

# **The Enchanted Crusade**

**By Geoff St. Reynard**

**Saracen blades held no fear for Godwin; but  
now he faced Mufaddal's sorcery with the fate of  
the beautiful Ramizail—and England—resting upon**

Just as daybreak burst over the rim of the desert, the dying man heard the crunch of horses' hooves on sand. He lifted his head and croaked as loudly as collapsing lungs would let him, saying thrice over, "In the name of God, help!" Then he pitched on his nose again and lay still, unable to move so much as an eyelash.

There was the grit of sand under the light tread of men, and a voice said, "Name of all camels! What a collection of vulture-victuals this one is!"

"I doubt it was he cried out," said another voice. "He must have been dead for a decade." This voice then rendered a belch of classic proportions. "Damn those figs," it said.

"If you will eat three pounds at a breakfast, Godwin love," said a throaty feminine voice, all full of honey and laughter, "you must expect some few repercussions."

The dying man collected his will and the scraps of strength that were left in his tortured body, and shoving at the sand with one arm managed to roll over on his back. The horizon-cleared sun lanced sickeningly across his eyeballs, adding one more pain to the thousand which beset him. Three vague dark shapes bent above him.

"By the very God, he lives! Give him a drink."

Water, cool and terrible and yet incredibly wondrous to lips and blackened gums that had tasted nothing save blood for what must surely be centuries, dribbled down across his cheeks, ran into his mouth, reached through his rasped

throat for his belly. He gurgled and thought he was drowning, and it seemed a splendid death.

But he had something to say, something of such importance that it had dragged him across this endless waste of hellish sand long after a missionless man would have given up and died. He recollected the message and blinked his nearly sightless eyes once or twice, and made futile little motions toward a sitting position. A brawny arm at his back tilted him upright. "Easy, man. You're all but dead. Don't strive so. Die easily."

"Godwin, you're a born diplomat," said the woman's voice. "Why don't you come right out and tell him he looks like two coppers' worth of dogmeat?"

"Well, he does," Godwin said grimly. "No sense in lying to a chap who's about to give up the spirit, Ramizail. No real man wants that."

"Listen," croaked the dying one. "Who are you?"

"Three adventurers," said the voice that had sworn by the very God. It was an elderly voice but full of vigor. "Three homeless travelers pledged to right wrongs and defeat hell's minions wherever they may be found."

"Thanks to the Holy Sepulcher," groaned the dying one. "Perhaps all may be well."

The man holding him up jerked with surprise. "Here," he said, with a kind of tender roughness, "are you a Crusader, man? Are you a Frank?"

"English," said he. "Sir Malcolm du Findley." He made a hideous rattling noise but from somewhere deep in his soul the power came to make him go on. "El Iskandariya. Big ship. Full of rats."

"What's he burbling about?" asked the deep voice of Godwin. "Poor devil's clean out of his head. Rats? Did rats do this to him?"

"Rats are full of plague," said Sir Malcolm faintly.

"Yes, yes," said the girl. "Ship full of rats, rats full of plague. Go on."

"Can a rat have the plague?" asked Godwin.

"Well, can it?" asked the girl. "Mihrjan, answer me."

A fourth voice, one like muted thunder over distant dunes, said, "Assuredly, O Mistress of My Life, though 'tis not known generally by men in this time."

"He knows it, evidently," said the girl. "Do go on, Sir Malcolm. What about these rats?"

"Ship at El Iskandariya. Going to England, spread plague, decimate whole country. No more Crusades. Saracen plot."

"Now by God and by God, no Saracen stoops that low!" shouted the elderly man.

"Yes. Whole crew of them. Leader—"

"Yes, man; the leader?" urged Godwin.

"Mufaddal al Mamun. Big black-faced swine. His gang can do—anything. Say they can wipe out nine-tenths of England with plague rats, then France, Germany. No more Crusades." He widened his bloody-veined eyes and retching, said, "Tell Richard! Get word to Richard! Got to sink that ship, slay Mufaddal al Mamun! Slay his sorcerers! Promise!"

"We promise," said Godwin. "Decimate England, eh? Plague-infested rats, ha? My halidom! I think not!"

Sir Malcolm, with a grimace that might have been a grin, collapsed in upon himself and died, as peacefully as a man can when he has come seventy miles on foot, over baking sand beneath a searing sun of brass, with a third of his skin flayed off.

## CHAPTER II

Godwin stood up. "Where's El Iskandariya?" he asked.

El Sareuk rubbed his beard with one slim brown hand. "You call it Alexandria. About twenty-five leagues west it lies, my great-thewed friend, on the banks of the Mediterranean."

The Lord Mohammed El Sareuk was a man of sixty, slightly built, fanatic-faced, whose body always seemed on the point of disintegrating from sheer concentration of energy. His boots were of red Cordovan leather worked with gold thread; his clothing was blue silk and rose samite, topped by the green turban of a Hadji; under the soft robes

he wore gold-washed Turkish light armor, and over the whole outfit a black Bedouin burnous. He was weaponed well: from his girdle hung a Damascus steel scimitar, and a beautiful gold-etched steel knife with a silver hilt and a ruby in the pommel. Once this man had led a great harka in the forces of Saladin; but love of Godwin had turned him to a rover, an adventurer who called no tent his own and no man his peer save the tall young Englishman he now addressed.

"What is it, Godwin? Twenty-five leagues to Alexandria, or eighty-odd to Richard the Lion Heart in Jaffa?"

The girl spoke before Godwin could answer. "Oh, heavens, uncle 'tis the twenty-five to the plague ship, without a doubt, because what would Godwin want with a thousand Crusaders at his back when he can wade in single-handed against an unknown number of enemies and grab the glory all for himself? An Englishman won't fight if he can't fight against odds, after all. Need you ask such a silly question?"

The girl, now: as tall and lovely a piece as ever came from the union of a crusading British knight and a Saracen lass who traced descent from Solomon. Her eyes were violet, pure clear liquid violet such as is seen once in a thousand years; her lips were sensuous, full and red; her hair was a rainbow-flashing mass of ink-black curls. Of her complexion nothing derogatory could be said, and of her full-breasted figure even less. She wore copper and cream-colored robes of as fine and yet tough silk as you might find anywhere in the world of 1191, with a black turban to which she managed to give a jaunty and most un-Moslem-

like air. Once this girl had been a sorceress, and controlled the entire tribe of djinn by virtue of a golden sigil and ring bequeathed her by her mother; her home and heritage and much of her power she had given up, to be a nomad and traipse about the world, all for love of Godwin.

This Godwin said now, "Ye gods! How can there be any question of Alexandria or Jaffa?" He held up a big hard hand and ticked off points on his fingers. "One: Dick, or Richard the Lion Nose, or whatever the hell they call him, thinks I'm a madman. If I took him a tale of rats with plague being shipped to England, he'd have me locked up for an idiot, and I can hardly blame him. Two: it's a good eighty-five leagues to Jaffa, and then more than a hundred from there back to Alexandria, eating up God knows how many days, the way the Franks travel. We three can do it from here in two days' time. There are decent people in Alexandria who'll fight with us against any such hellish scheme, surely. El Sareuk is a Hadji and has a certain reputation. Can't you command help from the Arabs, old wolf?"

"I can. He has the right of it, my dear."

"Well, at least we can have Mihrjan's djinn transport us there in comfort, and aid us in the squelching of this silly plot of Mufaddal's," said the girl, wiping sweat off her patrician nose.

Godwin frowned. He tugged at his beard. "My dear, you know my sentiments about the djinn. It's not knightly to use their supernatural powers when all one's fighting is a pack



of mortals. Besides, it takes the fun out of adventuring. If a man can cry up a legion of ten-foot bogies to do his bidding, how can he call himself a gentleman rover? No, we'll not employ Mihrjan. Not that I have anything against you, Mihrjan," he added hastily.

A voice from the air beside them said, like an enormous drum finding speech in its depths, "O Lord of Ten Thousand, I esteem thy principles without flaw. Truly thou art a man among men, and would be a djinni amongst djinn!"

"Oh, pooh," said the girl, Ramizail. "If I hadn't given you the ring in a rash moment of affection, Godwin, I'd lock it to the sigil and wish you home in England this minute, you hulking wonderful stupid baby."

Invisible Mihrjan chuckled, but made no other comment. Godwin said, "Let's mount and ride. The horses are fresh and even over this abominable sand we ought to make a good distance before sundown."

"What of Sir Malcolm?" asked Ramizail.

"What of him?" said Godwin. "I've laid him out properly. A Crusader doesn't expect to be buried when there's work afoot. Come on, to horse!" He went racing to his great Spanish charger and vaulted into the saddle from behind, a trick left over from his Crusading days, when he could do it in full weight of battle armor.

And this Godwin, what of him? A man of thirty-one hard winters and thirty-one baking summers that had leathered

his skin and steeled his sinews, while leaving his spirit boyish and irrepressible. A tiger-muscled, blue-fire-eyed, yellow-bearded man, quick to rage, quick to forgiveness, quick to gorge food and drink and quick to go hungry when needs must. A man educated to horse and hound and every weapon, bred to the saddle and the brawl, reckless and headstrong, generous and full of brag and bounce. A man of six feet and four inches, weighing sixteen stone, with scarce a thought in his handsome head but of war and hunting and being a gentleman according to his lights, of loving Ramizail and trotting happily over the world righting wrongs and murdering villains and being Godwin, Godwin of England.

And there was more to the man than all this, too, for had he not been till this early winter of 1191 the King of England?

It mattered little now, for Godwin was Godwin and no more. Not that that was not quite enough! thought Ramizail, resignedly mounting her bay palfrey. Sometimes it was a vast deal too much. She cast a glance of affection at her affianced. She shook her lovely head. What a man!

### CHAPTER III

Mufaddal al Mamun, a tall, bulky, brown-eyed, flat-nosed, dark-faced hulk of a man, was eating his midday meal. It consisted of *ful* beans fried in *samn*, millet bread, onions, cucumbers, and hard-boiled eggs, washed down with quarts of strong *buzah*, beer brewed from fermented bread. It was a poor man's meal, but Mufaddal preferred to eat the

cheapest of foods, for he thought that it made him appear fanatical and single-minded and self-sacrificing to his followers. As a matter of fact, they merely thought him a tasteless slob. He held the same warped opinion about his garments, and clad himself daily in a gray *gallabiyah*, the gown-like dress of the fellahin, with long loose cotton pants and a soiled green skullcap. His cohorts made jokes about it and regarded him with distaste, for many of them were proud Turks and high-blooded Bedouins, who took a ferocious pride in garbing themselves as well as possible and eating the best provender available. They followed him, however, because he was a wild terrible fighter, because he was half-brother to three potent sorcerers, and because he could think up much dirtier plots against the infidel hordes of the Crusaders than any other Saracen alive.

As he popped the last egg whole into his broad gash of a mouth, and smashed it between great yellow snaggleteeth, wishing it were the skull of Richard Coeur de Lion, one of his sorcerers came sliding in the door. There was a cool wind blowing through the house from the sea, which lay not more than thirty yards from its portals; but the sorcerer's presence seemed to heat the breeze and taint it with the stench of sulphur and brimstone. Mufaddal looked even more irritable than usual.

"What do you want, offspring of a leprous unwed camel?"

"May you live a thousand years, Mufaddal, my brother."

"This is a noble sentiment. Did you interrupt my eating—that is to say, my meditation—to wish me long life, imbecile?"

The sorcerer looked meditatively at his left forefinger, which turned into a blue snake and hissed at the big dirty man across the laden cloth. Mufaddal jumped and said hastily, "This, of course, is only my rough manner of speaking, Heraj, and naturally you know you are my favorite brother and may come in any time you like."

"Yes. Well, I was going to say, Mufaddal, that complications are lifting their ugly heads in this business of the plague ship."

"What? Are the rats not loaded into the hold, and the job accomplished with but seventeen fellahin bitten? Did we not slay the seventeen before they could come near anyone? And is the ship not as sound as any ship that sails the Mediterranean, having new sails and a new mast, and her belly caulked no later than last month?"

"Ah, very true," agreed Heraj.

"Does every rat not carry at least one flea, cleverly infected with the plague by your own subtle methods?"

"Fleas and rats are as deadly as any Saracen blade, and the grisly death they carry will spread far and wide when they are let off the ship on the coasts of England."

"And lastly, is all not in readiness to sail come the day after tomorrow?"

"True," said Heraj gloomily. "But we can't send it out before then, as our chosen crew will not be assembled till that morning, especially the far-experienced Nubian slave who is coming from Tripoli to guide the ship on its perilous course; and by the wrath of Eblis, you and I may not live to see the dawn of that day, near though you deem it!"

"What are you talking about?" roared Mufaddal.

"I just had a message from a friend who happens to be a hawk in his present incarnation. He tells me that Godwin is coming."

"This is terrible news indeed," said Mufaddal, fiercely mimicking the sorcerer's worried tones. "I quake with fright. I throw myself on the infinite mercy of Allah." He rose and flexed his arms, that were each as thick as a youth's body. "Heraj, who in the name of the seven hells is Godwin?"

"You may well ask," said Heraj, even more gloomily than before. "Nobody seems to know exactly. I can't get a line on his history before a month ago, when he rode out of Jaffa in company with a renegade Saracen chieftain called El Sareuk and a girl named Ramizail. But he's a brawny young champion, whatever his antecedents, and his girl controls the djinn."

Mufaddal sat down on the floor with vast violence. His dark face turned purple. His yellow teeth showed in a grin of sudden terror. "I betake me to Allah! *That* Ramizail?"

"Yes, that one. Well, this hawk says—"

"Can you understand the hawk tongue?"

"This one speaks Arabic. He's a fairly talented fellow, for a hawk. He says that Godwin and the others are pledged to go rampaging over the earth, righting wrongs, and they've heard of the plague ship and are on their way to destroy it. And us, I suppose," added Heraj.

"Name of forty goats," said Mufaddal worriedly. "I fear not this Godwin, but the djinn..." He stared up at the sorcerer. "Can't you do something to stop them? You and Pepi and Habu?"

"What? You know my limitations, and I'm the strongest of the three. I can do a lot, Mufaddal, but I can't combat djinn. The chief of them, Mihrjan, even travels with this Ramizail wench, personally. She controls him and his race by a sigil and ring that came down to her from Solomon."

"Curse it, Heraj, if this ship doesn't sail, England will continue to send Crusaders to the East until they have conquered every inch of desert and city! It's got to sail! How did these loathsome adventurers hear of it?"

"They happened across that Englishman who escaped us, Sir Malcolm du Findley. The one that we started to flay last Thursday, before he crawled out a window and treacherously disappeared."

Mufaddal got off the floor. He hitched up his pants and retied the string that held them around his muscular waist. "Heraj," he said grimly, "I give you an hour to think of some way to stop them. Djinn or no djinn, that ship sails!"

## CHAPTER IV

By evening they had covered more than half the distance to Alexandria, and Godwin was persuaded to halt for a few hours of rest, the horses being weary with plunging through sand for such a long spell. "We'll ride again with the moon's zenith," said Godwin, as he went about picketing the horses. "Perhaps we can make the city by midday tomorrow."

Ramizail went off and stood by herself. "Mihrjan," she said softly.

"I am here, Beloved of Allah."

"Mihrjan, I'm sick of the same dreary food day after day. Godwin maintains that gentlemen rovers should fare roughly, to toughen their bodies. But I'm not a gentleman."

"Assuredly thou art not," said the invisible djinni, respect and male admiration nicely blended in his great voice.

"Then spread me a real feast! I want *couscous*, with almond stuffing, and wild rice, and some lemon juice, and certainly some white bread."

"Thy will is sweet, Mistress."

"Then oranges, and *asida*, and sugar. And about three gallons of sherbet. And Mihrjan, do you remember the time you brought me that confection out of a far time? The one you called silk chocolate?"

"Milk chocolate, O Daughter of All Delights."

"Bring me some of that, too. Put the meal on a damask cloth, with blue gauze to wipe the mouth, and the vessels must all be of purest crystal with gold rims."

"To hear is to obey, Little Queen of My Tribe."

"Be sure there's plenty for all of us, with a bowl of mice for Godwin's falcon Yellow-eyes, and remember that my lord and master eats like two-thirds of a regiment."

"Give me but four minutes, Mistress, and you shall see it spread beneath the trees of this oasis, beside the clear spring that bubbles through the sand."

She strolled back to her uncle and her betrothed, a secret smile on her lips. In the specified four minutes a banquet popped into sight just beside them. Godwin jumped.

"What the devil!"

"I'm hungry," said Ramizail, at once on the defensive.

"Mihrjan!" said Godwin, glaring at her. "You had him do this. How often must I tell you my sentiments concerning all this magic, witch-wench?"

"Never again, Godwin dear, for I know them by heart."

"Ramizail," he said angrily, his eyes sparkling blue, "this is going to stop here and now. When you gave me the ring, and thus shared your power over the djinn with me, you promised not to command Mihrjan to do anything I didn't approve of."

"Oh, well," grumbled the girl, "I'm hungry for real food!"



"Ramizail, give me the sigil!"

Her eyes blazed back at his. "Come and take it, you big oaf!"

El Sareuk leaned against a date palm and smiled to himself. It was always a toss-up as to which of these iron-willed people would win an argument. Godwin strode over to the girl, upsetting a goblet of pale pink sherbet with his foot, and took her by the shoulders. She hit him on the nose. He turned her over and smacked her on her lightly-clad bottom. She screeched and bit his leg. He dropped her on the sand and sat on her.

Mihrjan, invisible but no more than three feet from them, laughed deeply.

El Sareuk said to Yellow-eyes, the old peregrine falcon, who was sitting on his shoulder watching the brawl, "Thy master has met, if not his match, at least a very worthy foe!"

Godwin, after a great deal of fumbling, got hold of the sigil where it hung on a chain round her neck, and opened the clasp and took it off.

"Bully!" shrieked Ramizail. "Swaggering, bragging, girl-defeating bully! Give me that back!"

"Not a chance," said Godwin equably. He moved over and sat in the small of her back. He locked the sigil into the ring he wore on his little finger, and the designs of each caught the other and made a single lump of gold. "Now," he said, "I control the djinn."

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