

# The Brothers

By A. C. Benson

There was once a great Lord of Yorkshire, the Baron de Benoit, who had two sons named Henry and Christopher. Their mother was long dead; Henry was a bold and careless boy, courageous and fearless, outspoken to every one, yet loving none; fond of the chase, restless, and never weary; but Christopher was a timid and weakly child, with a heart for all; dreaming of great deeds which he feared to do; while Henry dreamed not, but did whatever he undertook, great things or small. Christopher sate much with the old priest, or with the women; when the minstrels played in the hall, his heart was lifted up within him; and he loved to loiter alone in the woods in springtime, to look in the open faces of the flowers, and to listen for the songs of birds. The Baron was a rough good-natured man, who ruled his estates diligently; and he loved Henry well, but Christopher he despised in his heart, and often said that he was a girl spoiled in the making.

Now how different were the boys in character let the following tale witness

Once the huntsmen caught a wolf, and brought it to the castle yard to make sport; the wolf blinked and snarled in the pen where they put it; and the boys were called to kill it. Christopher bent over to look at it, and thought that the wolf was doubtless wondering why men wished it evil, and was longing for the deep woods and for its warm lair. Henry thrust a spear into Christopher's hand and bade him slay it. The wolf rose at his approach, hobbling on his pinioned feet, hating to die, thought Christopher, among laughter and jests. And he threw the spear down and said, "I will not." "Nay, you dare not," said Henry; and he thrust the spear into the wolf's side; the wolf struggled hard, and as Henry pushed close, tore his hand; but Henry only laughed and thrust again; and then he daubed Christopher's face with the blood that ran from his hand, and said, "Go and tell the maidens that you have slain a wolf in single combat."

But, for all that, Christopher loved his brother exceedingly, and thought him the brightest and goodliest treasure in the world.

There came to stay at the castle an Abbot, a wise and brave man, before whom even the Baron was awed; and he had much talk with Christopher, who opened his heart to him. The Abbot found that he could read, and knew the stories of the saints and the answers of the Mass, and had discernment of good and evil. So the Abbot sought out the Baron, and told him that Christopher would make a very wise priest, and that he was apt to be ruled, and therefore, said he, he will be apt to rule; and he added that he thought that the boy would make a great counsellor, and even bishop; and then the Baron said that Christopher had no courage and endurance. The Abbot replied that he believed he had both, but that they were of a different nature to the courage and endurance of a man-at-arms; that he was of the stuff of which holy men, martyrs and saints, were made; but that it was ill to nurture a dove in the nest of an eagle. So the Baron said that he should take Christopher, and make a priest of him, if the boy would.

Then Christopher was called, and the Baron asked him bluntly whether he would be a priest; and Christopher, seeing the Abbot's kind glance upon him, took courage and said that he would obey his father in all things. But he looked so wan and gentle, and so like his mother, that the Baron put his arm about him and said kindly that he would have him choose for himself, and kissed his cheek. But Christopher burst out weeping and hid his face on his father's shoulder; and then he said, "I will go." And the Abbot said, "Baron, you are a man of war, and yet shall

you be proud of this your son; he shall win victories indeed, but in his own field—nay, I doubt not that he will do your house great service and honour.” And so it was arranged that the Abbot, who was on a journey, should return in a week and take the boy.

So Christopher had a week to make his farewells, and he made them faithfully and tenderly, though he thought his heart would break. But the Abbot had told him on parting that God indeed called men, when He would have them to serve Him, and that he too was surely bidden. And Christopher, young though he was, felt that he was like a boat that must battle through a few breakers to reach a quiet haven; and he spake with all and each, and said farewell, until even the roughest were sorry that the boy should go. But the last night was the sorest, for he must part with his brother; the boys slept together in a great bed in a room in the tower; and Christopher dared that night to encircle his brother with his arms, and tell him that he loved him, and that he wished there were something small or great that he could do for him. And Henry, who loved not caresses, said laughing, that he should not need his services for a long time. “But when I am old and weary and have done many deeds of blood, then you may pray for me if you will.” Then Christopher would have had him talk awhile, but Henry said he was weary and must sleep, and turned away, adding that he would wake betimes in the morning and that they would talk then. And Christopher lay and heard him breathe softly, and at last, wearied out, he slept. But Henry woke in the dawn, and thinking of a stag that came down to pull the hay from the ricks, and half fearing, too, his brother’s tears and sighs, dressed himself quietly and stole away while Christopher slept, thinking that he would return to see him go. And when Christopher woke and found his brother gone, he fell into such a passion of grief that he heeded nothing else, but went through his farewells so stonily and dumbly that the Baron made haste to set him on his journey; and Henry did not return.

So Christopher passed into the holy life, but choosing not to be a priest, he became a monk of the strictest discipline, so that the monks wondered at his holiness. But they at the Castle soon forgot him and thought no more of the frail child.

Then it happened that the Baron rode one day in the sun, and coming home, dismounted, and fell dizzily upon his face; they laid him in his chamber, but he never spoke, only breathed heavily; and that night he died. And Henry, who was now of age, thought but little of his father’s death because of the respect that all paid him, and of the wealth and power that thus flowed suddenly into his hands. And he married a fair maiden called the Lady Alice, who bore him a son; and he ruled diligently in his lands, and rode to battle, and lived such a life as he best loved.

But one day there fell upon him a heaviness of limb and a loathing for food; and though they daily tended him, he grew no better; soon he could not even sit upon his horse, but became so pale and wasted that he could hardly rise from his chair. And some thought that a spell was cast upon him, but that mended not matters at all; the king’s own leech came to visit him, and shook his head, saying that no art could avail, since the spring of life was somehow broken within him and he must die unless God were good to him and healed him.

Now the Lady Alice feared God, and knew what wonders were wrought by Him at the prayers of saints, so she took counsel with the priests of the Castle, but said no word of it to the Lord Henry, because he jested at sacred things; and the priest told her that three days’ journey away was a house of holy monks, where many miracles of healing were wrought, and he advised her to go secretly and ask counsel of the Prior. So under pretence of seeking for another leech, the Lady Alice rode south, and on the third day she came to the place. The monastery stood very solitary in a valley with much wood about it; the walls rose fair and white, with a tall church in the midst,

all lit with a heavenly light of evening, And the Lady Alice felt in her burdened heart that God would be gracious and hear her prayers.

They rode to the gate, and Alice asked that she might see the Prior; she would not tell her name, but the porter seeing her attended by two men-at-arms, admitted her; and presently the Lady Alice was had into a small bare room, and in a moment the Prior stood before her. He was an old man, very lean and grim, but with a kindly face; she told him that her husband, a great knight, was sick unto death, but she told him not her name, and the Prior spared to ask her; when she had done her story, the Prior said that there was in the monastery a young monk, Brother Lawrence, of such steadfast life and holiness that his prayers would almost avail to give life to the dead; and that he would dispense him leave, if he were willing to go with her awhile; for the Prior saw that she was a great lady, and he was moved by her grief and purity.

So Brother Lawrence was fetched, and soon stood before them; and the Prior told the lady's tale, and Brother Lawrence said that he would go, if he was permitted. So in the morning they rode away. Then the Lady Alice told him all the tale, saying that the sick man was the Baron de Benoit, and that he loved not God, though he served him faithfully, though knowing not that it was God whom he served. And the monk said, "Ay, and there be many such;" but she wondered that he grew so strangely pale, yet thought that it was his long fasting, and the bitter morning air. Then the monk questioned her very nearly about all her life, saying that in such cases it was needful to know all things, "that our prayers," he said, "beat not in vain against a closed gate." And she told him of all she knew.

Then at last, in a still twilight, they drew near to the Castle, and the lady saw that the monk kept his eyes fixed on the ground, and looked not to left nor right, like a man in a sore conflict; and she knew that he prayed.

That night the monk was laid in a chamber in the tower; and all night his lamp burned, till the dawn came up. And the watchman thought he prayed late; but if they could have seen the monk they would have wondered that he paced softly up and down, looking lovingly about him, the tears welling to his eyes; once he kissed the bedpost of the bed; and then he knelt and wrestled in prayer, until the priest called him to the Mass. And there seemed such a radiance about him, worn and thin though he was, that the priest marvelled to see him.

Then the Lady Alice came to fetch him in a great fearfulness, for she knew that the Lord Henry hated monks; but the monk said to her that she need not fear; and she took comfort.

Then she brought him to the great room where the Baron lay; and she went in, and said, "Henry, I have brought one who works many wonders of healing—and dear husband, be not angry, though he is a monk; for the monks know many things; and perhaps God will be gracious, and give my dear one back to me, to cherish me and our son."

The Lord Henry looked at her very sternly; but the pale and tearful face of his wife, and her loving grid moved him, and he said, "Well, I will see him; and let it testify in how evil a case I am, that monks are brought to my bedside, and I have not even the strength to say them nay." He spoke roughly, but he took the Lady Mice's hand in his own and said to her, "Dear one, make haste. I will not refuse you this, for I think it is the last request that I shall have power to grant—I am past the help of man."

For since the Lady Alice's departure, the Lord Henry had been in very evil case; till then he had hoped; but his sleep had gone from him, and a great blackness came over him, and seemed to part his life, as with a dark chasm, from what lay before him. There in those lonely hours he went through the scenes of his past life; he saw himself a bright and bold boy, and all the joy of his early years came before him, and he saw that his joy had been the greater because he had not

known he was more glad than others. He thought of his father and of his frail brother Christopher; and he wished he had been kinder to both; then he had the thought of his wife and his helpless child, and all that might befall them. And he thought, too, of God, whom he must now meet, who seemed to sit like a Judge, in a pavilion of clouds at a ladder's fiery head, with no smile or welcome for him.

So the Lady Alice went out and brought Brother Lawrence to the chamber; and at the door he prayed for strength that he might comfort him that was sick; and Lady Alice pulled the door to and departed; and the two were left alone.

Then Brother Lawrence murmured a Latin salutation, as the custom of his order was; and Henry fixed his eyes, large with sickness, on him, and made a reverence of the head. Then he said, "I wish, sir, I could give you a better welcome; but I am sick, as you see; indeed, I think I am very near my end. The Lady Alice would have me see you, for she says you have wrought wonderful cures. Well, here is a man who is more than willing to be cured; but I am no saint. I believe in God and Holy Church; but—I will speak openly—not much in monks and priests."

"As though," said the monk with a smile, "a man should say 'I believe in food, but not in the eating of it'—yet let that pass, my Lord Baron; I am no foe to plain speaking—it was ever the mark of Christ and the holy saints; but let me ask you first about your disease, for that is my duty now."

Henry was well pleased with the shrewdness of the monk's words; and he answered the Brother's questions about his illness with a good grace. When he had done, the monk shook his head. "I must warn you," he said, "that it is a sore case; but I have known such recover. I would have time to consider; let me abide to-night under your roof, and I will tell you to-morrow what shall be given to me to say;" and the monk made as though he would have withdrawn.

But Henry said, "One question I would ask of you. I had a brother, Christopher by name; he is a monk—but he hath sent me no word of himself for many years—indeed, he may be dead. Can you give me tidings of him?"

The other grew pale to the lips; then he said, as with an effort, "I know your brother, my Lord Baron, but the rules of our order—he is of the same order indeed as myself—are strict, and it is forbidden us to speak of our brethren to those that are without. Be assured, however, that he is alive and well; and perhaps you shall have tidings from himself anon."

Then he went out; and presently the Lady Alice came in to see her husband. Henry seemed to her a little brighter already, and a hope flickered up in her heart. He smiled at her and said, "My Alice, I think well of your monk; he is a shrewd fellow, and knows his trade. I think somewhat better of his kind—he seems to me, indeed, in some way familiar, or reminds me of one that I know; let him be well bestowed, and to-morrow he will tell me, as he said, what he thinks of my case."

But the monk went to the chapel, and there he wrestled sore in prayer; and then he fasted and watched; but at last, wearied out, he fell asleep just before the dawn, and there came a dream to him. He dreamed that he stood in the castle yard, and he had in his hand two pots of flowers, one of lilies and one of roses; and there came to him a tall and strange man, with a look of command in his face, yet full of love; and the monk thought that he turned to the stranger and offered him the flowers, and the man laid his hand upon the roses; but the monk said, "Nay, my lord, rather take the lilies;" and the other said, "The roses are mine and the lilies are mine; one will I take and leave the other awhile; but at thy prayer I will take the lilies first, because thou hast been faithful in a few things." Then the monk gave him the lilies, but with a sore pang; and the other laid his hand upon them, and the lilies withered away. Then the monk said, "And now, my lord, they are

not worthy to be given thee," but the other said, "They shall revive and bloom," and then he smiled.

Then the monk awoke, and the dawn came faintly in at the east: and he shivered in his vigil, and fell to pondering on his dream; for he doubted not that it came from God. So, when he had pondered a little, he was amazed and said in his prayer, "Woe is me that I cannot see light." And as he said the words the sun brightened up the sky, and in a moment the monk saw what the Lord would have him to do.

Then, when it was day, he sought the Lady Alice, and she came and stood before him, and he said, "Lady, God will give back your lord to you—for a time; only believe!" Then she fell to weeping for joy, and the monk checked her not, but said, "These be gracious tears." Then he said, "And now I must return in haste; I must not linger." And she prayed him to go with her to the Baron; but he said he must not; but one thing he said he would have her promise, that if it were needful for him to see the Baron, when he should be healed of his disease, he would come to his summons; and the Lady Alice promised and pledged her word. Then he blessed her and departed and rode away, looking neither to left nor right. And the Lady Alice went to her husband, and the Baron said, wondering, that he was better already, and he called for food and ate with appetite; and from that day he revived, climbing back slowly into life again. And there was great rejoicing in the Castle.

And when he was nearly well, and could walk and ride, and his strength increased day by day, giving him exceeding joy, there rode a monk in haste to the Castle, and said to the Lady Alice that Brother Lawrence would see the Baron and he added that he must not fail to come speedily if he would see him alive, for he was in sore case. Then the Lady Alice asked how it was with him, and the monk said that ever since he had visited the Castle he had been in the chastening of God; his strength ebbed from him day by day. Then the Lady Alice told her husband of his promises, and he said, "Right gladly will I go and see the Brother, for he hath brought me back to life again, and he is a true man."

So the Baron rode away, and as he rode the spring was coming in all the lanes; the trees stood in a cloud of green; the woods were sweet with flowers, and the birds sang loud and clear, and the Baron had such joy in his heart as he had not believed a heart could hold; and he found it in his spirit to thank God for the gift of life restored to him, and as he went he sang softly to himself.

And he came to the house, and because he was a great Baron, the Prior came out to do him honour, and the Baron lighted off his horse and did him great reverence, saying, "Lord Prior, I have lived carelessly and thought little of God and served Him little; but He hath rewarded me though I am unworthy; and now I will serve Him well." Then the Prior rejoiced, and said, "Lord Baron, thou speakest wisely, and the Lord shall increase thee mightily."

Then the Prior led him to the infirmary, for he said that the Brother Lawrence was near to death; and the Baron found him lying in a little bed in a corner of the great room which was all full of light. There stood two monks beside him; but when the Baron entered, Brother Lawrence, who lay in a swoon, raised himself up, and said smiling, "So thou hast come, my brother." And the Baron kneeled down beside him, and said, "Yes, Brother, I have come to show my thanks to you for your prayers and good offices. For God has heard them and given me life." Then Brother Lawrence said, "Give the glory to God, my brother," and the baron said, "Ay, I do that! and Brother Lawrence smiled and bade the monks depart from him and leave him with the Baron alone. And then Brother Lawrence looked upon him for a while in silence, and his eyes were full of a heavenly light and great joy. And presently he said, "I have a thing that I must tell you, my

brother. You asked of me whether I knew your brother Christopher, and I answered you shortly enough, but now I have leave to tell you; and I am he.”

Then there was a long silence, and the Baron drew near and kissed him on the cheek.

Then Brother Lawrence said, “And now, dear brother, I will tell you all the truth; for the hand of God is laid upon me, and to-day I must depart;” and then he told him of the vision and interpreted it saying, “The Lord was merciful and let me give my life for thine; and I give it, O how gladly; and I tell you not this for your pity or for your praise, but that you may know that your life is not given you for nought; God had good works prepared for me to walk in, and now must you walk in them—and be not dismayed. He calls you not to the life of prayer; but be loving and just and merciful to the poor and the oppressed; for God has deeds fit for all to do; and though I could have served Him faithfully in the cloister, you will serve Him better in the world; only remember this, that life is lent you, and not given, and you must increase it, that you may give it back more worthily.”

Then the Baron was full of heaviness, and said that he could not take life on these terms; that both should live, or that if his brother must die, he would die too. Then Brother Lawrence rebuked him lovingly; and then began to talk of their childish days, saying with a smile, “When I last saw you, dear brother, you promised me that you would talk with me in the morning, and the morning is come now, and you will keep your promise.” And then presently he said, “Henry, we are frail things, and it is a pitiful thing that so much of vanity is mingled with our flesh; but I used to think as a child that I would compel you some day to think me brave, and would make you grateful to me for a service done you—and I think of this now and am glad; but now I grow weak and can speak no more; but tell me of your life and of all that I loved in the old days, that I may have you in my mind when I sleep beneath the altar, if God will have one so unworthy to sleep there.” And the Baron told him all things, struggling with his tears.

Then said Brother Lawrence: “The hour is come; call my brethren and let me go; He calleth me.”

Then the monks came in and made the cross of ashes, and did the rites of death; and Brother Lawrence smiled with closed eyes, but opened them once again upon his brother, who stood to see the end. And presently Brother Lawrence sighed like a weary child and died.

Many years have passed since that day; the Baron is a grey-haired man and has his grandchildren about him; and he has done worthily, knowing that life is lent him for this end. And every year he rides with a man-at-arms or two to stand beside the grave of Christopher, and to renew the vow which he made when his brother died.