

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-



dom in folly. That night he drank hard, and when deep measures had loosened his tongue, explained to numerous "Green Man" gossips the thing he proposed to do. Afterward, when the overdose of drink in him had turned to poison, hope died again and his mother, listening fearfully at his door, heard him muttering and cursing and growling of death as the only friend left to him. In the morning he was oppressed by the immediate prospect of breathing the same air with Sarah Belworthy no more. He alternated between savage indifference and stubborn fatalism. In the first mood he was minded to depart at once; in the second he felt disposed to seek out Tim Chave and let the brute in him have its fling. He itched for batterings in the flesh. But he visited Postbridge, obtained the letter of introduction from Mr. Hawkes, and then seriously set himself to the task of preparing for departure. He told his mother that he would return within a fortnight, and she rejoiced, feeling his temporary absence a light evil as compared with his present life. But the truth, that he was leaving home not to return, she never suspected. All preliminary matters arranged, John Aggett bade farewell, lifted his bundle and set out, after an early dinner, for Ashburton, and as he passed Sarah Belworthy's home and saw the straggling village of Postbridge sink into the naked web of the woods, a

dark inclination mastered him again and passions that craved outlet in violence clouded down stormily upon his soul. But resolutely he carried his turmoil of thoughts along at the rate of four miles an hour, and quickly passing beside the river southward, approached Yar Tor and the road to Ashburton. Then, as there appeared the spectacle of Gammer Gurney's cottage, standing in its innocent humility and forlorn loneliness upon the Moor edge, John observed a woman ahead of him and realised that the last familiar face his eyes would rest upon must be Sarah Belworthy's. Guessing her errand, he slackened his pace that she might reach the cottage and disappear without knowledge of his presence; but as he walked more slowly, so did Sarah, though quite unconscious of the fact her old lover was at hand; and presently, to his astonishment, the girl stopped altogether, hesitated, and sat down by the wayside on a boulder. A determination not to avoid her now influenced Aggett. He approached, and, as he reached her and stood still, Sarah grew very pale and shewed some fear.

"You, Jan! An' settin' forth 'pon a journey by the look of it. Wheer be gwaine?"

"Out of this, anyway."

"For long?"

"Can't say as to that. I ban't myself of late days — not my own man as I used to be. God



knows wheer my changed temper's like to drive me in the end."

"'Tis the same with me, Jan. I doan't know my duty no clearer now than afore. I'm torn to pieces one way an' another, an' theer won't be much left o' me worth any man's love come bimebye. Sometimes I think I'll run right away next giglet-market<sup>1</sup> to Okehampton, come Our Lady's Day, an' hire myself out to the fust as axes, an' never set eyes on this place more."

"Ban't 'e happy yet, then? What more do 'e want?"

"My love's a curse wheer it falls. I loved 'e an' brought 'e to bad ways; an' Tim—I've set his nearest an' dearest against un. I seed Farmer Chave essterday, an' he urged me by the Book to give un up."

"'Struth! He said that, did he? But you didn't fall in wi' it, I reckon, else you wouldn't be here now?"

"'Tis all tu difficult for the likes o' me. What's a poor maiden to do? If I takes Tim, he'll be a ruined man, 'cordin' to his father."

"'Twas a mean, cowardly trick to threaten 'e."

"But plain truth—I could see that. A terrible tantara theer'll be in Bellever if he braves the anger

<sup>1</sup> *Giglet-market*. A hiring fair for domestic servants, held in times past at Okehampton and elsewhere in the West.

of Farmer. I've prayed an' prayed—Lard He knows how I've prayed—'pon it, but—"

"Prayers won't help 'e; leastways, they didn't me. I've lifted up far-reachin' prayers in my time, I promise you, Sarah,—the best I could; but never no answer,—never so much as a Voice in the night to help a chap."

"You done right to pray an' you was led right, though you didn't know it. An' you'm well thought of for what you've done still, despite your fallin' away arterward."

"Never mind 'bout me. I be gwaine far ways off, an' so like's not us'll never set eyes 'pon each other more. For me, I'd so soon end all as not. But for mother I should have got out of it afore now, for I ban't feared o' dyin', an' would go out o' hand this minute. But you? Can't the man help 'e? Do he know your fix? What the devil be he made of? Sugar?"

"He doan't know yet that I've spoken wi' his faither. An' he've been careful to hide that his folks was against me. I s'pose 'tis natural they should be so."

"Ess—not knowin' you."

"An' in my gert quandary I was gwaine in to Mother Gurney here. She's juggled wi' my life afore, seemin'ly, an' if any knows what's to be the end of it, 'tis her, I should think. I want to hear



what's right an' proper. I'm so weary of my days as you. Life an' love be gall-bitter this way. Oh, Jan, can't 'e say nought to comfort me? 'Tis more'n I can bear."

She was hysterical, and he flung down his bundle and sat beside her and tried to bring some peace to her spirit. His heart was full for her and he spoke eagerly. Then he saw the gold and coral on her finger and stopped talking and put his elbows on his knees and his big sandy head down on his hands.

"'Twas what you done, 'twas same as what you done," she said. "You left me for love of me; why can't I leave Tim for love of him?"

"'Tis axin' a woman tu much."

A long silence reigned. Wind-blown ponies stamped and snorted close at hand, and from a window in the neighbouring cottage a sharp eye watched the man and woman. Gammer was counting the chances of a customer, possibly two.

Fired with a glimmer of the hope that can never perish while the maid is free, John Aggett argued the advantages of obedience to Farmer Chave. He felt himself base in this, but Sarah was under his eyes, within reach of his arm. Her hot tears were on his hand.

"'Tis for you I 'be thinkin', though you might say 'twas two words for myself an' but one for you.

I wants your sorrow turned into joy, Sally, if it's a thing can be done. Leave me out — theer — now I'm not thinkin' for myself at all. Leave me out, an' leave him out, an' bide a maid till the right man finds 'e. I lay he haven't crossed your path yet. Give young Chave up for your own sake, if not his, an' look life in the face again free."

He continued fitfully in this strain, quenching his own dim hope remorselessly as he spoke, and she, hearing little save the drone of his voice, occupied herself with her own thoughts. Her emotions toward John Aggett had never much changed. Her love for Tim, being a feeling of different quality, had left her temperate if sincere regard for John unmoved. Possibly his own action in the past had rendered her more kindly disposed to him than before. There certainly existed in her mind a homespun, drab regard for him, and circumstances had not changed it.

Now as he strengthened her determination to give up her lover for her lover's good, and despite the bitterness of her spirit before the sacrifice, she could find some room in her mind for the man before her. To-day the presence of Sarah awoke the finest note in John. His first dim hope was extinguished; he soared above it, resolutely banished any personal interest in the problem now to be solved, and assumed that Sarah had similarly oblit-



erated him from all considerations of the future. But it was not so.

Presently the girl declared her mind to be made up and promised that she would break off her engagement. For a moment the other showed hearty satisfaction, then his forehead grew wrinkled.

"One thing mind," he said. "My name must not crop up no more in this. Ban't that I fear anything man can do, but theer'll be no weight to what you sez onless you make it clear 'tis your own thought. 'Tis you I care about — an' 'tis him you care about. I be gude as gone a'ready. 'Twas mere chance throwed us together, an' none need know 'bout it."

She was silent awhile, then put her hand out to him.

"I do owe you more'n ever a maid owed a man, I reckon."

He took and held the hand extended.

"You cannot help what's past and gone. Just call me home to your mind now an' again — that's all I ax 'e. Now I must be movin', for I've got long ways to go to-day."

Even in her misery she took a mournful pleasure in her power to command.

"Sit down an' bide till I bid you go," she said.

He obeyed, resumed the seat from which he had risen and tied and untied his bundle, but did not speak.

"If us could call back a year an' begin livin' all over again, Jan."

He looked down at her, puzzled.

"A man would give his soul to go back a bit sometimes; but that's about the awnly thing God A'mighty's self can't do, I reckon. 'Tis more'n His power to give back essterday."

"He can do it His own way. He can help us poor unhappy creatures to forget."

"So can a pint of old ale; not but them around about a man mostly looks to it that the raw of sorrow shan't heal tu quick for want of callin' to mind."

"Jan, I'm gwaine to give him up. I have given him up for all time. I shall allus love him, Jan, because I must. But that is all. An' you — you mustn't go out into the world an' wander 'pon the airth an' maybe never come home no more through fault of mine. Ban't fair as two men should break theer hearts an' have theer days ruined for one worthless woman. What I am, I am; what I felt for you, Jan, I feel — no more, no less. 'Tisn't I loved you less than I always did, but him more. If 'tis unmaidenly so to say, rebuke me, Jan."

Thus she deliberately came into his life again for the third time, and he was overwhelmed. And yet his answer was one of almost savage fierceness. Joy shook him, too, — a sort of incredulous joy, as when one dreams rare things, yet knows that one dreams.



The mingled emotions of the time upset his self-control, induced a sort of tense excitation and rendered his voice indistinct, hollow, mumbling as that of a man drunken or cleft in palate.

"That! That! You say that to me — arter all these long, long days! To come back now! God in Heaven, what a puppet dance 'tis! Now here, now theer — be your heart so light as thistledown? I doan't know wheer I stand; I'm mazed as a sheep this minute. An' you'd come back to me now?"

"I would, Jan. I will."

"An' live man an' wife to the li'l lew cot offered us by the gudeness of Farmer?"

"No, not that. I couldn't do that. You've a heart soft enough to understand. I'll go with 'e, wheer you be gwaine — ay, this very day I will. But I can't bide here. I must get away from — from mother, an' faither, an' all. Then us can send a packet to 'em from far off. Anywheer but Post-bridge, Jan."

"You'm in honest, sober, Bible earnest, Sarah?"

"God's my witness, I be."

"Then He's my witness, tu, that I stand here a new man — an' not shamed o' the crumbs from t'other's table. You to come back! 'Tis more'n my deserts — such a drunken swine as I've been since —"

He paused a moment, then his manner changed

suddenly and he gripped the girl's arm so hard and glared so wildly that Gammer Gurney from her window feared a serious quarrel and nearly rushed out to separate them.

"Mind this, then," he said, with harsh intensity. "Mind this, now; you'm my whole life again, — body, an' bones, an' blood, an' soul, — from this moment onwards. Theer's gwaine to be no more changing now — no more altering your mind — or, by Christ, I won't answer for myself. I ban't so strong o' will as I was, an' since you've comed to me of your own free will, mine you'll be till death ends it; an' Lard help them as try to keep us apart now. Lard help 'em an' deliver 'em from me. You've come, an' I trust 'e — trust 'e same as I trust the sun to rise. But if you throw me over again, I'll — No matter to speak on that. Awnly I'll be true as steel to 'e; an' you must play your part an' look over your shoulder no more. You've spoke out o' your heart, me out o' mine; so let it be."

She was alarmed at this outburst, uttered with almost brutal energy and in loud accents. But it served its purpose and impressed her vacillating spirit with the impossibility of any further changes.

"We've been up an' down, him an' me, full long enough," continued Aggett. "Now, thanks be to a just God as I'd nearly forgot, you've come back to me an' I could crow like a marnin' cock to think



it. An' now what'll please 'e to do? Will 'e come along o' me this minute?"

"Ess — no — not now; but to-night I might. I must go home an' put together a few things an' pack up others. I can send along to home for my li'l box later."

"To-night, then. An', come next Sunday, us'll be axed out in church at Ashburton straightway. Come to think, 'twould be better for you to bide along wi' your folk until I be ready for 'e a week or two hence."

"No — I —" She was going to confess that she could not trust herself, but feared his eyes.

"Why for not?"

"I won't stop here without you. I'll come. They can hear the truth after I have gone."

"To-night, then," he said.

"Wheer shall I meet 'e to?"

"By the beech — you know. Through the woods be the nearest road for us. To the gert beech, wheer I set our letters in a love knot. No better place. Theer I'll come, an' theer I'll count to see 'e when the moon rises over the hill. An' doan't 'e keep me waitin' — not a moment, not the atom of a moment! I've gone through enough, an' my brain spins yet to think o' the past. Suffer more I can't — no more at all. You'll be sorry to your dying day if you'm late. Better never come than that. My head be

full o' strange things at this wonnerful happy happenin', — strange things, — but I'll say no more than bid you be to the beech by moon-rise, if 'tis true that you love me an' not false. Be theer — or you'll awnly repent it once, Sarah, an' that's so long as you do live arter."

He exhibited little love now and less tenderness. It almost appeared that a mind long familiar with darkness was unable to accept and understand the light suddenly shed upon it. A note of impending catastrophe sounded in his words, seemed shadowed in his wild eyes.

"You fright me," said Sarah. "You doan't take me as I hoped you would. You ban't your old self, yet. How should you be for that matter? 'Tis only poor second-hand goods I'm bringing to 'e."

"Not so. 'Tis what I had first promise of. I'll be all a man can be to 'e — all I should be. Forgive me for harsh words; but I be dazed wi' this gert come-along-o'-it. I've been sore let for many days, an' 'twill take time to make me see wi' the old eyes when the brains in my head grow sweet an' cool again, an' the poison works out of 'em."

They talked a little while longer, then the white witch from her chamber window saw them turn and together retrace their steps.