

The SARACEN STEED

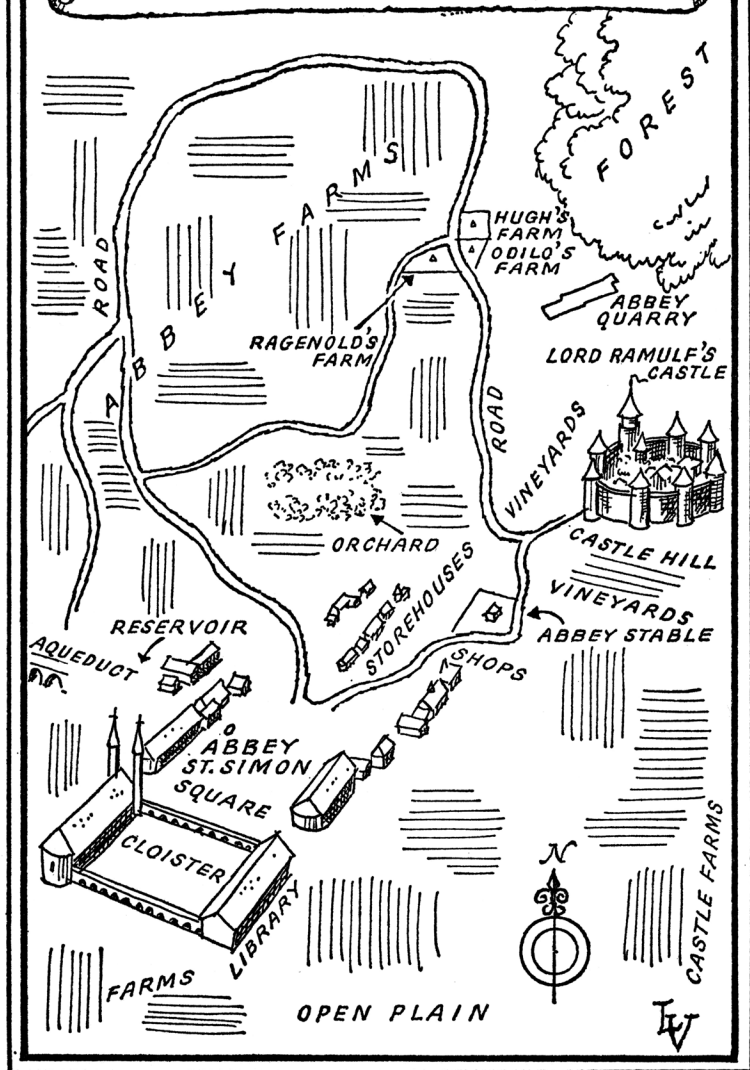
by
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THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY



Abbey St. Simon and Environs



In Old Aquitaine

OME, BERNO, no time for dozing!" cried Hugh, pausing in the midst of his chopping one morning in 732 A.D. "We've a hard day's work ahead of us if we're to finish this task."

Aptly was September called Wind-month on those plains of southwestern France, rolling toward the far Pyrenees. Through the night, fierce gusts had howled over the area's fertile farmlands, sending roof-tiles flying, scattering haystacks, and buffeting orchard and vineyard.

A dead tree had crashed to earth through the fence of one of the many farm plots surrounding Abbey St. Simon, and the two sun-bronzed country boys, in homespun tunics and pantaloons and heavy, crudely-made boots, had swung their axes since daybreak, clearing it away. After that, the reed fence which protected the field from the inroads of wild creatures would have to be repaired.

You might not have guessed that the boys were brothers. Hugh, a rangy, growing youth, with brown hair and eyes

and a good-natured face, tended to favor his Celtic forebears who had once occupied this old land of Gaul. Berno, four years younger, and, to his disgust, a few heads shorter, had inherited his crisp black curls and dark eyes from Latin conquerors. His features resembled those of the statues turned up by plows every now and then in the surrounding fields. For here, three centuries ago, as a great, arched aqueduct testified, had stood a Roman town.

That town, as was the case with so many others, had been razed by the barbarian hordes which had overrun Europe when the empire of the Caesars crumbled. It was an era of chaos for Duchy of Aquitaine, in which Abbey St. Simon was located. And out of the mingling of people had sprung boys like Hugh and Berno, part original stock, part Roman, part barbarian—heirs to a striving new Europe.

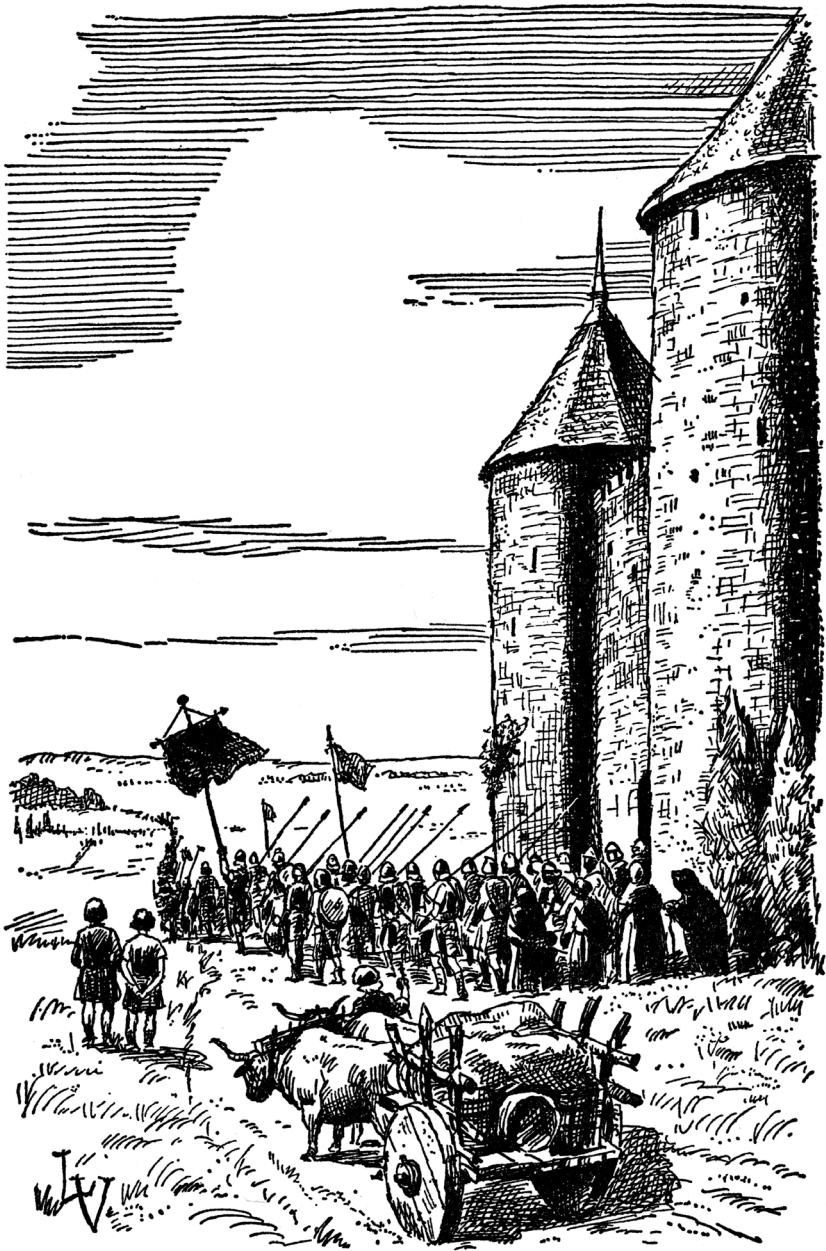
Young Berno had started the day industriously, matching ax-stroke for ax-stroke with Hugh. But as the sun had mounted higher, he had often stopped to shield his eyes and to gaze apprehensively southward over the plain beyond the patchwork of farm fields. Now, frowning mightily, lost in thought, he had not heard a word his brother had said.

“Berno!” Hugh studied him briefly, then called with a forced grin, “Dreaming doesn’t cut up trees any more than it mends fences!”

Down at the other end of the tree, Berno came to with a start. “I’ve been dreaming no more than you,” he protested. “You’ve looked yonder a few times yourself.”

Ax in hand, Hugh moved to the younger boy’s side, stretching his broad shoulders to ease them from the work of chopping. “So I have ... a *few* times.” He tousled Berno’s hair. “But not between every ax-stroke, lad.”

As he spoke, his eyes swung south and his strong jaw tightened.



*Rainulf the Bold had issued forth with his men-at-arms
from the castle.*

The horizon looked much as it usually did on any Wind-month morning, with the plain meeting a hazy sky streaked with scraggly wraiths of clouds.

But somewhere beyond its distant line the great battle might well be raging at this moment, the battle on whose outcome depended not only his family's future, not only the fate of Abbey St. Simon, but the destiny of all Aquitaine.

Two weeks had passed since Rainulf the Bold had issued forth with his men-at-arms from the castle on the nearby hill. Hugh and Berno had watched as, in dark silhouette, the force had descended to the plain.

Tall Lord Rainulf had ridden in front, head and shoulders above the horsemen who had trooped after him. Behind had trudged a file of foot soldiers, bearing swords and battle axes or shouldering spears.

Southward they had marched to join the army which Duke Odo of Aquitaine was mustering from all his domain to repel the Saracen invaders who had crossed the Pyrenees from Spain.

Since then, there had been occasional news from merchant mule trains carrying north wares from a threatened town, from processions of refugees evacuating the countryside. Their accounts had not been reassuring.

All through the south of Aquitaine, towns and castles had been captured and sacked, farms ravaged, inhabitants put to the sword. Abbeys and churches had been looted, used as stables, burned to the ground. Split into various mounted columns, the invaders had struck this way and that in the whirlwind Saracen fashion which made united resistance difficult.

Then last week, Lady Gertrude, wife of Lord Rainulf's brother, Lord Humbert, and her son, young Master Euric,

had arrived with a small entourage, fleeing their castle only a day's ride south.

They had brought word that the Saracens had remassed and were driving steadily northward, that Duke Odo was marching to head them off, that a pitched and very likely decisive battle was imminent.

Hugh had felt the strain of the days since then as much as anyone had. This morning, with the sun a blazing ball in the dusty sky, with a gritty wind lashing his hair, stinging his skin and smarting his eyes, he had felt especially on edge, though he had done his best to conceal it from Berno. Every whirling dust-devil had seemed a portent of disaster.

"Hugh ..." Berno broke the silence in a small, strange voice. "Do you think it's true that the Saracens—" The youngster took a deep breath. "Do you think they *really* have great, curved swords, twice as long as I am tall?"

"Now where did you hear that?" Hugh's lips compressed.

"Well ..."

"Don't tell me. Let me guess." Hugh made a play of thinking hard. "Was it by chance from our neighbor Ragenold?"

"Nay, not exactly."

"Oh! Then could it have been young Waifer?"

Berno flushed and looked at the ground.

"I knew it!" Hugh said, almost angrily. "Those two. Between Waifer and his father more wild tales have been spread than would fill all the books in the abbey library. I think they must lie awake nights, spinning them out of thin air."

"They didn't spin this out of thin air. They heard it from the peddler."

"What peddler?"

"A peddler who stopped with his cart on the edge of the

abbey farms yesterday. He'd just come up from the south. He knew all kinds of things about Saracens."

"Such as what?"

"He said that even the smallest of them is much taller than Lord Rainulf. That their horses are twice as big as ours. That there are so many of them that if they rode by ten abreast, it would take them a year to pass. And he said—"

"Spare me the rest!" pleaded Hugh. Swinging his ax, he buried it deeply in the trunk of the tree. "I'm honestly surprised at you, Berno," he said more evenly, folding his arms across his chest. "Swallowing stories like that. I almost think that if someone told you the Saracens had two heads and breathed fire and smoke, you'd be ready to believe it."

"But the peddler said—"

"I don't care what he said. Why, he probably hadn't been within miles of the fighting. Don't you see what he was up to? He wanted to draw a crowd about him so that he could sell his wares, and he knew that a sure way of doing so was to cry that he had news of the Saracens. Then he started hawking his goods, making people forget to bargain by filling their ears with frightening tales. Isn't that about what happened?"

"I guess he did sell quite a few things."

"Most of them worthless, no doubt."

"Well, I know you'll think so," said Berno. "But Ragenold and Waifer and many others bought all the amulets he had, especially those that were warranted to—"

"To ward off Saracens?"

"Aye! How did you know?"

"How did I know?" cried Hugh. "Berno, that's all you needed to hear. It shows how much truth there was in anything that peddler said. It also shows how foolish Ragenold and Waifer and others like them are, believing



Pulled this way and that, he held on with all his strength.