

THE

YULE

H. Rider Haggard's Great Romance of the Crusades

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CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)

"Were I not a Christian would I visit this foggy land of yours to drink wine?" answered the man, drawing aside the folds of his shawl and revealing a silver crucifix upon his broad breast. "I am a merchant of Famagusta in Cyprus, Georgios by name, and of the Greek Church which you Westerners hold to be heretical. But what think you of that wine, holy Abbot?"

The Prior smiled at him. "Frien Georgios, it is indeed a drink for the saint," he answered. "Aye, and has been a drink for sinners ever now—for this is the very liquor that Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, drank with her Roman lover Anthony, of whom you, being a learned man, may have heard. And you, Sir Knight, what say you of the black stuff—Mavro, we call it—not the common, but that which has been twenty years in cask?"

"I have tasted worse," said Wulf, holding out his horn to be filled again. "Aye, and will never taste better if you live as long as the Wandering Jew. Well, sir, may I take your orders? If you are wise you will make them large, since no such chance is likely to come your way again, and that wine, yellow or red, will keep for a century."

Then the chattering began, and it was long and keen—indeed, at one time they nearly left the place without purchasing, but the merchant Georgios called them back and offered to come to their terms, if they would take double the quantity, so as to make up a carload between them, which he said he would deliver before Christmas Day. At this they consented, and the merchant, who had never seen so much gold, departed home laden with the gifts with which the chaplain had clinched the bargain, after the Eastern fashion. The quick-eyed Cypriote saw the smile, and inquired if it might be needed for a lady's wear, at which some neighbors present in the room laughed.

"Do not laugh at me, gentlemen," said the Easterner; "for how can I, a stranger, know this young knight's affairs, and whether he has a betrothed, or sister, or lover? Well here are brooches fit for any of them." Then bidding his servant bring a bale, he opened it, and began to show his goods, which, indeed, were very beautiful. In the end Wulf purchased a vest of gauze-like silk worked with golden stars as a Christmas gift for Rosamund. Afterwards, the quick-eyed Cypriote saw the smile, and inquired if it might be needed for a lady's wear, at which some neighbors present in the room laughed.

He offered also to go with the Prior and Wulf to where his ship lay in the river, and show them many other goods aboard of her, which, he explained to them, were the property of a company of Cyprian merchants who had embarked on the venture jointly with himself. This they declined, however, as the darkness was not far off; but Wulf added that he would come with them to the harbor, and that even in such a matter he must take no advantage of his brother, he added to it a tunic embroidered with gold and silver flowers such as he had never seen before. These silks were costly, and Wulf turned to the Prior, and asked him to buy one for his betrothed, and that he would give him the money, but he had no more upon him. Georgios said, however, that it mattered nothing, as he would take a guide from the town and bring the wine in his cargo. He added that he had expected to spend Christmas at that city, but their having gone wrong in the rough weather, they were driven past the mouth of the Thames, and he had drifted into that of the Crouch, which, he thought, had fared better. So he bade them farewell for that time, but not before he had asked and received the blessing of the Prior.

Thus the pair of them departed, well pleased with their purchases, and the Cypriote Georgios, whom they were very pleasant merchants, had embarked to go to eat at the Hall that night, when he and Wulf told of all their dealings with him. Sir Andrew laughed at the story, showing them how they had been persuaded by the Eastern to buy a great deal more wine than they needed, so that it was he and not they who had the best of the bargain. Then he went on to tell tales of the rich island of Cyprus, where he had landed many years before and stayed awhile, and of the gorgeous court of its emperor, who was a Phoenician. These were, he said, the cunningest traders in the world—so cunning, indeed, that no Jew could overmatch them; bold sailors, which they were from the Phoenicians of Holy Writ, who, with the Greeks, were their forefathers, adding that what they told him of this Georgios accorded well with the character of that people.

Thus it came to pass that no suspicion of Georgios or of his ship entered the mind of any one of them, which gave a large to his tenants and vassals, and with it his good wishes and a caution that they should not become drunk at their Yule-tide feast, as was the common habit of the time.

"We shall not get the chance," said Wulf, as they walked to the Hall, "since the chaplain Georgios has now a large to his tenants and vassals, and with it his good wishes and a caution that they should not become drunk at their Yule-tide feast, as was the common habit of the time."

"Perhaps he has sold it at a better price to someone else; it would be like a Cypriote," answered Sir Andrew, smiling. "Then he went into the hall, and as had been agreed between them, together the brethren gave their Christmas gifts to Rosamund. She thanked them prettily enough, and much admired the beauty of

the work, laughing when they told her that had not yet been paid for, and saying that, however it was some, they would wear both tunic and veil at their feast, which was to be held at nightfall. About two o'clock in the afternoon a servant came into the hall to say that the wine drawn by three horses and accompanied by two men, one of whom led the horse, was coming down the road from St. Stephen's village.

"Our merchant—and in time after all," said Wulf, and followed by the others, he went out to receive them. Georgios it was sure enough, wrapped up in a great sheepskin cloak such as Cypriotes wear in winter, and seated on the head of one of his own barrels.

"Your pardon, knights," he said as he scrambled nimbly to the ground. "The roads in this country are such that, although I have left nearly half my load at Stangate, it has taken me four long hours to come from the Abbey here, most of which time we have spent in mud-holes that have wearied the horses and, as I fear, strained the wheels of this crazy wagon. Still, I am glad to see you, noble sir," he added, bowing to Sir Andrew, "here too is the wine that your own bought of me."

"My pardon," interrupted Sir Andrew. "Once more, my pardon. I thought for their likeness to you that these knights were your own."

"Has he bought it at that stuff?" asked Sir Andrew, for there were five tubs on the wagon, besides one or two smaller kegs and some packages wrapped in sheepskin. "No, alas!" answered the Cypriote ruefully, and shrugging his shoulders. "Only two of them, Mavro. The rest I took to the Abbey, for I understood the holy Prior to say that he would purchase six casks, but it seems that it was but three he needed."

"He said six," put in Wulf. "Did he, sir?" Then doubtless the error was mine, who speak your tongue but ill. So I must drag the rest back again over those accursed roads, and he made another grimace. "Yet I will ask you, sir," he added to Sir Andrew, "to lighten the load a little by accepting this small keg of the old sweet vintage that grows on the slopes of the Troodos."

"I remember it well," said Sir Andrew, with a smile; "but, friend, I do not wish to take your wine for nothing."

At these words the face of Georgios beamed. "What, noble sir," he exclaimed, "do you know my land of Cyprus? Oh, then indeed I kid you, for you would not will not affront me by refusing this little present? Indeed, to be frank, I can afford to lose its price, who have done so good trades, even here, to the Holy City."

"As you will," said Sir Andrew. "I thank you, and perhaps you have other things to sell." "I have indeed a few embroideries if this most gracious lady would be pleased to look at them. Some carpets also, such as the Moslems used to pray on in the name of their false prophet, Mahomet, and turning he spat upon the ground.

"I perceive you are a Christian," said Sir Andrew. "Yet, although I fought against them, I have known many a good Mussulman. Nor do I think it necessary to spit at the name of Mahomet, who to my mind was a great man deceived by the artifice of Satan."

"Neither do I," said Wulf reflectively. "It is true, servants should fight the enemies of the cross and pray for their souls, not spit at them." The merchant looked at them curiously, fingering the silver crucifix that hung upon his breast. "The capture of the Holy City," he said, "when he rode into the Mosque of Al Aka up to their horses' knees in blood, and I have been taught otherwise. But the times grow liberal, and after all, what right has a poor trader whose mind is set more on gain than on the sufferings of the blessed Son of Mary, to be vexed himself to 'to form a judgment upon such high matters? Pardon me, I accept your reproach, who perhaps am bigoted!'"

"For one not of all the men of this 'proof' was to save the life of many a man that night." "May I ask help with those packages?" he went on, as he cannot open them here and to move the casks? Nay, the little keg I will carry myself, as I hope that some of the wine will be left over for the feast. It must be gently handled, though I fear me that those roads of yours will not improve its quality." Then twisting the handle of the keg, he opened it, and a fragrant odor came forth. "It is indeed a good wine," he said, "and I have heard that it is the best in the world."

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to do? Already it is nearly dark, and how I shall find my way up yonder steep hill, I know not. As for the priestess, broodier, I suppose they must stay here for the night, since the wheel cannot be mended till tomorrow."

"As you and your servant had best do also," said Sir Andrew kindly. "Come, do not grieve; we are used to broken axes here in the house of our servants. Let us have a good dinner, and then we will eat your Christmas dinner at St. Stephen's in the morning."

"I thank you, Sir Knight; I thank you. But why should I, who am but a merchant, trust myself upon your noble company? Let me stop outside with my man, Petros, and dine with your servants, in that barn, where I see they are making ready their food."

"By no means," answered Sir Andrew. "Leave our servant with my people, who will look after him, and come you into the hall, and tell me some more of Cyprus. Tell me your Christmas meal is ready, which will be soon. Fear not for your goods; they will be placed under cover."

"All unworthy as I am, I obey," answered the polite Georgios. "You do not understand Greek—only Arabic? Well, he asks me to give him money to pay for his dinner and his night's lodging. You must forgive him, for although he can speak your language, he is but a simple peasant, and cannot understand that anyone may be lodged and fed without payment. He will explain to him the right, and explain he did in shrill, high notes, of which no one could understand a word. "There, Sir Knight, I do not think he will offend your language, he is a simple peasant, and cannot understand that anyone may be lodged and fed without payment. He will explain to him the right, and explain he did in shrill, high notes, of which no one could understand a word. "There, Sir Knight, I do not think he will offend your language, he is a simple peasant, and cannot understand that anyone may be lodged and fed without payment. 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