THE GLITTERING PLAIN; OR, THE LAND OF LIVING MEN.

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CHAPTER I.

OF THE THREE WHO CAME TO THE HOUSE OF THE RAVEN.

It is told that there was once a young man of free kindred, whose name was Hallblithe: he was fair, strong, and not untried in battle: he was of the House of the Raven of old time. This man loved an exceeding fair damsel called the Hostage, who was of the House of the Rose, wherein it was right and due that the men of the Raven should wed.

She loved him no less, and no man of the kindred gainsaid their love, and they were to be wedded on Midsummer Night.

But one day of early spring, when the days were yet short and the nights long, Hallblithe sat before the porch of the House smoothing an ash stave for his spear, and he heard the sound of horse-hoofs drawing near, and he looked up and saw folk riding toward the House, and presently they rode through the garth gate; and there was no man but he about the House, so he rose up and went to meet them and he saw that they were but three in company: they had weapons with them, and their horses were of the best; but they were no fellowship for a man to be afraid of: for two of them were old and feeble, and the third was dark and sad, and drooping of aspect; it seemed as if they had ridden far and fast, for their spurs were bloody and their horses all a-sweat.

Hallblithe hailed them kindly and said: "Ye are way-worn, and maybe ye have to ride further; so light down and come into the House, and take bite and sup, and hay and corn also for your horses; and then if ye needs must ride on your way, depart when ye are rested; or else if ye may, then abide here night-long, and go your ways to-morrow, and meantime that which is ours shall be yours, and all shall be free to you."

Then spake the oldest of the elders in a high piping voice and said: "Young man, we thank thee; but 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, but lead us to thy lord, and perhaps he will make us content."

Spake he who was somewhat less stricken in years than the first: "Thanks have thou! but we need something more than meat and drink, to wit the Land of Living Men. And Oh! but the time presses."

Spake the sad and sorry carle: "We seek the Land where the days are many; so
many that he who hath forgotten how to laugh may learn the craft again and forget the days of Sorrow."

Then they all three cried aloud and said: "Is this the Land? Is this the Land?"

But Hallblithe wondered, and he laughed and said: "Wayfarers, look under the sun down the plain which lieth betwixt the mountains and the sea, and ye shall behold the meadows all gleaming with the spring lilies; yet do we not call this the Glittering Plain, but Cleveland by the Sea. Here men die when their hour comes, nor know I if the days of their life be long enough for the forgetting of sorrow; for I am young and not yet a vokelfellow of sorrow; but this I know, that they are long enough for the doing of deeds that shall not die. And as for Lord, I know not this word, for here dwell we the sons of the Raven in good fellowship, with our wives that we have wedded, and our mothers that have borne us, and our sisters that serve us. Again I bid you light down off your horses, and eat and drink and be merry; and depart when ye will to seek what land ye will."

They scarce looked on him, but cried out together mournfully: "This is not the Land! This is not the Land!"

No more than that they said, but turned about their horses and rode out through the garth gate, and went clattering up the road that led to the pass of the mountains. But Hallblithe hearkened wondering, till the sound of their horse-hoofs died away, and then turned back to his work: and it was then two hours after high-noon.

CHAPTER II.

EVIL TIDINGS COME TO HAND.

Not long had he worked ere he heard the sound of horse-hoofs once more, and he looked not up, but said to himself, "It is the lads bringing back the teams from the acres, and riding fast and driving hard for joy of heart and in wantonness of youth."

But the sound grew nearer and he looked up and saw over the turf wall of the garth the flutter of white raiment; and he said: "Nay, it is the maidens coming back from the sea-shore and the gathering of wrack."

So he set himself the harder to his work, and laughed, all alone as he was, and said: "She is with them: now I will not look up again till they have ridden into the garth, and she has come from among them, and leapt off her horse, and cast her arms about my neck as her wont is; and it will rejoice her then to mock me with hard words and kind voice and longing heart; and I shall long for her and kiss her, and sweet shall the coming days seem to us: and the daughters of our folk shall look on and be kind and blithe with us."

Therewith rode the maidens into the garth, but he heard no sound of laughter or merriment amongst them, which was contrary to their wont; and his heart fell, and it was as if instead of the maidens' laughter the voices of those wayfarers came back upon the wind crying out, "Is this the land? Is this the land?"

Then he looked up hastily, and saw the maidens drawing near, ten of the House of the Raven and three of the House of the Rose; and he beheld them that their faces were pale and woe-begone, and their raiment rent, and there was no joy in them.

Hallblithe stood aghast while one who had gotten off her horse (and she was the daughter of his own mother) ran past him into the hall, looking not at him, as if she durst not: and another rode off swiftly to the horse-stalls. But the others, leaving their horses, drew round about him, and for a while none durst utter a word; and he stood gazing at them with the spoke-shave in his hand, he also silent; for he saw that the Hostage was not with them, and he knew that now he was the vokelfellow of sorrow.

At last he spoke gently and in a kind voice, and said: "Tell me, sisters, what evil hath befallen us, even if it be the death of a dear friend and the thing that may not be amended."

Then spoke a fair woman of the Rose, whose name was Brightling, and said: "Hallblithe, it is not of death that we have to tell, but of sundering which may yet be amended. We were on the sand of the sea nigh the Ship-stead and the Rollers of the Raven, and we were gathering the wrack and playing together; and we saw a round ship nigh to shore lying with her sheet slack, and her sail beating the mast; but we deemed it to be none other than some bark of the Fish-biteurs, and thought no harm
thereof, but went on running and playing amidst the little waves that fell on the sand, and the ripples that curled around our feet. At last there came a small boat from the side of the round ship, and rowed in toward shore, and still we feared not, though we drew a little aback from the surf and let fall our gown-hems. But the crew of that boat beached her close to where we stood, and came hastily wading the surf towards us; and we saw that they were twelve weaponed men, great and grim and all clad in black raiment. Then indeed were we afraid, and we turned about and fled up the beach; but now was it too late, for the tide was at more than half ebb and long was the way over the sand to the place where we had left our horses tied among the tamarisk-bushes. Nevertheless we ran, and had gotten up to the pebble-beach before they ran in amongst us: and they caught us, and cast us down on to the hard stones.

"Then they made us sit in a row on a ridge of the pebbles; and we were sore afraid, yet more for defilement at their hands than for death; for they were evil-looking men exceeding foul of favour.

"Then said one of them: 'Which of all you maidens is the Hostage of the House of the Rose?'

"Then all we kept silence, for we would not betray her. But the evil man spake again: 'Choose ye then whether we shall take one, or all of you across the waters in our black ship.'

"Yet still we others spake not, till arose thy beloved, O Hallblithe, and said, 'Let it be one then, and not all; for I am the Hostage.'

"'How shalt thou make us sure thereof?' said the evil carle.

"'She looked on him proudly and said: 'Because I say it.'

"'Wilt thou swear it?' said he.

"'Yea,' said she, 'I swear it by the token of the House wherein I shall wed; by the wings of the Fowl that seeketh the Field of Slaying.'

"'It is enough,' said the man, 'come thou with us. And ye maidens sit ye there and move not till we have made way on our ship, unless ye would feel the point of the arrow. For ye are within bow-shot of the ship, and we have shot weapons aboard.'

"So the Hostage departed with them, and she weeping, but we wept sorely. And we saw the small boat come up to the side of the round ship, and the Hostage going over the gunwale along with those evil men, and we heard the hale and how of the mariners as they drew up the anchor and sheeted home; and then the sweeps came out and the ship began to move over the sea. And one of those evil-minded men bent his bow and shot a shaft at us, but it fell far short of where we sat, and the laugh of those runagates came over the sands to us. So we crept up the beach trembling, and then rose to our feet and got to our horses, and rode hither speedily, and our hearts are broken for thy sorrow.'

At that word came Hallblithe's own sister out from the hall; and she bore weapons with her, to wit Hallblithe's sword and shield and helm and hauberk. 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 great round pebble that was thereby, and clenched the nail on the other side. Then he looked about, and saw that the other damsel had brought him his coal-black war-horse ready saddled and bridled; then he did on his armour, and girt his sword to his side and leapt into the saddle, and took his new-shafted spear in hand and shook the rein. But none of all those damselst durst say a word to him or ask him whither he went, for they feared his face, and the sorrow of his heart.

So he got him out of the garth and turned toward the sea-shore, and they saw the glitter of his spear-point a minute over the turf-wall, and heard the clatter of his horse-hoofs as he galloped over the hard way; and thus he departed.

CHAPTER III.

THE WARRIORS OF THE RAVEN SEARCH THE SEAS.

Then the women bethought them, and they spake a word or two together, and then sundere and went one this way and one that to gather together the warriors of the Raven who were a-field, or on the way, nigh the House, that they might follow Hallblithe down to the sea-shore and help him; after a while they came back again by
one and two and three, bringing with them the wrathful young men; and when there was upwards of a score gathered in the garth armed and horsed, they rode their ways to the sea, being minded to thrust a long ship of the Ravens out over the Rollers into the sea, and follow the strong-thieves of the waters and bring a-back the Hostage, so that they might end the sorrow at once, and establish joy once more in the House of the Raven and the House of the Rose. But they had with them three lads of fifteen winters or thereabouts to lead their horses back home again, when they should have gone up on to the Horse of the Brine.

Thus then they departed, and the maidens stood in the garth-gate till they lost sight of them behind the sandhills, and then turned back sorrowfully into the house, and sat there talking low of their sorrow. And many a time they had to tell their tale anew, as folk came into the hall one after another from field and fell. But the young men came down to the sea, and found Hallblithe's black horse straying about amongst the tamarisk bushes above the beach; and they looked thence over the sand, and saw neither Hallblithe nor any man; and they gazed out seaward, and saw neither ship nor sail on the barren brine. Then they went down on to the sand, and sunned their fellowship, and went half one way, half the other, betwixt the sand-hills and the surf, where now the tide was flowing, till the nesses of the east and the west, the horns of the bay, stayed them. Then they met together again by the Rollers, when the sun was within an hour of setting. There and then they laid hand to that ship which is called the Sea-mew, and they row her down over the Rollers into the waves, and leapt aboard and hoisted sail, and ran out the ears and put to sea; and a little wind was blowing seaward from the gates of the mountains behind them.

So they quartered the sea-plain, as the kestrel doth the water-meadows, till the night fell on them, and was cloudy, though whiles the wading moon shone out; and they had seen nothing, neither sail nor ship, nor aught else on the barren brine, save the washing of waves and the hovering of sea-fowl. So they lay-to outside the horns of the bay and awaited the dawning. And when morning was come they made way again, and searched the sea, and sailed to the out-skerries, and searched them with care; then they sailed into the main and fared hither and thither and up and down: and this they did for eight days, and in all that time they saw no ship nor sail, save three barks of the Fish-biters nigh to the Skerry which is called the Mew-stone.

So they fared home to the Raven Bay, and laid their keel on the Rollers, and so went their ways sadly, home to the House of the Raven: and they deemed that for this time they could do no more in seeking their valiant kinsman and his fair damsel. And they were very sorry; for these two were well-beloved of all men. But since they might not amend it, they abode in peace, awaiting what the change of days might bring them.

CHAPTER IV.

HALLBLITHE TAKES THE SEA.

Now must it be told of Hallblithe that he rode fiercely down to the sea shore, and from the top of the beach he gazed about him, and there below him was the Ship-stead and rollers of his kindred, whereon lay the three long-ships, the Sea-mew, and the Osprey and the Erne. Heavy and huge they seemed to him as they lay there, black-sided, icy-cold with the washing of the March waves, their golden dragon-heads looking seaward wistfully. But first had he looked out into the offing, and it was only when he had let his eyes come back from where the sea and sky met, and they had beheld nothing but the waste of waters, that he beheld the Ship-stead closely; and therewith he saw where a little to the west of it lay a skiff which the low wave of the tide lifted and let fall from time to time. It had a mast, and a black sail hoisted thereon and flapping with slackened sheet. A man sat in the boat clad in black raiment, and the sun smote a gleam from the helm on his head.

Then Hallblithe leapt off his horse, and strode down the sands shouldering his spear; and when he came near to the man in the boat he poised his spear and shook it and cried out: "Man, art thou friend or foe?"

Said the man: "Thou art a fair young man; but there is grief in thy voice along with wrath. Cast not till thou hast heard me, and mayst deem whether I may do aught to heal thy grief."
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"What mayst thou do?" said Hallblithe; "art thou not a robber of the sea, a harrier of the folks that dwell in peace?"

The man laughed: "Yea," said he, "my craft is thieving and carrying off the daughters of folk, so that we may have a ransom for them. Wilt thou come over the waters with me?"

Hallblithe said wrathfully: "Nay, rather, come thou ashore here! Thou seestest a big man, and belike shall be good of thine hands. Come and fight with me; and then he of us who is vanquished, if he be unslain, shall serve the other for a year, and then shalt thou do my business in the ransoming."

The man in the boat laughed again, and that so scornfully that he angered Hallblithe beyond measure: then he arose in the boat and stood on his feet swaying from side to side as he laughed. He was passing big, long-armed and big-headed, and long hair came from under his helm like the tail of a red horse; his eyes were gray and gleaming, and his mouth wide.

In a while he stayed his laughter and said: "O Warrior of the Raven, this were a simple game for thee to play; though it is not far from my mind, for fighting when I needs must win is no dull work. Look you, if I slay or vanquish thee then all is said; and if by some chance stroke thou slayest me, then is thine only helper in this matter gone from thee. Now to be short, I bid thee come aboard to me if thou wouldst ever hear another word of thy damsel betrothed. And moreover this need not hinder thee to fight with me if thou hast a mind to it thereafter; for we shall soon come to a land big enough for two to stand on. Or if thou listest to fight in a boat rocking on the waves, I see not but there may be manhood in that also."

Now was the hot wrath somewhat run off Hallblithe, nor durst he lose any chance to hear a word of his beloved; so he said: "Big man, I will come aboard. But look thou to it if thou hast a mind to betray me; for the sons of the Raven die hard."

"Well," said the big man, "I have heard that their minstrels are of many words and think that they have tales to tell. Come aboard and loiter not."

Then Hallblithe waded the surf and lightly strode over the gunwale of the skiff and sat him down. The big man thrust out into the deep and hailed home the sheet; but there was but little wind.

Then said Hallblithe: "Wilt thou have me row, for I wot not whitherward to steer?"

Said the red carle: "Maybe thou art not in a hurry; I am not: do as thou wilt."

So Hallblithe took the oars and rowed mightily, while the alien steered, and they went swiftly and lightly over the sea and the waves were little.

CHAPTER V.

THEY COME TO THE ISLE OF RANSOM.

Now the sun grew low, and it set; the stars and the moon shone a while and then it clouded over. But Hallblithe still rowed and rested not though he was weary; and the big man sat and steered, and held his peace. But when the night was grown old and it was not far from the dawn, the alien said: "Youngling of the Ravens, now shalt thou sleep and I will row."

Hallblithe was exceeding weary; so he gave the oars to the alien and lay down in the stern and slept. And in his sleep he dreamed that he was lying in the House of the Raven, and his sisters came to him and said, "Rise up now, Hallblithe! wilt thou be a sluggard on the day of thy wedding? Come thou with us to the House of the Rose that we may bear away the Hostage." Then he dreamed that they departed, and he arose and clad himself: but when he would have gone out of the hall, then was it no longer daylight but moonlight, and he dreamed that he had but dreamed: nevertheless he would have gone abroad, but might not find the door; so he said he would go out by a window; but the wall was high and smooth (quite other than in the House of the Raven, where were low windows all along one aisle), nor was there any way to come at them. But he dreamed that he was so abashed thereat, and had such a weakness on him, that he wept for pity of himself: and he went to his bed to lie down; and lo! there was no bed and no hall; nought but a heath, wild and wide, and empty under the moon. And still he wept in his dream, and his manhood seemed
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departed from him, and he heard a voice crying out, "Is this the land? Is this the land?"

Therewithal he awoke, and as his eyes cleared he beheld the big man rowing and the black sail flapping against the mast; for the wind had fallen dead and they were faring over a long smooth swell of the sea. It was broad daylight, but round about them was a thick mist, which seemed none the less as if the sun were ready to shine through it. As Hallblithe caught the red man's eye, he smiled and nodded on him and said: "Now has the time come for thee first to eat and then to row. But tell me what is that upon thy cheeks?"

Said Hallblithe, reddening somewhat, "The night dew hath fallen on me."

Quoth the sea-rover, "It is no shame for thee a youngling to remember thy betrothed in thy sleep, and to weep because thou lackest her. But now bestir thee, for it is later than thou mayest deem."

Therewith the big man drew in the oars and came to the after-part of the boat, and drew meat and drink out of a locker thereby; and they ate and drank together, and Hallblithe grew strong and somewhat less downcast; and he went forward and gat the oars into his hands.

Then the big man stood up and looked over his left shoulder and said: "Soon shall we have a breeze and bright weather."

Then he looked into the midmost of the sail and fell a-whistling such a tune as the fiddles play to dancing men and maids at Yule-tide, and his eyes gleamed and glittered therewithal, and exceeding big he looked. Then Hallblithe felt a little air on his cheek, and the mist grew thinner, and the sail began to fill with wind till the sheet tightened; then, lo! the mist rising from the face of the sea, and the sea's face rippling gaily under a bright sun. Then the wind increased, and the wall of mist departed and a few light clouds sped over the sky, and the sail swelled and the boat heeled over, and the seas fell white from the prow, and they sped fast over the face of the waters.

Then laughed the red-haired man, and said: "O croaker on the dead branch, now is the wind such that no rowing of thine may catch up with it: so in with the oars now, and turn about, and thou shalt see whitherward we are going."

Then Hallblithe turned about on the thwart and looked across the sea, and lo! before them the high cliffs and crags and mountains of a new land which seemed to be an isle, and they were deep blue under the sun, which now shone aloft in the mid heaven. He said nought, but sat looking and wondering what land it might be; but the big man said: "O tomb of warriors, is it not as if the blueness of the deep sea had heaved itself up aloft, and turned from coloured air into rock and stone, so wondrous blue it is? But that is because those crags and mountains are so far away, and as we draw nigher to them, thou shalt see them as they verily are, that they are coal-black; and yonder land is an isle, and is called the Isle of Ransom. Therein shall be the market for thee where thou mayst cheapen thy betrothed. There mayst thou take her by the hand and lead away thence, when thou hast dealt with the chapman of maidens and hast pledged thee by the fowl of battle, and the edge of the fallow-blade to pay that which he will have of thee."

As the big man spoke there was a mocking in his voice and his face and in his whole huge body, which made the sword of Hallblithe uneasy in his scabbard; but he refrained his wrath, and said: "Big man, the longer I look, the less I can think how we are to come up on to yonder island; for I can see nought but a huge cliff and great mountains rising beyond it."

"Thou shalt the more wonder," said the alien, "the nigher thou drawest thereto; for it is not because we are far away that thou canst see no beach or strand or sloping of the land seaward, but because there is nought of all these things. Yet fear not! am I not with thee? thou shalt come ashore on the Isle of Ransom."

Then Hallblithe held his peace, and the other spake not for a while, but gave a short laugh once or twice; and said at last in a big voice, "Little Carrion-biter, why dost thou not ask me of my name?"

Now Hallblithe was a tall man and a fell fighter; but he said: "Because I was thinking of other things and not of thee."

"Well," said the big man, in a voice still louder, "when I am at home men call me the Puny Fox."
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Then Hallblithe said: "Art thou a Fox? It may well be that thou shalt beguile me as such beasts will; but look to it, that if thou dost I shall know how to avenge me."

Then rose up the big man from the helm, and straddled wide in the boat, and cried out in a great roaring voice: "Crag-nester, I am one of seven brethren, and the smallest and weakest of them. Art thou not afraid?"

"No," said Hallblithe, "for the other six are not here. Wilt thou fight here in boat, O Fox?"

"Nay," said Fox, "rather we will drink a cup of wine together."

So he opened the locker again and drew out thence a great horn of some huge neat of the outlands which was girthed and stopped with silver, and also a golden cup, and he filled the cup from the horn and gave it into Hallblithe's hand and said: "Drink, O black-fledged nestling! But call a health over the cup if thou wilt."

So Hallblithe raised the cup aloft and cried: "Health to the House of the Raven and to them that love it! an ill day to its foemen!" Then he set his lips to the cup and drank; and that wine seemed to him better and stronger than any he had ever tasted. But when he had given the cup back again to Fox, that red one filled it again, and cried over it, "The Treasure of the Sea! and the King that dieth not!" Then he drank, and filled again for Hallblithe, and steered with his knees meanwhile; and thus they drank three cups each, and Fox smiled and was peaceful and said but little, but Hallblithe sat wondering how the world was changed for him since yesterday.

But now was the sky blown all clear of clouds and the wind piped shrill behind them, and the great waves arose and fell about them, and the sun glittered on them in many colours. Fast flew the boat before the wind as though it would never stop, and the day was waning, and the wind still rising; and now the Isle of Ransom upheved huge before them, and coal-black, and no beach and no haven was to be seen therein; and still they ran before the wind towards that black cliff-wall, against which the sea washed for ever, and no keel ever built by man might live for one moment 'twixt the surf and the cliff of that grim land. The sun grew low, and sank red under the sea, and that world of stone swallowed up half the heavens before them, for they were now come very nigh thereto; nor could Hallblithe see aught for it, but that they must be dashed against the cliff and perish in a moment of time.

Still the boat flew on; but now when the twilight was come, and they had just opened up a long reach of the cliff that lay beyond a high ness, Hallblithe thought he saw down by the edge of the sea something darker than the face of the rock-wall, and he deemed it was a cave: they came a little nearer and he saw it was a great cave high enough to let a round-ship go in with all her sails set.

"Son of the Raven," quoth Fox, "hearken, for thy heart is not little. Yonder is the gate into the Isle of Ransom, and if thou wilt thou mayst go through it. Yet it may be that if thou goest ashore on to the Isle something grievous shall befal thee, a trouble more than thou canst bear: a shame it may be. Now there are two choices for thee: either to go up on to the Isle and face all; or to die here by my hand having done nothing unmanly or shameful: What sayest thou?"

"Thou art of many words when time so presses, Fox," said Hallblithe. "Why should I not choose to go up on to the Island to deliver my trothplight maiden? For the rest, slay me if thou canst, if we come alive out of this cauldron of waters."

Said the big red man: "Look on then, and note Fox how he steereth, as it were through a needle's eye."

Now were they underneath the black shadow of the black cliff and amidst the twilight the surf was tossed about like white fire. In the lower heavens the stars were beginning to twinkle and the moon was bright and yellow, and aloft all was peaceful, for no cloud sullied the sky. One moment Hallblithe saw all this hanging above the turmoil of thundering water and dripping rock and the next he was in the darkness of the cave, the roaring wind and the waves still making thunder about him, though of a different voice from the harsh hubbub without. Then he heard Fox say:

"Sit down now and take the oars, for presently shall we be at home at the landing place."

So Hallblithe took the oars and rowed, and as they went up the cave the sea fell, and the wind died out into the aimless gustiness of hollow places; and for a little while was all as dark as dark might be. Then Hallblithe saw that the darkness grew a little greyer, and he looked over his shoulder and saw a star of light before the bows of the boat, and Fox cried out: "Yea, it is like day: bright will the moon be for such as
needs must be wayfaring to-night! Cease rowing, O Son of the coal-blue fowl, for there is way enough on her."

Then Hallblithe lay on his ears, and in a minute the bows smote the land; then he turned about and saw a steep stair of stone, and up the sloping shaft thereof the moonlit sky and the bright stars. Then Fox arose and came forward and leapt out of the boat and moored her to a big stone: then he leapt back again and said: "Bear a hand with the victuals; we must bring them out of the boat unless thou wilt sleep supperless, as I will not. For to-night must we be guests to ourselves, since it is far to the dwelling of my people, and the old man is said to be a skin-changer, a flit-by-night. And as to this cave, it is deemed to be nowise safe to sleep therein, unless the sleeper have a double share of luck. And thy luck, me-see meth, O Son of the Raven, is as now somewhat less than a single share. So to-night we shall sleep under the naked heaven."

Hallblithe yeasaid this, and they took the meat and drink, such as they needed, from out the boat, and climbed the steep stair no little way, and so came out on to a plain place, which seemed to Hallblithe bare and waste so far as he might see it by the moonlight; for the twilight was gone now, and nought was left of the light of day save a glimmer in the west.

This Hallblithe deemed wonderful, that no less out on the open heath and brow of the land than in the shut-in cave, all that tumult of the wind had fallen, and the cloudless night was calm, and with a little light air blowing from the south and the landward.

Therewithal was Fox done with his loud-voiced braggaro mood, and spoke gently and peaceably as a wayfarer, who hath business of his to look to like other men. Now he pointed to certain rocks or low crags that a little way off rose like a reef out of the treeless plain; then said he: "Shipmate, underneath yonder rocks is our resting-place for to-night; and I pray thee not to deem me churlish that I give thee no better harbour. But I have a charge over thee to bring thee safe thus far on thy quest; and thou wouldst find it hard to live amongst such housemates as thou wouldst find up yonder amongst our folk to-night. But to-morrow shalt thou come to speech with him who will deal with thee concerning the ransom."

"It is enough," said Hallblithe, "and I thank thee for thy leading: and as for thy rough and uncomely words which thou hast given me, I pardon thee for them; for I am none the worse of them: forsooth, if I had been, my sword would have had a voice in the matter."

"I am well content as it is, Son of the Raven," quoth Fox; "I have done my bidding and all is well."

"Tell me then who is it hath bidden thee bring me hither?"

"I may not tell thee," said Fox; "thou art here, be content, as I am."

And he spake no more till they had come to the reef aforesaid, which was some two furlongs from the place where they had come from out of the cave. There then they set forth their supper on the stones, and ate what they would, and drank of that good strong wine while the horn bare out. And now was Fox of few words, and when Hallblithe asked him concerning that land he had little to say. And at last when Hallblithe asked him of that perilous house and those who manned it, he said to him: "Son of the Raven, it avails not asking of these matters; for if I tell thee aught concerning them I shall tell thee lies. Once again let it be enough for thee that thou hast passed over the sea safely on thy quest; and a more perilous sea it is forsooth than thou deemest. But now let us make an end of vain words, and make our bed amidst these stones as best we may; for we should be stirring betimes in the morning."

Hallblithe said little in answer, and they arrayed their sleeping places cunningly, as the hare doth her form, and like men well used to lying abroad.

Hallblithe was very weary and he soon fell asleep; and as he lay there, he dreamed a dream, or maybe saw a vision; whether he were asleep when he saw it, or between sleeping and waking, I know not. But this was his dream or his vision, that the Hostage was standing over him, and she as he had seen her but yesterday, bright-haired and ruddy-cheeked and white-skinned, kind of hand and soft of voice, and she said to him: "Hallblithe, look on me and hearken, for I have a message for thee."

And he looked and longed for her, and his soul was ravished by the sweetness of his longing, and he would have leapt up and cast his arms about her, but sleep and the dream bound him, and he might not. Then the image smiled on him and said:
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"Nay, my love, lie still, for thou mayst not touch me: here is but the image of
the body which thou desirest. Hearken then. I am in evil plight, in the hands of
strong thieves of the sea, nor know I what they will do with me, and I have no will
to be shamed; to be sold for a price from one hand to another, yet to be bedded with-
out a price, and to lie beside some foeman of our folk, and he to cast his arms about
me, will I, will I not: this is a hard case. Therefore to-morrow morning at daybreak
while men sleep, I think to steal forth to the gunwale of the black ship and give myself
to the gods, that they and not these runagates may be masters of my life and my soul,
and may do with me as they will: for indeed they know that I may not bear the strange
kinless house, and the love and caressing of the alien house-master, and the mocking
and stripes of the alien house-mistress. Therefore let the Hoary One of the sea take
me and look to my matters and carry me to life or death, which-so he will. Thin now
grows the night, but lie still a little yet while I speak another word. Maybe we shall
meet alive again, and maybe not: and if not, though we have never yet lain in one
bed together, yet I would have thee remember me: yet not so that my image shall
come between thee and thy speech-friend and bed-fellow of the kindred that shall lie
where I was to have lain. Yet again, if I live and thou livest, I have been told and
have heard that by one way or other I am like to come to the Glittering Plain and the
Land of Living Men. O my beloved, if by any way thou mightest come thither also,
and we might meet there, and we two alive, how good it would be! Seek that land then,
beloved! seek it, whether or no we once more behold the House of the Rose, or tread
the floor of the Raven dwelling. And now must even this image of me sunder from thee. Farewell!"

Therewith was the dream done and the vision departed; and Hallblithe sat up full
of anguish and longing; and he looked about him over the dreary land, and it was
somewhat light and the sky was grown grey and cloudy, and he deemed that the dawn
was come. So he leapt to his feet and stooped down over Fox, and took him by the
shoulder, and shook him and said: "Faring-fellow, awake! the dawn is come, and
we have much to do."

Fox sat up and growled like a dog, and rubbed his eyes and looked about him and
said: "Thou hast waked me for nought: it is the false dawn of the moon that shineth
now behind the clouds and casteth no shadow; it is but an hour after midnight. Go
to sleep again, and let me be, else will I not be a guide to thee when the day comes."
And he lay down and was asleep at once. Then Hallblithe went and lay down again full
of sorrow: Yet so weary was he that he presently fell asleep, and dreamed no more.

CHAPTER VI.

A DWELLING OF MEN ON THE ISLE OF RANSOM.

When he awoke again the sun shone on him, and the morning was calm and
windless. He sat up and looked about him, but could see no signs of the Puny Fox
save the lair wherein he had lain. So he arose to his feet and sought for him about
the crannies of the rocks, and found him not; and he shouted for him, and had no
answer. Then he said, "Belike he has gone down to the boat to put a thing in, or take
a thing out." So he went his ways to the stair down into the water-cave, and he called
on Fox from the top of the stair, and had no answer.

So he went down that long stair with a misgiving in his heart, and when he came
to the last step there was neither man nor boat, nor aught else save the water and the
living rock. Then was he exceeding wroth, for he knew that he had been beguiled,
and he was in an evil case, left alone on an Isle that he knew not, a waste and
desolate land, where it seemed most like he should die of famine.

He wasted no breath or might now in crying out for Fox, or seeking him; for he said
to himself: "I might well have known that he was false and a liar, whereas he could
scarcely refrain his joy at my folly and his guile. Now is it for me to strive for life
against death."

Then he turned and went slowly up the stair, and came out on to the open face of
that Isle, and he saw that it was waste indeed and dreadful; a wilderness of black
sand and stones and ice-borne rocks, with here and there a little grass growing in the
hollows, and here and there a dreary mire where the white-tufted rushes shook in the

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wind, and here and there stretches of moss blended with red-blossomed sengreen; and
otherwhere nought but the wind-bitten creeping willow clinging to the black sand,
with a white bleached stick and a leaf or two, and again a stick and a leaf. In the
offing looking landward were great mountains, some very great and snow-capped,
some bare to the tops; and all that was far away save the snow was deep-blue in the
sunny morning. But about him on the heath were scattered rocks like the reef beneath
which he had slept the last night, and peaks, and hammers, and knolls of uncouth
shapes.

Then he went to the edge of the cliffs and looked down on the sea which lay wrinkled
and rippling on toward shore far below him, and long he gazed thereon and all about,
but could see neither ship nor sail, nor aught else save the washing of waves and the
hovering of sea fowl. Then he said: "Were it not well if I were to seek that house-
master of whom Fox spake? Might he not flit me at least to the Land of the Glittering
Plain. Woe is me! now am I of that woful company, and I also must needs cry out
Where is the land? Where is the land?"

Therewith he turned toward the reef above their lair, but as he went he thought
and said: "Nay, but was not this Stead a lie like the rest of Fox's tale? and am I
not alone in this sea-girt wilderness? Yea, and even that image of my Beloved which
I saw in the dream, perchance that also was a mere beguiling; for now I see that the
Puny Fox was in all ways wiser than is meet and comely." Yet again he said:
"At least I will seek on, and find out whether there be another man dwelling on this
hapless Isle, and then the worst of it will be battle with him, and death by point and
edge rather than by hunger; or at the best we may become friends and fellows and
deliver each other."

So came he to the reef, and with much ado climbed to the topmost of its rocks and
looked down thence landward: and betwixt him and the mountains, and by seeming
not very far off, he saw smoke arising: but no house he saw, nor any other token of a
dwelling.

So he came down from the stone and turned his back upon the sea and went
toward that smoke with his sword in its sheath, and his spear over his shoulder.
Rough and toilsome was the way: three little dales he crossed amidst the mountain
necks, each one narrow and bare, with a stream of water amidst, running seaward, and
whether in dale or on ridge, he went ever amidst sand and stones, and the weeds of the
wilderness, and saw no man or man-tended beast.

At last after he had been four hours on the way, but had not gone very far, he
topped a stony bent and from the brow thereof beheld a wide valley grass-grown for
the more part, with a river running through it, and sheep and kine and horses feeding
up and down it. And amidst this dale, by the stream-side, was a dwelling of men, a
long hall and other houses about it builded of stone.

Then was Hallblithie glad, and he strode down the bent speedily, his wargear
clashing upon him; and as he came to the foot thereof and on to the grass of the dale
he got amongst the pasturing horses, and passed close by the horse-herd and a woman
that was with him. They scowled at him as he went by but meddled not with him in
any way. Although they were giant-like of stature and fierce of face, they were not
ill-favoured: they were red-haired, and the woman as white as cream where the sun
had not burned her; they had no weapons that Hallblithe might see save the goad in
the hand of the carle.

So Hallblithe passed on and came to the biggest house, the hall aforesaid: it was
very long, and low as for its length, not over shapely of fashion, a mere gabled heap
of stones. Low and strait was the door thereinto, and as Hallblithe entered stooping
lowly, and the fire of the steel of his spear that he held before him was quenched in the
mirk of the hall, he smiled and said to himself: "Now if there were one anigh who
would not have me enter alive, and he with a weapon in his hand, soon were all the
tale told."

But he got into the hall unsmitten, and stood on the floor thereof, and spake:
"The seel of the day to whomsoever is herein! Will any man speak to the new-comer?"

But none answered or gave him greeting; and as his eyes got used to the dusk of
the hall, he looked about him, and neither on the floor or the high seat nor in any
ingle could he see a man; and there was silence there save for the crackling of the
flickering flame on the hearth amidst, and the running of the rats behind the
panelling of the walls
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On one side of the hall was a row of shut-beds, and Hallblithe deemed that there might be men therein; but since none had greeted him he refrained him from searching them for fear of a trap, and he thought, "I will abide amidst the floor, and if there be any that would deal with me, friend or foe, let him come hither to me."

So he fell to walking up and down the hall from buttery to dais, and his wargear rattled upon him. At last as he walked he thought he heard a small thin peevish voice, which yet was too husky for the squeak of a rat. So he stayed his walk and stood still, and said: "Will any man speak to Hallblithe, a new-comer, and a stranger in this Stead?"

Then the small voice made words and said: "Why paceth the fool up and down our hall, doing nothing, even as the Ravens flap croaking about the crags, abiding the war-mote and the clash of the fallow-blades?"

Said Hallblithe, and his voice sounded big in the hall: "Who calleth Hallblithe a fool and mocketh at the sons of the Raven?"

Spake the voice: "Why cometh not the fool to the man that may not go to him?"

Then Hallblithe bent forward to hearken, and he deemed that the voice came from one of the shut-beds, so he leaned his spear against a pillar, and went into the shut-bed he had noted, and saw where there lay along in it a man exceeding old by seeming, sore wasted, with long hair as white as snow lying over the bed-clothes.

When the elder saw Hallblithe, he laughed a thin cracked laugh as if in mockery and said: "Hail new-comer! wilt thou eat?"

"Yea," said Hallblithe.

"Go thou into the buttery then," said the old carle, "and there shalt thou find on the cupboard cakes and curds and cheese: eat thy fill, and when thou hast done look in the ingle, and thou shalt see a cask of mead exceeding good, and a stoup thereby, and two silver cups: fill the stoup and bring it hither with the cups; and then may we talk amidst drinking, which is good for an old carle. Hasten thou! or I shall deem thee a double fool who will not fare to fetch his meat, though he be hungry."

Then Hallblithe laughed, and went down the hall into the buttery and found the meat, and ate his fill, and came away with the drink back to the Long-hoary man, who chuckled as he came and said: "Fill up now for thee and for me, and call a health to me and wish me somewhat."

"I wish thee luck," said Hallblithe, and drank.

Said the elder: "And I wish thee more wits; is luck all that thou mayst wish me? What luck may an outworn elder have?"

"Well then," quoth Hallblithe, "what shall I wish thee? Wouldst thou have me wish thee youth?"

"Yea, certes," said the Long-hoary, "that and nought else."

"Youth then I wish thee, if it may avail thee aught," said Hallblithe, and he drank again therewith.

"Nay, nay," said the old carle peevishly, "take a third cup, and wish me youth with no idle words tacked thereto."

Said Hallblithe raising the cup: "Herewith I wish thee youth!" and he drank.

"Good is the wish," said the elder; "now ask thou the old carle whatso thou wilt."

Said Hallblithe: "What is this land called?"

"Son," said the other, "hast thou heard it called the Isle of Ransom?"

"Yea," said Hallblithe, "but what wilt thou call it?"

"By no other name," said the hoary carle.

"It is far from other lands?" said Hallblithe.

"Yea," said the carle, "when the light winds blow, and the ships sail slow."

"What do ye who live here?" said Hallblithe. "How do ye live, what work win ye?"

"We win diverse work," said the elder, "but the gainfullest is robbing men by the high hand."

"Is it ye who have stolen from me the Hostage of the Rose?" said Hallblithe.

Said the Long-hoary, "Maybe; I wot not; in diverse ways my kinsmen traffic, and they visit many lands. Why should they not have come to Cleveland also?"

"Is she in this Isle, thou old runagate?" said Hallblithe.

"She is not, thou young fool," said the elder.

Then Hallblithe flushed red and spake: "Knowest thou the Puny Fox?"
"How should I not?" said the carle, "since he is the son of one of my sons."
"Dost thou call him a liar and a rogue?" said Hallblithe.
The elder laughed; "Else were I a fool," said he; "there are few bigger liars or bigger rogues than the Puny Fox!"
"Is he here in this Isle?" said Hallblithe; "may I see him?"
The old man laughed again, and said: "Nay, he is not here, unless he hath turned fool since yesterday: why should he abide thy sword, since he hath done what he would and brought thee hither?"
Then he laughed, as a hen cackles, a long while, and then said: "What more wilt thou ask me?"
But Hallblithe was very wroth: "It availeth nought to ask," he said; "and now I am in two minds whether I shall slay thee or not."
"That were a meet deed for a Raven, but not for a man," said the carle, "and thou that hast wished me luck! Ask, ask!"
But Hallblithe was silent a long while. Then the carle said, "Another cup for the longer after youth!"
Hallblithe filled, and gave to him, and the old man drank and said: "Thou deemest us all liars in the Isle of Ransom because of thy beguiling by the Puny Fox: but therein thou errest. The Puny Fox is our chiefest liar, and doth for us the more part of such work as we need: therefore, why should we others lie. Ask, ask!"
"Well then," said Hallblithe, "why did the Puny Fox bewray me, and at whose bidding?"
Said the elder: "I know, but I will not tell thee. Is this a lie?"
"Nay, I deem not," said Hallblithe: "But, tell me, is it verily true that my trothplight is not here, that I may ransom her?"
Said the Long-hoary: "I swear by the Treasure of the Sea, that she is not here: the tale was but a lie of the Puny Fox."

(To be continued.)