

*Excerpt from*  
*Flower of the Desert: Book II of the Chronicles of Tancred*  
*By Rosanne E. Lortz*

*Chapter 1*

The hole in the floor of the church grew deeper with each thrust of the soldiers' spades. Twelve men, blessed with broad backs and brawny arms, had been digging in shifts since the light of dawn. It was now nearly vespers.

Over the last twelvemonth, the Church of St. Peter in Antioch had seen its share of abuse. First, the Mussulman governor had turned it into a stable for his horses. Now, the Crusaders, who had captured the city after a long and arduous siege, were tearing up the flagstones around the altar without any thought for the sanctity of the place. The pit was already shoulder-deep, and who knows how much longer they would have to dig?

While the twelve men grunted and toiled halfway underground, hundreds of observers watched impatiently. Row upon row of Crusaders lined the sanctuary. The lords and leading churchmen stood closest to the center and the lesser men-at-arms spilled out onto the porch and street outside. Every soldier who could be spared from manning the walls was there. The stifling air of June in the East left the spectators nearly as sweltering as the shovelers. The atmosphere was rank with sweat and anticipation.

Tancred, a tall, blond Norman important enough to view the spectacle from the very first row, rubbed his jaw ruefully and gave a yawn. It had been a long day full of false alarms, and he was tired of perpetually craning his neck to see if the diggers had discovered anything. Tancred turned to the man beside him. "What is your opinion of this endeavor, Bernard?"

"I think they should give up," answered Bernard, the Norman's companion, gesturing contemptuously at the diggers. His tonsure and threadbare black cowl revealed his clerical status. His tone and beetling black eyebrows revealed his cynical attitude. "Peter Bartholomew is a villain, a drunkard, and a brawler. Why should we trust his words? He *claims* Saint Andrew came to him in a dream—but perhaps, he only came to him in his cup of wine. He *swears* the saint told him the Holy Lance is buried here beneath the altar—but my master Bishop Adhemar swears he saw that selfsame relic enshrined in a church at Constantinople. Can there be two such artifacts in existence? Was the side of Christ pierced twice upon the cross?"

Tancred shrugged. He was a marquis of some small standing, not a doctor of religion. He had too little understanding of relics to judge the matter himself, and he did not know if the artifact they searched for was genuine. He knew only that Count Raymond of Toulouse, one of the oldest, richest, and most venerable leaders on the Crusade believed in Peter Bartholomew's vision as if it were his own. Five days ago he had brought it before the rest demanding action. "Just think—the Holy Lance itself! A gift from God Almighty in our time of greatest need!" Count Raymond's iron gray beard had quivered with emotion. "We must go to the church immediately and begin a search for it."

The other leaders were less trusting, and less ready to turn the highest and holiest church in Antioch into an excavation site. Bohemond, Tancred's uncle and self-proclaimed Duke of Antioch, averred that the vision must be verified further before any action be taken. He insisted on questioning this Peter Bartholomew in front of the rest. "For if his story stinks as strongly as I'm sure his breath does, we'll all be willing to swear that it was no saint that told it to him."

If Bohemond had expected Raymond to hem and haw and hide his prophet under a bushel, he could not have been more disappointed. The Count of Toulouse was certain that Peter Bartholomew's story could bear scrutiny, and he was only too eager to show off his new protégé. He dispatched a messenger who found the dreamer in his quarters and brought him hastily before the council of lords.

Peter Bartholomew was a lanky fellow with a mess of unkempt hair the color of old straw and a tongue as pat as a traveling tinker's. Scratching himself indecently, he pronounced his readiness to answer any question put to him. "I'm no liar, my lords. I know what I saw and I know what I heard. And I've had the vision more than once."

Bohemond, who knew how to take advantage of his own remarkable height, stood up to interview the man. "Tell us what you saw," he commanded coldly, towering over the dreamer like a mighty oak. On his head he wore an ornate diadem that proclaimed his new status as Duke of Antioch. His deep purple robe, two ells in length, cascaded over his shoulder like a waterfall of wine and pooled on the floor beneath him.

"Which time?" asked Peter with a tinge of impertinence. He refused to be overawed by the blond giant interrogating him, and Count Raymond, who was no friend of Bohemond's, smiled in his beard. Perhaps he had warned Peter that the Norman lord would attempt to bully him. Perhaps he had instructed him to be as insolent as possible to his rival.

But Bohemond knew how to sheathe and unsheathe his temper as easily as a man does his dagger—a skill that his nephew Tancred was just beginning to learn. He patiently instructed the man to begin at the beginning, and Peter Bartholomew launched into the story of his visions. "The first dream came just after Christmas. We'd been camped outside Antioch for over two months, and we were starting to feel the pinch of famine. The night following the earthquake, when the heavens were pouring out God's wrath upon us, I was on my knees in prayer, begging the Almighty that I might see my home again—when suddenly, I felt a bright light surrounding me. I lifted my eyes, and lo! A silver-haired man appeared to me and bid me rise. It was Saint Andrew...."

"How do you know that it was he?" demanded Bohemond, quick as a cat to seize upon any loose ends in Peter Bartholomew's story.

But the glib-tongued dreamer would not be caught out with a question so simple. "Why, I know it, my lord, because he told me so himself! 'I am Saint Andrew, the Apostle,' said the man, 'he who was brother to thy namesake Peter.' And then he went on to tell me more. 'Have comfort, my son, and know that the days have been appointed for the ending of this siege. And when thou shalt enter the town, go thou to the Church of St. Peter. There thou wilt find the lance of our Savior, Jesus Christ, with which He was wounded as He hung upon the arm of the Holy Cross. And thou shalt take the lance for thy armies, and with it, thou shalt take also the blessing of God.'

"Thus far, the words of Saint Andrew. And when he had finished speaking, he was taken up into heaven and I was left with his instructions and my own thoughts. All

the while he was present, I was filled with the certainty that his words were truth and the knowledge that I was duty-bound to do his bidding. But after the holy figure disappeared, a doubt grew within me. What man would believe a tale such as this? Would not my comrades mock at me and call me delirious with hunger, or else drunk on some secret cache of strong wine? And, fearful and foolish as a peahen, I concealed the vision within myself and would not speak it to my fellows.

“Winter passed and spring turned into summer. The siege ended—though our troubles did not—and just last night, the saint appeared to me again. ‘O man of little faith!’ he thundered. ‘Wherefore have you not told my words unto the multitude? Have you not heard of the fate that befell Jonah when he would not carry forth the words of the Lord? Go now unto Count Raymond of Toulouse. He will speak for you, as Aaron did for Moses, and you shall tell the assembled lords of the lance that lies beneath the floor of the church.’ Just like before, I was filled with a fear that I would be disbelieved and mocked by my fellows. But the terror that the saint inspired was even greater, and heeding his rebuke, I ran at once to Count Raymond. *He* easily saw the sacred origin of my dream and believed me without question.” Peter Bartholomew looked up at Bohemond slyly from beneath his thatch of dirty blond hair. “And if God grant you the same perspicacity, I trust that your worshipfulness will do the same.”

Count Raymond smiled benevolently. It was obvious that he enjoyed the last part of the tale the most, the mention of his own name from the mouth of the saint. But for Bohemond, that flourish at the end of the story was enough to convince him that the whole vision was a folderol concocted by Raymond to increase his own prestige. He dismissed Peter Bartholomew scornfully. Then, winding his purple robe around his arm, he paced back and forth as he addressed the council. “This fellow does nothing more than waste our time. There’s as much proof of his apparition as there are provisions in the city—little to none, I say.”

Some of the other leaders, however, had been more swayed than Bohemond by Peter Bartholomew’s tale. And although Bohemond had assumed the position of Duke of Antioch, that did not make him supreme leader of the Crusade. At Raymond’s insistence, and by common consent, the lords decided that the vision could prove its veracity in a trial by shovel. They would go to St. Peter’s at morning’s light to ascertain whether Saint Andrew had appeared in truth or in the dregs of a drunkard’s wine cup.

Rumors run fast when men are penned between four walls. The common soldiery learned of the impending event and insisted on being present at the excavation. And so the walls had been left with only a skeleton crew and a prayer that the Turks would not choose this opportunity for an assault. At sunrise many of the men had been optimistic about the outcome of the dig—but the day had been long, the sun had been hot, and now everyone’s patience was wearing as thin as a beggar woman’s shift.

“When will this farce be over?” asked Bohemond, standing a little to the left of his nephew Tancred. The similarities in their great height, fair coloring, and cropped blond hair were unmistakable. “There is nothing here. Have done, Raymond!” The Duke of Antioch seemed almost exultant that the digging had failed to produce the relic.

Raymond adopted an injured demeanor and began to sputter in protest. The light was not yet gone. There was no reason to give up on the project yet. But the other leaders, uncomfortable in their sweat-drenched tunics, agreed with Bohemond and

drowned out Count Raymond with cries to cease the search. The trial by shovel had failed to produce results.

“Wait!” shouted a hoarse voice. A frenzied frame leaped out of the crowd, arms flailing and hair sticking up every which way. It was Peter Bartholomew, the dreamer of dreams, clad in a woolen tunic and a cape much too warm for this weather.

Bohemond signaled for two of his men to lay hands on Peter and remove him from the scene. But Peter was too quick for them. He darted toward the altar to the site of the digging and, without seeming to calculate the distance, stepped haphazardly into the hole below.

Sounds of a scuffle ensued.

The front row of onlookers could see that Peter Bartholomew had seized a spade from one of the soldiers and was now digging maniacally. A moment passed. Murmurs filled the church, only to be silenced as Peter let out a mighty yell. Falling to his knees in the dirt, he stood up again and thrust his arms high above his head. In his hands was a dingy metal object, thin and long and tapering to a sharp point. Even the dullest imagination could see that it resembled the head of a spear.

“The Holy Lance!” shouted Raymond triumphantly, interpreting the scene for any who might still be in doubt. “God’s favor is with us!”

A great cheer went up from thousands of soldiers who wanted, most desperately, to believe that Raymond was right. Men shoved and jostled, standing on tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the holy relic. Half a dozen arms reached down into the pit to pull Peter—and his discovery—up onto the floor of the church. Then he was lifted aloft on the shoulders of the multitude and borne about like a king while the sounds of acclamation continued to crescendo.

“What say you now?” asked Tancred, yelling loudly in Bernard’s ear to make himself heard. “They’ve found the lance!” He placed a large hand against one of the pillars in the sanctuary to keep himself from being swept along by the excited crowd.

Bernard shook his head emphatically and the entire length of his gaunt frame oscillated from side to side. “Did you not see the thick cape Bartholomew was wearing, and the bulkiness of the tunic underneath? He had the lance head with *him* all along, probably retrieved from some rusty stack of arms in an old tower. His dreams of Saint Andrew and our whole day of digging were but a charade to win over feeble minds.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tancred, his brow furrowing with concern.

The thick-browed clergyman stared up at the young, fair-faced marquis. “It’s as plain as a pilgrim’s pikestaff—Peter Bartholomew’s lance is a cheat!”

Bernard pointed at Count Raymond grinning broadly from ear to ear. His voice took on an ugly edge. “And I’ll stake my head that scoundrel Raymond knows it!”