

The Brethren

by H. Rider Haggard

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Dedication

R.M.S. Mongolia, 12th May, 1904
Mayhap, Ella, here too distance lends its enchantment, and these gallant brethren would have quarrelled over Rosamund, or even had their long swords at each other's throat. Mayhap that Princess and heroine might have failed in the hour of her trial and never earned her saintly crown. Mayhap the good horse "Smoke" would have fallen on the Narrow Way, leaving false Lozelle a victor, and Masouda, the royal-hearted, would have offered up a strangely different sacrifice upon the altars of her passionate desire.

Still, let us hold otherwise, though we grow grey and know the world for what it is. Let us for a little time think as we thought while we were young; when faith knew no fears for anything and death had not knocked upon our doors; when you opened also to my childish eyes that gate of ivory and pearl which leads to the blessed kingdom of Romance.

At the least I am sure, and I believe that you, my sister, will agree with me, that, above and beyond its terrors and its pitfalls, Imagination has few finer qualities, and none, perhaps, more helpful to our hearts, than those which enable us for an hour to dream that men and women, their fortunes and their fate, are as we would fashion them.

H. Rider Haggard.

To Mrs. Maddison Green.

*“Two lovers by the maiden sate,
Without a glance of jealous hate;
The maid her lovers sat between,
With open brow and equal mien;—
It is a sight but rarely spied,
Thanks to man’s wrath and woman’s pride.”*
— Scott

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Standing a while ago upon the flower-clad plain above Tiberius, by the Lake of Galilee, the writer gazed at the double peaks of the Hill of Hattin. Here, or so tradition says, Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount—that perfect rule of gentleness and peace. Here, too—and this is certain—after nearly twelve centuries had gone by, Yusuf Salah-ed-din, whom we know as the Sultan Saladin, crushed the Christian power in Palestine in perhaps the most terrible battle which that land of blood has known. Thus the Mount of the Beatitudes became the Mount of Massacre.

Whilst musing on these strangely-contrasted scenes enacted in one place there arose in his mind a desire to weave, as best he might, a tale wherein any who are drawn to the romance of that pregnant and mysterious epoch, when men by thousands were glad to lay down their lives for visions and spiritual hopes, could find a picture, however faint and broken, of the long war between Cross and Crescent waged among the Syrian plains and deserts. Of Christian knights and ladies also, and their loves and sufferings in England and the East; of the fearful lord of the Assassins whom the Franks called Old Man of the Mountain, and his fortress city, Masyaf. Of the great-hearted, if at times cruel Saladin and his fierce Saracens; of the rout at Hattin itself, on whose rocky height the Holy Rood was set up as a standard and captured, to be seen no more by Christian eyes; and of the last surrender, whereby the Crusaders lost Jerusalem forever.

Of that desire this story is the fruit.

PROLOGUE

Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful, the king Strong to Aid, Sovereign of the East, sat at night in his palace at Damascus and brooded on the wonderful ways of God, by Whom he had been lifted to his high estate. He remembered how, when he was but small in the eyes of men, Nour-ed-din, king of Syria, forced him to accompany his uncle, Shirkuh, to Egypt, whither he went, “like one driven to his death,” and how, against his own will, there he rose to greatness. He thought of his father, the wise Ayoub, and the brethren with whom he was brought up, all of them dead now save one; and of his sisters, whom he had cherished. Most of all did he think of her, Zobeide, who had been stolen away by the knight whom she loved even to the loss of her own soul—yes, by the English friend of his youth, his father’s prisoner, Sir Andrew D’Arcy, who, led astray by passion, had done him and his house this grievous wrong. He had sworn, he remembered, that he would bring her back even from England, and already had planned to kill her husband and capture her when he learned her death. She had left a child, or so his spies told him, who, if she still lived, must be a woman now—his own niece, though half of noble English blood.

Then his mind wandered from this old, half-forgotten story to the woe and blood in which his days were set, and to the last great struggle between the followers of the prophets Jesus and Mahomet, that *Jihad*^[1] for which he made ready—and he sighed. For he was a merciful man, who loved not slaughter, although his fierce faith drove him from war to war.

[1] Holy War

Salah-ed-din slept and dreamed of peace. In his dream a maiden stood before him. Presently, when she lifted her veil, he saw that she was beautiful, with features like his own, but fairer, and knew her surely for the daughter of his sister who had fled with the English knight. Now he wondered why she visited him thus, and in his vision prayed Allah to make the matter clear. Then of a sudden he saw this same woman standing before him on a Syrian plain, and on either side of her a countless host of Saracens and Franks, of whom thousands and tens of thousands were appointed to death. Lo! he, Salah-ed-din, charged at the head of his squadrons, scimitar aloft, but she held up her hand and stayed him.

“What do you here, my niece?” he asked.

“I am come to save the lives of men through you,” she answered; “therefore was I born of your blood, and therefore I am sent to you. Put up your sword, King, and spare them.”

“Say, maiden, what ransom do you bring to buy this multitude from doom? What ransom, and what gift?”

“The ransom of my own blood freely offered, and Heaven’s gift of peace to your sinful soul, O King.” And with that outstretched hand she drew down his keen-edged scimitar until it rested on her breast.

Salah-ed-din awoke, and marvelled on his dream, but said nothing of it to any man. The next night it returned to him, and the memory of it went with him all the day that followed, but still he said nothing.

When on the third night he dreamed it yet again, even more vividly, then he was sure that this thing was from God, and summoned his

holy Imauns and his Diviners, and took counsel with them. These, after they had listened, prayed and consulted, spoke thus:

“O Sultan, Allah has warned you in shadows that the woman, your niece, who dwells far away in England, shall by her own nobleness and sacrifice, in some time to come, save you from shedding a sea of blood, and bring rest upon the land. We charge you, therefore, draw this lady to your court, and keep her ever by your side, since if she escape you, her peace goes with her.”

Salah-ed-din said that this interpretation was wise and true, for thus also he had read his dream. Then he summoned a certain false knight who bore the Cross upon his breast, but in secret had accepted the Koran, a Frankish spy of his, who came from that country where dwelt the maiden, his niece, and from him learned about her, her father, and her home. With him and another spy who passed as a Christian palmer, by the aid of Prince Hassan, one of the greatest and most trusted of his Emirs, he made a cunning plan for the capture of the maiden if she would not come willingly, and for her bearing away to Syria.

Moreover—that in the eyes of all men her dignity might be worthy of her high blood and fate—by his decree he created her, the niece whom he had never seen, Princess of Baalbec, with great possessions—a rule that her grandfather, Ayoub, and her uncle, Izzeddin, had held before her. Also he purchased a stout galley of war, manning it with proved sailors and with chosen men-at-arms, under the command of the Prince Hassan, and wrote a letter to the English lord, Sir Andrew D’Arcy, and to his daughter, and prepared a royal gift of jewels, and sent them to the lady, his niece, far away in England, and with it the Patent of her rank. Her he commanded this company to win by peace, or force, or fraud, as

best they might, but that without her not one of them should dare to look upon his face again. And with these he sent the two Frankish spies, who knew the place where the lady lived, one of whom, the false knight, was a skilled mariner and the captain of the ship.

These things did Yusuf Salah-ed-din, and waited patiently till it should please God to accomplish the vision with which God had filled his soul in sleep.

Chapter I.

By The Waters of Death Creek

From the sea-wall on the coast of Essex, Rosamund looked out across the ocean eastwards. To right and left, but a little behind her, like guards attending the person of their sovereign, stood her cousins, the twin brethren, Godwin and Wulf, tall and shapely men. Godwin was still as a statue, his hands folded over the hilt of the long, scabbarded sword, of which the point was set on the ground before him, but Wulf, his brother, moved restlessly, and at length yawned aloud. They were beautiful to look at, all three of them, as they appeared in the splendour of their youth and health. The imperial Rosamund, dark-haired and eyed, ivory skinned and slender-waisted, a posy of marsh flowers in her hand; the pale, stately Godwin, with his dreaming face; and the bold-fronted, blue-eyed warrior, Wulf, Saxon to his finger-tips, notwithstanding his father's Norman blood.

At the sound of that unstifled yawn, Rosamund turned her head with the slow grace which marked her every movement.

“Would you sleep already, Wulf, and the sun not yet down?” she asked in her rich, low voice, which, perhaps because of its foreign accent, seemed quite different to that of any other woman.

“I think so, Rosamund,” he answered. “It would serve to pass the time, and now that you have finished gathering those yellow flowers which we rode so far to seek, the time—is somewhat long.”

“Shame on you, Wulf,” she said, smiling. “Look upon yonder sea and sky, at that sheet of bloom all gold and purple—”

“I have looked for hard on half an hour, Cousin Rosamund; also at your back and at Godwin’s left arm and side-face, till in truth I thought myself kneeling in Stangate Priory staring at my father’s effigy upon his tomb, while Prior John pattered the Mass. Why, if you stood it on its feet, it is Godwin, the same crossed hands resting on the sword, the same cold, silent face staring at the sky.”

“Godwin as Godwin will no doubt one day be, or so he hopes—that is, if the saints give him grace to do such deeds as did our sire,” interrupted his brother.

Wulf looked at him, and a curious flash of inspiration shone in his blue eyes.

“No, I think not,” he answered; “the deeds you may do, and greater, but surely you will lie wrapped not in a shirt of mail, but with a monk’s cowl at the last—unless a woman robs you of it and the quickest road to heaven. Tell me now, what are you thinking of, you two—for I have been wondering in my dull way, and am curious to learn how far I stand from truth? Rosamund, speak first. Nay, not all the truth—a maid’s thoughts are her own—but just the cream of it, that which rises to the top and should be skimmed.”

Rosamund sighed. “I? I was thinking of the East, where the sun shines ever and the seas are blue as my girdle stones, and men are full of strange learning—”

“And women are men’s slaves!” interrupted Wulf. “Still, it is natural that you should think of the East who have that blood in your veins, and high blood, if all tales be true. Say, Princess”—and

he bowed the knee to her with an affectation of mockery which could not hide his earnest reverence—"say, Princess, my cousin, granddaughter of Ayoub and niece of the mighty monarch, Yusuf Salah-ed-din, do you wish to leave this pale land and visit your dominions in Egypt and in Syria?"

She listened, and at his words her eyes seemed to take fire, the stately form to erect itself, the breast to heave, and the thin nostrils to grow wider as though they scented some sweet, remembered perfume. Indeed, at that moment, standing there on the promontory above the seas, Rosamund looked a very queen.

Presently she answered him with another question.

"And how would they greet me there, Wulf, who am a Norman D'Arcy and a Christian maid?"

"The first they would forgive you, since that blood is none so ill either, and for the second—why, faiths can be changed."

Then it was that Godwin spoke for the first time.

"Wulf, Wulf," he said sternly, "keep watch upon your tongue, for there are things that should not be said even as a silly jest. See you, I love my cousin here better than aught else upon the earth—"

"There, at least, we agree," broke in Wulf.

"Better than aught else on the earth," repeated Godwin; "but, by the Holy Blood and by St. Peter, at whose shrine we are, I would kill her with my own hand before her lips kissed the book of the false prophet."

"Or any of his followers," muttered Wulf to himself, but fortunately, perhaps, too low for either of his companions to hear.

Aloud he said, "You understand, Rosamund, you must be careful, for Godwin ever keeps his word, and that would be but a poor end for so much birth and beauty and wisdom."

"Oh, cease mocking, Wulf," she answered, laying her hand lightly on the tunic that hid his shirt of mail. "Cease mocking, and pray St. Chad, the builder of this church, that no such dreadful choice may ever be forced upon you, or me, or your beloved brother—who, indeed, in such a case would do right to slay me."

"Well, if it were," answered Wulf, and his fair face flushed as he spoke, "I trust that we should know how to meet it. After all, is it so very hard to choose between death and duty?"

"I know not," she replied; "but oft-times sacrifice seems easy when seen from far away; also, things may be lost that are more prized than life."

"What things? Do you mean place, or wealth, or—love?"

"Tell me," said Rosamund, changing her tone, "what is that boat rowing round the river's mouth? A while ago it hung upon its oars as though those within it watched us."

"Fisher-folk," answered Wulf carelessly. "I saw their nets."

"Yes; but beneath them something gleamed bright, like swords."

"Fish," said Wulf; "we are at peace in Essex." Although Rosamund did not look convinced, he went on: "Now for Godwin's thoughts— what were they?"

"Brother, if you would know, of the East also—the East and its wars."

“Which have brought us no great luck,” answered Wulf, “seeing that our sire was slain in them and naught of him came home again save his heart, which lies at Stangate yonder.”

“How better could he die,” asked Godwin, “than fighting for the Cross of Christ? Is not that death of his at Harenc told of to this day? By our Lady, I pray for one but half as glorious!”

“Aye, he died well—he died well,” said Wulf, his blue eyes flashing and his hand creeping to his sword hilt. “But, brother, there is peace at Jerusalem, as in Essex.”

“Peace? Yes; but soon there will be war again. The monk Peter—he whom we saw at Stangate last Sunday, and who left Syria but six months gone—told me that it was coming fast. Even now the Sultan Saladin, sitting at Damascus, summons his hosts from far and wide, while his priests preach battle amongst the tribes and barons of the East. And when it comes, brother, shall we not be there to share it, as were our grandfather, our father, our uncle, and so many of our kin? Shall we rot here in this dull land, as by our uncle’s wish we have done these many years, yes, ever since we were home from the Scottish war, and count the kine and plough the fields like peasants, while our peers are charging on the pagan, and the banners wave, and the blood runs red upon the holy sands of Palestine?”

Now it was Wulf’s turn to take fire.

“By our Lady in Heaven, and our lady here!”—and he looked at Rosamund, who was watching the pair of them with her quiet thoughtful eyes—“go when you will, Godwin, and I go with you, and as our birth was one birth, so, if it is decreed, let our death be one death.” And suddenly his hand that had been playing with the

sword-hilt gripped it fast, and tore the long, lean blade from its scabbard and cast it high into the air, flashing in the sunlight, to catch it as it fell again, while in a voice that caused the wild fowl to rise in thunder from the Saltings beneath, Wulf shouted the old war-cry that had rung on so many a field—“*A D’Arcy! a D’Arcy! Meet D’Arcy, meet Death!*” Then he sheathed his sword again and added in a shamed voice, “Are we children that we fight where no foe is? Still, brother, may we find him soon!”

Godwin smiled grimly, but answered nothing; only Rosamund said:

“So, my cousins, you would be away, perhaps to return no more, and that will part us. But”—and her voice broke somewhat—“such is the woman’s lot, since men like you ever love the bare sword best of all, nor should I think well of you were it otherwise. Yet, cousins, I know not why”—and she shivered a little—“it comes into my heart that Heaven often answers such prayers swiftly. Oh, Wulf! your sword looked very red in the sunlight but now: I say that it looked very red in the sunlight. I am afraid—of I know not what. Well, we must be going, for we have nine miles to ride, and the dark is not so far away. But first, my cousins, come with me into this shrine, and let us pray St. Peter and St. Chad to guard us on our journey home.”

“Our journey?” said Wulf anxiously. “What is there for you to fear in a nine-mile ride along the shores of the Blackwater?”

“I said our journey home Wulf; and home is not in the hall at Steeple, but yonder,” and she pointed to the quiet, brooding sky.

“Well answered,” said Godwin, “in this ancient place, whence so many have journeyed home; all the Romans who are dead, when it

was their fortress, and the Saxons who came after them, and others without count.”

Then they turned and entered the old church—one of the first that ever was in Britain, rough-built of Roman stone by the very hands of Chad, the Saxon saint, more than five hundred years before their day. Here they knelt a while at the rude altar and prayed, each of them in his or her own fashion, then crossed themselves, and rose to seek their horses, which were tied in the shed hard by.

Now there were two roads, or rather tracks, back to the Hall at Steeple—one a mile or so inland, that ran through the village of Bradwell, and the other, the shorter way, along the edge of the Saltings to the narrow water known as Death Creek, at the head of which the traveller to Steeple must strike inland, leaving the Priory of Stangate on his right. It was this latter path they chose, since at low tide the going there is good for horses—which, even in the summer, that of the inland track was not. Also they wished to be at home by supper-time, lest the old knight, Sir Andrew D’Arcy, the father of Rosamund and the uncle of the orphan brethren, should grow anxious, and perhaps come out to seek them.

For the half of an hour or more they rode along the edge of the Saltings, for the most part in silence that was broken only by the cry of curlew and the lap of the turning tide. No human being did they see, indeed, for this place was very desolate and unvisited, save now and again by fishermen. At length, just as the sun began to sink, they approached the shore of Death Creek—a sheet of tidal water which ran a mile or more inland, growing ever narrower, but was here some three hundred yards in breadth. They were well mounted, all three of them. Indeed, Rosamund’s horse, a great grey, her father’s gift to her, was famous in that country-side for its

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