

Chapter Twenty-Three: Saint Rosamund

From the day when he saw Saladin Godwin began to grow strong again, and as his health came back, so he fell to thinking.

Rosamund was lost to him and Masouda was dead, and at times he wished that he were dead also. What more had he to do with his life, which had been so full of sorrow, struggle and bloodshed? Go back to England to live there upon his lands, and wait until old age and death overtook him? The prospect would have pleased many, but it did not please Godwin, who felt that his days were not given to him for this purpose, and that while he lived he must also labour.

As he sat thinking thus, and was very unhappy, the aged bishop Egbert, who had nursed him so well, entered his tent, and, noting his face, asked:

"What ails you, my son?"

"Would you wish to hear?" said Godwin.

"Am I not your confessor, with a right to hear?" answered the gentle old man. "Show me your trouble."

So Godwin began at the beginning and told it all--how as a lad he had secretly desired to enter the Church; how the old prior of

the abbey at Stangate counselled him that he was too young to judge; how then the love of Rosamund had entered into his life with his manhood, and he had thought no more of religion. He told him also of the dream that he had dreamed when he lay wounded after the fight on Death Creek; of the vows which he and Wulf had vowed at the time of their knighting, and of how by degrees he had learned that Rosamund's love was not for him. Lastly, he told him of Masouda, but of her Egbert, who had shriven her, knew already.

The bishop listened in silence till he had finished. Then he looked up, saying:

"And now?"

"Now," answered Godwin, "I know not. Yet it seems to me that I hear the sound of my own feet walking upon cloister stones, and of my own voice lifted up in prayer before the altar."

"You are still young to talk thus, and though Rosamund be lost to you and Masouda dead, there are other women in the world," said Egbert.

Godwin shook his head.

"Not for me, my father."

"Then there are the knightly Orders, in which you might rise high."

Again he shook his head.

"The Templars and the Hospitallers are crushed. Moreover, I watched them in Jerusalem and the field, and love them not. Should they change their ways, or should I be needed to fight against the Infidel, I can join them by dispensation in days to come. But counsel me--what shall I do now?"

"Oh! my son," the old bishop said, his face lighting up, "if God calls you, come to God. I will show you the road."

"Yes, I will come," Godwin answered quietly. "I will come, and, unless the Cross should once more call me to follow it in war, I will strive to spend the time that is left to me in His service and that of men. For I think, my father, that to this end I was born."

Three days later Godwin was ordained a priest, there in the camp of Saladin, by the hand of the bishop Egbert, while around his tent the servants of Mahomet, triumphant at the approaching downfall of the Cross, shouted that God is great and Mahomet His only prophet.

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Saladin lifted his head and looked at Balian.

"Tell me," he said, "what of the princess of Baalbec, whom you know as the lady Rosamund D'Arcy? I told you that I would speak no more with you of the safety of Jerusalem until she was delivered to me for judgment. Yet I see her not."

"Sultan," answered Balian, "we found this lady in the convent of the Holy Cross, wearing the robe of a novice of that order. She had taken the sanctuary there by the altar which we deem so sacred and inviolable, and refused to come."

Saladin laughed.

"Cannot all your men-at-arms drag one maiden from an altar stone?--unless, indeed, the great knight Wulf stood before it with sword aloft," he added.

"So he stood," answered Balian, "but it was not of him that we thought, though assuredly he would have slain some of us. To do this thing would have been an awful crime, which we were sure must bring down the vengeance of our God upon us and upon the city."

"What of the vengeance of Salah-ed-din?"

"Sore as is our case, Sultan, we still fear God more than Saladin."

"Ay, Sir Balian, but Salah-ed-din may be a sword in the hand of God."

"Which sword, Sultan, would have fallen swiftly had we done this deed."

"I think that it is about to fall," said Saladin, and again was silent and stroked his beard.

"Listen, now," he said at length. "Let the princess, my niece, come to me and ask it of my grace, and I think that I will grant you terms for which, in your plight, you may be thankful."

"Then we must dare the great sin and take her," answered Balian sadly, "having first slain the knight Wulf, who will not let her go while he is alive."

"Nay, Sir Balian, for that I should be sorry, nor will I suffer it, for though a Christian he is a man after my own heart. This time I said 'Let her come to me,' not 'Let her be brought.' Ay,

come of her own free will, to answer to me for her sin against me, understanding that I promise her nothing, who in the old days promised her much, and kept my word. Then she was the princess of Baalbec, with all the rights belonging to that great rank, to whom I had sworn that no husband should be forced upon her, nor any change of faith. Now I take back these oaths, and if she comes, she comes as an escaped Cross-worshipping slave, to whom I offer only the choice of Islam or of a shameful death."

"What high-born lady would take such terms?" asked Balian in dismay. "Rather, I think, would she choose to die by her own hand than by that of your hangman, since she can never abjure her faith."

"And thereby doom eighty thousand of her fellow Christians, who must accompany her to that death," answered Saladin sternly.

"Know, Sir Balian, I swear it before Allah and for the last time, that if my niece Rosamund does not come, of her own free will, unforced by any, Jerusalem shall be put to sack."

"Then the fate of the holy city and all its inhabitants hangs upon the nobleness of a single woman?" stammered Balian.

"Ay, upon the nobleness of a single woman, as my vision told me it should be. If her spirit is high enough, Jerusalem may yet be saved. If it be baser than I thought, as well may chance, then

assuredly with her it is doomed. I have no more to say, but my envoys shall ride with you bearing a letter, which with their own hands they must present to my niece, the princess of Baalbec. Then she can return with them to me, or she can bide where she is, when I shall know that I saw but a lying vision of peace and mercy flowing from her hands, and will press on this war to its bloody end."

Within an hour Balian rode to the city under safe conduct, taking with him the envoys of Saladin and the letter, which they were charged to deliver to Rosamund.

It was night, and in their lamp-lit chapel the Virgins of the Holy Cross upon bended knees chanted the slow and solemn Miserere. From their hearts they sang, to whom death and dishonour were so near, praying their Lord and the merciful Mother of God to have pity, and to spare them and the inhabitants of the hallowed town where He had dwelt and suffered, and to lead them safe through the shadow of a fate as awful as His own. They knew that the end was near, that the walls were tottering to their fall, that the defenders were exhausted, and that soon the wild soldiers of Saladin would be surging through the narrow streets.

Then would come the sack and the slaughter, either by the sword of the Saracens, or, perchance, if these found time and they were

not forgotten, more mercifully at the hands of Christian men, who thus would save them from the worst.

Their dirge ended, the abbess rose and addressed them. Her bearing was still proud, but her voice quavered.

"My daughters in the Lord," she said, "the doom is almost at our door, and we must brace our hearts to meet it. If the commanders of the city do what they have promised, they will send some here to behead us at the last, and so we shall pass happily to glory and be ever with the Lord. But perchance they will forget us, who are but a few among eighty thousand souls, of whom some fifty thousand must thus be killed. Or their arms may grow weary, or themselves they may fall before ever they reach this house--and what, my daughters, shall we do then?"

Now some of the nuns clung together and sobbed in their affright, and some were silent. Only Rosamund drew herself to her full height, and spoke proudly.

"My Mother," she said, "I am a newcomer among you, but I have seen the slaughter of Hattin, and I know what befalls Christian women and children among the unbelievers. Therefore I ask your leave to say my say."

"Speak," said the abbess.

"This is my counsel," went on Rosamund, "and it is short and plain. When we know that the Saracens are in the city, let us set fire to this convent and get us to our knees and so perish."

"Well spoken; it is best," muttered several. But the abbess answered with a sad smile:

"High counsel indeed, such as might be looked for from high blood. Yet it may not be taken, since self-slaughter is a deadly sin."

"I see little difference between it," said Rosamund, "and the stretching out of our necks to the swords of friends. Yet, although for others I cannot judge, for myself I do judge who am bound by no final vows. I tell you that rather than fall into the hands of the Paynims, I will dare that sin and leave them nothing but the vile mould which once held the spirit of a woman."

And she laid her hand upon the dagger hilt that was hidden in her robe.

Then again the abbess spoke.

"To you, daughter, I cannot forbid the deed, but to those who have fully sworn to obey me I do forbid it, and to them I show

another if a more piteous way of escape from the last shame of womanhood. Some of us are old and withered, and have naught to fear but death, but others are still young and fair. To these I say, when the end is nigh, let them take steel and score face and bosom and seat themselves here in this chapel, red with their own blood and made loathsome to the sight of man. Then will the end come upon them quickly, and they will pass hence unstained to be the brides of Heaven."

Now a great groan of horror went up from those miserable women, who already saw themselves seated in stained robes, and hideous to behold, there in the carved chairs of their choir, awaiting death by the swords of furious and savage men, as in a day to come their sisters of the Faith were to await it in the doomed convent of the Virgins of St. Clare at Acre.*

[* Those who are curious to know the story of the end of those holy heroines, the Virgins of St. Clare, I think in the year 1291, may read it in my book, "A Winter Pilgrimage," pp. 270 and 271--AUTHOR.]

Yet one by one, except the aged among them, they came up to the abbess and swore that they would obey her in this as in everything, while the abbess said that herself she would lead them down that dreadful road of pain and mutilation. Yes, save Rosamund, who declared that she would die undisfigured as God had

made her, and two other novices, they swore it one by one, laying their hands upon the altar.

Then again they got them to their knees and sang the Miserere.

Presently, above their mournful chant, the sound of loud, insistent knockings echoed down the vaulted roofs. They sprang up screaming:

"The Saracens are here! Give us knives! Give us knives!"

Rosamund drew the dagger from its sheath.

"Wait awhile," cried the abbess. "These may be friends, not foes. Sister Ursula, go to the door and seek tidings."

The sister, an aged woman, obeyed with tottering steps, and, reaching the massive portal, undid the guichet, or lattice, and asked with a quavering voice:

"Who are you that knock?" while the nuns within held their breath and strained their ears to catch the answer.

Presently it came, in a woman's silvery tones, that sounded strangely still and small in the spaces of that tomb-like church.

"I am the Queen Sybilla, with her ladies."

"And what would you with us, O Queen? The right of sanctuary?"

"Nay; I bring with me some envoys from Saladin, who would have speech with the lady named Rosamund D'Arcy, who is among you."

Now at these words Rosamund fled to the altar, and stood there, still holding the naked dagger in her hand.

"Let her not fear," went on the silvery voice, "for no harm shall come to her against her will. Admit us, holy Abbess, we beseech you in the name of Christ."

Then the abbess said, "Let us receive the queen with such dignity as we may." Motioning to the nuns to take their appointed seats. in the choir she placed herself in the great chair at the head of them, whilst behind her at the raised altar stood Rosamund, the bare knife in her hand.

The door was opened, and through it swept a strange procession. First came the beautiful queen wearing her insignia of royalty, but with a black veil upon her head. Next followed ladies of her court--twelve of them--trembling with fright but splendidly apparelled, and after these three stern and turbaned Saracens

clad in mail, their jewelled scimitars at their sides. Then appeared a procession of women, most of them draped in mourning, and leading scared children by the hand; the wives, sisters, and widows of nobles, knights and burgesses of Jerusalem. Last of all marched a hundred or more of captains and warriors, among them Wulf, headed by Sir Balian and ended by the patriarch Heraclius in his gorgeous robes, with his attendant priests and acolytes.

On swept the queen, up the length of the long church, and as she came the abbess and her nuns rose and bowed to her, while one offered her the chair of state that was set apart to be used by the bishop in his visitations. But she would have none of it.

"Nay," said the queen, "mock me with no honourable seat who come here as a humble suppliant, and will make my prayer upon my knees."

So down she went upon the marble floor, with all her ladies and the following women, while the solemn Saracens looked at her wondering and the knights and nobles massed themselves behind.

"What can we give you, O Queen," asked the abbess, "who have nothing left save our treasure, to which you are most welcome, our honour, and our lives?"

"Alas!" answered the royal lady. "Alas, that I must say it! I

come to ask the life of one of you."

"Of whom, O Queen?"

Sybilla lifted her head, and with her outstretched arm pointed to Rosamund, who stood above them all by the high altar.

For a moment Rosamund turned pale, then spoke in a steady voice:

"Say, what service can my poor life be to you, O Queen, and by whom is it sought?"

Thrice Sybilla strove to answer, and at last murmured:

"I cannot. Let the envoys give her the letter, if she is able to read their tongue."

"I am able," answered Rosamund, and a Saracen emir drew forth a roll and laid it against his forehead, then gave it to the abbess, who brought it to Rosamund. With her dagger blade she cut its silk, opened it, and read aloud, always in the same quiet voice, translating as she read:--

"In the name of Allah the One, the All-merciful, to my niece, aforetime the princess of Baalbec, Rosamund D'Arcy by name, now a fugitive hidden in a convent of the Franks in the city el-Kuds

Esh-sherif, the holy city of Jerusalem:

"Niece,--All my promises to you I have performed, and more, since for your sake I spared the lives of your cousins, the twin knights. But you have repaid me with ingratitude and trickery, after the manner of those of your false and accursed faith, and have fled from me. I promised you also, again and yet again, that if you attempted this thing, death should be your portion. No longer, therefore, are you the princess of Baalbec, but only an escaped Christian slave, and as such doomed to die whenever my sword reaches you.

"Of my vision concerning you, which caused me to bring you to the East from England, you know well. Repeat it in your heart before you answer. That vision told me that by your nobleness and sacrifice you should save the lives of many. I demanded that you should be brought back to me, and the request was refused--why, it matters not. Now I understand the reason--that this was so ordained. I demand no more that force should be used to you. I demand that you shall come of your own free will, to suffer the bitter and shameful reward of your sin. Or, if you so desire, bide where you are of your own free will, and be dealt with as God shall decree. This hangs upon your judgment. If you come and ask it of me, I will consider the question of the sparing of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. If you refuse to come, I will certainly put every one of them to the sword, save such of the

women and children as may be kept for slaves. Decide, then, Niece, and quickly, whether you will return with my envoys, or bide where they find you.--

"Yusuf Salah-ed-din."

Rosamund finished reading, and the letter fluttered from her hand down to the marble floor.

Then the queen said:

"Lady, we ask this sacrifice of you in the name of these and all their fellows," and she pointed to the women and the children behind her.

"And my life?" mused Rosamund aloud. "It is all I have. When I have paid it away I shall be beggared," and her eyes wandered to where the tall shape of Wulf stood by a pillar of the church.

"Perchance Saladin will be merciful," hazarded the queen.

"Why should he be merciful," answered Rosamund, "who has always warned me that if I escaped from him and was recaptured, certainly I must die? Nay, he will offer me Islam, or death,

which means--death by the rope--or in some worse fashion."

"But if you stay here you must die," pleaded the queen, "or at best fall into the hands of the soldiers. Oh! lady, your life is but one life, and with it you can buy those of eighty thousand souls."

"Is that so sure?" asked Rosamund. "The Sultan has made no promise; he says only that, if I pray it of him, he will consider the question of the sparing of Jerusalem."

"But--but," went on the queen, "he says also that if you do not come he will surely put Jerusalem to the sword, and to Sir Balian he said that if you gave yourself up he thought he might grant terms which we should be glad to take. Therefore we dare to ask of you to give your life in payment for such a hope. Think, think what otherwise must be the lot of these"--and again she pointed to the women and children--"ay, and your own sisterhood and of all of us. Whereas, if you die, it will be with much honour, and your name shall be worshipped as a saint and martyr in every church in Christendom.

"Oh! refuse not our prayer, but show that you indeed are great enough to step forward to meet the death which comes to every one of us, and thereby earn the blessings of half the world and make sure your place in heaven, nigh to Him Who also died for men.

Plead with her, my sisters--plead with her!"

Then the women and the children threw themselves down before her, and with tears and sobbing prayed her that she would give up her life for theirs. Rosamund looked at them and smiled, then said in a clear voice:

"What say you, my cousin and betrothed, Sir Wulf D'Arcy? Come hither, and, as is fitting in this strait, give me your counsel."

So the grey-eyed, war-worn Wulf strode up the aisle, and, standing by the altar rails, saluted her.

"You have heard," said Rosamund. "Your counsel. Would you have me die?"

"Alas!" he answered in a hoarse voice. "It is hard to speak. Yet, they are many--you are but one."

Now there was a murmur of applause. For it was known that this knight loved his lady dearly, and that but the other day he had stood there to defend her to the death against those who would give her up to Saladin.

Now Rosamund laughed out, and the sweet sound of her laughter was strange in that solemn place and hour.

"Ah, Wulf!" she said. "Wulf, who must ever speak the truth, even when it costs him dear. Well, I would not have it otherwise. Queen, and all you foolish people, I did but try your tempers. Could you, then, think me so base that I would spare to spend this poor life of mine, and to forego such few joys as God might have in store for me on earth, when those of tens of thousands may hang upon the issue? Nay, nay; it is far otherwise."

Then Rosamund sheathed the dagger that all this while she had held in her hand, and, lifting the letter from the floor, touched her brow with it in signal of obedience, saying in Arabic to the envoys:

"I am the slave of Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful. I am the small dust beneath his feet. Take notice, Emirs, that in presence of all here gathered, of my own free will I, Rosamund D'Arcy, aforetime princess and sovereign lady of Baalbec, determine to accompany you to the Sultan's camp, there to make prayer for the sparing of the lives of the citizens of Jerusalem, and afterwards to suffer the punishment of death in payment of my flight, according to my royal uncle's high decree. One request I make only, if he be pleased to grant it--that my body be brought back to Jerusalem for burial before this altar, where of my own act I lay down my life. Emirs, I am ready."

Now the envoys bowed before her in grave admiration, and the air grew thick with blessings. As Rosamund stepped down from the altar the queen threw her arms about her neck and kissed her, while lords and knights, women and children, pressed their lips upon her hands, upon the hem of her white robe, and even on her feet, calling her "Saint" and "Deliverer."

"Alas!" she answered, waving them back. "As yet I am neither of these things, though the latter of them I hope to be. Come; let us be going."

"Ay," echoed Wulf, stepping to her side, "let us be going."

Rosamund started at the words, and all there stared. "Listen, Queen, Emirs, and People," he went on. "I am this lady's kinsman and her betrothed knight, sworn to serve her to the end. If she be guilty of a crime against the Sultan, I am more guilty, and on me also shall fall his vengeance. Let us be going."

"Wulf, Wulf," she said, "it shall not be. One life is asked--not both."

"Yet, lady, both shall be given that the measure of atonement may run over, and Saladin moved to mercy. Nay, forbid me not. I have lived for you, and for you I die. Yes, if they hold me by force, still I die, if need be, on my own sword. When I counselled you

just now, I counselled myself also. Surely you never dreamed that I would suffer you to go alone, when by sharing it I could make your doom easier."

"Oh, Wulf!" she cried. "You will but make it harder."

"No, no; faced hand in hand, death loses half its terrors. Moreover, Saladin is my friend, and I also would plead with him for the people of Jerusalem."

Then he whispered in her ear, "Sweet Rosamund, deny me not, lest you should drive me to madness and self-murder, who will have no more of earth without you."

Now, her eyes full of tears and shining with love, Rosamund murmured back:

"You are too strong for me. Let it befall as God wills."

Nor did the others attempt to stay him any more.

Going to the abbess, Rosamund would have knelt before her, but it was the abbess who knelt and called her blessed, and kissed her. The sisters also kissed her one by one in farewell. Then a priest was brought--not the patriarch, of whom she would have none, but another, a holy man.

To him apart at the altar, first Rosamund and then Wulf made confession of their sins, receiving absolution and the sacrament in that form in which it was given to the dying; while, save the emirs, all in the church knelt and prayed as for souls that pass.

The solemn ritual was ended. They rose, and, followed by two of the envoys--for already the third had departed under escort to the court of Saladin to give him warning--the queen, her ladies and all the company, walked from the church and through the convent halls out into the narrow Street of Woe. Here Wulf, as her kinsman, took Rosamund by the hand, leading her as a man leads his sister to her bridal. Without it was bright moonlight, moonlight clear as day, and by now tidings of this strange story had spread through all Jerusalem, so that its narrow streets were crowded with spectators, who stood also upon every roof and at every window.

"The lady Rosamund!" they shouted. "The blessed Rosamund, who goes to a martyr's death to save us. The pure Saint Rosamund and her brave knight Wulf!" And they tore flowers and green leaves from the gardens and threw them in their path.

Down the long, winding streets, with bent heads and humble mien, companioned ever by the multitude, through which soldiers cleared the way, they walked thus, while women held up their

children to touch the robe of Rosamund or to look upon her face. At length the gate was reached, and while it was unbarred they halted. Then came forward Sir Balian of Ibelin, bareheaded, and said:

"Lady, on behalf of the people of Jerusalem and of the whole of Christendom, I give you honour and thanks, and to you also, Sir Wulf D'Arcy, the bravest and most faithful of all knights."

A company of priests also, headed by a bishop, advanced chanting and swinging censers, and blessed them solemnly in the name of the Church and of Christ its Master.

"Give us not praise and thanks, but prayers," answered Rosamund; "prayers that we may succeed in our mission, to which we gladly offer up our lives, and afterwards, when we are dead, prayers for the welfare of our sinful souls. But should we fail, as it may chance, then remember of us only that we did our best. Oh! good people, great sorrows have come upon this land, and the Cross of Christ is veiled with shame. Yet it shall shine forth once more, and to it through the ages shall all men bow the knee. Oh! may you live! May no more death come among you! It is our last petition, and with it, this--that when at length you die we may meet again in heaven! Now fare you well."

Then they passed through the gate, and as the envoys declared

that none might accompany them further, walked forward followed by the sound of the weeping of the multitude towards the camp of Saladin, two strange and lonesome figures in the moonlight.

At last these lamentations could be heard no more, and there, on the outskirts of the Moslem lines, an escort met them, and bearers with a litter.

But into this Rosamund would not enter, so they walked onwards up the hill, till they came to the great square in the centre of the camp upon the Mount of Olives, beyond the grey trees of the Garden of Gethsemane. There, awaiting them at the head of the square, sat Saladin in state, while all about, rank upon rank, in thousands and tens of thousands, was gathered his vast army, who watched them pass in silence.

Thus they came into the presence of the Sultan and knelt before him, Rosamund in her novice's white robe, and Wulf in his battered mail.