

## AFTER ALL

'I cannot tell you.'

'It would be wiser if you were to, I think. You have played the part of mentor to me many times, and I don't see why you should fear to do it now.'

'It is nothing that you have done, this time. The top and tail o't is this—that I am sniffing about here, and waiting for poor Boldwood's fall, with a thought of getting you some day.'

'Getting me! What does that mean?'

'Marrying o' 'ee, in plain British. You asked me to tell, so you mustn't blame me.'

Bathsheba did not look quite so alarmed as if a cannon had been discharged by her ear, which was what Oak had expected. 'Marrying me! I didn't know it was that you meant,' she said, quietly. 'Such a thing as that is too absurd—too soon—to think of, by far!'

'Yes; of course, it is too absurd. I don't desire any such thing; I should think that was plain enough by this time. Surely, surely you be the last person in the world I think of marrying. It is too absurd, as you say.'

'"Too—s-s-soon" were the words I used.'

'I must beg your pardon for correcting you, but you said, "too absurd," and so do I.'

'I beg your pardon too!' she returned, with tears in her eyes. '"Too soon" was what I said. But it doesn't matter a bit—not at all—but I only meant, "too soon." Indeed, I didn't, Mr. Oak, and you must believe me!'

Gabriel looked her long in the face, but the firelight being faint there was not much to be seen. 'Bathsheba,' he said, tenderly and in surprise, and coming closer: 'if I only knew one thing—whether you would allow me to love you and win you, and marry you after all—if I only knew that!'

'But you never will know,' she murmured.

'Why?'

'Because you never ask.'