

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 'eyes' 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 unless 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 recovered 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.