

Chapter Twenty-One: What Befell Godwin

At the village of Bittir, some seven miles from Jerusalem, the embassy dismounted to rest, then again they pressed forward down the valley in the hope of reaching the Zion Gate before the mid-day heat was upon them. At the end of this valley swelled the shoulder of a hill whence the eye could command its length, and on the crest of that shoulder appeared suddenly a man and a woman, seated on beautiful horses. The company halted, fearing lest these might herald some attack and that the woman was a man disguised to deceive them. While they waited thus irresolute, the pair upon the hill turned their horses' heads, and notwithstanding its steepness, began to gallop towards them very swiftly. Wulf looked at them curiously and said to Godwin:

"Now I am put in mind of a certain ride which once we took outside the walls of Beirut. Almost could I think that yonder Arab was he who sat behind my saddle, and yonder woman she who rode with you, and that those two horses were Flame and Smoke reborn. Note their whirlwind pace, and strength, and stride."

Almost as he finished speaking the strangers pulled up their steeds in front of the company, to whom the man bowed his salutations. Then Godwin saw his face, and knew him at once as the old Arab called Son of the Sand, who had given them the horses Flame and Smoke.

"Sir," said the Arab to the leader of the embassy, "I have come to ask a favour of yonder knights who travel with you, which I think that they, who have ridden my horses, will not refuse me. This woman," and he pointed to the closely-veiled shape of his companion, "is a relative of mine whom I desire to deliver to friends in Jerusalem, but dare not do so myself because the hilldwellers between here and there are hostile to my tribe. She is of the Christian faith and no spy, but cannot speak your language. Within the south gate she will be met by her relatives. I have spoken."

"Let the knights settle it," said the commander, shrugging his shoulders impatiently and spurring his horse.

"Surely we will take her," said Godwin, "though what we shall do with her if her friends are wanting I do not know. Come, lady, ride between us."

She turned her head to the Arab as though in question, and he repeated the words, whereon she fell into the place that was shown to her between and a little behind the brethren.

"Perhaps," went on the Arab to Godwin, "by now you have learned more of our tongue than you knew when we met in past days at Beirut, and rode the mountain side on the good horses Flame and

Smoke. Still, if so, I pray you of your knightly courtesy disturb not this woman with your words, nor ask her to unveil her face, since such is not the custom of her people. It is but an hour's journey to the city gate during which you will be troubled with her. This is the payment that I ask of you for the two good horses which, as I am told, bore you none so ill upon the Narrow Way and across plain and mountain when you fled from Sinan, also on the evil day of Hattin when you unhorsed Salah-ed-din and slew Hassan."

"It shall be as you wish," said Godwin; "and, Son of the Sand, we thank you for those horses."

"Good. When you want more, let it be known in the market places that you seek me," and he began to turn his horse's head.

"Stay," said Godwin. "What do you know of Masouda, your niece? Is she with you?"

"Nay," answered the Arab in a low voice, "but she bade me be in a certain garden of which you have heard, near Ascalon, at an appointed hour, to take her away, as she is leaving the camp of Salah-ed-din. So thither I go. Farewell." Then with a reverence to the veiled lady, he shook his reins and departed like an arrow by the road along which they had come.

Godwin gave a sigh of relief. If Masouda had appointed to meet her uncle the Arab, at least she must be safe. So it was no voice of hers which seemed to whisper his name in the darkness of the night when terror had ahold of him--terror, born perhaps of all that he had endured and the shadow of death through which he had so lately passed. Then he looked up, to find Wulf staring back at the woman behind him, and reproved him, saying that he must keep to the spirit of the bargain as well as to the letter, and that if he might not speak he must not look either.

"That is a pity," answered Wulf, "for though she is so tied up, she must be a tall and noble lady by the way she sits her horse. The horse, too, is noble, own cousin or brother to Smoke, I think. Perhaps she will sell it when we get to Jerusalem."

Then they rode on, and because they thought their honour in it, neither spoke nor looked more at the companion of this adventure, though, had they known it, she looked hard enough at them.

At length they reached the gate of Jerusalem, which was crowded with folk awaiting the return of their ambassadors. They all passed through, and the embassy was escorted thence by the chief people, most of the multitude following them to know if they brought peace or war.

Now Godwin and Wulf stared at each other, wondering whither they

were to go and where to find the relatives of their veiled companion, of whom they saw nothing. Out of the street opened an archway, and beyond this archway was a garden, which seemed to be deserted. They rode into it to take counsel, and their companion followed, but, as always, a little behind them.

"Jerusalem is reached, and we must speak to her now," said Wulf, "if only to ask her whither she wishes to be taken."

Godwin nodded, and they wheeled their horses round.

"Lady," he said in Arabic, "we have fulfilled our charge. Be pleased to tell us where are those kindred to whom we must lead you."

"Here," answered a soft voice.

They stared about the deserted garden in which stones and sacks of earth had been stored ready for a siege, and finding no one, said:

"We do not see them."

Then the lady let slip her cloak, though not her veil revealing the robe beneath.

"By St. Peter!" said Godwin. "I know the broidery on that dress. Masouda! Say, is it you, Masouda?"

As he spoke the veil fell also, and lo! before them was a woman like to Masouda and yet not Masouda. The hair was dressed like hers; the ornaments and the necklace made of the claws of the lion which Godwin killed were hers; the skin was of the same rich hue; there even was the tiny mole upon her cheek, but as the head was bent they could not see her eyes. Suddenly, with a little moan she lifted it, and looked at them.

"Rosamund! It is Rosamund herself!" gasped Wulf. "Rosamund disguised as Masouda!"

And he fell rather than leapt from his saddle and ran to her, murmuring, "God! I thank Thee!"

Now she seemed to faint and slid from her horse into his arms, and lay there a moment, while Godwin turned aside his head.

"Yes," said Rosamund, freeing herself, "it is I and no other, yet I rode with you all this way and neither of you knew me."

"Have we eyes that can pierce veils and woollen garments?" asked Wulf indignantly; but Godwin said in a strange, strained voice:

"You are Rosamund disguised as Masouda. Who, then, was that woman to whom I bade farewell before Saladin while the headsman awaited me; a veiled woman who wore the robes and gems of Rosamund?"

"I know not, Godwin," she answered, "unless it were Masouda clad in my garments as I left her. Nor do I know anything of this story of the headsman who awaited you. I thought--I thought it was for Wulf that he waited--oh! Heaven, I thought that."

"Tell us your tale," said Godwin hoarsely.

"It is short," she answered. "After the casting of the lot, of which I shall dream till my death-day, I fainted. When I found my senses again I thought that I must be mad, for there before me stood a woman dressed in my garments, whose face seemed like my face, yet not the same.

"'Have no fear,' she said; 'I am Masouda, who, amongst many other things, have learned how to play a part. Listen; there is no time to lose. I have been ordered to leave the camp; even now my uncle the Arab waits without, with two swift horses. You, Princess, will leave in my place. Look, you wear my robes and my face--almost; and are of my height, and the man who guides you will know no difference. I have seen to that, for although a soldier of Salah-ed-din, he is of my tribe. I will go with you to the door, and there bid you farewell before the eunuchs and

the guards with weeping, and who will guess that Masouda is the princess of Baalbec and that the princess of Baalbec is Masouda?'

"And whither shall I go?' I asked.

"My uncle, Son of the Sand, will give you over to the embassy which rides to Jerusalem, or failing that, will take you to the city, or failing that, will hide you in the mountains among his own people. See, here is a letter that he must read; I place it in your breast.'

"And what of you, Masouda?' I asked again.

"Of me? Oh! it is all planned, a plan that cannot fail,' she answered. 'Fear not; I escape to-night--I have no time to tell you how--and will join you in a day or two. Also, I think that you will find Sir Godwin, who will bring you home to England.'

"But Wulf? What of Wulf?' I asked again. 'He is doomed to die, and I will not leave him.'

"The living and the dead can keep no company,' she answered. 'Moreover, I have seen him, and all this is done by his most urgent order. If you love him, he bids that you will obey.'"

"I never saw Masouda! I never spoke such words! I knew nothing of this plot!" exclaimed Wulf, and the brethren looked at each other with white faces.

"Speak on," said Godwin; "afterwards we can debate."

"Moreover," continued Rosamund, bowing her head, "Masouda added these words, 'I think that Sir Wulf will escape his doom. If you would see him again, obey his word, for unless you obey you can never hope to look upon him living. Go, now, before we are both discovered, which would mean your death and mine, who, if you go, am safe.'"

"How knew she that I should escape?" asked Wulf.

"She did not know it. She only said she knew to force Rosamund away," answered Godwin in the same strained voice. "And then?"

"And then--oh! having Wulf's express commands, then I went, like one in a dream. I remember little of it. At the door we kissed and parted weeping, and while the guard bowed before her, she blessed me beneath her breath. A soldier stepped forward and said, 'Follow me, daughter of Sinan,' and I followed him, none taking any note, for at that hour, although perhaps you did not see it in your prisons, a strange shadow passed across the sun, of which all folk were afraid, thinking that it portended evil,

either to Saladin or Ascalon.*

[* The eclipse, which overshadowed Palestine and caused much terror at Jerusalem on 4th September, 1187, the day of the surrender of Ascalon. -Author]

"In the gloom we came to a place, where was an old Arab among some trees, and with him two led horses. The soldier spoke to the Arab, and I gave him Masouda's letter, which he read. Then he put me on one of the led horses and the soldier mounted the other, and we departed at a gallop. All that evening and last night we rode hard, but in the darkness the soldier left us, and I do not know whither he went. At length we came to that mountain shoulder and waited there, resting the horses and eating food which the Arab had with him, till we saw the embassy, and among them two tall knights.

"See,' said the old Arab, 'yonder come the brethren whom you seek. See and give thanks to Allah and to Masouda, who has not lied to you, and to whom I must now return.'

"Oh! my heart wept as though it would burst, and I wept in my joy--wept and blessed God and Masouda. But the Arab, Son of the Sand, told me that for my life's sake I must be silent and keep myself close veiled and disguised even from you until we reached Jerusalem, lest perhaps if they knew me the embassy might refuse

escort to the princess of Baalbec and niece of Saladin, or even give me up to him.

"Then I promised and asked, 'What of Masouda?' He said that he rode back at speed to save her also, as had been arranged, and that was why he did not take me to Jerusalem himself. But how that was to be done he was not sure as yet; only he was sure that she was hidden away safely, and would find a way of escape when she wished it. And--and--you know the rest, and here, by the grace of God, we three are together again."

"Ay," said Godwin, "but where is Masouda, and what will happen to her who has dared to venture such a plot as this? Oh! know you what this woman did? I was condemned to die in place of Wulf--how, does not matter; you will learn it afterwards--and the princess of Baalbec was brought to say me farewell. There, under the very eyes of Saladin, Masouda played her part and mimicked you so well that the Sultan was deceived, and I, even I, was deceived. Yes, when for the first and last time I embraced her, I was deceived, although, it is true, I wondered. Also since then a great fear has been with me, although here again I was deceived, for I thought I feared--for you.

"Now, hark you, Wulf; take Rosamund and lodge her with some lady in this city, or, better still, place her in sanctuary with the nuns of the Holy Cross, whence none will dare to drag her, and

let her don their habit. The abbess may remember you, for we have met her, and at least she will not refuse Rosamund a refuge."

"Yes, yes; I mind me she asked us news of folk in England. But you? Where do you go, Godwin?" said his brother.

"I? I ride back to Ascalon to find Masouda."

"Why?" asked Wulf. "Cannot Masouda save herself, as she told her uncle, the Arab, she would do? And has he not returned thither to take her away?"

"I do not know," answered Godwin; "but this I do know, that for the sake of Rosamund, and perhaps for my sake also, Masouda has run a fearful risk. Bethink you, what will be the mood of Saladin when at length he finds that she upon whom he had built such hopes has gone, leaving a waiting woman decked out in her attire."

"Oh!" broke in Rosamund. "I feared it, but I awoke to find myself disguised, and she persuaded me that all was well; also that this was done by the will of Wulf, whom she thought would escape."

"That is the worst of it," said Godwin. "To carry out her plan she held it necessary to lie, as I think she lied when she said that she believed we should both escape, though it is true that

so it came about. I will tell you why she lied. It was that she might give her life to set you free to join me in Jerusalem."

Now Rosamund, who knew the secret of Masouda's heart, looked at him strangely, wondering within herself how it came about that, thinking Wulf dead or about to die, she should sacrifice herself that she, Rosamund, might be sent to the care of Godwin. Surely it could not be for love of her, although they loved each other well. From love of Godwin then? How strange a way to show it!

Yet now she began to understand. So true and high was this great love of Masouda's that for Godwin's sake she was ready to hide herself in death, leaving him--now that, as she thought, his rival was removed--to live on with the lady whom he loved; ay, and at the price of her own life giving that lady to his arms. Oh! how noble must she be who could thus plan and act, and, whatever her past had been, how pure and high of soul! Surely, if she lived, earth had no grander woman; and if she were dead, heaven had won a saint indeed.

Rosamund looked at Godwin, and Godwin looked at Rosamund, and there was understanding in their eyes, for now both of them saw the truth in all its glory and all its horror.

"I think that I should go back also," said Rosamund.

"That shall not be," answered Wulf. "Saladin would kill you for this flight, as he has sworn."

"That cannot be," added Godwin. "Shall the sacrifice of blood be offered in vain? Moreover it is our duty to prevent you."

Rosamund looked at him again and stammered:

"If--if--that dreadful thing has happened, Godwin--if the sacrifice--oh! what will it serve?"

"Rosamund, I know not what has chanced; I go to see. I care not what may chance; I go to meet it. Through life, through death, and if there be need, through all the fires of hell, I ride on till I find Masouda, and kneel to her in homage--"

"And in love," exclaimed Rosamund, as though the words broke from her lips against her will.

"Mayhap," Godwin answered, speaking more to himself than to her.

Then seeing the look upon his face, the set mouth and the flashing eyes, neither of them sought to stay him further.

"Farewell, my liege-lady and cousin Rosamund," Godwin said; "my part is played. Now I leave you in the keeping of God in heaven

and of Wulf on earth. Should we meet no more, my counsel is that you two wed here in Jerusalem and travel back to Steeple, there to live in peace, if it may be so. Brother Wulf, fare you well also. We part to-day for the first time, who from our birth have lived together and loved together and done many a deed together, some of which we can look back upon without shame. Go on your course rejoicing, taking the love and gladness that Heaven has given you and living a good and Christian knight, mindful of the end which draws on apace, and of eternity beyond."

"Oh! Godwin, speak not thus," said Wulf, "for in truth it breaks my heart to hear such fateful words. Moreover, we do not part thus easily. Our lady here will be safe enough among the nuns--more safe than I can keep her. Give me an hour, and I will set her there and join you. Both of us owe a debt to Masouda, and it is not right that it should be paid by you alone."

"Nay," answered Godwin; "look upon Rosamund, and think what is about to befall this city. Can you leave her at such a time?"

Then Wulf dropped his head, and trusting himself to speak no more words, Godwin mounted his horse, and, without so much as looking back, rode into the narrow street and out through the gateway, till presently he was lost in the distance and the desert.

Wulf and Rosamund watched him go in silence, for they were choked

with tears.

"Little did I look to part with my brother thus," said Wulf at length in a thick and angry voice. "By God's Wounds! I had more gladly died at his side in battle than leave him to meet his doom alone."

"And leave me to meet my doom alone," murmured Rosamund; then added, "Oh! I would that I were dead who have lived to bring all this woe upon you both, and upon that great heart, Masouda. I say, Wulf, I would that I were dead."

"Like enough the wish will be fulfilled before all is done," answered Wulf wearily, "only then I pray that I may be dead with you, for now, Rosamund, Godwin has gone, forever as I fear, and you alone are left to me. Come; let us cease complaining, since to dwell upon these griefs cannot help us, and be thankful that for a while, at least, we are free. Follow me, Rosamund, and we will ride to this nunnery to find you shelter, if we may."

So they rode on through the narrow streets that were crowded with scared people, for now the news was spread that the embassy had rejected the terms of Saladin. He had offered to give the city food and to suffer its inhabitants to fortify the walls, and to hold them till the following Whitsuntide if, should no help reach them, they would swear to surrender then. But they had answered

that while they had life they would never abandon the place where their God had died.

So now war was before them--war to the end; and who were they that must bear its brunt? Their leaders were slain or captive, their king a prisoner, their soldiers skeletons on the field of Hattin. Only the women and children, the sick, the old, and the wounded remained--perhaps eighty thousand souls in all--but few of whom could bear arms. Yet these few must defend Jerusalem against the might of the victorious Saracen. Little wonder that they wailed in the streets till the cry of their despair went up to heaven, for in their hearts all of them knew that the holy place was doomed and their lives were forfeited.

Pushing their path through this sad multitude, who took little note of them, at length they came to the nunnery on the sacred Via Dolorosa, which Wulf had seen when Godwin and he were in Jerusalem after they had been dismissed by Saladin from Damascus. Its door stood in the shadow of that arch where the Roman Pilate had uttered to all generations the words "Behold the man!"

Here the porter told him that the nuns were at prayer in their chapel. Wulf replied that he must see the lady abbess upon a matter which would not delay, and they were shown into a cool and lofty room. Presently the door opened, and through it came the abbess in her white robes--a tall and stately Englishwoman, of

middle age, who looked at them curiously.

"Lady Abbess," said Wulf, bowing low, "my name is Wulf D'Arcy. Do you remember me?"

"Yes. We met in Jerusalem--before the battle of Hattin," she answered. "Also I know something of your story in this land--a very strange one."

"This lady," went on Wulf, "is the daughter and heiress of Sir Andrew D'Arcy, my dead uncle, and in Syria the princess of Baalbec and the niece of Saladin."

The abbess started, and asked: "Is she, then, of their accursed faith, as her garb would seem to show?"

"Nay, mother," said Rosamund, "I am a Christian, if a sinful one, and I come here to seek sanctuary, lest when they know who I am and he clamours at their gates, my fellow Christians may surrender me to my uncle, the Sultan."

"Tell me the story," said the abbess; and they told her briefly, while she listened, amazed. When they had finished, she said:

"Alas! my daughter, how can we save you, whose own lives are at stake? That belongs to God alone. Still, what we can we will do

gladly, and here, at least, you may rest for some short while. At the most holy altar of our chapel you shall be given sanctuary, after which no Christian man dare lay a hand upon you, since to do so is a sacrilege that would cost him his soul. Moreover, I counsel that you be enrolled upon our books as a novice, and don our garb. Nay," she added with a smile, noting the look of alarm on the face of Wulf, "the lady Rosamund need not wear it always, unless such should be her wish. Not every novice proceeds to the final vows."

"Long have I been decked in gold-embroidered silks and priceless gems," answered Rosamund, "and now I seem to desire that white robe of yours more than anything on earth."

So they led Rosamund to the chapel, and in sight of all their order and of priests who had been summoned, at the altar there, upon that holy spot where they said that once Christ had answered Pilate, they placed her hand and gave her sanctuary, and threw over her tired head the white veil of a novice. There, too, Wulf left her, and riding away, reported himself to Balian of Ibelin, the elected commander of the city, who was glad enough to welcome so stout a knight where knights were few.

Oh! weary, weary was that ride of Godwin's beneath the sun, beneath the stars. Behind him, the brother who had been his companion and closest friend, and the woman whom he had loved in

vain; and in front, he knew not what. What went he forth to seek? Another woman, who had risked her life for them all because she loved him. And if he found her, what then? Must he wed her, and did he wish this? Nay, he desired no woman on the earth; yet what was right that he would do. And if he found her not, what then? Well, at least he would give himself up to Saladin, who must think ill of them by whom he had dealt well, and tell him that of this plot they had no knowledge. Indeed, to him he would go first, if it were but to beg forgiveness for Masouda should she still be in his hands. Then--for he could not hope to be believed or pardoned a second time--then let death come, and he would welcome it, who greatly longed for peace.

It was evening, and Godwin's tired horse stumbled slowly through the great camp of the Saracens without the walls of fallen Ascalon. None hindered him, for having been so long a prisoner he was known by many, while others thought that he was but one of the surrendered Christian knights. So he came to the great house where Saladin lodged, and bade the guard take his name to the Sultan, saying that he craved audience of him. Presently he was admitted, and found Saladin seated in council among his ministers.

"Sir Godwin," he said sternly, "seeing how you have dealt by me, what brings you back into my camp? I gave you brethren your lives, and you have robbed me of one whom I would not lose."

"We did not rob you, sire," answered Godwin, "who knew nothing of this plot. Nevertheless, as I was sure that you would think thus, I am come from Jerusalem, leaving the princess and my brother there, to tell the truth and to surrender myself to you, that I may bear in her place any punishment which you think fit to inflict upon the woman Masouda."

"Why should you bear it?" asked Saladin.

"Because, Sultan," answered Godwin sadly, and with bent head, "whatever she did, she did for love of me, though without my knowledge. Tell me, is she still here, or has she fled?"

"She is still here," answered Saladin shortly. "Would you wish to see her?"

Godwin breathed a sigh of relief. At least, Masouda still lived, and the terror that had struck him in the night was but an evil dream born of his own fears and sufferings.

"I do," he answered, "once, if no more. I have words to say to her."

"Doubtless she will be glad to learn how her plot prospered," said Saladin, with a grim smile. "In truth it was well laid and

boldly executed."

Calling to one of his council, that same old imaum who had planned the casting of the lots, the Sultan spoke with him aside. Then he said:

"Let this knight be led to the woman Masouda. Tomorrow we will judge him."

Taking a silver lamp from the wall, the imaum beckoned to Godwin, who bowed to the Sultan and followed. As he passed wearily through the throng in the audience room, it seemed to Godwin that the emirs and captains gathered there looked at him with pity in their eyes. So strong was this feeling in him that he halted in his walk, and asked:

"Tell me, lord, do I go to my death?"

"All of us go thither," answered Saladin in the silence, "but Allah has not written that death is yours to-night."

They passed down long passages; they came to a door which the imaum, who hobbled in front, unlocked.

"She is under ward then?" said Godwin.

"Ay," was the answer, "under ward. Enter," and he handed him the lamp. "I remain without."

"Perchance she sleeps, and I shall disturb her," said Godwin, as he hesitated upon the threshold.

"Did you not say she loved you? Then doubtless, even if she sleeps, she, who has dwelt at Masyaf will not take your visit ill, who have ridden so far to find her," said the imaum with a sneering laugh. "Enter, I say."

So Godwin took the lamp and went in, and the door was shut behind him. Surely the place was familiar to him? He knew that arched roof and these rough, stone walls. Why, it was here that he had been brought to die, and through that very door the false Rosamund had come to bid him farewell, who now returned to greet her in this same darksome den. Well, it was empty--doubtless she would soon come, and he waited, looking at the door. It did not stir; he heard no footsteps; nothing broke that utter silence. He turned again and stared about him. Something glinted on the ground yonder, towards the end of the vault, just where he had knelt before the executioner. A shape lay there; doubtless it was Masouda, imprisoned and asleep.

"Masouda," he said, and the sounding echoes from the arched walls answered back, "Masouda!"

He must awaken her; there was no choice. Yes, it was she, asleep, and she still wore the royal robes of Rosamund, and a clasp of Rosamund's still glittered on her breast.

How sound Masouda slept! Would she never wake? He knelt down beside her and put out his hand to lift the long hair that hid her face.

Now it touched her, and lo! the head fell over.

Then, with horror in his heart, Godwin held down the lamp and looked. Oh! those robes were red, and those lips were ashen. It was Masouda, whose spirit had passed him in the desert; Masouda, slain by the headsman's sword! This was the evil jest that had been played upon him, and thus--thus they met again.

Godwin rose to his feet and stood over her still shape as a man stands in a dream, while words broke from his lips and a fountain in his heart was unsealed.

"Masouda," he whispered, "I know now that I love you and you only, henceforth and forever, O woman with a royal heart. Wait for me, Masouda, wherever you may dwell."

While the whispered words left his lips, it seemed to Godwin that

once more, as when he rode with Wulf from Ascalon, the strange wind blew about his brow, bringing with it the presence of Masouda, and that once more the unearthly peace sank into his soul.

Then all was past and over, and he turned to see the old imaum standing at his side.

"Did I not tell you that you would find her sleeping?" he said, with his bitter, chuckling laugh. "Call on her, Sir Knight; call on her! Love, they say, can bridge great gulfs--even that between severed neck and bosom."

With the silver lamp in his hand Godwin smote, and the man went down like a felled ox, leaving him once more in silence and in darkness.

For a moment Godwin stood thus, till his brain was filled with fire, and he too fell--fell across the corpse of Masouda, and there lay still.