

Chapter Eleven: The City of Al-Je-Bal

"I pray you have done," said Godwin, "it is but a scratch from the beast's claws. I am ashamed that you should put your hair to such vile uses. Give me a little water."

He asked it of Wulf, but Masouda rose without a word and fetched the water, in which she mingled wine. Godwin drank of it and his faintness left him, so that he was able to stand up and move his arms and legs.

"Why," he said, "it is nothing; I was only shaken. That lioness did not hurt me at all."

"But you hurt the lioness," said Wulf, with a laugh. "By St. Chad a good thrust!" and he pointed to the long sword driven up to the hilt in the brute's breast. "Why, I swear I could not have made a better myself."

"I think it was the lion that thrust," answered Godwin. "I only held the sword straight. Drag it out, brother, I am still too weak."

So Wulf set his foot upon the breast of the lion and tugged and tugged until at length he loosened the sword, saying as he strained at it:

"Oh! what an Essex hog am I, who slept through it all, never waking until Masouda seized me by the hair, and I opened my eyes to see you upon the ground with this yellow beast crouched on the top of you like a hen on a nest egg. I thought that it was alive and smote it with my sword, which, had I been fully awake, I doubt if I should have found the courage to do. Look," and he pushed the lioness's head with his foot, whereon it twisted round in such a fashion that they perceived for the first time that it only hung to the shoulders by a thread of skin.

"I am glad you did not strike a little harder," said Godwin, "or I should now be in two pieces and drowned in my own blood, instead of in that of this dead brute," and he looked ruefully at his burnous and hauberck, that were soaked with gore.

"Yes," said Wulf, "I never thought of that. Who would, in such a hurry?"

"Lady Masouda," asked Godwin, "when last I saw you you were hanging from those jaws. Say, are you hurt?"

"Nay," she answered, "for I wear mail like you, and the teeth glanced on it so that she held me by the cloak only. Come, let us skin the beast, and take its pelt as a present to the lord Al-je-bal."

"Good," said Godwin, "and I give you the claws for a necklace."

"Be sure that I will wear them," she answered, and helped Wulf to flay the lioness while he sat by resting. When it was done Wulf went to the little cave and walked into it, to come out again with a bound.

"Why!" he said, "there are more of them in there. I saw their eyes and heard them snarl. Now, give me a burning branch and I will show you, brother, that you are not the only one who can fight a lion."

"Let be, you foolish man," broke in Masouda. "Doubtless those are her cubs, and if you kill them, her mate will follow us for miles; but if they are left safe he will stay to feed them. Come, let us begone from this place as swiftly as we can."

So having shown them the skin of the lion, that they might know it was but a dead thing, at the sight of which they snorted and trembled, they packed it upon one of the mules and rode off slowly into a valley some five miles away, where was water but no trees. Here, since Godwin needed rest, they stopped all that day and the night which followed, seeing no more of lions, though they watched for them sharply enough. The next morning, having slept well, he was himself again, and they started forward

through a broken country towards a deep cleft, on either side of which stood a tall mountain.

"This is Al-je-bal's gateway," said Masouda, "and tonight we should sleep in the gate, whence one day's ride brings us to his city."

So on they rode till at length, perched upon the sides of the cleft, they saw a castle, a great building, with high walls, to which they came at sunset. It seemed that they were expected in this place, for men hastened to meet them, who greeted Masouda and eyed the brethren curiously, especially after they had heard of the adventure with the lion. These took them, not into the castle, but to a kind of hostelry at its back, where they were furnished with food and slept the night.

Next morning they went on again to a hilly country with beautiful and fertile valleys. Through this they rode for two hours, passing on their way several villages, where sombre-eyed people were labouring in the fields. From each village, as they drew near to it, horsemen would gallop out and challenge them, whereon Masouda rode forward and spoke with the leader alone. Then he would touch his forehead with his hand and bow his head and they rode on unmolested.

"See," she said, when they had thus been stopped for the fourth

time, "what chance you had of winning through to Masyaf unguarded. Why, I tell you, brethren, that you would have been dead before ever you passed the gates of the first castle."

Now they rode up a long slope, and at its crest paused to look upon a marvellous scene. Below them stretched a vast plain, full of villages, cornfields, olive-groves, and vineyards. In the centre of this plain, some fifteen miles away, rose a great mountain, which seemed to be walled all about. Within the wall was a city of which the white, flat-roofed houses climbed the slopes of the mountain, and on its crest a level space of land covered with trees and a great, many-towered castle surrounded by more houses.

"Behold the home of Al-je-bal, Lord of the Mountain," said Masouda, "where we must sleep to-night. Now, brethren, listen to me. Few strangers who enter that castle come thence living. There is still time; I can pass you back as I passed you hither. Will you go on?"

"We will go on," they answered with one breath.

"Why? What have you to gain? You seek a certain maiden. Why seek her here whom you say has been taken to Salah-ed-din? Because the Al-je-bal in bygone days swore to befriend one of your blood. But that Al-je-bal is dead, and another of his line rules who took no

such oath. How do you know that he will befriend you--how that he will not enslave or kill you? I have power in this land, why or how does not matter, and I can protect you against all that dwell in it--as I swear I will, for did not one of you save my life?" and she glanced at Godwin, "except my lord Sinan, against whom I have no power, for I am his slave."

"He is the enemy of Saladin, and may help us for his hate's sake."

"Yes, he is the enemy of Salah-ed-din now more than ever. He may help you or he may not. Also," she added with meaning, "you may not wish the help he offers. Oh!" and there was a note of entreaty in her voice, "think, think! For the last time, I pray you think!"

"We have thought," answered Godwin solemnly; "and, whatever chances, we will obey the command of the dead."

She heard and bowed her head in assent, then said, looking up again:

"So be it. You are not easily turned from your purpose, and I like that spirit well. But hear my counsel. While you are in this city speak no Arabic and pretend to understand none. Also drink nothing but water, which is good here, for the lord Sinan sets

strange wines before his guests, that, if they pass the lips, produce visions and a kind of waking madness in which you might do deeds whereof you were afterwards ashamed. Or you might swear oaths that would sit heavy on your souls, and yet could not be broken except at the cost of life."

"Fear not," answered Wulf. "Water shall be our drink, who have had enough of drugged wines," for he remembered the Christmas feast in the Hall at Steeple.

"You, Sir Godwin," went on Masouda, "have about your neck a certain ring which you were mad enough to show to me, a stranger--a ring with writing on it which none can read save the great men that in this land are called the dais. Well, as it chances, the secret is safe with me; but be wise; say nothing of that ring and let no eye see it."

"Why not?" asked Godwin. "It is the token of our dead uncle to the Al-je-bal."

She looked round her cautiously and replied:

"Because it is, or was once, the great Signet, and a day may come when it will save your lives. Doubtless when the lord who is dead thought it gone forever he caused another to be fashioned, so like that I who have had both in my hand could not tell the two

apart. To him who holds that ring all gates are open; but to let it be known that you have its double means death. Do you understand?"

They nodded, and Masouda continued:

"Lastly--though you may think that this seems much to ask--trust me always, even if I seem to play you false, who for your sakes," and she sighed, "have broken oaths and spoken words for which the punishment is to die by torment. Nay, thank me not, for I do only what I must who am a slave--a slave."

"A slave to whom?" asked Godwin, staring at her.

"To the Lord of all the Mountains," she answered, with a smile that was sweet yet very sad; and without another word spurred on her horse.

"What does she mean," asked Godwin of Wulf, when she was out of hearing, "seeing that if she speaks truth, for our sakes, in warning us against him, Masouda is breaking her fealty to this lord?"

"I do not know, brother, and I do not seek to know. All her talk may be a part of a plot to blind us, or it may not. Let well alone and trust in fortune, say I."

"A good counsel," answered Godwin, and they rode forward in silence.

They crossed the plain, and towards evening came to the wall of the outer city, halting in front of its great gateway. Here, as at the first castle, a band of solemn-looking mounted men came out to meet them, and, having spoken a few words with Masouda, led them over the drawbridge that spanned the first rock-cut moat, and through triple gates of iron into the city. Then they passed up a street very steep and narrow, from the roofs and windows of the houses on either side of which hundreds of people--many of whom seemed to be engaged at their evening prayer--watched them go by. At the head of this street they reached another fortified gateway, on the turrets of which, so motionless that at first they took them to be statues cut in stone, stood guards wrapped in long white robes. After parley, this also was opened to them, and again they rode through triple doors.

Then they saw all the wonder of that place, for between the outer city where they stood and the castle, with its inner town which was built around and beneath it yawned a vast gulf over ninety feet in depth. Across this gulf, built of blocks of stone, quite unrailed, and not more than three paces wide, ran a causeway some two hundred yards in length, which causeway was supported upon

arches reared up at intervals from the bottom of the gulf.

"Ride on and have no fear," said Masouda. "Your horses are trained to heights, and the mules and mine will follow."

So Godwin, showing nothing in his face of the doubt that he felt in his heart, patted Flame upon the neck, and, after hanging back a little, the horse started lifting its hoofs high and glancing from side to side at the terrible gulf beneath. Where Flame went Smoke knew that it could go, and came on bravely, but snorting a little, while the mules, that did not fear heights so long as the ground was firm beneath their feet, followed. Only Masouda's horse was terrified, backed, and strove to wheel round, till she drove the spur into it, when of a sudden it started and came over at a gallop.

At length they were across, and, passing under another gateway which had broad terraces on either side of it, rode up the long street beyond and entered a great courtyard, around which stood the castle, a vast and frowning fortress. Here a white-robed officer came forward, greeting them with a low bow, and with him servants who assisted them to dismount. These men took the horses to a range of stables on one side of the courtyard, whither the brethren followed to see their beasts groomed and fed. Then the officer, who had stood patiently by the while, conducted them through doorways and down passages to the guest chambers, large,

stone-roofed rooms, where they found their baggage ready for them. Here Masouda said that she would see them again on the following morning, and departed in company with the officer.

Wulf looked round the great vaulted chamber, which, now that the dark had fallen, was lit by flickering lamps set in iron brackets upon the wall, and said:

"Well, for my part, I had rather pass the night in a desert among the lions than in this dismal place."

Scarcely were the words out of his lips when curtains swung aside and beautiful women entered, clad in gauzy veils and bearing dishes of food. These they placed upon the ground before them, inviting them to eat with nods and smiles, while others brought basins of scented water, which they poured over their hands. Then they sat down and ate the food that was strange to them, but very pleasant to the taste; and while they ate, women whom they could not see sang sweet songs, and played upon harps and lutes. Wine was offered to them also; but of this, remembering Masouda's words, they would not drink, asking by signs for water, which was brought after a little pause.

When their meal was done, the beautiful women bore away the dishes, and black slaves appeared. These men led them to baths such as they had never seen, where they washed first in hot

water, then in cold. Afterwards they were rubbed with spicy-smelling oils, and having been wrapped in white robes, conducted back to their chamber, where they found beds spread for them. On these, being very weary, they lay down, when the strange, sweet music broke out afresh, and to the sound of it they fell asleep.

When they awoke it was to see the light streaming through the high, latticed windows.

"Did you sleep well, Godwin?" asked Wulf.

"Well enough," answered his brother, "only I dreamed that throughout the night people came and looked at me."

"I dreamed that also," said Wulf; "moreover, I think that it was not all a dream, since there is a coverlet on my bed which was not there when I went to sleep."

Godwin looked at his own, where also was another coverlet added, doubtless as the night grew colder in that high place.

"I have heard of enchanted castles," he said; "now I think that we have found one."

"Ay," replied Wulf, "and it is well enough while it lasts."

They rose and dressed themselves, putting on clean garments and their best cloaks, that they had brought with them on the mules, after which the veiled women entered the room with breakfast, and they ate. When this was finished, having nothing else to do, they made signs to one of the women that they wished for cloths wherewith to clean their armour, for, as they had been bidden, they pretended to understand no word of Arabic. She nodded, and presently returned with a companion carrying leathers and paste in a jar. Nor did they leave them, but, sitting upon the ground, whether the brethren willed it or no, took the shirts of mail and rubbed them till they shone like silver, while Godwin and Wulf polished their helms, spurs, and bucklers, cleansing their swords and daggers also, and sharpening them with a stone which they carried for that purpose.

Now as these women worked, they began to talk to each other in a low voice, and some of their talk, though not all, the brethren understood.

"A handsome pair truly," said the first. "We should be fortunate if we had such men for husbands, although they are Franks and infidels."

"Ay," answered the other; "and from their likeness they must be twins. Now which of them would you choose?"

Then for a long while they discussed them, comparing them feature by feature and limb by limb, until the brethren felt their faces grow red beneath the sunburn and scrubbed furiously at their armour to show a reason for it. At length one of the women said:

"It was cruel of the lady Masouda to bring these birds into the Master's net. She might have warned them."

"Masouda was ever cruel," answered the other, "who hates all men, which is unnatural. Yet I think if she loved a man she would love him well, and perhaps that might be worse for him than her hate."

"Are these knights spies?" asked the first.

"I suppose so," was the answer, "silly fellows who think that they can spy upon a nation of spies. They would have done better to keep to fighting, at which, doubtless, they are good enough. What will happen to them?"

"What always happens, I suppose--a pleasant time at first; then, if they can be put to no other use, a choice between the faith and the cup. Or, perhaps, as they seem men of rank, they may be imprisoned in the dungeon tower and held to ransom. Yes, yes; it was cruel of Masouda to trick them so, who may be but travellers after all, desiring to see our city."

Just then the curtain was drawn, and through it entered Masouda herself. She was dressed in a white robe that had a dagger worked in red over the left breast, and her long black hair fell upon her shoulders, although it was half hid by the veil, open in front, which hung from her head. Never had they seen her look so beautiful as she seemed thus.

"Greetings, brothers Peter and John. Is this fit work for pilgrims?" she said in French, pointing to the long swords which they were sharpening.

"Ay," answered Wulf, as they rose and bowed to her, "for pilgrims to this--holy city."

The women who were cleaning the mail bowed also, for it seemed that here Masouda was a person of importance. She took the hauberks from their hands.

"Ill cleansed," she said sharply. "I think that you girls talk better than you work. Nay, they must serve. Help these lords to don them. Fools, that is the shirt of the grey-eyed knight. Give it me; I will be his squire," and she snatched the hauberk from their hands, whereat, when her back was turned, they glanced at one another.

"Now," she said, when they were fully armed and had donned their mantles, "you brethren look as pilgrims should. Listen, I have a message for you. The Master"--and she bowed her head, as did the women, guessing of whom she spoke--"will receive you in an hour's time, till when, if it please you, we can walk in the gardens, which are worth your seeing."

So they went out with her, and as they passed towards the curtain she whispered:

"For your lives' sake, remember all that I have told you--above everything, about the wine and the ring, for if you dream the drink-dream you will be searched. Speak no word to me save of common matters."

In the passage beyond the curtain white-robed guards were standing, armed with spears, who turned and followed them without a word. First they went to the stables to visit Flame and Smoke, which whinnied as they drew near. These they found well-fed and tended--indeed, a company of grooms were gathered round them, discussing their points and beauty, who saluted as the owners of such steeds approached. Leaving the stable, they passed through an archway into the famous gardens, which were said to be the most beautiful in all the East. Beautiful they were indeed, planted with trees, shrubs, and flowers such as are seldom seen, while between fern-clad rocks flowed rills which fell over deep

cliffs in waterfalls of foam. In places the shade of cedars lay so dense that the brightness of day was changed to twilight, but in others the ground was open and carpeted with flowers which filled the air with perfume. Everywhere grew roses, myrtles, and trees laden with rich fruits, while from all sides came the sound of cooing doves and the voices of many bright-winged birds which flashed from palm to palm.

On they walked, down the sand-strewn paths for a mile or more, accompanied by Masouda and the guard. At length, passing through a brake of whispering, reed-like plants, of a sudden they came to a low wall, and saw, yawning black and wide at their very feet, that vast cleft which they had crossed before they entered the castle.

"It encircles the inner city, the fortress, and its grounds," said Masouda; "and who lives to-day that could throw a bridge across it? Now come back."

So, following the gulf round, they returned to the castle by another path, and were ushered into an ante-room, where stood a watch of twelve men. Here Masouda left them in the midst of the men, who stared at them with stony eyes. Presently she returned, and beckoned to them to follow her. Walking down a long passage they came to curtains, in front of which were two sentries, who drew these curtains as they approached. Then, side by side, they

entered a great hall, long as Stangate Abbey church, and passed through a number of people, all crouched upon the ground. Beyond these the hall narrowed as a chancel does.

Here sat and stood more people, fierce-eyed, turbaned men, who wore great knives in their girdles. These, as they learned afterwards, were called the fedai, the sworn assassins, who lived but to do the command of their lord the great Assassin. At the end of this chancel were more curtains, beyond which was a guarded door. It opened, and on its further side they found themselves in full sunlight on an unwallled terrace, surrounded by the mighty gulf into which it was built out. On the right and left edges of this terrace sat old and bearded men, twelve in number, their heads bowed humbly and their eyes fixed upon the ground. These were the dais or councillors.

At the head of the terrace, under an open and beautifully carved pavilion of wood, stood two gigantic soldiers, having the red dagger blazoned on their white robes. Between them was a black cushion, and on the cushion a black heap. At first, staring out of the bright sunlight at this heap in the shadow, the brethren wondered what it might be. Then they caught sight of the glitter of eyes, and knew that the heap was a man who wore a black turban on his head and a black, bell-shaped robe clasped at the breast with a red jewel. The weight of the man had sunk him down deep into the soft cushion, so that there was nothing of him to be

seen save the folds of the bell-shaped cloak, the red jewel, and the head. He looked like a coiled-up snake; the dark and glittering eyes also were those of a snake. Of his features, in the deep shade of the canopy and of the wide black turban, they could see nothing.

The aspect of this figure was so terrible and inhuman that the brethren trembled at the sight of him. They were men and he was a man, but between that huddled, beady-eyed heap and those two tall Western warriors, clad in their gleaming mail and coloured cloaks, helm on brow, buckler on arm, and long sword at side, the contrast was that of death and life.