

Chapter Five: The Wine Merchant

Godwin laid down the letter, and all of them stared at one another in amazement.

"Surely," said Wulf, "this is some fool's trick played off upon our uncle as an evil jest."

By way of answer Sir Andrew bade him lift the silk that hid the contents of the coffer and see what lay there. Wulf did so, and next moment threw back his head like a man whom some sudden light had blinded, as well he might, for from it came such a flare of gems as Essex had rarely seen before. Red, green and blue they sparkled; and among them were the dull glow of gold and the white sheen of pearls.

"Oh, how beautiful! how beautiful!" said Rosamund.

"Ay," muttered Godwin; "beautiful enough to maze a woman's mind till she knows not right from wrong."

Wulf said nothing, but one by one drew its treasures from the chest--coronet, necklace of pearls, breast ornaments of rubies, girdle of sapphires, jewelled anklets, and with them veil, sandals, robes and other garments of gold-embroidered purple silk. Moreover, among these, also sealed with the seals of

Salah-ed-din, his viziers, officers of state, and secretaries, was that patent of which the letter spoke, setting out the full titles of the Princess of Baalbec; the extent and boundaries of her great estates, and the amount of her annual revenue, which seemed more money than they had ever heard of.

"I was wrong," said Wulf. "Even the Sultan of the East could not afford a jest so costly."

"Jest?" broke in Sir Andrew; "it is no jest, as I was sure from the first line of that letter. It breathes the very spirit of Saladin, though he be a Saracen, the greatest man on all the earth, as I, who was a friend of his youth, know well. Ay, and he is right. In a sense I sinned against him as his sister sinned, our love compelling us. Jest? Nay, no jest, but because a vision of the night, which he believes the voice of God, or perhaps some oracle of the magicians has deeply stirred that great soul of his and led him on to this wild adventure."

He paused awhile, then looked up and said, "Girl, do you know what Saladin has made of you? Why, there are queens in Europe who would be glad to own that rank and those estates in the rich lands above Damascus. I know the city and the castle of which he speaks. It is a mighty place upon the banks of Litani and Orontes, and after its military governor--for that rule he would not give a Christian--you will be first in it, beneath the seal

of Saladin--the surest title in all the earth. Say, will you go and queen it there?"

Rosamund gazed at the gleaming gems and the writings that made her royal, and her eyes flashed and her breast heaved, as they had done by the church of St. Peter on the Essex coast. Thrice she looked while they watched her, then turned her head as from the bait of some great temptation and answered one word only--"Nay."

"Well spoken," said her father, who knew her blood and its longings. "At least, had the 'nay' been 'yea,' you must have gone alone. Give me ink and parchment, Godwin."

They were brought, and he wrote:

"To the Sultan Saladin, from Andrew D'Arcy and his daughter Rosamund.

"We have received your letter, and we answer that where we are there we will bide in such state as God has given us.

Nevertheless, we thank you, Sultan, since we believe you honest, and we wish you well, except in your wars against the Cross. As for your threats, we will do our best to bring them to nothing.

Knowing the customs of the East, we do not send back your gifts to you, since to do so would be to offer insult to one of the

greatest men in all the world; but if you choose to ask for them, they are yours--not ours. Of your dream we say that it was but an empty vision of the night which a wise man should forget.--Your servant and your niece."

Then he signed, and Rosamund signed after him, and the writing was done up, wrapped in silk, and sealed.

"Now," said Sir Andrew, "hide away this wealth, since were it known that we had such treasures in the place, every thief in England would be our visitor, some of them bearing high names, I think."

So they laid the gold-embroidered robes and the priceless sets of gems back in their coffer, and having locked it, hid it away in the great iron-bound chest that stood in Sir Andrew's sleeping chamber.

When everything was finished, Sir Andrew said: "Listen now, Rosamund, and you also, my nephews. I have never told you the true tale of how the sister of Saladin, who was known as Zobeide, daughter of Ayoub, and afterwards christened into our faith by the name of Mary, came to be my wife. Yet you should learn it, if only to show how evil returns upon a man. After the great Nur-ed-din took Damascus, Ayoub was made its governor; then some three-and-twenty years ago came the capture of Harenc, in

which my brother fell. Here I was wounded and taken prisoner. They bore me to Damascus, where I was lodged in the palace of Ayoub and kindly treated. Here too it was, while I lay sick, that I made friends with the young Saladin, and with his sister Zobeide, whom I met secretly in the gardens of the palace. The rest may be guessed. Although she numbered but half my years, she loved me as I loved her, and for my sake offered to change her faith and fly with me to England if opportunity could be found, which was hard.

"Now, as it chanced, I had a friend, a dark and secret man named Jebal, the young sheik of a terrible people, whose cruel rites no Christian understands. They are the subjects of one Mahomet, in Persia, and live in castles at Masyaf, on Lebanon. This man had been in alliance with the Franks, and once in a battle I saved his life from the Saracens at the risk of my own, whereon he swore that did I summon him from the ends of the earth he would come to me if I needed help. Moreover, he gave me his signet-ring as a token, and, by virtue of it, so he said, power in his dominions equal to his own, though these I never visited. You know it," and holding up his hand, Sir Andrew showed them a heavy gold ring, in which was set a black stone, with red veins running across the stone in the exact shape of a dagger, and beneath the dagger words cut in unknown characters.

"So in my plight I bethought me of Jebal, and found means to send

him a letter sealed with his ring. Nor did he forget his promise, for within twelve days Zobeide and I were galloping for Beirut on two horses so swift that all the cavalry of Ayoub could not overtake them. We reached the city, and there were married, Rosamund. There too your mother was baptised a Christian. Thence, since it was not safe for us to stay in the East, we took ship and came safe home, bearing this ring of Jebal with us, for I would not give it up, as his servants demanded that I should do, except to him alone. But before that vessel sailed, a man disguised as a fisherman brought me a message from Ayoub and his son Saladin, swearing that they would yet recapture Zobeide, the daughter of one of them and sister of the other.

"That is the story, and you see that their oath has not been forgotten, though when in after years they learned of my wife's death, they let the matter lie. But since then Saladin, who in those days was but a noble youth, has become the greatest sultan that the East has ever known, and having been told of you, Rosamund, by that traitor Lozelle, he seeks to take you in your mother's place, and, daughter, I tell you that I fear him."

"At least we have a year or longer in which to prepare ourselves, or to hide," said Rosamund. "His palmer must travel back to the East before my uncle Saladin can have our answer."

"Ay," said Sir Andrew; "perhaps we have a year."

"What of the attack on the quay?" asked Godwin, who had been thinking. "The knight Lozelle was named there. Yet if Saladin had to do with it, it seems strange that the blow should have come before the word."

Sir Andrew brooded a while, then said:

"Bring in this palmer. I will question him."

So the man Nicholas, who was found still eating as though his hunger would never be satisfied, was brought in by Wulf. He bowed low before the old knight and Rosamund, studying them the while with his sharp eyes, and the roof and the floor, and every other detail of the chamber. For those eyes of his seemed to miss nothing.

"You have brought me a letter from far away, Sir Palmer, who are named Nicholas," said Sir Andrew.

"I have brought you a chest from Damascus, Sir Knight, but of its contents I know nothing. At least you will bear me witness that it has not been tampered with," answered Nicholas.

"I find it strange," went on the old knight, "that one in your holy garb should be chosen as the messenger of Saladin, with whom

Christian men have little to do."

"But Saladin has much to do with Christian men, Sir Andrew. Thus he takes them prisoner even in times of peace, as he did me."

"Did he, then, take the knight Lozelle prisoner?"

"The knight Lozelle?" repeated the palmer. "Was he a big, red-faced man, with a scar upon his forehead, who always wore a black cloak over his mail?"

"That might be he."

"Then he was not taken prisoner, but he came to visit the Sultan at Damascus while I lay in bonds there, for I saw him twice or thrice, though what his business was I do not know. Afterwards he left, and at Jaffa I heard that he had sailed for Europe three months before I did."

Now the brethren looked at each other. So Lozelle was in England. But Sir Andrew made no comment, only he said: "Tell me your story, and be careful that you speak the truth."

"Why should I not, who have nothing to hide?" answered Nicholas.

"I was captured by some Arabs as I journeyed to the Jordan upon a pilgrimage, who, when they found that I had no goods to be

robbed of, would have killed me. This, indeed, they were about to do, had not some of Saladin's soldiers come by and commanded them to hold their hands and give me over to them. They did so, and the soldiers took me to Damascus. There I was imprisoned, but not close, and then it was that I saw Lozelle, or, at least, a Christian man who had some such name, and, as he seemed to be in favour with the Saracens, I begged him to intercede for me. Afterwards I was brought before the court of Saladin, and having questioned me, the Sultan himself told me that I must either worship the false prophet or die, to which you can guess my answer. So they led me away, as I thought, to death, but none offered to do me hurt.

"Three days later Saladin sent for me again, and offered to spare my life if I would swear an oath, which oath was that I should take a certain package and deliver it to you, or to your daughter named the Lady Rosamund here at your hall of Steeple, in Essex, and bring back the answer to Damascus. Not wishing to die, I said that I would do this, if the Sultan passed his word, which he never breaks, that I should be set free afterwards."

"And now you are safe in England, do you purpose to return to Damascus with the answer, and, if so, why?"

"For two reasons, Sir Andrew. First, because I have sworn to do so, and I do not break my word any more than does Saladin.

Secondly, because I continue to wish to live, and the Sultan promised me that if I failed in my mission, he would bring about my death wherever I might be, which I am sure he has the power to do by magic or otherwise. Well, the rest of the tale is short.

The chest was handed over to me as you see it, and with it money sufficient for my faring to and fro and something to spare. Then I was escorted to Joppa, where I took passage on a ship bound to Italy, where I found another ship named the Holy Mary sailing for Calais, which we reached after being nearly cast away. Thence I came to Dover in a fishing boat, landing there eight days ago, and having bought a mule, joined some travellers to London, and so on here."

"And how will you return?"

The palmer shrugged his shoulders.

"As best I may, and as quickly. Is your answer ready, Sir Andrew?"

"Yes; it is here," and he handed him the roll, which Nicholas hid away in the folds of his great cloak. Then Sir Andrew added, "You say you know nothing of all the business in which you play this part?"

"Nothing; or, rather, only this--the officer who escorted me to

Jaffa told me that there was a stir among the learned doctors and diviners at the court because of a certain dream which the Sultan had dreamed three times. It had to do with a lady who was half of the blood of Ayoub and half English, and they said that my mission was mixed up with this matter. Now I see that the noble lady before me has eyes strangely like those of the Sultan Saladin." And he spread out his hands and ceased.

"You seem to see a good deal, friend Nicholas."

"Sir Andrew, a poor palmer who wishes to preserve his throat unslit must keep his eyes open. Now I have eaten well, and I am weary. Is there any place where I may sleep? I must be gone at daybreak, for those who do Saladin's business dare not tarry, and I have your letter."

"There is a place," answered Sir Andrew. "Wulf, take him to it, and to-morrow, before he leaves, we will speak again. Till then, farewell, holy Nicholas."

With one more searching glance the palmer bowed and went. When the door closed behind him Sir Andrew beckoned Godwin to him, and whispered:

"To-morrow, Godwin, you must take some men and follow this Nicholas to see where he goes and what he does, for I tell you I

do not trust him--ay, I fear him much! These embassies to and from Saracens are strange traffic for a Christian man. Also, though he says his life hangs on it, I think that were he honest, once safe in England here he would stop, since the first priest would absolve him of an oath forced from him by the infidel."

"Were he dishonest would he not have stolen those jewels?" asked Godwin. "They are worth some risk. What do you think, Rosamund?"

"I?" she answered. "Oh, I think there is more in this than any of us dream.

"I think," she added in a voice of distress and with an involuntary wringing motion of the hands, "that for this house and those who dwell in it time is big with death, and that sharp-eyed palmer is its midwife. How strange is the destiny that wraps us all about! And now comes the sword of Saladin to shape it, and the hand of Saladin to drag me from my peaceful state to a dignity which I do not seek; and the dreams of Saladin, of whose kin I am, to interweave my life with the bloody policies of Syria and the unending war between Cross and Crescent, that are, both of them, my heritage." Then, with a woeful gesture, Rosamund turned and left them.

Her father watched her go, and said:

"The maid is right. Great business is afoot in which all of us must bear our parts. For no little thing would Saladin stir thus--he who braces himself as I know well, for the last struggle in which Christ or Mahomet must go down. Rosamund is right. On her brow shines the crescent diadem of the house of Ayoub, and at her heart hangs the black cross of the Christian and round her struggle creeds and nations. What, Wulf, does the man sleep already?"

"Like a dog, for he seems outworn with travel."

"Like a dog with one eye open, perhaps. I do not wish that he should give us the slip during the night, as I want more talk with him and other things, of which I have spoken to Godwin."

"No fear of that, uncle. I have locked the stable door, and a sainted palmer will scarcely leave us the present of such a mule."

"Not he, if I know his tribe," answered Sir Andrew. "Now let us sup and afterwards take counsel together, for we shall need it before all is done."

An hour before the dawn next morning Godwin and Wulf were up, and with them certain trusted men who had been warned that their services would be needed. Presently Wulf, bearing a lantern in

his hand, came to where his brother stood by the fire in the hall.

"Where have you been?" Godwin asked. "To wake the palmer?"

"No. To place a man to watch the road to Steeple Hill, and another at the Creek path; also to feed his mule, which is a very fine beast--too good for a palmer. Doubtless he will be stirring soon, as he said that he must be up early."

Godwin nodded, and they sat together on the bench beside the fire, for the weather was bitter, and dozed till the dawn began to break. Then Wulf rose and shook himself, saying:

"He will not think it uncourteous if we rouse him now," and walking to the far end of the hall, he drew a curtain and called out, "Awake, holy Nicholas! awake! It is time for you to say your prayers, and breakfast will soon be cooking."

But no Nicholas answered.

"Of a truth," grumbled Wulf, as he came back for his lantern, "that palmer sleeps as though Saladin had already cut his throat." Then having lit it, he returned to the guest place.

"Godwin," he called presently, "come here. The man has gone!"

"Gone?" said Godwin as he ran to the curtain. "Gone where?"

"Back to his friend Saladin, I think," answered Wulf. "Look, that is how he went." And he pointed to the shutter of the sleeping-place, that stood wide open, and to an oaken stool beneath, by means of which the sainted Nicholas had climbed up to and through the narrow window slit.

"He must be without, grooming the mule which he would never have left," said Godwin.

"Honest guests do not part from their hosts thus," answered Wulf; "but let us go and see."

So they ran to the stable and found it locked and the mule safe enough within. Nor--though they looked--could they find any trace of the palmer--not even a footstep, since the ground was frostbound. Only on examining the door of the stable they discovered that an attempt had been made to lift the lock with some sharp instrument.

"It seems that he was determined to be gone, either with or without the beast," said Wulf. "Well, perhaps we can catch him yet," and he called to the men to saddle up and ride with him to search the country.

For three hours they hunted far and wide, but nothing did they see of Nicholas.

"The knave has slipped away like a night hawk, and left as little trace," reported Wulf. "Now, my uncle, what does this mean?"

"I do not know, save that it is of a piece with the rest, and that I like it little," answered the old knight anxiously. "Here the value of the beast was of no account, that is plain. What the man held of account was that he should be gone in such a fashion that none could follow him or know whither he went. The net is about us, my nephews, and I think that Saladin draws its string."

Still less pleased would Sir Andrew have been, could he have seen the palmer Nicholas creeping round the hall while all men slept, ere he girded up his long gown and ran like a hare for London. Yet he had done this by the light of the bright stars, taking note of every window slit in it, more especially of those of the solar; of the plan of the outbuildings also, and of the path that ran to Steeple Creek some five hundred yards away.

From that day forward fear settled on the place--fear of some blow that none were able to foresee, and against which they could not guard. Sir Andrew even talked of leaving Steeple and of taking up his abode in London, where he thought that they might

be safer, but such foul weather set in that it was impossible to travel the roads, and still less to sail the sea. So it was arranged that if they moved at all--and there were many things against it, not the least of which were Sir Andrew's weak health and the lack of a house to go to--it should not be till after New Year's Day.

Thus the time went on, and nothing happened to disturb them. The friends of whom the old knight took counsel laughed at his forebodings. They said that so long as they did not wander about unguarded, there was little danger of any fresh attack upon them, and if one should by chance be made, with the aid of the men they had they could hold the Hall against a company until help was summoned. Moreover, at heart, none of them believed that Saladin or his emissaries would stir in this business before the spring, or more probably until another year had passed. Still, they always set guards at night, and, besides themselves, kept twenty men sleeping at the Hall. Also they arranged that on the lighting of a signal fire upon the tower of Steeple Church their neighbours should come to succour them.

So the time went on towards Christmas, before which the weather changed and became calm, with sharp frost.

It was on the shortest day that Prior John rode up to the Hall and told them that he was going to Southminster to buy some wine

for the Christmas feast. Sir Andrew asked what wine there was at Southminster. The Prior answered that he had heard that a ship, laden amongst other things with wine of Cyprus of wonderful quality, had come into the river Crouch with her rudder broken. He added that as no shipwrights could be found in London to repair it till after Christmas, the chapman, a Cypriote, who was in charge of the wine, was selling as much as he could in Southminster and to the houses about at a cheap rate, and delivering it by means of a wain that he had hired.

Sir Andrew replied that this seemed a fair chance to get fine liquor, which was hard to come by in Essex in those times. The end of it was that he bade Wulf, whose taste in strong drink was nice, to ride with the Prior into Southminster, and if he liked the stuff to buy a few casks of it for them to make merry with at Christmas--although he himself, because of his ailments, now drank only water.

So Wulf went, nothing loth. In this dark season of the year when there was no fishing, it grew very dull loitering about the Hall, and since he did not read much, like Godwin, sitting for long hours by the fire at night watching Rosamund going to and fro upon her tasks, but not speaking with her overmuch. For notwithstanding all their pretense of forgetfulness, some sort of veil had fallen between the brethren and Rosamund, and their intercourse was not so open and familiar as of old. She could not

but remember that they were no more her cousins only, but her lovers also, and that she must guard herself lest she seemed to show preference to one above the other. The brethren for their part must always bear in mind also that they were bound not to show their love, and that their cousin Rosamund was no longer a simple English lady, but also by creation, as by blood, a princess of the East, whom destiny might yet lift beyond the reach of either of them.

Moreover, as has been said, dread sat upon that rooftree like a croaking raven, nor could they escape from the shadow of its wing. Far away in the East a mighty monarch had turned his thoughts towards this English home and the maid of his royal blood who dwelt there, and who was mingled with his visions of conquest and of the triumph of his faith. Driven on by no dead oath, by no mere fancy or imperial desire, but by some spiritual hope or need, he had determined to draw her to him, by fair means if he could; if not, by foul. Already means both foul and fair had failed, for that the attack at Death Creek quay had to do with this matter they could no longer doubt. It was certain also that others would be tried again and again till his end was won or Rosamund was dead--for here, if even she would go back upon her word, marriage itself could not shield her.

So the house was sad, and saddest of all seemed the face of the old knight, Sir Andrew, oppressed as he was with sickness, with

memories and fears. Therefore, Wulf could find pleasure even in an errand to Southminster to buy wine, of which, in truth, he would have been glad to drink deeply, if only to drown his thoughts awhile.

So away he rode up Steeple Hill with the Prior, laughing as he used to do before Rosamund led him to gather flowers at St. Peter's-on-the-Wall.

Asking where the foreign merchant dwelt who had wine to sell, they were directed to an inn near the minster. Here in a back room they found a short, stout man, wearing a red cloth cap, who was seated on a pillow between two kegs. In front of him stood a number of folk, gentry and others, who bargained with him for his wine and the silks and embroideries that he had to sell, giving the latter to be handled and samples of the drink to all who asked for them.

"Clean cups," he said, speaking in bad French, to the drawer who stood beside him. "Clean cups, for here come a holy man and a gallant knight who wish to taste my liquor. Nay, fellow, fill them up, for the top of Mount Trooidos in winter is not so cold as this cursed place, to say nothing of its damp, which is that of a dungeon," and he shivered, drawing his costly shawl closer round him.

"Sir Abbot, which will you taste first--the red wine or the yellow? The red is the stronger but the yellow is the more costly and a drink for saints in Paradise and abbots upon earth. The yellow from Kyrenia? Well, you are wise. They say it was my patron St. Helena's favourite vintage when she visited Cyprus, bringing with her Disma's cross."

"Are you a Christian then?" asked the Prior. "I took you for a Paynim."

"Were I not a Christian would I visit this foggy land of yours to trade in wine--a liquor forbidden to the Moslems?" answered the man, drawing aside the folds of his shawl and revealing a silver crucifix upon his broad breast. "I am a merchant of Famagusta in Cyprus, Georgios by name, and of the Greek Church which you Westerners hold to be heretical. But what do you think of that wine, holy Abbot?"

The Prior smacked his lips.

"Friend Georgios, it is indeed a drink for the saints," he answered.

"Ay, and has been a drink for sinners ere now--for this is the very tippie that Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, drank with her Roman lover Antony, of whom you, being a learned man, may have heard.

And you, Sir Knight, what say you of the black stuff--'Mavro,' we call it--not the common, but that which has been twenty years in cask?"

"I have tasted worse," said Wulf, holding out his horn to be filled again.

"Ay, and will never taste better if you live as long as the Wandering Jew. Well, sirs, may I take your orders? If you are wise you will make them large, since no such chance is likely to come your way again, and that wine, yellow or red, will keep a century."

Then the chaffering began, and it was long and keen. Indeed, at one time they nearly left the place without purchasing, but the merchant Georgios called them back and offered to come to their terms if they would take double the quantity, so as to make up a cartload between them, which he said he would deliver before Christmas Day. To this they consented at length, and departed homewards made happy by the gifts with which the chapman clinched his bargain, after the Eastern fashion. To the Prior he gave a roll of worked silk to be used as an edging to an altar cloth or banner, and to Wulf a dagger handle, quaintly carved in olive wood to the fashion of a rampant lion. Wulf thanked him, and then asked him with a somewhat shamed face if he had more embroidery for sale, whereat the Prior smiled. The quick-eyed Cypriote saw

the smile, and inquired if it might be needed for a lady's wear, at which some neighbours present in the room laughed outright.

"Do not laugh at me, gentlemen," said the Eastern; "for how can I, a stranger, know this young knight's affairs, and whether he has mother, or sisters, or wife, or lover? Well here are broideries fit for any of them." Then bidding his servant bring a bale, he opened it, and began to show his goods, which, indeed, were very beautiful. In the end Wulf purchased a veil of gauze-like silk worked with golden stars as a Christmas gift for Rosamund. Afterwards, remembering that even in such a matter he must take no advantage of his brother, he added to it a tunic broidered with gold and silver flowers such as he had never seen--for they were Eastern tulips and anemones, which Godwin would give her also if he wished.

These silks were costly, and Wulf turned to the Prior to borrow money, but he had no more upon him. Georgios said, however, that it mattered nothing, as he would take a guide from the town and bring the wine in person, when he could receive payment for the broideries, of which he hoped to sell more to the ladies of the house.

He offered also to go with the Prior and Wulf to where his ship lay in the river, and show them many other goods aboard of her, which, he explained to them, were the property of a company of

Cyprian merchants who had embarked upon this venture jointly with himself. This they declined, however, as the darkness was not far off; but Wulf added that he would come after Christmas with his brother to see the vessel that had made so great a voyage.

Georgios replied that they would be very welcome, but if he could make shift to finish the repairs to his rudder, he was anxious to sail for London while the weather held calm, for there he looked to sell the bulk of his cargo. He added that he had expected to spend Christmas at that city, but their helm having gone wrong in the rough weather, they were driven past the mouth of the Thames, and had they not drifted into that of the Crouch, would, he thought, have foundered. So he bade them farewell for that time, but not before he had asked and received the blessing of the Prior.

Thus the pair of them departed, well pleased with their purchases and the Cypriote Georgios, whom they found a very pleasant merchant. Prior John stopped to eat at the Hall that night, when he and Wulf told of all their dealings with this man. Sir Andrew laughed at the story, showing them how they had been persuaded by the Eastern to buy a great deal more wine than they needed, so that it was he and not they who had the best of the bargain. Then he went on to tell tales of the rich island of Cyprus, where he had landed many years before and stayed awhile, and of the gorgeous court of its emperor, and of its inhabitants. These were, he said, the cunningest traders in the world--so cunning,

indeed, that no Jew could overmatch them; bold sailors, also, which they had from the Phoenicians of Holy Writ, who, with the Greeks, were their forefathers, adding that what they told him of this Georgios accorded well with the character of that people.

Thus it came to pass that no suspicion of Georgios or his ship entered the mind of any one of them, which, indeed, was scarcely strange, seeing how well his tale held together, and how plain were the reasons of his presence and the purpose of his dealings in wines and silks.