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THE BRETHREN

By RIDER HAGGARD
Author "King Solomon's Mines," "She," "Cleopatra," "The World's Desire," etc.

When was the noisy room, while others drove or led mobs of prisoners, among them the king and his chosen knights. The wilderness was red with blood, the air was rent with shouts of victory and cries of agony or despair. And there, in the midst of it all, ranged round with grave, courteous Saracens, stood the emir, clad above his mail in his white robe and jeweled turban, facing the great Christian knight, with his harness hacked and redged, the light of battle shining in his fierce eyes, and a smile upon his stained features.

For those who watched the battle was forgotten—or, rather, its interest was centred on this point. "It will be a good fight," said one of them to Godwin, whom they had suffered to rise, "for though your brother is the younger and the heavier man, he is hurt and weary, whereas the emir is fresh and unweary. Ah! they are at it!"



Hassan had struck first and the blow went home. Falling upon the point of Wulf's steel helm, the heavy razor-edged scimitar glanced from it and shore away the links from the flap which hung upon his shoulder. "Saladin for you, Hassan for me," shouted Wulf.

Then they met, and all the host of Islam cried out in dismay as they saw the Commander of the Faithful and his horse borne to the earth before the last despairing charge of these mad Christian knights. Another instant, and the Sultan was on his feet again, and a second terrible sword, others crept up behind, and springing on him, seized his arms and dragged him to the ground, where they bound him fast.

Meanwhile Wulf had fared otherwise, for it was his horse Smoke, at the point of the vital that fell as he plunged on prince Hassan. Yet he also arose but little hurt, and cried out: "Thus, Hassan, old foe and friend, we meet at last in war. Come, I would pay the debt I owe you for that dragged wine, man to man and sword to sword."

"Indeed, it is due, Sir Wulf," answered the prince, laughing. "Guards, touch not this brave knight who has dared so much to reach me, Sultan, I ask a boon. Between Sir Wulf and me there is an ancient quarrel that can only be washed away in blood. Let it be decided here and now, and let this be your decree—that if I fall in fair fight, none shall set upon my conqueror, and no vengeance shall be taken for my blood."

"I will have none of your mercy at such a price, nor do I bow the knee to your dog of a false prophet, who perish in the faith of Christ, and weary of the world, am content to go to Him."

Saladin sprang to his feet, his very beard bristling with wrath, and drawing his sabre, shouted aloud: "You scorn Mahomet! Behold! I avenge Mahomet upon you! Take him away! And he struck him with the flat of his scimitar."

Then Mameluks leapt upon the prince, dragging him to the entrance of the tent, where they forced him to his knees and there beheaded him in sight of the soldiers and of the other prisoners.

Thus, bravely enough, died Reginald de Chastillon, whom the Saracens called prince Arnat. In the hour that followed the terrible deed King Guy said to Godwin: "Ask the Sultan if it is my duty to go."

"Nay," answered Saladin; "kings do not kill kings, but that true-breaker has met with no more than his deserts. Then came a scene still more dreadful. Saladin went to the door of his tent, and standing over the body of Reginald, bade them parade the captive Templars and Hospitallers before him. They were brought to the number of over two hundred, and were easy to distinguish them by the red and white crosses on their breasts."

"These also are faith-breakers," he shouted, "and of their unclean tribes will I rid the world. Ho! my emirs and the great crowd of his captains about him, each of you one of them and kill him!"

Now the emirs hung back, for though fanatics they were brave, and loved not this slaughter of defenceless men, and even the Mameluks murmured aloud. But Saladin cried again: "But Saladin is worthy of death, and he who disobeys my command shall himself be slain."

"Sultan," said Godwin, "we cannot witness such a crime; we ask that we may die with them." "You have eaten of my salt, and to kill you would be murder. Get you to the tent of the princess Baabeec yonder, for there you will see nothing of the death of these Franks, your fellow-worshippers."

So the brethren turned, and led by a Mameluk died again for the first time in their lives, past the long lines of Templars and Hospitallers, who in the last red light of the dying day knelt upon the sand and prayed, while the emirs came up to kill them.

They entered the tent, none forbidding them, and at the end of it saw two women crouched together on some cushions, who rose, clinging to each other. Then the women saw also and sprang forward with a cry of joy, saying: "So you live—you live!"

"Ay, Rosamund, he is not mistaken. These knights are my prisoners, as you are, and none have shown themselves braver to-day, or done me and mine more damage. Indeed, had it not been for my guards, within the hour I should have fallen beneath the sword of Sir Godwin. But as they know Arabic, I have asked them to render my words into your tongue. Do you accept them as interpreters? If not, others must be found."

When they had translated this, the king said that he accepted them, adding to Godwin: "Would that I had also accepted you two night gone as an interpreter of the will of Heaven!"

The Sultan bade his captains be seated, and seeing their terrible thirst, commanded slaves to bring a great bowl of sherbet made of rose-water cooled with snow, and with his own hand gave it to King Guy, and then to Reginald de Chastillon, whereon Saladin cried out to Godwin: "Say to the king it is he and not I who gives this man to drink. There is no bond of salt between me and the prince Arnat."

Godwin translated, sorrowfully enough, and Reginald, who knew the habits of the Saracens, answered: "No need to explain, Sir Knight, those words are my death-warrant. Well, I never expected less."

Then Saladin spoke again. "Prince Arnat, you strove to take the holy city of Mecca and to desecrate the tomb of the Prophet, and then I swore to kill you. Again, when in a time of peace a caravan came from Egypt and passed by Esh-Shobeik, where you were, forgetting your oath, you fell upon them and slew them. They asked for mercy in the name of Allah, saying that there was truth between Saracen and Frank. But you mocked them, telling them to seek aid from Mahomet, in whom they trusted. Then for the second time I swore to kill you. Yet I give you one more chance. Will you subscribe the faith of Islam? Or will you die?"

Now the lips of Reginald turned pale, and for a moment he swayed upon his seat. Then his courage came back to him, and he answered in a strong voice: "I will have none of your mercy at such a price, nor do I bow the knee to your dog of a false prophet, who perish in the faith of Christ, and weary of the world, am content to go to Him."

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Very skillfully Mesrouc covered it with a fold of his robe, and under shelter of the fold slipped down his hand and grasped it, not knowing that although she seemed to be turned away, Masouda was watching him out of the corner of her eye. Waiting till the brethren reached the tent door, she called out: "Sir Wulf, are you already weary of the enchanted Star of Fortune, or would you bequeath it to us?"

Now Wulf came back, saying heavily: "I forgot the thing—where would not at such a time? Where is it? I left it on the cushion."

"Try then hand of Mesrouc," said Masouda, "whereat with a very crooked smile the emir produced it, and said: "I wished to show you, Sir Knight."

that you must be careful with such gems as these, especially in a camp, where there are many dishonest persons. "If thank you," answered Wulf as he took it; "you have shown me." Then, followed by the sound of Masouda's mocking laughter, they left the tent.

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