

## Chapter Twenty: The Luck of the Star of Hassan

An hour later the captain Abdullah might have been seen walking carelessly towards the tent where the brethren slept. Also, had there been any who cared to watch, something else might have been seen in that low moonlight, for now the storm and the heavy rain which followed it had passed. Namely, the fat shape of the eunuch Mesrour, slipping after him wrapped in a dark camel-hair cloak, such as was commonly worn by camp followers, and taking shelter cunningly behind every rock and shrub and rise of the ground. Hidden among some picketed dromedaries, he saw Abdullah enter the tent of the brethren, then, waiting till a cloud crossed the moon, Mesrour ran to it unseen, and throwing himself down on its shadowed side, lay there like a drunken man, and listened with all his ears. But the thick canvas was heavy with wet, nor would the ropes and the trench that was dug around permit him, who did not love to lie in the water, to place his head against it. Also, those within spoke low, and he could only hear single words, such as "garden," "the star," "princess."

So important did these seem to him, however, that at length Mesrour crept under the cords, and although he shuddered at its cold, drew his body into the trench of water, and with the sharp point of his knife cut a little slit in the taut canvas. To this he set his eye, only to find that it served him nothing, for there was no light in the tent. Still, men were there who talked

in the darkness.

"Good," said a voice--it was that of one of the brethren, but which he could not tell, for even to those who knew them best they seemed to be the same. "Good; then it is settled. To-morrow, at the hour arranged, you bring the princess to the place agreed upon, disguised as you have said. In payment for this service I hand you the Luck of Hassan which you covet. Take it; here it is, and swear to do your part, since otherwise it will bring no luck to you, for I will kill you the first time we meet--yes, and the other also."

"I swear it by Allah and his prophet," answered Abdullah in a hoarse, trembling voice.

"It is enough; see that you keep the oath. And now away; it is not safe that you should tarry here."

Then came the sound of a man leaving the tent. Passing round it cautiously, he halted, and opening his hand, looked at its contents to make sure that no trick had been played upon him in the darkness. Mesrour screwed his head round to look also, and saw the light gleam faintly on the surface of the splendid jewel, which he, too, desired so eagerly. In so doing his foot struck a stone, and instantly Abdullah glanced down to see a dead or drunken man lying almost at his feet. With a swift movement he

hid the jewel and started to walk away. Then bethinking him that it would be well to make sure that this fellow was dead or sleeping, he turned and kicked the prostrate Mesrour upon the back and with all his strength. Indeed, he did this thrice, putting the eunuch to the greatest agony.

"I thought I saw him move," Abdullah muttered after the third kick; "it is best to make sure," and he drew his knife.

Now, had not terror paralysed him, Mesrour would have cried out, but fortunately for himself, before he found his voice Abdullah had buried the knife three inches deep in his fat thigh. With an effort Mesrour bore this also, knowing that if he showed signs of life the next stroke would be in his heart. Then, satisfied that this fellow, whoever he might be, was either a corpse or insensible, Abdullah drew out the knife, wiped it on his victim's robe, and departed.

Not long afterwards Mesrour departed also, towards the Sultan's house, bellowing with rage and pain and vowing vengeance.

It was not long delayed.

That very night Abdullah was seized and put to the question. In his suffering he confessed that he had been to the tent of the brethren and received from one of them the jewel which was found

upon him, as a bribe to bring the princess to a certain garden outside the camp. But he named the wrong garden. Further, when they asked which of the brethren it was who bribed him, he said he did not know, as their voices were alike, and their tent was in darkness; moreover, that he believed there was only one man in it--at least he heard or saw no other. He added that he was summoned to the tent by an Arab man whom he had never seen before, but who told him that if he wished for what he most desired and good fortune, he was to be there at a certain hour after sunset. Then he fainted, and was put back in prison till the morning by the command of Saladin.

When the morning came Abdullah was dead, who desired no more torments with doom at the end of them, having made shift to strangle himself with his robe. But first he had scrawled upon the wall with a piece of charcoal:

"May that accursed Star of Hassan which tempted me bring better luck to others, and may hell receive the soul of Mesrour."

Thus died Abdullah, as faithful as he could be in such sore straits, since he had betrayed neither Masouda nor his son, both of whom were in the plot, and said that only one of the brethren was present in the tent, whereas he knew well that the two of them were there and which of these spoke and gave him the jewel.

Very early that morning the brethren, who were lying wakeful, heard sounds without their tent, and looking out saw that it was surrounded by Mameluks.

"The plot is discovered," said Godwin to Wulf quietly, but with despair in his face. "Now, my brother, admit nothing, even under torture, lest others perish with us."

"Shall we fight?" asked Wulf as they threw on their mail.

But Godwin answered:

"Nay, it would serve us nothing to kill a few brave men."

Then an officer entered the tent, and commanded them to give up their swords and to follow him to Saladin to answer a charge that had been laid against them both, nor would he say any more. So they went as prisoners, and after waiting awhile, were ushered into a large room of the house where Saladin lodged, which was arranged as a court with a dais at one end. Before this they were stood, till presently the Sultan entered through the further door, and with him certain of his emirs and secretaries. Also Rosamund, who looked very pale, was brought there, and in attendance on her Masouda, calm-faced as ever.

The brethren bowed to them, but Saladin, whose eyes were full of

rage, took no notice of their salutation. For a moment there was silence, then Saladin bade a secretary read the charge, which was brief. It was that they had conspired to steal away the princess of Baalbec.

"Where is the evidence against us?" asked Godwin boldly. "The Sultan is just, and convicts no man save on testimony."

Again Saladin motioned to the secretary, who read the words that had been taken down from the lips of the captain Abdullah. They demanded to be allowed to examine the captain Abdullah, and learned that he was already dead. Then the eunuch Mesrour was carried forward, for walk he could not, owing to the wound that Abdullah had given him, and told all his tale, how he had suspected Abdullah, and, following him, had heard him and one of the brethren speaking in the tent, and the words that passed, and afterwards seen Abdullah with the jewel in his hand.

When he had finished Godwin asked which of them he had heard speaking with Abdullah, and he answered that he could not say, as their voices were so alike, but one voice only had spoken.

Then Rosamund was ordered to give her testimony, and said, truly enough, that she knew nothing of the plot and had not thought of this flight. Masouda also swore that she now heard of it for the first time. After this the secretary announced that there was no

more evidence, and prayed of the Sultan to give judgment in the matter.

"Against which of us," asked Godwin, "seeing that both the dead and the living witness declared they heard but one voice, and whose that voice was they did not know? According to your own law, you cannot condemn a man against whom there is no good testimony."

"There is testimony against one of you," answered Saladin sternly, "that of two witnesses, as is required, and, as I have warned you long ago, that man shall die. Indeed, both of you should die, for I am sure that both are guilty. Still, you have been put upon your trial according to the law, and as a just judge I will not strain the law against you. Let the guilty one die by beheading at sundown, the hour at which he planned to commit his crime. The other may go free with the citizens of Jerusalem who depart to-night, bearing my message to the Frankish leaders in that holy town."

"Which of us, then, is to die, and which to go free?" asked Godwin. "Tell us, that he who is doomed may prepare his soul."

"Say you, who know the truth," answered Saladin.

"We admit nothing," said Godwin; "yet, if one of us must die, I

as the elder claim that right."

"And I claim it as the younger. The jewel was Hassan's gift to me; who else could give it to Abdullah?" added Wulf, speaking for the first time, whereat all the Saracens there assembled, brave men who loved a knightly deed, murmured in admiration, and even Saladin said:

"Well spoken, both of you. So it seems that both must die."

Then Rosamund stepped forward and threw herself upon her knees before him, exclaiming:

"Sire, my uncle, such is not your justice, that two should be slain for the offence of one, if offence there be. If you know not which is guilty, spare them both, I beseech you."

He stretched out his hand and raised her from her knees: then thought awhile, and said:

"Nay, plead not with me, for however much you love him the guilty man must suffer, as he deserves. But of this matter Allah alone knows the truth, therefore let it be decided by Allah," and he rested his head upon his hand, looking at Wulf and Godwin as though to read their souls.



Now behind Saladin stood that old and famous imaum who had been with him and Hassan when he commanded the brethren to depart from Damascus, who all this while had listened to everything that passed with a sour smile. Leaning forward, he whispered in his master's ear, who considered a moment, then answered him:

"It is good. Do so."

So the imaum left the court, and returned presently carrying two small boxes of sandalwood tied with silk and sealed, so like each other that none could tell them apart, which boxes he passed continually from his right hand to his left and from his left hand to his right, then gave them to Saladin.

"In one of these," said the Sultan, "is that jewel known as the enchanted Star and the Luck of the House of Hassan, which the prince presented to his conqueror on the day of Hattin, and for the desire of which my captain Abdullah became a traitor and was brought to death. In the other is a pebble of the same weight. Come, my niece, take you these boxes and give them to your kinsmen, to each the box you will. The jewel that is called the Star of Hassan is magical, and has virtue, so they say. Let it choose, therefore, which of these knights is ripe for death, and let him perish in whose box the Star is found."

"Now," muttered the imaum into the ear of his master, "now at

length we shall learn which it is of these two men that the lady loves."

"That is what I seek to know," answered Saladin in the same low voice.

As she heard this decree Rosamund looked round wildly and pleaded:

"Oh! be not so cruel. I beseech you spare me this task. Let it be another hand that is chosen to deal death to one of those of my own blood with whom I have dwelt since childhood. Let me not be the blind sword of fate that frees his spirit, lest it should haunt my dreams and turn all my world to woe. Spare me, I beseech you."

But Saladin looked at her very sternly and answered:

"Princess, you know why I have brought you to the East and raised you to great honour here, why also I have made you my companion in these wars. It is for my dream's sake, the dream which told me that by some noble act of yours you should save the lives of thousands. Yet I am sure that you desire to escape, and plots are made to take you from me, though of these plots you say that you and your woman"--and he looked darkly at Masouda--"know nothing. But these men know, and it is right that you, for whose sake if

not by whose command the thing was done, should mete out its reward, and that the blood of him whom you appoint, which is spilt for you, should be on your and no other head. Now do my bidding."

For a moment Rosamund stared at the boxes, then suddenly she closed her eyes, and taking them up at hazard, stretched out her arms, leaning forward over the edge of the dais. Thereon, calmly enough the brethren took, each of them, the box that was nearest to him, that in Rosamund's left hand falling to Godwin and that in her right to Wulf. Then she opened her eyes again, stood still, and watched.

"Cousin," said Godwin, "before we break this cord that is our chain of doom, know well that, whatever chances, we blame you not at all. It is God Who acts through you, and you are as innocent of the death of either of us as of that plot whereof we stand accused."

Then he began to unknot the silk which was bound about his box. Wulf, knowing that it would tell all the tale, did not trouble himself as yet, but looked around the room, thinking that, whether he lived or died, never would he see a stranger sight. Every eye in it was fixed upon the box in Godwin's hand; even Saladin stared as though it held his own destiny. No; not every one, for those of the old imaum were fixed upon the face of

Rosamund, which was piteous to see, for all its beauty had left it, and even her parted lips were ashy. Masouda alone still stood upright and unmoved, as though she watched some play, but he noted that her rich-hued cheek grew pale and that beneath her robe her hand was pressed upon her heart. The silence also was intense, and broken only by the little grating noise of Godwin's nails as, having no knife to cut it, he patiently untied the silk.

"Trouble enough about one man's life in a land where lives are cheap!" exclaimed Wulf, thinking aloud, and at the sound of his voice all men started, as though it had thundered suddenly in a summer sky. Then with a laugh he tore the silk about his box asunder with his strong fingers, and breaking the seal, shook out its contents. Lo! there on the floor before him, gleaming green and white with emerald and diamond, lay the enchanted Star of Hassan.

Masouda saw, and the colour crept back to her cheek. Rosamund saw also, and nature was too strong for her, for in one bitter cry the truth broke from her lips at last:

"Not Wulf! Not Wulf!" she wailed, and sank back senseless into Masouda's arms.

"Now, sire," said the old imaum with a chuckle, "you know which

of those two the lady loves. Being a woman, as usual she chooses badly, for the other has the finer spirit."

"Yes, I know now," said Saladin, "and I am glad to know, for the matter has vexed me much."

But Wulf, who had paled for a moment, flushed with joy as the truth came home to him, and he understood the end of all their doubts.

"This Star is well named 'The Luck,'" he said, as bending down he took it from the floor and fastened it to his cloak above his heart, "nor do I hold it dearly earned." Then he turned to his brother, who stood by him white and still, saying:

"Forgive me, Godwin, but such is the fortune of love and war. Grudge it not to me, for when I am sped tonight this Luck--and all that hangs to it--will be yours."

So that strange scene ended.

The afternoon drew towards evening, and Godwin stood before Saladin in his private chamber.

"What seek you now?" said the Sultan sternly.

"A boon," answered Godwin. "My brother is doomed to die before nightfall. I ask to die instead of him."

"Why, Sir Godwin?"

"For two reasons, sire. As you learned to-day, at length the riddle is answered. It is Wulf who is beloved of the lady Rosamund, and therefore to kill him would be a crime. Further, it is I and not he whom the eunuch heard bargaining with the captain Abdullah in the tent--I swear it. Take your vengeance upon me, and let him go to fulfil his fate."

Saladin pulled at his beard, then answered:

"If this is to be so, time is short, Sir Godwin. What farewells have you to make? You say that you would speak with my niece Rosamund? Nay, the princess you shall not see, and indeed cannot, for she lies swooning in her chamber. Do you desire to meet your brother for the last time?"

"No, sire, for then he might learn the truth and--"

"Refuse this sacrifice, Sir Godwin, which perchance will be scarcely to his liking."

"I wish to say good-bye to Masouda, she who is waiting woman to

the princess."

"That you cannot do, for, know, I mistrust this Masouda, and believe that she was at the bottom of your plot. I have dismissed her from the person of the princess and from my camp, which she is to leave--if she has not already left--with some Arabs who are her kin. Had it not been for her services in the land of the Assassins and afterwards, I should have put her to death."

"Then," said Godwin with a sigh, "I desire only to see Egbert the bishop, that he may shrive me according to our faith and make note of my last wishes."

"Good; he shall be sent to you. I accept your statement that you are the guilty man and not Sir Wulf, and take your life for his. Leave me now, who have greater matters on my mind. The guard will seek you at the appointed time."

Godwin bowed and walked away with a steady step while Saladin, looking after him, muttered:

"The world could ill spare so brave and good a man."

Two hours later guards summoned Godwin from the place where he was prisoned, and, accompanied by the old bishop who had shriven him, he passed its door with a happy countenance, such as a

bridegroom might have worn. In a fashion, indeed, he was happy, whose troubles were done with, who had few sins to mourn, whose faith was the faith of a child, and who laid down his life for his friend and brother. They took him to a vault of the great house where Saladin was lodged--a large, rough place, lit with torches, in which waited the headsman and his assistants. Presently Saladin entered, and, looking at him curiously, said:

"Are you still of the same mind, Sir Godwin?"

"I am."

"Good. Yet I have changed mine. You shall say farewell to your cousin, as you desired. Let the princess of Baalbec be brought hither, sick or well, that she may see her work. Let her come alone."

"Sire," pleaded Godwin, "spare her such a sight."

But he pleaded in vain, for Saladin answered only, "I have said."

A while passed, and Godwin, hearing the sweep of robes, looked up, and saw the tall shape of a veiled woman standing in the corner of the vault where the shadow was so deep that the torchlight only glimmered faintly upon her royal ornaments.



"They told me that you were sick, princess, sick with sorrow, as well you may be, because the man you love was about to die for you," said Saladin in a slow voice. "Now I have had pity on your grief, and his life has been bought with another life, that of the knight who stands yonder."

The veiled form started wildly, then sank back against the wall.

"Rosamund," broke in Godwin, speaking in French, "I beseech you, be silent and do not unman me with words or tears. It is best thus, and you know that it is best. Wulf you love as he loves you, and I believe that in time you will be brought together. Me you do not love, save as a friend, and never have. Moreover, I tell you this that it may ease your pain and my conscience; I no longer seek you as my wife, whose bride is death. I pray you, give to Wulf my love and blessing, and to Masouda, that truest and most sweet woman, say, or write, that I offer her the homage of my heart; that I thought of her in my last moments, and that my prayer is we may meet again where all crooked paths are straightened. Rosamund, farewell; peace and joy go with you through many years, ay, and with your children's children. Of Godwin I only ask you to remember this, that he lived serving you, and so died."

She heard and stretched out her arms, and, none forbidding him, Godwin walked to where she stood. Without lifting her veil she

bent forward and kissed him, first upon the brow and next upon the lips; then with a low, moaning cry, she turned and fled from that gloomy place, nor did Saladin seek to stay her. Only to himself the Sultan wondered how it came about that if it was Wulf whom Rosamund loved, she still kissed Godwin thus upon the lips.

As he walked back to the death-place Godwin wondered also, first that Rosamund should have spoken no single word, and secondly because she had kissed him thus, even in that hour. Why or wherefore he did not know, but there rose in his mind a memory of that wild ride down the mountain steeps at Beirut, and of lips which then had touched his cheek, and of the odour of hair that then was blown about his breast. With a sigh he thrust the thought aside, blushing to think that such memories should come to him who had done with earth and its delights, knelt down before the headsman, and, turning to the bishop, said:

"Bless me, father, and bid them strike."

Then it was that he heard a well-known footstep, and looked up to see Wulf staring at him.

"What do you here, Godwin?" asked Wulf. "Has yonder fox snared both of us?" and he nodded at Saladin.

"Let the fox speak," said the Sultan with a smile. "Know, Sir

Wulf, that your brother was about to die in your place, and of his own wish. But I refuse such sacrifice who yet have made use of it to teach my niece, the princess, that should she continue in her plottings to escape, or allow you to continue in them, certainly it will bring you to your deaths, and, if need be, her also. Knights, you are brave men whom I prefer to kill in war. Good horses stand without; take them as my gift, and ride with these foolish citizens of Jerusalem. We may meet again within its streets. Nay, thank me not. I thank you who have taught Salah-ed-din how perfect a thing can be the love of brothers."

The brethren stood awhile bewildered, for it is a strange thing thus to come back from death to life. Each of them had made sure that he must die within some few minutes, and pass through the blackness which walls man in, to find he knew not what. And now, behold! the road that led to that blackness turned again at its very edge, and ran forward through the familiar things of earth to some end unknown. They were brave, both of them, and accustomed to face death daily, as in such a place and time all men must be; moreover, they had been shriven, and looked to see the gates of Paradise open on their newborn sight.

Yet, since no man loves that journey, it was very sweet to know it done with for a while, and that they still might hope to dwell in this world for many years. Little wonder, then, that their brains swam, and their eyes grew dim, as they passed from the

shadow to the light again. It was Wulf who spoke the first.

"A noble deed, Godwin, yet one for which I should not have thanked you had it been accomplished, who then must have lived on by grace of your sacrifice. Sultan, we are grateful for your boon of life, though had you shed this innocent blood surely it would have stained your soul. May we bid farewell to our cousin Rosamund before we ride?"

"Nay," answered Saladin; "Sir Godwin has done that already--let it serve for both. To-morrow she shall learn the truth of the story. Now go, and return no more."

"That must be as fate wills," answered Godwin, and they bowed and went.

Outside that gloomy place of death their swords were given them, and two good horses, which they mounted. Hence guides led them to the embassy from Jerusalem that was already in the saddle, who were very glad to welcome two such knights to their company. Then, having bid farewell to the bishop Egbert, who wept for joy at their escape, escorted for a while by Saladin's soldiers, they rode away from Ascalon at the fall of night.

Soon they had told each other all there was to tell. When he heard of the woe of Rosamund Wulf well-nigh shed tears.

"We have our lives," he said, "but how shall we save her? While Masouda stayed with her there was some hope, but now I can see none."

"There is none, except in God," answered Godwin, "Who can do all things--even free Rosamund and make her your wife. Also, if Masouda is at liberty, we shall hear from her ere long; so let us keep a good heart."

But though he spoke thus, the soul of Godwin was oppressed with a fear which he could not understand. It seemed as though some great terror came very close to him, or to one who was near and dear. Deeper and deeper he sank into that pit of dread of he knew not what, until at length he could have cried aloud, and his brow was bathed with a sweat of anguish. Wulf saw his face in the moonlight, and asked:

"What ails you, Godwin? Have you some secret wound?"

"Yes, brother," he answered, "a wound in my spirit. Ill fortune threatens us--great ill fortune."

"That is no new thing," said Wulf, "in this land of blood and sorrows. Let us meet it as we have met the rest."

"Alas! brother," exclaimed Godwin, "I fear that Rosamund is in sore danger--Rosamund or another."

"Then," answered Wulf, turning pale, "since we cannot, let us pray that some angel may deliver her."

"Ay," said Godwin, and as they rode through the desert sands beneath the silent stars, they prayed to the Blessed Mother, and to their saints, St. Peter and St. Chad--prayed with all their strength. Yet the prayer availed not. Sharper and sharper grew Godwin's agony, till, as the slow hours went by, his very soul reeled beneath this spiritual pain, and the death which he had escaped seemed a thing desirable.

The dawn was breaking, and at its first sign the escort of Saladin's soldiers had turned and left them, saying that now they were safe in their own country. All night they had ridden fast and far. The plain was behind them, and their road ran among hills. Suddenly it turned, and in the flaming lights of the new-born day showed them a sight so beautiful that for a moment all that little company drew rein to gaze. For yonder before them, though far away as yet, throned upon her hills, stood the holy city of Jerusalem. There were her walls and towers, and there, stained red as though with the blood of its worshippers, soared the great cross upon the mosque of Omar--that cross which was so soon to fall.

Yes, yonder was the city for which throughout the ages men had died by tens and hundreds of thousands, and still must die until the doom was done. Saladin had offered to spare her citizens if they consented to surrender, but they would not. This embassy had told him that they had sworn to perish with the holy Places, and now, looking at it in its splendour, they knew that the hour was near, and groaned aloud.

Godwin groaned also, but not for Jerusalem. Oh! now the last terror was upon him. Blackness surged round him, and in the blackness swords, and a sound as of a woman's voice murmuring his name. Clutching the pommel of his saddle, he swayed to and fro, till suddenly the anguish passed. A strange wind seemed to blow about him and lift his hair; a deep, unearthly peace sank into his spirit; the world seemed far away and heaven very near.

"It is over," he said to Wulf. "I fear that Rosamund is dead."

"If so, we must make haste to follow her," answered Wulf with a sob.