

Chapter Twenty Four: The Dregs of the Cup

Saladin looked at them, but gave them no greeting. Then he spoke:

"Woman, you have had my message. You know that your rank is taken from you, and that with it my promises are at an end; you know also that you come hither to suffer the death of faithless women. Is it so?"

"I know all these things, great Salah-ed-din," answered Rosamund.

"Tell me, then, do you come of your own free will, unforced by any, and why does the knight Sir Wulf, whose life I spared and do not seek, kneel at your side?"

"I come of my own free will, Salah-ed-din, as your emirs can tell you; ask them. For the rest, my kinsman must answer for himself."

"Sultan," said Wulf, "I counselled the lady Rosamund that she should come--not that she needed such counsel--and, having given it, I accompanied her by right of blood and of Justice, since her offence against you is mine also. Her fate is my fate."

"I have no quarrel against you whom I forgave, therefore you must take your own way to follow the path she goes."

"Doubtless," answered Wulf, "being a Christian among many sons of the Prophet, it will not be hard to find a friendly scimitar to help me on that road. I ask of your goodness that her fate may be my fate."

"What!" said Saladin. "You are ready to die with her, although you are young and strong, and there are so many other women in the world?"

Wulf smiled and nodded his head.

"Good. Who am I that I should stand between a fool and his folly? I grant the boon. Your fate shall be her fate; Wulf D'Arcy, you shall drink of the cup of my slave Rosamund to its last bitterest dregs."

"I desire no less," said Wulf coolly.

Now Saladin looked at Rosamund and asked,

"Woman, why have you come here to brave my vengeance? Speak on if you have aught to ask."

Then Rosamund rose from her knees, and, standing before him, said:

"I am come, O my mighty lord, to plead for the people of Jerusalem, because it was told me that you would listen to no other voice than that of this your slave. See, many moons ago, you had a vision concerning me. Thrice you dreamed in the night that I, the niece whom you had never seen, by some act of mine should be the means of saving much life and a way of peace. Therefore you tore me from my home and brought my father to a bloody death, as you are about to bring his daughter; and after much suffering and danger I fell into your power, and was treated with great honour. Still I, who am a Christian, and who grew sick with the sight of the daily slaughter and outrage of my kin, strove to escape from you, although you had warned me that the price of this crime was death; and in the end, through the wit and sacrifice of another woman, I did escape.

"Now I return to pay that price, and behold! your vision is fulfilled--or, at the least, you can fulfil it if God should touch your heart with grace, seeing that of my own will I am come to pray you, Salah-ed-din, to spare the city, and for its blood to accept mine as a token and an offering.

"Oh, my lord! as you are great, be merciful. What will it avail you in the day of your own judgment that you have added another eighty thousand to the tally of your slain, and with them many more thousands of your own folk, since the warriors of Jerusalem

will not die unavenged? Give them their lives and let them go free, and win thereby the gratitude of mankind and the forgiveness of God above."

So Rosamund spoke, and stretching out her arms towards him, was silent.

"These things I offered to them, and they were refused," answered Saladin. "Why should I grant them now that they are conquered?"

"My lord, Strong-to-Aid," said Rosamund, "do you, who are so brave, blame yonder knights and soldiers because they fought on against desperate odds? Would you not have called them cowards if they had yielded up the city where their Saviour died and struck no blow to save it? Oh! I am outworn! I can say no more; but once again, most humbly and on my knees, I beseech you speak the word of mercy, and let not your triumph be dyed red with the blood of women and of little children."

Then casting herself upon her face, Rosamund clasped the hem of his royal robe with her hands, and pressed it to her forehead.

So for a while she lay there in the shimmering moonlight, while utter silence fell upon all that vast multitude of armed men as they waited for the decree of fate to be uttered by the conqueror's lips. But Saladin sat still as a statue, gazing at

the domes and towers of Jerusalem outlined against the deep blue sky.

"Rise," he said at length, "and know, niece, that you have played your part in a fashion worthy of my race, and that I, Salah-ed-din, am proud of you. Know also that I will weigh your prayer as I have weighed that of none other who breathes upon the earth. Now I must take counsel with my own heart, and to-morrow it shall be granted--or refused. To you, who are doomed to die, and to the knight who chooses to die with you, according to the ancient law and custom, I offer the choice of Islam, and with it life and honour."

"We refuse," answered Rosamund and Wulf with one voice. The Sultan bowed his head as though he expected no other answer, and glanced round, as all thought to order the executioners to do their office. But he said only to a captain of his Mameluks:

"Take them; keep them under guard and separate them, till my word of death comes to you. Your life shall answer for their safety. Give them food and drink, and let no harm touch them until I bid you."

The Mameluk bowed and advanced with his company of soldiers. As they prepared to go with them, Rosamund asked:

"Tell me of your grace, what of Masouda, my friend?"

"She died for you; seek her beyond the grave," answered Saladin, whereat Rosamund hid her face with her hands and sighed.

"And what of Godwin, my brother?" cried Wulf; but no answer was given him.

Now Rosamund turned; stretching out her arms towards Wulf, she fell upon his breast. There, then, in the presence of that countless army, they kissed their kiss of betrothal and farewell. They spoke no word, only ere she went Rosamund lifted her hand and pointed upwards to the sky.

Then a murmur rose from the multitude, and the sound of it seemed to shape itself into one word: "Mercy!"

Still Saladin made no sign, and they were led away to their prisons.

Among the thousands who watched this strange and most thrilling scene were two men wrapped in long cloaks, Godwin and the bishop Egbert. Thrice did Godwin strive to approach the throne. But it seemed that the soldiers about him had their commands, for they would not suffer him to stir or speak; and when, as Rosamund passed, he strove to break a way to her, they seized and held

him. Yet as she went by he cried:

"The blessing of Heaven be upon you, pure saint of God--on you and your true knight."

Catching the tones of that voice above the tumult, Rosamund stopped and looked around her, but saw no one, for the guard hemmed her in. So she went on, wondering if perchance it was Godwin's voice which she had heard, or whether an angel, or only some Frankish prisoner had spoken.

Godwin stood wringing his hands while the bishop strove to comfort him, saying that he should not grieve, since such deaths as those of Rosamund and Wulf were most glorious, and more to be desired than a hundred lives.

"Ay, ay," answered Godwin, "would that I could go with them!"

"Their work is done, but not yours," said the bishop gently.

"Come to our tent and let us to our knees. God is more powerful than the Sultan, and mayhap He will yet find a way to save them. If they are still alive tomorrow at the dawn we will seek audience of Saladin to plead with him."

So they entered the tent and prayed there, as the inhabitants of Jerusalem prayed behind their shattered walls, that the heart of

Saladin might be moved to spare them all. While they knelt thus the curtain of the tent was drawn aside, and an emir stood before them.

"Rise," he said, "both of you, and follow me. The Sultan commands your presence."

Egbert and Godwin went, wondering, and were led through the pavilion to the royal sleeping place, which guards closed behind them. On a silken couch reclined Saladin, the light from the lamp falling on his bronzed and thoughtful face.

"I have sent for you two Franks," he said, "that you may bear a message from me to Sir Balian of Ibelin and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This is the message:--Let the holy city surrender to-morrow and all its population acknowledge themselves my prisoners. Then for forty days I will hold them to ransom, during which time none shall be harmed. Every man who pays ten pieces of gold shall go free, and two women or ten children shall be counted as one man at a like price. Of the poor, seven thousand shall be set free also, on payment of thirty thousand bezants. Such who remain or have no money for their ransom--and there is still much gold in Jerusalem--shall become my slaves. These are my terms, which I grant at the dying prayer of my niece, the lady Rosamund, and to her prayer alone. Deliver them to Sir Balian, and bid him wait on me at the dawn with his chief notables, and

answer whether he is willing to accept them on behalf of the people. If not, the assault goes on until the city is a heap of ruins covering the bones of its children."

"We bless you for this mercy," said the bishop Egbert, "and we hasten to obey. But tell us, Sultan, what shall we do? Return to the camp with Sir Balian?"

"If he accepts my terms, nay, for in Jerusalem you will be safe, and I give you your freedom without ransom."

"Sire," said Godwin, "ere I go, grant me leave to bid farewell to my brother and my cousin Rosamund."

"That for the third time you may plot their escape from my vengeance?" said Saladin. "Nay, bide in Jerusalem and await my word; you shall meet them at the last, no more."

"Sire," pleaded Godwin, "of your mercy spare them, for they have played a noble part. It is hard that they should die who love each other and are so young and fair and brave."

"Ay," answered Saladin, "a noble part; never have I seen one more noble. Well, it fits them the better for heaven, if Cross-worshippers enter there. Have done; their doom is written and my purpose cannot be turned, nor shall you see them till the

last, as I have said. But if it pleases you to write them a letter of farewell and to send it back by the embassy, it shall be delivered to them. Now go, for greater matters are afoot than this punishment of a pair of lovers. A guard awaits you."

So they went, and within an hour stood before Sir Balian and gave him the message of Saladin, whereat he rose and blessed the name of Rosamund. While he called his counsellors from their sleep and bade his servants saddle horses, Godwin found pen and parchment, and wrote hurriedly:

"To Wulf, my brother, and Rosamund, my cousin and his betrothed,--I live, though well-nigh I died by dead Masouda--Jesus rest her gallant and most beloved soul! Saladin will not suffer me to see you, though he has promised that I shall be with you at the last, so watch for me then. I still dare to hope that it may please God to change the Sultan's heart and spare you. If so, this is my prayer and desire--that you two should wed as soon as may be, and get home to England, where, if I live, I hope to visit you in years to come. Till then seek me not, who would be lonely a while. But if it should be fated otherwise, then when my sins are purged I will seek you among the saints, you who by your noble deed have earned the sure grace of God.

"The embassy rides. I have no time for more, though there is much

to say. Farewell.--Godwin."

The terms of Saladin had been accepted. With rejoicing because their lives were spared, but with woe and lamentation because the holy city had fallen again into the hands of the Moslem, the people of Jerusalem made ready to leave the streets and seek new homes elsewhere. The great golden cross was torn from the mosque el-Aksa, and on every tower and wall floated the yellow banners of Saladin. All who had money paid their ransoms, and those who had none begged and borrowed it as they could, and if they could not, gave themselves over to despair and slavery. Only the patriarch Heraclius, forgetting the misery of these wretched ones, carried off his own great wealth and the gold plate of the churches.

Then Saladin showed his mercy, for he freed all the aged without charge, and from his own treasure paid the ransom of hundreds of ladies whose husbands and fathers had fallen in battle, or lay in prison in other cities.

So for forty days, headed by Queen Sybilla and her ladies, that sad procession of the vanquished marched through the gates, and there were many of them who, as they passed the conqueror seated in state, halted to make a prayer to him for those who were left behind. A few also who remembered Rosamund, and that it was because of her sacrifice that they continued to look upon the

sun, implored him that if they were not already dead, he would spare her and her brave knight.

At length it was over, and Saladin took possession of the city. Having purged the Great Mosque, washing it with rose-water, he worshipped in it after his own fashion, and distributed the remnant of the people who could pay no ransom as slaves among his emirs and followers. Thus did the Crescent triumph over the Cross in Jerusalem, not in a sea of blood, as ninety years before the Cross had triumphed over the Crescent within its walls, but with what in those days passed for gentleness, peace, and mercy.

For it was left to the Saracens to teach something of their own doctrines to the followers of Christ.

During all those forty days Rosamund and Wulf lay in their separate prisons, awaiting their doom of death. The letter of Godwin was brought to Wulf, who read it and rejoiced to learn that his brother lived. Then it was taken from him to Rosamund, who, although she rejoiced also, wept over it, and wondered a little what it might mean. Of one thing she was sure from its wording--that they had no hope of life.

They knew that Jerusalem had fallen, for they heard the shouts of triumph of the Moslems, and from far away, through their prison bars could see the endless multitude of fugitives passing the

ancient gates laden with baggage, and leading their children by the hand, to seek refuge in the cities of the coast. At this sight, although it was so sad, Rosamund was happy, knowing also that now she would not suffer in vain.

At length the camp broke up, Saladin and many of the soldiers entering Jerusalem; but still the pair were left languishing in their dismal cells, which were fashioned from old tombs. One evening, while Rosamund was kneeling; at prayer before she sought her bed, the door of the place was opened, and there appeared a glittering captain and a guard of soldiers, who saluted her and bade her follow him.

"Is it the end?" she asked.

"Lady," he answered, "it is the end." So she bowed her head meekly and followed. Without a litter was ready, in which they placed her and bore her through the bright moonlight into the city of Jerusalem and along the Way of Sorrow, till they halted at a great door, which she knew again, for by it stood the ancient arch.

"They have brought me back to the Convent of the Holy Cross to kill me where I asked that I might be buried," she murmured to herself as she descended from the litter.

Then the doors were thrown open, and she entered the great courtyard of the convent, and saw that it was decorated as though for a festival, for about it and in the cloisters round hung many lamps. More; these cloisters and the space in front of them were crowded with Saracen lords, wearing their robes of state, while yonder sat Saladin and his court.

"They would make a brave show of my death," thought Rosamund again. Then a little cry broke from her lips, for there, in front of the throne of Saladin, the moonlight and the lamp-blaze shining on his armour, stood a tall Christian knight. At that cry he turned his head, and she grew sure that it was Wulf, wasted somewhat and grown pale, but still Wulf.

"So we are to die together," she whispered to herself, then walked forward with a proud step amidst the deep silence, and, having bowed to Saladin, took the hand of Wulf and held it.

The Sultan looked at them and said:

"However long it may be delayed, the day of fate must break at last. Say, Franks, are you prepared to drink the dregs of that cup I promised you?"

"We are prepared," they answered with one voice.

"Do you grieve now that you laid down your lives to save those of all Jerusalem?" he asked again.

"Nay," Rosamund answered, glancing at Wulf's face; "we rejoice exceedingly that God has been so good to us."

"I too rejoice," said Saladin; "and I too thank Allah Who in bygone days sent me that vision which has given me back the holy city of Jerusalem without bloodshed. Now all is accomplished as it was fated. Lead them away."

For a moment they clung together, then emirs took Wulf to the right and Rosamund to the left, and she went with a pale face and high head to meet her executioner, wondering if she would see Godwin ere she died. They led her to a chamber where women waited but no swordsman that she could see, and shut the door upon her.

"Perchance I am to be strangled by these women," thought Rosamund, as they came towards her, "so that the blood royal may not be shed."

Yet it was not so, for with gentle hands, but in silence, they unrobed her, and washed her with scented waters and braided her hair, twisting it up with pearls and gems. Then they clad her in fine linen, and put over it gorgeous, brodered garments, and a royal mantle of purple, and her own jewels which she had worn in

bygone days, and with them others still more splendid, and threw about her head a gauzy veil worked with golden stars. It was just such a veil as Wulf's gift which she had worn on the night when Hassan dragged her from her home at Steeple. She noted it and smiled at the sad omen, then said:

"Ladies, why should I mock my doom with these bright garments?"

"It is the Sultan's will," they answered; "nor shall you rest to-night less happily because of them."

Now all was ready, and the door opened and she stepped through it, a radiant thing, glittering in the lamplight. Then trumpets blew and a herald cried: "Way! Way there! Way for the high sovereign lady and princess of Baalbec!"

Thus followed by the train of honourable women who attended her, Rosamund glided forward to the courtyard, and once more bent the knee to Saladin, then stood still, lost in wonder.

Again the trumpets blew, and on the right a herald cried, "Way! Way there! Way for the brave and noble Frankish knight, Sir Wulf D'Arcy!"

Lo! attended by emirs and notables, Wulf came forth, clad in splendid armour inlaid with gold, wearing on his shoulder a

mantel set with gems and on his breast the gleaming Star of the Luck of Hassan. To Rosamund he strode and stood by her, his hands resting on the hilt of his long sword.

"Princess," said Saladin, "I give you back your rank and titles, because you have shown a noble heart; and you, Sir Wulf, I honour also as best I may, but to my decree I hold. Let them go together to the drinking of the cup of their destiny as to a bridal bed."

Again the trumpets blew and the heralds called, and they led them to the doors of the chapel, which at their knocking were thrown wide. From within came the sound of women's voices singing, but it was no sad song they sang.

"The sisters of the Order are still there," said Rosamund to Wulf, "and would cheer us on our road to heaven."

"Perchance," he answered. "I know not. I am amazed."

At the door the company of Moslems left them, but they crowded round the entrance as though to watch what passed. Now down the long aisle walked a single whiterobed figure. It was the abbess.

"What shall we do, Mother?" said Rosamund to her.

"Follow me, both of you," she said, and they followed her through

the nave to the altar rails, and at a sign from her knelt down.

Now they saw that on either side of the altar stood a Christian priest. The priest to the right--it was the bishop Egbert--came forward and began to read over them the marriage service of their faith.

"They'd wed us ere we die," whispered Rosamund to Wulf.

"So be it," he answered; "I am glad."

"And I also, beloved," she whispered back.

The service went on--as in a dream, the service went on, while the white-robed sisters sat in their carven chairs and watched. The rings that were handed to them had been interchanged; Wulf had taken Rosamund to wife, Rosamund had taken Wulf to husband, till death did them part.

Then the old bishop withdrew to the altar, and another hooded monk came forward and uttered over them the benediction in a deep and sonorous voice, which stirred their hearts most strangely, as though some echo reached them from beyond the grave. He held his hands above them in blessing and looked upwards, so that his hood fell back, and the light of the altar lamp fell upon his face.

It was the face of Godwin, and on his head was the tonsure of a monk.

Once more they stood before Saladin, and now their train was swelled by the abbess and sisters of the Holy Cross.

"Sir Wulf D'Arcy," said the Sultan, "and you, Rosamund, my niece, princess of Baalbec, the dregs of your cup, sweet or bitter, or bitter-sweet, are drunk; the doom which I decreed for you is accomplished, and, according to your own rites, you are man and wife till Allah sends upon you that death which I withhold.

Because you showed mercy upon those doomed to die and were the means of mercy, I also give you mercy, and with it my love and honour. Now bide here if you will in my freedom, and enjoy your rank and wealth, or go hence if you will, and live out your lives across the sea. The blessing of Allah be upon you, and turn your souls light. This is the decree of Yusuf Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful, Conqueror and Caliph of the East."

Trembling, full of joy and wonder, they knelt before him and kissed his hand. Then, after a few swift words between them, Rosamund spoke.

"Sire, that God whom you have invoked, the God of Christian and of Moslem, the God of all the world, though the world worship Him in many ways and shapes, bless and reward you for this royal

deed. Yet listen to our petition. It may be that many of our faith still lie unransomed in Jerusalem. Take my lands and gems, and let them be valued, and their price given to pay for the liberty of some poor slaves. It is our marriage offering. As for us, we will get us to our own country."

"So be it," answered Saladin. "The lands I will take and devote the sum of them as you desire--yes, to the last bezant. The jewels also shall be valued, but I give them back to you as my wedding dower. To these nuns further I grant permission to bide here in Jerusalem to nurse the Christian sick, unharmed and unmolested, if so they will, and this because they sheltered you. Ho! minstrels and heralds lead this new-wed pair to the place that has been prepared for them."

Still trembling and bewildered, they turned to go, when lo! Godwin stood before them smiling, and kissed them both upon the cheek, calling them "Beloved brother and sister."

"And you, Godwin?" stammered Rosamund.

"I, Rosamund, have also found my bride, and she is named the Church of Christ."

"Do you, then, return to England, brother?" asked Wulf.

"Nay," Godwin answered, in a fierce whisper and with flashing eyes, "the Cross is down, but not forever. That Cross has Richard of England and many another servant beyond the seas, and they will come at the Church's call. Here, brother, before all is done, we may meet again in war. Till then, farewell."

So spoke Godwin and then was gone.