

The Pilgrim's Shell

FERGAN THE QUARRYMAN

A Tale From the Feudal Times

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TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL FRENCH

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PART II.—THE CRUSADE.

CHAPTER I.

THE SYRIAN DESERT.

The sun of Palestine inundates with its blinding and scorching light, a desert covered with reddish sand. As far as the eye reaches, not a house is seen, not a tree, not a bush, not a blade of grass, not a pebble. Not a sparrow could find shelter in this vast expanse. Everywhere a shifting sand, fine as ash, radiates back in more torrid temperature the heat imparted to it by that flaming sun, vaulted by a fiery sky that dips in the western horizon into a zone of burning vapor. Here and yonder, half buried in the waves of sand that are periodically raised by the gales of these regions, appear the whitened bones of men and children, horses, asses, oxen and camels. The flesh of these bodies has been devoured by vultures, jackals and lions. The Saracen proverb is verified: "The Christians find here shelter only in the belly of the vultures, the jackals and the lions!" These decomposing human and other debris trace across the desert the route to Marhala, a city situated ten days' march from Jerusalem,—the holy city toward which converge the several armies of the Crusaders from Gaul, Germany, Italy and England, marching to the conquest of an empty tomb.

If in this solitude there are skeletons and corpses half devoured, there are also dying and living beings. Numerous are the dying, few, on the contrary, the living; and the latter would count themselves happy if the dead and the dying around them were the worst of their plight. Here are the Crusaders, who, in their credulity, left the year before the "ungrateful soil of the Occident" for the "miraculous land of the Orient," where they arrived after a voyage of eleven or twelve hundred leagues. The bulk of the army that left Gaul, then under the command of Bohemund, Prince of Tarento, slowly melted away yonder, in the midst of the thick cloud of dust raised by the marching Crusaders. In their wake followed a long train of stragglers, scattered helter-skelter,—women, children, the wounded, the infirm, the sick, a mass of wretchedness dying of thirst, heat and fatigue. Here and there they drop down by the way in this boundless desert, never to rise again.

The least to be pitied among these stragglers are those who, having lost their horses, resolutely mounted an ass, an ox, a goat, occasionally one of those huge Syrian mastiffs, three feet in height. They thus drag along at the gait of the animal they ride, their swords on their side, their lances at their backs. In order to protect themselves from the consuming heat, that, descending at right angles on their skulls, often caused insanity or death, they carry strange head-pieces. Some shelter their heads under a piece of cloth spread out by means of sticks, that they hold in their hands in the manner of a dais; cleverer ones have plaited the dried leaves of the date plant into broad chaplets that shade their brows; the larger number wore a species of mask made of shreds of cloth, and perforated with a hole at the place of the eyes to protect their eye-lids from a dust so scorching and copious that it produced painful inflammations, and often led to death.

At a great distance from these Crusaders followed the foot-passengers in grotesque costumes, and sinking to their knees in the shifting sand, whose mere burning contact rendered intolerable the excoaration of their feet, worn to the quick by the road. Their limbs bandaged in dirty rags, the wounded tramped along painfully, leaning on their staffs. Women, gasping for breath, carried their children on their backs, or dragged them heaped upon rude sledges that they pulled after them with the aid of their husbands. Among these wretches, almost wholly in tatters, some were seen in bizarre accoutrement. There were men, who barely covered with a crazy frock-coat, yet sported on their heads a rich turban of Oriental material; others, out at toes, wore a splendid cloak of embroidered silk, dashed with spots of blood, like all the other spoils of pillage and massacre.

Suffocated with stifling heat, blinded with the dust that the march raised, streaming with perspiration, parched with a devouring thirst, their skins burnt by the sun, ill of humor, gloomy and discouraged, these wretched beings were tramping along, muttering imprecations against the Crusade, when they perceived a numerous and brilliant cavalcade approaching through thick clouds of dust from a great distance in the rear. At the head of the cavalcade and mounted upon a spirited Arabian horse, black as ebony, advanced a young man in splendid accoutrements. It is William IX, the handsome Duke of Aquitaine, the impious poet, the contemner of the Church, the seducer of Malborgiane, whose portrait he carried in Gaul upon his shield. But Malborgiane is now forgotten and cast off, like so many other victims of this great debauchee. William IX is advancing at the head of his men-at-arms. His face at once bold and bantering, is partially covered by a wrapper of white silk that falls upon his shoulders. The outlines of his elegant and supple figure are set off by a light tunic of purple color; his broad hose, worn loose in Oriental style, exposes his boots of green leather, wrought in silver and tipped with gold. William carries neither arms or armor. With his left hand he guides his horse; on his right, covered with a gauntlet of embroidered leather, sits his favorite falcon, hooded in scarlet and its legs ornamented with little gold bells. Such is the courage of this bird that often does its master fly against the vultures of the desert, as he more than once starts against the hyenas and jackals, the large hunting dogs with red collars that, breathing heavily, follow his horse. At the crupper of his prancing horse is a negro boy, eight or nine years of age, and quaintly arrayed. He car-

ries a large parasol, whose shade shelters the head of William. At the right of the duke, and towering above him with its large body, ambles a camel richly caparisoned. Another negro boy guides the animal seated in front of the double litter, which, closed in with silken curtains, is fastened with girths to the back and body of the animal, and is so contrived that in each of its compartments a person can be comfortably seated, protected from the sun and the dust. William often ensconced himself in one of them.

Beside William, rode the chevalier, Walter the Pennyless. Before his departure on the Crusade, the Gascon adventurer, pale, bony and tattered, bore a strong resemblance to the poor devil sketched on the upper part of his shield. Now, however, thanks to the sumptuousness of his dress, the knight recalls the second picture on his shield. From the pommel of his saddle hung a Venetian casque, which he had doffed for a turban, a more comfortable head-gear on the route. A long Dalmatic of light material, thrown over his rich armor, kept the latter from being heated in the burning rays of the sun. Of his poor equipment of yore, the Gascon preserved only his good sword, the Sweetheart of the Faith, and his little horse, the Sun of Glory. Surviving by the merest accident the perils and fatigues of the long passage, the Sun of Glory testified by the lustre of his coat to the good quality of the Saracen fodder, that he seemed to run short of as little as his master lacked provisions.

Behind these personages followed the equerries of the Duke of Aquitaine, carrying his standard, his sword, his lance and his shield, on which William was in the habit of carrying the pictures of his mistresses, the ephemeral objects of his libertine whims. Accordingly, the picture of Azenor the Pale, replacing that of Malborgiane, now occupied the center of the buckler; but, with a brazen refinement of corruption, other medallions, representing some of his numerous other concubines, surrounded the image of Azenor in token of homage.

The equerries led by the reins the duke's chargers, vigorous horses, covered and caparisoned in iron, carrying pendent from their saddles the several pieces of their master's armor. He could thus don his war harness when came the hour of battle, instead of supporting its oppressive weight during the long route. After the equerries came, led by black slaves taken from the Saracens, the mules and camels that were laden with the baggage and provisions of the duke. If hunger, thirst and fatigue decimated the masses, the noble Crusaders, thanks to their wealth, almost always escaped privations. One of William's camels was loaded with several bags of citron and large pouches filled with wine and with water,—inestimable commodities in a journey over the deserts.

About three hundred men-at-arms constituted the cavalcade of the Duke of Aquitaine. These cavaliers, the only survivors of a thousand warriors who departed on the Crusade, now habituated to battle, innured to fatigue and bronzed by the sun of Syria, had long braved the dangers of the murderous climate. Their heavy iron armor weighed on their robust bodies no more than a coat of gauze. Disdain for danger, together with ferocity, was depicted on their savage countenances. Many among them bore from the pommels of their saddles, as bloody trophies, some Saracen head freshly severed, and suspended from the single lock of hair that Mohammedans keep at the top of their skulls. The cavaliers of the duke were armed with strong ash or aspen-tree lances ornamented with streaming bannerets, and double-edged long swords, besides a battle axe or a spiked mace hanging from their saddles. Oval bucklers, hauberks or steel coats-of-arms, braces, greaves, iron jambars,—of such was their armor. The troop was rapidly riding through the bands of stragglers when a white slender hand parted the curtains of the litter beside which rode the duke, and a voice was heard calling:

"William, I am thirsty, let me have some water!"

"Azenor wishes to refresh herself," said the noble Crusader leaning in his horse and turning to Walter the Pennyless. "Fetch some water for my mistress. I know woman's impatience. Besides, the lips must not be allowed to languish that ask for a fresh drink or a warm kiss!"

"Seigneur duke, I shall fetch the drink, do you take care of the kiss," retorted the adventurer turning his horse's head toward the baggage, while, stooping down on his horse, the duke pushed his head under the curtain.

"Oh, William, only the other day my lips were white and frozen. The fire of your kisses has returned to them their reddish hue."

"Which proves that I can perform as great prodigies as you, my beautiful witch."

"You quit giving me that name, William. It recalls the days I spent in the turret of Nerweg Worse than a Wolf, whom I execrate,—days of shame and trial to me, and whose memory haunts me."

"But you are well revenged for those days of shame. Count Nerweg is now poorer than the lowest of his serfs as a result of his losses at the gaming tables of Joppa where he met such consummate gamblers that they won from him five thousand gold besans, his silver plate, his baggage, his horses, his arms and even his sword. By Satan! I imagine I see that Nerweg, that Worse than a Wolf, that Count of Plouernel, so rudely plucked at the start of his Crusade, fighting with an old cap on for helmet, a stick for a lance, and for charger an ass, a goat or good Palestine mastiff!"

"Let's drop that sad topic, and talk about yourself, who have been the dream of my youth. Now that I am yours, I should feel happy, and yet my heart is cruelly tormented. Your inconstancy makes me despair. I am dying with jealousy. Can it be that that infamous Perrette the Ribald has her share of your caresses?"

"What a frisky and bold girl that Perrette is! After the seige of Antioch, cup in hand, her hair to the breeze—"

"Be still, William, I am jealous of her!"

"Poor Ribald! She must have died on the route. She never turned up again after that moment."

"I could have strangled her with my hands, and Yolande, also!"

"A ravishing girl! What a beautiful shape! A skin of satin! One imagines, seeing her, the Diana of old resurrected!"

"You are pitiless!" replied Azenor with a tremulous voice. "I hate those two women."

"Let others conquer Jerusalem! As to me, I'm satisfied with conquering German, Saxon, Bohemian, Hungarian, Walachian, Moldavian, Bulgarian, Greek, Byzantine, Saracen, Syrian, Moorish and negro beauties. Yes, by Venus! If I am anxious to enter Jerusalem, it is for the purpose of capturing the handsomest of the Arabian virgins."

"You bold and debauched fellow, it is not an only woman I have to fear for a rival! I am crazy for this man! Woo is me!"

"In order to appease your anger, I shall confide to you that there is a whole race your jealousy has nothing to apprehend from. Heavens and earth! the mere sight of a woman of that one breed would make me as chaste as a saint, and would turn your lover into another St. Anthony!"

"Of what race are you speaking?"

"Of the Jews!" answered the Duke of Aquitaine with a look of disgust. "Oh, when I had all the Jews and Jewesses exterminated from my seignories, not one woman of that accursed species escaped the torture, and death!"

"Whence do you gather such a rage against those wretched people? What harm have they done you? You have shown yourself cruel towards them," said Azenor the Pale with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Blood of Christ! See me take a Jewess for mistress! a Jewess!" replied the duke, trembling anew. An instant later, wishing no doubt to disengage himself from the thoughts that haunted him, William cried out joyfully: "To the devil with the Jews, and long live Love! A sweet kiss, my charmer! A conversation on those infernal people leaves me an after-taste of sulphur and brimstone, as if I had tasted the kitchen of Satan! Let mine be the ambrosia of your kisses, of your passionate caresses, my loving one!"

A few distant cries and a tumult that broke out among the duke's men-at-arms interrupted his conversation with Azenor. He turned his head, and saw Walter the Pennyless riding towards him, holding a small vermilion cup in the hand that was free from his horse's bridle. "What noise is that?" asked the duke, taking the cup and passing it to Azenor.

"Seigneur duke, at the moment when your black slaves let down a pouch of water to fill this cup, into which I had first pressed the juice of two citrons and the sugar of one of the reeds found in this country and the marrow of which is as sweet as honey, the stragglers gathered around. 'Water! Water! I die of thirst!' cried some; 'My wife and children are dying for want!' cried others. By my sword, the Sweetheart of the Faith, never did frogs at a mid-summer drought croak more frightfully than those scamps. But some of your men-at-arms soon put an end to the frightful croaking, by laying about with their lances. The impudence of that rag-tag and bob-tail crowd is inconceivable! 'Where are those clear fountains that you promised us at our departure from Gaul?' they yelled in my ears; 'where are the refreshing shades?'"

"And what answer did you make, my merry Gascon, to those ignorant questioners?" asked the duke laughing, while Azenor, leaning out of the litter was imbibing and enjoying the contents of the little vermilion cup.

"I assumed the rude voice of my friend, Cuckoo Peter, and said to those brutes: 'Faith is a rich fountain that refreshes the soul. You have faith, ye soldiers of Christ. Dare you ask where are the shady gardens? Is not faith, besides a fountain, also an immense tree that spreads over the faithful its protecting branches? Rest yourselves, spread yourselves in that shade. Never will an earthly oak tree have afforded you a more delectable shelter under its leafy branches. Finally, if these various refreshments should not yet suffice you, then broil in the heat like fish under the sand!'"

"Well answered, my worthy Gascon!" And turning to his troop, the duke ordered in a loud voice: "On the march, and make haste, lest the army capture without us the city of Marhala, where a rich booty awaits us."

CHAPTER II.

SERF AND SEIGNEUR.

The cloud of dust raised by the troop of the Duke of Aquitaine was lost at a distance in a burning mist, whose reddish vapors were invading the horizon. Those among the stragglers who had resisted the fatigue, a consuming thirst, or painful wounds, followed haltingly, at great distances from one another, the road to Marhala, marked with so much human debris, above which flocks of vultures, for a moment frightened away, again leisurely flapped their wings. The last group of the stragglers had disappeared in the whirlwind of dust raised by the train, when three living creatures, a man, a woman and a child—Fergan, Joan the Hunchback and Colombaik—were left alone in the midst of the desert. Colombaik, dying with thirst, was stretched upon the sand beside his mother, whose sore feet, wrapped in blood-clotted rags, could no longer support her. On his knees beside them, his back turned to the sun, Fergan sought to shade his wife and child with his body. Not far from them, the corpses of a man and woman were in sight. An hour before the woman had succumbed to the agonies of childbirth, bringing forth a still child. The little being lay at the feet of its mother, almost shapeless, and already blackened and shriveled by the fiery sun. The man had been killed by the blow of a lance of one of the duke's men-at-arms for having tried to capture one of the water pouches.

Joan the Hunchback, seated beside Colombaik, whose head she held upon her knees, wept as she muttered: "Do you no longer hear me, dear heart? Do you not answer me?" The tears of the poor woman left their furrows on the dust-covered face of the child as they dropped, and ran down his cheeks to the corners of his parched lips. His eyes half shut, and feeling his face bathed in his mother's tears, Colombaik carried his fingers mechanically towards his cheeks and his mouth, as if seeking to quench his thirst with the maternal tears. "Oh!" muttered Joan, observing the motions of her child, "Oh, if but my blood could recall you to life!" And, struck by the idea, she said to the quarryman: "Fergan, take your knife and open one of my veins; we may be able to save the child!"

"I was myself thinking of letting him drink blood," answered Fergan; "but I am robuster than you—" and the serf stopped short, interrupted by the sound of a great flapping of wings above his head. He felt the air agitated around him, raised his eyes and saw an enormous brown vulture, its neck and head stripped of feathers, letting itself heavily down upon the corpse of the still-born child, seize the little body between its talons, and, carrying off its prey, rise into space emitting a prolonged cry. Joan and her husband, for a moment forgetful of their own agonies, followed with frightened eyes the circulating flight of the vulture, when the serf desisted, approaching from afar, a pilgrim mounted on an ass.

"Fergan," said Joan to the quarryman, whose eyes were fastened on the pilgrim, as he drew nearer and nearer, "Fergan, weakened as you are, if you lose blood for our child, you will perhaps die. I could not survive you. Who, then, would protect Colombaik? You can still walk and carry him on your shoulders. As to me, I am beyond proceeding. My bleeding feet refuse to

carry me. Let me sacrifice myself for our child. You will then dig me a grave in the sand, that I be not eaten up by the vultures or the wild beasts."

Instead of answering his wife, Fergan said to her sharply: "Joan, spread yourself on the ground; do not budge; pretend to be dead, as I shall. We are saved!" Saying which the serf threw himself down flat on his stomach beside his wife. Already the heavy breathing of the pilgrim's donkey was heard approaching. Though prodded, the beast moved slowly and with great effort, its legs sinking up to the knees in the sand. Its master, a man of tall and robust stature, was clad in a tattered brown robe, that fell to his feet, shod in sandals. In order to protect himself against the heat of the sun, he had drawn over his head like a cowl the tippet of his robe, which was sprinkled over with shells and bore the red cross of the Crusader on the left shoulder. From the donkey's pack-saddle hung a knap-sack, together with a large pouch of water.

While drawing near the corpses of the man and the woman whose new-born child had just been carried off by the vulture, the pilgrim, speaking to himself, said in a low voice: "Dead bodies everywhere! The road to Marhala is paved with corpses!" Saying this he arrived near the place where Joan and Fergan lay motionless on the sand. "And still more dead bodies!" muttered the pilgrim, turning his head aside, and he kicked his mule with both heels to hasten its pace. Hardly had he gone a few steps, when, rising and springing forward with one bound, Fergan jumped on the crupper of the donkey, seized the traveler by the shoulders, threw him back and on the ground, and, placing both his knees on the pilgrim's chest, held him down while hurriedly calling: "Joan, there is a full pouch at the donkey's saddle, take it quick, and give our child to drink!" The courageous mother was not able to walk, but dragging herself on her knees and hands as far as the donkey, which had stood still after its master was thrown down, she succeeded in unfastening the pouch, and, weeping with joy she returned to her child, again dragging herself on her knees with the help of one hand while holding the pouch with the other, muttering: "Provided it is not too late, my God, and that our child can be recalled to life!"

While Joan hastened to give her child to drink in the hope of plucking him from the claws of death, Fergan was engaged in a violent struggle with the traveler, whose traits he could not distinguish, the tippet of the latter's robe having wound itself completely around his head. As robust as the quarryman, this man made violent efforts to extricate himself from the embrace of the serf. "I mean you no harm," Fergan was saying to him, continuing to struggle with his adversary. "My child is dying of thirst! you have in your pouch a precious beverage; I shall take it in the knowledge that you would have answered with a refusal, had I requested you for a few drops of the water that it contains."

"Oh, that I have not a single weapon to kill this dog who steals away my water!" groaned the pilgrim while redoubling his efforts to disengage himself. "In a minute I would have killed you; I would have cut you to pieces, vagabond!"

"I know this voice!" cried out Fergan, and brusquely pulling aside the folds of the tippet that covered the face of the traveler, the serf remained dumb with astonishment. Under him lay Nerweg, Worse than a Wolf!

The seigneur of Plouernel profiting by that moment of confusion, freed himself from Fergan's hold, rose, and thinking only of his pouch of water, cast his eyes about him. He saw a few steps away Joan, radiant with joy, yet tearful, on her knees near Colombaik, and holding the pouch which the child pressed with his two little hands, while he drank with avidity. He seemed to regain life in the measure that he slaked his consuming thirst.

"That bastard is drinking up my water!" Nerweg yelled with fury. "In this desert, water is life," and he was about to rush upon Joan and her child when the quarryman, recovering from his stupor, seized the Count of Plouernel between his robust arms: "We are not here in your seignory; you covered with iron and I naked! Here we are man to man, body to body! In the midst of this desert we are equals, Nerweg! I shall have your life, or you shall have mine. Fight for it!"

A terrific struggle ensued, in the midst of the cries of Joan and Colombaik, who trembled for husband and for father. The seigneur of Plouernel was a man of redoubtable strength; but the serf, although weakened with privation and fatigue, drew energy from his hatred of his implacable enemy. A Gallic serf, Fergan was struggling with a descendant of the Nerwegs! The combatants swayed forward and back, silent, desperate, breast to breast, face to face, livid, terrible, foaming with rage, palpitating with a homicidal ardor, furiously pressing each other, under a brassy sky, in the midst of thick clouds of dust raised by their own feet. On their knees, their hands joined in prayer, passing alternately from hope to fear, Joan and Colombaik dared not approach the two athletes, who ever and anon reappeared through the cloud of dust, frightful to behold. Suddenly the thud of a heavy fall was heard, simultaneously with the exhausted voice of Fergan: "Woe is me! Oh, my wife! Oh, my child!" Fergan lay prone upon the sand, vainly battling against Nerweg, who, having gained the upper hand, sought to strangle his adversary. He held him under his left knee while raising himself by his right leg that he stretched out with a violent effort. At the cries of despair, "My wife! My child!" emitted by the serf, Colombaik ran to his father, threw himself flat on the ground and clinging to the bare and stiff leg of Nerweg, the child bit him in the calf. The sharp and unexpected pain drew from the Count a scream, and he turned back sharply towards Colombaik. Fergan, thus freed from the grasp of his seigneur, lost no time to spring upon his feet, and now keeping the advantage, succeeded in throwing Nerweg down. Calling his son to his aid, the serf managed to pinion the arms of the Count with a long cord that held his own robe at the waist, and to bind his legs with the fastenings of his own sandals. Feeling his strength exhausted by this desperate combat, Fergan, ready to faint, covered with perspiration, threw himself on the sand beside Joan and her son. These hastened to approach to his lips the pouch in which there still was some water left, while the seigneur of Plouernel, breathing fast and broken, shot at the quarryman looks of impotent rage.

"We are saved!" said Fergan when he had slaked his thirst and felt his strength returning. "By husbanding the water still left in this pouch, we shall have enough to reach Marhala with you and the child to ride on, my poor Joan. I can still walk. As to the seigneur of Plouernel," Fergan proceeded with a somber look, "he will soon need neither provision nor conveyance!" And rising to his feet, while his wife and child followed his movements with uneasy eyes, the serf approached Nerweg. The

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