

But while they were busied herein they saw a man come out of the house, and down to the river to meet them; and they soon saw that he was tall and old, long-hoary of hair and beard, and clad mostly in the skins of beasts.

He drew nigh without any fear or mistrust, and coming close to them gave them the sele of the day in a kindly and pleasant voice. The shipmaster greeted him in his turn, and said withal: "Old man, art thou the king of this country?"

The elder laughed; "It hath had none other a long while," said he; "and at least there is no other son of Adam here to gainsay."

"Thou art alone here then?" said the master.

"Yea," said the old man; "save for the beasts of the field and the wood, and the creeping things, and fowl. Wherefore it is sweet to me to hear your voices."

Said the master: "Where be the other houses of the town?"

The old man laughed. Said he: "When I said that I was alone, I meant that I was alone in the land and not only alone in this stead. There is no house save this betwixt the sea and the dwellings of the Bears, over the cliff-wall yonder, yea and a long way over it."

"Yea," quoth the shipmaster grinning, "and be the bears of thy country so manlike, that they dwell in builded houses?"

The old man shook his head. "Sir," said he, "as to their bodily fashion, it is altogether manlike, save that they be one and all higher and bigger than most. For they be bears only in name; they be a nation of half wild men; for I have been told by them that there be many more than that tribe whose folk I have seen, and that they spread wide about behind these mountains from east to west. Now, sir, as to their souls and understandings I warrant them not; for miscreants they be, trowing neither in God nor his hallows."

Said the master: "Trow they in Mahound then?"

"Nay," said the elder, "I wot not for sure that they have so much as a false God; though I have it from them that they worship a certain woman with mickle worship."

Then spake Walter: "Yea, good sir, and how knowest thou that? dost thou deal with them at all?"

Said the old man: "Whiles some of that folk come hither and have of me what I can spare; a calf or two, or a half-dozen of lambs or hoggets; or a skin of wine or cyder of mine own making; and they give me in return such things as I can use, as skins of hart and bear and other peltries; for now I am old, I can but little of the hunting hereabout. Whiles, also, they bring little lumps of pure copper, and would give me gold also, but it is of little use in this lonely land. Sooth to say, to me they are not masterful or rough-handed; but glad am I that they have been here but of late, and are not like to come again this while; for terrible they are of aspect, and whereas ye be aliens, belike they would not hold their hands from off you; and moreover ye have weapons and other matters which they would covet sorely."

Quoth the master: "Since thou dealest with these wild men, will ye not deal with us in chaffer? For whereas we are come from long travel, we hanker after fresh victual, and here aboard are many things which were for thine avail."

Said the old man: "All that I have is yours, so that ye do but leave me enough till my next ingathering: of wine and cyder, such as it is, I have plenty for your service; ye may

drink it till it is all gone, if ye will: a little corn and meal I have, but not much; yet are ye welcome thereto, since the standing corn in my garth is done blossoming, and I have other meat. Cheeses have I and dried fish; take what ye will thereof. But as to my neat and sheep, if ye have sore need of any, and will have them, I may not say you nay: but I pray you if ye may do without them, not to take my milch-beasts or their engenderers; for, as ye have heard me say, the Bear-folk have been here but of late, and they have had of me all I might spare: but now let me tell you, if ye long after flesh-meat, that there is venison of hart and hind, yea, and of buck and doe, to be had on this plain, and about the little woods at the feet of the rock-wall yonder: neither are they exceeding wild; for since I may not take them, I scare them not, and no other man do they see to hurt them; for the Bear-folk come straight to my house, and fare straight home thence. But I will lead you the nighest way to where the venison is easiest to be gotten. As to the wares in your ship, if ye will give me aught I will take it with a good will; and chiefly if ye have a fair knife or two and a roll of linen cloth, that were a good refreshment to me. But in any case what I have to give is free to you and welcome.”

The shipmaster laughed: “Friend,” said he, “we can thee mickle thanks for all that thou biddest us. And wot well that we be no lifters or sea-thieves to take thy livelihood from thee. So to-morrow, if thou wilt, we will go with thee and upraise the hunt, and meanwhile we will come aland, and walk on the green grass, and water our ship with thy good fresh water.”

So the old carle went back to his house to make them ready what cheer he might, and the shipmen, who were twenty and one, all told, what with the mariners and Arnold and Walter’s servants, went ashore, all but two who watched the ship and abode their turn. They went well-weaponed, for both the master and Walter deemed wariness wisdom, lest all might not be so good as it seemed. They took of their sail-cloths ashore and tilted them in on the meadow betwixt the house and the ship, and the carle brought them what he had for their avail, of fresh fruits, and cheeses, and milk, and wine, and cyder, and honey, and there they feasted nowise ill, and were right fain.

Chapter VI: The old man tells walter of himself. walter sees a shard in the cliff-wall

But when they had done their meat and drink the master and the shipmen went about the watering of the ship, and the others strayed off along the meadow, so that presently Walter was left alone with the carle, and fell to speech with him and said: "Father, meseemeth thou shouldest have some strange tale to tell, and as yet we have asked thee of nought save meat for our bellies: now if I ask thee concerning thy life, and how thou camest hither, and abided here, wilt thou tell me aught?"

The old man smiled on him and said: "Son, my tale were long to tell; and mayhappen concerning much thereof my memory should fail me; and withal there is grief therein, which I were loth to awaken: nevertheless if thou ask, I will answer as I may, and in any case will tell thee nought save the truth."

Said Walter: "Well then, hast thou been long here?"

"Yea," said the carle, "since I was a young man, and a stalwarth knight."

Said Walter: "This house, didst thou build it, and raise these garths, and plant orchard and vineyard, and gather together the neat and the sheep, or did some other do all this for thee?"

Said the carle: "I did none of all this; there was one here before me, and I entered into his inheritance, as though this were a lordly manor, with a fair castle thereon, and all well stocked and plenished."

Said Walter: "Didst thou find thy foregoer alive here?"

"Yea," said the elder, "yet he lived but for a little while after I came to him."

He was silent a while, and then he said: "I slew him: even so would he have it, though I bade him a better lot."

Said Walter: "Didst thou come hither of thine own will?"

"Mayhappen," said the carle; "who knoweth? Now have I no will to do either this or that. It is wont that maketh me do, or refrain."

Said Walter: "Tell me this; why didst thou slay the man? did he any scathe to thee?"

Said the elder: "When I slew him, I deemed that he was doing me all scathe: but now I know that it was not so. Thus it was: I would needs go where he had been before, and he stood in the path against me; and I overthrew him, and went on the way I would."

"What came thereof?" said Walter.

"Evil came of it," said the carle.

Then was Walter silent a while, and the old man spake nothing; but there came a smile in his face that was both sly and somewhat sad. Walter looked on him and said: "Was it from hence that thou wouldst go that road?"

“Yea,” said the carle.

Said Walter: “And now wilt thou tell me what that road was; whither it went and whereto it led, that thou must needs wend it, though thy first stride were over a dead man?”

“I will not tell thee,” said the carle.

Then they held their peace, both of them, and thereafter got on to other talk of no import.

So wore the day till night came; and they slept safely, and on the morrow after they had broken their fast, the more part of them set off with the carle to the hunting, and they went, all of them, a three hours’ faring towards the foot of the cliffs, which was all grown over with coppice, hazel and thorn, with here and there a big oak or ash-tree; there it was, said the old man, where the venison was most and best.

Of their hunting need nought be said, saving that when the carle had put them on the track of the deer and shown them what to do, he came back again with Walter, who had no great lust for the hunting, and sorely longed to have some more talk with the said carle. He for his part seemed nought loth thereto, and so led Walter to a mound or hillock amidst the clear of the plain, whence all was to be seen save where the wood covered it; but just before where they now lay down there was no wood, save low bushes, betwixt them and the rock-wall; and Walter noted that whereas elsewhere, save in one place whereto their eyes were turned, the cliffs seemed wellnigh or quite sheer, or indeed in some places beetling over, in that said place they fell away from each other on either side; and before this sinking was a slope or scree, that went gently up toward the sinking of the wall. Walter looked long and earnestly at this place, and spake nought, till the carle said: “What! thou hast found something before thee to look on. What is it then?”

Quoth Walter: “Some would say that where yonder slopes run together up towards that sinking in the cliff-wall there will be a pass into the country beyond.”

The carle smiled and said: “Yea, son; nor, so saying, would they err; for that is the pass into the Bear-country, whereby those huge men come down to chaffer with me.”

“Yea,” said Walter; and therewith he turned him a little, and scanned the rock-wall, and saw how a few miles from that pass it turned somewhat sharply toward the sea, narrowing the plain much there, till it made a bight, the face whereof looked wellnigh north, instead of west, as did the more part of the wall. And in the midst of that northern-looking bight was a dark place which seemed to Walter like a downright shard in the cliff. For the face of the wall was of a bleak grey, and it was but little furrowed.

So then Walter spake: “Lo, old friend, there yonder is again a place that meseemeth is a pass; whereunto doth that one lead?” And he pointed to it: but the old man did not follow the pointing of his finger, but, looking down on the ground, answered confusedly, and said:

“Maybe: I wot not. I deem that it also leadeth into the Bear-country by a roundabout road. It leadeth into the far land.”

Walter answered nought: for a strange thought had come uppermost in his mind, that the carle knew far more than he would say of that pass, and that he himself might be led

thereby to find the wondrous three. He caught his breath hardly, and his heart knocked against his ribs; but he refrained from speaking for a long while; but at last he spake in a sharp hard voice, which he scarce knew for his own: "Father, tell me, I adjure thee by God and All-hallows, was it through yonder shard that the road lay, when thou must needs make thy first stride over a dead man?"

The old man spake not a while, then he raised his head, and looked Walter full in the eyes, and said in a steady voice: "No, it was not." Thereafter they sat looking at each other a while; but at last Walter turned his eyes away, but knew not what they beheld nor where he was, but he was as one in a swoon. For he knew full well that the carle had lied to him, and that he might as well have said aye as no, and told him, that it verily was by that same shard that he had stridden over a dead man. Nevertheless he made as little semblance thereof as he might, and presently came to himself, and fell to talking of other matters, that had nought to do with the adventures of the land. But after a while he spake suddenly, and said: "My master, I was thinking of a thing."

"Yea, of what?" said the carle.

"Of this," said Walter; "that here in this land be strange adventures toward, and that if we, and I in especial, were to turn our backs on them, and go home with nothing done, it were pity of our lives: for all will be dull and deedless there. I was deeming it were good if we tried the adventure."

"What adventure?" said the old man, rising up on his elbow and staring sternly on him.

Said Walter: "The wending yonder pass to the eastward, whereby the huge men come to thee from out of the Bear-country; that we might see what should come thereof."

The carle leaned back again, and smiled and shook his head, and spake: "That adventure were speedily proven: death would come of it, my son."

"Yea, and how?" said Walter.

The carle said: "The big men would take thee, and offer thee up as a blood-offering to that woman, who is their Mawmet. And if ye go all, then shall they do the like with all of you."

Said Walter: "Is that sure?"

"Dead sure," said the carle.

"How knowest thou this?" said Walter.

"I have been there myself," said the carle.

"Yea," said Walter, "but thou camest away whole."

"Art thou sure thereof?" said the carle.

"Thou art alive yet, old man," said Walter, "for I have seen thee eat thy meat, which ghosts use not to do." And he laughed.

But the old man answered soberly: "If I escaped, it was by this, that another woman saved me, and not often shall that befall. Nor wholly was I saved; my body escaped forsooth. But where is my soul? Where is my heart, and my life? Young man, I rede thee, try no such adventure; but go home to thy kindred if thou canst. Moreover, wouldst thou fare alone? The others shall hinder thee."