FRIENDS INNCOMMECC IN THE WILDWOOD

THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END ✿ BOOK III. THE ROAD TO THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END ✿ ✿ ✿

Chapter I. An Adventure in the Wood under the Mountains ✿

AS THE NIGHT WORN to the time appointed, for it was two hours after midnight, so he stepped out of his tent clad in all his war gear, and went straight to the doddered oak, and found Redhead there with but one horse, whereby Ralph knew that he held to his purpose of going his ways to Utterbol: so he took him by the shoulders and embraced him, rough carle as he was, and Redhead kneeled to him one moment of time & then arose and went off into the night. But Ralph got a-horseback without delay & rode his ways warily across the highway and into the wood, and there was none to hinder him. Though it was dark but for the starlight, there was a path, which the horse, & not Ralph, found, so that he made some way even before the first glimmer of dawn, all the more as the wood was not very thick after the first mile, and there were clearings here and there. ✿ So rode Ralph till the sun was at point to rise, and he was about the midst of one of those clearings or wood-lawns, on the further side whereof there was more thicket, as he deemed, than he had yet come to; so he drew rein and looked about him for a minute. Even therewith he deemed he heard a sound less harsh than the cry of the jay in the beech-trees, and shriller than the moaning of the morning breeze in the wood. So he falls to listening with both ears, and this time deems that he hears the voice of a woman: & therewith came into his mind that old & dear adventure of the Wood Perilous; for he was dreamy with the past eagerness of his deeds, & the long and lonely night. But yet he doubted somewhat of the voice when it had passed his ears, so he shook his rein, for he thought it not good to tarry. ✿ Scarce then had his horse stepped out, ere there came a woman running out of the thicket before him & made toward him over the lawn. So he gat off his horse at once &

went to meet her, leading his horse; and as he drew nigh he could see that she was in a sorry plight; she had gathered up her skirts to run the better, and her legs and feet were naked: the coif was gone from her head, and her black hair streamed out behind her: her gown was rent about the shoulders and bosom, so that one sleeve hung tattered, as if by the handling of some one. ❧ So she ran up to him crying out: "Help, knight, help us!" & sank down therewith at his feet panting and sobbing. He stooped down to her, & raised her up, & said in a kind voice: "What is amiss, fair damsel, that thou art in such a plight; and what may I for thine avail? Doth any pursue thee, that thou fleest thus?" She stood sobbing awhile, and then took hold of his two hands & said: "O fair lord, come now & help my lady! for as for me, since I am with thee, I am safe" ❧ "Yea," said he. "Shall I get to horse at once?" And therewith he made as if he would move away from her; but she still held his hands, & seemed to think it good so to do, and she spake not for a while but gazed earnestly into his face. She was a fair woman, dark and sleek and lithe; for in good sooth she was none other than Agatha, who is afore told of.

Now Ralph is somewhat abashed by her eagerness, and lets his eyes fall before hers; and he cannot but note that, despite the brambles & briars of the wood that she had run through, there were no scratches on her bare legs, and that her arm was unbruised where the sleeve had been rent off ❧ At last she spake, but somewhat slowly, as if she were thinking of what she had to say: "O knight, by thy knightly oath I charge thee come to my lady and help and rescue her: she & I have been taken by evil men, and I fear that they will put her to shame, and torment her, ere they carry her off; for they were about tying her to a tree when I escaped: for they heeded not me who am but the maid, when they had the mistress in their hands." "Yea," said he, "and who is thy mistress?" Said the damsel: "She is the Lady of the Burnt Rock; and I fear me that these men are of the Riders of Utterbol; and then will it go hard with her; for there is naught but hatred betwixt my lord her husband & the tyrant of Utterbol." Said Ralph: "And how many were they?" "O but three, fair sir, but three," she said; "& thou so fair & strong, like the war-god himself." ❧

RALPH laughed: "Three to one is long odds," quoth he, "but I will come with thee when thou hast let go my hands so that I may mount my horse. But wilt thou not ride behind me, fair damsel; so wearied and spent as thou wilt be by thy flight."

SHE looked on him curiously, and laid a hand on his breast, and the hauberk rings tinkled beneath the broidered surcoat; then she said: "Nay, I had best go afoot before thee, so disarrayed as I am."

THEN she let him go, but followed him still with her eyes as he gat him into the saddle. She walked on beside his horse's head; and Ralph marvelled of her that for all her haste she had been in, she went somewhat leisurely, picking her way daintily so as to tread the smooth, & keep her feet from the rough.

THUS they went on, into the thicket and through it, and the damsel put the thorns & briars aside daintily as she stepped, & went slower still till they came to a pleasant place of oak-trees with greensward beneath them; and then she stopped, & turning, faced Ralph, & spoke with another voice than heretofore, whereas there was naught rueful or whining therein, but somewhat both of glee and of mocking as it seemed. "Sir knight," she said, "I have a word or two for thy ears; and this is a pleasant place, and good for us to talk together, whereas it is neither too near to her, nor too far from her, so that I can easily find my way back to her. Now, lord, I pray thee light down and listen to me." And therewith she sat down on the grass by the bole of a great oak.

BUT thy lady," said Ralph, "thy lady?" "O sir," she said, "my lady shall do well enough: she is not tied so fast but she might loose herself if the need were pressing. Light down, dear lord, light down!"

BUT Ralph sat still on his horse, & knit his brows, and said: "What is this, damsel? hast thou been playing a play with me? Where is thy lady whom thou wouldst have me deliver? If this be but game and play, let me go my ways; for time presses, and I have a weighty errand on hand."

SHE rose up & came close to him, and laid a hand on his knee and looked wistfully into his face as she said: "Nay then, I can tell thee all the tale as thou sittest in thy saddle; for me seems short will be thy farewell when I have told it." And she sighed withal.

THEN Ralph was ashamed to gainsay her, & she now become gentle and sweet and enticing, and sad withal; so he got off his horse and tied him to a tree, & went & stood by the damsel as she lay upon the grass, and said: "I prithee tell thy tale & let me depart if there be naught for me to do."

THEN she said: "This is the first word, that as to the Red Rock, I lied; and my lady is the Queen of Utterbol, and I am her thrall, and it is I who have drawn thee hither from the camp."

THE blood mounted to Ralph's brow for anger; when he called to mind how he had been led hither and thither on other folk's errands ever since he left Upmeads. But he said naught, & Agatha looked on him timidly & said: "I say I am her thrall, and I did it to serve her & because she bade me." Said Ralph roughly: "And Redhead, him whom I saved from torments & death; dost thou know him? didst thou know him?"

YEA," she said, "I had from him what he had learned concerning thee from the sergeants & others, and then I put words into his mouth." "Yea then," quoth Ralph, "then he also is a traitor!" "Nay, nay," she said, "he is a true man and loveth thee, & whatever he hath said to thee he troweth himself. Moreover, I tell thee here and now that all that he told thee of the affairs of Utterbol, and thine outlook there, is true & overtrue."

SHE sprang to her feet therewith, and stood before him and clasped her hands before him and said: "I know that thou seekest the Well at the World's End and the deliverance of the damsel whom the Lord ravished from the wild man: now I swear it by thy mouth, that if thou go to Utterbol thou art undone and shalt come to the foulest pass there, and moreover that so going thou shalt bring the uttermost shame & torments on the damsel." Said Ralph: "Yea, but what is her case as now? tell me."

QUOTH Agatha: "She is in no such evil case; for my lady hateth her not as yet, or but little; and, which is far more, my lord loveth her after his fashion, and withal as I deem feareth her; for though she hath utterly gainsaid his desire, he hath scarce so much as threatened her. A thing unheard of. Had it been another woman she had by this time known all the bitterness that leadeth unto death at Utterbol." Ralph

paled, and he scowled on her; then he said: "And how knowest thou all the privity of the Lord of Utterbol? who telleth thee of all this?" She smiled and spake daintily: "Many folk tell me that which I would know; & that is because whiles I conquer the tidings with my wits, & whiles buy it with my body. Anyhow, what I tell thee is the very sooth concerning this damsel, and this it is: that whereas she is but in peril, she shall be in deadly peril, yea and that instant, if thou go to Utterbol, thou, who art her lover ..." "Nay," said Ralph angrily, "I am not her lover, I am but her well-willer." "Well," quoth Agatha, looking down & knitting her brows, "when thy good will towards her has become known, then shall she be thrown at once into the pit of my lord's cruelty. Yea, to speak sooth, even as it is, for thy sake (for her I heed naught) I would that the lord might find her gone when he cometh back to Utterbol." "Yea," said Ralph, reddening, "and is there any hope for her getting clear off?" "So I deem," said Agatha. ❧ She was silent awhile, and then spake in a low voice: "It is said that each man that seeth her loveth her; yea, & will befriend her, even though she consent not to his desire. Maybe she hath fled from Utterbol."

RALPH stood silent awhile with a troubled face; and then he said: "Yet thou hast not told me the why and wherefore of this play of thine, and the beguiling me into fleeing from the camp. Tell it me, that I may pardon thee and pass on."

SHE said: "By thine eyes I swear that this is sooth, and that there is naught else in it than this: My lady set her love, when first she set her eyes upon thee; as forsooth all women must: as for me, I had not seen thee (though I told my lady that I had) till within this hour that we met in the wood."

SHE sighed therewith, & with her right hand played with the rent raiment about her bosom. Then she said: "She deemed that if thou camest a mere thrall to Utterbol, though she might command thy body, yet she would not gain thy love; but that if perchance thou mightest see her in hard need, and evilly mishandled, and mightest deliver her, there might at least grow up pity in thee for her, and that love might come thereof, as oft hath happed aforetime; for my lady is a fair woman. Therefore I, who am my lady's servant and thrall, and who, I bid thee remember, had not seen thee, took upon

me to make this adventure, like to a minstrel's tale done in the flesh. Also I spake to my lord & told him thereof; and though he jeered at my lady to me, he was content, because he would have her set her heart on thee utterly; since he feared her jealousy, & would fain be delivered of it, lest she should play some turn to his newly beloved damsel and do her a mischief. Therefore did he set thee free (in words), meaning, when he had thee safe at Utterbol again (as he nowise doubted to have thee), to do as he would with thee, according as occasion might serve. For at heart he hateth thee, as I could see well. So a little before thou didst leave the camp, we, the Queen and I, went privily into a place of the woods but a little way hence. There I disarrayed both my lady and myself so far as was needful for the playing out the play which was to have seemed to thee a real adventure. Then came I to thee as if by chance hap, that I might bring thee to her; and if thou hadst come, we had a story for thee, whereby thou mightest not for very knighthood forbear to succour her & bring her whither she would, which in the long run had been Utterbol, but for the present time was to have been a certain strong-house appertaining to Utterbol, & nigh unto it. This is all the tale, and now if thou wilt, thou mayst pardon me; or if thou wilt, thou mayst draw out thy sword and smite off my head. And forsooth I deem that were the better deed."

She knelt down before him and put her palms together, & looked up at him beseechingly. His face darkened as he beheld her thus, but it cleared at last, & he said: "Damsel, thou wouldst turn out but a sorry maker, and thy play is naught. For seest thou not that I should have found out all the guile at Utterbol, & owed thy lady hatred rather than love thereafter" "Yea," she said, "but my lady might have had enough of thy love by then, and would belike have let thee alone to fall into the hands of the lord. Lo now! I have delivered thee from this, so that thou art quit both of the lord and the lady and me: & again I say that thou couldst scarce have missed, both thou and thy damsel, of a miserable ending at Utterbol" "Yea," said Ralph, softly, and as if speaking to himself, "yet am I lonely and unholpen." Then he turned to Agatha and said: "The end of all this is that I pardon thee, and must depart forthwith; for when ye two come back to the camp, then presently will the hunt be up."

SHE rose from her knees, and stood before him humbly, and said: "Nay, I shall requite thee thy pardon thus far, that I will fashion some tale for my lady which will keep us in the woods two days or three; for we have provided victual for our adventure" ❧ Said Ralph: "I may at least thank thee for that, and will trust in thee to do so much" ❧ Quoth she: "Then might I ask a reward of thee? since forsooth other reward awaiteth me at Utterbol" ❧ "Thou shalt have it," said Ralph. She said: "The reward is that thou kiss me ere we part." "It must needs be according to my word," said Ralph, "yet I must tell thee that my kiss will bear but little love with it."

SHE answered naught, but laid her hands on his breast and put up her face to him, & he kissed her lips. Then she said: "Knight, thou hast kissed a thrall and a guileful woman, yet one that shall smart for thee; therefore grudge not the kiss nor repent thee of thy kindness." "How shalt thou suffer?" said he. She looked on him steadfastly a moment, & said: "Farewell! may all good go with thee." ❧ Therewith she turned away and walked off slowly through the wood, and somewhat he pitied her, & sighed as he got into his saddle; but he said to himself: "How might I help her? Yet true it is that she may well be in an evil case: I may not help everyone." Then he shook his rein and rode his ways.

❧ Chapter II. Ralph rides the Wood under the Mountains.

A LONG way now rode Ralph, and naught befell him but the fashion of the wood. And as he rode, the heart within him was lightened that he had escaped from all the confusion and the lying of those aliens, who knew him not, nor his kindred, and yet would all use him each for his own ends: and withal he was glad that he was riding all alone upon his quest, but free, unwounded, & well weaponed.

THE wood was not very thick whereas he rode, so that he could see the whereabouts of the sun, and rode east as far as he could judge it. Some little victual he had with him, and he found woodland fruit ripening here and there, & eked out his bread therewith; neither did water fail him, for he rode a good way up along a woodland stream that cleft the thicket, coming

down as he deemed from the mountains, & thereby he made the more way: but at last he deemed that he must needs leave it, as it turned overmuch to the north. The light was failing when he came into a wood-lawn amidst of which was a pool of water, and all that day he had had no adventure with beast or man, since he had sundered from Agatha. So he lay down and slept there with his naked sword by his side, and awoke not till the sun was high in the heavens next morning. Then he arose at once & went on his way, after he had washed him and eaten a morsel.

AFTER a little the thick of the wood gave out, & the land was no longer flat, as it had been, but was of dales and of hills, not blinded by trees. In this land he saw much deer, as hart and wild swine; & he happened also on a bear, who was about a honey tree, & had taken much comb from the wild bees. On him Ralph drew his sword, & drave him, exceeding loth, from his purchase, so that the knight dined off the bear's thieving. Another time he came across a bent where on the south side grew vines well fruited, & the grapes a-ripening; and he ate well thereof before he went on his way. Before nightfall he came on that same stream again, and it was now running straight from the east; so he slept that night on the bank thereof. On the morrow he rode up along it a great way, till again it seemed to be coming overmuch from the north; and then he left it, & made on east as near as he could guess it by the sun.

NOW he passed through thickets at whiles not very great, and betwixt them rode hilly land grassed mostly with long coarse grass, and with whin and thorn-trees scattered about. Thence he saw again from time to time the huge wall of the mountains rising up into the air like a great black cloud that would swallow up the sky, & though the sight was terrible, yet it gladdened him, since he knew that he was on the right way. So far he rode, going on the whole up-hill, till at last there was a great pine-wood before him, so that he could see no ending to it either north or south.

IT was now late in the afternoon, & Ralph pondered whether he should abide the dark where he was and sleep the night there, or whether he should press on in hope of winning to some clear place before dusk. So whereas he was in a place both rough & waterless, he deemed it better to go on, after he had rested

his horse and let him bite the herbage a while. Then he rode his ways, & entered the wood and made the most of the way.

Chapter III. Ralph meeteth with another adventure in the Wood under the Mountain

SOON the wood grew very thick of pine-trees, though there was no undergrowth, so that when the sun sank it grew dark very speedily; but he still rode on in the dusk, and there were but few wild things, and those mostly voiceless, in the wood, and it was without wind and very still. Now he thought he heard the sound of a horse going behind him or on one side, and he wondered whether the chase were up, & hastened what he might, till at last it grew black night, and he was constrained to abide. So he got off his horse, & leaned his back against a tree, & had the beast's reins over his arm; and now he listened again carefully, & was quite sure that he could hear the footsteps of some hard-footed beast going nowise far from him. He laughed inwardly, and said to himself: "If the chaser were to pass but three feet from my nose he should be none the wiser but if he hear me or my horse." And therewith he cast a lap of his cloak over the horse's head, lest he should whinny if he became aware of the other beast; and so there he stood abiding, and the noise grew greater, till he could hear clearly the horse-hoofs drawing nigh, till they came very nigh, & then stopped.

THEN came a man's voice that said: "Is there a man anigh in the wood?" Ralph held his peace till he should know more; & the voice spake again in a little while: "If there be a man anigh let him be sure that I will do him no hurt; nay, I may do him good, for I have meat with me." Clear was the voice, and as sweet as the April blackbird sings. It spake again: "Naught answereth, yet me seemeth I know surely that a man is anigh; & I am aweary of the waste, and long for fellowship" Ralph hearkened, and called to mind tales of wayfarers entrapped by wood-wives and evil things; but he thought: "At least this is no sending of the Lord of Utterbol, and, St. Nicholas to aid, I have little fear of wood-wights. Withal I shall be but a dastard if I answer not one man, for fear of I know not what." So he spake in a loud and cheerful voice: "Yea, there is a man anigh, and I desire thy fellow-

ship, if we might but meet. But how shall we see each other in the blackness of the wildwood night?" ❧ The other laughed, and the laugh sounded merry and sweet, and the voice said: "Hast thou no flint and fire-steel?" "No," said Ralph ❧ "But I have," said the voice, "and I am fain to see thee, for thy voice soundeth pleasant to me. Abide till I grope about for a stick or two" ❧ Ralph laughed in turn, as he heard the new-comer moving about; then he heard the click of the steel on the flint, and saw the sparks showering down, so that a little piece of the wood grew green again to his eyes. Then a little clear flame sprang up, & therewith he saw the tree-stems clearly, & some twenty yards from him a horse, & a man stooping down over the fire, who sprang up now and cried out: "It is a knight-at-arms! Come hither, fellow of the waste; it is five days since I have spoken to a child of Adam; so come nigh and speak to me, and as a reward of thy speech thou shalt have both meat and firelight." "That will be well paid," said Ralph laughing, & he stepped forward leading his horse, for now the wood was light all about, as the fire waxed & burned clear; so that Ralph could see that the new-comer was clad in quaintly-fashioned armour after the fashion of that land, with a bright steel sallet on the head, and a long green surcoat over the body armour. Slender of make was the new-comer, not big, nor tall of stature.

RALPH went up to him hastily, and merrily put his hand on his shoulder, and kissed him, saying: "The kiss of peace in the wilderness to thee!" And he found him smooth-faced and sweet-breathed. ❧ But the new-comer took his hand & led him to where the firelight was brightest and looked on him silently a while; and Ralph gave back the look. The strange-wrought sallet hid but little of the new-comer's face, & as Ralph looked thereon a sudden joy came into his heart, and he cried out: "O, but I have kissed thy face before! O, my friend, my friend!" ❧ Then spake the new-comer and said: "Yea, I am a woman, & I was thy friend for a little while at Bourton Abbas, and at the want-ways of the Wood Perilous."

THEN Ralph cast his arms about her & kissed her again; but she withdrew her from him, and said: "Help me, my friend, that we may gather sticks to feed our fire, lest it die and the dark come again, so that we see not each other's faces, & think that

we have but met in a dream." Then she busied herself with gathering the kindling; but presently she looked up at him, and said: "Let us make the wood shine wide about, for this is a feastful night."

SO they gathered a heap of wood & made the fire great; & then Ralph did off his helm and hauberk, and the damsel did the like, so that he could see the shapeliness of her uncovered head. Then they sat down before the fire, and the damsel drew meat and drink from her saddle-bags, & gave thereof to Ralph, who took it of her & her hand withal, and smiled on her and said: "Shall we be friends together as we were at Bourton Abbas & the want-ways of the Wood Perilous?" She shook her head and said: "If it might be! but it may not be. Not many days have worn since then; but they have brought about changed days." He looked on her wistfully and said: "But thou wert dear to me then." "Yea," she said, "& thou to me; but other things have befallen, and there is change betwixt." "Nay, what change?" said Ralph.

EVEN by the firelight he saw that she reddened as she answered: "I was a free woman then; now am I but a runaway thrall." Then Ralph laughed merrily, & said: "Then are we brought the nigher together, for I also am a runaway thrall." She smiled & looked down: then she said: "Wilt thou tell me how that befell?" "Yea," said he, "but I will ask thee first a question or two." She nodded a yeasay, and looked on him soberly, as a child waiting to say its task. Said Ralph: "When we parted at the want-ways of the Wood Perilous thou saidst that thou wert minded for the Well at the World's End, and to try it for life or death. But thou hadst not then the necklace, which now I see thee bear, and which, seest thou! is like to that about my neck. Wilt thou tell me whence thou hadst it?" She said: "Yea; it was given unto me by a lady, mighty as I deem, and certainly most lovely, who delivered me from an evil plight, and a peril past words, but whereof I will tell thee afterwards. And she it was who told me of the way to the Well at the World's End, and many matters concerning them that seek it, whereof thou shalt wot soon." Said Ralph: "As to how thou wert made a thrall thou needest not to tell me; for I have learned that of those that had to do with taking thee to Utterbol. But tell me; here are met we two in the pathless wilds, as if it were on the deep sea, and we two seek-

ing the same thing: Didst thou deem that we should meet, or that I should seek thee?"

NOW was the fire burning somewhat low, but he saw that she looked on him steadily; yet withal her sweet voice trembled a little as she answered: "Kind friend, I had a hope that thou wert seeking me and wouldst find me: for indeed that fairest of women who gave me the beads spake to me of thee, and said that thou also wouldst turn thee to the quest of the Well at the World's End; & already had I deemed thine eyes lucky as well as lovely. But tell me, my friend, what has befallen that lady that she is not with thee? for in such wise she spake of thee, that I deemed that naught would sunder you save death." "It is death that hath sundered us," said Ralph. Then she hung her head, and sat silent a while, neither did he speak till she had risen up and cast more wood upon the fire; & she stood before it with her back towards him. Then he spake to her in a cheerful voice & said: "Belike we shall be long together: tell me thy name; is it not Dorothy?" ❧ She turned about to him with a smiling face, and said: "Nay lord, nay: did I not tell thee my name before? They that held me at the font bade the priest call me Ursula, after the friend of Maidens. But what is thy name?" "I am Ralph of Upmeads," quoth he; and sat a while silent, pondering his dream and how it had betrayed him as to her name, when it had told him much that he yet deemed true.

SHE came and sat down by him again, and said to him: "Thy questions I have answered; but thou hast not yet told me the tale of thy captivity." Her voice sounded exceeding sweet to him, and he looked on her face & spake as kindly as he knew how, & said: "A short tale it is to-night at least: I came from Whitwall with a company of chapmen, and it was thee I was seeking and the Well at the World's End. All went well with me, till I came to Goldburg, and there I was betrayed by a felon, who had promised to lead me safe to Utterness, and tell me concerning the way unto the Well. But he sold me to the Lord of Utterbol, who would lead me to his house; which irked me not, at first, because I looked to find thee there. Thereafter, if for shame I may tell the tale, his lady and wife cast her love upon me, and I was entangled in the nets of guile: yet since I was told, and believed, that it would be ill both for thee and for me if I met thee at Utter-

bol, I took occasion to flee away, I will tell thee how another while."

SHE had turned pale as she heard him, and now she said: "It is indeed God's mercy that thou camest not to Utterbol nor found/ est me there, for then had both we been undone amidst the lusts of those two; or that thou camest not there to find me fled, else hadst thou been undone. My heart is sick to think of it, even as I sit by thy side." Said Ralph: "Thy last word maketh me afraid and ashamed to ask thee a thing. But tell me first, is that Lord of Utterbol as evil as men's fear would make him? for no man is feared so much unless he is deemed evil."

SHE was silent a while, & then she said: "He is so evil that it might be deem/ ed that he has been fetched up out of hell" ❧ Then Ralph looked sore troubled, and he said: "Dear friend, this is the thing hard for me to say. In what wise did they use thee at Utterbol? Did they deal with thee shamefully?" ❧ She answered him quietly: "Nay," she said, "fear not! no shame befell me, save that I was a thrall and not free to depart. forsooth," she said, smiling, "I fled away timely before the tormentors should be ready. Forsooth it is an evil house & a mere piece of hell. But now we are out of it and free in the wildwood, so let us forget it; for indeed it is a grief to remember it. And now once more let us mend the fire, for thy face is growing dim to me, and that misliketh me. Afterwards, be/ fore we lie down to sleep, we will talk a little of the way whither/ ward we shall turn our faces to/ morrow."

SO they cast on more wood and pineapples, & sweet it was to Ralph to see her face come clear again from out the mirk of the wood. Then they sat down again together, & she said: "We two are seek/ ing the Well at the World's End; now which of us knows more of the way? who is to lead & who to follow?" Said Ralph: "If thou know no more than I, it is little that thou knowest. Sooth it is that for many days past I have sought thee that thou mightest lead me." She laughed sweetly, & said: "Yea, knight, & was it for that cause that thou soughtest me, and not for my deliverance?" He said soberly: "Yet in very deed I set myself to deliver thee." "Yea," she said, "then since I am delivered, I must needs deem of it as if it were through thy deed. And as I suppose thou lookest for a reward there/ for, so thy reward shall be, that

I will lead thee to the Well at the World's End. Is it enough?" "Nay," said Ralph. They held their peace a minute, then she said: "Maybe when we have drunk of that Water and are coming back, it will be for thee to lead. For true it is that I shall scarce know whither to wend; since amidst of my dreaming of the Well, and of . . . other matters, my home that was is gone like a dream." He looked at her, but scarce as if he were heeding all her words. Then he spoke: "Yea, thou shalt lead me. I have been led by one or another ever since I have left Upmeads." Now she looked on him somewhat ruefully, & said: "Thou wert not hearkening e'en now; so I say it again, that the time shall come when thou shalt lead me."

IN RALPH'S mind had sprung up again that journey from the Water of the Oak-tree; so he strove with himself to put the thought from him, and sighed & said: "Dost thou verily know much of the way?" She nodded yea-say. "Knowest thou of the Rock of the Fighting Man?" "Yea," she said. "And of the Sage that dwelleth in this same wood?" "Most surely," she said, "and to-morrow evening or the morrow after we shall find him; for I have been taught the way to his dwelling; & I wot that he is now called the Sage of Swevenham. Yet I must tell thee that there is some peril in seeking to him; whereas his dwelling is known of the Utter-bol riders, who may follow us thither. And yet again I deem that he will find some remedy thereto." Said Ralph: "Whence didst thou learn all this, my friend?" And his face grew troubled again; but she said simply: "She taught it to me who spake to me in the wood by Hampton under Scaur."

SHE made as if she noted not the trouble in his face, but said: "Put thy trust in this, that here and with me thou art even now nigher to the Well at the World's End than any other creature on the earth. Yea, even if the Sage of Swevenham be dead or gone hence, yet have I tokens to find the Rock of the Fighting Man, & the way through the mountains, though I say not but that he may make it all clearer. But now I see thee drooping with the grief of days bygone; and I deem also that thou art weary with the toil of the way. So I rede thee lie down here in the wilderness and sleep, & forget grief till to-morrow is a new day." "Would it were come," said he, "that I might see thy face the clearer; yet I am indeed weary". So he went & fetched his saddle & lay down with

his head thereon; and was presently asleep. But she, who had again cast wood on the fire, sat by his head watching him with a drawn sword beside her, till the dawn of the woodland began to glimmer through the trees: then she also laid herself down and slept.

Chapter IV. They ride the Wood under the Mountains

WHEN RALPH awoke on the morrow it was broad day as far as the trees would have it so. He rose at once, and looked about for his fellow, but saw her not, & for some moments of time he thought he had but dreamed of her; but he saw that the fire had been quickened from its embers, and close by lay the hauberk & strange-fashioned helm, & the sword of the damsel, and presently he saw her coming through the trees barefoot, with the green-sleeved silken surcoat hanging below the knees, & her hair floating loose about her. She stepped lightly up to Ralph with a cheerful smiling countenance & a ruddy colour in her cheeks, but her eyes moist as if she could scarce keep back the tears for joy of the morning's meeting. He thought her fairer than erst, and made as if he would put his arms about her, but she held a little aloof from him, blushing yet more. Then she said in her sweet clear voice: "Hail, fellowfarer! now begins the day's work. I have been down yonder, & have found a bright woodland pool, to wash the night off me, and if thou wilt do in likewise and come back to me, I will dight our breakfast meantime, and will we speedily to the road." He did as she bade him, thinking of her all the while till he came back to her fresh & gay. Then he looked to their horses and gave them fodder gathered from the pool-side, and so turned to Ursula & found her with the meat ready dight; so they ate and were glad.

WHEN they had broken their fast Ralph went to saddle the horses, & coming back found Ursula binding up her long hair, and she smiled on him & said: "Now we are for the road I must be an armed knight again; forsooth I unbound my hair e'en now & let my surcoat hang loose about me in token that thou wottest my secret. Soothly, my friend, it irks me that now we have met after a long while, I must needs be clad thus graceless. But need drave me to it, and withal the occasion that was given to me

to steal this gay armour from a lad at Utterbol, the nephew of the lord; who like his eme was half my lover, half my tyrant. Of all which I will tell thee hereafter, & what wise I must needs steer betwixt stripes & kisses these last days. But now let us arm and to horse. Yet first, lo you, here are some tools that in thine hands shall keep us from sheer famine: as for me, I am no archer; and forsooth no man-at-arms save in seeming."

THEREWITH she showed him a short Turk bow and a quiver of arrows, which he took well pleased. So then they armed each the other, & as she handled Ralph's war-gear she said: "How well-wrought & trusty is this hauberk of thine, my friend; my coat is but a toy to it, with its gold and silver rings and its gemmed collar: & thy plates be thick & wide and well-wrought, whereas mine are little more than adornments to mine arms and legs" ❧ He looked on her lovingly and loved her shapely hands amidst the dark grey mail, and said: "That is well, dear friend, for since my breast is a shield for thee it behoves it to be well covered." She looked at him, & her lips trembled, and she put out her hand as if to touch his cheek, but drew it back again & said: "Come now, let us to horse, dear fellow in arms."

SO they mounted & went their ways through a close pine-wood, where the ground was covered with the pine-tree needles, and all was still and windless. So as they rode said Ursula: "I seek tokens of the way to the Sage of Swevenham. Hast thou seen a water yesterday?" "Yea," said Ralph, "I rode far along it, but left it because I deemed that it turned north overmuch." "Thou wert right," she said, "besides that thy turning from it hath brought us together; for it would have brought thee to Utterbol at last. But now have we to hit upon another that runneth straight down from the hills: not the Great Mountains, but the high ground whereon is the Sage's dwelling. I know not whether the ride be long or short; but the stream is to lead us."

ON they rode through the wood, wherein was little change for hours; & as they rested Ursula gave forth a deep breath, as one who has cast off a load of care. And Ralph said: "Why sighest thou, fellow-farer?" "O," she said, "it is for pleasure, and a thought that I had: for a while ago I was a thrall, living amongst fears that sickened

the heart; & then a little while I was a lonely wanderer, and now... Therefore I was thinking that if ever I come back to mine own land and my home, the scent of a pine-wood shall make me happy" Ralph looked on her eagerly, but said naught for a while; but at last he spoke: "Tell me, friend," if we be met by strong-thieves on the way, what shall we do then?" "It is not like to befall," she said, "for men fear the wood, therefore is there little prey for thieves therein: but if we chance on them, the token of Utterbol on mine armour shall make them meek enough." Then she fell silent a while, & spoke again: "True it is that we may be followed by the Utterbol riders; for though they also fear the wood, they fear it not so much as they fear their Lord. Howbeit, we be well ahead, and it is little like that we shall be overtaken before we have met the Sage; and then belike he shall provide." "Yea," said Ralph, "but what if the chase come up with us: shall we suffer us to be taken alive?" She looked on him solemnly, laid her hand on the beads about her neck, and answered: "By this token we must live as long as we may, whatsoever may befall; for at the worst may some road of escape be opened to us. Yet O, how far easier it were to die than to be led back to Utterbol!"

AWHILE they rode in silence, both of them: but at last spake Ralph, but slowly and in a dull and stern voice: "Maybe it were good that thou told me somewhat of the horrors and evil days of Utterbol?" "Maybe," she said, "but I will not tell thee of them. Forsooth there are some things which a man may not easily tell to a man, be he never so much his friend as thou art to me. But bethink thee" (and she smiled somewhat) "that this gear belieth me, & that I am but a woman; & some things there be which a woman may not tell to a man, nay, not even when he hath held her long in his arms." And therewith she flushed exceedingly. But he said in a kind voice: "I am sorry that I asked thee, and will ask thee no more thereof." She smiled on him friendly, & they spake of other matters as they rode on.

BUT after a while Ralph said: "If it were no mis-ease to thee to tell me how thou didst fall into the hands of the men of Utterbol, I were fain to hear the tale." She laughed outright, & said: "Why wilt thou be for ever

harping on the time of my captivity, friend? & thou who knowest the story somewhat already? Howbeit, I may tell thee thereof without heart-burning, though it be a felon tale." He said, somewhat shame-facedly: "Take it not ill that I am fain to hear of thee and thy life-days, since we are become fellow-farers."

WELL," she said, "this befell outside Utterbol, so I will tell thee. After I had stood in the thrall-market at Cheaping Knowe, & not been sold, the wild man led me away toward the mountains that are above Goldburg; & as we drew near to them on a day, he said to me that he was glad to the heart-root that none had cheapened me at the said market; & when I asked him wherefore, he fell a-weeping as he rode beside me, and said: 'Yet would God that I had never taken thee.' I asked what ailed him, though indeed I deemed that I knew. He said: 'This aileth me, that though thou art not of the blood wherein I am bound to wed, I love thee sorely, and would have thee to wife; and now I deem that thou wilt not love me again.' I said that he guessed aright, but that if he would do friendly with me, I would be no less than a friend to him. 'That availeth little,' quoth he; 'I would have thee be mine of thine own will.' I said that might not be, that I could love but one man alone. 'Is he alive?' said he. 'Goodsooth, I hope so,' said I, 'but if he be dead, then is desire of men dead within me.' So we spake, & he was downcast and heavy of mood; but thenceforward was he no worse to me than a brother. And he proffered it to lead me back, if I would, & put me safely on the way to Whitwall; but, as thou wottest, I had need to go forward, and no need to go back.

THUS we entered into the mountains of Goldburg; but one morning, when he arose, he was heavier of mood than his wont, and was restless withal, & could be steadfast neither in staying nor going, nor aught else. So I asked what ailed him, and he said: 'My end draweth nigh; I have seen my fetch, and am fey. My grave abideth me in these mountains.' 'Thou hast been dreaming ugly dreams,' said I, 'such things are of no import.' And I spoke lightly, and strove to comfort him. He changed not his mood for all that; but said: 'This is ill for thee also; for thou wilt be worser without me than with me in these lands.' Even so I deemed, and withal I was sorry for him, for though he were uncouth and ungainly, he was no ill man. So against

my will I tumbled into the same-like mood as his, and we both fared along drearily. But about sunset, as we came round a corner of the cliffs of those mountains, or ever we were ware, we happed upon a half-score of weaponed men, who were dighting a camp under a big rock thereby: but four there were with them who were still a-horseback; so that when Bull Nosy (for that was his name) strove to flee away with me, it was of no avail; for the said horsemen took us, & brought us before an evil-looking man, who, to speak shortly, was he whom thou hast seen, to wit, the Lord of Utterbol: he took no heed of Bull Nosy, but looked on me closely, and handled me as a man doth with a horse at a cheaping, so that I went nigh to smiting him, whereas I had a knife in my bosom, but the chaplet refrained me. To make a short tale of it, he bade Bull sell me to him, which Bull utterly naysaid, standing stiff and stark before the Lord, and scowling on him. But the Lord laughed in his face & said: 'So be it, for I will take her without a price, and thank thee for sparing my gold.' Then said Bull: 'If thou take her as a thrall, thou wert best take me also; else shall I follow thee as a free man and slay thee when I may. Many are the days of the year, and on some one of them will betide the occasion for the knife.'

THEREAT the Lord waxed very pale, and spake not, but looked at that man of his who stood by Bull with a great sword in his fist, and lifted up his hand twice, & let it fall twice, whereat that man stepped back one pace, and swung his sword, and smote Bull, and clave his skull. Then the colour came into the Lord's face again, & he said: 'Now, vassals, let us dine and be merry, for at least we have found something in the mountains.' So they fell to and ate and drank, and victual was given to me also, but I had no will to eat, for my soul was sick and my heart was heavy, foreboding the uttermost evil. Withal I was sorry for Bull Nosy, for he was no ill man, & had become my friend. So they abode there that night, leaving Bull lying like a dog unburied in the wilderness; and on the morrow they took the road to Utterbol, and went swiftly, having no baggage, and staying but for victual, & for rest every night. The Lord had me brought to him on that first evening of our journey, and he saw me privily and spake to me, bidding me do shameful things, & I would not; wherefore he threatened me griev-

ously; and, I being alone with him, bade him beware lest I should slay him or myself. Thereat he turned pale, as he had done before Bull Nosy, yet sent for none to slay me, but only bade me back to my keepers. And so I came to Utterbol unscathed."

"AND at Utterbol," said Ralph, "what befell thee there?" Ursula smiled on him, and held up her finger; yet she answered: "Utterbol is a very great house in a fair land, & there are sundry roofs & many fair chambers. There was I brought to a goodly chamber amidst a garden; and women servants were given me who led me to the bath & clad me in dainty raiment, and gave me to eat and to drink, and all that I needed. That is all my tale for this time."

Chapter V. They come on the Sage of Swevenham

NIGHT WAS at hand before they came to the stream that they sought. They found it cleaving the pine-wood, which held on till the very bank of it, and was thick again on the further side in a few yards' space. The stream was high-banked and ran deep and strong. Said Ursula as they came up to it: "We may not cross it, but it matters not; and it is to-morrow that we must ride up along it."

So they abode there, and made a fire by the water-side, and watched there, turn and turn about, till it was broad day. Naught befell to tell of, save that twice in the night Ralph deemed that he heard a lion roar.

THEY got to horse speedily when they were both awake, and rode up the stream, and began to go up hill, & by noon were come into a rough and shaggy upland, whence from time to time they could see the huge wall of the mountains, which yet seemed to Ralph scarce nigher, if at all, than when he had beheld it ere he had come to Vale Turris. The way was rough day-long, & now & again they found it hard to keep the stream in sight, as especially when it cleft a hill, & ran between sheer cliffs with no low shore on either side. They made way but slowly, so that at last Ralph lost patience somewhat, & said that he had but little hope of falling in with the Sage that day or any day. But Ursula was of good cheer, and mocked him merrily, but sweetly, till his heart was lightened again. Withal she bade him seek some venison, since they were drawing out the time, and she knew not how long it would be ere they came to the

Sage's dwelling. Therefore he betook him to the Turk bow, and shot a leash of heath/fowl, and they supped on the meat merrily in the wilderness. But if they were merry, they were soon weary; for they journeyed on after sunset that night, since the moon was up, and there was no thick wood to turn dusk into dark for them. Their resting/place was a smooth piece of greensward betwixt the water and a half circle of steep bent that well nigh lock/ed it about.

THERE then they abode, & in the stillness of the night heard a thundering sound coming down the wind to them, which they deemed was the roaring of distant waters; & when they went to the lip of the river they saw flecks of foam floating by, wherefore they thought themselves to be near some great mountain-neck whereover the water was falling from some high place. But with no to/do they lay down upon the greensward this second night of their fellowship, and waked later than on the day before; for so weary had they been, that they had kept but ill watch in the dark night, & none at all after dawn began to glimmer.

NOW Ralph sat up and saw Ursula still sleep/ing; then he rose to his feet and looked about him, and saw their two horses cropping the grass under the bent, and beside them a man, tall & white bearded, leaning on his staff. Ralph caught up his sword & went toward the man, and the sun gleamed from the blade just as the hoary/one turned to him; he lifted up his staff as if in greeting to Ralph, and came toward him, & even there/with Ursula awoke and arose, and saw the greybeard at once; and she cried out: "Take heed to thy sword, fellow/farer, for, praised be the saints, this is the Sage of Swevenham!"

SO they stood there together till the Sage came up to them & kissed them both, and said: "I am glad that ye are come at last; for I looked for you no later than this. So now mount your horses and come with me straightway; be/cause life is short to them who have not yet drunk of the Well at the World's End. Moreover if ye chance to come on the riders of Utterbol, it shall go hard with you unless I be at hand."

RALPH saw of him that though he was an old hoar man to look on, yet he was strong and sturdy, tall, and of goodly presence, with ruddy cheeks, and red lips and bright eyes, and that the skin of his face and hands was no-

wise wrinkled: but about his neck was a pair of beads like unto his own gossip's gift.

SO now they mounted at once, and with no more words he led them about the bent, and they came in a little while into the wood again, but this time it was of beech, with here & there an open place sprinkled about with hollies and thorns; & they rode down the wide slope of a long hill, and up again on the other side. Thus they went for an hour, and the elder spake not again, though it might have been deemed by his eyes that he was eager and fain. They also held their peace; for the hope & fear of their hearts kept them from words.

THEY came to the hill-top, and found a plain land, though the close wood still held on a while; but soon they rode into a clearing of some twelve acres, where were fenced crofts with goats therein, & three garths of tillage, wherein the wheat-shocks were yet standing, & there were coleworts and other pot-herbs also. But at the further end, whereas the wood closed in again, was a little house builded of timber, strong and goodly, & thatched with wheat-straw; and beside it was a bubbling spring which ran in a brook athwart the said clearing; over the house-door was a carven rood, and a bow & short spear were leaned against the wall of the porch.

RALPH looked at all closely, & wondered whether this were perchance the cot wherein the Lady of Abundance had dwelt with the evil witch. But the elder looked on him, and said: "I know thy thought, and it is not so; that house is far away hence; yet shalt thou come thereto. Now, children, welcome to the house of him who hath found what ye seek, but hath put aside the gifts which ye shall gain; & who belike shall remember what ye shall forget" Therewith he brought them into the house, & into a chamber, the plenishing whereof was both scanty and rude. There he bade them sit, and brought them victual, to wit, cheese and goats' milk and bread, and they fell to speech concerning the woodland ways, and the seasons, and other unweighty matters. But as for the old man he spoke but few words, and as one unused to speech, albeit he was courteous & debonair. But when they had eaten and drunk he spake to them and said: "Ye have sought to me because ye would find the Well at the World's End, & would have lore of me concerning the road thereto; but before I tell

you what ye would, let me know what ye know thereof already."

QUOTH Ralph: "For me, little enough I know, save that I must come to the Rock of the Fighting Man, & that thou knowest the way thither." "And thou, damsel," quoth the long-hoary, "what knowest thou? Must I tell thee of the way through the mountains and the Wall of the World, & the Winter Valley, and the Folk Innocent, and the Cot on the Way, and the Forest of Strange Things & the Dry Tree?" "Nay," she said, "of all this I wot somewhat, but it may be not enough."

SAID the Sage: "Even so it was with me, when a many years ago I dwelt nigh to Swevenham, and folk sought to me for lore, & I told them what I knew; but maybe it was not enough, for they never came back; but died belike or ever they had seen the Well. And then I myself, when I was gotten very old, fared thither a-seeking it, & I found it; for I was one of those who bore the chaplet of the seekers. And now I know all, and can teach all. But tell me, damsel, whence hadst thou this lore?" Said Ursula: "I had it of a very fair woman who, as it seemeth, was Lady & Queen of the Champions of Hampton under the Scaur, not far from mine own land." "Yea," quoth the Sage, "and what hath befallen her?... Nay, nay," said he, "I need not ask; for I can see by your faces that she is dead. Therefore hath she been slain, or otherwise she had not been dead. So I ask you if ye were her friends?" Quoth Ursula: "Surely she was my friend, since she befriended me; and this man I deem was altogether her friend."

RALPH hung his head, & the Sage gazed on him, but said naught. Then he took a hand of each of them in his hands, and held them a while silently, and Ralph was still downcast & sad, but Ursula looked on him fondly. Then spake the Sage: "So it is, Knight, that now I seem to understand what manner of man thou art, and I know what is between you two; whereof I will say naught, but will let the tree grow according to its seed. Moreover, I wot now that my friend of past years would have me make you both wise in the lore of the Well at the World's End; and when I have done this, I can do no more, but let your good hap prevail if so it may. Abide a little, therefore" Then he went unto an ark, and took thence a book wrapped in a piece of precious web of silk and gold, and bound in cuir-bouilly wrought

in strange devices. Then said he: "This book was mine heritage at Swevenham or ever I became wise, and it came from my father's grandsire: & my father bade me look on it as the dearest of possessions; but I heeded it naught till my youth had waned, & my manhood was full of weariness & grief. Then I turned to it, and read in it, and became wise, and the folk sought to me, & afterwards that befell which was foredoomed. Now herein amongst other matters is written of that which ye desire to know, and I will read the same to you & expound it. Yet were it not well to read in this book under a roof, nay, though it be as humble & innocent as this. Moreover, it is not meet that ye should hearken to this wisdom of old times clad as ye are; thou, knight, in the raiment of the manslayer, with the rod of wrath hanging at thy side; & thou, maiden, attired in the garments of the tyrant, which were won of him by lying and guile." Then he went to another ark, and took from it two bundles, which he gave, the one to Ralph, the other to Ursula, & said: "Thou, maiden, go thou into the inner chamber here & doff thy worldly raiment, and don that which thou wilt find wrapped in this cloth; and thou, knight, take this other and get thee into the thicket which is behind the house, and there do the like, & abide there till we come to thee."

So Ralph took the bundle, and came out into the thicket & unarmed him, & did on the raiment which he found in the cloth, which was but a long gown of white linen, much like to an alb, broidered about the wrists and the hems & collar with apparels of gold and silk, girt with a red silk girdle. There he abode a little, wondering at all these things and all that had befallen him since he had left Upmeads. Anon the two others came to him, & Ursula was clad in the same/like raiment & the elder had the book in his hand. He smiled on Ralph and nodded friendly to him. As to Ursula, she flushed as red as a rose when she set eyes on him, for she said to herself that he was as one of the angels which she had seen painted in the choir of St. Mary's at Higham.

Chapter VI. Those two are learned lore by the Sage of Swevenham

Now the Sage led them through the wood till they came to a grassy lawn amidst of which was a table

of stone, which it seemed to Ralph must be like to that whereon the witch-wife had offered up the goat to her devils as the Lady of Abundance had told him; and he changed countenance as the thought came into his mind. But the Sage looked on him and shook his head and spake softly: "In these wastes and wilds are many such-like places, where of old time the ancient folks did worship to the Gods of the Earth as they imagined them: and whereas the lore in this book cometh of such folk, this is no ill place for the reading thereof. But if ye fear the book & its writers, who are dead long ago, there is yet time to go back and seek the Well without my helping; and I say not but that ye may find it even thus. But if ye fear not, then sit ye down on the grass, and I will lay the book on this most ancient table, & read in it, and do ye hearken heedfully."

SO they sat down side by side, & Ralph would have taken Ursula's hand to caress it, but she drew it away from him; howbeit she found it hard to keep her eyes from off him. The elder looked on them soberly, but nowise in anger, and presently began reading in the book. What he read shall be seen hereafter in the process of this tale; for the more part thereof had but to do with the way to the Well at the World's End, all things concerning which were told out fully, both great & small. Long was this a-reading, and when the Sage had done, he bade now one, now the other, answer him questions as to what he had read; and if they answered amiss he read that part again, and yet again, as children are taught in the school. Until at last when he asked any question Ralph or the maiden answered it rightly at once; and by this time the sun was about to set. So he bade them home to his house that they might eat and sleep there. "But to-morrow," said he, "I shall give you your last lesson from this book, and thereafter ye shall go your ways to the Rock of the Fighting Man, and I look not for it that ye shall come to any harm on the way; but whereas I seem to-day to have seen the foes of Utterbol seeking you, I will lead you forth a little." So they went home to the house, and he made them the most cheer that he might, and spake to them in friendly and pleasant mood, so that they were merry.

WHEN it was morning they went again to the ancient altar, and

again they learned lore from the Elder, till they were waxen wise in the matters of the Well at the World's End, and long they sat & hearkened him till it was evening again, and once more they slept in the house of the Sage of Swevenham.

Chapter VII. An adventure by the way

THEN morrow dawned they arose betimes & did on their worldly raiment; & when they had eaten a morsel they made them ready for the road, and the elder gave them victual for the way in their saddle-bags, saying: "This shall suffice for the passing days, and when it is gone ye have learned what to do." Therewithal they gat to horse; but Ralph would have the Elder ride his nag, while he went afoot by the side of Ursula. So the Sage took his bidding, but smiled therewith, & said: "Thou art a King's son and a friendly young man, else had I said nay to this; for it needeth not, whereas I am stronger than thou, so hath my draught of the Well dealt with me."

THUS then they went their ways; but Ralph noted of Ursula that she was silent and shy with him, and it irked him so much, that at last he said to her: "My friend, doth aught ail me with thee? Wilt thou not tell me, so that I may amend it? for thou art grown of few words with me and turnest thee from me, and seemest as if thou heedest me little. Thou art as a fair spring morning gone cold and overcast in the afternoon. What is it then? we are going a long journey together, and belike shall find little help or comfort save in each other; and ill will it be if we fall asunder in heart, though we be nigh in body." She laughed and reddened therewithal; and then her countenance fell, and she looked piteously on him and said: "If I seemed to thee as thou sayest, I am sorry; for I meant not to be thus with thee as thou deemest. But so it is that I was thinking of this long journey, and of thee and me together in it, and how we shall be with each other if we come back again alive, with all things done that we had to do."

SHE stayed her speech awhile, and seemed to find it hard to give forth the word that was in her; but at last she said: "Friend, thou must pardon me; but that which thou sawest in me,

I also seemed to see in thee, that thou wert grown shy and cold with me; but now I know it is not so, since thou hast seen me wrongly; but that I have seen thee wrongly, as thou hast me." Therewith she reached her hand to him, and he took it and kissed it and caressed it while she looked fondly at him, and they fared on sweetly and happily together. But as this was a-saying and a-doing betwixt them, & a while after, they had heeded the Elder little or not at all, though he rode on the right hand of Ralph. And for his part the old man said naught to them & made as if he heard them not, when they spake thuswise together.

NOW they rode the wood on somewhat level ground for a while; then the trees began to thin, and the ground grew broken; and at last it was very rugged, with high hills & deep valleys, & all the land populous of wild beasts, so that about sunset they heard thrice the roar of a lion. But ever the Sage led them by winding ways that he knew, round the feet of the hills, along stream-sides for the most part, & by passes over the mountain-necks when they needs must, which was twice in the day. Dusk fell on them in a little valley, through which ran a stream bushed about its edges, and which for the rest was grassy and pleasant, with big sweet-chestnut trees scattered about it.

NOW," quoth the Elder; "two things we have to beware of in this valley, the lions first; which, though belike they will not fall upon weaponed men, may well make an onslaught on your horses, if they wind them; and the loss of the beasts were sore to you as now. But the second thing is the chase from Utterbol. As to the lions, if ye build up a big fire, and keep somewhat aloof from the stream & its bushes, and tether your horses anigh the fire, ye will have no harm of them".

"Yea," said Ralph, "but if the riders of Utterbol are anigh us, shall we light a candle for them, to show them the way?"

Said the Sage: "Were ye by yourselves, I would bid you journey night-long, and run all risk rather than the risk of falling into their hands. But whereas I am your guide, I bid you kindle your fire under yonder big tree, & leave me to deal with the men of Utterbol; only whatso I bid you, that do ye straightway." "So be it," said Ralph; "I have been bewrayed so oft of late, that I must needs trust thee, or all help shall fail me. Let us to work." So they fell to and built up a big bale

and kindled it, & their horses they tethered to a tree; and by then they had done this, dark night had fallen upon them. So they cooked their victual at the fire (for Ralph had shot a hare by the way), and the Sage went down to the stream and fetched them water in a leathern budget: "for," said he, "I know the beasts of the wood and they me, and there is peace betwixt us." There then they sat to meat unarmed, for the Sage had said to them: "Doff your armour; ye shall not come to handy-strokes with the Utterbol Riders."

SO they ate their meat in the wilderness, and were nowise ungleeful, for to those twain the world seemed fair, & they hoped for great things. But though they were glad, they were weary enough, for the way had been both rugged and long; so they lay them down to sleep while the night was yet young. But or ever Ralph closed his eyes he saw the Sage standing up with his cloak wrapped about his head, & making strange signs with his right hand; so that he deemed that he would ward them by wizardry. So therewith he turned about on the grass and was asleep at once.

AFTER a while he started and sat up, half awake at first; for he felt someone touch him; & his half-dreams went back to past days, and he cried out: "Hah Roger! is it thou? What is toward?" But therewith he woke up fully, & knew that it was the Sage that had touched him, & withal he saw hard by Ursula, sitting up also. There was still a flickering flame playing about the red embers of their fire, for they had made it very big; and the moon had arisen and was shining bright in a cloudless sky. The Sage spake softly but quickly: "Lie down together, ye two, & I shall cast my cloak over you, and look to it that ye stir not from out of it, nor speak one word till I bid you, whate'er may befall: for the riders of Utterbol are upon us."

THEY did as he bade them, but Ralph got somewhat of an eye-shot out of a corner of the cloak, & he could see that the Sage went & stood up against the tree-trunk holding a horse by the bridle, one on each side of him. Even therewith Ralph heard the clatter of horse-hoofs over the stones about the stream, and a man's voice cried out: "They will have heard us; so spur over the grass to the fire and the big tree: for then they cannot escape us."

Then came the thump of horse-hoofs on the turf, and in half a minute they were amidst of a route of men a-horseback,

more than a score, whose armour and weapons gleamed in the moonlight: yet when these riders were gotten there, they were silent, till one said in a quavering voice as if afeared: "Otter, Otter! what is this? A minute ago & we could all see the fire, and the tree, and men and horses about them: and now, lo you! there is naught save two great grey stones lying on the grass, and a man's bare bones leaning up against the tree, & a ruckle of old horse-bones on either side of him. Where are we then?" Then spake another; & Ralph knew the voice for Otter's: "I wot not, lord; naught else is changed, save the fire & the horses and the men: yonder are the hills, yonder overhead is the moon, with the little light cloud dogging her; even that is scarce changed. Belike the fire was an earth-fire, and for the rest we saw wrong in the moonlight."

SPAKE the first man again, & his voice quavered yet more: "Nay, nay, Otter, it is not so. Lo you the skeleton and the bones and the grey stones! And the fire, here this minute, there the next. O Otter, this is an evil place of an evil deed! Let us go seek elsewhere; let us depart, lest a worse thing befall us." And so with no more ado he turned his horse and smote his spurs into him, and galloped off by the way he had come, and the others followed, nothing loth; only Otter tarried a little, and looked around him, and laughed and said: "There goes my Lord's nephew; like my Lord he is not over bold, save in dealing with a shackled man. Well, for my part, if those others have sunk into the earth, or gone up into the air, they are welcome to their wizardry, & I am glad of it. For I know not how I should have done to have seen my mate that out-tilted me made a gelded wretch of; & it would have irked me to see that fair woman in the hands of the tormentors, though, forsooth, I have oft seen such sights. Well, it is good; but better were it to ride with my mate than serve the Devil and his Nephew."

THEREWITH he turned rein and galloped off after the others, and in a little while the sound of them had died off utterly into the night, and they heard but the voices of the wild things, and the wimbrel laughing from the hill-sides. Then came the Sage and drew the cloak from those two, and laughed on them and said: "Now may ye sleep soundly, when I have mended our fire; for ye will see no more of Utterbol for this time, & it yet lacks three hours of dawn: sleep ye then and dream of each other."

Then they arose and thanked the Sage with whole hearts, & praised his wisdom. But while the old man mended the fire Ralph went up to Ursula and took her hand, and said: "Welcome to life, fellow-farer!" & he gazed earnestly into her eyes, as though he would have her fall into his arms: but whereas she rather shrank from him, though she looked on him lovingly, if somewhat shyly, he but kissed her hand, and laid him down again, when he had seen her lying in her place. And therewith they fell asleep and slept sweetly.

Chapter VIII. They come to the Sea of Molten Rocks

THEN they woke again the sun was high above their heads, & they saw the Sage dighting their breakfast. So they arose and washed the night off them in the stream and ate hastily, & got to horse on a fair forenoon; then they rode the mountain neck east from that valley; and it was a long slope of stony & barren mountain nigh waterless. And on the way Ursula told Ralph how the man who was scared by the wizardry last night was verily the nephew of the Lord from whom she had stolen her armour by wheedling and a seeming promise. "But," said she, "his love lay not so deep but that he would have avenged him for my guile on my very body had he taken us." Ralph reddened & scowled at her word, & the Sage led them into other talk.

SO long was that fell, that they were nigh benighted ere they gained the topmost, or came to any pass. When they had come to a place where there was a little pool in a hollow of the rocks they made stay there, & slept safe, but ill-lodged, and on the morrow were on their way betimes, & went toiling up the neck another four hours, & came to a long rocky ridge or crest that ran athwart it; and when they had come to the brow thereof, then were they face to face with the Great Mountains, which now looked so huge that they seemed to fill all the world save the ground whereon they stood. Cloudless was the day, and the air clean and sweet, and every nook and cranny was clear to behold from where they stood: there were great jutting nesses with straight-walled burgs at their topmost, and pyramids and pinnacles that no hand of man had fashioned, and awful clefts like long streets in the city of the giants who wrought the world,

and high above all the undying snow, that looked as if the sky had come down on to the mountains and they were upholding it as a roof.

BUT clear as was the fashion of the mountains, they were yet a long way off: for betwixt them and the ridge whereon those fellows stood, stretched a vast plain, houseless and treeless, & as they beheld it thence, grey and ungrassed (though indeed it was not wholly so), like a huge river or firth of the sea it seemed, and such indeed it had been once, to wit a flood of molten rock in the old days when the earth was a-burning. Now as they stood and beheld it, the Sage spake: "Lo ye, my children, the castle and its outwork, and its dyke that wardeth the land of the Well at the World's End. Now from tomorrow, when we enter into the great sea of the rock molten in the ancient earth-fires, there is no least peril of pursuit for you. Yet amidst that sea should ye perish belike, were it not for the wisdom gathered by a few; & they are dead now save for the Book, and for me, who read it unto you. Now ye would not turn back were I to bid you, and I will not bid you. Yet since the journey shall be yet with grievous toil & much peril, & shall try the very hearts within you, were ye as wise as Solomon & as mighty as Alexander, I will say this much unto you; that if ye love not the earth and the world with all your souls, and will not strive all ye may to be frank and happy therein, your toil & peril aforesaid shall win you no blessing, but a curse. Therefore I bid you be no tyrants or builders of cities for merchants and usurers & warriors and thralls, like the fool who builded Goldburg to be for a tomb to him: or like the thrall-masters of the Burg of the Four Friths, who even now, it may be, are pierced by their own staff or overwhelmed by their own wall. But rather I bid you to live in peace & patience, without fear or hatred, and to succour the oppressed & love the lovely, & to be the friends of men, so that when ye are dead at last, men may say of you, they brought down Heaven to the Earth for a little while. What say ye, children?"

THEN said Ralph: "Father, I will say the sooth about mine intent, though ye may deem it little-minded. When I have accomplished this quest, I would get me home again to the little land of Upmeads, to see my father and my mother, and to guard its meadows from waste and its houses from fire-raising: to

hold war aloof and walk in the free fields, and see my children growing up about me, and lie at last beside my fathers in the choir of St. Laurence. The dead would I love & remember; the living would I love & cherish; and Earth shall be the well-beloved house of my fathers, & Heaven the highest hall thereof." "It is well," said the Sage; "all this shalt thou do and be no little-heart, though thou do no more. And thou, maiden?" She looked on Ralph and said: "I lost, and then I found, and then I lost again. Maybe I shall find the lost once more. And for the rest, in all that this man will do, I will help, living or dead, for I know naught better to do." "Again it is well," said the Sage, "and the lost which was verily thine shalt thou find again, and good days and their ending shall betide thee. Ye shall have no shame in your lives & no fear in your deaths. Wherefore now lieth the road free before you."

THEN was he silent a while, neither spake the others aught, but stood gazing on the dark grey plain, and the blue wall that rose beyond it, till at last the Sage lifted up his hand and said: "Look yonder, children, to where I point, and ye shall see how there thrusteth out a ness from the mountain-wall, and the end of it stands like a bastion above the lava-sea, and on its sides & its head are streaks ruddy and tawny, where the earth-fires have burnt not so long ago: see ye?" Ralph looked and said: "Yea, father, I see it, and its rifts and its ridges & its crannies." Quoth the Sage: "Behind that ness shall ye come to the Rock of the Fighting Man, which is the very Gate of the Mountains; & I will not turn again nor bid you farewell till I have brought you thither. And now time presses; for I would have you come timely to that cavern, whereof I have taught you, before ye fall on the first days of winter, or ye shall be hard bestead. So now we will eat a morsel, and then use diligence that we may reach the beginning of the rock-sea before nightfall."

SO did they, and the Sage led them down by a slant-way from off the ridge, which was toilsome but nowise perilous. So about sunset they came down into the plain, & found a belt of greensward, and waters therein betwixt the foot of the ridge and the edge of the rock-sea. And as for the said sea, though from afar it looked plain and unbroken, now that they were close to, and on a level with it, they saw that it rose up into cliffs, broken down in some

places, and in others arising high into the air, an hundred foot, it might be. Sometimes it thrust out into the green shore below the fell, & otherwhile drew back from it, as it had cooled ages ago. So they came to a place where there was a high wall of rock round three sides of a grassy place by a stream/side, and there they made their resting/place, and the night went calmly & sweetly with them.

Chapter IX. They come forth from the Rock/Sea

ON the morrow the Sage led them straight into the rock/sea, where/as it seemed to them at first that he was but bringing them into a blind alley; but at the end of the bight the rock/wall was broken down into a long scree of black stones. There the Sage bade Ralph & Ursula dismount (as for him he had been going afoot ever since that first day), & they led the horses up the said scree, which was a hard business, as they were no mountain beasts. And when they were atop of the scree it was harder yet to get them down, for on that side it was steeper; but at last they brought it about, & came down into a little grassy plain or isle in the rock/sea, which narrowed toward the eastern end, & the rocks on either side were smooth and glossy, as if the heat had gone out of them suddenly, when the earth/fires had ceased in the mountains.

NOW the Sage showed them on a certain rock a sign cut, whereof they had learned in the book afore/said, to wit, a sword crossed by a three/leaved bough; and they knew by the book that they should press on through the rock/sea nowhere, either going or returning, save where they should see this token.

NOW when they came to the narrow end of the plain they found still a wide way between the rock/walls, that whiles widened out, and whiles drew in again. Whiles withal were screes across the path, and little waters that ran out of the lava and into it again, & great blocks of fallen stone, sometimes as big as a husbandman's cot, that wind and weather had rent from the rocks; & all these things stayed them somewhat. But they went on merrily, albeit their road winded so much, that the Sage told them, when evening was, that for all their diligence they had but come a few short miles as the crow flies. Many wild things there were, both beast & fowl, in these islands and bridges of the rock/sea, hares & conies to wit, a many,

and heathfowl, and here and there a red fox lurking about the crannies of the rock/wall. Ralph shot a brace of conies with his Turk bow, and where/as there were bushes growing in the chinks, and no lack of whin and ling, they had firing enough, and supped off this venison of the rocks.

SO passed that day & two days more, & naught be/fell, save that on the mid/night of the first day of their wending the rock/sea, Ralph awoke & saw the sky all ablaze with other light than that of the moon; so he arose & went hastily to the Sage, and took him by the shoulder, and bade him awake; "for meseems the sky is afire, and perchance the foe is upon us" The Sage awoke and opened his eyes, & rose on his elbow and looked around sleepily; then he said, laughing: "It is naught, fair lord, thou mayst lie down and sleep out the remnant of the night, and thou also, maiden: this is but an earth/fire break/ing out on the flank of the mountains; it may be far away hence. Now ye see that we may not scale the rocks about here without toil; but to/morrow night we may climb up some-where and look on what is to-ward" So Ralph lay down and Ursula also, but Ralph lay long awake watching the light above him, which grew fiercer & redder in the hours betwixt moonset and daybreak, when he fell asleep, and woke not a-gain till the sun was high.

BUT on the next day as they went, the aspect of the rock/sea about them changed: for the rocks were not so smooth & shining & orderly, but rose up in con-fused heaps all clotted toge-ther by the burning, like to clinkers out of some mon-strous forge of the earth-giants, so that their way was naught so clear as it had been, but was rather a maze of jag-ged stone. But the Sage led through it all unfumbling, & moreover now and again they came on that carven token of the sword & the bough. Night fell, and as it grew dark they saw the glaring of the earth/fires again; & when they were rested, & had done their meat, the Sage said: "Come now with me, for hard by is there a place, as it were a stair, that goeth to the top of a great rock, let us climb it and look about us."

SO did they, and the head of the rock was higher than the main face of the rock/sea, so that they could see afar. Thence they looked north and beheld afar off a very pillar of fire rising up from a ness of the mountain wall, and seeming as if it bore up a black

roof of smoke; and the huge wall gleamed grey, because of its light, and it cast a ray of light across the rock/sea as the moon doth over the waters of the deep: withal there was the noise as of thunder in the air, but afar off: which thunder in/deed they had heard oft, as they rode through the afternoon and evening.

SPAKE the Sage: "It is far away; yet if the wind were not blowing from us, we had smelt the smoke, and the sky had been darkened by it. Now it is naught so far from Utterbol, and it will be for a token to them there. For that ness is called the Candle of the Giants, and men deem that the kindling thereof fore/bodeth ill to the lord who sitteth on the throne in the red hall of Utterbol". Ralph laid his hand on Ursula's shoulder & said: "May the Sage's saw be sooth!" She put her hand upon the hand & said: "Three months ago I lay on my bed at Bourton Abbas, & all the while here was this huge manless waste lying under the bare hea/vens & threatened by the store/house of the fires of the earth: and I had not seen it, nor thee either, O friend; & now it hath become a part of me for ever." Then was Ralph exceeding glad of her words, & the Sage laughed inwardly when he beheld them thus. So they came adown from the rock, and lay down presently under the fiery heavens; and their souls were comforted by the sound of the horses cropping the grass so close to their ears, that it broke the voice of the earth/fires' thunder, that ever and anon rolled over the grey sea amidst which they lay.

ON the morrow they still rode the lava like to clinkers, & it rose high/er about them, till suddenly nigh sunset it ended at a turn of their winding road, and naught lay betwixt them and that mighty ness of the moun/tains save a wide grassy plain, here & there swelling into low wide risings not to be called hills, & besprinkled with cops/es of bushes, and with trees neither great nor high. Then spake the Sage: "Here now will we rest, and by my will to-morrow also, that your beasts may graze their fill of the sweet grass of these unwarded mea/dows, which feedeth many a herd unowned of man, albeit they pay a quit/rent to wild things that be mightier than they. And now, children, we have passed over the mighty river that once ran molten be-twixt these mountains and the hills yonder to the west, which we trod the other day; yet once more, if your hearts fail you,

there is yet time to turn back; and no harm shall befall you, but I will be your fellow all the way home to Swevenham if ye will. But if ye still crave the water of the Well at the World's End, I will lead you over this green plain, and then go back home to mine hermitage, and abide there till ye come to me, or I die" Ralph smiled and said: "Master, no such sorry story shall I bear back to Upmeads, that after many sorrows borne, and perils overcome, I came to the Gates of the Mountains, & turned back for fear of that which I had not proved" So spake he; but Ursula laughed & said: "Yea, then should I deem thy friendship light if thou leftest me alone & unholpen in the uttermost wilderness; & thy manhood light to turn back from that which did not make a woman afraid" Then the Sage looked kindly on them & said: "Yea, then is the last word spoken, and the world may yet grow merrier to me. Look you, some there be who may abuse the gifts of the Well for evil errands, and some who may use it for good deeds; but I am one who hath not dared to use it lest I should abuse it, I being alone amongst weaklings and fools: but now if ye come back, who knows but that I may fear no longer, but use my life, & grow to be a mighty man. Come now, let us dight our supper, and kindle as big a fire as we lightly may; since there is many a prowling beast about, as bear and lynx & lion; for they haunt this edge of the rock-sea whereto the harts and the wild bulls and the goats resort for the sweet grass, and the water that floweth forth from the lava" So they cut good store of firing, whereas there was a plenty of bushes growing in the clefts of the rocks, and they made a big fire & tethered their horses anigh it when they lay down to rest; and in the night they heard the roaring of wild things round about them, & more than once or twice, awakening before day, they saw the shape of some terrible creature by the light of the moon mingled with the glare of the earth-fires, but none of these meddled with them, and naught befell them save the coming of the new day.

Chapter X. They come to the Gate of the Mountains

THAT DAY they herded their horses thereabout, and from time to time the Sage tried those two if

they were perfect in the lore of the road; & he found that they had missed nothing. They lay down in the self-same place again that night, and arose betimes on the morrow and went their ways over the plain as the Sage led, till it was as if the mountains & their terror hung over their very heads, and the hugeness & blackness of them were worse than a wall of fire had been. It was still a long way to them, so that it was not till noon of the third day from the rock-sea that they came to the very feet of the fire-scorchedness, and wonderful indeed it seemed to them that anything save the eagles could have aught to tell of what lay beyond it.

THERE were no foothills or downs betwixt the plain & the mountains, naught save a tumble of rocks that had fallen from the cliffs, piled up strangely, and making a maze through which the Sage led them surely; and at last they were clear even of this, and were underneath the flank of that ness, which was so huge that them seemed that there could scarce be any more mountain than that. Little of its huge height could they see, now that they were close to it, for it went up sheer at first and then beetled over them till they could see no more of its side; as they wound about its flank, and they were long about it, the Sage cried out to those two & stretched out his hand, and behold! the side of the black cliff plain and smooth and shining as if it had been done by the hand of men or giants, and on this smooth space was carven in the living rock the image of a warrior in mail and helm of ancient fashion, and holding a sword in his right hand. From head to heel he seemed some sixty feet high, & the rock was so hard, that he was all clean & clear to see; and they deemed of him that his face was keen and stern of aspect.

SO there they stood in an awful bight of the mountain, made by that ness, & the main wall from which it thrust out. But after they had gazed awhile and their hearts were in their mouths, the Sage turned on those twain & said: "Here then is the end of my journey with you; and ye wot all that I can tell you, and I can say no word more save to bid you cast all fear aside & thrive. Ye have yet for this day's journey certain hours of such daylight as the mountain pass will give you, which at the best is little better than twilight; therefore redeem ye the time". But Ralph got off his horse, and Ursula did in likewise, & they both kissed and embraced the old man, for their hearts were

full and fain. But he drew him/self away from them, & turned about with no word more, and went his ways, and presently was hidden from their eyes by the rocky maze which lay about the mountain's foot. Then the twain mounted their horses a/gain and set forth silently on the road, as they had been bid/den. In a little while the rocks of the pass closed about them, leaving but a way so narrow that they could see a glimmer of the stars above them as they rode the twilight; no sight they had of the measureless stony desert, yet in their hearts they saw it. They seemed to be wend/ing a straight/walled prison without an end, so that they were glad when the dark night came on them.

RALPH found some shel/ter in the cleft of a rock above a mound where was little grass for the horses. He drew Ursula into it, and they sat down there on the stones together. So long they sat si-lent that a great gloom settled upon Ralph, & he scarce knew whether he were asleep or wak/ing, alive or dead. But amidst of it fell a sweet voice on his ears, and familiar words ask-ing him of what like were the fields of Upmeads, & the flow/ers; & of the fish of its water, and of the fashion of the build/ing of his father's house; and of his brethren, & the mother that bore him. Then was it to him at first as if a sweet dream had come across the void of his gloom, and then at last the gloom and the dread and the deadness left him, & he knew that his friend and fellow was talking to him, and that he sat by her knee to knee, and the sweetness of her savoured in his nostrils as she leaned her face toward him, and he knew himself for what he was; and yet for memory of that past horror, and the sweetness of his friend & what not else, he fell a/weeping. But Ursula be/stirred herself & brought out food from her wallet, and sat down beside him again, and he wiped the tears from his eyes and laughed, and chid himself for being as a child in the dark, and then they ate and drank together in that dusk nook of the wilderness. And now was he happy and his tongue was loosed, and he fell to telling her many things of Upmeads, and of the tale of his fore-fathers, & of his old loves and his friends, till life and death seemed to him as they had seemed of time past in the merry land of his birth. So there anon they fell asleep for weariness, and no dreams of terror beset their slumbers.

Chapter XI. They come to the Vale of Sweet Chestnuts

THEN they went on their way next morning they found little change in the pass, and they rode the dread highway daylong, & it was still the same: so they rested a little before nightfall at a place where there was water running out of the rocks, but naught else for their avail. Ralph was merry & helpful, and filled water from the runnel, and wrought what he might to make the lodging meet; and as they ate & rested he said to Ursula: "Last night it was thou that beguiled me of my gloom, yet thereafter till we slept it was my voice for the more part, & not thine, that was heard in the wilderness. Now to-night it shall be otherwise, and I will but ask a question of thee, and hearken to the sweetness of thy voice." She laughed a little and very sweetly, and she said: "Forsooth, dear friend, I spoke to thee that I might hear thy voice; for I was afraid of the hugeness and emptiness of the desert; but when I heard thee, I deemed that the world was yet alive for us to come back to."

HE was silent awhile, for his heart was pierced with the sweetness of her speech, & he had fain have spoken back as sweetly as a man might; yet he could not, because he feared her somewhat, lest she should turn cold to him; therefore himseemed that he spoke roughly, as he said: "Nevertheless, my friend, I beseech thee to tell me of thine old home, even as last night I told thee of mine." "Yea," she said, "with a good will." And straightway she fell to telling him of her ways when she was little, & of her father and mother, and of her sister that had died, and the brother whom Ralph had seen at Bourton Abbas: she told also of bachelors who had wooed her, and jested concerning them, yet kindly and without malice, and talked so sweetly & plainly, that the wilderness was become a familiar place to Ralph, and he took her hand in the dusk & said: "But, my friend, how was it with the man for whom thou wert weeping when I first fell in with thee at Bourton Abbas?" She said: "I will tell thee plainly, as a friend may to a friend. Three hours had not worn from thy departure ere tidings came to me concerning him, that neither death nor wounding had befallen him; and that his masterless horse and bloodstained saddle were but a device to throw dust into our eyes, so that there might

be no chase after him by the men of the Abbot's bailiff, & that he might lightly do as he would, to wit, swear himself into the riders of the Burg of the four friths; for, in sooth, he was weary of me and mine. Yet further, I must needs tell thee that I know now, that when I wept before thee it was partly in despite, because I had found out in my heart (though I bade it not tell me so much) that I loved him but little." "Yea," said Ralph, "and when didst thou come to that knowledge of thine heart?" "Dear friend," she said, "mayhappen I may tell thee hereafter, but as now I will forbear." He laughed for joy of her, and in a little that talk fell down between them.

DESPITE the terror of the desert & the lonely ways, when Ralph laid him down on his stony bed, happiness wrapped his heart about. Albeit all this while he durst not kiss or caress her, save very measurely, for he deemed that she would not suffer it; nor as yet would he ask her wherefore, though he had it in his mind that he would not always forbear to ask her.

MANY days they rode that pass of the mountains, though it was not always so evil and dreadful as at the first beginning; for now again the pass opened out into little valleys, wherein was foison of grass & sweet waters withal, and a few trees. In such places must they needs rest them, to refresh their horses as well as themselves, and to gather food, of venison, and wild-fruit and nuts. But abiding in such vales was very pleasant to them. At last these said valleys came often and oftener, till it was so that all was pretty much one valley, whiles broken by a mountain neck, whiles straitened by a ness of the mountains that jutted into it, but never quite blind: yet was the said valley very high up, and as it were a trench of the great mountain. So they were glad that they had escaped from that strait prison betwixt the rock-walls, and were well at ease: and they failed never to find the tokens that led them on the way, even as they had learned of the Sage, so that they were not beguiled into any straying.

AND now they had worn away thirty days since they had parted from the Sage, and the days began to shorten and the nights to lengthen apace; when on the forenoon of a day, after they had ridden a very rugged mountain-neck, they came down and down into a much

wider valley, into which a great reef of rocks thrust out from the high mountain, so that the northern half of the said vale was nigh cleft atwain by it; well grassed was the vale, and a fair river ran through it, and there were on either side the water great groves of tall and great sweet-chestnuts & walnut trees, whereon the nuts were now ripe. They rejoiced as they rode into it; for they remembered how the Sage had told them thereof, that their travel & toil should be stayed there awhile, and that there they should winter, because of the bread which they could make them of the chestnuts, and the plenty of walnuts, and that withal there was foison of venison.

SO they found a ford of the river and crossed it, and went straight to the head of the rocky ness, being shown thither by the lore of the Sage, and they found in the face of the rock the mouth of a cavern, and beside it the token of the sword & the branch. Therefore they knew that they had come to their winter house, and they rejoiced thereat, and without more ado they got off their horses & went into the cavern. The entry thereof was low, so that they must needs creep into it, but within it was a rock-hall, high, clean, and sweet-smelling.

THERE then they dight their dwelling, doing all they might to be done with their work before the winter was upon them. The day after they had come there they fell to on the ingathering of their chestnut harvest, & they dried them, and made them into meal; & the walnuts they gathered also. Withal they hunted the deer, both great and small; amongst which Ralph, not without some peril, slew two great bears, of which beasts, indeed, there was somewhat more than enough, as they came into the dale to feed upon the nuts and the berry-trees. So they soon had good store of peltries for their beds & their winter raiment, which Ursula fell to work on deftly, for she knew all the craft of needlework: and, shortly to tell it, they had enough and to spare of victual & raiment.

Chapter XII. Winter amidst of the Mountains

IN all this they had enough to be busy with, so that time hung not heavy on their hands, & the shadow of the Quest was nowise burdensome to them, since they wot-

ted that they had to abide the wearing of the days till spring was come with fresh tidings. Their labour was nowise irksome to them, since Ralph was deft in all manner of sports & crafts, such as up-country folk follow, & though he were a king's son, he had made a doughty yeoman: and as for Ursula, she also was country-bred, of a lineage of field-folk, and knew all the manners of the fields. Withal in whatsoever way it were, they loved each other dearly, & all kind of speech flowed freely betwixt them. Sooth to say, Ralph, taking heed of Ursula, deemed that she were fain to love him bodily, and he wotted well by now, that, whatever had befallen, he loved her, body & soul. Yet still was that fear of her naysay lurking in his heart, if he should kiss her, or caress her, as a man with a maid. Therefore he forbore, though desire of her tormented him grievously at whiles. They wore their armour but little now, save when they were about some journey wherein was peril of wild beasts. Ursula had dight her some due woman's raiment betwixt her knight's surcoat & doe-skins which they had gotten, so that it was not unseemly of fashion. As for their horses, they but seldom backed them, but used them to draw stuff to their rock-house on sledges, which they made of tree-boughs; so that the beasts grew fat, feeding on the grass of the valley and the wild-oats withal, which grew at the upper end of the bight of the valley, toward the northern mountains, where the ground was sandy. No man they saw, nor any signs of man, nor had they seen any save the Sage, since those riders of Utterbol had vanished before them into the night.

So wore autumn into winter, and the frost came, and the snow, with prodigious winds from out the mountains: yet was not the weather so hard but that they might go forth most days, & come to no hurt if they were wary of the drifts; & forsooth needs must they go abroad to take venison for their livelihood. So the winter wore also amidst sweet speech and friendliness betwixt the two, and they lived still as dear friends, & not as lovers. Seldom they spoke of the Quest, for it seemed to them now a matter over great for speech. But now they were grown so familiar each to each that Ursula took heart to tell Ralph more of the tidings of Utterbol, for now the shame & grief of her bondage there was but

as a story told of another, so far away seemed that time from this. But so grievous was her tale that Ralph grew grim thereover, & he said: "By St. Nicholas! it were a good deed, once we are past the mountains again, to ride to Utterbol and drag that swine and wittol from his hall & slay him, and give his folk a good day. But then there is thou, my friend, and how shall I draw thee into deadly strife?" "Nay," she said, "whereso thou ridest thither will I, & one fate shall lie on us both. We will think thereof and ask the Sage of it when we return. Who knows what shall have befallen then? Remember the lighting of the candle of Utterbol that we saw from the rock-sea, & the boding thereof." So Ralph was appeased for that time. Oft also they spake of the little lands whence they came, & on a time amidst of such talk Ursula said: "But alas, friend, why do I speak of all this, when now, save for my brother, who loveth me but after a fashion, to wit that I must in all wise do his bidding, lad as he is, I have no longer kith nor kin there, save again as all the folk of one stead are somewhat akin. I think, my dear, that I have no country, nor any house to welcome me." Said Ralph: "All lands, any land that thou mayst come to, shall welcome thee, & I shall look to it that so it shall be." And in his heart he thought of the welcome of Upmeads, and of Ursula sitting on the dais of the hall of the High-House.

So wore the days till Candlemas, when the frost broke & the snows began to melt, and the waters came down from the mountains, so that the river rose over its banks and its waters covered the plain parts of the valley, and those two could go dry-shod but a little way out of their cavern; no further than the green mound or toft which lay at the mouth thereof: but the waters were thronged with fowl, as mallard and teal and coots, and of these they took what they would. Whiles also they waded the shallows of the flood, and whiles poled a raft about it, and so had pleasure of the waters as before they had had of the snow. But when at last the very spring was come, and the grass began to grow after the showers had washed the plain of the water-borne mud, and the snowdrop had thrust up and blossomed, and the celandine had come, and then when the blackthorn bloomed and the Lent-lilies hid the grass betwixt the great chestnut-boles, when the sun shone betwixt the showers &

the west wind blew, and the throstles & blackbirds ceased not their song betwixt dawn and dusk, then began Ralph to say to himself, that even if the Well at the World's End were not, and all that the Sage had told them was but a tale of Swevenham, yet were all better than well if Ursula were but to him a woman beloved rather than a friend. And whiles he was pensive and silent, even when she was by him, and she noted it, & forbore somewhat the sweetness of her glances, and the caressing of her soft speech: though oft when he looked on her fondly, the blood would rise to her cheeks, & her bosom would heave with the thought of his desire, which quickened hers so sorely, that it became a pain & grief to her.

Chapter XIII. Of Ursula and the Bear

IT befell on a fair sunny morning of spring, that Ralph sat alone on the toft by the rock-house, for Ursula had gone down the meadow to disport her & to bathe in the river. Ralph was fitting the blade of a dagger to a long ashen shaft, to make him a strong spear; for with the waxing spring the bears were often in the meadows again; & the day before they had come across a family of the beasts in the sandy bight under the mountains; to wit a carle, and a quean with her cubs; the beasts had seen them but afar off, & whereas the men were two and the sun shone back from their weapons, they had forborne them; although they were fierce and proud in those wastes, & could not away with creatures that were not of their kind. So because of this Ralph had bid-den Ursula not to fare abroad without her sword, which was sharp and strong, and she no weakling withal. He bethought him of this just as he had made an end of his spear-shaping, so therewith he looked aside & saw the said sword hanging to a bough of a little quicken-tree, which grew hard by the door. Fear came into his heart therewith, so he arose & strode down over the meadow hastily, bearing his new spear, and girt with his sword. Now there was a grove of chestnuts betwixt him and the river, but on the other side of them naught but the green grass down to the water's edge.

SURE enough as he came under the trees he heard a shrill cry, & knew that it could be naught save Ursula; so he ran thitherward whence came the cry, shouting as he

ran, and was scarce come out of the trees ere he saw Ursula indeed, mother-naked, held in chase by a huge bear as big as a bullock: he shouted again & ran the faster; but even there-with, whether she heard & saw him, & hoped for timely help, or whether she felt her legs failing her, she turned on the bear, & Ralph saw that she had a little axe in her hand where-with she smote hardily at the beast; but he, after the fashion of his kind, having risen to his hind legs, fenced with his great paws like a boxer, and smote the axe out of her hand, & she cried out bitterly and swerved from him and fell a-running a-gain; but the bear tarried not, and would have caught her in a few turns; but even there-with was Ralph come up, who thrust the beast into the side with his long-headed spear, &, not waiting to pull it out again, drew sword in a twinkling, & smote a fore-paw off him, and then drave the sword in over the shoulder so happily that it reached his heart, & he fell over dead with a mighty thump.

THEN RALPH looked a-round for Ursula; but she had already run back to the river-side & was casting her raiment on her; so he awaited her beside the slain bear, but with drawn sword, lest the oth-er bear should come upon them; for this was the he-bear. How-beit he saw naught save presently Ursula all clad & coming towards him speedily; so he turned toward her, & when they met he cast himself upon her without a word, & kissed her greedily; and she forbore not at all, but kissed & caress-ed him as if she could never be satisfied. So at last they drew apart a little, & walked quietly toward the rock-house hand in hand. And on the way she told him that even as she came up on to the bank from the water she saw the bear coming down on her as fast as he could drive, and so she but caught up her axe, and ran for it: "Yet I had little hope, dear friend," said she, "but that thou shouldst be left alone in the wilderness." And therewith she turned on him and cast her arms about him again, all weeping for joy of their two lives.

THUS slowly they came before the door of their rock-house, and Ralph said: "Let us sit down here on the grass, and if thou art not over wearied with the flight & the battle, I will ask thee a ques-tion". She laid herself down on the grass with a sigh, yet it was as of one who sighs for pleasure and rest, and said, as he sat down beside her: "I am fain to rest my limbs and my body, but my heart is at rest;

so ask on, dear friend" The song of birds was all around them, and the scent of many blossoms went past on the wings of the west wind, and Ralph was silent a little as he looked at the loveliness of his friend; then he said: "This is the question; of what kind are thy kisses this morning, are they the kisses of a friend or a lover? Wilt thou not call me beloved and not friend? Shall not we two lie on the bridal bed this same night?"

SHE looked on him steadily, smiling, but for love and sweetness, not for shame & folly; then she said: "O, dear friend & dearest lover, three questions are these and not one; but I will answer all three as my heart biddeth me. And first, I will tell thee that my kisses are as thine; and if thine are aught but the kisses of love, then am I befooled. And next, I say that if thou wilt be my friend indeed, I will not spare to call thee beloved, or to be all thy friend. But as to thy third question; tell me, is there not time enough for that?" She faltered as she spake, but he said: "Look, beloved, & see how fair the earth is to-day! What place & what season can be goodlier than this? And were it not well that we who love each other should have our full joy out of this sweet season, which as now is somewhat marred by our desire?" "Ah, beloved!" she said, looking shyly at him, "is it so marred by that which mareth not us?" "Hearken!" he said; "how much longer shall this fairness and peace, & our leisure & safety endure? Here and now the earth rejoiceth about us, and there is none to say us nay; but to-morrow it may all be otherwise. Bethink thee, dear, if but an hour ago the monster had slain thee, & rent thee ere we had lain in each other's arms!"

ALAS!" she said, "and had I lain in thine arms an hundred times, or an hundred times an hundred, should not the world be barren to me, wert thou gone from it, & that could never more be? But thou, friend, thou well-beloved, fain were I to do thy will that thou mightest be the happier . . . . and I withal. And if thou command it, be it so! Yet now should I tell thee all my thought, and it is on my mind, that for a many hundreds of years, yea, while our people were yet heathen, when a man should wed a maid all the folk knew of it, & were witnesses of the day & the hour thereof: now thou knowest that the time draws nigh when we may look for those messengers of the Innocent folk, who come every

spring to this cave to see if there be any whom they may speed on the way to the Well at the World's End. Therefore if thou wilt (& not otherwise) I would abide their coming if it be not over long delayed; so that there may be others to witness our wedding besides God, and those his creatures who dwell in the wilderness. Yet shall all be as thou wilt." "How shall I not do after thy bidding?" said Ralph. "I will abide their coming: yet would that they were here to-day! And one thing I will pray of thee, that because of them thou wilt not forbear, or cause me to forbear, such kissing and caressing as is meet betwixt troth-plight lovers" ❧ She laughed and said: "Nay, why should I torment thee... or me? We will not tarry for this." And therewith she took her arm about his neck and kissed him oft.

THEN they said naught awhile, but sat listening happily to the song of the pairing birds ❧ At last Ralph said: "What was it, beloved, that thou wert perchance to tell me concerning the thing that caused thine heart to see that thy betrothed, for whom thou weptst or seemedst to weep at the ale-house at Bourton Abbas, was of no avail to thee?" She said: "It was the sight of thee; and I thought also how I might never be thine. For that I have sorrowed many a time since" ❧ Said Ralph: "I am young and unmighty, yet lo! I heal thy sorrow as if I were an exceeding mighty man. And now I tell thee that I am minded to go back with thee to Apmeads straightway; for love will prevail" ❧ "Nay," she said, "that word is but from the teeth outwards; for thou knowest, as I do, that the perils of the homeward road shall overcome us, despite of love, if we have not drunk of the Well at the World's End."

AGAIN they were silent awhile, but anon she arose to her feet & said: "Now must I needs dight victual for us twain; but first" (and she smiled on him withal), "how is it that thou hast not asked me if the beast did me any hurt? Art thou grown careless of me, now the wedding is so nigh?" ❧ He said: "Nay, but could I not see thee that thou wert not hurt? There was no mark of blood upon thee, nor any stain at all." Then she reddened, & said: "Ah, I forgot how keen-eyed thou art." And she stood silent a little while, as he looked on her and loved her sweetness ❧ Then he said: "I am exceeding full of joy, but my body is uneasy; so I will now go & skin that troll who went so nigh to slay thee, and break

up the carcass, if thou wilt promise to abide about the door of the house, and have thy sword and the spear ready to hand, & to don thine helm and hauberk to boot" ❧ She laughed and said: "That were but strange attire for a cook-maid, Ralph, my friend; yet shall I do thy will, my lord and my love."

THEN went Ralph into the cave, and brought forth the armour & did it on her, & kissed her, and so went his ways to the carcass of the bear, which lay some two furlongs from their dwelling; & when he came to the quarry he fell to work, and was some time about it, so huge as the beast was. Then he hung the skin and the carcass on a tree of the grove, and went down to the river and washed him, and then went lightly homewards.

Chapter XIV. Now come the Messengers of the Innocent folk

BUT when he had come forth from the chestnut-grove, and could see the face of their house-rock clearly, he beheld new tidings; for there were folk before the door of the dwelling, & Ursula was standing amidst of them, for he could see the gleam of her armour; and with the men he could see also certain beasts of burden, and anon that these were oxen. So he hastened on to find what this might mean, and drew his sword as he went. But when he came up to the rock, he found there two young men and an elder, and they had with them five oxen, three for riding, & two sumpter beasts, laden: and Ursula & these men were talking together friendly; so that Ralph deemed that the new-comers must be the messengers of the Innocent folk. They were goodly men all three, somewhat brown of skin, but well-fashioned, and of smiling cheerful countenance, well knit, and tall. The elder had a long white beard, but his eye was bright, and his hand firm and smooth. They were all clad in white woollen raiment, and bore no armour, but each had an axe with a green stone blade, curiously tied to the heft, & each of the young men carried a strong bow and a quiver of arrows.

RALPH greeted the men, and bade them sit down on the toft & eat a morsel; they took his greeting kindly, and sat down, while Ursula went into the cave to fetch them matters for their victual, and there was already venison roasting at the fire on the toft, in the place where

they were wont to cook their meat. So then came Ursula forth from the cave, & served the new-comers and Ralph of such things as she had, & they ate & drank together; & none said aught of their errand till they had done their meat, but they talked together pleasantly about the spring, & the blossoms of the plain and the mountain, and the wild things that dwelt thereabout. But when the meal was over, the new-comers rose to their feet, and bowed before Ralph and Ursula, and the elder took up the word & said: "Ye fair people, have ye any errand in the wilderness, or are ye chance-comers who have strayed thus far, and know not how to return?" "Father," said Ralph, "we have come a long way on an errand of life or death; for we seek the WELL at the WORLD'S END. And see ye the token thereof, the pair of beads which we bear, either of us, and the fashion whereof ye know" Then the elder bowed to them again, & said: "It is well; then is this our errand with you, to be your way-leaders as far as the House of the Sorceress, where ye shall have other help. Will ye set out on the journey to-day? In one hour shall we be ready" "Nay," said Ralph, "we will not depart till to-morrow morn, if it may be so. Therewith I bid you sit down & rest you, while ye hearken a word which I have to say to you."

SO they sat down again, and Ralph arose & took Ursula by the hand, and stood with her before the elder, and said: "This maiden, who is my fellow-farer in the Quest, I desire to wed this same night, and she also desireth me: therefore I would have you as witnesses hereto. But first ye shall tell us if our wedding & the knowing each other carnally shall be to our hurt in the Quest; for if that be so, then shall we bridle our desires & perform our Quest in their despite."

THE old man smiled upon them kindly, and said: "Nay, son, we hear not that it shall be the worse for you in any wise that ye shall become one flesh; & right joyful it is to us, not only that we have found folk who seek to the Well at the World's End, but also that there is such love as I perceive there is betwixt such goodly and holy folk as ye be. For hither we come year by year according to the behest that we made to the fairest woman of the world, when she came back to us from the Well at the World's End, and it is many & many a year ago since we found any seekers after the

Well dwelling here. Therefore have we the more joy in you. And we have brought hither matters good for you, as raiment, and meal, & wine, on our sumpter-beasts; therefore as ye have feasted us this morning, so shall we feast you this even. And if ye will, we shall build for you in the grove yonder such a bower as we build for our own folk on the night of the wedding."

RALPH yeasaid this, and thanked them. So then the elder cried: "Up, my sons, and show your deftness to these dear friends!" Then the young men arose, naught loth, and when they had hoppled their oxen and taken the burdens from off them, they all went down the meadow together into the chestnut grove, and they fell to and cut willow boughs, and such-like wood, and drave stakes and wove the twigs together; & Ralph and Ursula worked with them as they bade, & they were all very merry together: because for those two wanderers it was a great delight to see the faces of the children of men once more after so many months, & to hold converse with them; while for their part the young men marvelled at Ursula's beauty, and the pith & goodliness of Ralph.

BY then it was nigh evening they had made a very goodly wattled bower, and roofed it with the skins that were in the cave, & hung it about with garlands, & strewn flowers on the floor thereof. And when all was done they went back to the toft before the rock-chamber, where the elder had opened the loads, & had taken meal thence, & was making cakes at the fire. And there was wine there in well-hooped kegs, & wooden cups fairly carven, and raiment of fine white wool for those twain, broidered in strange but beauteous fashion with the feathers of bright-hued birds.

SO then were those twain arrayed for the bridal; & the meat was dight and the cups filled, and they sat down on the grassy toft a little before sunset, and feasted till the night was come, and was grown all light with the moon; and then Ralph rose up, and took Ursula's hand, and they stood before the elder, & bade him and the young men bear witness that they were wedded: then those twain kissed the new-comers, and departed to their bridal bower hand in hand through the freshness of the night.

Chapter XV. They come to the Land of the Innocent folk.

THEN it was morning they speedily gat them ready for the road, whereas they had little to take with them; so they departed joyously, howbeit both Ralph & Ursula felt rather love than loathing for their winter abode. The day was yet young when they went their ways. Their horses and all their gear were a great wonder to the young men, for they had seen no such beasts before: but the elder said that once in his young days he had led a man to the Well who was riding a horse and was clad in knightly array.

SO THEY went by ways which were nowise dreadful, though they were void of men-folk, & in three days' time they were come out of the mountains, & in three more the said mountains were to behold but a cloud behind them, & the land was grown goodly, with fair valleys and little hills, though still they saw no men; & forsooth they went leisurely, for oxen are but slow-going nags. But when they were gone eight days from the Valley of Sweet-chestnuts, they came across a flock of uncouth-looking sheep on a green hill-side, and four folk shepherding them, two carles to wit, and two queans, like to their way-leaders, but scarce so goodly, and ruder of raiment. These men greeted them kindly, and yet with more worship than fellowship, and they marvelled exceedingly at their horses & weapons. Thence they passed on, and the next day came into a wide valley, well-grassed and watered, and wooded here and there; moreover there were cots scattered about it. There and thenceforth they met men a many, both carles and queans, and sheep & neat in plenty, and they passed by garths wherein the young corn was waxing, & vineyards on the hillsides, where the vines were beginning to grow green. The land seemed as goodly as might be, and all the folk they met were kind, if somewhat over reverent.

ON the evening of that day they came into the town of that folk, which was but simple, wholly unfenced for war, and the houses but low, & not great. Yet was there naught of filth or famine, nor any poverty or misery; and the people were merry-faced and well-liking, and clad goodly after their fashion in white

woollen cloth or frieze. All the people of the town were come forth to meet them, for runners had gone before them, & they stood on either side of the way murmuring greetings, & with their heads bent low in reverence. Thus rode Ralph & Ursula up to the door of the Temple, or Mote-house, or Guest-house, for it was all these, a house great, and as fair as they knew how to make it. Before the door thereof were standing the elders of the folk; and when they drew rein, the eldest & most reverend of these came forth & spake in a cheerful voice, yet solemnly: "Welcome and thrice welcome to the Seekers after length of days and happy times, and the loving-kindness of the folks of the Earth!"

THEN all the elders gathered about them, & bade them light down and be at rest amongst them, and they made much of them & brought them into the Mote-house, wherein were both women and men fair and stately, and the men took Ralph by the hand and the women Ursula, and brought them into chambers where they bathed them and did off their wayfaring raiment, and clad them in white woollen gowns of web exceeding fine, and fragrant withal. Then they crowned them with flowers, and led them back into the hall, whereas now was much folk gathered, & they set them down on a dais as though they had been kings, or rather gods; & when they beheld them there so fair & lovely, they cried out for joy of them, and bade them hail oft and oft. There then were they feasted by that kind folk, and when meat was done certain youths & maidens fell to singing songs very sweetly; and the words of the songs were simple and harmless, and concerning the fairness of the earth & the happy loves of the creatures that dwell therein. Thereafter as the night aged, they were shown to a sleeping chamber, which, albeit not richly decked, or plenished with precious things, was most dainty clean, and sweet smelling, and strewn with flowers, so that the night was sweet to them in a chamber of love.

Chapter XVI. They come to the House of the Sorceress.

ON THE morrow the kind people delayed them little, though they sorrowed for their departure, and before noon were their old way-leaders ready for them; & the old man and his two grandsons (for such they were) were

much honoured of the simple people for their way-leading of the Heavenly Folk; for so they called Ralph & Ursula. So they gat them to the way in suchlike guise as before, only they had with them five sumpter oxen instead of two; for the old man told them that not only was their way longer, but also they must needs pass through a terrible waste, wherein was naught for their avail, neither man, nor beast, nor herb. Even so they found it as he said; for after the first day's ride from the town they came to the edge of this same waste, & on the fourth day were deep in the heart of it: a desert it was, rather rocky & stony and sandy than mountainous, though they had hills to cross also: withal there was but little water there, and that foul & stinking. Long lasted this waste, & Ralph thought indeed that it had been hard to cross, had not their way-leaders been; therefore he made marks and signs by the wayside, & took note of the bearings of rocks and mounds against the day of return.

TWELVE days they rode this waste, & on the thirteenth it began to mend somewhat, & there was a little grass, and sweet waters, and they saw ahead the swelling hills of a great woodland, albeit they had to struggle through marshland and low scrubby thicket for a day longer, or ever they got to the aforesaid trees, which at first were naught but pines; but these failed in a while, & they rode a grass waste nearly treeless, but somewhat well watered, where they gat them good store of venison. Thereafter they came on woods of oak & sweet-chestnut, with here & there a beech-wood.

LONG & long they rode the woodland, but it was hard on May when they entered it, & it was pleasant therein, and what with one thing, what with another, they had abundant livelihood there. Yet was June at its full when at last they came within sight of the House of the Sorceress, on the hottest of a fair afternoon. And it was even as Ralph had seen it pictured in the arras of the hall of the Castle of Abundance; a little house built after the fashion of houses in his own land of the west; the thatch was trim, and the windows & doors were unbroken, and the garth was whole, and the goats feeding therein, and the wheat was tall & blossoming in the little closes, whereas he had looked to see all broken down and wild, and as to the house, a mere grass-grown heap, or at the most a broken gable fast crumbling away.

Then waxed his heart sore with the memory of that passed time, and the sweetness of his short-lived love, though he refrained him all he might: yet forsooth Ursula looked on him anxiously, so much his face was changed by the thoughts of his heart. But the elder of the way-leaders saw that he was moved, & deemed that he was wondering at that house so trim and orderly amidst the wildwood, so he said: "Here also do we after our behest to that marvellous & lovely Lady, that we suffer not this house to go to ruin: ever are some of our folk here, and every year about this season we send two or more to take the places of those who have dwelt in the House year-long: so ever is there someone to keep all things trim. But as to strangers, I have never in my life seen any Seeker of the Well herein, save once, and that was an old hoar man like to me, save that he was feebler in all wise than I be."

NOW Ralph heard him talking, yet noted his words but little; for it was with him as if all the grief of heart which he had penned back for so long a while swelled up within him and burst its bounds; & he turned towards Ursula and their eyes met, and she looked shy and anxious on him, and he might no longer refrain himself, but put his hands to his face (for they had now drawn rein at the garth-gate) & brake out a-weeping, & wept long for the friend whose feet had worn that path so often, and whose heart, though she were dead, had brought them thither for their thriving; and for love and sorrow of him Ursula wept also.

BUT the old man and his grandsons turned their heads away from his weeping, & got off their horses, and went up to the house-door, whereby were now standing a carle and a quean of their people. But Ralph slowly gat off his horse and stood by Ursula, who was on the ground already, but would not touch her, for he was ashamed. But she looked on him kindly and said: "Dear friend, there is no need for shame; for though I be young, I know how grievous it is when the dead that we have loved come across our ways, and we may not speak to them, nor they to us. So I will but bid thee be comforted and abide in thy love for the living and the dead." His tears brake out again at that word, for he was but young, and for a while there was a lull in the strife that had beset his days. But after a little he looked up, and dashed the tears from his eyes

and smiled on Ursula, & said: "The tale she told me of this place, the sweetness of it came back upon me, and I might not forbear." She said: "O friend, thou art kind, and I love thee."

SO then they joined hands and went through the garth together, & up to the door, where stood the wardens, who, when they saw them turning thither, came speedily down the path to them, and would have knelt in worship to them; but they would not suffer it, but embraced & kissed them, and thanked them many times for their welcome. The said wardens, both carle and quean, were goodly folk of middle age, stalwart, and kind of face. So then they went into the house together, and entered into the self-same chamber, where of old the Lady of Abundance had sickened for fear of the Sorceress sitting naked at her spell-work.

GREAT joy they made together, and the wardens set meat & drink before the guests, & they ate and drank and were of good cheer. But the elder who had brought them from Chestnut-dale said: "Dear friends, I have told you that these two young men are my grand-children, & they are the sons of this man and woman whom here ye see; for the man is my son. And so it is, that amongst us the care of the Quest of the Well at the World's End hath for long been the heritage of our blood, going with us from father to son. Therefore is it naught wonderful, though I have been sundry times at this house, & have learned about the place all that may be learned. For my father brought me hither when I was yet a boy; that time it was that I saw the last man of whom we know for sure that he drank of the Water of the Well, and he was that old hoar man like unto me, but, as I said, far weaker in all wise; but when he came back to us from the Well he was strong and stalwart, and a better man than I am now; and I heard him tell his name to my father, that he was called the Sage of Swevenham."

RALPH looked on Ursula & said: "Yea, father, & it was through him that we had our lore concerning the way hither; and it was he that bade us abide your coming in the rock-house of the Vale of Sweet-chestnuts." "Then he is alive still?" said the elder. Said Ralph: "Yea, and as fair and strong an old man as ye may lightly see." "Yea, yea," said the elder, "and yet fifty years ago his course seemed run." Then said Ralph: "Tell me, father, have

none of your own folk sought to the Well at the World's End?" "Nay, none," said the elder. Said Ralph: "That is strange, whereas ye are so nigh thereto, and have such abundant lore concerning the way." "Son," said the elder, "true it is that the water of that Well shall cause a man to thrive in all ways, and to live through many generations of men, maybe, in honour and goodliking; but it may not keep any man alive for ever; for so have the Gods given us the gift of death lest we weary of life. Now our folk live well & hale, and without the sickness and pestilence, such as I have heard oft befall folk in other lands: even as I heard the Sage of Swevenham say, and I wondered at his words. Of strife & of war also we know naught: nor do we desire aught which we may not easily attain to. Therefore we live long, and we fear the Gods if we should strive to live longer, lest they should bring upon us war and sickness, and overweening desire, and weariness of life. Moreover it is little like that all of us should seek to the Well at the World's End; and those few that sought and drank should be stronger and wiser than the others, and should make themselves earthly gods, and, maybe, should torment the others of us and make their lives a very burden to be borne. Of such matters are there tales current amongst us that so it hath been of yore & in other lands; and ill it were if such times came back upon us."

RALPH hung his head and was silent; for the joy of the Quest seemed dying out as the old man's words dropped slowly from his mouth. But he smiled upon Ralph and went on: "But for you, guests, it is otherwise, for ye of the World beyond the Mountains are stronger and more godlike than we, as all tales tell; and ye wear away your lives desiring that which ye may scarce get; and ye set your hearts on high things, desiring to be masters of the very Gods. Therefore ye know sickness and sorrow, and oft ye die before your time, so that ye must depart and leave undone things which ye deem ye were born to do; which to all men is grievous. And because of all this ye desire healing & thriving, whether good come of it, or ill. Therefore ye do but right to seek to the Well at the World's End, that ye may the better accomplish that which behoveth you, and that ye may serve your fellows & deliver them from the thralldom of those that be strong

and unwise and unkind, of whom we have heard strange tales." Ralph reddened as he spake, and Ursula looked on him anxiously, but that talk dropped for the present, and they fell to talking of lighter and more familiar matters.

THEREAFTER they wandered about the woods with the wardens & the way-leaders, & the elder brought them to the ancient altar in the wood whereon the Sorceress had offered up the goat; and the howe of the woman dight with the necklace of the Quest whom the Lady found dead in the snow; and the place nigh the house where the Sorceress used to torment her thrall that was afterwards the Lady of Abundance; yea, and they went further afield till they came to the Vale of Lore, and the Heath above it where they met the King's son and the Lady. All these & other places were now become as hallowed ground to the Innocent People, and to Ralph no less. In the house, moreover, was a fair ark wherein they kept matters which had belonged to the Lady, as her shoes and her smock, wrapped in goodly cloth amidst well-smelling herbs; and these things they worshipped as folk do with relics of the saints. In another ark also they showed the seekers a book wherein was written lore concerning the Well, and the way thereto. But of this book had the Sage forewarned Ralph and his mate, and had bidden them look to it that they should read in it, and no otherwhere than at that ancient altar in the wood, they two alone, and clad in suchlike gear as they wore when they hearkened to his reading by his hermitage. And so it was that they found the due raiment in the ark along with the book. Therefore day after day betimes in the morning they bore the said book to the altar and read therein, till they had learned much wisdom.

THUS they did for eight days, and on the ninth they rested & were merry with their hosts: but on the tenth day they mounted their horses and said farewell, and departed by the ways they had learned of, they two alone. And they had with them bread and meal, as much as they might bear, & water-skins moreover, that they might fill them at the last sweet water before they came to the waterless desert.

Chapter XVII. They come through the Woodland to the Thirsty Desert

SO they ride their ways, & when they were come well in/to the wildwood past the house, & had spoken but few words to each other, Ralph put forth his hand, and stayed Ursula, and they gat off their horses under a great/limbed oak, and did off their armour, & sat down on the green/sward there, & loved each other dear/ly, & wept for joy of their pain and travail and love. And after/wards, as they sat side by side leaning up against the great oak/bole, Ralph spake & said: "Now are we two once again all alone in the uttermost parts of the earth, and belike we are not very far from the Well at the World's End; and now I have bethought me that if we gain that which we seek for, & bear back our lives to our own peo-ple, the day may come when we are grown old, for as young as we may seem, that we shall be as lonely then as we are this hour, and that the folk round about us shall be to us as much and no more than these trees and the wild things that dwell amongst them."

SHE looked on him and laughed as one over/hap/py, and said: "Thou run/nest forward swiftly to meet trouble, beloved! But I say that well will it be in those days if I love the folk then as well as now I love these trees and the wild things whose house they are." And she rose up therewith and threw her arms about the oak/bole & kissed its ruggedness, while Ralph as he lay kissed the sleekness of her feet. And there came a robin hopping over the leaves anigh them, for in that wood most of the crea-tures, knowing not man, were tame to him, & feared the horses of those twain more than their riders And now as Ursula knelt to embrace Ralph with one hand, she held out the oth/er to the said robin, who perch/ed on her wrist, and sat there as a hooded falcon had done, and fell to whistling his sweet notes, as if he were a/talking to those new/comers: then Ur/sula gave him a song/reward of their broken meat, & he flew up and perched on her shoul-der, & nestled up against her cheek, and she laughed happi/ly, and said: "Lo you, sweet, have not the wild things un-derstood my words, and sent this fair messenger to foretell us all good?" "It is good," said Ralph, laughing, "yet the oak/tree hath not spoken yet, despite all thy kissing: and lo there goes thy friend the robin, now thou hast no more meat to

give him" "He is flying towards the Well at the World's End," she said, "and biddeth us onward: let us to horse and hasten: for if thou wilt have the whole truth concerning my heart, it is this, that some chance/hap may yet take thee from me ere thou hast drunk of the waters of the Well" "Yea," said Ralph, "& in the innermost of my heart lieth the fear that may happen there is no Well, and no healing in it if we find it, & that death and the backward way may yet sunder us. This is the worst of my heart, and evil is my coward fear" But she cast her arms about him & kissed & caressed him, and cried out: "Yea, then fair have been the days of our journeying, and fair this hour of the green oak! And bold & true thine heart that hath led thee thus far, & won thee thy desire of my love."

So then they armed them, & mounted their horses and set forward. They lived well while they were in the wood, but on the third day they came to where it thinned and at last died out into a stony waste like unto that which they had passed through before they came to the House of the Sorceress, save that this lay in ridges as the waves of a great sea; & these same ridges they were bidden to cross over at their highest, lest they should be bewildered in a maze of little hills and dales leading no whither So they entered on this desert, having filled their water/skins at a clear brook, whereat they rejoiced when they found that the face of the wilderness was covered with a salt scurf, & that naught grew there save a sprinkling of small sage bushes.

Now on the second day of their riding this ugly waste, as they came up over the brow of one of these stony ridges, Ralph the far-sighted cried out suddenly: "Hold! for I see a man weapon/ed" "Where is he?" quoth Ursula, "& what is he about?" Said Ralph: "He is up yonder on the swell of the next ridge, and by seeming is asleep leaning against a rock." Then he bent the Turk bow and set an arrow on the string, and they went on warily. When they were down at the foot of the ridge Ralph hailed the man with a lusty cry, but gat no answer of him; so they went on up the bent, till Ralph said: "Now I can see his face under his helm, and it is dark and the eyes are hollow: I will off horse and go up to him afoot, but do thou, beloved, sit still in thy saddle." But when he had come nigher, he turned and cried out to her: "The man is dead, come a-

nigh." So she went up to him and dismounted, & they both together stood over the man, who was lying up against a big stone like one at rest. How long he had lain there none knows but God; for in the saltness of the dry desert the flesh had dried on his bones without corrupting, & was as hardened leather. He was in full armour of a strange & ancient fashion, and his sword was girt to his side, neither was there any sign of a wound about him. Under a crag anigh him they found his horse, dead and dry like to himself; and a little way over the brow of the ridge another horse in like case; and close by him a woman, whose raiment had not utterly perished, nor her hair: there were gold rings on her arms, & her shoes were done with gold: she had a knife stuck in her breast, with her hand still clutching the handle thereof; so that it seemed that she had herself given herself death. Ralph & Ursula buried these two with the heaping of stones and went their ways; but some two miles thence they came upon another dead man-at-arms, & near him an old man unweaponed, and they heaped stones on them. Thereabout night overtook them, & it was dark, so they lay down in the waste, & comforted each other, and slept two or three hours, but arose with the first glimmer of dawn, and mounted and rode forth onward, that they might the sooner be out of that deadly desert, for fear clung to their hearts. This day, forsooth, they found so many dead folk, that they might not stay to bury them, lest they themselves should come to lie there lacking burial. So they made all the way they might, & rode on some hours by starlight after the night was come, for it was clear and cold. So that at last they were so utterly wearied that they lay down amongst those dead folk, and slept soundly.

ON the morrow morn Ralph awoke and saw Ursula sleeping peacefully as he deemed, & he looked about on the dreary desert and its dead men and saw no end to it, though they lay on the top of one of those stony bents; & he said softly to himself: "Will it end at all then? Surely all this people of the days gone by were Seekers of the Well as we be; & have they belike turned back from somewhere further on, & might not escape the desert despite of all? Shall we turn now: shall we turn? surely we might get into the kindly wood from here." So he spake; but Ursula sat up (for she was not asleep) & said: "The perils of the waste

being abundant and exceeding hard to face, would not the Sage or his books have told us of the most deadly?" Said Ralph: "Yet here are all these dead, and we were not told of them; nevertheless we have seen the token on the rocks oft-times yesterday, so we are yet in the road, unless all this hath been but a snare and a betrayal." She shook her head, & was silent a little; then she said: "Ralph, my lad, didst thou see this token (and she set hand to the beads about her neck) on any of those dead folk yesterday?" "Nay," said Ralph, "though sooth to say I looked for it." "And I in like-wise," she said; "for indeed I had misgivings as the day grew old; but now I say, let us on in the faith of that token and the kindness of the Sage, and the love of the Innocent People; yea, and thy luck, O lad of the green fields far away, that hath brought thee unscathed so far from Upmeads."

So they mounted and rode forth, and saw more and more of the dead folk; and ever and anon they looked to them to note if they wore the beads like to them, but saw none so dight. Then Ursula said: "Yea, why should the Sage and the books have told us aught of these dead bodies, that are but as the plenishing of the waste; like to the flowers that are cast down before the bier of a saint on a holy-day to be trodden under foot by the churls & the vicars of the close. Forsooth had they been alive now, with swords to smite withal, & hands to drag us into captivity, it had been another matter: but against these I feel bold". Ralph sighed, & said: "Yea, but even if we die not in the waste, yet this is piteous; so many lives passed away, so many hopes slain." "Yea," she said; "but do not folk die there in the world behind us? I have seen sights far worser than this at Utterbol, little while as I was there. Moreover I can note that this army of dead men has not come all in one day or one year, but in a long, long while, by one and two and three; for hast thou not noted that their raiment and wargear both, is of many fashions, and some much more perished than other, long as things last in this Dry Waste? I say that men die as in the world beyond, but here we see them as they lie dead, and have lain for so long." He said: "I fear neither the Waste nor the dead men, if thou fearest not, beloved: but I lament for these poor souls." "And I also," said she; "therefore let us on, that we may come to those whose grief we may heal."

Chapter XVIII. They come to the Dry Tree

PRESENTLY as they rode they had before them one of the greatest of those land-waves, & they climbed it slowly, going afoot & leading their horses; but when they were but a little way from the brow they saw, over a gap thereof, something, as it were huge horns rising up into the air beyond the crest of the ridge. So they marvelled, and drew their swords, and held them still awhile, misdoubting if this were perchance some terrible monster of the waste; but whereas the thing moved not at all, they plucked up heart and fared on.

SO came they to the brow and looked over it into a valley, about which on all sides went the ridge, save where it was broken down into a narrow pass on the further side, so that the said valley was like to one of those theatres of the ancient Roman folk, whereof are some to be seen in certain lands. Neither did those desert benches lack their sitters; for all down the sides of the valley sat or lay children of men; some women, but most men-folk, of whom the more part were weaponed, and some with their drawn swords in their hands. Whatever semblance of moving was in them was when the eddying wind of the valley stirred the rags of their raiment, or the long hair of the women. But a very midmost of this dreary theatre rose up a huge and monstrous tree, whose topmost branches were even the horns which they had seen from below the hill's brow. Leafless was that tree & lacking of twigs, and its bole upheld but some fifty of great limbs, & as they looked on it, they doubted whether it were not made by men's hands rather than grown up out of the earth. All round about the roots of it was a pool of clear water, that cast back the image of the valley-side and the bright sky of the desert, as though it had been a mirror of burnished steel. The limbs of that tree were all behung with blazoned shields & knights' helms, and swords, and spears, and axes, and hauberks; and it rose up into the air some hundred feet above the flat of the valley.

FOR a while they looked down silently on to this marvel, then from both their lips at once came the cry, THE DRY TREE. Then Ralph thrust his sword back into his sheath and said: "Meseems I must needs go down amongst them; there is naught to do us harm here; for all these are dead like the others that we

saw" Ursula turned to him with burning cheeks & sparkling eyes, & said eagerly: "Yea, yea, let us go down, else might we chance to miss something that we ought to wot of" Therewith she also sheathed her sword, and they went both of them down together, & that easily; for as aforesaid the slope was as if it had been cut into steps for their feet. And as they passed by the dead folk, for whom they had often to turn aside, they noted that each of the dead leathery faces was drawn up in a grin, as though they had died in pain, and yet beguiled, so that all those visages looked somewhat alike, as though they had all come from the workshop of one craftsman.

At last Ralph & Ursula stood on the level ground underneath the Tree, and they looked up at the branches, and down to the water at their feet; & now it seemed to them as though the Tree had verily growth in it, for they beheld its roots, that they went out from the mound or islet of earth into the water, and spread abroad therein, and seemed to waver about. So they walked around the Tree, and looked up at the shields that hung on its branches, but saw no blazon that they knew, though they were many and diverse; & the armour also and weapons were very diverse of fashion.

Now when they were come back again to the place where they had first stayed, Ralph said: "I thirst, and so belike dost thou; and here is water good and clear; let us drink then, and so spare our water-skins, for belike the dry desert is yet long." And therewith he knelt down that he might take of the water in the hollow of his hand. But Ursula drew him back, and cried out in terror: "O Ralph, do it not! Seest thou not this water, that although it be bright and clear, so that we may see all the pebbles at the bottom, yet nevertheless when the wind eddies about, and lifts the skirts of our raiment, it makes no ripple on the face of the pool, and doubtless it is heavy with venom; and moreover there is no sign of the way hereabout, as at other watering-steads; O forbear, Ralph!" Then he rose up & drew back with her, but slowly and unwillingly as she deemed; & they stood together a while gazing on these marvels. But lo amidst of this while, there came a crow wheeling over the valley of the dead, and he croaked over the Dry Tree, & let himself drop down to the edge of the pool, whereby he stalked about a little af-

ter the manner of his kind. Then he thrust his neb into the water and drank, & thereafter took wing again; but ere he was many feet off the ground he gave a grievous croak, and turning over in the air fell down stark dead close to the feet of those twain; & Ralph cried out, but spake no word with meaning therein; then said Ursula: "Yea, thus are we saved from present death." Then she looked in Ralph's face, and turned pale and said hastily: "O my friend, how is it with thee?" But she waited not for an answer, but turned her face to the bent whereby they had come down, and cried out in a loud, shrill voice: "O Ralph, Ralph! look up yonder to the ridge whereby we left our horses; look, look! there glitters a spear and stirreth! & lo a helm underneath the spear: tarry not, let us save our horses!"

THEN Ralph let a cry out from his mouth, and set off running to the side of the slope, and fell to climbing it with great strides, not heeding Ursula; but she followed close after, and scrambled up with foot and hand and knee, till she stood beside him on the top, & he looked around wildly and cried out: "Where! where are they?" "Nowhere," she said, "it was naught but my word to draw thee from death; but praise be to the saints that thou art come alive out of the accursed valley."

HE seemed not to hearken, but turned about once, and beat the air with his hands, and then fell down on his back; and with a great wail she cast herself upon him, for she deemed at first that he was dead. But she took a little water from one of their skins, & cast it into his face, and took a flask of cordial from her pouch and set it to his lips, and made him drink somewhat thereof. So in a while he came to himself, and opened his eyes and smiled upon her, and she took his head in her hands & kissed his cheek, & he sat up and said feebly: "Shall we not go down into the valley? there is naught there to harm us." "We have been down there already," she said, "and well it is that we are not both lying there now."

THEN he got to his feet, and stretched himself, & yawned like one just awakened from long sleep. But she said: "Let us to horse and begone; it is early hours to slumber, for those that are seeking the Well at the World's End." He smiled on her again and took her hand, and she led him to his horse, & helped him till he was in the saddle, and lightly she gat a-horseback, & they rode away swiftly from

that evil place; & after a while Ralph was himself again, and remembered all that had happened till he fell down on the brow of the ridge ❧ Then he praised Ursula's wisdom and valiancy till she bade him forbear lest he weary her. Albeit she drew up close to him and kissed his face sweetly.

Chapter XIX. They come out of the Thirsty Desert

PAST the Valley of the Dry Tree they saw but few dead men lying about, and soon they saw never another: and, though the land was still utterly barren, and all cast up into ridges as before, yet the salt slime grew less & less, and before nightfall of that day they had done with it: and the next day those stony waves were lower; and the next again the waste was but a swelling plain, and here and there they came on patches of dwarf willow, & other harsh and scanty herbage, whereof the horses might have a bait, which they sore needed, for now was their fodder done: but both men and horses were sore athirst; for, as carefully as they had hoarded their water, there was now but little left, which they durst not drink till they were driven perforce, lest they should yet die of drought ❧ They journeyed long that day, & whereas the moon was up at nighttide they lay not down till she was set; & their resting place was by some low bushes, whereabout was rough grass mingled with willow-herb, whereby Ralph judged that they drew nigh to water, so or ever they slept, they and the horses all but emptied the water-skins. ❧ They heard some sort of beasts roaring in the night, but they were too weary to watch, and might not make a fire.

WHEN Ralph awoke in the morning he cried out that he could see the woodland; and Ursula arose at his cry & looked where he pointed, and sure enough there were the trees on a rising ground some two miles ahead, & beyond them, not very far by seeming, they beheld the tops of great dark mountains. On either hand, moreover, nigh on their right hand, far off on their left, ran a reef of rocks, so that their way seemed to be as between two walls. And these said reefs were nowise like those that they had seen of late, but black and, as to their matter, like to the great mountains by the rock of the Fighting Man: but as the reefs ran eastward they seemed to grow higher.

NOW they mounted their horses at once and rode on; and the beasts were as eager as they were, and belike smelt the water. So when they had ridden but three miles, they saw a fair little river before them winding about exceedingly, but flowing eastward on the whole. So they spurred on with light hearts & presently were on the banks of the said river, & its waters were crystal-clear, though its sands were black: & the pink-blossomed willow-herb was growing abundantly on the sandy shores. Close to the water was a black rock, as big as a man, whereon was graven the sign of the way; so that they knew that there was no evil in the water, wherefore they drank their fill & watered their horses abundantly, & on the further bank was there abundance of good grass. So when they had drunk their fill, for the pleasure of the cool water they waded the ford barefoot, and it was scarce above Ursula's knee. Then they had great joy to lie on the soft grass and eat their meat, while the horses tore eagerly at the herbage close to them. So when they had eaten, they rested awhile, but before they went further they despoiled them, one after other, and bathed in a pool of the river to wash the foul wilderness off them. Then again they rested and let the horses yet bite the grass, and departed not from that pleasant place till it was two hours after noon. As they were lying there Ralph said he could hear a great roar like the sound of many waters, but very far off: but to Ursula it seemed naught but the wind waxing in the boughs of the woodland anigh them.

Chapter XX. They come to the Ocean Sea

BEING come to the wood they went not very far into it that day, for they were minded to rest them after the weariness of the wilderness: they feasted on a hare which Ralph shot, and made a big fire to keep off evil beasts, but none came nigh them, though they heard the voices of certain beasts as the night grew still. To be short, they slept far into the morrow's morn, and then, being refreshed, and their horses also, they rode strongly all day, and found the wood to be not very great; for before sunset they were come to its outskirts, and the mountains lay before them. These were but little like to that huge wall they had passed through on their

way to Chestnut-dale, being rather great hills than mountains, grass-grown, & at their feet somewhat wooded, and by seeming not over hard to pass over.

THE next day they entered them by a pass marked with the token, which led them about by a winding way till they were on the side of the biggest fell of all; so there they rested that night in a fair little hollow or dell in the mountain-side ❧ There in the stillness of the night both Ursula, as well as Ralph, heard that roaring of a great water, and they said to each other that it must be the voice of the Sea, and they rejoiced thereat, for they had learned by the Sage & his books that they must needs come to the verge of the Ocean-Sea, which girdles the earth about ❧ So they arose betimes on the morrow, and set to work to climb the mountain, going mostly a-foot; and the way was long, but not craggy or exceeding steep, so that in five hours' time they were at the mountain-top, & coming over the brow beheld beneath them fair green slopes besprinkled with trees, and beyond them, some three or four miles away, the blue landless sea, and on either hand of them was the sea also, so that they were nigh-hand at the ending of a great ness, and there was naught beyond it; and naught to do if they missed the Well, but to turn back by the way they had come.

NOW WHEN they saw this they were exceedingly moved, and they looked on one another, & each saw that the other was pale, with glistening eyes, since they were come to the very point of their doom, & that it should be seen whether there were no such thing as the Well in all the earth, but that they had been chasing a fair-hued cloud; or else their Quest should be achieved and they should have the world before them, & they happy & mighty, and of great worship amidst all men ❧ Little they tarried, but gat them down the steep of the mountain, and so lower and lower till they were come to ground nigh level; & then at last it was but thus, that without any great rock-wall or girdle of marvellous & strange land, there was an end of earth, with its grass and trees and streams, and a beginning of the ocean, which stretched away changeless, and it might be for ever. Where the land ended there was but a cliff of less than an hundred feet above the eddying of the sea; and on the very point of the

ness was a low green toft with a square stone set atop of it, whereon as they drew nigh they saw the token graven, yea on each face thereof ❧ Then they went along the edge of the cliff a mile on each side of the said toft, and then finding naught else to note, naught save the grass and the sea, they came back to that place of the token, & sat down on the grass of the toft.

IT was now evening, and the sun was setting behind them, but they could behold a kind of stair cut in the side of the cliff, and on the first step whereof was the token done; wherefore they knew that they were bidden to go down by the said stair; but it seemed to lead no whither, save straight into the sea. And whiles it came into Ralph's mind that this was naught but a mock, as if to bid the hapless seekers cast themselves down from the earth, and be done with it for ever. But in any case they might not try the adventure of that stair by the failing light, and with the night long before them ❧ So when they had hoppled their horses, and left them to graze at their will on the sweet grass of the meadow, they laid them down behind the green toft, and, being forewearied, it was no long time ere they twain slept fast at that uttermost end of the world.

Chapter XXI. Now they drink of the Well at the World's End ❧

RALPH awoke from some foolish morning dream of Upmeads, wondering where he was, or what familiar voice had cried out his name: then he raised himself on his elbow, and saw Ursula standing before him with flushed face and sparkling eyes, and she was looking out seaward, while she called on his name. So he sprang up and strove with the slumber that still hung about him, and as his eyes cleared he looked down, and saw that the sea, which last night had washed the face of the cliff, had now ebbed far out, & left bare betwixt the billows & the cliff some half mile of black sand, with rocks of the like hue rising out of it here and there. But just below the place where thy stood, right up against the cliff, was builded by man's hand of huge stones a garth or pound, the wall whereof was some seven feet high, and the pound within the wall of forty feet space endlong &

overthwart; & the said pound was filled with the waters of a spring that came forth from the face of the cliff as they deemed, though from above they might not see the issue thereof; but the water ran seaward from the pound by some way unseen, and made a wide stream through the black sand of the foreshore: but ever the great basin filled somewhat faster than it voided, so that it ran over the lip on all sides, making a thin veil over the huge ashlar-stones of the garth. The day was bright & fair with no wind, save light airs playing about from the westward ort, and all things gleamed and glittered in the sun.

RALPH stood still a moment, and then stretched abroad his arms, and with a great sob cast them round about the body of his beloved, and strained her to his bosom as he murmured about her, THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END. But she wept for joy as she fawned upon him, and let her hands beat upon his body. But when they were somewhat calmed of their ecstasy of joy, they made ready to go down by that rocky stair. And first they did off their armour and other gear, and when they were naked they did on the hallowed raiment which they had out of the ark in the House of the Sorceress; & so clad gat them down the rock-hewn stair, Ralph going first, lest there should be any broken place; but naught was amiss with those hard black stones, and they came safely to a level place of the rock, whence they could see the face of the cliff, & how the waters of the Well came gushing forth from a hollow therein in a great swelling wave as clear as glass; and the sun glistened in it & made a foam-bow about its edges. But above the issue of the waters the black rock had been smoothed by man's art, and thereon was graven the Sword and the Bough, and above it these words, to wit:

YE WHO HAVE COME A LONG WAY TO LOOK UPON ME, DRINK OF ME, IF YE DEEM THAT YE BE STRONG ENOUGH IN DESIRE TO BEAR LENGTH OF DAYS: OR ELSE DRINK NOT; BUT TELL YOUR FRIENDS & THE KINDREDS OF THE EARTH HOW YE HAVE SEEN A GREAT MARVEL.

SO they looked long and wondered; and Ursula said: "Deemest thou, my friend, that any have come thus far & forborne to drink?"

Said Ralph: "Surely not even the exceeding wise might remember the bitterness of his wisdom as he stood here" Then he looked on her and his face grew bright beyond measure, and cried out: "O love, love! why tarry we? for yet I fear lest we be come too late, and thou die before mine eyes ere yet thou hast drunken." "Yea," she said, "and I also fear for thee, though thy face is ruddy & thine eyes sparkle, and thou art as lovely as the Captain of the Lord's hosts." Then she laughed, & her laughter was as silver bells rung tunably, and she said: "But where is the cup for the drinking?" But Ralph looked on the face of the wall, & about the height of his hand saw square marks thereon, as though there were an ambry; & amidst the square was a knop of latten, all green with the weather and the salt spray. So Ralph set his hand to the knop & drew strongly, and lo it was a door made of a squared stone hung on brazen hinges, and it opened easily to him, and within was a cup of goldsmith's work, with the sword and the bough done thereon; and round about the rim was writ this posy:

THE STRONG OF HEART SHALL DRINK FROM ME.

So Ralph took it and held it aloft, so that its pure metal flashed in the sun, & he said: "This is for thee, sweetling." "Yea, and for thee," she said.

NOW that level place, or bench-table, went up to the very gushing & green bow of the water, so Ralph took Ursula's hand & led her along, she going a little after him, till he was close to the Well, and stood amidst the spray-bow thereof, so that he looked verily like one of the painted angels on the choir wall of St. Laurence of Upmeads. Then he reached forth his hand & thrust the cup into the water, holding it stoutly because the gush of the stream was strong, so that the water of the Well splashed all over him, wetting Ursula's face and breast withal: and he felt that the water was sweet without any saltness of the sea. But he turned to Ursula & reached out the full cup to her, & said: "Sweetling, call a health over the cup!" She took it & said: "To thy life, beloved!" and drank withal, & her eyes looked out of the cup the while, like a child's when he drinketh. Then she gave him the cup again and said: "Drink, & tarry not, lest thou die and I live." Then Ralph plunged the cup into the waters again, & he held the cup aloft, & cried out: "To the Earth, & the World of Manfolk!" and therewith he drank.

FOR a minute then they clung together within the spray-bow of the Well, & then she took his hand and led him back to the midst of the bench-table, and he put the cup into the ambry, & shut it up again, and then they sat them down on the widest of the platform under the shadow of a jutting rock; for the sun was hot; & therewithal a sweet weariness began to steal over them, though there was speech betwixt them for a little, and Ralph said: "How is it with thee, beloved?" "O well indeed," she said. Quoth he: "And how tasteth to thee the water of the Well?" Slowly she spake & sleepily: "It tasteth good, and as if thy love were blended with it." And she smiled in his face; but he said: "One thing I wonder over: how shall we wot if we have drunk aright? for whereas if we were sick, or old & failing, or ill-liking, and were now presently healed of all this, & become strong and fair to look on, then should we know it for sure; but now, though as I look on thee, I behold thee the fairest of all women, & on thy face is no token of toil and travail, & the weariness of the way; and though the heart-ache of loneliness & captivity, & the shame of Utterbol has left no mark upon thee, yet hast thou not always been sweet to my eyes, and as sweet as might be? And how then?" . . . But he broke off & looked on her, and she smiled upon the love in his eyes, and his head fell back and he slept with a calm and smiling face. And she leaned over him to kiss his face, but even therewith her own eyes closed, & she laid her head upon his breast and slept as peacefully as he.

Chapter XXII. Now they have drunk and are glad

LONG they slept, till the shadows were falling from the west, and the sea was flowing fast again over the sands beneath them, though there was still a great space bare betwixt the cliff and the sea. Then spake Ursula as if Ralph had but just left speaking; and she said: "Yea, dear lord, and I also say, that, lovely as thou art now, never hast thou been aught else but lovely to me. But tell me, hast thou had any scar of a hurt upon thy body? for if now that were gone, surely it should be a token of the renewal of thy life. But if it be not gone, then there may yet be another token". Then he stood upon his feet, and she cried out: "O but thou art fair and mighty, who now

shall dare gainsay thee? Who shall not long for thee?"

SAID Ralph: "Look, love! how the sea comes over the sand like the creeping of a sly wood-snake! Shall we go hence and turn from the ocean-sea without wetting our bodies in its waters?" "Let us go," she said. So they went down on to the level sands, & along the edges of the sweet-water stream that flowed from the Well: & Ralph said: "Beloved, I will tell thee of that which thou hast asked me: when I was but a lad of sixteen winters there rode men a-lifting into Upmeads, and Nicholas Longshanks, who is a wise man of war, gathered force & went against them, and I must needs ride beside him. Now we came to our above, and put the thieves to the road; but in the hurly I got a claw from the war-beast, for the stroke of a sword sheared me off somewhat from my shoulder: belike thou hast seen the scar and loathed it." "It is naught loathsome," she said, "for a lad to be a bold warrior, nor for a grown man to think lightly of the memory of death drawn near for the first time. Yea, I have noted it; but let me see now what has befallen with it."

AS she spoke they were come to a salt pool in a rocky bight on their right hand, which the tide was filling speedily; and Ralph spake: "See now, this is the bath of the water of the ocean-sea." So they were speedily naked and playing in the water: and Ursula took Ralph by the arm & looked to his shoulder & said: "O my lad of the pale edges, where is gone thy glory? There is no mark of the sword's pilgrimage on thy shoulder". "Nay, none?" quoth he. "None, none!" she said. "Didst thou say the very sooth of thy hurt in the battle, O poor lad of mine?" "Yea, the sooth," said he. Then she laughed sweetly and merrily, like the chuckle of a flute over the rippling waters, that rose higher and higher about them, and she turned her eyes askance & looked adown to her own sleek side, and laid her hand on it & laughed again. Then said Ralph: "What is toward, beloved? for thy laugh is rather of joy than of mirth alone." She said: "O smooth-skinned warrior, O Lily & Rose of battle; here on my side yesterday was the token of the hart's tyne that gored me when I was a young maiden five years ago: look now and pity the maiden that lay on the grass of the forest, and the woodman a-passing by deemed her dead five years ago". Ralph stooped down as the ripple washed away from her, then said: "In

sooth here is no mark nor blemish, but the best handiwork of God, as when he first made a woman from the side of the Ancient father of the field of Damask. But lo you, love, how swift the tide cometh up, and I long to see thy feet on the green grass, and I fear the sea, lest it stir the joy over strongly in our hearts and we be not able to escape from its waves."

SO they went up from out of the water, and did on the hallowed raiment fragrant with strange herbs, and passed joyfully up the sand towards the cliff and its stair; & speedily withal, for so soon as they were clad again, the little ripple of the sea was nigh touching their feet. As they went, they noted that the waters of the Well flowed seaward from the black-walled pound by three arched openings in its outer face, and they beheld the mason's work, how goodly it was; for it was as if it had been cut out of the foot of a mountain, so well jointed were its stones, and its walls solid against any storm that might drive against it.

THEY climbed the stair, and sat them down on the green grass awhile watching the ocean coming in over the sand and the rocks, & Ralph said: "I will tell thee, sweetling, that I am grown eager for the road; though true it is that whiles I was down yonder amidst the ripple of the sea I longed for naught but thee, though thou wert beside me, and thy joyous words were as fire to the heart of my love. But now that I am on the green grass of the earth I called to mind a dream that came to me when we slept after the precious draught of the Well: for methought that I was standing before the porch of the feast-hall of Upmeads and holding thine hand, & the ancient House spake to me with the voice of a man, greeting both thee & me, & praising thy goodliness and valiancy. Surely then it is calling me to deeds, and if it were but morning, as it is now drawing towards sunset, we would mount and be gone straightway". "Surely," she said, "thou hast drunk of the Well, and the fear of thee has already entered into the hearts of thy foemen far away, even as the love of thee constraineth me as I lie by thy side; but since it is evening & sunset, let it be evening, and let the morning see to its own matters. So now let us be pilgrims again, and eat the meal of pilgrims, & see to our horses, and then wander about this lovely wilderness and its green meads, where no son of man heedeth the wild things, till the night come, bringing to

us the rest & the sleep of them that have prevailed over many troubles."

GVEN so they did, and broke bread above the sea, and looked to their horses, and then went hand in hand about the goodly green bents betwixt the sea and the rough of the mountain; and it was the fairest and softest of summer evenings; & the deer of that place, both little and great, had no fear of man, but the hart and hind came to Ursula's hand; and the thrushes perched upon her shoulder, & the hares gambolled together close to the feet of the twain; so that it seemed to them that they had come into the very Garden of God; & they forgat all the many miles of the waste & the mountain that lay before them, and they had no thought for the strife of foemen & the thwarting of kindred, that belike awaited them in their own land, but they thought of the love and happiness of the hour that was passing. So sweetly they wore through the last minutes of the day, and when it was as dark as it would be in that fair season, they lay down by the green knoll at the ending of the land, and were lulled to sleep by the bubbling of the Well at the World's End.