POOR DOCUMENT

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THE BRETHREN

H. Rider Haggard's Great Romance of the Crusades

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CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued.)

"You met the Frank Lozelle today," he said to Godwin, "when riding in my gardens, and drew your sword on him. Why did you not kill him? Is he the better man?"

"It seems not, as I sit here unhurt, lord," answered Godwin. "Your servants thrust between and separated us."

"Aye," replied Sinan, "I remember; they had orders. Still, I would that you had killed him, the unbelieving dog, who has dared to lift his eyes to this Rose of Roses, your sister. Fear not," he went on, addressing Rosamund, "he shall offer you no more insult, who are henceforth under the protection of the Signet," and stretching out his thin, cruel-looking hand, on which gleamed the ring of power, he patted her on the arm.

All of these things Masouda translated, while Rosamund dropped her head to hide her face, though on it were not the blushes that he thought, but loathing and alarm.

Wulf glared at the Al-je-bal, whose head by good fortune was turned away and so fierce was the rage swelling in his heart that a mist seemed to gather before his eyes, and through it this devilish chief of a people of murderers, clothed in his robe of flaming red, looked like a man steeped in blood. The thought came to him suddenly that he would make him what he looked, and his hand passed to his sword-hilt. But Godwin saw the terror in Masouda's eyes, saw Wulf's hand also, and guessed what was about to chance. With a swift movement of his arm he struck a golden dish from the table to the marble floor, then said in a clear voice in French:

"Brother, be not so awkward; pick up that dish and answer the lord Sinan as is your right—I mean, touching the matter of Lozelle."

Wulf stooped to obey, and his mind cleared which had been so near to madness.

"I wish it not, lord," he said, "who, if I can, have your good leave to slay this fellow on the third night from now. If I fail, then let my brother take my place, but not before."

"Yes, I forgot," said Sinan. "So I decreed, and that will be a fight I wish to see. If he kills you then your brother shall meet him. And if he kills you both, then, perhaps I, Sinan, will meet him—in my own fashion. Sweet lady, knowing where the course is laid, say, do you fear to see this fray?"

Rosamund's face paled, but she answered proudly:

"Why should I fear what my brethern do not fear? They are brave knights, bred to arms, and God, in Whose hands are all our destinies—even yours, O Lord of Death—He will guard the right."

When this speech was translated to him Sinan gunled a little, then he answered:

"Lady, know that I am the Voice and Prophet of Allah—aye, and his sword to punish evil-doers and those who do not believe. Well, if what I hear is true, your brethern are skilled horsemen who even dared to pass my servant on the narrow bridge, so victory may rest with them. Tell me which of them do you love the best, for he shall first face the sword of Lozelle."

Now as she prepared herself to answer Masouda scanned her face through her half-closed eyes. But, whatever she may have felt within, it remained calm and cold as though it were cut in stone.

"To me they are as one man," she said. "When one speaks, both speak. I love them equally."

"Then, Guest of my heart, it shall go as I have said. Brother Blue-eyes shall fight first, and if he fails then brother Grey-eyes. The feast is ended, and it is my hour for prayer. Slaves, bid the people fill their cups. Lady, I pray of you, stand forward on the dais."

She obeyed, and at a sign the black slave-women gathered behind her with their flaming torches. Then Sinan rose also, and cried with a loud voice:

"Servants of Al-je-bal, pledge, I command you, this Flower of flowers, the high-born Princess of Baalbec, the niece of the Sultan, Salah-ed-din, whom men call the Great," and he sneered, "though he be not so great as I, this Queen of maids who soon—" And, checking himself, he drank off his wine, then with a low bow presented the empty jewelled cup to Rosamund.

All the company drank also, and shouted till the hall rang, for her loveliness as she stood thus in the fierce light of the torches, aflame as these men were with the vision-breeding wine of Al-je-bal, moved them to madness.

"Queen! Queen!" they shouted. "Queen of our Master and of us all!"

Sinan heard and smiled. Then, motioning for silence, he took the hand of Rosamund and kissed it, and turning, passed from the hall preceded by his singing women and surrounded by his dais and guards.

Godwin and Wulf stepped forward to speak with Rosamund, but Masouda interposed herself between them, saying in a cold, clear voice:

"It is not permitted. Go, knights, and cool your brows in yonder garden, where sweet water runs. Your sister is in charge. Fear not, for she is guarded."

"Come," said Godwin to Wulf; "we had best obey."

So together they walked through the crowd of those feasters that remained, for most of them had already left the hall, who made way, not without reverence, for the brethern of this new star of beauty, on to the terrace, and from the terrace into the gardens. Here they stood awhile in the sweet freshness of the night which was very grateful, after the heated, perfume-laden air of the banquet; then began to wander up and down among the scented trees and flowers. The moon, floating in a cloudless sky, was almost at its full, and by her light they saw a wonderous scene. Under many of the trees and in tents set about here and there, rugs were spread, and to them came men who had drunk of the wine of the feast, and cast themselves down to sleep.

"Are they drunk?" asked Wulf.

"It would seem so," answered Godwin.

Yet these men appeared to be mad rather than drunk, for they walked steadily enough, but with wide-set, dreamy eyes; nor did they seem to sleep upon the rugs, but lay there staring at the sky and muttering with their lips, their faces steeped in a strange, unholy rapture. Sometimes they would rise and walk a few paces with out-stretched arms, till the arms closed as though they clasped something invisible, to which they bent their heads to babble awhile. Then they walked back to their rugs again where they remained silent.

As they lay thus, white-veiled women appeared, who crouched by the heads of these sleepers, murmuring into their ears, and when from time to time they sat up, gave them to drink from cups they carried, after partaking of which they lay down again and became quite senseless. Only the women would move on to others and serve them likewise. Some of them approached the brethern with a slow, gliding motion, and offered them the cup; but they but they walked forward, taking no notice, whereupon the girls left them, laughing softly, and saying such things as "Tomorrow we shall meet," or "Soon you will be glad to drink and enter into paradise."

"When the time comes doubtless we shall be glad—who have dwelt here," answered Godwin gravely, but as he spoke in French they did not understand him.

"Step out, brother," said Wulf, "for at the very sight of those rugs I grow sleepy, and the wine in the cups sparkles as bright as their bearers' eyes."

So they walked on towards the sound of a waterfall, and, when they came to it, drank, and bathed their faces and heads.

"This is better than their wine," said Wulf. Then, catching sight of more women flitting round them, looking like ghosts amid the moonlit glades, they pressed forward till they reached an open sward where there were no rugs, no sleepers, and no cup-bearers. "Now," said Wulf, halting, "tell me what does all this mean?"

"Are you deaf and blind?" asked Godwin. "Cannot you see that yonder fiend is in love with Rosamund, and means to take her, as he well may do?"

Wulf groaned aloud, then answered:

"I swear that first I will send his soul to hell, even though our own must keep it company."

"Aye," answered Godwin, "I saw; you went near to it tonight. But remember, that is the end for all of us. Let us wait then to strike until we must—to save her from worse things."

"Who knows that we may find another chance? Meanwhile, meanwhile—" and again he groaned.

"Among those ornaments that hung about the waist of Rosamund I saw a jewelled knife, answered Godwin, sadly. "She can be trusted to use it if need be, and after that we can be trusted to do our worst. At least, I think that we should die in a fashion that should be remembered in this mountain."

As they spoke, they had loitered towards the edge of the glade, and halting there stood silent, till presently form under the shadow of a cedar tree appeared a solitary white-robed woman.

"Let us be going," said Wulf; "here is another of them with her accursed cup."

But before they could turn the woman glided up to them and suddenly unveiled. It was Masouda.

"Follow me, brothers Peter and John," she said in a laughing whisper. "I have words to say to you. What! you will not drink? Well, it is wisest." And emptying the cup upon the ground she flitted ahead of them.

Silently as a wraith she went, now appearing in the open spaces, now vanishing beneath the dense gloom of cedar boughs, till she reached a naked, lonely rock which stood almost upon the edge of the gulf. Opposite to this rock was a great mound such as ancient peoples reared over the bodies of their dead, and in the mound, cunningly hidden by growing shrubs, a massive door. Masouda took a key from her girdle, and, having looked around to see that they were alone, unlocked it.

"Enter," she said, pushing them before her.

They obeyed, and through the darkness within heard her close the door.

"Now we are safe awhile," she said with a sigh, "or, at least, so I think. But I will lead you to where there is more light."

Then, taking each of them by the hand, she went forward along a smooth incline, till presently they saw the moonlight, and by it discovered that they stood at the mouth of a cave which was fringed with bushes. Running up from the depths of the gulf below to this opening was a ridge or shoulder of rock, very steep and narrow.

"See the only road that leads from the citadel of Masyaf save that across the bridge," said Masouda.

"A bad one," answered Wulf, staring downward.

"Aye, yet horses trained to rocks can follow it. At the foot is the bottom of the gulf, and a mile or more away to the left a deep cleft which leads to the top of the mountain and to freedom. Will you not take it now? By tomorrow's dawn you might be far away."

"And where would the lady Rosamund be?" asked Wulf.

"In the harem of the lord Sinan—that is, very soon," she answered, cooly.

"Oh, say it not!" he exclaimed, clasping her arm, while Godwin leaned back against the wall of the cave.

"Why should I hide the truth? Have you no eyes to see that he is enamoured of her loveliness—like others? Listen; a while ago my master Sinan chanced to lose his queen—how, we need not ask, but it is said that she wearied him. Now, as he must by law, he mourns for her a month, from full moon to full moon. But on the day after the full moon—that is, the third morning from now—he may wed again, and I think there will be a marriage. Till then, however, your sister is as safe as though she yet sat at home in England before Salah-ed-din dreamed his dream."

"Therefore," said Godwin, "within that time she must either escape or die."

"There is a third way," answered Masouda, shrugging her shoulders. "She might stay and become the wife of Sinan."

Wulf muttered something between his teeth, then stepped towards her threateningly saying:

"Rescue her, or—"

"Stand back, pilgrim John," she said, with a laugh. "If I rescue her, which indeed would be hard, it will not be for fear of your great sword."

"What, then, will avail. Masouda?" asked Godwin, in a sad voice. "To promise you money would be useless, even if we could."

"I am glad that you spared me that insult," she replied with flashing eyes, "for then there had been an end. Yet," she added more humbly, "seeing my home and business, and what I appear to be," and she glanced at her dress and the empty cup in her hand, "it had not been strange. Now hear me, and forget no word. At present you are in favor with Sinan, who believes you to be the Brother of the Lady Rosamund, not her lovers; but from the moment he learns the truth your doom is sealed. Now what the Frank Lozelle knows, that Sinan may know at any time—and will know, if these should meet.

"Meanwhile, you are free; so tomorrow, while you ride about the garden, as you will do, take note of the tall rock that stands without, and how to reach it from any point, even in the dark. Tomorrow, also, when the moon is up, they will take you to the narrow bridge, to ride your horses to and fro there, that they may learn not to fear it in that light. When you have stabled them go into the gardens and come hither unobserved, as the place being so far away you can do. The guards will let you pass, thinking only that you desire to drink a cup of wine with some fair friend, as is the custom of our guests. Enter this cave—here is the key," and she handed it to Wulf, "and if I be not there, await me. Then I will tell you my plan, if I have any, but until then I must scheme and think. Now it grows late—go.

"And you, Masouda," said Godwin, doubtfully; "how will you escape this place?"

"By a road you do not know of, for I am mistress of the secrets of this city. Still, I thank you for your thought of me. Go, I say, and lock the door behind you."

So they went in silence, doing as she bade them, and walked back through the gardens, that now seemed empty enough, to the stable-entrance of the guest-house, where the guards admitted them without question.

That night the brethern slept together in one bed, fearing that if they lay separate they might be searched in their sleep and not awake. Indeed, it seemed to them that, as before, they heard footsteps and voices in the darkness.

Next morning, when they had breakfasted, they loitered awhile, hoping to win speech with Rosamund, or sight of her, or at least that Masouda would come to them; but they saw no Rosamund, and no Masouda came. At length an officer appeared, and beckoned to them to follow him. So they followed, and were led through the halls and passages to the terrace of justice, where Sinan, clad in his black robe, sat as before beneath a canopy in the midst of the sun-lit marble floor. There, too, beside him, also beneath the canopy and gorgeously apparelled, sat Rosamund. They strove to advance and speak with her, but guards came between them, pointing out a place where they must stand a few yards away. Only Wulf said in a loud voice, in English:

"Tell us, Rosamund, is it well with you?" Lifting her pale face, she smiled and nodded.

Then, at the bidding of Sinan, Masouda commanded them to be silent, saying that it was not lawful for them to speak to the Lord of the Mountain, or his Companion: unless they were first bidden so to do. So, having learnt what they wished to know, they were silent.

Now some of the dais drew near the canopy, and consulted with their master on what seemed to be a great matter, for their faces were troubled. Presently he gave an order, whereon they resumed their seats and messengers left the terrace. When they appeared again, in their company were three noble-looking Saracens, who were accompanied by a retinue of servants and wore green turbans, showing that they were descendants of the Prophet. These men, who seemed weary with long travel, marched up the terrace with a proud mien, not looking at the dais or any one until they saw the brethern standing side by side, at whom they stared a little. Next they caught sight of Rosamund sitting in the shadow of the canopy, and bowed to her, but of the Al-je-bal they took no notice.

"Who are you, and your pleasure?" asked Sinan, after he had eyed them awhile. "I am the ruler of this country. These are my ministers," and he pointed to the dais, "and here is my sceptre," and he touched the blood-red dagger broidered on his robe of black.

Now that Sinan had declared himself the embassy bowed to him, courteously enough. Then their spokesman answered him.

"That sceptre we know; it has been seen afar. Twice already we have cut down its bearers even in the tent of our master. Lord of Murder, we acknowledge the emblem of murder, and we bow to you whose title is the Great Murderer. As for our mission, it is this. We are the ambassadors of Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful, Sultan of the East; in these papers signed with his signet are our credentials, if you would read them."

"So," answered Sinan, "I have heard of that chief. What is his will with me?"

"This, Al-je-bal. A Frank in your pay, and a traitor, has betrayed to you a certain lady, niece of Salah-ed-din, the princess of Baalbec, whose father was a Frankish noble named D'Arcy, and who herself is named Rose of the World. The Sultan, Salah-ed-din, having been informed of this matter by his servant, the prince Hassan, who escaped from your soldiers, demands that this lady, his niece, be delivered to him forthwith, and with her the head of the Frank Lozelle."

"The head of the Frank Lozelle he may have if he will after tomorrow night, The lady I keep," snarled Sinan. "What then?"

"Then, Al-je-bal, in the name of Salah-ed-din, we declare war on you—war till this high place of yours is pulled stone from stone; war till your tribe be dead, till the last man, woman, and child be slain, until your carcass is tossed to the crows to feed on."

Now Sinan rose in his fury and rent at his beard.

"Go back," he said, "and tell that dog you name a sultan, that low as he is, the humble-born son of Ayoub, I, Al-je-bal, do him an honor that he does not deserve. My queen is dead, and two days from now, when my month of mourning is expired, I shall take to wife his niece, the princess of Baalbec, who sits here beside me, my bride elect."

At these words, Rosamund, who had been listening intently, started like one who has been stung by a snake, put her hands before her face and groaned.

"Princess," said the ambassador, who was watching her, "you seem to understand our language; is this your will, to mate your noble blood with that of the heretic chief of the Assassins?"

"Nay, nay!" she cried. "It is no will of mine, who am a helpless prisoner and by faith a Christian. If my uncle Salah-ed-din is indeed as great as I have heard, then let him show his power and deliver me, and with me these my brethren, the knights Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf."

"So you speak Arabic," said Sinan. "Good; our loving converse will be easier and for the rest—well, the whims of women change. Now, you messengers of Salah-ed-din, begone, lest I send you on a longer journey, and tell your master that if he dares to lift his standards against my walls my fedais shall speak with him. By day and by night, not for one moment shall he be safe. Poison shall lurk in his cup and a dagger in his bed. Let him kill a hundred of them, and another hundred shall appear. His most trusted guards shall be his executioners. The women in his harem shall bring him to his doom—aye, death shall be in the very air he breathes. If he would escape it, therefore, let him hide himself within the walls of his city of Damascus, or amuse himself with wars against the mad Cross-worshippers, and leave me to live in peace with this lady whom I have chosen."

"Great words, worthy of the Great Assassin," said the ambassador.

"Great words in truth which shall be followed by great deeds. What chance has this lord of yours against a nation sworn to obey to the death? You smile? Then come hither you—and you." And he summoned two of his dais by name.

They rose and bowed before him.

"Now, my worthy servants," he said, "show these heretic dogs how you obey, that their master may learn the power of your master. You are old and weary of life. Begone, and await me in paradise."

The old men bowed again, trembling a little. Then, straightening themselves, without a word they ran side by side and leapt into the abyss.

"Has Salah-ed-din servants such as these?" asked Sinan in the silence that followed. "Well, what they have done, all would do, if I bid them slay him. Back now; and, if you will, take these Franks with you, who are my guests, that they may bear witness of what you have seen, and of the state in which you left their sister. Translate to the knights, woman."

So Masouda translated. Then Godwin answered through her.

"We understand little of this matter, who are ignorant of your tongue, but, O Al-je-bal, ere we leave your sheltering roof we have a quarrel to settle with the man Lozelle. After that, with your permission, we will go, but not before."

Now Rosamund sighed as if in relief, and Sinan answered:

"As you will; so be it," adding, "Give these envoys food and drink before they go."

But their spokesman answered:

"We partake not of the bread and wine of murderers, lest we should become of their fellowship. Al-je-bal, we depart, but within a week we reappear again in the company of ten thousand spears, and on one of them shall your head be set. Your safe-conduct guards us until the sunset. After that, do your worst, as we do ours. High princess, our counsel to you is that you slay yourself and so gain an immortal honor." Then, bowing to her one by one, they turned and marched down the terrace followed by their servants.

Now Sinan waved his hand and the court broke up, Rosamund leaving it first, accompanied by Masouda and escorted by guards, after which the brethren were commanded to depart also.

So they went, talking earnestly of all these things, but finding no hope save in God.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Combat on the Bridge.

"Saladin will come," said Wulf the hopeful, and from the high place where he stood he pointed to the plain beneath, across which a band of horsemen moved at full gallop. "Look; yonder goes his embassy."

"Aye," answered Godwin, "he will come, but, I fear me, too late."

"Yes, brother, unless we go to meet him. Masouda has promised."

"Masouda," sighed Godwin. "Ah! to think that so much should hang upon the faithfulness of one woman."

"It does not hang on her," said Wulf; "it hangs on Fate, who writes with her finger. Come, let us ride."

So, followed by their escort, they rode in the gardens, taking note, without seeming to do so, of the position of the tall rock, and of how it could be approached from every side. Then they went in again and waited for some sign or word of Rosamund, but in vain. That night there was no feast, and their meal was brought to them in the guest-house. While they sat at it Masouda appeared for a moment to tell them that they had leave to ride the bridge in the moonlight, and that their escort would await them at a certain hour.

The brethern asked if their sister Rosamund was not coming to dine with them. Masouda answered that as the queen-elect of the Al-je-bal it was not lawful that she should eat with any other men, even her brothers. Then as she passed out, stumbling as though by accident, she brushed against Godwin and muttered:

"Remember, tonight," and was gone.

When the moon had been up an hour the officer of their escort appeared, and led them to their horses, which were waiting, and they rode away to the castle bridge. As they approached it they saw Lozelle departing on his great black stallion, which was in a lather of foam. It seemed that he also had made trial of that perilous path, for the people, of whom there were many gathered there, clapped their hands and shouted, "Well ridden, Frank! well ridden!"

Now, Godwin leading on Flame, they faced the bridge and walked their horses over it. Nor did these hang back, although they snorted a little at the black gulf on either side. Next they returned at a trot, then over again, and yet again at a canter and a gallop, sometimes together and sometimes singly. Lastly, Wulf made Godwin halt in the middle of the bridge and galloped down upon him at full speed, till within a lance's length. Then suddenly he checked his horse, and while his audience shouted, wheeled it around on its hind legs, its forehoofs beating the air, and galloped back again, followed by Godwin.

"All went well," Wulf said as they rode to the castle, "and nobler or more gentle horses were never crossed by men. I have good hopes for tomorrow night."

"Aye, brother, but I had no sword in my hand. Be not over confident, for the man is desperate and a skilled fighter, as I know who have stood face to face with him. Moreover, his black stallion is well trained, and has more weight than ours. Also, yonder is a fearsome place on which to ride a course, and one of which none but the devil would have thought."

"I shall do my best," answered Wulf, "and if I fall, why, then, act upon your own counsel. At least, let him not kill both of us."

Having stabled their horses the brethern wandered into the garden, and, avoiding the cup-bearing women and the men they plied with their drugged drink, drew by a round-about road to the tall rock. Then, finding themselves alone, they unlocked the door, and slipping through it, locked it again on the further side and groped their way to the moonlit mouth of the cave. Here they stood awhile studying the descent of the gulf as best they could in that light, till suddenly Godwin, feeling a hand upon his shoulder, started round to find himself face to face with Masouda.

"How did you come?" he asked.

"By a road in which is your only hope," she answered. "Now, Sir Godwin, waste no words, for my time is short, but if you think that you can trust me—and this is for you to judge—give me the Signet which hangs about your neck. If not, go back to the castle and do your best to save the lady Rosamund and yourselves."

Thrusting down his hand between his mail shirt and his breast, Godwin drew out the ancient ring, carved with the mysterious signs and veined with the emblem of the dagger, and handed it to Masouda.

"You trust indeed," she said with a little laugh, as, after scanning it closely by the light of the moon and touching her forehead with it, she hid it in her bosom.

"Yes, lady," he answered, "I trust you, though why you should risk so much for us I do not know."

"Why? Well, perhaps for hate's sake, for Sinan does not rule by love; perhaps because, being of a wild blood, I am willing to set my life at hazard, who care not if I win or die; perhaps because you saved me from the lioness. What is it to you, Sir Godwin, why a certain women-spy of the Assassins, whom in your own land you would spit on, chooses to do this or that?"

She ceased and stood before them with heaving breast and flashing eyes, a mysterious white figure in the moonlight, most beautiful to see.

Godwin felt his heart stir and the blood flow to his brow, but before he could speak Wulf broke in, saying:

"You bade us spare words, lady Masouda, so tell us what we must do."

"This," she answered, becoming calm again. "Tomorrow night about this hour you fight Lozelle upon the narrow way. That is certain, for all the city talks of it, and, whatever chances, Al-je-bal will not deprive them of the spectacle of this fray to the death. Well, you may fall, though that man at heart is a coward, which you are not, for here courage alone will avail nothing, but rather skill and horsemanship and trick of war. If so, then Sir Godwin fights him, and of this business none can tell the end. Should both of you go down, then I will do my best to save your lady and take her to Salah-ed-din, with whom she will be safe, or if I cannot save her I will find her a means to save herself by death."

"You swear that?" said Wulf.

"I have said it, it is enough," she answered impatiently.

"Then I face the bridge and the knave Lozelle with a light heart," said Wulf again, and Masouda went on.

"Now if you conquer, Sir Wulf, or if you fall and your brother conquers, both of you—or one of you, as it may happen—must gallop back at full speed toward the stable gate that lies more than a mile from the castle bridge. Mounted as you are, no horse can keep pace with you, nor must you stop at the gate, but ride on, ride like the wind till you reach this place. The gardens will be empty of feasters and of cup-bearers, who with every soul within the city will have gathered on the walls and on the house-tops to see the fray. There is but one fear—by then a guard may be set before this mound, seeing that Salah-ed-din has declared war upon Al-je-bal, and through yonder road is known to few, it is a road, and sentries may watch here. If so, you must cut them down or be cut down, and bring your story to an end. Sir Godwin, here is another key that you may use if you are alone. Take it."

He did so, and Masouda continued.

"Now if both of you, or one of you, win through to this cave, enter with your horses, lock the door, bar it, and wait. It may be I will join you here with the princess. But if I do not come by the dawn and you are not discovered and overwhelmed—which should not be, seeing that one man can hold that door against many—then know that the worst has happened, and fly to Salah-ed-din and tell him of this road, by which he may take vengeance upon his foe Sinan. Only then, I pray you, doubt not that I have done my best, who of I fail must die—most horribly. Now, farewell, until we meet again, or—do not meet again. Go; you know the road."

They turned to obey, but when they had gone a few paces Godwin looked round and saw Masouda watching them. The moonlight shone full upon her face, and by it he saw also that tears were running from her face, and tender eyes. Back he came again, and with him Wulf, for that sight drew them. Down he bent before her till his knee touched the ground, and, taking her hand, he kissed it, and said in a gentle voice:

"Henceforth through life, through death, we serve two ladies," and what he did Wulf did also.

"Mayhap," she answered sadly; "two ladies—but one love."

Then they went, and, creeping through the bushes to the path, wandered about awhile among the revellers and came to the guest-house safely.

Once more it was night, and high above the mountain fortress of Masyaf shone the full summer moon, lighting crag and tower as with some vast soilver lamp. Forth from the guest-house gate rode the brethern, side by side upon their splendid steeds, and the moon-rays sparkled upon their coats of mail, their polished bucklers, blazoned with the cognizance of a grinning skull, their close-fitting helms, and the points of the long tough lances that had been given them. Round them rode their escort, while in front and behind went a mob of people.

The nation of the Assassins had thrown off its gloom this night, for the while it was no longer oppressed even by the fear of attack from its mighty foe, Saladin. To death it was accustomed; death was its watchword; death in many dreadful forms its daily bread. From the walls of Masyaf, day by day, fedais went out to murder this great one, or that great one, at the bidding of their lord Sinan. For the most part they came not back again; they waited week by week, month by month, year by year, till the moment was ripe, then gave the poisoned cup or drove home the dagger, and escaped or were slain. Death waited them abroad, and if they failed, death waited them at home. The dreadful caliph was himself a sword of death. At his will they hurled themselves from towers or from precipices; to satisfy his policy they sacrificed their wives and children. And their reward—in life, the drugged cup and voluptuous dreams; after it, as they believed, a still more voluptuous paradise.

All forms of human agony and doom were known to this people; but now they were promised an unfamiliar sight, that of Frankish knights slaying each other in single combat beneath the silent moon, tilting at full gallop upon a narrow place where many might hesitate to walk, and—oh, joy!—falling perchance, horse and rider together, into the depths below. So they were happy, for to them this was a night of festival, to be followed by a morrow of still greater festival, when their sultan and their god took to himself this stranger beauty as a wife. Doubtless, too, he would soon weary of her, and they would be called together to see her cast from some topmost tower and hear her frail bones break on the cruel rocks below, or—as had happened to the last queen—to watch her writhe out her life in the pangs of poison upon a charge of sorcery. It was indeed a night of festival, a night filled full of promise of rich joys to come.

On rode the brethern, with stern, impassive faces, but wondering in their hearts whether they would live to see another dawn. The shouting crowd surged round them, breaking through the circle of their guards. A hand was thrust up to Godwin; in it was a letter, which he took and read by the bright moonlight. It was written in English, and brief:

"I cannot speak with you. God be with you both, my brothers, God and the spirit of my father. Strike home, Wulf, strike home, Godwin, and fear not for me who will guard myself. Conquer or die, and in life or death, await me. Tomorrow in the flesh, or in the spirit, we will talk—Rosamund."

Godwin handed the paper to Wulf, and as he did so, saw that the guards had caught its bearer, a withered, grey-haired woman. They asked her some questions, but she shook her head. Then they cast her down, trampled the life out of her beneath their horses' hoofs, and went on laughing. The mob laughed also.

"Tear that paper up," said Godwin. Wulf did so, saying:

"Our Rosamund has a brave heart. Well, we are of the same blood, and will not fail her."

Now they were come to the open space in front of the narrow bridge, where, tier on tier, the multitude were ranged, kept back from its centre by lines of guards. On the flat roofed houses also they were crowded thick as swarming bees, on the circling walls, and on the battlements that protected the far end of the bridge, and the houses of the outer city. Before the bridge, was a low gateway, and upon its roof sat the Al-je-bal, clad in his scarlet robe of festival, and by his side, the moonlight gleaming on her jewels, Rosamund. In front, draped in a rich garment, a dagger of jems in her dark hair, stood the interpreter or "mouth" Masouda, and behind were dais and guards.

The brethern rode to the space before the arch and halted, saluting with their pennoned spears. Then from the further side approached another procession, which opening, revealed the knight Lozelle riding on his great black horse, and a huge man and a fierce he seemed in his armor.

"What!" he shouted, glowering at them. "Am I to fight one against two? Is this your chivalry?"

"Nay, nay, Sir Traitor," answered Wulf. "Nay, nay, betrayer of Christian maids to the power of the heathen dog; you have fought Godwin, now it is the turn of Wulf. Kill Wulf and Godwin remains. Kill Godwin and God remains. Knave, you look your last upon the moon."

Lozelle heard, and seemed to go mad with rage, or fear, or both.

"Lord Sinan," he shouted in Arabic, "this is murder. Am I, who have done you so much service, to be murdered for your pleasure by the lovers of that woman, whom you should honor with the name of wife?"

Sinan heard, and stared at him with dull, angry eyes.

"Aye, you may stare," went on the maddened Lozelle, "but it is true—they are her lovers, not her brothers. Would men take so much pains for a sister's sake, think you? Would they swim into this net of yours for a sister's sake?"

Sinan held up his hand for silence.

"Let the lots be cast," he said, "for whatever these men are, this fight must go on, and it shall be fair."

So a dai, standing by himself, cast lots upon the ground, and having read them, announced Lozelle must run the first course from the further side of the bridge. Then one took his bridle to lead him across. As he passed the brethren he grinned in their faces and said:—

"At least this is sure, you also look your last upon the moon. I am avenged already. The bait that hooked me is a meal for yonder pike, and he will kill you both before her eyes to sharpen his appetite."

But the brethren answered nothing.

The black horse of Lozelle grew dim in the distance of the moonlight bridge, and vanished beneath the farther archway that led to the outer city. Then a herald cried, Masouda translating his words, which another herald echoed from beyond the gulf.

"Thirce will the trumpets blow. At the third blast of the trumpets the knights shall charge and meet in the centre of the bridge. Thenceforward they may fight as it pleases them, ahorse, or afoot, with lance, with sword, or with dagger, but the vanquished no mercy will be shown. If he he brought living from the bridge, living he shall be cast into the gulf. Hear the decree of Al-je-bal!"

Then Wulf's horse was led forward to the entrance of the bridge, and from the further side was led forward the horse of Lozelle.

"Good luck, brother," said Godwin, as he passed him. "Would that I rode this course instead of you."

"Your turn may come, brother," answered the grim Wulf, as he set his lance in rest.

Now from some neighboring tower peeled out the first long blast of trumpets, and dead silence fell on all the multitude. Grooms came forward to look to girth and bridle and stirrup straps, but Wulf waved them back.

"I mind my own harness," he said.

The second blast blew, and he loosened the great sword in its scabbard, the sword that had flamed in his forbear's hand upon the turrets of Jerusalem.

"Your gift," he cried back to Rosamund, and her answer came clear and sweet:—

"Bear it like your fathers, Wulf. Bear it as it was last borne in the hall at Steeple."

Then there was another long silence—a silence long and deep. Wulf looked at the white and narrow ribbon of the bridge, looked at the black gulf on either side, looked at the blue sky above, in which floated the great globe of the golden moon. Then he leant forward and patted Smoke upon the neck.

For the third time the trumpets blew, and from either end of that bridge, two hundred paces long, the knights flashed towards each other like living bolts of steel. The multitude rose to watch; even Sinan rose. Only Rosamund sat still, gripping the cushions with her hands. Hollow rang the hoofs of the horses upon the stone-work, swifter and swifter they flew, lower and lower bent the knights upon their saddles. Now they were near, and now they met. The spears seemed to shiver, the horses to hustle together on the narrow way and overhang its edge, then on came the black horse towards the inner city, and on sped Smoke towards the further gulf.

"They have passed! They have passed!" roared the multitude.

Look! Lozelle approached, reeling in his saddle, as well he might, for the helm was torn from his head and blood poured from his skull where the lance had grazed it.

"Too high, Wulf; too high," said Godwin sadly. "But oh! if those laces had but held!"

Soldiers caught the horse and turned it.

"Another helm!" cried Lozelle.

"Nay," answered Sinan; "yonder knight has lost his shield. New lances—that is all."

So they gave him a fresh lance, and presently, at the blast of the trumpets, again the horses were seen speeding together over the narrow way. They met, and lo! Lozelle, torn from his saddle, but still clinging to the reins, was flung backwards, far backwards, to fall on the stone-work of the bridge. Down, too, beneath the mighty shock went his black horse, a huddled heap, and lay there struggling.

"Wulf will fall over him!" cried Rosamund. But Smoke did not fall; the stallion gathered itself together—the moonlight shone so clear that every watcher saw it—and since stop it could not, leapt straight over the fallen black horse—aye, and over the rider beyond—and sped on in its stride. Then the black found its feet again and galloped forward to the further gate, and Lozelle also found his feet and turned to run.

"Stand! Stand, coward!" yelled ten thousand voices, and, hearing them, he drew his sword and stood.

Within three great strides Wulf dragged his charger to its haunches, then wheeled it round.

"Charge him!" shouted the multitude; but he remained seated, as though unwilling to attack a horseless man. Next, he sprang from the saddle, and accompanied by the horse Smoke, which followed him as a dog follows its master, walked slowly towards Lozelle, as he walked casting away his lance and drawing the great, cross-hilted sword.

Again the silence fell, and through it rang the cry of Godwin:—

"A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy!"

"A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy!" came back Wulf's answer from the bridge, and his voice echoed thin and hollow in the spaces of the gulf. Yet they rejoiced to hear it, for it told them that he was sound and strong.

Wulf had no shield and Lozelle had no helm—the fight was even. They crouched opposite each other, the sword flashed aloft in the moonlight; from far away came the distant clank of steel, a soft, continual clamor of iron on iron. A blow fell on Wulf's mail, who had nought wherewith to guard himself, and he staggered back. Another blow, another and another, and back, still back he reeled—back to the edge of the bridge, back until he struck against the horse that stood behind him, and, resting there a moment, as it seemed, regained his balance.

Then there was a change. Look, he rushed forward, wielding the great blade in both hands. The stroke lit upon Lozelle's shield and seemed to tear it in two, for in that stillness all could hear the clang of its upper half as it fell upon the stones. Beneath the weight of it he staggered, sank to his knee, gained his feet again, and in his turn gave back. Yes, now it was Lozelle who rocked and reeled. Aye, by St. Chad !Lozelle who went down beneath that mighty blow which missed the head but fell upon his shoulder, and lay there like a log, till presently the moonlight shone upon his mailed hand stretched upward in a prayer for mercy. From house-top, terrace, and wall, from soaring gates and battlements, the multitude of the people of the Assassins gathered on either side the gulf broke into a roar that beat up the mountain sides like a voice of thunder. And the roar shaped itself to these words:

"Kill him! kill him! kill him!"

Sinan held up his hand, and a sudden silence fell. Then he, too, screamed in his thin voice:

"Kill him! He is conquered!"

But the great Wulf only leaned upon the cross-handle of his brand, and looked at the fallen foe. Presently, he seemed to speak with him; then Lozelle lifted the blade that lay beside him and gave it to him in token of surrender. Wulf handled it awile, shook it on high in triumph, and whirled it about his head till it shone in the moonlight. Next, with a shout he cast it from him far into the gulf, where it was seen for a moment, an arc of gleaming light, and the next was gone.

Now, taking no more heed of the conquered knight, Wulf turned and began to walk towards his horse.

Scarcely was his back towards him when Lozelle was on his feet again, a dagger in his hand.

"Look behind you!" yelled Godwin; but the spectators, pleased that the fight was not yet done, broke into a roar of cheers. Wulf heard and swung round. As he faced Lozelle the dagger struck him on the breast, and well must it have been for him that his mail was good. To use his sword he had neither space nor time, but ere the next stroke could fall his arms were about Lozelle, and the fight for life begun.

To and fro they reeled and staggered, whirling round and round, till none could tell which of them was Wulf or which foe. Now they were on the edge of the abyss, and, in that last dread strain for mastery, seemed to stand there still as stone. Then one man began to bend down. See! his head hung over. Further and further he bent, but his arms could not be loosened.

"They will both go!" cried the multitude in their joy.

Look! A dagger flashed. Once, twice, thrice it gleamed, and those wrestlers fell apart, while from deep down in the gulf came the thud of a fallen body.

"Which—oh, which?" cried Rosamund from her battlement.

(To be continued.)