The Brethren

By RIDER HAGGARD,
...or of "She," "King Solomon's Mines," Etc.

...yright, 1903-1904, by Rider Haggard

(Continued from Last Week)

...there was silence for a little while from beneath his bushy ...ws the old knight watched their ...on which the light of the tapers ...hen Godwin spoke:

...thank you, cousin. Come, Wulf, ...ve our answer; let us be going."

...all of it," broke in Rosamond ...

...ten," she said, "for if it pleases ...am willing to make a promise ...my father has approved. Come ...this time two years, and if we all ...ive, should both of you still wish ...wife, that there may be no fur...pace of pain or waiting, I will ...the man whom I shall choose and ...him at once."

...d if one of us is dead?" asked ...in.

...n," replied Rosamund, "if his ...be untarnished and he has done ...ed that is not knightly I will ...with wed the other."

...rdon me"— broke in Wulf.

...held up her hand and stopped ...aying:

...u think this a strange saying, and ...rhaps it is, but the matter is ...trange, and for me the case is ... Remember, all my life is at ... and I may desire more time ...in to make my choice, that be ...two such men no maiden would ...asy. We are all of us still young ...arriage, for which, if God guards ...ives, there will be time and to ... Also in two years I may learn ...of you is in truth the worthier ...t, who today both seem so ...y."

...en is neither of us more to you ...the other?" asked Wulf outright.

...amund turned red, and her bosom ...d as she replied:

...will not answer that question."

...d Wulf should not have asked ...aid Godwin. "Brother, I read ...mund's saying thus: Between us ...nds not much to choose, or if she ...in her secret heart out of her ...ess—since she is determined not ...arry for awhile—she will not suf...s to see it and thereby bring grief ...e of us. For my part I find this ...ment wise and just, and I am con... to abide its issue."

...ell spoken," said Sir Andrew. ...you, Wulf?"

...n Wulf, feeling that Rosamund ...watching his face beneath the ...ow of her long eyelashes, answer...

...efore heaven, I am content also, ...whatever may be said against it, ...at least there will be two years ...ar in which one or both of us well ...fall, and for that while at least ...woman can come between our ...herhood. Uncle, I crave your leave ...serve my liege in Normandy."

...nd I also," said Godwin.

...the spring, in the spring," re... Sir Andrew hastily, "when King ...ry moves his power. Meanwhile ...you here in all good fellowship. ...good or ill the matter is now set... for two years to come, by which ...it is likely I shall be in my grave ...beyond all troubling.

...do not say that things have gone ...gether as I could have wished, but ...are as Rosamund wishes, and that ...ough for me. On which of you she ...s with the more favor I do not ..., and be you content to remain in ...rance of what a father does not ...k it wise to seek to learn. Now ...have done with all this business. ...mund, dismiss your knights, and ...ou all three brothers and sister ...more till this time two years, ...those who live will find an an... to the riddle."

...Rosamund came forward and ...out a word gave her right hand to ...win and her left to Wulf and suf...d that they should press their lips ...them. So for awhile this was the ...of their asking of her in marriage. ...they descended the steps their ...fell upon the figure of a tall man ...in a pilgrim's cape, hood and low ...wned hat, of which the front was ...upward and laced, who carried in ...hand a palmer's staff and about his ...t the scrip and water bottle.

...What do you seek, holy palmer?" ...d Godwin, coming toward him, "a ...t's lodging in my uncle's house?"

...e man bowed; then, fixing on him ...air of beadlike brown eyes, which ...nded Godwin of some he had seen, ...new not when or where, answered ...he humble voice affected by his ...s:

...Even so, most noble knight—shelter ...man and beast, for my mule is held ...out; also a word with the lord, Sir ...rew D'Arcy, for whom I have a ...sage."

...mule?" said Wulf. "I thought ...palmers always went afoot?"

...rue, Sir Knight, but, as it chances, I have baggage. Nay, not my own, whose earthly gear is all upon my back, but a chest, that contains I know not what, which I am charged to deliver to Sir Andrew D'Arcy, the owner of this hall, or should he be dead then to the Lady Rosamund, his daughter."

"We will help you," said Godwin. And they went with him into the courtyard, where by the scant light of the stars they saw a fine mule in charge of one of the serving men and bound upon its back a long shaped package sewed over with sacking. This the palmer unloosed, and, taking one end, while Wulf, after bidding the man stable the mule, took the other, they bore it into the hall, Godwin going before them to summon his uncle. Presently he came, and the palmer bowed to him.

"What is your name, palmer, and whence is this box?" asked the old knight, looking at him keenly.

"My name, Sir Andrew, is Nicholas of Salisbury, and as to who sent me, with your leave, I will whisper in your ear." And, leaning forward, he did so.

Sir Andrew heard and staggered back as though a dart had pierced him.

"What?" he said. "Are you, a holy palmer, the messenger of"— and he stopped suddenly.

"I was his prisoner," answered the man, "and he, who at least ever keeps his word, gave me my life, for I had been condemned to die, at the price that I brought this to you and took back your answer or hers, which I have sworn to do."

"Answer? To what?"

"Nay, I know nothing save that there is a writing in the chest. Its purport I am not told, who am but a messenger bound by oath to do certain things. Open the chest, lord, and meanwhile if you have food I have traveled far and fast."

Sir Andrew went to a door and called to his manservants, whom he bade give meat to the palmer and stay with him while he ate. Then he told Godwin and Wulf to lift the box and bring it to the solar and with it hammer and chisel in case they should be needed, which they did, setting it upon the oaken table.

"Open," said Sir Andrew. So they ripped off the canvas, two folds of it, revealing within a box of dark, foreign looking wood bound with iron bands, at which they labored long before they could break them. At length it was done, and there within was another box beautifully made of polished ebony and sealed at the front and ends with a strange device. This box had a lock of silver, to which was tied a silver key.

"At least it has not been tampered with," said Wulf, examining the unbroken seals, but Sir Andrew only repeated:

"Open, and be swift. Here, Godwin, take the key, for my hand shakes with cold."

The lock turned easily, and the seals being broken the lid rose upon its hinges, while, as it did so, a scent of precious odors filled the place. Beneath, covering the contents of the chest, was an oblong piece of worked silk and lying on it a parchment.

Sir Andrew broke the thread and seal and unrolled the parchment. Within it was written over in strange characters. Also, there was a second unsealed roll written in a clerkly hand in Norman French and headed, "Translation of this letter in case the knight, Sir Andrew D'Arcy, has forgotten the Arabic tongue or that his daughter, the Lady Rosamund, has not yet learned the same."

Sir Andrew glanced at both headings, then said:

"Nay, I have not forgotten Arabic, who, while my lady lived, spoke little else with her, and who taught it to our daughter. But the light is bad, and, Godwin, you are scholarly; read me the French. We can compare them afterward."

At this moment Rosamund entered the solar from her chamber and, seeing the three of them so strangely employed, said:

"Is it your will that I go, father?"

"No, daughter. Since you are here, stay here. I think that this matter concerns you as well as me. Read on, Godwin."

So Godwin read:

In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate, I, Salah-ed-din Yusuf ibn Ayoub, commander of the faithful, cause these words to be written and seal them with my own hand, to the Frankish lord, Sir Andrew D'Arcy, husband of my sister by another mother, Sitt Zobeide, the beautiful and faithless, on whom Allah has taken vengeance for her sin. Or, if he be dead also, then to his daughter and hers, my niece, and by blood a princess of Syria and Egypt, who among the English is named the Lady Rose of the World.

You, Sir Andrew, will remember how, many years ago, while we were friends, you by an evil chance became acquainted with my sister Zobeide while you were a prisoner and sick in my father's house—how, too, Satan put it into her heart to listen to your words of love, so that she became a cross worshiper and was married to you after the Frankish custom and fled with you to England. Within six years of that time sure news reached me that Allah had taken her, therefore I mourned for my sister and her fate awhile and forgot her and you.

Know that a certain knight named Lozelle, who dwelt in the part of England where you have your castle, has told me that Zobeide left a daughter, who is very beautiful. Now my heart, which loved her mother, goes out toward this niece whom I have never seen, for although she is your child and a cross worshiper at least—save in the matter of her mother's theft—you were a brave and noble knight, of good blood, as, indeed, I remember your brother was also, he who fell in the fight at Harenc.

Learn now that, having by the will of Allah come to great estate here at Damascus and throughout the east, I desire to lift your daughter up to be a princess of my house. Therefore I invite her to journey to Damascus, and you with her, if you live. Moreover, lest you should fear some trap, on behalf of myself, my successors and councilors, I promise in the name of God and by the word of Salah-ed-din, which never yet was broken, that, although I trust the merciful God may change her heart so that she enters it of her own will, I will not force her to accept the faith or to bind herself in any marriage which she does not desire. Nor will I take vengeance upon you, Sir Andrew, for what you have done in the past, or suffer others to do so, but will rather raise you to great honor and live with you in friendship as of yore.

But if my messenger returns and tells me that my niece refuses this, my loving offer, then I warn her that my arm is long, and I will surely take her as I can.

Therefore within a year of the day that I receive the answer of the lady, my niece, who is named Rose of the World, my emissaries will appear wherever she may be, married or single, to lead her to me, with honor if she be willing, but still to lead her to me if she be unwilling. Meanwhile, in token of my love, I send certain gifts of precious things and with them of my patent of her title as princess and Lady of the City of Baalbec, which title, with its revenue and prerogatives, is registered in the archives of my empire in favor of her and her lawful heirs and declared to be binding upon me and my successors forever.

The bearer of this letter and of my gifts is a certain cross worshiper named Nicholas, to whom let your answer be handed for delivery to me. This devoir he is under oath to perform and will perform it, for he knows that if he fails therein, then that he must die.

Signed by Salah-ed-din, commander of the faithful at Damascus, and sealed with his seal, in the spring season of the year of the Hegira 581.

Take note also that this writing having been read to me by my secretary before I set my name and seal thereunto, I perceive that you, Sir Andrew, or you, Lady Rose of the World, may think it strange that I should be at such pains and cost over a maid who is not of my religion and whom I never saw, and may therefore doubt my honesty in the matter. Know, then, the true reason. Since I heard that you, Lady Rose of the World, lived I have thrice been visited by a dream sent from God concerning you, and in it I saw your face.

Now this was the dream: That the oath I made as regards your mother is binding as regards you also; further, that in some way which is not revealed to me your presence here will withhold me from the shedding of a sea of blood and save the whole world much misery. Therefore it is decreed that you must come and bide in my house. That these things are so, Allah and His Prophet be my witnesses.

CHAPTER V.

GODWIN laid down the letter, and all of them stared at one another in amazement.

"Surely," said Wulf, "this is some fool's trick played off upon our uncle as an evil jest."

By way of answer Sir Andrew bade him lift the silk that hid the contents of the coffer and see what lay there. Wulf did so, and next moment threw back his head like a man whom some sudden light had blinded, as well he might, for from it came such a flare of gems as Essex had rarely seen before.

One by one they drew its treasures from the chest—coronet, necklace of pearls, breast ornaments of rubies, girdle of sapphires, jeweled anklets and with them veil, sandals, robes and other garments of gold embroidered purple silk. Moreover, among these, also sealed with the seals of Salah-ed-din, his viziers, officers of state and secretaries, was that patent of which the letter spoke, setting out the full titles of the Princess of Baalbec, the extent and boundaries of her great estates and the amount of her annual revenue, which seemed more money than they had ever heard of.

Sir Andrew looked up and said: "Girl, do you know what Saladin has made of you? Why, there are queens in Europe who would be glad to own that rank and those estates in the rich lands above Damascus. Say, will you go and queen it there?"

Rosamund gazed at the gleaming gems and the writings that made her royal, and her eyes flashed and her breast heaved. Thrice she looked while they watched her, then turned her head as from the bait of some great temptation and answered one word only—"Nay."

"Well spoken," said her father, who knew her blood and its longings. "At least, had the 'nay' been 'yea,' you must have gone alone. Give me ink and parchment, Godwin."

They were brought, and he wrote:

To the Sultan Saladin, from Andrew D'Arcy and his daughter Rosamund.

We have received your letter, and we answer that where we are there we will bide in such state as God has given us. As for your threats, we will do our best to bring them to nothing. Knowing the customs of the east, we do not send back your gifts to you, since to do so would be to offer insult to one of the greatest men in all the world, but if you choose to ask for them they are yours, not ours. Of your dream we say that it was but an empty vision of the night which a wise man should forget.

YOUR SERVANT AND YOUR NIECE.

Then he signed, and Rosamund signed after him, and the writing was done up, wrapped in silk and sealed.

"Now," said Sir Andrew, "hide away this wealth, since, were it known that we had such treasures in the place, every thief in England would be our visitor, some of them bearing high names, I think."

When everything was finished Sir Andrew said:

"Listen now, Rosamund, and you also, my nephews. I have never told you the true tale of how the sister of Saladin, who was known as Zobeide, daughter of Ayoub and afterward christened into our faith by the name of Mary, came to be my wife, yet you should learn it if only to show how evil returns upon a man. After the great Nur-ed-din took Damascus, Ayoub was made its governor; then some three and twenty years ago came the capture of Harenc, in which my brother fell. Here I was wounded and taken prisoner. They bore me to Damascus, where I was lodged in the palace of Ayoub and kindly treated. Here, too, it was, while I lay sick, that I made friends with the young Saladin and with his sister Zobeide, whom I met secretly in the gardens of the palace. The rest may be guessed. Although she numbered but half my years, she loved me as I loved her and for my sake offered to change her faith and fly with me to England if opportunity could be found, which was hard.

"Now, as it chanced, I had a friend, a dark and secret man named Jebal, the young sheik of a terrible people, whose cruel rites no Christian understands. They are the subjects of one Mohammed, in Persia, and live in castles at Masyaf, on Lebanon. This man had been in alliance with the Franks, and once in a battle I saved his life from the Saracens at the risk of my own, whereon he swore that did I summon him from the ends of the earth he would come to me if I needed help. Moreover, he gave me his signet ring as a token, and, by virtue of it, so he said, power in his dominions equal to his own, though these I never visited. You know it," and, holding up his hand, Sir Andrew showed them a heavy gold ring in which was set a black stone with red veins running across the stone in the exact shape of a dagger, and beneath the dagger words cut in unknown characters.

"So in my plight I bethought me of Jebal and found means to send him a letter sealed with his ring. Nor did he forget his promise, for within twelve days Zobeide and I were galloping for Beirut on two horses so swift that all the cavalry of Ayoub could not overtake them. We reached the city, and there were married, Rosamund. There, too, your mother was baptized a Christian. Thence, since it was not safe for us to stay in the east, we took ship and came safe home, bearing this ring of Jebal with us, for I would not give it up, as his servants demanded that I should do, except to him alone.

"That is the story. Since then Saladin, who in those days was but a noble youth, has become the greatest sultan that the east has ever known, and,

She answered one word only—"Nay."

having been told of you, Rosamund, by that traitor Lozelle, he seeks to take you in your mother's place, and, daughter, I tell you that I fear him."

"At least we have a year or longer in which to prepare ourselves or to hide," said Rosamund. "His palmer must travel back to the east before my uncle Saladin can have our answer."

"Aye," said Sir Andrew, "perhaps we have a year."

"What of the attack on the way?" asked Godwin, who had been thinking. "The knight Lozelle was named there. Yet if Saladin had to do with it, it seems strange that the blow should have come before the word."

Sir Andrew brooded awhile, then said:

"Bring in this palmer. I will question him."

So the man Nicholas, who was found still eating as though his hunger would never be satisfied, was brought in by Wulf. He bowed low before the old knight and Rosamund, studying them the while with his sharp eyes, and the roof and the floor and every other detail of the chamber, for those eyes of his seemed to miss nothing.

"You have brought me a letter from far away, Sir Palmer, who are named Nicholas," said Sir Andrew. "I find it strange that one in your holy garb should be chosen as the messenger of Saladin, with whom Christian men have little to do."

"But Saladin has much to do with Christian men, Sir Andrew. Thus he takes them prisoner even in times of peace, as he did me."

"Did he, then, take the knight Lozelle prisoner?"

"The knight Lozelle?" repeated the palmer. "Was he a big, red faced man, with a scar upon his forehead, who always wore a black cloak over his mail?"

"That might be he."

"Then he was not taken prisoner, but he came to visit the sultan at Damascus while I lay in bonds there. Afterward he left, and at Jaffa I heard that he had sailed for Europe three months before I did."

Now the brethren look at each other. So Lozelle *was* in England. But Sir Andrew made no comment, only he said:

"Tell me your story, and be careful that you speak the truth."

"Why should I not, who have nothing to hide?" answered Nicholas. "I was captured by some Arabs as I journeyed to the Jordan upon a pilgrimage, who, when they found that I had no goods to be robbed of, would have killed me. This, indeed, they were about to do, had not some of Saladin's soldiers come by and commanded them to hold their hands and give me over to them. They did so, and the soldiers took me to Damascus. There I was imprisoned, but not close, and then it was that I saw Lozelle, or, at least, a Christian man who had some such name, and, as he seemed to be in favor with the Saracens, I begged him to intercede for me. Afterward I was brought before the court of Saladin, and, having questioned me, the sultan himself told me that I must either worship the false prophet or die, to which you can guess my answer.

"Three days later Saladin sent for me again and offered to spare my life if I would swear an oath, which oath was that I should take a certain package and deliver it to you or to your daughter named the Lady Rosamund, here at your hall of Steeple, in Essex, and bring back the answer to Damascus. Not wishing to die, I said that I would do this if the sultan passed his word, which he never breaks, that I should be set free afterward."

"And, now you are safe in England, do you purpose to return to Damascus with the answer, and, if so, why?"

"For two reasons, Sir Andrew. First, because I have sworn to do so, and I do not break my word any more than does Saladin. Secondly, because I continue to wish to live, and the sultan promised me that if I failed in my mission he would bring about my death wherever I might be, which I am sure he has the power to do by magic or otherwise."

"And how will you return?"

The palmer shrugged his shoulders.

"As best I may and as quickly. Is your answer ready, Sir Andrew?"

"Yes; it is here." And he handed him the roll, which Nicholas hid away in the folds of his great cloak. Then Sir Andrew added, "You say you know nothing of all the business in which you play this part?"

"Nothing, or, rather, only this: The officer who escorted me to Jaffa told me that there was a stir among the learned doctors and diviners at the court because of a certain dream which the sultan had dreamed three times. It had to do with a lady who was half of the blood of Ayoub and half English, and they said that my mission was mixed up with this matter. Now, I have eaten well, and I am weary. Is there any place where I may sleep? I must be gone at daybreak, for those who do Saladin's business dare not tarry, and I have your letter."

"There is a place," answered Sir Andrew. "Wulf, take him to it, and tomorrow before he leaves we will speak again. Till then farewell, holy Nicholas."

With one more searching glance the palmer bowed and went. When the door closed behind him Sir Andrew beckoned Godwin to him and whispered:

"Tomorrow, Godwin, you must take some men and follow this Nicholas to see where he goes and what he does, for I tell you I do not trust him—aye, I fear him much! These embassies to and from Saracens are strange traffic for a Christian man; also, though he says his life hangs on it, I think that were he honest, once safe in England here he would stop, since the first priest would absolve him of an oath forced from him by the infidel."

(To be Continued)

Encouraging.

He (just accepted)—You say you were never engaged before? She—Yes. He—How is that? I thought all women always had three or four engagements. She (guilelessly)—Well, I presume I shall too. You see, this is the first chance I have had.

Consult your own interests by voting for W. H. Hooker for representative of DeSoto county. He will protect your county in all matters that come before the State Legislature.