THE STORY OF
THE GLITTERING
PLAIN
&
CHILD
CHRISTOPHER

William Morris

With a new Introduction by
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INTRODUCTION

1: THE WORLD OF MORRIS ROMANCE

In the last decade of his life, William Morris became one of the most innovative writers of prose fiction in English. Quite apart from his superb work in many fields of design, arts, crafts and their associated technologies, his quasi-prophetic role as a pioneer ecologist and conservationist, and his leading place in Western European socialist thought and action, he had been one of the foremost English poets (and a leading translator) for thirty years. Now, suddenly, he embraced - or rather invented - two new, interlinked careers, as the printer and designer of beautiful books, and as a writer of fantastic romance.

It is this last, least honoured of his many fields of achievement which has been and continues to be the most unexpectedly influential upon the imaginative life of English-speaking peoples. His A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere established self-consistent time-travel and time-constraint conventions. Many hundreds of time travel fantasies have since employed them, but they also begat a distinct line of fantasy through their influence on the young H. G. Wells, who allied to their historical and sociological speculation and analysis the rhetorics of scientific technology that Morris had carefully avoided. Science fictional utopian and dystopian fantasies, as well as the direct line of
arcadian fantasy (always shot through with cultural ironies), stem from Morris's work as genuinely as from Bellamy's *Looking Backward*.

His first romances employed temporally recognizable settings. The narrator of *News from Nowhere* travels into the future and that of *A Dream of John Ball* to the fourteenth century. *The House of the Wolfings* is set in the resistance to Roman invasion of Northern Europe, and *The Roots of the Mountains* similarly celebrates resistance, a few centuries later, to Hunnish westward expansions into Alpine Europe. Both are emphatically pre-Christian. All the range of ‘historical fantasy’ is indebted to Morris because, unlike Dumas, Scott, Reade and Bulwer-Lytton, he did not impose nineteenth-century standards of conduct and ideals of morality upon his source-period. Jeffries' post-disaster romance of restored feudalism, *After London*, directly influenced Morris, but his major inspiration came from three sources outside the novelistic traditions.

The first was the ‘Bibles’, traditional compendia of stories – especially myth and folk-tale – from many peoples and periods, created, adapted and preserved by communities rather than individuals, such as he listed with enthusiasm when the *Pall Mall Gazette* asked him for a catalogue of literature that had influenced him. Among these he listed Homer and the *Beowulf* poet, whom he had translated. The second was a wide range of sagas and saga-like histories, including those of Froissart which he had used so shrewdly in his early poetry and in *A Dream of John Ball*, ‘admirable pieces of story-telling’ that need not be expected to be

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objective. The third was nineteenth-century, more or less radical, analysis of history, economics, sociology and culture such as Grimm’s *Teutonic Mythology*, Morgan’s *Ancient Society*, Marx’s *Capital*, Engels’ *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Morris was a ‘scientific socialist’, after all.

The atemporal short romances, *The Story of the Glittering Plain* and *The Wood Beyond the World*, begin in naturalistic and historically credible worlds akin respectively to Anglian tribal settlements in the North Atlantic, and mercantile city states like precursors of the Hanseatic League. In both, the protagonist is ‘called’ by a deceptive version of erotic quest to leave his society and enter a magical other-world. He sails from medieval normality into, as it were, a medieval romance.

*Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* takes place entirely in a non-magical world, but the tiny kingdoms, thickly forested and thinly populated by peasants and foresters (dominated by nobles who muster armies and have ready recourse to violence, and a fallible, uncontested Christian church), might be those of central Europe in the tenth century, perhaps German States on which no Holy Roman Empire had ever fallen. The two large romances, *The Well at the World’s End* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, are much freer variations on this Europe that never was.

Magic, such as was unquestionably believed in, for narrative purposes at least, by most Mediaeval European storytellers, occurs in all the romances except the two time travel stories and *Child Christopher*, and obviously differentiates their world from a historical medieval Europe. However, it is not common: churchmen, burgesses, sceptics and stay-at-homes
doubt, or claim to doubt, its existence, and, when forced to recognize it, are likely to interpret it as an instrument of the devil, called into the human world by witchcraft. Nonetheless, it has objective existence, independent of anyone's belief in it. It can in a moment change the lives of wanderers among the wild woods and wastes, vast lakes and mountain ranges of the romance landscape, usually very much for the better — and it is these wanderers with whom the reader identifies.

On the other hand, God, Heaven and the angels, like the devil, Hell and all other aspects of reward and punishment after death, although believed in by some characters, are the products of faith rather than its objects. Such forces can never impinge directly on human life. Death does not take people to heaven or hell, purgatory or limbo, any more than a happy ending allows them to 'live happily ever after'.

Magic itself is in and of the world, essentially natural, and those who work to understand a little about it can channel it in practical ways. There are a few places, legendary and well-nigh inaccessible, that are full of mana, created and sustained by magic, or creating and offering it, or both. Such places are the eponymous Wood, Plain and Well in three romances (though the latter is balanced by an opposing Dry Tree). In the Wondrous Isles magic is dreadfully misused: two wicked sisters have trapped it in three magical objects, The Sending Boat, The Wonder-Coffer and the Water of Might, the better to exploit it. Their activities are opposed by the benevolent natural magic of the misnamed Evilshaw.

Philip Henderson's biography is representative of the generation that avoided and therefore misdescribed Morris's romances:
Morris, who peopled his late romances with idealised young girls, and whose *Story of the Glittering Plain* is a land of eternal youth spent in the delights of free love...  

Henderson cites *Plain* here, but the three handsome young women who briefly appear in the romance do not fit his description. The Hostage is the hero's fiancée, kidnapped as the book starts, to cause his journey – which is the book's story. She appears only at the book's end, where she is allotted just seven speeches; she seems admirably courageous and sensible, but hardly ideal. Her opposite, the unnamed Princess of the Glittering Plain, whose infatuation with a picture of the hero is the cause of the kidnapping, does not appear; Hallblithe describes and quotes her, and later sees her in a dream. The third is a pretty girl who becomes the Sea-eagle’s mistress on first meeting; she represents the loving and beautiful people of the Plain in her well-intentioned affection and helpless anonymity: she does not even rate a label-name such as ‘Hostage’, and has clearly forgotten her own story and kindred.

However, women are at the centre of seven of the romances. It is usually women, good or evil lore-mistresses, that employ and understand magic (except the locative varieties). Human-to-human magic involves changes in perception; the casting of illusions or invisibility, or the projection of influence by sights, prophecies, messages and dreams (many of which are significantly inaccurate in their detail). Perception-magic in Morris’s worlds is very much like that of the

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4 *William Morris, His Life, Work and Friends* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 143. He was attempting to use the book as evidence as to whether Morris was in love with Georgiana Burne-Jones....
Norse Sagas: for example, the devices of Katla to protect her son Odd in the Eyrbyggia Saga cause his enemies to mistake him for a distaff, a he-goat, and a boar-pig. It takes the perception-powers of Geirrid, another wise-woman, to detect him, literally seeing through the illusions.

Minor natural magic relates to potions, healing herbs, sleeping draughts, small occult rituals, and the passing down of non-rational lore. In a more ambiguous category are luck, fate, coincidence and foresight, all of which can be stimulated by the beauty and physical prowess of heroes, of either sex. Such things are undoubtedly 'natural': we still talk of beauty as 'charm', 'charms' or 'glamour'.

There are real differences between the time-contextable fantasies and the ahistorical, magical romances, but the settings of The Story of the Glittering Plain bridge the categories. All ten works correspond in general to Rosemary Jackson's Marxist and Freudian definition of fantasy:

...a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.... In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid, and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent. 5

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It is deeply regrettable that, with this most apposite of starting points, Jackson has read almost no Morris.\(^6\)

Worse, she naively accepts Stephen Prickett's grouping of Morris's work with several dissimilar fantasies,\(^7\) largely Christian, quoting,

"the high fantasy" of a world too rich and complex to be contained by the conventions of Victorian naturalism. Yet this metaphor of height betrays the critic's transcendentalism. Twentieth century romancers and critics have sustained these Victorian fantasists' repressive creations. (p. 153)

Transcendentalist the critic may be, but that does not make the author so! The accusing 'repressive' leads to even worse misrepresentation:

Behind the 'high' fantasy of Kingsley, Macdonald, Morris, Tolkien, Lewis, etc., there is a recognizable 'death wish', which has been identified as one recurrent feature of fantasy literature. Whereas more subversive texts activate a dialogue with this death drive, directing their energy towards a dissolution of repressive structures, these more conservative fantasies simply go along with a desire to cease 'to be', a longing to transcend or escape the human. They avoid the difficulties of confrontation, that tension between the imaginary and the symbolic which is the crucial, problematic area dramatized in more radical fantasies. (p. 156)

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\(^6\) She has no acquaintance with any of his full-scale and mature work, but discusses energetically two undergraduate stories.

Obviously, Rosemary Jackson’s credulousness about Prickett’s term has equated the epithet ‘high’ with something like ‘High Church’. Morris’s radical fantasies, all written well after his embrace of socialism and largely designed for a future socialist audience, have nothing in common with the ‘avoidance’ she identifies in this kind of fantasy.

First, the heightened language of both narration and dialogue, and the opacity of the tale-telling convention, distance the stories from the ‘slice-of-life’ restrictions of novels by Morris’s more naturalistic contemporaries. The romances positively invite hearers and readers to relish the beauty, the luck and the relatively ethical choices of the passionate young lovers who are the protagonists, and consequently to develop expectations of a happy ending (though always at some cost). Since Hallblithe could only be ‘blithe’ in his own hall, wedded to his own betrothed, we feel sure even the immortal king of the Glittering Plain will fail to frustrate his love-quest.

Second, no transcendental or spiritual compensation is offered for the frustrations, sorrows and brevity of fleshly, mortal life. Monkish or eremitical lives are a dreadfully impoverished response to hopeless love or physical inadequacy. Magic is real, palpable and often efficacious, but miracles and Heaven are impalpable assertions, even sentimental fictions: real purposes are in this world, not any posited next.

Third, women are largely disqualified from the successful use of violence, whether in open combat or in the ownership of the means of production, exchange and distribution of goods, and therefore often despised, underestimated or themselves converted into goods or objects by the worst and least perceptive of males. On
the other hand, women can be magical, have quite as much courage, discernment, passion and ethical vigour as males, and usually see through the self-deceptive facades of the social system more clearly than males. There are wise old men and perceptive lads, but far more wise old women and clear-headed maids.

Appendix A discusses in detail the ways in which Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair alters the fabula of Havelok the Dane, a poem totally committed to the divine right of monarchs and the sacredness of the royal body, into a tale acceptable to republican socialists. Loyal Victorians argued that people born to kingship are preferable in the job to those who strive for it, but on the few occasions when he tolerates a single ruler or a royal family as positive elements in his romances, Morris converts this weak compromise to a narrative logic in which bad rulers, whether strivers or ‘rightful rulers’, stoop to anxious and unprincipled plotting, employing more or less despicable instruments. And always the subject is the judge of the ruler, never the reverse.

Christopher and Goldilind incorporate folktale priorities in their duties: though leadership and alliance are important, their mutual love overrides both. It is this love which ratifies them, showing they can be trusted with their inheritance, and in the crucial bedchamber scene (chapter XXXIV, pp. 246–7) they doff the clothes that make them royal and enter the higher estate of lovers, new Adam and new Eve, equal as they were ‘upon the dewy grass of Littledale’. Just as in the folktale tradition, the lovers’ faith and generosity in love is the measure of how they rate as monarchs. Their rule is both fecund and conducive to good-fellowship.
On the other hand, *The Story of the Glittering Plain* offers a paradise kingdom with a magically splendid king, so wise, compassionate and non-violent, so benevolent, powerful and beloved, that any attempt to overthrow him would be stupid and certain to fail. Yet the hero has a genuine case against king and paradise, escapes both, and alienates from them the Plain’s major defensive unit, the tribe called the Ravagers. The success of Hallblitte’s defiance is assured when the Ravagers’ wisest counsellor argues that they should support him specifically because,

> ye shall not forget that he is the rebel of the Undying King, who is our lord and master; therefore in cherishing him we show ourselves great-hearted, in that we fear not the wrath of our master. (pp. 311–2)

This ever-smiling king’s immortality and inhuman, unearthly beauty are those of a lord of the Sidhe, an elven-king, coldly detached even as he exercises his benevolence upon subjects who dare not even say his name, though they believe ‘there is nought but good in him and mightiness’. Compare these descriptions of the first sight of a ruler:

> His face shone like a star; it was exceeding beauteous, and as kind as the even of May in the gardens of the happy, when the scent of eglantine fills all the air. When he spoke his voice was so sweet that all hearts were ravished, and none might gainsay him. (p. 260)

> His hair was dark as the shadows of twilight, and upon it was set a circlet of silver; his eyes were grey as a clear evening, and in them was a light like the light of stars.  

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8 The first is the King of the Glittering Plain, the second the elven-lord Elrond in *The Lord of the Rings* (The Fellowship of the Ring, p. 239).
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When crossed, the king is far colder than the lovely stone images of him:

the King was angry, tho' he smiled upon him; yet so coldly, that the face of him froze the very marrow of Hallblithe's bones.... (p. 269)

But since his previous benevolent promises had been mere equivocation, Hallblithe is perfectly entitled to consider him 'this King of lies'. A paradise that confines soon becomes a prison, and a paradise ruled by an unassailable king is the most confining of all. The fact that it is so privileged in its peace enables most of its people to forget that its interests are defended by destroyers and enslavers of the innocent like the Ravagers of the Isle of Ransom. In this (though admittedly not in much else) it resembles the lives of upper-class England in the British Empire of Morris's day.

This monarchy, though by no means despicable, is deeply equivocal, unlike Oakenrealm and Meadham in Child Christopher. Many are worse: in House the Emperors of Rome live in an abomination of a city and send out insane military machines. The Queen of the Wondrous Isles is an absolute monarch no better than robber barons like the Red Knight (in Water) and Gandolf of Utterbol (in Well); all use their power to expand their own cruelty and twisted appetites. The Lady who rules The Wood Beyond the World identifies herself with sadism, as personified by her Dwarf, and is imitated by the king's Son she is tiring of: her physical beauty and her pastoral amour with the hero should not mislead us!

The latter is darker and less glowing, since his world is an island resisting a flood of evil, and his people's days on Middle-earth are numbered, but they have similar elven beauty.
Morris saw nothing to recommend contemporary monarchy. There can be no doubt of his dislike for ‘the Empress Brown’, Victoria, in whose reign his whole life was passed. He described the Queen’s Jubilee as a parade of ‘vulgar Royal Upholstery’, and reflected indignantly on

the hundreds and thousands of slaves and slave holders who turned out into the streets to witness the symbolic procession of the triumph of Official Dishonesty.9

His eloquent Jubilee year comparison between traditional kings and queens and modern ‘constitutional monarchy’ constitutes Appendix B.

Morris would not have been surprised at the official preservation of the monarchy a century after his death, or at its conversion into a more or less cynically presented entertainment for the popular media. He would recognize the amalgamation of the Privilege of Capital with the Privilege of Public Relations (incorporating advertising, orchestrated public debate, and play-news, ‘infotainment’).

In Child Christopher the setting is medieval, as the term is loosely applied to this century’s sword-and-sorcery fiction. Most of Morris’s descendants employ a monarchic social structure, as here, with protagonists at the highest level of power and responsibility, so their constraints and actions always make an external, narrative difference, or at least readers expect they will. Protagonists who are young lovers may play either an ironic part (Love corrupted) or a tragic part (Love ratified as sacrifice) in the contest between patterns of power, but far more common in the medieval setting is

the high romance or romantic comedy role, in which the lovers heroically survive both internal and external tests and ordeals, and their ‘happy ending’ represents the renewal of the whole society. This renewed society may resemble either an idyllic (Garden of Eden) or a communal (New Jerusalem) structure, and Morris always prefers the latter.

Child Christopher seems to have been accorded his kingship by nature and by his fellows:

whiles folk in merry mockery call me Christopher King; meseems because I am of the least account of all carles. As for what else I am, a woodman I am, an outlaw, and the friend of them...though needs must they dwell aloof from kings’ courts and barons’ halls. (p. 179)

Just as the lowly birth of Jesus inspired many of the rebels in, for example, the Peasants’ Revolt, so the integrity of the blameless outcast ‘Christopher King’ and his wolf’s-head friends ratifies his kingship in quality long before he becomes the proclaimed king of Oakenrealm. At a deeper level, however, it is the Woodwoman of Oakenrealm, tutelary goddess of forest and country, that appears in a dream to tempt Marshal Rolf’s unprovoked attempt to have Christopher murdered, which is why he is a woodman, a ‘sackless’ outlaw, and out in the wildwood to meet the queen he will marry!

But Morris makes clear on the penultimate page of this, his only even vaguely monarch-friendly romance, what social structure could be specifically celebrated as superior to monarchy. Goldilind has been implored to return to Meadham as queen, and reconciled with Earl Geoffrey:
But a seven days hence was the Allmen’s Mote gathered to the woodside without Meadhamstead, and thronged it was: and there Goldlind stood up before all the folk and named Sir Geoffrey for Earl to rule the land under her, and none gainsaid it, for they all knew him meet thereto. (p. 261)

Such a popular Mote, held out of doors and in full view of all the people, has been cunningly led up to during the story, in stages that derive from aspects of ‘Ancient’ and ‘Feudal’ society as Morris and E. Belfort Bax had outlined them. In primitive cultures, the unit of society was the Gens, a group of blood-relations at peace among themselves, but which group was hostile to all other groups; within the Gens wealth was common to all its members, without it wealth was prize of war.

Within this clan system, warrior leadership was of especial value, and hence arose chieftainship. Correspondingly, the first proclamation of Christopher as king of Oakenrealm takes place (chapter XXVI) in the extended family or gens of which Jack of the Tofts is paterfamilias.

Though Morris and Bax do not emphasize the role of motherhood and the hearth, these too must have been prioritized in such a structure. Leadership and territorial acquisition encouraged the Gens to mutate into the Tribe:

this was a larger and more artificial group, in which blood relationships were conventionally assumed. In it, however, there was by no means mere individual

ownership...the tribe at large disposed of the use of the land according to certain arbitrary arrangements, but did not admit ownership of it to individuals. Under the tribal system also slavery was developed, so that class Society had fairly began (sic).

The coalescence of tribes, which was again conditional upon the prestige of active warrior chieftains and dispensers of justice, produced a larger and less organic association. Christopher is next proclaimed in daylight, and Jack appointed his war-leader, up on the bare Toft at a ‘Husting’ or House-Thing, a Norse term for a Mote of neighbouring and allied groups or Houses making public decisions.

Such Houses of People (Theod), are the focus of Morris’s first historical Romance, The House of the Wolfings, whose hero, Thiodolf (Folk-wolf) is only war-leader because he is appointed by the folk-mote, a meeting of the males of all the House-kindreds of the Gothic Mark. Such an office is only required when war is actually inevitable; otherwise the House of the Wolfings, for example, is ruled by the agreement of elders (assembling a jury of neighbours to decide legal disputes) and by custom. But this male responsibility is allied with the visionary wisdom of the seeress and domestic priestess Hall-Sun who tend the great lamp, also the Hall-Sun, that lights their communal hall and represents their House. What the Houses resist is a well-drilled all-male legion, sent to destroy or enslave all their tribe, by an Emperor of the imperial city Rome, where life is slavish and vicious, where people ‘have forgotten kindred, and have none, nor do they heed whom they wed, and great is the confusion among them’.  

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No such archaic and absolute opposition, family roof against imperial city, occurs in *Child Christopher*, but the pattern is still detectable. The young royal couple lead an untidy straggle of elders, wives and children, as well as warriors, from the Tofts and the neighbouring country to the ‘hosting’, the military disposal of the various groups of warriors. Partly for erotic reasons, partly out of fascinated jealousy because her own queenship has taken no active (let alone aggressive) form, Goldilind attends the hosting, and is there identified with the Wood-wife on the banner of Oakenrealm. More should have been made of this vivid moment.

The single combat in which Christopher defeats the Baron of Brimside shows the personal presence and prowess that kingship demands, and his mercy after victory, which wins the Brimside force to his support, shows the major spiritual aspect of a rightful king. The council of captains and the substantive battle that follows are presented as comparatively easy, and when, after Rolf’s murder, Christopher is proclaimed king, he adopts the role as if the whole of his people were his gens.

The admirable social systems in Morris romances, even the town-based ones, all approximate to the Heroic-Age bond between individual, gens and tribe. In *The Well at the World’s End*, for example, Ralph is the youngest son of a ‘kinglet’, whose rule is tolerated because lax and infrequent. On his journeys he rejects ecclesiastical rule (the Abbey of Higham), commercial oligarchy (the Burg of the Four Friths), high-handed robbers (the Fellowship of the Dry Tree), arcadian inertia (the Little Land of Abundance), nomadic barbarism (the wild men) allied with slave traders
(Cheaping Knowe), class-based feudal monarchy (Goldburg), and sadistic tyranny (the Lord of Utterbol). Nowhere except among the shepherds does he find a community he can respect, though plenty of people in most places are eager and brave enough to band together in a good cause once inspired by Ursula or himself, the Seekers for the Well.

Indeed, the interweaving of mythic and folktale heroism, and heroic love, with issues of integrity and social justice is at the core of all Morris’s romances, including the only one which centres on a monarchist convention.
2. THE STORY OF THE GLITTERING PLAIN

This romance is a key text for understanding William Morris’ fiction. The author recognized this: he chose it as the flagship, the first book from his Kelmscott Press. So did May Morris: the eight volumes of the Collected Works devoted to the ten prose romances of his last decade begin with the first full-length story, The House of the Wolfings (1888) and Plain, the fourth, in the text reprinted here.

Henderson’s ‘a land of eternal youth spent in the delights of free love...’ is representatively misleading. The hero accepts no ‘free love’, and the ‘land of eternal youth’ becomes the prison he spends the core of the book trying to escape – he even prefers the lifeless desert beyond.

Though only nine of the book’s twenty-two chapters are set on the Plain, it is the focus of the journeyings before, after and within them. However, since the Hostage never goes to the Plain, the patterns of closure appropriate to romance, the earned reunion of true lovers, and the release, resolution and redirection of community energies, are necessarily opposed to it. The fiercely unwelcoming Isle of Ransom can be won over to alliance with the young lovers and their people, the kindreds of Cleveland, which means the Ravagers accept mortal courage and reject the bribe of the idyll. The king is deprived of their savage obedience, but intrinsically his regime, shaped by his own elvish will and ageless power, asks, gives and needs nothing from mortal lands; he is well rid of Hallblithe’s passion, that chafing foreign body that makes the happy and adoring subjects of his Glittering Plain seem hardly human.
On the only other occasion that Henderson quotes a romance he again chooses *Plain* – but if he had read it he could never have called it a story of the search for the land of eternal youth, though, characteristically, Hallblithe...is only bent upon his quest for a lost maiden whose image he is shown in a painted book – ‘standing in a fair garden of the spring with the lilies all about her feet, and behind her the walls of a house, grey, ancient, and lovely’. (p. 343)

The book subverts exactly this kind of sentimental quest-romance, and the self-pity born of infatuations with ‘images’. Hallblithe’s ‘quest’ is for the girl he has known and loved since childhood: ‘I know not of any book that lieth betwixt myself and my betrothed.’ He is decoyed to the Glittering Plain because its princess is lovesick from seeing *his* picture in a book.

Then where did Henderson find his quotation? Significantly, in a dream: the hero, planning his escape from the Glittering Plain, is encouraged by a dream in which the princess, recovered from her crush on him, shows him a new part of the book, in which a picture of his fiancée faces one of Hallblithe himself, steering a little boat, the means of his escape.

Hallblithe is protagonist and focalizer of the action: the reader knows only what he experiences, but he is also heroic in terms of conduct. Alone against all odds, he is unswervingly faithful to his quest, his girl, his people and his own moral standards. He also looks the part: his bearing and clothes express his determination, and, more than usually handsome, he can impress most people, especially women, by his looks and style as much as by his powers of persuasion.
But Henderson’s error is informative. As Roderick Marshall has pointed out emphatically, the Plain is indeed paradisal, and specifically like the far-future ‘Nowhere’ Morris had constructed less than a year earlier. Similarly, while Cleveland by the Sea resembles a Bronze Age Teutonic community, or exogamic alliance of gens, the Isle of Ransom is markedly similar to Iceland, the ‘anti-paradise’ which Morris had found sovereign against his more dangerous longings. Hallblithe’s rejection of the dream of free love and Elvish immortality is not only like Oisin’s returning from the deathless beauty of the Sidhe to a very mortal Ireland; it also represents a cleaving to mortal community as opposed to all supposed alternatives, including other-worlds. In the historical Cleveland on England’s North Sea coast, where the gens-based Angles were reconciled with once-ruthless Danish invaders, the other-worldly seductions of Christianity came to dominate the community; Morris would not relish a story in which that could happen!

Marshall’s comparison with Nowhere shows that from the viewpoint of the Glittering Plain Hallblithe is not a brave, dedicated quester for his love, faithful to his vows, but a blight on innocent happiness. Already, on Ransom, he had been exile and misfit, the butt of mockery and jeering mime, the beguiled victim of plots and purposes he didn’t understand. On the Plain he is even more clearly a beautiful, cold alien, resisting beauty, majesty and tenderness that he cannot begin to appreciate. Worse, he is a sullen and belligerent menace, psychotically attached to his murderous weapons, looking for a fight when everybody else is

feasting, dancing and embracing. The only other weapon in the Land is the king’s ceremonial ‘deedless sword’. This melancholic obsessive casts a gloom over the happiness of innocent, loving folk who never did him any harm but continually go out of their way to help him, cheer him, and offer him their unconditional love. Ungratefully striving to leave and reject all the beauty of the Glittering Plain, he almost leads the two lovers who try to be his companions back into death.

In the spring of 1891, while writing *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Morris had his first severe illness; it was correctly diagnosed as diabetes. At that time there was not only no hope of a cure but also no insulin or other effective treatment. The ironies of his personal life, the prospect of future debility, and the probability that very few years of life remained to him, naturally found a place in his fiction. That May, *Plain* was the first book from his new and much-loved Kelmscott Press. Its theme is of course mortality, and its axioms are that you’d have to be a damn fool not to be tempted by the glittering legend of an Earthly Paradise of eternal youth, love and unselfish happiness – and a damned fool to be seduced by it. The first speech of the oldest of the three questers who start the *Story* puts the matter directly:

> though the days of the springtide are waxing, the hours of our lives are waning; nor may we abide unless thou canst truly tell us that this is the Land of the Glittering Plain: and if that be so, then delay not, lead us to thy lord, and perhaps he will make us content. (pp. 211–12)

This king has abdicated the rule of a mighty kingdom; one companion had similarly left the realm of which he
had been the uniquely successful general, and the other had abandoned his career as the most brilliant rhetorician and lawyer of his culture. Fame and glory are doubtful, hard-earned and brief, but sorrow and death are sure.

Their story is just another version of that old chestnut, the quest for a Promised Land, a Heaven on Earth. As a young poet Morris had been there and done that: his *Earthly Paradise* had had the biggest critical and popular success of any long poem in English. The wanderers in the frame-tale of those opulent volumes never found rest in a land of perennial youth, happiness and peace, though they met some excellent stories. Now, in his last years, Morris offers us three wishful-thinking questers who achieve their quest, but their guide, the hero, just as gratefully escapes it. Their quest frames his story as a contrast.

As his name announces, Hallblithe asks no other paradise than home, but they cannot appreciate his cheerful and hospitable reply:

They scarce looked on him, but cried out together mournfully:

‘This is not the Land! This is not the Land!’ (p. 212)

There are serio-comic elements in this opening scene, in both the unison chanting of the obsessed questers and the adolescent smugness of the very young male warrior’s summary of what life and community are all about. His Story starts as he is emblematically engaged in fitting his male-prowess spearhead to a new shaft, and when he hears the girls coming back from seaweed-gathering at the shore, he indulges in some charming adolescent posture. But his girl is not there. She has been kidnapped by sea-raiders, and suddenly he is ‘a yoke-fellow of sorrow’.
Before Hallblithe gallops to the rescue, he offers a memorable, self-dedicatory mime of the implacable warrior:

As for him he turned back silently to his work, and set the steel of the spear on the new ashen shaft, and took the hammer and smote the nail in, and laid the weapon on a round pebble that was thereby, and clenched the nail on the other side. (p. 215)

He bears this spear all through his double figure-eight journey to the Isle of Ransom and the Glittering Plain, into the lifeless desert beyond, and then back through Plain and Isle, and thence back home. The spear stands for a young man's ardour, in terms with which Dr Freud has made us familiar, but also for home and loyalty, since we first see Hallblithe seated at his house's threshold, making it by his own home-taught skills. It signifies that the man wielding it is striving manfully for home and house. As the quest develops, though, it also expresses the resentment of a fighting-man whose efforts are constantly frustrated, by deceit or by lack of a physical enemy: no one seems stupider than a man looking for a fight and being ignored! Frustration is a long spear in a short rowboat, especially when that infuriating psychopomp Puny Fox mocks and beguiles him by turns.

But the spear has a third signification: it marks him as the threatening, obsessive, ungrateful alien – the potential regicide amid the peaceable and weaponless dwellers on the Glittering Plain. Hallblithe is a triply complex hero, and narrative ironies also stem from his name. The Raven, his house-emblem, signifies a gens very ready to define itself on the battlefield, giving the beautiful young man a tough and menacing edge. Puny
Fox develops a series of kennings, seriously comic and more or less ingeniously poetic epithets, for ravens; like a skald he prides himself on ringing the changes on the carrion-bird theme every time he addresses the young ‘raven’, and his offputting compound of disarming sympathy and medicinal mockery keeps Hallblithe manipulated and mobile.

Still, ravens are not only bloodthirsty and ill-omened battle-crows and carrion-eaters: they are wise, faithful and perceptive birds, brave dwellers on perilous and barren crags. Fox’s gibing serves to prepare Hallblithe to endure the public ridicule and reproach of the mock-battle in which his people are shamefully bested, in the feast-hall on the Isle of Ransom. Nor is it always a bad thing to hear the mortal warning in a raven’s croak. Like a raven, Hallblithe travels to the Glittering Plain by following the dying. As ‘Grandfather’ is carried wellnigh moribund to the shore, Hallblithe hovers over him, looking his best and fiercest:

he stood upright in the boat, a goodly image of battle with the sun flashing back from his bright helm, his spear in his hand, his white shield on his back, and thereon the image of the Raven.... (p. 250)

One of the first things he notices about the joyous and peaceable inhabitants of the Glittering Plain is that any mention of death is anathema to them, and ‘not lawful for any man to utter here’ (p. 253). At first he tries not to spoil their day.

The cost of the happy, liberated life of the Glittering Plain, it seems, includes fear of and revulsion from death: a raven is the last thing they want to hear, croaking above their present-tense ease and pleasure. They also suffer progressive amnesia about their own
past mortal lives: ‘we have nought but hearsay of other lands. If we ever knew them we have forgotten them.’ They cannot remember winter! His fiancée might be on the Plain for all they know, ‘For such as come hither keep not their old names, and soon forget them what they were’. Their king has absolute power over the imagination as well as memory of his subjects:

‘And that King of yours,’ said he, ‘how do ye name him?’

‘He is the King,’ said the damsel.

‘Hath he no other name?’ said Hallblithe.

‘We may not utter it,’ she said; ‘But thou shalt see him soon, that there is nought but good in him and mightiness.’ (p. 254)

Hallblithe is even wary of Sea-Eagle’s rejuvenation, leaning on his spear amid this benevolent magic, ‘with smiling lips and knitted brow’. His antipathy to changeless contentment has an ominous raven-voice:

‘So it is, shipmate, that whereas thou sayest that the days flit, for thee they shall flit no more; and the day may come for thee when thou shalt be weary, and know it, and long for the lost which thou hast forgotten.’ (pp. 257–8)

This hero of gloom wanders the length and breadth of the Glittering Plain in his incessant search for his betrothed, rather as Hamlet stalks through Elsinore’s wedding finery dressed in funereal black, or Scrooge glowers through the festive streets of London’s Christmas. His physical beauty makes his obsessive intensity forgivable, until forgotten, but what is worse is that he proves the king cannot make everyone happy. In this Land of Heart’s Desire, one heart at least does not desire it.
The elven-beauteous king is splendid, an archetype of gracious and benevolent loveliness, always accessible to his ‘children’, his subjects, and confident that his power can gratify any wish they have. But Hallblithe is not used to kings, and resents having been decoyed and beguiled into the Plain: he cannot speak to this hyper-charismatic and adorable absolute ruler in the joyously grateful way everyone else does:

Said Hallblithe: ‘O great King of a happy land, I ask nought of thee save that which none shall withhold from me uncursed.’

‘I will give it to thee,’ said the King, ‘and thou shalt bless me. But what is it which thou wouldst? What more canst thou have than the Gifts of the land?’

(p. 261)

Is it ominous that the hero talks of curses and the king, his irresistibly charismatic and deathless opponent, of blessings? Well, there is no rule in fantasy that heroes have always to be polite and sophisticated, and the king’s offer is merely a series of lofty equivocations. In the last stage of Hallblithe’s beguiling he has to spy demeaningly upon a beautiful, suffering and love-lorn lady, the king’s own daughter, languishing over his picture in her illuminated book. He is ashamed, but he is also angry, for her soliloquy shows with the unself-conscious arrogance of the rich that she has caused the kidnapping and all the attendant deceptions that brought him there:

...For I deemed that this eve at least thou shouldst come, so many and strong as are the meshes of love which we have cast about thy feet. Oh come tomorrow at the least and latest, or what shall I do, and wherewith shall I quench the grief of my heart?
Or else why am I the daughter of the Undying King, the Lord of the Treasure of the Sea? Why have they wrought new marvels for me, and compelled the Ravagers of the Coasts to serve me, and sent false dreams flitting on the wings of the night? (p. 266)

She is in the habit of indulging her own whims, and has clearly insisted upon her father indulging them too. Love, for her, is a crush upon a man she has never met, and whose life she is prepared to lay waste; nor does she even mention her innocent 'rival', whom she has given into the hands of violent ravagers habituated to rape, murder and slave trading.

Hallblithe is dedicated enough to find his way out of the Plain, but the barren desert beyond the magical barrier would soon have killed him had he not been found by the three sad wanderers who began (and seemed to frame) the story with their longing for 'the Land'. Since the desert offers only death, and he has suddenly had a vision of himself escaping the Plain by sea, Hallblithe has to turn back, guiding the wanderers, and sure enough this Tir nan Og renews their youth, happiness and peace of mind. Their warm gratitude cannot, unfortunately, help our hero.

Hallblithe's boat-building is a technological task beyond the needs and the attention-span of the Undying King's subjects: they erect pleasant huts and commodious tents, and their weaving and dyeing are excellent, but why should they bother to go out on the sea, to fish, row or sail? As their king says, his Land offers them all they can possibly want.

And that is another dimension of Plain. Morris had resigned from the Socialist League in 1890, and been dismissed as editor of its paper, Commonweal, but carried on funding it in its new, anarchist phase until
November to make sure the final instalments of *News from Nowhere* were published there. That splendid Utopia is his crucial contribution to socialist discourse and a major work in its own right.

In *Plain*, his next work, Morris discovers that he has unfinished business with Nowhere. Though Guest visits Nowhere empowered by his own desire, and Hallblithe is tricked into the journey, both find happy, industrious and free-loving folk, who retain their youth and beauty for most of a very long lifespan. Both populations enjoy craftwork and outdoor labour, music and dancing, eating and drinking, and especially loving their neighbours, in ‘days of peace and rest and cleanliness and smiling goodwill’. Hammond says directly,

> It is easy for us to live without robbing each other. It would be possible to contend with and rob each other, but it would be harder for us than refraining from strife and robbery. That is in short the foundation of our life and our happiness.\(^\text{13}\)

In Nowhere, nature and society provide amply, while the king’s will furnishes the guarantee of peace and plenty on the Plain:

> in this land no man hath a lack which he may not satisfy without taking aught from any other. I deem not that thine heart may conceive a desire which I shall not fulfil for thee, or crave a gift which I shall not give thee. (p. 261)

The king would of course be intolerable in Nowhere, but his claim is as just as Old Hammond’s.

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\(^{13}\) *News from Nowhere, Collected Works*, vol. 16, p. 80.
When Hallblithe, thinking his passionate vision of the ploughing at home in Cleveland means his death, begs permission to leave the Land, the king cannot imagine that anywhere else is worth living in:

Where else than in this land wilt thou find rest? Without is battle and famine, longing unsatisfied, and heart-burning and fear; within it is plenty and peace and goodwill and pleasure without cease. (p. 272)

In practice, this arcadian regime rules over and exploits the violence and chaos of other lands: the Undying King is the master of the slavers and ravagers of the Isle of Ransom. As for ‘longing unsatisfied’, the king’s spoiled daughter personifies it, and the young hero she has fallen in love with, and his fiancée, catch the disease. The cause is in the royal privilege, both high-handed and sneaking, which the king has indulged.

In Nowhere, passion was the only remaining cause of misery and crime. The man who defies the seductions of the Land similarly bears the tokens of love and death. By luck or some other power, as is perhaps implied by the mysterious ‘great shout’ that wakes him in mid-ocean, he sails back to the Isle of Ransom, where Puny Fox has clearly been expecting him, and plans the charade which leads to his truth-telling triumph in the feast-hall. Their plan has consequences which ratify the power of love, but its only inspiration seems to come from Fox’s irascible and long-dead great-grandfather, whose unquiet spirit gives him power and has taught him shape-shifting and other perception-magics.

The romance celebrates this death-based purpose and power, this readiness to live a wholly mortal life. By converting Fox’s skills of mortal lying into his personal truth, Hallblithe brings Hostage at last home to their
folk; Fox accompanies them, at least sufficiently reformed to be able to endure being in the same room as the truth for a little while.

In this joyous and confident renewal, Hallblithe becomes the blood-brother of the Ravagers. In contrast, the Plain’s glittering pleasure thins out value, meaning and even identity. The king’s subjects can only endure the intensity of Hallblithe’s rebellious longing because they start to forget him as soon as he goes away. Though the ardent Princess does recover from her agonies of longing, she foresees in a mighty metaphor of ‘the lingworm laid upon the gold’ (p. 266) the horror of extended lifespan without content, and without death.

A life worth living does not seek to control the future, nor submit itself to a rule of deathless power. Morris, as author, finds he prefers the vitality of human beings to ‘an epoch of rest’. Even the Viking life of robbery with violence, boasting and bullying, that destroys the homes and enslaves the bodies of the helpless, seems preferable to being controlled by fear of death and the immortal bribery of an Elvish king.

On the Isle of Ransom, Hallblithe and the Hostage prove each other’s identity by a shared story from their childhood which uses the emblem of the snake brooding on gold very differently, since their life is fleeting and therefore its moments are more truly treasured:

‘If thou art Hallblithe, tell me what befell to the finger-gold-ring that my mother gave me when we were both but little.’

Then his face grew happy, and he smiled, and he said: ‘I put it for thee one autumn tide in the snake’s hole by the river, amidst the roots of an old thorn-
tree, that the snake might brood it, and make the gold grow greater; but when winter was over and we came to look for it, lo! there was neither ring, nor snake, nor thorn-tree: for the flood had washed it all away.' (p. 316)

The lifestyle of Hallblithe and his people, like their long-lost 'fame', may not be in every detail to your taste, but remember, the Glittering Plain is quite as conclusively lost by now, for us humans. Could any young couple, accepting time and oblivion, be happier to lose the gold and its increase? And who would prefer the slow ebbing away of meaning as the great snake of eternity encircles identity in its moveless, ever-augmenting coils?

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