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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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henceforth and forever, O woman with a royal heart. Wait for me, Masouda, wherever you may dwell."

While the whispered words left his lips, it seemed to Godwin that once more, as when he rode with Wulf from Acadon, the strange wind blew about his brow, bringing with it the presence of Masouda, and that once more the unearthly peace sank into his soul.

Then all was past and over, and he turned to see the old imaum standing at his side.

"Did I not tell you that you would find her sleeping?" he said, with his bitter, chuckling laugh. "Call on her, Sir Knight; call on her! Love, they say, can bridge great gulfs—even that between severed neck and bosom."

With the silver lamp in his hand Godwin smote, and the man went down like a felled ox, leaving him once more in silence and in darkness.

For a moment Godwin stood thus, till his brain was filled with fire, and he too fell—fell across the corpse of Masouda, and there lay still.

CHAPTER XXII.

Godwin knew that he lay sick, but save that Masouda seemed to tend him in his sickness he knew no more, for all the past had gone from him. There she was always, clad in a white robe, and looking at him with eyes full of ineffable calm and love, and he noted that round her neck ran a thin, red line, and wondered how it came there.

He knew also that he traveled while he was ill, for at dawn he would hear the camp break up with a mighty noise, and feel his litter lifted by slaves who bore him along for hours across the burning sand, till at length the evening came, and with a humming sound, like the sound of hiving bees, the great army set its bivouac. Then came the night and the pale moon floating like a boat upon the azure sea above, and everywhere the bright, eternal stars, to which went up the constant cry of "Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! God is the greatest, there is none but He."

"It is a false god," he would say. "Tell them to cry upon the Saviour of the World."

Then the voice of Masouda would seem to answer:

"Judge not. No god whom men worship with a pure and single heart is wholly false. Many be the ladders that lead to heaven. Judge not, you Christian knight."

At length that journey was done, and there arose new noises as of the roar of battle. Orders were given and men marched out in thousands; then rose that roar, and they marched back again, mourning their dead.

At last came a day when, opening his eyes, Godwin turned to rest them on Masouda, and lo! she was gone, and in her accustomed place there sat a man whom he knew well—Egbert, once bishop of Nazareth, who gave him to drink of sherbet cooled with snow. Yes, the Woman had departed and the Priest was there.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"Outside the walls of Jerusalem, my son, a prisoner in the camp of Saladin," was the answer.

"And where is Masouda, who has sat by me all these days?"

"In heaven, as I trust," came the gentle answer, "for she was a brave lady. It is I who have sat by you."

"Nay," said Godwin obstinately, "it was Masouda."

"If so," answered the bishop again, "it was her spirit, for I shrove her and have prayed over her open grave—her spirit, which came to visit you from heaven, and has gone back to heaven now that you are of the earth again."

Then Godwin remembered the truth, and groaning, fell asleep. Afterwards, as he grew stronger, Egbert told him all the story. He learned that when he was found lying senseless on the body of Masouda the emirs wished Saladin to kill him, if for no other reason because he had dashed out the eye of the holy imaum with a lamp. But the Sultan, who had discovered the truth, would not, for he said that it was unworthy of the imaum to have mocked her, and that Sir Godwin had dealt with him as he deserved. Also, that this Frank was one of the bravest of knights, who had returned to bear the punishment of a sin which he did not commit, and that, although he was a Christian, he loved him as a friend.

So the imaum lost both his eye and his vengeance.

Thus it had come about that the bishop Egbert was ordered to nurse him, and, if possible to save his life; and when at last they marched upon Jerusalem, soldiers were told off to bear his litter, and a good tent was set apart to cover him. Now the siege of the holy city had begun, and there was much slaughter on both sides.

"Will it fall?" asked Godwin.

"I fear so, unless the saints help them," answered Egbert. "Alas! I fear so."

"Will not Saladin be merciful?"

"Why should he be merciful, my son, since they have refused his terms and defied him? Nay, he has sworn that as Godfrey took the place nigh upon a hundred years ago and slaughtered the Mussulmen who dwelt there by thousands, men, women, and children together, so will he do to the Christians. Oh! why should he spare them? They must die! They must die!" and wringing his hands Egbert left the tent.

Godwin lay still, wondering what the answer to this riddle might be. He could think of one, and one only. In Jerusalem was Rosamund, the Sultan's niece, whom he must desire to recapture, above all things, not only because she was of his blood, but since he feared that if he did not do so his vision concerning her would come to nothing.

Now what was this vision? That through Rosamund much slaughter should be spared. Well, if Jerusalem were saved, would not tens of thousands of Moslem and Christian lives be saved also? Oh! surely here was the answer, and some angel had put it into his heart, and now he prayed for strength to plant it in the heart of Saladin, for strength and opportunity.

This very day Godwin found the opportunity. As he lay dozing in his tent that evening, being still too weak to rise, a shadow fell upon him, and opening his eyes he saw the Sultan himself standing alone by his bedside. Now he strove to rise to salute him, but in a kind voice Saladin bade him lie still, and seating himself, began to talk.

"Sir Godwin," he said, "I am come to ask your pardon. When I sent you to visit that dead woman, who had suffered justly for her crime, I did an act unworthy of a king. But my heart was bitter against her and you, and the imaum, he whom you smote, put into my mind the trick that cost him his eye and almost cost a worn-out and sorrowful man his life. I have spoken."

"I thank you, sire, who were always noble," answered Godwin.

"You say so. Yet I have done things to you and yours that you can scarcely hold as noble," said Saladin. "I stole your cousin from her home, as her mother had been stolen from mine, paying back ill with ill, which is against the law, and in his own hall my servants slew her father and your uncle, who was once my friend. Well, these things I did because a fate drove me on— the fate of a dream, the fate of a dream. Say, Sir Godwin, is that story which they tell in the camps true, that a vision came to you before the battle of Hatin, and that you warned the leaders of the Franks not to advance against me?"

"Yes, it is true," answered Godwin, and he told the vision, and of how he had sworn to it on the Rood.

"And what did they say to you?"

"They laughed at me, and hinted that I was a sorcerer, or a traitor in your pay, or both."

"Blind fools, who would not hear the truth when it was sent to them by the pure mouth of a prophet," muttered Saladin. "Well, they paid the price, and I and my faith are the gainers. Do you wonder, then, Sir Godwin, that I also believe my vision which came to me thrice in the night season, bringing with it the picture of the very face of my niece, the princess of Baalbec?"

"I do not wonder," answered Godwin.

"Do you wonder also that I was mad with rage when I learned that at last yonder brave dead woman had outwitted me and all my spies and guards, and this after I had spared your lives? Do you wonder that I am still so wroth, believing as I do that a great occasion has been taken from me?"

"I do not wonder. But, Sultan, I who have seen a vision speak to you who also have seen a vision—a prophet to a prophet. And I tell you that the occasion has not been taken—it has been brought, yes, to your very door, and that all these things have happened that it might thus be brought."

"Say on," said Saladin, gazing at him earnestly.

"See now, O Salah-ed-din, the princess Rosamund is in Jerusalem. She has been led to Jerusalem that you may spare it for her sake, and thus make an end of bloodshed and save the lives of folk uncounted."

"Never!" said the Sultan, springing up. "They have rejected my mercy, and I have sworn to sweep them away, man, woman, and child, and be avenged upon all their unclean and faithless race."

"Is Rosamund unclean that you would be avenged upon her? Will her dead body bring you peace? If Jerusalem is put to the sword, she must perish also."

"I will give orders that she is to be saved—that she may be judged for her crime by me," he added grimly.

"How can she be saved when the stormers are drunk with slaughter, and she but one disguised woman among ten thousand others?"

"Then," he answered, stamping his foot, "she shall be brought or dragged out of Jerusalem before the slaughter begins."

"That, I think, will not happen while Wulf is there to protect her," said Godwin quietly.

"Yet I say that it must be so—it shall be so."

Then, without more words, Saladin left the tent with a troubled brow.

Within Jerusalem all was misery, all was despair. There were crowded thousands and tens of thousands of fugitives, women and children, many of them, whose husbands and fathers had been slain at Hattin or elsewhere. The fighting men who were left had few commanders, and thus it came about that soon Wulf found himself the captain of very many of them.

First Saladin attacked from the west between the gates of Sts. Stephen and of David, but here stood strong fortresses called the Castle of the Pisans and the Tower of Tancred, whence the defenders made sallies upon him, driving back his stormers. So he determined to change his ground, and moved his army to the east, camping it near the valley of the Kedron. When they saw the tents being struck the Christians thought that he was abandoning the siege, and gave thanks to God in all their churches; but lo! next morning the white array of these appeared again on the east, and they knew that their doom was sealed.

There were in the city many who desired to surrender to the Sultan, and fierce grew the debates between them and those who swore that they would rather die. At length it was agreed that an embassy should be sent. So it came under safe conduct, and was received by Saladin in presence of his emirs and counsellors. He asked them what was their wish, and they replied that they had come to discuss terms. Then he answered thus:

"In Jerusalem is a certain lady, my niece, known among us as the princess of Baalbec, and among the Christians as Rosamund D'Arcy, who escaped thither a while ago in the company of the knight, Sir Wulf D'Arcy, whom I have seen fighting bravely among your warriors. Let her be surrendered to me that I may deal with her as she deserves, and we will talk again. Till then I have no more to say."

Now most of the embassy knew nothing of this lady, but one or two said they thought that they had heard of her, but had no knowledge of where she was hidden.

"Then return and search her out," said Saladin, and so dismissed them.

Back came the envoys to the council and told what Saladin had said.

"At least," exclaimed Heraclius the Patriarch, "in this matter it is easy to satisfy the Sultan. Let his niece be found and delivered to him. Where is she?"

Now one declared that was known by the knight, Sir Wulf D'Arcy, with whom she had entered the city. So he was sent for, and came with armour rent and red sword in hand, for he had just beaten back an attack upon the barbican, and asked what was their pleasure.

"We desire to know, Sir Wulf, said the patriarch, "where you have hidden away the lady known as the princess of Baalbec, whom you stole from the Sultan?"

"What is that to your Holiness?" asked Wulf shortly.

"A great deal, to me and to all, seeing that Saladin will not even treat with us until she is delivered to him."

Standing before the altar he lifted his great blade.

"Does this council, then, propose to hand over a Christian lady to the Saracens against her will?" asked Wulf sternly.

"We must," answered Heraclius. "Moreover, she belongs to them."

"She does not belong," answered Wulf. "She was kidnapped by Saladin in England, and ever since has striven to escape from him."

"Waste not our time," exclaimed the patriarch impatiently. "We understand that you are this woman's lover, but however that may be, Saladin demands her, and to Saladin she must go. So tell us where she is without more ado, Sir Wulf."

"Discover that for yourself, Sir Patriarch," replied Wulf in fury. "Or, if you cannot, send one of your own women in her place."

Now there was a murmur in the council, but of wonder at his boldness rather than of indignation, for this patriarch was a very evil liver.

"I care not if I speak the truth," went on Wulf, "for it is known to all. Moreover, I tell this man that it is well for him that he is a priest, however shameful, for otherwise I would cleave his head in two who has dared to call the lady Rosamund my lover." Then, still shaking with wrath, the great knight turned and stalked from the council chamber.

"A dangerous man," said Heraclius, who was white to the lips; "a very dangerous man. I propose that he should be imprisoned."

"Ay," answered the lord Balian of Ibelin, who was in supreme command of the city, "a very dangerous man—to his foes, as I can testify. I saw him and his brother charge through the hosts of the Saracens at the battle of Hattin, and I have seen him in the breach upon the wall. Would that we had more such dangerous men just now!"

"But he has insulted me," shouted the patriarch, "me and my holy office."

"The truth should be no insult," answered Balian with meaning. "At least, it is a private matter between you and him on account of which we cannot spare one of our few captains. Now as regards this lady, I like not the business—"

As he spoke a messenger entered the room and said that the hiding-place of Rosamund had been discovered. She had been admitted a novice into the community of the Virgins of the Holy Cross, who had their house by the arch on the Via Dolorosa.

"Now I like it still less," Balian went on, "for to touch her would be sacrilege."

"His Holiness, Heraclius, will give us absolution," said a mocking voice.

Then another leader rose—he was one of the party who desired peace—and pointed out that this was no time to stand on scruples, for the Sultan would not listen to them in their sore plight unless the lady were delivered to him to be judged for her offence. Perhaps, being his own niece, she would, in fact, suffer no harm at his hands, and whether this were so or not, it was better that one should endure wrong, or even death, than many.

With such words he over-persuaded the most of them, so that in the end they rose and went to the convent of the Holy Cross, where the patriarch demanded admission for them, which, indeed, could not be refused. The stately abbess received them in the refectory, and asked their pleasure.

"Daughter," said the patriarch, "you have in your keeping a lady named Rosamund D'Arcy, with whom we desire to speak. Where is she?"

"The novice Rosamund," answered the abbess, "prays by the holy altar in the chapel."

Now one murmured, "She has taken sanctuary," but the patriarch said:

"Tell us, daughter, does she pray alone?"

"A knight guards her prayers," was the answer.

"Ah! as I thought, he has been beforehand with us. Also, daughter, surely your discipline is somewhat lax if you suffer knights thus to invade your chapel. But lead us thither."

"The dangers of the times and of the lady must answer for it," the abbess replied boldly, as she obeyed.

Presently they were in the great, dim place, where the lamps burned day and night. There by the altar, built, it was said, upon the spot where the Lord stood to receive judgment, they saw a kneeling woman, who, clad in the robe of a novice, grasped the stonework with her hands. Without the rails, also kneeling, was the knight Wulf, still as a statue on a sepulchre. Hearing them, he rose, turned him about, and drew his great sword.

"Sheathe that sword," commanded Heraclius.

"When I became a knight," answered Wulf. "I swore to defend the innocent from harm and the altars of God from sacrilege at the hands of wicked men. Therefore I sheathe not my sword."

"Take no heed of him," said one; and Heraclius, standing back in the aisle, addressed Rosamuhd:

"Daughter," he cried, "with bitter grief we are come to ask of you a sacrifice, that you should give yourself for the people, as our Master gave Himself for the people. Saladin demands you as a fugitive of his blood, and until you are delivered to him he will not treat with us for the saving of the city. Come forth, then, we pray you."

Now Rosamund rose and faced them, with her hand resting upon the altar.

"I risked my life and I believe another gave her life," she said, "that I might escape from the power of the Moslems. I will not come forth to return to them."

"Then, our need being sore, we must take you," answered Heraclius sullenly.

"What!" she cried. "You, the patriarch of this sacred city, would tear me from the sanctuary of its holiest altar? Oh! then, indeed shall the curse fall upon it and you. Hence, they say, our sweet Lord was haled to sacrifice by the command of an unjust judge, and thereafter Jerusalem was taken by the sword. Must I too be dragged from the spot that His feet have hallowed, and even in these weeds"—and she pointed to her white robe—"thrown as an offering to your foes, who mayhap will bid me choose between death and the Koran? If so, I say assuredly that offering will be made in vain, and assuredly your streets shall run red with the blood of those who tore me from my sanctuary."

Now they consulted together, some taking one side and some the other, but the most of them declared that she must be given up to Saladin.

"Come of your own will, I pray you," said the patriarch, "since we would not take you by force."

"By force only will you take me," answered Rosamund.

Then the abbess spoke.

"Sirs, will you commit so great a crime? Then I tell you that it cannot go without its punishment. With this lady I say"—and she drew up her tall shape—"that it shall be paid for in your blood, and mayhap in the blood of all of us. Remember my words when the Saracens have won the city, and are putting its children to the sword."

"I absolve you from the sin," shouted the patriarch, "if sin it is."

"Absolve yourself," broke in Wulf sternly, "and know this. I am but one man, but I have some strength and skill. If you seek but to lay a hand upon the novice Rosamund to hale her away to be slain by Saladin, as he has sworn that he would do should she dare to fly from him, before I die there are those among you who have looked the last upon the light."

Then, standing there before the altar rails, he lifted his great blade and settled the skull-blazoned shield upon his arm.

Now the patriarch raved and stormed, and one among them cried that they would fetch bows and shoot Wulf down from a distance.

"And thus," broke in Rosamund, "add murder to sacrilege! Oh! sirs, bethink what you do—ay, and remember this, that you do it all it vain. Saladin has promised you nothing, except that if you deliver me to him, he will talk with you, and then you may find that you have sinned for nothing. Have pity on me and go your ways, leaving the issue in the hand of God."

"That is true," cried some. "Saladin made no promises."

Now Balian, the guardian of the city, who had followed them to the chapel and standing in the background heard what passed there, stepped forward and said:

"My lord Patriarch, I pray you let this thing be, since from such a crime no good could come to us or any. That altar is the holiest and most noted place of sanctuary in all Jerusalem. Will you dare to tear a maiden from it whose only sin is that she, a Christian, has escaped the Saracens by whom she was stolen? Do you dare to give her back to them and death, for such will be her doom at the hands of Saladin. Surely that would be the act of cowards, and bring upon us the fate of cowards. Sir Wulf, put up your sword and fear nothing. If there is any safety in Jerusalem, your lady is safe. Abbess, lead her to her cell."

"Nay," answered the abbess with fine sarcasm, "it is not fitting that we should leave this place before his Holiness."

"Then you have not long to wait," shouted the patriarch in fury. "Is this a time for scruples about altars? Is this a time to listen to the prayers of a girl or to threats of a single knight, or the doubts of a superstitious captain? Well, take your way and let your lives pay its cost. Yet I say that if Saladin asked for half the noble maidens in the city, it would be cheap to let him have them in payment for the blood of eighty thousand folk," and he stalked towards the door.

So they went away, all except Wulf, who stayed to make sure that they were gone, and the abbess, who came to Rosamund and embraced her, saying that for the while the danger was past, and she might rest quiet.

"Yes, mother," answered Rosamund with a sob, "but oh! have I done right? Should I not have surrendered myself to the wrath of Saladin if the lives of so many hang upon it? Perhaps, after all, he would forget his oath and spare my life, though at best I should never be suffered to escape again while there is a castle in Baalbec or a guarded harem in Damascus. Moreover, it is hard to bid farewell to all one loves forever," and she glanced towards Wulf, who stood out of hearing.

"Yes," answered the abbess, "it is hard, as we nuns know well, But, daughter, that sore choice has not yet been thrust upon you. When Saladin says that he sets you against the lives of all this cityful, then you must decide."

"Ay," repeated Rosamund, "then I—must judge."

The siege went on; from terror to terror it went on. The mangonels hurled their stones unceasingly, the arrows flew in clouds so that none could stand upon the walls. Thousands of the cavalry of Saladin hovered round St. Stephen's Gate, while the engines poured fire and bolts upon the doomed town, and the Saracen miners worked their way beneath the barbican and the wall. The soldiers within could not sally because of the multitude of the watching horsemen; they could not show themselves, since he who did so was at once destroyed by a thousand darts, and they could not build up the breaches of the crumbling wall. As day was added to day, the despair grew ever deeper. In every street might be met long processions of monks bearing crosses and chanting penitential psalms and prayers, while in the house-doors women wailed to Christ for mercy, and held to their breasts the children which must soon be given to death, or torn from them to deck some Mussulman harem.

The commander Balian called the knights together in council, and showed them that Jerusalem was doomed.

"Then," said one of the leaders, "let us sally out and die fighting in the midst of foes."

"Ay," added Heraclius, "and leave our children and our women to death and dishonor. Then that surrender is better, since there is no hope of succour."

"Nay, answered Balian, "we will not surrender. While God lives, there is hope."

"He lived on the day of Hattin, and suffered it," said Heraclius; and the council broke up, having decided nothing.

To be continued.

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