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THE BRETHREN

By RIDER HAGGARD

Author "King Solomon's Mines," "She," "Cleopatra," "Allan Quartermain," "The World's Desire," Etc.

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"Swift!" he said, as he threw down the second corpse. "Shut the door. I caught sight of horsemen riding through the trees. Nay, they saw nothing."

So they locked the massive door and barred it, and with beating hearts waited in the dark, expecting every moment to hear soldiers battering at its timbers. But no sound came; the searchers, if such they were, had passed on to seek elsewhere.

Now while Wulf made shift to fasten up the horses near the mouth of the cave, Godwin gathered stones as large as he could lift, and piled them up against the door, till they knew that it would take many men an hour or more to break through.

For this door was banded with iron and set fast in the living rock.

CHAPTER XV.

Then came the weariest time of waiting the brethren had ever known, or were to know, although at first they did not feel it so long and heavy. Water trickled from the walls of this cave, and Wulf, who was parched with thirst, gathered it in his hands and drank till he was satisfied. Then he let it run upon his head to cool its throbbing; and Godwin bathed such of his brother's hurts and bruises as could be come at, for he did not dare to remove the hauberk, and so gave him comfort.

When this was done, and he had looked to the saddles and trappings of the horses, Wulf told of all that had passed between him and Lozelle on the bridge. How at the first onset his spear had caught in the links of and torn away the head-piece of his foe, who, if the lacings had not burst, would have been hurled to death, while that of Lozelle struck his buckler fair and shattered on it, rending it from his arm. How they pushed past each other, and for a moment the fore hoofs of Smoke hung over the abyss, so that he thought he was surely sped: How at the next course Lozelle's spear passed beneath his arm, while his, striking full upon Sir Hugh's breast, brought down the black horse and his rider as though a thunderbolt had smitten them, and how Smoke, that could not check its furious pace, leapt over them, as a horse leaps a-hunting: How he would not ride down Lozelle, but dismounted to finish the fray in knightly fashion, and, being shieldless, received the full weight of the great sword upon his mail, so that he staggered back and would have fallen had he not struck against the horse.

Then he told of the blows that followed, and of his last that wounded Lozelle, shearing through his mail and felling him as an ox is felled by the butcher: How also, when he sprang to kill him, this mighty and brutal man had prayed for mercy, prayed it in the name of Christ and of their own mother, whom as a child he knew in Essex: How he could not slaughter him, being helpless, but turned away, saying that he left him to be dealt with by Al-je-bal, where upon this traitorous dog sprang up and strove to knife him. He told also of their last fearful struggle, and how, shaken as he was by the blow upon his back, although the point of the dagger had not pierced his mail, he strove with Lozelle, man to man; till at length his youth, great strength, and the skill he had in wrestling, learnt in many a village bout at home, enabled him to prevail, and, while they hung together on the perilous edge of the gulf, to free his right hand, draw his poniard, and make an end.

"Yet," added Wulf, "never shall I forget the look of that man's eyes as he fell backwards, or the whistling scream which came from his pierced throat."

"At least there is a rogue the less in the world, although he was a brave one in his own knavish fashion," answered Godwin. "Moreover, my brother," he added, placing his arm about Wulf's neck, "I am glad it fell to you to fight him, for at the last grip your might overcame, where I, who am not so strong, should have failed. Further, I think you did well to show mercy, as a good knight should; that thereby you have gained great honor, and that if his spirit can see through the darkness, our dead uncle is proud of you now, as I am, my brother."

"I thank you," replied Wulf simply; "but, in this hour of torment, who can think of such things as honor gained or lost?"

Then, lest he should grow stiff, who was sorely bruised beneath his mail, they began to walk up and down the cave from where the horses stood to where the two dead Assassins lay by the door, the faint light gleaming upon their stern, dark features. Ill company they seemed in that silent, lonely place.

The time crept on; the moon sank towards the mountains.

"What if they do not come?" asked Wulf.

"Let us wait to think of it till dawn," answered Godwin.

Again they walked the length of the cave and back.

"How can they come, the door being barred?" asked Wulf.

"How did Masouda come and go?" answered Godwin. "Oh, question me no more; if is in the hand of God."

"Look," said Wulf, in a whisper. "Who stand yonder at the end of the cave—there by the dead men?"

"Their spirits, perchance," answered Godwin, drawing his sword and leaning forward. Then he looked, and true enough there stood two figures faintly outlined in the gloom. They glided towards them, and now the level moonlight shone upon their white robes and gleamed in the gems they wore.

"I cannot see them," said a voice. "Oh, those dead soldiers—what do they portend?"

"At least yonder stand their horses," answered another voice.

Now the brethren guessed the truth, and, like men in a dream, stepped forward from the shadow of the wall.

"Rosamund!" they said.

"Oh Godwin! oh Wulf!" she cried in answer. "Oh, Jesu, I thank Thee, I thank Thee—Thee, and this brave woman!" and, casting her arms about Masouda, she kissed her on the face.

Masouda pushed her back, and said, in a voice that was almost harsh:

"It is not fitting, Princess, that your pure lips should touch the cheek of a woman of the Assassins."

But Rosamund would not re repulsed.

"It is most fitting," she sobbed, "that I should give you thanks who but for you must also have become 'a woman of the Assassins,' or an inhabitant of the House of Death."

Then Masouda kissed her back and, thrusting her away into the arms of Wulf, said roughly:

"So, pilgrims Peter and John, your patron saints have brought you through so far; and, John you fight right well. Nay, do not stop for our story, if you wish us to live to tell it. What! You have the soldiers' horses with your own? Well done! I did not credit you with so much wit. Now, Sir Wulf, can you walk? Yes; so much the better; it will save you a rough ride, for this place is steep, though not so steep as one you know of. Now set the princess upon Flame, for no cat is surer-footed than that horse, as you may remember, Peter. I who know the path will lead it. John, take you the other two; Peter, do you follow last of all with Smoke, and, if they hang back, prick them with your sword. Come, Flame, be not afraid, Flame. Where I go, you can come," and Masouda thrust her way through the bushes and over the edge of the cliff, talking to the snorting horse and patting its neck.

A minute more, and they were scrambling down a mountain ridge so steep that it seemed as though they must fall and be dashed to pieces at the bottom. Yet they fell not, for, made as it had been to meet such hours of need, this road was safer than it appeared, with ridges cut in the rock at the worst places.

Down they went, and down, till at length, panting, but safe, they stood at the bottom of the darksome gulf where only the starlight shone, for here the rays of the low moon could not reach.

"Mount," said Masouda. "Princess, stay you on Flame; he is the surest and the swiftest. Sir Wulf, keep your own horse Smoke; your brother and I will ride three of the soldiers. Though not very swift, doubtless they are good beasts, and accustomed to such roads." Then she leapt to the saddle as a woman born in the desert can, and pushed her horse in front.

For a mile or more Masouda led them along the rocky bottom of the gulf, where because of the stones they could only travel at a foot pace, till they came to a deep cleft on the left hand, up which they began to ride. By now the moon was quite behind the mountains, and such faint light as came from the stars began to be obscured with drifting clouds. Still, they stumbled on till they reached a little glade where water ran and grass grew.

"Halt," said Masouda. "Here we must wait till dawn, for in this darkness the horses cannot keep their footing on the stones. Moreover, all about us lie precipices, over one of which we might fall."

"But they will pursue us," pleaded Rosamund.

"Not until they have light to see by," answered Masouda, "or at least we must take the risk, for to go forward would be madness. Sit down and rest a while, and let the horses drink a little and eat a mouthful of grass, holding their reins in our hands, for we and they may need all our strength before to-morrow's sun is set. Sir Wulf, say, are you much hurt?"

"But very little," he answered in a cheerful voice; "a few bruises beneath my mail—that is all, for Lozelle's sword was heavy. Tell us, I pray you, what happened after we rode away from the castle bridge."

"This, knights. The princess here, being overcome, was escorted by the slaves back to her chambers, but Sinan bade me stay with him awhile that he might speak to you through me. Do you know what was in his mind? To have you killed at once, both of you, whom Lozelle had told him were this lady's lovers, and not her brothers. Only he feared that there might be trouble with the people, who were pleased with the fighting, so held his hand. Then he bade you to the supper, whence you would not have returned; but when Sir Wulf said he was hurt, I whispered to him that what he wished to do could best be done on the morrow at the wedding-feast when he was in his own halls, surrounded by his guards.

"'Ay,' he answered, 'these brethren shall fight with them until they are driven into the gulf. It will be a goodly sight for me and my queen to see.'"

"Oh! horrible, horrible!" said Rosamund; while Godwin muttered:

"I swear that I would have fought, not with his guards, but with Sinan only."

"So he suffered you to go, and I left him also. Before I went he spoke to me, bidding me bring the princess to him privately within two hours after we had supped, as he wished to speak to her about the ceremony of her marriage on the morrow, and to make her gifts. I answered aloud that his commands should be obeyed, and hurried to the guest-castle. There I found your lady recovered from her faintness, but mad with fear, and forced her to eat and drink.

"The rest is short. Before the two hours were gone a messenger came, saying that the Al-je-bal bade me do what he had commanded.

"'Return,' I answered; 'the princess adorns herself. We follow presently alone, as it is commanded.'

"Then I threw this cloak about her and bade her be brave, and, if we failed, to choose whether she would take Sinan or death for lord. Next, I took the ring you had, the Signet of the dead Al-je-bal, who gave it to your kinsman, and held it before the slaves, who bowed and let me pass. We came to the guards, and to them again I showed the ring. They bowed also, but when they saw that we turned down the passage to the left and not to the right, as we should have done to come to the doors of the inner palace, they would have stopped us.

"'Acknowledge the Signet,' I answered. 'Dogs, what is it to you which road the Signet takes?' Then they also let us pass.

"Now, following the passage, we were out of the guest-house and in the gardens, and I led her to what is called the prison tower, whence runs the secret way. Here were more guards whom I bade open in the name of Sinan. They said: 'We obey not. This place is shut save to the Signet itself.'

"'Behold it!' I answered. The officer looked and said: 'It is the very Signet, sure enough, and there is no other.' Yet he paused, studying the black stone veined with the red dagger and the ancient writing on it.

"'Are you, then, weary of life?' I asked. 'Fool, the Al-je-bal himself would keep a tryst within this house, which he enters secretly from the palace. Woe to you if he does not find his lady there!'

"'It is the Signet that he must have sent, sure enough,' the captain said again, 'to disobey which is death.' 'Yes, open, open,' whispered his companions.

"So they opened, though doubtfully, and we entered, and I barred the door behind us. Then, to be short, through the darkness of the tower passement, guiding ourselves by the wall, we crept to the entrance of that way of which I know the secret. Ay, and along all its length and through the rock door of escape at the end of which I set so that none can turn it, save skilled masons with their tools, and into the cave where we found you. It was no great matter, having the Signet, although without the Signet it had not been possible to-night, when every gate is guarded."

"No great matter!" gasped Rosamund. "Oh, Godwin and Wulf! if you could know how she thought of and made ready everything; if you could have seen how all those cruel men glared at us, searching out our very souls! If you could have heard how high she answered them, waving that ring before their eyes and bidding them to obey its presence, or to die!"

"Which they surely have done by now," broke in Masouda quietly, "though I do not pity them, who were wicked. Nay; thank me not; I have done what I promised to do, neither less nor more, and—I love danger and a high stake. Tell us your story, Sir Godwin."

So, seated there on the grass in the darkness, he told them of their mad ride and of the slaying of the guards, while Rosamund raised her hands and thanked Heaven for its mercies, and that they were without those accursed walls.

"You may be within them again before sunset," said Masouda grimly.

"Yes," answered Wulf, "but not alive. Now what plan have you? To ride for the coast towns?"

"No," replied Masouda; "at least not straight, since to do so we must pass through the country of the Assassins, who by this day's light will be warned to watch for us. We must ride through the desert mountain lands to Emesa, many miles away, and cross the Orontes there, then down into Baalbec, and so back to Beirut."

"Emesa?" said Godwin. "Why Saladin holds that place, and of Baalbec the lady Rosamund is princess."

"Which is best?" asked Masouda shortly. "That she should fall into the hands of Salah-ed-din, or back into those of the master of the Assassins? Choose which you wish."

"I choose Salah-ed-din," broke in Rosamund, "for at least he is my uncle, and will do me no wrong." Nor, knowing the case, did the others gainsay her.

Now at length the summer day began to break, and while it was still too dark to travel, Godwin and Rosamund let the horses graze, holding them by their bridles. Masouda, also, taking off the hauberk of Wulf, doctored his bruises as best she could with the crushed leaves of a bush that grew by the stream, having first washed them with water, and though the time was short, eased him much. Then, so soon as the dawn was grey, having drunk their fill and, as they had nothing else, eaten some watercress that grew in the stream, they tightened their saddle-girths and started. Scarcely had they gone a hundred yards when, from the gulf beneath, that was hidden in grey mists, they heard the sound of horse's hoofs and men's voices.

"Push on," said Masouda, "Al-je-bal is on our tracks."

Upwards they climbed through the gathering light, skirting the edge of dreadful precipices which in the gloom it would have been impossible to pass, till at length they reached a great table land, that ran to the foot of some mountains a dozen miles or more away. Among those mountains soared two peaks, set close together. To these Masouda pointed, saying that their road ran between them, and trat beyond lay the valley of the Orontes. While she spoke, far behind them they heard the sound of men shouting,

Skirting the edge of dreadful precipices.

although they could see nothing because of the dense mist.

"Push on," said Masouda; "there is no time to spare," and they went forward, but only at a hand gallop, for the ground was still rough and the light uncertain.

When they had covered some six miles of the distance between them and the mountain pass, the sun rose suddenly and sucked up the mist. This was what they saw. Before them lay a flat, sandy plain; behind, the stony ground that they had traversed, and riding over it, two miles from them, some twenty men of the Assassins.

"They cannot catch us," said Wulf; but Masouda pointed to the right, where the mist still hung, and said:

"Yonder I see spears."

Presently it thinned, and there a league away they saw a great body of mounted soldiers—perhaps there were four hundred.

"Look," she said; "they have come round during the night, as I feared they would. Now we must cross the path before them or be taken," and she struck her horse fiercely with a stick she had cut at the stream. Half a mile further on a shout from the great body of men to their right, which was answered by another shout from those behind, told them that they were seen.

"On!" said Masouda. "The race will be close." So they began to gallop their best.

Two miles were done, but although that behind was far off, the great cloud of dust to their right grew ever nearer till it seemed as though it must reach the mouth of the mountain pass before them. Then Godwin spoke:

"Wulf and Rosamund ride on. Your horses are swift and can outpace them. At the crest of the mountain pass wait a while to breathe the beasts, and see if we come. If not, ride on again, and God be with you."

"Ay," said Masouda, "ride and head for the Emesa bridge—it can be seen from far—and there yield yourselves to the officers of Salah-ed-din."

They hung back, but in a stern voice Godwin repeated:

"Ride, I command you both."

"For Rosamund's sake, so be it," answered Wulf. Then he called to Smoke and Flame, and they stretched themselves out upon the sand and passed thence swifter than swallows. Soon Godwin and Masouda, toiling behind, saw them enter the mouth of the pass.

"Good," she said. "Except those of their own breed, there are no horses in Syria that can catch those two. They will come to Emesa, have no fear."

"Who was the man who brought them to us?" asked Godwin, as they galloped side by side, their eyes fixed upon the ever-nearing cloud of dust, in which the spear points sparkled.

"My father's brother—my uncle, as I called him," she answered. "He is a sheik of the desert, who owns the ancient breed that cannot be bought for gold."

"Then you are not of the Assassins, Masouda?"

"No; I may tell you, now that the end seems near. My father was an Arab, my mother a noble Frank, a Frenchwoman, whom he found starving in the desert after a fight, and took to his tent and made his wife. The Assassins fell upon us and killed him and her, and captured me as a child of twelve. Afterwards, when I grew older, being beautiful in those days, I was taken to the harem of Sinan, and, although in secret I had been bred up a Christian by my mother, they swore me of his accursed faith. Now you will understand why I hate him so sorely who murdered my father and my mother, and made me what I am; why I hold myself so vile also. Yes, I have been forced to serve as his spy or be killed, who, although he believed me his faithful slave, desired first to be avenged upon him."

"I do not hold you vile," panted Godwin, as he spurred his laboring steed. "I hold you most noble."

"I rejoice to hear it before we die," she answered, looking him in the eyes in such a fashion that he dropped his head before her burning gaze, "who hold you dear, Sir Godwin, for whose sake I have dared these things, although I am nought to you. Nay, speak not; the lady Rosamund has told me all that story—except its answer."

Now they were off the sand over which they had been racing side by side, and beginning to breast the mountain slope, nor was Godwin sorry that the clatter of their horses' hoofs upon the stones prevented further speech between them. So far they had outpaced the Assassins, who had a longer and a rougher road to travel; but the great cloud of dust was not seven hundred yards away, and in front of it, shaking their spears, rode some of the best mounted of their soldiers.

"These horses still have strength; they are better than I thought them," cried Masouda. "They will not gain on us across the mountains, but afterwards—"

For the next league they spoke no more, who must keep their horses from falling as they toiled up the steep path. At length they reached the crest, and there, on the very top of it, saw Wulf and Rosamund standing by Flame and Smoke.

"They rest," Godwin said, then he shouted, "Mount! mount! The foe is close."

So they climbed to their saddles again, and, all four of them began to descend the long slope that stretched to the plain two leagues beneath. Far off across this plain ran a broad silver streak, beyond which from that height they could see the walls of a city.

"The Orontes!" creid Masouda. "Cross that, and we are safe." But Godwin looked first at his horse, then at Masouda, and shook his head.

Well might he do so, for, stout-hearted as they were, the beasts were much distressed that had galloped so far without drawing rein. Down the steep road they plunged, panting; indeed, at times it was hard to keep them on their feet.

"They will reach the plain—no more," said Godwin, and Masouda nodded.

The descent was almost done, and not a mile behind them the white-robed Assassins streamed endlessly. Godwin plied his spurs and Masouda her whip, though with little hope, for they knew that the end was near. Down the last declivity they rushed, till suddenly, as they reached its foot, Masouda's horse reeled, stopped, and sank to the ground, while Godwin's pulled up beside it.

"Ride on!" he cried to Rosamund and Wulf in front; but they would not. He stormed at them, but they replied:

"Nay, we will die together."

Masouda looked at the horses Flame and Smoke, which seemed but little troubled.

"So be it," she said; "they have carried double before, and must again. Mount in front of the lady, Sir Godwin; and, Sir Wulf, give me your hand, and you will learn what this breed can do."

So they mounted. Forward started Flame and Smoke with a long, swinging gallop, while from the Assassins above, who thought that they held them, went up a shout of rage and wonder.

"Their horses are also tired, and we may beat them yet," called the dauntless Masouda. But Godwin and Wulf looked sadly at the ten miles of plain between them and the river bank.

On they went, and on. A quarter of it was done. Half of it was done, but now the first of the fedai hung upon their flanks not two hundred yards behind. Little by little this distance lessened. At length they were scarcely fifty yards away, and one of them flung a spear. In her terror Rosamund sobbed aloud.

"Spur the horses, knights," cried Masouda, and for the first time they spurred them.

At the sting of the steel Flame and Smoke sprang forward as though they had but just left their stable door, and the gap between pursuers and pursued widened. Two more miles were done, and scarce seven furlongs from them they saw the broad mouth of the bridge, while the towers of Emesa beyond seemed so close that in this clear air they could discern the watchmen outlined against the sky. Then they descended a little valley, and lost sight of bridge and town.

At the rise of the opposing slope the strength of Flame and Smoke at last began to fail beneath their double burdens. They panted and trembled,

To be continued.

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