THE CHAMBER OF LOVE IN THE WILDERNESS

THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END.
BOOK II. THE ROAD UNTO TROUBLE.

Chapter I. Ralph meets with Love in the Wilderness

RALPH WOKE up while it was yet night, & knew that he had been awakened by a touch; but, like a good hunter and warrior, he forbore to start up or cry out till sleep had so much run off him that he could tell somewhat of what was toward. So now he saw the Lady bending over him, & she said in a kind and very low voice: "Rise up, young man, rise up, Ralph, & say no word, but come with me a little way into the wood ere dawn come, for I have a word for thee." So he stood up and was ready to go with her, his heart beating hard for joy and wonder. "Nay," she whispered, "take thy sword and wargear lest ill befall: do on thine hauberk; I will be thy squire." And she held his war-coat out for him to do on. "Now," she said, still softly, "hide thy curly hair with the helm, gird thy sword to thee, and come without a word."

EVEN so he did, & therewithal felt her hand take his (for it was dark as they stepped amidst the trees), & she led him into the Seventh Heaven, for he heard her voice, though it were but a whisper, as it were a caress and a laugh of joy in each word. She led him along swiftly, fumbling nought with the paths betwixt the pine-tree boles, where it was as dark as dark might be. Every minute he looked to hear her say a word of why she had brought him thither, and that then she would depart from him; so he prayed that the silence and the holding of his hand might last a long while, for he might think of nought save her; and long it lasted forsooth, & still she spake no word, though whiles a little sweet chuckle, as of the garden warbler at his softest, came from her lips, & the ripple of her raiment as her swift feet drave it, sounded loud to his eager ears in the dark windless wood.

At last, and it was more than half-an-hour of their walking thus, it grew lighter, and

he could see the shape of her alongside of him; and still she held his hand and glided on swifter and swifter, as he thought; & soon he knew that outside the wood dawn was giving place to day, and even there, in the wood, it was scarce darker than twilight.

Yet a little further, and it grew lighter still, and he heard the throstles singing a little way off, and knew that they were on the edge of the pine-wood, & still her swift feet sped on till they came to a little grassy wood-lawn, with nought anear it on the side away from the wood save maples and thorn-bushes: it was broad daylight there, though the sun had not yet arisen.

THERE she let fall his hand and turned about to him and faced him flushed & eager, with her eyes exceeding bright and her lips half open and quivering.

He stood beholding her, trembling, what for eagerness, what for fear of her words when he had told her of his desire. For he had now made up his mind to do no less. He put his helm from off his head and laid it down on the grass, & he noted therewith that she had come in her green gown only, & had left mantle and cotehardie behind.

NOW he stood up again and was just going to speak, when lo! she put both her palms to her face, and her bosom heaved, and her shoulders were shaken with sobs, and she burst out a-weeping, so that the tears ran through her fingers. Then he cast himself on the ground before her and kissed her feet, & clasped her about the knees, and laid his cheek to her raiment, and fawned upon her, & cried out many an idle word of love, and still she wept a while and spake not. At last she reached her hand down to his face and fondled it, and he let his lips lie on the hand, and she suffered it a while, & then took him by the arm & raised him up and led him on swiftly as before; & he knew not what to do or say, and durst by no means stay her, & could frame no word to ask her wherefore.

SO they sped across a waste not much beset with trees, he silent, she never wearying or slacking her pace or faltering as to the way, till they came into the thick wood again, and ever when he would have spoken she hushed him, with "Not yet! Not yet!" Until at last when the sun had been up for some three hours, she led him through a hazel copse, like a deep hedge, into a cleared grassy place where

were great grey stones lying about as if it had been the broken doom-ring of a forgotten folk. There she threw herself down on the grass & buried her face amidst the flowers, & was weeping and sobbing again & he bending over her, till she turned to him and drew him down to her and put her hands to his face, and laid her cheeks all wet with tears to his, & fell to kissing him long & sweetly, so that in his turn he was like to weep for the very sweetness of love.

THEN at last she spake: "This is the first word, that now I have brought thee away from death; and so sweet it is to me that I can scarce bear it" "O, sweet to me," he said, "for I have waited for thee many days." And he fell to kissing and clipping her, as one who might not be satisfied. At last she drew herself from him a little, &, turning on him a face smiling with love, she said: "forbear it a little, till we talk together" "Yea," quoth he, "but may I hold thine hand awhile?" "No harm in that," she said, laughing, and she gave him her hand and spake: "I spake it that I have brought thee from death, & thou hast asked me no word concerning what and how." "I will ask it now, then," said he, "since thou wilt have it so." She said: "Dost thou think that he would have let thee live?" "Who," said he, "since thou lettest me live?" "He, thy foeman, the Knight of the Sun," she said. "Why didst thou not flee from him before? for he did not so much desire to slay thee, but that he would have had thee depart; but if thou wert once at his house, he would thrust a sword through thee, or at the least cast thee into his prison & let thee lie there till thy youth be gone: or so it seemed to me," she said faltering as she looked on him. Said Ralph: "How could I depart when thou wert with him? Didst thou not see me there? I was deeming that thou wouldst have me abide" She looked upon him with such tender love that he made as if he would cast himself upon her; but she refrained him, & smiled and said: "Ah, yes, I saw thee & thought not that thou wouldst sunder thyself from me; therefore had I care of thee." And she touched his cheek with her other hand; & he sighed and knit his brows somewhat, & said: "But who is this man that he should slay me? And why is he thy tyrant, that thou must flee from him?" She laughed & said: "fair creature, he is my husband" Then Ralph flushed red, and his visage clouded, & he open-

ed his mouth to speak; but she stayed him & said: "Yet is he not so much my husband but that or ever we were bedded he must needs curse me and drive me away from his house." And she smiled, but her face reddened so deeply that her grey eyes looked strange and light therein.

BUT Ralph leapt up, and half drew his sword, and cried out loud: "Would God I had slain him! Wherefore could I not slay him?" And he strode up & down the sward before her in his wrath. But she leaned forward to him and laughed and said: "Yet, O champion, we will not go back to him, for he is stronger than thou, & hath vanquished thee. This is a desert place, but thou art loud, and maybe over loud. Come, rest by me"

So he came and sat down by her, & took her hand again and kissed the wrist thereof and fondled it and said: "Yea, but he desireth thee sorely; that was easy to see. It was my ill-luck that I slew him not"

She stroked his face again & said: "Long were the tale if I told thee all. After he had driven me out, and I had fled from him, he fell in with me again divers times, as was like to be; for his brother is the Captain of the Dry Tree; the tall man whom thou hast seen with me: and every time this baron hath come on me he has prayed my love, as one who would die despaired if I granted it not, but O my love with the bright sword" (& she kissed his cheek therewith, & fondled his hand with both her hands), "each time I said him nay, I said him nay." And again her face burned with blushes "And his brother," said Ralph, "the big captain that I have come across these four times, doth he desire thee also?" She laughed and said: "But as others have, no more: he will not slay any man for my sake"

Said Ralph: "Didst thou wot that I was abiding thy coming at the Castle of Abundance?" "Yea," she said, "have I not told thee that I bade Roger lead thee thither?" Then she said softly: "That was after that first time we met; after I had ridden away on the horse of that butcher whom thou slayedst." "But why camest thou so late?" said he; "Wouldst thou have come if I had abided there yet?" She said: "What else did I desire but to be with thee? But I set out alone looking not for any peril, since our riders had gone to the north against them of the Burg: but as I drew near to the Water of the Oak, I fell in with my husband and that other man; and this time all my naysays were

of no avail, and whatsoever I might say he constrained me to go with them; but straightway they fell out together, and fought, even as thou sawest." And she looked at him sweetly, and as frankly as if he had been nought but her dearest brother.

But he said: "It was concerning thee that they fought: hast thou known the Black Knight for long?" "Yea," she said, "I may not hide that he hath loved me: but he hath also betrayed me. It was through him that the Knight of the Sun drave me from him. Hearken, for this concerneth thee: he made a tale of me of true & false mingled, that I was a wise-wife and an enchantress, & my lord trowed in him, so that I was put to shame before all the house, & driven forth wrung with anguish, barefoot & bleeding."

HE looked & saw pain and grief in her face, as it had been the shadow of that past time, & the fierceness of love in him so changed his face, that she arose and drew a little way from him, and stood there gazing at him. But he also rose and knelt before her, & reached up for her hands, and took them in his and said: "Tell me truly, and beguile me not; for I am a young man, and without guile, and I love thee, & would have thee for my speech-friend, what woman soever may be in the world. Whatever thou hast been, what art thou now? Art thou good or evil? Wilt thou bless me or ban me? for it is the truth that I have heard tales & tales of thee: many were good, though it maybe strange; but some, they seemed to warn me of evil in thee. O look at me, & see if I love thee or not! and I may not help it. Say once for all, shall that be for my ruin or my bliss? If thou hast been evil, then be good this one time & tell me".

She neither reddened now, nor paled at his words, but her eyes filled with tears, and ran over, & she looked down on him as a woman looks on a man that she loves from the heart's root, and she said: "O my lord and love, may it be that thou shalt find me no worse to thee than the best of all those tales. Forsooth how shall I tell thee of myself, when, whatever I say, thou shalt believe every word I tell thee? But O my heart, how shouldest thou, so sweet and fair and good, be taken with the love of an evil thing? At the least I will say this, that whatsoever I have been, I am good to thee: I am good to thee, and will be true to thee".

He drew her down to him as he knelt there, and took his arms about her, & though she yet shrank from him a little & the eager flame of

his love, he might not be gainsayed, and she gave herself to him and let her body glide into his arms, & loved him no less than he loved her. And there between them in the wilderness was all the joy of love that might be.

Chapter II. They break their fast in the Wildwood

NOW when it was hard on noon, and they had lain long in that grassy place, Ralph rose up & stood upon his feet, and made as one listening. But the Lady looked on him and said: "It is nought save a hart & his hind running in the wood; yet mayhappen we were best on the road, for it is yet long" "Yea," said Ralph, "and it may be that my master will gather folk and pursue us" "Nay, nay," she said, "that were to wrong him, to deem that he would gather folk to follow one man; if he come, he will be by himself alone. When he found us gone he doubtless cast himself on Silverfax, my horse, in trust of the beast following after my feet" "Well," said Ralph, "& if he come alone, there is yet a sword betwixt him & thee." She was standing up by him now with her hand on his shoulder, & she laid her cheek to his, & said laughing: "Hear now the darling, the champion! how he trusteth well in his heart and his right hand. But nay, I have cared for thee well. Hearken, if thou wilt not take it amiss that I tell thee all I do, good or evil. I said a word in the ear of Silverfax or ever I departed, and now the good beast knows my mind, and will lead the fierce lord a little astray, but not too much, lest he follow us with his eager heart & be led by his own keen woodcraft. Indeed, I left the horse behind to that end, else hadst thou ridden the woodland ways with me, instead of my wearying thee by our going afoot; & thou with thy weapons and war-gear" He looked upon her tenderly, and said smiling: "And thou, my dear, art thou not a little wearied by what should weary a knight and one bred afield?" "Nay," she said, "seest thou not how I walk lightly clad, whereas I have left behind my mantle & cotehardie?" Thereat she gathered up her gown into her girdle ready for the way, and smiled as she saw his eyes embrace the loveliness of her feet; & she spake as she moved them daintily on the flowery grass: "Sooth to say, Knight, I am no weakling dame, who cannot move her limbs save in the dance, or to back the white palfry and ride the meadows, goshawk on wrist; I am both well-knit and lightfoot as the Woodwife & Goddess of yore

agone. Many a toil hath gone to that, whereof I may tell thee presently; but now we were best on our way. Yet before we go, I will at least tell thee this, that in my knowing of these woods, there is no sorcery at all; for in the woods, though not in these woods, was I bred; and here also I am at home, as I may say."

HAND in hand then they went lightly through the hazel copse, and soon was the wood thick about them, but, as before, the Lady led unfalteringly through the thicket paths. Now Ralph spake & said: "It is good that thou lead me whither thou wilt; but this I may say, that it is clear to me that we are not on the way to the Castle of Abundance". "Even so," said she; "indeed, had I come to thee there, as I was minded, I should presently have brought thee on the way which we are wending now, or one nigh to it; and that is that which leadeth to Hampton under Scaur, and the fellowship of Champions who dwell on the rock".

Said Ralph: "It is well; yet will I tell thee the truth, that a little sojourn in that fair house had liked me better. Fain had I been to see thee sitting in thine ivory chair in thy chamber of dais with the walls hung round with thee woven in pictures: wilt thou not tell me in words the story of those pictures? and also concerning the book which I read, which was also of thee?" "Ah," she said, "thou hast read in the book; well, I will tell thee the story very soon, and that the more since there are matters written wrong in the book". Therewith she hurried him on, and her feet seemed never tired, though now, to say sooth, he began to go somewhat heavily.

THEN she stayed him, and laughed sweetly in his face, and said: "It is a long while now since the beginning of the June day, & meseems I know thy lack, and the slaking of it lieth somewhat nearer than Hampton under Scaur, which we shall not reach these two days if we go afoot all the way". "My lack?" said he; "I lack nought now, that I may not have when I will". And he put his arms about her shoulders & strained her to his bosom. But she strove with him, and freed herself and laughed outright, and said: "Thou art a bold man & rash, my knight, even unto me. Yet must I see to it that thou die not of hunger". He said merrily: "Yea, by St. Nicholas, true it is: a while ago I felt no hunger, & had forgotten that men eat; for I was troubled with much longing, & in doubt

concerning my life; but now am I free and happy, & hungry therewithal" ❧ "Look," she said, pointing up to the heavens, "it is now past two hours after noon; that is nigh two hours since we left the lawn amidst the hazels, and thou longest to eat, as is but right, so lovely as thou art & young; and I withal long to tell thee something of that whereof thou hast asked me; & lastly, it is the hottest of the day, yea, so hot, that even Diana, the Wood-wife of yore agone, might have fainted somewhat, if she had been going afoot as we twain have been, and little is the risk of our resting awhile. And hereby is a place where rest is good as regards the place, whatever the resters may be; it is a little aside the straightest way, but meseems we may borrow an hour or so of our journey, and hope to pay it back ere nightfall. Come, champion!"

THEREWITH she led north through a thicket of mingled trees till Ralph heard water running, & anon they came to a little space about a brook, grassy & clear of trees save a few big thornbushes, with a green ridge or bank on the other side. There she stayed him and said: "Do off thy war-gear, knight. There is nought to fear here, less than there was amidst the hazels." So did he, & she kneeled down and drank of the clear water, and washed her face and hands therein, and then came and kissed him and said: "Lovely imp of Upmeads, I have some bread of last night's meal in my scrip here, and under the bank I shall find some woodland meat withal; abide a little and the tale and the food shall come back to thee together." Therewith she stepped lightly into the stream, and stood therein a minute to let her naked feet feel the cold ripple, for she had stripped off her foot-gear as she first came to the water, & then went hither and thither gathering strawberries about the bank, while he watched her, blessing her, till he well nigh wept at the thought of his happiness ❧ Back she came in a little while with good store of strawberries in the lap of her gown, and they sat down on the green lip of the brook, and she drew the bread from her scrip and they ate together, & she made him drink from the hollow of her hands, and kissed him & wept over him for joy, & the eagerness of her love. So at last she sat down quietly beside him, and fell to speaking to him, as a tale is told in the ingle nook on an even of Yule-tide.

Chapter III. The Lady telleth Ralph of the past days of her life

NOW shalt thou hear of me somewhat more than the arras and the book could tell thee; and yet not all, for time would fail us therefor . . . and moreover my heart would fail me. I cannot tell where I was born nor of what lineage, nor who were my father and mother; for this I have known not of myself, nor has any told me. But when I first remember anything, I was playing about a garden, wherein was a little house built of timber & thatched with reed, and the great trees of the forest were all about the garden save for a little croft which was grown over with high grass, & another somewhat bigger, wherein were goats. There was a woman at the door of the house and she spinning, yet clad in glittering raiment, and with jewels on her neck & fingers; this was the first thing that I remember, but all as it were a matter of every day, & use and wont, as it goes with the memories of children. Of such matter I will not tell thee at large, for thou knowest how it will be. Now the woman, who as I came to know was neither old nor young in those days, but of middle age, I called mother; but now I know that she was not my mother. She was hard and stern with me, but never beat me in those days, save to make me do what I would not have done unbeaten; and as to meat, I ate and drank what I could get, as she did, and indeed was well fed with simple meats, as thou mayest suppose from the aspect of me to-day. But as she was not fierce but rather sour to me in her daily wont in my younger days, so also she was never tender, or ever kissed me or caressed me, for as little as I was. And I loved her nought, nor did it ever come into my mind that I should love her, though I loved a white goat of ours & deemed it dear and lovely; and afterwards other things also that came to me from time to time, as a squirrel that I saved from a weasel, and a jackdaw that fell from a tall ash-tree nigh our house before he had learned how to fly, and a house-mouse that would run up and down my hand and arm, and other suchlike things; and shortly I may say that the wild things, even to the conies and fawns, loved me, & had but little fear of me, and made me happy, & I loved them.

FURTHER, as I grew up, the woman set me to do such work as I had strength for, as needs was; for there was no man dwelt anigh us, and seldom did I ever see man or woman there, and held no converse with any, save as I shall tell thee presently: though now & again a man or a woman passed by; what they were I knew not, nor their whence & whither, but by seeing them I came to know that there were other folk in the world besides us two. Nought else I knew save how to spin, and to tend our goats and milk them, & to set snares for birds & small deer: though when I had caught them, it irked me sore to kill them, and I had let them go again had I not feared the carline. Every day early I was put forth from the house and garth, and forbidden to go back thither till dusk. While the days were long and the grass was growing, I had to lead our goats to pasture in the wood/lawns, & must take with me rock and spindle, and spin so much of flax or hair as the woman gave me, or be beaten. But when the winter came and the snow was on the ground, then that watching and snaring of wild things was my business.

AT last one day of late summer when I, now of some fifteen summers, was pasturing the goats not far from the house, the sky darkened, and there came up so great a storm of thunder and lightning, and huge drift of rain, that I was afraid, and being so near to the house, I hastened thither, driving the goats, & when I had tethered them in the shed of the croft, I crept trembling up to the house, and when I was at the door, heard the clack of the loom in the weaving/chamber, & deemed that the woman was weaving there, but when I looked, behold there was no one on the bench, though the shuttle was flying from side to side, & the shed opening & changing, and the sley coming home in due order. Therewithal I heard a sound as of one singing a song in a low voice, but the words I could not understand: then terror seized on my heart, but I stepped over the threshold, and as the door of the chamber was open, I looked aside, and saw therein the woman sitting stark naked on the floor with a great open book before her, and it was from her mouth that the song was coming: grim she looked, and awful, for she was a big woman, black/haired & stern of aspect in her daily wont, speaking to me as few words as might be, and those harsh enough, yea, harsher than when I was but little.

I stood for one moment afraid beyond measure, though the woman did not look at me, and I hoped she had not seen me, then I ran back into the storm, though it was now wilder than ever, and ran and hid myself in the thicket of the wood, half-dead with fear, and wondering what would become of me. But finding that no one followed after me, I grew calmer, and the storm also drew off, and the sun shone out a little before his setting: so I sat & spun, with fear in my heart, till I had finished my tale of thread, and when dusk came, stole back again to the house, though my legs would scarce bear me over the threshold into the chamber.

THERE sat the woman in her rich attire no otherwise than her wont, nor did she say aught to me; but looked at the yarn that I had spun, to see that I had done my task, and nodded sternly to me as her wont was, and I went to bed amongst my goats as I was used to do, but slept not till towards morning, & then images of dreadful things, & of miseries that I may not tell thee of, mingled with my sleep for long.

SO I awoke and ate my meat and drank of the goats' milk with a heavy heart and then went into the house; and when I came into the chamber the woman looked at me, and contrary to her wont spoke to me, & I shook with terror at her voice: though she said naught but this: 'Go fetch thy white goat and come back to me therewith.' I did so & followed after her, sick with fear; and she led me through the wood into a lawn which I knew well, round which was a wall, as it were, of great yew trees, and amidst, a table of stone, made of four uprights and a great stone plank on the top of them; and this was the only thing in all the wood wherein I was used to wander which was of man's handiwork save and except our house, and the sheds and fences about it. The woman stayed and leaned against this stonework & said to me: 'Go about now & gather dry sticks for a fire.' I durst do naught else, and said to myself that I should be whipped if I were tardy, though, forsooth, I thought she was going to kill me; and I brought her a bundle, & she said: 'Fetch more.' And when I had brought her seven bundles, she said: 'It is enough: stand over against me & hearken.' So I stood there quaking; for my fear, which had somewhat abated while I went to & fro after the wood, now came back upon me tenfold.

"She said: 'It were thy due that I should slay thee here &

now, as thou slayest the partridges which thou takest in thy springes: but for certain causes I will not slay thee. Again, it were no more than thy earnings were I to torment thee till thou shouldst cry out for death to deliver thee from the anguish; and if thou wert a woman grown, even so would I deal with thee. But thou art yet but a child, therefore I will keep thee to see what shall befall betwixt us. Yet must I do somewhat to grieve thee, and moreover something must be slain & offered up here on this altar, lest all come to naught, both thou and I, & that which we have to do. Hold thy white goat now, which thou lovest more than aught else, that I may redden thee and me and this altar with the blood thereof'. "I durst do naught but obey her, and I held the poor beast, that licked my hands & bleated for love of me: & now since my terror and the fear of death was lessened at her words, I wept sore for my dear friend.

"But the woman drew a strong sharp knife from her girdle & cut the beast's throat, & dipped her fingers in the blood & reddened both herself and me on the breast, and the hands, & the feet; and then she turned to the altar and smote blood upon the uprights, & the face of the stone plank. Then she bade me help her, and we laid the seven faggots on the altar, and laid the carcase of the goat upon them: and she made fire, but I know not how, and set it to the wood, and when it began to blaze she stood before it with her arms outspread, and sang loud and hoarse to a strange tune; and though I knew not the words of her song, it filled me with dread, so that I cast myself down on the ground and hid my face in the grass. "So she went on till the beast was all burned up and the fire became naught but red embers, & then she ceased her song and sank down upon the grass, and laid her head back and so fell asleep; but I durst not move from the place, but cowered in the grass there, I know not how long, till she arose and came to me, & smote me with her foot & cried: 'Rise up, fool! what harm hast thou? Go milk thy goats & lead them to pasture.' And therewith she strode away home, not heeding me. "As for me, I arose & dealt with my goats as she bade me; and presently I was glad that I had not been slain, yet thenceforth was the joy of my life that I had had amongst my goats marred with fear, and the sounds of the woodland came to me mingled with terror; and I was sore afraid

when I entered the house in the morning and the evening, and when I looked on the face of the woman; though she was no harder to me than heretofore, but maybe somewhat softer.

SO wore the autumn, and winter came, and I fared as I was wont, setting springes for fowl and small-deer. And for all the roughness of the season, at that time it pleased me better than the leafy days, because I had less memory then of the sharpness of my fear on that day of the altar. Now one day as I went under the snow-laden trees, I saw something bright and big lying on the ground, & drawing nearer, I saw that it was some child of man: so I stopped and cried out, 'Awake & arise, lest death come on thee in this bitter cold.' But it stirred not; so I plucked up heart & came up to it, and lo! a woman clad in fair raiment of scarlet and fur, and I knelt down by her to see if I might help her; but when I touched her I found her cold and stiff, & dead, though she had not been dead long, for no snow had fallen on her. It still wanted more than an hour of twilight, and I by no means durst go home till nightfall; so I sat on there and watched her, and put the hood from her face and the gloves from her hands, & I deemed her a goodly and lovely thing, & was sorry that she was not alive, and I wept for her, and for myself also, that I had lost her fellowship. So when I came back to the house at dark with the venison, I knew not whether to tell my mistress & tyrant concerning this matter; but she looked on me and said at once: 'Wert thou going to tell me of something that thou hast seen?' So I told her all, even as it was, and she said to me: 'Hast thou taken aught from the corpse?' 'Nay,' said I. 'Then must I hasten,' she said, 'and be before the wolves.' Therewith she took a brand from the fire, and bade me bear one also and lead her: so did I easily enough, for the moon was up, and what with moon & snow, it was well nigh as bright as the day. So when we came to the dead woman, my mistress kneeled down by her & undid the collar of her cloak, which I had not touched, & took something from her neck swiftly; and yet I, who was holding the torch, saw that it was a necklace of blue stones and green, with gold between: Yea, dear Champion, like unto thine as one peascod is to another," quoth she.

AND therewith the distressfulness of her face which had worn Ralph's

heart while she had been telling her tale changed, and she came back, as it were, into her new life and the love of him again, and she kissed him & laid her cheek to his and he kissed her mouth. And then she fetched a sigh, and began with her story again: "My mistress took the necklace & put it in her pouch, & said, as if to herself: 'Here, then, is another seeker who hath not found, unless one should dig a pit for her here when the thaw comes, & call it the Well at the World's End: belike it will be for her as helpful as the real one.' Then she turned to me and said: 'Do thou with the rest what thou wilt,' and therewith she went back hastily to the house. But as for me, I went back also, & found a pick & a mattock in the goat-house, and came back in the moonlight and scraped the snow away, and dug a pit, and buried the poor damsel there with all her gear.

MORE the Winter on thence with naught that I need tell of, only I thought much of the words that my mistress had spoken. Spring came & went, & summer also, well nigh tidingless. But one day as I drave the goats from our house there came from the wood four men, a-horseback & weaponed, but so covered with their armour that I might see little of their faces. They rode past me to our house, and spake not to me, though they looked hard at me; but as they went past I heard one say: 'If she might but be our guide to the Well at the World's End!' I durst not tarry to speak with them, but as I looked over my shoulder I saw them talking to my mistress in the door; but meseemed she was clad but in poor homespun cloth instead of her rich apparel, & I am far-sighted & clear-sighted. After this the autumn & winter that followed it passed away tidingless."

Chapter IV. The Lady tells of her deliverance

NOW I had outgrown my old fear and not much befell to quicken it: and ever I was as much out of the house as I could be. But about this time my mistress, from being kinder to me than before, began to grow harder, & ofttimes used me cruelly: but of her deeds to me, my friend, thou shalt ask me no more than I tell thee. On a day of May-tide I fared abroad with my goats, and went far with them, further from the house than I had been as yet. The day was

the fairest of the year, & I rejoiced in it, and felt as if some exceeding great good were about to befall me; and the burden of fears seemed to have fallen from me. So I went till I came to a little flowery dell, beset with blossoming whitethorns & with a fair stream running through it; a place somewhat like to this, save that the stream there was bigger. And the sun was hot about noontide, so I did off my raiment, which was rough & poor, and more meet for winter than May-tide, and I entered a pool of the clear water, and bathed me and sported therein, smelling the sweet scent of the whitethorns and hearkening to the song of the many birds; & when I came forth from the water, the air was so soft and sweet to me, and the flowery grass so kind to my feet, & the May-blooms fell upon my shoulders, that I was loth to do on my rough raiment hastily, and withal I looked to see no child of man in that wilderness: so I sported myself there a long while, and milked a goat & drank of the milk, and crowned myself with white-thorn & hare-bells; and held the blossoms in my hand, and felt that I also had some might in me, and that I should not be a thrall of that sorceress for ever. And that day, my friend, belike was the spring-tide of the life and the love that thou holdest in thy kind arms.

But as I abode thus in that fair place, and had just taken my rock and spindle in hand that I might go on with my task and give as little occasion as I might for my mistress to chastise me, I looked up and saw a child of man coming down the side of the little dale towards me, so I sprang up, and ran to my raiment & cast them on me hastily, for I was ashamed; & when I saw that it was a woman, I thought at first that it was my mistress coming to seek me; and I thought within myself that if she smote me I would bear it no more, but let it be seen which of the twain was the mightier. But I looked again & saw that it was not she, but a woman smaller and older. So I stood where I was and abode her coming, smiling and unafraid, and half-clad.

She drew near & I saw that it was an old woman grey haired, uncomely of raiment, but with shining bright eyes in her wrinkled face. And she made an obeisance to me & said: 'I was passing through this lonely wilderness and I looked down into the little valley and saw these goats there and the lovely lady lying naked amongst them, and I said I am

too old to be afraid of aught; for if she be a goddess come back again from yore agone, she can but make an end of a poor old carline, a gangrel body, who hath no joy of her life now. And if she be of the daughters of men, she will belike methink her of her mother, and be kind to me for her sake, and give me a piece of bread and a draught of her goats' milk' ❧ I spake hastily, for I was ashamed of her words, though I only half understood them: 'I hear thee & deem that thou mockest me: I have never known a mother; I am but a poor thrall, a goatherd dwelling with a mistress in a nook of this wildwood: I have never a piece of bread; but as to goats' milk, that thou shalt have at once.' So I called one of my goats to me, for I knew them all, and milked her into a wooden bowl that I carried slung about me, and gave the old woman to drink: and she kissed my hand and drank and spake again, but no longer in a whining voice, like a beggar bidding alms in the street, but frank and free ❧ 'Damsel,' she said, 'now I see that thy soul goes with thy body, and that thou art kind & proud at once. And whatever thou art, it is no mock to say of thee, that thou art as fair as the fairest: & I think that this will follow thee, that henceforth no man who seeth thee once, will forget thee ever, or cease to long for thee: of a surety this is thy weird. Now I see that thou knowest no more of the world and its ways than one of the hinds that run in these woods. So if thou wilt, I will sit down by thee and tell thee much that shall avail thee; & thou in thy turn shalt tell me all the tale concerning thy dwelling & thy service, and the like' ❧ I said, 'I may not, I durst not; I serve a mighty mistress, & she would slay me if she knew that I had spoken to thee; and woe's me! I fear that even now she will not fail to know it. Depart in peace' ❧ 'Nay,' she said, 'thou needest not tell me, for I have an inkling of her and her ways: but I will give thee wisdom, and not sell it thee at a price. Sit down then, fair child, on this flowery grass, and I will sit beside thee and tell thee of many things worth thine heeding.' So there we sat awhile, & in good sooth she told me much of the world which I had not yet seen, of its fairness and its foulness; of life and death, and desire and disappointment, and despair; so that when she had done, if I were wiser than erst, I was perchance little more joyous; and yet I said to myself that come what would I would be a part of all that ❧ But at last she said: 'Lo the day is waning,

& thou hast two things to do; either to go home to thy mistress at once, or flee away from her by the way that I shall show thee; and if thou wilt be ruled by me, & canst bear thy thralldom yet a little while, thou wilt not flee at once, but abide till thou hast seen me again. And since it is here that thou hast met me, here mayst thou meet me again; for the days are long now, & thou mayst easily win thy way hither before noon on any day'. So I tied my goatskin shoes to my feet, & drave my goats together, & we went up together out of the dale, & were in the wide-spreading plain of the waste; & the carline said: 'Dost thou know the quarters of the heaven by the sun?' 'Yea,' said I. 'Then,' quoth she, 'whenso thou desirest to depart and come into the world of folk that I have told thee of, set thy face a little north of west, & thou shalt fall in with something or somebody beforelong; but be speedy on that day as thou art light-footed, & make all the way thou canst before thy mistress comes to know of thy departure; for not lightly will any one let loose such a thrall as thou'.

"I thanked her, and she went her ways over the waste, I wotted not whither, & I drave my goats home as speedily as I might; the mistress meddled not with me by word or deed, though I was short of my due tale of yarn. The next day I longed sore to go to the dale & meet the carline but durst not, and the next day I fared in likeways; but the third day I longed so to go, that my feet must needs take me there, whatsoever might befall. And when I had been in the dale a little, thither came the carline, and sat down by me and fell to teaching me wisdom, & showed me letters and told me what they were, and I learned like a little lad in the chorister's school.

THEREAFTER I mastered my fear of my mistress and went to that dale day by day, & learned of the carline; though at whiles I wondered when my mistress would let loose her fury upon me; for I called to mind the threat she had made to me on the day when she offered up my white goat. And I made up my mind to this, that if she fell upon me with deadly intent I would do my best to slay her before she should slay me. But so it was, that now & again she held her hand from my body, and scarce cast a word at me ever, but gloomed at me, and fared as if hatred of me had grown great in her heart. So the days went by, and my feet had worn a path through the wilderness to the Dale of

Lore, and May had melted into June, and the latter days of June were come. And on Midsummer Day I went my ways to the dale according to my wont, when, as I was driving on my goats hastily, I saw a bright thing coming over the heath toward me, and I went on my way to meet it, for I had no fear now, except what fear of my mistress lingered in my heart; nay, I looked that everything I saw of new should add some joy to my heart. So presently I saw that it was a weaponed man riding a white horse, and anon he had come up to me and drawn rein before me. I wondered exceedingly at beholding him, & the heart leapt within me at his beauty; for though the carline had told me of the loveliness of the sons of men, that was but words, & I knew not what they meant; & the others that I had seen were not young men or goodly, and those last, as I told thee, I could scarce see their faces. And this one was even fairer than the dead woman that I had buried, whose face was worn with toil & trouble, as now I called to mind. He was clad in bright shining armour with a gay surcoat of green, embroidered with flowers over it; he had a light sallet on his head, & the yellow locks of his hair flowed down from under, & fell on his shoulders: his face was as beardless as thine, dear friend, but not clear brown like to thine, but white & red like a blossom." Ralph spake and said: "Belike it was a woman"; & his voice sounded loud in the quiet place. She smiled on him and kissed his cheek, and said: "Nay, nay, dear Champion, it is not so. God rest his soul! Many a year he has been dead".

Said Ralph: "Many a year? What meanest thou?" "Ah!" she said, "fear not! as I am now, so shall I be for thee many a year. Was not thy fear that I should vanish away or change into something unsightly and gruesome? Fear not, I say; am I not a woman & thine own?" And again she flushed bright red, & her grey eyes lightened, and she looked at him all confused and shamefaced.

He took her face between his hands and kissed her over and over; then he let her go & said: "I have no fear: go on with thy tale, for the words thereof are as thy kisses to me, and the embracing of thine hands and thy body: tell on, I pray thee." She took his hand in hers and spake, telling her tale as before.

FRIEND, well-beloved forever! This fair young knight looked on me, & as he looked, his face flushed

as red as mine did even now. And I tell thee that my heart danced with joy as I looked on him, & he spake not for a little while, and then he said: 'Fair maiden, canst thou tell me of any who will tell me a word of the way to the Well at the World's End?' I said to him: 'Nay, I have heard the word once and no more, and I know not the way: & I am sorry that I cannot do for thee that which thou wouldst.' And then I spake again, and told him that he should by no means stop at our house, and I told him what it was like, so that he might give it the go by. I said: 'Even if thou hast to turn back again, and fail to find the thing thou seekest, yet I beseech thee ride not into that trap.' He sat still on his saddle a while, staring at me and I at him; and then he thanked me, but with so bad a grace, that I wondered of him if he were angry; and then he shook his rein, and rode off briskly, and I looked after him a while, and then went on my way; but I had gone but a short while, when I heard horse-hoofs behind me, and I turned and looked, and lo! it was the knight coming back again. So I stayed and abided him: and when he came up to me, he leapt from his horse & stood before me & said: 'I must needs see thee once again.' I stood and trembled before him, & longed to touch him. And again he spake, breathlessly, as one who has been running: 'I must depart, for I have a thing to do that I must do; but I long sore-ly to touch thee, and kiss thee; yet unless thou freely willest it, I will refrain me.' Then I looked at him and said: 'I will it freely.' Then he came close up to me, and put his hand on my shoulder and kissed my cheek; but I kissed his lips, & then he took me in his arms, and kissed me and embraced me; and there in that place, & in a little while, we loved each other sorely. But in a while he said to me: 'I must depart, for I am as one whom the Avenger of Blood followeth; and now I will give thee this, not so much as a gift, but as a token that we have met in the wilderness, thou and I.' Therewith he put his hand to his neck, and took from it this necklace which thou seest here, and I saw that it was like that which my mistress took from the neck of the dead woman. And no less is it like to the one that thou wearest, Ralph. I took it in my hand and wept that I might not help him. And he said: 'It is little likely that we shall meet again; but by the token of this collar thou mayest wot that I ever long for thee till I die; for though I am a king's son, this

is the dearest of my possessions. I said: 'Thou art young, and I am young, may happen we shall meet again: but thou shalt know that I am but a thrall, a goatherd.' For I knew by what the old woman told me of somewhat of the mightiness of the kings of the world. 'Yea,' he said, & smiled most sweetly, 'that is easy to be seen: yet if I live, as I think not to do, thou shalt sit where great men shall kneel to thee; not as I kneel now for love, and that I may kiss thy knees and thy feet, but because they needs must worship thee' Therewith he arose to his feet and leapt on his horse, & rode his ways speedily: and I went upon my way with my goats, and came down into the Dale of Lore, and found the old woman abiding me: and she came to me, & took me by the hands, and touched the collar (for I had done it about my neck), & said:

DEAR child, thou needest not to tell me thy tale, for I have seen him. But if thou must needs wear this necklace, I must give thee a gift to go with it. But first sit down by the old carline awhile & talk with her; for me seemeth it will be but a few days ere thou shalt depart from this uttermost wilderness, & the woods before the mountains.' So I sat down by her, and in spite of her word I told her all that had befallen betwixt me and the king's son: for my heart was too full that I might refrain me. She nodded her head from time to time, but said nought, till I had made an end: and then fell to telling me of many matters for my avail; but yet arose earlier than her wont was; & when we were about sundering on the path which I had trodden above the Dale, she said: 'Now must I give thee that gift to go along with the gift of the lover, the king's son; and I think thou wilt find it of avail before many days are gone by.' Therewith she took from her pouch a strong sharp knife, and drew it from the sheath, & flashed it in the afternoon sun, & gave it to me: and I took it and laid it in my bosom and thanked her; for I thought that I understood her meaning, and how it would avail me. Then I went driving my goats home speedily, so that the sun was barely set when I came to the garth; & a great horror rather than a fear of my mistress was on me; and lo! she stood in the door of the house gazing down the garth & the woodland beyond as though she were looking for my coming: and when her eyes lighted on me, she scowled, & drew her lips back

from her teeth and clenched her hands with fury, though there was nought in them; and she was a tall & strong woman, though now growing somewhat old: but as for me, I had unsheathed the carline's gift before I came to the garth, and now I held it behind my back in my left hand.

I HAD stayed my feet some six paces from the threshold, & my heart beat quick, but the sick fear & cowering had left me, though the horror of her grew in my heart. My goats had all gone off quietly to their house, and there was nothing betwixt me and her. In clearing from my sleeve the arm of me which held the knife, the rough clasp which fastened my raiment together at the shoulder had given way, & the cloth had fallen and left my bosom bare, so that I knew that the collar was clearly to be seen. So we stood a moment, and I had no words, but she spake at last in a hard, snarling voice, such as she oftenest used to me, but worse.

NOW at last the time has come when thou art of no more use to me; for I can see thee what thou hast got for thyself. But know now that thou hast not yet drunk of the Well at the World's End, and that it will not avail thee to flee out of this wood; for as long as I live thou wilt not be able to get out of reach of my hand; and I shall live long: I shall live long. Come, then, & give thyself up to me, that I may deal with thee as I threatened when I slew thy friend the white goat; for, indeed, I knew then it would come to this.'

SHE had but twice or thrice spoken to me so many words together as this; but I answered never a word, but stood watching her warily. And of a sudden she gave forth a dreadful screaming roar, wherewith all the wood rang again, and rushed at me; but my hand came from behind my back, & how it was I know not, but she touched me not till the blade had sunk into her breast, and she fell across my feet, her right hand clutching my raiment. So I loosed her fingers from the cloth, shuddering with horror the while, and drew myself away from her & stood a little aloof, wondering what should happen next. And indeed I scarce believed but she would presently rise up from the ground & clutch me in her hands, and begin the tormenting of me. But she moved no more, & the grass all about her was reddened with her blood; and at last I gathered heart to kneel down beside her, & found that she no more breathed than

one of those conies or partridges which I had been used to slay for her.

THEN I stood and considered what I should do, and indeed I had been pondering this all the way from the Dale thereto, in case I should escape my mistress. So I soon made up my mind that I would not dwell in that house even for one night; lest my mistress should come to me though dead, and torment me. I went into the house while it was yet light, and looked about the chamber, & saw three great books there laid on the lectern, but durst not have taken them even had I been able to carry them; nor durst I even to look into them, for fear that some spell might get to work in them if they were opened; but I found a rye loaf whereof I had eaten somewhat in the morning, & another untouched; & hanging to a horn of the lectern I found the necklace which my mistress had taken from the dead woman. These I put into my scrip and as to the necklace, I will tell thee how I bestowed it later on. Then I stepped out into the twilight which was fair & golden, & full fain I was of it. Then I drove the goats out of their house & went my way towards the Dale of Lore, and said to myself that the carline would teach me what further to do, & I came there before the summer dark had quite prevailed, and slept sweetly and softly amongst my goats after I had tethered them in the best of the pasture.

Chapter V. Yet more of the Lady's Story

O thou, beloved," she said, "thou hast seen me in the wildwood with little good quickened in me: doth not thine heart sink at the thought of thy love and thy life given over to the keeping of such an one?" He smiled in her face, & said: "Belike thou hast done worse than all thou hast told me: and these days past I have wondered often what there was in the stories which they of the Burg had against thee: yet sooth to say, they told little of what thou hast done: no more belike than being their foe." She sighed & said: "Well, hearken; yet shall I not tell thee every deed that I have been partaker in.

SAT in the Dale that next day & was happy, though I longed to see that fair man again: sooth to say, since my mistress was dead, everything seemed fairer to me, yea even mine own face,

as I saw it in the pools of the stream, though whiles I wondered when I should have another mistress, and how she would deal with me; and ever I said I would ask the carline when she came again to me. But all that day she came not: nor did I marvel thereat. But when seven days passed and still she came not, I fell to wondering what I should do: for my bread was all gone, and I durst not go back to the house to fetch meal; though there was store of it there. Howbeit, I drank of the milk of the goats and made curds thereof with the woodland roots, and ate of the woodberries like as thou hast done, friend, e'en now. And it was easier for me to find a livelihood in the woods than it had been for most folk, so well as I knew them. So wore the days, & she came not, and I began to think that I should see the wise carline no more, as indeed fell out at that time; & the days began to hang heavy on my hands, & I fell to thinking of that way to the west and the peopled parts, whereof the carline had told me; and whiles I went out of the Dale & went away hither & thither through the woods, & so far, that thrice I slept away out of the Dale: but I knew that the peopled parts would be strange to me and I feared to face them all alone.

THUS wore the days till July was on the wane, & on a morning early I awoke with unwonted sounds in mine ears; and when my eyes were fairly open I saw a man standing over me and a white horse cropping the grass hard by. And my heart was full and fain, and I sprang to my feet & showed him a smiling happy face, for I saw at once that it was that fair man come back again. But lo! his face was pale and worn, though he looked kindly on me, and he said: 'O my beloved, I have found thee, but I am faint with hunger and can speak but little.' And even therewith he sank down on the grass. But I bestirred myself, and gave him milk of my goats, and curds and berries, and the life came into him again, and I sat down by him and laid his head in my lap, and he slept a long while; and when he awoke (and it was towards sunset) he kissed my hands & my arms, and said to me: 'fair child, perhaps thou wilt come with me now; & even if thou art a thrall thou mayest flee with me; for my horse is strong and fat, though I am weak, for he can make his dinner on the grass'. Then he laughed and I no less; but I fed him with my poor victual again, & as he ate I said: 'I am no mistress's thrall now; for the evening of the day whereon I saw thee I

slew her, else had she slain me.' 'The saints be praised,' said he: 'Thou wilt come with me, then?' 'O yea,' said I. Then I felt shamefaced and I reddened; but I said: 'I have abided here many days for a wise woman who hath taught me many things; but withal I hoped that thou wouldst come also' ❧ Then he put his arms about my shoulders and loved me much; but at last he said: 'Yet is it now another thing than that which I looked for, when I talked of setting thee by me on the golden throne. For now am I a beaten man; I have failed of that I sought, and suffered shame and hunger and many ills. Yet ever I thought that I might find thee here or hereby.' Then a thought came into my mind, and I said: 'Else maybe thou hadst found what thou soughtest, and overcome the evil things.' 'Maybe,' he said; 'it is now but a little matter' ❧ As for me, I could have no guess at what were the better things he had meant for me, & my heart was full of joy, & all seemed better than well. And we talked together long till the day was gone. Then we kissed and embraced each other in the Dale of Lore, and the darkness of summer seemed but short for our delight."

Chapter VI. The Lady tells somewhat of her doings after she left the wilderness

RALPH stayed her speech now, and said: "When I asked of thee in the Land of Abundance, there were some who seemed to say that thou hast let more men love thee than one: and it was a torment to me to think that even so it might be. But now when thine own mouth telleth me of one of them it irks me little. Dost thou think it little-hearted in me?" ❧ "O friend," she said, "I see that so it is with thee that thou wouldst find due cause for loving me, whatever thou foundest true of me. Or dost thou deem that I was another woman in those days? Nay, I was not: I can see myself still myself all along the way I have gone." She was silent a little, and then she said: "Fear not, I will give thee much cause to love me. But now I know thy mind the better, I shall tell thee less of what befell me after I left the wilderness; for whatever I did and whatever I endured, still it was always I myself that was there, and it is me that thou lovest. Moreover, my life in the wilderness is a stranger thing to tell thee of than my dealings with

the folk, and with Kings and Barons & Knights. But hereafter thou shalt hear of me what tales thou wilt of these matters, as the days and the years pass over our heads.

NOW on the morrow we would not depart at once because there we had some victual, & the king's son was not yet so well fed as he should be; so we abode in that fair place another day, and then we went our ways westward, according to the rede of the carline; & it was many days before we gat us out of the wilderness, & we were often hard put to it for victual; whiles I sat behind my knight a-horseback, whiles he led the beast while I rode alone, and not seldom I went afoot, and that nowise slowly, while he rode the white horse, for I was as light-foot then as now ❧ And of the way we went I will tell thee nought as now, because sure it is that if we both live, thou and I shall tread that road together, but with our faces turned the other way; for it is the road from the Well at the World's End, where I myself have been, or else never had thine eyes fallen on me" ❧ Ralph said: "Even so much I deemed by reading in the book; yet it was not told clearly that thou hadst been there." "Yea," she said, "because the said book was made not by my friends but my foes, and they would have men deem that my length of days and the endurance of my beauty and never-dying youth of my heart came from evil and devilish sources; and if thou wilt trust my word it is not so, for in the Well at the World's End is no evil, but only the Quenching of Sorrow, and Clearing of the Eyes that they may behold. And how good it is that they look on thee now. And moreover, the history of that book is partly false of intention and ill-will, and partly a confused medley of true & false, which has come of mere chance-hap. Hearken now," she said, "till I tell thee in few words what befell me before I came to drink the Water of the Well. After we had passed long deserts of wood and heath, and gone through lands exceeding evil & perilous, and despaired of life for the horror of those places, and seen no men, we came at last amongst a simple folk who dealt kindly with us, yea, & more. These folk seemed to me happy and of good wealth, though to my lord they seemed poor & lacking of the goods of the world. Forsooth, by that time we lacked more than they, for we were worn with cold and hunger, and hard life: though for me, indeed, happy had been the days of my

wayfaring, but my lord remembered the days of his riches & the kingdom of his father, and the worship of mighty men, & all that he had promised me on the happy day when I first beheld him: so belike he was scarce so happy as I was ❧ It was springtime when we came to that folk; for we had worn through the autumn & winter in getting clear of the wilderness. Not that the way was long as I found out afterwards, but that we went astray in the woodland, & at last came out of it into a dreadful stony waste which we strove to cross thrice, and thrice were driven back into the greenwood by thirst and hunger; but the fourth time, having gotten us store of victual by my woodcraft, we overpassed it and reached the peopled country ❧ Yea, spring was on the earth, as we, my lord & I, came down from the desolate stony heaths, & went hand in hand across the plain, where men and women of that folk were feasting round about the simple roofs and woodland halls which they had raised there. Then they left their games and sports and ran to us, and we walked on quietly, though we knew not whether the meeting was to be for death or life. But that kind folk gathered round us, and asked of us no story till they had fed us, and bathed us, & clad us after their fashion. And then, despite the nakedness & poverty wherein they had first seen us, they would have it that we were gods sent down to them from the world beyond the mountains by their fathers of old time; for of Holy Church, and the Blessed Trinity, and the Mother of God they knew no more than did I at that time, but were heathen, as the Gentiles of yore agone. And even when we put all that Godhood from us, and told them as we might and could what we were (for we had no heart to lie to such simple folk), their kindness abated nothing, and they bade us abide there, and were our loving friends & brethren ❧ There in sooth had I been content to abide till eld came upon me, but my lord would not have it so, but longed for greater things for me. Though in sooth to me it seemed as if his promise of worship of me by the folk had been already fulfilled; for when we had abided there some while, & our beauty, which had been marred by the travail of our wayfaring, had come back to us in full, or it may be increased somewhat, they did indeed deal with us with more love than would most men with the saints, were they to come back on the earth again; & their chil-

dren would gather round about me and make me a partaker of their sports, & be loth to leave me; and the faces of their old folk would quicken & gladden when I drew nigh: and as for their young men, it seemed of them that they loved the very ground that my feet trod on, though it grieved me that I could not pleasure some of them in such wise as they desired. And all this was soft and full of delight for my soul: and I, whose body a little while ago had been driven to daily toil with evil words and stripes, and who had known not what words of thanks and praise might mean! But so it must be that we should depart, and the kind folk showed us how sore their hearts were of our departure, but they gainsaid us in nowise, but rather furthered us all they might, & we went our ways from them riding on horned neat (for they knew not of horses), and driving one for a sumpter beast before us; and they had given us bows and arrows for our defence, & that we might get us venison.

IT is not to be said that we did not encounter perils; but thereof I will tell thee naught as now. We came to other peoples, richer & mightier than these, & I saw castles, and abbeys, and churches, and walled towns, and wondered at them exceedingly. And in these places folk knew of the kingdom of my lord and his father, and whereas they were not of his foes (who lay for the more part on the other side of his land), and my lord could give sure tokens of what he was, we were treated with honour and worship, and my lord began to be himself again, and to bear him as a mighty man. And here to me was some gain in that poverty and nakedness wherewith we came out of the mountains and the raiment of the simple folk; for had I been clad in my poor cloth & goatskins of the House of the Sorcerer, and he in his brave attire and bright armour, they would have said, it is a thrall that he is assotted of, and would have made some story and pretence for taking me from him; but they deemed me a great lady indeed, and a king's daughter, according to the tale that he told them. Forsooth many men that saw me desired me beyond measure, and assuredly some great and proud man or other would have taken me from my lord, but that they feared the wrath of his father, who was a mighty man indeed.

YEA, one while as we sojourned by a certain town but a little outside the walls, a certain young man, a

great champion and exceeding masterful, came upon me with his squires as I was walking in the meadows, and bore me off, and would have taken me to his castle, but that my lord followed with a few of the burghers, and there was a battle fought, wherein my lord was hurt; but the young champion he slew; and I cannot say but I was sorry of his death, though glad of my deliverance.

AGAIN, on a time we guested in a great baron's house, who dealt so foully by us that he gave my lord a sleeping potion in his good-night cup, and came to me in the dead night and required me of my love; and I would not, and he threatened me sorely, & called me a thrall & a castaway that my lord had picked up off the road: but I gat a knife in my hand and was for warding myself when I saw that my lord might not wake: so the felon went away for that time. But on the morrow came two evil men into the hall whom he had suborned, & bore false witness that I was a thrall and a runaway. So that the baron would have held me there (being a mighty man) despite my lord and his wrath & his grief, had not a young knight of his house been, who swore that he would slay him unless he let us go; and whereas there were other knights & squires there present who murmured, the baron was in a way compelled. So we departed, and divers of the said knights and squires went with us to see us safe on the way. But this was nigh to the kingdom of my lord's father, & that felon baron I came across again, and he was ever after one of my worst foes. Moreover, that young champion who had first stood up in the hall rode with us still, when the others had turned back; & I soon saw of him that he found it hard to keep his eyes off me; and that also saw my lord, and it was a near thing that they did not draw sword thereover; yet was that knight no evil man, but good and true, & I was exceeding sorry for him; but I could not help him in the only way he could take help of me.

LO you, my friend, the beginnings of evil in those long past days, and the seeds of ill-hap sown in the field of my new life even before the furrow was turned.

WELL, we came soon into my lord's country, and fair and rich and lovely was it in those days; free from trouble and unpeace, a happy abode for the tillers of the soil, and the fashioners of wares. The tidings had gone to the king that my lord was come back, & he came to meet

him with a great company of knights and barons, arrayed in the noblest fashion that such folk use; so that I was bewildered with their glory, and besought my lord to let me fall back out of the way, and perchance he might find me again. But he bade me ride on his right hand, for that I was the half of his life and his soul, & that my friends were his friends & my foes his foes.

THEN there came to me an inkling of the things that should befall, and I saw that the sweet and clean happiness of my new days was marred, and had grown into something else, and I began to know the pain of strife & the grief of confusion: but whereas I had not been bred delicately, but had endured woes and griefs from my youngest days, I was not abashed, but hardened my heart to face all things, even as my lord strove to harden his heart: for, indeed, I said to myself that if I were to him as the half of his life, he was to me little less than the whole of my life.

IT is as if it had befallen yesterday, my friend, that I call to mind how we stood beside our horses in the midst of the ring of great men clad in gold and gleaming with steel, in the meadow without the gates, the peace & lowly goodliness whereof with its flocks and herds feeding, and husbandmen tending the earth and its increase, that great and noble array had changed so utterly. There we stood, & I knew that the eyes of all those lords and warriors were set upon me wondering. But the love of my lord & the late-learned knowledge of my beauty sustained me. Then the ring of men opened, & the king came forth towards us; a tall man & big, of fifty-five winters, goodly of body & like to my lord to look upon. He cast his arms about my lord, and kissed him and embraced him, and then stood a little aloof from him & said: 'Well, son, hast thou found it, the Well at the World's End?' 'Yea,' said my lord, & therewith lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it, and I looked the king in his face, and his eyes were turned to me, but it was as if he were looking through me at something behind me. Then he said: 'It is good, son: come home now to thy mother & thy kindred.' Then my lord turned to me while the king took no heed, & no man in the ring of knights moved from his place, and he set me in the saddle, and turned about to mount, and there came a lord from the ring of men gloriously bedight, and he bowed lowly before my lord, and held his

stirrup for him: but lightly he leapt up into the saddle, and took my reins & led me along with him, so that he & the king and I went on together, and all the baronage and their folk shouted and tossed sword & spear aloft and followed after us. And we left the meadow quiet and simple again, & rode through the gate of the king's chief city, wherein was his high house and his castle, the dwelling-place of his kindred from of old."

Chapter VII. The Lady tells of the strife and trouble that befell after her coming to the country of the King's Son

WHEN we came to the King's House my lord followed his father into the hall, where sat his mother amongst her damsels: she was a fair woman, and looked rather meek than high-hearted; my lord led me up to her, & she embraced and kissed him and caressed him long; then she turned about to me and would have spoken to me, but the king, who stood behind us, scowled on her, and she forebore; but she looked on me somewhat kindly, & yet as one who is afeard.

THUS it went for the rest of the day, and my lord had me to sit beside him in the great hall when the banquet was holden, and I ate and drank with him and beheld all the pageants by his side, and none meddled with me either to help or to hinder, because they feared the king. Yet many eyes I saw that desired my beauty. And so when night came, he took me to his chamber & his bed, as if I were his bride new wedded, even as it had been with us on the grass of the wilderness and the bracken of the wildwood. And then, at last, he spake to me of our case, & bade me fear not, for that a band of his friends, all-armed, was keeping watch & ward in the cloister without. And when I left the chamber on the morrow's morn, there were they yet, all in bright armour, and amongst them the young knight who had delivered me from the felon baron, & he looked mournfully at me, so that I was sorry for his sorrow. And I knew now that the king was minded to slay me, else had he bidden thrust me from my lord's side.

SO wore certain days; & on the seventh night, when we were come into our chamber, which was as fair as any house outside of heaven, my lord spake to me in a soft voice, & bade me not do off my raiment. 'For,' said he, 'this night we must flee the

town, or we shall be taken and cast into prison to-morrow; for thus hath my father determined.' I kissed him and clung to him, & he no less was good to me. And when it was the dead of night we escaped out of our window by a knotted rope which he had made ready; and beneath was the city wall; and that company of knights, amongst whom was the young knight abovesaid, had taken a postern thereby, & were abiding us armed and with good horses. So we came into the open country, & rode our ways with the mind to reach a hill-castle of one of those young barons, and to hold ourselves there in despite of the king. But the king had been as wary as we were privy, and no less speedy than we; and he was a mighty and deft warrior; and he himself followed us on the spur with certain of his best men-at-arms. And they came upon us as we rested in a wood-side not far from our house of refuge: & the king stood by to see the battle, with his sword in his sheath, but soon was it at an end, for though our friends fought valiantly, they were everyone slain or hurt, and but few escaped with bare life; but that young man who loved me so sorely crept up to me grievously hurt, & I did not forbear to kiss him once on the face, for I deemed I should soon die also, and his blood stained my sleeve & my wrist, but he died not as then, but lived to be a dear friend to me for long.

SO we, my lord and I, were led back to the city, & he was held in ward & I was cast into prison with chains & hunger & stripes. And the king would have had me lie there till I perished, that I might be forgotten utterly; but there were many of the king's knights who murmured at this, & would not forget me; so the king being constrained, had me brought forth to be judged by his bishops of sorcery for the beguiling of my lord.

"Long was the tale to me then, but I will not make it long for thee; as was like to be, I was brought in guilty of sorcery, and doomed to be burned in the Great Square in three days' time.

NAY, my friend, thou hast no need to look so troubled; for thou seest that I was not burned. This is the selfsame body that was tied to the stake in the market place of the king's city many a year ago.

FOR the friends of my lord, young men for the most part, & many who had been fain to be my friends also, put on their armour, and took my lord out of the cour-

teous prison wherein he was, and came to the Great Square whenas I stood naked in my smock, bound amid the faggots; and I saw the sheriffs' men give back, and great noise and rumour rise up around me; & then all about me was a clear space for a moment and I heard the tramp of many horse/hoofs, & the space was full of weaponed men shouting, and crying out, 'Life for our Lord's Lady!' Then a minute, and I was loose and in my lord's arms, and they brought me a horse and I mounted, lest the worst should come and we might have to flee. So I could see much of what went on; and I saw that all the unarmed folk and lookers/on were gone, but at our backs was a great crowd of folk with staves and bows who cried out: 'Life for the Lady!'

"But before us was naught but the sheriffs' sergeants & a company of knights and men/at/arms, about as many as we were, and the king in front of them, fully armed, his face hidden by his helm, & a royal surcoat over his hauberk beaten with his bearing, to wit, a silver tower on a blue sky bestarred with gold.

"And now I could see that despite the bills & bows behind us the king was going to fall on with his folk; and to say sooth I feared but little & my heart rose high within me, and I wished I had a sword in my hand to strike once for life and love. But lo! just as the king was raising his sword, and his trumpet was lifting the brass to his lips, came a sound of singing, & there was come the Bishop, and the Abbot of St. Peter's and his monks with him, and cross bearers & readers and others of the religious: & the Bishop bore in his hand the Blessed Host (as now I know it was) under a golden canopy, and he stood between the two companies and faced the king, while his folk sang loud and sweet about him.

"Then the spears went up from the rest, & swords were sheathed, & there went forth three ancient knights from out of the king's host & came up to him and spake with him. Then he gat him away unto his High House; and the three old knights came to our folk, and spake with the chiefs; but not with my lord, and I heard not what they said. But my lord came to me in all loving-kindness and brought me into the house of one of the Lineage, and into a fair chamber there, and kissed me, & made much of me; and brought me fair raiment and did it on me with his own hands, even as his wont was to be for my tire-

maiden. Then in a little while came those chiefs of ours and said that truce had been hanselled them for this time, but on these terms, that my lord and I and all those who had been in arms, and whosoever would, that feared the king's wrath, should have leave to depart from his city so that they went and abode no nearer than fifty miles thereof till they should know his further pleasure. Albeit that whosoever would go home peaceably might abide in the city still & need not fear the king's wrath if he stirred no further: but that in any case the Sorceress should get her gone from those walls.

SO we rode out of the gates that very day before sunset; for it was now midsummer again, and it was three hours before noon that I was to have been burned; and we were a gallant company of men-at-arms and knights; yet did I bethink me of those who were slain on that other day when we were taken, and fain had I been that they were riding with us. but at least that fair young man was in our company, though still weak with his hurts: for the prison & the process had worn away wellnigh two months. True it is that I rejoiced to see him, for I had deemed him dead.

DEAR friend, I pray thy pardon if I weary thee with making so long a tale of my friends of the past days; but needs must I tell thee somewhat of them, lest thou love that which is not. Since truly it is myself that I would have thee to love, and none other.

MANY folks gathered to us as we rode our ways to a town which was my lord's own, and where all men were his friends, so that we came there with a great host and sat down there in no fear of what the king might do against us. There was I duly wedded to my lord by a Bishop of Holy Church, and made his Lady & Queen; for even so he would have it. And now began the sore troubles of that land, which had been once so peaceful and happy; the tale whereof I may one day tell thee;

WE waged war against each other, my lord & the king, and whiles one, and whiles the other overcame. Either side belike deemed that one battle or two would end the strife; but so it was not, but it endured year after year, till fighting became the chief business of all in the land. As for me, I had many tribulations. Thrice I fled from the stricken field with my lord to hide in some stronghold of

the mountains. Once was I ta/ ken of the foemen in the town where I abode when my lord was away from me, and a huge slaughter of innocent folk was made, and I was cast into prison & chains, after I had seen my son that I had borne to my lord slain before mine eyes. At last we were driven clean out of the Kingdom of the Tower, & abode a long while, some two years, in the wilderness, living like outlaws & wolves' heads, and lifting the spoil for our livelihood ❧ forsooth of all the years that I abode about the Land of Tower those were the happiest. for we robbed no poor folk and needy, but rewarded them rather, and drave the spoil from rich men and lords, and hard/hearted chap/ men/folk: we ravished no maid of the tillers, we burned no cot, & taxed no husbandman's croft or acre, but defended them from their tyrants. Nevertheless we gat an ill name wide about through the kingdoms and cities; and were devils and witches to the boot of thieves and robbers in the mouths of these men; for when the rich man is hurt his wail goeth heavens high, and none may say he heareth not.

NOW it was at this time that I first fell in with the Champions of the Dry Tree; for they became our fellows & brothers in arms in the wildwood: for they had not as yet builded their stronghold of the Scaur, whereas thou & I shall be in two days' time ❧ Many a wild deed did our folk in their company, & many that had been better undone ❧ Whiles indeed they went on journeys wherein we were not partakers, as when they went to the North and harried the lands of the Abbot of Higham, & rode as far even as over the Downs to Bear Castle and fought a battle there with the Captain of Higham: whereas we went never out of the Wood Perilous to the northward; & lifted little save in the lands of our own proper foemen, the friends of the king.

NOW I say not of the men of the Dry Tree that they were good and peaceable men, neither would mercy hold their hands every while that they were hard bestead and thrust into a corner. Yet I say now and once for all that their fierceness was and is but kind/ ness and pity when set against the cruelty of the Burg of the four friths; men who have no friend to love, no broken foe to forgive, and can scarce be kind even to themselves: though forsooth they be wise men & cautelous and well living before the world, & wealthy and holy."

SHE stayed her speech a while, and her eyes glittered in her flushed face and she set her teeth; and she was as one beside herself till Ralph kissed her feet, and caressed her, and she went on again. "Dear friend, when thou knowest what these men are and have been thou wilt bless thy friend Roger for leading thee forth from the Burg by night and cloud, whatever else may happen to thee.

"Well, we abode in the wildwood, friends & good fellows from the first; and that young man, though he loved me ever, was somewhat healed of the fever of love, & was my faithful friend, in such wise that neither I nor my lord had aught to find fault with in him. Meanwhile we began to grow strong, for many joined us therein who had fled from their tyrants of the good towns & the manors of the baronage, and at last in the third year naught would please my lord but we must enter into the Kingdom of the Tower, and raise his banner in the wealthy land, and the fair cities. Moreover, his father, the King of the Tower, died in his bed in these days, and no word of love or peace had passed between them since that morning when I was led out to be burned in the Great Square.

SO we came forth from the forest, we, and the Champions of the Dry Tree; & made the tale a short one. For the king, the mighty warrior and wise man, was dead: and his captains of war, some of them were dead, and some weary of strife; & those who had been eager in debate were falling to ask themselves wherefore they had fought and what was to do that they should still be fighting; and lo! when it came to be looked into, it was all a matter of the life & death of one woman, to wit me myself, & why should she not live, why should she not sit upon the throne with the man who loved her?

Therefore when at last we came out from the twilight of the woods into the sunny fields of the Land of the Tower, there was no man to naysay us; nay the gates of the strong places flew open before the wind of our banners, and the glittering of our spears drew the folk together toward the places of rejoicing.

"We entered the master City in triumph, with the houses hung with green boughs and the maidens casting flowers before our feet, and I sat a crowned Queen on the throne high raised on the very place where erst I stood awaiting the coming of the torch to the fag-

gots which were to consume me.

THERE then began the reign of the Woman of the Waste; for so it was that my lord left to my hands the real ruling of the kingdom, though he wore the crown and set the seal to parchments. As to them of the Dry Tree, though some few of them abode in the kingdom, and became great there, the more part of them went back to the wildwood and lived the old life of the Wood, as we had found them living it aforetime. But or ever they went, the leaders of them came before me, and kissed my feet, and with tears and prayers besought me, and bade me that if aught fell amiss to me there, I should come back to them & be their Lady and Queen; and whereas these wild men loved me well, & I deemed that I owed much to their love and their helping, I promised them and swore to them by the Water of the Well at the World's End that I would do no less than they prayed me: albeit I set no term or year for the day that I would come to them.

AND now my lord and I, we set ourselves to heal the wounds which war had made in the land: and hard was the work, and late the harvest; so used had men become to turmoil and trouble. Moreover, there were many, & chiefly the women who had lost husband, lover, son, or brother, who laid all their griefs on my back; though forsooth how was I guilty of the old king's wrath against me, which was the cause of all? About this time my lord had the Castle of Abundance built up very fairly for me and him to dwell in at whiles; and indeed we had before that dwelt at a little manor house that was there, when we durst withdraw a little from the strife; but now he had it done as fair as ye saw it, and had those arras cloths made with the story of my sojourn in the wilderness, even as ye saw them. But the days & the years wore, and wealth came back to the mighty of the land, and the fields flourished and the acres bore increase, & fair houses were builded in the towns; and the land was called happy again.

BUT for me I was not so happy: & I looked back fondly to the days of the greenwood and the fellowship of the Dry Tree, and the days before that, of my flight with my lord. And moreover with the wearing of the years those murmurs against me & the blind causeless hatred began to grow again, and chiefly methinks because I was the

king, and my lord the king's cloak: but therewith tales concerning me began to spring up, how that I was not only a sorceress, but even one foredoomed from of old and sent by the lords of hell to wreck that fair Land of the Tower and make it unhappy and desolate. And the tale grew & gathered form, till now, when the bloom of my beauty was gone, I heard hard & fierce words cried after me in the streets when I fared abroad, and that still chiefly by the women: for yet most men looked on me with pleasure. Also my counsellors and lords warned me often that I must be wary and of great forbearance if trouble were to be held aback.

AND now amidst these things, as I was walking pensively in my garden one summer day, it was told me that a woman desired to see me, so I bade them bring her. And when she came I looked on her, & deemed that I had seen her aforetime: she was not old, but of middle age, of dark red hair, and brown eyes somewhat small: not a big woman, but well fashioned of body, and looking as if she had once been exceeding dainty and trim. She spake, and again I seemed to have heard her voice before: 'Hail, Queen,' she said, 'It does my heart good to see thee thus in thy glorious estate'. So I took her greeting; but those tales of my being but a sending of the Devil for the ruin of that land came into my mind, and I sent away the folk who were thereby before I said more to her. Then she spake again: 'Even so I guessed it would be that thou wouldst grow great amongst women'. But I said: 'What is this? & when have I known thee beforetime?'. She smiled and said naught; & my mind went back to those old days, and I trembled, and the flesh crept upon my bones, lest this should be the coming back in a new shape of my mistress whom I had slain. But the woman laughed, and said, as if she knew my thoughts: 'Nay, it is not so: the dead are dead; fear not: but hast thou forgotten the Dale of Lore?' 'Nay,' said I, 'never; and art thou then the carline that learned me lore? But if the dead come not back, how do the old grow young again? for 'tis a score of years since we two sat in the Dale, and I longed for many things'. Said the woman: 'The dead may not drink of the Well at the World's End; yet the living may, even if they be old; and that blessed water giveth them new might and changeth their blood, and they are as young

folk for a long while again after they have drunken' ❧ 'And hast thou drunken?' said I. ❧ 'Yea,' she said; 'but I am minded for another draught' ❧ I said: 'And wherefore hast thou come to me, and what shall I give to thee?' ❧ She said: 'I will take no gift of thee as now, for I need it not, though hereafter I may ask a gift of thee. But I am to ask this of thee, if thou wilt be my fellow-farer on the road thither?' ❧ 'Yea?' said I, 'and leave my love and my lord, & my kingship which he hath given me? for this I will tell thee, that all that here is done, is done by me' ❧ 'Great is thy kingship, Lady,' said the woman, and smiled withal. Then she sat silent a little, and said: 'When six months are worn, it will be springtide; I will come to thee in the spring days, and know what thy mind is then. But now I must depart' ❧ Quoth I: 'Glad shall I be to talk with thee again; for though thou hast learned me much of wisdom, yet much more I need; yea, as much as the folk here deem I have already' ❧ 'Thou shalt have no less,' said the woman ❧ Then she kissed my hands and went her ways, and I sat musing still for a long while: because for all my gains, and my love that I had been loved withal, & the greatness that I had gotten, there was as it were a veil of unhappiness wrapped round about my heart.

SO wore the months, & ere the winter had come befel an evil thing, for my lord, who had loved me so, and taken me out of the wilderness, died, and was gathered to the fathers, and there was I left alone; for there was no fruit of my womb by him alive. My first-born had been slain by those wretches, & a second son that I bore had died of a pestilence that war and famine had brought upon the land. I will not wear thy soul with words about my grief and sorrow: but it is to be told that I sat now in a perilous place, and yet I might not step down from it and abide in that land, for then it was a sure thing, that some of my foes would have laid hand on me & brought me to judgment for being but myself, and I should have ended miserably. So I gat to me all the strength that I might, and whereas there were many who loved me still, some for my own sake, & some for the sake of my lord that was, I endured in good hope that all my days were not done. Yet I longed for the coming of the Teacher of Lore; for now I made up my mind that I would go with her, and seek to the Well at the World's End for weal and woe.

SHE came while April was yet young: and I need make no long tale of how we gat us away: for whereas she was wise in hidden lore, it was no hard matter for her to give me another semblance than mine own, so that I might have walked about the streets of our city from end to end, and none had known me. So I vanished away from my throne and my kingdom, and that name and fame of a witch-wife clove to me once and for all, and spread wide about the cities of folk & the kingdoms; & many are the tales that have arisen concerning me, and belike some of these thou hast heard told."

RALPH reddened & said: "My soul has been vexed by some inkling of them; but now it is at rest from them for ever" "May it be so!" she said: "and now my tale is wearing thin for the present time.

BACK again went my feet over the ways they had trodden before, though the Teacher shortened the road much for us by her wisdom. Once again what need to tell thee of these ways when thine own eyes shall behold them as thou wendest them beside me? Be it enough to say that once again I came to that little house in the uttermost wilderness, and there once more was the garth and the goat-house, and the trees of the forest beyond it, and the wood-lawns and the streams and all the places and things that erst I deemed I must dwell amongst for ever."

SAID Ralph: "And did the carline keep troth with thee? Was she not but luring thee thither to be her thrall? Or did the book that I read in the Castle of Abundance but lie concerning thee?"

SHE held her troth to me in all wise," said the Lady, "and I was no thrall of hers, but as a sister, or it may be even as a daughter; for ever to my eyes was she the old carline who learned me lore in the Dale of the wildwood. But now a long while, years long, we abode in that House of the Sorceress ere we durst seek further to the Well at the World's End. And yet me seems though the years wore, they wore me no older; nay, in the first days at least I waxed stronger of body and fairer than I had been in the King's Palace in the Land of the Tower, as though some foretaste of the Well was there for us in the loneliness of the desert; although forsooth the abiding there amidst the scantiness of livelihood, and the nakedness, and the toil, and the torment of wind and weather were as a penance for the days and deeds of our past lives What more is to say

concerning our lives here, saving this, that in those days I learned yet more wisdom of the Teacher of Lore, & amidst that wisdom was much of that which ye call sorcery: as the foreseeing of things to come, and the sending of dreams or visions, and certain other matters. And I may tell thee that the holy man who came to us last even, I sent him the dream which came to him drowsing, and bade him come to the helping of Walter the Black: for I knew that I should take thy hand & flee with thee this morning e'en as I have done: and I would fain have a good leech to Walter lest he should die, although I owe him hatred rather than love. Now, my friend, tell me, is this an evil deed, and dost thou shrink from the Sorceress?" He strained her to his bosom & kissed her mouth, and then he said: "Yet thou hast never sent a dream to me." She laughed and said: "What! hast thou never dreamed of me since we met at the wantway of the Wood Perilous?" "Never," said he. She stroked his cheek fondly, and said: "Young art thou, sweet friend, & sleepest well a-nights. It was enough that thou thoughtest of me in thy waking hours." Then she went on with her tale.

Chapter VIII. The Lady maketh an end of her Tale

"WELL, my friend, after we had lived thus a long time, we set out one day to seek to the Well at the World's End, each of us signed & marked out for the quest by bearing such-like beads as thou and I both bear upon our necks to-day. Once again of all that befell us on that quest I will tell thee naught as now: because to that Well have I to bring thee: though myself, belike, I need not its waters again."

QUOTH Ralph: "And must thou lead me thy very self, mayest thou not abide in some safe place my going and returning? So many and sore as the toils and perils of the way may be." "What!" she said, "and how shall I be sundered from thee now I have found thee? Yea, & who shall lead thee, thou lovely boy? Shall it be a man to bewray thee, or a woman to bewray me? Yet need we not go to-morrow, my beloved, nor for many days: so sweet as we are to each other. But in those past days it was needs must we begin our quest before the burden of years was over heavy upon us. Shortly to say it, we

found the Well, and drank of its waters after abundant toil and peril, as thou mayst well deem. Then the life & the soul came back to us, and the past years were as naught to us, & my youth was renewed in me, and I became as thou seest me to-day. But my fellow was as a woman of forty summers again, strong and fair as I had seen her when she came into the garden in the days of my Queenhood, & thus we returned to the House of the Sorceress, and rested there for a little from our travel and our joy.

AT last, and that was but some five years ago, the Teacher said to me: 'Sister, I have learned thee all that thine heart can take of me, and thou art strong in wisdom, & moreover again shall it be with thee, as I told of thee long ago, that no man shall look on thee that shall not love thee. Now I will not seek to see thy life that is coming, nor what thine end shall be, for that should belike be grievous to both of us; but this I see of thee, that thou wilt now guide thy life not as I will, but as thou wilt; and since my way is not thy way, & that I see thou shalt not long abide alone, now shall we sunder; for I am minded to go to the most ancient parts of the world, and seek all the innermost of wisdom whiles I yet live; but with kings and champions and the cities of folk will I have no more to do: while thou shalt not be able to refrain from these. So now I bid thee farewell.' ❧ I wept at her words, but gainsaid them naught, for I wotted that she spake but the truth; so I kissed her, and we parted; she went her ways through the wildwood, and I abode at the House of the Sorceress, and waited on the wearing of the days.

BUT scarce a month after her departure, as I stood by the threshold one morning amidst of the goats, I saw men come riding from out the wood; so I abode them, & they came to the gate of the garth and there lighted down from their horses, and they were three in company; & no one of them was young, and one was old, with white locks flowing down from under his helm: for they were all armed in knightly fashion, but they had naught but white gaberdines over their hauberks, with no coat-armour or token upon them. So they came through the garth-gate and I greeted them & asked them what they would; then the old man knelt down on the grass before me and said: 'If I were as young as I am old, my heart would fail me in beholding thy beauty: but now I will ask thee some-

what: far away beyond the for-
est we heard rumours of a wo-
man dwelling in the uttermost
desert, who had drunk of the
Well at the World's End, and
was wise beyond measure. Now
we have set ourselves to seek
that woman, and if thou be
she, we would ask a question
of thy wisdom'. I answered
that I was even such as they
had heard of, and bade them
ask. Said the old man: 'fifty
years ago, when I was yet but
a young man, there was a fair
woman who was Queen of the
Land of the Tower and whom
we loved sorely because we had
dwelt together with her amidst
tribulation in the desert & the
wildwood: & we are not of her
people, but a fellowship of free
men and champions hight the
Men of the Dry Tree: and we
hoped that she would one day
come back & dwell with us and
be our Lady and Queen: and
indeed trouble seemed draw-
ing anigh her, so that we might
help her and she might become
our fellow again, when lo! she
vanished away from the folk
and none knew where she was
gone. Therefore a band of us
of the Dry Tree swore an oath
together to seek her till we
found her, that we might live
and die together: but of that
band of one score and one, am
I the last one left that seeketh;
for the rest are dead, or sick,
or departed: and indeed I was
the youngest of them. But for
these two men, they are my
sons whom I have bred in the
knowledge of these things &
in the hope of finding tidings
of our Lady & Queen, if it were
but the place where her body
lieth. Thou art wise: knowest
thou the resting place of her
bones?'

WHEN I had heard the
tale of the old man I
was moved to my in-
most heart, and I scarce knew
what to say. But now this long
while fear was dead in me, so I
thought I would tell the very
sooth: but I said first: 'Sir,
what I will tell, I will tell with-
out beseeching, so I pray thee
stand up'. So did he, and I
said: 'Geoffrey, what became
of the white hind after the ban-
ners had left the wildwood?'
He stared wild at me, and I
deemed that tears began to
come into his eyes; but I said
again: 'What betid to Dame
Joyce's youngest born, the
fair little maiden that we left
sick of a fever when we rode to
Up-castle?'. Still he said
naught, but looked at me won-
dering: and I said: 'Hast thou
ever again seen that great old
oak nigh the clearing by the
water, the half of which fell
away in the summer-storm of
that last July?'. Then verily
the tears gushed out of his

eyes, & he wept, for as old as he was; and when he could master himself he said: 'Who art thou? Who art thou? Art thou the daughter of my Lady, even as these are my sons?' But I said 'Now will I answer thy first question, and tell thee that the Lady thou seekest is verily alive; & she has thriven, for she has drunk of the Well at the World's End, & has put from her the burden of the years. O Geoffrey, and dost thou not know me?' And I held out my hand to him, & I also was weeping, because of my thought of the years gone by; for this old man had been that swain who had nigh died for me when I fled with my husband from the old king; & he became one of the Dry Tree, and had followed me with kind service about the woods in the days when I was at my happiest. But now he fell on his knees before me not like a vassal but like a lover, & kissed my feet, and was beside himself for joy. And his sons, who were men of some forty summers, tall and warrior-like, kissed my hands and made obeisance before me.

NOW when we had come to ourselves again, old Geoffrey, who was now naught but glad, spake & said: 'It is told amongst us that when our host departed from the Land of the Tower, after thou hadst taken thy due seat upon the throne, that thou didst promise our chieftains how thou wouldst one day come back to the fellowship of the Dry Tree & dwell amongst us. Wilt thou now hold to thy promise?' I said: 'O Geoffrey, if thou art the last of those seekers, and thou wert but a boy when I dwelt with you of old, who of the Dry Tree is left to remember me?' He hung his head awhile then, & spake: 'Old are we grown, yet art thou fittest to be amongst young folk: unless mine eyes are beguiled by some semblance which will pass away presently' 'Nay,' quoth I, 'it is not so; as I am now, so shall I be for many and many a day.' 'Well,' said Geoffrey, 'wherever thou mayst be, thou shalt be Queen of men.' 'I list not to be Queen again,' said I. He laughed and said: 'I wot not how thou mayst help it' I said: 'Tell me of the Dry Tree, how the champions have sped, & have they grown greater or less.' Said he: 'They are warriors and champions from father to son; therefore have they thriven not over well; yet they have left the thick of the wood, & built them a great castle above a little town hight Hampton; so that is now called Hampton under Scaur, for upon the height of the said Scaur

is our castle builded: and there we hold us against the Burg of the four friths which hath thriven greatly; there is none so great as the Burg in all the lands about' ❧ I said: 'And the Land of the Tower, thriveth the folk thereof at all?' ❧ 'Nay,' he said, 'they have been rent to pieces by folly and war and greediness: in the Great City are but few people, grass grows in its streets; the merchants wend not the ways that lead thither. Naught thriveth there since thou stolest thyself away from them' ❧ 'Nay,' I said, 'I fled from their malice, lest I should have been brought out to be burned once more; & there would have been none to rescue then' ❧ 'Was it so?' said old Geoffrey; 'well it is all one now; their day is done' ❧ 'Well,' I said, 'come into my house, and eat & drink therein & sleep here to-night, and to-morrow I shall tell thee what I will do.'

GEN so they did; and on the morrow early I spake to Geoffrey and said: 'What hath befallen the Land of Abundance, and the castle my lord built for me there; which we held as our refuge all through the War of the Tower, both before we joined us to you in the wildwood and afterwards?' ❧ He said: 'It is at peace still; no one hath laid hand on it; there is a simple folk dwelling there in the clearing of the wood, which forgetteth thee not; though forsooth strange tales are told of thee there; and the old men deem that it is but a little since thou hast ceased to come and go there; and they are ready to worship thee as somewhat more than the Blessed Saints, were it not for the fathers of the Thorn who are their masters.' I pondered this awhile, & then said: 'Geoffrey, ye shall bring me hence away to the peopled parts, and on the way, or when we are come amongst the cities and the kingdoms, we will settle it whither I shall go. See thou! I were fain to be of the brotherhood of the Dry Tree; yet I deem it will scarce be that I shall go and dwell there straightway' ❧ Therewith the old man seemed content; and indeed now that the first joy of our meeting, when his youth sprang up in him once more, was over, he found it hard to talk freely with me, & was downcast & shy before me, as if something had come betwixt us, which had made our lives cold to each other.

SO that day we left the house of the sorceress, which I shall not see again, till I come there hand in hand with thee, beloved. When we came to the peopled parts,

Geoffrey & his sons brought me to the Land of Abundance, & I found it all as he had said to me: and I took up my dwelling in the castle, & despised not those few folk of the land, but was kind to them: but though they prized my gifts, and honoured me as the saints are honoured, & though they loved me, yet it was with fear, so that I had little part with them. There I dwelt then; and the book which thou didst read there, part true and part false, and altogether of malice against me, I bought of a monk who came our way, and who at first was sore afeared when he found that he had come to my castle. As to the halling of the Chamber of Dais, I have told thee before how my lord, the King's Son, did do make it in memory of the wilderness wherein he found me, and the life of thraldom from which he brought me. There I dwelt till nigh upon these days in peace & quiet: nor did I go to the Dry Tree for a long while, though many of them sought to me there at the Castle of Abundance; and, woe worth the while! there was oftenest but one end to their guesting, that of all gifts, they besought me but of one, which, alack! I might not give them: and that is the love that I have given to thee, beloved. And, oh! my fear, that it will weigh too light with thee, to win me pardon of thee for all that thou must needs pardon me, ere thou canst give me all thy love, that I long for so sorely."

Chapter IX. They go on their way once more

"LOOK now," she said, "I have held thee so long in talk, that the afternoon is waning; now is it time for us to be on the way again; not because I misdoubt me of thy foeman, but because I would take thee to a fairer dwelling of the desert, and one where I have erst abided; & moreover, there thou shalt not altogether die of hunger. See, is it not as if I had thought to meet thee here?" "Yea, in good sooth," said he, "I wot that thou canst see the story of things before they fall"

She laughed and said: "But all this that hath befallen since I set out to meet thee at the Castle of Abundance I foresaw not, any more than I can foresee to-morrow. Only I knew that we must needs pass by the place whereto I shall now lead thee, & I made provision there. Lo! now the marvel slain: and in such wise shall perish other marvels which have been told

of me; yet not all. Come now, let us to the way."

SO they joined hands and left that pleasant place, & were again going speedily amidst the close pine-woods awhile, where it was smooth underfoot and silent of noises withal. Now Ralph said: "Beloved, thou hast told me of many things, but naught concerning how thou camest to be wedded to the Knight of the Sun, and of thy dealings with him". Said she, reddening withal: "I will tell thee no more than this, unless thou compel me: that he would have me wed him, as it were against my will, till I ceased striving against him, and I went with him to Sunway, which is no great way from the Castle of Abundance, and there befell that treason of Walter the Black, who loved me & prayed for my love, and when I gainsaid him, swore by all that was holy, before my lord, that it was I who sought his love, and how I had told & taught him ways of witchcraft, whereby we might fulfil our love, so that the Baron should keep a wife for another man. And the Knight of the Sun, whose heart had been filled with many tales of my wisdom, true and false, believed his friend whom he loved, and still believeth him, though he burneth for the love of me now; whereas in those first days of the treason he burned with love turned to hatred. So of this came that shaming & casting-forth of me. Whereof I will tell thee but this, that the brother of my lord, even the tall champion whom thou hast seen, came upon me presently, when I was cast forth; because he was coming to see the Knight of the Sun at his home; and he loved me, but not after the fashion of his brother, but was kind & mild with me. So then I went with him to Hampton and the Dry Tree, and a great joy made the folk thereof of my coming, whereas they remembered their asking of aforetime that I would come to be a Queen over them, & there have I dwelt ever since betwixt Hampton & the Castle of Abundance; & that tall champion has been ever as a brother unto me."

Said Ralph: "And thou art their Queen there?" "Yea," she said, "in a fashion; yet have they another who is mightier than I, and might, if she durst, hang me over the battlements of the Scaur, for she is a fierce and hard woman, and now no longer young in years". "Is it not so then," said Ralph, "that some of the ill deeds that are told of thee are of her doing?" "It is even so," she said, "& whiles, when she has spoken the word I may not be

against her openly, therefore I use my wisdom which I have learned, to set free luckless wights from her anger & malice. More by token the last time I did thus was the very night of the day we parted, after thou hadst escaped from the Burg."

"IN what wise was that?" said Ralph. She said: "When I rode away from thee on that happy day of my deliverance by thee, my heart laughed for joy of the life thou hadst given me, and of thee the giver, & I swore to myself that I would set free the first captive or death-doomed creature that I came across, in honour of my pleasure & delight: now speedily I came to Hampton & the Scaur; for it is not very far from the Want-ways of the wood; & there I heard how four of our folk had been led away by the men of the Burg, therefore it was clear to me that I must set these men free if I could; besides, it pleased me to think that I could walk about the streets of the foemen safely, who had just been led thitherward to the slaughter. Thou knowest how I sped therein. But when I came back again to our people, after thou hadst ridden away from us with Roger, I heard these tidings, that there was one new-come into our prison, a woman to wit, who had been haled before our old Queen for a spy & doomed by her, and should be taken forth & slain, belike, in a day or two. So I said to myself that I was not free of my vow as yet, because those friends of mine, I should in any case have done my best to deliver them: therefore I deemed my oath bound me to set that woman free. So in the night-tide when all was quiet I went to the prison and brought her forth, and led her past all the gates and wards, which was an easy thing to me, so much as I had learned, and came with her into the fields betwixt the thorp of Hampton & the wood, when it was more daylight than dawn, so that I could see her clearly, & no word as yet had we spoken to each other. But then she said to me: 'Am I to be slain here or led to a crueller prison?' And I said: 'Neither one thing nor the other: for lo! I have set thee free, and I shall look to it that there shall be no pursuit of thee till thou hast had time to get clear away'. But she said: 'What thanks wilt thou have for this? Wherefore hast thou done it?' And I said: 'It is because of the gladness I have gotten.' Said she: 'And would that I might get gladness!' So I asked her what was amiss now that she was free. She said: 'I have lost one thing that I loved, and found another & lost it also.'

So I said: 'Mightest thou not seek for the lost?' She said: 'It is in this wood, but when I shall find it I shall not have it.' 'It is love that thou art seeking,' said I. 'In what semblance is he?'

WHAT wilt thou, my friend? Straightway she fell to making a picture of thee in words; so that I knew that she had met thee, and belike after I had departed from thee, and my heart was sore thereat; for now I will tell thee the very truth, that she was a young woman & exceeding fair, as if she were of pearl all over, and as sweet as eglantine; and I feared her lest she should meet thee again in these wildwoods. And so I asked her what would she, and she said that she had a mind to seek to the Well at the World's End, which quencheth all sorrow; & I rejoiced thereat, thinking that she would be far away from thee, & deeming that thou and I must even meet to seek to it also. So I gave her the chaplet which my witch-mistress took from the dead woman's neck; and went with her into the wild wood, and taught her wisdom of the way and what she was to do. And again I say to thee that she was so sweet, and yet with a kind of pith in her both of soul and body, and wise withal and quiet, & I feared her, though I loved her; yea, and still do: for I deem her better than me, & meeter for thee & thy love than I be. Dost thou know her?"

YEA," said Ralph, "& fair & lovely she is in sooth. Yet hast thou naught to do to fear her. And true it is that I saw her and spake with her after thou hadst ridden away. for she came by the Wantways of the Wood Perilous in the dawn of the day after I had delivered thee; and in sooth she told me that she looked either for Death, or the Water of the Well to end her sorrow" Then he smiled and said: "As for that which thou sayest, that she had been meeter for me than thou, I know not this word. for look you, beloved, she came & passed, and is gone, but thou art here and shalt endure."

SHE stayed, and turned & faced him at that word; & love so consumed her, that all sportive words failed her; yea, and it was as if mirth & lightheartedness were swallowed up in the fire of her love; & all thought of other folk departed from him as he felt her tears of love and joy upon his face, & she kissed & embraced him there in the wilderness.

Chapter X. Of the Desert-House & the Chamber of Love in the Wilderness

THEN in a while they grew sober and went on their ways, & the sun was westering behind them, and casting long shadows. And in a little while they were come out of the thick woods & were in a country of steep little valleys, grassy, besprinkled with trees and bushes, with hills of sandstone going up from them, which were often broken into cliffs rising sheer from the tree-beset bottoms: & they saw plenteous deer both great and small, and the wild things seemed to fear them but little. To Ralph it seemed an exceeding fair land, & he was as joyous as it was fair; but the Lady was pensive, & at last she said: "Thou deemest it fair, and so it is; yet is it the lonesomest of deserts. I deem indeed that it was once one of the fairest of lands, with castles and cots and homesteads all about, and fair people no few, busy with many matters amongst them. But now it is all passed away, & there is no token of a dwelling of man, save it might be that those mounds we see, as yonder, and yonder again, are tofts of house-walls long ago sunken into the earth of the valley. And now few even are the hunters or way-farers that wend through it" Quoth Ralph: "Thou speakest as if there had been once histories and tales of this pleasant wilderness: tell me, has it anything to do with that land about the wide river which we went through, Roger and I, as we rode to the Castle of Abundance the other day? for he spoke of tales of deeds & mishaps concerning it." "Yea," she said, "so it is, & the little stream that runs yonder beneath those cliffs, is making its way towards that big river aforesaid, which is called the Swelling Flood. Now true it is also that there are many tales about of the wars and miseries that turned this land into a desert, & these may be true enough, and belike are true. But these said tales have become blended with the story of those aforesaid wars of the Land of the Tower; of which indeed this desert is verily a part, but was desert still in the days when I was Queen of the Land; so thou mayst well think that they who hold me to be the cause of all this loneliness (& belike Roger thought it was so) have scarce got hold of the very sooth of the matter." "Even so I deemed," said Ralph: "&

to-morrow we shall cross the big river, thou and I. Is there a ferry or a ford there whereas we shall come, or how shall we win over it?" She was growing merrier again now, & laughed at this & said: "O fair boy! the crossing will be to-morrow and not to-day; let to-morrow cross its own rivers; for surely to-day is fair enough, & fairer shall it be when thou hast been fed & art sitting by me in rest & peace till to-morrow morning. So now hasten yet a little more; & we will keep the said little stream in sight as well as we may for the bushes."

SO they sped on, till Ralph said: "Will thy feet never tire, beloved?" "O child," she said, "thou hast heard my story, & mayst well deem that they have wrought many a harder day's work than this day's. And moreover they shall soon rest; for look! yonder is our house for this even, & till to-morrow's sun is high: the house for me and thee & none else with us." And therewith she pointed to a place where the stream ran in a chain of pools & stickles, & a sheer cliff rose up some fifty paces beyond it, but betwixt the stream & the cliff was a smooth table of greensward, with three fair thorn bushes thereon, and it went down at each end to the level of the river's lip by a green slope, but amidmost, the said green plain was some ten feet above the stream, & was broken by a little undercliff, which went down sheer into the water. And Ralph saw in the face of the high cliff the mouth of a cave, however deep it might be.

COME," said the Lady, "tarry not, for I know that hunger hath hold of thee, and look, how low the sun is growing!" Then she caught him by the hand, and fell to running with him to the edge of the stream, where at the end of the further slope it ran wide and shallow before it entered into a deep pool overhung with boughs of alder and thorn. She stepped daintily over a row of big stones laid in the rippling shallow; and staying herself in midstream on the biggest of them, and gathering up her gown, looked up stream with a happy face, and then looked over her shoulder to Ralph and said: "The year has been good to me these seasons, so that when I stayed here on my way to the Castle of Abundance, I found but few stones washed away, & crossed wellnigh dry-shod, but this stone my feet are standing on now, I brought down from under the cliff, and set it amidmost, & I said that when I brought thee hither I would stay thereon and talk

with thee while I stood above the freshness of the water, as I am doing now."

RALPH looked on her & strove to answer her, but no words would come to his lips, because of the greatness of his longing; she looked on him fondly, & then stooped to look at the ripples that bubbled up about her shoes, and touched them at whiles; then she said: "See how they long for the water, these feet that have worn the waste so long, and know how kind it will run over them and lap about them: but ye must abide a little, waste-wearers, till we have done a thing or two. Come, love!" And she reached her hand out behind her to Ralph, not looking back, but when she felt his hand touch it, she stepped lightly over the other stones, & on to the grass with him, and led him quietly up the slope that went up to the table of greensward before the cave. But when they came on to the level grass she kissed him, and then turned toward the valley and spake solemnly: "May all blessings light on this House of the wilderness and this Hall of the Summertide, and the Chamber of Love that here is!"

THEN was she silent a while, and Ralph brake not the silence. Then she turned to him with a face grown merry and smiling, and said: "Lo! how the poor lad yearneth for meat, as well he may, so long as the day hath been. Ah, beloved, thou must be patient a little. For belike our servants have not yet heard of the wedding of us. So we twain must feed each the other. Is that so much amiss?" He laughed in her face for love, & took her by the wrist, but she drew her hand away and went into the cave, and came forth anon holding a copper kettle with'an iron bow, and a bag of meal, which she laid at his feet; then she went into the cave again, and brought forth a flask of wine and a beaker; then she caught up the little cauldron, which was well-beaten, & thin and light, and ran down to the stream therewith, and came up thence presently, bearing it full of water on her head, going as straight & stately as the spear is seen on a day of tourney, moving over the barriers that hide the knight, before he lays it in the rest. She came up to him & set the water-kettle before him, and put her hands on his shoulders, and kissed his cheek, and then stepped back from him and smote her palms together, and said: "Yea, it is well! But there are yet more things to do before we rest. There is the dighting of the

chamber, and the gathering of wood for the fire, and the mixing of the meal, and the kneading & the baking of the cakes; and all that is my work, & there is the bringing of the quarry for the roast, & that is thine." ❧ Then she ran into the cave and brought forth a bow and a quiver of arrows, & said: "Art thou somewhat of an archer?" Quoth he: "I shoot not ill." 'And I," she said, "shoot well, all woodcraft comes handy to me. But this eve I must trust to thy skill for my supper. Go swiftly & come back speedily. Do off thine hauberk, and beat the bushes down in the valley, and bring me some small deer, as roe or hare or coney. And wash thee in the pool below the stepping-stones, as I shall do whiles thou art away, & by then thou comest back, all shall be ready, save the roasting of the venison." ❧ So he did off his wargear, but thereafter tarried a little, looking at her, and she said: "What aileth thee not to go? the hunt's up." He said: "I would first go see the rock-hall that is for our chamber to-night; wilt thou not bring me in thither?" "Nay," she said, "for I must be busy about many matters; but thou mayst go by thyself, if thou wilt" ❧ So he went and stooped down and entered the cave, & found it high and wide within, & clean and fresh and well-smelling, and the floor of fine white sand without a stain.

SO he knelt down & kissed the floor, and said aloud: "God bless this floor of the rock-hall whereon my love shall lie to-night!" Then he arose and went out of the cave, & found the Lady at the entry stooping down to see what he would do; and she looked on him fondly and anxiously; but he turned a merry face to her, & caught her round the middle and strained her to his bosom, & then took the bow & arrows and ran down the slope & over the stream, into the thicket of the valley.

HE went further than he had looked for, ere he found a prey to his mind, and then he smote a roe with a shaft and slew her, and broke up the carcase & dight it duly, & so went his ways back. When he came to the stream he looked up and saw a little fire glittering not far from the cave, but had no clear sight of the Lady, though he thought he saw her gown fluttering nigh one of the thorn-bushes. Then he did off his raiment and entered that pool of the stream, and was glad to bathe him in the same place where her body had been but of late; for he had noted that the stones of the little shore were still wet with

her feet where she had gone up from the water.

BUT now, as he swam and sported in the sun-warmed pool he deemed he heard the whinnying of a horse but was not sure, so he held himself still to listen, & heard no more. Then he laughed and bethought him of falcon his own steed, & dived down under the water; but as he came up, laughing still and gasping, he heard a noise of the clatter of horse hoofs, as if some one were riding swiftly up the further side of the grassy table, where it was stony, as he had noted when they passed by. A deadly fear fell upon his heart as he thought of his love left all alone; so he gat him at once out of the water & cast his shirt over his head; but while his arms were yet entangled in the sleeves thereof, came to his ears a great and awful sound of a man's voice roaring out, though there were no shapen words in the roar. Then were his arms free through the sleeves, & he took up the bow and fell to bending it, and even therewith he heard a great wailing of a woman's voice, & she cried out, piteously: "Help me, O help, lovely creature of God!" Yet must he needs finish bending the bow, howsoever his heart died within him; or what help would there be of a naked & unarmed man? At last it was bent and an arrow nocked on the string, as he leapt over the river and up the slope.

BUT even as he came up on to that pleasant place he saw all in a moment of time; that there stood Silverfax anigh the Cave's mouth & the Lady lying on the earth anigh the horse; and betwixt her and him the Knight of the Sun stood up stark, his shining helm on his head, the last rays of the setting sun flashing in the broidered image of his armouries. He turned at once upon Ralph, shaking his sword in the air (and there was blood upon the blade) and he cried out in a terrible voice: "The witch is dead, the whore is dead! And thou, thief, who hast stolen her from me, and lain by her in the wilderness, now shalt thou die, thou!" Scarce had he spoken than Ralph drew his bow to the arrow-head & loosed; there was but some twenty paces betwixt them, and the shaft, sped by that fell archer, smote the huge man through the eye into the brain, and he fell down along clattering, dead without a word more.

BUT Ralph gave forth a great wail of woe, and ran forward & knelt by the Lady, who lay all huddled

up face down upon the grass, and he lifted her up & laid her gently on her back. The blood was flowing fast from a great wound in her breast & he tore off a piece of his shirt to staunch it, but she, without knowledge of him, breathed forth her last breath ere he could touch the hurt, and he still knelt by her, staring on her as if he knew not what was toward. She had dight her what she could to welcome his return from the hunting, and had set a wreath of meadow-sweet on her red hair, and a garland of eglantine about her girdle-stead, & left her feet naked after the pool of the stream, and had turned the bezels of her finger-rings outward, for joy of that meeting. After a while he rose up with a most bitter cry, and ran down the green slope & over the water, and hither and thither amongst the bushes like one mad, till he became so weary that he might scarce go or stand for weariness. Then he crept back again to that Chamber of Love and sat down beside his new-won mate, calling to mind all the wasted words of the day gone by; for the summer night was come now, most fair & fragrant. But he withheld the sobbing passion of his heart and put forth his hand, & touched her, and she was still, and his hand felt her flesh that it was cold as marble. And he cried out aloud in the night and the wilderness, where there was none to hear him, and arose & went away from her, passing by Silverfax who was standing nearby, stretching out his head, & whinnying at whiles. And he sat on the edge of the green table, & there came into his mind despite himself, thoughts of the pleasant fields of Upmeads and his sports and pleasures there, and the evensong of the High House, and the folk of his fellowship & his love. And therewith his breast arose and his face was wryed, & he wept loud and long, & as if he should never make an end of it. But so weary was he, that at last he lay back and fell asleep, and woke not till the sun was high in the heavens. And so it was, that his slumber had been so heavy, that he knew not at first what had befallen; and one moment he felt glad, and the next as if he should never be glad again, though why he wotted not. Then he turned about and saw Silverfax cropping the grass nearby, & the Lady lying there like an image that could move no whit, though the world awoke about her. Then he remembered, yet scarce all, so that wild hopes swelled his heart, and he rose to his knees and turned to her, & called to mind that he should never see her a-

live again, and sobbing & wailing broke out from him, for he was young and strong, & sorrow dealt hardly with him.

BUT presently he arose to his feet and went hither & thither, and came upon the quenched coals of the cooking fire: she had baked cakes for his eating, and he saw them lying thereby, and hunger constrained him, so he took & ate of them while the tears ran down his face and mingled with the bread he ate. And when he had eaten, he felt stronger, & therefore was life more grievous to him, & when he thought what he should do, still one thing seemed more irksome than the other.

HE went down to the water to drink, and passed by the body of the Knight of the Sun, and wrath was fierce in his heart against him who had overthrown his happiness. But when he had drunk and washed hands and face he came back again, and hardened his heart to do what he must needs do. He took up the body of the Lady, and with grief that may not be told of, he drew it into the cave, and cut boughs of trees & laid them over her face and all her body, & then took great stones from the scree at that other end of the little plain, and heaped them upon her till she was utterly hidden by them. Then he came out on to the green place and looked on the body of his foe, and said to himself that all must be decent and in order about the place whereas lay his love. And he came and stood over the body and said: "I have naught to do to hate him now: if he hated me, it was but for a little while, & he knew naught of me. So let his bones be covered up from the wolf and the kite. Yet shall they not lie along side of her. I will raise a cairn above him here on this fair little plain which he spoilt of all joy." Therewith he fell to & straightened his body, & laid his huge limbs together and closed his eyes and folded his arms over his breast; and then he piled the stones above him, & went on casting them on the heap a long while after there was need thereof.

RALPH had taken his raiment from the streamside and done them on before this, and now he did on helm and hauberk, and girt his sword to his side. Then as he was about leaving the sorrowful place, he looked on Silverfax, who had not strayed from the little plain, and came up to him and did off saddle & bridle, and laid them within the cave, & bade the beast go whither he would. He yet lingered about the place, & looked all around him and found nought to help

him, & could frame in his mind no intent of a deed then, nor any tale of a deed he should do thereafter. Yet belike in his mind were two thoughts, and though neither softened his grief save a little, he did not shrink from them as he did from all others; and these two were of his home at Upmeads, which was so familiar to him, and of the Well at the World's End, which was but a word.

Chapter XI. Ralph cometh out of the Wilderness

LONG he stood letting these thoughts run through his mind, but at last when it was now mid-morning, he stirred & gat him slowly down the green slope, & for very pity of himself the tears brake out from him as he crossed the stream and came into the bushy valley. There he stayed his feet a little, and said to himself: "And whither then am I going?" He thought of the Castle of Abundance and the Champions of the Dry Tree, of Higham, and the noble warriors who sat at the Lord Abbot's board, and of Upmeads & his own folk: but all seemed naught to him, & he thought: "And how can I go back and bear folk asking me curiously of my wayfarings, & whether I will do this, that, or the other thing." Withal he thought of that fair damsel and her sweet mouth in the hostelry at Bourton Abbas, and groaned when he thought of love and its ending, & he said within himself: "And now she is a wanderer about the earth as I am"; and he thought of her quest, and the chaplet of dame Katherine, his gossip, which he yet bore on his neck, & he deemed that he had naught to choose but to go forward and seek that he was doomed to; and now it seemed to him that there was that one thing to do and no other. And though this also seemed to him but weariness & grief, yet whereas he had ever lightly turned him to doing what work lay ready to hand, so now he knew that he must first of all get him out of that wilderness, that he might hear the talk of folk concerning the Well at the World's End, which he doubted not to hear again when he came into the parts inhabited.

SO now, with his will or without it, his feet bore him on, and he followed up the stream which the Lady had said ran into the broad river called the Swelling Flood; "for," thought he, "when I come thereabout I shall presently find some castle or good town, & it is like that either I shall have some tidings of the folk thereof, or else they will

compel me to do something, & that will irk me less than doing deeds of mine own will" He went his ways till he came to where the wood & the trees ended, and the hills were lower and longer, well grassed with short grass, a down-country fit for the feeding of sheep; and indeed some sheep he saw, and a shepherd or two, but far off. At last, after he had left the stream awhile, because it seemed to him to turn & wind round over much to the northward, he came upon a road running athwart the down-country, so that he deemed that it must lead one way down to the Swelling flood; so he followed it up, and after a while began to fall in with folk; and first two Companions armed & bearing long swords over their shoulders: he stopped as they met, & stared them in the face, but answered not their greeting; and they had no will to meddle with him, seeing his inches, & that he was well armed, & looked no craven: so they went on. Next he came on two women who had with them an ass between two panniers, laden with country stuff; & they were sitting by the wayside, one old & the other young. He made no stay for them, and though he turned his face their way, took no heed of them more than if they were trees; though the damsel, who was well-liking & somewhat gaily clad, stood up when she saw his face anigh, and drew her gown skirt about her & moved daintily, & sighed and looked after him as he went on, for she longed for him Yet again came two men a-horseback, merchants clad goodly, with three carles, their servants, riding behind them; and all these had weapons and gave little more heed to him than he to them. But a little after they were gone, he stopped & said within himself: "Maybe I had better have gone their way, and this road doubtless leadeth to some place of resort" But even therewith he heard horsehoofs behind him, & anon came up a man a-horseback, armed with jack and sallet, a long spear in his hand, & budgets at his saddle-bow, who looked like some lord's man going a message. He nodded to Ralph, who gave him good-day; for seeing these folk & their ways had by now somewhat amended his mind; & now he turned not, but went on as before. At last the way clomb a hill longer and higher than any he had yet crossed, & when he had come to the brow and looked down, he saw the big river close below running through the wide valley which he had crossed with Roger on that other day Then he sat

down on the green bank above the way, so heavy of heart that not one of the things he saw gave him any joy, & the world was naught to him. But within a while he came somewhat to himself, &, looking down toward the river he saw that where the road met it, it was very wide, & shallow withal, for the waves rippled merrily, and glittered in the afternoon sun, though there was no wind; moreover, the road went up white from the water on the other side, so he saw clearly that this was the ford of a highway. The valley was peopled withal: on the other side of the river was a little thorp, and there were cots and sheds scattered about the hither side, and sheep and neat feeding in the meadows, and in short it was another world from the desert.

Chapter XII. Ralph falleth in with friends and rideth to Whitwall

RALPH looks on to the ford and sees folk riding on through the thorp aforesaid and down to the river, and they take the water & are many in company, some two score by his deeming, and he sees the sun glittering on their weapons.

Now he thought that he would abide their coming and see if he might join their company, since if he crossed the water he would be on the backward way: & it was but a little while ere the head of them came up over the hill, & were presently going past Ralph, who rose up to look on them, & be seen of them, but they took little heed of him. So he sees that though they all bore weapons, they were not all men-at-arms, nay, not more than a half score, but those proper men enough.

Of the others, some half-dozen seemed by their attire to be merchants, and the rest their lads; and withal they had many sumpter horses & mules with them. They greeted him not, nor he them, nor did he heed them much till they were all gone by save three, & then he leapt into the road with a cry, for who should be riding there but Blaise, his eldest brother, and Richard the Red with him, both in good case by seeming; for Blaise was clad in a black coat welted with gold, and rode a good grey palfrey, and Richard was armed well & knightly.

THEY knew him at once, & drew rein, and Blaise lighted down from his horse and cast his arms about Ralph, & said: "O happy day! when two of the Upmeads kindred meet thus in an alien land! But what maketh thee here,

Ralph? I thought of thee as merry and safe in Upmeads?" Ralph said smiling, for his heart leapt up at the sight of his kindred: "Nay, must I not seek adventures like the rest? So I stole myself away from father and mother." "Ill done, little lord!" said Blaise, stroking Ralph's cheek. Then up came Richard, & if Blaise were glad, Richard was twice glad, & quoth he: "Said I not, Lord Blaise, that this chick would be the hardest of all to keep under the coop? Welcome to the Highways, Lord Ralph! But where is thine horse? and whence and whither is it now? Hast thou met with some foil and been held to ransom?"

Ralph found it hard & grievous, and dull work to answer; for now again his sorrow had taken hold of him: so he said: "Yea, Richard, I have had adventures, and have lost rather than won; but at least I am a free man, and have spent but little gold on my loss."

"That is well," said Richard, "but whence gat ye any gold for spending?" Ralph smiled, but sadly, for he called to mind the glad setting forth and the kind face of dame Katherine his gossip, and he said: "Clement Chapman deemed it not unmeet to stake somewhat on my luck, therefore I am no pauper".

"Well," said Blaise, "if thou hast no great errand elsewhere, thou mightest ride with us, brother. I have had good hap in these days, though scarce kingly or knightly, for I have been buying and selling: what matter? few know Upmeads and its kings to wite me with fouling a fair name. Richard, go fetch a horse hither for Lord Ralph's riding, and we will tarry no longer."

So Richard trotted on, & while they abode him, Ralph asked after his brethren, and Blaise told him that he had seen or heard naught of them. Then Ralph asked of whither away, & Blaise told him to Whitwall, where was much recourse of merchants from many lands, and a noble market.

Back then cometh Richard leading a good horse while Ralph was pondering his matter, and thinking that at such a town he might well hear tidings concerning the Well at the World's End.

NOW Ralph mounts, & they all ride away together. On the way, partly for brotherhood's sake, partly that he might not be questioned overmuch himself, Ralph asked Blaise to tell him more of his farings: & Blaise said, that when he had left Upmeads he had ridden with Richard up & down and round about, till he came to a rich town which had just been tak-

en in war, and that the Companions who had conquered it were looking for chapmen to cheapen their booty, and that he was the first, or nearly the first, to come who had will and money to buy, and the Companions, who were eager to depart, had sold him thieves' penny-worths: wherefore his share of the Upmeads treasure had gone far; and thence he had gone to another good town where he had the best of markets for his newly cheapened wares, and had bought more there, such as he deemed handy to sell, and so had gone from town to town, and had ever thriven, and had got much wealth: and so at last having heard tell of Whitwall as better for chaffer than all he had yet seen, he and other chapmen had armed them, & waged men-at-arms to defend them, and so tried the adventure of the wildwoods, and come safe through.

THEN at last came the question to Ralph concerning his adventures, and he enforced himself to speak, and told all as truly as he might, without telling of the Lady and her woeful ending. Thus they gave & took in talk, and Ralph did what he might to seem like other folk, that he might nurse his grief in his own heart as far asunder from other men as might be. So they rode on till it was even, and came to Whitwall before the shutting of the gates and rode into the street, and found it a fair and great town, well defensible, with high and new walls, and men-at-arms good store to garnish them. Ralph rode with his brother to the hostel of the chapmen, & there they were well lodged.

Chapter XIII. Richard talketh with Ralph concerning the Well at the World's End. Concerning Swevenham

ON the morrow Blaise went to his chaffer and to visit the men of the Port at the Guildhall: he bade Ralph come with him, but he would not, but abode in the hall of the hostel and sat pondering sadly while men came and went; but he heard no word spoken of the Well at the World's End. In like wise passed the next day and the next, save that Richard was among those who came into the hall, and he talked long with Ralph at whiles; that is to say that he spake, & Ralph made semblance of listening.

NOW as is aforesaid Richard was old & wise, & he loved Ralph much

more belike than Lord Blaise his proper master, whereas he had no mind for chaffer, or aught pertaining to it: so he took heed of Ralph and saw that he was sad and weary-hearted; so on the sixth day of their abiding at Whitwall, in the morning when all the chapmen were gone about their business, and he and Ralph were left alone in the Hall, he spake to Ralph & said: "This is no prison, lord." "Even so," quoth Ralph. "Nay, if thou doubtest it," said Richard, "let us go to the door and try if they have turned the key and shot the bolt on us." Ralph smiled faintly & stood up, & said: "I will go with thee if thou willest it, but sooth to say I shall be but a dull fellow of thine to-day." Said Richard: "Wouldst thou have been better yesterday, lord, or the day before?" "Nay," said Ralph. "Wilt thou be better to-morrow?" said Richard. Ralph shook his head. Said Richard: "Yea, but thou wilt be, or thou mayst call me a fool else." "Thou art kind, Richard," said Ralph; "and I will come with thee, & do what thou biddest me; but I must needs tell thee that my heart is sick." "Yea," quoth Richard, "& thou needest not tell me so much, dear youngling; he who runs might read that in thee. But come forth."

So into the street they went, & Richard brought Ralph into the market-place, and showed him where was Blaise's booth (for he was thriving greatly) but Ralph would not go anigh it lest his brother should entangle him in talk; and they went into the Guildhall, which was both great & fair, & the smell of the new-shaven oak (for the roof was not yet painted) brought back to Ralph's mind the days of his childhood when he was hanging about the building of the water-reeve's new house at Upmeads. Then they went in-to the Great Church and heard a Mass at the altar of St. Nicholas, Ralph's very friend; and the said church was great to the letter, and very goodly, and somewhat new also, since the blossom-tide of Whitwall was not many years old: and the altars of its chapels were beyond any thing for fairness that Ralph had seen save at Higham on the Way.

But when they came forth from the church, Ralph looked on Richard with a face that was both blank and weary, as who should say: "What is to do now?" And forsooth so woe-begone he looked, that Richard, despite his sorrow and trouble for him, could scarce withhold his laughter. But he said: "Well, foster son (for thou art pretty

much that to me), since the good town pleasureth thee lit/tle, go we further afield" ❧ So he led him out of the mar-ket/place, and brought him to the east gate of the town which hight Petergate Bar, & forth they went & out into the mea-dows under the walls, & stayed him at a little bridge over one of the streams, for it was a land of many waters; there they sat down in a nook, & spake Rich/ard to Ralph, saying:

LORD Ralph, ill it were if the Upmeads kin-dred came to naught, or even to little. Now as for my own master Blaise, he hath, so please you, the makings of a noble chapman, but not of a noble knight; though he say-eth that when he is right rich he will cast aside all chaffer; naught of which he will do. As for the others, my lord Gre-gory is no better, or indeed worse, save that he shall not be rich ever, having no mastery over himself; while lord Hugh is like to be slain in some emp/ty brawl, unless he come back speedily to Upmeads." "Yea, yea," said Ralph, "what then? I came not hither to hear thee missay my mother's sons." But Richard went on: "As for thee, lord Ralph, of thee I look/ed for something; but now I cannot tell; for the heart in thee seemeth to be dead; and thou must look to it lest the body die also." "So be it!" said Ralph. ❧ Said Richard: "I am old now, but I have been young, and many things have I seen and suffered, ere I came to Up/meads. Old am I, and I cannot feel certain hopes and griefs as a young man can; yet have I bought the knowledge of them dear enough, and have not for-gotten. Whereby I wot well that thy dreariihead is concerning a woman. Is it not so?" "Yea," quoth Ralph. Said Richard: "Now shalt thou tell me there/of, and so lighten thine heart a little." "I will not tell thee," said Ralph; "or, rather, to speak more truly, I cannot" ❧ "Yea," said Richard, "and though it were now an easier thing for me to tell thee of the griefs of my life than for thee to hearken to the tale, yet I believe thee. But mayhappen thou mayst tell me of one thing that thou desirest more than another" ❧ Said Ralph: "I desire to die." And the tears started in his eyes therewith. But Richard spake, smiling on him kindly: "That way is open for thee on any day of the week. Why hast thou not taken it al-ready?" But Ralph answered naught. ❧ Richard said: "Is it not because thou hopest to de/sire something; if not to/day, then to/morrow, or the next day, or the next?" Still Ralph

spake no word; but he wept. Quoth Richard: "Maybe I may help thee to a hope, though thou mayest think my words wild. In the land and the thorp where I was born & bred there was talk now & again of a thing to be sought, which should cure sorrow, & make life blossom in the old, & uphold life in the young." "Yea," said Ralph, looking up from his tears, "& what was that? and why hast thou never told me thereof before?" "Nay," said Richard, "and why should I tell it to the merry lad I knew in Upmeads? but now thou art a man, and hast seen the face of sorrow, it is meet that thou shouldest hear of THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END."

RALPH sprang to his feet as he said the word, and cried out eagerly: "Old friend, and where then wert thou bred & born?" Richard laughed and said: "See, then, there is yet a deed and a day betwixt thee & death! But turn about and look straight over the meadows in a line with yonder willow-tree, and tell me what thou seest." Said Ralph: "The fair plain spreading wide, and a river running through it, & little hills beyond the water, and blue mountains beyond them, and snow yet lying on the tops of them, though the year is in young July." "Yea," quoth Richard; and seest thou on the first of the little hills beyond the river a great grey tower rising up and houses anigh it?" "Yea," said Ralph, "the tower I see, & the houses, for I am far-sighted; but the houses are small." "So it is," said Richard; "now yonder tower is of the Church of Swevenham, which is under the invocation of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; & the houses are the houses of the little town. And what has that to do with me? sayest thou: why this, that I was born & bred at Swevenham. And indeed I it was who brought my lord Blaise here to Whitwall, with tales of how good a place it was for chaffer, that I might see the little town and the great grey tower once more. Forsooth I lied not, for thy brother is happy here, whereas he is piling up the coins one upon the other. Forsooth thou shouldest go into his booth, fair lord; it is a goodly sight."

BUT Ralph was walking to and fro hastily, & he turned to Richard & said: "Well, well! but why dost thou not tell me more of the Well at the World's End?" Said Richard: "I was going to tell thee somewhat which might be worth thy noting; or might not be worth it: hearken! When I dwelt at Swevenham over yon-

der, and was but of eighteen winters, who am now of three score and eight, three folk of our township, two young men and one young woman, set out thence to seek the said Well: & much lore they had concerning it, which they had learned of an old man, a nigh kinsman of one of them. This ancient carle I had seldom seen, for he dwelt in the mountains a way off, and these men were some five years older than I, so that I was a boy when they were men grown; & such things I heeded not, but rather sport and play; and above all, I longed for the play of war & battle. God wot I have had my bellyful of it since those days! Howbeit I mind me the setting forth of these three. They had a sumpter-ass with them for their livelihood on the waste; but they went afoot crowned with flowers, and the pipe and tabour playing before them, & much people brought them on the way. By St. Christopher! I can see it all as if it were yesterday. I was sorry of the departure of the damsel; for though I was a boy, I had loved her, & she had suffered me to kiss her and toy with her; but it was soon over. Now I call to mind that they had prayed our priest, Sir Cyprian, to bless them on their departure, but he naysaid them; for he held that such a quest came of the inspiration of the devil, and was but a memory of the customs of the ancient gentiles & heathen. But as to me, I deemed it naught, & was sorry that my white-bosomed, sweet-breathed friend should walk away from me thus into the clouds."

"WHAT came of it?" said Ralph, "did they come back, or any of them?" "I wot not," said Richard, "for I was weary of Swevenham after that, so I girt myself to a sword and laid a spear upon my shoulder and went my ways to the Castle of the Waste March, sixty miles from Swevenham town, & the Baron took me in and made me his man: and almost as little profit were in my telling thee again of my deeds there, as there was in my doing them: but the grey tower of Swevenham I have never seen again till this hour". Said Ralph: "Now then it behoveth me to go to Swevenham straightway: wilt thou come with me? it seemeth to be but some four miles hence."

RICHARD held his peace and knit his brows as if pondering the matter, & Ralph abided till he spake: so he said: "Foster-son, so to call thee, thou knowest the manner of up-country carles, that tales flow forth from them the bet-

ter if they come without over much digging & hoeing of the ground; that is, without questioning; so meseems better it will be if I go to Swevenham alone, and better if I be asked to go, than if I go of myself. Now to-morrow is Saturday, and high market in Whitwall; & I am not so old but that it is likeliest that there will be some of my fellows alive and on their legs in Swevenham: & if such there be, there will be one at the least in the market to-morrow, and I will be there to find him out: & then it will go hard if he bring me not to Swevenham as a well-beloved guest; & when I am there, and telling my tidings, & asking them of theirs, if there be any tales concerning the Well at the World's End working in their bellies, then shall I be the midwife to bring them to birth. Ha? Will it do?"

"Yea," said Ralph, "but how long wilt thou be?" Said Richard: "I shall come back speedily if I find the land barren; but if the field be in ear I shall tarry to harvest it. So keep thou thy soul in patience." "And what shall I do now?" said Ralph. "Wear away the hours," said Richard. "And to begin with, come back within gates with me and let us go look at thy brother's booth in the market-place: it is the nethermost of a goodly house which he is minded to dwell in; and he will marry a wife and sit down in Whitwall, so well he seemeth like to thrive; for they have already bidden him to the freedom of the city, and to be a brother of the faring-Knights, whereas he is not only a stirring man, but of good lineage also: for now he hideth not that he is of the Upmeads kindred."

Chapter XIV. Ralph falleth in with another old friend

RALPH went with Richard now without more words, & they came into the market-place & unto Blaise's booth and house, which was no worse than the best in the place; and the painters and stainers were at work on the upper part of it to make it as bright & goodly as might be with red and blue and green and gold, and all fair colours, and already was there a sign hung out of the fruitful tree by the water-side. As for the booth, it was full within of many wares & far-fetched and dear-bought things; as pieces of good & fine cloth plumbed with the seal of the greatest of the cities; and silk of Babylon, and spices of the hot burning islands, & wonders of the silversmith's & the goldsmith's fashioning, and fair-wrought

weapons & armour of the best, & every thing that a rich chapman may deal in. And amidst of it all stood Blaise clad in fine black cloth welted with needle work, and a gold chain about his neck. He was talking with three honourable men of the Port, and they were doing him honour with kind words and the bidding of help. When he saw Ralph & Richard come in, he nodded to them, as to men whom he loved, but were beneath him in dignity, & left not talking with the great men. Richard grinned a little thereat, as also did Ralph in his heart; for he thought: "Here then is one of the Upmeads kin provided for, so that soon he may buy with his money two domains as big as Upmeads and call them his manors."

NOW Ralph looks about him, and presently he sees a man come forward to meet him from the innermost of the booth, and lo! there was come Clement Chapman. His heart rose at the sight of him, and he thought of his kind gossip till he could scarce withhold his tears. But Clement came to him and cast his arms about him & kissed him, and said: "Thou shalt pardon me for this, lord, for it is the kiss of the gossip which she bade me give thee, if I fell in with thee, as now I have, praised be the Saints! Yet it irks me that I shall see little more of thee at this time, for to-morrow early I must needs join myself to my company; for we are going south awhile to a good town some fifty miles hence. Nevertheless, if thou dwellest here some eight days I shall see thee again belike, since thereafter I get me eastward on a hard and long journey not without peril. How sayest thou?" "I wot not," quoth Ralph, looking at Richard. Said Richard: "Thou mayst wot well, master Clement, that my lord is anhungered of the praise of the folks, and is not like to abide in a mere merchant-town till the mould grow on his back" "Well, well," said Clement, "however that may be, I have now done my matters with this cloth-lord, Blaise, and he has my florins in his pouch: so will not ye twain come with me and drink a cup till he hath done his talk with these magnates?" Ralph was nothing loth, for besides that he loved Master Clement, & that his being in company was like having a piece of his home anigh him, he hoped to hear some tidings concerning the Well at the World's End.

SO he & Ralph went with master Clement to the Christopher, a fair alehouse over against the Great

Church, and sat down to good wine; and Ralph asked of Clement many things concerning dame Katherine his gossip, & Clement told him all, and that she was well, and had been to Upmeads, and had seen King Peter & the mother of Ralph; and how she had assuaged his mother's grief at his departure by forecasting fair days for her son. All this Ralph heard gladly, though he was somewhat shamefaced withal, & sat silent and thinking of many matters. But Richard took up the word & said: "Which way camest thou from Wulstead, Master Clement?" "The nighest way I came," said Clement, "through the Wood Perilous." Said Richard: "And they of the Dry Tree, heardest thou aught of them?" "Yea, certes," quoth Clement, "for I fell in with their Bailiff, and paid him due scot for the passage of the Wood; he knoweth me withal, and we talked together." "And had he any tidings to tell thee of the champions?" said Richard. Said Clement: "Great tidings maybe, how that there was a rumour that they had lost their young Queen and Lady; and if that be true, it will go nigh to break their hearts, so sore as they loved her. And that will make them bitter & fierce, till their grief has been slaked by the blood of men. And that the more as their old Queen abideth still, and she herself is ever of that mind."

RALPH hearkened, and his heart was wounded that other men should speak of his beloved: but he heard how Richard said: "Hast thou ever known why that company of champions took the name of the Dry Tree?"

"Why, who should know that, if thou knowest it not, Richard of Swevenham?" said Clement: "Is it not by the token of the Dry Tree that standeth in the lands on the hither side of the Wall of the World?" Richard nodded his head; but Ralph cried out: "O Master Clement, & hast thou seen it, the Wall of the World?" "Yea, afar off, my son," said he; "or what the folk with me called so; as to the Dry Tree, I have told thee at Wulstead that I have seen it not, though I have known men who have told me that they have seen it." "And must they who find the Well at the World's End come by the Dry Tree?" "Yea, surely," said Clement. Quoth Richard: "And thus have some heard, who have gone on that quest, & they have heard of the Champions of Hampton, & have gone thither, being deceived by that name of the Dry Tree, and whiles have been slain by the champions, whiles have entered their company."

"Yea," said Clement, "so it is that their first error hath ended their quest. But now, lord Ralph, I will tell thee one thing; to wit, that when I return hither after eight days wearing, I shall be wending east, as I said e'en now, & what will that mean save going somewhat nigher to the Wall of the World; for my way lieth beyond the mountains that ye see from hence, & beyond the mountains that lie the other side of those; and I bid thee come with us, & I will be thy warrant that so far thou shalt have no harm: but when thou hast come so far, & hast seen three very fair cities, besides towns and castles and thorps and strange men, and merchandize, God forbid that thou shouldest wend further, & so cast away thy young life for a gay-coloured cloud. Then will be the time to come back with me, that I may bring thee through the perils of the way to Wulstead, and Upmeads at the last, and the folk that love thee" Richard held his peace at this word, but Ralph said: "I thank thee, Master Clement for thy love and thy helping hand; and will promise thee to abide thee here eight days at the least; and meanwhile I will ponder the matter well."

Chapter XV. Ralph dreams a Dream or sees a Vision

THEREWITHAL they parted after more talk concerning small matters, & Ralph wore through the day but Richard again did him to wit, that on the morrow he would find his old friends of Swevenham in the Market. And Ralph was come to life again more than he had been since that evil hour in the desert; though hard and hard he deemed it that he should never see his love again.

NOW as befalleth young men, he was a good sleeper, and dreamed but seldom, save such light & empty dreams as he might laugh at, if perchance he remembered them by then his raiment was on him in the morning. But that night himseemed that he awoke in his chamber at Whitwall, and was lying on his bed, as he verily was, and the door of the chamber opened, and there entered quietly the Lady of the Woodland, dight even as he had seen her as she lay dead beside their cooking fire on that table of greensward in the wilderness, barefoot and garlanded about her brow and her girdlestead, but fair and fresh coloured as

she was before the sword had pierced her side; & he thought that he rejoiced to see her, but no wild hope rose in his heart, & no sobbing passion blinded his eyes, nor did he stretch out hand to touch her, because he remembered that she was dead. But he thought she spake to him & said: "I know that thou wouldest have me speak, therefore I say that I am come to bid thee farewell, since there was no farewell between us in the wilderness, & I know that thou art about going on a long and hard and perilous journey: and I would that I could kiss thee and embrace thee, but I may not, for this is but the image of me as thou hast known me. Furthermore, as I loved thee when I saw thee first, for thy youth, and thy fairness, & thy kindness and thy valiancy, so now I rejoice that all this shall endure in thee, as it surely shall."

THEN the voice ceased, but still that image stood before him awhile, and he wondered if she would speak again, & tell him aught of the way to the Well at the World's End; and she spake again: "Nay," she said, "I cannot, since we may not tread the way together hand in hand; and this is a part of the loss that thou hast had of me; and oh! but it is hard & hard."

And her face became sad and distressful, & she turned and departed as she had come. Then he knew not if he awoke, or if it were a change in his dream; but the chamber became dark about him, and he lay there thinking of her, till, as it seemed, day began to dawn, and there was some little stir in the world without, and the new wind moved the casement. And again the door opened, and someone entered as before; and this also was a woman: green-clad she was and barefoot, yet he knew at once that it was not his love that was dead, but the damsel of the ale-house of Bourton, whom he had last seen by the wantways of the Wood Perilous, and he thought her wondrous fair, far fairer than he had deemed. And the word came from her: "I am a sending of the woman whom thou hast loved, and I should not have been here save she had sent me". Then the words ended, while he looked at her and wondered if she also had died on the way to the Well at the World's End. And it came into his mind that he had never known her name upon the earth. Then again came the word: "So it is that I am not dead, but alive in the world, though I am far away from this land; and it is good that

thou shouldst go seek the Well at the World's End not allalone: & the seeker may find me: & whereas thou wouldst know my name, I hight Dorothea."

SO fell the words again: and this image stood awhile as the other had done, & as the other had done, departed, and once more the chamber became dark, so that Ralph could not so much as see where was the window, & he knew no more till he awoke in the early morn, and there was stir in the street and the voice of men, and the scent of fresh herbs and worts, and fruits; for it was market-day, & the country-folk were early afoot, that they might array their wares timely in the market-place.

Chapter XVI. Of the Tales of Swevenham

OLD Richard was no worse than his word, & failed not to find old acquaintance of Swevenham in the Saturday's market: and Ralph saw naught of him till midweek afterwards. And he was sitting in the chamber of the hostel when Richard came in to him. Forsooth Blaise had bidden him come dwell in his fair house, but Ralph would not, deeming that he might be hindered in his quest & be less free to go whereso he would, if he were dwelling with one who was so great with the magnates as was Blaise.

NOW Ralph was reading in a book when Richard came in, but he stood up & greeted him; and Richard said smiling: "What have ye found in the book, lord?" Said Ralph: "It telleth of the deeds of Alexander." "Is there aught concerning the Well at the World's End therein?" said Richard. "I have not found aught thereof as yet," said Ralph; "but the book tells concerning the Dry Tree, and of kings sitting in their chairs in the mountains nearby".

"Well then," said Richard, "maybe thou wilt think me the better tale-teller." "Tell on then," quoth Ralph. So they went and sat them down in a window, and Richard said:

WHEN I came to Swevenham with two old men that I had known young, the folk made much of me, and made me good cheer, whereof were over long to tell thee; but to speak shortly, I drew the talk round to the matter that we would wot of: for we spake of the Men of the Dry Tree, and an old man be-

gan to say, as master Clement the other day, that this name of theirs was but a token and an armoury which those champions have taken from the Tree itself, which Alexander the Champion saw in his wayfarings; and he said that this tree was on the hither side of the mountains called the Wall of the World, and no great way from the last of the towns whereto Clement will wend; for Clement told me the name thereof, to wit, Goldburg. Then another & an older man, one that I remember a stout carle ere I left Swevenham, said that this was not so, but that the Tree was on the further side of the Wall of the World, and that he who could lay his hand on the bole thereof was like enough to drink of the Well at the World's End. Thereafter another spake, & told a tale of how the champions at Hampton first took the Dry Tree for a token; and he said that the rumour ran, that a woman had brought the tidings thereof to those valiant men, & had fixed the name upon them, though wherefore none knew. So the talk went on. But there was a carline sitting in the ingle, and she knew me and I her. And indeed in days past, when I was restless & longing to depart, she might have held me at Swevenham, for she was one of the friends that I loved there: a word and a kiss had done it, or maybe the kiss without the word: but if I had the word, I had not the kiss of her. Well, when the talk began to fail, she spake & said to me:

"'Now it is somewhat strange that the talk must needs fall on this seeking of that which shall not be found, whereas it was but the month before thou wert last at Swevenham, that Wat Miller and Simon Bowyer set off to seek the Well at the World's End, and took with them Alice of Queenhough, whom Simon loved as well as might be, and Wat somewhat more than well. Mindest thou not? There are more than I alive that remember it.' 'Yea,' said I, 'I remember it well.'

FOR indeed, foster-son, these were the very three of whom I told thee, though I told thee not their names. 'Well,' said I; 'how sped they? Came they back, or any of them?' 'Nay,' she said, 'that were scarce to be looked for.' Said I: 'Have any other to thy knowledge gone on this said quest?'

YEA,' she said, 'I will tell thee all about it, and then there will be an end of the story, for none knoweth better thereof than I. First there was that old man, the

wizard, to whom folk from Swevenham and other places about were used to seek for his lore in hidden matters; and some months after those three had departed, folk who went to his abode amongst the mountains found him not; & soon the word was about that he also, for as feeble as he was, had gone to seek the Well at the World's End; though mayhappen it was not so. Then the next spring after thy departure, Richard, comes home Arnold Wright from the wars, and asks after Alice; and when he heard what had befallen, he takes a scrip with a little meat for the road, lays his spear on his shoulder, & is gone seeking the lost, & the thing which they found not . . that, I deem, was the end of him. Again the year after that, as I deem, three of our carles fell in with two knights riding east from Whitwall, & were questioned of them concerning the road to the Well, & doubted not but that they were on that quest. Furthermore (& some of you wot this well enough, & more belike know it not) two of our young men were faring by night & cloud on some errand, good or bad, it matters not, on the highway thirty miles east of Whitwall: it was after harvest, and the stubblefields lay on either side of the way, & the moon was behind thin clouds, so that it was light on the way, as they told me; and they saw a woman wending before them afoot, & as they came up with her, the moon ran out, & they saw that the woman was fair, and that about her neck was a chaplet of gems that shone in the moon, and they had a longing both for the jewel and the woman: but before they laid hand on her they asked her of whence and whither, and she said: 'from ruin and wrack to the Well at the World's End,' and therewith turned on them with a naked sword in her hand; so that they shrank from before her.

HEARKEN once more: the next year came a knight to Swevenham, & guested in this same house, and he sat just where sitteth now yon yellow-headed swain, and the talk went on the same road as it hath gone to-night; and I told him all the tale as I have said it e'en now; & he asked many questions, but most of the Lady with the pair of beads. And on the morrow he departed and we saw him not again.

THEN she was silent, but the young man at whom she had pointed flushed red and stared at her wide-eyed, but said no word. But I spake: 'Well dame, but

have none else gone from Swevenham, or what hath befallen them?' She said: 'Hearken yet! Twenty years agone a great sickness lay heavy upon us & the folk of Whitwall, and when it was at its worst, five of our young men, calling to mind all the tales concerning the Well at the World's End, went their ways to seek it, & swore that back would they never, save they found it and could bear of its water to the folk of Swevenham; & I suppose they kept their oath; for we saw naught either of the water or of them. Well, I deem that this is the last that I have to tell thee, Richard, concerning this matter: and now is come the time for thee to tell tales of thyself.'

THUS for that time dropped the talk of the Well at the World's End, Lord Ralph, and of the way thither. But I hung about the township yet a while, & yesterday as I stood on their stone bridge, and looked on the water, up comes that long lad with the yellow hair that the dame had pointed at, and says to me: 'Master Richard, saving thine age and thy dignity and mastery, I can join an end to the tale which the carline began on Sunday night.' 'Yea, forsooth?' said I, '& how, my lad?' Said he: 'Thou hast a goodly knife there in thy girdle, give it to me, and I will tell thee.' 'Yea,' quoth I, 'if thy tale be knife-worthy' Well, the end of it was that he told me thus: That by night & moon he came on one riding the highway, just about where the other woman had been seen, whose tale he had heard of. He deemed at first this rider to be a man, or a lad rather for smallness and slenderness, but coming close up he found it was a woman, and saw on her neck a chaplet of gems, and deemed it no great feat to take it of her: but he asked her of whence & whither, & she answered: 'from unrest to the Well at the World's End' Then when he put out his hand to her, he saw a great anlace gleaming in her hand, wherefore he forbore her; and this was but five days ago. So I gave the lad my knife, and deemed there would be little else to hear in Swevenham for this bout; and at least I heard no more tales to tell till I came away this morning; so there is my poke turned inside out for thee. But this word further would I say to thee, that I have seen on thy neck also a pair of beads exceeding goodly. Tell me now whence came they?"

FROM my gossip, dame Katherine," said Ralph; "and it seems to me now, though at the time I heeded

the gift little save for its kindness, that she thought something great might go with it; & there was a monk at Higham on the Way, who sorely longed to have it of me." "Well," said Richard, "that may well come to pass, that it shall lead thee to the Well at the World's End. But as to the tales of Swevenham, what deemest thou of them?" Said Ralph: "What are they, save a token that folk believe that there is such a thing on earth as the Well? Yet I have made up my mind already that I would so do as if I trowed in it. So I am no nearer to it than erst. Now is there naught for it save to abide Master Clement's coming; and when he hath brought me to Goldburg, then shall I see how the quest looks by the daylight of that same city." He spake so cheerfully that Richard looked at him askance, wondering what was toward with him, & if may happen anything lay underneath those words of his.

BUT in his heart Ralph was thinking of that last tale of the woman whom the young man had met such a little while ago; and it seemed to him that she must have been in Whitwall when he first came there; and he scarce knew whether he were sorry or not that he had missed her: for though it seemed to him that it would be little more than mere grief and pain, nay, that it would be wicked and evil to be led to the Well at the World's End by any other than her who was to have brought him there; yet he longed, or thought he longed, to speak with her concerning that love of his heart, so early rewarded, so speedily beggared. For indeed he doubted not that the said woman was the damsel of Bourton Abbas, whose image had named herself Dorothea to him in that dream.

Chapter XVII. Richard bringeth tidings of Departing

FELL the talk between them at that time, and three days wore, and on the morning of the fourth day came Richard to Ralph, & said to him: "Foster-son, I am sorry for the word I must say, but Clement Chapman came within gates this morning early, & the company with which he is riding are alboun for the road, and will depart at noon to-day, so that there are but four hours wherein we twain may be together; & thereafter whatso may betide thee, it may well be, that I shall see thy face no more; so what thou wilt tell me must be told straightway.

And now I will say this to thee, that of all things I were fain to ride with thee, but I may not, because it is Blaise whom I am bound to serve in all ways. And I deem, moreover, that troublous times may be at hand here in Whitwall. For there is an Earl hight Walter the Black, a fair young man outwardly, but false at heart & a tyrant, & he had some occasion against the good town, and it was looked for that he should send his herald here to defy the Port more than a half moon ago; but about that time he was hurt in a fray as we hear, and may not back a horse in battle yet. Albeit, fristed is not forgotten, as saith the saw; & when he is whole again, we may look for him at our gates; and whereas Blaise knows me for a deft man-at-arms or something more, it is not to be looked for that he will give me to thee for this quest. Nay, of thee also it will be looked for that thou shouldst do knightly service to the Port, & even so Blaise means it to be; therefore have I lied to him on thy behalf, and bidden Clement also to lie (which forsooth he may do better than I, since he wotteth not wholly whither thou art minded), and I have said thou wouldst go with Clement no further than Cheaping Knowe, which lieth close to the further side of these mountains, and will be back again in somewhat more than a half-moon's wearing. So now thou art warned hereof."

RALPH was moved by these words of Richard, & he spake: "forsooth, old friend, I am sorry to depart from thee; but though I shall presently be all alone amongst aliens, yet now is manhood rising again in me. So for that cause at least shall I be glad to be on the way; and as a token that I am more whole than I was, I will tell thee my tale of grief, if thou wilt hearken to it, which the other day I might not tell thee". "I will hearken it gladly," said Richard. And therewith they sat down in a window, for they were within doors in the hostel, and Ralph told all that had befallen him as plainly & shortly as he might; and when he had done, Richard said: "Thou hast had much adventure in a short space, lord, and if thou mightest now refrain thy longing for that which is gone, and set it on that which is to come, thou mayst yet harden into a famous knight and a happy man." Said Ralph: "Yea? now tell me all thy thought."

SAID Richard: "My thought is that this lady who was slain, was scarce wholly of the race of

Adam; but that at the least there was some blending in her of the blood of the fays. Or how deemest thou?" "I wot not," said Ralph sadly; "to me she seemed but a woman, though she were fairer & wiser than other women." Said Richard: "Well, furthermore, if I heard thee aright, there is another woman in the tale who is also fairer and wiser than other women?" "I would she were my sister!" said Ralph. "Yea," quoth Richard, "and dost thou bear in mind what she was like? I mean the fashion of her body." "Yea, verily," said Ralph ❧ Again said Richard: "Doth it seem to thee as if the Lady of the Dry Tree had some inkling that thou shouldst happen upon this other woman: whereas she showed her of the road to the Well at the World's End, and gave her that pair of beads, & meant that thou shouldst go thither? And thou sayest that she praised her, her beauty and wisdom. In what wise did she praise her? how came the words forth from her? was it sweetly?" "Like honey and roses for sweetness," said Ralph. "Yea," said Richard, "& she might have praised her in such wise that the words had come forth like gall & vinegar. Now I will tell thee of my thought, since we be at point of sundering, though thou take it amiss and be wroth with me: to wit, that thou wouldst have lost the love of this lady as time wore, even had she not been slain: and she being, if no fay, yet wiser than other women, & foreseeing, knew that so it would be." Ralph brake in: "Nay, nay, it is not so; it is not so!" "Hearken, youngling!" quoth Richard; "I deem that it was thus. Her love for thee was so kind that she would have thee happy after the sundering: therefore she was minded that thou shouldst find the damsel, who as I deem loveth thee, and that thou shouldst love her truly" ❧ "O nay, nay!" said Ralph, "all this guess of thine is naught, saving that she was kind indeed. Even as heaven is kind to them who have died martyrs, and enter into its bliss after many torments" ❧ And therewith he fell a-weeping at the very thought of her great kindness: for indeed to this young man she had seemed great, and exalted far above him.

RICHARD looked at him a while; and then said: "Now, I pray thee be not wroth with me for the word I have spoken. But something more shall I say, which shall like thee better. To wit, when I came back from Swevenham on Wednesday I deemed it

most like that the Well at the World's End was a tale, a coloured cloud only; or that at most if it were indeed on the earth, that thou shouldst never find it. But now is my mind changed by the hearing of thy tale, and I deem both that the Well verily is, & that thou thyself shalt find it; and that the wise Lady knew this, and set the greater store by thy youth and goodliness, as a richer & more glorious gift than it had been, were it as fleeting as such things mostly be. Now of this matter will I say no more; but I think that the words that I have said, and which now seem so vain to thee, shall come into thy mind on some later day, & avail thee somewhat; and that is why I have spoken them. But this again is another word, that I have got a right good horse for thee, and other gear, such as thou mayst need for the road, and that Clement's fellowship will meet in Petergate hard by the church, and I will be thy squire till thou comest thither, and ridest thence out a-gates. Now I suppose that thou wilt want to bid Blaise farewell: yet thou must look to it that he will not deem thy farewell of great moment, since he swimmeth in florins and goodly wares; and moreover deemeth that thou wilt soon be back here" "Nevertheless," said Ralph, "I must needs cast my arms about my own mother's son before I depart: so go we now, as all this talk hath worn away more than an hour of those four that were left me."

Chapter XVIII. Ralph departeth from Whitwall with the Fellowship of Clement Chapman

THEREWITHAL they went together to Blaise's house, and when Blaise saw them, he said: "Well, Ralph, so thou must needs work at a little more idling before thou fallest to in earnest. Forsooth I deem that when thou comest back thou wilt find that we have cut thee out a goodly piece of work for thy sewing. For the good town is gathering a gallant host of men; and we shall look to thee to do well in the hard handplay, whenso that befalleth. But now come and look at my house within, how fair it is, & thou wilt see that thou wilt have somewhat to fight for, whereas I am" Therewith he led them up a stair into the great chamber, which was all newly dight & hung with rich arras of the Story of Hercules; & there was a goodly cupboard

of silver vessel, & some gold, and the cupboard was of five shelves as was but meet for a king's son. So Ralph praised all, but was wishful to depart, for his heart was sore, and he blamed himself in a manner that he must needs lie to his brother.

BUT Blaise brought them to the upper chamber, & showed them the goodly beds with their cloths, & hangings, & all was as fair as might be. Then Blaise bade bring wine & made them drink; and he gave Ralph a purse of gold, & an anlace very fair of fashion, and brought him to the door thereafter; and Ralph cast his arms about him, & kissed him and strained him to his breast. But Blaise was somewhat moved thereat, and said to him: "Why lad, thou art sorry to depart from me for a little while, and what would it be, were it for long? But ever wert thou a kind & tender-hearted youngling, and we twain are alone in an alien land. Forsooth, I wot that thou hast, as it were, embraced the Upmeads kindred, father, mother and all; & good is that! So now God and the Saints keep thee, and bear in mind the hosting of the good town, & the raising of the banner, that shall be in no great while. Fare thee well, lad!"

SO they parted, & Ralph went back to the hostel, & gathered his stuff together, and laid it on a sumpter horse, & armed him, & so went into Petergate to join himself to that company. There he found the chapmen, five of them in all, and their lads, and a score of men-at-arms, with whom was Clement, not clad like a merchant, but weaponed, and bearing a coat of proof and a bright sallet on his head. They greeted each the other, and Ralph said: "Yea, Master Clement, and we be riding to battle?" "Maybe," quoth Clement; "the way is long, and our goods worth the lifting, and there are some rough places that we must needs pass through. But if ye like not the journey, abide here in this town the onset of Walter the Black" Therewith he laughed, and Ralph understanding the jape, laughed also; & said: "Well, Master Clement, but tell me who be these that we shall meet." "Yea, & I will tell thee the whole tale of them," said Clement, "but abide till we are without the gates; I am a busy man e'en now, for all is ready for the road, save what I must do. So now bid thy Upmeads squire farewell, & then to horse with thee!"

SO Ralph cast his arms about Richard, and kissed him and said: "This is also a farewell to the House where I was born and bred." And as he spake the thought of the House and the garden,

and the pleasant fields of Upmeads came into his heart so bitter-sweet, that it mingled with his sorrow, and well-nigh made him weep. But as for Richard he forebore words, for he was sad at heart for the sundering.

THEN he gat to horse, & the whole company of them bestirred them and they rode out a-gates. And Master Clement it was that ordered them, riding up & down along the array. But Ralph fell to speech with the chapmen and men-at-arms; and both of these were very courteous with him; for they rejoiced in his company, & especially the chapmen, who were somewhat timorous of the perils of the road.

Chapter XIX. Master Clement tells Ralph concerning the Lands whereunto they were riding

THEN they were gotten a mile or two from Whitwall, and all was going smoothly, Clement came up to Ralph and rode at his left hand, & fell to speech with him, and said: "Now, lord, will I tell thee more concerning our journey, & the folk that we are like to meet upon the road. And of the perils, whatso they may be, I told thee not before, because I knew thee desirous of seeking adventures east-away, and knew that my tales would not hinder thee" "Yea," said Ralph, "& had not this goodly fellowship been, I had gone alone, or with any carle that I could have lightly hired." Clement laughed and said: "Fair sir, thou wouldst have failed of hiring any one man to go with thee eastward a many miles. For with less than a score of men well-armed the danger of death or captivity is over great, if ye ride the mountain ways unto Cheaping Knowe. Yea, & even if a poor man who hath nothing, wend that way alone, he may well fall among thieves, and be stolen himself, body & bones, for lack of anything better to steal."

HEREAT Ralph felt his heart rise when he thought of battle and strife, & he made his horse to spring some what, and then he said: "It liketh me well, dear friend, that I ride not with thee for naught, but that I may earn my daily bread like another" "Yea," said Clement, looking on him kindly, "I deem of all thy brethren thou hast the biggest share of the blood of Red Robert, who first won Upmeads. And now thou shalt know that this good town of Whitwall that lieth behind us is the last of the

lands we shall come to wherein folk can any courtesy, or are ruled by the customs of the manor, or by due lawful Earls & Kings, or the laws of the Lineage or the Porte, or have any Guilds for their guiding & helping. And though these folks whereunto we shall come, are, some of them, Christian men by name, & have amongst them priests and religious; yet are they wild men of manners, and many heathen customs abide amongst them; as swearing on the altars of devils, and eating horse-flesh at the High-tides, & spell-raising more than enough, & such-like things, even to the reddening of the doom-rings with the blood of men & of women, yea, and of babes: from such things their priests cannot withhold them. As for their towns that we shall come to, I say not but we shall find crafts amongst them, & worthy good men therein, but they have little might against the tyrants who reign over the towns, & who are of no great kindred, nor of blood better than other folk, but merely masterful and wise men who have gained their place by cunning and the high hand. Thou shalt see castles and fair strong-houses about the country-side; but the great men who dwell therein are not the natural kindly lords of the land yielding service to Earls, Dukes, and Kings, and having under them vavassors and villains, men of the manor; but their tillers and shepherds and workmen and servants be mere thralls, whom they may sell at any market, like their horses or oxen. Forsooth, these great men have with them for the more part free men waged for their service, who will not hold their hands from aught that their master biddeth, not staying to ask if it be lawful or unlawful. And that the more, because whoso is a free man there, house & head must he hold on the tenure of bow and sword, and his life is like to be short if he hath not sworn himself to the service of some tyrant of a castle or a town."

"YEA, Master Clement," said Ralph, "these be no peaceful lands whereto thou art bringing us, or very pleasant to dwell in." "Little for peace, but much for profit," said Clement; "for these lands be fruitful of wine and oil and wheat, & neat and sheep; withal metals and gems are dug up out of the mountains; & on the other hand, they make but little by craftsmanship, wherefore are they the eagerer for chaffer with us merchants; whereas also there are many of them well able to pay for what they lack, if not in money, then in kind, which in a way is better. Yea, it is

a goodly land for merchants." "But I am no merchant," said Ralph. "So it is," said Clement, "yet thou desireth something; & whither we are wending thou mayst hear tidings that shall please thee, or tidings that shall please me. To say sooth, these two may well be adverse to each other, for I would not have thee hear so much of tidings as shall lead thee on, but rather I would have thee return with me, and not throw thy young life away: for indeed I have an inkling of what thou seekest, & meseems that Death & the Devil shall be thy faring-fellows". Ralph held his peace, and Clement said in a cheerfuller voice: "Moreover, there shall be strange & goodly things to see; and the men of these parts be mostly goodly of body, & the women goodlier yet, as we carles deem."

RALPH sighed, and answered not at once, but presently he said: "Master Clement, canst thou give me the order of our goings for these next days?" "Yea, certes," said Clement. "In three days' time we shall come to the entry of the mountains: two days thence we shall go without coming under any roof save the naked heavens; the day thereafter shall we come to the Mid-Mountain House, which is as it were an hostelry; but it was built and is upheld by the folks that dwell anigh, amongst whom be the folk of Cheaping Knowe; and that house is hallowed unto truce, and no man smiteth another therein; so that we oft come on the mountain strong-thieves there, and there we be blithe together & feast together in good fellowship. But when there be foemen in that house together, each man or each fellowship departing, hath grace of an hour before his foeman follow. Such are the customs of that house, & no man breaketh them ever. But when we depart thence we shall ride all day & sleep amidst the mountains, & if we be not beset that night or the morrow's morn thereof, safe and unfoughten shall we come to Cheaping Knowe. Doth that suffice thee as at this time?" "Yea, master," quoth Ralph. So therewith their talk dropped, for the moment; but Clement talked much with Ralph that day, and honoured him much, as did all that company.

Chapter XX. They come to the Mid-Mountain Guest-House.

ON that night they slept in their tents which they had pitched on the field of a little thorp beside

a water; & there they had meat & drink and all things as they needed them. And in likewise it befell them the next day; but the third evening they set up their tents on a little hillside by a road which led into a deep pass, even the entry of the mountains, a road which went betwixt exceeding high walls of rock. For the mountain sides went up steep from the plain. There they kept good watch & ward, & naught befell them to tell of. The next morning they entered the pass & rode through it up on to the heaths, and rode all day by wild and stony ways & came at even to a grassy valley watered by a little stream, where they guested, watching their camp well; & again none meddled with them.

As they were departing the next morn Ralph asked of Clement if he yet looked for onset from the way-layers. Said Clement: "It is most like, lord; for we be a rich prey, and it is but seldom that such a company rideth this road. And albeit that the wild men know not to a day when we shall pass through their country, yet they know the time within a four & twenty hours or so. For we may not hide our journey from all men's hearing; & when the ear heareth, the tongue waggeth. But art thou yet anxious concerning this matter, son?"

"Yea," said Ralph, "for I would fain look on these mescreants."

"It is like that ye shall see them," said Clement; "but I shall look on it as a token that they are about waylaying us if we come on none of them in the Mountain House. For they will be fearful lest their purpose leak out from unwary lips"

Ralph wondered how it would be, and what might come of it, and rode on, pondering much.

The road was rough that day & they went not above a foot-pace the more part of the time; the day long they were going up and up, & it grew cold as the sun got low; though it was yet summer. At last at the top of a long stony ridge, which lay beneath a great spreading mountain, on the crest whereof the snow lay in plenty, Ralph saw a house, long & low, builded of great stones, both walls & roof: at sight thereof the men of the fellowship shouted for joy, & hastened on, & Clement spurred up the stony slopes all he might. But Ralph rode slowly, since he had naught to see to, save himself, so that he was presently left alone. Now he looks aside, and sees something bright-hued lying under a big stone where the last rays of the sun just caught some corner of it. So he goes thither, deeming that may happen one of the company had dropped

something; pouch or clout, or what not, in his haste and hurry. He got off his horse to pick it up, & when he had laid hand on it found it to be a hand's-breadth of fine green cloth embroidered with flowers. He held it in his hand a while wondering where he could have seen such like stuff before, that it should smite a pang into his heart, and suddenly called to mind the little hall at Bourton Abbas with the oaken benches and the rush-strewn floor, and this same flower-embroidered green cloth dancing about the naked feet of a fair damsel, as she moved nimbly hither and thither dighting him his bever. But his thought stayed not there, but carried him into the days when he was abiding in desire of the love that he won at last, & lost so speedily. But as he stood pondering he heard Clement shouting to him from the garth-gate of that house. So he leapt on his horse & rode up the slope into the garth and lighted down by Clement; who fell to chiding him for tarrying, & said: "There is peril in loitering outside this garth alone; for those Sons of the Rope often lurk hard by for what they may easily pick up, and they be brisk & nimble lads. What ailed thee?" Said Ralph: "I stayed to look at a flower which called Upmeads to my mind"

"Yea lad, yea," quoth Clement, "and art thou so soft as that? But come thou into the House; it is as I deemed it might be; besides the House-warden and his wife there is no soul therein. Thou shalt yet look on Mick Hangman's sons, as thou desirest."

So they went into the House, and men had all that they might need. The warden was an old hoar man, and his wife well-stricken in years; and after supper was talk of this and that, and it fell much, as was like to be, on those strong-thieves, & Clement asked the warden what he had seen of them of late.

The old carle answered: "Nay, master Clement, much according to wont: a few beeves driven into our garth; a pack or two brought into the hall; and whiles one or two of them come in hither with empty hands for a sleep and a bellyful; and again a captive led in on the road to the market. Forsooth it is now a good few days ago three of them brought in a woman as goodly as mine eyes have ever seen; and she sat on the bench yonder, and seemed to heed little that she was a captive and had shackles on her feet after the custom of these men, though indeed her hands were un-

bound, so that she might eat her meat; and the carle thief told me that he took her but a little way from the garth, and that she made a stout defence with a sword before they might take her, but being taken, she made but little of it." "Would he do her any hurt?" said Ralph. "Nay, surely," said the carle; "doth a man make a hole in a piece of cloth which he is taking to market? Nay, he was courteous to her after his fashion, and bade us give her the best of all we had." "What like was she?" said Ralph. Said the carle: "She was somewhat tall, if I am to note such matters, grey-eyed & brown haired, & great abundance of it. Her lips very red; her cheeks tanned with the sun, but in such wise that her own white and red shone through the sun's painting, so that her face was as sweet as the best wheat-ear in a ten-acre field, when the season hath been good. Her hands were not like those of a damoiselle who sitteth in a chamber to be looked at, but brown as of one who hath borne the sickle in the sun. But when she stretched out her hand so that the wrist of her came forth from her sleeve it was as white as milk." "Well, my man," said the carline, "thou hast a good memory for an old and outworn carle. Why dost thou not tell the young knight what she was clad withal; since save for their raiment all women of an age are much alike?" "Nay, do thou do it," said the carle; "she was even as fair as I have said; so that there be few like her."

SAID the dame: "Well, there is naught so much to be said of her raiment: her gown was green, of fine cloth enough; but not very new: welts of needle-work it had on it, & a wreath of needle-work flowers round the hem of the skirt; but a cantle was torn from off it, in the scuffle when she was taken, I suppose, so that it was somewhat ragged in one place. Furthermore..." She had been looking at Ralph as she spoke, and now she broke off suddenly, and said, still looking at him hard: "Well, it is strange!" "What is strange?" said Clement. "O naught, naught," said the dame, "save that folk should make so much to do about this matter, when there are so many coming & going about the Midhouse of the Mountains." But Ralph noted that she was still staring at him even after she had let the talk drop.

WANED the even, and folk began to go bedward, so that the hall

grew thin of guests. Then came up the carline to Ralph & took him aside into a nook, & said to him: "Young knight now will I tell thee what seemed to me strange e'en now; to wit, that the captive damsel should be bearing a necklace about her neck as like to thine as one lamb is to another: but I thought thou mightest believer that I spake it not openly before all the other folk. So I held my peace" "Dame," said he, "I thank thee: forsooth I fear sorely that this damsel is my sister; for ever we have worn the samelike pair of beads. And as for me I have come hither to find her, & evil will it be if I find her enthralled, and it may be past redemption." And therewith he gave her a piece of the gold money of Upmeads.

"Yea," said she, "poor youth; that will be sooth indeed, for thou art somewhat like unto her, yet far goodlier. But I grieve for thee, and know not what thou wilt do; whereas by this time most like she has been sold & bought and is dwelling in some lord's strong-house; some tyrant that needeth not money, and will not let his prey go for a prayer. Here, take thou thy gold again, for thou mayest well need it, and let me shear a lock of thy golden hair, and I shall be well apaid for my keeping silence concerning thy love. For I deem that it is even so, and that she is not thy sister, else hadst thou stayed at home, and prayed for her with book and priest and altar, and not gone seeking her a weary way"

Ralph reddened but said naught, & let her put scizzors amongst his curly locks, and take what of them she would. And then he went to his bed, and pondered these matters somewhat, & said to himself that it was by this damsel's means that he should find the Well at the World's End. Yet he said also, that, whether it were so or not, he was bound to seek her, & deliver her from thralldom, since he had kissed her so sweet and friendly, like a brother, for the sweetness and kindness of her, before he had fallen into the love that had brought him such joy and such grief. And therewith he took out that piece of her gown from his pouch, and it seemed dear to him. But it made him think sadly of what grief or pain she might even then be bearing, so that he longed to deliver her, & that longing was sweet to him. In such thoughts he fell asleep.

Chapter XXI. A Battle in the Mountains

WHEN it was morning they arose early and ate a morsel; & Clement gave freely to the Warden and his helpmate on behalf of the fellowship; & then they saddled their nags, and did on the loads and departed; and the way was evil otherwise, but it was down hill, and all waters ran east. All day they rode, and at even when the sun had not quite set, they pitched their camp at the foot of a round knoll amidst a valley where was water & grass; & looking down thence, they had a sight of the fruitful plain, wherein lay Cheaping Knowe all goodly blue in the distance.

THIS was a fair place and a lovely, and great ease would they have had there, were it not that they must keep watch and ward with more pains than theretofore; for Clement deemed it as good as certain that the wild men would fall upon them that night. But all was peaceful the night through, & in the morning they gat to the way speedily, riding with their armour on, & their bows bent: & three of the men-at-arms rode ahead to espy the way. So it befell that they had not ridden two hours ere back came the forerider with the tidings that the pass next below them was thick with the Strong-thieves. The fellowship were as then in such a place, that they were riding a high bare ridge, and could not be assailed to the advantage of the thieves if they abode where they were; whereas if they went forward, they must needs go down with the road into the dale that was beset by the wild men. Now they were three-score & two all told, but of these but a score of men-at-arms besides Ralph, & Clement, who was a stout fighter when need was. Of the others, some were but lads, and of the Chapmen were three old men, & more than one blencher besides. However, all men were armed, & they had many bows, and some of the chapmen's knaves were fell archers. So they took counsel together, & to some it seemed better to abide the onset on their vantage ground. But to Clement & the older men-at-arms this seemed of no avail. For though they could see the plain country down below, they would have no succour of it; and Clement bade them think how the night would come at last, & that the longer they abode, the greater would be the gathering of the Strong-thieves; so that, all things considered, it were bet-

ter to fall on at once and to try the adventure of the valley. And this after some talk they yea/said all, save a few who held their skins so dear that their wits wandered somewhat. So these timorous ones they bade guard the sumpter beasts and their loads; and even so they did, & abode a little, while the men/at/arms and the bowmen went forward without more ado; and Ralph rode betwixt Clement and the captain of the men/at/arms.

PRESENTLY they were come close to the place where the way went down into the valley, clea/ving through a clayey bent, so that the slippery sides of the cleft went up high to right and left; wherefore by good/hap there were no big stones anigh to roll down upon them. More-over the way was short, & they rode six abreast down the pass & were soon through the hol-low way. As he rode Ralph saw a few of the Strong/thieves at the nether end where the pass widened out, & they let fly some arrows at the chapmen which did no hurt, though some of the shafts rattled on the ar-mour of the companions. But when Clement saw that folk, and heard the noise of their shouting, he lifted up a great axe that he bore and cried: "St. Agnes for the Mercers!" and set spurs to his horse. So did they all, & came clattering and shouting down the steep road like a stone out of a sling, and drave right into the valley one and all, the wouldbe laggards following after; for they were afraid to be left behind. The wild men, who, save for wide shields which they bore, were but evilly armed, mostly in skins of beasts, made no coun/tenance of defence, but fled all they might towards the steep slopes of the valley, and then turned & fell to shooting; for the companions durst not pur/sue in haste lest they should be scattered, & overwhelmed by the multitude of foemen; but they drew up along the south side of the valley, and had the mastery of the road, so that this first bout was with-out blood/shedding. Albeit the thieves still shot in their weak bows from the hill/side, but scarce hurt a man. Then the bowmen of the fellowship fell to shooting at the wild men, while the men/at/arms breath-ed their horses, and the sump-ter beasts were gathered to-gether behind them; for they had no dread of abiding there a while, whereas behind them the ground was broken into a steep shaly cliff, bushed here and there with tough bushes, so that no man could come up it save by climbing with hand

and knee, and that not easily ❧ Now when the archers had shot a good while, & some of the thieves had fallen before them, and men were in good heart because of the flight of the wild men, Ralph, seeing that these still hung about the slopes, cried out: "Master Clement, and thou Captain, sure it will be ill-done to leave these men unbroken behind us, lest they follow us and hang about our hindermost, slaying us both men & horses" ❧ "Even so," quoth the captain, who was a man of few words, "let us go. But do thou, Clement, abide by the stuff with the lads and bowmen." Then he cried out aloud: "St. Christofer to aid!" and shook his rein, and all they who were clad in armour & well mounted spurred on with him against the strong-thieves. But these, when they saw the onset of the horsemen, but drew a little up the hill-side and stood fast, and some of the horses were hurt by their shot. So the captain bade draw rein and off horse, while Clement led his bowmen nigher, and they shot well together, & hindered the thieves from closing round the men-at-arms, or falling on the horses. So then the companions went forward stoutly on foot, and entered into the battle of the thieves, and there was the thrusting & the hewing great: for the foemen bore axes, and malls, and spears, and were little afraid, having the vantage-ground; and they were lithe and strong men, though not tall ❧ Ralph played manfully, and was hurt by a spear above the knee, but not grievously; so he heeded it not, but cleared a space all about him with great strokes of the Upmead's blade: then as the wild men gave back there was one of them who stood his ground and let drive a stroke of a long-handled hammer at him, but Ralph ran in under the stroke and caught him by the throat and drew him out of the press. And even therewith the wild men broke up before the onset of the all-armed carles, and fled up the hill, & the men-at-arms followed them but a little, for their armour made them unspeedy; so that they took no more of those men, though they slew some, but turned about & gathered round Ralph and made merry over his catch, for they were joyous with the happy end of battle; & Clement, who had left his bowmen when the Companions were mingled with the wild-men, was there amidst the nighest ❧ Said Ralph to him: "Well, have I not got me a servant & thrall good cheap?" "Yea," said Clement, "if thou deem

a polecat a likely hound." Said the Captain: "Put thy sword through him, knight." Quoth another: "Let him run up hill, and our bowmen shall shoot a match at him." "Nay," said Ralph, "they have done well with their shooting, let them rest. As to my thrusting my sword through the man, Captain, I had done that before, had I been so minded. At any rate, I will ask him if he will serve me truly. Otherwise he seemeth a strong carle and a handy. How sayest thou, man, did I take thee fairly?" "Yea," said the man, "thou art a strong lad" ❧ He seemed to fear the swords about him but little, and forsooth he was a warrior-like man, & not ill-looking. He was of middle height, strong and well-knit, with black hair like a beast's mane for shagginess, and bright blue eyes. He was clad in a short coat of grey homespun, with an ox-skin habergeon laced up over it; he had neither helm nor hat, nor shoes, but hosen made of a woollen clout tied about his legs; his shield of wood and ox-hide lay on the ground a few paces off, and his hammer beside it, which he had dropped when Ralph first handled him, but a great ugly knife was still girt to him.

NOW Ralph saith to him: "Which wilt thou: be slain, or serve me?" Said the carle, grinning, yet not foully: "Guess if I would not rather serve thee!" "Wilt thou serve me truly?" said Ralph. "Why not?" quoth the carle: "yet I warn thee that if thou beat me, save in hot blood, I shall put a knife into thee when I may" ❧ "O," said one, "thrust him through now at once, lord Ralph." "Nay, I will not," said Ralph; "he hath warned me fairly. Maybe he will serve me truly. Master Clement, wilt thou lend me a horse for my man to ride?" "Yea," said Clement; "yet I misdoubt me of thy new squire." Then he turned to the men-at-arms and said: "No tarrying, my masters! To horse and away before they gather again!"

SO they mounted & rode away from that valley of the pass, and Ralph made his man ride beside him. But the man said to him, as soon as they were riding: "Take note that I will not fight against my kindred." "None biddeth thee so," said Ralph; "but do thou take heed that if thou fight against us I will slay thee outright." Said the man: 'A fair bargain!" "Well," said Ralph, "I will have thy knife of thee, lest it tempt thee, as is the wont of cold iron, and a maiden's body." "Nay, master," quoth the man, "leave me my knife, as thou art a good fellow. In two hours time we

shall be past all peril of my people, & when we come down below I will slay thee as many as thou wilt, so it be out of the kindred. forsooth down there, evil they be, and unkinsome." "So be it, lad," said Ralph, laughing, "keep thy knife; but hang this word of mine thereon, that if thou slay any man of this fellowship save me, I will rather flay thee alive than slay thee." Quoth the carle: "That is the bargain, then, & I yeasay it." "Good," said Ralph; "now tell me thy name." "Bull Shockhead," said the carle.

BUT now the fellowship took to riding so fast down the slopes of the mountains on a far better road, that talking together was not easy. They kept good watch, both behind & ahead, nor were they set upon again, though whiles they saw clumps of men on the hill-sides. So after a while, when it was a little past noon, they came adown to the lower slopes of the mountains, and the foot-hills, which were green and unstony; and thereon were to be seen cattle and neatherds and shepherds, and here and there the garth of a homestead, and fenced acres about it.

NOW that they were come down into the peopled parts, they displayed the banners of their fellowships, to wit, the Agnes, the White fleece, the Christopher, and the Ship and Nicholas, which last was the banner of the faring-knights of Whitwall; but Ralph was glad to ride under the banner of St. Nicholas, his friend, and deemed that luck might the rather come to him thereby. But they displayed their banners now, because they knew that no man of the peopled parts would be so hardy as to fall upon the Chapmen, of whom they looked to have many matters for their use & pleasure. So now that they felt themselves safe, they stayed them, and sat down by a fair little stream, & ate their dinner of such meat and drink as they had; & Ralph departed his share with his thrall, and the man was hungry and ate well; so that Clement said mockingly: "Thou feedest thy thrall over well, lord, even for a king's son: is it so that thou art minded to fatten him and eat him?" Then some of the others took up the jest, & bade the carle refrain him of the meat, so that he might not fatten, and might live the longer. He hearkened to them, & knit his brows and looked fiercely from one to the other. But Ralph laughed aloud, & shook his finger at him and refrained him, and his wrath ran off him

and he laughed, & shoved the victual into him doughtily, & sighed for pleasure when he had made an end and drunk a draught of wine.

Chapter XXII. Ralph talks with Bull Shockhead

THEN they rode on again, Ralph rode beside Bull who was merry & blithe now he was full of meat and drink; and he spake anon: "So thou art a king's son, master? I deemed from the first that thou wert of lineage. for as for these churls of chapmen, & the sworders whom they wage, they know not the name of their mother's mother, nor have heard one word of the beginner of their kindred; & their deeds are like unto their kinlessness".

"And are thy deeds so good?" said Ralph. "Are they ill," said Bull, "when they are done against the foemen?" Said Ralph: "And are all men your foemen who pass through these mountains?". "All," said Bull, "but they be of the kindred or their known friends." "Well, Bull," said Ralph, "I like thy deeds little, that thou shouldest ravish men and women from their good life, and sell them for a price into toil and weariness and strife." Said Bull: "How much worse do we than the chapman by his debtor, & the lord of the manor by his villein?" Said Ralph: "far worse, if ye did but know it, poor men!" Quoth Bull: "But I neither know it, nor can know it, nay, not when thou sayest it; for it is not so. And look you, master, this life of a bought thrall is not such an exceeding evil life; for oft they be dealt with softly & friendly, and have other thralls to work for them under their whips".

Ralph laughed: "Which shall I make thee, friend Bull, the upper or the under?" Bull reddened, but said naught. Said Ralph: "Or where shall I sell thee, that I may make the best penny out of my good luck & valiancy?" Bull looked chopfallen: "Nay," said he in a wheedling voice, "thou wilt not sell me, thou? for I deem that thou wilt be a good master to me: and," he broke into sudden heat hereat, "if I have another master I shall surely slay him whate'er betide".

Ralph laughed again, & said: "Seest thou what an evil craft ye follow, when thou deemest it better to be slain with bitter torments (as thou shouldest be if thou slewest thy master) than to be sold to any master save one exceeding good?".

Bull held his peace hereat, but presently he said: "Well, be our craft good or evil, it is

gainful; and whiles there is prey taken right good, which, for my part, I would not sell, once I had my hand thereon." "Yea, women?" said Ralph. "Even so," said Bull, "such an one was taken by my kinsman Bull Nosy but a little while agone, whom he took down to the market at Cheaping Knowe, as I had not done if I had once my arms about her. For she was as fair as a flower; and yet so well built, that she could bear as much as a strong man in some ways; and, saith Nosy, when she was taken, there was no weeping or screeching in her, but patience rather and quietness, and intent to bear all and live .... Master, may I ask thee a question?" "Ask on," said Ralph. Said Bull: "The pair of beads about thy neck, whence came they?" "They were the gift of a dear friend," said Ralph. "A woman?" quoth Bull. "Yea," said Ralph "Now is this strange," said Bull, "and I wot not what it may betoken, but this same woman had about her neck a pair of beads as like to thine as if they had been the very same: did this woman give thee the beads? For I will say this of thee, master, that thou art well nigh as likely a man as she is a woman" Ralph sighed, for this talk of the woman & the beads brought all the story into his mind, so that it was as if he saw it adoing again; the Lady of the Wildwood led along to death before he delivered her, and their flight together from the Water of the Oak, and that murder of her in the desert. And betwixt the diverse deeds of the day, this had of late become somewhat dim to him. Yet after his grief came joy that this man also had seen the damsel, whom his dream of the night had called Dorothea, and that he knew of her captors; wherefore by his means he might come on her and deliver her.

NOW he spake aloud: "Nay, it was not she that gave them to me, but yet were I fain to find this woman that thou sawest; for I look to meet a friend whenas I meet her. So tell me, dost thou think that I may cheapen her of thy kinsman?" Bull shook his head, and said: "It may be: or it may be that he hath already sold her to one who heedeth not treasure so much as fair flesh: and fair is hers beyond most. But, lord, I will do my best to find her for thee; as thou art a king's son, & no ill master, I deem." "Do that," quoth Ralph, "& I in turn will do what more I may for thee besides making thee free" And therewith

he rode forward that he might get out of earshot, for Bull's tongue seemed like to be long. And presently he heard laughter behind him, as the carle began jesting and talking with the chapman lads.

Chapter XXIII. Of the Town of Cheaping Knowe

NOW when it was evening they pitched their camp down in the plain fields amidst tall elm-trees, & had their banners still flying over the tents to warn all comers of what they were. But the next morning the chapmen & their folk were up betimes to rummage their loads, and to array their wares for the market; & they gat not to the road before mid-morning. Meantime of their riding Ralph had more talk with Bull, who said to him: "Fair lord, I rede thee when thou art in the market of Cheaping Knowe, bid master Clement bring thee to the thrall-merchant, and trust me that if such a fair image as that we were speaking of hath passed through his hands within these three months, he will remember it; & then thou shalt have at least some tale of what hath befallen her but little while ago". That seemed good rede to Ralph, and when they went on their way he rode beside Clement, and asked him many things concerning Cheaping Knowe; and at last about the thrall-market therein. And Clement said that, though he dealt not in such wares, he had often seen them sold, and knew the master of that market. And when Ralph asked if the said master would answer questions concerning the selling of men and of women, Clement smiled and said: "Yea, yea, he will answer; for as he lives by selling thralls, and every time a thrall is sold by him he maketh some gain by it, it is to his profit that they change masters as often as may be; and when thou askest of the woman whom thou art seeking, he will be deeming that there will be some new chaffer ahead. I will bring thee to him, & thou shalt ask him of what thou wilt, and belike he will tell thee quietly over the wine-cup". Therewith was Ralph well content, & he grew eager to enter into the town.

THEY came to the gates a little before sunset, after they had passed through much fair country; but nigh to the walls it was bare of trees & thickets, whereas, said Clement, they had been cut down lest they should serve as cover to strong-thieves, or folk assailing the town. The walls were

strong and tall, & a great castle stood high up on a hill, about which the town was build/ed; so that if the town were tak/en, there would yet be another town within it to be taken also. But the town within, save for the said castle, was scarce so fairly builded as the worst of the towns which Ralph had seen erst, though there were a many houses therein. Much people was gathered about the gate to see the merchants enter with banners displayed; & Ralph deemed many of the folk fair, such as were goodly clad; for many had but foul clouts to cover their nakedness, & seem/ed needy and hunger/pinched. Withal there were many warri/ors amongst the throng, and most of these bore a token on their sleeves, to wit a sword red/dened with blood. And Clement, speaking softly in Ralph's ear, did him to wit that this was the token of the lord who had gotten the castle in those days and was tyrant of the town; & how that he had so many men/at/arms ready to do his bidding, that none in the town was safe from him if he deemed it more for his pleasure and pro/fit to rob or maim, or torment or slay, than to suffer them to live peaceably. "But with us chapmen," said Clement, "he will not meddle, lest there be an end of chaffer in the town; and verily the market is good". Thus they rode through the streets into the market/place, which was wide and great, and the best houses of the town were therein, & so came to the hostel of the Merchants, called the Fleece, which was a big house, and goodly enough.

The next morning Clement & the other chapmen went up into the Castle, bearing with them gifts out of their wares for the lord, & Cle/ment bade Ralph keep close till he came back, and especially to keep his war/caught thrall, Bull Shockhead, safe at home, lest he be taken from him, and to clothe him in the guise of the chapmen lads, and to dock his hair; and even so Ralph did, though Bull were loath thereto. About noon the chapmen came back again well pleased; & Clement gave Ralph a parch/ment from the lord, which bade all men help and let pass Ralph of Upmeads, as a sergeant of the chapmen's guard, and said withal that now he was free to go about the town if he listed, so that he were back at the hos/tel of the Fleece by nightfall. So Ralph went in company with some of the sergeants & others, and looked at this and that about the town without hindrance, save that the guard would not suffer them to pass further than the bailey of the

Castle. And for the said bailey, forsooth, they had but little stomach; for they saw thence, on the slopes of the Castle-hill, tokens of the cruel justice of the said lord; for there were men and women there, yea, and babes also, hanging on gibbets and thrust through with sharp pales, and when they asked of folk why these had suffered, they but looked at them astonished, and passed on without a word. So they went thence, and found the master-church, and deemed it not much fairer than it was great; & it was nowise great, albeit it was strange and uncouth of fashion.

Then they came to great gardens within the town, and they were exceeding goodly, & had trees and flowers and fruits in them which Ralph had not seen hitherto, as lemons & oranges, & pomegranates; & the waters were running through them in runnels of ashlar; and the weather was fair and hot; so they rested in those gardens till it was evening, & then gat them home to the Fleece, where they had good entertainment.

Chapter XXIV. Ralph hareth more tidings of the Damsel

THE second day, while the merchants saw to their chaffer, most of the men-at-arms and Ralph with them, spent their time again in those goodly gardens; where, indeed, some of them made friends of fair women of the place; in which there was less risk than had been for aliens in some towns, whereas at Cheaping Knowe such women as were wedded according to law, or damsels in the care of their kindred, or slaves who were concubines, had not dared so much as to look on a man.

The third day time hung somewhat heavy on Ralph's hands, not but that the Companions were well at ease, but rather because himseemed that he was not stirring in the quest. But the next day Clement bade him come see that thrall-merchant aforesaid, and brought him to a corner of the market-place, where was a throng looking on at the cheaping. They went through the throng, & beside a stone like a leaping-on stone saw a tall man, goodly of presence, black bearded, clad in scarlet; & this was the merchant; & by him were two of his knaves and certain weaponed men who had brought their wares to the cheaping. And some of these were arrayed like those foemen of the mountains. There was a half score and three of these chattels to be sold, who stood upon one after other on the stone, that folk might cheapen them. The cheaping was long about, because they that had a mind to

buy were careful to know what they were buying, like as if they had been cheapening a horse; and most of them before they bid their highest had the chattels away into the merchant's booth to strip them, lest they should buy damaged or unhandsome bodies, & this more especially if it were a woman, for the men were already well nigh naked. Of women four of them were young and goodly, & Ralph looked at them closely; but they were naught like to the woman of his quest. Now this cheaping irked Ralph sorely, as was like to be, whereas, as hath been told, he came from a land where were no thralls, none but vavassors and good yeomen: yet he abode till all was done, hansel paid, & the thralls led off by their new masters. Then Clement led him up to the merchant, to whom he gave the sele of the day, & said: "Master, this is the young knight of whom I told thee, who deemeth that a woman who is his friend hath been brought to this market & sold here, & if he might, he would ransom her." The merchant greeted Ralph courteously, and bade him and Clement come into his house, where they might speak more privily. So did they, & he treated them with honour, and set wine and spices before them, and bade Ralph say whatlike the woman was. Ralph did so, and wondered at himself how well and closely he could tell of her, like as a picture painted. And, moreover, he drew forth that piece of her gown which he had come on by the Mid-Mountain House.

So when he had done, the merchant, who was a man sober of aspect & somewhat slow of speech, said: "Sir, I believe surely that I have seen this damsel, but she is not with me now, nor have I sold her ever; but hither was she brought to be sold by a man of the mountain-folk not very many days ago. And the man's name was Bull Nosy, or the long-nosed man of the kindred of the Bull, for in such wise are named the men of that unhappy folk. Now this was the cause why I might not sell her, that she was so proud & stout that men feared her, what she might do if they had her away. And when some spake to see her body naked, she denied it utterly, saying that she would do a mischief to whomsoever tried it. So I spake to him who owned her, and asked him if he thought it good to take her a while & quell her with such pains as would spoil her but little, and then bring her to market when she was meeker. But he heeded my words little, and led her away, she riding on a horse & he go-

ing afoot beside her; for the mountain-men be no horsemen" Said Ralph: "Dost thou know at all whither he will have led her?" Said the merchant: "By my deeming, he will have gone first of all to the town of Whiteness, whither thy fellowship will betake them ere long: for he will be minded to meet there the Lord of Utterbol, who is for suchlike wares; & he will either give her to him as a gift, for which he will have a gift in return, or he will sell her to my lord at a price, if he dare to chaffer with him. At least so will he do if he be wise. Now if the said lord hath her, it will be somewhat more than hard for thee to get her again till he have altogether done with her; for money & goods are naught to him beside the doing of his will. But there is this for thy comfort, that whereas she is so fair a woman, she will be well with my lord. For I warrant me that she will not dare to be proud with him, as she was with the folk here." "Yea," said Ralph, "and what is this lord of Utterbol that all folk, men & women, fear him so?" Said the merchant: "Fair sir, thou must pardon me if I say no more of him. Belike thou mayst fall in with him; & if thou dost, take heed that thou make not thyself great with him."

So Ralph thanked the merchant and departed with Clement, of whom presently he asked if he knew aught of this lord of Utterbol. Said Clement: "God forbid that I should ever meet him, save where I were many & he few. I have never seen him; but he is deemed by all men as the worst of the tyrants who vex these lands, and, maybe, the mightiest" So was Ralph sore at heart for the damsel, and anon he spake to Bull again of her, who deemed somewhat, that his kinsman had been minded at the first to sell her to the lord of Utterbol. And Ralph thinks his game a hard one, yet deems that if he could but find out where the damsel was, he might deliver her, what by sleight, what by boldness.

Chapter XXV. The Fellowship comes to Whiteness

Two days thereafter the chapmen having done with their matters in Cheaping Knowe, whereas they must needs keep some of their wares for other places, and especially for Goldburg, they dight them to be gone and rode out a-gates of a mid-morning with banners displayed.

IT was some fifty miles thence to Whiteness, which lay close underneath the mountains, and was, as it were, the door of the passes whereby men rode to Goldburg. The land which they passed through was fair, both of tillage and pasture, with much cattle therein. Everywhere they saw men & women working afield, but no houses of worthy yeomen or vavassors, nor cots of good husbandmen. Here & there was a castle or strong-house, and here and there long rows of ugly hovels, or whiles houses, big, tall and long, but exceeding foul and ill-favoured, such as Ralph had not yet seen the like of. And when he asked of Clement concerning all this, he said: "It is as I have told thee, that here be no freemen who work afield, nay, nor villeins either. All those whom ye have seen working have been bought and sold like to those whom we saw standing on the Stone in the market of Cheaping Knowe, or else were born of such cattle, & each one of them can be bought and sold again, & they work not save under the whip. And as for those hovels & the long & foul houses, they are the stables wherein this kind of cattle is harboured"

Then Ralph's heart sank, and he said: "Master Clement, I prithee tell me; were it possible that the damsel whom I seek may be come to such a pass as one of these?"

"Nay," quoth Clement, "that is little like to be; such goodly wares are kept for the adornment of great men's houses. True it is that whiles the house thralls be sent into the fields for their punishment; yet not such as she, unless the master be wholly wearied of them, or if their wrath outrun their wits; for it is more to the master's profit to chastise them at home; so keep a good heart I bid thee, and maybe we shall have tidings at Whiteness"

So Ralph refrained his anxious heart, though forsooth his thought was much upon the damsel & of how she was faring.

IT was not till the third day at sunset that they came to Whiteness; for on the last day of their riding they came amongst the confused hills that lay before the great mountains, which were now often hidden from their sight; but whenever they appeared through the openings of the near hills, they seemed very great & terrible; dark and bare and stony; and Clement said that they were little better than they looked from afar. As to Whiteness, they saw it a long way off, as it lay on a long ridge at the end of a valley;

and so long was the ridge, that behind it was nothing green; naught but the huge and bare mountains. The westering sun fell upon its walls & its houses so that it looked white indeed against those great cliffs and crags; though, said Clement, that these were yet a good way off. Now when, after a long ride from the hither end of the valley, they drew nigh to the town, Ralph saw that the walls and towers were not very high or strong, for so steep was the hill whereon the town stood, that it needed not. Here also was no great castle within the town as at Cheaping Knowe, & the town itself nothing so big, but long & straggling along the top of the ridge. Cheaping Knowe was all builded of stone; but the houses here were of timber for the most part, done over with pargeting and whitened well. Yet was the town more cheerful of aspect than Cheaping Knowe, and the folk who came thronging about the chapmen at the gates not so woe-begone, and goodly enough. Of the lord of Whiteness, Clement told that he paid tribute to him of Cheaping Knowe, rather for love of peace than for fear of him; for he was no ill lord, and free men lived well under him. So the chapmen lodged in the market-place; & in two days time Ralph got speech of the Deacon of the Chapmen of the Town; who told him two matters; first that the lord of Utterbol had not been in Whiteness these six months; & next that the wild man had verily brought the damsel into the market; but he had turned away thence suddenly with her, without bringing her to the stone, and that it was most like that he would have the lord of Utterbol buy her; who, since he would be deeming that he might easily bend her to his will, would give him the better penny for her. "At the last," quoth the Deacon, "the wild man led her away toward the mountain pass that goeth to Goldburg, the damsel and he alone, and she with her hands unbound and riding a little horse." Of these tidings Ralph deemed it good that all traces of her were not lost; but his heart misgave him when he thought that by this time she must surely be in the hands of the lord of Utterbol.

Chapter XXVI. They ride the Mountains toward Goldburg.

FIVE days the fellowship abode at Whiteness, and or ever they departed Clement waged men-at-arms of the lord of the town, besides ser-

vants to look to the beasts amongst the mountains, so that what with one, what with another, they entered the gates of the mountains a goodly company of four score & ten.

RALPH asked of Bull if any of those whom he might meet in these mountains were of his kindred; and he answered, nay, unless perchance there might be some one or two going their peaceful errands there like Bull Nosy. So Ralph armed him with a good sword & a shield, & would have given him a steel hood also, but he would not bear it, saying that if sword & shield could not keep his head he had well earned a split skull.

SEVEN days they rode the mountains, and the way was toilsome and weary enough for it was naught but a stony maze of the rocks where nothing living dwelt, & nothing grew, save now and again a little dwarf willow. Yet was there naught worse to meet save toil, because they were over strong for the wild men to meddle with them, whereas the kindreds thereabout were but feeble. But as it drew towards evening on the seventh day, Ralph had ridden a little ahead with Bull alone, if he might perchance have a sight of the ending of this grievous wilderness, as Clement said might be, since now the way was down-hill, and all waters ran east. So as they rode, and it was about sunset, they saw something lying by a big stone under a cliff; they drew nigh, & saw a man lying on his back, and they deemed he was dead. So Bull went up to him, and leapt off his horse close by him & bent over him, but straight-way cast up his arms and set up a long wailing whoop, and then another & another, so that they that were behind heard it and came up upon the spur. But Ralph leapt from his horse and ran up to Bull and said: "What aileth thee to whoop & wail? Who is it?" But Bull turned about and shook his head at him, and said: "It is a man of my kindred, even he that was leading away thy sweet friend; & belike she it was that slew him, or why is she not here: Ochone! ahoo! ahoo!" Therewith fire ran through Ralph's heart, & he bethought him of that other murder in the wilderness, & he fell to wringing his hands, and cried out: "Ah, and where is she, where is she? Is she also taken away from me for ever? O me unhappy!" And he drew his sword therewith, and ran about amongst the rocks & the bushes seeking her body.

AND therewith came up Clement, and others of the company, and wondered to see Bull kneeling

down by the corpse, & to hear him crying out & wailing, and Ralph running about like one mad, & crying out now: "Oh! that I might find her! Mayhap/pen she is alive yet, and anigh here in some cleft of the rocks in this miserable wilderness. O my love that hast lain in mine arms, wouldst thou not have me find her alive? But if she be dead, then will I slay myself, for as young as I am, that I may find thee and her out of the world, since from the world both ye are gone" Then Cle/ment went up to Ralph, and would have a true tale out of him, and asked him what was amiss; but Ralph stared wild at him and answered not. But Bull cried out from where he knelt: "He is seeking the woman, and I would that he could find her; for then would I slay her on the howe of my kinsman: for she hath slain him; she hath slain him" That word heard Ralph, and he ran at Bull with uplifted sword to slay him, but Clem/ent tripped him & he fell, and his sword flew out of his hand. Then Clement and two of the others bound his hands with their girdles, till they might know what had befallen; for they deemed that a devil had entered into him, and feared that he would do a mischief to himself or some other.

AND now was the whole fellowship assembled, & stood in a ring round about Ralph and Bull, and the dead man; as for him, he had been dead some time, many days belike; but in that high and clear cold air, his carcase, whistled by the wind, had dried rather than rotted, & his face was clear to be seen with its great hooked nose and long black hair: and his skull was cloven.

NOW Bull had done his wailing for his kins-man, and he seemed to wake up as from a dream, and looked about the ring of men and spake: "Here is a great to do, my masters! What will ye with me? Have ye heard, or is it your custom, that when a man cometh on the dead corpse of his brother, his own mother's son, he turneth it over with his foot, as if it were the carcase of a dog, and so goeth on his way? This I ask, that albeit I be but a war/taken thrall, I be suffered to lay my brother in earth and heap a howe over him in these mountains" They all murmured a yeasay to this save Ralph. He had been so-bered by his fall, & was stand-ing up now betwixt Clement and the captain, who had un-bound his hands, now that the others had come up; he hung his head, and was ashamed of

his fury by seeming. But when Bull had spoken, & the others had answered, Ralph said to Bull, wrathfully still, but like a man in his wits: "Why didst thou say that thou wouldest slay her?" "Hast thou found her?" said Bull. "Nay," quoth Ralph, sullenly. "Well, then," said Bull, "when thou dost find her, we will speak of it." Said Ralph: "Why didst thou say that she hath slain him?" "I was put out of my wits by the sight of him dead," said Bull; "but now I say mayhappen she hath slain him." "And mayhappen not," said Clement; "look here to the cleaving of his skull right through this iron headpiece, which he will have bought at Cheaping Knowe (for I have seen suchlike in the armourers' booth there): it must have taken a strong man to do this" "Yea," quoth the captain, "& a big sword to boot: this is the stroke of a strong man wielding a good weapon" Said Bull: "Well, & will my master bid me forego vengeance for my brother's slaying, or that I bear him to purse? Then let him slay me now, for I am his thrall" Said Ralph: "Thou shalt do as thou wilt herein, & I also will do as I will. For if she slew him, the taking of her captive should be set against the slaying." "That is but right," said the captain; "but Sir Ralph, I bid thee take the word of an old man-at-arms for it, that she slew him not; neither she, nor any other woman" Said Clement: "Well, let all this be. But tell me, lord Ralph, what thou wouldst do, since now thou art come to thyself again?" Said Ralph: "I would seek the wilderness hereabout, if perchance the damsel be thrust in to some cleft or cavern, alive or dead" "Well," said Clement, "this is my rede. Since Bull Shockhead would bury his brother, and lord Ralph would seek the damsel, and whereas there is water anigh, and the sun is well nigh set, let us pitch our tents and abide here till morning, and let night bring counsel unto some of us. How say ye, fellows?" None naysaid it, & they fell to pitching the tents, and lighting the cooking-fires; but Bull at once betook him to digging a grave for his brother, whilst Ralph with the captain & four others went and sought all about the place, and looked into all clefts of the rocks, & found not the maiden, nor any token of her. They were long about it, and when they were come back again, and it was night, though the moon shone out, there was Bull Shockhead standing by the howe of his brother Bull

Nosy, which was heaped up high over the place where they had found him. So when Bull saw him, he turned to him and said: "King's son, I have done what needs was for this present. Now, wilt thou slay me for my fault, or shall I be thy man again, and serve thee truly unless the blood feud come between us?" Said Ralph: "Thou shalt serve me truly, and help me to find him who hath slain thy brother, and carried off the damsel; for even thus it hath been done me seemeth, since about here we have seen no signs of her alive or dead. But tomorrow we shall seek wider ere I ride on my way." "Yea," said Bull, "and I will be one in the search."

So then they gat them to their sleeping-berths, and Ralph, contrary to his wont, lay long awake, pondering these things; till at last he said to himself that this woman, whom he called Dorothea, was certainly alive, and wotted that he was seeking her. And then it seemed to him that he could behold her through the darkness of night, clad in the green flowered gown as he had first seen her, & she bewailing her captivity & the long tarrying of the deliverer as she went to and fro in a great chamber builded of marble and done about with gold and bright colours: and or ever he slept, he deemed this to be a vision of what then was, rather than a memory of what had been; and it was sweet to his very soul.

Chapter XXVII. Clement tells of Goldburg

Now when it was morning he rose early and roused Bull and the captain, and they searched in divers places where they had not been the night before, & even a good way back about the road they had ridden yesterday, but found no tidings. And Ralph said to himself that this was naught but what he had looked for after that vision of the night.

So he rode with his fellows somewhat shamefaced that they had seen that sudden madness in him; but was presently of better cheer than he had been yet. He rode beside Clement; they went downhill speedily, & the wilderness began to better, & there was grass at whiles, and bushes here and there. A little after noon they came out of a pass cleft deep through the rocks by a swift stream which had once been far greater than then, and climbed up a steep ridge that lay across the road,

& looking down from the top of it, beheld the open country again. But this was otherwise from what they had beheld from the mountain's brow above Cheaping Knowe. For thence the mountains beyond Whiteness, even those that they had just ridden, were clear to be seen like the wall of the plain country. But here, looking adown, the land below them seemed but a great spreading plain with no hills rising from it, save that far away they could see a certain break in it, and amidst that, something that was brighter than the face of the land elsewhere. Clement told Ralph that this was Goldburg and that it was built on a gathering of hills, not great, but going up steep from the plain. And the plain, said he, was not so wholly flat and even as it looked from up there, but swelled at whiles into downs and low hills. He told him that Goldburg was an exceeding fair town to behold; that the lord who had built it had brought from over the mountains masons & wood-wrights and artificers of all kinds, that they might make it as fair as might be, and that he spared on it neither wealth nor toil nor pains. For in sooth he deemed that he should find the Well at the World's End, and drink thereof, & live long and young and fair past all record; therefore had he builded this city, to be the house & home of his long-enduring joyance. Now some said that he had found the Well, and drank thereof; others naysaid that; but all deemed that they knew how that Goldburg was not done building ere that lord was slain in a tumult, and that what was then undone was cobbled up after the uncomely fashion of the towns thereabout.

Clement said moreover that this happy lord dead, things had not gone so well there as had been looked for. Forsooth it had been that lord's will and meaning that all folk in Goldburg should thrive, both those who wrought and those for whom they wrought. But it went not so, but there were many poor folk there, and few wealthy. Again, said Clement, that though the tillers and toilers of Goldburg were not for the most part mere thralls and chattels, as in the lands beyond the mountains behind them, yet were they little more thriving for that cause; whereas they belonged not to a master, who must at worst feed them, and to no manor, whose acres they might till for their livelihood, and on whose pastures they might feed their

cattle; nor had they any to help or sustain them against the oppressor and the violent man; so that they toiled and swinked and died with none heeding them, save that they had the work of their hands good cheap; & they forsooth heeded them less than their draught beasts whom they must needs buy with money, and whose bellies they must needs fill; whereas these poor wretches were slaves without a price, and if one died another took his place on the chance that thereby he might escape present death by hunger, for there was a great many of them.

Chapter XXVIII. Now they come to Goldburg

THAT night they slept yet among the mountains, or rather in the first of the hill country at their feet; but on the morrow they rode down into the lowlands, and thereby lost all sight of Goldburg, and it was yet afar off, so that they rode four days through lands well-tilled, but for the most part ill-housed, a country of little hills & hollows & rising grounds, before they came in sight of it again heaving up huge and bright under the sun. It was built partly on three hills, the buttresses of a long ridge which turned a wide river, and on the ridge itself, and partly on the flat shore of the river, on either side, hillward and plainward: but a great white wall girt it all about, which went right over the river as a bridge, & on the plain side it was exceeding high, so that its battlements might be somewhat evened with those of the hill-wall above. So that as they came up to the place they saw little of the town because of the enormity of the wall; scarce aught save a spire or a tall tower-like roof here and there.

SO when they were come a-nigh the gate, they displayed their banners and rode right up to it; and people thronged the walls to see their riding. One by one they passed through the wicket of the gate: which gate itself was verily huge beyond measure, all built of great ashlar-stones; and when they were within, it was like a hall somewhat long & exceeding high, most fairly vaulted; midmost of the said hall they rode through a noble arch on their right hand, and lo another hall exceeding long, but lower than the first, with many glazen windows set in its townward wall; and when they looked through these, they saw the river running un-

derneath; for this was naught but the lower bridge of the city; and they learned afterwards and saw, that above the vault of this long bridge rose up the castle, chamber on chamber, till its battlements were level with the highest towers of the wall on the hill top.

THUS they passed the bridge, and turning to the left at its ending, came into the Water-Street of Goldburg, where the river, with wide quays on either side thereof, ran betwixt the houses. As for these, beneath the dwellings went a fair arched passage like to the ambulatory of an abbey; and every house all along this street was a palace for its goodliness. The houses were built of white stones and red and grey; with shapely pillars to the cloister, & all about carvings of imagery and knots of flowers; goodly were the windows and all glazed, as fair as might be ❧ On the river were great barges, and other craft such as were not sea-goers, river-ships that might get them through the bridges, and furnished with masts that might be lowered and shipped.

MUCH people was gathered to see the chapmen enter, yet scarce so many as might be looked for in so goodly a town; yea, & many of the folk were clad foully, and were haggard of countenance, and cried on the chapmen for alms. Howbeit some were clad gaily and richly enough, & were fair of favour as any that Ralph had seen since he left Upmeads; & amongst these goodly folk were women not a few, whose gear & bearing called to Ralph's mind the women of the Wheat-wearers whom he had seen erst in the Burg of the Four Friths, whereas they were somewhat wantonly clad in scanty & thin raiment. And of these, though they were not all thralls, were many who were in servitude; for, as Clement did Ralph to wit, though the tillers of the soil, & the herdsmen, in short the hewers of wood and drawers of water, were men masterless, yet rich men might & did buy both men and women for servants in their houses & for their pleasure and profit in divers wise.

SO they rode to their hostel in the market place, which lay a little back from the river in an ingle of the ridge & one of its buttresses; and all round the said market were houses as fair as the first they had seen: but above, on the hill-sides, save for the castle & palace of the Queen (for a woman ruled in Goldburg), were the houses but low, poorly built of post and pan, and

thatched with straw, or reed, or shingle. But the great church was all along one side of the market place; and albeit this folk was somewhat wild and strange of faith for Christian men, yet was it dainty and delicate as might be, & its steeples and bell-towers were high and well builded, and adorned exceeding richly.

SO they lighted down at their hostel, & never had Ralph seen such another, for the court within was very great & with a fair garden filled with flowers & orchard-trees, and amidst it was a fountain of fresh water, built in the goodliest fashion of many-coloured marble-stones. And the arched and pillared way about the said court was as fair as the cloister of a mitred abbey; and the hall for the guests was of like fashion, vaulted with marvellous cunning, and with a row of pillars amidmost. There they abode in good entertainment; yet this noted Ralph, that as goodly as was the fashion of the building of that house, yet the hangings & beds, & stools and chairs, and other plenishing were no richer or better than might be seen in the hostelry of any good town. So they went bedward & Ralph slept dreamlessly, as was mostly his wont.

Chapter XXIX. Of Goldburg and the Queen thereof

ON the morrow, when Ralph and Clement met in the hall, Clement spake and said: "Lord Ralph, as I told thee in Whitwall we chapmen are now at the end of our outward journey, and in about twenty days time we shall turn back to the mountains; but, as I deem, thou wilt be minded to follow up thy quest of the damsel, and whatsoever else thou mayst be seeking. Now this thou mayst well do whiles we are here in Goldburg, & yet come back hither in time to fare back with us: and also, if thou wilt, thou mayst have fellows in thy quest, to wit, some of those our men-at-arms, who love thee well. But now, when thou hast done thy best these days during, if thou hast then found naught, I counsel thee & beseech thee to come thy ways back with us, that we twain may wend to Upmeads together, where thou shalt live well, and better all the deeds of thy father. Me seemeth this will be more meet for thee than the casting away of thy life in seeking a woman, who maybe will be naught to thee when thou hast found her; or in chasing some castle in the clouds, that shall be ne-

ver the nigher to thee, how far soever thou farest. For now I tell thee that I have known this while how thou art seeking the Well at the World's End; and who knoweth that there is any such thing on the earth? Come, then, thou art fair, and young, and strong; & if ye seek wealth thou shalt have it, and my furtherance to the utmost, if that be aught worth. Bethink thee, child, there are they that love thee in Upmeads & thereabout, were it but thy gossip, my wife, dame Katherine"

Said Ralph: "Master Clement, I thank thee for all that thou hast said, and thy behest, and thy deeds. Thy rede is good, and in all ways will I follow it, save one; to wit, that if I have not found the damsel ere ye turn back, I must needs abide in this land searching for her. And I pray the pardon both of thee and of thy gossip, if I answer not your love as ye would, and perchance as I should. Yea, and of Upmeads also I crave pardon. But in doing as I do, my deed shall be but according to the duty bounden on me by mine oath when Duke Osmond made me knight last year in the church of St. Laurence of Upmeads" Said Clement: "I see that there is something else in it than that; I see thee to be young, and that love and desire bind thee in closer bonds than thy knightly oath. Well, so it must be, and till thou hast her, there is but one woman in the world for thee" "Nay, it is not so, Master Clement," said Ralph, "& I will tell thee this, so that thou mayst trow my naysay; since I departed from Upmeads, I have been taken in the toils of love, and desired a fair woman, and I have won her & death hath taken her. Trowest thou my word?" "Yea," said Clement, "but to one of thy years love is not plucked up by the root, & it soon groweth again." Then said Ralph, sadly: "Now tell my gossip of this when thou comest home." Clement nodded yeasay, and Ralph spake again in a moment: "And now will I begin my search in Goldburg by praying thee to bring me to speech of merchants & others who may have seen or heard tidings of my damsel." He looked at Clement anxiously as he spake; & Clement smiled, for he said to himself that looking into Ralph's heart on this matter was like looking into a chamber through an open window. But he said: "Fear not but I will look to it; I am thy friend, and not thy schoolmaster."

THEREWITH he departed from Ralph, & within three days he had brought him to speech of all those who were like to know

anything of the matter, & one and all they said that they had seen no such woman, and that as for the Lord of Utterbol, he had not been in Goldburg these three months. But one of the merchants said: "Master Clement, if this young knight is bound for Utterbol, he beareth his life in his hand, as thou knowest full well. Now I rede thee bring him to our Queen, who is good and compassionate, & if she may not help him otherwise, yet belike she may give him a writing to show to that tyrant, which may stand him in stead: for it does not do for any man to go against the will of our Lady & Queen; who will surely pay him back for his ill-will some day or other." Said Clement: "It is well thought of, and I will surely do as thou biddest."

SO wore four days, and, that time during, Ralph was going to & fro asking questions of folk that he came across; as people newcome to the city and hunters from the mountain-feet & the forests of the plain, & mariners and suchlike, concerning the damsel and the Lord of Utterbol; and Bull also went about seeking tidings: but whereas Ralph asked down-right what he wanted to know, Bull was wary, and rather led men on to talk with him concerning those things than asked them of them in such wise that they saw the question. Albeit it was all one, and no tidings came to them; indeed, the name of the Lord of Utterbol (whom forsooth Bull named not) seemed to freeze the speech on men's tongues, and they commonly went away at once when it was spoken.

ON the fifth day came Clement to Ralph and said: "Now will I bring thee to the Queen, and she is young, and so fair, and withal so wise, that it seems to me not all so sure but that the sight of her will make an end of thy quest once for all. So that meseems thou mayest abide here in a life far better than wandering amongst uncouth folk, perilous and cruel. Yea, so thou mayst have it if thou wilt, being so exceeding goodly, and wise, and well-spoken, and of high lineage" Ralph heard & reddened, but gave him back no answer; and they went together to the High House of the Queen, which was like a piece of the Kingdom of Heaven for loveliness, so many pillars as there were of bright marble-stone, and gilded, and the chapiters carved most excellently: not many hangings on the walls, for the walls themselves were carven, and painted with pictures in the most excel-

lent manner; the floors withal were so dainty that they seemed as if they were made for none but the feet of the fairest of women. And all this was set amidst of gardens, the like of which they had never seen. But they entered without more ado, and were brought by the pages to the Lady's innermost chamber; and if the rest of the house were goodly, this was goodlier, and a marvel, so that it seemed wrought rather by goldsmiths and jewellers than by masons and carvers. Yet indeed many had said with Clement that the Queen who sat there was the goodliest part thereof.

NOW she spake to Clement and said: "Hail, merchant! Is this the young knight of whom thou tellest, he who seeketh his beloved that hath been borne away into thralldom by evil men?" "Even so," said Clement. But Ralph spake: "Nay, Lady, the damsel whom I seek is not my beloved, but my friend. My beloved is dead" The Queen looked on him smiling kindly, yet was her face somewhat troubled. She said: "Master chapman, thy time here is not over long for all that thou hast to do; so we give thee leave to depart with our thanks for bringing a friend to see us. But this knight hath no affairs to look to: so if he will abide with us for a little, it will be to our pleasure." So Clement made his obeisance and went his ways.

BUT the Queen bade Ralph sit before her, & tell her of his griefs, & she looked so kindly and friendly upon him that the heart melted within him, and he might say no word, for the tears that brake out from him, and he wept before her; while she looked on him, the colour coming & going in her face, & her lips trembling, & let him weep on. But he thought not of her, but of himself and how kind she was to him. But after a while he mastered his passion & began, and told her all he had done and suffered. Long was the tale in the telling, for it was sweet to him to lay before her both his grief and his hope. She let him talk on, and whiles she listened to him, and whiles not, but all the time she gazed on him, yet sometimes askance, as if she were ashamed. As for him, he saw her face how fair and lovely she was, yet was there little longing in his heart for her, more than for one of the painted women on the wall, for as kind and as dear as he deemed her.

WHEN he had done, she kept silence a while, but at last she en-

forced her, and spake: "Sad it is for the mother that bore thee that thou art not in her house, wherein all things would be kind & familiar to thee. Maybe thou art seeking for what is not. Or maybe thou shalt seek & shalt find, and there may be naught in what thou findest, whereof to give thee such gifts as are meet for thy faithfulness and valiancy. But in thine home shouldst thou have all gifts which thou mayest desire"

Then was she silent awhile, & then spake: "Yet must I needs say that I would that thine home were in Goldburg"

He smiled sadly and looked on her, but with no astonishment; & indeed he still scarce thought of her as he said: "Lady and Queen, thou art good to me beyond measure. Yet, look you! One home I had, and I left it; another I looked to have, and I lost it; & now I have no home. Maybe in days to come I shall go back to mine old home; and whiles I wonder with what eyes it will look on me. For merry is that land, and dear; and I have become sorrowful"

"Fear not," she said; "I say again that in thine home shall all things look kindly on thee"

Once more she sat silent, & no word did his heart bid him speak. Then she sighed & said: "Fair lord, I bid thee come and go in this house as thou wilt; but whereas there are many folk who must needs see me, & many things are appointed for me to do, therefore I pray thee to come hither in three days' space, and meanwhile I will look to the matter of thy search, that I may speed thee on the way to Utterness, which is no great way from Utterbol, and is the last town whereof we know aught. And I will write a letter for thee to give to the lord of Utterbol, which he will heed, if he heedeth aught my good-will or enmity. I beseech thee come for it in three days' wearing." Therewith she arose and took his hand and led him to the door, and he departed, blessing her goodness, & wondering at her courtesy & gentle speech.

FOR those three days he was still seeking tidings everywhere, till folk began to know of him far and wide, and to talk of him. And at the time appointed he went to the Queen's House & was brought to her chamber as before, & she was alone therein. She greeted him and smiled on him exceeding kindly, but he might not fail to note of her that she looked sad & her face was worn by sorrow. She bade him sit beside her, and said: "Hast thou any tidings of the woman whom thou seekest?" "Nay, nay," said he, "and now

I am minded to carry on the search out/a/gates. I have some good friends who will go with me awhile. But thou, Lady, hast thou heard aught?"

"Naught of the damsel," she said. "But there is something else. As Clement told me, thou seekest the Well at the World's End, and through Utterness and by Utterbol is a way whereby folk seek thither. Mayst thou find it, and may it profit thee more than it did my kinsman of old, who first raised up Goldburg in the wilderness. Whereas for him was naught but strife & confusion, till he was slain in a quarrel, wherein to fail was to fail, and to win the day was to win shame and misery"

She looked on him sweetly and said: "Thou art nowise such as he; and if thou drink of the Well, thou wilt go back to Upmeads, & thy father and mother, & thine own folk and thine home. But now here is the letter which thou shalt give to the Lord of Utterbol if thou meet him; & mayhappen he is nought so evil a man as the tale of him runs"

She gave him the letter into his hands, and spake again: "And now I have this to say to thee, if anything go amiss with thee, & thou be nigh enough to seek to me, come hither, and then, in whatso plight thou mayst be, or whatsoever deed thou mayst have done, here will be the open door for thee and the welcome of a friend"

Her voice shook a little as she spake, and she was silent again, mastering her trouble. Then she said: "At last I must say this to thee, that there may no lie be between us. That damsel of whom thou spakest that she was but thy friend, & not thy love.. O that I might be thy friend in such/wise! But over clearly I see that it may not be so. For thy mind looketh on thy deeds to come, that they shall be shared by some other than me. Friend, it seemeth strange and strange to me that I have come on thee so suddenly, and loved thee so sorely, and that I must needs say farewell to thee in so short a while. Farewell, farewell!"

Therewith she arose, and once more she took his hand in hers, and led him to the door. And he was sorry & all amazed: for he had not thought so much of her before, that he might see that she loved him; and he thought but that she, being happy and great, was kind to him who was hapless & homeless. And he was bewildered by her words and sore ashamed that for all his grief for her he had no speech, and scarce a look for her; he knew not what to do or say

So he left the Queen's House and the court thereof as though the pave-

ment were growing red-hot beneath his feet.

Chapter XXX. Ralph hath hope of tidings concerning the Well at the World's End

NOW he goes to Clement, & tells him that he deems he has no need to abide their departure from Goldburg to say farewell and follow his quest further afield; since it is clear that in Goldburg he should have no more tidings. Clement laughed & said: "Not so fast, Lord Ralph; thou mayst yet hear a word or two." "What!" said Ralph, "hast thou heard of something new?" Said Clement: "There has been a man here seeking thee, who said that he wotted of a wise man who could tell thee much concerning the Well at the World's End. And when I asked him of the Damsel and the Lord of Utterbol, if he knew anything of her, he said yea, but that he would keep it for thy privy ear. So I bade him go, and come again when thou shouldst be here. And I deem that he will not tarry long."

NOW they were sitting on a bench outside the hall of the hostel, with the court between them and the gate; & Ralph said: "Tell me, didst thou deem the man good or bad?" Said Clement: "He was hard to look into: but at least he looked not a fierce or cruel man; nor indeed did he seem false or sly, though I take him for one who has lost his manhood . . . but lo you! here he comes across the court". So Ralph looked, and saw in sooth a man drawing nigh, who came straight up to them & lowted to them, and then stood before them waiting for their word: he was fat & somewhat short, white-faced and pink-cheeked, with yellow hair long and curling, and with a little thin red beard & blue eyes: altogether much unlike the fashion of men of those parts. He was clad gaily in an orange-tawny coat laced with silver, and broidered with colours. Clement spake to him and said: "This is the young knight who is minded to seek further east to wot if it be mere lies which he hath heard of the Well at the World's End".

The new-comer lowted before them again, & said in a small voice, and as one who was shy & somewhat afeared: "Lords, I can tell many a tale concerning that Well, and them who have gone on the quest thereof. And the first thing I have to tell is that the way thereto is through Utterness, & that I can be a shower of the way &

a leader to any worthy knight who listeth to seek thither; & moreover, I know of a sage who dwelleth not far from the town of Utterness, and who, if he will, can put a seeker of the Well on the right road"

He looked askance on Ralph, whose face flushed and whose eyes glittered at that word.

But Clement said: "Yea, that seemeth fair to look to: but hark ye! Is it not so that the way to Utterness is perilous?" Said the man: "Thou mayst rather call it deadly, to any who is not furnished with a let-pass from the Lord of Utterbol, as I am. But with such a scroll a child or a woman may wend the road unharmed." "Where hast thou the said let-pass" said Clement. "Here," quoth the newcomer; and therewith he drew a scroll from out of his pouch and opened it before them, & they read it together, & sure enough it was a writing charging all men to let pass and aid Morfinn the Minstrel (of whose aspect it told closely), under pain of falling into the displeasure of Gandolf, Lord of Utterbol; & the date thereon was but three months old. Said Clement: "This is good, this let-pass: see thou, Ralph, the seal of Utterbol, the Bear upon the Castle Wall. None would dare to counterfeit this seal, save one who was weary of life, and longed for torments"

Said Ralph, smiling: "Thou seest, Master Clement, that there must be a parting betwixt us, and that this man's coming furthers it: but were he or were he not, yet the parting had come. And wert thou not liefer that it should come in a way to pleasure and aid me, than that thou shouldst but leave me behind at Goldburg when thou departest: & I with naught done toward the achieving my quest, but merely dragging my deedless body about these streets; & at last, it may be, going on a perilous journey without guiding or safe-conduct?"

"Yea, lad," said Clement, "I wotted well that thou wouldst take thine own way, but fain had I been that it had been mine also." Then he pondered a while & said afterwards: "I suppose that thou wilt take thy servant Bull Shockhead with thee, for he is a stout man-at-arms, & I deem him trusty, though he be a wild man. But one man is of little avail to a traveller on a perilous road, so if thou wilt, I will give leave & license to a half score of our sergeants to follow thee on the road; for, as thou wottest, I may easily wage others in their place. Or else

wouldst thou ask the Queen of Goldburg to give thee a score of men-at-arms; she looked to me the other day as one who would deny thee few of thine askings"

Ralph blushed red, and said: "Nay, I will not ask her this." Then he was silent; the newcomer looked from one to the other, and said nothing. At last Ralph spake: "Look you Clement, my friend, I wot well how thou wouldst make my goings safe, even if it were to thy loss, and I thank thee for it: but I deem I shall do no better than putting myself into this man's hands, since he has a let-pass for the lands of him of Utterbol: and meseemeth from all that I have heard that a half-score or a score, or for the matter of that an hundred men-at-arms would not be enough to fight a way to Utterbol, & their gathering together would draw folk upon them, who would not meddle with two men journeying together, even if they had no let-pass of this mighty man". Clement sighed and grunted, & then said: "Well, lord, maybe thou art right".

"Yea," said the guide, "he is as right as may be: I have not spoken before, lest ye might have deemed me untrusty: but now I tell thee this, that never should a small band of men unknown win through the lands of the Lord of Utterbol, or the land debatable that lieth betwixt them and Goldburg". Ralph nodded friendly at him as he spake; but Clement looked on him sternly; and the man beheld his scowling face innocently, and took no heed of it.

Then said Ralph: "As to Bull Shockhead, I will speak to him anon; but I will not take him with me; for indeed I fear lest his mountain-pride grow up over greenly at whiles and entangle me in some thicket of peril hard to win out of".

"Well," said Clement, "and when wilt thou depart?" "To-morrow," said Ralph, "if my faring-fellow be ready for me by then." "I am all ready," said the man: "if thou wilt ride out by the east gate about two hours before noon to-morrow, I will abide thee on a good horse with all that we may need for the journey: and now I ask leave." "Thou hast it," said Clement.

So the man departed, & those two being left alone, Master Clement said: "Well, I deemed that nothing else would come of it: & I fear that thy gossip will be ill-content with me; for great is the peril." "Yea," said Ralph, "and great the reward." Clement smiled and sighed, and

said: "Well, lad, even so hath a many thought before thee, wise men as well as fools" ❧ Ralph looked at him and reddened, and departed from him a little, & went walking in the cloister there to and fro, and pondered these matters; and whatever he might do, still would that trim figure be before his eyes which he had looked on so gladly erewhile in the hostel of Bourton Abbas; and he said aloud to himself: "Surely she needeth me, & draweth me to her whether I will or no." So wore the day.

Chapter XXXI. The beginning of the Road to Utterbol.

EARLY next morning Ralph arose and called Bull Shockhead unto him and said: "So it is, Bull, that thou art my war-taken thrall." Bull nodded his head, but frowned therewithal. Said Ralph: "If I bid thee aught that is not beyond reason thou wilt do it, wilt thou not?" "Yea," said Bull, surlily ❧ "Well," quoth Ralph, "I am going a journey east-away, & I may not have thee with me, therefore I bid thee take this gold & go free with my goodwill." Bull's face lighted up, & the eyes glittered in his face; but he said: "Yea, king's son, but why wilt thou not take me with thee?" Said Ralph: "It is a perilous journey, and thy being with me will cast thee into peril, & make mine more. Moreover, I have an errand, as thou wottest, which is all mine own" ❧ Bull pondered a little and then said: "King's son, I was thinking at first that our errands lay together, and it is so; but belike thou sayest true that there will be less peril to each of us if we sunder at this time. But now I will say this to thee, that henceforth thou shalt be as a brother to me, if thou wilt have it so, and if ever thou comest amongst our people, thou wilt be in no danger of them: nay, they shall do all the good they may to thee" ❧ Then he took him by the hand and kissed him, and he set his hand to his gear and drew forth a little purse of some small beast's skin that was broidered in front with a pair of bull's horn's: then he stooped down and plucked a long and tough bent from the grass at his feet (for they were talking in the garden of the hostel) and twisted it swiftly into a strange knot of many plies, and opening the purse laid it therein & said: "King's son, this is the token whereby it shall be known amongst our folk that I have made thee my brother: were the flames roaring about thee, or the swords

clashing over thine head, if thou cry out, I am the brother of Bull Shockhead, all those of my kindred who are near will be thy friends & thy helpers. And now I say to thee fare-well: but it is not altogether unlike that thou mayst hear of me again in the furthest East"

So Ralph departed from him and Clement went with Ralph to the Gate of Goldburg, and bade him farewell there; and or they parted he said: "Meseems I have with me now some deal of the foreseeing of Katherine my wife, and in my mind it is that we shall yet see thee at Wulstead & Upmeads, and thou no less famous than now thou art. This is my last word to thee" Therewith they parted, and Ralph rode his ways."

HE came on his way-leader about a bowshot from the gate & they greeted each other: the said guide was clad no otherwise than yesterday: he had saddle-bags on his horse, which was a strong black roadster: but he was no-wise armed, & bore but a satchel with a case of knives done on to it, and on the other side a fiddle in its case

So Ralph smiled on him and said: "Thou hast no weapon, then?" "What need for weapon?" said he; "since we are not of might for battle. This is my weapon," said he, touching his fiddle, "and withal it is my field and mine acre that raiseth flesh-meat and bread for me: yea, and whiles a little drink."

SO they rode on together and the man was blithe and merry; & Ralph said to him: "Since we are fellows for a good while, as I suppose, what shall I call thee?" Said he: "Morfinn the Minstrel, I hight, to serve thee, fair lord. Or some call me Morfinn the Unmanned. Wilt thou not now ask me concerning that privy word that I had for thine ears?" "Yea," said Ralph, reddening, "hath it to do with a woman?" "Naught less," said Morfinn. "for I heard of thee asking many questions thereof in Goldburg, & I said to myself, now may I, who am bound for Utterness, do a good turn to this fair young lord, whose face bewrayeth his heart, and telleth all men that he is kind and bounteous; so that there is no doubt but he will reward me well at once for any help I may give him; & also it may be that he will do me a good turn hereafter in memory of this that I have done him." "Speak, wilt thou not," said Ralph, "& tell me at once if thou hast seen this woman? Be sure that I shall reward thee."

"Nay, nay, fair sir," said

Morfinn; "a woman I have seen brought captive to the House of Utterbol. See thou to it if it be she whom thou seekest" He smiled therewith, but now Ralph deemed him not so debonnaire as he had at first, for there was mocking in the smile; therefore he was wroth, but he refrained him & said: "Sir Minstrel, I wot not why thou hast come with a tale in thy mouth & it will not out of it: lo you, will this open the doors of speech to thee" (& he reached his hand out to him with two pieces of gold lying therein), "or shall this?" & therewith he half drew his sword from his sheath Said Morfinn, grinning again: "Nay, I fear not the bare steel in thine hands, Knight; for thou hast not fool written plain in thy face; therefore thou wilt not slay thy way-leader, or even anger him over much. And as to thy gold, the wages shall be paid at the journey's end. I was but seeking about in my mind how best to tell thee my tale so that thou mightest believe my word which is true. Thus it goes: As I left Utterbol a month ago, I saw a damsel brought in captive there, and she seemed to me so exceeding fair that I looked hard on her, and asked one of the men-at-arms, who is my friend, concerning the market whereat she was cheapened; and he told me that she had not been bought, but taken out of the hands of the wild men from the further mountains. Is that aught like to your story, lord?" "Yea," said Ralph knitting his brows for eagerness. "Well," said Morfinn, "but there are more fair women than one in the world, & belike this is not thy friend: so now, as well as I may, I will tell thee whatlike she was, and if thou knowest her not, thou mayst give me those two gold pieces and go back again. She was tall rather than short, & slim rather than bigly made. But many women are fashioned so: & doubtless she was worn by travel, since she has at least come from over the mountains: but that is little to tell her by: her hands, & her feet also (for she was a horseback & barefoot) wrought well beyond most women: yet so might it have been with some: yet few, methinks, of women who have worked afield, as I deem her to have done, would have hands & feet so shapely: her face tanned with the sun, but with fair colour shining through it; her hair brown, yet with a fair bright colour shining therein, and very abundant: her cheeks smooth, round & well wrought as any imager could do them: her chin round and cloven: her lips full & red, but firm-set as if she might be both valiant & wroth. Her eyes

set wide apart, grey and deep: her whole face sweet of aspect, as though she might be exceeding kind to one that pleased her; yet high and proud of demeanour also, meseemed, as though she were come of great kindred. Is this aught like to thy friend?"

He spake all this slowly and smoothly and that mocking smile came into his face now & again. Ralph grew pale as he spoke and knitted his brows as one in great wrath and grief; & he was slow to answer; but at last he said "Yea," shortly and sharply. Then said Morfinn: "And yet after all it might not be she: for there might be another or two even in these parts of whom all this might be said. But now I will tell thee of her raiment, though there may be but little help to thee therein, as she may have shifted it many times since thou hast seen her. Thus it was: she was clad outwardly in a green gown, short of skirt as of one wont to go afoot; somewhat straight in the sleeves as of one who hath household work to do, & there was broidery many coloured on the seams thereof, & a border of flower-work round the hem: & this I noted, that a cantle of the skirt had been rent away by some hap of the journey. Now what sayest thou, fair lord? Have I done well to bring thee this tale?" "O yea, yea," said Ralph, and he might not contain himself; but set spurs to horse & galloped on ahead for some furlong or so: and then drew rein and gat off his horse, and made as if he would see to his saddle-girths, for he might not refrain from weeping the sweet and bitter tears of desire and fear, so stirred the soul within him. Morfinn rode on quietly, & by then he came up, Ralph was mounting again, & when he was in the saddle he turned away his head from his fellow & said in a husky voice: "Morfinn, I command thee, or if thou wilt I beseech thee, that thou speak not to me again of this woman whom I am seeking; for it moveth me over much." "That is well, lord," said Morfinn, "I will do after thy command; and there be many other matters to speak of besides one fair woman."

Then they rode on soberly a while, & Ralph kept silence, as he rode pondering much; but the minstrel hummed snatches of rhyme as he rode the way.

But at last Ralph turned to him suddenly & said: "Tell me, way-leader, in what wise did they seem to be using that woman?" The minstrel chuckled: "Fair lord," said he, "if I had a mind for mocking I might say of thee that

thou blowest both hot & cold, since it was but half an hour ago that thou badest me speak naught of her: but I deem that I know thy mind herein: so I will tell thee that they seemed to be using her courteously; as is no marvel; for who would wish to mar so fair an image? O, it will be well with her: I noted that the Lord seemed to think it good to ride beside her, & eye her all over. Yea, she shall have a merry life of it if she but do somewhat after the Lord's will" Ralph looked askance at him fiercely, but the other heeded it naught: then said Ralph: "And how if she do not his will?" Said Morfinn, grinning: "Then hath my Lord a many servants to do his will." Ralph held his peace for a long while; at last he turned a cleared brow to Morfinn and said: "Dost thou tell of the Lord of Utterbol that he is a good lord and merciful to his folk and servants?" "Fair sir," said the minstrel; "thou hast bidden me not speak of one woman, now will I pray thee not to speak of one man, and that is my Lord of Utterbol" Ralph's heart fell at this word, and he asked no question as to wherefore.

So now they rode on both, rather more than soberly for a while: but the day was fair; the sun shone, the wind blew, & the sweet scents floated about them, & Ralph's heart cast off its burden somewhat & he fell to speech again; and the minstrel answered him gaily by seeming, noting many things as they rode along, as one that took delight in the fashion of the earth.

It was a fresh & bright morning of early autumn, the sheaves were on the acres, & the grapes were blackening to the vintage, and the beasts & birds at least were merry. But little merry were the husbandmen whom they met, either carles or queans, & they were scantily and foully clad, and sullen-faced, if not hunger-pinched If they came across any somewhat joyous, it was here & there certain gangrel folk resting on the wayside grass, or coming out of the woods & other passes by twos and threes, whiles with a child or two with them. These were of aspect like to the gipsies of our time and nation, & were armed, all of them, and mostly well clad after their fashion. Sometimes when there were as many as four or five carles of them together, they would draw up amidst of the highway, but presently would turn aside at the sight either of Ralph's war-gear or of the minstrel's raiment. Forsooth, some of them seemed to know

him, & nodded friendly to him as they passed by, but he gave them back no good day. They had now ridden out of the land of Goldburg, which was narrow on that side, & the day was wearing fast. This way the land was fair and rich, with no hills of any size. They crossed a big river twice by bridges, & small streams often, mostly by fords.

SOME two hours before sunset they came upon a place where a byway joined the high road, & on the ingle stood a chapel of stone (whether of the heathen or Christian men Ralph wotted not, for it was uncouth of fashion), and by the door of the said chapel, on a tussock of grass, sat a knight all-armed save the head, and beside him a squire held his war-horse, & five other men-at-arms stood anigh bearing halberds & axes of strange fashion. The Knight rose to his feet when he saw the wayfarers coming up the rising ground, and Ralph had his hand on his sword-hilt; but ere they met, the minstrel said: "Nay, nay, draw thy let-pass, not thy sword. This Knight shalt bid thee to a courteous joust; but do thou nay-say it, for he is a mere felon, & shalt set his men-at-arms on thee, and then will rob thee and slay thee after, or cast thee into his prison". So Ralph drew out his parchment which Morfinn had given into his keeping, and held it open in his hand, and when the knight called out on him in a rough voice as they drew anigh, he said: "Nay, sir, I may not stay me as now, need driveth me on." Quoth the knight, smoothing out his knitted brow: "Fair sir, since thou art a friend of our lord, wilt thou not come home to my house, which is hard by, and rest awhile, and eat a morsel, and drink a cup, and sleep in a fair chamber thereafter?" "Nay, sir," said Ralph, "for time presses"; and he passed on withal, and the knight made no step to stay him, but laughed a short laugh, like a swine snorting, and sat him down on the grass again. Ralph heeded him naught, but was glad that his let-pass was shown to be good for something; but he could see that the minstrel was nigh sick for fear & was shaking like an aspen leaf, & it was long ere he found his tongue again.

FORTH then they rode till dusk, when the minstrel stayed Ralph at a place where a sort of hovels lay together about a house somewhat better builded, which Ralph took for a hostelry, though it had no sign nor bush. They entered the said house, wherein

was an old woman to whom the minstrel spake a word or two in a tongue that Ralph knew not, and straightway she got them victual and drink nowise ill, and showed them to beds thereafter. In spite of both victuals & drink the minstrel fell silent & moody; it might be from weariness, Ralph deemed; & he himself had no great lust for talk, so he went bedward, and made the bed pay for all.

Chapter XXXII. Ralph happens on Evil Days

EARLY on the morrow they departed, & now in the morning light and the sun the minstrel seemed glad again and talked abundantly, even though at whiles Ralph answered him little. As they rode, the land began to get less fertile and less, till at last there was but tillage here & there in patches: of houses there were but few, and the rest was but dark heathland and bog, with scraggy woods scattered about the country-side.

NAUGHT happened to tell of, save that once in the afternoon, as they were riding up to the skirts of one of the woods aforesaid, weaponed men came forth from it & drew up across the way; they were a dozen in all, & four were horsed. Ralph set his hand to his sword, but the minstrel cried out, "Nay, no weapons, no weapons! Pull out thy let-pass again & show it in thine hand, and then let us on". So saying he drew a white kerchief from his hand, and tied it to the end of his ridingstaff, and so rode trembling by Ralph's side: therewith they rode on together towards those men, whom as they drew nearer they heard laughing & jeering at them, though in a tongue that Ralph knew not. They came so close at last that the waylayers could see the parchment clearly, with the seal thereon, & then they made obeisance to it, as though it were the relic of a saint, & drew off quietly into the wood one by one. These were big men, and savage-looking, and their armour was utterly uncouth.

THE minstrel was loud in his mirth when they were well past these men; but Ralph rode on silently, and was somewhat sober. "Fair sir," quoth the minstrel, "I would wager that I know thy thought." "Yea," said Ralph, "what is it then?" Said the minstrel: "Thou art thinking what thou shalt do when thou meetest suchlike folk on thy way back; but fear not, for with

that same seal thou shalt pass through the land again." Said Ralph: "Yea, something like that forsooth, was my thought. But also I was pondering who should be my guide when I leave Utterbol." The minstrel looked at him askance; quoth he: "Thou mayst leave thinking of that awhile." Ralph looked hard at him, but could make naught of the look of his face; so he said: "Why dost thou say that?" Said Morfinn: "Because I know whither thou art bound, & have been wondering this long while that thou hast asked me not about the way to the WELL at the WORLD'S END: since I told thy friend the merchant that I could tell thee somewhat concerning it. But I suppose thou hast been thinking of something else?"

"Well," said Ralph, "tell me what thou hast to say of the Well." Said Morfinn: "This will I tell thee first: that if thou hast any doubt that such a place there is, thou mayst set that aside; for we of Utterness and Utterbol are sure thereof; and of all nations and peoples whereof we know, we deem that we are the nighest thereto. How sayest thou, is that not already something?" "Yea, verily," said Ralph.

"NOW," said Morfinn, "the next thing to be said is that we are on the road thereto: but the third thing again is this, lord, that though few who seek it find it, yet we know that some have failed not of it, besides that lord of Goldburg, of whom I know that thou hast heard. Furthermore, there dwelleth a sage in the woods not right far from Utterbol, a hermit living by himself; and folk seek to him for divers lore, to be holpen by him in one way or other, and of him men say that he hath so much lore concerning the road to the Well (whether he hath been there himself they know not certainly), that if he will, he can put anyone on the road so surely that he will not fail to come there, but he be slain on the way, as I said to thee in Goldburg. True it is that the said sage is chary of his lore, & if he think any harm of the seeker, he will show him naught; but, fair sir, thou art so valiant and so goodly, and as meseemeth so good a knight per amours, that I deem it a certain thing that he will tell thee the uttermost of his knowledge"

Now again waxed Ralph eager concerning his quest; for true it is that since he had had that story of the damsel from the minstrel, she had stood in the way before the Well at the World's End. But now he said: "And canst thou bring me to the said sage, good minstrel?"

"Without doubt," quoth Morfinn, "when we are once safe at Utterbol. From Utterbol ye may wend any road." "Yea," said Ralph, "& there are perils yet a few on the way, is it not so?" "So it is," said the minstrel; "but to-morrow shall try all." Said Ralph: "And is there some special peril ahead to-morrow? And if it be so, what is it?" Said his fellow: "It would avail thee naught to know it. What then, doth that daunt thee?" "No," said Ralph, "by then it is nigh enough to hurt us, we shall be nigh enough to see it." "Well said!" quoth the minstrel; "but now we must mend our pace, or dark night shall overtake us amid these rough ways."

WILD as the land was, they came at even to a place where were a few houses of woodmen or hunters; & they got off their horses and knocked at the door of one of these, & a great black-haired carle opened to them, who, when he saw the knight's armour, would have clapped the door to again, had not Ralph by the minstrel's rede held out the parchment to him, who when he saw it, became humble indeed, & gave them such guesting as he might, which was scant indeed of victual or drink save wild-fowl from the heath. But they had wine with them from the last guest-house, whereof they bade the carle to drink; but he would not, and in all wise seemed to be in dread of them.

WHEN it was morning early they rode their ways, and the carle seemed glad to be rid of them. After they had ridden a few miles the land bettered somewhat; there were islands of deep green pasture amidst the blackness of the heath, with cattle grazing on them, and here and there was a little tillage: the land was little better than level, only it swelled a little this way and that. It was a bright sunny day & the air very clear, and as they rode Ralph said: "Quite clear is the sky, & yet one cloud there is far in the offing; but this is strange about it, though I have been watching it this half hour, and looking to see the rack come up from that quarter, yet it changes not at all. I never saw the like of this cloud" ❧ Said the minstrel: "Yea, fair sir, & of this cloud I must tell thee that it will change no more till the bones of the earth are tumbled together. Forsooth this is no cloud, but the topmost head of the mountain ridge which men call the Wall of the World: and if ever thou come close up to the said Wall, that shall fear thee, I deem, however fearless thou

be." "Is it nigh to Utterness?" said Ralph. "Nay," said the minstrel, "not so nigh; for as huge as it seemeth thence" Said Ralph: "Do folk tell that the Well at the World's End lieth beyond it?" "Surely," said the minstrel

Said Ralph, his face flushing: "forsooth, that ancient lord of Goldburg came through those mountains, and why not I?" "Yea," said the minstrel, "why not?" And therewith he looked uneasily on Ralph, who heeded his looks naught, for his mind was set on high matters. On then they rode, and when trees or some dip in the land hid that mountain top from them, the way seemed long to Ralph.

NAUGHT befell to tell of for some while; but at last when it was drawing towards evening again, they had been riding through a thick pine-wood for a long while, & coming out of it they beheld before them a plain country fairly well grassed, but lo! on the field not far from the road-side a pavilion pitched and a banner on the top thereof, but the banner hung down about the staff, so that the bearing was not seen: & about this pavilion, which was great & rich of fashion, were many tents great and small, & there were horses tethered in the field, & men moving about & the gleam of armour. At this sight the minstrel drew rein and stared about him wildly; but Ralph said: "What is this, is it the peril aforesaid?" "Yea," quoth the minstrel, shivering with fear. "What aileth thee?" said Ralph; "have we not the let-pass, what then can befall us? If this be other than the Lord of Utterbol, he will see our let-pass and let us alone; or if it be he indeed, what harm shall he do to the bearers of his own pass? Come on then, or else (and therewith he half drew his sword) is this Lord of Utterbol but another name for the Devil in Hell?" But the minstrel still stared wild & trembled; then he stammered out: "I thought I should bring thee to Utterness first, & that some other should lead thee thence, I did not look to see him. I dare not, I dare not! O look, look!" As he spake the wind arose & ran along the wood-side, and beat back from it and stirred the canvas of the tents & raised the folds of the banner, & blew it out, so that the bearing was clear to see; yet Ralph deemed it naught dreadful, but an armoury fit for a baron, to wit, a black bear on a castle-wall on a field of gold.

BUT as Ralph sat on his horse gazing, himseemed that men were looking towards him, and a great horn

was sounded hard by the pavilion; then Ralph looked toward the minstrel fiercely, and laughed and said: "I see now that thou art another traitor: so get thee gone; I have more to do than the slaying of thee." And therewith he turned his horse's head, and smote the spurs into the sides of him, & went a great gallop over the field on the right side of the road, away from the gay pavilion; but even therewith came a half-score of horsemen from the camp, as if they were awaiting him, and they spurred after him straightway. The race was no long one, for Ralph's beast was wearied, & the other horses were fresh, and Ralph knew naught of the country before him, whereas those riders knew it well. Therefore it was but a few minutes till they came up to him, & he made no show of defence, but suffered them to lead him away, and he crossed the highway, where he saw no token of the minstrel. So they brought him to the pavilion, and made him dismount & led him in. The dusk had fallen by now, but within it was all bright with candles. The pavilion was hung with rich silken cloth, & at the further end, on a carpet of the hunting, was an ivory chair, whereon sat a man, who was the only one sitting. He was clad in a gown of blue silk, broidered with roundels beaten with the Bear upon the Castle-wall.

RALPH deemed that this must be no other than the Lord of Utterbol, yet after all the tales he had heard of that lord, he seemed no such terrible man: he was short of stature, but broad across the shoulders, his hair long and straight, dark brown of hue, & his beard scanty, he was clean-featured & smooth-faced, and had been no ill-looking man, save that his skin was sallow & for his eyes, which were brown, small, and somewhat bloodshot. Beside him stood Morfinn bowed down with fear and not daring to look either at the Lord or at Ralph. Wherefore he knew for certain that when he had called him traitor even now, that it was no more than the very sooth, and that he had fallen into the trap; though how or why he wotted not clearly. Well then might his heart have fallen, but so it was, that when he looked into the face of this Lord, the terror of the lands, hatred of him so beset his heart that it swallowed up fear in him. Albeit he held himself well in hand, for his soul was waxing, and he deemed that he should yet do great deeds, therefore he desired to live, whatsoever pains or shame of the passing day he might suffer.

NOW this mighty lord spake, & his voice was harsh & squeaking, so that the sound of it was worse than the sight of his face; and he said: "Bring the man forth, that I may see him." So they brought up Ralph, till he was eye to eye with the Lord, who turned to Morfinn & said: "Is this thy catch, lucky man?" "Yea," quavered Morfinn, not lifting his eyes; "will he do, lord?" "Do?" said the lord: "how can I see him when he is all muffled up in steel? Ye fools, doff his war-gear" Speedily then had they stripped Ralph of hauberk, and helm, and arm & leg plates, so that he stood up in his jerkin and breeches, and the lord leaned forward to look on him as if he were cheapening a horse; and then turned to a man somewhat stricken in years, clad in scarlet, who stood on his other hand, and said to him: "Well, David the Sage! is this the sort of man? Is he goodly enough?" Then the elder put on a pair of spectacles and eyed Ralph curiously a while, and then said: "There are no two words to be said about it; he is as goodly & well-fashioned a young man as was ever sold" "Well," said the lord, turning towards Morfinn, "the catch is good, lucky man: David will give thee gold for it, and thou mayest go back west when thou wilt. And thou must be lucky again, moreover; because there are women needed for my house; & they must be goodly and meek, & not grievously marked with stripes, or branded, so that thou hadst best take them, luckily if thou mayst, & not buy them. Now go, for there are more than enough men under this woven roof, & we need no half-men to boot." Said David, the old man, grinning: "He will hold him well paid if he go unscathed from before thee, lord: for he looked not to meet thee here, but thought to bring the young man to Utterness, that he might be kept there till thou camest" The lord said, grimly: "He is not far wrong to fear me, maybe: but he shall go for this time. But if he bring me not those women within three months' wearing, & if there be but two uncomely ones amongst them, let him look to it. Give him his gold, David. Now take ye the new man, and let him rest, and give him meat and drink. And look you, David, if he be not in condition when he cometh home to Utterbol, thou shalt pay for it in one way or other, if not in thine own person, since thou art old, and deft of service, then through those that be dear to thee. Go now!" David smiled on Ralph and led him out unto a tent not far off,

& there he made much of him, and bade bring meat and drink & all he needed. Withal he bade him not to try fleeing, lest he be slain; and he showed him how nigh the guards were and how many.

GLAD was the old man when he saw the captive put a good face on matters, and that he was not down-hearted. In sooth that hatred of the tyrant mingled with hope sustained Ralph's heart. He had been minded when he was brought before the lord to have shown the letter of the Queen of Goldburg, and to defy him if he still held him captive. But when he had beheld him and his fellowship a while he thought better of it. For though they had abundance of rich plenishing, & gay raiment, & good weapons and armour, howbeit of strange & uncouth fashion, yet he deemed when he looked on them that they would scarce have the souls of men in their bodies, but that they were utterly vile through & through, like the shapes of an evil dream. Therefore he thought shame of it to show the Queen's letter to them, even as if he had shown to them the very naked body of her, who had been so piteous kind to him. Also he had no mind to wear his heart on his sleeve, but would keep his own counsel, & let his foemen speak and show what was in their minds. For this cause he now made himself sweet, & was of good cheer with old David, deeming him to be a great man there; as indeed he was, being the chief counsellor of the Lord of Utterbol; though forsooth not so much his counsellor as that he durst counsel otherwise than as the Lord desired to go; unless he thought that it would bring his said Lord, and therefore himself, to very present peril and damage. In short, though this man had not been bought for money he was little better than a thrall of the higher sort, as forsooth were all the Lord's men, saving the best & trustiest of his warriors: & these were men whom the Lord somewhat feared himself: though, on the other hand, he could not but know that they understood how the dread of the Lord of Utterbol was a shield to them, and that if it were to die out amongst men, their own skins were not worth many days' purchase.

SO then David spake pleasantly with Ralph, and ate and drank with him, and saw that he was well bedded for the night, & left him in the first watch. But Ralph lay down in little more trouble than the night before, when, though he were being led friendly to Ut-

terness, yet he had not been able to think what he should do when he came there: whereas now he thought: Who knoweth what shall betide? and for me there is naught to do save to lay hold of the occasion that another may give me. And at the worst I scarce deem that I am being led to the slaughter.

Chapter XXXIII. Ralph is brought on the road towards Utterbol

BUT now when it was morning they struck the tents and laded them on wains, and went their ways the selfsame road that Ralph had been minded for yesterday; to wit the road to Utterness; but now must he ride it unarmed and guarded: other shame had he none. Indeed David, who stuck close to his side all day, was so sugary sweet with him, and praised and encouraged him so diligently, that Ralph began to have misgivings that all this kindness was but as the flower-garlands wherewith in heathen times men were wont to deck the slaughter-beasts for the blood offering. Yea, and into his mind came certain tales of how there were heathen men yet in the world, who beguiled men and women, and offered them up to their devils, whom they called gods: but all this ran off him soon, when he bethought him how little wisdom there was in running to meet the evil, which might be on the way, and that way a rough and perilous one. So he plucked up heart, and spake freely & gaily with David and one or two others who rode anigh.

THEY were amidst of the company: the Lord went first after his fore-runners in a litter done about with precious cloths; & two score horsemen came next, fully armed after their manner. Then rode Ralph with David and a half dozen of the magnates: Then came a sort of cooks and other serving-men, but none without a weapon, & last another score of men-at-arms: so that he saw that fleeing was not to be thought of, though he was not bound, & save for lack of weapons rode like a free man.

THE day was clear as yesterday had been, wherefore again Ralph saw the distant mountain-top like a cloud; and he gazed at it long till David said: "I see that thou art gazing hard at the mountains, and perchance art longing to be beyond them,

were it but to see what like the land is on the further side. If all tales be true thou art best this side thereof, whatever thy lot may be"

"Lieth death on the other side then?" quoth Ralph. "Yea," said David, "but that is not all, since he is not asleep elsewhere in the world: but men say that over there are things to be seen which might slay a strong man for pure fear, without stroke of sword or dint of axe" "Yea," said Ralph, "but how was it then with him that builded Goldburg?" "O," said David, "hast thou heard that tale? Well, they say of him, who certes went over those mountains, and drank of the Well at the World's End, that he was one of the lucky: yet for all his luck never had he drunk the draught had he not been helped by one who had learned many things, a woman to wit. for he was one of them with whom all women are in love; and thence indeed was his luck .... Moreover, when all is said, 'tis but a tale"

"Yea," quoth Ralph laughing, "even as the tales of the ghosts & bugs that abide the wayfarer on the other side of yonder white moveless cloud." David laughed in his turn and said: "Thou hast me there; & whether or no, these tales are nothing to us, who shall never leave Utterbol again while we live, save in such a company as this." Then he held his peace, but presently spake again: "Hast thou heard anything, then, of those tales of the Well at the World's End? I mean others beside that concerning the lord of Goldburg?"

"Yea, surely I have," said Ralph, nowise changing countenance. Said David: "Deemest thou aught of them? deemest thou that it may be true that a man may drink of the Well and recover his youth thereby?" Ralph laughed and said: "Master, it is rather for me to ask thee hereof, than thou me, since thou dwellest so much nigher thereto than I have done heretofore."

DAVID drew up close to him, and said softly: "Nigher? Yea, but belike not so much nigher" "How meanest thou?" said Ralph Said David: "Is it so nigh that a man may leave home and come thereto in his life-time?" "Yea," said Ralph, "in my tales it is" Said the old man still softlier: "Had I deemed that true I had tried the adventure, whatever might lies beyond the mountains, but (and he sighed withal) I deem it untrue." Therewith dropped the talk of that matter: & in sooth Ralph was loath to

make many words thereof, lest his eagerness shine through, and all the story of him be known.

ANON it was noon, & the lord bade all men stay for meat: so his serving-men busied them about his dinner, and David went with them. Then the men-at-arms bade Ralph sit among them & share their meat. So they sat down all by the wayside, and they spake kindly & friendly to Ralph, and especially their captain, a man somewhat low of stature, but long-armed like the Lord, a man of middle age, beardless and spare of body, but wiry and tough-looking, with hair of the hue of the dust of a sandstone quarry. This man fell a-talking with Ralph, & asked him of the manner of tilting and courteous jousting between knights in the countries of knighthood, till that talk dropped between them. Then Ralph looked round upon the land, which had now worsened again, and was little better than rough moorland, little fed, and not at all tilled, & he said: "This is but a sorry land for earth's increase" "Well," said the captain, "I wot not; it beareth plover and whimbrel and conies & hares; yea, and men withal, some few. And whereas it beareth naught else that cometh of my lord's will: for deemest thou that he should suffer a rich land betwixt him and Goldburg, that it might sustain an host big enough to deal with him?" "But is not this his land?" said Ralph Said the captain: "Nay, & also yea. None shall dwell in it save as he willeth, and they shall pay him tribute, be it never so little. Yet some there are of them, who are to him as the hounds be to the hunter, & these same he even wageth, so that if aught rare and goodly cometh their way they shall bring it to his hands; as thou thyself knowest to thy cost"

"Yea," said Ralph smiling, "and is Morfinn the Unmanned one of these curs?" "Yea," said the captain, with a grin, "& one of the richest of them, in despite of his fiddle & minstrel's gear, and his lack of manhood: for he is one of the cunningest of men But my Lord unmanned him for some good reason" Ralph kept silence a while and then said: "Why doth the Goldburg folk suffer all this felony, robbery and confusion, so near their borders, and the land debateable" Said the captain, and again he grinned: "Passing for thy hard words, sir knight, why dost thou suffer me to lead thee along whither thou wouldest not?" "Because

I cannot help myself," said Ralph.

Said the captain: "Even so it is with the Goldburg folk: if they raise hand against some of these strong-thieves or man-stealers, he has but to send the war-arrow round about these deserts, as ye deem them, & he will presently have as rough a company of carles for his fellows as need be, say ten hundred of them. And the Goldburg folk are not very handy at a fray without their walls. Forsooth within them it is another matter, and beside not even our Lord of Utterbol would see Goldburg broken down, no, not for all that he might win there"

"Is it deemed a holy place in the land, then? said Ralph.

"I wot not the meaning of holy," said the other: "but all we deem that when Goldburg shall fall, the world shall change, so that living therein shall be hard to them that have not drunk of the Well at the World's End"

Ralph was silent a while and eyed the captain curiously: then he said: "Have the Goldburgers so drunk?" Said the captain: "Nay, nay; but the word goes that under each tower of Goldburg lieth a youth and a maiden that have drunk of the water, and might not die save by point & edge."

THEN was Ralph silent again, for once more he fell pondering the matter if he had been led away to be offered as a blood offering to some of the evil gods of the land But as he pondered a flourish of trumpets was blown, and all men sprang up, and the captain said to Ralph: "Now hath our Lord done his dinner and we must to horse." Anon they were on the way again, and they rode long and saw little change in the aspect of the land, neither did that cloudlike token of the distant mountains grow any greater or clearer to Ralph's deeming.

Chapter XXXIV. The Lord of Utterbol will wot of Ralph's might and minstrelsy

A LITTLE before sunset they made halt for the night, Ralph was shown to a tent as erst, & had meat & drink good enough brought to him. But somewhat after he had done eating comes David to him & says: "Up, young man! and come to my lord, he asketh for thee" "What will he want with me?" said Ralph "Yea, that is a proper question to ask!" quoth David; "as though the knife should ask the cutler, what wilt thou cut with me? Dust thou deem that I durst ask him of his will

with thee?" "I am ready to go with thee," said Ralph. So they went forth; but Ralph's heart fell, & he sickened at the thought of seeing that man again. Nevertheless he set his face as brass, and thrust back both his fear and his hatred for a fitter occasion.

SOON they came into the pavilion of the Lord, who was sitting there as yester eve, save that his gown was red, and done about with gold and turquoise and emerald. David brought Ralph nigh to his seat, but spake not. The mighty lord was sitting with his head drooping, and his arm hanging over his knee, with a heavy countenance as though he were brooding matters which pleased him naught. But in a while he sat up with a start, and turned about and saw David standing there with Ralph, and spake at once like a man waking up: "He that sold thee to me said that thou wert of avail for many things. Now tell me, what canst thou do?" Ralph so hated him, that he was of half a mind to answer naught save by smiting him to slay him; but there was no weapon anigh, & life was sweet to him with all the tale that was lying ahead. So he answered coldly: "It is sooth, lord, that I can do more than one deed".

"Canst thou back a horse?" said the Lord. Said Ralph: "As well as many." Said the Lord: "Canst thou break a wild horse, and shoe him, and physic him?" "Not worse than some," said Ralph. "Canst thou play with sword and spear?" said the Lord. "Better than some few," said Ralph. "How shall I know that?" said the Lord. Said Ralph: "Try me, lord!" Indeed, he half hoped that if it came to that, he might escape in the hurley. The Lord looked on him and said: "Well, it may be tried. But here is a cold and proud answerer, David. I misdoubt me whether it be worth while bringing him home".

David looked timidly on Ralph & said: "Thou hast paid the price for him, lord". "Yea, that is true," said the Lord. "Thou! canst thou play at the chess?" "Yea," said Ralph. "Canst thou music?" said the other. "Yea," said Ralph, "when I am merry, or whiles indeed when I am sad." The lord said: "Make thyself merry or sad, which thou wilt; but sing, or thou shalt be beaten. Ho! Bring ye the harp." Then they brought it as he bade. But Ralph looked to right and left and saw no deliverance, and knew this for the first hour of his thrall-

dom. Yet, as he thought of it all, he remembered that if he would do, he must needs bear and forbear; & his face cleared, and he looked round about again & let his eyes rest calmly on all eyes that he met till they came on the Lord's face again. Then he let his hand fall into the strings and they fell a-tinkling sweetly, like unto the song of the winter robin, and at last he lifted up his voice and sang:

STILL now is the stithy this morning unclouded,
Naught stirs in the thorp save the yellow-haired maid
A-peeling the withy last Candlemas shrouded
From the mere where the moorhen now swims unafraid.

For over the ford now the grass and the clover
Fly off from the tines as the wind driveth on;
And soon round the Sword-howe the swathe shall lie over,
And to-morrow at even the mead shall be won.

But the Hall of the Garden amidst the hot morning,
It drew my feet thither; I stood at the door,
And felt my heart harden 'gainst wisdom and warning
As the sun and my footsteps came on to the floor.

When the sun lay behind me, there scarce in the dimness
I saw what I sought for, yet trembled to find;
But it came forth to find me, until the sleek slimness
Of the summer-clad woman made summer o'er kind.

There we the once-sundered together were blended,
We strangers, unknown once, were hidden by naught.
I kissed and I wondered how doubt was all ended,
How friendly her excellent fairness was wrought.

ROUND the hall of the Garden the hot sun is burning,
But no master nor minstrel goes there in the shade,
It hath never a warden till comes the returning,
When the moon shall hang high and all winds shall be laid.

Waned the day and I hied me afield, and thereafter
I sat with the mighty when daylight was done,
But with great men beside me, midst high-hearted laughter,

I deemed me of all men the gainfullest one.

To wisdom I hearkened; for there the wise father
Cast the seed of his learning abroad o'er the hall,
Till men's faces darkened, but mine gladdened rather
With the thought of the knowledge I knew over all.

Sang minstrels the story, and with the song's welling
Men looked on each other and glad were they grown,
But mine was the glory of the tale and its telling
How the loved and the lover were naught but mine own.

WHEN he was done all kept silence till they should know whether the lord should praise the song or blame; and he said naught for a good while, but sat as if pondering: but at last he spake: "Thou art young, and would that we were young also! Thy song is sweet, and it pleaseth me, who am a man of war, and have seen enough and to spare of rough work, and would any day rather see a fair woman than a band of spears. But it shall please my lady wife less: for of love, and fair women, and their lovers she hath seen enough; but of war nothing save its shows & pomps; wherefore she desireth to hear thereof. Now sing of battle!" Ralph thought awhile and began to smite the harp while he conned over a song which he had learned one yule-tide from a chieftain who had come to Upmeads from the far-away Northland, and had abided there till spring was waning into summer, and meanwhile he taught Ralph this song & many things else, & his name was Sir Kar Woodneb This song now Ralph sang loud and sweet, though he were now a thrall in an alien land:

LEAVE we the cup!
For the moon is up,
And bright is the gleam
Of the rippling stream,
That runneth his road
To the old abode,
Where the walls are white
In the moon and the night;

The house of the neighbour that drave us away
When strife ended labour amidst of the hay,
And no road for our riding was left us but one
Where the hill's brow is hiding that earth's ways are done,
And the sound of the billows comes up at the last
Like the wind in the willows ere autumn is past.

BUT oft and again
Comes the ship from the main,
And we came once more
And no lading we bore,
But the point and the edge,
And the ironed ledge,
And the bolt and the bow,
And the bane of the foe.
To the House 'neath the mountain we came in the morn,
Where welleth the fountain up over the corn,
And the stream is a/running fast on to the House
Of the neighbours uncunning who quake at the mouse,
As their slumber is broken; they know not for why;
Since yestreen was no token on earth or in sky.

COME, up, then up!
Leave board and cup,
And follow the gleam
Of the glittering stream
That leadeth the road
To the old abode,
High/walled and white
In the moon and the night;
Where low lies the neighbour that drave us away
Sleep/sunk from his labour amidst of the hay.
No road for our riding is left us save one,
Where the hills' brow is hiding the city undone,
And the wind in the willows is with us at last,
And the house of the billows is done and o'er/past.

HASTE! mount and haste
Ere the short night waste,
For night and day,

Late turned away,
Draw nigh again
All kissing-fain;
And the morn and the moon
Shall be married full soon.
So ride we together with wealth-winning wand,
The steel o'er the leather, the ash in the hand.
Lo! white walls before us, and high are they built;
But the luck that outwore us now lies on their guilt;
Lo! the open gate biding the first of the sun,
And to peace are we riding when slaughter is done.

WHEN Ralph had done singing, all folk fell to praising his song, whereas the Lord had praised the other one; but the Lord said, looking at Ralph askance meanwhile: "Yea, if that pleaseth me not, & I take but little keep of it, it shall please my wife to her heart's root; & that is the first thing. Hast thou other good store, newcomer?" "Yea, lord," said Ralph "And canst thou tell tales of yore agone, and of the fays & such-like? All that she must have" "Some deal I can of that lore," said Ralph.

THEN the Lord sat silent, and seemed to be pondering: at last he said, as if to himself: "Yet there is one thing: many a blencher can sing of battle; & it hath been seen, that a fair body of a man is whiles soft amidst the hard hand-play. Thou! Morfinn's luck! art thou of any use in the tilt-yard?" "Wilt thou try me, lord?" said Ralph, looking somewhat brisker Said the Lord: "I deem that I may find a man or two for thee, though it is not much our manner here; but now go thou! David, take the lad away to his tent, and get him a flask of wine of the best to help out thy maundering with him" Therewith they left the tent, & Ralph walked by David sadly and with hanging head at first; but in a while he called to mind that, whatever betid, his life was safe as yet; that every day he was drawing nigher to the Well at the World's End; and that it was most like that he should fall in with that Dorothea of his dream somewhere on the way thereto. So he lifted up his head again, & was singing to himself as he stooped down to enter into his tent.

NEXT day naught happed to tell of save that they journeyed on; the

day was cloudy, so that Ralph saw no signs of the distant mountains; ever the land was the same, but belike somewhat more beset with pinewoods; they saw no folk at all on the road. So at even Ralph slept in his tent, and none meddled with him, save that David came to talk with him or he slept, and was merry and blithe with him, and he brought with him Otter, the captain of the guard, who was good company.

Thus wore three days that were hazy and cloudy, and the Lord sent no more for Ralph, who on the road spake for the more part with Otter, & liked him not ill; howbeit it seemed of him that he would make no more of a man's life than of a rabbit's according as his lord might bid slay or let live.

The three hazy days past, it fell to rain for four days, so that Ralph could see little of the face of the land; but he noted that they went up at whiles, & never so much down as up, so that they were wending up hill on the whole.

ON the ninth day of his captivity the rain ceased and it was sunny & warm, but somewhat hazy, so that naught could be seen afar, but the land near-hand rose in long, low downs now, and was quite treeless, save where was a hollow here and there and a stream running through it, where grew a few willows, but alders more abundantly.

This day he rode by Otter, who said presently: "Well, young-ling of the North, to-morrow we shall see a new game, thou and I, if the weather be fair." "Yea," said Ralph, "and what like shall it be?" Said Otter: "At mid-morn we shall come into a fair dale amidst the downs, where be some houses and a tower of the Lord's, so that that place is called the Dale of the Tower: there shall we abide a while to gather victual, a day or two, or three maybe: so my lord will hold a tourney there: that is to say that I myself and some few others shall try thy manhood somewhat." "What?" said Ralph, "are the new colt's paces to be proven? And how if he fail?"

Quoth Otter, laughing: "fail not, I rede thee, or my lord's love for thee shall be something less than nothing."

"And then will he slay me?" said Ralph. Said Otter: "Nay I deem not, at least not at first: he will have thee home to Utterbol, to make the most of his bad bargain, & there shalt thou be a mere serving-thrall, either in the house or the field: where thou shalt be well-fed (save in times of scarcity), and

belike well beaten withal" Said Ralph, somewhat down-cast: "Yea, I am a thrall, who was once a knight. But how if thou fail before me?" Otter laughed again: "That is another matter; whatever I do my lord will not lose me if he can help it; but as for the others who shall stand before thy valiancy, there will be some who will curse the day whereon my lord bought thee, if thou turnest out a good spear, as ye call it in your lands. Howsoever, that is not thy business; & I bid thee fear naught; for thou seemest to be a mettle lad."

So they talked, and that day wore like the others, but the haze did not clear off, & the sun went down red. In the evening David talked with Ralph in his tent, and said: "If to-morrow be clear, knight, thou shalt see a new sight when thou comest out from the canvas." Said Ralph: "I suppose thy meaning is that we shall see the mountains from hence?" "Yea," said David; "so hold up thine heart when that sight first cometh before thine eyes. As for us, we are used to the sight, and that from a place much nigher to the mountains: yet they who are soft-hearted amongst us are overcome at whiles, when there is storm and tempest, and evil tides at hand" Said Ralph: "And how far then are we from Utterbol?" Said David: "After we have left Bullmead in the Dale of the Tower, where to-morrow thou art to run with the spear, it is four days' ride to Utterness; and from Utterness ye may come (if my lord will) unto Utterbol in twelve hours. But tell me, knight, how deemest thou of thy tilting to-morrow?" Said Ralph: "Little should I think of it, if little lay upon it" "Yea," said David, "but art thou a good tilter?" Ralph laughed: quoth he, "That hangs on the goodness of him that tilteth against me: I have both overthrown, and been overthrown oft enough. Yet again, who shall judge me? for I must tell thee, that were I fairly judged I should be deemed no ill spear even when I came not uppermost: for in all these games are haps which no man may foresee" "Well then," said David, "all will go well with thee for this time: for my lord will judge thee, and if it be seen that thou hast spoken truly, & art more than a little deft at the play, he will be like to make the best of thee, since thou art already paid for." Ralph laughed: yet as though the jest pleased him but little; & they fell to talk of other matters. And so David departed, and Ralph slept.

Chapter XXXV. Ralph cometh to the Vale of the Tower

BUT when it was morning Ralph awoke, and saw that the sun was shining brightly; so he cast his shirt on him, & went out at once, and turned his face eastward, and, scarce awake, said to himself that the clouds lay heavy in the eastward heavens after last night's haze: but presently his eyes cleared, and he saw that what he had taken for clouds was a huge wall of mountains, black and terrible, that rose up sharp & clear into the morning air; for there was neither cloud nor mist in all the heavens. Now Ralph, though he were but little used to the sight of great mountains, yet felt his heart rather rise than fall at the sight of them; for he said: "Surely beyond them lieth some new thing for me, life or death: fair fame or the forgetting of all men." And it was long that he could not take his eyes off them.

AS he looked, came up the Captain Otter, and said: "Well, Knight, thou hast seen them this morn, even if ye die ere nightfall." Said Ralph: "What deemest thou to lie beyond them?" "Of us none knoweth surely," said Otter; "whiles I deem that if one were to get to the other side there would be a great plain like to this: whiles that there is naught save mountains beyond, & yet again mountains, like the waves of a huge stone sea. Or whiles I think that one would come to an end of the world, to a place where is naught but a ledge, and then below it a gulf filled with nothing but the howling of winds, & the depth of darkness. Moreover this is my thought, that all we of these parts should be milder men and of better conditions, if yonder terrible wall were away. It is as if we were thralls of the great mountains" Said Ralph, "Is this then the Wall of the World?" "It may well be so," said Otter; "but this word is at whiles said of something else, which no man alive amongst us has yet seen. It is a part of the tale of the seekers for the Well at the World's End, whereof we said a word that other day" "And the Dry Tree," said Ralph, "knowest thou thereof?" "Such a tree, much beworshipped," said Otter, "we have, not very far from Utterbol, on the hither side of the mountains. Yet I have heard old men say that it is but a toy, and an image of that which is verily anigh the Well at the World's End. But now haste thee to do on thy raiment, for

we must needs get to horse in a little while." "Yet one more word," said Ralph; "thou sayest that none alive amongst you have seen the Wall of the World?" "None alive," quoth Otter; "forsooth what the dead may see, that is another question." Said Ralph: "But have ye not known of any who have sought to the Well from this land, which is so nigh thereunto?" "Such there have been," said Otter; "but if they found it, they found something beyond it, or came west again by some way else than by Utterbol; for they never came back again to us"

Therewith he turned on his heel, and went his ways, & up came David and one with him bringing victual; and David said: "Now, thou lucky one, here is come thy breakfast! for we shall presently be on our way. Cast on thy raiment, and eat and strengthen thyself for the day's work. Hast thou looked well on the mountains?"

"Yea," said Ralph, "and the sight of them has made me as little down-hearted as thou art. for thou art joyous of mood this morning." David nodded and smiled, & looked so merry that Ralph wondered what was toward. Then he went into his tent and clad himself, & ate his breakfast, and then gat to horse and rode betwixt two

of the men-at-arms, he & Otter; for David was ridden forward to speak with the Lord. Otter talked ever gaily enough; but Ralph heeded him little a while, but had his eyes ever on the mountains, and could see that for all they were so dark, and filled up so much of the eastward heaven, they were so far away that he could see but little of them save that they were dark blue and huge, & one rising up behind the other.

THUS they rode the down country, till at last, two hours before noon, coming over the brow of a long down, they had before them a shallow dale, pleasanter than aught they had yet seen. It was well-grassed, & a little river ran through it, from which went narrow leats held up by hatches, so that the more part of the valley-bottom was a water-meadow, wherein as now were grazing many kine & sheep. There were willows about the banks of the river, & in an ingle of it stood a grange or homestead, with many roofs half hidden by clumps of tall old elm trees. Other houses there were in the vale; two or three cots, to wit, on the slope of the hither down and some half-dozen about the homestead; & above & beyond all these, on a mound somewhat away from the river & the grange, a great square tower,

with barriers & bailey all dight ready for war, and with a banner of the Lord's hanging out. But between the tower and the river stood as now a great pavilion of snow-white cloth striped with gold and purple; and round about it were other tents as though a little army were come into the vale. So when they looked into that fair place, Otter the Captain rose in the stirrups and cast up his hand for joy, and cried out aloud: "Now, young knight, now we are come home: how likest thou my Lord's land?" "It is a fair land," said Ralph; "but is there not come some one to bid thy Lord battle for it? or what mean the tents down yonder?" Said Otter, laughing: "Nay, nay, it hath not come to that yet. Yonder is my Lord's lady-wife, who hath come to meet him, but in love, so to say, not in battle: not yet. Though I say not that the cup of love betwixt them be brim-full. But this it behoveth me not to speak of, though thou art to be my brother-in-arms, since we are to tilt together presently: for lo! yonder the tilt-yard, my lad." Therewith he pointed to the broad green meadow: but Ralph said: "How canst thou, a free man, be brother-in-arms to a thrall?" "Nay, lad," quoth Otter, "let not that wasp sting thee: for even such was I, time was. Nay, such am I now, but that a certain habit of keeping my wits in a fray maketh me of avail to my Lord, so that I am well looked to. Forsooth in my Lord's land the freemen are of little account, since they must oftenest do as my Lord & my Lord's thralls bid them. Truly, brother, it is we who have the wits & the luck to rise above the whipping-post and the shackles, that are the great men hereabouts. I say we, for I deem that thou wilt do no less, whereas thou hast the lucky look in thine eyes. So let to-day try it." As he spake came many glittering figures from out of those tents, & therewithal arose the sound of horns & the clashing of cymbals, & their own horns gave back the sound of welcome. Then Ralph saw a man in golden armour of strange, outlandish fashion, sitting on a great black horse beside the Lord's litter; and Otter said: "Lo! my Lord, armed and a-horseback to meet my lady: she looketh kinder on him thus; though in thine ear be it said, he is no great man of war; nor need he be, since he hath us for his shield and his hauberk."

HEREWITH were they come on to the causeway above the green meadows, and presently drew rein before the pavilion, and stood about in a half-ring facing a

two score of gaily clad men-at-arms, who had come with the Lady and a rout of folk of the household. Then the Lord gat off his horse, and stood in his golden armour, & all the horns and other music struck up, & forth from the pavilion came the Lady with a half-score of her women clad gaily in silken gowns of green, & blue, & yellow, broidered all about with gold and silver, but with naked feet, & having iron rings on their arms, so that Ralph saw that they were thralls. Something told him that his damsel should be amongst these, so he gazed hard on them, but though they were goodly enough there was none of them like to her. As to the Queen, she was clad all in fine linen & gold, with gold shoes on her feet: her arms came bare from out of the linen: great they were, and the hands shapely, and all very white and rosy: her hair was as yellow as any that can be seen, and it was plenteous, and shed all down about her. Her eyes were blue & set wide apart, her nose a little snubbed, her mouth wide, full-lipped and smiling. She was very tall, a full half-head taller than any of her women: yea, as tall as a man who is above the middle height of men.

NOW she came forward hastily with long strides & knelt down before the Lord, but even as she kneeled, looked round with laughing face. The Lord stooped down to her and took her by both hands, and raised her up, and kissed her on the cheek (and he looked but little and of no presence beside her): and he said: "Hail to thee, my Lady; thou art come far from thine home to meet me, & I thank thee therefor. Is it well with our House?" She spake seeming carelessly and loud; but her voice was somewhat husky: "Yea, my Lord, all is well; few have done amiss, and the harvest is plenteous." As she spake the Lord looked with knit brows at the damsels behind her, as if he were seeking something; & the Lady followed his eyes, smiling a little and flushing as if with merriment. But the Lord was silent a while, and then let his brow clear & said: "Yea, Lady, thou art thanked for coming to meet us; & timely is thy coming, since there is game and glee for thee at hand; I have cheapened a likely thrall of Morfinn the Unmanned, & he is a gift to thee; and he hath given out that he is no ill player with the spear after the fashion of them of the west; & we are going to prove his word here in this meadow presently". The Lady's face grew glad, and she said, looking toward the ring of new-comers: "Yea, Lord, & which of these

is he, if he be here?" The Lord turned a little to point out Ralph, but even therewith the Lady's eyes met Ralph's, who reddened for shame of being so shown to a great lady; but as for her she flushed bright red all over her face and even to her bosom, & trouble came into her eyes, & she looked adown. But the Lord said: "Yonder is the youngling, the swordless one in the green coat; a likely lad, if he hath not lied about his prowess; and he can sing thee a song withal, & tell a piteous tale of old, and do all that those who be reared in the lineages of the Westlands deem meet & due for men of knightly blood. Dost thou like the looks of him, lady? wilt thou have him?" The Lady still held her head down, and tormented the grass with her foot and murmured somewhat; for she could not come to herself again as yet. So the Lord looked sharply on her & said: "Well, when this tilting is over, thou shalt tell me thy mind of him; for if he turn out a dastard I would not ask thee to take him." Now the lady lifted up her face, and she was grown somewhat pale; but she forced her speech to come, & said: "It is well, Lord, but now come thou into my pavilion, for thy meat is ready, and it lacketh but a minute or so of noon." So he took her hand and led her in to the pavilion, and all men got off their horses, & fell to pitching the tents & getting their meat ready; but Otter drew Ralph apart into a nook of the homestead, and there they ate their meat together.

Chapter XXXVI. The talk of two women concerning Ralph.

BUT when dinner was done, came David and a man with him bringing Ralph's war gear, & bade him do it on, while the folk were fencing the lists, which they were doing with such stuff as they had at the Tower; & the Lord had been calling for Otter that he might command him what he should tell to the marshals of the lists and how all should be duly ordered, wherefore he went up into the Tower whither the Lord had now gone. So Ralph did on his armour, which was not right meet for tilting, being over light for such work; & his shield in especial was but a target for a sergeant, which he had bought at Cheaping Knowe; but he deemed that his deftness & much use should bear him well through.

NOW, the Lady had abided in her pavilion when her Lord went

abroad; anon after she sent all her women away, save one whom she loved, and to whom she was wont to tell the innermost of her mind; though forsooth she mishandled her at whiles; for she was hot of temper, and over-ready with her hands when she was angry; though she was nowise cruel. But the woman aforesaid, who was sly and sleek, and somewhat past her first youth, took both her caresses and her buffets with patience, for the sake of the gifts & largesse wherewith they were bought. So now she stood by the board in the pavilion with her head drooping humbly, yet smiling to herself and heedful of whatso might betide. But the Lady walked up & down the pavilion hastily, as one much moved.

AT last she spake as she walked and said: "Agatha, didst thou see him when my Lord pointed him out?" "But scarcely," said the woman lifting her face a little. "And what seemed he to thee?" said the Lady. "O my Lady," quoth Agatha, "what seemed he to thee!" The Lady stood and turned and looked at her; she was slender & dark and sleek; and though her lips moved not, and her eyes did not change, a smile seemed to steal over her face whether she would or not. The Lady stamped her foot and lifted her hand & cried out: "What! dost thou deem thyself meet for him?" And she caught her by the folds over her bosom. But Agatha looked up into her face with a simple smile as of a child: "Dost thou deem him meet for thee, my Lady: he a thrall, and thou so great?" The Lady took her hand from her, but her face flamed with anger and she stamped on the ground again: "What dost thou mean?" she said; "am I not great enough to have what I want when it lieth close to my hand?" Agatha looked on her sweetly, & said in a soft voice: "Stretch out thine hand for it then." The Lady looked at her grimly, and said: "I understand thy jeer; thou meanest that he will not be moved by me, he being so fair, and I being but somewhat fair. Wilt thou have me beat thee? Nay, I will send thee to the White Pillar when we come to Utterbol."

The woman smiled again, and said: "My Lady, when thou hast sent me to the White Pillar, or the Red, or the Black, my stripes will not mend the matter for thee, or quench the fear of thine heart that by this time, since he is a grown man, he loveth some other. Yet belike he will obey thee if thou command, even to the lying in the same bed with thee; for he is a thrall."

The Lady hung her head, but Agatha went on in her sweet clear voice: "The Lord will think little of it, & say nothing of it unless thou anger him otherwise; or unless, indeed, he be minded to pick a quarrel with thee, & hath baited a trap with this stripling. But that is all unlike: thou knowest why, & how that he loveth the little finger of that new-come thrall of his (whom ye left at home at Utterbol in his despite), better than all thy body, for all thy white skin & lovely limbs. Nay, now I think of it, I deem that he meaneth this gift to make an occasion for the staying of any quarrel with thee, that he may stop thy mouth from crying out at him: well, what wilt thou do? he is a mighty Lord"

The Lady looked up (for she had hung her head at first), her face all red with shame, yet smiling, though ruefully, and she said: "Well, thou art determined that if thou art punished it shall not be for naught. But thou knowest not my mind."

"Yea, Lady," said Agatha, smiling in despite herself, "that may well be."

NOW the Lady turned from her, & went and sat upon a stool that was thereby, and said nothing a while; only covering her face with her hands & rocking herself to and fro, while Agatha stood looking at her. At last she said: "Hearken, Agatha, I must tell thee what lieth in mine heart, though thou hast been unkind to me & hast tried to hurt my soul. Now, thou art self-willed, and hot-blooded, and not unlovely, so that thou mayst have loved & been loved ere now. But thou art so wily and subtle that mayhappen thou wilt not understand what I mean, when I say that love of this young man hath suddenly entered into my heart, so that I long for him more this minute than I did the last, and the next minute shall long still more. And I long for him to love me, and not alone to pleasure me."

"Mayhappen it will so betide without any pushing the matter," said Agatha.

"Nay," said the Lady, "nay; my heart tells me that it will not be so; for I have seen him, that he is of higher kind than we be; as if he were a god come down to us, who might not cast his love upon a goddess, and would disdain to love an earthly woman, little-minded and in whom perfection is not."

Therewith the tears began to run from her eyes; but Agatha looked on her with a subtle smile and said: "O my Lady! and thou hast scarce seen him! And yet I will not say but that I understand this. But as to the matter of a goddess, I

know not. Many would say that thou sitting on thine ivory chair in thy golden raiment, with thy fair bosom & white arms and yellow hair, wert not ill done for the image of a goddess; and this young man may well think so of thee. However that may be, there is something else I will say to thee; (& thou knowest that I speak the truth to thee, most often, though I be wily). This is the word, that although thou hast time & again treated me like the thrall I am, I deem thee no ill woman, but rather something overgood for Utterbol & the dark lord thereof." Now sat the Lady shaken with sobs, & weeping without stint; but she looked up at that word & said: "Nay, nay, Agatha, it is not so. To-day hath this man's eyes been a candle to me, that I may see myself truly; and I know that though I am a queen & not uncomely, I am but coarse & little-minded. I rage in my household when the whim takes me, and I am hot-headed, & masterful, & slothful, and should belike be untrue if there were any force to drive me thereto. And I suffer my husband to go after other women, & this new thrall in especial, so that I may take my pleasure unstayed with other men whom I love not greatly. Yea, I am foolish, and empty-hearted, and unclean. And all this he will see through my queenly state, & my golden gown, & my white skin withal"

Agatha looked at her curiously, but smiling no more. At last she said: "What is to do, then? or must I think of something for thee?" "I know not, I know not," said the lady between her sobs; "yet if I might be in such case that he might pity me; belike it might blind his eyes to the ill part of me. Yea," she said, rising up and falling to walking to and fro swiftly, "if he might hurt me and wound me himself, and I so loving him"

Said Agatha coldly: "Yea, Lady, I am not wily for naught; and I both deem that I know what is in thine heart, and that it is good for something; and moreover that I may help thee somewhat therein. So in a few days thou shalt see whether I am worth something more than hard words and beating. Only thou must promise in all wise to obey me, though I be the thrall, and thou the Lady, and to leave all the whole matter in my hands" Quoth the Lady: "That is easy to promise; for what may I do by myself?" Then Agatha fell pondering a while, and said thereafter: "First, thou shalt get me speech with my Lord,

and cause him to swear immunity to me, whatsoever I shall say or do herein" Said the Lady: "Easy is this. What more hast thou?"

Said Agatha: "It were better for thee not to go forth to see the jousting; because thou art not to be trusted that thou show not thy love openly when the youngling is in peril; and if thou put thy lord to shame openly before the people, he must needs thwart thy will, & be fierce and cruel, and then it will go hard with thy darling. So thou shalt not go from the pavilion till the night is dark, and thou mayst feign thyself sick meantime." "Sick enough shall I be if I may not go forth to see how my love is faring in his peril: this at least is hard to me; but so be it! At least thou wilt come and tell me how he speedeth." "O yes," said Agatha, "if thou must have it so; but fear thou not, he shall do well enough" Said the Lady: "Ah, but thou wottest how oft it goes with a chance stroke, that the point pierceth where it should not; nay, where by likelihead it could not" "Nay," said Agatha, "what chance is there in this, when the youngling knoweth the whole manner of the play, and his foemen know naught thereof? It is as the chance betwixt Geoffroy the Minstrel and Black Anselm, when they play at chess together, that Anselm must needs be mated ere he hath time to think of his fourth move. I wot of these matters, my Lady. Now, further, I would have thy leave to marshal thy maids about the seat where thou shouldest be, and moreover there should be someone in thy seat, even if I sat in it myself." Said the Lady: "Yea, sit there if thou wilt"

"Woe's me!" said Agatha laughing, "why should I sit there? I am like to thee, am I not?" "Yea," said the Lady, "as the swan is like to the loon." "Yea, my Lady," said Agatha, "which is the swan and which the loon? Well, well, fear not; I shall set Joyce in thy seat by my Lord's leave; she is tall & fair and forsooth somewhat like to thee." "Why wilt thou do this?" quoth the Lady; "Why should thralls sit in my seat?" Said Agatha: "O, the tale is long to tell; but I would confuse that young man's memory of thee somewhat, if his eyes fell on thee at all whenas ye met e'en now, which is to be doubted"

The Lady started up in sudden wrath, & cried out: "She had best not be too like to me then, & strive to draw his eyes to her, or I will have her marked for diversity betwixt

us. Take heed, take heed!" Agatha looked softly on her and said: "My Lady, ye fair-skinned, open-faced women should look to it not to show yourselves angry before men-folk. For open wrath marreth your beauty sorely. Leave scowls and fury to the dark-browed, who can use them without wrying their faces like a three months' baby with the colic. Now that is my last rede as now. For methinks I can hear the trumpets blowing for the arraying of the tourney. Wherefore I must go to see to matters, while thou hast but to be quiet. And to-night make much of my Lord, & bid him see me to-morrow, and give heed to what I shall say to him. But if I meet him without, now, as is most like, I shall bid him in to thee, that thou mayst tell him of Joyce, and her sitting in thy seat. Otherwise I will tell him as soon as he is set down in his place. Sooth to say, he is little like to quarrel with either thee or me for setting a fair woman other than thee by his side."

THEREWITH she lifted the tent lap, & went out, stepping daintily, and her slender body swaying like a willow branch, & came at once face to face with the Lord of Utterbol, and bowed low & humbly before him, though her face, unseen by him, smiled mockingly. The Lord looked on her greedily, & let his hand and arm go over her shoulder, and about her side, & he drew her to him, and kissed her, and said: "What, Agatha! and why art thou not bringing forth thy mistress to us?" She raised her face to him, and murmured softly, as one afraid, but with a wheedling smile on her face & in her eyes: "Nay, my Lord, she will abide within to-day, for she is ill at ease; if your grace goeth in, she will tell thee what she will have" "Agatha," quoth he, "I will hear her, and I will do her pleasure if thou ask me so to do." Then Agatha cast down her eyes, & her speech was so low and sweet that it was as the cooing of a dove, as she said: "O my Lord, what is this word of thine?" He kissed her again, & said: "Well, well, but dost thou ask it?" "O yea, yea, my Lord," said she "It is done then," said the Lord; and he let her go; for he had been stroking her arm and shoulder, and she hurried away, laughing inwardly, to the Lady's women. But he went into the pavilion after he had cast one look at her.

Chapter XXXVII. How Ralph jousted with the Aliens

MEANWHILE Captain Otter had brought Ralph into the staked-out lists, which, being hastily pitched, were but slenderly done, & now the Upmeads stripling stood there beside a good horse which they had brought to him, & Otter had been speaking to him friendly. But Ralph saw the Lord come forth from the pavilion and take his seat on an ivory chair set on a turf ridge close to the stakes of the lists: for that place was used of custom for such games as they exercised in the lands of Utterbol. Then presently the Lady's women came out of their tents, and, being marshalled by Agatha, went into the Queen's pavilion, whence they came forth again presently like a bed of garden flowers moving, having in the midst of them a woman so fair & clad so gloriously, that Ralph must needs look on her, though he were some way off, and take note of her beauty. She went and sat her down beside the Lord, and Ralph doubted not that it was the Queen, whom he had but glanced at when they first made stay before the pavilion. Sooth to say, Joyce being well nigh as tall as the Queen, & as white of skin, was otherwise a far fairer woman.

NOW spake Otter to Ralph: "I must leave thee here, lad, and go to the other side, as I am to run against thee." Said Ralph: "Art thou to run first?" "Nay, but rather last," said Otter; "they will try thee first with one of the sergeants, & if he overcome thee, then all is done, and thou art in an evil plight. Otherwise will they find another and another, and at last it will be my turn. So keep thee well, lad."

THEREWITH he rode away, and there came to Ralph one of the sergeants, who brought him a spear, and bade him to horse. So Ralph mounted and took the spear in hand; and the sergeant said: "Thou art to run at whatsoever meeteth thee when thou hast heard the third blast of the horn. Art thou ready?" "Yea, yea," said Ralph; "but I see that the spear-head is not rebated, so that we are to play at sharps." "Art thou afraid, youngling?" said the sergeant, who was old & crabbed, "if that be so, go and tell the Lord: but thou wilt find that he will not have his sport wholly spoiled, but will somehow make a bolt or shaft out of thee." Said Ralph: "I did but jest; I deem

myself not so near my death to-day as I have been twice this summer or oftener." Said the sergeant: "It is ill jesting in matters wherein my Lord hath to do. Now thou hast heard my word: do after it." Therewith he departed, and Ralph laughed and shook the spear aloft, & deemed it not overstrong; but he said to himself that the spears of the others would be much the same.

NOW the horn blew up thrice, & at the latest blast Ralph pricked forth, as one well used to the tilt, but held his horse well in hand; & he saw a man come driving against him with his spear in the rest, & deemed him right big, but this withal he saw, that the man was ill arrayed, & was pulling on his horse as one not willing to trust him to rush; and indeed he came on so ill that it was clear that he would never strike Ralph's shield fairly. So he swerved as they met, so that his spear-point was never near to Ralph, who turned his horse toward him a little, and caught his foeman by the gear about his neck, & spurred on, so that he dragged him clean out of his saddle, and let him drop, and rode back quietly to his place, & got off his horse to see to his girths; & he heard great laughter rising up from the ring of men, and from the women also. But the Lord of Utterbol cried out: "Bring forth some one who doth not eat my meat for nothing: & set that wretch and dastard aside till the tilting be over, and then he shall pay a little for his wasted meat and drink."

RALPH got into his saddle again, and saw a very big man come forth at the other end of the lists, and wondered if he should be overthrown of him; but noted that his horse seemed not over good. Then the horn blew up and he spurred on, and his foeman met him fairly in the midmost of the lists: yet he laid his spear but ill, & as one who would thrust and foin with it rather than letting it drive all it might, so that Ralph turned the point with his shield that it glanced off, but he smote the other full on the shoulder, and the shaft brake, but the point had pierced the man's armour, and the truncheon stuck in the wound: yet since the spear was broken he kept his saddle. The Lord cried out: "Well, Black Anselm, this is better done; yet art thou a big man and a well-skilled to be beaten by a stripling." So the man was helped away and Ralph went back to his place again. Then another man was gotten to run against Ralph, and it went the same-like way: for Ralph smote him

amidst of the shield, and the spear held, so that he fell floundering off his horse.

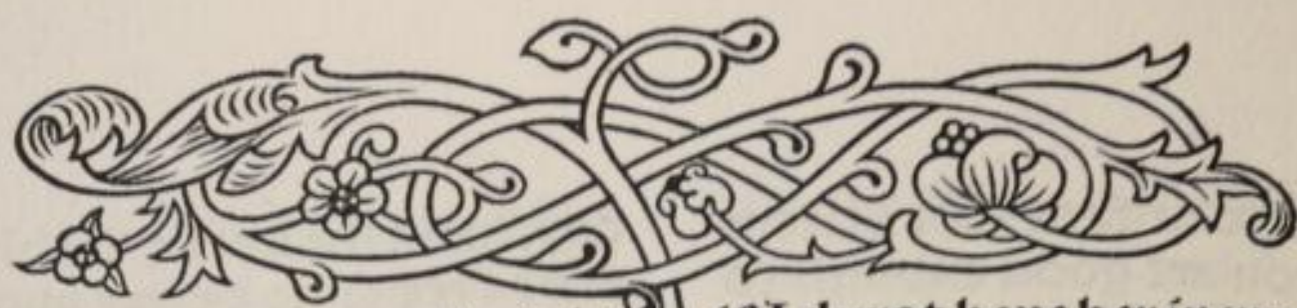
SIX of the stoutest men of Utterbol did Ralph overthrow or hurt in this wise; & then he ran three courses with Otter, and in the first two each brake his spear fairly on the other; but in the third, Otter smote not Ralph squarely, but Ralph smote full amidst of his shield, and so dight him that he well-nigh fell, & could not master his horse, but yet just barely kept his saddle. Then the Lord cried out: "Now make we an end of it! We have no might against this youngling, man to man: or else would Otter have done it. This comes of learning a craft diligently." So Ralph got off his horse, and did off his helm and awaited tidings; anon comes to him the surly sergeant, & brought him a cup of wine, and said: "Youngling, thou art to drink this, and then go to my Lord; & I deem that thou art in favour with him. So if thou art not too great a man, thou mightest put in a word for poor Redhead, that first man that did so ill. For my Lord would have him set up, head down & buttocks aloft, as a target for our bowmen. And it will be his luck if he be sped with the third shot, and last not out to the twentieth." "Yea, certes," said Ralph, "I will do no less, even if it anger the Lord." "O thou wilt not anger him," said the man, "for I tell thee, thou art in favour. Yea, and for me also thou mightest say a word also, when thou becomest right great; for have I not brought thee a good bowl of wine?" "Doubt it not, man," said Ralph, "if I once get safe to Utterbol: weary on it & all its ways!" Said the sergeant: "That is an evil wish for one who shall do well at Utterbol. But come, tarry not."

SO he brought Ralph to the Lord, who still sat in his chair beside that fair woman, & Ralph did obeisance to him; yet he had a sidelong glance also for that fair-seeming queen, & deemed her both proud-looking, and so white-skinned, that she was a wonder, like the queen of the fays: and it was just this that he had noted of the Queen as he stood before her earlier in the day when they first came into the vale; therefore he had no doubt of the damsel's queenship. Now the Lord spake to him & said: "Well, youngling, thou hast done well, and better than thy behest: and since ye have been playing at sharps, I deem thou wouldst not do ill in battle, if it came to that. So now I am like to make something other of thee than I was

minded to at first: for I deem that thou art good enough to be a man. And if thou wilt now ask a boon of me, if it be not overgreat, I will grant it thee." ❧ Ralph put one knee to the ground, & said: "Great Lord, I thank thee: but whereas I am in an alien land & seeking great things, I know of no gift which I may take for myself save leave to depart, which I deem thou wilt not grant me. Yet one thing thou mayst do for my asking if thou wilt. If thou be still angry with the carle whom I first unhorsed, I pray thee pardon him his ill-luck." "Ill-luck!" said the Lord, "why, I saw him that he was downright afraid of thee. And if my men are to grow blenchers & soft-hearts, what is to do then? But tell me, Otter, what is the name of this carle?" Said Otter: "Redhead, he hight, Lord." Said the Lord: "And what like a man is he in a fray?" ❧ "Naught so ill, Lord," said Otter. "This time, like the rest of us, he knew not this gear. It were scarce good to miss him at the next pinch. It were enough if he had the thongs over his back a few dozen times; it will be the first day of such cheer to him." "Ha!" said the Lord, "and what for, Otter, what for?" "Because he was somewhat rough-handed, Lord," said Otter. "Then shall we need him and use him some day," said the Lord; "let him go scot free & do better another bout. There is thy boon granted for thee, knight; & another day thou mayst ask something more. And now shall David have a care of thee. And when we come to Utterbol we shall see what is to be done with thee."

THEN Ralph rose up & thanked him, & David came forward and led him to his tent. And he was wheedling in his ways to him, as if Ralph were now become one who might do him great good if so his will were. ❧ But the Lord went back again into the Tower.

AS to the Lady, she abode in her pavilion amidst many fears and desires, till Agatha entered & said: "My Lady, so far all has gone happily." Said the Lady: "I deemed from the noise and the cry that he was doing well. But tell me, how did he?" "My Lady," quoth Agatha, "he knocked our folk about well-favouredly, & seemed to think little of it" ❧ "And Joyce," said the Lady, "how did she?" "She looked a queen, every inch of her, & she is tall," said Agatha: "soothly some folk stared on her, but not many knew of her, since she is but new into our house. Though it is a matter of course that



all save our new-come knight knew that it was not thou that sat there. And my Lord was well-pleased, and now he hath taken her by the hand and led her into the Tower" ❧ The Lady reddened and scowled, and said: "And he...did he come anigh her?" ❧ "O yea," said Agatha, "whereas he stood before my Lord a good while, and then kneeled to him to pray pardon for one of our men who had done ill in the tilting: yea, he was nigh enough to her to touch her hand had he dared, & to smell the fragrance of her raiment. And he seemed to think it good to look out of the corners of his eyes at her; though I do not say that she smiled on him" ❧ The Lady sprang up, her cheeks burning, & walked about angrily awhile, striving for words, till at last she said: "When we come home to Utterbol, my lord will see his new thrall again, & will care for Joyce no whit: then will I have my will of her; and she shall learn, she, whether I am verily the least of women at Utterbol. Ha! what sayest thou? Now why wilt thou stand and smile & smile on me? Yea, I know what is in thy thought; & in very sooth it is good that the dear youngling hath not seen this new thrall, this Ursula. forsooth, I tell thee that if I durst have her in my hands I would have a true tale out of her as to why she weareth ever that pair of beads about her neck" ❧ "Now, our Lady," said Agatha, "thou art marring the fairness of thy face again. I bid thee be at peace, for all shall be well, and other than thou deemest. Tell me, then, didst thou get our Lord to swear immunity for me?" Said the Lady: "Yea, he swore on the edge of the sword that thou mightest say what thou wouldst, & neither he nor any other should lay hand on thee." "Good," said Agatha; "then will I go to him to-morrow morning, when Joyce has gone from him ❧ But now hold up thine heart, and keep close for these two days that we shall yet abide in Tower Dale: and trust me, this very evening I shall begin to set tidings going that shall work and grow, and shall one day rejoice thine heart." So fell the talk betwixt them.

Chapter XXXVIII. A friend gives Ralph warning

ON the morrow Ralph wandered about the dale where he would, & none meddled with him. And as he walked east along the stream where the valley began to narrow, he saw a man sitting on the bank fishing with an angle,

& when he drew near, the man turned about and saw him. Then he lays down his angling rod and rises to his feet, and stands facing Ralph, looking sheepish, with his hands hanging down by his sides; and Ralph, who was thinking of other folk, wondered what he would. So he said: "Hail, good fellow! What wouldst thou?" Said the man: "I would thank thee" "What for?" said Ralph; but as he looked on him he saw that it was Redhead, whose pardon he had won of the Lord yesterday; so he held out his hand, and took Redhead's, and smiled friendly on him. Redhead looked him full in the face, and though he was both big and very rough looking, he had not altogether the look of a rascal. He said: "fair lord, I would that I might do something for thine avail, and perchance I may: but it is hard to do good things in Hell, especially for one of its devils" "Yea, is it so bad as that?" said Ralph. "for thee not yet," said Redhead, "but it may come to it. Hearken, lord, there is none anigh us that I can see, so I will say a word to thee at once, later on it may be over late: Go thou not to Utterbol whatever may betide." "Yea," said Ralph, "but how if I be taken thither?" Quoth Redhead: "I can see this, that thou art so favoured that thou mayst go whither thou wilt about the camp with none to hinder thee. Therefore it will be easy for thee to depart by night and cloud, or in the grey of the morning, when thou comest to a good pass, whereof I will tell thee. And still I say, go thou not to Utterbol: for thou art over good to be made a devil of, like to us, & therefore thou shalt be tormented till thy life is spoilt, & by that road shalt thou be sent to heaven." "But thou saidst even now," said Ralph, "that I was high in the Lord's grace" "Yea," said Redhead, "that may last till thou hast command to do some dastard's deed and naysayest it, as thou wilt: & then farewell to thee." "Yea," said Ralph, "& what is that?" Said Redhead: "He hath bought thee to give to his wife for a toy and a minion, and if she like thee, it will be well for a while: but on the first occasion that serveth him, and she wearieth of thee (for she is a woman like a weathercock), he will lay hand on thee & take the manhood from thee, and let thee drift about Utterbol a mock for all men. for already at heart he hateth thee."

RALPH stood pondering this word, for somehow it chimed in with the thought already in his

heart. Yet how should he not go to Utterbol, with the Damsel abiding deliverance of him there: and yet again, if they met there and were espied on, would not that ruin everything, for her as well as for him?

At last he said: "Good fellow, this may be true, but how shall I know it for true before I run the risk of fleeing away, instead of going on to Utterbol, whereas folk deem honour awaiteth me?"

Said Redhead: "There is no honour at Utterbol save for such as are unworthy of honour. But thy risk is as I say, and I shall tell thee whence I had my tale, since I love thee for thy kindness to me, and thy manliness. It was told me yesterseve by a woman who is in the very privity of the Lady of Utterbol, & is well with the Lord also: and it jumpeth with mine own thought on the matter; so I bid thee beware: for what is in me to grieve would be sore grieved wert thou cast away"

"Well," said Ralph, "let us sit down here on the bank & then tell me more; but go on with thine angling the while, lest any should see us."

So they sat down, & Redhead did as Ralph bade; & he said: "Lord, I have bidden thee to flee; but this is an ill land to flee from, & indeed there is but one pass whereby ye may well get away from this company betwixt this and Utterbol; & we shall encamp hard by it on the second day of our faring hence. Yet I must tell thee that it is no road for a dastard; for it leadeth through the forest up into the mountains: yet such as it is, for a man bold and strong like thee, I bid thee take it: and I can see to it that leaving this company shall be easy to thee: only thou must make up thy mind speedily, since the time draws so nigh, and when thou art come to Utterbol with all this rout, and the house full, & some one or other dogging each footstep of thine, fleeing will be another matter. Now thus it is: on that same second night, not only is the wood at hand to cover thee, but I shall be chief warder of the side of the camp where thou lodgest, so that I can put thee on the road: & if I were better worth, I would say, take me with thee, but as it is, I will not burden thee with that prayer"

"Yea," said Ralph, "I have had one guide in this countryside and he bewrayed me. This is a matter of life and death, so I will speak out and say, how am I to know but that thou also art going about to bewray me?"

REDHEAD leapt up to his feet, & roared out: "What shall I say? what

shall I say? By the soul of my father I am not bewraying thee. May all the curses of Utterbol be sevenfold heavier on me if I am thy traitor and dastard" "Softly lad, softly," said Ralph, "lest some one should hear thee. Content thee, I must needs believe thee if thou makest so much noise about it" Then Redhead sat him down again, and for all that he was so rough and sturdy a carle he fell a-weeping "Nay, nay," said Ralph, "this is worse in all wise than the other noise. I believe thee as well as a man can who is dealing with one who is not his close friend, and who therefore spareth truth to his friend because of many years use and wont. Come to thyself again & let us look at this matter square in the face, & speedily too, lest some unfriend or busybody come on us. There now! Now, in the first place dost thou know why I am come into this perilous and tyrannous land?" Said Redhead: "I have heard it said that thou art on the quest of the Well at the World's End" "And that is but the sooth," said Ralph "Well then," quoth Redhead, "there is the greater cause for thy fleeing at the time & in the manner I have bidden thee. For there is a certain sage who dwelleth in the wildwood betwixt that place & the Great Mountains, & he hath so much lore concerning the Mountains, yea, and the Well itself, that if he will tell thee what he can tell, thou art in a fair way to end thy quest happily. What sayest thou then?" Said Ralph, "I say that the Sage is good if I may find him. But there is another cause why I have come hither from Goldburg." "What is that?" said Redhead. "This," said Ralph, "to come to Utterbol." "Heaven help us!" quoth Redhead, "& wherefore?" Ralph said: "Belike it is neither prudent nor wise to tell thee, but I do verily trust thee; so hearken! I go to Utterbol to deliver a friend from Utterbol; & this friend is a woman: hold a minute: and this woman, as I believe, hath been of late brought to Utterbol, having been taken out of the hands of one of the men of the mountains that lie beyond Cheaping Knowe."

REDHEAD stared astonished, & kept silence awhile; then he said: "Now all the more I say, flee! flee! flee! Doubtless the woman is there, whom thou seekest; for it would take none less fair and noble than that new-come thrall to draw to her one so fair & noble as thou art. But what availeth it? If thou go to Utterbol thou wilt destroy both her and thee. For know, that we can

all see that the Lord hath set his love on this damsel; & what better can betide, if thou come to Utterbol, but that the Lord shall at once see that there is love betwixt you two, and then there will be an end of the story?" "How so?" quoth Ralph. Said Redhead: "At Utterbol all do the will of the Lord of Utterbol, and he is so lustful and cruel, & so false withal, that his will shall be to torment the damsel to death, and to geld and maim thee; so that none hereafter shall know how goodly and gallant thou hast been" "Redhead," quoth Ralph much moved, "though thou art in no knightly service, thou mayst understand that it is good for a friend to die with a friend" "Yea, forsooth," said Redhead, "if he may do no more to help than that! Wouldst thou not help the damsel? Now when thou comest back from the quest of the Well at the World's End, thou wilt be too mighty & glorious for the Lord of Utterbol to thrust thee aside like to an over eager dog; & thou mayst help her then. But now I say to thee, and swear to thee, that three days after thou hast met thy beloved in Utterbol she will be dead. I would that thou couldst ask someone else nearer to the Lord than I have been. The tale would be the same as mine."

Now soothly to say it, this was even what Ralph had feared would be, and he could scarce doubt Redhead's word. So he sat there pondering the matter a good while, and at last he said: "My friend, I will trust thee with another thing; I have a mind to flee to the wildwood, & yet come to Utterbol for the damsel's deliverance." "Yea," said Redhead, "and how wilt thou work in the matter?" Said Ralph: "How would it be if I came thither in other guise than mine own, so that I should not be known either by the damsel or her tyrants?" Said Redhead: "There were peril in that; yet hope also. Yea, & in one way thou mightest do it; to wit, if thou wert to find that Sage, and tell him thy tale: if he be of good will to thee, he might then change not thy gear only, but thy skin also; for he hath exceeding great lore" "Well," said Ralph, "thou mayst look upon it as certain that on that aforesaid night I will do my best to shake off this company of tyrant and thralls, unless I hear fresh tidings, so that I must needs change my purpose. But I will ask thee to give me some token that all holds together some little time beforehand." Quoth Redhead: "Even so shall it be; thou shalt see me at latest on the eve of

the night of thy departure; but on the night before that, if it be anywise possible" "Now will I go away from thee," said Ralph, "and I thank thee heartily for thine help, and deem thee my friend. And if thou think better of fleeing with me, thou wilt gladden me the more" Redhead shook his head but spake not, and Ralph went his ways down the dale.

Chapter XXXIX. The Lord of Utterbol makes Ralph a free man

DE went to and fro that day and the next, & none meddled with him; with Redhead he spake not again those days, but had talk with Otter & David, who were blithe enough with him. Agatha he saw not at all; nor the Lady, & still deemed that the white-skinned woman whom he had seen sitting by the Lord after the tilting was the Queen.

AS for the Lady, she abode in her pavilion, & whiles lay in a heap on the floor weeping, or dull and blind with grief; whiles she walked up & down mad wroth with whomsoever came in her way, even to the dealing out of stripes and blows to her women.

BUT on the eve before the day of departure Agatha came into her, & chid her, and bade her be merry: "I have seen the Lord & told him what I would, and found it no hard matter to get him to yea say our plot, which were hard to carry out without his good-will. Withal the seed that I have sowed two days or more ago is bearing fruit; so that thou mayst look to it that whatsoever plight we may be in, we shall find a deliverer" "I wot not thy meaning," quoth the Lady, "but I deem thou wilt now tell me what thou art planning, and give me some hope, lest I lay hands on myself" Then Agatha told her without tarrying what she was about doing for her, the tale of which will be seen hereafter; & when she had done, the Lady mended her cheer, and bade bring meat and drink, and was once more like a great & proud Lady.

ON the morn of departure, when Ralph arose, David came to him and said: "My Lord is astir already, and would see thee for thy good." So Ralph went with David, who brought him to the Tower, and there they found the Lord sitting in a window, and Otter stood before him, & some others of his highest folk. But beside him sat Joyce, and it seemed that he thought it nought but good to hold her hand and play with the fingers thereof, though all those great

men were by; and Ralph had no thought of her but that she was the Queen.

So Ralph made obeisance to the Lord & stood awaiting his word; and the Lord said: "We have been thinking of thee, young man, and have deemed thy lot to be somewhat of the hardest, if thou must needs be a thrall, since thou art both young & well-born, & so good a man of thine hands. Now, wilt thou be our man at Utterbol?" Ralph delayed his answer a space & looked at Otter, who seemed to him to frame a Yea with his lips, as who should say, take it. So he said: "Lord, thou art good to me, yet mayst thou be better if thou wilt." "Yea, man!" said the Lord, knitting his brows; "What shall it be? say thy say, and be done with it." "Lord," said Ralph, "I pray thee to give me my choice, whether I shall go with thee to Utterbol or forbear going."

"Why, lo you!" said the Lord testily, and somewhat sourly, "thou hast the choice. Have I not told thee that thou art free?" Then Ralph knelt before him, and said: "Lord, I thank thee from a full heart, in that thou wilt suffer me to depart on mine errand, for it is a great one." The scowl deepened on the Lord's face, and he turned away from Ralph, and said presently: "Otter, take the Knight away, and let him have all his armour & weapons, and a right good horse; & then let him do as he will, either ride with us, or depart if he will, and whither he will. And if he must needs ride into the desert, and cast himself away in the mountains, so be it. But whatever he hath a mind to, let none hinder him, but further him rather; hearest thou? take him with thee" Then was Ralph overflowing with thanks, but the Lord heeded him nought, but looked askance at him & sourly. And he rose up withal, and led the damsel by the hand into another chamber; & she minced in her gait & leaned over to the Lord and spake softly in his ear and laughed, and he laughed in his turn and toyed with her neck and shoulders.

BUT the great men turned & went their ways from the Tower, & Ralph went with Otter & was full of glee, & as merry as a bird. But Otter looked on him, & said gruffly: "Yea now, thou art like a song-bird but newly let out of his cage. But I can see the string which is tied to thy leg, though thou feelest it not" "Why, what now?" quoth Ralph, making as though he were astonished. "Hearken," said Otter: "there is none nigh us, so I will speak straight out; for I love

thee since the jousting when we tried our might together. If thou deemest that thou art verily free, ride off on the backward road when we go forward; I warrant me thou shalt presently meet with an adventure, and be brought in a captive for the second time." "How then," said Ralph, "hath not the Lord good will toward me?" Said Otter: "I say not that he is now minded to do thee a mischief for cruelty's sake; but he is minded to get what he can out of thee. If he use thee not for the pleasuring of his wife (so long as her pleasure in thee lasteth) he will verily use thee for somewhat else. And to speak plainly, I now deem that he will make thee my mate, to use with me, or against me, as occasion may serve; so thou shalt be another captain of his host." He laughed withal, and said again: "But if thou be not wary, thou wilt tumble off that giddy height, and find thyself a thrall once more, and maybe a gelding to boot." Now waxed Ralph angry & forgat his prudence, and said: "Yea, but how shall he use me when I am out of reach of his hand?" "Oho, young man," said Otter, "whither away then, to be out of his reach?"

"Why," quoth Ralph still angrily, "is thy Lord master of all the world?" "Nay," said the captain, "but of a piece thereof. In short, betwixt Utterbol and Goldburg, and Utterbol and the mountains, and Utterbol & an hundred miles north, and an hundred miles south, there is no place where thou canst live, no place save the howling wilderness, and scarcely there either, where he may not lay hand on thee, if he do but whistle. What, man! be not downhearted! come with us to Utterbol, since thou needs must. Be wise, and then the Lord shall have no occasion against thee; above all, beware of crossing him in any matter of a woman. Then who knows" (& here he sunk his voice well nigh to a whisper) "but thou & I together may rule in Utterbol & make better days there."

RALPH was waxen master of himself by now, and was gotten wary indeed, so he made as if he liked Otter's counsel well, and became exceeding gay; for indeed the heart within him was verily glad at the thought of his escaping from thralldom; for more than ever now he was fast in his mind to flee at the time appointed by Redhead. So Otter said: "Well, youngling, I am glad that thou takest it thus, for I deem that if thou wert to seek to depart, the Lord would make it an occasion against thee" "Such an oc-

casion shall he not have, fellow in arms," quoth Ralph. "But tell me, we ride presently, and I suppose are bound for Utterness by the shortest road?" "Yea," said Otter, "& anon we shall come to the great forest which lieth along our road all the way to Utterness and beyond it; for the town is, as it were, an island in the sea of woodland which covers all, right up to the feet of the Great Mountains, and does what it may to climb them whereso the great wall or its buttresses are anywise broken down toward our country; but the end of it lieth along our road, as I said, and we do but skirt it. A woful wood it is, and save for the hunting of the beasts, which be there in great plenty, with wolves and bears, yea, & lions to boot, which come down from the mountains, there is no gain in it. No gain, though forsooth they say that some have found it gainful" "How so?" said Ralph. Said Otter: "That way lieth the way to the Well at the World's End, if one might find it. If at any time we were clear of Utterbol, I have a mind for the adventure along with thee, lad, and so I deem hast thou from all the questions thou hast put to me thereabout." Ralph mastered himself so that his face changed not, and he said: "Well, Captain, that may come to pass; but tell me, are there any tokens known whereby a man shall know that he is on the right path to the Well?" "The report of folk goeth," said Otter, "concerning one token, where is the road & the pass through the Great Mountains, to wit, that on the black rock thereby is carven the image of a fighting Man, or monstrous giant, of the days long gone by. Of other signs I can tell thee nought; and few of men are alive that can. But there is a Sage dwelleth in the wood under the mountains to whom folk seek for his diverse lore; and he, if he will, say men, can set forth all the way, and its perils, and how to escape them. Well, knight, when the time comes, thou and I will go find him together, for he at least is not hard to find, and if he be gracious to us, then will we on our quest. But as now, see ye, they have struck our tents and the Queen's pavilion also; so to horse, is the word" "Yea," quoth Ralph, looking curiously toward the place where the Queen's pavilion had stood; "is not yonder the Queen's litter taking the road?" "Yea, surely," said Otter. "Then the litter will be empty," said Ralph. "Maybe, or maybe not," said Otter; "but now I must get me gone hastily to my folk; doubtless

we shall meet upon the road to Utterbol."

SO he turned & went his ways; & Ralph also ran to his horse, whereby was David already in the saddle, and so mounted, and the whole rout moved slowly from out of Vale Turris, Ralph going ever by David. The company was now a great one, for many wains were joined to them, laden with meal, and fleeces, and other household stuff, & withal there was a great herd of neat, and of sheep, & of goats, which the Lord's men had been gathering in the fruitful country these two days; but the Lord was tarrying still in the Tower.

Chapter XL. They ride toward Utterness from out of Vale Turris

SO they rode by a good highway, well beaten, past the Tower & over the ridge of the valley, and came full upon the terrible sight of the Great Mountains; & the sea of woodland lay before them, swelling & falling, & swelling again, till it broke grey against the dark blue of the mountain wall. They went as the way led, down hill, and when they were at the bottom, thence along their highway parted the tillage and fenced pastures from the rough edges of the woodland, like as a ditch sunders field from field. They had the wildwood ever on their right hand, and but a little way from where they rode the wood thickened for the more part into dark and close thicket, the trees whereof were so tall that they hid the over-shadowing mountains whenso they rode the bottoms, though when the way mounted on the ridges, & the trees gave back a little, they had sight of the woodland & the mountains. On the other hand at whiles the thicket came close up to the roadside.

NOW David biddeth press on past the wains & the driven beasts, which were going very slowly. So did they, and at last were well nigh at the head of the Lord's company; but when Ralph would have pressed on still, David refrained him, & said that they must by no means outgo the Queen's people, or even mingle with them; so they rode on softly. But as the afternoon was drawing toward evening they heard great noise of horns behind them, and the sound of horses galloping. Then David drew Ralph to the side of the way, and everybody about, both before and behind them, drew up in likewise at the wayside, and or ever Ralph could ask any

question, came a band of men-at-arms at the gallop, led by Otter, and after them the Lord on his black steed, and beside him on a white palfrey the woman whom Ralph had seen in the Tower, and whom he had taken for the Queen, her light raiment streaming out from her, and her yellow hair flying loose. They passed in a moment of time, and then David and Ralph and the rest rode on after them. Then said Ralph: "The Queen rideth well and hardily." "Yea," said David, screwing his face into a grin, would he or no. Ralph beheld him, and it came into his mind that this was not the Queen whom he had looked on when they first came into Vale Turris, and he said: "What then! this woman is not the Queen?"

David spake not for a while, and then he answered: "Sir Knight, there be matters whereof we servants of my Lord say little or nothing, & thou wert best to do the like." And no more would he say thereon.

Chapter XLI. Redhead keeps tryst

THEY rode not above a dozen miles that day, & pitched their tents and pavilions in the fair meadows by the wayside looking into the thick of the forest. There this betid to tell of, that when Ralph got off his horse, & the horse-lads were gathered about the men-at-arms & high folk, who should take Ralph's horse but Redhead, who made a sign to him by lifting his eyebrows as if he were asking him somewhat; and Ralph took it as a question as to whether his purpose held to flee on the morrow night; so he nodded a yea-say, just so much as Redhead might note it; and naught else befell betwixt them.

WHEN it was barely dawn after that night, Ralph awoke with the sound of great stir in the camp, and shouting of men and lowing and bleating of beasts; so he looked out, and saw that the wains and the flocks and herds were being got on to the road, so that they might make good way before the company of the camp took the road. But he heeded it little & went to sleep again.

When it was fully morning he arose, and found that the men were not hastening their departure, but were resting by the wood-side and disporting them about the meadow; so he wandered about amongst the men-at-arms & serving-men, and came across Redhead and hailed him; and there was no

man very nigh to them; so Red/head looked about him warily, & then spake swiftly & softly: "fail not to/night! fail not! for yesterday again was I told by one who wotteth surely, what abideth thee at Utterbol if thou go thither. I say if thou fail, thou shalt repent but once; all thy life long to wit." Ralph nodded his head, & said: "Fear not, I will not fail thee" ❧ And therewith they turned a-way from each other lest they should be noted.

ABOUT two hours before noon they got to horse again, &, being no more encumbered with the wains & the beasts, rode at a good pace. As on the day before, the road led them along the edge of the wildwood, & whiles it even went close to the very thicket. Whiles again they mounted somewhat & looked down on the thicket, leagues and leagues thereof, which yet seemed but a little space because of the hugeness of the mountain/wall which brooded over it; but oftenest the forest hid all but the near trees. ❧ Thus they rode some twenty miles, and made stay at sunset in a place that seemed rather a clearing of the wood than a meadow; for they had trees on their left hand at a fur/long's distance, as well as on their right at a stone's throw. ❧ Ralph saw not Redhead as he got off his horse, & David ac/cording to his wont went with him to his tent. But after they had supped together, & David had made much of Ralph, and had drunk many cups to his health, he said to him: "The night is yet young, yea, but new/born; yet must I depart from thee, if I may, to meet a man who will sell me a noble horse good cheap; and I may well leave thee now, seeing that thou hast become a free man; so I bid thee good/night."

THEREWITH he depart/ed, and was scarce gone out ere Redhead cometh in, & saith in his wonted rough loud voice: "Here, knight, here is the bridle thou badest me get mended; will the cobbling serve?" Then seeing no one there, he fell to speaking softer & said: "I heard the old pimp call thee a free man e'en now: I fear me that thou art not so free as he would have thee think. Anyhow, were I thou, I would be freer in two hours' space. Is it to be so?" ❧ "Yea, yea," said Ralph. Redhead nodded: "Good is that," said he; "I say in two hours' time all will be quiet, and we are as near the thicket as may be; there is no moon, but the night is fair and the stars clear; so all that thou hast to do is to walk out of this tent, and turn at once to thy right hand: come out with me

now quietly, and I will show thee" They went out together, and Redhead said softly: "Lo thou that doddered oak yonder; like a piece of a hayrick it looks under the stars; if thou seest it, come in again at once" Ralph turned and drew Redhead in, & said when they were in the tent again: "Yea, I saw it: what then?" Said Redhead: "I shall be behind it abiding thee." "Must I go afoot?" said Ralph, "or how shall I get me a horse?" "I have a horse for thee," said Redhead, "not thine own, but a better one yet, that hath not been backed to-day. Now give me a cup of wine, and let me go" Ralph filled for him & took a cup himself, & said: "I pledge thee, friend, and wish thee better luck; and I would have thee for my fellow in this quest" "Nay," said Redhead, "it may not be: I will not burden thy luck with my ill-luck ... and moreover I am seeking something which I may gain at Utterbol, and if I have it, I may do my best to say good-night to that evil abode" "Yea," said Ralph, "and I wish thee well therein." Said Redhead, stammering somewhat: "It is even that woman of the Queen's whereof I told thee. And now one last word, since I must not be over long in thy tent, lest some one come upon us. But, fair sir, if thy mind misgive thee for this turning aside from Utterbol; though it is not to be doubted that the damsel whom thou seekest hath been there, it is not all so sure that thou wouldst have found her there. For of late, what with my Lord and my Lady being both away, the place hath been scant of folk; and not only is the said damsel wise & wary, but there be others who have seen her besides my Lord, & whoso hath seen her is like to love her; and such is she, that whoso loveth her is like to do her will. So I bid thee in all case be earnest in thy quest; and think that if thou die on the road thy damsel would have died with thee; and if thou drink of the Well and come back whole and safe, I know not why thou shouldest not go straight to Utterbol and have the damsel away with thee whosoever gainsay it. For they (if there be any such) who have drunk of the Well at the World's End are well looked to in this land. Now one more word yet; when I come to Utterbol, if thy damsel be there still, fear not but I will have speech of her, and tell of thee, and what thou wert looking to, & how thou deemedst of her" Therewith he turned & departed hastily. But Ralph, left alone, was sorely moved with hope and fear, & a longing that

grew in him to see the damsel. ❧ For though he was firmly set on departure, and on seeking the sage aforesaid, yet his heart was drawn this way and that: and it came into his mind how the damsel would fare when the evil Lord came home to Utterbol; and he could not choose but make stories of her meeting of the tyrant, and her fear and grief and shame, and the despair of her heart. So the minutes went slow to him, till he should be in some new place and doing somewhat toward bringing about the deliverance of her from thraldom, and the meeting of him and her.