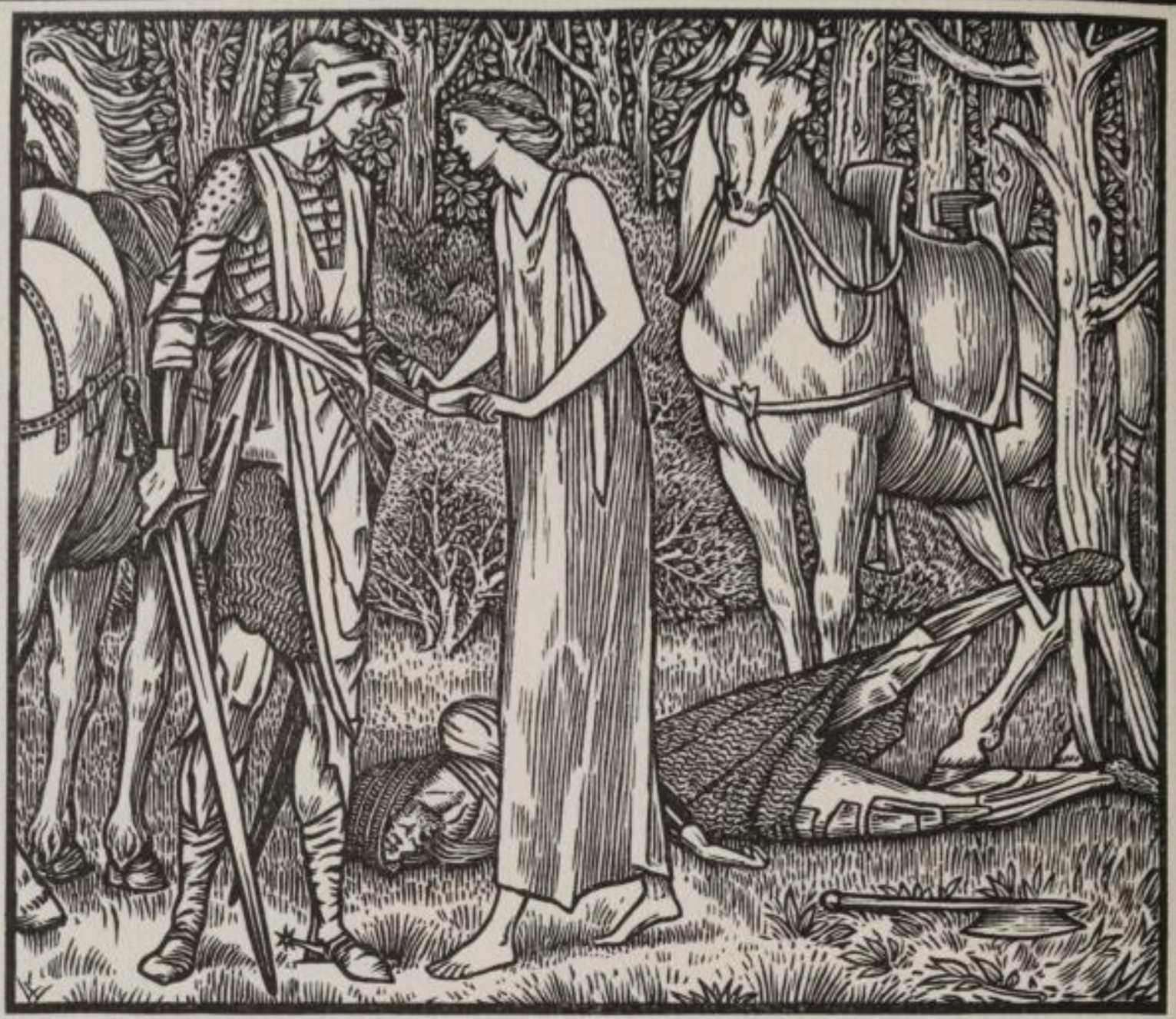

HELPISTO RANDINGA AGO PARTHOS

Chapter I. The Sundering of the Ways

AGO there was a little land, over which ruled a regulus or kinglet, who was called King Peter, although his kingdom was but little. He had four sons whose names were Blaise, Hugh, Gregory, and Ralph. Of these Ralph was the youngest whereas he was but of twenty winters & one; and Blaise was the oldest and had seen thirty winters

NOW it came to this at the last, that to these young men the kingdom of their father seemed strait; and they longed to see the ways of other men, and to strive for life. For though they were king's sons, they had but little world's wealth; save and except good meat & drink, and enough or too much thereof; house-room of the best; fair friends to be merry with, and maidens to kiss, and these also as good as might be; freedom withal to come and go as they would; the heavens above them, the earth to bear them up, & the meadows and acres, the woods & the fair streams, & the little hills of Upmeads, for that was the name of their country and the kingdom of King Peter

So having nought but this little they longed for much; and that the more because, king's sons as they were, they had but scant dominion save over their horses & dogs: for the men of that country were stubborn & sturdy vavassors, and might not away with masterful doings, but were like to pay back a blow with a blow, and a foul word with a buffet. So that, all things considered, it was little wonder if King Peter's sons found themselves straitened in their little land: wherein was no great merchant city; nor no mighty castle, or noble abbey of monks: nought but fair little halls of yeomen, with here & there a franklin's court or a shield-knight's manor-house; with many a goodly church, & whiles a house of good canons, who knew not the road to Rome, or how to find the door

of the Chancellor's house. So these young men wearied their father and mother a long while with telling them of their weariness, & their longing to be gone: till at last on a fair & hot afternoon of June, King Peter rose up from the carpet which the Prior of St. John's by the Bridge had given him, for he had been sleeping there/on amidst of the grass of his orchard after his dinner, and he went up into the hall of his house, which was called the High House of Upmeads, and sent for his four sons to come to him. And they came & stood before his high/seat & he said: "Sons, ye have long wearied me with words concerning your longing for travel on the roads; now if ye verily wish to be gone, tell me when would ye take your departure if ye had your choice?" They looked at one another, and the three younger ones nodded at Blaise the eldest: so he began, and said: "Saving the love & honour that we have for thee, and also for our mother, we would be gone at once, even with the noon's meat still in our bellies. But thou art the lord in this land, and thou must rule. Have I said well, brethren?" And they all said: "Yea, yea." Then said the king: "Good! now is the sun high and hot; & yet if ye ride softly ye may come to some good harbour before nightfall without foun/dering your horses. So come ye in an hour's space to the four/want/way, and there and then will I order your departure". The young men were full of joy when they heard his word; and they departed and went this way and that, gathering such small matters as each deemed that he needed, & which he might lightly carry with him; then they armed themselves, and would bid the squires bring them their horses; but men told them that the said squires had gone their ways already to the Want/ways by the king's commandment: so thither they went at once a/foot all four in company, laughing & talking together merrily.

THIS Want/way aforesaid, as tells the tale, was but four furlongs from the house, which lay in an ingle of the river called Upmeads/water amongst very fair meadows at the end of the upland tillage; and the land sloped gently up toward the hill/country and the unseen mountains on the north; but to the south was a low ridge which ran along the water, as it wound along from west to east. Beyond the said ridge, at a place whence you could see the higher hills to the south,

that stretched mainly east & west also, there was presently an end of the Kingdom of Upmeads, though the neighbours on that side were peaceable and friendly, & were wont to send gifts to King Peter. But toward the north beyond the Want/way King Peter was lord over a good stretch of land, and that of the best; yet was he never a rich man, for he had no freedom to tax and tail his folk, nor forsooth would he have used it if he had; for he was no ill man, but kindly & of measure. On these northern marches there was war at whiles, whereas they ended in a great forest well furnished with trees; and this wood was debateable, and King Peter & his sons rode therein at their peril: but great plenty was therein of all wild deer, as hart, & buck, and roe, and swine, and bears and wolves withal. The lord on the other side thereof was a mightier man than King Peter, albeit he was a bishop, and a baron of Holy Church. To say sooth he was a close-fist & a man/slayer, though he did his man/slaying through his vicars, the knights and men/at/arms who held their manors of him, or whom he waged.

In that forest had King Peter's father died in battle, and his eldest son also, therefore, being a man of peace, he rode therein but seldom, though his sons, the three eldest of them, had both ridden therein & ran therefrom valiantly. As for Ralph the youngest, his father would not have him ride the Wood Debateable as yet.

NOW CAME THOSE young men to the Want/way, and found their father sitting there on a heap of stones, and over against him eight horses, four destriers and four hackneys, and four squires withal. So they came and stood before their father, waiting for his word, & wondering what it would be. Now spake King Peter: "Fair sons, ye would go on all adventure to seek a wider land, and a more stirring life than ye may get of me at home: so be it! But I have bethought me, that, since I am growing old and past the age of getting children, one of you, my sons, must abide at home to cherish me and your mother, & to lead our carls in war if trouble falleth upon us. Now I know not how to choose by mine own wit which of you shall shall ride and which abide. For so it is that ye are diverse of your conditions; but the evil conditions which one of you lacks the other hath, & the valiancy which one hath the other lacks. Blaise is wise and prudent, but no great man

of his hands. Hugh is a stout rider & lifter, but headstrong and foolhardy, and over bounteous a skinker; and Gregory is courteous & many-worded, but sluggish in deed; though I will not call him a dastard. As for Ralph, he is fair to look on, and peradventure he may be as wise as Blaise, as valiant as Hugh, & as smooth-tongued as Gregory; but of all this we know little or nothing, whereas he is but young & untried. Yet may he do better than you others, and I deem that he will do so. All things considered, then, I say, I know not how to choose between you, my sons; so let luck choose for me, and ye shall draw cuts for your roads; and he that draweth longest shall go north, & the next longest shall go east, and the third straw shall send the drawer west; but as to him who draweth the shortest cut, he shall go nowhither but back again to my house, there to abide with me the chances and changes of life; and it is most like that this one shall sit in my chair when I am gone, and be called King of Upmeads. Now, my sons, doth this ordinance please you? for if so be it doth not, then may ye all abide at home, and eat of my meat, and drink of my cup, but little chided either for sloth or misdoing, even as it hath been aforetime."

THE young men looked at one another, & Blaise answered and said: "Sir, as for me I say we will do after your commandment, to take what road luck may show us or to turn back home again." They all yea said this, one after the other; and then King Peter said: "Now before I draw the cuts, I shall tell you that I have appointed the squires to go with each one of you. Richard the Red shall go with Blaise; for though he be somewhat stricken in years, and wise, yet is he a fierce carle & a doughty, and knoweth well all feats of arms. Lancelot Longtongue shall be squire to Hugh; for he is good of seeming and can all courtesy, and knoweth logic (though it be of the law & not of the schools), yet is he a proper man of his hands; as needs must he be who followeth Hugh; for where is Hugh, there is trouble & debate. Clement the Black shall serve Gregory: for he is a careful carle, & speaketh one word to every ten deeds that he doeth; whether they be done with point & edge or with the hammer in the stithy. Lastly, I have none left to follow thee, Ralph, save Nicholas Long-shanks; but though he hath more words than I have, yet hath he more wisdom, and is a man lettered and far-travelled, and loveth our house right well. How

say ye, sons, is this to your liking?" They all said "yea." Then quoth the king: "Nicholas, bring hither the straws ready dight, & I will give them my sons to draw." So each young man came up in turn & drew; and King Peter laid the straws together and looked at them, and said "Thus it is, Hugh goeth north with Lancelot; Gregory westward with Clement." He stayed a moment and then said: "Blaise fareth eastward & Richard with him. As for thee, Ralph my dear son, thou shalt back with me and abide in my house and I shall see thee day by day; and thou shalt help me to live my last years happily in all honour; and thy love shall be my hope, & thy valiancy my stay." Therewith he arose & threw his arm about the young man's neck; but he shrank away a little from his father, & his face grew troubled; and King Peter noted that, & his countenance fell, and he said "Nay nay, my son; grudge not thy brethren the chances of the road, & the ill-hap of the battle. Here at least for thee is the bounteous board and the full cup, and the love of kindred & well-willers, and the fellowship of the folk. O well is thee, my son, & happy shalt thou be!" But the young man knit his brows & said no word in answer. Then came forward those three brethren who were to fare at all adventure, and they stood before the old man saying nought. Then he laughed and said: "O ho, my sons! Here in Upmeads have ye all ye need without money, but when ye fare in the outlands ye need money; is it not a lack of yours that your pouches be bare? Abide, for I have seen to it." Therewith he drew out of his pouch three little bags, & said: "Take ye each one of these; for therein is all that my treasury may shed as now. In each of these is there coined money, both white and red, and some deal of gold uncoined, and of rings and brooches a few, and by estimation there is in each bag the same value reckoned in lawful silver of Upmeads & the Wolds and the Overhill-Countries. Take ye each what there is and do the best ye may therewith." Then each took his bag, and kissed and embraced his father; and they kissed Ralph and each other, and so got to horse & departed with their squires, going softly because of the hot sun. But Nicholas slowly mounted his hackney and led Ralph's war-horse with him home again to King Peter's house, which was called the High House of Upmeads.

Chapter II. Ralph goeth back home to the High House

RALPH and King Peter walked slowly home together, and as they went King Peter fell to telling of how in his young days he rode in the Wood Debateable, & was belated there all alone, & happed upon men who were outlaws and wolves' heads, and feared for his life; but they treated him kindly, and honoured him, and saw him safe on his way in the morning. So that never thereafter would he be art and part with those who hunted outlaws to slay them. "For," said he, "it is with these men as with others that they make prey of folk; yet these for the most part prey on the rich, and the lawful prey on the poor. Otherwise, it is with these wolves' heads as with lords & knights & franklins, that as there be bad amongst them, so also there be good; & the good ones I happed on, and so may another man" Hereto paid Ralph little heed at that time, since he had heard the tale & its morality before, & that more than once; & moreover his mind was set upon his own matters, and these was he pondering. Albeit, perchance, the words abode with him. So came they to the House, and Ralph's mother, who was a noble dame, and well liking as for her years, which were but little over fifty, stood in the hall-door to see which of her sons should come back to her, and when she saw them coming together, she went up to them, & cast her arms about Ralph & kissed him & caressed him, being exceeding glad that it was he and not one of the others who had returned to dwell with them; for he was her best beloved, as was little marvel, seeing that he was by far the fairest and the most loving. But Ralph's face grew troubled again in his mother's arms, for he loved her exceeding well; & forsooth he loved the whole house and all that dwelt there, down to the turnspit dogs in the chimney ingle, & the martins that nested in the earthen bottles, which when he was little he had seen his mother put up in the eaves of the outbowers: but now, love or no love, the spur was in his side, and he must needs hasten as fate would have him. However, when he had disentangled himself from his mother's caresses, he enforced himself to keep a cheerful countenance, & upheld it the whole evening through, and was by seeming merry at supper, and went to bed singing.

Chapter III. Ralph cometh to the Cheaping-town

HE slept in an upper chamber in a turret of the House, which chamber was his own, and none might meddle with it. There the next day he awoke in the dawning, and arose & clad himself, and took his war-gear & his sword and spear, & so bore all away without doors to the side of the ford in that ingle of the river, and laid it for a while in a little willow-copse, so that no chance-comer might see it; then he went back to the stable of the House and took his destrier from the stall (it was a dapple-grey horse called Falcon, and was right good,) and brought him down to the said willow-copse, & tied him to a tree till he had armed himself amongst the willows, whence he came forth presently as brisk-looking & likely a man-at-arms as you might see on a summer day. Then he clomb up into the saddle, and went his ways splashing across the ford, before the sun had arisen, while the throstle-cocks were yet amidst their first song.

THENCE he rode a little trot south-away; and by then the sun was up he was without the bounds of Upmeads; albeit in the land thereabout dwelt none who were not friends to King Peter and his sons: & that was well, for now were folk stirring and were abroad in the fields; as a band of carles going with their scythes to the hay-field; or a maiden with her milking-pails going to her kine, bare-foot through the seeding grass; or a company of noisy little lads on their way to the nearest pool of the stream that they might bathe in the warm morning after the warm night. All these and more knew him and his armour & Falcon his horse, and gave him the sele of the day, and he was nowise troubled at meeting them; for besides that they thought it no wonder to meet one of the lords of Upmeads going armed about his errands, their own errands were close at home, and it was little likely that they should go that day so far as to Upmeads water, seeing that it ran through the meadows a half score miles to the northward.

SO Ralph rode on, and came into the high road that led one way back again into Upmeads, & crossed the water by a fair bridge late builded between King Peter and a house of Canons on the north side, and the other way into a good cheaping-town hight Wulstead, beyond which

Ralph knew little of the world which lay to the south, & seemed to him a wondrous place, full of fair things and marvellous adventures.

So he rode till he came into the town when the fair morning was still young, the first mass over, and maids gathered about the fountain amidst the market place, and two or three dames sitting under the buttercross. Ralph rode straight up to the house of a man whom he knew, and had often given him guesting there, & he himself was not seldom seen in the High House of Upmeads. This man was a merchant, who went and came betwixt men's houses, & bought and sold many things needful and pleasant to folk, and King Peter dealt with him much & often. Now he stood in the door of his house, which was new and goodly, sniffing the sweet scents which the morning wind bore into the town; he was clad in a goodly long gown of grey welted with silver, of thin cloth and meet for the summer-tide; for little he wrought with his hands, but much with his tongue; he was a man of forty summers, ruddy-faced & black-bearded, & he was called Clement Chapman.

When he saw Ralph he smiled kindly on him, and came and held his stirrup as he lighted down, and said: "Welcome, lord! Art thou come to give me a message, and eat and drink in a poor huckster's house, & thou armed so gallantly?"

Ralph laughed merrily, for he was hungry, & he said: "Yea, I will eat and drink with thee and kiss my gossip, & go my ways."

THEREWITH the carle led him into the house; & if it were goodly without, within it was better. For there was a fair chamber panelled with wainscot well carven, and a cupboard of no sorry vessels of silver and latten: the chairs and stools as fair as might be; no king's might be better: the windows were glazed, & there were flowers & knots and posies in them; and the bed was hung with goodly web from over sea such as the soldan useth. Also, whereas the chapman's ware-bowers were hard by the chamber there was a pleasant mingled smell therefrom floating about. The table was set with meat and drink & vessel of pewter and earth, all fair and good; and thereby stood the chapman's wife, a very goodly woman of two-score years, who had held Ralph at the fount when she was a slim damsel new wedded; for she was come of no mean kindred of the Kingdom

of Upmeads: her name was Dame Katherine. Now she kissed Ralph's cheek friendly, & said: "Welcome, gossip! thou art here in good time to break thy fast; and we will give thee a trim dinner thereafter, when thou hast been here and there in the town & done thine errand; and then shalt thou drink a cup & sing me a song, & so home again in the cool of the evening".

RALPH seemed a little troubled at her word, & he said: "Nay, gossip, though I thank thee for all these good things as though I had them, yet must I ride away south straightway after I have breakfasted, and said one word to the goodman. Goodman, how call ye the next town southward, & how far is it thither?" Quoth Clement: "My son, what hast thou to do with riding south? As thou wottest, going hence south ye must presently ride the hill-country; & that is no safe journey for a lonely man, even if he be a doughty knight like to thee, lord". Said Ralph, reddening withal: "I have an errand that way". "An errand of King Peter's or thine own?" said Clement "Of King Peter's, if ye must wot," said Ralph. Clement were no chapman had he not seen that the lad was lying; so he said: "Fair lord, saving your worship, how would it be as to the speeding of King Peter's errand, if I brought thee before our mayor, & swore the peace against thee; so that I might keep thee in courteous prison till I had sent to thy father of thy whereabouts?". The young man turned red with anger; but ere he could speak Dame Katherine said sharply: "Hold thy peace, Clement! What hast thou to meddle or make in the matter? If our young lord hath will to ride out & see the world, why should we let him? Yea, why should his father let him, if it come to that? Take my word for it that my gossip shall go through the world and come back to those that love him, as goodly as he went forth. And hold! here is for a token thereof". Therewith she went to an ark that stood in the corner, and groped in the till thereof and brought out a little necklace of gold, and green & blue stones like a pair of beads; albeit neither pope nor priest had blessed them; and tied to the necklace was a little box of gold with something hidden therein. This gaud she gave to Ralph, & said to him: "Gossip, wear this about thy neck, & let no man take it from thee, and I think it will be salvation to thee in peril, and good luck

to thee in the time of questing; so that it shall be to thee as if thou hadst drunk of the WELL at the WORLD'S END"

"What is that water?" said Ralph, "and how may I find it?" "I know not rightly," she said, "but if a body might come by it, I hear say that it saveth from weariness & wounding and sickness; and it winneth love from all, and maybe life everlasting. Hast thou not heard tell of it, my husband?"

"Yea," said the chapman, "many times; and how that whoso hath drunk thereof hath the tongue that none may withstand, whether in buying or selling, or prevailing over the hearts of men in any wise. But as for its whereabouts, ye shall not find it in these parts. Men say that it is beyond the Dry Tree; & that is afar, God wot! But now, lord Ralph, I rede thee go back again this evening with Andrew, my nephew, for company: forsooth, he will do little less gainful than riding with thee to Upmeads than if he abide in Wulstead; for he is idle. But, my lord, take it not amiss that I spake about the mayor & the tipstaves; for it was but a jest, as thou mayest well wot."

Ralph's face cleared at that word, and he stood smiling, weighing the chaplet in his hand, but Dame Katherine said "Dear gossip, do it on speedily; for it is a gift from me unto thee: and from a gossip even king's sons may take a gift"

Quoth Ralph: "But is it lawful to wear it? is there no wizardry within it?" "Hearken to him!" she said, "& how like unto a man he speaketh; if there were a brawl in the street, he would strike in and ask no word thereof, not even which were the better side: whereas here is my falcon-chick frighted at a little gold box & a pair of Saracen beads" "Well," quoth Ralph, "the first holy man I meet shall bless them for me"

"That shall he not," said the dame, "that shall he not. Who wotteth what shall betide to thee or me if he do so? Come, do them on, and then to table! for seest thou not that the goodman is wearying for meat? and even thine eyes will shine the brighter for a mouthful, king's son and gossip."

She took him by the hand and did the beads on his neck, and kissed & fondled him before he sat down, while the goodman looked on, grinning rather sheepishly, but said nought to them; & only called on his boy to lead the destrier to stable. So when they were set down the chapman took up the

word where it had been dropped, & said: "So, Lord Ralph, thou must needs take to adventures, being, as thou deemest, full grown. That is all one as the duck taketh to water despite of the hen that hath hatched her. Well, it was not to be thought that Upmeads would hold you lords much longer. Or what is gone with my lords your brethren?"

SAID Ralph: "They have departed at all adventure, north, east, & west, each bearing our father's blessing and a bag of pennies. And to speak the truth, goodman, for I perceive I am no doctor at lying, my father and mother would have me stay at home when my brethren were gone, and that liketh me not; therefore am I come out to seek my luck in the world: for Upmeads is good for a star-gazer, maybe, or a simpler, or a priest, or a worthy good carle of the fields, but not for a king's son with the blood running hot in his veins. Or what sayest thou, gossip?" Quoth the dame: "I could weep for thy mother; but for thee nought at all. It is good that thou shouldest do thy will in the season of youth and the days of thy pleasure. Yea, & I deem that thou shalt come back again; and I am called somewhat foreseeing. Only look to it that thou keep the pretty thing that I have just given thee."

WELL," said the chapman, "this is fine talk about pleasure & the doing of one's will; nevertheless a whole skin is good wares though it be not to be cheapened in any market of the world. Now, lord, go thou where thou wilt, whether I say go or abide; and forsooth I am no man of King Peter's, that I should stay thee. As for the name of the next town, it is called High am-on-the-Way, and is a big town, plenteous of victuals, with strong walls & a castle, & a very rich abbey of monks: & there is peace within its walls, because the father-abbot wages a many men to guard him and his, & to uphold his rights against all comers; wherein he doth wisely, and also well. For much folk flock unto his town and live well therein; & there is great recourse of chapmen thither. No better market is there betwixt this & Babylon. Well, Sir Ralph, I rede thee if thou comest unhurt to Higham-on-the-Way, go no further for this time, but take service with the lord abbot, and be one of his men of war; thou may'st then become his captain, if thou shouldest live; which would be no bad adventure for one who cometh from Upmeads." Ralph looked no brighter for

this word, & he answered nought to it: but said presently ❧ "And what is to be looked for beyond Higham if one goeth further? Dost thou know the land any further?" ❧ The carle smiled: "Yea forsooth, & beyond the wood & beyond it, & the lands beyond the further woods; and far away through them. I say not that I have been to the Dry Tree; but I have spoken to one who hath seen it; though he might not come by a draught of the Well at the World's End" ❧ Ralph's eyes flashed, & his cheeks reddened as he listened hereto; but he spake quietly: "Master Clement, how far dost thou make it to Higham on the Way ❧ "A matter of forty miles," said the Chapman; "because, as thou wottest, if ye ride south from hence, ye shall presently bring your nose up against the big downs, and must needs climb them at once; and when ye are at the top of Bear Hill, and look south away, ye shall see nought but downs on downs with never a road to call a road, and never a castle, or church, or homestead: nought but some shepherd's hut; or at the most the little house of a holy man with a little chapel thereby in some swelly of the chalk where the water hath trickled into a pool; for otherwise the place is waterless." Therewith he took a long pull at the tankard by his side, and went on: "Higham is beyond all that, and out into the fertile plain; & a little river hight Coldlake windeth about the meadows there; & it is a fair land; though, look you, the wool of the downs is good, good, good! I have foison of this year's fleeces with me. Ye shall raise none such in Upmeads."

RALPH sat silent a little, as if pondering, & then he started up and said: "Good master Clement, we have eaten thy meat & thank thee for that & other matters. Wilt thou now be kinder, & bid thy boy bring round Falcon our horse; for we have far to go, and must begone straight away." ❧ "Yea, lord," said Clement, "even so will I do." And he muttered under his breath: 'Thou talkest big, my lad, with thy 'we'; but thou art pressed lest Nicholas be here presently to fetch thee back; & to say sooth I would his hand were on thy shoulder even now." Then he spake aloud again & said: "I must now begone to my lads, and I will send one round with thy war horse. But take my rede, my lord, and become the man of the Abbot of St. Mary's of Higham, and all will be well" ❧ Therewith he edged himself out of the chamber, and the dame fell to making a

mighty clatter with the vessel and trenchers and cups on the board, while Ralph walked up & down the chamber, his war-gear jingling upon him. Presently the dame left her table-clatter and came up to Ralph & looked kindly into his face and said: "Gossip, hast thou perchance any money?" He flushed up red, & then his face fell; yet he spake gaily: "Yea, gossip. I have both white and red: there are three crowns of gold in my pouch, and a little flock of silver pennies: forsooth I say not as many as would reach from here to Upmeads, if they were laid one after the other" She smiled and patted his cheek, & said: "Thou art no very prudent child, king's son. But it comes into my mind that my master did not mean thee to go away empty-handed; else had he not departed and left us twain together" Therewith she went to the credence that stood in a corner, & opened a drawer therein & took out a little bag, & gave it into Ralph's hand, and said: "This is the gift of the gossip; and thou mayst take it without shame; all the more because if thy father had been a worser man, & a harder lord, he would have had more to give thee. But now thou hast as much or more as any one of thy brethren"

He took the bag smiling and shame-faced, but she looked on him fondly & said: "Now I know not whether I shall lay old Nicholas on thine heels when he cometh after thee, as come he will full surely; or whether I shall suffer the old sleuth-hound nose out thy slot of himself, as full surely he will get on to it" "Thou mightest tell him," said Ralph, "that I am gone to take service with the Abbot of St. Mary's of Higham: hah?" She laughed and said: "Wilt thou do so, lord, & follow the rede of that good man of mine, who thinketh himself as wise as Solomon?" Ralph smiled and answered her nothing "Well," she said, "I shall say what likes me when the hour is at hand. Lo, here! thine horse. Abide yet a moment of time, & then go whither thou needs must, like the wind of the summer day"

Therewith she went out of the chamber, and came back again with a scrip which she gave to Ralph, and said: "Herein is a flask of drink for the waterless country, and a little meat for the way. Fare thee well, gossip! Little did I look for it when I rose up this morning and nothing irked me save the dulness of our town, & the littleness of men's doings therein, that I should have to cut off a

piece of my life from me this morning, & say, farewell gossip, as now again I do."

THEREWITH she kissed him on either cheek and embraced him; and it might be said of her & him that she let him go thereafter; for though as aforesaid he loved her, and praised her kindness, he scarce understood the eagerness of her love for him; whereas moreover she saw him not so often betwixt Upmeads and Wulstead: and belike she herself scarce understood it. Albeit she was a childless woman. So when he had got to horse, she watched him riding a moment, & saw how he waved his hand to her as he turned the corner of the market-place and how a knot of lads & lasses stood staring on him after she lost sight of him. Then she turned her back into the chamber and laid her head on the table and wept. Then came in the goodman quietly and stood by her and she heeded him not. He stood grinning curiously on her awhile, and then laid his hand on her shoulder, and said as she raised her face to him:

SWEETHEART, it availeth nought; when thou wert young & exceeding fair, he was but a little babe, and thou wert looking in those days to have babes of thine own; and then it was too soon: and now that he is such a beauteous young man, and a king's son withal, & thou art wedded to a careful carle of no weak heart, and thou thyself art more than two-score years old, it is too late. Yet thou didst well to give our lord the money. Lo! here is wherewithal to fill up the lack in thy chest; & here is a toy for thee in place of the pair of beads thou gavest him; and I bid thee look on it as if I had given him my share of the money and the beads". She turned to Clement, and took the bag of money, and the chaplet which he held out to her, and she said: "God wot thou art no ill man, my husband, but would God I had a son like to him!". She still wept somewhat; but the chapman said: "Let it rest there, sweetheart! let it rest there! It may be a year or twain before thou seest him again: & then belike he shall be come back with some woman whom he loves better than any other; and who knows but in a way he may deem himself our son. Meanwhile thou hast done well, sweetheart, so be glad." Therewith he kissed her & went his ways to his merchandise, and she to the ordering of her house, grieved but not unhappy.

Chapter IV. Ralph rideth the Downs

AS for Ralph, he rode on with a merry heart, & presently came to an end of the plain country, & the great downs rose up before him with a white road winding up to the top of them. Just before the slopes began to rise was a little thorp beside a stream, & thereby a fair church and a little house of Canons: so Ralph rode toward the church to see if therein were an altar of St. Nicholas, who was his good lord and patron, that he might ask of him a blessing on his journey. But as he came up to the churchyard-gate he saw a great black horse tied thereto, as if abiding some one; and as he lighted down from his saddle he saw a man coming hastily from out the church-door and striding swiftly toward the said gate. He was a big man, & armed; for he had a bright steel sallet on his head, which covered his face all save the end of his chin; and plates he had on his legs and arms. He wore a green coat over his armour, & thereon was wrought in gold an image of a tree leafless: he had a little steel axe about his neck, and a great sword hung by his side. Ralph stood looking on him with his hand on the latch of the gate, but when the man came thereto he tore it open roughly and shoved through at once, driving Ralph back, so that he well nigh overset him, & so sprang to his horse & swung himself into the saddle, just as Ralph steadied himself and ruffled up to him, half drawing his sword from the scabbard the while. But the man-at-arms cried out: "Put it back, put it back! If thou must needs deal with every man that shoveth thee in his haste, thy life is like to be but short". He was settling himself in his saddle as he spoke, & now he shook his rein, and rode off speedily toward the hill-road. But when he was so far off that Ralph might but see his face e'en as a piece of reddish colour, he reined up for a moment of time and turning round in his saddle lifted up his sallet and left his face bare, and cried out as if to Ralph: "The first time!" And then let the head-piece fall again, & set spurs to his horse and gallopped away. Ralph stood looking at him as he got smaller on the long white road, & wondering what this might mean & how the unknown man should know him, if he did know him. But pre-

sently he let his wonder run off him, & went his ways into the church, wherein he found his good lord and friend St. Nicholas, and so said a paternoster before his altar, & besought his help, and made his offering; & then departed and gat to horse again, and rode softly the way to the downs, for the day was hot.

THE way was steep and winding, with a hollow cup of the hills below it, and above it a bent so steep that Ralph could see but a few yards of it on his left hand; but when he came to the hill's brow & could look down on the said bent, he saw strange figures on the face thereof, done by cutting away the turf that the chalk might show clear. A tree with leaves was done on that hill-side, & on either hand of it a beast like a bear ramping up against the tree; & these signs were very ancient. This hill-side carving could not be seen from the thorp beneath, which was called Netherton, because the bent looked westward down into the hollow of the hill above-said; but from nigher to Wulstead they were clear to see, and Ralph had often beheld them, but never so nigh: and that hill was called after them Bear Hill. At the top of it was an earth-work of the ancient folk, which also was called Bear Castle. And now Ralph rode over the hill's brow into it; for the walls had been beaten down in places long and long ago. Now he rode up the wall, and at the topmost of it turned & looked aback on the blue country which he had ridden through stretching many a league below & tried if he could pick out Upmeads from amongst the diverse wealth of the summer land: but Upmeads Water was hidden, & he could see nothing to be sure of to tell him whereabouts the High House stood; yet he deemed that he could make out the Debateable Wood & the hills behind it well enough. Then he turned his horse about, and had the down-country before him; long lines of hills to wit, one rising behind the other like the waves of a somewhat quiet sea: no trees thereon, nor houses that he might see thence; nought but a green road that went waving up & down before him greener than the main face of the slopes. He looked at it all for a minute or two as the south-west wind went past his ears, and played a strange tune on the innumerable stems of the bents, & the hard-stalked blossoms, to which the bees sang counterpoint. Then the heart arose within him, and he drew his sword from the scabbard, and waved it about his

head, and shook it toward the south, & cried out: "Now, welcome world, and be thou blessed from one end to the other, from the ocean sea to the uttermost mountains!" ❧ A while he held the white steel in his fist, & then sheathed the blade, & rode down soberly over the turf bridge across the ancient fosse, and so came on to the green road made many ages before by an ancient people, and so trotted south along fair and softly.

LITTLE is to be told of his journey through the downs: as he topped a low hill whereon were seven grave-mounds of the ancient folk in a row, he came on a shepherd lying amidst of his sheep: the man sprang to his feet when he heard horse-hoofs anigh him and saw the glint of steel, and he set his hand to a short spear which lay by him; but when he saw nought but Ralph, and heard how he gave him the sele of the day, he nodded his head in a friendly way, though he said nought in salutation; for the loneliness of the downs made the speech slow within him. ❧ Again some two miles further on Ralph met a flock of sheep coming down a bent which the road climbed, & with them were three men, their drovers, & they drew nigh him as he was amidst of the sheep, so that he could scarce see the way. Each of these three had a weapon; one a pole-axe, another a long spear, & the third a flail jointed and bound with iron, and an anlace hanging at his girdle. So they stood in the way and hailed him when the sheep were gone past; and the man with the spear asked him whither away. "I am turned toward Higham-on-the-Way," quoth he; "& how many miles shall I ride ere I get there?" ❧ Said one of them: "Little less than twenty, lord." Now it was past noon two hours, and the day was hot; so whereas the faces of the men looked kind and friendly, albeit somewhat rugged, he lighted down from his horse & sat down by the wayside, & drew his bottle of good wine from out of his wallet, & asked the men if they were in haste. "Nay, master," said he of the pole-axe, while all eyes turned to the bottle, "HE has gone by too long; & will neither meddle with us, nor may we deal with him" ❧ "Well then," quoth Ralph, "there is time for bever. Have ye ought of a cup, that we may drink to each other?" ❧ "Yea," said the carle with the anlace, "that have I." Therewith he drew from his pouch a ram's horn rimmed with silver, and held it up, and said as if he were speaking to it: "Now, Thirly, rejoice! for ye

shall have lord's wine poured into thy maw" ❧ Therewith he held it out toward Ralph, who laughed and filled it up, & filled for himself a little silver cup which he carried, and said: "To you, shepherds! Much wool and little cry!" And he drank withal. "And I," quoth the man with the horn, "call this health; Much cry & little wool!" ❧ "Well, well, how mean ye by that, Greasy Wat?" said the man with the spear, taking the horn as he spake; "that is but a poor wish for a lord that drink-eth out of our cup." Said Wat: "Why, neighbour, why! thy wit is none too hasty. The wool that a knight sheareth is war & battle; that is wounding and death; but the cry is the talk & boasting and minstrelsy that goeth before all this. Which is the best wish to wish him? the wounds and the death, or the fore-rumour and stir thereof which hurteth no man?" Ralph laughed thereat, and was merry & blithe with them; but the spearman, who was an old man, said: "For all Wat sayeth, lord, and his japes, ye must not misdeem of us that we shepherds of the Downs can do nought but run to ales & feasts, & that we are but pot-valiant: maybe thou thyself mayst live to see things go otherwise: & in that day may we have such as thee for captain. Now, fair lord, I drink to thy crown of valour, and thy good luck; & we thank thee for the wine & yet more for the blithe fellowship." ❧ So Ralph filled up the ram's horn till Dame Katherine's good island wine was well-nigh spent; and at last he said: "Now, my masters, I must to horse; but I pray you tell or we depart, what did ye mean when ye said that HE had gone past? Who is HE?" ❧ The merry faces of the men changed at his word, & they looked in each other's faces, till at last the old spearman answered him: "Fair lord, these things we have little will to talk about: for we be poor men with no master to fleece us, and no lord to help us: also we be folk unlearned & unlettered, & from our way of life, whereas we dwell in the wilderness, we seldom come within the doors of a church. But whereas we have drunk with thee, who seemest to be a man of lineage, and thou hast been blithe with us, we will tell thee that we have seen one riding south along the Greenway, clad in a coat as green as the way, with the leafless tree done on his breast. So nigh to him we were that we heard his cry as he sped along, as ye may hear the lapwing whining; for he said: 'POINT & EDGE, POINT AND EDGE! THE RED WATER AMIDST OF THE

HILLS!' In my lifetime such a man hath, to my knowledge, been seen thrice before; & after each sight of him followed evil days and the death of men. Moreover this is the Eve of St. John, & we deem the token the worse therefor. Or how deemest thou?" Ralph stood silent awhile; for he was thinking of the big man whom he had met at the churchyard gate, & all this tale seemed wonderful to him. But at last he said: "I cannot tell what there is in it; herein am I no help to you. To-day I am but little; though I may one day be great. Yet this may I do for you; to-morrow will I let sing a mass in St. Mary's Church on your behoof. And hereafter, if I wax as my will is, and I come to be lord in these lands, I will look to it to do what a good lord should do for the shepherds of the Downs, so that they may live well, and die in good hope. So may the Mother of God help me at need!" Said the old shepherd: "Thou hast sworn an oath, and it is a good oath, and well sworn. Now if thou dost as thou swearest, words can but little thanks, yet deeds may. Wherefore if ever thou comest back hither, & art in such need that a throng of men may help thee therein; then let light a great fire upon each corner of the topmost wall of Bear Castle, & call to mind this watchword: 'SMITE ASIDE THE AXE, O BEAR-FATHER,' & then shalt thou see what shall betide thee for thy good-hap: farewell now, with the saints to aid!" Ralph bade them live well and hail, and mounted his horse and rode off down the Greenway, and as he rode the shepherds waved their weapons to him in token of good-will.

Chapter V. Ralph cometh to Higham-on-the-Way

THOUGHT more befell Ralph to tell of till he came to the end of the Downs & saw Higham lying below him overlooked by a white castle on a knoll & with a river lapping it about & winding on through its fair green meadows even as Clement had told. From amidst its houses rose up three towers of churches above their leaden roofs, and high above all, long and great, the Abbey Church; & now was the low sun glittering on its gilded vanes and the wings of the angels high upon the battlements. So Ralph rode down the slopes and was brisk about it, for it was drawing toward sunset, & he knew not at what hour they shut their gates. The road was steep and winding, & it was the more part of an hour ere he came to

the gate, which was open & like to be yet, for many folk were thronging in, which throng also had hindered him soon after he came into the plain country. The gate was fair & strong, but Ralph saw no men-at-arms about it that evening. He rode into the street unquestioned, & therein was the throng great of people clad in fair & gay attire; and presently Ralph called to mind that this was St. John's Eve, so that he knew that there was some feast toward.

AT last the throng was so thick that he was stayed by it; & therewithal a religious who was beside him and thrust up against his horse, turned to him & gave him good even, and said: "By thy weapons and gear thou art a stranger here in our burg, Sir Knight?" "So it is," said Ralph. "And whither away?" said the monk; "hast thou some kinsman or friend in the town?" "Nay," said Ralph, "I seek a good hostelry where I may abide the night for my money." The monk shook his head and said: "See ye the folk? It is holiday time, & mid-summer after haysel. Ye shall scarce get lodging outside our house. But what then? Come thou thither straightway and have harbour of the best, & see our prior, who loveth young & brisk men-at-arms like to thee. Lo now! the throng openeth a little; I will walk by thy bridle & lead thee the shortest road thither." Ralph gainsaid him not, & they bored through the throng of the street till they came into the market-square, which was very great and clean, paved with stones all over: tall & fair houses rose up on three sides of it, & on the fourth was the Great Church which made those houses seem but low: most of it was new-built, for the lord Abbot that then was, though he had not begun it, had taken the work up from his forerunner and had pushed it forward all he might; for he was very rich, and an open-handed man. Like dark gold it showed under the evening sun and the painted and gilded imagery shone like jewels upon it "Yea," said the monk, as he noted Ralph's wonder at this wonder; "a most goodly house it is, & happy shall they be that dwell there."

THEREWITH he led Ralph on, turning aside through the great square. Ralph saw that there were many folk therein, but it was too big to be thronged thick with them. Amidst of it was now a great pile of wood hung about with flowers, and hard by it a stage built up with hangings of rich cloth on one

side thereof. He asked the monk what this might mean, and he told him the wood was for the Midsummer bale-fire, & the stage for the show that should come thereafter. So the brother led Ralph down a lane to the south of the great west door, and along the side of the minster & so came to the Abbey gate, and there was Ralph well greeted, & had all things given him which were due to a good knight; and then was he brought into the Guest-hall, a very fair chamber, which was now full of men of all degrees. He was shown to a seat on the dais within two of the sub-prior's, and beside him sat an honourable lord, a vassal of St. Mary's. So was supper served well and abundantly: the meat & drink was of the best, and the vessel and all the plenishing was as good as might be; and the walls of that chamber were hung with noble arras-cloth picturing the Pilgrimage of the Soul of Man.

Every man there who spoke with Ralph, & they were many, was exceeding courteous to him; and he heard much talk about him of the wealth of the lands of St. Mary's at Higham, & how it was flourishing; & of the Abbot how mighty he was, so that he might do what he would, and that his will was to help & to give, and be blithe with all men: and folk told of turmoil & war in other lands, & praised the peace of Higham-on-the-Way. Ralph listened to all this, and smiled, & said to himself that to another man this might well be the end of his journey for that time; but for him all this peace and well-being was not enough; for though it were a richer land than Upmeads, yet to the peace and the quiet he was well used, & he had come forth not for the winning of fatter peace, but to try what new thing his youth and his might & his high hope & his good hap might accomplish.

So when the supper was over, and the wine and spices had been brought, the Guest-hall began to thin somewhat, and the brother who had erst brought Ralph thither came to him & said: "Fair lord, it were nowise ill if ye went forth, as others of our guests have done to see the deeds of Midsummer Eve that shall be done in the great square in honour of Holy John; for our manner therein at Higham has been much thought of. Look, my son!" He pointed to the windows of the hall therewith, & lo! they grew yellow & bright with some fire without, as if a new fiery day had been born out of the dusk of the sum-

mer night; for the light that shone through the windows out/did the candle/light in the hall. Ralph started thereat & laid his right hand to the place of his sword, which indeed he had left with the chamberlain; but the monk laughed & said: "Fear nothing, lord; there is no foeman in Higham: come now, lest thou be belated of the show" ❧ So he led Ralph forth, & into the square, where there was a space appointed for the brethren and for their guests to see the plays; & the square was now so full of folk that it seemed like as if there were no one man in the streets, which were erewhile so throng/ed. There were rows of men/at/arms in bright armour also to keep the folk in their places, like as hurdles pen the sheep up; howbeit they were nowise rough with folk, but humble & courteous. Many & many were the torches & cressets burning steadily in the calm air, so that, as aforesaid, night was turned into day. But on the scaffold aforesaid were standing bright & gay figures whose names or what they were Ralph had no time to ask.

NOW the bells began to clash from the great tower of the minster, and in a little while they had clashed themselves into order & rang clear & tuneably for a space; & while they were ringing, lo! those gay/clad people departed from the scaffold, & a canvas painted like a mountain/side, rocky & with caves therein, was drawn up at the back of it. Then came thereon one clad like a king holding a fair maiden by the hand, and with him was a dame richly clad and with a crown on her head. So these two kissed the maiden, & lamented over her, and went their ways, and the maiden left alone sat down up on a rock & covered up her face and wept; & while Ralph wondered what this might mean or what grieved the maiden, there came creeping, as it were from out of a cranny of the rocks, a worm huge/headed & covered over with scales that glittered in the torch/light. Then Ralph sprang up in his place, for he feared for the maiden that the worm would devour her: but the monk who sat by him pulled him down by the skirt, and laughed and said: "Sit still, lord! for the champion also has been provided." ❧

Then Ralph sat down again somewhat abashed and looked on; yet was his heart in his mouth the while. And so while the maiden stood as one astonied before the worm, who gaped upon her with wide open mouth, there came forth from

a cleft in the rocks a goodly knight who bore silver, a red cross; and he had his sword in his hand, and he fell upon the worm to smite him; & the worm ramped upagainst him, and there was battle betwixt them, while the maiden knelt anigh with her hands clasped together ❧ Then Ralph knew that this was a play of the fight of St. George with the worm; so he sat silent till the champion had smitten off the worm's head and had come to the maiden and kissed and embraced her, and shown her the grisly head. Then presently came many folk on to the scaffold, to wit, the king and queen who were the father and mother of the maiden, and a bishop clad in very fair vestments, & knights withal; and they stood about St. George and the maiden, and with them were minstrels who fell to playing upon harps & fiddles; while othersome fell to singing a sweet song in honour of St. George, and the maiden delivered ❧ So when it was all done, the monk said: "This play is set forth by the men-at-arms of our lord Abbot, who have great devotion toward St. George, and he is their friend and their good lord. But hereafter will be other plays, of wild men & their feasting in the woods in the Golden Age of the world; & that is done by the scribes & the limners. And after that will be a pageant of St. Agnes ordered by the clothiers & the webbers, which be both many and deft in this good town. Albeit thou art a young man, and hast ridden far to-day belike, and mayhappen thou wilt not be able to endure it: so it may be well to bring thee out of this throng straightway. Moreover, I have bethought me, that there is much of what is presently to come which we shall see better from the minster roof, or even it may be from the tower: wilt thou come then?"

RALPH had liefer have sat there & seen all the plays to the end, for they seemed to him exceeding fair, and like to ravish the soul from the body; howbeit, being shamefaced, he knew not how to gainsay the brother, who took him by the hand, and led him through the press to the west front of the minster, where on the north side was a little door in a nook. So they went up a stair therein a good way till they came into a gallery over the western door; & looking forth thence Ralph deemed that he could have seen a long way had daylight been, for it was higher than the tops of the highest houses ❧ So there they abode a space look-

ing down on the square & its throng, & the bells, which had been ringing when they came up, now ceased a while. But presently there arose great shouts and clamour amongst the folk below, and they could see men with torches drawing near to the pile of wood, and then all of a sudden shot up from it a great spiring flame, and all the people shouted together, while the bells broke out again over their heads. Then the brother pointed aloof with his finger and said: "Lo you! fair lord, how bale speaks to bale all along the headlands of the down-country, & down below there in the thorps by the river!"

Forsooth Ralph saw fire after fire break out to the westward; and the brother said: "And if we stood over the high altar & looked east, ye would see more of such fires and many more; and all these bales are piled up & lighted by vassals & villeins of my lord Abbot; now tonight they are but mere Midsummer bale-fires; but doubt ye not that if there came war into the land each one of these bales would mean at least half a score of stout men, archers and men-at-arms, all ready to serve their lord at all adventure. All this the tyrants round about, that hate Holy Church and oppress the poor, know full well; therefore we live in peace in these lands"

Ralph hearkened, but said nought; for amidst all this flashing of fire and flame, and the crying out of folk, and the measured clash of the bells so near him, his thought was confused, & he had no words ready to hand. But the monk turned from the parapet and looked him full in the face & said to him: "Thou art a fair young man, & a strong, & of gentle blood as I deem; & thou seemest to me to have a lucky look in thine eyes: now I tell thee that if thou wert to take service with my lord Abbot thou shouldest never rue it. Yea, why shouldest thou not wax in his service & become his Captain of Captains, which is an office meet for kings?"

Ralph looked on him, but answered nought, for he could not gather his thoughts for an answer; and the brother said: "Think of it, I bid thee, fair young lord; & be sure that nowhere shalt thou have a better livelihood, not even wert thou a king's son; for the children of my lord Abbot are such that none dareth to do them any displeasure; neither is any overlord as good as is Holy Church"

"Yea," said Ralph, "doubtless thou sayest sooth; yet I wot not that I am come forth

to seek a master." Said the brother: "Nay, do but see the lord Abbot, as thou mayst do to-morrow, if thou wilt." "I would have his blessing," said Ralph. "No less shalt thou have," said the brother; "but look you down yonder; for I can see tokens that my lord is even now coming forth" ❧ Ralph looked down & beheld the folk parting to right and left, and a lane made amidst the throng, guarded by men-at-arms mingled with the crossbearers & brethren; & the sound of trumpets blared forth over the noises of the throng ❧

"If the lord Abbot cometh," said Ralph, "I were fain of his blessing to-night before I go sleep: therefore go we down straightway that I may kneel before him with the rest" ❧

"What!" said the monk, "Wilt thou, my lord, kneel amongst all these burgesses and vavasors when thou mightest see the Abbot in his own chamber face to face alone with him?" "Father," said Ralph, "I am no great man, & I must needs depart betimes to-morrow; for I perceive that here are things too mighty & over-mastering for such as I be." "Well," said the monk, "yet mayst thou come back again; so at present I will make no more words about it" ❧

So they went down, and came out amidst of the throng, above which the bale still flared high, making the summer night as light as day. The brother made way for Ralph, so that they stood in the front row of folk: they had not been there one minute ere they heard the sound of the brethren singing, & the Abbot came forth out of the lane that went down to the gate. Then all folk went down upon their knees & thus abode him. Right so Ralph deemed that he felt some one pull his sleeve, but in such a throng that was nought of a wonder; howbeit, he turned & looked to his left, whence came the tug, and saw kneeling beside him a tall man-at-arms, who bore a sallet on his head in such wise that it covered all his face save the point of his chin. Then Ralph bethought him of the man of the leafless tree, & he looked to see what armoury the man bore on his coat; but he had nothing save a loose frock of white linen over his hauberk. Nevertheless, he heard a voice in his ear, which said: "The second time!" whereon he deemed that it was verily that same man: yet had he nought to do to lay hold on him, & he might not speak with him, for even therewith came the Abbot in garments all of gold, going afoot under a canopy of baude-

kyn, with the precious mitre on his head, and the crozier borne before him, as if he had been a patriarch: for he was an exceeding mighty lord. Ralph looked hard on him as he passed by, blessing the folk with upraised hand; & he saw that he was a tall spare man, clean-shaven, & thin-faced; but no old man, belike scarce of fifty winters. Ralph caught his eye & he smiled on the goodly young man so kindly, that for a moment Ralph deemed that he would dwell in St. Mary's House for a little while: for, thought he, if my father, or Nicholas, hear of me therein, they must even let me alone to abide here. There with the Abbot went forth to his place, and sat him under a goodly cloth of estate, and folk stood up again; but when Ralph looked for the man in the sallet he could see nought of him. Now when the Abbot was set down, men made a clear ring round about the bale, and there came into the said ring twelve young men, each clad in nought save a goat-skin, and with garlands of leaves & flowers about their middles: they had with them a wheel done about with straw & hemp payed with pitch and brimstone. They set fire to the same, and then trundled it blazing round about the bale twelve times. Then came to them twelve damsels clad in such-like guise as the young men: then both bands, the young men and the maidens, drew near to the bale, which was now burning low, & stood about it and so joined hands, & so danced round it a while, & meantime the fiddles played an uncouth tune merrily. Then they sundered, and each couple of men and maids leapt backward and forward over the fire; & when they had all leapt, came forward men with buckets of water which they cast over the dancers till it ran down them in streams. Then was all the throng mingled together, and folk trod the embers of the bale under foot, and scattered them hither and thither all over the square. All this while men were going about with pitchers of wine & ale, & other good drinks; and every man drank freely what he would, and there was the greatest game and joyance.

BUT now was Ralph exceeding weary, and he said: "Father, mightest thou lead me out of this throng, and show me some lair where I may sleep in peace, I would thank thee blithely". As he spake there sounded a great horn over the square, & the Abbot rose in his place and blessed all the people once more.

Then said the monk: "Come

then, fair field-lord, now shalt thou have thy will of bed." And he laughed therewith, & drew Ralph out of the throng and brought him into the Abbey, and into a fair little chamber, on the wall whereof was pictured St. Christopher, & St. Julian the lord & friend of wayfarers. Then he brought Ralph the wine and spices, and gave him good-night, and went his ways. As Ralph put the raiment from off him, he said to himself.

A long day forsooth, so long that I should have thought no day could have held all that has befallen me. So many strange things have I seen, that surely my dreams shall be full of them; for even now I seem to see them, though I waken. So he lay down in his bed & slept, & dreamed that he was fishing with an angle in a deep of Upmeads Water; and he caught many fish; but after a while whatsoever he caught was but of gilded paper stuffed with wool, and at last the water itself was gone, & he was casting his angle on to a dry road. Therewith he awoke & saw that day was dawning, & heard the minster clock strike three, and heard the thrushes singing their first song in the Prior's garden. Then he turned about and slept, and dreamed no more till he woke up in the bright sunny morning.

Chapter VI. Ralph goeth his ways from the Abbey of St. Mary at Higham

It was the monk who had been his guide the day before who had now waked him, & he stood by the bed side holding a great bowl of milk in his hand, & as Ralph sat up, and rubbed his eyes, with all his youthful sloth up on him, the monk laughed and said: "That is well, lord, that is well! I love to see a young man so sleepy in the morning; it is a sign of thriving; and I see thou art thriving heartily for the time when thou shalt come back to us to lead my lord's host in battle".

"Where be the bale-fires?" said Ralph, not yet fully awake.

"Where be they!" said the brother, "where be they! They be sunken to cold coals long ago, like many a man's desires and hopes, who hath not yet laid his head on the bosom of the mother, that is Holy Church. Come, my lord, arise, & drink the monk's wine of morning & then if ye must needs ride, ride betimes, and ride hard; for the Wood Perilous beginneth presently as ye wend your ways; & it were well for thee to make

the Burg of the four friths ere thou be benighted. For, son, there be untoward things in the wood; & though some of them be of those for whom Christ's Cross was shapen, yet have they forgotten hell, & hope not for heaven, and their by-word is, 'Thou shalt lack ere I lack.' Furthermore there are worse wights in the wood than they be, God save us! but against them have I a good hauberk, a neck-guard which I will give thee, son, in token that I look to see thee again at the lovely house of Mary our Mother."

Ralph had taken the bowl & was drinking, but he looked over the brim, and saw how the monk drew from his frock a pair of beads, as like to Dame Katherine's gift as one pea to another, save that at the end thereof was a little box shapen crosswise. Ralph emptied the bowl hastily, got out of bed, & sat on the bed naked, save that on his neck was Dame Katherine's gift. He reached out his hand and took the beads from the monk and reddened therewith, as was his wont when he had to begin a contest in words: but he said: "I thank thee, father; yet God wot if these beads will lie sweetly alongside the collar which I bear on my neck as now, which is the gift of a dear friend."

The monk made up a solemn countenance & said: "Thou sayest sooth, my son; it is most like that my chaplet which hath been blessed time was by the holy Richard, is no meet fellow for the gift of some light love of thine: or even," quoth he, noting Ralph's flush deepen, and his brow knit, "or even if it were the gift of a well-willer, yet belike it is a worldly gift; therefore, since thy journey is with peril, thou wert best do it off and let me keep it for thee till thou comest again." Now as he spake he looked anxiously, nay, it may be said greedily, at the young man. But Ralph said nought; for in his heart he was determined not to chaffer away his gossip's gift for any shaveling's token. Yet he knew not how to set his youthful words against the father's wisdom; so he stood up, & got his shirt into his hand, and as he did it over his head he fell to singing to himself a song of eventide of the High House of Upmeads, the words whereof were somewhat like to these:

ART thou man, art thou maid, through the long grass a-going?
For short shirt thou bearest, and no beard I see,
And the last wind ere moonrise about thee is blowing.
Would'st thou meet with thy maiden or look'st thou for me?

Bright shineth the moon now, I see thy gown longer;
And down by the hazels Joan meeteth her lad:
But hard is thy palm, lass, and scarcely were stronger
Wat's grip than thine hand/kiss that maketh me glad.

And now as the candles shine on us and over,
full shapely thy feet are, but brown on the floor,
As the bare/footed mowers' amidst of the clover
When the gowk's note is broken and mid/June is o'er.

O HARD are mine hand/palms because on the ridges
I carried the reap/hook and smote for thy sake;
And in the hot noon/tide I beat off the midges
As thou slep'st 'neath the linden o'er/loath to awake.

And brown are my feet now because the sun burneth
High up on the down/side amidst of the sheep,
And there in the hollow wherefrom the wind turneth,
Thou lay'st in my lap while I sung thee to sleep.

O FRIEND of the earth, O come nigher and nigher,
Thou art sweet with the sun's kiss as meads of the May,
O'er the rocks of the waste, o'er the water and fire,
Will I follow thee, love, till earth waneth away.

The monk hearkened to him with knitted brow, and as one that liketh not the speech of his fellow, though it be not wise to question it: then he went out of the chamber, but left the pair of beads lying in the window. But Ralph clad himself in haste, & when he was fully clad, went up to the window & took the beads in his hand, & looked into them curiously & turned them over, but left them lying there. Then he went forth also, & came into the forecourt of the house, & found there a squire of the men/at/arms with his weapons and horse, who helped him to do on his war/gear So then, just as he was setting his foot in the stirrup, came the Brother again, with his face once more grown smiling and happy; and in his left hand he held the chaplet, but did not offer it to Ralph again, but nodded his head to him kindly, and said: "Now, lord, I can see by thy face that thou art set on beholding the fashion of this world, and most like it will give thee the rue." Then came a word into Ralph's mouth, & he said: "Wilt thou tell me, fath/

er, whose work was the world's fashion?" The monk reddened, but answered nought, and Ralph spake again: "Forsooth, did the craftsman of it fumble over his work?"

Then the monk scowled, but presently he enforced himself to speak blithely and said: "Such matters are over high for my speech or thine, lord; but I tell thee, I who know, that there are men in this House who have tried the world and found it wanting." Ralph smiled, and said stammering: "Father, did the world try them, & find them wanting maybe?"

Then he reddened, & said: "Are ye verily all such as this in this House? Who then is it who hath made so fair a lordship, & so goodly a governance for so many people? Know ye not at all of the world's ways?"

"Fair sir," said the monk sternly, "they that work for us work for the Lord & all his servants."

"Yea," said Ralph, "so it is; & will the Lord be content with the service of him whom the devil hath cast out because he hath found him a dastard?"

The monk frowned, yet smiled somewhat withal, & said: "Sir, thou art young, but thy wits are over old for me; but there are they in this House who may answer thee featly; men who have read the books of the wise men of the heathen, & the doctors of Holy Church, & are even now making books for the scribes to copy." Then his voice softened, and he said: "Dear lord, we should be right fain of thee here, but since thou must needs go, go with my blessing, and double blessing shalt thou have when thou comest back to us." Then Ralph remembered his promise to the shepherds and took a gold crown from his pouch, & said: "Father, I pray thee say a mass for the shepherd downsmen; and this is for the offering"

The monk praised the gift & the bidding, and kissed Ralph, who clomb into his saddle; & the brother hospitalier brought him his wallet with good meat & drink therein for the way. Then Ralph shook his rein, & rode out of the abbey-gate, smiling at the lay brethren & the men-at-arms who hung about there.

But he sighed for pleasure when he found himself in the street again, & looked on the shops of the chapmen and the booths of the petty craftsmen, as shoesmiths and glovers, and tinsmiths & coppersmiths, and horners and the like; & the folk that he met as he rode toward the southern gate seemed to him merry & in good case, and goodly to look on

And he thought it pleasant to gaze on the damsels in the street, who were fair and well clad: & there

were a many of them about his way now, especially as he drew nigh the gate before the streets branched off: for folk were coming in from the country-side with victual & other wares for the town & the Abbey; & surely as he looked on some of the maidens he deemed that Hallsong of Upmeads a good one.

Chapter VII. The Maiden of Bourton Abbas

SO went he through the gate, & many, both of men and maids gazed at him for he was fair to look on, but none meddled with him. There was a goodly fauburg outside the gate, and therein were fair houses, not a few, with gardens & orchards about them; and when these were past he rode through very excellent meadows lying along the water, which he crossed thrice, once by a goodly stone bridge and twice by fords; for the road was straight, & the river wound about much. After a little while the road led him off the plain meads into a country of little hills & dales, the hill-sides covered with vineyards and orchards, & the dales plenteous of corn-fields; and now amongst these dales Higham was hidden from him. Through this tillage and vine-land he rode a good while, & thought he had never seen a goodlier land; & as he went, he came on husbandmen and women of the country going about their business: yet were they not too busy to gaze on him, and most greeted him; & with some he gave and took a little speech. These people also he deemed well before the world, for they were well clad & buxom, & made no great haste as they went, but looked about them as though they deemed the world worth looking at, & as if they had no fear either of a blow or a hard word for loitering.

SO he rode till it was noon and he was amidst a little thorp of grey stone houses, trim enough, in a valley wherein there was more of wild wood trees and less of fruit-bearers than those behind him. In the thorp was a tavern with the sign of the Nicholas, so Ralph deemed it but right to enter a house which was under the guard of his master and friend; therefore he lighted down and went in. Therein he found a lad of fifteen winters, and a maiden spinning, they two alone, who hailed him and asked his pleasure, & he bade them bring him meat & drink, and look to his horse, for that he had a mind to rest a while. So they brought him bread &

flesh, and good wine of the hill-side, in a little hall well arrayed as of its kind; & he sat down & the damsel served him at table, but the lad, who had gone to see to his horse, did not come back. So when he had eaten & drunk, and the damsel was still there, he looked on her and saw that she was sad and drooping of aspect; & whereas she was a fair maiden, Ralph, now that he was full, fell to pitying her, and asked her what was amiss. "for," said he, "thou art fair and ailest nought; that is clear to see; neither dwellest thou in penury, but by seeming hast enough & to spare. Or art thou a servant in this house, & hath any one misused thee?" She wept at his words, for indeed he spoke softly to her; then she said: "Young lord, thou art kind, & it is thy kindness that draweth the tears from me; or else it were not so well to weep before a young man: therefore I pray thee pardon me. As for me, I am no servant, nor has any one misused me: the folk round about are good & neighbourly; and this house and the croft, and a vineyard hard by, all that is mine own and my brother's; that is the lad who hath gone to tend thine horse. Yea, & we live in peace here for the most part; for this thorp, which is called Bourton Abbas, is a land of the Abbey of Higham; though it be the outermost of its lands; and the Abbot is a good lord and a defence against tyrants. All is well with me if one thing were not." "What is thy need then?" said Ralph, "if perchance I might amend it." And as he looked on her he deemed her yet fairer than he had done at first. But she stayed her weeping and sobbing and said: "Sir, I fear me that I have lost a dear friend." "How then," said he, "why fearest thou, and knowest not? doth thy friend lie sick between life and death?" "O Sir," she said, "it is the Wood which is the evil & disease." "What wood is that?" said he. She said: "The Wood Perilous, that lieth betwixt us and the Burg of the four friths, and all about the Burg. And, Sir, if ye be minded to ride to the Burg to-day, do it not, for through the wood must thou wend thereto; and ye are young and lovely. Therefore take my rede, and abide till the Chapmen wend thither from Higham, who ride many in company. for, look you, fair lord, ye have asked of my grief, and this it is and nothing else; that my very earthly love & speech-friend rode five days ago toward the Burg of the four friths all alone amid the Wood Perilous, and he has not come back, though

we looked to see him in three days' wearing: but his horse has come back, and the reins and the saddle all bloody." And she fell a-weeping with the telling of the tale. But Ralph said (for he knew not what to say) "Keep a good heart, maiden; maybe he is safe and sound; oft are young men fond to wander wide, even as I myself" She looked at him hard and said: "If thou hast stolen thyself away from them that love thee, thou hast done amiss. Though thou art a lord, & so fair as I see thee, yet will I tell thee so much" Ralph reddened & answered nought; but deemed the maiden both fair and sweet. But she said: "Whether thou hast done well or ill, do no worse; but abide till the Chapmen come from Higham, on their road to the Burg of the Four Friths. Here mayst thou lodge well & safely if thou wilt. Or if our hall be not dainty enough for thee, then go back to Higham: I warrant me the monks will give thee good guesting as long as thou wilt"

"Thou art kind, maiden," said Ralph, "but why should I tarry for an host? & what should I fear in the Wood, as evil as it may be? One man journeying with little wealth, and unknown, & he no weakling, but bearing good weapons, hath nought to dread of strong-thieves, who ever rob where it is easiest & gainfullest. And what worse may I meet than strong-thieves?" "But thou mayst meet worse," she said; and therewith fell a-weeping again, and said amidst her tears: "O weary on my life! And should I heed thee, when nothing heedeth me; neither the Saints of God's House, nor the Master of it; nor the father & the mother that were once so piteous kind to me? O if I might but drink a draught from the WELL AT THE WORLD'S END!"

He turned about on her hastily at that word; for he had risen to depart; being grieved at her grief and wishful to be away from it, since he might not amend it. But now he said eagerly: "Where, then, is that Well? Know ye of it in this land?" "At least I know the hearsay thereof," she said; "but as now thou shalt know no more from me thereof; lest thou wander the wider in seeking it. I would not have thy life spilt" Ever as he looked on her he thought her still fairer; & now he looked long on her, saying nought, & she on him in likewise, and the blood rose to her cheeks & her brow, but she would not turn her from his gaze. At last he said: "Well

then, I must depart, no more learned than I came: but yet am I less hungry and thirsty than I came; and have thou thanks therefor." Therewith he took from his pouch a gold piece of Upmeads, which was good, and of the touch of the Easterlings, and held it out to her. And she put out her open hand and he put the money in it; but thought it good to hold her hand a while, and she gainsayed him not. Then he said: "Well then, I must needs depart with things left as they are: wilt thou bid thy brother bring hither my horse, for time presses." "Yea," she said (and her hand was still in his), But do thine utmost, yet shalt thou not get to the Burg before nightfall. O wilt thou not tarry?" "Nay," he said, "my heart will not suffer it; lest I deem myself a dastard" Then she reddened again, but as if she were wroth; and she drew her hand away from his and smote her palms together thrice and cried out: "Ho Hugh! bring hither the Knight's horse and be speedy!" And she went hither and thither about the hall and into the buttery & back, putting away the victual and vessels from the board and making as if she heeded him not: and Ralph looked on her, & deemed that each way she moved was better than the last, so shapely of fashion she was; and again he bethought him of the Evensong of the High House at Upmeads, & how it befitted her; for she went barefoot after the manner of maidens who work afield, & her feet were tanned with the sun of hay harvest, but as shapely as might be; but she was clad goodly withal, in a green gown wrought with flowers.

So he watched her going to and fro; and at last he said: "Maiden, wilt thou come hither a little, before I depart?" "Yea," she said; and came and stood before him: and he deemed that she was scarce so sad as she had been; and she stood with her hands joined and her eyes downcast. Then he said: "Now I depart. Yet I would say this, that I am sorry of thy sorrow: and now since I shall never see thee more, small would be the harm if I were to kiss thy lips & thy face" And therewith he took her hands in his and drew her to him, and put his arms about her and kissed her many times, and she nothing loth by seeming; and he found her as sweet as May blossom Thereafter she smiled on him, yet scarce for gladness, and said: "It is not all so sure that I shall not see thee again; yet shall I do to thee as thou

hast done to me." Therewith she took his face between her hands, and kissed him well-favouredly; so that the hour seemed good to him. Then she took him by the hand and led him out-a-doors to his horse, whereby the lad had been standing a good while; and he when he saw his sister come out with the fair knight he scowled on them, and handled a knife which hung at his girdle; but Ralph heeded him nought. As for the damsel, she put her brother aside, & held the stirrup for Ralph; & when he was in the saddle she said to him: "All luck go with thee! forsooth I deem thee safer in the Wood than my words said. Verily I deem that if thou wert to meet a company of foemen, thou wouldest compel them to do thy bidding" "Farewell to thee, maiden," said Ralph, "and mayst thou find thy beloved whole & well, and that speedily. Farewell!" She said no more; so he shook his rein and rode his ways; but looked over his shoulder presently and saw her standing yet barefoot on the dusty highway, shading her eyes from the afternoon sun, and looking after him, & he waved his hand to her & so went his ways between the houses of the Thorp.

Chapter VIII. Ralph cometh to the Wood Perilous. An adventure therein

Now when he was clear of the Thorp the road took him out of the dale; & when he was on the hill's brow he saw that the land was of other fashion from that which lay behind him. For the road went straight through a rough waste, no pasture, save for mountain sheep or goats, with a few bushes scattered about it; and beyond this the land rose into a long ridge; & on the ridge was a wood thick with trees, & no break in them. So on he rode, and soon passed that waste, which was dry and parched, and the afternoon sun was hot on it; so he deemed it good to come under the shadow of the thick trees (which at the first were wholly beech trees), for it was now the hottest of the day. There was still a beaten way between the tree-boles, though not overwide, albeit a highway, since it pierced the wood. So thereby he went at a soft pace for the saving of his horse, and thought but little of all he had been told of the perils of the way, and not a little of the fair maid whom he had left behind at the Thorp. After a while

the thick beech-wood gave out and he came into a place where great oaks grew, fair & stately, as though some lord's wood-reeve had taken care that they should not grow over close together, and betwixt them the greensward was fine, unbroken, and flowery. Thereby as he rode, he beheld deer, both buck and hart and roe, & other wild things, but for a long while no man.

THE afternoon wore & still he rode the oak wood, and deemed it a goodly forest for the greatest king on earth. At last he came to where another road crossed the way he followed, & about the crossway was the ground clearer of trees, while beyond it the trees grew thicker, and there was some underwood of holly and thorn as the ground fell off, as towards a little dale There Ralph drew rein, because he doubted in his mind which was his right road toward the Burg of the four friths; so he got off his horse and abode a little, if perchance any might come by; he looked about him, and noted on the road that crossed his, and the sward about it, the sign of many horses having gone by, & deemed that they had passed but a little while. So he lay on the ground to rest him and let his horse stray about and bite the grass; for the beast loved him and would come at his call or his whistle.

RALPH was drowsy when he lay down, & though he said to himself that he would nowise go to sleep, yet, as oft happens, he had no defence to make against sleepiness, & presently his hands relaxed, his head fell aside, and he slept quietly. When he woke up in a little space of time, he knew at once that something had awaked him & that he had not had his sleep out; for in his ears was the trampling of horse-hoofs and the clashing of weapons and loud speech of men. So he leapt up hastily, & while he was yet scarce awake, took to whistling on his horse; but even therewith those men were upon him, and two came up to him and laid hold of him; and when he asked them what they would, they bade him hold his peace. Now his eyes cleared, and he saw that those men were in goodly war-gear & bore coats of plate, and cuir-bouilly, or of bright steel; they held long spears and were girt with good swords; there was a pennon with them, green, whereon was done a golden tower, embattled, amidst of four white ways; and the same token bore many of the men on their coats & sleeves. Unto this same pennon he was brought by the two

men who had taken him, and under it, on a white horse, sat a Knight bravely armed at all points with the Tower & Four Ways on his green surcoat; & beside him was an ancient man-at-arms, with nought but an oak wreath on his bare head, and his white beard falling low over his coat: but behind these twain a tall young man, also on a white horse & very gaily clad, upheld the pennon. On one side of these three were five men unarmed, clad in green coats, with a leafless tree done on them in gold: they were stout carles, bearded and fierce-faced: their hands were bound behind their backs & their feet tied together under their horses' bellies. The company of those about the Knight, Ralph deemed, would number ten score men.

So when those twain stayed Ralph before the Knight, he turned to the old man & said: "It is of no avail asking this lither lad if he be of them or no: for no will be his answer. But what sayest thou, Oliver?"

The ancient man drew closer to Ralph & looked at him up and down and all about; for those two turned him about as if he had been a joint of flesh on the roasting-jack; & at last he said: "His beard is sprouting, else might ye have taken him for a maid of theirs, one of those of whom we wot. But to say sooth I seem to know the fashion of his gear, even as Duke Jacob knew Joseph's tabard. So ask him whence he is, lord, and if he lie, then I bid bind him and lead him away, that we may have a true tale out of him; otherwise let him go and take his chance; for we will not waste the bread of the Good Town on him."

The Knight looked hard on Ralph, & spake to him somewhat courteously: "Whence art thou, fair Sir, and what is thy name? for we have many foes in the wildwood"

Ralph reddened as he answered: "I am of Upmeads beyond the down country; & I pray thee let me be gone on mine errands. It is meet that thou deal with thine own robbers and reivers, but not with me" Then cried out one of the bounden men: "Thou liest, lad, we be no robbers." But he of the Knight's company who stood by him smote the man on the mouth & said: "Hold thy peace, runagate! Thou shalt give tongue to-morrow when the hangman hath thee under his hands." The Knight took no heed of this; but turned to the ancient warrior & said: "Hath he spoken truth so far?" "Yea, Sir Aymer," quoth Oliver; "And now meseems I know him better than he knoweth me"

Therewith he turned to Ralph & said: "How fareth Long Nic-

holas, my lord?" Ralph reddened again: "He is well," said he. Then said the Knight: "Is the young man of a worthy house, Oliver?" But ere the elder could speak, Ralph brake in and said: "Old warrior, I bid thee not to tell out my name, as thou lovest Nicholas" ❧ Old Oliver laughed & said: "Well, Nicholas and I have been friends in a way, as well as foes; and for the sake of the old days his name shall help thee, young lord." Then he said to his Knight: "Yea, Sir Aymer, he is of a goodly house & an ancient; but thou hearest how he adjureth me. Ye shall let his name alone." The Knight looked silently on Ralph for a while; then he said: "Wilt thou wend with us to the Burg of the four friths, fair Sir? Wert thou not faring thither? Or what else dost thou in the Wood Perilous?" ❧ Ralph turned it over in his mind; and though he saw no cause why he should not join himself to their company, yet something in his heart forbade him to rise to the fly too eagerly; so he did but say: "I am seeking adventures, fair lord." ❧ The Knight smiled: "Then mayst thou fill thy budget with them if thou goest with us," quoth he. ❧ Now Ralph did not know how he might gainsay so many men at arms in the long run, though he were scarce willing to go; so he made no haste to answer; and even therewith came a man running through the wood up from the dale; a long, lean carle, meet for running, with brogues on his feet, and nought else but a shirt; the company parted before him to right & left to let him come to the Knight, as though he had been looked for; & when he was beside him, the Knight leaned down while the carle spake softly to him and all men drew out of ear-shot. And when the carle had given his message, the Knight drew himself straight up in his saddle again and lifted up his hand and cried out: "Oliver! Oliver! lead on the way thou wottest! Spur! spur, all men!" ❧ Therewith he blew one blast from a horn which hung at his saddle-bow; the runner leapt up behind old Oliver, & the whole company went off at a smart trot somewhat south-east, slantwise of the cross-roads, where the wood was nought cumbered with undergrowth; and presently they were all gone to the last horse-tail, and no man took any more note of Ralph.

Chapter IX. Another Adventure in the Wood Perilous

RALPH left alone pondered a little; & thought that he would by no means go hastily to the Burg of the four

friths. Said he to himself: This want/way is all unlike to the one near our house at home: for be/like adventures shall befall here: I will even abide here for an hour or two; but will have my horse by me & keep awake, lest some/thing hap to me unawares ❧ Therewith he whistled for fal/con his horse, & the beast came to him, and whinnied for love of him, and Ralph smiled and tied him to a sapling anigh, & himself sat down on the grass, and pondered many things; as to what folk were about at Up/meads & how his brethren were faring; and it was now about five hours after noon, and the sun's rays fell aslant through the boughs of the noble oaks, and the scent of the grass and bracken trodden by the horse/hoofs of that company went up into the warm summer air. A while he sat musing, but a-wake, though the faint sound of a little stream in the dale be/low mingled with all the lesser noises of the forest did its best to soothe him to sleep again: and presently had its way with him; for he leaned his head back on the bracken, and in a minute or two was sleeping once more & dreaming some dream made up of masterless memories of past days.

WHEN HE awoke a-gain he lay still a lit-tle while, wondering where in the world he was, but as the drowsiness left him, he arose & looked about, and saw that the sun was sinking low & gilding the oak/boles red. He stood awhile and watched the gambols of three hares, who had drawn nigh him while he slept, and now noted him not; a little way off he saw through the trees a hart and two hinds going slowly from grass to grass, feeding in the cool even/tide; but presently he saw them raise their heads and amble off down the slope of the little dale, and therewith he himself turned his face sharply toward the north/west, for he was fine/eared as well as sharp/eyed, and on a little wind which had just arisen came down to him the sound of horse/hoofs once more ❧ So he went up to fal-con and loosed him, and stood by him bridle in hand, & looked to it that his sword was handy to him: and he hearkened, & the sound drew nigher and nigher to him. Then lightly he got into the saddle & gathered the reins into his left hand & sat peering up the trodden wood/glades, lest he should have to ride for his life suddenly ❧ Therewith he heard voices talking rough/ly and a man whistling, and a-thwart the glade of the wood from the north/west, or there/abouts, came new folk; and he saw at once that there went two

men a-horseback and armed; so he drew his sword & abode them close to the want-ways. Presently they saw the shine of his war-gear, and then they came but a little nigher ere they drew rein, & sat on their horses looking toward him ❧ Then Ralph saw that they were armed & clad as those of the company which had gone before. One of the armed men rode a horse-length after his fellow, and bore a long spear over his shoulder. But the other who rode first was girt with a sword and had a little axe hanging about his neck, & with his right hand he seemed to be leading something, Ralph could not see what at first, as his left side was turned toward Ralph and the want-way.

NOW, as Ralph looked, he saw that at the spear-man's saddle-bow was hung a man's head, red-haired and red-bearded; for this man now drew nigher, and cried out to Ralph in a loud and merry voice: "Hail, knight! whither away now, that thou ridest the green-wood sword in hand?" ❧ Ralph was just about to answer somewhat, when the first man moved a little nigher, and as he did so he turned so that Ralph could see what betid on his right hand; & lo! he was leading a woman by a rope tied about her neck (though her hands were loose), as though he were bringing a cow to market. When the man stayed his horse she came forward and stood within the slack of the rope by the horse's head, and Ralph could see her well, that though she was not to say naked, her raiment was but scanty, for she had naught to cover her save one short and strait little coat of linen ❧ Yet Ralph deemed her to be of some degree, whereas he caught the gleam of gold and gems on her hands, and there was a golden chaplet on her head. She stood now by the horse's head with her hands folded, looking on, as if what was tiding and to betide, were but a play done for her pleasure ❧ So when Ralph looked on her, he was silent a while; and the spearman cried out again: "Ho, young man, wilt thou speak, or art thou dumbfoundered for fear of us?" ❧ But Ralph knit his brows, and was first red and then pale; for he was both wroth, and doubtful how to go to work; but he said: "I ride to seek adventures; and here me seemeth is one come to hand. Or what will ye with the woman?" ❧ Said the man who had the woman in tow: "Trouble not thine head therewith; we lead her to her due doom. As for thee, be glad that thou art not her fellow; since forsooth thou seemest not to be one of

them; so go thy ways in peace" "No foot further will I go," said Ralph, "till ye loose the woman and let her go; or else tell me what her worst deed is." The man laughed, & said: "That were a long tale to tell; and it is little like that thou shalt live to hear the ending thereof."

THEREWITH he wagged his head at the spearman, who suddenly let his spear fall into the rest, and spurred, and drave on at Ralph all he might. There and then had the tale ended, but Ralph, who was wary, though he were young, and had falcon well in hand, turned his wrist & made the horse swerve, so that the man-at-arms missed his attaint, but could not draw rein speedily enough to stay his horse; and as he passed by all bowed over his horse's neck, Ralph gat his sword two-handed and rose in his stirrups and smote his mightiest; and the sword caught the foeman on the neck betwixt sallet & jack, and naught held before it, neither leather nor ring-mail, so that the man's head was nigh smitten off, and he fell clattering from his saddle; but his stirrups held him yet, so that his horse went dragging him on earth as he gallopped over rough & smooth betwixt the trees of the forest. Then Ralph turned about to deal with his fellow, & even through the wrath and fury of the slaying saw him clear and bright against the trees as he sat handling his axe doubtfully; but the woman was fallen back again somewhat.

But even as Ralph raised his sword & pricked forward, the woman sprang as light as a leopard on to the saddle behind the foeman, & wound her arms about him & dragged him back, just as he was raising his axe to smite her, & as Ralph rode forward she cried out to him: "Smite him, smite! O lovely creature of God!" Therewith was Ralph beside them, & though he were loth to slay a man held in the arms of a woman, yet he feared lest the man should slay her with some knife-stroke unless he made haste; so he thrust his sword through him, and the man died at once, & fell headlong off his horse, dragging down the woman with him. Then Ralph lighted down from his horse, & the woman rose up to him, her white smock all bloody with the slain man. Nevertheless was she as calm and stately before him, as if she were sitting on the dais of a fair hall; so she said to him:

YOUNG warrior thou hast done well and knightly, & I shall look to it that thou have thy reward. And now I rede thee go not to the Burg

of the four friths; for this tale of thee shall get about, & they shall take thee, if it were out of the very frith-stool, and there for thee should be the scourge & the gibbet; for they of that Burg be robbers & murderers merciless. Yet well it were that thou ride hence presently; for those be behind my tormentors whom thou hast slain, who will be as an host to thee, and thou mayst not deal with them. If thou follow my rede, thou wilt take the way that goeth hence east-away, & then shalt thou come to Hampton under Scaur, where the folk are peaceable & friendly" ❧ He looked at her hard as she spake, and noted that she spake but slowly, and turned red & white and red again as she looked at him. But whatever she did, and in spite of her poor attire, he deemed he had never seen woman so fair. Her hair was dark red, but her eyes grey, & light at whiles & yet at whiles deep; her lips betwixt thin & full, but yet when she spoke or smiled, clad with all enticements; her chin round and so wrought as none was ever better wrought; her body strong and well-knit; tall she was, with fair and large arms, and limbs most goodly of fashion, of which but little was hidden, since her coat was but thin and scanty. But whatever may be said of her, no man would have deemed her aught save most lovely. Now her face grew calm and stately again as it was at the first, and she laid a hand on Ralph's shoulder, and smiled in his face and said: "Surely thou art fair, though thy strokes be not light." Then she took his hand & caressed it, and said again: "Dost thou deem that thou hast done great things, fair child? Maybe. Yet some will say that thou hast but slain two butchers: and if thou wilt say that thou hast delivered me; yet it may be that I should have delivered myself ere long. Nevertheless hold up thine heart, for I think that greater things await thee" ❧ Then she turned about, & saw the dead man, how his feet yet hung in the stirrups as his fellow's had done, save that the horse of this one stood nigh still, only reaching his head down to crop a mouthful of grass; so she said: "Take him away, that I may mount on his horse" ❧ So he drew the dead man's feet out of the stirrups, & dragged him away to where the bracken grew deep, & laid him down there, so to say hidden. Then he turned back to the lady, who was pacing up and down near the horse as the beast fed quietly on the cool grass. When Ralph came back she took the reins in her hand and put one foot in the stirrup as if she would mount at once; but suddenly lighted down a-

gain, & turning to Ralph, cast her arms about him, & kissed his face many times, blushing red as a rose meantime. Then lightly she gat her up into the saddle, & bestrode the beast, and smote his flanks with her heels, and went her ways riding speedily toward the south-east, so that she was soon out of sight.

BUT Ralph stood still looking the way she had gone & wondering at the adventure; & he pondered her words & held debate with himself whether he should take the road she bade him. And he said within himself: "Hitherto have I been safe & have got no scratch of a weapon upon me, and this is a place by seeming for all adventures; & little way moreover shall I make in the night if I must needs go to Hampton under Scaur, where dwell those peaceable people; and it is now growing dusk already. So I will abide the morning hereby; but I will be wary and let the wood cover me if I may" ❧ Therewith he went & drew the body of the slain man down into a little hollow where the bracken was high and the brambles grew strong, so that it might not be lightly seen. Then he called to him Falcon, his horse, & looked about for cover anigh the wantway, and found a little thin coppice of hazel and sweet chestnut, just where two great oaks had been felled a half score years ago; & looking through the leaves thence, he could see the four ways clearly enough, though it would not be easy for anyone to see him thence. ❧ Thither he betook him, and he did therein off Falcon, but tethered him by a halter in the thickest of the copse, and sat down himself nigher to the outside thereof; he did off his helm and drew what meat he had from out his wallet & ate & drank in the beginning of the summer night; and then sat pondering awhile on what had befallen on this second day of his wandering. The moon shone out presently, little clouded, but he saw her not, for though he strove to wake awhile, slumber soon overcame him, & nothing waked him till the night was passing, nor did he see aught of that company of which the lady had spoken, & which in sooth came not.

Chapter X. A Meeting and a Parting in the Wood Perilous

THEN the first glimmer of dawn was in the sky he awoke in the fresh morning & sat up at once & hearkened, for even as he woke

he had heard something, since wariness had made him wakeful. Now he hears the sound of horse-hoofs on the hard road, & riseth to his feet and goeth to the very edge of the copse; looking thence he saw a rider who was just come to the very crossing of the roads. ❧ The new comer was much muffled in a wide cloak, but he seemed to be a man low of stature. He peered all round about him as if to see if the way were clear, and then alighted down from horseback & let the hood fall off his head, and seemed pondering which way were the best to take. By this time it was grown somewhat lighter, & Ralph, looking hard, deemed that the rider was a woman; so he stepped forward lightly, and as he came on to the open sward about the way, the new-comer saw him and put a foot into the stirrup to mount, but yet looked at him over the shoulder, and then presently left the saddle and came forward a few steps as if to meet Ralph, having cast the cloak to the ground. ❧

Then Ralph saw that it was none other than the damsel of the ale-house of Bourton Abbas, and he came up to her and reached out his hand to her, & she took it in both hers and held it and said, smiling: "It is nought save mountains that shall never meet. Here have I followed on thy footsteps; yet knew I not where thou wouldst be in the forest. And now I am glad to have fallen in with thee; for I am going a long way" ❧ Ralph looked on her and him-seemed some pain or shame touched his heart, & he said: "I am a knight adventurous; I have nought to do save to seek adventures. Why should I not go with thee?" She looked at him earnestly awhile and said: "Nay, it may not be; thou art a lord's son and I a yeoman's daughter" ❧ She stopped, and he said nothing in answer. ❧ "Furthermore," said she, "it is a long way, & I know not how long." Again he made no answer, & she said: "I am going to seek the WELL AT THE WORLD'S END, and to find it & live, or to find it not, and die" ❧

He spake after a while: "Why should I not come with thee?" ❧ It was growing light now, and he could see that she reddened & then turned pale and set her lips close. Then she said: "Because thou willest it not: because thou hadst liefer make that journey with some one else." He reddened in his turn, and said: "I know of no one else who shall go with me" ❧ "Well," she said, "it is all one, I will not have thee go with me." "Yea, and why

not?" said he. She said: "Wilt thou swear to me that nought hath happed to thee to change thee betwixt this & Bourton? If thou wilt, then come with me; if thou wilt not, then refrain thee. And this I say because I see & feel that there is some change in thee since yesterday, so that thou wouldst scarce be dealing truly in being my fellow in this quest: for they that take it up must be single-hearted, and think of nought save the quest and the fellow that is with them." She looked on him sadly, and his many thoughts tongue-tied him a while; but at last he said: "Must thou verily go on this quest?" "Ah," she said, "now since I have seen thee and spoken with thee again, all need there is that I should follow it at once" Then they both kept silence, & when she spoke again, her voice was as if she were gay against her will. She said: "Here am I come to these wanting-ways, & there are three roads besides the one I came by, & I wot that this that goeth south will bring me to the Burg of the four friths; & so much I know of the folk of the said Burg that they would mock at me if I asked them of the way to the Well at the World's End. And as for the western way, I deem that that will lead me back again to the peopled parts whereof I know; therefore I am minded to take the eastern way. What sayest thou, fair lord?" Said Ralph: "I have heard of late that it leadeth presently to Hampton under the Scaur, where dwelleth a people of goodwill" "Who told thee this tale?" said she. Ralph answered, reddening again: "I was told by one who seemed to know both of that folk, and of the Burg of the four friths, and she said that the folk of Hampton were a good folk, & that they of the Burg were evil." The damsel smiled sadly when she heard him say 'She,' & when he had done she said: "And I have heard, & not from yesterday, that at Hampton dwelleth the fellowship of the Dry Tree, & that those of that fellowship are robbers and reivers. Nevertheless they will perchance be little worse than the others; & the tale tells that the way to the Well at the World's End is by the Dry Tree; so thither will I at all adventure. And now will I say farewell to thee, for it is most like that I shall not see thee again."

MAIDEN! said Ralph, "why wilt thou not go back to Bourton Abbas? There I might soon meet thee again, and yet, indeed, I also am like to go to Hampton. Shall I not see thee there?" She shook her head and said: "Nay, since I must go so far,

I shall not tarry; and, sooth to say, if I saw thee coming in at one gate I should go out by the other, for why should I dally with a grief that may not be amended. For indeed I wot that thou shalt soon forget to wish to see me, either at Bourton Abbas or elsewhere; so I will say no more than once again farewell." Then she came close to him & put her hands on his shoulders and kissed his mouth; and then she turned away swiftly, caught up her cloak, and gat lightly into the saddle, & so shook her reins & rode away east toward Hampton, and left Ralph standing there downcast & pondering many things. It was still so early in the summer morning, and he knew so little what to do, that presently he turned and walked back to his lair amongst the hazels, and there he lay down, and his thoughts by then were all gone back again to the lovely lady whom he had delivered, and he wondered if he should ever see her again, &, sooth to say, he sorely desired to see her. Amidst such thoughts he fell asleep again, for the night yet owed him something of rest, so young as he was, and so hard as he had toiled, both body & mind, during the past day.

Chapter XI. Now must Ralph ride for it

THEN he awoke again the sun was shining through the hazel leaves, though it was yet early; he arose & looked to his horse, and led him out of the hazel copse & stood & looked about him; & lo! a man coming on slowly through the wood on Ralph's right hand, & making as it seemed for the want-way; he saw Ralph presently, and stopped, & bent a bow which he held in his hand, & then came towards him warily, with the arrow nocked. But Ralph went to meet him with his sword in his sheath, & leading falcon by the rein, and the man stopped & took the shaft from the string: he had no armour, but there was a little axe & a wood-knife in his girdle; he was clad in homespun, & looked like a carle of the countryside. Now he greeted Ralph, & Ralph gave him the sele of the day, & saw that the new-comer was both tall and strong, dark of skin and black-haired, but of a cheerful countenance. He spake frank and free to Ralph, and said: "Whither away, lord, out of the woodland hall, and the dwelling of deer & strong thieves? I would that the deer would choose them a captain,

and gather head & destroy the thieves, and some few others with them." Said Ralph: "I may scarce tell thee till I know myself. Awhile ago I was minded for the Burg of the four friths; but now I am for Hampton under Scaur." "Yea?" said the carle, "when the Devil drives, to hell must we." "What meanest thou, good fellow?" said Ralph; "Is Hampton then so evil an abode?" And indeed it was in his mind that the adventure of the lady led captive bore some evil with it. Said the carle: "If thou wert not a stranger in these parts I need not to answer thy question; but I will answer it presently, yet not till we have eaten, for I hunger, & have in this wallet both bread and cheese, and thou art welcome to a share thereof, if thou hungerest also, as is most like, whereas thou art young and fresh-coloured." "So it is," said Ralph, laughing, "and I also may help to spread this table in the wilderness, since there are yet some crumbs in my wallet. Let us sit down and fall to at once." "By your leave, Sir Gentleman," said the carle, "we will go a few yards further on, where there is a woodland brook, whereof we may drink when my bottle faileth." "Nay, I may better that," said Ralph, "for I have wherewithal." "Nevertheless," said the carle, "we will go thither, for here is it too open for so small a company as ours, since this want-way hath an ill name, & I shall lead thee whereas we shall be somewhat out of the way of murder-carles. So come on, if thou trustest in me."

RALPH yea said him, and they went together a furlong from the want-way into a little hollow place wherethrough ran a clear stream betwixt thick-leaved alders. The carle led Ralph to the very lip of the water so that the bushes covered them; there they sat down and drew what they had from their wallets, & so fell to meat; and amidst of the meat the carle said: "Fair Knight, as I suppose thou art one, I will ask thee if any need draweth thee to Hampton?" Said Ralph: "The need of giving the go-by to the Burg of the four friths, since I hear tell that the folk thereof be robbers & murderers"

"Thou shalt find that out better, lord, by going thither; but I shall tell thee, that though men may slay & steal there time and time about, yet in regard to Hampton-under-Scaur, it is Heaven, wherein men sin not. And I am one who should know, for I have been long dwelling in Hell, that is Hampton; and now am I escaped thence, and am minded for the Burg, if per-

chance I may be deemed there a man good enough to ride in their host, whereby I might avenge me somewhat on them that have undone me: some of whom meseemeth must have put in thy mouth that word against the Burg. Is it not so?"

"Maybe," said Ralph, "for thou seemest to be a true man." No more he spake though he had half a mind to tell the carle all the tale of that adventure; but something held him back when he thought of that lady & her fairness. Yet again his heart misgave him of what might betide that other maiden at Hampton, and he was unquiet, deeming that he must needs follow her thither. The carle looked on him curiously and somewhat anxiously, but Ralph's eyes were set on something that was not there; or else maybe had he looked closely on the carle he might have deemed that longing to avenge whereof he spoke did not change his face much; for in truth there was little wrath in it.

Now the carle said: "Thou hast a tale which thou deemest unmeet for my ears, as it well may be. Well, thou must speak, or refrain from speaking, what thou wilt; but thou art so fair a young knight, & so blithe with a poor man, and withal I deem that thou mayest help me to some gain and good, that I will tell thee a true tale: & first that the Burg is a good town under a good lord, who is no tyrant nor oppressor of peaceful men; & that thou mayest dwell there in peace as to the folk thereof, who be good folk, albeit they be no dastards to let themselves be cowed by murder-carles. And next I will tell thee that the folk of the town of Hampton be verily as harmless & innocent as sheep; but that they be under evil lords who are not their true lords, who lay heavy burdens on them & torment them even to the destroying of their lives: and lastly I will tell thee that I was one of those poor people, though not so much a sheep as the more part of them, therefore have these tyrants robbed me of my croft, and set another man in my house; & me they would have slain had I not fled to the wood that it might cover me. And happy it was for me that I had neither wife, nor chick, nor child, else had they done as they did with my brother, whose wife was too fair for him, since he dwelt at Hampton; so that they took her away from him to make sport for them of the Dry Tree, dwelling in the Castle of the Scaur, who shall be thy masters if thou goest thither. This is my tale, and thine, I say, I ask not; but I deem that thou shalt do ill if thou go not to the Burg, either

with me or by thyself alone; either as a guest, or as a good knight to take service in their host."

NOW so it was that Ralph was wary; and this time he looked closely at the carle, and found that he spake coldly for a man with so much wrath in his heart; therefore he was in doubt about the thing; moreover he called to mind the words of the lady whom he had delivered, & her loveliness, and the kisses she had given him, & he was loth to find her a liar; and he was loth also to think that the maid of Bourton had betaken her to so evil a dwelling. So he said: "Friend, I know not that I must needs be a partaker in the strife betwixt Hampton and the Burg? or go either to one or the other of these strongholds. Is there no other way out of this wood save by Hampton or the Burg; or no other place anigh, where I may rest in peace awhile, and then go on mine own errands?" Said the Carle: "There is a thorp that lieth somewhat west of the Burg, which is called Apthorp; but it is an open place, not fenced, and is debateable ground, whiles held by them of the Burg, whiles by the Dry Tree; & if thou tarry there, and they of the Dry Tree take thee, so on is thine errand sped; & if they of the Burg take thee, then shalt thou be led into the Burg in worse case than thou wouldest be if thou go thereto uncompelled. What sayest thou, therefore? Who shall hurt thee in the Burg, a town which is under good and strong law, if thou be a true man, as thou seemest to be? And if thou art seeking adventures, as may well be, thou shalt soon find them there ready to hand. I rede thee come with me to the Burg; for, to say sooth, I shall find it somewhat easier to enter therein if I be in the company of thee, a knight & a lord" So Ralph considered & thought that there lay indeed but little peril nigher to him. But whereas both those men with whom he had striven were hushed for ever, and there was none else to tell the tale of the battle, save the lady, whose peril from them of the Burg was much greater than his; and also he thought that if anything untoward befel, he had some one to fall back on in old Oliver: yet on the other hand he had a hankering after Hampton under Scaur, where, to say sooth, he doubted not to see the lady again So betwixt one thing & the other, speech hung on his lips awhile, when suddenly the carle said: "Hist! thou hast left thy horse without the bushes, & he is whinnying" (which indeed he was), "there is now no

time to lose. To horse straight-way, for certainly there are folk at hand, & they may be foemen, and are most like to be."

THEREWITH they both arose and hastened to where Falcon stood just outside the alder bushes, and Ralph leapt a-horseback without more ado, & the carle waited no bidding to leap up behind him, and pointing to a glade of the wood which led toward the highway, cried out, "Spur that way, thither! they of the Dry Tree are abroad this morning. Spur! 'tis for life or death!" Ralph shook the rein & Falcon leapt away without waiting for the spur, while the carle looked over his shoulder & said: "Yonder they come! they are three; and ever they ride well horsed. Nay, nay! they are four," quoth he, as a shout sounded behind them. 'Spur, young lord! spur! And thine horse is a mettlesome beast. Yea, it will do, it will do" Therewith came to Ralph's ears the sound of their horse-hoofs beating the turf, and he spurred indeed, & Falcon flew forth "Ah," cried the carle! "but take heed, for they see thy horse to be good, and one of them, the last, hath a bent Turk bow in his hand, and is laying an arrow on it; as ever their wont is to shoot a-horseback: a turn of thy rein, as if thine horse were shying at a weasel on the road!" Ralph stooped his head and made Falcon swerve, and heard therewith the twang of the bow string & straightway the shaft flew past his ears. Falcon galloped on, & the carle cried out: "There is the highway toward the Burg! Do thy best, do thy best! Lo you again!" For the second shaft flew from the Turkish bow, and the noise of the chase was loud behind them. Once again twanged the bow-string, but this time the arrow fell short, and the woodland man, turning himself about as well as he might, shook his clenched fist at the chase, crying out in a voice broken by the gallop: "Ha, thieves! I am Roger of the Rope-walk, I go to twist a rope for the necks of you!" Then he spake to Ralph: "They are turning back: they are beaten, & withal they love not the open road: yet slacken not yet, young knight, unless thou lovest thine horse more than thy life; for they will follow on through the thicket on the way-side to see whether thou wert born a fool and hast learned nothing later." "Yea," said Ralph, "and now I deem thou wilt tell me that to the Burg I needs must." "Yea, forsooth," said the carle, "nor shall we be long, riding thus, ere we come to the Burg Gate." "Yea, or even slower," said

Ralph drawing rein somewhat, "for now I deem the chase done: & after all is said, I have no will to slay Falcon, who is one of my friends, as thou perchance mayest come to be another" ❧ Thereafter he went a hand/gallop till the wood began to thin, & there were fields of tillage about the highway; & presently Roger said: "Thou mayst breathe thy nag now, & ride single, for we are amidst friends; not even a score of the Dry Tree dare ride so nigh the Burg save by night & cloud."

So Ralph stayed his horse and he & Roger lighted down, and Ralph looked about him and saw a stone tower builded on a little knoll amidst a wheatfield, & below it some simple houses thatched with straw; there were folk moreover working, or coming and going about the fields, who took little heed of the two when they saw them standing quiet by the horse's head; but each and all of these folk, so far as could be seen, had some weapon ❧ Then said Ralph: "Good fellow, is this the Burg of the Four Friths?" The carle laughed, & said: "Simple is the question, Sir Knight: yonder is a watch/tower of the Burg, whereunder husbandmen can live, because there be men/at/arms therein. And all round the outskirts of the Frank of the Burg are there such/like towers to the number of twenty-seven. For that, say folk, was the tale of the winters of the Fair Lady who erewhile began the building of the Burg, when she was first wedded to the Forest Lord, who before that building had dwelt, he and his fathers, in thatched halls of timber here & there about the clearings of the wildwood. But now, knight, if thou wilt, thou mayest go on softly toward the Gate of the Burg, and if thou wilt I will walk beside thy rein, which fellowship, as afore said, shall be a gain to me" ❧ Said Ralph: "I pray thee come with me, good fellow, & show me how easiest to enter this stronghold." So, when Falcon was well breathed, they went on, passing through goodly acres and wide meadows, with here and there a homestead on them, and here and there a carle's cot. Then came they to a thorp of the smallest on a rising ground, from the further end of which they could see the walls and towers of the Burg. Thereafter right up to the walls were no more houses or cornfields, nought but reaches of green meadows plenteously stored with sheep and kine, and with a little stream winding about them.

Chapter XII. Ralph entereth into the Burg of the Four Friths

THEN they came up to the wall they saw that it was well builded of good ashlar, and so high that they might not see the roofs of the town because of it; but there were tall towers on it, a many of them, strong & white. The road led up straight to the master-gate of the Burg, and there was a bailey before it strongly walled, and manned with weaponed men, and a captain going about amongst them. But they entered it along with men bringing wares into the town, & none heeded them much, till they came to the very gate, on the further side of a moat that was both deep and clean; but as now the bridge was down & the portcullis up, so that the market-people might pass in easily, for it was yet early in the day. But before the door on either side stood men-at-arms well weaponed, & on the right side was their captain, a tall man with bare grizzled head, but otherwise all-armed, who stopped every one whom he knew not, & asked their business. As Ralph came riding up with Roger beside him, one of the guard laid his spear across and bade them stand, & the captain spake in a dry cold voice: "Whence comest thou, man-at-arms?" "From the Abbey of St. Mary at Higham," said Ralph. "Yea," said the captain, smiling grimly, "even so I might have deemed: thou wilt be one of the Lord Abbot's lily lads." "No I am not," quoth Ralph angrily. "Well, well," said the captain, "what is thy name?" "Man Motherson," quoth Ralph, knitting his brow. Said the captain "And whither wilt thou?" Said Ralph, "On mine own errands." "Thou answerest not over freely," quoth the captain. Said Ralph, "Then is it even; for thou askest freely enough." "Well, well," said the captain, grinning in no unfriendly wise, "thou seemest a stout lad enough; & as to my asking, it is my craft as captain of the North Gate: but now tell me friendly, goest thou to any kinsman or friend in the Burg?" Then Ralph's brow cleared & he said, "Nay, fair sir." "Well then," said the captain, "art thou but riding straight through to another gate, & so away again?" "Nay," said Ralph, "if I may, I would abide here the night over, or may-happen longer." "Therein thou shalt do well, young man," said the captain; "then I suppose thou wilt to some hostelry? tell me which one." Said Ralph, "Nay, I wot not to which one, knowing not

the town." But Roger close by him spake and said: "My lord shall go to the Flower de Luce, which is in the big square" ❧ "Truly," said the captain, "he goes to a good harbour; and moreover, fair sir, to-morrow thou shalt see a goodly sight from thine inn; thou mayst do no better, lord. But thou, carle, who art thou, who knowest the inside of our Burg so well, though I know thee not, for as well as I know our craftsmen and vavassors?" ❧ Then Roger's words hung on his lips awhile, and the knight bent his brow on him, till at last he said: "Sir Captain, I was minded to lie, & say that I am this young knight's serving-man." The captain broke in on him grimly, "Thou wert best not lie." "Yea, sir," quoth Roger, "I deemed, as it was on my tongue's end, that thou wouldst find me out, so I have nought to do but tell thee the very sooth: this it is: I am a man made masterless by the thieves of the Dry Tree. From my land at Hampton under Scaur have I been driven, my chattels have been lifted, and my friends slain; & therefore by your leave would I ride in the host of the Burg, that I may pay back the harm which I had, according to the saw, 'better bale by breeding bale.' So, lord, I ask thee wilt thou lend me the sword and give me the loaf, that I may help both thee, and the Burg, and me?" ❧ The captain looked at him closely and sharply, while the carle faced him with open simple eyes, and at last he said: "Well, carle, thou wert about to name thyself this young knight's serving-man; be thou even so whiles he abideth in the Burg; and when he leaveth the Burg then come back to me here any day before noon, and may be I shall then put a sword in thy fist and a horse between thy thighs. But," (& he wagged his head threateningly at Roger) "see that thou art at the Flower de Luce when thou art called for" ❧ Roger held his peace and seemed somewhat abashed at this word, & the captain turned to Ralph & said courteously: "Young knight, if thou art seeking adventures, thou shalt find them in our host; & if thou be but half as wise as thou seemest bold, thou wilt not fail to gain honour and wealth both, in the service of the Burg; for we be overmuch beset with foemen that we should not welcome any wight & wary warrior, though he be an alien of blood & land. If thou thinkest well of this, then send me thy man here and give me word of thy mind, and I shall lead thee to the chiefs of the Port, and make the way easy for thee." Ralph thanked

him and rode through the gate into the street, and Roger still went beside his stirrup.

PRESENTLY Ralph turned to Roger and spake to him somewhat sourly, and said: "Thou hadst one lie in thy mouth and didst swallow it; but how shall I know that another did not come out thence? Withal thou must needs be my fellow here, will I, nill I; for thou it was that didst put that word into the captain's mouth that thou shouldst serve me while I abide in the Burg. So I will say here and now, that my mind misgives me concerning thee, whether thou be not of those very thieves & tyrants whom thou didst mis-say but a little while ago" ❧ "Yea," said Roger, "thou art wise indeed to set me down as one of the Dry Tree; doubtless that is why I delivered thee from their ambush even now. And as for my service, thou mayst need it; for indeed I deem thee not so safe as thou deemest thyself in this Burg" ❧ "What!" said Ralph, "Dost thou blow hot & cold? why even now, when we were in the wood, thou wert telling me that I had nought at all to fear in the Burg of the Four Friths, and that all was done there by reason and with justice. What is this new thing then which thou hast found out, or what is that I have to fear?" ❧ Roger changed countenance thereat and seemed somewhat confused, as one who has been caught unawares; but he gat his own face presently, & said: "Nay, Sir Knight, I will tell thee the truth right out. In the wood yonder thy danger was great that thou mightest run into the hands of them of the Dry Tree; therefore true it is that I spake somewhat beyond my warrant concerning the life of the folk of the Burg, as how could I help it? But surely what ever thy peril may be here, it is nought to that which awaited thee at Hampton" ❧ "Nay, but what is the peril?" said Ralph. Quoth Roger, "If thou wilt become their man & enter into their host, there is none; for they will ask few questions of so good a man-at-arms, when they know that thou art theirs; but if thou naysay that, it may well be that they will be for turning the key on thee till thou tellest them what and whence thou art." Ralph answered nought, thinking in his mind that this was like enough; so he rode on soberly, till Roger said: "Anyhow, thou mayst turn the cold shoulder on me if thou wilt. Yet were I thee, I would not, for so it is, both that I can help thee, as I deem, in time to come, and that I have helped thee somewhat in time past" ❧ Now Ralph was young and could not abide the blame

of thanklessness; so he said, "Nay, nay, fellow, go we on together to the Flower de Luce" Roger nodded his head and grumbled somewhat, and they made no stay except that now and again Ralph drew rein to look at goodly things in the street, for there were many open booths therein, so that the whole street looked like a market. The houses were goodly of building, but not very tall, the ways wide and well-paved. Many folk were in the street, going up and down on their errands, and both men and women of them seemed to Ralph stout & strong, but not very fair of favour. Withal they seemed intent on their business, and paid little heed to Ralph and his fellow, though he was by his attire plainly a stranger.

NOW Ralph sees a house more gaily adorned than most, and a sign hung out from it whereon was done an image of St. Loy, and underneath the same a booth on which was set out weapons & war-gear exceeding goodly; & two knaves of the armourer were standing by to serve folk, & crying their wares with "What d'ye lack?" from time to time. So he stayed & fell to looking wistfully at the gleam & glitter of those fair things, till one of the aforesaid knaves came to his side & said: "Fair Sir, surely thou lackest somewhat; what have we here for thy needs?"

So Ralph thought & called to mind that strong little steel axe of the man whom he had slain yesterday, and asked for the sight of such a weapon, if he might perchance cheapen it. And the lad brought a very goodly steel axe, gold-inlaid about the shaft, and gave him the price thereof, which Ralph deemed he might compass; so he brought round his scrip to his hand, that he might take out the money. But while his hand was yet in the bag, out comes the master-armourer, a tall and very stark carle, and said in courteous wise: "Sir Knight, thou art a stranger to me and I know thee not; so I must needs ask for a sight of thy license to buy weapons, under the seal of the Burg." "Hear a wonder," said Ralph, "that a free man for his money shall not buy wares set out to be bought, unless he have the Burg-Reeve's hand & seal for it! Nay, take thy florins, master, and give me the axe and let the jest end there." "I jest not, young rider," quoth the armourer. "When we know thee for a liegeman of the Burg, thou shalt buy what thou wilt without question; but otherwise I have told thee the law; and how may I, the master of

the craft, break the law? Be not wrath, fair sir, I will set aside thine axe for thee, till thou bring me the license, or bid me come see it, and thou shalt get the said license at the Town Hall straightway, when they may certify thee no foeman of the Burg" ❧ Ralph saw that it availed nothing to bicker with the smith, and so went his way somewhat crestfallen, & that the more as he saw Roger grinning a little.

NOW they come into the market-place, on one side whereof was the master-church of the town, which was strongly built and with a tall tower to it, but was not very big, and but little adorned. Over against it they saw the sign of the flower de Luce, a goodly house & great. Thitherward they turned; but in the face of the hostelry amidmost the place was a thing which Roger pointed at with a grin that spoke as well as words; & this was a high gallows-tree furnished with four forks or arms, each carved and wrought in the fashion of the very bough of a tree, from which dangled four nooses, & above them all was a board whereon was written in big letters THE DRY TREE. And at the foot of this gallows were divers folk laughing and talking. ❧ So Ralph understood at once that those four men whom he had seen led away bound yesterday should be hanged thereon; so he stayed a franklin who was passing by, & said to him: "Sir, I am a stranger in the town, & I would know if justice shall be done on the four woodmen to-day." "Nay," said the man, "but to-morrow; they are even now before the judges" ❧ Then said Roger in a surly voice, "Why art thou not there to look on?" "Because," quoth the man, "there is little to see there, and not much more to hearken. The thieves shall be speedily judged, and not questioned with torments, so that they may be the lustier to feel what the hangman shall work on them to-morrow; then forsooth the show shall be goodly. But far better had it been if we had had in our hands the great witch of these dastards, as we looked to have her; but now folk say that she has not been brought within gates, & it is to be feared that she hath slipped through our fingers once more" ❧ Roger laughed, and said: "Simple are ye folk of the Burg, and know nought of her shifts. I tell thee it is not unlike that she is in the Burg even now, & hath in hand to take out of your prison the four whom ye have caught" ❧ The franklin laughed scornfully in his turn and said: "If

we be simple, thou art a fool merely: are we not stronger & more than the Dry Tree? How should she not be taken? How should she not be known, if she were walking about these streets? Have we no eyes, foolcarle?" And he laughed again, for he was wroth.

Ralph hearkened, & a kind of fear seemed griping his heart, so he asked the franklin: "Tell me, sir, are ye two speaking of a woman who is Queen of these strong-thieves?" "Yea," said he, "or it might better be said that she is their goddess, their mawmet, their devil, the very heart and soul of their wickedness. But one day shall we have her body and soul, & then shall her body have but an evil day of it till she dieth in this world"

"Yea, forsooth, if she can die at all," quoth Roger. The franklin looked sourly on him and said: "Good man, thou knowest much of her, meseemeth.. Whence art thou?" Said Roger speedily: "from Hampton under Scaur; and her rebel I am, and her dastard, and her runaway. Therefore I know her forsooth." "Well," the franklin said, "thou seemest a true man, and yet I would counsel thee to put a rein on thy tongue when thou art minded to talk of the Devil of the Dry Tree, or thou mayst come to harm in the Burg" He walked away towards the gallows therewith; and Roger said, almost as if he were talking to himself: "A heavy-footed fool goeth yonder; but after this talk we were better hidden by the walls of the Flower de Luce." So therewith they went on toward the hostel. But the market place was wide, & they were yet some minutes getting to the door, & ere they came there Ralph said, knitting his brows anxiously: "Is this woman fair or foul to look on?" "That is nought so easy to tell of," said Roger, "whiles she is foul, whiles very fair, whiles young and whiles old; whiles cruel & whiles kind. But note this, when she is the kindest, then are her carles the cruellest; and she is the kinder to them because they are cruel"

Ralph pondered what he said, and wondered if this were verily the woman whom he had delivered, or some other. As if answering to his unspoken thought, Roger went on: "They speak but of one woman amongst them of the Dry Tree, but in sooth they have many others who are like unto her in one way or other; & this again is a reason why they may not lay hands on the very Queen of them all."

THEREWITHAL they came unto the hostel, & found it fair enough within, the hall great & goodly

for such a house, and with but three chapmen-carles therein. Straightway they sent for meat, for it was now past noon, & the folk of the house served them when the grooms had taken charge of falcon. And Roger served Ralph as if he were verily his man.

Then Ralph went to his chamber aloft and rested a while, but came down into the hall a little before nones, & found Roger there walking up and down the hall floor, and no man else, so he said to him: "Though thou art not of the Burg, thou knowest it; wilt thou not come abroad then, & show it me? for I have a mind to learn the ways of the folk here". Said Roger, & smiled a little: "If thou commandest me as my lord, I will come; yet I were better pleased to abide behind; for I am weary with night-waking and sorrow; and have a burden of thought, one which I must bear to the end of the road; and if I put it down I shall have to go back & take it up again." Ralph thought that he excused himself with more words than were needed; but he took little heed of it, but nodded to him friendly, & so went out of the house afoot, but left his weapons and armour behind him by the rede of Roger.

Chapter XIII. The Streets of the Burg of the Four Friths

He went about the streets & found them all much like to the one which they had entered by the north gate; he saw no poor or wretched houses, & none very big as of great lords; they were well and stoutly builded, but as aforesaid not much adorned either with carven work or painting: there were folk enough in the streets, and now Ralph, as was like to be, looked specially at the women, & thought many of them little better-favoured than the men, being both dark & low; neither were they gaily clad, though their raiment, like the houses, was stout and well wrought. But here and there he came on a woman taller & whiter than the others, as though she were of another blood; all such of these as he saw were clad otherwise than the darker women: their heads uncoifed, uncovered save for some garland or silken band; their gowns yellow like wheat-straw, but gaily embroidered; sleeveless withal and short, scarce reaching to the ankles, & whiles so thin that they were rather clad with the embroidery than the cloth; shoes they had not, but sandals bound on their naked feet

with white thongs, & each bore an iron ring about her right arm ❧

The more part of the men wore weapons at their sides and had staves in hand, and were clad in short jerkins brown or blue of colour, and looked ready for battle if any moment should call them thereto; but among them were men of different favour & stature from these, taller for the most part, unarmed, and clad in long gowns of fair colours with cloths of thin and gay-coloured web twisted about their heads. These he took for merchants, as they were oftenest standing in and about the booths and shops, whereof there were some in all the streets, though the market for victuals and such-like he found over for that day, & but scantily peopled. ❧ Out of one of these markets, which was the fish and fowl market, he came into a long street that led him down to a gate right over against that whereby he had entered the Burg; and as he came thereto he saw that there was a wide way clear of all houses inside of the wall, so that men-at-arms might go freely from one part to the other; and he had also noted that a wide way led from each ort out of the great place, and each ended not but in a gate. But as to any castle in the town he saw none; and when he asked a burgher thereof, the carle laughed in his face, and said to him that the whole Burg, houses & all, was a castle, and that it would turn out to be none of the easiest to win. And forsooth Ralph himself was much of that mind. ❧ Now he was just within the south gate when he held this talk, and there were many folk thereby already, & more flocking thereto; so he stood there to see what should betide; & anon he heard great blowing of horns & trumpets all along the wall, &, as he deemed, other horns answered from without; & so it was; for soon the without-ward horns grew louder, and the folk fell back on either side of the way, and next the gates were thrown wide open (which before had been shut save for a wicket) and thereafter came the first of a company of men-at-arms, foot-men, with bills some, & some with bows, and all-armed knights & sergeants a-horseback.

So streamed in these weaponed men till Ralph saw that it was a great host that was entering the Burg; & his heart rose within him, so warrior-like they were of men and array, though no big men of their bodies; and many of them bore signs of battle about them, both in the batter-

ing of their armour & the rending of their raiment, and the clouts tied about the wounds on their bodies.

After a while among the warriors came herds of neat and flocks of sheep and strings of horses, of the spoil which the host had lifted; & then wains filled, some with weapons and war gear, and some with bales of goods & household stuff. Last came captives, some going afoot and some for weariness borne in wains; for all these war-taken thralls were women & women-children; of males there was not so much as a little lad. Of the women many seemed fair to Ralph despite their grief and travel; and as he looked on them he deemed that they must be of the kindred and nation of the fair white women he had seen in the streets; though they were not clad like those, but diversely.

SO Ralph gazed on this pageant till all had passed, and he was weary with the heat & the dust & the confused clamour of shouting and laughter and talking; and whereas most of the folk followed after the host and their spoil, the streets of the town thereabout were soon left empty & peaceful. So he turned into a street narrower than most, that went east from the South Gate and was much shaded from the afternoon sun, & went slowly down it, meaning to come about the inside of the wall till he should hit the East Gate, and so into the Great Place when the folk should have gone their ways home. He saw no folk in the street save here and there an old woman sitting at the door of her house, & maybe a young child with her. As he came to where the street turned somewhat, even such a carline was sitting on a clean white doorstep on the sunny side, somewhat shaded by a tall rose-laurel tree in a great tub, and she sang as she sat spinning, and Ralph stayed to listen in his idle mood, & he heard how she sang in a dry, harsh voice:

GLASHED sword on shield
In the harvest field;
And no man blames
The red red flames,
War's candle-wick
On roof and rick.
Now dead lies the yeoman unwept and unknown
On the field he hath furrowed, the ridge he hath sown:

And all in the huddle of wethers and neat
The maidens are driven with blood on their feet:
For yet 'twixt the Burg-gate and battle half-won
The dust-driven highway creeps uphill and on,
And the smoke of the beacons goes coiling aloft,
While the gathering horn bloweth, loud, louder, and oft.

THROW wide the gates
For nought night waits;
Though the chase is dead
The moon's o'erhead
And we need the clear
Our spoil to share.
Shake the lots in the helm then, for brethren are we,
And the goods of my missing are gainful to thee.
Lo! thine are the wethers, and his are the kine;
And the colts of the marshland unbroken are thine,
With the dapple-grey stallion that trampled his groom;
And Giles hath the gold-blossomed rose of the loom.
Lo! leaps out the last lot and nought have I won,
But the maiden unmerry, by battle undone.

GVEN as her song ended came one of those fair yellow-gowned damsels round the corner of the street, bearing in her hand a light basket full of flowers: and she lifted up her head and beheld Ralph there; then she went slowly and dropped her eyelids, and it was pleasant to Ralph to behold her; for she was as fair as need be. Her corn-coloured gown was dainty and thin, & but for its silver embroidery had hidden her limbs but little; the rosiness of her ankles showed amidst her white sandal-thongs, and there were silver rings & gold on her arms along with the iron ring. Now she lifted up her eyes and looked shyly at Ralph, & he smiled at her well-pleased, and deemed it would be good to hear her voice; so he went up to her and greeted her, and she seemed to take his greeting well, though she glanced swiftly at the carline in the doorway. Said Ralph: "Fair maiden, I am a stranger in this town, and have seen things I do not wholly understand; now wilt thou tell me before I ask the next question, who will be those war-taken thralls whom even now I saw brought into the Burg by the

host? of what nation be they, and of what kindred?"

Straightway was the damsel all changed; she left her dainty tricks, and drew herself up straight & stiff. She looked at him in the eyes, flushing red, & with knit brows, a moment, and then passed by him with swift and firm feet as one both angry and ashamed. But the carline who had beheld the two with a grin on her wrinkled face changed aspect also, and cried out fiercely after the damsel, & said: "What! dost thou flee from the fair young man, and he so kind and soft with thee, thou jade? Yea, I suppose thou dost fetch and carry for some mistress who is young and a fool, & who has not yet learned how to deal with the daughters of thine accursed folk. Ah! if I had but money to buy some one of you, and a good one, she should do something else for me than showing her fairness to young men; and I would pay her for her long legs & her white skin, till she should curse her fate that she had not been born little and dark-skinned & free, & with heels un-bloodied with the blood of her back"

Thus she went on, though the damsel was long out of earshot of her curses; and Ralph tarried not to get away from her spiteful babble, which he now partly understood; & that all those yellow-clad damsels were thralls to the folk of the Burg; and belike were of the kindred of those captives late-taken whom he had seen amidst the host at its entering into the Burg.

So he wandered away thence, turning over what he should do till the sun was set, & he had come into the open space underneath the walls, & had gone along it till he came to the East Gate: there he looked around him a little, and found people flowing back from the Great Place, whereto they had gathered to see the host mustered and the spoil blessed; then he went on still under the wall, and noted not that here and there a man turned about to look upon him curiously, for he was deep in thought concerning the things which he had seen & heard of, & pondered much what might have befallen his brethren since they sundered at the Wantway nigh to the High House of Upmeads. Withal the chief thing that he desired was to get him away from the Burg, for he felt himself unfree therein; & he said to himself that if he were forced to dwell among this folk, that he had better never have stolen himself away from his father & mother; & whiles even he thought that he would do his best on the

morrow to get him back home to Upmeads again. But then when he thought of how his life would go in his old home, there seemed to him a lack, and when he questioned himself as to what that lack was, straightway he seemed to see that Lady of the Wildwood standing before the men-at-arms in her scanty raiment the minute before his life was at adventure because of them. And in sooth he smiled to himself then with a beating heart, as he told himself that above all things he desired to see that Lady, whatever she might be, and that he would follow his adventure to the end until he met her. Amidst these thoughts he came unto the North Gate, whereby he had first entered the Burg, and by then it was as dark as the summer night would be; so he woke up from his dream, as it were, and took his way briskly back to the Flower de Luce.

Chapter XIV. What Ralph heard of the matters of the Burg of the Four Friths

THERE was no candle in the hall when he entered, but it was not so dark therein but he might see Roger sitting on a stool near the chimney, and opposite to him on the settle sat two men; one very tall & big, the other small; Roger was looking away from these, and whistling; and it came into Ralph's mind that he would have him think that he had nought to do with them, whether that were so or not. But he turned round as Ralph came up the hall and rose and came up to him, and fell to talking with him & asking him how he liked the Burg; and ever he spake fast and loud, so that again it came on Ralph that he was playing a part.

Ralph heeded him little, but ever looked through the hall-dusk on those twain, who presently arose & went toward the hall-door, but when they were but half-way across the floor a chamberlain came in suddenly, bearing candles in his hands, & the light fell on those guests and flashed back from a salade on the head of the big man, and Ralph saw that he was clad in a long white gaberdine, and he deemed that he was the very man whom he had seen last in the Great Place at Higham, nigh the church, & before that upon the road. As for the smaller man Ralph had no knowledge of him, for he could see but little of his face, whereas he was wrapped up in a cloak, for as warm as the evening was, & wore a slouch hat withal; but

his eyes seemed great & wond-rous bright.

BUT when they were gone Ralph asked Roger if he knew aught of them, or if they had told him aught. "Nay," said Roger, "they came in here as I sat alone & had their meat, & spake naught to me, & little to each other. I deem them not to be of the Burg. Nay, sooth to say, I doubt if they be true men." As he spake came in a sort of the townsmen somewhat merry and noisy, & called for meat & drink & more lights; so that the board was brought & the hall was speed-ily astir. These men, while sup-per was being dight, fell to talking to Ralph and Roger, and asking them questions of whence and whither, but no-wise uncourteously: to whom Roger answered with the tale which he had told Ralph, and Ralph told what he would, and that was but little. But when the board was dight they bade them sit down with them and eat. Ralph sat down at once, & Roger would have served him, but Ralph bade him do it not, and constrained him to sit by his side, & they two sat a little apart from the townsmen.

WHEN they had eaten their fill, & wine was brought, & men were drinking kindly, Ralph began to ask Roger concerning those women whom he had seen in the street, and the captives whom he had seen brought in by the host, & if they were of one kind-red, & generally how it was with them: and he spake somewhat softly as if he would not break into the talk of the townsmen: but Roger answered him in a loud voice so that all could hear: "Yea, lord, I will tell thee the tale of them, which setteth forth well both the wise policy and the great mercy of the folk of the Burg & their ru-lers." Said Ralph: "Are these women also of the Dry Tree? for I perceive them to be born of the foes of the Burg."

NOW the townsmen had let their talk drop a while to listen to the talk of the aliens; & Roger answered still in a loud voice: "Nay, nay, it is not so. These queans are in-deed war-taken thralls, but not from them of the Dry Tree, or they would have been slain at once, like as the carles of those accursed ones. But these are of the folk of the Wheat-wear-ers, even as those whom thou sawest brought to-day amidst the other spoil. And to this folk the Burg showeth mercy, and whenso the host goeth a-gainst them & overcometh (& that is well nigh whenever they meet) these worthy lords slay no women of them, but the men only, whether they be old or

young or youngest. As for their women they are brought hither and sold at the market-cross to the highest bidder. And this honour they have, that such of them as be fair, and that is the more part of the younger ones, fetch no ill penny. Yet for my part I were loth to cheapen such wares: for they make but evil servants, being proud, and not abiding stripes lightly, or toiling the harder for them; & they be somewhat too handy with the knife if they deem themselves put upon. Speak I sooth, my masters?" quoth he, turning toward them of the town. ❧ Said a burgher somewhat stricken in years, "Nought but sooth; peaceable men like to me eschew such servants; all the more because of this, that if one of these queans misbehave with the knife, or strayeth from her master's bed, the laws of the Burg meddle not therein. For the wise men say that such folk are no more within the law than kine be, & may not for their deeds be brought before leet or assize any more than kine. So that if the master punish her not for her misdoings, unpunished she needs must go; yea even if her deed be mere murder" ❧ "That is sooth," said a somewhat younger man; "yet whiles it fareth ill with them at the hands of our women. To wit, my father's brother has even now come from the war to find his thrall all spoilt by his wife: and what remedy may he have against his wife? his money is gone, even as if she had houghed his horse or his best cow." ❧ "Yea," said a third, "we were better without such cattle. A thrust with a sword & all the tale told, were the better way of dealing with them." Said another: "Yet are the queans good websters, &, lacking them, figured cloth of silk would be far-fetched and dear-bought here."

A YOUNG man gaily clad, who had been eyeing the speakers disdainfully, spake next & said: "Fair sirs, ye are speaking like hypocrites, & as if your lawful wives were here to hearken to you; whereas ye know well how goodly these thralls be, & that many of them can be kind enough withal; and ye would think yourselves but ill bestead if ye might not cheapen such jewels for your money. Which of you will go to the Cross next Saturday and there buy him a fairer wife than he can wed out of our lineages? & a wife withal of whose humours he need take no more account than of the dullness of his hound or the skittish temper of his mare, so long as the thong smarts, and the twigs sting." ❧ One or two grinned

as he spake, but some bent their brows at him, yet scarce in earnest, and the talk thereover dropped, nor did Ralph ask any more questions; for he was somewhat down-hearted, calling to mind the frank and free maidens of Upmead, and their friendly words & hearty kisses. And himseemed the world was worse than he had looked to find it.

NOWSOEVER, the oldest and soberest of the guests, seeing that he was a stranger & of noble aspect, came unto him and sat by him, & fell to telling him tales of the wars of the men of the Burg with the Wheat-wearers; and how in time past, when the town was but little fenced, the Wheat-wearers had stormed their gates and taken the city, & had made a great slaughter; but yet had spared many of the fighting-men, although they had abided there as the masters of them, & held them enthralled for three generations of men: after which time the sons' sons of the old Burg-dwellers having grown very many again, & divers of them being trusted in sundry matters by the conquerors, who oppressed them but little, rose up against them as occasion served, in the winter season & the Yule-feast, and slew their masters, save for a few who were hidden away.

"And thereafter," quoth he, "did we make the Burg strong and hard to win, as ye see it to-day; and we took for our captain the Forest Lord, who erewhile had dwelt in the clearings of the wildwood, and he wedded the fair Lady who was the son's daughter of him who had been our lord ere the Wheat-wearers overcame us; and we grew safe and free and mighty again. And the son of the Forest Lord, he whom we call the War-smith, he it was who beheld the Burg too much given to pleasure, and delighting in the softness of life; & he took order to harden our hearts, & to cause all freemen to learn the craft of war and battle, and let the women and thralls and aliens see to other craftsmanship and to chaffer; and even so is it done as he would; and ye shall find us hardy of heart enough, though belike not so joyous as might be. Yet at least we shall not be easy to overcome". "So indeed it seemeth," said Ralph. "Yet will I ask of you first one question, and then another." "Ask on," said the burgher. Said Ralph: "How is it that ye, being so strong should still suffer them of the Dry Tree, taking a man here and a man there, when ye might destroy them utterly?" The burgher reddened and cleared his throat & said: "Sir, it must be made clear to you

that these evil beasts are no peril to the Burg of the four friths; all the harm they may do us, is as when a cur-dog biteth a man in the calf of the leg; whereby the man shall be grieved indeed, but the dog slain. Such grief as that they have done us at whiles: but the grief is paid for thus, that the hunting and slaying of them keeps our men in good trim, & pleasures them; shortly to say it, they are the chief deer wherewith our wood is stocked" He stopped awhile and then went on again & said: "To say sooth they be not very handy for crushing as a man crushes a wasp, because sorcery goes with them, & the wiles of one who is their Queen, the evilest woman who ever spat upon the blessed Host of the Altar: yet is she strong; a devouring sea of souls, God help us!" And he blessed himself therewith Said Ralph: "Yet a word on these Wheat-wearers; it seemeth that ye never fail to overcome them in battle?" "But seldom at least," quoth the burgher. Said Ralph: "Then it were no great matter for you to gather a host overwhelming, and to take their towns and castles, and forbid them weapons and make them your thralls to till the land for you which now they call theirs; so that ye might have of their gettings all save what were needful for them to live as thralls?" "I deem it were an easy thing," said the burgher. Quoth Ralph: "Then why do ye not so?" "It were but a poor game to play," said the burgher. "Such of their wealth as we have a mind to, we can have now at the cost of a battle or two, begun one hour and ended the next: were we their masters sitting down amidst of their hatred, and amidst of their plotting, yea, and in the very place where that were the hottest and thickest, the battle would be to begin at every sun's uprising, nor would it be ended at any sunset. Hah! what sayest thou?" Said Ralph: "This seemeth to me but the bare truth; yet it is little after the manner of such masterful men as ye be. But why then do ye slay all their carles that are taken; whereas ye bear away the women & make thralls of them at home, that is to say, foes in every house?" "It may be," said the burgher, "that this is not amongst the wisest of our dealings. Yet may we do no otherwise; for thus we swore to do by all the greatest oaths that we might swear, in the days when we first cast off their yoke, & yet were not over strong at the first; & now it hath so grown into a part of our manners, yea, and

of our very hearts and minds, that the slaying of a Wheat-wearer is to us a lighter matter than the smiting of a rabbit or a fowmart. But now, look you, fair sir, my company ariseth from table; so I bid thee a good night. And I give thee a good rede along with the good wish, to wit, that thou ask not too many questions in this city concerning its foemen: for here is the stranger looked upon with doubt, if he neither will take the wages of the Burg for battle, nor hath aught to sell." Ralph reddened at his word, & the other looked at him steadily as he spoke, so that Ralph deemed that he mistrusted him: he deemed moreover that three or four of the others looked hard at him as they went towards the door, while Roger stood somewhat smiling, and humming a snatch of an old song.

BUT when the other guests had left the hostelry, Roger left his singing, & turned to Ralph and said: "Master, meseems that they mistrust us, & now maybe is that peril that I spake of nigher than I deemed when we came into the Burg this morning. And now I would that we were well out of the Burg and in the merry greenwood again, and it repents me that I brought thee hither."

"Nay, good fellow," quoth Ralph, "heed it not: besides, it was me, not thee, that they seemed to doubt of. I will depart hence to-morrow morning no worser than I came, & leave thee to seek thy fortune here; and good luck go with thee" Roger looked hard at him and said: "Not so, young lord; if thou goest I will go with thee, for thou hast won my heart, I know not how; and I would verily be thy servant, to follow thee whithersoever thou goest; for I think that great deeds will come of thee" This word pleased Ralph, for he was young and lightly put faith in men's words, and loved to be well thought of, & was fain of good fellowship withal. So he said: "This is a good word of thine, & I thank thee for it; and look to it that in my adventures, and the reward of them thou shalt have thy due share. Lo here my hand on it!" Roger took his hand, yet therewith his face seemed a little troubled, but he said nought. Then spoke Ralph: "True it is that I am not fain to take the wages of the Burg; for it seems to me that they be hard men, & cruel and joyless, and that their service shall be rather churlish than knightly. Howbeit, let night bring counsel, and we will see to this to-morrow; for now I am both

sleepy and weary." Therewith he called the chamberlain, who bore a wax light before him to his chamber, and he did off his raiment and cast himself on his bed, & fell asleep straightway, before he knew where Roger was sleeping, whether it were in the hall or some place else.

Chapter XV. How Ralph departed from the Burg of the four friths

DIMSEEMED he had scarce been asleep a minute ere he awoke with a sound of someone saying softly: "Master, master, awake!" So he sat up & answered softly in his turn: "Who is it? what is amiss, since the night is yet young?" "I am thy fellow-farer, Roger," said the speaker, "and this thou hast to do; get on thy raiment speedily, and take thy weapons without noise, if thou wouldst not be in the prison of the Burg before sunrise" Ralph did as he was bidden without more words; for already when he lay down his heart misgave him that he was in no safe place; he looked to his weapons & armour that they should not clash, & down they came into the hall & found the door on the latch; so out they went & Ralph saw that it was somewhat cloudy; the moon was set and it was dark, but Ralph knew by the scent that came in on the light wind, and a little stir of blended sounds, that it was hard on dawning; & even therewith he heard the challenge of the warders on the walls & their crying of the hour; and the chimes of the belfry rang clear & loud, & seeming close above him, two hours & a half after midnight. Roger spake not, & Ralph was man-at-arms enough to know that he must hold his peace; & though he longed sore to have his horse falcon with him, yet he wotted that it availed not to ask of his horse, since he durst not ask of his life.

THEY went on silently till they were out of the Great Place & came into a narrow street, & so into another which led them straight into the houseless space under the wall. Roger led right on as if he knew the way well, and in a twinkling were they come to a postern in the wall betwixt the East Gate & the South. By the said postern Ralph saw certain men standing; & on the earth near by, whereas he was keen-eyed, he saw more than one man lying moveless. Spake Roger softly to the men who stood on their feet: "Is the rope twined?" "Nay, rope-twiner," said

one of them. Then Roger turned and whispered to Ralph: "Friends. Get out thy sword!" Wherewithal the gate was opened, and they all passed out through the wall, and stood above the ditch in the angle-nook of a square tower. Then Ralph saw some of the men stoop and shoot out a broad plank over the ditch, which was deep but not wide thereabout, and straightway he followed the others over it, going last save Roger. By then they were on the other side he saw a glimmer of the dawn in the eastern heaven, but it was still more than dusk, and no man spoke again. They went on softly across the plain fields outside the wall, creeping from bush to bush, and from tree to tree, for here, if nowhere about the circuit of the Burg, were a few trees growing. Thus they came into a little wood and passed through it, & then Ralph could see that the men were six besides Roger; by the glimmer of the growing dawn he saw before him a space of meadows with high hedges about them, and a long dim line that he took for the roof of a barn or grange, and beyond that a dark mass of trees.

Still they pressed on without speaking; a dog barked not far off & the cocks were crowing, and close by them in the meadow a cow lowed & went hustling over the bents & the long, unbitten buttercups. Day grew apace, and by then they were under the barn-gable which he had seen aloof, he saw the other roofs of the grange & heard the bleating of sheep. And now he saw those six men clearly, & noted that one of them was very big and tall, & one small and slender, & it came into his mind that these two were none other than the twain whom he had come upon the last night sitting in the hall of the Flower de Luce.

GVEN therewith came a man to the gate of the sheep-cote by the grange, and caught sight of them, and had the wits to run back at once shouting out: "Hugh, Wat, Richard, and all ye, out with you, out a doors! Here be men! Ware the Dry Tree! Bows & bills! Bows and bills!" With that those fellows of Ralph made no more ado, but set off running at their best toward the wood aforesaid, which crowned the slope leading up from the grange, & now took no care to go softly, nor heeded the clashing of their armour. Ralph ran with the best & entered the wood alongside the slim youth aforesaid, who stayed not at the wood's edge but went on running still: but Ralph stayed

& turned to see what was toward, and beheld how that tall man was the last of their company, and ere he entered the wood turned about with a bent bow in his hand, and even as he nocked the shaft, the men from the Grange, who were seven in all, came running out from behind the barn-gable, crying out: "Ho thieves! ho ye of the Dry Tree, abide till we come! flee not from handy strokes." The tall man had the shaft to his ear in a twinkling, & loosed straightway & nocked and loosed another shaft without staying to note how the first had sped. But Ralph saw that a man was before each of the shafts, & had fallen to earth, though he had no time to see aught else, for even therewith the tall man caught him by the hand, and crying out, "The third time!" ran on with him after the rest of their company; & whereas he was long-legged and Ralph light-footed, they speedily came up with them who were running still, but laughing as they ran, & jeering at the men of the Burgh; & the tall man shouted out to them: "Yea, lads, the counterfeit Dry Tree that they have raised in the Burg shall be dry enough this time." "Truly," said another, "till we come to water it with the blood of these wretches." "Well, well, get on," said a third, "waste not your wind in talk; those carles will make but a short run of it to the walls, long as it was for us, creeping and creeping as we behoved to." The long man laughed: "Thou sayest sooth," said he, "but thou art the longest winded of all in talking: get on, lads." They laughed again at his word and sped on with less noise; while Ralph thought within himself that he was come into strange company, for now he knew well that the big man was even he whom he had first met at the churchyard gate of the thorp under Bear Hill. Yet he deemed that there was nought for it now but to go on.

WITHIN a while they all slacked somewhat & presently did but walk, though swiftly, through the paths of the thicket, which Ralph deemed full surely was part of that side of the Wood Perilous that lay south of the Burg of the four friths. And now Roger joined himself to him, and spake to him aloud & said: "So, fair master, thou art out of the peril of death for this bout." "Art thou all so sure of that?" quoth Ralph, "or who are these that be with us? meseems they smell of the Dry Tree." "Yea, or rebels & runaways therefrom," said Roger, with a dry grin. "But whosoever they may be, thou shalt see that they will suffer

us to depart whither we will, if we like not their company. I will be thy warrant thereof." "Moreover," said Ralph, "I have lost Falcon my horse; it is a sore miss of him" "Maybe," quoth Roger, "but at least thou hast saved thy skin; and whereas there are many horses on the earth, there is but one skin of thine: be content; if thou wilt, thou shalt win somewhat in exchange for thine horse." Ralph smiled, but somewhat sourly, and even therewith he heard a shrill whistle a little aloof, & the men stayed and held their peace, for they were talking together freely again now. Then the big man put his fingers to his mouth and whistled again in answer; a third whistle answered him, & lo, presently, as their company hastened on, the voices of men, & anon they came into a little wood-lawn wherein, standing about or lying on the grass beside their horses, was more than a score of men well armed, but without any banner or token, & all in white armour with white gaberdines thereover; & they had with them, as Ralph judged, some dozen of horses more than they needed for their own riding.

GREAT was the joy at this meeting, and there was embracing & kissing of friends: but Ralph noted that no man embraced that slender youth, & that he held him somewhat aloof from the others, and all seemed to do him reverence Now spake one of the runaways: "Well, lads, here be all we four well met again along with those twain who came to help us at our pinch, as their wont is, and Roger withal, good at need again, and a friend of his, as it seemeth, and whom we know not. See ye to that" Then stood forth the big man and said: "He is a fair young knight, as ye may see; and he rideth seeking adventures, & Roger did us to wit that he was abiding in the Burg at his peril, and would have him away, even if it were somewhat against his will: and we were willing that it should be so, all the more as I have a guess concerning what he is; and a fore-seeing man might think that luck should go with him." Therewith he turned to Ralph and said: "How say ye, fair sir, will ye take guesting with us a while & learn our ways?" Said Ralph: "Certain I am, that whither ye will have me go, thither must I; yet I deem that I have an errand that lies not your way. Therefore if I go with you, ye must so look upon it that I am in your fellowship as one compelled. To be short with you, I crave leave

to depart and go mine own road." ❧ As he spoke he saw the youth walking up & down in short turns; but his face he could scarce see at all, what for his slouched hat, what for his cloak; and at last he saw him go up to the tall man & speak softly to him awhile. The tall man nodded his head, & as the youth drew right back nigh to the thicket, spake to Ralph again:

"Fair sir, we grant thine asking; and add this thereto, that we give thee the man who has joined himself to thee, Roger of the Rope-walk to wit, to help thee on the road, so that thou mayst not turn thy face back to the Burg of the Four Friths, where thine errand, & thy life withal, were soon sped now, or run into any other trap which the Wood Perilous may have for thee. And yet if thou think better of it, thou mayst come with us straightway; for we have nought to do to tarry here any longer. And in any case, here is a good horse that we will give thee, since thou hast lost thy steed; & Roger who rideth with thee, he also is well horsed" ❧

Ralph looked hard at the big man, who now had his salade thrown back from his face, to see if he gave any token of jeering or malice, but could see nought such: nay, his face was grave and serious, not ill-fashioned, though it were both long and broad like his body: his cheek-bones somewhat high, his eyes grey and middling great, and looking, as it were, far away.

NOW deems Ralph that as for a trap of the Wood Perilous, he had already fallen into the trap; for he scarce needed to be told that these were men of the Dry Tree. He knew also that it was Roger who had led him into this trap, although he deemed it done with no malice against him ❧ So he said to himself that if he went with Roger he but went a roundabout road to the Dry Tree; so that he was well nigh choosing to go on with their company. Yet again he thought that something might well befall which would free him from that fellowship if he went with Roger alone; whereas if he went with the others it was not that he might be, but that he was already, of the fellowship of the Dry Tree & most like would go straight thence to their stronghold. So he spake as soberly as the tall man had done ❧ "Since ye give me the choice, fair sir, I will depart hence with Roger alone, whom ye call my man, though to me he seemeth to be yours. Howbeit, he has led me to you once, & belike will do

so once more." "Yea," quoth the big man smiling no whit more than erst, "and that will make the fourth time. Depart then, fair sir, & take this word with thee that I wish thee good and not evil."

Chapter XVI. Ralph rideth the Wood Perilous again.

NOW Roger led up unto Ralph a strong horse, red roan of hue, duly harnessed for war, and he himself had a good grey horse, and they mounted at once, and Ralph rode slowly away through the wood at his horse's will, for he was pondering all that had befallen him, and wondering what next should hap. Meanwhile those others had not loitered, but were a-horseback at once, and went their ways from Ralph through the wildwood.

NOUGHT spake Ralph for a while until Roger came close up to him and said: "Whither shall we betake us, fair lord? hast thou an inkling of the road whereon lies thine errand?" Now to Ralph this seemed but mockery, & he answered sharply: "I wot not, thou wilt lead whither thou wilt, even as thou hast trained me hitherward with lies and a forged tale. I suppose thou wilt lead me now by some roundabout road to the stronghold of the Dry Tree. It matters little, since thou durst not lead me back into the Burg. Yet now I come to think of it, it is evil to be alone with a found out traitor and liar; & I had belike have done better to go with their company"

"Nay, nay," quoth Roger, "thou art angry, and I marvel not thereat; but let thy wrath run off thee if thou mayst; for indeed what I have told thee of myself and my griefs is not all mere lying. Neither was it any lie that thou wert in peril of thy life amongst those tyrants of the Burg; thou with thy manly bearing, and free tongue, & bred, as I judge, to hate cruel deeds and injustice. Such freedom they cannot away with in that fellowship of hard men-at-arms; and soon hadst thou come to harm amongst them. And further, let alone that it is not ill to be sundered from yonder company, who mayhap will have rough work to do or ever they win home, I have nought to do to bring thee to Hampton under Scaur if thou hast no will to go thither: though certes I would lead thee somewhither, whereof thou shalt ask me nought as now; yet will I say thereof this much, that there

thou shalt be both safe & well at ease. Now lastly know this, that whatever I have done, I have done it to do thee good and not ill; and there is also another one, whom I will not name to thee, who wisheth thee better yet, by the token of those two strokes stricken by thee in the Wood Perilous before yesterday was a day."

NOW when Ralph heard those last words, such strong and sweet hope and desire stirred in him to see that woman of the Want-ways of the Wood Perilous that he forgat all else, except that he must nowise fall to strife with Roger, lest they should sunder, & he should lose the help of him, which he now deemed would bring him to sight of her whom he had unwittingly come to long for more than aught else; so he spake to Roger quietly & humbly: "Well, faring-fellow, thou seest how I am little more than a lad, and have fallen into matters mighty and perilous, which I may not deal with of my own strength, at least until I get nigher to them so that I may look them in the eyes, & strike a stroke or two on them if they be at enmity with me. So I bid thee lead me whither thou wilt, & if thou be a traitor to me, on thine own head be it; in good sooth, since I know nought of this wood and since I might go astray and so come back to the Burg, where be those whom thou hast now made my foemen, I am content to take thee on thy word, and to hope the best of thee, and ask no question of thee, save whitherward"

"fair sir," said Roger, "away from this place at least; for we are as yet over nigh to the Burg to be safe: but as to elsewhither we may wend, thereof we may speak on the road as we have leisure"

Therewith he smote his horse with his heel & they went forward at a smart trot, for the horses were unwearied, & the wood thereabouts of beech & clear of underwood; & Roger seemed to know his way well, and made no fumbling over it.

FOUR hours or more gone, the wood thinned, and the beeches failed, and they came to a country, still waste, of little low hills, stony for the more part, beset with scraggy thorn-bushes, & here and there some other berry-tree sown by the birds. Then said Roger: "Now I deem us well out of the peril of them of the Burg, who if they follow the chase as far as the sundering of us and the others, will heed our slot nothing, but will follow on that of the company: so we may breathe our horses a little, though their bait will be but small in this rough waste: therein we are better off than they, for lo you, saddle bags on my nag and meat and drink

therein" So they lighted down & let their horses graze what they could, while they ate & drank; amidst which Ralph again asked Roger of whither they were going. Said Roger: "I shall lead thee to a good harbour, and a noble house of a master of mine, wherein thou mayst dwell certain days, if thou hast a mind thereto, not without solace may be." "And this master," said Ralph, "is he of the Dry Tree?" Said Roger: "I scarce know how to answer thee without lying: but this I say, that whether he be or not, this is true; amongst those men I have friends and amongst them foes; but fate bindeth me to them for a while" Said Ralph reddening: "Be there any women amongst them?" "Yea, yea," quoth Roger, smiling a little, "doubt not thereof." "And that Lady of the Dry Tree," quoth Ralph, reddening yet more, but holding up his head, "that woman whereof the burgher spoke so bitterly, threatening her with torments & death if they might but lay hold of her; what wilt thou tell me concerning her?" "But little," said Roger, "save this, that thou desirest to see her, & that thou mayest have thy will thereof if thou wilt be guided by me" Ralph hearkened as if he heeded little what Roger said; but presently he rose up and walked to and fro in short turns with knit brows as one pondering a hard matter. He spake nought, & Roger seemed to heed him nothing, though in sooth he looked at him askance from time to time, till at last he came & lay down again by Roger, and in a while he spake: "I wot not why ye of the Dry Tree want me, or what ye will do with me; and but for one thing I would even now ride away from thee at all adventure." Roger said: "All this ye shall learn later on, and shalt find it but a simple matter; and meanwhile I tell thee again that all is for thy gain and thy pleasure. So now ride away if thou wilt; who hindereth thee? certes not I" "Nay," said Ralph, "I will ride with thee first to that fair house; & afterwards we shall see what is to hap." "Yea," quoth Roger, "then let us to horse straightway, so that we may be there if not before dark night yet at least before bright morn; for it is yet far away."

Chapter XVII. Ralph cometh to the House of Abundance

THEREWITHAL they gat to horse & rode away through the stony land aforesaid, wherein was

no river, but for water many pools in the bottoms, with little brooks running from them. But after a while they came up on to a ridge somewhat high, on the further side whereof was a wide valley well-grassed and with few trees, & no habitation of man that they might see. But a wide river ran down the midst of it; and it was now four hours after noon. Quoth Roger: "The day wears and we shall by no means reach harbour before dark night, even if we do our best: art thou well used to the water, lord?" "Much as a mallard is," said Ralph. Said Roger: "That is well, for though there is a ford some mile and a half down stream, for that same reason it is the way whereby men mostly cross the water into the wildwood; and here again we are more like to meet foes than well-wishers; or at the least there will be question of who we are, and whence and whither; and we may stumble in our answer." Said Ralph: "There is no need to tarry, ride we down to the water." So did they, & took the water, which was deep, but not swift. On the further side they clomb up a hill somewhat steep; at the crown they drew rein to give their horses breath, and Ralph turned in his saddle & looked down on to the valley, and as aforesaid he was clear-sighted and far-sighted; now he said: "Fellow-farer, I see the riding of folk down below there, and meseems they be spurring toward the water; and they have weapons: there! dost thou not see the gleam?" "I will take thy word for it, fair sir," said Roger, "& will even spur, since they be the first men whom we have seen since we left the thickets." And therewith he went off at a hand gallop, and Ralph followed him without more ado. They rode up hill & down dale of a grassy downland, till at last they saw a wood before them again, & soon drew rein under the boughs; for now were their horses somewhat wearied. Then said Ralph: "Here have we ridden a fair land & seen neither house nor herd, neither sheep-cote nor shepherd. I wonder thereat" Said Roger: "Thou wouldst wonder the less didst thou know the story of it." "What story?" said Ralph. Quoth Roger: "A story of war and wasting." "Yea?" said Ralph, "yet surely some bold knight or baron hath rights in the land, and might be free to build him a strong house and gather men to him to guard the shepherds & husbandmen from burners and lifters." "Sooth is that," said Roger; "but there are other things in the tale." "What things?" said Ralph Quoth Roger: "Ill hap & sorrow and

the hand of fate & great Sorcery." "And dastards withal?" said Ralph. "Even so," said Roger, "yet mingled with valiant men. Over long is the tale to tell as now, so low as the sun is; therefore ride we on with little fear of foemen. For look you, this wood, like the thickets about the Burg of the Four Friths, hath an evil name, and few folk ride it uncompelled; therefore it is the safer for us. And yet I will say this to thee, that whereas awhile agone thou mightest have departed from me with little peril of aught save the stumbling on some of the riders of the Burg of the Four Friths, departing from me now will be a hard matter to thee; for the saints in Heaven only know whitherward thou shouldest come, if thou wert to guide thyself now. This is a rough word, but a true one, so help me God and Saint Michael! What sayest thou; art thou content, or wilt thou cast hard words at me again?" So it was that for all that had come and gone Ralph was light-hearted and happy; so he laughed & said: "Content were I, even if I were not compelled thereto. For my heart tells me of new things, & marvellous and joyous that I shall see ere long" "And thine heart lieth not," said Roger, "for amidst of this wood is the house where we shall have guesting to-night, which will be to thee, belike, the door of life & many marvels. For thence have folk sought ere now to the WELL AT THE WORLD'S END" Ralph turned to him sharply & said: "Many times in these few days have I heard that word. Dost thou know the meaning thereof? For as to me I know it not." Said Roger: "Thou mayst well be as wise as I am thereon: belike men seek to it for their much thriving, and oftenest find it not. Yet have I heard that they be the likeliest with whom all women are in love." Ralph held his peace, but Roger noted that he reddened at the word.

NOW they got on horseback again, for they had lighted down to breathe their beasts, and they rode on and on, & never was Roger at fault; long was the way & perforce they rested at whiles, so that night fell upon them in the wood, but the moon rose withal. So night being fairly come, they rested a good while, as it would be dawn before moonset. Then they rode on again, till now the summer night grew old & waned, but the wood hid the beginnings of the dawn.

AT last they came out of the close wood suddenly into an open plain, & now, as the twilight of the

dawn was passing into early day, they saw that wide grassy meadows & tilled fields lay before them, with a little river running through the plain; and amidst the meadows, on a green mound, was a white castle, strong & well built, though not of the biggest ❧ Roger pointed to it, and said: "Now we are come home!" and cried on his wearied beast, who for his part seemed to see the end of his journey. They splashed through a ford of the river and came to the gate of the castle as day drew on apace; Roger blew a blast on a great horn that hung on the gate, & Ralph looking round deemed he had never seen fairer building than in the castle, what he could see of it, and yet it was built from of old. They waited no long while before they were answered; but whereas Ralph looked to see armed gatewards peer from the battlements or the shot window, & a porter espying them through a lattice, it happened in no such way, but without more ado the wicket was opened to them by a tall old woman, gaunt and grey, who greeted them courteously: Roger lighted down and Ralph did in likewise, & they led their horses through the gate into the court of the castle; the old woman going before them till they came to the hall door, which she opened to them, and taking the reins of their horses, led them away to the stable, while those twain entered the hall, which was as goodly as might be ❧ Roger led Ralph up to a board on the dais, whereon there was meat and drink enow, & Ralph made his way, leader sit down by him and they fell to. There was no serving-man to wait on them nor a carle of any kind did they see; the old woman only, coming back from the horses, served them at table. Ever as she went about she looked long on Ralph, and seemed as if she would have spoken to him, but as often, she glanced at Roger and forbore ❧ So when they were well nigh done with their meat Ralph spake to the carline and said: "Belike the lord or the lady of this house are abed and we shall not see them till the morrow?" Ere the carline could speak Roger broke in and said: "There is neither lord nor lady in the castle as now, nor belike will there be tomorrow morning, or rather, before noon on this day; so now ye were better to let this dame lead thee to bed, & let the next hours take care of themselves" ❧ "So be it," said Ralph, who was by this time heartly wearied, "shall we two lie in the same chamber?" "Nay," said the carline shortly, "lodging for the

master & lodging for the man are two different things." Roger laughed and said nought, & Ralph gave him good-night, and followed the carline nothing loth, who led him to a fair chamber over the solar, as if he had been the very master of the castle, & he lay down in a very goodly bed, nor troubled himself as to where Roger lay, nor indeed of aught else, nor did he dream of Burg, or wood, or castle, or man, or woman; but lay still like the image of his father's father on the painted tomb in the choir of St. Laurence of Upmeads.

Chapter XVIII. Of Ralph in the Castle of Abundance

BROAD lay the sun upon the plain amidst the wildwood when he awoke and sprang out of bed & looked out of the window (for the chamber was in the gable of the hall and there was nought of the castle beyond it). It was but little after noon of a fair June day, for Ralph had slumbered as it behoved a young man. The light wind bore into the chamber the sweet scents of the early summer, the chief of all of them being the savour of the new-cut grass, for about the wide meadows the carles & queans were awork at the beginning of hay harvest; & late as it was in the day, more than one blackbird was singing from the bushes of the castle pleasance. Ralph sighed for very pleasure of life before he had yet well remembered where he was, or what had befallen of late; but as he stood at the window & gazed over the meadows, & the memory of all came back to him, he sighed once more for a lack of somewhat that came into his heart, & he smiled shamefacedly, though there was no one near, as his thought bade him wonder if amongst the hay-making women yonder there were any as fair as those yellow-clad thrall-women of the Burg; & as he turned from the window a new hope made his heart beat, for he deemed that he had been brought to that house that he might meet some one who should change his life and make him a new man.

SO he did on his raiment and went on his ways down to the hall, and looked about for Roger, but found him not, nor any one else save the carline, who presently came in from the buttery, and of whom he asked, where was Roger. Quoth she: "He has been gone these six hours, but hath left a word for

thee, lord, to wit, that he beseeches thee to abide him here for two days at the least, and thereafter thou art free to go if thou wilt. But as for me" (and therewith she smiled on him as sweetly as her wrinkled old face might compass) "I say to thee, abide beyond those two days if Roger cometh not, & as long as thou art here I will make thee all the cheer I may. And who knoweth but thou mayest meet worthy adventures here. Such have ere now befallen good knights in this house or anigh it" "I thank thee, mother," quoth Ralph, "and it is like that I may abide here beyond the two days if the adventure befall me not ere then. But at least I will bide the eating of my dinner here to-day"

"Well is thee, fair lord," said the carline. "If thou wilt but walk in the meadow but a little half hour all shall be ready for thee. Forsooth it had been dight before now, but that I waited thy coming forth from thy chamber, for I would not wake thee. And the saints be praised for the long sweet sleep that hath painted thy goodly cheeks." So saying, she hurried off to the buttery, leaving Ralph laughing at her outspoken flattering words.

THEN he got him out of the hall and the castle, for no door was shut, and there was no man to be seen within or about the house. So he walked to and fro the meadow & saw the neat-herds in the pasture, and the hay-making folk beyond them, and the sound of their voices came to him on the little airs that were breathing. He thought he would talk to some of these folk ere the world was much older, and also he noted between the river and the wood many cots of the husbandmen trimly builded and thatched, and amidst them a little church, white and delicate of fashion; but as now his face was set toward the river because of the hot day. He came to a pool a little below where a wooden foot-bridge crossed the water, & about the pool were willows growing, which had not been shrouded these eight years, & the water was clear as glass with a bottom of fine sand. There then he bathed him, & as he sported in the water he bethought him of the long smooth reaches of Upmeads Water, & the swimming low down amidst the long swinging weeds between the chuckle of the reed sparrows, when the sun was new risen in the July morning. When he stood on the grass again, what with the bright weather & fair little land, what with the freshness of the water, and his good rest, and the hope of adventure to come,

he felt as if he had never been merrier in his life-days. Withal it was a weight off his heart that he had escaped from the turmoil of the wars of the Burg of the four friths, and the men of the Dry Tree, and the Wheat-wearers, with the thralldom and stripes & fire-raising, and the hard life of strife and gain of the walled town and strong place.

WHEN he came back to the castle gate there was the carline in the wicket peering out to right & left, seeking him to bring him in to dinner. And when she saw him so joyous, with his lips smiling and his eyes dancing for mirth, she also became joyous, and said: "Verily, it is a pity of thee that there is never a fair damsel or so to look on thee and love thee here to-day. Far would many a maiden run to kiss thy mouth, fair lad. But now come to thy meat, that thou mayest grow the fairer & last the longer." He laughed gaily & went into the hall with her, and now was it well dight with bankers and dorsars of goodly figured cloth, and on the walls a goodly halling of arras of the Story of Alexander. So he sat to table, and the meat and drink was of the best, and the carline served him, praising him ever with fulsome words as he ate, till he wished her away.

AFTER dinner he rested awhile, and called to the carline & bade her bring him his sword and his basnet. "Wherefore?" said she. "Whither wilt thou?" Said he: "I would walk abroad to drink the air." "Wilt thou into the wild-wood?" said she. "Nay, mother," he said, "I will but walk the meadow & look on the hay-making folk." "For that," said the carline, "thou needest neither sword nor helm. I was afeard that thou wert about departing, & thy departure would be a grief to my heart: in the deep wood thou mightest be so bestead as to need a sword in thy fist; but what shouldst thou do with it in this Plain of Abundance, where are nought but peaceful husbandmen and frank & kind maidens? and all these are as if they had drunk a draught of the WELL AT THE WORLD'S END" Ralph started as she said the word, but held his peace awhile. Then he said: "And who is lord of this fair land?" "There is no lord, but a lady," said the carline. "How hight she?" said Ralph. "We call her the Lady of Abundance," said the old woman. Said Ralph: "Is she a good lady?" "She is my lady," said the carline, "& doeth good to me, and there is not a carle in the land but speaketh well of her, it may be over well" "Is she fair to look on?" said

Ralph. "Of women/folk there is none fairer," said the carline; "as to men, that is another thing." Ralph was silent awhile, then he said: "What is the Well at the World's End?" "They talk of it here," said she, "many things too long to tell of now: but there is a book in this house that telleth of it; I know it well by the look of it though I may not read in it. I will seek it for thee to/morrow if thou wilt." "Have thou thanks, dame," said he; "and I pray thee forget it not; but now I will go forth." "Yea," said the carline, "but abide a little." Therewith she went into the buttery, & came back bearing with her a garland of roses of the garden, intermingled with green leaves, and she said: "The sun is yet hot and over hot, do this on thine head to shade thee from the burning. I knew that thou wouldst go abroad to/day, so I made this for thee in the morning; and when I was young I was called the garland/maker. It is better summer wear than thy basnet." He thanked her & did it on smiling, but somewhat ruefully; for he said to himself: "This is over old a dame that I should wear a love/token from her." But when it was on his head, the old dame clapped her hands and cried: "O there, there! Now art thou like the image of St. Michael in the Choir of Our Lady of the Thorn: there is none so lovely as thou. I would my Lady could see thee thus; surely the sight of thee should gladden her heart. And withal thou art not ill clad otherwise." Indeed his raiment was goodly, for his surcoat was new, and it was of fine green cloth, and the coat/armour of Upmeads was beaten on it, to wit, on a gold ground an apple/tree fruited, standing by a river/side.

Now he laughed somewhat uneasily at her words, & so went forth from the castle again, & made straight for the hay/making folk on the other side of the water; for all this side was being fed by beasts and sheep; but at the point where he crossed, the winding of the stream brought it near to the castle gate. So he came up with the country folk & greeted them, and they did as much by him in courteous words: they were goodly and well/shapen, both men and women, gay and joyous of demeanour & well/clad as for folk who work afield. So Ralph went from one to another & gave them a word or two, and was well pleased to watch them at their work awhile; but yet he would fain speak somewhat more with one or other of them. At last under the shade

of a tall elm-tree he saw an old man sitting heeding the outer raiment of the haymakers and their victual & bottles of drink; and he came up to him and gave him the sele of the day; and the old man blessed him and said: "Art thou dwelling in my Lady's castle, fair lord?" "A while at least," said Ralph. Said the old man: "We thank thee for coming to see us; and meseemeth from the look of thee thou art worthy to dwell in my Lady's House." "What sayest thou?" said Ralph. "Is she a good lady and a gracious?" "O yea, yea," said the carle. Said Ralph: "Thou meanest, I suppose, that she is fair to look on, & soft-spoken when she is pleased?" "I mean far more than that," said the carle; "surely is she most heavenly fair, & her voice is like the music of heaven: but withal, her deeds, and the kindness of her to us poor men and husbandmen, are no worse than should flow forth from that loveliness"

"Will ye be her servants?" said Ralph, "or what are ye?" Said the carle: "We be yeomen & her vavassors; there is no thralldom in our land." "Do ye live in good peace for the more part?" said Ralph Said the carle: "Time has been when cruel battles were fought in these wood-lawns, and many poor people were destroyed therein: but that was before the coming of the Lady of Abundance" "And when was that?" said Ralph. "I wot not," said the old carle; "I was born in peace & suckled in peace; & in peace I fell to the loving of maidens, and I wedded in peace, & begat children in peace, and in peace they dwell about me, & in peace shall I depart." "What then," said Ralph (& a grievous fear was born in his heart), "is not the Lady of Abundance young?" Said the carle: "I have seen her when I was young and also since I have been old, and ever was she fair & lovely, and slender handed; as straight as a spear, and as sweet as white clover, and gentle-voiced and kind, & dear to our souls" "Yea," said Ralph, "and she doth not dwell in this castle always; where else then doth she dwell?" "I wot not," said the carle, "but it should be in heaven: for when she cometh to us all our joys increase in us by the half" "Look you, father," said Ralph, "May it not have been more than one Lady of Abundance that thou hast seen in thy life-days; and that this one that now is, is the daughter's daughter of the one whom thou first sawest.. how sayest thou?" The carle laughed: "Nay, nay," said he, "It is not so: never has there

been another like to her in all ways, in body and voice, and heart and soul. It is as I say, she is the same as she was always." "And when," said Ralph, with a beating heart, "does she come hither? Is it at some set season?" "Nay, from time to time, at all seasons," said the carle; "and as fair she is when she goeth over the snow, as when her feet are set amidst the June daisies"

Now was Ralph so full of wonder that he scarce knew what to say; but he bethought him of that fair waste on the other side of the forest, the country through which that wide river flowed, so he said: "And that land north-away beyond the wildwood, canst thou tell me the tale of its wars, and if it were wasted in the same wars that tormented this land?" The carle shook his head: "As to the land beyond this wood," quoth he, "I know nought of it, for beyond the wood go we never: nay, most often we go but a little way into it, no further than we can see the glimmer of the open daylight through its trees, the daylight of the Land of Abundance, that is enough for us." "Well," said Ralph, "I thank thee for the tale thou hast told me, & wish thee more years of peace." "And to thee, young man," said the carle, "I wish a good wish indeed, to wit that thou mayest see the Lady of Abundance here before thou departest."

HIS words once more made Ralph's heart beat & his cheek flush, and he went back to the castle somewhat speedily; for he said to himself, after the folly of lovers: "Maybe she will be come even now, and I not there to meet her." Yet when he came to the castle-gate his heart misgave him, & he would not enter at once, but turned about to go round the wall by the north & west. In the castle he saw no soul save the old dame looking out of the window and nodding to him, but in the pasture all about were neatherds and shepherds, both men and women; and at the north-west corner, whereas the river drew quite close to the wall, he came upon two damsels of the field-folk fishing with an angle in a quiet pool of the stream. He greeted them, & they, who were young & goodly, returned his greeting, but were shamefaced at his gallant presence, as indeed was he at the thoughts of his heart mingled with the sight of their fairness. So he passed on at first without more words than his greeting. Yet presently he turned back again, for he longed to hear some word more concerning

the Lady whose coming he abode. They stood smiling and blushing as he came up to them again, and heeded their angles little. Said Ralph: "Fair maidens, do ye know at all when the Lady of the castle may be looked for?" They were slow to answer, but at last one said: "No, fair sir, such as we know nothing of the comings & goings of great folk." Said Ralph, smiling on her for kindness, and pleasure of her fairness: "Is it not so that ye will be glad of her coming?" But she answered never a word, only looked at him steadily, with her great grey eyes fixed in wonderment, while the other one looked down, as if intent on her angling tools. Ralph knew not how to ask another question, so he turned about with a greeting word again, and this time went on steadily round about the wall. And now in his heart waxed the desire of that Lady, once seen, as he deemed, in such strange wise; but he wondered within himself if the devil had not sown that longing within him: whereas it might be that this woman on whom he had set his heart was herself no real woman but a devil, and one of the goddesses of the ancient world, and his heart was sore and troubled by many doubts and hopes & fears; but he said to himself that when he saw her, then could he judge between the good & the evil, and could do or forbear, and that the sight of her would cure all.

THUS thinking he walked swiftly, & was soon round at the castle gate again, and entered, and went into the hall, where was the old dame, busied about some household matter. Ralph nodded to her and hastened away, lest she should fall to talk with him; & he set himself now to go from chamber to chamber, that he might learn the castle, what it was. He came into the guard-chamber and found the walls thereof all hung with armour and weapons, clean and in good order, though there was never a man-at-arms there nor any soul except the old woman. He went up a stair therefrom on to the battlements, & went into the towers of the wall, and found weapons both for hand & for cast and shot in each one of them, and all ready as if for present battle; then he came down into the court again and went into a very goodly ambulatory over against the hall, & he entered a door therefrom, which was but on the latch, and went up a little stair into a chamber, which was the goodliest and the richest of all. Its roof was all done with gold and blue

from over sea, & its pavement wrought delicately in Alexandrine work. On the dais was a throne of carven ivory, & above it a canopy of baudekin of the goodliest fashion, and there was a foot-carpet before it, wrought with beasts and the hunting of the deer. As for the walls of that chamber, they were hung with a marvellous halling of arras, wherein was wrought the greenwood, and there amidst in one place a pot-herb garden, with a green garth with goats therein, and in that garth a little thatched house. And amidst all this greenery were figured over and over again two women, whereof one old & the other young; and the old one was clad in grand attire, with gold chains and brooches and rings, and sat with her hands before her by the house-door, or stood looking on as the young one worked, spinning or digging in the garth, or milking the goats outside of it, or what not; and this one was clad in sorry & scanty raiment. What all this might mean, Ralph knew not; but when he had looked long at the greenery & its images, he said to himself that if he who wrought that cloth had not done the young woman after the likeness of the Lady whom he had helped in the wildwood, then it must

have been done from her twin sister.

LONG he abode in that chamber looking at the arras, and wondering whether the sitter in the ivory throne would be any other than the thrall in the greenwood cot. He abode there so long that the dusk began to gather in the house, & he could see the images no more; for he was filled with the sweetness of desire when he looked on them. Then he went back slowly to the hall, and found the carline, who had lighted the waxlights and made meat ready for him; and when she saw him she cried out joyously: "Ah, I knew that thou wouldst come back. Art thou well content with our little land?" "I like it well, dame," said he; "but tell me, if thou canst, what is the meaning of the halling in the chamber with the ivory throne?" Said the carline: "Thereof shall another tell thee, who can tell of it better than I; but it is nought to hide that yonder chamber is the chamber of estate of our Lady, and she sitteth there to hear the cases of folk and to give dooms." The old woman crossed herself as she spoke, and Ralph wondered thereat, but asked no more questions, for he was scarce sorry that the carline

would not tell him thereof, lest she should spoil the tale.

SO passed the evening, and he went to bed and slept as a young man should, and the next day he was up betimes & went abroad and mingled with the carles & queans afield; but this time he spake not of the Lady, and heard nought to heed from any of that folk. So he went back to the castle and gat him a bow and arrows, and entered the thicket of the wood nigh where he and Roger first came out of it. He had prayed a young man of the folk to go with him, but he was not over willing to go, though he would not say wherefore. So Ralph went him-self by himself and wandered some way into the wood, and saw nought worse than himself. As he came back, making a circuit toward the open meadows, he happened on a herd of deer in a lonely place, half wood half meadow, & there he slew a hart with one shaft, for he was a deft bowman. Then he went and fetched a leash of carles, who went with him somewhat less than half willingly, and between them they broke up the hart and carried him home to the castle, where the carline met them. She smiled on Ralph and praised the venison, and said withal that the hunting was well done; "for, as fond and as fair as thou mayst be, it is not good that young men should have their minds set on one thing only." Therewith she led him in to his meat, & set him down & served him; and all the while of his dinner he was longing to ask her if she deemed that the Lady would come that day, since it was the last day of those which Roger had bidden him wait; but the words would not out of his mouth. She looked at him and smiled, as though she had a guess of his thought, and at last she said to him: "Thy tongue is tied to-day. Hast thou, after all, seen something strange in the wood?" He shook his head for naysay. Said she: "Why, then, dost thou not ask more concerning the Well at the World's End?" He laughed, & said: "Maybe because I think that thou canst not tell me thereof." "Well," she said, "if I cannot, yet the book may, and this evening, when the sun is down, thou shalt have it." "I thank thee, mother," said he; "but this is now the last day that Roger bade me wait. Dost thou think that he will come back to-night?" and he reddened therewith. "Nay," she said, "I know not, & thou carest not whether he will come or not. Yet I know that thou wilt abide here till some one

else come, whether that be early or late." Again he reddened, & said, in a coaxing way: "And wilt thou give me guesting, mother, for a few more summer days?" "Yea," she said, "and till summer is over, if need be, & the corn is cut and carried, and till the winter is come and the latter end of winter is gone." He smiled faintly, though his heart fell, and he said: "Nay, mother, and can it by any chance be so long a-coming?" "O, fair boy," she said, "thou wilt make it long, howsoever short it be. And now I will give thee a rede, lest thou vex thyself sick and fret thy very heart. To-morrow go see if thou canst meet thy fate instead of abiding it. Do on thy war-gear & take thy sword and try the adventure of the wildwood; but go not over deep into it." Said he: "But how if the Lady come while I am away from this house?" "Sooth to say," said the carline, "I deem not that she will, for the way is long betwixt us and her" "Dost thou mean," said Ralph standing up from the board, "that she will not come ever? I adjure thee not to beguile me with soft words, but tell me the very sooth." "There, there!" said she, "sit down, king's son; eat thy meat and drink thy wine; for to-morrow is a new day. She will come soon or late, if she be yet in the world. And now I will say no more to thee concerning this matter"

Therewith she went her ways from the hall, and when she came back with hand-basin & towel, she said no word to him but only smiled kindly. He went out presently into the meadow (for it was yet but early afternoon) and came among the haymaking folk and spake with them, hoping that perchance some of them might speak again of the Lady of Abundance; but none of them did so, though the old carle he had spoken with was there, & there also were the two maidens whom he had seen fishing; and as for him, he was over faint-hearted to ask them any more questions concerning her. Yet he abode with them long, and ate and drank amidst the hay with them till the moon shone brightly. Then he went back to the castle and found the carline in the hall, & she had the book with her and gave it to him, and he sat down in the shot-window under the waxlights and fell to reading of it.

Chapter XIX. Ralph readeth in a book concerning the Well at the World's End

FAIRLY written was that book, & there were many pictures therein: of the meaning of which Ralph knew not; but amongst them was the image of the fair woman whom he had holpen at the want/ways of the wood, & but four days ago was that, yet it seemed long and long to him. The book told not much about the Well at the World's End, but much it told of a certain woman whom no man that saw her could forbear to love: of her it told that erewhile she dwelt lonely in the wildwood (though how she came there was not said) and how a king's son found her there & brought her to his father's kingdom & wedded her, whether others were lief or loth: and in a little while, when the fame of her had spread, he was put out of his kingdom and his father's house for the love of her, because other kings and lords hankered after her; whereof befel long and grievous war which she abode not to the end, but sought to her old place in the wildwood; and how she found there another woman, a sorceress, who made her her thrall; and tormented her grievously with toil and stripes. And how again there came a knight to that place who was seeking the Well at the World's End, & bore her away with him; and how the said knight was slain on the way, and she was taken by tyrants and robbers of the folk: but these being entangled in her love fought amongst themselves and she escaped, and went seeking that Well, and found it at the long last, and drank thereof, and throve ever after: and how she liveth yet, and is become the servant of the Well to entangle the seekers in her love and keep them from drinking thereof; because there was no man that beheld her, but anon he was the thrall of her love, & might not pluck his heart away from her to do any of the deeds whereby men thrive and win the praise of the people.

Ralph read on and on till the short night waned, & the waxlights failed one after the other, & the windows of the hall grew grey and daylight came, and the throstles burst out a-singing at once in the castle pleasaunce, and the sun came up over the wood, & the sound of men/folk bestirring themselves a/field came to his ears through the open windows; & at last he was done with the tale, and the carline came not

near him though the sun had clomb high up the heavens. As for Ralph, what he had read was sweet poison to him; for if before he was somewhat tormented by love, now was his heart sick and sore with it. Though he knew not for certain whether this tale had to do with the Lady of the Forest, and though he knew not if the Lady who should come to the castle were even she, yet he needs must deem that so it was, and his heart was weary with love, and his manhood seemed changed.

Chapter XX. Ralph meeteth a man in the Wood

BUT the morning began to wear as he sat deep in these thoughts & still the Carline came not to him; and he thought: "She leaveth me alone that I may do her bidding: so will I without tarrying." And he arose & did on his hauberk & basnet, and girt his sword to his side, and went forth, afoot as before. He crossed the river by a wide ford & stepping stones somewhat below the pool wherein he had bathed on that first day; and already by then he had got so far, what with the fresh air of the beauteous morning, what with the cheerful tinkling of his sword and hauberk he was somewhat amended of his trouble and heaviness of spirit. A little way across the river, but nigher to the wood, was a house or cot of that country-folk, and an old woman sat spinning in the door. So Ralph went up thither, and greeted her, and craved of her a draught of milk; so the goody turned about & cried out to one within, & there came forth one of the maidens whom Ralph had met fishing that other day, and the old woman bade her bring forth milk and bread. Then the carline looked hard at Ralph, & said: "Ah! I have heard tell of thee: thou art abiding the turn of the days up at the castle yonder, as others have done before thee. Well, well, belike thou shalt have thy wish, though whether it shall be to thy profit, who shall say?"

Thereat Ralph's heart fell again, & he said: "Sayest thou, mother, that there have been others abiding like me in the tower? I know not what thy words mean." The carline laughed. "Well," said she, "here comes thy morning's bait borne by shapely hands enough; eat & drink first; and then will I tell thee my meaning." Therewith came the maiden forth with the bowl & the loaf; and indeed she was fair enough, and shy and kind;

but Ralph heeded her little, nor was his heart moved by her at all. She set a stool for him beside the door and he sat down and ate and drank, though his heart was troubled; and the maiden hung about, and seemed to find it no easy matter to keep her eyes off him.

PRESENTLY the carline, who had been watching the two, said: "Thou askest of the meaning of my words; well, deemest thou that I have had more men than one to love me?" "I know not, mother," said Ralph, who could scarce hold himself patient. "There now!" quoth the carline, "look at my damsel! (she is not my daughter, but my brother's,) there is a man, and a brisk lad too, whom she calleth her batchelor, and is as I verily deem well-pleased with him: yet lo you how she eyeth thee, thou fair man, and doth so with her raiment that thou mayst best see how shapely she is of limb and foot, and toyeth her right hand with her left wrist, and the like. Well, as for me, I have had more lovers than one or two. And why have I had just so many & no more? Nay, thou needest not make any long answer to me. I am old now, and even before I was old I was not young: I am now foul of favour, and even before I became foul, I was not so fair; well then?" "Yea, what then?" said Ralph. "This then, fair young fool," said she: "the one whom thou lovest, long hath she lived, but she is not old to look on, nor foul; but fair: O how fair!"

Then Ralph forgot his fear, & his heart grew greedy and his eyes glistened, and he said, yet he spoke faintly: "Yea, is she fair?" "What! hast thou not seen her?" said the carline. Ralph called to mind the guise in which he had seen her and flushed bright red, as he answered: "Yea, I deem that I have: surely it was she." The carline laughed: "Well," said she; "however thou hast seen her, thou hast scarce seen her as I have." Said Ralph, "How was that?" Said she: "It is her way here in the summer-tide to bathe her in yonder pool up the water:" (& it was the same pool wherein Ralph had bathed) "& she hath me & my niece and two other women to hold up the silken cloth betwixt her body and the world; so that I have seen her as God made her; and I shall tell thee that when he was about that work he was minded to be a craftsmaster; for there is no blemish about her that she should hide her at all or anywhere. Her sides are sleek, & her thighs no rougher than her face, and her feet as

dainty as her hands: yea, she is a pearl all over; withal she is as strong as a knight, and I warrant her hardier of heart than most knights. A happy man shalt thou be; for surely I deem thou hast not come hither to abide her without some token or warrant of her"

Ralph held down his head, and he could not meet the old woman's eyes as she spake thus; & the maiden took herself out of earshot at the first words of the carline hereof, & was half-way down to the river by now

Ralph spake after a while & said: "Tell me, is she good, and a good woman?" The dame laughed scornfully and said: "Surely, surely; she is the saint of the Forest Land, and the guardian of all poor folk. Ask the carles else!"

Ralph held his peace, and rose to be gone, and turning saw the damsel wading the shallow ford, and looking over her shoulder at him. He gave the dame good day, and departed light-foot but heavy hearted. Yet as he went, he kept saying to himself: "Did she not send that Roger to turn my ways hither? yet she cometh not. Surely she hath changed in these last days, or it may be in these last hours: yea, or this very hour."

AMIDST such thoughts he came into the wood, and made his way by the paths and open places, going south and east of the House: Whereas the last day he had gone west and north. He went a soft pace, but wandered on without any stay till it was noon, and he had seen nought but the wild things of the wood, nor many of them. But at last he heard the tinkle of a little bell coming towards him: so he stood still & got the hilt of his sword ready to hand; and the tinkle drew nearer, and he heard withal the trample of some riding-beast; so he went toward the sound, & presently in a clearer place of the wood came upon a man of religion, a clerk, riding on a hackney, to whose neck hung a horse-bell: the priest had saddle bags beside him & carried in his right hand a book in a bag. When he met Ralph he blessed him, and Ralph gave him the sele of the day, and asked him whither he would. Said the Priest: "I am for the Little Plain and the Land of Abundance; whence art thou, my son, and whither wilt thou?" "From that very land I come," said Ralph; "and as to whither, I seek adventures; but unless I see more than I have this forenoon, or thou canst tell me of them, back will I whence I came: yet

to say sooth, I shall not be sorry for a fellow to help me back, for these woodland ways are somewhat blind". Said the Priest: "I will bear thee company with a good will; and I know the road right well; for I am the Vicar appointed by the fathers of the Thorn to serve the church of the Little Plain, and the chapel of St. Anthony yonder in the wood, & to-day I go to the church of the good folk there". So Ralph turned, and went along with him, walking by his bridle-rein. And as they went the priest said to him: "Art thou one of my Lady's lords?" Ralph reddened as he sighed, & said: "I am no captain of hers." Then smiled the priest and said: "Then will I not ask thee of thine errand; for belike thou wouldest not tell me thereof". Ralph said nought, but waxed shamefaced as he deemed that the priest eyed him curiously. At last he said: "I will ask thee a question in turn, father." "Yea," said the priest. Said Ralph: "This lady of the land, the Lady of Abundance, is she a very woman?" "Holy Saints!" quoth the priest, blessing himself, "what meanest thou?" Said Ralph: "I mean, is she of those who outwardly have a woman's semblance, but within are of the race of the ancient devils, the gods of the Gentiles?" Then the priest crossed himself again, and spake as solemnly as a judge on the bench: "Son, I pray that if thou art not in thy right mind, thou will come thereinto anon. Know this, that whatever else she may be, she is a right holy woman. Or hast thou perchance heard any evil tales concerning her?" Now Ralph was confused at his word, and knew not what to say; for though in his mind he had been piecing together all that he had heard of the lady both for good and for evil, he had no clear tale to tell even to himself: so he answered nothing.

BUT the priest went on: "Son, I shall tell thee that such tales I have heard, but from whose mouth forsooth? I will tell thee; from a sort of idle jades, young women who would be thought fairer than they be, who are afraid of everything save a naked man, and who can lie easier than they can say their paternoster: from such as these come the stories; or from old crones who live in sour anger with themselves & all else, because they have lived no goodly life in their youth, and have not learned the loveliness of Holy Church. Now, son, shall the tales of such women, old and young, weigh in thy mind beside the word I tell thee of

what I have seen & know concerning this most excellent of ladies? I trow not. And for my part I tell thee, that though she is verily as fair as Venus (God save us) yet is she as chaste as Agnes, as wise as Katherine, and as humble and meek as Dorothy. She bestow/eth her goods plentifully to the church, and is merciful to poor men therewith; & so far as occasion may serve her she is constant at the Holy Office; neither doth she spare to confess her sins, & to do all penance which is bidden her, yea and more. For though I cannot say to my knowledge that she weareth a hair; yet once and again have I seen her wending this woodland toward the chapel of her friend St. Anthony by night & cloud, so that few might see her, obedient to the Scripture which sayeth, 'Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth,' and she barefoot in her smock amidst the rugged wood, and, so arrayed, fairer than any queen in a golden gown. Yea, as fair as the woodwives of the ancient heathen"

Therewith the priest stayed his words, and seemed as if he were fallen into a dream; & he sighed heavily. But Ralph walked on by his bridle/rein dreamy no less; for the words that he had heard he heeded not, save as they made pictures for him of the ways of that woman of the forest.

SO they went on soberly till the priest lifted up his head and looked about like one come out of slumber, & said in a firm voice: "I tell thee, my son, thou may/est set thy love upon her with/out sin." And therewith suddenly he fell a/weeping; and Ralph was ill at ease of his weeping, & went along by him saying nought; till the priest plucked up heart again, and said, turning to Ralph, but not meeting his eye: "My son, I weep because men and women are so evil, and mis/say each other so sorely, even as they do by this holy woman." As he spake his tears brake out again, & Ralph strode on fast, so as to outgo him, thinking it unmannerly to seem as if he noted not his sorrow; yet withal unable to say aught to him thereof. Moreover it irked him to hear a grown man weep/ing for grief, even though it were but a priest. Within a while the priest caught up with him, his tears all staunched, & fell to talk with him cheerfully concerning the wood, and the Little Land and the dwellers therein and the conditions of them, & he praised them much save the women. Ralph answered him with good cheer

in likewise; & thus they came to the cot of the old woman, and both she and the maiden were without the house, the old carline hithering & thithering on some errand, the maiden leaning against a tree as if pondering some matter. As they passed by, the priest blessed them in words, but his eyes scowled on them, whereat the carline grinned, but the damsel heeded him not, but looked wistfully on Ralph. The priest muttered somewhat as he passed which Ralph caught not the meaning of, & fell moody again; and when he was a little past the ford he drew rein and said: "Now, son, I must to my cell hard by the church yonder: but yet I will say one word to thee ere we sunder; to wit, that to my mind the Holy Lady will love no one but the saints of heaven, save it be some man with whom all women are in love" Therewith he turned away suddenly, & rode smartly towards his church; and Ralph deemed that he was weeping once more. As for Ralph, he went quietly home toward the castle, for the sun was setting now, and as he went he pondered all these things in his heart.

Chapter XXI. Ralph weareth away three days uneasily

He read again in the book that night, till he had gotten the whole tale into his head, and he specially noted this of it, that it told not whence that Lady came, nor what she was, nor aught else, save that there she was in the wood by herself, & was found therein by the king's son: neither told the tale in what year of the world she was found there, though it told concerning all the war and miseries which she had bred, and which long endured. Again, he could not gather from that book why she had gone back to the lone place in the woods, whereas she might have wedded one of those warring barons who sorely desired her: nor why she had yielded herself to the witch of that place & endured with patience her thralldom, with stripes and torments of her body, like the worst of the thralls of the ancient heathen men. Lastly, he might not learn from the book where in the world was that lone place, or aught of the road to the Well at the World's End. But amidst all his thinking his heart came back to this: "When I meet her, she will tell me of it

all; I need be no wiser than to learn how to meet her and to make her love me; then shall she show me the way to the Well at the World's End, and I shall drink thereof & never grow old, even as she endureth in youth, & she shall love me for ever, and I her for ever."

SO he thought; but yet amidst these happy thoughts came in this evil one, that whereas all the men-folk spoke well of her & worshipped her, the women-folk feared her or hated her; even the lecherous old woman who had praised the beauty of her body for his torment. So he thought till his head grew heavy, and he went & lay down in his bed and slept, & dreamed of the days of Upmead; & things forgotten in his waking time came between him & any memories of his present longing and the days thereof.

HE awoke and arose betimes in the morning, & when he had breakfasted he bade the carline bring him his weapons. "Wilt thou again to the wood?" said she. "Didst thou not bid me fare thither yesterday?" said he. "Yea," she said, "but to-day I fear lest thou depart & come not back." He laughed & said: "Seest thou not, mother, that I go afoot, and I in hauberk & helm? I cannot run far or fast from thee. Also" (and here he broke off his speech a little) "where should I be but here?" "Ah," she said, "but who knows what may happen?" Nevertheless she went and fetched his war-gear & looked at him fondly as he did it on, and went his ways from the hall.

NOW he entered the wood more to the south than he had done yesterday, and went softly as before, and still was he turning over in his mind the thoughts of last night, and ever they came back. "Might I but see her! Would she but love me! O for a draught of the Well at the World's End, that the love might last long and long!" So he went on a while betwixt the trees and the thickets, till it was a little past noon. But all on a sudden a panic fear took him, lest she should indeed come to the castle while he was away, and not finding him, depart again, who knows whither? & when this thought came upon him, he cried aloud, and hastened at his swiftest back again to the castle, and came there breathless & wearied, and ran to the old woman, and cried out to her: "Is she come? is she come?" The carline laughed, & said: "Nay, she is not, but thou art come: praise be to the saints! But

what aileth thee? Nay, fear not, she shall come at last" ❧ Then grew Ralph shamefaced and turned away from her, and miscalled himself for a fool and a dastard that could not abide the pleasure of his lady at the very place whereto she had let lead him ❧ So he wore through the remnant of the day howso he might, without going out-adoors again; and the carline came & spake with him; but whatever he asked her about the lady, she would not tell aught of any import, so he refrained him from that talk, & made a show of hearkening when she spake of other matters; as tales concerning the folk of the land, and the fathers of the Thorn, and so forth.

ON the next morning he arose and said to himself, that whatever betid, he would bide in the castle and the Plain of Abundance till the lady came; and he went amongst the haymaking folk in the morning & ate his dinner with them, and strove to be of good cheer, & belike the carles & queans thought him merry company; but he was now wearying his heart with longing, and might not abide any great while in one place; so when, dinner over, they turned to their work again, he went back to the Castle, and read in that book, and looked at the pictures thereof, & kept turning his wonder and hope and fear over and over again in his mind, & making to himself stories of how he should meet the Lady and what she would say to him, and how he should answer her, till at last the night came, and he went to his bed, and slept for the very weariness of his longing.

WHEN the new day came, he arose and went into the hall, and found the carline there, who said to him: "fair sir, wilt thou to the wood again today?" "Nay," said Ralph, "I must not, I dare not." "Well," she said, "thou mayest if thou wilt; why shouldst thou not go?" Said Ralph, reddening and stammering: "Because I fear to; thrice have I been away long from the castle & all has gone well; but the fourth time she will come & find me gone." ❧ The carline laughed: "Well," she said, "I shall be here if thou goest; for I promise thee not to stir out of the house whiles thou art away." Said Ralph: "Nay, I will abide here." "Yea," she said, "I see: thou trustest me not. Well, no matter; and to-day it will be handy if thou abidest, for I have an errand to my brother in the flesh, who is one of the brethren of the Thorn

over yonder. If thou wilt give me leave, it will be to my pleasure & gain." Ralph was glad when he heard this, deeming that if she left him alone there, he would be the less tempted to stray into the wood again. Besides, he deemed that the Lady might come that day when he was alone in the Castle, & that himseemed would make the meeting sweeter yet. So he yea-said the carline's asking joyously, & in an hour's time she went her ways & left him alone there.

RALPH said to himself, when he saw her depart, that he would have the more joy in the castle of his Lady if he were alone, & would wear away the day in better patience therefor. But in sooth the hours of that day were worse to wear than any day there had yet been. He went not without the house at all that day, for he deemed that the folk abroad would note of him that he was so changed & restless ❧ Whiles he read in that book, or turned the leaves over, not reading it; whiles he went into the Chamber of Estate, and pored over the woven pictures there wherein the Lady was figured. Whiles he wandered from chamber to chamber, not knowing what to do ❧ At last, a little after dark, back comes the carline again, and he met her at the door of the hall, for he was weary of his own company, & the ceaseless turning over and over of the same thoughts ❧ As for her, she was so joyous of him that she fairly threw her arms about him & kissed & clipped him, as though she had been his very mother ❧ Whereof he had some shame, but not much, for he deemed that her goodwill to him was abundant, which indeed it was ❧ Now she looks on him and says: "Truly it does my heart good to see thee: but thou poor boy, thou art wearing thyself with thy longing, and thy doubting, and if thou wilt do after my rede, thou wilt certainly go into the wood tomorrow and see what may befall; and indeed and in sooth thou wilt leave behind thee a trusty friend" ❧
He looked on her kindly, and smiled, and said: "In sooth, mother, I deem thou art but right; though it be hard for me to leave this house, to which in a way my Lady hath bidden me. Yet I will do thy bidding herein." She thanked him, & he went unto his bed and slept; for now that he had made up his mind to go, he was somewhat more at rest.

Chapter XXII. An Adventure in the Wood

RALPH arrayed himself for departure the next morning without more words; and when he was ready the carline said to him: "When thou wentest forth before, I was troubled at thy going & feared for thy returning: but now I fear not; for I know that thou wilt return; though it may be leading a fair woman by the hand. So go, and all luck go with thee" Ralph smiled at her words, & went his ways, and came into the wood that lay due south from the Castle, and he went on and on, and had no thought of turning back. He rested twice and still went on, till the fashion of the thickets and the woods changed about him; and at last when the sun was getting low, he saw light gleaming through a great wood of pines, which had long been dark before him against the tall boles, & soon he came to the very edge of the wood, & going heedfully, saw between the great stems of the outermost trees, a green strand, and beyond it a long smooth water, a little lake between green banks on either side. He came out of the pinewood on to the grass; but there were thornbushes a few about, so that moving warily from one to the other, he might perchance see without being seen. Warily he went forsooth, going along the green strand to the east and the head of that water, and saw how the bank sloped up gently from its ending toward the pine-wood, in front of whose close-set trees stood three great-boled tall oak trees on a smooth piece of green sward And now he saw that there were folk come before him on to this green place, and keen-sighted as he was, could make out that three men were on the hither side of the oak-trees, & on the further side of them was a white horse. Thitherward then he made, stealing from bush to bush, since he deemed that he needed not be seen of men who might be foes, for at the first sight he had noted the gleam of weapons there And now he had gone no long way before he saw the westering sun shine brightly from a naked sword, and then another sprang up to meet it, and he heard faintly the clash of steel, and saw withal that the third of the folk had long and light raiment and was a woman belike. Then he bettered his pace, and in a minute or two came so near that he could see the men clearly, that they were clad in

knightly war-gear, & were lay-ing on great strokes, so that the still place rang with the clatter. As for the woman, he could see but little of her, because of the fighting men before her; & the shadow of the oak boughs fell on her withal.

NOW as he went, hidden by the bushes, they hid the men also from him, & when he was come to the last bush, some fifty paces from them, & peered out from it, in that very nick of time the two knights were breathing them somewhat, & Ralph saw that one of them, the furthest from him, was a very big man with a blue surcoat, whereon was beaten a great golden sun, and the other, whose back was towards Ralph, was clad in black over his armour. Even as he looked and doubted whether to show himself or not, he of the sun raised his sword aloft, and giving forth a great roar as of wrath and grief mingled together, rushed on his foe & smote so fiercely that he fell to the earth before him, & the big man fell upon him as he fell, and let knee and sword-pommel and fist follow the stroke, and there they wallowed on the earth together.

STRAIGHTWAY Ralph came forth from the bushes with his drawn sword in his hand, and even therewith, what with the two knights being both low upon the earth, what with the woman herself coming from out the shadow of the oak boughs and turning her toward Ralph, he saw her clearly, and stood staring and amazed: for lo! it was the Lady whom he had delivered at the want-ways. His heart well nigh stood still with joy, yet was he shamefaced also; for though now she was no longer clad in that scanty raiment, yet did he seem to see her body through that which covered it. But now her attire was but simple; a green gown, thin and short, and thereover a cote-hardy of black cloth with orphreys of gold and colours: but on her neck was a collar that seemed to him like to that which Dame Katherine had given him; and the long tresses of her hair, which he had erst seen floating loose about her, were wound as a garland around her head. She looked with a flushed and joyous face on Ralph, & seemed as if she heeded nought the battle of the knights, but saw him only: but he feared her and his love for her, and stood still, and durst not move forward to go to her.

THUS they abode for about the space of one minute: and meanwhile the big man rose up on one knee & steadied him with his

sword for a moment of time, & the blade was bloody from the point half way up to the hilt; but the black knight lay still and made no sign of life. Then the Knight of the Sun rose up slowly and stood on his feet & faced the Lady and seemed not to see Ralph, for his back was towards him. He came slowly toward the Lady, scowling, and his face white as chalk; then he spake to her coldly and sternly, stretching out his bloody sword before her ❧ "I have done thy bidding, & slain my very earthly friend of friends for thy sake. Wherewith wilt thou reward me?"

THEN once more Ralph heard the voice, which he remembered so sweet amidst peril and battle aforetime, as she said as coldly as the Knight: "I bade thee not: thine own heart bade thee to strive with him because thou deemedst that he loved me. Be content! thou hast slain him who stood in thy way, as thou deemedst. Thinkest thou that I rejoice at his slaying? O no! I grieve at it, for all that I had such good cause to hate him." ❧ He said: "My own heart! my own heart! Half of my heart biddeth me slay thee, who hast made me slay him. What wilt thou give me?" She knit her brow & spake angrily: "Leave to depart," she said. Then after a while, & in a kinder voice: "And thus much of my love, that I pray thee not to sorrow for me, but to have a good heart, and live as a true knight should." He frowned: "Wilt thou not go with me?" said he. "Not uncompelled," she said: "if thou biddest me go with threats of hewing and mangling the body which thou sayest thou lovest, needs must I go then. Yet scarce wilt thou do this" ❧ "I have a mind to try it," said he. "If I set thee on thine horse & bound thine hands for thee & linked thy feet together under the beast's belly, belike thou wouldest come. Shall I have slain my brother-in-arms for nought?" ❧ "Thou hast the mind," said she, "hast thou the might?" "So I deem," said he, smiling grimly ❧ She looked at him proudly and said: "Yea, but I misdoubt me thereof." He still had his back to Ralph and was staring at the Lady; she turned her head a little and made a sign to Ralph, just as the Knight of the Sun said: "Thou misdoubtest thee? Who shall help thee in the desert?"

LOOK over thy left shoulder," she said. He turned, and saw Ralph drawing near, sword in hand, smiling, but somewhat pale. He drew aback from the

Lady, & spinning round on his heel, faced Ralph, & cried out: "Hah! Hast thou raised up a devil against me, thou sorceress, to take from me my grief and my lust, and my life? fair will the game be to fight with thy devil as I have fought with my friend! Yet now I know not whether I shall slay him or thee."

SHE spake not, but stood quietly looking on him, not unkindly, while a wind came up from the water & played with a few light locks of hair that hung down from that ruddy crown, and blew her raiment from her feet & wrapped it close round her limbs; and Ralph beheld her, & close as was that very death to him (for huge & most warrior-like was his foeman) yet longing for her melted the heart within him, and he felt the sweetness of life in his inmost soul as he had never felt it before.

SUDDENLY the Knight of the Sun turned about to the Lady again, and fell down on his knees before her, & clasped his hands as one praying, & said: "Now pardon me all my words, I pray thee; and let this young man depart unhurt, whether thou madest him, or hast but led him away from country & friends and all. And then do thou come with me and make some semblance of loving me, and suffer me to love thee. And then shall all be well, for in a few days we will go back to thy people, and there will I be their lord or thy servant, or my brother's man, or what thou wilt. O wilt thou not let the summer days be sweet?"

But she spake, holding up her head proudly and speaking in a clear ringing voice: "I have said it, that uncompelled I will not go with thee at all." And therewithal she turned her face toward Ralph, as she might do on any chance-met courteous man, and he saw her smiling, but she said nought to him, & gave no token of knowing him. Then the Knight of the Sun sprang to his feet, and shook his sword above his head & ran furiously on Ralph, who leapt nimbly on one side (else had he been slain at once) and fetched a blow at the Sun-Knight, and smote him, & brake the mails on his left shoulder, so that the blood sprang, & fell on fiercely enough, smiting to right & left as the other gave back at his first onset. But all was for nought, for the Knight of the Sun, after his giving aback under that first stroke drew himself up stark and stiff, & pressing on through all Ralph's strokes, though they rent his mail here and there, ran within his sword, & smote him furi-

ously with the sword-pommel on the side of the head, so that the young man of Upmeads could not stand up under the weight of the blow, but fell to the earth swooning, and the Knight of the Sun knelt on him & drew out an anlace, short thick and sharp, and cried out: "Now, Devil, let see whether thou wilt bleed black." Therewith he raised up his hand: but the weapon was stayed or ever it fell, for the Lady had glided up to them when she saw that Ralph was overcome, and now she stretched out her arm and caught hold of the Knight's hand & the anlace withal, and he groaned & cried out: "What now! thou art strong-armed as well as white-armed"; (for she had rent the sleeve back from her right arm) and he laughed in the extremity of his wrath. But she was pale and her lips quivered as she said softly & sweetly: "Wilt thou verily slay this young man?" "And why not?" said he, "since I have just slain the best friend that I ever had, though he was nought willing to fight with me, and only for this, that I saw thee toying with him; though forsooth thou hast said truly that thou hadst more reason to hate him than to love him. Well, since thou wilt not have this youngling slain, I may deem at least that he is no devil of thy making, else wouldst thou be glad of his slaying, so that he might be out of the path of thee; so a man he is, & a well-favoured one, & young; and valiant, as it seemeth: so I suppose that he is thy lover, or will be one day. Well then," and he lifted his hand again; but again she stayed him, and said: "Look thou, I will buy him of thee: and, indeed, I owe him a life." "How is that?" said he. "Why wouldst thou know?" she said; "thou who, if thou hadst me in thine hands again, wouldst keep me away from all men. Yea, I know what thou wouldst say, thou wouldst keep me from sinning again." And she smiled, but bitterly ❧ "Well, the tale is no long one: five days ago I was taken by them of the Burg: and thou wottest what they would do with me; yea, even if they deemed me less than they do deem me: well, as two of their men-at-arms were leading me along by a halter, as a calf is led to the butcher, we fell in with this goodly lad, who slew them both in manly fashion, and I escaped for that time: though, forsooth, I must needs put my neck in the noose again in delivering four of our people, who would else have been tormented to death by the Burgers" ❧ "Well," said the knight, "perchance thou hast more mercy than I look-

ed for of thee; though I misdoubt thee that thou mayst yet pray me or some other to slay him for thee. Thou art merciful, my Queen, though not to me, and a churl were I if I were less merciful than thou. Therefore will I give his life to him, yet not to thee will I give him if I may help it. Lo you, Sweet! he is just opening his eyes" ❧ Therewith he rose up from Ralph, who raised himself a little, & sat up dazed and feeble. The Knight of the Sun stood up over him beside the lady with his hands clasped on his sword-hilt, and said to Ralph: "Young man, canst thou hear my words?" ❧ Ralph smiled feebly and nodded a yea-say. "Dost thou love thy life then?" said the Knight. Ralph found speech & said faintly: "Yea." Said the Knight: "Where dost thou come from, where is thine home?" ❧ Said Ralph, "Upmeads." "Well then," quoth the big knight, "go back to Upmeads, & live." Ralph shook his head and knit his brows & said: "I will not." "Yea," said the Knight, "thou wilt not live? Then must I shape me to thy humour. Stand on thy feet and fight it out; for now I am cool I will not slay a swordless man." ❧ Ralph staggered up to his feet, but was so feeble still, that he sank down again, and muttered: "I may not; I am so sick and faint;" and therewith swooned away again. But the Knight stood a while leaning on his sword, & looking down on him not so grimly. Then he turned about to the Lady, but lo! she had left his side. She had glided away, & got to her horse, which was tethered on the other side of the oak-tree, and had loosed him & mounted him, and so sat in the saddle there, the reins gathered in her hands. She smiled on the Knight as he stood astonished, & cried to him: "Now, lord, I warn thee, draw not a single foot nigher to me; for thou seest that I have Silverfax between my knees, & thou knowest how swift he is, and if I see thee move, he shall spring away with me. Thou wottest how well I know all the ways of the woodland, & I tell thee that the ways behind me to the Dry Tree be all safe and open, and that beyond the Gliding River I shall come on Roger of the Ropewalk & his men. And if thou thinkest to ride after me, and overtake me, cast the thought out of thy mind. For thy horse is strong but heavy, as is meet for so big a knight, and moreover he is many yards away from me and Silverfax: so before thou art in the saddle, where shall I be? Yea," (for the Knight was handling his anlace) "thou mayst cast it,

& peradventure mayst hit Silverfax & not me, & peradventure not; & I deem that it is my body alive thou wouldest have back with thee. So now, wilt thou hearken?" "Yea," quoth the Knight, though for wrath he could scarce bring the word from his mouth. "Hearken," she said, "this is the bargain to be struck between us: even now thou wouldst not refrain from slaying this young man, unless perchance he should swear to depart from us; and as for me, I would not go back with thee to Sunhome, where erst thou shamedst me. Now will I buy thy nay-say with mine, and if thou give the youngling his life, and suffer him to come his ways with us, then will I go home with thee and will ride with thee in all the love & duty that I owe thee; or if thou like this fashion of words better, I will give thee my body for his life. But if thou likest not the bargain, there is not another piece of goods for thee in the market, for then I will ride my ways to the Dry Tree, & thou shalt slay the poor youth, or make of him thy sworn friend, like as was Walter; which thou wilt."

So she spake, and Ralph yet lay on the grass and heard nought. But the Knight's face was dark & swollen with anger as he answered: "My sworn friend! yea, I understand thy gibe. I need not thy words to bring to my mind how I have slain one sworn friend for thy sake." "Nay," she said, "not for my sake, for thine own folly's sake" He heeded her not, but went on: "And as for this one, I say again of him, if he be not thy devil, then thou meanest him for thy lover. And now I deem that I will verily slay him, ere he wake again; belike it were his better luck"

She said: "I wot not why thou hagglest over the price of that thou wouldest have. If thou have him along with thee, shall he not be in thy power, as I shall be? and thou mayst slay him, or me, when thou wilt"

"Yea," he said, grimly, "when thou art weary of him. O art thou not shameless amongst women! Yet must I needs pay thy price, though my honour and the welfare of my life go with it. Yet how if he have no will to fare with us?" She laughed & said: "Then shalt thou have him with thee as thy captive and thrall. Hast thou not conquered him in battle?" He stood silent a moment and then he said: "Thou sayest it; he shall come with me, will he, nill he, unarmed, and as a prisoner, and the spoil of my valiancy." And he laughed, not altogether in bitterness, but as

if some joy were rising in his heart. "Now, my Queen," said he, "the bargain is struck betwixt us, and thou mayst light down off Silverfax; as for me, I will go fetch water from the lake, that we may wake up this valiant and mighty youth, this new-found jewel, & bring him to his wits again" ❧ She answered nought, but rode her horse close to him and lighted down nimbly, while his greedy eyes devoured her beauty. Then he took her hand and drew her to him, and kissed her cheek, and she suffered it, but kissed him not again. Then he took off his helm, and went down to the lake to fetch up water therein.

Chapter XXIII. The Leechcraft of the Lady

GEANWHILE she went up to Ralph & stood by him, who now began to stir again; & she knelt down by him and kissed his face gently, & rose up hastily and stood a little aloof again ❧ Now Ralph sat up & looked about him, & when he saw the Lady he first blushed red, and then turned very pale; for the full life was in him again, and he knew her, & love drew strongly at his heart-strings. But she looked on him kindly and said to him: "How fares it with thee? I am sorry of thy hurt which thou hast had for me" ❧ He said: "forsooth, Lady, a chance knock or two is no great matter for a lad of Upmeads. But oh! I have seen thee before." "Yea," she said, "thrice before, fair knight." "How is that?" he said; "once I saw thee, the fairest thing in the world, & evil men would have led thee to slaughter; but not twice" ❧ She smiled on him still more kindly, as if he were a dear friend, and said simply: "I was that lad in the cloak that ye saw in the Flower de Luce; and afterwards when ye, thou and Roger, fled away from the Burg of the Four Friths. I had come into the Burg with my captain of war at the peril of our lives to deliver four faithful friends of mine who were else doomed to an evil death."

HE said nought, but gazed at her face, wondering at her valiancy and goodness. She took him by the hand now, & held it without speaking for a little while, and he sat there still looking up into her face, wondering at her sweetness and his happiness. Then she said, as she drew her hand away and spake in such a voice, and so looking at him, that every word was as

a caress to him: "Thy soul is coming back to thee my friend, and thou art well at ease: is it not so?" "O yea," he said, "and I woke up happily e'en now; for me dreamed that my gossip came to me and kissed me kindly; and she is a fair woman, but not a young woman."

As he spoke, the knight who had come nearly noiselessly over the grass, stood by them, holding his helm full of water, & looking grimly upon them; but the Lady looked up at him with wide eyes wonderingly, and Ralph, beholding her, deemed that all he had heard of her goodness was but the very sooth.

But the knight spake: "Young man, thou hast fought with me, thou knowest not wherefore, and grim was my mood when thou madest thine onset, and still is, so that never but once wilt thou be nigher thy death than thou hast been this hour. But now I have given thee life because of the asking of this lady; and therewith I give thee leave to come thy ways with us: nay, rather, I command thee to come, for thou art my prisoner, to be kept or ransomed, or set free as I will. But my will is that thou shalt not have thine armour and weapons; and there is a cause for this, which may happen I will tell thee hereafter. But now I bid thee drink of this water, and then do off thine helm and hauberk & give me thy sword and dagger, and go with us peaceably; and be not overmuch ashamed, for I have overcome men who boasted themselves to be great warriors".

So Ralph drank of the water, and did off his helm, and cast water on his face, and arose, and said smiling: "Nay, my master, I am nought ashamed of my mishaps: and as to my going with thee and the Lady, thou hast heard me say under thy dagger that I would not forbear to follow her; so I scarce need thy command thereto." The knight scowled on him and said: "Hold thy peace, fool! Thou wert best not stir my wrath again".

"Nay," said Ralph, "thou hast my sword, & mayst slay me if thou wilt: therefore be not word-valiant with me".

Said the Knight of the Sun: "Well, well, thou hast the right of it there. Only beware lest thou try me overmuch. But now must we set forth on our road; and here is work for thee to do: an hundred yards within the thick wood in a straight line from the oak-tree thou shalt find two horses, mine and the knight's who fell

before me; go thou and bring them hither; for I will not leave thee with my lady, lest I have to slay thee in the end, & may-be her also" Ralph nodded cheerfully, and set off on his task, & was the readier therein because the Lady looked on him kindly and compassionately as he went by her He found the horses speedily, a black horse that was of the Black Knight, and a bay of the Knight of the Sun, & he came back with them lightly.

BUT when he came to the oak-tree again, lo, the knight & the Lady both kneeling over the body of the Black Knight, & Ralph saw that the Knight of the Sun was sobbing & weeping sorely, so that he deemed that he was taking leave of his friend that lay dead there: but when Ralph had tied up those other two steeds by Silverfax and drawn near to the twain, the Knight of the Sun looked up at him, and spake in a cheerful voice: "Thou seemest to be no ill man, though thou hast come across my lady; so now I bid thee rejoice that there is a good knight more in the world than we deemed e'en now; for this my friend Walter the Black is alive still." "Yea," said the Lady, "and belike he shall live a long while yet"

So Ralph looked, & saw that they had stripped the knight of his hauberk and helm, and bared his body, and that the Lady was dressing a great and sore wound in his side; neither was he come to himself again: he was a young man, and very goodly to look on, dark haired and straight of feature, fair of face; and Ralph felt a grief at his heart as he beheld the Lady's hands dealing with his bare flesh, though nought the man knew of it belike.

AS for the Knight of the Sun, he was no more grim and moody, but smiling & joyous, & he spake and said: "Young man, this shall stand thee in good stead that I have not slain my friend this bout Sooth to say, it might else have gone hard with thee on the way to my house, or still more in my house. But now be of good heart, for unless of thine own folly thou run on the sword's point, thou mayst yet live and do well." Then he turned to the Lady & said: "Dame, for as good a leech as ye be, ye may not heal this man so that he may sit in his saddle within these ten days; and now what is to do in this matter?" She looked on him with smiling lips & a strange light in her eyes and said: "Yea, forsooth, what wilt thou do? Wilt thou abide here by Walter thyself alone,

and let me bring the imp of Upmeads home to our house? Or wilt thou ride home and send folk with a litter to us? Or shall this youngling ride at all adventure, & seek to Sunway through the blind woodland? Which shall it be?" The knight laughed outright, and said: "Yea, fair one, this is much like to the tale of the carle at the ferry with the fox, & the goat, & the cabbage" The there was scarce a smile on her face as she said gently: "One thing is to be thought of, that Walter's soul is not yet so fast in his body that either thou or some rough-handed leech may be sure of healing him; it must be this hand, and the learning which it hath learned which must deal with him for a while" And she stretched out her arm over the wounded man, with the fingers pointing down the water, and reddened withal, as if she felt the heart's greediness of the two men who were looking on her beauty The big knight sighed & said: "Well, unless I am to kill him over again, there is nothing for it but our abiding with him for the next few hours at least. To-morrow is a new day, & fair is the woodland-hall of summer-tide; neither shall water fail us. But as to victual, I wot not, save that we have none" The Lady laughed, & said to Ralph: "Who knoweth what thou mayst find if thou go to the black horse, and look into the saddle-bags which I saw upon him awhile agone? for indeed we need somewhat, if it were but to keep the life in the body of this wounded man" Ralph sprang up & turned to the horse, & found the saddle-bags on him, & took from them bread and flesh, & a flask of good wine, & brought them to the lady, who laughed, and said: "Thou art a good seeker & no ill finder." Then she gave the wounded man to drink of the wine, so that he stirred somewhat, & the colour came into his face a little. Then she bade gather store of bracken for a bed for the Black Knight, and Ralph bestirred himself therein, but the Knight of the Sun sat looking at the Lady as she busied herself with his friend, & gloom seemed gathering on him again. But when the bracken was enough, the Lady made a bed deftly and speedily; & between the three they laid the wounded man thereon, who seemed coming to himself somewhat, & spake a few words, but those nothing to the point Then the Lady took her gay embroidered cloak, which lay at the foot of the oak tree, & cast it over him, & as Ralph deemed, eyed him lovingly, and belike the

Knight of the Sun thought in likewise, for he scowled upon her; & for awhile but little was the joyance by the ancient oak, unless it were with the Lady.

Chapter XXIV. Supper and Slumber in the Woodland Hall

BUT when all was done to make the wounded knight as easy as might be, the Lady turned to the other twain, and said kindly: "Now, lords, it were good to get to table, since here is wherewithal." And she looked on them both full kindly as she spake the words, but nowise wantonly; even as the lady of a fair house might do by honoured guests. So the hearts of both were cheered, and nothing loth they sat down by her on the grass and fell to meat. Yet was the Knight of the Sun a little moody for a while, but when he had eaten and drunken somewhat, he said: "It were well if someone might come hereby, some hermit or holy man, to whom we might give the care of Walter: then might we home to Sunway, and send folk with a litter to fetch him home softly when the due time were" "Yea," said the Lady, "that might happen, forsooth, and perchance it will; & if it were before nightfall it were better."

RALPH saw that as she spake she took hold of the two fingers of her left hand with her right forefinger, and let the thumb meet it, so that it made a circle about them, & she spake something therewith in a low voice, but he heeded it little, save as he did all ways that her body moved. As for the Knight of the Sun, he was looking down on the grass as one pondering matters, and noted this not. But he said presently: "What hast thou to say of Walter now? Shall he live?" "Yea," she said, "maybe as long as either of you twain" The knight looked hard at Ralph, but said nothing, & Ralph heeded not his looks, for his eyes were busy devouring the Lady.

SO they abode a little, & the more part of what talk there was came from the Lady, and she was chiefly asking Ralph of his home in Upmeads, & his brethren and kindred, & he told her all openly, & hid naught, while her voice ravished his very soul from him, & it seemed strange to him, that such an one should hold him in talk concerning these simple matters & familiar haps, and look on him so kindly and simply. Ever and anon would she go & look to the welfare of the wounded

man, and come back from him (for they sat a little way aloof), and tell them how he did. And still the Knight of the Sun took little heed, & once again gloom settled down on him.

AMIDST all this the sun was set, and the long water lay beneath the heavens like a sheet of bright, fair-hued metal, and naught stirred it: till at last the Lady leaned forward to Ralph, and touched his shoulder (for he was sitting over against her, with his back to the water), and she said: "Sir Knight, Sir Knight, his wish is coming about, I believe verily." He turned his head to look over his shoulder, & as if by chance hap, his cheek met the outstretched hand she was pointing with: she drew it not away very speedily, and as sweet to him was the touch of it as if his face had been brushed past by a summer lily "Nay, look! something cometh," she cried; and he looked and saw a little boat making down the water toward the end anigh them. Then the Knight of the Sun seemed to awake at her word, & he leapt to his feet, & stood looking at the new comer. It was but a little while ere the boat touched the shore, and a man stepped out of it on to the grass and made it fast to the bank, & then stood & looked about him as if seeking something; & lo, it was a holy man, a hermit in the habit of the Blackfriars. Then the Knight of the Sun hastened down to the strand to meet him, & when Ralph was thus left alone with the Lady, though it were but for a little, his heart beat, & he longed sore to touch her with his hand, but durst not, & did but hope that her hand would stray his way as it had e'en now. But she arose and stood a little way from him, & spake to him sweetly of the fairness of the evening, & the wounded man, and the good hap of the friar's coming before nightfall; and his heart was wrung sore with love of her.

SO came the Knight up from the strand, & the holy man with him, who greeted Ralph and the Lady, and blessed them, and said: "Now, daughter, show me thy sick man; for I am somewhat of a leech, and this thy baron would have me heal him, and I have a right good will thereto" So he went to the Black Knight, & when he had looked to his hurts, he turned to them and said: "Have ye perchance any meat in the wilderness?" "Yea," quoth the Knight of the Sun; "there is enough for a day or more, & if we must needs abide here longer, I or this young man may well make

shift to slay some deer, great or little, for our sustenance & the healing of my friend" "It is well," said the friar; "my hermitage is no great way hence, in the thicket at the end of this water. But now is the fever on this knight, & we may not move him before morning at soonest; but to-morrow we may make a shift to bear him hence by boat; or, if not, then may I go & fetch from my cell bread and other meat, & milk of my goats; & thus shall we do well till we may bring him to my cell, and then shall ye leave him there; and afterwards I will lead him home to Sunway where thou dwellest, baron, when he is well enough healed; or, if he will not go thither, let him go his ways, and I myself will come to Sunway & let thee wot of his welfare"

The knight yea said all this, & thereafter tended the wounded knight and gave him water to drink, and wine. And meanwhile Ralph and the Knight of the Sun lay down on the grass & watched the eve darkening, & Ralph marvelled at his happiness, & wondered what the morrow would bring forth.

BUT amidst his happy thoughts the Knight of the Sun spake to him & said: "Young knight, I have struck a bargain with her that thou shalt follow us home, if thou wilt; but to say sooth, I think when the bargain was struck I was minded when I had thee at Sunway to cast thee into my prison. But now I will do otherwise, & if thou must needs follow after thine own perdition, as I have, thou shalt do so freely; therefore take again thine armour and weapons, & do what thou wilt with them. But if thou wilt do after my rede, get thee away to-morrow, or better, to-night, and desire our fellowship no more"

Ralph heard him, & the heart within him was divided. It was in his mind to speak debonairly to the knight; but again he felt as if he hated him, and the blythe words would not come, & he answered doggedly: "I will not leave my Lady since she biddeth me go with her. If thou wilt then, make the most of it that thou art stronger than I, and a warrior more proven; set me before thy sword, & fight with me and slay me"

Then rose the wrath to the knight's lips, & he brake forth: "Then is there one other thing for thee to do, and that is that thou take thy sword, which I have just given back to thee, & thrust her through therewith. That were better for thee & me, & for him that lieth yonder."

THE knight was silent awhile, & then he said: "With what words shall I beseech thee to depart

while it is yet time? It may well be that in days to come I shall be good to thee, & help thee" But Ralph said never a word. Then said the knight, and sighed withal: "I now see this of thee, that thou mayst not depart; well, so let it be!" and he sighed heavily again. Then Ralph strove with himself, & said courteously: "Sir, I am sorry that I am a burden irksome to thee; and that, why I know not, thou mayst not rid thyself of me by the strong hand, and that otherwise thou mayst not be rid of me. What then is this woman to thee, that thou wouldst have me slay her, & yet art so fierce in thy love for her?" The Knight of the Sun laughed wrathfully thereat, & was on the point of answering him, when up came those two from the wounded man, and the friar said: "The knight shall do well; but well it is for him that the Lady of Abundance was here for his helping; for from her hands goeth all healing, as it was with the holy men of old time. May the saints keep her from all harm; for meek & holy indeed she is, as oft we have heard it." The Lady put her hand on his shoulder, as if to bid him silence, & then set herself down on the grass beside the Knight of the Sun, and fell to talking sweetly & blithely to the three men. The friar answered her with many words, and told her of the deer and fowl of the wood and the water that he was wont to see nigh to his hermitage; for of such things she asked him, and at last he said: "Good sooth, I should be shy to say in all places & before all men of my dealings with God's creatures which live about me there. Wot ye what? E'en now I had no thought of coming hitherward; but I was sitting amongst the trees pondering many things, when I began to drowse, and drowsing I heard the thorn bushes speaking to me like men, and they bade me take my boat and go up the water to help a man who was in need; and that is how I came hither; benedicite" So he spake; but the Knight of the Sun did but put in a word here and there, and that most often a sour and a snappish word. As for Ralph, he also spake but little, and strayed somewhat in his answers; for he could not but deem that she spake softlier & kinder to him than to the others; and he was dreamy with love and desire, and scarce knew what he was saying.

THUS they wore away some two hours, the friar or the Lady turning away at whiles to heed the wounded man, who was now

talking wildly in his fever. But at last the night was grown as dark as it would be, since cloud and storm came not, for the moon had sunk down; so the Lady said: "Now, lords, our candle hath gone out, & I for my part will to bed; so let us each find a meet chamber in the woodland hall; & I will lie near to thee, father, and the wounded friend, lest I be needed to help thee in the night; & thou, Baron of Sunway, lie thou betwixt me & the wood, to ward me from the wild deer & the wood-wights. But thou, Swain of Upmeads, wilt thou deem it hard to lie anear the horses, to watch them if they be scared by aught?"

"Yea," said the Knight of the Sun, "thou art Lady here forsooth; even as men say of thee, that thou swayest man and beast in the wildwood. But this time at least it is not so ill-marshalled of thee: I myself would have shown folk to chamber here in like wise"

Therewith he rose up, & walked to and fro for a little, and then went & sat down on a root of the oak-tree, clasping his knees with his hands, but lay not down awhile. But the Lady made herself a bed of the bracken which was over from those that Ralph had gathered for the bed of the wounded Knight; and the friar lay down on the grass nigh to her, and both were presently asleep

Then Ralph got up quietly; &, shamefacedly for very love, passed close beside the sleeping woman as he went to his place by the horses, taking his weapons & war-gear with him: and he said to himself as he laid him down, that it was good for him to be quite alone, that he might lie awake and think at his ease of all the loveliness & kindness of his Lady. Howbeit, he was a young man, and a sturdy, used to lying abroad in the fields or in the woods, & it was his custom to sleep at once and sweetly when he lay down after the day's work had wearied him, & even so he did now, and was troubled by no dreams of what was past or to come.