

Chapter Nine: The Horses Flame and Smoke

On the following morning, when they came into the eating-room of the inn, Godwin and Wulf found they were no longer alone in the house, for sundry other guests sat there partaking of their morning meal. Among them were a grave merchant of Damascus, another from Alexandria in Egypt, a man who seemed to be an Arab chief, a Jew of Jerusalem, and none other than the English trader Thomas of Ipswich, their fellow-passenger, who greeted them warmly.

Truly they seemed a strange and motley set of men. Considering them as the young and stately widow Masouda moved from one to the other, talking to each in turn while she attended to their wants, it came into Godwin's mind that they might be spies meeting there to gain or exchange information, or even to make report to their hostess, in whose pay perhaps they were. Still if so, of this they showed no sign. Indeed, for the most part they spoke in French, which all of them understood, on general matters, such as the heat of the weather, the price of transport animals or merchandise, and the cities whither they purposed to travel.

The trader Thomas, it appeared, had intended to start for Jerusalem that morning with his goods. But the riding mule he had bought proved to be lame from a prick in the hoof, nor were all his hired camels come down from the mountains, so that he must

wait a few days, or so he said.

Under these circumstances, he offered the brethren his company in their ramblings about the town. This they thought it wise not to refuse, although they felt little confidence in the man, believing that it was he who had found out their story and true names and revealed them to Masouda, either through talkativeness or with a purpose.

However these things might be, this Thomas proved of service to them, since, although he was but just landed, he seemed to know all that had passed in Syria since he left it, and all that was passing then. Thus he told them how Guy of Lusignan had just made himself king in Jerusalem on the death of the child Baldwin, and how Raymond of Tripoli refused to acknowledge him and was about to be besieged in Tiberias. How Saladin also was gathering a great host at Damascus to make war upon the Christians, and many other things, false and true.

In his company, then, and sometimes in that of the other guests--none of whom showed any curiosity concerning them, though whether this was from good manners or for other reasons they could not be sure--the brethren passed the hours profitably enough.

It was on the third morning of their stay that their hostess

Masouda, with whom as yet they had no further private talk, asked them if they had not said that they wished to buy horses. On their answering "Yes," she added that she had told a certain man to bring two for them to look at, which were now in the stable beyond the garden. Thither they went, accompanied by Masouda, to find a grave Arab, wrapped in a garment of camel's hair and carrying a spear in his hand, standing at the door of the cave which served the purpose of a stable, as is common in the East where the heat is so great. As they advanced towards him, Masouda said:

"If you like the horses, leave me to bargain, and seem to understand nothing of my talk."

The Arab, who took no notice of them, saluted Masouda, and said to her in Arabic:

"Is it then for Franks that I have been ordered to bring the two priceless ones?"

"What is that to you, my Uncle, Son of the Sand?" she asked. "Let them be led forth that I may know whether they are those for which I sent."

The man turned and called into the door of the cave.

"Flame, come hither!" As he spoke, there was a sound of hoofs, and through the low archway leapt the most beautiful horse that ever their eyes had seen. It was grey in colour, with flowing mane and tail, and on its forehead was a black star; not over tall, but with a barrel-like shape of great strength, small-headed, large-eyed; wide-nostriled, big-boned, but fine beneath the knee, and round-hoofed. Out it sprang snorting; then seeing its master, the Arab, checked itself and stood still by him as though it had been turned to stone.

"Come hither, Smoke," called the Arab again, and another horse appeared and ranged itself by the first. In size and shape it was the same, but the colour was coal-black and the star upon its forehead white. Also the eye was more fiery.

"These are the horses," said the Arab, Masouda translating. "They are twins, seven years old and never backed until they were rising six, cast at a birth by the swiftest mare in Syria, and of a pedigree that can be counted for a hundred years."

"Horses indeed!" said Wulf. "Horses indeed! But what is the price of them?"

Masouda repeated the question in Arabic, whereon the man replied in the same tongue with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"Be not foolish. You know this is no question of price, for they are beyond price. Say what you will."

"He says," said Masouda, "that it is a hundred gold pieces for the pair. Can you pay as much?"

The brethren looked at each other. The sum was large.

"Such horses have saved men's lives ere now," added Masouda, "and I do not think that I can ask him to take less, seeing that, did he but know it, in Jerusalem they could be sold for thrice as much. But if you wish, I could lend you money, since doubtless you have jewels or other articles of value you could give as security--that ring in your breast, for instance, Peter."

"We have the gold itself," answered Wulf, who would have paid to his last piece for those horses.

"They buy," said Masouda.

"They buy, but can they ride?" asked the Arab. "These horses are not for children or pilgrims. Unless they can ride well they shall not have them--no, not even if you ask it of me."

Godwin said that he thought so--at least, they would try. Then the Arab, leaving the horses standing there, went into the

stable, and with the help of two of the inn servants, brought out bridles and saddles unlike any they had seen. They were but thickly-quilted pads stretching far back upon the horses' loins, with strong hide girths strapped with wool and chased stirrups fashioned like half hoofs. The bits also were only snaffles without curbs.

When all was ready and the stirrups had been let down to the length they desired, the Arab motioned to them to mount. As they prepared to do so, however, he spoke some word, and suddenly those meek, quiet horses were turned into two devils, which reared up on their hind legs and threatened them with their teeth and their front hoofs, that were shod with thin plates of iron. Godwin stood wondering, but Wulf, who was angry at the trick, got behind the horses, and watching his chance, put his hands upon the flanks of the stallion named Smoke, and with one spring leapt into the saddle. Masouda smiled, and even the Arab muttered "Good," while Smoke, feeling himself backed, came to the ground again and became quiet as a sheep. Then the Arab spoke to the horse Flame, and Godwin was allowed to vault into the saddle also.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

Masouda said they would show them, and, accompanied by her and the Arab, they walked the horses until they were quite clear of

the town, to find themselves on a road that had the sea to the left, and to the right a stretch of flat land, some of it cultivated, above which rose the steep and stony sides of hills. Here on this road the brethren trotted and cantered the horses to and fro, till they began to be at home in their strange saddles who from childhood had ridden barebacked in the Essex marshes, and to learn what pressure on the bit was needed to check or turn them. When they came back to where the pair stood, Masouda said that if they were not afraid the seller wished to show them that the horses were both strong and swift.

"We fear no ride that he dares to take himself," answered Wulf angrily, whereon the Arab smiled grimly and said something in a low voice to Masouda. Then, placing his hand upon Smoke's flank, he leapt up behind Wulf, the horse never stirring.

"Say, Peter, are you minded to take a companion for this ride?" asked Masouda; and as she spoke a strange look came into her eyes, a wild look that was new to the brethren.

"Surely," answered Godwin, "but where is the companion?"

Her reply was to do as the Arab had done, and seating herself straddle-legged behind Godwin, to clasp him around the middle.

"Truly you look a pretty pilgrim now, brother," said Wulf,

laughing aloud, while even the grave Arab smiled and Godwin muttered between his teeth the old proverb "Woman on croup, devil on bow." But aloud he said, "I am indeed honoured; yet, friend Masouda, if harm should come of this, do not blame me."

"No harm will come--to you, friend Peter; and I have been so long cooped in an inn that I, who am desert-born, wish for a gallop on the mountains with a good horse beneath me and a brave knight in front. Listen, you brethren; you say you do not fear; then leave your bridles loose, and where'er we go and whate'er we meet seek not to check or turn the horses Flame and Smoke. Now, Son of the Sand, we will test these nags of which you sing so loud a song. Away, and let the ride be fast and far!"

"On your head be it then, daughter," answered the old Arab.

"Pray Allah that these Franks can sit a horse!"

Then his sombre eyes seemed to take fire, and gripping the encircling saddle girth, he uttered some word of command, at which the stallions threw up their heads and began to move at a long, swinging gallop towards the mountains a mile away. At first they went over cultivated land off which the crops had been already cut, taking two or three ditches and a low wall in their stride so smoothly that the brethren felt as though they were seated upon swallows. Then came a space of sandy sward, half a mile or more, where their pace quickened, after which they began

to breast the long slope of a hill, picking their way amongst its stones like cats.

Ever steeper it grew, till in places it was so sheer that Godwin must clutch the mane of Flame, and Masouda must cling close to Godwin's middle to save themselves from slipping off behind. Yet, notwithstanding the double weights they bore, those gallant steeds never seemed to falter or to tire. At one spot they plunged through a mountain stream. Godwin noted that not fifty yards to their right this stream fell over a little precipice cutting its way between cliffs which were full eighteen feet from bank to bank, and thought to himself that had they struck it lower down, that ride must have ended. Beyond the stream lay a hundred yards or so of level ground, and above it still steeper country, up which they pushed their way through bushes, till at length they came to the top of the mountain and saw the plain they had left lying two miles or more below them.

"These horses climb hills like goats," Wulf said; "but one thing is certain: we must lead them down."

Now on the top of the mountain was a stretch of land almost flat and stoneless, over which they cantered forward, gathering speed as the horses recovered their wind till the pace grew fast. Suddenly the stallions threw themselves on to their haunches and stopped, as well they might, for they were on the verge of a

chasm, at whose far foot a river brawled in foam. For a moment they stood; then, at some word from the Arab, wheeled round, and, bearing to the left, began to gallop back across the tableland, until they approached the edge of the mountainside, where the brethren thought that they would stop.

But Masouda cried to the Arab, and the Arab cried to the horses, and Wulf cried to Godwin in the English tongue, "Show no fear, brother. Where they go, we can go."

"Pray God that the girths may hold," answered Godwin, leaning back against the breast of Masouda behind him. As he spoke they began to descend the hill, slowly at first, afterwards faster and yet more fast, till they rushed downwards like a whirlwind.

How did those horses keep their footing? They never knew, and certainly none that were bred in England could have done so. Yet never falling, never stumbling even, on they sped, taking great rocks in their stride, till at length they reached the level piece of land above the stream, or rather above the cleft full eighteen feet in width at the foot of which that stream ran. Godwin saw and turned cold. Were these folk mad that they would put double-laden horses at such a jump? If they hung back, if they missed their stride, if they caught hoof or sprang short, swift death was their portion.

But the old Arab seated behind Wulf only shouted aloud, and Masouda only tightened her round arms about Godwin's middle and laughed in his ear. The horses heard the shout, and seeming to see what was before them, stretched out their long necks and rushed forward over the flat ground.

Now they were on the edge of the terrible place, and, like a man in a dream, Godwin noted the sharp, sheer lips of the cliff, the gulf between them, and the white foam of the stream a score of yards beneath. Then he felt the brave horse Flame gather itself together and next instant fly into the air like a bird.

Also--and was this dream indeed, or even as they sped over that horrible pit did he feel a woman's lips pressed upon his cheek? He was not sure. Who could have been at such a time, with death beneath them? Perchance it was the wind that kissed him, or a lock of her loose hair which struck across his face.

Indeed, at the moment he thought of other things than women's lips--those of the black and yawning gulf, for instance.

They swooped through the air, the white foam vanished, they were safe. No; the hind feet of Flame had missed their footing, they fell, they were lost. A struggle. How tight those arms clung about him. How close that face was pressed against his own. Lo! it was over. They were speeding down the hill, and alongside of the grey horse Flame raced the black horse Smoke. Wulf on its

back, with eyes that seemed to be starting from his head, was shouting, "A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy!" and behind him, turban gone, and white burnous floating like a pennon on the air, the grim-visaged Arab, who also shouted.

Swifter and yet swifter. Did ever horses gallop so fast? Swifter and yet swifter, till the air sang past them and the ground seemed to fly away beneath. The slope was done. They were on the flat; the flat was past, they were in the fields; the fields were left behind; and, behold! side by side, with hanging heads and panting flanks, the horses Smoke and Flame stood still upon the road, their sweating hides dyed red in the light of the sinking sun.

The grip loosened from about Godwin's middle. It had been close; on Masouda's round and naked arms were the prints of the steel shirt beneath his tunic, for she slipped to the ground and stood looking at them. Then she smiled one of her slow, thrilling smiles, gasped and said: "You ride well, pilgrim Peter, and pilgrim John rides well also, and these are good horses; and, oh! that ride was worth the riding, even though death had been its end. Son of the Sand, my Uncle, what say you?"

"That I grow old for such gallops--two on one horse, with nothing to win."

"Nothing to win?" said Masouda. "I am not so sure!" and she looked at Godwin. "Well, you have sold your horses to pilgrims who can ride, and they have proved them, and I have had a change from my cooking in the inn, to which I must now get me back again."

Wulf wiped the sweat from his brow, shook his head, and muttered:

"I always heard the East was full of madmen and devils; now I know that it is true."

But Godwin said nothing.

They led the horses back to the inn, where the brethren groomed them down under the direction of the Arab, that the gallant beasts might get used to them, which, after carrying them upon that fearful ride, they did readily enough. Then they fed them with chopped barley, ear and straw together, and gave them water to drink that had stood in the sun all day to warm, in which the Arab mixed flour and some white wine.

Next morning at the dawn they rose to see how Flame and Smoke fared after that journey. Entering the stable, they heard the sound of a man weeping, and hidden in the shadow, saw by the low light of the morning that it was the old Arab, who stood with his back to them, an arm around the neck of each horse, which he

kissed from time to time. Moreover, he talked aloud in his own tongue to them, calling them his children, and saying that rather would he sell his wife and his sister to the Franks.

"But," he added, "she has spoken--why, I know not--and I must obey. Well, at least they are gallant men and worthy of such steeds. Half I hoped that you and the three of us and my niece Masouda, the woman with the secret face and eyes that have looked on fear, might perish in the cleft of the stream; but it was not willed of Allah. So farewell, Flame, and farewell, Smoke, children of the desert, who are swifter than arrows, for never more shall I ride you in battle. Well, at least I have others of your matchless blood."

Then Godwin touched Wulf on the shoulder, and they crept away from the stable without the Arab knowing that they had been there, for it seemed shameful to pry upon his grief. When they reached their room again Godwin asked Wulf:

"Why does this man sell us those noble steeds?"

"Because his niece Masouda has bid him so to do," he answered.

"And why has she bidden him?"

"Ah!" replied Wulf. "He called her 'the woman with the secret

face and eyes that have looked on fear,' didn't he? Well, for reasons that have to do with his family perhaps, or with her secrets, or us, with whom she plays some game of which we know neither the beginning nor the end. But, Brother Godwin, you are wiser than I. Why do you ask me these riddles? For my part, I do not wish to trouble my head about them. All I know is that the game is a brave one, and I mean to go through with it, especially as I believe that this playing will lead us to Rosamund."

"May it lead us nowhere worse," answered Godwin with something like a groan, for he remembered that dream of his which he dreamed in mid-air between the edges of black rock with the bubbling foam beneath.

But to Wulf he said nothing of this dream.

When the sun was fully up they prepared to go out again, taking with them the gold to pay the Arab; but on opening the door of their room they met Masouda, apparently about to knock upon it.

"Whither go you, friends Peter and John, and so early?" she asked, looking at them with a smile upon her beautiful face that was so thrilling and seemed to hide so much mystery.

Godwin thought to himself that it was like another smile, that on the face of the woman-headed, stone sphinx which they had seen

set up in the market place of Beirut.

"To visit our horses and pay your uncle, the Arab, his money," answered Wulf.

"Indeed! I thought I saw you do the first an hour ago, and as for the second, it is useless; Son of the Sand has gone."

"Gone! With the horses?"

"Nay, he has left them behind."

"Did you pay him, then, lady?" asked Godwin.

It was easy to see that Masouda was pleased at this courteous word, for her voice, which in general seemed a little hard, softened as she answered, for the first time giving him his own title.

"Why do you call me 'lady,' Sir Godwin D'Arcy, who am but an inn-keeper, for whom sometimes men find hard names? Well, perhaps I was a lady once before I became an inn-keeper; but now I am--the widow Masouda, as you are the pilgrim Peter. Still, I thank you for this--bad guess of yours." Then stepping back a foot or two towards the door, which she had closed behind her, she made him a curtsy so full of dignity and grace that any who

saw it must be sure that, wherever she might dwell, Masouda was not bred in inns.

Godwin returned the bow, doffing his cap. Their eyes met and in hers he learned that he had no treachery to fear from this woman, whatever else he might have to fear. Indeed, from that moment, however black and doubtful seemed the road, he would have trusted his life to her; for this was the message written there, a message which she meant that he should read. Yet at his heart he felt terribly afraid.

Wulf, who saw something of all this and guessed more, also was afraid. He wondered what Rosamund would have thought of it, if she had seen that strange and turbulent look in the eyes of this woman who had been a lady and was an inn-keeper; of one whom men called Spy, and daughter of Satan, and child of Al-je-bal. To his fancy that look was like a flash of lightning upon a dark night, which for a second illumines some magical, unguessed landscape, after which comes the night again, blacker than before.

Now the widow Masouda was saying in her usual somewhat hard voice:

"No; I did not pay him. At the last he would take no money; but, having passed it, neither would he break his word to knights who ride so well and boldly. So I made a bargain with him on behalf

of both of you, which I expect that you will keep, since my good faith is pledged, and this Arab is a chief and my kinsman. It is this, that if you and these horses should live, and the time comes when you have no more need of them, you will cause it to be cried in the market-place of whatever town is nearest to you, by the voice of the public crier, that for six days they stand to be returned to him who lent them. Then if he comes not they can be sold, which must not be sold or given away to any one without this proclamation. Do you consent?"

"Ay," answered both of them, but Wulf added: "Only we should like to know why the Arab, Son-of-the-Sand, who is your kinsman, trusts his glorious horses to us in this fashion."

"Your breakfast is served, my guests," answered Masouda in tones that rang like the clash of metal, so steely were they. Whereon Wulf shook his head and followed her into the eating-room, which was now empty again as it had been on the afternoon of their arrival.

Most of that day they spent with their horses. In the evening, this time unaccompanied by Masouda, they rode out for a little way, though rather doubtfully, since they were not sure that these beasts which seemed to be almost human would not take the bits between their teeth and rush with them back to the desert whence they came. But although from time to time they looked

about them for their master, the Arab, whinnying as they looked, this they did not do, or show vice of any kind; indeed, two ladies' palfreys could not have been more quiet. So the brethren brought them home again, groomed, fed and fondled them, while they pricked their ears, sniffing them all over, as though they knew that these were their new lords and wished to make friends of them.

The morrow was a Sunday, and, attended by Masouda's slave, without whom she would not suffer them to walk in the town, the brethren went to mass in the big church which once had been a mosque, wearing pilgrim's robes over their mail.

"Do you not accompany us, who are of the faith?" asked Wulf.

"Nay," answered Masouda, "I am in no mood to make confession. This day I count my beads at home."

So they went alone, and mingling with a crowd of humble persons at the back of the church, which was large and dim, watched the knights and priests of various nations struggling for precedence of place beneath the dome. Also they heard the bishop of the town preach a sermon from which they learnt much. He spoke at length of the great coming war with Saladin, whom he named Anti-Christ. Moreover, he prayed them all to compose their differences and prepare for that awful struggle, lest in the end the Cross of

their Master should be trampled under foot of the Saracen, His soldiers slain, His fanes desecrated, and His people slaughtered or driven into the sea--words of warning that were received in heavy silence.

"Four full days have gone by. Let us ask our hostess if she has any news for us," said Wulf as they walked back to the inn.

"Ay, we will ask her," answered Godwin.

As it chanced, there was no need, for when they entered their chamber they found Masouda standing in the centre of it, apparently lost in thought.

"I have come to speak with you," she said, looking up. "Do you still wish to visit the Sheik Al-je-bal?"

They answered "Yes."

"Good. I have leave for you to go; but I counsel you not to go, since it is dangerous. Let us be open with one another. I know your object. I knew it an hour before ever you set foot upon this shore, and that is why you were brought to my house. You would seek the help of the lord Sinan against Salah-ed-din, from whom you hope to rescue a certain great lady of his blood who is your kinswoman and whom both of you--desire in marriage. You see, I

have learned that also. Well, this land is full of spies, who travel to and from Europe and make report of all things to those who pay them enough. For instance--I can say it, as you will not see him again--the trader Thomas, with whom you stayed in this house, is such a spy. To him your story has been passed on by other spies in England, and he passed it on to me."

"Are then you a spy also, as the porter called you?" asked Wulf outright.

"I am what I am," she answered coldly. "Perhaps I also have sworn oaths and serve as you serve. Who my master is or why I do so is naught to you. But I like you well, and we have ridden together--a wild ride. Therefore I warn you, though perhaps I should not say so much, that the lord Al-je-bal is one who takes payment for what he gives, and that this business may cost you your lives."

"You warned us against Saladin also," said Godwin, "so what is left to us if we may dare a visit to neither?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "To take service under one of the great Frankish lords and wait a chance that will never come. Or, better still, to sew some cockle shells into your hats, go home as holy men who have made the pilgrimage, marry the richest wives that you can find, and forget Masouda the widow, and Al-je-bal and Salah-ed-din and the lady about whom he has dreamed a dream.

Only then," she added in a changed voice, "remember, you must leave the horses Flame and Smoke behind you."

"We wish to ride those horses," said Wulf lightly, and Godwin turned on her with anger in his eyes.

"You seem to know our story," he said, "and the mission to which we are sworn. What sort of knights do you think us, then, that you offer us counsel which is fitter for those spies from whom you learn your tidings? You talk of our lives. Well, we hold our lives in trust, and when they are asked of us we will yield them up, having done all that we may do."

"Well spoken," answered Masouda. "Ill should I have thought of you had you said otherwise. But why would you go to Al-je-bal?"

"Because our uncle at his death bade us so to do without fail, and having no other counsel we will take that of his spirit, let come what may."

"Well spoken again! Then to Al-je-bal you shall go, and let come what come may--to all three of us!"

"To all three of us?" said Wulf. "What, then, is your part in this matter?"

"I do not know, but perhaps more than you think. At least, I must be your guide."

"Do you mean to betray us?" asked Wulf bluntly.

She drew herself up and looked him in the eyes till he grew red, then said:

"Ask your brother if he thinks that I mean to betray you. No; I mean to save you, if I can, and it comes into my mind that before all is done you will need saving, who speak so roughly to those who would befriend you. Nay, answer not; it is not strange that you should doubt. Pilgrims to the fearful shrine of Al-je-bal, if it pleases you, we will ride at nightfall. Do not trouble about food and such matters. I will make preparation, but we go alone and secretly. Take only your arms and what garments you may need; the rest I will store, and for it give you my receipt. Now I go to make things ready. See, I pray of you, that the horses Flame and Smoke are saddled by sunset."

At sundown, accordingly, the brethren stood waiting in their room. They were fully armed beneath their rough pilgrims' robes, even to the bucklers which had been hidden in their baggage. Also the saddle-bags of carpet which Masouda had given them were packed with such things as they must take, the rest having been handed over to her keeping.

Presently the door opened, and a young man stood before them clothed in the rough camel-hair garment, or burnous, which is common in the East.

"What do you want?" asked Godwin.

"I want you, brothers Peter and John," was the reply, and they saw that the slim young man was Masouda. "What! you English innocents, do you not know a woman through a camel-hair cloak?" she added as she led the way to the stable. "Well, so much the better, for it shows that my disguise is good. Henceforth be pleased to forget the widow Masouda and, until we reach the land of Al-je-bal, to remember that I am your servant, a halfbreed from Jaffa named David, of no religion--or of all."

In the stable the horses stood saddled, and near to them another--a good Arab--and two laden Cyprian mules, but no attendant was to be seen. They brought them out and mounted, Masouda riding like a man and leading the mules, of which the head of one was tied to the tail of the other. Five minutes later they were clear of Beirut, and through the solemn twilight hush, followed the road whereon they had tried the horses, towards the Dog River, three leagues away, which Masouda said they would reach by moonrise.

Soon it grew very dark, and she rode alongside of them to show them the path, but they did not talk much. Wulf asked her who would take care of the inn while she was absent, to which she answered sharply that the inn would take care of itself, and no more. Picking their way along the stony road at a slow amble, they crossed the bed of two streams then almost dry, till at length they heard running water sounding above that of the slow wash of the sea to their left, and Masouda bade them halt. So they waited, until presently the moon rose in a clear sky, revealing a wide river in front, the pale ocean a hundred feet beneath them to the left, and to the right great mountains, along the face of which their path was cut. So bright was it that Godwin could see strange shapes carven on the sheer face of the rock, and beneath them writing which he could not read.

"What are these?" he asked Masouda.

"The tablets of kings," she answered, "whose names are written in your holy book, who ruled Syria and Egypt thousands of years ago. They were great in their day when they took this land, greater even than Salah-ed-din, and now these seals which they set upon this rock are all that is left of them."

Godwin and Wulf stared at the weather-worn sculptures, and in the silence of that moonlit place there arose in their minds a vision of the mighty armies of different tongues and peoples who had

stood in their pride on this road and looked upon yonder river and the great stone wolf that guarded it, which wolf, so said the legend, howled at the approach of foes. But now he howled no more, for he lay headless beneath the waters, and there he lies to this day. Well, they were dead, everyone of them, and even their deeds were forgotten; and oh! how small the thought of it made them feel, these two young men bent upon a desperate quest in a strange and dangerous land. Masouda read what was passing in their hearts, and as they came to the brink of the river, pointed to the bubbles that chased each other towards the sea, bursting and forming again before their eyes.

"Such are we," she said briefly; "but the ocean is always yonder, and the river is always here, and of fresh bubbles there will always be a plenty. So dance on life's water while you may, in the sunlight, in the moonlight, beneath the storm, beneath the stars, for ocean calls and bubbles burst. Now follow me, for I know the ford, and at this season the stream is not deep. Pilgrim Peter, ride you at my side in case I should be washed from the saddle; and pilgrim John, come you behind, and if they hang back, prick the mules with your sword point."

Thus, then, they entered the river, which many might have feared to do at night, and, although once or twice the water rose to their saddles and the mules were stubborn in the swift stream, in the end gained the further bank in safety. Thence they pursued

their path through mountains till at length the sun rose and they found themselves in a lonely land where no one was to be seen. Here they halted in a grove of oaks, off-saddled their animals, tethered and fed them with barley which they had brought upon a mule, and ate of the food that Masouda had provided. Then, having secured the beasts, they lay down to sleep, all three of them, since Masouda said that here there was nothing to fear; and being weary, slept on till the heat of noon was past, when once more they fed the horses and mules, and having dined themselves, set forward upon their way.

Now their road--if road it could be called, for they could see none--ran ever upwards through rough, mountainous country, where seemed to dwell neither man nor beast. At sunset they halted again, and at moonrise went forward till the night turned towards morning, when they came to a place where was a little cave.

Before they reached this spot of a sudden the silence of those lonely hills was broken by a sound of roaring, not very near to them, but so loud and so long that it echoed and reechoed from the cliff. At it the horses Flame and Smoke pricked their ears and trembled, while the mules strove to break away and run back.

"What is that?" asked Wulf, who had never heard its like.

"Lions," answered Masouda. "We draw near the country where there are many of them, and therefore shall do well to halt presently, since it is best to pass through that land in daylight."

So when they came to the cave, having heard no more of the lion, or lions, they unsaddled there, purposing to put the horses into it, where they would be safe from the attack of any such ravening beast. But when they tried to do this, Smoke and Flame spread out their nostrils, and setting their feet firm before them, refused to enter the place, about which there was an evil smell.

"Perhaps jackals have been here," said Masouda. "Let us tether them all in the open."

This then they did, building a fire in front of them with dry wood that lay about in plenty, for here grew sombre cedar trees. The brethren sat by this fire; but, the night being hot, Masouda laid herself down about fifteen paces away under a cedar tree, which grew almost in front of the mouth of the cave, and slept, being tired with long riding. Wulf slept also, since Godwin had agreed to keep watch for the first part of the night.

For an hour or more he sat close by the horses, and noted that they fed uneasily and would not lie down. Soon, however, he was lost in his own thoughts, and, as he heard no more of the lions, fell to wondering over the strangeness of their journey and of

what the end of it might be. He wondered also about Masouda, who she was, how she came to know so much, why she befriended them if she really was a friend, and other things--for instance, of that leap over the sunken stream; and whether--no, surely he had been mistaken, her eyes had never looked at him like that. Why, he was sleeping at his post, and the eyes in the darkness yonder were not those of a woman. Women's eyes were not green and gold; they did not grow large, then lessen and vanish away.

Godwin sprang to his feet. As he thought, they were no eyes. He had dreamed, that was all. So he took cedar boughs and threw them on to the fire, where soon they flared gloriously, which done he sat himself down again close to Wulf, who was lost in heavy slumber.

The night was very still and the silence so deep that it pressed upon him like a weight. He could bear it no longer, and rising, began to walk up and down in front of the cave, drawing his sword and holding it in his hand as sentries do. Masouda lay upon the ground, with her head pillowed on a saddle-bag, and the moonlight fell through the cedar boughs upon her face. Godwin stopped to look at it, and wondered that he had never noted before how beautiful she was. Perhaps it was but the soft and silvery light which clothed those delicate features with so much mystery and charm. She might be dead, not sleeping; but even as he thought this, life came into her face, colour stole up beneath the pale,

olive-hued skin, the red lips opened, seeming to mutter some words, and she stretched out her rounded arms as though to clasp a vision of her dream.

Godwin turned aside; it seemed not right to watch her thus, although in truth he had only come to know that she was safe. He went back to the fire, and lifting a cedar bough, which blazed like a torch in his left hand, was about to lay it down again on the centre of the flame, when suddenly he heard the sharp and terrible cry of a woman in an agony of pain or fear, and at the same moment the horses and mules began to plunge and snort. In an instant, the blazing bough still in his hand, he was back by the cave, and lo! there before him, the form of Masouda, hanging from its jaws, stood a great yellow beast, which, although he had never seen its like, he knew must be a lioness. It was heading for the cave, then catching sight of him, turned and bounded away in the direction of the fire, purposing to reenter the wood beyond.

But the woman in its mouth cumbered it, and running swiftly, Godwin came face to face with the brute just opposite the fire. He hurled the burning bough at it, whereon it dropped Masouda, and rearing itself straight upon its hind legs, stretched out its claws, and seemed about to fall on him. For this Godwin did not wait. He was afraid, indeed, who had never before fought lions, but he knew that he must do or die. Therefore he charged straight

at it, and with all the strength of his strong arm drove his long sword into the yellow breast, till it seemed to him that the steel vanished and he could see nothing but the hilt.

Then a shock, a sound of furious snarling, and down he went to earth beneath a soft and heavy weight, and there his senses left him.

When they came back again something soft was still upon his face; but this proved to be only the hand of Masouda, who bathed his brow with a cloth dipped in water, while Wulf chafed his hands. Godwin sat up, and in the light of the new risen sun, saw a dead lioness lying before him, its breast still transfixed with his own sword.

"So I saved you," he said faintly.

"Yes, you saved me," answered Masouda, and kneeling down she kissed his feet; then rising again, with her long, soft hair wiped away the blood that was running from a wound in his arm.