

Chapter One: By The Waters of Death Creek

From the sea-wall on the coast of Essex, Rosamund looked out across the ocean eastwards. To right and left, but a little behind her, like guards attending the person of their sovereign, stood her cousins, the twin brethren, Godwin and Wulf, tall and shapely men. Godwin was still as a statue, his hands folded over the hilt of the long, scabbarded sword, of which the point was set on the ground before him, but Wulf, his brother, moved restlessly, and at length yawned aloud. They were beautiful to look at, all three of them, as they appeared in the splendour of their youth and health. The imperial Rosamund, dark-haired and eyed, ivory skinned and slender-waisted, a posy of marsh flowers in her hand; the pale, stately Godwin, with his dreaming face; and the bold-fronted, blue-eyed warrior, Wulf, Saxon to his finger-tips, notwithstanding his father's Norman blood.

At the sound of that unstifled yawn, Rosamund turned her head with the slow grace which marked her every movement.

"Would you sleep already, Wulf, and the sun not yet down?" she asked in her rich, low voice, which, perhaps because of its foreign accent, seemed quite different to that of any other woman.

"I think so, Rosamund," he answered. "It would serve to pass the

time, and now that you have finished gathering those yellow flowers which we rode so far to seek, the time--is somewhat long."

"Shame on you, Wulf," she said, smiling. "Look upon yonder sea and sky, at that sheet of bloom all gold and purple--"

"I have looked for hard on half an hour, Cousin Rosamund; also at your back and at Godwin's left arm and side-face, till in truth I thought myself kneeling in Stangate Priory staring at my father's effigy upon his tomb, while Prior John pattered the Mass. Why, if you stood it on its feet, it is Godwin, the same crossed hands resting on the sword, the same cold, silent face staring at the sky."

"Godwin as Godwin will no doubt one day be, or so he hopes--that is, if the saints give him grace to do such deeds as did our sire," interrupted his brother.

Wulf looked at him, and a curious flash of inspiration shone in his blue eyes.

"No, I think not," he answered; "the deeds you may do, and greater, but surely you will lie wrapped not in a shirt of mail, but with a monk's cowl at the last--unless a woman robs you of it and the quickest road to heaven. Tell me now, what are you

thinking of, you two--for I have been wondering in my dull way, and am curious to learn how far I stand from truth? Rosamund, speak first. Nay, not all the truth--a maid's thoughts are her own--but just the cream of it, that which rises to the top and should be skimmed."

Rosamund sighed. "I? I was thinking of the East, where the sun shines ever and the seas are blue as my girdle stones, and men are full of strange learning--"

"And women are men's slaves!" interrupted Wulf. "Still, it is natural that you should think of the East who have that blood in your veins, and high blood, if all tales be true. Say, Princess"--and he bowed the knee to her with an affectation of mockery which could not hide his earnest reverence--"say, Princess, my cousin, granddaughter of Ayoub and niece of the mighty monarch, Yusuf Salah-ed-din, do you wish to leave this pale land and visit your dominions in Egypt and in Syria?"

She listened, and at his words her eyes seemed to take fire, the stately form to erect itself, the breast to heave, and the thin nostrils to grow wider as though they scented some sweet, remembered perfume. Indeed, at that moment, standing there on the promontory above the seas, Rosamund looked a very queen.

Presently she answered him with another question.

"And how would they greet me there, Wulf, who am a Norman D'Arcy and a Christian maid?"

"The first they would forgive you, since that blood is none so ill either, and for the second--why, faiths can be changed."

Then it was that Godwin spoke for the first time.

"Wulf, Wulf," he said sternly, "keep watch upon your tongue, for there are things that should not be said even as a silly jest. See you, I love my cousin here better than aught else upon the earth--"

"There, at least, we agree," broke in Wulf.

"Better than aught else on the earth," repeated Godwin; "but, by the Holy Blood and by St. Peter, at whose shrine we are, I would kill her with my own hand before her lips kissed the book of the false prophet."

"Or any of his followers," muttered Wulf to himself, but fortunately, perhaps, too low for either of his companions to hear. Aloud he said, "You understand, Rosamund, you must be careful, for Godwin ever keeps his word, and that would be but a poor end for so much birth and beauty and wisdom."

"Oh, cease mocking, Wulf," she answered, laying her hand lightly on the tunic that hid his shirt of mail. "Cease mocking, and pray St. Chad, the builder of this church, that no such dreadful choice may ever be forced upon you, or me, or your beloved brother--who, indeed, in such a case would do right to slay me."

"Well, if it were," answered Wulf, and his fair face flushed as he spoke, "I trust that we should know how to meet it. After all, is it so very hard to choose between death and duty?"

"I know not," she replied; "but oft-times sacrifice seems easy when seen from far away; also, things may be lost that are more prized than life."

"What things? Do you mean place, or wealth, or--love?"

"Tell me," said Rosamund, changing her tone, "what is that boat rowing round the river's mouth? A while ago it hung upon its oars as though those within it watched us."

"Fisher-folk," answered Wulf carelessly. "I saw their nets."

"Yes; but beneath them something gleamed bright, like swords."

"Fish," said Wulf; "we are at peace in Essex." Although Rosamund

did not look convinced, he went on: "Now for Godwin's thoughts-- what were they?"

"Brother, if you would know, of the East also--the East and its wars."

"Which have brought us no great luck," answered Wulf, "seeing that our sire was slain in them and naught of him came home again save his heart, which lies at Stangate yonder."

"How better could he die," asked Godwin, "than fighting for the Cross of Christ? Is not that death of his at Harenc told of to this day? By our Lady, I pray for one but half as glorious!"

"Aye, he died well--he died well," said Wulf, his blue eyes flashing and his hand creeping to his sword hilt. "But, brother, there is peace at Jerusalem, as in Essex."

"Peace? Yes; but soon there will be war again. The monk Peter--he whom we saw at Stangate last Sunday, and who left Syria but six months gone--told me that it was coming fast. Even now the Sultan Saladin, sitting at Damascus, summons his hosts from far and wide, while his priests preach battle amongst the tribes and barons of the East. And when it comes, brother, shall we not be there to share it, as were our grandfather, our father, our uncle, and so many of our kin? Shall we rot here in this dull

land, as by our uncle's wish we have done these many years, yes, ever since we were home from the Scottish war, and count the kine and plough the fields like peasants, while our peers are charging on the pagan, and the banners wave, and the blood runs red upon the holy sands of Palestine?"

Now it was Wulf's turn to take fire.

"By our Lady in Heaven, and our lady here!"--and he looked at Rosamund, who was watching the pair of them with her quiet thoughtful eyes--"go when you will, Godwin, and I go with you, and as our birth was one birth, so, if it is decreed, let our death be one death." And suddenly his hand that had been playing with the sword-hilt gripped it fast, and tore the long, lean blade from its scabbard and cast it high into the air, flashing in the sunlight, to catch it as it fell again, while in a voice that caused the wild fowl to rise in thunder from the Saltings beneath, Wulf shouted the old war-cry that had rung on so many a field--"A D'Arcy! a D'Arcy! Meet D'Arcy, meet Death!" Then he sheathed his sword again and added in a shamed voice, "Are we children that we fight where no foe is? Still, brother, may we find him soon!"

Godwin smiled grimly, but answered nothing; only Rosamund said:

"So, my cousins, you would be away, perhaps to return no more,

and that will part us. But"--and her voice broke somewhat--"such is the woman's lot, since men like you ever love the bare sword best of all, nor should I think well of you were it otherwise. Yet, cousins, I know not why"--and she shivered a little--"it comes into my heart that Heaven often answers such prayers swiftly. Oh, Wulf! your sword looked very red in the sunlight but now: I say that it looked very red in the sunlight. I am afraid--of I know not what. Well, we must be going, for we have nine miles to ride, and the dark is not so far away. But first, my cousins, come with me into this shrine, and let us pray St. Peter and St. Chad to guard us on our journey home."

"Our journey?" said Wulf anxiously. "What is there for you to fear in a nine-mile ride along the shores of the Blackwater?"

"I said our journey home Wulf; and home is not in the hall at Steeple, but yonder," and she pointed to the quiet, brooding sky.

"Well answered," said Godwin, "in this ancient place, whence so many have journeyed home; all the Romans who are dead, when it was their fortress, and the Saxons who came after them, and others without count."

Then they turned and entered the old church--one of the first that ever was in Britain, rough-built of Roman stone by the very hands of Chad, the Saxon saint, more than five hundred years

before their day. Here they knelt a while at the rude altar and prayed, each of them in his or her own fashion, then crossed themselves, and rose to seek their horses, which were tied in the shed hard by.

Now there were two roads, or rather tracks, back to the Hall at Steeple--one a mile or so inland, that ran through the village of Bradwell, and the other, the shorter way, along the edge of the Saltings to the narrow water known as Death Creek, at the head of which the traveller to Steeple must strike inland, leaving the Priory of Stangate on his right. It was this latter path they chose, since at low tide the going there is good for horses--which, even in the summer, that of the inland track was not. Also they wished to be at home by supper-time, lest the old knight, Sir Andrew D'Arcy, the father of Rosamund and the uncle of the orphan brethren, should grow anxious, and perhaps come out to seek them.

For the half of an hour or more they rode along the edge of the Saltings, for the most part in silence that was broken only by the cry of curlew and the lap of the turning tide. No human being did they see, indeed, for this place was very desolate and unvisited, save now and again by fishermen. At length, just as the sun began to sink, they approached the shore of Death Creek--a sheet of tidal water which ran a mile or more inland, growing ever narrower, but was here some three hundred yards in

breadth. They were well mounted, all three of them. Indeed, Rosamund's horse, a great grey, her father's gift to her, was famous in that country-side for its swiftness and power, also because it was so docile that a child could ride it; while those of the brethren were heavy-built but well-trained war steeds, taught to stand where they were left, and to charge when they were urged, without fear of shouting men or flashing steel.

Now the ground lay thus. Some seventy yards from the shore of Death Creek and parallel to it, a tongue of land, covered with scrub and a few oaks, ran down into the Saltings, its point ending on their path, beyond which were a swamp and the broad river. Between this tongue and the shore of the creek the track wended its way to the uplands. It was an ancient track; indeed the reason of its existence was that here the Romans or some other long dead hands had built a narrow mole or quay of rough stone, forty or fifty yards in length, out into the water of the creek, doubtless to serve as a convenience for fisher boats, which could lie alongside of it even at low tide. This mole had been much destroyed by centuries of washing, so that the end of it lay below water, although the landward part was still almost sound and level.

Coming over the little rise at the top of the wooded tongue, the quick eyes of Wulf, who rode first--for here the path along the border of the swamp was so narrow that they must go in single

file--caught sight of a large, empty boat moored to an iron ring set in the wall of the mole.

"Your fishermen have landed, Rosamund," he said, "and doubtless gone up to Bradwell."

"That is strange," she answered anxiously, "since here no fishermen ever come." And she checked her horse as though to turn.

"Whether they come or not, certainly they have gone," said Godwin, craning forward to look about him; "so, as we have nothing to fear from an empty boat, let us push on."

On they rode accordingly, until they came to the root of the stone quay or pier, when a sound behind them caused them to look back. Then they saw a sight that sent the blood to their hearts, for there behind them, leaping down one by one on to that narrow footway, were men armed with naked swords, six or eight of them, all of whom, they noted, had strips of linen pierced with eyelet holes tied beneath their helms or leather caps, so as to conceal their faces.

"A snare! a snare!" cried Wulf, drawing his sword. "Swift! follow me up the Bradwell path!" and he struck the spurs into his horse. It bounded forward, to be dragged next second with all

the weight of his powerful arm almost to its haunches. "God's mercy!" he cried, "there are more of them!" And more there were, for another band of men armed and linen-hooded like the first, had leapt down on to that Bradwell path, amongst them a stout man, who seemed to be unarmed, except for a long, crooked knife at his girdle and a coat of ringed mail, which showed through the opening of his loose tunic.

"To the boat!" shouted Godwin, whereat the stout man laughed--a light, penetrating laugh, which even then all three of them heard and noted.

Along the quay they rode, since there was nowhere else that they could go, with both paths barred, and swamp and water on one side of them, and a steep, wooded bank upon the other. When they reached it, they found why the man had laughed, for the boat was made fast with a strong chain that could not be cut; more, her sail and oars were gone.

"Get into it," mocked a voice; "or, at least, let the lady get in; it will save us the trouble of carrying her there."

Now Rosamund turned very pale, while the face of Wulf went red and white, and he gripped his sword-hilt. But Godwin, calm as ever, rode forward a few paces, and said quietly:

"Of your courtesy, say what you need of us. If it be money, we have none--nothing but our arms and horses, which I think may cost you dear."

Now the man with the crooked knife advanced a little, accompanied by another man, a tall, supple-looking knave, into whose ear he whispered.

"My master says," answered the tall man, "that you have with you that which is of more value than all the king's gold--a very fair lady, of whom someone has urgent need. Give her up now, and go your way with your arms and horses, for you are gallant young men, whose blood we do not wish to shed."

At this it was the turn of the brethren to laugh, which both of them did together.

"Give her up," answered Godwin, "and go our ways dishonoured? Aye, with our breath, but not before. Who then has such urgent need of the lady Rosamund?"

Again there was whispering between the pair.

"My master says," was the answer, "he thinks that all who see her will have need of her, since such loveliness is rare. But if you wish a name, well, one comes into his mind; the name of the

knight Lozelle."

"The knight Lozelle!" murmured Rosamund, turning even paler than before, as well she might. For this Lozelle was a powerful man and Essex-born. He owned ships of whose doings upon the seas and in the East evil tales were told, and once had sought Rosamund's hand in marriage, but being rejected, uttered threats for which Godwin, as the elder of the twins, had fought and wounded him. Then he vanished--none knew where.

"Is Sir Hugh Lozelle here then?" asked Godwin, "masked like you common cowards? If so, I desire to meet him, to finish the work I began in the snow last Christmas twelvemonths."

"Find that out if you can," answered the tall man. But Wulf said, speaking low between his clenched teeth:

"Brother, I see but one chance. We must place Rosamund between us and charge them."

The captain of the band seemed to read their thoughts, for again he whispered into the ear of his companion, who called out:

"My master says that if you try to charge, you will be fools, since we shall stab and ham-string your horses, which are too good to waste, and take you quite easily as you fall. Come then,

yield, as you can do without shame, seeing there is no escape, and that two men, however brave, cannot stand against a crowd. He gives you one minute to surrender."

Now Rosamund spoke for the first time.

"My cousins," she said, "I pray you not to let me fall living into the hands of Sir Hugh Lozelle, or of yonder men, to be taken to what fate I know not. Let Godwin kill me, then, to save my honour, as but now he said he would to save my soul, and strive to cut your way through, and live to avenge me."

The brethren made no answer, only they looked at the water and then at one another, and nodded. It was Godwin who spoke again, for now that it had come to this struggle for life and their lady, Wulf, whose tongue was commonly so ready, had grown strangely silent, and fierce-faced also.

"Listen, Rosamund, and do not turn your eyes," said Godwin.

"There is but one chance for you, and, poor as it is, you must choose between it and capture, since we cannot kill you. The grey horse you ride is strong and true. Turn him now, and spur into the water of Death Creek and swim it. It is broad, but the incoming tide will help you, and perchance you will not drown."

Rosamund listened and moved her head backwards towards the boat.

Then Wulf spoke--few words and sharp: "Begone, girl! we guard the boat."

She heard, and her dark eyes filled with tears, and her stately head sank for a moment almost to her horse's mane.

"Oh, my knights! my knights! And would you die for me? Well, if God wills it, so it must be. But I swear that if you die, that no man shall be aught to me who have your memory, and if you live--" And she looked at them confusedly, then stopped.

"Bless us, and begone," said Godwin.

So she blessed them in words low and holy; then of a sudden wheeled round the great grey horse, and striking the spur into its flank, drove straight at the deep water. A moment the stallion hung, then from the low quay-end sprang out wide and clear. Deep it sank, but not for long, for presently its rider's head rose above the water, and regaining the saddle, from which she had floated, Rosamund sat firm and headed the horse straight for the distant bank. Now a shout of wonderment went up from the woman thieves, for this was a deed that they had never thought a girl would dare. But the brethren laughed as they saw that the grey swam well, and, leaping from their saddles, ran forward a few paces--eight or ten--along the mole to where it was narrowest, as they went tearing the cloaks from their shoulders,

and, since they had none, throwing them over their left arms to serve as bucklers.

The band cursed sullenly, only their captain gave an order to his spokesman, who cried aloud:

"Cut them down, and to the boat! We shall take her before she reaches shore or drowns."

For a moment they wavered, for the tall twin warriors who barred the way had eyes that told of wounds and death. Then with a rush they came, scrambling over the rough stones. But here the causeway was so narrow that while their strength lasted, two men were as good as twenty, nor, because of the mud and water, could they be got at from either side. So after all it was but two to two, and the brethren were the better two. Their long swords flashed and smote, and when Wulf's was lifted again, once more it shone red as it had been when he tossed it high in the sunlight, and a man fell with a heavy splash into the waters of the creek, and wallowed there till he died. Godwin's foe was down also, and, as it seemed, sped.

Then, at a muttered word, not waiting to be attacked by others, the brethren sprang forward. The huddled mob in front of them saw them come, and shrank back, but before they had gone a yard, the swords were at work behind. They swore strange oaths, they

caught their feet among the rocks, and rolled upon their faces. In their confusion three of them were pushed into the water, where two sank in the mud and were drowned, the third only dragging himself ashore, while the rest made good their escape from the causeway. But two had been cut down, and three had fallen, for whom there was no escape. They strove to rise and fight, but the linen masks flapped about their eyes, so that their blows went wide, while the long swords of the brothers smote and smote again upon their helms and harness as the hammers of smiths smite upon an anvil, until they rolled over silent and stirless.

"Back!" said Godwin; "for here the road is wide; and they will get behind us."

So back they moved slowly, with their faces to the foe, stopping just in front of the first man whom Godwin had seemed to kill, and who lay face upwards with arms outstretched.

"So far we have done well," said Wulf, with a short laugh. "Are you hurt?"

"Nay," answered his brother, "but do not boast till the battle is over, for many are left and they will come on thus no more. Pray God they have no spears or bows."

Then he turned and looked behind him, and there, far from the shore now, swam the grey horse steadily, and there upon its back sat Rosamund. Yes, and she had seen, since the horse must swim somewhat sideways with the tide, for look, she took the kerchief from her throat and waved it to them. Then the brethren knew that she was proud of their great deeds, and thanked the saints that they had lived to do even so much as this for her dear sake.

Godwin was right. Although their leader commanded them in a stern voice, the band sank from the reach of those awful swords, and, instead, sought for stones to hurl at them. But here lay more mud than pebbles, and the rocks of which the causeway was built were too heavy for them to lift, so that they found but few, which when thrown either missed the brethren or did them little hurt. Now, after some while, the man called "master" spoke through his lieutenant, and certain of them ran into the thorn thicket, and thence appeared again bearing the long oars of the boat.

"Their counsel is to batter us down with the oars. What shall we do now, brother?" asked Godwin.

"What we can," answered Wulf. "It matters little if Rosamund is spared by the waters, for they will scarcely take her now, who must loose the boat and man it after we are dead."

As he spoke Wulf heard a sound behind him, and of a sudden Godwin threw up his arms and sank to his knees. Round he sprang, and there upon his feet stood that man whom they had thought dead, and in his hand a bloody sword. At him leapt Wulf, and so fierce were the blows he smote that the first severed his sword arm and the second shore through cloak and mail deep into the thief's side; so that this time he fell, never to stir again. Then he looked at his brother and saw that the blood was running down his face and blinding him.

"Save yourself, Wulf, for I am sped," murmured Godwin.

"Nay, or you could not speak." And he cast his arm round him and kissed him on the brow.

Then a thought came into his mind, and lifting Godwin as though he were a child, he ran back to where the horses stood, and heaved him onto the saddle.

"Hold fast!" he cried, "by mane and pommel. Keep your mind, and hold fast, and I will save you yet."

Passing the reins over his left arm, Wulf leapt upon the back of his own horse, and turned it. Ten seconds more, and the pirates, who were gathering with the oars where the paths joined at the root of the causeway, saw the two great horses thundering down

upon them. On one a sore wounded man, his bright hair dabbled with blood, his hands gripping mane and saddle, and on the other the warrior Wulf, with starting eyes and a face like the face of a flame, shaking his red sword, and for the second time that day shouting aloud: "A D'Arcy! a D'Arcy! Contre D'Arcy, contre Mort!"

They saw, they shouted, they massed themselves together and held up the oars to meet them. But Wulf spurred fiercely, and, short as was the way, the heavy horses, trained to tourney, gathered their speed. Now they were on them. The oars were swept aside like reeds; all round them flashed the swords, and Wulf felt that he was hurt, he knew not where. But his sword flashed also, one blow--there was no time for more--yet the man beneath it sank like an empty sack.

By St. Peter! They were through, and Godwin still swayed upon the saddle, and yonder, nearing the further shore, the grey horse with its burden still battled in the tide. They were through! they were through! while to Wulf's eyes the air swam red, and the earth seemed as though it rose up to meet them, and everywhere was flaming fire.

But the shouts had died away behind them, and the only sound was the sound of the galloping of their horses' hoofs. Then that also grew faint and died away, and silence and darkness fell upon

the mind of Wulf.