

Chapter Sixteen: The Sultan Saladin

In the third morning Godwin awoke to see the ray of sunrise streaming through the latticed window.

They fell upon another bed near-by where Wulf still lay sleeping, a bandage on his head that had been hurt in the last charge against the Assassins, and other bandages about his arms and body, which were much bruised in the fight upon the dreadful bridge.

Wondrous was it to Godwin to watch him lying there sleeping healthily, notwithstanding his injuries, and to think of what they had gone through together with so little harm; to think, also, of how they had rescued Rosamund out of the very mouth of that earthly hell of which he could see the peaks through the open window-place--out of the very hands of that fiend, its ruler. Reckoning the tale day by day, he reflected on their adventures since they landed at Beirut, and saw how Heaven had guided their every step.

In face of the warnings that were given them, to visit the Al-je-bal in his stronghold had seemed a madness. Yet there, where none could have thought that she would be, they had found Rosamund. There they had been avenged upon the false knight Sir Hugh Lozelle, who had betrayed her, first to Saladin, then to

Sinan, and sent him down to death and judgment; and thence they had rescued Rosamund.

Oh, how wise they had been to obey the dying words of their uncle, Sir Andrew, who doubtless was given foresight at the end! God and His saints had helped them, who could not have helped themselves, and His minister had been Masouda. But for Masouda, Rosamund would by now be lost or dead, and they, if their lives were still left to them, would be wanderers in the great land of Syria, seeking for one who never could be found.

Why had Masouda done these things, again and again putting her own life upon the hazard to save theirs and the honour of another woman? As he asked himself the question Godwin felt the red blood rise to his face. Because she hated Sinan, who had murdered her parents and degraded her, she said; and doubtless that had to do with the matter. But it was no longer possible to hide the truth. She loved him, and had loved him from the first hour when they met. He had always suspected it--in that wild trial of the horses upon the mountain side, when she sat with her arms about him and her face pressed against his face; when she kissed his feet after he had saved her from the lion, and many another time.

But as they followed Wulf and Rosamund up the mountain pass while the host of the Assassins thundered at their heels, and in broken gasps she had told him of her sad history, then it was that he

grew sure. Then, too, he had said that he held her not vile, but noble, as indeed he did; and, thinking their death upon them, she had answered that she held him dear, and looked on him as a woman looks upon her only love--a message in her eyes that no man could fail to read. Yet if this were so, why had Masouda saved Rosamund, the lady to whom she knew well that he was sworn? Reared among those cruel folk who could wade to their desire through blood and think it honour, would she not have left her rival to her doom, seeing that oaths do not hold beyond the grave?

An answer came into the heart of Godwin, at the very thought of which he turned pale and trembled. His brother was also sworn to Rosamund, and she in her soul must be sworn to one of them. Was it not to Wulf, Wulf who was handsomer and more strong than he, to Wulf, the conqueror of Lozelle? Had Rosamund told Masouda this? Nay, surely not.

Yet women can read each other's hearts, piercing veils through which no man may see, and perchance Masouda had read the heart of Rosamund. She stood behind her during the dreadful duel at the gate, and watched her face when Wulf's death seemed sure; she might have heard words that broke in agony from her lips in those moments of torment.

Oh, without doubt it was so, and Masouda had protected Rosamund

because she knew that her love was for Wulf and not for him. The thought was very bitter, and in its pain Godwin groaned aloud, while a fierce jealousy of the brave and handsome knight who slept at his side, dreaming, doubtless, of the fame that he had won and the reward by which it would be crowned, gripped his vitals like the icy hand of death. Then Godwin remembered the oath that they two had sworn far away in the Priory at Stangate, and the love passing the love of woman which he bore towards this brother, and the duty of a Christian warrior whereto he was vowed, and hiding his face in his pillow he prayed for strength.

It would seem that it came to him--at least, when he lifted his head again the jealousy was gone, and only the great grief remained. Fear remained also--for what of Masouda? How should he deal with her? He was certain that this was no fancy which would pass--until her life passed with it, and, beautiful as she was, and noble as she was, he did not wish her love. He could find no answer to these questions, save this--that things must go on as they were decreed. For himself, he, Godwin, would strive to do his duty, to keep his hands clean, and await the end, whatever that might be.

Wulf woke up, stretched his arms, exclaimed because that action hurt him, grumbled at the brightness of the light upon his eyes, and said that he was very hungry. Then he arose, and with the help of Godwin, dressed himself, but not in his armour. Here,

with the yellow-coated soldiers of Saladin, grave-faced and watchful, pacing before their door--for night and day they were trebly guarded lest Assassins should creep in--there was no need for mail. In the fortress of Masyaf, indeed, where they were also guarded, it had been otherwise. Wulf heard the step of the sentries on the cemented pavement without, and shook his great shoulders as though he shivered.

"That sound makes my backbone cold," he said. "For a moment, as my eyes opened, I thought that we were back again in the guest chambers of Al-je-bal, where folk crept round us as we slept and murderers marched to and fro outside the curtains, fingering their knife-points. Well, whatever there is to come, thank the Saints, that is done with. I tell you, brother, I have had enough of mountains, and narrow bridges, and Assassins. Henceforth, I desire to live upon a flat with never a hill in sight, amidst honest folk as stupid as their own sheep, who go to church on Sundays and get drunk, not with hachich, but on brown ale, brought to them by no white-robed sorceress, but by a draggle-tailed wench in a tavern, with her musty bedstraw still sticking in her hair. Give me the Saltings of Essex with the east winds blowing over them, and the primroses abloom upon the bank, and the lanes fetlock deep in mud, and for your share you may take all the scented gardens of Sinan and the cups and jewels of his ladies, with the fightings and adventures of the golden East thrown in."

"I never sought these things, and we are a long way from Essex," answered Godwin shortly.

"No," said Wulf, "but they seem to seek you. What news of Masouda? Have you seen her while I slept, which has been long?"

"I have seen no one except the apothecary who tended you, the slaves who brought us food, and last evening the prince Hassan, who came to see how we fared. He told me that, like yourself, Rosamund and Masouda slept."

"I am glad to hear it," answered Wulf, "for certainly their rest was earned. By St. Chad! what a woman is this Masouda! A heart of fire and nerves of steel! Beautiful, too--most beautiful; and the best horsewoman that ever sat a steed. Had it not been for her--By Heaven! when I think of it I feel as though I loved her--don't you?"

"No," said Godwin, still more shortly.

"Ah, well, I daresay she can love enough for two who does nothing by halves, and, all things considered," he added, with one of his great laughs, "I am glad it is I of whom she thinks so little--yes, I who adore her as though she were my patron saint. Hark! the guards challenge," and, forgetting where he was, he

snatched at his sword.

Then the door opened, and through it appeared the emir Hassan, who saluted them in the name of Allah, searching them with his quiet eyes.

"Few would judge, to look at you, Sir Knights," he said with a smile, "that you have been the guests of the Old Man of the Mountain, and left his house so hastily by the back door. Three days more and you will be as lusty as when we met beyond the seas upon the wharf by a certain creek. Oh, you are brave men, both of you, though you be infidels, from which error may the Prophet guide you; brave men, the flower of knighthood. Ay, I, Hassan, who have known many Frankish knights, say it from my heart," and, placing his hand to his turban, he bowed before them in admiration that was not feigned.

"We thank you, Prince, for your praise," said Godwin gravely, but Wulf stepped forward, took his hand, and shook it.

"That was an ill trick, Prince, which you played us yonder in England," he said, "and one that brought as good a warrior as ever drew a sword--our uncle Sir Andrew D'Arcy--to an end sad as it was glorious. Still, you obeyed your master, and because of all that has happened since, I forgive you, and call you friend, although should we ever meet in battle I still hope to pay you

for that drugged wine."

Here Hassan bowed, and said softly:

"I admit that the debt is owing; also that none sorrow more for the death of the noble lord D'Arcy than I, your servant, who, by the will of God, brought it upon him. When we meet, Sir Wulf, in war--and that, I think, will be an ill hour for me--strike, and strike home; I shall not complain. Meanwhile, we are friends, and in very truth all that I have is yours. But now I come to tell you that the princess Rose of the World--Allah bless her footsteps!--is recovered from her fatigues, and desires that you should breakfast with her in an hour's time. Also the doctor waits to tend your bruises, and slaves to lead you to the bath and clothe you. Nay, leave your hauberk; here the faith of Salah-ed-din and of his servants is your best armour."

"Still, I think that we will take them," said Godwin, "for faith is a poor defence against the daggers of these Assassins, who dwell not so far away."

"True," answered Hassan; "I had forgotten." So thus they departed.

An hour later they were led to the hall, where presently came Rosamund, and with her Masouda and Hassan.

She was dressed in the rich robes of an Eastern lady, but the gems with which she had been adorned as the bride elect of Al-je-bal were gone; and when she lifted her veil the brethren saw that though her face was still somewhat pallid, her strength had come back to her, and the terror had left her eyes. She greeted them with sweet and gentle words, thanking first Godwin and then Wulf for all that they had done, and turning to Masouda, who stood by, stately, and watchful, thanked her also. Then they sat down, and ate with light hearts and a good appetite.

Before their meal was finished, the guard at the door announced that messengers had arrived from the Sultan. They entered, grey-haired men clad in the robes of secretaries, whom Hassan hastened to greet. When they were seated and had spoken with him awhile, one of them drew forth a letter, which Hassan, touching his forehead with it in token of respect, gave to Rosamund. She broke its seal, and, seeing that it was in Arabic, handed it to her cousin, saying:

"Do you read it, Godwin, who are more learned than I."

So he read aloud, translating the letter sentence by sentence.

This was its purport:

"Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful, the Strong-to-aid, to

his niece beloved, Rose of the World, princess of Baalbec:--

"Our servant, the emir Hassan, has sent us tidings of your rescue from the power of the accursed lord of the Mountain, Sinan, and that you are now safe in our city of Emesa, guarded by many thousands of our soldiers, and with you a woman named Masouda, and your kinsmen, the two Frankish knights, by whose skill in arms and courage you were saved. Now this is to command you to come to our court at Damascus so soon as you may be fit to travel, knowing that here you will be received with love and honour. Also I invite your kinsmen to accompany you, since I knew their father, and would welcome knights who have done such great deeds, and the woman Masouda with them. Or, if they prefer it, all three of them may return to their own lands and peoples.

"Hasten, my niece, lady Rose of the World, hasten, for my spirit seeks you, and my eyes desire to look upon you. In the name of Allah, greeting."

"You have heard," said Rosamund, as Godwin finished reading the scroll. "Now, my cousins, what will you do?"

"What else but go with you, whom we have come so far to seek?" answered Wulf, and Godwin nodded his head in assent.

"And you, Masouda?"

"I, lady? Oh, I go also, since were I to return yonder," and she nodded towards the mountains, "my greeting would be one that I do not wish."

"Do you note their words, prince Hassan?" asked Rosamund.

"I expected no other," he answered with a bow. "Only, knights, you must give me a promise, for even in the midst of my army such is needful from men who can fly like birds out of the fortress of Masyaf and from the knives of the Assassins--who are mounted, moreover, on the swiftest horses in Syria that have been trained to carry a double burden," and he looked at them meaningly. "It is that upon this journey you will not attempt to escape with the princess, whom you have followed from over-sea to rescue her out of the hand of Salah-ed-din."

Godwin drew from his tunic the cross which Rosamund had left him in the hall at Steeple, and saying: "I swear upon this holy symbol that during our journey to Damascus I will attempt no escape with or without my cousin Rosamund," he kissed it.

"And I swear the same upon my sword," added Wulf, laying his hand upon the silver hilt of the great blade which had been his forefather's.

"A security that I like better," said Hassan with a smile, "but in truth, knights, your word is enough for me." Then he looked at Masouda and went on, still smiling: "Nay it is useless; for women who have dwelt yonder oaths have no meaning. Lady, we must be content to watch you, since my lord has bidden you to his city, which, fair and brave as you are, to be plain, I would not have done."

Then he turned to speak to the secretaries, and Godwin, who was noting all, saw Masouda's dark eyes follow him and in them a very strange light.

"Good," they seemed to say; "as you have written, so shall you read."

That same afternoon they started for Damascus, a great army of horsemen. In its midst, guarded by a thousand spears, Rosamund was borne in a litter. In front of her rode Hassan, with his yellow-robed bodyguard; at her side, Masouda; and behind--for, notwithstanding his hurts, Wulf would not be carried--the brethren, mounted upon ambling palfreys. After them, led by slaves, came the chargers, Flame and Smoke, recovered now, but still walking somewhat stiffly, and then rank upon rank of turbaned Saracens. Through the open curtains of her litter Rosamund beckoned to the brethren, who pushed alongside of her.

"Look," she said, pointing with her hand.

They looked, and there, bathed in the glory of the sinking sun, saw the mountains crowned far, far away with the impregnable city and fortress of Masyaf, and below it the slopes down which they had ridden for their lives. Nearer to them flashed the river bordered by the town of Emesa. Set at intervals along its walls were spears, looking like filaments against the flaming, sunset sky, and on each of them a black dot, which was the head of an Assassin, while from the turrets above, the golden banner of Saladin fluttered in the evening wind. Remembering all that she had undergone in that fearful home of devil-worshippers, and the fate from which she had been snatched, Rosamund shuddered.

"It burns like a city in hell," she said, staring at Masyaf, environed by that lurid evening light and canopied with black, smoke-like clouds. "Oh! such I think will be its doom."

"I trust so," answered Wulf fervently. "At least, in this world and the next we have done with it."

"Yes," added Godwin in his thoughtful voice; "still, out of that evil place we won good, for there we found Rosamund, and there, my brother, you conquered in such a fray as you can never hope to fight again, gaining great glory, and perhaps much more."

Then reining in his horse, Godwin fell back behind the litter, while Wulf wondered, and Rosamund watched him with dreaming eyes.

That evening they camped in the desert, and next morning, surrounded by wandering tribes of Bedouins mounted on their camels, marched on again, sleeping that night in the ancient fortress of Baalbec, whereof the garrison and people, having been warned by runners of the rank and titles of Rosamund came out to do her homage as their lady.

Hearing of it, she left her litter, and mounting a splendid horse which they had sent her as a present, rode to meet them, the brethren, in full armour and once more bestriding Flame and Smoke, beside her, and a guard of Saladin's own Mameluks behind. Solemn, turbaned men, who had been commanded so to do by messengers from the Sultan, brought her the keys of the gates on a cushion, minstrels and soldiers marched before her, whilst crowding the walls and running alongside came the citizens in their thousands. Thus she went on, through the open gates, past the towering columns of ruined temples once a home of the worship of heathen gods, through courts and vaults to the citadel surrounded by its gardens that in dead ages had been the Acropolis of forgotten Roman emperors.

Here in the portico Rosamund turned her horse, and received the salutations of the multitude as though she also were one of the

world's rulers. Indeed, it seemed to the brethren watching her as she sat upon the great white horse and surveyed the shouting, bending crowd with flashing eyes, splendid in her bearing and beautiful to see, a prince at her stirrup and an army at her back, that none of those who had trod that path before her could have seemed greater or more glorious in the hour of their pride than did this English girl, who by the whim of Fate had suddenly been set so high. Truly by blood and nature she was fitted to be a queen. Yet as Rosamund sat thus the pride passed from her face, and her eyes fell.

"Of what are you thinking?" asked Godwin at her side.

"That I would we were back among the summer fields at Steeple," she answered, "for those who are lifted high fall low. Prince Hassan, give the captains and people my thanks and bid them be gone. I would rest."

Thus for the first and last time did Rosamund behold her ancient fief of Baalbec, which her grandsire, the great Ayoub, had ruled before her.

That night there was feasting in the mighty, immemorial halls, and singing and minstrelsy and the dancing of fair women and the giving of gifts. For Baalbec, where birth and beauty were ever welcome, did honour to its lady, the favoured niece of the mighty

Salah-ed-din. Yet there were some who murmured that she would bring no good fortune to the Sultan or this his city, who was not all of the blood of Ayoub, but half a Frank, and a Cross worshipper, though even these praised her beauty and her royal bearing. The brethren they praised also, although these were unbelievers, and the tale of how Wulf had fought the traitor knight upon the Narrow Way, and of how they had led their kinswoman from the haunted fortress of Masyaf, was passed from mouth to mouth. At dawn the next day, on orders received from the Sultan, they left Baalbec, escorted by the army and many of the notables of the town. That afternoon they drew rein upon the heights which overlook the city of Damascus, Bride of the Earth, set amidst its seven streams and ringed about with gardens, one of the most beautiful and perhaps the most ancient city in the world. Then they rode down to the bounteous plain, and as night fell, having passed the encircling gardens, were escorted through the gates of Damascus, outside of which most of the army halted and encamped.

Along the narrow streets, bordered by yellow, flat-roofed houses, they rode slowly, looking now at the motley, many-coloured crowds, who watched them with grave interest, and now at the stately buildings, domed mosques and towering minarets, which everywhere stood out against the deep blue of the evening sky. Thus at length they came to an open space planted like a garden, beyond which was seen a huge and fantastic castle that Hassan

told them was the palace of Salah-ed-din. In its courtyard they were parted, Rosamund being led away by officers of state, whilst the brethren were taken to chambers that had been prepared, where, after they had bathed, they were served with food.

Scarcely had they eaten it when Hassan appeared, and bade them follow him. Passing down various passages and across a court they came to some guarded doors, where the soldiers demanded that they should give up their swords and daggers.

"It is not needful," said Hassan, and they let them go by. Next came more passages and a curtain, beyond which they found themselves in a small, domed room, lit by hanging silver lamps and paved in tessellated marbles, strewn with rich rugs and furnished with cushioned couches.

At a sign from Hassan the brethren stood still in the centre of this room, and looked about them wondering. The place was empty and very silent; they felt afraid--of what they knew not.

Presently curtains upon its further side opened and through them came a man turbaned and wrapped in a dark robe, who stood awhile in the shadow, gazing at them beneath the lamps.

The man was not very tall, and slight in build, yet about him was much majesty, although his garb was such as the humblest might have worn. He came forward, lifting his head, and they saw that his features were small and finely cut; that he was bearded, and

beneath his broad brow shone thoughtful yet at times piercing eyes which were brown in hue. Now the prince Hassan sank to his knees and touched the marble with his forehead, and, guessing that they were in the presence of the mighty monarch Saladin, the brethren saluted in their western fashion. Presently the Sultan spoke in a low, even voice to Hassan, to whom he motioned that he should rise, saying:

"I can see that you trust these knights, Emir," and he pointed to their great swords.

"Sire," was the answer, "I trust them as I trust myself. They are brave and honourable men, although they be infidels."

The Sultan stroked his beard.

"Ay," he said, "infidels. It is a pity, yet doubtless they worship God after their own fashion. Noble to look on also, like their father, whom I remember well, and, if all I hear is true, brave indeed. Sir Knights, do you understand my language?"

"Sufficiently to speak it, lord," answered Godwin, "who have learned it since childhood, yet ill enough."

"Good. Then tell me, as soldiers to a soldier, what do you seek from Salah-ed-din?"

"Our cousin, the lady Rosamund, who, by your command, lord, was stolen from our home in England."

"Knights, she is your cousin, that I know, as surely as I know that she is my niece. Tell me now, is she aught more to you?" and he searched them with those piercing eyes.

Godwin looked at Wulf, who said in English:

"Speak the whole truth, brother. From that man nothing can be hid."

Then Godwin answered:

"Sire, we love her, and are affianced to her."

The Sultan stared at them in surprise.

"What! Both of you?" he asked.

"Yes, both."

"And does she love you both?"

"Yes," replied Godwin, "both, or so she says."

Saladin stroked his beard and considered them, while Hassan smiled a little.

"Then, knights," he said presently, "tell me, which of you does she love best?"

"That, sire, is known to her alone. When the time comes, she will say, and not before."

"I perceive," said Saladin, "that behind this riddle hides a story. If it is your good pleasure, be seated, and set it out to me."

So they sat down on the divan and obeyed, keeping nothing back from the beginning to the end, nor, although the tale was long, did the Sultan weary of listening.

"A great story, truly," he said, when at length they had finished, "and one in which I seem to see the hand of Allah. Sir Knights, you will think that I have wronged you--ay, and your uncle, Sir Andrew, who was once my friend, although an older man than I, and who, by stealing away my sister, laid the foundations of this house of love and war and woe, and perchance of happiness unforeseen.

"Now listen. The tale that those two Frankish knaves, the priest and the false knight Lozelle, told to you was true. As I wrote to your uncle in my letter, I dreamed a dream. Thrice I dreamed it; that this niece of mine lived, and that if I could bring her here to dwell at my side she should save the shedding of much blood by some noble deed of hers--ay, of the blood of tens of thousands; and in that dream I saw her face. Therefore I stretched out my arm and took her from far away. And now, through you--yes, through you--she has been snatched from the power of the great Assassin, and is safe in my court, and therefore henceforth I am your friend."

"Sire, have you seen her?" asked Godwin.

"Knights, I have seen her, and the face is the face of my dreams, and therefore I know full surely that in those dreams God spoke. Listen, Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf," Saladin went on in a changed voice, a stern, commanding voice. "Ask of me what you will, and, Franks though you are, it shall be given you for your service's sake--wealth, lands, titles, all that men desire and I can grant--but ask not of me my niece, Rose of the World, princess of Baalbec, whom Allah has brought to me for His own purposes. Know, moreover, that if you strive to steal her away you shall certainly die; and that if she escapes from me and I recapture her, then she shall die. These things I have told her already, and I swear them in the name of Allah. Here she is, and in my

house she must abide until the vision be fulfilled."

Now in their dismay the brethren looked at each other, for they seemed further from their desire than they had been even in the castle of Sinan. Then a light broke upon the face of Godwin, and he stood up and answered:

"Dread lord of all the East, we hear you and we know our risk. You have given us your friendship; we accept it, and are thankful, and seek no more. God, you say, has brought our lady Rosamund to you for His own purposes, of which you have no doubt since her face is the very face of your dreams. Then let His purposes be accomplished according to His will, which may be in some way that we little guess. We abide His judgment Who has guided us in the past, and will guide us in the future."

"Well spoken," replied Saladin. "I have warned you, my guests, therefore blame me not if I keep my word; but I ask no promise from you who would not tempt noble knights to lie. Yes, Allah has set this strange riddle; by Allah let it be answered in His season."

Then he waved his hand to show that the audience was ended.