CHAPTER XLIV

UNDER A TREE--REACTION

Bathsheba went along the dark road, neither knowing nor caring about the direction or issue of her flight. The first time that she definitely noticed her position was when she reached a gate leading into a thicket overhung by some large oak and beech trees. On looking into the place, it occurred to her that she had seen it by daylight on some previous occasion, and that what appeared like an impassable thicket was in reality a brake of fern now withering fast. She could think of nothing better to do with her palpitating self than to go in here and hide; and entering, she lighted on a spot sheltered from the damp fog by a reclining trunk, where she sank down upon a tangled couch of fronds and stems. She mechanically pulled some armfuls round her to keep off the breezes, and closed her eyes.

Whether she slept or not that night Bathsheba was not clearly aware. But it was with a freshened existence and a cooler brain that, a long time afterwards, she became conscious of some interesting proceedings which were going on in the trees above her head and around.

A coarse-throated chatter was the first sound.

It was a sparrow just waking.

Next: "Chee-weeze-weeze-weeze!" from another retreat.

It was a finch.

Third: "Tink-tink-tink-tink-a-chink!" from the hedge.

It was a robin.

"Chuck-chuck-chuck!" overhead.

A squirrel.

Then, from the road, "With my ra-ta-ta, and my rum-tum-tum!"

It was a ploughboy. Presently he came opposite, and she believed from his voice that he was one of the boys on her own farm. He was followed by a shambling tramp of heavy feet, and looking through the ferns Bathsheba could just discern in the wan light of daybreak a team of her own horses. They stopped to drink at a pond on the other side of the way. She watched them flouncing into the pool, drinking, tossing up their heads, drinking again, the water dribbling from their lips in silver threads. There was another flounce, and they came out of the pond, and turned back again towards the farm.

She looked further around. Day was just dawning, and beside its cool air and colours her heated actions and resolves of the night stood out in lurid contrast. She perceived that in her lap, and clinging to her hair, were red and yellow leaves which had come down from the tree and settled silently upon her during her partial sleep. Bathsheba shook her dress to get rid of them, when multitudes of the same family lying round about her rose and fluttered away in the breeze thus created, "like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing."

There was an opening towards the east, and the glow from the as yet unrisen sun attracted her eyes thither. From her feet, and between the beautiful yellowing ferns with their feathery arms, the ground sloped downwards to a hollow, in which was a species of swamp, dotted with fungi. A morning mist hung over it now--a fulsome yet magnificent silvery veil, full of light from the sun, yet semi-opaque--the hedge behind it being in some measure hidden by its hazy luminousness. Up the sides of this depression grew sheaves of the common rush, and here and there a peculiar species of flag, the blades of which glistened in the emerging sun, like scythes. But the general aspect of the swamp was malignant. From its moist and poisonous coat seemed to be exhaled the essences of evil things in the earth, and in the waters under the earth. The fungi grew in all manner of positions from rotting leaves and tree stumps, some exhibiting to her listless gaze their clammy tops, others their oozing gills. Some were marked with great splotches, red as arterial blood, others were saffron yellow, and others tall and attenuated,

with stems like macaroni. Some were leathery and of richest browns. The hollow seemed a nursery of pestilences small and great, in the immediate neighbourhood of comfort and health, and Bathsheba arose with a tremor at the thought of having passed the night on the brink of so dismal a place.

There were now other footsteps to be heard along the road. Bathsheba's nerves were still unstrung: she crouched down out of sight again, and the pedestrian came into view. He was a schoolboy, with a bag slung over his shoulder containing his dinner, and a book in his hand. He paused by the gate, and, without looking up, continued murmuring words in tones quite loud enough to reach her ears.

"'O Lord, O Lord, O Lord, O Lord, O Lord':--that I know out o' book. 'Give us, give us, give us, give us, give us':--that I know. 'Grace that, grace that, grace that, grace that':--that I know." Other words followed to the same effect. The boy was of the dunce class apparently; the book was a psalter, and this was his way of learning the collect. In the worst attacks of trouble there appears to be always a superficial film of consciousness which is left disengaged and open to the notice of trifles, and Bathsheba was faintly amused at the boy's method, till he too passed on.

By this time stupor had given place to anxiety, and anxiety began to make room for hunger and thirst. A form now appeared upon the rise

on the other side of the swamp, half-hidden by the mist, and came towards Bathsheba. The woman--for it was a woman--approached with her face askance, as if looking earnestly on all sides of her.
When she got a little further round to the left, and drew nearer, Bathsheba could see the newcomer's profile against the sunny sky, and knew the wavy sweep from forehead to chin, with neither angle nor decisive line anywhere about it, to be the familiar contour of Liddy Smallbury.

Bathsheba's heart bounded with gratitude in the thought that she was not altogether deserted, and she jumped up. "Oh, Liddy!" she said, or attempted to say; but the words had only been framed by her lips; there came no sound. She had lost her voice by exposure to the clogged atmosphere all these hours of night.

"Oh, ma'am! I am so glad I have found you," said the girl, as soon as she saw Bathsheba.

"You can't come across," Bathsheba said in a whisper, which she vainly endeavoured to make loud enough to reach Liddy's ears. Liddy, not knowing this, stepped down upon the swamp, saying, as she did so, "It will bear me up, I think."

Bathsheba never forgot that transient little picture of Liddy crossing the swamp to her there in the morning light. Iridescent bubbles of dank subterranean breath rose from the sweating sod beside

the waiting-maid's feet as she trod, hissing as they burst and expanded away to join the vapoury firmament above. Liddy did not sink, as Bathsheba had anticipated.

She landed safely on the other side, and looked up at the beautiful though pale and weary face of her young mistress.

"Poor thing!" said Liddy, with tears in her eyes, "Do hearten yourself up a little, ma'am. However did--"

"I can't speak above a whisper--my voice is gone for the present," said Bathsheba, hurriedly. "I suppose the damp air from that hollow has taken it away. Liddy, don't question me, mind. Who sent you--anybody?"

"Nobody. I thought, when I found you were not at home, that something cruel had happened. I fancy I heard his voice late last night; and so, knowing something was wrong--"

"Is he at home?"

"No; he left just before I came out."

"Is Fanny taken away?"

"Not yet. She will soon be--at nine o'clock."

"We won't go home at present, then. Suppose we walk about in this wood?"

Liddy, without exactly understanding everything, or anything, in this episode, assented, and they walked together further among the trees.

"But you had better come in, ma'am, and have something to eat. You will die of a chill!"

"I shall not come indoors yet--perhaps never."

"Shall I get you something to eat, and something else to put over your head besides that little shawl?"

"If you will, Liddy."

Liddy vanished, and at the end of twenty minutes returned with a cloak, hat, some slices of bread and butter, a tea-cup, and some hot tea in a little china jug.

"Is Fanny gone?" said Bathsheba.

"No," said her companion, pouring out the tea.

Bathsheba wrapped herself up and ate and drank sparingly. Her voice

was then a little clearer, and trifling colour returned to her face.
"Now we'll walk about again," she said.

They wandered about the wood for nearly two hours, Bathsheba replying in monosyllables to Liddy's prattle, for her mind ran on one subject, and one only. She interrupted with--

"I wonder if Fanny is gone by this time?"

"I will go and see."

She came back with the information that the men were just taking away the corpse; that Bathsheba had been inquired for; that she had replied to the effect that her mistress was unwell and could not be seen.

"Then they think I am in my bedroom?"

"Yes." Liddy then ventured to add: "You said when I first found you that you might never go home again--you didn't mean it, ma'am?"

"No; I've altered my mind. It is only women with no pride in them who run away from their husbands. There is one position worse than that of being found dead in your husband's house from his ill usage, and that is, to be found alive through having gone away to the house of somebody else. I've thought of it all this morning, and I've

chosen my course. A runaway wife is an encumbrance to everybody, a burden to herself and a byword--all of which make up a heap of misery greater than any that comes by staying at home--though this may include the trifling items of insult, beating, and starvation. Liddy, if ever you marry--God forbid that you ever should!--you'll find yourself in a fearful situation; but mind this, don't you flinch. Stand your ground, and be cut to pieces. That's what I'm going to do."

"Oh, mistress, don't talk so!" said Liddy, taking her hand; "but I knew you had too much sense to bide away. May I ask what dreadful thing it is that has happened between you and him?"

"You may ask; but I may not tell."

In about ten minutes they returned to the house by a circuitous route, entering at the rear. Bathsheba glided up the back stairs to a disused attic, and her companion followed.

"Liddy," she said, with a lighter heart, for youth and hope had begun to reassert themselves; "you are to be my confidante for the present--somebody must be--and I choose you. Well, I shall take up my abode here for a while. Will you get a fire lighted, put down a piece of carpet, and help me to make the place comfortable. Afterwards, I want you and Maryann to bring up that little stump bedstead in the small room, and the bed belonging to it, and a table,

and some other things.... What shall I do to pass the heavy time away?"

"Hemming handkerchiefs is a very good thing," said Liddy.

"Oh no, no! I hate needlework--I always did."

"Knitting?"

"And that, too."

"You might finish your sampler. Only the carnations and peacocks want filling in; and then it could be framed and glazed, and hung beside your aunt's ma'am."

"Samplers are out of date--horribly countrified. No Liddy, I'll read. Bring up some books--not new ones. I haven't heart to read anything new."

"Some of your uncle's old ones, ma'am?"

"Yes. Some of those we stowed away in boxes." A faint gleam of humour passed over her face as she said: "Bring Beaumont and Fletcher's Maid's Tragedy, and the Mourning Bride, and--let me see--Night Thoughts, and the Vanity of Human Wishes."

"And that story of the black man, who murdered his wife Desdemona? It is a nice dismal one that would suit you excellent just now."

"Now, Liddy, you've been looking into my books without telling me; and I said you were not to! How do you know it would suit me? It wouldn't suit me at all."

"But if the others do--"

"No, they don't; and I won't read dismal books. Why should I read dismal books, indeed? Bring me Love in a Village, and Maid of the Mill, and Doctor Syntax, and some volumes of the Spectator-."

All that day Bathsheba and Liddy lived in the attic in a state of barricade; a precaution which proved to be needless as against Troy, for he did not appear in the neighbourhood or trouble them at all. Bathsheba sat at the window till sunset, sometimes attempting to read, at other times watching every movement outside without much purpose, and listening without much interest to every sound.

The sun went down almost blood-red that night, and a livid cloud received its rays in the east. Up against this dark background the west front of the church tower--the only part of the edifice visible from the farm-house windows--rose distinct and lustrous, the vane upon the summit bristling with rays. Hereabouts, at six o'clock, the

young men of the village gathered, as was their custom, for a game of Prisoners' base. The spot had been consecrated to this ancient diversion from time immemorial, the old stocks conveniently forming a base facing the boundary of the churchyard, in front of which the ground was trodden hard and bare as a pavement by the players. She could see the brown and black heads of the young lads darting about right and left, their white shirt-sleeves gleaming in the sun; whilst occasionally a shout and a peal of hearty laughter varied the stillness of the evening air. They continued playing for a quarter of an hour or so, when the game concluded abruptly, and the players leapt over the wall and vanished round to the other side behind a yew-tree, which was also half behind a beech, now spreading in one mass of golden foliage, on which the branches traced black lines.

"Why did the base-players finish their game so suddenly?" Bathsheba inquired, the next time that Liddy entered the room.

"I think 'twas because two men came just then from Casterbridge and began putting up a grand carved tombstone," said Liddy. "The lads went to see whose it was."

"Do you know?" Bathsheba asked.

"I don't," said Liddy.