The last Thrashing of the Champion

BOOK IV. THE ROAD HOME.

Chapter I. Ralph and Ursula come back again through the Great Mountains.

THE MORROW MORNING they armed them and took to their horses & departed from that pleasant place, and climbed the mountain without weariness, & made provision of meat and drink for the Dry Desert, & so entered it, & journeyed happily with naught evil befalling them till they came back to the House of the Sorceress; and of the Desert they made little, & the wood was pleasant to them after the drought of the Desert. But at the said House they saw those kind people, & they saw in their eager eyes as in a glass how they had been bettered by their drinking of the Well, & the Elder said to them: "Dear friends, there is no need to ask you whether ye have achieved your quest; for ye, who before were lovely, are now become as the very Gods who rule the world. And now methinks we have to pray you but one thing, to wit, that ye will not be overmuch of Gods, but will be kind and lowly with them that needs must worship you." They laughed on him for kindness' sake, and kissed and embraced the old man, and they thanked them all for their helping, and they abode with them for a whole day in good-will & love; and thereafter the carle, who was the son of the Elder, with his wife, bade farewell to his kinsmen, & led Ralph and Ursula back through the wood and over the desert to the town of the Innocent folk. The said folk received them in all joy & triumph, & would have them abide there the winter over. But they prayed leave to depart, because their hearts were sore for their own land and their kindred. So they abode there but two days, and on the third day were led away by a half score of men gaily apparelled after their manner, and having with them many sumpter-beasts with provision for the road. With this fellowship they came safely and with little pain unto Chestnut Vale, where they abode but one night, though to

Ralph & Ursula the place was sweet for the memory of their loving sojourn there. They would have taken leave of the Innocent Folk in the said vale, but those others must needs go with them a little further, and would not leave them till they were come to the jaws of the pass which led to the Rock of the Fighting Man. Further than that indeed they would not, or durst not, go; & those huge mountains they called the Wall of Strife, even as they on the other side called them the Wall of the World.

So the twain took leave of their friends there, and howbeit that they had drunk of the Well at the World's End, yet were their hearts grieved at the parting. The kind folk left with them abundant provision for the remnant of the road, & a sumpter-ox to bear it; so they were in no doubt of their livelihood. Moreover, though the turn of autumn was come again & winter was at hand, yet the weather was fair and calm, and their journey through the dreary pass was as light as it might be to any men.

Chapter II. They hear new tidings of Utterbol

It was on a fair evening of later autumn-tide that they won their way out of the Gates of the Mountains, and came under the rock of the Fighting Man. There they kissed & comforted each other in memory of the terror & loneliness wherewith they had entered the Mountains that other time; though, sooth to say, it was to them now like the reading of sorrow in a book. But when they came out with joyful hearts into the green plain betwixt the mountains & the River of Lava, they looked westward, and beheld no great way off a little bower or cot, builded of boughs and rushes, by a blackthorn copse; and as they rode toward it they saw a man come forth therefrom, and presently saw that he was hoary, a man with a long white beard. Then Ralph gave a glad cry, and set spurs to his horse and galloped over the plain; for he deemed that it could be none other than the Sage of Swevenham; & Ursula came pricking after him laughing for joy. The old man abode their coming, and Ralph leapt off his horse at once, and kissed and embraced him; but the Sage said: "There is no need to ask thee of tidings; for thine eyes & thine whole body tell me that thou hast drunk of the Well at the World's End. And that shall be better for thee belike than it has been for

me; though for me also the world has not gone ill after my fashion since I drank of that water." Then was Ursula come up, and she also lighted down and made much of the Sage. But he said: "Hail, daughter! It is sweet to see thee so, & to wot that thou art in the hands of a mighty man: for I know that Ralph thy man is minded for his father's House, & the deeds that abide him there; & I think we may journey a little way together; for as for me, I would go back to Swevenham to end my days there, whether they be long or short" But Ralph said: "As for that, thou mayst go further than Swevenham, & as far as Upmeads, where there will be as many to love and cherish thee as at Swevenham" The old man laughed a little, and reddened withal, but answered nothing. Then they untrussed their sumpter-beast, and took meat and drink from his burden, & they ate & drank together, sitting on the green grass there; and the twain made great joy of the Sage, and told him the whole tale; and he told them that he had been abiding there since the spring-tide, lest they might have turned back without accomplishing their quest, & then may happen he should have been at hand to comfort them, or the one of them left, if so it had befallen. "But," quoth he, "since ye have verily drunk of the Well at the World's End, ye have come back no later than I looked for you."

THAT night they slept in the bower there, and on the morrow betimes the Sage drove together three or four milch goats that he pastured there, & they went their ways over the plain, & so in due time entered into the lava-sea. But the first night that they lay there, though it was moonless and somewhat cloudy, they saw no glare of the distant earth-fires which they had looked for; and when on the morrow they questioned the Sage thereof, he said: "The earth-fires ceased about the end of last year, as I have heard tell. But sooth it is that the foreboding of the Giant's Candle was not fornaught, for there hath verily been a change of masters at Utterbol" "Yea," said Ralph, "for better or worse?" Said the Sage: "It could scarce have been for worse; but if rumour runneth right it is much for the better. Hearken how I learned thereof. One fair even of late March, a little before I set off hither, as I was sitting before the door of my house, I saw the glint of steel through the wood, and presently rode up a sort of

knights and men-at-arms, about a score; and at the head of them a man on a big red-roan horse, with his surcoat blazoned with a white bull on a green field: he was a man black-haired, but blue-eyed; not very big, but well knit and strong, and looked both doughty and knightly; and he wore a gold coronet about his basnet: so not knowing his blazonry, I wondered who it was that durst be so bold as to ride in the lands of the Lord of Utterbol. Now he rode up to me and craved a drink of milk, for he had seen my goats; so I milked two goats for him, & brought whey for the others, whereas I had no more goats in milk at that season. So the bull-knight spake to me about the woodland, & wherefore I dwelt there apart from others; somewhat rough in his speech he was, yet rather jolly than fierce; & he thanked me for the bever kindly enough, and said: "I deem that it will not avail to give thee money; but I shall give thee what may be of avail to thee. Ho, Gervaise! give me one of those scrolls!" ❧ So a squire hands him a parchment and he gave it me, and it was a safe-conduct to the bearer from the Lord of Utterbol; but whereas I saw that the seal bore not the Bear on the Castle-wall, but the Bull, and that the superscription was unknown to me, I held the said scroll in my hand and wondered; and the knight said to me: "Yea, look long at it; but so it is, though thou trow it not, that I am verily Lord of Utterbol, and that by conquest; so that belike I am mightier than he was, for that mighty runagate have I slain. And many there be who deem that no mishap, heathen though I be. ❧ Come thou to Utterbol & see for thyself if the days be not changed there; and thou shalt have a belly-full of meat & drink, and honour after thy deserving." ❧ So they rested a while, and then went their ways. To Utterbol I went not, but ere I departed to come hither two or three carles strayed my way, as whiles they will, who told me that this which the knight had said was naught but the sooth, and that great was the change of days at Utterbol, whereas all men there, both bond and free, were as merry as they deserved to be, or belike merrier."

RALPH pondered this tale, and was not so sure but that this new lord was not Bull Shockhead, his war-taken thrall; natheless he held his peace; but Ursula said: "I marvel not much at the tale, for sure I am, that had Gandolf of the Bear been slain when I was at Utterbol,

neither man nor woman had stirred a finger to avenge him. But all feared him, I scarce know why; &, moreover, there was none to be master if he were gone" Thereafter she told more tales of the miseries of Utterbol than Ralph had yet heard, as though this tale of the end of that evil rule had set her free to utter them; and they fell to talking of other matters.

Chapter III. They winter with the Sage; and thereafter come again to Vale Turris

THUS with no peril & little pain they came to the Sage's hermitage; and whereas the autumn was now wearing, and it was not to be looked for that they should cross even the mountains west of Goldburg, let alone those to the west of Cheaping Knowe, when winter had once set in, Ralph and Ursula took the Sage's bidding to abide the winter through with him, & set forth on their journey again when spring should be fairly come and the mountain ways be clear of snow. So they dwelt there happily enough; for they helped the Sage in his husbandry, and he enforced him to make them cheer, and read in the ancient book to them, and learned them as much as it behoved them to hearken; and told them tales of past time.

THEREAFTER when May was at hand they set out on their road, and whereas the Sage knew the wood well, he made a long story short by bringing them to Vale Turris in four days' time. But when they rode down into the dale, they saw the plain meads below the Tower all bright with tents & booths, and much folk moving about amidst them; here and there amidst the roofs of cloth withal was showing the half finished frame of a timber house a-building. But now as they looked and wondered what might be toward, a half score of weaponed men rode up to them & bade them, but courteously, to come with them to see their Lord. The Sage drew forth his let-pass thereat; but the leader of the riders said, as he shook his head: "That is good for thee, father; but these two knights must needs give an account of themselves: for my lord is minded to put down all lifting throughout his lands; therefore hath he made the meshes of his net small. But if these be thy friends it will be well. Therefore thou art free to come with them & bear wit-

ness to their good life."

HERE it must be said that since they were on the road again Ursula had donned her war-gear once more, & as she rode was to all men's eyes naught but a young and slender knight. So without more ado they followed those men-at-arms, and saw how the banner of the Bull was now hung out from the Tower; and the sergeants brought them into the midst of the vale, where, about those tents and those half-finished frame-houses (whereof they saw six) was a market toward and much concourse of folk. But the sergeants led through them and the lanes of the booths down to the side of the river, where on a green knoll, with some dozen of men-at-arms & captains about him, sat the new Lord of Utterbol.

NOW as the others drew away from him to right & left, the Lord sat before Ralph with naught to hide him, and when their eyes met Ralph gave a cry as one astonished; & the Lord of Utterbol rose up to his feet & shouted, & then fell a-laughing joyously, and then cried out: "Welcome, King's Son, and look on me! for though the feathers be fine 'tis the same bird. I am Lord of Utterbol & therewithal Bull Shockhead, whose might was less than thine on the bent of the mountain valley." Therewith he caught hold of Ralph's hand, & sat himself down and drew Ralph down, & made him sit beside him. "Thou seest I am become great?" said he. "Yea," said Ralph; "I give thee joy thereof!" Said the new Lord: "Perchance thou wilt be deeming that since I was once thy war-taken thrall I should give myself up to thee: but I tell thee I will not: for I have much to do here. Moreover I did not run away from thee, but thou rannest from me, lad." Thereat in his turn Ralph fell a-laughing, and when he might speak he said: "What needeth the lord of all these spears to beg off his service to the poor wandering knight?" Then Bull put his arms about him, and said: "I am fain at the sight of thee; time was thou wert a kind lad & a good master; yet naught so merry as thou shouldest have been; but now I see that gladness plays all about thy face, & sparkles in thine eyes; & that is good. But these thy fellows? I have seen the old carle before: he was dwelling in the wildwood because he was overwise to live with other folk. But this young man, who may he be? Or else... yea, verily, it is a young woman. Yea, and now I deem that it is the thrall of my brother Bull Nosy. There-

fore by heritage she is now mine."

RALPH heard the words but saw not the smiling face, so wroth he was; therefore the bare sword was in his fist in a twinkling. But ere he could smite, Bull caught hold of his wrist, and said: "Master, master, thou art but a sorry lawyer, or thou wouldst have said: 'Thou art my thrall, & how shall a thrall have heritage?' Dost thou not see that I cannot own her till I be free, & that thou wilt not give me my freedom save for hers? There, now is all the matter of the service duly settled, and I am free, and a Lord. And this damsel is free also, and...yea, is she not thy well-beloved, King's Son?" Ralph was somewhat abashed, & said: "I crave thy pardon, Lord, for misdoubting thee: but think how feeble are we two lovers amongst the hosts of the aliens." "It is well, it is well," said Bull, "& in very sooth I deem thee my friend; and this damsel was my brother's friend. Sit down, dear maiden, I bid thee; & thou also, O man overwise; and let us drink a cup, & then we will talk about what we may do for each other."

SO they sat down all on the grass, and the Lord of Utterbol called for wine, and they drank together in the merry season of May; and the new Lord said: "Here be we friends come together, and it were pity of our lives if we must needs sunder speedily: howbeit, it is thou must rule herein, King's Son; for in my eyes thou art still greater than I, O my master. for I can see in thine eyes and thy gait, and in thine also, maiden, that ye have drunk of the Well at the World's End. Therefore I pray you gently & heartily that ye come home with me to Utterbol." Ralph shook his head, & answered: "Lord of Utterbol, I bid thee all thanks for thy friendliness, but it may not be." "But take note," said Bull, "that all is changed there, and it hath become a merry dwelling of men. We have cast down the Red Pillar, and the White and the Black also; and it is no longer a place of torment and fear, & cozening and murder; but the very thralls are happy and free-spoken. Now come ye, if it were but for a moon's wearing: I shall be there in eight days' time. Yea, Lord Ralph, thou wouldst see old acquaintance there withal: for when I slew the tyrant, who forsooth owed me no less than his life for the murder of my brother, I made atonement to his widow, and wedded her: a fair woman as thou wottest, lord, & of good

kindred, and of no ill conditions, as is well seen now that she lives happy days. Though I have heard say that while she was under the tyrant she was somewhat rough with her women when she was sad. Eh, fair sir! but is it not so that she cast sheep's eyes on thee, time was, in this same dale?"

RALPH reddened and answered naught; & Bull spake again, laughing: "Yea, so it is: she told me that much herself, and afterwards I heard more from her damsel Agatha, who told me the merry tale of that device they made to catch thee, and how thou brakest through the net. Forsooth, though this she told me not, I deem that she would have had the same gift of thee as her mistress would. Well, lad, lucky are they with whom all women are in love. So now I prithee trust so much in thy luck as to come with me to Utterbol." Quoth Ralph: "Once again, Lord of Utterbol, we thank thee; but whereas thou hast said that thou hast much to do in this land; even so I have a land where deeds await me. For I stole myself away from my father & mother, and who knows what help they need of me against foemen, and evil days; & now I might give help to them were I once at home, and to the people of the land also, who are a stout-hearted and valiant and kindly folk."

THE new Lord's face clouded somewhat, as he said: "If thine heart draweth thee to thy kindred, there is no more to say. As for me, what I did was for kindred's sake, & then what followed after was the work of need. Well, let it be! But since we must needs part hastily, this at least I bid you, that ye abide with me for to-night, and the banquet in the great pavilion. Howsoever ye may be busied, gainsay me not this; & to-morrow I shall further you on your way, & give you a score of spears to follow thee to Goldburg. Then as for Goldburg and Cheaping Knowe, see ye to it yourselves: but beyond Cheaping Knowe and the plain country, thy name is known, and the likeness of thee told in words; and no man in those mountains shall hurt or hinder thee, but all thou meetest shall aid & further thee. Moreover, at the feast to-night thou shalt see thy friend Otter, and he and I betwixt us shall tell thee how I came to Utterbol, and of the change of days, and how it betid. For he is now my right-hand man, as he was of the dead man. Forsooth, after the slaying I would have had him take the lordship of Utterbol, but he would not, so I must take it perforce or be slain, & let

a new master reign there little better than the old. Well then, how sayest thou? Or wilt thou run from me without leave-taking, as thou didst erewhile at Goldburg?"

RALPH laughed at his word, and said that he would not be so churlish this time, but would take his bidding with a good heart; and thereafter they fell to talking of many things. But Ralph took note of Bull, that now his hair and beard were trim and his raiment goodly; for all his rough speech and his laughter and heart-whole gibes and mocking, his aspect and bearing was noble and knightly.

Chapter IV. A Feast in the Red Pavilion

SO in a while they went with him to the Tower, and there was woman's raiment of the best gotten for Ursula, and afterwards at nightfall they went to the feast in the Red Pavilion of Utterbol, which awhile ago the now-slain Lord of Utterbol had let make; & it was exceeding rich with broidery of pearl & gems: since forsooth gems and fair women were what the late lord had lusted for the most, and have them he would at the price of howsoever many tears and groans. But that pavilion was yet in all wise as it was wont to be, saving that the Bull had supplanted the Bear upon the Castle-wall.

NOW the wayfarers were treated with all honour & were set upon the high-seat, Ralph upon the right hand of the Lord, and Ursula upon his left, and the Sage of Swevenham out from her. But on Ralph's right hand was at first a void place, whereto after a while came Otter, the old Captain of the Guard. He came in hastily, & as though he had but just taken his armour off: for his raiment was but such as the men-at-arms of that country were wont to wear under their war-gear, and was somewhat stained and worn; whereas the other knights and lords were arrayed grandly in silks and fine cloth embroidered & begemmed.

OTTER was fain when he saw Ralph, & kissed and embraced him, and said: "forsooth, I saw by thy face, lad, that the world would be soft before thee; and now that I behold thee I know already that thou hast won thy quest; & the Gods only know to what honour thou shalt attain" Ralph laughed for joy of him, and yet said soberly: "As to honour, meseems I covet little world's goods, save that it may be well with my folk

at home." Nevertheless as the words were out of his mouth his thought went back to the tallman whom he had first met at the churchyard gate of Netherton, and it seemed to him that he wished his thriving, yea, & in a lesser way, he wished the same to Roger of the Rope-walk, whereas he deemed that both of these, each in his own way, had been true to the lady whom he had lost.

THEN Otter fell a-talking to him of the change of days at Utterbol, & how that it was the Lord's intent that a cheaping town should grow up in the Dale of the Tower, & that the wilderness beyond it should be tilled and builded. "And," said he, "if this be done, and the new lord live to see it, as he may, being but young of years, he may become exceedingly mighty, and if he hold on in the way wherein he now is, he shall be well-beloved also."

SO they spake of many things, and there was minstrelsy and diverse joyance, till at last the Lord of Utterbol stood up and said: "Now bring in the Bull, that we may speak some words over him; for this is a great feast." Ralph wondered what bull this might be whereof he spake; but the harps and fiddlers, & all instruments of music, struck up a gay and gallant tune, and presently there came into the hall four men richly attired, who held up on spears a canopy of bawdekin, under which went a man-at-arms helmed, and clad in bright armour, who held in his hands a great golden cup fashioned like to a bull, and he bore it forth unto the dais, and gave it into the hands of the Lord. Then straightway all the noise ceased, and the glee and clatter of the hall, & there was dead silence. Then the Lord held the cup aloft & said in a loud voice: "Hail, all ye folk! I swear by the Bull, & they that made him, that in three years' time or less I will have purged all the lands of Utterbol of all strong-thieves and cruel tyrants, be they big or little, till all be peace betwixt the mountains & the mark of Goldburg; and the wilderness shall blossom like the rose. Or else shall I die in the pain."

THEREWITH he drank of the cup, and all men shouted. Then he sat him down and bade hand the cup to Otter; & Otter took the cup and looked into the bowl and saw the wave of wine, and laughed and cried out: "As for me, what shall I swear but that I will follow the Bull through thick and thin, through peace and unpeace, through grief & joy. This is my oath-swear-

ing." And he drank mightily & sat down. Then turned the Lord to Ralph and said: "And thou who art my master, wilt thou not tell thy friends and the Gods what thou wilt do?" "No great matter, belike," said Ralph; "but if ye will it, I will speak out my mind thereon." "We will it," said the Lord. Then Ralph arose & took the cup and lifted it and spake: "This I swear, that I will go home to my kindred, yet on the road will I not gainsay help to any that craveth it. So may all hallows help me!" Therewith he drank: and Bull said: "This is well said, O happy man! But now that men have drunk well, do ye three & Otter come with me into the Tower, whereas the chambers are dight for you, that I may make the most of this good day wherein I have met thee again."

So they went with him, & when they had sat down in the goodliest chamber of the Tower, & they had been served with wine & spices, the new Lord said to Ralph: "And now, my master, wilt thou not ask somewhat concerning me?" "Yea," said Ralph, "I will ask thee to tell the tale of how thou camest into thy Lordship". Said the Lord: "This shall ye hear of me with Otter to help me out. Hearken!"

Chapter V. Bull telleth of his winning of the Lordship of Utterbol

THEN thou franest away from me, and left me alone at Goldburg, I was grieved; then Clement Chapman offered to take me back with him to his own country, which, he did me to wit, lieth hard by thine: but I would not go with him, since I had an inkling that I should find the slayer of my brother, and be avenged on him. So the Chapmen departed from Goldburg after that Clement had dealt generously by me for thy sake; and when they were gone I bethought me what to do, and thou knowest I can some skill with the fiddle and song, so I betook myself to that craft, both to earn somewhat, and that I might gather tidings and be little heeded; till within awhile folk got to know me well, and would often send for me to their merrymakings, where they gave me fiddler's wages, to wit, meat, drink, & money. So what with one thing, what with another, I was rich enough to leave Goldburg and fall to my journey unto Utterbol; since I misdoubted me from the first that the caitiff who had slain my

brother was the Lord thereof.

BUT one day when I went into the market-place I found a great stir and clutter there; some folk, both men & women, screeching and fleeing, and some running to bows and other weapons. So I caught hold of one of the fleers, and asked him what was toward; & he cried out, 'Loose me! let me go! he is loose, he is loose!' 'Who is loose, fool?' quoth I. 'The lion,' said he, and therewith in the extremity of his terror tore himself away from me & fled. By this time the others also had got some distance away from me, and I was left pretty much alone. So I went forth on a little, looking about me, and sure enough under one of the pillars of the cloister beneath the market-house (the great green pillar, if thou mindest it) lay crouched a huge yellow lion, on the carcass of a goat, which he had knocked down, but would not fall to eating of amidst all that cry and hubbub.

NOW belike one thing of me thou wottest not, to wit, that I have a gift that wild things love and will do my bidding. The house-mice will run over me as I lie awake looking on them; the small birds will perch on my shoulders without fear; the squirrels and hares will gambol about quite close to me as if I were but a tree; and, withal, the fiercest hound or mastiff is tame before me. Therefore I feared not this lion, and, moreover, I looked to it that if I might tame him thoroughly, he would both help me to live as a jongleur, and would be a sure ward to me. So I walked up towards him quietly, till he saw me & half rose up growling; but I went on still, and said to him in a peaceable voice: 'How now, yellow mane! what aileth thee? down with thee, & eat thy meat.' So he sat down to his quarry again, but growled still, and I went up close to him, and said to him: 'Eat in peace and safety, am I not here?' And therewith I held out my bare hand unclenched to him, and he smelt to it, and straightway began to be peaceable, and fell to tearing the goat, and devouring it, while I stood by speaking to him friendly. But presently I saw weapons glitter on the other side of the square place, and men with bended bows. The yellow king saw them also, & rose up again & stood growling; then I strove to quiet him, and said: 'These shall not harm thee.'

THEREWITH the men cried out to me to come away, for they would

shoot. But I called out: 'Shoot not yet! but tell me, does any man own this beast?' 'Yea,' said one, 'I own him, and happy am I that he doth not own me.' Said I: 'Wilt thou sell him?' 'Yea,' said he, 'if thou livest another hour to tell down the money.' Said I: 'I am a tamer of wild beasts, & if thou wilt sell this one at such a price, I will rid thee of him.' The man yeasaid this, but kept well aloof with his fellows, who looked on, handling their weapons. Then I turned to my new-bought thrall and bade him come with me, and he followed me like a dog to his cage, which was hard by; and I shut him in there, & laid down the money to his owner; and folk came round about, and wondered, and praised me. But I said: 'My masters, have ye naught of gifts for the tamer of beasts and the deliverer of men?' Thereat they laughed; but they brought me money & other goods, till I had gotten far more than I had given for the lion.

HOWBEIT the next day the officers of the Porte came and bade me avoid the town of Goldburg, but gave me more money withal. I was not loth thereto, but departed, riding a little horse that I had, and leading my lion by a chain, though when I was by he needed little chaining. So that without more ado I took the road to Utterbol, & wheresoever I came, I had what was to be had that I would; neither did any man fall on me, or on my lion. For though they might have shot him or slain him with many spear-thrusts, yet besides that they feared him sorely, they feared me still more; deeming me some mighty sending from their Gods. Thus came I to Utterness, and found it poor and wretched (as, forsooth, it yet is, but shall not be so for long). But the House of Utterbol is exceeding fair and stately (as thou mightest have learned from others, my master), and its gardens, and orchards, and acres, and meadows as goodly as may be. Yea, a very paradise; yet the dwellers therein as if it were hell, as I saw openly with mine own eyes.

TO be short, the fame of me and my beast had somehow gone before me, and when I came to the House, I was dealt with fairly, and had good entertainment; and this all the more, as the Lord was away for a while, and the life of folk not so hard by a great way as it had been if he had been there: but the Lady was there in the house, and on the morrow of my coming, by

her command, I brought my lion before her window and made him come and go, and fetch and carry at my bidding, and when I had done my play she bade me up into her bower, and bade me sit and had me served with wine, while she asked me many questions as to my country and friends, & whence & whither I was; and I answered her with the very sooth, so far as the sooth was handy; and there was with her but one of her women, even thy friend Agatha, fair sir. ❧ Methought both that this Queen was a fair woman, and that she looked kindly upon me; and at last she said, sighing, that she were well at ease if her baron were even such a man as I, whereas the said Lord was fierce and cruel, and yet a dastard withal. But the said Agatha turned on her, & chided her, as one might with a child, and said: 'Hold thy peace of thy loves & thy hates before a very stranger! Or must I leave yet more of my blood on the pavement of the White Pillar, for the pleasure of thy loose tongue? Come out now, mountain-carle!' ❧ And she took me by the hand and led me out, and when we had passed the door & it was shut, she turned to me & said: 'Thou, if I hear any word abroad of what my Lady has just spoken, I shall know that thou hast told it, and though I be but a thrall, yea, and of late a mishandled one, yet am I of might enough in Utterbol to compass thy destruction.' I laughed in her face and went my ways: and thereafter I saw many folk & showed them my beast, and soon learned two things clearly. And first, that the Lord and the Lady were now utterly at variance. For a little before he had come home, and found a lack in his household, to wit, how a certain fair woman whom he had but just got hold of, and whom he lusted after sorely, was fled away. And he laid the wyte thereof on his Lady, & threatened her with death: and when he considered that he durst not slay her, or torment her (for he was verily but a dastard), he made thy friend Agatha pay for her under pretence of wringing a true tale out of her.

NOW when I heard this story I said to myself that I should hear that other one of the slaying of my brother, and even so it befell. For I came across a man who told me when and how the Lord came by the said damsel (whom I knew at once could be none other than thou, Lady), & how he had slain my brother to get her, even as doubtless thou knowest, Lord Ralph ❧

But the second thing which I learned was that all folk at Utterbol, men and women, dreaded the home-coming of this tyrant; & that there was no man but would have deemed it a good deed to slay him. But, dastard as he was, use & wont, and the fear that withholdeth rebels, and the doubt that draweth back slaves, saved him; and they dreaded him moreover as a devil rather than a man. Forsooth one of the men there, who looked upon me friendly, who had had tidings of this evil beast drawing near, spake to me a word of warning, and said: 'Friend lion-master, take heed to thyself! for I fear for thee when the Lord cometh home & findeth thee here; lest he let poison thy lion and slay thee miserably afterwards.'

WELL, in three days from that word home cometh the Lord with a rout of his spearmen, and some dozen of captives, whom he had taken. And the morrow of his coming, he, having heard of me, sent and bade me show him the wonder of the Man and the Lion; therefore in the bright morning I played with the lion under his window as I had done by the Queen. And after I had played some while, and he looking out of the window, he called to me and said: 'Canst thou lull thy lion to sleep, so that thou mayst leave him for a little? for I would fain have thee up here.' I yeasaid that, and chid the beast, and then sang to him till he lay down and slept like a hound weary with hunting. And then I went up into the Lord's chamber; and as it happed, all the while of my playing I had had my short-sword naked in my hand, and thus, I deem without noting it, yet as weird would, I came before the tyrant, where he sat with none anigh him save this Otter and another man-at-arms. But when I saw him, all the blood within me that was come of one mother with my brother's blood stirred within me, and I set my foot on the foot-pace of this murderer's chair, and hove up my short-sword, and clave his skull, in front & with mine own hand: not as he wrought, not as he wrought with my brother.

THEN I turned about to Otter (who had his sword in his fist when it was too late) till he should speak. Hah Otter, what didst thou say?" Otter laughed. Quoth he, "I said: 'Thus endeth the worst man in the world. Well done, lion-tamer! thou art no ill guest, and hast paid on the nail for meat, drink, and lodging. But what shall we do

now?' Then thou saidst: 'Well, I suppose thou wilt be for slaying me.' 'Nay,' said I, 'we will not slay thee; at least not for this, nor now, nor without terms.' Thou saidst: 'Perchance then thou wilt let me go free, since this man was ill-beloved: yea, and he owed me a life.' 'Nay, nay,' said I, 'not so fast, good beast-lord.' 'Why not?' saidst thou, 'I can see of thee that thou art a valiant man, and whereas thou hast been captain of the host, & the men-at-arms will lightly do thy bidding, why shouldest thou not sit in the place of this man, and be Lord of Utterbol?' 'Nay, nay,' said I, 'it will not do; hearken thou rather: for here I give thee the choice of two things, either that thou be Lord of Utterbol, or that we slay thee here and now. For we be two men all-armed.' Thou didst seem to ponder it a while, & then saidst at last: 'Well, I set not out on this journey with any such-like intent; yet will I not wrestle with weird. Only I forewarn thee that I shall change the days of Utterbol.' 'It will not be for the worst then,' quoth I. 'So now go wake up thy lion, and lead him away to his den; & we will presently send him this carrion for a reward of his jonglery.' 'Gramercy, butcher,' saidst thou, 'I am not for thy flesh-meat today. I was forewarned that the poor beast should be poisoned at this man's home-coming, and so will he be if he eat of this dastard; he will not outlive such a dinner.' Thereat we all laughed heartily." ❧ "Yea," said Bull; "so I went to lead away the lion when thou hadst bidden me return in an hour's wearing, when all should be ready for my Lordship. And thou wert not worse than thy word, for when I came into that court again, there were all the men-at-arms assembled, and the free carles, & the thralls; and the men-at-arms raised me on a shield, set a crowned helm on my head, & thrust a great sword into my hand, & hailed me by the name of the Bull of Utterbol, Lord of the Waste & the Wildwood, and the Mountain-side: & then thou, Otter, wert so simple as to kneel before me and name thyself my man, and take the girding on of sword at my hand. Then even as I was I went in to my Lady & told her the end of my tale, & in three minutes she lay in my arms, & in three days in my bed as my wedded wife. As to Agatha, when I had a little jeered her, I gave her rich gifts and good lands, and freedom, to boot her for her many stripes. And lo there, King's Son & Sweet

Lady, the end of all my tale." "Yea," quoth Otter, "saving this, that even already thou hast raised up Utterbol from Hell to Earth, & yet meseemeth thou hast good-will to raise it higher." Bull reddened at his word, and said: "Tush, man! praise the day when the sun has set." Then he turned to Ralph, and said: "Yet couldst thou at whiles put in a good word for me here and there amongst the folks that thou shalt pass through on thy ways home; I were fain to know that I had a well-speaking friend abroad." "We shall do no less," said Ralph; and Ursula spake in like wise. So they talked together merrily a while longer, till night began to grow old, and then went to their chambers in all content and good-liking.

Chapter VI. They ride from Vale Turris. Redhead tells of Agatha

ON THE morrow when they arose, Ralph heard the sound of horses and the clashing of arms: he went to the window, and looked out, and saw how the spears stood up thick together at the Tower's foot, and knew that these were the men who were to be his fellows by the way. Their captain he saw, a big man all-armed in steel, but himseemed that he knew his face under his sallet, and presently saw that it was Redhead. He was glad thereof, & clad himself hastily, and went out a-doors, and went up to him and hailed him, & Redhead leapt off his horse, & cast his arms about Ralph, and made much of him, and said: "It is good for sore eyes to see thee, lord; and I am glad at heart that all went well with thee that time. Although, forsooth, there was guile behind it. Yet whereas I wotted nothing thereof, which I will pray thee to believe, & whereas thou hast the gain of all, I deem thou mayst pardon me." Said Ralph: "Thou hast what pardon of me thou needest; so be content. For the rest, little need is there to ask if thou thrivest, for I behold thee glad and well honoured."

AS they spoke came the Lord forth from the Tower, & said: "Come thou, Lord Ralph, and eat with us ere thou takest to the road; I mean with Otter and me. As for thee, Redhead, if aught of ill befall this King's Son under thy way-leading, look to it that thou shalt lose my good word with Agatha; yea, or gain my naysay herein; whereby thou shalt miss both fee and fair

dame." Redhead looked sheep-ishly on Ralph at that word, yet winked at him also, as if it pleased him to be jeered concerning his wooing; so that Ralph saw how the land lay, & that the guileful handmaid was not ill content with that big man. So he smiled kindly on him and nodded, and went back with Bull into the Tower. There they sat down all to meat together; and when they were done with their victual, Bull spake, & said to Ralph: "Fair King's Son, is this then the last sight of thee? wilt thou never come over the mountains again?" Said Ralph: "Who knoweth? I am young yet, and have drunk of the Water of the Well." Bull grew somewhat pensive and said: "Yea, thou meanest that thou mayst come back and find me no longer here. Yet if thou findest but my grave-mound, yet mayhappen thou shalt come on something said or sung of me, which shall please thee. For I will tell thee, that thou hast changed my conditions; how, I wot not." "Thy word is good," said Ralph, "yet I meant not that; never should I come to Utterbol if I looked not to find thee living there." Bull smiled on him as though he loved him, and said: "This is well spoken; I shall look to see thee before I die." Then said Ursula: "Lord of Utterbol, this also thou mayst think on, that it is no further from Utterbol to Upmeads than from Upmeads to Utterbol." The Lord laughed and said: "Sooth is that; and were but my Bull here, as I behold you I should be of mind to swear by him to come & see you at Upmeads ere ten years have worn." Then she put forth her hand and said: "Swear by this!" So he took it and swore the oath; but the Sage of Swevenham said: "This oath thou shalt keep to the gain and not the loss both of thee and of thy friends of Upmeads."

THUS were they fain of each other, and Ralph saw how Bull's heart was grown big, and he rejoiced thereat. But anon he arose and said: "Now, Lord, we ask leave to depart, for the way is long, & mayhappen my kindred now lack a man's helping." Then Bull stood up and called for his horse, and Otter also, and they all went forth and gat a-horseback & rode away from Vale Turris, and Redhead rode behind them humbly, till it was noon and they made stay for meat. Then after they had broken bread together & drunk a cup, Bull and Otter kissed the wayfarers, and bade them farewell, and so rode back to Vale Turris, and Ralph & Ursula and the Sage tarried not

but rode on their ways.

BUT anon Ralph called to Redhead, and bade him ride beside them that they might talk together, and he came up with them, and Ursula greeted him kindly, and they were merry one with another. And Ralph said to Redhead: "Friend Captain, thou art exceeding in humility not to ride with the Lord or Captain Otter; save for chance-hap, I see not that thou art worser than they." Redhead grinned, and said: "Well, as to Otter, that is all true; but as for Lord Bull, it is another matter; I wot not but his kindred may be as good or better than any in these east parts. In any case, he hath his kin and long descent full often in his mouth, while I am but a gangrel body. Howbeit it is all one, whereas whatso he or Otter bid any man to do, he doeth it, but my bidding may be questioned at whiles. And look you, lord, times are not ill, so wherefore should I risk a change of days? Sooth to say, both these great lords have done well by me."

RALPH laughed: "And better will they do, as thou deemest; give thee Agatha to wit?" "Yea, fair sir," quoth Redhead. "No great gift, that seemeth to me, for thy valiancy," said Ralph; "she is guileful enough and loose enough for a worse man than thee." "Lord," said Redhead, "even of her thou shalt say what pleaseth thee; but no other man shall say of her what pleaseth me not. For all that is come and gone she is true and valiant, and none may say that she is not fair & sweet enough for a better man than me; and my great good luck it is that, as I hope, she looketh no further for a better."

URSULA said: "Is it so, perchance, that now she is free and hath naught to fear, she hath no need for guile?" "Hail to thee for thy word, lady," quoth Redhead; and then he was silent, glooming somewhat on Ralph. But Ralph said: "Nay, my friend, I meant no harm, but I was wondering what had befallen to bring you two so close together." "It was fear & pain, and the helping of each other that wrought it," said Redhead. Said Ursula: "Good Captain, how was it that she escaped the uttermost of evil at the tyrant's hands? since from all that I have heard, it must needs be that he laid the blame on her (working for her mistress) of my flight from Utterbol." "Even so it was, lady," said Redhead; "but, as thou wottest belike, she had got it spread abroad that she was cunning in sorcery, and

that her spell would not end when her life ended; nay that he to whom her ghost should bear ill-will, and more especially such an one as might compass her death, should have but an ill time of it while he lived, which should not be long. This tale, which, sooth to say, I myself helped to spread, the Lord of Utterbol trowed in wholly, so cunningly was it told; so that, to make a long story short, he feared her, and feared her more dead than living. So that when he came home, & found thee gone, lady, he did indeed deem that thy flight was of Agatha's contrivance. And this the more because his nephew (he whom thou didst beguile; I partly guess how) told him a made-up tale how all was done by the spells of Agatha. For this youth was of all men, not even saving his uncle, most full of malice; and he hated Agatha, and would have had her suffer the uttermost of torments & he to be standing by the while; howbeit his malice overshot itself, since his tale made her even more of a witch than the lord deemed before."

"YEA," said Ursula, "and what hath befallen that evil young man, Captain?" Said Redhead: "It is not known to many, lady; but two days before the slaying of his uncle, I met him in a wood a little way from Utterbol, and, the mood being on me, I tied him neck and heels and cast him, with a stone round his neck, into a deep woodland pool hight the Ram's Bane, which is in that same wood. Well, as to my tale of Agatha. When the lord came home first, he sent for her, and his rage had so mastered his fear for a while that his best word was scourge and rack and faggot; but she was, outwardly, so calm and cold, smiling on him balefully, that he presently came to himself, & found that fear was in his belly, and that he might not do what he would with her; wherefore he looked to it that however she were used (which was ill enough, God wot!) she should keep the soul in her body. And at last the fear so mounted into his head, that he made peace with her, and even craved forgiveness of her, and gave her gifts. She answered him sweetly indeed, yet so as he (and all others who were by-standing, of whom I was one) might well see that she deemed she owed him a day in harvest. As for me, he heeded me naught, & I lay low all I might. And in any wise we wore the time till the great day of deliverance."

THEREWITH dropped the talk about Agatha, when they had bidden him all luck in his life. Forsooth, they were fain of his words, and of his ways withal. For he was a valiant man, and brisk, and one who forgat no benefit, & was trusty as steel; merry-hearted withal, & kind & ready of speech despite his uplandish manners, which a life not a little rude had thrust on him.

Chapter VII. Of their Riding the Waste, & of a Battle thereon

THEY SLEPT IN NO HOUSE that night nor for many nights after; for they were now fairly on the waste. They bore with them a light tent for Ursula's lodging benights, and the rest of them slept on the field as they might; or should they come to a thicket or shaw, they would lodge them there softly. Victual and drink failed them not, for they bore what they needed on sumpter-horses, & shot some venison on the way withal. They saw but few folk; for the most part naught save a fowler of the waste, or a peat-cutter, who stood to look on the men-at-arms going by, & made obeisance to the token of Utterbol.

BUT on a time, the fifth day of their journey, they saw, in the morning, spears not a few standing up against a thicket-side in the offing. Redhead looked under the sharp of his hand, & laughed as though he were glad, and said: "I know not clearly what these may be, but it looketh like war. Now, knight, this is best to do: hold with thee three of our best men, so that ye may safeguard the Lady, and I with the others will prick on & look into this." "Nay," said Ralph, "thou mayst yet be apaid of a man's aid; & if there be strokes on sale in the cheaping-stead yonder, I will deal along with thee. Leave thy three men with the Lady, & let us on; we shall soon be back." "Nay, once more, dear lord," quoth Ursula, "I fear to be left alone of thee, and it is meet that thou free me from fear. I will ride with you, but three horse-lengths behind, so as not to hinder you. I have been worse bestead than this shall be." "It is good," quoth Redhead; "let her ride with us: for why should she suffer the pain of fear in the lonely waste? But let her do on a hauberk over her coats, and a steel coif over her head, for shaft & bolt will ofttimes go astray."

EVEN so they did & rode forward, and presently they saw the spear-

men that they were somewhat more than their company, and that they were well mounted on black horses & clad in black armour. Then they drew rein for a while, & Redhead scanned them again and said: "Yea, these are the men of the brother of thy hot wooer, Lady Ursula, whom I cooled in the Ram's Bane, but a man well nigh as old as his uncle, though he hath not made men tremble so sore, albeit he be far the better man, a good warrior, a wise leader, a reiver and lifter well wrought at all points. Well, 'tis not unlike that we shall have to speak to his men again, either out-going or home-coming: so we had best kill as many of these as we may now. Do on thy sallet, my lord; & thou, Michael-a-green, shake out the Bull; & thou, our Noise, blow a point of war, that they may be warned. God to aid! but they be ready and speedy!" ❧ In sooth even as the pennon of the Bull ran down the wind, & the Utterbol horn was winded, the Black men-at-arms came on at a trot, & presently with a great screeching yell cast their spears into the rest, and spurred on all they might, while a half score of bowmen who had come out of the thicket bent their bows & fell a-shooting. But now the men of Utterbol spurred to meet the foe, and as Redhead cast his spear into the rest, he said to Ralph: "Glad am I that thy Lady is a-near to see me, for now I worship her."

THEREWITH the two bands met, and whereas on neither side was the armour very stout, some men of either band were hurt or slain at once with spear-thrust; though, save for Ralph, they did not run straight on each other; but fenced & foined with their spears deftly enough. As for Ralph, he smote a tall man full on the breast and pierced him through and through, and then pulled out the Upmeads blade and smote on the right hand and the left, so that none came anigh him willingly. ❧ Shortly to say it, in five minutes' time the Black Riders were fleeing all over the field with them of Utterbol at their heels, & the bowmen ran back again into the wood. But one of the foemen as he fled cast a javelin at a venture, and who should be before it save Ursula, so that she reeled in her saddle, and would have fallen downright but for one of the Utterbol fellows who stayed her, and got her gently off her horse. ❧ This Ralph saw not, for he had followed far in the chase, & was coming back somewhat slowly along with Redhead, who was hurt, but not sorely. ❧ So when he came up,

and saw Ursula sitting on the grass with four or five men about her, he sickened for fear; but she rose up & came slowly and pale-faced to meet him, and said: "Fear not, beloved, for steel kept out steel: I have no scratch of point or edge on me." So therewith he kissed her, and embraced her, and was glad.

THE Utterbol Riders had slain sixteen of their foemen; for they took none to mercy, & four of their band were slain outright, & six hurt, but not grievously. So they tarried awhile on the field of deed to rest them & tend their wounded men, and so rode on again heedfully. But Redhead spake: "It is good to see thee tilting, King's Son. I doubt me I shall never learn thy downright thrust. Dost thou remember how sorry a job I made of it, when we met in the lists at Vale Turris that other day?" "Yea, yea," said Ralph. "Thou wert best let that flea stick on the wall. For to-day, at least, I have seen thee play at sharps deftly enough." Quoth Redhead: "Lord, it is naught, a five minutes' scramble. That which trieth a man, is to fight & overcome, & straight have to fight with fresh foemen, & yet again, till ye long for dark night to cover you; yea, or even death." "Warrior-like and wisely thou speakest," said Ralph; "& whoever thou servest thou shalt serve well. And now once more, I would it were me." Redhead shook his head at that word, & said: "I would it might be so; but it will not be so as now."

FORTH on they rode, & slept in a wood that night, keeping good watch; but saw no more of the Black Riders for that time. On a day thereafter, when it was nigh evening, Ralph looked about, and saw a certain wood on the edge of a plain, and he stayed Ursula, & said: "Look round about, beloved; for this is the very field whereas I was betrayed into the hands of the men of Utterbol." She smiled on him & said: "Let me light down then, that I may kiss the earth of that kind field, where thou wert not stayed overlong, but even long enough that we might meet in the dark wood thereafter." "Sweetling," said Ralph, "this mayst thou do and grieve no man, not even for a little. For lo you! the captain is staying the sumpter-beasts, and it is his mind, belike, that we shall sleep in yonder wood to-night." Therewith he lighted down and she in likewise: then he took her by the hand and led her on a few yards, and said: "Lo, beloved, this quicken tree; hereby it

was that the tent was pitched wherein I lay the night when I was taken" ❧ She looked on him shyly & said: "Wilt thou not sleep here once more to-night?" "Yea, well-beloved," said he; "I will bid them pitch thy tent on this same place, that I may smell the wild thyme again, as I did that other while." ❧ So there on the field of his ancient grief they rested that night in all love and content.

Chapter VIII. Of Goldburg again, and the Queen thereof.

NEXT day they went forth through the country where through Morfinn had led Ralph into captivity; and Redhead rode warily; for there were many passes which looked doubtful: but whether the ill men feared to meddle with them, or however it were, none waylaid them, and they all came safely to the gate of Goldburg, the towers whereof were full of folk looking forth on them. So they displayed their pennon, & rode into the street, where folk pressed about them in friendly wise; for the new Lord of Utterbol had made firm and fast peace with Goldburg. So they rode to the hostel, & gat them victual, and rested in peace that night. But Ralph wondered whether the Queen would send for him when she heard of his coming back again, & he hoped that she would let him be; for he was ashamed when he thought of her love for him, & how that he had clean forgotten her till he was close to Goldburg again.

BUT when morning was come Ralph spake to Redhead & asked him how he should do to wage men for the homeward journey on thence; and Redhead said: "I have already seen the Clerk of the Porte, and he will be here in an hour with the license for thee to wage men to go with thee to Cheaping Knowe. As for me, I must needs go see the King, & give him a letter sealed by my lord's hand; and when I come back from him, I will go round to the alehouses which be haunted of the men-at-arms to see after strong carles for thine avail. But to the King hast thou no need to go, save he send for thee, whereas thou art not come hither to chaffer, & he needeth not men of war." ❧ Ralph stared at him and said: "The King, sayst thou? is there no Queen of Goldburg?" Said Redhead: "There is the King's wedded wife, but her they call not Queen, but Lady." "But the Queen that was," said Ralph, "where is she then?" "Yea truly," said Redhead, "a Queen sat alone

as ruler here a while ago; but whether she died, or what befell her, I know nothing. I had little to do with Goldburg till our lord conquered Utterbol. Lo here the host! he may tell thee the tale thereof."

CHEREWITH he departed, and left Ralph with the host, whom Ralph questioned of the story, for his heart was wrung lest such a fair woman and so friendly should have come to harm.

SO the host sat down by Ralph & said: "My master, this is a tale which is grievous to us: for though the saints forbid I should say a word against my lord that is now, nor is there any need to, yet we deemed us happy to be under so dear a lady, & so good & fair as she was. Well, she is gone, so that we wot not whether she be living or dead. For so it is that in the early spring, somewhat more than a year ago that is, one morning when folk arose, the Queen's place was empty. Riding & running there was about and about, but none the more was she found. Forsooth as time wore, tales were told of what wise she left us, and why: but she was gone. Well, fair sir, many deemed that though her lineage was known by seeming, yet she was of the fairy, & needed neither steed nor chariot to go where she would. But her women, and those that knew her best, deemed that whatso she were, she had slain herself, as they thought, for some unhappiness of love. For indeed she had long gone about sad and distraught, though she neither wept, nor would say one word of her sorrow, whatsoever it might be. But, fair sir, since thou art a stranger, & art presently departing from our city, I will tell thee a thing. To wit; one month or so after she had vanished away, I held talk with a certain old fisherman of our water, and he told me that on that same night of her vanishing, as he stood on the waterside handing the hawser of his bark, and the sail was all ready to be sheeted home, there came along the shore a woman going very swiftly, who, glancing about her, as if to see that there was none looking on or prying, came up to him & prayed him in a sweet voice for instant passage down the water. Wrapped she was in a dark cloak and a cowl over her head, but as she put forth her hand to give him gold, he saw even by the light of his lantern that it was exceeding fair, & that great gems flashed from the finger-rings, and that there was a great gold ring most precious on her arm. He yea said her asking, partly because of her gold, partly (as

he told me) that he feared her, deeming her to be of the fairy. Then she stepped over his gangway of one board on to his boat, & as he held the lantern low down to light her, lest she should make a false step & fall into the water, he noted (quoth he) that a golden shoe all begemmed came out from under her gown-hem, and that the said hem was broidered thickly with pearl and jewels. Small was his bark, & he alone with the woman, and there was a wind in the March night, and the stream is swift betwixt the quays of our city; so that by night & cloud they made much way down the water, & at sun-rise were sailing through the great wood which lieth hence a twenty leagues seaward. So when the sun was risen she stood up in the fore part of the boat, & bade him turn the bark toward the shore, and even as the bows ran upon the sand, she leapt out and let the thicket cover her; nor have any of Goldburg seen her since, or the Queen. But for my part I deem the woman to have been none other than the Queen. Seest thou then! she is gone: but the King Rainald her cousin reigns in her stead, a wise man, and a mighty, and no tyrant or skinner of the people."

RALPH heard & pondered, & was exceeding sorry, and more had he been but for the joyousness which came of the Water of the Well. Howbeit he might not amend it: for even were he to seek for the Queen & find her, it might well be worse than letting it be. For he knew (when he thought of her) that she loved him, & how would it be if she might not outwear her love, or endure the days of Goldburg, and he far away? This he said to himself, which he might not have said to any other soul.

Chapter IX. They come to Cheaping Knowe once more. Of the King thereof

TOWARD evening comes Redhead, & tells Ralph how he had hired him a dozen men-at-arms to follow him well-weaponed to Cheaping Knowe: withal he counselled him to take a good gift with him to that same town to buy the good will of the King there; who was a close-fist & a cruel lord. Afterwards they sat together in the court of that fair house before good wine, Ralph and Ursula, and Redhead and the Sage of Swevenham, and spake of many things, & were merry and kind together. But on the morrow Redhead de-

parted from Goldburg with his men, and he loth to depart, and they gave him farewell lovingly. Thereafter Ralph's new men came to him in the hostelry, and he feasted them and did well to them, so that they praised him much. Then he gat him victuals & sumpter-horses for the journey, and bought good store of bows & arrows withal. Furthermore he took heed to Redhead's word, and bought a goodly gift of silver vessel and fine cloth for the King of Cheaping Knowe.

THE day after, he and his company departed from Goldburg toward the mountains, which they passed unfought & unwaylaid: partly because they were a band of stout men, and partly because a little before there had been a great overthrow of the wild men of those mountains at the hands of the men of Goldburg and the Chapmen; so that now the mountain-men lay close, & troubled none that rode with any force. On the way they failed not to pass by the place where they had erst found Bull Nosy slain: there they saw his howe, heaped up exceeding high, covered in with earth, whereon the grass was now beginning to grow, and with a great standing stone on the top thereof, whereon was graven the image of a bull, with a sword thereunder; whereby the wayfarers wotted that this had been done in his memory by his brother, the new Lord of Utterbol.

SO they came down out of the mountains to Whiteness, where they had good entertainment, but tarried not save for one night, riding their ways betimes to Cheaping Knowe: & they came before the gate thereof safe & sound on the third day; & slept in the hostelry of the chapmen. On the morrow Ralph went up to the King's Castle with but three men unweaponed bearing the gift which he had got for the King. Albeit he sent not away his men-at-arms till he should know how the King was minded towards him. As he went he saw in the streets sad tokens of the lord's cruel justice, as handless men, fettered, dragging themselves about, and folk hung up before chapmen's booths, and whipping-cheer, & the pillar, & such like. But whereas he might not help he would not heed, but came right to the Castle-gate, and entered easily when he had told his errand, for gift-bearing men are not oftenest withstood.

HE was brought straightway into the great hall, where sat the King on his throne amidst the chiefs of

the Porte, & his captains and sergeants, who were, so to say, his barons, though they were not barons of lineage, but masterful men who were wise to do his bidding. As he went up the hall he saw a sort of poor caitiffs, women as well as men, led away from the high-place in chains by bailiffs and tipstaves; & he doubted not that these were for torments, or maiming & death; & thought it were well might he do them some good. Being come to the King, he made his obeisance to him, and craved his good will & leave to wage men-at-arms to bring him through the mountains.

THE King was a tall man, a proper man of war; long-legged, black-bearded, & fierce-eyed. Some word he had heard of Ralph's gift, therefore he was gracious to him; he spake & said: "Thou hast come across the mountains a long way, fair sir; prithee on what errand?" Answered Ralph: "For no errand, lord, save to fare home to mine own land" "Where is thine own land?" said the King, stretching out his legs and lying back in his chair. "West-away, lord, many a mile," said Ralph "Yea," quoth the King, "and how far didst thou go beyond the mountains? As far as Utterbol?" Said Ralph: "Yet further, but not to Utterbol." "Hah!" said the King, "who goeth beyond Utterbol must have a great errand; what was thine?"

RALPH thought for a moment, & deemed it best to say as little as he might concerning Ursula; so he answered, & his voice grew loud & bold: "I was minded to drink a draught of the WELL at the WORLD'S END, and even so I did." As he spake, he drew himself up, & his brows were knit a little, but his eyes sparkled from under them, & his cheeks were bright & rosy. He half drew the sword from the scabbard, & sent it back again rattling, so that the sound of it went about the hall; he upreared his head and looked around him on this and that one of the warriors of the aliens, and he sniffed the air into his nostrils as he stood alone amongst them, & set his foot down hard on the floor of the King's hall, & his armour rattled upon him But the King sat bolt upright in his chair & stared in Ralph's face; and the warriors & lords & merchants fell back from Ralph & stood in an ordered rank on either side of him & bent their heads before him. None spoke till the King said in a hoarse voice, but lowly and wheedling: "Tell us, fair sir, what is it that we can

do to pleasure thee?" "King," said Ralph, "I am not here to take gifts but to give them rather: yet since thou biddest me I will crave somewhat of thee, that thou mayst be the more content: and moreover the giving shall cost thee nothing: I crave of thee to give me life and limb and freedom for the poor folk whom I saw led down the hall by thy tipstaves, even now. Give me that or nothing." The King scowled, but he spake: "This is indeed a little gift of thee to take; yet to none else save thee had I given it."

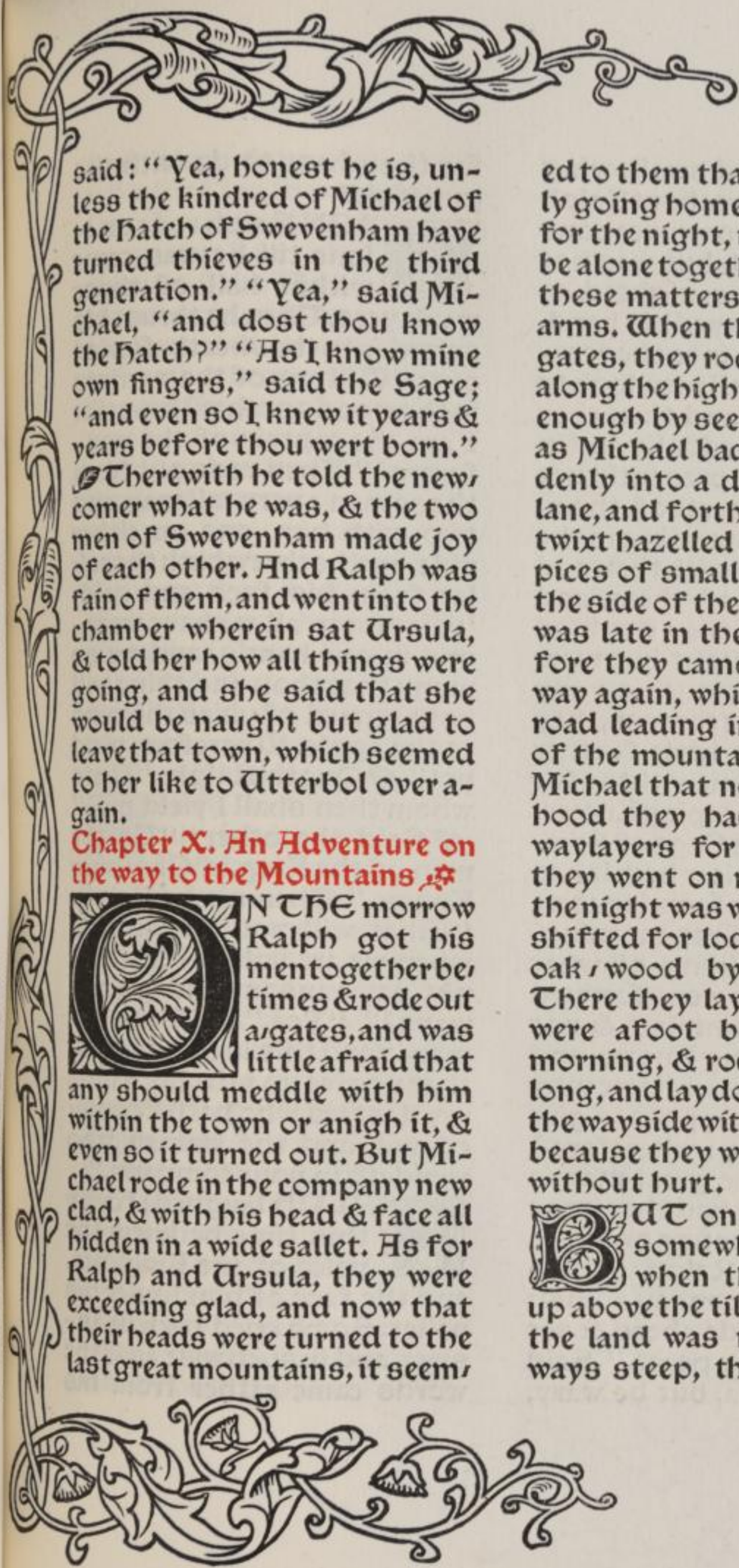
THEREWITH he spake to a man beside him and said: "Go thou, set them free, and if any hurt hath befallen them thy life shall answer for it. Is it enough, fair sir, and have we thy goodwill?" Ralph laughed for joy of his life and his might, and he answered: "King, this is the token of my goodwill; fear naught of me." And he turned to his men, and bade them bring forth the gift of Goldburg and open it before the King; and they did so. But when the King cast eyes on the wares his face was gladdened, for he was a greedy wolf, & whoso had been close to his mouth would have heard him mutter: "So mighty! yet so wealthy!" But he thanked Ralph aloud & in smooth words. And Ralph made obeisance to him again, and then turned and went his ways down the hall, and was glad at heart that he had become so mighty a man, for all fell back before him & looked on him with worship. Howbeit he had looked on the King closely and wisely, and deemed that he was both cruel and guileful, so that he rejoiced that he had spoken naught of Ursula, & he was minded to keep her within gates all the while they abode at Cheaping Knowe.

WHEN he came to the hostel he called his men-at-arms together and asked them how far they would follow him, & with one voice they said all that they would go with him whereso he would, so that it were not beyond reason. So they arrayed them for departure on the morrow, and were to ride out of gates about mid-morning. So wore the day to evening; but ere the night was old came a man asking for Ralph, as one who would have a special alms of him, a poor man by seeming, and evilly clad. But when Ralph was alone with him, the poor man did him to wit that for all his seeming wretchedness he was but disguised, & was in sooth a man of worship, and one of the Porte. Quoth he: "I am of the King's Council, and I must needs tell

thee a thing of the King: that though he was at the first over-awed and cowed by the majesty of thee, a friend of the Well, he presently came to himself, which was but ill; so that what for greed, what for fear even, he is minded to send men to waylay thee, some three leagues from the town, on your way to the mountains, but ye shall easily escape his gin now I have had speech of thee; for ye may take a by-road and fetch a compass of some twelve miles, and get aback of the waylayers. Yet if ye escape this first ambush, unless ye are timely in riding early to-morrow it is not unlike that he shall send swift riders to catch up with you ere ye come to the mountains. Now I am come to warn thee hereof, partly because I would not have so fair a life spilt, which should yet do so well for the sons of Adam, and partly also because I would have a reward of thee for my warning and my way-leading, for I shall show thee the way and the road."

SAID Ralph: "Ask and fear not; for if I may trust thee I already owe thee a reward." "My name is Michael-a-dale," said the man, "and from Swevenham I came hither, and fain would I go thither, and little hope I have thereof save I go privily in some such band as thine, whereas the tyrant holdeth me here on pain, as well I know, of an evil death." "I grant thine asking, friend," said Ralph; "and now thou wert best go to thine house and truss what stuff thou mayst have with thee and come back hither in the grey of the morning." The man shook his head and said: "Nay; here must I bide night-long, and go out of gates amongst thy men-at-arms, and clad like one of them with iron enough about me to hide the fashion of me; it were nowise safe for me to go back into the town; for this tyrant wages many a spy: yea, forsooth, I fear me by certain tokens that it is not all so certain that I have not been spied upon already, & that it is known that I have come to thee. And I will tell thee, that by hook or by crook the King already knoweth somewhat of thee and of the woman who is in thy company."

RALPH flushed red at that word, and felt his heart bound: but even therewith came into them the Sage; and straightway Ralph took him apart & told him on what errand the man was come, & asked him if he deemed him trusty. Then the Sage went up to Michael and looked him hard in the face awhile, & then



said: "Yea, honest he is, unless the kindred of Michael of the Hatch of Swevenham have turned thieves in the third generation." "Yea," said Michael, "and dost thou know the Hatch?" "As I know mine own fingers," said the Sage; "and even so I knew it years & years before thou wert born." ¶ Therewith he told the newcomer what he was, & the two men of Swevenham made joy of each other. And Ralph was fain of them, and went into the chamber wherein sat Ursula, & told her how all things were going, and she said that she would be naught but glad to leave that town, which seemed to her like to Utterbol over again.

Chapter X. An Adventure on the way to the Mountains

ON THE morrow Ralph got his men together betimes & rode out agates, and was little afraid that any should meddle with him within the town or anigh it, & even so it turned out. But Michael rode in the company new clad, & with his head & face all hidden in a wide sallet. As for Ralph and Ursula, they were exceeding glad, and now that their heads were turned to the last great mountains, it seemed to them that they were verily going home, & they longed for the night, that they might be alone together, & talk of all these matters in each others' arms. When they were out agates, they rode for two miles along the highway, heedlessly enough by seeming, and then, as Michael bade, turned suddenly into a deep and narrow lane, and forth on, as it led betwixt hazelled banks and coppices of small wood, skirting the side of the hills, so that it was late in the afternoon before they came into the highway again, which was the only road leading into the passes of the mountains. Then said Michael that now by all likelihood they had beguiled the waylayers for that time; so they went on merrily till half the night was worn, when they shifted for lodging in a little oak-wood by the wayside. There they lay not long, but were afoot betimes in the morning, & rode swiftly daylong, and lay down at night on the wayside with the less dread because they were come so far without hurt.

BUT on the third day, somewhat after noon, when they were come up above the tilled upland and the land was rough and the ways steep, there lay before

them a dark wood swallowing up the road. Thereabout Ralph deemed that he saw weapons glittering ahead, but was not sure, for as clear-sighted as he was. So he stayed his band, and had Ursula into the rearward, and bade all men look to their weapons, and then they went forward heedfully and in good order; and presently not only Ralph, but all of them, could see men standing in the jaws of the pass with the wood on either side of them, and though at first they doubted if these were aught but mere strong-thieves, such as any wayfarers might come on, they had gone but a little further when Michael knew them for the riders of Cheaping Knowe. "Yea," said the Sage of Swevenham, "it is clear how it has been: when they found that we came not that first morning, they had an inkling of what had befallen, & went forward toward the mountains, & not back to Cheaping Knowe, and thus outwent us while we were fetching that compass to give them the go-by: wherefore I deem that some great man is with them, else had they gone back to town for new orders." "Well," said Ralph, "then will they be too many for us; so now will I ride ahead & see if we may have peace." Said the Sage: "Yea, but be wary, for thou hast to do with the guileful."

THEN Ralph rode on alone till he was come within hail of those waylayers. Then he thrust his sword into the sheath, & cried out: "Will any of the warriors in the wood speak with me; for I am the captain of the wayfarers?" Then rode out from those men a very tall man, and two with him, one on either side, and he threw back the sallet from his face, and said: "Wayfarer, all we have weapons in our hands, and we so many that thou and thine will be in regard of us as the pips to the apple. Wherefore, yield ye!" Quoth Ralph: "Unto whom then shall I yield me?" Said the other: "To the men of the King of Cheaping Knowe." Then spake Ralph: "What will you do with us when we are yolden? Shall we not pay ransom and go our ways?" "Yea," said the tall man, "and this is the ransom: that ye give up into my hands my dastard who hath bewrayed me, and the woman who wendeth in your company."

RALPH laughed; for by this time he knew the voice of the King, yea, and the face of him under his sallet. So he cried back in answer, and in such wise as if the words came rather from his

luck than from his youth: "Ho, Sir King! beware, beware! lest thou tremble when thou seest the bare blade of the friend of the Well more than thou trembledst erst, when the blade was hidden in the sheath before the throne of thine hall." But the King cried out in a loud harsh voice: "Thou, young man, beware thou! and try not thy luck overmuch. We are as many as these trees, and thou canst not prevail over us. Go thy ways free, & leave me what thou canst not help leaving." "Yea, fool," cried Ralph, "and what wilt thou do with these two?" Said the King: "The traitor I will flay, and the woman I will bed."

SCARCE were the words out of his mouth ere Ralph gave forth a great cry & drew his sword, set spurs to his horse, and galloped on up the road with all his band at his back, for they had drawn anigh amidst this talk. But or ever they came on the foemen, they heard a great confused cry of onset mingled with affright, and lo! the King threw up his arms, and fell forward on his horse's neck with a great arrow through his throat. Ralph drave on sword in hand, crying out, "Home, home to Upmeads!" and anon was amidst of the foe smiting on either hand. His men followed, shouting: "Ho, for the friend of the Well!" And amongst the foemen, who were indeed very many, was huge dismay, so that they made but a sorry defence before the band of the wayfarers, who knew not what to make of it, till they noted that arrows & casting-spears were coming out of the wood on either side, which smote none of them, but many of the foemen. Short was the tale, for in a few minutes there were no men of the foe together save those that were fleeing down the road to Cheaping Knowe.

RALPH would not suffer his men to follow the chase, for he wotted not with whom he might have to deal besides the King's men. He drew his men together and looked round for Ursula, and saw that the Sage had brought her up anigh him, & there she sat a-horseback, pale & panting with the fear of death & the joy of deliverance. Now Ralph cried out from his saddle in a loud voice, and said: "Ho ye of the arrows of the wood! ye have saved me from my foemen; where be ye, and what be ye?" Came a loud voice from out of the wood on the right hand: "Children, tell the warrior whose sons ye be!" Straightway brake out a huge bellowing on either side of the road, as though the wood were all full

of great neat. Then cried out Ralph: "If ye be of the kindred of the Bull, ye will belike be my friends rather than my foes. Or have ye heard tell of Ralph of Upmeads? Now let your captain come forth and speak with me." Scarce were the words out of his mouth ere a man came leaping forth from out the wood, and stood before Ralph in the twilight of the boughs, and Ralph noted of him that he was clad pretty much like to Bull Shockhead of the past time, save that he had a great bull's head for a helm (which afterwards Ralph found out was of iron and leather) and a great gold ring on his arm.

THEN Ralph thrust his sword back into the sheath, and his folk handled their weapons peaceably, while Ralph hailed the new-comer as Lord or Duke of the Bulls. "Belike," quoth the said chieftain, "thou wouldest wish to show me some token, whereby we may wot that thou art that friend of the Well & of our kinsman concerning whom he sent us a message." Then Ralph bethought him of the pouch with the knot of grass therein which Bull Shockhead had given him at Goldburg; so he drew it out, and gave it into the hand of the chieftain, who no sooner caught a glimpse thereof than he said: "Verily our brother's hand hath met thine when he gave thee this. Yet forsooth, now that I look on thee, I may say that scarce did I need token to tell me that thou wert the very man. for I can see thee, that thou art of great honour and worship, and thou didst ride boldly against the foemen when thou knewest not that we had waylaid thy waylayers. Now I wot that there is no need to ask thee whether thou wouldst get thee out of our mountains by the shortest road, yet wilt thou make it little longer, and somewhat safer, if ye will suffer us to lead thee by way of our dwelling." So Ralph yea said his bidding without more words.

AS they spake thus together the road both above and below was become black with weaponed men, and some of Ralph's band looked on one another, as though they doubted their new friends somewhat. But the Sage of Swevenham spoke to them & bade them fear nought. "for," said he, "so far as we go, who are now their friends, there is no guile in these men." The Bull captain heard him & said: "Thou sayest sooth, old man; and I shall tell thee that scarce had a band like thine come safe through the mountains, save by great good luck, without the leave of us; for the

fool with the crown that lieth there dead had of late days so stirred up the folks of the fells through his grimness & cruelty that we have been minded to stop everything bigger than a cur-dog that might seek to pass by us, for at least so long as yonder rascal should live. But ye be welcome; so now let us to the road, for the day weareth."

SO the tribesmen gat them into order, & their Duke went on the left side of Ralph, while Ursula rode on his right hand. The Duke & all his men were afoot, but they went easily and swiftly, as wolves trot. As for the slain of the waylayers, of whom there were some threescore, the Bull captain would do naught but let them lie on the road. "For," said he, "there be wolves and lynxes enough in the wood, & the ravens of the uplands & the kites shall soon scent the carrion. They shall have burial soon enough. Neither will we meddle with it; nay, not so much as to hang the felon King's head at thy saddle-bow, lord." By sunset they were out of the wood & on the side of a rough fell, so they went no further, but lighted fires at the edge of the thicket, and made merry round about them, singing their songs concerning the deeds of their folk, & jesting withal, but not foully; and they roasted venison of hart & hind at the fires, and they had with them wine, the more part whereof they had found in the slain King's carriages, and they made great feast to the wayfarers, and were exceeding fain of them; after their fashion, whereas if a man were their friend he could scarce be enough their friend, and if he were their foe, they could never be fierce enough with him.

Chapter XI. They come through the Mountains into the Plain

ON the morrow early they all fared on together, and thereafter they went for two days more till they came into a valley amidst of the mountains, which was fair and lovely, and therein was the dwelling or town of this folk of the fells. It was indeed no stronghold, save that it was not easy to find, and that the way thither was well defensible were foemen to try it. The houses thereof were artless, the chiefest of them like to the great barn of an abbey in our land, the others low & small; but the people, both men and women, haunted mostly the big house. As for the folk, they

were for the more part like those whom they had met afore: strong men, but not high of stature, black-haired, with blue or grey eyes, cheerful of countenance, & of many words. Their women were mostly somewhat more than comely, smiling, kind of speech, but not suffering the caresses of aliens. They saw no thralls amongst them; & when Ralph asked hereof, how that might be, since they were men-catchers, they told him that when they took men and women, as oft they did, they always sold them for what they would bring to the plain-dwellers; or else slew them, or held them to ransom, but never brought them home to their stead. Howbeit, when they took children, as whiles befell, they sometimes brought them home, and made them very children of their folk with many uncouth prayers & worship of their Gods, who were indeed, as they deemed, but forefathers of the folk.

NOW Ralph, he and his, being known for friends, these wild men could not make enough of them, and, as it were, compelled them to abide there three days, feasting them, and making them all the cheer they might. And they showed the wayfarers their manner of hunting, both of the hart & the boar, and of wild bulls also. At first Ralph somewhat loathed all this (though he kept a pleasant countenance toward his host), for sorely he desired the fields of Upmeads and his father's house. But at last when the hunt was up in the mountains, and especially of the wild bulls, the heart and the might in him so arose that he enforced himself to do well, & the wild men wondered at his prowess, whereas he was untried in their manner of sports, and they deemed him one of the Gods, and said that their kinsman had done well to get him so good a friend. Both Ursula & the Sage withheld them from this hunting, & Ursula abode with the women, who told her much of their ways of life, and stories of old time; frank and free they were, and loved her much, and she was fain of such manly-minded women after the sleight and lies of the poor thralls of Utterbol.

ON the fourth day the wayfarers made them ready & departed; and the chief of the folk went with them with a chosen band of weaponed men, partly for the love of his guests, and partly that he might see the Goldburg men-at-arms safe back to the road unto the plain and the Midhouse of the Mountains, for they went now by other ways, which missed the said

house. On this journey naught befell to tell of, and they all came down safe into the plain. There the Goldburg men took their wage, and bidding farewell, turned back with the wild men, praising Ralph much for his frankness and open hand. As for the wild men, they exceeded in their sorrow for the parting, & many of them wept and howled as though they had seen him die before their faces. But all that came to an end, and presently their cheer was amended, & their merry speech and laughter came down from the pass unto the wayfarers' ears as each band rode its way.

Chapter XII. The roads sunder again

RALPH & Ursula, with the Sage & Michael-a-dale went their ways, & all was smooth with them, and they saw but few folk, & those mild and lowly. At last, of an afternoon, they saw before them afar off the towers & pinnacles of Whitwall, & Ralph's heart rose within him, so that he scarce knew how to contain himself; but Ursula was shy and silent, and her colour came and went, as though some fear had hold of her. Now they two were riding on somewhat ahead of the others, so Ralph turned to Ursula, & asked what ailed her. She smiled on him & said: "A simple sickness. I am drawing nigh to thy home, and I am ashamed. Beyond the mountains, who knew what & whence I was? I was fair, and for a woman not unvaliant, & that was enough. But now when I am coming amongst the baronages & the lineages, what shall I do to hold up my head before the fools and the dastards of these high kindreds? And that all the more, my knight, because thou art changed since yester-year, and since we met on the want-way of the Wood Perilous, when I bade thee remember that thou wert a King's son & I a yeoman's daughter; for then thou wert but a lad, high-born and beautiful, but simple maybe, and untried; whereas now thou art meet to sit in the Kaiser's throne and rule the world from the Holy City."

HE laughed gaily & said: "What! is it all so soon forgotten, our deeds beyond the Mountains? Belike because we had no minstrel to rhyme it for us. Or is it all but a dream? and has the last pass of the mountains changed all that for us? What then! hast thou never become my beloved, nor lain in one bed with me? Thou whom I looked to deliver from the shame & the torment of Utterbol, never didst

thou free thyself without my helping, & meet me in the dark wood, and lead me to the Sage who rideth yonder behind us! No, nor didst thou ride fearless with me, leaving the world behind; nor didst thou comfort me when my heart went nigh to breaking in the wilderness! Nor thee did I deliver as I saw thee running naked from the jaws of death. Nor were we wedded in the wilderness far from our own folk. Nor didst thou deliver me from the venom of the Dry Tree. Yea verily, nor did we drink together of the Water of the Well! It is all but tales of Swevenham, a blue vapour hanging on the mountains yonder! So be it then! And here we ride together, deedless, a man and a maid of whom no tale may be told. What next then, & who shall sunder us?" Therewith he drew his sword from the sheath, and tossed it into the air, & caught it by the hilts as it came down, & he cried out: "Hearken, Ursula! By my sword I swear it, that when I come home to the little land, if my father and my mother and all my kindred fall not down before thee and worship thee, then will I be a man without kindred, & I will turn my back on the land I love, and the House wherein I was born, and will win for thee and me a new kindred that all the world shall tell of. So help me Saint Nicholas, and all Hallows, and the Mother of God!"

SHE looked on him with exceeding love, and said: "Ah, beloved, how fair thou art! Is it not as I said, yea, and more, that now lieth the world at thy feet, if thou wilt stoop to pick it up! Believe me, sweet, all folk shall see this as I see it, and shall judge betwixt thee and me, and deem me naught." "Beloved," he said, "thou dost not wholly know thyself; and I deem that the mirrors of steel serve thee but ill; & now must thou have somewhat else for a mirror, to wit, the uprising and increase of trouble concerning thee and thy fairness, and the strife of them that love thee overmuch, who shall strive to take thee from me; and then the blade that hath seen the Well at the World's End shall come out of his sheath and take me and thee from the hubbub, & into the quiet fields of my father's home, and then shalt thou be learned of thyself, when thou seest that thou art the desire of all hearts." "Ah, the wisdom of thee," she said, "and thy valiancy, and I am become feeble and foolish before thee! What shall I do then?" He said: "Many a time shall it be shown what thou shalt do; but here and now is the highway dry &

long, and the plain meads and acres on either hand, & a glimmer of Whitwall afar off, and the little cloud of dust about us two in the late spring weather; and the Sage & Michael riding behind us, and smiting dust from the hard road. And nowif this also be a dream, let it speedily begone, and let us wake up in the ancient House at Upmeads, which thou hast never seen, and thou and I in each other's arms."

Chapter XIII. They come to Whitwall again

THEREWITH they were come to a little thorp where the way sundered, for the highway went on to Whitwall, & a byway turned off to Swevenham. Thereby was a poor hostel, where they stayed & rested for the night, because evening was at hand. So when those four had eaten and drunk there together, Ralph spoke & said: "Michael-a-dale, thou art for Swevenham to-morrow?" "Yea, lord," said Michael, "belike I shall yet find kindred there; & I call to thy mind that I craved of thee to lead me to Swevenham as payment for all, if I had done aught for thy service." "Sooth is that," said Ralph, "thou shalt go with my good-will; and, as I deem, thou shalt not lack company betwixt here and Swevenham, whereas our dear friend here, the friend of thy father's father, is going the same road." Then the Sage of Swevenham leaned across the board, and said: "What word hath come out of thy mouth, my son?" Said Ralph, smiling on him: "It is the last word which we have heard from thee of this matter, though verily it was spoken a while ago. What wilt thou add to it as now?" "This," quoth the Sage, "that I will leave thee no more till thou biddest me go from thee. Was this word needful?" Ralph reached his hand to him and said: "It is well and more; but the road hence to Upmeads may yet be a rough one." "Yea," said the Sage, "yet shall we come thither all living, unless my sight now faileth." Then Ursula rose up and came to the old man, and cast her arms about him and said: "Yea, father, come with us, and let thy wisdom bless our roof-tree. Wilt thou not teach our children wisdom; yea, maybe our children's children, since thou art a friend of the Well?" "I know not of the teaching of wisdom," said the Sage; "but as to my going with thee, it shall be as I said e'en now; and forsooth I looked for this bid-

ding of thee to make naught of the word which I spoke ere yet I had learned wisdom of thee" ❧ Therewith were they merry, and fain of each other, and the evening wore amidst great content.

BUT when morning was come they gat to horse, & Ralph spake to Michael & said: "Well, friend, now must thou ride alone to thy kindred, and may fair days befall thee in Swevenham. But if thou deem at any time that matters go not so well with thee as thou wouldst, then turn thine head to Upmeads, and try it there, and we shall further thee all we may" ❧ Then came the Sage to Michael as he sat upon his horse, a stalwarth man of some forty winters, & said: "Michael-dale, reach me thine hand." So did he, and the Sage looked into the palm thereof, and said: "This man shall make old bones, and it is more like than not, King's son, that he shall seek to thee at Upmeads ere he die." Said Ralph: "His coming shall be a joy to us, how pleasant soever our life may be otherwise. Farewell, Michael! all good go with thee for thine wholesome redes."

SO THEN Michael gave them farewell, & rode his ways to Swevenham, going hastily, as one who should hurry away from a grief. But the three held on their way to Whitwall, & it was barely noon when they came to the gate thereof on a Saturday of latter May. It was a market-day, and the streets were thronged, & they looked on the folk & were fain of them, since they seemed to them to be something more than aliens ❧ The folk also looked on them curiously, and deemed them goodly, both the old man & the two knights, for they thought no otherwise of Ursula than that she was a carle. But now as they rode, slowly because of the crowd, up Petergate, they heard a cry of one beside them, as of a man astonished but joyful; so Ralph drew rein, and turned thither whence the cry came, & Ursula saw a man wide-shouldered, grey-haired, blue-eyed, & ruddy of countenance; a man warrior-like to look on, & girt with a long sword ❧ Ralph lighted down from his horse, and met the man, who was coming toward him, cast his arms about his neck, and kissed him, and lo, it was Richard the Red. The people round about, when they saw it, clapped their hands, & crowded about the two, crying out: "Hail to the friends long parted, and now united!" But Richard, whom most knew, cried out: "Make way, my masters! will ye sunder us again?" Then he said to Ralph: "Get

into thy saddle, lad; for surely thou hast a tale to tell overlong for the open street."

RALPH did as he was bidden, & without more ado they went on all toward that hostelry where Ralph had erst borne the burden of grief. Richard walked by Ralph's side, and as he went he said: "Moreover, lad, I can see that thy tale is no ill one; therefore my heart is not wrung for thee or me, though I wait for it a while" Then again he said: "Thou doest well to hide her loveliness in war-weed even in this town of peace" Ursula reddened, and Richard laughed and said: "Well, it is a fair rose which thou hast brought from east-way. There will be never another couple in these parts like to you. Now I see the words on thy lips; so I tell thee that Blaise thy brother is alive and well and happy; which last word means that his coffer is both deep and full. Forsooth, he would make a poor bargain in buying any kingship that I wot of, so rich he is, yea, and mighty withal." Said Ralph: "And how went the war with Walter the Black?"

EVEN as he spake his face changed, for he bethought him over closely of the past days, & his dream of the Lady of Abundance and of Dorothea, who rode by him now as Ursula. But Richard spake: "Short is the tale to tell. I slew him in shock of battle, and his men craved peace of the good town. Many were glad of his death, & few sorrowed for it; for, fair as his young body was, he was a cruel tyrant" Therewith were they come to the hostel of the Lamb, which was the very same house wherein Ralph had abided aforetime; and as he entered it, it is not to be said but that inwardly his heart bled for the old sorrow. Ursula looked on him lovingly and blithely; & when they were within doors Richard turned to the Sage & said: "Hail to thee, reverend man! wert thou forty years older to behold, outworn & forgotten of death, I should have said that thou wert like to the Sage that dwelt alone amidst the mountains nigh to Swevenham when I was a little lad, & fearsome was the sight of thee unto me" The Sage laughed and said: "Yea, somewhat like am I yet to myself of forty years ago. Good is thy memory, grey-beard."

THEN Richard shook his head, & spake under his breath: "Yea, then it was no dream or coloured cloud, & he hath drunk of the waters, and so then hath my dear lord." Then he looked up bright-faced, and called on the serving-men, and bade one lead them

into a fair chamber, & another go forth & provide a banquet to be brought in thither. So they went up into a goodly chamber high aloft; & Ursula went forth from it awhile, and came back presently clad in very fair woman's raiment, which Ralph had bought for her at Goldburg. Richard looked on her and nothing else for a while; then he walked about the chamber uneasily, now speaking with the Sage, now with Ursula, but never with Ralph. At last he spake to Ursula, and said: "Grant me a grace, lady, and be not wroth if I take thy man into the window yonder that I may talk with him privily while ye hold converse together, thou and the Sage of Swevenham." She laughed merrily and said: "Sir nurse, take thy bantling and cosset him in whatso corner thou wilt, and I will turn away mine eyes from thy caresses."

SO Richard took Ralph into a window & sat down beside him & said: "Mayhappen I shall sadden thee by my question, but I mind me what our last talking together was about, & therefore I must needs ask thee this, was that other one fairer than this one is?" Ralph knit his brows: "I wot not," quoth he, "since she is gone, that other one." "Yea," said Richard, "but this I say, that she is without a blemish. Did ye drink of the Well together?" "Yea, surely," said Ralph. Said Richard: "And is this woman of a good heart? Is she valiant?" "Yea, yea," said Ralph, flushing red. "As valiant as was that other?" said Richard. Said Ralph: "How may I tell, unless they were tried in one way?" Yet Richard spake: "Are ye wedded?" "Even so," said Ralph. "Dost thou deem her true?" said Richard. "Truer than myself," said Ralph, in a voice which was somewhat angry. Quoth Richard: "Then is it better than well, and better than well; for now hast thou wedded into the World of living men, and not to a dream of the Land of Fairy." Ralph sat silent a little, and as if he were swallowing somewhat; at last he said: "Old friend, I were well content if thou wert to speak such words no more; for it irks me, and woundeth my heart." Said Richard: "Well, I will say no more thereof; be content therefore, for now I have said it, and thou needest not fear me, what I have to say thereon, any more; and thou mayst well wot that I must needs have said somewhat of this."

RALPH nodded to him friendly, and even therewith came in the banquet, which was richly served, as for a King's son, & wine was pour-

ed forth of the best, and they feasted and were merry. And then Ralph told all the tale of his wanderings, how it had be-tid, bringing in all that Ursula had told him of Utterbol; while as for her, she put in no word of it. So that at last Ralph, being wishful to hear her tell somewhat, made more of some things than was really in them, that she might set him right; but no word more she said for all that, but only smiled on him now and again, and sat blushing like a rose over her golden-flowered gown, while Richard looked on her and praised her in his heart exceedingly. But when Ralph had done the story (which was long, so that by then it was over it had been dark night some while), Richard said: "Well, fosterling, thou hast seen much, and done much, & many would say that thou art a lucky man, and that more & much more lieth ready to thine hand. Whither now wilt thou wend, or what wilt thou do?" Ralph's face reddened, as its wont had been when it was two years younger, at contention drawing nigh, and he answered: "Where then should I go save to the House of my fathers, and the fields that fed them? What should I do but live amongst my people, warding them from evil, & loving them and giving them good counsel? for wherefore should I love them less than heretofore? Have they become dastards, & the fools of mankind?" Quoth Richard: "They are no more fools than they were belike, nor less valiant. But thou art grown wiser and mightier by far; so that thou art another manner man than thou wert, and the Master of Masters maybe. To Upmeads wilt thou go; but wilt thou abide there? Upmeads is a fair land, but a narrow; one day is like another there, save when sorrow and harm is blent with it. The world is wide, and now I deem that thou holdest the glory thereof in the hollow of thine hand."

THEN spake the Sage, & said: "Yea, Richard of Swevenham, & how knowest thou but that this sorrow and trouble have not now fallen upon Upmeads? And if that be so, upon whom should they call to their helping rather than him who can help them most, and is their very lord?" Said Richard: "It may be so, wise man, though as yet we have heard no tidings thereof. But if my lord goeth to their help, yet, when the trouble shall be over, will he not betake him thither where fresh deeds await him?" "Nay, Richard," said the Sage, "art thou so little a friend of thy fosterling

as not to know that when he hath brought back peace to the land, it will be so that both he shall need the people, and they him, so that if he go away for awhile, yet shall he soon come back? Yea, & so shall the little land, it may be, grow great."

NOW had Ralph sat quiet while this talk was going on, & as if he heeded not, and his eyes were set as if he were beholding something far away. Then Richard spoke again after there had been silence awhile: "Wise man, thou sayest sooth; yea, & so it is, that though we here have heard no tale concerning war in Upmeads, yet, as it were, we have been feeling some stirring of the air about us; even as though matters were changing, great might undone, and weakness grown to strength. Who can say but our lord may find deeds to hand or ever he come to Upmeads?" Ralph turned his head as one awaking from a dream, and he said: "When shall to-morrow be, that we may get us gone from Whitwall, we three, & turn our faces toward Upmeads?" Said Richard: "Wilt thou not tarry a day or two, & talk with thine own mother's son and tell him of thine haps?" "Yea," said Ralph, "and so would I, were it not that my father's trouble & my mother's grief draw me away" "O tarry not," said Ursula; "nay, not for the passing of the night; but make this hour the sunrise, and begone by the clear of the moon. For lo! how he shineth through the window!" Then she turned to Richard, and said: "O fosterer of my love, knowest thou not that as now he speaketh as a friend of the Well, & wotteth more of far-off tidings than even this wise man of many years?" Said Ralph: "She sayeth sooth, O Richard. Or how were it if the torch were even now drawing nigh to the High House of Upmeads: yea, or if the very House were shining as a dreary candle of the meadows, and reddening the waters of the ford! What do we here?"

THEREWITH he thrust the board from him, and arose & went to his harness, and fell to arming him; & he spake to Richard: "Now shall thine authority open to us the gates of the good town, though the night be growing old; we shall go our ways, dear friend, & mayhappen we shall meet again, and mayhappen not: and thou shalt tell my brother Blaise, who wotteth not of my coming hither, how things have gone with me, and how need hath drawn me hence. And bid him come see me at Upmeads, and to ride with a

good band of proper men, for eschewing the dangers of the road" ❧ Then spake Richard: "I shall tell Lord Blaise neither more nor less than thou mayst tell him thyself: for think it not that thou shalt go without me. As for Blaise, he may well spare me; for he is become a chief and Lord of the Porte; & the Porte hath now right good men-at-arms, and captains withal younger and defter than I be. But now suffer me to send a swain for my horse & arms, & another to the captain of the watch at Westgate Bar that he be ready to open to me and three of my friends, and to send me a let-pass for the occasion. So shall we go forth ere it be known that the brother of the Lord of the Porte is abiding at the Lamb. for verily I see that the Lady hath spoken truth; and it is like that she is foreseeing, even as thou hast grown to be. And now I bethink me I might lightly get me a score of men to ride with us, whereas we may meet men worse than ourselves on the way" ❧ Said Ralph: "All good go with thy words, Richard; yet gather not force: there may stout men be culled on the road; and if thou runnest or rides t about the town, we may yet be stayed by Blaise and his men. Wherefore now send for thine horse and arms, & bid the host here open his gates with little noise when we be ready; and we will presently ride out by the clear of the moon. But thou, beloved, shalt don thine armour no more, but shalt ride henceforth in thy woman's raiment, for the wild and the waste is well nigh over, and the way is but short after all these months of wandering; and I say that now shall all friends drift toward us, and they that shall rejoice to strike a stroke for my father's son, & the peaceful years of the friend of the Well."

To those others, & chiefly to Ursula, it seemed that now he spoke strongly and joyously, like to a king and a captain of men. Richard did his bidding, and was swift in dealing with the messengers ❧ But the Sage said: "Ralph, my son, since ye have lost one man-at-arms, & have gotten but this golden angel in his stead, I may better that. I prithee bid thy man Richard find me armour and weapons that I may amend the shard in thy company. Thou shalt find me no feeble man when we come to push of staves." Ralph laughed, and bade Richard see to it; so he dealt with the host, & bought good war-gear of him, and a trenchant sword, and an axe

withal; and when the Sage was armed he looked as doughty a warrior as need be. By this time was Richard's horse and war-gear come, and he armed him speedily and gave money to the host, & they rode therewith all four out of the hostel, and found the street empty & still, for the night was wearing. So rode they without tarrying into Westgate and came to the Bar, and speedily was the gate opened to them; and anon were they on the moonlit road outside of Whitwall.

Chapter XIV. They ride away from Whitwall.

BUT when they were well on the way, and riding a good pace by the clear of the moon, Richard spake to Ralph, and said: "Whither ride we now?" Said Ralph: "Whither, save to Upmeads?" "Yea, yea," said Richard, "but by what road? Shall we ride down to the ford of the Swelling Flood, & ride the beaten way, or take to the downland and the forest, and so again by the forest and the downland and the forest once more, till we come to the Burg of the Four Friths?" "Which way is the shorter?" said Ralph. "Forsooth," said Richard, "by the wildwood ye may ride shorter, if ye know it as I do." Quoth the Sage: "Yea, or as I do. Hear a wonder! that two men of Swevenham know the wilds more than twenty miles from their own thorp." Said Ralph: "Well, wend we the shorter road; why make more words over it? Or what lion lieth on the path? Is it that we may find it hard to give the go-by to the Burg of the Four Friths?" Said Richard: "Though the Burg be not very far from Whitwall, we hear but little tidings thence; our chapmen but seldom go there, and none cometh to us thence save such of our men as have strayed thither. Yet, as I said e'en now in the hostel, there is an air of tidings abroad, & one rumour sayeth, and none denieth it, that the old fierceness and stout headstrong mood of the Burg is broken down, and that men dwell there in peace & quiet." Said the Sage: "In any case we have amongst us lore enough to hoodwink them if they be foes; so that we shall pass easily. Naught of this need we fear."

BUT Richard put his mouth close to Ralph's ear, and spake to him softly: "Shall we indeed go by that shorter road, whatever in days gone by may have be-

fallen in places thereon, to which we must go anigh tomorrow?" Ralph answered softly in turn: "Yea, forsooth, for I were fain to try my heart, how strong it may be." So they rode on, and turned off from the road that led down to the ford of the Swelling Flood, anigh which Ralph had fallen in with Blaise and Richard on the day after the woeful slaying, which had made an end of his joy for that time. But when they were amidst of the bushes and riding a deep ghyll of the waste, Richard said: "It is well that we are here: for now if Blaise send riders to bring us back courteously, they shall not follow us at once, but shall ride straight down to the ford, and even cross it in search of us." "Yea," said Ralph, "it is well in all wise." So then they rode thence awhile till the moon grew low, and great, and red, and sank down away from them; and by then were they come to a shepherd's cot, empty of men, with naught therein save an old dog, and some victual, as bread & white cheese, and a well for drinking. So there they abode & rested that night.

Chapter XV. A strange meeting in the Wilderness

ON the morrow betimes they got to the road again; the country at first, though it was scanty of tillage, was not unfurnished of sheep, being for the most part of swelling hills & downs well grassed, with here & there a deep cleft in them. They saw but few houses, and those small and poor. A few shepherds they fell in with, who were short of speech, after the manner of such men, but deemed a greeting not wholly thrown away on such goodly folk as those wayfarers. So they rode till it was noon, and Richard talked more than his wont was, though his daily use it was to be of many words: nor did the Sage spare speech; but Ursula spoke little, nor heeded much what the others said, & Ralph deemed that she was paler than of wont, and her brows were knitted as if she were somewhat anxious. As for him, he was grave & calm, but of few words; and whiles when Richard was wordiest he looked on him steadily for a moment, whereat Richard changed countenance, and for a while stinted his speech, but not for long; while Ralph looked about him, inwardly striving to gather together the ends of unhappy thoughts that floated about him, and to note the land he was passing through, if indeed he had verily seen it aforetime, elsewhere than in some evil dream.

AT last when they stopped to bait by some scrubby bushes at the foot of a wide hill-side, he took Richard apart, and said to him: "Old friend, and whither go we?" Said Richard: "As thou wottest, to the Burg of the four friths" ❧ "Yea," said Ralph, "but by what road?" Said Richard: "Youngling, is not thine heart, then, as strong as thou deemedst last night?" Ralph was silent a while, and then he said: "I know what thou wouldst say; we are going by the shortest road to the Castle of Abundance" ❧ He spake this out loud, but Richard nodded his head to him, as if he would say: "Yea, so it is; but hold thy peace." But Ralph knew that Ursula had come up behind him, and, still looking at Richard, he put his open hand aback toward her, & her hand fell into it. Then he turned about to her, and saw that her face was verily pale; so he put his hands on her shoulders & kissed her kindly; and she let her head fall on to his bosom and fell a-weeping, and the two elders turned away to the horses, and feigned to be busy with them.

THUS then they bided some minutes of time, & then all gat to horse again, and Ursula's face was cleared of the grief of fear, & the colour had come back to her cheeks & lips. But Ralph's face was stern & sorrowful to behold; howbeit, as they rode away he spake in a loud & seeming cheerful voice: "Still ever shorteneth more and more the way unto my fathers' House: and withal I am wishful to see if it be indeed true that the men of the Burg have become mild and peaceful; & to know what hath befallen those doughty champions of the Dry Tree; and if perchance they have any will to hold us a tilting in courteous fashion. Richard smiled on him, and said: "Thou holdest more then by the Dry Tree than by the Burg; though while agone we deemed the Champions worse men to meet in the wood than the Burgers." "So it is," said Ralph; "but men are oft mis-said by them that know them not thoroughly: & now, if it were a good wish, O Sage of Swevenham, I were fain to fall in with the best of all those champions, a tall man and a proper, who, meseems, had good-will toward me, I know not why" ❧ Quoth the Sage: "If thou canst not see the end of this wish fulfilled, no more can I. And yet, meseems, something may follow it which is akin to grief: be content with things so done, my son."

NOW RALPH holds his peace, and they speed on their way, Ursula riding close by Ralph's side, and caressing him with looks, & by touch also when she might; & after a while he fell to talking again, & ever in the same loud, cheerful voice. Till at last, in about another hour, they came in sight of the stream which ran down toward the Swelling flood from that pool wherein erst the Lady of Abundance had bathed her before the murder. Hard looked Ralph on the stream, but howsoever his heart might ache with the memory of that passed grief, like as the body aches with the bruise of yesterday's blow, yet he changed countenance but little, and in his voice was the same cheery sound. But Ursula noted him, and how his eyes wandered, and how little he heeded the words of the others, & she knew what ailed him, for long ago he had told her all that tale, and so now her heart was troubled, & she looked on him and was silent.

THUS, then, a little before sunset, they came on that steep cliff with the cave therein, & the little green plain thereunder, & the rocky bank going down sheer into the water of the stream. Forsooth they came on it somewhat suddenly from out of the bushes of the valley; and there indeed not only the Sage and Richard, but Ursula also, were stayed by the sight as folk compelled; for all three knew what had befallen there. But Ralph, though he looked over his shoulder at it all, yet rode on steadily, and when he saw that the others lingered, he waved his hand & cried out as he rode: "On, friends, on! for the road shortens towards my fathers' House". Then were they ashamed, and shook their reins to hasten after him.

BUT in that very nick of time there came forth one from amidst the bushes that edged the pool of the stream and strode dripping on to the shallow; a man brown and hairy, and naked, save for a green wreath about his middle. Tall he was above the stature of most men; awful of aspect, & his eyes glittered from his dark brown face amidst of his shock-head of the colour of rain-spoilt hay. He stood and looked while one might count five, & then without a word or cry rushed up from the water, straight on Ursula, who was riding first of the three lingerers, and in the twinkling of an eye tore her from off her horse; & she was in his grasp as the cushat in the claws of the kite. Then he cast her to earth, & stood over

her, shaking a great club, but or ever he brought it down he turned his head over his shoulder toward the cliff & the cave therein, and in that same moment first one blade and then another flashed about him, & he fell crashing down upon his back, smitten in the breast and the side by Richard and Ralph; and the wounds were deep and deadly.

RALPH heeded him no more, but drew Ursula away from him, & raised her up & laid her head upon his knee; and she had not quite swooned away, and forsooth had taken but little hurt; only she was dizzy with terror and the heaving up & casting down. She looked up into Ralph's face, and smiled on him and said: "What hath been done to me, and why did he do it?" His eyes were still wild with fear and wrath, as he answered: "O Beloved, Death and the foeman of old came forth from the cavern of the cliff. What did they there, Lord God? and he caught thee to slay thee; but him have I slain. Nevertheless, it is a terrible & evil place: let us go hence." "Yea," she said, "let us go speedily!" Then she stood up, weak and tottering still, & Ralph arose and put his left arm about her to stay her; and lo, there before them was Richard kneeling over the wild-man, & the Sage was coming back from the river with his headpiece full of water; so Ralph cried out: "To horse, Richard, to horse! Hast thou not done slaying the woodman?" But therewith came a weak and hoarse voice from the earth, & the wild-man spake: "Child of Upmeads, drive not on so hard: it will not be long. For thou and Richard the Red are naught light-handed."

RALPH marvelled that the wild-man knew him & Richard, but the wild-man spake again: "Hearken, thou lover, thou young man!" But therewith was the Sage come to him and kneeling beside him with the water, and he drank thereof, while Ralph said to him: "What is this, woodman? & canst thou speak my Latin? What art thou?" Then the wild-man when he had drunk raised him up a little, & said: "Young man, thou and Richard are deft leeches; ye have let me blood to a purpose, and have brought back to me my wits, which were wandering wide. Yet am I indeed where my fool's brains told me I was." Then he lay back again, and turned his head as well as he could toward the cavern in the cliff. But Ralph deemed he had heard his voice before, and his heart was softened toward

him, he knew not why; but he said: "Yea, but wherefore didst thou fall upon the Lady?" The wild-man strove with his weakness, and said angrily: "What did another woman there?" Then he said in a calmer but weaker voice: "Nay, my wits shall wander no more from me; we will make the journey together, I and my wits. But O, young man, this I will say if I can. Thou fleddest from her and forgattest her. I came to her and forgat all but her; yea, my very life I forgat." Again he spoke, and his voice was weaker yet: "Kneel down by me, or I may not tell thee what I would; my voice dieth before me."

THEN Ralph knelt down by him, for he began to have a deeming of what he was, & he put his face close to the dying man's, and said to him: "I am here, what wouldst thou?" Said the wild-man very feebly: "I did not much for thee, time was; how might I, when I loved her so sorely? But I did a little. Believe it, and do so much for me that I may lie by her side when I am dead, who never lay by her living. For into the cave I durst go never." Then Ralph knew him, that he was the tall champion whom he had met first at the churchyard gate of Netherton; so he said: "I know thee now, & I will promise to do thy will herein. I am sorry that I have slain thee; forgive it me." A mocking smile came into the dying man's eyes, & he spake whispering: "Richard it was; not thou." The smile spread over his face, he strove to turn more toward Ralph, & said in a very faint whisper: "The last time!"

NO more he said, but gave up the ghost presently. The Sage rose up from his side & said: "Ye may now bury this man as he craved of thee, for he is dead. Thus hath thy wish been accomplished; for this was the great champion & duke of the men of the Dry Tree. Indeed it is a pity of him that he is dead, for as terrible as he was to his foes, he was no ill man." Spake Richard: "Now is the riddle areded of the wild-man & the mighty giant that haunted these passes. We have played together ere now, in days long past, he and I; and ever he came to his above. He was a wise man and a prudent that he should have become a wild-man. It is great pity of him." But Ralph took his knight's cloak of red scarlet, and they lapped the wild-man therein, who had once been a champion beworshipped. But first Ursula sheared his hair & his beard, till the face of him came back again, grave, & somewhat mocking, as Ralph

remembered it, time was. Then they bore him in the four corners across the stream, & up on to the lawn before the cliff; and Richard and the Sage bore him into the cave, & laid him down there beside the howe which Ralph had erewhile heaped over the Lady; and now over him also they heaped stones.

MEANWHILE Ursula knelt at the mouth of the cave and wept; but Ralph turned him about and stood on the edge of the bank, & looked over the ripple of the stream on to the valley, where the moon was now beginning to cast shadows, till those two came out of the cave for the last time. Then Ralph turned to Ursula and raised her up and kissed her, & they went down all of them from that place of death and ill-hap, and gat to horse on the other side of the stream, and rode three miles further on by the glimmer of the moon, and lay down to rest amongst the bushes of the waste, with few words spoken between them.

Chapter XVI. They come to the Castle of Abundance once more

THEN they rode on next morning Ralph was few-spoken, & seemed to heed little so long as they made good speed on the way: most of the talk was betwixt Richard and the Sage, Ralph but putting in a word when it would have seemed churlish to forbear. So they went their ways through the wood till by then the sun was well westering they came out at the Water of the Oak, and Richard drew rein there, and spake: "Here is a fair place for a summer night's lodging, and I would warrant both good knight and fair lady have lain here aforetime, and wished the dark longer: shall we not rest here?"

RALPH stared at him astonished, & then anger grew in his face for a little, because, forsooth, as Richard & the Sage both wotted of the place of the slaying of the Lady, and he himself had every yard of the way in his mind as they went, it seemed but due that they should have known of this place also, what betid there: but it was not so, & the place was to Richard like any other lawn of the woodland. But thought came back to Ralph in a moment, & he smiled at his own folly, howbeit he could not do to lie another night on that lawn with other folk than erst. So he said quietly: "Nay, friend, were we not better to make the most of this daylight? Seest thou it wants yet an hour of sunset?" Rich-

ard nodded a yeasay, and the Sage said no word more; but Ursula cast her anxious look on Ralph as though she understood what was moving in him; & therewith those others rode away lightly, but Ralph turned slowly from the oak-tree, and might not forbear looking on to the short sward round about, as if he hoped to see some token left behind. Then he lifted up his face as one awaking, shook his rein, & rode after the others down the long water. So they turned from the water anon, & rode the woodland ways, and lay that night by a stream that ran west.

THEY arose betimes on the morrow, and whereas the Sage knew the woodland ways well, they made but a short journey of it to the Castle of Abundance, & came into the little plain but two hours after noon, where, saving that the scythe had not yet wended the tall mowing grass in the crofts which the beasts and sheep were not pasturing, all was as on that other tide. The folk were at work in their gardens, or herding their cattle in the meads, & as aforetime they were merry of countenance and well-clad, fair & gentle to look on. There were their pleasant cots, & the little white church, and the fair walls of the castle on its low mound, and the day bright and sunny, all as aforetime, and Ralph looked on it all, & made no countenance of being moved beyond his wont.

SO THEY came out of the wood, & rode to the ford of the river, and the carles & queans came streaming from their garths and meads to meet them, & stood round wondering at them; but an old carle came from out the throng and went up to Ralph, and hailed him, & said: "Ah, Knight! and hast thou come back to us? & hast thou brought us tidings of our Lady? Who is this fair woman that rideth with thee? Is it she?" Spake Ralph: "Nay; go look on her closely, and tell me thy deeming of her."

SO the carle went up to Ursula, and peered closely into her face, & took her hand and looked on it, & knelt down and took her foot out of the stirrup, and kissed it, and then came back to Ralph, and said: "Fair sir, I wot not but it may be her sister; for yonder old wise man I have seen here erst with our heavenly Lady. But though this fair woman may be her sister, it is not she. So tell me what is become of her, for it is long since we have seen her; and what thou tellest us, that same shall we trow, even as if thou wert her angel. For I spake with thee, it is nigh two years agone, when thou

wert abiding the coming of our Lady in the castle yonder. But now I see of thee that thou art brighter-faced, and mightier of aspect than aforetime, and it is in my mind that the Lady of Abundance must have loved thee and holpen thee, & blessed thee with some great blessing."

SAID Ralph: "Old man, canst thou feel sorrow, & canst thou bear it?" The carle shook his head. "I wot not," said he; "I fear thy words." Said Ralph: "It were naught to say less than the truth; & this is the very truth, that thou shalt never see thy Lady any more. I was the last living man that ever saw her alive." Then he spake in a loud voice and said: "Lament, ye people! for the Lady of Abundance is dead; yet sure I am that she sendeth this message to you, Live in peace, and love ye the works of the earth." But when they heard him, the old man covered up his face with the folds of his gown, and all that folk brake forth into weeping, and crying out: "Woe for us! the Lady of Abundance is dead!" & some of the younger men cast themselves down on to the earth, & wallowed, weeping and wailing: and there was no man there that seemed as if he knew which way to turn, or what to do; & their faces were foolish with sorrow. Yet forsooth it was rather the carles than the queans who made all this lamentation.

AT last the old man spake: "Fair sir, ye have brought us heavy tidings, and we know not how to ask you to tell us more of the tale. Yet if thou mightst but tell us how the Lady died? Woe's me for the word!" Said Ralph: "She was slain with the sword." The old man drew himself up stiff and stark, the eyes of him glittered under his white hair, and wrath changed his face, and the other men-folk thronged them to hearken what more should be said. But the elder spake again: "Tell me who it was that slew her, for surely shall I slay him, or die in the pain else." Said Ralph: "Be content, thou mayst not slay him; he was a great and mighty man, a baron who bore a golden sun on a blue field. Thou mayst not slay him." "Yea," said the old man, "but I will, or he me." "Live in peace," said Ralph, "for I slew him then and there."

THE old man held his peace a while, and then he said: "I know the man, for he hath been here aforetime, and not so long ago. But if he be dead, he hath a brother yet, an exceeding mighty man: he will be coming here to vex us and minish us." Said

Ralph: "He will not stir from where he lies till Earth's bones be broken, for my sword lay in his body yesterday." The old man stood silent again, & the other carles thronged him; but the women stood aloof staring on Ralph. Then the elder came up to Ralph and knelt before him and kissed his feet; then he turned & called to him three of the others who were of the stoutest and most stalwarth, and he spake with them awhile, and then he came to Ralph again, and again knelt before him and said: "Lord, ye have come to us, and found us void of comfort, since we have lost our Lady. But we see in thee, that she hath loved thee and blessed thee, & thou hast slain her slayer & his kindred. And we see of thee also that thou art a good lord. O the comfort to us, therefore, if thou wouldest be our Lord! We will serve thee truly so far as we may: yea, even if thou be beset by foes, we will take bow and bill from the wall, and stand round about thee and fight for thee. Only thou must not ask us to go hence from this place: for we know naught but the Plain of Abundance, and the edges of the wood, and the Brethren of the House of the Thorn, who are not far hence. Now we pray thee by thy fathers not to naysay us, so sore as thou hast made our hearts. Also we see about thy neck the same/like pair of beads which our Lady was wont to bear, and we deem that ye were in one tale together."

THEN was Ralph silent awhile, but the Sage spake to the elder: "Old man, how great is the loss of the Lady to you?" "Heavy loss, wise old man," said the carle, "as thou thyself mayst know, having known her." "And what did she for you?" said the Sage. Said the elder: "We know that she was gracious to us; never did she lay tax or tale on us, and whiles she would give us of her store, and that often, and abundantly. We deem also that every time when she came to us our increase became more plenteous, which is well seen by this, that since she hath ceased to come, the seasons have been niggard unto us." The Sage smiled somewhat, and the old man went on: "But chiefly the blessing was to see her when she came to us: for verily it seemed that where she set her feet the grass grew greener, and that the flowers blossomed fairer where the shadow of her body fell." And therewith the old man fell aweeping again. The Sage held his peace, and Ralph still kept silence; and now of those men all the younger ones had their

eyes upon Ursula.

AFTER a while Ralph spake & said: "O elder, and ye folk of the People of Abundance, true it is that your Lady who is dead loved me, and it is through her that I am become a friend of the Well. Now me seemeth though ye have lost your Lady, whom ye so loved and worshipped, God wot not without cause, yet I wot not why ye now cry out for a master, since ye dwell here in peace and quiet & all wealth, and the fathers of the Thorn are here to do good to you. Yet, if ye will it in sooth, I will be called your Lord, in memory of your Lady whom ye shall not see again. And as time wears I will come and look on you and hearken to your needs: and if ye come to fear that any should fall upon you with the strong hand, then send ye a message to me, Ralph of Upmeads, down by the water, and I will come to you with such following as need be. And as for service, this only I lay upon you, that ye look to the Castle and keep it in good order, and ward it against thieves and runagates, and give guesting therein to any wandering knight or pilgrim, or honest goodman, who shall come to you. Now is all said, my masters, and I pray you let us depart in peace; for time presses."

THEN all they (and this time women as well as men) cried out joyfully: "Hail to our lord! and long life to our helper." And the women withal drew nearer to him, and some came close up to him, as if they would touch him or kiss his hand, but by seeming durst not, but stood blushing before him, & he looked on them, smiling kindly. But the old man laid his hand on his knee and said: "Lord, wouldst thou not light down and enter thy Castle? for none hath more right there now than thou. The Prior of the Thorn hath told us that there is no lineage of the Lady left to claim it; and none other might ever have claimed it save the Baron of Sunway, whom thou hast slain. And else would we have slain him, since he slew our Lady." Ralph shook his head & said: "Nay, old friend, and new vassal, this we may not do: we must on speedily, for belike there is work for us to do nearer home."

"Yea, Lord," said the carle, "but at least light down & sit for a while under this fair oak-tree in the heat of the day, and eat a morsel with us, and drink a cup, that thy luck may abide with us when thou art gone."

RALPH would not naysay him; so he & all of them got off their horses, and sat down on the green grass

under the oak: and that people gathered about & sat down by them, save that a many of the women went to their houses to fetch out the victual. Mean/while the carles fell to speech freely with the wayfarers, and told them much concerning their little land, were it hearsay, or stark sooth: such as tales of the wights that dwelt in the wood, wodehouses, & elf/women, & dwarfs, and such like, and how fearful it were to deal with such creatures. Amongst other matters they told how a hermit, a holy man, had come to dwell in the wood, in a clear/ing but a little way thence to-ward the north/west. But when Ralph asked if he dwelt on the way to the ford of the Swelling flood, they knew not what he meant; for the wood was to them as a wall. Hereon the Sage held one of the younger men in talk, and taught him what he might of the way to the Burg of the Four Friths, so that they might verily send a messenger to Upmeads if need were. But the country youth said there was no need to think thereof, as no man of theirs would dare the journey through the wood, and that if they had need of a messen-ger, one of the Fathers of the Thorn would do their errand, whereas they were holy men, and knew the face of the world full well. Now in this while the folk seemed to have gotten their courage again, and to be cheery, and to have lost their grief for the Lady: and of the maidens left about the oak were more than two or three very fair, who stood gazing at Ralph as if they were exceed-ing fain of him.

BUT amidst these things came back the women with the victual; to wit bread in baskets, and cheeses both fresh and old, & honey, and wood/strawberries, and eggs cooked diversely, and skewers of white wood with gobbets of roasted lamb's flesh, and salad good plenty. All these they bore first to Ralph and Ursula, & their two fellows, and then dealt them to their own folk: and they feasted and were merry in de-spite of that tale of evil tid-ings. They brought also bowls and pitchers of wine that was good and strong, and cider of their orchards, and called many a health to the new Lord and his kindred. Thus then they abode a/feasting till the sun was westering and the shadows waxed about them, and then at last Ralph rose up and called to horse, and the other wayfarers arose also, & the horses were led up to them. Then the maidens, made bold by the joy of the feast, & being

stirred to the heart by much beholding of this beloved Lord, cast off their shamefacedness and crowded about him, and kissed his raiment and his hands: some even, though trembling, and more for love than fear, prayed him for kisses, and he, nothing loath, laughed merrily and laid his hands on their shoulders or took them by the chins, & set his lips to the sweetness of their cheeks and their lips, of those that asked & those that refrained; so that their hearts failed them for love of him, & when he was gone, they knew not how to go back to their houses, or the places that were familiar to them. Therewith he and his got into their saddles and rode away slowly, because of the thronging about them of that folk, who followed them to the edge of the wood, and even entered a little thereinto; and then stood gazing on Ralph and his fellows after they had spurred on and were riding down a glade of the woodland.

Chapter XVII. They fall in with that Hermit.

So much had they tarried over this greeting & feasting, that though they had hoped to have come to the hermit's house that night, he of whom that folk had told them, it fell not so, whereas the day had aged so much ere they left the Plain of Abundance that it began to dusk before they had gone far, & they must needs stay and await the dawn there; so they dight their lodging as well as they might, and lay down and slept under the thick boughs. Ralph woke about sunrise, and looking up saw a man standing over him, & deemed at first that it would be Richard or the Sage; but as his vision cleared, he saw that it was neither of them, but a new-comer; a stout carle clad in russet, with a great staff in his hand & a short-sword girt to his side. Ralph sprang up, still not utterly awake, & cried out: "Who art thou, carle?" The man laughed, and said: "Yea, thou art still the same brisk lad, only filled out to something more warrior-like than of old. But it is unmeet to forget old friends. Why dost thou not hail me?" "Because I know thee not, good fellow," said Ralph. But even as he spoke, he looked into the man's face again, & cried out: "By St. Nicholas! but it is Roger of the Ropewalk. But look you, fellow, if I have somewhat filled out, thou, who wast always black-muzzled, art now

become as hairy as a wode-house. What dost thou in the wilds?" Said Roger: "Did they not tell thee of a hermit new come to these shaws?" "Yea," said Ralph. "I am that holy man," quoth Roger, grinning; "not that I am so much of that, either. I have not come hither to pray or fast overmuch, but to rest my soul and be out of the way of men. For all things have changed since my Lady passed away."

He looked about, & saw Ursula just rising up from the ground & the Sage stirring, while Richard yet hugged his bracken bed, snoring. So he said: "And who be these, & why hast thou taken to the wildwood? Yea lad, I see of thee, that thou hast gotten another Lady; and if mine eyes do not fail me she is fair enough. But there be others as fair; while the like to our Lady that was, there is none such." He fell silent a while, & Ralph turned about to the others, for by this time Richard also was awake, and said: "This man is the hermit of whom we were told." Roger said: "Yea, I am the hermit and the holy man; & withal I have a thing to hear and a thing to tell. Ye were best to come with me, all of you, to my house in the woods; a poor one, forsooth, but there is somewhat of victual there, and we can tell and hearken therein well sheltered & at peace. So to horse, fair folk." They would not be bidden twice, but mounted and went along with him, who led them by a thicket path about a mile, till they came to a lawn where through ran a stream; and there was a little house in it, simple enough, of one hall, built with rough tree-limbs and reed thatch. He brought them in, & bade them sit on such stools or bundles of stuff as were there. But withal he brought out victual nowise ill, though it were but simple also, of venison of the wildwood, with some little deal of cakes baked on the hearth, and he poured for them also both milk and wine.

They were well content with the banquet, and when they were full, Roger said: "Now, my Lord, like as oft befalleth minstrels, ye have had your wages before your work. Fall to, then, and pay me the scot by telling me all that hath befallen you since (woe worth the while!) my Lady died, I must needs say, for thy sake." "'All' is a big word," said Ralph, "but I will tell thee somewhat. Yet I bid thee take note that I & this ancient wise one, and my Lady withal, deem that I am drawn by my kindred to come to their help, and that time presses" Roger scowl-

ed somewhat on Ursula; but he said: "Lord and master, let not that fly trouble thy lip. For so I deem of it, that whatsoever time ye may lose by falling in with me, ye may gain twice as much again by hearkening my tale and the rede that shall go with it. And I do thee to wit that the telling of thy tale shall unfreeze mine; so tarry not, if ye be in haste to be gone, but let thy tongue wag."

RALPH smiled, & without more ado told him all that had befallen him; & of Swevenham and Utterbol, and of his captivity and flight; and of the meeting in the wood, & of the Sage (who there was), and of the journey to the Well, and what betid there and since, and of the death of the Champion of the Dry Tree. But when he had made an end, Roger said: "There it is, then, as I said when she first spake to me of thee and bade me bring about that meeting with her, drawing thee first to the Burg & after to the Castle of Abundance, I have forgotten mostly by what lies; but I said to her that she had set her heart on a man over lucky, and that thou wouldst take her luck from her and make it thine. But now I will let all that pass, and will bid thee ask what thou wilt; & I promise thee that I will help thee to come thy ways to thy kindred, that thou mayst put forth thy luck in their behalf." Said Ralph: "First of all, tell me what shall I do to pass unhindered through the Burg of the Four Friths?" Said Roger: "Thou shalt go in at one gate and out at the other, and none shall hinder thee." Said Ralph: "And shall I have any hindrance from them of the Dry Tree?" Roger made as if he were swallowing down something, and answered: "Nay, none" "And the folk of Higham by the Way, and the Brethren and their Abbot?" said Ralph. "I know but little of them," quoth Roger, "but I deem that they will make a push to have thee for captain; because they have had war on their hands of late. But this shall be at thine own will to say yea or nay to them. But for the rest, on this side of the shepherds' country ye will pass by peaceful folk" "Yea," said Ralph, "what then hath become of the pride and cruelty of the Burg of the Four Friths, and the eagerness and fierceness of the Dry Tree?"

QUOTH Roger: "This is the tale of it: After the champions of the Dry Tree had lost their queen & beloved, the Lady of Abundance, they were both restless & fierce, for the days of sorrow hung heavy on their hands. So

on a time a great company of them had ado with the Burgers somewhat recklessly, & came to the worse; wherefore some drew back into their fastness of the Scaur & the others still rode on, and further west than their wont had been; but warily when they had the Wood Perilous behind them, for they had learned wisdom again. Thus riding, they had tidings of an host of the Burg of the four friths, who were resting in a valley hard by with a great train of captives and beasts & other spoil: for they had been raising the fray against the Wheat-wearers, and had slain many carles there, and were bringing home to the Burg many young women and women-children, after their custom. So they of the Dry Tree advised them of these tidings, & deemed that it would ease the sorrow of their hearts for their Lady if they could deal with these sons of whores & make a mark upon the Burg: so they lay hid while the daylight lasted, & by night & cloud fell upon these fainéants of the Burg, & won them good cheap, as was like to be, though the Burg-dwellers were many the more. Whereof a many were slain, but many escaped & gat home to the Burg, even as will lightly happen even in the worst of overthrows, that not all, or even the more part be slain. Well, there were the champions and their prey, which was very great, & especially of women, of whom the more part were young and fair: for the women of the Wheat-wearers be goodly, and these had been picked out by the rutters of the Burg for their youth and strength and beauty. And whereas the men of the Dry Tree were scant of women at home, & sore-hearted because of our Lady, they forbore not these women, but fell to talking with them & loving them; howbeit in courteous & manly fashion, so that the women deemed themselves in heaven and were ready to do anything to please their lovers. So the end of it was that the Champions sent messengers to Hampton and the Castle of the Scaur to tell what had betid, and they themselves took the road to the land of the Wheat-wearers, having those women with them, not as captives, but as free damsels.

NOW the road to the Wheat-wearing country was long, & on the way the damsels told their new men many things of their land and their unhappy wars with them of the Burg, & the griefs & torments which they endured of them. And this amongst other things, that wherever they came, they slew all the

males even to the sucking babe, but spared the women, even when they bore them not into captivity. 'Whereof,' said these poor damsels, 'it cometh that our land is ill-furnished of carles, so that we women, high and low, go afield and do many things, as crafts and the like, which in other lands are done by carles.' In sooth it seemed of them that they were both of stouter fashion & defter than women are wont to be. So the Champions, part in jest, part in earnest, bade them do on the armour of the slain Burgers, and take their weapons, & fell to teaching them how to handle staff & sword & bow; and the women took heart from the valiant countenance of their new lovers, and deemed it all bitter earnest enough, & learned their part speedily; and yet none too soon. For when the fleers of the Burg came home the Porte lost no time, but sent out another host to follow after the Champions and their spoil; for they had learned that those men had not turned about to Hampton after their victory, but had gone on to the Wheat-wearers. So it befell that the host of the Burg came up with the Champions on the eve of a summer day when there were yet three hours of daylight. But whereas they had looked to have an easy bargain of their foemen, since they knew the Champions to be but a few, lo! there was all the hillside covered with a goodly array of spears and glaives and shining helms. They marvelled; but now for very shame, and because they scarce could help it, they fell on, and before sunset were scattered to the winds again, and the fleers had to bear back the tale that the more part of their foes were women of the Wheat-wearers; but this time few were those that came back alive to the Burg of the four friths; for the freed captives were hot and eager in the chase, casting aside their shields & hauberks that they might speed the better, and valuing their lives at naught if they might but slay a man or two of the tyrants before they died.

THUS WAS the Burg wounded with its own sword: but the matter stopped not there: for when that victorious host of men & women came into the land of the Wheat-wearers, all men fled away in terror at first, thinking that it was a new onset of the men of the Burg; and that all the more, as so many of them bore their weapons & armour. But when they found out how matters had gone, then, as ye may deem, was the greatest joy and exultation, and carles

and queans both ran to arms and bade their deliverers learn them all that belonged to war, and said that one thing should not be lacking, to wit, the gift of their bodies, that should either lie dead in the fields, or bear about henceforth the souls of free men. Nothing loath, the Champions became their doctors & teachers of battle, and a great host was drawn together; & meanwhile the Champions had sent messengers again to Hampton telling them what was befallen, and asking for more men if they might be had. But the Burg-abiders were not like to sit down under their foil. Another host they sent against the Wheat-wearers, not so huge as well arrayed and wise in war. The Champions espied its goings, and knew well that they had to deal with the best men of the Burg, and they met them in like wise; for they chose the very best of the men and the women, and pitched on a place whence they might ward them well, & abode the foemen there; who failed not to come upon them, stout and stern and cold, and well-learned in all feats of war. Long & bitter was the battle, & the Burgers were fierce without head-strong folly, & the Wheat-wearers deemed that if they blenched now, they had something worse than death to look to. But in the end, when both sides were grown weary and worn out, and yet neither would flee, on a sudden came into the field the help from the Dry Tree, a valiant company of riders to whom battle was but game and play. Then indeed the men of the Burg gave back and drew out of the battle as best they might: yet were they little chased, save by the new-comers of the Dry Tree, for the others were over weary, and moreover the leaders had no mind to let the new-made warriors leave their vantage-ground lest the old & tried men-at-arms of the Burg should turn upon them and put them to the worse. Men looked for battle again the next day; but it fell not out so; for the host of the Burg saw that there was more to lose than to gain, so they drew back towards their own place. Neither did they waste the land much; for the riders of the Dry Tree followed hard at heel, and cut off all who tarried, or strayed from the main battle.

WHEN they were gone, then at last did the Wheat-wearers give themselves up to the joy of their deliverance and the pleasure of their new lives: & one of their old men that I have spoken with told me this; that before, when they were little

better than the thralls of the Burg, and durst scarce raise a hand against the foemen, the carles were but slow to love, & the queans, for all their fairness, cold and but little kind. However, now in the fields of the Wheat-wearers themselves all this was changed, and men and maids took to arraying themselves gaily as occasion served, and there was singing and dancing on every green, & straying of couples amongst the greenery of the summer night; and in short the god of love was busy in the land, and made the eyes seem bright, & the lips sweet, and the bosom fair, and the arms sleek, & the feet trim: so that every hour was full of allurement; & ever the nigher that war and peril was, the more delight had man & maid of each other's bodies.

WELL, within a while the Wheat-wearers were grown so full of hope that they bade the men of the Dry Tree lead them against the Burg of the Four Friths, & the Champions were ready thereto; because they wotted well, that, Hampton being disgarnished of men, the men of the Burg might fall on it; & even if they took it not, they would beset all ways & make riding a hard matter for their fellowship. So they fell to, wisely & deliberately, and led an host of the best of the carles with them, & bade the women keep their land surely, so that their host was not a great many. But so wisely they led them that they came before the Burg well-nigh unawares; and though it seemed little likely that they should take so strong a place, yet naught less befell. For the Burg-dwellers, beset with cruelty & bitter anger, cried out that now at last they would make an end of this cursed people, and the whoreson strong-thieves their friends: so they went out a-gates a great multitude, but in worser order than their wont was; and there befell that marvel which sometimes befalleth even to very valiant men, that now at the pinch all their valour flowed from them, & they fled before the spears had met, and in such evil order that the gates could not be shut, and their foemen entered with them, slaying & slaying even as they would. So that in an hour's space the pride and the estate of the Burg of the Four Friths was utterly fallen. Huge was the slaughter; for the Wheat-wearers deemed they had many a grief whereof to avenge them; nor were the men of the Dry Tree either sluggards or saints to be careless of their foemen, or to be merciful in the battle: but at last the murder was stayed: and then the men of

the Wheat-wearers went from house to house in the town to find the women of their folk who had been made thralls by the Burgers. There then was many a joyful meeting betwixt those poor women and the men of their kindred: all was forgotten now of the days of their thraldom, their toil and mocking and stripes; & within certain days all the sort of them came before the host clad in green raiment, and garlanded with flowers for the joy of their deliverance; & great feast was made to them.

AS for them of the Burg, the battle & chase over, no more were slain, save that certain of the great ones were made shorter by the head. But the Champions and the Wheat-wearers both, said that none of that bitter and cruel folk should abide any longer in the town; so that after a delay long enough for them to provide stuff for their wayfaring, they were all thrust out a-gates, rich and poor, old and young, man, woman, and child. Proudly & with a stout countenance they went, for now was their valour come again to them. And it is like that we shall hear of them oft again; for though they had but few weapons amongst them when they were driven out of their old home, and neither hauberk nor shield nor helm, yet so learned in war be they & so marvellous great of pride, that they will somehow get them weapons; and even armed but with headless staves & cudgels of the thicket, woe betide the peaceful folk whom they shall first fall on. Yea, fair sir, the day shall come meseemeth when folk shall call on thee to lead the hunt after these famished wolves, & when thou dost so, call on me to tell thee tales of their doings which shall make thine heart hard, and thine hand heavy against them."

MEANTIME," SAID Ralph, "what has betid to the fellowship of the Dry Tree? for I see that thou hast some grief on thy mind because of them." Roger kept silence a little, and then he said: "I grieve because Hampton is no more a strong place of warriors; two or three carles & a dozen of women dwell now in the halls & chambers of the Scaur. Here on earth all endeth. God send us to find the world without end!" "What then," said Ralph, "have they then had another great overthrow, worse than that other?" "Nay," said Roger doggedly, "it is not so." "But where is the fellowship?" said Ralph. "It is scattered abroad," quoth Roger; "for some of the Dry Tree had no heart to leave the

women whom they had wooed in the Wheat-wearers' land: & some, and a great many, have taken their dears to dwell in the Burg of the four friths, whereas a many of the Wheat-wearers have gone to beget children on the old bondwomen of the Burgers; of whom there were some two thousand alive after the Burg was taken; besides that many women also came with the carles from their own land. So that now a mixed folk are dwelling in the Burg, partly of those women-thralls, partly of carles and queans come newly from the Wheat-wearers, partly of men of our fellowship, the more part of whom are wedded to queans of the Wheat-wearers, and partly of men, chapmen and craftsmen, & others who have drifted into the town, having heard that there is no lack of wealth there, & many fair women unmated." "Yea," said Ralph, "and is all this so ill?" Said Roger: "Meseems it is ill enough that there is no longer, rightly said, a fellowship of the Dry Tree, though the men be alive who were once of that fellowship." "Nay," said Ralph, "and why should they not make a new fellowship in the Burg, whereas they may well be peaceful, since they have come to their above of their foemen?" "Yea," said Roger slowly, "that is sooth; and so is this, that there in the Burg they are a strong band, with a captain of their own, & much worshipped of the peaceful folk; & moreover, though they be not cruel to torment helpless folk, or hard to make an end of all joy to-day, lest they lose their joy to-morrow, they now array all men in good order within the Burg, so that it shall be no easier for a foeman to win than erst it was." "What, man!" said Ralph; "then be of better cheer, and come thou with us, and maybe the old steel of the Champions may look on the sun down in Upmeads. Come thou with me I say, and show me and my luck to some of thy fellows who are dwelling in the Burg, & it may be, when thou hast told my tale to them, that some of them shall be content to leave their beds cold for a while, that they may come help a friend of the Well in his need." Roger sat silent as if he were pondering the matter, while Richard and the Sage, both of them, took up the word one after the other, & urged him to it. At last he said: "Well, so be it for this adventure. Only I say not that I shall give up this hermitage and my holiness for ever. Come thou aside, wise man of Swevenham, & I shall tell thee wherefore" "Yea," said Ralph, laughing, "and when he hath

told thee, tell me not again; for sure I am that he is right to go with us, & belike shall be wrong in his reason therefor."

ROGER looked a little askance at him, and he went without doors with the Sage, and when they were out of earshot he said to him: "Hearken, I would have gone with my lord at the first word, and have been fain thereof; but there is this woman that followeth him. At every turn she shall mind me of our Lady that was; & I shall loathe her, and her fairness and the allurements of her body, because I see of her, that she it is that hath gotten my Lady's luck, and that but for her my Lady might yet have been alive." Said the Sage: "Well quoth my lord that thou wouldst give me a fool's reason! What! dost not thou know, thou that knowest so much of the Lady of Abundance, that she it was who ordained this Ursula to be Ralph's bedmate, when she herself should be gone from him, were she dead or alive, and that she also should be a friend of the Well, so that he might not lack a fellow his life long? But this thou sayest, not knowing the mind of our Lady, and how she loved him in her inmost heart" Roger hung his head and spake not for a while, and then he said: "Well, wise man, I have said that I will go on this adventure, and I will smooth my tongue for this while at least, & for what may come hereafter, let it be. And now we were best get to horse; for what with meat and minstrelsy, we have worn away the day till it wants but a little of noon. Go tell thy lord that I am ready. Farewell peace, and welcome war & grudging!" So the Sage went within, & came out with the others, & they mounted their horses anon, & Roger went ahead on foot, and led them through the thicketways without fumbling; & they lay down that night on the farther side of the Swelling Flood.

Chapter XVIII. A change of days in the Burg of the Four Friths

THERE is naught to tell of their ways till they came out of the thicket into the fields about the Burg of the Four Friths; and even there was a look of a bettering of men's lives; though forsooth the husbandmen there were much the same as had abided in the fields aforetime, whereas they were not for the most part freemen of

the Burg, but aliens who did service in war and otherwise thereto. But, it being eventide, there were men and women & children, who had come out of gates, walking about and disporting themselves in the loveliness of early summer, and that in far merrier guise than they had durst do in the bygone days. Moreover, there was scarce a sword or spear to be seen amongst them, whereat Roger grudged somewhat, and Richard said: "Meseems this folk trusts the peace of the Burg overmuch, since, when all is told, unpeace is not so far from their borders." But as they drew a little nigher Ralph pointed out to his fellows the gleam of helms and weapons on the walls, and they saw a watchman on each of the high towers of the south gate; and then quoth Roger: "Nay, the Burg will not be won so easily; and if a few fools get themselves slain outside it is no great matter."

HOLK nowise let them come up to the gate unheeded, but gathered about them to look at the newcomers, but not so as to hinder them, & they could see that these summerers were goodly folk enough, & demeaned them as though they had but few troubles weighing on them. But the wayfarers were not unchallenged at the gate, for a stout man-at-arms stayed them and said: "Ye ride somewhat late, friends. What are ye?" Quoth Ralph: "We be peaceful wayfarers, save to them that would fall on us, & we seek toward Upmeads." "Yea?" said the man; "belike ye shall find something less than peace betwixt here & Upmeads, for rumour goes that there are alien riders come into the lands of Higham, & for aught I know the said unpeace may spread further on. Well, if ye will go to the Flower de Luce & abide there this night, ye shall have a let-pass to-morn betimes." Then Ralph spake a word in Roger's ear, & Roger nodded his head, and, throwing his cowl aback, went up to the man-at-arms and said: "Stephen a-Hurst, hast thou time for a word with an old friend?" "Yea, Roger," said the man, "is it verily thou? I deemed that thou hadst fled away from all of us to live in the wilds" "So it was, lad," said Roger, "but times change from good to bad and back again; & now am I of this good lord's company; & I shall tell thee, Stephen, that though he rideth but few to-day, yet merry shall he be that rideth with him to-morrow if unpeace be in the land. Lo you, Stephen, this is the Child of Upmeads,

whom belike thou hast heard of; and if thou wilt take me in/to the chamber of thy tower, I will tell thee things of him that thou wottest not."

STEPHEN turned to Ralph and made obeis/ance to him, and said: "fair sir, there are tales going about concerning thee, some whereof are strange enow, but none of them ill; and I deem by the look of thee that thou shalt be both a stark champion and a good lord; and I deem that it shall be my good luck, if I see more of thee, and much more. Now if thou wilt, pass on with thine other fellows to the Flower de Luce, and leave this my old fellow/in/arms with me, & he shall tell me of thy mind; for I see that thou wouldest have somewhat of us; & since I doubt not, by the looks of thee, that thou wilt not bid us aught unknightly, when we know thy will we shall try to pleasure thee."

"Yea, Lord Ralph," said Roger, "thou mayest leave all the business with me, & I will come to thee not later than betimes to/morrow, & let thee wot how matters have sped. And methinks ye may hope to wend out/a/gates this time otherwise than thou didest before."

SO Ralph gave him yea say and thanked the man/at/arms, and rode his ways with the others toward the Flower de Luce; & whereas the sun was but newly set, Ralph noted that the booths were gayer & the houses brighter & more fairly adorned than afore/time. As for the folk, they were such that the streets seemed full of holiday makers, so joy/ous and well dight were they; & the women like to those fair thralls whom he had seen that other time, saving that they were not clad so wantonly, how/ever gaily. They came into the great square, and there they saw that the masons & build-ers had begun on the master church to make it fairer and bigger; the people were sport/ing there as in the streets, and amongst them were some wea/poned men, but the most part of these bore the token of the Dry Tree. So they entered the Flower de Luce, and had good welcome there, as if they were come home to their own house; for when its people saw such a goodly old man in the Sage, and so stout and trim a knight as was Richard, and above all when they beheld the loveli-ness of Ralph & Ursula, they praised them open/mouthed, and could scarce make enough of them. And when they had had their meat & were rested, came two of the maids there & asked them if it were lawful to talk with them; and Ralph

laughed and bade them sit by them, and eat a dainty morsel; and they took that blushing, for they were fair and young, and Ralph's face & the merry words of his mouth stirred the hearts within them: & forsooth it was not so much they that spake as Ursula and the Sage; for Ralph was somewhat few spoken, whereas he pondered concerning the coming days, & what he half deemed that he saw a-doing at Upmeads. But at last they found their tongues, & said how that already rumour was abroad that they were in the Burg who had drunk of the Water of the Well at the World's End; and said one: "It is indeed a fair sight to see you folk coming back in triumph; and so methinks will many deem if ye abide with us over to-morrow; and yet, Lady, for a while we are well-nigh as joyous as ye can be, whereas we have but newly come into new life also: some of us from very thraldom of the most grievous, and I am of those; and some of us in daily peril of it, like to my sister here. So mayhappen," said she, smiling, "none of us shall seek to the Well until we have worn our present bliss a little threadbare."

URSULA smiled on her, but the Sage said: "Mayhappen it is of no avail speaking of such things to a young & fair woman; but what would betide you if the old Burgers were to come back and win their walls again?" The maid who had been a thrall changed countenance at his word; but the other one said: "If the Burgers come back, they will find them upon the walls who have already chased them. Thou mayst deem me slim and tender, old wise man; but such as mine arm is, it has upheaved the edges against the foe; and if it be a murder to slay a Burger, then am I worthy of the gallows." "Yea, yea," quoth Richard, laughing, "ye shall be double-manned then in this good town: ye may well win, unless the sight of you shall make the foe over fierce for the gain." Said the Sage: "It is well, maiden, and if ye hold to that, and keep your carles in the same road, ye need not to fear the Burgers: and to say sooth, I have it in my mind, that before long ye shall have both war and victory." Then Ralph seemed to wake up as from a dream, & he arose, and said: "Thou art in the right, Sage, & to mine eyes it seemeth that both thou and I shall be sharers in the war and the victory." And therewith he fell to striding up and down the hall, while the two maidens sat gazing on him with gleaming

eyes and flushed cheeks. But in a little while he came back to his seat and sat him down, and fell to talk with the women, and asked them of the town & the building therein, and the markets, whether they throve; and they and two or three of the townsmen or merchants answered all, & told him how fair their estate was, and how thriving was the lot of one & all with them. Therewith was Ralph well pleased, and they sat talking there in good fellowship till the night was somewhat worn, and all men fared to bed.

Chapter XIX. Ralph sees Hampton and the Scaur

THEN it was morning Ralph arose & went into the hall of the hostelry, & even as he entered it the outside door opened, and in came Roger, and Richard with him (for he had been astir very early); & Roger, who was armed from head to foot and wore a coat of the Dry Tree, cried out: "Now, Lord, thou wert best do on thy war-gear, for thou shalt presently be captain of an host." "Yea, Roger," quoth Ralph, "and hast thou done well?" "Well enough," said Richard; "thine host shall not be a great one, but no man in it will be a blencher, for they be all Champions of the Dry Tree." "Yea," quoth Roger, "so it was that Stephen a-Hurst brought me to a company of my old fellows, and we went all of us together to the Captain of the Burg (e'en he of the Dry Tree, who in these latest days is made captain of all), and did him to wit that thou hadst a need; and whereas he, as all of us, had heard of the strokes that thou struckest in the wood that day when thy happiness first began (woe worth the while!), he stickled not to give some of us leave to look on the hand-play with thee. But soft, my Lord! abound not in thanks as yet, till I tell thee. The said Captain hath gotten somewhat of the mind of a chapman by dwelling in a town, 'tis like (the saints forgive me for saying so!), & would strike a bargain with thee." "Yea," said Ralph, smiling, "I partly guess what like the bargain is; but say thou."

SAID Roger: "I like not his bargain, not for thy sake but mine own; this it is, that we shall ride, all of us who are to be of thy fellowship, to the Castle of the Scaur today, & there thy Lady shall sit in the throne whereas in past days our Lady and Queen was wont to sit; & that thou shalt swear upon her head that when-

soever he biddeth thee come to the help of the Burg of the four friths and the tribes of the Wheat-wearers, thou shalt come in arms by the straightest road with such fellowship as thou mayst gather; and if thou wilt so do, we of the Dry Tree who go with thee on this journey are thine to save or to spend by flood or field, or castle wall, amidst the edges and the shafts and the fire-flaught. What sayest thou, thou who art lucky, and hast of late become wise? And I will tell thee, that though I hope it not, yet I would thou shouldst naysay it; for it will be hard for me to see another woman sitting in our Lady's seat: yea, to see her sitting there, who hath stolen her luck." Said Ralph: "Now this proffer of the Captain's I call friendly and knightly, and I will gladly swear as he will; all the more as without any oath I should never fail him whensoever he may send for me. As for thee, Roger, ride with us if thou wilt, & thou shalt be welcome both in the company and at the High House of Upmeads whenso we come there."

THEN was Roger silent, but nowise abashed; and as they spoke they heard the tramp of horses and the clash of weapons, and they saw through the open door three men-at-arms riding up to the house; so Ralph went out to welcome them; they were armed full well in bright armour, and their coats were of the Dry Tree, & they were tall men and warrior-like. They hailed Ralph as captain, and he gave them the sele of the day & bade come in and drink a cup; so did they, but they were scarce off their horses ere there came another three, and then six together, & so one after other till the hall of the Flower de Luce was full of the gleam of steel and clash of armour, and the lads held their horses without and were merry with the sight of the stalwart men-at-arms. Now cometh Ursula down from her chamber clad in her bravery; & when they saw her they set up a shout for joy of her, so that the rafters rang again; but she laughed for pleasure of them, & poured them out the wine, till they were merrier with the sight of her than with the good liquor. Now Roger comes to Ralph & tells him that he deems his host hath come to the last man. Then Ralph armed him, and those two maidens brought him his horse, and they mount all of them and draw up in the Square; and Roger & Stephen a-Hurst array them, for they were chosen of them as leaders along with Ralph & Richard, whom they all knew, at least

by hearsay. Then Roger drew from his pouch a parchment, and read the roll of names, and there was no man lacking, and they were threescore save five, besides Roger and the wayfarers, & never was a band of like number seen better; and Richard said softly unto Ralph: "If we had a few more of these, I should care little what foemen we should meet in Upmeads: soothly, my lord, they had as well have ridden into red Hell as into our green fields." "Fear not, Richard," said Ralph, "we shall have enough."

SO then they rode out of the Square and through the streets to the North Gate, and much folk was abroad to look on them, & they blessed them as they went, both carles & queans; for the rumour was toward that there was riding a good & dear Lord and a friend of the Well to get his own again from out of the hands of the aliens.

HEREWITH they ride a little trot through the freedom of the Burg, & when they were clear of it they turned aside from the woodland highway whereon Ralph had erst ridden with Roger, & followed the rides a good way till it was past noon, when they came into a very close thicket where there was but a narrow and winding way whereon two men might not ride abreast, & Roger said: "Now, if we were the old Burgers, and the Dry Tree still holding the Scaur, we should presently know what steel-point dinner meaneth; if the dead could rise out of their graves to greet their foemen, we should anon be a merry company here. But at last they learned the trick, and were wont to fetch a compass round about Grey Goose Thicket, as it hight amongst us." "Well," said Ralph, "but how if there be any waylaying us; the Burgers may be wiser still than thou deemest, & ye may have learned them more than thou art minded to think." "Nay," said Roger, "I bade a half score turn aside by the thicket path on our left hands; that shall make all sure; but indeed I look for no lurkers as yet. In a month's time that may betide, but not yet; not yet. But tell me, fair sir, have ye any deeming of where thou mayst get thee more folk who be not afraid of the hard hand-play? for Richard hath been telling me that there be tidings in the air." Said Ralph: "If hope play me not false, I look to gather some stout carles of the Shepherd Country." "Yea," said Roger, "but I shall tell thee that they have been at whiles unfriends of the Dry Tree" Said Ralph: "I

think they will be friends unto me." "Then it shall do well," said Roger, "for they be good in a fray."

SO talked they as they rode, but ever Roger would give no heed to Ursula, but made as if he wotted not that she was there, though ever and anon Ralph would be turning back to speak to her & help her through the passes. At last the thicket began to dwindle, and presently riding out of a little valley or long trench on to a ridge nearly bare of trees, they saw below them a fair green plain, and in the midst of it a great heap of grey rocks rising out of it like a reef out of the sea, & on the said reef, and climbing up as it were to the topmost of it, the white walls of a great castle, the crown whereof was a huge round tower. At the foot of the ridge was a thorp of white houses thatched with straw scattered over a good piece of the plain. The company drew rein on the ridge-top, and the Champions raised a great shout at the sight of their old strong-place; and Roger turned to Ralph & said: "fair sir, how deemest thou of the Castle of the Scaur?" But Richard broke in: "for my part, friend Roger, I deem that ye do like to people unlearned in war to leave the stronghold ungarnished of men. This is a fool's deed." "Nay, nay," said Roger, "we need not be over-hasty, while it is our chief business to order the mingled folk of the Wheat-wearers and others who dwell in the Burg as now."

THEN spake Ralph: "Yet how wilt thou say but that the foemen whom we go to meet in Upmeads may be some of those very Burgers: hast thou heard whether they have found a new dwelling among some unhappy folk, or be still roving? maybe they shall deem Upmeads fair" Spake Michael a-Hurst: "By thy leave, fair sir, we have had a word of those same riders & strong-thieves that they have fetched a far compass, & got them armour, and be come into the woodland north of the Wood Debateable. for like all strong-thieves, they love the wood." Roger laughed: "Yea, as we did, friend Michael, when we were thieves; whereas now we be lords & gentlemen. But as to thy tidings, I set not much by them; for of the same message was this word that they had already fallen on Higham by the Way; and we know that this cannot be true; since though forsooth the Abbot has had unpeace on his hands, we know where his foemen came from, the West to wit, &

the Banded Barons." "Yea, yea," quoth the Sage, "but may not the Burgers have taken service with them?" "Yea, forsooth," quoth Roger, "but I deem not, or we had been surer thereof."

THUS they spake, & they lighted down all of them to breathe their horses, and Ursula spake with Ralph as they walked the greensward together a little apart, & said: "Sweetheart, I am afraid of to-day." "Yea, dear," said he, "and wherefore?" She said: "It will be hard for me to enter that grim house yonder, & sit in the seat whence I was erewhile threatened by the evil hag with hair like a grey she-bear." He made much of her & said: "Yet belike a friend of the Well may overcome this also; & withal the hall shall be far other to-day than it was." She looked about on the warriors as they lay on the grass or loitered by their horses; then she smiled, and her face lightened, and she reddened & cast down her eyes and said: "Yea, that is sooth; that day there were few men in the hall, and they old and evil of semblance. It was a band of women who took me in the thorp & brought me up into the Castle, & mishandled me there, & cast me into prison there; whereas these be good fellows, & frank and free of aspect. But O, my heart, look thou how fearful the piled-up rocks rise from the plain and the walls wind up amongst them; and that huge tower, the crown of all! Surely there is none more fearful in the world." He kissed her and laughed merrily, & said: "Yea, sweetheart, and there will be another change in the folk of the hall when we come there this time, to wit, that thou shouldst not be alone therein, even were all these Champions and Richard & the Sage away from thee. Wilt thou tell me how that shall be?" She turned to him and kissed him and caressed him, and then they turned back again toward their fellows, for by now they had walked together a good way along the ridge.

SO then they gat to horse again and rode into the thorp, where men & women stood about to behold them, and made them humble reverence as they passed by. So rode they to the bailly of the Castle; and if that stronghold looked terrible from the ridge above, tenfold more terrible of aspect it was when the upper parts were hidden by the grey rocks, & they so huge and beetling; and though the sun was bright about them, and they in the midst of their friends, yet even Ralph felt

somewhat of dread creep over him: yet he smiled cheerfully as Ursula turned an anxious face on him. They alighted from their horses in the bailly, for over steep for horse-hoofs was the walled way upward; & as they began to mount, even the merry Champions hushed their holiday clamour for awe of the huge stronghold, and Ralph took Ursula by the hand, and she sidled up to him, and said softly: "Yea, it was here they drave me up, those women, thrusting and smiting me; & some would have stripped off my raiment, but one, who seemed the wisest, said, 'Nay, leave her till she come before the ancient Lady, for her gear may be a token of whence she is, and whither, if she be come as a spy.' So I escaped them for that moment. And now I wonder what we shall find in the hall when we come in thither. It is somewhat like to me, as when one gets up from bed in the dead night, when all is quiet and the moon is shining, and goes out of the chamber into the hall, & coming back, almost dreads to see some horror lying in one's place amid the familiar bedclothes." And she grew paler as she spake. Then Ralph comforted her and trimmed his countenance to a look of mirth, but inwardly he was ill at ease.

So up they went and up, till they came to a level place whereon was built the chief hall & its chambers: there they stood awhile to breathe them before the door, which was rather low than great; and Ursula clung to Ralph & trembled, but Ralph spake in her ear: "Take heart, my sweet, or these men, and Roger in especial, will think the worse of thee; and thou a friend of the Well. What! here is naught to hurt thee! this is naught beside the perils of the desert, and the slaves and the evil lord of Utterbol." "Yea," she said, "but meseemeth I loved thee not so sore as now I do. O friend, I am become a weak woman and unvaliant, & there is naught in me but love of thee, & love of life because of thee; nor dost thou know altogether what befell me in that hall." But Ralph turned about and cried out in a loud, cheerful voice: "Let us enter, friends! and lo you, I will show the Champions of the Dry Tree the way into their own hall & high place." Therewith he thrust the door open, for it was not locked, & strode into the hall, still leading Ursula by the hand, and all the company followed him, the clash of their armour resounding through the huge building. Though it was long, it was not

so much that it was long as that it was broad, and exceeding high, so that in the dusk of it the great vault of the roof was dim and misty. There was no man therein, no halling on its walls, no benches nor boards, naught but the great standing table of stone on the dais, and the stone high-seat amidst of it: and the place did verily seem like the house and hall of a people that had died out in one hour because of their evil deeds.

THEY stood still a moment when they were all fairly within doors, and Roger thrust up to Ralph and said, but softly: "The woman is blenching, & all for naught; were it not for the oath, we had best have left her in the thorp: I fear me she will bring evil days on our old home with her shivering fear. How far otherwise came our Lady in hither when first she came amongst us, when the Duke of us found her in the wood after she had been thrust out from Sunway by the Baron whom thou slewest afterward. Our Duke brought her in hither wrapped up in his knight's scarlet cloak, and went up with her on to the dais; but when she came thither she turned about and let her cloak fall to earth, & stood there barefoot in her smock, as she had been cast out into the wildwood, & she spread abroad her hands, and cried out in a loud voice as sweet as the May blackbird: 'May God bless this House and the abode of the valiant and the shelter of the hapless.'"

SAID Ursula (& her voice was firm and the colour come back to her cheeks now, while Ralph stood agaze & wondering): "Roger, thou lovest me little, meseemeth, though if I did less than I do, I should do against the will of thy Lady that was Queen in this hall. But tell me, Roger, where is gone that other one, the fearful she-bear of this crag, who sat in yonder stone high-seat, and roared at me & mocked me, and gave me over into the hands of her tormentors, who haled me away to the prison wherefrom thy very Lady delivered me?" "Lady," said Roger, "the tale of her is short since the day thou sawest her herein. On the day when we first had the evil tidings of the slaying of my Lady we were sad at heart, and called to mind ancient transgressions against us; therefore we fell on the she-bear, as thou callest her, and her company of men and women, and some we slew and some we thrust forth; but as to her, I slew her not three feet from where thou standest

now. A rumour there is that she walketh, and it may be so; yet in the summer noon ye need not look to see her." Ralph said coldly: "Roger, let us be done with minstrels' tales; lead me to the place where the oath is to be sworn, for time presses."

SCARCE were the words out of his mouth ere Roger strode forward & gat him on to the dais and went hastily to the wall behind the high-seat, whence he took down a very great horn, & set it to his lips & winded it loudly thrice, so that the great and high hall was full of its echoes. Richard started thereat & half drew his sword; but the Sage put his hand upon the hilts, and said: "It is naught, let the edges lie quiet." Ursula stared astonished, but now she quaked no more; Ralph changed not countenance a wit, & the Champions of the Tree made as if naught had been done they looked not for. But thereafter cried Roger from the dais: "This is the token that the men of the Dry Tree are met for matters of import; thus is the mote hallowed. Come up hither, ye aliens, and ye also of the fellowship, that the oath may be sworn, and we may go our ways, even as the alien captain biddeth." Then Ralph took Ursula's hand again, and went up the hall calmly and proudly, and the Champions followed with Richard and the Sage. Ralph and Ursula went up on to the dais, and he set down Ursula in the stone high-seat, & even in the hall-dusk a right fair-coloured picture she looked therein; for she was clad in a goodly green gown broidered with flowers, and a green cloak with gold orphreys over it; her hair was spread abroad over her shoulders, & on her head was a garland of roses which the women of the Flower de Luce had given her; so there she sat with her fair face, whence now all the wrinkles of trouble and fear were smoothed out, looking like an image of the early summer-tide itself. And the Champions looked on her and marvelled, & one whispered to the other that it was their Lady of aforetime come back again; only Roger, who had now gone back to the rest of the fellowship, cast his eyes upon the ground, and muttered.

NOW Ralph draws his sword, & lays it naked on the stone table, and he stood beside Ursula and said: "Champions of the Dry Tree, by the blade of Upmeads, which lieth here before me, and by the head which I love best in the world, and is best worthy of love" (and herewith he laid

his hand on Ursula's head), "I swear that whensoever the Captain of the Dry Tree calleth on me, whether I be eating or drinking, abed or standing on my feet, at peace or at war, glad or sorry, I shall do my utmost to come to his aid straightway with whatso force I may gather. Is this rightly sworn, Champions?" Said Stephen a-Hurst: "It is sworn well and knightly, & now cometh our oath" "Nay," said Ralph, "I had no mind to drive a bargain with you; your deeds shall prove you; and I fear not for your doughtiness." Said Stephen: "Yea, Lord; but he bade us swear to thee. Reach me thy sword, I pray thee." Then Ralph reached him his sword across the great stone table, and Stephen took it, and kissed the blade and the hilts; and then lifted up his voice and said: "By the hilts & the blade, by the point and the edge, we swear to follow the Lord Ralph of Upmeads for a year and a day, and to do his will in all wise. So help us God and Allhallows!" And therewith he gave the sword to the others, and each man of them kissed it as he had. But Ralph said: "Champions, for this oath I thank you all heartily. But it is not my meaning that I should hold you by me for a year, whereas I deem I shall do all that my kindred may need in three days' space from the first hour wherein we set foot in Upmeads" Stephen smiled friendly at him & nodded, and said: "That may well be; but now to make a good end of this mote I will tell thee a thing; to wit, that our Captain, yea, and all we, are minded to try thee by this fray in Upmeads, now we know that thou hast become a friend of the Well. And if thou turn out as we deem is likest, we will give thee this Castle of the Scaur, for thee & those that shall spring from thy loins; for we deem that some such man as thou will be the only one to hold it worthily, and in such wise as it may be a stronghold against tyrants & for the helping of peaceable folk; since, forsooth, we of the Dry Tree have heard somewhat of the Well at the World's End, & trow in the might thereof."

He made an end; & Ralph kept silence and pondered the matter. But Roger lifted up his head and broke in, and said: "Yea, yea! that is it: we are all become men of peace, we riders of the Dry Tree!" And he laughed withal, but as one nowise best pleased. But as Ralph was gathering his words together, and Ursula was looking up to him with trouble in her face again, came a man of the thorp rushing in-

to the hall, and cried out: "O, my lords! there are weaponed men coming forth from the thicket. Save us, we pray you, for we are ill-weaponed & men of peace." Roger laughed, and said: "Eh, good man! So ye want us back again? But my Lord Ralph, & thou Richard, and thou Stephen, come ye to the shot-window here, that giveth on to the forest. We are high up here, and we shall see all as clearly as in a good mirror. Hast thou shut the gates, carle?" "Yea, Lord Roger," quoth he, "and there are some fifty of us together down in the base-court."

RALPH and Richard and Stephen looked forth from the shot-window, and saw verily a band of men riding down the bent into the thorp, and Ralph, who as aforesaid was far-sighted and clear-sighted, said: "Yea, it is strange: but without doubt these are riders of the Dry Tree; and they seem to me to be some ten-score. Thou Stephen, thou Roger, what is to hand? Is your Captain wont to give a gift & take it back . . . and somewhat more with it?" Stephen looked abashed at his word; & Roger hung his head again. But therewith the Sage drew up to them and said: "Be not dismayed, Lord Ralph. What wert thou going to say to the Champions when this carle brake in?" "This," said Ralph, "that I thanked the Dry Tree heartily for its gift, but that meseemed it naught wise to leave this stronghold disgarnished of men till I can come or send back from Upmeads." Stephen's face cleared at the word, and he said: "I bid thee believe it, lord, that there is no treason in our Captain's heart; and that if there were I would fight against him and his men on thy behalf." And Roger, though in a somewhat surly voice, said the like. Ralph thought a little, and then he said: "It is well; go we down and out of gates to meet them, that we may the sooner get on our way to Upmeads." And without more words he went up to Ursula and took her hand and went out of the hall, and down the rock-cut stair, & all they with him. And when they came into the base-court, Ralph spoke to the carles of the thorp, who stood huddled together sore afeard, and said: "Throw open the gates. These riders who have so scared you are naught else than the Champions of the Dry Tree who are coming back to their stronghold that they may keep you sure against wicked tyrants who would oppress you."

THE carles looked askance at one another, but straightway opened the gates, and Ralph & his company went forth, & abode the new-comers on a little green mound half a bowshot from the Castle. Ralph sat down on the grass and Ursula by him, and she said: "My heart tells me that these Champions are no traitors, however rough & fierce they have been, and still shall be if occasion serve. But O, sweetheart, how dear and sweet is this sunlit greensward after yonder grim hold. Surely, sweet, it shall never be our dwelling?" "I wot not, beloved," said he; "must we not go and dwell where deeds shall lead us; and the hand of Weird is mighty. But lo thou, here are the new-comers to hand!"

SO it was as he said, and presently the whole band came before them, & they were all of the Dry Tree, stout men & well weaponed, & they had ridden exceeding fast, so that their horses were somewhat spent. A tall man very gallantly armed, who rode at their head, leapt at once from his horse & came up to Ralph and hailed him, and Roger and Stephen both made obeisance to him. Ralph, who had risen up, hailed him in his turn, and the tall man said: "I am the Captain of the Dry Tree for lack of a better; art thou Ralph of Upmeads, fair sir?" "Even so," said Ralph. Said the Captain: "Thou wilt marvel that I have ridden after thee on the spur; so here is the tale shortly. Your backs were not turned on the walls of the Burg an hour, ere three of my riders brought in to me a man who said, and gave me tokens of his word being true, that he had fallen in with a company of the old Burgers in the Wood Debateable, which belike thou wottest of." "All we of Upmeads wot of it," said Ralph. "Well," said the Captain, "amongst these said Burgers, who were dwelling in the wildwood in summer content, the word went free that they would gather to them other bands of strong-thieves who haunt that wood, and go with them upon Upmeads, & from Upmeads, when they were waxen strong, they would fall upon Higham by the Way, and thence with yet more strength on their old dwelling of the Burg. Now whereas I know that thou art of Upmeads, & also what thou art, and what thou hast done, I have ridden after thee to tell thee what is toward. But if thou deemest I have brought thee all these riders, it is not wholly so. for it was borne into my mind that our old stronghold was left bare of men, and

I knew not what might betide; & that the more, as more than one man has told us how that another band of the disinherit/ed Burgers have fallen upon Higham or the lands thereof, and Higham is no great way hence; so that some five score of these riders are to hold our Castle of the Scaur, and the rest are for thee to ride afield with. As for the others, thou hast been told already that the Scaur, & Hampton therewith, is a gift from us to thee; for henceforward we be the lords of the Burg of the four friths, and that is more than enough for us."

RALPH thanked the Cap/tain for this, and did him to wit that he would take the gift if he came back out of the Upmeads fray alive: said he: "With thee and the Wheat-wearers in the Burg, and me in the Scaur, no strong/thief shall dare lift up his hand in these parts" ❧ The Captain smiled, and Ralph went on: "And now I must needs ask thee for leave to depart; which is all the more needful, where-as thy men have over/ridden their horses, & we must needs go a soft pace till we come to Higham." "Yea, art thou for Higham, fair sir?" said the Captain. "That is well; for ye may get men therefrom, & at the least it is like that ye shall hear tidings: as to my men & their horses, this hath been looked to. For five hundred good men of the Wheat/wear-ers, men who have not learned the feat of arms a/horseback, are coming through the woods hither to help ward thy castle, fair lord; they will be here in some three hours' space & will bring horses for thy five score men, therefore do ye but ride softly to Higham, and if these sergeants catch up with you it is well, but if not, abide them at Higham" ❧ "Thanks have thou for this once more," said Ralph; "and now I have no more word than this for thee; that I will come to thee at thy least word, and serve thee with all that I have, to my very life if need be. And yet I must say this, that I wot not why ye and these others are become to me, who am alien to you, as very brothers." Said the Captain: "There is this to be said of it, as was aforesaid, that all we count thy winning of the Well at the World's End as valiancy in thee, yea, & luck withal. But, moreover, she who was Our Lady would have had thee for her friend had she lived, and how then could we be less than friends to thee? Depart in peace, my friend, and we look to see thee again in a little while."

THEREWITH he kissed him, and bade farewell; and Ralph bade his band to horse, and they were in the saddle in a twinkling, and rode away from Hampton at a soft pace. But as they went, Ralph turned to Ursula & said: "And now belike shall we see Bourton Abbas once more, and the house where first I saw thee. And O how sweet thou wert! And I so happy & so young." "Yea," she said, "and sorely I longed for thee, and now we have long been together, as it seemeth; & yet that long space shall be but a little while of our lives. But, my friend, as to Bourton Abbas, I misdoubt me of our seeing it; for there is a nigher road by the byways to Higham, which these men know, & doubtless that way we shall wend; & I am glad thereof; for I shall tell thee, that somewhat I fear that thorp, lest it should lay hold of me, and wake me from a dream." "Yea," said Ralph, "but even then, belike thou shouldst find me beside thee; as if I had fallen asleep in the ale-house, and dreamed of the Well at the World's End, & then awoke & seen the dear barefoot maiden busying her about her house & its matters. That were naught so ill." "Ah," she said, "look round on thy men, and think of the might of war that is in them, and think of the deeds to come. But O how I would that these next few days were worn away, and we yet alive for a long while."

Chapter XX. They come to the Gate of Higham by the way

IT WAS as Ursula had deemed, & they made for Higham by the shortest road, so that they came before the gate a little before sunset: to the very gate they came not; for there were strong barriers before it, and men-at-arms within them, as though they were looking for an onfall. And amongst these were bowmen who bended their bows on Ralph and his company. So Ralph stayed his men, and rode up to the barriers with Richard and Stephen a-Hurst, all three of them bare-headed with their swords in the sheaths; & Stephen moreover bearing a white cloth on a truncheon. Then a knight of the town, very bravely armed, came forth from the barriers & went up to Ralph, and said: "fair sir, art thou a knight?" "Yea," said Ralph. Said the knight: "Who be ye?" "I hight Ralph of Upmeads," said Ralph, "and these be my men: & we pray thee for guesting in the town of my Lord Abbot to-night, and leave to de-

part to-morrow betimes." "O unhappy young man," said the knight, "meseems these men be not so much thine as thou art theirs; for they are of the Dry Tree, and bear their token openly. Wilt thou then lodge thy company of strong-thieves with honest men?" Stephen a-Hurst laughed roughly at this word, but Ralph said mildly: "These men are indeed of the Dry Tree, but they are my men and under my rule, and they be riding on my errands, which be lawful."

THE knight was silent a while, and then he said: "Well, it may be so; but into this town they come not, for the tale of them is over long for honest men to hearken to." ❧ Even as he spake, a man-at-arms somewhat evilly armed shoved through the barriers, thrusting aback certain of his fellows, & coming up to Ralph, stood staring up into his face with the tears starting into his eyes. Ralph looked a moment, & then reached down his arms to embrace him, and kissed his face; for lo! it was his own brother Hugh. Withal he whispered in his ear: "Get thee behind us, Hugh, if thou wilt come with us, lad." So Hugh passed on quietly toward the band, while Ralph turned to the knight again, who said to him: "Who is that man?" ❧ "He is mine own brother," said Ralph. ❧ "Be he the brother of whom he will," said the knight, "he was none the less our sworn man. Ye fools," said he, turning toward the men in the barrier, "why did ye not slay him?" "He slipped out," said they, "before we wotted what he was about" ❧ Said the knight: "Where were your bows, then?" ❧ Said the man: "They were pressing so hard on the barrier that we could not draw a bow-string. Besides, how might we shoot him without hitting thee, belike?" The knight turned toward Ralph, grown wroth and surly, and that the more as he saw Stephen and Richard grinning; he said: "Fair sir, ye have strengthened the old saw that saith, 'Tell me what thy friends are, and I will tell thee what thou art.' Thou hast stolen our man with not a word on it." ❧ "Fair sir," said Ralph, "meseemeth thou makest more words than enough about it. Shall I buy my brother of thee, then? I have a good few pieces in my pouch" ❧ The captain shook his head angrily. "Well," said Ralph, "how can I please thee, fair sir?" ❧ Quoth the knight: "Thou canst please me best by turning thy horses' heads away from Higham, all the sort of you." He stepped back toward the barriers, and then came forward again, and said: "Look you, men-at-arms, I warn thee that I trust thee

not, and deem that thou liest. Now have I mind to issue out and fall upon you: for ye shall be evil guests in my Lord Abbot's lands."

NOW at last Ralph waxed somewhat wroth, and he said: "Come out then, if you will, and we shall meet you man for man; there is yet light on this lily lea, and we will do so much for thee, churl though thou be" But as he spoke, came the sound of horns, and lo, over the bent showed the points of spears, and then all those five-score of the Dry Tree whom the captain had sent after Ralph came pouring down the bent. The knight looked on them under the sharp of his hand, till he saw the Dry Tree on their coats also, and then he turned and gat him hastily into the barriers; & when he was amongst his own men he fell to roaring out a defiance to Ralph, and a bolt flew forth, & two or three shafts, but hurt no one. Richard & Stephen drew their swords, but Ralph cried out: "Come away, friends, tarry not to bicker with these fools, who are afraid of they know not what: it is but lying under the naked heaven to-night instead of under the rafters, but we have all lodged thus a many times: and we shall be nigher to our journey's end to-morrow when we wake up."

THEREWITH he turned his horse with Richard and Stephen and came to his own men. There was much laughter and jeering at the Abbot's men amidst of the Dry Tree, both of those who had ridden with Ralph, & the new-comers; but they arrayed them to ride further in good order, and presently were skirting the walls of Higham out of bow-shot, & making for the Down country by the clear of the moon. The sergeants had gotten a horse for Hugh, & by Ralph's bidding he rode beside him as they went their ways, & the two brethren talked together lovingly.

Chapter XXI. Talk between those two Brethren

RALPH asked Hugh first if he wotted aught of Gregory their brother. Hugh laughed and pointed to Higham, and said: "He is yonder." "What," said Ralph, "in the Abbot's host?" "Yea," said Hugh, laughing again, "but in his spiritual, not his worldly host: he is turned monk, brother; that is, he is already a novice, and will be a brother of the Abbey in six months' space." Said Ralph: "And Launcelot Long-tongue,

thy squire, how hath he sped?" Said Hugh: "He is yonder, also, but in the worldly host, not the spiritual: he is a sergeant of theirs, and somewhat of a catch for them, for he is no ill man-at-arms as thou wottest, and besides he adorneth everything with words, so that men hearken to him gladly." "But tell me," said Ralph, "how it befalleth that the Abbot's men of war be so churlish, & chary of the inside of their town; what have they to fear? Is not the Lord Abbot still a mighty man?" Hugh shook his head: "There hath been a change of days at Higham; though I say not but that the knights are over-careful, & much over-fearful." "What has the change been?" said Ralph. Hugh said: "In time past my Lord Abbot was indeed a mighty man, and both this town of Higham was well garnished of men-at-arms, and also many of his manors had castles & strong-houses on them, and the yeomen were ready to run to their weapons whenso the gathering was blown. In short, Higham was as mighty as it was wealthy; and the Abbot's men had naught to do with any, save with thy friends here who bear the Tree Leafless; all else feared those holy walls & the well-blessed men who warded them. But the Dry Tree feared, as men said, neither man nor devil (and I hope it may be so still, since they are become thy friends), & they would whiles lift in the Abbot's lands when they had no merrier business on hand, and not seldom came to their above in their dealings with his men. But all things come to an end; for, as I am told, some year and a half ago the Abbot had debate with the Westland Barons, who both were & are ill men to deal with, being both hungry & doughty. The quarrel grew till my Lord must needs defy them, and to make a long tale short, he himself in worldly armour led his host against them, and they met some twenty miles to the west, in the field of the Wry Bridge, and there was Holy Church overthrown; and the Abbot, who is as valiant a man as ever sang mass, though not over-wise in war, would not flee, and as none would slay him, might they help it, they had to lead him away, and he sits to this day in their strongest castle, the Red Mount west-away. Well, he being gone, and many of his wisest warriors slain, the rest ran into gates again; but when the Westlanders beset Higham & thought to have it good cheap, the monks & their men warded it not so ill but that the Westlanders broke their teeth

over it. Forsooth, they turned away thence and took most of the castles & strong-houses of the Abbot's lands; burned some and put garrisons into others, & drave away a mighty spoil of chattels and men and women, so that the lands of Higham are half ruined; and thereby the monks, though they be stout enough within their walls, will not suffer their men to ride abroad. Whereby, being cooped up in a narrow place, & with no deeds to hand to cheer their hearts withal, they are grown sour and churlish" "But, brother," said Ralph, "howsoever churlish they may be, and howso timorous, I cannot see why they should shut their gates in our faces, a little band, when there is no foe anear them" "Ralph," said Hugh, "thou must think of this once more, that the Dry Tree is no good let-pass to flourish in honest men's faces; specialiter if they be monks. Amongst the brothers of Higham the tale goes that those Champions have made covenant with the devil to come to their above whensoever they be not more than one to five. Nay, moreover, it is said that there be very devils amongst them; some in the likeness of carles, and some (God help us!) dressed up in women's flesh; and fair flesh also, meseemeth. Also to-day they say in Higham that no otherwise might they ever have overcome the stark and cruel carles of the Burg of the Four Friths and chased them out of their town, as we know they have done. Hah! what sayest thou?" "I say, Hugh," quoth Ralph angrily, "that thou art a fool to go about with a budget of slanderous old wives' tales." Hugh laughed. "Be not so wroth, little lord, or I shall be asking thee tales of marvels also. But hearken. I shall smooth out thy frowns with a smile when thou hast heard this: this folk are not only afeard of their old enemies, the devil-led men, but also they fear those whom the devil-led men have driven out of house and home, to wit, the Burgers. Yet again they fear the Burgers yet more, because they have beaten some of the very foes of Higham, to wit, the Westland Barons; for they have taken from them some of their strongholds, and are deemed to be gathering force."

RALPH pondered a while, and then he said: "Brother, hast thou any tidings of Upmeads, or that these Burgers have gone down thither?" "God forbid!" said Hugh. "Nay, I have had no tidings of Upmeads since I was fool enough to leave it." "What,

brother," said Ralph, "thou hast not thriven then?" "I have had ups & downs," said Hugh, "but the ups have been one rung of the ladder, & the downs three... or more. Three months I sat in prison forgetting me a broken head in a quarrel that concerned me not. Six months was I besieged in a town whither naught led me but ill-luck. Two days I wore in running thence, having scaled the wall and swam the ditch in the night. Three months I served squire to a knight who gave me the business of watching his wife of whom he was jealous; and to help me out of the weariness of his house I must needs make love myself to the said wife, who sooth to say was perchance worth it. Thence again I went by night and cloud. Ten months I wore away at the edge of the wildwood, & sometimes in it, with a sort of fellows who taught me many things, but not how to keep my hands from other men's goods when I was hungry. There was I taken with some five others by certain sergeants of Higham, whom the warriors of the town had sent out cautiously to see if they might catch a few men for their ranks. Well, they gave me the choice of the gallows-tree or service for the Church, and so, my choice made, there have I been ever since, till I saw thy face this evening, fair sir" "Well, brother," said Ralph, "all that shall be amended, & thou shalt back to Upmeads with me. Yet wert thou to amend thyself somewhat, it might not be ill." Quoth Hugh: "It shall be tried, brother. But may I ask thee somewhat?" Said Ralph: "Ask on." "Fair sir," said Hugh, "thou seemedst grown into a pretty man when I saw thee e'en now, before this twilight made us all alike; but the men at thy back are not wont to be led by men who have not earned a warrior's name, yet they follow thee: how cometh that about? Again, before the twilight gathered I saw the woman that rideth anigh us (who is now but a shadow) how fair and gentle she is: indeed there is no marvel in her following thee (though if she be an earl's daughter she is a fair getting for an imp of Upmeads), for thou art a well-shapen lad, little lord, & carriest a sweet tongue in thy mouth. But tell me, what is she?" "Brother," said Ralph kindly, "she is my wife." "I kiss her hands," said Hugh; "but of what lineage is she?" "She is my wife," said Ralph. Said Hugh: "That is, forsooth, a high dignity." Said Ralph: "Thou sayest sooth, though in mockery thou

speakest, which is scarce kind to thine own mother's son: but learn, brother, that I am become a friend of the Well, and were meet to wed with the daughters of the best of the Kings: yet is this one meeter to wed with me than the highest of the Queens; for she also is a friend of the Well. Moveover, thou sayest it that the Champions of the Dry Tree, who would think but little of an earl for a leader, are eager to follow me: and if thou still doubt what this may mean, abide, till in two days or three thou see me before the foemen. Then shalt thou tell me how much changed I am from the stripling whom thou knewest in Upmeads a little while ago."

THEN was Hugh somewhat abashed, and he said: "I crave thy pardon, brother, but never had I a well-filed tongue, and belike it hath grown no smoother amid the hard haps which have befallen me of late. Besides, it was dull in there, and I must needs try to win a little mirth out of kith and kin." "So be it, lad," quoth Ralph kindly; "thou didst ask & I told, and all is said." "Yet forsooth," said Hugh, "thou hast given me marvel for marvel, brother." "Even so," said Ralph, "and hereafter I will tell thee more when we sit safe by the wine at Upmeads."

NOW cometh back one of the fore-riders, & draweth rein by Ralph & saith that they are hard on a little thorp under the hanging of the hill that was the beginning of the Down country on that road. So Ralph bade make stay there and rest the night over, and seek new tidings on the morrow; & the man told Ralph that the folk of the thorp were fleeing fast at the tidings of their company, and that it were best that he & some half score should ride sharply into the thorp, so that it might not be quite bare of victuals when they came to their night's lodging. Ralph bids him so do, but to heed well that he hurt no man, or let fire get into any house or roof; so he takes his knot of men and rides off on the spur, and Ralph and the main of them come on quietly; & when they came into the street of the thorp, lo there by the cross a big fire lighted, & the elders standing thereby cap in hand, and a score of stout carles with weapons in their hands. Then the chief man came up to Ralph & greeted him, & said: "Lord, when we heard that an armed company was at hand we deemed no less than that the riders of the Burg were upon us, and deemed that there was naught for it but to flee each as far and

as fast as he might. But now we have heard that thou art a good lord seeking his own with the help of worthy champions, and a foeman to those devils of the Burg, we bid thee look upon us and all we have as thine, lord, & take kindly such guesting as we may give thee." The old man's voice quavered a little as he looked on the stark shapes of the Dry Tree; but Ralph looked kindly on him, and said: "Yea, my master, we will but ask for a covering for our heads, & what victual thou mayst easily spare us in return for good silver, and thou shalt have our thanks withal. But who be these stout lads with staves & bucklers, or whither will they to-night?" Thereat a tall young man with a spear in his hand, and girt with a short sword, came forth and said boldly: "Lord, we be a few who thought when we heard that the Burg-devils were at hand that we might as well die in the field giving stroke for stroke, as be hauled off and drop to pieces under the hands of their tormentors; & now thou hast come, we have little will to abide behind, but were fain to follow thee, and do thee what good we can: & after thou hast come to thine above, when we go back to our kin thou mayst give us a gift if it please thee: but we deem that no great matter if thou but give us leave to have the comfort of thee and thy Champions for a while in these hard days."

When he had done speaking there rose up from the Champions a hum as of praise, and Ralph was well pleased withal, deeming it a good omen; so he said: "Fear not, good fellows, that I shall forget you when we have overcome the foemen, and meanwhile we will live and die together. But thou, ancient man, show our sergeants where our riders shall lie to-night, & what they shall do with their horses." So the elders marshalled the little host to their abodes for that night, lodging the more part of them in a big barn on the western outskirt of the thorp. The elder who led them thither, brought them victual and good drink, & said to them: "Lords, ye were best to keep a good watch to-night, because it is on this side that we may look for an onfall from the foemen if they be abroad to-night; & sooth to say that is one cause we have bestowed you here, deeming that ye would not grudge us the solace of knowing that your valiant bodies were betwixt us & them, for we be a poor unwalled people" ❧ Stephen, to whom he spake, laughed at his word, & said: "Heart-up, carle! within

these few days we shall build up a better wall than ye may have of stone and lime; & that is the overthrow of our foemen in the open field."

SO there was kindness & good fellowship betwixt the thorp-dwellers and the riders, & the country-folk told those others many tales of the evil deeds of the Burg-devils, as they called them; but they could not tell them for certain whether they had gone down into Upmeads. As to Ralph & Ursula, they, with Richard and Roger, were lodged in the headman's house, and had good feast there, and he also talked over the whereabouts of the Burgers with the thorp-dwellers, but might have no certain tidings. So he and Ursula and his fellows went to bed and slept peacefully for the first hours of the night.

Chapter XXII. An old acquaintance comes from the Down Country to see Ralph.

BUT AN HOUR after midnight Ralph arose, as his purpose was, and called Richard, & they took their swords and went forth and about the thorp and around its outskirts, & found naught worse than their own watch anywhere; so they came back again to their quarters and found Roger standing at the door, who said to Ralph: "Lord, here is a man who would see thee." "What like is he?" said Ralph. Said Roger, "He is an old man, but a tough one; however, I have got his weapons from him." "Bring him in," said Ralph, "and he shall have his say". So they all went into the chamber together & there was light therein; but the man said to Ralph: "Art thou the Captain of the men-at-arms, lord?" "Yea," said Ralph. Said the man: "I were as lief have these others away". "So be it," said Ralph; "depart for a little while, friends." So they went, but Ursula lay in the bed, which was in a nook in the wall; the man looked about the chamber & said: "Is there any one in the bed?" "Yea," said Ralph, "my wife, good fellow; shall she go also?" "Nay," said the carle, "we shall do as we are now. So I will begin my tale."

RALPH looked on him & deemed he had seen him before, but could not altogether call his visage to mind; so he held his peace and the man went on. "I am of the folk of the shepherds of the Downs: we be not a many

by count of noses, but each one of us who is come to man's years, & many who be past them, as I myself, can handle weapons at a pinch. Now some deal we have been harried and have suffered by these wretches who have eaten into the bowels of this land; that is to say, they have lifted our sheep, and slain some of us who withstood them: but whereas our houses be uncostly & that we move about easily from one hill-side to another, it is like that we should have deemed it wisest to have borne this trouble, like others of wind and weather, without seeking new remedy, but that there have been tokens on earth and in the heavens, whereof it is too long to tell thee, lord, at present, which have stirred up our scattered folk to meet together in arms. Moreover, the blood of our young men is up, because the Burg-devils have taken some of our women, & have mishandled them grievously and shamefully, so that naught will keep point & edge from seeking the war-clash. Furthermore, there is an old tale which hath now come up again, That some time when our folk shall be in great need, there shall come to our helping one from afar, whose home is anigh; a stripling & a great man; a runaway, and the conqueror of many: then, say they, shall the point and the edge bring the red water down on the dear dales; whereby we understand that the blood of men shall be shed there, and naught to our shame or dishonour. Again I mind me of a rhyme concerning this, which sayeth:

The Dry Tree shall be seen
On the green earth, and green
The Well-spring shall arise
For the hope of the wise.
They are one which were twain,
The Tree bloometh again,
And the Well-spring hath come
From the waste to the home.

Well, lord, thou shalt tell me presently if this hath aught to do with thee: for indeed I saw the Dry Tree, which hath scared us so many a time, beaten on thy sergeants' coats; but now I will go on and make an end of my story."

RALPH nodded to him kindly, for now he remembered the carle, though he had seen him but that once when he rode the Greenway across the downs to Higham. The old man looked up at him as if he too had an inkling of old acquaintance with Ralph, but went on presently: "There is a woman who dwells alone with none to help her, anigh to Saint Ann's Chapel; a woman not very old;

for she is of mine own age, & time was we have had many a fair play in the ingles of the downs in the July weather: not very old, I say, but wondrous wise, as I know better than most men; for oft, even when she was young, would she foretell things to come to me, and ever it fell out according to her spaedom. To the said woman I sought to-day in the morning, not to win any wisdom of her, but to talk over remembrances of old days; but when I came into her house, lo, there was my carline walking up and down the floor, and she turned round upon me like the young woman of past days, and stamped her foot & cried out: 'What does the sluggard dallying about women's chambers when the time is come for the deliverance?' I let her talk, & spake no word lest I should spoil her story, & she went on: 'Take thy staff, lad, for thou art stout as well as merry, and go adown to the thorps at the feet of the downs toward Higham; keep thee well from the Burg-devils, & go from stead to stead till thou comest on a captain of men-at-arms who is lord over a company of green-coats, green-coats of the Dry Tree; a young lord, fair-faced, and kind-faced, and mighty, and not to be conquered, and the blessing of the folk & the leader of the Shepherds, and the foe of their foemen and the well-beloved of Bear-father. Go night and day, sit not down to eat, stand not to drink; heed none that crieth after thee for deliverance, but go, go, go till thou hast found him. Meseems I see him riding toward Higham, but those dastards will not open gate to him, of that be sure. He shall pass on and lie to-night, it may be at Mileham, it may be at Milton, it may be at Garton; at one of those thorps shall ye find him. And when ye have found him thus bespeak him: O bright friend of the Well, turn not aside to fall on the Burgers in this land, either at Foxworth Castle, or the Longford, or the Nineways Garth: all that thou mayest do hereafter, thou or thy champions. There be Burgers other-where, housed in no strong castle, but wending the road toward the fair greensward of Upmeads. If thou delay to go look on them, then shall thy work be to begin again amid sorrow of heart and loss that may not be remedied.' Hast thou heard me, lord?" "Yea, verily," said Ralph, "& at sun-rise shall we be in the saddle to ride straight to Upmeads. For I know thee, friend." "Hold a while," said the carle, "for meseemeth I know thee also. But this withal she said: 'But

hearken, Giles, hearken a while, for I see him clearly, & the men that he rideth with, & the men that are following to his aid, fierce and fell are they; but so withal are the foemen that await them, & his are few, howsoever fierce. Therefore bid him this also. Haste, haste, haste! But haste not overmuch, lest thou speed the worse: in Bear Castle I see a mote of our folk, and thee amidst of it with thy champions, & I see the staves of the Shepherds rising round thee like a wood. In Wulstead I see a valiant man with sword by side and sallet on head, and with him sitteth a tall man-at-arms grizzle-headed and red-bearded, big-boned & mighty; they sit at the wine in a fair chamber, and a well-looking dame serveth them; and there are weaponed men no few about the streets. Wilt thou pass by friends, and old friends? Now ride on, Green Coats! stride forth, Shepherds! staves on your shoulders, Wool-wards! and there goes the host over the hills into Upmeads, and the Burg-devils will have come from the Wood Debateable to find graves by the fair river. And then do thy will, O friend of the Well.'" The carle took a breath, & then he said: "Lord, this is the say I was charged with, and if thou understandest it, well; but if it be dark to thee, I may make it clear if thou ask me aught." Ralph pondered a while, and then he said: "Is it known of others than thy spaewife that the Burgers be in Upmeads?" "Nay, lord," said the carle. "And this also I say to thee, that I deem by what she said that they be not in Upmeads yet, & but drawing thitherward, as I deem, from the Wood Debateable."

RALPH arose from his seat and strode up and down the chamber a while; then he went to the bed, & stood over Ursula, who lay twixt sleeping and waking, for she was weary; then he came back to the carle, & said to him: "Good friend, I thank thee, & this is what I shall do: when daylight is broad (and lo, the dawn beginning!) I shall gather my men, & ride the shortest way, which thou shalt show me, to Bear Castle, and there I shall give the token of the four fires which erewhile a good man of the Shepherds bade me if I were in need. And it seems to me that there shall the mote be hallowed, though it may be not before nightfall. But the mote done, we shall wend, the whole host of us, be we few or many, down to Wulstead, where we shall fall in with my friend Clement Chapman, and hear tidings. Thence shall we wend the dear ways I

know into the land where I was born & the folk amongst whom I shall die. And so let St. Nicholas & All Hallows do as they will with us. Deemest thou, friend, that this is the meaning of thy wise she-friend?"

THE carle's eyes glittered, and he rose up & stood close by Ralph, and said: "Even so she meant; & now I seem to see that but few of thy riders shall be lacking when they turn their heads away from Upmeads towards the strong-places of the Burg-devils that are hereabouts. But tell me, Captain of the host, is that victual and bread that I see on the board?" Ralph laughed: "Fall to, friend, and eat thy fill; & here is wine withal. Thou needst not to fear it. Wert thou any the worse of the wine that Thirly poured into thee that other day?" "Nay, nay, master," said the carle between his mouthfuls, "but mickle the better, as I shall be after this: all luck to thee! Yet see I that I need not wish thee luck, since that is thine already. Sooth to say, I deemed I knew thee when I first set eyes on thee again. I looked not to see thee more; though I spoke to thee words at that time which came from my heart, almost without my will. Though it is but a little while ago, thou hast changed much since then, and hast got another sort of look in the eyes than then they had. Nay, nay," said he laughing, "not when thou lookest on me so frankly and kindly; that is like thy look when we passed Thirly about. Yea, I see the fashion of it: one look is for thy friends, another for thy foes. God be praised for both. And now I am full, I will go look on thy wife." So he went up to the bed and stood over Ursula, while she, who was now fully awake, smiled up into his face. The old man smiled back at her & bent down & kissed her mouth, & said: "I ask thy pardon, lady, & thine, my lord, if I be too free, but such is our custom of the Downs; and sooth to say thy face is one that even an old man should not fail to kiss if occasion serve, so that he may go to paradise with the taste thereof on his lips." "We are nowise hurt by thy love, friend," said Ursula; "God make thy latter days of life sweet to thee!"

Chapter XXIII. They ride to Bear Castle

BUT while they spake thus and were merry, the dawn had well-nigh passed into daylight. Then

Ralph bade old Giles sleep for an hour, and went forth and called Roger and Richard and went to the great barn. There he bade the watch wake up Stephen and all men, and they gat to horse as speedily as they might, and were on the road ere the sun was fully up. The spearmen of the thorp did not fail them, & numbered twenty and three all told. Giles had a horse given him and rode the way by Ralph. They rode up and down the hills and dales, but went across country & not by the Greenway, for thuswise the road was shorter. But when they had gone some two leagues, & were nigh on the top of a certain low green ridge, they deemed that they heard men's voices anigh & the clash of arms; and it must be said that by Ralph's rede they journeyed somewhat silently. So Ralph, who was riding first with Giles, bid all stay and let the crown of the ridge cover them. So did they, and Giles gat off his horse and crept on to the top of the ridge till he could see down to the dale below. Presently he came down again, the old face of him puckered with mirth, & said softly to Ralph: "Did I not say thou wert lucky? here is the first fruits thereof. Ride over the ridge, lord, at once, & ye shall have what there is of them as safe as a sheep in a penfold."

So Ralph drew sword and beckoned his men up, & they all handled their weapons & rode over the brow, and tarried not one moment there, not even to cry their cries; for down in the bottom were a sort of men, two score and six (as they counted them afterward), sitting or lying about a cooking fire, or loitering here and there, with their horses standing behind them, & they mostly unhelmed. The Champions knew them at once for men of their old foes, & there was scarce time for a word ere the full half of them had passed by the sword of the Dry Tree; then Ralph cried out to spare the rest, unless they offered to run; so the foemen cast down their weapons and stood still, and were presently brought before Ralph, who sat on the grass amidst of the ring of the Champions. He looked on them a while & remembered the favour of those whom he had seen erewhile in the Burg; but ere he could speak Giles said softly in his ear: "These be of the Burg, forsooth, as ye may see by their dogs' faces; but they be not clad nor armed as those whom we have met heretofore. Ask them whence they be, lord."

RALPH spake and said: "Whence and whither are ye, ye manslayers?" But no man of them answered. Then said Ralph: "Pass these murderers by the edge of the sword, Stephen; unless some one of them will save his life and the life of his fellows by speaking." As he spake, one of the youngest of the men hung down his head a little, & then raised it up: "Wilt thou spare our lives if I speak?" "Yea," said Ralph. "Wilt thou swear it by the edge of the blade?" said the man. Ralph drew forth his sword and said: "Lo then! I swear it" The man nodded his head, & said: "few words are best; & whereas I wot not if my words will avail thee aught, & since they will save our lives, I will tell thee truly. We are men of the Burg whom these green-coated thieves drave out of the Burg on an unlucky day. Well, some of us, of whom I was one, fetched a compass and crossed the water that runneth through Upmeads by the Red Bridge, and so gat us into the Wood Debateable through the Uplands. There we struck a bargain with the main band of strong-thieves of the wood, that we & they together would get us a new home in Upmeads, which is a fat & pleasant land. So we got us ready; but the Woodmen told us that the Upmeads carles, though they be not many, are strong & dauntless, & since we now had pleasant life before us, with good thralls to work for us, & with plenty of fair women for our bed-mates, we deemed it best to have the most numbers we might, so that we might overwhelm the said carles at one blow, and get as few of ourselves slain as might be. Now we knew that another band of us had entered the lands of the Abbot of Higham, & had taken hold of some of his castles; wherefore the captains considered and thought, and sent us to give bidding to our folk south here to march at once toward us in Upmeads, that our bands might meet there, & scatter all before us. There is our story, lord."

RALPH knitted his brow, and said: "Tell me (and thy life lieth on thy giving true answers), do thy folk in these strongholds know of your purpose of falling upon Upmeads?" "Nay," said the Burger. Said Ralph: "And will they know otherwise if ye do them not to wit?" "Nay," again said the man. Said Ralph: "Are thy folk already in Upmeads?" "Nay," said the captive, "but by this time they will be on the road thither." "How many all told?" said Ralph.

The man reddened and stammered: "A thousand... two... two thousand... A thousand, lord," said he. "Get thy sword ready, Stephen," said Ralph. "How many, on thy life, Burger?" "Two thousand, lord," said the man. "And how many do ye look to have from Higham-land?" Said the Burger, "Somewhat more than a thousand." Withal he looked uneasily at his fellows, some of whom were scowling on him felly. "Tell me now," said Ralph, "where be the other bands of the Burgers?" Ere the captive could speak, he who stood next him snatched an unsheathed knife from the girdle of one of the Dry Tree, & quick as lightning thrust it into his fellow's belly, so that he fell dead at once amongst them. Then Stephen, who had his sword naked in his hand, straightway hewed down the slayer, and swords came out of the scabbards everywhere; & it went but a little but that all the Burgers were slain at once. But Ralph cried out: "Put up your swords, Champions! Stephen slew yonder man for slaying his fellow, who was under my ward, and that was but his due. But I have given life to these others, & so it must be held to. Tie their hands behind them and let us on to Bear Castle. For this tide brooks no delay."

So they gat to horse, and the footmen from Garton mounted the horses of the slain Burgers, & had the charge of guarding the twenty that were left. So they rode off all of them toward Bear Castle, & shortly to say it, came within sight of its rampart two hours before noon. Sooner had they come thither; but divers times they caught up with small companies of weaponed men, whose heads were turned the same way; & Giles told Ralph each time that they were of the Shepherd-folk going to the mote. But now when they were come so nigh to the castle they saw a very stream of men setting that way, and winding up the hill to the rampart. And Giles said: "It is not to be doubted but that Martha hath sent round the war-brand, and thou wilt presently have an host that will meet thy foemen without delay; and what there lacks in number shall be made good by thy luck, which once again was shown by our falling in with that company e'en now." "Yea, truly," said Ralph; "but wilt thou now tell me how I shall guide myself amongst thy folk, & if they will grant me the aid I ask?" "Look, look," said Giles, "already some one hath made clear thine asking to our folk; and hearken! up there they are naming the an-

cient father of our Race, without whom we may do naught, even with the blessed saints to aid. There then is thine answer, lord."

INDEED as he spoke came down on the wind the voice of a chant, sung by many folk, the words whereof he well remembered: SMITE ASIDE THE AXE, O BEAR-FATHER. And therewith rose up into the air a column of smoke intermingled with fire from each of the four corners of that stronghold of the Ancient folk. Ralph rejoiced when he saw it, & the heart rose within him and fluttered in his bosom, and Ursula, who rode close behind him, looked up into his face well pleased & happy. Thus rode they up the bend and over the turf bridge into the plain of the garth, and whatso of people were there flocked about to behold the new-come warriors; sooth to say, there were but some two hundreds, who looked but few indeed in the great square place, but more were streaming in every minute. Giles led him & his men into the north-east corner of the castle, and there they gat off their horses and lay down on the grass awaiting what should betide.

Chapter XXIV. The Folkmote of the Shepherds

IN about an hour all the folk within the castle began to set toward the ingle wherein lay Ralph & his fellows, and then all rose up, while the folk of the Shepherds took their places on the slopes of the earth walls; but on the top, hard by the fire, which was still burning, stood up an old hoar man with a beard exceeding long; he had a sallet on his head, and held a guisarme in his hand. All men held their peace when they saw him standing there; and straightway he proclaimed the hallowing of the Mote in such form of words as was due amongst that folk, & which were somewhat long to tell here. Then was silence again for a little, & then the old man spake: "Few words are best to-day, neighbours; for wherefore are we met together?" There arose a hum of assent from the Shepherds as he spoke, & men clashed their weapons together; but none said any clear word. Then spake the old man: "We be met together because we have trouble on hand, and because there is a helper to hand, of whom the words of the wise & tales of old have told us; and

because as he shall help us, so shall we help him, since indeed our trouble is his also: now, neighbours, shall I say the word for you which ye would say to this young man, who is nevertheless old in wisdom, & true-hearted and kind?"

THEN came the hum of yeasay again and the clashing of weapons, and the old man spake again: "Ralph of Upmeads, there thou standest, wilt thou help us against the tyrants, as we shall help thee?" "Yea," said Ralph. Said the Elder: "Wilt thou be our Captain, if we do according to thy bidding? for thou needest not fear our failing thee." "Yea, verily," said Ralph. Said the Elder: "Ralph of Upmeads, wilt thou be our Captain as an alien and a hireling, or as a brother?" "As a brother," quoth Ralph. "Come up here then, Captain of our folk, & take my hand in thine, and swear by our fathers and thine to be a true brother of us, and take this ancient staff of war in thine hand. And, ye kindred of the Shepherds, bear witness of his swearing. Yea, and ye also, O neighbours of the Dry Tree!"

SO RALPH went up on the wall-top & took the Elder's hand, and took from him the ancient guisarme, which was inlaid with gold in letters of old time; & he swore in a loud voice to be a true brother of the Shepherd-folk, and raised the weapon aloft and shook it strongly, and all the folk cried: "Hail, our brother!" and the Champions shouted gladly withal, & great joy there was in that ingle of the ancient work. Then spake the Elder & said: "Ye Champions of the Dry Tree, will ye wend with us under the Captain our brother against his foemen and ours?" Then stood forth Stephen a-Hurst & said: "Master shepherd, for naught else are we come hither" Said the Elder: "Will ye come with us as friends or as hirelings? for in any case we would have you by our sides, & not in face of us; & though we be shepherds, & unhoused, or ill-housed, yet have we wherewithal to wage you, as ye know well enough, who have whiles lifted our gear." Then Stephen laughed & said: "True it is that we have whiles driven prey in your country, yea, & had some hard knocks therein; but all that was in playing the game of war, and now since we are to fight side by side, we will be paid by our foes and not by our friends; so neither hair nor wool will we have of yours, whatever we may have of the Burgers; and it is like that we shall be good friends of yours henceforward."

ONCE more all they that were there shouted. But once more the Elder spoke & said: "Is any man now wishful to speak?" None answered, till a big and burly man rose up and said: "Nay, Tall Thomas, thou hast said and done all that need was, & I deem that time presses; wherefore my mind is that we now break up this mote, and that after we have eaten a morsel we get ourselves into due array & take to the road. Now let any man speak against this if he will." None gainsaid him; nay, all seemed well pleased. So the Elder proclaimed the breaking up of the mote, and they went from out the hallowed place and sat down in the dyke on the outside of the rampart, and beheld the country which stretched out all lovely & blue before them, for the day was bright and fair. There then certain women brought victual & drink to them, and served the strangers first.

SO when they had eaten & drunk, Ralph bade the Shepherds array them duly, & appointed them leaders of tens and hundreds with the help of Giles, who was now clad in a hauberk and mail-coif, and looked a proper man-at-arms. Then they told over their company, & numbered of the Dry Tree one hundred & fifty champions, outtaken Stephen and Roger; of the men of Garton were twenty and two, and of the Shepherds three hundred & seventy & seven stout carles, some eighty of whom had bows, and the rest glaives & spears and other staff-weapons. There was not much armour of defence amongst them, but they were one and all stark carles and doughty. So when they were told over and made five hundred and fifty & four, they gat them into array for the road; and Ralph went afoot with no armour but his sallet, and a light coat of fence which he had gotten him in the Burg. He would have had Ursula ride on her palfrey with the Sage, but she would not, and held it for mirth and pleasure that she should go afoot through the land, now she was so nigh come home to her lord's house; so she went forth by Ralph's side with her broidered gown trussed through her girdle, so that the trimness of her feet drew the eyes of all men to them. As for Richard, he took a half score of the champions, and they rode on ahead to see that all was clear before the main host; which he might well do, as he knew the country so well.

Chapter XXV. They come to Wulstead

THUS WENT they, & naught befell them to tell of till they came anigh the gates of Wulstead hard on sunset. The gates, it has been said; for, whereas Ralph left Wulstead a town unwalled, he now found it fenced with pales, and with two towers strongly framed of timber, one on either side the gate, and on the battlements of the said towers they saw spears glittering; before the gate they saw a barrier of big beams also, and the gleaming of armour therein. Ralph was glad when he saw that they meant some defence; for though Wulstead was not in the lands of Upmeads, yet it was always a friendly neighbour, and he looked to eke out his host therein.

WULSTEAD standeth on a little hill or swelling of the earth, and the road that the company of Ralph took went up to the gate across the plain meadows, which had but here and there a tree upon them, so that the going of the company was beheld clearly from the gate; as was well seen, because anon came the sound of the blowing of great horns, & the spears thickened in the towers. Then Ralph stayed his company two bowshots from the barriers, while he himself, with his sword in his sheath, took Ursula's hand and set forth an easy pace toward the gate. Some of his company, and specially Roger and Stephen, would have letted him; but he laughed and said: "Why, lads, why? these be friends." "Yea," quoth Roger, "but an arrow knoweth no kindred nor well-willers: have a care, lord." Said the Sage of Swevenham: "Ye speak but after the folly of men of war; the hands and the eyes that be behind the bows have other hands & eyes behind them which shall not suffer that a friend of the Well shall be hurt." So Ralph and Ursula went forth, & came within a stone's cast of the barrier, when Ralph lifted up his voice and said: "Is there a captain of the townsfolk within the timber there?" A cheery voice answered him: "Yea, yea, lad; spare thy breath; I am coming to thee."

AND therewith a man came from out the barrier and did off his headpiece & ran straight toward Ralph, who saw at once that it was Clement Chapman; he made no more ado, but coming up to Ralph fell to clipping him in his arms,

while the tears ran down his face. Then he stood aloof & gazed upon him speechless a little while, and then spake: "Hail, & a hundred times hail! but now I look on thee I see what hath betid, and that thou art too noble and high that I should have cast mine arms about thee. But now as for this one, I will be better mannered with her." Therewith he knelt down before Ursula, & kissed her feet, but reverently. And she stooped down and raised him up, & with a merry countenance kissed his face, & stroked his cheeks with her hand and said: "Hail, friend of my lord! Was it not rather thou than he who delivered me from the pain and shame of Utterbol, whereas thou didst bring him safe through the mountains unto Goldburg? And but for that there had been no Well, either for him or for me."

But Clement stood with his head hanging down, and his face reddening. Till Ralph said to him: "Hail, friend! many a time we thought of this meeting when we were far away and hard bestead; but this is better than all we thought of. But now, Clement, hold up thine head & be a stout man of war, for thou seest that we be not alone." Said Clement: "Yea, fair lord, and timely ye come, both thou & thy company; and now that I have my speech again which joy had taken away from me at the first, I shall tell thee this, that if ye go further than the good town ye shall be met & fought withal by men who are over-many and over-fierce for us." "Yea," said Ralph, "and how many be they?" Quoth Clement: "How many men may be amongst them I wot not, but I deem there be some two thousand devils."

Now Ralph reddened, & he took Clement by the shoulder, & said: "Tell me, Clement, are they yet in Upmeads?" "Sooth to say," said Clement, "by this while they may be therein; but this morn it was yet free of them; but when thou art home in our house, thy gossip shall belike tell thee much more than I can; for she is foreseeing, and hath told us much in this matter also that hath come to pass." Then spake Ralph: "Where are my father and my mother; and shall I go after them at once without resting, through the dark night and all?" Said Clement, & therewith his face brightened: "Nay, thou needest go no further to look for them than the House of Black Canons within our walls: there are they dwelling in all honour and dignity these two days past." "What!" said Ralph, "have they fled from Upmeads,

& left the High House empty? I pray thee, Clement, bring me to them as speedily as may be." "Verily," said Clement, "they have fled, with many another, women & children and old men, who should but hinder the carles who have abided behind. Nicholas Longshanks is the leader of them down there, & the High House is their stronghold in a way; though forsooth their stout heads & strong hands are a better defence." Here Ralph brake in: "Sweetling Ursula, though thy feet have worn a many miles to-day, I bid thee hasten back to the company & tell Richard that it is as I said, to wit, that friends and good guesting await them; so let them hasten hither and come within gates at once. For as for me, I have sworn it that I will not go one step back till I have seen my father & mother in their house of Upmeads. Is it well said, Clement?" "Yea, forsooth," said Clement; but he could not take his eyes off Ursula's loveliness, as she kilted her skirts and ran her ways like one of Diana's ladies in the wildwood. At last he said: "Thou shalt wot, fair sir, that ye will have a little band to go with thee from us of Wulstead; forsooth we had gone to-morrow morn in any case, but since thou art here, all is well." Even as he spake a great shout broke out from the company as Ursula had given her message, & then came the tramp of men and horses and the clash of weapons as they set forward; and Clement looked & beheld how first of all the array came Ursula, bearing the hallowed staff in her hand; for her heart also was set on what was to come. Then cried out Clement: "Happy art thou, lord, and happy shalt thou be, and who shall withstand thee? Lo! what a war-duke it is! & what a leader that marches with fate in her hands before thine host!" Therewith were they all joined together, and Ursula gave the guisarme into Ralph's hand, & with his other hand he took hers, and the bar of the barrier was lifted & the gates thrown open, and they all streamed into the street, the champions coming last and towering over the footmen as they sat, big men on their big horses, as if they were very bodyguards of the God of War.

Chapter XXVI. Ralph sees his father & Mother again

THUS came they into the market-place of Wulstead nigh to Clement's house & there the company stood in

ordered ranks. Ralph looked round about half expecting to see his gossip standing in the door; but Clement smiled and said: "Thou art looking round for thy gossip, fair sir; but she is upon the north gate in war-gear; for we be too few in Wulstead to spare so clean-limbed & strong-armed a dame from our muster; but she shall be here against thou comest back from the Austin Canons, whither forsooth thou mayst go at once if thou wilt let me be master in the matter of lodging" Said Ralph, smiling: "Well, King of Wulstead, since thou givest leave I will e'en take it, nor needest thou give me any guide to the House of St. Austin, for I know it well. Sweetheart," said he, turning to Ursula, "what sayest thou: wilt thou come with me, or abide till to-morrow, when I shall show thee to my kinsmen?" "Nay," she said, "I will with thee at once, my lord, if thou wilt be kind and take me; for meseemeth I also have a word to say to thy father, and the mother that bore thee." "And thou, Hugh," said Ralph, "what sayest thou?" "Why, brother," said Hugh, "I think my blessing will abide the morrow's morn, for I have naught so fair & dear to show our father and mother as thou hast. Also to-morrow thou wilt have more to do; since thou art a captain, and I but a single varlet" And he smiled a little sourly on Ralph; who heeded it little, but took Ursula's hand and went his way with her.

IT WAS but a few minutes for them to come to the House of the Canons, which was well walled toward the fields at the west of the town, so that it was its chief defence on that side. It was a fair house with a church but just finished, and Ralph could see down the street its new white pinnacles and the cross on its eastern gable rising over the ridge of the dortoir They came to the gate, & round about it were standing men-at-arms not a few, who seemed doughty enough at first sight; but when Ralph looked on them he knew some of them, that they were old men, and somewhat past warlike deeds, for in sooth they were carles of Upmeads. Him they knew not, for he had somewhat cast down the visor of his helm; but they looked eagerly on the fair lady and the goodly knight So Ralph spake to the porter and bade him show him where was King Peter of Upmeads and his Lady wife; and the porter made him obeisance and told him that they were in the church, wherein was service toward; and bade him

enter. So they went in & entered the church, & it was somewhat dim, because the sun was set, and there were many pictures, and knots of flowers in the glass of the windows. So they went halfway down the nave, & stood together there; and the whole church was full of the music that the minstrels were making in the rood-loft, and most heavenly sweet it was; & as Ralph stood there his heart heaved with hope and love, and the sweetness of his youth; and he looked at Ursula, and she hung her head, and he saw that her shoulders were shaken with sobs; but he knew that it was with her as with him, so he spake no word to her.

NOW when his eyes cleared, & he was used to the twilight of the church, he looked toward the choir, & saw near to the Jesus altar a man & a woman standing together even as they were standing, and they were somewhat stricken in years. So presently he knew that this would be his father and mother; so he stood still and waited till the service should be over; and by then it was done the twilight was growing fast in the church, and the sacristan was lighting a lamp here and there in some of the chapels, and the aisles of the choir.

SO King Peter and his wife turned and came slowly down the nave, and when they were come anigh, Ralph spake aloud, and said: "Hail, King Peter of Upmeads!" And the old man stopped and said unto him: "Yea, forsooth, my name is Peter, & my business is to be a king, or a kinglet rather; & once it seemed no such hard craft; but now it all goes otherwise, and belike my craft has left me; even as it fares with a leech when folk are either too well or too ill to need his leech-craft." Then he looked at Ralph and at Ursula, & said: "Either my eyes are worse than I deemed yesterday, or thou art young, & a gallant knight, and she that is standing by thee is young and fair. Ah, lad! time was when I would have bid thee come home, thou & thy sweetling, to my house with me, and abide there in ease and feastfully; but now the best rede I can give thee is to get thee gone from the land, for there is all unpeace in it. And yet, forsooth, friend, I know not where to send thee to seek for peace, since Upmeads hath failed us."

WHILE he spoke, and Ralph was sore moved by the sound of his voice, & his speech wherein kindness and mocking was so blended, the Dame of Upmeads came to Ralph and laid

her hand on his arm, and said in a pleasant voice, for she was soft-hearted and soft-spoken both: "Will not the fair young warrior & his mate do so much for an old man & his wife, who have heard no tidings of their best-beloved son for two years well nigh, as to come with them to their chamber, and answer a little question or two as to the parts of the world they have seen of late?" Ralph nodded yea-say and began to move toward the porch, the Dame of Upmeads sticking close to him all the time, & King Peter following after & saying: "Yea, young man, thou mayst think the worse of me for hanging about here amongst the monks, when e'en now, for all I know, the battle is pitched in Upmeads; but Nicholas and all of them would have it so. Yea, & all my sons are away, fair sir; though of the eldest, who methinks was born with a long head, we hear that he is thriving, and hath grown great."

AS HE spake they were come into the porch, and passed into the open air, where it was still light; then the Dame turned round on Ralph, & caught him by the two arms, and cried out & cast her arms about his neck; and when she could sunder herself a little from him, she said: "O Ralph, I deemed that I knew thy voice, but I durst not halse thee till I knew it was mine own flesh and blood, lest I should have died for grief to think it was thee when it was not. O son, how fair thou art! Now do off thy sallet that I may see thee, thy face & thy curly head."

SO DID he, smiling as one who loved her, and again she fell to kissing and clipping him. Then his father came up and thrust her aside gently & embraced him also, & said: "Tell me, son, what thou art become? Thou art grown much of a man since thou stolest thyself away from me. Is there aught behind this goodly raiment of thine? And this fair lady, hath she stolen thee away from thy foes to bring thee home to us?" Ralph laughed & said: "No less than that, father; I will tell thee all presently; but this first, that I am the captain of a goodly company of men-at-arms; and ...." "Ah, son, sweetheart," said his mother, "& thou wilt be going away from us again to seek more fame: and yet, as I look on thee, thou seemest to have grown great enough already. I deem thou wilt not leave us." "Mother, my dear," said Ralph, "to-morrow morn we shall go down to battle in Upmeads, & the day after I shall come hither again, & bring you back to the High House with

all honour and glory. But look, mother," and he took Ursula's hand, "here is a daughter and a darling that I have brought back to thee, for this is my wedded wife."

THEN Ursula looked beseechingly at the Dame, who took her in her arms and clipped her & kissed her, & said: "Welcome, daughter; for I feel thy body that thou lovest me" ❧ Then said King Peter: "Forsooth, son, she is a sweet and dainty creature. If there be a fairer than her, I wot not; but none so fair have mine eyes looked on. Tell me whose daughter she is, and of what lineage" ❧ And therewith he took her hand and kissed her. But Ursula said: "I am come of no earl or baron. I am a yeoman's daughter, and both my father & my mother are dead, & I have no nigh kin save one brother who loveth me not, & would heed it little if he never saw my face again. Now I tell thee this: that if my lord biddeth me go from him, I will depart; but for the bidding of none else will I leave him" ❧ King Peter laughed and said: "Never will I bid thee depart." Then he took her hand & said: "Sweetling, fair daughter, what is thy name?" "Ursula," she said ❧ Said he: "Ursula, thy palms are harder than be the hands of the dainty dames of the cities, but there is no churl's blood in thee meseemeth. What is thy kindred of the yeomen?" She said: "We be come of the Geirings of old time: it may be that the spear is broken, & the banner torn; but we forget not our forefathers, though we labour afield, & the barons & the earls call us churls. It is told amongst us that that word is but another way of saying earl, and that it meaneth a man."

THEN spoke Ralph: "Father and mother both, I may well thank thee and bless thee that your eyes look upon this half of me with kind eyes. And now I shall tell thee that for this woman, her heart is greater than a king's or a leader of folk. And meseemeth her palms have hardened with the labour of delivering me from many troubles." ❧ Then the Dame of Upmeads put her arms about Ursula's neck again, & bade her all welcome once more, with sweet words of darling and dear, & well-beloved daughter ❧ But King Peter said: "Son, thou hast not told me what thou art become; & true it is that thou hast the look of a great one." Said Ralph: "Father and King, I have become the Lord of the Little Land of Abundance, the sworn brother of the Champions of the Dry Tree, the Lord of the Castle of the Scaur, the

brother and War-duke of the Shepherds; & to-morrow shall I be the Conqueror of the robbers & the devils of the Burg. And this be not enough for me, hearken! I & my wife both, yea, & she leading me, have drunk of the Well at the World's End, & have become friends thereof."

AND he looked at his father with looks of love, & his father drew nigh to him again, & embraced him once more, and stroked his cheeks and kissed him as if he had become a child again: "O son," said he, "whatsoever thou dost, that thou dost full well. And lo, one while when I look on thee thou art my dear and sweet child, as thou wert years agone, and I love thee dearly and finely; and another while thou art a great and mighty man, and I fear thee; so much greater thou seemest than we poor upland folk" ❧ Then smiled Ralph for love & happiness, & he said: "father, I am thy child in the house and at the board, & that is for thine helping. And I am thy champion & the fierce warrior afield, & that also is for thine helping. Be of good cheer; for thine house shall not wane, but wax." And all those four were full of joy & their hearts were raised aloft.

BUT as they spake thus, came a lay-brother and bent the knee before King Peter and bade him & the Dame of Upmeads to supper in the name of the Prior, & the Captain & the Lady therewith; for indeed the rumour of the coming of an host for the helping of the countryside had gotten into that House, and the Prior and the brethren sorely desired to look upon the Captain, not knowing him for Ralph of Upmeads ❧ So into the Hall they went together, & there the holy fathers made them great feast and joy; and King Peter might not refrain him, but told the Prior how this was his son come back from far lands, with the goodly Lady he had won to wife therein; and the Prior and all the fathers made much of Ralph, & rejoiced in their hearts when they saw how goodly a man of war he had gotten to be. And the Prior would lead him on to tell him of the marvels he had seen in the far parts of the world; but Ralph said but little thereon, whereas his thought was set on the days that lay even before his feet; yet some deal he told him of the uncouth manners of the lands beyond Whitwall, and at last he said: "father, when the battles be over here, and there is peace on our lands again, I will ask thee to give me guest-

ing for a night, that I may tell thee all the tale of what hath befallen me since the last summer day when I rode through Wulstead; but now I ask leave of thee to depart, for I have many things to do this even, as behoveth a captain, before I sleep for an hour or two. And if it be thy will, I would leave the Lady my wife with my mother here at least till morrow morn."

SO THE Prior gave him leave, loth though he were, and Ralph kissed his father and mother, and they blessed him. But Ursula said to him softly: "It is my meaning to go with thee down into Upmeads to-morrow; for who knoweth what may befall thee." Then he smiled upon her & went his ways down the hall and out-a-gates, while all men looked on him & did him worship.

Chapter XXVII. Ralph holds converse with Katherine his gossip

RALPH WENT straight from St. Austin's to Clement's house, & found much people about the door thereof, what of the townsmen, what of the men of his own host. He passed through these, and found Clement in his chamber, & with him a half score of such company as was without, & amongst them Roger and the Sage; but Stephen & Richard both were amongst their men doing what was needful. All men arose when Ralph entered; but he looked around, & could see naught of his gossip amongst them. Then he sat down by Clement and asked if he had any fresh tidings; & Clement did him to wit that there had come in a carle from out of Upmeads, who had told them by sure tokens that the foe were come into the Upmeads-land at noon that day, and between then and sunset had skirmished with Nicholas & them that were holding the High House, but had gotten naught thereby. This man, said Clement, being both bold and of good sleight had mingled with the foe; & had heard the talk of them, and he said that they had no inkling of the Shepherds or the Dry Tree coming against them; but they looked to have aid from their own folk from the lands of Higham; wherefore they made a mock of the defence of the Upmeads men; and said that since, when they were all joined together in Upmeads, they might enter where they would without the loss of a half-score men, therefore they would risk

naught now; nor would they burn either the High House or the other steadings, since, said they, they were minded to keep them sound & whole for their own.

THESE tidings seemed good to Ralph; so he took a cup of wine and pledged the company, & said: "My masters, such of you as list to sleep long to-night had best be abed presently, for I warn you that the trumpets will blow for departure before the sun riseth to-morrow; and he that faileth to see to-morrow's battle will be sorry for his lack all his life long." When he had thus spoken they all cried hail to him, & anon arose & went their ways. Then Ralph bade Clement come with him that he might visit the quarters of his men-at-arms, and see that all the leaders knew of the muster, and of the order of departing on the morrow; and Clement arose and went with him.

AS THEY were on the way Ralph asked Clement what ailed his gossip Katherine that she had not come to meet him already; and Clement laughed & said: "Naught, naught; she is somewhat shamefaced to meet thee first amongst a many folk, and she not able, belike, to refrain her kisses & caresses to thee. Fear not, she is in her bower-aloft, & we shall find her there when we come back from our errand; fear not! she will not sleep till she hath had her arms about thee." "Good is that," said Ralph; "I had looked to see her ere now; but when we meet apart from folk, something we shall be able to say to each other, which belike neither she nor I had liked to leave unsaid till we meet again." So came they to the chief quarters of the fighting men, and Ralph had all the leaders called to him, and he spake to them of how they should do on the morrow, both footmen and horsemen, whatwise they should stand together, and how they should fall on; and he told them all as clearly as if he were already in the field with the foe before him; so that they wondered at him, so young in years, being so old in the wisdom of war. Withal they saw of him that he had no doubt but that they should come to their above on the morrow; and all men, not only of the tried men-at-arms of the Dry Tree, but they of the Shepherds also, even those of them who had never stricken a stroke in anger, were of high heart & feared not what should befall.

SO when all this business was over, they turned about & came their ways

home to Clement's house again. They saw lights in the chamber or ever they entered, & when they came to the door, lo! there within was Katherine walking up and down the floor as if she knew not how to contain herself. She turned and saw Ralph at the door, and she cried aloud & ran towards him with arms outspread. But when she drew nigh to him and beheld him closely, she withheld her, and falling down on her knees before him took his hand and fell to kissing it and weeping & crying out: "O my lord, my lord, thou art come again to us!" But Ralph stooped down to her, and lifted her up, and embraced her, & kissed her on the cheeks and the mouth, and led her to the settle & sat down beside her and put his arm about her; and Clement looked on smiling, & sat him down over against them.

THEN spake Katherine: "O my lord! how great & masterful hast thou grown; never did I hope to see thee come back so mighty a man." And again she wept for joy; but Ralph kissed her again, and she said, laughing through her tears: "Master Clement, this lord and warrior hath brought back with him something that I have not seen; and belike he hath had one fair woman in his arms, or more it may be, since I saw him last. For though he but kisses me as his gossip and foster-mother, yet are his kisses closer & kinder than they were afore-time." Said Clement: "Sooth is the Sage's guess; yet verily, fair sir, I have told her somewhat of thy journeys, so far as I knew of them." Said Katherine: "Dear lord & gossip, wilt thou not tell me more thereof now?" "What!" said Ralph; "shall I not sleep to-night?" "Dear gossip," she said, "thou art over-mighty to need sleep. And ah! I had forgotten in the joy of our meeting that to-morrow thou goest to battle; and how if thou come not again?" "Fear naught," said Ralph, "art thou not somewhat foreseeing? Dost thou not know that to-morrow or the day after I shall come back unhurt & victorious; and then shall both thou and Clement come to Upmeads and abide there as long as ye will; and then shall I tell thee a many tales of my wanderings; & Ursula my beloved, she also shall tell thee." Katherine reddened somewhat, but she said: "Would I might kiss her feet, dear lord. But now, I pray thee, tell me somewhat, now at once." "So shall it be," said Ralph, "since thou wilt have it, dear gossip; but when I have done I shall ask thee to tell me somewhat, whereof

hath long been wonder in my mind; and meseemeth that by the time we are both done with tales, I shall needs be putting on my helm again. Nay, again I tell thee it is but a show of battle that I go to!"

SO then he went and sat by Clement's side, and began and told over as shortly as might be the tidings of his journeys. And oft she wept for pity thereat. But when he was done and he had sat beholding her, & saw how goodly a woman she was, and how straight and well knit of body, he said: "Gossip, I wonder now if thou also hast drunk of the Well; for thou art too fair & goodly to be of the age that we call thee. How is this? Also tell me how thou camest by this pair of beads that seem to have led me to the Well at the World's End? for as I said e'en now, I have long marvelled how thou hadst them and where" ❧ "fair sir," said Clement, "as for her drinking of the Well at the World's End, it is not so; but this is a good woman, and a valiant, and of great wisdom; and such women wear well, even as a well-wrought piece of armour that hath borne many strokes of the craftsman's hand, & hath in it some deal of his very mind & the wisdom of him. But now let her tell thee her tale (which forsooth I know not), for night is growing old."

Chapter XXVIII. Dame Katherine tells of the Pair of Beads, and whence she had them ❧

KATHERINE cast friendly looks on them & said: "Gossip, & thou, Clement, I will make a clean breast of it once for all. In the days when I was first wedded to Master Clement yonder, he found his bed cold without me, for he was a hot lover; therefore would he oft have me with him on his journeys, how hard soever or perilous the way might be. Yea, Clement, thou lookest the sooth, though thou sayest it not, I was naught loth thereto, partly because I would not grieve thee, my man; but partly, & belike mostly, because I was wishful to see the ways of the world even at the risk of being thrust out of the world. So it befell us on a time to make a journey together, a journey exceeding long, in the company of certain chapmen, whereof some, and not a few, died on the way. But we lived, & came into the eastern parts of the earth to a city right ancient, and fulfilled of marvels, which hight Sarras the Holy. There saw we wonders whereof were

it overlong to tell of here; but one while I will tell thee, my lord. But this I must needs say, that I heard tell of a woman dwelling there, who was not old by seeming, but had in her the wisdom of ten lives, & the longing gat hold of me to see her & learn wisdom of her. So I entreated many who were called wise, some with prayers, & some with gifts also, to help me to speech of her; but I gat nothing either by praying or giving; they that would have helped me could not, and they that could would not. So, what between one thing and another, the longing to see the Wise Woman grew as it were into a madness in me. Amidst of which we fell in with a merchant exceeding wise in ancient lore, who looked at me (though Clement knew it not) with eyes of love. Of this man I asked concerning the Wise Woman, & he seeing my desire, strove to use it merchant-like, & would deal with me & have in payment for his learning a gift which I had naught to do to give. How-beit, madness & my desire for speech with the Wise Woman got the better of me, & I promised to give no less than he would, trusting to beguile him after I had got my desire, and be quit of him. So he led me to the woman and went his ways. She dwelt all by herself in a nook of an ancient ruined palace, erst the house of the ancientest of all the kings of Sarras. When I came to her, I saw naught dreadful or ugsome about her: she was cheerful of countenance & courteous of demeanour, & greeted me kindly, as one neighbour in the street of Wulstead might do to another. I saw her, that she was by seeming a woman of some forty winters, trim & well-fashioned of body, nowise big, but slender, of dark red hair & brown eyes somewhat small.

NOW, SHE said to me, 'I have looked for thee a while; now thou art come, thou shalt tell me what thou needest, & thy needs will I fulfil. Yet needs must thou do a thing for me in return, and maybe thou wilt deem it a great thing. Yet whereas thou hast struck a bargain before thou camest hither, if I undo that for thee, the bargain with me may be naught so burdensome. How sayest thou?' Well, I saw now that I was in the trap, for ill had it been in those days had Clement come to know that I had done amiss; for he was a jealous lover, and a violent man."

Clement smiled hereat, but said naught, & Katherine went on: "Trap or no trap, if I were eager before, I was over-eager now; so when she bade me swear to do her will, I swore

it without tarrying. Then she said: 'Sit down before me, & I will teach thee wisdom.' What did she teach me? say ye. Well, if I told you belike ye would be none the wiser; but so much she told me, that my heart swelled with joy of the wisdom which I garnered. Say thou, Clement, if I have been the worser woman to thee, or thy friends, or mine?" "Nay, goodwife," said Clement, "I have naught against thee." Katherine laughed and went on: "At last the Wise Woman said: 'Now that thou hast of me all that may avail thee, comes the other part of our bargain, wherein I shall take & thou shalt give.' Quoth I: 'That is but fair, & thou shalt find me true to thee.' She said: 'If thou be not, I shall know it, and shall amend it in such wise that it shall cost thee much.' Then she looked on me long & keenly, & said afterward: 'forsooth I should forbear laying this charge upon thee if I did not deem that thou wouldst be no less than true. But now I will try it, whereas I deem that the days of my life henceforward shall not be many; and many days would it take me to find a woman as little foolish as thee and as little false, and thereto as fairly fashioned.'

THEREWITH SHE put her hand to her neck, and took thence the self-same pair of beads which I gave to thee, dear gossip, and which (praise be to All Hallows!) thou hast borne ever since; and she said: 'Now hearken! Thou shalt take this pair of beads, and do with them as I bid thee. Swear again thereto.' So I swore by All Angels; & she said again: 'This pair of beads shall one day lead a man unto the Well at the World's End, but no woman; forsooth, if a woman have them of a woman, or the like of them (for there be others), they may serve her for a token; but will be no talisman or leading-stone to her; & this I tell thee lest thou seek to the Well on the strength of them. for I bid thee give them to a man that thou lovest... that thou lovest well, when he is in most need; only he shall not be of thine own blood. This is all that I lay upon thee; & if thou do it, thou shalt thrive, and if thou do it not, thou shalt come to harm. And I will tell thee now that this meeting betwixt us is not by chance-hap, but of my bringing about; for I have laboured to draw thee to me, knowing that thou alone of women would avail me herein. Now shalt thou go home to thine hostel, & take this for a token of my sooth-saying. The wise merchant who led thee unto me is abiding thine home-coming that he may have of thee that

which thou promisedst to him. If then thou find him at thine hostel, and he take thee by the hand & lead thee to bed, whereas Clement is away till to-morrow even, then shalt thou call me a vain word-spinner and a liar; but if when thou comest home there, the folk there say to thee the merchant Valerius is ridden away hastily, being called afar on a message of life & death, then shalt thou trow in me as a wise woman. Herewith depart, & I bid thee farewell.'

SO I went my ways to my hostel trembling, and at the door I met the chamberlain, who said to me: 'Lady, the merchant Valerius hath been here seeking thee, & he said that he would abide thy coming; but amidst of his abiding cometh a man who would speak to him privily; whereof it came that he called for his horse and bade me tell thee, Lady, that he was summoned on a matter of life and death, and would return to kiss thine hands in five days' space.' So I wotted that the woman had spoken sooth, & was wise and foreseeing, and something of a dread of her came upon me. But the next even back cometh Clement, and the day after we rode away from Sarras the Holy, and Valerius I saw never again. And as to the beads, there is naught to tell of them till they came into thine hands; and something tells me that it was the will of the Wise Woman that to no other hands they should come."

HERE Katherine made an end, & both the men sat pondering her tale a little. As for Ralph, he deemed it certain that the Wise Woman of Sarras would be none other than she who had taught lore to the Lady of Abundance; but why she should have meant the beads for him he wotted not. Again he wondered how it was that the Lady of Abundance should have given the beads to Ursula, and whether she knew that they had no might to lead her to the Well at the World's End. And yet further he wondered how it was that Ursula, unholpen by the talisman, should have done so much to bring him to the Well; yea, and how she was the first to see it while he slept. But his heart told him that whereas he was seeking the Well with her, she must needs come thither with him, unless they were both cast away; withal Katherine looked at him and said: "Yea, dear lord, I wot what thou art thinking of; but couldest thou have left her, when thou hadst once found her again, Well or no Well?" "Sooth is that," said Ralph, "yet for all that she

hath done without help of talisman or witchcraft is she the more worshipful & the dearer."

THEN speech came into Clement's mouth, and he said: "Wife, it is as I said before, when thy gossip had just departed from us. It was meet enough that thou shouldst have loved him better than me; but now it is even less to be undone than ever, when he has come back bringing with him a woman so valiant & lovely as is my Lady Ursula. So thou must e'en take the life that fate hath sent thee." Katherine laughed through her tears, and said: "Withal, goodman, I have been no bad wife to thee. And, moreover, look thou, gossip dear: when I was wandering about with Clement amongst many perils, when our need seemed sorest, then would I think to give the beads to Clement; but so soon as I began to speak to him of the Well at the World's End he would belittle the tale of it, and would bid me look to it if it were not so, that where the world endeth the clouds begin."

AS SHE spoke, Ralph lifted up his hand and pointed to the window and said: "Friends, as we were speaking of all these marvels we were forgetting the need of Upmeads and the day of battle; and lo now! how the dawn is widening & the candles fading" Scarce were the words out of his mouth, when on the quietness of the beginning of day brake out the sound of four trumpets, which were sounding in the four quarters of the town, and blowing men to the gathering. Then rose up both Ralph and Clement and took their weapons, and they kissed Katherine and went soberly out-a-doors into the market-place, where already weaponed men were streaming in to the muster.

Chapter XXIX. They go down to Battle in Upmeads

BEFORE IT was light were all men come into the market-place, & Ralph and Richard and Clement & Stephen a-Hurst fell to & arrayed them duly; and now, what with the company which Ralph had led into Wulstead, what with the men of the town, and them that had fled from Upmeads (though these last were mostly old men and lads), they were a thousand and four score and three. Ralph would go afoot as he went yesterday; but to-day he bore in his hand the ancient staff of war, the gold-written guisarme; and he went a-

mongst the Shepherds, with whom were joined the feeble folk of Upmeads, men whom he had known of old and who knew him, and it was as if their hearts had caught fire from his high heart, and that whatever their past days had been to them, this day at least should be glorious. ❧ Withal anon comes Ursula from St. Austin's with the Sage of Swevenham, whose face was full smiling and cheerful. Ursula wore that day a hauberk under her gown, & was helmed with a sallet; and because of her armour she rode upon a little horse. Ralph gave her into the warding of the Sage, who was armed at all points, & looked a valiant man of war. But Ralph's brother, Hugh, had gotten him a horse, and had fallen into the company of the Champions, saying that he deemed they would go further forth than a sort of sheep-tending churls & the runaways of Upmeads.

AS for Ralph, he walked up and down the ranks of the stout men of the Down-country, and saw how they had but little armour for defence, though their weapons for cutting & thrusting looked fell & handy. So presently he turned about to Giles, who, as aforesaid, bore a long hauberk, & said: "Friend, the walk we are on to-day is a long one for carrying burdens, & an hour after sunrise it will be hot. Wilt thou not do with thy raiment as I do?" And therewith he did off his hauberk and his other armour save his sallet. "This is good," said he, "for the sun to shine on, so that I may be seen from far; but these other matters are good for folk who fight a-horseback or on a wall; we striders have no need of them."

THEN arose great shouting from the Shepherds, & men stretched out the hand to him and called hail on his valiant heart. ❧ Amidst of which cries Giles muttered, but so as Ralph might hear him: "It is all down hill to Upmeads; I shall take off my iron-coat coming back again." So Ralph clapped him on the shoulder & bade him come back whole and well in any case. "Yea, and so shalt thou come back," said he. ❧ Then the horns blew for departure, and they went their ways out of the market-place, and out into the fields through the new wooden wall of Wulstead. ❧ Richard led the way with a half score of the Champions, but he rode but a little way before Ralph, who marched at the head of the Shepherds. ❧ So they went in the fresh morning over the old familiar fields, & strange it seemed to Ralph that he was lead-

ing an host into the little land of Upmeads. Speedily they went, though in good order, & it was but a little after sunrise when they were wending toward the brow of the little hill whence they would look down into the fair meads whose image Ralph had seen on so many days of peril and weariness.

AND now Richard and his fore-riders had come up on to the brow & sat there on their horses clear against the sky; and Ralph saw how Richard drew his sword from the scabbard and waved it over his head, and he and his men shouted; then the whole host set up a great shout, & hastened up the bent, but with the end of their shout & the sound of the tramp of their feet and the rattle of their war-gear was mingled a confused noise of cries a way off, and the blowing of horns, and as Ralph and his company came crowding up on to the brow, he looked down & saw the happy meadows black with weaponed men, & armour gleaming in the clear morning, & the points of weapons casting back the low sun's rays & glittering like the sparks in a dying fire of straw. Then again he looked, & lo! the High House rising over the meadows unburned and unhurt, & the banner of the fruited tree hanging forth from the topmost tower thereof. Then he felt a hand come on to his cheek, and lo, Ursula beside him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glittering; & she cried out: "O thine home, my beloved, thine home!" And he turned to her and said: "Yea, presently, sweetheart!" "Ah," she said, "will it be long? and they so many!" "And we so mighty!" said Ralph. "Nay, it will be but a little while. Wise man of Swevenham, see to it that my beloved is anigh me to-day, for where I am, there will be safety." The Sage nodded yea-say and smiled.

THEN Ralph looked along the ridge to right and left of him, & saw that all the host had come up and had a sight of the foemen; on the right stood the Shepherds staring down into the meadow and laughing for the joy of battle and the rage of the oppressed. On the left sat the Champions of the Dry Tree on their horses, and they also were tossing up their weapons and roaring like lions for the prey; & down below the black crowd had drawn together into ordered ranks, and still the clamour and rude roaring of the warriors arose thence, and beat against the hill's brow. Now so fierce & ready were the men of Ralph's company that it was a near thing but that they, and the Shepherds in es-

pecial, did not rush tumultuously down the hill all breathless and in ill order. But Ralph cried out to Richard to go left, and Giles to go right, and stay the onset for a while; & to bid the leaders come to him where he stood. Then the tumult amidst his folk lulled, and Stephen a-Hurst and Roger and three others of the Dry Tree came to him, & Giles brought three of the Shepherds, & there was Clement & a fellow of his. So when they were come and standing in a ring round Ralph, he said to them:

BROTHERS in arms, ye see that our foes are all in array to meet us, having had belike some spy in Wulstead, who hath brought them the tale of what was toward. Albeit methinks that this irks not either you nor me; for otherwise we might have found them straggling, & scattered far and wide, which would have made our labour the greater. Now ye can see with your eyes that they are many more than we be, even were Nicholas to issue out of the High House against them, as doubtless he will do if need be. Brethren, though they be so many, yet my heart tells me that we shall overcome them; yet if we leave our strength and come down to them, both our toil shall be greater, and some of us, belike many, shall be slain; and evil should I deem it if but a score of my friends should lose their lives on this joyous day when at last I see Upmeads again after many troubles. Wherefore my rede is that we abide their onset on the hill-side here; and needs must they fall on us, whereas we have Wulstead and friends behind us, and they naught but Nicholas and the bows and bills of the High House. But if any have aught to say against it let him speak, but be speedy; for already I see a stir in their array, and I deem that they will send men to challenge us to come down to them."

THEN spake Stephen a-Hurst: "I, and we all, meseemeth, deem that thou art in the right, Captain; though sooth to say, when we first set eyes on these dogs again, the blood so stirred in us that we were like to let all go & ride down on them." Said Richard: "Thou biddest us wisdom of war; let them have the hill against them" ❧ Said Clement: "Yea, for they are well-learned & well-armed; another sort of folk to those wild men whom we overthrew in the mountains." And in like wise said they all ❧ Then spake Stephen again: "Lord, since thou wilt fight afoot with our friends of the Shepherds, we

of the Dry Tree are minded to fare in like wise and to forego our horses; but if thou gainsay it....." "Champion," said Ralph, "I do gainsay it. Thou seest how many of them be horsed, and withal ye it is who must hold the chase of them; for I will that no man of them escape" They laughed joyously at his word, and then he said: "Go now, and give your leaders of scores and tens the word that I have said, & come back speedily for a little while; for now I see three men sundering them from their battle, and one beareth a white cloth at the end of his spear; these shall be the challengers."

SO they did after his bidding, & by then they had come back to Ralph those three men were at the foot of the hill, which was but low Then Ralph said to his captains: "Stand before me, so that I be not seen of them until one of you hath made answer: 'Speak of this to our leader & captain.'" Even so they did; & presently those three came so nigh that they could see the whites of their eyes They were all three well armed, but the foremost of them was clad in white steel from head to foot, so that he looked like a steel image, all but his face, which was pale and sallow & grim. He and his two fellows, when they were right nigh, rode slowly all along the front of Ralph's battles thrice, and none spake aught to them, and they gave no word to any; but when they came over against the captains who stood before Ralph for the fourth time, they reined up and faced them, and the leader put back his sallet and spake in a great and rough voice:

E MEN! we have heard these three hours that ye were coming, wherefore we have drawn out into the meads, which we have taken, that ye might see how many & how valiant we be, & might fear us. Wherefore now, ye broken reivers of the Dry Tree, ye silly shepherds of silly sheep, ye weavers & apprentices of Wulstead, & if there be any more, ye fools! we give you two choices this morn. Either come down to us into the meadow yonder, that we may slay you with less labour, or else, which will be the better for you, give up to us the Upmeads thralls who be with you, and then turn your faces and go back to your houses, & abide there till we come & pull you out of them, which may be some while yet. Hah! what say ye, fools?" Then spake Clement & said: "Ye messengers of the robbers & oppressors, why make ye this roaring to the common people and the sergeants? Why speak ye not with

our Captain?" Cried out the challenger: "Where then is the Captain of the Fools? is he hidden? can he hear my word?"

SCARCE was it out of his mouth ere the captains fell away to right and left, & there, standing by himself, was Ralph, holding the ancient lettered war-staff; his head was bare, for now he had done off his sallet, and the sun and the wind played in his bright hair; glorious was his face, and his grey eyes gleamed with wrath and mastery as he spake in a clear voice, and there was silence all along the ranks to hearken him: "O messenger of the robbers! I am the captain of this folk. I see that the voice hath died away within the jaws of you; but it matters not, for I have heard thy windy talk, and this is the answer: we will neither depart, nor come down to you, but will abide our death by your hands here on this hill-side. Go with this answer."

THE MAN stared wild at Ralph while he was speaking, and seemed to stagger in his saddle; then he let his sallet fall over his face, and, turning his horse about, rode swiftly, he and his two fellows, down the hill and away to the battle of the Burgers. None followed or cried after him; for now had a great longing and expectation fallen upon Ralph's folk, and they abode what should befall with little noise. They noted so soon as the messenger was gotten to the main of the foemen that there was a stir amongst them, and they were ordering their ranks to move against the hill. And withal they saw men all armed coming from out the High House, who went down to the Bridge & abode there. Up-meads-water ran through the meadows betwixt the hill and the High House, as hath been said afore; but as it winded along, one reach of it went nigh to the House, and made well-nigh a quarter of a circle about it before it turned to run down the meadows to the eastward; and at this nighest point was there a wide bridge well builded of stone. The Burg-devils heeded not the men at the Bridge, but, being all arrayed, made but short tarrying (and that belike only to hear the tale of their messenger) ere they came in two battles straight across the meadow. They on their right were all riders, and these faced the Champions of the Dry Tree, but a great battle of footmen came against the Shepherds and the rest of Ralph's footmen, but in their rearward was a company of well-horsed men-at-arms; and all of them were well armed &

went right orderly & warrior-like.

IT was but some fifteen minutes ere they were come to the foot of the hill, & they fell to mounting it with laughter & mockery, but Ralph's men held their peace. ❧ The horsemen were somewhat speedier than those on foot, though they rode but at a foot's pace, and when they were about halfway up the hill & were faltering a little (for it was somewhat steep, though naught high), the Champions of the Dry Tree could forbear them no longer, but set up a huge roar, & rode at them, so that they all went down the hill together, but the Champions were lost amidst of the huge mass of the foemen ❧ But Ralph was left at the very left end of his folk, and the foemen came up the hill speedily with much noise & many foul mocks as aforesaid, and they were many & many more than Ralph's folk, and, now that the Champions were gone, could have enfolded them at either end; but no man of the company blenched or faltered, only here and there one spake soft to his neighbour, and here and there one laughed the battle-laugh.

NOW at the hanging of the hill, whenas either side could see the whites of the foemen's eyes, the robbers stayed a little to gather breath, and in that nick of time Ralph strode forth into the midst between the two lines and up on to a little mound on the hillside (which well he knew), and he lifted up the ancient guisarme, & cried on high: "Home now! Home to Upmeads!" ❧ ❧ Then befell a marvel, for even, as all eyes of the foemen were turned on him, straightway their shouts & jeering and laughter fell dead, & then gave place to shrieks and wailing, as all they who beheld him cast down their weapons and fled wildly down the hill, overturning whatever stood in their way, till the whole mass of them was broken to pieces, and the hill was covered with naught but cravens & the light-footed Shepherds slaughtering them in the chase.

BUT Ralph called Clement to him, and they drew a stalworth band together, and, heeding naught the chase of the runaways, they fell on those who had the Champions in their midst, and fell to smiting down men on either hand; and every man who looked on Ralph crouched and cowered before him, casting down his weapons & throwing up his hands. Shortly to say it, when these horsemen felt this new onset, and looking round saw

their men fleeing hither & thither over the green fields of Upmeads, smitten by the Shepherds & leaping into the deep pools of the river, they turned and fled, every man who could keep his saddle, and made for the Bridge, the Dry Tree thundering at their backs. But even as they came within bowshot, a great flight of arrows came from the further side of the water, & the banner of the Fruitful Tree came forth from the bridge-end with Nicholas and his tried men-at-arms behind it; and then indeed great and grim was the murder, and the proud men of the Burg grovelled on the ground and prayed for mercy, till neither the Champions nor the men of Nicholas could smite helpless men any longer.

NOW HAD RALPH held his hand from the chase, and he was sitting on a mound amidst of the meadow under an ancient thorn, & beside him sat the Sage of Swevenham and Ursula. And she was grown pale now & looked somewhat scared, & she spake in a trembling voice to Ralph, and said: "Alas, friend! that this should be so grim! When we hear the owls a-nighttime about the High House, shall we not deem at whiles that it is the ghosts of this dreadful battle & slaughter wandering about our fair fields?" But Ralph spake sternly & wrathfully as he sat there bareheaded and all unarmed, save for the ancient glaive: "Why did they not slay me then? Better the ghosts of robbers in our fields by night, than the over-burdened hapless thrall by day, & the scourged woman, and ruined child. These things they sought for us & have found death on the way...let it be!" He laughed as he spake; but then the grief of the end of battle came upon him, and he trembled & shook, and great tears burst from his eyes & rolled down his cheeks, and he became stark and hard-faced. Then Ursula took his hands and caressed them, and kissed his face, and fell a-talking to him of how they rode the pass to the Valley of Sweet Chestnuts; and in a while his heart and his mind came back to him as it did that other time of which she spake, & he kissed her in turn, and began to tell her of his old chamber in the turret of the High House.

AND now there come riding across the field two warriors. They draw rein by the mound, and one lights down, and lo! it is Long Nicholas; and he took Ralph in his arms, & kissed him and wept over him, for all his grizzled beard & his gaunt limbs; but few words he had for him, save

this: "My little Lord, was it thou that was the wise captain to-day, or this stout lifter and reiver?" But the other man was Stephen a-Hurst, who laughed & said: "Nay, Nicholas, I was the fool, and this stripling the wise warrior. But, Lord Ralph, thou wilt pardon me, I hope, but we could not kill them all, for they would not fight in any wise; what shall we do with them?" Ralph knit his brows & thought a little; then he said: "How many hast thou taken?" Said Stephen: "Some two hundred alive." "Well," quoth Ralph, "strip them of all armour & weapons, & let a score of thy riders drive them back the way they came into the Debateable Wood. But give them this last word from me, that or long I shall clear the said wood of all strong-thieves" Stephen departed on that errand; and presently comes Giles and another of the Shepherds with a like tale, & had a like answer.

NOW AMIDST all these deeds it yet lacked an hour of noon. So presently Ralph arose and took Richard apart for a while and spoke with him a little, & then came back to Ursula and took her by the hand, and said: "Beloved, Richard shall take thee now to a pleasant abode this side the water; for I grudge that thou shouldst enter the High House without me; & as for me, I must needs ride back to Wulstead to bring hither my father & mother, as I promised to do after the battle. In good sooth, I deemed it would have lasted longer." Said Ursula: "Dear friend, this is even what I should have bidden thee myself. Depart speedily, that thou mayst be back the sooner; for sorely do I long to enter thine house, beloved" Then Ralph turned to Nicholas, and said: "Our host is not so great but that thou mayst victual it well; yet I deem it is little less than when we left Wulstead early this morning." "True is that, little lord," said Nicholas. "Hear a wonder amongst battles: of thy Shepherds and the other footmen is not one slain, and but some five hurt. The Champions have lost three men slain outright, and some fifteen hurt; of whom is thy brother Hugh, but not sorely" "Better than well is thy story then," said Ralph. "Now let them bring me a horse" So when he was horsed, he kissed Ursula & went his ways. And she abode his coming back at Richard's house anigh the water.

Chapter XXX. Ralph brings his father and Mother to Upmeads

SHORT WAS the road back again to Wulstead, and whereas the day was not very old when Ralph came there, he failed not to stop at Clement's house, & came into the chamber where sat Dame Katherine in pensive wise nigh to the window, with her open hands in her lap. Quoth Ralph: "Rejoice, gossip! for neither is Clement hurt, nor I, & all is done that should be done" She moved her but little, but the tears came into her eyes & rolled down her cheeks. "What, gossip?" quoth Ralph; "these be scarce tears of joy; what aileth thee?" "Nay," said Katherine, "indeed I am joyful of thy tidings, though sooth to say I looked for none other. But, dear lord & gossip, forgive me my tears on the day of thy triumph; for if they be not wholly of joy, so also are they not wholly of sorrow. But love and the passing of the days are bitter-sweet within my heart today. Later on thou shalt see few faces more cheerful and merry in the hall at Upmeads than this of thy gossip's. So be merry now, and go fetch thy father and thy mother, and rejoice their hearts that thou hast been even better than thy word to them. Farewell, gossip; but look to see me at Upmeads before many days are past; for I know thee what thou art; and that the days will presently find deeds for thee, and thou wilt be riding into peril, & coming safe from out of it. Farewell!"

SO he departed, and rode to the House of St. Austin, and the folk gathered so about him in the street that at the gate of the Priory he had to turn about and speak to them; & he said: "Good people, rejoice! there are no more foemen of Wulstead anigh you now; and take this word of me, that I will see to it in time to come that ye live in peace and quiet here." Folk shouted for joy, and the fathers who were standing within the gate heard his word and rejoiced, & some of them ran off to tell King Peter that his son was come back victorious already; so that by then he had dismounted at the Guest-house door, lo! there was the King and his wife with him, and both they alboun for departure And when they saw him, King Peter cried out: "There is no need to say a word, my son; unless thou wouldst tell the tale to the holy father Prior, who, as ye see, has e'en now come out to us" Said

Ralph: "Father and mother, I pray your blessing, & also the blessing of the father Prior here; and the tale is short enough: that we have overthrown them and slain the more part, and the others are now being driven like a herd of swine into their stronghold of the Wood Debateable, where, forsooth, I shall be ere the world is one month older. And in the doing of all this have but three of our men been slain and a few hurt, amongst whom is thy son Hugh, but not sorely" "O yea, son," said his mother, "he shall do well enough. But now with thy leave, holy Prior, we will depart, so that we may sleep in the High House tonight, and feel that my dear son's hand is over us to ward us."

THEN Ralph knelt before them, & King Peter and his wife blessed their son when they had kissed and embraced each other, & they wept for joy of him. The Prior also, who was old, and a worthy prelate, and an ancient friend of King Peter, might not refrain his tears at the joy of his friends as he gave Ralph his blessing. And then, when Ralph had risen up and the horses were come, he said to him: "One thing thou art not to forget, young conqueror, to wit, that thou art to come here early one day, & tell me all thy tale at full length." "Yea, Prior," said Ralph; "or there is the High House of Upmeads for thee to use as thine own, and a rest for thee of three or four days while thou hearkenest the tale; for it may need that" "Hearken," said King Peter softly to the Dame, "how he reckons it all his own; my day is done, my dear" He spake smiling, & she said: "Soothly he is waxen masterful, & well it becometh the dear youngling."

NOW they get to horse & ride their ways, while all folk blessed them. The two old folk rode fast & pressed their nags whatever Ralph might do to give them pastime of words; so they came into the plain field of Upmeads two hours before sunset; and King Peter said: "Now I account it that I have had one day more of my life than was my due, and thou, son, hast added it to the others, whereas thou didst not promise to bring me hither till morrow" Ralph led them round by the ford, so that they might not come across the corpses of the robbers; but already were the Upmeads carles at work digging trenches wherein to bury them.

SO Ralph led his father & his mother to the gate of the garth of High House;

then he got off his horse and helped them down, and as he so dealt with his father, he said to him: "Thou art springy & limber yet, father; maybe thou wilt put on thine helm this year to ride the Debateable Wood with me." The old man laughed and said: "Maybe, son; but as now it is time for thee to enter under our roof-tree once more" "Nay," said Ralph, "but go ye in & sit in the high-seat and abide me. For did I not go straight back to you from the field of battle; & can I suffer it that any other hand than mine should lead my wife into the hall & up to the high-seat of my fathers; and therefore I go to fetch her from the house of Richard the Red where she is abiding me; but presently I shall lead her in, and do ye then with us what ye will."

THEREWITH he turned about & rode his ways to Richard's house, which was but a half-mile thence. But his father and mother laughed when he was gone, & King Peter said: "There again! thou seest, wife, it is he that commands and we that obey." "O happy hour that so it is!" said the Lady, "& happy now shall be the wearing of our days." So they entered the garth and came into the house, and were welcomed with all joy by Nicholas, & told him all that Ralph had said, and bade him array the house as he best might; for there was much folk about the High House, though the Upmeads carles and queans had taken the more part of the host to their houses, which they had delivered from the fire & sword, and they made much of them there with a good heart.

Chapter XXXI. Ralph brings Ursula home to the High House

RALPH speedily came to Richard's house, & entered the chamber, and found Ursula alone therein, clad in the daintiest of her woman's gear of the web of Goldburg. She rose up to meet him, & he took her in his arms, and said: "Now is come the very ending of our journey that we so often longed for; and all will be ready by then we come to the High House." "Ah," she said, as she clung to him, "but they were happy days, the days of our journey; & to-morrow begins a new life." "Nay," he said, "but rather this even; shall it be loathly to thee, lady?" She said: "There will be many people whom I knew not yesterday." "There will be but me," he said, "when the night hath been dark for a little" She

kissed him & said naught. And therewithal came some of Richard's folk, for it was his house, & led with them a white palfrey for Ursula's riding, dight all gay & goodly. "Come then," said Ralph, "thou needest not to fear the ancient house, for it is kind and lovely, & my father & my mother thou hast seen already, & they love thee. Come then, lest the hall be grown too dusk for men to see thy fairness" ❧ "Yea, yea," she said; "but first here is a garland I made for thee, and one also for me, while I was abiding thee after the battle, and my love and my hope is woven into it." And she set it on his head, & said: "O thou art fair, and I did well to meet thee in the dark wood." Then he kissed her dearly on the mouth and led her forth, & none went with them, and they mounted and went their ways. But Ralph said: "I deem that we should ride the meadow to the bridge, because that way lies the great door of the hall, & if I know my father and Nicholas they will look for us that way. Dost thou yet fear these dead men, sweetheart, whom our folk slew this morning?" "Nay," she said, "it has been a long time since the morning, and they, and their fierceness which has so burned out, are now to me as a tale that hath been told. It is the living that I am going to, and I hope to do well by them."

CAME they then to the bridge-end, & there was no man there, naught but the kine that were wandering about over the dewy grass of eventide. ❧ Then they rode over the bridge & through the orchard, and still there was no man, and all gates were open wide. ❧ So they came into the base-court of the house, and it also was empty of folk; & they came to the great doors of the hall, and they were open wide, & they could see through them that the hall was full of folk, and therein by the light of the low sun that streamed in at the shot-window at the other end they saw the faces of men and the gleam of steel & gold. ❧ So they lighted down from their horses, and took hand in hand and entered bright-faced and calm, and goodly beyond the goodliness of men; then indeed all that folk burst forth into glad cries, and tossed up their weapons, and many wept for joy.

AS they went slowly up the long hall (& it was thirty fathom of length) Ralph looked cheerfully and friendly from side to side, & beheld the faces of the Shepherds & the Champions, & the men of Wulstead, & his own folk; & all they cried hail to him and the lovely

& valiant Lady. Then he looked up to the high-seat, & saw that his father's throne was empty, & his mother's also; but behind the throne stood a knight all armed in bright armour holding the banner of Upmeads; but his father & mother stood on the edge of the dais to meet him and Ursula; and when they came up thither, these old folk embraced them & kissed them, and led them up to the table. Then Ralph bade Ursula sit by his mother, & made him ready to sit by his father in all love & duty. But King Peter stayed him & said: "Nay, dear son, not there, but here shalt thou sit, thou saviour of Upmeads and conqueror of the hearts of men; this is a little land, but therein shall be none above thee." And therewith he set Ralph down in the throne, and Ralph, turning to his left hand, saw that it was Ursula, & not his mother, who sat beside him. But at the sight of these two in the throne the glad cries & shouts shook the very timbers of the roof, and the sun sank under while yet they cried hail to the King of Upmeads.

THEN WERE the lights brought and the supper, and all men fell to feast, and plenteous was the wine in the hall; & sure since first men met to eat together none have been merrier than they.

BUT now when men had well eaten, & the great cup called the River of Upmeads was brought in, the cupbearers, being so bidden before, brought it last of all to King Peter, & he stood up with the River in his hand & spoke aloud, & said: "Lords and warriors, and good people all, here I do you to wit, that it is not because my son Ralph has come home to-day and wrought us a great deliverance, and that my love hath overcome me; it is not for this cause that I have set him in my throne this even; but because I see & perceive that of all the kindred he is meetest to sit therein so long as he liveth; unless perchance this lovely & valiant woman should bear him a son even better than himself ...and so may it be. Therefore I do you all to wit that this man is the King of Upmeads, & this woman is his Lady and Queen; and so deem I of his prowess, and his wisdom, & kindliness, that I trow he shall be lord and servant of other lands than Upmeads, & shall draw the good towns and the kindreds and worthy good lords into peace and might & well-being, such as they have not known heretofore. Now within three days shall mass be sung in the choir of St. Laurence, and then shall King Ralph swear on the gospels such oaths as ye wot of, to

guard his people, and help the needy, & oppress no man, even as I have sworn it. And I say to you, that if I have kept the oath to my power, yet shall he keep it better, as he is mightier than I. furthermore, when he hath sworn, then shall the vassals swear to him, according to ancient custom, to be true to him & hardy in all due service. But so please you I will not abide till then, but will kneel to him & to his Lady and Queen here and now."

GVEN so he did, & took Ralph's hand in his & swore service to him such as was due; and he knelt to Ursula also, and bade her all thanks for what she had done in the helping of his son; and they raised him up and made much of him & of Ralph's mother; and great was the joy of all folk in the hall. So the feast went on a while till the night grew old, & folk must fare bedward. Then King Peter and his wife brought Ralph & Ursula to the chamber of the solar, the kingly chamber, which was well & goodly dight with hangings and a fair and glorious bed, and was newly decked with such fair flowers as the summer might furnish; and at the threshold King Peter stayed them and said: "Kinsman, and thou, dear friend, this is become your due chamber and resting-place while ye live in the world, and this night of all others it shall be a chamber of love; for ye are, as it were, new wedded, since now first ye are come amongst the kindred as lover & beloved; and thou, Ursula, art now at last the bride of this ancient house; now tell me, doth it not look friendly & kindly on thee?" "O yea, yea," she said. "Come thou, my man and my darling, and let us be alone in the master-chamber of this ancient House."

THEN Ralph drew her unto him; and the old man blessed them and prayed for goodly offspring for them, that the House of Upmeads might long endure. And thus were they two left alone amidst the love and hope of the kindred, as erst they lay alone in the desert.

Chapter XXXII. Yet a few words concerning Ralph of Upmeads

CERTAIN IT IS THAT RALPH FAILED NOT of his promise to the good Prior of St. Austin's at Wulstead, but went to see him speedily, & told him all the tale of his wanderings as closely as he might, and hid naught from him; which, as ye may wot, was

more than one day's work, or two or three. And ever when Ralph thus spoke was a brother of the House sitting with the Prior, which brother was a learned and wise man, and very speedy and deft with his pen. Wherefore it has been deemed not unlike that from this monk's writing has come the more part of the tale above told. And if it be so, it is well.

FURTHERMORE, IT is told of Ralph of Upmeads that he ruled over his lands in right & might, & suffered no oppression within them, & delivered other lands and good towns when they fell under tyrants & oppressors; and for as kind a man as he was in hall and at hearth, in the field he was a warrior so wise and dreadful, that oft forsooth the very sound of his name & rumour of his coming stayed the march of hosts and the ravage of fair lands; and no lord was ever more beloved. Till his deathday he held the Castle of the Scaur, & cleansed the Wood Perilous of all strong-thieves & reivers, so that no high street of a good town was safer than its glades and its byways. The new folk of the Burg of the four friths made him their lord and captain, & the Champions of the Dry Tree obeyed him in all honour so long as any of them lasted. He rode to Higham and offered himself as captain to the abbot thereof, & drave out the tyrants and oppressors thence, and gave back peace to the frank of Higham. Ever was he true captain & brother to the Shepherd-folk, and in many battles they followed him; and were there any scarcity or ill hap amongst them, he helped them to the uttermost of his power. The Wood Debateable also he cleared of foul robbers and reivers, and rooted out the last of the Burg-devils, and delivered three good towns beyond the wood from the cruelty of the oppressor.

ONCE in every year he & Ursula his wife visited the Land of Abundance, & he went into the castle there as into a holy place, & worshipped the memory of the Lady whom he had loved so dearly. With all the friends of his quest he was kind and well-beloved.

IN ABOUT TWO years from the day when he rode home, came to him the Lord Bull of Utterbol with a chosen band, of whom were both Otter and Redhead. That very day they came he was about putting his foot in the stirrup to ride against the foemen; so Bull & his men would not go into the High House to eat, but drank a cup where they stood, & turned and rode with

him straightway, and did him right manly service in battle; and went back with him afterwards to Upmeads, and abode with him there in feasting and joyance for two months' wearing. And thrice in the years that followed, when his lands at home seemed safest & most at peace, Ralph took a chosen band, and Ursula with them, and Clement withal, and journeyed through the wastes and the mountains to Utterbol, & passed joyous days with his old thrall of war, Bull Shockhead, now become a very mighty man & the warder of the peace of the Uttermost lands. Clement & Katherine came oft to the High House, & Katherine exceeding often; and she loved & cherished Ursula, and lived long in health of body & peace of mind.

ALL the days that Ralph of Upmeads lived, he was the goodliest of men, & no man to look on him had known it when he grew old; & when he changed his life, an exceeding ancient man, he was to all men's eyes in the very blossom of his age. As to Ursula his wife, she was ever as valiant & true as when they met in the dark night amidst of the Eastland wood. Eight goodly children she bore him, & saw four generations of her kindred wax up; but even as it was with Ralph, never was she less goodly of body, nay rather, but fairer than when first she came to Upmeads; and the day whereon any man saw her was a day of joyful feast to him, a day to be remembered for ever. On one day they two died and were laid together in one tomb in the choir of St. Laurence of Upmeads.

HERE ends the Well at the World's End, written by William Morris, with four pictures designed by Sir Edward Burne-Jones. Printed by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press, 14, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, in the County of Middlesex, and finished on the 2nd day of March, 1896.

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7