

Chapter Three: The Knighting of the Brethren

Another month had gone by, and though Godwin was still somewhat weak and suffered from a headache at times, the brethren had recovered from their wounds. On the last day of November, about two o'clock in the afternoon, a great procession might have been seen wending its way from the old Hall at Steeple. In it rode many knights fully armed, before whom were borne their banners. These went first. Then came old Sir Andrew D'Arcy, also fully armed, attended by squires and retainers. He was accompanied by his lovely daughter, the lady Rosamund, clad in beautiful apparel under her cloak of fur, who rode at his right hand on that same horse which had swum Death Creek. Next appeared the brethren, modestly arrayed as simple gentlemen, followed each of them by his squire, scions of the noble houses of Salcote and of Dengie. After them rode yet more knights, squires, tenants of various degree, and servants, surrounded by a great number of peasantry and villeins, who walked and ran with their women folk and children.

Following the road through the village, the procession turned to the left at the great arch which marked the boundary of the monk's lands, and headed for Stangate Abbey, some two miles away, by the path that ran between the arable land and the Salt marshes, which are flooded at high tide. At length they came to the stone gate of the Abbey, that gave the place its name of

Stangate. Here they were met by a company of the Cluniac monks, who dwelt in this wild and lonely spot upon the water's edge, headed by their prior, John Fitz Brien. He was a venerable, white-haired man, clad in wide-sleeved, black robes, and preceded by a priest carrying a silver cross. Now the procession separated, Godwin and Wulf, with certain of the knights and their esquires, being led to the Priory, while the main body of it entered the church, or stood about outside its door.

Arrived in the house, the two knights elect were taken to a room where their hair was cut and their chins were shaved by a barber who awaited them. Then, under the guidance of two old knights named Sir Anthony de Mandeville and Sir Roger de Merci, they were conducted to baths surrounded with rich cloths. Into these, having been undressed by the squires, they entered and bathed themselves, while Sir Anthony and Sir Roger spoke to them through the cloths of the high duties of their vocation, ending by pouring water over them, and signing their bare bodies with the sign of the Cross. Next they were dressed again, and preceded by minstrels, led to the church, at the porch of which they and their esquires were given wine to drink.

Here, in the presence of all the company, they were clothed first in white tunics, to signify the whiteness of their hearts; next in red robes, symbolical of the blood they might be called upon to shed for Christ; and lastly, in long black cloaks, emblems of

the death that must be endured by all. This done, their armour was brought in and piled before them upon the steps of the altar, and the congregation departed homeward, leaving them with their esquires and the priest to spend the long winter night in orisons and prayers.

Long, indeed, it was, in that lonesome, holy place, lit only by a lamp which swung before the altar. Wulf prayed and prayed until he could pray no more, then fell into a half dreamful state that was haunted by the face of Rosamund, where even her face should have been forgotten. Godwin, his elbow resting against the tomb that hid his father's heart, prayed also, until even his earnestness was outworn, and he began to wonder about many things.

That dream of his, for instance, in his sickness, when he had seemed to be dead, and what might be the true duty of man. To be brave and upright? Surely. To fight for the Cross of Christ against the Saracen? Surely, if the chance came his way. What more? To abandon the world and to spend his life muttering prayers like those priests in the darkness behind him? Could that be needful or of service to God or man? To man, perhaps, because such folk tended the sick and fed the poor. But to God? Was he not sent into the world to bear his part in the world--to live his full life? This would mean a half-life--one into which no woman might enter, to which no child might be added, since to

monks and even to certain brotherhoods, all these things, which Nature decreed and Heaven had sanctified, were deadly sin.

It would mean, for instance, that he must think no more of Rosamund. Could he do this for the sake of the welfare of his soul in some future state?

Why, at the thought of it even, in that solemn place and hour of dedication, his spirit reeled, for then and there for the first time it was borne in upon him that he loved this woman more than all the world beside--more than his life, more, perhaps, than his soul. He loved her with all his pure young heart--so much that it would be a joy to him to die for her, not only in the heat of battle, as lately had almost chanced on the Death Creek quay, but in cold blood, of set purpose, if there came need. He loved her with body and with spirit, and, after God, here to her he consecrated his body and his spirit. But what value would she put upon the gift? What if some other man--?

By his side, his elbows resting on the altar rails, his eyes fixed upon the beaming armour that he would wear in battle, knelt Wulf, his brother--a mighty man, a knight of knights, fearless, noble, open-hearted; such a one as any woman might well love. And he also loved Rosamund. Of this Godwin was sure. And, oh! did not Rosamund love Wulf? Bitter jealousy seized upon his vitals. Yes; even then and there, black envy got hold of Godwin, and rent him

so sore that, cold as was the place, the sweat poured from his brow and body.

Should he abandon hope? Should he fly the battle for fear that he might be defeated? Nay; he would fight on in all honesty and honour, and if he were overcome, would meet his fate as a brave knight should--without bitterness, but without shame. Let destiny direct the matter. It was in the hands of destiny, and stretching out his arm, he threw it around the neck of his brother, who knelt beside him, and let it rest there, until the head of the weary Wulf sank sleepily upon his shoulder, like the head of an infant upon its mother's breast.

"Oh Jesu," Godwin moaned in his poor heart, "give me strength to fight against this sinful passion that would lead me to hate the brother whom I love. Oh Jesu, give me strength to bear it if he should be preferred before me. Make me a perfect knight--strong to suffer and endure, and, if need be, to rejoice even in the joy of my supplanter."

At length the grey dawn broke, and the sunlight, passing through the eastern window, like a golden spear, pierced the dusk of the long church, which was built to the shape of a cross, so that only its transepts remained in shadow. Then came a sound of chanting, and at the western door entered the Prior, wearing all his robes, attended by the monks and acolytes, who swung censers.

In the centre of the nave he halted and passed to the confessional, calling on Godwin to follow. So he went and knelt before the holy man, and there poured out all his heart. He confessed his sins. They were but few. He told him of the vision of his sickness, on which the Prior pondered long; of his deep love, his hopes, his fears, and his desire to be a warrior who once, as a lad, had wished to be a monk, not that he might shed blood, but to fight for the Cross of Christ against the Paynim, ending with a cry of--

"Give me counsel, O my father. Give me counsel."

"Your own heart is your best counsellor," was the priest's answer. "Go as it guides you, knowing that, through it, it is God who guides. Nor fear that you will fail. But if love and the joys of life should leave you, then come back, and we will talk again. Go on, pure knight of Christ, fearing nothing and sure of the reward, and take with you the blessing of Christ and of his Church."

"What penance must I bear, father?"

"Such souls as yours inflict their own penance. The saints forbid that I should add to it," was the gentle answer.

Then with a lightened heart Godwin returned to the altar rails,

while his brother Wulf was summoned to take his place in the confessional. Of the sins that he had to tell we need not speak. They were such as are common to young men, and none of them very grievous. Still, before he gave him absolution, the good Prior admonished him to think less of his body and more of his spirit; less of the glory of feats of arms and more of the true ends to which he should enter on them. He bade him, moreover, to take his brother Godwin as an earthly guide and example, since there lived no better or wiser man of his years, and finally dismissed him, prophesying that if he would heed these counsels, he would come to great glory on earth and in heaven.

"Father, I will do my best," answered Wulf humbly; "but there cannot be two Godwins; and, father, sometimes I fear me that our paths will cross, since two men cannot win one woman."

"I know the trouble," answered the Prior anxiously, "and with less noble-natured men it might be grave. But if it should come to this, then must the lady judge according to the wishes of her own heart, and he who loses her must be loyal in sorrow as in joy. Be sure that you take no base advantage of your brother in the hour of temptation, and bear him no bitterness should he win the bride."

"I think I can be sure of that," said Wulf; "also that we, who have loved each other from birth, would die before we betrayed

each other."

"I think so also," answered the Prior; "but Satan is very strong."

Then Wulf also returned to the altar rails, and the full Mass was sung, and the Sacrament received by the two neophytes, and the offerings made all in their appointed order. Next they were led back to the Priory to rest and eat a little after their long night's vigil in the cold church, and here they abode awhile, thinking their own thoughts, seated alone in the Prior's chamber. At length Wulf, who seemed to be ill at ease, rose and laid his hand upon his brother's shoulder, saying:

"I can be silent no more; it was ever thus: that which is in my mind must out of it. I have words to say to you."

"Speak on, Wulf," said Godwin.

Wulf sat himself down again upon his stool, and for a while stared hard at nothing, for he did not seem to find it easy to begin this talk. Now Godwin could read his brother's mind like a book, but Wulf could not always read Godwin's, although, being twins who had been together from birth, their hearts were for the most part open to each other without the need of words.

"It is of our cousin Rosamund, is it not?" asked Godwin presently.

"Ay. Who else?"

"And you would tell me that you love her, and that now you are a knight--almost--and hard on five-and twenty years of age, you would ask her to become your affianced wife?"

"Yes, Godwin; it came into my heart when she rode the grey horse into the water, there upon the pier, and I thought that I should never see her any more. I tell you it came into my heart that life was not worth living nor death worth dying without her."

"Then, Wulf," answered Godwin slowly, "what more is there to say? Ask on, and prosper. Why not? We have some lands, if not many, and Rosamund will not lack for them. Nor do I think that our uncle would forbid you, if she wills it, seeing that you are the properest man and the bravest in all this country side."

"Except my brother Godwin, who is all these things, and good and learned to boot, which I am not," replied Wulf musingly. Then there was silence for a while, which he broke.

"Godwin, our ill-luck is that you love her also, and that you thought the same thoughts which I did yonder on the quay-head."

Godwin flushed a little, and his long fingers tightened their grip upon his knee.

"It is so," he said quietly. "To my grief it is so. But Rosamund knows nothing of this, and should never know it if you will keep a watch upon your tongue. Moreover, you need not be jealous of me, before marriage or after."

"What, then, would you have me do?" asked Wulf hotly. "Seek her heart, and perchance--though this I doubt--let her yield it to me, she thinking that you care naught for her?"

"Why not?" asked Godwin again, with a sigh; "it might save her some pain and you some doubt, and make my own path clearer. Marriage is more to you than to me, Wulf, who think sometimes that my sword should be my spouse and duty my only aim."

"Who think, having a heart of gold, that even in such a thing as this you will not bar the path of the brother whom you love. Nay, Godwin, as I am a sinful man, and as I desire her above all things on earth, I will play no such coward's game, nor conquer one who will not lift his sword lest he should hurt me. Sooner would I bid you all farewell, and go to seek fortune or death in the wars without word spoken."

"Leaving Rosamund to pine, perchance. Oh, could we be sure that she had no mind toward either of us, that would be best--to begone together. But, Wulf, we cannot be sure, since at times, to be honest, I have thought she loves you."

"And at times, to be honest, Godwin, I have been sure that she loves you, although I should like to try my luck and hear it from her lips, which on such terms I will not do."

"What, then, is your plan, Wulf?"

"My plan is that if our uncle gives us leave, we should both speak to her--you first, as the elder, setting out your case as best you can, and asking her to think of it and give you your answer within a day. Then, before that day is done I also should speak, so that she may know all the story, and play her part in it with opened eyes, not deeming, as otherwise she might, that we know each other's minds, and that you ask because I have no will that way."

"It is very fair," replied Godwin; "and worthy of you, who are the most honest of men. Yet, Wulf, I am troubled. See you, my brother, have ever brethren loved each other as we do? And now must the shadow of a woman fall upon and blight that love which is so fair and precious?"

"Why so?" asked Wulf. "Come, Godwin, let us make a pact that it shall not be thus, and keep it by the help of heaven. Let us show the world that two men can love one woman and still love each other, not knowing as yet which of them she will choose--if, indeed, she chooses either. For, Godwin, we are not the only gentlemen whose eyes have turned, or yet may turn, towards the high-born, rich, and lovely lady Rosamund. Is it your will that we should make such a pact?"

Godwin thought a little, then answered:

"Yes; but if so, it must be one so strong that for her sake and for both our sakes we cannot break it and live with honour."

"So be it," said Wulf; "this is man's work, not child's make-believe."

Then Godwin rose, and going to the door, bade his squire, who watched without, pray the Prior John to come to them as they sought his counsel in a matter. So he came, and, standing before him with downcast head, Godwin told him all the tale, which, indeed, he who knew so much already, was quick to understand, and of their purpose also; while at a question from the prior, Wulf answered that it was well and truly said, nothing having been kept back. Then they asked him if it was lawful that they should take such an oath, to which he replied that he thought it not

only lawful, but very good.

So in the end, kneeling together hand in hand before the Rood that stood in the chamber, they repeated this oath after him, both of them together.

"We brethren, Godwin and Wulf D'Arcy, do swear by the holy Cross of Christ, and by the patron saint of this place, St. Mary Magdalene, and our own patron saints, St. Peter and St. Chad, standing in the presence of God, of our guardian angels, and of you, John, that being both of us enamoured of our cousin, Rosamund D'Arcy, we will ask her to wife in the manner we have agreed, and no other. That we will abide by her decision, should she choose either of us, nor seek to alter it by tempting her from her troth, or in any fashion overt or covert. That he of us whom she refuses will thenceforth be a brother to her and no more, however Satan may tempt his heart otherwise. That so far as may be possible to us, who are but sinful men, we will suffer neither bitterness nor jealousy to come between our love because of this woman, and that in war or peace we will remain faithful comrades and brethren. Thus we swear with a true heart and purpose, and in token thereof, knowing that he who breaks this oath will be a knight dishonoured and a vessel fit for the wrath of God, we kiss this Rood and one another."

This, then, these brethren said and did, and with light minds and

joyful faces received the blessing of the Prior, who had christened them in infancy, and went down to meet the great company that had ridden forth to lead them back to Steeple, where their knighting should be done.

So to Steeple, preceded by the squires, who rode before them bareheaded, carrying their swords by the scabbarded points, with their gold spurs hanging from the hilts, they came at last. Here the hall was set for a great feast, a space having been left between the tables and the dais, to which the brethren were conducted. Then came forward Sir Anthony de Mandeville and Sir Roger de Merci in full armour, and presented to Sir Andrew D'Arcy, their uncle, who stood upon the edge of the dais, also in his armour, their swords and spurs, of which he gave back to them two of the latter, bidding them affix these upon the candidates' right heels. This done, the Prior John blessed the swords, after which Sir Andrew girded them about the waists of his nephews, saying:

"Take ye back the swords that you have used so well."

Next, he drew his own silver-hilted blade that had been his father's and his grandfather's, and whilst they knelt before him, smote each of them three blows upon the right shoulder, crying with a loud voice: "In the name of God, St. Michael, and St. George, I knight ye. Be ye good knights."

Thereafter came forward Rosamund as their nearest kinswoman, and, helped by other ladies, clad upon them their hauberks, or coats of mail, their helms of steel, and their kite-shaped shields, emblazoned with a skull, the cognizance of their race. This done, with the musicians marching before them, they walked to Steeple church--a distance of two hundred paces from the Hall, where they laid their swords upon the altar and took them up again, swearing to be good servants of Christ and defenders of the Church. As they left its doors, who should meet them but the cook, carrying his chopper in his hand and claiming as his fee the value of the spurs they wore, crying aloud at the same time:

"If either of you young knights should do aught in despite of your honour and of the oaths that you have sworn--from which may God and his saints prevent you!--then with my chopper will I hack these spurs from off your heels."

Thus at last the long ceremony was ended, and after it came a very great feast, for at the high table were entertained many noble knights and ladies, and below, in the hall their squires, and other gentlemen, and outside all the yeomanry and villagers, whilst the children and the aged had food and drink given to them in the nave of the church itself. When the eating at length was done, the centre of the hall was cleared, and while men drank, the minstrels made music. All were very merry with wine and strong ale, and talk arose among them as to which of these

brethren--Sir Godwin or Sir Wulf--was the more brave, the more handsome, and the more learned and courteous.

Now a knight--it was Sir Surin de Salcote--seeing that the argument grew hot and might lead to blows, rose and declared that this should be decided by beauty alone, and that none could be more fitted to judge than the fair lady whom the two of them had saved from woman-thieves at the Death Creek quay. They all called, "Ay, let her settle it," and it was agreed that she would give the kerchief from her neck to the bravest, a beaker of wine to the handsomest, and a Book of Hours to the most learned.

So, seeing no help for it, since except her father, the brethren, the most of the other ladies and herself, who drank but water, gentle and simple alike, had begun to grow heated with wine, and were very urgent, Rosamund took the silk kerchief from her neck. Then coming to the edge of the dais, where they were seated in the sight of all, she stood before her cousins, not knowing, poor maid, to which of them she should offer it. But Godwin whispered a word to Wulf, and both of them stretching out their right hands, snatched an end of the kerchief which she held towards them, and rending it, twisted the severed halves round their sword hilts. The company laughed at their wit, and cried:

"The wine for the more handsome. They cannot serve that thus."

Rosamund thought a moment; then she lifted a great silver beaker, the largest on the board, and having filled it full of wine, once more came forward and held it before them as though pondering. Thereon the brethren, as though by a single movement, bent forward and each of them touched the beaker with his lips. Again a great laugh went up, and even Rosamund smiled.

"The book! the book!" cried the guests. "They dare not rend the holy book!"

So for the third time Rosamund advanced, bearing the missal.

"Knights," she said, "you have torn my kerchief and drunk my wine. Now I offer this hallowed writing--to him who can read it best."

"Give it to Godwin," said Wulf. "I am a swordsman, not a clerk."

"Well said! well said!" roared the company. "The sword for us--not the pen!" But Rosamund turned on them and answered:

"He who wields sword is brave, and he who wields pen is wise, but better is he who can handle both sword and pen--like my cousin Godwin, the brave and learned."

"Hear her! hear her!" cried the revellers, knocking their horns upon the board, while in the silence that followed a woman's

voice said, "Sir Godwin's luck is great, but give me Sir Wulf's strong arms."

Then the drinking began again, and Rosamund and the ladies slipped away, as well they might--for the times were rough and coarse.

On the morrow, after most of the guests were gone, many of them with aching heads, Godwin and Wulf sought their uncle, Sir Andrew, in the solar where he sat alone, for they knew Rosamund had walked to the church hard by with two of the serving women to make it ready for the Friday's mass, after the feast of the peasants that had been held in the nave. Coming to his oaken chair by the open hearth which had a chimney to it--no common thing in those days--they knelt before him.

"What is it now, my nephews?" asked the old man, smiling. "Do you wish that I should knight you afresh?"

"No, sir," answered Godwin; "we seek a greater boon."

"Then you seek in vain, for there is none."

"Another sort of boon," broke in Wulf.

Sir Andrew pulled his beard, and looked at them. Perhaps the

Prior John had spoken a word to him, and he guessed what was coming.

"Speak," he said to Godwin. "The gift is great that I would not give to either of you if it be within my power."

"Sir," said Godwin, "we seek the leave to ask your daughter's hand in marriage."

"What! the two of you?"

"Yes, sir; the two of us."

Then Sir Andrew, who seldom laughed, laughed outright.

"Truly," he said, "of all the strange things I have known, this is the strangest--that two knights should ask one wife between them."

"It seems strange, sir; but when you have heard our tale you will understand."

So he listened while they told him all that had passed between them and of the solemn oath which they had sworn.

"Noble in this as in other things," commented Sir Andrew when

they had done; "but I fear that one of you may find that vow hard to keep. By all the saints, nephews, you were right when you said that you asked a great boon. Do you know, although I have told you nothing of it, that, not to speak of the knave Lozelle, already two of the greatest men in this land have sought my daughter Rosamund in marriage?"

"It may well be so," said Wulf.

"It is so, and now I will tell you why one or other of the pair is not her husband, which in some ways I would he were. A simple reason. I asked her, and she had no mind to either, and as her mother married where her heart was, so I have sworn that the daughter should do, or not at all--for better a nunnery than a loveless bridal.

"Now let us see what you have to give. You are of good blood--that of Uluin by your mother, and mine, also on one side her own. As squires to your sponsors of yesterday, the knights Sir Anthony de Mandeville and Sir Roger de Merci, you bore yourselves bravely in the Scottish War; indeed, your liege king Henry remembered it, and that is why he granted my prayer so readily. Since then, although you loved the life little, because I asked it of you, you have rested here at home with me, and done no feats of arms, save that great one of two months gone which made you knights, and, in truth, gives you some claim on

Rosamund.

"For the rest, your father being the younger son, your lands are small, and you have no other gear. Outside the borders of this shire you are unknown men, with all your deeds to do--for I will not count those Scottish battles when you were but boys. And she whom you ask is one of the fairest and noblest and most learned ladies in this land, for I, who have some skill in such things, have taught her myself from childhood. Moreover, as I have no other heir, she will be wealthy. Well, what more have you to offer for all this?"

"Ourselves," answered Wulf boldly. "We are true knights of whom you know the best and worst, and we love her. We learned it for once and for all on Death Creek quay, for till then she was our sister and no more."

"Ay," added Godwin, "when she swore herself to us and blessed us, then light broke on both."

"Stand up," said Sir Andrew, "and let me look at you."

So they stood side by side in the full light of the blazing fire, for little other came through those narrow windows.

"Proper men; proper men," said the old knight; "and as like to one

another as two grains of wheat from the same sample. Six feet high, each of you, and broad chested, though Wulf is larger made and the stronger of the two. Brown and waving-haired both, save for that line of white where the sword hit yours, Godwin--Godwin with grey eyes that dream and Wulf with the blue eyes that shine like swords. Ah! your grandsire had eyes like that, Wulf; and I have been told that when he leapt from the tower to the wall at the taking of Jerusalem, the Saracens did not love the light which shone in them--nor, in faith, did I, his son, when he was angry. Proper men, the pair of you; but Sir Wulf most warriorlike, and Sir Godwin most courtly."

"Now which do you think would please a woman most?"

"That, sir, depends upon the woman," answered Godwin, and straightway his eyes began to dream.

"That, sir, we seek to learn before the day is out, if you give us leave," added Wulf; "though, if you would know, I think my chance a poor one."

"Ah, well; it is a very pretty riddle. But I do not envy her who has its answering, for it might well trouble a maid's mind, neither is it certain when all is done that she will guess best for her own peace. Would it not be wiser, then, that I should forbid them to ask this riddle?" he added as though to himself

and fell to thinking while they trembled, seeing that he was minded to refuse their suit.

At length he looked up again and said: "Nay, let it go as God wills Who holds the future in His hand. Nephews, because you are good knights and true, either of whom would ward her well--and she may need warding--because you are my only brother's sons, whom I have promised him to care for; and most of all because I love you both with an equal love, have your wish, and go try your fortunes at the hands of my daughter Rosamund in the fashion you have agreed. Godwin, the elder, first, as is his right; then Wulf. Nay, no thanks; but go swiftly, for I whose hours are short wish to learn the answer to this riddle."

So they bowed and went, walking side by side. At the door of the hall, Wulf stopped and said:

"Rosamund is in the church. Seek her there, and--oh! I would that I could wish you good fortune; but, Godwin, I cannot. I fear me that this may be the edge of that shadow of woman's love whereof you spoke, falling cold upon my heart."

"There is no shadow; there is light, now and always, as we have sworn that it should be," answered Godwin.