MOUND BY THE WAY

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CHAPTER I

WHERE the sylvan character of the scene changes; where fields give place to hanging woods and they in their turn thin to poverty and obliquity under eternal stress of western winds, a gate, resting by its own weight against a granite post, indicates the limits of agriculture and forestry upon the southern confines of the Moor. Beneath this standpoint Devon's unnumbered breasts billow to the misty horizon, and dimpling valleys, between the arable lands and higher wealds, are marked by orchards, water meadows and the winding ways of rivers. These, borne aloft, have come from far, and now, with slower current and ampler volume, roam melodiously through pleasant lees, through denes and dingles of sweet flowers, beneath the music of birds and the shadows of great woodlands, to their confluence with the sea. Here, too, lie hamlets and rise crocketed church towers; peat reek sweetens the air; blue doves croon through blue smoke on

many a low thatched cot; and life moves in simplicity and apparent peace. The habitations of men glimmer with white-washed walls at fringes of forests, at wind-blown crossways, about small village greens, on lonely roads, by steep hillsides and among sunny combes. Homesteads rise in isolation along the edges of the great central loneliness; whole villages lie in the lap of the hills; and the manifold planes of this spacious scene, whether under flying cloud-shadows or grey rain, midday sunlight or the splendour of summer moons, commingle in one vision, whose particulars only vary to the play of the dawn and sunset lights, to the hands of the roaming elements, to the seasons that bring in turn awakening life and music, high colour-pageants and dying pomps, ultimate sobrieties and snows.

Beyond the gate to the Moor rises a steep road of broken granite and flint. It climbs upward, straight and dogged, into the world of the heather and, pursued a little, reveals the solemn sweep and dip of the circumambient waste. To the skyline tumbles this billowy ocean, and the ripples upon the crest of each mighty wave are granite. Here rise the tors, adorned at this August season with purple ling to their footstools of stone; here subtend wildernesses between the high hills; and the sheep bells jangle upon them, and the red kine bellow from the watercourses. A rook, his feathers

blown awry, hops thrice, then ascends heavily; but the kestrel, with greater distinction of flight, glides away from his perch upon a stone, ere he swoops aloft with long reaches, to hang motionless in the air, like a brown star afar off. The moorland world extends in vast, undulating mosaic of olive and dun, thinly veiled by the bloom of the ling and splashed with golden furze and grey granite. The expanse is touched to umber and velvet warmth in sunshine; is enriched with the pure, cool purple of cloud-shadows; is brightened into sheer emerald-green, where springs burst from their peat-moss cradles amid seeding cotton-grass; is lightened throughout its sombre heath tones with glistening sheets of polished fern, where the tracts of the bracken stand under direct sunlight. There is warmth of colour in its breezy interspaces—warmth, won from the ruddiness of ripe rush-heads and manifold grasses all bending and swaying in waves under the wind.

At the junction of two roads, that cross at right angles within a hundred yards of the moor-gate, there stands a blackthorn of venerable shape. It is a deformed, grotesque tree, much bent and shrivelled. Its boughs are coated with close fabric of grey encrustations, but such clothing has failed to protect its carcase against a century of winters and biting winds. In autumn the scanty foliage is still bright-

ened by a meagre crop of fruit; but life crawls with difficulty up the zigzag bones of this most ancient thorn, while each spring its tardy sap awakes less of the tree, and leaves increasing concourse of abrupt and withered twigs to rot above and below the centre of vitality. Beneath this ruin you shall note a slight hillock of green grass, where foxgloves shake aloft their purple pyramids of blossom and a rabbit's hole lies close beside them. Of artificial barrow or modern burying-place there is no suggestion here; and yet this mound by the highway side conceals a grave; and the story of the human dust within it is the truth concerning one who lived and smarted more than a hundred years ago. Men were of the same pattern then as now, but manners varied vastly; and the Moor-man, who farms upon the grudging boundaries of that great central desert to-day, and curses the winds that scatter his beggarly newtakes with thistle-down and fern seed, might wonder at the tales this same wild wind could tell him of past times and of the customs of his ancestors.

Human life on the Moor is still hard enough, but modern methods of softening the rough edges of existence were even less considered in the beginning of the century, when American and French prisoners of war sorrowfully sighed at Prince Town. In those days the natives of the Devonshire high-

lands endured much hardship and laughed at the more delicate nurture of the townfolk, as the wandering Tuaregs laugh when their softer fellows exchange tent and desert for the green oases of many palms and sweet waters. Then food was rough on Dartmoor and drink was rougher. Cider colic all men knew as a common ill; most beverages were brewed of native herbs and berries; only upon some occasion of rare rejoicing would a lavish goodwife commission "Johnny Fortnight," the nomad packman, to bring her two or three ounces of genuine Cathay as entertainment for her cronies.

It was rather more than a century ago that one, John Aggett, dwelt within two hundred yards of the thorn-bush already described; and the remains of his cottage, of which the foundation and a broken wall still exist, may yet be seen — a grey ghost, all smothered with nettles, docks and trailing briars. A cultivated patch of land formerly extended around this dwelling, and in that old-world garden grew kale and potatoes, with apple trees, an elder, whose fruit made harsh wine, and sundry herbs, used for seasoning meat or ministering to sickness. No evidence of this cultivation now survives, save only the ruined wall and a patriarchal crab-apple tree — the stock that once supported a choicer scion, long since perished.

Here, a mile or two distant from Postbridge in the vale of Eastern Dart, resided John Aggett and his widowed mother. The cottage was the woman's property; and that no regular rent had to be paid for it she held a lucky circumstance, for John by no means walked in his laborious father's footsteps. Work indeed he could; and he performed prodigious feats of strength when it pleased him; but it was not in the details of his prosaic trade as a thatcher that he put forth his great powers. Business by no means attracted him or filled his life. As a matter of fact the man was extremely lazy and only when sports of the field occupied his attention did he disdain trouble and exertion. He would tramp for many miles to shoot plovers or the great golden-eyed heath poults and bustards that then frequented the Moor; he cared nothing for cold and hunger on moonlight winter nights when wild ducks and geese were to be slain; and trout-fishing in summer-time would brace him to days of heroic toil on remote waters. But thatching or the thought of it proved a sure narcotic to his energies; and it was not until Sarah Belworthy came into his life as a serious factor that the young giant began to take a more serious view of existence and count the ultimate cost of wasted years.

Man and maid had known one another from early youth, and John very well remembered the

first meeting of all, when he was a lanky youngster of eleven, she a little lass of eight. Like the boy, Sarah was an only child, and her parents, migrating from Chagford to Postbridge, within which moorland parish the Aggetts dwelt, secured a cottage midway between the home of the thatcher and the village in the valley below. Soon afterward the children met upon one of the winding sheep tracks that traverse the Moor on every hand. They were upon the same business, and each, moving slowly along, sought for every tress, lock or curl of sheeps' wool that hung here and there in the thorny clutch of furze and bramble.

The boy stopped, for Sarah's great grey eyes and red mouth awoke something in him. He felt angry because the blood flowed to his freckled face; but she was cool as the little spring that rose in their path — cool as the crystal water that bubbled up and set a tiny column of silver sand shivering among the red sundews and bog asphodels at their feet.

"Marnin' to 'e," said John, who already knew the small stranger by sight.

"Marnin', Jan Aggett."

"An' what might your name be, if I may ax?"

"I be called Sarah, but Sally most times; an' I be wool-gatherin' same as you."

"Hast-a got gude store?"

"But little yet."

"I'll shaw 'e all the best plaaces, if you mind to let me."

"Thank 'e, Jan Aggett. My mother's a gert spinner."

"An' my mother's a gert spinner tu."

"Not so gert as mine, I reckon."

"Never was better'n my mother."

"Mine be better, I tell 'e! Her spins black wool an' white together into butivul, braave grey yarn; an' auld Churdles Ash — him what's got the loom to Widecombe, do buy it for money, wi' gladness."

"Ban't much black wool in these paarts; an' my mother knits her worsted into clothes for me. But I'll share what I find with you now."

"I lay I'll find a plenty for myself."

"I lay you will. An' I'll shaw 'e wheer the blackberries be in autumn time, an' wheer the best hurts be got out Laughter Tor way; an' wheer the properest rexens for cannel-making[1] do graw."

"Sure you'm a very kind-fashioned bwoy, Jan Aggett."

"You'd best to call me just 'Jan,' like other folks."

"So I will; an' you'd best to call me 'Sally.'"

"Burned if I doan't then! An' us'll be friends."

[1] *Rexens for cannel-making.* Rushes for candle-making.

From that time forward the lonely children became close companions; and when years passed and Sarah ripened to maidenhood, while John brought forth a straw-coloured moustache and thick beard that matched his sandy locks, the pair of them were already regarded by their own generation as surely bound for marriage in due season.

There came an afternoon when the girl had reached the age of eighteen and John was just arrived at man's estate. They worked together during harvest time, and the thatcher, standing on a stack ladder, watched the girl where she was gleaning and likened her pink sunbonnet to some bright flower nodding over the gold stubbles. Presently she came to him with a bundle of good corn under her arm.

"'Tis long in the straw this year," she said. "You must thresh it for me when you can and hand me the straw for plaiting. I can sell all the hats an' bonnets tu, as I'm like to weave. An' parson do allus give me half a crown each year for a new straw hat."

John came down from his perch and picked up the little sheaf. Then, the day's work done, they dawdled up the hill, and Sarah, hot and weary, after toil in great sunshine, sometimes took John's hand, like a little child, when the road revealed no other person.

Up through the lanes from the farm of Cator Court to the higher land they made their way, crossed over the river nigh Dury and passed beside a wall where scabious drew a sky-blue mantle over the silver and ebony lichens of the granite. Pennyworts also raised their little steeples from the interstices of the old wall; briars broke its lines; red berries and black twinkled among the grasses, and dainty cups and purses of ripe seeds revealed their treasures; flowers not a few also blossomed there, while butterflies gemmed the golden ragwort, and bees struggled at many blossoms. A mellow murmur of life gladdened the evening, and the sun, slow sinking behind distant Bellever, warmed the world with rich horizontal light. At a break in the stones dripped a stream in a little dark nest of ferns. Here, too, stood a stile leading into heavy woods, and one sentinel beech tree arose at the corner of a gamekeeper's path through the preserves. Hither, weary with her labours and desiring a brief rest, Sarah turned, climbed the stile, and sat down beneath the tree. John accompanied her and they reclined in silence awhile where the ripe glory of September sunshine sent a shimmer of ruddy and diaphanous light into the heart of the wood and flamed upon the bole of the great beech. A woodpecker suddenly departed from the foliage

above the silent pair. He made off with a dipping, undulatory motion and cheerful laughter, as who should say, "two is company and three none."

John turned to Sarah and sighed and shook his head while he tickled her hand with a straw from the sheaf. She did not withdraw it, so he came a little nearer and put the straw up her arm; then followed it with two of his own fingers and felt her moist skin under them.

She laughed lazily, and the music fired his heart and sluggish tongue.

"Oh, God, Sally, how long be I to dance upon your beck and call for nought? How long be I to bide this way while you hang back?"

"Us couldn't be gerter friends."

"Ess fay, but us could. Wheer do friendship lead to 'twixt men an' women? Dost hear? I knaw you'm butivul to see, an' purtiest gal in Postbridge an' such like; an' I knaw a man o' my fortune an' poor brain power's got no right — an' yet, though 'tis bowldacious so to do, I ban't built to keep away from 'e. I peek an' pine an' dwindle for 'e, I do."

"'Dwindle,' dear heart! Wheer's the signs of that? You'm stronger an' taller an' better'n any man on East Dart."

"Did 'e say 'better,' Sally? Did 'e mean it? 'Tis a year since I fust axed 'e, serious as a man,

an' a dozen times 'twixt then an' now I've axed again. I swear I thought as I'd seen love light in them misty eyes of thine, else I'd have troubled 'e less often. But — but —"

"Wouldn't I have sent 'e away wi' a flea to your ear when fust you axed, if I'd meant all I said, you silly gawkim?"

Then he put his arm round her and hugged her very close. No artifice restrained the plump natural curves of her waist; her garments were thin and the soft body of her beneath them fired him.

"Give awver! You'm squeezin' me, Jan!"

"Say it then — say it out — or I'll hug 'e, an' hug 'e, an' hug 'e to death for sheer love!"

"You gert thick-headed twoad! Caan't 'e read awnly a woman's words to 'e? Haven't 'e found out these long months? Didn't 'e even guess how 'twas when we went christening Farmer Chave's apple trees down-along by night, an' I slapped your face for comin' to me arter you'd been fooling with that slammocking maypole of a gal, Tom Chubb's darter? You'm blind for all your eyes."

He gave an inarticulate grunt and poured huge noisy kisses on her hair and face and little ears.

"Christ A'mighty! Sweatin' for joy I be! To think it — to think you finds the likes o' me gude enough for 'e! Theer — theer. Hallelujah!"

He shouted and danced with the grace of a brown

bear, while she smoothed herself from his salutations and sat up panting after such rough embrace. Then he took out his knife and sought the beech tree behind them. Sunset fires were dying away. Only a starry twinkling of auburn light still caught the high tops of the tallest trees and marked them out against the prevailing shadows of the woods.

"'Tis a deed should be cut on the first bark as meets your eyes arter the woman's said 'yes' to 'e," declared John.

Then, turning to the trunk where lichens painted pale silver patterns on the grey, he set to work, at the height of a man's heart, and roughly fashioned the letters "S. B." and "J. A." with a scroll around them and a knot beneath to indicate the nature of true love.

"Theer let it bide, sweetheart, for our childer's childer to see when we'm sleepin' down-along."

"Go away with 'e, Jan!"

Presently they moved onward to their homes.

"Braave news for my mother," said the girl.

"Braaver news for mine," declared John.

The sun had set and the twilight was in Sarah's grey eyes as she lifted them to him. Together they passed upward, very slowly, with her head against his shoulder and his arm round her.

"'Tis a pleasant thing seemin'ly to have a huge gert man to love 'e."

"Ess fay, my bird! You'll live to knaw it, please God."

From their lofty standpoint spread a wide scene of waning light on a fading world; and above the eastern horizon, through the last roses of the after-glow, imperceptibly stole a round shield of pale pearl. Aloft the sleeping wind-clouds lost their light and turned slate-grey as the misty phantom of the moon gathered brightness, and the western nimbus of sunset faded away.

Then John took his lips from his love's and gave her the sheaf of gleaned corn and left her at her father's door, while he tramped on up the hill.

His mother trembled before the long-anticipated truth and knew the first place in his heart was gone at last.

"As purty as a pictur in truth," she said, "but something too taffety[1] for the wife of a day labourer."

"Not so," answered the man. "She'm an angel out o' heaven, an' she'll come to be the awnly wife worth namin' on Dartymoor. For that matter she ban't feared of a day's work herself, an' have awftentimes earned a fourpenny piece 'pon the land."

[1] *Taffety.* Delicate, dainty.

CHAPTER II

THROUGHOUT the week Samson Belworthy, the father of Sarah, swung a sledge and followed a blacksmith's calling at Postbridge; upon the day of rest his labours were of a more delicate sort, for he played the bass viol and pulled as good a bow as any musician around about the Moor. This man accepted John as a suitor to his daughter with certain reservations. He had no mind to dismiss Sally into poverty, and bargained for delay until Aggett had saved money, obtained regular occupation, instead of his present casual trade, and arrived at a worldly position in which he could command a cottage and thus offer his wife a home worthy of her.

From desultory application to the business of his dead father — a sort of work in which he had never much distinguished himself — John now turned his face upon the problems of life in earnest, and sought employment under a responsible master. His ambition was to win a place as gamekeeper or assistant keeper on the estates of the manor lord; but he lacked the necessary qualifications in the opinion of those who knew him; being in-

deed strong enough, courageous enough, and familiar enough with the duties of such a calling, but having an uncertain temper, by nature fiery as his own freckled skin in summer-time. Finally, his physical strength obtained for him daily work and weekly wage at Farmer Chave's. Into the establishment of Bellever Barton he entered, and, as cowman, began a new chapter of his life.

All proceeded prosperously during the autumnal progress of his romance. John gave every satisfaction, was said to have forgotten his way to the sign of the "Green Man" at Postbridge, and certainly developed unsuspected capabilities in the direction of patience and self-control. He toiled amain, attracted his master's regard and won the red-hot friendship of his master's son.

This youth, by name Timothy, returning from his apprenticeship to a brewer at Plymouth after futile endeavours to master that profitable business, decided to follow in his father's footsteps, much to the elder's disappointment. Timothy Chave elected to be a farmer, however, and coming home a fortnight before Christmas, he devoted his days and nights to the pleasure of sport as a preliminary to the tremendous application he promised when the new year should come. He was two years younger than John Aggett and a youth of higher intelligence and finer clay; but he

found in John an ideal follower by flood and field. There came a day, one week before the Christmas festival, when for particular reasons Tim desired a heavy bag. John was therefore begged off his farm duties, and the young men, rising by starlight, trod the high land and pressed forward before dawn toward Aggett's familiar haunts.

Young Chave, a lad of good repute and handsome exterior, had learned his lessons at Blundell's School, was accounted a very clever youth, and held in much esteem as a traveller and a scholar amidst the natives of Postbridge. His mother spoiled him and fooled him to the top of his bent; his father had been proud of him until the lad's recent determination to soar no higher than the life of a countryman.

This present excursion bore reference to a special event, as has been said. There were coming from North Devon to Bellever Barton, for the holiday season, sundry poor cousins of the Chaves. On Christmas Eve they would arrive, and, as a certain pretty damsel of seventeen was to accompany her elders, Timothy's generous heart determined that moorland delicacies must await her, if his right arm, long fowling-piece and liver-coloured spaniel could secure them. With this excuse he had won John Aggett away from the cow-byres, and together, as day broke, they passed southward

to Dartmeet, held on by Combestone Tor and presently tramped into the lonely and desolate fastnesses of Holne Moor. Here, with cautious passage across half-frozen swamps, the sportsmen sought their game.

To the progress of that day no part of this narrative need be devoted; suffice it that we meet the men again coming homeward under an early, universal twilight and a cold northern wind. In certain marshes, rumoured to send forth warm springs even at dead of frosty nights, John Aggett had found good sport, and now from the servant's waist-girdle a big bag bulged with two brace of teal, three snipe, two woodcock and a hare. Through the grey promise of coming snow they pushed homeward where the wind wailed a sad harmony in the dead heath, and all the ground was very hard save upon the black bogs that froze not. John was clad as the Kurds and Mountain Syrians to this day; he wore a sheep's pelt with the hair toward his body, the skin turned out. Arms of like material fitted into this snug vest, and his breeches were similarly fashioned. Timothy, as he faced the north wind booming over a heather ridge, envied Aggett, for his own garments, albeit stout enough, lacked the warmth of the natural skin.

"Colder and colder," he said, "and the last drop of sloe gin drunk and five good miles before us yet."

"'Tis so; but theer's Gammer Gurney's cot down along in a lew place under Yar Tor. If you mind to turn out of the way a bit, 'tis certain she'll have gude, heartening liquors hid away, though how she comes by the fiery stuff, an' the tobacco her sells in secret, an' the frill-de-dills o' precious silks an' foreign lace-work ban't my business to knaw."

"Good! We'll pay Gammer a visit. My father gets many a gill of brandy from the old rascal."

"In league wi' the Dowl, I doubt."

"More likely with the smugglers. Plenty of cargoes are run down Teignmouth way, and when they've dodged the gaugers and made a good haul, the farther they take their wares inland the better. She pays them well, be sure."

"She do awften talk 'bout a sailor son, come to think on't."

"Ay, many and many a sailor son, I warrant you! My father says her cognac is drink for the gods; yet if they are pleased to make him a Justice of the Peace, then he will adopt different measures with Mother Gurney, for a man's conscience must be set above his stomach."

"Her be a baggarin' auld sarpent for sartain, an' goeth through the air on a birch broom or awver the sea in a eggshell, an' many such-like devilries. In times past I judge the likes o' she would burn

for such dark wickednesses; though her did me a gude turn once, I'll allow."

While speaking, they had rounded the ragged side of Yar Tor, and then proceeding, passed to the north by some ancient hut circles of the old stone men. Following a wall, where the hill sloped, they found themselves confronted with the bird's-eye view of a lonely, thatched cottage. Below it the land sank with abruptness; before the entrance extended a square patch of garden. No sign of life marked the spot; but as the men climbed down a pathway through withered fern, they aroused a bob-tailed, blue-eyed sheep-dog which leapt, gaunt and apelike, to the limit of its tether and barked wildly at the intruders. A naked austerity, a transparent innocence and poverty, marked the spot to casual eyes.

"Down these winding ways, or else out of the woods below, come Mother Gurney's 'sailor sons' with their packs and barrels hid under innocent peat and rushes, no doubt," commented Timothy.

Then John Aggett knocked at the door with a modest tap and young Chave noted that he spat over his left shoulder before doing so.

"'Tis plaguey hard to be upsides wi' a witch, I do assure 'e; but she'm a wonnerful clever woman, as all in these paarts do very well knaw," confessed John.

CHAPTER III

Gammer Gurney dwelt quite alone and none had seen the alleged mariner her son, for the occasions of his visits were hidden in nocturnal mystery. Upon one point at least no doubt existed: the dame could vend choicest cognac to a favoured few at a shilling a pint; and those whom it concerned also knew that no such tobacco as that she sold, whether for smoking or chewing, might be otherwise procured nearer than Exeter. There was a whisper, too, of French silks and laces, concerning which the wives of the quality could have told a tale; and gossips of that district were prepared to swear upon the Book how more than once in moments of high excitement Gammer Gurney had uttered words and whole sentences of words in a heathen tongue. Yet, despite her powers and accomplishments, she always went her humble rounds with an old donkey in an older cart. Ostensibly she purchased rags and bones and other waste from farm kitchens; and those who knew not her peculiarities and pitied her lean apparition in its iron pattens, old sunbonnet and "dandy-go-risset" gown, would give her cast-off garments and orts from the table to keep life in her. Others,