CHAPTER LII

CONVERGING COURSES

I

Christmas-eve came, and a party that Boldwood was to give in the evening was the great subject of talk in Weatherbury. It was not that the rarity of Christmas parties in the parish made this one a wonder, but that Boldwood should be the giver. The announcement had had an abnormal and incongruous sound, as if one should hear of croquet-playing in a cathedral aisle, or that some much-respected judge was going upon the stage. That the party was intended to be a truly jovial one there was no room for doubt. A large bough of mistletoe had been brought from the woods that day, and suspended in the hall of the bachelor's home. Holly and ivy had followed in armfuls. From six that morning till past noon the huge wood fire in the kitchen roared and sparkled at its highest, the kettle, the saucepan, and the three-legged pot appearing in the midst of the flames like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; moreover, roasting and basting operations were continually carried on in front of the genial blaze.

As it grew later the fire was made up in the large long hall into which the staircase descended, and all encumbrances were cleared out for dancing. The log which was to form the back-brand of the evening fire was the uncleft trunk of a tree, so unwieldy that it could be neither brought nor rolled to its place; and accordingly two men were to be observed dragging and heaving it in by chains and levers as the hour of assembly drew near.

In spite of all this, the spirit of revelry was wanting in the atmosphere of the house. Such a thing had never been attempted before by its owner, and it was now done as by a wrench. Intended gaieties would insist upon appearing like solemn grandeurs, the organization of the whole effort was carried out coldly, by hirelings, and a shadow seemed to move about the rooms, saying that the proceedings were unnatural to the place and the lone man who lived therein, and hence not good.

II

Bathsheba was at this time in her room, dressing for the event. She had called for candles, and Liddy entered and placed one on each side of her mistress's glass.

"Don't go away, Liddy," said Bathsheba, almost timidly. "I am

foolishly agitated--I cannot tell why. I wish I had not been obliged to go to this dance; but there's no escaping now. I have not spoken to Mr. Boldwood since the autumn, when I promised to see him at Christmas on business, but I had no idea there was to be anything of this kind."

"But I would go now," said Liddy, who was going with her; for Boldwood had been indiscriminate in his invitations.

"Yes, I shall make my appearance, of course," said Bathsheba. "But I am THE CAUSE of the party, and that upsets me!--Don't tell, Liddy."

"Oh no, ma'am. You the cause of it, ma'am?"

"Yes. I am the reason of the party--I. If it had not been for me, there would never have been one. I can't explain any more--there's no more to be explained. I wish I had never seen Weatherbury."

"That's wicked of you--to wish to be worse off than you are."

"No, Liddy. I have never been free from trouble since I have lived here, and this party is likely to bring me more. Now, fetch my black silk dress, and see how it sits upon me."

"But you will leave off that, surely, ma'am? You have been a widow-lady fourteen months, and ought to brighten up a little on

such a night as this."

"Is it necessary? No; I will appear as usual, for if I were to wear any light dress people would say things about me, and I should seem to be rejoicing when I am solemn all the time. The party doesn't suit me a bit; but never mind, stay and help to finish me off."

III

Boldwood was dressing also at this hour. A tailor from Casterbridge was with him, assisting him in the operation of trying on a new coat that had just been brought home.

Never had Boldwood been so fastidious, unreasonable about the fit, and generally difficult to please. The tailor walked round and round him, tugged at the waist, pulled the sleeve, pressed out the collar, and for the first time in his experience Boldwood was not bored. Times had been when the farmer had exclaimed against all such niceties as childish, but now no philosophic or hasty rebuke whatever was provoked by this man for attaching as much importance to a crease in the coat as to an earthquake in South America. Boldwood at last expressed himself nearly satisfied, and paid the bill, the tailor passing out of the door just as Oak came in to report progress for the day.

"Oh, Oak," said Boldwood. "I shall of course see you here to-night. Make yourself merry. I am determined that neither expense nor trouble shall be spared."

"I'll try to be here, sir, though perhaps it may not be very early," said Gabriel, quietly. "I am glad indeed to see such a change in 'ee from what it used to be."

"Yes--I must own it--I am bright to-night: cheerful and more than cheerful--so much so that I am almost sad again with the sense that all of it is passing away. And sometimes, when I am excessively hopeful and blithe, a trouble is looming in the distance: so that I often get to look upon gloom in me with content, and to fear a happy mood. Still this may be absurd--I feel that it is absurd. Perhaps my day is dawning at last."

"I hope it 'ill be a long and a fair one."

"Thank you--thank you. Yet perhaps my cheerfulness rests on a slender hope. And yet I trust my hope. It is faith, not hope. I think this time I reckon with my host.--Oak, my hands are a little shaky, or something; I can't tie this neckerchief properly. Perhaps you will tie it for me. The fact is, I have not been well lately, you know."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir."

"Oh, it's nothing. I want it done as well as you can, please. Is there any late knot in fashion, Oak?"

"I don't know, sir," said Oak. His tone had sunk to sadness.

Boldwood approached Gabriel, and as Oak tied the neckerchief the farmer went on feverishly--

"Does a woman keep her promise, Gabriel?"

"If it is not inconvenient to her she may."

"--Or rather an implied promise."

"I won't answer for her implying," said Oak, with faint bitterness. "That's a word as full o' holes as a sieve with them."

"Oak, don't talk like that. You have got quite cynical lately--how is it? We seem to have shifted our positions: I have become the young and hopeful man, and you the old and unbelieving one. However, does a woman keep a promise, not to marry, but to enter on an engagement to marry at some time? Now you know women better than I--tell me."

"I am afeard you honour my understanding too much. However, she may keep such a promise, if it is made with an honest meaning to repair a wrong."

"It has not gone far yet, but I think it will soon--yes, I know it will," he said, in an impulsive whisper. "I have pressed her upon the subject, and she inclines to be kind to me, and to think of me as a husband at a long future time, and that's enough for me. How can I expect more? She has a notion that a woman should not marry within seven years of her husband's disappearance--that her own self shouldn't, I mean--because his body was not found. It may be merely this legal reason which influences her, or it may be a religious one, but she is reluctant to talk on the point. Yet she has promised--implied--that she will ratify an engagement to-night."

"Seven years," murmured Oak.

"No, no--it's no such thing!" he said, with impatience. Five years, nine months, and a few days. Fifteen months nearly have passed since he vanished, and is there anything so wonderful in an engagement of little more than five years?"

"It seems long in a forward view. Don't build too much upon such promises, sir. Remember, you have once be'n deceived. Her meaning may be good; but there--she's young yet."

"Deceived? Never!" said Boldwood, vehemently. "She never promised me at that first time, and hence she did not break her promise! If she promises me, she'll marry me. Bathsheba is a woman to her word."

IV

Troy was sitting in a corner of The White Hart tavern at Casterbridge, smoking and drinking a steaming mixture from a glass. A knock was given at the door, and Pennyways entered.

"Well, have you seen him?" Troy inquired, pointing to a chair.

"Boldwood?"

"No--Lawyer Long."

"He wadn' at home. I went there first, too."

"That's a nuisance."

"'Tis rather, I suppose."

"Yet I don't see that, because a man appears to be drowned and was not, he should be liable for anything. I shan't ask any lawyer--not

I."

"But that's not it, exactly. If a man changes his name and so forth, and takes steps to deceive the world and his own wife, he's a cheat, and that in the eye of the law is ayless a rogue, and that is ayless a lammocken vagabond; and that's a punishable situation."

"Ha-ha! Well done, Pennyways," Troy had laughed, but it was with some anxiety that he said, "Now, what I want to know is this, do you think there's really anything going on between her and Boldwood? Upon my soul, I should never have believed it! How she must detest me! Have you found out whether she has encouraged him?"

"I haen't been able to learn. There's a deal of feeling on his side seemingly, but I don't answer for her. I didn't know a word about any such thing till yesterday, and all I heard then was that she was gwine to the party at his house to-night. This is the first time she has ever gone there, they say. And they say that she've not so much as spoke to him since they were at Greenhill Fair: but what can folk believe o't? However, she's not fond of him--quite offish and quite careless, I know."

"I'm not so sure of that.... She's a handsome woman, Pennyways, is she not? Own that you never saw a finer or more splendid creature in your life. Upon my honour, when I set eyes upon her that day I wondered what I could have been made of to be able to leave her by

herself so long. And then I was hampered with that bothering show, which I'm free of at last, thank the stars." He smoked on awhile, and then added, "How did she look when you passed by yesterday?"

"Oh, she took no great heed of me, ye may well fancy; but she looked well enough, far's I know. Just flashed her haughty eyes upon my poor scram body, and then let them go past me to what was yond, much as if I'd been no more than a leafless tree. She had just got off her mare to look at the last wring-down of cider for the year; she had been riding, and so her colours were up and her breath rather quick, so that her bosom plimmed and fell--plimmed and fell--every time plain to my eye. Ay, and there were the fellers round her wringing down the cheese and bustling about and saying, 'Ware o' the pommy, ma'am: 'twill spoil yer gown.' 'Never mind me,' says she. Then Gabe brought her some of the new cider, and she must needs go drinking it through a strawmote, and not in a nateral way at all. 'Liddy,' says she, 'bring indoors a few gallons, and I'll make some cider-wine.' Sergeant, I was no more to her than a morsel of scroff in the fuel-house!"

"I must go and find her out at once--O yes, I see that--I must go. Oak is head man still, isn't he?"

"Yes, 'a b'lieve. And at Little Weatherbury Farm too. He manages everything."

"'Twill puzzle him to manage her, or any other man of his compass!"

"I don't know about that. She can't do without him, and knowing it well he's pretty independent. And she've a few soft corners to her mind, though I've never been able to get into one, the devil's in't!"

"Ah, baily, she's a notch above you, and you must own it: a higher class of animal--a finer tissue. However, stick to me, and neither this haughty goddess, dashing piece of womanhood, Juno-wife of mine (Juno was a goddess, you know), nor anybody else shall hurt you. But all this wants looking into, I perceive. What with one thing and another, I see that my work is well cut out for me."

V

"How do I look to-night, Liddy?" said Bathsheba, giving a final adjustment to her dress before leaving the glass.

"I never saw you look so well before. Yes--I'll tell you when you looked like it--that night, a year and a half ago, when you came in so wildlike, and scolded us for making remarks about you and Mr. Troy."

"Everybody will think that I am setting myself to captivate Mr.

Boldwood, I suppose," she murmured. "At least they'll say so. Can't my hair be brushed down a little flatter? I dread going--yet I dread the risk of wounding him by staying away."

"Anyhow, ma'am, you can't well be dressed plainer than you are, unless you go in sackcloth at once. 'Tis your excitement is what makes you look so noticeable to-night."

"I don't know what's the matter, I feel wretched at one time, and buoyant at another. I wish I could have continued quite alone as I have been for the last year or so, with no hopes and no fears, and no pleasure and no grief."

"Now just suppose Mr. Boldwood should ask you--only just suppose it--to run away with him, what would you do, ma'am?"

"Liddy--none of that," said Bathsheba, gravely. "Mind, I won't hear joking on any such matter. Do you hear?"

"I beg pardon, ma'am. But knowing what rum things we women be, I just said--however, I won't speak of it again."

"No marrying for me yet for many a year; if ever, 'twill be for reasons very, very different from those you think, or others will believe! Now get my cloak, for it is time to go."

VI

"Oak," said Boldwood, "before you go I want to mention what has been passing in my mind lately--that little arrangement we made about your share in the farm I mean. That share is small, too small, considering how little I attend to business now, and how much time and thought you give to it. Well, since the world is brightening for me, I want to show my sense of it by increasing your proportion in the partnership. I'll make a memorandum of the arrangement which struck me as likely to be convenient, for I haven't time to talk about it now; and then we'll discuss it at our leisure. My intention is ultimately to retire from the management altogether, and until you can take all the expenditure upon your shoulders, I'll be a sleeping partner in the stock. Then, if I marry her--and I hope--I feel I shall, why--"

"Pray don't speak of it, sir," said Oak, hastily. "We don't know what may happen. So many upsets may befall 'ee. There's many a slip, as they say--and I would advise you--I know you'll pardon me this once--not to be TOO SURE."

"I know, I know. But the feeling I have about increasing your share is on account of what I know of you. Oak, I have learnt a little about your secret: your interest in her is more than that of bailiff

for an employer. But you have behaved like a man, and I, as a sort of successful rival--successful partly through your goodness of heart--should like definitely to show my sense of your friendship under what must have been a great pain to you."

"O that's not necessary, thank 'ee," said Oak, hurriedly. "I must get used to such as that; other men have, and so shall I."

Oak then left him. He was uneasy on Boldwood's account, for he saw anew that this constant passion of the farmer made him not the man he once had been.

As Boldwood continued awhile in his room alone--ready and dressed to receive his company--the mood of anxiety about his appearance seemed to pass away, and to be succeeded by a deep solemnity. He looked out of the window, and regarded the dim outline of the trees upon the sky, and the twilight deepening to darkness.

Then he went to a locked closet, and took from a locked drawer therein a small circular case the size of a pillbox, and was about to put it into his pocket. But he lingered to open the cover and take a momentary glance inside. It contained a woman's finger-ring, set all the way round with small diamonds, and from its appearance had evidently been recently purchased. Boldwood's eyes dwelt upon its many sparkles a long time, though that its material aspect concerned him little was plain from his manner and mien, which were those of

a mind following out the presumed thread of that jewel's future history.

The noise of wheels at the front of the house became audible. Boldwood closed the box, stowed it away carefully in his pocket, and went out upon the landing. The old man who was his indoor factotum came at the same moment to the foot of the stairs.

"They be coming, sir--lots of 'em--a-foot and a-driving!"

"I was coming down this moment. Those wheels I heard--is it Mrs. Troy?"

"No, sir--'tis not she yet."

A reserved and sombre expression had returned to Boldwood's face again, but it poorly cloaked his feelings when he pronounced Bathsheba's name; and his feverish anxiety continued to show its existence by a galloping motion of his fingers upon the side of his thigh as he went down the stairs.

VII

"How does this cover me?" said Troy to Pennyways. "Nobody would

recognize me now, I'm sure."

He was buttoning on a heavy grey overcoat of Noachian cut, with cape and high collar, the latter being erect and rigid, like a girdling wall, and nearly reaching to the verge of a travelling cap which was pulled down over his ears.

Pennyways snuffed the candle, and then looked up and deliberately inspected Troy.

"You've made up your mind to go then?" he said.

"Made up my mind? Yes; of course I have."

"Why not write to her? 'Tis a very queer corner that you have got into, sergeant. You see all these things will come to light if you go back, and they won't sound well at all. Faith, if I was you I'd even bide as you be--a single man of the name of Francis. A good wife is good, but the best wife is not so good as no wife at all. Now that's my outspoke mind, and I've been called a long-headed feller here and there."

"All nonsense!" said Troy, angrily. "There she is with plenty of money, and a house and farm, and horses, and comfort, and here am I living from hand to mouth--a needy adventurer. Besides, it is no use talking now; it is too late, and I am glad of it; I've been seen and

recognized here this very afternoon. I should have gone back to her the day after the fair, if it hadn't been for you talking about the law, and rubbish about getting a separation; and I don't put it off any longer. What the deuce put it into my head to run away at all, I can't think! Humbugging sentiment--that's what it was. But what man on earth was to know that his wife would be in such a hurry to get rid of his name!"

"I should have known it. She's bad enough for anything."

"Pennyways, mind who you are talking to."

"Well, sergeant, all I say is this, that if I were you I'd go abroad again where I came from--'tisn't too late to do it now. I wouldn't stir up the business and get a bad name for the sake of living with her--for all that about your play-acting is sure to come out, you know, although you think otherwise. My eyes and limbs, there'll be a racket if you go back just now--in the middle of Boldwood's Christmasing!"

"H'm, yes. I expect I shall not be a very welcome guest if he has her there," said the sergeant, with a slight laugh. "A sort of Alonzo the Brave; and when I go in the guests will sit in silence and fear, and all laughter and pleasure will be hushed, and the lights in the chamber burn blue, and the worms--Ugh, horrible!--Ring for some more brandy, Pennyways, I felt an awful shudder just then! Well,

what is there besides? A stick--I must have a walking-stick."

Pennyways now felt himself to be in something of a difficulty, for should Bathsheba and Troy become reconciled it would be necessary to regain her good opinion if he would secure the patronage of her husband. "I sometimes think she likes you yet, and is a good woman at bottom," he said, as a saving sentence. "But there's no telling to a certainty from a body's outside. Well, you'll do as you like about going, of course, sergeant, and as for me, I'll do as you tell me."

"Now, let me see what the time is," said Troy, after emptying his glass in one draught as he stood. "Half-past six o'clock. I shall not hurry along the road, and shall be there then before nine."