POOR DOCUMENT

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THE BRETHREN

H. Rider Haggard's Great Romance of the Crusades

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CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

Here Hassan bowed, and said softly:

"I admit that the debt is owing; also that none sorrow more for the debt of the noble lord D'Arcy than I, your servant, who, by the will of God, brought it upon him. When we meet, Sir Wulf, in war—and that, I think, will be an ill hour for me—strike, and strike home; I shall not complain. Meanwhile, we are friends, and in very truth all that I have is yours. But now I come to tell you that the princess Rose of the World—Allah bless her footsteps!—is recovered from her fatigues, and desires that you should breakfast with her in an hour's time. Also the leech waits to tend your bruises, and slaves to lead you to the bath and clothe you. Nay, leave your hauberk; here the faith of Salah-ed-din and of his servants is your best armour."

"Still, I think that we will take them," said Godwin, "for faith is a poor defence against the daggers of the Assassins, who dwell not so far away."

"True," answered Hassan; "I had forgotten." So thus they departed.

An hour later they were led to the hall, where presently came Rosamund, and with her Masouda and Hassan. She was dressed in the rich robes of an Eastern lady, but the gems with which she had been adorned as the brideelect of Al-jebal were gone; and when she lifted her veil the brethren saw that though her face was still somewhat pallid, her strength had come back to her, and the terror had left her eyes. She greeted them with sweet and gentle words, thanking first Godwin and then Wulf for all that they had done, and turning to Masouda, who stood by, stately, and watchful, thanked her also. Then they sat down, and ate with light hearts and a good appetite.

Before their meal was finished, the guard at the door announced that messengers had arrived from the Sultan. They entered, grey-haired men clad in the robes of secrtaries, whom Hassan hastened to greet. When they were seated and had spoken with him awhile, one of them drew forth a letter, which Hassan, touching his forehead with it in token of respect, gave to Rosamund. She broke its seal, and, seeing that it was in Arabic, handed it to her cousin, saying:

"Do you read it, Godwin, who are more learned than I."

So he read it aloud, translating the letter sentence by sentence. This was its purport:

"Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful, the Strong to aid, to his niece beloved, Rose of the World, princess of Baalbec:—

"Our servant, the emir Hassan, has sent us tidings of your rescue from the power of the accursed lord of the Mountain, Sinan, and that you are now safe in our city of Emesa, guarded by many thousands of our soldiers, and with you a woman named Masouda, and your kinsmen, the two Frankish knights, by whose skill in arms and courage you were saved. Now this is to command you to come to our court at Damascus so soon as you may be fit to travel, knowing that here you will be received with love and honor. Also I invite your kinsmen to accompany you, since I knew their father, and would welcome knights who have done such great deeds, and the woman Masouda with them. Or, if they prefer it, all three of them may return to their own lands and peoples.

"Hasten, my niece, lady Rose of the World, hasten, for my spirit seeks you, and my eyes desire to look upon you. In the name of Allah, greeting."

"You have heard," said Rosamund, as Godwin finished reading the scroll. "Now, my cousins, what will you do?"

"What else but go with you, whom we have come so far to seek?" answered Wulf, and Godwin nodded his head in assent.

"And you, Masouda?"

"I, lady? Oh, I go also, since were I to return yonder," and she nodded towards the mountains, "my greeting would be one that I do not wish."

"Do you note their words, prince Hassan?" asked Rosamund.

"I expected no other," he answered with a bow. "Only knights, you must give me a promise, for even in the midst of my army, such is needful from men who can fly like birds out of the fortress of Masyaf and from the knives of the Assassins—who are mounted, moreover ,on the swiftest horses in Syria that have been trained to carry a double burden," and he looked at them meaningly. "It is that upon this journey you will not attempt to escape with the princess, whom you have followed from over sea, to rescue her out of the hand of Salah-ed-din."

Godwin drew from his tunic the cross which Rosamund had left him in the hall at Steeple, and saying: "I swear upon this holy symbol that during our journey to Damascus I will attempt no escape with or without my cousin Rosamund," he kissed it.

"And I swear the same upon my sword," added Wulf, laying his hand upon the silver hilt of the great blade which had been his forefather's.

"A security that I like better," said Hassan with a smile, "but in truth,knights, your word is enough for me." Then he looked at Masouda and went on, still smiling: "Nay, it is useless; for women who have dwelt yonder oaths have no meaning. Lady, we must be content to watch you, since my lord has bidden you to this city, which, fair and brave as you are, to be plain, I would not have done."

Then he turned to speak to the secretaries, and Godwin, who was noting all, saw Masouda's dark eyes follow him and in them a very strange light.

"Good," they seemed to say; "as you have written, so shall you read."

The same afternoon they started for Damascus, a great army of horsemen. In its midst, guarded by a thousand spears, Rosamund was borne in a litter. In front of her rode Hassan, with his yellow-robed body-guard; at her side Masouda; and behind—for, notwithstanding his hurts, Wulf would not be carried—the brethren, mounted upon ambling palfreys. After them, led by slaves, came the chargers, Flame and Smoke, recovered now, but still walking somewhat stiffly, and then rank upon rank of turbaned Saracens. Through the open curtains of her litter Rosamund beckoned to the brethren, who pushed alongside of her.

"Look," she said, pointing with her hand.

They looked, and there, bathed in the glory of the sinking sun, saw the mountains crowned far, far away with the impregnable city and fortress of Masyaf, and below it the slopes down which they had ridden for their lives.Nearer to them flashed the river bordered by the town of Emesa. Set at intervals along its walls were spears,looking like filaments against the flaming, sunset sky, and on each of them a black dot, which was the head of an Assassin, while from the turrets above, the golden banner of Saladin fluttered in the evening wind. Remembering all that she had undergone in that fearful home of devil-worshippers, and the fate from which she had been snatched, Rosamund shuddered.

"It burns like a city in hell," she said, staring at Masyaf, environed by that lurid evening light and canopied with black, smoke-like clouds. "Oh! such I think will be its doom."

"I trust so," answered Wulf fervently. "At least, in this world and the next we have done with it."

"Yes," added Godwin in his thoughtful voice; "still, out of that evil place we won good, for there we found Rosamund, and there, my brother, you conquered in such a fray as you can never hope to fight again, gaining great glory, and perhaps much more."

Then reining in his horse, Godwin fell back behind the litter, while Wulf wondered, and Rosamund watched him with dreaming eyes.

That night they camped in the desert, and next morning, surrounded by wandering tribes of Bedouins mounted on their camels, marched on again, sleeping that night in the ancient fortress of Baalbec, whereof the garrison and people, having been warned by runners of the rank and titles of Rosamund came out to do her homage as their lady.

Hearing of it, she left her littler, and mounting a splendid horse which they had sent her as a present, rode to meet them, the brethren, in full armour and once more bestriding Flame and Smoke, beside her and a guard of Saladin's own Mamelukes behind. Solemn, turbaned men, who had been commanded so to do by messengers from the Sultan, brought her the keys of the gates on a cushion, minstrels and soldiers marched before her, whilst crowding on the walls and running alongside came the citizens in their thousands. On they went, through the open gates, past the towering columns of ruined temples once a home of the worship of heathen gods, through courts and vaults to the citadel surrounded by its gardens that in dead ages had been the Acropolis of forgotten Roman emperors.

Here in the portico Rosamund turned her horse, and received the salutations of the multitude as though she also were one of the world's rulers. Indeed, it seemed to the brethren watching her as she sat upon the great white horse and surveyed the shouting, bending crowd with flashing eyes, splendid in her bearing and beautiful to see, a prince at her stirrup and an army at her back, that none of those who had trod that path before her could have seemed greater or more glorious in the hour of their pride than did this English girl, who by the whim of Fate had suddenly been set so high. Truly by blood and nature she was fitted to be a queen. Yet as Rosamund sat thus the pride passed from her face, and her eyes fell.

"Of what are you thinking?" asked Godwin at her side.

"That I would we were back among the summer fields at Steeple," she answered, "for those who are lifted high fall low. Prince Hassan, give the captains and people my thanks and bid them be gone. I would rest."

Thus for the first time and last did Rosamund behold her ancient fief of Baalbec, which her grandsire, the great Ayoub, had ruled before her.

That night there was feasting in the mighty, immemorial halls, and singing and minstrelsy and the dancing of fair women and the giving of gifts. For Baalbec, where birth and beauty were ever welcome, did honor to its lady, the favored niece of the mighty Salah-ed-din. Yet there were some who murmured that she would bring no good fortune to the Sultan or this his city, who was not of all the blood of Ayoub, but half a Frank,and a cross-worshipper, though even these praised her beauty and her royal bearing. The brethren they praised also, although these were unbelievers, and the tale of how Wulf had fought the traitor knight upon the Narrow Way, and of how they had led their kinswoman from the haunted fortress of Masyaf, was passed from mouth to mouth.

At dawn the next day, on orders received from the Sultan, they left Baalbec, escorted by the army and many of the notables of the town. That afternoon they drew rein upon the heights which overlook the city of Damascus, Bride of the Earth, set amidst its seven streams and ringed about with gardens, one of the most beautiful and perhaps the most ancient city in the world. Then they rode down to the bounteous plain, and as night fell, having passed the encircling gardens, were escorted through the gates of Damascus, outside of which most of the army halted and encamped.

Along the narrow streets, bordered by yellow, flat-roofed houses, they rode slowly, looking now at the motely, many-colored crowds, who watched them with grave interest, and now at the stately buildings, domed mosques and towering minarets, which everywhere stood out against the deep blue of the evening sky. Thus at length they came to an open space planted like a garden, beyond which was seen a huge and fantastic castle that Hassan told them was the palace of Salah-ed-din. In its courtyard they were parted, Rosamund being led away by officers of the state, whilst the brethern were taken to chambers that had been prepared, where, after they had bathed, they were served with food.

Scarcely had they eaten it when Hassan appeared, and bade them follow him. Passing down various passages and across a court they came to some guarded doors, where the soldiers demanded that they should give up their swords and daggers.

"It is not needful," said Hassan, and they let them go by. Next came more passages and a curtain, beyond which they found themselves in a small, domed room, lit by hanging silver lamps and paved in tesselated marble, strewn with rich rugs and furnished with cushioned couches.

At a sign from Hassan they stood still in the centre of this room, and looked about them wondering. The place was empty and very silent; they felt afraid—of what they knew not. Presently curtains upon its further side opened and through them came a man turbaned and wrapped in a dark robe, who stood awhile in the shadow, gazing at them beneath the lamps.

The man was not very tall, and slight in build, yet about him was much majesty, although his garb was such as the humblest might have worn. He came forward, lifting his head, and they saw that his features were small and finely cut; that he was bearded, and beneath his broad brow shone thoughtful yet at times piercing eyes that were brown in hue. Now the prince Hassan sank to his knees and touched the marble with his forehead, and, guessing that they were in the presence of the mighty monarch Saladin, the brethern saluted in their western fashion. Presently the Sultan spoke in a low, even voice to Hassan, to whom he motioned that he should rise, saying:

"I see that you trust these knights, emir," and he pointed to their great swords.

"Sire," was the answer, "I trust them as I trust myself. They are brave and honorable men, although they be infidels."

The Sultan stroked his beard.

"Aye," he said, "infidels, It is a pity, yet doubtless they worship God after their own fashion. Noble to look on also, like their father, whom I remember well, and if all I hear is true, brave indeed. Sir Knight, do you understand my language?"

"Sufficiently to speak it, lord," answered Godwin," who have learned it since childhood, yet ill enough."

"Good. Then tell me, as soldiers to a soldier, what do you seek from Salaed-din?"

"Our cousin, the lady Rosamund, who, by your command, lord, was stolen from our home in England."

"Knights, she is your cousin, that I know, as surely as I know that she is my niece. Tell me now, is she aught more to you?" and he searched them with those piercing eyes.

Godwin looked at Wulf, who said in English:

"Speak the whole truth, brother. From that man nothing can be hid."

Then Godwin answered:

"Sire, we love her, and are affianced to her."

The Sultan stared at them in surprise.

"What! Both of you?" he asked.

"Yes, both."

"And is the princess, then, affianced to you both?"

"Yes, to both."

"And does she love you both?"

"Yes," replied Godwin, "both, or so she says."

Saladin stroked his beard and considered them, while Hassan smiled a little.

"Then, knights," he said presently, "tell me, which of you does she love best?"

"That, sire, is known to her alone. When the time comes, she will say, and not before."

"I perceve," said Saladin, "that behind this riddle hides a story. If it be your good pleasure, be seated, and set it out to me."

So they sat down on the divan and obeyed, keeping nothing back from the beginning to the end, nor, although the tale was long, did the Sultan weary of listening.

"A great story, truly," he said, when at length they had finished, "and one in which I seem to see the hand of Allah. Sir Knights, you will think that I have wronged you—aye, and your uncle, Sir Andrew, who was once my friend, although an older man than I, and who, by stealing away my sister, laid the foundations of this house of love and war and woe, and perchance of happiness unforseen. Now listen. The tale that those two Frankish knaves, the priest and the false knight Lozelle, told to you was true. As I wrote to your uncle in my letter, I dreamed a dream. Thrice I dreamed it; that this niece of mine lived, and that if I could bring her here to dwell at my side she should save the shedding of much blood by some noble deed of hers—aye, of the blood of tens of thousands; and in that dream I saw her face. Therefore I stretched out my arm and took her from far away. And now, through you—yes, through you—she has been snatched from the power of the great Assassin, and is safe in my court, and therefore henceforth I am your friend."

"Sire, have you seen her?" asked Godwin.

"Knights, I have seen her, and the face is the face of my dreams, and I know that in those dreams God spoke. Listen, Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf," Saladin went on in a changed voice, a stern, commanding voice. "Ask of me what you will, and, Franks though you are, it shall be given you for your service's sake—wealth, lands, titles, all that men desire and I can grant—but ask not of me my niece, Rose of the World, Princess of Baalbec, whom Allah has brought to me for His own purposes. Know, moreover, that if you strive to steal her away you shall surely die; and that if she escapes from me and I recapture her, then she shall die. These things I have told her already, and I swear them in the name of Allah. Here she is, and in my house she must abide until the vision be fulfilled."

Now in their dismay the brethern looked upon each other, for they seemed further from their desire than they had been even in the castle of Sinan. Then a light broke upon the face of Godwin, and he stood up and answered:

"Dread lord of all the East, we hear you and we know our risk. You have given us your friendship; we accept it, and are thankful, and seek no more. God, you say, has brought our lady Rosamund to you for His own purposes. Then let His purposes be accomplished according to His will, which may be in some way that we little guess. We abide His judgment Who has guided us in the past, and will guide us in the future."

"Well spoken," replied Saladin. "I have warned you, my guests, therefore blame me not if I keep my word; but I ask no promise from you who would not tempt noble knights to lie. Yes, Allah has set this strange riddle; by Allah let it be answered in His season."

Then he waved his hand to show that the audience was ended.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Brethern Depart From Damascus.

At the court of Saladin Godwin and Wulf were treated with much honor. A house was given them to dwell in, and a company of servants to minister to their comfort and to guard them. Mounted on their swift horses, Flame and Smoke, they were taken out into the desert to hunt, and, had they so willed, it would have been easy for them to outdistance their retinue and companions and ride away to the nearest Christian town. Indeed, no hand would have been lifted to stay them who were free to come or go. But whither were they to go without Rosamund?

Saladin they saw often, for it pleased him to tell them tales of those days when their father and uncle were in the East, or talk with them of England and the Franks, and even now and again to reason with Godwin on matters of religion. Moreover, to show his faith in them, he gave them the rank of officers of his own bodyguard, and when, wearying of idleness, they asked it of him, allowed them to take their share of duty in the guarding of his palace and person. This, at a time when peace still reigned between Frank and Saracen, the brethern were not ashamed to do, who received no payment for their services.

Peace reigned indeed, but Godwin and Wulf could guess that it would not reign for long. Damascus and the plain around it were one great camp, and every day new thousands of wild tribesmen poured in and took up the quarters that had been prepared for them. They asked Masouda, who knew everything, what it meant. She answered:

"It means that Fibad, the Holy War, which is being preached in every mosque throughout the East. It means that the great struggle between Cross and Crescent is at hand, and then, Pilgrims Peter and John, you will have to choose your standard."

"There can be little doubt about that," said Wulf.

"None," replied Masouda, with one of her smiles, "only it may pain you to have to make war upon the princess of Baalbec and her uncle, the Commander of the Faithful." Then she went, still smiling.

For this was the trouble of it: Rosamund, their cousin and their love, had in truth become the princess of Baalbec—for them. She lived in great state and freedom, as Saladin had promised that she should live in his letter to Sir Andrew D'Arcy. No insult or violence were offered to her faith; no suitor was thrust upon her. But she was in a land where women do not consort with men, especially if they are high-placed. As a princess of the empire of Saladin, she must obey its rules, even to veiling herself when she went abroad, and exchanging no private words with men. Godwin and Wulf prayed Saladin that they might be allowed to speak with her from time to time, but he only answered shortly:

"Sir Knights, our customs are our customs. Moreover, the less you see of the princess of Baalbec the better I think it will be for her, for you, whose blood I do not wish to have upon my hands, and for myself, who await the fulfilment of that dream which the angel brought."

Then the brethern left his presence sore at heart, for although they saw her from time to time at feasts tnd festivals, Rosamund was as far apart from them as though she sat in Steeple Hall—aye, and further. Also they came to see that of rescuing her from Damascus there was no hope at all. She dwelt in her own palace, whereof the walls were guarded night and day by a company of the Sultan's Mamelukes, who knew that they were answerable for her with their lives. Within its walls, again, lived trusted Mesrour, and her retinue of women, all of them spies and watchful. How could two men hope to snatch her from the heart of such a host and to spirit her out of Damascus and through its encircling armies?

One comfort, however, was left to them. When she reached the court Rosamund had prayed of the Sultan that Masouda should not be separated from her, and this, because of the part she had played in his niece's rescue from the power of Sinan, he had granted, though doubtfully. Moreover, Masouda, being a person of no account except for her beauty, and a heretic, was allowed to go where she would and to speak with whom she wished. So, as she wished to speak often with Godwin, they did not lack for tidings of Rosamund.

From her they learned that in a fashion she was happy enough—who would not be that had just escaped from Al-je-bal?—yet weary of the strange Eastern life, of the restraints upon her, and of ner aimless days; vexed also that she might not mix with the brethern. Day by day she sent them her greetings, and with them warnings to attempt nothing—not even to see her—since there was no hope that they would succeed. So much afraid of them was the Sultan, Rosamund said, that both she and they were watched day and night, and of any folly their lives would pay the price. When they heard all this the brethern began to despair, and their spirits sank so low that they cared not what should happen to them.

Then it was that a chance came to them of which the issue was to make them admired by Saladin and to lift Masouda to honor. One morning they were seated in the courtyard of their house beside the fountain, staring at the passers-by through the bars of the bronze gates and at the sentries who marched to and fro before them. This house was in one of the principal thoroughfares of Damascus, and in front of it flowed continually an unending, many-colored stream of folk.

There were white-robed Arabs of the desert, mounted on their grumbling camels; caravans of merchandise from Egypt or elsewhere; asses laden with firewood of the grey, prickly growth of the wild thyme for the bakers' ovens; water sellers with their goatskin bags; venders of birds or sweetmeats; women going to the bath in closed and curtained litters, escorted by the eunuchs of their households; great lords riding in their Arab horses and preceded by their runners, who thrust the crowd asunder and beat the poor with whips; beggars, halt, maimed, and blind, beseeching alms; lepers, from whom all shrank away, who wailed their woes aloud; stately companies of soldiers, some mounted and some afoot; holy men, who gave blessings and received alms; and so forth, without number and without end.

Godwin and Wulf, seated in the shade of the painted house, watched them gloomily. They were weary of this ever-changing sameness, weary of the eternal glare and glitter of this unfamiliar life, weary of the insistent cries of the mullahs on the minarets, of the flash of the swords that would soon be red with the blood of their own people; weary, too, of the hopeless task to which they were sworn. Rosamund was one of this multitude; she was the princess of Baalbec, half an Eastern by her blood, and growing more Eastern day by day—or so they thought in their bitterness. As well might two Saracens hope to snatch the queen of England from her palace at Westminster, as they to drag the princess of Baalbec out of the power of a monarch more absolute than any king of England.

So they sat silent since they had nothing to say, and looked now at the passing crowd, and now at the thin stream of water falling continually into the marble basin.

Presently they heard voices at the gate, and, looking up, saw a woman wrapped in a long cloak, talking with the guard, who with a laugh thrust out his arm, as though to place it round her. Then a knife flashed, and the soldier stepped back, still laughing, and opened the wichet. The woman came in. It was Masouda. They rose and bowed to her, but she passed before them into the house. Thither they followed, while the soldier at the gate laughed again, and at the sound of his mockery Godwin's cheek grew red. Even in the cool, darkened room she noticed it, and said, bitterly enough:

"What does it matter? Such insults are my daily bread whom they believe——" and she stopped.

"They had best say nothing of what they believe to me," muttered Godwin.

"I thank you," Masouda answered, with a sweet, swift smile, and, throwing off her cloak, stood before them unveiled, clad in the white robes that befitted her tall and graceful form so well, and were blazoned on the breast with the cognizance of Baalbec. "Well for you," she went on, "that they hold me to be what I am not, since otherwise I should win no entry to this house."

"What of our lady Rosamund," broke in Wulf awkwardly, for like Godwin, he was pained.

Masouda laid her hand upon her breast as though to still its heaving, then answered:

"The princess of Baalbec, my mistress, is well and as ever, beautiful, though somewhat weary of the pomp in which she finds no joy. She sent her greetings, but did not say to which of you they should be delivered, so, pilgrims, you must share them.

Godwin winced, but Wulf asked if there were any hope of seeing her, to which Masouda answered:

"None," adding in a low voice, "I came upon another business. Do you brethern wish to do Salah-ed-din a service?"

"I don't know. What is it?" asked Godwin gloomily.

"Only to save his life—for which he may be grateful, or may not, according to his mood."

"Speak on," said Godwin, "and tell us how we can save the life of the Sultan of the East."

"Do you still remember Sinan and his fedais? Yes—they are not easily forgotten, are they? Well, tonight he has plotted to murder Salah-ed-din, and afterwards to murder you if he can, or, failing that, to murder her also. Oh! the tale is true enough. I have it from one of them under the Signet—surely that Signet has served us well—who believes, poor fool, that I am in the plot. Now, you are the officers of the bodyguard who watch in the ante-chamber tonight, are you not? Well, when the guard is changed at midnight, the eight men who should replace them at the doors of the room Salah-ed-din will not arrive; they will be decoyed away by a false order. In their stead will come eight murderers, disguised in the robes and arms of Mamelukes. They look to deceive and cut you down, kill Salah-ed-din, and escape by the further door. Can you hold your own awhile against eight men, think you?"

"We have done so before and will try," answered Wulf. "But how shall we know that they are not Mamelukes?"

"Thus—they will wish to pass the door, and you will say, 'Nay, sons of Sinan,' whereon they will spring on you to kill you. Then be ready and shout aloud."

"And if they overcome us," asked Godwin, "then the Sultan would be slain?"

"Nay, for you must lock the door of the chamber of Salah-ed-din and hide away the key. The sound of the fighting will arouse the outer guard ere hurt can come to him. Or," she added, after thinking awhile, "perhaps it will be best to reveal the plot to the Sultan at once."

"No, no," answered Wulf; "let us take the chance. I weary of doing nothing here. Hassan guards the outer gate. He will come swiftly at the sound of blows."

"Good," said Masouda; "I will see that he is there and awake. Now farewell, and pray that we may meet again. I say nothing of this story to the princess Rosamund until it is done with." Then throwing her cloak about her shoulders she turned and went.

"Is that true, think you?" asked Wulf of Godwin.

"We have never found Masouda to be a liar," was his answer. "Come; let us see to our armour, for the knives of those fedai are sharp."

It was near midnight, and the brethern stood in the small-domed ante-chamber, from which a door opened into the sleeping rooms of Saladin. The guard of eight Mamelukes had left them, expecting to be met by their relief in the courtyard, according to custom, but no relief had come.

"It would seem that Masouda's tale is true," said Godwin, and going to the door he locked it, and hid the key beneath a cushion.

Then they took their stand in front of the locked door, before which hung curtains, standing in the shadow with the light from the hanging silver lamps pouring down in front of them. Here they waited awhile in silence, till at length they heard the tramp of men, and eight Marmalukes, clad in yellow above their mail, marched in and saluted.

"Stand!" said Godwin, and they stood a minute, then began to edge forward.

"Stand!" said both the brethren again, but still they edged forward.

"Stand, sons of Sinan!" they said a third time, drawing their swords.

Then with a hiss of disappointed rage the fedai came at them.

"A'Dricy! A'D'rcy! Help for the Sultan!" shouted the brethren, and the fray began.

Six of the men attacked them,and while they were engaged with these the other two slipped round and tried the door, only find it fast. Then they also turned upon the brethren, thinking to take the key from off their bodies. At the first rush two of the fedai went down beneath the sweep of the long swords, but after that the murderers would not come close, and while some engaged them in front, others strove to pass and stab them from behind. Indted,, a blow from one of their long knives fell upon Godwin's shoulder, but the good mail turned it.

"Give way," he cried to Wulf, "or they will best us."

So suddenly they gave way before them till their backs were against the door, and there they stood, shouting for help and sweeping round them with their swords into reach of which the fedai dare not come. Now from without the chamber rose a cry of tumult and the sound of heavy blows falling upon the gates that the murderers had barred behind them, while upon the further side of the door, which he could not open, was heard the voice of the Sultan demanding to know what passed.

The fedai heard these sounds also, and read in them their doom. Forgetting caution in their despair and rage, they hurled themselves upon the brethren, for they thought that if they could get them down they might still break through the door and slay Salah-ed-din before they themselves were slain. But for awhile tht brethren stopped their rush with point and buckler, wounding two of them sorely; and when at length they closed in upon them, the gates were burst, and Hassan and the outer guard were at hand.

A minute later and, but little hurt, Godwin and Wulf were leaning on their swords, and the fedai, some of them dead or wounded and some of them captive, lay before them on the marble floor. Moreover, the door had been opened, and through it came the Sultan in his night-gear.

"What has chanced?" he asked, looking at them doubtfully.

"Only this, lord," answered Godwin, "these men came to kill you and we held them off till help arrived."

"Kill me! My own guard kill me?"

"They are not your guard; they are fedai, disguised as your guard, and sent by Al-je-bal, as he promised."

Now Salah-ed-din turned pale,for he was feared nothing else, was all his life afraid of the Assassins and their lord, who thrice had striven to murder him.

"Strip the armour from those men," went on Godwin, "and I think that you will find truth in my words, or, if not, question such of them as still lives."

They obyed, and there upon the breast of one of them, burnt into his skin, was the symbol of the blood-red dagger. Now Saladin saw, and beckoned the Brethren aside.

"How knew you of this?" he asked, searching them with his piercing eyes.

"Masouda, the lady Rosamund's waiting woman, warned us that you, lord, and we, were to be murdered tonight by eight men, so we made ready."

"Why, then, did you not tell me?"

"Because," answered Wulf, "we were not sure that the news was true, and did not wish to bring false tidings and be made foolish. Besides, also, my brother and I thought that we could hold our own awhile against eight of Sinan's rats disguised as soldiers of Saladin.

"You have done it well, though yours was a mad counsel, answered the Sultan. Then he gave his hand first to one and next to the other, and said, simply:

"Sir Knights, Salah-ed-din owes his life to you. Should it ever come about that you owe your lives to Salah-ed-din, he will remember this."

Thus this business ended. On the morrow those of the fedai who remained alive were questioned and confessing freely that they had been sent to murder Salah-ed-din who had robbed their master of his bride, the two Franks who had carried to death cruelly enough. Also many others her off, and the woman Masouda, were put in the city were seized and killed on suspicion, and so for awhile there was no fear from the Assassins.

Now from that day forward Salah-ed-din held the brethren in great friendship, and pressed gifts upon them and offered them honors. But they refused them all, saying that they needed but one thing of him, and he knew what it was—an answer at which his face sank.

One morning he sent for them, and, except for the presence of prince Hassan, the most favorite of his emirs, and a famous imaum, or priest of his religion, received them alone.

"Listen," he said briefly, addressing Godwin, "I understand that my niece, the princess of Baalbec, is beloved by you. Good. Subscribe the Koran, and I give her to you in marriage, for thus also she may be led to the true faith, whom I have sworn not to force thereto, and I gain a great warrior and Paradise a brave soul. The imaum here will instruct you in the truth."

Thus he spoke, but Godwin only stared at him with eyes set wide in wonderment, and answered:

"Sire, I thank you, but I cannot change my faith to win a woman, however dearly I may love her."

"So I thought," said Saladin with a sigh, "through indeed it is said that superstition should thus blind so brave and good a man. Now, Sir Wulf, it is your turn. What say you to my offer? Will you take the princess and her dominions with my love thrown in as a marriage portion?"

Wulf thought a moment, and as he thought there arose in his mind a vision of an autumn afternoon that seemed years and years ago, when they two and Rosamund had stood by the shrine of St. Chad on the shores of Essex, and jested of this very matter of a change of faith.Then he answered, with one of his great laughs:

"Aye, sire, but on my own terms, not on yours, for if I took these I think that my marriage would lack blessings. Nor, indeed, would Rosamund wish to wed a servant of your Prophet, who if it pleased him might take other wives."

Saladin leant his head upon his hand, and looked at them with disappointed eyes, yet not unkindly.

"The knight Lozelle was a cross-worshipper," he said, "but you two are very different from the knight Lozelle, who accepted the Faith when it was offered to him——"

"To win your trade," said Godwin, bitterly.

"I know not," answered Saladin, "though it is true the man seemed to have been a Christian among the Franks, who here was a follower of the Prophet. At least, he is dead at your hands, and though he sinned against me and betrayed my niece to Sinan, peace be with his soul. That Frank, Prince Arnat of Karak,whom you call Reginald de Chatillon—accursed be his name!—" and he spat upon the ground, "has once more broken the peace between me and the king of Jerusalem, slaughtering my merchants and stealing my goods. I will suffer this shame no more, and very shortly I unfurl my standards, which shall not be folded up again until they float upon the mosque of Omar and from every tower top in Palestine. Your people are doomed. I, Yusuf Salah-ed-din," and he rose as he said the words, his very beard bristling with wrath, "declare the Holy War, and will sweep them down to the sea. Choose now, you brethren. Do you fight for me or against me? Or will you give up your swords and bide here as my prisoners."

"We are the servants of the cross," answered Godwin, "and cannot lift steel against it and thereby lose our souls." Then he spoke with Wulf, and added, "As to your second question, whether we should bide here in chains. It is one that our lady Rosamund must answer, for we are sworn to her service. We demand to see the princess of Baalbec."

"Send for her, Emir," said Saladin to the prince Hassan, who bowed and departed.

A while later Rosamund came, looking beautiful but, as they saw when she threw back her veil, very white and weary. She bowed to Saladin, and the brethren, who were not allowed to touch her hand, bowed to her, devouring her face with eager eyes.

"Greeting, my uncle," she said to the Sultan, "and to you, my cousins, greeting also. What is your pleasure with me?"

Saladin motioned to her to be seated and bade Godwin set out the case, which he did very clearly, ending:

"Is it your wish, Rosamund, that we stay in this court as prisoners, or go forth to fight with the Franks in the great war that is to be?"

Rosamund looked at them awhile, then answered:

"To whom were you sworn to first? Was it to the service of our Lord, or to the service of a woman? I have said."

"Such words as we expected from you, being what you are," exclaimed Godwin, while Wulf nodded his head in assent, and added:

"Sultan we ask your safe conduct to Jerusalem, and leave this lady in your charge, relying on your plighted word to do no violence to her faith and to protect her person."

"My safe conduct you have," replied Saladin, "and my friendship also. Nor, indeed, should I have thought well of you had you decided otherwise. Now, henceforth we are enemies in the eyes of all men, and I shall strive to slay you as you will strive to slay me. But as regards this lady, have no fear. What I have promised shall be fulfilled. Bid her farewell, whom you will see no more."

"Who taught your lips to say such words, O Sultan?" asked Godwin. "Is it given to you to read the future and the decrees of God?"

"I should have said," answered Saladin, "'Whom you will see no more if I can keep you apart.' Can you complain, who, both of you, have refused to take her as a wife."

Here Rosamund looked up wondering, and Wulf broke in:

"Tell her the price. Tell her that she was asked to wed either of us who would bow the knee to Mohammed, and to be the head of his harem, and I think that she will not blame us."

"Never would I have spoken again to him who answered otherwise," exclaimed Rosamund, and Saladin frowned at the words. "Oh! my uncle," she went on, "you have been kind to me and raised me high, but I do not seek this greatness, nor are your ways my ways, who am of a faith that you call accursed. Let me go, I beseech you, in care of these my kinsmen."

"And your lovers," said Saladin bitterly. "Niece, it cannot be. I love you well, but did I know even that your life must pay the price of your sojourn here, here you still should stay, since, as my dream told me, on you hang the lives of thousands, and I believe that dream. What, then is your life, or the lives of these knights, or even my life, that any or all of them should turn the scales against those of thousands. Oh! everything that my empire can give is at your feet, but here you stay until the dream be accomplished, and," he added, looking at the brethren, "death shall be the portion of any who would steal you from my hand."

"Until the dream be accomplished?" said Rosamund, catching at the words. "Then, when it is accomplished, shall I be free?"

"Aye," answered the Sultan; "free to come or to go, unless you attempt escape, for then you know your doom."

"It is a decree. Take note, my cousins, it is a decree. And you, prince Hassan, remember it also. Oh! I pray, with all my soul I pray, that it was no lying spirit who brought you that dream, my uncle, though how I shall bring peace, who hitherto have brought nothing except war and bloodshed, I know not. Now go, my cousins; but if you will, leave me Masouda, who has no other friends. Go, and take my love and blessing with you—aye, and the blessing of the saints which shall protect you in the hour of battle, and bring us together again."

So spoke Rosamund and threw her veil before her face that she might hide her tears.

Then Godwin and Wulf stepped to where she stood by the throne of Saladin, bent the knee before her, and, taking her hand, kissed it in farewell, nor did the Sultan say them nay. But when she was gone and the brethren were gone, he turned to the emir Hassan and to the great imaum who had sat silent all this while, and said:

"Now tell me, you who ae old and wise, which of those men does the lady love? Speak, Hassan, you who know her well."

But Hassan shook his head. "One or the other. Both or neither—I know not." he answered. "Her counsel is too close for me."

Then Saladin turned to the imaum—a cunning, silent man.

"When those infields are about to die before her face, as I still hope to see them do, we may learn the answer. But unless she wills it, never before," he replied, and the Sultan noted his saying.

Next morning, having been warned that they would pass there by Masouda, Rosamund, watching through the lattice of one of the palace windows, saw the brethern go by. They were fully armed and mounted on their splendid chargers, Flame and Smoke, looked glorious men as, followed by their escort of swarthy, turbaned Mamelukes, they rode proudly side by side, the sunlight glinting on their mail. Opposite to her house they halted awhile, and, knowing that Rosamund watched, although they could not see her, drew their swords and lifted them in salute. Then, sheathing them again, they rode forward in silence, and soon were lost to sight.

Little did Rosamund guess how different they would appear when they three met again. Indeed, she scarcely dared to hope that they would ever meet, for she knew well that even if the war went in favor of the Christians she would be hurried away to some place where they would never find her. She knew well also that from Damascus her rescue was impossible, and that although Saladin loved them, as he loved all who were honest and brave, he would receive them no more as friends, for fear lest they should rob him of her, whom he hoped in some way unforseen would enable him to end his days in peace. Moreover, the struggle between Cross and Crescent would be fierce and to the death, and she was sure that where was the closest fighting, there in the midst of it would be found Godwin and Wulf. Well might it chance, therefore, that her eyes had looked their last upon them.

Oh! she was great. Gold was hers, and gems more than she could count, and few were the weeks that did not bring her added wealth or gifts. She had palaces to dwell in—alone; gardens to wander in—alone; eunuchs and slaves to rule over—alone; But never a friend had she, the woman of the Assassins, to whom she clung because she, Masouda, had saved her from Sinan, and who clung to her, why, Rosamund could not be sure, for there was a veil between their hearts.

(To be continued.)