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THE BRETHREN

By RIDER HAGGARD

Author "King Solomon's Mines," "She," "Cleopatra," "Alian Quartermaster," "The World's Desire," Etc.

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je-bal. Then low to the earth he came his knee, while the grave Saracens of the sand, like the hem of her garment, he kissed it.

"Allah be praised indeed!" he said. "I, His unworthy servant, thank Him from my heart, who never thought to see you living more. Soldiers, salute. Before you stands the lady Rose of the World, prince of Baalbe and niece of our lord, Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful."

Then in stately salutation to this dishevelled, outworn, but still queenly woman, uprose hand and spear, and scimitar, while Wulf cried from where he lay:

"Why, it is our merchant of the drugged wine—none other! Oh! Sir Saracen, does not the memory of that chapman's trick shame you now?"

The emir Hassan heard and grew red, muttering in his beard:

"Like you, Sir Wulf, I am the slave of Fate, and must obey. Be not bitter against me till you know all."

"I am not bitter," answered Wulf, "but I always pay for my drink, and we will settle that score yet, as I have sworn."

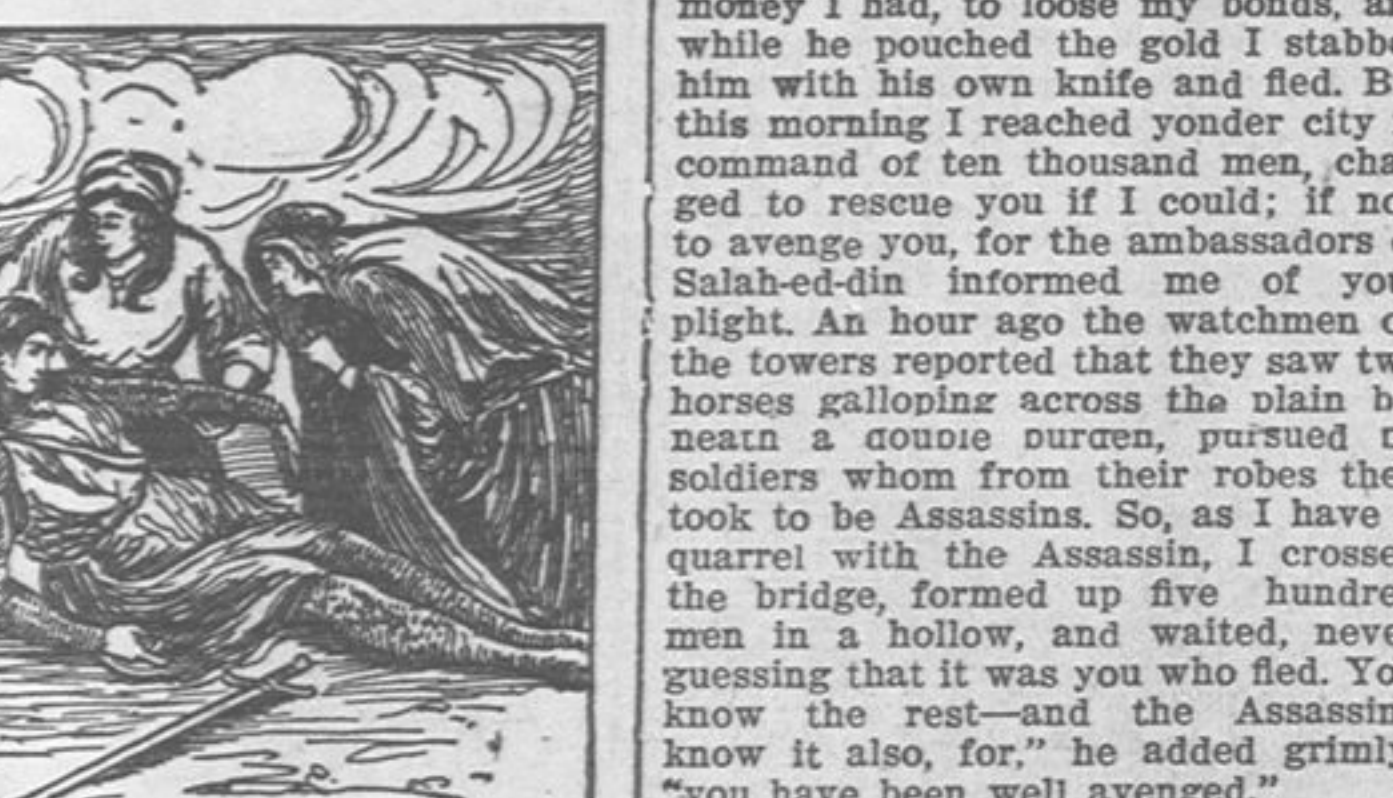
"Hush!" broke in Rosamund. "Although he stole the wine, he is also my deliverer and friend through many a peril, and had it not been for him, by now—" and she shuddered.

"I do not know all the story, but, Princess, it seems that you should thank not me, but these goodly cousins of yours and of these splendid horses," and Hassan pointed to Smoke and Flame, which stood by quivering with hollow flanks and drooping heads.

"There is another whom I must thank also, this noble woman, as you will call her also when you hear the story," said Rosamund, frowning her arm about the neck of Masouda.

"My master will reward her," said Hassan. "But oh! lady, what must you think of me who seemed to desert you so basely? Yet I reasoned well. In that castle of that son of Satan, Sinan, and he spat upon the ground, 'I could not have aided you, for there he would only have butchered me. But by escaping I thought that I might help, so I bribed the Frankish knight with the priceless Star of my House,' and he touched the great jewel that he wore in his turban, 'and with what money I had, to loose my bonds, and while he pouched the gold I stabbed him with his own sword and fled. But this morning I reached yonder city in command of ten thousand men, charged to rescue you if I could; if not, to avenge you, for the ambassadors of Salah-ed-din informed me of your plight. An hour ago the watchmen on the towers reported that they saw two horses galloping across the plain, and near a goodly caravan, pursued by soldiers whom from their robes they took to be Assassins. So, as I have a quarrel with the Assassin, I crossed the bridge, formed up five hundred men in a hollow, and waited, never guessing that it was you who were fled. Now that secret way of yours will be safe enough by now. So there I let the matter bide, glad enough that it had ended thus. Only I warn you, all—and myself also—to walk warily, since, if I know ought of him, Sinan's feidais will henceforth dog the steps of every one of us, striving to bring us to our ends by murder. Now here come the litterers, enter them, all of you, and be borne to the city, who have ridden far enough to-day. Fear not for your horses; they shall be led in gently and saved alive, if skill and care can save them. I go to count the slain, and will join you presently in the citadel."

So the bearers came and lifted up Wulf, and helped Godwin from his horse—for now that all was over he could scarcely stand—and with him



Wulf woke up, stretched his arms, exclaimed because that action hurt him, grumbled at the brightness of the light upon his eyes, and said that he was very hungry. Then he arose, and with the help of Godwin, dressed himself, but not in his armour. Here, with the yellow-coated soldiers of Saladin, grave-faced and watchful, pacing before their door—for night and day they were equally startled lest

Assassins should creep in—there was no need for mail, in the fortress of Masaf, indeed, where they were also guarded, it had been otherwise. Wulf heard the step of the sentries on the cemented pavement without, and shook his great shoulders as though he shivered.

"That sound makes my backbone cold," he said. "For a moment, as my eyes opened, I thought that we were back again in the great chambers of Al-Jabal, where folk crept round us as we slept and murderers marched to and fro outside the curtains, finging their knife-points. Well, whatever there is to come, thank the Salits, that is done with. I tell you, brother, I have had enough of mountains and narrow bridges, and Assassins. Henceforth, I desire to live upon a fat with never a hill in sight, amidst honest folk as stupid as my own sheep, who go to church on Sundays and get drunk with mead on Wednesdays. I have brought to them by a draggled wench in a tavern, with her musty bedstraw still sticking in her hair. Give me the Saltings of Essex with the east winds blowing over them, and

and ate with light hearts and a good appetite.

Before their meal was finished, the guard at the door announced that messengers had arrived from the Sultan. They entered, grey-haired men clad in the robes of secretaries, whom Hassan hastened to greet. When they were seated and had spoken with him awhile, one of them drew forth a letter, which Hassan, touching his forehead with it in token of respect, gave to Rosamund. He broke its seal, and, seeing that it was in Arabic, handed it to her cousin, saying:

"Do you read it, Godwin, who are more learned than I."

So he read aloud, translating the letter sentence by sentence. This was its purport:

"Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful, the Strong-to-aid, to his niece, the Princess of the World, Princess of Baalbe:—

"Our servant, the emir Hassan, has sent us tidings of your rescue from the power of the accursed lord of the Mountain, Sinan, and that you are now safe in our city of Emesa, guarded by many thousands of our soldiers, and with you a woman named Masouda, and your kinsmen, the two Frankish knights, by whose skill in arms and courage you were saved. Now this is to command you to come to our court at Damascus so soon as you may be fit to travel, knowing that here you will be received with love and honor. Also I invite your kinsmen to accompany you, since I knew their father, and would welcome knights who have done such great deeds, and the woman Masouda, so soon as she may be fit to return to her own lands and people."

"Hasten, my niece, lady Rose of the World, hasten, for my spirit seeks you, and my eyes desire to look upon you. In the name of Allah, greeting."

"You have heard," said Rosamund, as Godwin finished reading the scroll. "Now, my cousins, what will you do?"

"What else but go with you, whom we have come so far to seek?" answered Wulf, and Godwin nodded his head in assent.

"And you, Masouda?"

"I, lady? Oh, I go also, since were I to return yonder," she nodded towards the mountains, "my greeting would be one that I do not wish."

"Do you note their words, prince Hassan?" asked Rosamund.

"I expected no other," he answered with a bow. "Only, knights, you must give me a promise, for even in the midst of my army such is needful from men who can fly like birds out of the fortress of Masaf and from the knives of the Assassins—who are mounted on the swift horses of Syria that have been trained to carry a double burden," and he looked at them meaningly. "It is that upon this journey you will not attempt to escape with the princes, whom you have followed from over-seas to rescue her out of the hand of Salah-ed-din."

Godwin drew from his tunic the cross which Rosamund had left him in the hall at Steeple, and saying: "I swear upon this holy symbol that during our journey to Damascus I will attempt no escape with you, and that my cousin Rose shall be kissed it."

"And I swear the same upon my sword," added Wulf, laying his hand upon the silver hilt of the great blade which had been his forefather's.

"A security that I like better," said Hassan with a smile, "but in truth, knights, your word is enough for me." Then he looked at Masouda and went on, still smiling. "Nay it is useless; for women who have dwelt yonder oaths have no meaning. Lady, we must be content to watch you, since my lord has hidden you to his city, which, fair and brave as you are, to be plain, I would not have done."

Then he turned to speak to the secretaries, and Godwin who was noting all, saw Masouda's dark eyes follow him and in them a very strange light.

"Good," they seemed to say; "as you have written, so shall you read."

That same afternoon they started for Damascus, a great army of horsemen. In its midst, guarded by a thousand spears, Rosamund was borne in a litter. In front of her rode Hassan, with his yellow-robed bodyguard; at her side, Masouda; and behind—for, notwithstanding his hurts, Wulf would not be carried—the brethren, mounted upon ambling palfreys. After them, led by slaves, came the chargers, Flame and Smoke, recovered now, but still walking somewhat stiffly, and then rank upon rank of turbaned Saracens.

Through the open curtains of the litter Rosamund beckoned to the brethren, who pushed alongside of her.

"Look," she said, pointing with her hand.

They looked, and there, bathed in the glory of the sinking sun, saw the mountains crowded far, far away with an impregnable city and fortress of Masaf, and below it the slopes down which had hid riddan for their lives.

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