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

By WILLIAM MORRIS, AUTHOR OF “THE EARTHY PARADISE.”

CHAPTER XIII.

HALLBITHE BEHOLDETTH THE WOMAN WHO LOVETH HIM.

But on the morrow the men arose and the Sea-eagle and his damsel came to Hallbithe; for the other two damsels were departed, and the Sea-eagle said to him: “Here am I well honoured and measurelessly happy; and I have a message for thee from the King.”

“What is it?” said Halblithe; but he deemed that he knew what it would be, and he reddened for the joy of his assured hope.

Said the Sea-eagle: “Joy to thee, O shipmate! I am to take thee to the place where thy beloved abideth, and there shalt thou see her, but not so as she can see thee; and thereafter shalt thou go to the King, that thou mayst tell him if she shall accomplish thy desire.”

Then was Hallbithe glad beyond measure, and his heart danced within him, and he deemed it but meet that the others should be so joyous and blithe with him, for they led him along without any delay, and were glad at his rejoicing; and words failed him to tell of his gladness.

But as he went the thoughts of his coming converse with his beloved curled sweetly round his heart, so that scarce anything had seemed so sweet to him before; and he fell a-pondering what they twain, he and the Hostage, should do when they came together again; whether they should abide on the Glittering Plain or go back again to Cleveland by the Sea and dwell in the House of the Kindred; and for his part he yearned to behold the roof of his fathers and to tread the meadow which his scythe had swept, and the acres where his hook had smitten the wheat. But he said to himself, “I will wait till I hear her desire hereon.”

Now they went into the wood at the back of the King’s pavilion and through it and so over the hill, and beyond it came into a land of hills and dales exceeding fair and lovely; and a river wound about the dales, lapping the feet of one hill-side or the other; and in each dale (for they passed through two) was a goodly house of men, and tillage about it, and vineyards and orchards. They went all day till the sun was near setting, and were not weary, for they turned into the houses by the way when they would, and had good welcome and meat and drink, and what they would of the folk that dwelt there. Thus anigh sunset they came into a dale fairer than either of the others, and nigh to the end where they had entered it was an exceeding goodly house. Then said the damsels:

“We are nigh hand to our journey’s end; let us sit down on the grass by this river-side whilst I tell thee the tale which the King would have thee know.”

So they sat down on the grass beside the brimming river, scant two bowshots from that fair house, and the damsel said, reading from a scroll which she drew from her bosom:
"O Spearman, in yonder house dwelleth the woman foredoomed to love thee: if thou wouldst see her, go thitherward, following the path which turneth from the river-side by yonder oak-tree, and thou shalt presently come to a thicket of bay-trees at the edge of an apple-orchard, whose trees are blossoming; abide thou hidden by the bay-leaves, and thou shalt see maidens come into the orchard, and at last one fairer than all the others. This shall be thy love foredoomed, and none other; and thou shalt know her by this token, that when she hath sat her down on the grass beside the bay-tree, she shall say to her maidens: 'Bring me now the book wherein is the image of my beloved, that I may solace myself with beholding it before the sun goes down and the night cometh.'"

Now Haliblith was troubled when she read out these words, and he said:

"What is this tale about a book? I know not of any book that lieth betwixt me and my beloved."

"O Spearman," said the damsel, "I may tell thee no more, because I know no more. But keep up thine heart! For dost thou know any more than I do what hath befallen thy beloved since thou wert sundered from her? and why should not this matter of the book be one of the things that hath befallen her? Go now with joy, and come again blessing us."

"Yea, go, faring-fellow," said the Sea-eagle, "and come back joyful, that we may all be merry together. And we will abide thee here."

Haliblith foreboded evil, but he held his peace and went his ways down the path by the oak-tree; and they abode there by the water-side, and were very merry talking of this and that (but no whit of Haliblith), and kissing and caressing each other; so that it seemed but a little while to them ere they saw Haliblith coming back by the oak-tree.

He went slowly, hanging his head like a man sore burdened with grief: thus he came up to them, and stood there above them as they lay on the fragrant grass, and he saying no word and looking so sad and sorry, and withal so fell, that they feared his grief and his anger, and would fain have been away from him; so that they durst not ask him a question for a long while, and the sun sank below the hill while they abided thus.

Then all trembling the damsel spake to the Sea-eagle:

"Speak thou to him, dear friend, else must I flee away, for I fear his silence."

Quoth the Sea-eagle: "Shipmate and friend, what hath betided? How art thou? May we hearken, and mayhappen amend it?"

Then Haliblith cast himself adown on the grass and said:

"I am accursed and beguiled; and I wander round and round in a tangle that I may not escape from. I am not far from deeming that this is a land of dreams made for my beguiling. Or has the earth become so full of lies, that there is no room amidst them for a true man to stand upon his feet and go his ways?"

Said the Sea-eagle: "Thou shalt tell us what hath betided, and so ease the sorrow of thy soul if thou wilt. Or if thou wilt thou shalt nurse thy sorrow in thine heart and tell no man. Do what thou wilt; am I not become thy friend?"

Said Haliblith: "I will tell you twain the tidings, and thereafter ask me no more concerning them. Hearken. I went wheresoe ye bade me, and hid myself in the bay-tree thicket; and there came maidens into the blossoming orchard and made a resting-place with silken cushions close to where I was lurking, and stood about as though they were looking for some one to come. In a little time came two more maidens, and betwixt them one so much fairer than any there that my heart sank within me: whereas I deemed because of her fairness that this would be the foredoomed love whereof ye spake, and lo, she was in nought like to my troth-plight maiden, save that she was exceeding beauteous: nevertheless, heart-sick as I was, I determined to abide the token that ye told me of. So she lay down amidst those cushions, and I beheld her that she was sad of countenance; and she was so near to me that I could see the tears welling into her eyes, and running down her cheeks; so that I should have grieved sorely for her had I not been grieving so sorely for myself. For presently she sat up and said: 'O maiden, bring me hither the book wherein is the image of my beloved, that I may behold it in this season of sunset wherein I first beheld it; that I may fill my heart with the sight thereof before the sun is gone and the dark night come.' Then indeed my heart died within me when I wotted that this was the love whereof the King spake, that he would give to me, and she not mine own beloved: yet I could not choose but abide and look on a while, and she being one that any man might love beyond measure. Now a maiden went away into the house and came back.
again with a book covered with gold set with gems, and the fair woman took it and opened it, and I was so near to her that I saw every leaf clearly as she turned the leaves. And in that book were pictures of many things, as flaming mountains, and castles of war, and ships upon the sea, but chiefly of fair women, and queens, and warriors and kings; and it was done in gold and azure and cinnabar and minium. So she turned the leaves till she came to one whereon was pictured none other than myself, and over against me was the image of mine own beloved, the Hostage of the Rose, as if she were alive, so that the heart within me swelled with the sobbing which I must needs refrain, which grieved me like a sword-stroke. Shame also took hold of me as the fair woman spoke to my painted image, and I lying well nigh within touch of her hand; but she said: 'O my beloved, why dost thou delay to come to me? For I deemed that this eve at least thou wouldst come, so many and strong are the meshes of love which we have cast about thy feet. Oh come to-morrow at the least and latest, or what shall I do, and wherewith shall I quench the grief of my heart? Or else why am I the daughter of the Undying King, the Lord of the Treasure of the Sea? Why have they wrought new marvels for me, and compelled the Ravagers of the Coasts to serve me, and sent false dreams slitting on the wings of the night? Yea, why is the earth fair and fruitful, and the heavens kind above it, if thou comest not to-night, nor to-morrow, nor the day after? And I the daughter of the Undying, on whom the days shall grow and grow as the grains of sand which the wind heaps up above the sea-beach. And life shall grow huger and more hideous round about the lonely one, like the ling-worm laid upon the gold, that waxeth thereby till it lies all round about the house of the queen entrapped, the moveless unending ring of the years that change not.' So she spake till the weeping ended her words, and I was all abashed with shame and pale with anguish. I stole quietly from my lair unheeded of any, save that one damsel said that a rabbit ran in the hedge, and another that a blackbird stirred in the thicket. Behold me, then, that my quest beginneth again amidst the tangle of lies whereinto I have been entrapped."

CHAPTER XIV.

HALLBLITHE SPEAKETH WITH THE KING AGAIN

He stood up when he had made an end, as a man ready for the road; but they lay there downcast and abashed, and had no words to answer him. For the Sea-eagle was sorry that his faring-fellow was hapless, and was sorry that he was sorry; and as for the damsel, she had not known but that she was leading the goodly Spearman to the fulfilment of his heart's desire. Albeit after a while she spake again and said: "Dear friends, day is gone and night is at hand; now to-night it were ill lodging at yonder house; and the next house on our backward road is over far for wayworn folk. But hard by the thicket is a fair little wood-lawn, by the lip of a pool in the stream wherein we may bathe us to-morrow morning; and it is grassy and flowery and sheltered from all winds that blow, and I have victual enough in my wallet. Let us sup and rest there under the bare heaven, as oft is the wont of us in this land; and on the morrow early we will arise and get us back again to Woodend, where yet the King abideth, and there shalt thou talk to him again, O Spearman."

Said Hallblithe: "Take me whither ye will; but now nought availeth. I am a captive in a land of lies, and here most like shall I live betrayed and die hapless." "Hold thy peace, dear friend, of such words as those last," said she, "or I must needs flee from thee, for they hurt me sorely. Come now to this pleasant place."

She took him by the hand and looked kindly on him, and the Sea-eagle followed him, murmuring an old song of the harvest-field, and they went together by a path through a thicket of whitethorn till they came to a grassy place. There then they sat down, and ate and drank what they would, sitting by the lip of the pool till a waning moon was bright over their heads. And Hallblithe made no semblance of content; but the Sea-eagle and his damsel were grown merry again, and talked and sang together like autumn stares, with the kissing and caressing of lovers.

So at last those twain lay down amongst the flowers, and slept in each other's arms; but Hallblithe betook him to the brake a little aloof, and lay down, but slept not till morning was at hand, when slumber and confused dreams overtook him.
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He was awaked from his sleep by the damsels, who came pushing through the thicket all fresh and rosy from the river, and roused him, and said: "Awake now, Spearman, that we may take our pleasure in the sun; for he is high in the heavens now and all the land laughs beneath him."

Her eyes glittered as she spoke, and her limbs moved under her raiment as though she would presently fall to dancing for very joy. But Hallblithe arose wearily, and gave her back no smile in answer, but thrust through the thicket to the water, and washed the night from off him, and so came back to the twain as they sat dallying together over their breakfast. He would not sit down by them, but ate a morsel of bread as he stood, and said: "Tell me how I can soonest find the King; I bid you not lead me thither, but let me go my ways alone. For with me time presses, and with you meseemeth time is nought. Neither am I a meet fellow for the happy."

But the Sea-eagle sprang up, and swore with a great oath that he would nowise leave his shipmate in the lurch. And the damsels said: "Fair man, I had best go with thee, I shall not hinder thee but further thee rather, so that thou shalt make one day's journey of two."

And she put forth her hand to him, and caressed him smiling, and fawned upon him, and he heeded it little, but hung not aback from them since they were ready for the road: so they set forth all three together.

They made such diligence on the backward road that the sun was not set by then they came to Wood-end; and there was the King sitting in the door of his pavilion. Thither went Hallblithe straight, and thrust through the throng, and stood before the King; who greeted him kindly, and was no less sweet of face than on that other day.

Hallblithe hailed him not, but said: "King, look on my anguish, and if thou art other than a king of dreams and lies, play no longer with me, but tell me straight out if thou knowest of my tooth-plight maiden, whether she is in this land or not."

Then the King smiled on him and said: "True it is that I know of her; yet know I not whether she is in this land or not."

"King," said Hallblithe, "wilt thou bring us together and stay my heart's bleeding?"

"I cannot, since I know not where she is." said the King: "Why didst thou lie to me the other day?"

"I did not," said the King; "I bade bring thee to the woman that loved thee, and whom thou shouldst love; and that is my daughter. And look thou! Even as I may not bring thee to thine earthly love, so couldst thou not make thyself manifest before my daughter, and become her deathless love. Is it not enough?"

He spake sternly for all that he smiled, and Hallblithe said: "O King, have pity on me!"

"Yea," said the King, "pity thee I do: but I will live despite thy sorrow; my pity of thee shall not slay me, or make thee happy. Even in such wise didst thou pity my daughter."

"Thou art mighty, O King, and maybe the mightiest. Wilt thou not help me?"

"How can I help thee?" said the King, "thou who wilt not help thyself. Thou hast seen what thou shouldst do: do it then, and be holpen."

Then said Hallblithe: "Wilt thou not slay me, O King, since thou wilt not do aught else?"

"Nay," said the King, "thy slaying wilt not serve me nor mine: I will neither help nor hinder. Thou art free to seek thy love wheresoever thou wilt in this my realm. Depart in peace!"

Hallblithe saw that the King was angry, though he smiled upon him; yet so coldly, that the face of him froze the very marrow of Hallblithe's bones: and he said within himself: "This King of lies shall not slay me, though mine anguish be hard to bear: for I am alive, and it may be that my love is in this land, and I may find her here, and how to reach another land I know not."

So he turned from before the face of the King as the sun was setting, and he went down the land southward betwixt the mountains and the sea, not heeding whether it were night or day; and he went on till it was long past midnight, and then for mere weariness laid him down under a tree, not knowing where he was, and fell asleep.

And in the morning he woke up to the bright sun, and found folk standing
round about him, both men and women, and their sheep were anigh them, for they were shepherd folk. So when they saw that he was awake they greeted him, and were blithe with him and made much of him; and they took him home to their house, and gave him to eat and to drink, and asked him what he would that they might serve him. And they seemed to him to be kind and simple folk, and though he loathed to speak the words, so sick at heart he was, yet he told them how he was seeking his troth-plight maiden, his earthly love, and asked them to say if they had seen any woman like her.

They heard him kindly and pitied him, and they told him how they had heard of a woman in the land, who sought her beloved even as he sought his. And when he heard this his heart leapt up, and he asked them to tell him more concerning this woman. Then they said that she dwelt in the hill country in a goodly house, and had set her heart on a lovely man, whose image she had seen in a book, and that no man but this one would content her; and this, they said, was a sad and sorry matter, such as was unheard of hitherto in the land.

So when Hallblithe heard this, as heavily as his heart fell again, he changed not countenance, but thanked the kind folk and departed, and went on down the land betwixt the mountains and the sea, and before nightfall he had been into three more houses of folk, and asked there of all comers concerning a woman who was sundered from her beloved; and at none of them gat he any answer to make him less sorry than yesterday. At the last of the three he slept, and on the morrow early there was the work to begin again; and the next day was the same as the last, and the day after differed not from it. Thus he went on seeking his beloved betwixt the mountains and the plain, till the great rock-wall came down to the side of the sea and made an end of the Glittering Plain on that side. Then he turned about and went back by the way that he had come, and up the country betwixt the mountains and the plain northward, until he had been into every house of folk in those parts and asked his question.

Then he went up into that fair country of the dales, and even anigh to where dwelt the King’s daughter, and otherwhere in the land and everywhere, quartering the realm of the Glittering Plain as the heron quarters the flooded meadow when the waters draw aback into the river. So that now all people knew him when he came, and they wondered at him; but when he came to any house for the third or fourth time, they wearied of him, and were glad when he departed.

Ever it was one of two answers that he had: either folk said to him, “There is no such woman; this land is happy, and nought but happy people dwell therein;” or else they told him of the woman who lived in sorrow, and was ever looking on a book, that she might bring to her the man whom she desired.

Whiles he wearied and longed for death, but would not die until there was no corner of the land unsearched. Whiles he shook off weariness, and went about his quest as a craftsman sets about his work in the morning. Whiles it irked him to see the soft and merry folk of the land, who had no skill to help him, and he longed for the house of his fathers and the men of the spear and the plough; and thought, “Oh, if I might but get me back, if it were but for an hour and to die there, to the meadows of the Raven, and the acres beneath the mountains of Cleveland by the Sea. Then at least should I learn some tale of what is or what hath been, howsoever evil the tidings were, and not be bandied about by lies for ever.”

CHAPTER XV.
AGAIN HALLBLITHE SPEAKEST WITH THE KING.

So wore the days and the moons; and now were some six moons worn since first he came to the Glittering Plain; and he was come to Wood-end again, and heard and knew that the King was sitting once more in the door of his pavilion to hearken to the words of his people, and he said to himself: “I will speak yet again to this man, if indeed he be a man; yea, though he turn me into stone.”

And he went up toward the pavilion; and on the way it came into his mind what the men of the kindred were doing that morning; and he had a vision of them as it were, and saw them yoking the oxen to the plough, and slowly going down the acres as the shining iron drew the long furrow down the stubble-land, and the light haze hung about the elm-trees in the calm morning, and the smoke rose straight into the air.
from the roof of the kindred. And he said: "What is this? am I death-doomed this morning that this sight cometh so clearly upon me amidst the falseness of this unchanging land?"

Thus he came to the pavilion, and folk fell back before him to the right and the left, and he stood before the King, and said to him: "I cannot find her; she is not in thy land."

Then spake the King, smiling upon him as erst: "What wilt thou then? Is it not time to rest?"

He said: "Yea, O King; but not in this land."

Said the King: "Where else than in this land wilt thou find rest? Without is battle and famine, longing unsatisfied, and heart-burning and fear; within it is plenty and peace and good will and pleasure without cease. Thy word hath no meaning to me."

Said Hallblithe: "Give me leave to depart, and I will bless thee."

"Is there nought else to do?" said the King.

"Nought else," said Hallblithe.

Therewith he felt that the King's face changed though he still smiled on him, and again he felt his heart grow cold before the King.

But the King spake and said: "I hinder not thy departure, nor will any of my folk. No hand will be raised against thee; there is no weapon in all the land, save the needless sword by my side and the weapons which thou bearest."

Said Hallblithe: "Dost thou not owe me a joy in return for my begging?"

"Yea," said the King, "reach out thine hand to take it.

"One thing only may I take of thee," said Hallblithe; "my troth-plight maiden or else the speed of my departure."

Then said the King, and his voice was terrible though he smiled: "I will not hinder; I will not help. Depart in peace!"

Then Hallblithe turned away dizzy and half fainting, and strayed down the field, scarce knowing where he was; and as he went he felt his sleeve plucked at, and turned about, and lo! he was face to face with the Sea-eagle, no less joyous than aforetime. He took Hallblithe in his arms and embraced him and kissed him, and said: "Well met faring-fellow! Whither away?"

"Away out of this land of lies," said Hallblithe.

The Sea-eagle shook his head, and quoth he: "Art thou still seeking a dream? And thou so fair that thou puttest all other men to shame."

"I seek no dream," said Hallblithe, "but rather the end of dreams."

"Well," said the Sea-eagle, "we will not wrangle about it. But hearken. Hard by in a pleasant nook of the meadows have I set up my tent; and although it be not as big as the King's pavilion, yet is it fair enough. Wilt thou not come thither with me and rest thee to-night; and to-morrow we will talk of this matter?"

Now Hallblithe was weary and confused, and down-hearted beyond his wont, and the friendly words of the Sea-eagle softened his heart, and he smiled on him and said: "I give thee thanks; I will come with thee: thou art kind, and hast done nought to me save good from the time when I first saw thee lying in thy bed in the Hall of the Ravagers. Dost thou remember that day?"

The Sea-eagle knitted his brow as one striving with a troubled memory, and said: "But dimly, friend, as if it had passed in an ugly dream: meseemeth my friendship with thee began when I came to thee from out of the wood, and saw thee standing with those three damsels: that I remember full well: ye were fair to look on."

Hallblithe wondered at his words, but said no more about it, and they went together to a flowery nook nigh a stream of clear water where stood a silken tent, green like the grass which it stood on, and flecked with gold and goodly colours. Nigh it on the grass lay the Sea-eagle's damsel, ruddy-cheeked and sweet-lipped, as fair as aforetime. She turned about when she heard men coming, and when she saw Hallblithe a smile came into her face like the sun breaking out on a fair but clouded morning, and she went up to him and took him by the hands and kissed his cheek, and said: "Welcome, Spearman! welcome back! We have heard of thee in many places, and have been sorry that thou wert not glad, and now are we fain of thy returning. Shall not sweet life begin for thee from henceforward?"

Again was Hallblithe moved by her kind welcome; but he shook his head and spake: "Thou art kind, sister; yet if thou wouldst be kinder thou wilt show me a way whereby I may escape from this land. For abiding here has become irksome to me, and meseemeth that hope is yet alive without the Glittering Plain."
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Her face fell as she answered: "Yea, and fear also, and worse, if aught be worse. But come, let us eat and drink in this fair place, and gather for thee a little joyance before thou departest, if thou needs must depart."

He smiled on her as one not ill-content, and laid himself down on the grass, while the twain busied themselves, and brought forth fair cushions and a gilded table, and laid dainty victual thereon and good wine.

So they ate and drank together, and the Sea-eagle and his mate became very joyous again, and Hallblithe bestirred himself not to be a mar-feast; for he said within himself: "I am departing, and after this time I shall see them no more; and they are kind and blithe with me, and have been aforetime; I will not make their merry hearts sore. For when I am gone I shall be remembered of them but a little while."

CHAPTER XVI.

THOSE THREE SET OUT FOR THE EDGE OF THE GLITTERING PLAIN.

So the evening wore merrily; and they made Hallblithe lie in an angle of the tent on a fair bed, and he was weary and slept thereon like a child. But in the morning early they waked him; and while they were breaking their fast they began to speak to him of his departure, and asked him if he had an inkling of the way whereby he should get him gone, and he said: "If I escape it must needs be by way of the mountains that wall the land about till they come down to the sea. For on the sea is no ship and no haven; and well I wot that no man of the land durst or can ferry me over to the land of my kindred, or otherwhere without the Glittering Plain. Tell me therefore (and I ask no more of you), is there any rumour or memory of a way that cleaveth yonder mighty wall of rock to other lands?"

Said the damsel: "There is more than a memory or a rumour: there is a road through the mountains known to all men. For at whiles the earthly pilgrims come into the Glittering Plain thereby; and yet but seldom, so many are the griefs and perils which beset the wayfarers on that road. Whereof thou hast far better bethink thee in time, and abide here and be happy with us and others who long sore to make thee happy."

"Nay," said Hallblithe, "there is nought to do but tell me of the way, and I will depart at once, blessing you."

Said the Sea-eagle: "More than that at least will we do. May I lose the bliss whereto I have attained if I go not with thee to the very edge of the land of the Glittering Plain. Shall it not be so, sweetheart?"

"Yea, at least we may do that," said the damsel; and she hung her head as if she were ashamed, and said: "And that is all that thou wilt get from us at most."

Said Hallblithe: "It is enough, and I asked not so much."

Then the damsel busied herself, and set meat and drink in two wallets, and took one herself and gave the other to the Sea-eagle, and said: "We will be thy porters, O Spearman, and will give thee a full wallet from the last house by the Desert of Dread, for when thou hast entered therein, thou mayst well find victual hard to come by: and now let us linger no more since the road is dear to thee."

So they set forth on foot, for in that land men were slow to feel weariness, and turning about the hill of Wood-end, they passed by some broken country, and came at even to a house at the entrance of a long valley with high and steeply-sloping sides which seemed, as it were, to cleave the dale-country wherein they had fared aforetime. At that house they slept well-guested by its folk, and the next morning took their way down the valley, and the folk of the house stood at the door to watch their departure; for they had told the wayfarers that they had fared but a little way thitherward and knew of no folk who had used that road.

So those three fared down the valley southward all day, ever mounting higher as they went. The way was pleasant and easy, for they went over fair, smooth, grassy lawns betwixt the hill-sides, beside a clear rattling stream that ran northward; at whiles were clumps of tall trees, oak for the most part, and at whiles thickets of thorn and eglington and other such trees: so that they could rest well shaded when they would.

They passed by no house of men, nor came to any such in the even, but lay down to sleep in a thicket of thorn and eglington, and rested well, and on the morrow they rose up betimes and went on their ways.
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This second day as they went the hill-sides on either hand grew lower, till at last they died out into a wide plain, beyond which in the southern offing the mountains rose huge and bare. This plain also was grassy and beset with trees and thickets here and there. Hereon they saw wild deer enough, as hart and buck, and roe-buck, and swine: withal a lion came out of a brake hard by them as they went and stood gazing on them, so that Hallblithe looked to his weapons and the Sea-eagle took up a big stone to fight with, being weaponless; but the damsel laughed, and tripped on her way lightly with girt-up gown, and the beast gave no more heed to them.

Easy and smooth was their way over this pleasant wilderness, and clear to see though but little used, and before nightfall, after they had gone a long way, they came to a house. It was not large nor high, but was built very strongly and fairily of good ashlar: its door was shut, and on the jamb thereof hung a slughorn. The damsel, who seemed to know what to do, set her mouth to the horn, and blew a blast; and in a little while the door was opened, and a big man clad in red scarlet stood therein: he had no weapons, but was somewhat surly of aspect: he spake not, but stood abiding the word: so the damsel took it up and said: "Art thou not the Warden of the Uttermost House?"

He said: "I am."
Said the damsel: "May we guest here to-night?"
He said: "The house lieth open to you with all that it hath of victual and plenishing: take what ye will, and use what ye will."

They thanked him; but he heeded not their thanks, and withdrew him from them. So they entered and found the table laid in a fair hall of stone carven and painted very goody; so they ate and drank therein, and Hallblithe was of good heart, and the Seaeagle and his mate were merry, though they looked softly and shyly on Hallblithe because of the sundering; and they saw no man in the house save the man in scarlet, who went and came about his business, paying no heed to them. So when the night was deep they lay down in the shut-bed off the hall, and slept, and the hours were tidingless to them until they woke in the morning.

On the morrow they arose and broke their fast, and thereafter the damsel spake to the man in scarlet and said: "May we fill our wallets with victual for the way?"
Said the Warden: "There lieth the meat."
So they filled the wallets, while the man looked on; and they came to the door when they were ready, and he unlocked it to them, saying no word. But when they turned their faces toward the mountains he spake at last, and stayed them at the first step. Quoth he: "Whither away? Ye take the wrong road!"
Said Hallblithe: "Nay; for we go toward the mountains and the edge of the Glittering Plain."
"Ye shall do ill to go thither," said the Warden, "and I bid you forbear."
"O Warden of the Uttermost House, wherefore should we forbear?"
Said the scarlet man: "Because my charge is to further those who would go inward to the King, and to stay those who would go outward from the King."
"How then if we go outward despite thy bidding?" said the Sea-eagle, "wilt thou then hinder us perforce?"
"How may I," said the man, "since thy fellow hath weapons?"
"Go we forth, then," said the Sea-eagle.
"Yea," said the damsel, "we will go forth. And know, O Warden, that this weaponed man only is of mind to fare over the edge of the Glittering Plain; but we twain shall come back hither again, and fare inwards."
Said the Warden: "Nought is it to me what ye will do when you are past this house. Nor shall any man who goeth out of this garth toward the mountains ever come back inwards save he cometh in the company of new comers to the Glittering Plain."
"Who shall hinder him?" said the Sea-eagle.
"The King," said the Warden.
Then there was silence a while, and the man said: "Now do as ye will." And therewith he turned back into the house and shut the door.
But the Sea-eagle and the damsel stood gazing on one another, and at Hallblithe; and the damsel was downcast and pale; but the Sea-Eagle cried out: "Forward now, O Hallblithe, since thou willest it, and we will go with thee and share whatever
may befall thee; yea, right up to the very edge of the Glittering Plain. And thou, O beloved, why dost thou delay? Why dost thou stand as if thy fair feet were grown to the grass?"

But the damsel gave a lamentable cry, and cast herself down on the ground, and knelt before the Sea-eagle, and took him by the knees, and said betwixt sobbing and weeping: "O my lord and love, I pray thee to forbear, and the Spearman, our friend, shall pardon us. For if thou goest, I shall never see thee more; since my heart will not serve me to go with thee. Oh forbear, I pray thee!"

And she grovelled on the earth before him; and the Sea-eagle waxed red, and would have spoken; but Hallblithe cut his speech across, and said: "Friends, be at peace! For this is the minute that sundereth us. Get ye back at once to the heart of the Glittering Plain, and live there and be happy; and take my blessing and thanks for the love and help that ye have given me. For your going forward with me should destroy you and profit me nothing. It would be as the host bringing his guests one field beyond his garth, when their goal is the ends of the earth; and if there were a lion in the path, why should he perish for courtesy's sake?"

Therewith he stooped down to the damsel, and lifted her up and kissed her face; and he cast his arms about the Sea-eagle and said to him: "Farewell, shipmate!"

Then the damsel gave him the wallet of victual, and bade him farewell, weeping sorely; and he looked kindly on them for a moment of time, and then turned away from them and faced on toward the mountains, striding with great strides, holding his head aloft. But they looked no more on him, having no will to eke their sorrow, but went their ways back again without delay.

CHAPTER XVII.

HALLBLITHE AMONGST THE MOUNTAINS.

So strode on Hallblithe; but when he had gone but a little way his head turned, and the earth and heavens wavered before him, so that he must needs sit down on a stone by the wayside, wondering what ailed him. Then he looked up at the mountains, which now seemed quite near to him at the plain's ending, and his weakness increased on him; and lo! as he looked, it was to him as if the crags rose up in the sky to meet him and overhang him, and as if the earth heaved up beneath him, and therewith he fell aback and lost all sense, so that he knew not what was become of the earth and the heavens and the passing of the minutes of his life.

When he came to himself, he knew not whether he had lain so a great while or a little; he felt feeble, and for a while he lay scarce moving, and beholding nought, not even the sky above him. Presently he turned about and saw hard stone on either side, so he rose wearily and stood upon his feet, and knew that he was faint with hunger and thirst.

Then he looked around him, and saw that he was in a narrow valley or cleft of the mountains amidst wan rocks bare and waterless, where grew no blade of green; but he could see no further than the sides of that cleft, and he longed to be out of it that he might see whitherward to turn. Then he bethought him of his wallet, and set his hand to it and opened it, thinking to get victual thence; but lo! it was all spoilt and wasted. None the less, for all his feebleness, he turned and went toiling slowly along what seemed to be a path little trodden leading upward out of the cleft; and at last he reached the crest thereof, and sat him down on a rock on the other side; yet durst not raise his eyes a while and look on the land, lest he should see death manifest therein. At last he looked, and saw that he was high up amongst the mountain peaks: before him and on either hand was but a world of fallow stone rising ridge upon ridge like the waves of the wildest of the winter sea. The sun not far from its midmost shone down bright and hot on that wilderness; yet was there no sign that any man had ever been there since the beginning of the world, save that the path aforesaid seemed to lead onward down the stony slope.

This way and that way and all about he gazed, straining his eyes if perchance he might see any diversity in the stony waste; and at last betwixt two peaks of the rock wall on his left hand he descried a streak of green mingling with the cold blue of the distance; and he thought in his heart that this was the last he should see of the Glittering Plain. Then he spake aloud in that desert, and said though there was
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none to hear: "Now is my last hour come; and here is Hallblithe of the Raven perishing, with his deeds undone and his longing unfulfilled, and his bridal-bed acold for ever. Long may the House of the Raven abide and flourish, with many a man and maiden, valiant and fair and fruitful! O kindred, cast thy blessing on this man about to die here, doing none otherwise than ye would have him!"

He sat there a little while longer, and then he said to himself: "Death tarries; were it not well that I go to meet him, even as the cot-carle preventeth the mighty chieftain?"

Then he arose, and went painfully down the slope, steadying himself with the shaft of his gleaming spear; but all at once he stopped; for it seemed to him that he heard voices borne on the wind that blew up the mountain-side. But he shook his head and said: "Now forsooth beginneth the dream which shall last for ever; nowise am I beguiled by it." None the less he strove the more eagerly with the wind, and the way, and his feebleness; yet did the weakness wax on him, so that it was but a little while ere he faltered and reeled and fell down once more in a swoon.

When he came to himself again he was no longer alone: a man was kneeling down by him and holding up his head, while another before him, as he opened his eyes, put a cup of wine to his lips. So Hallblithe drank and was refreshed; and presently they gave him bread, and he ate, and his heart was strengthened, and the happiness of life returned to it, and he lay back, and slept sweetly for a season.

When he awoke from that slumber he found that he had gotten back much of his strength again, and he sat up and looked around him, and saw three men sitting anigh, armed and girt with swords, yet in evil array, and sore travel-worn. One of these was very old, with long white hair hanging down; and another, though he was not so much stricken in years, still looked an old man of over sixty winters. The third was a man some forty years old, but sad and sorry and drooping of aspect.

So when they saw him stirring, they all fixed their eyes upon him, and the oldest man said: "Welcome to him who erst had no tidings for us!" And the second said: "Tell us now thy tidings." But the third, the sorry man, cried out aloud, saying: "Where is the land? Where is the land?"

Said Hallblithe: "Meseemeth the land which ye seek is the land which I seek to flee from. And now I will not hide that meseemeth I have seen you before, and that was at Cleveland by the Sea when the days were happier."

Then they all three bowed their heads in yea-say, and spake: "Where is the land? Where is the land?"

Then Hallblithe arose to his feet, and said: "Ye have healed me of the sickness of death, and I will do what I may to heal you of your sickness of sorrow. Come up the pass with me, and I will show you the land afar off."

Then they arose like young and brisk men, and he led them over the brow of the ridge into the little valley wherein he had first come to himself: there he showed them that glimpse of a green land betwixt the two peaks, which he had beheld o’er now; and they stood a while looking at it and weeping for joy.

Then spake the oldest of the seekers: "Show us the way to the land."

"Nay," said Hallblithe, "I may not; for when I would depart thence, I might not go by mine own will, but was borne out hither, I wot not how. For when I came to the edge of the land against the will of the King, he smote me, and then cast me out. Therefore since I may not help you, find ye the land for yourselves, and let me go blessing you, and come out of this desert by the way whereby ye entered it. For I have an errand in the world."

Spake the youngest of the seekers: "Now art thou become the yoke-fellow of Sorrow, and thou must wend, not whither thou wouldst, but whither she will: and she would have thee go forward toward life, not backward toward death."

Said the midmost seeker: "If we let thee go further into the wilderness thou shalt surely die: for hence to the peopled parts, and the City of Merchants, whence we come, is a month’s journey: and there is neither meat nor drink, nor beast nor bird, nor any green thing all that way; and since we have found thee famishing, we may well deem that thou hast no victual. As to us we have but little; so that if it be much more than three days’ journey to the Glittering Plain, we may well starve and die within sight of the Acre of the Undying. Nevertheless that little will we share with thee if thou wilt help us to find that good land; so that thou mayst yet put away Sorrow, and take Joy again to thy board and bed."
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Hallblithe hung his head and answered nought; for he was confused by the meshes of ill-hap, and his soul grew sick with the bitterness of death. But the sad man spake again and said: "Thou hast an errand sayest thou? is it such as a dead man may do?"

Hallblithe pondered, and amidst the anguish of his despair was borne in to him a vision of the sea-waves lapping the side of a black ship, and a man therein: who but himself, set free to do his errand? and his heart was quickened within him, and he said: "I thank you, and I will wend back with you, since there is no road for me save back again into the trap."

The three seekers seemed glad thereat, and the second one said: "Though death is pursuing, and life lieth ahead, yea will we not hasten thee unduly. Time was when I was Captain of the Host, and learned how battles were lost by lack of rest. Therefore have out thy sleep now, that thou mayst wax in strength for our helping."

Said Hallblithe: "I need not rest; I may not rest; I will not rest."

Said the sad man: "It is lawful for thee to rest. So say I, who was once a master of law."

Said the long-hoary elder: "And I command thee to rest; I who was once the king of a mighty folk."

In sooth Hallblithe was now exceeding weary; so he laid him down and slept sweetly in the stony wilderness amidst those three seekers, the old, the sad, and the very-old.

When he awoke he felt strong and well again, and he leapt to his feet and looked about him, and saw the three seekers stirring, and he deemed by the sun that it was early morning. The sad man brought forth bread and water and wine, and they broke their fast; and when they had done he spake and said: "Abideth now in wallet and bottle but one more full meal for us, and then no more save a few crumbs and a drop or two of wine if we husband it well.

Said the second elder: "Get we to toe road, then, and make haste. I have been seeking, and meseemeth, though the way be long, it is not utterly blind for us. Or look thou, Raven-son, is there not a path yonder that leadeth onward up to the brow of the ghyll again? and, as I have seen, it leadeth on again down from the said brow."

Forsooth there was a track that led through the stony tangle of the wilderness; so they took to the road with a good heart, and went all day, and saw no living thing, and not a blade of grass or a trickle of water: nought save the wan rocks under the sun; and though they trusted in their road that it led them aright, they saw no other glimpse of the Glittering Plain, because there rose a great ridge like a wall on the north side, and they went as it were down along a trench of the rocks, albeit it was whiles broken across by ghylls, and knolls, and reefs.

So at sunset they rested and ate their victual, for they were very weary; and thereafter they lay down, and slept as soundly as if they were in the best of the halls of men. On the morrow betimes they arose soberly and went their ways with few words, and, as they deemed, the path still led them onward. And now the great ridge on the north rose steeper and steeper, and their crossing it seemed not to be thought of; but their half-blind track failed them not. They rested at even, and ate and drank what little they had left, save a mouthful or two of wine, and then went on again by the light of the moon, which was so bright that they still saw their way. And it happened to Hallblithe as mostly it does with men very travel-worn, that he went on and on scarce remembering where he was, or who his fellows were, or that he had any fellows.

So at midnight they lay down in the wilderness again, hungry and weary. They rose at dawn and went forward with waning hope: for now the mountain ridge on the north was close to their path, rising up along a sheer wall of pale stone over which nothing might go save the fowl flying; so that at first on that morning they looked for nothing save to lay their bones in that grievous desert where no man should find them. But, as bested with famine, they fared on heavily down the narrow track, there came a hoarse cry from Hallblithe's dry throat, and it was as if his cry had been answered by another like to his; and the seekers turned, and beheld him pointing to the cliff-side, and lo! half-way up the pale sun-litten crag stood two ravens in a cranny of the stone, flapping their wings and croaking, with thrusting forth and twisting of their heads; and presently they came floating on the thin pure air high up over the heads of the wayfarers, croaking for the pleasure of the meeting, as though they laughed thereat.
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Then rose the heart of Halliblithe, and he smote his palms together, and fell to singing an old song of his people, amidst the rocks whereas few men had sung aforetime:

Whence are ye and whither, O fowl of our fathers?
What field have ye looked on, what acres unshorn?
What land have ye left where the battle-folk gathers,
And the war-helms are white o'er the paths of the corn?

What tale do ye bear of the people uncraven,
Where amidst the long hall-shadow sparkle the spears;
Where aloft on the hall-ridge now dappeth the raven,
And singeth the song of the nourishing years?

There gather the lads in the first of the morning,
While white lies the battle-day's dew on the grass,
And the kind steeds trot up to the horn's voice of warning,
And the winds wake and whine in the dusk of the pass.

O fowl of our fathers, why now are ye resting?
Come over the mountains and look on the foe.
Full fair after fight won shall yet be your nesting:
And your fledglings the sons of the kindred shall know.

Therewith he strode with his head upraised, and above him flew the ravens, croaking as if they answered his song in friendly fashion.

It was but a little after that the path turned aside sharp toward the cliffs, and the seekers were abashed thereof, till Halliblithe running forward beheld a great cavern in the face of the cliff at the path's ending: so he turned and cried on his fellows, and they hastened up, and presently stood before that cavern's mouth with doubt and joy mingled in their minds; for now mayhap they had reached the gate of the Glittering Plain, or mayhap the gate of death.

The sad man hung his head and spake: "Doth not some new trap abide us? What do we here? Is this aught save death?"

Spake the elder: "Was not death on either hand e'en now, even as treason betseth the king upon his throne?"

And the second said: "Yea, we were as the host which hath no road save through the multitude of foesmen."

But Halliblithe laughed and said: "Why do ye hang back, then? As for me, if death be here, soon is mine errand sped." Therewith he led the way into the dark of the cave, and the ravens hung about the crag over-head croaking, as the men left the light.

So was their way swallowed up in the cavern, and day and its time became naught to them; they went on and on, and became exceeding faint and weary, but rested not, for death was behind them.

Whiles they deemed that they heard waters running, and whiles the singing of fowl; and to Halliblithe it seemed that he heard his name called, so that he shouted back in answer; but all was still when the sound of his voice had died out.

At last, when they were pressing on again after a short while of resting, Halliblithe cried out that the cave was lightening: so they hastened onward, and the light grew till they could see each other, and dimly they beheld the cave that it was both wide and high. Yet a little further, and their faces showed white to one another, and they could see the crannies of the rocks, and the bats hanging garlanded from the roof.

So then they came to where the day streamed down bright on them from a break overhead, and lo! the sky and green leaves waving against it.

To those way-worn men it seemed hard to clamber out that way, and especially to the elders; so they went on a little further to see if there were aught better abiding them, but when they found the daylight failing them again, they turned back to the place of the break in the roof, lest they should waste their strength and perish in the bowels of the mountain. So with much ado they hove up Halliblithe till he got him first on to a ledge of the rocky wall, and so, what by strength, what by cunning, into the daylight through the rent in the roof. So when he was without he made a rope of his girdle and strips from his raiment, for he was ever a deft craftsman, and made a shift to heave up therewith the sad man, who was light and lithe of body; and then the two together dealt with the elders one after another, till they were all four on the face of the earth again.
CHAPTER XVIII.

HALLBLITHE DWELLETH IN THE WOOD ALONE.

But on the morrow they arose betimes, and broke their fast on that woodland victual, and then went speedily down the mountain-side; and Hallblithe saw by the clear morning light that it was indeed the Uttermost House which he had seen across the green waste. So he told the seekers; but they were silent and heedful nought, because of a fear that had come upon them, lest they should die before they came into that good land.

At the foot of the mountain they came upon a river, deep but not wide, with low grassy banks, and Hallblithe, who was an exceeding strong swimmer, helped the seekers over without much ado; and there they stood upon the grass of that goodly waste.

Hallblithe looked on them to note if any change should come over them, and he deemed that already they were become stronger and of more avail. But he spake nought thereof, and strode on toward the Uttermost House, even as that other day he had stridden away from it.

Such diligence they made that it was but little after noon when they came to the door thereof. Then Hallblithe took the horn and blew upon it, while his fellows stood by murmuring, "It is the Land! It is the Land!"

So came the Warden to the door clad in red scarlet, and the elder went up to him and said: "Is this the Land?"

"What Land?" said the Warden.

"Is it the Glittering Plain?" said the second of the seekers.

"Yea, forsooth," said the Warden.

Said the sad man: "Will ye lead us to the King?"

"Ye shall come to the King," said the Warden.

"When, oh when?" cried they out all three.

"The morrow of to-morrow, maybe," said the Warden.

"Oh, if to-morrow were but come!" they cried.

"It will come," said the red man; "enter ye the house, and eat and drink and rest you."

So they entered, and the Warden heeded Hallblithe nothing. They ate and drank and then went to their rest, and Hallblithe lay in a shut-bed off from the hall, but the Warden brought the seekers otherwhere, so that Hallblithe saw them not after he had gone to bed; but as for him he slept and forgot that aught was.

In the morning when he awoke he felt very strong and well-liking; and he beheld his limbs that they were clear of skin and sleek and fair; and he heard one hard by in the hall carolling and singing joyously. So he sprang from his bed with the wonder of sleep yet in him, and drew the curtains of the shut-bed and looked forth into the
hall; and lo! on the high seat a man of thirty winters by seeming, tall, fair of fashion, with golden hair and eyes as grey as glass, proud and noble of aspect; and anigh him sat another man of like age to look on—a man strong and burly, with short curling brown hair and a red beard, and ruddy countenance, and the mien of a warrior. Also, up and down the hall, paced a man younger of aspect than these two, tall and slender, black-haired and dark-eyed, amorous of countenance; he it was who was singing a snatch of song as he went lightly on the hall pavement: a snatch like to this:

Fair is the world, now autumn’s wearing,
And the sluggard sun lies long abed;
Sweet are the days, now winter’s nearing,
And all winds feign that the wind is dead.

Dumb is the hedge where the crabs hang yellow,
Bright as the blossoms of the spring;
Dumb is the close where the pears grow mellow,
And none but the dauntless redbreasts sing.

Fair was the spring, but amidst his greening
Grey were the days of the hidden sun;
Fair was the summer, but overweening,
So soon his o'er-sweet days were done.

Come then, love, for peace is upon us,
Far off is failing, and far is fear,
Here where the rest in the end hath won us,
In the garnering tide of the happy year.

Come from the grey old house by the water,
Where, far from the lips of the hungry sea,
Green groweth the grass o'er the field of the slaughter,
And all is a tale for thee and me.

So Hallblithe did on his raiment and went into the hall; and when those three saw him they smiled upon him kindly and greeted him; and the noble man at the board said: "Thanks have thou, O Warrior of the Raven, for thy help in our need: thy reward from us shall not be lacking."

Then the brown-haired man came up to him, and clapped him on the back and said to him: "Brisk man of the Raven, good is thy help at need; even so shall be mine to thee henceforward."

But the young man stepped up to him lightly, and cast his arms about him, and kissed him, and said: "O friend and fellow, who knoweth but I may one day help thee as thou hast holpen me; though thou art one who by seeming mayst well help thyself. And now mayst thou be as merry as I am to-day!"

Then they all three cried out joyously: "It is the Land! It is the Land!"

So Hallblithe knew that these men were the two elders and the sad man of yesterday, and that they had renewed their youth.

Joyously now did those men break their fast; nor did Hallblithe make any grim countenance, for he thought: "That which these dotards and drivellers have been mighty enough to find, shall I not be mighty enough to flee from."

Breakfast done, the seekers made little delay, so eager as they were to behold the King, and to have handsel of their new sweet life. So they got them ready to depart, and the once-captain said: "Art thou able to lead us to the King, O Raven-son, or must we seek another man to do so much for us?"

Said Hallblithe: "I am able to lead you so nigh unto Wood-end (where, as I deem, the King abideth) that ye shall not miss him."

Therewith they went to the door, and the Warden unlocked to them, and spake no word to them when they departed, though they thanked him kindly for the giving; when they were without the garth, the young man fell to running about the meadow plucking great handfuls of the rich flowers that grew about, singing and carolling the while. But he who had been king looked up and down and round about, and said at last: "Where be the horses and the men?"

But his fellow with the red beard said: "Raven-son, in this land when they journey, what do they as to riding or going afoot?"

Said Hallblithe: "Fair fellows, ye shall wot that in this land folk go afoot for
the most part, both men and women; whereas they weary but little, and are in no haste."

Then the once-captain clapped the once-king on the shoulder, and said: "Hearken, lord, and delay no longer, but gird up thy gown, since here is no mare's son to help thee: for fair is to-day that lies before us, with many a fair new day beyond it."

So Hallblithe led the way inward, thinking of many things, yet but little of his fellows. Albeit they, and the younger man especially, were of many words; for this black-haired man had many questions to ask, chiefly concerning the women, what they were like to look on, and of what mood they were. Hallblithe answered thereto as long as he might, but at last he laughed and said: "Friend, forbear thy questions now; for me seemeth in a few hours thou shalt be as wise hereon as the God of Love himself."

So they made diligence along the road, and all was tidingless till on the second day at even they came to the first house off the waste. They then had good welcome, and slept. But on the morrow when they arose, Hallblithe spake to the seekers, and said: "Now are things much changed betwixt us since the time when we first met: for then I had all my desire, as I thought, and ye had but one desire, and well nigh lacked hope of its fulfilment. Whereas now the lack hath left you and come to me. Wherefore even as time agone ye might abide but one night at the House of the Raven, so hard as your desire lay on you; even so it fareth with me to-day, that I am consumed with my desire, and I may not abide with you; lest that befall which befalleth betwixt the full man and the fasting. Wherefore now I bless you and depart."

They abounded in words of good-will to him, and the once-king said: "Abide with us, and we shall see to it that thou have all dignities that a man may think of."

And the once-captain said: "Lo, here is mine hand that hath been mighty; never shalt thou lack it for the accomplishment of thine uttermost desire. Abide with us."

Lastly said the young man: "Abide with us, Son of the Raven! Set thine heart on a fair woman, yea even were it the fairest; and I will get her for thee, yea, even were my desire set on her."

But he smiled on them, and shook his head, and said: "All hail to you! but mine errand is yet undone." And therewith he departed.

He skirted Wood-end and came not to it, but got him down to the side of the sea, not far from where he first came aland, but somewhat south of it. A fair oak-wood came down close to the beach of the sea; it was some four miles end-long and over-wart. Thither Hallblithe betook him, and in a day or two got him wood-wright's tools from a house of men a little outside the wood, three miles from the sea-shore. Then he set to work and built him a little frame-house on a lawn of the wood beside a clear stream; for he was a very deft wood-wright. Withal he made him a bow and arrows, and shot what he would of the fowl and the deer for his livelihood; and folk from that house and otherwhence came to see him, and brought him bread and wine and spicery and other matters which he needed. And the days wore, and men got used to him, and loved him as if he had been a rare image which had been brought to that land for its adornment; and now they no longer called him the Spearman, but the Wood-lover. And as for him, he took all in patience, abiding what the lapse of days should bring forth.

(To be continued.)