

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, correctingly, 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, Cainey 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.