

"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-



ting, for John Aggett's existence now sank as much below its usual level of indifferent goodness as his relinquishment of Sarah Belworthy, for love of her, had risen above it. Until the present his attachment to the girl and hope of happiness had made him a hard-working man, and since his engagement he had laboured with the patience of a beast and counted weariness a delight as the shillings in his savings-box increased. Now incentive to further work was withdrawn, he abated his energies, lacking wit to realise that upon sustained toil and ceaseless mental occupation his salvation might depend. His final departure from Bellever Barton was brought about as the result of a curious interview with his master.

To Farmer Chave, young Timothy, now reëstablished with Sarah, had come to break the news of his betrothal. But no parental congratulation rewarded the announcement. Mr. Chave knew every man and woman in Postbridge, and was familiar with the fact that the blacksmith's daughter had long been engaged to his cowman. That his son and heir should favour a labourer's sweetheart was a galling discovery and provoked language of a sort seldom heard even in those plain-speaking times. Finally the father dismissed his son, bade him get out of sight and conquer his calf-love once and for all or hold himself disinherited. A little later he acted on

his own shrewd judgement and held converse with Sarah's original suitor.

John was milking as the farmer entered his cow-yard, and a flood of sunlight slanted over the low byre roofs and made the coats of the cattle shine ripe chestnut red.

"Evenin' to 'e, Aggett. Leave that job an' come an' have a tell wi' me. I wants to speak to 'e."

"Evenin', maister. I'll milk 'Prim' dry, 'cause she do awnly give down to me. Milly can do t'others."

Farmer Chave waited until the cow "Prim" had yielded her store, then he led the way to an empty cow-stall — dark, cool and scented by its inhabitants. Across the threshold fell a bar of light; without, a vast heap of rich ordure sent forth delicate sun-tinted vapour; close at hand the cows stood waiting each her turn, and one with greatly distended udder lowed to the milkmaid.

"Look you here, Jan Aggett, you'm for marryin', ban't 'e? Didn't you tell me when I took you on as a you was keepin' company wi' blacksmith's purty darter?"

"'Twas so, then."

"Well, I'm one as likes to see my hands married an' settled an' getting childer 'cordin' to Bible command. What's your wages this minute?"

"You'm on a wrong tack, maister. Sarah Bel-



worthy an' me be out. Theer's nought betwixt us more."

Mr. Chave affected great indignation at this statement.

"Struth! Be you that sort?"

John reflected a moment before answering. He suspected his master must know the truth, but could not feel certain, for Mr. Chave's manner suggested absolute ignorance.

"Us changed our minds — that's all."

"You say so! When a girl changes her mind theer's generally another string to her bow. Either that, or she's tired of waiting for the fust."

"It might be 'twas so," said John, falling into the trap laid for him. "A maid like her can't be expected in reason to bide till such as me can make a home for her. I doan't blame her."

"Well, if that's the trouble, you can go right along to her this night an' tell her theer's no cause to keep single after Eastertide. Yeo and his wife do leave my cottage in Longley Bottom come then, an' instead of raisin' your wages as I meant to do bimebye, I'll give 'e the cot rent free. A tidy li'l place tu, I warn 'e, wi' best part of an acre o' ground, an' only half a mile from the village. Now be off with 'e an' tell the girl."

Aggett gasped and his eyes dimmed a moment before the splendid vision of what might have been.

It took him long to find words and breath to utter them. Then he endeavoured to explain.

"You'm a kind maister, God knows, an' I'd thank 'e year in an' year out wi' the sweat o' my body for such gudeness. But the thing can't be, worse luck. Best I tell 'e straight. 'Tis like this: Sally have met another chap — a chap built o' softer mud than what I be. An' he'm more to her than me, an' —"

"God A'mighty! An' you stand theer whining wi' no more spirit than a auld woman what's lost her shoe-string! A chap hath kindiddled the maid from 'e? Another man hath stole her? Is that what you mean?"

John grew fiery red, breathed hard and rubbed his chin with a huge fist.

"Ban't the man I cares a curse for. 'Tis the girl."

"Rubbishy auld nonsense! 'Tis woman's play to show 'e the worth of her. They'm built that way an' think no man can value 'em right unless he sees they'm for other markets so well as his. Do 'e know what that vixen wants 'e to do? Why, she's awnly waiting for 'e to give t'other chap a damn gude hiding! Then she'll cuddle round again — like a cat arter fish. I know 'em!"

John's jaw dropped before this sensational advice. Now he was more than ever convinced that his master knew nothing of the truth. It appeared to him



the most fantastic irony that a father should thus in ignorance condemn his son to such a sentence. Then Aggett put a question that shewed quickening of perception.

"If 'twas your own flesh an' blood, what would 'e say?"

"Same as I be sayin' now. Burned if I'd blame any man for sticking to his own."

"It be your son," declared John, shortly.

"I know it," answered the other. "That's why I'm here. You'm not the fule you look, Jan, an' you know so well as I can tell 'e this match ban't seemly nohow. I ban't agwaine to have it — not if the Lard Bishop axed me. An' I tell you plain an' plump — me being your master — that you must stop it. The girl's your girl, an' you must keep her to her bargain. An' you won't repent it neither. Marry her out of hand an' look to me for the rest. An' if a word's said, send him as sez it to me. I'll soon shut their mouths."

"Ban't the folks — 'tis her. She do love your son wi' all her heart an' soul — an' he loves her — onless he's a liar."

"Drivel! What does he know about love — a moon-blind calf like him? I won't have it, I tell 'e. He's gone his awn way tu long! Spoiled by his fule of a mother from the church-vamp<sup>1</sup> onward till he've

<sup>1</sup> *Church-vamp*. Font.

come to this bit of folly. It's not to be — dost hear what I say?"

"I hear. Go your ways, maister, an' prevent it if you can. I'll not meddle or make in the matter. Sally Belworthy have chosen, an' ban't me as can force her to change her mind."

"More fule her. An' between the pair of 'e, she'll find herself in the dirt. 'Tis in a nutshell. Will 'e take the cottage an' make her marry you? I lay you could if you was masterful."

"Never — ban't a fair thing to ax a man."

"Best hear me through 'fore you sez it. If you'm against me in this, you can go to hell for all I care. If you won't help me to keep my son from disgracing me an' mine, you'm no true man, an' I doan't want 'e any more to Bellever Farm. 'Tis a wife an' a home rent free 'pon wan side, an' the sack on the other. So you'd best to make choice."

"I'll go Saturday."

"Of all the ninnyhammers ever I saw! You gert yellow-headed cake, can't you see you'm spoilin' your awn life? Or was it that t'other side offered 'e better terms? If that's so, you won't get 'em, because Tim Chave'll be a pauper man the day he marries wi'out my leave."

The farmer stormed awhile longer, but presently he stamped off and Aggett returned to his mother. Then, as he had angered Mr. Chave, so did his own



parent enrage him. She protested at his folly, and implored him to carry out his master's wish while opportunity remained to do so. He was strong against it until the old woman went on her knees to him and wept. Then he lost his temper and cursed the whole earth and all thereon for a cruel tangle that passed the understanding of man to unravel.

Later in the evening he revisited the village and before ten o'clock returned intoxicated to his home.

## CHAPTER VIII

FROM that day forward John Aggett exhibited a spectacle of reckless indifference to circumstances and a manner of life lightened only by occasional returns to sobriety and self-command. As to how it fared with Timothy and Sarah he cared not. Others ceased to speak of the matter in his presence, and thus it happened that he went in ignorance of events for the space of five weeks. During that period he loafed at the "Green Man" Inn until his money was spent, then returned to dwell with his mother.

Meantime Timothy Chave's romance was prospering ill, despite his rival's endeavour to make the way easy. Other obstacles now confronted him, and though Sarah was happy and well content to live in the delight of each hour with her lover, Tim found delay less easily borne and struggled to change Mr. Chave's attitude toward his desires. But it proved useless, and the young man chafed in vain. He assured Sarah that his father was merely an obstinate elder and would surely be won to reason in good time; but the full significance of her engagement with Timothy, as his father viewed it, she did



not know and never would have heard from Tim's lips. There happened, however, an accidental meeting between Sarah and Farmer Chave himself, and this brushed all mystery or doubt from the girl's mind, opened her eyes to the gravity of Tim's actions and left her face to face with the truth.

One day Sarah, on foot, with her face set homeward, observed Farmer Chave riding back from Widecombe to Postbridge on a big bay horse. He saw her, too, eyed her narrowly and slackened speed, while she wished the road might open and swallow her from his sight. But there was no escape, so she curtsied and wished Mr. Chave a very good evening. He returned the salute and seeing, as he believed, a possibility of setting all right on the spot by one great master-stroke, attempted the same.

"Ah, my girl, Belworthy's darter, ban't 'e? A peart maid an' well thought on, I doubt not. Be you gwaine home-along?"

Sarah's heart fluttered at this genial salutation.

"Ess, maister," she said.

"Then I'll lighten your journey. I haven't got the double saddle, but you'm awnly a featherweight an' can ride pillion behind me an' save your shoes."

The mode of travel he suggested was common enough in those days, but such a proposal from Tim's father frightened Sarah not a little. Her first thought was for herself, her second for her

sweetheart, and she nerved herself to refuse the farmer's offer.

"I'm sure you'm very kind, sir, but —"

"No 'buts.' Here's a stone will make a splendid upping stock, an' 'Sharky' can carry the pair of us without knowing his load be increased. Up you get! Theer's plenty of room for my fardels in front o' the pommel. Us won't bate our pace for you, I promise. Now jump! Whoa, bwoy! Theer we are. Just put your arms around my flannel waistcoat an' doan't be shy. 'Tis well I met 'e, come to think on't, for I wanted a matter o' few words."

Soon they jogged forward, the big horse taking little account of Sarah's extra weight. At length they crossed Riddon Ridge and passed Dart at a ford, where Sarah had to hold up her toes out of the reach of the river. Then, as they rode along the foothills of Bellever, the farmer spoke suddenly.

"My life's been wisht of late days along wi' taking thought for my son Tim. You've heard tell of un? You see, 'tis my wish to have un mated wi' his cousin. But I'm led to onderstand as theer's a maiden up-long he thinks he likes better; an' her name's same as yours, Sarah Belworthy."

"Oh, Maister Chave, I do love un very dear, I do."

"So you done to that yellow man, Jan Aggett."

"'Tweern't the same. When Maister Timothy comed, I seed differ'nt."



"Doan't shake an' tremble. You'll never have no reason to fear me. Tell me how 'twas. Jan gived 'e up — eh?"

"Ess, he did."

"Why for?"

"For love of me."

"Ah! Now that was a brave fashion deed. I allus thought a lot of the man, an' I'm sorry you've sent un to the Devil, wheer they tell me he's bound of late days."

"He'm a gude man, an' I wish to God as something could be done to bring him back in the right road."

"Ess fay! An' you'm the one as would have to look the shortest distance to find a way to do it, Sarah. A gude example that man, for all his foolishness since. Loved 'e well enough to leave 'e — for your own gude, he did — eh?"

"God bless him for doin' it."

"Why doan't 'e go back to him?"

"I cannot, I cannot now."

"Well, man's love be greater than woman's by the look of it. What girl would have done same as that man done? What girl would give up a man for love of him, an' even leave un for his gude? Not one as ever I heard tell of."

"Many an' many would for that matter. What's a sacrifice if your love be big enough?"

"Be yours? That's the question I'd ax 'e."

Sarah's heart sank low; Mr. Chave felt her shiver and the hands clasped over his thick waistcoat tremble. Looking down, he saw her fingers peeping out of woollen mittens; and upon one, sacred to the ring, a small gold hoop appeared with a coral bead set therein.

Sarah did not answer the last pointed question, and Farmer Chave continued:—

"I know you've promised to be wife to my son some day, an' I know he've taken partickler gude care to hide from you my view of the question. But you must hear it, for your awn sake as well as his an' mine. I've nothin' against you, Sarah, nothin', an' less than nothin', for I like you well an' wish to see you so gude as you'm purty an' so happy as you'm gude; but I know my son for a lad of light purposes an' weak will an' wrong ambitions. Ban't enough iron in un; an' the maid I'm set on for un have got a plenty backbone to make up for his lack. Her he's to wed in fulness o' time, if I've any voice left in affairs; an' if he doan't, 'tis gude-bye to Bellever for him, an' gude-bye to more'n that. So theer he stands, Sarah, an' you'd best to hear what it means. Maybe you thought you was makin' choice between a labourin' man an' a gentleman, between a pauper an' a young chap wi' his pockets full o' money. But ban't so, I assure 'e. 'Tis the gentleman'll be the



pauper if he marries you; but John Aggett — why, I offered un my cottage in Longley Bottom free o' rent from the day as your banns was axed in marriage wi' un to Widecombe Church! That's the man as gived 'e up for love of 'e. An' ban't you so strong as him?"

"Tu gude he was — tu gude for the likes o' me."

"Well, as to t'other, though he's my son, blamed if I think he's gude enough. But that's neither here nor theer. The question ban't what sort of love he's got for you; but what sort you've got for him. Do 'e follow my meanin'? I doan't storm or rave, you see — tu wise for that. I only bid you think serious whether your feeling for Timothy's the sort to ruin him, or to save him from ruin. 'Tis a hard choice for 'e, but we'm all faaced wi' ugly puzzles 'pon the crossways o' life. Now you know my 'pinions, you'll do what's right, or you'm not the girl I think 'e."

"I must give un up for all time?"

"Best not put it that way. Doan't drag my rascal of a bwoy in the argeyment. Say to yourself, 'I must mate him as I promised to mate — him that's wastin' his life an' gwaine all wrong for love o' me.' 'Tis plain duty, woman, looked at right. Not that I'd rob 'e of the pleasure of knowin' you'd done a gert deed if you gived Tim up; but t'other's the man as you've got to think of; an', if you do

this gude thing, 'tis just similar as he done for you. Wi' Jan Aggett be your happiness wrapped up, if you could see it. An' Jan's much more like to go well in marriage harness than my son be, or I doan't know carater."

"I'll try, I'll try. It's more than I've heart or strength for, but I'll try, Maister Chave. I'll try to do right by both of them."

"Who could say fairer? An' here's the lane to blacksmith's, so I'll drop 'e. An' give your faither my respects an' tell un I want un to-morrow to the farm."

After Sarah had dismounted, the farmer spoke again.

"Take to heart what I've said to 'e, an' remember that to please me won't be a bad action from a worldly side. Go back to Jan Aggett, Sarah Belworthy; that's my advice to you, an' angels from heaven couldn't give 'e no better, 'cause theer ban't room for two 'pinions. Now let me hear what metal you'm made of, an' that afore the week be out. So gude night."

The man trotted off with knees stiff and elbows at right angles to his body; the girl entered her home; and that night, tossing and turning wearily, thrice she decided to give up her lover and thrice determined to take no definite step until she had again seen and spoken with Timothy. But her heart told her that such a course was of all the weak-



est. Presently she assured herself that many plans might be pursued and that wide choice of action lay before her. Then John Aggett chiefly occupied her thoughts. To go back to him now appeared absolutely impossible. He had given her up, at a cost even she but dimly guessed, and to return into his troubled life again struck her as a deed beyond measure difficult and dangerous.

Long she reflected miserably on the sorrow of her lot; then, in the small hours of morning and upon the threshold of sleep, Sarah determined to let another judge of her right course of conduct and dictate it to her.

"'Twas the white witch, Gammer Gurney, as foretold Tim would marry me that terrible night," she thought. "Then 'tis for she to say what I should do an' what I shouldn't do. If 'tis ordained by higher things than men-folk as I'm to have Tim, what's the use o' weeping 'cause Farmer Chave wishes differ'nt?"

There was a sort of comfort in this philosophy; but her grey eyes closed upon a wet pillow as she slept, to wake with sudden starts and twitches from visions in great aisles of gloom, from dim knowledge of horrors hidden behind storm-clouds, from the murmur of remote callings and threatenings and cries of woe, from all-embracing dread begotten of a heavy heart, and an outlook wholly dreary and desolate.

## CHAPTER IX

WITH morning light Sarah's decision to visit Gammer Gurney was still strong in her, and she determined to call upon the white witch before another nightfall. It was this enterprise that precipitated affairs and brought their end within sight.

Upon the evening that saw Sarah riding pillion with Farmer Chave, John Aggett had met the curate of Postbridge — one Reverend Cosmo Hawkes. The parson, who was a keen sportsman, came across John upon the Moor and improved his occasion to such good purpose that Aggett's ears tingled before the man of God had done with him. They returned together, and on the way home Mr. Hawkes, with admirable pertinacity, so hammered and pounded the erring labourer, that he alarmed him into frank regret for his evil ways. The reckless and unhappy young man was steadied by his minister's forcible description of what most surely awaits all evil livers; and when Mr. Hawkes, striking while the iron was hot, undertook to get Aggett good and enduring work at Ashburton, John promised to comply and to reform his bad courses from that day forth. The decision come to, he spent his last hours of free-