

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 naturalized 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 realization. "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."