CHAPTER LI

BATHSHEBA TALKS WITH HER OUTRIDER

The arrangement for getting back again to Weatherbury had been that Oak should take the place of Poorgrass in Bathsheba's conveyance and drive her home, it being discovered late in the afternoon that Joseph was suffering from his old complaint, a multiplying eye, and was, therefore, hardly trustworthy as coachman and protector to a woman. But Oak had found himself so occupied, and was full of so many cares relative to those portions of Boldwood's flocks that were not disposed of, that Bathsheba, without telling Oak or anybody, resolved to drive home herself, as she had many times done from Casterbridge Market, and trust to her good angel for performing the journey unmolested. But having fallen in with Farmer Boldwood accidentally (on her part at least) at the refreshment-tent, she found it impossible to refuse his offer to ride on horseback beside her as escort. It had grown twilight before she was aware, but Boldwood assured her that there was no cause for uneasiness, as the moon would be up in half-an-hour.

Immediately after the incident in the tent, she had risen to go--now absolutely alarmed and really grateful for her old lover's protection--though regretting Gabriel's absence, whose company she

would have much preferred, as being more proper as well as more pleasant, since he was her own managing-man and servant. This, however, could not be helped; she would not, on any consideration, treat Boldwood harshly, having once already ill-used him, and the moon having risen, and the gig being ready, she drove across the hilltop in the wending way's which led downwards--to oblivious obscurity, as it seemed, for the moon and the hill it flooded with light were in appearance on a level, the rest of the world lying as a vast shady concave between them. Boldwood mounted his horse, and followed in close attendance behind. Thus they descended into the lowlands, and the sounds of those left on the hill came like voices from the sky, and the lights were as those of a camp in heaven. They soon passed the merry stragglers in the immediate vicinity of the hill, traversed Kingsbere, and got upon the high road.

The keen instincts of Bathsheba had perceived that the farmer's staunch devotion to herself was still undiminished, and she sympathized deeply. The sight had quite depressed her this evening; had reminded her of her folly; she wished anew, as she had wished many months ago, for some means of making reparation for her fault. Hence her pity for the man who so persistently loved on to his own injury and permanent gloom had betrayed Bathsheba into an injudicious considerateness of manner, which appeared almost like tenderness, and gave new vigour to the exquisite dream of a Jacob's seven years service in poor Boldwood's mind.

He soon found an excuse for advancing from his position in the rear, and rode close by her side. They had gone two or three miles in the moonlight, speaking desultorily across the wheel of her gig concerning the fair, farming, Oak's usefulness to them both, and other indifferent subjects, when Boldwood said suddenly and simply--

"Mrs. Troy, you will marry again some day?"

This point-blank query unmistakably confused her, and it was not till a minute or more had elapsed that she said, "I have not seriously thought of any such subject."

"I quite understand that. Yet your late husband has been dead nearly one year, and--"

"You forget that his death was never absolutely proved, and may not have taken place; so that I may not be really a widow," she said, catching at the straw of escape that the fact afforded.

"Not absolutely proved, perhaps, but it was proved circumstantially. A man saw him drowning, too. No reasonable person has any doubt of his death; nor have you, ma'am, I should imagine."

"I have none now, or I should have acted differently," she said, gently. "I certainly, at first, had a strange unaccountable feeling that he could not have perished, but I have been able to explain that

in several ways since. But though I am fully persuaded that I shall see him no more, I am far from thinking of marriage with another. I should be very contemptible to indulge in such a thought."

They were silent now awhile, and having struck into an unfrequented track across a common, the creaks of Boldwood's saddle and her gig springs were all the sounds to be heard. Boldwood ended the pause.

"Do you remember when I carried you fainting in my arms into the King's Arms, in Casterbridge? Every dog has his day: that was mine."

"I know--I know it all," she said, hurriedly.

"I, for one, shall never cease regretting that events so fell out as to deny you to me."

"I, too, am very sorry," she said, and then checked herself. "I mean, you know, I am sorry you thought I--"

"I have always this dreary pleasure in thinking over those past times with you--that I was something to you before HE was anything, and that you belonged ALMOST to me. But, of course, that's nothing. You never liked me."

"I did; and respected you, too."

"Do you now?"

"Yes."

"Which?"

"How do you mean which?"

"Do you like me, or do you respect me?"

"I don't know--at least, I cannot tell you. It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs. My treatment of you was thoughtless, inexcusable, wicked! I shall eternally regret it. If there had been anything I could have done to make amends I would most gladly have done it--there was nothing on earth I so longed to do as to repair the error. But that was not possible."

"Don't blame yourself--you were not so far in the wrong as you suppose. Bathsheba, suppose you had real complete proof that you are what, in fact, you are--a widow--would you repair the old wrong to me by marrying me?"

"I cannot say. I shouldn't yet, at any rate."

"But you might at some future time of your life?"

"Oh yes, I might at some time."

"Well, then, do you know that without further proof of any kind you may marry again in about six years from the present--subject to nobody's objection or blame?"

"Oh yes," she said, quickly. "I know all that. But don't talk of it--seven or six years--where may we all be by that time?"

"They will soon glide by, and it will seem an astonishingly short time to look back upon when they are past--much less than to look forward to now."

"Yes, yes; I have found that in my own experience."

"Now listen once more," Boldwood pleaded. "If I wait that time, will you marry me? You own that you owe me amends--let that be your way of making them."

"But, Mr. Boldwood--six years--"

"Do you want to be the wife of any other man?"

"No indeed! I mean, that I don't like to talk about this matter now. Perhaps it is not proper, and I ought not to allow it. Let us drop

it. My husband may be living, as I said."

"Of course, I'll drop the subject if you wish. But propriety has nothing to do with reasons. I am a middle-aged man, willing to protect you for the remainder of our lives. On your side, at least, there is no passion or blamable haste--on mine, perhaps, there is. But I can't help seeing that if you choose from a feeling of pity, and, as you say, a wish to make amends, to make a bargain with me for a far-ahead time--an agreement which will set all things right and make me happy, late though it may be--there is no fault to be found with you as a woman. Hadn't I the first place beside you? Haven't you been almost mine once already? Surely you can say to me as much as this, you will have me back again should circumstances permit? Now, pray speak! O Bathsheba, promise--it is only a little promise--that if you marry again, you will marry me!"

His tone was so excited that she almost feared him at this moment, even whilst she sympathized. It was a simple physical fear--the weak of the strong; there was no emotional aversion or inner repugnance. She said, with some distress in her voice, for she remembered vividly his outburst on the Yalbury Road, and shrank from a repetition of his anger:--

"I will never marry another man whilst you wish me to be your wife, whatever comes--but to say more--you have taken me so by surprise--"

"But let it stand in these simple words--that in six years' time you will be my wife? Unexpected accidents we'll not mention, because those, of course, must be given way to. Now, this time I know you will keep your word."

"That's why I hesitate to give it."

"But do give it! Remember the past, and be kind."

She breathed; and then said mournfully: "Oh what shall I do? I don't love you, and I much fear that I never shall love you as much as a woman ought to love a husband. If you, sir, know that, and I can yet give you happiness by a mere promise to marry at the end of six years, if my husband should not come back, it is a great honour to me. And if you value such an act of friendship from a woman who doesn't esteem herself as she did, and has little love left, why I--I will--"

"Promise!"

"--Consider, if I cannot promise soon."

"But soon is perhaps never?"

"Oh no, it is not! I mean soon. Christmas, we'll say."

"Christmas!" He said nothing further till he added: "Well, I'll say no more to you about it till that time."

Bathsheba was in a very peculiar state of mind, which showed how entirely the soul is the slave of the body, the ethereal spirit dependent for its quality upon the tangible flesh and blood. It is hardly too much to say that she felt coerced by a force stronger than her own will, not only into the act of promising upon this singularly remote and vague matter, but into the emotion of fancying that she ought to promise. When the weeks intervening between the night of this conversation and Christmas day began perceptibly to diminish, her anxiety and perplexity increased.

One day she was led by an accident into an oddly confidential dialogue with Gabriel about her difficulty. It afforded her a little relief--of a dull and cheerless kind. They were auditing accounts, and something occurred in the course of their labours which led Oak to say, speaking of Boldwood, "He'll never forget you, ma'am, never."

Then out came her trouble before she was aware; and she told him how she had again got into the toils; what Boldwood had asked her, and how he was expecting her assent. "The most mournful reason of all for my agreeing to it," she said sadly, "and the true reason why I think to do so for good or for evil, is this--it is a thing I have not breathed to a living soul as yet--I believe that if I don't give

my word, he'll go out of his mind."

"Really, do ye?" said Gabriel, gravely.

"I believe this," she continued, with reckless frankness; "and Heaven knows I say it in a spirit the very reverse of vain, for I am grieved and troubled to my soul about it--I believe I hold that man's future in my hand. His career depends entirely upon my treatment of him. O Gabriel, I tremble at my responsibility, for it is terrible!"

"Well, I think this much, ma'am, as I told you years ago," said Oak, "that his life is a total blank whenever he isn't hoping for 'ee; but I can't suppose--I hope that nothing so dreadful hangs on to it as you fancy. His natural manner has always been dark and strange, you know. But since the case is so sad and odd-like, why don't ye give the conditional promise? I think I would."

"But is it right? Some rash acts of my past life have taught me that a watched woman must have very much circumspection to retain only a very little credit, and I do want and long to be discreet in this! And six years--why we may all be in our graves by that time, even if Mr. Troy does not come back again, which he may not impossibly do! Such thoughts give a sort of absurdity to the scheme. Now, isn't it preposterous, Gabriel? However he came to dream of it, I cannot think. But is it wrong? You know--you are older than I."

"Eight years older, ma'am."

"Yes, eight years--and is it wrong?"

"Perhaps it would be an uncommon agreement for a man and woman to make: I don't see anything really wrong about it," said Oak, slowly. "In fact the very thing that makes it doubtful if you ought to marry en under any condition, that is, your not caring about him--for I may suppose--"

"Yes, you may suppose that love is wanting," she said shortly. "Love is an utterly bygone, sorry, worn-out, miserable thing with me--for him or any one else."

"Well, your want of love seems to me the one thing that takes away harm from such an agreement with him. If wild heat had to do wi' it, making ye long to over-come the awkwardness about your husband's vanishing, it mid be wrong; but a cold-hearted agreement to oblige a man seems different, somehow. The real sin, ma'am in my mind, lies in thinking of ever wedding wi' a man you don't love honest and true."

"That I'm willing to pay the penalty of," said Bathsheba, firmly. "You know, Gabriel, this is what I cannot get off my conscience--that I once seriously injured him in sheer idleness. If I had never played a trick upon him, he would never have wanted to marry me. Oh

if I could only pay some heavy damages in money to him for the harm I did, and so get the sin off my soul that way!... Well, there's the debt, which can only be discharged in one way, and I believe I am bound to do it if it honestly lies in my power, without any consideration of my own future at all. When a rake gambles away his expectations, the fact that it is an inconvenient debt doesn't make him the less liable. I've been a rake, and the single point I ask you is, considering that my own scruples, and the fact that in the eye of the law my husband is only missing, will keep any man from marrying me until seven years have passed--am I free to entertain such an idea, even though 'tis a sort of penance--for it will be that? I HATE the act of marriage under such circumstances, and the class of women I should seem to belong to by doing it!"

"It seems to me that all depends upon whe'r you think, as everybody else do, that your husband is dead."

"Yes--I've long ceased to doubt that. I well know what would have brought him back long before this time if he had lived."

"Well, then, in a religious sense you will be as free to THINK o' marrying again as any real widow of one year's standing. But why don't ye ask Mr. Thirdly's advice on how to treat Mr. Boldwood?"

"No. When I want a broad-minded opinion for general enlightenment, distinct from special advice, I never go to a man who deals in

the subject professionally. So I like the parson's opinion on law, the lawyer's on doctoring, the doctor's on business, and my business-man's--that is, yours--on morals."

"And on love--"

"My own."

"I'm afraid there's a hitch in that argument," said Oak, with a grave smile.

She did not reply at once, and then saying, "Good evening, Mr. Oak." went away.

She had spoken frankly, and neither asked nor expected any reply from Gabriel more satisfactory than that she had obtained. Yet in the centremost parts of her complicated heart there existed at this minute a little pang of disappointment, for a reason she would not allow herself to recognize. Oak had not once wished her free that he might marry her himself--had not once said, "I could wait for you as well as he." That was the insect sting. Not that she would have listened to any such hypothesis. O no--for wasn't she saying all the time that such thoughts of the future were improper, and wasn't Gabriel far too poor a man to speak sentiment to her? Yet he might have just hinted about that old love of his, and asked, in a playful off-hand way, if he might speak of it. It would have seemed pretty

and sweet, if no more; and then she would have shown how kind and inoffensive a woman's "No" can sometimes be. But to give such cool advice--the very advice she had asked for--it ruffled our heroine all the afternoon.