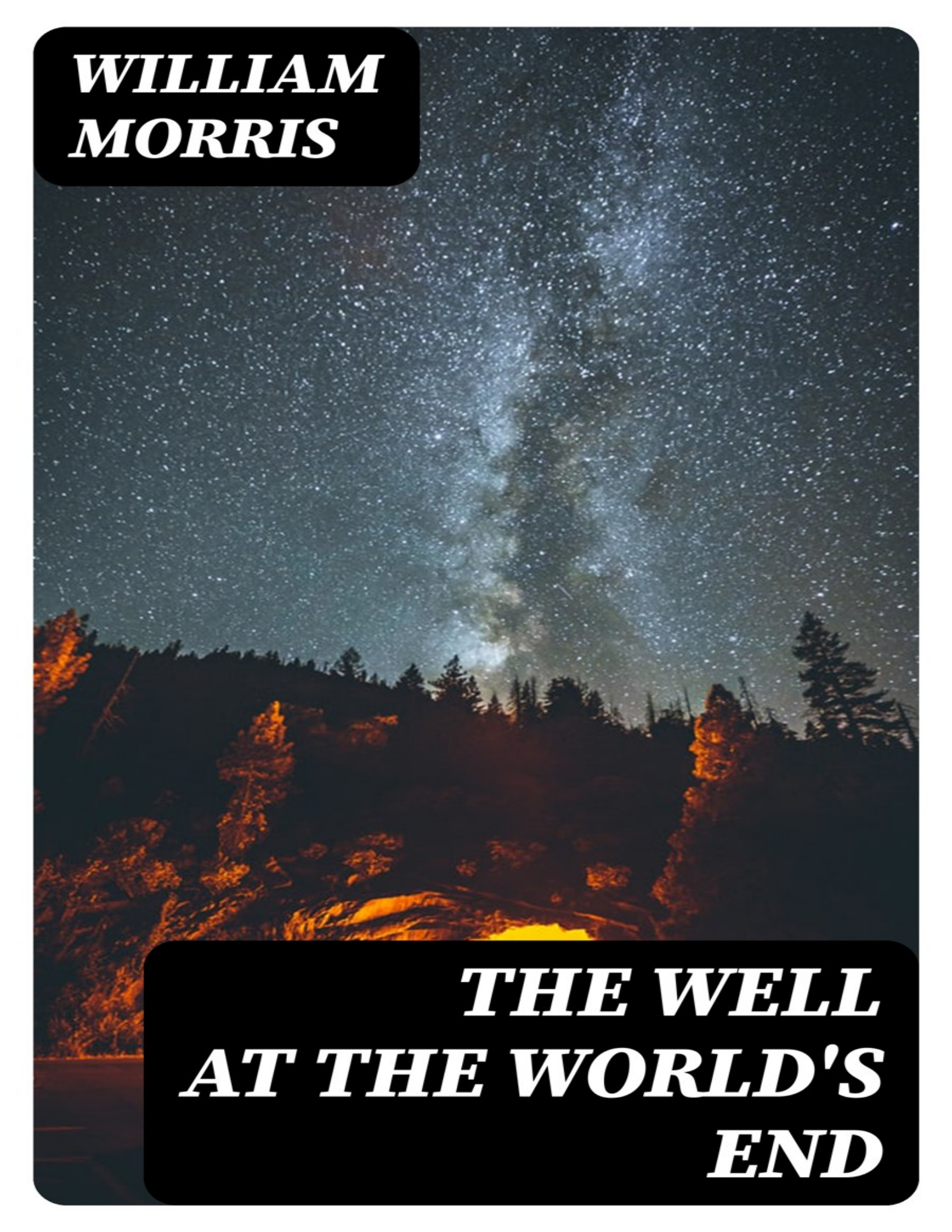




***WILLIAM
MORRIS***

***THE WELL
AT THE WORLD'S
END***

William Morris

The Well at the World's End

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BOOK ONE

The Road Unto Love

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CHAPTER 1

The Sundering of the Ways

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Long ago there was a little land, over which ruled a regulus or kinglet, who was called King Peter, though his kingdom was but little. He had four sons whose names were Blaise, Hugh, Gregory and Ralph: of these Ralph was the youngest, whereas he was but of twenty winters and one; and Blaise was the oldest and had seen thirty winters.

Now it came to this at last, that to these young men the kingdom of their father seemed strait; and they longed to see the ways of other men, and to strive for life. For though they were king's sons, they had but little world's wealth; save and except good meat and drink, and enough or too much thereof; house-room of the best; friends to be merry with, and maidens to kiss, and these also as good as might be; freedom withal to come and go as they would; the heavens above them, the earth to bear them up, and the meadows and acres, the woods and fair streams, and the little hills of Upmeads, for that was the name of their country and the kingdom of King Peter.

So having nought but this little they longed for much; and that the more because, king's sons as they were, they had but scant dominion save over their horses and dogs: for the men of that country were stubborn and sturdy vavassors, and might not away with masterful doings, but were like to pay back a blow with a blow, and a foul word

with a buffet. So that, all things considered, it was little wonder if King Peter's sons found themselves straitened in their little land: wherein was no great merchant city; no mighty castle, or noble abbey of monks: nought but fair little halls of yeomen, with here and there a franklin's court or a shield-knight's manor-house; with many a goodly church, and whiles a house of good canons, who knew not the road to Rome, nor how to find the door of the Chancellor's house.

So these young men wearied their father and mother a long while with telling them of their weariness, and their longing to be gone: till at last on a fair and hot afternoon of June King Peter rose up from the carpet which the Prior of St. John's by the Bridge had given him (for he had been sleeping thereon amidst the grass of his orchard after his dinner) and he went into the hall of his house, which was called the High House of Upmeads, and sent for his four sons to come to him. And they came and stood before his high-seat and he said:

"Sons, ye have long wearied me with words concerning your longing for travel on the roads; now if ye verily wish to be gone, tell me when would ye take your departure if ye had your choice?"

They looked at one another, and the three younger ones nodded at Blaise the eldest: so he began, and said: "Saving the love and honour that we have for thee, and also for our mother, we would be gone at once, even with the noon's meat still in our bellies. But thou art the lord in this land, and thou must rule. Have I said well, brethren?" And they all said "Yea, yea." Then said the king; "Good! now is the sun

high and hot; yet if ye ride softly ye may come to some good harbour before nightfall without foundering your horses. So come ye in an hour's space to the Four-want-way, and there and then will I order your departure."

The young men were full of joy when they heard his word; and they departed and went this way and that, gathering such small matters as each deemed that he needed, and which he might lightly carry with him; then they armed themselves, and would bid the squires bring them their horses; but men told them that the said squires had gone their ways already to the Want-way by the king's commandment: so thither they went at once a-foot all four in company, laughing and talking together merrily.

It must be told that this Want-way aforesaid was but four furlongs from the House, which lay in an ingle of the river called Upmeads Water amongst very fair meadows at the end of the upland tillage; and the land sloped gently up toward the hill-country and the unseen mountains on the north; but to the south was a low ridge which ran along the water, as it wound along from west to east. Beyond the said ridge, at a place whence you could see the higher hills to the south, that stretched mainly east and west also, there was presently an end of the Kingdom of Upmeads, though the neighbours on that side were peaceable and friendly, and were wont to send gifts to King Peter. But toward the north beyond the Want-way King Peter was lord over a good stretch of land, and that of the best; yet was he never a rich man, for he had no freedom to tax and tail his folk, nor forsooth would he have used it if he had; for he was no ill man, but kindly and of measure. On these northern marches

there was war at whiles, whereas they ended in a great forest well furnished of trees; and this wood was debateable, and King Peter and his sons rode therein at their peril: but great plenty was therein of all wild deer, as hart, and buck, and roe, and swine, and bears and wolves withal. The lord on the other side thereof was a mightier man than King Peter, albeit he was a bishop, and a baron of Holy Church. To say sooth he was a close-fist and a manslayer; though he did his manslaying through his vicars, the knights and men-at-arms who held their manors of him, or whom he waged.

In that forest had King Peter's father died in battle, and his eldest son also; therefore, being a man of peace, he rode therein but seldom, though his sons, the three eldest of them, had both ridden therein and ran therefrom valiantly. As for Ralph the youngest, his father would not have him ride the Wood Debateable as yet.

So came those young men to the Want-ways, and found their father sitting there on a heap of stones, and over against him eight horses, four destriers, and four hackneys, and four squires withal. So they came and stood before their father, waiting for his word, and wondering what it would be.

Now spake King Peter: "Fair sons, ye would go on all adventure to seek a wider land, and a more stirring life than ye may get of me at home: so be it! But I have bethought me, that, since I am growing old and past the age of getting children, one of you, my sons, must abide at home to cherish me and your mother, and to lead our carles in war if trouble falleth upon us. Now I know not how to choose by

mine own wit which of you shall ride and which abide. For so it is that ye are diverse of your conditions; but the evil conditions which one of you lacks the other hath, and the valiancy which one hath, the other lacks. Blaise is wise and prudent, but no great man of his hands. Hugh is a stout rider and lifter, but headstrong and foolhardy, and over bounteous a skinker; and Gregory is courteous and many worded, but sluggish in deed; though I will not call him a dastard. As for Ralph, he is fair to look on, and peradventure he may be as wise as Blaise, as valiant as Hugh, and as smooth-tongued as Gregory; but of all this we know little or nothing, whereas he is but young and untried. Yet may he do better than you others, and I deem that he will do so. All things considered, then, I say, I know not how to choose between you, my sons; so let luck choose for me, and ye shall draw cuts for your roads; and he that draweth longest shall go north, and the next longest shall go east, and the third straw shall send the drawer west; but as to him who draweth the shortest cut, he shall go no whither but back again to my house, there to abide with me the chances and changes of life; and it is most like that this one shall sit in my chair when I am gone, and be called King of Upmeads.

"Now, my sons, doth this ordinance please you? For if so be it doth not, then may ye all abide at home, and eat of my meat, and drink of my cup, but little chided either for sloth or misdoing, even as it hath been aforetime."

The young men looked at one another, and Blaise answered and said: "Sir, as for me I say we will do after your commandment, to take what road luck may show us, or to turn back home again." They all yeasaid this one after the

other; and then King Peter said: "Now before I draw the cuts, I shall tell you that I have appointed the squires to go with each one of you. Richard the Red shall go with Blaise; for though he be somewhat stricken in years, and wise, yet is he a fierce carle and a doughty, and knoweth well all feats of arms.

"Lancelot Longtongue shall be squire to Hugh; for he is good of seeming and can compass all courtesy, and knoweth logic (though it be of the law and not of the schools), yet is he a proper man of his hands; as needs must he be who followeth Hugh; for where is Hugh, there is trouble and debate.

"Clement the Black shall serve Gregory: for he is a careful carle, and speaketh one word to every ten deeds that he doeth; whether they be done with point and edge, or with the hammer in the smithy.

"Lastly, I have none left to follow thee, Ralph, save Nicholas Longshanks; but though he hath more words than I have, yet hath he more wisdom, and is a man lettered and far-travelled, and loveth our house right well.

"How say ye, sons, is this to your liking?"

They all said "yea." Then quoth the king; "Nicholas, bring hither the straws ready dight, and I will give them my sons to draw."

So each young man came up in turn and drew; and King Peter laid the straws together and looked at them, and said:

"Thus it is, Hugh goeth north with Lancelot, Gregory westward with Clement." He stayed a moment and then said: "Blaise fareth eastward and Richard with him. As for thee, Ralph my dear son, thou shalt back with me and abide

in my house and I shall see thee day by day; and thou shalt help me to live my last years happily in all honour; and thy love shall be my hope, and thy valiancy my stay."

Therewith he arose and threw his arm about the young man's neck; but he shrank away a little from his father, and his face grew troubled; and King Peter noted that, and his countenance fell, and he said:

"Nay nay, my son; grudge not thy brethren the chances of the road, and the ill-hap of the battle. Here at least for thee is the bounteous board and the full cup, and the love of kindred and well-willers, and the fellowship of the folk. O well is thee, my son, and happy shalt thou be!"

But the young man knit his brows and said no word in answer.

Then came forward those three brethren who were to fare at all adventure, and they stood before the old man saying nought. Then he laughed and said: "O ho, my sons! Here in Upmeads have ye all ye need without money, but when ye fare in the outlands ye need money; is it not a lack of yours that your pouches be bare? Abide, for I have seen to it."

Therewith he drew out of his pouch three little bags, and said; "Take ye each one of these; for therein is all that my treasury may shed as now. In each of these is there coined money, both white and red, and some deal of gold uncoined, and of rings and brooches a few, and by estimation there is in each bag the same value reckoned in lawful silver of Upmeads and the Wolds and the Overhill-Countries. Take up each what there is, and do the best ye may therewith."

Then each took his bag, and kissed and embraced his father; and they kissed Ralph and each other, and so got to horse and departed with their squires, going softly because of the hot sun. But Nicholas slowly mounted his hackney and led Ralph's war-horse with him home again to King Peter's House.

CHAPTER 2

Ralph Goeth Back Home to the High House

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Ralph and King Peter walked slowly home together, and as they went King Peter fell to telling of how in his young days he rode in the Wood Debateable, and was belated there all alone, and happed upon men who were outlaws and wolfheads, and feared for his life; but they treated him kindly, and honoured him, and saw him safe on his way in the morning. So that never thereafter would he be art and part with those who hunted outlaws to slay them. "For," said he, "it is with these men as with others, that they make prey of folk; yet these for the more part prey on the rich, and the lawful prey on the poor. Otherwise it is with these wolfheads as with lords and knights and franklins, that as there be bad amongst them, so also there be good; and the good ones I happed on, and so may another man."

Hereto paid Ralph little heed at that time, since he had heard the tale and its morality before, and that more than once; and moreover his mind was set upon his own matters and these was he pondering. Albeit perchance the words abode with him. So came they to the House, and Ralph's mother, who was a noble dame, and well-liking as for her years, which were but little over fifty, stood in the hall-door to see which of her sons should come back to her, and when she saw them coming together, she went up to them, and cast her arms about Ralph and kissed him and caressed him

—being exceedingly glad that it was he and not one of the others who had returned to dwell with them; for he was her best-beloved, as was little marvel, seeing that he was by far the fairest and the most loving. But Ralph's face grew troubled again in his mother's arms, for he loved her exceedingly well; and forsooth he loved the whole house and all that dwelt there, down to the turnspit dogs in the chimney ingle, and the swallows that nested in the earthen bottles, which when he was little he had seen his mother put up in the eaves of the out-bowers: but now, love or no love, the spur was in his side, and he must needs hasten as fate would have him. However, when he had disentangled himself from his mother's caresses, he enforced himself to keep a cheerful countenance, and upheld it the whole evening through, and was by seeming merry at supper, and went to bed singing.

CHAPTER 3

Ralph Cometh to the Cheaping-Town

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He slept in an upper chamber in a turret of the House, which chamber was his own, and none might meddle with it. There the next day he awoke in the dawning, and arose and clad himself, and took his wargear and his sword and spear, and bore all away without doors to the side of the Ford in that ingle of the river, and laid it for a while in a little willow copse, so that no chance-comer might see it; then he went back to the stable of the House and took his destrier from the stall (it was a dapple-grey horse called Falcon, and was right good,) and brought him down to the said willow copse, and tied him to a tree till he had armed himself amongst the willows, whence he came forth presently as brisk-looking and likely a man-at-arms as you might see on a summer day. Then he clomb up into the saddle, and went his ways splashing across the ford, before the sun had arisen, while the throstle-cocks were yet amidst their first song.

Then he rode on a little trot south away; and by then the sun was up he was without the bounds of Upmeads; albeit in the land thereabout dwelt none who were not friends to King Peter and his sons: and that was well, for now were folk stirring and were abroad in the fields; as a band of carles going with their scythes to the hay-field; or a maiden with her milking-pails going to her kine, barefoot through the seeding grass; or a company of noisy little lads on their way

to the nearest pool of the stream that they might bathe in the warm morning after the warm night. All these and more knew him and his armour and Falcon his horse, and gave him the sele of the day, and he was nowise troubled at meeting them; for besides that they thought it no wonder to meet one of the lords of Upmeads going armed about his errands, their own errands were close at home, and it was little likely that they should go that day so far as to Upmeads Water, seeing that it ran through the meadows a half-score miles to the north-ward.

So Ralph rode on, and came into the high road, that led one way back again into Upmeads, and crossed the Water by a fair bridge late builded between King Peter and a house of Canons on the north side, and the other way into a good cheaping-town hight Wulstead, beyond which Ralph knew little of the world which lay to the south, and seemed to him a wondrous place, full of fair things and marvellous adventures.

So he rode till he came into the town when the fair morning was still young, the first mass over, and maids gathered about the fountain amidst the market-place, and two or three dames sitting under the buttercross. Ralph rode straight up to the house of a man whom he knew, and had often given him guesting there, and he himself was not seldom seen in the High House of Upmeads. This man was a merchant, who went and came betwixt men's houses, and bought and sold many things needful and pleasant to folk, and King Peter dealt with him much and often. Now he stood in the door of his house, which was new and goodly, sniffing the sweet scents which the morning wind bore into the

town; he was clad in a goodly long gown of grey welted with silver, of thin cloth meet for the summer-tide: for little he wrought with his hands, but much with his tongue; he was a man of forty summers, ruddy-faced and black-bearded, and he was called Clement Chapman.

When he saw Ralph he smiled kindly on him, and came and held his stirrup as he lighted down, and said: "Welcome, lord! Art thou come to give me a message, and eat and drink in a poor huckster's house, and thou armed so gallantly?"

Ralph laughed merrily, for he was hungry, and he said: "Yea, I will eat and drink with thee and kiss my gossip, and go my ways."

Therewith the carle led him into the house; and if it were goodly without, within it was better. For there was a fair chamber panelled with wainscot well carven, and a cupboard of no sorry vessels of silver and latten: the chairs and stools as fair as might be; no king's might be better: the windows were glazed, and there were flowers and knots and posies in them; and the bed was hung with goodly web from over sea such as the soldan useth. Also, whereas the chapman's ware-bowers were hard by the chamber, there was a pleasant mingled smell therefrom floating about. The table was set with meat and drink and vessel of pewter and earth, all fair and good; and thereby stood the chapman's wife, a very goodly woman of two-score years, who had held Ralph at the font when she was a slim damsel new wedded; for she was come of no mean kindred of the Kingdom of Upmeads: her name was Dame Katherine.

Now she kissed Ralph's cheek friendly, and said: "Welcome, gossip! thou art here in good time to break thy fast; and we will give thee a trim dinner thereafter, when thou hast been here and there in the town and done thine errand; and then shalt thou drink a cup and sing me a song, and so home again in the cool of the evening."

Ralph seemed a little troubled at her word, and he said: "Nay, gossip, though I thank thee for all these good things as though I had them, yet must I ride away south straightway after I have breakfasted, and said one word to the goodman. Goodman, how call ye the next town southward, and how far is it thither?"

Quoth Clement: "My son, what hast thou to do with riding south? As thou wottest, going hence south ye must presently ride the hill-country; and that is no safe journey for a lonely man, even if he be a doughty knight like to thee, lord."

Said Ralph, reddening withal: "I have an errand that way."

"An errand of King Peter's or thine own?" said Clement.

"Of King Peter's, if ye must wot," said Ralph.

Clement were no chapman had he not seen that the lad was lying; so he said:

"Fair lord, saving your worship, how would it be as to the speeding of King Peter's errand, if I brought thee before our mayor, and swore the peace against thee; so that I might keep thee in courteous prison till I had sent to thy father of thy whereabouts?"

The young man turned red with anger; but ere he could speak Dame Katherine said sharply: "Hold thy peace, Clement! What hast thou to meddle or make in the matter?"

If our young lord hath will to ride out and see the world, why should we let him? Yea, why should his father let him, if it come to that? Take my word for it that my gossip shall go through the world and come back to those that love him, as goodly as he went forth. And hold! here is for a token thereof."

Therewith she went to an ark that stood in the corner, and groped in the till thereof and brought out a little necklace of blue and green stones with gold knobs betwixt, like a pair of beads; albeit neither pope nor priest had blessed them; and tied to the necklace was a little box of gold with something hidden therein. This gaud she gave to Ralph, and said to him: "Gossip, wear this about thy neck, and let no man take it from thee, and I think it will be salvation to thee in peril, and good luck to thee in the time of questing; so that it shall be to thee as if thou hadst drunk of the WELL AT THE WORLD'S END."

"What is that water?" said Ralph, "and how may I find it?"

"I know not rightly," she said, "but if a body might come by it, I hear say it saveth from weariness and wounding and sickness; and it winneth love from all, and maybe life everlasting. Hast thou not heard tell of it, my husband?"

"Yea," said the chapman, "many times; and how that whoso hath drunk thereof hath the tongue that none may withstand, whether in buying or selling, or prevailing over the hearts of men in any wise. But as for its wherabouts, ye shall not find it in these parts. Men say that it is beyond the Dry Tree; and that is afar, God wot! But now, lord Ralph, I rede thee go back again this evening with Andrew, my nephew, for company: forsooth, he will do little less gainful

than riding with thee to Upmeads than if he abide in Wulstead; for he is idle. But, my lord, take it not amiss that I spake about the mayor and the tipstaves; for it was but a jest, as thou mayest well wot."

Ralph's face cleared at that word, and he stood smiling, weighing the chaplet in his hand; but Dame Katherine said:

"Dear gossip, do it on speedily; for it is a gift from me unto thee: and from a gossip even king's sons may take a gift."

Quoth Ralph: "But is it lawful to wear it? is there no wizardry within it?"

"Hearken to him!" she said, "and how like unto a man he speaketh; if there were a brawl in the street, he would strike in and ask no word thereof, not even which were the better side: whereas here is my falcon-chick frightened at a little gold box and a pair of Saracen beads."

"Well," quoth Ralph, "the first holy man I meet shall bless them for me."

"That shall he not," said the dame, "that shall he not. Who wotteth what shall betide to thee or me if he do so? Come, do them on, and then to table! For seest thou not that the goodman is wearying for meat? and even thine eyes will shine the brighter for a mouthful, king's son and gossip."

She took him by the hand and did the beads on his neck and kissed and fondled him before he sat down, while the goodman looked on, grinning rather sheepishly, but said nought to them; and only called on his boy to lead the destrier to stable. So when they were set down, the chapman took up the word where it had been dropped, and

said: "So, Lord Ralph, thou must needs take to adventures, being, as thou deemest, full grown. That is all one as the duck taketh to water despite of the hen that hath hatched her. Well, it was not to be thought that Upmeads would hold you lords much longer. Or what is gone with my lords your brethren?"

Said Ralph: "They have departed at all adventure, north, east, and west, each bearing our father's blessing and a bag of pennies. And to speak the truth, goodman, for I perceive I am no doctor at lying, my father and mother would have me stay at home when my brethren were gone, and that liketh me not; therefore am I come out to seek my luck in the world: for Upmeads is good for a star-gazer, maybe, or a simpler, or a priest, or a worthy good carle of the fields, but not for a king's son with the blood running hot in his veins. Or what sayest thou, gossip?"

Quoth the dame: "I could weep for thy mother; but for thee nought at all. It is good that thou shouldest do thy will in the season of youth and the days of thy pleasure. Yea, and I deem that thou shalt come back again great and worshipful; and I am called somewhat foreseeing. Only look to it that thou keep the pretty thing that I have just given thee."

"Well," said the chapman, "this is fine talk about pleasure and the doing of one's will; nevertheless a whole skin is good wares, though it be not to be cheapened in any market of the world. Now, lord, go thou where thou wilt, whether I say go or abide; and forsooth I am no man of King Peter's, that I should stay thee. As for the name of the next town, it is called Higham-on-the-Way, and is a big town plenteous of

victuals, with strong walls and a castle, and a very rich abbey of monks: and there is peace within its walls, because the father abbot wages a many men to guard him and his, and to uphold his rights against all comers; wherein he doth wisely, and also well. For much folk flocketh to his town and live well therein; and there is great recourse of chapmen thither. No better market is there betwixt this and Babylon. Well, Sir Ralph, I rede thee if thou comest unhurt to Higham-on-the-Way, go no further for this time, but take service with the lord abbot, and be one of his men of war; thou may'st then become his captain if thou shouldest live; which would be no bad adventure for one who cometh from Upmeads."

Ralph looked no brighter for this word, and he answered nought to it: but said presently:

"And what is to be looked for beyond Higham if one goeth further? Dost thou know the land any further?"

The carle smiled: "Yea forsooth, and down to the Wood Perilous, and beyond it, and the lands beyond the Wood; and far away through them. I say not that I have been to the Dry Tree; but I have spoken to one who hath heard of him who hath seen it; though he might not come by a draught of the Well at the World's End."

Ralph's eyes flashed, and his cheeks reddened as he listened hereto; but he spake quietly:

"Master Clement, how far dost thou make it to Higham-on-the-Way?"

"A matter of forty miles," said the Chapman; "because, as thou wottest, if ye ride south from hence, ye shall presently bring your nose up against the big downs, and must needs climb them at once; and when ye are at the top

of Bear Hill, and look south away ye shall see nought but downs on downs with never a road to call a road, and never a castle, or church, or homestead: nought but some shepherd's hut; or at the most the little house of a holy man with a little chapel thereby in some swelly of the chalk, where the water hath trickled into a pool; for otherwise the place is waterless." Therewith he took a long pull at the tankard by his side, and went on:

"Higham is beyond all that, and out into the fertile plain; and a little river hight Coldlake windeth about the meadows there; and it is a fair land; though look you the wool of the downs is good, good, good! I have foison of this year's fleeces with me. Ye shall raise none such in Upmeads."

Ralph sat silent a little, as if pondering, and then he started up and said: "Good master Clement, we have eaten thy meat and thank thee for that and other matters. Wilt thou now be kinder, and bid thy boy bring round Falcon our horse; for we have far to go, and must begone straight-away."

"Yea, lord," said Clement, "even so will I do." And he muttered under his breath; "Thou talkest big, my lad, with thy 'we'; but thou art pressed lest Nicholas be here presently to fetch thee back; and to say sooth I would his hand were on thy shoulder even now."

Then he spake aloud again, and said:

"I must now begone to my lads, and I will send one round with thy war-horse. But take my rede, my lord, and become the man of the Abbot of St. Mary's of Higham, and all will be well."

Therewith he edged himself out of the chamber, and the dame fell to making a mighty clatter with the vessel and trenchers and cups on the board, while Ralph walked up and down the chamber his war-gear jingling upon him. Presently the dame left her table-clatter and came up to Ralph and looked kindly into his face and said: "Gossip, hast thou perchance any money?"

He flushed up red, and then his face fell; yet he spake gaily: "Yea, gossip, I have both white and red: there are three golden crowns in my pouch, and a little flock of silver pennies: forsooth I say not as many as would reach from here to Upmeads, if they were laid one after the other."

She smiled and patted his cheek, and said:

"Thou art no very prudent child, king's son. But it comes into my mind that my master did not mean thee to go away empty-handed; else had he not departed and left us twain together."

Therewith she went to the credence that stood in a corner, and opened a drawer therein and took out a little bag, and gave it into Ralph's hand, and said: "This is the gift of the gossip; and thou mayst take it without shame; all the more because if thy father had been a worser man, and a harder lord he would have had more to give thee. But now thou hast as much or more as any one of thy brethren."

He took the bag smiling and shame-faced, but she looked on him fondly and said:

"Now I know not whether I shall lay old Nicholas on thine heels when he cometh after thee, as come he will full surely; or whether I shall suffer the old sleuth-hound nose out thy slot of himself, as full surely he will set on to it."

"Thou mightest tell him," said Ralph, "that I am gone to take service with the Abbot of St. Mary's of Higham: hah?"

She laughed and said: "Wilt thou do so, lord, and follow the rede of that goodman of mine, who thinketh himself as wise as Solomon?"

Ralph smiled and answered her nothing.

"Well," she said, "I shall say what likes me when the hour is at hand. Lo, here! thine horse. Abide yet a moment of time, and then go whither thou needs must, like the wind of the summer day."

Therewith she went out of the chamber and came back again with a scrip which she gave to Ralph and said: "Herein is a flask of drink for the waterless country, and a little meat for the way. Fare thee well, gossip! Little did I look for it when I rose up this morning and nothing irked me save the dulness of our town, and the littleness of men's doings therein, that I should have to cut off a piece of my life from me this morning, and say, farewell gossip, as now again I do."

Therewith she kissed him on either cheek and embraced him; and it might be said of her and him that she let him go thereafter; for though as aforesaid he loved her, and praised her kindness, he scarce understood the eagerness of her love for him; whereas moreover she saw him not so often betwixt Upmeads and Wulstead: and belike she herself scarce understood it. Albeit she was a childless woman.

So when he had got to horse, she watched him riding a moment, and saw how he waved his hand to her as he turned the corner of the market-place, and how a knot of lads and lasses stood staring on him after she lost sight of

him. Then she turned her back into the chamber and laid her head on the table and wept. Then came in the goodman quietly and stood by her and she heeded him not. He stood grinning curiously on her awhile, and then laid his hand on her shoulder, and said as she raised her face to him:

"Sweetheart, it availeth nought; when thou wert young and exceeding fair, he was but a little babe, and thou wert looking in those days to have babes of thine own; and then it was too soon: and now that he is such a beauteous young man, and a king's son withal, and thou art wedded to a careful carle of no weak heart, and thou thyself art more than two-score years old, it is too late. Yet thou didst well to give our lord the money. Lo! here is wherewithal to fill up the lack in thy chest; and here is a toy for thee in place of the pair of beads thou gavest him; and I bid thee look on it as if I had given him my share of the money and the beads."

She turned to Clement, and took the bag of money, and the chaplet which he held out to her, and she said: "God wot thou art no ill man, my husband, but would God I had a son like to him!"

She still wept somewhat; but the chapman said: "Let it rest there, sweetheart! let it rest there! It may be a year or twain before thou seest him again: and then belike he shall be come back with some woman whom he loves better than any other; and who knows but in a way he may deem himself our son. Meanwhile thou hast done well, sweetheart, so be glad."

Therewith he kissed her and went his ways to his merchandize, and she to the ordering of her house, grieved but not unhappy.

CHAPTER 4

Ralph Rideth the Downs

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As for Ralph, he rode on with a merry heart, and presently came to an end of the plain country, and the great downs rose up before him with a white road winding up to the top of them. Just before the slopes began to rise was a little thorp beside a stream, and thereby a fair church and a little house of Canons: so Ralph rode toward the church to see if therein were an altar of St. Nicholas, who was his good lord and patron, that he might ask of him a blessing on his journey. But as he came up to the churchyard-gate he saw a great black horse tied thereto as if abiding some one; and as he lighted down from his saddle he saw a man coming hastily from out the church-door and striding swiftly toward the said gate. He was a big man, and armed; for he had a bright steel sallet on his head, which covered his face all save the end of his chin; and plates he had on his legs and arms. He wore a green coat over his armour, and thereon was wrought in gold an image of a tree leafless: he had a little steel axe about his neck, and a great sword hung by his side. Ralph stood looking on him with his hand on the latch of the gate, but when the man came thereto he tore it open roughly and shoved through at once, driving Ralph back, so that he well-nigh overset him, and so sprang to his horse and swung himself into the saddle, just as Ralph steadied himself and ruffled up to him, half drawing his