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

BY WILLIAM MORRIS, AUTHOR OF "THE EARTHLY PARADISE."

CHAPTER XIX.

HALBLITHE BUILDS HIM A SKIFF.

After Hallblithe had been housed a little while, and the time was now again drawing nigh to the twelfth moon since he had come to the Glittering Plain, he went in the wood one day, and, pondering many things without fixing on any one, he stood before a very great oak-tree and looked at the tall straight bole thereof, and there came into his head the words of an old song which was written round a scroll of the carving over the shut-bed wherein he was wont to lie when he was at home in the House of the Raven: and thus it said:

I am the oak-tree, and forsooth
Men deal by me with little ruth;
My boughs they shred, my life they slay
And speed me o'er the watery way.

He looked up into that leafy world for a little and then turned back toward his house; but all day long, whether he were at work or at rest, that posy ran in his head, and he kept on saying it over, aloud or not aloud, till the day was done and he went to sleep.

Then in his sleep he dreamed that an exceeding fair woman stood by his bedside, and at first she seemed to him to be an image of the Hostage. But presently her face changed, and her body and her raiment; and, lo! it was the lovely woman, the King’s daughter whom he had seen wasting her heart for the love of him. Then even in his dream shame thereof overtook him, and because of that shame he awoke, and lay awake a little, hearkening the wind going through the woodland boughs, and the singing of the owl who had her dwelling in the hollow oak nigh to his house. Slumber overcame him in a little while, and again the image of the King’s daughter came to him in his dream, and again when he looked upon her, shame and pity rose so hotly in his heart that he awoke weeping, and lay a while hearkening to the noises of the night. The third time he slept and dreamed; and once more that image came to him. And now he looked, and saw that she had in her hand a book covered outside with gold and gems, even as he saw it in the orchard-close aforesaid: and he beheld her face that it was no longer the face of one sick with sorrow; but glad and clear, and most beauteous.

Now she opened the book and held it before Hallblithe and turned the leaves so
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that he might see them clearly; and therein were woods and castles painted, and burning mountains, and the wall of the world, and kings upon their thrones, and fair women and warriors, all most lovely to behold, even as he had seen it aforesaid in the orchard when he lay lurking amidst the leaves of the bay-tree.

So at last she came to the place in the book wherein was painted Hallblithe's own image over against the image of the Hostage; and he looked thereon and longed. But she turned the leaf, and, lo! on one side the Hostage again, 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; and on the other leaf over against her was painted a sea rippled by a little wind and a boat thereon sailing swiftly, and one man alone in the boat sitting and steering with a cheerful countenance; and he, who but Hallblithe himself.

Hallblithe looked thereon for a while and then the King's daughter shut the book, and the dream flowed into other imaginings of no import.

In the grey dawn Hallblithe awoke, and called to mind his dream, and he leapt from his bed and washed the night from off him in the stream, and clad himself and went the shortest way through the wood to that House of folk aforesaid: and as he went his face was bright and he sang the second part of the carven posy; to wit:—

Along the grass I lie forlorn
That when a while of time is worn,
I may be filled with war and peace
And bridge the sundering of the seas.

He came out of the wood and hastened over the flowery meads of the Glittering Plain, and came to that same house when it was yet very early. At the door he came across a damsel bearing water from the well, and she spake to him and said: "Welcome, Wood-lover! Seldom art thou seen in our garth; and that is a pity of thee. And now I look on thine face I see that gladness hath come into thine heart, and that thou art most fair and lovely. Here then is a token for thee of the increase of gladness." Therewith she set her buckets on the earth, and stood before him, and took him by the ears, and drew down his face to hers and kissed him sweetly. He smiled on her and said: "I thank thee, sister, for the kiss and the greeting; but I come here having a lack."

"Tell us," she said, "that we may do thee a pleasure."

He said, "I would ask the folk to give me timber, both beams and battens and boards; for if I hew in the wood it will take long to season."

"All this is free for thee to take from our wood-store when thou hast broken thy fast with us," said the damsel. "Come thou in and rest thee."

She took him by the hand and they went in together, and she gave him to eat and drink, and went up and down the house saying to every one: "Here is come the Wood-lover, and he is glad again; come and see him."

So the folk gathered about him, and made much of him. And when they had made an end of breakfast, the head man of the House said to him: "The beasts are in the wain, and the timber abideth thy choosing; come and see." So he brought Hallblithe to the timber-bower, where he chose for himself all that he needed of oak-timber of the best; and they loaded the wain therewith, and gave him what he would moreover of nails and tree-nails and other matters; and he thanked them; and they said to him: "Whither now shall we lead thy timber?"

"Down to the sea-side," quoth he, "nighest to my dwelling."

So did they, and more than a score, men and women, went with him, some in the wain, and some afoot. Thus they came down to the sea-shore, and laid the timber on the strand just above high-water mark; and straightway Hallblithe fell to work shaping him a boat, for well he knew the whole craft thereof; and the folk looked on wondering till the tide had ebbed the little it was wont to ebb, and left the moist sand firm and smooth; then the women left watching Hallblithe's work, and fell to paddling barefoot in the clear water, for there was scarce a ripple on the sea; and the carles came and played with them so that Hallblithe was left alone a while; for this kind of play was new to that folk, since they seldom came down to the sea-side.

Thereafter they needs must dance together, and would have had Hallblithe dance with them; and when he naysaid them because he was fain of his work, in all playfulness they fell to taking the adze from out his hand, whereat he became somewhat wroth, and they were afraid and went and had their dance out without him.

By this time the sun was grown very hot, and they came to him again, and lay
down about him and watched his work, for they were weary. And one of the women, still panting with the dance, spake as she looked on the loveliness of her limbs, which one of the swains was caressing: “Brother,” said she, “great strokes thou smittest; when wilt thou have smitten the last of them, and come to our house again?”

“Not for many days, fair sister,” said he, without looking up.

“Alas that thou shouldst talk so,” said a carle, rising up from the warm sand; “what shall all thy toil win thee?”

Spake Hallblithe: “Maybe a merry heart, or maybe death.”

At that word they all rose up together, and stood huddled together like sheep that have been driven to the croft-gate, and the shepherd hath left them for a little and they know not whither to go. Little by little they got them to the wain and harnessed their beasts thereto, and departed silently by the way that they had come; but in a little time Hallblithe heard their laughter and merry speech across the flowery meadows. He heeded their departure little, but went on working, and worked the sun down, and on till the stars began to twinkle. Then he went home to his house in the wood, and slept and dreamed not, and began again on the morrow with a sound heart.

To be short, no day passed that he wrought not his full tale of work, and the days wore, and his shipwright's work throve. Often the folk of that house, and from otherwhere round about, came down to the strand to watch him working. Nowise did they wilfully hinder him, but whiles when they could get no talk from him, they would speak of him to each other gravely, wondering that he should so toil to sail upon the sea; for they loved the sea but little, and it soon became clear to them that he was looking to nought else: though it may not be said that they deemed he would leave the land for ever. On the other hand, if they hindered him not, neither did they help, saving when he prayed them for somewhat which he needed, which they would then give him blithely.

Of the Sea-eagle and his damsel, Hallblithe saw nought; whereat he was well-content, for he deemed it of no avail to make a second sundering of it.

So he worked and kept his heart up, and at last all was ready; he had made him a mast and a sail, and oars, and whatso-other gear there was need of. So then he thrust his skiff into the sea on an evening whenas there were but two carles standing by; for there would often be a score or two of folk. These two smiled on him and bespake him kindly, but would not help him when he bade them set shoulder to her bows and shove. Albeit he got the skiff into the water without much ado, and got into her, and brought her to where a stream running from out of his wood made a little haven for her up from the sea. There he tied her to a tree bole, and busied himself that even with getting the gear into her, and victual and water withal as much as he deemed he should need: and so, being weary, he went to his house to sleep, thinking that he should awake in the grey of the morning and thrust out into the deep sea. And he was the more content to abide, because on that eve, as oftest betid, the wind blew landward from the sea, whereas in the morning it oftest blew seaward from the land. In any case he thought to be astir so timely that he should come alone to his keel, and depart with no leave-takings. But, as it fell out, he overslept himself, so that when he came out into the wood clad in all his armour, with his sword girt to his side, and his spear over his shoulder, he heard the voices of folk, and presently found so many gathered about his boat that he had some ado to get aboard.

The folk had brought many gifts for him of such things as they deemed he might need for a short voyage, as fruit and wine, and woollen cloths to keep the cold night from him; he thanked them kindly as he stepped over the gunwale, and some of the women kissed him: and one said (she it was who had met him at the stead that morning when he went to fetch timber): “Thou wilt be back this even, wilt thou not, brother? It is yet but early, and thou shalt have time enough to take all thy pleasure on the sea, and then come back to us to eat thy meat in our house at nightfall.”

She spake, knitting her brows in longing for his return; but he knew that all those deemed he would come back again soon; else had they deemed him a rebel of the King, and might, as he thought, have stayed him. So he changed not countenance in any wise, but said only: “Farewell, sister, for this day, and farewell to all you till I come back.”

Therewith he unmoored his boat, and sat down and took the oars, and rowed till he was out of the little haven, and on the green sea, and the keel rose and fell on the waves. Then he stepped the mast and hoisted sail, and sheeted home, for the morning
wind was blowing gently from the mountains over the meadows of the Glittering Plain, so the sail filled, and the keel leapt forward and sped over the face of the cold sea. And it is to be said that whether he wotted or not, it was the very day twelve months since he had come to that shore along with the Sea-eagle. So that folk stood and watched the skiff growing less and less upon the deep till they could scarce see her. Then they turned about and went into the wood to disport them, for the sun was growing hot. Nevertheless, there were some of them (and that damsel was one), who came back to the sea-shore from time to time all day long; and even when the sun was down they looked seaward under the rising moon, expecting to see Hallblithe's bark come into the shining path which she drew across the waters round about the Glittering Land.

CHAPTER XX.

HALLBLITHE SAILETH AWAY FROM THE GLITTERING PLAIN.

But as to Hallblithe, he soon lost sight of the Glittering Plain and the mountains thereof, and there was nought but sea all round about him, and his heart swelled with joy as he sniffed the brine and watched the gleaming hills and valleys of the restless deep; and he said to himself that he was going home to his kindred and the roof of his fathers of old time.

He stood as near due north as he might; but as the day wore, the wind headed him, and he deemed it not well to beat, lest he should make his voyage overlong; so he ran on with the wind abeam, and his little craft leapt merrily over the sea-hills under the freshening breeze. The sun set and the moon and stars shone out, and he still sailed on, and durst not sleep, save as a dog does, with one eye. At last came dawn, and as the light grew, it was a fair day with a falling wind, and a bright sky, but it clouded over before sunset and the wind freshened from the north by east, and, would he, would he not, Hallblithe must run before it night-long, till at sunrise it fell again, and all day was too light for him to make much way beating to northward; nor did it freshen till after the moon was risen some while after sunset. And now he was so weary that he must needs sleep; so he lashed the helm, and took a reef in the sail, and ran before the wind, he sleeping in the stern.

But past the middle of the night, towards the dawning, he awoke with the sound of a great shout in his ears. So he looked over the dark waters, and saw nought, for the night was cloudy again. Then he trimmed his craft, and went to sleep again, for he was overburdened with slumber.

When he awoke it was broad daylight; so he looked to the tiller and got the boat's head a little up to the wind, and then gazed about him with the sleep still in his eyes. And as his eyes took in the picture before him he could not refrain a cry; for lo! there arose up great and grim right ahead the black cliffs of the Isle of Ransom. Straightway he got to the sheet, and strove to wear the boat; but for all that he could do she drifted toward the land, for she was gotten into a strong current of the sea that set shoreward. So he struck sail, and took the oars and rowed mightily so that he might bear her off shore; but it availed nothing, and still he drifted landward. So he stood up from the oars, and turned about and looked and saw that he was but some three furlongs from the shore, and that he was come to the very haven-mouth whence he had set sail with the Sea-eagle a twelvemonth ago: and he knew that into that haven he needs must get him, or be dashed to pieces against the high cliffs of the land; and he saw how the waves ran on to the cliffs, and whiles one higher than the others smote the rock-wall and ran up it, as if it could climb over on to the grassy lip beyond, and then fell back again leaving a river of brine running down the steep. Then he said that he would take what might befall him inside the haven. So he hoisted sail again, and took the tiller, and steered right for the midst of the gate between the rocks, wondering what should await him there. Then it was but a few minutes ere his bark shot into the smoothness of the haven, and presently began to lose way; for all the wind was dead within that land-locked water.

Hallblithe looked steadfastly round about seeking his foe; but the haven was empty of ship or boat; so he ran his eye along the shore to see where he should best lay his keel; and as aforesaid there was no beach there, and the water was deep right up to the grassy lip of the land; though the tides ran somewhat high, and at low water would a little steep undercliff go up from the face of the sea. But now it was near
the top of the tide, and there was scarce two feet betwixt the grass and the dark-green sea. Now Halblithe steered toward an ingle of the haven; and beyond it, a little way off, rose a reef of rocks out of the green grass, and thereby was a flock of sheep feeding, and a big man lying down amongst them, who seemed to be unarmed, as Halblithe could not see any glint of steel about him. Halblithe drew nigh the shore, and the big man stirred not; nor did he any the more when the keel ran along the shore, and Halblithe leapt out and moored his craft to his spear stuck deep in the earth. And now Halblithe deems that the man must be either dead or asleep: so he drew his sword and had it in his right hand, and in his left a sharp knife, and went straight up to the man betwixt the sheep, and found him so lying on his side that he could not see his face; so he stirred him with his foot, and cried out: "Awake, O shepherd! For dawn is long past and darkness come, and therewithal a guest for thee!"

The man turned over and slowly sat up, and, lo! who should it be but the Puny Fox? Halblithe started back at the sight of him, and cried out at him and said: "Have I found thee, O mine enemy?"

The Puny Fox sat up a little straighter, and rubbed his eyes and said: "Yea, thou hast found me sure enough. But as to my being, thine enemy, a word or two may be said about that presently."

"What!" said Halblithe, "dost thou deem that aught save my sword will speak to thee?"

"I wot not," said the Puny Fox, slowly rising to his feet, "but I suppose thou wilt not slay me unarmed, and thou seest that I have no weapons."

"Get thee weapons then," quoth Halblithe, "and delay not; for the sight of thee alive sickens me."

"I'll is that," said the Puny Fox, "but come thou with me at once, where I shall find both the weapons and a good fighting-stead. Hasten! time presseth, now thou art come at last."

"And my boat?" said Halblithe.

"Wilt thou carry her in thy pouch?" said the Puny Fox; "thou wilt not need her again, whether thou slay me, or I thee."

Halblithe knit his brows on him in his wrath; for he deemed it ill to wrangle in words with one whom he was presently to meet in battle: so he followed as the Puny Fox led. Fox brought him past the reef of rock aforesaid, and up a narrow cleft of the cliffs overlooking the sea, whereby they came into a little grass-grown meadow well nigh round in shape, as smooth and level as a hall-floor, and fenced about by a wall of rock: a place which had once been the mouth of an earth-fire, and a caldron of molten stone.

When they stood on the smooth grass Fox said: "Hold there a little, while I go to my weapon-chest, and then shall we see what is to be done."

Therewith he turned aside to a cranny of the rock, and going down on his hands and knees, fell to creeping like a worm up a hole therein, which belike led to a cavern; for after his voice had come forth from the earth, grunting and groaning and cursing this thing, and that, out he comes again feet first, and casts down an old rusty sword without a sheath; a helm no less rusty and battered withal, and a round target, curled up and outworn as if it would fall to pieces of itself. Then he stands up and stretches himself, and smiles pleasantly on Halblithe and says: "Now, mine enemy, when I have donned helm and shield and got my sword in hand, we may begin the play: as to a hauberk I must needs go lack; for I could not come by it; I think the old man must have chaffered it away: he was ever too money-fain."

But Halblithe looked on him angrily and said: "Hast thou brought me hither to mock me? Hast thou no better weapons wherewith to meet a warrior of the Raven than these rusty shards, which look as if thou hadst robbed a grave of the dead? I will not fight thee so armed."

"Well," said the Puny Fox, "and from out of a grave come they verily: for in that little hole lieth my father's grandsire, the Great Sea-mew of the Ravagers, the father of that Sea-eagle whom thou knowest. But since thou thinkest scorn of these weapons of a dead warrior, in go the old carle's treasures again! It is as well maybe; since he might be wrath beyond his wont if he were to wake and miss them; and already this cold cup of the once-boiling rock is not wholly safe because of him."

So he crept into the hole once more, and out of it presently, and stood smiting his
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palms one against the other to dust them, like a man who has been handling parchments long laid by; and Hallbithe stood looking at him, still wrathful, but silent. Then said the Puny Fox: "This at least was a wise word of thine, that thou wouldst not fight me. For the end of fighting is slaying; and it is stark folly to fight without slaying; and now I see that thou desirrest not to slay me: for if thou didst, why didst thou refuse to fall on me armed with the ghosts of weapons that I borrowed from a ghost? Nay, why dost thou not slay me as I crept out of yonder hole? Thou wouldst have had a cheap gain of me either way. It would be rank folly to fight me."

Said Hallbithe hoarsely: "Why didst thou bearray me, and tie to me, and lure me away from the quest of my beloved, and waste a whole year of my life?"

"It is a long story," said the Puny Fox, "which I may tell thee some day. Meantime I may tell thee this, that I was compelled thereto by one far mightier than I, the Undying King."

At that word the smouldering wrath blazed up in Hallbithe, and he drew his sword hastily and hewed at the Puny Fox: but he left aside nimbly and ran in on Hallbithe, and caught his sword-arm by the wrist, and tore the weapon out of his hand, and overbore him by sheer weight and stature, and drove him to the earth. Then he rose up, and let Hallbithe rise also, and took his sword and gave it into his hand again and said: "Crag-nester, thou art wrathful, but little. Now thou hast thy sword again and mayst slay me if thou wilt. Yet not until I have spoken a word to thee: so hearken or else by the Treasure of the sea I will slay thee with my bare hands. For I am strong indeed in this place with my old kinsman beside me. Wilt thou hearken?"

"Speak," said Hallbithe, "I hearken."

Said the Puny Fox: "True it is that I lured thee away from thy quest, and wore away a year of thy life. Yet true it is also that I repent me thereof, and ask thy pardon. What sayest thou?"

Hallbithe spake not; but the heat died out of his face and he was become somewhat pale. Said the Puny Fox: "Dost thou not remember, O Raven, how thou besadest me battle last year on the sea-shore by the side of the Rollers of the Raven? and how this was to be the prize of battle, that the vanquished should serve the vanquisher year-long, and do all his will? And now this prize and more thou hast won without battle; for I swear by the treasure of the sea, and by the bones of the great Sea-Mew yonder that I will serve thee not year-long but life-long, and that I will help thee in thy quest for thy beloved. What sayest thou?"

Hallbithe stood speechless a moment, looking past the Puny Fox, rather than at him. Then the sword tumbled out of his hand on to the grass, and great tears rolled down his cheeks and fell on to his raiment, and he reached out his hand to the Puny Fox and said: "O friend, wilt thou not bring me to her? for the days wear, and the trees are growing old round about the Acres of the Raven."

Then the Puny Fox took his hand, and laughed merrily in his face, and said: "Great is thine heart, O Carrion-biter! But now that thou art my friend I will tell thee that I have a deeming of the whereabouts of thy beloved or where deemest thou was the garden wherein thou sawest her standing on the page of the book in that dream of the night? So it is, O Raven-son, that it is not for nothing that my grandsire's father lieth in yonder hole of the rocks; for of late he hath made me wise in mighty lore. Thanks have thou, O kinsman!" And he turned him toward the rock wherein was the grave.

But Hallbithe said: "What is to do now? Am I not in a land of foemen?"

"Yea, forsooth," said the Puny Fox, "and even if thou knewest where thy love is, thou shouldst hardly escape from this isle unslain, save for me."

Said Hallbithe: "Is there not my bark, that I might depart at once? for I deem not that the Hostage is on the Isle of Ransom."

The Puny Fox laughed boisterously and said: "Nay, she is not. But as to thy boat, there is so strong a set of the flood-tide toward this end of the isle, that with the wind blowing as now, from the north-north-east, thou mayst not get off the shore for four hours at least; and I misdoubt me that within that time we shall have tidings of a ship of ours coming into the haven. Thy bark they shall take, and thee also if thou art therein; and then soon were the story told, for they know thee for a rebel of the Undying King. Hearken! Dost thou not hear the horn's voice? Come up hither and we shall see what is towards."

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So saying he led hastily up a kind of stair in the rock-wall, until they reached a cranny whence through a hole in the cliff they could see all over the haven. And lo! as they looked, in the very gate and entry of it came a great ship heaving up her bows on the last swell of the outer sea (where the wind had risen somewhat), and rolling into the smooth, land-locked water. Black was her sail, and the image of the Sea-eagle enwrought thereon spread wide over it; and the banner of the Flaming Sword streamed out from the stern. Many men all weaponed were on the decks, and the minstrels high up on the poop were blowing a merry song of return on their battle-horns.

"Lo, you," said the Puny Fox, "thy luck or mine hath served thee this time, in that the Flaming Sword did not over haul thee ere thou madest the haven. We are well here at least."

Said Hallblithe: "But may not some of them come up hither perchance?"

"Nay, nay," said the Puny Fox; "they fear the old man in the cleft yonder; for he is not over guest-fain. This mead is mine own, as for other living men; it is my unroofed house, and I have here a house with a roof also, which I will show thee presently. For now since the Flaming Sword hath come, there is no need for haste; nay, we cannot depart till they have gone up-country. So I will show thee presently what we shall do to-night."

So there they sat and watched those men bring their ship to the shore and moor her harbours Hallblithe's boat. They tied out when they saw her, and when they were aland they gathered about her to note her build, and the fashion of the spear whereto she was tied. Then in a while the more part of them, some four-score in number, departed up the valley toward the great house and left none but a half dozen ship warders behind.

"Seest thou, friend of the Ravens," said the Fox, "hadst thou been there, they might have done with thee what they would. Did I not well to bring thee into my unroofed house?"

"Yea verily," said Hallblithe; "but will not some of the ship-wards, or some of the others returning, come up hither and find us? I shall yet lay my bones in this evil island."

The Puny Fox laughed, and said: "It is not so bad as thy sour looks would have it; anyhow it is good enough for a grave, and at this present I may call it a casket of precious things."

"What meanest thou?" said Hallblithe eagerly.

"Nay, nay," said the other, "nought but what thou knowest. Art thou not therein—a? and I myself? without reckoning the old carle in the hole yonder. But I promise thee thou shalt not die here this time, unless thou wilt. And as to folk coming up hither, I tell thee again they durst not; because they fear my great-grand sire over much. Not that they are far wrong therein; for now he is dead, the worst of him seemeth to come out of him, and he is not easily dealt with, save by one who hath some share of his wisdom. Thou thyself couldst see by my kinsman, the Sea-eagle, how much of ill and churlish malice there may be in our kindred when they wax old, and loneliness and dreariness taketh hold of them. For I must tell thee that I have oft heard my father say that his father the Sea-eagle was in his youth and his prime blithe and buxom, a great lover of women, and a very friendly fellow. But ever, as I say, as the men of our kind wax in years, they worsen; and thereby mayst thou deem how bad the old man in yonder must be, since he hath lain so long in the grave. But now we will go to that house of mine on the other side of the mead, over against my kinsman's."

Therewith he led Hallblithe down from the rock, while Hallblithe said to him: "What! art thou also dead that thou hast a grave here?"

"Nay, nay," said Fox, smiling, "am I so evil-conditioned then? I am no older than thou art."

"But tell me," said Hallblithe, "wilt thou also wax evil as thou growest old?"

"Maybe not," said Fox, looking hard at him, "for in my mind it is that I may be taken into another house, and another kindred, and amongst them I shall be healed of much that might turn to ill."

Therewith were they come across the little meadow to a place where was a cave in the rock closed with a door, and a wicket window therein. Fox led Hallblithe into it, and within, it was no ill dwelling; for it was dry and clean, and there were stools
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therein and a table, and shelves and lockers in the wall. When they had sat them down Fox said:

"Here mightst thou dwell safely as long as thou wouldest, if thou wouldest risk the dealings with the old carle. But, as I wot well that thou art in haste to be gone and get home to thy kindred, I must bring thee at dusk to-day close up to our feast-hall, so that thou mayst be at hand to do what hath to be done to-night, so that we may get us gone to-morrow. Also thou must do off thy Raven gear lest we meet any in the twilight as we go up to the house; and here have I to hand home-spun raiment such as our war-taken thralls wear, which shall serve thy turn well enough; but this thou needest not do on till the time is at hand for our departure; and then I will bring thee away, and bestow thee in a bower hard by the hall; and when thou art within, I may so look to it that none shall go in there, or if they do, they shall see nought in thee save a carle known to them by name. My kinsman hath learned me to do harder things than this. But now it is time to eat and drink."

Therewith he drew victual from out a locker and they fell to. But when they had eaten, Fox taught Hallblithe what he should do in the hall that night, as shall be told hereafter. And then, with much talk about many things, they wore away the day in that ancient cup of the seething rock, and a little before dusk set out for the hall, bearing with them Hallblithe's gear bundled up together, as though it had been wares from over sea. So they came to the house before the tables were set, and the Puny Fox bestowed Hallblithe in a bower which gave into the buttery, so that it was easy to go straight into the midst of the hall. There was Hallblithe clad and armed in his Raven gear; but Fox gave him a vizard to go over his face, so that none might know him when he entered therein.

CHAPTER XXI.

OF THE CHAMPIONS IN THE HALL OF THE RAVAGERS.

Now it is to be told that the chieftains came into the hall that night and sat down at the board on the dais, even as Hallblithe had seen them do aforetime. And the chieftain of all, who was called the Erne of the Sea-eagles, rose up according to custom and said: "Hearken, folk! this is a night of the champions, whereon we may not eat till the pale blades have clashed together, and one hath vanquished and another been overcome. Now let them stand forth and give out the prize of victory which the vanquished shall pay to the vanquisher. And let it be known, that, whosoever may be the champion that winneth the battle, whether he be a kinsman, or an alien, or a foeman declared; yea, though he have left the head of my brother at the hall-door, he shall pass this night with us safe from sword, safe from axe, safe from hand: he shall eat as we eat, drink as we drink, sleep as we sleep, and depart safe from any hand or weapon, and shall sail the sea at his pleasure in his own keel or in ours, as to him and us may be meet. Blow up horns for the champions!"

So the horns blew a cheerful strain, and when they were done, there came into the hall a tall man clad in black, and with black armour and weapons saving the white blade of his sword. He had a vizard over his face, but his hair came down from under his helm like the tail of a red horse.

So he stood amidst the floor and cried out: "I am the champion of the Ravagers. But I swear by the treasure of the sea that I will cross no blade to-night save with an alien, a foeman of the kindred. Hearest thou, O chieftain, O Erne of the Sea-eagles?"

"Hear it I do," said the chieftain, "and I deem that thy meaning is that we should go supperless to bed; and this cometh of thy perversity: for we know thee despite thy vizard. Belike thou deemest that thou shalt not be met this even, and that there is no free alien in the island to draw sword against thee. But beware! For when we came aland this morning we found a skiff of the aliens tied to a great spear stuck in the bank of the haven; so that there will be one foeman at least abroad in the island. But we said that if we should come on the man, we would set his head on the gable of the hall with the mouth open toward the North for a token of reproach to the dwellers in the land over sea. But now give out the prize of victory, and I swear by the treasure of the sea that we will abide by thy word."
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Said the champion: "These are the terms and conditions of the battle; that whichever of us is vanquished, he shall either die, or serve the vanquisher for twelve moons, to fare with him at his will, to go his errands, and do according to his commandment in all wise. Hearkest thou, chieftain?"

"Yea," said he, "and by the Undying King, both thou and we shall abide by this bargain. So look to it that thou smite great strokes, lest our hall lack a gable-knop. Horns, blow up for the alien champion!"

So again the horns were winded; and ere their voice had died, in from the buttery screens came a glittering image of war, and there stood the alien champion over against the warrior of the sea; and he too had a wizard over his face.

Now when the folk saw him, and how slim and light and small he looked beside their champion, and they beheld the Raven painted on his white shield, they hooted and laughed for scorn of him and his littleness.

But he tossed his sword up lightly and caught it by the hilts as it fell, and drew nigher to the champion of the sea and stood facing him within reach of his sword. Then the chieftain on the high-seat put his two hands to his mouth and roared out: "Fall on, ye champions, fall on!"

But the folk in the hall were so eager that they stood on the benches and the boards, and craned over each other's shoulders, so that they might lose no whit of the hand-play. Now flashed the blades in the candle-lit hall, and the red-haired champion hove up his sword and smote two great strokes to right and to left; but the alien gave way before him, and the folk cried out at him in scorn and in joy of their champion, who fell to raining down great strokes like the hail amidst the lightning. But so deft was the alien, that he stood amidst it unhurt, and laid many strokes on his foe, and did all so lightly and easily, that it seemed as if he were dancing rather than fighting; and the folk held their peace and began to doubt if their huge champion would prevail.

Now the red-haired fetched a mighty stroke at the alien, who leapt aside lightly and got his sword in his left hand and dealt a great stroke on the other's head, and the red-haired staggered, for he had over-reached himself; and again the alien smote him a left-handed stroke so that he fell full length on the floor with a mighty clatter, and the sword flew out of his hand: and the folk were dumb-foundered.

Then the alien threw himself on the sea-champion, and knelt upon him, and shortened his sword as if to slay him with a thrust. But thereon the alien overthrown cried out: "Hold thine hand, for I am vanquished! Now give me peace according to the bargain struck between us, that I shall serve thee year-long, and follow thee wheresoever thou goest."

Therewith the alien champion arose and stood off from him, and the man of the sea got to his feet, and did off his helm, so that all men could see that he was the Puiny Fox.

Then the victorious champion unhelmed himself, and lo, it was Hallblithe! And a shout arose in the hall, part of wonder, part of wrath.

Then cried out the Puiny Fox: "I call on all men here to bear witness that by reason of this battle Hallblithe of the Ravens is free to come and go as he will in the Isle of Ransom, and to take help of any man that will help him, and 'o depart from the isle when he will and how he will, taking me with him if so he will."

Said the chieftain: "Yea, this is right and due, and so shall it be. But now, since no freeman, who is not a foe of the passing hour, may abide in our hall without eating of our meat, come up here, Hallblithe, and sit by me, and eat and drink of the best we have, since the Norns would not give us thine head for a gable-knop. But what wilt thou do with thy thrall the Puiny Fox; and whereto in the hall wilt thou have him shown? Or wilt thou that he sit fasting in the darkness to-night, laid in gyves and fetters. Or shall he have the cheer of whipping and stripes, as befiteth a thrall to whom the master oweth a grudge? What is thy will with him?"

Said Hallblithe: "My will is that thou give him a seat next to me, whether that be high or low, or the bench of thy prison-house. That he eat of my dish, and drink of my cup, whatsoever the meat and drink may be. For to-morrow I mean that we twain shall go under the earth-collar together, and that our blood shall run together and that we shall be brothers in arms henceforward." Then Hallblithe did on his helm again and drew his sword, and looked aside to the Puiny Fox to bid him do the like, and he did so, and Hallblithe said: "Chieftain, thou hast hidden me to table, and I thank thee; but I will not set my teeth in meat,
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out of our own house and land, which hath not been truly given to me by one who wotteth of me, unless I have conquered it as a prey of battle; neither will I cast a lie into the loving-cup which shall pass from thy lips to mine: therefore I will tell thee, that though I laid a stroke or two on the Puny Fox, and those no light ones, yet was this battle nought true and real, but a mere beguiling, even as that which I saw foughten in this hall aforesight, when meseemeth the slain men rose up again in time to drink the good-night cup. Therefore, O men of the Ravagers, and thou, O Puny Fox, there is nought to bind your hands and restrain your hearts, and ye may slay me if ye will without murder or dishonour, and may make of the head of Hallblithe a knob for your feast-hall. Yet shall one or two fall to earth before I fall."

Therewith he shook his sword aloft, and a great roar arose, and weapons came down from the wall, and the candles shone on naked steel. But the Puny Fox came and stood by Hallblithe, and spake in his ear amidst the uproar: "Well now, brother-in-arms, I have been trying to learn thee the lore of lies, and surely thou art the worst scholar who was ever smitten by master. And the outcome of it is that I, who have lied so long and well, must now pay for all and die for a barren truth."

Said Hallblithe: "Let all be as it will! I love thee, lies and all; but as for me I cannot handle them. Lo you! great and grim shall be the slaying, and we shall not fall unavenged."

Said the Puny Fox: "Hearken! for still they hang back. Belike it is I that have drawn this death on thee and me. My last lie was a fool's lie and we die for it: for what wouldst thou have done hast thou wotted that thy beloved, the Hostage of the Rose—" He broke off perforce; for Hallblithe was looking to right and left and handling his sword, and heard not that last word of his; and from both sides of the hall the throng was drawing round about those twain, weapon in hand. Then Hallblithe set his eyes on a big man in front who was heaving up a heavy short-sword and thought that he would at least slay this one. But or ever he might smite, the great horn blared out over the tumult, and men forbore a while and fell somewhat silent.

Then came down to them the voice of the chieftain, a loud voice, but clear and with mirth mingled with anger in it, and he said: "What do these fools of the Ravagersumbering the floor of the feast-hall, and shaking weapons when there is no foe man anigh? Are they dreaming-drunk before the wine is poured? Why do they not sit down in their places, and abide the bringing in of the meat? And ye women, where are ye, why do ye delay our meat, when ye may well wot that our hearts are drooping for hunger; and all hath been duly done, the battle of the champions fought and won, and the prize of war given forth and taken? How long, O folk, shall your chieftains sit fasting?"

Then arose great laughter in the hall, and men withdrew them from those twain and went and sat them down in their places.

Then the chieftain said: "Come up hither, I say, O Hallblithe, and bring thy war-thrall with thee if thou may. But delay not, unless it be so that thou art neither hungry nor thirsty; and good sooth thou shouldst be both; for men say that the ravens are hard to satisfy. Come then and make good cheer with us!"

So Hallblithe thrust his sword into the sheath, and the Puny Fox did the like, and they went both together up the hall to the high-seat. And Hallblithe sat down on the chieftain's right hand, and the Puny Fox next to him; and the chieftain, the Erne, said: "O Hallblithe, dost thou need thine armour at table; or dost thou find it handy to take thy meat clad in thy byrny and girt with a sword?"

Then laughed Hallblithe and said: "Nay, meseemeth to-night I shall need war-gear no more." And he stood up and did off all his armour and gave it, sword and all, into the hands of a woman, who bore it off, he knew not whither. And the Erne looked on him and said: "Well is that! and now I see that thou art a fair young man, and it is no marvel though maidens desire thee."

As he spake came in the damsels with the victual, and the cheer was exceeding good, and Hallblithe grew light-hearted.

But when the healths had been drunk as aforesight, and men had drunk a cup or two thereafter, there rose a warrior from one of the endlong benches, a big young man, black-haired and black-bearded, ruddy of visage, and he said in a voice that was rough and fat: "O Erne, and ye other chieftains, we have been talking here at our table concerning this guest of thine who hath beguiled us, and we are not wholly at one
with thee as to thy dealings with him. True it is, now that the man hath our meat in his belly, that he must depart from amongst us with a whole skin, unless of his own will he stand up to fight some man of us here. Yet some of us think that he is not so much our friend that we should help him to a keel whereon to fare home to those that hate us; and we say that it would not be unlawful to let the man abide in the isle, and proclaim him a wolf’s-head within a half-moon of to-day. Or what sayest thou?

Said the Erne: “Wait for my word a while, and hearken to another! Is the Grey-goose of the Ravagers in the hall? Let him give out his word on this matter.”

Then arose a white-headed earle from a table nigh to the dais, whose black raiment was well adorned with gold. Despite his years his face was fair and little wrinkled; a man with a straight nose and a well-fashioned mouth, and with eyes still bright and grey. He spake: “O folk, I find that the Erne hath done well in cherishing this guest. For first, if he hath beguiled us, he did it not save by the furtherance and sleight of our own kinsman; therefore if any one is to die for beguiling us, let it be the Puny Fox.

“Secondly, we may well wot that heavy need hath driven the man to this beguilement; and I say that it was no unmanly deed for him to enter our hall and beguile us with his sleight; and that he hath played out the play right well and cunningly with the wisdom of a warrior.

“Thirdly, the manliness of him is well proven, in that having overcame us in sleight, he hath spoken out the sooth concerning our beguilement; and hath made himself our foeman and captive when he might have sat down by us as our guest freely and in all honour. And this he did, not as contemning the Puny Fox and his lies and crafty wiles (for he hath told us that he loveth him); but so that he might show himself a man in that which trieth manhood.

“Moreover, 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. Therefore I naysay the word of the War-brand that we should make this man a wolf’s-head; for in so doing we shall show ourselves lesser-hearted than he is, and of no account beside of him; and his head on our hall-gable should be to us a nithing-stake, and a tree of reproach. So I bid thee, O Erne, to make much of this man; and thou shalt do well to give him worthy gifts, such as warriors may take, so that he may show them at home in the House of the Raven, that it may be the beginning of peace betwixt us and his noble kindred. This is my say, and later on I shall wax no wiser.”

Therewith he sat down, and there arose a murmur and stir in the hall; but the more part said that the Grey-goose had spoken well, and that it was good to be at peace with such manly fellows as the new guest was.

But the Erne said: “One word will I lay hereto, to wit, that he who desireth mine enmity let him do scathe to Hallblithe of the Ravens and hinder him.” Then he bade fill round the cups, and called a health to Hallblithe, and all men drank to him, and there was much joyance and merriment.

But when the night was well worn the Erne turned to Hallblithe and said: “That was a good word of the Grey-goose which he spake concerning the giving of gifts: Raven-son, wilt thou take a gift of me and be my friend?”

“Thy friend will I be,” said Hallblithe, “but no gift will I take of thee or any other till I have the gift of gifts, and that is my troth-plight maiden. I will not be glad till I can be glad with her.”

Then laughed the Erne, and the Puny Fox grinned all across his wide face, and Hallblithe looked from one to the other of them and wondered at their mirth, and when they saw his wondering eyes, they did but laugh the more; and the Erne said: “Nevertheless, thou shalt see the gift which I would give thee; and then mayst thou take it or leave it as thou wilt. Ho ye! bring in the throne of the Eastland with them that minister to it!”

Certain men left the hall as he spake, and came back bearing with them a throne fashioned most goodly of ivory, parcel-gilt, and begemmed and adorned with marvellous craftsmanship; and they set it down amidst of the hall-floor and went aback to their places, while the Erne sat and smiled kindly on the folk and on Hallblithe. Then arose the sound of fiddles and the lesser harp, and the doors of the screen were opened, and there flowed into the hall a company of fair damsels not less than a score, each one
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with a rose on her bosom, and they came and stood in order behind the throne of the Eastlands, and they strewed roses on the ground before them: and when they were duly ranged they fell to singing:

Now waneth spring, To and fro
While all birds sing, By the doors we know,
And the south wind blows And the scented gale
The earliest rose Fills every dale.

Slow now are brooks running because of the weed,
And the thrush hath no cunning to hide her at need,
So swift as she fleeth from hedgerow to tree,
As one that toil trieth, and deedful must be.

And O! that at last, O, to wake from sleep,
All sorrows past, To see dawn creep
This night I lay Through the fruitful grove
'Neath the oak-beams grey! Of the house that I love!

O! my feet to be treading the threshold once more,
O'er which once went the leading of swords to the war!
O! my feet in the garden's edge under the sun,
Where the seeding grass hardens for hayesel begun!

Lo, lo! the wind blows But O for the keel
To the heart of the Rose, The sails to feel!
And the ship lies tied And the rocky ness
To the haven side! Growing less and less!

As down the wind driveth and thrusts through the sea
The sail-burg that striveth to turn and go free,
But the lads at the tiller they hold her in hand,
And the wind our well-willer drifts fierce to the land.

We shall wend it yet, What lieth sweet
The highway wet; Before our feet?
For what is this What token hath come
That our bosoms kiss? To lead us home?

'Tis the Rose of the garden walled round from the croft
Where the grey roof its warden steep riseth aloft,
'Tis the Rose neath the oaken-beamed hall, where they bide
The pledges unbroken, the hand of the bride.

Hallblithe heard the song, and half thought it promised him somewhat; but then he had so been misled and mocked at, that he scarce knew how to rejoice at it.

Now the Erne spake: "Wilt thou not take the chair and these dainty song-birds that stand about it? Much wealth might come into thine hall if thou wert to carry them over sea to rich men who have no kindred, nor affinity wherein to wed, but who love women as well as other men."

Said Hallblithe: "I have wealth enow were I once home again. As to these maidens, I know by the fashion of them that they are no women of the Rose, as by their song they should be. Yet will I take any of these maidens that have will to go with me and be made sisters of my sisters, and wed with the warriors of the Rose; or if they are of a kindred, and long to sit each in the house of her folk, then will we send them home over the sea with warriors to guard them from all trouble; for this gift I thank thee. As to thy throne, I bid thee keep it till a keel cometh thy way from our land, bringing fair gifts for thee and thine. For we are not so unhealthy."

Those that sat nearby heard his words and praised them; but the Erne said: "All this is free to thee, and thou mayst do what thou wilt with the gifts given to thee. Yet shalt thou have the throne; and I have thought of a way to make thee take it. Or what sayst thou, Puny Fox?"

Said the Puny Fox: "Yea if thou wilt, thou mayst, but I thought it not of thee that thou wouldst. Now is all well."

Again Hallblithe looked from one to the other and wondered what they meant. But the Erne cried out: "Bring in now the sitter, who shall fill the empty throne!"

Then again the screen-doors opened, and there came in two weaponed men, leading
between them a woman clad in gold and garlanded with roses. So fair was the fashion of her face and all her body, that her coming seemed to make a change in the hall, as though the sun had shone into it suddenly. She trod the hall-floor with firm feet, and sat down on the ivory chair. But even before she was seated therein Hallblithe knew that the Hostage was under that roof and coming toward him. And the heart arose in his breast and fluttered therein, so sore he yearned toward the Daughter of the Rose, and his very speech-friend. Then he heard the Erne saying, "How now, Raven-son, wilt thou have the throne and the sitter therein, or wilt thou gainsay me once more?"

Thereafter he himself spake, and the sound of his voice was strange to him and as if he knew it not: "Chieftain, I will not gainsay thee, but will take thy gift, and thy friendship therewith, whatsoever hath betided. Yet would I say a word or two unto the woman that sitteth yonder. For I have been straying amongst wiles and images, and mayhap I shall yet find this to be but a dream of the night, or a beguilement of the day." Therewith he arose from the table, and walked slowly down the hall; but it was a near thing that he did not fall a weeping before all those aliens, so full his heart was.

He came and stood before the Hostage, and their eyes were upon each other, and for a little while they had no words. Then Hallblithe began wondering at his voice as he spake: "Art thou a woman and my speech-friend? For many images have mocked me, and I have been encompassed with lies, and led astray by behests that have not been fulfilled. And the world hath become strange to me, and empty of friends."

Then she said: "Art thou verily Hallblithe? For I also have been encompassed by lies, and beset by images of things unhelpful."

"Yea," said he, "I am Hallblithe of Ravens, weared with desire for my troth-plight maiden."

Then came the rosy colour into the fairness of her face, as the rising sun lighteth the garden of flowers in the June morning; and she said: "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 autumntide in the snake's hole in the bank above the river, amidst the roots of the 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."

Thereat she smiled most sweetly, and whereas she had been looking on him hitherto with strained and anxious eyes, she now beheld him simply and friendly; and she said: "O Hallblithe, I am a woman indeed, and thy speech-friend. This is the flesh that desireth thee, and the life that is thine, and the heart which thou rejoicest. But now tell me, who are these huge images around us, amongst whom I have sat thus, once in every month this year past, and afterwards I was taken back to the women's bower? Are they men or mountain-giants? Will they slay us, or shut us up from the light and air? Or hast thou made peace with them? Wilt thou then dwell with me here, or shall we go back again to Cleveland by the Sea? And when, oh, when shall we depart?"

He smiled and said: "Quick come thy questions, beloved. These are the folks of the Ravagers and the Sea-eagles: they be men, though fierce and wild they be. Our foes they have been, and have sundered us; but now are they our friends, and have brought us together. And to-morrow, O friend, shall we depart across the waters to Cleveland by the Sea."

She leaned forward, and was about to speak softly to him, but suddenly started back, and said: "There is a big, red-haired man, as big as any here, behind thy shoulder. Is he also a friend? What would he with us?"

So Hallblithe turned about, and beheld the Puny Fox beside him, who took up the word and spoke, smiling as a man in great glee: "O maiden of the Rose, I am Hallblithe's thrall, and his scholar, to unlearn the craft of lying, whereby I have done amiss towards both him and thee. Whereof I will tell thee all the tale soon. But now I will say that it is true that we depart to-morrow for Cleveland by the Sea, thou and he, and I in company. Now I would ask thee, Hallblithe, if thou wouldst have me bestow this gift of thine in safe-keeping to-night, since there is an end of her sitting
in the hall like a graven image; and to-morrow the way will be long and wearisome. What sayest thou?"

Said the Hostage: "Shall I trust this man and go with him?"

"Yea, thou shalt trust him," said Hallblithe, "for he is trusty. And even were he not, it is meet for us of the Raven and the Rose to do as our worth biddeth us, and not to fear this folk. And it behoveth us to do after their customs since we are in their house."

"That is sooth," she said; "big man, lead me out of the hall to my place. Farewell, Hallblithe, for a little while, and then shall there be no more sundering for us."

Therewith she departed with the Puny Fox, and Hallblithe went back to the high-seat and sat down by the Erne, who laughed on him, and said: "Thou hast taken my gift, and that is well; yet shall I tell thee that I would not have given it to thee if I could have kept it for myself in such plight as thou wilt have it. But all I could do, and the Puny Fox to help withal, availed me nought. So good luck go with thine hands. Now will we to bed, and to-morrow I will lead thee out on thy way; for to say sooth, there be some here who are not well pleased with either thee or me; and thou knowest that words are wasted on willful men, but that deeds may avail somewhat."

Therewith he cried out for the cup of good-night, and when it was drunken, Hallblithe was shown to a fair shut-bed; even that wherein he had lain aforetime; and there he went to sleep in joy, and in good liking with all men.

CHAPTER XXII.

THEY LEAVE THE ISLE OF RANSOM AND COME TO CLEVELAND BY THE SEA.

In the morning early Hallblithe arose from his bed, and when he came into the mid-hall there was the Puny Fox and the Hostage with him; and Hallblithe kissed her and embraced her, and she him; yet not like lovers long sundered, but as a man and maid betrothed are wont to do, for there were folk coming and going about the hall.

Then spake the Puny Fox: "The Erne is abiding us out in the meadow yonder; for now nought will serve him but he must needs go under the earth-collar with us. How sayest thou, is he enough thy friend?"

Said Hallblithe, smiling on the Hostage: "What hast thou to say to it, beloved?"

"Nought at all," she said, "if thou art friend to any of these men. I may deem that I have somewhat against the chieftain, whereof belike this big man may tell thee hereafter; but even so much meseemeth I have against this man himself, who is now become thy friend and scholar; for he also strove for my beguilement, and that not for himself, but for another."

"True it is," said the Fox, "that I did it for another; even as yesterday I took thy mate Hallblithe out of the trap whereinto he had strayed, and compassed his deliverance by means of the unfaithful battle; and even as I would have stolen thee for him, O Rose-maiden, if need had been; yea, even if I must have smitten into ruin the root-tree of the Ravagers. And how could I tell that the Erne would give thee up unstolen? Yea, thou sayest sooth, O noble and spotless maiden; all my deeds, both good and ill, have I done for others; and so I deem it shall be while my life lasteth."

Then Hallblithe laughed and said: "Art thou nettled, fellow-in-arms, at the word of a woman who knoweth thee not? She shall yet be thy friend, O Fox. But tell me, beloved, I deemed that thou hadst not seen Fox before; how then can he have helped the Erne against thee?"

"Yet she sayeth sooth," said Fox, "this was of my sleight: for when I had to come before her, I changed my skin, as I well know how; there are others in this land who can do so much as that. But what sayest thou concerning the brotherhood with the Erne?"

"Let it be so," said Hallblithe, "he is manly and true, though masterful, and is meet for this land of his. I shall not fall out with him; for seldom meseemeth shall I see the Isle of Ransom."

"And I never again," said the Puny Fox.

"Dost thou loathe it, then," said the Hostage, "because of the evil thou hast done therein?"
THE GLITTERING PLAIN; OR, THE LAND OF LIVING MEN.

"Nay," said he, "what is the evil, when henceforth I shall do but good? Nay, I love the land. Belike thou deemest it but dreary, with its black rocks and black sand, and treeless wind-swept dales; but I know it in summer and winter, and sun and shade, in storm and calm. And I know where the fathers dwelt and the sons of their sons' sons have long lain in the earth. I have sailed its windiest forths, and climbed its steepest crags; and ye may well wot that it hath a friendly face to me; and the landscapes of the mountains will be sorry for my departure."

So he spake, and Hallblithe would have answered him, but by now were they come to a grassy hollow amidst the vale, where the Erne had already made the earth-yoke ready. To wit, he had loosened a strip of turf all save the two ends, and had propped it up with two ancient dwarf-wrought spears, so that amidmost there was a lintel to go under.

So when he saw those others coming, he gave them the seel of the day, and said to Hallblithe: "What is it to be? shall I be less than thy brother-in-arms henceforward?"

Said Hallblithe: "Not a whit less. It is good to have brothers in other lands than one." So they made no delay, but clad in all their war-gear, they went under the earth-yoke one after the other; thereafter they stood together, and each let blood in his arm, so that the blood of all three mingled together fell down on the grass of the ancient earl; and they wore friendship and brotherhood each to each.

But when all was done the Erne spake: "Brother Hallblithe, as I lay awake in bed this morning I deemed that I would take ship with thee to Cleveland by the sea, that I might dwell there a while. But when I came out of the hall, and saw the dale lying green betwixt hill-side and hill-side, and the glittering river running down amidmost, and the sheep, and kine, and horses feeding up and down on either side the water: and I looked up at the fells and saw how deep blue they stood up against the snowy peaks, and I thought of all our deeds on the deep sea, and the merry nights in yonder abode of men. Then I thought that I would not leave the kindred, were it but for a while unless war and lifting called me. So now I will ride with thee to the ship, and then farewell to thee."

"It is good," said Hallblithe, "though not as good as it might be. Glad had we been with thee in the Hall of the Ravens."

As he spoke drew anigh the carles leading the horses, and with them came six of those damsel's whom the Erne had given to Hallblithe the night before; two of whom asked to be brought to their kindred over sea; but the other four were fain to go with Hallblithe and the Hostage, and become their sisters at Cleveland by the sea.

So then they got to horse and rode down the dale toward the haven, and the carles rode with them, so that of weaponry men they were a score in company. But when they were half-way to the haven they saw where hard by three knolls on the way-side were men standing with their weapons and war-gear glittering in the sun. So the Erne laughed and said: "Shall we have a word with War-brand then?"

But they rode steadily on their way, and when they came up to the knolls they saw that it was War-brand indeed with a score of men at his back; but they stirred not when they saw Erne's company that it was great. Then Erne laughed aloud and cried out in a big voice, "What, lads! Ye ride early this morning; are there foemen abroad in the isle?"

They shrank aback before him, but a carle of those who was hindermost cried out: "Art thou coming back to us, Erne, or have thy new friends bought thee to lead them in battle?"

"Fear it nought," quoth Erne, "I shall be back before the shepherd's noon."

So they went their ways and came to the haven, and there lay the Flaming Sword, and beside her a trim bairk, not right great, all ready for sea: and Hallblithe's skiff was made fast to her for an after-boat.

Then the Hostage and Hallblithe and the six damsel went aboard her, and when the Erne had bidden them farewell, they cast off the hawser and thrust her out through the haven-mouth; but ere they had got midst of the haven, they saw the Erne that he had turned about, and was riding up the dale with his house-carles, and each man's weapon was shining in his hand; and they wondered if he were riding to battle with War-brand; and Fox said: "Meseemeth our brother-in-arms hath in his mind to give those waylayers an evil minute, and verily he is the man to do the same."
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So they gat them out of the haven, and the ebb-tide drove out seaward strongly, and the wind was fair for Cleveland by the Sea; and they ran speedily past the black cliffs of the Isle of Ransom, and soon were they hull down behind them. But on the afternoon of the next day they hove up the land of the kindreds, and by sunset they beached their ship on the sand by the Rollers of the Raven, and went ashore without more ado. And the strand was empty of all men even as on the day when Hallblithie first met the Puny Fox. So then in the cool of the evening they went up toward the House of the Raven.

Those damsels went together hand in hand two by two, and Hallblithie held the Hostage by the hand; but the Puny Fox went alone beside them, gleeful and of many words; telling them tales of his wiles and his craft, and his skin-changing.

"But now," quoth he, "I have left all that behind me in the Isle of Ransom, and have but one shape, and I would for your behoof that it were a goodlier one; and but one wisdom have I, even that which dwelleth in mine own head-bone. Yet it may be that this may avail you one time or other. But lo, you! though I am thy thrall, have I not the look of a thrall-huckster from over sea leading up my wares to the cheaping-stand?"

They laughed at his words and were merry, and much love there was amongst them as they went up to the House of the Raven.

But when they came thither they went into the garth, and there was no man therein, for it was now dusk, and the windows of the long hall were yellow with candle-light. Then said Fox: "Abide ye here a little; for I would go into the hall alone and see the conditions of thy people, O Hallblithie."

"Go thou, then," said Hallblithie, "but be not rash, I counsel thee; for our folk are not over-patient when they deem they have a foe before them."

The Puny Fox laughed, and said: "So it is then the world over, that happy men are willful and masterful."

Then he drew his sword and smote on the door with the pommele, and the door opened to him and in he went: and he found that fair hall full of folk and bright with candles; and he stood amidst the floor; all men looked on him, and many knew him at once to be a man of the Ravagers, and silence fell upon the hall, but no man stirred hand against him.

Then he said: "Will ye hearken to the word of an evil man, a robber of the folks?"

Spake a chieftain from the daïs: "Words will not hurt us, sea-warrior; and thou art but one amongst many; wherefore thy might this eve is but as the might of a new-born baby. Speak, and afterwards eat and drink, and depart safe from amongst us!"

Spake the Puny Fox: "What is gone with Hallblithie a fair young man of your kindred, and with the Hostage of the Rose, his trothplight maiden?"

Then was the hush yet greater in the hall, so that you might have heard a pin drop; and the chieftain said: "It is a grief of ours that they are gone, and that none hath brought us back their dead bodies that we might lay them in the Acre of the Fathers."

Then leapt up a man from the endlong table nigh to Fox, and cried out: "Yea, folk! they are gone, and we deem that runagates of thy kindred have stolen them from us; wherefore they shall one day pay us."

Then laughed the Puny Fox and said: "Some would say that stealing Hallblithie was like stealing a lion, and that he might take care of himself; though he was not as big as I am."

Said the last speaker: "Did thy kin—— didst thou steal him, O evil man?"

"Yea, I stole him," quoth Fox, "but by sleight and not by might."

Then uprose great uproar in the hall, but the chieftain on the high-seat cried out,

"Peace, peace!" and the noise abated, and the chieftain said: "Dost thou mean that thou comest hither to give us thine head for making away with Hallblithie and the Hostage?"

"I mean to ask rather," said the Fox, "what thou wilt give me for the bodies of these twain?"

Said the chieftain: "A boat-load of gold were not too much if thou shouldst live a little longer."

Quoth the Puny Fox: "Well, in anywise I will go and bring in the bodies aforesaid, and leave my reward to the goodwill of the Ravens."
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Therewith he turned about to go, but lo! there already in the door stood Hallblithe holding the Hostage by the hand; and many in the hall saw them, for the door was wide. Then they came in and stood by the side of the Puny Fox, and all men in the hall arose and shouted for joy.

But when the tumult was a little abated, the Puny Fox cried out: "O chieftain, and all ye folk! if a boat-load of gold were not too much reward for the bringing back the dead bodies of your friends, what reward shall he have who hath brought back their bodies and the souls therein?"

Said the chieftain: "The man shall choose his own reward." And the men in the hall shouted their yeasay.

Then said the Puny Fox: "Well, then, this I choose, that ye make me one of your kindred before the fathers of old time."

They all cried out that he had chosen wisely and manfully; but Hallblithe said: "I bid you do for him no less than this; and ye shall wot that he is already my sworn brother-in-arms."

Now the chieftain cried out: "O wanderers from over the sea, come up hither and sit with us and be merry at last!"

So they went up to the daíß, Hallblithe and the Hostage, and the Puny Fox, and the six maidens withal. And since the night was yet young, the supper of the men of the Ravens was turned into the wedding-feast of Hallblithe and the Hostage, and that very night she became a wife of the Ravens, that she might bear to the house the best of men and the fairest of women.

But on the morrow they brought the Puny Fox to the mote-stead of the kindreds that he might stand before the fathers and be made a son of the kindred; and this they did because of the word of Hallblithe, and because they believed in the tale which he told them of the Glittering Land and the Acre of the Undying. The four maidens also were made sisters of the house; and the other twain were sent home to their kindred in all honour.

Of the Puny Fox it is said that he soon lost and forgot all the lore which he had learned of the ancient men, living and dead; and became as other men and was no wizard. Yet was he exceeding valiant and doughty; and he ceased not to go with Hallblithe wheresover he went; and many deeds they did together, whereof the memory of men hath failed: but neither they nor any man of the Ravens came any more to the Glittering Land, or heard any tidings of the folk that dwell there.

HEREWITH ENDETH THE TALE.