

GOLDEN FLEECE

20¢

DECEMBER

HISTORICAL
ADVENTURE



Two Against the Gods
by E. Hoffmann Price

• ALL STORIES COMPLETE •

GOLDEN CHAINS
by Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr.

DEAD MAN ALIVE by H. BEDFORD-JONES

Harold

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HISTORICAL ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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Vol. 1 No. 3

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by Harold S. Delay and Jay Jackson.

These stories are fiction. If any character bears the name of a living person, it is purely a coincidence.

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"My lord," shouted de Courtenai, "you're drunk . . . this isn't man's vengeance . . ."

Wolves

"LOOK, *sidi*, a girl from Feringhistan—fit for the harem of a king—and only a thousand *dinars*—a thousand—"

The auctioneer's bleary eyes shifted toward a lean Turk who was licking his thin lips. "Nine hundred?" he wheedled. "Nine hundred, and Allah make you happy?"

The Turk shrugged. Captive women were plentiful as fleas in Cairo since Saladin had carved his way to the throne of Syria and Egypt. Though this one was different, in her white, frozen loveliness.

Hussayn, the auctioneer, whisked the mantle from the girl's shoulders, leaving her clad only in her unbound hair. It trailed to her hips, a red-gold veil that almost hid her white breasts—though their roundness was kissed by the late afternoon light that lanced past the

minarets of the El Azhar Mosque. The ruddy light gilded her sleek legs, accented the exquisite modelling of her face.

She was too proud to shrink from the eyes and hands that would go over her loveliness as though she were a horse put through its paces.

"Eight hundred?" pleaded Hussayn. "The daughter of an infidel prince, Allah burn him! Taken from a galley bound for Akka!"

The buyers were dubious. Her haughty green eyes warned them that she would be a handful to manage.

"Bound for Akka?" rumbled a broad-shouldered man whose peaked helmet towered over the kinky heads of the tall Sudanese guards. His hawk face was bronzed and arrogant. The eyes that narrowed beneath his dark brows were



of Kerak

granite gray, not the smouldering black of the lean Arabs about him.

"Ay, wallah! The galley of Henri de Montfried."

The tall man thrust himself a pace forward, and the auctioneer pleaded, "Seven hundred dinars, my lord emir! See those white arms—a mouth like a pomegranate blossom—"

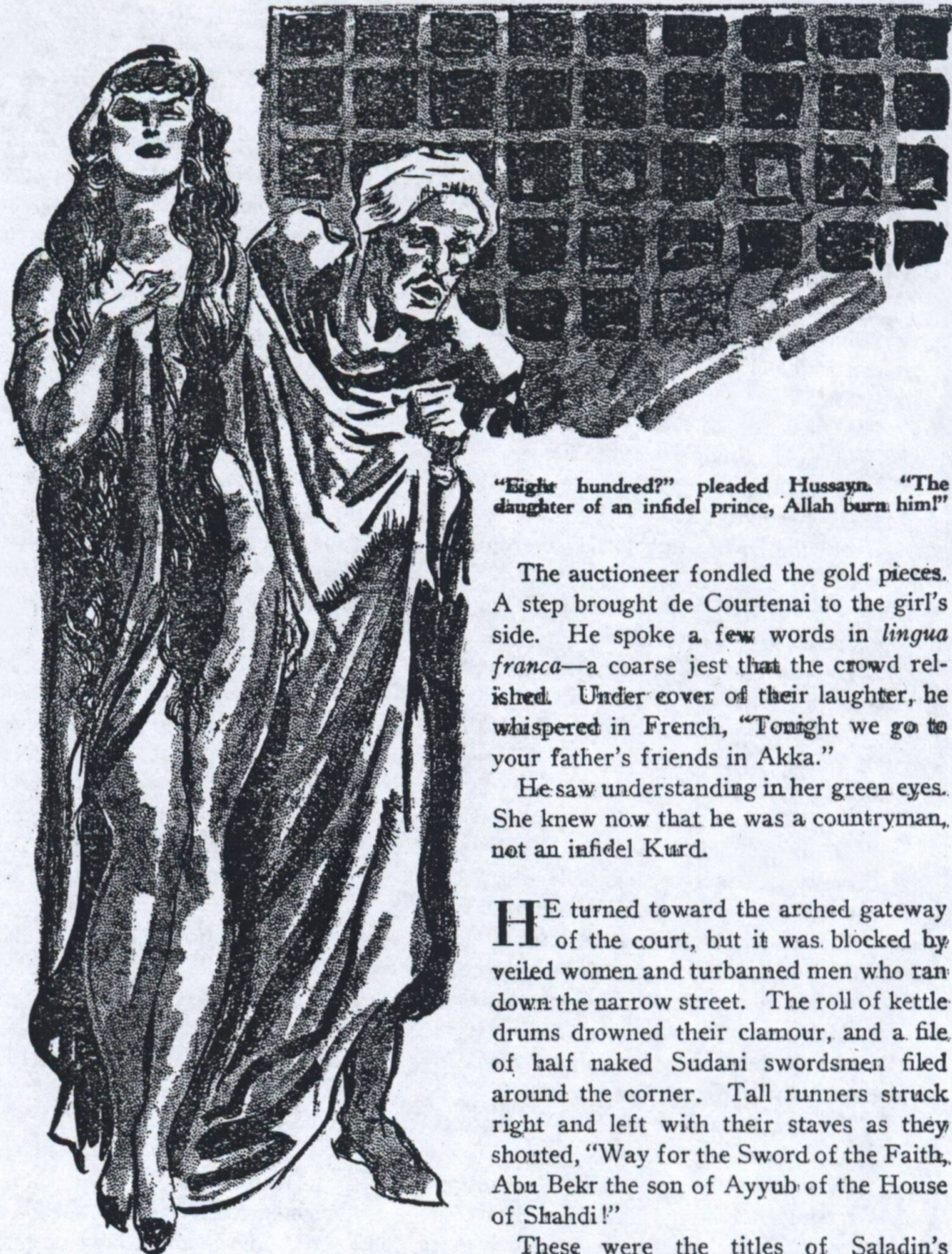
Poetry dripped from Hussayn's lips, and fire raced through the veins of Jehan de Courtenai, the tall spy from the Crusaders' outpost at Kerak. Her beauty was like exalting music, making him almost forget the chatelaine whose fickle fancy had sent him to find oblivion in the Holy Land. And she was a Christian, this girl on the auction block, stripped for the eyes of greasy merchants, rapacious money lenders, grim-faced *mamluks* of the sultan's guard.

Jehan de Courtenai's duty was plain: to move on, continue his gaming, drinking, jesting, listening to voices of Cairo to learn what troops El Adel was sending into Syria to join Saladin. But he could not so easily abandon this red-haired girl.

"Five hundred, and you are robbing me." After five years in the service of fierce old Raynald de Châtillon, he had learned enough about the East to bargain. Immediate acceptance would have betrayed him.

"Six hundred, and my children starve," groaned Hussayn.

But the payment of even sixty *dinars* would have left de Courtenai without a *dirhem* for the next day's bread. He had a horse and arms. He could sell them, ambush some drunken *mamluk* and get fresh equipment. And he could leave



Cairo that very night; he had El Adel's plans—

"Done, and Allah blacken you!" He dug into his purse. "Take this—in earnest—I bring the rest tonight—"

"Eight hundred?" pleaded Hussayn. "The daughter of an infidel prince, Allah burn him!"

The auctioneer fondled the gold pieces. A step brought de Courtenai to the girl's side. He spoke a few words in *lingua franca*—a coarse jest that the crowd relished. Under cover of their laughter, he whispered in French, "Tonight we go to your father's friends in Akka."

He saw understanding in her green eyes. She knew now that he was a countryman, not an infidel Kurd.

HE turned toward the arched gateway of the court, but it was blocked by veiled women and turbanned men who ran down the narrow street. The roll of kettle drums drowned their clamour, and a file of half naked Sudani swordsmen filed around the corner. Tall runners struck right and left with their staves as they shouted, "Way for the Sword of the Faith, Abu Bekr the son of Ayyub of the House of Shahdi!"

These were the titles of Saladin's brother, El Adel, the governor of Egypt. He rode a black horse, and his jet robes made a dark tall splash among the yellow tunics and chain mail of his Turkish guards. De Courtenai salaamed with those

who had taken refuge in the gateway. His voice swelled their applause.

Then the column turned, and the heralds cleared the gate. De Courtenai, though forced back against the jamb, could not hear what El Adel said to the tall *mamluk* who rode with him, boot to boot; but the Turkish officer's answer was plain enough: "She is here, in Hussayn's slave pen. On my head and eyes, *ya sidi!*"

She. De Courtenai's heart froze. The hoof beats of El Adel's horse ceased. A curb chain's tinkle broke the silence. Then El Adel demanded, "*Ya Hussayn! Where is the Feringhi girl—*"

"In the corner, my lord!" the *mamluk* cut in.

"*Ay wallah!*" said Hussayn. "This way, redhead."

El Adel's words seemed like clods dropping into a grave: "Send her to the palace—to Sitti Zayda's apartments." A tinkle of gold. The prince cut off Hussayn's flood of thanks. "And veil her, father of a dog!"

Drums rolled, and the black-robed horseman spurred his splendid beast through the gateway. Mail jingling, the yellow clad *mamluks* poured after him. El Adel resumed his march to the mosque.

Hussayn whined in de Courtenai's ear, "*Sidi*, your money—there is no bargain when the brother of the Victorious King buys. But I have other women—"

"Shaytan blacken you!" De Courtenai stalked down the street.

Who could oppose Saladin's brother? Certainly not a spy who dared not court notice. But this red-haired girl was more than just a Christian captive. De Courtenai's promise had revived her hope. He could not fail her now.

He stepped into the nearby *serai*, where his horse was waiting. "Saddle up!" he commanded to the groom. "Have him ready!"

SITTI ZAYDA was Saladin's sister. In the morning she was leaving with the caravan bound for Damascus, eight hundred miles away. That much de Courtenai knew from bazaar gossip; nor was the rest difficult to guess. The red-haired girl, sought out by El Adel himself, would go with the caravan; perhaps as Sitti Zayda's serving maid, perhaps as a hostage whose life would be bought with ruinous concessions from her friends.

There was still a way. The way of death and madness.

"Raynald has sent other spies who didn't return!" De Courtenai's laugh was iron as he rode that night toward the palace.

Hard men served Raynald. He could have no other kind; not in that hawk's nest southeast of the Dead Sea, perched on a high hill as a bulwark against the Moslem tide which relentlessly tried to engulf the long, narrow strip of Palestine that the Cross still held against the Crescent. Saladin's power grew day by day, and Raynald cursed the four years' truce which kept him from raiding the caravan trails.

Slowly, cautiously, not a link of his mail complaining, de Courtenai crept to the shadow of a bastion. Wrapped about his waist was a coil of silken cord. With infinite patience, he dug his dagger into the mortar, gouging toe holds. The moon rose above the domed tombs of the Khalifs as he reached the crest of the wall that girdled El Adel's palace.

But the shadow of a minaret reached out with a black band to hide him as he crouched, knotting the cord about a crenelation. And a moment later he was picking his way across a fragrant garden.

The spray of fountains mingled with jasmine. From afar, he heard the call of sentries walking their posts on the walls of the citadel. Presently de Courtenai slipped into the shadow of a pointed archway.

It seemed unguarded. From far within

came the wavering light of flambeaux. Then a harsh voice rasped, "Back, *ya emir!* Are you drunk?"

A long-faced eunuch accosted him, blinking, scarcely crediting his eyes. An armed man in the quarter reserved for El Adel's women!

De Courtenai made no move for his blade. He regarded the eunuch as he might some curious insect. "Maybe you'd like to ask El Adel what I'm doing here. Quick, brother of a dog! Where's your chief?"

The eunuch's eyes dropped. There was no fear in this man, nor had he touched a weapon. He could not be an intruder. His bearing accorded with his gilded mail and silken *khalat*.

"I'll get him, *sidi*. On my head and eyes."

An easy way out. Let the chief eunuch be responsible. But de Courtenai interposed, "Get *al-asfarani*—the yellow haired daughter of the infidel. El Adel won't risk taking her across the desert. She's to go by boat. I'm in a hurry—it sails at once!"

The tall Kurd spoke with authority.

The eunuch had no mind to confess ignorance of El Adel's plans, and for all he knew de Courtenai had entered through the guarded gate. "Wait, *sidi*. I'll see if she is ready—"

"Tell her to get ready, pig!" snapped de Courtenai. He dared give the eunuch no time to think! "Hurry—or I'll skin you alive!"

His voice made echoes rumble. It was not until the fellow had hastened along the passageway that de Courtenai shivered from the sweat on which a breeze blew coldly. He muttered a prayer. Moments dragged . . .

FROM somewhere in that luxurious pile of masonry came the notes of an eight stringed *oudh*. A woman was singing.

There was another voice; a man's. And the only man in this building must be El Adel.

A white shape blossomed in the dark arch of a cross passage. The tinkle of bracelets startled de Courtenai. He turned. It was a woman.

She hurried to him, slippered feet whispering across the tiles. As she came into the torch glow, he could see her splendid figure outlined by the frail fabric that clung to every curve.

"I'm Elinor de Montfried—I heard your voice." Her breath trembled in his ear, and her red hair caressed his cheek. "You're as good as dead—go! While you can! Maqsoud will find out—El Adel is taking leave of his sister—I'm going with her—he said so."

"With me!" He caught her hand. "Over the wall—"

Elinor clung to him, fingers sinking into his wrist. "You can't—good God—they'll miss me any minute—"

"You're not going to Damascus!" He lifted her from her feet. She was tall and shapely, but she gasped at the ease with which he swung her to his shoulder. "Hang on. That rope'll—take us both—"

It would, but it was too far away. From within came a babel of voices. It swelled and echoed. Women scurried about, chattering and screaming with excitement. A man shouted, and others answered. Their armor rang, their feet thudded against the tiles. The alarm was out!

De Courtenai, carrying the girl, raced across the garden. Torches glared in its further depths, and steel gleamed. He ducked into the shadow of a plane tree, hoping the search would sweep past him. But the file of *mamluks* wheeled and their drawn scimitars were crescents of silver.

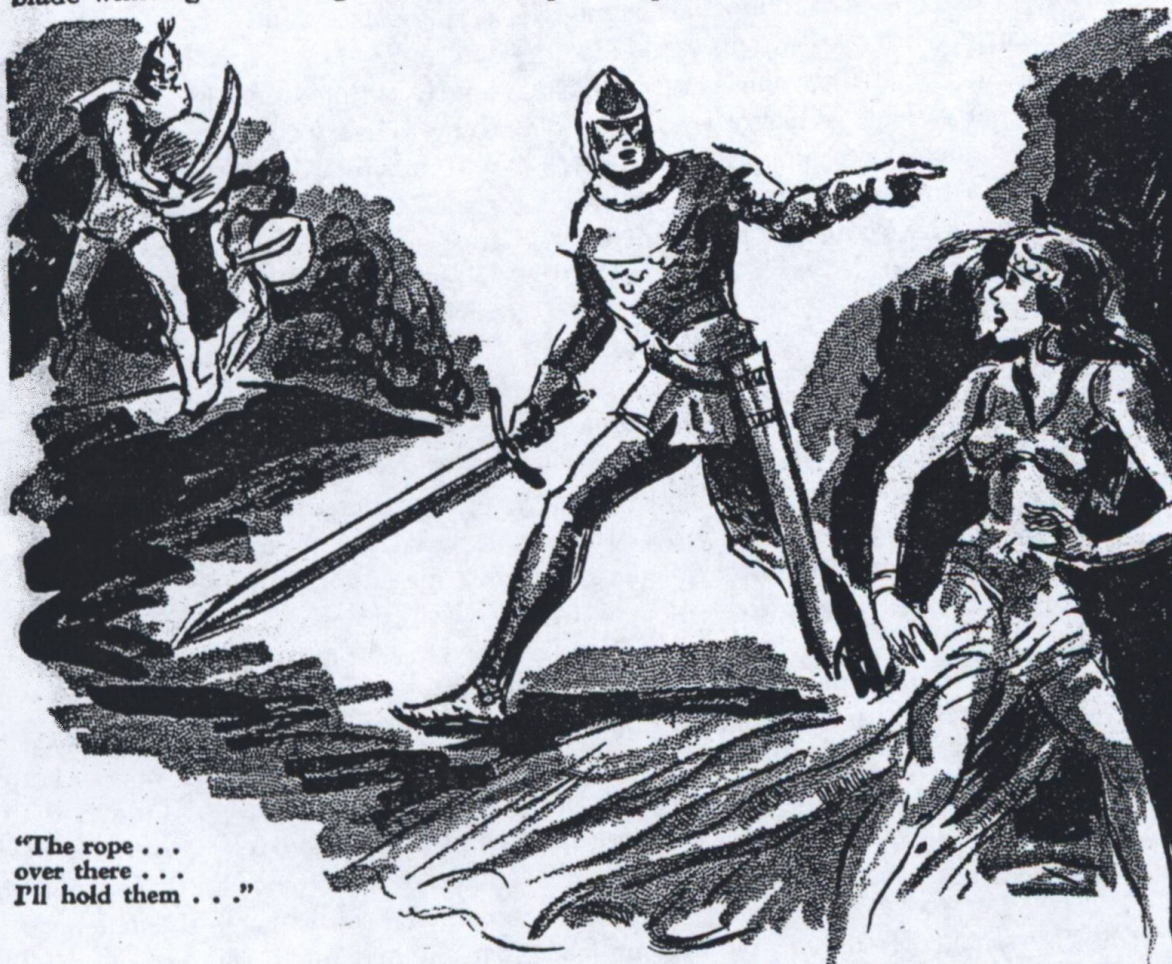
Elinor slipped to her feet. He said, "The rope—over there—I'll hold them—"

From the corner of his eye he saw the

white flash of her legs as she ran. So did the pursuit. They divided, and as de Courtenai's sword drew sparks from a peaked helmet, another squad came charging from his right.

They came at his flank. He leaped back, blade whirling in hissing arcs. The cap-

He had to. He could not cut down a company of *mamluks*; not while his life was valuable to Raynald de Châtillon. He whirled, dodging the tips of the crescent of blades that was swooping to surround him. He struck in passing, shifted swiftly, leaped clear.



"The rope . . .
over there . . .
I'll hold them . . ."

tain dropped, his neck mail shorn, and his throat with it. A scimitar splintered to shards against de Courtenai's guard. But the weight of the attack was bearing him back.

Beyond his assailants he saw Elinor's white body writhing in the grasp of four men at arms. Her cape yielded in the struggle. Then a circle of mail engulfed her. But one bare arm reached out, and above the ring of steel and the panting of his enemies, de Courtenai heard her scream, "The gate—the gate—go—"

ELINOR'S captors were dragging her into the palace. De Courtenai was separated from her by a wall of swords. And then he saw what she had meant by "the gate." It was open. Another squad of *mamluks*, summoned by the sentries, was rushing in from outside. They had him caged, or thought so; but if they had known him for one of Raynald's men, they would not have been so sure.

He moved faster than his first assailants could follow in the treacherous light of moon and torch; the newcomers did not

recognize him for an enemy until he struck with his flailing blade.

Surprise helped; wrath drove him, and the strong arm behind his heavy scimitar cut through. For a moment the sheer weight of steel against casque and shoulders seemed to crush him to the ground. But the enemy were in each other's way. Chain mail yielded to his savage slashing; tall, wiry men scattered before his charge.

De Courtenai, battered and sword-seamed, cleared the gateway. He cut a horseman from the saddle, took the dead man's seat as the milling footmen poured out after him.

Then de Courtenai raced down the avenue toward the citadel. A sentry challenged him. Cairo was awakening. But the swift desert horse swooped falcon-like into the wastelands, in and out among the tombs, and toward the Mokkatam Hills . . .

At the first oasis, he mounted a racing camel whose owner's lance had been no match for de Courtenai's blood browned sword . . .

LATE one night, the sentries at the outer works of the Castle of Kerak challenged a solitary rider. They could not understand his answer. His camel collapsed, and his peaked helmet gleamed dully as he sprawled in the sand near his beast.

"Another infidel trick—" But they called the captain of the guard.

"De Courtenai!" The officer recognized the hawk's beak; the rest was grimy parchment drawn over bones, and a beard caked with dried blood. But when they gave him a flagon of wine, the returned spy spat the dust from his lips and croaked, "Where's Sieur Raynald?"

Presently, supported by two men at arms, he faced his grim chief and reported, "El Adel's armies are marching to Kurdistan. To compel the atabeg of Mosul

to join Saladin. A holy war is brewing

"Well done, de Courtenai," approved Raynald, but as he turned, the spy detained him.

"A moment, sir. I raced Saladin's caravan from Cairo. It's bound for Damascus. On the road that passes not far from our eastern boundary. We can seize it. El Adel has a captive. Elinor, the daughter of the sieur de Montfried."

Raynald cursed, shook his grizzled head. "Can't do it. That damned truce! I'd like to help you. With that moon calf look of yours, when you ought to be thinking of food and rest. But forget it."

Then de Courtenai played his last card. "Wait—there's something else I forgot. Sitti Zayda, Saladin's sister, is with the caravan."

"God's death! Are you certain?" Raynald caught the other's shoulder.

"I learned that in El Adel's palace. But the truce, Sieur Raynald?"

It was now a horse of a different color. "Truce—body of God!" Raynald stormed. "I didn't make the truce! That pagan-loving Raymond of Tripoli—that weak-kneed King of Jerusalem—they made it! What a chance! After thirteen years in a Turk's prison!"

Raynald paced the flagging like a caged tiger. His sword-seamed face was exalted. "Get some rest! You, Guilford, send out scouts! Don't worry, lad—we'll get that girl for you. But if Saladin's sister isn't in that train, I'll hang you by your heels!"

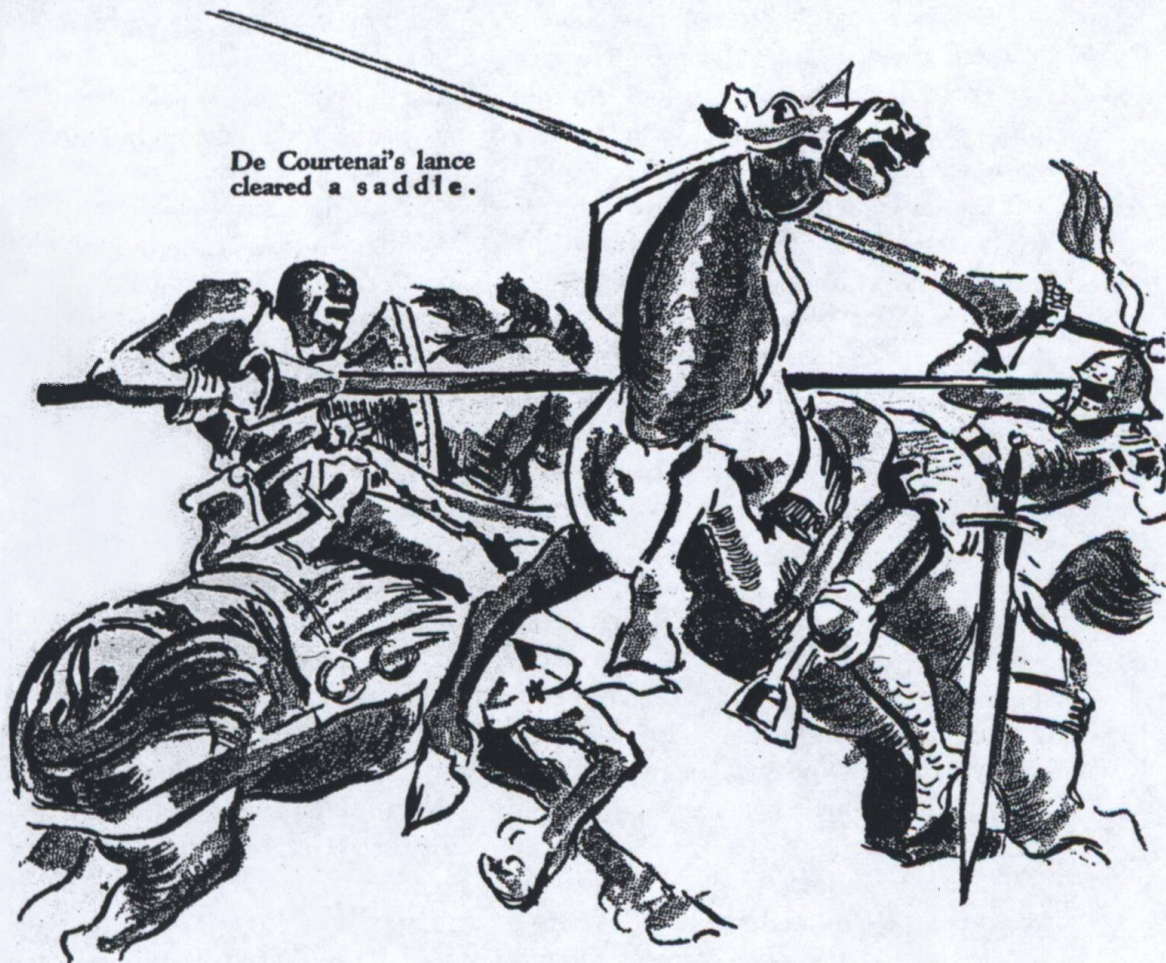
KERAK was already buzzing. The *snick-snick-snick* of whetstones on steel was the last sound that de Courtenai heard as he flung himself on a pallet of rushes. That, and the brazen blare of trumpets, was the first sound he heard, a full day later, when he stretched his aching limbs and tottered to his feet.

All day he scanned the shimmering horizon. Late in the afternoon, a white cloud rose toward the brazen sky. Many camels . . . fast camels—Saladin's camel, and Satan take all truces!

As the sun set, the iron men of Kerak rided down the steep hill. De Courtenai now wore his cross hilted sword, and the vizor of his flat-topped helmet masked his

muttered command passed down the column.

The nomad free lances swung from the troop. De Courtenai's heart hammered beneath his hauberk; hammered as it never had since his first battle. Time dragged as he pictured the nomads making a vast circle, looping back to the caravan's further flank—



De Courtenai's lance cleared a saddle.

face. He rode beside Raynald, and behind them came all the other wolves of Kerak; fierce Franks and lean Arab nomads who plundered all men alike.

Neither drum nor trumpet sounded. These men knew the desert and its warfare. They were intent on surprising the camp whose fires were a small winking red in the distance. There was only the muted voice of armor and curb chains muffled to avoid any betraying clank. And later, a

Time unending . . . and then he heard it, a far off yell, the rush of camels' padding feet, the drumming hoofs of desert horses. He lowered his lance, leaned forward in the saddle.

"Hold it, fool!" yelled Raynald. "Wait till they're sure the nomads are running—wait—"

But de Courtenai's beast stretched long legs. Devil take strategy! The caravan guards were already in triumphant pur-

suit of the nomads. The camel train would not race into the darkness with its precious cargo.

He charged into the glare of waving torches, riding down the Negro footmen. Arrows rattled against his armor. A platoon of horse, about to take up the pursuit of the nomads, wheeled about at the howling. Scimitars whirling, mail agleam in the light of a blazing tent, they swooped into the oasis.

De Courtenai's lance cleared a saddle. Another — and splintered as it swept a Kurdish horseman to the sand. He pivoted, and his sword flailed into the pack that enclosed him. A blade licked up from the ground. His horse lurched, hamstrung.

But the yell of triumph was drowned by the rumble of hoofs from the rear. Women screamed. Fallen torches set other tents aflame. Grooms galloped frantically across the desert. The wolves of Kerak had arrived.

THEY swept the camp clear, reformed and met the main guard that came from its phantom chase across the sand. De Courtenai, again on horse, rode through the confusion to join in the last stroke of destruction. But as he passed a broad silken pavilion, a squad of Turkish guards charged out. In their center was a veiled woman, and beside her was one whose red hair trailed like a banner in the leaping flames: Sitti Zayda, and Elinor.

El Adel's *mamluks*, whom no alarm could draw from their loyal mistress! De Courtenai spurred his beast athwart their path. Scimitars danced against his shoulders, hammered his casque. Lances tore into his hauberk, and blades licked at his maddened horse. But he stood in the stirrups, wedged in the heart of the pack. Sword gripped in both hands, he whirled it, and the chaff from his mill was red.

Then the rear guard troop from Kerak

poured in. De Courtenai's dripping blade waved them away from the captives. Elinor slipped from her horse and to his saddle bow. One arm steadied her; his other hand seized the veiled woman before she could bolt.

It was all over except for guards beyond the fire glow, fighting back to back until thirsty blades cut them down. And that had scarcely ended when Raynald returned from his red work at the further fringe of the oasis.

He reined in, eyed Elinor's white loveliness, and boomed, "God's blood, de Courtenai! I don't blame you. But I've found something sweeter!"

He leaned over in the saddle, reached for the Saracen girl's gold embroidered veil. De Courtenai's protest was too late. The frail fabric yielded, and her cape came with it in Raynald's great paw. Bare faced and bare headed; lustrous black hair all agleam with great rubies; pearls shimmered against her olive tinted throat, and a pearl pendant nestled in the hollow of her breast.

In the eyes of a Moslem, this was exposure shameful as the nudity of the slave market.

"My lord the wolf." Zayda's voice trembled with fury, and the glow of cheek and breast was more than the fire's reflection. "Saladin's own hand will cut that arm from your body."

The Lord of Kerak laughed gustily. "Let him seek me, any day."

"Sieur de Châtillon," interposed de Courtenai, impressed by the girl's proud bearing, "it's not her fault, your thirteen years' captivity."

Elinor caught Raynald's arm. "As a favor, let her be veiled."

Raynald shrugged, gestured to the trumpeter. Recall rang above the dying crackle of the flames, and soon the wolves of

Kerak were marching across the desert with their loot.

Elinor refused a horse. Arms twined about de Courtenai's blood splashed neck, bare shoulder leaning against his slashed hauberk, she whispered, "Take off your helmet. So I can see you. Every minute, as long as I can. It's so wonderful—I can't believe it—I heard in Cairo that father escaped—"

He doffed his battered casque, drew her toward him till she gasped from his fierce

"It's not that," she explained, "this raid will mean war. It's my fault—"



"My lord the wolf, Saladin's own hand will cut that arm from your body."

embrace. Then in the moonlight he saw that her eyes were tear-gleaming, and sorrowful as her face.

"I'll send a message to your father. He won't worry long—"

"A dozen wars!" he laughed. "This is worth them."

"No. It's the end for the Crusader's power. The holy fire has left them. In Cairo I heard that. Saladin is uniting all the infidel tribes who used to fight each other instead of us. The King of Jerusalem is an oaf. Count Raymond of Tripoli is more Saracen than Christian. We'll be swept into the sea—"

"We'll go back to France, you and I!" He kissed the qualms from her red mouth, but not the fear from his own heart. Elinor was right. Not this year, or next, but in the end. Islam had become a consuming flame.

THE rising moon welcomed the wolves to Kerak. Sieur Raynald ushered Elinor and Sitti Zayda to apartments in an isolated turret in the great black castle. He relished his vengeance and said, "Lady Elinor, I give you a king's sister to dress your hair!"

But the smouldering eyes of the Saracenic princess did not brighten. She knew the lord of Kerak and his undying hatred for her race.

"Rest while we drink," was de Courtenai's final word at the massive door. "Vengeance is sleep for Sieur Raynald. But you won't hear the splash of wine up there in the turret."

"Try and break away," whispered Elinor.

"You'd better bolt the door," he warned, knowing that she would not.

Down in the sombre acre of dining room, Sieur Raynald and his wolves feasted and drank. Circassian girls from the caravan poured their wine. Flickering torchlight kissed their unveiled beauty, brought fire from their gilded hair. Syrian slaves with languorous black eyes sang to the music of pearl inlaid rebeks.

"Bring out that wine from Samos!" roared Raynald, pounding his flagon against the board. "Out of the deepest

cellar! What we can't drink now, time will lap up! Dry dusty time—time that makes old men of me and Saladin—puts a white beard on my vengeance—"

"You've brought him out of his hole, Sieur Raynald!" boomed hook nosed Guilford, and others shouted, "Here's your war, Father of Wolves!"

So they drank and planned. War it must be, for they had seized a caravan that their overlord, the King of Jerusalem, had given protection.

But de Courtenai's thoughts were in the far off turret. . . . He watched the dancing girls from Hindustan, part of the royal loot. Their breasts were masked by hemispheres of gold, and their writhing stomachs were pale gold in the torch glow. The jewelled pendants of their broad girdles winked with the sensuous sway of their hips, and their black eyes seconded the passionate voice of the *sitars*.

When the table was cleared, half the wolves of Kerak were beneath it. Wine blazed in their eyes and dripped from the beards of those who were still in their chairs. They pounded their flagons as the nautch girls from El Adel's train swayed down the length of the table. Their slim legs twinkled, smiled through the frail scarlet skirts that swirled with their turning, rising hip-high, settling faster than the eye could follow.

The planning for war was over. The Syrian slaves left their corners, joined the girls from Hindustan. Their lips were ready for any master. Sieur Raynald slapped de Courtenai on the shoulder, nearly knocking him from his chair. "Go to the turret! *Pardieu!* She's waiting for you!"

He welcomed his dismissal, and laughed as Sieur Raynald reached for the nautch girl de Courtenai had thrust aside. As he stalked through the halls, he regretted a

frayed doublet and patched cape, the last of his once rich wardrobe.

SHE was waiting, eyes aglow — until they misted from his kiss. He carried her to the massive bench set into the turret's overhanging gallery. The poison sweetness of oriental perfumes no longer tainted her outlandish borrowed garb. In the shadows, all he could see was whiteness that reminded him of home and far off France.

He had kissed many women in many a mad Syrian night. But Elinor was a wonder that made him feel awkward and unworthy. To have her beside him was enough. Or so the thought was in his wine dizzied brain, until her nearness inflamed him, and she whispered, "Don't ever leave me! Love me as long as you can—there's war tomorrow — I'll be in Tiberias, waiting—"

And that was heady logic . . .

"I don't care why you left France . . . whose husband you killed," she murmured finally. "Father will let me marry you. After last night—"

But a cry cut into their kisses; low, wrathful, like the scream of a panther. It was Saladin's high spirited sister. "Dog and father of many dogs—"

Glass spattered. Cloth ripped. A triumphant laugh raised bellowing echoes. Sieur Raynald was seeking vengeance. De Courtenai leaped to his feet. Elinor followed, seeking a taper from a far alcove.

Zayda it was, and Sieur Raynald's powerful hands were more than full. Her gown hung in shreds to her slim waist, but her hennaed nails were raking his face.

"My lord," shouted de Courtenai, seizing Raynald by the shoulder, "you're drunk—this isn't man's vengeance—"

The wolf of Kerak whirled, flung Zayda asprawl. He was weaving on his feet, yet cat-quick for all of that. De Courtenai

flung up an empty hand to strike aside Sieur Raynald's dagger slash.

"Stop!" screamed Elinor. "She was good to me—as she could be—"

Sieur Raynald lunged, raging.

Zayda scrambled to her feet. "Saladin's own hands will cut the arms from you!"

But Elinor settled it as de Courtenai grappled with his wrath crazed chief. She smote him over the head with a candlestick, and he dropped.

"By God!" panted de Courtenai. "He's dead—"

The three eyed one another.

But Raynald was too drunk to be killed easily. He grunted, came to his knees, well sobered. "Maybe you're right, de Courtenai," he said thickly. "Take her away. Take them both to Tiberias. If that heathen wench is untouched, we can bargain with Saladin. Win time for that thin blooded King of Jerusalem to collect his wits and prepare for war."

He reeled, blinked. "Tonight, de Courtenai. Before the news spreads and the marches are thick with Saladin's men."

"But you, Sieur Raynald?"

"I stay to hold Kerak. Until those fools on the coast need me!"

SO THAT dawn, de Courtenai and a fairly sober squad of the wolf's pack set out for the black gorge of the Dead Sea.

As he rode, de Courtenai said to his men, "This infidel girl is Lady Elinor's maid. The first man who noises it about Jerusalem that she is Saladin's sister gets his skull split to the chin!"

And the wolves knew their captain.

Sitti Zayda said to him, "Why do you do this for me, *ya emir*?"

"For her sake, King's Sister," he answered in Arabic. "Because of you, not her, the wolf of Kerak made his raid. You were her fortune."

"Allah does what he will do," Zayda answered, shrugging her cape closer about her. "It was written."

And de Courtenai began to know why the holy fire of the crusades had dimmed. For a century, between battles, the invading Franks had rubbed elbows with the Moslem. They could no longer as fervently hate these people who accepted any turn of fortune as the unquestioned will of the One True God. The Crusader was no longer certain as he once had been; like himself, the Moslem revered Christ as a prophet.

King Guy of Jerusalem blustered and trembled when, days later, he received de Courtenai's report. The grim Templars brightened. Their Grand Master, iron hearted Gerard de Rideford, caressed his sword. But swarthy Count Raymond of Tripoli pulled his sharp face into sombre angles.

"This is not well, de Courtenai. We had two more years of truce. Two more years to prepare against Saladin's growing power. And with diplomacy—"

"Christ's blood!" growled the wolf's cub. "Were diplomats sent to hold Kerak? Sharpen sword, *monsieur le compte!* We've got—"

But he checked himself before he blurted out that Saladin's sister was a hostage. He could not betray that high spirited girl to this lukewarm pack; each night on the long march with Elinor had made him more grateful to Zayda. His Moslem disguise had been more than skin deep; Arab-like, he felt that Zayda was part of Elinor's *kismet*.

"We've got," he resumed, "the advantage of assembling before Saladin gets the news."

As he turned on his heel, Count Raymond detained him. "Raynald should be hanged by the heels, the hot-headed fool! But take a message to my wife in Tiberias.

If you will be so good, *monsieur*."

"At your pleasure, Sieur Raymond."

"King Guy's council," said the Count of Tripoli, "has appointed Nablûs as the rallying point. Tell her to send messengers north from Tiberias to Tripoli. And to Antioch."

At dawn, de Courtenai's party left Jerusalem.

"I'm afraid," shuddered Elinor. "God can't bless our love. It's causing war—fresh war, when there could have been two years' peace—"

"But war in the end, just the same," de Courtenai finished.

"There is no God but Allah," murmured the veiled maid-servant who rode the ambling jenny. "He does what he will do, and may he give my brother the right arm of Raynald!"

WHEN de Courtenai left the banks of the Jordan to skirt the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, he overtook villagers heading northward. Dust rose as far as he could see the road, and dust clouds trailed down the vine clad slopes, cut the dark green of olive groves, the ripe gold of wheat in the flatlands. The country was alive, and each beast of burden was heaped mountain high; not with farm produce, but with household goods.

The countryside was heading for Tiberias, and de Courtenai could taste fear in the very air. "Oh Uncle," he shouted to a grizzled Syrian bent double with the burden he carried, "what festival brings you from the hills?"

"Saladin has come to harvest!" moaned the woman at his side, stumbling from the naked children that ran at her heels. "The Turks come down from Damascus—last night we saw the flames of villages—"

They were on their way to Tiberias and the shelter of its walls. De Courtenai cursed, gestured at the gray towers and

walls of the city and the blue of the sea behind, where it bowed out to Mejdal. He had lost too much time. Some survivor of the caravan had ridden north. Saladin must have received the news in Damascus!

They ploughed on through the stream of peasants that blocked the road. They were caught by the vortex that poured into the gates of Tiberias that evening. The walls were manned, and knights with fresh crosses sewed to their surcoats spurred about, directing the men at arms who carried rocks and oil and sheaves of arrows to the parapets. It was stale news that de Courtenai brought to Eschiva, Count Raymond's wife and châtelaine of Tiberias.

"Madame," said de Courtenai when the countess received him in a hall all astir with her clanking captains, "I bring you greetings from *monsieur le compte*. But instead of giving you his message, I will take your news to him."

The blonde châtelaine thanked him, called for food and wine for his weary party. Then she said to Elinor, "Your father reached Tiberias, but his wounds are—" She checked herself.

"Tell me!" Elinor's nails dug into her palms.

"He died praying for your safety." Eschiva drew the white-faced girl to her side. "But you are welcome—to whatever war leaves us."

Elinor swallowed a sob, smiled bravely. She caught de Courtenai's hand and said, "It has brought me Jehan, *madame*. It will leave me with him. And this pagan girl who was kind to me during my captivity."

Eschiva's weary eyes brightened. "Sieur de Courtenai, the priests will soon be too busy with the dying. But there will be time for them to do a happier duty."

Elinor turned from the châtelaine's arm.

"Jehan," she said, "I'm so very much alone—and if you can love me, after the ruin I've caused—"

His kiss cut short her words of self-reproach. Then he turned to bow to the countess. "*Madame*, where is this priest?"

The countess laughed softly. "De Courtenai, give this poor girl a chance to get over that long march! And you're dying on your feet. Tomorrow—forgive me, but these officers are enough to drive one woman crazy!"

She turned to the captains who came to report. A steward ushered the travelers to their quarters. The countess was right. De Courtenai was perishing of weariness; but his last thought was that with a night's rest, he could handle Saladin and all his armies . . .

AT FIRST it seemed that a far off storm was brewing. Still half asleep, de Courtenai gained his feet, saw the gray of dawn against his window bars. Then knew that the sullen rumble was the voice of saddle drums. Trumpets shook the city, and the shouts of men on the walls drove de Courtenai toward his armor. The hoofs of Saracen cavalry were shaking the earth. Saladin's advance guard had ridden day and night to strike before the city was prepared for siege.

He bounded to his door; Elinor's trembling fingers buckled his hauberk, laced his helmet. Sunrise reddened the Sea of Galilee. Leaning from the window, they could see the gleaming helmets of the advancing horde. A crescent of steel was enveloping the landward side of Tiberias.

"Fate rides fast," said the girl in de Courtenai's arms. "God—look at them—" It was lighter now, and she could distinguish the black standards of Islam, the dirty brown of camels and the brown robes of Bedouin lancers who followed the wave of cavalry. "No! Don't go—not yet—"

He could not shake her loose. "I've got to join them." He gestured toward the squires who helped armored knights to their horses in the court below; to the horse and foot that already sortied from the city gates, pennons a-flutter and field music blaring.

"No — it'll be a siege — you're worn out—" she begged. "Tomorrow—there'll be days a-plenty for that!"

Her lips sapped his resolution. But Elinor recoiled from his arms when the châtelaine's quiet voice broke in, "Sieur de Courtenai, she's right. I'm recalling the hotheads who just left without orders. But you can serve us all. As no one else can.

"How, *madame*?"

"Ride to rallying point at Nablûs. Warn my husband and the king. More than the advance guard is surrounding us. A messenger arrived before dawn. It's the main body of Saladin's army."

Her slender arm reached beyond the embrasure, indicating the turbanned men who were unloading parts of siege engines from the backs of camels, and assembling the fitted beams.

"You can get through, disguised as an infidel. No one else could have done what you did in Cairo."

"No one," echoed Elinor, lips suddenly gray as she thought of one man, and that man her lover, facing Saladin's horde.

"I can," said de Courtenai, removing his flat topped helmet. "By slipping to the lake. Getting beyond their flank."

"Zayda," Elinor whispered fiercely, close in his arms. "Couldn't we make her buy them off?"

"No woman could stop that army! She's your luck. Don't betray her."

Then de Courtenai followed the Chatelaine to choose a Saracen's weapons from the armory. . . .

LATER, a patrol filed from a sally port, fanned out, charged at the besiegers. Dust and the wide line of steel blotted the enemy from de Courtenai's eye. When the charge of the Franks melted before a hail of Turkish arrows, he was afloat, unperceived by Moslems who followed the retreating horsemen to the very walls.

Miles south, his swarthy Turcople boatmen set him ashore. De Courtenai had no horse, nor was any to be found in that deserted lakeside. But a mule grazing beyond an abandoned village served his purpose. So he rode, turban wound to hide his helmet, a flowing cape to conceal his chain mail and scimitar.

The Wolf of Kerak was at Nablûs when de Courtenai gave the message to the council. "I left soon after you did," he laughed, "to prod these cattle into the field. But where's that heathen hell cat?"

"In Tiberias." This unexpected encounter with his chief left de Courtenai no other answer. Had he chosen a lie, he could not have convinced Sieur Raynald that Zayda had escaped. "But the Saracens won't raise the siege on her account—it's gone too far for bargaining."

The strategy of the Crusaders was direct enough: go north at once with what forces had gathered, menace the Saracen flank and block their southward march. In the meanwhile, the rest of the Franks could assemble and then join the advance guard.

The column of horse and foot set out the following dawn, an iron serpent that wound across the sun drenched plain. Heat devils danced ahead, and low hanging dust lingered behind. Armor speedily became blistering hot. Sweat blackened leather jerkins, foam whitened the horse gear—until the fierce breath of Palestine dried out both man and beast, and bitter dust burned eye and lip and nostril.

Slow, relentless, massive; giant men, ponderous mounts, heavy lances, going

north to meet lean horsemen who swooped like falcons across the desert's face. De Courtenai put pebbles into his dry mouth and husbanded his leather flask of brackish water like his chief. He had but one thirst: for battle beneath the walls of Tiberias.

Scouts came and went. Rumors were thicker than the dust. Tiberias had capitulated . . . Saladin had died in battle at Antioch, and victorious Franks were hurrying south to join their comrades . . . but that night, the blaze of looted villages winked from far off hilltops.

A second day. Then the third: a baking, stifling hell. Footmen stumbled over the furnace-hot, rocky terrain, and horses fell beneath the weight of armored riders. But at last they reached the shade and cool water of the springs at Seffuriyeh.

"Another day's march!" De Courtenai unlaced his helmet.

"The wolves of Kerak," growled Sieur Raynald, "could go tonight and strike at dawn!"

But there was no advance in the morning. Couriers came from the flank guards, and this time there were no rumors. Men riddled with lance and arrow were riding in from the Jordan. They had barely escaped the Saracen column that came from the east to ford the river and march along the Sea of Galilee toward Tiberias.

Taki-ud-Din, Saladin's nephew, had arrived with a second army of Kurdish mountaineers, bearded Bedouins, the atabegs of Mosul with their horse-tail standards. All Islam was in motion and moving swiftly.

The council of the Franks temporized. "Wait for reinforcements!" was a many-voiced demand that drowned the impatient clamor of Sieur Raynald, and de Courtenai's taunt to Count Raymond: "Coward! Your wife and your castle besieged—and you wait for men!"



DAYS passed. June ended, and July's flame burned the land. Troops, Templars, Knights of the Hospital, lords of outlying fortresses had come to Seffuriyeh to reinforce King Guy's army. All the power of the Franks was massed; but valor and strength were weakened by dissension.

Sieur Raynald and de Courtenai forced the issue. That was when a haggard courier came from Tiberias. Lady Eschiva could not much longer hold the beleaguered city.

"God's death!" stormed de Courtenai. "We can cut through! Ask Sieur Raynald!"

But Count Raymond, though haggard from brooding over his wife's peril, shook his head. "No. We've waited too long. There is not a well between here and Tiberias. Not a drop of water. Our men

would be dead on their feet before we met the Saracens."

"How many times can a man die?" mocked grim de Rideford, the Templar. "Or have you made another private bargain with Saladin?"

Count Raymond's sharp face whitened with wrath. He gripped his sword-hilt, but King Guy intervened. The count answered, wearily, "By God and the Holy Cross that goes before us into battle, I would rather lose my wife and castle than doom an army. You, de Courtenai—would you give all these men to the sword to save Lady Elinor—do you love her more than I my wife?"

"All these and as many more!" flared de Courtenai.

"And I'll lead them!" Sieur Raynald thundered.

They turned blazing eyes to the king who gnawed his blond moustache. He glanced helplessly from face to face. The rumble of voices dizzied him; some seconded Count Raymond's heroic sacrifice, some damned it as treachery, cowardice. And then de Rideford, Master of the Templars, advanced a pace.

"My lord king," he said, "I gave you the treasure I held in trust for the King of England. It has paid all these troops you summoned in this extremity."

"Lead us!" stormed the wolf of Kerak. And de Courtenai added, "Through hell if you will—let thirst drive us to Galilee!"

Count Raymond raised his hand, but de Courtenai's voice was a contagious fire, and so was the gleam in the Templar's eye. Though King Guy gestured for silence, it was his white face that stilled them.

"Lords, knights, burghers—we advance at dawn!"

FROM the hills about the well of Sef-furiyeh they marched east toward

Galilee. And the sun that baked them that day made all former heat a coolness; a slow torment of choking dust and parched lips. Men lagged, stumbled, rose again as the horsemen smote them with the flat of swords.

But de Courtenai and the wolves of Kerak mocked thirst. This was no worse than any desert march. Elinor was beyond the steep ridge that blocked the view of cool Galilee. Her welcoming arms seemed to reach out, urge him on.

Midway across the Plain of Turan, Turkish archers swooped from the flanking hills, taunting the advance guard, halting the main body while the wolves of Kerak met them in their own game. Harassed on the entire front, backing and filling, the Frankish army wore itself out, making no progress, nor yet closing with the elusive horsemen.

In camp that night the last water skin was emptied. Haggard men dropped in their tracks to sleep. Weary horsemen patrolled to guard against surprise. And priests moved softly to and fro, administering the sacraments to those who would die in the morning.

"*Pardieu!*" De Courtenai's dry lips twisted, but he refused to touch the water he had hoarded against the next day's march. "We were wrong, Sieur Raynald! These poor devils will die of thirst. We might have known they couldn't stand it."

The old wolf laughed as he sucked a cross bow bolt to save water. "God's blood, Jehan! Is that girl making you a weakling?"

"No. But the lives of these men are on my head and yours." Too late, de Courtenai realized that Elinor should have left Tiberias with him. But who could have foreseen Taki-ud-Din's army, the last fatal reinforcement to Saladin's horde?

A red sun rose into a brazen sky, fierce promise of the torment ahead. Trumpets

blared down the long line of spears, and pennons drooped in the still air. De Courtenai and the wolves of Kerak were the king's body guard; and with them went the True Cross, encased in gold. They trotted out, and as the ranks wavered from the broken ground, Sieur Raynald gestured to the dust cloud far ahead.

"God's death! They've come to welcome us!"

Cymbals clanged. Saddle drums muttered. The hills flung back the sonorous war cry of the Moslem. The Saracens had cut down the outposts; and the battle began before the march was half under way.

The two forces clashed in the deserted village of Lubiye. Dust clouds obscured the sun, and companies lost each other in the confusion. De Courtenai led the charge to the center of crescent. Lance shattered, he hewed with his blade.

Yard by yard, sheer weight of horse and man ploughed into the whirlpool of swooping horsemen. Arrows peppered de Courtenai like hail, lances bit his hauberk; but Sieur Raynald and the wolves smote home. Water and Tiberias were ahead. Death was behind.

"They're breaking!" He spurred his wounded horse into that hell roar of drums and thundering hoofs.

But as they advanced, the tips of the crescent closed in. Exhaustion killed more than did Turkish arrow or scimitar stroke. And narrow gullies broke the front of the advancing pike men. The battle became raging clusters of unorganized combat. Saracen cavalry swooped through gaps, diving to attack, then swiftly retreating. They had water at their backs and they were fresh.

"Once more!" roared Sieur Raynald, pausing at the king's side. "We're through the village! Guilford—de Courtenai—over there—"

COURAGE flamed anew. Men half dead of thirst took life from desperation. Scattered companies formed, aligned, shoulder to shoulder. Knights massed to lead the way. Over the next crest, then down the steep slope to the fresh waters of Galilee—



"How many times can a man die?" mocked grim de Rideford.

But a new foe met them. They saw too late why the enemy fled. The tamarisk brush of the gullies was aflame, and dense smoke billowed to join the dust. The hollow beyond the village was a furnace. Sparks rained, and arrows beyond number hissed through the enveloping curtain of fire.

Back—around — flank exposed — they

formed again, those who were not cut down. Ahead, above the blazing gullies, was barren ground. De Courtenai toiled up the slope of the crescent shaped hill. There, on the "Horns of Hattin," what remained of the Frankish army gathered around its king and the True Cross. Only a handful; the wolves of Kerak, and Templars pledged to accept no quarter—though none would be offered here.

King Guy wielded a broken sword. Shoulder to shoulder they stood, notched blades and axes, hacked armor still turning the Saracen charge. Then footmen closed in, driven ahead by the cavalry to overwhelm the king and his standard, whatever the cost.

Sieur Raynald went down. De Courtenai whirled, sword in both hands. It bit deep, slashed wide. But the Templar guarding his back caught a lance between the teeth. A mace smashed down on de Courtenai's dented helmet. He stumbled, dazed by the shock. And a surge of Turks trampled him into the ground, stifling him, weighting the blade he strove to recover. Another blow—the red sunset became black—

NIGHT had veiled the Horns of Hattin when de Courtenai crawled from among the dead. Ahead of him were the fires of Saladin's camp, and above was a moon that picked out the armor of the dead. Bit by bit he remembered, and as his strength returned, he dug into the tangle of Frank and Moslem about him. But he did not find Sieur Raynald nor the king.

A water skin from the saddle of a dead camel gave him fresh life, and with it, fresh woe. All this slaughter was on his head; his strategy had brought this to pass, and Sieur Raynald was a captive.

Desperation moved him. What he had done in Cairo, he could do again. He un-

buckled his armor, stripped a raw boned Kurd he found at the foot of the slope. He bandaged his wounds, armed himself anew. His brain was a fevered maze; he knew only that Elinor was in Tiberias, and Sieur Raynald in the Saracen camp. Perhaps he had thus far escaped Saladin's notice.

De Courtenai moved without plan or stealth. Madness succeeded where reason could not. He passed the lines, stumbled among the Moslems who squatted about guard fires. A word here—a word there—a battered, reeling Kurd was no novelty in that camp. Thus he heard the last heavy word. Tiberias had capitulated; with the Franks doomed at Hattin, the countess had no other choice. Elinor, captive again—

He was now too numb to move except by instinct. Find Saladin, assume Sieur Raynald's guilt. Ransom Elinor. Meet Saladin, stab him, and go down in a whirl of blades. Everything was confused, chaotic.

He halted near a pavilion lit by many torches. There were guards—in yellow khalats, emirs in gilded mail, bearded scribes and clerks; slaves and musicians. He knew that he was right, even before he saw that thin man whose weary face was darker than his beard; a frail man in black, older than El Adel, governor of Cairo, but with features like his.

Saladin, seated on a rug spread on the earth. Picked swordsmen about him, and others guarding the captives he faced. There was the blonde King of Jerusalem, and Sieur Raynald, sword-slashed but arrogant. The Sultan clapped his hands. A slave stepped to his side, presented a flagon of sherbert chilled by snow from Lebanon.

Saladin rose, took the flagon and with his own hands offered it to Guy of Jerusalem. De Courtenai relaxed. No man who tasted the Sultan's food and drink would bend his neck beneath the heads-

man's sword. The King, lips black with dust, could scarcely speak his thanks. He took a swallow, turned to hand the drink to Saladin's mortal enemy, the wolf of Kerak.

"Thank God," muttered de Courtenai. "Merciful in victory—maybe he doesn't know about Zayda—maybe—"

HE trembled, watching the flagon rise to Sieur Raynald's parched mouth. No one dashed it from his lips. And then de Courtenai's blood froze. Saladin said, "Drink, lord of the wolf pack. But your king gave it to you, not I."

Sieur Raynald started. Strong arms seized King Guy, who understood. Saladin's thin scimitar hissed from its sheath. De Courtenai's yell shook the wits of the bodyguard. He leaped into the pavilion, his own blade dancing.

But he was not quick enough to block the sultan's stroke. The keen crescent slashed through flesh and bone, shearing the right arm Sieur Raynald raised. He sank beneath the flailing steel of the guards who closed in to finish what their master had begun; and rough hands gripped the madman who cursed the grim faced Sultan.

Weight and weariness overpowered de Courtenai. King Guy was pale as he stared at the red heap that shuddered on the ground.

Saladin smiled. "You are a king, and

under my protection. But that man affronted the honor of my house and broke a safeguard." He turned to de Courtenai. "Another wolf, and loyal to the end?"

"Strike again!" challenged de Courtenai. "They kept me from you."

"A madman is in the hand of Allah," countered Saladin. "And you came tonight as a Kurd. As you came to Cairo and my brother's palace. Your life is yours, de Courtenai."

De Courtenai scarcely heard for the drumming in his ears. Saladin reassured him. "The power of the Franks ended this day on the Horns of Hattin. Others may come, but Islam is ready and waiting. So go your way. And take with you the red-haired girl who was my sister's maid."

He gestured to the curtain that divided the front of the pavilion from the back. De Courtenai bowed to the conquering king and the conquered; then he followed a *mamluk* down the silken passageway to the rear.

He still could not believe. Not until he saw Elinor and the tears that gleamed in her incredulous eyes.

"You—Jehan—but they told me," she sobbed against his dusty mail, "you were dead—Saladin sent men to capture you alive—"

"I cut them down before they could tell me!" He laughed exultantly, and his arms closed about that white loveliness which had led him to the Horns of Hattin.

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