

## 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 FORWARDDEST 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."