

THE MOUNTAINS AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

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Now already from a distance could the Captain see the rising base of the mountains as they lifted high above the whispering trees at the edge of the world. He had come for the poets and bards past their wavering branches, across the impenetrable range and down the other side, where it was said by some that the rays of the sun grew stalks of verse that ripened with the rhyming of time and bore the fruit of poetry and song; in a single field would even the fruit of seven perfect sonnets and four great epics burst forth from emerald buds, and thirteen hymns of holy grandeur and as many as twenty drunken ballads in their midst, and more still if the odist in his stupor did mistaken wine for the feed; and there was of course always an odd limerick or two that found its way through the weeds of rationality into a stray patch of sun, much to the chagrin of all his proud fellows. And it was said that there were many acres of these fields, for the soil was rich and pleasant weather very plentiful, and the land was populated with bards at every corner and turn, and each crossroads had its own minstrel, as though it were the court of a patron-king, and he would beckon to travellers the roads to the south where strange tunes afloat, or to the gay sailors of the eastern coasts, where all sang of maidens who themselves were fine sonneteers, and rare metals and treasures of the highest pitch, and baubles unmatched in their resonance. These the kings and dukes would keep hoarded in great halls, and nightly listen to their sonorous choir. Such were the lands that now the Captain sought, where poets and song abound.

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For now in long while had the Captain wandered these ways west of the mountains, and as the days and months and years went by, ever it seemed to him that the world was without the colour of new song, for in all the lands through which he passed, nothing now seemed to strike him, though it might be new to his ears, such that he was refreshed. But the ways of new melody and the living craft of their forefathers, he thought, seemed ever lost. Perhaps he was simply old.

Indeed he found that he missed the lyric of his youth, when yet the curious Otter would tell strange tales in yet stranger tongues, and they were of music to him; when the Badger seemed endless in his skill on the lute. Where fled that mystical air that conjured the wild, that he stood now at the edge of the world; even his uncle's ruddy tunes seemed a magic, yet now the lays of old were distant, farther than even the peaks of those mountains that cast their great looks below onto the groves that loomed ahead.

The river which had just moments ago flooded as a torment, with crashing and crackling fallen the steep ways by the ragged crags at the Gates, did now ease into a quiet flow. The *Morben*, though fiercely battered, yet glode with a slight teeter as they approached with care to the ends. For here it was that the river would flow no more but fall to sleep at the foot of the mountains; not trickle into the cracks and become whispering gullies under the earth and spill into the east, but be a rest for the few fishes and toads and buzzing insects that knew nothing of what lie beyond the range impassable.

Now the Captain leapt from his vessel into the muddy shallows, and reigning in the *Morben*, though it would have preferred itself to continue sailing unto the end, he lugged it onto the forest bank and laid it to rest at the foot of an enormous oak. And indeed, it was the end now of the *Morben*'s final voyage, and it was laid to rest, and never again would the spirits consent it to see its master again. And so does lie that indomitable vessel until it is made new by the turning of the world and all is redone.

But the Captain's journey was incomplete, and he looked now upwards where the lofty cliffs of the mountains disappeared into the clouds which rumbled high above. A march of grey had broken the lines of the heavens, and the vanguard in desperate retreat raced for safety over the battlements of the last peaks. Therewith the Captain frowned, for it was not in his mind to stay within these woods beneath the mountains and suffer their gaze for many days until the multitudes of the sky should make rout of the grey host

or until their brethren of the west should chase them away. And indeed he feared most that these angry mercenaries should grow weary of siege and in desperation make war upon the mortals below. Yet neither did he desire to infiltrate into their midst and scurry as a rat beneath the footfalls of heated battle. But he thought of song, and the call of the east tugged at him now, as it did in his youth and for all the decades since, through the ruined fields of Swan-camp and up and down the untamed canyons of the Middle-middle, unto even the indigo grottos and towering summits of the Borenn; and at once he set out onto the slopes that curved gently out of the trees and became the jagged ridges and eroded ways that guarded the edge of the world.

How close he now was! he realised in delight, and he began to hum an old tune that his uncle used to yodel when the clouds trampled the skies even in those days, those idle days on the River. And that morning he made great progress upon the slopes, and when the sun was high over head, a faint glow behind the storm, he could see already the tops of the forest for many leagues, and the winding route of the river he could follow far upstream until its snaking designs faded dolefully into the mist, to the Gates yonder and the world beyond their mouths.

All about the Captain were the leaves and flowers of familiar shrubs and those he had never before seen, but there were no trees of considerable height, for now the earth beneath his boots crunched neatly with the sounds of gravel, and below the sands still was a rock of marble texture. He went on, climbing all that day and the evening, until the sky grew too dark for such activities; one could not see clearly if the step were toward the peaks or into the abyss that now haunted below. So there, on the cold slopes, the Captain took to sleep and dreamed on the gravel of the poets and their vineyards that lay on the other side of his rest.

In the morning he rose to the thundering above, and broken again were his wistful hopes of the sun's blessing, but he would trudge in wonder at the time when the hosts above would descend upon him and wash him away. But the Captain was a traveller all his days, and such things were not new to veterans of his calibre, only mere annoyances. But perhaps it was his age now showing clear, for he felt weary indeed of mere annoyances, and pined for song and good cheer by the fireplaces of that poet-land to brighten his final days.

It was said even that there lay great cities to pale all the jewels of the far

south, should only one travel to the lands where song was the language of all and verse the metre of life. Their names were long and bore euphonious melody themselves; their lords magnificent and courteous, their laws just and given in rhyme. So to those thoughts did the Captain continue his climb unbothered, and by nightfall on the second day of his ascent even the landscape below had become a hazy blur of sages and pines and spruces, and all that the Captain could perceive about him was the fierce rock beneath his feet, and the rushing wind, and the clouds, having gathered westward, making merry above, for it was now the beginning of spring, and all the world behind him was alike in festivity. He was, too, in spite of all weariness, lifted by the cheer about him, and though the wind, in its furious dances of joy, blew his tent about this way and that, the Captain hummed tunes of his own, old ones from his youth which had not yet completely lost their flavour when others did long ago. And there was a heavy longing in his heart, though he knew not wherefore, but he was torn in all directions, toward those kingdoms of the fabled east and beyond, but also above to the clambering of the heavenly host in their springtime jubilation, and even westwards to the familiar County that seemed now of an older past; until the lifting of dawn, and the fair plumes of its flames filled the starry gap of the equinoctial ceasefire, casting a mellow warmth onto the enormous slopes upon which the Captain lay.

That morning, he made his final climb toward those highest peaks, and with the merrymaking all ended and the towering hosts renewed in war, it came to be that the Captain entered into the fury of the battlefield, and he stooped low and fought as a warrior himself, but under no command. The cold and wet were as an onslaught against him. And indeed it grew very cold, as though spring had come in the night and passed away so soon, and summer and autumn gone with it, dashing west to catch the final ship; for the cold around the peaks of the mountains was like the breath of many dragons and the trolls that ride upon them in their hunting. But the Captain thought suddenly how he missed the quiches of spinach and cheese made in his youth by his mother the sister of his uncle the old Captain.

Late in the afternoon, he came at last to the great crater at the top of the mountain, and as night fell for the third time upon the Captain, he climbed over the rim, and bracing against the furious wind, he peered long into the bowl there, which seemed to stretch onward for many miles, and he could

not for all his straining see the far walls. He saw only the floor below and the faded outlines of weathered pillars here and there in the far distance. These were not of mortals, or the spirits even, but erected during the wars of yet greater beings when the world was still young; and there were also colossal chains, now hopelessly broken, that lay in ruin upon the plain. It was a great plain of grasses. They waved now, and in the flickering shadows, a memory of thundering, mighty hooves and the flourishing of arms yet crashed terribly, unto the rounding of the world.

Marvelled the Captain at all that he saw, so near to the eye of this mountaintop tempest. He stepped gingerly into the bowl of the crater, taking great care not to fall, and beneath his boots he felt suddenly the anguish of long forgotten bones, crushed now into mere dust by mortal feet. And lo! the wind lulled in its blowing, and the great hosts of high heavens released their siege, and the bones ceased their cries, and the grasses hushed to stillness, sitting gently now in wait for the first wanderer in many ages to come upon the crater at the top of the mountain; indeed, since of old when the gods had made it a terrible battlefield. And the Captain wondered at the sky's opening and the blossoming of a million stars onto the darkening violet tapestry; for who knew that so many stars did nest in the skies? He marked new arrangements, and the Stag now stood triumphant and the Spheres were at length complete; was not the Maiden Who Was Lost now dancing in merriment, with joy and ease, and her feet lifted in flight above the surface of the water by a new wind from the west? And in its path all the stars seemed to glitter with gold. Amidst all this the Captain passed his final night in the crater upon the edge of the world, utterly sleepless.

As the skies grew light again and the millions of stars bade farewell to that lonely traveller, the first in many ages, and the Maiden Who Was Not Lost was not least among them, indeed, since the gods had made it their terrible battlefield, the Captain arose out of his sleepless stupor and faced anew the east. His strength was renewed, and he turned now with excitement to the lands beyond the peak. From there rose a blinding brightness that accompanied the sun, and, shielding his eyes, the Captain strode forth. And he ascended toward the rim of the far side, and it was very steep and slippery, as a pool of gravel of untold age. But the Captain trudged on unfettered, and now striving with all his might, he peered over the very top.

And for a moment he was utterly blinded by the light of the sun, or that

which accompanied the sun, but he forced his eyes open again; and he saw the turning of the waves of the world and the folding of the skies with them, and he thought he heard out of the heavens a new melody, as though at last the final harmony was composed. There was a great tremor, and the Captain felt himself shaken violently, that he shut his eyes in terror.

And when all had settled, peering out now far to the east from the peak of the mountains of the farthest east, the Captain saw the untouched woods and whistling sands, and the high cliffs, and the sea crashing upon its marble. And by some gift of the heavens or other, he could see very far and below, across the sloping forests and beaches, and the great cliffs of marble and the vast ocean, even unto the Pillars of the West! Thus with great joy he hastened down to those sloping woods, to erect a new vessel and tell all he knew about the mountains at the edge of the world.