this week."

"I must have it now."

"If you would like one of these in stock it could be got ready immediately."

"Very well," said Troy, impatiently. "Let's see what you have."

"The best I have in stock is this one," said the stone-cutter, going into a shed. "Here's a marble headstone beautifully crocketed, with medallions beneath of typical subjects; here's the footstone after the same pattern, and here's the coping to enclose the grave. The polishing alone of the set cost me eleven pounds — the slabs are the best of their kind, and I can warrant them to resist rain and frost for a hundred years without flying."

“And how much?”

“Well, I could add the name, and put it up at Weatherbury for the sum you mention.”

“Get it done to-day, and I’ll pay the money now.”

The man agreed, and wondered at such a mood in a visitor who wore not a shred of mourning. Troy then wrote the words which were to form the inscription, settled the account and went away. In the afternoon he came back again, and found that the lettering was almost done. He waited in the yard till the tomb was packed, and saw it placed in the cart and starting on its way to Weatherbury, giving directions to the two men who were to accompany it to inquire of the sexton for the grave of the person named in the inscription.

It was quite dark when Troy came out of Casterbridge. He carried rather a heavy basket upon his arm, with which he strode moodily along the road, resting occasionally at bridges and gates, whereon he deposited his burden for a time. Midway on his journey he met, returning in the darkness, the men and the waggon which had conveyed the tomb. He merely inquired if the work was done, and, on being assured that it was, passed on again.

Troy entered Weatherbury churchyard about ten o’clock and went immediately to the corner where he had marked the vacant grave early in the morning. It was on the obscure side of the tower, screened to a great extent from the view of passers along the road — a spot which until lately had been abandoned to heaps of stones and bushes of alder, but now it was cleared and made orderly for interments, by reason of the rapid filling of the ground elsewhere.

Here now stood the tomb as the men had stated, snow-white and shapely in the gloom, consisting of head and foot-stone, and enclosing border of marble-work uniting them. In the midst was mould, suitable for plants.

Troy deposited his basket beside the tomb, and vanished for a few minutes. When he returned he carried a spade and a lantern, the light of which he directed for a few moments upon the marble, whilst he read the inscription. He hung his lantern on the lowest bough of the yew-tree, and took from his basket flower-roots of several varieties. There were bundles of snow-drop, hyacinth and crocus bulbs, violets and double daisies, which were to bloom in early spring, and of carnations, pinks, picotees, lilies of the valley, forget-me-not, summer’s farewell, meadow-saffron and others, for the later seasons of the year.

Troy laid these out upon the grass, and with an impassive face set to work to plant them. The snowdrops were arranged in a line on the outside of the coping, the remainder within the enclosure of the grave. The crocuses and hyacinths were to grow in rows; some of the summer flowers he placed over her head and feet, the lilies and forget-me-nots over her heart. The remainder were dispersed in the spaces between these.

Troy, in his prostration at this time, had no perception that in the futility of these romantic doings, dictated by a remorseful reaction from previous indifference, there was any element of absurdity. Deriving his idiosyncrasies from both sides of the Channel,

he showed at such junctures as the present the inelasticity of the Englishman, together with that blindness to the line where sentiment verges on mawkishness, characteristic of the French.

It was a cloudy, muggy, and very dark night, and the rays from Troy's lantern spread into the two old yews with a strange illuminating power, flickering, as it seemed, up to the black ceiling of cloud above. He felt a large drop of rain upon the back of his hand, and presently one came and entered one of the holes of the lantern, whereupon the candle sputtered and went out. Troy was weary and it being now not far from midnight, and the rain threatening to increase, he resolved to leave the finishing touches of his labour until the day should break. He groped along the wall and over the graves in the dark till he found himself round at the north side. Here he entered the porch, and, reclining upon the bench within, fell asleep.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE GURGOYLE: ITS DOINGS

The tower of Weatherbury Church was a square erection of fourteenth-century date, having two stone gargoyles on each of the four faces of its parapet. Of these eight carved protuberances only two at this time continued to serve the purpose of their erection — that of spouting the water from the lead roof within. One mouth in each front had been closed by bygone church-wardens as superfluous, and two others were broken away and choked — a matter not of much consequence to the wellbeing of the tower, for the two mouths which still remained open and active were gaping enough to do all the work.

It has been sometimes argued that there is no truer criterion of the vitality of any given art-period than the power of the master-spirits of that time in grotesque; and certainly in the instance of Gothic art there is no disputing the proposition. Weatherbury tower was a somewhat early instance of the use of an ornamental parapet in parish as distinct from cathedral churches, and the gargoyles, which are the necessary correlatives of a parapet, were exceptionally prominent — of the boldest cut that the hand could shape, and of the most original design that a human brain could conceive. There was, so to speak, that symmetry in their distortion which is less the characteristic of British than of Continental grotesques of the period. All the eight were different from each other. A beholder was convinced that nothing on earth could be more hideous than those he saw on the north side until he went round to the south. Of the two on this latter face, only that at the south-eastern corner concerns the story. It was too human to be called like a dragon, too impish to be like a man, too animal to be like a fiend, and not enough like a bird to be called a griffin. This horrible stone entity was fashioned as if covered with a wrinkled hide; it had short, erect ears, eyes starting from their sockets, and its fingers and hands were seizing the corners of its mouth, which they thus seemed to pull open to give free passage to the water it vomited. The lower row of teeth was quite washed away, though the upper still remained. Here and thus,

jutting a couple of feet from the wall against which its feet rested as a support, the creature had for four hundred years laughed at the surrounding landscape, voicelessly in dry weather, and in wet with a gurgling and snorting sound.

Troy slept on in the porch, and the rain increased outside. Presently the gargoyle spat. In due time a small stream began to trickle through the seventy feet of aerial space between its mouth and the ground, which the water-drops smote like duckshot in their accelerated velocity. The stream thickened in substance, and increased in power, gradually spouting further and yet further from the side of the tower. When the rain fell in a steady and ceaseless torrent the stream dashed downward in volumes.

We follow its course to the ground at this point of time. The end of the liquid parabola has come forward from the wall, has advanced over the plinth mouldings, over a heap of stones, over the marble border, into the midst of Fanny Robin's grave.

The force of the stream had, until very lately, been received upon some loose stones spread thereabout, which had acted as a shield to the soil under the onset. These during the summer had been cleared from the ground, and there was now nothing to resist the down-fall but the bare earth. For several years the stream had not spouted so far from the tower as it was doing on this night, and such a contingency had been over-looked. Sometimes this obscure corner received no inhabitant for the space of two or three years, and then it was usually but a pauper, a poacher, or other sinner of undignified sins.

The persistent torrent from the gargoyle's jaws directed all its vengeance into the grave. The rich tawny mould was stirred into motion, and boiled like chocolate. The water accumulated and washed deeper down, and the roar of the pool thus formed spread into the night as the head and chief among other noises of the kind created by the deluging rain. The flowers so carefully planted by Fanny's repentant lover began to move and writhe in their bed. The winter-violets turned slowly upside down, and became a mere mat of mud. Soon the snowdrop and other bulbs danced in the boiling mass like ingredients in a cauldron. Plants of the tufted species were loosened, rose to the surface, and floated off.

Troy did not awake from his comfortless sleep till it was broad day. Not having been in bed for two nights his shoulders felt stiff, his feet tender, and his head heavy. He remembered his position, arose, shivered, took the spade, and again went out.

The rain had quite ceased, and the sun was shining through the green, brown, and yellow leaves, now sparkling and varnished by the raindrops to the brightness of similar effects in the landscapes of Ruysdael and Hobbema, and full of all those infinite beauties that arise from the union of water and colour with high lights. The air was rendered so transparent by the heavy fall of rain that the autumn hues of the middle distance were as rich as those near at hand, and the remote fields intercepted by the angle of the tower appeared in the same plane as the tower itself.

He entered the gravel path which would take him behind the tower. The path, instead of being stony as it had been the night before, was browned over with a thin coating of mud. At one place in the path he saw a tuft of stringy roots washed white

and clean as a bundle of tendons. He picked it up — surely it could not be one of the primroses he had planted? He saw a bulb, another, and another as he advanced. Beyond doubt they were the crocuses. With a face of perplexed dismay Troy turned the corner and then beheld the wreck the stream had made.

The pool upon the grave had soaked away into the ground, and in its place was a hollow. The disturbed earth was washed over the grass and pathway in the guise of the brown mud he had already seen, and it spotted the marble tombstone with the same stains. Nearly all the flowers were washed clean out of the ground, and they lay, roots upwards, on the spots whither they had been splashed by the stream.

Troy's brow became heavily contracted. He set his teeth closely, and his compressed lips moved as those of one in great pain. This singular accident, by a strange confluence of emotions in him, was felt as the sharpest sting of all. Troy's face was very expressive, and any observer who had seen him now would hardly have believed him to be a man who had laughed, and sung, and poured love-trifles into a woman's ear. To curse his miserable lot was at first his impulse, but even that lowest stage of rebellion needed an activity whose absence was necessarily antecedent to the existence of the morbid misery which wrung him. The sight, coming as it did, superimposed upon the other dark scenery of the previous days, formed a sort of climax to the whole panorama, and it was more than he could endure. Sanguine by nature, Troy had a power of eluding grief by simply adjourning it. He could put off the consideration of any particular spectre till the matter had become old and softened by time. The planting of flowers on Fanny's grave had been perhaps but a species of elusion of the primary grief, and now it was as if his intention had been known and circumvented.

Almost for the first time in his life, Troy, as he stood by this dismantled grave, wished himself another man. It is seldom that a person with much animal spirit does not feel that the fact of his life being his own is the one qualification which singles it out as a more hopeful life than that of others who may actually resemble him in every particular. Troy had felt, in his transient way, hundreds of times, that he could not envy other people their condition, because the possession of that condition would have necessitated a different personality, when he desired no other than his own. He had not minded the peculiarities of his birth, the vicissitudes of his life, the meteor-like uncertainty of all that related to him, because these appertained to the hero of his story, without whom there would have been no story at all for him; and it seemed to be only in the nature of things that matters would right themselves at some proper date and wind up well. This very morning the illusion completed its disappearance, and, as it were, all of a sudden, Troy hated himself. The suddenness was probably more apparent than real. A coral reef which just comes short of the ocean surface is no more to the horizon than if it had never been begun, and the mere finishing stroke is what often appears to create an event which has long been potentially an accomplished thing.

He stood and meditated — a miserable man. Whither should he go? "He that is accursed, let him be accursed still," was the pitiless anathema written in this spoliated

effort of his new-born solicitousness. A man who has spent his primal strength in journeying in one direction has not much spirit left for reversing his course. Troy had, since yesterday, faintly reversed his; but the merest opposition had disheartened him. To turn about would have been hard enough under the greatest providential encouragement; but to find that Providence, far from helping him into a new course, or showing any wish that he might adopt one, actually jeered his first trembling and critical attempt in that kind, was more than nature could bear.

He slowly withdrew from the grave. He did not attempt to fill up the hole, replace the flowers, or do anything at all. He simply threw up his cards and forswore his game for that time and always. Going out of the churchyard silently and unobserved — none of the villagers having yet risen — he passed down some fields at the back, and emerged just as secretly upon the high road. Shortly afterwards he had gone from the village.

Meanwhile, Bathsheba remained a voluntary prisoner in the attic. The door was kept locked, except during the entries and exits of Liddy, for whom a bed had been arranged in a small adjoining room. The light of Troy's lantern in the churchyard was noticed about ten o'clock by the maid-servant, who casually glanced from the window in that direction whilst taking her supper, and she called Bathsheba's attention to it. They looked curiously at the phenomenon for a time, until Liddy was sent to bed.

Bathsheba did not sleep very heavily that night. When her attendant was unconscious and softly breathing in the next room, the mistress of the house was still looking out of the window at the faint gleam spreading from among the trees — not in a steady shine, but blinking like a revolving coast-light, though this appearance failed to suggest to her that a person was passing and repassing in front of it. Bathsheba sat here till it began to rain, and the light vanished, when she withdrew to lie restlessly in her bed and re-enact in a worn mind the lurid scene of yesternight.

Almost before the first faint sign of dawn appeared she arose again, and opened the window to obtain a full breathing of the new morning air, the panes being now wet with trembling tears left by the night rain, each one rounded with a pale lustre caught from primrose-hued slashes through a cloud low down in the awakening sky. From the trees came the sound of steady dripping upon the drifted leaves under them, and from the direction of the church she could hear another noise — peculiar, and not intermittent like the rest, the purl of water falling into a pool.

Liddy knocked at eight o'clock, and Bathsheba un-locked the door.

"What a heavy rain we've had in the night, ma'am!" said Liddy, when her inquiries about breakfast had been made.

"Yes, very heavy."

"Did you hear the strange noise from the churchyard?"

"I heard one strange noise. I've been thinking it must have been the water from the tower spouts."

"Well, that's what the shepherd was saying, ma'am. He's now gone on to see."

"Oh! Gabriel has been here this morning!"

"Only just looked in in passing — quite in his old way, which I thought he had left off lately. But the tower spouts used to spatter on the stones, and we are puzzled, for this was like the boiling of a pot."

Not being able to read, think, or work, Bathsheba asked Liddy to stay and breakfast with her. The tongue of the more childish woman still ran upon recent events. "Are you going across to the church, ma'am?" she asked.

"Not that I know of," said Bathsheba.

"I thought you might like to go and see where they have put Fanny. The trees hide the place from your window."

Bathsheba had all sorts of dreads about meeting her husband. "Has Mr. Troy been in to-night?" she said.

"No, ma'am; I think he's gone to Budmouth."

Budmouth! The sound of the word carried with it a much diminished perspective of him and his deeds; there were thirteen miles interval betwixt them now. She hated questioning Liddy about her husband's movements, and indeed had hitherto sedulously avoided doing so; but now all the house knew that there had been some dreadful disagreement between them, and it was futile to attempt disguise. Bathsheba had reached a stage at which people cease to have any appreciative regard for public opinion.

"What makes you think he has gone there?" she said.

"Laban Tall saw him on the Budmouth road this morning before breakfast."

Bathsheba was momentarily relieved of that wayward heaviness of the past twenty-four hours which had quenched the vitality of youth in her without substituting the philosophy of maturer years, and she resolved to go out and walk a little way. So when breakfast was over, she put on her bonnet, and took a direction towards the church. It was nine o'clock, and the men having returned to work again from their first meal, she was not likely to meet many of them in the road. Knowing that Fanny had been laid in the reprobates' quarter of the graveyard, called in the parish "behind church," which was invisible from the road, it was impossible to resist the impulse to enter and look upon a spot which, from nameless feelings, she at the same time dreaded to see. She had been unable to overcome an impression that some connection existed between her rival and the light through the trees.

Bathsheba skirted the buttress, and beheld the hole and the tomb, its delicately veined surface splashed and stained just as Troy had seen it and left it two hours earlier. On the other side of the scene stood Gabriel. His eyes, too, were fixed on the tomb, and her arrival having been noiseless, she had not as yet attracted his attention. Bathsheba did not at once perceive that the grand tomb and the disturbed grave were Fanny's, and she looked on both sides and around for some humbler mound, earthed up and clodded in the usual way. Then her eye followed Oak's, and she read the words with which the inscription opened: —

Erected by Francis Troy
In Beloved Memory of
Fanny Robin

Oak saw her, and his first act was to gaze inquiringly and learn how she received this knowledge of the authorship of the work, which to himself had caused considerable astonishment. But such discoveries did not much affect her now. Emotional convulsions seemed to have become the commonplaces of her history, and she bade him good morning, and asked him to fill in the hole with the spade which was standing by. Whilst Oak was doing as she desired, Bathsheba collected the flowers, and began planting them with that sympathetic manipulation of roots and leaves which is so conspicuous in a woman's gardening, and which flowers seem to understand and thrive upon. She requested Oak to get the churchwardens to turn the leadwork at the mouth of the gurgyle that hung gaping down upon them, that by this means the stream might be directed sideways, and a repetition of the accident prevented. Finally, with the superfluous magnanimity of a woman whose narrower instincts have brought down bitterness upon her instead of love, she wiped the mud spots from the tomb as if she rather liked its words than otherwise, and went again home.

CHAPTER XLVII

ADVENTURES BY THE SHORE

Troy wandered along towards the south. A composite feeling, made up of disgust with the, to him, humdrum tediousness of a farmer's life, gloomy images of her who lay in the churchyard, remorse, and a general averseness to his wife's society, impelled him to seek a home in any place on earth save Weatherbury. The sad accessories of Fanny's end confronted him as vivid pictures which threatened to be indelible, and made life in Bathsheba's house intolerable. At three in the afternoon he found himself at the foot of a slope more than a mile in length, which ran to the ridge of a range of hills lying parallel with the shore, and forming a monotonous barrier between the basin of cultivated country inland and the wilder scenery of the coast. Up the hill stretched a road nearly straight and perfectly white, the two sides approaching each other in a gradual taper till they met the sky at the top about two miles off. Throughout the length of this narrow and irksome inclined plane not a sign of life was visible on this garish afternoon. Troy toiled up the road with a languor and depression greater than any he had experienced for many a day and year before. The air was warm and muggy, and the top seemed to recede as he approached.

At last he reached the summit, and a wide and novel prospect burst upon him with an effect almost like that of the Pacific upon Balboa's gaze. The broad steely sea, marked only by faint lines, which had a semblance of being etched thereon to a degree not deep enough to disturb its general evenness, stretched the whole width of his front and round to the right, where, near the town and port of Budmouth, the sun bristled down upon it, and banished all colour, to substitute in its place a clear oily polish. Nothing moved in sky, land, or sea, except a frill of milkwhite foam along the nearer angles of the shore, shreds of which licked the contiguous stones like tongues.

He descended and came to a small basin of sea enclosed by the cliffs. Troy's nature freshened within him; he thought he would rest and bathe here before going farther. He undressed and plunged in. Inside the cove the water was uninteresting to a swimmer, being smooth as a pond, and to get a little of the ocean swell, Troy presently swam between the two projecting spurs of rock which formed the pillars of Hercules to this miniature Mediterranean. Unfortunately for Troy a current unknown to him existed outside, which, unimportant to craft of any burden, was awkward for a swimmer who might be taken in it unawares. Troy found himself carried to the left and then round in a swoop out to sea.

He now recollected the place and its sinister character. Many bathers had there prayed for a dry death from time to time, and, like Gonzalo also, had been unanswered; and Troy began to deem it possible that he might be added to their number. Not a boat of any kind was at present within sight, but far in the distance Budmouth lay upon the sea, as it were quietly regarding his efforts, and beside the town the harbour showed its position by a dim meshwork of ropes and spars. After well-nigh exhausting himself in attempts to get back to the mouth of the cove, in his weakness swimming several inches deeper than was his wont, keeping up his breathing entirely by his nostrils, turning upon his back a dozen times over, swimming en papillon, and so on, Troy resolved as a last resource to tread water at a slight incline, and so endeavour to reach the shore at any point, merely giving himself a gentle impetus inwards whilst carried on in the general direction of the tide. This, necessarily a slow process, he found to be not altogether so difficult, and though there was no choice of a landing-place — the objects on shore passing by him in a sad and slow procession — he perceptibly approached the extremity of a spit of land yet further to the right, now well defined against the sunny portion of the horizon. While the swimmer's eye's were fixed upon the spit as his only means of salvation on this side of the Unknown, a moving object broke the outline of the extremity, and immediately a ship's boat appeared manned with several sailor lads, her bows towards the sea.

All Troy's vigour spasmodically revived to prolong the struggle yet a little further. Swimming with his right arm, he held up his left to hail them, splashing upon the waves, and shouting with all his might. From the position of the setting sun his white form was distinctly visible upon the now deep-hued bosom of the sea to the east of the boat, and the men saw him at once. Backing their oars and putting the boat about, they pulled towards him with a will, and in five or six minutes from the time of his first halloo, two of the sailors hauled him in over the stern.

They formed part of a brig's crew, and had come ashore for sand. Lending him what little clothing they could spare among them as a slight protection against the rapidly cooling air, they agreed to land him in the morning; and without further delay, for it was growing late, they made again towards the roadstead where their vessel lay.

And now night drooped slowly upon the wide watery levels in front; and at no great distance from them, where the shoreline curved round, and formed a long riband of shade upon the horizon, a series of points of yellow light began to start into existence,

denoting the spot to be the site of Budmouth, where the lamps were being lighted along the parade. The cluck of their oars was the only sound of any distinctness upon the sea, and as they laboured amid the thickening shades the lamp-lights grew larger, each appearing to send a flaming sword deep down into the waves before it, until there arose, among other dim shapes of the kind, the form of the vessel for which they were bound.

CHAPTER XLVIII

DOUBTS ARISE — DOUBTS LINGER

Bathsheba underwent the enlargement of her husband's absence from hours to days with a slight feeling of surprise, and a slight feeling of relief; yet neither sensation rose at any time far above the level commonly designated as indifference. She belonged to him: the certainties of that position were so well defined, and the reasonable probabilities of its issue so bounded that she could not speculate on contingencies. Taking no further interest in herself as a splendid woman, she acquired the indifferent feelings of an outsider in contemplating her probable fate as a singular wretch; for Bathsheba drew herself and her future in colours that no reality could exceed for darkness. Her original vigorous pride of youth had sickened, and with it had declined all her anxieties about coming years, since anxiety recognizes a better and a worse alternative, and Bathsheba had made up her mind that alternatives on any noteworthy scale had ceased for her. Soon, or later — and that not very late — her husband would be home again. And then the days of their tenancy of the Upper Farm would be numbered. There had originally been shown by the agent to the estate some distrust of Bathsheba's tenure as James Everdene's successor, on the score of her sex, and her youth, and her beauty; but the peculiar nature of her uncle's will, his own frequent testimony before his death to her cleverness in such a pursuit, and her vigorous marshalling of the numerous flocks and herds which came suddenly into her hands before negotiations were concluded, had won confidence in her powers, and no further objections had been raised. She had latterly been in great doubt as to what the legal effects of her marriage would be upon her position; but no notice had been taken as yet of her change of name, and only one point was clear — that in the event of her own or her husband's inability to meet the agent at the forthcoming January rent-day, very little consideration would be shown, and, for that matter, very little would be deserved. Once out of the farm, the approach of poverty would be sure.

Hence Bathsheba lived in a perception that her purposes were broken off. She was not a woman who could hope on without good materials for the process, differing thus from the less far-sighted and energetic, though more petted ones of the sex, with whom hope goes on as a sort of clockwork which the merest food and shelter are sufficient to wind up; and perceiving clearly that her mistake had been a fatal one, she accepted her position, and waited coldly for the end.

The first Saturday after Troy's departure she went to Casterbridge alone, a journey she had not before taken since her marriage. On this Saturday Bathsheba was passing slowly on foot through the crowd of rural business-men gathered as usual in front of the market-house, who were as usual gazed upon by the burghers with feelings that those healthy lives were dearly paid for by exclusion from possible aldermanship, when a man, who had apparently been following her, said some words to another on her left hand. Bathsheba's ears were keen as those of any wild animal, and she distinctly heard what the speaker said, though her back was towards him.

"I am looking for Mrs. Troy. Is that she there?"

"Yes; that's the young lady, I believe," said the person addressed.

"I have some awkward news to break to her. Her husband is drowned."

As if endowed with the spirit of prophecy, Bathsheba gasped out, "No, it is not true; it cannot be true!" Then she said and heard no more. The ice of self-command which had latterly gathered over her was broken, and the currents burst forth again, and overwhelmed her. A darkness came into her eyes, and she fell.

But not to the ground. A gloomy man, who had been observing her from under the portico of the old corn-exchange when she passed through the group without, stepped quickly to her side at the moment of her exclamation, and caught her in his arms as she sank down.

"What is it?" said Boldwood, looking up at the bringer of the big news, as he supported her.

"Her husband was drowned this week while bathing in Lulwind Cove. A coastguardsman found his clothes, and brought them into Budmouth yesterday."

Thereupon a strange fire lighted up Boldwood's eye, and his face flushed with the suppressed excitement of an unutterable thought. Everybody's glance was now centred upon him and the unconscious Bathsheba. He lifted her bodily off the ground, and smoothed down the folds of her dress as a child might have taken a storm-beaten bird and arranged its ruffled plumes, and bore her along the pavement to the King's Arms Inn. Here he passed with her under the archway into a private room; and by the time he had deposited — so lothly — the precious burden upon a sofa, Bathsheba had opened her eyes. Remembering all that had occurred, she murmured, "I want to go home!"

Boldwood left the room. He stood for a moment in the passage to recover his senses. The experience had been too much for his consciousness to keep up with, and now that he had grasped it it had gone again. For those few heavenly, golden moments she had been in his arms. What did it matter about her not knowing it? She had been close to his breast; he had been close to hers.

He started onward again, and sending a woman to her, went out to ascertain all the facts of the case. These appeared to be limited to what he had already heard. He then ordered her horse to be put into the gig, and when all was ready returned to inform her. He found that, though still pale and unwell, she had in the meantime sent for the Budmouth man who brought the tidings, and learnt from him all there was to know.

Being hardly in a condition to drive home as she had driven to town, Boldwood, with every delicacy of manner and feeling, offered to get her a driver, or to give her a seat in his phaeton, which was more comfortable than her own conveyance. These proposals Bathsheba gently declined, and the farmer at once departed.

About half-an-hour later she invigorated herself by an effort, and took her seat and the reins as usual — in external appearance much as if nothing had happened. She went out of the town by a tortuous back street, and drove slowly along, unconscious of the road and the scene. The first shades of evening were showing themselves when Bathsheba reached home, where, silently alighting and leaving the horse in the hands of the boy, she proceeded at once upstairs. Liddy met her on the landing. The news had preceded Bathsheba to Weatherbury by half-an-hour, and Liddy looked inquiringly into her mistress's face. Bathsheba had nothing to say.

She entered her bedroom and sat by the window, and thought and thought till night enveloped her, and the extreme lines only of her shape were visible. Somebody came to the door, knocked, and opened it.

"Well, what is it, Liddy?" she said.

"I was thinking there must be something got for you to wear," said Liddy, with hesitation.

"What do you mean?"

"Mourning."

"No, no, no," said Bathsheba, hurriedly.

"But I suppose there must be something done for poor — "

"Not at present, I think. It is not necessary."

"Why not, ma'am?"

"Because he's still alive."

"How do you know that?" said Liddy, amazed.

"I don't know it. But wouldn't it have been different, or shouldn't I have heard more, or wouldn't they have found him, Liddy? — or — I don't know how it is, but death would have been different from how this is. I am perfectly convinced that he is still alive!"

Bathsheba remained firm in this opinion till Monday, when two circumstances conjoined to shake it. The first was a short paragraph in the local newspaper, which, beyond making by a methodizing pen formidable presumptive evidence of Troy's death by drowning, contained the important testimony of a young Mr. Barker, M.D., of Budmouth, who spoke to being an eyewitness of the accident, in a letter to the editor. In this he stated that he was passing over the cliff on the remoter side of the cove just as the sun was setting. At that time he saw a bather carried along in the current outside the mouth of the cove, and guessed in an instant that there was but a poor chance for him unless he should be possessed of unusual muscular powers. He drifted behind a projection of the coast, and Mr. Barker followed along the shore in the same direction. But by the time that he could reach an elevation sufficiently great to command a view of the sea beyond, dusk had set in, and nothing further was to be seen.

The other circumstance was the arrival of his clothes, when it became necessary for her to examine and identify them — though this had virtually been done long before by those who inspected the letters in his pockets. It was so evident to her in the midst of her agitation that Troy had undressed in the full conviction of dressing again almost immediately, that the notion that anything but death could have prevented him was a perverse one to entertain.

Then Bathsheba said to herself that others were assured in their opinion; strange that she should not be. A strange reflection occurred to her, causing her face to flush. Suppose that Troy had followed Fanny into another world. Had he done this intentionally, yet contrived to make his death appear like an accident? Nevertheless, this thought of how the apparent might differ from the real — made vivid by her bygone jealousy of Fanny, and the remorse he had shown that night — did not blind her to the perception of a likelier difference, less tragic, but to herself far more disastrous.

When alone late that evening beside a small fire, and much calmed down, Bathsheba took Troy's watch into her hand, which had been restored to her with the rest of the articles belonging to him. She opened the case as he had opened it before her a week ago. There was the little coil of pale hair which had been as the fuze to this great explosion.

"He was hers and she was his; they should be gone together," she said. "I am nothing to either of them, and why should I keep her hair?" She took it in her hand, and held it over the fire. "No — I'll not burn it — I'll keep it in memory of her, poor thing!" she added, snatching back her hand.

CHAPTER XLIX

OAK'S ADVANCEMENT — A GREAT HOPE

The later autumn and the winter drew on apace, and the leaves lay thick upon the turf of the glades and the mosses of the woods. Bathsheba, having previously been living in a state of suspended feeling which was not suspense, now lived in a mood of quietude which was not precisely peacefulness. While she had known him to be alive she could have thought of his death with equanimity; but now that it might be she had lost him, she regretted that he was not hers still. She kept the farm going, raked in her profits without caring keenly about them, and expended money on ventures because she had done so in bygone days, which, though not long gone by, seemed infinitely removed from her present. She looked back upon that past over a great gulf, as if she were now a dead person, having the faculty of meditation still left in her, by means of which, like the mouldering gentlefolk of the poet's story, she could sit and ponder what a gift life used to be.

However, one excellent result of her general apathy was the long-delayed installation of Oak as bailiff; but he having virtually exercised that function for a long time already,

the change, beyond the substantial increase of wages it brought, was little more than a nominal one addressed to the outside world.

Boldwood lived secluded and inactive. Much of his wheat and all his barley of that season had been spoilt by the rain. It sprouted, grew into intricate mats, and was ultimately thrown to the pigs in armfuls. The strange neglect which had produced this ruin and waste became the subject of whispered talk among all the people round; and it was elicited from one of Boldwood's men that forgetfulness had nothing to do with it, for he had been reminded of the danger to his corn as many times and as persistently as inferiors dared to do. The sight of the pigs turning in disgust from the rotten ears seemed to arouse Boldwood, and he one evening sent for Oak. Whether it was suggested by Bathsheba's recent act of promotion or not, the farmer proposed at the interview that Gabriel should undertake the superintendence of the Lower Farm as well as of Bathsheba's, because of the necessity Boldwood felt for such aid, and the impossibility of discovering a more trustworthy man. Gabriel's malignant star was assuredly setting fast.

Bathsheba, when she learnt of this proposal — for Oak was obliged to consult her — at first languidly objected. She considered that the two farms together were too extensive for the observation of one man. Boldwood, who was apparently determined by personal rather than commercial reasons, suggested that Oak should be furnished with a horse for his sole use, when the plan would present no difficulty, the two farms lying side by side. Boldwood did not directly communicate with her during these negotiations, only speaking to Oak, who was the go-between throughout. All was harmoniously arranged at last, and we now see Oak mounted on a strong cob, and daily trotting the length breadth of about two thousand acres in a cheerful spirit of surveillance, as if the crops all belonged to him — the actual mistress of the one-half and the master of the other, sitting in their respective homes in gloomy and sad seclusion.

Out of this there arose, during the spring succeeding, a talk in the parish that Gabriel Oak was feathering his nest fast.

"Whatever d'ye think," said Susan Tall, "Gable Oak is coming it quite the dand. He now wears shining boots with hardly a hob in 'em, two or three times a-week, and a tall hat a-Sundays, and 'a hardly knows the name of smockfrock. When I see people strut enough to be cut up into bantam cocks, I stand dormant with wonder, and says no more!"

It was eventually known that Gabriel, though paid a fixed wage by Bathsheba independent of the fluctuations of agricultural profits, had made an engagement with Boldwood by which Oak was to receive a share of the receipts — a small share certainly, yet it was money of a higher quality than mere wages, and capable of expansion in a way that wages were not. Some were beginning to consider Oak a "near" man, for though his condition had thus far improved, he lived in no better style than before, occupying the same cottage, paring his own potatoes, mending his stockings, and sometimes even making his bed with his own hands. But as Oak was not only provokingly indifferent

to public opinion, but a man who clung persistently to old habits and usages, simply because they were old, there was room for doubt as to his motives.

A great hope had latterly germinated in Boldwood, whose unreasoning devotion to Bathsheba could only be characterized as a fond madness which neither time nor circumstance, evil nor good report, could weaken or destroy. This fevered hope had grown up again like a grain of mustard-seed during the quiet which followed the hasty conjecture that Troy was drowned. He nourished it fearfully, and almost shunned the contemplation of it in earnest, lest facts should reveal the wildness of the dream. Bathsheba having at last been persuaded to wear mourning, her appearance as she entered the church in that guise was in itself a weekly addition to his faith that a time was coming — very far off perhaps, yet surely nearing — when his waiting on events should have its reward. How long he might have to wait he had not yet closely considered. What he would try to recognize was that the severe schooling she had been subjected to had made Bathsheba much more considerate than she had formerly been of the feelings of others, and he trusted that, should she be willing at any time in the future to marry any man at all, that man would be himself. There was a substratum of good feeling in her: her self-reproach for the injury she had thoughtlessly done him might be depended upon now to a much greater extent than before her infatuation and disappointment. It would be possible to approach her by the channel of her good nature, and to suggest a friendly businesslike compact between them for fulfilment at some future day, keeping the passionate side of his desire entirely out of her sight. Such was Boldwood's hope.

To the eyes of the middle-aged, Bathsheba was perhaps additionally charming just now. Her exuberance of spirit was pruned down; the original phantom of delight had shown herself to be not too bright for human nature's daily food, and she had been able to enter this second poetical phase without losing much of the first in the process.

Bathsheba's return from a two months' visit to her old aunt at Norcombe afforded the impassioned and yearning farmer a pretext for inquiring directly after her — now possibly in the ninth month of her widowhood — and endeavouring to get a notion of her state of mind regarding him. This occurred in the middle of the haymaking, and Boldwood contrived to be near Liddy, who was assisting in the fields.

"I am glad to see you out of doors, Lydia," he said pleasantly.

She simpered, and wondered in her heart why he should speak so frankly to her.

"I hope Mrs. Troy is quite well after her long absence," he continued, in a manner expressing that the coldest-hearted neighbour could scarcely say less about her.

"She is quite well, sir."

"And cheerful, I suppose."

"Yes, cheerful."

"Fearful, did you say?"

"Oh no. I merely said she was cheerful."

"Tells you all her affairs?"

"No, sir."

"Some of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mrs. Troy puts much confidence in you, Lydia, and very wisely, perhaps."

"She do, sir. I've been with her all through her troubles, and was with her at the time of Mr. Troy's going and all. And if she were to marry again I expect I should bide with her."

"She promises that you shall — quite natural," said the strategic lover, throbbing throughout him at the presumption which Liddy's words appeared to warrant — that his darling had thought of re-marriage.

"No — she doesn't promise it exactly. I merely judge on my own account."

"Yes, yes, I understand. When she alludes to the possibility of marrying again, you conclude — "

"She never do allude to it, sir," said Liddy, thinking how very stupid Mr. Boldwood was getting.

"Of course not," he returned hastily, his hope falling again. "You needn't take quite such long reaches with your rake, Lydia — short and quick ones are best. Well, perhaps, as she is absolute mistress again now, it is wise of her to resolve never to give up her freedom."

"My mistress did certainly once say, though not seriously, that she supposed she might marry again at the end of seven years from last year, if she cared to risk Mr. Troy's coming back and claiming her."

"Ah, six years from the present time. Said that she might. She might marry at once in every reasonable person's opinion, whatever the lawyers may say to the contrary."

"Have you been to ask them?" said Liddy, innocently.

"Not I," said Boldwood, growing red. "Liddy, you needn't stay here a minute later than you wish, so Mr. Oak says. I am now going on a little farther. Good-afternoon."

He went away vexed with himself, and ashamed of having for this one time in his life done anything which could be called underhand. Poor Boldwood had no more skill in finesse than a battering-ram, and he was uneasy with a sense of having made himself to appear stupid and, what was worse, mean. But he had, after all, lighted upon one fact by way of repayment. It was a singularly fresh and fascinating fact, and though not without its sadness it was pertinent and real. In little more than six years from this time Bathsheba might certainly marry him. There was something definite in that hope, for admitting that there might have been no deep thought in her words to Liddy about marriage, they showed at least her creed on the matter.

This pleasant notion was now continually in his mind. Six years were a long time, but how much shorter than never, the idea he had for so long been obliged to endure! Jacob had served twice seven years for Rachel: what were six for such a woman as this? He tried to like the notion of waiting for her better than that of winning her at once. Boldwood felt his love to be so deep and strong and eternal, that it was possible she had never yet known its full volume, and this patience in delay would afford him an opportunity of giving sweet proof on the point. He would annihilate the six years

of his life as if they were minutes — so little did he value his time on earth beside her love. He would let her see, all those six years of intangible ethereal courtship, how little care he had for anything but as it bore upon the consummation.

Meanwhile the early and the late summer brought round the week in which Greenhill Fair was held. This fair was frequently attended by the folk of Weatherbury.

CHAPTER L

THE SHEEP FAIR — TROY TOUCHES HIS WIFE'S HAND

Greenhill was the Nijni Novgorod of South Wessex; and the busiest, merriest, noisiest day of the whole statute number was the day of the sheep fair. This yearly gathering was upon the summit of a hill which retained in good preservation the remains of an ancient earthwork, consisting of a huge rampart and entrenchment of an oval form encircling the top of the hill, though somewhat broken down here and there. To each of the two chief openings on opposite sides a winding road ascended, and the level green space of ten or fifteen acres enclosed by the bank was the site of the fair. A few permanent erections dotted the spot, but the majority of visitors patronized canvas alone for resting and feeding under during the time of their sojourn here.

Shepherds who attended with their flocks from long distances started from home two or three days, or even a week, before the fair, driving their charges a few miles each day — not more than ten or twelve — and resting them at night in hired fields by the wayside at previously chosen points, where they fed, having fasted since morning. The shepherd of each flock marched behind, a bundle containing his kit for the week strapped upon his shoulders, and in his hand his crook, which he used as the staff of his pilgrimage. Several of the sheep would get worn and lame, and occasionally a lambing occurred on the road. To meet these contingencies, there was frequently provided, to accompany the flocks from the remoter points, a pony and waggon into which the weakly ones were taken for the remainder of the journey.

The Weatherbury Farms, however, were no such long distance from the hill, and those arrangements were not necessary in their case. But the large united flocks of Bathsheba and Farmer Boldwood formed a valuable and imposing multitude which demanded much attention, and on this account Gabriel, in addition to Boldwood's shepherd and Cain Ball, accompanied them along the way, through the decayed old town of Kingsbere, and upward to the plateau, — old George the dog of course behind them.

When the autumn sun slanted over Greenhill this morning and lighted the dewy flat upon its crest, nebulous clouds of dust were to be seen floating between the pairs of hedges which streaked the wide prospect around in all directions. These gradually converged upon the base of the hill, and the flocks became individually visible, climbing the serpentine ways which led to the top. Thus, in a slow procession, they entered the opening to which the roads tended, multitude after multitude, horned and hornless

— blue flocks and red flocks, buff flocks and brown flocks, even green and salmon-tinted flocks, according to the fancy of the colourist and custom of the farm. Men were shouting, dogs were barking, with greatest animation, but the thronging travellers in so long a journey had grown nearly indifferent to such terrors, though they still bleated piteously at the unwontedness of their experiences, a tall shepherd rising here and there in the midst of them, like a gigantic idol amid a crowd of prostrate devotees.

The great mass of sheep in the fair consisted of South Downs and the old Wessex horned breeds; to the latter class Bathsheba's and Farmer Boldwood's mainly belonged. These filed in about nine o'clock, their vermiculated horns lopping gracefully on each side of their cheeks in geometrically perfect spirals, a small pink and white ear nestling under each horn. Before and behind came other varieties, perfect leopards as to the full rich substance of their coats, and only lacking the spots. There were also a few of the Oxfordshire breed, whose wool was beginning to curl like a child's flaxen hair, though surpassed in this respect by the effeminate Leicesters, which were in turn less curly than the Cotswolds. But the most picturesque by far was a small flock of Exmoors, which chanced to be there this year. Their pied faces and legs, dark and heavy horns, tresses of wool hanging round their swarthy foreheads, quite relieved the monotony of the flocks in that quarter.

All these bleating, panting, and weary thousands had entered and were penned before the morning had far advanced, the dog belonging to each flock being tied to the corner of the pen containing it. Alleys for pedestrians intersected the pens, which soon became crowded with buyers and sellers from far and near.

In another part of the hill an altogether different scene began to force itself upon the eye towards midday. A circular tent, of exceptional newness and size, was in course of erection here. As the day drew on, the flocks began to change hands, lightening the shepherd's responsibilities; and they turned their attention to this tent and inquired of a man at work there, whose soul seemed concentrated on tying a bothering knot in no time, what was going on.

"The Royal Hippodrome Performance of Turpin's Ride to York and the Death of Black Bess," replied the man promptly, without turning his eyes or leaving off tying.

As soon as the tent was completed the band struck up highly stimulating harmonies, and the announcement was publicly made, Black Bess standing in a conspicuous position on the outside, as a living proof, if proof were wanted, of the truth of the oracular utterances from the stage over which the people were to enter. These were so convinced by such genuine appeals to heart and understanding both that they soon began to crowd in abundantly, among the foremost being visible Jan Coggan and Joseph Poorgrass, who were holiday keeping here to-day.

"That's the great ruffen pushing me!" screamed a woman in front of Jan over her shoulder at him when the rush was at its fiercest.

"How can I help pushing ye when the folk behind push me?" said Coggan, in a deprecating tone, turning his head towards the aforesaid folk as far as he could without turning his body, which was jammed as in a vice.

There was a silence; then the drums and trumpets again sent forth their echoing notes. The crowd was again ecstasied, and gave another lurch in which Coggan and Poorgrass were again thrust by those behind upon the women in front.

“Oh that helpless feymels should be at the mercy of such ruffens!” exclaimed one of these ladies again, as she swayed like a reed shaken by the wind.

“Now,” said Coggan, appealing in an earnest voice to the public at large as it stood clustered about his shoulder-blades, “did ye ever hear such onreasonable woman as that? Upon my carcase, neighbours, if I could only get out of this cheese-wring, the damn women might eat the show for me!”

“Don’t ye lose yer temper, Jan!” implored Joseph Poorgrass, in a whisper. “They might get their men to murder us, for I think by the shine of their eyes that they be a sinful form of womankind.”

Jan held his tongue, as if he had no objection to be pacified to please a friend, and they gradually reached the foot of the ladder, Poorgrass being flattened like a jumping-jack, and the sixpence, for admission, which he had got ready half-an-hour earlier, having become so reeking hot in the tight squeeze of his excited hand that the woman in spangles, brazen rings set with glass diamonds, and with chalked face and shoulders, who took the money of him, hastily dropped it again from a fear that some trick had been played to burn her fingers. So they all entered, and the cloth of the tent, to the eyes of an observer on the outside, became bulged into innumerable pimples such as we observe on a sack of potatoes, caused by the various human heads, backs, and elbows at high pressure within.

At the rear of the large tent there were two small dressing-tents. One of these, allotted to the male performers, was partitioned into halves by a cloth; and in one of the divisions there was sitting on the grass, pulling on a pair of jack-boots, a young man whom we instantly recognise as Sergeant Troy.

Troy’s appearance in this position may be briefly accounted for. The brig aboard which he was taken in Budmouth Roads was about to start on a voyage, though somewhat short of hands. Troy read the articles and joined, but before they sailed a boat was despatched across the bay to Lulwind cove; as he had half expected, his clothes were gone. He ultimately worked his passage to the United States, where he made a precarious living in various towns as Professor of Gymnastics, Sword Exercise, Fencing, and Pugilism. A few months were sufficient to give him a distaste for this kind of life. There was a certain animal form of refinement in his nature; and however pleasant a strange condition might be whilst privations were easily warded off, it was disadvantageously coarse when money was short. There was ever present, too, the idea that he could claim a home and its comforts did he but chose to return to England and Weatherbury Farm. Whether Bathsheba thought him dead was a frequent subject of curious conjecture. To England he did return at last; but the fact of drawing nearer to Weatherbury abstracted its fascinations, and his intention to enter his old groove at the place became modified. It was with gloom he considered on landing at Liverpool that if he were to go home his reception would be of a kind very unpleasant to contemplate;

for what Troy had in the way of emotion was an occasional fitful sentiment which sometimes caused him as much inconvenience as emotion of a strong and healthy kind. Bathsheba was not a woman to be made a fool of, or a woman to suffer in silence; and how could he endure existence with a spirited wife to whom at first entering he would be beholden for food and lodging? Moreover, it was not at all unlikely that his wife would fail at her farming, if she had not already done so; and he would then become liable for her maintenance: and what a life such a future of poverty with her would be, the spectre of Fanny constantly between them, harrowing his temper and embittering her words! Thus, for reasons touching on distaste, regret, and shame commingled, he put off his return from day to day, and would have decided to put it off altogether if he could have found anywhere else the ready-made establishment which existed for him there.

At this time — the July preceding the September in which we find at Greenhill Fair — he fell in with a travelling circus which was performing in the outskirts of a northern town. Troy introduced himself to the manager by taming a restive horse of the troupe, hitting a suspended apple with a pistol-bullet fired from the animal's back when in full gallop, and other feats. For his merits in these — all more or less based upon his experiences as a dragoon-guardsman — Troy was taken into the company, and the play of Turpin was prepared with a view to his personation of the chief character. Troy was not greatly elated by the appreciative spirit in which he was undoubtedly treated, but he thought the engagement might afford him a few weeks for consideration. It was thus carelessly, and without having formed any definite plan for the future, that Troy found himself at Greenhill Fair with the rest of the company on this day.

And now the mild autumn sun got lower, and in front of the pavilion the following incident had taken place. Bathsheba — who was driven to the fair that day by her odd man Poorgrass — had, like every one else, read or heard the announcement that Mr. Francis, the Great Cosmopolitan Equestrian and Roughrider, would enact the part of Turpin, and she was not yet too old and careworn to be without a little curiosity to see him. This particular show was by far the largest and grandest in the fair, a horde of little shows grouping themselves under its shade like chickens around a hen. The crowd had passed in, and Boldwood, who had been watching all the day for an opportunity of speaking to her, seeing her comparatively isolated, came up to her side.

"I hope the sheep have done well to-day, Mrs. Troy?" he said, nervously.

"Oh yes, thank you," said Bathsheba, colour springing up in the centre of her cheeks. "I was fortunate enough to sell them all just as we got upon the hill, so we hadn't to pen at all."

"And now you are entirely at leisure?"

"Yes, except that I have to see one more dealer in two hours' time: otherwise I should be going home. He was looking at this large tent and the announcement. Have you ever seen the play of 'Turpin's Ride to York'? Turpin was a real man, was he not?"

"Oh yes, perfectly true — all of it. Indeed, I think I've heard Jan Coggan say that a relation of his knew Tom King, Turpin's friend, quite well."

"Coggan is rather given to strange stories connected with his relations, we must remember. I hope they can all be believed."

"Yes, yes; we know Coggan. But Turpin is true enough. You have never seen it played, I suppose?"

"Never. I was not allowed to go into these places when I was young. Hark! What's that prancing? How they shout!"

"Black Bess just started off, I suppose. Am I right in supposing you would like to see the performance, Mrs. Troy? Please excuse my mistake, if it is one; but if you would like to, I'll get a seat for you with pleasure." Perceiving that she hesitated, he added, "I myself shall not stay to see it: I've seen it before."

Now Bathsheba did care a little to see the show, and had only withheld her feet from the ladder because she feared to go in alone. She had been hoping that Oak might appear, whose assistance in such cases was always accepted as an inalienable right, but Oak was nowhere to be seen; and hence it was that she said, "Then if you will just look in first, to see if there's room, I think I will go in for a minute or two."

And so a short time after this Bathsheba appeared in the tent with Boldwood at her elbow, who, taking her to a "reserved" seat, again withdrew.

This feature consisted of one raised bench in a very conspicuous part of the circle, covered with red cloth, and floored with a piece of carpet, and Bathsheba immediately found, to her confusion, that she was the single reserved individual in the tent, the rest of the crowded spectators, one and all, standing on their legs on the borders of the arena, where they got twice as good a view of the performance for half the money. Hence as many eyes were turned upon her, enthroned alone in this place of honour, against a scarlet background, as upon the ponies and clown who were engaged in preliminary exploits in the centre, Turpin not having yet appeared. Once there, Bathsheba was forced to make the best of it and remain: she sat down, spreading her skirts with some dignity over the unoccupied space on each side of her, and giving a new and feminine aspect to the pavilion. In a few minutes she noticed the fat red nape of Coggan's neck among those standing just below her, and Joseph Poorgrass's saintly profile a little further on.

The interior was shadowy with a peculiar shade. The strange luminous semi-opacities of fine autumn afternoons and eves intensified into Rembrandt effects the few yellow sunbeams which came through holes and divisions in the canvas, and spirted like jets of gold-dust across the dusky blue atmosphere of haze pervading the tent, until they alighted on inner surfaces of cloth opposite, and shone like little lamps suspended there.

Troy, on peeping from his dressing-tent through a slit for a reconnoitre before entering, saw his unconscious wife on high before him as described, sitting as queen of the tournament. He started back in utter confusion, for although his disguise effectually concealed his personality, he instantly felt that she would be sure to recognize his voice. He had several times during the day thought of the possibility of some Weatherbury person or other appearing and recognizing him; but he had taken the risk carelessly.

If they see me, let them, he had said. But here was Bathsheba in her own person; and the reality of the scene was so much intenser than any of his prefigurings that he felt he had not half enough considered the point.

She looked so charming and fair that his cool mood about Weatherbury people was changed. He had not expected her to exercise this power over him in the twinkling of an eye. Should he go on, and care nothing? He could not bring himself to do that. Beyond a politic wish to remain unknown, there suddenly arose in him now a sense of shame at the possibility that his attractive young wife, who already despised him, should despise him more by discovering him in so mean a condition after so long a time. He actually blushed at the thought, and was vexed beyond measure that his sentiments of dislike towards Weatherbury should have led him to dally about the country in this way.

But Troy was never more clever than when absolutely at his wit's end. He hastily thrust aside the curtain dividing his own little dressing space from that of the manager and proprietor, who now appeared as the individual called Tom King as far down as his waist, and as the aforesaid respectable manager thence to his toes.

"Here's the devil to pay!" said Troy.

"How's that?"

"Why, there's a blackguard creditor in the tent I don't want to see, who'll discover me and nab me as sure as Satan if I open my mouth. What's to be done?"

"You must appear now, I think."

"I can't."

"But the play must proceed."

"Do you give out that Turpin has got a bad cold, and can't speak his part, but that he'll perform it just the same without speaking."

The proprietor shook his head.

"Anyhow, play or no play, I won't open my mouth," said Troy, firmly.

"Very well, then let me see. I tell you how we'll manage," said the other, who perhaps felt it would be extremely awkward to offend his leading man just at this time. "I won't tell 'em anything about your keeping silence; go on with the piece and say nothing, doing what you can by a judicious wink now and then, and a few indomitable nods in the heroic places, you know. They'll never find out that the speeches are omitted."

This seemed feasible enough, for Turpin's speeches were not many or long, the fascination of the piece lying entirely in the action; and accordingly the play began, and at the appointed time Black Bess leapt into the grassy circle amid the plaudits of the spectators. At the turnpike scene, where Bess and Turpin are hotly pursued at midnight by the officers, and the half-awake gatekeeper in his tasselled nightcap denies that any horseman has passed, Coggan uttered a broad-chested "Well done!" which could be heard all over the fair above the bleating, and Poorgrass smiled delightedly with a nice sense of dramatic contrast between our hero, who coolly leaps the gate, and halting justice in the form of his enemies, who must needs pull up clumsily and wait to be let through. At the death of Tom King, he could not refrain from seizing

Coggan by the hand, and whispering, with tears in his eyes, "Of course he's not really shot, Jan — only seemingly!" And when the last sad scene came on, and the body of the gallant and faithful Bess had to be carried out on a shutter by twelve volunteers from among the spectators, nothing could restrain Poorgrass from lending a hand, exclaiming, as he asked Jan to join him, "Twill be something to tell of at Warren's in future years, Jan, and hand down to our children." For many a year in Weatherbury, Joseph told, with the air of a man who had had experiences in his time, that he touched with his own hand the hoof of Bess as she lay upon the board upon his shoulder. If, as some thinkers hold, immortality consists in being enshrined in others' memories, then did Black Bess become immortal that day if she never had done so before.

Meanwhile Troy had added a few touches to his ordinary make-up for the character, the more effectually to disguise himself, and though he had felt faint qualms on first entering, the metamorphosis effected by judiciously "lining" his face with a wire rendered him safe from the eyes of Bathsheba and her men. Nevertheless, he was relieved when it was got through.

There was a second performance in the evening, and the tent was lighted up. Troy had taken his part very quietly this time, venturing to introduce a few speeches on occasion; and was just concluding it when, whilst standing at the edge of the circle contiguous to the first row of spectators, he observed within a yard of him the eye of a man darted keenly into his side features. Troy hastily shifted his position, after having recognized in the scrutineer the knavish bailiff Pennyways, his wife's sworn enemy, who still hung about the outskirts of Weatherbury.

At first Troy resolved to take no notice and abide by circumstances. That he had been recognized by this man was highly probable; yet there was room for a doubt. Then the great objection he had felt to allowing news of his proximity to precede him to Weatherbury in the event of his return, based on a feeling that knowledge of his present occupation would discredit him still further in his wife's eyes, returned in full force. Moreover, should he resolve not to return at all, a tale of his being alive and being in the neighbourhood would be awkward; and he was anxious to acquire a knowledge of his wife's temporal affairs before deciding which to do.

In this dilemma Troy at once went out to reconnoitre. It occurred to him that to find Pennyways, and make a friend of him if possible, would be a very wise act. He had put on a thick beard borrowed from the establishment, and in this he wandered about the fair-field. It was now almost dark, and respectable people were getting their carts and gigs ready to go home.

The largest refreshment booth in the fair was provided by an innkeeper from a neighbouring town. This was considered an unexceptionable place for obtaining the necessary food and rest: Host Trencher (as he was jauntily called by the local newspaper) being a substantial man of high repute for catering through all the country round. The tent was divided into first and second-class compartments, and at the end of the first-class division was a yet further enclosure for the most exclusive, fenced off from the body of the tent by a luncheon-bar, behind which the host himself stood bustling

about in white apron and shirt-sleeves, and looking as if he had never lived anywhere but under canvas all his life. In these penetralia were chairs and a table, which, on candles being lighted, made quite a cozy and luxurious show, with an urn, plated tea and coffee pots, china teacups, and plum cakes.

Troy stood at the entrance to the booth, where a gipsy-woman was frying pancakes over a little fire of sticks and selling them at a penny a-piece, and looked over the heads of the people within. He could see nothing of Pennyways, but he soon discerned Bathsheba through an opening into the reserved space at the further end. Troy thereupon retreated, went round the tent into the darkness, and listened. He could hear Bathsheba's voice immediately inside the canvas; she was conversing with a man. A warmth overspread his face: surely she was not so unprincipled as to flirt in a fair! He wondered if, then, she reckoned upon his death as an absolute certainty. To get at the root of the matter, Troy took a penknife from his pocket and softly made two little cuts crosswise in the cloth, which, by folding back the corners left a hole the size of a wafer. Close to this he placed his face, withdrawing it again in a movement of surprise; for his eye had been within twelve inches of the top of Bathsheba's head. It was too near to be convenient. He made another hole a little to one side and lower down, in a shaded place beside her chair, from which it was easy and safe to survey her by looking horizontally.

Troy took in the scene completely now. She was leaning back, sipping a cup of tea that she held in her hand, and the owner of the male voice was Boldwood, who had apparently just brought the cup to her, Bathsheba, being in a negligent mood, leant so idly against the canvas that it was pressed to the shape of her shoulder, and she was, in fact, as good as in Troy's arms; and he was obliged to keep his breast carefully backward that she might not feel its warmth through the cloth as he gazed in.

Troy found unexpected chords of feeling to be stirred again within him as they had been stirred earlier in the day. She was handsome as ever, and she was his. It was some minutes before he could counteract his sudden wish to go in, and claim her. Then he thought how the proud girl who had always looked down upon him even whilst it was to love him, would hate him on discovering him to be a strolling player. Were he to make himself known, that chapter of his life must at all risks be kept for ever from her and from the Weatherbury people, or his name would be a byword throughout the parish. He would be nicknamed "Turpin" as long as he lived. Assuredly before he could claim her these few past months of his existence must be entirely blotted out.

"Shall I get you another cup before you start, ma'am?" said Farmer Boldwood.

"Thank you," said Bathsheba. "But I must be going at once. It was great neglect in that man to keep me waiting here till so late. I should have gone two hours ago, if it had not been for him. I had no idea of coming in here; but there's nothing so refreshing as a cup of tea, though I should never have got one if you hadn't helped me."

Troy scrutinized her cheek as lit by the candles, and watched each varying shade thereon, and the white shell-like sinuosities of her little ear. She took out her purse and was insisting to Boldwood on paying for her tea for herself, when at this moment

Pennyways entered the tent. Troy trembled: here was his scheme for respectability endangered at once. He was about to leave his hole of espial, attempt to follow Pennyways, and find out if the ex-bailiff had recognized him, when he was arrested by the conversation, and found he was too late.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said Pennyways; "I've some private information for your ear alone."

"I cannot hear it now," she said, coldly. That Bathsheba could not endure this man was evident; in fact, he was continually coming to her with some tale or other, by which he might creep into favour at the expense of persons maligned.

"I'll write it down," said Pennyways, confidently. He stooped over the table, pulled a leaf from a warped pocket-book, and wrote upon the paper, in a round hand —

"Your husband is here. I've seen him. Who's the fool now?"

This he folded small, and handed towards her. Bathsheba would not read it; she would not even put out her hand to take it. Pennyways, then, with a laugh of derision, tossed it into her lap, and, turning away, left her.

From the words and action of Pennyways, Troy, though he had not been able to see what the ex-bailiff wrote, had not a moment's doubt that the note referred to him. Nothing that he could think of could be done to check the exposure. "Curse my luck!" he whispered, and added imprecations which rustled in the gloom like a pestilent wind. Meanwhile Boldwood said, taking up the note from her lap —

"Don't you wish to read it, Mrs. Troy? If not, I'll destroy it."

"Oh, well," said Bathsheba, carelessly, "perhaps it is unjust not to read it; but I can guess what it is about. He wants me to recommend him, or it is to tell me of some little scandal or another connected with my work-people. He's always doing that."

Bathsheba held the note in her right hand. Boldwood handed towards her a plate of cut bread-and-butter; when, in order to take a slice, she put the note into her left hand, where she was still holding the purse, and then allowed her hand to drop beside her close to the canvas. The moment had come for saving his game, and Troy impulsively felt that he would play the card. For yet another time he looked at the fair hand, and saw the pink finger-tips, and the blue veins of the wrist, encircled by a bracelet of coral chippings which she wore: how familiar it all was to him! Then, with the lightning action in which he was such an adept, he noiselessly slipped his hand under the bottom of the tent-cloth, which was far from being pinned tightly down, lifted it a little way, keeping his eye to the hole, snatched the note from her fingers, dropped the canvas, and ran away in the gloom towards the bank and ditch, smiling at the scream of astonishment which burst from her. Troy then slid down on the outside of the rampart, hastened round in the bottom of the entrenchment to a distance of a hundred yards, ascended again, and crossed boldly in a slow walk towards the front entrance of the tent. His object was now to get to Pennyways, and prevent a repetition of the announcement until such time as he should choose.

Troy reached the tent door, and standing among the groups there gathered, looked anxiously for Pennyways, evidently not wishing to make himself prominent by inquiring

for him. One or two men were speaking of a daring attempt that had just been made to rob a young lady by lifting the canvas of the tent beside her. It was supposed that the rogue had imagined a slip of paper which she held in her hand to be a bank note, for he had seized it, and made off with it, leaving her purse behind. His chagrin and disappointment at discovering its worthlessness would be a good joke, it was said. However, the occurrence seemed to have become known to few, for it had not interrupted a fiddler, who had lately begun playing by the door of the tent, nor the four bowed old men with grim countenances and walking-sticks in hand, who were dancing "Major Malley's Reel" to the tune. Behind these stood Pennyways. Troy glided up to him, beckoned, and whispered a few words; and with a mutual glance of concurrence the two men went into the night together.

CHAPTER LI

BATHSHEBA TALKS WITH HER OUTFRIDER

The arrangement for getting back again to Weatherbury had been that Oak should take the place of Poorgrass in Bathsheba's conveyance and drive her home, it being discovered late in the afternoon that Joseph was suffering from his old complaint, a multiplying eye, and was, therefore, hardly trustworthy as coachman and protector to a woman. But Oak had found himself so occupied, and was full of so many cares relative to those portions of Boldwood's flocks that were not disposed of, that Bathsheba, without telling Oak or anybody, resolved to drive home herself, as she had many times done from Casterbridge Market, and trust to her good angel for performing the journey unmolested. But having fallen in with Farmer Boldwood accidentally (on her part at least) at the refreshment-tent, she found it impossible to refuse his offer to ride on horseback beside her as escort. It had grown twilight before she was aware, but Boldwood assured her that there was no cause for uneasiness, as the moon would be up in half-an-hour.

Immediately after the incident in the tent, she had risen to go — now absolutely alarmed and really grateful for her old lover's protection — though regretting Gabriel's absence, whose company she would have much preferred, as being more proper as well as more pleasant, since he was her own managing-man and servant. This, however, could not be helped; she would not, on any consideration, treat Boldwood harshly, having once already ill-used him, and the moon having risen, and the gig being ready, she drove across the hilltop in the wending way's which led downwards — to oblivious obscurity, as it seemed, for the moon and the hill it flooded with light were in appearance on a level, the rest of the world lying as a vast shady concave between them. Boldwood mounted his horse, and followed in close attendance behind. Thus they descended into the lowlands, and the sounds of those left on the hill came like voices from the sky, and the lights were as those of a camp in heaven. They soon passed

the merry stragglers in the immediate vicinity of the hill, traversed Kingsbere, and got upon the high road.

The keen instincts of Bathsheba had perceived that the farmer's staunch devotion to herself was still undiminished, and she sympathized deeply. The sight had quite depressed her this evening; had reminded her of her folly; she wished anew, as she had wished many months ago, for some means of making reparation for her fault. Hence her pity for the man who so persistently loved on to his own injury and permanent gloom had betrayed Bathsheba into an injudicious considerateness of manner, which appeared almost like tenderness, and gave new vigour to the exquisite dream of a Jacob's seven years service in poor Boldwood's mind.

He soon found an excuse for advancing from his position in the rear, and rode close by her side. They had gone two or three miles in the moonlight, speaking desultorily across the wheel of her gig concerning the fair, farming, Oak's usefulness to them both, and other indifferent subjects, when Boldwood said suddenly and simply —

"Mrs. Troy, you will marry again some day?"

This point-blank query unmistakably confused her, and it was not till a minute or more had elapsed that she said, "I have not seriously thought of any such subject."

"I quite understand that. Yet your late husband has been dead nearly one year, and —"

"You forget that his death was never absolutely proved, and may not have taken place; so that I may not be really a widow," she said, catching at the straw of escape that the fact afforded.

"Not absolutely proved, perhaps, but it was proved circumstantially. A man saw him drowning, too. No reasonable person has any doubt of his death; nor have you, ma'am, I should imagine."

"I have none now, or I should have acted differently," she said, gently. "I certainly, at first, had a strange unaccountable feeling that he could not have perished, but I have been able to explain that in several ways since. But though I am fully persuaded that I shall see him no more, I am far from thinking of marriage with another. I should be very contemptible to indulge in such a thought."

They were silent now awhile, and having struck into an unfrequented track across a common, the creaks of Boldwood's saddle and her gig springs were all the sounds to be heard. Boldwood ended the pause.

"Do you remember when I carried you fainting in my arms into the King's Arms, in Casterbridge? Every dog has his day: that was mine."

"I know — I know it all," she said, hurriedly.

"I, for one, shall never cease regretting that events so fell out as to deny you to me."

"I, too, am very sorry," she said, and then checked herself. "I mean, you know, I am sorry you thought I —"

"I have always this dreary pleasure in thinking over those past times with you — that I was something to you before he was anything, and that you belonged almost to me. But, of course, that's nothing. You never liked me."

"I did; and respected you, too."

"Do you now?"

"Yes."

"Which?"

"How do you mean which?"

"Do you like me, or do you respect me?"

"I don't know — at least, I cannot tell you. It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs. My treatment of you was thoughtless, inexcusable, wicked! I shall eternally regret it. If there had been anything I could have done to make amends I would most gladly have done it — there was nothing on earth I so longed to do as to repair the error. But that was not possible."

"Don't blame yourself — you were not so far in the wrong as you suppose. Bathsheba, suppose you had real complete proof that you are what, in fact, you are — a widow — would you repair the old wrong to me by marrying me?"

"I cannot say. I shouldn't yet, at any rate."

"But you might at some future time of your life?"

"Oh yes, I might at some time."

"Well, then, do you know that without further proof of any kind you may marry again in about six years from the present — subject to nobody's objection or blame?"

"Oh yes," she said, quickly. "I know all that. But don't talk of it — seven or six years — where may we all be by that time?"

"They will soon glide by, and it will seem an astonishingly short time to look back upon when they are past — much less than to look forward to now."

"Yes, yes; I have found that in my own experience."

"Now listen once more," Boldwood pleaded. "If I wait that time, will you marry me? You own that you owe me amends — let that be your way of making them."

"But, Mr. Boldwood — six years —"

"Do you want to be the wife of any other man?"

"No indeed! I mean, that I don't like to talk about this matter now. Perhaps it is not proper, and I ought not to allow it. Let us drop it. My husband may be living, as I said."

"Of course, I'll drop the subject if you wish. But propriety has nothing to do with reasons. I am a middle-aged man, willing to protect you for the remainder of our lives. On your side, at least, there is no passion or blamable haste — on mine, perhaps, there is. But I can't help seeing that if you choose from a feeling of pity, and, as you say, a wish to make amends, to make a bargain with me for a far-ahead time — an agreement which will set all things right and make me happy, late though it may be — there is no fault to be found with you as a woman. Hadn't I the first place beside you? Haven't you been almost mine once already? Surely you can say to me as much as this, you will have me back again should circumstances permit? Now, pray speak! O Bathsheba, promise — it is only a little promise — that if you marry again, you will marry me!"

His tone was so excited that she almost feared him at this moment, even whilst she sympathized. It was a simple physical fear — the weak of the strong; there was no emotional aversion or inner repugnance. She said, with some distress in her voice, for she remembered vividly his outburst on the Yalbury Road, and shrank from a repetition of his anger: —

“I will never marry another man whilst you wish me to be your wife, whatever comes — but to say more — you have taken me so by surprise — ”

“But let it stand in these simple words — that in six years’ time you will be my wife? Unexpected accidents we’ll not mention, because those, of course, must be given way to. Now, this time I know you will keep your word.”

“That’s why I hesitate to give it.”

“But do give it! Remember the past, and be kind.”

She breathed; and then said mournfully: “Oh what shall I do? I don’t love you, and I much fear that I never shall love you as much as a woman ought to love a husband. If you, sir, know that, and I can yet give you happiness by a mere promise to marry at the end of six years, if my husband should not come back, it is a great honour to me. And if you value such an act of friendship from a woman who doesn’t esteem herself as she did, and has little love left, why I — I will — ”

“Promise!”

“ — Consider, if I cannot promise soon.”

“But soon is perhaps never?”

“Oh no, it is not! I mean soon. Christmas, we’ll say.”

“Christmas!” He said nothing further till he added: “Well, I’ll say no more to you about it till that time.”

Bathsheba was in a very peculiar state of mind, which showed how entirely the soul is the slave of the body, the ethereal spirit dependent for its quality upon the tangible flesh and blood. It is hardly too much to say that she felt coerced by a force stronger than her own will, not only into the act of promising upon this singularly remote and vague matter, but into the emotion of fancying that she ought to promise. When the weeks intervening between the night of this conversation and Christmas day began perceptibly to diminish, her anxiety and perplexity increased.

One day she was led by an accident into an oddly confidential dialogue with Gabriel about her difficulty. It afforded her a little relief — of a dull and cheerless kind. They were auditing accounts, and something occurred in the course of their labours which led Oak to say, speaking of Boldwood, “He’ll never forget you, ma’am, never.”

Then out came her trouble before she was aware; and she told him how she had again got into the toils; what Boldwood had asked her, and how he was expecting her assent. “The most mournful reason of all for my agreeing to it,” she said sadly, “and the true reason why I think to do so for good or for evil, is this — it is a thing I have not breathed to a living soul as yet — I believe that if I don’t give my word, he’ll go out of his mind.”

“Really, do ye?” said Gabriel, gravely.

"I believe this," she continued, with reckless frankness; "and Heaven knows I say it in a spirit the very reverse of vain, for I am grieved and troubled to my soul about it — I believe I hold that man's future in my hand. His career depends entirely upon my treatment of him. O Gabriel, I tremble at my responsibility, for it is terrible!"

"Well, I think this much, ma'am, as I told you years ago," said Oak, "that his life is a total blank whenever he isn't hoping for 'ee; but I can't suppose — I hope that nothing so dreadful hangs on to it as you fancy. His natural manner has always been dark and strange, you know. But since the case is so sad and odd-like, why don't ye give the conditional promise? I think I would."

"But is it right? Some rash acts of my past life have taught me that a watched woman must have very much circumspection to retain only a very little credit, and I do want and long to be discreet in this! And six years — why we may all be in our graves by that time, even if Mr. Troy does not come back again, which he may not impossibly do! Such thoughts give a sort of absurdity to the scheme. Now, isn't it preposterous, Gabriel? However he came to dream of it, I cannot think. But is it wrong? You know — you are older than I."

"Eight years older, ma'am."

"Yes, eight years — and is it wrong?"

"Perhaps it would be an uncommon agreement for a man and woman to make: I don't see anything really wrong about it," said Oak, slowly. "In fact the very thing that makes it doubtful if you ought to marry en under any condition, that is, your not caring about him — for I may suppose —"

"Yes, you may suppose that love is wanting," she said shortly. "Love is an utterly bygone, sorry, worn-out, miserable thing with me — for him or any one else."

"Well, your want of love seems to me the one thing that takes away harm from such an agreement with him. If wild heat had to do wi' it, making ye long to over-come the awkwardness about your husband's vanishing, it mid be wrong; but a cold-hearted agreement to oblige a man seems different, somehow. The real sin, ma'am in my mind, lies in thinking of ever wedding wi' a man you don't love honest and true."

"That I'm willing to pay the penalty of," said Bathsheba, firmly. "You know, Gabriel, this is what I cannot get off my conscience — that I once seriously injured him in sheer idleness. If I had never played a trick upon him, he would never have wanted to marry me. Oh if I could only pay some heavy damages in money to him for the harm I did, and so get the sin off my soul that way! ... Well, there's the debt, which can only be discharged in one way, and I believe I am bound to do it if it honestly lies in my power, without any consideration of my own future at all. When a rake gambles away his expectations, the fact that it is an inconvenient debt doesn't make him the less liable. I've been a rake, and the single point I ask you is, considering that my own scruples, and the fact that in the eye of the law my husband is only missing, will keep any man from marrying me until seven years have passed — am I free to entertain such an idea, even though 'tis a sort of penance — for it will be that? I hate the act of marriage

under such circumstances, and the class of women I should seem to belong to by doing it!"

"It seems to me that all depends upon whe'r you think, as everybody else do, that your husband is dead."

"Yes — I've long ceased to doubt that. I well know what would have brought him back long before this time if he had lived."

"Well, then, in a religious sense you will be as free to think o' marrying again as any real widow of one year's standing. But why don't ye ask Mr. Thirdly's advice on how to treat Mr. Boldwood?"

"No. When I want a broad-minded opinion for general enlightenment, distinct from special advice, I never go to a man who deals in the subject professionally. So I like the parson's opinion on law, the lawyer's on doctoring, the doctor's on business, and my business-man's — that is, yours — on morals."

"And on love — "

"My own."

"I'm afraid there's a hitch in that argument," said Oak, with a grave smile.

She did not reply at once, and then saying, "Good evening, Mr. Oak." went away.

She had spoken frankly, and neither asked nor expected any reply from Gabriel more satisfactory than that she had obtained. Yet in the centremost parts of her complicated heart there existed at this minute a little pang of disappointment, for a reason she would not allow herself to recognize. Oak had not once wished her free that he might marry her himself — had not once said, "I could wait for you as well as he." That was the insect sting. Not that she would have listened to any such hypothesis. O no — for wasn't she saying all the time that such thoughts of the future were improper, and wasn't Gabriel far too poor a man to speak sentiment to her? Yet he might have just hinted about that old love of his, and asked, in a playful off-hand way, if he might speak of it. It would have seemed pretty and sweet, if no more; and then she would have shown how kind and inoffensive a woman's "No" can sometimes be. But to give such cool advice — the very advice she had asked for — it ruffled our heroine all the afternoon.

CHAPTER LII

CONVERGING COURSES

I

Christmas-eve came, and a party that Boldwood was to give in the evening was the great subject of talk in Weatherbury. It was not that the rarity of Christmas parties in the parish made this one a wonder, but that Boldwood should be the giver. The announcement had had an abnormal and incongruous sound, as if one should hear

of croquet-playing in a cathedral aisle, or that some much-respected judge was going upon the stage. That the party was intended to be a truly jovial one there was no room for doubt. A large bough of mistletoe had been brought from the woods that day, and suspended in the hall of the bachelor's home. Holly and ivy had followed in armfuls. From six that morning till past noon the huge wood fire in the kitchen roared and sparkled at its highest, the kettle, the saucepan, and the three-legged pot appearing in the midst of the flames like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; moreover, roasting and basting operations were continually carried on in front of the genial blaze.

As it grew later the fire was made up in the large long hall into which the staircase descended, and all encumbrances were cleared out for dancing. The log which was to form the back-brand of the evening fire was the uncleft trunk of a tree, so unwieldy that it could be neither brought nor rolled to its place; and accordingly two men were to be observed dragging and heaving it in by chains and levers as the hour of assembly drew near.

In spite of all this, the spirit of revelry was wanting in the atmosphere of the house. Such a thing had never been attempted before by its owner, and it was now done as by a wrench. Intended gaieties would insist upon appearing like solemn grandeurs, the organization of the whole effort was carried out coldly, by hirelings, and a shadow seemed to move about the rooms, saying that the proceedings were unnatural to the place and the lone man who lived therein, and hence not good.

II

Bathsheba was at this time in her room, dressing for the event. She had called for candles, and Liddy entered and placed one on each side of her mistress's glass.

"Don't go away, Liddy," said Bathsheba, almost timidly. "I am foolishly agitated — I cannot tell why. I wish I had not been obliged to go to this dance; but there's no escaping now. I have not spoken to Mr. Boldwood since the autumn, when I promised to see him at Christmas on business, but I had no idea there was to be anything of this kind."

"But I would go now," said Liddy, who was going with her; for Boldwood had been indiscriminate in his invitations.

"Yes, I shall make my appearance, of course," said Bathsheba. "But I am the cause of the party, and that upsets me! — Don't tell, Liddy."

"Oh no, ma'am. You the cause of it, ma'am?"

"Yes. I am the reason of the party — I. If it had not been for me, there would never have been one. I can't explain any more — there's no more to be explained. I wish I had never seen Weatherbury."

"That's wicked of you — to wish to be worse off than you are."

"No, Liddy. I have never been free from trouble since I have lived here, and this party is likely to bring me more. Now, fetch my black silk dress, and see how it sits upon me."

"But you will leave off that, surely, ma'am? You have been a widow-lady fourteen months, and ought to brighten up a little on such a night as this."

"Is it necessary? No; I will appear as usual, for if I were to wear any light dress people would say things about me, and I should seem to be rejoicing when I am solemn all the time. The party doesn't suit me a bit; but never mind, stay and help to finish me off."

III

Boldwood was dressing also at this hour. A tailor from Casterbridge was with him, assisting him in the operation of trying on a new coat that had just been brought home.

Never had Boldwood been so fastidious, unreasonable about the fit, and generally difficult to please. The tailor walked round and round him, tugged at the waist, pulled the sleeve, pressed out the collar, and for the first time in his experience Boldwood was not bored. Times had been when the farmer had exclaimed against all such niceties as childish, but now no philosophic or hasty rebuke whatever was provoked by this man for attaching as much importance to a crease in the coat as to an earthquake in South America. Boldwood at last expressed himself nearly satisfied, and paid the bill, the tailor passing out of the door just as Oak came in to report progress for the day.

"Oh, Oak," said Boldwood. "I shall of course see you here to-night. Make yourself merry. I am determined that neither expense nor trouble shall be spared."

"I'll try to be here, sir, though perhaps it may not be very early," said Gabriel, quietly. "I am glad indeed to see such a change in 'ee from what it used to be."

"Yes — I must own it — I am bright to-night: cheerful and more than cheerful — so much so that I am almost sad again with the sense that all of it is passing away. And sometimes, when I am excessively hopeful and blithe, a trouble is looming in the distance: so that I often get to look upon gloom in me with content, and to fear a happy mood. Still this may be absurd — I feel that it is absurd. Perhaps my day is dawning at last."

"I hope it 'ill be a long and a fair one."

"Thank you — thank you. Yet perhaps my cheerfulness rests on a slender hope. And yet I trust my hope. It is faith, not hope. I think this time I reckon with my host. — Oak, my hands are a little shaky, or something; I can't tie this neckerchief properly. Perhaps you will tie it for me. The fact is, I have not been well lately, you know."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir."

"Oh, it's nothing. I want it done as well as you can, please. Is there any late knot in fashion, Oak?"

"I don't know, sir," said Oak. His tone had sunk to sadness.

Boldwood approached Gabriel, and as Oak tied the neckerchief the farmer went on feverishly —

"Does a woman keep her promise, Gabriel?"

"If it is not inconvenient to her she may."

"— Or rather an implied promise."

"I won't answer for her implying," said Oak, with faint bitterness. "That's a word as full o' holes as a sieve with them."

"Oak, don't talk like that. You have got quite cynical lately — how is it? We seem to have shifted our positions: I have become the young and hopeful man, and you the old and unbelieving one. However, does a woman keep a promise, not to marry, but to enter on an engagement to marry at some time? Now you know women better than I — tell me."

"I am afeard you honour my understanding too much. However, she may keep such a promise, if it is made with an honest meaning to repair a wrong."

"It has not gone far yet, but I think it will soon — yes, I know it will," he said, in an impulsive whisper. "I have pressed her upon the subject, and she inclines to be kind to me, and to think of me as a husband at a long future time, and that's enough for me. How can I expect more? She has a notion that a woman should not marry within seven years of her husband's disappearance — that her own self shouldn't, I mean — because his body was not found. It may be merely this legal reason which influences her, or it may be a religious one, but she is reluctant to talk on the point. Yet she has promised — implied — that she will ratify an engagement to-night."

"Seven years," murmured Oak.

"No, no — it's no such thing!" he said, with impatience. "Five years, nine months, and a few days. Fifteen months nearly have passed since he vanished, and is there anything so wonderful in an engagement of little more than five years?"

"It seems long in a forward view. Don't build too much upon such promises, sir. Remember, you have once be'n deceived. Her meaning may be good; but there — she's young yet."

"Deceived? Never!" said Boldwood, vehemently. "She never promised me at that first time, and hence she did not break her promise! If she promises me, she'll marry me. Bathsheba is a woman to her word."

IV

Troy was sitting in a corner of The White Hart tavern at Casterbridge, smoking and drinking a steaming mixture from a glass. A knock was given at the door, and Pennyways entered.

"Well, have you seen him?" Troy inquired, pointing to a chair.

"Boldwood?"

"No — Lawyer Long."

"He wadn' at home. I went there first, too."

"That's a nuisance."

"'Tis rather, I suppose."

“Yet I don’t see that, because a man appears to be drowned and was not, he should be liable for anything. I shan’t ask any lawyer — not I.”

“But that’s not it, exactly. If a man changes his name and so forth, and takes steps to deceive the world and his own wife, he’s a cheat, and that in the eye of the law is ayless a rogue, and that is ayless a lammocken vagabond; and that’s a punishable situation.”

“Ha-ha! Well done, Pennyways,” Troy had laughed, but it was with some anxiety that he said, “Now, what I want to know is this, do you think there’s really anything going on between her and Boldwood? Upon my soul, I should never have believed it! How she must detest me! Have you found out whether she has encouraged him?”

“I haen’t been able to learn. There’s a deal of feeling on his side seemingly, but I don’t answer for her. I didn’t know a word about any such thing till yesterday, and all I heard then was that she was gwine to the party at his house to-night. This is the first time she has ever gone there, they say. And they say that she’ve not so much as spoke to him since they were at Greenhill Fair: but what can folk believe o’t? However, she’s not fond of him — quite offish and quite careless, I know.”

“I’m not so sure of that... She’s a handsome woman, Pennyways, is she not? Own that you never saw a finer or more splendid creature in your life. Upon my honour, when I set eyes upon her that day I wondered what I could have been made of to be able to leave her by herself so long. And then I was hampered with that bothering show, which I’m free of at last, thank the stars.” He smoked on awhile, and then added, “How did she look when you passed by yesterday?”

“Oh, she took no great heed of me, ye may well fancy; but she looked well enough, far’s I know. Just flashed her haughty eyes upon my poor scram body, and then let them go past me to what was yond, much as if I’d been no more than a leafless tree. She had just got off her mare to look at the last wring-down of cider for the year; she had been riding, and so her colours were up and her breath rather quick, so that her bosom plimmed and fell — plimmed and fell — every time plain to my eye. Ay, and there were the fellers round her wringing down the cheese and bustling about and saying, ‘Ware o’ the pommy, ma’am: ‘twill spoil yer gown.’ ‘Never mind me,’ says she. Then Gabe brought her some of the new cider, and she must needs go drinking it through a strawmote, and not in a nateral way at all. ‘Liddy,’ says she, ‘bring indoors a few gallons, and I’ll make some cider-wine.’ Sergeant, I was no more to her than a morsel of scroff in the fuel-house!”

“I must go and find her out at once — O yes, I see that — I must go. Oak is head man still, isn’t he?”

“Yes, ‘a b’lieve. And at Little Weatherbury Farm too. He manages everything.”

“‘Twill puzzle him to manage her, or any other man of his compass!”

“I don’t know about that. She can’t do without him, and knowing it well he’s pretty independent. And she’ve a few soft corners to her mind, though I’ve never been able to get into one, the devil’s in’t!”

“Ah, baily, she’s a notch above you, and you must own it: a higher class of animal — a finer tissue. However, stick to me, and neither this haughty goddess, dashing piece of womanhood, Juno-wife of mine (Juno was a goddess, you know), nor anybody else shall hurt you. But all this wants looking into, I perceive. What with one thing and another, I see that my work is well cut out for me.”

V

“How do I look to-night, Liddy?” said Bathsheba, giving a final adjustment to her dress before leaving the glass.

“I never saw you look so well before. Yes — I’ll tell you when you looked like it — that night, a year and a half ago, when you came in so wildlike, and scolded us for making remarks about you and Mr. Troy.”

“Everybody will think that I am setting myself to captivate Mr. Boldwood, I suppose,” she murmured. “At least they’ll say so. Can’t my hair be brushed down a little flatter? I dread going — yet I dread the risk of wounding him by staying away.”

“Anyhow, ma’am, you can’t well be dressed plainer than you are, unless you go in sackcloth at once. ‘Tis your excitement is what makes you look so noticeable to-night.”

“I don’t know what’s the matter, I feel wretched at one time, and buoyant at another. I wish I could have continued quite alone as I have been for the last year or so, with no hopes and no fears, and no pleasure and no grief.”

“Now just suppose Mr. Boldwood should ask you — only just suppose it — to run away with him, what would you do, ma’am?”

“Liddy — none of that,” said Bathsheba, gravely. “Mind, I won’t hear joking on any such matter. Do you hear?”

“I beg pardon, ma’am. But knowing what rum things we women be, I just said — however, I won’t speak of it again.”

“No marrying for me yet for many a year; if ever, ‘twill be for reasons very, very different from those you think, or others will believe! Now get my cloak, for it is time to go.”

VI

“Oak,” said Boldwood, “before you go I want to mention what has been passing in my mind lately — that little arrangement we made about your share in the farm I mean. That share is small, too small, considering how little I attend to business now, and how much time and thought you give to it. Well, since the world is brightening for me, I want to show my sense of it by increasing your proportion in the partnership. I’ll make a memorandum of the arrangement which struck me as likely to be convenient, for I haven’t time to talk about it now; and then we’ll discuss it at our leisure. My intention is ultimately to retire from the management altogether, and until you can take all the expenditure upon your shoulders, I’ll be a sleeping partner in the stock. Then, if I marry her — and I hope — I feel I shall, why — ”

"Pray don't speak of it, sir," said Oak, hastily. "We don't know what may happen. So many upsets may befall 'ee. There's many a slip, as they say — and I would advise you — I know you'll pardon me this once — not to be too sure."

"I know, I know. But the feeling I have about increasing your share is on account of what I know of you. Oak, I have learnt a little about your secret: your interest in her is more than that of bailiff for an employer. But you have behaved like a man, and I, as a sort of successful rival — successful partly through your goodness of heart — should like definitely to show my sense of your friendship under what must have been a great pain to you."

"O that's not necessary, thank 'ee," said Oak, hurriedly. "I must get used to such as that; other men have, and so shall I."

Oak then left him. He was uneasy on Boldwood's account, for he saw anew that this constant passion of the farmer made him not the man he once had been.

As Boldwood continued awhile in his room alone — ready and dressed to receive his company — the mood of anxiety about his appearance seemed to pass away, and to be succeeded by a deep solemnity. He looked out of the window, and regarded the dim outline of the trees upon the sky, and the twilight deepening to darkness.

Then he went to a locked closet, and took from a locked drawer therein a small circular case the size of a pillbox, and was about to put it into his pocket. But he lingered to open the cover and take a momentary glance inside. It contained a woman's finger-ring, set all the way round with small diamonds, and from its appearance had evidently been recently purchased. Boldwood's eyes dwelt upon its many sparkles a long time, though that its material aspect concerned him little was plain from his manner and mien, which were those of a mind following out the presumed thread of that jewel's future history.

The noise of wheels at the front of the house became audible. Boldwood closed the box, stowed it away carefully in his pocket, and went out upon the landing. The old man who was his indoor factotum came at the same moment to the foot of the stairs.

"They be coming, sir — lots of 'em — a-foot and a-driving!"

"I was coming down this moment. Those wheels I heard — is it Mrs. Troy?"

"No, sir — 'tis not she yet."

A reserved and sombre expression had returned to Boldwood's face again, but it poorly cloaked his feelings when he pronounced Bathsheba's name; and his feverish anxiety continued to show its existence by a galloping motion of his fingers upon the side of his thigh as he went down the stairs.

VII

"How does this cover me?" said Troy to Pennyways. "Nobody would recognize me now, I'm sure."

He was buttoning on a heavy grey overcoat of Noachian cut, with cape and high collar, the latter being erect and rigid, like a girdling wall, and nearly reaching to the verge of a travelling cap which was pulled down over his ears.

Pennyways snuffed the candle, and then looked up and deliberately inspected Troy.

"You've made up your mind to go then?" he said.

"Made up my mind? Yes; of course I have."

"Why not write to her? 'Tis a very queer corner that you have got into, sergeant. You see all these things will come to light if you go back, and they won't sound well at all. Faith, if I was you I'd even bide as you be — a single man of the name of Francis. A good wife is good, but the best wife is not so good as no wife at all. Now that's my outspoke mind, and I've been called a long-headed feller here and there."

"All nonsense!" said Troy, angrily. "There she is with plenty of money, and a house and farm, and horses, and comfort, and here am I living from hand to mouth — a needy adventurer. Besides, it is no use talking now; it is too late, and I am glad of it; I've been seen and recognized here this very afternoon. I should have gone back to her the day after the fair, if it hadn't been for you talking about the law, and rubbish about getting a separation; and I don't put it off any longer. What the deuce put it into my head to run away at all, I can't think! Humbugging sentiment — that's what it was. But what man on earth was to know that his wife would be in such a hurry to get rid of his name!"

"I should have known it. She's bad enough for anything."

"Pennyways, mind who you are talking to."

"Well, sergeant, all I say is this, that if I were you I'd go abroad again where I came from — 't isn't too late to do it now. I wouldn't stir up the business and get a bad name for the sake of living with her — for all that about your play-acting is sure to come out, you know, although you think otherwise. My eyes and limbs, there'll be a racket if you go back just now — in the middle of Boldwood's Christmasing!"

"H'm, yes. I expect I shall not be a very welcome guest if he has her there," said the sergeant, with a slight laugh. "A sort of Alonzo the Brave; and when I go in the guests will sit in silence and fear, and all laughter and pleasure will be hushed, and the lights in the chamber burn blue, and the worms — Ugh, horrible! — Ring for some more brandy, Pennyways, I felt an awful shudder just then! Well, what is there besides? A stick — I must have a walking-stick."

Pennyways now felt himself to be in something of a difficulty, for should Bathsheba and Troy become reconciled it would be necessary to regain her good opinion if he would secure the patronage of her husband. "I sometimes think she likes you yet, and is a good woman at bottom," he said, as a saving sentence. "But there's no telling to a certainty from a body's outside. Well, you'll do as you like about going, of course, sergeant, and as for me, I'll do as you tell me."

"Now, let me see what the time is," said Troy, after emptying his glass in one draught as he stood. "Half-past six o'clock. I shall not hurry along the road, and shall be there then before nine."

CHAPTER LIII

CONCURRITUR — HORAE MOMENTO

Outside the front of Boldwood's house a group of men stood in the dark, with their faces towards the door, which occasionally opened and closed for the passage of some guest or servant, when a golden rod of light would stripe the ground for the moment and vanish again, leaving nothing outside but the glowworm shine of the pale lamp amid the evergreens over the door.

"He was seen in Casterbridge this afternoon — so the boy said," one of them remarked in a whisper. "And I for one believe it. His body was never found, you know."

"'Tis a strange story," said the next. "You may depend upon't that she knows nothing about it."

"Not a word."

"Perhaps he don't mean that she shall," said another man.

"If he's alive and here in the neighbourhood, he means mischief," said the first. "Poor young thing: I do pity her, if 'tis true. He'll drag her to the dogs."

"O no; he'll settle down quiet enough," said one disposed to take a more hopeful view of the case.

"What a fool she must have been ever to have had anything to do with the man! She is so self-willed and independent too, that one is more minded to say it serves her right than pity her."

"No, no. I don't hold with 'ee there. She was no otherwise than a girl mind, and how could she tell what the man was made of? If 'tis really true, 'tis too hard a punishment, and more than she ought to hae. — Hullo, who's that?" This was to some footsteps that were heard approaching.

"William Smallbury," said a dim figure in the shades, coming up and joining them. "Dark as a hedge, to-night, isn't it? I all but missed the plank over the river ath'art there in the bottom — never did such a thing before in my life. Be ye any of Boldwood's workfolk?" He peered into their faces.

"Yes — all o' us. We met here a few minutes ago."

"Oh, I hear now — that's Sam Samway: thought I knowed the voice, too. Going in?"

"Presently. But I say, William," Samway whispered, "have ye heard this strange tale?"

"What — that about Sergeant Troy being seen, d'ye mean, souls?" said Smallbury, also lowering his voice.

"Ay: in Casterbridge."

"Yes, I have. Laban Tall named a hint of it to me but now — but I don't think it. Hark, here Laban comes himself, 'a b'lieve." A footstep drew near.

"Laban?"

"Yes, 'tis I," said Tall.

"Have ye heard any more about that?"

"No," said Tall, joining the group. "And I'm inclined to think we'd better keep quiet. If so be 'tis not true, 'twill flurry her, and do her much harm to repeat it; and if so be 'tis true, 'twill do no good to forestall her time o' trouble. God send that it mid be a lie, for though Henery Fray and some of 'em do speak against her, she's never been anything but fair to me. She's hot and hasty, but she's a brave girl who'll never tell a lie however much the truth may harm her, and I've no cause to wish her evil."

"She never do tell women's little lies, that's true; and 'tis a thing that can be said of very few. Ay, all the harm she thinks she says to yer face: there's nothing underhand wi' her."

They stood silent then, every man busied with his own thoughts, during which interval sounds of merriment could be heard within. Then the front door again opened, the rays streamed out, the well-known form of Boldwood was seen in the rectangular area of light, the door closed, and Boldwood walked slowly down the path.

"'Tis master," one of the men whispered, as he neared them. "We'd better stand quiet — he'll go in again directly. He would think it unseemly o' us to be loitering here."

Boldwood came on, and passed by the men without seeing them, they being under the bushes on the grass. He paused, leant over the gate, and breathed a long breath. They heard low words come from him.

"I hope to God she'll come, or this night will be nothing but misery to me! Oh my darling, my darling, why do you keep me in suspense like this?"

He said this to himself, and they all distinctly heard it. Boldwood remained silent after that, and the noise from indoors was again just audible, until, a few minutes later, light wheels could be distinguished coming down the hill. They drew nearer, and ceased at the gate. Boldwood hastened back to the door, and opened it; and the light shone upon Bathsheba coming up the path.

Boldwood compressed his emotion to mere welcome: the men marked her light laugh and apology as she met him: he took her into the house; and the door closed again.

"Gracious heaven, I didn't know it was like that with him!" said one of the men. "I thought that fancy of his was over long ago."

"You don't know much of master, if you thought that," said Samway.

"I wouldn't he should know we heard what 'a said for the world," remarked a third.

"I wish we had told of the report at once," the first uneasily continued. "More harm may come of this than we know of. Poor Mr. Boldwood, it will be hard upon en. I wish Troy was in — Well, God forgive me for such a wish! A scoundrel to play a poor wife such tricks. Nothing has prospered in Weatherbury since he came here. And now I've no heart to go in. Let's look into Warren's for a few minutes first, shall us, neighbours?"

Samway, Tall, and Smallbury agreed to go to Warren's, and went out at the gate, the remaining ones entering the house. The three soon drew near the malt-house, approaching it from the adjoining orchard, and not by way of the street. The pane of glass was illuminated as usual. Smallbury was a little in advance of the rest when, pausing, he turned suddenly to his companions and said, "Hist! See there."

The light from the pane was now perceived to be shining not upon the ivied wall as usual, but upon some object close to the glass. It was a human face.

"Let's come closer," whispered Samway; and they approached on tiptoe. There was no disbelieving the report any longer. Troy's face was almost close to the pane, and he was looking in. Not only was he looking in, but he appeared to have been arrested by a conversation which was in progress in the malt-house, the voices of the interlocutors being those of Oak and the maltster.

"The spree is all in her honour, isn't it — hey?" said the old man. "Although he made believe 'tis only keeping up o' Christmas?"

"I cannot say," replied Oak.

"Oh 'tis true enough, faith. I cannot understand Farmer Boldwood being such a fool at his time of life as to ho and hanker after this woman in the way 'a do, and she not care a bit about en."

The men, after recognizing Troy's features, withdrew across the orchard as quietly as they had come. The air was big with Bathsheba's fortunes to-night: every word everywhere concerned her. When they were quite out of earshot all by one instinct paused.

"It gave me quite a turn — his face," said Tall, breathing.

"And so it did me," said Samway. "What's to be done?"

"I don't see that 'tis any business of ours," Smallbury murmured dubiously.

"But it is! 'Tis a thing which is everybody's business," said Samway. "We know very well that master's on a wrong tack, and that she's quite in the dark, and we should let 'em know at once. Laban, you know her best — you'd better go and ask to speak to her."

"I bain't fit for any such thing," said Laban, nervously. "I should think William ought to do it if anybody. He's oldest."

"I shall have nothing to do with it," said Smallbury. "'Tis a ticklish business altogether. Why, he'll go on to her himself in a few minutes, ye'll see."

"We don't know that he will. Come, Laban."

"Very well, if I must I must, I suppose," Tall reluctantly answered. "What must I say?"

"Just ask to see master."

"Oh no; I shan't speak to Mr. Boldwood. If I tell anybody, 'twill be mistress."

"Very well," said Samway.

Laban then went to the door. When he opened it the hum of bustle rolled out as a wave upon a still strand — the assemblage being immediately inside the hall — and was deadened to a murmur as he closed it again. Each man waited intently, and looked around at the dark tree tops gently rocking against the sky and occasionally shivering in a slight wind, as if he took interest in the scene, which neither did. One of them began walking up and down, and then came to where he started from and stopped again, with a sense that walking was a thing not worth doing now.

"I should think Laban must have seen mistress by this time," said Smallbury, breaking the silence. "Perhaps she won't come and speak to him."

The door opened. Tall appeared, and joined them.

"Well?" said both.

"I didn't like to ask for her after all," Laban faltered out. "They were all in such a stir, trying to put a little spirit into the party. Somehow the fun seems to hang fire, though everything's there that a heart can desire, and I couldn't for my soul interfere and throw damp upon it — if 'twas to save my life, I couldn't!"

"I suppose we had better all go in together," said Samway, gloomily. "Perhaps I may have a chance of saying a word to master."

So the men entered the hall, which was the room selected and arranged for the gathering because of its size. The younger men and maids were at last just beginning to dance. Bathsheba had been perplexed how to act, for she was not much more than a slim young maid herself, and the weight of stateliness sat heavy upon her. Sometimes she thought she ought not to have come under any circumstances; then she considered what cold unkindness that would have been, and finally resolved upon the middle course of staying for about an hour only, and gliding off unobserved, having from the first made up her mind that she could on no account dance, sing, or take any active part in the proceedings.

Her allotted hour having been passed in chatting and looking on, Bathsheba told Liddy not to hurry herself, and went to the small parlour to prepare for departure, which, like the hall, was decorated with holly and ivy, and well lighted up.

Nobody was in the room, but she had hardly been there a moment when the master of the house entered.

"Mrs. Troy — you are not going?" he said. "We've hardly begun!"

"If you'll excuse me, I should like to go now." Her manner was restive, for she remembered her promise, and imagined what he was about to say. "But as it is not late," she added, "I can walk home, and leave my man and Liddy to come when they choose."

"I've been trying to get an opportunity of speaking to you," said Boldwood. "You know perhaps what I long to say?"

Bathsheba silently looked on the floor.

"You do give it?" he said, eagerly.

"What?" she whispered.

"Now, that's evasion! Why, the promise. I don't want to intrude upon you at all, or to let it become known to anybody. But do give your word! A mere business compact, you know, between two people who are beyond the influence of passion." Boldwood knew how false this picture was as regarded himself; but he had proved that it was the only tone in which she would allow him to approach her. "A promise to marry me at the end of five years and three-quarters. You owe it to me!"

"I feel that I do," said Bathsheba; "that is, if you demand it. But I am a changed woman — an unhappy woman — and not — not —"

"You are still a very beautiful woman," said Boldwood. Honesty and pure conviction suggested the remark, unaccompanied by any perception that it might have been adopted by blunt flattery to soothe and win her.

However, it had not much effect now, for she said, in a passionless murmur which was in itself a proof of her words: "I have no feeling in the matter at all. And I don't at all know what is right to do in my difficult position, and I have nobody to advise me. But I give my promise, if I must. I give it as the rendering of a debt, conditionally, of course, on my being a widow."

"You'll marry me between five and six years hence?"

"Don't press me too hard. I'll marry nobody else."

"But surely you will name the time, or there's nothing in the promise at all?"

"Oh, I don't know, pray let me go!" she said, her bosom beginning to rise. "I am afraid what to do! I want to be just to you, and to be that seems to be wronging myself, and perhaps it is breaking the commandments. There is considerable doubt of his death, and then it is dreadful; let me ask a solicitor, Mr. Boldwood, if I ought or no!"

"Say the words, dear one, and the subject shall be dismissed; a blissful loving intimacy of six years, and then marriage — O Bathsheba, say them!" he begged in a husky voice, unable to sustain the forms of mere friendship any longer. "Promise yourself to me; I deserve it, indeed I do, for I have loved you more than anybody in the world! And if I said hasty words and showed uncalled-for heat of manner towards you, believe me, dear, I did not mean to distress you; I was in agony, Bathsheba, and I did not know what I said. You wouldn't let a dog suffer what I have suffered, could you but know it! Sometimes I shrink from your knowing what I have felt for you, and sometimes I am distressed that all of it you never will know. Be gracious, and give up a little to me, when I would give up my life for you!"

The trimmings of her dress, as they quivered against the light, showed how agitated she was, and at last she burst out crying. "And you'll not — press me — about anything more — if I say in five or six years?" she sobbed, when she had power to frame the words.

"Yes, then I'll leave it to time."

She waited a moment. "Very well. I'll marry you in six years from this day, if we both live," she said solemnly.

"And you'll take this as a token from me."

Boldwood had come close to her side, and now he clasped one of her hands in both his own, and lifted it to his breast.

"What is it? Oh I cannot wear a ring!" she exclaimed, on seeing what he held; "besides, I wouldn't have a soul know that it's an engagement! Perhaps it is improper? Besides, we are not engaged in the usual sense, are we? Don't insist, Mr. Boldwood — don't!" In her trouble at not being able to get her hand away from him at once, she stamped passionately on the floor with one foot, and tears crowded to her eyes again.

"It means simply a pledge — no sentiment — the seal of a practical compact," he said more quietly, but still retaining her hand in his firm grasp. "Come, now!" And Boldwood slipped the ring on her finger.

"I cannot wear it," she said, weeping as if her heart would break. "You frighten me, almost. So wild a scheme! Please let me go home!"

"Only to-night: wear it just to-night, to please me!"

Bathsheba sat down in a chair, and buried her face in her handkerchief, though Boldwood kept her hand yet. At length she said, in a sort of hopeless whisper —

"Very well, then, I will to-night, if you wish it so earnestly. Now loosen my hand; I will, indeed I will wear it to-night."

"And it shall be the beginning of a pleasant secret courtship of six years, with a wedding at the end?"

"It must be, I suppose, since you will have it so!" she said, fairly beaten into non-resistance.

Boldwood pressed her hand, and allowed it to drop in her lap. "I am happy now," he said. "God bless you!"

He left the room, and when he thought she might be sufficiently composed sent one of the maids to her. Bathsheba cloaked the effects of the late scene as she best could, followed the girl, and in a few moments came downstairs with her hat and cloak on, ready to go. To get to the door it was necessary to pass through the hall, and before doing so she paused on the bottom of the staircase which descended into one corner, to take a last look at the gathering.

There was no music or dancing in progress just now. At the lower end, which had been arranged for the work-folk specially, a group conversed in whispers, and with clouded looks. Boldwood was standing by the fireplace, and he, too, though so absorbed in visions arising from her promise that he scarcely saw anything, seemed at that moment to have observed their peculiar manner, and their looks askance.

"What is it you are in doubt about, men?" he said.

One of them turned and replied uneasily: "It was something Laban heard of, that's all, sir."

"News? Anybody married or engaged, born or dead?" inquired the farmer, gaily. "Tell it to us, Tall. One would think from your looks and mysterious ways that it was something very dreadful indeed."

"Oh no, sir, nobody is dead," said Tall.

"I wish somebody was," said Samway, in a whisper.

"What do you say, Samway?" asked Boldwood, somewhat sharply. "If you have anything to say, speak out; if not, get up another dance."

"Mrs. Troy has come downstairs," said Samway to Tall. "If you want to tell her, you had better do it now."

"Do you know what they mean?" the farmer asked Bathsheba, across the room.

"I don't in the least," said Bathsheba.

There was a smart rapping at the door. One of the men opened it instantly, and went outside.

"Mrs. Troy is wanted," he said, on returning.

"Quite ready," said Bathsheba. "Though I didn't tell them to send."

"It is a stranger, ma'am," said the man by the door.

"A stranger?" she said.

"Ask him to come in," said Boldwood.

The message was given, and Troy, wrapped up to his eyes as we have seen him, stood in the doorway.

There was an unearthly silence, all looking towards the newcomer. Those who had just learnt that he was in the neighbourhood recognized him instantly; those who did not were perplexed. Nobody noted Bathsheba. She was leaning on the stairs. Her brow had heavily contracted; her whole face was pallid, her lips apart, her eyes rigidly staring at their visitor.

Boldwood was among those who did not notice that he was Troy. "Come in, come in!" he repeated, cheerfully, "and drain a Christmas beaker with us, stranger!"

Troy next advanced into the middle of the room, took off his cap, turned down his coat-collar, and looked Boldwood in the face. Even then Boldwood did not recognize that the impersonator of Heaven's persistent irony towards him, who had once before broken in upon his bliss, scourged him, and snatched his delight away, had come to do these things a second time. Troy began to laugh a mechanical laugh: Boldwood recognized him now.

Troy turned to Bathsheba. The poor girl's wretchedness at this time was beyond all fancy or narration. She had sunk down on the lowest stair; and there she sat, her mouth blue and dry, and her dark eyes fixed vacantly upon him, as if she wondered whether it were not all a terrible illusion.

Then Troy spoke. "Bathsheba, I come here for you!"

She made no reply.

"Come home with me: come!"

Bathsheba moved her feet a little, but did not rise. Troy went across to her.

"Come, madam, do you hear what I say?" he said, peremptorily.

A strange voice came from the fireplace — a voice sounding far off and confined, as if from a dungeon. Hardly a soul in the assembly recognized the thin tones to be those of Boldwood. Sudden dispaire had transformed him.

"Bathsheba, go with your husband!"

Nevertheless, she did not move. The truth was that Bathsheba was beyond the pale of activity — and yet not in a swoon. She was in a state of mental gutta serena; her mind was for the minute totally deprived of light at the same time no obscuration was apparent from without.

Troy stretched out his hand to pull her towards him, when she quickly shrank back. This visible dread of him seemed to irritate Troy, and he seized her arm and

pulled it sharply. Whether his grasp pinched her, or whether his mere touch was the cause, was never known, but at the moment of his seizure she writhed, and gave a quick, low scream.

The scream had been heard but a few seconds when it was followed by sudden deafening report that echoed through the room and stupefied them all. The oak partition shook with the concussion, and the place was filled with grey smoke.

In bewilderment they turned their eyes to Boldwood. At his back, as stood before the fireplace, was a gun-rack, as is usual in farmhouses, constructed to hold two guns. When Bathsheba had cried out in her husband's grasp, Boldwood's face of gnashing despair had changed. The veins had swollen, and a frenzied look had gleamed in his eye. He had turned quickly, taken one of the guns, cocked it, and at once discharged it at Troy.

Troy fell. The distance apart of the two men was so small that the charge of shot did not spread in the least, but passed like a bullet into his body. He uttered a long guttural sigh — there was a contraction — an extension — then his muscles relaxed, and he lay still.

Boldwood was seen through the smoke to be now again engaged with the gun. It was double-barrelled, and he had, meanwhile, in some way fastened his hand-kerchief to the trigger, and with his foot on the other end was in the act of turning the second barrel upon himself. Samway his man was the first to see this, and in the midst of the general horror darted up to him. Boldwood had already twitched the handkerchief, and the gun exploded a second time, sending its contents, by a timely blow from Samway, into the beam which crossed the ceiling.

"Well, it makes no difference!" Boldwood gasped. "There is another way for me to die."

Then he broke from Samway, crossed the room to Bathsheba, and kissed her hand. He put on his hat, opened the door, and went into the darkness, nobody thinking of preventing him.

CHAPTER LIV

AFTER THE SHOCK

Boldwood passed into the high road and turned in the direction of Casterbridge. Here he walked at an even, steady pace over Yalbury Hill, along the dead level beyond, mounted Mellstock Hill, and between eleven and twelve o'clock crossed the Moor into the town. The streets were nearly deserted now, and the waving lamp-flames only lighted up rows of grey shop-shutters, and strips of white paving upon which his step echoed as he passed along. He turned to the right, and halted before an archway of heavy stonework, which was closed by an iron studded pair of doors. This was the entrance to the gaol, and over it a lamp was fixed, the light enabling the wretched traveller to find a bell-pull.

The small wicket at last opened, and a porter appeared. Boldwood stepped forward, and said something in a low tone, when, after a delay, another man came. Boldwood entered, and the door was closed behind him, and he walked the world no more.

Long before this time Weatherbury had been thoroughly aroused, and the wild deed which had terminated Boldwood's merrymaking became known to all. Of those out of the house Oak was one of the first to hear of the catastrophe, and when he entered the room, which was about five minutes after Boldwood's exit, the scene was terrible. All the female guests were huddled aghast against the walls like sheep in a storm, and the men were bewildered as to what to do. As for Bathsheba, she had changed. She was sitting on the floor beside the body of Troy, his head pillowed in her lap, where she had herself lifted it. With one hand she held her handkerchief to his breast and covered the wound, though scarcely a single drop of blood had flowed, and with the other she tightly clasped one of his. The household convulsion had made her herself again. The temporary coma had ceased, and activity had come with the necessity for it. Deeds of endurance, which seem ordinary in philosophy, are rare in conduct, and Bathsheba was astonishing all around her now, for her philosophy was her conduct, and she seldom thought practicable what she did not practise. She was of the stuff of which great men's mothers are made. She was indispensable to high generation, hated at tea parties, feared in shops, and loved at crises. Troy recumbent in his wife's lap formed now the sole spectacle in the middle of the spacious room.

"Gabriel," she said, automatically, when he entered, turning up a face of which only the well-known lines remained to tell him it was hers, all else in the picture having faded quite. "Ride to Casterbridge instantly for a surgeon. It is, I believe, useless, but go. Mr. Boldwood has shot my husband."

Her statement of the fact in such quiet and simple words came with more force than a tragic declamation, and had somewhat the effect of setting the distorted images in each mind present into proper focus. Oak, almost before he had comprehended anything beyond the briefest abstract of the event, hurried out of the room, saddled a horse and rode away. Not till he had ridden more than a mile did it occur to him that he would have done better by sending some other man on this errand, remaining himself in the house. What had become of Boldwood? He should have been looked after. Was he mad — had there been a quarrel? Then how had Troy got there? Where had he come from? How did this remarkable reappearance effect itself when he was supposed by many to be at the bottom of the sea? Oak had in some slight measure been prepared for the presence of Troy by hearing a rumour of his return just before entering Boldwood's house; but before he had weighed that information, this fatal event had been superimposed. However, it was too late now to think of sending another messenger, and he rode on, in the excitement of these self-inquiries not discerning, when about three miles from Casterbridge, a square-figured pedestrian passing along under the dark hedge in the same direction as his own.

The miles necessary to be traversed, and other hindrances incidental to the lateness of the hour and the darkness of the night, delayed the arrival of Mr. Aldritch, the

surgeon; and more than three hours passed between the time at which the shot was fired and that of his entering the house. Oak was additionally detained in Casterbridge through having to give notice to the authorities of what had happened; and he then found that Boldwood had also entered the town, and delivered himself up.

In the meantime the surgeon, having hastened into the hall at Boldwood's, found it in darkness and quite deserted. He went on to the back of the house, where he discovered in the kitchen an old man, of whom he made inquiries.

"She's had him took away to her own house, sir," said his informant.

"Who has?" said the doctor.

"Mrs. Troy. 'A was quite dead, sir."

This was astonishing information. "She had no right to do that," said the doctor. "There will have to be an inquest, and she should have waited to know what to do."

"Yes, sir; it was hinted to her that she had better wait till the law was known. But she said law was nothing to her, and she wouldn't let her dear husband's corpse bide neglected for folks to stare at for all the crownors in England."

Mr. Aldritch drove at once back again up the hill to Bathsheba's. The first person he met was poor Liddy, who seemed literally to have dwindled smaller in these few latter hours. "What has been done?" he said.

"I don't know, sir," said Liddy, with suspended breath. "My mistress has done it all."

"Where is she?"

"Upstairs with him, sir. When he was brought home and taken upstairs, she said she wanted no further help from the men. And then she called me, and made me fill the bath, and after that told me I had better go and lie down because I looked so ill. Then she locked herself into the room alone with him, and would not let a nurse come in, or anybody at all. But I thought I'd wait in the next room in case she should want me. I heard her moving about inside for more than an hour, but she only came out once, and that was for more candles, because hers had burnt down into the socket. She said we were to let her know when you or Mr. Thirdly came, sir."

Oak entered with the parson at this moment, and they all went upstairs together, preceded by Liddy Smallbury. Everything was silent as the grave when they paused on the landing. Liddy knocked, and Bathsheba's dress was heard rustling across the room: the key turned in the lock, and she opened the door. Her looks were calm and nearly rigid, like a slightly animated bust of Melpomene.

"Oh, Mr. Aldritch, you have come at last," she murmured from her lips merely, and threw back the door. "Ah, and Mr. Thirdly. Well, all is done, and anybody in the world may see him now." She then passed by him, crossed the landing, and entered another room.

Looking into the chamber of death she had vacated they saw by the light of the candles which were on the drawers a tall straight shape lying at the further end of the bedroom, wrapped in white. Everything around was quite orderly. The doctor went in,

and after a few minutes returned to the landing again, where Oak and the parson still waited.

"It is all done, indeed, as she says," remarked Mr. Aldritch, in a subdued voice. "The body has been undressed and properly laid out in grave clothes. Gracious Heaven — this mere girl! She must have the nerve of a stoic!"

"The heart of a wife merely," floated in a whisper about the ears of the three, and turning they saw Bathsheba in the midst of them. Then, as if at that instant to prove that her fortitude had been more of will than of spontaneity, she silently sank down between them and was a shapeless heap of drapery on the floor. The simple consciousness that superhuman strain was no longer required had at once put a period to her power to continue it.

They took her away into a further room, and the medical attendance which had been useless in Troy's case was invaluable in Bathsheba's, who fell into a series of fainting-fits that had a serious aspect for a time. The sufferer was got to bed, and Oak, finding from the bulletins that nothing really dreadful was to be apprehended on her score, left the house. Liddy kept watch in Bathsheba's chamber, where she heard her mistress, moaning in whispers through the dull slow hours of that wretched night: "Oh it is my fault — how can I live! O Heaven, how can I live!"

CHAPTER LV

THE MARCH FOLLOWING — "BATHSHEBA BOLDWOOD"

We pass rapidly on into the month of March, to a breezy day without sunshine, frost, or dew. On Yalbury Hill, about midway between Weatherbury and Casterbridge, where the turnpike road passes over the crest, a numerous concourse of people had gathered, the eyes of the greater number being frequently stretched afar in a northerly direction. The groups consisted of a throng of idlers, a party of javelin-men, and two trumpeters, and in the midst were carriages, one of which contained the high sheriff. With the idlers, many of whom had mounted to the top of a cutting formed for the road, were several Weatherbury men and boys — among others Poorgrass, Coggan, and Cain Ball.

At the end of half-an-hour a faint dust was seen in the expected quarter, and shortly after a travelling-carriage, bringing one of the two judges on the Western Circuit, came up the hill and halted on the top. The judge changed carriages whilst a flourish was blown by the big-cheeked trumpeters, and a procession being formed of the vehicles and javelin-men, they all proceeded towards the town, excepting the Weatherbury men, who as soon as they had seen the judge move off returned home again to their work.

"Joseph, I seed you squeezing close to the carriage," said Coggan, as they walked. "Did ye notice my lord judge's face?"

"I did," said Poorgrass. "I looked hard at en, as if I would read his very soul; and there was mercy in his eyes — or to speak with the exact truth required of us at this solemn time, in the eye that was towards me."

"Well, I hope for the best," said Coggan, "though bad that must be. However, I shan't go to the trial, and I'd advise the rest of ye that bain't wanted to bide away. 'Twill disturb his mind more than anything to see us there staring at him as if he were a show."

"The very thing I said this morning," observed Joseph, "'Justice is come to weigh him in the balances,' I said in my reflectious way, 'and if he's found wanting, so be it unto him,' and a bystander said 'Hear, hear! A man who can talk like that ought to be heard.' But I don't like dwelling upon it, for my few words are my few words, and not much; though the speech of some men is rumoured abroad as though by nature formed for such."

"So 'tis, Joseph. And now, neighbours, as I said, every man bide at home."

The resolution was adhered to; and all waited anxiously for the news next day. Their suspense was diverted, however, by a discovery which was made in the afternoon, throwing more light on Boldwood's conduct and condition than any details which had preceded it.

That he had been from the time of Greenhill Fair until the fatal Christmas Eve in excited and unusual moods was known to those who had been intimate with him; but nobody imagined that there had shown in him unequivocal symptoms of the mental derangement which Bathsheba and Oak, alone of all others and at different times, had momentarily suspected. In a locked closet was now discovered an extraordinary collection of articles. There were several sets of ladies' dresses in the piece, of sundry expensive materials; silks and satins, poplins and velvets, all of colours which from Bathsheba's style of dress might have been judged to be her favourites. There were two muffs, sable and ermine. Above all there was a case of jewellery, containing four heavy gold bracelets and several locketts and rings, all of fine quality and manufacture. These things had been bought in Bath and other towns from time to time, and brought home by stealth. They were all carefully packed in paper, and each package was labelled "Bathsheba Boldwood," a date being subjoined six years in advance in every instance.

These somewhat pathetic evidences of a mind crazed with care and love were the subject of discourse in Warren's malt-house when Oak entered from Casterbridge with tidings of sentence. He came in the afternoon, and his face, as the kiln glow shone upon it, told the tale sufficiently well. Boldwood, as every one supposed he would do, had pleaded guilty, and had been sentenced to death.

The conviction that Boldwood had not been morally responsible for his later acts now became general. Facts elicited previous to the trial had pointed strongly in the same direction, but they had not been of sufficient weight to lead to an order for an examination into the state of Boldwood's mind. It was astonishing, now that a presumption of insanity was raised, how many collateral circumstances were remembered

to which a condition of mental disease seemed to afford the only explanation — among others, the unprecedented neglect of his corn stacks in the previous summer.

A petition was addressed to the Home Secretary, advancing the circumstances which appeared to justify a request for a reconsideration of the sentence. It was not “numerously signed” by the inhabitants of Casterbridge, as is usual in such cases, for Boldwood had never made many friends over the counter. The shops thought it very natural that a man who, by importing direct from the producer, had daringly set aside the first great principle of provincial existence, namely that God made country villages to supply customers to county towns, should have confused ideas about the Decalogue. The prompters were a few merciful men who had perhaps too feelingly considered the facts latterly unearthed, and the result was that evidence was taken which it was hoped might remove the crime in a moral point of view, out of the category of wilful murder, and lead it to be regarded as a sheer outcome of madness.

The upshot of the petition was waited for in Weatherbury with solicitous interest. The execution had been fixed for eight o’clock on a Saturday morning about a fortnight after the sentence was passed, and up to Friday afternoon no answer had been received. At that time Gabriel came from Casterbridge Gaol, whither he had been to wish Boldwood good-bye, and turned down a by-street to avoid the town. When past the last house he heard a hammering, and lifting his bowed head he looked back for a moment. Over the chimneys he could see the upper part of the gaol entrance, rich and glowing in the afternoon sun, and some moving figures were there. They were carpenters lifting a post into a vertical position within the parapet. He withdrew his eyes quickly, and hastened on.

It was dark when he reached home, and half the village was out to meet him.

“No tidings,” Gabriel said, wearily. “And I’m afraid there’s no hope. I’ve been with him more than two hours.”

“Do ye think he really was out of his mind when he did it?” said Smallbury.

“I can’t honestly say that I do,” Oak replied. “However, that we can talk of another time. Has there been any change in mistress this afternoon?”

“None at all.”

“Is she downstairs?”

“No. And getting on so nicely as she was too. She’s but very little better now again than she was at Christmas. She keeps on asking if you be come, and if there’s news, till one’s wearied out wi’ answering her. Shall I go and say you’ve come?”

“No,” said Oak. “There’s a chance yet; but I couldn’t stay in town any longer — after seeing him too. So Laban — Laban is here, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Tall.

“What I’ve arranged is, that you shall ride to town the last thing to-night; leave here about nine, and wait a while there, getting home about twelve. If nothing has been received by eleven to-night, they say there’s no chance at all.”

“I do so hope his life will be spared,” said Liddy. “If it is not, she’ll go out of her mind too. Poor thing; her sufferings have been dreadful; she deserves anybody’s pity.”

"Is she altered much?" said Coggan.

"If you haven't seen poor mistress since Christmas, you wouldn't know her," said Liddy. "Her eyes are so miserable that she's not the same woman. Only two years ago she was a romping girl, and now she's this!"

Laban departed as directed, and at eleven o'clock that night several of the villagers strolled along the road to Casterbridge and awaited his arrival — among them Oak, and nearly all the rest of Bathsheba's men. Gabriel's anxiety was great that Boldwood might be saved, even though in his conscience he felt that he ought to die; for there had been qualities in the farmer which Oak loved. At last, when they all were weary the tramp of a horse was heard in the distance —

First dead, as if on turf it trode,
Then, clattering on the village road
In other pace than forth he yode.

"We shall soon know now, one way or other," said Coggan, and they all stepped down from the bank on which they had been standing into the road, and the rider pranced into the midst of them.

"Is that you, Laban?" said Gabriel.

"Yes — 'tis come. He's not to die. 'Tis confinement during Her Majesty's pleasure."

"Hurrah!" said Coggan, with a swelling heart. "God's above the devil yet!"

CHAPTER LVI

BEAUTY IN LONELINESS — AFTER ALL

Bathsheba revived with the spring. The utter prostration that had followed the low fever from which she had suffered diminished perceptibly when all uncertainty upon every subject had come to an end.

But she remained alone now for the greater part of her time, and stayed in the house, or at furthest went into the garden. She shunned every one, even Liddy, and could be brought to make no confidences, and to ask for no sympathy.

As the summer drew on she passed more of her time in the open air, and began to examine into farming matters from sheer necessity, though she never rode out or personally superintended as at former times. One Friday evening in August she walked a little way along the road and entered the village for the first time since the sombre event of the preceding Christmas. None of the old colour had as yet come to her cheek, and its absolute paleness was heightened by the jet black of her gown, till it appeared preternatural. When she reached a little shop at the other end of the place, which stood nearly opposite to the churchyard, Bathsheba heard singing inside the church, and she knew that the singers were practising. She crossed the road, opened the gate, and entered the graveyard, the high sills of the church windows effectually screening her from the eyes of those gathered within. Her stealthy walk was to the nook wherein

Troy had worked at planting flowers upon Fanny Robin's grave, and she came to the marble tombstone.

A motion of satisfaction enlivened her face as she read the complete inscription. First came the words of Troy himself: —

Erected by Francis Troy

In Beloved Memory of

Fanny Robin

Who died October 9, 18 — ,

Aged 20 years

Underneath this was now inscribed in new letters: —

In the Same Grave lie

The Remains of the aforesaid

Francis Troy,

Who died December 24th, 18 — ,

Aged 26 years

Whilst she stood and read and meditated the tones of the organ began again in the church, and she went with the same light step round to the porch and listened. The door was closed, and the choir was learning a new hymn. Bathsheba was stirred by emotions which latterly she had assumed to be altogether dead within her. The little attenuated voices of the children brought to her ear in distinct utterance the words they sang without thought or comprehension —

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,

Lead Thou me on.

Bathsheba's feeling was always to some extent dependent upon her whim, as is the case with many other women. Something big came into her throat and an uprising to her eyes — and she thought that she would allow the imminent tears to flow if they wished. They did flow and plenteously, and one fell upon the stone bench beside her. Once that she had begun to cry for she hardly knew what, she could not leave off for crowding thoughts she knew too well. She would have given anything in the world to be, as those children were, unconcerned at the meaning of their words, because too innocent to feel the necessity for any such expression. All the impassioned scenes of her brief experience seemed to revive with added emotion at that moment, and those scenes which had been without emotion during enactment had emotion then. Yet grief came to her rather as a luxury than as the scourge of former times.

Owing to Bathsheba's face being buried in her hands she did not notice a form which came quietly into the porch, and on seeing her, first moved as if to retreat, then paused and regarded her. Bathsheba did not raise her head for some time, and when she looked round her face was wet, and her eyes drowned and dim. "Mr. Oak," exclaimed she, disconcerted, "how long have you been here?"

"A few minutes, ma'am," said Oak, respectfully.

"Are you going in?" said Bathsheba; and there came from within the church as from a prompter —

I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

"I was," said Gabriel. "I am one of the bass singers, you know. I have sung bass for several months."

"Indeed: I wasn't aware of that. I'll leave you, then."

Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile,
sang the children.

"Don't let me drive you away, mistress. I think I won't go in to-night."

"Oh no — you don't drive me away."

Then they stood in a state of some embarrassment, Bathsheba trying to wipe her dreadfully drenched and inflamed face without his noticing her. At length Oak said, "I've not seen you — I mean spoken to you — since ever so long, have I?" But he feared to bring distressing memories back, and interrupted himself with: "Were you going into church?"

"No," she said. "I came to see the tombstone privately — to see if they had cut the inscription as I wished. Mr. Oak, you needn't mind speaking to me, if you wish to, on the matter which is in both our minds at this moment."

"And have they done it as you wished?" said Oak.

"Yes. Come and see it, if you have not already."

So together they went and read the tomb. "Eight months ago!" Gabriel murmured when he saw the date. "It seems like yesterday to me."

"And to me as if it were years ago — long years, and I had been dead between. And now I am going home, Mr. Oak."

Oak walked after her. "I wanted to name a small matter to you as soon as I could," he said, with hesitation. "Merely about business, and I think I may just mention it now, if you'll allow me."

"Oh yes, certainly."

It is that I may soon have to give up the management of your farm, Mrs. Troy. The fact is, I am thinking of leaving England — not yet, you know — next spring."

"Leaving England!" she said, in surprise and genuine disappointment. "Why, Gabriel, what are you going to do that for?"

"Well, I've thought it best," Oak stammered out. "California is the spot I've had in my mind to try."

"But it is understood everywhere that you are going to take poor Mr. Boldwood's farm on your own account."

"I've had the refusal o' it 'tis true; but nothing is settled yet, and I have reasons for giving up. I shall finish out my year there as manager for the trustees, but no more."

"And what shall I do without you? Oh, Gabriel, I don't think you ought to go away. You've been with me so long — through bright times and dark times — such old friends as we are — that it seems unkind almost. I had fancied that if you leased the other farm as master, you might still give a helping look across at mine. And now going away!"

"I would have willingly."

"Yet now that I am more helpless than ever you go away!"

"Yes, that's the ill fortune o' it," said Gabriel, in a distressed tone. "And it is because of that very helplessness that I feel bound to go. Good afternoon, ma'am" he concluded, in evident anxiety to get away, and at once went out of the churchyard by a path she could follow on no pretence whatever.

Bathsheba went home, her mind occupied with a new trouble, which being rather harassing than deadly was calculated to do good by diverting her from the chronic gloom of her life. She was set thinking a great deal about Oak and of his wish to shun her; and there occurred to Bathsheba several incidents of her latter intercourse with him, which, trivial when singly viewed, amounted together to a perceptible disinclination for her society. It broke upon her at length as a great pain that her last old disciple was about to forsake her and flee. He who had believed in her and argued on her side when all the rest of the world was against her, had at last like the others become weary and neglectful of the old cause, and was leaving her to fight her battles alone.

Three weeks went on, and more evidence of his want of interest in her was forthcoming. She noticed that instead of entering the small parlour or office where the farm accounts were kept, and waiting, or leaving a memorandum as he had hitherto done during her seclusion, Oak never came at all when she was likely to be there, only entering at unseasonable hours when her presence in that part of the house was least to be expected. Whenever he wanted directions he sent a message, or note with neither heading nor signature, to which she was obliged to reply in the same offhand style. Poor Bathsheba began to suffer now from the most torturing sting of all — a sensation that she was despised.

The autumn wore away gloomily enough amid these melancholy conjectures, and Christmas-day came, completing a year of her legal widowhood, and two years and a quarter of her life alone. On examining her heart it appeared beyond measure strange that the subject of which the season might have been supposed suggestive — the event in the hall at Boldwood's — was not agitating her at all; but instead, an agonizing conviction that everybody abjured her — for what she could not tell — and that Oak was the ringleader of the recusants. Coming out of church that day she looked round in hope that Oak, whose bass voice she had heard rolling out from the gallery overhead in a most unconcerned manner, might chance to linger in her path in the old way. There he was, as usual, coming down the path behind her. But on seeing Bathsheba turn, he looked aside, and as soon as he got beyond the gate, and there was the barest excuse for a divergence, he made one, and vanished.

The next morning brought the culminating stroke; she had been expecting it long. It was a formal notice by letter from him that he should not renew his engagement with her for the following Lady-day.

Bathsheba actually sat and cried over this letter most bitterly. She was aggrieved and wounded that the possession of hopeless love from Gabriel, which she had grown

to regard as her inalienable right for life, should have been withdrawn just at his own pleasure in this way. She was bewildered too by the prospect of having to rely on her own resources again: it seemed to herself that she never could again acquire energy sufficient to go to market, barter, and sell. Since Troy's death Oak had attended all sales and fairs for her, transacting her business at the same time with his own. What should she do now? Her life was becoming a desolation.

So desolate was Bathsheba this evening, that in an absolute hunger for pity and sympathy, and miserable in that she appeared to have outlived the only true friendship she had ever owned, she put on her bonnet and cloak and went down to Oak's house just after sunset, guided on her way by the pale primrose rays of a crescent moon a few days old.

A lively firelight shone from the window, but nobody was visible in the room. She tapped nervously, and then thought it doubtful if it were right for a single woman to call upon a bachelor who lived alone, although he was her manager, and she might be supposed to call on business without any real impropriety. Gabriel opened the door, and the moon shone upon his forehead.

"Mr. Oak," said Bathsheba, faintly.

"Yes; I am Mr. Oak," said Gabriel. "Who have I the honour — O how stupid of me, not to know you, mistress!"

"I shall not be your mistress much longer, shall I Gabriel?" she said, in pathetic tones.

"Well, no. I suppose — But come in, ma'am. Oh — and I'll get a light," Oak replied, with some awkwardness.

"No; not on my account."

"It is so seldom that I get a lady visitor that I'm afraid I haven't proper accommodation. Will you sit down, please? Here's a chair, and there's one, too. I am sorry that my chairs all have wood seats, and are rather hard, but I — was thinking of getting some new ones." Oak placed two or three for her.

"They are quite easy enough for me."

So down she sat, and down sat he, the fire dancing in their faces, and upon the old furniture,

all a-sheenen

Wi' long years o' handlen,

that formed Oak's array of household possessions, which sent back a dancing reflection in reply. It was very odd to these two persons, who knew each other passing well, that the mere circumstance of their meeting in a new place and in a new way should make them so awkward and constrained. In the fields, or at her house, there had never been any embarrassment; but now that Oak had become the entertainer their lives seemed to be moved back again to the days when they were strangers.

"You'll think it strange that I have come, but — "

"Oh no; not at all."

"But I thought — Gabriel, I have been uneasy in the belief that I have offended you, and that you are going away on that account. It grieved me very much and I couldn't help coming."

"Offended me! As if you could do that, Bathsheba!"

"Haven't I?" she asked, gladly. "But, what are you going away for else?"

"I am not going to emigrate, you know; I wasn't aware that you would wish me not to when I told 'ee or I shouldn't ha' thought of doing it," he said, simply. "I have arranged for Little Weatherbury Farm and shall have it in my own hands at Lady-day. You know I've had a share in it for some time. Still, that wouldn't prevent my attending to your business as before, hadn't it been that things have been said about us."

"What?" said Bathsheba, in surprise. "Things said about you and me! What are they?"

"I cannot tell you."

"It would be wiser if you were to, I think. You have played the part of mentor to me many times, and I don't see why you should fear to do it now."

"It is nothing that you have done, this time. The top and tail o't is this — that I am sniffing about here, and waiting for poor Boldwood's farm, with a thought of getting you some day."

"Getting me! What does that mean?"

"Marrying of 'ee, in plain British. You asked me to tell, so you mustn't blame me."

Bathsheba did not look quite so alarmed as if a cannon had been discharged by her ear, which was what Oak had expected. "Marrying me! I didn't know it was that you meant," she said, quietly. "Such a thing as that is too absurd — too soon — to think of, by far!"

"Yes; of course, it is too absurd. I don't desire any such thing; I should think that was plain enough by this time. Surely, surely you be the last person in the world I think of marrying. It is too absurd, as you say."

"'Too — s-s-soon' were the words I used."

"I must beg your pardon for correcting you, but you said, 'too absurd,' and so do I."

"I beg your pardon too!" she returned, with tears in her eyes. "'Too soon' was what I said. But it doesn't matter a bit — not at all — but I only meant, 'too soon.' Indeed, I didn't, Mr. Oak, and you must believe me!"

Gabriel looked her long in the face, but the firelight being faint there was not much to be seen. "Bathsheba," he said, tenderly and in surprise, and coming closer: "if I only knew one thing — whether you would allow me to love you and win you, and marry you after all — if I only knew that!"

"But you never will know," she murmured.

"Why?"

"Because you never ask."

"Oh — Oh!" said Gabriel, with a low laugh of joyousness. "My own dear — "

"You ought not to have sent me that harsh letter this morning," she interrupted. "It shows you didn't care a bit about me, and were ready to desert me like all the rest of them! It was very cruel of you, considering I was the first sweetheart that you ever had, and you were the first I ever had; and I shall not forget it!"

"Now, Bathsheba, was ever anybody so provoking," he said, laughing. "You know it was purely that I, as an unmarried man, carrying on a business for you as a very taking young woman, had a proper hard part to play — more particular that people knew I had a sort of feeling for 'ee; and I fancied, from the way we were mentioned together, that it might injure your good name. Nobody knows the heat and fret I have been caused by it."

"And was that all?"

"All."

"Oh, how glad I am I came!" she exclaimed, thankfully, as she rose from her seat. "I have thought so much more of you since I fancied you did not want even to see me again. But I must be going now, or I shall be missed. Why Gabriel," she said, with a slight laugh, as they went to the door, "it seems exactly as if I had come courting you — how dreadful!"

"And quite right too," said Oak. "I've danced at your skittish heels, my beautiful Bathsheba, for many a long mile, and many a long day; and it is hard to begrudge me this one visit."

He accompanied her up the hill, explaining to her the details of his forthcoming tenure of the other farm. They spoke very little of their mutual feeling; pretty phrases and warm expressions being probably unnecessary between such tried friends. Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship — camaraderie — usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where, however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death — that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam.

CHAPTER LVII

A FOGGY NIGHT AND MORNING — CONCLUSION

"The most private, secret, plainest wedding that it is possible to have."

Those had been Bathsheba's words to Oak one evening, some time after the event of the preceding chapter, and he meditated a full hour by the clock upon how to carry out her wishes to the letter.

"A license — O yes, it must be a license," he said to himself at last. "Very well, then; first, a license."

On a dark night, a few days later, Oak came with mysterious steps from the surrogate's door, in Casterbridge. On the way home he heard a heavy tread in front of him, and, overtaking the man, found him to be Coggan. They walked together into the village until they came to a little lane behind the church, leading down to the cottage of Laban Tall, who had lately been installed as clerk of the parish, and was yet in mortal terror at church on Sundays when he heard his lone voice among certain hard words of the Psalms, whither no man ventured to follow him.

"Well, good-night, Coggan," said Oak, "I'm going down this way."

"Oh!" said Coggan, surprised; "what's going on to-night then, make so bold Mr. Oak?"

It seemed rather ungenerous not to tell Coggan, under the circumstances, for Coggan had been true as steel all through the time of Gabriel's unhappiness about Bathsheba, and Gabriel said, "You can keep a secret, Coggan?"

"You've proved me, and you know."

"Yes, I have, and I do know. Well, then, mistress and I mean to get married to-morrow morning."

"Heaven's high tower! And yet I've thought of such a thing from time to time; true, I have. But keeping it so close! Well, there, 'tis no consarn of of mine, and I wish 'ee joy o' her."

"Thank you, Coggan. But I assure 'ee that this great hush is not what I wished for at all, or what either of us would have wished if it hadn't been for certain things that would make a gay wedding seem hardly the thing. Bathsheba has a great wish that all the parish shall not be in church, looking at her — she's shy-like and nervous about it, in fact — so I be doing this to humour her."

"Ay, I see: quite right, too, I suppose I must say. And you be now going down to the clerk."

"Yes; you may as well come with me."

"I am afeard your labour in keeping it close will be throwed away," said Coggan, as they walked along. "Labe Tall's old woman will horn it all over parish in half-an-hour."

"So she will, upon my life; I never thought of that," said Oak, pausing. "Yet I must tell him to-night, I suppose, for he's working so far off, and leaves early."

"I'll tell 'ee how we could tackle her," said Coggan. "I'll knock and ask to speak to Laban outside the door, you standing in the background. Then he'll come out, and you can tell yer tale. She'll never guess what I want en for; and I'll make up a few words about the farm-work, as a blind."

This scheme was considered feasible; and Coggan advanced boldly, and rapped at Mrs. Tall's door. Mrs. Tall herself opened it.

"I wanted to have a word with Laban."

"He's not at home, and won't be this side of eleven o'clock. He've been forced to go over to Yalbury since shutting out work. I shall do quite as well."

"I hardly think you will. Stop a moment;" and Coggan stepped round the corner of the porch to consult Oak.

"Who's t'other man, then?" said Mrs. Tall.

"Only a friend," said Coggan.

"Say he's wanted to meet mistress near church-hatch to-morrow morning at ten," said Oak, in a whisper. "That he must come without fail, and wear his best clothes."

"The clothes will floor us as safe as houses!" said Coggan.

"It can't be helped," said Oak. "Tell her."

So Coggan delivered the message. "Mind, het or wet, blow or snow, he must come," added Jan. "'Tis very particular, indeed. The fact is, 'tis to witness her sign some law-work about taking shares wi' another farmer for a long span o' years. There, that's what 'tis, and now I've told 'ee, Mother Tall, in a way I shouldn't ha' done if I hadn't loved 'ee so hopeless well."

Coggan retired before she could ask any further; and next they called at the vicar's in a manner which excited no curiosity at all. Then Gabriel went home, and prepared for the morrow.

"Liddy," said Bathsheba, on going to bed that night, "I want you to call me at seven o'clock to-morrow, in case I shouldn't wake."

"But you always do wake afore then, ma'am."

"Yes, but I have something important to do, which I'll tell you of when the time comes, and it's best to make sure."

Bathsheba, however, awoke voluntarily at four, nor could she by any contrivance get to sleep again. About six, being quite positive that her watch had stopped during the night, she could wait no longer. She went and tapped at Liddy's door, and after some labour awoke her.

"But I thought it was I who had to call you?" said the bewildered Liddy. "And it isn't six yet."

"Indeed it is; how can you tell such a story, Liddy? I know it must be ever so much past seven. Come to my room as soon as you can; I want you to give my hair a good brushing."

When Liddy came to Bathsheba's room her mistress was already waiting. Liddy could not understand this extraordinary promptness. "Whatever is going on, ma'am?" she said.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Bathsheba, with a mischievous smile in her bright eyes. "Farmer Oak is coming here to dine with me to-day!"

"Farmer Oak — and nobody else? — you two alone?"

"Yes."

"But is it safe, ma'am, after what's been said?" asked her companion, dubiously. "A woman's good name is such a perishable article that —"

Bathsheba laughed with a flushed cheek, and whispered in Liddy's ear, although there was nobody present. Then Liddy stared and exclaimed, "Souls alive, what news! It makes my heart go quite bumpity-bump!"

"It makes mine rather furious, too," said Bathsheba. "However, there's no getting out of it now!"

It was a damp disagreeable morning. Nevertheless, at twenty minutes to ten o'clock, Oak came out of his house, and

Went up the hill side

With that sort of stride

A man puts out when walking in search of a bride,

and knocked Bathsheba's door. Ten minutes later a large and a smaller umbrella might have been seen moving from the same door, and through the mist along the road to the church. The distance was not more than a quarter of a mile, and these two sensible persons deemed it unnecessary to drive. An observer must have been very close indeed to discover that the forms under the umbrellas were those of Oak and Bathsheba, arm-in-arm for the first time in their lives, Oak in a greatcoat extending to his knees, and Bathsheba in a cloak that reached her clogs. Yet, though so plainly dressed, there was a certain rejuvenated appearance about her: —

As though a rose should shut and be a bud again.

Repose had again incarnadined her cheeks; and having, at Gabriel's request, arranged her hair this morning as she had worn it years ago on Norcombe Hill, she seemed in his eyes remarkably like a girl of that fascinating dream, which, considering that she was now only three or four-and-twenty, was perhaps not very wonderful. In the church were Tall, Liddy, and the parson, and in a remarkably short space of time the deed was done.

The two sat down very quietly to tea in Bathsheba's parlour in the evening of the same day, for it had been arranged that Farmer Oak should go there to live, since he had as yet neither money, house, nor furniture worthy of the name, though he was on a sure way towards them, whilst Bathsheba was, comparatively, in a plethora of all three.

Just as Bathsheba was pouring out a cup of tea, their ears were greeted by the firing of a cannon, followed by what seemed like a tremendous blowing of trumpets, in the front of the house.

"There!" said Oak, laughing, "I knew those fellows were up to something, by the look on their faces"

Oak took up the light and went into the porch, followed by Bathsheba with a shawl over her head. The rays fell upon a group of male figures gathered upon the gravel in front, who, when they saw the newly-married couple in the porch, set up a loud "Hurrah!" and at the same moment bang again went the cannon in the background, followed by a hideous clang of music from a drum, tambourine, clarionet, serpent, hautboy, tenor-viol, and double-bass — the only remaining relics of the true and original Weatherbury band — venerable worm-eaten instruments, which had celebrated in their own persons the victories of Marlborough, under the fingers of the forefathers of those who played them now. The performers came forward, and marched up to the front.

"Those bright boys, Mark Clark and Jan, are at the bottom of all this," said Oak. "Come in, souls, and have something to eat and drink wi' me and my wife."

"Not to-night," said Mr. Clark, with evident self-denial. "Thank ye all the same; but we'll call at a more seemly time. However, we couldn't think of letting the day pass without a note of admiration of some sort. If ye could send a drop of som'at down to Warren's, why so it is. Here's long life and happiness to neighbour Oak and his comely bride!"

"Thank ye; thank ye all," said Gabriel. "A bit and a drop shall be sent to Warren's for ye at once. I had a thought that we might very likely get a salute of some sort from our old friends, and I was saying so to my wife but now."

"Faith," said Coggan, in a critical tone, turning to his companions, "the man hev learnt to say 'my wife' in a wonderful naterel way, considering how very youthful he is in wedlock as yet — hey, neighbours all?"

"I never heerd a skilful old married feller of twenty years' standing pipe 'my wife' in a more used note than 'a did,'" said Jacob Smallbury. "It might have been a little more true to nater if't had been spoke a little chillier, but that wasn't to be expected just now."

"That improvement will come wi' time," said Jan, twirling his eye.

Then Oak laughed, and Bathsheba smiled (for she never laughed readily now), and their friends turned to go.

"Yes; I suppose that's the size o't," said Joseph Poorgrass with a cheerful sigh as they moved away; "and I wish him joy o' her; though I were once or twice upon saying to-day with holy Hosea, in my scripture manner, which is my second nature, 'Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.' But since 'tis as 'tis, why, it might have been worse, and I feel my thanks accordingly."

THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA

This novel was published in 1876, in serial form, for the Cornhill Magazine, which was edited by Leslie Stephen, Hardy's friend and mentor. The novel concerns Ethelberta, who was raised in humble circumstances. However, through her work as a governess, she married well at the age of eighteen. The events of the story concern her career as a famous poetess and storyteller as she struggles to support her family and conceal a 'dark' secret.

[image not archived]

Reginald Eves' famous portrait of Hardy, 1923

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“Vitae post-scenia celant.” — Lucretius.

PREFACE

This somewhat frivolous narrative was produced as an interlude between stories of a more sober design, and it was given the sub-title of a comedy to indicate — though not quite accurately — the aim of the performance. A high degree of probability was not attempted in the arrangement of the incidents, and there was expected of the reader a certain lightness of mood, which should inform him with a good-natured willingness to accept the production in the spirit in which it was offered. The characters themselves, however, were meant to be consistent and human.

On its first appearance the novel suffered, perhaps deservedly, for what was involved in these intentions — for its quality of unexpectedness in particular — that unforgivable sin in the critic’s sight — the immediate precursor of ‘Ethelberta’ having been a purely rural tale. Moreover, in its choice of medium, and line of perspective, it undertook a delicate task: to excite interest in a drama — if such a dignified word may be used in the connection — wherein servants were as important as, or more important than, their masters; wherein the drawing-room was sketched in many cases from the point of view of the servants’ hall. Such a reversal of the social foreground has, perhaps, since grown more welcome, and readers even of the finer crusted kind may now be disposed to pardon a writer for presenting the sons and daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Chickerel as beings who come within the scope of a congenial regard.

T. H.

December 1895.

CHAPTER 1.

A STREET IN ANGLEBURY — A HEATH NEAR IT — INSIDE THE ‘RED LION’ INN

Young Mrs. Petherwin stepped from the door of an old and well-appointed inn in a Wessex town to take a country walk. By her look and carriage she appeared to belong to that gentle order of society which has no worldly sorrow except when its jewellery gets stolen; but, as a fact not generally known, her claim to distinction was rather one of brains than of blood. She was the daughter of a gentleman who lived in a large house not his own, and began life as a baby christened Ethelberta after an infant of title who does not come into the story at all, having merely furnished Ethelberta’s mother with a subject of contemplation. She became teacher in a school, was praised by examiners, admired by gentlemen, not admired by gentlewomen, was touched up with accomplishments by masters who were coaxed into painstaking by her many graces, and, entering a mansion as governess to the daughter thereof, was stealthily married by the son. He, a minor like herself, died from a chill caught during the wedding tour, and a few weeks later was followed into the grave by Sir Ralph Petherwin, his unforgiving father, who had bequeathed his wealth to his wife absolutely.

These calamities were a sufficient reason to Lady Petherwin for pardoning all concerned. She took by the hand the forlorn Ethelberta — who seemed rather a detached bride than a widow — and finished her education by placing her for two or three years in a boarding-school at Bonn. Latterly she had brought the girl to England to live under her roof as daughter and companion, the condition attached being that Ethelberta was never openly to recognize her relations, for reasons which will hereafter appear.

The elegant young lady, as she had a full right to be called if she cared for the definition, arrested all the local attention when she emerged into the summer-evening light with that diadem-and-sceptre bearing — many people for reasons of heredity discovering such graces only in those whose vestibules are lined with ancestral mail, forgetting that a bear may be taught to dance. While this air of hers lasted, even the inanimate objects in the street appeared to know that she was there; but from a way she had of carelessly overthrowing her dignity by versatile moods, one could not calculate upon its presence to a certainty when she was round corners or in little lanes which demanded no repression of animal spirits.

‘Well to be sure!’ exclaimed a milkman, regarding her. ‘We should freeze in our beds if ‘twere not for the sun, and, dang me! if she isn’t a pretty piece. A man could make a meal between them eyes and chin — eh, hostler? Odd nation dang my old sides if he couldn’t!’

The speaker, who had been carrying a pair of pails on a yoke, deposited them upon the edge of the pavement in front of the inn, and straightened his back to an excruciating perpendicular. His remarks had been addressed to a rickety person, wearing a waistcoat of that preternatural length from the top to the bottom button which

prevails among men who have to do with horses. He was sweeping straws from the carriage-way beneath the stone arch that formed a passage to the stables behind.

‘Never mind the cursing and swearing, or somebody who’s never out of hearing may clap yer name down in his black book,’ said the hostler, also pausing, and lifting his eyes to the mullioned and transomed windows and moulded parapet above him — not to study them as features of ancient architecture, but just to give as healthful a stretch to the eyes as his acquaintance had done to his back. ‘Michael, a old man like you ought to think about other things, and not be looking two ways at your time of life. Pouncing upon young flesh like a carrion crow — ’tis a vile thing in a old man.’

‘Tis; and yet ’tis not, for ’tis a naterel taste,’ said the milkman, again surveying Ethelberta, who had now paused upon a bridge in full view, to look down the river. ‘Now, if a poor needy feller like myself could only catch her alone when she’s dressed up to the nines for some grand party, and carry her off to some lonely place — sakes, what a pot of jewels and goold things I warrant he’d find about her! ’Twould pay en for his trouble.’

‘I don’t dispute the picter; but ’tis sly and untimely to think such roguery. Though I’ve had thoughts like it, ’tis true, about high women — Lord forgive me for’t.’

‘And that figure of fashion standing there is a widow woman, so I hear?’

‘Lady — not a penny less than lady. Ay, a thing of twenty-one or thereabouts.’

‘A widow lady and twenty-one. ’Tis a backward age for a body who’s so forward in her state of life.’

‘Well, be that as ’twill, here’s my showings for her age. She was about the figure of two or three-and-twenty when a’ got off the carriage last night, tired out wi’ boaming about the country; and nineteen this morning when she came downstairs after a sleep round the clock and a clane-washed face: so I thought to myself, twenty-one, I thought.’

‘And what’s the young woman’s name, make so bold, hostler?’

‘Ay, and the house were all in a stoor with her and the old woman, and their boxes and camp-kettles, that they carry to wash in because hand-basons bain’t big enough, and I don’t know what all; and t’other folk stopping here were no more than dirt thencefor’ard.’

‘I suppose they’ve come out of some noble city a long way herefrom?’

‘And there was her hair up in buckle as if she’d never seen a clay-cold man at all. However, to cut a long story short, all I know besides about ’em is that the name upon their luggage is Lady Petherwin, and she’s the widow of a city gentleman, who was a man of valour in the Lord Mayor’s Show.’

‘Who’s that chap in the gaiters and pack at his back, come out of the door but now?’ said the milkman, nodding towards a figure of that description who had just emerged from the inn and trudged off in the direction taken by the lady — now out of sight.

‘Chap in the gaiters? Chok’ it all — why, the father of that nobleman that you call chap in the gaiters used to be hand in glove with half the Queen’s court.’

‘What d’ye tell o’?’

‘That man’s father was one of the mayor and corporation of Sandbourne, and was that familiar with men of money, that he’d slap ‘em upon the shoulder as you or I or any other poor fool would the clerk of the parish.’

‘O, what’s my lordlin’s name, make so bold, then?’

‘Ay, the toppermost class nowadays have left off the use of wheels for the good of their constitutions, so they traipse and walk for many years up foreign hills, where you can see nothing but snow and fog, till there’s no more left to walk up; and if they reach home alive, and ha’n’t got too old and weared out, they walk and see a little of their own parishes. So they tower about with a pack and a stick and a clane white pocket-handkerchief over their hats just as you see he’s got on his. He’s been staying here a night, and is off now again. “Young man, young man,” I think to myself, “if your shoulders were bent like a bandy and your knees bowed out as mine be, till there is not an inch of straight bone or gristle in ‘ee, th’ wouldstn’t go doing hard work for play ‘a b’lieve.”’

‘True, true, upon my song. Such a pain as I have had in my lynes all this day to be sure; words don’t know what shipwreck I suffer in these lynes o’ mine — that they do not! And what was this young widow lady’s maiden name, then, hostler? Folk have been peeping after her, that’s true; but they don’t seem to know much about her family.’

‘And while I’ve tended horses fifty year that other folk might straddle ‘em, here I be now not a penny the better! Often-times, when I see so many good things about, I feel inclined to help myself in common justice to my pocket.

“Work hard and be poor,

Do nothing and get more.”

But I draw in the horns of my mind and think to myself, “Forbear, John Hostler, forbear!” — Her maiden name? Faith, I don’t know the woman’s maiden name, though she said to me, “Good evening, John;” but I had no memory of ever seeing her afore — no, no more than the dead inside church-hatch — where I shall soon be likewise — I had not. “Ay, my nabs,” I think to myself, “more know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows.”’

‘More know Tom Fool — what rambling old canticle is it you say, hostler?’ inquired the milkman, lifting his ear. ‘Let’s have it again — a good saying well spit out is a Christmas fire to my withered heart. More know Tom Fool — ’

‘Than Tom Fool knows,’ said the hostler.

‘Ah! That’s the very feeling I’ve feeled over and over again, hostler, but not in such gifted language. ‘Tis a thought I’ve had in me for years, and never could lick into shape! — O-ho-ho-ho! Splendid! Say it again, hostler, say it again! To hear my own poor notion that had no name brought into form like that — I wouldn’t ha’ lost it for the world! More know Tom Fool than — than — h-ho-ho-ho-ho!’

‘Don’t let your sense o’ vitness break out in such uproar, for heaven’s sake, or folk will surely think you’ve been laughing at the lady and gentleman. Well, here’s at it again — Night t’ee, Michael.’ And the hostler went on with his sweeping.

‘Night t’ee, hostler, I must move too,’ said the milkman, shouldering his yoke, and walking off; and there reached the inn in a gradual diminuendo, as he receded up the street, shaking his head convulsively, ‘More know — Tom Fool — than Tom Fool — ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!’

The ‘Red Lion,’ as the inn or hotel was called which of late years had become the fashion among tourists, because of the absence from its precincts of all that was fashionable and new, stood near the middle of the town, and formed a corner where in winter the winds whistled and assembled their forces previous to plunging helter-skelter along the streets. In summer it was a fresh and pleasant spot, convenient for such quiet characters as sojourned there to study the geology and beautiful natural features of the country round.

The lady whose appearance had asserted a difference between herself and the Anglebury people, without too clearly showing what that difference was, passed out of the town in a few moments and, following the highway across meadows fed by the From, she crossed the railway and soon got into a lonely heath. She had been watching the base of a cloud as it closed down upon the line of a distant ridge, like an upper upon a lower eyelid, shutting in the gaze of the evening sun. She was about to return before dusk came on, when she heard a commotion in the air immediately behind and above her head. The saunterer looked up and saw a wild-duck flying along with the greatest violence, just in its rear being another large bird, which a countryman would have pronounced to be one of the biggest duck-hawks that he had ever beheld. The hawk neared its intended victim, and the duck screamed and redoubled its efforts.

Ethelberta impulsively started off in a rapid run that would have made a little dog bark with delight and run after, her object being, if possible, to see the end of this desperate struggle for a life so small and unheard-of. Her stateliness went away, and it could be forgiven for not remaining; for her feet suddenly became as quick as fingers, and she raced along over the uneven ground with such force of tread that, being a woman slightly heavier than gossamer, her patent heels punched little D’s in the soil with unerring accuracy wherever it was bare, crippled the heather-twigs where it was not, and sucked the swampy places with a sound of quick kisses.

Her rate of advance was not to be compared with that of the two birds, though she went swiftly enough to keep them well in sight in such an open place as that around her, having at one point in the journey been so near that she could hear the whisk of the duck’s feathers against the wind as it lifted and lowered its wings. When the bird seemed to be but a few yards from its enemy she saw it strike downwards, and after a level flight of a quarter of a minute, vanish. The hawk swooped after, and Ethelberta now perceived a whitely shining oval of still water, looking amid the swarthy level of the heath like a hole through to a nether sky.

Into this large pond, which the duck had been making towards from the beginning of its precipitate flight, it had dived out of sight. The excited and breathless runner was in a few moments close enough to see the disappointed hawk hovering and floating in the air as if waiting for the reappearance of its prey, upon which grim pastime

it was so intent that by creeping along softly she was enabled to get very near the edge of the pool and witness the conclusion of the episode. Whenever the duck was under the necessity of showing its head to breathe, the other bird would dart towards it, invariably too late, however; for the diver was far too experienced in the rough humour of the buzzard family at this game to come up twice near the same spot, unaccountably emerging from opposite sides of the pool in succession, and bobbing again by the time its adversary reached each place, so that at length the hawk gave up the contest and flew away, a satanic moodiness being almost perceptible in the motion of its wings.

The young lady now looked around her for the first time, and began to perceive that she had run a long distance — very much further than she had originally intended to come. Her eyes had been so long fixed upon the hawk, as it soared against the bright and mottled field of sky, that on regarding the heather and plain again it was as if she had returned to a half-forgotten region after an absence, and the whole prospect was darkened to one uniform shade of approaching night. She began at once to retrace her steps, but having been indiscriminately wheeling round the pond to get a good view of the performance, and having followed no path thither, she found the proper direction of her journey to be a matter of some uncertainty.

‘Surely,’ she said to herself, ‘I faced the north at starting:’ and yet on walking now with her back where her face had been set, she did not approach any marks on the horizon which might seem to signify the town. Thus dubiously, but with little real concern, she walked on till the evening light began to turn to dusk, and the shadows to darkness.

Presently in front of her Ethelberta saw a white spot in the shade, and it proved to be in some way attached to the head of a man who was coming towards her out of a slight depression in the ground. It was as yet too early in the evening to be afraid, but it was too late to be altogether courageous; and with balanced sensations Ethelberta kept her eye sharply upon him as he rose by degrees into view. The peculiar arrangement of his hat and pugree soon struck her as being that she had casually noticed on a peg in one of the rooms of the ‘Red Lion,’ and when he came close she saw that his arms diminished to a peculiar smallness at their junction with his shoulders, like those of a doll, which was explained by their being girt round at that point with the straps of a knapsack that he carried behind him. Encouraged by the probability that he, like herself, was staying or had been staying at the ‘Red Lion,’ she said, ‘Can you tell me if this is the way back to Anglebury?’

‘It is one way; but the nearest is in this direction,’ said the tourist — the same who had been criticized by the two old men.

At hearing him speak all the delicate activities in the young lady’s person stood still: she stopped like a clock. When she could again fence with the perception which had caused all this, she breathed.

‘Mr. Julian!’ she exclaimed. The words were uttered in a way which would have told anybody in a moment that here lay something connected with the light of other days.

‘Ah, Mrs. Petherwin! — Yes, I am Mr. Julian — though that can matter very little, I should think, after all these years, and what has passed.’

No remark was returned to this rugged reply, and he continued unconcernedly, ‘Shall I put you in the path — it is just here?’

‘If you please.’

‘Come with me, then.’

She walked in silence at his heels, not a word passing between them all the way: the only noises which came from the two were the brushing of her dress and his gaiters against the heather, or the smart rap of a stray flint against his boot.

They had now reached a little knoll, and he turned abruptly: ‘That is Anglebury — just where you see those lights. The path down there is the one you must follow; it leads round the hill yonder and directly into the town.’

‘Thank you,’ she murmured, and found that he had never removed his eyes from her since speaking, keeping them fixed with mathematical exactness upon one point in her face. She moved a little to go on her way; he moved a little less — to go on his.

‘Good-night,’ said Mr. Julian.

The moment, upon the very face of it, was critical; and yet it was one of those which have to wait for a future before they acquire a definite character as good or bad.

Thus much would have been obvious to any outsider; it may have been doubly so to Ethelberta, for she gave back more than she had got, replying, ‘Good-bye — if you are going to say no more.’

Then in struck Mr. Julian: ‘What can I say? You are nothing to me. . . . I could forgive a woman doing anything for spite, except marrying for spite.’

‘The connection of that with our present meeting does not appear, unless it refers to what you have done. It does not refer to me.’

‘I am not married: you are.’

She did not contradict him, as she might have done. ‘Christopher,’ she said at last, ‘this is how it is: you knew too much of me to respect me, and too little to pity me. A half knowledge of another’s life mostly does injustice to the life half known.’

‘Then since circumstances forbid my knowing you more, I must do my best to know you less, and elevate my opinion of your nature by forgetting what it consists in,’ he said in a voice from which all feeling was polished away.

‘If I did not know that bitterness had more to do with those words than judgment, I — should be — bitter too! You never knew half about me; you only knew me as a governess; you little think what my beginnings were.’

‘I have guessed. I have many times told myself that your early life was superior to your position when I first met you. I think I may say without presumption that I recognize a lady by birth when I see her, even under reverses of an extreme kind. And certainly there is this to be said, that the fact of having been bred in a wealthy home does slightly redeem an attempt to attain to such a one again.’

Ethelberta smiled a smile of many meanings.

‘However, we are wasting words,’ he resumed cheerfully. ‘It is better for us to part as we met, and continue to be the strangers that we have become to each other. I owe you an apology for having been betrayed into more feeling than I had a right to show, and let us part friends. Good night, Mrs. Petherwin, and success to you. We may meet again, some day, I hope.’

‘Good night,’ she said, extending her hand. He touched it, turned about, and in a short time nothing remained of him but quick regular brushings against the heather in the deep broad shadow of the moor.

Ethelberta slowly moved on in the direction that he had pointed out. This meeting had surprised her in several ways. First, there was the conjuncture itself; but more than that was the fact that he had not parted from her with any of the tragic resentment that she had from time to time imagined for that scene if it ever occurred. Yet there was really nothing wonderful in this: it is part of the generous nature of a bachelor to be not indisposed to forgive a portionless sweetheart who, by marrying elsewhere, has deprived him of the bliss of being obliged to marry her himself. Ethelberta would have been disappointed quite had there not been a comforting development of exasperation in the middle part of his talk; but after all it formed a poor substitute for the loving hatred she had expected.

When she reached the hotel the lamp over the door showed a face a little flushed, but the agitation which at first had possessed her was gone to a mere nothing. In the hall she met a slender woman wearing a silk dress of that peculiar black which in sunlight proclaims itself to have once seen better days as a brown, and days even better than those as a lavender, green, or blue.

‘Menlove,’ said the lady, ‘did you notice if any gentleman observed and followed me when I left the hotel to go for a walk this evening?’

The lady’s-maid, thus suddenly pulled up in a night forage after lovers, put a hand to her forehead to show that there was no mistake about her having begun to meditate on receiving orders to that effect, and said at last, ‘You once told me, ma’am, if you recollect, that when you were dressed, I was not to go staring out of the window after you as if you were a doll I had just manufactured and sent round for sale.’

‘Yes, so I did.’

‘So I didn’t see if anybody followed you this evening.’

‘Then did you hear any gentleman arrive here by the late train last night?’

‘O no, ma’am — how could I?’ said Mrs. Menlove — an exclamation which was more apposite than her mistress suspected, considering that the speaker, after retiring from duty, had slipped down her dark skirt to reveal a light, puffed, and festooned one, put on a hat and feather, together with several pennyweights of metal in the form of rings, brooches, and earrings — all in a time whilst one could count a hundred — and enjoyed half-an-hour of prime courtship by an honourable young waiter of the town, who had proved constant as the magnet to the pole for the space of the day and a half that she had known him.

Going at once upstairs, Ethelberta ran down the passage, and after some hesitation softly opened the door of the sitting-room in the best suite of apartments that the inn could boast of.

In this room sat an elderly lady writing by the light of two candles with green shades. Well knowing, as it seemed, who the intruder was, she continued her occupation, and her visitor advanced and stood beside the table. The old lady wore her spectacles low down her cheek, her glance being depressed to about the slope of her straight white nose in order to look through them. Her mouth was pursed up to almost a youthful shape as she formed the letters with her pen, and a slight move of the lip accompanied every downstroke. There were two large antique rings on her forefinger, against which the quill rubbed in moving backwards and forwards, thereby causing a secondary noise rivalling the primary one of the nib upon the paper.

‘Mamma,’ said the younger lady, ‘here I am at last.’

A writer’s mind in the midst of a sentence being like a ship at sea, knowing no rest or comfort till safely piloted into the harbour of a full stop, Lady Petherwin just replied with ‘What,’ in an occupied tone, not rising to interrogation. After signing her name to the letter, she raised her eyes.

‘Why, how late you are, Ethelberta, and how heated you look!’ she said. ‘I have been quite alarmed about you. What do you say has happened?’

The great, chief, and altogether eclipsing thing that had happened was the accidental meeting with an old lover whom she had once quarrelled with; and Ethelberta’s honesty would have delivered the tidings at once, had not, unfortunately, all the rest of her attributes been dead against that act, for the old lady’s sake even more than for her own.

‘I saw a great cruel bird chasing a harmless duck!’ she exclaimed innocently. ‘And I ran after to see what the end of it would be — much further than I had any idea of going. However, the duck came to a pond, and in running round it to see the end of the fight, I could not remember which way I had come.’

‘Mercy!’ said her mother-in-law, lifting her large eyelids, heavy as window-shutters, and spreading out her fingers like the horns of a snail. ‘You might have sunk up to your knees and got lost in that swampy place — such a time of night, too. What a tomboy you are! And how did you find your way home after all!’

‘O, some man showed me the way, and then I had no difficulty, and after that I came along leisurely.’

‘I thought you had been running all the way; you look so warm.’

‘It is a warm evening. . . . Yes, and I have been thinking of old times as I walked along,’ she said, ‘and how people’s positions in life alter. Have I not heard you say that while I was at Bonn, at school, some family that we had known had their household broken up when the father died, and that the children went away you didn’t know where?’

‘Do you mean the Julians?’

‘Yes, that was the name.’

‘Why, of course you know it was the Julians. Young Julian had a day or two’s fancy for you one summer, had he not? — just after you came to us, at the same time, or just before it, that my poor boy and you were so desperately attached to each other.’

‘O yes, I recollect,’ said Ethelberta. ‘And he had a sister, I think. I wonder where they went to live after the family collapse.’

‘I do not know,’ said Lady Petherwin, taking up another sheet of paper. ‘I have a dim notion that the son, who had been brought up to no profession, became a teacher of music in some country town — music having always been his hobby. But the facts are not very distinct in my memory.’ And she dipped her pen for another letter.

Ethelberta, with a rather fallen countenance, then left her mother-in-law, and went where all ladies are supposed to go when they want to torment their minds in comfort — to her own room. Here she thoughtfully sat down awhile, and some time later she rang for her maid.

‘Menlove,’ she said, without looking towards a rustle and half a footstep that had just come in at the door, but leaning back in her chair and speaking towards the corner of the looking-glass, ‘will you go down and find out if any gentleman named Julian has been staying in this house? Get to know it, I mean, Menlove, not by directly inquiring; you have ways of getting to know things, have you not? If the devoted George were here now, he would help — ’

‘George was nothing to me, ma’am.’

‘James, then.’

‘And I only had James for a week or ten days: when I found he was a married man, I encouraged his addresses very little indeed.’

‘If you had encouraged him heart and soul, you couldn’t have fumed more at the loss of him. But please to go and make that inquiry, will you, Menlove?’

In a few minutes Ethelberta’s woman was back again. ‘A gentleman of that name stayed here last night, and left this afternoon.’

‘Will you find out his address?’

Now the lady’s-maid had already been quick-witted enough to find out that, and indeed all about him; but it chanced that a fashionable illustrated weekly paper had just been sent from the bookseller’s, and being in want of a little time to look it over before it reached her mistress’s hands, Mrs. Menlove retired, as if to go and ask the question — to stand meanwhile under the gas-lamp in the passage, inspecting the fascinating engravings. But as time will not wait for tire-women, a natural length of absence soon elapsed, and she returned again and said,

‘His address is, Upper Street, Sandbourne.’

‘Thank you, that will do,’ replied her mistress.

The hour grew later, and that dreamy period came round when ladies’ fancies, that have lain shut up close as their fans during the day, begin to assert themselves anew. At this time a good guess at Ethelberta’s thoughts might have been made from her manner of passing the minutes away. Instead of reading, entering notes in her diary, or doing any ordinary thing, she walked to and fro, curled her pretty nether lip within her

pretty upper one a great many times, made a cradle of her locked fingers, and paused with fixed eyes where the walls of the room set limits upon her walk to look at nothing but a picture within her mind.

CHAPTER 2.

CHRISTOPHER'S HOUSE — SANDBOURNE TOWN — SANDBOURNE MOOR

During the wet autumn of the same year, the postman passed one morning as usual into a plain street that ran through the less fashionable portion of Sandbourne, a modern coast town and watering-place not many miles from the ancient Anglebury. He knocked at the door of a flat-faced brick house, and it was opened by a slight, thoughtful young man, with his hat on, just then coming out. The postman put into his hands a book packet, addressed, 'Christopher Julian, Esq.'

Christopher took the package upstairs, opened it with curiosity, and discovered within a green volume of poems, by an anonymous writer, the title-page bearing the inscription, 'Metres by E.' The book was new, though it was cut, and it appeared to have been looked into. The young man, after turning it over and wondering where it came from, laid it on the table and went his way, being in haste to fulfil his engagements for the day.

In the evening, on returning home from his occupations, he sat himself down cosily to read the newly-arrived volume. The winds of this uncertain season were snarling in the chimneys, and drops of rain spat themselves into the fire, revealing plainly that the young man's room was not far enough from the top of the house to admit of a twist in the flue, and revealing darkly a little more, if that social rule-of-three inverse, the higher in lodgings the lower in pocket, were applicable here. However, the aspect of the room, though homely, was cheerful, a somewhat contradictory group of furniture suggesting that the collection consisted of waifs and strays from a former home, the grimy faces of the old articles exercising a curious and subduing effect on the bright faces of the new. An oval mirror of rococo workmanship, and a heavy cabinet-piano with a cornice like that of an Egyptian temple, adjoined a harmonium of yesterday, and a harp that was almost as new. Printed music of the last century, and manuscript music of the previous evening, lay there in such quantity as to endanger the tidiness of a retreat which was indeed only saved from a chronic state of litter by a pair of hands that sometimes played, with the lightness of breezes, about the sewing-machine standing in a remote corner — if any corner could be called remote in a room so small.

Fire lights and shades from the shaking flames struck in a butterfly flutter on the underparts of the mantelshelf, and upon the reader's cheek as he sat. Presently, and all at once, a much greater intentness pervaded his face: he turned back again, and read anew the subject that had arrested his eyes. He was a man whose countenance varied with his mood, though it kept somewhat in the rear of that mood. He looked sad when

he felt almost serene, and only serene when he felt quite cheerful. It is a habit people acquire who have had repressing experiences.

A faint smile and flush now lightened his face, and jumping up he opened the door and exclaimed, 'Faith! will you come here for a moment?'

A prompt step was heard on the stairs, and the young person addressed as Faith entered the room. She was small in figure, and bore less in the form of her features than in their shades when changing from expression to expression the evidence that she was his sister.

'Faith — I want your opinion. But, stop, read this first.' He laid his finger upon a page in the book, and placed it in her hand.

The girl drew from her pocket a little green-leather sheath, worn at the edges to whity-brown, and out of that a pair of spectacles, unconsciously looking round the room for a moment as she did so, as if to ensure that no stranger saw her in the act of using them. Here a weakness was uncovered at once; it was a small, pretty, and natural one; indeed, as weaknesses go in the great world, it might almost have been called a commendable trait. She then began to read, without sitting down.

These 'Metres by E.' composed a collection of soft and marvellously musical rhymes, of a nature known as the *vers de société*. The lines presented a series of playful defences of the supposed strategy of womankind in fascination, courtship, and marriage — the whole teeming with ideas bright as mirrors and just as unsubstantial, yet forming a brilliant argument to justify the ways of girls to men. The pervading characteristic of the mass was the means of forcing into notice, by strangeness of contrast, the single mournful poem that the book contained. It was placed at the very end, and under the title of 'Cancelled Words,' formed a whimsical and rather affecting love-lament, somewhat in the tone of many of Sir Thomas Wyatt's poems. This was the piece which had arrested Christopher's attention, and had been pointed out by him to his sister Faith.

'It is very touching,' she said, looking up.

'What do you think I suspect about it — that the poem is addressed to me! Do you remember, when father was alive and we were at Solentsea that season, about a governess who came there with a Sir Ralph Petherwin and his wife, people with a sickly little daughter and a grown-up son?'

'I never saw any of them. I think I remember your knowing something about a young man of that name.'

'Yes, that was the family. Well, the governess there was a very attractive woman, and somehow or other I got more interested in her than I ought to have done (this is necessary to the history), and we used to meet in romantic places — and — and that kind of thing, you know. The end of it was, she jilted me and married the son.'

'You were anxious to get away from Solentsea.'

'Was I? Then that was chiefly the reason. Well, I decided to think no more of her, and I was helped to do it by the troubles that came upon us shortly afterwards; it is a blessed arrangement that one does not feel a sentimental grief at all when additional

grief comes in the shape of practical misfortune. However, on the first afternoon of the little holiday I took for my walking tour last summer, I came to Anglebury, and stayed about the neighbourhood for a day or two to see what it was like, thinking we might settle there if this place failed us. The next evening I left, and walked across the heath to Flychett — that's a village about five miles further on — so as to be that distance on my way for next morning; and while I was crossing the heath there I met this very woman. We talked a little, because we couldn't help it — you may imagine the kind of talk it was — and parted as coolly as we had met. Now this strange book comes to me; and I have a strong conviction that she is the writer of it, for that poem sketches a similar scene — or rather suggests it; and the tone generally seems the kind of thing she would write — not that she was a sad woman, either.'

'She seems to be a warm-hearted, impulsive woman, to judge from these tender verses.'

'People who print very warm words have sometimes very cold manners. I wonder if it is really her writing, and if she has sent it to me!'

'Would it not be a singular thing for a married woman to do? Though of course' — (she removed her spectacles as if they hindered her from thinking, and hid them under the timepiece till she should go on reading) — 'of course poets have morals and manners of their own, and custom is no argument with them. I am sure I would not have sent it to a man for the world!'

'I do not see any absolute harm in her sending it. Perhaps she thinks that, since it is all over, we may as well die friends.'

'If I were her husband I should have doubts about the dying. And "all over" may not be so plain to other people as it is to you.'

'Perhaps not. And when a man checks all a woman's finer sentiments towards him by marrying her, it is only natural that it should find a vent somewhere. However, she probably does not know of my downfall since father's death. I hardly think she would have cared to do it had she known that. (I am assuming that it is Ethelberta — Mrs. Petherwin — who sends it: of course I am not sure.) We must remember that when I knew her I was a gentleman at ease, who had not the least notion that I should have to work for a living, and not only so, but should have first to invent a profession to work at out of my old tastes.'

'Kit, you have made two mistakes in your thoughts of that lady. Even though I don't know her, I can show you that. Now I'll tell you! the first is in thinking that a married lady would send the book with that poem in it without at any rate a slight doubt as to its propriety: the second is in supposing that, had she wished to do it, she would have given the thing up because of our misfortunes. With a true woman the second reason would have had no effect had she once got over the first. I'm a woman, and that's why I know.'

Christopher said nothing, and turned over the poems.

* * * * *

He lived by teaching music, and, in comparison with starving, thrived; though the wealthy might possibly have said that in comparison with thriving he starved. During this night he hummed airs in bed, thought he would do for the ballad of the fair poetess what other musicians had done for the ballads of other fair poetesses, and dreamed that she smiled on him as her prototype Sappho smiled on Phaon.

The next morning before starting on his rounds a new circumstance induced him to direct his steps to the bookseller's, and ask a question. He had found on examining the wrapper of the volume that it was posted in his own town.

'No copy of the book has been sold by me,' the bookseller's voice replied from far up the Alpine height of the shop-ladder, where he stood dusting stale volumes, as was his habit of a morning before customers came. 'I have never heard of it — probably never shall;' and he shook out the duster, so as to hit the delicate mean between stifling Christopher and not stifling him.

'Surely you don't live by your shop?' said Christopher, drawing back.

The bookseller's eyes rested on the speaker's; his face changed; he came down and placed his hand on the lapel of Christopher's coat. 'Sir,' he said, 'country bookselling is a miserable, impoverishing, exasperating thing in these days. Can you understand the rest?'

'I can; I forgive a starving man anything,' said Christopher.

'You go a long way very suddenly,' said the book seller. 'Half as much pity would have seemed better. However, wait a moment.' He looked into a list of new books, and added: 'The work you allude to was only published last week; though, mind you, if it had been published last century I might not have sold a copy.'

Although his time was precious, Christopher had now become so interested in the circumstance that the unseen sender was somebody breathing his own atmosphere, possibly the very writer herself — the book being too new to be known — that he again passed through the blue shadow of the spire which stretched across the street to-day, and went towards the post-office, animated by a bright intention — to ask the postmaster if he knew the handwriting in which the packet was addressed.

Now the postmaster was an acquaintance of Christopher's, but, as regarded putting that question to him, there was a difficulty. Everything turned upon whether the postmaster at the moment of asking would be in his under-government manner, or in the manner with which mere nature had endowed him. In the latter case his reply would be all that could be wished; in the former, a man who had sunk in society might as well put his tongue into a mousetrap as make an inquiry so obviously outside the pale of legality as was this.

So he postponed his business for the present, and refrained from entering till he passed by after dinner, when pleasant malt liquor, of that capacity for cheering which is expressed by four large letter X's marching in a row, had refilled the globular trunk of the postmaster and neutralised some of the effects of officiality. The time was well chosen, but the inquiry threatened to prove fruitless: the postmaster had never, to his knowledge, seen the writing before. Christopher was turning away when a clerk in the

background looked up and stated that some young lady had brought a packet with such an address upon it into the office two days earlier to get it stamped.

‘Do you know her?’ said Christopher.

‘I have seen her about the neighbourhood. She goes by every morning; I think she comes into the town from beyond the common, and returns again between four and five in the afternoon.’

‘What does she wear?’

‘A white wool jacket with zigzags of black braid.’

Christopher left the post-office and went his way. Among his other pupils there were two who lived at some distance from Sandbourne — one of them in the direction indicated as that habitually taken by the young person; and in the afternoon, as he returned homeward, Christopher loitered and looked around. At first he could see nobody; but when about a mile from the outskirts of the town he discerned a light spot ahead of him, which actually turned out to be the jacket alluded to. In due time he met the wearer face to face; she was not Ethelberta Petherwin — quite a different sort of individual. He had long made up his mind that this would be the case, yet he was in some indescribable way disappointed.

Of the two classes into which gentle young women naturally divide, those who grow red at their weddings, and those who grow pale, the present one belonged to the former class. She was an April-natured, pink-cheeked girl, with eyes that would have made any jeweller in England think of his trade — one who evidently took her day in the daytime, frequently caught the early worm, and had little to do with yawns or candlelight. She came and passed him; he fancied that her countenance changed. But one may fancy anything, and the pair receded each from each without turning their heads. He could not speak to her, plain and simple as she seemed.

It is rarely that a man who can be entered and made to throb by the channel of his ears is not open to a similar attack through the channel of his eyes — for many doors will admit to one mansion — allowance being made for the readier capacity of chosen and practised organs. Hence the beauties, concords, and eloquences of the female form were never without their effect upon Christopher, a born musician, artist, poet, seer, mouthpiece — whichever a translator of Nature’s oracles into simple speech may be called. The young girl who had gone by was fresh and pleasant; moreover, she was a sort of mysterious link between himself and the past, which these things were vividly reviving in him.

The following week Christopher met her again. She had not much dignity, he had not much reserve, and the sudden resolution to have a holiday which sometimes impels a plump heart to rise up against a brain that overweights it was not to be resisted. He just lifted his hat, and put the only question he could think of as a beginning: ‘Have I the pleasure of addressing the author of a book of very melodious poems that was sent me the other day?’

The girl’s forefinger twirled rapidly the loop of braid that it had previously been twirling slowly, and drawing in her breath, she said, ‘No, sir.’

‘The sender, then?’

‘Yes.’

She somehow presented herself as so insignificant by the combined effect of the manner and the words that Christopher lowered his method of address to her level at once. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘such an atmosphere as the writer of “Metres by E.” seems to breathe would soon spoil cheeks that are fresh and round as lady-apples — eh, little girl? But are you disposed to tell me that writer’s name?’

By applying a general idea to a particular case a person with the best of intentions may find himself immediately landed in a quandary. In saying to the country girl before him what would have suited the mass of country lasses well enough, Christopher had offended her beyond the cure of compliment.

‘I am not disposed to tell the writer’s name,’ she replied, with a dudgeon that was very great for one whose whole stock of it was a trifle. And she passed on and left him standing alone.

Thus further conversation was checked; but, through having rearranged the hours of his country lessons, Christopher met her the next Wednesday, and the next Friday, and throughout the following week — no further words passing between them. For a while she went by very demurely, apparently mindful of his offence. But effrontery is not proved to be part of a man’s nature till he has been guilty of a second act: the best of men may commit a first through accident or ignorance — may even be betrayed into it by over-zeal for experiment. Some such conclusion may or may not have been arrived at by the girl with the lady-apple cheeks; at any rate, after the lapse of another week a new spectacle presented itself; her redness deepened whenever Christopher passed her by, and embarrassment pervaded her from the lowest stitch to the tip of her feather. She had little chance of escaping him by diverging from the road, for a figure could be seen across the open ground to the distance of half a mile on either side. One day as he drew near as usual, she met him as women meet a cloud of dust — she turned and looked backwards till he had passed.

This would have been disconcerting but for one reason: Christopher was ceasing to notice her. He was a man who often, when walking abroad, and looking as it were at the scene before his eyes, discerned successes and failures, friends and relations, episodes of childhood, wedding feasts and funerals, the landscape suffering greatly by these visions, until it became no more than the patterned wall-tints about the paintings in a gallery; something necessary to the tone, yet not regarded. Nothing but a special concentration of himself on externals could interrupt this habit, and now that her appearance along the way had changed from a chance to a custom he began to lapse again into the old trick. He gazed once or twice at her form without seeing it: he did not notice that she trembled.

He sometimes read as he walked, and book in hand he frequently approached her now. This went on till six weeks had passed from the time of their first encounter. Latterly might have been once or twice heard, when he had moved out of earshot, a

sound like a small gasping sigh; but no arrangements were disturbed, and Christopher continued to keep down his eyes as persistently as a saint in a church window.

The last day of his engagement had arrived, and with it the last of his walks that way. On his final return he carried in his hand a bunch of flowers which had been presented to him at the country-house where his lessons were given. He was taking them home to his sister Faith, who prized the lingering blossoms of the seeding season. Soon appeared as usual his fellow-traveller; whereupon Christopher looked down upon his nosegay. 'Sweet simple girl,' he thought, 'I'll endeavour to make peace with her by means of these flowers before we part for good.'

When she came up he held them out to her and said, 'Will you allow me to present you with these?'

The bright colours of the nosegay instantly attracted the girl's hand — perhaps before there had been time for thought to thoroughly construe the position; for it happened that when her arm was stretched into the air she steadied it quickly, and stood with the pose of a statue — rigid with uncertainty. But it was too late to refuse: Christopher had put the nosegay within her fingers. Whatever pleasant expression of thanks may have appeared in her eyes fell only on the bunch of flowers, for during the whole transaction they reached to no higher level than that. To say that he was coming no more seemed scarcely necessary under the circumstances, and wishing her 'Good afternoon' very heartily, he passed on.

He had learnt by this time her occupation, which was that of pupil-teacher at one of the schools in the town, whither she walked daily from a village near. If he had not been poor and the little teacher humble, Christopher might possibly have been tempted to inquire more briskly about her, and who knows how such a pursuit might have ended? But hard externals rule volatile sentiment, and under these untoward influences the girl and the book and the truth about its author were matters upon which he could not afford to expend much time. All Christopher did was to think now and then of the pretty innocent face and round deep eyes, not once wondering if the mind which enlivened them ever thought of him.

CHAPTER 3.

SANDBOURNE MOOR (continued)

It was one of those hostile days of the year when chatterbox ladies remain miserably in their homes to save the carriage and harness, when clerks' wives hate living in lodgings, when vehicles and people appear in the street with duplicates of themselves underfoot, when bricklayers, slaters, and other out-door journeymen sit in a shed and drink beer, when ducks and drakes play with hilarious delight at their own family game, or spread out one wing after another in the slower enjoyment of letting the delicious moisture penetrate to their innermost down. The smoke from the flues of Sandbourne had barely strength enough to emerge into the drizzling rain, and hung down the sides

of each chimney-pot like the streamer of a becalmed ship; and a troop of rats might have rattled down the pipes from roof to basement with less noise than did the water that day.

On the broad moor beyond the town, where Christopher's meetings with the teacher had so regularly occurred, were a stream and some large pools; and beside one of these, near some hatches and a weir, stood a little square building, not much larger inside than the Lord Mayor's coach. It was known simply as 'The Weir House.' On this wet afternoon, which was the one following the day of Christopher's last lesson over the plain, a nearly invisible smoke came from the puny chimney of the hut. Though the door was closed, sounds of chatting and mirth fizzed from the interior, and would have told anybody who had come near — which nobody did — that the usually empty shell was tenanted to-day.

The scene within was a large fire in a fireplace to which the whole floor of the house was no more than a hearthstone. The occupants were two gentlemanly persons, in shooting costume, who had been traversing the moor for miles in search of wild duck and teal, a waterman, and a small spaniel. In the corner stood their guns, and two or three wild mallards, which represented the scanty product of their morning's labour, the iridescent necks of the dead birds replying to every flicker of the fire. The two sportsmen were smoking, and their man was mostly occupying himself in poking and stirring the fire with a stick: all three appeared to be pretty well wetted.

One of the gentlemen, by way of varying the not very exhilarating study of four brick walls within microscopic distance of his eye, turned to a small square hole which admitted light and air to the hut, and looked out upon the dreary prospect before him. The wide concave of cloud, of the monotonous hue of dull pewter, formed an unbroken hood over the level from horizon to horizon; beneath it, reflecting its wan lustre, was the glazed high-road which stretched, hedgeless and ditchless, past a directing-post where another road joined it, and on to the less regular ground beyond, lying like a riband unrolled across the scene, till it vanished over the furthest undulation. Beside the pools were occasional tall sheaves of flags and sedge, and about the plain a few bushes, these forming the only obstructions to a view otherwise unbroken.

The sportsman's attention was attracted by a figure in a state of gradual enlargement as it approached along the road.

'I should think that if pleasure can't tempt a native out of doors to-day, business will never force him out,' he observed. 'There is, for the first time, somebody coming along the road.'

'If business don't drag him out pleasure'll never tempt en, is more like our nater in these parts, sir,' said the man, who was looking into the fire.

The conversation showed no vitality, and down it dropped dead as before, the man who was standing up continuing to gaze into the moisture. What had at first appeared as an epicene shape the decreasing space resolved into a cloaked female under an umbrella: she now relaxed her pace, till, reaching the directing-post where the road

branched into two, she paused and looked about her. Instead of coming further she slowly retraced her steps for about a hundred yards.

‘That’s an appointment,’ said the first speaker, as he removed the cigar from his lips; ‘and by the lords, what a day and place for an appointment with a woman!’

‘What’s an appointment?’ inquired his friend, a town young man, with a Tussaud complexion and well-pencilled brows half way up his forehead, so that his upper eyelids appeared to possess the uncommon quality of tallness.

‘Look out here, and you’ll see. By that directing-post, where the two roads meet. As a man devoted to art, Ladywell, who has had the honour of being hung higher up on the Academy walls than any other living painter, you should take out your sketch-book and dash off the scene.’

Where nothing particular is going on, one incident makes a drama; and, interested in that proportion, the art-sportsman puts up his eyeglass (a form he adhered to before firing at game that had risen, by which merciful arrangement the bird got safe off), placed his face beside his companion’s, and also peered through the opening. The young pupil-teacher — for she was the object of their scrutiny — re-approached the spot whereon she had been accustomed for the last many weeks of her journey home to meet Christopher, now for the first time missing, and again she seemed reluctant to pass the hand-post, for that marked the point where the chance of seeing him ended. She glided backwards as before, this time keeping her face still to the front, as if trying to persuade the world at large, and her own shamefacedness, that she had not yet approached the place at all.

‘Query, how long will she wait for him (for it is a man to a certainty)?’ resumed the elder of the smokers, at the end of several minutes of silence, when, full of vacillation and doubt, she became lost to view behind some bushes. ‘Will she reappear?’ The smoking went on, and up she came into open ground as before, and walked by.

‘I wonder who the girl is, to come to such a place in this weather? There she is again,’ said the young man called Ladywell.

‘Some cottage lass, not yet old enough to make the most of the value set on her by her follower, small as that appears to be. Now we may get an idea of the hour named by the fellow for the appointment, for, depend upon it, the time when she first came — about five minutes ago — was the time he should have been there. It is now getting on towards five — half-past four was doubtless the time mentioned.’

‘She’s not come o’ purpose: ‘tis her way home from school every day,’ said the waterman.

‘An experiment on woman’s endurance and patience under neglect. Two to one against her staying a quarter of an hour.’

‘The same odds against her not staying till five would be nearer probability. What’s half-an-hour to a girl in love?’

‘On a moorland in wet weather it is thirty perceptible minutes to any fireside man, woman, or beast in Christendom — minutes that can be felt, like the Egyptian plague of darkness. Now, little girl, go home: he is not worth it.’

Twenty minutes passed, and the girl returned miserably to the hand-post, still to wander back to her retreat behind the sedge, and lead any chance comer from the opposite quarter to believe that she had not yet reached this ultimate point beyond which a meeting with Christopher was impossible.

‘Now you’ll find that she means to wait the complete half-hour, and then off she goes with a broken heart.’

All three now looked through the hole to test the truth of the prognostication. The hour of five completed itself on their watches; the girl again came forward. And then the three in ambuscade could see her pull out her handkerchief and place it to her eyes.

‘She’s grieving now because he has not come. Poor little woman, what a brute he must be; for a broken heart in a woman means a broken vow in a man, as I infer from a thousand instances in experience, romance, and history. Don’t open the door till she is gone, Ladywell; it will only disturb her.’

As they had guessed, the pupil-teacher, hearing the distant town-clock strike the hour, gave way to her fancy no longer, and launched into the diverging path. This lingering for Christopher’s arrival had, as is known, been founded on nothing more of the nature of an assignation than lay in his regular walk along the plain at that time every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of the six previous weeks. It must be said that he was very far indeed from divining that his injudicious peace-offering of the flowers had stirred into life such a wearing, anxious, hopeful, despairing solicitude as this, which had been latent for some time during his constant meetings with the little stranger.

She vanished in the mist towards the left, and the loiterers in the hut began to move and open the door, remarking, ‘Now then for Wyndway House, a change of clothes, and a dinner.’

CHAPTER 4.

SANDBOURNE PIER — ROAD TO WYNDWAY — BALL-ROOM IN WYNDWAY HOUSE

The last light of a winter day had gone down behind the houses of Sandbourne, and night was shut close over all. Christopher, about eight o’clock, was standing at the end of the pier with his back towards the open sea, whence the waves were pushing to the shore in frills and coils that were just rendered visible in all their bleak instability by the row of lights along the sides of the jetty, the rapid motion landward of the wavetips producing upon his eye an apparent progress of the pier out to sea. This pier-head was a spot which Christopher enjoyed visiting on such moaning and sighing nights as the present, when the sportive and variegated throng that haunted the pier on autumn days was no longer there, and he seemed alone with weather and the invincible sea.

Somebody came towards him along the deserted footway, and rays from the nearest lamp streaked the face of his sister Faith.

‘O Christopher, I knew you were here,’ she said eagerly. ‘You are wanted; there’s a servant come from Wyndway House for you. He is sent to ask if you can come immediately to play at a little dance they have resolved upon this evening — quite suddenly it seems. If you can come, you must bring with you any assistant you can lay your hands upon at a moment’s notice, he says.’

‘Wyndway House; why should the people send for me above all other musicians in the town?’

Faith did not know. ‘If you really decide to go,’ she said, as they walked homeward, ‘you might take me as your assistant. I should answer the purpose, should I not, Kit? since it is only a dance or two they seem to want.’

‘And your harp I suppose you mean. Yes; you might be competent to take a part. It cannot be a regular ball; they would have had the quadrille band for anything of that sort. Faith — we’ll go. However, let us see the man first, and inquire particulars.’

Reaching home, Christopher found at his door a horse and wagonette in charge of a man-servant in livery, who repeated what Faith had told her brother. Wyndway House was a well-known country-seat three or four miles out of the town, and the coachman mentioned that if they were going it would be well that they should get ready to start as soon as they conveniently could, since he had been told to return by ten if possible. Christopher quickly prepared himself, and put a new string or two into Faith’s harp, by which time she also was dressed; and, wrapping up herself and her instrument safe from the night air, away they drove at half-past nine.

‘Is it a large party?’ said Christopher, as they whizzed along.

‘No, sir; it is what we call a dance — that is, ‘tis like a ball, you know, on a small scale — a ball on a spurt, that you never thought of till you had it. In short, it grew out of a talk at dinner, I believe; and some of the young people present wanted a jig, and didn’t care to play themselves, you know, young ladies being an idle class of society at the best of times. We’ve a house full of sleeping company, you understand — been there a week some of ‘em — most of ‘em being mistress’s relations.’

‘They probably found it a little dull.’

‘Well, yes — it is rather dull for ‘em — Christmas-time and all. As soon as it was proposed they were wild for sending post-haste for somebody or other to play to them.’

‘Did they name me particularly?’ said Christopher.

‘Yes; “Mr. Christopher Julian,” she says. “The gent who’s turned music-man?” I said. “Yes, that’s him,” says she.’

‘There were music-men living nearer to your end of the town than I.’

‘Yes, but I know it was you particular: though I don’t think mistress thought anything about you at first. Mr. Joyce — that’s the butler — said that your name was mentioned to our old party, when he was in the room, by a young lady staying with us, and mistress says then, “The Julians have had a downfall, and the son has taken to music.” Then when dancing was talked of, they said, “O, let’s have him by all means.”’

‘Was the young lady who first inquired for my family the same one who said, “Let’s have him by all means?”’

‘O no; but it was on account of her asking that the rest said they would like you to play — at least that’s as I had it from Joyce.’

‘Do you know that lady’s name?’

‘Mrs. Petherwin.’

‘Ah!’

‘Cold, sir?’

‘O no.’

Christopher did not like to question the man any further, though what he had heard added new life to his previous curiosity; and they drove along the way in silence, Faith’s figure, wrapped up to the top of her head, cutting into the sky behind them like a sugar-loaf. Such gates as crossed the roads had been left open by the forethought of the coachman, and, passing the lodge, they proceeded about half-a-mile along a private drive, then ascended a rise, and came in view of the front of the mansion, punctured with windows that were now mostly lighted up.

‘What is that?’ said Faith, catching a glimpse of something that the carriage-lamp showed on the face of one wall as they passed, a marble bas-relief of some battle-piece, built into the stonework.

‘That’s the scene of the death of one of the squire’s forefathers — Colonel Sir Martin Jones, who was killed at the moment of victory in the battle of Salamanca — but I haven’t been here long enough to know the rights of it. When I am in one of my meditations, as I wait here with the carriage sometimes, I think how many more get killed at the moment of victory than at the moment of defeat. This is the entrance for you, sir.’ And he turned the corner and pulled up before a side door.

They alighted and went in, Christopher shouldering Faith’s harp, and she marching modestly behind, with curly-eared music-books under her arm. They were shown into the house-steward’s room, and ushered thence along a badly-lit passage and past a door within which a hum and laughter were audible. The door next to this was then opened for them, and they entered.

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Scarcely had Faith, or Christopher either, ever beheld a more shining scene than was presented by the saloon in which they now found themselves. Coming direct from the gloomy park, and led to the room by that back passage from the servants’ quarter, the light from the chandelier and branches against the walls, striking on gilding at all points, quite dazzled their sight for a minute or two; it caused Faith to move forward with her eyes on the floor, and filled Christopher with an impulse to turn back again into some dusky corner where every thread of his not over-new dress suit — rather moth-eaten through lack of feasts for airing it — could be counted less easily.

He was soon seated before a grand piano, and Faith sat down under the shadow of her harp, both being arranged on a dais within an alcove at one end of the room. A screen of ivy and holly had been constructed across the front of this recess for the games of the children on Christmas Eve, and it still remained there, a small creep-hole being left for entrance and exit.

Then the merry guests tumbled through doors at the further end, and dancing began. The mingling of black-coated men and bright ladies gave a charming appearance to the groups as seen by Faith and her brother, the whole spectacle deriving an unexpected novelty from the accident of reaching their eyes through interstices in the tracery of green leaves, which added to the picture a softness that it would not otherwise have possessed. On the other hand, the musicians, having a much weaker light, could hardly be discerned by the performers in the dance.

The music was now rattling on, and the ladies in their foam-like dresses were busily threading and spinning about the floor, when Faith, casually looking up into her brother's face, was surprised to see that a change had come over it. At the end of the quadrille he leant across to her before she had time to speak, and said quietly, 'She's here!'

'Who?' said Faith, for she had not heard the words of the coachman.

'Ethelberta.'

'Which is she?' asked Faith, peeping through with the keenest interest.

'The one who has the skirts of her dress looped up with convolvulus flowers — the one with her hair fastened in a sort of Venus knot behind; she has just been dancing with that perfumed piece of a man they call Mr. Ladywell — it is he with the high eyebrows arched like a girl's.' He added, with a wrinkled smile, 'I cannot for my life see anybody answering to the character of husband to her, for every man takes notice of her.'

They were interrupted by another dance being called for, and then, his fingers tapping about upon the keys as mechanically as fowls pecking at barleycorns, Christopher gave himself up with a curious and far from unalloyed pleasure to the occupation of watching Ethelberta, now again crossing the field of his vision like a returned comet whose characteristics were becoming purely historical. She was a plump-armed creature, with a white round neck as firm as a fort — altogether a vigorous shape, as refreshing to the eye as the green leaves through which he beheld her. She danced freely, and with a zest that was apparently irrespective of partners. He had been waiting long to hear her speak, and when at length her voice did reach his ears, it was the revelation of a strange matter to find how great a thing that small event had become to him. He knew the old utterance — rapid but not frequent, an obstructive thought causing sometimes a sudden halt in the midst of a stream of words. But the features by which a cool observer would have singled her out from others in his memory when asking himself what she was like, was a peculiar gaze into imaginary far-away distance when making a quiet remark to a partner — not with contracted eyes like a seafaring man, but with an open full look — a remark in which little words in a low tone were made to express a great deal, as several single gentlemen afterwards found.

The production of dance-music when the criticizing stage among the dancers has passed, and they have grown full of excitement and animal spirits, does not require much concentration of thought in the producers thereof; and desultory conversation accordingly went on between Faith and her brother from time to time.

‘Kit,’ she said on one occasion, ‘are you looking at the way in which the flowers are fastened to the leaves? — taking a mean advantage of being at the back of the tapestry? You cannot think how you stare at them.’

‘I was looking through them — certainly not at them. I have a feeling of being moved about like a puppet in the hands of a person who legally can be nothing to me.’

‘That charming woman with the shining bunch of hair and convolvuluses?’

‘Yes: it is through her that we are brought here, and through her writing that poem, “Cancelled Words,” that the book was sent me, and through the accidental renewal of acquaintance between us on Anglebury Heath, that she wrote the poem. I was, however, at the moment you spoke, thinking more particularly of the little teacher whom Ethelberta must have commissioned to send the book to me; and why that girl was chosen to do it.’

‘There may be a hundred reasons. Kit, I have never yet seen her look once this way.’

Christopher had certainly not yet received look or gesture from her; but his time came. It was while he was for a moment outside the recess, and he caught her in the act. She became slightly confused, turned aside, and entered into conversation with a neighbour.

It was only a look, and yet what a look it was! One may say of a look that it is capable of division into as many species, genera, orders, and classes, as the animal world itself. Christopher saw Ethelberta Petherwin’s performance in this kind — the well-known spark of light upon the well-known depths of mystery — and felt something going out of him which had gone out of him once before.

Thus continually beholding her and her companions in the giddy whirl, the night wore on with the musicians, last dances and more last dances being added, till the intentions of the old on the matter were thrice exceeded in the interests of the young. Watching the couples whirl and turn, advance and recede as gently as spirits, knot themselves like house-flies and part again, and lullabied by the faint regular beat of their footsteps to the tune, the players sank into the peculiar mesmeric quiet which comes over impressionable people who play for a great length of time in the midst of such scenes; and at last the only noises that Christopher took cognizance of were those of the exceptional kind, breaking above the general sea of sound — a casual smart rustle of silk, a laugh, a stumble, the monosyllabic talk of those who happened to linger for a moment close to the leafy screen — all coming to his ears like voices from those old times when he had mingled in similar scenes, not as servant but as guest.

CHAPTER 5.

AT THE WINDOW — THE ROAD HOME

The dancing was over at last, and the radiant company had left the room. A long and weary night it had been for the two players, though a stimulated interest had hindered physical exhaustion in one of them for a while. With tingling fingers and

aching arms they came out of the alcove into the long and deserted apartment, now pervaded by a dry haze. The lights had burnt low, and Faith and her brother were waiting by request till the wagonette was ready to take them home, a breakfast being in course of preparation for them meanwhile.

Christopher had crossed the room to relieve his cramped limbs, and now, peeping through a crevice in the window curtains, he said suddenly, 'Who's for a transformation scene? Faith, look here!'

He touched the blind, up it flew, and a gorgeous scene presented itself to her eyes. A huge inflamed sun was breasting the horizon of a wide sheet of sea which, to her surprise and delight, the mansion overlooked. The brilliant disc fired all the waves that lay between it and the shore at the bottom of the grounds, where the water tossed the ruddy light from one undulation to another in glares as large and clear as mirrors, incessantly altering them, destroying them, and creating them again; while further off they multiplied, thickened, and ran into one another like struggling armies, till they met the fiery source of them all.

'O, how wonderful it is!' said Faith, putting her hand on Christopher's arm. 'Who knew that whilst we were all shut in here with our puny illumination such an exhibition as this was going on outside! How sorry and mean the grand and stately room looks now!'

Christopher turned his back upon the window, and there were the hitherto beaming candle-flames shining no more radiantly than tarnished javelin-heads, while the snow-white lengths of wax showed themselves clammy and cadaverous as the fingers of a corpse. The leaves and flowers which had appeared so very green and blooming by the artificial light were now seen to be faded and dusty. Only the gilding of the room in some degree brought itself into keeping with the splendours outside, stray darts of light seizing upon it and lengthening themselves out along fillet, quirk, arris, and moulding, till wasted away.

'It seems,' said Faith, 'as if all the people who were lately so merry here had died: we ourselves look no more than ghosts.' She turned up her weary face to her brother's, which the incoming rays smote aslant, making little furrows of every wrinkle thereon, and shady ravines of every little furrow.

'You are very tired, Faith,' he said. 'Such a heavy night's work has been almost too much for you.'

'O, I don't mind that,' said Faith. 'But I could not have played so long by myself.'

'We filled up one another's gaps; and there were plenty of them towards the morning; but, luckily, people don't notice those things when the small hours draw on.'

'What troubles me most,' said Faith, 'is not that I have worked, but that you should be so situated as to need such miserable assistance as mine. We are poor, are we not, Kit?'

'Yes, we know a little about poverty,' he replied.

While thus lingering

'In shadowy thoroughfares of thought,'

Faith interrupted with, 'I believe there is one of the dancers now! — why, I should have thought they had all gone to bed, and wouldn't get up again for days.' She indicated to him a figure on the lawn towards the left, looking upon the same flashing scene as that they themselves beheld.

'It is your own particular one,' continued Faith. 'Yes, I see the blue flowers under the edge of her cloak.'

'And I see her squirrel-coloured hair,' said Christopher.

Both stood looking at this apparition, who once, and only once, thought fit to turn her head towards the front of the house they were gazing from. Faith was one in whom the meditative somewhat overpowered the active faculties; she went on, with no abundance of love, to theorize upon this gratuitously charming woman, who, striking freakishly into her brother's path, seemed likely to do him no good in her sisterly estimation. Ethelberta's bright and shapely form stood before her critic now, smartened by the motes of sunlight from head to heel: what Faith would have given to see her so clearly within!

'Without doubt she is already a lady of many romantic experiences,' she said dubiously.

'And on the way to many more,' said Christopher. The tone was just of the kind which may be imagined of a sombre man who had been up all night piping that others might dance.

Faith parted her lips as if in consternation at possibilities. Ethelberta, having already become an influence in Christopher's system, might soon become more — an indestructible fascination — to drag him about, turn his soul inside out, harrow him, twist him, and otherwise torment him, according to the stereotyped form of such processes.

They were interrupted by the opening of a door. A servant entered and came up to them.

'This is for you, I believe, sir,' he said. 'Two guineas;' and he placed the money in Christopher's hand. 'Some breakfast will be ready for you in a moment if you like to have it. Would you wish it brought in here; or will you come to the steward's room?'

'Yes, we will come.' And the man then began to extinguish the lights one by one. Christopher dropped the two pounds and two shillings singly into his pocket, and looking listlessly at the footman said, 'Can you tell me the address of that lady on the lawn? Ah, she has disappeared!'

'She wore a dress with blue flowers,' said Faith.

'And remarkable bright in her manner? O, that's the young widow, Mrs — what's that name — I forget for the moment.'

'Widow?' said Christopher, the eyes of his understanding getting wonderfully clear, and Faith uttering a private ejaculation of thanks that after all no commandments were likely to be broken in this matter. 'The lady I mean is quite a girlish sort of woman.'

‘Yes, yes, so she is — that’s the one. Coachman says she must have been born a widow, for there is not time for her ever to have been made one. However, she’s not quite such a chicken as all that. Mrs. Petherwin, that’s the party’s name.’

‘Does she live here?’

‘No, she is staying in the house visiting for a few days with her mother-in-law. They are a London family, I don’t know her address.’

‘Is she a poetess?’

‘That I cannot say. She is very clever at verses; but she don’t lean over gates to see the sun, and goes to church as regular as you or I, so I should hardly be inclined to say that she’s the complete thing. When she’s up in one of her vagaries she’ll sit with the ladies and make up pretty things out of her head as fast as sticks a-breaking. They will run off her tongue like cotton from a reel, and if she can ever be got in the mind of telling a story she will bring it out that serious and awful that it makes your flesh creep upon your bones; if she’s only got to say that she walked out of one door into another, she’ll tell it so that there seems something wonderful in it. ‘Tis a bother to start her, so our people say behind her back, but, once set going, the house is all alive with her. However, it will soon be dull enough; she and Lady Petherwin are off to-morrow for Rookington, where I believe they are going to stay over New Year’s Day.’

‘Where do you say they are going?’ inquired Christopher, as they followed the footman.

‘Rookington Park — about three miles out of Sandbourne, in the opposite direction to this.’

‘A widow,’ Christopher murmured.

Faith overheard him. ‘That makes no difference to us, does it?’ she said wistfully.

Forty minutes later they were driving along an open road over a ridge which commanded a view of a small inlet below them, the sands of this nook being sheltered by crumbling cliffs. Here at once they saw, in the full light of the sun, two women standing side by side, their faces directed over the sea.

‘There she is again!’ said Faith. ‘She has walked along the shore from the lawn where we saw her before.’

‘Yes,’ said the coachman, ‘she’s a curious woman seemingly. She’ll talk to any poor body she meets. You see she had been out for a morning walk instead of going to bed, and that is some queer mortal or other she has picked up with on her way.’

‘I wonder she does not prefer some rest,’ Faith observed.

The road then dropped into a hollow, and the women by the sea were no longer within view from the carriage, which rapidly neared Sandbourne with the two musicians.

CHAPTER 6.

THE SHORE BY WYNDWAY

The east gleamed upon Ethelberta's squirrel-coloured hair as she said to her companion, 'I have come, Picotee; but not, as you imagine, from a night's sleep. We have actually been dancing till daylight at Wyndway.'

'Then you should not have troubled to come! I could have borne the disappointment under such circumstances,' said the pupil-teacher, who, wearing a dress not so familiar to Christopher's eyes as had been the little white jacket, had not been recognized by him from the hill. 'You look so tired, Berta. I could not stay up all night for the world!'

'One gets used to these things,' said Ethelberta quietly. 'I should have been in bed certainly, had I not particularly wished to use this opportunity of meeting you before you go home to-morrow. I could not have come to Sandbourne to-day, because we are leaving to return again to Rookington. This is all that I wish you to take to mother — only a few little things which may be useful to her; but you will see what it contains when you open it.' She handed to Picotee a small parcel. 'This is for yourself,' she went on, giving a small packet besides. 'It will pay your fare home and back, and leave you something to spare.'

'Thank you,' said Picotee docilely.

'Now, Picotee,' continued the elder, 'let us talk for a few minutes before I go back: we may not meet again for some time.' She put her arm round the waist of Picotee, who did the same by Ethelberta; and thus interlaced they walked backwards and forwards upon the firm flat sand with the motion of one body animated by one will.

'Well, what did you think of my poems?'

'I liked them; but naturally, I did not understand all the experience you describe. It is so different from mine. Yet that made them more interesting to me. I thought I should so much like to mix in the same scenes; but that of course is impossible.'

'I am afraid it is. And you posted the book as I said?'

'Yes.' She added hurriedly, as if to change the subject, 'I have told nobody that we are sisters, or that you are known in any way to me or to mother or to any of us. I thought that would be best, from what you said.'

'Yes, perhaps it is best for the present.'

'The box of clothes came safely, and I find very little alteration will be necessary to make the dress do beautifully for me on Sundays. It is quite new-fashioned to me, though I suppose it was old-fashioned to you. O, and Berta, will the title of Lady Petherwin descend to you when your mother-in-law dies?'

'No, of course not. She is only a knight's widow, and that's nothing.'

'The lady of a knight looks as good on paper as the lady of a lord.'

'Yes. And in other places too sometimes. However, about your journey home. Be very careful; and don't make any inquiries at the stations of anybody but officials. If any man wants to be friendly with you, try to find out if it is from a genuine wish to assist you, or from admiration of your fresh face.'

'How shall I know which?' said Picotee.

Ethelberta laughed. 'If Heaven does not tell you at the moment I cannot,' she said. 'But humanity looks with a different eye from love, and upon the whole it is most to be prized by all of us. I believe it ends oftener in marriage than do a lover's flying smiles. So that for this and other reasons love from a stranger is mostly worthless as a speculation; and it is certainly dangerous as a game. Well, Picotee, has any one paid you real attentions yet?'

'No — that is — '

'There is something going on.'

'Only a wee bit.'

'I thought so. There was a dishonesty about your dear eyes which has never been there before, and love-making and dishonesty are inseparable as coupled hounds. Up comes man, and away goes innocence. Are you going to tell me anything about him?'

'I would rather not, Ethelberta; because it is hardly anything.'

'Well, be careful. And mind this, never tell him what you feel.'

'But then he will never know it.'

'Nor must he. He must think it only. The difference between his thinking and knowing is often the difference between your winning and losing. But general advice is not of much use, and I cannot give more unless you tell more. What is his name?'

Picotee did not reply.

'Never mind: keep your secret. However, listen to this: not a kiss — not so much as the shadow, hint, or merest seedling of a kiss!'

'There is no fear of it,' murmured Picotee; 'though not because of me!'

'You see, my dear Picotee, a lover is not a relative; and he isn't quite a stranger; but he may end in being either, and the way to reduce him to whichever of the two you wish him to be is to treat him like the other. Men who come courting are just like bad cooks: if you are kind to them, instead of ascribing it to an exceptional courtesy on your part, they instantly set it down to their own marvellous worth.'

'But I ought to favour him just a little, poor thing? Just the smallest glimmer of a gleam!'

'Only a very little indeed — so that it comes as a relief to his misery, not as adding to his happiness.'

'It is being too clever, all this; and we ought to be harmless as doves.'

'Ah, Picotee! to continue harmless as a dove you must be wise as a serpent, you'll find — ay, ten serpents, for that matter.'

'But if I cannot get at him, how can I manage him in these ways you speak of?'

'Get at him? I suppose he gets at you in some way, does he not? — tries to see you, or to be near you?'

'No — that's just the point — he doesn't do any such thing, and there's the worry of it!'

'Well, what a silly girl! Then he is not your lover at all?'

'Perhaps he's not. But I am his, at any rate — twice over.'

‘That’s no use. Supply the love for both sides? Why, it’s worse than furnishing money for both. You don’t suppose a man will give his heart in exchange for a woman’s when he has already got hers for nothing? That’s not the way old Adam does business at all.’

Picotee sighed. ‘Have you got a young man, too, Berta?’

‘A young man?’

‘A lover I mean — that’s what we call ‘em down here.’

‘It is difficult to explain,’ said Ethelberta evasively. ‘I knew one many years ago, and I have seen him again, and — that is all.’

‘According to my idea you have one, but according to your own you have not; he does not love you, but you love him — is that how it is?’

‘I have not quite considered how it is.’

‘Do you love him?’

‘I have never seen a man I hate less.’

‘A great deal lies covered up there, I expect!’

‘He was in that carriage which drove over the hill at the moment we met here.’

‘Ah-ah — some great lord or another who has his day by candlelight, and so on. I guess the style. Somebody who no more knows how much bread is a loaf than I do the price of diamonds and pearls.’

‘I am afraid he’s only a commoner as yet, and not a very great one either. But surely you guess, Picotee? But I’ll set you an example of frankness by telling his name. My friend, Mr. Julian, to whom you posted the book. Such changes as he has seen! — from affluence to poverty. He and his sister have been playing dances all night at Wyndway — What is the matter?’

‘Only a pain!’

‘My dear Picotee — ’

‘I think I’ll sit down for a moment, Berta.’

‘What — have you over-walked yourself, dear?’

‘Yes — and I got up very early, you see.’

‘I hope you are not going to be ill, child. You look as if you ought not to be here.’

‘O, it is quite trifling. Does not getting up in a hurry cause a sense of faintness sometimes?’

‘Yes, in people who are not strong.’

‘If we don’t talk about being faint it will go off. Faintness is such a queer thing that to think of it is to have it. Let us talk as we were talking before — about your young man and other indifferent matters, so as to divert my thoughts from fainting, dear Berta. I have always thought the book was to be forwarded to that gentleman because he was a connection of yours by marriage, and he had asked for it. And so you have met this — this Mr. Julian, and gone for walks with him in evenings, I suppose, just as young men and women do who are courting?’

‘No, indeed — what an absurd child you are!’ said Ethelberta. ‘I knew him once, and he is interesting; a few little things like that make it all up.’

‘The love is all on one side, as with me.’

‘O no, no: there is nothing like that. I am not attached to any one, strictly speaking — though, more strictly speaking, I am not unattached.’

‘‘Tis a delightful middle mind to be in. I know it, for I was like it once; but I had scarcely been so long enough to know where I was before I was gone past.’

‘You should have commanded yourself, or drawn back entirely; for let me tell you that at the beginning of caring for a man — just when you are suspended between thinking and feeling — there is a hair’s-breadth of time at which the question of getting into love or not getting in is a matter of will — quite a thing of choice. At the same time, drawing back is a tame dance, and the best of all is to stay balanced awhile.’

‘You do that well, I’ll warrant.’

‘Well, no; for what between continually wanting to love, to escape the blank lives of those who do not, and wanting not to love, to keep out of the miseries of those who do, I get foolishly warm and foolishly cold by turns.’

‘Yes — and I am like you as far as the “foolishly” goes. I wish we poor girls could contrive to bring a little wisdom into our love by way of a change!’

‘That’s the very thing that leading minds in town have begun to do, but there are difficulties. It is easy to love wisely, but the rich man may not marry you; and it is not very hard to reject wisely, but the poor man doesn’t care. Altogether it is a precious problem. But shall we clamber out upon those shining blocks of rock, and find some of the little yellow shells that are in the crevices? I have ten minutes longer, and then I must go.’

CHAPTER 7.

THE DINING-ROOM OF A TOWN HOUSE — THE BUTLER’S PANTRY

A few weeks later there was a friendly dinner-party at the house of a gentleman called Doncastle, who lived in a moderately fashionable square of west London. All the friends and relatives present were nice people, who exhibited becoming signs of pleasure and gaiety at being there; but as regards the vigour with which these emotions were expressed, it may be stated that a slight laugh from far down the throat and a slight narrowing of the eye were equivalent as indices of the degree of mirth felt to a Ha-ha-ha! and a shaking of the shoulders among the minor traders of the kingdom; and to a Ho-ho-ho! contorted features, purple face, and stamping foot among the gentlemen in corduroy and fustian who adorn the remoter provinces.

The conversation was chiefly about a volume of musical, tender, and humorous rhapsodies lately issued to the world in the guise of verse, which had been reviewed and talked about everywhere. This topic, beginning as a private dialogue between a young painter named Ladywell and the lady on his right hand, had enlarged its ground by degrees, as a subject will extend on those rare occasions when it happens to be one about which each person has thought something beforehand, instead of, as

in the natural order of things, one to which the oblivious listener replies mechanically, with earnest features, but with thoughts far away. And so the whole table made the matter a thing to inquire or reply upon at once, and isolated rills of other chat died out like a river in the sands.

‘Witty things, and occasionally Anacreontic: and they have the originality which such a style must naturally possess when carried out by a feminine hand,’ said Ladywell.

‘If it is a feminine hand,’ said a man near.

Ladywell looked as if he sometimes knew secrets, though he did not wish to boast.

‘Written, I presume you mean, in the Anacreontic measure of three feet and a half — spondees and iambics?’ said a gentleman in spectacles, glancing round, and giving emphasis to his inquiry by causing bland glares of a circular shape to proceed from his glasses towards the person interrogated.

The company appeared willing to give consideration to the words of a man who knew such things as that, and hung forward to listen. But Ladywell stopped the whole current of affairs in that direction by saying —

‘O no; I was speaking rather of the matter and tone. In fact, the Seven Days’ Review said they were Anacreontic, you know; and so they are — any one may feel they are.’

The general look then implied a false encouragement, and the man in spectacles looked down again, being a nervous person, who never had time to show his merits because he was so much occupied in hiding his faults.

‘Do you know the authoress, Mr. Neigh?’ continued Ladywell.

‘Can’t say that I do,’ he replied.

Neigh was a man who never disturbed the flesh upon his face except when he was obliged to do so, and paused ten seconds where other people only paused one; as he moved his chin in speaking, motes of light from under the candle-shade caught, lost, and caught again the outlying threads of his burnished beard.

‘She will be famous some day; and you ought at any rate to read her book.’

‘Yes, I ought, I know. In fact, some years ago I should have done it immediately, because I had a reason for pushing on that way just then.’

‘Ah, what was that?’

‘Well, I thought of going in for Westminster Abbey myself at that time; but a fellow has so much to do, and — ’

‘What a pity that you didn’t follow it up. A man of your powers, Mr. Neigh — ’

‘Afterwards I found I was too steady for it, and had too much of the respectable householder in me. Besides, so many other men are on the same tack; and then I didn’t care about it, somehow.’

‘I don’t understand high art, and am utterly in the dark on what are the true laws of criticism,’ a plain married lady, who wore archaeological jewellery, was saying at this time. ‘But I know that I have derived an unusual amount of amusement from those verses, and I am heartily thankful to “E.” for them.’

‘I am afraid,’ said a gentleman who was suffering from a bad shirt-front, ‘that an estimate which depends upon feeling in that way is not to be trusted as permanent opinion.’

The subject now flitted to the other end.

‘Somebody has it that when the heart flies out before the understanding, it saves the judgment a world of pains,’ came from a voice in that quarter.

‘I, for my part, like something merry,’ said an elderly woman, whose face was bisected by the edge of a shadow, which toned her forehead and eyelids to a livid neutral tint, and left her cheeks and mouth like metal at a white heat in the uninterrupted light. ‘I think the liveliness of those ballads as great a recommendation as any. After all, enough misery is known to us by our experiences and those of our friends, and what we see in the newspapers, for all purposes of chastening, without having gratuitous grief inflicted upon us.’

‘But you would not have wished that “Romeo and Juliet” should have ended happily, or that Othello should have discovered the perfidy of his Ancient in time to prevent all fatal consequences?’

‘I am not afraid to go so far as that,’ said the old lady. ‘Shakespeare is not everybody, and I am sure that thousands of people who have seen those plays would have driven home more cheerfully afterwards if by some contrivance the characters could all have been joined together respectively. I uphold our anonymous author on the general ground of her levity.’

‘Well, it is an old and worn argument — that about the inexpedience of tragedy — and much may be said on both sides. It is not to be denied that the anonymous Sappho’s verses — for it seems that she is really a woman — are clever.’

‘Clever!’ said Ladywell — the young man who had been one of the shooting-party at Sandbourne — ‘they are marvellously brilliant.’

‘She is rather warm in her assumed character.’

‘That’s a sign of her actual coldness; she lets off her feeling in theoretic grooves, and there is sure to be none left for practical ones. Whatever seems to be the most prominent vice, or the most prominent virtue in anybody’s writing is the one thing you are safest from in personal dealings with the writer.’

‘O, I don’t mean to call her warmth of feeling a vice or virtue exactly — ’

‘I agree with you,’ said Neigh to the last speaker but one, in tones as emphatic as they possibly could be without losing their proper character of indifference to the whole matter. ‘Warm sentiment of any sort, whenever we have it, disturbs us too much to leave us repose enough for writing it down.’

‘I am sure, when I was at the ardent age,’ said the mistress of the house, in a tone of pleasantly agreeing with every one, particularly those who were diametrically opposed to each other, ‘I could no more have printed such emotions and made them public than I — could have helped privately feeling them.’

‘I wonder if she has gone through half she says? If so, what an experience!’

‘O no — not at all likely,’ said Mr. Neigh. ‘It is as risky to calculate people’s ways of living from their writings as their incomes from their way of living.’

‘She is as true to nature as fashion is false,’ said the painter, in his warmth becoming scarcely complimentary, as sometimes happens with young persons. ‘I don’t think that she has written a word more than what every woman would deny feeling in a society where no woman says what she means or does what she says. And can any praise be greater than that?’

‘Ha-ha! Capital!’

‘All her verses seem to me,’ said a rather stupid person, ‘to be simply —

“Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-la’,

Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-lu’,

Tral’-la-la-lal’-la-la-lalla’,

Tral’-la-la-lu’.”

When you take away the music there is nothing left. Yet she is plainly a woman of great culture.’

‘Have you seen what the London Light says about them — one of the finest things I have ever read in the way of admiration?’ continued Ladywell, paying no attention to the previous speaker. He lingered for a reply, and then impulsively quoted several lines from the periodical he had named, without aid or hesitation. ‘Good, is it not?’ added Ladywell.

They assented, but in such an unqualified manner that half as much readiness would have meant more. But Ladywell, though not experienced enough to be quite free from enthusiasm, was too experienced to mind indifference for more than a minute or two. When the ladies had withdrawn, the young man went on —

‘Colonel Staff said a funny thing to me yesterday about these very poems. He asked me if I knew her, and — ’

‘Her? Why, he knows that it is a lady all the time, and we were only just now doubting whether the sex of the writer could be really what it seems. Shame, Ladywell!’ said his friend Neigh.

‘Ah, Mr. Ladywell,’ said another, ‘now we have found you out. You know her!’

‘Now — I say — ha-ha!’ continued the painter, with a face expressing that he had not at all tried to be found out as the man possessing incomparably superior knowledge of the poetess. ‘I beg pardon really, but don’t press me on the matter. Upon my word the secret is not my own. As I was saying, the Colonel said, “Do you know her?” — but you don’t care to hear?’

‘We shall be delighted!’

‘So the Colonel said, “Do you know her?” adding, in a most comic way, “Between U. and E., Ladywell, I believe there is a close affinity” — meaning me, you know, by U. Just like the Colonel — ha-ha-ha!’

The older men did not oblige Ladywell a second time with any attempt at appreciation; but a weird silence ensued, during which the smile upon Ladywell’s face became frozen to painful permanence.

‘Meaning by E., you know, the “E” of the poems — heh-heh!’ he added.

‘It was a very humorous incident certainly,’ said his friend Neigh, at which there was a laugh — not from anything connected with what he said, but simply because it was the right thing to laugh when Neigh meant you to do so.

‘Now don’t, Neigh — you are too hard upon me. But, seriously, two or three fellows were there when I said it, and they all began laughing — but, then, the Colonel said it in such a queer way, you know. But you were asking me about her? Well, the fact is, between ourselves, I do know that she is a lady; and I don’t mind telling a word — ’

‘But we would not for the world be the means of making you betray her confidence — would we, Jones?’

‘No, indeed; we would not.’

‘No, no; it is not that at all — this is really too bad! — you must listen just for a moment — ’

‘Ladywell, don’t betray anybody on our account.’

‘Whoever the illustrious young lady may be she has seen a great deal of the world,’ said Mr. Doncastle blandly, ‘and puts her experience of the comedy of its emotions, and of its method of showing them, in a very vivid light.’

‘I heard a man say that the novelty with which the ideas are presented is more noticeable than the originality of the ideas themselves,’ observed Neigh. ‘The woman has made a great talk about herself; and I am quite weary of people asking of her condition, place of abode, has she a father, has she a mother, or dearer one yet than all other.’

‘I would have burlesque quotation put down by Act of Parliament, and all who dabble in it placed with him who can cite Scripture for his purposes,’ said Ladywell, in retaliation.

After a pause Neigh remarked half-privately to their host, who was his uncle: ‘Your butler Chickerel is a very intelligent man, as I have heard.’

‘Yes, he does very well,’ said Mr. Doncastle.

‘But is he not a — very extraordinary man?’

‘Not to my knowledge,’ said Doncastle, looking up surprised. ‘Why do you think that, Alfred?’

‘Well, perhaps it was not a matter to mention. He reads a great deal, I dare say?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I noticed how wonderfully his face kindled when we began talking about the poems during dinner. Perhaps he is a poet himself in disguise. Did you observe it?’

‘No. To the best of my belief he is a very trustworthy and honourable man. He has been with us — let me see, how long? — five months, I think, and he was fifteen years in his last place. It certainly is a new side to his character if he publicly showed any interest in the conversation, whatever he might have felt.’

‘Since the matter has been mentioned,’ said Mr. Jones, ‘I may say that I too noticed the singularity of it.’

‘If you had not said otherwise,’ replied Doncastle somewhat warmly, ‘I should have asserted him to be the last man-servant in London to infringe such an elementary rule. If he did so this evening, it is certainly for the first time, and I sincerely hope that no annoyance was caused — ’

‘O no, no — not at all — it might have been a mistake of mine,’ said Jones. ‘I should quite have forgotten the circumstance if Mr. Neigh’s words had not brought it to my mind. It was really nothing to notice, and I beg that you will not say a word to him about it on my account.’

‘He has a taste that way, my dear uncle, nothing more, depend upon it,’ said Neigh. ‘If I had such a man belonging to me I should only be too proud. Certainly do not mention it.’

‘Of course Chickerel is Chickerel,’ Mr. Doncastle rejoined. ‘We all know what that means. And really, on reflecting, I do remember that he is of a literary turn of mind — not further by an inch than is commendable, you know. I am quite aware as I glance down the papers and prints any morning that Chickerel’s eyes have been over the ground before mine, and that he generally forestalls the rest of us by a chapter or so in the last new book sent home; but in these vicious days that particular weakness is really virtue, just because it is not quite a vice.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Jones, the reflective man in spectacles, ‘positive virtues are getting moved off the stage: negative ones are moved on to the place of positives; we thank bare justice as we used only to thank generosity; call a man honest who steals only by law, and consider him a benefactor if he does not steal at all.’

‘Hear, hear!’ said Neigh. ‘We will decide that Chickerel is even a better trained fellow than if he had shown no interest at all in his face.’

‘The action being like those trifling irregularities in art at its vigorous periods, which seemed designed to hide the unpleasant monotony of absolute symmetry,’ said Ladywell.

‘On the other hand, an affected want of training of that sort would be even a better disguise for an artful man than a perfectly impassible demeanour. He is two removes from discovery in a hidden scheme, whilst a neutral face is only one.’

‘You quite alarm me by these subtle theories,’ said Mr. Doncastle, laughing; and the subject then became compounded with other matters, till the speakers rose to rejoin the charming flock upstairs.

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In the basement story at this hour Mr. Chickerel the butler, who had formed the subject of discussion on the floor above, was busily engaged in looking after his two subordinates as they bustled about in the operations of clearing away. He was a man of whom, if the shape of certain bones and muscles of the face is ever to be taken as a guide to the character, one might safely have predicated conscientiousness in the performance of duties, a thorough knowledge of all that appertained to them, a general desire to live on without troubling his mind about anything which did not concern him. Any person interested in the matter would have assumed without hesitation that the estimate his

employer had given of Chickerel was a true one — more, that not only would the butler under all ordinary circumstances resolutely prevent his face from showing curiosity in an unbecoming way, but that, with the soul of a true gentleman, he would, if necessary, equivocate as readily as the noblest of his betters to remove any stain upon his honour in such trifles. Hence it is apparent that if Chickerel's countenance really appeared, as Neigh had asserted, full of curiosity with regard to the gossip that was going on, the feelings which led to the exhibition must have been of a very unusual and irrepressible kind.

His hair was of that peculiar bluish-white which is to be observed when the oncoming years, instead of singling out special locks of a man's head for operating against, advance uniformly over the whole field, and enfeeble the colour at all points before absolutely extinguishing it anywhere; his nose was of the knotty shape in the gristle and earthward tendency in the flesh which is commonly said to carry sound judgment above it, his eyes were thoughtful, and his face was thin — a contour which, if it at once abstracted from his features that cheerful assurance of single-minded honesty which adorns the exteriors of so many of his brethren, might have raised a presumption in the minds of some beholders that perhaps in this case the quality might not be altogether wanting within.

The coffee having been served to the people upstairs, one of the footmen rushed into his bedroom on the lower floor, and in a few minutes emerged again in the dress of a respectable clerk who had been born for better things, with the trifling exceptions that he wore a low-crowned hat, and instead of knocking his heels on the pavement walked with a gait as delicate as a lady's. Going out of the area-door with a cigar in his mouth, he mounted the steps hastily to keep an appointment round the corner — the keeping of which as a private gentleman necessitated the change of the greater part of his clothes twice within a quarter of an hour — the limit of his time of absence. The other footman was upstairs, and the butler, finding that he had a few minutes to himself, sat down at the table and wrote: —

'MY DEAR ETHELBERTA, — I did not intend to write to you for some few days to come, but the way in which you have been talked about here this evening makes me anxious to send a line or two at once, though I have very little time to spare, as usual. We have just had a dinner-party — indeed the carriages have not yet been brought round — and the talk at dinner was about your verses, of course. The thing was brought up by a young fellow named Ladywell — do you know him? He is a painter by profession, but he has a pretty good private income beyond what he gets by practising his line of business among the nobility, and that I expect is not little, for he is well known, and encouraged because he is young, and good-looking, and so forth. His family own a good bit of land somewhere out Aldbrickham way. However, I am before my story. From what they all said it is pretty clear that you are thought a great deal of in fashionable society as a poetess — but perhaps you know this as well as I — moving in it as you do yourself, my dear.

‘The ladies afterwards got very curious about your age, so curious, in fact, and so full of certainty that you were thirty-five and a blighted existence, if an hour, that I felt inclined to rap out there and then, and hang what came of it: “My daughter, ladies, was to my own and her mother’s certain knowledge only twenty-one last birthday, and has as bright a heart as anybody in London.” One of them actually said that you must be fifty to have got such an experience. Her guess was a very shrewd one in the bottom of it, however, for it was grounded upon the way you use those strange experiences of mine in the society that I tell you of, and dress them up as if they were yours; and, as you see, she hit off my own age to a year. I thought it was very sharp of her to be so right, although so wrong.

‘I do not want to influence your plans in any way about things which your school learning fits you to understand much better than I, who never had such opportunities, but I think that if I were in your place, Berta, I would not let my name be known just yet, for people always want what’s kept from them, and don’t value what’s given. I am not sure, but I think that after the women had gone upstairs the others turned their thoughts upon you again; what they said about you I don’t know, for if there’s one thing I hate ‘tis hanging about the doors when the men begin to get moved by their wine, which they did to a large extent to-night, and spoke very loud. They always do here, for old Don is a hearty giver in his way. However, as you see these people from their own level now, it is not much that I can tell you in seeing them only from the under side, though I see strange things sometimes, and of course —

”What great ones do the less will prattle of,”

as it says in that book of select pieces that you gave me.

‘Well, my dear girl, I hope you will prosper. One thing above all others you’ll have to mind, and it is that folk must continually strain to advance in order to remain where they are: and you particularly. But as for trying too hard, I wouldn’t do it. Much lies in minding this, that your best plan for lightness of heart is to raise yourself a little higher than your old mates, but not so high as to be quite out of their reach. All human beings enjoy themselves from the outside, and so getting on a little has this good in it, you still keep in your old class where your feelings are, and are thoughtfully treated by this class: while by getting on too much you are sneered at by your new acquaintance, who don’t know the skill of your rise, and you are parted from and forgot by the old ones who do. Whatever happens, don’t be too quick to feel. You will surely get some hard blows when you are found out, for if the great can find no excuse for hitting with a mind, they’ll do it and say ‘twas in fun. But you are young and healthy, and youth and health are power. I wish I could have a decent footman here with me, but I suppose it is no use trying. It is such men as these that provoke the contempt we get. Well, thank God a few years will see the end of me, for I am growing ashamed of my company — so different as they are to the servants of old times. — Your affectionate father, R. CHICKEREL.

‘P.S. — Do not press Lady Petherwin any further to remove the rules on which you live with her. She is quite right: she cannot keep us, and to recognize us would do you no good, nor us either. We are content to see you secretly, since it is best for you.’

CHAPTER 8.

CHRISTOPHER’S LODGINGS — THE GROUNDS ABOUT ROOKINGTON

Meanwhile, in the distant town of Sandbourne, Christopher Julian had recovered from the weariness produced by his labours at the Wyndway evening-party where Ethelberta had been a star. Instead of engaging his energies to clear encumbrances from the tangled way of his life, he now set about reading the popular ‘Metres by E.’ with more interest and assiduity than ever; for though Julian was a thinker by instinct, he was a worker by effort only; and the higher of these kinds being dependent upon the lower for its exhibition, there was often a lamentable lack of evidence of his power in either. It is a provoking correlation, and has conduced to the obscurity of many a genius.

‘Kit,’ said his sister, on reviving at the end of the bad headache which had followed the dance, ‘those poems seem to have increased in value with you. The lady, lofty as she appears to be, would be flattered if she only could know how much you study them. Have you decided to thank her for them? Now let us talk it over — I like having a chat about such a pretty new subject.’

‘I would thank her in a moment if I were absolutely certain that she had anything to do with sending them, or even writing them. I am not quite sure of that yet.’

‘How strange that a woman could bring herself to write those verses!’

‘Not at all strange — they are natural outpourings.’

Faith looked critically at the remoter caverns of the fire.

‘Why strange?’ continued Christopher. ‘There is no harm in them.’

‘O no — no harm. But I cannot explain to you — unless you see it partly of your own accord — that to write them she must be rather a fast lady — not a bad fast lady; a nice fast lady, I mean, of course. There, I have said it now, and I daresay you are vexed with me, for your interest in her has deepened to what it originally was, I think. I don’t mean any absolute harm by “fast,” Kit.’

‘Bold, forward, you mean, I suppose?’

Faith tried to hit upon a better definition which should meet all views; and, on failing to do so, looked concerned at her brother’s somewhat grieved appearance, and said, helplessly, ‘Yes, I suppose I do.’

‘My idea of her is quite the reverse. A poetess must intrinsically be sensitive, or she could never feel: but then, frankness is a rhetorical necessity even with the most modest, if their inspirations are to do any good in the world. You will, for certain, not be interested in something I was going to tell you, which I thought would have pleased you immensely; but it is not worth mentioning now.’

‘If you will not tell me, never mind. But don’t be crabbed, Kit! You know how interested I am in all your affairs.’

‘It is only that I have composed an air to one of the prettiest of her songs, “When tapers tall” — but I am not sure about the power of it. This is how it begins — I threw it off in a few minutes, after you had gone to bed.’

He went to the piano and lightly touched over an air, the manuscript copy of which he placed in front of him, and listened to hear her opinion, having proved its value frequently; for it was not that of a woman merely, but impersonally human. Though she was unknown to fame, this was a great gift in Faith, since to have an unsexed judgment is as precious as to be an unsexed being is deplorable.

‘It is very fair indeed,’ said the sister, scarcely moving her lips in her great attention. ‘Now again, and again, and again. How could you do it in the time!’

Kit knew that she admired his performance: passive assent was her usual praise, and she seldom insisted vigorously upon any view of his compositions unless for purposes of emendation.

‘I was thinking that, as I cannot very well write to her, I may as well send her this,’ said Christopher, with lightened spirits, voice to correspond, and eyes likewise; ‘there can be no objection to it, for such things are done continually. Consider while I am gone, Faith. I shall be out this evening for an hour or two.’

When Christopher left the house shortly after, instead of going into the town on some errand, as was customary whenever he went from home after dark, he ascended a back street, passed over the hills behind, and walked at a brisk pace inland along the road to Rookington Park, where, as he had learnt, Ethelberta and Lady Petherwin were staying for a time, the day or two which they spent at Wyndway having formed a short break in the middle of this visit. The moon was shining to-night, and Christopher sped onwards over the pallid high-road as readily as he could have done at noonday. In three-quarters of an hour he reached the park gates; and entering now upon a tract which he had never before explored, he went along more cautiously and with some uncertainty as to the precise direction that the road would take. A frosted expanse of even grass, on which the shadow of his head appeared with an opal halo round it, soon allowed the house to be discovered beyond, the other portions of the park abounding with timber older and finer than that of any other spot in the neighbourhood. Christopher withdrew into the shade, and wheeled round to the front of the building that contained his old love. Here he gazed and idled, as many a man has done before him — wondering which room the fair poetess occupied, waiting till lights began to appear in the upper windows — which they did as uncertainly as glow-worms blinking up at eventide — and warming with currents of revived feeling in perhaps the sweetest of all conditions. New love is brightest, and long love is greatest; but revived love is the tenderest thing known upon earth.

Occupied thus, Christopher was greatly surprised to see, on casually glancing to one side, another man standing close to the shadowy trunk of another tree, in a similar attitude to his own, gazing, with arms folded, as blankly at the windows of the house as

Christopher himself had been gazing. Not willing to be discovered, Christopher stuck closer to his tree. While he waited thus, the stranger began murmuring words, in a slow soft voice. Christopher listened till he heard the following: —

‘Pale was the day and rayless, love,
That had an eve so dim.’

Two well-known lines from one of Ethelberta’s poems.

Jealousy is a familiar kind of heat which disfigures, licks playfully, clouds, blackens, and boils a man as a fire does a pot; and on recognizing these pilferings from what he had grown to regard as his own treasury, Christopher’s fingers began to nestle with great vigour in the palms of his hands. Three or four minutes passed, when the unknown rival gave a last glance at the windows, and walked away. Christopher did not like the look of that walk at all — there was grace enough in it to suggest that his antagonist had no mean chance of finding favour in a woman’s eyes. A sigh, too, seemed to proceed from the stranger’s breast; but as their distance apart was too great for any such sound to be heard by any possibility, Christopher set down that to imagination, or to the brushing of the wind over the trees.

The lighted windows went out one by one, and all the house was in darkness. Julian then walked off himself, with a vigour that was spasmodic only, and with much less brightness of mind than he had experienced on his journey hither. The stranger had gone another way, and Christopher saw no more of him. When he reached Sandbourne, Faith was still sitting up.

‘But I told you I was going to take a long walk,’ he said.

‘No, Christopher: really you did not. How tired and sad you do look — though I always know beforehand when you are in that state: one of your feet has a drag about it as you pass along the pavement outside the window.’

‘Yes, I forgot that I did not tell you.’

He could not begin to describe his pilgrimage: it was too silly a thing even for her to hear of.

‘It does not matter at all about my staying up,’ said Faith assuringly; ‘that is, if exercise benefits you. Walking up and down the lane, I suppose?’

‘No; not walking up and down the lane.’

‘The turnpike-road to Rookington is pleasant.’

‘Faith, that is really where I have been. How came you to know?’

‘I only guessed. Verses and an accidental meeting produce a special journey.’

‘Ethelberta is a fine woman, physically and mentally, both. I wonder people do not talk about her twice as much as they do.’

‘Then surely you are getting attached to her again. You think you discover in her more than anybody else does; and love begins with a sense of superior discernment.’

‘No, no. That is only nonsense,’ he said hurriedly. ‘However, love her or love her not, I can keep a corner of my heart for you, Faith. There is another brute after her too, it seems.’

‘Of course there is: I expect there are many. Her position in society is above ours, so that it is an unwise course to go troubling yourself more about her.’

‘No. If a needy man must be so foolish as to fall in love, it is best to do so where he cannot double his foolishness by marrying the woman.’

‘I don’t like to hear you talk so slightly of what poor father did.’

Christopher fixed his attention on the supper. That night, late as it was, when Faith was in bed and sleeping, he sat before a sheet of music-paper, neatly copying his composition upon it. The manuscript was intended as an offering to Ethelberta at the first convenient opportunity.

* * * * *

‘Well, after all my trouble to find out about Ethelberta, here comes the clue unasked for,’ said the musician to his sister a few days later.

She turned and saw that he was reading the Wessex Reflector.

‘What is it?’ asked Faith.

‘The secret of the true authorship of the book is out at last, and it is Ethelberta of course. I am so glad to have it proved hers.’

‘But can we believe — ?’

‘O yes. Just hear what “Our London Correspondent” says. It is one of the nicest bits of gossip that he has furnished us with for a long time.’

‘Yes: now read it, do.’

“‘The author of ‘Metres by E.’” Christopher began, “a book of which so much has been said and conjectured, and one, in fact, that has been the chief talk for several weeks past of the literary circles to which I belong, is a young lady who was a widow before she reached the age of eighteen, and is now not far beyond her fourth lustrum. I was additionally informed by a friend whom I met yesterday on his way to the House of Lords, that her name is Mrs. Petherwin — Christian name Ethelberta; and that she resides with her mother-in-law at their house in Exonbury Crescent. She is, moreover, the daughter of the late Bishop of Silchester (if report may be believed), whose active benevolence, as your readers know, left his family in comparatively straitened circumstances at his death. The marriage was a secret one, and much against the wish of her husband’s friends, who are wealthy people on all sides. The death of the bridegroom two or three weeks after the wedding led to a reconciliation; and the young poetess was taken to the home which she still occupies, devoted to the composition of such brilliant effusions as those the world has lately been favoured with from her pen.”

‘If you want to send her your music, you can do so now,’ said Faith.

‘I might have sent it before, but I wanted to deliver it personally. However, it is all the same now, I suppose, whether I send it or not. I always knew that our destinies would lie apart, though she was once temporarily under a cloud. Her momentary inspiration to write that “Cancelled Words” was the worst possible omen for me. It showed that, thinking me no longer useful as a practical chance, she would make me ornamental as a poetical regret. But I’ll send the manuscript of the song.’

‘In the way of business, as a composer only; and you must say to yourself, “Ethelberta, as thou art but woman, I dare; but as widow I fear thee.”’

Notwithstanding Christopher’s affected carelessness, that evening saw a great deal of nicety bestowed upon the operation of wrapping up and sending off the song. He dropped it into the box and heard it fall, and with the curious power which he possessed of setting his wisdom to watch any particular folly in himself that it could not hinder, speculated as he walked on the result of this first tangible step of return to his old position as Ethelberta’s lover.

CHAPTER 9.

A LADY’S DRAWING-ROOMS — ETHELBERTA’S DRESSING-ROOM

It was a house on the north side of Hyde Park, between ten and eleven in the evening, and several intelligent and courteous people had assembled there to enjoy themselves as far as it was possible to do so in a neutral way — all carefully keeping every variety of feeling in a state of solution, in spite of any attempt such feelings made from time to time to crystallize on interesting subjects in hand.

‘Neigh, who is that charming woman with her head built up in a novel way even for hair architecture — the one with her back towards us?’ said a man whose coat fitted doubtfully to a friend whose coat fitted well.

‘Just going to ask for the same information,’ said Mr. Neigh, determining the very longest hair in his beard to an infinitesimal nicety by drawing its lower portion through his fingers. ‘I have quite forgotten — cannot keep people’s names in my head at all; nor could my father either — nor any of my family — a very odd thing. But my old friend Mrs. Napper knows for certain.’ And he turned to one of a small group of middle-aged persons near, who, instead of skimming the surface of things in general, like the rest of the company, were going into the very depths of them.

‘O — that is the celebrated Mrs. Petherwin, the woman who makes rhymes and prints ‘em,’ said Mrs. Napper, in a detached sentence, and then continued talking again to those on the other side of her.

The two loungers went on with their observations of Ethelberta’s headdress, which, though not extraordinary or eccentric, did certainly convey an idea of indefinable novelty. Observers were sometimes half inclined to think that her cuts and modes were acquired by some secret communication with the mysterious clique which orders the livery of the fashionable world, for — and it affords a parallel to cases in which clever thinkers in other spheres arrive independently at one and the same conclusion — Ethelberta’s fashion often turned out to be the coming one.

‘O, is that the woman at last?’ said Neigh, diminishing his broad general gaze at the room to a close criticism of Ethelberta.

“‘The rhymes,” as Mrs. Napper calls them, are not to be despised,’ said his companion. ‘They are not quite *virginibus puerisque*, and the writer’s opinions of life and

society differ very materially from mine, but I cannot help admiring her in the more reflective pieces; the songs I don't care for. The method in which she handles curious subjects, and at the same time impresses us with a full conviction of her modesty, is very adroit, and somewhat blinds us to the fact that no such poems were demanded of her at all.'

'I have not read them,' said Neigh, secretly wrestling with his jaw, to prevent a yawn; 'but I suppose I must. The truth is, that I never care much for reading what one ought to read; I wish I did, but I cannot help it. And, no doubt, you admire the lady immensely for writing them: I don't. Everybody is so talented now-a-days that the only people I care to honour as deserving real distinction are those who remain in obscurity. I am myself hoping for a corner in some biographical dictionary when the time comes for those works only to contain lists of the exceptional individuals of whom nothing is known but that they lived and died.'

'Ah — listen. They are going to sing one of her songs,' said his friend, looking towards a bustling movement in the neighbourhood of the piano. 'I believe that song, "When tapers tall," has been set to music by three or four composers already.'

'Men of any note?' said Neigh, at last beaten by his yawn, which courtesy nevertheless confined within his person to such an extent that only a few unimportant symptoms, such as reduced eyes and a certain rectangular manner of mouth in speaking, were visible.

'Scarcely,' replied the other man. 'Established writers of music do not expend their energies upon new verse until they find that such verse is likely to endure; for should the poet be soon forgotten, their labour is in some degree lost.'

'Artful dogs — who would have thought it?' said Neigh, just as an exercise in words; and they drew nearer to the piano, less to become listeners to the singing than to be spectators of the scene in that quarter. But among some others the interest in the songs seemed to be very great; and it was unanimously wished that the young lady who had practised the different pieces of music privately would sing some of them now in the order of their composers' reputations. The musical persons in the room unconsciously resolved themselves into a committee of taste.

One and another had been tried, when, at the end of the third, a lady spoke to Ethelberta.

'Now, Mrs. Petherwin,' she said, gracefully throwing back her face, 'your opinion is by far the most valuable. In which of the cases do you consider the marriage of verse and tune to have been most successful?'

Ethelberta, finding these and other unexpected calls made upon herself, came to the front without flinching.

'The sweetest and the best that I like by far,' she said, 'is none of these. It is one which reached me by post only this morning from a place in Wessex, and is written by an unheard-of man who lives somewhere down there — a man who will be, nevertheless, heard a great deal of some day, I hope — think. I have only practised it this afternoon; but, if one's own judgment is worth anything, it is the best.'

‘Let us have your favourite, by all means,’ said another friend of Ethelberta’s who was present — Mrs. Doncastle.

‘I am so sorry that I cannot oblige you, since you wish to hear it,’ replied the poetess regretfully; ‘but the music is at home. I had not received it when I lent the others to Miss Belmaine, and it is only in manuscript like the rest.’

‘Could it not be sent for?’ suggested an enthusiast who knew that Ethelberta lived only in the next street, appealing by a look to her, and then to the mistress of the house.

‘Certainly, let us send for it,’ said that lady. A footman was at once quietly despatched with precise directions as to where Christopher’s sweet production might be found.

‘What — is there going to be something interesting?’ asked a young married friend of Mrs. Napper, who had returned to her original spot.

‘Yes — the best song she has written is to be sung in the best manner to the best air that has been composed for it. I should not wonder if she were going to sing it herself.’

‘Did you know anything of Mrs. Petherwin until her name leaked out in connection with these ballads?’

‘No; but I think I recollect seeing her once before. She is one of those people who are known, as one may say, by subscription: everybody knows a little, till she is astonishingly well known altogether; but nobody knows her entirely. She was the orphan child of some clergyman, I believe. Lady Petherwin, her mother-in-law, has been taking her about a great deal latterly.’

‘She has apparently a very good prospect.’

‘Yes; and it is through her being of that curious undefined character which interprets itself to each admirer as whatever he would like to have it. Old men like her because she is so girlish; youths because she is womanly; wicked men because she is good in their eyes; good men because she is wicked in theirs.’

‘She must be a very anomalous sort of woman, at that rate.’

‘Yes. Like the British Constitution, she owes her success in practice to her inconsistencies in principle.’

‘These poems must have set her up. She appears to be quite the correct spectacle. Happy Mrs. Petherwin!’

The subject of their dialogue was engaged in a conversation with Mrs. Belmaine upon the management of households — a theme provoked by a discussion that was in progress in the pages of some periodical of the time. Mrs. Belmaine was very full of the argument, and went on from point to point till she came to servants.

The face of Ethelberta showed caution at once.

‘I consider that Lady Plamby pets her servants by far too much,’ said Mrs. Belmaine. ‘O, you do not know her? Well, she is a woman with theories; and she lends her maids and men books of the wrong kind for their station, and sends them to picture

exhibitions which they don't in the least understand — all for the improvement of their taste, and morals, and nobody knows what besides. It only makes them dissatisfied.'

The face of Ethelberta showed venturesomeness. 'Yes, and dreadfully ambitious!' she said.

'Yes, indeed. What a turn the times have taken! People of that sort push on, and get into business, and get great warehouses, until at last, without ancestors, or family, or name, or estate — '

'Or the merest scrap of heirloom or family jewel.'

'Or heirlooms, or family jewels, they are thought as much of as if their forefathers had glided unobtrusively through the peerage — '

'Ever since the first edition.'

'Yes.' Mrs. Belmaine, who really sprang from a good old family, had been going to say, 'for the last seven hundred years,' but fancying from Ethelberta's addendum that she might not date back more than a trifling century or so, adopted the suggestion with her usual well-known courtesy, and blushed down to her locket at the thought of the mistake that she might have made. This sensitiveness was a trait in her character which gave great gratification to her husband, and, indeed, to all who knew her.

'And have you any theory on the vexed question of servant-government?' continued Mrs. Belmaine, smiling. 'But no — the subject is of far too practical a nature for one of your bent, of course.'

'O no — it is not at all too practical. I have thought of the matter often,' said Ethelberta. 'I think the best plan would be for somebody to write a pamphlet, "The Shortest Way with the Servants," just as there was once written a terribly stinging one, "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters," which had a great effect.'

'I have always understood that that was written by a dissenter as a satire upon the Church?'

'Ah — so it was: but the example will do to illustrate my meaning.'

'Quite so — I understand — so it will,' said Mrs. Belmaine, with clouded faculties.

Meanwhile Christopher's music had arrived. An accomplished gentleman who had every musical talent except that of creation, scanned the notes carefully from top to bottom, and sat down to accompany the singer. There was no lady present of sufficient confidence or skill to venture into a song she had never seen before, and the only one who had seen it was Ethelberta herself; she did not deny having practised it the greater part of the afternoon, and was very willing to sing it now if anybody would derive pleasure from the performance. Then she began, and the sweetness of her singing was such that even the most unsympathetic honoured her by looking as if they would be willing to listen to every note the song contained if it were not quite so much trouble to do so. Some were so interested that, instead of continuing their conversation, they remained in silent consideration of how they would continue it when she had finished; while the particularly civil people arranged their countenances into every attentive form that the mind could devise. One emotional gentleman looked at the corner of a chair as if, till that moment, such an object had never crossed his vision before; the

movement of his finger to the imagined tune was, for a deaf old clergyman, a perfect mine of interest; whilst a young man from the country was powerless to put an end to an enchanted gaze at nothing at all in the exact middle of the room before him. Neigh, and the general phalanx of cool men and celebrated club yawners, were so much affected that they raised their chronic look of great objection to things, to an expression of scarcely any objection at all.

‘What makes it so interesting,’ said Mrs. Doncastle to Ethelberta, when the song was over and she had retired from the focus of the company, ‘is, that it is played from the composer’s own copy, which has never met the public eye, or any other than his own before to-day. And I see that he has actually sketched in the lines by hand, instead of having ruled paper — just as the great old composers used to do. You must have been as pleased to get it fresh from the stocks like that as he probably was pleased to get your thanks.’

Ethelberta became reflective. She had not thanked Christopher; moreover, she had decided, after some consideration, that she ought not to thank him. What new thoughts were suggested by that remark of Mrs. Doncastle’s, and what new inclination resulted from the public presentation of his tune and her words as parts of one organic whole, are best explained by describing her doings at a later hour, when, having left her friends somewhat early, she had reached home and retired from public view for that evening.

Ethelberta went to her room, sent away the maid who did double duty for herself and Lady Petherwin, walked in circles about the carpet till the fire had grown haggard and cavernous, sighed, took a sheet of paper and wrote: —

‘DEAR MR. JULIAN, — I have said I would not write: I have said it twice; but discretion, under some circumstances, is only another name for unkindness. Before thanking you for your sweet gift, let me tell you in a few words of something which may materially change an aspect of affairs under which I appear to you to deserve it.

‘With regard to my history and origin you are altogether mistaken; and how can I tell whether your bitterness at my previous silence on those points may not cause you to withdraw your act of courtesy now? But the gratification of having at last been honest with you may compensate even for the loss of your respect.

‘The matter is a small one to tell, after all. What will you say on learning that I am not the trodden-down “lady by birth” that you have supposed me? That my father is not dead, as you probably imagine; that he is working for his living as one among a peculiarly stigmatized and ridiculed multitude?

‘Had he been a brawny cottager, carpenter, mason, blacksmith, well-digger, navvy, tree-feller — any effective and manly trade, in short, a worker in which can stand up in the face of the noblest and daintiest, and bare his gnarled arms and say, with a consciousness of superior power, “Look at a real man!” I should have been able to show you antecedents which, if not intensely romantic, are not altogether antagonistic to romance. But the present fashion of associating with one particular class everything that is ludicrous and bombastic overpowers me when I think of it in relation to myself

and your known sensitiveness. When the well-born poetess of good report melts into. . .’

Having got thus far, a faint-hearted look, which had begun to show itself several sentences earlier, became pronounced. She threw the writing into the dull fire, poked and stirred it till a red inflammation crept over the sheet, and then started anew: —

‘DEAR MR. JULIAN, — Not knowing your present rank as composer — whether on the very brink of fame, or as yet a long way off — I cannot decide what form of expression my earnest acknowledgments should take. Let me simply say in one short phrase, I thank you infinitely!

‘I am no musician, and my opinion on music may not be worth much: yet I know what I like (as everybody says, but I do not use the words as a form to cover a hopeless blank on all connected with the subject), and this sweet air I love. You must have glided like a breeze about me — seen into a heart not worthy of scrutiny, jotted down words that cannot justify attention — before you could have apotheosized the song in so exquisite a manner. My gratitude took the form of wretchedness when, on hearing the effect of the ballad in public this evening, I thought that I had not power to withhold a reply which might do us both more harm than good. Then I said, “Away with all emotion — I wish the world was drained dry of it — I will take no notice,” when a lady whispered at my elbow to the effect that of course I had expressed my gratification to you. I ought first to have mentioned that your creation has been played to-night to full drawing-rooms, and the original tones cooled the artificial air like a fountain almost.

‘I prophesy great things of you. Perhaps, at the time when we are each but a row of bones in our individual graves, your genius will be remembered, while my mere cleverness will have been long forgotten.

‘But — you must allow a woman of experience to say this — the undoubted power that you possess will do you socially no good unless you mix with it the ingredient of ambition — a quality in which I fear you are very deficient. It is in the hope of stimulating you to a better opinion of yourself that I write this letter.

‘Probably I shall never meet you again. Not that I think circumstances to be particularly powerful to prevent such a meeting, rather it is that I shall energetically avoid it. There can be no such thing as strong friendship between a man and a woman not of one family.

‘More than that there must not be, and this is why we will not meet. You see that I do not mince matters at all; but it is hypocrisy to avoid touching upon a subject which all men and women in our position inevitably think of, no matter what they say. Some women might have written distantly, and wept at the repression of their real feeling; but it is better to be more frank, and keep a dry eye. — Yours, ETHELBERTA.’

Her feet felt cold and her heart weak as she directed the letter, and she was overpowered with weariness. But murmuring, ‘If I let it stay till the morning I shall not send it, and a man may be lost to fame because of a woman’s squeamishness — it shall go,’ she partially dressed herself, wrapped a large cloak around her, descended the stairs, and went out to the pillar-box at the corner, leaving the door not quite

close. No gust of wind had realised her misgivings that it might be blown shut on her return, and she re-entered as softly as she had emerged.

It will be seen that Ethelberta had said nothing about her family after all.

CHAPTER 10.

LADY PETHERWIN'S HOUSE

The next day old Lady Petherwin, who had not accompanied Ethelberta the night before, came into the morning-room, with a newspaper in her hand.

'What does this mean, Ethelberta?' she inquired in tones from which every shade of human expressiveness was extracted by some awful and imminent mood that lay behind. She was pointing to a paragraph under the heading of 'Literary Notes,' which contained in a few words the announcement of Ethelberta's authorship that had more circumstantially appeared in the Wessex Reflector.

'It means what it says,' said Ethelberta quietly.

'Then it is true?'

'Yes. I must apologize for having kept it such a secret from you. It was not done in the spirit that you may imagine: it was merely to avoid disturbing your mind that I did it so privately.'

'But surely you have not written every one of those ribald verses?'

Ethelberta looked inclined to exclaim most vehemently against this; but what she actually did say was, "'Ribald" — what do you mean by that? I don't think that you are aware what "ribald" means.'

'I am not sure that I am. As regards some words as well as some persons, the less you are acquainted with them the more it is to your credit.'

'I don't quite deserve this, Lady Petherwin.'

'Really, one would imagine that women wrote their books during those dreams in which people have no moral sense, to see how improper some, even virtuous, ladies become when they get into print.'

'I might have done a much more unnatural thing than write those poems. And perhaps I might have done a much better thing, and got less praise. But that's the world's fault, not mine.'

'You might have left them unwritten, and shown more fidelity.'

'Fidelity! it is more a matter of humour than principle. What has fidelity to do with it?'

'Fidelity to my dear boy's memory.'

'It would be difficult to show that because I have written so-called tender and gay verse, I feel tender and gay. It is too often assumed that a person's fancy is a person's real mind. I believe that in the majority of cases one is fond of imagining the direct opposite of one's principles in sheer effort after something fresh and free; at any rate, some of the lightest of those rhymes were composed between the deepest fits of dismals

I have ever known. However, I did expect that you might judge in the way you have judged, and that was my chief reason for not telling you what I had done.'

'You don't deny that you tried to escape from recollections you ought to have cherished? There is only one thing that women of your sort are as ready to do as to take a man's name, and that is, drop his memory.'

'Dear Lady Petherwin — don't be so unreasonable as to blame a live person for living! No woman's head is so small as to be filled for life by a memory of a few months. Four years have passed since I last saw my boy-husband. We were mere children; see how I have altered since in mind, substance, and outline — I have even grown half an inch taller since his death. Two years will exhaust the regrets of widows who have long been faithful wives; and ought I not to show a little new life when my husband died in the honeymoon?'

'No. Accepting the protection of your husband's mother was, in effect, an avowal that you rejected the idea of being a widow to prolong the idea of being a wife; and the sin against your conventional state thus assumed is almost as bad as would have been a sin against the married state itself. If you had gone off when he died, saying, "Thank heaven, I am free!" you would, at any rate, have shown some real honesty.'

'I should have been more virtuous by being more unfeeling. That often happens.'

'I have taken to you, and made a great deal of you — given you the inestimable advantages of foreign travel and good society to enlarge your mind. In short, I have been like a Naomi to you in everything, and I maintain that writing these poems saps the foundation of it all.'

'I do own that you have been a very good Naomi to me thus far; but Ruth was quite a fast widow in comparison with me, and yet Naomi never blamed her. You are unfortunate in your illustration. But it is dreadfully flippant of me to answer you like this, for you have been kind. But why will you provoke me!'

'Yes, you are flippant, Ethelberta. You are too much given to that sort of thing.'

'Well, I don't know how the secret of my name has leaked out; and I am not ribald, or anything you say,' said Ethelberta, with a sigh.

'Then you own you do not feel so ardent as you seem in your book?'

'I do own it.'

'And that you are sorry your name has been published in connection with it?'

'I am.'

'And you think the verses may tend to misrepresent your character as a gay and rapturous one, when it is not?'

'I do fear it.'

'Then, of course, you will suppress the poems instantly. That is the only way in which you can regain the position you have hitherto held with me.'

Ethelberta said nothing; and the dull winter atmosphere had far from light enough in it to show by her face what she might be thinking.

'Well?' said Lady Petherwin.

‘I did not expect such a command as that,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I have been obedient for four years, and would continue so — but I cannot suppress the poems. They are not mine now to suppress.’

‘You must get them into your hands. Money will do it, I suppose?’

‘Yes, I suppose it would — a thousand pounds.’

‘Very well; the money shall be forthcoming,’ said Lady Petherwin, after a pause. ‘You had better sit down and write about it at once.’

‘I cannot do it,’ said Ethelberta; ‘and I will not. I don’t wish them to be suppressed. I am not ashamed of them; there is nothing to be ashamed of in them; and I shall not take any steps in the matter.’

‘Then you are an ungrateful woman, and wanting in natural affection for the dead! Considering your birth — ’

‘That’s an intolerable — ’

Lady Petherwin crashed out of the room in a wind of indignation, and went upstairs and heard no more. Adjoining her chamber was a smaller one called her study, and, on reaching this, she unlocked a cabinet, took out a small deed-box, removed from it a folded packet, unfolded it, crumpled it up, and turning round suddenly flung it into the fire. Then she stood and beheld it eaten away word after word by the flames, ‘Testament’ — ‘all that freehold’ — ‘heirs and assigns’ appearing occasionally for a moment only to disappear for ever. Nearly half the document had turned into a glossy black when the lady clasped her hands.

‘What have I done!’ she exclaimed. Springing to the tongs she seized with them the portion of the writing yet unconsumed, and dragged it out of the fire. Ethelberta appeared at the door.

‘Quick, Ethelberta!’ said Lady Petherwin. ‘Help me to put this out!’ And the two women went trampling wildly upon the document and smothering it with a corner of the hearth-rug.

‘What is it?’ said Ethelberta.

‘My will!’ said Lady Petherwin. ‘I have kept it by me lately, for I have wished to look over it at leisure — ’

‘Good heavens!’ said Ethelberta. ‘And I was just coming in to tell you that I would always cling to you, and never desert you, ill-use me how you might!’

‘Such an affectionate remark sounds curious at such a time,’ said Lady Petherwin, sinking down in a chair at the end of the struggle.

‘But,’ cried Ethelberta, ‘you don’t suppose — ’

‘Selfishness, my dear, has given me such crooked looks that I can see it round a corner.’

‘If you mean that what is yours to give may not be mine to take, it would be as well to name it in an impersonal way, if you must name it at all,’ said the daughter-in-law, with wet eyelids. ‘God knows I had no selfish thought in saying that. I came upstairs to ask you to forgive me, and knew nothing about the will. But every explanation distorts it all the more!’

‘We two have got all awry, dear — it cannot be concealed — awry — awry. Ah, who shall set us right again? However, now I must send for Mr. Chancerly — no, I am going out on other business, and I will call upon him. There, don’t spoil your eyes: you may have to sell them.’

She rang the bell and ordered the carriage; and half-an-hour later Lady Petherwin’s coachman drove his mistress up to the door of her lawyer’s office in Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

CHAPTER 11.

SANDBOURNE AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD — SOME LONDON STREETS

While this was going on in town, Christopher, at his lodgings in Sandbourne, had been thrown into rare old visions and dreams by the appearance of Ethelberta’s letter. Flattered and encouraged to ambition as well as to love by her inspiring sermon, he put off now the last remnant of cynical doubt upon the genuineness of his old mistress, and once and for all set down as disloyal a belief he had latterly acquired that ‘Come, woo me, woo me; for I am like enough to consent,’ was all a young woman had to tell.

All the reasoning of political and social economists would not have convinced Christopher that he had a better chance in London than in Sandbourne of making a decent income by reasonable and likely labour; but a belief in a far more improbable proposition, impetuously expressed, warmed him with the idea that he might become famous there. The greater is frequently more readily credited than the less, and an argument which will not convince on a matter of halfpence appears unanswerable when applied to questions of glory and honour.

The regulation wet towel and strong coffee of the ambitious and intellectual student floated before him in visions; but it was with a sense of relief that he remembered that music, in spite of its drawbacks as a means of sustenance, was a profession happily unencumbered with those excruciating preliminaries to greatness.

Christopher talked about the new move to his sister, and he was vexed that her hopefulness was not roused to quite the pitch of his own. As with others of his sort, his too general habit of accepting the most clouded possibility that chances offered was only transcended by his readiness to kindle with a fitful excitement now and then. Faith was much more equable. ‘If you were not the most melancholy man God ever created,’ she said, kindly looking at his vague deep eyes and thin face, which was but a few degrees too refined and poetical to escape the epithet of lantern-jawed from any one who had quarrelled with him, ‘you would not mind my coolness about this. It is a good thing of course to go; I have always fancied that we were mistaken in coming here. Mediocrity stamped “London” fetches more than talent marked “provincial.” But I cannot feel so enthusiastic.’

‘Still, if we are to go, we may as well go by enthusiasm as by calculation; it is a sensation pleasanter to the nerves, and leads to just as good a result when there is only one result possible.’

‘Very well,’ said Faith. ‘I will not depress you. If I had to describe you I should say you were a child in your impulses, and an old man in your reflections. Have you considered when we shall start?’

‘Yes.’

‘What have you thought?’

‘That we may very well leave the place in six weeks if we wish.’

‘We really may?’

‘Yes. And what is more, we will.’

* * * * *

Christopher and Faith arrived in London on an afternoon at the end of winter, and beheld from one of the river bridges snow-white scrolls of steam from the tall chimneys of Lambeth, rising against the livid sky behind, as if drawn in chalk on toned cardboard.

The first thing he did that evening, when settled in their apartments near the British Museum, before applying himself to the beginning of the means by which success in life might be attained, was to go out in the direction of Ethelberta’s door, leaving Faith unpacking the things, and sniffing extraordinary smoke-smells which she discovered in all nooks and crannies of the rooms. It was some satisfaction to see Ethelberta’s house, although the single feature in which it differed from the other houses in the Crescent was that no lamp shone from the fanlight over the entrance — a speciality which, if he cared for omens, was hardly encouraging. Fearing to linger near lest he might be detected, Christopher stole a glimpse at the door and at the steps, imagined what a trifle of the depression worn in each step her feet had tended to produce, and strolled home again.

Feeling that his reasons for calling just now were scarcely sufficient, he went next day about the business that had brought him to town, which referred to a situation as organist in a large church in the north-west district. The post was half ensured already, and he intended to make of it the nucleus of a professional occupation and income. Then he sat down to think of the preliminary steps towards publishing the song that had so pleased her, and had also, as far as he could understand from her letter, hit the popular taste very successfully; a fact which, however little it may say for the virtues of the song as a composition, was a great recommendation to it as a property. Christopher was delighted to perceive that out of this position he could frame an admissible, if not an unimpeachable, reason for calling upon Ethelberta. He determined to do so at once, and obtain the required permission by word of mouth.

He was greatly surprised, when the front of the house appeared in view on this spring afternoon, to see what a white and sightless aspect pervaded all the windows. He came close: the eyeball blankness was caused by all the shutters and blinds being shut tight from top to bottom. Possibly this had been the case for some time — he could not

tell. In one of the windows was a card bearing the announcement, 'This House to be let Furnished.' Here was a merciless clash between fancy and fact. Regretting now his faint-heartedness in not letting her know beforehand by some means that he was about to make a new start in the world, and coming to dwell near her, Christopher rang the bell to make inquiries. A gloomy caretaker appeared after a while, and the young man asked whither the ladies had gone to live. He was beyond measure depressed to learn that they were in the South of France — Arles, the man thought the place was called — the time of their return to town being very uncertain; though one thing was clear, they meant to miss the forthcoming London season altogether.

As Christopher's hope to see her again had brought a resolve to do so, so now resolve led to dogged patience. Instead of attempting anything by letter, he decided to wait; and he waited well, occupying himself in publishing a 'March' and a 'Morning and Evening Service in E flat.' Some four-part songs, too, engaged his attention when the heavier duties of the day were over — these duties being the giving of lessons in harmony and counterpoint, in which he was aided by the introductions of a man well known in the musical world, who had been acquainted with young Julian as a promising amateur long before he adopted music as the staff of his pilgrimage.

It was the end of summer when he again tried his fortune at the house in Exonbury Crescent. Scarcely calculating upon finding her at this stagnant time of the town year, and only hoping for information, Julian was surprised and excited to see the shutters open, and the house wearing altogether a living look, its neighbours having decidedly died off meanwhile.

'The family here,' said a footman in answer to his inquiry, 'are only temporary tenants of the house. It is not Lady Petherwin's people.'

'Do you know the Petherwins' present address?'

'Underground, sir, for the old lady. She died some time ago in Switzerland, and was buried there, I believe.'

'And Mrs. Petherwin — the young lady,' said Christopher, starting.

'We are not acquainted personally with the family,' the man replied. 'My master has only taken the house for a few months, whilst extensive alterations are being made in his own on the other side of the park, which he goes to look after every day. If you want any further information about Lady Petherwin, Mrs. Petherwin will probably give it. I can let you have her address.'

'Ah, yes; thank you,' said Christopher.

The footman handed him one of some cards which appeared to have been left for the purpose. Julian, though tremblingly anxious to know where Ethelberta was, did not look at it till he could take a cool survey in private. The address was 'Arrowthorne Lodge, Upper Wessex.'

'Dear me!' said Christopher to himself, 'not far from Melchester; and not dreadfully far from Sandbourne.'

CHAPTER 12.

ARROWTHORNE PARK AND LODGE

Summer was just over when Christopher Julian found himself rattling along in the train to Sandbourne on some trifling business appertaining to his late father's affairs, which would afford him an excuse for calling at Arrowthorne about the song of hers that he wished to produce. He alighted in the afternoon at a little station some twenty miles short of Sandbourne, and leaving his portmanteau behind him there, decided to walk across the fields, obtain if possible the interview with the lady, and return then to the station to finish the journey to Sandbourne, which he could thus reach at a convenient hour in the evening, and, if he chose, take leave of again the next day.

It was an afternoon which had a fungous smell out of doors, all being sunless and stagnant overhead and around. The various species of trees had begun to assume the more distinctive colours of their decline, and where there had been one pervasive green were now twenty greenish yellows, the air in the vistas between them being half opaque with blue exhalation. Christopher in his walk overtook a countryman, and inquired if the path they were following would lead him to Arrowthorne Lodge.

"'Twill take 'ee into Arr'thorne Park," the man replied. "But you won't come anigh the Lodge, unless you bear round to the left as might be."

"Mrs. Petherwin lives there, I believe?"

"No, sir. Leastwise unless she's but lately come. I have never heard of such a woman."

"She may possibly be only visiting there."

"Ah, perhaps that's the shape o't. Well, now you tell o't, I have seen a strange face thereabouts once or twice lately. A young good-looking maid enough, seemingly."

"Yes, she's considered a very handsome lady."

"I've heard the woodmen say, now that you tell o't, that they meet her every now and then, just at the closing in of the day, as they come home along with their nitches of sticks; ay, stalking about under the trees by herself — a tall black martel, so long-legged and awful-like that you'd think 'twas the old feller himself a-coming, they say. Now a woman must be a queer body to my thinking, to roam about by night so lonesome and that? Ay, now that you tell o't, there is such a woman, but 'a never have showed in the parish; sure I never thought who the body was — no, not once about her, nor where 'a was living and that — not I, till you spoke. Well, there, sir, that's Arr'thorne Lodge; do you see they three elms?" He pointed across the glade towards some confused foliage a long way off.

"I am not sure about the sort of tree you mean," said Christopher, "I see a number of trees with edges shaped like edges of clouds."

"Ay, ay, they be oaks; I mean the elms to the left hand."

"But a man can hardly tell oaks from elms at that distance, my good fellow!"

"That 'a can very well — leastwise, if he's got the sense."

"Well, I think I see what you mean," said Christopher. "What next?"

‘When you get there, you bear away smart to nor’-west, and you’ll come straight as a line to the Lodge.’

‘How the deuce am I to know which is north-west in a strange place, with no sun to tell me?’

‘What, not know nor-west? Well, I should think a boy could never live and grow up to be a man without knowing the four quarters. I knowed ‘em when I was a mossel of a chiel. We be no great scholars here, that’s true, but there isn’t a Tom-rig or Jack-straw in these parts that don’t know where they lie as well as I. Now I’ve lived, man and boy, these eight-and-sixty years, and never met a man in my life afore who hadn’t learnt such a common thing as the four quarters.’

Christopher parted from his companion and soon reached a stile, clambering over which he entered a park. Here he threaded his way, and rounding a clump of aged trees the young man came in view of a light and elegant country-house in the half-timbered Gothic style of the late revival, apparently only a few years old. Surprised at finding himself so near, Christopher’s heart fluttered unmanageably till he had taken an abstract view of his position, and, in impatience at his want of nerve, adopted a sombre train of reasoning to convince himself that, far from indulgence in the passion of love bringing bliss, it was a folly, leading to grief and disquiet — certainly one which would do him no good. Cooled down by this, he stepped into the drive and went up to the house.

‘Is Mrs. Petherwin at home?’ he said modestly.

‘Who did you say, sir?’

He repeated the name.

‘Don’t know the person.’

‘The lady may be a visitor — I call on business.’

‘She is not visiting in this house, sir.’

‘Is not this Arrowthorne Lodge?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then where is Arrowthorne Lodge, please?’

‘Well, it is nearly a mile from here. Under the trees by the high-road. If you go across by that footpath it will bring you out quicker than by following the bend of the drive.’

Christopher wondered how he could have managed to get into the wrong park; but, setting it down to his ignorance of the difference between oak and elm, he immediately retraced his steps, passing across the park again, through the gate at the end of the drive, and into the turnpike road. No other gate, park, or country seat of any description was within view.

‘Can you tell me the way to Arrowthorne Lodge?’ he inquired of the first person he met, who was a little girl.

‘You are just coming away from it, sir,’ said she. ‘I’ll show you; I am going that way.’

They walked along together. Getting abreast the entrance of the park he had just emerged from, the child said, 'There it is, sir; I live there too.'

Christopher, with a dazed countenance, looked towards a cottage which stood nestling in the shrubbery and ivy like a mushroom among grass. 'Is that Arrowthorne Lodge?' he repeated.

'Yes, and if you go up the drive, you come to Arrowthorne House.'

'Arrowthorne Lodge — where Mrs. Petherwin lives, I mean.'

'Yes. She lives there along wi' mother and we. But she don't want anybody to know it, sir, cause she's celebrate, and 'twouldn't do at all.'

Christopher said no more, and the little girl became interested in the products of the bank and ditch by the wayside. He left her, pushed open the heavy gate, and tapped at the Lodge door.

The latch was lifted. 'Does Mrs. Petherwin,' he began, and, determined that there should be no mistake, repeated, 'Does Mrs. Ethelberta Petherwin, the poetess, live here?' turning full upon the person who opened the door.

'She does, sir,' said a faltering voice; and he found himself face to face with the pupil-teacher of Sandbourne.

CHAPTER 13.

THE LODGE (continued) — THE COPSE BEHIND

'This is indeed a surprise; I — am glad to see you!' Christopher stammered, with a wire-drawn, radically different smile from the one he had intended — a smile not without a tinge of ghastliness.

'Yes — I am home for the holidays,' said the blushing maiden; and, after a critical pause, she added, 'If you wish to speak to my sister, she is in the plantation with the children.'

'O no — no, thank you — not necessary at all,' said Christopher, in haste. 'I only wish for an interview with a lady called Mrs. Petherwin.'

'Yes; Mrs Petherwin — my sister,' said Picotee. 'She is in the plantation. That little path will take you to her in five minutes.'

The amazed Christopher persuaded himself that this discovery was very delightful, and went on persuading so long that at last he felt it to be so. Unable, like many other people, to enjoy being satirized in words because of the irritation it caused him as aimed-at victim, he sometimes had philosophy enough to appreciate a satire of circumstance, because nobody intended it. Pursuing the path indicated, he found himself in a thicket of scrubby undergrowth, which covered an area enclosed from the park proper by a decaying fence. The boughs were so tangled that he was obliged to screen his face with his hands, to escape the risk of having his eyes filliped out by the twigs that impeded his progress. Thus slowly advancing, his ear caught, between

the rustles, the tones of a voice in earnest declamation; and, pushing round in that direction, he beheld through some beech boughs an open space about ten yards in diameter, floored at the bottom with deep beds of curled old leaves, and cushions of furry moss. In the middle of this natural theatre was the stump of a tree that had been felled by a saw, and upon the flat stool thus formed stood Ethelberta, whom Christopher had not beheld since the ball at Wyndway House.

Round her, leaning against branches or prostrate on the ground, were five or six individuals. Two were young mechanics — one of them evidently a carpenter. Then there was a boy about thirteen, and two or three younger children. Ethelberta's appearance answered as fully as ever to that of an English lady skilfully perfected in manner, carriage, look, and accent; and the incongruity of her present position among lives which had had many of Nature's beauties stamped out of them, and few of the beauties of Art stamped in, brought him, as a second feeling, a pride in her that almost equalled his first sentiment of surprise. Christopher's attention was meanwhile attracted from the constitution of the group to the words of the speaker in the centre of it — words to which her auditors were listening with still attention.

It appeared to Christopher that Ethelberta had lately been undergoing some very extraordinary experiences. What the beginning of them had been he could not in the least understand, but the portion she was describing came distinctly to his ears, and he wondered more and more.

'He came forward till he, like myself, was about twenty yards from the edge. I instinctively grasped my useless stiletto. How I longed for the assistance which a little earlier I had so much despised! Reaching the block or boulder upon which I had been sitting, he clasped his arms around from behind; his hands closed upon the empty seat, and he jumped up with an oath. This method of attack told me a new thing with wretched distinctness; he had, as I suppose, discovered my sex, male attire was to serve my turn no longer. The next instant, indeed, made it clear, for he exclaimed, "You don't escape me, masquerading madam," or some such words, and came on. My only hope was that in his excitement he might forget to notice where the grass terminated near the edge of the cliff, though this could be easily felt by a careful walker: to make my own feeling more distinct on this point I hastily bared my feet.'

The listeners moistened their lips, Ethelberta took breath, and then went on to describe the scene that ensued, 'A dreadful variation on the game of Blindman's buff,' being the words by which she characterized it.

Ethelberta's manner had become so impassioned at this point that the lips of her audience parted, the children clung to their elders, and Christopher could control himself no longer. He thrust aside the boughs, and broke in upon the group.

'For Heaven's sake, Ethelberta,' he exclaimed with great excitement, 'where did you meet with such a terrible experience as that?'

The children shrieked, as if they thought that the interruption was in some way the catastrophe of the events in course of narration. Every one started up; the two young mechanics stared, and one of them inquired, in return, 'What's the matter, friend?'

Christopher had not yet made reply when Ethelberta stepped from her pedestal down upon the crackling carpet of deep leaves.

‘Mr. Julian!’ said she, in a serene voice, turning upon him eyes of such a disputable stage of colour, between brown and grey, as would have commended itself to a gallant duellist of the last century as a point on which it was absolutely necessary to take some friend’s life or other. But the calmness was artificially done, and the astonishment that did not appear in Ethelberta’s tones was expressed by her gaze. Christopher was not in a mood to draw fine distinctions between recognized and unrecognized organs of speech. He replied to the eyes.

‘I own that your surprise is natural,’ he said, with an anxious look into her face, as if he wished to get beyond this interpolated scene to something more congenial and understood. ‘But my concern at such a history of yourself since I last saw you is even more natural than your surprise at my manner of breaking in.’

‘That history would justify any conduct in one who hears it — ’

‘Yes, indeed.’

‘If it were true,’ added Ethelberta, smiling. ‘But it is as false as — ’ She could name nothing notoriously false without raising an image of what was disagreeable, and she continued in a better manner: ‘The story I was telling is entirely a fiction, which I am getting up for a particular purpose — very different from what appears at present.’

‘I am sorry there was such a misunderstanding,’ Christopher stammered, looking upon the ground uncertain and ashamed. ‘Yet I am not, either, for I am very glad you have not undergone such trials, of course. But the fact is, I — being in the neighbourhood — I ventured to call on a matter of business, relating to a poem which I had the pleasure of setting to music at the beginning of the year.’

Ethelberta was only a little less ill at ease than Christopher showed himself to be by this way of talking.

‘Will you walk slowly on?’ she said gently to the two young men, ‘and take the children with you; this gentleman wishes to speak to me on business.’

The biggest young man caught up a little one under his arm, and plunged amid the boughs; another little one lingered behind for a few moments to look shyly at Christopher, with an oblique manner of hiding her mouth against her shoulder and her eyes behind her pinafore. Then she vanished, the boy and the second young man followed, and Ethelberta and Christopher stood within the wood-bound circle alone.

‘I hope I have caused no inconvenience by interrupting the proceedings,’ said Christopher softly; ‘but I so very much wished to see you!’

‘Did you, indeed — really wish to see me?’ she said gladly. ‘Never mind inconvenience then; it is a word which seems shallow in meaning under the circumstances. I surely must say that a visit is to my advantage, must I not? I am not as I was, you see, and may receive as advantages what I used to consider as troubles.’

‘Has your life really changed so much?’

‘It has changed. But what I first meant was that an interesting visitor at a wrong time is better than a stupid one at a right time.’

‘I had been behind the trees for some minutes, looking at you, and thinking of you; but what you were doing rather interrupted my first meditation. I had thought of a meeting in which we should continue our intercourse at the point at which it was broken off years ago, as if the omitted part had not existed at all; but something, I cannot tell what, has upset all that feeling, and — ’

‘I can soon tell you the meaning of my extraordinary performance,’ Ethelberta broke in quickly, and with a little trepidation. ‘My mother-in-law, Lady Petherwin, is dead; and she has left me nothing but her house and furniture in London — more than I deserve, but less than she had distinctly led me to expect; and so I am somewhat in a corner.’

‘It is always so.’

‘Not always, I think. But this is how it happened. Lady Petherwin was very capricious; when she was not foolishly kind she was unjustly harsh. A great many are like it, never thinking what a good thing it would be, instead of going on tacking from side to side between favour and cruelty, to keep to a mean line of common justice. And so we quarrelled, and she, being absolute mistress of all her wealth, destroyed her will that was in my favour, and made another, leaving me nothing but the fag-end of the lease of the town-house and the furniture in it. Then, when we were abroad, she turned to me again, forgave everything, and, becoming ill afterwards, wrote a letter to the brother, to whom she had left the bulk of her property, stating that I was to have twenty-thousand of the one-hundred-thousand pounds she had bequeathed to him — as in the original will — doing this by letter in case anything should happen to her before a new will could be considered, drawn, and signed, and trusting to his honour quite that he would obey her expressed wish should she die abroad. Well, she did die, in the full persuasion that I was provided for; but her brother (as I secretly expected all the time) refused to be morally bound by a document which had no legal value, and the result is that he has everything, except, of course, the furniture and the lease. It would have been enough to break the heart of a person who had calculated upon getting a fortune, which I never did; for I felt always like an intruder and a bondswoman, and had wished myself out of the Petherwin family a hundred times, with my crust of bread and liberty. For one thing, I was always forbidden to see my relatives, and it pained me much. Now I am going to move for myself, and consider that I have a good chance of success in what I may undertake, because of an indifference I feel about succeeding which gives the necessary coolness that any great task requires.’

‘I presume you mean to write more poems?’

‘I cannot — that is, I can write no more that satisfy me. To blossom into rhyme on the sparkling pleasures of life, you must be under the influence of those pleasures, and I am at present quite removed from them — surrounded by gaunt realities of a very different description.’

‘Then try the mournful. Trade upon your sufferings: many do, and thrive.’

'It is no use to say that — no use at all. I cannot write a line of verse. And yet the others flowed from my heart like a stream. But nothing is so easy as to seem clever when you have money.'

'Except to seem stupid when you have none,' said Christopher, looking at the dead leaves.

Ethelberta allowed herself to linger on that thought for a few seconds; and continued, 'Then the question arose, what was I to do? I felt that to write prose would be an uncongenial occupation, and altogether a poor prospect for a woman like me. Finally I have decided to appear in public.'

'Not on the stage?'

'Certainly not on the stage. There is no novelty in a poor lady turning actress, and novelty is what I want. Ordinary powers exhibited in a new way effect as much as extraordinary powers exhibited in an old way.'

'Yes — so they do. And extraordinary powers, and a new way too, would be irresistible.'

'I don't calculate upon both. I had written a prose story by request, when it was found that I had grown utterly inane over verse. It was written in the first person, and the style was modelled after De Foe's. The night before sending it off, when I had already packed it up, I was reading about the professional story-tellers of Eastern countries, who devoted their lives to the telling of tales. I unfastened the manuscript and retained it, convinced that I should do better by telling the story.'

'Well thought of!' exclaimed Christopher, looking into her face. 'There is a way for everybody to live, if they can only find it out.'

'It occurred to me,' she continued, blushing slightly, 'that tales of the weird kind were made to be told, not written. The action of a teller is wanted to give due effect to all stories of incident; and I hope that a time will come when, as of old, instead of an unsocial reading of fiction at home alone, people will meet together cordially, and sit at the feet of a professed romancer. I am going to tell my tales before a London public. As a child, I had a considerable power in arresting the attention of other children by recounting adventures which had never happened; and men and women are but children enlarged a little. Look at this.'

She drew from her pocket a folded paper, shook it abroad, and disclosed a rough draft of an announcement to the effect that Mrs. Petherwin, Professed Story-teller, would devote an evening to that ancient form of the romancer's art, at a well-known fashionable hall in London. 'Now you see,' she continued, 'the meaning of what you observed going on here. That you heard was one of three tales I am preparing, with a view of selecting the best. As a reserved one, I have the tale of my own life — to be played as a last card. It was a private rehearsal before my brothers and sisters — not with any view of obtaining their criticism, but that I might become accustomed to my own voice in the presence of listeners.'

'If I only had had half your enterprise, what I might have done in the world!'

‘Now did you ever consider what a power De Foe’s manner would have if practised by word of mouth? Indeed, it is a style which suits itself infinitely better to telling than to writing, abounding as it does in colloquialisms that are somewhat out of place on paper in these days, but have a wonderful power in making a narrative seem real. And so, in short, I am going to talk De Foe on a subject of my own. Well?’

The last word had been given tenderly, with a long-drawn sweetness, and was caused by a look that Christopher was bending upon her at the moment, in which he revealed that he was thinking less of the subject she was so eagerly and hopefully descanting upon than upon her aspect in explaining it. It is a fault of manner particularly common among men newly imported into the society of bright and beautiful women; and we will hope that, springing as it does from no unworthy source, it is as soon forgiven in the general world as it was here.

‘I was only following a thought,’ said Christopher: — ‘a thought of how I used to know you, and then lost sight of you, and then discovered you famous, and how we are here under these sad autumn trees, and nobody in sight.’

‘I think it must be tea-time,’ she said suddenly. ‘Tea is a great meal with us here — you will join us, will you not?’ And Ethelberta began to make for herself a passage through the boughs. Another rustle was heard a little way off, and one of the children appeared.

‘Emmeline wants to know, please, if the gentleman that come to see ‘ee will stay to tea; because, if so, she’s agoing to put in another spoonful for him and a bit of best green.’

‘O Georgina — how candid! Yes, put in some best green.’

Before Christopher could say any more to her, they were emerging by the corner of the cottage, and one of the brothers drew near them. ‘Mr. Julian, you’ll bide and have a cup of tea wi’ us?’ he inquired of Christopher. ‘An old friend of yours, is he not, Mrs. Petherwin? Dan and I be going back to Sandbourne to-night, and we can walk with ‘ee as far as the station.’

‘I shall be delighted,’ said Christopher; and they all entered the cottage. The evening had grown clearer by this time; the sun was peeping out just previous to departure, and sent gold wires of light across the glades and into the windows, throwing a pattern of the diamond quarries, and outlines of the geraniums in pots, against the opposite wall. One end of the room was polygonal, such a shape being dictated by the exterior design; in this part the windows were placed, as at the east end of continental churches. Thus, from the combined effects of the ecclesiastical lancet lights and the apsidal shape of the room, it occurred to Christopher that the sisters were all a delightful set of pretty saints, exhibiting themselves in a lady chapel, and backed up by unkempt major prophets, as represented by the forms of their big brothers.

Christopher sat down to tea as invited, squeezing himself in between two children whose names were almost as long as their persons, and whose tin cups discoursed primitive music by means of spoons rattled inside them until they were filled. The tea proceeded pleasantly, notwithstanding that the cake, being a little burnt, tasted on

the outside like the latter plums in snapdragon. Christopher never could meet the eye of Picotee, who continued in a wild state of flushing all the time, fixing her looks upon the sugar-basin, except when she glanced out of the window to see how the evening was going on, and speaking no word at all unless it was to correct a small sister of somewhat crude manners as regards filling the mouth, which Picotee did in a whisper, and a gentle inclination of her mouth to the little one's ear, and a still deeper blush than before.

Their visitor next noticed that an additional cup-and-saucer and plate made their appearance occasionally at the table, were silently replenished, and then carried off by one of the children to an inner apartment.

'Our mother is bedridden,' said Ethelberta, noticing Christopher's look at the proceeding. 'Emmeline attends to the household, except when Picotee is at home, and Joey attends to the gate; but our mother's affliction is a very unfortunate thing for the poor children. We are thinking of a plan of living which will, I hope, be more convenient than this is; but we have not yet decided what to do.' At this minute a carriage and pair of horses became visible through one of the angular windows of the apse, in the act of turning in from the highway towards the park gate. The boy who answered to the name of Joey sprang up from the table with the promptness of a Jack-in-the-box, and ran out at the door. Everybody turned as the carriage passed through the gate, which Joey held open, putting his other hand where the brim of his hat would have been if he had worn one, and lapsing into a careless boy again the instant that the vehicle had gone by.

'There's a tremendous large dinner-party at the House to-night,' said Emmeline methodically, looking at the equipage over the edge of her teacup, without leaving off sipping. 'That was Lord Mountclere. He's a wicked old man, they say.'

'Lord Mountclere?' said Ethelberta musingly. 'I used to know some friends of his. In what way is he wicked?'

'I don't know,' said Emmeline, with simplicity. 'I suppose it is because he breaks the commandments. But I wonder how a big rich lord can want to steal anything.' Emmeline's thoughts of breaking commandments instinctively fell upon the eighth, as being in her ideas the only case wherein the gain could be considered as at all worth the hazard.

Ethelberta said nothing; but Christopher thought that a shade of depression passed over her.

'Hook back the gate, Joey,' shouted Emmeline, when the carriage had proceeded up the drive. 'There's more to come.'

Joey did as ordered, and by the time he got indoors another carriage turned in from the public road — a one-horse brougham this time.

'I know who that is: that's Mr. Ladywell,' said Emmeline, in the same matter-of-fact tone. 'He's been here afore: he's a distant relation of the squire's, and he once gave me sixpence for picking up his gloves.'

‘What shall I live to see?’ murmured the poetess, under her breath, nearly dropping her teacup in an involuntary trepidation, from which she made it a point of dignity to recover in a moment. Christopher’s eyes, at that exhibition from Ethelberta, entered her own like a pair of lances. Picotee, seeing Christopher’s quick look of jealousy, became involved in her turn, and grew pale as a lily in her endeavours to conceal the complications to which it gave birth in her poor little breast likewise.

‘You judge me very wrongly,’ said Ethelberta, in answer to Christopher’s hasty look of resentment.

‘In supposing Mr. Ladywell to be a great friend of yours?’ said Christopher, who had in some indescribable way suddenly assumed a right to Ethelberta as his old property.

‘Yes: for I hardly know him, and certainly do not value him.’

After this there was something in the mutual look of the two, though their words had been private, which did not tend to remove the anguish of fragile Picotee. Christopher, assured that Ethelberta’s embarrassment had been caused by nothing more than the sense of her odd social subsidence, recovered more bliss than he had lost, and regarded calmly the profile of young Ladywell between the two windows of his brougham as it passed the open cottage door, bearing him along unconscious as the dead of the nearness of his beloved one, and of the sad buffoonery that fate, fortune, and the guardian angels had been playing with Ethelberta of late. He recognized the face as that of the young man whom he had encountered when watching Ethelberta’s window from Rookington Park.

‘Perhaps you remember seeing him at the Christmas dance at Wyndway?’ she inquired. ‘He is a good-natured fellow. Afterwards he sent me that portfolio of sketches you see in the corner. He might possibly do something in the world as a painter if he were obliged to work at the art for his bread, which he is not.’ She added with bitter pleasantry: ‘In bare mercy to his self-respect I must remain unseen here.’

It impressed Christopher to perceive how, under the estrangement which arose from differences of education, surroundings, experience, and talent, the sympathies of close relationship were perceptible in Ethelberta’s bearing towards her brothers and sisters. At a remark upon some simple pleasure wherein she had not participated because absent and occupied by far more comprehensive interests, a gloom as of banishment would cross her face and dim it for awhile, showing that the free habits and enthusiasms of country life had still their charm with her, in the face of the subtler gratifications of abridged bodices, candlelight, and no feelings in particular, which prevailed in town. Perhaps the one condition which could work up into a permanent feeling the passing revival of his fancy for a woman whose chief attribute he had supposed to be sprightliness was added now by the romantic ubiquity of station that attached to her. A discovery which might have grated on the senses of a man wedded to conventionality was a positive pleasure to one whose faith in society had departed with his own social ruin.

The room began to darken, whereupon Christopher arose to leave; and the brothers Sol and Dan offered to accompany him.

CHAPTER 14.

A TURNPIKE ROAD

'We be thinking of coming to London ourselves soon,' said Sol, a carpenter and joiner by trade, as he walked along at Christopher's left hand. 'There's so much more chance for a man up the country. Now, if you was me, how should you set about getting a job, sir?'

'What can you do?' said Christopher.

'Well, I am a very good staircase hand; and I have been called neat at sash-frames; and I can knock together doors and shutters very well; and I can do a little at the cabinet-making. I don't mind framing a roof, neither, if the rest be busy; and I am always ready to fill up my time at planing floor-boards by the foot.'

'And I can mix and lay flat tints,' said Dan, who was a house painter, 'and pick out mouldings, and grain in every kind of wood you can mention — oak, maple, walnut, satinwood, cherry-tree — '

'You can both do too much to stand the least chance of being allowed to do anything in a city, where limitation is all the rule in labour. To have any success, Sol, you must be a man who can thoroughly look at a door to see what ought to be done to it, but as to looking at a window, that's not your line; or a person who, to the remotest particular, understands turning a screw, but who does not profess any knowledge of how to drive a nail. Dan must know how to paint blue to a marvel, but must be quite in the dark about painting green. If you stick to some such principle of specialty as this, you may get employment in London.'

'Ha-ha-ha!' said Dan, striking at a stone in the road with the stout green hazel he carried. 'A wink is as good as a nod: thank'ee — we'll mind all that now.'

'If we do come,' said Sol, 'we shall not mix up with Mrs. Petherwin at all.'

'O indeed!'

'O no. (Perhaps you think it odd that we call her "Mrs. Petherwin," but that's by agreement as safer and better than Berta, because we be such rough chaps you see, and she's so lofty.) 'Twould demean her to claim kin wi' her in London — two journeymen like we, that know nothing besides our trades.'

'Not at all,' said Christopher, by way of chiming in in the friendliest manner. 'She would be pleased to see any straightforward honest man and brother, I should think, notwithstanding that she has moved in other society for a time.'

'Ah, you don't know Berta!' said Dan, looking as if he did.

'How — in what way do you mean?' said Christopher uneasily.

'So lofty — so very lofty! Isn't she, Sol? Why she'll never stir out from mother's till after dark, and then her day begins; and she'll traipse about under the trees, and never go into the high-road, so that nobody in the way of gentle-people shall run up against her and know her living in such a little small hut after biding in a big mansion-place. There, we don't find fault wi' her about it: we like her just the same, though she don't speak to us in the street; for a feller must be a fool to make a piece of work about a

woman's pride, when 'tis his own sister, and hang upon her and bother her when he knows 'tis for her good that he should not. Yes, her life has been quare enough. I hope she enjoys it, but for my part I like plain sailing. None of your ups and downs for me. There, I suppose 'twas her nater to want to look into the world a bit.'

'Father and mother kept Berta to school, you understand, sir,' explained the more thoughtful Sol, 'because she was such a quick child, and they always had a notion of making a governess of her. Sums? If you said to that child, "Berta, 'levenpence-three-farthings a day, how much a year?" she would tell 'ee in three seconds out of her own little head. And that hard sum about the herrings she had done afore she was nine.'

'True, she had,' said Dan. 'And we all know that to do that is to do something that's no nonsense.'

'What is the sum?' Christopher inquired.

'What — not know the sum about the herrings?' said Dan, spreading his gaze all over Christopher in amazement.

'Never heard of it,' said Christopher.

'Why down in these parts just as you try a man's soul by the Ten Commandments, you try his head by that there sum — hey, Sol?'

'Ay, that we do.'

'A herring and a half for three-halfpence, how many can ye get for 'levenpence: that's the feller; and a mortal teaser he is, I assure 'ee. Our parson, who's not altogether without sense o' week days, said one afternoon, "If cunning can be found in the multiplication table at all, Chickerel, 'tis in connection with that sum." Well, Berta was so clever in arithmetic that she was asked to teach summing at Miss Courtley's, and there she got to like foreign tongues more than ciphering, and at last she hated ciphering, and took to books entirely. Mother and we were very proud of her at that time: not that we be stuck-up people at all — be we, Sol?'

'Not at all; nobody can say that we be that, though there's more of it in the country than there should be by all account.'

'You'd be surprised to see how vain the girls about here be getting. Little rascals, why they won't curtsy to the loftiest lady in the land; no, not if you were to pay 'em to do it. Now, the men be different. Any man will touch his hat for a pint of beer. But then, of course, there's some difference between the two. Touching your hat is a good deal less to do than bending your knees, as Berta used to say, when she was blowed up for not doing it. She was always one of the independent sort — you never seed such a maid as she was! Now, Picotee was quite the other way.'

'Has Picotee left Sandbourne entirely?'

'O no; she is home for the holidays. Well, Mr. Julian, our road parts from yours just here, unless you walk into the next town along with us. But I suppose you get across to this station and go by rail?'

'I am obliged to go that way for my portmanteau,' said Christopher, 'or I should have been pleased to walk further. Shall I see you in Sandbourne to-morrow? I hope so.'

‘Well, no. ‘Tis hardly likely that you will see us — hardly. We know how unpleasant it is for a high sort of man to have rough chaps like us hailing him, so we think it best not to meet you — thank you all the same. So if you should run up against us in the street, we should be just as well pleased by your taking no notice, if you wouldn’t mind. ‘Twill save so much awkwardness — being in our working clothes. ‘Tis always the plan that Mrs. Petherwin and we agree to act upon, and we find it best for both. I hope you take our meaning right, and as no offence, Mr. Julian.’

‘And do you do the same with Picotee?’

‘O Lord, no — ’tishn’t a bit of use to try. That’s the worst of Picotee — there’s no getting rid of her. The more in the rough we be the more she’ll stick to us; and if we say she shan’t come, she’ll bide and fret about it till we be forced to let her.’

Christopher laughed, and promised, on condition that they would retract the statement about their not being proud; and then he wished his friends good-night.

CHAPTER 15.

AN INNER ROOM AT THE LODGE

At the Lodge at this time a discussion of some importance was in progress. The scene was Mrs. Chickereel’s bedroom, to which, unfortunately, she was confined by some spinal complaint; and here she now appeared as an interesting woman of five-and-forty, properly dressed as far as visible, and propped up in a bed covered with a quilt which presented a field of little squares in many tints, looking altogether like a bird’s-eye view of a market garden.

Mrs. Chickereel had been nurse in a nobleman’s family until her marriage, and after that she played the part of wife and mother, upon the whole, affectionately and well. Among her minor differences with her husband had been one about the naming of the children; a matter that was at last compromised by an agreement under which the choice of the girls’ names became her prerogative, and that of the boys’ her husband’s, who limited his field of selection to strict historical precedent as a set-off to Mrs. Chickereel’s tendency to stray into the regions of romance.

The only grown-up daughters at home, Ethelberta and Picotee, with their brother Joey, were sitting near her; the two youngest children, Georgina and Myrtle, who had been strutting in and out of the room, and otherwise endeavouring to walk, talk, and speak like the gentleman just gone away, were packed off to bed. Emmeline, of that transitional age which causes its exponent to look wistfully at the sitters when romping and at the rompers when sitting, uncertain whether her position in the household is that of child or woman, was idling in a corner. The two absent brothers and two absent sisters — eldest members of the family — completed the round ten whom Mrs. Chickereel with thoughtless readiness had presented to a crowded world, to cost Ethelberta many wakeful hours at night while she revolved schemes how they might be decently maintained.

'I still think,' Ethelberta was saying, 'that the plan I first proposed is the best. I am convinced that it will not do to attempt to keep on the Lodge. If we are all together in town, I can look after you much better than when you are far away from me down here.'

'Shall we not interfere with you — your plans for keeping up your connections?' inquired her mother, glancing up towards Ethelberta by lifting the flesh of her forehead, instead of troubling to raise her face altogether.

'Not nearly so much as by staying here.'

'But,' said Picotee, 'if you let lodgings, won't the gentlemen and ladies know it?'

'I have thought of that,' said Ethelberta, 'and this is how I shall manage. In the first place, if mother is there, the lodgings can be let in her name, all bills will be receipted by her, and all tradesmen's orders will be given as from herself. Then, we will take no English lodgers at all; we will advertise the rooms only in Continental newspapers, as suitable for a French or German gentleman or two, and by this means there will be little danger of my acquaintance discovering that my house is not entirely a private one, or of any lodger being a friend of my acquaintance. I have thought over every possible way of combining the dignified social position I must maintain to make my story-telling attractive, with my absolute lack of money, and I can see no better one.'

'Then if Gwendoline is to be your cook, she must soon give notice at her present place?'

'Yes. Everything depends upon Gwendoline and Cornelia. But there is time enough for them to give notice — Christmas will be soon enough. If they cannot or will not come as cook and housemaid, I am afraid the plan will break down. A vital condition is that I do not have a soul in the house (beyond the lodgers) who is not one of my own relations. When we have put Joey into buttons, he will do very well to attend to the door.'

'But s'pose,' said Joey, after a glassy look at his future appearance in the position alluded to, 'that any of your gentle-people come to see ye, and when I opens the door and lets 'em in a swinging big lodger stalks downstairs. What will 'em think? Up will go their eye-glasses at one another till they glares each other into holes. My gracious!'

'The one who calls will only think that another visitor is leaving, Joey. But I shall have no visitors, or very few. I shall let it be well known among my late friends that my mother is an invalid, and that on this account we receive none but the most intimate friends. These intimate friends not existing, we receive nobody at all.'

'Except Sol and Dan, if they get a job in London? They'll have to call upon us at the back door, won't they, Berta?' said Joey.

'They must go down the area steps. But they will not mind that; they like the idea.'

'And father, too, must he go down the steps?'

'He may come whichever way he likes. He will be glad enough to have us near at any price. I know that he is not at all happy at leaving you down here, and he away in London. You remember that he has only taken the situation at Mr. Doncastle's on the supposition that you all come to town as soon as he can see an opening for getting you

there; and as nothing of the sort has offered itself to him, this will be the very thing. Of course, if I succeed wonderfully well in my schemes for story-tellings, readings of my ballads and poems, lectures on the art of versification, and what not, we need have no lodgers; and then we shall all be living a happy family — all taking our share in keeping the establishment going.'

'Except poor me!' sighed the mother.

'My dear mother, you will be necessary as a steadying power — a flywheel, in short, to the concern. I wish that father could live there, too.'

'He'll never give up his present way of life — it has grown to be a part of his nature. Poor man, he never feels at home except in somebody else's house, and is nervous and quite a stranger in his own. Such is the fatal effects of service!'

'O mother, don't!' said Ethelberta tenderly, but with her teeth on edge; and Picotee curled up her toes, fearing that her mother was going to moralise.

'Well, what I mean is, that your father would not like to live upon your earnings, and so forth. But in town we shall be near him — that's one comfort, certainly.'

'And I shall not be wanted at all,' said Picotee, in a melancholy tone.

'It is much better to stay where you are,' her mother said. 'You will come and spend the holidays with us, of course, as you do now.'

'I should like to live in London best,' murmured Picotee, her head sinking mournfully to one side. 'I HATE being in Sandbourne now!'

'Nonsense!' said Ethelberta severely. 'We are all contriving how to live most comfortably, and it is by far the best thing for you to stay at the school. You used to be happy enough there.'

Picotee sighed, and said no more.

CHAPTER 16.

A LARGE PUBLIC HALL

It was the second week in February, Parliament had just met, and Ethelberta appeared for the first time before an audience in London.

There was some novelty in the species of entertainment that the active young woman had proposed to herself, and this doubtless had due effect in collecting the body of strangers that greeted her entry, over and above those friends who came to listen to her as a matter of course. Men and women who had become totally indifferent to new actresses, new readers, and new singers, once more felt the freshness of curiosity as they considered the promise of the announcement. But the chief inducement to attend lay in the fact that here was to be seen in the flesh a woman with whom the tongue of rumour had been busy in many romantic ways — a woman who, whatever else might be doubted, had certainly produced a volume of verses which had been the talk of the many who had read them, and of the many more who had not, for several consecutive weeks.

What was her story to be? Persons interested in the inquiry — a small proportion, it may be owned, of the whole London public, and chiefly young men — answered this question for themselves by assuming that it would take the form of some pungent and gratifying revelation of the innermost events of her own life, from which her gushing lines had sprung as an inevitable consequence, and which being once known, would cause such musical poesy to appear no longer wonderful.

The front part of the room was well filled, rows of listeners showing themselves like a drilled-in crop of which not a seed has failed. They were listeners of the right sort, a majority having noses of the prominent and dignified type, which when viewed in oblique perspective ranged as regularly as bow-windows at a watering place. Ethelberta's plan was to tell her pretended history and adventures while sitting in a chair — as if she were at her own fireside, surrounded by a circle of friends. By this touch of domesticity a great appearance of truth and naturalness was given, though really the attitude was at first more difficult to maintain satisfactorily than any one wherein stricter formality should be observed. She gently began her subject, as if scarcely knowing whether a throng were near her or not, and, in her fear of seeming artificial, spoke too low. This defect, however, she soon corrected, and ultimately went on in a charmingly colloquial manner. What Ethelberta relied upon soon became evident. It was not upon the intrinsic merits of her story as a piece of construction, but upon her method of telling it. Whatever defects the tale possessed — and they were not a few — it had, as delivered by her, the one pre-eminent merit of seeming like truth. A modern critic has well observed of De Foe that he had the most amazing talent on record for telling lies; and Ethelberta, in wishing her fiction to appear like a real narrative of personal adventure, did wisely to make De Foe her model. His is a style even better adapted for speaking than for writing, and the peculiarities of diction which he adopts to give verisimilitude to his narratives acquired enormous additional force when exhibited as viva-voce mannerisms. And although these artifices were not, perhaps, slavishly copied from that master of feigning, they would undoubtedly have reminded her hearers of him, had they not mostly been drawn from an easeful section in society which is especially characterized by the mental condition of knowing nothing about any author a week after they have read him. The few there who did remember De Foe were impressed by a fancy that his words greeted them anew in a winged auricular form, instead of by the weaker channels of print and eyesight. The reader may imagine what an effect this well-studied method must have produced when intensified by a clear, living voice, animated action, and the brilliant and expressive eye of a handsome woman — attributes which of themselves almost compelled belief. When she reached the most telling passages, instead of adding exaggerated action and sound, Ethelberta would lapse to a whisper and a sustained stillness, which were more striking than gesticulation. All that could be done by art was there, and if inspiration was wanting nobody missed it.

It was in performing this feat that Ethelberta seemed first to discover in herself the full power of that self-command which further onward in her career more and more

impressed her as a singular possession, until at last she was tempted to make of it many fantastic uses, leading to results that affected more households than her own. A talent for demureness under difficulties without the cold-bloodedness which renders such a bearing natural and easy, a face and hand reigning unmoved outside a heart by nature turbulent as a wave, is a constitutional arrangement much to be desired by people in general; yet, had Ethelberta been framed with less of that gift in her, her life might have been more comfortable as an experience, and brighter as an example, though perhaps duller as a story.

‘Ladywell, how came this Mrs. Petherwin to think of such a queer trick as telling romances, after doing so well as a poet?’ said a man in the stalls to his friend, who had been gazing at the Story-teller with a rapt face.

‘What — don’t you know? — everybody did, I thought,’ said the painter.

‘A mistake. Indeed, I should not have come here at all had I not heard the subject mentioned by accident yesterday at Grey’s; and then I remembered her to be the same woman I had met at some place — Belmaine’s I think it was — last year, when I thought her just getting on for handsome and clever, not to put it too strongly.’

‘Ah! naturally you would not know much,’ replied Ladywell, in an eager whisper. ‘Perhaps I am judging others by myself a little more than — but, as you have heard, she is an acquaintance of mine. I know her very well, and, in fact, I originally suggested the scheme to her as a pleasant way of adding to her fame. “Depend upon it, dear Mrs. Petherwin,” I said, during a pause in one of our dances together some time ago, “any public appearance of yours would be successful beyond description.”’

‘O, I had no idea that you knew her so well! Then it is quite through you that she has adopted this course?’

‘Well, not entirely — I could not say entirely. She said that some day, perhaps, she might do such a thing; and, in short, I reduced her vague ideas to form.’

‘I should not mind knowing her better — I must get you to throw us together in some way,’ said Neigh, with some interest. ‘I had no idea that you were such an old friend. You could do it, I suppose?’

‘Really, I am afraid — hah-hah — may not have the opportunity of obliging you. I met her at Wyndway, you know, where she was visiting with Lady Petherwin. It was some time ago, and I cannot say that I have ever met her since.’

‘Or before?’ said Neigh.

‘Well — no; I never did.’

‘Ladywell, if I had half your power of going to your imagination for facts, I would be the greatest painter in England.’

‘Now Neigh — that’s too bad — but with regard to this matter, I do speak with some interest,’ said Ladywell, with a pleased sense of himself.

‘In love with her? — Smitten down? — Done for?’

‘Now, now! However, several other fellows chaff me about her. It was only yesterday that Jones said — ’

‘Do you know why she cares to do this sort of thing?’

‘Merely a desire for fame, I suppose.’

‘I should think she has fame enough already.’

‘That I can express no opinion upon. I am thinking of getting her permission to use her face in a subject I am preparing. It is a fine face for canvas. Glorious contour — glorious. Ah, here she is again, for the second part.’

‘Dream on, young fellow. You’ll make a rare couple!’ said Neigh, with a flavour of superciliousness unheeded by his occupied companion.

Further back in the room were a pair of faces whose keen interest in the performance contrasted much with the languidly permissive air of those in front. When the ten minutes’ break occurred, Christopher was the first of the two to speak. ‘Well, what do you think of her, Faith?’ he said, shifting restlessly on his seat.

‘I like the quiet parts of the tale best, I think,’ replied the sister; ‘but, of course, I am not a good judge of these things. How still the people are at times! I continually take my eyes from her to look at the listeners. Did you notice the fat old lady in the second row, with her cloak a little thrown back? She was absolutely unconscious, and stayed with her face up and lips parted like a little child of six.’

‘She well may! the thing is a triumph. That fellow Ladywell is here, I believe — yes, it is he, busily talking to the man on his right. If I were a woman I would rather go donkey-driving than stick myself up there, for gaping fops to quiz and say what they like about! But she had no choice, poor thing; for it was that or nothing with her.’

Faith, who had secret doubts about the absolute necessity of Ethelberta’s appearance in public, said, with remote meanings, ‘Perhaps it is not altogether a severe punishment to her to be looked at by well-dressed men. Suppose she feels it as a blessing, instead of an affliction?’

‘She is a different sort of woman, Faith, and so you would say if you knew her. Of course, it is natural for you to criticize her severely just now, and I don’t wish to defend her.’

‘I think you do a little, Kit.’

‘No; I am indifferent about it all. Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had never seen her; and possibly it might have been better for her if she had never seen me. She has a heart, and the heart is a troublesome encumbrance when great things have to be done. I wish you knew her: I am sure you would like each other.’

‘O yes,’ said Faith, in a voice of rather weak conviction. ‘But, as we live in such a plain way, it would be hardly desirable at present.’

* * * * *

Ethelberta being regarded, in common with the latest conjurer, spirit-medium, aeronaut, giant, dwarf or monarch, as a new sensation, she was duly criticized in the morning papers, and even obtained a notice in some of the weekly reviews.

‘A handsome woman,’ said one of these, ‘may have her own reasons for causing the flesh of the London public to creep upon its bones by her undoubtedly remarkable narrative powers; but we question if much good can result from such a form of entertainment. Nevertheless, some praise is due. We have had the novel-writer among us

for some time, and the novel-reader has occasionally appeared on our platforms; but we believe that this is the first instance on record of a Novel-teller — one, that is to say, who relates professedly as fiction a romantic tale which has never been printed — the whole owing its chief interest to the method whereby the teller identifies herself with the leading character in the story.’

Another observed: ‘When once we get away from the magic influence of the storyteller’s eye and tongue, we perceive how improbable, even impossible, is the tissue of events to which we have been listening with so great a sense of reality, and we feel almost angry with ourselves at having been the victims of such utter illusion.’

‘Mrs. Petherwin’s personal appearance is decidedly in her favour,’ said another. ‘She affects no unconsciousness of the fact that form and feature are no mean vehicles of persuasion, and she uses the powers of each to the utmost. There spreads upon her face when in repose an air of innocence which is charmingly belied by the subtlety we discover beneath it when she begins her tale; and this amusing discrepancy between her physical presentment and the inner woman is further illustrated by the misgiving, which seizes us on her entrance, that so impressionable a lady will never bear up in the face of so trying an audience. . . . The combinations of incident which Mrs. Petherwin persuades her hearers that she has passed through are not a little marvellous; and if what is rumoured be true, that the tales are to a great extent based upon her own experiences, she has proved herself to be no less daring in adventure than facile in her power of describing it.’

CHAPTER 17.

ETHELBERTA’S HOUSE

After such successes as these, Christopher could not forego the seductive intention of calling upon the poetess and romancer, at her now established town residence in Exonbury Crescent. One wintry afternoon he reached the door — now for the third time — and gave a knock which had in it every tender refinement that could be thrown into the somewhat antagonistic vehicle of noise. Turning his face down the street he waited restlessly on the step. There was a strange light in the atmosphere: the glass of the street-lamps, the varnished back of a passing cab, a milk-woman’s cans, and a row of church-windows glared in his eyes like new-rubbed copper; and on looking the other way he beheld a bloody sun hanging among the chimneys at the upper end, as a danger-lamp to warn him off.

By this time the door was opened, and before him stood Ethelberta’s young brother Joey, thickly populated with little buttons, the remainder of him consisting of invisible green.

‘Ah, Joseph,’ said Christopher, instantly recognizing the boy. ‘What, are you here in office? Is your — ’

Joey lifted his forefinger and spread his mouth in a genial manner, as if to signify particular friendliness mingled with general caution.

‘Yes, sir, Mrs. Petherwin is my mistress. I’ll see if she is at home, sir,’ he replied, raising his shoulders and winking a wink of strategic meanings by way of finish — all which signs showed, if evidence were wanted, how effectually this pleasant young page understood, though quite fresh from Wessex, the duties of his peculiar position. Mr. Julian was shown to the drawing-room, and there he found Ethelberta alone.

She gave him a hand so cool and still that Christopher, much as he desired the contact, was literally ashamed to let her see and feel his own, trembling with unman-ageable excess of feeling. It was always so, always had been so, always would be so, at these meetings of theirs: she was immeasurably the strongest; and the deep-eyed young man fancied, in the chagrin which the perception of this difference always bred in him, that she triumphed in her superior control. Yet it was only in little things that their sexes were thus reversed: Christopher would receive quite a shock if a little dog barked at his heels, and be totally unmoved when in danger of his life.

Certainly the most self-possessed woman in the world, under pressure of the incongruity between their last meeting and the present one, might have shown more embarrassment than Ethelberta showed on greeting him to-day. Christopher was only a man in believing that the shyness which she did evince was chiefly the result of personal interest. She might or might not have been said to blush — perhaps the stealthy change upon her face was too slow an operation to deserve that name: but, though pale when he called, the end of ten minutes saw her colour high and wide. She soon set him at his ease, and seemed to relax a long-sustained tension as she talked to him of her arrangements, hopes, and fears.

‘And how do you like London society?’ said Ethelberta.

‘Pretty well, as far as I have seen it: to the surface of its front door.’

‘You will find nothing to be alarmed at if you get inside.’

‘O no — of course not — except my own shortcomings,’ said the modest musician. ‘London society is made up of much more refined people than society anywhere else.’

‘That’s a very prevalent opinion; and it is nowhere half so prevalent as in London society itself. However, come and see my house — unless you think it a trouble to look over a house?’

‘No; I should like it very much.’

The decorations tended towards the artistic gymnastics prevalent in some quarters at the present day. Upon a general flat tint of duck’s-egg green appeared quaint patterns of conventional foliage, and birds, done in bright auburn, several shades nearer to redbreast-red than was Ethelberta’s hair, which was thus thrust further towards brown by such juxtaposition — a possible reason for the choice of tint. Upon the glazed tiles within the chimney-piece were the forms of owls, bats, snakes, frogs, mice, spiders in their webs, moles, and other objects of aversion and darkness, shaped in black and burnt in after the approved fashion.

‘My brothers Sol and Dan did most of the actual work,’ said Ethelberta, ‘though I drew the outlines, and designed the tiles round the fire. The flowers, mice, and spiders are done very simply, you know: you only press a real flower, mouse, or spider out flat under a piece of glass, and then copy it, adding a little more emaciation and angularity at pleasure.’

‘In that “at pleasure” is where all the art lies,’ said he.

‘Well, yes — that is the case,’ said Ethelberta thoughtfully; and preceding him upstairs, she threw open a door on one of the floors, disclosing Dan in person, engaged upon a similar treatment of this floor also. Sol appeared bulging from the door of a closet, a little further on, where he was fixing some shelves; and both wore workmen’s blouses. At once coming down from the short ladder he was standing upon, Dan shook Christopher’s hand with some velocity.

‘We do a little at a time, you see,’ he said, ‘because Colonel down below, and Mrs. Petherwin’s visitors, shan’t smell the turpentine.’

‘We be pushing on to-day to get it out of the way,’ said Sol, also coming forward and greeting their visitor, but more reluctantly than his brother had done. ‘Now I’ll tell ye what — you two,’ he added, after an uneasy pause, turning from Christopher to Ethelberta and back again in great earnestness; ‘you’d better not bide here, talking to we rough ones, you know, for folks might find out that there’s something closer between us than workmen and employer and employer’s friend. So Berta and Mr. Julian, if you’ll go on and take no more notice o’ us, in case of visitors, it would be wiser — else, perhaps, if we should be found out intimate with ye, and bring down your gentility, you’ll blame us for it. I get as nervous as a cat when I think I may be the cause of any disgrace to ye.’

‘Don’t be so silly, Sol,’ said Ethelberta, laughing.

‘Ah, that’s all very well,’ said Sol, with an unbelieving smile; ‘but if we bain’t company for you out of doors, you bain’t company for we within — not that I find fault with ye or mind it, and shan’t take anything for painting your house, nor will Dan neither, any more for that — no, not a penny; in fact, we are glad to do it for ‘ee. At the same time, you keep to your class, and we’ll keep to ours. And so, good afternoon, Berta, when you like to go, and the same to you, Mr. Julian. Dan, is that your mind?’

‘I can but own it,’ said Dan.

The two brothers then turned their backs upon their visitors, and went on working, and Ethelberta and her lover left the room. ‘My brothers, you perceive,’ said she, ‘represent the respectable British workman in his entirety, and a touchy individual he is, I assure you, on points of dignity, after imbibing a few town ideas from his leaders. They are painfully off-hand with me, absolutely refusing to be intimate, from a mistaken notion that I am ashamed of their dress and manners; which, of course, is absurd.’

‘Which, of course, is absurd,’ said Christopher.

‘Of course it is absurd!’ she repeated with warmth, and looking keenly at him. But, finding no harm in his face, she continued as before: ‘Yet, all the time, they will do anything under the sun that they think will advance my interests. In our hearts we are one. All they ask me to do is to leave them to themselves, and therefore I do so. Now, would you like to see some more of your acquaintance?’

She introduced him to a large attic; where he found himself in the society of two or three persons considerably below the middle height, whose manners were of that gushing kind sometimes called Continental, their ages ranging from five years to eight. These were the youngest children, presided over by Emmeline, as professor of letters, capital and small.

‘I am giving them the rudiments of education here,’ said Ethelberta; ‘but I foresee several difficulties in the way of keeping them here, which I must get over as best I can. One trouble is, that they don’t get enough air and exercise.’

‘Is Mrs. Chickerel living here as well?’ Christopher ventured to inquire, when they were downstairs again.

‘Yes; but confined to her room as usual, I regret to say. Two more sisters of mine, whom you have never seen at all, are also here. They are older than any of the rest of us, and had, broadly speaking, no education at all, poor girls. The eldest, Gwendoline, is my cook, and Cornelia is my housemaid. I suffer much sadness, and almost misery sometimes, in reflecting that here are we, ten brothers and sisters, born of one father and mother, who might have mixed together and shared all in the same scenes, and been properly happy, if it were not for the strange accidents that have split us up into sections as you see, cutting me off from them without the compensation of joining me to any others. They are all true as steel in keeping the secret of our kin, certainly; but that brings little joy, though some satisfaction perhaps.’

‘You might be less despondent, I think. The tale-telling has been one of the successes of the season.’

‘Yes, I might; but I may observe that you scarcely set the example of blitheness.’

‘Ah — that’s not because I don’t recognize the pleasure of being here. It is from a more general cause: simply an underfeeling I have that at the most propitious moment the distance to the possibility of sorrow is so short that a man’s spirits must not rise higher than mere cheerfulness out of bare respect to his insight.

”As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,

Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,

Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.”

Ethelberta bowed uncertainly; the remark might refer to her past conduct or it might not. ‘My great cause of uneasiness is the children,’ she presently said, as a new page of matter. ‘It is my duty, at all risk and all sacrifice of sentiment, to educate and provide for them. The grown-up ones, older than myself, I cannot help much, but the little ones I can. I keep my two French lodgers for the sake of them.’

‘The lodgers, of course, don’t know the relationship between yourself and the rest of the people in the house?’

‘O no! — nor will they ever. My mother is supposed to let the ground and first floors to me — a strange lady — as she does the second and third floors to them. Still, I may be discovered.’

‘Well — if you are?’

‘Let me be. Life is a battle, they say; but it is only so in the sense that a game of chess is a battle — there is no seriousness in it; it may be put an end to at any inconvenient moment by owning yourself beaten, with a careless “Ha-ha!” and sweeping your pieces into the box. Experimentally, I care to succeed in society; but at the bottom of my heart, I don’t care.’

‘For that very reason you are likely to do it. My idea is, make ambition your business and indifference your relaxation, and you will fail; but make indifference your business and ambition your relaxation, and you will succeed. So impish are the ways of the gods.’

‘I hope that you at any rate will succeed,’ she said, at the end of a silence.

‘I never can — if success means getting what one wants.’

‘Why should you not get that?’

‘It has been forbidden to me.’

Her complexion changed just enough to show that she knew what he meant. ‘If you were as bold as you are subtle, you would take a more cheerful view of the matter,’ she said, with a look signifying innermost things.

‘I will instantly! Shall I test the truth of my cheerful view by a word of question?’

‘I deny that you are capable of taking that view, and until you prove that you are, no question is allowed,’ she said, laughing, and still warmer in the face and neck. ‘Nothing but melancholy, gentle melancholy, now as in old times when there was nothing to cause it.’

‘Ah — you only tease.’

‘You will not throw aside that bitter medicine of distrust, for the world. You have grown so used to it, that you take it as food, as some invalids do their mixtures.’

‘Ethelberta, you have my heart — my whole heart. You have had it ever since I first saw you. Now you understand me, and no pretending that you don’t, mind, this second time.’

‘I understood you long ago; you have not understood me.’

‘You are mysterious,’ he said lightly; ‘and perhaps if I disentangle your mystery I shall find it to cover — indifference. I hope it does — for your sake.’

‘How can you say so!’ she exclaimed reproachfully. ‘Yet I wish it did too — I wish it did cover indifference — for yours. But you have all of me that you care to have, and may keep it for life if you wish to. Listen, surely there was a knock at the door? Let us go inside the room: I am always uneasy when anybody comes, lest any awkward discovery should be made by a visitor of my miserable contrivances for keeping up the establishment.’

Joey met them before they had left the landing.

‘Please, Berta,’ he whispered, ‘Mr. Ladywell has called, and I’ve showed him into the liberry. You know, Berta, this is how it was, you know: I thought you and Mr. Julian were in the drawing-room, and wouldn’t want him to see ye together, and so I asked him to step into the liberry a minute.’

‘You must improve your way of speaking,’ she said, with quick embarrassment, whether at the mention of Ladywell’s name before Julian, or at the way Joey coupled herself with Christopher, was quite uncertain. ‘Will you excuse me for a few moments?’ she said, turning to Christopher. ‘Pray sit down; I shall not be long.’ And she glided downstairs.

They had been standing just by the drawing-room door, and Christopher turned back into the room with no very satisfactory countenance. It was very odd, he thought, that she should go down to Ladywell in that mysterious manner, when he might have been admitted to where they were talking without any trouble at all. What could Ladywell have to say, as an acquaintance calling upon her for a few minutes, that he was not to hear? Indeed, if it came to that, what right had Ladywell to call upon her at all, even though she were a widow, and to some extent chartered to live in a way which might be considered a trifle free if indulged in by other young women. This was the first time that he himself had ventured into her house on that very account — a doubt whether it was quite proper to call, considering her youth, and the fertility of her position as ground for scandal. But no sooner did he arrive than here was Ladywell blundering in, and, since this conjunction had occurred on his first visit, the chances were that Ladywell came very often.

Julian walked up and down the room, every moment expanding itself to a minute in his impatience at the delay and vexation at the cause. After scrutinizing for the fifth time every object on the walls as if afflicted with microscopic closeness of sight, his hands under his coat-tails, and his person jiggling up and down upon his toes, he heard her coming up the stairs. When she entered the apartment her appearance was decidedly that of a person subsiding after some little excitement.

‘I did not calculate upon being so long,’ she said sweetly, at the same time throwing back her face and smiling. ‘But I — was longer than I expected.’

‘It seemed rather long,’ said Christopher gloomily, ‘but I don’t mind it.’

‘I am glad of that,’ said Ethelberta.

‘As you asked me to stay, I was very pleased to do so, and always should be; but I think that now I will wish you good-bye.’

‘You are not vexed with me?’ she said, looking quite into his face. ‘Mr. Ladywell is nobody, you know.’

‘Nobody?’

‘Well, he is not much, I mean. The case is, that I am sitting to him for a subject in which my face is to be used — otherwise than as a portrait — and he called about it.’

‘May I say,’ said Christopher, ‘that if you want yourself painted, you are ill-advised not to let it be done by a man who knows how to use the brush a little?’

‘O, he can paint!’ said Ethelberta, rather warmly. ‘His last picture was excellent, I think. It was greatly talked about.’

‘I imagined you to say that he was a mere nobody!’

‘Yes, but — how provoking you are! — nobody, I mean, to talk to. He is a true artist, nevertheless.’

Christopher made no reply. The warm understanding between them had quite ended now, and there was no fanning it up again. Sudden tiffs had been the constant misfortune of their courtship in days gone by, had been the remote cause of her marriage to another; and the familiar shadows seemed to be rising again to cloud them with the same persistency as ever. Christopher went downstairs with well-behaved moodiness, and left the house forthwith. The postman came to the door at the same time.

Ethelberta opened a letter from Picotee — now at Sandbourne again; and, stooping to the fire-light, she began to read: —

‘MY DEAR ETHELBERTA, — I have tried to like staying at Sandbourne because you wished it, but I can’t endure the town at all, dear Berta; everything is so wretched and dull! O, I only wish you knew how dismal it is here, and how much I would give to come to London! I cannot help thinking that I could do better in town. You see, I should be close to you, and should have the benefit of your experience. I would not mind what I did for a living could I be there where you all are. It is so like banishment to be here. If I could not get a pupil-teachership in some London school (and I believe I could by advertising) I could stay with you, and be governess to Georgina and Myrtle, for I am sure you cannot spare time enough to teach them as they ought to be taught, and Emmeline is not old enough to have any command over them. I could also assist at your dressmaking, and you must require a great deal of that to be done if you continue to appear in public. Mr. Long read in the papers the account of your first evening, and afterwards I heard two ladies of our committee talking about it; but of course not one of them knew my personal interest in the discussion. Now will you, Ethelberta, think if I may not come: Do, there’s a dear sister! I will do anything you set me about if I may only come. — Your ever affectionate, PICOTEE.’

‘Great powers above — what worries do beset me!’ cried Ethelberta, jumping up. ‘What can possess the child so suddenly? — she used to like Sandbourne well enough!’ She sat down, and hastily scribbled the following reply: —

‘MY DEAR PICOTEE — There is only a little time to spare before the post goes, but I will try to answer your letter at once. Whatever is the reason of this extraordinary dislike to Sandbourne? It is a nice healthy place, and you are likely to do much better than either of our elder sisters, if you follow straight on in the path you have chosen. Of course, if such good fortune should attend me that I get rich by my contrivances of public story-telling and so on, I shall share everything with you and the rest of us, in which case you shall not work at all. But (although I have been unexpectedly successful so far) this is problematical; and it would be rash to calculate upon all of us being able to live, or even us seven girls only, upon the fortune I am going to make that way. So, though I don’t mean to be harsh, I must impress upon you the necessity of

going on as you are going just at present. I know the place must be dull, but we must all put up with dullness sometimes. You, being next to me in age, must aid me as well as you can in doing something for the younger ones; and if anybody at all comes and lives here otherwise than as a servant, it must be our father — who will not, however, at present hear of such a thing when I mention it to him. Do think of all this, Picotee, and bear up! Perhaps we shall all be happy and united some day. Joey is waiting to run to the post-office with this at once. All are well. Sol and Dan have nearly finished the repairs and decorations of my house — but I will tell you of that another time. — Your affectionate sister, BERTA.'

CHAPTER 18.

NEAR SANDBOURNE — LONDON STREETS — ETHELBERTA'S

When this letter reached its destination the next morning, Picotee, in her over-anxiety, could not bring herself to read it in anybody's presence, and put it in her pocket till she was on her walk across the moor. She still lived at the cottage out of the town, though at some inconvenience to herself, in order to teach at a small village night-school whilst still carrying on her larger occupation of pupil-teacher in Sandbourne.

So she walked and read, and was soon in tears. Moreover, when she thought of what Ethelberta would have replied had that keen sister known the wildness of her true reason in wishing to go, she shuddered with misery. To wish to get near a man only because he had been kind to her, and had admired her pretty face, and had given her flowers, to nourish a passion all the more because of its hopeless impracticability, were things to dream of, not to tell. Picotee was quite an unreasoning animal. Her sister arranged situations for her, told her how to conduct herself in them, how to make up anew, in unobtrusive shapes, the valuable wearing apparel she sent from time to time — so as to provoke neither exasperation in the little gentry, nor superciliousness in the great. Ethelberta did everything for her, in short; and Picotee obeyed orders with the abstracted ease of mind which people show who have their thinking done for them, and put out their troubles as they do their washing. She was quite willing not to be clever herself, since it was unnecessary while she had a much-admired sister, who was clever enough for two people and to spare.

This arrangement, by which she gained an untroubled existence in exchange for freedom of will, had worked very pleasantly for Picotee until the anomaly of falling in love on her own account created a jar in the machinery. Then she began to know how wearing were miserable days, and how much more wearing were miserable nights. She pictured Christopher in London calling upon her dignified sister (for Ethelberta innocently mentioned his name sometimes in writing) and imagined over and over again the mutual signs of warm feeling between them. And now Picotee resolved upon a noble course. Like Juliet, she had been troubled with a consciousness that perhaps

her love for Christopher was a trifle forward and unmaidenly, even though she had determined never to let him or anybody in the whole world know of it. To set herself to pray that she might have strength to see him without a pang the lover of her sister, who deserved him so much more than herself, would be a grand penance and corrective.

After uttering petitions to this effect for several days, she still felt very bad; indeed, in the psychological difficulty of striving for what in her soul she did not desire, rather worse, if anything. At last, weary of walking the old road and never meeting him, and blank in a general powerlessness, she wrote the letter to Ethelberta, which was only the last one of a series that had previously been written and torn up.

Now this hope had been whirled away like thistledown, and the case was grievous enough to distract a greater stoic than Picotee. The end of it was that she left the school on insufficient notice, gave up her cottage home on the plea — true in the letter — that she was going to join a relative in London, and went off thither by a morning train, leaving her things packed ready to be sent on when she should write for them.

Picotee arrived in town late on a cold February afternoon, bearing a small bag in her hand. She crossed Westminster Bridge on foot, just after dusk, and saw a luminous haze hanging over each well-lighted street as it withdrew into distance behind the nearer houses, showing its direction as a train of morning mist shows the course of a distant stream when the stream itself is hidden. The lights along the riverside towards Charing Cross sent an inverted palisade of gleaming swords down into the shaking water, and the pavement ticked to the touch of pedestrians' feet, most of whom tripped along as if walking only to practise a favourite quick step, and held handkerchiefs to their mouths to strain off the river mist from their lungs. She inquired her way to Exonbury Crescent, and between five and six o'clock reached her sister's door.

Two or three minutes were passed in accumulating resolution sufficient to ring the bell, which when at last she did, was not performed in a way at all calculated to make the young man Joey hasten to the door. After the lapse of a certain time he did, however, find leisure to stroll and see what the caller might want, out of curiosity to know who there could be in London afraid to ring a bell twice.

Joey's delight exceeded even his surprise, the ruling maxim of his life being the more the merrier, under all circumstances. The beaming young man was about to run off and announce her upstairs and downstairs, left and right, when Picotee called him hastily to her. In the hall her quick young eye had caught sight of an umbrella with a peculiar horn handle — an umbrella she had been accustomed to meet on Sandbourne Moor on many happy afternoons. Christopher was evidently in the house.

'Joey,' she said, as if she were ready to faint, 'don't tell Berta I am come. She has company, has she not?'

'O no — only Mr. Julian!' said the brother. 'He's quite one of the family!'

'Never mind — can't I go down into the kitchen with you?' she inquired. There had been bliss and misery mingled in those tidings, and she scarcely knew for a moment which way they affected her. What she did know was that she had run her dear fox

to earth, and a sense of satisfaction at that feat prevented her just now from counting the cost of the performance.

‘Does Mr. Julian come to see her very often?’ said she.

‘O yes — he’s always a-coming — a regular bore to me.’

‘A regular what?’

‘Bore! — Ah, I forgot, you don’t know our town words. However, come along.’

They passed by the doors on tiptoe, and their mother upstairs being, according to Joey’s account, in the midst of a nap, Picotee was unwilling to disturb her; so they went down at once to the kitchen, when forward rushed Gwendoline the cook, flourishing her floury hands, and Cornelia the housemaid, dancing over her brush; and these having welcomed and made Picotee comfortable, who should ring the area-bell, and be admitted down the steps, but Sol and Dan. The workman-brothers, their day’s duties being over, had called to see their relations, first, as usual, going home to their lodgings in Marylebone and making themselves as spruce as bridegrooms, according to the rules of their newly-acquired town experience. For the London mechanic is only nine hours a mechanic, though the country mechanic works, eats, drinks, and sleeps a mechanic throughout the whole twenty-four.

‘God bless my soul — Picotee!’ said Dan, standing fixed. ‘Well — I say, this is splendid! ha-ha!’

‘Picotee — what brought you here?’ said Sol, expanding the circumference of his face in satisfaction. ‘Well, come along — never mind so long as you be here.’

Picotee explained circumstances as well as she could without stating them, and, after a general conversation of a few minutes, Sol interrupted with — ‘Anybody upstairs with Mrs. Petherwin?’

‘Mr. Julian was there just now,’ said Joey; ‘but he may be gone. Berta always lets him slip out how he can, the form of ringing me up not being necessary with him. Wait a minute — I’ll see.’

Joseph vanished up the stairs; and, the question whether Christopher were gone or not being an uninteresting one to the majority, the talking went on upon other matters. When Joey crept down again a minute later, Picotee was sitting aloof and silent, and he accordingly singled her out to speak to.

‘Such a lark, Picotee!’ he whispered. ‘Berta’s a-courting of her young man. Would you like to see how they carries on a bit?’

‘Dearly I should!’ said Picotee, the pupils of her eyes dilating.

Joey conducted her to the top of the basement stairs, and told her to listen. Within a few yards of them was the morning-room door, now standing ajar; and an intermittent flirtation in soft male and female tones could be heard going on inside. Picotee’s lips parted at thus learning the condition of things, and she leant against the stair-newel.

‘My? What’s the matter?’ said Joey.

‘If this is London, I don’t like it at all!’ moaned Picotee.

‘Well — I never see such a girl — fainting all over the stairs for nothing in the world.’

‘O — it will soon be gone — it is — it is only indigestion.’

‘Indigestion? Much you simple country people can know about that! You should see what devils of indigestions we get in high life — eating ‘normous great dinners and suppers that require clever physicians to carry ‘em off, or else they’d carry us off with gout next day; and waking in the morning with such a splitting headache, and dry throat, and inward cusses about human nature, that you feel all the world like some great lord. However, now let’s go down again.’

‘No, no, no!’ said the unhappy maiden imploringly. ‘Hark!’

They listened again. The voices of the musician and poetess had changed: there was a decided frigidity in their tone — then came a louder expression — then a silence.

‘You needn’t be afeard,’ said Joey. ‘They won’t fight; bless you, they busts out quarrelling like this times and times when they’ve been over-friendly, but it soon gets straight with ‘em again.’

There was now a quick walk across the room, and Joey and his sister drew down their heads out of sight. Then the room door was slammed, quick footsteps went along the hall, the front door closed just as loudly, and Christopher’s tread passed into nothing along the pavement.

‘That’s rather a wuss one than they mostly have; but Lord, ‘tis nothing at all.’

‘I don’t much like biding here listening!’ said Picotee.

‘O, ‘tis how we do all over the West End,’ said Joey. ‘‘Tis yer ignorance of town life that makes it seem a good deal to ‘ee.’

‘You can’t make much boast about town life; for you haven’t left off talking just as they do down in Wessex.’

‘Well, I own to that — what’s fair is fair, and ‘tis a true charge; but if I talk the Wessex way ‘tisn’t for want of knowing better; ‘tis because my staunch nater makes me bide faithful to our old ancient institutions. You’d soon own ‘twasn’t ignorance in me, if you knowed what large quantities of noblemen I gets mixed up with every day. In fact ‘tis thoughted here and there that I shall do very well in the world.’

‘Well, let us go down,’ said Picotee. ‘Everything seems so overpowering here.’

‘O, you’ll get broke in soon enough. I felt just the same when I first entered into society.’

‘Do you think Berta will be angry with me? How does she treat you?’

‘Well, I can’t complain. You see she’s my own flesh and blood, and what can I say? But, in secret truth, the wages is terrible low, and barely pays for the tobacco I consooms.’

‘O Joey, you wicked boy! If mother only knew that you smoked!’

‘I don’t mind the wickedness so much as the smell. And Mrs. Petherwin has got such a nose for a fellow’s clothes. ‘Tis one of the greatest knots in service — the smoke question. ‘Tis thoughted that we shall make a great stir about it in the mansions of the nobility soon.’

‘How much more you know of life than I do — you only fourteen and me seventeen!’

‘Yes, that’s true. You see, age is nothing — ’tis opportunity. And even I can’t boast, for many a younger man knows more.’

‘But don’t smoke, Joey — there’s a dear!’

‘What can I do? Society hev its rules, and if a person wishes to keep himself up, he must do as the world do. We be all Fashion’s slave — as much a slave as the meanest in the land!’

They got downstairs again; and when the dinner of the French lady and gentleman had been sent up and cleared away, and also Ethelberta’s evening tea (which she formed into a genuine meal, making a dinner of luncheon, when nobody was there, to give less trouble to her servant-sisters), they all sat round the fire. Then the rustle of a dress was heard on the staircase, and squirrel-haired Ethelberta appeared in person. It was her custom thus to come down every spare evening, to teach Joey and her sisters something or other — mostly French, which she spoke fluently; but the cook and housemaid showed more ambition than intelligence in acquiring that tongue, though Joey learnt it readily enough.

There was consternation in the camp for a moment or two, on account of poor Picotee, Ethelberta being not without firmness in matters of discipline. Her eye instantly lighted upon her disobedient sister, now looking twice as disobedient as she really was.

‘O, you are here, Picotee? I am glad to see you,’ said the mistress of the house quietly.

This was altogether to Picotee’s surprise, for she had expected a round rating at least, in her freshness hardly being aware that this reserve of feeling was an acquired habit of Ethelberta’s, and that civility stood in town for as much vexation as a tantrum represented in Wessex.

Picotee lamely explained her outward reasons for coming, and soon began to find that Ethelberta’s opinions on the matter would not be known by the tones of her voice. But innocent Picotee was as wily as a religionist in sly elusions of the letter whilst infringing the spirit of a dictum; and by talking very softly and earnestly about the wondrous good she could do by remaining in the house as governess to the children, and playing the part of lady’s-maid to her sister at show times, she so far coaxed Ethelberta out of her intentions that she almost accepted the plan as a good one. It was agreed that for the present, at any rate, Picotee should remain. Then a visit was made to Mrs. Chickerel’s room, where the remainder of the evening was passed; and harmony reigned in the household.

CHAPTER 19.

ETHELBERTA’S DRAWING-ROOM

Picotee’s heart was fitfully glad. She was near the man who had enlarged her capacity from girl’s to woman’s, a little note or two of young feeling to a whole diapason; and though nearness was perhaps not in itself a great reason for felicity when viewed

beside the complete realisation of all that a woman can desire in such circumstances, it was much in comparison with the outer darkness of the previous time.

It became evident to all the family that some misunderstanding had arisen between Ethelberta and Mr. Julian. What Picotee hoped in the centre of her heart as to the issue of the affair it would be too complex a thing to say. If Christopher became cold towards her sister he would not come to the house; if he continued to come it would really be as Ethelberta's lover — altogether, a pretty game of perpetual check for Picotee.

He did not make his appearance for several days. Picotee, being a presentable girl, and decidedly finer-natured than her sisters below stairs, was allowed to sit occasionally with Ethelberta in the afternoon, when the teaching of the little ones had been done for the day; and thus she had an opportunity of observing Ethelberta's emotional condition with reference to Christopher, which Picotee did with an interest that the elder sister was very far from suspecting.

At first Ethelberta seemed blithe enough without him. One more day went, and he did not come, and then her manner was that of apathy. Another day passed, and from fanciful elevations of the eyebrow, and long breathings, it became apparent that Ethelberta had decidedly passed the indifferent stage, and was getting seriously out of sorts about him. Next morning she looked all hope. He did not come that day either, and Ethelberta began to look pale with fear.

'Why don't you go out?' said Picotee timidly.

'I can hardly tell: I have been expecting some one.'

'When she comes I must run up to mother at once, must I not?' said clever Picotee.

'It is not a lady,' said Ethelberta blandly. She came then and stood by Picotee, and looked musingly out of the window. 'I may as well tell you, perhaps,' she continued. 'It is Mr. Julian. He is — I suppose — my lover, in plain English.'

'Ah!' said Picotee.

'Whom I am not going to marry until he gets rich.'

'Ah — how strange! If I had him — such a lover, I mean — I would marry him if he continued poor.'

'I don't doubt it, Picotee; just as you come to London without caring about consequences, or would do any other crazy thing and not mind in the least what came of it. But somebody in the family must take a practical view of affairs, or we should all go to the dogs.'

Picotee recovered from the snubbing which she felt that she deserved, and charged gallantly by saying, with delicate showings of indifference, 'Do you love this Mr. What's-his-name of yours?'

'Mr. Julian? O, he's a very gentlemanly man. That is, except when he is rude, and ill-uses me, and will not come and apologize!'

'If I had him — a lover, I would ask him to come if I wanted him to.'

Ethelberta did not give her mind to this remark; but, drawing a long breath, said, with a pouting laugh, which presaged unreality, 'The idea of his getting indifferent

now! I have been intending to keep him on until I got tired of his attentions, and then put an end to them by marrying him; but here is he, before he has hardly declared himself, forgetting my existence as much as if he had vowed to love and cherish me for life. 'Tis an unnatural inversion of the manners of society.'

'When did you first get to care for him, dear Berta?'

'O — when I had seen him once or twice.'

'Goodness — how quick you were!'

'Yes — if I am in the mind for loving I am not to be hindered by shortness of acquaintanceship.'

'Nor I neither!' sighed Picotee.

'Nor any other woman. We don't need to know a man well in order to love him. That's only necessary when we want to leave off.'

'O Berta — you don't believe that!'

'If a woman did not invariably form an opinion of her choice before she has half seen him, and love him before she has half formed an opinion, there would be no tears and pining in the whole feminine world, and poets would starve for want of a topic. I don't believe it, do you say? Ah, well, we shall see.'

Picotee did not know what to say to this; and Ethelberta left the room to see about her duties as public story-teller, in which capacity she had undertaken to appear again this very evening.

CHAPTER 20.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF THE HALL — THE ROAD HOME

London was illuminated by the broad full moon. The pavements looked white as if mantled with snow; ordinary houses were sublimated to the rank of public buildings, public buildings to palaces, and the faces of women walking the streets to those of calendared saints and guardian-angels, by the pure bleaching light from the sky.

In the quiet little street where opened the private door of the Hall chosen by Ethelberta for her story-telling, a brougham was waiting. The time was about eleven o'clock; and presently a lady came out from the building, the moonbeams forthwith flooding her face, which they showed to be that of the Story-teller herself. She hastened across to the carriage, when a second thought arrested her motion: telling the man-servant and a woman inside the brougham to wait for her, she wrapped up her features and glided round to the front of the house, where she paused to observe the carriages and cabs driving up to receive the fashionable crowd stepping down from the doors. Standing here in the throng which her own talent and ingenuity had drawn together, she appeared to enjoy herself by listening for a minute or two to the names of several persons of more or less distinction as they were called out, and then regarded attentively the faces of others of lesser degree: to scrutinize the latter was, as the event proved, the

real object of the journey from round the corner. When nearly every one had left the doors, she turned back disappointed. Ethelberta had been fancying that her alienated lover Christopher was in the back rows to-night, but, as far as could now be observed, the hopeful supposition was a false one.

When she got round to the back again, a man came forward. It was Ladywell, whom she had spoken to already that evening. 'Allow me to bring you your note-book, Mrs. Petherwin: I think you had forgotten it,' he said. 'I assure you that nobody has handled it but myself.'

Ethelberta thanked him, and took the book. 'I use it to look into between the parts, in case my memory should fail me,' she explained. 'I remember that I did lay it down, now you remind me.'

Ladywell had apparently more to say, and moved by her side towards the carriage; but she declined the arm he offered, and said not another word till he went on, haltingly:

'Your triumph to-night was very great, and it was as much a triumph to me as to you; I cannot express my feeling — I cannot say half that I would. If I might only —'

'Thank you much,' said Ethelberta, with dignity. 'Thank you for bringing my book, but I must go home now. I know that you will see that it is not necessary for us to be talking here.'

'Yes — you are quite right,' said the repressed young painter, struck by her seriousness. 'Blame me; I ought to have known better. But perhaps a man — well, I will say it — a lover without indiscretion is no lover at all. Circumspection and devotion are a contradiction in terms. I saw that, and hoped that I might speak without real harm.'

'You calculated how to be uncalculating, and are natural by art!' she said, with the slightest accent of sarcasm. 'But pray do not attend me further — it is not at all necessary or desirable. My maid is in the carriage.' She bowed, turned, and entered the vehicle, seating herself beside Picotee.

'It was harsh!' said Ladywell to himself, as he looked after the retreating carriage. 'I was a fool; but it was harsh. Yet what man on earth likes a woman to show too great a readiness at first? She is right: she would be nothing without repulse!' And he moved away in an opposite direction.

'What man was that?' said Picotee, as they drove along.

'O — a mere Mr. Ladywell: a painter of good family, to whom I have been sitting for what he calls an Idealization. He is a dreadful simpleton.'

'Why did you choose him?'

'I did not: he chose me. But his silliness of behaviour is a hopeful sign for the picture. I have seldom known a man cunning with his brush who was not simple with his tongue; or, indeed, any skill in particular that was not allied to general stupidity.'

'Your own skill is not like that, is it, Berta?'

'In men — in men. I don't mean in women. How childish you are!'

The slight depression at finding that Christopher was not present, which had followed Ethelberta's public triumph that evening, was covered over, if not removed, by Ladywell's declaration, and she reached home serene in spirit. That she had not the

slightest notion of accepting the impulsive painter made little difference; a lover's arguments being apt to affect a lady's mood as much by measure as by weight. A useless declaration like a rare china teacup with a hole in it, has its ornamental value in enlarging a collection.

No sooner had they entered the house than Mr. Julian's card was discovered; and Joey informed them that he had come particularly to speak with Ethelberta, quite forgetting that it was her evening for tale-telling.

This was real delight, for between her excitements Ethelberta had been seriously sick-hearted at the horrible possibility of his never calling again. But alas! for Christopher. There being nothing like a dead silence for getting one's off-hand sweetheart into a corner, there is nothing like prematurely ending it for getting into that corner one's self.

'Now won't I punish him for daring to stay away so long!' she exclaimed as soon as she got upstairs. 'It is as bad to show constancy in your manners as fickleness in your heart at such a time as this.'

'But I thought honesty was the best policy?' said Picotee.

'So it is, for the man's purpose. But don't you go believing in sayings, Picotee: they are all made by men, for their own advantages. Women who use public proverbs as a guide through events are those who have not ingenuity enough to make private ones as each event occurs.'

She sat down, and rapidly wrote a line to Mr. Julian: —

'EXONBURY CRESCENT.

'I return from Mayfair Hall to find you have called. You will, I know, be good enough to forgive my saying what seems an unfriendly thing, when I assure you that the circumstances of my peculiar situation make it desirable, if not necessary. It is that I beg you not to give me the pleasure of a visit from you for some little time, for unhappily the frequency of your kind calls has been noticed; and I am now in fear that we may be talked about — invidiously — to the injury of us both. The town, or a section of it, has turned its bull's-eye upon me with a brightness which I did not in the least anticipate; and you will, I am sure, perceive how indispensable it is that I should be circumspect. — Yours sincerely,

E. PETHERWIN.'

CHAPTER 21.

A STREET — NEIGH'S ROOMS — CHRISTOPHER'S ROOMS

As soon as Ethelberta had driven off from the Hall, Ladywell turned back again; and, passing the front entrance, overtook his acquaintance Mr. Neigh, who had been one of the last to emerge. The two were going in the same direction, and they walked a short distance together.

‘Has anything serious happened?’ said Neigh, noticing an abstraction in his companion. ‘You don’t seem in your usual mood to-night.’

‘O, it is only that affair between us,’ said Ladywell.

‘Affair? Between you and whom?’

‘Her and myself, of course. It will be in every fellow’s mouth now, I suppose!’

‘But — not anything between yourself and Mrs. Petherwin?’

‘A mere nothing. But surely you started, Neigh, when you suspected it just this moment?’

‘No — you merely fancied that.’

‘Did she not speak well to-night! You were in the room, I believe?’

‘Yes, I just turned in for half-an-hour: it seems that everybody does, so I thought I must. But I had no idea that you were feeble that way.’

‘It is very kind of you, Neigh — upon my word it is — very kind; and of course I appreciate the delicacy which — which — ’

‘What’s kind?’

‘I mean your well-intentioned plan for making me believe that nothing is known of this. But stories will of course get wind; and if our attachment has made more noise in the world than I intended it should, and causes any public interest, why — ha-ha! — it must. There is some little romance in it perhaps, and people will talk of matters of that sort between individuals of any repute — little as that is with one of the pair.’

‘Of course they will — of course. You are a rising man, remember, whom some day the world will delight to honour.’

‘Thank you for that, Neigh. Thank you sincerely.’

‘Not at all. It is merely justice to say it, and one must be generous to deserve thanks.’

‘Ha-ha! — that’s very nicely put, and undeserved I am sure. And yet I need a word of that sort sometimes!’

‘Genius is proverbially modest.’

‘Pray don’t, Neigh — I don’t deserve it, indeed. Of course it is well meant in you to recognize any slight powers, but I don’t deserve it. Certainly, my self-assurance was never too great. ‘Tis the misfortune of all children of art that they should be so dependent upon any scraps of praise they can pick up to help them along.’

‘And when that child gets so deep in love that you can only see the whites of his eyes — ’

‘Ah — now, Neigh — don’t, I say!’

‘But why did — ’

‘Why did I love her?’

‘Yes, why did you love her?’

‘Ah, if I could only turn self-vivisector, and watch the operation of my heart, I should know!’

‘My dear fellow, you must be very bad indeed to talk like that. A poet himself couldn’t be cleaner gone.’

'Now, don't chaff, Neigh; do anything, but don't chaff. You know that I am the easiest man in the world for taking it at most times. But I can't stand it now; I don't feel up to it. A glimpse of paradise, and then perdition. What would you do, Neigh?'

'She has refused you, then?'

'Well — not positively refused me; but it is so near it that a dull man couldn't tell the difference. I hardly can myself.'

'How do you really stand with her?' said Neigh, with an anxiety ill-concealed.

'Off and on — neither one thing nor the other. I was determined to make an effort the last time she sat to me, and so I met her quite coolly, and spoke only of technicalities with a forced smile — you know that way of mine for drawing people out, eh, Neigh?'

'Quite, quite.'

'A forced smile, as much as to say, "I am obliged to entertain you, but as a mere model for art purposes." But the deuce a bit did she care. And then I frequently looked to see what time it was, as the end of the sitting drew near — rather a rude thing to do, as a rule.'

'Of course. But that was your finesse. Ha-ha! — capital! Yet why not struggle against such slavery? It is regularly pulling you down. What's a woman's beauty, after all?'

'Well you may say so! A thing easier to feel than define,' murmured Ladywell. 'But it's no use, Neigh — I can't help it as long as she repulses me so exquisitely! If she would only care for me a little, I might get to trouble less about her.'

'And love her no more than one ordinarily does a girl by the time one gets irrevocably engaged to her. But I suppose she keeps you back so thoroughly that you carry on the old adoration with as much vigour as if it were a new fancy every time?'

'Partly yes, and partly no! It's very true, and it's not true!'

'Tis to be hoped she won't hate you outright, for then you would absolutely die of idolizing her.'

'Don't, Neigh! — Still there's some truth in it — such is the perversity of our hearts. Fancy marrying such a woman!'

'We should feel as eternally united to her after years and years of marriage as to a dear new angel met at last night's dance.'

'Exactly — just what I should have said. But did I hear you say "We," Neigh? You didn't say "WE should feel?"'

'Say "we"? — yes — of course — putting myself in your place just in the way of speaking, you know.'

'Of course, of course; but one is such a fool at these times that one seems to detect rivalry in every trumpety sound! Were you never a little touched?'

'Not I. My heart is in the happy position of a country which has no history or debt.'

'I suppose I should rejoice to hear it,' said Ladywell. 'But the consciousness of a fellow-sufferer being in just such another hole is such a relief always, and softens the sense of one's folly so very much.'

'There's less Christianity in that sentiment than in your confessing to it, old fellow. I know the truth of it nevertheless, and that's why married men advise others to marry.'

Were all the world tied up, the pleasantly tied ones would be equivalent to those at present free. But what if your fellow-sufferer is not only in another such a hole, but in the same one?’

‘No, Neigh — never! Don’t trifle with a friend who — ’

‘That is, refused like yourself, as well as in love.’

‘Ah, thanks, thanks! It suddenly occurred to me that we might be dead against one another as rivals, and a friendship of many long — days be snapped like a — like a reed.’

‘No — no — only a jest,’ said Neigh, with a strangely accelerated speech. ‘Love-making is an ornamental pursuit that matter-of-fact fellows like me are quite unfit for. A man must have courted at least half-a-dozen women before he’s a match for one; and since triumph lies so far ahead, I shall keep out of the contest altogether.’

‘Your life would be pleasanter if you were engaged. It is a nice thing, after all.’

‘It is. The worst of it would be that, when the time came for breaking it off, a fellow might get into an action for breach — women are so fond of that sort of thing now; and I hate love-affairs that don’t end peaceably!’

‘But end it by peaceably marrying, my dear fellow!’

‘It would seem so singular. Besides, I have a horror of antiquity: and you see, as long as a man keeps single, he belongs in a measure to the rising generation, however old he may be; but as soon as he marries and has children, he belongs to the last generation, however young he may be. Old Jones’s son is a deal younger than young Brown’s father, though they are both the same age.’

‘At any rate, honest courtship cures a man of many evils he had no power to stem before.’

‘By substituting an incurable matrimony!’

‘Ah — two persons must have a mind for that before it can happen!’ said Ladywell, sorrowfully shaking his head.

‘I think you’ll find that if one has a mind for it, it will be quite sufficient. But here we are at my rooms. Come in for half-an-hour?’

‘Not to-night, thanks!’

They parted, and Neigh went in. When he got upstairs he murmured in his deepest chest note, ‘O, lords, that I should come to this! But I shall never be such a fool as to marry her! What a flat that poor young devil was not to discover that we were tarred with the same brush. O, the deuce, the deuce!’ he continued, walking about the room as if passionately stamping, but not quite doing it because another man had rooms below.

Neigh drew from his pocket-book an envelope embossed with the name of a fashionable photographer, and out of this pulled a portrait of the lady who had, in fact, enslaved his secret self equally with his frank young friend the painter. After contemplating it awhile with a face of cynical adoration, he murmured, shaking his head, ‘Ah, my lady; if you only knew this, I should be snapped up like a snail! Not a minute’s peace for me till I had married you. I wonder if I shall! — I wonder.’

Neigh was a man of five-and-thirty — Ladywell's senior by ten years; and, being of a phlegmatic temperament, he had glided thus far through the period of eligibility with impunity. He knew as well as any man how far he could go with a woman and yet keep clear of having to meet her in church without her bonnet; but it is doubtful if his mind that night were less disturbed with the question how to guide himself out of the natural course which his passion for Ethelberta might tempt him into, than was Ladywell's by his ardent wish to secure her.

* * * * *

About the time at which Neigh and Ladywell parted company, Christopher Julian was entering his little place in Bloomsbury. The quaint figure of Faith, in her bonnet and cloak, was kneeling on the hearth-rug endeavouring to stir a dull fire into a bright one.

'What — Faith! you have never been out alone?' he said.

Faith's soft, quick-shutting eyes looked unutterable things, and she replied, 'I have been to hear Mrs. Petherwin's story-telling again.'

'And walked all the way home through the streets at this time of night, I suppose!'

'Well, nobody molested me, either going or coming back.'

'Faith, I gave you strict orders not to go into the streets after two o'clock in the day, and now here you are taking no notice of what I say at all!'

'The truth is, Kit, I wanted to see with my spectacles what this woman was really like, and I went without them last time. I slipped in behind, and nobody saw me.'

'I don't think much of her after what I have seen tonight,' said Christopher, moodily recurring to a previous thought.

'Why? What is the matter?'

'I thought I would call on her this afternoon, but when I got there I found she had left early for the performance. So in the evening, when I thought it would be all over, I went to the private door of the Hall to speak to her as she came out, and ask her flatly a question or two which I was fool enough to think I must ask her before I went to bed. Just as I was drawing near she came out, and, instead of getting into the brougham that was waiting for her, she went round the corner. When she came back a man met her and gave her something, and they stayed talking together two or three minutes. The meeting may certainly not have been intentional on her part; but she has no business to be going on so coolly when — when — in fact, I have come to the conclusion that a woman's affection is not worth having. The only feeling which has any dignity or permanence or worth is family affection between close blood-relations.'

'And yet you snub me sometimes, Mr. Kit.'

'And, for the matter of that, you snub me. Still, you know what I mean — there's none of that off-and-on humbug between us. If we grumble with one another we are united just the same: if we don't write when we are parted, we are just the same when we meet — there has been some rational reason for silence; but as for lovers and sweethearts, there is nothing worth a rush in what they feel!'

Faith said nothing in reply to this. The opinions she had formed upon the wisdom of her brother's pursuit of Ethelberta would have come just then with an ill grace. It must, however, have been evident to Christopher, had he not been too preoccupied for observation, that Faith's impressions of Ethelberta were not quite favourable as regarded her womanhood, notwithstanding that she greatly admired her talents.

CHAPTER 22.

ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE

Ethelberta came indoors one day from the University boat-race, and sat down, without speaking, beside Picotee, as if lost in thought.

'Did you enjoy the sight?' said Picotee.

'I scarcely know. We couldn't see at all from Mrs. Belmaine's carriage, so two of us — very rashly — agreed to get out and be rowed across to the other side where the people were quite few. But when the boatman had us in the middle of the river he declared he couldn't land us on the other side because of the barges, so there we were in a dreadful state — tossed up and down like corks upon great waves made by steamers till I made up my mind for a drowning. Well, at last we got back again, but couldn't reach the carriage for the crowd; and I don't know what we should have done if a gentleman hadn't come — sent by Mrs. Belmaine, who was in a great fright about us; then he was introduced to me, and — I wonder how it will end!'

'Was there anything so wonderful in the beginning, then?'

'Yes. One of the coolest and most practised men in London was ill-mannered towards me from sheer absence of mind — and could there be higher flattery? When a man of that sort does not give you the politeness you deserve, it means that in his heart he is rebelling against another feeling which his pride suggests that you do not deserve. O, I forgot to say that he is a Mr. Neigh, a nephew of Mr. Doncastle's, who lives at ease about Piccadilly and Pall Mall, and has a few acres somewhere — but I don't know much of him. The worst of my position now is that I excite this superficial interest in many people and a deep friendship in nobody. If what all my supporters feel could be collected into the hearts of two or three they would love me better than they love themselves; but now it pervades all and operates in none.'

'But it must operate in this gentleman?'

'Well, yes — just for the present. But men in town have so many contrivances for getting out of love that you can't calculate upon keeping them in for two days together. However, it is all the same to me. There's only — but let that be.'

'What is there only?' said Picotee coaxingly.

'Only one man,' murmured Ethelberta, in much lower tones. 'I mean, whose wife I should care to be; and the very qualities I like in him will, I fear, prevent his ever being in a position to ask me.'

'Is he the man you punished the week before last by forbidding him to come?'

‘Perhaps he is: but he does not want civility from me. Where there’s much feeling there’s little ceremony.’

‘It certainly seems that he does not want civility from you to make him attentive to you,’ said Picotee, stifling a sigh; ‘for here is a letter in his handwriting, I believe.’

‘You might have given it to me at once,’ said Ethelberta, opening the envelope hastily. It contained very few sentences: they were to the effect that Christopher had received her letter forbidding him to call; that he had therefore at first resolved not to call or even see her more, since he had become such a shadow in her path. Still, as it was always best to do nothing hastily, he had on second thoughts decided to ask her to grant him a last special favour, and see him again just once, for a few minutes only that afternoon, in which he might at least say Farewell. To avoid all possibility of compromising her in anybody’s eyes, he would call at half-past six, when other callers were likely to be gone, knowing that from the peculiar constitution of the household the hour would not interfere with her arrangements. There being no time for an answer, he would assume that she would see him, and keep the engagement; the request being one which could not rationally be objected to.

‘There — read it!’ said Ethelberta, with glad displeasure. ‘Did you ever hear such audacity? Fixing a time so soon that I cannot reply, and thus making capital out of a pretended necessity, when it is really an arbitrary arrangement of his own. That’s real rebellion — forcing himself into my house when I said strictly he was not to come; and then, that it cannot rationally be objected to — I don’t like his “rationally.”’

‘Where there’s much love there’s little ceremony, didn’t you say just now?’ observed innocent Picotee.

‘And where there’s little love, no ceremony at all. These manners of his are dreadful, and I believe he will never improve.’

‘It makes you care not a bit about him, does it not, Berta?’ said Picotee hopefully.

‘I don’t answer for that,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I feel, as many others do, that a want of ceremony which is produced by abstraction of mind is no defect in a poet or musician, fatal as it may be to an ordinary man.’

‘Mighty me! You soon forgive him.’

‘Picotee, don’t you be so quick to speak. Before I have finished, how do you know what I am going to say? I’ll never tell you anything again, if you take me up so. Of course I am going to punish him at once, and make him remember that I am a lady, even if I do like him a little.’

‘How do you mean to punish him?’ said Picotee, with interest.

‘By writing and telling him that on no account is he to come.’

‘But there is not time for a letter — ’

‘That doesn’t matter. It will show him that I did not mean him to come.’

At hearing the very merciful nature of the punishment, Picotee sighed without replying; and Ethelberta despatched her note. The hour of appointment drew near, and Ethelberta showed symptoms of unrest. Six o’clock struck and passed. She walked here and there for nothing, and it was plain that a dread was filling her: her letter

might accidentally have had, in addition to the moral effect which she had intended, the practical effect which she did not intend, by arriving before, instead of after, his purposed visit to her, thereby stopping him in spite of all her care.

‘How long are letters going to Bloomsbury?’ she said suddenly.

‘Two hours, Joey tells me,’ replied Picotee, who had already inquired on her own private account.

‘There!’ exclaimed Ethelberta petulantly. ‘How I dislike a man to misrepresent things! He said there was not time for a reply!’

‘Perhaps he didn’t know,’ said Picotee, in angel tones; ‘and so it happens all right, and he has got it, and he will not come after all.’

They waited and waited, but Christopher did not appear that night; the true case being that his declaration about insufficient time for a reply was merely an ingenious suggestion to her not to be so cruel as to forbid him. He was far from suspecting when the letter of denial did reach him — about an hour before the time of appointment — that it was sent by a refinement of art, of which the real intention was futility, and that but for his own misstatement it would have been carefully delayed.

The next day another letter came from the musician, decidedly short and to the point. The irate lover stated that he would not be made a fool of any longer: under any circumstances he meant to come that self-same afternoon, and should decidedly expect her to see him.

‘I will not see him!’ said Ethelberta. ‘Why did he not call last night?’

‘Because you told him not to,’ said Picotee.

‘Good gracious, as if a woman’s words are to be translated as literally as Homer! Surely he is aware that more often than not “No” is said to a man’s importunities because it is traditionally the correct modest reply, and for nothing else in the world. If all men took words as superficially as he does, we should die of decorum in shoals.’

‘Ah, Berta! how could you write a letter that you did not mean should be obeyed?’

‘I did in a measure mean it, although I could have shown Christian forgiveness if it had not been. Never mind; I will not see him. I’ll plague my heart for the credit of my sex.’

To ensure the fulfilment of this resolve, Ethelberta determined to give way to a headache that she was beginning to be aware of, go to her room, disorganize her dress, and ruin her hair by lying down; so putting it out of her power to descend and meet Christopher on any momentary impulse.

Picotee sat in the room with her, reading, or pretending to read, and Ethelberta pretended to sleep. Christopher’s knock came up the stairs, and with it the end of the farce.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said Ethelberta in the prompt and broadly-awake tone of one who had been concentrated on the expectation of that sound for a length of time, ‘it was a mistake in me to do this! Joey will be sure to make a muddle of it.’

Joey was heard coming up the stairs. Picotee opened the door, and said, with an anxiety transcending Ethelberta’s, ‘Well?’

‘O, will you tell Mrs. Petherwin that Mr. Julian says he’ll wait.’

‘You were not to ask him to wait,’ said Ethelberta, within.

‘I know that,’ said Joey, ‘and I didn’t. He’s doing that out of his own head.’

‘Then let Mr. Julian wait, by all means,’ said Ethelberta. ‘Allow him to wait if he likes, but tell him it is uncertain if I shall be able to come down.’

Joey then retired, and the two sisters remained in silence.

‘I wonder if he’s gone,’ Ethelberta said, at the end of a long time.

‘I thought you were asleep,’ said Picotee. ‘Shall we ask Joey? I have not heard the door close.’

Joey was summoned, and after a leisurely ascent, interspersed by various gymnastic performances over the handrail here and there, appeared again.

‘He’s there jest the same: he don’t seem to be in no hurry at all,’ said Joey.

‘What is he doing?’ inquired Picotee solicitously.

‘O, only looking at his watch sometimes, and humming tunes, and playing rat-a-tat-tat upon the table. He says he don’t mind waiting a bit.’

‘You must have made a mistake in the message,’ said Ethelberta, within.

‘Well, no. I am correct as a jeneral thing. I jest said perhaps you would be engaged all the evening, and perhaps you wouldn’t.’

When Joey had again retired, and they had waited another ten minutes, Ethelberta said, ‘Picotee, do you go down and speak a few words to him. I am determined he shall not see me. You know him a little; you remember when he came to the Lodge?’

‘What must I say to him?’

Ethelberta paused before replying. ‘Try to find out if — if he is much grieved at not seeing me, and say — give him to understand that I will forgive him, Picotee.’

‘Very well.’

‘And Picotee — ’

‘Yes.’

‘If he says he must see me — I think I will get up. But only if he says must: you remember that.’

Picotee departed on her errand. She paused on the staircase trembling, and thinking between the thrills how very far would have been the conduct of her poor slighted self from proud recalcitration had Mr. Julian’s gentle request been addressed to her instead of to Ethelberta; and she went some way in the painful discovery of how much more tantalising it was to watch an envied situation that was held by another than to be out of sight of it altogether. Here was Christopher waiting to bestow love, and Ethelberta not going down to receive it: a commodity unequalled in value by any other in the whole wide world was being wantonly wasted within that very house. If she could only have stood to-night as the beloved Ethelberta, and not as the despised Picotee, how different would be this going down! Thus she went along, red and pale moving in her cheeks as in the Northern Lights at their strongest time.

Meanwhile Christopher had sat waiting minute by minute till the evening shades grew browner, and the fire sank low. Joey, finding himself not particularly wanted upon

the premises after the second inquiry, had slipped out to witness a nigger performance round the corner, and Julian began to think himself forgotten by all the household. The perception gradually cooled his emotions and enabled him to hold his hat quite steadily.

When Picotee gently thrust open the door she was surprised to find the room in darkness, the fire gone completely out, and the form of Christopher only visible by a faint patch of light, which, coming from a lamp on the opposite side of the way and falling upon the mirror, was thrown as a pale nebulosity upon his shoulder. Picotee was too flurried at sight of the familiar outline to know what to do, and, instead of going or calling for a light, she mechanically advanced into the room. Christopher did not turn or move in any way, and then she perceived that he had begun to doze in his chair.

Instantly, with the precipitancy of the timorous, she said, 'Mr. Julian!' and touched him on the shoulder — murmuring then, 'O, I beg pardon, I — I will get a light.'

Christopher's consciousness returned, and his first act, before rising, was to exclaim, in a confused manner, 'Ah — you have come — thank you, Berta!' then impulsively to seize her hand, as it hung beside his head, and kiss it passionately. He stood up, still holding her fingers.

Picotee gasped out something, but was completely deprived of articulate utterance, and in another moment being unable to control herself at this sort of first meeting with the man she had gone through fire and water to be near, and more particularly by the overpowering kiss upon her hand, burst into hysterical sobbing. Julian, in his inability to imagine so much emotion — or at least the exhibition of it — in Ethelberta, gently drew Picotee further forward by the hand he held, and utilized the solitary spot of light from the mirror by making it fall upon her face. Recognizing the childish features, he at once, with an exclamation, dropped her hand and started back. Being in point of fact a complete bundle of nerves and nothing else, his thin figure shook like a harp-string in painful excitement at a contretemps which would scarcely have quickened the pulse of an ordinary man.

Poor Picotee, feeling herself in the wind of a civil d — -, started back also, sobbing more than ever. It was a little too much that the first result of his discovery of the mistake should be absolute repulse. She leant against the mantelpiece, when Julian, much bewildered at her superfluity of emotion, assisted her to a seat in sheer humanity. But Christopher was by no means pleased when he again thought round the circle of circumstances.

'How could you allow such an absurd thing to happen?' he said, in a stern, though trembling voice. 'You knew I might mistake. I had no idea you were in the house: I thought you were miles away, at Sandbourne or somewhere! But I see: it is just done for a joke, ha-ha!'

This made Picotee rather worse still. 'O-O-O-O!' she replied, in the tone of pouring from a bottle. 'What shall I do-o-o-o! It is — not done for a — joke at all-l-l-l!'

‘Not done for a joke? Then never mind — don’t cry, Picotee. What was it done for, I wonder?’

Picotee, mistaking the purport of his inquiry, imagined him to refer to her arrival in the house, quite forgetting, in her guilty sense of having come on his account, that he would have no right or thought of asking questions about a natural visit to a sister, and she said: ‘When you — went away from — Sandbourne, I — I — I didn’t know what to do, and then I ran away, and came here, and then Ethelberta — was angry with me; but she says I may stay; but she doesn’t know that I know you, and how we used to meet along the road every morning — and I am afraid to tell her — O, what shall I do!’

‘Never mind it,’ said Christopher, a sense of the true state of her case dawning upon him with unpleasant distinctness, and bringing some irritation at his awkward position; though it was impossible to be long angry with a girl who had not reasoning foresight enough to perceive that doubtful pleasure and certain pain must be the result of any meeting whilst hearts were at cross purposes in this way.

‘Where is your sister?’ he asked.

‘She wouldn’t come down, unless she MUST,’ said Picotee. ‘You have vexed her, and she has a headache besides that, and I came instead.’

‘So that I mightn’t be wasted altogether. Well, it’s a strange business between the three of us. I have heard of one-sided love, and reciprocal love, and all sorts, but this is my first experience of a concatenated affection. You follow me, I follow Ethelberta, and she follows — Heaven knows who!’

‘Mr. Ladywell!’ said the mortified Picotee.

‘Good God, if I didn’t think so!’ said Christopher, feeling to the soles of his feet like a man in a legitimate drama.

‘No, no, no!’ said the frightened girl hastily. ‘I am not sure it is Mr. Ladywell. That’s altogether a mistake of mine!’

‘Ah, yes, you want to screen her,’ said Christopher, with a withering smile at the spot of light. ‘Very sisterly, doubtless; but none of that will do for me. I am too old a bird by far — by very far! Now are you sure she does not love Ladywell?’

‘Yes!’

‘Well, perhaps I blame her wrongly. She may have some little good faith — a woman has, here and there. How do you know she does not love Ladywell?’

‘Because she would prefer Mr. Neigh to him, any day.’

‘Ha!’

‘No, no — you mistake, sir — she doesn’t love either at all — Ethelberta doesn’t. I meant that she cannot love Mr. Ladywell because he stands lower in her opinion than Mr. Neigh, and him she certainly does not care for. She only loves you. If you only knew how true she is you wouldn’t be so suspicious about her, and I wish I had not come here — yes, I do!’

‘I cannot tell what to think of it. Perhaps I don’t know much of this world after all, or what girls will do. But you don’t excuse her to me, Picotee.’

Before this time Picotee had been simulating haste in getting a light; but in her dread of appearing visibly to Christopher's eyes, and showing him the precise condition of her tear-stained face, she put it off moment after moment, and stirred the fire, in hope that the faint illumination thus produced would be sufficient to save her from the charge of stupid conduct as entertainer.

Fluttering about on the horns of this dilemma, she was greatly relieved when Christopher, who read her difficulty, and the general painfulness of the situation, said that since Ethelberta was really suffering from a headache he would not wish to disturb her till to-morrow, and went off downstairs and into the street without further ceremony.

Meanwhile other things had happened upstairs. No sooner had Picotee left her sister's room, than Ethelberta thought it would after all have been much better if she had gone down herself to speak to this admirably persistent lover. Was she not drifting somewhat into the character of coquette, even if her ground of offence — a word of Christopher's about somebody else's mean parentage, which was spoken in utter forgetfulness of her own position, but had wounded her to the quick nevertheless — was to some extent a tenable one? She knew what facilities in suffering Christopher always showed; how a touch to other people was a blow to him, a blow to them his deep wound, although he took such pains to look stolid and unconcerned under those inflictions, and tried to smile as if he had no feelings whatever. It would be more generous to go down to him, and be kind. She jumped up with that alertness which comes so spontaneously at those sweet bright times when desire and duty run hand in hand.

She hastily set her hair and dress in order — not such matchless order as she could have wished them to be in, but time was precious — and descended the stairs. When on the point of pushing open the drawing-room door, which wanted about an inch of being closed, she was astounded to discover that the room was in total darkness, and still more to hear Picotee sobbing inside. To retreat again was the only action she was capable of at that moment: the clash between this picture and the anticipated scene of Picotee and Christopher sitting in frigid propriety at opposite sides of a well-lighted room was too great. She flitted upstairs again with the least possible rustle, and flung herself down on the couch as before, panting with excitement at the new knowledge that had come to her.

There was only one possible construction to be put upon this in Ethelberta's rapid mind, and that approximated to the true one. She had known for some time that Picotee once had a lover, or something akin to it, and that he had disappointed her in a way which had never been told. No stranger, save in the capacity of the one beloved, could wound a woman sufficiently to make her weep, and it followed that Christopher was the man of Picotee's choice. As Ethelberta recalled the conversations, conclusion after conclusion came like pulsations in an aching head. 'O, how did it happen, and who is to blame?' she exclaimed. 'I cannot doubt his faith, and I cannot doubt hers; and yet how can I keep doubting them both?'

It was characteristic of Ethelberta's jealous motherly guard over her young sisters that, amid these contending inquiries, her foremost feeling was less one of hope for her own love than of championship for Picotee's.

CHAPTER 23.

ETHELBERTA'S HOUSE (continued)

Picotee was heard on the stairs: Ethelberta covered her face.

'Is he waiting?' she said faintly, on finding that Picotee did not begin to speak.

'No; he is gone,' said Picotee.

'Ah, why is that?' came quickly from under the handkerchief. 'He has forgotten me — that's what it is!'

'O no, he has not!' said Picotee, just as bitterly.

Ethelberta had far too much heroism to let much in this strain escape her, though her sister was prepared to go any lengths in the same. 'I suppose,' continued Ethelberta, in the quiet way of one who had only a headache the matter with her, 'that he remembered you after the meeting at Anglebury?'

'Yes, he remembered me.'

'Did you tell me you had seen him before that time?'

'I had seen him at Sandbourne. I don't think I told you.'

'At whose house did you meet him?'

'At nobody's. I only saw him sometimes,' replied Picotee, in great distress.

Ethelberta, though of all women most miserable, was brimming with compassion for the throbbing girl so nearly related to her, in whom she continually saw her own weak points without the counterpoise of her strong ones. But it was necessary to repress herself awhile: the intended ways of her life were blocked and broken up by this jar of interests, and she wanted time to ponder new plans. 'Picotee, I would rather be alone now, if you don't mind,' she said. 'You need not leave me any light; it makes my eyes ache, I think.'

Picotee left the room. But Ethelberta had not long been alone and in darkness when somebody gently opened the door, and entered without a candle.

'Berta,' said the soft voice of Picotee again, 'may I come in?'

'O yes,' said Ethelberta. 'Has everything gone right with the house this evening?'

'Yes; and Gwendoline went out just now to buy a few things, and she is going to call round upon father when he has got his dinner cleared away.'

'I hope she will not stay and talk to the other servants. Some day she will let drop something or other before father can stop her.'

'O Berta!' said Picotee, close beside her. She was kneeling in front of the couch, and now flinging her arm across Ethelberta's shoulder and shaking violently, she pressed her forehead against her sister's temple, and breathed out upon her cheek:

'I came in again to tell you something which I ought to have told you just now, and I have come to say it at once because I am afraid I shan't be able to to-morrow. Mr. Julian was the young man I spoke to you of a long time ago, and I should have told you all about him, but you said he was your young man too, and — and I didn't know what to do then, because I thought it was wrong in me to love your young man; and Berta, he didn't mean me to love him at all, but I did it myself, though I did not want to do it, either; it would come to me! And I didn't know he belonged to you when I began it, or I would not have let him meet me at all; no I wouldn't!'

'Meet you? You don't mean to say he used to meet you?' whispered Ethelberta.

'Yes,' said Picotee; 'but he could not help it. We used to meet on the road, and there was no other road unless I had gone ever so far round. But it is worse than that, Berta! That was why I couldn't bide in Sandbourne, and — and ran away to you up here; it was not because I wanted to see you, Berta, but because I — I wanted —'

'Yes, yes, I know,' said Ethelberta hurriedly.

'And then when I went downstairs he mistook me for you for a moment, and that caused — a confusion!'

'O, well, it does not much matter,' said Ethelberta, kissing Picotee soothingly. 'You ought not of course to have come to London in such a manner; but, since you have come, we will make the best of it. Perhaps it may end happily for you and for him. Who knows?'

'Then don't you want him, Berta?'

'O no; not at all!'

'What — and don't you really want him, Berta?' repeated Picotee, starting up.

'I would much rather he paid his addresses to you. He is not the sort of man I should wish to — think it best to marry, even if I were to marry, which I have no intention of doing at present. He calls to see me because we are old friends, but his calls do not mean anything more than that he takes an interest in me. It is not at all likely that I shall see him again! and I certainly never shall see him unless you are present.'

'That will be very nice.'

'Yes. And you will be always distant towards him, and go to leave the room when he comes, when I will call you back; but suppose we continue this to-morrow? I can tell you better then what to do.'

When Picotee had left her the second time, Ethelberta turned over upon her breast and shook in convulsive sobs which had little relationship with tears. This abandonment ended as suddenly as it had begun — not lasting more than a minute and a half altogether — and she got up in an unconsidered and unusual impulse to seek relief from the stinging sarcasm of this event — the unhappy love of Picotee — by mentioning something of it to another member of the family, her eldest sister Gwendoline, who was a woman full of sympathy.

Ethelberta descended to the kitchen, it being now about ten o'clock. The room was empty, Gwendoline not having yet returned, and Cornelia, being busy about her own affairs upstairs. The French family had gone to the theatre, and the house on

that account was very quiet to-night. Ethelberta sat down in the dismal place without turning up the gas, and in a few minutes admitted Gwendoline.

The round-faced country cook floundered in, untying her bonnet as she came, laying it down on a chair, and talking at the same time. 'Such a place as this London is, to be sure!' she exclaimed, turning on the gas till it whistled. 'I wish I was down in Wessex again. Lord-a-mercy, Berta, I didn't see it was you! I thought it was Cornelia. As I was saying, I thought that, after biding in this underground cellar all the week, making up messes for them French folk, and never pleasing 'em, and never shall, because I don't understand that line, I thought I would go out and see father, you know.'

'Is he very well?' said Ethelberta.

'Yes; and he is going to call round when he has time. Well, as I was a-coming home-along I thought, "Please the Lord I'll have some chippols for supper just for a plain trate," and I went round to the late greengrocer's for 'em; and do you know they swore me down that they hadn't got such things as chippols in the shop, and had never heard of 'em in their lives. At last I said, "Why, how can you tell me such a brazen story? — here they be, heaps of 'em!" It made me so vexed that I came away there and then, and wouldn't have one — no, not at a gift.'

'They call them young onions here,' said Ethelberta quietly; 'you must always remember that. But, Gwendoline, I wanted —'

Ethelberta felt sick at heart, and stopped. She had come down on the wings of an impulse to unfold her trouble about Picotee to her hard-headed and much older sister, less for advice than to get some heart-ease by interchange of words; but alas, she could proceed no further. The wretched homeliness of Gwendoline's mind seemed at this particular juncture to be absolutely intolerable, and Ethelberta was suddenly convinced that to involve Gwendoline in any such discussion would simply be increasing her own burden, and adding worse confusion to her sister's already confused existence.

'What were you going to say?' said the honest and unsuspecting Gwendoline.

'I will put it off until to-morrow,' Ethelberta murmured gloomily; 'I have a bad headache, and I am afraid I cannot stay with you after all.'

As she ascended the stairs, Ethelberta ached with an added pain not much less than the primary one which had brought her down. It was that old sense of disloyalty to her class and kin by feeling as she felt now which caused the pain, and there was no escaping it. Gwendoline would have gone to the ends of the earth for her: she could not confide a thought to Gwendoline!

'If she only knew of that unworthy feeling of mine, how she would grieve,' said Ethelberta miserably.

She next went up to the servants' bedrooms, and to where Cornelia slept. On Ethelberta's entrance Cornelia looked up from a perfect wonder of a bonnet, which she held in her hands. At sight of Ethelberta the look of keen interest in her work changed to one of gaiety.

'I am so glad — I was just coming down,' Cornelia said in a whisper; whenever they spoke as relations in this house it was in whispers. 'Now, how do you think this

bonnet will do? May I come down, and see how I look in your big glass?' She clapped the bonnet upon her head. 'Won't it do beautiful for Sunday afternoon?'

'It looks very attractive, as far as I can see by this light,' said Ethelberta. 'But is it not rather too brilliant in colour — blue and red together, like that? Remember, as I often tell you, people in town never wear such bright contrasts as they do in the country.'

'O Berta!' said Cornelia, in a deprecating tone; 'don't object. If there's one thing I do glory in it is a nice flare-up about my head o' Sundays — of course if the family's not in mourning, I mean.' But, seeing that Ethelberta did not smile, she turned the subject, and added docilely: 'Did you come up for me to do anything? I will put off finishing my bonnet if I am wanted.'

'I was going to talk to you about family matters, and Picotee,' said Ethelberta. 'But, as you are busy, and I have a headache, I will put it off till to-morrow.'

Cornelia seemed decidedly relieved, for family matters were far from attractive at the best of times; and Ethelberta went down to the next floor, and entered her mother's room.

After a short conversation Mrs. Chickerel said, 'You say you want to ask me something?'

'Yes: but nothing of importance, mother. I was thinking about Picotee, and what would be the best thing to do — '

'Ah, well you may, Berta. I am so uneasy about this life you have led us into, and full of fear that your plans may break down; if they do, whatever will become of us? I know you are doing your best; but I cannot help thinking that the coming to London and living with you was wild and rash, and not well weighed afore we set about it. You should have counted the cost first, and not advised it. If you break down, and we are all discovered living so queer and unnatural, right in the heart of the aristocracy, we should be the laughing-stock of the country: it would kill me, and ruin us all — utterly ruin us!'

'O mother, I know all that so well!' exclaimed Ethelberta, tears of anguish filling her eyes. 'Don't depress me more than I depress myself by such fears, or you will bring about the very thing we strive to avoid! My only chance is in keeping in good spirits, and why don't you try to help me a little by taking a brighter view of things?'

'I know I ought to, my dear girl, but I cannot. I do so wish that I never let you tempt me and the children away from the Lodge. I cannot think why I allowed myself to be so persuaded — cannot think! You are not to blame — it is I. I am much older than you, and ought to have known better than listen to such a scheme. This undertaking seems too big — the bills frighten me. I have never been used to such wild adventure, and I can't sleep at night for fear that your tale-telling will go wrong, and we shall all be exposed and shamed. A story-teller seems such an impossible castle-in-the-air sort of a trade for getting a living by — I cannot think how ever you came to dream of such an unheard-of thing.'

‘But it is not a castle in the air, and it does get a living!’ said Ethelberta, her lip quivering.

‘Well, yes, while it is just a new thing; but I am afraid it cannot last — that’s what I fear. People will find you out as one of a family of servants, and their pride will be stung at having gone to hear your romancing; then they will go no more, and what will happen to us and the poor little ones?’

‘We must all scatter again!’

‘If we could get as we were once, I wouldn’t mind that. But we shall have lost our character as simple country folk who know nothing, which are the only class of poor people that squires will give any help to; and I much doubt if the girls would get places after such a discovery — it would be so awkward and unheard-of.’

‘Well, all I can say is,’ replied Ethelberta, ‘that I will do my best. All that I have is theirs and yours as much as mine, and these arrangements are simply on their account. I don’t like my relations being my servants; but if they did not work for me, they would have to work for others, and my service is much lighter and pleasanter than any other lady’s would be for them, so the advantages are worth the risk. If I stood alone, I would go and hide my head in any hole, and care no more about the world and its ways. I wish I was well out of it, and at the bottom of a quiet grave — anybody might have the world for me then! But don’t let me disturb you longer; it is getting late.’

Ethelberta then wished her mother good-night, and went away. To attempt confidences on such an ethereal matter as love was now absurd; her hermit spirit was doomed to dwell apart as usual; and she applied herself to deep thinking without aid and alone. Not only was there Picotee’s misery to disperse; it became imperative to consider how best to overpass a more general catastrophe.

CHAPTER 24.

ETHELBERTA’S HOUSE (continued) — THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Mrs. Chickereel, in deploring the risks of their present speculative mode of life, was far from imagining that signs of the foul future so much dreaded were actually apparent to Ethelberta at the time the lament was spoken. Hence the daughter’s uncommon sensitiveness to prophecy. It was as if a dead-reckoner poring over his chart should predict breakers ahead to one who already beheld them.

That her story-telling would prove so attractive Ethelberta had not ventured to expect for a moment; that having once proved attractive there should be any falling-off until such time had elapsed as would enable her to harvest some solid fruit was equally a surprise. Future expectations are often based without hesitation upon one happy accident, when the only similar condition remaining to subsequent sets of circumstances is that the same person forms the centre of them. Her situation was so peculiar, and so unlike that of most public people, that there was hardly an argument explaining this triumphant opening which could be used in forecasting the close; unless, indeed,

more strategy were employed in the conduct of the campaign than Ethelberta seemed to show at present.

There was no denying that she commanded less attention than at first: the audience had lessened, and, judging by appearances, might soon be expected to be decidedly thin. In excessive lowness of spirit, Ethelberta translated these signs with the bias that a lingering echo of her mother's dismal words naturally induced, reading them as conclusive evidence that her adventure had been chimerical in its birth. Yet it was very far less conclusive than she supposed. Public interest might without doubt have been renewed after a due interval, some of the falling-off being only an accident of the season. Her novelties had been hailed with pleasure, the rather that their freshness tickled than that their intrinsic merit was appreciated; and, like many inexperienced dispensers of a unique charm, Ethelberta, by bestowing too liberally and too frequently, was destroying the very element upon which its popularity depended. Her entertainment had been good in its conception, and partly good in its execution; yet her success had but little to do with that goodness. Indeed, what might be called its badness in a histrionic sense — that is, her look sometimes of being out of place, the sight of a beautiful woman on a platform, revealing tender airs of domesticity which showed her to belong by character to a quiet drawing-room — had been primarily an attractive feature. But alas, custom was staling this by improving her up to the mark of an utter impersonator, thereby eradicating the pretty abashments of a poetess out of her sphere; and more than one well-wisher who observed Ethelberta from afar feared that it might some day come to be said of her that she had

‘Enfeoffed herself to popularity:

That, being daily swallowed by men's eyes,

They surfeited with honey, and began

To loathe the taste of sweetness, whereof a little

More than a little is by much too much.’

But this in its extremity was not quite yet.

We discover her one day, a little after this time, sitting before a table strewn with accounts and bills from different tradesmen of the neighbourhood, which she examined with a pale face, collecting their totals on a blank sheet. Picotee came into the room, but Ethelberta took no notice whatever of her. The younger sister, who subsisted on scraps of notice and favour, like a dependent animal, even if these were only an occasional glance of the eye, could not help saying at last, ‘Berta, how silent you are. I don't think you know I am in the room.’

‘I did not observe you,’ said Ethelberta. ‘I am very much engaged: these bills have to be paid.’

‘What, and cannot we pay them?’ said Picotee, in vague alarm.

‘O yes, I can pay them. The question is, how long shall I be able to do it?’

‘That is sad; and we are going on so nicely, too. It is not true that you have really decided to leave off story-telling now the people don't crowd to hear it as they did?’

‘I think I shall leave off.’

‘And begin again next year?’

‘That is very doubtful.’

‘I’ll tell you what you might do,’ said Picotee, her face kindling with a sense of great originality. ‘You might travel about to country towns and tell your story splendidly.’

‘A man in my position might perhaps do it with impunity; but I could not without losing ground in other domains. A woman may drive to Mayfair from her house in Exonbury Crescent, and speak from a platform there, and be supposed to do it as an original way of amusing herself; but when it comes to starring in the provinces she establishes herself as a woman of a different breed and habit. I wish I were a man! I would give up this house, advertise it to be let furnished, and sally forth with confidence. But I am driven to think of other ways to manage than that.’

Picotee fell into a conjectural look, but could not guess.

‘The way of marriage,’ said Ethelberta. ‘Otherwise perhaps the poetess may live to become what Dryden called himself when he got old and poor — a rent-charge on Providence. . . . Yes, I must try that way,’ she continued, with a sarcasm towards people out of hearing. I must buy a “Peerage” for one thing, and a “Baronetage,” and a “House of Commons,” and a “Landed Gentry,” and learn what people are about me. ‘I must go to Doctors’ Commons and read up wills of the parents of any likely gudgeons I may know. I must get a Herald to invent an escutcheon of my family, and throw a genealogical tree into the bargain in consideration of my taking a few second-hand heirlooms of a pawnbroking friend of his. I must get up sham ancestors, and find out some notorious name to start my pedigree from. It does not matter what his character was; either villain or martyr will do, provided that he lived five hundred years ago. It would be considered far more creditable to make good my descent from Satan in the age when he went to and fro on the earth than from a ministering angel under Victoria.’

‘But, Berta, you are not going to marry any stranger who may turn up?’ said Picotee, who had creeping sensations of dread when Ethelberta talked like this.

‘I had no such intention. But, having once put my hand to the plough, how shall I turn back?’

‘You might marry Mr. Ladywell,’ said Picotee, who preferred to look at things in the concrete.

‘Yes, marry him villainously; in cold blood, without a moment to prepare himself.’

‘Ah, you won’t!’

‘I am not so sure about that. I have brought mother and the children to town against her judgment and against my father’s; they gave way to my opinion as to one who from superior education has larger knowledge of the world than they. I must prove my promises, even if Heaven should fall upon me for it, or what a miserable future will theirs be! We must not be poor in London. Poverty in the country is a sadness, but poverty in town is a horror. There is something not without grandeur in the thought of starvation on an open mountain or in a wide wood, and your bones lying there to

bleach in the pure sun and rain; but a back garret in a rookery, and the other starvers in the room insisting on keeping the window shut — anything to deliver us from that!’

‘How gloomy you can be, Berta! It will never be so dreadful. Why, I can take in plain sewing, and you can do translations, and mother can knit stockings, and so on. How much longer will this house be yours?’

‘Two years. If I keep it longer than that I shall have to pay rent at the rate of three hundred a year. The Petherwin estate provides me with it till then, which will be the end of Lady Petherwin’s term.’

‘I see it; and you ought to marry before the house is gone, if you mean to marry high,’ murmured Picotee, in an inadequate voice, as one confronted by a world so tragic that any hope of her assisting therein was out of the question.

It was not long after this exposition of the family affairs that Christopher called upon them; but Picotee was not present, having gone to think of superhuman work on the spur of Ethelberta’s awakening talk. There was something new in the way in which Ethelberta received the announcement of his name; passion had to do with it, so had circumspection; the latter most, for the first time since their reunion.

‘I am going to leave this part of England,’ said Christopher, after a few gentle preliminaries. ‘I was one of the applicants for the post of assistant-organist at Melchester Cathedral when it became vacant, and I find I am likely to be chosen, through the interest of one of my father’s friends.’

‘I congratulate you.’

‘No, Ethelberta, it is not worth that. I did not originally mean to follow this course at all; but events seemed to point to it in the absence of a better.’

‘I too am compelled to follow a course I did not originally mean to take.’ After saying no more for a few moments, she added, in a tone of sudden openness, a richer tincture creeping up her cheek, ‘I want to put a question to you boldly — not exactly a question — a thought. Have you considered whether the relations between us which have lately prevailed are — are the best for you — and for me?’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Christopher, hastily anticipating all that she might be going to say; ‘and I am glad you have given me the opportunity of speaking upon that subject. It has been very good and considerate in you to allow me to share your society so frequently as you have done since I have been in town, and to think of you as an object to exist for and strive for. But I ought to have remembered that, since you have nobody at your side to look after your interests, it behoved me to be doubly careful. In short, Ethelberta, I am not in a position to marry, nor can I discern when I shall be, and I feel it would be an injustice to ask you to be bound in any way to one lower and less talented than you. You cannot, from what you say, think it desirable that the engagement should continue. I have no right to ask you to be my betrothed, without having a near prospect of making you my wife. I don’t mind saying this straight out — I have no fear that you will doubt my love; thank Heaven, you know what that is well enough! However, as things are, I wish you to know that I cannot conscientiously put in a claim upon your attention.’

A second meaning was written in Christopher's look, though he scarcely uttered it. A woman so delicately poised upon the social globe could not in honour be asked to wait for a lover who was unable to set bounds to the waiting period. Yet he had privily dreamed of an approach to that position — an unreserved, ideally perfect declaration from Ethelberta that time and practical issues were nothing to her; that she would stand as fast without material hopes as with them; that love was to be an end with her henceforth, having utterly ceased to be a means. Therefore this surreptitious hope of his, founded on no reasonable expectation, was like a guilty thing surprised when Ethelberta answered, with a predominance of judgment over passion still greater than before:

'It is unspeakably generous in you to put it all before me so nicely, Christopher. I think infinitely more of you for being so unreserved, especially since I too have been thinking much on the indefiniteness of the days to come. We are not numbered among the blest few who can afford to trifle with the time. Yet to agree to anything like a positive parting will be quite unnecessary. You did not mean that, did you? for it is harsh if you did.' Ethelberta smiled kindly as she said this, as much as to say that she was far from really upbraiding him. 'Let it be only that we will see each other less. We will bear one another in mind as deeply attached friends if not as definite lovers, and keep up friendly remembrances of a sort which, come what may, will never have to be ended by any painful process termed breaking off. Different persons, different natures; and it may be that marriage would not be the most favourable atmosphere for our old affection to prolong itself in. When do you leave London?'

The disconnected query seemed to be subjoined to disperse the crude effect of what had gone before.

'I hardly know,' murmured Christopher. 'I suppose I shall not call here again.'

Whilst they were silent somebody entered the room softly, and they turned to discover Picotee.

'Come here, Picotee,' said Ethelberta.

Picotee came with an abashed bearing to where the other two were standing, and looked down steadfastly.

'Mr. Julian is going away,' she continued, with determined firmness. 'He will not see us again for a long time.' And Ethelberta added, in a lower tone, though still in the unflinching manner of one who had set herself to say a thing, and would say it — 'He is not to be definitely engaged to me any longer. We are not thinking of marrying, you know, Picotee. It is best that we should not.'

'Perhaps it is,' said Christopher hurriedly, taking up his hat. 'Let me now wish you good-bye; and, of course, you will always know where I am, and how to find me.'

It was a tender time. He inclined forward that Ethelberta might give him her hand, which she did; whereupon their eyes met. Mastered by an impelling instinct she had not reckoned with, Ethelberta presented her cheek. Christopher kissed it faintly. Tears were in Ethelberta's eyes now, and she was heartfull of many emotions. Placing her arm round Picotee's waist, who had never lifted her eyes from the carpet, she drew the

slight girl forward, and whispered quickly to him — 'Kiss her, too. She is my sister, and I am yours.'

It seemed all right and natural to their respective moods and the tone of the moment that free old Wessex manners should prevail, and Christopher stooped and dropped upon Picotee's cheek likewise such a farewell kiss as he had imprinted upon Ethelberta's.

'Care for us both equally!' said Ethelberta.

'I will,' said Christopher, scarcely knowing what he said.

When he had reached the door of the room, he looked back and saw the two sisters standing as he had left them, and equally tearful. Ethelberta at once said, in a last futile struggle against letting him go altogether, and with thoughts of her sister's heart:

'I think that Picotee might correspond with Faith; don't you, Mr. Julian?'

'My sister would much like to do so,' said he.

'And you would like it too, would you not, Picotee?'

'O yes,' she replied. 'And I can tell them all about you.'

'Then it shall be so, if Miss Julian will.' She spoke in a settled way, as if something intended had been set in train; and Christopher having promised for his sister, he went out of the house with a parting smile of misgiving.

He could scarcely believe as he walked along that those late words, yet hanging in his ears, had really been spoken, that still visible scene enacted. He could not even recollect for a minute or two how the final result had been produced. Did he himself first enter upon the long-looming theme, or did she? Christopher had been so nervously alive to the urgency of setting before the hard-striving woman a clear outline of himself, his surroundings and his fears, that he fancied the main impulse to this consummation had been his, notwithstanding that a faint initiative had come from Ethelberta. All had completed itself quickly, unceremoniously, and easily. Ethelberta had let him go a second time; yet on foregoing mornings and evenings, when contemplating the necessity of some such explanation, it had seemed that nothing less than Atlantean force could overpower their mutual gravitation towards each other.

On his reaching home Faith was not in the house, and, in the restless state which demands something to talk at, the musician went off to find her, well knowing her haunt at this time of the day. He entered the spiked and gilded gateway of the Museum hard by, turned to the wing devoted to sculptures, and descended to a particular basement room, which was lined with bas-reliefs from Nineveh. The place was cool, silent, and soothing; it was empty, save of a little figure in black, that was standing with its face to the wall in an innermost nook. This spot was Faith's own temple; here, among these deserted antiques, Faith was always happy. Christopher looked on at her for some time before she noticed him, and dimly perceived how vastly differed her homely suit and unstudied contour — painfully unstudied to fastidious eyes — from Ethelberta's well-arranged draperies, even from Picotee's clever bits of ribbon, by which she made herself look pretty out of nothing at all. Yet this negligence was his sister's essence;

without it she would have been a spoilt product. She had no outer world, and her rusty black was as appropriate to Faith's unseen courses as were Ethelberta's correct lights and shades to her more prominent career.

'Look, Kit,' said Faith, as soon as she knew who was approaching. 'This is a thing I never learnt before; this person is really Sennacherib, sitting on his throne; and these with fluted beards and hair like plough-furrows, and fingers with no bones in them, are his warriors — really carved at the time, you know. Only just think that this is not imagined of Assyria, but done in Assyrian times by Assyrian hands. Don't you feel as if you were actually in Nineveh; that as we now walk between these slabs, so walked Ninevites between them once?'

'Yes. . . . Faith, it is all over. Ethelberta and I have parted.'

'Indeed. And so my plan is to think of verses in the Bible about Sennacherib and his doings, which resemble these; this verse, for instance, I remember: "Now in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah did Sennacherib, King of Assyria, come up against all the fenced cities of Judah and took them. And Hezekiah, King of Judah, sent to the King of Assyria to Lachish," and so on. Well, there it actually is, you see. There's Sennacherib, and there's Lachish. Is it not glorious to think that this is a picture done at the time of those very events?'

'Yes. We did not quarrel this time, Ethelberta and I. If I may so put it, it is worse than quarrelling. We felt it was no use going on any longer, and so — Come, Faith, hear what I say, or else tell me that you won't hear, and that I may as well save my breath!'

'Yes, I will really listen,' she said, fluttering her eyelids in her concern at having been so abstracted, and excluding Sennacherib there and then from Christopher's affairs by the first settlement of her features to a present-day aspect, and her eyes upon his face. 'You said you had seen Ethelberta. Yes, and what did she say?'

'Was there ever anybody so provoking! Why, I have just told you!'

'Yes, yes; I remember now. You have parted. The subject is too large for me to know all at once what I think of it, and you must give me time, Kit. Speaking of Ethelberta reminds me of what I have done. I just looked into the Academy this morning — I thought I would surprise you by telling you about it. And what do you think I saw? Ethelberta — in the picture painted by Mr. Ladywell.'

'It is never hung?' said he, feeling that they were at one as to a topic at last.

'Yes. And the subject is an Elizabethan knight parting from a lady of the same period — the words explaining the picture being —

"Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate."

The lady is Ethelberta, to the shade of a hair — her living face; and the knight is —

'Not Ladywell?'

'I think so; I am not sure.'

‘No wonder I am dismissed! And yet she hates him. Well, come along, Faith. Women allow strange liberties in these days.’

CHAPTER 25.

THE ROYAL ACADEMY — THE FARNFIELD ESTATE

Ethelberta was a firm believer in the kindly effects of artistic education upon the masses. She held that defilement of mind often arose from ignorance of eye; and her philanthropy being, by the simple force of her situation, of that sort which lingers in the neighbourhood of home, she concentrated her efforts in this kind upon Sol and Dan. Accordingly, the Academy exhibition having now just opened, she ordered the brothers to appear in their best clothes at the entrance to Burlington House just after noontide on the Saturday of the first week, this being the only day and hour at which they could attend without ‘losing a half’ and therefore it was necessary to put up with the inconvenience of arriving at a crowded and enervating time.

When Ethelberta was set down in the quadrangle she perceived the faithful pair, big as the Zamzummims of old time, standing like sentinels in the particular corner that she had named to them: for Sol and Dan would as soon have attempted petty larceny as broken faith with their admired lady-sister Ethelberta. They welcomed her with a painfully lavish exhibition of large new gloves, and chests covered with broad triangular areas of padded blue silk, occupying the position that the shirt-front had occupied in earlier days, and supposed to be lineally descended from the tie of a neckerchief.

The dress of their sister for to-day was exactly that of a respectable workman’s relative who had no particular ambition in the matter of fashion — a black stuff gown, a plain bonnet to match. A veil she wore for obvious reasons: her face was getting well known in London, and it had already appeared at the private view in an uncovered state, when it was scrutinized more than the paintings around. But now homely and useful labour was her purpose.

Catalogue in hand she took the two brothers through the galleries, teaching them in whispers as they walked, and occasionally correcting them — first, for too reverential a bearing towards the well-dressed crowd, among whom they persisted in walking with their hats in their hands and with the contrite bearing of meek people in church; and, secondly, for a tendency which they too often showed towards straying from the contemplation of the pictures as art to indulge in curious speculations on the intrinsic nature of the delineated subject, the gilding of the frames, the construction of the skylights overhead, or admiration for the bracelets, locketts, and lofty eloquence of persons around them.

‘Now,’ said Ethelberta, in a warning whisper, ‘we are coming near the picture which was partly painted from myself. And, Dan, when you see it, don’t you exclaim “Hullo!” or “That’s Berta to a T,” or anything at all. It would not matter were it not dangerous

for me to be noticed here to-day. I see several people who would recognize me on the least provocation.'

'Not a word,' said Dan. 'Don't you be afeard about that. I feel that I baint upon my own ground to-day; and wouldn't do anything to cause an upset, drown me if I would. Would you, Sol?'

In this temper they all pressed forward, and Ethelberta could not but be gratified at the reception of Ladywell's picture, though it was accorded by critics not very profound. It was an operation of some minutes to get exactly opposite, and when side by side the three stood there they overheard the immediate reason of the pressure. 'Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing' had been lengthily discoursed upon that morning by the Coryphaeus of popular opinion; and the spirit having once been poured out sons and daughters could prophesy. But, in truth, Ladywell's work, if not emphatically original, was happily centred on a middle stratum of taste, and apart from this adventitious help commanded, and deserved to command, a wide area of appreciation.

While they were standing here in the very heart of the throng Ethelberta's ears were arrested by two male voices behind her, whose words formed a novel contrast to those of the other speakers around.

'Some men, you see, with extravagant expectations of themselves, coolly get them gratified, while others hope rationally and are disappointed. Luck, that's what it is. And the more easily a man takes life the more persistently does luck follow him.'

'Of course; because, if he's industrious he does not want luck's assistance. Natural laws will help him instead.'

'Well, if it is true that Ladywell has painted a good picture he has done it by an exhaustive process. He has painted every possible bad one till nothing more of that sort is left for him. You know what lady's face served as the original to this, I suppose?'

'Mrs. Petherwin's, I hear.'

'Yes, Mrs. Alfred Neigh that's to be.'

'What, that elusive fellow caught at last?'

'So it appears; but she herself is hardly so well secured as yet, it seems, though he takes the uncertainty as coolly as possible. I knew nothing about it till he introduced the subject as we were standing here on Monday, and said, in an off-hand way, "I mean to marry that lady." I asked him how. "Easily," he said; "I will have her if there are a hundred at her heels." You will understand that this was quite in confidence.'

'Of course, of course.' Then there was a slight laugh, and the companions proceeded to other gossip.

Ethelberta, calm and compressed in manner, sidled along to extricate herself, not daring to turn round, and Dan and Sol followed, till they were all clear of the spot. The brothers, who had heard the words equally well with Ethelberta, made no remark to her upon them, assuming that they referred to some peculiar system of courtship adopted in high life, with which they had rightly no concern.

Ethelberta ostensibly continued her business of tutoring the young workmen just as before, though every emotion in her had been put on the alert by this discovery.

She had known that Neigh admired her; yet his presumption in uttering such a remark as he was reported to have uttered, confidentially or otherwise, nearly took away her breath. Perhaps it was not altogether disagreeable to have her breath so taken away.

‘I mean to marry that lady.’ She whispered the words to herself twenty times in the course of the afternoon. Sol and Dan were left considerably longer to their private perceptions of the false and true in art than they had been earlier in the day.

When she reached home Ethelberta was still far removed in her reflections; and it was noticed afterwards that about this time in her career her openness of manner entirely deserted her. She mostly was silent as to her thoughts, and she wore an air of unusual stillness. It was the silence and stillness of a starry sky, where all is force and motion. This deep undecipherable habit sometimes suggested, though it did not reveal, Ethelberta’s busy brain to her sisters, and they said to one another, ‘I cannot think what’s coming to Berta: she is not so nice as she used to be.’

The evening under notice was passed desultorily enough after the discovery of Neigh’s self-assured statement. Among other things that she did after dark, while still musingly examining the probabilities of the report turning out true, was to wander to the large attic where the children slept, a frequent habit of hers at night, to learn if they were snug and comfortable. They were talking now from bed to bed, the person under discussion being herself. Herself seemed everywhere to-day.

‘I know that she is a fairy,’ Myrtle was insisting, ‘because she must be, to have such pretty things in her house, and wear silk dresses such as mother and we and Picotee haven’t got, and have money to give us whenever we want it.’

‘Emmeline says perhaps she knows the fairy’s godmother, and is not a fairy herself, because Berta is too tall for a real fairy.’

‘She must be one; for when there was a notch burnt in the hem of my pretty blue frock she said it should be gone in the morning if I would go to bed and not cry; and in the morning it was gone, and all nice and straight as new.’

Ethelberta was recalling to mind how she had sat up and repaired the damage alluded to by cutting off half an inch of the skirt all round and hemming it anew, when the breathing of the children became regular, and they fell asleep. Here were bright little minds ready for a training, which without money and influence she could never give them. The wisdom which knowledge brings, and the power which wisdom may bring, she had always assumed would be theirs in her dreams for their social elevation. By what means were these things to be ensured to them if her skill in bread-winning should fail her? Would not a well-contrived marriage be of service? She covered and tucked in one more closely, lifted another upon the pillow and straightened the soft limbs to an easy position; then sat down by the window and looked out at the flashing stars. Thoughts of Neigh’s audacious statement returned again upon Ethelberta. He had said that he meant to marry her. Of what standing was the man who had uttered such an intention respecting one to whom a politic marriage had become almost a necessity of existence?

She had often heard Neigh speak indefinitely of some estate — 'my little place' he had called it — which he had purchased no very long time ago. All she knew was that its name was Farnfield, that it lay thirty or forty miles out of London in a south-westerly direction, a railway station in the district bearing the same name, so that there was probably a village or small town adjoining. Whether the dignity of this landed property was that of domain, farmstead, allotment, or garden-plot, Ethelberta had not the slightest conception. She was almost certain that Neigh never lived there, but that might signify nothing. The exact size and value of the estate would, she mused, be curious, interesting, and almost necessary information to her who must become mistress of it were she to allow him to carry out his singularly cool and crude, if tender, intention. Moreover, its importance would afford a very good random sample of his worldly substance throughout, from which alone, after all, could the true spirit and worth and seriousness of his words be apprehended. Impecuniosity may revel in unqualified vows and brim over with confessions as blithely as a bird of May, but such careless pleasures are not for the solvent, whose very dreams are negotiable, and are expressed with due care accordingly.

That Neigh had used the words she had far more than *primâ-facie* appearances for believing. Neigh's own conduct towards her, though peculiar rather than devoted, found in these words alone a reasonable key. But, supposing the estate to be such a verbal hallucination as, for instance, hers had been at Arrowthorne, when her poor, unprogressive, hopelessly impracticable Christopher came there to visit her, and was so wonderfully undeceived about her social standing: what a fiasco, and what a cuckoo-cry would his utterances about marriage seem then. Christopher had often told her of his expectations from 'Arrowthorne Lodge,' and of the blunders that had resulted in consequence. Had not Ethelberta's affection for Christopher partaken less of lover's passion than of old-established tutelary tenderness she might have been reminded by this reflection of the transcendent fidelity he had shown under that trial — as severe a trial, considering the abnormal, almost morbid, development of the passion for position in present-day society, as can be prepared for men who move in the ordinary, unheroic channels of life.

By the following evening the consideration of this possibility, that Neigh's position might furnish scope for such a disillusionary discovery by herself as hers had afforded to Christopher, decoyed Ethelberta into a curious little scheme. She was piqued into a practical undertaking by the man who could say to his friend with such sangfroid, 'I mean to marry that lady.'

Merely telling Picotee to prepare for an evening excursion, of which she was to talk to no one, Ethelberta made ready likewise, and they left the house in a cab about half-an-hour before sunset, and drove to the Waterloo Station.

With the decline and departure of the sun a fog gathered itself out of the low meadow-land that bordered the railway as they went along towards the west, stretching over it like a placid lake, till at the end of the journey, the mist became generally pervasive, though not dense. Avoiding observation as much as they conveniently could,

the two sisters walked from the long wooden shed which formed the station here, into the rheumy air and along the road to the open country. Picotee occasionally questioned Ethelberta on the object of the strange journey: she did not question closely, being satisfied that in such sure hands as Ethelberta's she was safe.

Deeming it unwise to make any inquiry just yet beyond the simple one of the way to Farnfield, Ethelberta led her companion along a newly-fenced road across a heath. In due time they came to an ornamental gate with a curved sweep of wall on each side, signifying the entrance to some enclosed property or other. Ethelberta, being quite free from any digested plan for encouraging Neigh in his resolve to wive, was startled to find a hope in her that this very respectable beginning before their eyes was the entrance to the Farnfield property: that she hoped it was nevertheless unquestionable. Just beyond lay a turnpike-house, where was dimly visible a woman in the act of putting up a shutter to the front window.

Compelled by this time to come to special questions, Ethelberta instructed Picotee to ask of this person if the place they had just passed was the entrance to Farnfield Park. The woman replied that it was. Directly she had gone indoors Ethelberta turned back again towards the park gate.

'What have we come for, Berta?' said Picotee, as she turned also.

'I'll tell you some day,' replied her sister.

It was now much past eight o'clock, and, from the nature of the evening, dusk. The last stopping up-train was about ten, so that half-an-hour could well be afforded for looking round. Ethelberta went to the gate, which was found to be fastened by a chain and padlock.

'Ah, the London season,' she murmured.

There was a wicket at the side, and they entered. An avenue of young fir trees three or four feet in height extended from the gate into the mist, and down this they walked. The drive was not in very good order, and the two women were frequently obliged to walk on the grass to avoid the rough stones in the carriage-way. The double line of young firs now abruptly terminated, and the road swept lower, bending to the right, immediately in front being a large lake, calm and silent as a second sky. They could hear from somewhere on the margin the purl of a weir, and around were clumps of shrubs, araucarias and deodars being the commonest.

Ethelberta could not resist being charmed with the repose of the spot, and hastened on with curiosity to reach the other side of the pool, where, by every law of manorial topography, the mansion would be situate. The fog concealed all objects beyond a distance of twenty yards or thereabouts, but it was nearly full moon, and though the orb was hidden, a pale diffused light enabled them to see objects in the foreground. Reaching the other side of the lake the drive enlarged itself most legitimately to a large oval, as for a sweep before a door, a pile of rockwork standing in the midst.

But where should have been the front door of a mansion was simply a rough rail fence, about four feet high. They drew near and looked over.

In the enclosure, and on the site of the imaginary house, was an extraordinary group. It consisted of numerous horses in the last stage of decrepitude, the animals being such mere skeletons that at first Ethelberta hardly recognized them to be horses at all; they seemed rather to be specimens of some attenuated heraldic animal, scarcely thick enough through the body to throw a shadow: or enlarged castings of the fire-dog of past times. These poor creatures were endeavouring to make a meal from herbage so trodden and thin that scarcely a wholesome blade remained; the little that there was consisted of the sourer sorts common on such sandy soils, mingled with tufts of heather and sprouting ferns.

‘Why have we come here, dear Berta?’ said Picotee, shuddering.

‘I hardly know,’ said Ethelberta.

Adjoining this enclosure was another and smaller one, formed of high boarding, within which appeared to be some sheds and outhouses. Ethelberta looked through the crevices, and saw that in the midst of the yard stood trunks of trees as if they were growing, with branches also extending, but these were sawn off at the points where they began to be flexible, no twigs or boughs remaining. Each torso was not unlike a huge hat-stand, and suspended to the pegs and prongs were lumps of some substance which at first she did not recognize; they proved to be a chronological sequel to the previous scene. Horses’ skulls, ribs, quarters, legs, and other joints were hung thereon, the whole forming a huge open-air larder emitting not too sweet a smell.

But what Stygian sound was this? There had arisen at the moment upon the mute and sleepy air a varied howling from a hundred tongues. It had burst from a spot close at hand — a low wooden building by a stream which fed the lake — and reverberated for miles. No further explanation was required.

‘We are close to a kennel of hounds,’ said Ethelberta, as Picotee held tightly to her arm. ‘They cannot get out, so you need not fear. They have a horrid way of suddenly beginning thus at different hours of the night, for no apparent reason: though perhaps they hear us. These poor horses are waiting to be killed for their food.’

The experience altogether, from its intense melancholy, was very depressing, almost appalling to the two lone young women, and they quickly retraced their footsteps. The pleasant lake, the purl of the weir, the rudimentary lawns, shrubberies, and avenue, had changed their character quite. Ethelberta fancied at that moment that she could not have married Neigh, even had she loved him, so horrid did his belongings appear to be. But for many other reasons she had been gradually feeling within this hour that she would not go out of her way at a beck from a man whose interest was so unimpassioned.

Thinking no more of him as a possible husband she ceased to be afraid to make inquiries about the peculiarities of his possessions. In the high-road they came on a local man, resting from wheeling a wheelbarrow, and Ethelberta asked him, with the air of a countrywoman, who owned the estate across the road.

‘The man owning that is one of the name of Neigh,’ said the native, wiping his face. ‘‘Tis a family that have made a very large fortune by the knacker business and tanning,

though they be only sleeping partners in it now, and live like lords. Mr. Neigh was going to pull down the old huts here, and improve the place and build a mansion — in short, he went so far as to have the grounds planted, and the roads marked out, and the fish-pond made, and the place christened Farnfield Park; but he did no more. “I shall never have a wife,” he said, “so why should I want a house to put her in?” He’s a terrible hater of women, I hear, particularly the lower class.’

‘Indeed!’

‘Yes, and since then he has let half the land to the Honourable Mr. Mountclere, a brother of Lord Mountclere’s. Mr. Mountclere wanted the spot for a kennel, and as the land is too poor and sandy for cropping, Mr. Neigh let him have it. ‘Tis his hounds that you hear howling.’

They passed on. ‘Berta, why did we come down here?’ said Picotee.

‘To see the nakedness of the land. It was a whim only, and as it will end in nothing, it is not worth while for me to make further explanation.’

It was with a curious sense of renunciation that Ethelberta went homeward. Neigh was handsome, grim-natured, rather wicked, and an indifferentist; and these attractions interested her as a woman. But the news of this evening suggested to Ethelberta that herself and Neigh were too nearly cattle of one colour for a confession on the matter of lineage to be well received by him; and without confidence of every sort on the nature of her situation, she was determined to contract no union at all. The sympathy of unlikeness might lead the scion of some family, hollow and fungous with antiquity, and as yet unmarked by a mesalliance, to be won over by her story; but the antipathy of resemblance would be ineradicable.

CHAPTER 26.

ETHELBERTA’S DRAWING-ROOM

While Ethelberta during the next few days was dismissing that evening journey from her consideration, as an incident altogether foreign to the organized course of her existence, the hidden fruit thereof was rounding to maturity in a species unforeseen.

Inferences unassailable as processes, are, nevertheless, to be suspected, from the almost certain deficiency of particulars on some side or other. The truth in relation to Neigh’s supposed frigidity was brought before her at the end of the following week, when Dan and Sol had taken Picotee, Cornelia, and the young children to Kew for the afternoon.

Early that morning, hours before it was necessary, there had been such a chatter of preparation in the house as was seldom heard there. Sunday hats and bonnets had been retrimmed with such cunning that it would have taken a milliner’s apprentice at least to discover that any thread in them was not quite new. There was an anxious peep through the blind at the sky at daybreak by Georgina and Myrtle, and the perplexity of these rural children was great at the weather-signs of the town, where atmospheric

effects had nothing to do with clouds, and fair days and foul came apparently quite by chance. Punctually at the hour appointed two friendly human shadows descended across the kitchen window, followed by Sol and Dan, much to the relief of the children's apprehensions that they might forget the day.

The brothers were by this time acquiring something of the airs and manners of London workmen; they were less spontaneous and more comparative; less genial, but smarter; in obedience to the usual law by which the emotion that takes the form of humour in country workmen becomes transmuted to irony among the same order in town. But the fixed and dogged fidelity to one another under apparent coolness, by which this family was distinguished, remained unshaken in these members as in all the rest, leading them to select the children as companions in their holiday in preference to casual acquaintance. At last they were ready, and departed, and Ethelberta, after chatting with her mother awhile, proceeded to her personal duties.

The house was very silent that day, Gwendoline and Joey being the only ones left below stairs. Ethelberta was wishing that she had thrown off her state and gone to Kew to have an hour of childhood over again in a romp with the others, when she was startled by the announcement of a male visitor — none other than Mr. Neigh.

Ethelberta's attitude on receipt of this information sufficiently expressed a revived sense that the incidence of Mr. Neigh on her path might have a meaning after all. Neigh had certainly said he was going to marry her, and now here he was come to her house — just as if he meant to do it forthwith. She had mentally discarded him; yet she felt a shock which was scarcely painful, and a dread which was almost exhilarating. Her flying visit to Farnfield she thought little of at this moment. From the fact that the mind prefers imaginings to recapitulation, conjecture to history, Ethelberta had dwelt more upon Neigh's possible plans and anticipations than upon the incidents of her evening journey; and the former assumed a more distinct shape in her mind's eye than anything on the visible side of the curtain.

Neigh was perhaps not quite so placidly nonchalant as in ordinary; still, he was by far the most trying visitor that Ethelberta had lately faced, and she could not get above the stage — not a very high one for the mistress of a house — of feeling her personality to be inconveniently in the way of his eyes. He had somewhat the bearing of a man who was going to do without any fuss what gushing people would call a philanthropic action.

'I have been intending to write a line to you,' said Neigh; 'but I felt that I could not be sure of writing my meaning in a way which might please you. I am not bright at a letter — never was. The question I mean is one that I hope you will be disposed to answer favourably, even though I may show the awkwardness of a fellow-person who has never put such a question before. Will you give me a word of encouragement — just a hope that I may not be unacceptable as a husband to you? Your talents are very great; and of course I know that I have nothing at all in that way. Still people are happy together sometimes in spite of such things. Will you say "Yes," and settle it now?'

‘I was not expecting you had come upon such an errand as this,’ said she, looking up a little, but mostly looking down. ‘I cannot say what you wish, Mr. Neigh.

‘Perhaps I have been too sudden and presumptuous. Yes, I know I have been that. However, directly I saw you I felt that nobody ever came so near my idea of what is desirable in a lady, and it occurred to me that only one obstacle should stand in the way of the natural results, which obstacle would be your refusal. In common kindness consider. I daresay I am judged to be a man of inattentive habits — I know that’s what you think of me; but under your influence I should be very different; so pray do not let your dislike to little matters influence you.’

‘I would not indeed. But believe me there can be no discussion of marriage between us,’ said Ethelberta decisively.

‘If that’s the case I may as well say no more. To burden you with my regrets would be out of place, I suppose,’ said Neigh, looking calmly out of the window.

‘Apart from personal feeling, there are considerations which would prevent what you contemplated,’ she murmured. ‘My affairs are too lengthy, intricate, and unpleasant for me to explain to anybody at present. And that would be a necessary first step.’

‘Not at all. I cannot think that preliminary to be necessary at all. I would put my lawyer in communication with yours, and we would leave the rest to them: I believe that is the proper way. You could say anything in confidence to your family-man; and you could inquire through him anything you might wish to know about my — about me. All you would need to say to myself are just the two little words — “I will,” in the church here at the end of the Crescent.’

‘I am sorry to pain you, Mr. Neigh — so sorry,’ said Ethelberta. ‘But I cannot say them.’ She was rather distressed that, despite her discouraging words, he still went on with his purpose, as if he imagined what she so distinctly said to be no bar, but rather a stimulant, usual under the circumstances.

‘It does not matter about painning me,’ said Neigh. ‘Don’t take that into consideration at all. But I did not expect you to leave me so entirely without help — to refuse me absolutely as far as words go — after what you did. If it had not been for that I should never have ventured to call. I might otherwise have supposed your interest to be fixed in another quarter; but your acting in that manner encouraged me to think you could listen to a word.’

‘What do you allude to?’ said Ethelberta. ‘How have I acted?’

Neigh appeared reluctant to go any further; but the allusion soon became sufficiently clear. ‘I wish my little place at Farnfield had been worthier of you,’ he said brusquely. ‘However, that’s a matter of time only. It is useless to build a house there yet. I wish I had known that you would be looking over it at that time of the evening. A single word, when we were talking about it the other day, that you were going to be in the neighbourhood, would have been sufficient. Nothing could have given me so much delight as to have driven you round.’

He knew that she had been to Farnfield: that knowledge was what had inspired him to call upon her to-day! Ethelberta breathed a sort of exclamation, not right out,

but stealthily, like a parson's damn. Her face did not change, since a face must be said not to change while it preserves the same pleasant lines in the mobile parts as before; but anybody who has preserved his pleasant lines under the half-minute's peer of the invidious camera, and found what a wizened, starched kind of thing they stiffen to towards the end of the time, will understand the tendency of Ethelberta's lovely features now.

'Yes; I walked round,' said Ethelberta faintly.

Neigh was decidedly master of the position at last; but he spoke as if he did not value that. His knowledge had furnished him with grounds for calling upon her, and he hastened to undeceive her from supposing that he could think ill of any motive of hers which gave him those desirable grounds.

'I supposed you, by that, to give some little thought to me occasionally,' he resumed, in the same slow and orderly tone. 'How could I help thinking so? It was your doing that which encouraged me. Now, was it not natural — I put it to you?'

Ethelberta was almost exasperated at perceiving the awful extent to which she had compromised herself with this man by her impulsive visit. Lightly and philosophically as he seemed to take it — as a thing, in short, which every woman would do by nature unless hindered by difficulties — it was no trifle to her as long as he was ignorant of her justification; and this she determined that he should know at once, at all hazards.

'It was through you in the first place that I did look into your grounds!' she said excitedly. 'It was your presumption that caused me to go there. I should not have thought of such a thing else. If you had not said what you did say I never should have thought of you or Farnfield either — Farnfield might have been in Kamtschatka for all I cared.'

'I hope sincerely that I never said anything to disturb you?'

'Yes, you did — not to me, but to somebody,' said Ethelberta, with her eyes over-full of retained tears.

'What have I said to somebody that can be in the least objectionable to you?' inquired Neigh, with much concern.

'You said — you said, you meant to marry me — just as if I had no voice in the matter! And that annoyed me, and made me go there out of curiosity.'

Neigh changed colour a little. 'Well, I did say it: I own that I said it,' he replied at last. Probably he knew enough of her nature not to feel long disconcerted by her disclosure, however she might have become possessed of the information. The explanation was certainly a great excuse to her curiosity; but if Ethelberta had tried she could not have given him a better ground for making light of her objections to his suit. 'I felt that I must marry you, that we were predestined to marry ages ago, and I feel it still!' he continued, with listless ardour. 'You seem to regret your interest in Farnfield; but to me it is a charm, and has been ever since I heard of it.'

'If you only knew all!' she said helplessly, showing, without perceiving it, an unnecessary humility in the remark, since there was no more reason just then that she

should go into details about her life than that he should about his. But melancholy and mistaken thoughts of herself as a counterfeit had brought her to this.

‘I do not wish to know more,’ said Neigh.

‘And would you marry any woman off-hand, without being thoroughly acquainted with her circumstances?’ she said, looking at him curiously, and with a little admiration, for his unconscionably phlegmatic treatment of her motives in going to Farnfield had a not unbecoming daring about it in Ethelberta’s eye.

‘I would marry a woman off-hand when that woman is you. I would make you mine this moment did I dare; or, to speak with absolute accuracy, within twenty-four hours. Do assent to it, dear Mrs. Petherwin, and let me be sure of you for ever. I’ll drive to Doctors’ Commons this minute, and meet you to-morrow morning at nine in the church just below. It is a simple impulse, but I would adhere to it in the coolest moment. Shall it be arranged in that way, instead of our waiting through the ordinary routine of preparation? I am not a youth now, but I can see the bliss of such an act as that, and the contemptible nature of methodical proceedings beside it!’

He had taken her hand. Ethelberta gave it a subtle movement backwards to imply that he was not to retain the prize, and said, ‘One whose inner life is almost unknown to you, and whom you have scarcely seen except at other people’s houses!’

‘We know each other far better than we may think at first,’ said Neigh. ‘We are not people to love in a hurry, and I have not done so in this case. As for worldly circumstances, the most important items in a marriage contract are the persons themselves, and, as far as I am concerned, if I get a lady fair and wise I care for nothing further. I know you are beautiful, for all London owns it; I know you are talented, for I have read your poetry and heard your romances; and I know you are politic and discreet —

‘For I have examined your property,’ said she, with a weak smile.

Neigh bowed. ‘And what more can I wish to know? Come, shall it be?’

‘Certainly not to-morrow.’

‘I would be entirely in your hands in that matter. I will not urge you to be precipitate — I could not expect you to be ready yet. My suddenness perhaps offended you; but, having thought deeply of this bright possibility, I was apt to forget the forbearance that one ought to show at first in mentioning it. If I have done wrong forgive me.’

‘I will think of that,’ said Ethelberta, with a cooler manner. ‘But seriously, all these words are nothing to the purpose. I must remark that I prize your friendship, but it is not for me to marry now. You have convinced me of your goodness of heart and freedom from unworthy suspicions; let that be enough. The best way in which I in my turn can convince you of my goodness of heart is by asking you to see me in private no more.’

‘And do you refuse to think of me as — -. Why do you treat me like that, after all?’ said Neigh, surprised at this want of harmony with his principle that one convert to matrimony could always find a second ready-made.

‘I cannot explain, I cannot explain,’ said she, impatiently. ‘I would and I would not — explain I mean, not marry. I don’t love anybody, and I have no heart left for beginning. It is only honest in me to tell you that I am interested in watching another man’s career, though that is not to the point either, for no close relationship with him is contemplated. But I do not wish to speak of this any more. Do not press me to it.’

‘Certainly I will not,’ said Neigh, seeing that she was distressed and sorrowful. ‘But do consider me and my wishes; I have a right to ask it for it is only asking a continuance of what you have already begun to do. To-morrow I believe I shall have the happiness of seeing you again.’

She did not say no, and long after the door had closed upon him she remained fixed in thought. ‘How can he be blamed for his manner,’ she said, ‘after knowing what I did!’

Ethelberta as she sat felt herself much less a Petherwin than a Chickereel, much less a poetess richly freighted with fancy than an adventuress with a nebulous prospect. Neigh was one of the few men whose presence seemed to attenuate her dignity in some mysterious way to its very least proportions; and that act of espial, which had so quickly and inexplicably come to his knowledge, helped his influence still more. She knew little of the nature of the town bachelor; there were opaque depths in him which her thoughts had never definitely plumbed. Notwithstanding her exaltation to the atmosphere of the Petherwin family, Ethelberta was very far from having the thoroughbred London woman’s knowledge of sets, grades, coteries, cliques, forms, glosses, and niceties, particularly on the masculine side. Setting the years from her infancy to her first look into town against those linking that epoch with the present, the former period covered not only the greater time, but contained the mass of her most vivid impressions of life and its ways. But in recognizing her ignorance of the ratio between words to women and deeds to women in the ethical code of the bachelor of the club, she forgot that human nature in the gross differs little with situation, and that a gift which, if the germs were lacking, no amount of training in clubs and coteries could supply, was mother-wit like her own.

CHAPTER 27.

MRS. BELMAINE’S — CRIPPLEGATE CHURCH

Neigh’s remark that he believed he should see Ethelberta again the next day referred to a contemplated pilgrimage of an unusual sort which had been arranged for that day by Mrs. Belmaine upon the ground of an incidental suggestion of Ethelberta’s. One afternoon in the week previous they had been chatting over tea at the house of the former lady, Neigh being present as a casual caller, when the conversation was directed upon Milton by somebody opening a volume of the poet’s works that lay on a table near.

‘Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:

England hath need of thee — ’

said Mrs. Belmaine with the degree of flippancy which is considered correct for immortal verse, the Bible, God, etc., in these days. And Ethelberta replied, lit up by a quick remembrance, ‘It is a good time to talk of Milton; for I have been much impressed by reading the “Life;” and I have decided to go and see his tomb. Could we not all go? We ought to quicken our memories of the great, and of where they lie, by such a visit occasionally.’

‘We ought,’ said Mrs. Belmaine.

‘And why shouldn’t we?’ continued Ethelberta, with interest.

‘To Westminster Abbey?’ said Mr. Belmaine, a common man of thirty, younger than his wife, who had lately come into the room.

‘No; to where he lies comparatively alone — Cripplegate Church.’

‘I always thought that Milton was buried in Poet’s Corner,’ said Mr. Belmaine.

‘So did I,’ said Neigh; ‘but I have such an indifferent head for places that my thinking goes for nothing.’

‘Well, it would be a pretty thing to do,’ said Mrs. Belmaine, ‘and instructive to all of us. If Mrs. Petherwin would like to go, I should. We can take you in the carriage and call round for Mrs. Doncastle on our way, and set you both down again coming back.’

‘That would be excellent,’ said Ethelberta. ‘There is nowhere I like going to so much as the depths of the city. The absurd narrowness of world-renowned streets is so surprising — so crooked and shady as they are too, and full of the quaint smells of old cupboards and cellars. Walking through one of them reminds me of being at the bottom of some crevasse or gorge, the proper surface of the globe being the tops of the houses.’

‘You will come to take care of us, John? And you, Mr. Neigh, would like to come? We will tell Mr. Ladywell that he may join us if he cares to,’ said Mrs. Belmaine.

‘O yes,’ said her husband quietly; and Neigh said he should like nothing better, after a faint aspect of apprehension at the remoteness of the idea from the daily track of his thoughts. Mr. Belmaine observing this, and mistaking it for an indication that Neigh had been dragged into the party against his will by his over-hasty wife, arranged that Neigh should go independently and meet them there at the hour named if he chose to do so, to give him an opportunity of staying away. Ethelberta also was by this time doubting if she had not been too eager with her proposal. To go on such a sentimental errand might be thought by her friends to be simply troublesome, their adherence having been given only in the regular course of complaisance. She was still comparatively an outsider here, her life with Lady Petherwin having been passed chiefly in alternations between English watering-places and continental towns. However, it was too late now to muse on this, and it may be added that from first to last Ethelberta never discovered from the Belmaines whether her proposal had been an infliction or a charm, so perfectly were they practised in sustaining that complete divorce between thinking and saying which is the hall-mark of high civilization.

But, however she might doubt the Belmaines, she had no doubt as to Neigh's true sentiments: the time had come when he, notwithstanding his air of being oppressed by almost every lively invention of town and country for charming griefs to rest, would not be at all oppressed by a quiet visit to the purlieu of St Giles's, Cripplegate, since she was the originator, and was going herself.

It was a bright hope-inspiring afternoon in this mid-May time when the carriage containing Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine, Mrs. Doncastle, and Ethelberta, crept along the encumbered streets towards Barbican; till turning out of that thoroughfare into Red-cross Street they beheld the bold shape of the old tower they sought, clothed in every neutral shade, standing clear against the sky, dusky and grim in its upper stage, and hoary grey below, where every corner of every stone was completely rounded off by the waves of wind and storm.

All people were busy here: our visitors seemed to be the only idle persons the city contained; and there was no dissonance — there never is — between antiquity and such beehive industry; for pure industry, in failing to observe its own existence and aspect, partakes of the unobtrusive nature of material things. This intra-mural stir was a flywheel transparent by excessive motion, through which Milton and his day could be seen as if nothing intervened. Had there been ostensibly harmonious accessories, a crowd of observing people in search of the poetical, conscious of the place and the scene, what a discord would have arisen there! But everybody passed by Milton's grave except Ethelberta and her friends, and for the moment the city's less invidious conduct appeared to her more respectful as a practice than her own.

But she was brought out of this rumination by the halt at the church door, and completely reminded of the present by finding the church open, and Neigh — the, till yesterday, unimpassioned Neigh — waiting in the vestibule to receive them, just as if he lived there. Ladywell had not arrived. It was a long time before Ethelberta could get back to Milton again, for Neigh was continuing to impend over her future more and more visibly. The objects along the journey had distracted her mind from him; but the moment now was as a direct renewal and prolongation of the declaration-time yesterday, and as if in furtherance of the conclusion of the episode.

They all alighted and went in, the coachman being told to take the carriage to a quiet nook further on, and return in half-an-hour. Mrs. Belmaine and her carriage some years before had accidentally got jammed crosswise in Cheapside through the clumsiness of the man in turning up a side street, blocking that great artery of the civilized world for the space of a minute and a half, when they were pounced upon by half-a-dozen policemen and forced to back ignominiously up a little slit between the houses where they did not mean to go, amid the shouts of the hindered drivers; and it was her nervous recollection of that event which caused Mrs. Belmaine to be so precise in her directions now.

By the time that they were grouped around the tomb the visit had assumed a much more solemn complexion than any one among them had anticipated. Ashamed of the influence that she discovered Neigh to be exercising over her, and opposing it

steadily, Ethelberta drew from her pocket a small edition of Milton, and proposed that she should read a few lines from 'Paradise Lost.' The responsibility of producing a successful afternoon was upon her shoulders; she was, moreover, the only one present who could properly manage blank verse, and this was sufficient to justify the proposal.

She stood with her head against the marble slab just below the bust, and began a selected piece, Neigh standing a few yards off on her right looking into his hat in order to listen accurately, Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine and Mrs. Doncastle seating themselves in a pew directly facing the monument. The ripe warm colours of afternoon came in upon them from the west, upon the sallow piers and arches, and the infinitely deep brown pews beneath, the aisle over Ethelberta's head being in misty shade through which glowed a lurid light from a dark-stained window behind. The sentences fell from her lips in a rhythmical cadence one by one, and she could be fancied a priestess of him before whose image she stood, when with a vivid suggestiveness she delivered here, not many yards from the central money-mill of the world, yet out from the very tomb of their author, the passage containing the words:

'Mammon led them on;

Mammon, the least erected spirit that fell

From heaven.'

When she finished reading Ethelberta left the monument, and then each one present strayed independently about the building, Ethelberta turning to the left along the passage to the south door. Neigh — from whose usually apathetic face and eyes there had proceeded a secret smouldering light as he listened and regarded her — followed in the same direction and vanished at her heels into the churchyard, whither she had now gone. Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine exchanged glances, and instead of following the pair they went with Mrs. Doncastle into the vestry to inquire of the person in charge for the register of the marriage of Oliver Cromwell, which was solemnized here. The church was now quite empty, and its stillness was as a vacuum into which an occasional noise from the street overflowed and became rarefied away to nothing.

Something like five minutes had passed when a hansom stopped outside the door, and Ladywell entered the porch. He stood still, and, looking inquiringly round for a minute or two, sat down in one of the high pews, as if under the impression that the others had not yet arrived.

While he sat here Neigh reappeared at the south door opposite, and came slowly in. Ladywell, in rising to go to him, saw that Neigh's attention was engrossed by something he held in his hand. It was his pocket-book, and Neigh was looking at a few loose flower-petals which had been placed between the pages. When Ladywell came forward Neigh looked up, started, and closed the book quickly, so that some of the petals fluttered to the ground between the two men. They were striped, red and white, and appeared to be leaves of the Harlequin rose.

'Ah! here you are, Ladywell,' he said, recovering himself. 'We had given you up: my aunt said that you would not care to come. They are all in the vestry.' How it came to pass that Neigh designated those in the vestry as 'all,' when there was one in the

churchyard, was a thing that he himself could hardly have explained, so much more had it to do with instinct than with calculation.

‘Never mind them — don’t interrupt them,’ said Ladywell. ‘The plain truth is that I have been very greatly disturbed in mind; and I could not appear earlier by reason of it. I had some doubt about coming at all.’

‘I am sorry to hear that.’

‘Neigh — I may as well tell you and have done with it. I have found that a lady of my acquaintance has two strings to her bow, or I am very much in error.’

‘What — Mrs. Petherwin?’ said Neigh uneasily. ‘But I thought that — that fancy was over with you long ago. Even your acquaintance with her was at an end, I thought.’

‘In a measure it is at an end. But let me tell you that what you call a fancy has been anything but a fancy with me, to be over like a spring shower. To speak plainly, Neigh, I consider myself badly used by that woman; damn badly used.’

‘Badly used?’ said Neigh mechanically, and wondering all the time if Ladywell had been informed that Ethelberta was to be one of the party to-day.

‘Well, I ought not to talk like that,’ said Ladywell, adopting a lighter tone. ‘All is fair in courtship, I suppose, now as ever. Indeed, I mean to put a good face upon it: if I am beaten, I am. But it is very provoking, after supposing matters to be going on smoothly, to find out that you are quite mistaken.’

‘I told you you were quite mistaken in supposing she cared for you.’

‘That is just the point I was not mistaken in,’ said Ladywell warmly. ‘She did care for me, and I stood as well with her as any man could stand until this fellow came, whoever he is. I sometimes feel so disturbed about it that I have a good mind to call upon her and ask his name. Wouldn’t you, Neigh? Will you accompany me?’

‘I would in a moment, but, but — I strongly advise you not to go,’ said Neigh earnestly. ‘It would be rash, you know, and rather unmannerly; and would only hurt your feelings.’

‘Well, I am always ready to yield to a friend’s arguments. . . . A sneaking scamp, that’s what he is. Why does he not show himself?’

‘Don’t you really know who he is?’ said Neigh, in a pronounced and exceptional tone, on purpose to give Ladywell a chance of suspecting, for the position was getting awkward. But Ladywell was blind as Bartimeus in that direction, so well had indifference to Ethelberta’s charms been feigned by Neigh until he thought seriously of marrying her. Yet, unfortunately for the interests of calmness, Ladywell was less blind with his outward eye. In his reflections his glance had lingered again upon the pocket-book which Neigh still held in his hand, and upon the two or three rose-leaves on the floor, until he said idly, superimposing humorousness upon misery, as men in love can:

‘Rose-leaves, Neigh? I thought you did not care for flowers. What makes you amuse yourself with such sentimental objects as those, only fit for women, or painters like me? If I had not observed you with my own eyes I should have said that you were

about the last man in the world to care for things of that sort. Whatever makes you keep rose-leaves in your pocket-book?’

‘The best reason on earth,’ said Neigh. ‘A woman gave them to me.’

‘That proves nothing unless she is a great deal to you,’ said Ladywell, with the experienced air of a man who, whatever his inferiority in years to Neigh, was far beyond him in knowledge of that sort, by virtue of his recent trials.

‘She is a great deal to me.’

‘If I did not know you to be such a confirmed misogynist I should say that this is a serious matter.’

‘It is serious,’ said Neigh quietly. ‘The probability is that I shall marry the woman who gave me these. Anyhow I have asked her the question, and she has not altogether said no.’

‘I am glad to hear it, Neigh,’ said Ladywell heartily. ‘I am glad to hear that your star is higher than mine.’

Before Neigh could make further reply Ladywell was attracted by the glow of green sunlight reflected through the south door by the grass of the churchyard, now in all its spring freshness and luxuriance. He bent his steps thither, followed anxiously by Neigh.

‘I had no idea there was such a lovely green spot in the city,’ Ladywell continued, passing out. ‘Trees too, planted in the manner of an orchard. What a charming place!’

The place was truly charming just at that date. The untainted leaves of the lime and plane trees and the newly-sprung grass had in the sun a brilliancy of beauty that was brought into extraordinary prominence by the sable soil showing here and there, and the charcoaled stems and trunks out of which the leaves budded: they seemed an importation, not a produce, and their delicacy such as would perish in a day.

‘What is this round tower?’ Ladywell said again, walking towards the iron-grey bastion, partly covered with ivy and Virginia creeper, which stood obtruding into the enclosure.

‘O, didn’t you know that was here? That’s a piece of the old city wall,’ said Neigh, looking furtively around at the same time. Behind the bastion the churchyard ran into a long narrow strip, grassed like the other part, but completely hidden from it by the cylinder of ragged masonry. On rounding this projection, Ladywell beheld within a few feet of him a lady whom he knew too well.

‘Mrs. Petherwin here!’ exclaimed he, proving how ignorant he had been of the composition of the party he was to meet, and accounting at the same time for his laxity in attending it.

‘I forgot to tell you,’ said Neigh awkwardly, behind him, ‘that Mrs. Petherwin was to come with us.’

Ethelberta’s look was somewhat blushful and agitated, as if from some late transaction: she appeared to have been secluding herself there till she should have recovered her equanimity. However, she came up to him and said, ‘I did not see you before this moment: we had been thinking you would not come.’

While these words were being prettily spoken, Ladywell's face became pale as death. On Ethelberta's bosom were the stem and green calyx of a rose, almost all its flower having disappeared. It had been a Harlequin rose, for two or three of its striped leaves remained to tell the tale.

She could not help noticing his fixed gaze, and she said quickly, 'Yes, I have lost my pretty rose: this may as well go now,' and she plucked the stem from its fastening in her dress and flung it away.

Poor Ladywell turned round to meet Mr. and Mrs. Belmaine, whose voices were beginning to be heard just within the church door, leaving Neigh and Ethelberta together. It was a graceful act of young Ladywell's that, in the midst of his own pain at the strange tale the rose-leaves suggested — Neigh's rivalry, Ethelberta's mutability, his own defeat — he was not regardless of the intense embarrassment which might have been caused had he remained.

The two were silent at first, and it was evident that Ethelberta's mood was one of anger at something that had gone before. She turned aside from him to follow the others, when Neigh spoke in a tone somewhat bitter and somewhat stern.

'What — going like that! After being compromised together, why don't you close with me? Ladywell knows all: I had already told him that the rose-leaves were given me by my intended wife. We seem to him to be practising deceptions all of a piece, and what folly it is to play off so! As to what I did, that I ask your forgiveness for.'

Ethelberta looked upon the ground and maintained a compressed lip. Neigh resumed: 'If I showed more feeling than you care for, I insist that it was not more than was natural under the circumstances, if not quite proper. Opinions may differ, but my experience goes to prove that conventional squeamishness at such times as these is more talked and written about than practised. Plain behaviour must be expected when marriage is the question. Nevertheless, I do say — and I cannot say more — that I am sincerely sorry to have offended you by exceeding my privileges. I will never do so again.'

'Don't say privileges. You have none.'

'I am sorry that I thought otherwise, and that others will think so too. Ladywell is, at any rate, bent on thinking so. . . . It might have been made known to him in a gentle way — but God disposes.'

'There is nothing to make known — I don't understand,' said Ethelberta, going from him.

By this time Ladywell had walked round the gravel walks with the two other ladies and Mr. Belmaine, and they were all turning to come back again. The young painter had deputed his voice to reply to their remarks, but his understanding continued poring upon other things. When he came up to Ethelberta, his agitation had left him: she too was free from constraint; while Neigh was some distance off, carefully examining nothing in particular in an old fragment of wall.

The little party was now united again as to its persons; though in spirit far otherwise. They went through the church in general talk, Ladywell sad but serene, and Ethelberta

keeping far-removed both from him and from Neigh. She had at this juncture entered upon that Sphinx-like stage of existence in which, contrary to her earlier manner, she signified to no one of her ways, plans, or sensations, and spoke little on any subject at all. There were occasional smiles now which came only from the face, and speeches from the lips merely.

The journey home was performed as they had come, Ladywell not accepting the seat in Neigh's cab which was phlegmatically offered him. Mrs. Doncastle's acquaintance with Ethelberta had been slight until this day; but the afternoon's proceeding had much impressed the matron with her younger friend. Before they parted she said, with the sort of affability which is meant to signify the beginning of permanent friendship: 'A friend of my husband's, Lord Mountclere, has been anxious for some time to meet you. He is a great admirer of the poems, and more still of the story-telling invention, and your power in it. He has been present many times at the Mayfair Hall to hear you. When will you dine with us to meet him? I know you will like him. Will Thursday be convenient?'

Ethelberta stood for a moment reflecting, and reflecting hoped that Mrs. Doncastle had not noticed her momentary perplexity. Crises were becoming as common with her as blackberries; and she had foreseen this one a long time. It was not that she was to meet Lord Mountclere, for he was only a name and a distant profile to her: it was that her father would necessarily be present at the meeting, in the most anomalous position that human nature could endure.

However, having often proved in her disjointed experience that the shortest way out of a difficulty lies straight through it, Ethelberta decided to dine at the Doncastles', and, as she murmured that she should have great pleasure in meeting any friend of theirs, set about contriving how the encounter with her dearest relative might be made safe and unsuspected. She bade them adieu blithely; but the thoughts engendered by the invitation stood before her as sorrowful and rayless ghosts which could not be laid. Often at such conjunctures as these, when the futility of her great undertaking was more than usually manifest, did Ethelberta long like a tired child for the conclusion of the whole matter; when her work should be over, and the evening come; when she might draw her boat upon the shore, and in some thymy nook await eternal night with a placid mind.

CHAPTER 28.

ETHELBERTA'S — MR. CHICKEREL'S ROOM

The question of Neigh or no Neigh had reached a pitch of insistence which no longer permitted of dallying, even by a popular beauty. His character was becoming defined to Ethelberta as something very differently composed from that of her first imagining. She had set him down to be a man whose external in excitability owed nothing to self-repression, but stood as the natural surface of the mass within. Neigh's urban torpor,

she said, might have been in the first instance produced by art, but, were it thus, it had gone so far as to permeate him. This had been disproved, first surprisingly, by his reported statement; wondrously, in the second place, by his call upon her and sudden proposal; thirdly, to a degree simply astounding, by what had occurred in the city that day. For Neigh, before the fervour had subsided which was produced in him by her look and general power while reading 'Paradise Lost,' found himself alone with her in a nook outside the church, and there had almost demanded her promise to be his wife. She had replied by asking for time, and idly offering him the petals of her rose, that had shed themselves in her hand. Neigh, in taking them, pressed her fingers more warmly than she thought she had given him warrant for, which offended her. It was certainly a very momentary affair, and when it was over seemed to surprise himself almost as much as it had vexed her; but it had reminded her of one truth which she was in danger of forgetting. The town gentleman was not half so far removed from Sol and Dan, and the hard-handed order in general, in his passions as in his philosophy. He still continued to be the male of his species, and when the heart was hot with a dream Pall Mall had much the same aspect as Wessex.

Well, she had not accepted him yet; indeed, for the moment they were in a pet with one another. Yet that might soon be cleared off, and then recurred the perpetual question, would the advantage that might accrue to her people by her marriage be worth the sacrifice? One palliative feature must be remembered when we survey the matrimonial ponderings of the poetess and romancer. What she contemplated was not meanly to ensnare a husband just to provide incomes for her and her family, but to find some man she might respect, who would maintain her in such a stage of comfort as should, by setting her mind free from temporal anxiety, enable her to further organize her talent, and provide incomes for them herself. Plenty of saleable originality was left in her as yet, but it was getting crushed under the rubbish of her necessities.

She was not sure that Neigh would stand the test of her revelations. It would be possible to lead him to marry her without revealing anything — the events of the last few days had shown her that — yet Ethelberta's honesty shrank from the safe course of holding her tongue. It might be pleasant to many a modern gentleman to find himself allied with a lady, none of whose ancestors had ever pandered to a court, lost an army, taken a bribe, oppressed a community, or broken a bank; but the added disclosure that, in avoiding these stains, her kindred had worked and continued to work with their hands for bread, might lead such an one to consider that the novelty was dearly purchased.

Ethelberta was, upon the whole, dissatisfied with her progress thus far. She had planned many things and fulfilled few. Had her father been by this time provided for and made independent of the world, as she had thought he might be, not only would her course with regard to Neigh be quite clear, but the impending awkwardness of dining with her father behind her chair could not have occurred. True, that was a small matter beside her regret for his own sake that he was still in harness; and a mere change of occupation would be but a tribute to a fastidiousness which he did not

himself share. She had frequently tried to think of a vocation for him that would have a more dignified sound, and be less dangerously close to her own path: the post of care-taker at some provincial library, country stationer, registrar of births and deaths, and many others had been discussed and dismissed in face of the unmanageable fact that her father was serenely happy and comfortable as a butler, looking with dread at any hint of change short of perfect retirement. Since, then, she could not offer him this retirement, what right had she to interfere with his mode of life at all? In no other social groove on earth would he thrive as he thrived in his present one, to which he had been accustomed from boyhood, and where the remuneration was actually greater than in professions ten times as stately in name.

For the rest, too, Ethelberta had indulged in hopes, the high education of the younger ones being the chief of these darling wishes. Picotee wanted looking to badly enough. Sol and Dan required no material help; they had quickly obtained good places of work under a Pimlico builder; for though the brothers scarcely showed as yet the light-fingered deftness of London artizans, the want was in a measure compensated by their painstaking, and employers are far from despising country hands who bring with them strength, industry, and a desire to please. But their sister had other lines laid down for them than those of level progress; to start them some day as masters instead of men was a long-cherished wish of Ethelberta's.

Thus she had quite enough machinery in her hands to keep decently going, even were she to marry a man who would take a kindly view of her peculiar situation, and afford her opportunities of strengthening her powers for her kindred's good. But what would be the result if, eighteen months hence — the date at which her occupation of the house in Exonbury Crescent came to an end — she were still a widow, with no accumulated capital, her platform talents grown homely and stunted through narrow living, and her tender vein of poesy completely dispersed by it? To calmly relinquish the struggle at that point would have been the act of a stoic, but not of a woman, particularly when she considered the children, the hopes of her mother for them, and her own condition — though this was least — under the ironical cheers which would greet a slip back into the mire.

It here becomes necessary to turn for a moment to Master Joey Chickerel, Ethelberta's troublesome page and brother. The face of this juvenile was that of a Graeco-Roman satyr to the furthest degree of completeness. Viewed in front, the outer line of his upper lip rose in a double arch nearly to his little round nostrils, giving an expression of a jollity so delicious to himself as to compel a perpetual drawing in of his breath. During half-laughs his lips parted in the middle, and remained closed at the corners, which were small round pits like his nostrils, the same form being repeated as dimples a little further back upon his cheek. The opening for each eye formed a sparkling crescent, both upper and under lid having the convexity upwards.

But during some few days preceding the dinner-party at the Doncastles' all this changed. The luxuriant curves departed, a compressed lineality was to be observed everywhere, the pupils of his eyes seemed flattened, and the carriage of his head was limp

and sideways. This was a feature so remarkable and new in him that Picotee noticed it, and was lifted from the melancholy current of her own affairs in contemplating his.

‘Well, what’s the matter?’ said Picotee.

‘O — nothing,’ said Joey.

‘Nothing? How can you say so?’

‘The world’s a holler mockery — that’s what I say.’

‘Yes, so it is, to some; but not to you,’ said Picotee, sighing.

‘Don’t talk argument, Picotee. I only hope you’ll never feel what I feel now. If it wasn’t for my juties here I know what I’d do; I’d ‘list, that’s what I’d do. But having my position to fill here as the only responsible man-servant in the house, I can’t leave.’

‘Has anybody been beating you?’

‘Beating! Do I look like a person who gets beatings? No, it is a madness,’ said Joey, putting his hand upon his chest. ‘The case is, I am in love.’

‘O Joey, a boy no bigger than you are!’ said Picotee reprovingly. Her personal interest in the passion, however, provoked her to inquire, in the next breath, ‘Who is it? Do tell, Joey.’

‘No bigger than I! What hev bigness to do with it? That’s just like your old-fashioned notions. Bigness is no more wanted in courting nowadays than in soldiering or smoking or any other duty of man. Husbands is rare; and a promising courter who means business will fetch his price in these times, big or small, I assure ye. I might have been engaged a dozen times over as far as the bigness goes. You should see what a miserable little fellow my rival is afore you talk like that. Now you know I’ve got a rival, perhaps you’ll own there must be something in it.’

‘Yes, that seems like the real thing. But who is the young woman?’

‘Well, I don’t mind telling you, Picotee. It is Mrs. Doncastle’s new maid. I called to see father last night, and had supper there; and you should have seen how lovely she were — eating sparrowgrass sideways, as if she were born to it. But, of course, there’s a rival — there always is — I might have known that, and I will crush him!’

‘But Mrs. Doncastle’s new maid — if that was she I caught a glimpse of the other day — is ever so much older than you — a dozen years.’

‘What’s that to a man in love? Pooh — I wish you would leave me, Picotee; I wants to be alone.’

A short time after this Picotee was in the company of Ethelberta, and she took occasion to mention Joey’s attachment. Ethelberta grew exceedingly angry directly she heard of it.

‘What a fearful nuisance that boy is becoming,’ she said. ‘Does father know anything of this?’

‘I think not,’ said Picotee. ‘O no, he cannot; he would not allow any such thing to go on; she is so much older than Joey.’

‘I should think he wouldn’t allow it! The fact is I must be more strict about this growing friendliness between you all and the Doncastle servants. There shall be absolutely no intimacy or visiting of any sort. When father wants to see any of you he

must come here, unless there is a most serious reason for your calling upon him. Some disclosure or reference to me otherwise than as your mistress, will certainly be made else, and then I am ruined. I will speak to father myself about Joey's absurd nonsense this evening. I am going to see him on another matter.' And Ethelberta sighed. 'I am to dine there on Thursday,' she added.

'To dine there, Berta? Well, that is a strange thing! Why, father will be close to you!'

'Yes,' said Ethelberta quietly.

'How I should like to see you sitting at a grand dinner-table, among lordly dishes and shining people, and father about the room unnoticed! Berta, I have never seen a dinner-party in my life, and father said that I should some day; he promised me long ago.'

'How will he be able to carry out that, my dear child?' said Ethelberta, drawing her sister gently to her side.

'Father says that for an hour and a half the guests are quite fixed in the dining-room, and as unlikely to move as if they were trees planted round the table. Do let me go and see you, Berta,' Picotee added coaxingly. 'I would give anything to see how you look in the midst of elegant people talking and laughing, and you my own sister all the time, and me looking on like puss-in-the-corner.'

Ethelberta could hardly resist the entreaty, in spite of her recent resolution.

'We will leave that to be considered when I come home to-night,' she said. 'I must hear what father says.'

After dark the same evening a woman, dressed in plain black and wearing a hood, went to the servants' entrance of Mr. Doncastle's house, and inquired for Mr. Chickereel. Ethelberta found him in a room by himself, and on entering she closed the door behind her, and unwrapped her face.

'Can you sit with me a few minutes, father?' she said.

'Yes, for a quarter of an hour or so,' said the butler. 'Has anything happened? I thought it might be Picotee.'

'No. All's well yet. But I thought it best to see you upon one or two matters which are harassing me a little just now. The first is, that stupid boy Joey has got entangled in some way with the lady's-maid at this house; a ridiculous affair it must be by all account, but it is too serious for me to treat lightly. She will worm everything out of him, and a pretty business it will be then.'

'God bless my soul! why, the woman is old enough to be his mother! I have never heard a sound of it till now. What do you propose to do?'

'I have hardly thought: I cannot tell at all. But we will consider that after I have done. The next thing is, I am to dine here Thursday — that is, to-morrow.'

'You going to dine here, are you?' said her father in surprise. 'Dear me, that's news. We have a dinner-party to-morrow, but I was not aware that you knew our people.'

'I have accepted the invitation,' said Ethelberta. 'But if you think I had better stay away, I will get out of it by some means. Heavens! what does that mean — will

anybody come in?' she added, rapidly pulling up her hood and jumping from the seat as the loud tones of a bell clanged forth in startling proximity.

'O no — it is all safe,' said her father. 'It is the area door — nothing to do with me. About the dinner: I don't see why you may not come. Of course you will take no notice of me, nor shall I of you. It is to be rather a large party. Lord What's-his-name is coming, and several good people.'

'Yes; he is coming to meet me, it appears. But, father,' she said more softly and slowly, 'how wrong it will be for me to come so close to you, and never recognize you! I don't like it. I wish you could have given up service by this time; it would have been so much less painful for us all round. I thought we might have been able to manage it somehow.'

'Nonsense, nonsense,' said Mr. Chickereel crossly. 'There is not the least reason why I should give up. I want to save a little money first. If you don't like me as I am, you must keep away from me. Don't be uneasy about my comfort; I am right enough, thank God. I can mind myself for many a year yet.'

Ethelberta looked at him with tears in her eyes, but she did not speak. She never could help crying when she met her father here.

'I have been in service now for more than seven-and-thirty years,' her father went on. 'It is an honourable calling; and why should you maintain me because you can earn a few pounds by your gifts, and an old woman left you her house and a few sticks of furniture? If she had left you any money it would have been a different thing, but as you have to work for every penny you get, I cannot think of it. Suppose I should agree to come and live with you, and then you should be ill, or such like, and I no longer able to help myself? O no, I'll stick where I am, for here I am safe as to food and shelter at any rate. Surely, Ethelberta, it is only right that I, who ought to keep you all, should at least keep your mother and myself? As to our position, that we cannot help; and I don't mind that you are unable to own me.'

'I wish I could own you — all of you.'

'Well, you chose your course, my dear; and you must abide by it. Having put your hand to the plough, it will be foolish to turn back.'

'It would, I suppose. Yet I wish I could get a living by some simple humble occupation, and drop the name of Petherwin, and be Berta Chickereel again, and live in a green cottage as we used to do when I was small. I am miserable to a pitiable degree sometimes, and sink into regrets that I ever fell into such a groove as this. I don't like covert deeds, such as coming here to-night, and many are necessary with me from time to time. There is something without which splendid energies are a drug; and that is a cold heart. There is another thing necessary to energy, too — the power of distinguishing your visions from your reasonable forecasts when looking into the future, so as to allow your energy to lay hold of the forecasts only. I begin to have a fear that mother is right when she implies that I undertook to carry out visions and all. But ten of us are so many to cope with. If God Almighty had only killed off three-quarters of

us when we were little, a body might have done something for the rest; but as we are it is hopeless!’

‘There is no use in your going into high doctrine like that,’ said Chickereel. ‘As I said before, you chose your course. You have begun to fly high, and you had better keep there.’

‘And to do that there is only one way — that is, to do it surely, so that I have some groundwork to enable me to keep up to the mark in my profession. That way is marriage.’

‘Marriage? Who are you going to marry?’

‘God knows. Perhaps Lord Mountclere. Stranger things have happened.’

‘Yes, so they have; though not many wretcheder things. I would sooner see you in your grave, Ethelberta, than Lord Mountclere’s wife, or the wife of anybody like him, great as the honour would be.’

‘Of course that was only something to say; I don’t know the man even.’

‘I know his valet. However, marry who you may, I hope you’ll be happy, my dear girl. You would be still more divided from us in that event; but when your mother and I are dead, it will make little difference.’

Ethelberta placed her hand upon his shoulder, and smiled cheerfully. ‘Now, father, don’t despond. All will be well, and we shall see no such misfortune as that for many a year. Leave all to me. I am a rare hand at contrivances.’

‘You are indeed, Berta. It seems to me quite wonderful that we should be living so near together and nobody suspect the relationship, because of the precautions you have taken.’

‘Yet the precautions were rather Lady Petherwin’s than mine, as you know. Consider how she kept me abroad. My marriage being so secret made it easy to cut off all traces, unless anybody had made it a special business to search for them. That people should suspect as yet would be by far the more wonderful thing of the two. But we must, for one thing, have no visiting between our girls and the servants here, or they soon will suspect.’

Ethelberta then laid down a few laws on the subject, and, explaining the other details of her visit, told her father soon that she must leave him.

He took her along the passage and into the area. They were standing at the bottom of the steps, saying a few parting words about Picotee’s visit to see the dinner, when a female figure appeared by the railing above, slipped in at the gate, and flew down the steps past the father and daughter. At the moment of passing she whispered breathlessly to him, ‘Is that you, Mr. Chickereel?’

‘Yes,’ said the butler.

She tossed into his arms a quantity of wearing apparel, and adding, ‘Please take them upstairs for me — I am late,’ rushed into the house.

‘Good heavens, what does that mean?’ said Ethelberta, holding her father’s arm in her uneasiness.

‘That’s the new lady’s-maid, just come in from an evening walk — that young scamp’s sweetheart, if what you tell me is true. I don’t yet know what her character is, but she runs neck and neck with time closer than any woman I ever met. She stays out at night like this till the last moment, and often throws off her dashing courting-clothes in this way, as she runs down the steps, to save a journey to the top of the house to her room before going to Mrs. Doncastle’s, who is in fact at this minute waiting for her. Only look here.’ Chickerel gathered up a hat decked with feathers and flowers, a parasol, and a light muslin train-skirt, out of the pocket of the latter tumbling some long golden tresses of hair.

‘What an extraordinary woman,’ said Ethelberta. ‘A perfect Cinderella. The idea of Joey getting desperate about a woman like that; no doubt she has just come in from meeting him.’

‘No doubt — a blockhead. That’s his taste, is it! I’ll soon see if I can’t cure his taste if it inclines towards Mrs. Menlove.’

‘Mrs. what?’

‘Menlove; that’s her name. She came about a fortnight ago.’

‘And is that Menlove — what shall we do!’ exclaimed Ethelberta. ‘The idea of the boy singling out her — why it is ruin to him, to me, and to us all!’

She hastily explained to her father that Menlove had been Lady Petherwin’s maid and her own at some time before the death of her mother-in-law, that she had only stayed with them through a three months’ tour because of her flightiness, and hence had learnt nothing of Ethelberta’s history, and probably had never thought at all about it. But nevertheless they were as well acquainted as a lady and her maid well could be in the time. ‘Like all such doubtful characters,’ continued Ethelberta, ‘she was one of the cleverest and lightest-handed women we ever had about us. When she first came, my hair was getting quite weak; but by brushing it every day in a peculiar manner, and treating it as only she knew how, she brought it into splendid condition.’

‘Well, this is the devil to pay, upon my life!’ said Mr. Chickerel, with a miserable gaze at the bundle of clothes and the general situation at the same time. ‘Unfortunately for her friendship, I have snubbed her two or three times already, for I don’t care about her manner. You know she has a way of trading on a man’s sense of honour till it puts him into an awkward position. She is perfectly well aware that, whatever scrape I find her out in, I shall not have the conscience to report her, because I am a man, and she is a defenceless woman; and so she takes advantage of one’s feeling by making me, or either of the menservants, her bottle-holder, as you see she has done now.’

‘This is all simply dreadful,’ said Ethelberta. ‘Joey is shrewd and trustworthy; but in the hands of such a woman as that! I suppose she did not recognize me.’

‘There was no chance of that in the dark.’

‘Well, I cannot do anything in it,’ said she. ‘I cannot manage Joey at all.’

‘I will see if I can,’ said Mr. Chickerel. ‘Courting at his age, indeed — what shall we hear next!’

Chickereel then accompanied his daughter along the street till an empty cab passed them, and putting her into it he returned to the house again.

CHAPTER 29.

ETHELBERTA'S DRESSING-ROOM — MR. DONCASTLE'S HOUSE

The dressing of Ethelberta for the dinner-party was an undertaking into which Picotee threw her whole skill as tirewoman. Her energies were brisker that day than they had been at any time since the Julians first made preparations for departure from town; for a letter had come to her from Faith, telling of their arrival at the old cathedral city, which was found to suit their inclinations and habits infinitely better than London; and that she would like Picotee to visit them there some day. Picotee felt, and so probably felt the writer of the letter, that such a visit would not be very practicable just now; but it was a pleasant idea, and for fastening dreams upon was better than nothing.

Such musings were encouraged also by Ethelberta's remarks as the dressing went on.

'We will have a change soon,' she said; 'we will go out of town for a few days. It will do good in many ways. I am getting so alarmed about the health of the children; their faces are becoming so white and thin and pinched that an old acquaintance would hardly know them; and they were so plump when they came. You are looking as pale as a ghost, and I daresay I am too. A week or two at Knollsea will see us right.'

'O, how charming!' said Picotee gladly.

Knollsea was a village on the coast, not very far from Melchester, the new home of Christopher; not very far, that is to say, in the eye of a sweetheart; but seeing that there was, as the crow flies, a stretch of thirty-five miles between the two places, and that more than one-third the distance was without a railway, an elderly gentleman might have considered their situations somewhat remote from each other.

'Why have you chosen Knollsea?' inquired Picotee.

'Because of aunt's letter from Rouen — have you seen it?'

'I did not read it through.'

'She wants us to get a copy of the register of her baptism; and she is not absolutely certain which of the parishes in and about Knollsea they were living in when she was born. Mother, being a year younger, cannot tell of course. First I thought of writing to the clergyman of each parish, but that would be troublesome, and might reveal the secret of my birth; but if we go down there for a few days, and take some lodgings, we shall be able to find out all about it at leisure. Gwendoline and Joey can attend to mother and the people downstairs, especially as father will look in every evening until he goes out of town, to see if they are getting on properly. It will be such a weight off my soul to slip away from acquaintances here.'

'Will it?'

‘Yes. At the same time I ought not to speak so, for they have been very kind. I wish we could go to Rouen afterwards; aunt repeats her invitation as usual. However, there is time enough to think of that.’

Ethelberta was dressed at last, and, beholding the lonely look of poor Picotee when about to leave the room, she could not help having a sympathetic feeling that it was rather hard for her sister to be denied so small an enjoyment as a menial peep at a feast when she herself was to sit down to it as guest.

‘If you still want to go and see the procession downstairs you may do so,’ she said reluctantly; ‘provided that you take care of your tongue when you come in contact with Menlove, and adhere to father’s instructions as to how long you may stay. It may be in the highest degree unwise; but never mind, go.’

Then Ethelberta departed for the scene of action, just at the hour of the sun’s lowest decline, when it was fading away, yellow and mild as candle-light, and when upper windows facing north-west reflected to persons in the street dissolving views of tawny cloud with brazen edges, the original picture of the same being hidden from sight by soiled walls and slaty slopes.

Before entering the presence of host and hostess, Ethelberta contrived to exchange a few words with her father.

‘In excellent time,’ he whispered, full of paternal pride at the superb audacity of her situation here in relation to his. ‘About half of them are come.’

‘Mr. Neigh?’

‘Not yet; he’s coming.’

‘Lord Mountclere?’

‘Yes. He came absurdly early; ten minutes before anybody else, so that Mrs. D. could hardly get on her bracelets and things soon enough to scramble downstairs and receive him; and he’s as nervous as a boy. Keep up your spirits, dear, and don’t mind me.’

‘I will, father. And let Picotee see me at dinner if you can. She is very anxious to look at me. She will be here directly.’

And Ethelberta, having been announced, joined the chamberful of assembled guests, among whom for the present we lose sight of her.

* * * * *

Meanwhile the evening outside the house was deepening in tone, and the lamps began to blink up. Her sister having departed, Picotee hastily arrayed herself in a little black jacket and chip hat, and tripped across the park to the same point. Chickereel had directed a maid-servant known as Jane to receive his humbler daughter and make her comfortable; and that friendly person, who spoke as if she had known Picotee five-and-twenty years, took her to the housekeeper’s room, where the visitor deposited her jacket and hat, and rested awhile.

A quick-eyed, light-haired, slight-built woman came in when Jane had gone. ‘Are you Miss Chickereel?’ she said to Picotee.

‘Yes,’ said Picotee, guessing that this was Menlove, and fearing her a little.

‘Jane tells me that you have come to visit your father, and would like to look at the company going to dinner. Well, they are not much to see, you know; but such as they are you are welcome to the sight of. Come along with me.’

‘I think I would rather wait for father, if you will excuse me, please.’

‘Your father is busy now; it is no use for you to think of saying anything to him.’

Picotee followed her guide up a back staircase to the height of several flights, and then, crossing a landing, they descended to the upper part of the front stairs.

‘Now look over the balustrade, and you will see them all in a minute,’ said Mrs. Menlove. ‘O, you need not be timid; you can look out as far as you like. We are all independent here; no slavery for us: it is not as it is in the country, where servants are considered to be of different blood and bone from their employers, and to have no eyes for anything but their work. Here they are coming.’

Picotee then had the pleasure of looking down upon a series of human crowns — some black, some white, some strangely built upon, some smooth and shining — descending the staircase in disordered column and great discomfort, their owners trying to talk, but breaking off in the midst of syllables to look to their footing. The young girl’s eyes had not drooped over the handrail more than a few moments when she softly exclaimed, ‘There she is, there she is! How lovely she looks, does she not?’

‘Who?’ said Mrs. Menlove.

Picotee recollected herself, and hastily drew in her impulses. ‘My dear mistress,’ she said blandly. ‘That is she on Mr. Doncastle’s arm. And look, who is that funny old man the elderly lady is helping downstairs?’

‘He is our honoured guest, Lord Mountclere. Mrs. Doncastle will have him all through the dinner, and after that he will devote himself to Mrs. Petherwin, your “dear mistress.” He keeps looking towards her now, and no doubt thinks it a nuisance that she is not with him. Well, it is useless to stay here. Come a little further — we’ll follow them.’ Menlove began to lead the way downstairs, but Picotee held back.

‘Won’t they see us?’ she said.

‘No. And if they do, it doesn’t matter. Mrs. Doncastle would not object in the least to the daughter of her respected head man being accidentally seen in the hall.’

They descended to the bottom and stood in the hall. ‘O, there’s father!’ whispered Picotee, with childlike gladness, as Chickerel became visible to her by the door. The butler nodded to his daughter, and became again engrossed in his duties.

‘I wish I could see her — my mistress — again,’ said Picotee.

‘You seem mightily concerned about your mistress,’ said Menlove. ‘Do you want to see if you have dressed her properly?’

‘Yes, partly; and I like her, too. She is very kind to me.’

‘You will have a chance of seeing her soon. When the door is nicely open you can look in for a moment. I must leave you now for a few minutes, but I will come again.’

Menlove departed, and Picotee stood waiting. She wondered how Ethelberta was getting on, and whether she enjoyed herself as much as it seemed her duty to do in such a superbly hospitable place. Picotee then turned her attention to the hall, every article

of furniture therein appearing worthy of scrutiny to her unaccustomed eyes. Here she walked and looked about for a long time till an excellent opportunity offered itself of seeing how affairs progressed in the dining-room.

Through the partly-opened door there became visible a sideboard which first attracted her attention by its richness. It was, indeed, a noticeable example of modern art-workmanship, in being exceptionally large, with curious ebony mouldings at different stages; and, while the heavy cupboard doors at the bottom were enriched with inlays of paler wood, other panels were decorated with tiles, as if the massive composition had been erected on the spot as part of the solid building. However, it was on a space higher up that Picotee's eyes and thoughts were fixed. In the great mirror above the middle ledge she could see reflected the upper part of the dining-room, and this suggested to her that she might see Ethelberta and the other guests reflected in the same way by standing on a chair, which, quick as thought, she did.

To Picotee's dazed young vision her beautiful sister appeared as the chief figure of a glorious pleasure-parliament of both sexes, surrounded by whole regiments of candles grouped here and there about the room. She and her companions were seated before a large flowerbed, or small hanging garden, fixed at about the level of the elbow, the attention of all being concentrated rather upon the uninteresting margin of the bed, and upon each other, than on the beautiful natural objects growing in the middle, as it seemed to Picotee. In the ripple of conversation Ethelberta's clear voice could occasionally be heard, and her young sister could see that her eyes were bright, and her face beaming, as if divers social wants and looming penuriousness had never been within her experience. Mr. Doncastle was quite absorbed in what she was saying. So was the queer old man whom Menlove had called Lord Mountclere.

'The dashing widow looks very well, does she not?' said a person at Picotee's elbow.

It was her conductor Menlove, now returned again, whom Picotee had quite forgotten.

'She will do some damage here to-night you will find,' continued Menlove. 'How long have you been with her?'

'O, a long time — I mean rather a short time,' stammered Picotee.

'I know her well enough. I was her maid once, or rather her mother-in-law's, but that was long before you knew her. I did not by any means find her so lovable as you seem to think her when I had to do with her at close quarters. An awful flirt — awful. Don't you find her so?'

'I don't know.'

'If you don't yet you will know. But come down from your perch — the dining-room door will not be open again for some time — and I will show you about the rooms upstairs. This is a larger house than Mrs. Petherwin's, as you see. Just come and look at the drawing-rooms.'

Wishing much to get rid of Menlove, yet fearing to offend her, Picotee followed upstairs. Dinner was almost over by this time, and when they entered the front drawing-room a young man-servant and maid were there rekindling the lights.

‘Now let’s have a game of cat-and-mice,’ said the maid-servant cheerily. ‘There’s plenty of time before they come up.’

‘Agreed,’ said Menlove promptly. ‘You will play, will you not, Miss Chickerel?’

‘No, indeed,’ said Picotee, aghast.

‘Never mind, then; you look on.’

Away then ran the housemaid and Menlove, and the young footman started at their heels. Round the room, over the furniture, under the furniture, through the furniture, out of one window, along the balcony, in at another window, again round the room — so they glided with the swiftness of swallows and the noiselessness of ghosts.

Then the housemaid drew a jew’s-harp from her pocket, and struck up a lively waltz sotto voce. The footman seized Menlove, who appeared nothing loth, and began spinning gently round the room with her, to the time of the fascinating measure

‘Which fashion hails, from countesses to queens,
And maids and valets dance behind the scenes.’

Picotee, who had been accustomed to unceiled country cottages all her life, wherein the scamper of a mouse is heard distinctly from floor to floor, exclaimed in a terrified whisper, at viewing all this, ‘They’ll hear you underneath, they’ll hear you, and we shall all be ruined!’

‘Not at all,’ came from the cautious dancers. ‘These are some of the best built houses in London — double floors, filled in with material that will deaden any row you like to make, and we make none. But come and have a turn yourself, Miss Chickerel.’

The young man relinquished Menlove, and on the spur of the moment seized Picotee. Picotee flounced away from him in indignation, backing into a corner with ruffled feathers, like a pullet trying to appear a hen.

‘How dare you touch me!’ she said, with rounded eyes. ‘I’ll tell somebody downstairs of you, who’ll soon see about it!’

‘What a baby; she’ll tell her father.’

‘No I shan’t; somebody you are all afraid of, that’s who I’ll tell.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Menlove; ‘he meant no harm.’

Playtime was now getting short, and further antics being dangerous on that account, the performers retired again downstairs, Picotee of necessity following. Her nerves were screwed up to the highest pitch of uneasiness by the grotesque habits of these men and maids, who were quite unlike the country servants she had known, and resembled nothing so much as pixies, elves, or gnomes, peeping up upon human beings from their shady haunts underground, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill — sometimes doing heavy work, sometimes none; teasing and worrying with impish laughter half suppressed, and vanishing directly mortal eyes were bent on them. Separate and distinct from overt existence under the sun, this life could hardly be without its distinctive pleasures, all of them being more or less pervaded by thrills and titillations from games of hazard, and the perpetual risk of sensational surprises.

Long before this time Picotee had begun to be anxious to get home again, but Menlove seemed particularly to desire her company, and pressed her to sit awhile,

telling her young friend, by way of entertainment, of various extraordinary love adventures in which she had figured as heroine when travelling on the Continent. These stories had one and all a remarkable likeness in a certain point — Menlove was always unwilling to love the adorer, and the adorer was always unwilling to live afterwards on account of it.

‘Ha-ha-ha!’ in men’s voices was heard from the distant dining-room as the two women went on talking.

‘And then,’ continued Menlove, ‘there was that duel I was the cause of between the courier and the French valet. Dear me, what a trouble that was; yet I could do nothing to prevent it. This courier was a very handsome man — they are handsome sometimes.’

‘Yes, they are. My aunt married one.’

‘Did she? Where do they live?’

‘They keep an hotel at Rouen,’ murmured Picotee, in doubt whether this should have been told or not.

‘Well, he used to follow me to the English Church every Sunday regularly, and I was so determined not to give my hand where my heart could never be, that I slipped out at the other door while he stood expecting me by the one I entered. Here I met M. Pierre, when, as ill luck would have it, the other came round the corner, and seeing me talking to the valet, he challenged him at once.’

‘Ha-ha-ha!’ was heard again afar.

‘Did they fight?’ said Picotee.

‘Yes, I believe they did. We left Nice the next day; but I heard some time after of a duel not many miles off, and although I could not get hold of the names, I make no doubt it was between those two gentlemen. I never knew which of them fell; poor fellow, whichever it was.’

‘Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!’ came from the dining-room.

‘Whatever are those boozy men laughing at, I wonder?’ said Menlove. ‘They are always so noisy when the ladies have gone upstairs. Upon my soul, I’ll run up and find out.’

‘No, no, don’t,’ entreated Picotee, putting her hand on her entertainer’s arm. ‘It seems wrong; it is no concern of ours.’

‘Wrong be hanged — anything on an impulse,’ said Mrs. Menlove, skipping across the room and out of the door, which stood open, as did others in the house, the evening being sultry and oppressive.

Picotee waited in her seat until it occurred to her that she could escape the lady’s-maid by going off into her father’s pantry in her absence. But before this had been put into effect Menlove appeared again.

‘Such fun as they are having up there,’ she said. ‘Somebody asked Mr. Neigh to tell a story which he had told at some previous time, but he was very reluctant to do so, and pretended he could not recollect it. Well, then, the other man — I could not distinguish him by his voice — began telling it, to prompt Mr. Neigh’s memory;

and, as far as I could understand, it was about some lady who thought Mr. Neigh was in love with her, and, to find whether he was worth accepting or not, she went with her maid at night to see his estate, and wandered about and got lost, and was frightened, and I don't know what besides. Then Mr. Neigh laughed too, and said he liked such common sense in a woman. No names were mentioned, but I fancy, from the awkwardness of Mr. Neigh at being compelled to tell it, that the lady is one of those in the drawing-room. I should like to know which it was.'

'I know — have heard something about it,' said Picotee, blushing with anger. 'It was nothing at all like that. I wonder Mr. Neigh had the audacity ever to talk of the matter, and to misrepresent it so greatly!'

'Tell all about it, do,' said Menlove.

'O no,' said Picotee. 'I promised not to say a word.'

'It is your mistress, I expect.'

'You may think what you like; but the lady is anything but a mistress of mine.'

The flighty Menlove pressed her to tell the whole story, but finding this useless the subject was changed. Presently her father came in, and, taking no notice of Menlove, told his daughter that she had been called for. Picotee very readily put on her things, and on going outside found Joey awaiting her. Mr. Chickereel followed closely, with sharp glances from the corner of his eye, and it was plain from Joey's nervous manner of lingering in the shadows of the area doorway instead of entering the house, that the butler had in some way set himself to prevent all communion between the fair lady's-maid and his son for that evening at least.

He watched Picotee and her brother off the premises, and the pair went on their way towards Exonbury Crescent, very few words passing between them. Picotee's thoughts had turned to the proposed visit to Knollsea, and Joey was sulky under disappointment and the blank of thwarted purposes.

CHAPTER 30.

ON THE ROOFTOP

'Picotee, are you asleep?' Ethelberta whispered softly at dawn the next morning, by the half-opened door of her sister's bedroom.

'No, I keep waking, it is so warm.'

'So do I. Suppose we get up and see the sun rise. The east is filling with flame.'

'Yes, I should like it,' said Picotee.

The restlessness which had brought Ethelberta hither in slippers and dressing-gown at such an early hour owed its origin to another cause than the warmth of the weather; but of that she did not speak as yet. Picotee's room was an attic, with windows in the roof — a chamber dismal enough at all times, and very shadowy now. While Picotee was wrapping up, Ethelberta placed a chair under the window, and mounting upon this they stepped outside, and seated themselves within the parapet.

The air was as clear and fresh as on a mountain side; sparrows chattered, and birds of a species unsuspected at later hours could be heard singing in the park hard by, while here and there on ridges and flats a cat might be seen going calmly home from the devilries of the night to resume the amiabilities of the day.

‘I am so sorry I was asleep when you reached home,’ said Picotee. ‘I was so anxious to tell you something I heard of, and to know what you did; but my eyes would shut, try as I might, and then I tried no longer. Did you see me at all, Berta?’

‘Never once. I had an impression that you were there. I fancied you were from father’s carefully vacuous look whenever I glanced at his face. But were you careful about what you said, and did you see Menlove? I felt all the time that I had done wrong in letting you come; the gratification to you was not worth the risk to me.’

‘I saw her, and talked to her. But I am certain she suspected nothing. I enjoyed myself very much, and there was no risk at all.’

‘I am glad it is no worse news. However, you must not go there again: upon that point I am determined.’

‘It was a good thing I did go, all the same. I’ll tell you why when you have told me what happened to you.’

‘Nothing of importance happened to me.’

‘I expect you got to know the lord you were to meet?’

‘O yes — Lord Mountclere.’

‘And it’s dreadful how fond he is of you — quite ridiculously taken up with you — I saw that well enough. Such an old man, too; I wouldn’t have him for the world!’

‘Don’t jump at conclusions so absurdly, Picotee. Why wouldn’t you have him for the world?’

‘Because he is old enough to be my grandfather, and yours too.’

‘Indeed he is not; he is only middle-aged.’

‘O Berta! Sixty-five at least.’

‘He may or may not be that; and if he is, it is not old. He is so entertaining that one forgets all about age in connection with him.’

‘He laughs like this — ”Hee-hee-hee!”’ Picotee introduced as much antiquity into her face as she could by screwing it up and suiting the action to the word.

‘This very odd thing occurred,’ said Ethelberta, to get Picotee off the track of Lord Mountclere’s peculiarities, as it seemed. ‘I was saying to Mr. Neigh that we were going to Knollsea for a time, feeling that he would not be likely to know anything about such an out-of-the-way place, when Lord Mountclere, who was near, said, “I shall be at Enckworth Court in a few days, probably at the time you are at Knollsea. The Imperial Archaeological Association holds its meetings in that part of Wessex this season, and Corvsgate Castle, near Knollsea, is one of the places on our list.” Then he hoped I should be able to attend. Did you ever hear anything so strange? Now, I should like to attend very much, not on Lord Mountclere’s account, but because such gatherings are interesting, and I have never been to one; yet there is this to be considered, would it be right for me to go without a friend to such a place? Another point is, that we

shall live in menagerie style at Knollsea for the sake of the children, and we must do it economically in case we accept Aunt Charlotte's invitation to Rouen; hence, if he or his friends find us out there it will be awkward for me. So the alternative is Knollsea or some other place for us.'

'Let it be Knollsea, now we have once settled it,' said Picotee anxiously. 'I have mentioned to Faith Julian that we shall be there.'

'Mentioned it already! You must have written instantly.'

'I had a few minutes to spare, and I thought I might as well write.'

'Very well; we will stick to Knollsea,' said Ethelberta, half in doubt. 'Yes — otherwise it will be difficult to see about aunt's baptismal certificate. We will hope nobody will take the trouble to pry into our household. . . . And now, Picotee, I want to ask you something — something very serious. How would you like me to marry Mr. Neigh?'

Ethelberta could not help laughing with a faint shyness as she asked the question under the searching east ray. 'He has asked me to marry him,' she continued, 'and I want to know what you would say to such an arrangement. I don't mean to imply that the event is certain to take place; but, as a mere supposition, what do you say to it, Picotee?' Ethelberta was far from putting this matter before Picotee for advice or opinion; but, like all people who have an innate dislike to hole-and-corner policy, she felt compelled to speak of it to some one.

'I should not like him for you at all,' said Picotee vehemently. 'I would rather you had Mr. Ladywell.'

'O, don't name him!'

'I wouldn't have Mr. Neigh at any price, nevertheless. It is about him that I was going to tell you.' Picotee proceeded to relate Menlove's account of the story of Ethelberta's escapade, which had been dragged from Neigh the previous evening by the friend to whom he had related it before he was so enamoured of Ethelberta as to regard that performance as a positive virtue in her. 'Nobody was told, or even suspected, who the lady of the anecdote was,' Picotee concluded; 'but I knew instantly, of course, and I think it very unfortunate that we ever went to that dreadful ghostly estate of his, Berta.'

Ethelberta's face heated with mortification. She had no fear that Neigh had told names or other particulars which might lead to her identification by any friend of his, and she could make allowance for bursts of confidence; but there remained the awkward fact that he himself knew her to be the heroine of the episode. What annoyed her most was that Neigh could ever have looked upon her indiscretion as a humorous incident, which he certainly must have done at some time or other to account for his telling it. Had he been angry with her, or sneered at her for going, she could have forgiven him; but to see her manoeuvre in the light of a joke, to use it as illustrating his grim theory of womankind, and neither to like nor to dislike her the more for it from first to last, this was to treat her with a cynicism which was intolerable. That Neigh's use of the incident as a stock anecdote ceased long before he had decided to ask her to marry him she had no doubt, but it showed that his love for her was of that sort in

which passion makes war upon judgment, and prevails in spite of will. Moreover, he might have been speaking ironically when he alluded to the act as a virtue in a woman, which seemed the more likely when she remembered his cool bearing towards her in the drawing-room. Possibly it was an antipathetic reaction, induced by the renewed recollection of her proceeding.

‘I will never marry Mr. Neigh!’ she said, with decision. ‘That shall settle it. You need not think over any such contingency, Picotee. He is one of those horrid men who love with their eyes, the remainder part of him objecting all the time to the feeling; and even if his objections prove the weaker, and the man marries, his general nature conquers again by the time the wedding trip is over, so that the woman is miserable at last, and had better not have had him at all.’

‘That applies still more to Lord Mountclere, to my thinking. I never saw anything like the look of his eyes upon you.’

‘O no, no — you understand nothing if you say that. But one thing be sure of, there is no marriage likely to take place between myself and Mr. Neigh. I have longed for a sound reason for disliking him, and now I have got it. Well, we will talk no more of this — let us think of the nice little pleasure we have in store — our stay at Knollsea. There we will be as free as the wind. And when we are down there, I can drive across to Corvsgate Castle if I wish to attend the Imperial Association meeting, and nobody will know where I came from. Knollsea is not more than five miles from the Castle, I think.’

Picotee was by this time beginning to yawn, and Ethelberta did not feel nearly so wakeful as she had felt half-an-hour earlier. Tall and swarthy columns of smoke were now soaring up from the kitchen chimneys around, spreading horizontally when at a great height, and forming a roof of haze which was turning the sun to a copper colour, and by degrees spoiling the sweetness of the new atmosphere that had rolled in from the country during the night, giving it the usual city smell. The resolve to make this rising the beginning of a long and busy day, which should set them beforehand with the rest of the world, weakened with their growing weariness, and an impulse to lie down just for a quarter of an hour before dressing, ended in a sound sleep that did not relinquish its hold upon them till late in the forenoon.

CHAPTER 31.

KNOLLSEA — A LOFTY DOWN — A RUINED CASTLE

Knollsea was a seaside village lying snug within two headlands as between a finger and thumb. Everybody in the parish who was not a boatman was a quarrier, unless he were the gentleman who owned half the property and had been a quarryman, or the other gentleman who owned the other half, and had been to sea.

The knowledge of the inhabitants was of the same special sort as their pursuits. The quarrymen in white fustian understood practical geology, the laws and accidents

of dips, faults, and cleavage, far better than the ways of the world and mammon; the seafaring men in Guernsey frocks had a clearer notion of Alexandria, Constantinople, the Cape, and the Indies than of any inland town in their own country. This, for them, consisted of a busy portion, the Channel, where they lived and laboured, and a dull portion, the vague unexplored miles of interior at the back of the ports, which they seldom thought of.

Some wives of the village, it is true, had learned to let lodgings, and others to keep shops. The doors of these latter places were formed of an upper hatch, usually kept open, and a lower hatch, with a bell attached, usually kept shut. Whenever a stranger went in, he would hear a whispering of astonishment from a back room, after which a woman came forward, looking suspiciously at him as an intruder, and advancing slowly enough to allow her mouth to get clear of the meal she was partaking of. Meanwhile the people in the back room would stop their knives and forks in absorbed curiosity as to the reason of the stranger's entry, who by this time feels ashamed of his unwarrantable intrusion into this hermit's cell, and thinks he must take his hat off. The woman is quite alarmed at seeing that he is not one of the fifteen native women and children who patronize her, and nervously puts her hand to the side of her face, which she carries slanting. The visitor finds himself saying what he wants in an apologetic tone, when the woman tells him that they did keep that article once, but do not now; that nobody does, and probably never will again; and as he turns away she looks relieved that the dilemma of having to provide for a stranger has passed off with no worse mishap than disappointing him.

A cottage which stood on a high slope above this townlet and its bay resounded one morning with the notes of a merry company. Ethelberta had managed to find room for herself and her young relations in the house of one of the boatmen, whose wife attended upon them all. Captain Flower, the husband, assisted her in the dinner preparations, when he slipped about the house as lightly as a girl and spoke of himself as cook's mate. The house was so small that the sailor's rich voice, developed by shouting in high winds during a twenty years' experience in the coasting trade, could be heard coming from the kitchen between the chirpings of the children in the parlour. The furniture of this apartment consisted mostly of the painting of a full-rigged ship, done by a man whom the captain had specially selected for the purpose because he had been seven-and-twenty years at sea before touching a brush, and thereby offered a sufficient guarantee that he understood how to paint a vessel properly.

Before this picture sat Ethelberta in a light linen dress, and with tightly-knotted hair — now again Berta Chickerel as of old — serving out breakfast to the rest of the party, and sometimes lifting her eyes to the outlook from the window, which presented a happy combination of grange scenery with marine. Upon the irregular slope between the house and the quay was an orchard of aged trees wherein every apple ripening on the boughs presented its rubicund side towards the cottage, because that building chanced to lie upwards in the same direction as the sun. Under the trees were a few Cape sheep, and over them the stone chimneys of the village below: outside these

lay the tanned sails of a ketch or smack, and the violet waters of the bay, seamed and creased by breezes insufficient to raise waves; beyond all a curved wall of cliff, terminating in a promontory, which was flanked by tall and shining obelisks of chalk rising sheer from the trembling blue race beneath.

By one sitting in the room that commanded this prospect, a white butterfly among the apple-trees might be mistaken for the sails of a yacht far away on the sea; and in the evening when the light was dim, what seemed like a fly crawling upon the window-pane would turn out to be a boat in the bay.

When breakfast was over, Ethelberta sat leaning on the window-sill considering her movements for the day. It was the time fixed for the meeting of the Imperial Association at Corvsgate Castle, the celebrated ruin five miles off, and the meeting had some fascinations for her. For one thing, she had never been present at a gathering of the kind, although what was left in any shape from the past was her constant interest, because it recalled her to herself and fortified her mind. Persons waging a harassing social fight are apt in the interest of the combat to forget the smallness of the end in view; and the hints that perishing historical remnants afforded her of the attenuating effects of time even upon great struggles corrected the apparent scale of her own. She was reminded that in a strife for such a ludicrously small object as the entry of drawing-rooms, winning, equally with losing, is below the zero of the true philosopher's concern.

There could never be a more excellent reason than this for going to view the meagre stumps remaining from flourishing bygone centuries, and it had weight with Ethelberta this very day; but it would be difficult to state the whole composition of her motive. The approaching meeting had been one of the great themes at Mr. Doncastle's dinner-party, and Lord Mountclere, on learning that she was to be at Knollsea, had recommended her attendance at some, if not all of the meetings, as a desirable and exhilarating change after her laborious season's work in town. It was pleasant to have won her way so far in high places that her health of body and mind should be thus considered — pleasant, less as personal gratification, than that it casually reflected a proof of her good judgment in a course which everybody among her kindred had condemned by calling a foolhardy undertaking.

And she might go without the restraint of ceremony. Unconventionality — almost eccentricity — was *de rigueur* for one who had been first heard of as a poetess; from whose red lips magic romance had since trilled for weeks to crowds of listeners, as from a perennial spring.

So Ethelberta went, after a considerable pondering how to get there without the needless sacrifice either of dignity or cash. It would be inconsiderate to the children to spend a pound on a brougham when as much as she could spare was wanted for their holiday. It was almost too far too walk. She had, however, decided to walk, when she met a boy with a donkey, who offered to lend it to her for three shillings. The animal was rather sad-looking, but Ethelberta found she could sit upon the pad without discomfort. Considering that she might pull up some distance short of the castle, and

leave the ass at a cottage before joining her four-wheeled friends, she struck the bargain and rode on her way.

This was, first by a path on the shore where the tide dragged huskily up and down the shingle without disturbing it, and thence up the steep crest of land opposite, whereon she lingered awhile to let the ass breathe. On one of the spires of chalk into which the hill here had been split was perched a cormorant, silent and motionless, with wings spread out to dry in the sun after his morning's fishing, their white surface shining like mail. Retiring without disturbing him and turning to the left along the lofty ridge which ran inland, the country on each side lay beneath her like a map, domains behind domains, parishes by the score, harbours, fir-woods, and little inland seas mixing curiously together. Thence she ambled along through a huge cemetery of barrows, containing human dust from prehistoric times.

Standing on the top of a giant's grave in this antique land, Ethelberta lifted her eyes to behold two sorts of weather pervading Nature at the same time. Far below on the right hand it was a fine day, and the silver sunbeams lighted up a many-armed inland sea which stretched round an island with fir-trees and gorse, and amid brilliant crimson heaths wherein white paths and roads occasionally met the eye in dashes and zigzags like flashes of lightning. Outside, where the broad Channel appeared, a berylline and opalised variegation of ripples, currents, deeps, and shallows, lay as fair under the sun as a New Jerusalem, the shores being of gleaming sand. Upon the radiant heather bees and butterflies were busy, she knew, and the birds on that side were just beginning their autumn songs.

On the left, quite up to her position, was dark and cloudy weather, shading a valley of heavy greens and browns, which at its further side rose to meet the sea in tall cliffs, suggesting even here at their back how terrible were their aspects seaward in a growling southwest gale. Here grassed hills rose like knuckles gloved in dark olive, and little plantations between them formed a still deeper and sadder monochrome. A zinc sky met a leaden sea on this hand, the low wind groaned and whined, and not a bird sang.

The ridge along which Ethelberta rode divided these two climates like a wall; it soon became apparent that they were wrestling for mastery immediately in her pathway. The issue long remained doubtful, and this being an imaginative hour with her, she watched as typical of her own fortunes how the front of battle swayed — now to the west, flooding her with sun, now to the east, covering her with shade: then the wind moved round to the north, a blue hole appeared in the overhanging cloud, at about the place of the north star; and the sunlight spread on both sides of her.

The towers of the notable ruin to be visited rose out of the furthestmost shoulder of the upland as she advanced, its site being the slope and crest of a smoothly nibbled mount at the toe of the ridge she had followed. When observing the previous uncertainty of the weather on this side Ethelberta had been led to doubt if the meeting would be held here to-day, and she was now strengthened in her opinion that it would not

by the total absence of human figures amid the ruins, though the time of appointment was past. This disposed of another question which had perplexed her: where to find a stable for the ass during the meeting, for she had scarcely liked the idea of facing the whole body of lords and gentlemen upon the animal's back. She now decided to retain her seat, ride round the ruin, and go home again, without troubling further about the movements of the Association or acquaintance with the members composing it.

Accordingly Ethelberta crossed the bridge over the moat, and rode under the first archway into the outer ward. As she had expected, not a soul was here. The arrow-slits, portcullis-grooves, and staircases met her eye as familiar friends, for in her childhood she had once paid a visit to the spot. Ascending the green incline and through another arch into the second ward, she still pressed on, till at last the ass was unable to clamber an inch further. Here she dismounted, and tying him to a stone which projected like a fang from a raw edge of wall, performed the remainder of the ascent on foot. Once among the towers above, she became so interested in the windy corridors, mildewed dungeons, and the tribe of daws peering invidiously upon her from overhead, that she forgot the flight of time.

Nearly three-quarters of an hour passed before she came out from the immense walls, and looked from an opening to the front over the wide expanse of the outer ward, by which she had ascended.

Ethelberta was taken aback to see there a file of shining carriages, which had arrived during her seclusion in the keep. From these began to burst a miscellany of many-coloured draperies, blue, buff, pied, and black; they united into one, and crept up the incline like a cloud, which then parted into fragments, dived into old doorways, and lost substance behind projecting piles. Recognizing in this the ladies and gentlemen of the meeting, her first thought was how to escape, for she was suddenly overcome with dread to meet them all single-handed as she stood. She drew back and hurried round to the side, as the laughter and voices of the assembly began to be audible, and, more than ever vexed that she could not have fallen in with them in some unobtrusive way, Ethelberta found that they were immediately beneath her.

Venturing to peep forward again, what was her mortification at finding them gathered in a ring, round no object of interest belonging to the ruin, but round her faithful beast, who had loosened himself in some way from the stone, and stood in the middle of a plat of grass, placidly regarding them.

Being now in the teeth of the Association, there was nothing to do but to go on, since, if she did not, the next few steps of their advance would disclose her. She made the best of it, and began to descend in the broad view of the assembly, from the midst of which proceeded a laugh — 'Hee-hee-hee!' Ethelberta knew that Lord Mountclere was there.

'The poor thing has strayed from its owner,' said one lady, as they all stood eyeing the apparition of the ass.

'It may belong to some of the villagers,' said the President in a historical voice: 'and it may be appropriate to mention that many were kept here in olden times: they were

largely used as beasts of burden in victualling the castle previous to the last siege, in the year sixteen hundred and forty-five.'

'It is very weary, and has come a long way, I think,' said a lady; adding, in an imaginative tone, 'the humble creature looks so aged and is so quaintly saddled that we may suppose it to be only an animated relic, of the same date as the other remains.'

By this time Lord Mountclere had noticed Ethelberta's presence, and straightening himself to ten years younger, he lifted his hat in answer to her smile, and came up jauntily. It was a good time now to see what the viscount was really like. He appeared to be about sixty-five, and the dignified aspect which he wore to a gazer at a distance became depreciated to jocund slyness upon nearer view, when the small type could be read between the leading lines. Then it could be seen that his upper lip dropped to a point in the middle, as if impressing silence upon his too demonstrative lower one. His right and left profiles were different, one corner of his mouth being more compressed than the other, producing a deep line thence downwards to the side of his chin. Each eyebrow rose obliquely outwards and upwards, and was thus far above the little eye, shining with the clearness of a pond that has just been able to weather the heats of summer. Below this was a preternaturally fat jowl, which, by thrusting against cheeks and chin, caused the arch old mouth to be almost buried at the corners.

A few words of greeting passed, and Ethelberta told him how she was fearing to meet them all, united and primed with their morning's knowledge as they appeared to be.

'Well, we have not done much yet,' said Lord Mountclere. 'As for myself, I have given no thought at all to our day's work. I had not forgotten your promise to attend, if you could possibly drive across, and — hee-hee-hee! — I have frequently looked towards the hill where the road descends. . . . Will you now permit me to introduce some of my party — as many of them as you care to know by name? I think they would all like to speak to you.'

Ethelberta then found herself nominally made known to ten or a dozen ladies and gentlemen who had wished for special acquaintance with her. She stood there, as all women stand who have made themselves remarkable by their originality, or devotion to any singular cause, as a person freed of her hampering and inconvenient sex, and, by virtue of her popularity, unfettered from the conventionalities of manner prescribed by custom for household womankind. The charter to move abroad unchaperoned, which society for good reasons grants only to women of three sorts — the famous, the ministering, and the improper — Ethelberta was in a fair way to make splendid use of: instead of walking in protected lanes she experienced that luxury of isolation which normally is enjoyed by men alone, in conjunction with the attention naturally bestowed on a woman young and fair. Among the presentations were Mr. and Mrs. Tynn, member and member's mainspring for North Wessex; Sir Cyril and Lady Blandsbury; Lady Jane Joy; and the Honourable Edgar Mountclere, the viscount's brother. There also hovered near her the learned Doctor Yore; Mr. Small, a profound writer, who never printed his works; the Reverend Mr. Brook, rector; the Very Reverend Dr. Taylor,

dean; and the undoubtedly Reverend Mr. Tinkleton, Nonconformist, who had slipped into the fold by chance.

These and others looked with interest at Ethelberta: the old county fathers hard, as at a questionable town phenomenon, the county sons tenderly, as at a pretty creature, and the county daughters with great admiration, as at a lady reported by their mammas to be no better than she should be. It will be seen that Ethelberta was the sort of woman that well-rooted local people might like to look at on such a free and friendly occasion as an archaeological meeting, where, to gratify a pleasant whim, the picturesque form of acquaintance is for the nonce preferred to the useful, the spirits being so brisk as to swerve from strict attention to the select and sequent gifts of heaven, blood and acres, to consider for an idle moment the subversive Mephistophelian endowment, brains.

‘Our progress in the survey of the castle has not been far as yet,’ Lord Mountclere resumed; ‘indeed, we have only just arrived, the weather this morning being so unsettled. When you came up we were engaged in a preliminary study of the poor animal you see there: how it could have got up here we cannot understand.’

He pointed as he spoke to the donkey which had brought Ethelberta thither, whereupon she was silent, and gazed at her untoward beast as if she had never before beheld him.

The ass looked at Ethelberta as though he would say, ‘Why don’t you own me, after safely bringing you over those weary hills?’ But the pride and emulation which had made her what she was would not permit her, as the most lovely woman there, to take upon her own shoulders the ridicule that had already been cast upon the ass. Had he been young and gaily caparisoned, she might have done it; but his age, the clumsy trappings of rustic make, and his needy woful look of hard servitude, were too much to endure.

‘Many come and picnic here,’ she said serenely, ‘and the animal may have been left till they return from some walk.’

‘True,’ said Lord Mountclere, without the slightest suspicion of the truth. The humble ass hung his head in his usual manner, and it demanded little fancy from Ethelberta to imagine that he despised her. And then her mind flew back to her history and extraction, to her father — perhaps at that moment inventing a private plate-powder in an underground pantry — and with a groan at her inconsistency in being ashamed of the ass, she said in her heart, ‘My God, what a thing am I!’

They then all moved on to another part of the castle, the viscount busying himself round and round her person like the head scraper at a pig-killing; and as they went indiscriminately mingled, jesting lightly or talking in earnest, she beheld ahead of her the form of Neigh among the rest.

Now, there could only be one reason on earth for Neigh’s presence — her remark that she might attend — for Neigh took no more interest in antiquities than in the back of the moon. Ethelberta was a little flurried; perhaps he had come to scold her, or to treat her badly in that indefinable way of his by which he could make a woman feel as nothing without any direct act at all. She was afraid of him, and, determining to

shun him, was thankful that Lord Mountclere was near, to take off the edge of Neigh's manner towards her if he approached.

'Do you know in what part of the ruins the lecture is to be given?' she said to the viscount.

'Wherever you like,' he replied gallantly. 'Do you propose a place, and I will get Dr. Yore to adopt it. Say, shall it be here, or where they are standing?'

How could Ethelberta refrain from exercising a little power when it was put into her hands in this way?

'Let it be here,' she said, 'if it makes no difference to the meeting.'

'It shall be,' said Lord Mountclere.

And then the lively old nobleman skipped like a roe to the President and to Dr. Yore, who was to read the paper on the castle, and they soon appeared coming back to where the viscount's party and Ethelberta were beginning to seat themselves. The bulk of the company followed, and Dr. Yore began.

He must have had a countenance of leather — as, indeed, from his colour he appeared to have — to stand unmoved in his position, and read, and look up to give explanations, without a change of muscle, under the dozens of bright eyes that were there converged upon him, like the sticks of a fan, from the ladies who sat round him in a semicircle upon the grass. However, he went on calmly, and the women sheltered themselves from the heat with their umbrellas and sunshades, their ears lulled by the hum of insects, and by the drone of the doctor's voice. The reader buzzed on with the history of the castle, tracing its development from a mound with a few earthworks to its condition in Norman times; he related monkish marvels connected with the spot; its resistance under Matilda to Stephen, its probable shape while a residence of King John, and the sad story of the Damsel of Brittany, sister of his victim Arthur, who was confined here in company with the two daughters of Alexander, king of Scotland. He went on to recount the confinement of Edward II. herein, previous to his murder at Berkeley, the gay doings in the reign of Elizabeth, and so downward through time to the final overthrow of the stern old pile. As he proceeded, the lecturer pointed with his finger at the various features appertaining to the date of his story, which he told with splendid vigour when he had warmed to his work, till his narrative, particularly in the conjectural and romantic parts, where it became coloured rather by the speaker's imagination than by the pigments of history, gathered together the wandering thoughts of all. It was easy for him then to meet those fair centred eyes, when the sunshades were thrown back, and complexions forgotten, in the interest of the history. The doctor's face was then no longer criticized as a rugged boulder, a dried fig, an oak carving, or a walnut shell, but became blotted out like a mountain top in a shining haze by the nebulous pictures conjured by his tale.

Then the lecture ended, and questions were asked, and individuals of the company wandered at will, the light dresses of the ladies sweeping over the hot grass and brushing up thistledown which had hitherto lain quiescent, so that it rose in a flight from the skirts of each like a comet's tail.

Some of Lord Mountclere's party, including himself and Ethelberta, wandered now into a cool dungeon, partly open to the air overhead, where long arms of ivy hung between their eyes and the white sky. While they were here, Lady Jane Joy and some other friends of the viscount told Ethelberta that they were probably coming on to Knollsea.

She instantly perceived that getting into close quarters in that way might be very inconvenient, considering the youngsters she had under her charge, and straightway decided upon a point that she had debated for several days — a visit to her aunt in Normandy. In London it had been a mere thought, but the Channel had looked so tempting from its brink that the journey was virtually fixed as soon as she reached Knollsea, and found that a little pleasure steamer crossed to Cherbourg once a week during the summer, so that she would not have to enter the crowded routes at all.

'I am afraid I shall not see you in Knollsea,' she said. 'I am about to go to Cherbourg and then to Rouen.'

'How sorry I am. When do you leave?'

'At the beginning of next week,' said Ethelberta, settling the time there and then.

'Did I hear you say that you were going to Cherbourg and Rouen?' Lord Mountclere inquired.

'I think to do so,' said Ethelberta.

'I am going to Normandy myself,' said a voice behind her, and without turning she knew that Neigh was standing there.

They next went outside, and Lord Mountclere offered Ethelberta his arm on the ground of assisting her down the burnished grass slope. Ethelberta, taking pity upon him, took it; but the assistance was all on her side; she stood like a statue amid his slips and totterings, some of which taxed her strength heavily, and her ingenuity more, to appear as the supported and not the supporter. The incident brought Neigh still further from his retirement, and she learnt that he was one of a yachting party which had put in at Knollsea that morning; she was greatly relieved to find that he was just now on his way to London, whence he would probably proceed on his journey abroad.

Ethelberta adhered as well as she could to her resolve that Neigh should not speak with her alone, but by dint of perseverance he did manage to address her without being overheard.

'Will you give me an answer?' said Neigh. 'I have come on purpose.'

'I cannot just now. I have been led to doubt you.'

'Doubt me? What new wrong have I done?'

'Spoken jestingly of my visit to Farnfield.'

'Good — -! I did not speak or think of you. When I told that incident I had no idea who the lady was — I did not know it was you till two days later, and I at once held my tongue. I vow to you upon my soul and life that what I say is true. How shall I prove my truth better than by my errand here?'

'Don't speak of this now. I am so occupied with other things. I am going to Rouen, and will think of it on my way.'

'I am going there too. When do you go?'

'I shall be in Rouen next Wednesday, I hope.'

'May I ask where?'

'Hôtel Beau Séjour.'

'Will you give me an answer there? I can easily call upon you. It is now a month and more since you first led me to hope — '

'I did not lead you to hope — at any rate clearly.'

'Indirectly you did. And although I am willing to be as considerate as any man ought to be in giving you time to think over the question, there is a limit to my patience. Any necessary delay I will put up with, but I won't be trifled with. I hate all nonsense, and can't stand it.'

'Indeed. Good morning.'

'But Mrs. Petherwin — just one word.'

'I have nothing to say.'

'I will meet you at Rouen for an answer. I would meet you in Hades for the matter of that. Remember this: next Wednesday, if I live, I shall call upon you at Rouen.'

She did not say nay.

'May I?' he added.

'If you will.'

'But say it shall be an appointment?'

'Very well.'

Lord Mountclere was by this time toddling towards them to ask if they would come on to his house, Enckworth Court, not very far distant, to lunch with the rest of the party. Neigh, having already arranged to go on to town that afternoon, was obliged to decline, and Ethelberta thought fit to do the same, idly asking Lord Mountclere if Enckworth Court lay in the direction of a gorge that was visible where they stood.

'No; considerably to the left,' he said. 'The opening you are looking at would reveal the sea if it were not for the trees that block the way. Ah, those trees have a history; they are half-a-dozen elms which I planted myself when I was a boy. How time flies!'

'It is unfortunate they stand just so as to cover the blue bit of sea. That addition would double the value of the view from here.'

'You would prefer the blue sea to the trees?'

'In that particular spot I should; they might have looked just as well, and yet have hidden nothing worth seeing. The narrow slit would have been invaluable there.'

'They shall fall before the sun sets, in deference to your opinion,' said Lord Mountclere.

'That would be rash indeed,' said Ethelberta, laughing, 'when my opinion on such a point may be worth nothing whatever.'

'Where no other is acted upon, it is practically the universal one,' he replied gaily.

And then Ethelberta's elderly admirer bade her adieu, and away the whole party drove in a long train over the hills towards the valley wherein stood Enckworth Court.

Ethelberta's carriage was supposed by her friends to have been left at the village inn, as were many others, and her retiring from view on foot attracted no notice.

She watched them out of sight, and she also saw the rest depart — those who, their interest in archaeology having begun and ended with this spot, had, like herself, declined the hospitable viscount's invitation, and started to drive or walk at once home again. Thereupon the castle was quite deserted except by Ethelberta, the ass, and the jackdaws, now floundering at ease again in and about the ivy of the keep.

Not wishing to enter Knollsea till the evening shades were falling, she still walked amid the ruins, examining more leisurely some points which the stress of keeping herself companionable would not allow her to attend to while the assemblage was present. At the end of the survey, being somewhat weary with her clambering, she sat down on the slope commanding the gorge where the trees grew, to make a pencil sketch of the landscape as it was revealed between the ragged walls. Thus engaged she weighed the circumstances of Lord Mountclere's invitation, and could not be certain if it were prudishness or simple propriety in herself which had instigated her to refuse. She would have liked the visit for many reasons, and if Lord Mountclere had been anybody but a remarkably attentive old widower, she would have gone. As it was, it had occurred to her that there was something in his tone which should lead her to hesitate. Were any among the elderly or married ladies who had appeared upon the ground in a detached form as she had done — and many had appeared thus — invited to Enckworth; and if not, why were they not? That Lord Mountclere admired her there was no doubt, and for this reason it behoved her to be careful. His disappointment at parting from her was, in one aspect, simply laughable, from its odd resemblance to the unfeigned sorrow of a boy of fifteen at a first parting from his first love; in another aspect it caused reflection; and she thought again of his curiosity about her doings for the remainder of the summer.

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While she sketched and thought thus, the shadows grew longer, and the sun low. And then she perceived a movement in the gorge. One of the trees forming the curtain across it began to wave strangely: it went further to one side, and fell. Where the tree had stood was now a rent in the foliage, and through the narrow rent could be seen the distant sea.

Ethelberta uttered a soft exclamation. It was not caused by the surprise she had felt, nor by the intrinsic interest of the sight, nor by want of comprehension. It was a sudden realisation of vague things hitherto dreamed of from a distance only — a sense of novel power put into her hands without request or expectation. A landscape was to be altered to suit her whim. She had in her lifetime moved essentially larger mountains, but they had seemed of far less splendid material than this; for it was the nature of the gratification rather than its magnitude which enchanted the fancy of a woman whose poetry, in spite of her necessities, was hardly yet extinguished. But there was something more, with which poetry had little to do. Whether the opinion of any pretty woman in England was of more weight with Lord Mountclere than memories of

his boyhood, or whether that distinction was reserved for her alone; this was a point that she would have liked to know.

The enjoyment of power in a new element, an enjoyment somewhat resembling in kind that which is given by a first ride or swim, held Ethelberta to the spot, and she waited, but sketched no more. Another tree-top swayed and vanished as before, and the slit of sea was larger still. Her mind and eye were so occupied with this matter that, sitting in her nook, she did not observe a thin young man, his boots white with the dust of a long journey on foot, who arrived at the castle by the valley-road from Knollsea. He looked awhile at the ruin, and, skirting its flank instead of entering by the great gateway, climbed up the scarp and walked in through a breach. After standing for a moment among the walls, now silent and apparently empty, with a disappointed look he descended the slope, and proceeded along on his way.

Ethelberta, who was in quite another part of the castle, saw the black spot diminishing to the size of a fly as he receded along the dusty road, and soon after she descended on the other side, where she remounted the ass, and ambled homeward as she had come, in no bright mood. What, seeing the precariousness of her state, was the day's triumph worth after all, unless, before her beauty abated, she could ensure her position against the attacks of chance?

'To be thus is nothing;

But to be safely thus.'

— she said it more than once on her journey that day.

On entering the sitting-room of their cot up the hill she found it empty, and from a change perceptible in the position of small articles of furniture, something unusual seemed to have taken place in her absence. The dwelling being of that sort in which whatever goes on in one room is audible through all the rest, Picotee, who was upstairs, heard the arrival and came down. Picotee's face was rosed over with the brilliance of some excitement. 'What do you think I have to tell you, Berta?' she said.

'I have no idea,' said her sister. 'Surely,' she added, her face intensifying to a wan sadness, 'Mr. Julian has not been here?'

'Yes,' said Picotee. 'And we went down to the sands — he, and Myrtle, and Georgina, and Emmeline, and I — and Cornelia came down when she had put away the dinner. And then we dug wriggles out of the sand with Myrtle's spade: we got such a lot, and had such fun; they are in a dish in the kitchen. Mr. Julian came to see you; but at last he could wait no longer, and when I told him you were at the meeting in the castle ruins he said he would try to find you there on his way home, if he could get there before the meeting broke up.'

'Then it was he I saw far away on the road — yes, it must have been.' She remained in gloomy reverie a few moments, and then said, 'Very well — let it be. Picotee, get me some tea: I do not want dinner.'

But the news of Christopher's visit seemed to have taken away her appetite for tea also, and after sitting a little while she flung herself down upon the couch, and told Picotee that she had settled to go and see their aunt Charlotte.

‘I am going to write to Sol and Dan to ask them to meet me there,’ she added. ‘I want them, if possible, to see Paris. It will improve them greatly in their trades, I am thinking, if they can see the kinds of joinery and decoration practised in France. They agreed to go, if I should wish it, before we left London. You, of course, will go as my maid.’

Picotee gazed upon the sea with a crestfallen look, as if she would rather not cross it in any capacity just then.

‘It would scarcely be worth going to the expense of taking me, would it?’ she said.

The cause of Picotee’s sudden sense of economy was so plain that her sister smiled; but young love, however foolish, is to a thinking person far too tragic a power for ridicule; and Ethelberta forbore, going on as if Picotee had not spoken: ‘I must have you with me. I may be seen there: so many are passing through Rouen at this time of the year. Cornelia can take excellent care of the children while we are gone. I want to get out of England, and I will get out of England. There is nothing but vanity and vexation here.’

‘I am sorry you were away when he called,’ said Picotee gently.

‘O, I don’t mean that. I wish there were no different ranks in the world, and that contrivance were not a necessary faculty to have at all. Well, we are going to cross by the little steamer that puts in here, and we are going on Monday.’ She added in another minute, ‘What had Mr. Julian to tell us that he came here? How did he find us out?’

‘I mentioned that we were coming here in my letter to Faith. Mr. Julian says that perhaps he and his sister may also come for a few days before the season is over. I should like to see Miss Julian again. She is such a nice girl.’

‘Yes.’ Ethelberta played with her hair, and looked at the ceiling as she reclined. ‘I have decided after all,’ she said, ‘that it will be better to take Cornelia as my maid, and leave you here with the children. Cornelia is stronger as a companion than you, and she will be delighted to go. Do you think you are competent to keep Myrtle and Georgina out of harm’s way?’

‘O yes — I will be exceedingly careful,’ said Picotee, with great vivacity. ‘And if there is time I can go on teaching them a little.’ Then Picotee caught Ethelberta’s eye, and colouring red, sank down beside her sister, whispering, ‘I know why it is! But if you would rather have me with you I will go, and not once wish to stay.’

Ethelberta looked as if she knew all about that, and said, ‘Of course there will be no necessity to tell the Julians about my departure until they have fixed the time for coming, and cannot alter their minds.’

The sound of the children with Cornelia, and their appearance outside the window, pushing between the fuchsia bushes which overhung the path, put an end to this dialogue; they entered armed with buckets and spades, a very moist and sandy aspect pervading them as far up as the high-water mark of their clothing, and began to tell Ethelberta of the wonders of the deep.

CHAPTER 32.

A ROOM IN ENCKWORTH COURT

‘Are you sure the report is true?’

‘I am sure that what I say is true, my lord; but it is hardly to be called a report. It is a secret, known at present to nobody but myself and Mrs. Doncastle’s maid.’

The speaker was Lord Mountclere’s trusty valet, and the conversation was between him and the viscount in a dressing-room at Enckworth Court, on the evening after the meeting of archaeologists at Corvsgate Castle.

‘H’m-h’m; the daughter of a butler. Does Mrs. Doncastle know of this yet, or Mr. Neigh, or any of their friends?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘You are quite positive?’

‘Quite positive. I was, by accident, the first that Mrs. Menlove named the matter to, and I told her it might be much to her advantage if she took particular care it should go no further.’

‘Mrs. Menlove! Who’s she?’

‘The lady’s-maid at Mrs. Doncastle’s, my lord.’

‘O, ah — of course. You may leave me now, Tipman.’ Lord Mountclere remained in thought for a moment. ‘A clever little puss, to hoodwink us all like this — hee-hee!’ he murmured. ‘Her education — how finished; and her beauty — so seldom that I meet with such a woman. Cut down my elms to please a butler’s daughter — what a joke — certainly a good joke! To interest me in her on the right side instead of the wrong was strange. But it can be made to change sides — hee-hee! — it can be made to change sides! Tipman!’

Tipman came forward from the doorway.

‘Will you take care that that piece of gossip you mentioned to me is not repeated in this house? I strongly disapprove of talebearing of any sort, and wish to hear no more of this. Such stories are never true. Answer me — do you hear? Such stories are never true.’

‘I beg pardon, but I think your lordship will find this one true,’ said the valet quietly.

‘Then where did she get her manners and education? Do you know?’

‘I do not, my lord. I suppose she picked ‘em up by her wits.’

‘Never mind what you suppose,’ said the old man impatiently. ‘Whenever I ask a question of you tell me what you know, and no more.’

‘Quite so, my lord. I beg your lordship’s pardon for supposing.’

‘H’m-h’m. Have the fashion-books and plates arrived yet?’

‘Le Follet has, my lord; but not the others.’

‘Let me have it at once. Always bring it to me at once. Are there any handsome ones this time?’

‘They are much the same class of female as usual, I think, my lord,’ said Tipman, fetching the paper and laying it before him.

‘Yes, they are,’ said the viscount, leaning back and scrutinizing the faces of the women one by one, and talking softly to himself in a way that had grown upon him as his age increased. ‘Yet they are very well: that one with her shoulder turned is pure and charming — the brown-haired one will pass. All very harmless and innocent, but without character; no soul, or inspiration, or eloquence of eye. What an eye was hers! There is not a girl among them so beautiful. . . . Tipman! Come and take it away. I don’t think I will subscribe to these papers any longer — how long have I subscribed? Never mind — I take no interest in these things, and I suppose I must give them up. What white article is that I see on the floor yonder?’

‘I can see nothing, my lord.’

‘Yes, yes, you can. At the other end of the room. It is a white handkerchief. Bring it to me.’

‘I beg pardon, my lord, but I cannot see any white handkerchief. Whereabouts does your lordship mean?’

‘There in the corner. If it is not a handkerchief, what is it? Walk along till you come to it — that is it; now a little further — now your foot is against it.’

‘O that — it is not anything. It is the light reflected against the skirting, so that it looks like a white patch of something — that is all.’

‘H’m-hm. My eyes — how weak they are! I am getting old, that’s what it is: I am an old man.’

‘O no, my lord.’

‘Yes, an old man.’

‘Well, we shall all be old some day, and so will your lordship, I suppose; but as yet — ’

‘I tell you I am an old man!’

‘Yes, my lord — I did not mean to contradict. An old man in one sense — old in a young man’s sense, but not in a house-of-parliament or historical sense. A little oldish — I meant that, my lord.’

‘I may be an old man in one sense or in another sense in your mind; but let me tell you there are men older than I — ’

‘Yes, so there are, my lord.’

‘People may call me what they please, and you may be impertinent enough to repeat to me what they say, but let me tell you I am not a very old man after all. I am not an old man.’

‘Old in knowledge of the world I meant, my lord, not in years.’

‘Well, yes. Experience of course I cannot be without. And I like what is beautiful. Tipman, you must go to Knollsea; don’t send, but go yourself, as I wish nobody else to be concerned in this. Go to Knollsea, and find out when the steamboat for Cherbourg starts; and when you have done that, I shall want you to send Taylor to me. I wish Captain Strong to bring the Fawn round into Knollsea Bay. Next week I may want you to go to Cherbourg in the yacht with me — if the Channel is pretty calm — and then perhaps to Rouen and Paris. But I will speak of that to-morrow.’

‘Very good, my lord.’

‘Meanwhile I recommend that you and Mrs. Menlove repeat nothing you may have heard concerning the lady you just now spoke of. Here is a slight present for Mrs. Menlove; and accept this for yourself.’ He handed money.

‘Your lordship may be sure we will not,’ the valet replied.

CHAPTER 33.

THE ENGLISH CHANNEL — NORMANDY

On Monday morning the little steamer *Speedwell* made her appearance round the promontory by Knollsea Bay, to take in passengers for the transit to Cherbourg. Breezes the freshest that could blow without verging on keenness flew over the quivering deeps and shallows; and the sunbeams pierced every detail of barrow, path and rabbit-run upon the lofty convexity of down and waste which shut in Knollsea from the world to the west.

They left the pier at eight o’clock, taking at first a short easterly course to avoid a sinister ledge of limestones jutting from the water like crocodile’s teeth, which first obtained notoriety in English history through being the spot whereon a formidable Danish fleet went to pieces a thousand years ago. At the moment that the *Speedwell* turned to enter upon the direct course, a schooner-yacht, whose sheets gleamed like bridal satin, loosed from a remoter part of the bay; continuing to bear off, she cut across the steamer’s wake, and took a course almost due southerly, which was precisely that of the *Speedwell*. The wind was very favourable for the yacht, blowing a few points from north in a steady pressure on her quarter, and, having been built with every modern appliance that shipwrights could offer, the schooner found no difficulty in getting abreast, and even ahead, of the steamer, as soon as she had escaped the shelter of the hills.

The more or less parallel courses of the vessels continued for some time without causing any remark among the people on board the *Speedwell*. At length one noticed the fact, and another; and then it became the general topic of conversation in the group upon the bridge, where Ethelberta, her hair getting frizzed and her cheeks carnationed by the wind, sat upon a camp-stool looking towards the prow.

‘She is bound for Guernsey,’ said one. ‘In half-an-hour she will put about for a more westerly course, you’ll see.’

‘She is not for Guernsey or anywhere that way,’ said an acquaintance, looking through his glass. ‘If she is out for anything more than a morning cruise, she is bound for our port. I should not wonder if she is crossing to get stocked, as most of them do, to save the duty on her wine and provisions.’

‘Do you know whose yacht it is?’

‘I do not.’

Ethelberta looked at the light leaning figure of the pretty schooner, which seemed to skate along upon her bilge and make white shavings of all the sea that touched her. She at first imagined that this might be the yacht Neigh had arrived in at the end of the previous week, for she knew that he came as one of a yachting party, and she had noticed no other boat of that sort in the bay since his arrival. But as all his party had gone ashore and not yet returned, she was surprised to see the supposed vessel here. To add to her perplexity, she could not be positive, now that it came to a real nautical query, whether the craft of Neigh's friends had one mast or two, for she had caught but a fragmentary view of the topsail over the apple-trees.

'Is that the yacht which has been lying at Knollsea for the last few days?' she inquired of the master of the Speedwell, as soon as she had an opportunity.

The master warmed beneath his copper-coloured rind. 'O no, miss; that one you saw was a cutter — a smaller boat altogether,' he replied. 'Built on the sliding-keel principle, you understand, miss — and red below her water-line, if you noticed. This is Lord Mountclere's yacht — the Fawn. You might have seen her re'ching in round Old-Harry Rock this morning afore we started.'

'Lord Mountclere's?'

'Yes — a nobleman of this neighbourhood. But he don't do so much at yachting as he used to in his younger days. I believe he's aboard this morning, however.'

Ethelberta now became more absorbed than ever in their ocean comrade, and watched its motions continually. The schooner was considerably in advance of them by this time, and seemed to be getting by degrees out of their course. She wondered if Lord Mountclere could be really going to Cherbourg: if so, why had he said nothing about the trip to her when she spoke of her own approaching voyage thither? The yacht changed its character in her eyes; losing the indefinite interest of the unknown, it acquired the charm of a riddle on motives, of which the alternatives were, had Lord Mountclere's journey anything to do with her own, or had it not? Common probability pointed to the latter supposition; but the time of starting, the course of the yacht, and recollections of Lord Mountclere's homage, suggested the more extraordinary possibility.

She went across to Cornelia. 'The man who handed us on board — didn't I see him speaking to you this morning?' she said.

'O yes,' said Cornelia. 'He asked if my mistress was the popular Mrs. Petherwin?'

'And you told him, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'What made you do that, Cornelia?'

'I thought I might: I couldn't help it. When I went through the toll-gate, such a gentlemanly-looking man asked me if he should help me to carry the things to the end of the pier; and as we went on together he said he supposed me to be Mrs. Petherwin's maid. I said, "Yes." The two men met afterwards, so there would ha' been no good in my denying it to one of 'em.'

'Who was this gentlemanly person?'

‘I asked the other man that, and he told me one of Lord Mountclere’s upper servants. I knew then there was no harm in having been civil to him. He is well-mannered, and talks splendid language.’

‘That yacht you see on our right hand is Lord Mountclere’s property. If I do not mistake, we shall have her closer by-and-by, and you may meet your gentlemanly friend again. Be careful how you talk to him.’

Ethelberta sat down, thought of the meeting at Corvsgate Castle, of the dinner-party at Mr. Doncastle’s, of the strange position she had there been in, and then of her father. She suddenly reproached herself for thoughtlessness; for in her pocket lay a letter from him, which she had taken from the postman that morning at the moment of coming from the door, and in the hurry of embarking had forgotten ever since. Opening it quickly, she read: —

‘MY DEAR ETHELBERTA, — Your letter reached me yesterday, and I called round at Exonbury Crescent in the afternoon, as you wished. Everything is going on right there, and you have no occasion to be anxious about them. I do not leave town for another week or two, and by the time I am gone Sol and Dan will have returned from Paris, if your mother and Gwendoline want any help: so that you need not hurry back on their account.

‘I have something else to tell you, which is not quite so satisfactory, and it is this that makes me write at once; but do not be alarmed. It began in this way. A few nights after the dinner-party here I was determined to find out if there was any truth in what you had been told about that boy, and having seen Menlove go out as usual after dark, I followed her. Sure enough, when she had got into the park, up came master Joe, smoking a cigar. As soon as they had met I went towards them, and Menlove, seeing somebody draw nigh, began to edge off, when the blockhead said, “Never mind, my love, it is only the old man.” Being very provoked with both of them, though she was really the most to blame, I gave him some smart cuts across the shoulders with my cane, and told him to go home, which he did with a flea in his ear, the rascal. I believe I have cured his courting tricks for some little time.

‘Well, Menlove then walked by me, quite cool, as if she were merely a lady passing by chance at the time, which provoked me still more, knowing the whole truth of it, and I could not help turning upon her and saying, “You, madam, ought to be served the same way.” She replied in very haughty words, and I walked away, saying that I had something better to do than argue with a woman of her character at that hour of the evening. This so set her up that she followed me home, marched into my pantry, and told me that if I had been more careful about my manners in calling her a bad character, it might have been better both for me and my stuck-up daughter — a daw in eagle’s plumes — and so on. Now it seems that she must have coaxed something out of Joey about you — for what lad in the world could be a match for a woman of her experience and arts! I hope she will do you no serious damage; but I tell you the whole state of affairs exactly as they are, that you may form your own opinions. After

all, there is no real disgrace, for none of us have ever done wrong, but have worked honestly for a living. However, I will let you know if anything serious really happens.'

This was all that her father said on the matter, the letter concluding with messages to the children and directions from their mother with regard to their clothes.

Ethelberta felt very distinctly that she was in a strait; the old impression that, unless her position were secured soon, it never would be secured, returned with great force. A doubt whether it was worth securing would have been very strong ere this, had not others besides herself been concerned in her fortunes. She looked up from her letter, and beheld the pertinacious yacht; it led her up to a conviction that therein lay a means and an opportunity.

Nothing further of importance occurred in crossing. Ethelberta's head ached after a while, and Cornelia's healthy cheeks of red were found to have diminished their colour to the size of a wafer and the quality of a stain. The *Speedwell* entered the breakwater at Cherbourg to find the schooner already in the roadstead; and by the time the steamer was brought up Ethelberta could see the men on board the yacht clewing up and making things snug in a way from which she inferred that they were not going to leave the harbour again that day. With the aspect of a fair galleon that could easily out-manoeuvre her persevering buccaneer, Ethelberta passed alongside. Could it be possible that Lord Mountclere had on her account fixed this day for his visit across the Channel?

'Well, I would rather be haunted by him than by Mr. Neigh,' she said; and began laying her plans so as to guard against inconvenient surprises.

The next morning Ethelberta was at the railway station, taking tickets for herself and Cornelia, when she saw an old yet sly and somewhat merry-faced Englishman a little way off. He was attended by a younger man, who appeared to be his valet.

'I will exchange one of these tickets,' she said to the clerk, and having done so she went to Cornelia to inform her that it would after all be advisable for them to travel separate, adding, 'Lord Mountclere is in the station, and I think he is going on by our train. Remember, you are my maid again now. Is not that the gentlemanly man who assisted you yesterday?' She signified the valet as she spoke.

'It is,' said Cornelia.

When the passengers were taking their seats, and Ethelberta was thinking whether she might not after all enter a second-class with Cornelia instead of sitting solitary in a first because of an old man's proximity, she heard a shuffling at her elbow, and the next moment found that he was overtly observing her as if he had not done so in secret at all. She at once gave him an unsurprised gesture of recognition. 'I saw you some time ago; what a singular coincidence,' she said.

'A charming one,' said Lord Mountclere, smiling a half-minute smile, and making as if he would take his hat off and would not quite. 'Perhaps we must not call it coincidence entirely,' he continued; 'my journey, which I have contemplated for some time, was not fixed this week altogether without a thought of your presence on the road — hee-hee! Do you go far to-day?'

‘As far as Caen,’ said Ethelberta.

‘Ah! That’s the end of my day’s journey, too,’ said Lord Mountclere. They parted and took their respective places, Lord Mountclere choosing a compartment next to the one Ethelberta was entering, and not, as she had expected, attempting to join her.

Now she had instantly fancied when the viscount was speaking that there were signs of some departure from his former respectful manner towards her; and an enigma lay in that. At their earlier meetings he had never ventured upon a distinct coupling of himself and herself as he had done in his broad compliment to-day — if compliment it could be called. She was not sure that he did not exceed his license in telling her deliberately that he had meant to hover near her in a private journey which she was taking without reference to him. She did not object to the act, but to the avowal of the act; and, being as sensitive as a barometer on signs affecting her social condition, it darted upon Ethelberta for one little moment that he might possibly have heard a word or two about her being nothing more nor less than one of a tribe of thralls; hence his freedom of manner. Certainly a plain remark of that sort was exactly what a susceptible peer might be supposed to say to a pretty woman of far inferior degree. A rapid redness filled her face at the thought that he might have smiled upon her as upon a domestic whom he was disposed to chuck under the chin. ‘But no,’ she said. ‘He would never have taken the trouble to follow and meet with me had he learnt to think me other than a lady. It is extremity of devotion — that’s all.’

It was not Ethelberta’s inexperience, but that her conception of self precluded such an association of ideas, which led her to dismiss the surmise that his attendance could be inspired by a motive beyond that of paying her legitimate attentions as a co-ordinate with him and his in the social field. Even if he only meant flirtation, she read it as of that sort from which courtship with an eye to matrimony differs only in degree. Hence, she thought, his interest in her was not likely, under the ordinary influences of caste feeling, to continue longer than while he was kept in ignorance of her consanguinity with a stock proscribed. She sighed at the anticipated close of her full-feathered towering when her ties and bonds should be uncovered. She might have seen matters in a different light, and sighed more. But in the stir of the moment it escaped her thought that ignorance of her position, and a consequent regard for her as a woman of good standing, would have prevented his indulgence in any course which was open to the construction of being disrespectful.

Valognes, Carentan, Isigny, Bayeux, were passed, and the train drew up at Caen. Ethelberta’s intention had been to stay here for one night, but having learnt from Lord Mountclere, as previously described, that this was his destination, she decided to go on. On turning towards the carriage after a few minutes of promenading at the Caen station, she was surprised to perceive that Lord Mountclere, who had alighted as if to leave, was still there.

They spoke again to each other. ‘I find I have to go further,’ he suddenly said, when she had chatted with him a little time. And beckoning to the man who was attending to his baggage, he directed the things to be again placed in the train.

Time passed, and they changed at the next junction. When Ethelberta entered a carriage on the branch line to take her seat for the remainder of the journey, there sat the viscount in the same division. He explained that he was going to Rouen.

Ethelberta came to a quick resolution. Her audacity, like that of a child getting nearer and nearer a parent's side, became wonderfully vigorous as she approached her destination; and though there were three good hours of travel to Rouen as yet, the heavier part of the journey was past. At her aunt's would be a safe refuge, play what pranks she might, and there she would to-morrow meet those bravest of defenders Sol and Dan, to whom she had sent as much money as she could conveniently spare towards their expenses, with directions that they were to come by the most economical route, and meet her at the house of her aunt, Madame Moulin, previous to their educational trip to Paris, their own contribution being the value of the week's work they would have to lose. Thus backed up by Sol and Dan, her aunt, and Cornelia, Ethelberta felt quite the reverse of a lonely female persecuted by a wicked lord in a foreign country. 'He shall pay for his weaknesses, whatever they mean,' she thought; 'and what they mean I will find out at once.'

'I am going to Paris,' she said.

'You cannot to-night, I think.'

'To-morrow, I mean.'

'I should like to go on to-morrow. Perhaps I may. So that there is a chance of our meeting again.'

'Yes; but I do not leave Rouen till the afternoon. I first shall go to the cathedral, and drive round the city.'

Lord Mountclere smiled pleasantly. There seemed a sort of encouragement in her words. Ethelberta's thoughts, however, had flown at that moment to the approaching situation at her aunt's hotel: it would be extremely embarrassing if he should go there.

'Where do you stay, Lord Mountclere?' she said.

Thus directly asked, he could not but commit himself to the name of the hotel he had been accustomed to patronize, which was one in the upper part of the city.

'Mine is not that one,' said Ethelberta frigidly.

No further remark was made under this head, and they conversed for the remainder of the daylight on scenery and other topics, Lord Mountclere's air of festivity lending him all the qualities of an agreeable companion. But notwithstanding her resolve, Ethelberta failed, for that day at least, to make her mind clear upon Lord Mountclere's intentions. To that end she would have liked first to know what were the exact limits set by society to conduct under present conditions, if society had ever set any at all, which was open to question: since experience had long ago taught her that much more freedom actually prevails in the communion of the sexes than is put on paper as etiquette, or admitted in so many words as correct behaviour. In short, everything turned upon whether he had learnt of her position when off the platform at Mayfair Hall.

Wearied with these surmises, and the day's travel, she closed her eyes. And then her enamoured companion more widely opened his, and traced the beautiful features opposite him. The arch of the brows — like a slur in music — the droop of the lashes, the meeting of the lips, and the sweet rotundity of the chin — one by one, and all together, they were adored, till his heart was like a retort full of spirits of wine.

It was a warm evening, and when they arrived at their journey's end distant thunder rolled behind heavy and opaque clouds. Ethelberta bade adieu to her attentive satellite, called to Cornelia, and entered a cab; but before they reached the inn the thunder had increased. Then a cloud cracked into flame behind the iron spire of the cathedral, showing in relief its black ribs and stanchions, as if they were the bars of a blazing cresset held on high.

'Ah, we will clamber up there to-morrow,' said Ethelberta.

A wondrous stillness pervaded the streets of the city after this, though it was not late; and their arrival at M. Moulin's door was quite an event for the quay. No rain came, as they had expected, and by the time they halted the western sky had cleared, so that the newly-lit lamps on the quay, and the evening glow shining over the river, inwove their harmonious rays as the warp and woof of one lustrous tissue. Before they had alighted there appeared from the archway Madame Moulin in person, followed by the servants of the hotel in a manner signifying that they did not receive a visitor once a fortnight, though at that moment the clatter of sixty knives, forks, and tongues was audible through an open window from the adjoining dining-room, to the great interest of a group of idlers outside. Ethelberta had not seen her aunt since she last passed through the town with Lady Petherwin, who then told her that this landlady was the only respectable relative she seemed to have in the world.

Aunt Charlotte's face was an English outline filled in with French shades under the eyes, on the brows, and round the mouth, by the natural effect of years; she resembled the British hostess as little as well could be, no point in her causing the slightest suggestion of drops taken for the stomach's sake. Telling the two young women she would gladly have met them at the station had she known the hour of their arrival, she kissed them both without much apparent notice of a difference in their conditions; indeed, seeming rather to incline to Cornelia, whose country face and homely style of clothing may have been more to her mind than Ethelberta's finished travelling-dress, a class of article to which she appeared to be well accustomed. Her husband was at this time at the head of the table-d'hôte, and mentioning the fact as an excuse for his non-appearance, she accompanied them upstairs.

After the strain of keeping up smiles with Lord Mountclere, the rattle and shaking, and the general excitements of the chase across the water and along the rail, a face in which she saw a dim reflex of her mother's was soothing in the extreme, and Ethelberta went up to the staircase with a feeling of expansive thankfulness. Cornelia paused to admire the clean court and the small caged birds sleeping on their perches, the boxes of veronica in bloom, of oleander, and of tamarisk, which freshened the air of the court and lent a romance to the lamplight, the cooks in their paper caps and white

blouses appearing at odd moments from an Avernus behind; while the prompt 'v'la!' of teetotums in mob caps, spinning down the staircase in answer to the periodic clang of bells, filled her with wonder, and pricked her conscience with thoughts of how seldom such transcendent nimbleness was attempted by herself in a part so nearly similar.

CHAPTER 34.

THE HÔTEL BEAU SÉJOUR AND SPOTS NEAR IT

The next day, much to Ethelberta's surprise, there was a letter for her in her mother's up-hill hand. She neglected all the rest of its contents for the following engrossing sentences: —

'Menlove has wormed everything out of poor Joey, we find, and your father is much upset about it. She had another quarrel with him, and then declared she would expose you and us to Mrs. Doncastle and all your friends. I think that Menlove is the kind of woman who will stick to her word, and the question for you to consider is, how can you best face out any report of the truth which she will spread, and contradict the lies that she will add to it? It appears to me to be a dreadful thing, and so it will probably appear to you. The worst part will be that your sisters and brothers are your servants, and that your father is actually engaged in the house where you dine. I am dreadful afraid that this will be considered a fine joke for gossips, and will cause no end of laughs in society at your expense. At any rate, should Menlove spread the report, it would absolutely prevent people from attending your lectures next season, for they would feel like dupes, and be angry with themselves, and you, and all of us.

'The only way out of the muddle that I can see for you is to put some scheme of marrying into effect as soon as possible, and before these things are known. Surely by this time, with all your opportunities, you have been able to strike up an acquaintance with some gentleman or other, so as to make a suitable match. You see, my dear Berta, marriage is a thing which, once carried out, fixes you more firm in a position than any personal brains can do; for as you stand at present, every loose tooth, and every combed-out hair, and every new wrinkle, and every sleepless night, is so much took away from your chance for the future, depending as it do upon your skill in charming. I know that you have had some good offers, so do listen to me, and warm up the best man of them again a bit, and get him to repeat his words before your roundness shrinks away, and 'tis too late.

'Mr. Ladywell has called here to see you; it was just after I had heard that this Menlove might do harm, so I thought I could do no better than send down word to him that you would much like to see him, and were wondering sadly why he had not called lately. I gave him your address at Rouen, that he might find you, if he chose, at once, and be got to propose, since he is better than nobody. I believe he said, directly Joey gave him the address, that he was going abroad, and my opinion is that he will

come to you, because of the encouragement I gave him. If so, you must thank me for my foresight and care for you.

‘I heave a sigh of relief sometimes at the thought that I, at any rate, found a husband before the present man-famine began. Don’t refuse him this time, there’s a dear, or, mark my words, you’ll have cause to rue it — unless you have beforehand got engaged to somebody better than he. You will not if you have not already, for the exposure is sure to come soon.’

‘O, this false position! — it is ruining your nature, my too thoughtful mother! But I will not accept any of them — I’ll brazen it out!’ said Ethelberta, throwing the letter wherever it chose to fly, and picking it up to read again. She stood and thought it all over. ‘I must decide to do something!’ was her sigh again; and, feeling an irresistible need of motion, she put on her things and went out to see what resolve the morning would bring.

No rain had fallen during the night, and the air was now quiet in a warm heavy fog, through which old cider-smells, reminding her of Wessex, occasionally came from narrow streets in the background. Ethelberta passed up the Rue Grand-Pont into the little dusky Rue Saint-Romain, behind the cathedral, being driven mechanically along by the fever and fret of her thoughts. She was about to enter the building by the transept door, when she saw Lord Mountclere coming towards her.

Ethelberta felt equal to him, or a dozen such, this morning. The looming spectres raised by her mother’s information, the wearing sense of being over-weighted in the race, were driving her to a Hamlet-like fantasticism and defiance of augury; moreover, she was abroad.

‘I am about to ascend to the parapets of the cathedral,’ said she, in answer to a half inquiry.

‘I should be delighted to accompany you,’ he rejoined, in a manner as capable of explanation by his knowledge of her secret as was Ethelberta’s manner by her sense of nearing the end of her maying. But whether this frequent glide into her company was meant as ephemeral flirtation, to fill the half-hours of his journey, or whether it meant a serious love-suit — which were the only alternatives that had occurred to her on the subject — did not trouble her now. ‘I am bound to be civil to so great a lord,’ she lightly thought, and expressing no objection to his presence, she passed with him through the outbuildings, containing Gothic lumber from the shadowy pile above, and ascended the stone staircase. Emerging from its windings, they duly came to the long wooden ladder suspended in mid-air that led to the parapet of the tower. This being wide enough for two abreast, she could hardly do otherwise than wait a moment for the viscount, who up to this point had never faltered, and who amused her as they went by scraps of his experience in various countries, which, to do him justice, he told with vivacity and humour. Thus they reached the end of the flight, and entered behind a balustrade.

‘The prospect will be very lovely from this point when the fog has blown off,’ said Lord Mountclere faintly, for climbing and chattering at the same time had fairly taken

away his breath. He leant against the masonry to rest himself. 'The air is clearing already; I fancy I saw a sunbeam or two.'

'It will be lovelier above,' said Ethelberta. 'Let us go to the platform at the base of the flèche, and wait for a view there.'

'With all my heart,' said her attentive companion.

They passed in at a door and up some more stone steps, which landed them finally in the upper chamber of the tower. Lord Mountclere sank on a beam, and asked smilingly if her ambition was not satisfied with this goal. 'I recollect going to the top some years ago,' he added, 'and it did not occur to me as being a thing worth doing a second time. And there was no fog then, either.'

'O,' said Ethelberta, 'it is one of the most splendid things a person can do! The fog is going fast, and everybody with the least artistic feeling in the direction of bird's-eye views makes the ascent every time of coming here.'

'Of course, of course,' said Lord Mountclere. 'And I am only too happy to go to any height with you.'

'Since you so kindly offer, we will go to the very top of the spire — up through the fog and into the sunshine,' said Ethelberta.

Lord Mountclere covered a grim misgiving by a gay smile, and away they went up a ladder admitting to the base of the huge iron framework above; then they entered upon the regular ascent of the cage, towards the hoped-for celestial blue, and among breezes which never descended so low as the town. The journey was enlivened with more breathless witticisms from Lord Mountclere, till she stepped ahead of him again; when he asked how many more steps there were.

She inquired of the man in the blue blouse who accompanied them. 'Fifty-five,' she returned to Lord Mountclere a moment later.

They went round, and round, and yet around.

'How many are there now?' Lord Mountclere demanded this time of the man.

'A hundred and ninety, Monsieur,' he said.

'But there were only fifty-five ever so long ago!'

'Two hundred and five, then,' said the man. 'Perhaps the mist prevented Mademoiselle hearing me distinctly?'

'Never mind: I would follow were there five thousand more, did Mademoiselle bid me!' said the exhausted nobleman gallantly, in English.

'Hush!' said Ethelberta, with displeasure.

'He doesn't understand a word,' said Lord Mountclere.

They paced the remainder of their spiral pathway in silence, and having at last reached the summit, Lord Mountclere sank down on one of the steps, panting out, 'Dear me, dear me!'

Ethelberta leaned and looked around, and said, 'How extraordinary this is. It is sky above, below, everywhere.'

He dragged himself together and stepped to her side. They formed as it were a little world to themselves, being completely ensphered by the fog, which here was dense as a

sea of milk. Below was neither town, country, nor cathedral — simply whiteness, into which the iron legs of their gigantic perch faded to nothing.

‘We have lost our labour; there is no prospect for you, after all, Lord Mountclere,’ said Ethelberta, turning her eyes upon him. He looked at her face as if there were, and she continued, ‘Listen; I hear sounds from the town: people’s voices, and carts, and dogs, and the noise of a railway-train. Shall we now descend, and own ourselves disappointed?’

‘Whenever you choose.’

Before they had put their intention in practice there appeared to be reasons for waiting awhile. Out of the plain of fog beneath, a stone tooth seemed to be upheaving itself: then another showed forth. These were the summits of the St. Romain and the Butter Towers — at the western end of the building. As the fog stratum collapsed other summits manifested their presence further off — among them the two spires and lantern of St. Ouen’s; when to the left the dome of St. Madeline’s caught a first ray from the peering sun, under which its scaly surface glittered like a fish. Then the mist rolled off in earnest, and revealed far beneath them a whole city, its red, blue, and grey roofs forming a variegated pattern, small and subdued as that of a pavement in mosaic. Eastward in the spacious outlook lay the hill of St. Catherine, breaking intrusively into the large level valley of the Seine; south was the river which had been the parent of the mist, and the Ile Lacroix, gorgeous in scarlet, purple, and green. On the western horizon could be dimly discerned melancholy forests, and further to the right stood the hill and rich groves of Boisguillaume.

Ethelberta having now done looking around, the descent was begun and continued without intermission till they came to the passage behind the parapet.

Ethelberta was about to step airily forward, when there reached her ear the voices of persons below. She recognized as one of them the slow unaccented tones of Neigh.

‘Please wait a minute!’ she said in a peremptory manner of confusion sufficient to attract Lord Mountclere’s attention.

A recollection had sprung to her mind in a moment. She had half made an appointment with Neigh at her aunt’s hotel for this very week, and here was he in Rouen to keep it. To meet him while indulging in this vagary with Lord Mountclere — which, now that the mood it had been engendered by was passing off, she somewhat regretted — would be the height of imprudence.

‘I should like to go round to the other side of the parapet for a few moments,’ she said, with decisive quickness. ‘Come with me, Lord Mountclere.’

They went round to the other side. Here she kept the viscount and their suisse until she deemed it probable that Neigh had passed by, when she returned with her companions and descended to the bottom. They emerged into the Rue Saint-Romain, whereupon a woman called from the opposite side of the way to their guide, stating that she had told the other English gentleman that the English lady had gone into the flèche.

Ethelberta turned and looked up. She could just discern Neigh's form upon the steps of the flèche above, ascending toilsomely in search of her.

'What English gentleman could that have been?' said Lord Mountclere, after paying the man. He spoke in a way which showed he had not overlooked her confusion. 'It seems that he must have been searching for us, or rather for you?'

'Only Mr. Neigh,' said Ethelberta. 'He told me he was coming here. I believe he is waiting for an interview with me.'

'H'm,' said Lord Mountclere.

'Business — only business,' said she.

'Shall I leave you? Perhaps the business is important — most important.'

'Unfortunately it is.'

'You must forgive me this once: I cannot help — will you give me permission to make a difficult remark?' said Lord Mountclere, in an impatient voice.

'With pleasure.'

'Well, then, the business I meant was — an engagement to be married.'

Had it been possible for a woman to be perpetually on the alert she might now have supposed that Lord Mountclere knew all about her; a mechanical deference must have restrained such an illusion had he seen her in any other light than that of a distracting slave. But she answered quietly, 'So did I.'

'But how does he know — dear me, dear me! I beg pardon,' said the viscount.

She looked at him curiously, as if to imply that he was seriously out of his reckoning in respect of her if he supposed that he would be allowed to continue this little play at love-making as long as he chose, when she was offered the position of wife by a man so good as Neigh.

They stood in silence side by side till, much to her ease, Cornelia appeared at the corner waiting. At the last moment he said, in somewhat agitated tones, and with what appeared to be a renewal of the respect which had been imperceptibly dropped since they crossed the Channel, 'I was not aware of your engagement to Mr. Neigh. I fear I have been acting mistakenly on that account.'

'There is no engagement as yet,' said she.

Lord Mountclere brightened like a child. 'Then may I have a few words in private —'

'Not now — not to-day,' said Ethelberta, with a certain irritation at she knew not what. 'Believe me, Lord Mountclere, you are mistaken in many things. I mean, you think more of me than you ought. A time will come when you will despise me for this day's work, and it is madness in you to go further.'

Lord Mountclere, knowing what he did know, may have imagined what she referred to; but Ethelberta was without the least proof that he had the key to her humour. 'Well, well, I'll be responsible for the madness,' he said. 'I know you to be — a famous woman, at all events; and that's enough. I would say more, but I cannot here. May I call upon you?'

'Not now.'

‘When shall I?’

‘If you must, let it be a month hence at my house in town,’ she said indifferently, the Hamlet mood being still upon her. ‘Yes, call upon us then, and I will tell you everything that may remain to be told, if you should be inclined to listen. A rumour is afloat which will undeceive you in much, and depress me to death. And now I will walk back: pray excuse me.’ She entered the street, and joined Cornelia.

Lord Mountclere paced irregularly along, turned the corner, and went towards his inn, nearing which his tread grew lighter, till he scarcely seemed to touch the ground. He became gleeful, and said to himself, nervously palming his hip with his left hand, as if previous to plunging it into hot water for some prize: ‘Upon my life I’ve a good mind! Upon my life I have! . . . I must make a straightforward thing of it, and at once; or he will have her. But he shall not, and I will — hee-hee!’

The fascinated man, screaming inwardly with the excitement, glee, and agony of his position, entered the hotel, wrote a hasty note to Ethelberta and despatched it by hand, looked to his dress and appearance, ordered a carriage, and in a quarter of an hour was being driven towards the Hôtel Beau Séjour, whither his note had preceded him.

CHAPTER 35.

THE HOTEL (continued), AND THE QUAY IN FRONT

Ethelberta, having arrived there some time earlier, had gone straight to her aunt, whom she found sitting behind a large ledger in the office, making up the accounts with her husband, a well-framed reflective man with a grey beard. M. Moulin bustled, waited for her remarks and replies, and made much of her in a general way, when Ethelberta said, what she had wanted to say instantly, ‘Has a gentleman called Mr. Neigh been here?’

‘O yes — I think it is Neigh — there’s a card upstairs,’ replied her aunt. ‘I told him you were alone at the cathedral, and I believe he walked that way. Besides that one, another has come for you — a Mr. Ladywell, and he is waiting.’

‘Not for me?’

‘Yes, indeed. I thought he seemed so anxious, under a sort of assumed calmness, that I recommended him to remain till you came in.’

‘Goodness, aunt; why did you?’ Ethelberta said, and thought how much her mother’s sister resembled her mother in doings of that sort.

‘I thought he had some good reason for seeing you. Are these men intruders, then?’

‘O no — a woman who attempts a public career must expect to be treated as public property: what would be an intrusion on a domiciled gentlewoman is a tribute to me. You cannot have celebrity and sex-privilege both.’ Thus Ethelberta laughed off the awkward conjuncture, inwardly deploring the unconscionable maternal meddling which had led to this, though not resentfully, for she had too much staunchness of

heart to decry a parent's misdirected zeal. Had the clanship feeling been universally as strong as in the Chickereel family, the fable of the well-bonded fagot might have remained unwritten.

Ladywell had sent her a letter about getting his picture of herself engraved for an illustrated paper, and she had not replied, considering that she had nothing to do with the matter, her form and feature having been given in the painting as no portrait at all, but as those of an ideal. To see him now would be vexatious; and yet it was chilly and formal to an ungenerous degree to keep aloof from him, sitting lonely in the same house. 'A few weeks hence,' she thought, 'when Menlove's disclosures make me ridiculous, he may slight me as a lackey's girl, an upstart, an adventuress, and hardly return my bow in the street. Then I may wish I had given him no personal cause for additional bitterness.' So, putting off the fine lady, Ethelberta thought she would see Ladywell at once.

Ladywell was unaffectedly glad to meet her; so glad, that Ethelberta wished heartily, for his sake, there could be warm friendship between herself and him, as well as all her lovers, without that insistent courtship-and-marriage question, which sent them all scattering like leaves in a pestilent blast, at enmity with one another. She was less pleased when she found that Ladywell, after saying all there was to say about his painting, gently signified that he had been misinformed, as he believed, concerning her future intentions, which had led to his absenting himself entirely from her; the remark being of course, a natural product of her mother's injudicious message to him.

She cut him short with terse candour. 'Yes,' she said, 'a false report is in circulation. I am not yet engaged to be married to any one, if that is your meaning.'

Ladywell looked cheerful at this frank answer, and said tentatively, 'Am I forgotten?' 'No; you are exactly as you always were in my mind.'

'Then I have been cruelly deceived. I was guided too much by appearances, and they were very delusive. I am beyond measure glad I came here to-day. I called at your house and learnt that you were here; and as I was going out of town, in any indefinite direction, I settled then to come this way. What a happy idea it was! To think of you now — and I may be permitted to — '

'Assuredly you may not. How many times I have told you that!'

'But I do not wish for any formal engagement,' said Ladywell quickly, fearing she might commit herself to some expression of positive denial, which he could never surmount. 'I'll wait — I'll wait any length of time. Remember, you have never absolutely forbidden my — friendship. Will you delay your answer till some time hence, when you have thoroughly considered; since I fear it may be a hasty one now?'

'Yes, indeed; it may be hasty.'

'You will delay it?'

'Yes.'

'When shall it be?'

'Say a month hence. I suggest that, because by that time you will have found an answer in your own mind: strange things may happen before then. "She shall follow

after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them; then shall she say, I will go and return to my first" — however, that's no matter.'

'What — did you — ?' Ladywell began, altogether bewildered by this.

'It is a passage in Hosea which came to my mind, as possibly applicable to myself some day,' she answered. 'It was mere impulse.'

'Ha-ha! — a jest — one of your romances broken loose. There is no law for impulse: that is why I am here.'

Thus fancifully they conversed till the interview concluded. Getting her to promise that she would see him again, Ladywell retired to a sitting-room on the same landing, in which he had been writing letters before she came up. Immediately upon this her aunt, who began to suspect that something peculiar was in the wind, came to tell her that Mr. Neigh had been inquiring for her again.

'Send him in,' said Ethelberta.

Neigh's footsteps approached, and the well-known figure entered. Ethelberta received him smilingly, for she was getting so used to awkward juxtapositions that she treated them quite as a natural situation. She merely hoped that Ladywell would not hear them talking through the partition.

Neigh scarcely said anything as a beginning: she knew his errand perfectly; and unaccountable as it was to her, the strange and unceremonious relationship between them, that had originated in the peculiar conditions of their first close meeting, was continued now as usual.

'Have you been able to bestow a thought on the question between us? I hope so,' said Neigh.

'It is no use,' said Ethelberta. 'Wait a month, and you will not require an answer. You will not mind speaking low, because of a person in the next room?'

'Not at all. — Why will that be?'

'I might say; but let us speak of something else.'

'I don't see how we can,' said Neigh brusquely. 'I had no other reason on earth for calling here. I wished to get the matter settled, and I could not be satisfied without seeing you. I hate writing on matters of this sort. In fact I can't do it, and that's why I am here.'

He was still speaking when an attendant entered with a note.

'Will you excuse me one moment?' said Ethelberta, stepping to the window and opening the missive. It contained these words only, in a scrawl so full of deformities that she could hardly piece its meaning together: —

'I must see you again to-day unless you absolutely deny yourself to me, which I shall take as a refusal to meet me any more. I will arrive, punctually, five minutes after you receive this note. Do pray be alone if you can, and eternally gratify, — Yours,

'MOUNTCLERE.'

'If anything has happened I shall be pleased to wait,' said Neigh, seeing her concern when she had closed the note.

‘O no, it is nothing,’ said Ethelberta precipitately. ‘Yet I think I will ask you to wait,’ she added, not liking to dismiss Neigh in a hurry; for she was not insensible to his perseverance in seeking her over all these miles of sea and land; and secondly, she feared that if he were to leave on the instant he might run into the arms of Lord Mountclere and Ladywell.

‘I shall be only too happy to stay till you are at leisure,’ said Neigh, in the unimpassioned delivery he used whether his meaning were a trite compliment or the expression of his most earnest feeling.

‘I may be rather a long time,’ said Ethelberta dubiously.

‘My time is yours.’

Ethelberta left the room and hurried to her aunt, exclaiming, ‘O, Aunt Charlotte, I hope you have rooms enough to spare for my visitors, for they are like the fox, the goose, and the corn, in the riddle; I cannot leave them together, and I can only be with one at a time. I want the nicest drawing-room you have for an interview of a bare two minutes with an old gentleman. I am so sorry this has happened, but it is not altogether my fault! I only arranged to see one of them; but the other was sent to me by mother, in a mistake, and the third met with me on my journey: that’s the explanation. There’s the oldest of them just come.’

She looked through the glass partition, and under the arch of the court-gate, as the wheels of the viscount’s carriage were heard outside. Ethelberta ascended to a room on the first floor, Lord Mountclere was shown up, and the door closed upon them.

At this time Neigh was very comfortably lounging in an arm-chair in Ethelberta’s room on the second floor. This was a pleasant enough way of passing the minutes with such a tender interview in prospect; and as he leant he looked with languid and luxurious interest through the open casement at the spars and rigging of some luggers on the Seine, the pillars of the suspension bridge, and the scenery of the Faubourg St. Sever on the other side of the river. How languid his interest might ultimately have become there is no knowing; but there soon arose upon his ear the accents of Ethelberta in low distinctness from somewhere outside the room.

‘Yes; the scene is pleasant to-day,’ she said. ‘I like a view over a river.’

‘I should think the steamboats are objectionable when they stop here,’ said another person.

Neigh’s face closed in to an aspect of perplexity. ‘Surely that cannot be Lord Mountclere?’ he muttered.

Had he been certain that Ethelberta was only talking to a stranger, Neigh would probably have felt their conversation to be no business of his, much as he might have been surprised to find her giving audience to another man at such a place. But his impression that the voice was that of his acquaintance, Lord Mountclere, coupled with doubts as to its possibility, was enough to lead him to rise from the chair and put his head out of the window.

Upon a balcony beneath him were the speakers, as he had suspected — Ethelberta and the viscount.

Looking right and left, he saw projecting from the next window the head of his friend Ladywell, gazing right and left likewise, apparently just drawn out by the same voice which had attracted himself.

‘What — you, Neigh! — how strange,’ came from Ladywell’s lips before he had time to recollect that great coolness existed between himself and Neigh on Ethelberta’s account, which had led to the reduction of their intimacy to the most attenuated of nods and good-mornings ever since the Harlequin-rose incident at Cripplegate.

‘Yes; it is rather strange,’ said Neigh, with saturnine evenness. ‘Still a fellow must be somewhere.’

Each then looked over his window-sill downwards, upon the speakers who had attracted them thither.

Lord Mountclere uttered something in a low tone which did not reach the young men; to which Ethelberta replied, ‘As I have said, Lord Mountclere, I cannot give you an answer now. I must consider what to do with Mr. Neigh and Mr. Ladywell. It is too sudden for me to decide at once. I could not do so until I have got home to England, when I will write you a letter, stating frankly my affairs and those of my relatives. I shall not consider that you have addressed me on the subject of marriage until, having received my letter, you — ’

‘Repeat my proposal,’ said Lord Mountclere.

‘Yes.’

‘My dear Mrs. Petherwin, it is as good as repeated! But I have no right to assume anything you don’t wish me to assume, and I will wait. How long is it that I am to suffer in this uncertainty?’

‘A month. By that time I shall have grown weary of my other two suitors.’

‘A month! Really inflexible?’

Ethelberta had returned inside the window, and her answer was inaudible. Ladywell and Neigh looked up, and their eyes met. Both had been reluctant to remain where they stood, but they were too fascinated to instantly retire. Neigh moved now, and Ladywell did the same. Each saw that the face of his companion was flushed.

‘Come in and see me,’ said Ladywell quickly, before quite withdrawing his head. ‘I am staying in this room.’

‘I will,’ said Neigh; and taking his hat he left Ethelberta’s apartment forthwith.

On entering the quarters of his friend he found him seated at a table whereon writing materials were strewn. They shook hands in silence, but the meaning in their looks was enough.

‘Just let me write a note, Ladywell, and I’m your man,’ said Neigh then, with the freedom of an old acquaintance.

‘I was going to do the same thing,’ said Ladywell.

Neigh then sat down, and for a minute or two nothing was to be heard but the scratching of a pair of pens, ending on the one side with a more boisterous scratch, as the writer shaped ‘Eustace Ladywell,’ and on the other with slow firmness in the characters ‘Alfred Neigh.’

‘There’s for you, my fair one,’ said Neigh, closing and directing his letter.

‘Yours is for Mrs. Petherwin? So is mine,’ said Ladywell, grasping the bell-pull. ‘Shall I direct it to be put on her table with this one?’

‘Thanks.’ And the two letters went off to Ethelberta’s sitting-room, which she had vacated to receive Lord Mountclere in an empty one beneath. Neigh’s letter was simply a pleading of a sudden call away which prevented his waiting till she should return; Ladywell’s, though stating the same reason for leaving, was more of an upbraiding nature, and might almost have told its reader, were she to take the trouble to guess, that he knew of the business of Lord Mountclere with her to-day.

‘Now, let us get out of this place,’ said Neigh. He proceeded at once down the stairs, followed by Ladywell, who — settling his account at the bureau without calling for a bill, and directing his portmanteau to be sent to the Right-bank railway station — went with Neigh into the street.

They had not walked fifty yards up the quay when two British workmen, in holiday costume, who had just turned the corner of the Rue Jeanne d’Arc, approached them. Seeing him to be an Englishman, one of the two addressed Neigh, saying, ‘Can you tell us the way, sir, to the Hotel Bold Soldier?’

Neigh pointed out the place he had just come from to the tall young men, and continued his walk with Ladywell.

Ladywell was the first to break silence. ‘I have been considerably misled, Neigh,’ he said; ‘and I imagine from what has just happened that you have been misled too.’

‘Just a little,’ said Neigh, bringing abstracted lines of meditation into his face. ‘But it was my own fault: for I ought to have known that these stage and platform women have what they are pleased to call Bohemianism so thoroughly engrained with their natures that they are no more constant to usage in their sentiments than they are in their way of living. Good Lord, to think she has caught old Mountclere! She is sure to have him if she does not dally with him so long that he gets cool again.’

‘A beautiful creature like her to think of marrying such an infatuated idiot as he!’

‘He can give her a title as well as younger men. It will not be the first time that such matches have been made.’

‘I can’t believe it,’ said Ladywell vehemently. ‘She has too much poetry in her — too much good sense; her nature is the essence of all that’s romantic. I can’t help saying it, though she has treated me cruelly.’

‘She has good looks, certainly. I’ll own to that. As for her romance and good-feeling, that I leave to you. I think she has treated you no more cruelly, as you call it, than she has me, come to that.’

‘She told me she would give me an answer in a month,’ said Ladywell emotionally.

‘So she told me,’ said Neigh.

‘And so she told him,’ said Ladywell.

‘And I have no doubt she will keep her word to him in her usual precise manner.’

‘But see what she implied to me! I distinctly understood from her that the answer would be favourable.’

‘So did I.’

‘So does he.’

‘And he is sure to be the one who gets it, since only one of us can. Well, I wouldn’t marry her for love, money, nor — ’

‘Offspring.’

‘Exactly: I would not. “I’ll give you an answer in a month” — to all three of us! For God’s sake let’s sit down here and have something to drink.’

They drew up a couple of chairs to one of the tables of a wine-shop close by, and shouted to the waiter with the vigour of persons going to the dogs. Here, behind the horizontal-headed trees that dotted this part of the quay, they sat over their bottles denouncing womankind till the sun got low down upon the river, and the houses on the further side began to be toned by a blue mist. At last they rose from their seats and departed, Neigh to dine and consider his route, and Ladywell to take the train for Dieppe.

While these incidents had been in progress the two workmen had found their way into the hotel where Ethelberta was staying. Passing through the entrance, they stood at gaze in the court, much perplexed as to the door to be made for; the difficulty was solved by the appearance of Cornelia, who in expectation of them had been for the last half-hour leaning over the sill of her bed-room window, which looked into the interior, amusing herself by watching the movements to and fro in the court beneath.

After conversing awhile in undertones as if they had no real right there at all, Cornelia told them she would call their sister, if an old gentleman who had been to see her were gone again. Cornelia then ran away, and Sol and Dan stood aloof, till they had seen the old gentleman alluded to go to the door and drive off, shortly after which Ethelberta ran down to meet them.

‘Whatever have you got as your luggage?’ she said, after hearing a few words about their journey, and looking at a curious object like a huge extended accordion with bellows of gorgeous-patterned carpeting.

‘Well, I thought to myself,’ said Sol, ‘’tis a terrible bother about carrying our things. So what did I do but turn to and make a carpet-bag that would hold all mine and Dan’s too. This, you see, Berta, is a deal top and bottom out of three-quarter stuff, stained and varnished. Well, then you see I’ve got carpet sides tacked on with these brass nails, which make it look very handsome; and so when my bag is empty ‘twill shut up and be only a couple of boards under yer arm, and when ‘tis open it will hold a’most anything you like to put in it. That portmantle didn’t cost more than three half-crowns altogether, and ten pound wouldn’t ha’ got anything so strong from a portmantle maker, would it, Dan?’

‘Well, no.’

‘And then you see, Berta,’ Sol continued in the same earnest tone, and further exhibiting the article, ‘I’ve made this trap-door in the top with hinges and padlock complete, so that — ’

‘I am afraid it is tiring you after your journey to explain all this to me,’ said Ethelberta gently, noticing that a few Gallic smilers were gathering round. ‘Aunt has found a nice room for you at the top of the staircase in that corner — ”Escalier D” you’ll see painted at the bottom — and when you have been up come across to me at number thirty-four on this side, and we’ll talk about everything.’

‘Look here, Sol,’ said Dan, who had left his brother and gone on to the stairs. ‘What a rum staircase — the treads all in little blocks, and painted chocolate, as I am alive!’

‘I am afraid I shall not be able to go on to Paris with you, after all,’ Ethelberta continued to Sol. ‘Something has just happened which makes it desirable for me to return at once to England. But I will write a list of all you are to see, and where you are to go, so that it will make little difference, I hope.’

Ten minutes before this time Ethelberta had been frankly and earnestly asked by Lord Mountclere to become his bride; not only so, but he pressed her to consent to have the ceremony performed before they returned to England. Ethelberta had unquestionably been much surprised; and, barring the fact that the viscount was somewhat ancient in comparison with herself, the temptation to close with his offer was strong, and would have been felt as such by any woman in the position of Ethelberta, now a little reckless by stress of circumstances, and tinged with a bitterness of spirit against herself and the world generally. But she was experienced enough to know what heaviness might result from a hasty marriage, entered into with a mind full of concealments and suppressions which, if told, were likely to stop the marriage altogether; and after trying to bring herself to speak of her family and situation to Lord Mountclere as he stood, a certain caution triumphed, and she concluded that it would be better to postpone her reply till she could consider which of two courses it would be advisable to adopt; to write and explain to him, or to explain nothing and refuse him. The third course, to explain nothing and hasten the wedding, she rejected without hesitation. With a pervading sense of her own obligations in forming this compact it did not occur to her to ask if Lord Mountclere might not have duties of explanation equally with herself, though bearing rather on the moral than the social aspects of the case.

Her resolution not to go on to Paris was formed simply because Lord Mountclere himself was proceeding in that direction, which might lead to other unseemly rencounters with him had she, too, persevered in her journey. She accordingly gave Sol and Dan directions for their guidance to Paris and back, starting herself with Cornelia the next day to return again to Knollsea, and to decide finally and for ever what to do in the vexed question at present agitating her.

Never before in her life had she treated marriage in such a terribly cool and cynical spirit as she had done that day; she was almost frightened at herself in thinking of it. How far any known system of ethics might excuse her on the score of those curious pressures which had been brought to bear upon her life, or whether it could excuse her

at all, she had no spirit to inquire. English society appeared a gloomy concretion enough to abide in as she contemplated it on this journey home; yet, since its gloominess was less an essential quality than an accident of her point of view, that point of view she had determined to change.

There lay open to her two directions in which to move. She might annex herself to the easy-going high by wedding an old nobleman, or she might join for good and all the easy-going low, by plunging back to the level of her family, giving up all her ambitions for them, settling as the wife of a provincial music-master named Julian, with a little shop of fiddles and flutes, a couple of old pianos, a few sheets of stale music pinned to a string, and a narrow back parlour, wherein she would wait for the phenomenon of a customer. And each of these divergent grooves had its fascinations, till she reflected with regard to the first that, even though she were a legal and indisputable Lady Mountclere, she might be despised by my lord's circle, and left lone and lorn. The intermediate path of accepting Neigh or Ladywell had no more attractions for her taste than the fact of disappointing them had qualms for her conscience; and how few these were may be inferred from her opinion, true or false, that two words about the spigot on her escutcheon would sweep her lovers' affections to the antipodes. She had now and then imagined that her previous intermarriage with the Petherwin family might efface much besides her surname, but experience proved that the having been wife for a few weeks to a minor who died in his father's lifetime, did not weave such a tissue of glory about her course as would resist a speedy undoing by startling confessions on her station before her marriage, and her environments now.

CHAPTER 36.

THE HOUSE IN TOWN

Returning by way of Knollsea, where she remained a week or two, Ethelberta appeared one evening at the end of September before her house in Exonbury Crescent, accompanied by a pair of cabs with the children and luggage; but Picotee was left at Knollsea, for reasons which Ethelberta explained when the family assembled in conclave. Her father was there, and began telling her of a surprising change in Menlove — an unasked-for concession to their cause, and a vow of secrecy which he could not account for, unless any friend of Ethelberta's had bribed her.

'O no — that cannot be,' said she. Any influence of Lord Mountclere to that effect was the last thing that could enter her thoughts. 'However, what Menlove does makes little difference to me now.' And she proceeded to state that she had almost come to a decision which would entirely alter their way of living.

'I hope it will not be of the sort your last decision was,' said her mother.

'No; quite the reverse. I shall not live here in state any longer. We will let the house throughout as lodgings, while it is ours; and you and the girls must manage it. I will retire from the scene altogether, and stay for the winter at Knollsea with Picotee. I

want to consider my plans for next year, and I would rather be away from town. Picotee is left there, and I return in two days with the books and papers I require.'

'What are your plans to be?'

'I am going to be a schoolmistress — I think I am.'

'A schoolmistress?'

'Yes. And Picotee returns to the same occupation, which she ought never to have forsaken. We are going to study arithmetic and geography until Christmas; then I shall send her adrift to finish her term as pupil-teacher, while I go into a training-school. By the time I have to give up this house I shall just have got a little country school.'

'But,' said her mother, aghast, 'why not write more poems and sell 'em?'

'Why not be a governess as you were?' said her father.

'Why not go on with your tales at Mayfair Hall?' said Gwendoline.

'I'll answer as well as I can. I have decided to give up romancing because I cannot think of any more that pleases me. I have been trying at Knollsea for a fortnight, and it is no use. I will never be a governess again: I would rather be a servant. If I am a schoolmistress I shall be entirely free from all contact with the great, which is what I desire, for I hate them, and am getting almost as revolutionary as Sol. Father, I cannot endure this kind of existence any longer; I sleep at night as if I had committed a murder: I start up and see processions of people, audiences, battalions of lovers obtained under false pretences — all denouncing me with the finger of ridicule. Mother's suggestion about my marrying I followed out as far as dogged resolution would carry me, but during my journey here I have broken down; for I don't want to marry a second time among people who would regard me as an upstart or intruder. I am sick of ambition. My only longing now is to fly from society altogether, and go to any hovel on earth where I could be at peace.'

'What — has anybody been insulting you?' said Mrs. Chickereel.

'Yes; or rather I sometimes think he may have: that is, if a proposal of marriage is only removed from being a proposal of a very different kind by an accident.'

'A proposal of marriage can never be an insult,' her mother returned.

'I think otherwise,' said Ethelberta.

'So do I,' said her father.

'Unless the man was beneath you, and I don't suppose he was that,' added Mrs. Chickereel.

'You are quite right; he was not that. But we will not talk of this branch of the subject. By far the most serious concern with me is that I ought to do some good by marriage, or by heroic performance of some kind; while going back to give the rudiments of education to remote hamleteers will do none of you any good whatever.'

'Never you mind us,' said her father; 'mind yourself.'

'I shall hardly be minding myself either, in your opinion, by doing that,' said Ethelberta dryly. 'But it will be more tolerable than what I am doing now. Georgina, and Myrtle, and Emmeline, and Joey will not get the education I intended for them; but that must go, I suppose.'

‘How full of vagaries you are,’ said her mother. ‘Why won’t it do to continue as you are? No sooner have I learnt up your schemes, and got enough used to ‘em to see something in ‘em, than you must needs bewilder me again by starting some fresh one, so that my mind gets no rest at all.’

Ethelberta too keenly felt the justice of this remark, querulous as it was, to care to defend herself. It was hopeless to attempt to explain to her mother that the oscillations of her mind might arise as naturally from the perfection of its balance, like those of a logan-stone, as from inherent lightness; and such an explanation, however comforting to its subject, was little better than none to simple hearts who only could look to tangible outcrops.

‘Really, Ethelberta,’ remonstrated her mother, ‘this is very odd. Making yourself miserable in trying to get a position on our account is one thing, and not necessary; but I think it ridiculous to rush into the other extreme, and go wilfully down in the scale. You may just as well exercise your wits in trying to swim as in trying to sink.’

‘Yes; that’s what I think,’ said her father. ‘But of course Berta knows best.’

‘I think so too,’ said Gwendoline.

‘And so do I,’ said Cornelia. ‘If I had once moved about in large circles like Ethelberta, I wouldn’t go down and be a schoolmistress — not I.’

‘I own it is foolish — suppose it is,’ said Ethelberta wearily, and with a readiness of misgiving that showed how recent and hasty was the scheme. ‘Perhaps you are right, mother; anything rather than retreat. I wonder if you are right! Well, I will think again of it to-night. Do not let us speak more about it now.’

She did think of it that night, very long and painfully. The arguments of her relatives seemed ponderous as opposed to her own inconsequent longing for escape from galling trammels. If she had stood alone, the sentiment that she had begun to build but was not able to finish, by whomsoever it might have been entertained, would have had few terrors; but that the opinion should be held by her nearest of kin, to cause them pain for life, was a grievous thing. The more she thought of it, the less easy seemed the justification of her desire for obscurity. From regarding it as a high instinct she passed into a humour that gave that desire the appearance of a whim. But could she really set in train events, which, if not abortive, would take her to the altar with Viscount Mountclere?

In one determination she never faltered; to commit her sin thoroughly if she committed it at all. Her relatives believed her choice to lie between Neigh and Ladywell alone. But once having decided to pass over Christopher, whom she had loved, there could be no pausing for Ladywell because she liked him, or for Neigh in that she was influenced by him. They were both too near her level to be trusted to bear the shock of receiving her from her father’s hands. But it was possible that though her genesis might tinge with vulgarity a commoner’s household, susceptible of such depreciation, it might show as a picturesque contrast in the family circle of a peer. Hence it was just as well to go to the end of her logic, where reasons for tergiversation would be most

pronounced. This thought of the viscount, however, was a secret for her own breast alone.

Nearly the whole of that night she sat weighing — first, the question itself of marrying Lord Mountclere; and, at other times, whether, for safety, she might marry him without previously revealing family particulars hitherto held necessary to be revealed — a piece of conduct she had once felt to be indefensible. The ingenious Ethelberta, much more prone than the majority of women to theorize on conduct, felt the need of some soothing defence of the actions involved in any ambiguous course before finally committing herself to it.

She took down a well-known treatise on Utilitarianism which she had perused once before, and to which she had given her adherence ere any instance had arisen wherein she might wish to take it as a guide. Here she desultorily searched for argument, and found it; but the application of her author's philosophy to the marriage question was an operation of her own, as unjustifiable as it was likely in the circumstances.

'The ultimate end,' she read, 'with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people) is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality. . . . This being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality.'

It was an open question, so far, whether her own happiness should or should not be preferred to that of others. But that her personal interests were not to be considered as paramount appeared further on: —

'The happiness which forms the standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.'

As to whose happiness was meant by that of 'other people,' 'all concerned,' and so on, her luminous moralist soon enlightened her: —

'The occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale — in other words, to be a public benefactor — are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to.'

And that these few persons should be those endeared to her by every domestic tie no argument was needed to prove. That their happiness would be in proportion to her own well-doing, and power to remove their risks of indigence, required no proving either to her now.

By a sorry but unconscious misapplication of sound and wide reasoning did the active mind of Ethelberta thus find itself a solace. At about the midnight hour she felt more fortified on the expediency of marriage with Lord Mountclere than she had done at all since musing on it. In respect of the second query, whether or not, in that event, to conceal from Lord Mountclere the circumstances of her position till it should

be too late for him to object to them, she found her conscience inconveniently in the way of her theory, and the oracle before her afforded no hint. 'Ah — it is a point for a casuist!' she said.

An old treatise on Casuistry lay on the top shelf. She opened it — more from curiosity than from guidance this time, it must be observed — at a chapter bearing on her own problem, 'The disciplina arcani, or, the doctrine of reserve.'

Here she read that there were plenty of apparent instances of this in Scripture, and that it was formed into a recognized system in the early Church. With reference to direct acts of deception, it was argued that since there were confessedly cases where killing is no murder, might there not be cases where lying is no sin? It could not be right — or, indeed, anything but most absurd — to say in effect that no doubt circumstances would occur where every sound man would tell a lie, and would be a brute or a fool if he did not, and to say at the same time that it is quite indefensible in principle. Duty was the key to conduct then, and if in such cases duties appeared to clash they would be found not to do so on examination. The lesser duty would yield to the greater, and therefore ceased to be a duty.

This author she found to be not so tolerable; he distracted her. She put him aside and gave over reading, having decided on this second point, that she would, at any hazard, represent the truth to Lord Mountclere before listening to another word from him. 'Well, at last I have done,' she said, 'and am ready for my rôle.'

In looking back upon her past as she retired to rest, Ethelberta could almost doubt herself to be the identical woman with her who had entered on a romantic career a few short years ago. For that doubt she had good reason. She had begun as a poet of the Satanic school in a sweetened form; she was ending as a pseudo-utilitarian. Was there ever such a transmutation effected before by the action of a hard environment? It was not without a qualm of regret that she discerned how the last infirmity of a noble mind had at length nearly departed from her. She wondered if her early notes had had the genuine ring in them, or whether a poet who could be thrust by realities to a distance beyond recognition as such was a true poet at all. Yet Ethelberta's gradient had been regular: emotional poetry, light verse, romance as an object, romance as a means, thoughts of marriage as an aid to her pursuits, a vow to marry for the good of her family; in other words, from soft and playful Romanticism to distorted Benthamism. Was the moral incline upward or down?

CHAPTER 37.

KNOLLSEA — AN ORNAMENTAL VILLA

Her energies collected and fermented anew by the results of the vigil, Ethelberta left town for Knollsea, where she joined Picotee the same evening. Picotee produced a letter, which had been addressed to her sister at their London residence, but was not

received by her there, Mrs. Chickereel having forwarded it to Knollsea the day before Ethelberta arrived in town.

The crinkled writing, in character like the coast-line of Tierra del Fuego, was becoming familiar by this time. While reading the note she informed Picotee, between a quick breath and a rustle of frills, that it was from Lord Mountclere, who wrote on the subject of calling to see her, suggesting a day in the following week. 'Now, Picotee,' she continued, 'we shall have to receive him, and make the most of him, for I have altered my plans since I was last in Knollsea.'

'Altered them again? What are you going to be now — not a poor person after all?'

'Indeed not. And so I turn and turn. Can you imagine what Lord Mountclere is coming for? But don't say what you think. Before I reply to this letter we must go into new lodgings, to give them as our address. The first business to-morrow morning will be to look for the gayest house we can find; and Captain Flower and this little cabin of his must be things we have never known.'

The next day after breakfast they accordingly sallied forth.

Knollsea had recently begun to attract notice in the world. It had this year undergone visitation from a score of professional gentlemen and their wives, a minor canon, three marine painters, seven young ladies with books in their hands, and nine-and-thirty babies. Hence a few lodging-houses, of a dash and pretentiousness far beyond the mark of the old cottages which formed the original substance of the village, had been erected to meet the wants of such as these. To a building of this class Ethelberta now bent her steps, and the crush of the season having departed in the persons of three-quarters of the above-named visitors, who went away by a coach, a van, and a couple of wagonettes one morning, she found no difficulty in arranging for a red and yellow streaked villa, which was so bright and glowing that the sun seemed to be shining upon it even on a cloudy day, and the ruddiest native looked pale when standing by its walls. It was not without regret that she renounced the sailor's pretty cottage for this porticoed and balconied dwelling; but her lines were laid down clearly at last, and thither she removed forthwith.

From this brand-new house did Ethelberta pen the letter fixing the time at which she would be pleased to see Lord Mountclere.

When the hour drew nigh enormous force of will was required to keep her perturbation down. She had not distinctly told Picotee of the object of the viscount's visit, but Picotee guessed nearly enough. Ethelberta was upon the whole better pleased that the initiative had again come from him than if the first step in the new campaign had been her sending the explanatory letter, as intended and promised. She had thought almost directly after the interview at Rouen that to enlighten him by writing a confession in cold blood, according to her first intention, would be little less awkward for her in the method of telling than in the facts to be told.

So the last hair was arranged and the last fold adjusted, and she sat down to await a new page of her history. Picotee sat with her, under orders to go into the next room when Lord Mountclere should call; and Ethelberta determined to waste no time,

directly he began to make advances, in clearing up the phenomena of her existence to him; to the end that no fact which, in the event of his taking her to wife, could be used against her as an example of concealment, might remain unrelated. The collapse of his attachment under the test might, however, form the grand climax of such a play as this.

The day was rather cold for the season, and Ethelberta sat by a fire; but the windows were open, and Picotee was amusing herself on the balcony outside. The hour struck: Ethelberta fancied she could hear the wheels of a carriage creeping up the steep ascent which led to the drive before the door.

‘Is it he?’ she said quickly.

‘No,’ said Picotee, whose indifference contrasted strangely with the restlessness of her who was usually the coolest. ‘It is a man shaking down apples in the garden over the wall.’

They lingered on till some three or four minutes had gone by. ‘Surely that’s a carriage?’ said Ethelberta, then.

‘I think it is,’ said Picotee outside, stretching her neck forward as far as she could. ‘No, it is the men on the beach dragging up their boats; they expect wind to-night.’

‘How wearisome! Picotee, you may as well come inside; if he means to call he will; but he ought to be here by this time.’

It was only once more, and that some time later that she again said ‘Listen!’

‘That’s not the noise of a carriage; it is the fizz of a rocket. The coastguardsmen are practising the life-apparatus to-day, to be ready for the autumn wrecks.’

‘Ah!’ said Ethelberta, her face clearing up. Hers had not been a sweetheart’s impatience, but her mood had intensified during these minutes of suspense to a harassing mistrust of her man-compelling power, which was, if that were possible, more gloomy than disappointed love. ‘I know now where he is. That operation with the cradle-apparatus is very interesting, and he is stopping to see it. . . . But I shall not wait indoors much longer, whatever he may be stopping to see. It is very unaccountable, and vexing, after moving into this new house too. We were much more comfortable in the old one. In keeping any previous appointment in which I have been concerned he has been ridiculously early.’

‘Shall I run round?’ said Picotee, ‘and if he is not watching them we will go out.’

‘Very well,’ said her sister.

The time of Picotee’s absence seemed an age. Ethelberta heard the roar of another rocket, and still Picotee did not return. ‘What can the girl be thinking of?’ she mused. . . . ‘What a half-and-half policy mine has been! Thinking of marrying for position, and yet not making it my rigid plan to secure the man the first moment that he made his offer. So I lose the comfort of having a soul above worldliness, and my compensation for not having it likewise!’ A minute or two more and in came Picotee.

‘What has kept you so long — and how excited you look,’ said Ethelberta.

‘I thought I would stay a little while, as I had never seen a rocket-apparatus,’ said Picotee, faintly and strangely.

‘But is he there?’ asked her sister impatiently.

‘Yes — he was. He’s gone now!’

‘Lord Mountclere?’

‘No. There is no old man there at all. Mr Julian was there.’

A little ‘Ah!’ came from Ethelberta, like a note from a storm-bird at night. She turned round and went into the back room. ‘Is Mr. Julian going to call here?’ she inquired, coming forward again.

‘No — he’s gone by the steamboat. He was only passing through on his way to Sandbourne, where he is gone to settle a small business relating to his father’s affairs. He was not in Knollsea ten minutes, owing to something which detained him on the way.’

‘Did he inquire for me?’

‘No. And only think, Ethelberta — such a remarkable thing has happened, though I nearly forgot to tell you. He says that coming along the road he was overtaken by a carriage, and when it had just passed him one of the horses shied, pushed the other down a slope, and overturned the carriage. One wheel came off and trundled to the bottom of the hill by itself. Christopher of course ran up, and helped out of the carriage an old gentleman — now do you know what’s likely?’

‘It was Lord Mountclere. I am glad that’s the cause,’ said Ethelberta involuntarily.

‘I imagined you would suppose it to be Lord Mountclere. But Mr. Julian did not know the gentleman, and said nothing about who he might be.’

‘Did he describe him?’

‘Not much — just a little.’

‘Well?’

‘He said he was a sly old dog apparently, to hear how he swore in whispers. This affair is what made Mr. Julian so late that he had no time to call here. Lord Mountclere’s ankle — if it was Lord Mountclere — was badly sprained. But the servants were not injured beyond a scratch on the coachman’s face. Then they got another carriage and drove at once back again. It must be he, or else why is he not come? It is a pity, too, that Mr. Julian was hindered by this, so that there was no opportunity for him to bide a bit in Knollsea.’

Ethelberta was not disposed to believe that Christopher would have called, had time favoured him to the utmost. Between himself and her there was that kind of division which is more insurmountable than enmity; for estrangements produced by good judgment will last when those of feeling break down in smiles. Not the lovers who part in passion, but the lovers who part in friendship, are those who most frequently part for ever.

‘Did you tell Mr. Julian that the injured gentleman was possibly Lord Mountclere, and that he was coming here?’ said Ethelberta.

‘I made no remark at all — I did not think of him till afterwards.’

The inquiry was hardly necessary, for Picotee’s words would dry away like a brook in the sands when she held conversation with Christopher.

As they had anticipated, the sufferer was no other than their intending visitor. Next morning there was a note explaining the accident, and expressing its writer's suffering from the cruel delay as greater than that from the swollen ankle, which was progressing favourably.

Nothing further was heard of Lord Mountclere for more than a week, when she received another letter, which put an end to her season of relaxation, and once more braced her to the contest. This epistle was very courteously written, and in point of correctness, propriety, and gravity, might have come from the quill of a bishop. Herein the old nobleman gave a further description of the accident, but the main business of the communication was to ask her if, since he was not as yet very active, she would come to Enckworth Court and delight himself and a small group of friends who were visiting there.

She pondered over the letter as she walked by the shore that day, and after some hesitation decided to go.

CHAPTER 38.

ENCKWORTH COURT

It was on a dull, stagnant, noiseless afternoon of autumn that Ethelberta first crossed the threshold of Enckworth Court. The daylight was so lowered by the imperious roof of cloud overhead that it scarcely reached further into Lord Mountclere's entrance-hall than to the splays of the windows, even but an hour or two after midday; and indoors the glitter of the fire reflected itself from the very panes, so inconsiderable were the opposing rays.

Enckworth Court, in its main part, had not been standing more than a hundred years. At that date the weakened portions of the original mediaeval structure were pulled down and cleared away, old jambs being carried off for rick-staddles, and the foliated timbers of the hall roof making themselves useful as fancy chairs in the summer-houses of rising inns. A new block of masonry was built up from the ground of such height and lordliness that the remnant of the old pile left standing became as a mere cup-bearer and culinary menial beside it. The rooms in this old fragment, which had in times past been considered sufficiently dignified for dining-hall, withdrawing-room, and so on, were now reckoned barely high enough for sculleries, servants' hall, and laundries, the whole of which were arranged therein.

The modern portion had been planned with such a total disregard of association, that the very rudeness of the contrast gave an interest to the mass which it might have wanted had perfect harmony been attempted between the old nucleus and its adjuncts, a probable result if the enlargement had taken place later on in time. The issue was that the hooded windows, simple string-courses, and random masonry of the Gothic workman, stood elbow to elbow with the equal-spaced ashlar, architraves, and fasciae of the Classic addition, each telling its distinct tale as to stage of thought and domestic

habit without any of those artifices of blending or restoration by which the seeker for history in stones will be utterly hoodwinked in time to come.

To the left of the door and vestibule which Ethelberta passed through rose the principal staircase, constructed of a freestone so milk-white and delicately moulded as to be easily conceived in the lamplight as of biscuit-ware. Who, unacquainted with the secrets of geometrical construction, could imagine that, hanging so airily there, to all appearance supported on nothing, were twenty or more tons dead weight of stone, that would have made a prison for an elephant if so arranged? The art which produced this illusion was questionable, but its success was undoubted. 'How lovely!' said Ethelberta, as she looked at the fairy ascent. 'His staircase alone is worth my hand!'

Passing along by the colonnade, which partly fenced the staircase from the visitor, the saloon was reached, an apartment forming a double cube. About the left-hand end of this were grouped the drawing-rooms and library; while on the right was the dining-hall, with billiard, smoking, and gun rooms in mysterious remoteness beyond.

Without attempting to trace an analogy between a man and his mansion, it may be stated that everything here, though so dignified and magnificent, was not conceived in quite the true and eternal spirit of art. It was a house in which Pugin would have torn his hair. Those massive blocks of red-veined marble lining the hall — emulating in their surface-glitter the *Escalier de Marbre* at Versailles — were cunning imitations in paint and plaster by workmen brought from afar for the purpose, at a prodigious expense, by the present viscount's father, and recently repaired and re-varnished. The dark green columns and pilasters corresponding were brick at the core. Nay, the external walls, apparently of massive and solid freestone, were only veneered with that material, being, like the pillars, of brick within.

To a stone mask worn by a brick face a story naturally appertained — one which has since done service in other quarters. When the vast addition had just been completed King George visited Enckworth. Its owner pointed out the features of its grand architectural attempt, and waited for commendation.

'Brick, brick, brick,' said the king.

The Georgian Lord Mountclere blushed faintly, albeit to his very poll, and said nothing more about his house that day. When the king was gone he sent frantically for the craftsmen recently dismissed, and soon the green lawns became again the colour of a Nine-Elms cement wharf. Thin freestone slabs were affixed to the whole series of fronts by copper cramps and dowels, each one of substance sufficient to have furnished a poor boy's pocket with pennies for a month, till not a speck of the original surface remained, and the edifice shone in all the grandeur of massive masonry that was not massive at all. But who remembered this save the builder and his crew? and as long as nobody knew the truth, pretence looked just as well.

What was honest in Enckworth Court was that portion of the original edifice which still remained, now degraded to subservient uses. Where the untitled Mountclere of the White Rose faction had spread his knees over the brands, when the place was a castle and not a court, the still-room maid now simmered her preserves; and where

Elizabethan mothers and daughters of that sturdy line had tapestried the love-scenes of Isaac and Jacob, boots and shoes were now cleaned and coals stowed away.

Lord Mountclere had so far recovered from the sprain as to be nominally quite well, under pressure of a wish to receive guests. The sprain had in one sense served him excellently. He had now a reason, apart from that of years, for walking with his stick, and took care to let the reason be frequently known. To-day he entertained a larger number of persons than had been assembled within his walls for a great length of time.

Until after dinner Ethelberta felt as if she were staying at an hotel. Few of the people whom she had met at the meeting of the Imperial Association greeted her here. The viscount's brother was not present, but Sir Cyril Blandsbury and his wife were there, a lively pair of persons, entertaining as actors, and friendly as dogs. Beyond these all the faces and figures were new to her, though they were handsome and dashing enough to satisfy a court chronicler. Ethelberta, in a dress sloped about as high over the shoulder as would have drawn approval from Reynolds, and expostulation from Lely, thawed and thawed each friend who came near her, and sent him or her away smiling; yet she felt a little surprise. She had seldom visited at a country-house, and knew little of the ordinary composition of a group of visitors within its walls; but the present assemblage seemed to want much of that old-fashioned stability and quaint monumental dignity she had expected to find under this historical roof. Nobody of her entertainer's own rank appeared. Not a single clergyman was there. A tendency to talk Walpolean scandal about foreign courts was particularly manifest. And although tropical travellers, Indian officers and their wives, courteous exiles, and descendants of Irish kings, were infinitely more pleasant than Lord Mountclere's landed neighbours would probably have been, to such a cosmopolite as Ethelberta a calm Tory or old Whig company would have given a greater treat. They would have struck as gratefully upon her senses as sylvan scenery after crags and cliffs, or silence after the roar of a cataract.

It was evening, and all these personages at Enckworth Court were merry, snug, and warm within its walls. Dinner-time had passed, and everything had gone on well, when Mrs. Tara O'Fanagan, who had a gold-clamped tooth, which shone every now and then, asked Ethelberta if she would amuse them by telling a story, since nobody present, except Lord Mountclere, had ever heard one from her lips.

Seeing that Ethelberta had been working at that art as a profession, it can hardly be said that the question was conceived with tact, though it was put with grace. Lord Mountclere evidently thought it objectionable, for he looked unhappy. To only one person in the brilliant room did the request appear as a timely accident, and that was to Ethelberta herself. Her honesty was always making war upon her manoeuvres, and shattering their delicate meshes, to her great inconvenience and delay. Thus there arose those devious impulses and tangential flights which spoil the works of every would-be schemer who instead of being wholly machine is half heart. One of these now was to show herself as she really was, not only to Lord Mountclere, but to his friends assembled, whom, in her ignorance, she respected more than they deserved, and so get

rid of that self-reproach which had by this time reached a morbid pitch, through her over-sensitiveness to a situation in which a large majority of women and men would have seen no falseness.

Full of this curious intention, she quietly assented to the request, and laughingly bade them put themselves in listening order.

‘An old story will suit us,’ said the lady who had importuned her. ‘We have never heard one.’

‘No; it shall be quite new,’ she replied. ‘One not yet made public; though it soon will be.’

The narrative began by introducing to their notice a girl of the poorest and meanest parentage, the daughter of a serving-man, and the fifth of ten children. She graphically recounted, as if they were her own, the strange dreams and ambitious longings of this child when young, her attempts to acquire education, partial failures, partial successes, and constant struggles; instancing how, on one of these occasions, the girl concealed herself under a bookcase of the library belonging to the mansion in which her father served as footman, and having taken with her there, like a young Fawkes, matches and a halfpenny candle, was going to sit up all night reading when the family had retired, until her father discovered and prevented her scheme. Then followed her experiences as nursery-governess, her evening lessons under self-selected masters, and her ultimate rise to a higher grade among the teaching sisterhood. Next came another epoch. To the mansion in which she was engaged returned a truant son, between whom and the heroine an attachment sprang up. The master of the house was an ambitious gentleman just knighted, who, perceiving the state of their hearts, harshly dismissed the homeless governess, and rated the son, the consequence being that the youthful pair resolved to marry secretly, and carried their resolution into effect. The runaway journey came next, and then a moving description of the death of the young husband, and the terror of the bride.

The guests began to look perplexed, and one or two exchanged whispers. This was not at all the kind of story that they had expected; it was quite different from her usual utterances, the nature of which they knew by report. Ethelberta kept her eye upon Lord Mountclere. Soon, to her amazement, there was that in his face which told her that he knew the story and its heroine quite well. When she delivered the sentence ending with the professedly fictitious words: ‘I thus was reduced to great distress, and vainly cast about me for directions what to do,’ Lord Mountclere’s manner became so excited and anxious that it acted reciprocally upon Ethelberta; her voice trembled, she moved her lips but uttered nothing. To bring the story up to the date of that very evening had been her intent, but it was beyond her power. The spell was broken; she blushed with distress and turned away, for the folly of a disclosure here was but too apparent.

Though every one saw that she had broken down, none of them appeared to know the reason why, or to have the clue to her performance. Fortunately Lord Mountclere came to her aid.

‘Let the first part end here,’ he said, rising and approaching her. ‘We have been well entertained so far. I could scarcely believe that the story I was listening to was utterly an invention, so vividly does Mrs. Petherwin bring the scenes before our eyes. She must now be exhausted; we will have the remainder to-morrow.’

They all agreed that this was well, and soon after fell into groups, and dispersed about the rooms. When everybody’s attention was thus occupied Lord Mountclere whispered to Ethelberta tremulously, ‘Don’t tell more: you think too much of them: they are no better than you! Will you meet me in the little winter garden two minutes hence? Pass through that door, and along the glass passage.’ He himself left the room by an opposite door.

She had not set three steps in the warm snug octagon of glass and plants when he appeared on the other side.

‘You knew it all before!’ she said, looking keenly at him. ‘Who told you, and how long have you known it?’

‘Before yesterday or last week,’ said Lord Mountclere. ‘Even before we met in France. Why are you so surprised?’

Ethelberta had been surprised, and very greatly, to find him, as it were, secreted in the very rear of her position. That nothing she could tell was new to him was a good deal to think of, but it was little beside the recollection that he had actually made his first declaration in the face of that knowledge of her which she had supposed so fatal to all her matrimonial ambitions.

‘And now only one point remains to be settled,’ he said, taking her hand. ‘You promised at Rouen that at our next interview you would honour me with a decisive reply — one to make me happy for ever.’

‘But my father and friends?’ said she.

‘Are nothing to be concerned about. Modern developments have shaken up the classes like peas in a hopper. An annuity, and a comfortable cottage — ’

‘My brothers are workmen.’

‘Manufacture is the single vocation in which a man’s prospects may be said to be illimitable. Hee-hee! — they may buy me up before they die! And now what stands in the way? It would take fifty alliances with fifty families so little disreputable as yours, darling, to drag mine down.’

Ethelberta had anticipated the scene, and settled her course; what had to be said and done here was mere formality; yet she had been unable to go straight to the assent required. However, after these words of self-depreciation, which were let fall as much for her own future ease of conscience as for his present warning, she made no more ado.

‘I shall think it a great honour to be your wife,’ she said simply.

CHAPTER 39.

KNOLLSEA — MELCHESTER

The year was now moving on apace, but Ethelberta and Picotee chose to remain at Knollsea, in the brilliant variegated brick and stone villa to which they had removed in order to be in keeping with their ascending fortunes. Autumn had begun to make itself felt and seen in bolder and less subtle ways than at first. In the morning now, on coming downstairs, in place of a yellowish-green leaf or two lying in a corner of the lowest step, which had been the only previous symptoms around the house, she saw dozens of them playing at corkscrews in the wind, directly the door was opened. Beyond, towards the sea, the slopes and scarps that had been muffled with a thick robe of cliff herbage, were showing their chill grey substance through the withered verdure, like the background of velvet whence the pile has been fretted away. Unexpected breezes broomed and rasped the smooth bay in evanescent patches of stippled shade, and, besides the small boats, the ponderous lighters used in shipping stone were hauled up the beach in anticipation of the equinoctial attack.

A few days after Ethelberta's reception at Enckworth, an improved stanhope, driven by Lord Mountclere himself, climbed up the hill until it was opposite her door. A few notes from a piano softly played reached his ear as he descended from his place: on being shown in to his betrothed, he could perceive that she had just left the instrument. Moreover, a tear was visible in her eye when she came near him.

They discoursed for several minutes in the manner natural between a defenceless young widow and an old widower in Lord Mountclere's position to whom she was plighted — a great deal of formal considerateness making itself visible on her part, and of extreme tenderness on his. While thus occupied, he turned to the piano, and casually glanced at a piece of music lying open upon it. Some words of writing at the top expressed that it was the composer's original copy, presented by him, Christopher Julian, to the author of the song. Seeing that he noticed the sheet somewhat lengthily, Ethelberta remarked that it had been an offering made to her a long time ago — a melody written to one of her own poems.

'In the writing of the composer,' observed Lord Mountclere, with interest. 'An offering from the musician himself — very gratifying and touching. Mr. Christopher Julian is the name I see upon it, I believe? I knew his father, Dr. Julian, a Sandbourne man, if I recollect.'

'Yes,' said Ethelberta placidly. But it was really with an effort. The song was the identical one which Christopher sent up to her from Sandbourne when the fire of her hope burnt high for less material ends; and the discovery of the sheet among her music that day had started eddies of emotion for some time checked.

'I am sorry you have been grieved,' said Lord Mountclere, with gloomy restlessness. 'Grieved?' said Ethelberta.

'Did I not see a tear there? or did my eyes deceive me?'

‘You might have seen one.’

‘Ah! a tear, and a song. I think — ’

‘You naturally think that a woman who cries over a man’s gift must be in love with the giver?’ Ethelberta looked him serenely in the face.

Lord Mountclere’s jealous suspicions were considerably shaken.

‘Not at all,’ he said hastily, as if ashamed. ‘One who cries over a song is much affected by its sentiment.’

‘Do you expect authors to cry over their own words?’ she inquired, merging defence in attack. ‘I am afraid they don’t often do that.’

‘You would make me uneasy.’

‘On the contrary, I would reassure you. Are you not still doubting?’ she asked, with a pleasant smile.

‘I cannot doubt you!’

‘Swear, like a faithful knight.’

‘I swear, my fairy, my flower!’

After this the old man appeared to be pondering; indeed, his thoughts could hardly be said to be present when he uttered the words. For though the tabernacle was getting shaky by reason of years and merry living, so that what was going on inside might often be guessed without by the movement of the hangings, as in a puppet-show with worn canvas, he could be quiet enough when scheming any plot of particular neatness, which had less emotion than impishness in it. Such an innocent amusement he was pondering now.

Before leaving her, he asked if she would accompany him to a morning instrumental concert at Melchester, which was to take place in the course of that week for the benefit of some local institution.

‘Melchester,’ she repeated faintly, and observed him as searchingly as it was possible to do without exposing herself to a raking fire in return. Could he know that Christopher was living there, and was this said in prolongation of his recent suspicion? But Lord Mountclere’s face gave no sign.

‘You forget one fatal objection,’ said she; ‘the secrecy in which it is imperative that the engagement between us should be kept.’

‘I am not known in Melchester without my carriage; nor are you.’

‘We may be known by somebody on the road.’

‘Then let it be arranged in this way. I will not call here to take you up, but will meet you at the station at Anglebury; and we can go on together by train without notice. Surely there can be no objection to that? It would be mere prudishness to object, since we are to become one so shortly.’ He spoke a little impatiently. It was plain that he particularly wanted her to go to Melchester.

‘I merely meant that there was a chance of discovery in our going out together. And discovery means no marriage.’ She was pale now, and sick at heart, for it seemed that the viscount must be aware that Christopher dwelt at that place, and was about to test her concerning him.

‘Why does it mean no marriage?’ said he.

‘My father might, and almost certainly would, object to it. Although he cannot control me, he might entreat me.’

‘Why would he object?’ said Lord Mountclere uneasily, and somewhat haughtily.

‘I don’t know.’

‘But you will be my wife — say again that you will.’

‘I will.’

He breathed. ‘He will not object — hee-hee!’ he said. ‘O no — I think you will be mine now.’

‘I have said so. But look to me all the same.’

‘You malign yourself, dear one. But you will meet me at Anglebury, as I wish, and go on to Melchester with me?’

‘I shall be pleased to — if my sister may accompany me.’

‘Ah — your sister. Yes, of course.’

They settled the time of the journey, and when the visit had been stretched out as long as it reasonably could be with propriety, Lord Mountclere took his leave.

When he was again seated on the driving-phaeton which he had brought that day, Lord Mountclere looked gleeful, and shrewd enough in his own opinion to outwit Mephistopheles. As soon as they were ascending a hill, and he could find time to free his hand, he pulled off his glove, and drawing from his pocket a programme of the Melchester concert referred to, contemplated therein the name of one of the intended performers. The name was that of Mr. C. Julian. Replacing it again, he looked ahead, and some time after murmured with wily mirth, ‘An excellent test — a lucky thought!’

Nothing of importance occurred during the intervening days. At two o’clock on the appointed afternoon Ethelberta stepped from the train at Melchester with the viscount, who had met her as proposed; she was followed behind by Picotee.

The concert was to be held at the Town-hall half-an-hour later. They entered a fly in waiting, and secure from recognition, were driven leisurely in that direction, Picotee silent and absorbed with her own thoughts.

‘There’s the Cathedral,’ said Lord Mountclere humorously, as they caught a view of one of its towers through a street leading into the Close.

‘Yes.’

‘It boasts of a very fine organ.’

‘Ah.’

‘And the organist is a clever young man.’

‘Oh.’

Lord Mountclere paused a moment or two. ‘By the way, you may remember that he is the Mr. Julian who set your song to music!’

‘I recollect it quite well.’ Her heart was horrified and she thought Lord Mountclere must be developing into an inquisitor, which perhaps he was. But none of this reached her face.

They turned in the direction of the Hall, were set down, and entered.

The large assembly-room set apart for the concert was upstairs, and it was possible to enter it in two ways: by the large doorway in front of the landing, or by turning down a side passage leading to council-rooms and subsidiary apartments of small size, which were allotted to performers in any exhibition; thus they could enter from one of these directly upon the platform, without passing through the audience.

‘Will you seat yourselves here?’ said Lord Mountclere, who, instead of entering by the direct door, had brought the young women round into this green-room, as it may be called. ‘You see we have come in privately enough; when the musicians arrive we can pass through behind them, and step down to our seats from the front.’

The players could soon be heard tuning in the next room. Then one came through the passage-room where the three waited, and went in, then another, then another. Last of all came Julian.

Ethelberta sat facing the door, but Christopher, never in the least expecting her there, did not recognize her till he was quite inside. When he had really perceived her to be the one who had troubled his soul so many times and long, the blood in his face — never very much — passed off and left it, like the shade of a cloud. Between them stood a table covered with green baize, which, reflecting upwards a band of sunlight shining across the chamber, flung upon his already white features the virescent hues of death. The poor musician, whose person, much to his own inconvenience, constituted a complete breviary of the gentle emotions, looked as if he were going to fall down in a faint.

Ethelberta flung at Lord Mountclere a look which clipped him like pincers: he never forgot it as long as he lived.

‘This is your pretty jealous scheme — I see it!’ she hissed to him, and without being able to control herself went across to Julian.

But a slight gasp came from behind the door where Picotee had been sitting. Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere looked that way: and behold, Picotee had nearly swooned.

Ethelberta’s show of passion went as quickly as it had come, for she felt that a splendid triumph had been put into her hands. ‘Now do you see the truth?’ she whispered to Lord Mountclere without a drachm of feeling; pointing to Christopher and then to Picotee — as like as two snowdrops now.

‘I do, I do,’ murmured the viscount hastily.

They both went forward to help Christopher in restoring the fragile Picotee: he had set himself to that task as suddenly as he possibly could to cover his own near approach to the same condition. Not much help was required, the little girl’s indisposition being quite momentary, and she sat up in the chair again.

‘Are you better?’ said Ethelberta to Christopher.

‘Quite well — quite,’ he said, smiling faintly. ‘I am glad to see you. I must, I think, go into the next room now.’ He bowed and walked out awkwardly.

‘Are you better, too?’ she said to Picotee.

‘Quite well,’ said Picotee.

‘You are quite sure you know between whom the love lies now — eh?’ Ethelberta asked in a sarcastic whisper of Lord Mountclere.

‘I am — beyond a doubt,’ murmured the anxious nobleman; he feared that look of hers, which was not less dominant than irresistible.

Some additional moments given to thought on the circumstances rendered Ethelberta still more indignant and intractable. She went out at the door by which they had entered, along the passage, and down the stairs. A shuffling footstep followed, but she did not turn her head. When they reached the bottom of the stairs the carriage had gone, their exit not being expected till two hours later. Ethelberta, nothing daunted, swept along the pavement and down the street in a turbulent prance, Lord Mountclere trotting behind with a jowl reduced to a mere nothing by his concern at the discourtesy into which he had been lured by jealous whisperings.

‘My dearest — forgive me; I confess I doubted you — but I was beside myself,’ came to her ears from over her shoulder. But Ethelberta walked on as before.

Lord Mountclere sighed like a poet over a ledger. ‘An old man — who is not very old — naturally torments himself with fears of losing — no, no — it was an innocent jest of mine — you will forgive a joke — hee-hee?’ he said again, on getting no reply.

‘You had no right to mistrust me!’

‘I do not — you did not blench. You should have told me before that it was your sister and not yourself who was entangled with him.’

‘You brought me to Melchester on purpose to confront him!’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Are you not ashamed?’

‘I am satisfied. It is better to know the truth by any means than to die of suspense; better for us both — surely you see that?’

They had by this time got to the end of a long street, and into a deserted side road by which the station could be indirectly reached. Picotee appeared in the distance as a mere distracted speck of girlhood, following them because not knowing what else to do in her sickness of body and mind. Once out of sight here, Ethelberta began to cry.

‘Ethelberta,’ said Lord Mountclere, in an agony of trouble, ‘don’t be vexed! It was an inconsiderate trick — I own it. Do what you will, but do not desert me now! I could not bear it — you would kill me if you were to leave me. Anything, but be mine.’

Ethelberta continued her way, and drying her eyes entered the station, where, on searching the time-tables, she found there would be no train for Anglebury for the next two hours. Then more slowly she turned towards the town again, meeting Picotee and keeping in her company.

Lord Mountclere gave up the chase, but as he wished to get into the town again, he followed in the same direction. When Ethelberta had proceeded as far as the Red Lion Hotel, she turned towards it with her companion, and being shown to a room, the two sisters shut themselves in. Lord Mountclere paused and entered the White Hart, the rival hotel to the Red Lion, which stood in an adjoining street.

Having secluded himself in an apartment here, walked from window to window awhile, and made himself generally uncomfortable, he sat down to the writing materials on the table, and concocted a note: —

‘WHITE HART HOTEL.

‘MY DEAR MRS. PETHERWIN, — You do not mean to be so cruel as to break your plighted word to me? Remember, there is no love without much jealousy, and lovers are ever full of sighs and misgiving. I have owned to as much contrition as can reasonably be expected. I could not endure the suspicion that you loved another. — Yours always,

‘MOUNTCLERE.’

This he sent, watching from the window its progress along the street. He awaited anxiously for an answer, and waited long. It was nearly twenty minutes before he could hear a messenger approaching the door. Yes — she had actually sent a reply; he prized it as if it had been the first encouragement he had ever in his life received from woman: —

‘MY LORD’ (wrote Ethelberta), — ‘I am not prepared at present to enter into the question of marriage at all. The incident which has occurred affords me every excuse for withdrawing my promise, since it was given under misapprehensions on a point that materially affects my happiness.

‘E. PETHERWIN.’

‘Ho-ho-ho — Miss Hoity-toity!’ said Lord Mountclere, trotting up and down. But, remembering it was her June against his November, this did not last long, and he frantically replied: —

‘MY DARLING, — I cannot release you — I must do anything to keep my treasure. Will you not see me for a few minutes, and let bygones go to the winds?’

Was ever a thrush so safe in a cherry net before!

The messenger came back with the information that Mrs. Petherwin had taken a walk to the Close, her companion alone remaining at the hotel. There being nothing else left for the viscount to do, he put on his hat, and went out on foot in the same direction. He had not walked far when he saw Ethelberta moving slowly along the High Street before him.

Ethelberta was at this hour wandering without any fixed intention beyond that of consuming time. She was very wretched, and very indifferent: the former when thinking of her past, the latter when thinking of the days to come. While she walked thus unconscious of the streets, and their groups of other wayfarers, she saw Christopher emerge from a door not many paces in advance, and close it behind him: he stood for a moment on the step before descending into the road.

She could not, even had she wished it, easily check her progress without rendering the chance of his perceiving her still more certain. But she did not wish any such thing, and it made little difference, for he had already seen her in taking his survey round, and came down from the door to her side. It was impossible for anything formal to pass between them now.

‘You are not at the concert, Mr. Julian?’ she said. ‘I am glad to have a better opportunity of speaking to you, and of asking for your sister. Unfortunately there is not time for us to call upon her to-day.’

‘Thank you, but it makes no difference,’ said Julian, with somewhat sad reserve. ‘I will tell her I have met you; she is away from home just at present.’ And finding that Ethelberta did not rejoin immediately he observed, ‘The chief organist, old Dr. Breeve, has taken my place at the concert, as it was arranged he should do after the opening part. I am now going to the Cathedral for the afternoon service. You are going there too?’

‘I thought of looking at the interior for a moment.’

So they went on side by side, saying little; for it was a situation in which scarcely any appropriate thing could be spoken. Ethelberta was the less reluctant to walk in his company because of the provocation to skittishness that Lord Mountclere had given, a provocation which she still resented. But she was far from wishing to increase his jealousy; and yet this was what she was doing, Lord Mountclere being a perturbed witness from behind of all that was passing now.

They turned the corner of the short street of connection which led under an archway to the Cathedral Close, the old peer dogging them still. Christopher seemed to warm up a little, and repeated the invitation. ‘You will come with your sister to see us before you leave?’ he said. ‘We have tea at six.’

‘We shall have left Melchester before that time. I am now only waiting for the train.’

‘You two have not come all the way from Knollsea alone?’

‘Part of the way,’ said Ethelberta evasively.

‘And going back alone?’

‘No. Only for the last five miles. At least that was the arrangement — I am not quite sure if it holds good.’

‘You don’t wish me to see you safely in the train?’

‘It is not necessary: thank you very much. We are well used to getting about the world alone, and from Melchester to Knollsea is no serious journey, late or early. . . . Yet I think I ought, in honesty, to tell you that we are not entirely by ourselves in Melchester to-day.’

‘I remember I saw your friend — relative — in the room at the Town-hall. It did not occur to my mind for the moment that he was any other than a stranger standing there.’

‘He is not a relative,’ she said, with perplexity. ‘I hardly know, Christopher, how to explain to you my position here to-day, because of some difficulties that have arisen since we have been in the town, which may alter it entirely. On that account I will be less frank with you than I should like to be, considering how long we have known each other. It would be wrong, however, if I were not to tell you that there has been a possibility of my marriage with him.’

‘The elderly gentleman?’

‘Yes. And I came here in his company, intending to return with him. But you shall know all soon. Picotee shall write to Faith.’

‘I always think the Cathedral looks better from this point than from the point usually chosen by artists,’ he said, with nervous quickness, directing her glance upwards to the silent structure, now misty and unrelieved by either high light or deep shade. ‘We get the grouping of the chapels and choir-aisles more clearly shown — and the whole culminates to a more perfect pyramid from this spot — do you think so?’

‘Yes. I do.’

A little further, and Christopher stopped to enter, when Ethelberta bade him farewell. ‘I thought at one time that our futures might have been different from what they are apparently becoming,’ he said then, regarding her as a stall-reader regards the brilliant book he cannot afford to buy. ‘But one gets weary of repining about that. I wish Picotee and yourself could see us oftener; I am as confirmed a bachelor now as Faith is an old maid. I wonder if — should the event you contemplate occur — you and he will ever visit us, or we shall ever visit you!’

Christopher was evidently imagining the elderly gentleman to be some retired farmer, or professional man already so intermixed with the metamorphic classes of society as not to be surprised or inconvenienced by her beginnings; one who wished to secure Ethelberta as an ornament to his parlour fire in a quiet spirit, and in no intoxicated mood regardless of issues. She could scarcely reply to his supposition; and the parting was what might have been predicted from a conversation so carefully controlled.

Ethelberta, as she had intended, now went on further, and entering the nave began to inspect the sallow monuments which lined the grizzled pile. She did not perceive amid the shadows an old gentleman who had crept into the mouldy place as stealthily as a worm into a skull, and was keeping himself carefully beyond her observation. She continued to regard feature after feature till the choristers had filed in from the south side, and peals broke forth from the organ on the black oaken mass at the junction of nave and choir, shaking every cobweb in the dusky vaults, and Ethelberta’s heart no less. She knew the fingers that were pressing out those rolling sounds, and knowing them, became absorbed in tracing their progress. To go towards the organ-loft was an act of unconsciousness, and she did not pause till she stood almost beneath it.

Ethelberta was awakened from vague imaginings by the close approach of the old gentleman alluded to, who spoke with a great deal of agitation.

‘I have been trying to meet with you,’ said Lord Mountclere. ‘Come, let us be friends again! — Ethelberta, I **MUST** not lose you! You cannot mean that the engagement shall be broken off?’ He was far too desirous to possess her at any price now to run a second risk of exasperating her, and forbore to make any allusion to the recent pantomime between herself and Christopher that he had beheld, though it might reasonably have filled him with dread and petulance.

‘I do not mean anything beyond this,’ said she, ‘that I entirely withdraw from it on the faintest sign that you have not abandoned such miserable jealous proceedings as those you adopted to-day.’

‘I have quite abandoned them. Will you come a little further this way, and walk in the aisle? You do still agree to be mine?’

‘If it gives you any pleasure, I do.’

‘Yes, yes. I implore that the marriage may be soon — very soon.’ The viscount spoke hastily, for the notes of the organ which were plunging into their ears ever and anon from the hands of his young rival seemed inconveniently and solemnly in the way of his suit.

‘Well, Lord Mountclere?’

‘Say in a few days? — it is the only thing that will satisfy me.’

‘I am absolutely indifferent as to the day. If it pleases you to have it early I am willing.’

‘Dare I ask that it may be this week?’ said the delighted old man.

‘I could not say that.’

‘But you can name the earliest day?’

‘I cannot now. We had better be going from here, I think.’

The Cathedral was filling with shadows, and cold breathings came round the piers, for it was November, when night very soon succeeds noon in spots where noon is sobered to the pallor of eve. But the service was not yet over, and before quite leaving the building Ethelberta cast one other glance towards the organ and thought of him behind it. At this moment her attention was arrested by the form of her sister Picotee, who came in at the north door, closed the lobby-wicket softly, and went lightly forward to the choir. When within a few yards of it she paused by a pillar, and lingered there looking up at the organ as Ethelberta had done. No sound was coming from the ponderous mass of tubes just then; but in a short space a whole crowd of tones spread from the instrument to accompany the words of a response. Picotee started at the burst of music as if taken in a dishonest action, and moved on in a manner intended to efface the lover’s loiter of the preceding moments from her own consciousness no less than from other people’s eyes.

‘Do you see that?’ said Ethelberta. ‘That little figure is my dearest sister. Could you but ensure a marriage between her and him she listens to, I would do anything you wish!’

‘That is indeed a gracious promise,’ said Lord Mountclere. ‘And would you agree to what I asked just now?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’ A gleeful spark accompanied this.

‘As you requested.’

‘This week? The day after to-morrow?’

‘If you will. But remember what lies on your side of the contract. I fancy I have given you a task beyond your powers.’

‘Well, darling, we are at one at last,’ said Lord Mountclere, rubbing his hand against his side. ‘And if my task is heavy and I cannot guarantee the result, I can make it very probable. Marry me on Friday — the day after to-morrow — and I will do all that money and influence can effect to bring about their union.’

‘You solemnly promise? You will never cease to give me all the aid in your power until the thing is done?’

‘I do solemnly promise — on the conditions named.’

‘Very good. You will have ensured my fulfilment of my promise before I can ensure yours; but I take your word.’

‘You will marry me on Friday! Give me your hand upon it.’

She gave him her hand.

‘Is it a covenant?’ he asked.

‘It is,’ said she.

Lord Mountclere warmed from surface to centre as if he had drunk of hippocras, and, after holding her hand for some moments, raised it gently to his lips.

‘Two days and you are mine,’ he said.

‘That I believe I never shall be.’

‘Never shall be? Why, darling?’

‘I don’t know. Some catastrophe will prevent it. I shall be dead perhaps.’

‘You distress me. Ah, — you meant me — you meant that I should be dead, because you think I am old! But that is a mistake — I am not very old!’

‘I thought only of myself — nothing of you.’

‘Yes, I know. Dearest, it is dismal and chilling here — let us go.’

Ethelberta mechanically moved with him, and felt there was no retreating now. In the meantime the young ladykin whom the solemn vowing concerned had lingered round the choir screen, as if fearing to enter, yet loth to go away. The service terminated, the heavy books were closed, doors were opened, and the feet of the few persons who had attended evensong began pattering down the paved alleys. Not wishing Picotee to know that the object of her secret excursion had been discovered, Ethelberta now stepped out of the west doorway with the viscount before Picotee had emerged from the other; and they walked along the path together until she overtook them.

‘I fear it becomes necessary for me to stay in Melchester to-night,’ said Lord Mountclere. ‘I have a few matters to attend to here, as the result of our arrangements. But I will first accompany you as far as Anglebury, and see you safely into a carriage there that shall take you home. To-morrow I will drive to Knollsea, when we will make the final preparations.’

Ethelberta would not have him go so far and back again, merely to attend upon her; hence they parted at the railway, with due and correct tenderness; and when the train had gone, Lord Mountclere returned into the town on the special business he had mentioned, for which there remained only the present evening and the following morning, if he were to call upon her in the afternoon of the next day — the day before

the wedding — now so recklessly hastened on his part, and so coolly assented to on hers.

By the time that the two young people had started it was nearly dark. Some portions of the railway stretched through little copses and plantations where, the leaf-shedding season being now at its height, red and golden patches of fallen foliage lay on either side of the rails; and as the travellers passed, all these death-stricken bodies boiled up in the whirlwind created by the velocity, and were sent flying right and left of them in myriads, a clean-fanned track being left behind.

Picotee was called from the observation of these phenomena by a remark from her sister: 'Picotee, the marriage is to be very early indeed. It is to be the day after to-morrow — if it can. Nevertheless I don't believe in the fact — I cannot.'

'Did you arrange it so? Nobody can make you marry so soon.'

'I agreed to the day,' murmured Ethelberta languidly.

'How can it be? The gay dresses and the preparations and the people — how can they be collected in the time, Berta? And so much more of that will be required for a lord of the land than for a common man. O, I can't think it possible for a sister of mine to marry a lord!'

'And yet it has been possible any time this last month or two, strange as it seems to you. . . . It is to be not only a plain and simple wedding, without any lofty appliances, but a secret one — as secret as if I were some under-age heiress to an Indian fortune, and he a young man of nothing a year.'

'Has Lord Mountclere said it must be so private? I suppose it is on account of his family.'

'No. I say so; and it is on account of my family. Father might object to the wedding, I imagine, from what he once said, or he might be much disturbed about it; so I think it better that he and the rest should know nothing till all is over. You must dress again as my sister to-morrow, dear. Lord Mountclere is going to pay us an early visit to conclude necessary arrangements.'

'O, the life as a lady at Enckworth Court! The flowers, the woods, the rooms, the pictures, the plate, and the jewels! Horses and carriages rattling and prancing, seneschals and pages, footmen hopping up and hopping down. It will be glory then!'

'We might hire our father as one of my retainers, to increase it,' said Ethelberta drily.

Picotee's countenance fell. 'How shall we manage all about that? 'Tis terrible, really!'

'The marriage granted, those things will right themselves by time and weight of circumstances. You take a wrong view in thinking of glories of that sort. My only hope is that my life will be quite private and simple, as will best become my inferiority and Lord Mountclere's staidness. Such a splendid library as there is at Enckworth, Picotee — quartos, folios, history, verse, Elzevirs, Caxtons — all that has been done in literature from Moses down to Scott — with such companions I can do without all other sorts of happiness.'

‘And you will not go to town from Easter to Lammastide, as other noble ladies do?’ asked the younger girl, rather disappointed at this aspect of a viscountess’s life.

‘I don’t know.’

‘But you will give dinners, and travel, and go to see his friends, and have them to see you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Will you not be, then, as any other peeress; and shall not I be as any other peeress’s sister?’

‘That, too, I do not know. All is mystery. Nor do I even know that the marriage will take place. I feel that it may not; and perhaps so much the better, since the man is a stranger to me. I know nothing whatever of his nature, and he knows nothing of mine.’

CHAPTER 40.

MELCHESTER (continued)

The commotion wrought in Julian’s mind by the abrupt incursion of Ethelberta into his quiet sphere was thorough and protracted. The witchery of her presence he had grown strong enough to withstand in part; but her composed announcement that she had intended to marry another, and, as far as he could understand, was intending it still, added a new chill to the old shade of disappointment which custom was day by day enabling him to endure. During the whole interval in which he had produced those diapason blasts, heard with such inharmonious feelings by the three auditors outside the screen, his thoughts had wandered wider than his notes in conjectures on the character and position of the gentleman seen in Ethelberta’s company. Owing to his assumption that Lord Mountclere was but a stranger who had accidentally come in at the side door, Christopher had barely cast a glance upon him, and the wide difference between the years of the viscount and those of his betrothed was not so particularly observed as to raise that point to an item in his objections now. Lord Mountclere was dressed with all the cunning that could be drawn from the metropolis by money and reiterated dissatisfaction; he prided himself on his upright carriage; his stick was so thin that the most malevolent could not insinuate that it was of any possible use in walking; his teeth had put on all the vigour and freshness of a second spring. Hence his look was the slowest of possible clocks in respect of his age, and his manner was equally as much in the rear of his appearance.

Christopher was now over five-and-twenty. He was getting so well accustomed to the spectacle of a world passing him by and splashing him with its wheels that he wondered why he had ever minded it. His habit of dreaming instead of doing had led him up to a curious discovery. It is no new thing for a man to fathom profundities by indulging humours: the active, the rapid, the people of splendid momentum, have been surprised to behold what results attend the lives of those whose usual plan for

discharging their active labours has been to postpone them indefinitely. Certainly, the immediate result in the present case was, to all but himself, small and invisible; but it was of the nature of highest things. What he had learnt was that a woman who has once made a permanent impression upon a man cannot altogether deny him her image by denying him her company, and that by sedulously cultivating the acquaintance of this Creature of Contemplation she becomes to him almost a living soul. Hence a sublimated Ethelberta accompanied him everywhere — one who never teased him, eluded him, or disappointed him: when he smiled she smiled, when he was sad she sorrowed. He may be said to have become the literal duplicate of that whimsical unknown rhapsodist who wrote of his own similar situation —

‘By absence this good means I gain,
That I can catch her,
Where none can watch her,
In some close corner of my brain:
There I embrace and kiss her;
And so I both enjoy and miss her.’

This frame of mind naturally induced an amazing abstraction in the organist, never very vigilant at the best of times. He would stand and look fixedly at a frog in a shady pool, and never once think of batrachians, or pause by a green bank to split some tall blade of grass into filaments without removing it from its stalk, passing on ignorant that he had made a cat-o’-nine-tails of a graceful slip of vegetation. He would hear the cathedral clock strike one, and go the next minute to see what time it was. ‘I never seed such a man as Mr. Julian is,’ said the head blower. ‘He’ll meet me anywhere out-of-doors, and never wink or nod. You’d hardly expect it. I don’t find fault, but you’d hardly expect it, seeing how I play the same instrument as he do himself, and have done it for so many years longer than he. How I have indulged that man, too! If ‘tis Pedals for two martel hours of practice I never complain; and he has plenty of vagaries. When ‘tis hot summer weather there’s nothing will do for him but Choir, Great, and Swell altogether, till yer face is in a vapour; and on a frosty winter night he’ll keep me there while he tweedles upon the Twelfth and Sixteenth till my arms be scrambled for want of motion. And never speak a word out-of-doors.’ Somebody suggested that perhaps Christopher did not notice his coadjutor’s presence in the street; and time proved to the organ-blower that the remark was just.

Whenever Christopher caught himself at these vacuous tricks he would be struck with admiration of Ethelberta’s wisdom, foresight, and self-command in refusing to wed such an incapable man: he felt that he ought to be thankful that a bright memory of her was not also denied to him, and resolved to be content with it as a possession, since it was as much of her as he could decently maintain.

Wrapped thus in a humorous sadness he passed the afternoon under notice, and in the evening went home to Faith, who still lived with him, and showed no sign of ever being likely to do otherwise. Their present place and mode of life suited her well. She revived at Melchester like an exotic sent home again. The leafy Close, the climbing

buttresses, the pondering ecclesiastics, the great doors, the singular keys, the whispered talk, echoes of lonely footsteps, the sunset shadow of the tall steeple, reaching further into the town than the good bishop's teaching, and the general complexion of a spot where morning had the stillness of evening and spring some of the tones of autumn, formed a proper background to a person constituted as Faith, who, like Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon's chicken, possessed in miniature all the antiquity of her progenitors.

After tea Christopher went into the streets, as was frequently his custom, less to see how the world crept on there than to walk up and down for nothing at all. It had been market-day, and remnants of the rural population that had visited the town still lingered at corners, their toes hanging over the edge of the pavement, and their eyes wandering about the street.

The angle which formed the turning-point of Christopher's promenade was occupied by a jeweller's shop, of a standing which completely outshone every other shop in that or any trade throughout the town. Indeed, it was a staple subject of discussion in Melchester how a shop of such pretensions could find patronage sufficient to support its existence in a place which, though well populated, was not fashionable. It had not long been established there, and was the enterprise of an incoming man whose whole course of procedure seemed to be dictated by an intention to astonish the native citizens very considerably before he had done. Nearly everything was glass in the frontage of this fairy mart, and its contents glittered like the hammo-chrysos stone. The panes being of plate-glass, and the shop having two fronts, a diagonal view could be had through it from one to the other of the streets to which it formed a corner.

This evening, as on all evenings, a flood of radiance spread from the window-lamps into the thick autumn air, so that from a distance that corner appeared as the glistening nucleus of all the light in the town. Towards it idle men and women unconsciously bent their steps, and closed in upon the panes like night-birds upon the lantern of a lighthouse.

When Christopher reached the spot there stood close to the pavement a plain close carriage, apparently waiting for some person who was purchasing inside. Christopher would hardly have noticed this had he not also perceived, pressed against the glass of the shop window, an unusual number of local noses belonging to overgrown working lads, tosspots, an idiot, the ham-smoker's assistant with his sleeves rolled up, a scot-and-lot freeholder, three or four seamstresses, the young woman who brought home the washing, and so on. The interest of these gazers in some proceedings within, which by reason of the gaslight were as public as if carried on in the open air, was very great.

'Yes, that's what he's a buying o' — haw, haw!' said one of the young men, as the shopman removed from the window a gorgeous blue velvet tray of wedding-rings, and laid it on the counter.

'Tis what you may come to yerself, sooner or later, God have mercy upon ye; and as such no scoffing matter,' said an older man. 'Faith, I'd as lief cry as laugh to see a man in that corner.'

‘He’s a gent getting up in years too. He must hev been through it a few times afore, seemingly, to sit down and buy the tools so cool as that.’

‘Well, no. See what the shyest will do at such times. You bain’t yerself then; no man living is hisself then.’

‘True,’ said the ham-smoker’s man. ‘‘Tis a thought to look at that a chap will take all this trouble to get a woman into his house, and a twelvemonth after would as soon hear it thunder as hear her sing!’

The policeman standing near was a humane man, through having a young family he could hardly keep, and he hesitated about telling them to move on. Christopher had before this time perceived that the articles were laid down before an old gentleman who was seated in the shop, and that the gentleman was none other than he who had been with Ethelberta in the concert-room. The discovery was so startling that, constitutionally indisposed as he was to stand and watch, he became as glued to the spot as the other idlers. Finding himself now for the first time directly confronting the preliminaries of Ethelberta’s marriage to a stranger, he was left with far less equanimity than he could have supposed possible to the situation.

‘So near the time!’ he said, and looked hard at Lord Mountclere.

Christopher had now a far better opportunity than before for observing Ethelberta’s betrothed. Apart from any bias of jealousy, disappointment, or mortification, he was led to judge that this was not quite the man to make Ethelberta happy. He had fancied her companion to be a man under fifty; he was now visibly sixty or more. And it was not the sort of sexagenarianism beside which a young woman’s happiness can sometimes contrive to keep itself alive in a quiet sleepy way. Suddenly it occurred to him that this was the man whom he had helped in the carriage accident on the way to Knollsea. He looked again.

By no means undignified, the face presented that combination of slyness and jocundity which we are accustomed to imagine of the canonical jolly-dogs in mediaeval tales. The gamesome Curate of Meudon might have supplied some parts of the countenance; cunning Friar Tuck the remainder. Nothing but the viscount’s constant habit of going to church every Sunday morning when at his country residence kept unholiness out of his features, for though he lived theologically enough on the Sabbath, as it became a man in his position to do, he was strikingly mundane all the rest of the week, always preferring the devil to God in his oaths. And nothing but antecedent good-humour prevented the short fits of crossness incident to his passing infirmities from becoming established. His look was exceptionally jovial now, and the corners of his mouth twitched as the telegraph-needles of a hundred little erotic messages from his heart to his brain. Anybody could see that he was a merry man still, who loved good company, warming drinks, nymph-like shapes, and pretty words, in spite of the disagreeable suggestions he received from the pupils of his eyes, and the joints of his lively limbs, that imps of mischief were busy sapping and mining in those regions, with the view of tumbling him into a certain cool cellar under the church aisle.

In general, if a lover can find any ground at all for serenity in the tide of an elderly rival's success, he finds it in the fact itself of that ancientness. The other side seems less a rival than a makeshift. But Christopher no longer felt this, and the significant signs before his eyes of the imminence of Ethelberta's union with this old hero filled him with restless dread. True, the gentleman, as he appeared illuminated by the jeweller's gas-jets, seemed more likely to injure Ethelberta by indulgence than by severity, while her beauty lasted; but there was a nameless something in him less tolerable than this.

The purchaser having completed his dealings with the goldsmith, was conducted to the door by the master of the shop, and into the carriage, which was at once driven off up the street.

Christopher now much desired to know the name of the man whom a nice chain of circumstantial evidence taught him to regard as the happy winner where scores had lost. He was grieved that Ethelberta's confessed reserve should have extended so far as to limit her to mere indefinite hints of marriage when they were talking almost on the brink of the wedding-day. That the ceremony was to be a private one — which it probably would be because of the disparity of ages — did not in his opinion justify her secrecy. He had shown himself capable of a transmutation as valuable as it is rare in men, the change from pestering lover to staunch friend, and this was all he had got for it. But even an old lover sunk to an indifferentist might have been tempted to spend an unoccupied half-hour in discovering particulars now, and Christopher had not lapsed nearly so far as to absolute unconcern.

That evening, however, nothing came in his way to enlighten him. But the next day, when skirting the Close on his ordinary duties, he saw the same carriage standing at a distance, and paused to behold the same old gentleman come from a well-known office and re-enter the vehicle — Lord Mountclere, in fact, in earnest pursuit of the business of yesternight, having just pocketed a document in which romance, rashness, law, and gospel are so happily made to work together that it may safely be regarded as the neatest compromise which has ever been invented since Adam sinned.

This time Julian perceived that the brougham was one belonging to the White Hart Hotel, which Lord Mountclere was using partly from the necessities of these hasty proceedings, and also because, by so doing, he escaped the notice that might have been bestowed upon his own equipage, or men-servants, the Mountclere hammer-cloths being known in Melchester. Christopher now walked towards the hotel, leisurely, yet with anxiety. He inquired of a porter what people were staying there that day, and was informed that they had only one person in the house, Lord Mountclere, whom sudden and unexpected business had detained in Melchester since the previous day.

Christopher lingered to hear no more. He retraced the street much more quickly than he had come; and he only said, 'Lord Mountclere — it must never be!'

As soon as he entered the house, Faith perceived that he was greatly agitated. He at once told her of his discovery, and she exclaimed, 'What a brilliant match!'

'O Faith,' said Christopher, 'you don't know! You are far from knowing. It is as gloomy as midnight. Good God, can it be possible?'

Faith blinked in alarm, without speaking.

‘Did you never hear anything of Lord Mountclere when we lived at Sandbourne?’

‘I knew the name — no more.’

‘No, no — of course you did not. Well, though I never saw his face, to my knowledge, till a short time ago, I know enough to say that, if earnest representations can prevent it, this marriage shall not be. Father knew him, or about him, very well; and he once told me — what I cannot tell you. Fancy, I have seen him three times — yesterday, last night, and this morning — besides helping him on the road some weeks ago, and never once considered that he might be Lord Mountclere. He is here almost in disguise, one may say; neither man nor horse is with him; and his object accounts for his privacy. I see how it is — she is doing this to benefit her brothers and sisters, if possible; but she ought to know that if she is miserable they will never be happy. That’s the nature of women — they take the form for the essence, and that’s what she is doing now. I should think her guardian angel must have quitted her when she agreed to a marriage which may tear her heart out like a claw.’

‘You are too warm about it, Kit — it cannot be so bad as that. It is not the thing, but the sensitiveness to the thing, which is the true measure of its pain. Perhaps what seems so bad to you falls lightly on her mind. A campaigner in a heavy rain is not more uncomfortable than we are in a slight draught; and Ethelberta, fortified by her sapphires and gold cups and wax candles, will not mind facts which look like spectres to us outside. A title will turn troubles into romances, and she will shine as an interesting viscountess in spite of them.’

The discussion with Faith was not continued, Christopher stopping the argument by saying that he had a good mind to go off at once to Knollsea, and show her her danger. But till the next morning Ethelberta was certainly safe; no marriage was possible anywhere before then. He passed the afternoon in a state of great indecision, constantly reiterating, ‘I will go!’

CHAPTER 41.

WORKSHOPS — AN INN — THE STREET

On an extensive plot of ground, lying somewhere between the Thames and the Kensington squares, stood the premises of Messrs. Nockett and Perch, builders and contractors. The yard with its workshops formed part of one of those frontier lines between mangy business and garnished domesticity that occur in what are called improving neighbourhoods. We are accustomed to regard increase as the chief feature in a great city’s progress, its well-known signs greeting our eyes on every outskirt. Slush-ponds may be seen turning into basement-kitchens; a broad causeway of shattered earthenware smothers plots of budding gooseberry-bushes and vegetable trenches, foundations following so closely upon gardens that the householder may be expected to find cadaverous sprouts from overlooked potatoes rising through the chinks of his

cellar floor. But the other great process, that of internal transmutation, is not less curious than this encroachment of grey upon green. Its first erections are often only the milk-teeth of a suburb, and as the district rises in dignity they are dislodged by those which are to endure. Slightness becomes supplanted by comparative solidity, commonness by novelty, lowness and irregularity by symmetry and height.

An observer of the precinct which has been named as an instance in point might have stood under a lamp-post and heard simultaneously the peal of the visitor's bell from the new terrace on the right hand, and the stroke of tools from the musty workshops on the left. Waggons laden with deals came up on this side, and landaus came down on the other — the former to lumber heavily through the old-established contractors' gates, the latter to sweep fashionably into the square.

About twelve o'clock on the day following Lord Mountclere's exhibition of himself to Christopher in the jeweller's shop at Melchester, and almost at the identical time when the viscount was seen to come from the office for marriage-licences in the same place, a carriage drove nearly up to the gates of Messrs. Nockett and Co.'s yard. A gentleman stepped out and looked around. He was a man whose years would have been pronounced as five-and-forty by the friendly, fifty by the candid, fifty-two or three by the grim. He was as handsome a study in grey as could be seen in town, there being far more of the raven's plumage than of the gull's in the mixture as yet; and he had a glance of that practised sort which can measure people, weigh them, repress them, encourage them to sprout and blossom as a March sun encourages crocuses, ask them questions, give them answers — in short, a glance that could do as many things as an American cooking-stove or a multum-in-parvo pocket-knife. But, as with most men of the world, this was mere mechanism: his actual emotions were kept so far within his person that they were rarely heard or seen near his features.

On reading the builders' names over the gateway he entered the yard, and asked at the office if Solomon Chickerel was engaged on the premises. The clerk was going to be very attentive, but finding the visitor had come only to speak to a workman, his tense attitude slackened a little, and he merely signified the foot of a Flemish ladder on the other side of the yard, saying, 'You will find him, sir, up there in the joiner's shop.'

When the man in the black coat reached the top he found himself at the end of a long apartment as large as a chapel and as low as a malt-room, across which ran parallel carpenters' benches to the number of twenty or more, a gangway being left at the side for access throughout. Behind every bench there stood a man or two, planing, fitting, or chiselling, as the case might be. The visitor paused for a moment, as if waiting for some cessation of their violent motions and uproar till he could make his errand known. He waited ten seconds, he waited twenty; but, beyond that a quick look had been thrown upon him by every pair of eyes, the muscular performances were in no way interrupted: every one seemed oblivious of his presence, and absolutely regardless of his wish. In truth, the texture of that salmon-coloured skin could be seen to be aristocratic without a microscope, and the exceptionis artizan has an offhand way

when contrasts are made painfully strong by an idler of this kind coming, gloved and brushed, into the very den where he is sweating and muddling in his shirt-sleeves.

The gentleman from the carriage then proceeded down the workshop, wading up to his knees in a sea of shavings, and bruising his ankles against corners of board and sawn-off blocks, that lay hidden like reefs beneath. At the ninth bench he made another venture.

‘Sol Chickerel?’ said the man addressed, as he touched his plane-iron upon the oilstone. ‘He’s one of them just behind.’

‘Damn it all, can’t one of you show me?’ the visitor angrily observed, for he had been used to more attention than this. ‘Here, point him out.’ He handed the man a shilling.

‘No trouble to do that,’ said the workman; and he turned and signified Sol by a nod without moving from his place.

The stranger entered Sol’s division, and, nailing him with his eye, said at once: ‘I want to speak a few words with you in private. Is not a Mrs. Petherwin your sister?’

Sol started suspiciously. ‘Has anything happened to her?’ he at length said hurriedly.

‘O no. It is on a business matter that I have called. You need not mind owning the relationship to me — the secret will be kept. I am the brother of one whom you may have heard of from her — Lord Mountclere.’

‘I have not. But if you will wait a minute, sir — ’ He went to a little glazed box at the end of the shop, where the foreman was sitting, and, after speaking a few words to this person, Sol led Mountclere to the door, and down the ladder.

‘I suppose we cannot very well talk here, after all?’ said the gentleman, when they reached the yard, and found several men moving about therein.

‘Perhaps we had better go to some room — the nearest inn will answer the purpose, won’t it?’

‘Excellently.’

‘There’s the “Green Bushes” over the way. They have a very nice private room upstairs.’

‘Yes, that will do.’ And passing out of the yard, the man with the glance entered the inn with Sol, where they were shown to the parlour as requested.

While the waiter was gone for some wine, which Mountclere ordered, the more ingenuous of the two resumed the conversation by saying, awkwardly: ‘Yes, Mrs. Petherwin is my sister, as you supposed, sir; but on her account I do not let it be known.’

‘Indeed,’ said Mountclere. ‘Well, I came to see you in order to speak of a matter which I thought you might know more about than I do, for it has taken me quite by surprise. My brother, Lord Mountclere, is, it seems, to be privately married to Mrs. Petherwin to-morrow.’

‘Is that really the fact?’ said Sol, becoming quite shaken. ‘I had no thought that such a thing could be possible!’

‘It is imminent.’

‘Father has told me that she has lately got to know some nobleman; but I never supposed there could be any meaning in that.’

‘You were altogether wrong,’ said Mountclere, leaning back in his chair and looking at Sol steadily. ‘Do you feel it to be a matter upon which you will congratulate her?’

‘A very different thing!’ said Sol vehemently. ‘Though he is your brother, sir, I must say this, that I would rather she married the poorest man I know.’

‘Why?’

‘From what my father has told me of him, he is not — a more desirable brother-in-law to me than I shall be in all likelihood to him. What business has a man of that character to marry Berta, I should like to ask?’

‘That’s what I say,’ returned Mountclere, revealing his satisfaction at Sol’s estimate of his noble brother: it showed that he had calculated well in coming here. ‘My brother is getting old, and he has lived strangely: your sister is a highly respectable young lady.’

‘And he is not respectable, you mean? I know he is not. I worked near Enckworth once.’

‘I cannot say that,’ returned Mountclere. Possibly a certain fraternal feeling repressed a direct assent: and yet this was the only representation which could be expected to prejudice the young man against the wedding, if he were such an one as the visitor supposed Sol to be — a man vulgar in sentiment and ambition, but pure in his anxiety for his sister’s happiness. ‘At any rate, we are agreed in thinking that this would be an unfortunate marriage for both,’ added Mountclere.

‘About both I don’t know. It may be a good thing for him. When do you say it is to be, sir — to-morrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know what to do!’ said Sol, walking up and down. ‘If half what I have heard is true, I would lose a winter’s work to prevent her marrying him. What does she want to go mixing in with people who despise her for? Now look here, Mr. Mountclere, since you have been and called me out to talk this over, it is only fair that you should tell me the exact truth about your brother. Is it a lie, or is it true, that he is not fit to be the husband of a decent woman?’

‘That is a curious inquiry,’ said Mountclere, whose manner and aspect, neutral as a winter landscape, had little in common with Sol’s warm and unrestrained bearing. ‘There are reasons why I think your sister will not be happy with him.’

‘Then it is true what they say,’ said Sol, bringing down his fist upon the table. ‘I know your meaning well enough. What’s to be done? If I could only see her this minute, she might be kept out of it.’

‘You think your presence would influence your sister — if you could see her before the wedding?’

‘I think it would. But who’s to get at her?’

‘I am going, so you had better come on with me — unless it would be best for your father to come.’

‘Perhaps it might,’ said the bewildered Sol. ‘But he will not be able to get away; and it’s no use for Dan to go. If anybody goes I must! If she has made up her mind nothing can be done by writing to her.’

‘I leave at once to see Lord Mountclere,’ the other continued. ‘I feel that as my brother is evidently ignorant of the position of Mrs. Petherwin’s family and connections, it is only fair in me, as his nearest relative, to make them clear to him before it is too late.’

‘You mean that if he knew her friends were working-people he would not think of her as a wife? ‘Tis a reasonable thought. But make your mind easy: she has told him. I make a great mistake if she has for a moment thought of concealing that from him.’

‘She may not have deliberately done so. But — and I say this with no ill-feeling — it is a matter known to few, and she may have taken no steps to undeceive him. I hope to bring him to see the matter clearly. Unfortunately the thing has been so secret and hurried that there is barely time. I knew nothing until this morning — never dreamt of such a preposterous occurrence.’

‘Preposterous! If it should come to pass, she would play her part as his lady as well as any other woman, and better. I wish there was no more reason for fear on my side than there is on yours! Things have come to a sore head when she is not considered lady enough for such as he. But perhaps your meaning is, that if your brother were to have a son, you would lose your heir-presumptive title to the cor’net of Mountclere? Well, ‘twould be rather hard for ye, now I come to think o’t — upon my life, ‘twould.’

‘The suggestion is as delicate as the — - atmosphere of this vile room. But let your ignorance be your excuse, my man. It is hardly worth while for us to quarrel when we both have the same object in view: do you think so?’

‘That’s true — that’s true. When do you start, sir?’

‘We must leave almost at once,’ said Mountclere, looking at his watch. ‘If we cannot catch the two o’clock train, there is no getting there to-night — and to-morrow we could not possibly arrive before one.’

‘I wish there was time for me to go and tidy myself a bit,’ said Sol, anxiously looking down at his working clothes. ‘I suppose you would not like me to go with you like this?’

‘Confound the clothes! If you cannot start in five minutes, we shall not be able to go at all.’

‘Very well, then — wait while I run across to the shop, then I am ready. How do we get to the station?’

‘My carriage is at the corner waiting. When you come out I will meet you at the gates.’

Sol then hurried downstairs, and a minute or two later Mr. Mountclere followed, looking like a man bent on policy at any price. The carriage was brought round by the time that Sol reappeared from the yard. He entered and sat down beside Mountclere, not without a sense that he was spoiling good upholstery; the coachman then allowed the lash of his whip to alight with the force of a small fly upon the horses, which set them up in an angry trot. Sol rolled on beside his new acquaintance with the

shamefaced look of a man going to prison in a van, for pedestrians occasionally gazed at him, full of what seemed to himself to be ironical surprise.

‘I am afraid I ought to have changed my clothes after all,’ he said, writhing under a perception of the contrast between them. ‘Not knowing anything about this, I ain’t a bit prepared. If I had got even my second-best hat, it wouldn’t be so bad.’

‘It makes no difference,’ said Mountclere inanimately.

‘Or I might have brought my portmantle, with some things.’

‘It really is not important.’

On reaching the station they found there were yet a few minutes to spare, which Sol made use of in writing a note to his father, to explain what had occurred.

CHAPTER 42.

THE DONCASTLES’ RESIDENCE, AND OUTSIDE THE SAME

Mrs. Doncastle’s dressing-bell had rung, but Menlove, the lady’s maid, having at the same time received a letter by the evening post, paused to read it before replying to the summons: —

‘ENCKWORTH COURT, Wednesday.

DARLING LOUISA, — I can assure you that I am no more likely than yourself to form another attachment, as you will perceive by what follows. Before we left town I thought that to be able to see you occasionally was sufficient for happiness, but down in this lonely place the case is different. In short, my dear, I ask you to consent to a union with me as soon as you possibly can. Your prettiness has won my eyes and lips completely, sweet, and I lie awake at night to think of the golden curls you allowed to escape from their confinement on those nice times of private clothes, when we walked in the park and slipped the bonds of service, which you were never born to any more than I. . . .

‘Had not my own feelings been so strong, I should have told you at the first dash of my pen that what I expected is coming to pass at last — the old dog is going to be privately married to Mrs. P. Yes, indeed, and the wedding is coming off to-morrow, secret as the grave. All her friends will doubtless leave service on account of it. What he does now makes little difference to me, of course, as I had already given warning, but I shall stick to him like a Briton in spite of it. He has to-day made me a present, and a further five pounds for yourself, expecting you to hold your tongue on every matter connected with Mrs. P.’s friends, and to say nothing to any of them about this marriage until it is over. His lordship impressed this upon me very strong, and familiar as a brother, and of course we obey his instructions to the letter; for I need hardly say that unless he keeps his promise to help me in setting up the shop, our nuptials cannot be consumed. His help depends upon our obedience, as you are aware. . . .’

This, and much more, was from her very last lover, Lord Mountclere’s valet, who had been taken in hand directly she had convinced herself of Joey’s hopeless youthfulness.

The missive sent Mrs. Menlove's spirits soaring like spring larks; she flew upstairs in answer to the bell with a joyful, triumphant look, which the illuminated figure of Mrs. Doncastle in her dressing-room could not quite repress. One could almost forgive Menlove her arts when so modest a result brought such vast content.

Mrs. Doncastle seemed inclined to make no remark during the dressing, and at last Menlove could repress herself no longer.

'I should like to name something to you, m'm.'

'Yes.'

'I shall be wishing to leave soon, if it is convenient.'

'Very well, Menlove,' answered Mrs. Doncastle, as she serenely surveyed her right eyebrow in the glass. 'Am I to take this as a formal notice?'

'If you please; but I could stay a week or two beyond the month if suitable. I am going to be married — that's what it is, m'm.'

'O! I am glad to hear it, though I am sorry to lose you.'

'It is Lord Mountclere's valet — Mr. Tipman — m'm.'

'Indeed.'

Menlove went on building up Mrs. Doncastle's hair awhile in silence.

'I suppose you heard the other news that arrived in town to-day, m'm?' she said again. 'Lord Mountclere is going to be married to-morrow.'

'To-morrow? Are you quite sure?'

'O yes, m'm. Mr. Tipman has just told me so in his letter. He is going to be married to Mrs. Petherwin. It is to be quite a private wedding.'

Mrs. Doncastle made no remark, and she remained in the same still position as before; but a countenance expressing transcendent surprise was reflected to Menlove by the glass.

At this sight Menlove's tongue so burned to go further, and unfold the lady's relations with the butler downstairs, that she would have lost a month's wages to be at liberty to do it. The disclosure was almost too magnificent to be repressed. To deny herself so exquisite an indulgence required an effort which nothing on earth could have sustained save the one thing that did sustain it — the knowledge that upon her silence hung the most enormous desideratum in the world, her own marriage. She said no more, and Mrs. Doncastle went away.

It was an ordinary family dinner that day, but their nephew Neigh happened to be present. Just as they were sitting down Mrs. Doncastle said to her husband: 'Why have you not told me of the wedding to-morrow? — or don't you know anything about it?'

'Wedding?' said Mr. Doncastle.

'Lord Mountclere is to be married to Mrs. Petherwin quite privately.'

'Good God!' said some person.

Mr. Doncastle did not speak the words; they were not spoken by Neigh: they seemed to float over the room and round the walls, as if originating in some spiritualistic source. Yet Mrs. Doncastle, remembering the symptoms of attachment between Ethelberta and

her nephew which had appeared during the summer, looked towards Neigh instantly, as if she thought the words must have come from him after all; but Neigh's face was perfectly calm; he, together with her husband, was sitting with his eyes fixed in the direction of the sideboard; and turning to the same spot she beheld Chickerel standing pale as death, his lips being parted as if he did not know where he was.

'Did you speak?' said Mrs. Doncastle, looking with astonishment at the butler.

'Chickerel, what's the matter — are you ill?' said Mr. Doncastle simultaneously. 'Was it you who said that?'

'I did, sir,' said Chickerel in a husky voice, scarcely above a whisper. 'I could not help it.'

'Why?'

'She is my daughter, and it shall be known at once!'

'Who is your daughter?'

He paused a few moments nervously. 'Mrs. Petherwin,' he said.

Upon this announcement Neigh looked at poor Chickerel as if he saw through him into the wall. Mrs. Doncastle uttered a faint exclamation and leant back in her chair: the bare possibility of the truth of Chickerel's claims to such paternity shook her to pieces when she viewed her intimacies with Ethelberta during the past season — the court she had paid her, the arrangements she had entered into to please her; above all, the dinner-party which she had contrived and carried out solely to gratify Lord Mountclere and bring him into personal communication with the general favourite; thus making herself probably the chief though unconscious instrument in promoting a match by which her butler was to become father-in-law to a peer she delighted to honour. The crowd of perceptions almost took away her life; she closed her eyes in a white shiver.

'Do you mean to say that the lady who sat here at dinner at the same time that Lord Mountclere was present, is your daughter?' asked Doncastle.

'Yes, sir,' said Chickerel respectfully.

'How did she come to be your daughter?'

'I — Well, she is my daughter, sir.'

'Did you educate her?'

'Not altogether, sir. She was a very clever child. Lady Petherwin took a deal of trouble about her education. They were both left widows about the same time: the son died, then the father. My daughter was only seventeen then. But though she's older now, her marriage with Lord Mountclere means misery. He ought to marry another woman.'

'It is very extraordinary,' Mr. Doncastle murmured. 'If you are ill you had better go and rest yourself, Chickerel. Send in Thomas.'

Chickerel, who seemed to be much disturbed, then very gladly left the room, and dinner proceeded. But such was the peculiarity of the case, that, though there was in it neither murder, robbery, illness, accident, fire, or any other of the tragic and legitimate shakers of human nerves, two of the three who were gathered there sat

through the meal without the least consciousness of what viands had composed it. Impressiveness depends as much upon propinquity as upon magnitude; and to have honoured unawares the daughter of the vilest Antipodean miscreant and murderer would have been less discomfiting to Mrs. Doncastle than it was to make the same blunder with the daughter of a respectable servant who happened to live in her own house. To Neigh the announcement was as the catastrophe of a story already begun, rather than as an isolated wonder. Ethelberta's words had prepared him for something, though the nature of that thing was unknown.

'Chickerel ought not to have kept us in ignorance of this — of course he ought not!' said Mrs. Doncastle, as soon as they were left alone.

'I don't see why not,' replied Mr. Doncastle, who took the matter very coolly, as was his custom.

'Then she herself should have let it be known.'

'Nor does that follow. You didn't tell Mrs. Petherwin that your grandfather narrowly escaped hanging for shooting his rival in a duel.'

'Of course not. There was no reason why I should give extraneous information.'

'Nor was there any reason why she should. As for Chickerel, he doubtless felt how unbecoming it would be to make personal remarks upon one of your guests — Ha-ha-ha! Well, well — Ha-ha-ha-ha!'

'I know this,' said Mrs. Doncastle, in great anger, 'that if my father had been in the room, I should not have let the fact pass unnoticed, and treated him like a stranger!'

'Would you have had her introduce Chickerel to us all round? My dear Margaret, it was a complicated position for a woman.'

'Then she ought not to have come!'

'There may be something in that, though she was dining out at other houses as good as ours. Well, I should have done just as she did, for the joke of the thing. Ha-ha-ha! — it is very good — very. It was a case in which the appetite for a jest would overpower the sting of conscience in any well-constituted being — that, my dear, I must maintain.'

'I say she should not have come!' answered Mrs. Doncastle firmly. 'Of course I shall dismiss Chickerel.'

'Of course you will do no such thing. I have never had a butler in the house before who suited me so well. It is a great credit to the man to have such a daughter, and I am not sure that we do not derive some lustre of a humble kind from his presence in the house. But, seriously, I wonder at your short-sightedness, when you know the troubles we have had through getting new men from nobody knows where.'

Neigh, perceiving that the breeze in the atmosphere might ultimately intensify to a palpable black squall, seemed to think it would be well to take leave of his uncle and aunt as soon as he conveniently could; nevertheless, he was much less discomposed by the situation than by the active cause which had led to it. When Mrs. Doncastle arose, her husband said he was going to speak to Chickerel for a minute or two, and Neigh followed his aunt upstairs.

Presently Doncastle joined them. 'I have been talking to Chickerel,' he said. 'It is a very curious affair — this marriage of his daughter and Lord Mountclere. The whole situation is the most astounding I have ever met with. The man is quite ill about the news. He has shown me a letter which has just reached him from his son on the same subject. Lord Mountclere's brother and this young man have actually gone off together to try to prevent the wedding, and Chickerel has asked to be allowed to go himself, if he can get soon enough to the station to catch the night mail. Of course he may go if he wishes.'

'What a funny thing!' said the lady, with a wretchedly factitious smile. 'The times have taken a strange turn when the angry parent of the comedy, who goes post-haste to prevent the undutiful daughter's rash marriage, is a gentleman from below stairs, and the unworthy lover a peer of the realm!'

Neigh spoke for almost the first time. 'I don't blame Chickerel in objecting to Lord Mountclere. I should object to him myself if I had a daughter. I never liked him.'

'Why?' said Mrs. Doncastle, lifting her eyelids as if the act were a heavy task.

'For reasons which don't generally appear.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Doncastle, in a low tone. 'Still, we must not believe all we hear.'

'Is Chickerel going?' said Neigh.

'He leaves in five or ten minutes,' said Doncastle.

After a few further words Neigh mentioned that he was unable to stay longer that evening, and left them. When he had reached the outside of the door he walked a little way up the pavement and back again, as if reluctant to lose sight of the street, finally standing under a lamp-post whence he could command a view of Mr. Doncastle's front. Presently a man came out in a great-coat and with a small bag in his hand; Neigh at once recognizing the person as Chickerel, went up to him.

'Mr. Doncastle tells me you are going on a sudden journey. At what time does your train leave?' Neigh asked.

'I go by the ten o'clock, sir: I hope it is a third-class,' said Chickerel; 'though I am afraid it may not be.'

'It is as much as you will do to get to the station,' said Neigh, turning the face of his watch to the light. 'Here, come into my cab — I am driving that way.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Chickerel.

Neigh called a cab at the first opportunity, and they entered and drove along together. Neither spoke during the journey. When they were driving up to the station entrance Neigh looked again to see the hour.

'You have not a minute to lose,' he said, in repressed anxiety. 'And your journey will be expensive: instead of walking from Anglebury to Knollsea, you had better drive — above all, don't lose time. Never mind what class the train is. Take this from me, since the emergency is great.' He handed something to Chickerel folded up small.

The butler took it without inquiry, and stepped out hastily.

'I sincerely hope she — Well, good-night, Chickereel,' continued Neigh, ending his words abruptly. The cab containing him drove again towards the station-gates, leaving Chickereel standing on the kerb.

He passed through the booking-office, and looked at the paper Neigh had put into his hand. It was a five-pound note.

Chickereel mused on the circumstance as he took his ticket and got into the train.

CHAPTER 43.

THE RAILWAY — THE SEA — THE SHORE BEYOND

By this time Sol and the Honourable Edgar Mountclere had gone far on their journey into Wessex. Enckworth Court, Mountclere's destination, though several miles from Knollsea, was most easily accessible by the same route as that to the village, the latter being the place for which Sol was bound.

From the few words that passed between them on the way, Mountclere became more stubborn than ever in a belief that this was a carefully laid trap of the fair Ethelberta's to ensnare his brother without revealing to him her family ties, which it therefore behoved him to make clear, with the utmost force of representation, before the fatal union had been contracted. Being himself the viscount's only remaining brother and near relative, the disinterestedness of his motives may be left to imagination; that there was much real excuse for his conduct must, however, be borne in mind. Whether his attempt would prevent the union was another question: he believed that, conjoined with his personal influence over the viscount, and the importation of Sol as a firebrand to throw between the betrothed pair, it might do so.

About half-an-hour before sunset the two individuals, linked by their differences, reached the point of railway at which the branch to Sandbourne left the main line. They had taken tickets for Sandbourne, intending to go thence to Knollsea by the steamer that plied between the two places during the summer months — making this a short and direct route. But it occurred to Mountclere on the way that, summer being over, the steamer might possibly have left off running, the wind might be too high for a small boat, and no large one might be at hand for hire: therefore it would be safer to go by train to Anglebury, and the remaining sixteen miles by driving over the hills, even at a great loss of time.

Accident, however, determined otherwise. They were in the station at the junction, inquiring of an official if the Speedwell had ceased to sail, when a countryman who had just come up from Sandbourne stated that, though the Speedwell had left off for the year, there was that day another steamer at Sandbourne. This steamer would of necessity return to Knollsea that evening, partly because several people from that place had been on board, and also because the Knollsea folk were waiting for groceries and draperies from London: there was not an ounce of tea or a hundredweight of coal in the village, owing to the recent winds, which had detained the provision parcels at

Sandbourne, and kept the colliers up-channel until the change of weather this day. To introduce necessities by a roundabout land journey was not easy when they had been ordered by the other and habitual route. The boat returned at six o'clock.

So on they went to Sandbourne, driving off to the pier directly they reached that place, for it was getting towards night. The steamer was there, as the man had told them, much to the relief of Sol, who, being extremely anxious to enter Knollsea before a late hour, had known that this was the only way in which it could be done.

Some unforeseen incident delayed the boat, and they walked up and down the pier to wait. The prospect was gloomy enough. The wind was north-east; the sea along shore was a chalky-green, though comparatively calm, this part of the coast forming a shelter from wind in its present quarter. The clouds had different velocities, and some of them shone with a coppery glare, produced by rays from the west which did not enter the inferior atmosphere at all. It was reflected on the distant waves in patches, with an effect as if the waters were at those particular spots stained with blood. This departed, and what daylight was left to the earth came from strange and unusual quarters of the heavens. The zenith would be bright, as if that were the place of the sun; then all overhead would close, and a whiteness in the east would give the appearance of morning; while a bank as thick as a wall barricaded the west, which looked as if it had no acquaintance with sunsets, and would blush red no more.

'Any other passengers?' shouted the master of the steamboat. 'We must be off: it may be a dirty night.'

Sol and Mountclere went on board, and the pier receded in the dusk.

'Shall we have any difficulty in getting into Knollsea Bay?' said Mountclere.

'Not if the wind keeps where it is for another hour or two.'

'I fancy it is shifting to the east'ard,' said Sol.

The captain looked as if he had thought the same thing.

'I hope I shall be able to get home to-night,' said a Knollsea woman. 'My little children be left alone. Your mis'ess is in a bad way, too — isn't she, skipper?'

'Yes.'

'And you've got the doctor from Sandbourne aboard, to tend her?'

'Yes.'

'Then you'll be sure to put into Knollsea, if you can?'

'Yes. Don't be alarmed, ma'am. We'll do what we can. But no one must boast.'

The skipper's remark was the result of an observation that the wind had at last flown to the east, the single point of the compass whence it could affect Knollsea Bay. The result of this change was soon perceptible. About midway in their transit the land elbowed out to a bold chalk promontory; beyond this stretched a vertical wall of the same cliff, in a line parallel with their course. In fair weather it was possible and customary to steer close along under this hoary facade for the distance of a mile, there being six fathoms of water within a few boats' lengths of the precipice. But it was an ugly spot at the best of times, landward no less than seaward, the cliff rounding off

at the top in vegetation, like a forehead with low-grown hair, no defined edge being provided as a warning to unwary pedestrians on the downs above.

As the wind sprung up stronger, white clots could be discerned at the water level of the cliff, rising and falling against the black band of shaggy weed that formed a sort of skirting to the base of the wall. They were the first-fruits of the new east blast, which shaved the face of the cliff like a razor — gatherings of foam in the shape of heads, shoulders, and arms of snowy whiteness, apparently struggling to rise from the deeps, and ever sinking back to their old levels again. They reminded an observer of a drowning scene in a picture of the Deluge. At some points the face of rock was hollowed into gaping caverns, and the water began to thunder into these with a leap that was only topped by the rebound seaward again. The vessel's head was kept a little further to sea, but beyond that everything went on as usual.

The precipice was still in view, and before it several huge columns of rock appeared, detached from the mass behind. Two of these were particularly noticeable in the grey air — one vertical, stout and square; the other slender and tapering. They were individualised as husband and wife by the coast men. The waves leapt up their sides like a pack of hounds; this, however, though fearful in its boisterousness, was nothing to the terrible games that sometimes went on round the knees of those giants in stone. Yet it was sufficient to cause the course of the frail steamboat to be altered yet a little more — from south-west-by-south to south-by-west — to give the breakers a still wider berth.

'I wish we had gone by land, sir; 'twould have been surer play,' said Sol to Mountclere, a cat-and-dog friendship having arisen between them.

'Yes,' said Mountclere. 'Knollsea is an abominable place to get into with an east wind blowing, they say.'

Another circumstance conspired to make their landing more difficult, which Mountclere knew nothing of. With the wind easterly, the highest sea prevailed in Knollsea Bay from the slackening of flood-tide to the first hour of ebb. At that time the water outside stood without a current, and ridges and hollows chased each other towards the beach unchecked. When the tide was setting strong up or down Channel its flow across the mouth of the bay thrust aside, to some extent, the landward plunge of the waves.

We glance for a moment at the state of affairs on the land they were nearing.

This was the time of year to know the truth about the inner nature and character of Knollsea; for to see Knollsea smiling to the summer sun was to see a courtier before a king; Knollsea was not to be known by such simple means. The half-dozen detached villas used as lodging-houses in the summer, standing aloof from the cots of the permanent race, rose in the dusk of this gusty evening, empty, silent, damp, and dark as tombs. The gravel walks leading to them were invaded by leaves and tufts of grass. As the darkness thickened the wind increased, and each blast raked the iron railings before the houses till they hummed as if in a song of derision. Certainly it seemed absurd at this time of year that human beings should expect comfort in a spot capable of such moods as these.

However, one of the houses looked cheerful, and that was the dwelling to which Ethelberta had gone. Its gay external colours might as well have been black for anything that could be seen of them now, but an unblinded window revealed inside it a room bright and warm. It was illuminated by firelight only. Within, Ethelberta appeared against the curtains, close to the glass. She was watching through a binocular a faint light which had become visible in the direction of the bluff far away over the bay.

‘Here is the Spruce at last, I think,’ she said to her sister, who was by the fire. ‘I hope they will be able to land the things I have ordered. They are on board I know.’

The wind continued to rise till at length something from the lungs of the gale alighted like a feather upon the pane, and remained there sticking. Seeing the substance, Ethelberta opened the window to secure it. The fire roared and the pictures kicked the walls; she closed the sash, and brought to the light a crisp fragment of foam.

‘How suddenly the sea must have risen,’ said Picotee.

The servant entered the room. ‘Please, mis’ess says she is afraid you won’t have your things to-night, ‘m. They say the steamer can’t land, and mis’ess wants to know if she can do anything?’

‘It is of no consequence,’ said Ethelberta. ‘They will come some time, unless they go to the bottom.’

The girl left the room. ‘Shall we go down to the shore and see what the night is like?’ said Ethelberta. ‘This is the last opportunity I shall have.’

‘Is it right for us to go, considering you are to be married to-morrow?’ said Picotee, who had small affection for nature in this mood.

Her sister laughed. ‘Let us put on our cloaks — nobody will know us. I am sorry to leave this grim and primitive place, even for Enckworth Court.’

They wrapped themselves up, and descended the hill.

On drawing near the battling line of breakers which marked the meeting of sea and land they could perceive within the nearly invisible horizon an equilateral triangle of lights. It was formed of three stars, a red on the one side, a green on the other, and a white on the summit. This, composed of mast-head and side lamps, was all that was visible of the Spruce, which now faced end-on about half-a-mile distant, and was still nearing the pier. The girls went further, and stood on the foreshore, listening to the din. Seaward appeared nothing distinct save a black horizontal band embodying itself out of the grey water, strengthening its blackness, and enlarging till it looked like a nearing wall. It was the concave face of a coming wave. On its summit a white edging arose with the aspect of a lace frill; it broadened, and fell over the front with a terrible concussion. Then all before them was a sheet of whiteness, which spread with amazing rapidity, till they found themselves standing in the midst of it, as in a field of snow. Both felt an insidious chill encircling their ankles, and they rapidly ran up the beach.

‘You girls, come away there, or you’ll be washed off: what need have ye for going so near?’

Ethelberta recognized the stentorian voice as that of Captain Flower, who, with a party of boatmen, was discovered to be standing near, under the shelter of a wall. He did not know them in the gloom, and they took care that he should not. They retreated further up the beach, when the hissing fleece of froth slid again down the shingle, dragging the pebbles under it with a rattle as of a beast gnawing bones.

The spot whereon the men stood was called 'Down-under-wall;' it was a nook commanding a full view of the bay, and hither the nautical portion of the village unconsciously gravitated on windy afternoons and nights, to discuss past disasters in the reticent spirit induced by a sense that they might at any moment be repeated. The stranger who should walk the shore on roaring and sobbing November eves when there was not light sufficient to guide his footsteps, and muse on the absoluteness of the solitude, would be surprised by a smart 'Good-night' being returned from this corner in company with the echo of his tread. In summer the six or eight perennial figures stood on the breezy side of the wall — in winter and in rain to leeward; but no weather was known to dislodge them.

'I had no sooner come ashore than the wind began to fly round,' said the previous speaker; 'and it must have been about the time they were off Old-Harry Point. "She'll put back for certain," I said; and I had no more thought o' seeing her than John's set-net that was carried round the point o' Monday.'

'Poor feller: his wife being in such a state makes him anxious to land if 'a can: that's what 'tis, plain enough.'

'Why that?' said Flower.

'The doctor's aboard, 'a believe: "I'll have the most understanding man in Sandbourne, cost me little or much," he said.'

''Tis all over and she's better,' said the other. 'I called half-an-hour afore dark.'

Flower, being an experienced man, knew how the judgment of a ship's master was liable to be warped by family anxieties, many instances of the same having occurred in the history of navigation. He felt uneasy, for he knew the deceit and guile of this bay far better than did the master of the Spruce, who, till within a few recent months, had been a stranger to the place. Indeed, it was the bay which had made Flower what he was, instead of a man in thriving retirement. The two great ventures of his life had been blown ashore and broken up within that very semicircle. The sturdy sailor now stood with his eyes fixed on the triangle of lights which showed that the steamer had not relinquished her intention of bringing up inside the pier if possible; his right hand was in his pocket, where it played with a large key which lay there. It was the key of the lifeboat shed, and Flower was coxswain. His musing was on the possibility of a use for it this night.

It appeared that the captain of the Spruce was aiming to pass in under the lee of the pier; but a strong current of four or five knots was running between the piles, drifting the steamer away at every attempt as soon as she slowed. To come in on the other side was dangerous, the hull of the vessel being likely to crash against and overthrow the

fragile erection, with damage to herself also. Flower, who had disappeared for a few minutes, now came back.

‘It is just possible I can make ‘em hear with the trumpet, now they be to leeward,’ he said, and proceeded with two or three others to grope his way out upon the pier, which consisted simply of a row of rotten piles covered with rotten planking, no balustrade of any kind existing to keep the unwary from tumbling off. At the water level the piles were eaten away by the action of the sea to about the size of a man’s wrist, and at every fresh influx the whole structure trembled like a spider’s web. In this lay the danger of making fast, for a strong pull from a headfast rope might drag the erection completely over. Flower arrived at the end, where a lantern hung.

‘Spruce ahoy!’ he blared through the speaking trumpet two or three times.

There seemed to be a reply of some sort from the steamer.

‘Tuesday’s gale hev loosened the pier, Cap’n Ounce; the bollards be too weak to make fast to: must land in boats if ye will land, but dangerous; yer wife is out of danger, and ‘tis a boy-y-y!’

Ethelberta and Picotee were at this time standing on the beach a hundred and fifty yards off. Whether or not the master of the steamer received the information volunteered by Flower, the two girls saw the triangle of lamps get narrow at its base, reduce themselves to two in a vertical line, then to one, then to darkness. The Spruce had turned her head from Knollsea.

‘They have gone back, and I shall not have my wedding things after all!’ said Ethelberta. ‘Well, I must do without them.’

‘You see, ‘twas best to play sure,’ said Flower to his comrades, in a tone of complacency. ‘They might have been able to do it, but ‘twas risky. The shop-folk be out of stock, I hear, and the visiting lady up the hill is terribly in want of clothes, so ‘tis said. But what’s that? Ounce ought to have put back afore.’

Then the lantern which hung at the end of the jetty was taken down, and the darkness enfolded all around from view. The bay became nothing but a voice, the foam an occasional touch upon the face, the Spruce an imagination, the pier a memory. Everything lessened upon the senses but one; that was the wind. It mauled their persons like a hand, and caused every scrap of their raiment to tug westward. To stand with the face to sea brought semi-suffocation, from the intense pressure of air.

The boatmen retired to their position under the wall, to lounge again in silence. Conversation was not considered necessary: their sense of each other’s presence formed a kind of conversation. Meanwhile Picotee and Ethelberta went up the hill.

‘If your wedding were going to be a public one, what a misfortune this delay of the packages would be,’ said Picotee.

‘Yes,’ replied the elder.

‘I think the bracelet the prettiest of all the presents he brought to-day — do you?’

‘It is the most valuable.’

‘Lord Mountclere is very kind, is he not? I like him a great deal better than I did — do you, Berta?’

‘Yes, very much better,’ said Ethelberta, warming a little. ‘If he were not so suspicious at odd moments I should like him exceedingly. But I must cure him of that by a regular course of treatment, and then he’ll be very nice.’

‘For an old man. He likes you better than any young man would take the trouble to do. I wish somebody else were old too.’

‘He will be some day.’

‘Yes, but — ’

‘Never mind: time will straighten many crooked things.’

‘Do you think Lord Mountclere has reached home by this time?’

‘I should think so: though I believe he had to call at the parsonage before leaving Knollsea.’

‘Had he? What for?’

‘Why, of course somebody must — ’

‘O yes. Do you think anybody in Knollsea knows it is going to be except us and the parson?’

‘I suppose the clerk knows.’

‘I wonder if a lord has ever been married so privately before.’

‘Frequently: when he marries far beneath him, as in this case. But even if I could have had it, I should not have liked a showy wedding. I have had no experience as a bride except in the private form of the ceremony.’

‘Berta, I am sometimes uneasy about you even now and I want to ask you one thing, if I may. Are you doing this for my sake? Would you have married Mr. Julian if it had not been for me?’

‘It is difficult to say exactly. It is possible that if I had had no relations at all, I might have married him. And I might not.’

‘I don’t intend to marry.’

‘In that case you will live with me at Enckworth. However, we will leave such details till the ground-work is confirmed. When we get indoors will you see if the boxes have been properly corded, and are quite ready to be sent for? Then come in and sit by the fire, and I’ll sing some songs to you.’

‘Sad ones, you mean.’

‘No, they shall not be sad.’

‘Perhaps they may be the last you will ever sing to me.’

‘They may be. Such a thing has occurred.’

‘But we will not think so. We’ll suppose you are to sing many to me yet.’

‘Yes. There’s good sense in that, Picotee. In a world where the blind only are cheerful we should all do well to put out our eyes. There, I did not mean to get into this state: forgive me, Picotee. It is because I have had a thought — why I cannot tell — that as much as this man brings to me in rank and gifts he may take out of me in tears.’

‘Berta!’

‘But there’s no reason in it — not any; for not in a single matter does what has been supply us with any certain ground for knowing what will be in the world. I have

seen marriages where happiness might have been said to be ensured, and they have been all sadness afterwards; and I have seen those in which the prospect was black as night, and they have led on to a time of sweetness and comfort. And I have seen marriages neither joyful nor sorry, that have become either as accident forced them to become, the persons having no voice in it at all. Well, then, why should I be afraid to make a plunge when chance is as trustworthy as calculation?’

‘If you don’t like him well enough, don’t have him, Berta. There’s time enough to put it off even now.’

‘O no. I would not upset a well-considered course on the haste of an impulse. Our will should withstand our misgivings. Now let us see if all has been packed, and then we’ll sing.’

That evening, while the wind was wheeling round and round the dwelling, and the calm eye of the lighthouse afar was the single speck perceptible of the outside world from the door of Ethelberta’s temporary home, the music of songs mingled with the stroke of the wind across the iron railings, and was swept on in the general tide of the gale, and the noise of the rolling sea, till not the echo of a tone remained.

An hour before this singing, an old gentleman might have been seen to alight from a little one-horse brougham, and enter the door of Knollsea parsonage. He was bent upon obtaining an entrance to the vicar’s study without giving his name.

But it happened that the vicar’s wife was sitting in the front room, making a pillow-case for the children’s bed out of an old surplice which had been excommunicated the previous Easter; she heard the newcomer’s voice through the partition, started, and went quickly to her husband, who was where he ought to have been, in his study. At her entry he looked up with an abstracted gaze, having been lost in meditation over a little schooner which he was attempting to rig for their youngest boy. At a word from his wife on the suspected name of the visitor, he resumed his earlier occupation of inserting a few strong sentences, full of the observation of maturer life, between the lines of a sermon written during his first years of ordination, in order to make it available for the coming Sunday. His wife then vanished with the little ship in her hand, and the visitor appeared. A talk went on in low tones.

After a ten minutes’ stay he departed as secretly as he had come. His errand was the cause of much whispered discussion between the vicar and his wife during the evening, but nothing was said concerning it to the outside world.

CHAPTER 44.

SANDBOURNE — A LONELY HEATH — THE ‘RED LION’ — THE HIGHWAY

It was half-past eleven before the Spruce, with Mountclere and Sol Chickerel on board, had steamed back again to Sandbourne. The direction and increase of the wind had made it necessary to keep the vessel still further to sea on their return than in going, that they might clear without risk the windy, sousing, thwacking, basting,

scourging Jack Ketch of a corner called Old-Harry Point, which lay about halfway along their track, and stood, with its detached posts and stumps of white rock, like a skeleton's lower jaw, grinning at British navigation. Here strong currents and cross currents were beginning to interweave their scrolls and meshes, the water rising behind them in tumultuous heaps, and slamming against the fronts and angles of cliff, whence it flew into the air like clouds of flour. Who could now believe that this roaring abode of chaos smiled in the sun as gently as an infant during the summer days not long gone by, every pinnacle, crag, and cave returning a doubled image across the glassy sea?

They were now again at Sandbourne, a point in their journey reached more than four hours ago. It became necessary to consider anew how to accomplish the difficult remainder. The wind was not blowing much beyond what seamen call half a gale, but there had been enough unpleasantness afloat to make landsmen glad to get ashore, and this dissipated in a slight measure their vexation at having failed in their purpose. Still, Mountclere loudly cursed their confidence in that treacherously short route, and Sol abused the unknown Sandbourne man who had brought the news of the steamer's arrival to them at the junction. The only course left open to them now, short of giving up the undertaking, was to go by the road along the shore, which, curving round the various little creeks and inland seas between their present position and Knollsea, was of no less length than thirty miles. There was no train back to the junction till the next morning, and Sol's proposition that they should drive thither in hope of meeting the mail-train, was overruled by Mountclere.

'We will have nothing more to do with chance,' he said. 'We may miss the train, and then we shall have gone out of the way for nothing. More than that, the down mail does not stop till it gets several miles beyond the nearest station for Knollsea; so it is hopeless.'

'If there had only been a telegraph to the confounded place!'

'Telegraph — we might as well telegraph to the devil as to an old booby and a damned scheming young widow. I very much question if we shall do anything in the matter, even if we get there. But I suppose we had better go on now?'

'You can do as you like. I shall go on, if I have to walk every step o't.'

'That's not necessary. I think the best posting-house at this end of the town is Tempett's — we must knock them up at once. Which will you do — attempt supper here, or break the back of our journey first, and get on to Anglebury? We may rest an hour or two there, unless you feel really in want of a meal.'

'No. I'll leave eating to merrier men, who have no sister in the hands of a cursed old Vandal.'

'Very well,' said Mountclere. 'We'll go on at once.'

An additional half-hour elapsed before they were fairly started, the lateness and abruptness of their arrival causing delay in getting a conveyance ready: the tempestuous night had apparently driven the whole town, gentle and simple, early to their beds. And when at length the travellers were on their way the aspect of the weather grew yet more forbidding. The rain came down unmercifully, the booming wind caught it,

bore it across the plain, whizzed it against the carriage like a sower sowing his seed. It was precisely such weather, and almost at the same season, as when Picotee traversed the same moor, stricken with her great disappointment at not meeting Christopher Julian.

Further on for several miles the drive lay through an open heath, dotted occasionally with fir plantations, the trees of which told the tale of their species without help from outline or colour; they spoke in those melancholy moans and sobs which give to their sound a solemn sadness surpassing even that of the sea. From each carriage-lamp the long rays stretched like feelers into the air, and somewhat cheered the way, until the insidious damp that pervaded all things above, around, and underneath, overpowered one of them, and rendered every attempt to rekindle it ineffectual. Even had the two men's dislike to each other's society been less, the general din of the night would have prevented much talking; as it was, they sat in a rigid reticence that was almost a third personality. The roads were laid hereabouts with a light sandy gravel, which, though not clogging, was soft and friable. It speedily became saturated, and the wheels ground heavily and deeply into its substance.

At length, after crossing from ten to twelve miles of these eternal heaths under the eternally drumming storm, they could discern eyelets of light winking to them in the distance from under a nebulous brow of pale haze. They were looking on the little town of Havenpool. Soon after this cross-roads were reached, one of which, at right angles to their present direction, led down on the left to that place. Here the man stopped, and informed them that the horses would be able to go but a mile or two further.

'Very well, we must have others that can,' said Mountclere. 'Does our way lie through the town?'

'No, sir — unless we go there to change horses, which I thought to do. The direct road is straight on. Havenpool lies about three miles down there on the left. But the water is over the road, and we had better go round. We shall come to no place for two or three miles, and then only to Flychett.'

'What's Flychett like?'

'A trumpery small bit of a village.'

'Still, I think we had better push on,' said Sol. 'I am against running the risk of finding the way flooded about Havenpool.'

'So am I,' returned Mountclere.

'I know a wheelwright in Flychett,' continued Sol, 'and he keeps a beer-house, and owns two horses. We could hire them, and have a bit of sommat in the shape of victuals, and then get on to Anglebury. Perhaps the rain may hold up by that time. Anything's better than going out of our way.'

'Yes. And the horses can last out to that place,' said Mountclere. 'Up and on again, my man.'

On they went towards Flychett. Still the everlasting heath, the black hills bulging against the sky, the barrows upon their round summits like warts on a swarthy skin. The storm blew huskily over bushes of heather and furze that it was unable materially

to disturb, and the travellers proceeded as before. But the horses were now far from fresh, and the time spent in reaching the next village was quite half as long as that taken up by the previous heavy portion of the drive. When they entered Flychett it was about three.

‘Now, where’s the inn?’ said Mountclere, yawning.

‘Just on the knap,’ Sol answered. ‘‘Tis a little small place, and we must do as well as we can.’

They pulled up before a cottage, upon the whitewashed front of which could be seen a square board representing the sign. After an infinite labour of rapping and shouting, a casement opened overhead, and a woman’s voice inquired what was the matter. Sol explained, when she told them that the horses were away from home.

‘Now we must wait till these are rested,’ growled Mountclere. ‘A pretty muddle!’

‘It cannot be helped,’ answered Sol; and he asked the woman to open the door. She replied that her husband was away with the horses and van, and that they could not come in.

Sol was known to her, and he mentioned his name; but the woman only began to abuse him.

‘Come, publican, you’d better let us in, or we’ll have the law for’t,’ rejoined Sol, with more spirit. ‘You don’t dare to keep nobility waiting like this.’

‘Nobility!’

‘My mate hev the title of Honourable, whether or no; so let’s have none of your slack,’ said Sol.

‘Don’t be a fool, young chopstick,’ exclaimed Mountclere. ‘Get the door opened.’

‘I will — in my own way,’ said Sol testily. ‘You mustn’t mind my trading upon your quality, as ‘tis a case of necessity. This is a woman nothing will bring to reason but an appeal to the higher powers. If every man of title was as useful as you are to-night, sir, I’d never call them lumber again as long as I live.’

‘How singular!’

‘There’s never a bit of rubbish that won’t come in use if you keep it seven years.’

‘If my utility depends upon keeping you company, may I go to h — - for lacking every atom of the virtue.’

‘Hear, hear! But it hardly is becoming in me to answer up to a man so much older than I, or I could say more. Suppose we draw a line here for the present, sir, and get indoors?’

‘Do what you will, in Heaven’s name.’

A few more words to the woman resulted in her agreeing to admit them if they would attend to themselves afterwards. This Sol promised, and the key of the door was let down to them from the bedroom window by a string. When they had entered, Sol, who knew the house well, busied himself in lighting a fire, the driver going off with a lantern to the stable, where he found standing-room for the two horses. Mountclere walked up and down the kitchen, mumbling words of disgust at the situation, the few

of this kind that he let out being just enough to show what a fearfully large number he kept in.

‘A-calling up people at this time of morning!’ the woman occasionally exclaimed down the stairs. ‘But folks show no mercy upon their flesh and blood — not one bit or mite.’

‘Now never be stomachy, my good soul,’ cried Sol from the fireplace, where he stood blowing the fire with his breath. ‘Only tell me where the victuals bide, and I’ll do all the cooking. We’ll pay like princes — especially my mate.’

‘There’s but little in house,’ said the sleepy woman from her bedroom. ‘There’s pig’s fry, a side of bacon, a conger eel, and pickled onions.’

‘Conger eel?’ said Sol to Mountclere.

‘No, thank you.’

‘Pig’s fry?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Well, then, tell me where the bacon is,’ shouted Sol to the woman.

‘You must find it,’ came again down the stairs. ‘Tis somewhere up in chimley, but in which part I can’t mind. Really I don’t know whether I be upon my head or my heels, and my brain is all in a spin, wi’ being rafted up in such a larry!’

‘Bide where you be, there’s a dear,’ said Sol. ‘We’ll do it all. Just tell us where the tea-caddy is, and the gridiron, and then you can go to sleep again.’

The woman appeared to take his advice, for she gave the information, and silence soon reigned upstairs.

When one piece of bacon had been with difficulty cooked over the newly-lit fire, Sol said to Mountclere, with the rasher on his fork: ‘Now look here, sir, I think while I am making the tea, you ought to go on griddling some more of these, as you haven’t done nothing at all?’

‘I do the paying. . . . Well, give me the bacon.’

‘And when you have done yours, I’ll cook the man’s, as the poor feller’s hungry, I make no doubt.’

Mountclere, fork in hand, then began with his rasher, tossing it about the gridiron in masterly style, Sol attending to the tea. He was attracted from this occupation by a brilliant flame up the chimney, Mountclere exclaiming, ‘Now the cursed thing is on fire!’

‘Blow it out — hard — that’s it! Well now, sir, do you come and begin upon mine, as you must be hungry. I’ll finish the griddling. Ought we to mind the man sitting down in our company, as there’s no other room for him? I hear him coming in.’

‘O no — not at all. Put him over at that table.’

‘And I’ll join him. You can sit here by yourself, sir.’

The meal was despatched, and the coachman again retired, promising to have the horses ready in about an hour and a half. Sol and Mountclere made themselves comfortable upon either side of the fireplace, since there was no remedy for the delay: after sitting in silence awhile, they nodded and slept.

How long they would have remained thus, in consequence of their fatigues, there is no telling, had not the mistress of the cottage descended the stairs about two hours later, after peeping down upon them at intervals of five minutes during their sleep, lest they should leave without her knowledge. It was six o'clock, and Sol went out for the man, whom he found snoring in the hay-loft. There was now real necessity for haste, and in ten minutes they were again on their way.

* * * * *

Day dawned upon the 'Red Lion' inn at Anglebury with a timid and watery eye. From the shadowy archway came a shining lantern, which was seen to be dangling from the hand of a little bow-legged old man — the hostler, John. Having reached the front, he looked around to measure the daylight, opened the lantern, and extinguished it by a pinch of his fingers. He paused for a moment to have the customary word or two with his neighbour the milkman, who usually appeared at this point at this time.

'It sounds like the whistle of the morning train,' the milkman said as he drew near, a scream from the further end of the town reaching their ears. 'Well, I hope, now the wind's in that quarter, we shall ha'e a little more fine weather — hey, hostler?'

'What be ye a talking o'?'

'Can hear the whistle plain, I say.'

'O ay. I suppose you do. But faith, 'tis a poor fist I can make at hearing anything. There, I could have told all the same that the wind was in the east, even if I had not seed poor Thomas Tribble's smoke blowing across the little orchard. Joints be a true weathercock enough when past three-score. These easterly rains, when they do come, which is not often, come wi' might enough to squail a man into his grave.'

'Well, we must look for it, hostler. . . . Why, what mighty ekkypage is this, come to town at such a purblinking time of day?'

'Tis what time only can tell — though 'twill not be long first,' the hostler replied, as the driver of the pair of horses and carriage containing Sol and Mountclere slackened pace, and drew rein before the inn.

Fresh horses were immediately called for, and while they were being put in the two travellers walked up and down.

'It is now a quarter to seven o'clock,' said Mountclere; 'and the question arises, shall I go on to Knollsea, or branch off at Corvsgate Castle for Enckworth? I think the best plan will be to drive first to Enckworth, set me down, and then get him to take you on at once to Knollsea. What do you say?'

'When shall I reach Knollsea by that arrangement?'

'By half-past eight o'clock. We shall be at Enckworth before eight, which is excellent time.'

'Very well, sir, I agree to that,' said Sol, feeling that as soon as one of the two birds had been caught, the other could not mate without their knowledge.

The carriage and horses being again ready, away they drove at once, both having by this time grown too restless to spend in Anglebury a minute more than was necessary.

The hostler and his lad had taken the jaded Sandbourne horses to the stable, rubbed them down, and fed them, when another noise was heard outside the yard; the omnibus had returned from meeting the train. Relinquishing the horses to the small stable-lad, the old hostler again looked out from the arch.

A young man had stepped from the omnibus, and he came forward. 'I want a conveyance of some sort to take me to Knollsea, at once. Can you get a horse harnessed in five minutes?'

'I'll make shift to do what I can master, not promising about the minutes. The truest man can say no more. Won't ye step into the bar, sir, and give your order? I'll let ye know as soon as 'tis ready.'

Christopher turned into a room smelling strongly of the night before, and stood by the newly-kindled fire to wait. He had just come in haste from Melchester. The upshot of his excitement about the wedding, which, as the possible hour of its solemnization drew near, had increased till it bore him on like a wind, was this unpremeditated journey. Lying awake the previous night, the hangings of his bed pulsing to every beat of his heart, he decided that there was one last and great service which it behoved him, as an honest man and friend, to say nothing of lover, to render to Ethelberta at this juncture. It was to ask her by some means whether or not she had engaged with open eyes to marry Lord Mountclere; and if not, to give her a word or two of enlightenment. That done, she might be left to take care of herself.

His plan was to obtain an interview with Picotee, and learn from her accurately the state of things. Should he, by any possibility, be mistaken in his belief as to the contracting parties, a knowledge of the mistake would be cheaply purchased by the journey. Should he not, he would send up to Ethelberta the strong note of expostulation which was already written, and waiting in his pocket. To intrude upon her at such a time was unseemly; and to despatch a letter by a messenger before evidence of its necessity had been received was most undesirable. The whole proceeding at best was clumsy; yet earnestness is mostly clumsy; and how could he let the event pass without a protest? Before daylight on that autumn morning he had risen, told Faith of his intention, and started off.

As soon as the vehicle was ready, Christopher hastened to the door and stepped up. The little stable-boy led the horse a few paces on the way before relinquishing his hold; at the same moment a respectably dressed man on foot, with a small black bag in his hand, came up from the opposite direction, along the street leading from the railway. He was a thin, elderly man, with grey hair; that a great anxiety pervaded him was as plainly visible as were his features. Without entering the inn, he came up at once to old John.

'Have you anything going to Knollsea this morning that I can get a lift in?' said the pedestrian — no other than Ethelberta's father.

'Nothing empty, that I know of.'

'Or carrier?'

'No.'

‘A matter of fifteen shillings, then, I suppose?’

‘Yes — no doubt. But yond there’s a young man just now starting; he might not take it ill if ye were to ask him for a seat, and go halves in the hire of the trap. Shall I call out?’

‘Ah, do.’

The hostler bawled to the stable-boy, who put the question to Christopher. There was room for two in the dogcart, and Julian had no objection to save the shillings of a fellow-traveller who was evidently not rich. When Chickerel mounted to his seat, Christopher paused to look at him as we pause in some enactment that seems to have been already before us in a dream long ago. Ethelberta’s face was there, as the landscape is in the map, the romance in the history, the aim in the deed: denuded, rayless, and sorry, but discernible.

For the moment, however, this did not occur to Julian. He took the whip, the boy loosed his hold upon the horse, and they proceeded on their way.

‘What slap-dash jinks may there be going on at Knollsea, then, my sonny?’ said the hostler to the lad, as the dogcart and the backs of the two men diminished on the road. ‘You be a Knollsea boy: have anything reached your young ears about what’s in the wind there, David Straw?’

‘No, nothing: except that ‘tis going to be Christmas day in five weeks: and then a hide-bound bull is going to be killed if he don’t die afore the time, and gi’ed away by my lord in three-pound junks, as a reward to good people who never curse and sing bad songs, except when they be drunk; mother says perhaps she will have some, and ‘tis excellent if well stewed, mother says.’

‘A very fair chronicle for a boy to give, but not what I asked for. When you try to answer a old man’s question, always bear in mind what it was that old man asked. A hide-bound bull is good when well stewed, I make no doubt — for they who like it; but that’s not it. What I said was, do you know why three fokes, a rich man, a middling man, and a poor man, should want horses for Knollsea afore seven o’clock in the morning on a blinking day in Fall, when everything is as wet as a dishclout, whereas that’s more than often happens in fine summer weather?’

‘No — I don’t know, John hostler.’

‘Then go home and tell your mother that ye be no wide-awake boy, and that old John, who went to school with her father afore she was born or thought o’, says so. . . . Chok’ it all, why should I think there’s sommat going on at Knollsea? Honest travelling have been so rascally abused since I was a boy in pinner, by tribes of nobodies tearing from one end of the country to t’other, to see the sun go down in salt water, or the moon play jack-lantern behind some rotten tower or other, that, upon my song, when life and death’s in the wind there’s no telling the difference!’

‘I like their sixpences ever so much.’

‘Young sonny, don’t you answer up to me when you baint in the story — stopping my words in that fashion. I won’t have it, David. Now up in the tallet with ye, there’s

a good boy, and down with another load or two of hay — as fast as you can do it for me.'

The boy vanished under the archway, and the hostler followed at his heels. Meanwhile the carriage bearing Mr. Mountclere and Sol was speeding on its way to Enckworth. When they reached the spot at which the road forked into two, they left the Knollsea route, and keeping thence under the hills for the distance of five or six miles, drove into Lord Mountclere's park. In ten minutes the house was before them, framed in by dripping trees.

Mountclere jumped out, and entered without ceremony. Sol, being anxious to know if Lord Mountclere was there, ordered the coachman to wait a few moments. It was now nearly eight o'clock, and the smoke which ascended from the newly-lit fires of the Court painted soft blue tints upon the brown and golden leaves of lofty boughs adjoining.

'O, Ethelberta!' said Sol, as he regarded the fair prospect.

The gravel of the drive had been washed clean and smooth by the night's rain, but there were fresh wheelmarks other than their own upon the track. Yet the mansion seemed scarcely awake, and stillness reigned everywhere around.

Not more than three or four minutes had passed when the door was opened for Mountclere, and he came hastily from the doorsteps.

'I must go on with you,' he said, getting into the vehicle. 'He's gone.'

'Where — to Knollsea?' said Sol.

'Yes,' said Mountclere. 'Now, go ahead to Knollsea!' he shouted to the man. 'To think I should be fooled like this! I had no idea that he would be leaving so soon! We might perhaps have been here an hour earlier by hard striving. But who was to dream that he would arrange to leave it at such an unearthly time of the morning at this dark season of the year? Drive — drive!' he called again out of the window, and the pace was increased.

'I have come two or three miles out of my way on account of you,' said Sol sullenly. 'And all this time lost. I don't see why you wanted to come here at all. I knew it would be a waste of time.'

'Damn it all, man,' said Mountclere; 'it is no use for you to be angry with me!'

'I think it is, for 'tis you have brought me into this muddle,' said Sol, in no sweeter tone. 'Ha, ha! Upon my life I should be inclined to laugh, if I were not so much inclined to do the other thing, at Berta's trick of trying to make close family allies of such a cantankerous pair as you and I! So much of one mind as we be, so alike in our ways of living, so close connected in our callings and principles, so matched in manners and customs! 'twould be a thousand pities to part us — hey, Mr. Mountclere!'

Mountclere faintly laughed with the same hideous merriment at the same idea, and then both remained in a withering silence, meant to express the utter contempt of each for the other, both in family and in person. They passed the Lodge, and again swept into the highroad.

‘Drive on!’ said Mountclere, putting his head again out of the window, and shouting to the man. ‘Drive like the devil!’ he roared again a few minutes afterwards, in fuming dissatisfaction with their rate of progress.

‘Baint I doing of it?’ said the driver, turning angrily round. ‘I ain’t going to ruin my governor’s horses for strangers who won’t pay double for ‘em — not I. I am driving as fast as I can. If other folks get in the way with their traps I suppose I must drive round ‘em, sir?’

There was a slight crash.

‘There!’ continued the coachman. ‘That’s what comes of my turning round!’

Sol looked out on the other side, and found that the forewheel of their carriage had become locked in the wheel of a dogcart they had overtaken, the road here being very narrow. Their coachman, who knew he was to blame for this mishap, felt the advantage of taking time by the forelock in a case of accusation, and began swearing at his victim as if he were the sinner. Sol jumped out, and looking up at the occupants of the other conveyance, saw against the sky the back elevation of his father and Christopher Julian, sitting upon a little seat which they overhung, like two big puddings upon a small dish.

‘Father — what, you going?’ said Sol. ‘Is it about Berta that you’ve come?’

‘Yes, I got your letter,’ said Chickerel, ‘and I felt I should like to come — that I ought to come, to save her from what she’ll regret. Luckily, this gentleman, a stranger to me, has given me a lift from Anglebury, or I must have hired.’ He pointed to Christopher.

‘But he’s Mr. Julian!’ said Sol.

‘You are Mrs. Petherwin’s father? — I have travelled in your company without knowing it!’ exclaimed Christopher, feeling and looking both astonished and puzzled. At first, it had appeared to him that, in direct antagonism to his own purpose, her friends were favouring Ethelberta’s wedding; but it was evidently otherwise.

‘Yes, that’s father,’ said Sol. ‘Father, this is Mr. Julian. Mr. Julian, this gentleman here is Lord Mountclere’s brother — and, to cut the story short, we all wish to stop the wedding.’

‘Then let us get on, in Heaven’s name!’ said Mountclere. ‘You are the lady’s father?’

‘I am,’ said Chickerel.

‘Then you had better come into this carriage. We shall go faster than the dogcart. Now, driver, are the wheels right again?’

Chickerel hastily entered with Mountclere, Sol joined them, and they sped on. Christopher drove close in their rear, not quite certain whether he did well in going further, now that there were plenty of people to attend to the business, but anxious to see the end. The other three sat in silence, with their eyes upon their knees, though the clouds were dispersing, and the morning grew bright. In about twenty minutes the square unembattled tower of Knollsea Church appeared below them in the vale, its summit just touching the distant line of sea upon sky. The element by which they had been victimized on the previous evening now smiled falsely to the low morning sun.

They descended the road to the village at a little more mannerly pace than that of the earlier journey, and saw the rays glance upon the hands of the church clock, which marked five-and-twenty minutes to nine.

CHAPTER 45.

KNOLLSEA — THE ROAD THENCE — ENCKWORTH

All eyes were directed to the church-gate, as the travellers descended the hill. No wedding carriages were there, no favours, no slatternly group of women brimming with interest, no aged pauper on two sticks, who comes because he has nothing else to do till dying time, no nameless female passing by on the other side with a laugh of indifference, no ringers taking off their coats as they vanish up a turret, no hobbledehoys on tiptoe outside the chancel windows — in short, none whatever of the customary accessories of a country wedding was anywhere visible.

‘Thank God!’ said Chickerel.

‘Wait till you know he deserves it,’ said Mountclere.

‘Nothing’s done yet between them.’

‘It is not likely that anything is done at this time of day. But I have decided to go to the church first. You will probably go to your relative’s house at once?’

Sol looked to his father for a reply.

‘No, I too shall go to the church first, just to assure myself,’ said Chickerel. ‘I shall then go on to Mrs Petherwin’s.’

The carriage was stopped at the corner of a steep incline leading down to the edifice. Mountclere and Chickerel alighted and walked on towards the gates, Sol remaining in his place. Christopher was some way off, descending the hill on foot, having halted to leave his horse and trap at a small inn at the entrance to the village.

When Chickerel and Mountclere reached the churchyard gate they found it slightly open. The church-door beyond it was also open, but nobody was near the spot.

‘We have arrived not a minute too soon, however,’ said Mountclere. ‘Preparations have apparently begun. It was to be an early wedding, no doubt.’

Entering the building, they looked around; it was quite empty. Chickerel turned towards the chancel, his eye being attracted by a red kneeling-cushion, placed at about the middle of the altar-railing, as if for early use. Mountclere strode to the vestry, somewhat at a loss how to proceed in his difficult task of unearthing his brother, obtaining a private interview with him, and then, by the introduction of Sol and Chickerel, causing a general convulsion.

‘Ha! here’s somebody,’ he said, observing a man in the vestry. He advanced with the intention of asking where Lord Mountclere was to be found. Chickerel came forward in the same direction.

‘Are you the parish clerk?’ said Mountclere to the man, who was dressed up in his best clothes.

‘I hev the honour of that calling,’ the man replied.

Two large books were lying before him on the vestry table, one of them being open. As the clerk spoke he looked slantingly on the page, as a person might do to discover if some writing were dry. Mountclere and Chickerel gazed on the same page. The book was the marriage-register.

‘Too late!’ said Chickerel.

There plainly enough stood the signatures of Lord Mountclere and Ethelberta. The viscount’s was very black, and had not yet dried. Her strokes were firm, and comparatively thick for a woman’s, though paled by juxtaposition with her husband’s muddled characters. In the space for witnesses’ names appeared in trembling lines as fine as silk the autograph of Picotee, the second name being that of a stranger, probably the clerk.

‘Yes, yes — we are too late, it seems,’ said Mountclere coolly. ‘Who could have thought they’d marry at eight!’

Chickerel stood like a man baked hard and dry. Further than his first two words he could say nothing.

‘They must have set about it early, upon my soul,’ Mountclere continued. ‘When did the wedding take place?’ he asked of the clerk sharply.

‘It was over about five minutes before you came in,’ replied that luminary pleasantly, as he played at an invisible game of pitch-and-toss with some half-sovereigns in his pocket. ‘I received orders to have the church ready at five minutes to eight this morning, though I knew nothing about such a thing till bedtime last night. It was very private and plain, not that I should mind another such a one, sir;’ and he secretly pitched and tossed again.

Meanwhile Sol had found himself too restless to sit waiting in the carriage for more than a minute after the other two had left it. He stepped out at the same instant that Christopher came past, and together they too went on to the church.

‘Father, ought we not to go on at once to Ethelberta’s, instead of waiting?’ said Sol, on reaching the vestry, still in ignorance. ‘Twas no use in coming here.’

‘No use at all,’ said Chickerel, as if he had straw in his throat. ‘Look at this. I would almost sooner have had it that in leaving this church I came from her grave — well, no, perhaps not that, but I fear it is a bad thing.’

Sol then saw the names in the register, Christopher saw them, and the man closed the book. Christopher could not well command himself, and he retired.

‘I knew it. I always said that pride would lead Berta to marry an unworthy man, and so it has!’ said Sol bitterly. ‘What shall we do now? I’ll see her.’

‘Do no such thing, young man,’ said Mountclere. ‘The best course is to leave matters alone. They are married. If you are wise, you will try to think the match a good one, and be content to let her keep her position without inconveniencing her by your intrusions or complaints. It is possible that the satisfaction of her ambition will help her to endure any few surprises to her propriety that may occur. She is a clever young woman, and has played her cards adroitly. I only hope she may never repent of the game! A-hem.

Good morning.' Saying this, Mountclere slightly bowed to his relations, and marched out of the church with dignity; but it was told afterwards by the coachman, who had no love for Mountclere, that when he stepped into the fly, and was as he believed unobserved, he was quite overcome with fatuous rage, his lips frothing like a mug of hot ale.

'What an impertinent gentleman 'tis,' said Chickerel. 'As if we had tried for her to marry his brother!'

'He knows better than that,' said Sol. 'But he'll never believe that Berta didn't lay a trap for the old fellow. He thinks at this moment that Lord Mountclere has never been told of us and our belongings.'

'I wonder if she has deceived him in anything,' murmured Chickerel. 'I can hardly suppose it. But she is altogether beyond me. However, if she has misled him on any point she will suffer for it.'

'You need not fear that, father. It isn't her way of working. Why couldn't she have known that when a title is to be had for the asking, the owner must be a shocking one indeed?'

'The title is well enough. Any poor scrubs in our place must be fools not to think the match a very rare and astonishing honour, as far as the position goes. But that my brave girl will be miserable is a part of the honour I can't stomach so well. If he had been any other lord in the kingdom, we might have been merry indeed. I believe he will ruin her happiness — yes, I do — not by any personal snubbing or rough conduct, but by other things, causing her to be despised; and that is a thing she can't endure.'

'She's not to be despised without a deal of trouble — we must remember that. And if he insults her by introducing new favourites, as they say he did his first wife, I'll call upon him and ask his meaning, and take her away.'

'Nonsense — we shall never know what he does, or how she feels; she will never let out a word. However unhappy she may be, she will always deny it — that's the unfortunate part of such marriages.'

'An old chap like that ought to leave young women alone, damn him!'

The clerk came nearer. 'I am afraid I cannot allow bad words to be spoke in this sacred pile,' he said. 'As far as my personal self goes, I should have no objection to your cussing as much as you like, but as a official of the church my conscience won't allow it to be done.'

'Your conscience has allowed something to be done that cussing and swearing are godly worship to.'

'The prettiest maid is left out of harness, however,' said the clerk. 'The little witness was the chicken to my taste — Lord forgive me for saying it, and a man with a wife and family!'

Sol and his father turned to withdraw, and soon forgot the remark, but it was frequently recalled by Christopher.

'Do you think of trying to see Ethelberta before you leave?' said Sol.

‘Certainly not,’ said Chickerel. ‘Mr. Mountclere’s advice was good in that. The more we keep out of the way the more good we are doing her. I shall go back to Anglebury by the carrier, and get on at once to London. You will go with me, I suppose?’

‘The carrier does not leave yet for an hour or two.’

‘I shall walk on, and let him overtake me. If possible, I will get one glimpse of Enckworth Court, Berta’s new home; there may be time, if I start at once.’

‘I will walk with you,’ said Sol.

‘There is room for one with me,’ said Christopher. ‘I shall drive back early in the afternoon.’

‘Thank you,’ said Sol. ‘I will endeavour to meet you at Corvsgate.’

Thus it was arranged. Chickerel could have wished to search for Picotee, and learn from her the details of this mysterious matter. But it was particularly painful to him to make himself busy after the event; and to appear suddenly and uselessly where he was plainly not wanted to appear would be an awkwardness which the pleasure of seeing either daughter could scarcely counterbalance. Hence he had resolved to return at once to town, and there await the news, together with the detailed directions as to his own future movements, carefully considered and laid down, which were sure to be given by the far-seeing Ethelberta.

Sol and his father walked on together, Chickerel to meet the carrier just beyond Enckworth, Sol to wait for Christopher at Corvsgate. His wish to see, in company with his father, the outline of the seat to which Ethelberta had been advanced that day, was the triumph of youthful curiosity and interest over dogged objection. His father’s wish was based on calmer reasons.

Christopher, lone and out of place, remained in the church yet a little longer. He desultorily walked round. Reaching the organ chamber, he looked at the instrument, and was surprised to find behind it a young man. Julian first thought him to be the organist; on second inspection, however, he proved to be a person Christopher had met before, under far different circumstances; it was our young friend Ladywell, looking as sick and sorry as a lily with a slug in its stalk.

The occasion, the place, and their own condition, made them kin. Christopher had despised Ladywell, Ladywell had disliked Christopher; but a third item neutralised the other two — it was their common lot.

Christopher just nodded, for they had only met on Ethelberta’s stairs. Ladywell nodded more, and spoke. ‘The church appears to be interesting,’ he said.

‘Yes. Such a tower is rare in England,’ said Christopher.

They then dwelt on other features of the building, thence enlarging to the village, and then to the rocks and marine scenery, both avoiding the malady they suffered from — the marriage of Ethelberta.

‘The village streets are very picturesque, and the cliff scenery is good of its kind,’ rejoined Ladywell. ‘The rocks represent the feminine side of grandeur. Here they are white, with delicate tops. On the west coast they are higher, black, and with angular

summits. Those represent grandeur in its masculine aspect. It is merely my own idea, and not very bright, perhaps.'

'It is very ingenious,' said Christopher, 'and perfectly true.'

Ladywell was pleased. 'I am here at present making sketches for my next subject — a winter sea. Otherwise I should not have — happened to be in the church.'

'You are acquainted with Mrs. Petherwin — I think you are Mr. Ladywell, who painted her portrait last season?'

'Yes,' said Ladywell, colouring.

'You may have heard her speak of Mr. Julian?'

'O yes,' said Ladywell, offering his hand. Then by degrees their tongues wound closer round the subject of their sadness, each tacitly owing to what he would not tell.

'I saw it,' said Ladywell heavily.

'Did she look troubled?'

'Not in the least — bright and fresh as a May morning. She has played me many a bitter trick, and poor Neigh too, a friend of mine. But I cannot help forgiving her. . . . I saw a carriage at the door, and strolled in. The ceremony was just proceeding, so I sat down here. Well, I have done with Knollsea. The place has no further interest for me now. I may own to you as a friend, that if she had not been living here I should have studied at some other coast — of course that's in confidence.'

'I understand, quite.'

'I only arrived in the neighbourhood two days ago, and did not set eyes upon her till this morning, she has kept so entirely indoors.'

Then the young men parted, and half-an-hour later the ingenuous Ladywell came from the visitors' inn by the shore, a man walking behind him with a quantity of artists' materials and appliances. He went on board the steamer, which this morning had performed the passage in safety. Ethelberta single having been the loadstone in the cliffs that had attracted Ladywell hither, Ethelberta married was the negative pole of the same, sending him away. And thus did a woman put an end to the only opportunity of distinction, on Art-exhibition walls, that ever offered itself to the tortuous ways, quaint alleys, and marbled bluffs of Knollsea, as accessories in the picture of a winter sea.

Christopher's interest in the village was of the same evaporating nature. He looked upon the sea, and the great swell, and the waves sending up a sound like the huzzas of multitudes; but all the wild scene was irksome now. The ocean-bound steamers far away on the horizon inspired him with no curiosity as to their destination; the house Ethelberta had occupied was positively hateful; and he turned away to wait impatiently for the hour at which he had promised to drive on to meet Sol at Corvsgate.

Sol and Chickerel plodded along the road, in order to skirt Enckworth before the carrier came up. Reaching the top of a hill on their way, they paused to look down on a peaceful scene. It was a park and wood, glowing in all the matchless colours of late autumn, parapets and pediments peering out from a central position afar. At the

bottom of the descent before them was a lodge, to which they now descended. The gate stood invitingly open. Exclusiveness was no part of the owner's instincts: one could see that at a glance. No appearance of a well-rolled garden-path attached to the park-drive; as is the case with many, betokening by the perfection of their surfaces their proprietor's deficiency in hospitality. The approach was like a turnpike road full of great ruts, clumsy mendings; bordered by trampled edges and incursions upon the grass at pleasure. Butchers and bakers drove as freely herein as peers and peeresses. Christening parties, wedding companies, and funeral trains passed along by the doors of the mansion without check or question. A wild untidiness in this particular has its recommendations; for guarded grounds ever convey a suspicion that their owner is young to landed possessions, as religious earnestness implies newness of conversion, and conjugal tenderness recent marriage.

Half-an-hour being wanting as yet to Chickerel's time with the carrier, Sol and himself, like the rest of the world when at leisure, walked into the extensive stretch of grass and grove. It formed a park so large that not one of its owners had ever wished it larger, not one of its owner's rivals had ever failed to wish it smaller, and not one of its owner's satellites had ever seen it without praise. They somewhat avoided the roadway passing under the huge, misshapen, ragged trees, and through fern brakes, ruddy and crisp in their decay. On reaching a suitable eminence, the father and son stood still to look upon the many-chimneyed building, or rather conglomeration of buildings, to which these groves and glades formed a setting.

'We will just give a glance,' said Chickerel, 'and then go away. It don't seem well to me that Ethelberta should have this; it is too much. The sudden change will do her no good. I never believe in anything that comes in the shape of wonderful luck. As it comes, so it goes. Had she been brought home today to one of those tenant-farms instead of these woods and walls, I could have called it good fortune. What she should have done was glorify herself by glorifying her own line of life, not by forsaking that line for another. Better have been admired as a governess than shunned as a peeress, which is what she will be. But it is just the same everywhere in these days. Young men will rather wear a black coat and starve than wear fustian and do well.'

'One man to want such a monstrous house as that! Well, 'tis a fine place. See, there's the carpenters' shops, the timber-yard, and everything, as if it were a little town. Perhaps Berta may hire me for a job now and then.'

'I always knew she would cut herself off from us. She marked for it from childhood, and she has finished the business thoroughly.'

'Well, it is no matter, father, for why should we want to trouble her? She may write, and I shall answer; but if she calls to see me, I shall not return the visit; and if she meets me with her husband or any of her new society about her, I shall behave as a stranger.'

'It will be best,' said Chickerel. 'Well, now I must move.'

However, by the sorcery of accident, before they had very far retraced their steps an open carriage became visible round a bend in the drive. Chickerel, with a servant's instinct, was for beating a retreat.

'No,' said Sol. 'Let us stand our ground. We have already been seen, and we do no harm.'

So they stood still on the edge of the drive, and the carriage drew near. It was a landau, and the sun shone in upon Lord Mountclere, with Lady Mountclere sitting beside him, like Abishag beside King David.

Very blithe looked the viscount, for he rode upon a cherub to-day. She appeared fresh, rosy, and strong, but dubious; though if mien was anything, she was a viscountess twice over. Her dress was of a dove-coloured material, with a bonnet to match, a little tufted white feather resting on the top, like a truce-flag between the blood of noble and vassal. Upon the cool grey of her shoulders hung a few locks of hair, toned warm as fire by the sunshiny addition to its natural hue.

Chickerel instinctively took off his hat; Sol did the same.

For only a moment did Ethelberta seem uncertain how to act. But a solution to her difficulty was given by the face of her brother. There she saw plainly at one glance more than a dozen speeches would have told — for Sol's features thoroughly expressed his intention that to him she was to be a stranger. Her eyes flew to Chickerel, and he slightly shook his head. She understood them now. With a tear in her eye for her father, and a sigh in her bosom for Sol, she bowed in answer to their salute; her husband moved his hat and nodded, and the carriage rolled on. Lord Mountclere might possibly be making use of the fine morning in showing her the park and premises. Chickerel, with a moist eye, now went on with his son towards the highroad. When they reached the lodge, the lodge-keeper was walking in the sun, smoking his pipe. 'Good morning,' he said to Chickerel.

'Any rejoicings at the Court to-day?' the butler inquired.

'Quite the reverse. Not a soul there. 'Tisn't knowed anywhere at all. I had no idea of such a thing till he brought my lady here. Not going off, neither. They've come home like the commonest couple in the land, and not even the bells allowed to ring.'

They walked along the public road, and the carrier came in view.

'Father,' said Sol, 'I don't think I'll go further with you. She's gone into the house; and suppose she should run back without him to try to find us? It would be cruel to disappoint her. I'll bide about here for a quarter of an hour, in case she should. Mr. Julian won't have passed Corvsgate till I get there.'

'Well, one or two of her old ways may be left in her still, and it is not a bad thought. Then you will walk the rest of the distance if you don't meet Mr. Julian? I must be in London by the evening.'

'Any time to-night will do for me. I shall not begin work until to-morrow, so that the four o'clock train will answer my purpose.'

Thus they parted, and Sol strolled leisurely back. The road was quite deserted, and he lingered by the park fence.

‘Sol!’ said a bird-like voice; ‘how did you come here?’

He looked up, and saw a figure peering down upon him from the top of the park wall, the ground on the inside being higher than the road. The speaker was to the expected Ethelberta what the moon is to the sun, a star to the moon. It was Picotee.

‘Hullo, Picotee!’ said Sol.

‘There’s a little gate a quarter of a mile further on,’ said Picotee. ‘We can meet there without your passing through the big lodge. I’ll be there as soon as you.’

Sol ascended the hill, passed through the second gate, and turned back again, when he met Picotee coming forward under the trees. They walked together in this secluded spot.

‘Berta says she wants to see you and father,’ said Picotee breathlessly. ‘You must come in and make yourselves comfortable. She had no idea you were here so secretly, and she didn’t know what to do.’

‘Father’s gone,’ said Sol.

‘How vexed she will be! She thinks there is something the matter — that you are angry with her for not telling you earlier. But you will come in, Sol?’

‘No, I can’t come in,’ said her brother.

‘Why not? It is such a big house, you can’t think. You need not come near the front apartments, if you think we shall be ashamed of you in your working clothes. How came you not to dress up a bit, Sol? Still, Berta won’t mind it much. She says Lord Mountclere must take her as she is, or he is kindly welcome to leave her.’

‘Ah, well! I might have had a word or two to say about that, but the time has gone by for it, worse luck. Perhaps it is best that I have said nothing, and she has had her way. No, I shan’t come in, Picotee. Father is gone, and I am going too.’

‘O Sol!’

‘We are rather put out at her acting like this — father and I and all of us. She might have let us know about it beforehand, even if she is a lady and we what we always was. It wouldn’t have let her down so terrible much to write a line. She might have learnt something that would have led her to take a different step.’

‘But you will see poor Berta? She has done no harm. She was going to write long letters to all of you to-day, explaining her wedding, and how she is going to help us all on in the world.’

Sol paused irresolutely. ‘No, I won’t come in,’ he said. ‘It would disgrace her, for one thing, dressed as I be; more than that, I don’t want to come in. But I should like to see her, if she would like to see me; and I’ll go up there to that little fir plantation, and walk up and down behind it for exactly half-an-hour. She can come out to me there.’ Sol had pointed as he spoke to a knot of young trees that hooded a knoll a little way off.

‘I’ll go and tell her,’ said Picotee.

‘I suppose they will be off somewhere, and she is busy getting ready?’

‘O no. They are not going to travel till next year. Ethelberta does not want to go anywhere; and Lord Mountclere cannot endure this changeable weather in any place but his own house.’

‘Poor fellow!’

‘Then you will wait for her by the firs? I’ll tell her at once.’

Picotee left him, and Sol went across the glade.

CHAPTER 46.

ENCKWORTH (continued) — THE ANGLEBURY HIGHWAY

He had not paced behind the firs more than ten minutes when Ethelberta appeared from the opposite side. At great inconvenience to herself, she had complied with his request.

Ethelberta was trembling. She took her brother’s hand, and said, ‘Is father, then, gone?’

‘Yes,’ said Sol. ‘I should have been gone likewise, but I thought you wanted to see me.’

‘Of course I did, and him too. Why did you come so mysteriously, and, I must say, unbecomingly? I am afraid I did wrong in not informing you of my intention.’

‘To yourself you may have. Father would have liked a word with you before — you did it.’

‘You both looked so forbidding that I did not like to stop the carriage when we passed you. I want to see him on an important matter — his leaving Mrs. Doncastle’s service at once. I am going to write and beg her to dispense with a notice, which I have no doubt she will do.’

‘He’s very much upset about you.’

‘My secrecy was perhaps an error of judgment,’ she said sadly. ‘But I had reasons. Why did you and my father come here at all if you did not want to see me?’

‘We did want to see you up to a certain time.’

‘You did not come to prevent my marriage?’

‘We wished to see you before the marriage — I can’t say more.’

‘I thought you might not approve of what I had done,’ said Ethelberta mournfully. ‘But a time may come when you will approve.’

‘Never.’

‘Don’t be harsh, Sol. A coronet covers a multitude of sins.’

‘A coronet: good Lord — and you my sister! Look at my hand.’ Sol extended his hand. ‘Look how my thumb stands out at the root, as if it were out of joint, and that hard place inside there. Did you ever see anything so ugly as that hand — a misshaped monster, isn’t he? That comes from the jackplane, and my pushing against it day after day and year after year. If I were found drowned or buried, dressed or undressed, in fustian or in broadcloth, folk would look at my hand and say, “That

man's a carpenter." Well now, how can a man, branded with work as I be, be brother to a viscountess without something being wrong? Of course there's something wrong in it, or he wouldn't have married you — something which won't be righted without terrible suffering.'

'No, no,' said she. 'You are mistaken. There is no such wonderful quality in a title in these days. What I really am is second wife to a quiet old country nobleman, who has given up society. What more commonplace? My life will be as simple, even more simple, than it was before.'

'Berta, you have worked to false lines. A creeping up among the useless lumber of our nation that'll be the first to burn if there comes a flare. I never see such a deserter of your own lot as you be! But you were always like it, Berta, and I am ashamed of ye. More than that, a good woman never marries twice.'

'You are too hard, Sol,' said the poor viscountess, almost crying. 'I've done it all for you! Even if I have made a mistake, and given my ambition an ignoble turn, don't tell me so now, or you may do more harm in a minute than you will cure in a lifetime. It is absurd to let republican passions so blind you to fact. A family which can be honourably traced through history for five hundred years, does affect the heart of a person not entirely hardened against romance. Whether you like the peerage or no, they appeal to our historical sense and love of old associations.'

'I don't care for history. Prophecy is the only thing can do poor men any good. When you were a girl, you wouldn't drop a curtesy to 'em, historical or otherwise, and there you were right. But, instead of sticking to such principles, you must needs push up, so as to get girls such as you were once to curtesy to you, not even thinking marriage with a bad man too great a price to pay for't.'

'A bad man? What do you mean by that? Lord Mountclere is rather old, but he's worthy. What did you mean, Sol?'

'Nothing — a mere sommat to say.'

At that moment Picotee emerged from behind a tree, and told her sister that Lord Mountclere was looking for her.

'Well, Sol, I cannot explain all to you now,' she said. 'I will send for you in London.' She wished him goodbye, and they separated, Picotee accompanying Sol a little on his way.

Ethelberta was greatly perturbed by this meeting. After retracing her steps a short distance, she still felt so distressed and unpresentable that she resolved not to allow Lord Mountclere to see her till the clouds had somewhat passed off; it was but a bare act of justice to him to hide from his sight such a bridal mood as this. It was better to keep him waiting than to make him positively unhappy. She turned aside, and went up the valley, where the park merged in miles of wood and copse.

She opened an iron gate and entered the wood, casually interested in the vast variety of colours that the half-fallen leaves of the season wore: more, much more, occupied with personal thought. The path she pursued became gradually involved in bushes as well as trees, giving to the spot the character rather of a coppice than a wood. Perceiving

that she had gone far enough, Ethelberta turned back by a path which at this point intersected that by which she had approached, and promised a more direct return towards the Court. She had not gone many steps among the hazels, which here formed a perfect thicket, when she observed a belt of holly-bushes in their midst; towards the outskirts of these an opening on her left hand directly led, thence winding round into a clear space of greensward, which they completely enclosed. On this isolated and mewed-up bit of lawn stood a timber-built cottage, having ornamental barge-boards, balconettes, and porch. It was an erection interesting enough as an experiment, and grand as a toy, but as a building contemptible.

A blue gauze of smoke floated over the chimney, as if somebody was living there; round towards the side some empty hen-coops were piled away; while under the hollies were divers frameworks of wire netting and sticks, showing that birds were kept here at some seasons of the year.

Being lady of all she surveyed, Ethelberta crossed the leafy sward, and knocked at the door. She was interested in knowing the purpose of the peculiar little edifice.

The door was opened by a woman wearing a clean apron upon a not very clean gown. Ethelberta asked who lived in so pretty a place.

‘Miss Gruchette,’ the servant replied. ‘But she is not here now.’

‘Does she live here alone?’

‘Yes — excepting myself and a fellow-servant.’

‘Oh.’

‘She lives here to attend to the pheasants and poultry, because she is so clever in managing them. They are brought here from the keeper’s over the hill. Her father was a fancier.’

‘Miss Gruchette attends to the birds, and two servants attend to Miss Gruchette?’

‘Well, to tell the truth, m’m, the servants do almost all of it. Still, that’s what Miss Gruchette is here for. Would you like to see the house? It is pretty.’ The woman spoke with hesitation, as if in doubt between the desire of earning a shilling and the fear that Ethelberta was not a stranger. That Ethelberta was Lady Mountclere she plainly did not dream.

‘I fear I can scarcely stay long enough; yet I will just look in,’ said Ethelberta. And as soon as they had crossed the threshold she was glad of having done so.

The cottage internally may be described as a sort of boudoir extracted from the bulk of a mansion and deposited in a wood. The front room was filled with nicknacks, curious work-tables, filigree baskets, twisted brackets supporting statuettes, in which the grotesque in every case ruled the design; love-birds, in gilt cages; French bronzes, wonderful boxes, needlework of strange patterns, and other attractive objects. The apartment was one of those which seem to laugh in a visitor’s face and on closer examination express frivolity more distinctly than by words.

‘Miss Gruchette is here to keep the fowls?’ said Ethelberta, in a puzzled tone, after a survey.

‘Yes. But they don’t keep her.’

Ethelberta did not attempt to understand, and ceased to occupy her mind with the matter. They came from the cottage to the door, where she gave the woman a trifling sum, and turned to leave. But footsteps were at that moment to be heard beating among the leaves on the other side of the hollies, and Ethelberta waited till the walkers should have passed. The voices of two men reached herself and the woman as they stood. They were close to the house, yet screened from it by the holly-bushes, when one could be heard to say distinctly, as if with his face turned to the cottage —

‘Lady Mountclere gone for good?’

‘I suppose so. Ha-ha! So come, so go.’

The speakers passed on, their backs becoming visible through the opening. They appeared to be woodmen.

‘What Lady Mountclere do they mean?’ said Ethelberta.

The woman blushed. ‘They meant Miss Gruchette.’

‘Oh — a nickname.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

The woman whispered why in a story of about two minutes’ length. Ethelberta turned pale.

‘Is she going to return?’ she inquired, in a thin hard voice.

‘Yes; next week. You know her, m’m?’

‘No. I am a stranger.’

‘So much the better. I may tell you, then, that an old tale is flying about the neighbourhood — that Lord Mountclere was privately married to another woman, at Knollsea, this morning early. Can it be true?’

‘I believe it to be true.’

‘And that she is of no family?’

‘Of no family.’

‘Indeed. Then the Lord only knows what will become of the poor thing. There will be murder between ‘em.’

‘Between whom?’

‘Her and the lady who lives here. She won’t budge an inch — not she!’

Ethelberta moved aside. A shade seemed to overspread the world, the sky, the trees, and the objects in the foreground. She kept her face away from the woman, and, whispering a reply to her Good-morning, passed through the hollies into the leaf-strewn path. As soon as she came to a large trunk she placed her hands against it and rested her face upon them. She drew herself lower down, lower, lower, till she crouched upon the leaves. ‘Ay — ’tis what father and Sol meant! O Heaven!’ she whispered.

She soon arose, and went on her way to the house. Her fair features were firmly set, and she scarcely heeded the path in the concentration which had followed her paroxysm. When she reached the park proper she became aware of an excitement that was in progress there.

Ethelberta's absence had become unaccountable to Lord Mountclere, who could hardly permit her retirement from his sight for a minute. But at first he had made due allowance for her eccentricity as a woman of genius, and would not take notice of the half-hour's desertion, unpardonable as it might have been in other classes of wives. Then he had inquired, searched, been alarmed: he had finally sent men-servants in all directions about the park to look for her. He feared she had fallen out of a window, down a well, or into the lake. The next stage of search was to have been drags and grapnels: but Ethelberta entered the house.

Lord Mountclere rushed forward to meet her, and such was her contrivance that he noticed no change. The searchers were called in, Ethelberta explaining that she had merely obeyed the wish of her brother in going out to meet him. Picotee, who had returned from her walk with Sol, was upstairs in one of the rooms which had been allotted to her. Ethelberta managed to run in there on her way upstairs to her own chamber.

'Picotee, put your things on again,' she said. 'You are the only friend I have in this house, and I want one badly. Go to Sol, and deliver this message to him — that I want to see him at once. You must overtake him, if you walk all the way to Anglebury. But the train does not leave till four, so that there is plenty of time.'

'What is the matter?' said Picotee. 'I cannot walk all the way.'

'I don't think you will have to do that — I hope not.'

'He is going to stop at Corvsgate to have a bit of lunch: I might overtake him there, if I must!'

'Yes. And tell him to come to the east passage door. It is that door next to the entrance to the stable-yard. There is a little yew-tree outside it. On second thoughts you, dear, must not come back. Wait at Corvsgate in the little inn parlour till Sol comes to you again. You will probably then have to go home to London alone; but do not mind it. The worst part for you will be in going from the station to the Crescent; but nobody will molest you in a four-wheel cab: you have done it before. However, he will tell you if this is necessary when he gets back. I can best fight my battles alone. You shall have a letter from me the day after to-morrow, stating where I am. I shall not be here.'

'But what is it so dreadful?'

'Nothing to frighten you.' But she spoke with a breathlessness that completely nullified the assurance. 'It is merely that I find I must come to an explanation with Lord Mountclere before I can live here permanently, and I cannot stipulate with him while I am here in his power. Till I write, good-bye. Your things are not unpacked, so let them remain here for the present — they can be sent for.'

Poor Picotee, more agitated than her sister, but never questioning her orders, went downstairs and out of the house. She ran across the shrubberies, into the park, and to the gate whereat Sol had emerged some half-hour earlier. She trotted along upon the turnpike road like a lost doe, crying as she went at the new trouble which had come upon Berta, whatever that trouble might be. Behind her she heard wheels and

the stepping of a horse, but she was too concerned to turn her head. The pace of the vehicle slackened, however, when it was abreast of Picotee, and she looked up to see Christopher as the driver.

‘Miss Chickerel!’ he said, with surprise.

Picotee had quickly looked down again, and she murmured, ‘Yes.’

Christopher asked what he could not help asking in the circumstances, ‘Would you like to ride?’

‘I should be glad,’ said she, overcoming her flurry. ‘I am anxious to overtake my brother Sol.’

‘I have arranged to pick him up at Corvsgate,’ said Christopher.

He descended, and assisted her to mount beside him, and drove on again, almost in silence. He was inclined to believe that some supernatural legerdemain had to do with these periodic impacts of Picotee on his path. She sat mute and melancholy till they were within half-a-mile of Corvsgate.

‘Thank you,’ she said then, perceiving Sol upon the road, ‘there is my brother; I will get down now.’

‘He was going to ride on to Anglebury with me,’ said Julian.

Picotee did not reply, and Sol turned round. Seeing her he instantly exclaimed, ‘What’s the matter, Picotee?’

She explained to him that he was to go back immediately, and meet her sister at the door by the yew, as Ethelberta had charged her. Christopher, knowing them so well, was too much an interested member of the group to be left out of confidence, and she included him in her audience.

‘And what are you to do?’ said Sol to her.

‘I am to wait at Corvsgate till you come to me.’

‘I can’t understand it,’ Sol muttered, with a gloomy face. ‘There’s something wrong; and it was only to be expected; that’s what I say, Mr. Julian.’

‘If necessary I can take care of Miss Chickerel till you come,’ said Christopher.

‘Thank you,’ said Sol. ‘Then I will return to you as soon as I can, at the “Castle” Inn, just ahead. ‘Tis very awkward for you to be so burdened by us, Mr. Julian; but we are in a trouble that I don’t yet see the bottom of.’

‘I know,’ said Christopher kindly. ‘We will wait for you.’

He then drove on with Picotee to the inn, which was not far off, and Sol returned again to Enckworth. Feeling somewhat like a thief in the night, he zigzagged through the park, behind belts and knots of trees, until he saw the yew, dark and clear, as if drawn in ink upon the fair face of the mansion. The way up to it was in a little cutting between shrubs, the door being a private entrance, sunk below the surface of the lawn, and invisible from other parts of the same front. As soon as he reached it, Ethelberta opened it at once, as if she had listened for his footsteps.

She took him along a passage in the basement, up a flight of steps, and into a huge, solitary, chill apartment. It was the ball-room. Spacious mirrors in gilt frames formed panels in the lower part of the walls, the remainder being toned in sage-green.

In a recess between each mirror was a statue. The ceiling rose in a segmental curve, and bore sprawling upon its face gilt figures of wanton goddesses, cupids, satyrs with tambourines, drums, and trumpets, the whole ceiling seeming alive with them. But the room was very gloomy now, there being little light admitted from without, and the reflections from the mirrors gave a depressing coldness to the scene. It was a place intended to look joyous by night, and whatever it chose to look by day.

‘We are safe here,’ said she. ‘But we must listen for footsteps. I have only five minutes: Lord Mountclere is waiting for me. I mean to leave this place, come what may.’

‘Why?’ said Sol, in astonishment.

‘I cannot tell you — something has occurred. God has got me in his power at last, and is going to scourge me for my bad doings — that’s what it seems like. Sol, listen to me, and do exactly what I say. Go to Anglebury, hire a brougham, bring it on as far as Little Enckworth: you will have to meet me with it at one of the park gates later in the evening — probably the west, at half-past seven. Leave it at the village with the man, come on here on foot, and stay under the trees till just before six: it will then be quite dark, and you must stand under the projecting balustrade a little further on than the door you came in by. I will just step upon the balcony over it, and tell you more exactly than I can now the precise time that I shall be able to slip out, and where the carriage is to be waiting. But it may not be safe to speak on account of his closeness to me — I will hand down a note. I find it is impossible to leave the house by daylight — I am certain to be pursued — he already suspects something. Now I must be going, or he will be here, for he watches my movements because of some accidental words that escaped me.’

‘Berta, I shan’t have anything to do with this,’ said Sol. ‘It is not right!’

‘I am only going to Rouen, to Aunt Charlotte!’ she implored. ‘I want to get to Southampton, to be in time for the midnight steamer. When I am at Rouen I can negotiate with Lord Mountclere the terms on which I will return to him. It is the only chance I have of rooting out a scandal and a disgrace which threatens the beginning of my life here! My letters to him, and his to me, can be forwarded through you or through father, and he will not know where I am. Any woman is justified in adopting such a course to bring her husband to a sense of her dignity. If I don’t go away now, it will end in a permanent separation. If I leave at once, and stipulate that he gets rid of her, we may be reconciled.’

‘I can’t help you: you must stick to your husband. I don’t like them, or any of their sort, barring about three or four, for the reason that they despise me and all my sort. But, Ethelberta, for all that I’ll play fair with them. No half-and-half trimming business. You have joined ‘em, and ‘rayed yourself against us; and there you’d better bide. You have married your man, and your duty is towards him. I know what he is and so does father; but if I were to help you to run away now, I should scorn myself more than I scorn him.’

‘I don’t care for that, or for any such politics! The Mountclere line is noble, and how was I to know that this member was not noble, too? As the representative of an illustrious family I was taken with him, but as a man — I must shun him.’

‘How can you shun him? You have married him!’

‘Nevertheless, I won’t stay! Neither law nor gospel demands it of me after what I have learnt. And if law and gospel did demand it, I would not stay. And if you will not help me to escape, I go alone.’

‘You had better not try any such wild thing.’

The creaking of a door was heard. ‘O Sol,’ she said appealingly, ‘don’t go into the question whether I am right or wrong — only remember that I am very unhappy. Do help me — I have no other person in the world to ask! Be under the balcony at six o’clock. Say you will — I must go — say you will!’

‘I’ll think,’ said Sol, very much disturbed. ‘There, don’t cry; I’ll try to be under the balcony, at any rate. I cannot promise more, but I’ll try to be there.’

She opened in the panelling one of the old-fashioned concealed modes of exit known as jib-doors, which it was once the custom to construct without architraves in the walls of large apartments, so as not to interfere with the general design of the room. Sol found himself in a narrow passage, running down the whole length of the ball-room, and at the same time he heard Lord Mountclere’s voice within, talking to Ethelberta. Sol’s escape had been marvellous: as it was the viscount might have seen her tears. He passed down some steps, along an area from which he could see into a row of servants’ offices, among them a kitchen with a fireplace flaming like an altar of sacrifice. Nobody seemed to be concerned about him; there were workmen upon the premises, and he nearly matched them. At last he got again into the shrubberies and to the side of the park by which he had entered.

On reaching Corvsgate he found Picotee in the parlour of the little inn, as he had directed. Mr. Julian, she said, had walked up to the ruins, and would be back again in a few minutes. Sol ordered the horse to be put in, and by the time it was ready Christopher came down from the hill. Room was made for Sol by opening the flap of the dogcart, and Christopher drove on.

He was anxious to know the trouble, and Sol was not reluctant to share the burden of it with one whom he believed to be a friend. He told, scrap by scrap, the strange request of Ethelberta. Christopher, though ignorant of Ethelberta’s experience that morning, instantly assumed that the discovery of some concealed spectre had led to this precipitancy.

‘When does she wish you to meet her with the carriage?’

‘Probably at half-past seven, at the west lodge; but that is to be finally fixed by a note she will hand down to me from the balcony.’

‘Which balcony?’

‘The nearest to the yew-tree.’

‘At what time will she hand the note?’

‘As the Court clock strikes six, she says. And if I am not there to take her instructions of course she will give up the idea, which is just what I want her to do.’

Christopher begged Sol to go. Whether Ethelberta was right or wrong, he did not stop to inquire. She was in trouble; she was too clear-headed to be in trouble without good reason; and she wanted assistance out of it. But such was Sol’s nature that the more he reflected the more determined was he in not giving way to her entreaty. By the time that they reached Anglebury he repented having given way so far as to withhold a direct refusal.

‘It can do no good,’ he said mournfully. ‘It is better to nip her notion in its beginning. She says she wants to fly to Rouen, and from there arrange terms with him. But it can’t be done — she should have thought of terms before.’

Christopher made no further reply. Leaving word at the ‘Red Lion’ that a man was to be sent to take the horse of him, he drove directly onwards to the station.

‘Then you don’t mean to help her?’ said Julian, when Sol took the tickets — one for himself and one for Picotee.

‘I serve her best by leaving her alone!’ said Sol.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘She has married him.’

‘She is in distress.’

‘She has married him.’

Sol and Picotee took their seats, Picotee upbraiding her brother. ‘I can go by myself!’ she said, in tears. ‘Do go back for Berta, Sol. She said I was to go home alone, and I can do it!’

‘You must not. It is not right for you to be hiring cabs and driving across London at midnight. Berta should have known better than propose it.’

‘She was flurried. Go, Sol!’

But her entreaty was fruitless.

‘Have you got your ticket, Mr. Julian?’ said Sol. ‘I suppose we shall go together till we get near Melchester?’

‘I have not got my ticket yet — I’ll be back in two minutes.’

The minutes went by, and Christopher did not reappear. The train moved off: Christopher was seen running up the platform, as if in a vain hope to catch it.

‘He has missed the train,’ said Sol. Picotee looked disappointed, and said nothing. They were soon out of sight.

‘God forgive me for such a hollow pretence!’ said Christopher to himself. ‘But he would have been uneasy had he known I wished to stay behind. I cannot leave her in trouble like this!’

He went back to the ‘Red Lion’ with the manner and movement of a man who after a lifetime of desultoriness had at last found something to do. It was now getting late in the afternoon. Christopher ordered a one-horse brougham at the inn, and entering it was driven out of the town towards Enckworth as the evening shades were beginning to fall. They passed into the hamlet of Little Enckworth at half-past five, and drew

up at a beer-house at the end. Jumping out here, Julian told the man to wait till he should return.

Thus far he had exactly obeyed her orders to Sol. He hoped to be able to obey them throughout, and supply her with the aid her brother refused. He also hoped that the change in the personality of her confederate would make no difference to her intention. That he was putting himself in a wrong position he allowed, but time and attention were requisite for such analysis: meanwhile Ethelberta was in trouble. On the one hand was she waiting hopefully for Sol; on the other was Sol many miles on his way to town; between them was himself.

He ran with all his might towards Enckworth Park, mounted the lofty stone steps by the lodge, saw the dark bronze figures on the piers through the twilight, and then proceeded to thread the trees. Among these he struck a light for a moment: it was ten minutes to six. In another five minutes he was panting beneath the walls of her house.

Enckworth Court was not unknown to Christopher, for he had frequently explored that spot in his Sandbourne days. He perceived now why she had selected that particular balcony for handing down directions; it was the only one round the house that was low enough to be reached from the outside, the basement here being a little way sunk in the ground.

He went close under, turned his face outwards, and waited. About a foot over his head was the stone floor of the balcony, forming a ceiling to his position. At his back, two or three feet behind, was a blank wall — the wall of the house. In front of him was the misty park, crowned by a sky sparkling with winter stars. This was abruptly cut off upward by the dark edge of the balcony which overhung him.

It was as if some person within the room above had been awaiting his approach. He had scarcely found time to observe his situation when a human hand and portion of a bare arm were thrust between the balusters, descended a little way from the edge of the balcony, and remained hanging across the starlit sky. Something was between the fingers. Christopher lifted his hand, took the scrap, which was paper, and the arm was withdrawn. As it withdrew, a jewel on one of the fingers sparkled in the rays of a large planet that rode in the opposite sky.

Light steps retreated from the balcony, and a window closed. Christopher had almost held his breath lest Ethelberta should discover him at the critical moment to be other than Sol, and mar her deliverance by her alarm. The still silence was anything but silence to him; he felt as if he were listening to the clanging chorus of an oratorio. And then he could fancy he heard words between Ethelberta and the viscount within the room; they were evidently at very close quarters, and dexterity must have been required of her. He went on tiptoe across the gravel to the grass, and once on that he strode in the direction whence he had come. By the thick trunk of one of a group of aged trees he stopped to get a light, just as the Court clock struck six in loud long tones. The transaction had been carried out, through her impatience possibly, four or five minutes before the time appointed.

The note contained, in a shaken hand, in which, however, the well-known characters were distinguishable, these words in pencil:

‘At half-past seven o’clock. Just outside the north lodge; don’t fail.’

This was the time she had suggested to Sol as that which would probably best suit her escape, if she could escape at all. She had changed the place from the west to the north lodge — nothing else. The latter was certainly more secluded, though a trifle more remote from the course of the proposed journey; there was just time enough and none to spare for fetching the brougham from Little Enckworth to the lodge, the village being two miles off. The few minutes gained by her readiness at the balcony were useful now. He started at once for the village, diverging somewhat to observe the spot appointed for the meeting. It was excellently chosen; the gate appeared to be little used, the lane outside it was covered with trees, and all around was silent as the grave. After this hasty survey by the wan starlight, he hastened on to Little Enckworth.

An hour and a quarter later a little brougham without lamps was creeping along by the park wall towards this spot. The leaves were so thick upon the unfrequented road that the wheels could not be heard, and the horse’s pacing made scarcely more noise than a rabbit would have done in limping along. The vehicle progressed slowly, for they were in good time. About ten yards from the park entrance it stopped, and Christopher stepped out.

‘We may have to wait here ten minutes,’ he said to the driver. ‘And then shall we be able to reach Anglebury in time for the up mail-train to Southampton?’

‘Half-past seven, half-past eight, half-past nine — two hours. O yes, sir, easily. A young lady in the case perhaps, sir?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I hope she’ll be done honestly by, even if she is of humble station. ‘Tis best, and cheapest too, in the long run.’ The coachman was apparently imagining the dove about to flit away to be one of the pretty maid-servants that abounded in Enckworth Court; such escapades as these were not unfrequent among them, a fair face having been deemed a sufficient recommendation to service in that house, without too close an inquiry into character, since the death of the first viscountess.

‘Now then, silence; and listen for a footstep at the gate.’

Such calmness as there was in the musician’s voice had been produced by considerable effort. For his heart had begun to beat fast and loud as he strained his attentive ear to catch the footfall of a woman who could only be his illegally.

The obscurity was as great as a starry sky would permit it to be. Beneath the trees where the carriage stood the darkness was total.

CHAPTER 47.

ENCKWORTH AND ITS PRECINCTS — MELCHESTER

To be wise after the event is often to act foolishly with regard to it; and to preserve the illusion which has led to the event would frequently be a course that omniscience itself could not find fault with. Reaction with Ethelberta was complete, and the more violent in that it threatened to be useless. Sol's bitter chiding had been the first thing to discompose her fortitude. It reduced her to a consciousness that she had allowed herself to be coerced in her instincts, and yet had not triumphed in her duty. She might have pleased her family better by pleasing her tastes, and have entirely avoided the grim irony of the situation disclosed later in the day.

After the second interview with Sol she was to some extent composed in mind by being able to nurse a definite intention. As momentum causes the narrowest wheel to stand upright, a scheme, fairly imbibed, will give the weakest some power to maintain a position stoically.

In the temporary absence of Lord Mountclere, about six o'clock, she slipped out upon the balcony and handed down a note. To her relief, a hand received it instantly.

The hour and a half wanting to half-past seven she passed with great effort. The main part of the time was occupied by dinner, during which she attempted to devise some scheme for leaving him without suspicion just before the appointed moment.

Happily, and as if by a Providence, there was no necessity for any such thing.

A little while before the half-hour, when she moved to rise from dinner, he also arose, tenderly begging her to excuse him for a few minutes, that he might go and write an important note to his lawyer, until that moment forgotten, though the postman was nearly due. She heard him retire along the corridor and shut himself into his study, his promised time of return being a quarter of an hour thence.

Five minutes after that memorable parting Ethelberta came from the little door by the bush of yew, well and thickly wrapped up from head to heels. She skimmed across the park and under the boughs like a shade, mounting then the stone steps for pedestrians which were fixed beside the park gates here as at all the lodges. Outside and below her she saw an oblong shape — it was a brougham, and it had been drawn forward close to the bottom of the steps that she might not have an inch further to go on foot than to this barrier. The whole precinct was thronged with trees; half their foliage being overhead, the other half under foot, for the gardeners had not yet begun to rake and collect the leaves; thus it was that her dress rustled as she descended the steps.

The carriage door was held open by the driver, and she entered instantly. He shut her in, and mounted to his seat. As they drove away she became conscious of another person inside.

'O! Sol — it is done!' she whispered, believing the man to be her brother. Her companion made no reply.

Ethelberta, familiar with Sol's moods of troubled silence, did not press for an answer. It was, indeed, certain that Sol's assistance would have been given under a sullen protest; even if unwilling to disappoint her, he might well have been taciturn and angry at her course.

They sat in silence, and in total darkness. The road ascended an incline, the horse's tramp being still deadened by the carpet of leaves. Then the large trees on either hand became interspersed by a low brushwood of varied sorts, from which a large bird occasionally flew, in its fright at their presence beating its wings recklessly against the hard stems with force enough to cripple the delicate quills. It showed how deserted was the spot after nightfall.

'Sol?' said Ethelberta again. 'Why not talk to me?'

She now noticed that her fellow-traveller kept his head and his whole person as snugly back in the corner, out of her way, as it was possible to do. She was not exactly frightened, but she could not understand the reason. The carriage gave a quick turn, and stopped.

'Where are we now?' she said. 'Shall we get to Anglebury by nine? What is the time, Sol?'

'I will see,' replied her companion. They were the first words he had uttered.

The voice was so different from her brother's that she was terrified; her limbs quivered. In another instant the speaker had struck a wax vesta, and holding it erect in his fingers he looked her in the face.

'Hee-hee-hee!' The laughter was her husband the viscount.

He laughed again, and his eyes gleamed like a couple of tarnished brass buttons in the light of the wax match.

Ethelberta might have fallen dead with the shock, so terrible and hideous was it. Yet she did not. She neither shrieked nor fainted; but no poor January fieldfare was ever colder, no ice-house more dank with perspiration, than she was then.

'A very pleasant joke, my dear — hee-hee! And no more than was to be expected on this merry, happy day of our lives. Nobody enjoys a good jest more than I do: I always enjoyed a jest — hee-hee! Now we are in the dark again; and we will alight and walk. The path is too narrow for the carriage, but it will not be far for you. Take your husband's arm.'

While he had been speaking a defiant pride had sprung up in her, instigating her to conceal every weakness. He had opened the carriage door and stepped out. She followed, taking the offered arm.

'Take the horse and carriage to the stables,' said the viscount to the coachman, who was his own servant, the vehicle and horse being also his. The coachman turned the horse's head and vanished down the woodland track by which they had ascended.

The viscount moved on, uttering private chuckles as numerous as a woodpecker's taps, and Ethelberta with him. She walked as by a miracle, but she would walk. She would have died rather than not have walked then.

She perceived now that they were somewhere in Enckworth wood. As they went, she noticed a faint shine upon the ground on the other side of the viscount, which showed her that they were walking beside a wet ditch. She remembered having seen it in the morning: it was a shallow ditch of mud. She might push him in, and run, and so

escape before he could extricate himself. It would not hurt him. It was her last chance. She waited a moment for the opportunity.

‘We are one to one, and I am the stronger!’ she at last exclaimed triumphantly, and lifted her hand for a thrust.

‘On the contrary, darling, we are one to half-a-dozen, and you considerably the weaker,’ he tenderly replied, stepping back adroitly, and blowing a whistle. At once the bushes seemed to be animated in four or five places.

‘John?’ he said, in the direction of one of them.

‘Yes, my lord,’ replied a voice from the bush, and a keeper came forward.

‘William?’

Another man advanced from another bush.

‘Quite right. Remain where you are for the present. Is Tomkins there?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said a man from another part of the thicket.

‘You go and keep watch by the further lodge: there are poachers about. Where is Strongway?’

‘Just below, my lord.’

‘Tell him and his brother to go to the west gate, and walk up and down. Let them search round it, among the trees inside. Anybody there who cannot give a good account of himself to be brought before me to-morrow morning. I am living at the cottage at present. That’s all I have to say to you.’ And, turning round to Ethelberta: ‘Now, dearest, we will walk a little further if you are able. I have provided that your friends shall be taken care of.’ He tried to pull her hand towards him, gently, like a cat opening a door.

They walked a little onward, and Lord Mountclere spoke again, with imperturbable good-humour:

‘I will tell you a story, to pass the time away. I have learnt the art from you — your mantle has fallen upon me, and all your inspiration with it. Listen, dearest. I saw a young man come to the house to-day. Afterwards I saw him cross a passage in your company. You entered the ball-room with him. That room is a treacherous place. It is panelled with wood, and between the panels and the walls are passages for the servants, opening from the room by doors hidden in the woodwork. Lady Mountclere knew of one of these, and made use of it to let out her conspirator; Lord Mountclere knew of another, and made use of it to let in himself. His sight is not good, but his ears are unimpaired. A meeting was arranged to take place at the west gate at half-past seven, unless a note handed from the balcony mentioned another time and place. He heard it all — hee-hee!

‘When Lady Mountclere’s confederate came for the note, I was in waiting above, and handed one down a few minutes before the hour struck, confirming the time, but changing the place. When Lady Mountclere handed down her note, just as the clock was striking, her confederate had gone, and I was standing beneath the balcony to receive it. She dropped it into her husband’s hands — ho-ho-ho-ho!

‘Lord Mountclere ordered a brougham to be at the west lodge, as fixed by Lady Mountclere’s note. Probably Lady Mountclere’s friend ordered a brougham to be at the north gate, as fixed by my note, written in imitation of Lady Mountclere’s hand. Lady Mountclere came to the spot she had mentioned, and like a good wife rushed into the arms of her husband — hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!’

As if by an ungovernable impulse, Ethelberta broke into laughter also — laughter which had a wild unnatural sound; it was hysterical. She sank down upon the leaves, and there continued the fearful laugh just as before.

Lord Mountclere became greatly frightened. The spot they had reached was a green space within a girdle of hollies, and in front of them rose an ornamental cottage. This was the building which Ethelberta had visited earlier in the day: it was the Petit Trianon of Enckworth Court.

The viscount left her side and hurried forward. The door of the building was opened by a woman.

‘Have you prepared for us, as I directed?’

‘Yes, my lord; tea and coffee are both ready.’

‘Never mind that now. Lady Mountclere is ill; come and assist her indoors. Tell the other woman to bring wine and water at once.’

He returned to Ethelberta. She was better, and was sitting calmly on the bank. She rose without assistance.

‘You may retire,’ he said to the woman who had followed him, and she turned round. When Ethelberta saw the building, she drew back quickly.

‘Where is the other Lady Mountclere?’ she inquired.

‘Gone!’

‘She shall never return — never?’

‘Never. It was not intended that she should.’

‘That sounds well. Lord Mountclere, we may as well compromise matters.’

‘I think so too. It becomes a lady to make a virtue of a necessity.’

‘It was stratagem against stratagem. Mine was ingenious; yours was masterly! Accept my acknowledgment. We will enter upon an armed neutrality.’

‘No. Let me be your adorer and slave again, as ever. Your beauty, dearest, covers everything! You are my mistress and queen! But here we are at the door. Tea is prepared for us here. I have a liking for life in this cottage mode, and live here on occasion. Women, attend to Lady Mountclere.’

The woman who had seen Ethelberta in the morning was alarmed at recognizing her, having since been informed officially of the marriage: she murmured entreaties for pardon. They assisted the viscountess to a chair, the door was closed, and the wind blew past as if nobody had ever stood there to interrupt its flight.

* * * * *

Full of misgivings, Christopher continued to wait at the north gate. Half-past seven had long since been past, and no Ethelberta had appeared. He did not for the moment suppose the delay to be hers, and this gave him patience; having taken up the position,

he was induced by fidelity to abide by the consequences. It would be only a journey of two hours to reach Anglebury Station; he would ride outside with the driver, put her into the train, and bid her adieu for ever. She had cried for help, and he had heard her cry.

At last through the trees came the sound of the Court clock striking eight, and then, for the first time, a doubt arose in his mind whether she could have mistaken the gate. She had distinctly told Sol the west lodge; her note had expressed the north lodge. Could she by any accident have written one thing while meaning another? He entered the carriage, and drove round to the west gate. All was as silent there as at the other, the meeting between Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere being then long past; and he drove back again.

He left the carriage, and entered the park on foot, approaching the house slowly. All was silent; the windows were dark; moping sounds came from the trees and sky, as from Sorrow whispering to Night. By this time he felt assured that the scheme had miscarried. While he stood here a carriage without lights came up the drive; it turned in towards the stable-yard without going to the door. The carriage had plainly been empty.

Returning across the grass by the way he had come, he was startled by the voices of two men from the road hard by.

‘Have ye zeed anybody?’

‘Not a soul.’

‘Shall we go across again?’

‘What’s the good? let’s home to supper.’

‘My lord must have heard somebody, or ‘a wouldn’t have said it.’

‘Perhaps he’s nervous now he’s living in the cottage again. I thought that fancy was over. Well, I’m glad ‘tis a young wife he’s brought us. She’ll have her routs and her rackets as well as the high-born ones, you’ll see, as soon as she gets used to the place.’

‘She must be a queer Christian to pick up with him.’

‘Well, if she’ve charity ‘tis enough for we poor men; her faith and hope may be as please God. Now I be for on-along homeward.’

As soon as they had gone Christopher moved from his hiding, and, avoiding the gravel-walk, returned to his coachman, telling him to drive at once to Anglebury.

Julian was so impatient of the futility of his adventure that he wished to annihilate its existence. On reaching Anglebury he determined to get on at once to Melchester, that the event of the night might be summarily ended; to be still in the neighbourhood was to be still engaged in it. He reached home before midnight.

Walking into their house in a quiet street, as dissatisfied with himself as a man well could be who still retained health and an occupation, he found Faith sitting up as usual. His news was simple: the marriage had taken place before he could get there, and he had seen nothing of either ceremony or viscountess. The remainder he reserved for a more convenient season.

Edith looked anxiously at him as he ate supper, smiling now and then.

‘Well, I am tired of this life,’ said Christopher.

‘So am I,’ said Faith. ‘Ah, if we were only rich!’

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Or if we were not rich,’ she said, turning her eyes to the fire. ‘If we were only slightly provided for, it would be better than nothing. How much would you be content with, Kit?’

‘As much as I could get.’

‘Would you be content with a thousand a year for both of us?’

‘I daresay I should,’ he murmured, breaking his bread.

‘Or five hundred for both?’

‘Or five hundred.’

‘Or even three hundred?’

‘Bother three hundred. Less than double the sum would not satisfy me. We may as well imagine much as little.’

Faith’s countenance had fallen. ‘O Kit,’ she said, ‘you always disappoint me.’

‘I do. How do I disappoint you this time?’

‘By not caring for three hundred a year — a hundred and fifty each — when that is all I have to offer you.’

‘Faith!’ said he, looking up for the first time. ‘Ah — of course! Lucy’s will. I had forgotten.’

‘It is true, and I had prepared such a pleasant surprise for you, and now you don’t care! Our cousin Lucy did leave us something after all. I don’t understand the exact total sum, but it comes to a hundred and fifty a year each — more than I expected, though not so much as you deserved. Here’s the letter. I have been dwelling upon it all day, and thinking what a pleasure it would be; and it is not after all!’

‘Good gracious, Faith, I was only supposing. The real thing is another matter altogether. Well, the idea of Lucy’s will containing our names! I am sure I would have gone to the funeral had I known.’

‘I wish it were a thousand.’

‘O no — it doesn’t matter at all. But, certainly, three hundred for two is a tantalising sum: not enough to enable us to change our condition, and enough to make us dissatisfied with going on as we are.’

‘We must forget we have it, and let it increase.’

‘It isn’t enough to increase much. We may as well use it. But how? Take a bigger house — what’s the use? Give up the organ? — then I shall be rather worse off than I am at present. Positively, it is the most provoking amount anybody could have invented had they tried ever so long. Poor Lucy, to do that, and not even to come near us when father died. . . . Ah, I know what we’ll do. We’ll go abroad — we’ll live in Italy.’

SEQUEL.

ANGLEBURY — ENCKWORTH — SANDBOURNE

Two years and a half after the marriage of Ethelberta and the evening adventures which followed it, a man young in years, though considerably older in mood and expression, walked up to the 'Red Lion' Inn at Anglebury. The anachronism sat not unbecomingly upon him, and the voice was precisely that of the Christopher Julian of heretofore. His way of entering the inn and calling for a conveyance was more off-hand than formerly; he was much less afraid of the sound of his own voice now than when he had gone through the same performance on a certain chill evening the last time that he visited the spot. He wanted to be taken to Knollsea to meet the steamer there, and was not coming back by the same vehicle.

It was a very different day from that of his previous journey along the same road; different in season; different in weather; and the humour of the observer differed yet more widely from its condition then than did the landscape from its former hues. In due time they reached a commanding situation upon the road, from which were visible knots and plantations of trees on the Enckworth manor. Christopher broke the silence.

'Lord Mountclere is still alive and well, I am told?'

'O ay. He'll live to be a hundred. Never such a change as has come over the man of late years.'

'Indeed!'

'O, 'tis my lady. She's a one to put up with! Still, 'tis said here and there that marrying her was the best day's work that he ever did in his life, although she's got to be my lord and my lady both.'

'Is she happy with him?'

'She is very sharp with the pore man — about happy I don't know. He was a good-natured old man, for all his sins, and would sooner any day lay out money in new presents than pay it in old debts. But 'tis altered now. 'Tisn't the same place. Ah, in the old times I have seen the floor of the servants' hall over the vamp of your boot in solid beer that we had poured aside from the horns because we couldn't see straight enough to pour it in. See? No, we couldn't see a hole in a ladder! And now, even at Christmas or Whitsuntide, when a man, if ever he desires to be overcome with a drop, would naturally wish it to be, you can walk out of Enckworth as straight as you walked in. All her doings.'

'Then she holds the reins?'

'She do! There was a little tussle at first; but how could a old man hold his own against such a spry young body as that! She threatened to run away from him, and kicked up Bob's-a-dying, and I don't know what all; and being the woman, of course she was sure to beat in the long run. Pore old nobleman, she marches him off to church every Sunday as regular as a clock, makes him read family prayers that haven't been read in Enckworth for the last thirty years to my certain knowledge, and keeps him down to three glasses of wine a day, strict, so that you never see him any the more

generous for liquor or a bit elevated at all, as it used to be. There, 'tis true, it has done him good in one sense, for they say he'd have been dead in five years if he had gone on as he was going.'

'So that she's a good wife to him, after all.'

'Well, if she had been a little worse 'twould have been a little better for him in one sense, for he would have had his own way more. But he was a curious feller at one time, as we all know and I suppose 'tis as much as he can expect; but 'tis a strange reverse for him. It is said that when he's asked out to dine, or to anything in the way of a jaunt, his eye flies across to hers afore he answers: and if her eye says yes, he says yes: and if her eye says no, he says no. 'Tis a sad condition for one who ruled womankind as he, that a woman should lead him in a string whether he will or no.'

'Sad indeed!'

'She's steward, and agent, and everything. She has got a room called "my lady's office," and great ledgers and cash-books you never see the like. In old times there were bailiffs to look after the workfolk, foremen to look after the tradesmen, a building-steward to look after the foremen, a land-steward to look after the building-steward, and a dashing grand agent to look after the land-steward: fine times they had then, I assure ye. My lady said they were eating out the property like a honeycomb, and then there was a terrible row. Half of 'em were sent flying; and now there's only the agent, and the viscountess, and a sort of surveyor man, and of the three she does most work so 'tis said. She marks the trees to be felled, settles what horses are to be sold and bought, and is out in all winds and weathers. There, if somebody hadn't looked into things 'twould soon have been all up with his lordship, he was so very extravagant. In one sense 'twas lucky for him that she was born in humble life, because owing to it she knows the ins and outs of contriving, which he never did.'

'Then a man on the verge of bankruptcy will do better to marry a poor and sensible wife than a rich and stupid one. Well, here we are at the tenth milestone. I will walk the remainder of the distance to Knollsea, as there is ample time for meeting the last steamboat.'

When the man was gone Christopher proceeded slowly on foot down the hill, and reached that part of the highway at which he had stopped in the cold November breeze waiting for a woman who never came. He was older now, and he had ceased to wish that he had not been disappointed. There was the lodge, and around it were the trees, brilliant in the shining greens of June. Every twig sustained its bird, and every blossom its bee. The roadside was not muffled in a garment of dead leaves as it had been then, and the lodge-gate was not open as it always used to be. He paused to look through the bars. The drive was well kept and gravelled; the grass edgings, formerly marked by hoofs and ruts, and otherwise trodden away, were now green and luxuriant, bent sticks being placed at intervals as a protection.

While he looked through the gate a woman stepped from the lodge to open it. In her haste she nearly swung the gate into his face, and would have completely done so had he not jumped back.

‘I beg pardon, sir,’ she said, on perceiving him. ‘I was going to open it for my lady, and I didn’t see you.’

Christopher moved round the corner. The perpetual snubbing that he had received from Ethelberta ever since he had known her seemed about to be continued through the medium of her dependents.

A trotting, accompanied by the sound of light wheels, had become perceptible; and then a vehicle came through the gate, and turned up the road which he had come down. He saw the back of a basket carriage, drawn by a pair of piebald ponies. A lad in livery sat behind with folded arms; the driver was a lady. He saw her bonnet, her shoulders, her hair — but no more. She lessened in his gaze, and was soon out of sight.

He stood a long time thinking; but he did not wish her his.

In this wholesome frame of mind he proceeded on his way, thankful that he had escaped meeting her, though so narrowly. But perhaps at this remote season the embarrassment of a rencounter would not have been intense. At Knollsea he entered the steamer for Sandbourne.

Mr. Chickerel and his family now lived at Firtop Villa, in that place, a house which, like many others, had been built since Julian’s last visit to the town. He was directed to the outskirts, and into a fir plantation where drives and intersecting roads had been laid out, and where new villas had sprung up like mushrooms. He entered by a swing gate, on which ‘Firtop’ was painted, and a maid-servant showed him into a neatly-furnished room, containing Mr. Chickerel, Mrs. Chickerel, and Picotee, the matron being reclined on a couch, which improved health had permitted her to substitute for a bed.

He had been expected, and all were glad to see again the sojourner in foreign lands, even down to the ladylike tabby, who was all purr and warmth towards him except when she was all claws and nippers. But had the prime sentiment of the meeting shown itself it would have been the unqualified surprise of Christopher at seeing how much Picotee’s face had grown to resemble her sister’s: it was less a resemblance in contours than in expression and tone.

They had an early tea, and then Mr. Chickerel, sitting in a patriarchal chair, conversed pleasantly with his guest, being well acquainted with him through other members of the family. They talked of Julian’s residence at different Italian towns with his sister; of Faith, who was at the present moment staying with some old friends in Melchester: and, as was inevitable, the discourse hovered over and settled upon Ethelberta, the prime ruler of the courses of them all, with little exception, through recent years.

‘It was a hard struggle for her,’ said Chickerel, looking reflectively out at the fir trees. ‘I never thought the girl would have got through it. When she first entered the house everybody was against her. She had to fight a whole host of them single-handed. There was the viscount’s brother, other relations, lawyers, ladies, servants, not one of them was her friend; and not one who wouldn’t rather have seen her arrive there in evil relationship with him than as she did come. But she stood her ground. She

was put upon her mettle; and one by one they got to feel there was somebody among them whose little finger, if they insulted her, was thicker than a Mountclere's loins. She must have had a will of iron; it was a situation that would have broken the hearts of a dozen ordinary women, for everybody soon knew that we were of no family, and that's what made it so hard for her. But there she is as mistress now, and everybody respecting her. I sometimes fancy she is occasionally too severe with the servants and I know what service is. But she says it is necessary, owing to her birth; and perhaps she is right.'

'I suppose she often comes to see you?'

'Four or five times a year,' said Picotee.

'She cannot come quite so often as she would,' said Mrs. Chickerel, 'because of her lofty position, which has its juties. Well, as I always say, Berta doesn't take after me. I couldn't have married the man even though he did bring a coronet with him.'

'I shouldn't have cared to let him ask ye,' said Chickerel. 'However, that's neither here nor there — all ended better than I expected. He's fond of her.'

'And it is wonderful what can be done with an old man when you are his darling,' said Mrs. Chickerel.

'If I were Berta I should go to London oftener,' said Picotee, to turn the conversation. 'But she lives mostly in the library. And, O, what do you think? She is writing an epic poem, and employs Emmeline as her reader.'

'Dear me. And how are Sol and Dan? You mentioned them once in your letters,' said Christopher.

'Berta has set them up as builders in London.'

'She bought a business for them,' said Chickerel. 'But Sol wouldn't accept her help for a long time, and now he has only agreed to it on condition of paying her back the money with interest, which he is doing. They have just signed a contract to build a hospital for twenty thousand pounds.'

Picotee broke in — 'You knew that both Gwendoline and Cornelia married two years ago, and went to Queensland? They married two brothers, who were farmers, and left England the following week. Georgie and Myrtle are at school.'

'And Joey?'

'We are thinking of making Joseph a parson,' said Mrs. Chickerel.

'Indeed! a parson.'

'Yes; 'tis a genteel living for the boy. And he's talents that way. Since he has been under masters he knows all the strange sounds the old Romans and Greeks used to make by way of talking, and the love stories of the ancient women as if they were his own. I assure you, Mr. Julian, if you could hear how beautiful the boy tells about little Cupid with his bow and arrows, and the rows between that pagan apostle Jupiter and his wife because of another woman, and the handsome young gods who kissed Venus, you'd say he deserved to be made a bishop at once!'

The evening advanced, and they walked in the garden. Here, by some means, Picotee and Christopher found themselves alone.

‘Your letters to my sister have been charming,’ said Christopher. ‘And so regular, too. It was as good as a birthday every time one arrived.’

Picotee blushed and said nothing.

Christopher had full assurance that her heart was where it always had been. A suspicion of the fact had been the reason of his visit here to-day.

‘Other letters were once written from England to Italy, and they acquired great celebrity. Do you know whose?’

‘Walpole’s?’ said Picotee timidly.

‘Yes; but they never charmed me half as much as yours. You may rest assured that one person in the world thinks Walpole your second.’

‘You should not have read them; they were not written to you. But I suppose you wished to hear of Ethelberta?’

‘At first I did,’ said Christopher. ‘But, oddly enough, I got more interested in the writer than in her news. I don’t know if ever before there has been an instance of loving by means of letters. If not, it is because there have never been such sweet ones written. At last I looked for them more anxiously than Faith.’

‘You see, you knew me before.’ Picotee would have withdrawn this remark if she could, fearing that it seemed like a suggestion of her love long ago.

‘Then, on my return, I thought I would just call and see you, and go away and think what would be best for me to do with a view to the future. But since I have been here I have felt that I could not go away to think without first asking you what you think on one point — whether you could ever marry me?’

‘I thought you would ask that when I first saw you.’

‘Did you. Why?’

‘You looked at me as if you would.’

‘Well,’ continued Christopher, ‘the worst of it is I am as poor as Job. Faith and I have three hundred a year between us, but only half is mine. So that before I get your promise I must let your father know how poor I am. Besides what I mention, I have only my earnings by music. But I am to be installed as chief organist at Melchester soon, instead of deputy, as I used to be; which is something.’

‘I am to have five hundred pounds when I marry. That was Lord Mountclere’s arrangement with Ethelberta. He is extremely anxious that I should marry well.’

‘That’s unfortunate. A marriage with me will hardly be considered well.’

‘O yes, it will,’ said Picotee quickly, and then looked frightened.

Christopher drew her towards him, and imprinted a kiss upon her cheek, at which Picotee was not so wretched as she had been some years before when he mistook her for another in that performance.

‘Berta will never let us come to want,’ she said, with vivacity, when she had recovered. ‘She always gives me what is necessary.’

‘We will endeavour not to trouble her,’ said Christopher, amused by Picotee’s utter dependence now as ever upon her sister, as upon an eternal Providence. ‘However, it

is well to be kin to a coach though you never ride in it. Now, shall we go indoors to your father? You think he will not object?’

‘I think he will be very glad,’ replied Picotee. ‘Berta will, I know.’

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