

Sir Hugh of Tabarie

translated by

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In the years when Saladin was King, there lived a Prince in Galilee, who was named Sir Hugh of Tabarie. On a day he was with other Christian men who gave battle to the Turks, and, since it pleased God to cast His chivalry behind Him, Sir Hugh was taken prisoner, and many another stout knight with him. When dusk closed down on the field, the Prince was led before Saladin, who, calling him straightway to mind, rejoiced greatly and cried –

“Ah, Sir Hugh, now are you taken.”

“Sire,” answered the brave knight, “the greater grief is mine.”

“By my faith, Hugh, every reason have you for grief, since you must either pay your ransom or die.”

“Sire, I am more fain to pay ransom than to die, if by any means I may find the price you require of me.”

“Is that truly so?” said the King.

“Sire,” said Sir Hugh, “in the fewest words, what is the sum you demand of me?”

“I ask of you,” replied the King, “one hundred thousand besants.”

“Sire, such a sum is too great a ransom for a man of my lands to pay.”

“Hugh,” said the King, “you are so good a knight, and so hardy, that there is none who hears of your prison and this ransom, but will gladly send of his riches for your ease.”

“Sire,” said he, “since thus it must be, I promise to pay the sum you require, but what time do you grant me to find so mighty a ransom?”

“Hugh,” said the King, “I accord you the grace of one year. If within the year you count me out the tale of these besants, I will take it gladly; but if you fail to gain it, then must you return to your prison, and I will hold you more willingly still.”

“Sire, I pledge my word and my faith. Now deliver me such a safe conduct that I may return in surety to my own land.”

“Hugh, before you part I have a privy word to speak to you.”

“Sire, with all my heart, and where?”

“In this tent, close by.”

When they were entered into the pavilion, the Emperor Saladin sought to know of Sir Hugh in what fashion a man was made knight of the Christian chivalry, and required of him that he should show it to his eyes.

“Sire, whom then should I dub knight?”

“Myself,” answered the King.

“Sire, God forbid that I should be so false as to confer so high a gift and so fair a lordship even upon the body of so mighty a prince as you.”

“But wherefore?” said the King.

“For reason, sire, that your body is but an empty vessel.”

“Empty of what, Sir Hugh?”

“Sire, of Christianity and of baptism.”

“Hugh,” said he, “think not hardly of me because of this. You are in my hand, and if you do the thing that I require of you, what man is there to blame you greatly when you return to your own realm. I seek this grace of you, rather than of another, because you are the stoutest and most perfect knight that ever I may meet.”

“Sire,” said he, “I will show you what you seek to know, for were it but the will of God that you were a christened man, our chivalry would bear in you its fairest flower.”

“Hugh,” said he, “that may not be.”

Thereupon Sir Hugh made ready all things necessary for the making of a knight; and having trimmed the hair and beard of the King in seemly fashion, he caused him to enter within a bath, and inquired—

“Sire, do you understand the meaning of this water?”

“Hugh, of this I know nothing.”

“Sire, as the little child comes forth from the waters of baptism clean of sin, so should you issue from this bath washed pure of all stain and villainy.”

“By the law of the Prophet, Sir Hugh, it is a fair beginning.”

Then Sir Hugh brought the Sultan before an untouched bed, and having laid him therein, he said—

“Sire, this bed is the promise of that long rest in Paradise which you must gain by the toils of chivalry.”

So when the King had lain softly therein for a little space, Sir Hugh caused him to stand upon his feet, and having clothed him in a fair white vesture of linen and of silk, said—

“Sire, this spotless stole you first put on is but the symbol of a body held and guarded clean.”

Afterwards he set upon the King a gown of scarlet silk, and said—

“Sire, this vermeil robe keeps ever in your mind the blood a knight must shed in the service of his God and the defence of Holy Church.”

Then taking the King’s feet in his hands, he drew thereon shoes of brown leather, saying

“Sire, these brown shoes with which you are shod, signify the colour of that earth from which you came, and to which you must return; for whatever degree God permits you to attain, remember, O mortal man, that you are but dust.”

Then Sir Hugh raised the Sultan to his feet, and girt him with a white baldrick, saying—

“Sire, this white cincture I belt about your loins is the type of that chastity with which you must be girded withal. For he who would be worthy of such dignity as this must ever keep his body pure as any maid.”

After this was brought to Sir Hugh a pair of golden spurs, and these he did upon the shoes with which the Sultan was shod, saying—

“Sire, so swiftly as the destrier plunges in the fray at the prick of these spurs, so swiftly, so joyously, should you fight as a soldier of God for the defence of Holy Church.”

Then at the last Hugh took a sword, and holding it before the King, said—

“Sire, know you the three lessons of this glaive?”

“What lessons are these?”

“Courage, justice and loyalty. The cross at the hilt of his sword gives courage to the bearer, for when the brave knight girds his sword upon him he neither can, nor should, fear the strong Adversary himself. Again, sire, the two sharp edges of the blade teach loyalty and justice, for the

office of chivalry is this, to sustain the weak against the strong, the poor before the rich, uprightly and loyally."

The King listened to all these words very heedfully, and at the end inquired if there was nothing more that went to the making of a knight.

"Sire, there is one thing else, but that I dare not do."

"What thing is this?"

"It is the accolade."

"Grant me now this accolade, and tell me the meaning thereof."

"Sire, the accolade is a blow upon the neck given with a sword, and the significance thereof is that the newly made knight may always bear in mind the lord who did him that great courtesy. But such a stroke will I not deal to you, for it is not seemly, since I am here your prisoner."

That night Saladin, the mighty Sultan, feasted in his chamber, with the fifty greatest lords of his realm, emirs, governors and admirals, and Sir Hugh of Tabarie sat on a cushion at his feet. At the close of the banquet Sir Hugh rose up before the King and said—

"Sire, grant me grace. I may not forget that you bade me to seek out all fair and honourable lords, since there is none who would not gladly come to my help in this matter of my ransom. But, fair Sir King, in all the world shall I never find a lord so wise, so hardy, and so courteous as yourself. Since you have taught me this lesson, it is but just and right that I should pray you to be the first to grant me aid herein."

Then Saladin laughed loudly out of a merry heart, and said—

"Pray God that the end be as sweet as the beginning. Truly, Sir Hugh, I will not have it on my conscience that you miss your ransom because of any meanness of mine, and therefore, without guile, for my part I will give you fifty thousand good besants."

Then the great Sultan rose from his throne, and taking Prince Hugh with him, came to each of the lords in turn—emir, governor and admiral—and prayed of him aid in the business of this ransom. So all the lords gave largely out of a good heart, in such measure that Sir Hugh presently acquitted himself of his ransom, and returned to his own realm from amongst the Paynim.