POOR DOCUMENT

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THE BRETHREN

H. Rider Haggard's Great Romance of the Crusades

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CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

"He who sold drugged wine," echoed the chaplain, has stolen away the lady Rosamund."

Then Wulf seemed to go mad.

"Stolen Rosamund over our sleeping carcases! Stolen Rosamund with never a blow struck by us to save her! O, Christ, that such a thing should be! O, Christ, that I should live to hear it!" And he, the mighty man, the knight of skill and strength, broke down and wept like a very child. But not for long, for presently he shouted in a voice of thunder:

"Awake, ye drunkards! Awake, and learn what has chanced to us. Your lady Rosamund has been raped away while we were lost in sleep!"

At the sound of that great voice a tall form arose from the floor, and staggered towards him, holding a gold cross in its hand.

"What awful words are those I heard you say, my brother?" asked Godwin, who, pale and dall-eyed, rocked to and fro before him. Then, he, too, saw the red sword and stared, first at it and next at the gold cross in his hand. "My uncle's sword, Rosamund's chain, Rosamund's cross! Where, then, is Rosamund?"

"Gone! gone! gone!" cried Wulf. "Tell him, priest."

So the chaplain told him all he knew.

"Thus have we kept our oaths," went on Wulf. "Oh, what can we do now, save die for every shame?"

"Nay," answered Godwin, dreamingly; "we can live on to save her. See, these are her tokens—the cross for me, the blood-stained sword for you, and about its hilt the chain, a symbol of her slavery. Now both of us must bear the cross; both of us must wield the sword, and both of us must cut the chain, or if we fail, then die."

"You rave," said Wulf; "and little wonder. Here, drink water. Would that we had never touched aught else, as she did, and desired that we should do. What said you of my uncle, priest? Dead, or only dying? Nay, answer not, let us see. Come, brother." Then together they ran, or rather reeled, torch in hand, along the passage.

Wulf saw the bloodstains on the floor and laughed savagely.

"The old man made a good fight," he said, "while, like drunken brutes, we slept."

They were there, and before them, beneath the white, shroud-like cloak, lay Sir Andrew, the steel helm on his head, and his face beneath it even whiter than the cloak. At the sound of their footsteps he opened his eyes.

"At length, at length," he muttered. "Oh, how many years have I waited for you? Nay, be silent, for I do not know how long my strength will last, but listen—kneel down and listen."

So they knelt on either side of him, and in quick, fierce words he told them all—of the drugging, of the fight, of the long parely carried on to give the palmer knave time to climb to the window; of his cowardly blow, and of what chanced afterwards. Then his strength seemed to fail him, but they poured drink down his throat, and it came back again.

"Take horse swiftly," he gasped, pausing now and again to rest, "and rouse the countryside. There is still a chance. Nay, seven hours have gone by; there is no chance. Their plans were too well laid; by now they will be at sea. So hear me. Go to Palestine. There is money for your faring in my chest, but go alone, with no company, for in time of peace these would betray you. Godwin, draw off this ring from my finger, and with it as a token, find out Jebal, the black sheik of the Mountain Tribe at Masyaf on Lebanon, and bed him remember the vow made to Andrew D'Arcy, the English knight. If any can aid you, it will be Jebal, who hates the Houses of Nur-ed-din and of Ayoub. So, I charge you, let nothing—I say nothing—turn you aside from seeking him.

"Afterwards act as God will guide you. If he still lives, kill that traitor Nicholas and Hugh Lozelle, but, save in open war, spare the Emir Hassan, who did but do his duty as an Eastern reads it, and show some mercy, for he could have slain or burnt us all. This riddle has been hard for me; yet now, in my dying hour, I seem to see its answer. I think that Saladin did not dream in vain. Keep brave hearts, for I think also that as Masyaf you will find friends, and that things will yet go well, and our sorrows bear good fruit."

"What is that you said? She left you my father's sword, Wulf? Then wield it bravely, winning honor for our name. She left you the cross, Godwin? Wear it worthily, winning glory for the lord, and salvation to your soul. Remember what you have sworn. Whate'er befall, bear no bitterness to one another, and be true to one another, and to her, your lady, so that when at the last you make your report to me before high Heaven, I may have no cause to be ashamed of you, my nephews, Godwin and Wulf."

For a moment he was silent, until his face lit up as with a great gladness, and he [illegible] a loud, clear voice, "Beloved w[illegible] you! Oh, God, I come!"

[illegible]gh his eyes stayed open, and the [illegible]ile still rested on his face, his jaw fell.

Thus died Sir Andrew D'Arcy.

Still kneeling on either side of him, the brethern watched the end, and, as his spirit passed, bowed their heads in prayer.

"We have seen a great death," said Godwin presently. "Let us learn a lesson from it and when our time comes we may die like him.

"Aye," answered Wulf, springing to his feet; "but first let us take vengeance for it. Why, what is this Rosamund's writing! Read it, Godwin."

Godwin took the parchment and read: "Follow me to Saladin. In that hope I live on."

"Surely we will follow you Rosamund," he cried aloud. "Follow you through life to death or victory."

Then he threw down the paper, and calling for the chaplain to come to watch the body, they ran into the hall. By this time about a half of the folk were awake from their drugged sleep, while others who had been doctored by the man Ali in the barn came staggering into the hall—wild-eyed, while-faced, and holding their hands to their heads and hearts. They were so sick and bewildered, indeed, that it was difficult to make them understand what had chanced, and when they learned the truth, the most of them could only groan. Still, a few were found strong enough in wit and body to grope their way through the darkness and the falling snow to Stangate Abbey, to Southminster, and to the houses of their neighbours, although of these there were none near, praying that every true man would arm and ride to help them in the hunt. Also Wulf, cursing the priest Matthew and himself that he had not thought of it before, called him from his prayers by their dead uncle, and charged him to climb the church tower as swiftly as he could, and set light to the beacon that was laid ready there.

Away he went, taking flint, steel and tinder with him, and ten minutes later the blaze was flaring furiously above the roof of Steeple Church, warning all men of the need of help. Then they armed, saddled such horses as they had, amongst them the three that had been left there by the merchant Georgios, and gathered all of them that were not too sick to ride or run, in the courtyard of the Hall. But as yet their haste availed them little, for the moon was down. Snow fell also, and the night was still black as death—so black that a man could scarcely see the hand he held before his face. So they must wait, and wait they did, eating their hearts out with grief and rage, and bathing their aching brows in snow and ice-cold water.

At length the dawn began to break, and by its first grey light they saw men mounted and afoot feeling their way through the snow, shouting to each other as they came to know what dreadful thing had happened at Steeple. Quickly the tidings spread among them that Sir Andrew was slain, the lady Rosamund snatched away by Paynims, while all who feasted in the place had been drugged with poisoned wine by a man whom they believed to be a merchant. So soon as a band was got together—perhaps thirty men in all—and there was light to stir by, they set out and began to search, though where to look they knew not, for the snow had covered up all traces of their foes.

"One thing is certain," said Godwin, "they must have come by water."

"Aye," answered Wulf; "and landed hard by, since, had they far to go, they would have taken the horses, and must run the risk also of losing their path in the darkness. To the Staithe! Let us try Steeple Staithe."

So on they went across the meadow to the creek. It lay but three bow-shots distant. At first they could see nothing, for the snow covered the stones of the little pier, but presently a man cried out that the lock of the waterhouse, in which the brethern kept their fishing boat, was broken, and next minute, that the boat was gone.

"She was small; she would hold but six men," cried a voice. "So great a company could never have crowded into her."

"Fool!" one answered, "there may have been other boats."

So they looked again, and beneath the thin coating of rime, found a mark in the mud by the Staithe, made by the prow of a large boat, and not far from it a hole in the earth into which a peg had been driven to make her fast. Now the thing seemed clear enough, but it was to be made yet clearer, for presently, even through the driving snow, the quick eye of Wulf caught sight of some glittering thing which hung to the edge of a clump of dead reeds. A man with a lance lifted it out at his command, and gave it to him.

"I thought so," he said in a heavy voice; "it is a fragment of that star-wrought veil that was my Christmas gift to Rosamund, and she has torn it off and left it here to show us her road. To St. Peter's-on-the-Wall! To St. Peter's, I say, for there the boats or ship must pass, and maybe that in the darkness they have not yet won out to sea."

So they turned their horses' heads, and those of them that were mounted rode for St. Peter's by the inland path that runs through Steeple St. Lawrence and Bradwell town, while those who were not, started to search along the Saltings and the river bank. On they galloped through the falling snow, Godwin and Wulf leading the way on their great horses, whilst behind them thundered an ever-gathering train of knights, squires and yeomen, who had seen the beacon flare on Steeple tower, or learned the tale from messengers—yes, and even of monks from Stangate and chapmen from Southminster.

Hard they rode, but the lanes were heavy with fallen snow and mud beneath and the way was far, so that an hour had gone by before Bradwell was left behind, and the shrine of St. Chad lay but a half mile in front. Now of a sudden the snow ceased, and a strong northerly wind springing up, drove the thick mist before it and left the sky bright and blue behind. Still riding in this mist, they pressed on to where the old tower loomed up in front of them, then drew rein and waited.

"What is that?" said Godwin presently, pointing to a great, dim thing upon the vapour-hidden sea.

As he spoke a strong gust of wind tore away the last veils of mist, revealing the red face of the risen sun, and not a hundred yards away from them—for the tide was high—the tall masts of a great galley creeping out to sea beneath her banks of oars. As they stared the wind caught her, and upon the main-mast rose her bellying sail, while a shout of laughter told them that they themselves were seen. They shook their swords in the madness of their rage, well knowing who was aboard that galley; while to the fore peak ran up the yellow flag of Saladin, streaming there like gold in the golden sunlight.

Nor was this all, for on the high poop appeared the tall shape of Rosamund herself, and on one side of her, clad now in coat of mail and turban, the Emir Hassan, whom they had known as the merchant Georgios, and on the other, a stout man, also clad in mail, who at that distance looked like a Christian knight. Rosamund stretched out her arms towards them. Then suddenly she sprang forward as though she would throw herself into the sea, had not Hassan cought her by the arm and held her back, whilst the other man who was watching slipped between her and the bulwork.

In his fury and despair Wulf drove his horse into the water till the waves broke about his middle, and there, since he could go no farther, sat shaking his sword and shouting:

"Fear not! We follow! we follow!" in such a voice of thunder, that even through the wind and across the ever-widening space of foam his words may have reached the ship. At least Rosamund seemed to hear them, for she tossed up her arms as though in token.

But Hassan, one hand pressed upon his heart and the other upon his forehead, only bowed thrice in courteous farewell.

Then, the great sail filled, the oars were drawn in, and the vessel swept away swiftly across the dancing waves, till at length she vanished, and they could only see the sunlight playing on the golden banner of Saladin which floated from her truck.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Widow Masouda.

Many months had gone by since the brethern sat upon their horses that winter morning, and from the shrine of St. Peter's-on-the-Wall, at the mouth of the Blackwater in Essex, had watched with anguished hearts the galley of Saladin sailing southwards; their love and cousin, Rosamund, standing a prisoner on the deck. Having no ship in which to follow her—and this, indeed, it would have been too late to do— they thanked those who had come to aid them, and returned home to Steeple, where they had matters to arrange. As they went they gathered from this man and that tidings which made the whole tale clear to them.

They learned, for instance, then and afterwards, that the galley that had been thought to be a merchantman had put into the River Crouch by design, feigning an injury to her rudder, and that on Christmas eve she had moved up with the tide, and anchored in the Blackwater about three miles from its mouth. Thence a great boat, which she towed behind her, and was afterwards found abandoned, had rowed in the dusk, keeping along the further shore to avoid observation, to the mouth of Steeple Creek, which she descended at dark, making fast to the Staithe, unseen of any. Her crew of thirty men or more, guided by the false palmer Nicholas, next hid themselves in the grove of trees about fifty yards from the house, where traces of them were found afterwards, waiting for the signal and, if that were necessary, ready to attack and burn the Hall while all men feasted there. But it was not necessary, since the cunning scheme of the drugged wine, which only an Eastern could have devised, succeeded. So it happened that the only man they had to meet in arms was one old knight, of which doubtless they were glad, as their numbers being few, they wished to avoid a desperate battle, wherein many must fall, and, if help came, they might be destroyed to the last man.

When all was over they led Rosamund to the boat, felt their way down the creek, towing behind them the little skiff which they had taken from the water-house, laden with their dead and wounded. This, as the brethern learned afterwards, proved the most perilous part of their adventures, since it was very dark, and came on to snow; twice they grounded upon mud banks. Still guided by Nicholas, who had studied the river, they reached the galley before dawn, and with the first light weighed anchor, and very cautiously rowed out to sea. The rest is known.

Two days later, since there was no time to spare, Sir Andrew was buried with great pomp at Stangate Abbey, in the same tomb where lay the heart of his brother, the father of the brethern, who had fallen in the Eastern wars. After he had been laid to rest amidst much lamentation and in the presence of a great concourse of people, for the fame of these strange happenings had travelled far and wide, his will was opened. Then it was found that with the exception of certain sums of money left to his nephews a legacy to Stangate Abbey, and another to be devoted to masses for the repose of his soul, with some gifts to his servants and the poor, all his estate was devised to his daughter Rosamund. The brethern however, or the survivor of them, held it in trust on her behalf, with the charge that they should keep watch and ward over her, and manage her lands till she took a husband.

These lands, together with their own, the brethern placed in the hands of Prior John at Stangate, in the presence of witnesses, to administer for them subject to the provisions of the will, taking a tithe of the rents and profits for his pains. The priceless jewels also that had been sent by Saladin were given into his keeping, and a receipt with a list of the same signed in duplicate, deposited with a clerk at Southminister. This, indeed, was necessary seeing that none save the brethern and the Prior knew of these jewels, of which, being of so great a value, it was not safe to speak. Their affairs arranged, having first made their wills in favor of each other with remainder to their heirs-at-law, since it was scearcely to be hoped that both of them would return alive from such a quest, they received the Communion, and with it his blessing from the hands of the Prior John. Then early one morning, before any were astir, they rode quietly away to London.

On the top of Steeple Hill, sending forward the servant who led the mule laden with their baggage—that same mule which had been left by the spy Nicholas—they turned their horses' heads to look in farewell on their home. There to the north of them lay the Blackwater, and to the west the parish of Mayland, towards which the laden barges crept along the stream to Steeple Creek. Below was the wide, flat plain outlined with trees, and in it, marked by the plantation where the Saracens had hid, the Hall and church of Steeple, the home in which they had grown from childhood to youth, and from youth to man's estate in the company of the fair, lost Rosamund, who was the love of both, and whom both went forth to seek. That past was all behind them, and in front a dark and troublesome future, of which they could not read the mystery nor guess the end.

Would they ever look on Steeple Hall again? Where they who stood there about to match their strength and courage against all the might of Saladin, doomed to fail or gloriously to succeed?

Through the darkness that shrouded their forward path shone one bright star of love—but for which of them did that star shine, or was it perchance for neither? They knew not. How could they know aught save that the venture seemed very desperate. Indeed, the few to whom they had spoken of it thought them mad. Yet they remembered the last words of Sir Andrew, bidding them keep a high heart, since he believed that things would yet go well. It seemed to them, in trust, that they were not quite alone—as though his brave spirit companioned them on their search, guiding their feet, with ghostly counsel which they could not hear. They remembered also their oaths to him, to one another, and to Rosamund; and in silent token that they would keep them to the death, pressed each other's hands. Then turning their horses southwards, they rode forward with light hearts, not caring what befel, if only at the last, living or dead, Rosamund and her father should, in his own words, find no cause to be ashamed of them.

Through the hot haze of a July morning a dromon, as certain merchant vessels of that time were called, might have been seen drifting before a light breeze into St. George's Bay at Beirut, on the coast of Syria. Cyprus, whence she had sailed last, was not a hundred miles away, yet she had taken six days to do the journey, not on account of storms—of which there were none at this time of year, but though lack of wind to move her. Still, her captain and the motely crowd of passengers—for the most part Eastern merchants and their servants, together with a number of pilgrims of all nations—thanked God for so prosperous a voyage—for in those times he who crossed the seas without shipwreck was very fortunate. Among these passengers were Godwin and Wulf, travelling, as their uncle had bidden them, unattended by squires or by servants. Upon the ship they passed themselves off as brothers named Peter and John of Lincoln, a town of which they knew something, having stayed there on their way to the Scottish wars, simple gentlemen of small estate, making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in penitence for their sins and for the repose of the souls of their father and mother. At this tale their fellow-passengers, with whom they had sailed from Genoa, to which place they travelled overland, shrugged their shoulders. For these brethern looked what they were, knights of high degree; and considering their great stature, long swords, and the coats of mail they always wore beneath their gambesons, none believed them but simple gentlefolk bent on a pious errand. Indeed, they nicknamed them Sir Peter and Sir John, and as such they were known throughout the voyage.

The brethern were seated together in a little place apart in the bow of the ship, and engaged, Godwin in reading from an Arabic translations of the Gospels made by some Egyptian monk, and Wulf in following it with little ease in the Latin version. Of the former tongue, indeed, they had acquired much in their youth, since they learned it from Sir Andrew with Rosamund, although they could not talk it as she did, who had been taught to lisp it as an infant by her mother. Knowing that much might hang upon a knowledge of this tongue, they occupied their long journey in studying if from such books as they could get; also in speaking it with a priest, who had spent many years in the East, and instructed them for a fee, and with certain Syrian merchants and sailors.

"Shut the book, brother," said Wulf; "there is Lebaron at last," and he pointed to the great line of mountains revealing themselves dimly through their wrappings of mist. "Glad I am to see them, who have had enough of these crooked scrolls and learnings."

"Aye," said Godwin; "the Promised Land."

"And the Land of Promise for us," answered his brother. "Well, thank God that the time has come to act, though how we are to set about it is more than I can say."

"Doubtless time will show. As our uncle bade, we will seek out this Sheik Jebal——"

"Hush!" said Wulf, for just then some merchants, and with them a number of pilgrims, their travel-worn faces full of rapture at the thought that the terrors of the voyage were done, and they were about to set foot upon ground their Lord had trodden, crowded forward to the bow to obtain their first view of it, and there burst into prayers and songs of thanksgiving. Indeed, one of these men—a trader known as Thomas of Ipswich—was, they found, standing close to them, and seemed as though he listened to their talk.

The brethern mingled with them while this same Thomas of Ipswich, who had visited the place before, or so it seemed, pointed out the beauties of the city, of the fertile country by which it was surrounded, and of the distant cedar-clad mountains where, as he said, Hiram, King of Tyre, had cut the timber for Solomon's Temple.

"Have you been on them?" asked Wulf.

"Aye, following my business," he answered, "so far." And he showed them a great snow-capped peak to the north. "Few ever go further."

"Why not?" asked Godwin.

"Because there begins the territory of the Sheik Al-jebal"—and he looked at them meaningly—"whom," he added, "neither Christian nor Saracen visit without an invitaion, which is seldom given."

They inquired why not.

"Because," answered the trader, still watching them, "most men love their lives, and that man is the lord of death and magic. Strange things are to be seen in his castle, and about it wonderful gardens inhabited by lovely women that are evil spirits, who bring the souls of men to ruin. Also, this Old Man of the Mountain is a great murderer, of whom even all the princes of the East are terrified, for he speaks a word to his fedais—or servants—who are initiated, and they go forth and bring to death any whom he hates. Young men, I like you well, and I say to you, be warned. In this Syria there are many wonders to be seen; leave those of Masyaf and its fearful lord alone if you desire to look again upon—the towers of Lincoln."

"Fear not; we will," answered Godwin, "who come to seek holy places—not haunts of devils."

"Of course we will," added Wulf. "Still, that country must be worth travelling in."

Then boats came out to greet them from the shore—for at that time Beirut was in the hands of the Franks—and in the shouting and confusion which followed they saw no more of this merchant Thomas. Nor did they seek him out again, since they thought it unwise to show themselves too curious about the Sheik Al-je-bal. Indeed, it would have been useless, since he was ashore two full hours before they were suffered to leave the ship, from which he departed alone in a private boat.

At length they stood in the motely Eastern crowd upon the quay, wondering where they could find an inn that was quiet and of cheap charges, since they did not wish to be considered persons of wealth or importance. As they lingered here, somewhat bewildered, a tall, veiled woman whom they had noted watching them, drew near, accompanied by a porter, who led a donkey. This man, without more ado, seized their baggage, and helped by other porters began to fasten it upon the back of the donkey with great rapidity, and when they would have forbidden him, pointed to the veiled woman.

"Your pardon," said Godwin to her at length and speaking in French, "but this man——"

"Loads up you baggage to take it to my inn. It is cheap, quiet and comfortable—things which I heard you say you required just now, did I not?" she answered in a sweet voice, also speaking in good French.

Godwin looked at Wulf, and Wulf at Godwin, and they began to discuss together what they should do. When they agreed that it seemed not wise to trust themselves to the care of a strange woman in this fashion, they looked up to see the donkey laden with their trunks being led away by the porter.

"Too late to say nay, I fear me," said the woman with a laugh, "so you must be my guests awhile if you would not lose your baggage. Come after so long a journey you need to wash and eat. Follow me, sirs, I pray you."

Then she walked through the crowd, which, they noted, parted for her as she went, to a post where a fine mule was tied. Loosing it, she leaped to the saddle without help, and began to ride away, looking back from time to time to see that they were following her, as, indeed, they must.

"Whither go we, I wonder," said Godwin, as they trudged through the sands of Beirut, with the hot sun striking on their heads.

"Who can answer that question when a strange woman leads?" replied Wulf, with a laugh.

At last the woman on the mule turned through a doorway in a wall of unburnt brick, and they found themselves before the porch of a white, rambling house which stood in a large garden planted with mulberries, oranges, and other fruit trees that were strange to them, and was situated on the borders of the city.

Here the woman dismounted and gave the mule to a Nubian who was waiting. Then, with a quick movement she unveiled herself, and turned towards them as though to show her beauty. Beautiful she was, of that there could be no boubt, with her graceful, swaying shape, her dark and liquid eyes, her rounded features, and strangely impassive countenance. She was young also, perhaps twenty-five, no more, and very fair-skinned for an Eastern.

"My poor house is for pilgrims and merchants, not for famous knights; yet, sirs, I welcome you to it," she said presently, scanning them out of the corners of her eyes.

"We are but squires in our own country, who make the pilgrimage," replied Godwin. "For what sum each day will you give us board and a good room to sleep in?"

"These strangers," she said in Arabic to the porter, "do not speak the truth."

"What is that to you?" he answered, as he busied himself in loosening the baggage. "They will pay their score, and all sorts of mad folk come to this country, pretending to be what they are not. Also you sought them—why, I know not—not they you."

"Mad or sane, they are proper men," said the impassive woman, as though to herself, then added in French, "Sirs, I repeat, this is but a humble place, scarce fit for knights like you, but if you will honor it, the charge is—so much."

"We are satisfied," said Godwin, "especially," he added, with a bow and removing the cap from his head, "as, having brought us here without leave asked, we are sure that you will treat us who are strangers kindly."

"As kindly as you will—I mean as you can pay for," said the woman. "Nay, I will settle with the porter; he would cheat you."

Then followed a wrangle five minutes' long between this curious, handsome, still-faced woman and the porter, who, after the eastern fashion lashed himself into a frenzy over the sum she offered, and at length began to call her by ill names.

She stood looking at him quite unmoved, although Godwin, who understood all, but pretended to understand nothing, wondered at her patience. Presently, however, in a perfect form of passion he said, or rather spat out:

"No wonder, Masouda the Spy, that after hiring me to do your evil work, you take the part of these Christian dogs against a true believer, you child of Al-je-bal!"

Instantly the woman seemed to stiffen like a snake about to strike.

"Who is he?" she said coldly. "Do you mean the lord—who kills?" And she looked at him—a terrible look.

At that glance all the anger seemed to go out of the man.

"Your pardon, widow Masouda," he said; "I forgot that you are a Christian, and naturally side with Christians. The money will not pay me for the wear of my ass's hoofs, but give it me, and let me go to pilgrims who will reward me better."

She gave him the sum, adding in her quiet voice:

"Go; and if you love life, keep better watch over your words."

Then he went, and now so humble was his mien that in his dirty turban and long, tattered robe he looked, Wulf thought, more like a bundle of rags than a man mounted on the donkey's back Also it came into his mind that the strange hostess had powers not possessed by inn-keepers in England. When she had watched him through the gate, Masouda turned to them and said in French:

"Forgive me, but here in Beirut these Saracen porters are extortionate, especially towards us Christians. He was deceived by your appearance. He thought that you were knights, not simple pilgrims as you avow yourselves, who happen to be dressed and armed like knights beneath your gambesons; and," she added, fixing her eyes upon the line of white hair on Godwin's head where the sword had struck him in the fray on Death Creek Quay, "show the wounds of knights, though it is true that a man might come by such in any brawl in a tavern. Well, you are to pay me a good price, and you shall have my best room while it pleases you to honor me with your company. Ah! your baggage. You do not wish to leave it. Slave, come here."

With startling suddenness the Nubian who had led away the mule appeared, and took up some of the packages. Then she led them down a passage into a large, sparsely-furnished room with high windows, in which were two beds laid on the cement floor, and asked them if it pleased them. They said: "Yes; it will serve." Reading what passed in their minds, she added: "Have no fear for your baggage. Were you as rich as you say you are poor, and as noble as you say you are humble, both it and you are safe in the inn of the widow Masouda, O my guests—but how are you named?"

"Peter and John."

"O, my guests, Peter and John, who have come to visit the land of Peter and John and other holy founders of our faith."

"And have been so fortunate as to be captured on its shore by the widow Masouda," answered Godwin, bowing again.

"Wait to speak of the fortune until you have done with her, Sir—is it Peter, or John?" she replied, with something like a smile upon her handsome face.

"Peter," answered Godwin. "Remember the pilgrim with the line of white hair is Peter."

"You need it to distinguish you apart, who, I suppose, are twins. Let me see—Peter has a line of white hair and grey eyes. John has blue eyes. John also is the greater warrior, if a pilgrim can be a warrior—look at his muscles; but Peter thinks the more. It would be hard for a woman to choose between Peter and John, who must both of them be hungry, so I go to prepare their food."

"A strange hostess," said Wulf, laughing, when she had left the room; "but I like her, though she netted us so finely. I wonder why? What is more, brother Godwin, she likes you, which is as well, since she may be useful. But friend, Peter, do not let it go too far, since I think also that she may be dangerous, as that porter thought. Remember, he called her a spy, and like enough she is one."

Godwin turned to reprove him, when the voice of the widow Masouda was heard without saying:

"Brothers Peter and John, I forgot to caution you to speak low in this house, as there is lattice-work over the doors to let in the air. Do not be afraid. I only heard the voice of John, not what he said."

"I hope not," muttered Wulf, and this time he spoke very low indeed.

Then they undid their baggage, and having taken from it clean garments, washed themselves after their long journey with the water that had been placed ready for them in great jars. This, indeed, they needed, for on that crowded dromon there was little chance of washing. By the time they had clothed themselves afresh, putting on their shirts of mail beneath their tunics, the Nubian came and led them to another room, large and lighted with high-set lattices, where cushions were piled upon the floor round a rug that also was laid upon the flood. Motioning them to be seated on the cushions, he went away, to return again presently, accompanied by Masouda bearing dishes upon brass platters. These she placed before them, bidding them eat. What that food was they did not know, because of the sauces with which it had been covered, until she told them that it was fish. After the fish came flesh, and after the flesh fowls, and after the fowls cakes and sweetmeats and fruits, until, ravenous as they were, who for days had fed upon salted pork and biscuits full of worms washed down with bad water, they were forced to beg her to bring no more.

"Drink another cup of wine at least," she said, smilling and filling their mugs with the sweet vintage of Lebanon—for it seemed to please her to see them eat so heartily of her fare.

They obeyed, mixing the wine with water. While they drank she asked them suddenly what were their plans, and how long they wished to stay in Beirut. They answered that for the next few days they had none, as they needed to rest, to see the town and its neighborhood, and to buy good horses—a matter in which perhaps she could help them. Masouda nodded again, and asked wither they wished to ride on horses.

"Out yonder," said Wulf, waiving his hands toward the mountains. "We desire to look upon the cedars of Lebanon and its great hills before we go on towards Jerusalem."

"Cedars of Lebanon?" she replied. "That is scarcely safe for two men alone, for in those mountains are many wild beasts and wild people who rob and kill. Moreover, the lord of those mountains has just now a quarrel with the Christians, and would take any whom he found prisoners."

"How is that lord named?" asked Godwin.

"Sinan," she answered, and they noted that she looked round quickly as she spoke the word.

"Oh," he said, "we thought the name was Jebal."

Now she stared at him with wide wondering eyes, and replied:

"He is so called also; but, Sir Pilgrams, what know you of the dread lord Al-je-bal-"

"Only that he lives at a place called Masyaf, which we wish to visit."

Again she stared.

"Are you mad?" she queried, then checked herself, and clapped her hands for the slave to remove the dishes.

While this was being done they said they would like to walk abroad.

"Good," answered Masouda; "the man shall accompany you—nay, it is best tnat you do not go alone, as you might lose your way. Also, the place is not always safe for strangers, however humble they may seem," she added with meaning. "Would you wish to visit the governor at the castle, where there are a few English knights, also some priests who give advice to pilgrims?"

"We think not," answered Godwin; "we are not worthy of such high company. But, lady, why do you look at us so strangely?"

"I am wondering, Sir Peter and Sir John, why you think it worth while to tell lies to a poor widow? Say, in your own country did you ever hear of certain twin brethern named—oh, how are they named?—Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf, of the house of D'Arcy, which has been told of in this land?"

Now Godwin's jaw dropped, but Wulf laughed out loud, and seeing that they were alone in the room, for the slave had departed, asked in his turn:

"Surely those twins would be pleased to find themselves so famous. But how did you chance to hear of them, O widowed hostess of a Syrian inn?"

"I? Oh, from a man on the dromom who called here while I made ready your food, and told me a strange story that he had learned in England of a band sent by Salah-ed-din—may his name be accursed!—to capture a certain lady. Of how the brethern named Godwin and Wulf fought all that band also—aye, and held them off—a very knightly deed he said it was—while the lady escaped; and of how afterwards they were taken in a snare, as those are apt to be who deal with the Sultan, and this time the lady was snatched away."

"A wild tale truly," said Godwin. "But did this man tell you further whether that lady chanced to come to Palestine?"

She shook her head.

"Of that he told me nothing, and I have heard nothing. Now listen, my guests. You think it strange that I should know so much, but it is not strange, since here in Syria, knowledge is the business of some of us. Did you then believe, O foolish children, that two knights like you, who have played a part in a very great story, whereof already whispers run throughout the East, could travel by land and sea and not be known? Did you then think that none were left behind to watch your movements and make report of them to that mighty one who sent out the ship of war, charged with a certain mission? Well, what he knows I know. Have I not said it is my business to know? Now, why do I tell you this? Well, perhaps because I like such knights as you are, and I like that tale of two men who stood side by side upon a pier, while a woman swam the stream behind them, and afterwards, sore wounded, charged their way through a host of foes. In the East we love such deeds of chivalry. Perhaps also I would warn you not to throw away lives so gallant by attempting to win through the guarded gates of Damascus upon the maddest of all quests."

"What, you still stare at me and doubt? Good, I have been telling you lies. I was not awaiting you upon the quay, and that porter with whom I seemed to quarrel was not charged to seize your baggage and bring it to my house. No spies watched your movements from England to Beirut. Only since you have been at dinner I visited your room and read some writings which, foolishly, you have left among your baggage, and opened some books in which other names than Peter and John were written, and drew a great sword from its scabbard on which was engraved a motto: 'Meet D'Arcy, meet Death!' and heard Peter call John Wulf, and John call Peter Godwin, and so forth."

"It seems," said Wulf in English, "that we are flies in a web, and that the spider is called the widow Masouda, though of what use we are to her I know not. Now, brother, what is to be done? Make friends with the spider?"

"An ill ally," answered Godwin. Then looking her straight in the face he asked: "Hostess, who knows so much, tell me, why, amongst other names, did the donkey driver call you 'Child of Al-je-bal'?"

She started, and answered:

"So you understand Arabic. I thought it. Why do you ask? What does it matter to you?"

"Not much except we are going to visit Al-je-bal, of course we think ourselves fortunate to have met his daughter."

"Going to visit Al-je-bal? Yes, you hinted as much upon the ship, did you not? Perhaps that is why I came to meet you. Well, your throats will be cut before ever you reach the first of his castles."

"I think not," said Godwin, and, putting his hand into his breast, he drew thence a ring, with which he began to play carelessly.

"Whence did you get that ring?" she said with fear and wonder in her eyes. "It is—" and she ceased.

"From one to whom it was given and who has charged us with a message. Now, hostess, let us be plain with one another. You know a great deal about us, but although it has suited us to call ourselves the pilgrims Peter and John, in all this there is nothing of which we need be ashamed, especially as you say that our secret is no secret, which I can well believe. Now, this secret being out, I propose that we remove ourselves from your roof, and go to stay with our own people at the castle, where I doubt not we shall be welcome, telling them that we would bide no longer with one who is called a spy, whom we have discovered also to be a 'daughter of Al-je-bal.' After which, perhaps, you will bide no longer in Beirut, where, as we gather, spies and the 'daughters of Al-je-bal' are not welcome."

She listened with an impassive face, and answered:

"Doubtless you will have heard that one of us who was so named was burned here recently as a witch?"

"Yes," broke in Wulf, who now learned this fact for the first time; "we heard that."

"And think to bring a like fate upon me. Why, foolish men, I can lay you both dead before ever those words pass your lips."

"You think you can," said Godwin; "but for my part I am sure that this is not fated, and am sure also that you do not wish to harm us any more than we wish to harm you. To be plain, then, it is necessary for us to visit Al-je-bal. As chance has brought us together—if it be chance—will you aid us in this, as I think you can, or must we seek other help?"

"I do not know. I will tell you after four days. If you are not satisfied with that, go, denounce me, do your worst, and I will do mine, for which I should be sorry."

"Where is the security that you will not do it if we are satisfied?" asked Wulf bluntly.

"You must take the word of a 'daughter of Al-je-bal.' I have none other to offer," she replied.

"That may mean death," said Wulf.

"You said just now that was not fated, and although I have sought your company for my own reasons, I have no quarrel with you—as yet. Choose your own path. Still, I tell you that if you go, who, chancing to know Arabic, have learned my secret, you die, and that if you stay you are safe—at least while you are in this house. I swear it on the token of Al-je-bal," and bending forward she touched the ring in Godwin's hand; "but remember that for the future I cannot answer."

Godwin and Wulf looked at each other. Then Godwin replied:

"I think that we will trust you, and stay," words at which she smiled a little as though she were pleased, then said:

"Now, if you wish to walk abroad, guests Peter and John, I will summon the slave to guide you, and in four days we will talk more of this matter of your journey, which, until then, had best be forgotten."

(To be continued.)

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