

## King Richard "Lion Heart" meets Sultan Saladin

### Advanced

**Sir Walter Scott** (1771 – 1832) was a popular Scottish writer. One might say he was the first internationally read novelist who catered to the (despicable, of course) common taste and thus made money. He wrote plenty of historical novels, always with valiant heroes doing heroic deeds, fair maidens in distress, and vicious villains needing to get hit hard with a good sword.

His partially still famous books include *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy*, *The Lady of The Lake*, and *The Bride of Lammermoor*. **Donizetti's** opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* is based on Scott's novel. You should definitely go see it if you have the opportunity. Consider: On their wedding night, Lucia stabs the bridegroom, succumbs to insanity, and dies; but not before singing at full throttle and in extremely high registers for a long time.

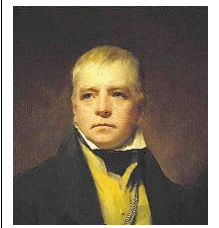
In 1825 Scott published "**Tales of the Crusaders**", a two volume cloak-and-dagger (plus swords) BS story with plenty of valiant knights, princes and physicians in disguise, kings, fair maidens, treacherous villains, and what not. The first volume is "*The Betrothed*"; the second volume "**The Talisman**" contains the famous and purely fictitious encounter of **King Richard the Lionheart** and **Sultan Saladin**, where they compare their swords.

Once more: King Richard the Lionheart and Sultan Saladin *never* met and thus never compared their swords. Note that pretty much *all* sword lore relating to the crusades is just as invented as this beauty.

The "Talisman" attempts to describe events at the end of the [Third Crusade](#). The plot goes like this: Scheming and partisan politics, as well as the illness of King Richard the Lionheart, are placing the Crusade in danger. The main characters are the Scottish knight Kenneth, based on the real David Earl of Huntingdon who did in fact return from the third Crusade in 1190, Richard the Lionheart, Saladin, and Edith Plantagenet, a relative of Richard.

Sir Thomas de Vaux of Gilsland is one of the two knights in attendance on the King. He has the role of the naive and a bit stupid sidekick of the hero, a must in novels like this for comic relief.

Here is the text of the part where the two main characters meet and compare their swords:



**Sir Walter Scott**  
Raeburn, 1822

He led the way accordingly to a splendid pavilion, where was everything that royal luxury could devise. De Vaux, who was in attendance, then removed the chappe (capa), or long riding-cloak, which Richard wore, and he stood before Saladin in the close dress which showed to advantage the strength and symmetry of his person, while it bore a strong contrast to the flowing robes which disguised the thin frame of the Eastern monarch. It was Richard's two-handed sword that chiefly attracted the attention of the Saracen—a broad, straight blade, the seemingly unwieldy length of which extended well-nigh from the shoulder to the heel of the wearer.

"Had I not," said Saladin, "seen this brand flaming in the front of battle, like that of Azrael, I had scarce believed that human arm could wield it. Might I request to see the Melech Ric strike one blow with it in peace, and in pure trial of strength?"

"Willingly, noble Saladin," answered Richard; and looking around for something whereon to exercise his strength, he saw a steel mace held by one of the attendants, the handle being of the same metal, and about an inch and a half in diameter. This he placed on a block of wood.

The anxiety of De Vaux for his master's honour led him to whisper in English, "For the blessed Virgin's sake, beware what you attempt, my liege! Your full strength is not as yet returned—give no triumph to the infidel."

"Peace, fool!" said Richard, standing firm on his ground, and casting a fierce glance around; "thinkest thou that I can fail in his presence?"

The glittering broadsword, wielded by both his hands, rose aloft to the King's left shoulder, circled round his head, descended with the sway of some terrific engine, and the bar of iron rolled on the ground in two pieces, as a woodsman would sever a sapling with a hedging-bill.

"By the head of the Prophet, a most wonderful blow!" said the Soldan, critically and accurately examining the iron bar which had been cut asunder; and the blade of the sword was so well tempered as to exhibit not the least token of having suffered by the feat it had performed. He then took the King's hand, and looking on the size and muscular strength which it exhibited, laughed as he placed it beside his own, so lank and thin, so inferior in brawn and sinew.

"Ay, look well," said De Vaux in English, "it will be long ere your long jackanape's fingers do such a feat with your fine gilded reaping-hook there."

"Silence, De Vaux," said Richard; "by Our Lady, he understands or guesses thy meaning—be not so broad, I pray thee."

The Soldan, indeed, presently said, "Something I would fain attempt—though wherefore should the

weak show their inferiority in presence of the strong? Yet each land hath its own exercises, and this may be new to the Melech Ric." So saying, he took from the floor a cushion of silk and down, and placed it upright on one end. "Can thy weapon, my brother, sever that cushion?" he said to King Richard.

"No, surely," replied the King; "no sword on earth, were it the Excalibur of King Arthur, can cut that which opposes no steady resistance to the blow."

"Mark, then," said Saladin; and tucking up the sleeve of his gown, showed his arm, thin indeed and spare, but which constant exercise had hardened into a mass consisting of nought but bone, brawn, and sinew. He unsheathed his scimitar, a curved and narrow blade, which glittered not like the swords of the Franks, but was, on the contrary, of a dull blue colour, marked with ten millions of meandering lines, which showed *how anxiously the metal had been welded* by the armourer.

Wielding this weapon, apparently so inefficient when compared to that of Richard, the Soldan stood resting his weight upon his left foot, which was slightly advanced; he balanced himself a little, as if to steady his aim; then stepping at once forward, drew the scimitar across the cushion, applying the edge so dexterously, and with so little apparent effort, that the cushion seemed rather to fall asunder than to be divided by violence.

"It is a juggler's trick," said De Vaux, darting forward and snatching up the portion of the cushion which had been cut off, as if to assure himself of the reality of the feat; "there is gramarye in this."

The Soldan seemed to comprehend him, for he undid the sort of veil which he had hitherto worn, laid it double along the edge of his sabre, extended the weapon edgeways in the air, and drawing it suddenly through the veil, although it hung on the blade entirely loose, severed that also into two parts, which floated to different sides of the tent, equally displaying the extreme temper and sharpness of the weapon, and the exquisite dexterity of him who used it.

Note that there is a myth inside a myth. Saladin's scimitar certainly had **not** been "*anxiously ... welded*" to produce "*ten millions of meandering lines*". I'm not sure if we know what kind of blade the real Saladin wielded but Scott describes in essence a wootz or "true damascene" blade that was made from one kind of steel. Scott may have known some hearsay about wootz blades. Their "secret" had no not yet been discovered (just as the "secret" of any steel), and the scientists [of his and later times](#) were mightily puzzled by this. King Richard's sword from around 1190 was most likely **not** pattern-welded either but made from [uniform steel](#).