

Chapter Seven: The Banner of Saladin

As the echoes of Hassan's whistle died away there was a crash amongst the wooden shutters of the window behind them, and down into the room leaped a long, lithe figure, holding an axe aloft. Before Sir Andrew could turn to see whence the sound came, that axe dealt him a fearful blow between the shoulders which, although the ringed mail remained unshorn, shattered his spine beneath. Down he fell, rolled on to his back, and lay there, still able to speak and without pain, but helpless as a child. For he was paralysed, and never more would move hand or foot or head.

In the silence that followed he spoke in a heavy voice, letting his eyes rest upon the man who had struck him down.

"A knightly blow, truly; one worthy of a Christian born who does murder for Paynim pay! Traitor to God and man, who have eaten my bread and now slaughter me like an ox on my hearth-stone, may your own end be even worse, and at the hands of those you serve."

The palmer Nicholas, for it was he, although he no longer wore the palmer's robe, slunk away muttering, and was lost among the crowd in the passage. Then, with a sudden and a bitter cry, Rosamund swooped forward, as a bird swoops, snatched up the

sword her sire would never lift again, and setting its hilt upon the floor, cast herself forward. But its point never touched her breast, for the emir sprang swiftly and struck the steel aside; then, as she fell, caught her in his arms. "Lady," he said, loosing her very gently. "Allah does not need you yet. I have told you that it is not fated. Now will you pass me your word--for being of the blood of Salah-ed-din and D'Arcy, you, too, cannot lie--that neither now nor afterwards you will attempt to harm yourself? If not, I must bind you, which I am loth to do--it is a sacrilege to which I pray you will not force me."

"Promise, Rosamund," said the hollow voice of her father, "and go to fulfil your fate. Self-murder is a crime, and the man is right; it is decreed. I bid you promise."

"I obey and promise," said Rosamund. "It is your hour, my lord Hassan."

He bowed deeply and answered:

"I am satisfied, and henceforth we are your servants. Princess, the night air is bitter; you cannot travel thus. In which chamber are your garments?"

She pointed with her finger. A man took a taper, and, accompanied by two others, entered the place, to return presently with their

arms full of all the apparel they could find. Indeed, they even brought her missal and the silver crucifix which hung above her bed and with it her leathern case of trinkets.

"Keep out the warmest cloak," said Hassan, "and tie the rest up in those carpets."

So the rugs that Sir Andrew had bought that day from the merchant Georgios were made to serve as travelling bags to hold his daughter's gear. Thus even in this hour of haste and danger thought was taken for her comfort.

"Princess," said Hassan, bowing, "my master, your uncle, sent you certain jewels of no mean value. Is it your wish that they should accompany you?"

Without lifting her eyes from her dying father's face, Rosamund answered heavily:

"Where they are, there let them bide. What have I to do with jewels?"

"Your will is my law," he said, "and others will be found for you. Princess, all is ready; we wait your pleasure."

"My pleasure? Oh, God, my pleasure?" exclaimed Rosamund in the

same drear voice, still staring at her father, who lay before her on the ground.

"I cannot help it," said Hassan, answering the question in her eyes, and there was grief in his tone. "He would not come, he brought it on himself; though in truth I wish that accursed Frank had not struck so shrewdly. If you ask it, we will bear him with you; but, lady, it is idle to hide the truth--he is sped. I have studied medicine, and I know."

"Nay," said Sir Andrew from the floor, "leave me here. Daughter, we must part awhile. As I stole his child from Ayoub, so Ayoub's son steals my child from me. Daughter, cling to the faith--that we may meet again."

"To the death," she answered.

"Be comforted," said Hassan. "Has not Salah-ed-din passed his word that except her own will or that of Allah should change her heart, a Cross-worshipper she may live and die? Lady, for your own sake as well as ours, let this sad farewell be brief. Begone, my servants, taking these dead and wounded with you. There are things it is not fitting that common eyes should see."

They obeyed, and the three of them remained alone together. Then Rosamund knelt down beside her father, and they whispered into

each other's ears. Hassan turned his back upon them, and threw the corner of his cloak over his head and eyes that he might neither see nor hear their voices in this dread and holy hour of parting.

It would seem that they found some kind of hope and consolation in it--at least when Rosamund kissed him for the last time, Sir Andrew smiled and said:

"Yes, yes; it may all be for the best. God will guard you, and His will be done. But I forgot. Tell me, daughter, which?"

Again she whispered into his ear, and when he had thought a moment, he answered:

"Maybe you are right. I think that is wisest for all. And now on the three of you--aye, and on your children's children's children--let my blessing rest, as rest it shall. Come hither, Emir."

Hassan heard him through his cloak, and, uncovering, came.

"Say to Saladin, your master, that he has been too strong for me, and paid me back in my own coin. Well, had it been otherwise, my daughter and I must soon have parted, for death drew near to me. At least it is the decree of God, to which I bow my head,

trusting there may be truth in that dream of his, and that our sorrows, in some way unforeseen, will bring blessings to our brethren in the East. But to Saladin say also that whatever his bigot faith may teach, for Christian and for Paynim there is a meeting-place beyond the grave. Say that if aught of wrong or insult is done towards this maiden, I swear by the God who made us both that there I will hold him to account. Now, since it must be so, take her and go your way, knowing that my spirit follows after you and her; yes, and that even in this world she will find avengers."

"I hear your words, and I will deliver them," answered Hassan.

"More, I believe that they are true, and for the rest you have the oath of Salah-ed-din--ay, and my oath while she is in my charge. Therefore, Sir Andrew D'Arcy, forgive us, who are but the instruments of Allah, and die in peace."

"I, who have so much to be forgiven, forgive you," answered the old knight slowly.

Then his eyes fixed themselves upon his daughter's face with one long, searching look, and closed.

"I think that he is dead," said Hassan. "May God, the Merciful and Compassionate, rest his soul!" And taking a white garment from the wall, he flung it over him, adding, "Lady, come."

Thrice Rosamund looked at the shrouded figure on the floor; once she wrung her hands and seemed about to fall. Then, as though a thought struck her, she lifted her father's sword from where it lay, and gathering her strength, drew herself up and passed like a queen down the blood-stained passage and the steps of the solar. In the hall beneath waited the band of Hassan, who bowed as she came--a vision of despairing loveliness, that held aloft a red and naked sword. There, too, lay the drugged men fallen this way and that, and among them Wulf across the table, and Godwin on the dais. Rosamund spoke.

"Are these dead or sleeping?"

"Have no fear," answered Hassan. "By my hope of paradise, they do but sleep, and will awake ere morning."

Rosamund pointed to the renegade Nicholas--he that had struck down her father from behind--who, an evil look upon his face, stood apart from the Saracens, holding in his hand a lighted torch.

"What does this man with the torch?" she asked.

"If you would know, lady," Nicholas answered with a sneer, "I wait till you are out of it to fire the hall."

"Prince Hassan," said Rosamund, "is this a deed that great Saladin would wish, to burn drugged men beneath their own roof? Now, as you shall answer to him, in the name of Saladin I, a daughter of his House, command you, strike the fire from that man's hand, and in my hearing give your order that none should even think of such an act of shame."

"What?" broke in Nicholas, "and leave knights like these, whose quality you know"--and he pointed to the brethren--"to follow in our path, and take our lives in vengeance? Why, it is madness!"

"Are you master here, traitor, or am I?" asked Hassan in cold contempt. "Let them follow if they will, and I for one shall rejoice to meet foes so brave in open battle, and there give them their revenge. Ali," he added, addressing the man who had been disguised as a merchant's underling, and who had drugged the men in the barn as his master had drugged those in the hall, and opened the moat gate to the band, "Ali, stamp upon the torch and guard that Frank till we reach the boat lest the fool should raise the country on us with his fires. Now, Princess, are you satisfied?"

"Ay, having your word," she answered. "One moment, I pray you. I would leave a token to my knights."

Then, while they watched her with wondering eyes, she unfastened the gold cross and chain that hung upon her bosom, and slipping the cross from the chain, went to where Godwin lay, and placed it on his breast. Next, with a swift movement, she wound the chain about the silver hilt of Sir Andrew's sword, and passing to Wulf, with one strong thrust, drove the point between the oak boards of the table, so that it stood before him--at once a cross, a brand of battle, and a lady's token.

"His grandsire bore it," she said in Arabic, "when he leapt on to the walls of Jerusalem. It is my last gift to him." But the Saracens muttered and turned pale at these words of evil omen.

Then taking the hand of Hassan, who stood searching her white, inscrutable face, with never a word or a backward look, she swept down the length of the long hall, and out into the night beyond.

"It would have been well to take my counsel and fire the place, or at least to cut the throats of all within it," said the man Nicholas to his guard Ali as they followed with the rest. "If I know aught of these brethren, cross and sword will soon be hard upon our track, and men's lives must pay the price of such soft folly." And he shivered as though in fear.

"It may be so, Spy," answered the Saracen, looking at him with sombre, contemptuous eyes. "It may be that your life will pay the

price."

Wulf was dreaming, dreaming that he stood on his head upon a wooden plank, as once he had seen a juggler do, which turned round one way while he turned round the other, till at length some one shouted at him, and he tumbled off the board and hurt himself. Then he awoke to hear a voice shouting surely enough--the voice of Matthew, the chaplain of Steeple Church.

"Awake!" said the voice. "In God's name, I conjure you, awake!"

"What is it?" he said, lifting his head sleepily, and becoming conscious of a dull pain across his forehead.

"It is that death and the devil have been here, Sir Wulf."

"Well, they are often near together. But I thirst. Give me water."

A serving-woman, pallid, dishevelled, heavy-eyed, who was stumbling to and fro, lighting torches and tapers, for it was still dark, brought it to him in a leathern jack, from which he drank deeply.

"That is better," he said. Then his eye fell upon the bloody sword set point downwards in the wood of the table before him,

and he exclaimed, "Mother of God! what is that? My uncle's silver-hilted sword, red with blood, and Rosamund's gold chain upon the hilt! Priest, where is the lady Rosamund?"

"Gone," answered the chaplain in a voice that sounded like a groan. "The women woke and found her gone, and Sir Andrew lies dead or dying in the solar--but now I have shriven him--and oh! we have all been drugged. Look at them!" and he waved his hand towards the recumbent forms. "I say that the devil has been here."

Wulf sprang to his feet with an oath.

"The devil? Ah! I have it now. You mean the Cyprian chapman Georgios. He who sold wine."

"He who sold drugged wine," echoed the chaplain, "and has stolen away the lady Rosamund."

Then Wulf seemed to go mad.

"Stolen Rosamund over our sleeping carcasses! Stolen Rosamund with never a blow struck by us to save her! O, Christ, that such a thing should be! O, Christ, that I should live to hear it!" And he, the mighty man, the knight of skill and strength, broke down and wept like a very child. But not for long, for presently he

shouted in a voice of thunder:

"Awake, ye drunkards! Awake, and learn what has chanced to us. Your lady Rosamund has been raped away while we were lost in sleep!"

At the sound of that great voice a tall form arose from the floor, and staggered towards him, holding a gold cross in its hand.

"What awful words are those my brother?" asked Godwin, who, pale and dull-eyed, rocked to and fro before him. Then he, too, saw the red sword and stared, first at it and next at the gold cross in his hand. "My uncle's sword, Rosamund's chain, Rosamund's cross! Where, then, is Rosamund?"

"Gone! gone! gone!" cried Wulf. "Tell him, priest."

So the chaplain told him all he knew.

"Thus have we kept our oaths," went on Wulf. "Oh, what can we do now, save die for very shame?"

"Nay," answered Godwin, dreamingly; "we can live on to save her. See, these are her tokens--the cross for me, the blood-stained sword for you, and about its hilt the chain, a symbol of her

slavery. Now both of us must bear the cross; both of us must wield the sword, and both of us must cut the chain, or if we fail, then die."

"You rave," said Wulf; "and little wonder. Here, drink water. Would that we had never touched aught else, as she did, and desired that we should do. What said you of my uncle, priest? Dead, or only dying? Nay, answer not, let us see. Come, brother."

Now together they ran, or rather reeled, torch in hand, along the passage.

Wulf saw the bloodstains on the floor and laughed savagely.

"The old man made a good fight," he said, "while, like drunken brutes, we slept."

They were there, and before them, beneath the white, shroud-like cloak, lay Sir Andrew, the steel helm on his head, and his face beneath it even whiter than the cloak.

At the sound of their footsteps he opened his eyes. "At length, at length," he muttered. "Oh, how many years have I waited for you? Nay, be silent, for I do not know how long my strength will last, but listen--kneel down and listen."

So they knelt on either side of him, and in quick, fierce words he told them all--of the drugging, of the fight, of the long parley carried on to give the palmer knave time to climb to the window; of his cowardly blow, and of what chanced afterwards. Then his strength seemed to fail him, but they poured drink down his throat, and it came back again.

"Take horse swiftly," he gasped, pausing now and again to rest, "and rouse the countryside. There is still a chance. Nay, seven hours have gone by; there is no chance. Their plans were too well laid; by now they will be at sea. So hear me. Go to Palestine. There is money for your faring in my chest, but go alone, with no company, for in time of peace these would betray you. Godwin, draw off this ring from my finger, and with it as a token, find out Jebal, the black sheik of the Mountain Tribe at Masyaf on Lebanon. Bid him remember the vow he made to Andrew D'Arcy, the English knight. If any can aid you, it will be Jebal, who hates the Houses of Nur-ed-din and of Ayoub. So, I charge you, let nothing--I say nothing--turn you aside from seeking him.

"Afterwards act as God shall guide you. If they still live, kill that traitor Nicholas and Hugh Lozelle, but, save in open war, spare the Emir Hassan, who did but do his duty as an Eastern reads it, and shown some mercy, for he could have slain or burnt us all. This riddle has been hard for me; yet now, in my dying hour, I seem to see its answer. I think that Saladin did not

dream in vain. Keep brave hearts, for I think also that at Masyaf you will find friends, and that things will yet go well, and our sorrows bear good fruit.

"What is that you said? She left you my father's sword, Wulf? Then wield it bravely, winning honour for our name. She left you the cross, Godwin? Wear it worthily, winning glory for the Lord, and salvation to your soul. Remember what you have sworn. Whate'er befall, bear no bitterness to one another. Be true to one another, and to her, your lady, so that when at the last you make your report to me before high Heaven, I may have no cause to be ashamed of you, my nephews, Godwin and Wulf."

For a moment the dying man was silent, until his face lit up as with a great gladness, and he cried in a loud, clear voice, "Beloved wife, I hear you! O, God, I come!"

Then though his eyes stayed open, and the smile still rested on his face, his jaw fell.

Thus died Sir Andrew D'Arcy.

Still kneeling on either side of him, the brethren watched the end, and, as his spirit passed, bowed their heads in prayer.

"We have seen a great death," said Godwin presently. "Let us

learn a lesson from it, that when our time comes we may die like him."

"Ay," answered Wulf, springing to his feet, "but first let us take vengeance for it. Why, what is this? Rosamund's writing! Read it, Godwin."

Godwin took the parchment and read:

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

"Surely we will follow you, Rosamund," he cried aloud. "Follow you through life to death or victory."

Then he threw down the paper, and calling for the chaplain to come to watch the body, they ran into the hall. By this time about half of the folk were awake from their drugged sleep, whilst others who had been doctored by the man Ali in the barn staggered into the hall--wild-eyed, white-faced, and holding their hands to their heads and hearts. They were so sick and bewildered, indeed, that it was difficult to make them understand

what had chanced, and when they learned the truth, the most of them could only groan. Still, a few were found strong enough in wit and body to grope their way through the darkness and the falling snow to Stangate Abbey, to Southminster, and to the

houses of their neighbours, although of these there were none near, praying that every true man would arm and ride to help them in the hunt. Also Wulf, cursing the priest Matthew and himself that he had not thought of it before, called him from his prayers by their dead uncle, and charged him to climb the church tower as swiftly as he could, and set light to the beacon that was laid ready there.

Away he went, taking flint, steel, and tinder with him, and ten minutes later the blaze was flaring furiously above the roof of Steeple Church, warning all men of the need for help. Then they armed, saddled such horses as they had, amongst them the three that had been left there by the merchant Georgios, and gathered all of them who were not too sick to ride or run, in the courtyard of the Hall. But as yet their haste availed them little, for the moon was down. Snow fell also, and the night was still black as death--so black that a man could scarcely see the hand he held before his face. So they must wait, and wait they did, eating their hearts out with grief and rage, and bathing their aching brows in icy water.

At length the dawn began to break, and by its first grey light they saw men mounted and afoot feeling their way through the snow, shouting to each other as they came to know what dreadful thing had happened at Steeple. Quickly the tidings spread among them that Sir Andrew was slain, and the lady Rosamund snatched

away by Paynims, while all who feasted in the place had been drugged with poisoned wine by a man whom they believed to be a merchant. So soon as a band was got together--perhaps thirty men in all--and there was light to stir by, they set out and began to search, though where to look they knew not, for the snow had covered up all traces of their foes.

"One thing is certain," said Godwin, "they must have come by water."

"Ay," answered Wulf, "and landed near by, since, had they far to go, they would have taken the horses, and must run the risk also of losing their path in the darkness. To the Staithe! Let us try Steeple Staithe."

So on they went across the meadow to the creek. It lay but three bow-shots distant. At first they could see nothing, for the snow covered the stones of the little pier, but presently a man cried out that the lock of the water house, in which the brethren kept their fishing-boat, was broken, and next minute, that the boat was gone.

"She was small; she would hold but six men," cried a voice. "So great a company could never have crowded into her."

"Fool!" one answered, "there may have been other boats."

So they looked again, and beneath the thin coating of rime, found a mark in the mud by the Staithe, made by the prow of a large boat, and not far from it a hole in the earth into which a peg had been driven to make her fast.

Now the thing seemed clear enough, but it was to be made yet clearer, for presently, even through the driving snow, the quick eye of Wulf caught sight of some glittering thing which hung to the edge of a clump of dead reeds. A man with a lance lifted it out at his command, and gave it to him.

"I thought so," he said in a heavy voice; "it is a fragment of that star-wrought veil which was my Christmas gift to Rosamund, and she has torn it off and left it here to show us her road. To St. Peter's-on-the-Wall! To St. Peter's, I say, for there the boats or ship must pass, and maybe that in the darkness they have not yet won out to sea."

So they turned their horses' heads, and those of them that were mounted rode for St. Peter's by the inland path that runs through Steeple St. Lawrence and Bradwell town, while those who were not, started to search along the Saltings and the river bank. On they galloped through the falling snow, Godwin and Wulf leading the way, whilst behind them thundered an ever-gathering train of knights, squires and yeomen, who had seen the beacon flare on

Steeple tower, or learned the tale from messengers--yes, and even of monks from Stangate and traders from Southminster.

Hard they rode, but the lanes were heavy with fallen snow and mud beneath, and the way was far, so that an hour had gone by before Bradwell was left behind, and the shrine of St. Chad lay but half a mile in front. Now of a sudden the snow ceased, and a strong northerly wind springing up, drove the thick mist before it and left the sky hard and blue behind. Still riding in this mist, they pressed on to where the old tower loomed in front of them, then drew rein and waited.

"What is that?" said Godwin presently, pointing to a great, dim thing upon the vapour-hidden sea.

As he spoke a strong gust of wind tore away the last veils of mist, revealing the red face of the risen sun, and not a hundred yards away from them--for the tide was high--the tall masts of a galley creeping out to sea beneath her banks of oars. As they stared the wind caught her, and on the main-mast rose her bellying sail, while a shout of laughter told them that they themselves were seen. They shook their swords in the madness of their rage, knowing well who was aboard that galley; while to the fore peak ran up the yellow flag of Saladin, streaming there like gold in the golden sunlight.

Nor was this all, for on the high poop appeared the tall shape of Rosamund herself, and on one side of her, clad now in coat of mail and turban, the emir Hassan, whom they had known as the merchant Georgios, and on the other, a stout man, also clad in mail, who at that distance looked like a Christian knight.

Rosamund stretched out her arms towards them. Then suddenly she sprang forward as though she would throw herself into the sea, had not Hassan caught her by the arm and held her back, whilst the other man who was watching slipped between her and the bulwark.

In his fury and despair Wulf drove his horse into the water till the waves broke about his middle, and there, since he could go no further, sat shaking his sword and shouting:

"Fear not! We follow! we follow!" in such a voice of thunder, that even through the wind and across the everwidening space of foam his words may have reached the ship. At least Rosamund seemed to hear them, for she tossed up her arms as though in token.

But Hassan, one hand pressed upon his heart and the other on his forehead, only bowed thrice in courteous farewell.

Then the great sail filled, the oars were drawn in, and the vessel swept away swiftly across the dancing waves, till at

length she vanished, and they could only see the sunlight playing on the golden banner of Saladin which floated from her truck.