POOR DOCUMENT

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THE BRETHREN

H. Rider Haggard's Great Romance of the Crusades

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CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

"Well enough," answered his brother, "only I dreamed that throughout the night folk came and looked at me."

"I dreamed that also," said Wulf; "moreover, I think that it was not all a dream, since there is a coverlet on my bed which not there when I went to sleep."

Godwin looked at his own, whose also was another coverlet added, doubtless as the night grew colder in that high place.

"I have heard of enchanted castles," he said; "now I think that we have found one."

"Aye," replied Wulf, "and it is well enough while it lasts."

They rose and dressed themselves, putting on clean garments and their best cloaks that they had brought with them on the mules, after which the veiled women entered the room with breakfast, and they ate. When this was finished, having nothing else to do, they made signs to one of the women that they wished for cloths wherewith to clean their armor, for, as they had been bidden, they pretended to understand no word of Arabic. She nodded, and presently returned with a companion carrying leathers and paste in a jar. Nor did they leave them, but, sitting upon the ground, whether the brethern willed it or no, took the shirts of mail and rubbed them till they shone like silver, while Godwin and Wulf polished their helms, spurs, and buckers, cleaning their swords and daggers also, and sharpening them with a stone which they carried for that purpose.

Now as these women worked, they began to talk to each other in a low voice, and some of their talk, though not all, the brethern understood.

"A handsome pair truly," said the first. "We should be fortunate if we had such men for husbands, although they are Franks and infidels."

"Aye," answered the other; "and from their likeness they must be twins. Now which of them would you choose?"

Then for a long time they discussed them, comparing them feature by feature and limb by limb, until the brethern felt their faces grow red beneath the sunburn and scrubbed furiously at their armour to show a reason for it. At length one of the women said:

"It was cruel of Masouda to bring these birds into the Master's net. She might have warned them."

"Masouda as ever cruel," answered the other, "who hates all men, which is unnatural. Yet I think if she loved a man she would love him well, and perhaps that might be worse for him than her hate."

"Are these knights spies?" asked the first.

"I suppose so," was the answer, "silly fellows who think that they can spy upon a nation of spies. They would have done better to keep to fighting, at which doubtless, they are good enough. What will happen to them?"

"What always happens. I suppose—a pleasant time at first, then, if they can be put to no other use, a choice between the faith and the cup. Or, perhaps, as they seem men of rank, they may be imprisoned in the dungeon tower and held for ransom. Yes, yes; it was cruel of of Masouda to trick them so, who may be but travellers after all, desiring to see our city."

Just then the curtain was drawn, and through it entered Masouda herself. She was dressed in a white robe that had a dagger worked in red over the left breast, and her long black hair fell upon her shoulders ,although it was half hid by a veil, open in front, which hung from her head. Never had they seen her look so beautiful as she seemed thus.

"Greetings, brothers Peter and John. Is this fit work for pilgrims?" she said in French, pointing to the long swords which they were sharpening.

"Aye," answered Wulf as they rose and bowed to her, "for pilgrims to this—holy city."

The women who were cleaning the mail bowed also, for it seemed that here Masouda was a person of importance. She took the hauberks from their hands.

"Ill cleansed," she said sharply. "I think that you girls talk better than you work. Nay, they must serve. Help these lords to don them. Fools, that is the shirt of the grey-eyed knight. Give it me; I will be his squire," and she snatched the hauberk from their hands, whereat, when her back was turned, they glanced at one another.

"Now," she said, when they were fully armed and had donned their mantles, "you brethren look as pilgrims should. Listen, I have a message for you. The Master"—and she bowed her head, as did the women, guessing of whom she spoke—"will receive you in an hour's time, till then, if it please you, we can walk in the gardens, which are worth your seeing."

So they went out with her, and as they passed towards the curtain she whispered::

For your life's sake remember all that I have told you—above everything about the wine and the ring, for if you dream the drink-dream you will be searched. Speak no word to me save of common matters."

In the passage beyond the curtain white-robed guards were standing, armed with spears, who turned and followed them without a word. First they went to the stables to visit the horses Flame and Smoke, which whinnied as they drew near. These were found well-fed and tended indeed, a company of the grooms were gathered round them, discussing their points and beauty, who saluted as the owners of such steeds approached. Leaving the stable, they passed through an archway into the famous gardens, which were said to be the most beautiful in all the East. Beautiful they were indeed, for here grew trees, shrubs, and flowers such as had never been seen, while between fern-clad rocks flowed sparkling rills which fell over deep cliffs in waterfalls of foam. In places the shade of cedars lay so dense that the light of day was changed to twilight, but in others the ground was open and carpeted with flowers which filled the air with heavy perfume. Everywhere grew roses, myrtles, and trees laden with rich fruits, while from all sides came sound of cooing doves and the voice of the bright-winged birds which flashed from palm to palm.

On they walked down the sand-strewn paths for a mile or more, accompanied by Masouda and the guard. At length, passing through a brake of whispering, reed-like plants, of a sudden they came to a low wall,and saw yawning black and white at their very feet, that vast cleft which they had crossed before they entered the castle.

"It encircles the inner city, the fortress, and its grounds," said Masouda; "and who lives today that could throw a bridge across it? Now come back."

So, following the gulf round, they returned to the castle by another path, and were ushered into an ante-room, where stood a watch of twelve men. Here Masouda left them in the midst of the men, who stared at them with stoney eyes. Presently she returned, and beckoned to them to follow her. Walking down a long passage they came to curtains, in front of which stood two sentries, who drew these curtains as they approached. Then, side by side, they entered a great hall, long as Strangate Abbey church, and passed through a number of people, all crouched upon the ground.Beyond them the hall narrowed as a chancel does.

Here sat and stood more people,fierce-eyed, turbaned men, who wore great knives in their girdles. These, as they learned afterwards, were called the fedai, the sworn assassins, who lived but to do the command of their lord the great Assassin. At the end of this chancel were more curtains, beyond which was a guard-hall, long as Stangate Abbey church, ed door. It opened, and on its further side they found themselves in full sunlight on an unwalled terrace, surrounded by the mighty gulf into which it was built out. On the right and left edges of this terrace sat old and beaded men, twelve in number, their heads bowed humbly and their eyes fixed upon the ground, who were the dais or councillors.

At the head of the terrace, under an open and beautifully carved pavilion of wood, stood two gigantic soldiers, having the red dagger blazoned on their white robes. Between them was a black cushion, and on the cushion a black heap. At first, staring out of the sunlight at this heap in the shadow, the brethren wondered what it might be. Then they caught sight of the glitter of eyes, and knew that the heap was a man who wore a black turban on his head and a black, bell-shaped robe clasped about his throat with a red jewel. The weight of the man had sunk him down deep into the soft cushion, so that there was nothing of him to be seen save the folds of the bell-shaped cloak, the red jewel, and the head. He looked like a coiled-up snake, the dark and glittering eyes also were those of a snake. Of his features, in the deep shade of the canopy and of the wide black turban, they could see nothing.

The aspect of this figure was so terrible and inhuman that the brethren trembled at the sight of him. They were men and he was a man, but between that huddle beady-eyed heap and those two tall Western warriors, clad in their gleaming mail and colored cloaks, helm on brow, buckler on arm, and long sword at side, the contrast was that of death and life.

CHAPTER XII.

The Lord of Death.

Masouda ran forward and prostrated herself at full length, but Godwin and Wulf stared at the heap, and the heap stared at them. Then, some motion of his chin, Masouda rose and said:

"Strangers, you stand in the presence of the Master, Sinan, Lord of Death. Kneel, and do homage to the Master."

But the brethren stiffened their backs and would not kneel. They lifted their hands to their brows in salute and no more.

Then from between the black turban and the black cloak came a hollow voice,speaking in Arabic, and saying:

"Are these the men who brought me the lion's skin? Well, what seek ye, Franks?"

They stood silent.

"Dread lord," said Masouda, "these knights are but now come from England over sea, and do not understand our tongue."

"Set out their story and their request," said Al-je-bal, "that we may judge of them."

"Dread lord," answered Masouda, "as I sent you word, they say they are the kin of a certain knight who in battle saved the life of him who ruled before you, but is now an inhabitant of Paradise."

"I have heard that there was such a knight," said the voice. "He was named D'Arcy, and he bore the same cognisance on his shield—the sign of the skull."

"Lord, these brethren are also named D'Arcy, and now they come to ask your help against Salah-ed-din."

At that name the heap stirred as a snake stirs when it hears danger, and the head erected itself a little beneath the great turban.

"What help and why?" asked the voice.

"Lord, Salah-ed-din has stolen a woman of their house who is his niece, and these knights, her brothers, ask you to aid them to recover her."

The beady eyes instantly became interested.

"Report has been made to me of that story," said the voice; "but what sign do these Franks show? He who went before me gave a ring, and with it certain rights in this land, to the knight D'Arcy who befriended him in danger. Where is that ring, with which he parted in his foolishness?"

Masouda translated, and seeing the warning in her eyes and remembering her words, the brethren shook their heads, while Wulf answered:

"Our uncle, the knight Sir Andrew, was cut down by the soldiers of Salah-ed-din, and before he died bade us seek you out. What time had he to tell us of any ring?"

The head sank upon the breast.

"I hoped," said Sinan to Masouda, "that they had the ring, and it was for this reason, woman, that I allowed you to lead these knights hither, after you had reported of them and their quest to me from Beirut. It is not well that there should be two sacred Signets in the world, and he who went before me, when he lay dying, charged me to recover his if that were possible. Let them go back to their own land and return to me with the ring, and I will help them."

Masouda translated the last sentence only, and again the brethren shook their heads. This time it was Godwin who spoke.

"Our land is far away, O lord, and where shall we find this long-lost ring? Let not our journey be in vain. O mighty One, give us justice against Salah-ed-din."

"All my years have I sought justice on Salah-ed-din," answered Sinan, "and yet he prevails against me. Go, Franks, and bring me his head, and we will talk again."

When they heard this saying, Wulf said to Godwin in English:

"I think that we had best go; I do not like this company." But Godwin made no answer.

As they stood silent thus, not knowing what to say, a man entered through the door, and, throwing himself on his hands and knees, crawled towards the cushion through the double lines of councillors or dais.

"Your report," said Sinan in Arabic.

"Lord," answered the man, "I acquaint you that your will has been done in the matter of the vessel." Then he went on speaking in a low voice, so rapidly that the brethren could scarcely hear and much less understand him.

Sinan listened, then said:

"Let the fedai enter and make his own report, bringing with him his prisoners."

Now one of the dais, he who sat nearest the canopy, rose and, pointing towards the brethren,said, "Touching these Franks, what is your will?"

The beady eyes, which seemed to search out their souls, fixed themselves upon them and for a long while Sinan considered. They trembled, knowing that he was passing some judgment concerning them in his heart, and that on his next words much might hang—even their lives.

"Let them stay here," he said at length. "I may have questions to ask them."

For a time there was silence. Sinan, lord of Death, seemed to be lost in thought under the black shadow of his canopy; the double line of dais stared at nothingness across the passage way; the giant guards stood still as statues; Masouda watched the brethren from beneath her long eye-lashes, while the brethren watched the sharp edge of the shadow of the canopy on the marble floor. They strove to seem unconcerned, but their hearts were beating fast within them who felt that great things were about to happen, though what these might be they knew not.

So intense was the silence, so dreadful seemed that inhuman, snake-like man, so strange his aged, passionless councillors, and the place of council surrounded by a dizzy gulf, that fear took hold of them like the fear of an evil dream. Godwin wondered if Sinan could see the ring upon his breast, and what would happen to him if he did see it; while Wulf longed to shout aloud, to do anything that would break this deathly, sunlit quiet. To them those minutes seemed like hours; indeed, for aught they knew, they might have been hours.

At length there was a stir behind the brethren, and at a word from Masouda they separated, falling apart a pace or two, and stood opposite to each other and sideways to Sinan. Standing thus, they saw the curtains drawn. Through them came four men, carrying a stretcher covered with a cloth, beneath which they could see the outline of a form, that lay there stirless. The four men brought the stretcher to the front of the canopy, set it on the ground, prostrated themselves, and retired, walking backwards down the length of the terrace.

Again there was silence, while the brethern wondered whose corpse it was that lay beneath the cloth, for a corpse it must surely be; though neither the Lord of the Mountain nor his dais and guards seemed to concern themselves in the matter. Again the curtains parted, and a procession advanced up the terrace. First came a great man clad in a white robe blazoned with the bleeding dagger, after whom walked a tall woman shrouded in a long veil, who was followed by a thick-set knight clad in Frankish armor and wearing a cape of which the cowl covered his head as though to keep the rays of the sun form beating on his helm. Lastly walked four guards. Up the long place they marched through the double line of dais, while with a strange stirring in their breasts the brethern watched the step and shape of the veiled woman who walked forward rapidly, not seeing them, for she turned her head neither to the right nor left. The leader of the little band reached the space before the canopy, and, prostrating himself by the side of the stretcher lay still. She who walked behind him stopped also, and, seeing the black heap upon the cushion; shuddered.

"Woman, unveil," commanded the voice of Sinan.

She hesitated, then swiftly undid some fastening, so that her drapery fell from her head. The brethern stared, rubbed their eyes, and stared again.

Before them stood Rosamund!

Yes, it was Rosamund, worn with sickness, terrors, and travel, Rosamund herself beyond all doubt. At the sight of her pale, queenly beauty the heap on the cushion stirred beneath his black cloak, and the eyes were filled with an evil, eager light. Even the dais seemed to wake from their contemplation, and Masouda bit her red lip, turned pale beneath her olive skin, and watched with devouring eyes, waiting to read this woman's heart.

"Rosamund!" cried the brethern with one voice.

She heard. As they sprang toward her she glanced wildly from face to face, then with a low cry flung an arm about the neck of each and would have fallen in the ecstacy of her joy had they not held her. Indeed, her knees touched the ground. As they stooped to lift her it flashed into Godwin's mind that Masouda had told Sinan that they were her brethern. The thought was followed by another. If this were so, they might be left with her, whereas otherwise that black-robed devil——

"Listen," he whispered in English; "we are not your cousins—we are your brothers, your half-brothers, and we know no Arabic."

She heard and Wulf heard, but the watchers thought that they were but welcoming each other, for Wulf began to talk also, random words in French, such as "Greeting, sister!" "Well found, sister!" and kissed her on the forehead.

Rosamund opened her eyes, which had closed, and, gaining her feet, gave one hand to each of the brethern. Then the voice of Masouda was heard interpreting the words to Sinan.

"It seems, lady, that you know these knights."

"I do—well. They are my brothers, from whom I was stolen when they were drugged and our father was killed."

"How is that, lady, seeing that you are said to be the niece of Salah-ed-din? Are these knights then the nephews of Salah-ed-din?"

"Nay," answered Rosamund, "they are my father's sons of another wife."

The answer appeared to satisfy Sinan, who fixed his eyes upon the pale beauty of Rosamund and asked no more questions. While he remained thus thinking, a noise arose at the end of the terrace, and the brethern, turning their heads, saw that the thick-set knight was striving to thrust his way through the guards who stood by the curtains and barred his path with the shafts of their spears. Then it came into Godwin's mind that just before Rosamund unveiled he had seen this knight suddenly trun back and walk down the terrace.

The lord Sinan looked up at the sound and made a sign. Thereon two of the dais sprang to their feet and ran toward the curtain, where they spoke with the knight, who turned and came back with them, though slowly, as one who is unwilling. Now his hood had fallen from his head, and Godwin and Wulf stared at him as he advanced, for surely they knew those great shoulders, those round, black eyes, those thick lips, and that heavy jowl.

"Lozelle! It is Lozelle!" said Godwin.

"Aye," echoed Rosamund, "it is Rozelle, the double traitor, who betrayed me first to the soldiers of Saladin, and, because I would have none of his love, next to this lord Sinan."

Wulf heard, and, as Lozelle drew near to them, sprang forward with an oath and struck him across the face with his mailed hand. Instantly guards thrust themselves between them, and Sinan asked through Masouda:

"Why do you dare to strike this Frank in my presence?"

"Because, lord," answered Wulf, "he is a rogue who has brought all these troubles on our house. I challenge him to meet me in battle to the death."

"And I also," said Godwin.

"I am ready," shouted Lozelle, stung to fury by the blow.

"Then, dog, why did you try to run away when you saw our faces?" asked Wulf.

Masouda held up her hand and began to interpret, addressing Lozelle, and speaking in the first person as the "mouth" of Sinan.

"I thank you for your service who have served me before. Your messenger came, a Frank whom I knew in old days. As you had arranged it should be, I sent one of my fedais with soldiers to kill the men of Salah-ed-din on the ship and capture this lady who is his niece, all of which it seems has been done. The bargain that your messenger made was that the lady should be given over to you—"

Here Godwin and Wulf ground their teeth and glared at him.

"But these knights say that you stole her, their kins-woman from them, and one of them has struck you and challenged you to single combat, which challenge you have accepted. I sanction the combat gladly, who have long desired to see two knights of the Franks fight in tourney according to their custom. I will set the courses, and you shall be given the best horse in my kingdom; this knight shall ride his own. These are the conditions—the course shall be on the bridge between the inner and outer gates of the castle city, and the fight which must be to the death, shall take place on the night of the full moon—that is, three days from now. If you are victor, we will talk of the matter of the lady for whom you bargained as a wife."

"My lord, my lord," answered Lozelle, "who can lay a lance on that terrible place in moonlight? Is it thus that you keep faith with me?"

"I can and will!" cried Wulf. "Dog, I would fight you in the gates of hell, with my soul on the hazard."

"Keep faith with yourself," said Sinan, "who said that you accepted the challenge of this knight and made no conditions, and when you have proved upon his body that his quarrel is not just, then speak of my faith with you. Nay, no more words; when this fight is done we will speak again, and not before. Let him be led to the outer castle and there given to our best. Let my great black horse be brought to him that he may gallop it to and fro upon the bridge, or where he will within the circuit of the walls, by day or by night; but see that he has no speech with this lady whom he has betrayed into my power, or with these knights his foes, nor suffer him to come into my presence. I will not talk with a man who has been struck in the face until he has washed away the blow in blood."

As Masouda finished translating, and before Lozelle could answer, the lord Sinan moved his head, whereon guards sprang forward and conducted Lozelle from the terrace.

"Farewell, Sir Thief," cried Wulf after him, "till we meet again upon the narrow bridge and there settle our account. You have fought Godwin, perhaps you will have better luck with Wulf."

Lozelle glared back at him, and, finding no answer, went on his way.

"Your report," said Sinan, addressing the tall fedai who all this while had lain upon his face before him, still as the form that was stretched upon the bier. "Their should have been another prisoner, the emir Hassan. Also where is the Frankish spy?"

The fedai rose and spoke.

"Lord," he said, "I did your bidding. The knight who has gone steered the ship into the bay, as had been arranged. I attacked with the daylight. The soldiers of Salah-ed-din fought bravely, for the lady here saw us, and gave them time to gather, and we lost many men. We overcame and killed them all, except the prince Hassan, whom we took prisoner. I left some men to watch the ship. The crew we spared, as they were the servants of the Frank Lozelle, setting them loose upon the beach, together with a Frankish woman, but the lady your captive begged for her life, saying she had come from the land of the Franks to seek her husband; so, having no orders, I let her go. Yesterday morning we started for Masyaf, the prince Hassan riding in a litter together with that Frankish spy who was here a while ago, and told you of the coming of the ship. At night they slept in the same tent; I left the prince bound and set guard, but in the morning when we looked we found him gone—how, I know not—and lying in the tent the Frankish spy, dead, with a knife-wound through her heart. Behold!" and withdrawing the cloth from the stretcher he revealed the stiff form of the spy Nicholas, who lay there dead, a look of terror frozen on his face.

"At least this one has come to an end he deserved," muttered Wulf to Godwin.

"So, having searched without avail, I came on here with the lady your prisoner and the Frank Lozelle. I have spoken."

Now when he had heard this report, forgetting his calm, Sinan arose from the cushion and stepped forward two paces. There he halted, with fury in his glittering eyes, looking like a man clothed in a black bell. For a moment he stroked his long beard, and the brethern noted that on the first finger of his right hand was a ring so like to that which hung about the neck of Godwin that none could have told them apart.

"Man," Sinan said in a low voice, "what have you done? You have left the emir Hassan go, who is the most trusted friend and general of the Sultan of Damascus. By now he is there, or near it, and within six days we shall see the army of Salah-ed-din riding across the plain. Also you have not killed the crew and the Frankish woman, and they too will make report of the taking of the ship and the capture of this lady, who is of the house of Salah-ed-din and whom he seeks more earnestly than all the kingdom of the Franks. What have you to say?"

"Lord," said the tall fedai, and his hand trembled as he spoke, "most mighty lord, I had no orders as to the killing of the crew from your lips, and the Frank Lozelle told me that he had agreed with you that they should be spared."

"Then, slave, he lied. He agreed with me through that dead spy that they should be slain, and do you not know that if I give no orders in such a case I mean death, not life? But what of the prince Hassan?"

"Lord, I have nothing to say. I think he must have bribed the spy named Nicholas"—and he pointed to the corpse—"to cut his bonds, and afterwards killed the man for vengeance sake, for by the body we found a purse of gold. That he hated him as he hated yonder Lozelle I know, for he called them dogs and traitors in the boat; and since he could not strike them, his hands being bound, he spat on their faces, cursing them in the name of Allah. That is why, Lozelle being afraid to be near him, I set the spy Nicholas, who was a bold fellow, as a watch over him, and two soldiers outside the tent, while Lozelle and I watched the lady."

"Let those soldiers be brought," said Sinan, "and tell their story."

They were brought and stood by their captain, but they had no story to tell. They swore that they had not slept on guard, nor heard a sound, yet when morning came the prince was gone. Again the Lord of Death stroked his black beard. Then he held up the signet before the eyes of the three men, saying:

"You see the token. Go."

"Lord," said the fedai, "I have served you well for many years."

"Your service is ended. Go." was the stern answer.

The fedai bowed his head in salute, stood for a moment as though lost in thought, then, turning suddenly, walked with a steady step to the edge of the abyss and leapt. For an instant the sunlight shone on his white and fluttering robe, then from the depths of that dark-some place floated up the sound of a heavy fall, and all was still.

"Follow your captain to Paradise," said Sinan to the two soldiers, whereon one of them drew a knife to stab himself, but a dai sprang up, saying:

"Beast, would you shed blood before your lord? Do you not know the custom? Begone!"

So the poor men went, the first with a steady step, and the second, who was not so brave, reeling over the edge of the precipice as one might who is drunken.

"It is finished, said the dais, clapping their hands gently. "Dread lord, we thank thee for thy justice."

But Rosamund turned sick and faint, and even the brethern paled. This man was terrible indeed—if he were a man and not a devil—and they were in his power. How long would it be, they wondered, before they also were bidden to walk that gulf? Only Wulf swore in his heart that if he went by this road Sinan should go with him.

Then the corpse of the false palmer was borne away to be thrown to the eagles which always hovered over that house of death, and Sinan, having reseated himself upon the cushion, began to talk again through his "mouth" Masouda, in a low, quite voice, as though nothing had happened to anger him.

"Lady," he said to Rosamund, "your story is known to me. Salah-ed-din seeks you, nor is it wonderful"—here his eyes glittered with a new and horrible light—"that he should desire to see such loveliness at his court, although the Frank Lozelle swore through yonder dead spy that you are precious in his eyes because of some vision that has come to him. Well, this heretic sultan is my enemy whom Satan protects, for even my fedais have failed to kill him, and perhaps there will be war on account of you. But have no fear, for the price at which you shall be delivered to him is higher than Salah-ed-din himself would care to pay, even for you. So, since this castle is impregnable, here you may dwell at peace, nor shall any desire be denied you. Speak, and your wishes are fulfilled."

"I desire," said Rosamund in a low steady voice, "protection against Sir Hugh Lozelle and all men."

"It is yours. The Lord of the Mountain covers you with his own mantle."

"I desire," she went on, "that my brothers here may lodge with me, that I may not feel alone among strange people."

He thought awhile, and answered:

"Your brethern shall lodge near you in the guest castle. Why not, since from them you cannot need protection? They shall meet you at the feast and in the garden. But, lady, do you know it? They came here upon faith of some old tale of a promise made by him who went before me to ask my help to recover you from Salah-ed-din, unwitting that I was your host, not Salah-ed-din. That they should meet you thus in a chance which makes even my wisdom wonder, for in it I see omens. Now she whom they wished to rescue from Salah-ed-din, these tale brethern of yours might wish to rescue from Al-je-bal. Understand, then, all of you, that from the Lord of Death there is but one escape. Yonder runs its path," and he pointed to the dizzy place whence his three servants had leapt to their doom.

"Knights," he went on, addressing Godwin and Wulf, "lead your sister hence. This evening I bid her, and you, to my banquet. Till then, farewell. Woman," he added to Masouda, "accompany them. You know your duties; this lady is in your charge. Suffer that no strange man comes near her—above all, the Frank Lozelle. Dais, take notice and let it be proclaimed—To these three is given the protection of the Signet in all things, save that they must not leave my walls except under sanction of the Signet—nay, in its very presence."

The dais rose, bowed, and seated themselves again. Then, guided by Masouda and preceded and followed by guards, the brethern and Rosamund walked down the terrace through the curtains into the chancel-like place where men crouched upon the ground; through the great hall were more men crouched upon the ground; through the ante-chamber where, at a word from Masouda, the guards saluted; through passages to that place where they had slept. Here Masouda halted and said:

"Lady Rose of the World, who are fitly so named, I go to prepare your chamber. Doubtless you will wish to speak awhile with these your—brothers. Speak on and fear not, for it shall be my care that fear not, for it shall be my care that you are left alone, if only for a little while. Yet walls have ears, so I counsel you use that English tongue which none of us understand in the land of Al-je-bal—not even I."

Then she bowed and went.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Embassy.

The brethern and Rosamund looked at each other, for having so much to say it seemed that they could not speak. Then with a low cry Rosamund said:

"Oh! let us thank God, Who, after all these black months of travel and of danger, has thus brought us together again," and kneeling down there together in the guest-hall of the lord of Death, they gave thanks earnestly enough.

Then, moving to the centre of the chamber where they thought that none would hear them, they began to speak in low voices and in English.

"Tell you your tale first, Rosamund," said Godwin.

She told it as shortly as she could, they listening without a word.

Then Godwin spoke and told her theirs. Rosamund listened, and asked a question almost in a whisper.

Why does that beautiful dark-eyed woman befriend you?"

"I do not know," answered Godwin, "unless it is because of the accident of my having saved her from the lion."

Rosamund looked at him and smiled a little, and Wulf smiled also. Then she said:

"Blessings be on that lion and all its tribe! I pray that she may not soon forget the deed, for it seems that our lives hung upon her favor. How strange is this story, and how desperate our case! How strange also that you should have come on hither against her counsel, which seeing what we have, I think was honest."

"We were led," answered Godwin. "Your father had wisdom at his death, and saw what we could not see."

"Aye," added Wulf, "but I would that it had been in some other place, for I fear this lord Al-je-bal at whose nod men hurl themselves to death."

"He is hateful," answered Rosamund, with a shudder; "worse even than the knight Lozelle; and when he fixes his eyes on me, my heart grows sick. Oh! that we could escape this place!"

"An ell in an osier trap has more chance of freedom," said Wulf gloomily. "Let us at least be thankful that we are caged together—for how long, I wonder."

As he spoke Masouda appeared, attended by waiting women, and, bowing to Rosamund, said:

"It is the will of the Master, lady, that I lead you to the chambers that have been made ready for you, there to rest until the hour of the feast. Fear not; you shall meet your brethern then. You knights have leave, if it so pleases you, to exercise your horses in the garden. They stand saddled in the court-yard, to which this woman will bring you," and she pointed to one of those two maids who had cleaned the armor, "and with them are guides and an escort."

"She means that we must go," muttered Godwin, adding aloud, "farewell, sister, until to-night."

So they parted, unwillingly enough. In the courtyard they found the horses, Flame and Smoke, as they had been told, also a mounted escort of four fierce-looking fedais and an officer. When they were in the saddle, this man, motioning to them to follow him, passed by an archway out of the courtyard into the gardens. Hence ran a broad road strewn with sand, along which he began to gallop. This road followed the gulf which encircled the citadel and inner town of Masyaf, that was, as it were, an island on a mountain top with a circumference of over three miles.

As they went, the gulf always on their right hand, holding in their horses to prevent their passing that of the guide, swift as it was, they saw another troop approaching them. This was also preceded by an officer of the Assassins, as these servants of Al-je-bal were called by the Franks, and behind him, mounted on a splendid coal-black steed and followed by guards, rode a mail-clad Frankish knight.

"It is Lozelle," said Wulf, "upon the horse that Sinan promised him."

At the sight of the man a fury took hold of Godwin. With a shout of warning he drew his sword. Lozelle saw, and out leapt his blade in answer. Then sweeping past the officers who were with them and reining up their steeds, in a second they were face to face. Lozelle struck first and Godwin caught the stroke upon his buckler, but before he could return it the fedais of either party rushed between them and thrust them asunder.

"A pity," said Godwin, as they dragged his horse away. "Had they left us alone I think, brother, I might have saved you a moonlight duel."

"That do I not want to miss, but the chance at his head was good if those fellows would have let you take it," answered Wulf reflectively.

Then the horses began to gallop again, and they saw no more of Lozelle. Now, skirting the edge of the town, they came to the narrow, wall-less bridge that spanned the gulf between it and the outer gate and city. Here the officer wheeled his horse, and, beckoning to them to follow, charged it at full gallop. After him went the brethern—Godwin first, then Wulf. In the deep gateway on the further side they reined up. The captain turned, and began to gallop back faster than he had come—as fast, indeed, as his good beast would travel.

"Pass him!" cried Godwin, and shaking the reins loose upon the neck of Flame he called to it aloud.

Forward it sprang, with Smoke at its heels. Now they had overtaken the captain, and now even on that narrow way they had swept past him. Not an inch was there to spare between them and the abyss, and the man, brave as he was, expecting to be thrust to death, clung to his horse's mane with terror in his eyes. On the city side the brethern pulled up laughing among the astonished fedais who had waited for them there.

"By the Signet," cried the officer, thinking that the knights could not understand, "these are not men; they are devils, and their horses are goats of the mountains. I thought to frighten them, but it's I who was frightened, for they swept past me like eagles of the air."

"Gallant riders and swift, well-trained steeds," answered one of the fedai with admiration in his voice. "The fight at the full moon will be worth our seeing."

Then once more they took the sand-strewn road and galloped on. Thrice they passed round the city thus, the last time by themselves, for the captain and the fedai were far outstripped. Indeed it was not until they had unsaddled Flame and Smoke in their stalls that these appeared, spurring their foaming horses. Taking no heed of them, the brethern thrust aside the grooms, dressed their steeds down, fed and watered them.

Then having seen them eat, there being no more to do, they walked back to the guest-house, hoping to find Rosamund. But they found no Rosamund, so sat down together and talked of the wonderful things that had befallen them, and of what might befall them in the future; of the mercy of Heaven also which had brought them all three together safe and sound, although it was in this house of hell. So the time passed on, till about the hour of sunset the women servants came and led them to the bath, where the black slaves washed and perfumed them, clothing them in fresh robes above their armor.

When they came out the sun was down, and the women, bearing torches in their hands, conducted them to a great and gorgeous hall which they had not seen before, built of stone but with a carved and painted roof. Along one side of this hall, that was lit with cressets, were a number of round-headed open arches supported by elegant columns, and beyond them a marble terrace with flights of steps which led to the gardens beneath. On the floor of this hall, each seated upon his cushion beside low tables inlaid with pearl, sat the guests, a hundred or more, all dressed in white robes on which the red dagger was blazoned, and all as silent as though they were asleep.

When the brethern reached the place the women left them, and servants with gold chains round their necks escorted them to a dais in the middle of the hall where there were many cushions, as yet unoccupied, arranged in a semicircle, of which the centre was a divan higher and more gorgeous than the rest.

Here places were pointed out to them opposite the divan, and they took their stand by them. They had not long to wait, for presently there was a sound of music, and, heralded by troops of singing women, the lord Sinan approached, walking slowly down the length of the great hall. It was a strange procession, for after the women came the aged, white robed dais, then the lord Al-je-bal himself, clad now in his blood-red, festal robe, and wearing jewels on his turban.

Around him marched four slaves, black as ebony, each of whom held a flaming torch on high, while behind followed the two gigantic guards who had stood sentry over him when he sat under the canopy of justice. As he advanced down the hall every man in it rose and prostrated himself, and so remained until their lord was seated, save only the two brethern, who stood erect like the survivors among the slain of a battle. Settling himself among the cushions at one end of the divan, he waved his hand, whereon the feastern, and with them Godwin and Wulf, sat themselves down.

Now there was a pause, while Sinan glanced along the hall impatiently. Soon the brethern saw why, since at the end opposite to that by which he had entered appeared more singing women, and after them, also escorted by four black torch-bearers, only these were women, walked Rosamund, and, behind her, Masouda.

Rosamund it was without doubt, but Rosamund transformed, for now she seemed an Eastern queen. Round her head was a coronet of gems from which hung a veil, but not so as to hide her face. Jewelled, too, were her heavy plaits of hair, jewelled the rose-silk garments that she wore, the girdle at her waist, her naked, ivory arms and even the slippers on her feet. As she approaced in her royal-looking beauty all the guests at that strange feast stared first at her and next at each other. Then as though by a single impulse they rose and bowed.

"What can this mean?" muttered Wulf to Godwin as they did likewise. But Godwin made no answer.

On came Rosamund, and now, behold! the lord Al-je-bal rose and, giving her his hand, seated her by him on the divan.

"Show no surprise, Wulf," muttered Godwin, who had caught a warning look in the eyes of Masouda as she took up her position behind Rosamund.

Now the feast began. Slaves running to and fro, set dish after dish filled with strange and savory meats, upon the little inlaid tables, those that were served to Sinan and his guests fashioned, all of them, of silver or of gold.

Godwin and Wulf ate, though not for hunger's sake, but of what they ate they remembered nothing who were watching Sinan and straining their ears to catch all he said without seeming to take note or listen. Although she strove to hide it and to appear indifferent, it was plain to them that Rosamund was much afraid. Again and again Sinan presented to her choice morsels of food, sometimes on the dishes and sometimes with his fingers, and these she was obliged to take. All the while also he devoured her with his fierce eyes so that she shrank away from him to the furthest limit of the divan.

Then wine, perfumed and spiced, was brought in golden cups, of which, having drunk, he offered to Rosamund. But she shook her head and asked Masouda for water, saying that she touched nothing stronger, and it was given her, cooled with snow. The brethern asked for water also, whereon Sinan looked at them suspiciously and demanded the reason. Godwin replied through Masouda that they were under an oath to touch no wine till they returned to their own country, having fulfilled their mission. To this he answered meaningly that it was good and right to keep oaths, but he feared that theirs would make them water-drinkers for the rest of their lives, a saying at which their hearts sank.

Now the wine that he had drunk took hold of Sinan, and he began to talk who without it was so silent.

(To be continued.)

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