

head was in her arms and she was opening the top of his shirt.



‘What’s the matter?’ asked Oak.

‘Nothing now,’ she replied. ‘But you could have died. You forgot to open a window.’

‘Oh,’ said Oak. He wanted to stay with his head in her arms forever, but she made him sit up.

‘I heard your dog barking<sup>28</sup>,’ she told him. ‘It was trying to open the door of the hut. I came to see what was wrong.’

‘You saved my life, miss,’ said Oak. ‘But – but I don’t know your name. I know your aunt’s name. It’s Mrs Hurst. But I don’t know yours.’

‘You don’t have to know my name,’ she replied. ‘And I don’t like it.’

'You'll soon get a new name, when you marry.'

'Well, Farmer Oak!' she said. 'Do you always speak so – so – plainly?'

'I'm sorry, miss,' said Oak. 'I did not mean to be rude. I'm not clever with words. I'm a plain man and I speak plainly and honestly. But I do thank you. Please, let me shake your hand.'

Oak held the young woman's hand in his own. 'How soft it is,' he said quietly.

'You're thinking, "I would like to kiss her hand",' she said. 'Well, you can if you want to.'

'I wasn't thinking that at all, but —'

'Then you won't!' she said. And she pulled her hand away. 'Now you must find out my name,' she said, laughing. And she went away.

## 2

# *Bathsheba*

Oak learnt that the young woman's name was Bathsheba Everdene. And he realized that he was in love. He thought about her all the time. He thought about her face, her hair, her soft hands. He said her name – 'Bathsheba!' – again and again.

'I must marry her!' he said to himself. 'She must be my wife, or I'll not be good for anything again!'

When Bathsheba no longer visited the cowshed, he went to her aunt's house. He knocked at the door of the farmhouse and Mrs Hurst opened the door.

'Mr Oak!' she said.

'Can I see Miss Everdene?' said Oak. 'I've brought a lamb

for her to care for. Its mother died. Girls sometimes like to take care of a lamb.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Mrs Hurst. 'Bathsheba is only a visitor here. She won't be staying long on my farm. And she's not here at the moment. Do you want to wait for her?'

'Yes, I'll wait,' said Oak and he sat in a chair. 'The lamb isn't the real reason I came here, Mrs Hurst. I want to ask Miss Everdene if she would like to be married. I would be very happy to marry her. Do you know if there are any other young men who want to marry her?'

'Oh, yes!' said Mrs Hurst. 'It's not surprising, because she's so pretty and so clever. The young men never come here, of course. But there are ten or more young men who want to marry her.'

'Oh, then I won't wait,' said Oak. 'I'm only an ordinary man. My best chance<sup>29</sup> was to be the first man to propose<sup>30</sup> to her.'

He was walking back across the fields, when he heard someone give a shout. He turned round and saw Bathsheba running after him.

'Farmer Oak!' she called. She stopped in front of him, breathing fast. 'My aunt made a mistake,' she said. 'There aren't any other young men who have proposed to me.'

'Is this true?' said Oak. 'I'm *very* happy to hear that!'

He held out his hand, but she quickly put her own hand behind her back.

'I have a nice little farmhouse and some good fields,' he went on. 'I haven't paid for the farm yet. But when we're married —'

'Farmer Oak,' Bathsheba said, surprised. 'I never said that I was going to marry you. I only wanted to tell you of my aunt's mistake.'

Oak was disappointed. 'Think about my proposal,' he said

softly. 'I'll wait, Miss Everdene. Please, Bathsheba. I love you more than my life!'

'I'll think about what you have said,' she replied. 'Give me time before I must answer.'

'I can make you happy,' he said. 'In a year or two, I will have earned more money. You can have a piano, and a little carriage which you can drive to the market each week.'

'I should like that,' she said.

'We'll be comfortable and happy in our home. And I'll be there, by the fire, whenever you look up. And whenever *I* look up, there *you* will be ...'

Bathsheba was silent for a few minutes, and he watched her.

Then she said, 'No, I don't want to marry you, Farmer Oak. A wedding in a church would be nice, and people would say nice things about me. But a husband —'

'Yes?' said Oak quickly.

'A husband would always *be there*,' she said. 'If I could have a wedding without having a husband . . . but I can't. So I won't marry anyone, not yet.'

'What a stupid thing to say!' said Oak. 'But my dear, why won't you marry me?'

'Because I don't love you,' she answered.

'But *I* love *you*,' said Oak. 'And I will love you and want you, until I die!'

'No, I'm sorry, Mr Oak,' she said. 'We couldn't be happy as man and wife. I'm too independent<sup>31</sup>. I need a husband who is a stronger character than me. And I live with my aunt and have no money. You need a woman with money. You need a rich wife who can buy more sheep for your farm and help it to grow.'

'But —' began Oak.

'No – no, I can't marry you,' said Bathsheba. Then she laughed. 'I don't love you. I would be stupid if I married you.'

Oak did not like people laughing at him. 'Then I'll not ask you again,' he said quietly.

It is not easy to stop loving someone. And Oak soon found out that this was true.

A few days after Oak's proposal, Bathsheba went to Weatherbury – which was more than twenty miles away. Had she gone to live in the town, or was she only visiting it? Oak did not know. But his love for Bathsheba grew stronger now that she was further away from him. And then something happened that changed his life.

One night, Oak came back to his house and called his two sheepdogs. But only the older dog came home. Oak did not worry about the younger dog.

'He'll come back soon,' he thought. And he went to bed.

Very early the next morning, as the sky began to get light, Oak woke up suddenly. He had heard the sound of sheep's bells<sup>32</sup> ringing. The sheep were running on the hill and the bells around their necks were ringing loudly. Oak knew that something was wrong. He jumped from his bed and put on his clothes quickly. Then he ran out of the house, down the lane, and onto Norcombe Hill.

Oak had two hundred and fifty sheep. Fifty sheep and their young lambs were in one field. Two hundred pregnant sheep were in a second field. Their lambs were going to be born in a week or two. And these sheep had disappeared.

Oak began to call the sheep. Then he saw that the fence was broken. He ran through the hole in the fence and looked up to the top of the hill. His younger dog was standing there. Suddenly, Oak knew the terrible truth. The young dog had become excited and had chased<sup>33</sup> the sheep.

Oak ran to the top of the hill and looked down. Below the other side of the hill, there was a deep chalk pit<sup>34</sup>.

At the bottom of the pit lay his sheep – two hundred of

them. And inside the dead or dying bodies of the sheep, were two hundred unborn lambs.



At first, Oak felt very sorry for the sheep and their lambs. But moments later, he realized that he had lost more than his sheep.

‘I’m ruined<sup>35</sup>!’ he thought. ‘The sheep were not insured<sup>36</sup>, and I have no more money. I cannot buy more sheep.’

The next day, Oak took his gun and shot the young dog.

A bank had given him money so that could buy the sheep. Now he had to sell everything so that he could repay the debt<sup>37</sup>.

‘Thank God that I’m not married to Bathsheba,’ he thought. ‘I’ve lost everything. I have nothing but the clothes that I’m wearing.’

## *The Fire*

Two months later, Gabriel Oak was at the market in the town of Casterbridge. It was now the month of February.

Oak was at the hiring fair. He wanted to work as a farm manager<sup>38</sup>. But he had been unlucky. No one had hired him. During the morning, he saw a regiment<sup>39</sup> of soldiers leaving the town.

‘Should I become a soldier?’ Gabriel thought. ‘The army would pay me each month. It would give me food, clothes and somewhere to live.’

The next day, Gabriel decided to go to another village which was ten miles on the other side of Weatherbury. He would try to find work there. Perhaps someone would hire him as a shepherd. Gabriel bought a shepherd’s crook<sup>40</sup> and then he started walking.

‘Is Bathsheba still living in Weatherbury?’ he thought.

After he had walked three or four miles, Gabriel saw a wagon standing beneath some trees. There was no horse with the wagon, but there was a large pile of hay<sup>41</sup> on the top of it.

‘I’m tired and that hay will make a good, soft bed,’ Gabriel thought. He climbed into the wagon and covered himself with hay. He was asleep after only a few minutes.

When Gabriel woke up again, it was dark and the wagon was moving. He could hear men’s voices.

‘She’s not married and she’s a very handsome woman,’ said one man. ‘But she knows that she’s pretty.’

The other man gave a short laugh. ‘I’m much too shy<sup>42</sup> to look at her,’ he said. ‘Tell me, Billy Smallbury, does she pay her workers well?’

‘I don’t know, Joe Poorgrass.’

‘Are these men talking about Bathsheba?’ thought Gabriel. ‘No. The woman they’re speaking about is the owner of a farm.’

Gabriel looked at the road they were travelling on. He guessed<sup>43</sup> that the wagon was near Weatherbury now. He jumped down onto the road and climbed over a gate into a field. The two men in the wagon did not see him.

Gabriel had to find a place to sleep for the rest of the night. He began walking. After a few minutes, he saw a strange light about half a mile away. Gabriel watched the light growing bigger and brighter. Something was burning!

Gabriel ran towards the fire and saw that a rick of straw<sup>44</sup> was burning. The powerful flames were reaching across to another rick – a rick of wheat. And past this, there were more wheat-ricks. All the wheat from the farm’s fields was kept in these ricks and soon they would be burnt.

Farm workers were running around the farmyard<sup>45</sup>. People were shouting, ‘Fire, fire!’ But nobody seemed to know what to do. Nobody knew how to put out the flames.

‘Quickly! Get a rick-cloth<sup>46</sup>!’ shouted Gabriel. ‘Make it wet and hang it between the straw-rick and the wheat-rick. The cloth might stop the flames reaching across to the other ricks!’

Some of the men did this. They found a rick-cloth and put it into a pond to make it wet. Then they pulled the wet cloth up onto two tall poles between the ricks.

‘Get a ladder!’ shouted Gabriel. ‘And some buckets of water. Hurry!’

‘The ladder that was against the straw-rick was burnt,’ shouted a man.

Gabriel quickly climbed to the top of the wheat-rick. He used his hands and feet to pull himself up. Gabriel began to beat the flames which were on the stalks of wheat with his