POOR DOCUMENT

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THE BRETHREN

H. Rider Haggard's Great Romance of the Crusades

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CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

Then another leader rose—he was one of the party who desired peace—and pointed out that this was no time to stand on scruples, for the Sultan would not listen to them in their sore plight unless the lady were delivered to him to be judged, for her offence. Perhaps, being his own niece, she would in fact suffer no harm at his hands, and whether this were so or not, it were better that one should endure wrong or even death than many.

With such words he over-persuaded the most of them, so that in the end they rose and went to the convent of the Holy Cross, where the patriarch demanded admission for them, which, indeed, could not be refused. The stately abbess received them in the refectory, and asked their pleasure.

"Daughter," said the patriarch," you have in your keeping a lady named Rosamund D'Arcy, with whom we desire to speak. Where is she?"

"The novice Rosamund," answered the abbess, "prays by the holy altar in the chapel."

Now one murmured, "She has taken sanctuary," but the patriarch said:

"Tell us, daughter,does she pray alone?"

"A knight guards her prayers," was the answer.

"Ah! as I thought he has been beforehand with us. Also, daughter, surely your discipline is somewhat lax if you suffer knights thus to invade your chapel. But lead us thither."

"The danger of the times and of the lady must answer for it," the abbess replied boldly as she obeyed.

Presently they were in the great, dim place, where the lamps burned day and night. There by the altar, built, it was said, upon the spot where the lord stood to receive judgment, they saw a kneeling woman, who, clad in the robe of a novice, grasped the stonework with her hands. Without the rails, also kneeling, was the knight Wulf, still as a statue upon a sepulchre. Hearing them, he rose, turned him about and drew his great sword.

"Sheathe that sword," commanded Heraclius.

"When I became a knight," answered Wulf, "I swore to defend the innocent from harm and the altars of God from sacrilege at the hands of wicked men. Therefore I sheathe not my sword."

"Take no head of him," said one; and Heraclius, standing back in the isle, addressed Rosamund:

"Daughter," he said, "with bitter grief we are come to ask of you a sacrifice, that you should give yourself for the people, as our master gave Himself for the people. Saladin demands you as a fugitive of his blood, and until you are delivered to him he will not treat with us for the saving of the city. Come forth, then, we pray you."

Now Rosamund rose and faced them with her hand resting upon the altar.

"I risked my life and another gave her life," she said, "that I might escape from the power of the Moslems. I will not come forth to return to them."

"Then, our need being sore, we must take you," answered Heraclius sullenly.

"What!" she cried. "You, the Patriarch of this sacred city, would tear me from the sanctuary of its holiest altar? Oh! then, indeed shall the curse fall upon it and you. Hence, they say, our sweet Lord was haled to sacrifice by the command of an unjust judge, and thereafter Jerusalem was taken by the sword. Must I too be dragged from the spot that His feet have hallowed, and even in these weeds"—and she pointed to her white robe—"thrown as an offering to your foes,who, mayhap, will bid me choose between death and the Koran? If so, I say assuredly that offering will be made in vain, and assuredly your streets shall run red with the blood of those who tore me from my sanctuary."

Now they consulted together, some taking one side and some the other, but the most of them declared that she must be given up to Saladin.

"Come of your own will, I pray you," said the patriarch, "since we would not take you by force."

"By force only will you take me," answered Rosamund.

Then the abbess spoke.

"Sirs, will you commit so great a crime? Then I tell you that it can not go without its punishment. Will this lay, I say"—and she drew up her tall shape—"that it shall be paid for in your blood, and mayhap in the blood of all us. Remember my words when the Saracens have won the city, and are putting its children to the sword."

"I absolve you from the sin," shouted the patriarch, "if sin it is."

"Absolve yourself," broke in Wulf sternly, "and know this. I am but one man, but I have some strength and skill. If you seek but to lay a hand upon the novice Rosamund to hale her away to be slain by Saladin, as he has sworn that he would do if she dared to fly from him, before I die there are those among you who have looked the last upon the light."

Then, standing there before the altar rails, he lifted his great blade and settled the skull-blazoned shield upon his arm.

Now the patriarch raved and stormed, and one among them cried that they would fetch bows and shoot Wulf down from a distance.

"And thus," broke in Rosamund, "add murder to sacrilege! Oh! sirs, bethink what you do—aye, and remember this, that you do it all in vain. Saladin has promised you nothing, except that if you deliver me to him, he will talk with you, and then you may find that you have sinned for nothing. Have pity on me and go your ways, leaving the issue in the hand of God."

"That is true," cried some. "Saladin made no promises."

Now Balian, the guardian of the city, who had followed them to the chapel and stading in the background heard what passed there, stepped forward and said:

"My lord Patriarch, I pray you let this thing be, since from such a crime no good could come to us or any. That altar is the holiest and most noted place of sanctuary in all Jerusalem. Will you dare to tear a maiden from it whose only sin is that she, a Christian, has escaped the Saracens by whom she was stolen. Do you dare to give her back to them and death, for such will be her doom at the hands of Saladin? Surely that would be the act of cowards, and bring upon us the fate of cowards. Sir Wulf, put up your sword and fear nothing. If there is any safety in Jerusalem, your lady is safe. Abbess, lead her to her cell."

"Nay," answered the abbess with fine sarcasm," it is not fitting that we should leave this place before his Holiness."

"Then you have not long to wait," shouted the patriarch in fury. "Is this a time for scruples about altars? Is this the time to listen to the prayers of a girl, or to threats of a single knight, or the doubts of a superstitious captain? Well, take your way and let your lives pay its cost. Yet I say that if Saladin asked for half the noble maidens in this city, it would be cheap to let him have them in payment for the blood of eighty folk," and he stalked towards the door.

So they went away, all except Wulf, who stayed to make sure that they were gone, and the abbess, who came to Rosamund and embraced her, saying that for the while the danger was past, and she might rest quiet.

"Yes, mother," answered Rosamund with a sob, "but oh- have I done right? Should I have not surrendered myself to the wrath of Saladin if the lives of so many hang upon it? Perhaps, after all, he would forget his oath and spare my life, while at best I should never be suffered to escape again while there is a castle in Baalbec or a guarded palace in Damascus. Moreover, it is hard to bid farewell to all one loves forever," and she glared towards Wulf, who stood out of hearing.

"Yes," answered the abbess, "it is hard, as we nuns know well. But, daughter, that sore choice has not yet been thrust upon you. When Saladin says that he sets you against the lives of all this cityful, then you must judge."

"Aye," repeated Rosamund, "then I—must judge."

The seige went on; from terror to terror it went on. The mangonels hurled their stones unceasingly; the arrows flew in clouds so thick none could stand upon the walls. Thousands of the cavalry of Saladin hovered round St. Stephen's Gate, while the engines poured fire and bolts upon the doomed town, and the Saracen miners worked their way beneath the barbican and the wall. The soldiers within could not sally because of the multitude of the watching horsemen; they could not show themselves, since he who did so was at once destroyed by a thousand darts, and they could not build up the breaches of the crumbling wall. As day was added to day, the despair grew ever deeper. In every street might be met long processions of monks bearing crosses and chanting penitential psalms and prayers, while in the house doors women wailed to Christ for mercy, and held to their breasts the children which so soon must be given to death, or torn from them to deck some Mussulman harem.

The commander Balian called the knights together in council, and showed them that Jerusalem was doomed.

"Then," said one of the leaders, "let us sally out and die fighting in the midst of foes."

"Aye," added Heraclius, "and leave our children and our women to death and dishonor. Then, that surrender is better, since there is no hope of succour."

"Nay," answered Balian, "we will not surrender. While God lives, there is hope."

"He lived on the day of Hattin, and suffered it," said Heraclius; and the council broke up, having decided nothing.

That afternoon Balian stood once more before Saladin and implored him to spare the city.

Saladin led him to the door of the tent and pointed to his yellow banners floating here and there upon the wall, and to one that this moment rose upon the breach itself.

"Why should I spare what I have already conquered," he asked, "and what I have sworn to destory? When I offered you mercy you would have none of it. Why do you ask it now?"

Then Balian answered him in the words that will ring through history for ever.

"For this reason, Sultan. Before God, if die we must, we will first slaughter our women and our children, leaving you neither male nor female to enslave. We will burn the city and its wealth; we will grind the holy Rock to powder and make of the mosque el-Aksa, and the other sacred places, a heap of ruins. We will cut the throats of the the five thousand followers of the Prophet who are in our power, and then, every man of us who can bear arms, we will sally out into the midst of you and fight on till we fall. So methinks Jerusalem shall cost you dear."

The Sultan stared at him and stroked his beard.

"Eighty thousand lives," he muttered; "eighty thousand lives, besides those of my soldiers whom you will slay. A great slaughter—and the holy city destroyed for ever. Oh! it was of such a massacre as this that once I dreamed."

And Saladin sat still and thought awhile, his head bowed upon his breast.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Saint Rosamund.

From the day that 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 labor.

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 that 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.

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 alttr."

"You are still young to talk thus, and there are other women in the world," said Egbert.

Godwin shook his head.

"Not for me, my father."

"Then there are the knightly Orders, amongst whom 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 was his anly prophet.

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."

"Aye, 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 your terms for which 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, 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.' Aye, 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 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 as an escaped Christian slave, to whom I offer only the choice of Islam or of 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 executioner, 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 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.

"Aye, 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 is lower 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 lady Rosamund. 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 dishonor 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 would thus 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 one here to behead us at the last, and 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 daughter, 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 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 unstrained 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 in the Faith were to await it in the doomed convent of the Virgins of St. Clare at Acre.*

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. Then 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 voice, 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 santuary?"

"Nay; I bring with some envoys from Saladin, who would have speech with the lady 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 beauteous queen wearing her insignia of royalty, but with a black veil upon her head. Next followed ladies of the court—twelve of them—trembling with fright but splendidly apparalled, and after them three stern and turbaned Saracens clad in mail, their jewelled scimitars at their sides. After these again 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 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 to 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 honorable seat who come here as a humble suppliant, and will make my prayer upon my knees."

So down she knelt 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 honor, 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, then murmured:

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

"I can read it," 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 of 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 when ever 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 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 I must die? Nay, he will offer me Isalm, or death, which means—death."

"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 certainly 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—"aye, and your own sisterhood and of all of us. Whereas, if you die, it will be gently and with honor, 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 are indeed great enough to step forward to meet the death that comes to everyone 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, 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 the lady, 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 laugh 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, 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 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 his 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 solemn 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."

"Aye," 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 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 were full of tears and shining with love, she murmured back:

"You are too strong for me, Wulf. 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 envoys, 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 camp 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 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 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, in the name of the people of Jerusalem and of the whole of Christendom, I give you honor and thanks and to you also, Sir Wulf D'Arcy, the bravest and most faithful of all knights."

"Give us not thanks, but prayers," answered Rosamund; "prayers that we may succeed in our mission, to which we gladly offer up our lives, and when we are dead, prayers for the welfare of our 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 their 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.

CHAPTER XXIV.

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 death. Is it so?"

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

"Tell me, then, do you come of your own free will, unforced by any, and why the knight Sir Wulf, whose life I spared and do not seek, kneels 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," said 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 be my fate."

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

Wulf smiled and nodded his head.

"Good. Who am I that 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 bitter 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?"

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 honor. 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 I did escape.

"Now I return to pay that price, and behold! your vision is fulfilled—or, at the least, you can fulfill it if God should touch your heart with grace, seeing that of my own will I am come to pray you to spare the city, and for its blood to accept mine as a token and a sacrifice. 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," 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 the 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. 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 tomorrow 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 Islem, and with it life and honor."

"We refuse them," 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 headsmen to do their office. But he said only to a captain of his Mamelukes:

"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 come to them till I bid you."

The Mameluke 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?"

"You will find her beyond the grave," answered Saladin, whereat she 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, and stretching out her arms towards Wulf 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 strang and thrilling scene were two men wrapped in long cloaks, Godwin and 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 blessings 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 prisoner had spoken.

Godwin stood wringing his hands while the bishop strove to comfort him, saying that he should no grieve, since such deaths as those of Rosamund and Wulf were most glorious, and more to be desired than a hundred lives.

"Aye, aye," 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 tomorrow and all its population acknowledge themselves my prisoners. Then for forty days I will

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