

## Chapter Fourteen: The Combat on the Bridge

"Saladin will come," said Wulf the hopeful, and from the high place where they stood he pointed to the plain beneath, across which a band of horsemen moved at full gallop. "Look; yonder goes his embassy."

"Ay," answered Godwin, "he will come, but, I fear me, too late."

"Yes, brother, unless we go to meet him. Masouda has promised."

"Masouda," sighed Godwin. "Ah! to think that so much should hang upon the faithfulness of one woman."

"It does not hang on her," said Wulf; "it hangs on Fate, who writes with her finger. Come, let us ride."

So, followed by their escort, they rode in the gardens, taking note, without seeming to do so, of the position of the tall rock, and of how it could be approached from every side. Then they went in again and waited for some sign or word of Rosamund, but in vain. That night there was no feast, and their meal was brought to them in the guest-house. While they sat at it Masouda appeared for a moment to tell them that they had leave to ride the bridge in the moonlight, and that their escort would await them at a certain hour.

The brethren asked if their sister Rosamund was not coming to dine with them. Masouda answered that as the queen-elect of the Al-je-bal it was not lawful that she should eat with any other men, even her brothers. Then as she passed out, stumbling as though by accident, she brushed against Godwin, and muttered:

"Remember, to-night," and was gone.

When the moon had been up an hour the officer of their escort appeared, and led them to their horses, which were waiting, and they rode away to the castle bridge. As they approached it they saw Lozelle departing on his great black stallion, which was in a lather of foam. It seemed that he also had made trial of that perilous path, for the people, of whom there were many gathered there, clapped their hands and shouted, "Well ridden, Frank! well ridden!"

Now, Godwin leading on Flame, they faced the bridge and walked their horses over it. Nor did these hang back, although they snorted a little at the black gulf on either side. Next they returned at a trot, then over again, and yet again at a canter and a gallop, sometimes together and sometimes singly. Lastly, Wulf made Godwin halt in the middle of the bridge and galloped down upon him at speed, till within a lance's length. Then

suddenly he checked his horse, and while his audience shouted, wheeled it around on its hind legs, its forehoofs beating the air, and galloped back again, followed by Godwin.

"All went well," Wulf said as they rode to the castle, "and nobler or more gentle horses were never crossed by men. I have good hopes for to-morrow night."

"Ay, brother, but I had no sword in my hand. Be not over confident, for Lozelle is desperate and a skilled fighter, as I know who have stood face to face with him. More over, his black stallion is well trained, and has more weight than ours. Also, yonder is a fearsome place on which to ride a course, and one of which none but that devil Sinan would have thought."

"I shall do my best," answered Wulf, "and if I fall, why, then, act upon your own counsel. At least, let him not kill both of us."

Having stabled their horses the brethren wandered into the garden, and, avoiding the cup-bearing women and the men they plied with their drugged drink, drew by a roundabout road to the tall rock. Then, finding themselves alone, they unlocked the door, and slipping through it, locked it again on the further side and groped their way to the moonlit mouth of the cave. Here they stood awhile studying the descent of the gulf as best they

could in that light, till suddenly Godwin, feeling a hand upon his shoulder, started round to find himself face to face with Masouda.

"How did you come?" he asked.

"By a road in which is your only hope," she answered. "Now, Sir Godwin, waste no words, for my time is short, but if you think that you can trust me--and this is for you to judge--give me the Signet which hangs about your neck. If not, go back to the castle and do your best to save the lady Rosamund and yourselves."

Thrusting down his hand between his mail shirt and his breast, Godwin drew out the ancient ring, carved with the mysterious signs and veined with the emblem of the dagger, and handed it to Masouda.

"You trust indeed," she said with a little laugh, as, after scanning it closely by the light of the moon and touching her forehead with it, she hid it in her bosom.

"Yes, lady," he answered, "I trust you, though why you should risk so much for us I do not know."

"Why? Well, perhaps for hate's sake, for Sinan does not rule by love; perhaps because, being of a wild blood, I am willing to set

my life at hazard, who care not if I win or die; perhaps because you saved me from the lioness. What is it to you, Sir Godwin, why a certain woman-spy of the Assassins, whom in your own land you would spit on, chooses to do this or that?"

She ceased and stood before him with heaving breast and flashing eyes, a mysterious white figure in the moonlight, most beautiful to see.

Godwin felt his heart stir and the blood flow to his brow, but before he could speak Wulf broke in, saying:

"You bade us spare words, lady Masouda, so tell us what we must do."

"This," she answered, becoming calm again. "Tomorrow night about this hour you fight Lozelle upon the narrow way. That is certain, for all the city talks of it, and, whatever chances, Al-je-bal will not deprive them of the spectacle of this fray to the death. Well, you may fall, though that man at heart is a coward, which you are not, for here courage alone will avail nothing, but rather skill and horsemanship and trick of war. If so, then Sir Godwin fights him, and of this business none can tell the end. Should both of you go down, then I will do my best to save your lady and take her to Salah-ed-din, with whom she will be safe, or if I cannot save her I will find her a means to save herself by

death."

"You swear that?" said Wulf.

"I have said it; it is enough," she answered impatiently.

"Then I face the bridge and the knave Lozelle with a light heart," said Wulf again, and Masouda went on.

"Now if you conquer, Sir Wulf, or if you fall and your brother conquers, both of you--or one of you, as it may happen--must gallop back at full speed toward the stable gate that lies more than a mile from the castle bridge. Mounted as you are, no horse can keep pace with you, nor must you stop at the gate, but ride on, ride like the wind till you reach this place. The gardens will be empty of feasters and of cup-bearers, who with every soul within the city will have gathered on the walls and on the house-tops to see the fray. There is but one fear--by then a guard may be set before this mound, seeing that Salah-ed-din has declared war upon Al-je-bal, and though yonder road is known to few, it is a road, and sentries may watch here. If so, you must cut them down or be cut down, and bring your story to an end. Sir Godwin, here is another key that you may use if you are alone. Take it."

He did so, and she continued:

"Now if both of you, or one of you, win through to this cave, enter with your horses, lock the door, bar it, and wait. It may be I will join you here with the princess. But if I do not come by the dawn and you are not discovered and overwhelmed--which should not be, seeing that one man can hold that door against many--then know that the worst has happened, and fly to Salah-ed-din and tell him of this road, by which he may take vengeance upon his foe Sinan. Only then, I pray you, doubt not that I have done my best, who if I fail must die--most horribly. Now, farewell, until we meet again or--do not meet again. Go; you know the road."

They turned to obey, but when they had gone a few paces Godwin looked round and saw Masouda watching them. The moonlight shone full upon her face, and by it he saw also that tears were running from her dark and tender eyes. Back he came again, and with him Wulf, for that sight drew them. Down he bent before her till his knee touched the ground, and, taking her hand, he kissed it, and said in his gentle voice:

"Henceforth through life, through death, we serve two ladies," and what he did Wulf did also.

"Mayhap," she answered sadly; "two ladies--but one love."

Then they went, and, creeping through the bushes to the path,

wandered about awhile among the revellers and came to the guest-house safely.

Once more it was night, and high above the mountain fortress of Masyaf shone the full summer moon, lighting crag and tower as with some vast silver lamp. Forth from the guest-house gate rode the brethren, side by side upon their splendid steeds, and the moon-rays sparkled on their coats of mail, their polished bucklers, blazoned with the cognizance of a grinning skull, their close-fitting helmets, and the points of the long, tough lances that had been given them. Round them rode their escort, while in front and behind went a mob of people.

The nation of the Assassins had thrown off its gloom this night, for the while it was no longer oppressed even by the fear of attack from Saladin, its mighty foe. To death it was accustomed; death was its watchword; death in many dreadful forms its daily bread. From the walls of Masyaf, day by day, fedais went out to murder this great one, or that great one, at the bidding of their lord Sinan.

For the most part they came not back again; they waited week by week, month by month, year by year, till the moment was ripe, then gave the poisoned cup or drove home the dagger, and escaped or were slain. Death waited them abroad, and if they failed, death waited them at home. Their dreadful caliph was himself a



sword of death. At his will they hurled themselves from towers or from precipices; to satisfy his policy they sacrificed their wives and children. And their reward--in life, the drugged cup and voluptuous dreams; after it, as they believed, a still more voluptuous paradise.

All forms of human agony and doom were known to this people; but now they were promised an unfamiliar sight, that of Frankish knights slaying each other in single combat beneath the silent moon, tilting at full gallop upon a narrow place where many might hesitate to walk, and--oh, joy!--falling perchance, horse and rider together, into the depths below. So they were happy, for to them this was a night of festival, to be followed by a morrow of still greater festival, when their sultan and their god took to himself this stranger beauty as a wife. Doubtless, too, he would soon weary of her, and they would be called together to see her cast from some topmost tower and hear her frail bones break on the cruel rocks below, or--as had happened to the last queen--to watch her writhe out her life in the pangs of poison upon a charge of sorcery. It was indeed a night of festival, a night filled full of promise of rich joys to come.

On rode the brethren, with stern, impassive faces, but wondering in their hearts whether they would live to see another dawn. The shouting crowd surged round them, breaking through the circle of their guards. A hand was thrust up to Godwin; in it was a letter,

which he took and read by the bright moonlight. It was written in English, and brief:

"I cannot speak with you. God be with you both, my brothers, God and the spirit of my father. Strike home, Wulf, strike home, Godwin, and fear not for me who will guard myself. Conquer or die, and in life or death, await me. To-morrow, in the flesh, or in the spirit, we will talk--Rosamund."

Godwin handed the paper to Wulf, and, as he did so, saw that the guards had caught its bearer, a withered, grey-haired woman. They asked her some questions, but she shook her head. Then they cast her down, trampled the life out of her beneath their horses' hoofs, and went on laughing. The mob laughed also.

"Tear that paper up," said Godwin. Wulf did so, saying:

"Our Rosamund has a brave heart. Well, we are of the same blood, and will not fail her."

Now they were come to the open space in front of the narrow bridge, where, tier on tier, the multitude were ranged, kept back from its centre by lines of guards. On the flat roofed houses also they were crowded thick as swarming bees, on the circling walls, and on the battlements that protected the far end of the bridge, and the houses of the outer city. Before the bridge was a

low gateway, and upon its roof sat the Al-je-bal, clad in his scarlet robe of festival, and by his side, the moonlight gleaming on her jewels, Rosamund. In front, draped in a rich garment, a dagger of gems in her dark hair, stood the interpreter or "mouth" Masouda, and behind were dais and guards.

The brethren rode to the space before the arch and halted, saluting with their pennoned spears. Then from the further side advanced another procession, which, opening, revealed the knight Lozelle riding on his great black horse, and a huge man and a fierce he seemed in his armour.

"What!" he shouted, glowering at them. "Am I to fight one against two? Is this your chivalry?"

"Nay, nay, Sir Traitor," answered Wulf. "Nay, nay betrayer of Christian maids to the power of the heathen dog; you have fought Godwin, now it is the turn of Wulf. Kill Wulf and Godwin remains. Kill Godwin and God remains. Knave, you look your last upon the moon."

Lozelle heard, and seemed to go mad with rage, or fear, or both.

"Lord Sinan," he shouted in Arabic, "this is murder. Am I, who have done you so much service, to be butchered for your pleasure by the lovers of that woman, whom you would honour with the name

of wife?"

Sinan heard, and stared at him with dull, angry eyes.

"Ay, you may stare," went on the maddened Lozelle, "but it is true--they are her lovers, not her brothers. Would men take so much pains for a sister's sake, think you? Would they swim into this net of yours for a sister's sake?"

Sinan held up his hand for silence.

"Let the lots be cast," he said, "for whatever these men are, this fight must go on, and it shall be fair."

So a dai, standing by himself, cast lots upon the ground, and having read them, announced that Lozelle must run the first course from the further side of the bridge. Then one took his bridle to lead him across. As he passed the brethren he grinned in their faces and said:

"At least this is sure, you also look your last upon the moon. I am avenged already. The bait that hooked me is a meal for yonder pike, and he will kill you both before her eyes to whet his appetite."

But the brethren answered nothing.

The black horse of Lozelle grew dim in the distance of the moonlit bridge, and vanished beneath the farther archway that led to the outer city. Then a herald cried, Masouda translating his words, which another herald echoed from beyond the gulf.

"Thrice will the trumpets blow. At the third blast of the trumpets the knights shall charge and meet in the centre of the bridge. Thenceforward they may fight as it pleases them, ahorse, or afoot, with lance, with sword, or with dagger, but to the vanquished no mercy will be shown. If he be brought living from the bridge, living he shall be cast into the gulf. Hear the decree of the Al-je-bal!"

Then Wulf's horse was led forward to the entrance of the bridge, and from the further side was led forward the horse of Lozelle.

"Good luck, brother," said Godwin, as he passed him. "Would that I rode this course instead of you."

"Your turn may come, brother," answered the grim Wulf, as he set his lance in rest.

Now from some neighbouring tower pealed out the first long blast of trumpets, and dead silence fell on all the multitude. Grooms came forward to look to girth and bridle and stirrup strap, but

Wulf waved them back.

"I mind my own harness," he said.

The second blast blew, and he loosened the great sword in its scabbard, that sword which had flamed in his forbear's hand upon the turrets of Jerusalem.

"Your gift," he cried back to Rosamund, and her answer came clear and sweet:

"Bear it like your fathers, Wulf. Bear it as it was last borne in the hall at Steeple."

Then there was another silence--a silence long and deep. Wulf looked at the white and narrow ribbon of the bridge, looked at the black gulf on either side, looked at the blue sky above, in which floated the great globe of the golden moon. Then he leant forward and patted Smoke upon the neck.

For the third time the trumpets blew, and from either end of that bridge, two hundred paces long, the knights flashed towards each other like living bolts of steel. The multitude rose to watch; even Sinan rose. Only Rosamund sat still, gripping the cushions with her hands. Hollow rang the hoofs of the horses upon the stonework, swifter and swifter they flew, lower and lower bent

the knights upon their saddles. Now they were near, and now they met. The spears seemed to shiver, the horses to hustle together on the narrow way and overhang its edge, then on came the black horse towards the inner city, and on sped Smoke towards the further gulf.

"They have passed! They have passed!" roared the multitude.

Look! Lozelle approached, reeling in his saddle, as well he might, for the helm was torn from his head and blood ran from his skull where the lance had grazed it.

"Too high, Wulf; too high," said Godwin sadly. "But oh! if those laces had but held!"

Soldiers caught the horse and turned it.

"Another helm!" cried Lozelle.

"Nay," answered Sinan; "yonder knight has lost his shield. New lances--that is all."

So they gave him a fresh lance, and, presently, at the blast of the trumpets again the horses were seen speeding together over the narrow way. They met, and lo! Lozelle, torn from his saddle, but still clinging to the reins, was flung backwards, far

backwards, to fall on the stonework of the bridge. Down, too, beneath the mighty shock went his black horse, a huddled heap, and lay there struggling.

"Wulf will fall over him!" cried Rosamund. But Smoke did not fall; the stallion gathered itself together--the moonlight shone so clear that every watcher saw it--and since stop it could not, leapt straight over the fallen black horse--ay, and over the rider beyond--and sped on in its stride. Then the black found its feet again and galloped forward to the further gate, and Lozelle also found his feet and turned to run.

"Stand! Stand, coward!" yelled ten thousand voices, and, hearing them, he drew his sword and stood.

Within three great strides Wulf dragged his charger to its haunches, then wheeled it round.

"Charge him!" shouted the multitude; but Wulf remained seated, as though unwilling to attack a horseless man. Next he sprang from his saddle, and accompanied by the horse Smoke, which followed him as a dog follows its master, walked slowly towards Lozelle, as he walked casting away his lance and drawing the great, cross-hilted sword.

Again the silence fell, and through it rang the cry of Godwin:



"A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy!"

"A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy!" came back Wulf's answer from the bridge, and his voice echoed thin and hollow in the spaces of the gulf. Yet they rejoiced to hear it, for it told them that he was sound and strong.

Wulf had no shield and Lozelle had no helm--the fight was even. They crouched opposite each other, the swords flashed aloft in the moonlight; from far away came the distant clank of steel, a soft, continual clamour of iron on iron. A blow fell on Wulf's mail, who had nought wherewith to guard himself, and he staggered back. Another blow, another, and another, and back, still back he reeled--back to the edge of the bridge, back till he struck against the horse that stood behind him, and, resting there a moment, as it seemed, regained his balance.

Then there was a change. Look, he rushed forward, wielding the great blade in both hands. The stroke lit upon Lozelle's shield and seemed to shear it in two, for in that stillness all could hear the clang of its upper half as it fell upon the stones. Beneath the weight of it he staggered, sank to his knee, gained his feet again, and in his turn gave back. Yes, now it was Lozelle who rocked and reeled. Ay, by St. Chad! Lozelle who went down beneath that mighty blow which missed the head but fell upon

his shoulder, and lay there like a log, till presently the moonlight shone upon his mailed hand stretched upward in a prayer for mercy. From house-top and terrace wall, from soaring gates and battlements, the multitude of the people of the Assassins gathered on either side the gulf broke into a roar that beat up the mountain sides like a voice of thunder. And the roar shaped itself to these words:

"Kill him! kill him! kill him!"

Sinan held up his hand, and a sudden silence fell. Then he, too, screamed in his thin voice:

"Kill him! He is conquered!"

But the great Wulf only leaned upon the cross-handle of his brand, and looked at the fallen foe. Presently he seemed to speak with him; then Lozelle lifted the blade that lay beside him and gave it to him in token of surrender. Wulf handled it awhile, shook it on high in triumph, and whirled it about his head till it shone in the moonlight. Next, with a shout he cast it from him far into the gulf, where it was seen for a moment, an arc of gleaming light, and the next was gone.

Now, taking no more heed of the conquered knight, Wulf turned and began to walk towards his horse.

Scarcely was his back towards him when Lozelle was on his feet again, a dagger in his hand.

"Look behind you!" yelled Godwin; but the spectators, pleased that the fight was not yet done, broke into a roar of cheers. Wulf heard and swung round. As he faced Lozelle the dagger struck him on the breast, and well must it have been for him that his mail was good. To use his sword he had neither space nor time, but ere the next stroke could fall Wulf's arms were about Lozelle, and the fight for life begun.

To and fro they reeled and staggered, whirling round and round, till none could tell which of them was Wulf or which his foe. Now they were on the edge of the abyss, and, in that last dread strain for mastery, seemed to stand there still as stone. Then one man began to bend down. See! his head hung over. Further and further he bent, but his arms could not be loosened.

"They will both go!" cried the multitude in their joy.

Look! A dagger flashed. Once, twice, thrice it gleamed, and those wrestlers fell apart, while from deep down in the gulf came the thud of a fallen body.

"Which--oh, which?" cried Rosamund from her battlement.

"Sir Hugh Lozelle," answered Godwin in a solemn voice.

Then the head of Rosamund fell forward on her breast, and for a while she seemed to sleep.

Wulf went to his horse, turned it about on the bridge, and throwing his arm around its neck, rested for a space. Then he mounted and walked slowly towards the inner gate. Pushing through the guard and officers, Godwin rode out to meet him.

"Bravely done, brother," he said, when they came face to face.

"Say, are you hurt?"

"Bruised and shaken--no more," answered Wulf.

"A good beginning, truly. Now for the rest," said Godwin. Then he glanced over his shoulder, and added, "See, they are leading Rosamund away, but Sinan remains, to speak with you doubtless, for Masouda beckons."

"What shall we do?" asked Wulf. "Make a plan, brother, for my head swims."

"Hear what he has to say. Then, as your horse is not wounded either, ride for it when I give the signal as Masouda bade us.

There is no other way. Pretend that you are wounded."

So, Godwin leading, while the multitude roared a welcome to the conquering Wulf who had borne himself so bravely for their pleasure, they rode to the mouth of the bridge and halted in the little space before the archway. There Al-je-bal spoke by Masouda.

"A noble fray," he said. "I did not think that Franks could fight so well; Say, Sir Knight, will you feast with me in my palace?"

"I thank you, lord," answered Wulf, "but I must rest while my brother tends my hurts," and he pointed to blood upon his mail.

"To-morrow, if it pleases you."

Sinan stared at them and stroked his beard, while they trembled, waiting for the word of fate.

It came.

"Good. So be it. To-morrow I wed the lady Rose of Roses, and you two--her brothers--shall give her to me, as is fitting," and he sneered. "Then also you shall receive the reward of valour--a great reward, I promise you."

While he spoke Godwin, staring upward, had noted a little

wandering cloud floating across the moon. Slowly it covered it, and the place grew dim.

"Now," he whispered, and bowing to the Al-je-bal, they pushed their horses through the open gate where the mob closed in on them, thus for a little while holding back the escort from following on their heels. They spoke to Flame and Smoke, and the good horses plunged onward side by side, separating the crowd as the prows of boats separate the water. In ten paces it grew thin, in thirty it was behind them, for all folk were gathered about the archway where they could see, and none beyond. Forward they cantered, till the broad road turned to the left, and in that faint light they were hidden.

"Away!" said Godwin, shaking his reins.

Forward leapt the horses at speed. Again Godwin turned, taking that road which ran round the city wall and through the gardens, leaving the guest-castle to the left, whereas their escort followed that whereby they had come, which passed along the main street of the inner town, thinking that they were ahead of them. Three minutes more and they were in the lonely gardens, in which that night no women wandered and no neophytes dreamed in the pavilions.

"Wulf," said Godwin, as they swept forward, skimming the turf

like swallows, "draw your sword and be ready. Remember the secret cave may be guarded, and, if so, we must kill or be killed."

Wulf nodded, and next instant two long blades flashed in the moonlight, for the little cloud had passed away. Within a hundred paces of them rose the tall rock, but between it and the mound were two mounted guards. These heard the beating of horses' hoofs, and wheeling about, stared to see two armed knights sweeping down upon them like a whirlwind. They called to them to stop, hesitating, then rode forward a few paces, as though wondering whether this were not a vision.

In a moment the brethren were on them. The soldiers lifted their lances, but ere they could thrust the sword of Godwin had caught one between neck and shoulder and sunk to his breast bone, while the sword of Wulf, used as a spear, had pierced the other through and through, so that those men fell dead by the door of the mound, never knowing who had slain them.

The brethren pulled upon their bridles and spoke to Flame and Smoke, halting them within a score of yards. Then they wheeled round and sprang from their saddles. One of the dead guards still held his horses's reins, and the other beast stood by snorting. Godwin caught it before it stirred, then, holding all four of them, threw the key to Wulf and bade him unlock the door. Soon it was done, although he staggered at the task; then he held the

horses, while one by one Godwin led them in, and that without trouble, for the beasts thought that this was but a cave-hewn stable of a kind to which they were accustomed.

"What of the dead men?" said Wulf.

"They had best keep us company," answered Godwin, and, running out, he carried in first one and then the other.

"Swift!" he said, as he threw down the second corpse. "Shut the door. I caught sight of horsemen riding through the trees. Nay, they saw nothing."

So they locked the massive door and barred it, and with beating hearts waited in the dark, expecting every moment to hear soldiers battering at its timbers. But no sound came; the searchers, if such they were, had passed on to seek elsewhere.

Now while Wulf made shift to fasten up the horses near the mouth of the cave, Godwin gathered stones as large as he could lift, and piled them up against the door, till they knew that it would take many men an hour or more to break through.

For this door was banded with iron and set fast in the living rock.