

Chapter Seventeen: The Brethren Depart from Damascus

At the court of Saladin Godwin and Wulf were treated with much honour. A house was given them to dwell in, and a company of servants to minister to their comfort and to guard them. Mounted on their swift horses, Flame and Smoke, they were taken out into the desert to hunt, and, had they so willed, it would have been easy for them to out-distance their retinue and companions and ride away to the nearest Christian town. Indeed, no hand would have been lifted to stay them who were free to come or go. But whither were they to go without Rosamund?

Saladin they saw often, for it pleased him to tell them tales of those days when their father and uncle were in the East, or to talk with them of England and the Franks, and even now and again to reason with Godwin on matters of religion. Moreover, to show his faith in them, he gave them the rank of officers of his own bodyguard, and when, wearying of idleness, they asked it of him, allowed them to take their share of duty in the guarding of his palace and person. This, at a time when peace still reigned between Frank and Saracen, the brethren were not ashamed to do, who received no payment for their services.

Peace reigned indeed, but Godwin and Wulf could guess that it would not reign for long. Damascus and the plain around it were one great camp, and every day new thousands of wild tribesmen

poured in and took up the quarters that had been prepared for them. They asked Masouda, who knew everything, what it meant. She answered:

"It means the jihad, the Holy War, which is being preached in every mosque throughout the East. It means that the great struggle between Cross and Crescent is at hand, and then, pilgrims Peter and John, you will have to choose your standard."

"There can be little doubt about that," said Wulf.

"None," replied Masouda, with one of her smiles, "only it may pain you to have to make war upon the princess of Baalbec and her uncle, the Commander of the Faithful."

Then she went, still smiling. For this was the trouble of it: Rosamund, their cousin and their love, had in truth become the princess of Baalbec--for them. She lived in great state and freedom, as Saladin had promised that she should live in his letter to Sir Andrew D'Arcy. No insult or violence were offered to her faith; no suitor was thrust upon her. But she was in a land where women do not consort with men, especially if they be high-placed. As a princess of the empire of Saladin, she must obey its rules, even to veiling herself when she went abroad, and exchanging no private words with men. Godwin and Wulf prayed Saladin that they might be allowed to speak with her from time to

time, but he only answered shortly:

"Sir Knights, our customs are our customs. Moreover, the less you see of the princess of Baalbec the better I think it will be for her, for you, whose blood I do not wish to have upon my hands, and for myself, who await the fulfilment of that dream which the angel brought."

Then the brethren left his presence sore at heart, for although they saw her from time to time at feasts and festivals, Rosamund was as far apart from them as though she sat in Steeple Hall--ay, and further. Also they came to see that of rescuing her from Damascus there was no hope at all. She dwelt in her own palace, whereof the walls were guarded night and day by a company of the Sultan's Mameluks, who knew that they were answerable for her with their lives. Within its walls, again, lived trusted eunuchs, under the command of a cunning fellow named Mesrour, and her retinue of women, all of them spies and watchful. How could two men hope to snatch her from the heart of such a host and to spirit her out of Damascus and through its encircling armies?

One comfort, however, was left to them. When she reached the court Rosamund had prayed of the Sultan that Masouda should not be separated from her, and this because of the part she had played in his niece's rescue from the power of Sinan, he had

granted, though doubtfully. Moreover, Masouda, being a person of no account except for her beauty, and a heretic, was allowed to go where she would and to speak with whom she wished. So, as she wished to speak often with Godwin, they did not lack for tidings of Rosamund.

From her they learned that in a fashion the princess was happy enough--who would not be that had just escaped from Al-je-bal?--yet weary of the strange Eastern life, of the restraints upon her, and of her aimless days; vexed also that she might not mix with the brethren. Day by day she sent them her greetings, and with them warnings to attempt nothing--not even to see her--since there was no hope that they would succeed. So much afraid of them was the Sultan, Rosamund said, that both she and they were watched day and night, and of any folly their lives would pay the price. When they heard all this the brethren began to despair, and their spirits sank so low that they cared not what should happen to them.

Then it was that a chance came to them of which the issue was to make them still more admired by Saladin and to lift Masouda to honour. One hot morning they were seated in the courtyard of their house beside the fountain, staring at the passers-by through the bars of the bronze gates and at the sentries who marched to and fro before them. This house was in one of the principal thoroughfares of Damascus, and in front of it flowed

continually an unending, many-coloured stream of folk.

There were white-robed Arabs of the desert, mounted on their grumbling camels; caravans of merchandise from Egypt or elsewhere; asses laden with firewood or the grey, prickly growth of the wild thyme for the bakers' ovens; water-sellers with their goatskin bags and chinking brazen cups; vendors of birds or sweetmeats; women going to the bath in closed and curtained litters, escorted by the eunuchs of their households; great lords riding on their Arab horses and preceded by their runners, who thrust the crowd asunder and beat the poor with rods; beggars, halt, maimed, and blind, beseeching alms; lepers, from whom all shrank away, who wailed their woes aloud; stately companies of soldiers, some mounted and some afoot; holy men, who gave blessings and received alms; and so forth, without number and without end.

Godwin and Wulf, seated in the shade of the painted house, watched them gloomily. They were weary of this ever-changing sameness, weary of the eternal glare and glitter of this unfamiliar life, weary of the insistent cries of the mullahs on the minarets, of the flash of the swords that would soon be red with the blood of their own people; weary, too, of the hopeless task to which they were sworn. Rosamund was one of this multitude; she was the princess of Baalbec, half an Eastern by her blood, and growing more Eastern day by day--or so they

thought in their bitterness. As well might two Saracens hope to snatch the queen of England from her palace at Westminster, as they to drag the princess of Baalbec out of the power of a monarch more absolute than any king of England.

So they sat silent since they had nothing to say, and stared now at the passing crowd, and now at the thin stream of water falling continually into the marble basin.

Presently they heard voices at the gate, and, looking up, saw a woman wrapped in a long cloak, talking with the guard, who with a laugh thrust out his arm, as though to place it round her. Then a knife flashed, and the soldier stepped back, still laughing, and opened the wicket. The woman came in. It was Masouda. They rose and bowed to her, but she passed before them into the house. Thither they followed, while the soldier at the gate laughed again, and at the sound of his mockery Godwin's cheek grew red. Even in the cool, darkened room she noticed it, and said, bitterly enough:

"What does it matter? Such insults are my daily bread whom they believe--" and she stopped.

"They had best say nothing of what they believe to me," muttered Godwin.

"I thank you," Masouda answered, with a sweet, swift smile, and, throwing off her cloak, stood before them unveiled, clad in the white robes that befitted her tall and graceful form so well, and were blazoned on the breast with the cognizance of Baalbec. "Well for you," she went on, "that they hold me to be what I am not, since otherwise I should win no entry to this house."

"What of our lady Rosamund?" broke in Wulf awkwardly, for, like Godwin, he was pained.

Masouda laid her hand upon her breast as though to still its heaving, then answered:

"The princess of Baalbec, my mistress, is well and as ever, beautiful, though somewhat weary of the pomp in which she finds no joy. She sent her greetings, but did not say to which of you they should be delivered, so, pilgrims, you must share them."

Godwin winced, but Wulf asked if there were any hope of seeing her, to which Masouda answered:

"None," adding, in a low voice, "I come upon another business. Do you brethren wish to do Salah-ed-din a service?"

"I don't know. What is it?" asked Godwin gloomily.

"Only to save his life--for which he may be grateful, or may not, according to his mood."

"Speak on," said Godwin, "and tell us how we two Franks can save the life of the Sultan of the East."

"Do you still remember Sinan and his fedais? Yes--they are not easily forgotten, are they? Well, to-night he has plotted to murder Salah-ed-din, and afterwards to murder you if he can, and to carry away your lady Rosamund if he can, or, failing that, to murder her also. Oh! the tale is true enough. I have it from one of them under the Signet--surely that Signet has served us well--who believes, poor fool, that I am in the plot. Now, you are the officers of the bodyguard who watch in the ante-chamber to-night, are you not? Well, when the guard is changed at midnight, the eight men who should replace them at the doors of the room of Salah-ed-din will not arrive; they will be decoyed away by a false order. In their stead will come eight murderers, disguised in the robes and arms of Mameluks. They look to deceive and cut you down, kill Salah-ed-din, and escape by the further door. Can you hold your own awhile against eight men, think you?"

"We have done so before and will try," answered Wulf. "But how shall we know that they are not Mameluks?"

"Thus--they will wish to pass the door, and you will say, 'Nay,

sons of Sinan,' whereon they will spring on you to kill you. Then be ready and shout aloud."

"And if they overcome us," asked Godwin, "then the Sultan would be slain?"

"Nay, for you must lock the door of the chamber of Salah-ed-din and hide away the key. The sound of the fighting will arouse the outer guard ere hurt can come to him. Or," she added, after thinking awhile, "perhaps it will be best to reveal the plot to the Sultan at once."

"No, no," answered Wulf; "let us take the chance. I weary of doing nothing here. Hassan guards the outer gate. He will come swiftly at the sound of blows."

"Good," said Masouda; "I will see that he is there and awake. Now farewell, and pray that we may meet again. I say nothing of this story to the princess Rosamund until it is done with." Then throwing her cloak about her shoulders, she turned and went.

"Is that true, think you?" asked Wulf of Godwin.

"We have never found Masouda to be a liar," was his answer.

"Come; let us see to our armour, for the knives of those fedai are sharp."

It was near midnight, and the brethren stood in the small, domed ante-chamber, from which a door opened into the sleeping rooms of Saladin. The guard of eight Mameluks had left them, to be met by their relief in the courtyard, according to custom, but no relief had as yet appeared in the ante-chamber.

"It would seem that Masouda's tale is true," said Godwin, and going to the door he locked it, and hid the key beneath a cushion.

Then they took their stand in front of the locked door, before which hung curtains, standing in the shadow with the light from the hanging silver lamps pouring down in front of them. Here they waited awhile in silence, till at length they heard the tramp of men, and eight Mameluks, clad in yellow above their mail, marched in and saluted.

"Stand!" said Godwin, and they stood a minute, then began to edge forward.

"Stand!" said both the brethren again, but still they edged forward.

"Stand, sons of Sinan!" they said a third time, drawing their swords.

Then with a hiss of disappointed rage the fedai came at them.

"A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy! Help for the Sultan!" shouted the brethren, and the fray began.

Six of the men attacked them, and while they were engaged with these the other two slipped round and tried the door, only to find it fast. Then they also turned upon the brethren, thinking to take the key from off their bodies. At the first rush two of the fedai went down beneath the sweep of the long swords, but after that the murderers would not come close, and while some engaged them in front, others strove to pass and stab them from behind. Indeed, a blow from one of their long knives fell upon Godwin's shoulder, but the good mail turned it.

"Give way," he cried to Wulf, "or they will best us."

So suddenly they gave way before them till their backs were against the door, and there they stood, shouting for help and sweeping round them with their swords into reach of which the fedai dare not come. Now from without the chamber rose a cry and tumult, and the sound of heavy blows falling upon the gates that the murderers had barred behind them, while upon the further side of the door, which he could not open, was heard the voice of the Sultan demanding to know what passed.

The fedai heard these sounds also, and read in them their doom. Forgetting caution in their despair and rage, they hurled themselves upon the brethren, for they thought that if they could get them down they might still break through the door and slay Salah-ed-din before they themselves were slain. But for awhile the brethren stopped their rush with point and buckler, wounding two of them sorely; and when at length they closed in upon them, the gates were burst, and Hassan and the outer guard were at hand.

A minute later and, but little hurt, Godwin and Wulf were leaning on their swords, and the fedai, some of them dead or wounded and some of them captive, lay before them on the marble floor. Moreover, the door had been opened, and through it came the Sultan in his nightgear.

"What has chanced?" he asked, looking at them doubtfully.

"Only this, lord," answered Godwin; "these men came to kill you and we held them off till help arrived."

"Kill me! My own guard kill me?"

"They are not your guard; they are fedai, disguised as your guard, and sent by Al-je-bal, as he promised."

Now Salah-ed-din turned pale, for he who feared nothing else was all his life afraid of the Assassins and their lord, who thrice had striven to murder him.

"Strip the armour from those men," went on Godwin, "and I think that you will find truth in my words, or, if not, question such of them as still live."

They obeyed, and there upon the breast of one of them, burnt into his skin, was the symbol of the blood-red dagger. Now Saladin saw, and beckoned the brethren aside.

"How knew you of this?" he asked, searching them with his piercing eyes.

"Masouda, the lady Rosamund's waiting woman, warned us that you, lord, and we, were to be murdered tonight by eight men, so we made ready."

"Why, then, did you not tell me?"

"Because," answered Wulf, "we were not sure that the news was true, and did not wish to bring false tidings and be made foolish. Because, also, my brother and I thought that we could hold our own awhile against eight of Sinan's rats disguised as

soldiers of Saladin."

"You have done it well, though yours was a mad counsel," answered the Sultan. Then he gave his hand first to one and next to the other, and said, simply:

"Sir Knights, Salah-ed-din owes his life to you. Should it ever come about that you owe your lives to Salah-ed-din, he will remember this."

Thus this business ended. On the morrow those of the fedai who remained alive were questioned, and confessing freely that they had been sent to murder Salah-ed-din who had robbed their master of his bride, the two Franks who had carried her off, and the woman Masouda who had guided them, they were put to death cruelly enough. Also many others in the city were seized and killed on suspicion, so that for awhile there was no more fear from the Assassins.

Now from that day forward Saladin held the brethren in great friendship, and pressed gifts upon them and offered them honours. But they refused them all, saying that they needed but one thing of him, and he knew what it was--an answer at which his face sank.

One morning he sent for them, and, except for the presence of

prince Hassan, the most favourite of his emirs, and a famous imaum, or priest of his religion, received them alone.

"Listen," he said briefly, addressing Godwin. "I understand that my niece, the princess of Baalbec, is beloved by you. Good. Subscribe the Koran, and I give her to you in marriage, for thus also she may be led to the true faith, whom I have sworn not to force thereto, and I gain a great warrior and Paradise a brave soul. The imaum here will instruct you in the truth."

Thus he spoke, but Godwin only stared at him with eyes set wide in wonderment, and answered:

"Sire, I thank you, but I cannot change my faith to win a woman, however dearly I may love her."

"So I thought," said Saladin with a sigh, "though indeed it is sad that superstition should thus blind so brave and good a man. Now, Sir Wulf, it is your turn. What say you to my offer? Will you take the princess and her dominions with my love thrown in as a marriage portion?"

Wulf thought a moment, and as he thought there arose in his mind a vision of an autumn afternoon that seemed years and years ago, when they two and Rosamund had stood by the shrine of St. Chad on the shores of Essex, and jested of this very matter of a change

of faith. Then he answered, with one of his great laughs:

"Ay, sire, but on my own terms, not on yours, for if I took these I think that my marriage would lack blessings. Nor, indeed, would Rosamund wish to wed a servant of your Prophet, who if it pleased him might take other wives."

Saladin leant his head upon his hand, and looked at them with disappointed eyes, yet not unkindly.

"The knight Lozelle was a Cross-worshipper," he said, "but you two are very different from the knight Lozelle, who accepted the Faith when it was offered to him--"

"To win your trade," said Godwin, bitterly.

"I know not," answered Saladin, "though it is true the man seems to have been a Christian among the Franks, who here was a follower of the Prophet. At least, he is dead at your hands, and though he sinned against me and betrayed my niece to Sinan, peace be with his soul. Now I have one more thing to say to you. That Frank, Prince Arnat of Karak, whom you call Reginald de Chatillon--accursed be his name!--" and he spat upon the ground, "has once more broken the peace between me and the king of Jerusalem, slaughtering my merchants, and stealing my goods. I will suffer this shame no more, and very shortly I unfurl my

standards, which shall not be folded up again until they float upon the mosque of Omar and from every tower top in Palestine. Your people are doomed. I, Yusuf Salah-ed-din," and he rose as he said the words, his very beard bristling with wrath, "declare the Holy War, and will sweep them to the sea. Choose now, you brethren. Do you fight for me or against me? Or will you give up your swords and bide here as my prisoners?"

"We are the servants of the Cross," answered Godwin, "and cannot lift steel against it and thereby lose our souls." Then he spoke with Wulf, and added, "As to your second question, whether we should bide here in chains. It is one that our lady Rosamund must answer, for we are sworn to her service. We demand to see the princess of Baalbec."

"Send for her, Emir," said Saladin to the prince Hassan, who bowed and departed.

A while later Rosamund came, looking beautiful but, as they saw when she threw back her veil, very white and weary. She bowed to Saladin, and the brethren, who were not allowed to touch her hand, bowed to her, devouring her face with eager eyes.

"Greeting, my uncle," she said to the Sultan, "and to you, my cousins, greeting also. What is your pleasure with me?"

Saladin motioned to her to be seated and bade Godwin set out the case, which he did very clearly, ending:

"Is it your wish, Rosamund, that we stay in this court as prisoners, or go forth to fight with the Franks in the great war that is to be?"

Rosamund looked at them awhile, then answered:

"To whom were you sworn the first? Was it to the service of our Lord, or to the service of a woman? I have said."

"Such words as we expected from you, being what you are," exclaimed Godwin, while Wulf nodded his head in assent, and added:

"Sultan, we ask your safe conduct to Jerusalem, and leave this lady in your charge, relying on your plighted word to do no violence to her faith and to protect her person."

"My safe conduct you have," replied Saladin, "and my friendship also. Nor, indeed, should I have thought well of you had you decided otherwise. Now, henceforth we are enemies in the eyes of all men, and I shall strive to slay you as you will strive to slay me. But as regards this lady, have no fear. What I have promised shall be fulfilled. Bid her farewell, whom you will see

no more."

"Who taught your lips to say such words, O Sultan?" asked Godwin.

"Is it given to you to read the future and the decrees of God?"

"I should have said," answered Saladin, "'Whom you will see no more if I am able to keep you apart.' Can you complain who, both of you, have refused to take her as a wife?"

Here Rosamund looked up wondering, and Wulf broke in:

"Tell her the price. Tell her that she was asked to wed either of us who would bow the knee to Mahomet, and to be the head of his harem, and I think that she will not blame us."

"Never would I have spoken again to him who answered otherwise," exclaimed Rosamund, and Saladin frowned at the words. "Oh! my uncle," she went on, "you have been kind to me and raised me high, but I do not seek this greatness, nor are your ways my ways, who am of a faith that you call accursed. Let me go, I beseech you, in care of these my kinsmen."

"And your lovers," said Saladin bitterly. "Niece, it cannot be. I love you well, but did I know even that your life must pay the price of your sojourn here, here you still should stay, since, as my dream told me, on you hang the lives of thousands, and I

believe that dream. What, then, is your life, or the lives of these knights, or even my life, that any or all of them should turn the scale against those of thousands. Oh! everything that my empire can give is at your feet, but here you stay until the dream be accomplished, and," he added, looking at the brethren, "death shall be the portion of any who would steal you from my hand."

"Until the dream be accomplished?" said Rosamund catching at the words. "Then, when it is accomplished, shall I be free?"

"Ay," answered the Sultan; "free to come or to go, unless you attempt escape, for then you know your certain doom."

"It is a decree. Take note, my cousins, it is a decree. And you, prince Hassan, remember it also. Oh! I pray with all my soul I pray, that it was no lying spirit who brought you that dream, my uncle, though how I shall bring peace, who hitherto have brought nothing except war and bloodshed, I know not. Now go, my cousins but, if you will, leave me Masouda, who has no other friends. Go, and take my love and blessing with you, ay, and the blessing of Jesu and His saints which shall protect you in the hour of battle, and bring us together again."

So spoke Rosamund and threw her veil before her face that she might hide her tears.

Then Godwin and Wulf stepped to where she stood by the throne of Saladin, bent the knee before her, and, taking her hand, kissed it in farewell, nor did the Sultan say them nay. But when she was gone and the brethren were gone, he turned to the emir Hassan and to the great imaum who had sat silent all this while, and said:

"Now tell me, you who are old and wise, which of those men does the lady love? Speak, Hassan, you who know her well."

But Hassan shook his head. "One or the other. Both or neither--I know not," he answered. "Her counsel is too close for me."

Then Saladin turned to the imaum--a cunning, silent man.

"When both the infidels are about to die before her face, as I still hope to see them do, we may learn the answer. But unless she wills it, never before," he replied, and the Sultan noted his saying.

Next morning, having been warned that they would pass there by Masouda, Rosamund, watching through the lattice of one of her palace windows, saw the brethren go by. They were fully armed and, mounted on their splendid chargers Flame and Smoke, looked glorious men as, followed by their escort of swarthy, turbaned Mameluks, they rode proudly side by side, the sunlight glinting

on their mail. Opposite to her house they halted awhile, and, knowing that Rosamund watched, although they could not see her, drew their swords and lifted them in salute. Then sheathing them again, they rode forward in silence, and soon were lost to sight.

Little did Rosamund guess how different they would appear when they three met again. Indeed, she scarcely dared to hope that they would ever meet, for she knew well that even if the war went in favour of the Christians she would be hurried away to some place where they would never find her. She knew well also that from Damascus her rescue was impossible, and that although Saladin loved them, as he loved all who were honest and brave, he would receive them no more as friends, for fear lest they should rob him of her, whom he hoped in some way unforeseen would enable him to end his days in peace. Moreover, the struggle between Cross and Crescent would be fierce and to the death, and she was sure that where was the closest fighting there in the midst of it would be found Godwin and Wulf. Well might it chance, therefore, that her eyes had looked their last upon them.

Oh! she was great. Gold was hers, with gems more than she could count, and few were the weeks that did not bring her added wealth or gifts. She had palaces to dwell in--alone; gardens to wander in--alone; eunuchs and slaves to rule over--alone. But never a friend had she, save the woman of the Assassins, to whom she

clung because she, Masouda, had saved her from Sinan, and who
clung to her, why, Rosamund could not be sure, for there was a
veil between their spirits.

They were gone--they were gone! Even the sound of their horses'
hoofs had died away, and she was desolate as a child lost in a
city full of folk. Oh! and her heart was filled with fears for
them, and most of all for one of them. If he should not come back
into it, what would her life be?

Rosamund bowed her head and wept; then, hearing a sound behind
her, turned to see that Masouda was weeping also.

"Why do you weep?" she asked.

"The maid should copy her mistress," answered Masouda with a hard
laugh; "but, lady, why do you weep? At least you are beloved,
and, come what may, nothing can take that from you. You are not
of less value than the good horse between the rider's knees, or
the faithful hound that runs at his side."

A thought rose in Rosamund's mind--a new and terrible thought.
The eyes of the two women met, and those of Rosamund asked,
"Which?" anxiously as once in the moonlight she had asked it with
her voice from the gate above the Narrow Way. Between them stood
a table inlaid with ivory and pearl, whereon the dust from the

street had gathered through the open lattice. Masouda leaned over, and with her forefinger wrote a single Arabic letter in the dust upon the table, then passed her hand across it.

Rosamund's breast heaved twice or thrice and was still. Then she asked:

"Why did not you who are free go with him?"

"Because he prayed me to bide here and watch over the lady whom he loved. So to the death--I watch."

Slowly Masouda spoke, and the heavy words seemed like blood dropping from a death wound. Then she sank forward into the arms of Rosamund.