

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-gorisset" gown, would give her cast-off garments and orts from the table to keep life in her. Others,

better informed, well understood what was hidden in the donkey cart, and Gammer came as an honoured if a secret guest to many a great house on the countryside. Indeed half a hundred sea-dogs were her sons, and the smugglers thought a ten-mile tramp over Dartmoor no hardship when the Gammer's great discretion and the liberality of her prices for matters contraband came to be considered. In addition to these dark practices Mother Gurney was reputed a witch in her own right, but a witch of the better sort — a white wonder-worker, whose marvellous knowledge enabled her to combat the black necromancers that haunted Devon in those days to the detriment of honest folk. Their power of the evil eye; their unpleasant habit of overlooking innocent men and women, was quelled and crushed by Gammer's stronger if less sinister charms. To gain private ends, she fostered this vulgar opinion concerning her accomplishments; was much rapt in secret studies and claimed wide skill in medicaments and cures by drug and amulet for beast and man. Recoveries, indeed, were laid at her door with frank thankfulness; though whether the moorland herbs and rare simples, ostentatiously plucked at times of old moons and eclipses, were to be thanked so much as that ingredient of strong French brandy which entered into her prescriptions, may be left a matter of conjecture.

Upon the door of Gammer Gurney's mysterious home John Aggett knocked, then a little nut-brown woman opened to him, nodded without affectation of superior parts, and even curtsied in old-fashioned style at sight of Timothy.

"Your sarvant, young maister," she said. "Be pleased to step in, an' you'm welcome, I'm sure, though 'tis the home of poverty. Rest free, if that's your errand — rest; an' theer's a gude cushioned chair to hold 'e tu, though you mightn't count to find such here."

The white witch had no peculiarities. She merely suggested a venerable and time-worn body whose life had not lacked tribulations and whose tether must be near at hand. But her dark eyes were very bright and her activity of body was still apparent.

Timothy lolled in the great "grandfather" chair and a red peat glow flamed on his leather gaiters from the fire; John sat near the door with a wandering and uneasy eye, ready to discover mystery and read secrets at every turn. He knew that to ask openly for the cordial he desired had been to make a hole in his manners. He therefore waited for his master to speak.

Gammer Gurney mended the fire and chattered briskly.

"Theer'll be little more huntin' 'pon the high

Moor 'fore the snaw come. An' 'tis near now. It be given me to know 'bout what fashion weather us may look for by the birds an' berries, by the autumn colour of leaves, by tokens hid in still waters an' the callin' of the cleeves."

"The reds was in the sky this marnin'," said John, "a savage, sulky sunrise, I warn 'e."

"I seed un; an' a terrible braave sight of snaw unshed in the elements; an' the airth ripe for it. Gert snaw an' ice be comin', wi' sorrowful deep drifts an' death to man an' beast, an' awfullest floods to follow arter. I've knawn this many days an' laid in store against it."

Timothy now saw his opportunity.

"And I'm going to add to that store if you'll let me. There's a fine hare in the bag."

"A hare, did 'e say? They'm dark, fanciful beasts, an' if I was anything but a honest woman, I'd not touch no such thing. But I know what I know. Wheer did 'e find un?"

"I shot un," said John, dragging the animal forth. "Her was sittin' aquott under a tussock nigh Horn's Cross on Holne Moor."

"Then 'tis a pure, natural beast wi' no dark tricks to un, if 'twas theer. A witch hare wouldn't go in them plaaces. A right hare — sure enough, an' heavy tu. Thank 'e kindly; an' if you comes round arter Christmas I'll cure the skin for 'e, Jan

Aggett. 'Twill make a proper cap against the hard weather."

John scraped and offered respectful thanks; then refreshments became the subject of Timothy Chave's speech.

"You haven't a cup of milk by you, mother? I'm thirsty as a fish."

"Milk — ess fay; but none for you. Ban't drink for grawed men, if you ax me. But I've — well, no call to name it. Yet 'tis a wholesome sort o' tippie took in reason an' took hot. You bide here. I'll be back direckly minute."

She disappeared through a low door at the side of the kitchen and locked it behind her. In five minutes she returned with the promised refreshment and poured it from a square earthenware crock into two large cups. These she half filled with brandy, then added hot water from a kettle, and finally dropped a lump of yellow candy into each, with mingled spices from a shining black box.

"'Twill do 'e a power o' gude an' keep away evil an' make heroes of 'e," declared the woman. Then she watched the drinking men, with pleasure in her bright eyes, and shewed that she appreciated their grunts and gurgles of satisfaction.

"Better'n milk?" she said.

"A godlike brew!" declared Timothy; and John, who had waited to see his master drink first

before venturing upon the witch's gift, now gave Gammer Gurney the compliments of the blessed season with all respect, then drained the last drop of his refreshment and scraped out the remaining spice and sugar with his fingers.

"Sure I feels like a mighty man o' Scripture compared to what I was a bit ago," he declared, as the spirit moved him.

"You'd make your fortune if you set up a sign in a city and sold that stuff to all buyers," prophesied Timothy.

"I wants no fortune, Maister Chave. I be here, an auld sawl well thought 'pon an' wi'in call o' friends. I tell no tales an' breed no troubles, an' what goes in my ear doan't come out at my mouth wi' a new shape to it, I assure 'e. No tale-bearer me. Tongue an' ear strangers — that's the wise way."

"You'm wise enough, ma'am; everybody knows that."

"Not that I set up for anything above my neighbours, though I may have done 'em a gude service here an' theer."

"A many of 'em — Lard, He knows how many," declared John, eagerly. "Taake my awn case. Didn't 'e tell me how to win my maid for a silver sixpence, an' didn't I do as you bid an' worrit her marnin', noon an' night till she said the word?"

An' didn't Digory Crampiron, the shepherd, come to 'e 'pon the same cause an' ax what fashion woman 'twas as he'd best pay court to? An' didn't you say her'd be a dark maid? An' sure enough dark her was; an' a gude wife an' mother these many days now."

"That's the thing I'd like to hear!" cried Timothy. "Read me riddles, Gammer. Tell me my fate in marriage, and when the girl is coming, and what she'll be like. Tell me, and I'll give thee a golden guinea!"

Now it fell out, strangely enough, that the white witch knew certain facts hidden from her questioner — facts that none the less concerned him in some measure. She had that forenoon visited Bellever Barton to find the household of the farm in some confusion. The Christmas guests had arrived three days earlier than they were expected; that circumstance being explained by an opportunity to travel cheaply to Moretonhampstead on a stage-coach, some of whose passengers had failed it. From Moreton to Postbridge was no great matter, and the male travellers had ridden that distance, bringing their luggage on a packhorse and their ladies upon pillions behind them. In the bustle and confusion caused by this premature advent, Gammer Gurney was kept waiting in the buttery — treatment very rarely extended to her

dignity. But this delay had not been wasted. A garrulous housekeeper explained circumstances to the old woman and added that one of the newcomers, a girl of a fair face, reserved manners and great good sense, had won Farmer Chave's heart, and was by him secretly destined for Timothy without that young man's knowledge. This maiden the Gammer had seen and spoken with before she departed homeward; but as for Tim, he knew nothing of the business. Thus it may be guessed what excellent matter for a prophecy was now at the hand of the white witch. Indeed, she had oftentimes done miracles in the public esteem with less promising material. Nevertheless, this circumspect woman shewed no eagerness to take young Chave at his word.

"Best to think twice 'fore you ax me that," she answered. "'Tis a serious deed, boy, and not to be undertaken in a light spirit. Mind this tu: the truth ban't always sweet or what our ears are best tuned for hearin'."

Her respectful manner vanished upon the introduction of this theme. She now spoke as the young man's superior. Timothy was not frightened from his purpose, however, and screwed his face into solemnity. Then he winked behind Gammer Gurney's back at John Aggett, who, knowing well how witches have eyes behind and before, doubted not

that the action had been observed and was much discomfited in consequence.

"Here's your guinea, mother; that'll shew you I'm in solemn earnest upon this matter."

The wise woman instantly swept up the coin.

"If you will, you will," she said.

As a preliminary to the fortune reading, two rush candles were lighted and the table cleared. Then upon it the sibyl drew a half circle with black charcoal and spread ancient cards round the circumference. Next she set up in the midst a lump of shining quartz, of the sort known as Cornish crystal, and into a natural cup within this stone she poured the black contents of a small, strangely shaped bottle. Now, bidding them be silent and motionless, with impenetrable gravity she went upon her knees beside the table and so remained for a long five minutes. Sometimes she gabbled to herself, sometimes she set her hands upon a conjunction of the outspread cards; but her eyes, as it appeared, never closed for a moment and never for a moment wandered from the little black lake in the quartz discerning-glass.

John, deeply impressed, sat with his mouth open; and even the scholar felt his scepticism waning a trifle.

Presently Gammer Gurney began to talk, and after much moonshine and a whole rigmarole of

promises, predictions and cautions, the witch broke off and scanned the crystal with increased intensity.

"Terrible coorious!" she murmured in an audible aside. "No such thing as this ever happened afore, I should judge. What's the day of the month?"

"Eighteen of December," said John.

"Exacally so! An' if — theer! Of all strange fallings-out!"

She gazed blankly at her guest until Timothy, despite his education at Blundell's, grew a little uncomfortable.

"Well, well, what's amiss, mother? Out with it for good or ill. What pitfall is waiting for me — an early marriage?"

"A maiden be waitin' for 'e, Timothy Chave; an' this very day — a grey-eyed young girl wi' bright hair an' cherry lips — this day — by picture an' by crystal! She'm nearer than the coming snow — she'm at your elbow, man! Ess fay, first young woman as you see an' speak with come the owl-light — her an' none other will be your lifelong mate!"

"Merciful to me! 'Tis 'most owl-light now!" gasped John Aggett.

"By St. George, and the dragon too, I'm near my fate then! Up and off, John! I'll see my bride before nightfall. Come on."

The woman huddled up her cards, cleaned the

table and poured the black liquid into the fire. Timothy was eager to be gone, and now took an abrupt leave of his soothsayer; while as for Gammer Gurney, she stood like one in a dream and regarded Tim with vacant eyes. It was her custom thus to appear elevated in the spirit after exercise of her remarkable gifts. So they left her at her cottage door and started for home at a good pace. The fresh air contributed much to blow superstition out of Timothy's mind; but his companion continued taciturn and was evidently impressed by what he had seen and heard.

"She gave I goose-flesh down the spine, for all her outlandish fiery drink," he said.

"You're a fool, John; an' I'm a greater. A good guinea wasted."

Nearing home, they turned off the Moor, passed the cottage of Aggett's mother, and proceeded along the hill. Then it was that John, desiring to shift the game-bag from his girdle to his shoulder, hung back some forty paces. His fingers were cold and the buckle was stiff; his master therefore gained upon him and, passing the corner of a plantation, went out of sight. Mending his pace to overtake the other, John heard hidden voices, the hour then being dusk; and, a moment later, coming round the corner of the woodlands, he saw Timothy Chave in conversation with a woman. She was clad in

scarlet flannel even to the snug hood round her ears, and her figure shone brightly through the gloaming.

He heard words half laughing, half annoyed, in the girl's uplifted voice.

"Who be glazin' at then? Make way, caan't 'e? Do 'e think I be a ghost out the wood?"

"Not a bit of it! A good fairy, more likely. And forgive me; I wanted so much to hear you speak."

"You'm a very impident chap then, for all your gert gashly gun awver your shoulder!"

The woman passed Timothy light footed, then, turning quickly down a lane, she disappeared, just as John joined his master. The young man was in an extremity of excitement.

"Good God! Did you see her — that red girl? An' after what the hag said! Her eyes, man! Eyes like stars in the dark and a voice like the wood doves! I came straight upon her peeping out of her red hood, like the queen of pixies! Who is she, John? Who's her father? And where has she vanished to? Speak if you know. 'Tis a marvellous miracle of a thing that I should meet her in this way. I could swear I was dreaming; yet I'm as much awake as she was alive. Who in the name of wonder is she? Speak if you know."

"She'm a maiden by the name of Sarah Belworthy, darter o' Smith Belworthy; an' she'm tokened to me," said Aggett, stolidly.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN'S announcement awoke a laugh in the younger man, and Timothy dismissed the subject with a sort of lame apology; but the other remained dumb after his assertion, and few more words passed between them. Aggett, however, burnt within, for the recent incident had caused him infinite uneasiness and alarm. To allay these emotions he hastened to the home of Sarah as soon as his duties at the farm were ended, and there, before her parents, rated her in round terms for speaking to a strange man under the darkness. The girl's mother heard of what had happened with secret interest; Sarah herself laughed, then cried, and finally made her peace with many promises that no light action in this sort should ever again be brought against her. Of the white witch and the prediction John did not speak; and though he returned to his loft above the cows a comforted man, yet, in the hours of night, fear and foreboding gripped his heart again and frank terror at the shadow of an awful catastrophe made him toss and sweat in the darkness. Twice he rose and prayed childish prayers that his mother had taught him. They were noth-