

CHAPTER II.

In the room from which this cheerful blaze proceeded, he beheld a girl seated on a willow chair, and busily occupied by the light of the fire, which was ample and of wood. With a bill-hook in one hand and a leather glove, much too large for her, on the other, she was making spars, such as are used by thatchers, with great rapidity. She wore a leather apron for this purpose, which was also much too large for her figure. On her left hand lay a bundle of the straight, smooth sticks called spar-gads--the raw material of her manufacture; on her right, a heap of chips and ends--the refuse--with which the fire was maintained; in front, a pile of the finished articles. To produce them she took up each gad, looked critically at it from end to end, cut it to length, split it into four, and sharpened each of the quarters with dexterous blows, which brought it to a triangular point precisely resembling that of a bayonet.

Beside her, in case she might require more light, a brass candlestick stood on a little round table, curiously formed of an old coffin-stool, with a deal top nailed on, the white surface of the latter contrasting oddly with the black carved oak of the substructure. The social position of the household in the past was almost as definitively shown by the presence of this article as that of an esquire or nobleman by his old helmets or shields. It had been customary for every well-to-do villager, whose tenure was by copy of court-roll, or in any way more permanent than that of the mere cotter, to keep a pair of these stools

for the use of his own dead; but for the last generation or two a feeling of *cui bono* had led to the discontinuance of the custom, and the stools were frequently made use of in the manner described.

The young woman laid down the bill-hook for a moment and examined the palm of her right hand, which, unlike the other, was ungloved, and showed little hardness or roughness about it. The palm was red and blistering, as if this present occupation were not frequent enough with her to subdue it to what it worked in. As with so many right hands born to manual labor, there was nothing in its fundamental shape to bear out the physiological conventionalism that gradations of birth, gentle or mean, show themselves primarily in the form of this member. Nothing but a cast of the die of destiny had decided that the girl should handle the tool; and the fingers which clasped the heavy ash haft might have skilfully guided the pencil or swept the string, had they only been set to do it in good time.

Her face had the usual fulness of expression which is developed by a life of solitude. Where the eyes of a multitude beat like waves upon a countenance they seem to wear away its individuality; but in the still water of privacy every tentacle of feeling and sentiment shoots out in visible luxuriance, to be interpreted as readily as a child's look by an intruder. In years she was no more than nineteen or twenty, but the necessity of taking thought at a too early period of life had forced the provisional curves of her childhood's face to a premature finality. Thus she had but little pretension to beauty, save in one prominent

particular--her hair. Its abundance made it almost unmanageable; its color was, roughly speaking, and as seen here by firelight, brown, but careful notice, or an observation by day, would have revealed that its true shade was a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut.

On this one bright gift of Time to the particular victim of his now before us the new-comer's eyes were fixed; meanwhile the fingers of his right hand mechanically played over something sticking up from his waistcoat-pocket--the bows of a pair of scissors, whose polish made them feebly responsive to the light within. In her present beholder's mind the scene formed by the girlish spar-maker composed itself into a post-Raffaelite picture of extremest quality, wherein the girl's hair alone, as the focus of observation, was depicted with intensity and distinctness, and her face, shoulders, hands, and figure in general, being a blurred mass of unimportant detail lost in haze and obscurity.

He hesitated no longer, but tapped at the door and entered. The young woman turned at the crunch of his boots on the sanded floor, and exclaiming, "Oh, Mr. Percombe, how you frightened me!" quite lost her color for a moment.

He replied, "You should shut your door--then you'd hear folk open it."

"I can't," she said; "the chimney smokes so. Mr. Percombe, you look as unnatural out of your shop as a canary in a thorn-hedge. Surely you have not come out here on my account--for--"

"Yes--to have your answer about this." He touched her head with his cane, and she winced. "Do you agree?" he continued. "It is necessary that I should know at once, as the lady is soon going away, and it takes time to make up."

"Don't press me--it worries me. I was in hopes you had thought no more of it. I can NOT part with it--so there!"

"Now, look here, Marty," said the barber, sitting down on the coffin-stool table. "How much do you get for making these spars?"

"Hush--father's up-stairs awake, and he don't know that I am doing his work."

"Well, now tell me," said the man, more softly. "How much do you get?"

"Eighteenpence a thousand," she said, reluctantly.

"Who are you making them for?"

"Mr. Melbury, the timber-dealer, just below here."

"And how many can you make in a day?"

"In a day and half the night, three bundles--that's a thousand and a

half."

"Two and threepence." The barber paused. "Well, look here," he continued, with the remains of a calculation in his tone, which calculation had been the reduction to figures of the probable monetary magnetism necessary to overpower the resistant force of her present purse and the woman's love of comeliness, "here's a sovereign--a gold sovereign, almost new." He held it out between his finger and thumb. "That's as much as you'd earn in a week and a half at that rough man's work, and it's yours for just letting me snip off what you've got too much of."

The girl's bosom moved a very little. "Why can't the lady send to some other girl who don't value her hair--not to me?" she exclaimed.

"Why, simpleton, because yours is the exact shade of her own, and 'tis a shade you can't match by dyeing. But you are not going to refuse me now I've come all the way from Sherton o' purpose?"

"I say I won't sell it--to you or anybody."

"Now listen," and he drew up a little closer beside her. "The lady is very rich, and won't be particular to a few shillings; so I will advance to this on my own responsibility--I'll make the one sovereign two, rather than go back empty-handed."

"No, no, no!" she cried, beginning to be much agitated. "You are a-tempting me, Mr. Percombe. You go on like the Devil to Dr. Faustus in the penny book. But I don't want your money, and won't agree. Why did you come? I said when you got me into your shop and urged me so much, that I didn't mean to sell my hair!" The speaker was hot and stern.

"Marty, now hearken. The lady that wants it wants it badly. And, between you and me, you'd better let her have it. 'Twill be bad for you if you don't."

"Bad for me? Who is she, then?"

The barber held his tongue, and the girl repeated the question.

"I am not at liberty to tell you. And as she is going abroad soon it makes no difference who she is at all."

"She wants it to go abroad wi'?"

Percombe assented by a nod. The girl regarded him reflectively.

"Barber Percombe," she said, "I know who 'tis. 'Tis she at the House--Mrs. Charmond!"

"That's my secret. However, if you agree to let me have it, I'll tell you in confidence."

"I'll certainly not let you have it unless you tell me the truth. It is Mrs. Charmond."

The barber dropped his voice. "Well--it is. You sat in front of her in church the other day, and she noticed how exactly your hair matched her own. Ever since then she's been hankering for it, and at last decided to get it. As she won't wear it till she goes off abroad, she knows nobody will recognize the change. I'm commissioned to get it for her, and then it is to be made up. I shouldn't have vamped all these miles for any less important employer. Now, mind--'tis as much as my business with her is worth if it should be known that I've let out her name; but honor between us two, Marty, and you'll say nothing that would injure me?"

"I don't wish to tell upon her," said Marty, coolly. "But my hair is my own, and I'm going to keep it."

"Now, that's not fair, after what I've told you," said the nettled barber. "You see, Marty, as you are in the same parish, and in one of her cottages, and your father is ill, and wouldn't like to turn out, it would be as well to oblige her. I say that as a friend. But I won't press you to make up your mind to-night. You'll be coming to market to-morrow, I dare say, and you can call then. If you think it over you'll be inclined to bring what I want, I know."

"I've nothing more to say," she answered.

Her companion saw from her manner that it was useless to urge her further by speech. "As you are a trusty young woman," he said, "I'll put these sovereigns up here for ornament, that you may see how handsome they are. Bring the hair to-morrow, or return the sovereigns." He stuck them edgewise into the frame of a small mantle looking-glass. "I hope you'll bring it, for your sake and mine. I should have thought she could have suited herself elsewhere; but as it's her fancy it must be indulged if possible. If you cut it off yourself, mind how you do it so as to keep all the locks one way." He showed her how this was to be done.

"But I sha'nt," she replied, with laconic indifference. "I value my looks too much to spoil 'em. She wants my hair to get another lover with; though if stories are true she's broke the heart of many a noble gentleman already."

"Lord, it's wonderful how you guess things, Marty," said the barber. "I've had it from them that know that there certainly is some foreign gentleman in her eye. However, mind what I ask."

"She's not going to get him through me."

Percombe had retired as far as the door; he came back, planted his cane on the coffin-stool, and looked her in the face. "Marty South," he

said, with deliberate emphasis, "YOU'VE GOT A LOVER YOURSELF, and that's why you won't let it go!"

She reddened so intensely as to pass the mild blush that suffices to heighten beauty; she put the yellow leather glove on one hand, took up the hook with the other, and sat down doggedly to her work without turning her face to him again. He regarded her head for a moment, went to the door, and with one look back at her, departed on his way homeward.

Marty pursued her occupation for a few minutes, then suddenly laying down the bill-hook, she jumped up and went to the back of the room, where she opened a door which disclosed a staircase so whitely scrubbed that the grain of the wood was wellnigh sodden away by such cleansing. At the top she gently approached a bedroom, and without entering, said, "Father, do you want anything?"

A weak voice inside answered in the negative; adding, "I should be all right by to-morrow if it were not for the tree!"

"The tree again--always the tree! Oh, father, don't worry so about that. You know it can do you no harm."

"Who have ye had talking to ye down-stairs?"

"A Sherton man called--nothing to trouble about," she said, soothingly.

"Father," she went on, "can Mrs. Charmond turn us out of our house if she's minded to?"

"Turn us out? No. Nobody can turn us out till my poor soul is turned out of my body. 'Tis life-hold, like Ambrose Winterborne's. But when my life drops 'twill be hers--not till then." His words on this subject so far had been rational and firm enough. But now he lapsed into his moaning strain: "And the tree will do it--that tree will soon be the death of me."

"Nonsense, you know better. How can it be?" She refrained from further speech, and descended to the ground-floor again.

"Thank Heaven, then," she said to herself, "what belongs to me I keep."