

To Timothy's relief John did not delay for an answer to his exhortation, but proceeded upon his way. So they parted, by curious chance, at that spot where to-day there rise the mound and aged thorn. The Moor was of a uniform and sullen iron colour under a sky of like hue but paler shade. The north wind still blew, but the clouds were lower, denser and heavy with snow. Even as Aggett went down the hill and his rival proceeded upward, there came fluttering out of the grey the first scattered flakes of a long-delayed downfall. They floated singly, wide-scattered on the wind; others followed; here a monstrous fragment, undulating like a feather, capsized in the invisible currents of the air. Then the swarm thickened and hurried horizontally in puffs and handfuls. The clean black edges of the distant Moor were now swept and softened with a mist of falling snow; aloft, thicker and faster, came the flakes, huddling and leaping out of nothingness and appearing as dark grey specks against the lighter sky. Presently indication of change marked the world, and a glimmer of virgin white under on-coming gloom outlined sheep tracks and made ghostly the grey boulders of the Moor. By nightfall the great snow had fairly begun, and blinding blizzards were screaming over the Moor on the wings of a gale of wind.

## CHAPTER V

BEFORE the snows melted and the first month of the new year had passed by, John Aggett and his master's son were friends no more.

Of Timothy it may be recorded that he fought fiercely, then with waning strength, and finally succumbed and lost his battle. By slow degrees his intimacy with Sarah grew. Neither sought the other; but love dragged them together. The man hid it from his small world, or fancied that he did so; the girl blushed in secret and knew that what she had mistaken for love was mere attachment — an emotion as far removed from her affection for Timothy as the bloodless moonbeams from the flush of a rosy sunrise. A time came, and that quickly, when she could deceive herself no longer, and she knew that her life hung on her lover, while the other man was no more than a sad cloud upon the horizon of the future.

Frosts temporarily retarded the thaw, and Timothy and Sarah walked together at evening time in a great pine wood. A footpath, ribbed and fretted with snakelike roots, extended here, and moving along it they sighed, while the breath of the great



trees bore their suspirations aloft into the scented silence. One band of orange light hung across the west and the evening star twinkled diamond-bright upon it, while perpendicularly against the splendour sprang the lines of pine trunks, dimmed aloft with network of broken and naked boughs, merging above into a sombre crown of accumulated foliage. Cushions of dead needles were crisp under foot and the whisper of growing ice tinkled on the ear.

"'Tis vain to lie — at least to you an' to myself. I love 'e, Tim; I love 'e wi' all my poor heart — all — all of it."

Her breath left her red lips in a little cloud and she hung her head hopelessly down.

"God can tell why such cruel things happen, dearest. Yet you loved him too — poor chap."

"Never. 'Tis the difference 'tween thinkin' an' knowin' — a difference wide as the Moor. I never knowed love; I never knowed as theer was such a — but this be wicked talk. You've wonned the solemn truth out o' me; an' that must content 'e. I never could ax un to give me up — him so gude an' workin' that terrible hard to make a home for me."

"What will the home be when you've got it? Some might think it was better that one should suffer instead of two."

"I couldn't leave him, out of pity."

"You must think of yourself, too, Sarah — if not of me. I hate saying so, but when your life's salvation hangs on it, who can be dumb? John Aggett's a big-hearted, honest man; yet he hasn't our deep feelings; it isn't in him to tear his heart to tatters over one woman as I should."

"Us can't say what deeps a man may have got hid in him."

"Yes, but we can — in a great measure. John's not subtle. He's made of hard stuff and sensible stuff. I'll fathom him at any rate. It must be done. He shall know. God forgive me — and yet I don't blame myself very much. I was not free — never since you came into my life and filled it up to the brim. He saw the danger. I confess that. He warned me, an' I bade him fear nothing. I was strong in my own conceit. Then this happened. The thing is meant to be; I know it at the bottom of my being. It was planned at creation and we cannot alter it if we would."

"'Tis well to say that; but I reckon poor Jan thought the same?"

"I'll see him; I'll speak with him man to man. He must give you up. Oh, if I could change places with him and find myself a labourer just toiling to make a home for you, I'd thank the Lord on my knees!"

"I wish I'd never seen either of 'e, for I've awnly



made the both of 'e wretched men. Better I'd never drawed breath than bring this gert load of sorrow upon you an' him."

"You can't help it; you're innocent, and the punishment must not fall upon your shoulders. You love me better than Aggett; and that he must know in justice to himself — and us."

"Then his life be ruined an' his cup bitter for all time."

"I don't think so, Sarah. You misjudge him. And even if this must be so, it is only Fate. I will speak to him to-night."

"Leave it a little while. I'm fearful to trembling when I think of it. 'Tis I must tell him, not you. 'Tis I must tell him I'm not faithful an' beg for forgiveness from him. An' if he struck me down an' hurted me — if he killed me — I'd say 'twas awnly fair punishment."

"He never would lift a finger, even in his rage."

"Jan? Never — never. A fiery soul, but so soft-hearted as a li'l cheel. Ess fay, 'tis from me he should hear it, if he must."

"It would be better that I should do this."

Before they reached the stile, that stood under the great beech tree, each loving coward had prayed the other to leave the task alone; and finally both promised to do nothing for a short space. Then into the light they came, and Sarah, glancing upward, saw

dim letters and a lovers' knot like sad eyes staring from the tree trunk.

As a matter of fact, there existed no great need to impress the situation upon John Aggett. The man, if slow-witted, was not blind, and, indeed, agile enough of intellect where Sarah was concerned. For many days he had hesitated to read the change in her. His visits to her had been marked by gloomy fits of taciturnity, by short speeches, abrupt leave-takings, by distrust in his eyes, by rough mumbled sentences she could not catch, by outbursts of affection, by sudden hugs to his heart, by searching, silent scrutiny of her features and numberless reiterations of one question. He never wearied to hear her declare that she loved him; his only peace of mind was in the moments of that assurance daily repeated; and he approached to absolute subtlety in appraisal of Sarah's voice and vocal inflection as she made answer. Until the present, her affirmation of love had rung truly upon his ear; now he felt a shadow behind the words and steeled himself to the change. Her lips said one thing; her voice and eyes another. He grew slowly to believe the signs and to realise that she loved him no more, or if a little, so little that she did not mind lying to him.

Over this earthquake in his life he brooded bitterly enough, yet the stroke of it, upon first falling, was in some measure broken by his knowledge of



Timothy's interview with Gammer Gurney. A fatalistic resignation arose from this recollection and manifested itself, for the brief space of a week, in John's attitude to his fate. But as the nature of all he had lost and how he had lost it beat upon his brain, a great agony of reality soon caused him to brush the white witch and her predictions out of the argument; they were factors too trivial to determine the careers of men and women; and thus, from beneath the smoke of his brief apathy appeared a consuming fire, and the man's passionate nature cried for a speedy and definite end to his torments.

Work upon the land was suspended under frost; but from the great barn in Bellever Barton came daily a hurtling of flails where threshing of barley kept the hands busy for many hours in each brief day. The flails gleamed like shooting stars across the dusty atmosphere of the barn, and when the sunlight entered, a sort of delicate golden cloud hung in the air, only to sink slowly away upon cessation of labour. Timothy Chave, too, laboured here. For something to occupy him he swung a flail with the rest, and made the old hands think better of themselves and their skill within sight of his clumsy efforts. Then it happened that Aggett, awake to an opportunity, suddenly desisted from work, pulled on his coat and accosted his rival. But he spoke for Tim's ear alone and challenged no general attention.

"Set down your drashel an' come an' speak wi' me a minute t'other side the yard."

"Certainly, John, if you wish it."

A moment later the meeting that Sarah had dreaded came about; but the results of it were of a sort not to have been anticipated. Aggett went straight to the point of attack and his temper suffered from the outset before the more cultured man's attitude and command of words.

"You know full well what I've got to say before I sez it, I judge. I see in your face you know, Timothy Chave."

"Yes, I do. It's about Sarah. Things that must happen, must happen. I'm glad you've broached this subject, Aggett. Well, it stands thus; we are not our own masters always, unfortunately."

"You can say that an' look me in the face calm as a stone, arter what passed between us six weeks ago?"

"Six weeks — is that all?"

"Ess fay, though more like six years to me — six years o' raging, roasting hell. Why do 'e bide here? Why do 'e take walks along wi' she — skulking in the woods away from honest eyes like a fox? You've lied to me —"

"Don't speak quite so loud, John. I cannot help the past. It was not my doing. I never sought out Sarah. We are all tools in the hand of Fate or Providence, or whatever you like to call it; we are puppets



and must dance to the tune God is pleased to play. We're not free, any of us — not free to make promises or give undertakings. Doesn't this prove that we're slaves to a man? I love Sarah Belworthy with all my heart and soul. That is not a sin. There is nothing in the world for me but her. I'm frank enough to you now; and if I lied before, it was because I thought I could control what was to come. I tried to keep my word. I turned from her path many times. I begged to be allowed to go away from the Moor, but my father would not suffer me to change my mind again. I swear I did my best; but loving is another matter. I might as easily have promised not to breathe as not to love her."

"Words! An' her — an' me —?"

"It's cursedly hard. God knows I don't find it easy to answer you. But think: picture yourself in her place. Imagine that you found a woman you loved better than Sarah."

"'Tis allus lifting of the burden on to other folks' shoulders wi' you. I ban't agwaine to imagine vain things at your bidding. Dost hear me? I want the plain truth in plain speech. But that's more'n you could give me, I reckon. The question I've got to ax, my girl's got to answer. An' I call her 'my girl,' yet, until I hear from her awn lips she ban't my girl no more. Then — then — Christ knows what —"

"If there's any sort of satisfaction on earth, I'd

give it to you. I know better than you can tell me that I'm a weak man. And I've hated myself for many days when I thought of you; but there it is — a fact beyond any mending."

"Get out of her life, if you're honest, an' doan't whine to me 'bout things being beyond mendin'! Go! Turn your back on her an' let the dazzle of 'e fade out of her eyes an' out of her mind. You know so well as me, that it ban't beyond mendin'. She promised to marry me 'fore ever she seed the shadow of you; an' you knawed it from the fust moment you set eyes on her; an' yet you went on an' sinked from manhood into this. You'm a whole cowardice o' curs in the skin o' one man, damn you!"

"You do right to curse. You will never feel greater contempt for me than I do for myself. I cannot go away. It is impossible — wholly above my strength. And the position is beyond mending, despite what you say — both for Sarah and for me. It is no crime in her to love me; the fault is mine, and if I had sworn on my hope of salvation to you, I should have broken my oath as I did my promise. Measure my punishment — that is all you can do; and I won't flinch from it."

"She loves you — better'n what she do me? It's come to that; an' you ax me to measure your punishment! You pitiful wretch! You know you'm safe enough now. She loves you better'n me. Theer's



your safety. 'Struth! I could smash your bones like rotten wood, an' you know it; but she loves you better'n me; an' who be I to crack her painted china wi' my rough cloam? I doan't love her no less — anyways not so little as to bruise you, an' that you knowed afore you spoke. Get out o' my sight an' may worse fall on you than ever I would bring. May the thing you've done breed an' bite an' sap the heart out of 'e like a canker worm; may it bring thorns to your roses, an' death to your hopes, an' storms to your skies; may it fill your cup wi' gall an' bend your back afore your time an' sting you on your death-bed. May it do all that, an' more, so as you'll mind this hour an' know if I'd scatted your lying brains abroad an' killed 'e, 'twould have been kinder than to let you live!"

"I have deserved your hardest words; but forgive her — now that you yield her up; forgive her if ever you loved her, for the fault was none of hers."

"You can think for her, can 'e? You can stand between me an' her to shield her against the man as would have faced fire an' water an' all hell's delights for her ever since she was a li'l dinky maid! You ax me to forgive her — you? Christ A'mighty! she'm a lucky woman to have a man of your metal to stand up for her against me!"

"I didn't mean that, Aggett; only I feared —"

"Doan't I love her tu, you smooth-faced fule?"

Do 'e think one hair of her ban't so precious to me as to you? Do 'e think because she've took your poison I'm mazed tu? I've got to live my life wi'out her; I've got to bide all my days wi'out her — that's enough. But she'd have loved me still if she could. Ban't her sin that you poured magic in her cup; ban't her sin that she won't wear glass beads no more now she thinks she've found a strong o' di'monds."

"You're a better man than I am, John; you make me see what I've done; you make me wish I was dead."

"Liar! Don't prate no more to me. I hate the filthy sight of 'e, an' the sound of thy oily tongue. I'd swing for 'e to-morrow, an' keep my last breath to laugh with; but for she. Tell her — no, that I'll do myself. I'll tell her; an' no call for you to fear as your fine name will get any hard knocks. I'll never soil my mouth with it more arter to-day."

He departed, and the other, in misery and shame, stood and watched him return to the threshing-floor. Yet, as the unhappy spirit who has sacrificed his life to a drug and creeps through shame and contumely back and back to the poison, counting nothing as vital that does not separate him therefrom, so now the man felt that Sarah Belworthy was his own and told himself that his honour, his self-respect, his fair reputé were well lost in exchange for this unexampled pearl.



## CHAPTER VI

AT nightfall John Aggett visited the cottage of the Belworthys, but Sarah was from home for the day and he had a few words with her mother instead. That astute woman was well informed of affairs, and the romance now proceeding had long been the salt of her life, though she pretended no knowledge of it. In common with her husband, she hoped for glory from a possible union between the cot of Belworthy and the homestead of the Chaves. But these ambitions were carefully hidden from sight. All the smith said, when the matter was whispered, amounted to a pious hope that the Lord would look after his own — meaning Sarah; but presently it behooved both parents to stir in the matter, when they learned of the subsequent meeting between their daughter and John Aggett. A very unexpected determination on the girl's part resulted from that occasion, and the matter fell out in this way.

Before seeing John again, Sally had lengthy speech with her new sweetheart, and he, a little dead to the danger of so doing, detailed at length his conversation with the cowman and explained the complete nature of his rival's renunciation. This narrative set

Timothy in a somewhat sorry light, and the fact that he unconsciously bore himself as a victor added to the unpleasant impression conveyed. Had Tim declared his own sorrow and shame, blamed himself and acknowledged John's greatness with whole-hearted or even simulated praise, the girl had accepted the position more readily; but as it was, young Chave, whose fear of rousing her pity for John rendered him less eloquent upon that theme than he felt disposed to be, by this very reticence and oblivion touching the other's profound sorrow, awoke that pity he desired to stifle. Indeed, his story moved Sarah unutterably. While her love for Tim was the light of her life, yet at this juncture her nature forced her to turn to the first man, and now she held herself guilty of wickedness in her treatment of him. An instinct toward abstract justice, rare in women, uplifted her in this strait; the stricken man clung to her mind and would not be banished. Even before Timothy's subsequent abasement and self-accusations, she could not forget the past or live even for an hour in the joy of the present. The very note of triumph in her loved one's voice jarred upon her. It was, therefore, with feelings painfully mingled and heart distracted by many doubts that Sarah met John Aggett at last.

He was harsh enough — harsh to brutality — and for some subtle reason this attitude moved her to the



step he least expected. Softness and kind speech might have sent Sarah weeping to Timothy after all; but the ferocity, despair and distraction of the big flaxen man confirmed her in a contrary course of action. She put her hands into his, cried out that, before God, she was his woman for all time, and that his woman she would remain until the end. John Aggett strangled his reason upon this loving declaration — as many a stronger spirit would have done. He told himself that his gigantic love might well serve for them both; he caressed the wanderer in love and called upon Heaven to hear his thanksgivings. New rosy-fledged hope sprang and soared in his heart at this unhopéd blessing, and for a few blissful days light returned to his face, elasticity to his step. He had steeled his soul to part with her; he had told himself the worst of the agony was over, but in reality the girl had come back into his life again before the real grief of his loss had bitten itself into his mind. Now, despite the inner whisper that told him his joy rested on the most futile foundations possible, he took her back as he had resigned her — in a whirlwind of emotion. And he assured himself that, having once yielded her up, neither men nor God could reasonably ask him to do so again.

Mrs. Belworthy it was who first penetrated the false pretence and mockery of the new understanding. Upon the strength of that discovery she com-

municated in secret with Timothy Chave, and bade him cultivate patience and be of good cheer despite the darkness of appearances. Sarah, indeed, shewed by no sign that she desired to turn from her bargain again; but the emptiness and aridity of these renewed relations could not be hidden. Even John grasped the truth after a fortnight of hollow love-making. He tried to reawaken the old romance, to galvanise a new interest into the old hopes and plans; but Sarah's simulation too often broke down despite her best endeavours. Tears filled her eyes even while she clung most fiercely to him; her parents murmured their regrets that John should persist in ruining her life. Indeed, Mrs. Belworthy did more than murmur; she took an occasion to speak strongly to the cowman; yet he shut his eyes to the truth and blundered blindly on, straining every nerve and rack-ing his brain to discover means whereby Sarah might be won back to the old simple ways, to her former humility of ambition and simplicity of thought. But any restoration of the past conditions was impossible, for her mind had much expanded in Timothy's keeping; and this fact did Aggett, by slow and bitter stages, at length receive and accept. With heart the sorer for his temporary flicker of renewed happiness, he tore himself from out a fool's paradise and abandoned hope and Sarah once for all.

"'Tis vain to make believe any more," he said to



her. "God knows you've tried your hardest, but you ban't built to throw dust in a body's eyes. Your bread's a-been leavened wi' tears these many days, an' your heart's in arms against the falling out of things. 'Tis natural as it should be so. We've tried to come together again an' failed. Us can do no more now."

"Leave 'e I won't; if you beat me away from 'e like a dog, like a dog I'll come back again."

"Leave me you must, Sally. I ban't gwaine to spoil your butivul life for all time wi' my love, though you come wi' open arms an' ax me to. Go to un free, an' take my solemn word as I'll rage against him no more. I'll know you'm happy then; an' that must be my happiness. I'll never forget you comed twice to me o' your own free will."

"You'm a gude man — a gert saintly man — an' God knows why I be so pitiful weak that anything born should have come between us, once I'd promised."

"Many things comes between the bee an' the butt, the cup an' the lip, men an' women folks an' their hopes o' happiness. Please God you'll fare happy wi' him."

"I don't deserve it, if theer's any justice in the sky."

"Theer ban't to my knowledge. Pray God He'll be gude to 'e — then I'll forgive the man. An' the

world won't come to me for his character whether or no."

She protested and wept; he was firm. For a little hour his lofty mood held and he completed the final act of renunciation before he slept. Knowing full well that Chave would never hear the truth from Sarah, he laid wait for him that night and met him in Postbridge at a late hour.

The men stood side by side in the empty, naked road that here crossed Dart by a pack-saddle bridge. The night was rough and cold but dry, and the wind wailing through naked beeches, the river rattling harshly over its granite bed, chimed in unison with the recent sorrow of Timothy's heart. When Sarah announced her determination, the youth had threatened self-destruction and foretold madness. Neither one thing nor the other happened, but he was sufficiently miserable and his sufferings had by no means grown blunted on this night as he plodded wearily through the village.

Aggett, moving out of the darkness, recognised his man and spoke.

"Come you here — on to the bridge," he said abruptly. "Theer us'll be out o' the way o' the world, an' can sit 'pon the stones an' I can say what's to say."

"There is nothing to talk about between us. If you knew how much I have suffered and am still suffering, you'd spare me more words."



"Aw jimmery! You'm a poor whinin' twoad — too slack-twisted for any full-grown woman, I should have reckoned. But your luck be in. She comed back to me for duty; now she'm gwaine back to you for love."

"Does she know her own mind, John?"

"Ess fay, an' allus did arter you come."

Now Aggett briefly explained the events of the past fortnight and his own determination concerning Sarah, while the younger man felt his blood wake from its sleep and race again through his veins. His treasure had not been lost and life was worth living yet. He had tact sufficient to make no comments upon the story. He spared John Aggett many words. But he gazed once or twice at the other's heaving breast and wild eyes and told himself that the cowman was a being altogether beyond his power to understand. Then he crept away as quickly as he could and did not sleep until he had spoken with Sarah. On this occasion his account of events was framed in words of most meek and humble sort. He awarded Aggett full measure of praise, while upon himself he heaped sufficient obloquy, feeling that he could very well afford to do so as a price for this return to paradise.

## CHAPTER VII

Now thundered upon John Aggett the full flood of his griefs at highest water-mark. Until this time hopes had alternated with fears, possibilities of recovered joy with the thought of utter loss. Then he had possessed Sarah's promises and the consciousness that in his hands, not another's, lay the future. But now John had departed out of her life for good and all, and the great act of self-renunciation was complete. To the highest-minded and noblest soul something in the nature of anti-climax must have followed upon this action. That one capable of so great a deed and such unselfish love possessed ample reserves of self-command and self-control to live his life henceforward on the same high plane by no means followed. Having by his own act insured the highest good for the woman he loved, John Aggett's subsequent display sank far below that standard and indeed embraced a rule of life inferior to his usual conduct. A supreme unconcern as to what might now await him characterised his actions. As a lighthouse lamp illuminates some horror of sea and stone, so his notable deed shone in a sorry set-