

Chapter Six: The Christmas Feast at Steeple

The fourth day after Wulf's visit to Southminster was Christmas morning, and the weather being bad, Sir Andrew and his household did not ride to Stangate, but attended mass in Steeple Church. Here, after service, according to his custom on this day, he gave a largesse to his tenants and villeins, and with it his good wishes and a caution that they should not become drunk at their Yuletide feast, as was the common habit of the time.

"We shall not get the chance," said Wulf, as they walked to the Hall, "since that merchant Georgios has not delivered the wine, of which I hoped to drink a cup to-night."

"Perhaps he has sold it at a better price to someone else; it would be like a Cypriote," answered Sir Andrew, smiling.

Then they went into the hall, and as had been agreed between them, together the brethren gave their Christmas gifts to Rosamund. She thanked them prettily enough, and much admired the beauty of the work. When they told her that it had not yet been paid for, she laughed and said that, however they were come by, she would wear both tunic and veil at their feast, which was to be held at nightfall.

About two o'clock in the afternoon a servant came into the hall

to say that a wain drawn by three horses and accompanied by two men, one of whom led the horses, was coming down the road from Steeple village.

"Our merchant--and in time after all," said Wulf, and, followed by the others, he went out to meet them.

Georgios it was, sure enough, wrapped in a great sheepskin cloak such as Cypriotes wear in winter, and seated on the head of one of his own barrels.

"Your pardon, knights," he said as he scrambled nimbly to the ground. "The roads in this country are such that, although I have left nearly half my load at Stangate, it has taken me four long hours to come from the Abbey here, most of which time we spent in mud-holes that have wearied the horses and, as I fear, strained the wheels of this crazy wagon. Still, here we are at last, and, noble sir," he added, bowing to Sir Andrew, "here too is the wine that your son bought of me."

"My nephew," interrupted Sir Andrew.

"Once more your pardon. I thought from their likeness to you that these knights were your sons."

"Has he bought all that stuff?" asked Sir Andrew--for there were

five tubs on the wagon, besides one or two smaller kegs and some packages wrapped in sheepskin.

"No, alas!" answered the Cypriote ruefully, and shrugging his shoulders. "Only two of the Mavro. The rest I took to the Abbey, for I understood the holy Prior to say he would purchase six casks, but it seems that it was but three he needed."

"He said three," put in Wulf.

"Did he, sir? Then doubtless the error was mine, who speak your tongue but ill. So I must drag the rest back again over those accursed roads," and he made another grimace. "Yet I will ask you, sir," he added to Sir Andrew, "to lighten the load a little by accepting this small keg of the old sweet vintage that grows on the slopes of Trooidos."

"I remember it well," said Sir Andrew, with a smile; "but, friend, I do not wish to take your wine for nothing."

At these words the face of Georgios beamed.

"What, noble sir," he exclaimed, "do you know my land of Cyprus? Oh, then indeed I kiss your hands, and surely you will not affront me by refusing this little present? Indeed, to be frank, I can afford to lose its price, who have done a good trade, even

here in Essex."

"As you will," said Sir Andrew. "I thank you, and perhaps you have other things to sell."

"I have indeed; a few embroideries if this most gracious lady would be pleased to look at them. Some carpets also, such as the Moslems used to pray on in the name of their false prophet, Mahomet," and, turning, he spat upon the ground.

"I see that you are a Christian," said Sir Andrew. "Yet, although I fought against them, I have known many a good Mussulman. Nor do I think it necessary to spit at the name of Mahomet, who to my mind was a great man deceived by the artifice of Satan."

"Neither do I," said Godwin reflectively. "Its true servants should fight the enemies of the Cross and pray for their souls, not spit at them."

The merchant looked at them curiously, fingering the silver crucifix that hung upon his breast. "The captors of the Holy City thought otherwise," he said, "when they rode into the Mosque El Aksa up to their horses' knees in blood, and I have been taught otherwise. But the times grow liberal, and, after all, what right has a poor trader whose mind, alas! is set more on gain than on the sufferings of the blessed Son of Mary," and he crossed

himself, "to form a judgment upon such high matters? Pardon me, I accept your reproof, who perhaps am bigoted."

Yet, had they but known it, this "reproof" was to save the life of many a man that night.

"May I ask help with these packages?" he went on, "as I cannot open them here, and to move the casks? Nay, the little keg I will carry myself, as I hope that you will taste of it at your Christmas feast. It must be gently handled, though I fear me that those roads of yours will not improve its quality." Then twisting the tub from the end of the wain onto his shoulder in such a fashion that it remained upright, he walked off lightly towards the open door of the hall.

"For one not tall that man is strangely strong," thought Wulf, who followed with a bale of carpets.

Then the other casks of wine were stowed away in the stone cellar beneath the hall.

Leaving his servant--a silent, stupid-looking, dark-eyed fellow named Petros--to bait the horses, Georgios entered the hall and began to unpack his carpets and embroideries with all the skill of one who had been trained in the bazaars of Cairo, Damascus, or Nicosia. Beautiful things they were which he had to show;

broideries that dazzled the eye, and rugs of many hues, yet soft and bright as an otter's pelt. As Sir Andrew looked at them, remembering long dead days, his face softened.

"I will buy that rug," he said, "for of a truth it might be one on which I lay sick many a year ago in the house of Ayoub at Damascus. Nay, I haggle not at the price. I will buy it." Then he fell to thinking how, whilst lying on such a rug (indeed, although he knew it not, it was the same), looking through the rounded beads of the wooden lattice-work of his window, he had first seen his Eastern wife walking in the orange garden with her father Ayoub. Afterwards, still recalling his youth, he began to talk of Cyprus, and so time went on until the dark was falling.

Now Georgios said that he must be going, as he had sent back his guide to Southminster, where the man desired to eat his Christmas feast. So the reckoning was paid--it was a long one--and while the horses were harnessed to the wain the merchant bored holes in the little cask of wine and set spigots in them, bidding them all be sure to drink of it that night. Then calling down good fortune on them for their kindness and liberality, he made his salaams in the Eastern fashion, and departed, accompanied by Wulf.

Within five minutes there was a sound of shouting, and Wulf was back again saying that the wheel of the wain had broken at the first turn, so that now it was lying upon its side in the

courtyard. Sir Andrew and Godwin went out to see to the matter, and there they found Georgios wringing his hands, as only an Eastern merchant can, and cursing in some foreign tongue.

"Noble knights," he said, "what am I to do? Already it is nearly dark, and how I shall find my way up yonder steep hill I know not. As for the priceless broideries, I suppose they must stay here for the night, since that wheel cannot be mended till to-morrow--"

"As you had best do also," said Sir Andrew kindly. "Come, man, do not grieve; we are used to broken axles here in Essex, and you and your servant may as well eat your Christmas dinners at Steeple as in Southminster."

"I thank you, Sir knight; I thank you. But why should I, who am but a merchant, thrust myself upon your noble company? Let me stop outside with my man, Petros, and dine with your people in that barn, where I see they are making ready their food."

"By no means," answered Sir Andrew. "Leave your servant with my people, who will look after him, and come you into the hall, and tell me some more of Cyprus till our food is ready, which will be soon. Do not fear for your goods; they shall be placed under cover."

"All unworthy as I am, I obey," answered the obsequious Georgios.

"Petros, do you understand? This noble lord gives us hospitality for the night. His people will show you where to eat and sleep, and help you with your horses."

This man, who, he explained, was a Cypriote--a fisherman in summer and a muleteer in winter--bowed, and fixing his dark eyes upon those of his master, spoke in some foreign tongue.

"You hear what he says, the silly fellow?" said Georgios. "What? You do not understand Greek--only Arabic? Well, he asks me to give him money to pay for his dinner and his night's lodging. You must forgive him, for he is but a simple peasant, and cannot believe that anyone may be lodged and fed without payment. I will explain to him, the pig!" And explain he did in shrill, high notes, of which no one else could understand a word.

"There, Sir Knight, I do not think he will offend you so again. Ah! look. He is walking off--he is sulky. Well, let him alone; he will be back for his dinner, the pig! Oh, the wet and the wind! A Cypriote does not mind them in his sheepskins, in which he will sleep even in the snow."

So, Georgios still declaiming upon the shortcomings of his servant, they went back into the hall. Here the conversation soon turned upon other matters, such as the differences between the

creeds of the Greek and Latin churches--a subject upon which he seemed to be an expert--and the fear of the Christians in Cyprus lest Saladin should attempt to capture that island.

At length five o'clock came, and Georgios having first been taken to the lavatory--it was but a stone trough--to wash his hands, was led to the dinner, or rather to the supper-table, which stood upon a dais in front of the entrance to the solar. Here places were laid for six--Sir Andrew, his nephews, Rosamund, the chaplain, Matthew, who celebrated masses in the church and ate at the hall on feast-days, and the Cypriote merchant, Georgios himself. Below the dais, and between it and the fire, was another table, at which were already gathered twelve guests, being the chief tenants of Sir Andrew and the reeves of his outlying lands. On most days the servants of the house, with the huntsmen, swineherds, and others, sat at a third table beyond the fire. But as nothing would stop these from growing drunken on the good ale at a feast, and though many ladies thought little of it, there was no sin that Rosamund hated so much as this, now their lord sent them to eat and drink at their ease in the barn which stood in the courtyard with its back to the moat.

When all had taken their seats, the chaplain said grace, and the meal began. It was rude but very plentiful. First, borne in by the cook on a wooden platter, came a great codfish, whereof he helped portions to each in turn, laying them on their

"trenchers"--that is, large slices of bread--whence they ate them with the spoons that were given to each. After the fish appeared the meats, of which there were many sorts, served on silver spits. These included fowls, partridges, duck, and, chief of all, a great swan, that the tenants greeted by knocking their horn mugs upon the table; after which came the pastries, and with them nuts and apples. For drink, ale was served at the lower table. On the dais however, they drank some of the black wine which Wulf had bought--that is, except Sir Andrew and Rosamund, the former because he dared not, and the latter because she had always hated any drink but water--a dislike that came to her, doubtless, with her Eastern blood.

Thus they grew merry since their guest proved himself a cheerful fellow, who told them many stories of love and war, for he seemed to know much of loves, and to have been in sundry wars. At these even Sir Andrew, forgetting his ailments and forebodings, laughed well, while Rosamund, looking more beautiful than ever in the gold-starred veil and the brodered tunic which the brethren had given her, listened to them, smiling somewhat absently. At last the feast drew towards its end, when suddenly, as though struck by a sudden recollection, Georgios exclaimed:

"The wine! The liquid amber from Trooidos! I had forgotten it. Noble knight, have I your leave to draw?"

"Ay, excellent merchant," answered Sir Andrew. "Certainly you can draw your own wine."

So Georgios rose, and took a large jug and a silver tankard from the sideboard where such things were displayed. With these he went to the little keg which, it will be remembered, had been stood ready upon the trestles, and, bending over it while he drew the spigots, filled the vessels to the brim. Then he beckoned to a reeve sitting at the lower table to bring him a leather jack that stood upon the board. Having rinsed it out with wine, he filled that also, handing it with the jug to the reeve to drink their lord's health on this Yule night. The silver vessel he bore back to the high table, and with his own hand filled the horn cups of all present, Rosamund alone excepted, for she would touch none, although he pressed her hard and looked vexed at her refusal. Indeed, it was because it seemed to pain the man that Sir Andrew, ever courteous, took a little himself, although, when his back was turned, he filled the goblet up with water. At length, when all was ready, Georgios charged, or seemed to charge, his own horn, and, lifting it, said:

"Let us drink, everyone of us here, to the noble knight, Sir Andrew D'Arcy, to whom I wish, in the phrase of my own people, that he may live for ever. Drink, friends, drink deep, for never will wine such as this pass your lips again."

Then, lifting his beaker, he appeared to drain it in great gulps--an example which all followed, even Sir Andrew drinking a little from his cup, which was three parts filled with water.

There followed a long murmur of satisfaction.

"Wine! It is nectar!" said Wulf.

"Ay," put in the chaplain, Matthew; "Adam might have drunk this in the Garden," while from the lower table came jovial shouts of praise of this smooth, creamlike vintage.

Certainly that wine was both rich and strong. Thus, after his sup of it, a veil as it were seemed to fall on the mind of Sir Andrew and to cover it up. It lifted again, and lo! his brain was full of memories and foresights. Circumstances which he had forgotten for many years came back to him altogether, like a crowd of children tumbling out to play. These passed, and he grew suddenly afraid. Yet what had he to fear that night? The gates across the moat were locked and guarded. Trusty men, a score or more of them, ate in his outbuildings within those gates; while others, still more trusted, sat in his hall; and on his right hand and on his left were those two strong and valiant knights, Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf. No, there was nothing to fear--and yet he felt afraid. Suddenly he heard a voice speak. It was Rosamund's; and she said:

"Why is there such silence, father? A while ago I heard the servants and bondsmen carousing in the barn; now they are still as death. Oh, and look! Are all here drunken? Godwin--"

But as she spoke Godwin's head fell forward on the board, while Wulf rose, half drew his sword, then threw his arm about the neck of the priest, and sank with him to the ground. As it was with these, so it seemed with all, for folk rocked to and fro, then sank to sleep, everyone of them, save the merchant Georgios, who rose to call another toast.

"Stranger," said Sir Andrew, in a heavy voice, "your wine is very strong."

"It would seem so, Sir Knight," he answered; "but I will wake them from their wassail." Springing from the dais lightly as a cat, he ran down the hall crying, "Air is what they need. Air!" Now coming to the door, he threw it wide open, and drawing a silver whistle from his robe, blew it long and loud. "What," he laughed, "do they still sleep? Why, then, I must give a toast that will rouse them all," and seizing a horn mug, he waved it and shouted:

"Arouse you, ye drunkards, and drink to the lady Rose of the World, princess of Baalbec, and niece to my royal master, Yusuf Salah-ed-din, who sends me to lead her to him!"

"Oh, father," shrieked Rosamund, "the wine was drugged and we are betrayed!"

As the words passed her lips there rose a sound of running feet, and through the open door at the far end of the hall burst in a score or over of armed men. Then at last Sir Andrew saw and understood.

With a roar of rage like that of a wounded lion, he seized his daughter and dragged her back with him down the passage into the solar where a fire burned and lights had been lit ready for their retiring, flinging to and bolting the door behind them.

"Swift!" he said, as he tore his gown from him, "there is no escape, but at least I can die fighting for you. Give me my mail."

She snatched his hauberk from the wall, and while they thundered at the door, did it on to him--ay, and his steel helm also, and gave him his long sword and his shield.

"Now," he said, "help me." And they thrust the oak table forward, and upset it in front of the door, throwing the chairs and stools on either side, that men might stumble on them.

"There is a bow," he said, "and you can use it as I have taught you. Get to one side and out of reach of the sword sweeps, and shoot past me as they rush; it may stay one of them. Oh, that Godwin and Wulf were here, and we would still teach these Paynim dogs a lesson!"

Rosamund made no answer but there came into her mind a vision of the agony of Godwin and of Wulf should they ever wake again to learn what had chanced to her and them. She looked round. Against the wall stood a little desk, at which Godwin was wont to write, and on it lay pen and parchment. She seized them, and as the door gave slowly inwards, scrawled:

"Follow me to Saladin. In that hope I live on.--Rosamund."

Then as the stout door at length crashed in Rosamund turned what she had written face downwards on the desk, and seizing the bow, set an arrow to its string. Now it was down and on rushed the mob up the six feet of narrow passage. At the end of it, in front of the overturned table, they halted suddenly. For there before them, skull-emblazoned, shield on arm, his long sword lifted, and a terrible wrath burning in his eyes, stood the old knight, like a wolf at bay, and by his side, bow in hand, the beautiful lady Rosamund, clad in all her festal broideries.

"Yield you!" cried a voice. By way of answer the bowstring

twanged, and an arrow sped home to its feathers through the throat of the speaker, so that he went down, grabbing at it, and spoke no more for ever.

As he fell clattering to the floor, Sir Andrew cried in a great voice:

"We yield not to pagan dogs and poisoners. A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy! Meet D'Arcy, meet Death!"

Thus for the last time did old Sir Andrew utter the warcry of his race, which he had feared would never pass his lips again. His prayer had been heard, and he was to die as he had desired.

"Down with him! seize the Princess!" said a voice. It was that of Georgios, no longer humble with a merchant's obsequious whine, but speaking in tones of cold command and in Arabic. For a moment the swarthy mob hung back, as well they might in face of that glittering sword. Then with a cry of "Salah-ed-din! Salah-ed-din!" on they surged, with flashing spears and scimitars. The overthrown table was in front of them, and one leapt upon its edge, but as he leapt, the old knight, all his years and sickness forgotten now, sprang forward and struck downwards, so heavy a blow that in the darkling mouth of the passage the sparks streamed out, and where the Saracen's head had been, appeared his heels. Back Sir Andrew stepped again to win

space for his sword-play, while round the ends of the table broke two fierce-faced men. At one of them Rosamund shot with her bow, and the arrow pierced his thigh, but as he fell he struck with his keen scimitar and shored the end off the bow, so that it was useless. The second man caught his foot in the bar of the oak chair which he did not see, and went down prone, while Sir Andrew, taking no heed of him, rushed with a shout at the crowd who followed, and catching their blows upon his shield, rained down others so desperate that, being hampered by their very number, they gave before him, and staggered back along the passage.

"Guard your right, father!" cried Rosamund. He sprang round, to see the Saracen, who had fallen, on his feet again. At him he went, nor did the man wait the onset, but turned to fly, only to find his death, for the great sword caught him between neck and shoulders. Now a voice cried: "We make poor sport with this old lion, and lose men. Keep clear of his claws, and whelm him with spear casts."

But Rosamund, who understood their tongue, sprang in front of him, and answered in Arabic:

"Ay, through my breast; and go, tell that tale to Saladin!"

Then, clear and calm was heard the command of Georgios. "He who

harms a hair of the Princess dies. Take them both living if you may, but lay no hand on her. Stay, let us talk."

So they ceased from their onslaught and began to consult together.

Rosamund touched her father and pointed to the man who lay upon the floor with an arrow through his thigh. He was struggling to his knee, raising the heavy scimitar in his hand. Sir Andrew lifted his sword as a husbandman lifts a stick to kill a rat, then let it fall again, saying:

"I fight not with the wounded. Drop that steel, and get you back to your own folk."

The fellow obeyed him--yes, and even touched the floor with his forehead in salaam as he crawled away, for he knew that he had been given his life, and that the deed was noble towards him who had planned a coward's stroke. Then Georgios stepped forward, no longer the same Georgios who had sold poisoned wine and Eastern broideries, but a proud-looking, high-browed Saracen clad in the mail which he wore beneath his merchant's robe, and in place of the crucifix wearing on his breast a great star-shaped jewel, the emblem of his house and rank.

"Sir Andrew," he said, "hearken to me, I pray you. Noble was that

act," and he pointed to the wounded man being dragged away by his fellows, "and noble has been your defence--well worthy of your lineage and your knighthood. It is a tale that my master," and he bowed as he said the word, "will love to hear if it pleases Allah that we return to him in safety. Also you will think that I have played a knave's trick upon you, overcoming the might of those gallant knights, Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf, not with sword blows but with drugged wine, and treating all your servants in like fashion, since not one of them can shake off its fumes before to-morrow's light. So indeed it is--a very scurvy trick which I shall remember with shame to my life's end, and that perchance may yet fall back upon my head in blood and vengeance. Yet bethink you how we stand, and forgive us. We are but a little company of men in your great country, hidden, as it were, in a den of lions, who, if they saw us, would slay us without mercy. That, indeed, is a small thing, for what are our lives, of which your sword has taken tithe, and not only yours, but those of the twin brethren on the quay by the water?"

"I thought it," broke in Sir Andrew contemptuously. "Indeed, that deed was worthy of you--twenty or more men against two."

Georgios held up his hand.

"Judge us not harshly," he said, speaking slowly, who, for his own ends wished to gain time, "you who have read the letter of

our lord. See you, these were my commands: To secure the lady Rose of the World as best I might, but if possible without bloodshed. Now I was reconnoitring the country with a troop of the sailors from my ship who are but poor fighters, and a few of my own people, when my spies brought me word that she had ridden out attended by only two men, and surely I thought that already she was in my hands. But the knights foiled me by strategy and strength, and you know the end of it. So afterwards my messenger presented the letter, which, indeed, should have been done at first. The letter failed also, for neither you, nor the Princess"--and he bowed to Rosamund--"could be bought. More, the whole country was awakened; you were surrounded with armed men, the knightly brethren kept watch and ward over you, and you were about to fly to London, where it would have been hard to snare you. Therefore, because I must, I--who am a prince and an emir, who also, although you remember it not, have crossed swords with you in my youth; yes, at Harenc--became a dealer in drugged wine.

"Now hearken. Yield you, Sir Andrew, who have done enough to make your name a song for generations, and accept the love of Salah-ed-din, whose word you have, the word that, as you know well, cannot be broken, which I, the lord El-Hassan--for no meaner man has been sent upon this errand--plight to you afresh. Yield you, and save your life, and live on in honour, clinging to your own faith, till Azrael takes you from the pleasant fields

of Baalbec to the waters of Paradise--if such there be for infidels, however gallant.

"For know, this deed must be done. Did we return without the princess Rose of the World, we should die, every one of us, and did we offer her harm or insult, then more horribly than I can tell you. This is no fancy of a great king that drives him on to the stealing of a woman, although she be of his own high blood. The voice of God has spoken to Salah-ed-din by the mouth of his angel Sleep. Thrice has Allah spoken in dreams, telling him who is merciful, that through your daughter and her nobleness alone can countless lives be saved; therefore, sooner than she should escape him, he would lose even the half of all his empire. Outwit us, defeat us now, capture us, cause us to be tortured and destroyed, and other messengers would come to do his bidding--indeed, they are already on the way. Moreover, it is useless to shed more blood, seeing it is written in the Books that this lady, Rose of the World, must return to the East where she was begot, there to fulfil her destiny and save the lives of men."

"Then, emir El-Hassan, I shall return as a spirit," said Rosamund proudly.

"Not so, Princess," he answered, bowing, "for Allah alone has power over your life, and it is otherwise decreed. Sir Andrew, the time grows short, and I must fulfil my mission. Will you take

the peace of Salah-ed-din, or force his servants to take your life?"

The old knight listened, resting on his reddened sword; then he lifted his head, and spoke:

"I am aged and near my death, wine-seller Georgios, or prince El-Hassan, whichever you may be. In my youth I swore to make no pact with Paynims, and in my old I will not break that vow. While I can lift sword I will defend my daughter, even against the might of Saladin. Get to your coward's work again, and let things go as God has willed them."

"Then, Princess," answered El-Hassan, "bear me witness throughout the East that I am innocent of your father's blood. On his own head be it, and on yours," and for the second time he blew upon the whistle that hung around his neck.