

The Brethren Romance of the Crusades.

This is the first installment of "The Brethren," H. Rider Haggard's latest work. Mr. Haggard needs no introduction. "She," "Allan Quartermain," "King Solomon's Mines" and a dozen other equally absorbing romances have made his name a household word. In the present novel the author has almost entirely departed from the weird, imaginative sensationalism of his earlier books and has devoted himself to the tools of the writer of the legitimate historical novel. In "The Brethren" Mr. Haggard has stamped himself as a master of the modern historical romance.

Following "The Brethren" will appear "The Castaway," by H. E. Ermie Rives, to be followed by Booth Tarkington's "Monsieur Beaucaire."

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Author's Note.

Standing a while ago upon the flower-clad plain above Tibérius, by the Lake of Galilee, the writer gazed at the double peaks of the Hill of Hattin. Here, so tradition says, Christ preached the sermon on the mount—that perfect rule of gentleness and love. Here, too—and this is certain—eight or twelve centuries had gone by, Yusuf Salah-ed-din, whom we know as the Sultan, had crushed the Christian power in Palestine in perhaps the most terrible battle which that land of blood has known, and the Mount of the Beatitudes became the Mount of Massacre. It was while musing on these scenes of contrasted scenes enacted in one place that there arose in his mind a desire to weave, as best he might, a tale of the East, and of the romance of that pregnant and mysterious epoch, when men by thousands were glad to lay down their lives for visions and hopes, which, if they were to be realized, would have broken the long war between Cross and Crescent, 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, Mas'ad; of the great-hearted, if at times cruel, Saladin and his fierce barons; of the Holy Sepulchre, on whose rocky height the Holy Road was set up as a standard and captured, to be seen no more by Christian eyes; and among other matters of the last surrender, whereby the Crusaders lost Jerusalem forever. Of that death this story is the fruit.

PROLOGUE.

Salah-ed-din, Commander of the Faithful, the King strong and tall, 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, Nur-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 arose 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 life, and who, 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 of the woe and blood in which his days were set, and to the last great struggle between the followers of the prophets, Jesus and Mohammed, that Jihad for which he made ready—and he sighed. For he was a merciful man, who loved not slaughter, although his fierce faith drove him on from war to war.

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, Izz-ed-din, 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 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.

CHAPTER I.

By the Waters of Death Creek. From the seawall on the coast of Essex Rosamund looked out across the ocean eastward. 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 splendor of their youth and health. The imperial Rosamund, dark haired and eyed, ivory skinned and slender waisted, a bossy marsh Mawer in her hand; the pale, stately Godwin, with his dreaming face; and the bold-fronted warrior, Wulf, Saxon to his fingers, his nostrils standing his father's Norman blood.

At the sound of that unsteady yawn Rosamund turned her head with the slow grace which marked her every movement. "Would you sleep 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 his arms 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 be wrapped not in a shirt of mail, but with a monk's cowd 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 thought is her own, but just the cream of it, that which rises to the top and can be skimmed."

Rosamund sighed. "I was thinking of the East, where the sun shines ever and the seas are blue as my girl's stones, and men are full of strange learning."

"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 shrine, 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, it is so very hard to choose between death and duty."

"I know not," she replied; "but oftentimes sacrifice seems easy when seen from far away; also, sometimes things may be best 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 carefully. "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 holy 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."

"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 among the tribes and barons of the East. And when it comes, my 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, ever since we were home from the Scottish war, and count the time and plow the fields like peasants, while our peers are charging on the pagans, 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, brother, 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 the 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 ashamed 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 would 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"—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 saw that it looked very red in the sunlight. I am afraid—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 holy place, 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 said," answered Godwin, "in this ancient place, whence so many have journeyed home; all the Romans who are dead, when it was their fortress, and the Saxon 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 600 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 barn by the side of the church.

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 traveler 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.

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 the 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 300 yards in breadth. They were well mounted, all three of them. Indeed, Rosamund's horse, a great gray, her father's gift to her, was famous in that country-side for its swiftness and power, also because it was so docile that a child could ride it. While those of the brethren were heavy-built, but well trained war steeds, taught to stand when they were left, and to charge when they were urged, without fear of shouting men or flashing steel.

Now the ground lay thus. Some seventy yards from the shore of the creek and parallel to it a tongue of land, covered with scrub and a few oaks, ran down into the Saltings, its point ending on their path, beyond which were a swamp and a broad river. Between this tongue and the shore of the creek the track wended its way to the uplands. It was an ancient track; indeed the reason of its existence was that here the Romans or some other long dead hands had built a narrow mole or quay of rough stone, forty or fifty yards in length, out into the water of the creek, doubtless to serve as a convenience for fisher boats, which could lie alongside of it even at low tide. This mole had been much destroyed by centuries of washing, so that the end of it lay below water, although the landward part was still almost sound and level.

Coming over the little rise at the tip of the wooded tongue, the quick eyes of Wulf, who rode first—for here the path along the border of the swamp was so narrow that they could see only a single file-caught sight of a large empty boat moored to an iron ring set in the wall of the mole.

"Your fishermen have landed, Rosamund," he said, "and doubtless gone up to Bradwell."

"That is strange," she added, anxiously, "since here no fisherman ever comes." And she checked her horse as though to turn back.

"Whether they come or not, certainly they have gone," said Godwin, craning forward to look about him; "so, as we have nothing to fear from an empty boat, let us push on."

On they rode accordingly until they came to the root of the stone quay or pier, when a sound behind them caused them to look back. They saw a sight that sent the blood to their hearts; for there behind them, leaping down one by one on that narrow footway, were men armed with naked swords, six or eight of them, all of whom, as noted, had strips of linen pierced with eyelet holes tied beneath their helmets or leather caps, so as to conceal their faces.

"A snare! a snare!" cried Wulf, drawing his sword. "Swift! follow me up the Bradwell path," and he struck the spurs into his horse. It bounded forward, but he was so close to the other band of men armed and lined hooded like the first, had leaped down to that Bradwell path, among them a stout man, who seemed to be unarmed, except for a long crooked knife at his girdle and a coat of ringed mail, which showed through the opening of his loose tunic.

"To the boat," shouted Godwin, whereat the stout man laughed—a light, penetrating laugh, which even then all three of them heard and noted. Along the quay they rode, since there was nowhere else that they could go with both paths barred, and swamp and water on one side of them, and a steep wooded bank upon the other. When they reached the boat, they saw the man had laughed, for the boat was made fast with a strong chain that could not be cut; mocked, her sail and oars were gone.

"Get into it," mocked a voice; "or, at least, let the lady get in; it will save us the trouble of carrying her there."

Now Rosamund turned very pale, while the stout man, who was tall and white, and he gripped his sword-hilt. But Godwin, calm as ever, rode forward a few paces, and said quietly: "Of your courtesy, say what you need of us. If it be money, we have none—nothing but our arms and horses, which I think may cost you dear."

Now the man with the crooked knife advanced a little, accompanied by another man, a tall, supple looking knave, into whose ear he whispered.

"My master says," answered the tall man, "that you have with you that which is of more value than all the king's gold—a very fair lady, of whom some one has urgent need. Give her up now, and go your way with your arms and horses, and your lives, and your blood, whose blood we do not wish to shed."

At this it was the turn of the brethren to laugh, which both of them did together.

"Give her up," answered Godwin, "and go our ways dishonored? Ave, with our breath, but not before. Who has then such urgent need of the Lady Rosamund?"

Again there was whispering between the pair.

"My master says," was the answer, "he thinks that all who see her will have eyes for her, since she is well-nigh rare. But if you wish a name, well, one comes into his mind; the name of the Knight Lozelle."

"The Knight Lozelle?" murmured Rosamund, turning even paler than before, as well she might. For this Lozelle was a powerful man and Essex-born. He owned ships whose doings upon the seas and in the East evil tales were told, and once had sought Rosamund's hand in marriage, but being rejected, uttered threats for which Godwin, as the elder of the twins, had fought and wounded him. Then he vanished—none knew where.

"Is Sir Hugh Lozelle here?" asked Godwin, "masked like you common cowards? If so, I desire to meet him, to finish the work I began in the snow last Christmas month."

"Find that out if you can," answered the tall man. But Wulf said, speaking low between his clenched teeth:

"I rather, I see but one chance. We must place Rosamund between us and charge them."

The captain of the band seemed to read their thoughts, for again he whispered into the ear of his companion, who again called out:

"My master says that if you try to charge you will be fools; since, as shall I say and hamstring your horses, which are too good to waste, and take you quite easily as you fall. Come, then, yield as you can do without shame, seeing that there is no escape and that two men, however brave, cannot stand against a crowd. He gives you one minute to surrender."

Now Rosamund spoke for the first time.

"My cousins," she said, "I pray you not to let me fall living into the hands of Sir Hugh Lozelle or of yonder men."



By
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