

FAIR ROSEMONDE

E. Barrington
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FAIR ROSEMONDE

BY E. BARRINGTON

In her little low house at Rouen the holy Canon of the Chapel of St. Nicholas noted down these words of Dame Petronille, woman formerly to Eleanor, Queen of Henry Fitz Empress, the Second Henry of England. Even then, at the end of her life, she trembled very exceedingly in revealing these secrets of the great. Yet, for admonition, they should be known. And what is here writ is true.

I

Of the Lady Queen Eleanor I would fain say little; yet must I, since all was of her shaping, and as she sowed so she reaped, and by the justice of God will so do for all eternity.

No greater Lady of birth and right dwelt ever in this world; for she was herself Duchess of Aquitaine, that land of the Trouveres and of song, and to the holy French King Louis was she wife, and after, wife to Henry of England, great lords both. Wherefore of this world's glories was she full fain and of them she fed full, and for this her immortal part mourneth in great torment.

I saw this lady first when she sat Queen of a Court of Love in Bordeaux, her chief city. By the river she sat, under a bower of roses—roses about her in myriads; and so strong was the scent of them that the Lady Alix de Coutances, seated at her feet, swooned from the heat and perfume. But the young Duchess drew it in smiling, and it flushed her face like strong wine. A rose herself, all color and bright flame she seemed among those other roses.

The Duchess Eleanor had plenteous hair, dark as night and braided about her head with jewels, for she would not follow the custom that a maid's tresses should fall about her shoulders or braided to her knee. On her head she had a garland of red roses and about her neck sparkling jewels set in fretted gold in the design of a peacock with spread tail, very precious, of Saracen's work, that her suzerain and lord to be, the holy King of France, had sent her. This lay on her bosom, splendid in the sun. She had a kirtle of cloth of silver that fitted her shape and full breast, and over all she wore a long white pelisson of great brocade from Byzantium, edged with fur of ermine because she was a sovereign Duchess. Very haut and proud was her face, and her long golden eyes that, seeming to see nothing, yet saw all. She had a trick of looking sidelong and smiling at a man beneath her lashes;

and if on this he dared a return, she would flash a look at him that made him shrink. Yet a very magnificent lady, tall as a young poplar, and showed beneath her robe her silver brodequins that men said were the smallest in Christendom. But I have seen smaller.

Before her stood Bertrand d'Arles, the *trouvere*, and all round her sat the ladies and nobles to hear him sing, and the song he sang to his lute was a *chanson* of her own making. Wherefore she listened with a flush of pride and a musing on her that for once softened her into a girl.

And thus he sang:—

'In the orchard the dawn is breaking,
Look forth, *ma douce amie!*
See o'er the dewy hills the sun is waking—
Monseigneur Dieu! what hath he done to me?
Lo, how the sweet night dies before his shining,
Slain of this cruel baron the high sun,
And I, that for my lady's arms am pining
Must weep and weep to see my joys foredone!
Monseigneur Dieu, sitting enthroned on high,
Remember me, how for my love I die,
And grant the pity of her soothfast kiss,
A little bounty dropped from thine own bliss.'

She smiled a little when he ceased, and even I could see in the glance she cast from her long amber eyes that there was a secret thought between her and Bertrand; and he was such a

man as a lady might well favour,—lean in the body, eagle-faced,—and sang indeed like one of God's choristers.

A Court of Love followed, where was tried the piteous case of the young Comtesse de Saintonges against her old husband; but all this I have forgot. Only I see the Duchess Eleanor seated above the rest, dark and glorious—a great lady.

Very soon came the news that the French King, Louis the Saint, had asked her in marriage, most deeply desiring the marriage between her rich lands of Aquitaine and his kingdom of France. My brother, the Seigneur de Vermandois, laughed aloud when this news came to his Seigneurie; and when his wife asked him why, he said,—

'From a marriage of the dove and eagle what should follow? No peace, but rending!'

And on her replying, 'But our Eleanor is no dove,' he laughed again and said no more. After, I knew that the French King was the dove, and he had need to be to bear with our haughty Duchess.

For she would have none of Paris. Sunless and cold she held it after her warm and languid Provence. Cold and cloistered also the court of the saint; and ever and again she would come riding down at speed of horse and man to Bordeaux, and laying aside her dolorous royalty, be once more our Duchess, and sit by the clear waters, crowned and throned amid roses.

It was on one of these days that she chose me to be a woman about her, knowing my mother had served her mother with loyal heart. For her sake she loved me a little, but she could love none greatly—no, not even Bertrand d'Arles! So I entered upon the service with great fear, for blows and hard words were plenty in our lady's chamber, though in public all was summer sunshine, for this lady would be loved and feared.

All the joys of this world she tasted, and would have sweetened her lips on the next; for when St. Bernard preached the Crusade at Vezelai, the Queen-Duchess must needs make a plaything of that also. A fair penitent, she knelt before the high altar, and, receiving the Cross from his hand, wore it upon her shoulder like a knight Crusader, and she and her ladies sent their cast-off distaffs to the knights and nobles who shunned the Crusades, to shame them. So that on the Pentecost, when the King of France marched for the Holy Land, the Queen-Duchess and her ladies went with him as fellow soldiers.

No need to tell that journey and the shame she brought on the King! as well may witness Raymond de Poitou, and even the infidel—the Emir Sal-u-din. And from this Crusade of bitterness and defeat she returned, loathing the monkish King, crying aloud for freedom from him and his cloistered ways, weary of her very life because of him, sullen and black-browed with anger.

Behind her chair I stood, when he who should be King of England, Henry Plantagenet, surnamed Henry Fitz-Empress,

was presented to her, the shaven King leading him by the hand, and saying,—

'Madame my Queen, show favour to this damoiseau, Duke of Normandy, who shall rise higher.'

I saw the red glow in her face as he knelt to kiss her hand, for though younger by ten years than she, he was a great gentleman already. Short of hair, gray-eyed, clean-lipped like a boy, strong of arm, light of foot, he moved like a woodman—a hunter and a soldier rather than a man of palaces and councils. The courtiers called him Courtmantle, for he went in jerkin and hose, but yet very splendid with fur and jewels; and for me I compared him with Monseigneur Saint Michael, so much a warrior he seemed with his fighting face and gold head above his furs. He was a goodly sight for such eyes as hers, and when he was gone she sat staring into the wood fire—for it was Christmas and cold—until the monk King returned; then she flouted him until the blood stood on his lip as he bit it striving for patience.

Three years later she demanded her divorce of him as in the fourth degree of kinship, and well I knew the cause, knowing also that she would gain it, as what did not our Eleanor gain when she would! But it was ill to gain, for the King held that Aquitaine and France were one, be he and she what they might, and it was wrenching a cantle from his heart to break that bond. But she had the ear of His Holiness, and what she would she had.

So she departed, taking her great inheritance with her; and when Henry Fitz-Empress heard what was done, he knew her

mind, and counted her lands and gold and weighed them against herself, for he loved her not. Piers the Norman that was with him at Courtelai hath told me that, when the letters came, he frowned all day a black Plantagenet frown, sitting in his chamber of dais; and the next day he sent letters, asking her in marriage, and for answer, he had the one word, 'Come.'

With great pomp they were wedded, and with pomp they sailed for England; and I, who was ever near the Queen-Duchess, wondered in my soul how she should live in that gray land of rain and mist. She shivered when we landed and drew her pelisson of vair about her, and King Henry said,—

'Fair Lady, lose no heart, for the sun shines merry here also when the leaves wax long and green in the shaws. And my English love a laughing Queen; therefore greet your new kingdom with smiles.'

II

But if she smiled then, she smiled little when we came to London, to the Tower, for among her ladies was Rosemonde de Clifford. Of her I knew nothing, but it seemed the Queen knew more, for I saw her black brows draw together as the noble demoiselle came up to kneel and kiss her hands, averting her glance from Henry, who sat beside Eleanor on a Chair of State. And henceforth I watched.

Very tall was this lady and slender, with great gold hair, braided above each ear like a cup, so that her face was set in gold as the faces of saints in a Book of Hours—pure ivory it seemed against a glory, having little color in cheeks or lips. Her eyes were a green blue like the beryls in the clasp of the Queen's Missal, and the lashes so long that she could look through them unseen, as birds do in the reeds; and so she looked upon Eleanor and dropped them. Her gown of blue sendal fitted her body closely and was set with goldsmiths' work about her long throat, and on her head she had a network of gold chains set with blue jewels. She held herself with a stiff grace, not gliding and languishing like the ladies of France and Provence, but straight like a young saint on a Church banner. No saint was Rosemonde, but most gentle, patient, and sweet-voiced—with long cool hands, ready to plead or pray, swift in alms-giving, pitiful to man and beast. But this I knew not then.

'Iseult of the White Hands!' whispered our Eleanor bitterly to me, as the fair de Clifford drew back among the other ladies. Very learned was Eleanor in all the loves of bygone days and had herself made a lai on Sir Tristan and the two Iseults—the dark and the fair. But Henry was no Tristan—a swearing, fighting Plantagenet, a lover of the tall deer, no lover of the harp; and had our Eleanor been wise, she had shut her eyes and gone her way. For all kings are not as the monk King of France, to whom a woman was a painted picture; and when she had him, she loved him none the better for the milk that ran in his veins, for a man must be all fire for her and steel for others. But this she did not find—no, not with Bertrand d'Arles, who sang of her as a thing divine, and

when he laid his harp aside found solace in Marguerite Spagnolles. This we knew right well, but she did not know.

In the Tower was her son born—a lionceau indeed; and the King laid him in his shield and held him up to the barons that crowded the Queen's chamber. His face was hard and flushed as if with pride, and he cried,—

'Lords, let us receive with joy what God and Madame give us! Here is a boy shall carry the Leopards and Lilies into France and further. Welcome him, Barons all!'

And they clashed their swords, and the Queen turned as she lay and looked on the King. The child she never heeded.

But Rosemonde was not long a Queen's woman. She grew paler and paler, and her eyes feared like a bird's when the hawk hangs on steady wings above him. This I knew, for I watched and pitied.

Later, when the Queen sat by the window that looks out upon the muddy river of the English, the Lady Rosemonde sat before her upon a low tabouret, her hands folded in her lap, an image of patience. Thinner she had grown, so that the small bones showed in her face, and her shape was like a willow wand under her close cymarre. Her hands were so white and frail that in my heart I also called her Iseult Blanchmains as did the Queen. She sat among the ladies as if she were not of them and had no friend at all. And the thing grieved me inwardly, for to me she was ever courteous and sweet of speech.

And the Queen said, 'See—the King passes!'

And we looked out and saw the Royal barge, with Thomas of Ipswich, Lord Mayor that year, sitting at the King's feet, and at his elbow a Bishop, and they rowed down to see the ships at Queenhithe. So the King looked up to the window and saluted with his hand, Eleanor waving her kerchief; and I saw the blood rise slow in Rosemonde's white cheek until it burnt red and brought the water into her eyes under the hard stare of the Queen. A blow had been less cruel than that stare! And when it was past, she rose and knelt before Eleanor, and, in a voice that trembled, she said,—

'Lady, a boon. I ask of the Queen's Grace that I may go down to Hever, to my father's house, for I have a wasting upon me and weakness.'

The Queen's eyes pricked her like steel from head to foot as she knelt with her eyes on the ground. They searched out every secret of body and soul. Indeed, I pitied the damsel, for Henry was a very splendid lord.

'There is none to take your place, fair lady,' said Eleanor. 'She whom King and Queen delight to honour is well beside them. And in this grim Tower I have need of your skill with lute and voice.'

'Madame, my sister Aloyse is a sweet singer. And, moreover, she is skilled in broidery. I pray you accept her service for mine, for I am ill at ease.'

'I also!' said the Queen, and all the ladies looked upon each other. 'But I must needs endure, and why not Rosemonde de Clifford? Dismiss it, damsel, and content yourself. What! have we not pleasures and merry-makings at court to gladden a maiden's heart? And for the wasting and fever, my own leech shall heal it.'

As she said this, Rosemonde stretched out her hands like one blind and fell forward, swooning at the Queen's feet; and all the ladies looked again upon each other and none gave any help. None but I—and I feared not Eleanor, for I was not high enough for her wrath, or so I thought; and with me the storms came and went. So I raised this Rosemonde in my arms, and summoning the gentleman of the antechamber, we bore her to her bed; and there she lay so long with her lashes sealed upon her cheek, that, thinking her a dying woman, I sent for Maître Pierre, the Queen's leech that she had brought with her from Provence—a learned man, small and gray.

He, doing all his knowledge bade him with strong essences and cordials, at length made the fair dead image tremble, and it was then I said very earnestly to him, 'Sir, is it death?'

And he replied, looking pitifully upon her, 'No—alas! ma bonne dame, but life. Guard well your lips, for this is a King's secret.'

'But the Queen's Grace?' I asked, trembling.

He shrugged his shoulders French-fashion and went his way, a small bowed figure in his gray robe; and turning, I

saw her eyes were fixed upon me and staring like a lost soul.

'I have heard,' she said. 'Oh, if it be thus, let me die. Have pity! I would die and be at peace. It is still and quiet in Winchester where the tombs stand in the dimness and the incense floats about them. There a woman may lie and none disquiet her—no passion in the night, no hard eyes in the day; but day and night in a silence of great peace.'

The pity brought the water to my eyes. None ever knew this Rosemonde but loved her, so child-sweet she was, so piteous in gentleness; and nothing witting, I kissed her brow that was cold as marble and the sweat in drops upon it.

'What should I say? Trust me for silence. Speak with the King this night that he may bid her let you go. Talk not of death, sweet lady. She that bears a King's son need not despair. His arm is strong.'

'But how to see him, I know not,' said Rosemonde, lying stark before me, and her voice like a whisper. 'I am beset with spies. With the King I have not spoken in three months; yet must I see him for his sake also, for this is a greater matter than a woman's sorrow and shame. Write I cannot, nor he read. Mother of Mercy, what should I do? There is no way.'

Then in my folly and pity I said,—

'There is this way. To-night I will guard you, and to this the Queen's Grace will agree, that I may spy. And I will speak with the King. What token is between him and you?'

She thrust her hand in her thin bosom and pulled out a ring set with a small gold lion and a balas ruby in his claws.

'He will speak with whoever wears this. But I am watched, and since Jehanne my woman went I have had none to trust. For God's pity, help me now, and I will pray like a soul in Purgatory that though I lie in flame you may sit in Paradise.'

And so, by the choosing of fate, was I made privy to the King's love of Rosemonde. I did not choose it, Saint Katharine knows, but I pitied her as a mother her child, and also I feared for very great harm to all these noble persons. So I left her lying, her long limbs folded beneath her gown like a lady on a tomb, and returned to the Queen.

She had none with her but a page, and him she dismissed to the other end of the hall, where he stood, looking upon the steps. And then she caught my hand.

'Eh bien, Petronille, what has she said? How I loathed her as she knelt before me, her eyes on the ground, pure as a saint to see and with her heart of hell! She would go, would she! But I will keep her here, and her shame shall be her gibbet.'

'Madame,' said I kneeling, 'I know not if you are right or wrong. This is a matter that needs watching and discretion, for the de Cliffords are great barons. Certain it is that she is ill at ease. One should be with her this night. I desire not to intermeddle in great matters, yet if it be your will, I will watch this night, and mayhap she will speak—'

The Queen's face shone with fierce joy; I sickened, seeing.

'Excellently said, my good Petronille. Stay not only this night with her, but many. You she will trust. Your face is like the picture of Saint Anne in the Church of Ouen, and she has no friends. That has been my care. But though my spies could watch her, they could not win her heart. But you will do this and tell me all. Is it not so, my Petronille?'

I bowed my head meekly, but I would not speak. Surely it should be devils that serve the great, for it is devil's work they do! And before I could rise from my knees, the King entered, bright-coloured of blood with the sharp wind on the river.

I stood behind her chair, as he kissed her cheek lightly, telling her the doings of the voyage down the river and the shouting of the people, and how they should dine with the City of London come summer; and she smiled as if well pleased, and presently, I laid my hand over the Queen's chair, and looked at him.

He was yawning as if wearied, but I saw his eye catch on the ring and stay. He looked straight and hardily at me with a question, and behind the Queen's back I laid my finger on my lips. He continued his tale, and though she watched as ever, she saw nothing.

Two hours later, when Eleanor sat with my Lord Prince, the King called me into the small bower chamber, and looking behind the doors to see we were private, he faced me.

'What says my lady?'

'Sire, that she would see you. She has that to say that brooks no delay.'

'So!' he said, and looked upon the ground. Then again,—

'But you, Dame Petronille, what do you in this matter? You are the Queen's woman. Is it spying or honesty?'

'It is pity. Let Madame Rosemonde herself tell you of it.'

'Madame?' he said, and up went his eyebrows, as if he laughed. He read my meaning.

'La pauvette! she has no friends,' he said, half sighing. 'If indeed you are one, Dame Petronille, it shall be for your good. Take an earnest!'

And he lifted a long gold chain from his neck, and would have flung it over me, but I stepped aside.

'Not so, beausire. I have done nothing. But this night I watch with the Lady Rosemonde, and there will be no spies. Come, therefore.'

'I will come,' he said, and strode away with his dog.

I alone was present when he came to the chamber where she lay, white as death, but a beautiful girl certainly, with the eyes that take men captive and a body like a swaying reed in her slacked gold loin-belt.

He came, wrapped in a long gown of silk, a noble crimson with the French lilies on it in silver. Great comely men were the Plantagenets, all ruddy and gold, and used this like a weapon with the hearts of women. Even now Eleanor loved him after her fashion—a love so shot with hate and jealousy that she would as lief have killed as kissed him. I stood by the vaulted door on guard, and because I dared not move I heard their speech, and the first word caused me to totter where I stood.

'Wife,' he said, softening his lion's voice to her ear, 'what is this? Come, smile on me and have good cheer. A King is your man, and who shall harm the Rose of the World?'

She said only, 'Husband,' and was silent. Then again, 'Shame!'—and I could hear the sob in her throat.

And he, caressing her,—

'What shame? Ma mie—ma belle amie, were we not wedded of God and Holy Church, and that before ever I took the Queen? Is this not known to Wilfrid of Hampton, the mass priest of Hever, and is it not known to you and me? Then what shame? Doth that not suffice?'

And Rosemonde, sighing bitterly,—

'For me, beausire, it hath sufficed, and I have endured the looks of women and the smiles of men. But for the child—the heir of England—this I cannot endure. Speak out or slay me.'

'Ma mie, would I not set you by me on the throne if that might be? Would I not wear my rose on my helm for all to see? But I cannot. See with me that this cannot be! If it could not then, how now, that the Queen is beside me and her son born?'

'And my son?' Her voice was like a cry.

'What shame? The sons of Kings are royal and their mothers go proud and tall because of them! This shall be—What name shall he bear? William, from the Conqueror his ancestor, and Longsword because of the great sword I will gird on his thigh. And he shall be a haut Duke and ride with the Lilies and Leopards on his shield.'

'And the baton sinister?' she said faintly.

'We will make it a charge of honor. Sweet, fear not! Smile as you smiled at Rouen the day I saw you first in your long gold gown, when you leaned from the balcony to see the knights ride in two by two.'

'How can I smile? I die with grief and shame. Who will believe, for none can know, that with mass and ring was I made your wife and true Queen of England. For that last little I care, as well you know, but for the child—'

There was silence, and I knew the man was seeking in his heart how he might bend her will. Alas! he knew her well. Not Bertrand d'Arles played more skilfully on his lute than this man on the souls of women, and most of all on the soul of this sweet lady. So, after a while, he spoke.

'Rosemonde, your mother is with the saints.' (I could hear her weep.) 'But there is a mother of more than your earthly body—there is this land of England. How often hath not my rose entreated me to toil for England, to fight, to pray for England. Remember you not that day at Shene when the thrushes sang in the coverts and all the world was white with May, and you spoke proud and high? "For this dear land I would die. What is there I would not give for England?" Now, therefore, give! For if I put away the Queen, I put away Aquitaine from England. I challenge France, and you will see this land a province of the French King, and men of England will curse the name of Rosemonde de Clifford. My lady, I am in your obedience in this thing, for I am your husband and the father of this child to be. Choose therefore for me, and from your dear hand will I take dishonor if it be your will. But you shall know first what must be.'

Now I, listening, knew well that Henry would take his own way in face of God or Devil; but this she did not know. Love is blindness and a great weeping. Never have I seen aught else in this world, nor ever shall!

Again there was no word. But alas! I knew and he knew also what would be her mind; for this Rosemonde was a very great lady, true and high and gentle—the dove and the eagle

in one sweet flesh. But I caught my breath to hear, and he doubtless did likewise.

And she said, 'England,' and paused. And again, 'England!' like one musing.

And he said not a word.

Then, very softly, she spoke.

'Lord, I am English born and bred. Neither my child nor I would hurt this land that is our mother. True words have you said. It is expedient that one woman perish for the people. I did think—I believed that this our secret was but for a while; but since it is not so, since it is for England, I will endure. Had you but told me—'

And then again she was silent. She would not chide where she loved. The Plantagenet was safe in the shelter of the England that as yet the Plantagenets loved not, for they were but Normans at heart.

He clasped and kissed her.

'O Sweet, most sweet, what a lady have I loved! O worthy to be Queen of the world and not only of this little land! God do so unto me and more also if some day—some glad day—you sit not on my right hand, the Queen of the King and of all he hath.'

His voice died away in a murmur of love and worship. So it is with men who triumph.

'The Queen?' she said, and I heard the shudder in her voice. 'She knows! Her eyes pierced me like daggers.'

'But I will hide my Rose in a thicket so full of thorns that she shall find no way through. I have mused long and I remembered fair Woodstock by the river, where the meadows are cloth of gold with buttercups, cloth of silver with daisies, and the thrushes sing all day. There is a little house in the heart of the Maze—a house like a bird's nest all hid in leaves, and there shall my Sweet sit, and Dame Petronille, who is the wise and kind, shall be about her, and I will come through the Maze like a knight errant to La Belle au Bois Dormante, and wake her with a kiss.'

I had not thought he could be so gentle. Certain it is he loved this Rosemonde with what love he had; but I think it was little enough, though she, poor soul, fed on it, believed it, worshipped him for the scant measure, as is the way of women. So in all things he triumphed.

At the last he strode out, and his brow darkened, as he beckoned to me.

'If the Queen knows this, Dame, as well I believe, that poor sweetheart's life is not worth the purchase of an old pantoufle! and Woodstock Maze is the only hope for her and me. The Queen is cunning, but my love and I will outwit her. Who is on my side—who?'

So he said, like the King in the Holy Book; and I answered, 'I, beausire!'—for indeed I loved that Rosemonde,

as did all who came near her, excepting only the King that thought he loved her well.

It needs not to tell of the plotting: of how I asked good leave from the Queen-Duchess to return to Aquitaine, because I could not endure the damps of England—and indeed I endured them ill. She gave unwilling leave, but, as I think, suspected nothing, and gave me a jewel at parting, a gold asp with eyes of diamond sparks, but I never wore it, for I loathed the coiled murderer.

So I rode to Woodstock, with Simon of Winchester for my guard; but my heart was heavy, for I knew the mind of Eleanor, and had seen her downcast eyes when she asked delicately and smoothly of de Clifford how fared his daughter the Lady Rosemonde.

But when Simon threaded through the Maze, guiding me, I banished fear, for I thought no creature not a sleuth-hound could nose without the clue through those intricate ways. I scarce could see the sun, and we turned and twisted and doubled in the close walls of green; and there I might have wandered until God's Angel trumpeted, but that Simon held the clue; and what it was, he would not say. So at the long last we entered the little garden close in the heart of it, and there stood the little low house, brown and quiet like a wren's nest in a hedge, and at the door was Rosemonde clothed in apple green, and her great hair in two mighty gold plaits that fell to her knee, twisted with pearls—the very Queen of the wild woods.

The time drifted away in that quiet place like flowers falling—it made no sound nor stir. The days grew to months and the great day came, and we had not seen the King. Simon of Winchester, a good, simple man, but not, as I think, understanding all that hung on his tongue, told us how the Court was at Windsor or Shene, and where not, and how the King had taken ship for Normandy, but would soon return.

So the day came and passed, and we were now one more in the House of the Wood, for the little William Longsword lay in his mother's arms, and praying for forgiveness, I could but liken the poor soul to the Queen of Heaven, so fair she was, so mother pure and sweet. And then was her poor heart torn again, for ere long came Simon with the King's Sign-Manual to convey the child into safe keeping at York, and his mother must see him go.

But two days later the King came, winding through the Maze by the clue known only to him and to Simon. Great joy was there in the meeting of him and Rosemonde. No longer pale and thin, she bloomed forth like a rose-royal, the Empress of all the garden. I, who have seen the courts of Aquitaine, France, and England, do say that never was such a lady as she, with a beauty of light and laughter about her, beyond all naming or painting, so that where she came the hearts of all naturally waited upon her, and she had been a Queen of hearts had she been a peasant.

So he made great joy of her, she sitting at his feet, and I saw her sigh when he told her that next day he rode to the sea and so to Harfleur.

'Sad life to be a King's wife!' she said; 'lonely days and weary nights and a heart that knows not rest.'

'Yet would you forget the King, if you might, Rosemonde?'

'That would I not! Better a heart that aches with love than a dead heart. But better still, a cot here in the woods, with my King for a simple archer and my little son on my knee, and I to bake and brew for them, and the weary crown forgotten.'

So she sighed; but for Kings is no refuge from the crown but in the high tombs where they lay down sceptre and state.

He stayed but a few hours, and as he went I, looking, saw tangled about his spur a little ball of broidering silk, and I thought, Can it be the clue? But she was at her prie-dieu, and I said nought.

Days went by and Simon had brought confections and sewing silks and gold threads, and a message from the King that in three months he would return, and that with the child all was well.

IV

Now on a certain afternoon the air was hot and still, with a leaden sunshine such as comes before thunder. The birds were still in the trees, and on the little garden-plot the rose-

leaves fell as if dropping from the heat, and fluttered to the ground.

I sat at the broidery frame, stitching the gold borders on the robe of the Queen Dido forsaken and weeping, in a design that Rosemonde's ghostly father, Wilfrid of Hampton, had made for her, when I heard a step on the grass, and before me came a woman, bending, as if she traced her way by something on the ground. She wore a close coif and a veil that hid her face, but I knew the Queen-Duchess.

Now at such times it is not thought that moves hand or foot—it is the passion that makes the mother deer face the lion if no better may be; and when I saw her put by her veil and gaze at the house that sheltered us, with those fell, fierce eyes, yellow as a lion's, I thought not at all. I fled like a lapwing to Rosemonde where she lay upon her bed faint with the heat, and cried in her ear, 'Fly, while I hold her in talk. Fly. Take sanctuary in the nunnery at Godstowe.' No more; and seeing the white terror of her face as she sat up stark and still, I walked forth of the door quiet as a gossip at a christening and did obeisance to Eleanor that stood and steadily regarded me.

'Greeting, Dame Petronille!' she said, in her hard voice that with her yellow eyes had brought her the name of the Shrew of Aquitaine. 'Greeting! Is this the France you sailed for so many months ago? Well indeed for you that you are out of England, where the English Queen has still a word to say concerning her subjects.'

So she mocked, but at that hour I knew no fear.

'Madame la Reine, I have obeyed the King's command. And there is none in this house but me.'

She smiled a smile I knew—a cruel smile if ever the great Devil set one on the mouth of a woman.

'The King is in France, the Queen in England. Give way, Dame Petronille! I would see the Rose of the World that a King hath plucked and flung by!'

And still I knelt before her and clung to the skirts of her great velvet robe.

'Madame, there is none but me.'

And this I thought was truth. But as I held her, she, like the she-wolf that she was, drew a dagger of jewels from her girdle. I knew it well—had I not seen Bertrand d'Arles give it her with kisses? She struck at me—and whether she meant it for my throat, God knoweth; but it glanced and took me in the shoulder, and I have the mark now. And even then Rosemonde came forth, white and tall, and stood before the Queen.

'Spare this poor faithful heart, Madame,' she said. 'What is her crime? It is I only that have sinned against you. I give myself to your mercy. But for her I ask grace.'

'My mercy!' The smile of the Queen was dreadful. It crooked her lips like an old woman's, and indeed I saw her for the first time old, with the deep lines about her mouth and her throat bagged like a vulture's.

'What do you standing, wanton?' she cried. 'Kneel—kneel before your liege lady!'

And folding her hands very sweetly, Rosemonde knelt and spoke.

'Great wrong have you had, Madame, though not as you have thought. I kneel to beseech your pardon for more than myself. I have sinned against you—though I knew it not.'

The leaden sun struck us with blows like a strong man armed. So hot and still that the earth, like the Mouth of the Pit, knew neither coolth nor refreshing. I huddled against the sun-dial and the blood soaked slowly in the woolen of my gown; but still I watched and prayed.

'Bold to sin and craven to ask mercy! Crawl lower, Rosemonde de Clifford! Swear that never in life will you see the face of my Henry again.'

And Rosemonde, meekly,—

'Would I had never seen it, for it was to his great losing. Madame, I swear this if it lie with me; but for him I cannot swear, and you know it.'

How could she but know that the poor lamb spoke the truth? Who should let the King from his heart's desire? I saw her eyes darken and gloom. Very terrible the woman was, in her coif and gorget stiff as a knight's armor, and the haggard vulture's face above it.

'That is true, and being true there is but one way. So dainty a lady should choose her death. See, Rosemonde, when first I set foot on English shore I knew I was mocked of the King and you.'

'Never that, Madame,' she replied patiently—the sweet soul was ever patient! 'The King's Grace honored the Queen. But true it is he loved me before ever you set foot in England.'

So she held the King's secret!

'Loved!' God's pity for Rosemonde! That word had slain her.

'What are words between us two?' said the Queen. And I feared with deadly fear, for I saw her mood was like iron upon her, and stilled her voice and dulled her eyes. She looked like one drunk with wine. 'See here, woman—I have brought this cup and this dagger. Choose.'

She took from her bosom a small closed cup of gold, set with green stones, and I knew it for that Sal-u-din the Emir gave her when there was that between them that Christian Queen should scorn. And in her other hand was the dagger still wet with my blood. And a faint giddiness took me so that, though I could hear and see, no word could I say.

'Choose!' she whispered: 'the swift stroke or the sleep that lies in this cup. And because I am crowned Queen and Christian woman, I say the cup is the easier way. It is sleep

and sleep without pain or dream. Choose, for with either choice the waking is in hell.'

She held out the cup with a hand that did not tremble and in the other the dagger, and Rosemonde, white to the lips and kneeling, said,—

'Madame, I have a little son. Have then pity on a mother. The nunnery at Godstowe is close and sure. Neither King nor baron may enter. Give me leave to hide my head therein.'

And she,—

'Could I breathe the air you breathe? Could I live if you have life? Talk no more, but choose, for the thunder comes quickly.'

And even as she spoke fell some slow drops of rain like blood upon the grass.

Then Rosemonde, still kneeling, put her hands together like a young maid at the Mass, and she prayed,—

'Crowned Queen of Heaven, Mother and Maid, have pity on my extremity, and on my child. For love's sake and my King's.' And again, 'Merciful, have pity, for I have wept and suffered. Receive my spirit.'

Having said this, with one hand clasping the gold reliquary that the King had given her to wear in her bosom, she stretched forth her hand and said in all simplicity,—

'Madame, for this small mercy of the cup I thank you. You have had wrong. I ask your forgiveness.'

But never a word said Eleanor as she unclasped the cup. Sure, if hate could walk the world as a woman, it were thus and thus. So Rosemonde, kneeling, received the cup and drank, and it fell and tinkled as it fell. And the thunder broke upon us like a leaping lion.

No sleep—no sleep for Rosemonde! for the Queen lied in her throat. Sharp pains, rending agonies, dread anguish of soul and body tore her. She fell writhing, with the pains of hell upon her, and Eleanor smiled.

'Madame, the dagger, the dagger! O mercy of God, slay me!' she shrieked; and her shrieks pierced the air, and sure they pleaded like angels at the throne. Was it for eternity she shrieked?—God He knoweth, and not I: but it pierced my ears—my soul; and still she shrieked, and I swooned at long last, and even in my darkness heard the cries of soul and body rent apart in torment.

Now when I waked, the thunder was rolling fearfully away in the distance, and in the wet fresh air a bird sang, and there was a clear shining. I dragged myself to my knees, and looked about me, and beside me lay Rosemonde, gray and still in death, like one wearied and at peace at the end, and her hair like wet seaweed in the grass; but the reliquary was in her hand. So Simon of Winchester, coming later, found us. He knoweth.

Later, Rosemonde was coffined, and in Godstowe stands her tomb covered with a pall of gold that the King gave with many masses for her soul, and upon it these words graved:—

'Hic jacet in tumbâ Rosa mundi, non Rosamunda.' (In this tomb there lieth not Rosemonde, but the World's Rose.)

But who shall know the hearts of the great? For I looked that he should see the Queen no more, nor touch her hand in this world nor that to come; and this was not so, for she bore him children, and he and she ruled as King and Queen to his life's end. Also, very speedily he found him a new love, the Lady Aloyse of France; and God He knows that should not have been, for reasons many and heavy. But these matters are above a simple woman like me.

Only this I know—his sons were his scourges, and in and by them no peace had he, and he loathed the face of the Queen. And it is told that as he rode against them in battle he said this to the son of my Rosemonde:—

'True son of mine are you—true son of a true mother, and England is yours as mine. For these are but misbegotten whelps.'

So sin and shame fulfil their day.

Blessings also. For strange it is and true that in the arms of the son of Rosemonde this King died at Chinon, deserted of all else, and laying his head on her son's bosom as one content.

And, O King that sits above the thunder, Judge of the world, deliver us from evil Kings and Queens and all their deeds!

And let all of their charity pray for the soul of this Rosemonde, who with much sorrowing passed through pain to God's mercy.

[The end of *Fair Rosemonde* by Elizabeth Louisa Moresby (as E. Barrington)]