

# THE AMERICAN PRISONER

## CHAPTER I

### CATER'S BEAM

THE huge and solitary but featureless elevation of Cater's Beam on Dartmoor arrests few eyes. Seen from the central waste, one hog-backed ridge swells along the southern horizon, and its majestic outline, unfretted by tor or forest, describes the curve of a projectile discharged at gentle elevation. No detail relieves the solemn bulk of this hill, and upon it ages have left but little imprint of their passing. Time rolls over the mountain like a mist, and the mighty granite arch of the Beam emerges eternal and unchanged. Its tough integument of peat and heath and matted herbage answers only to the call of the seasons, and it bears grass, bloom, berry, as it bore them for palæolithic man and his flocks. Now, like a leopard, the Beam crouches black-spotted by the swaling fires of spring; now, in the late autumn time, its substance is coated with tawny foliage, scarlet-splashed under the low sun; now, dwarfed by snow, the great hill takes shape of an arctic bear. With spring the furzes flame again, and wonderful mosses—purple, gold, and emerald green—light the marshes or jewel the bank at every rill; and with summer the ling shines out, the asphodel burns in the bog, cloud-shadows drop their deep blue mantles upon the mountain's bosom, and the hot air dances mile on mile. Beneath Cater's Beam, and dwarfed thereby, arise the twin turrets of Fox Tor; while not far distant from these most lonely masses and pinnacles of granite shall be found the work of men's hands. Beside the desolate morasses and storm-scarred wastes that here