

THE BROOK KERITH

A Syrian Story

BY

GEORGE MOORE

So he went and did according unto the word of the Lord: for he went and dwelt by the brook Kerith, that is before Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook. — *1 Kings xvii. 5, 6.*

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A DEDICATION

My dear Mary Hunter. It appears that you wished to give me a book for Christmas, but were in doubt what book to give me as I seemed to have little taste for reading, so in your embarrassment you gave me a Bible. It lies on my table now with the date 1898 on the fly-leaf — my constant companion and chief literary interest for the last eighteen years. Itself a literature, it has led me into many various literatures and into the society of scholars. I owe so much to your Bible that I cannot let pass the publication of "The Brook Kerith" without thanking you for it again.

Yours always ;

GEORGE MOORE.

THE BROOK KERITH

CHAPTER I

IT was at the end of a summer evening, long after his usual bedtime, that Joseph, sitting on his grandmother's knee, heard her tell that Kish having lost his asses sent Saul, his son, to seek them in the land of the Benjamites and the land of Shalisha, whither they might have strayed. But they were not in these lands, Son, she continued, nor in Zulp, whither Saul went afterwards, and being then tired out with looking for them he said to the servant: we shall do well to forget the asses, lest my father should ask what has become of us. But the servant, being of a mind that Kish would not care to see them without the asses, said to young Saul: let us go up into yon city, for a great seer lives there and he will be able to put us in the right way to come upon the asses. But we have little in our wallet to recompense him, Saul answered, only half a loaf and a little wine at the end of the bottle. We have more than that, the servant replied, and opening his hand he showed a quarter of a shekel of silver to Saul, who said: he will take that in payment. Whereupon they walked into Arimathea, casting their eyes about for somebody to direct them to the seer's house. And seeing some maidens at the well, come to draw water, they asked them if the seer had been in the city that day, and were answered that he had been seen and would offer sacrifice that morning, as had been

announced. He must be on his way now to the high rock, one of the maidens cried after them, and they pressed through the people till none was in front of them but an old man walking alone, likewise in the direction of the rock; and overtaking him they asked if he could point out the seer's house to them, to which he answered sharply: I am the seer, and fell at once to gazing on Saul as if he saw in him the one that had been revealed to him. For you see, Son, seers have foresight, and the seer had been warned over-night that the Lord would send a young man to him, so the moment he saw Saul he knew him to be the one the Lord had promised, and he said: thou art he whom the Lord has promised to send me for anointment, but more than that I cannot tell thee, being on my way to offer sacrifice, but afterwards we will eat together, and all that has been revealed to me I will tell. You understand me, Son, the old woman crooned, the Lord had been with Samuel be-foretimes and had promised to send the King of Israel to him for anointment, and the moment he laid eyes on Saul he knew him to be the king; and that was why he asked him to eat with him after sacrifice. Yes, Granny, I understand: but did the Lord set the asses astray that Saul might follow them and come to Samuel to be made a King? I daresay there was something like that at the bottom of it, the old woman answered, and continued her story till her knees ached under the boy's weight.

The child's asleep, she said, and on the instant he awoke crying: no, Granny, I wasn't asleep. I heard all you said and would like to be a prophet. A prophet, Joseph, and to anoint a king? But there are no more prophets or kings in Israel. And now, Joseph, my little prophet, 'tis bedtime and past it. Come. I didn't say I wanted to anoint kings, he answered, and refused to go to bed, though manifestly he could hardly keep awake. I'll wait up for Father.

Now what can the child want his father for at this hour? she muttered as she went about the room, not guessing that he was angry and resentful, that her words had wounded him deeply and that he was asking himself, in his corner, if she thought him too stupid to be a prophet.

I'll tell thee no more stories, she said to him, but he answered that he did not want to hear her stories, and betwixt feelings of anger and shame his head drooped, and he slept in his chair till the door opened and his father's footsteps crossed the threshold.

Now, he said to himself, Granny will tell father that I said I'd like to be a prophet. And feigning sleep he listened, determined to hear the worst that could be said of him. But they did not speak about him but of the barrels of salt fish that were to go to Beth-Shemish on the morrow; which was their usual talk. So he slipped from his chair and bade his father good-night. A resentful good-night it was; and his good-night to his grandmother was still more resentful. But she found an excuse for his rudeness, saying that his head was full of sleep — a remark that annoyed him considerably and sent him upstairs wishing that women would not talk about things they do not understand. I'll ask father in the morning why Granny laughed at me for saying I'd like to be a prophet. But as morning seemed still a long way ahead he tried to find a reason, but could find no better one than that prophets were usually old men. But I shall be old in time to come and have a beard. Father has a beard and they can't tell that I won't have a beard, and a white one too, so why should they —

His senses were numbing, and he must have fallen asleep soon after, for when he awoke it seemed to him that he had been asleep a long time, several hours at least, so many things had happened or seemed to have happened; but as he recovered his mind all the dream happenings melted

away, and he could remember only his mother. She had been dead four years, but in his dream she looked as she had always looked, and had scolded Granny for laughing at him. He tried to remember what else she had said but her words faded out of his mind and he fell asleep again. In this second sleep an old man rose up by his bedside and told him that he was the prophet Samuel, who though he had been dead a thousand years had heard him say he would like to be a prophet. But shall I be a prophet? Joseph asked, and as Samuel did not answer he cried out as loudly as he could: shall I? shall I?

What ails thee, Son? he heard his grandmother calling to him, and he answered: an old man, an old man. Ye are dreaming, she mumbled between sleeping and waking. Go to sleep like a good boy, and don't dream any more. I will, Granny, and don't be getting up; the bed-clothes don't want settling. I am well tucked in, he pleaded; and fell asleep praying that Granny had not heard him ask Samuel if he would be a prophet.

A memory of his dream of Samuel came upon him while she dressed him, and he hoped she had forgotten all about it; but his father mentioned at breakfast that he had been awakened by cries. It was Joseph crying out in his dream, Dan, disturbed thee last night: such cries, "Shall I? Shall I?" And when I asked "What ails thee?" the only answer I got was "An old man."

Dan, Joseph's father, wondered why Joseph should seem so disheartened and why he should murmur so perfunctorily that he could not remember his dream. But if he had forgotten it, why trouble him further? If we are to forget anything it were well that we should choose our dreams; at which piece of incredulity his mother shook her head, being firm in the belief that there was much sense in dreams and that they could be interpreted to the advantage of everybody.

Dan said: if that be so, let him tell thee his dream. But Joseph hung his head and pushed his plate away; and seeing him so morose they left him to his sulks and fell to talking of dreams that had come true. Joseph had never heard them speak of anything so interesting before, and though he suspected that they were making fun of him he could not do else than listen, till becoming convinced suddenly that they were talking in good earnest without intention of fooling him he began to regret that he had said he had forgotten his dream, and rapped out: he was the prophet Samuel. Now what are you saying, Joseph? his father asked. Joseph would not say any more, but it pleased him to observe that neither his father nor his granny laughed at his admission, and seeing how interested they were in his dream he said: if you want to know all, Samuel said he had heard me say that I'd like to be a prophet. That was why he came back from the dead. But, Father, is it true that we are his descendants? He said that I was.

A most extraordinary dream, his father answered, for it has always been held in the family that we are descended from him. Do you really mean, Joseph, that the old man you saw in your dream told you he was Samuel and that you were his descendant? How should I have known if he hadn't told me? Joseph looked from one to the other and wondered why they had kept the secret of his ancestor from him. You laughed at me yesterday, Granny, when I said I'd like to be a prophet. Now what do you say? Answer me that. And he continued to look from one to the other for an answer. But neither had the wit to find an answer, so amazed were they at the news that the prophet Samuel had visited Joseph in a dream; and satisfied at the impression he had made and a little frightened by their silence Joseph stole out of the room, leaving his parents to place whatever interpretation they pleased on

his dream. Nor did he care whether they believed he had spoken the truth. He was more concerned with himself than with them, and conscious that something of great importance had happened to him he ascended the stairs, pausing at every step uncertain if he should return to ask for the whole of the story of Saul's anointment. It seemed to him to lack courtesy to return to the room in which he had seen the prophet, till he knew these things. But he could not return to ask questions: later he would learn what had happened to Samuel and Saul, and he entered the room, henceforth to him a sacred room, and stood looking through it, having all the circumstances of his dream well in mind: he was lying on his left side when Samuel had risen up before him, and it was there, upon that spot, in that space he had seen Samuel. His ancestor had seemed to fade away from the waist downwards, but his face was extraordinarily clear in the darkness, and Joseph tried to recall it. But he could only remember it as a face that a spirit might wear, for it was not made up of flesh but of some glowing matter or stuff, such as glow-worms are made of; nor could he call it ugly or beautiful, for it was not of this world. He had drawn the bed-clothes over his head, but — impelled he knew not why, for he was nearly dead with fright — he had poked his head out to see if the face was still there. The lips did not move, but he had heard a voice. The tones were not like any heard before, but he had listened to them all the same, and if he had not lost his wits again in an excess of fear he would have put questions to Samuel: he would have put questions if his tongue had not been tied back somewhere in the roof of his mouth. But the next time he would not be frightened and pull the bed-clothes over his head.

And convinced of his own courage he lay night after night thinking of all the great things he would ask the old man and of the benefit he would derive from his teaching. But

Samuel did not appear again, perhaps because the nights were so dark. Joseph was told the moon would become full again, but sleep closed his eyes when he should have been waking, and in the morning he was full of fear that perhaps Samuel had come and gone away disappointed at not finding him awake. But that could not be, for if the prophet had come he would have awakened him as he had done before. His ancestor had not come again: a reasonable thing to suppose, for when the dead return to the earth they do so with much pain and difficulty; and if the living, whom they come to instruct, cannot keep their eyes open, the poor dead wander back, and do not try to come between their descendants and their fate again.

But I will keep awake, he said, and resorted to all sorts of devices, keeping up a repetition of a little phrase: he will come to-night when the moon is full; and lying with one leg hanging out of bed; and these proving unavailing he strewed his bed with crumbs. But no ancestor appeared, and little by little he relinquished hope of ever being able to summon Samuel to his bedside, and accepted as an explanation of his persistent absence that Samuel had performed his duty by coming once to visit him and would not come again unless some new necessity should arise. It was then that the conviction began to mount into his brain that he must learn all that his grandmother could tell him about Saul and David, and learning from her that they had been a great trouble to Samuel he resolved never to allow a thought into his mind that the prophet would deem unworthy. To become worthy of his ancestor was now his aim, and when he heard that Samuel was the author of two sacred books it seemed to him that his education had been neglected: for he had not yet been taught to read. Another step in his advancement was the discovery that the language his father, his granny and himself spoke was not the language spoken by Samuel,

and every day he pressed his grandmother to tell him why the Jews had lost their language in Babylon, till he exhausted the old woman's knowledge and she said: well now, Son, if you want to hear any more about Babylon you must ask your father, for I have told you all I know. And Joseph waited eagerly for his father to come home, and plagued him to tell him a story.

But after a long day spent in the counting-house his father was often too tired to take him on his knee and instruct him, for Joseph's curiosity was unceasing and very often wearisome. Now, Joseph, his father said, you will learn more about these things when you are older. And why not now? he asked, and his grandmother answered that it was change of air that he wanted and not books; and they began to speak of the fierce summer that had taken the health out of all of them, and of how necessary it was for a child of that age to be sent up to the hills.

Dan looked into his son's face, and Rachel seemed to be right. A thin, wan little face, that the air of the hills will brighten, he said; and he began at once to make arrangements for Joseph's departure for a hill village, saying that the pastoral life of the hills would take his mind off Samuel, Hebrew and Babylon. Rachel was doubtful if the shepherds would absorb Joseph's mind as completely as his father thought. She hoped, however, that they would. As soon as he hears the sound of the pipe, his father answered. A prophecy this was, for while Joseph was resting after the fatigue of the journey, he was awakened suddenly by a sound he had never heard before, and one that interested him strangely. His nurse told him that the sound he was hearing was a shepherd's pipe. The shepherd plays and the flock follows, she said. And when may I see the flock coming home with the shepherd? he asked. To-morrow evening, she answered, and the time

seemed to him to loiter, so eager was he to see the flocks returning and to watch the she-goat milked.

And in the spring as his strength came back he followed the shepherds and heard from them many stories of wolves and dogs, and from a shepherd lad, whom he had chosen as a companion, he acquired knowledge of the plumage and the cries and the habits of birds, and whither he was to seek their nests: it had become his ambition to possess all the wild birds' eggs, one that was easily satisfied till he came to the egg of the cuckoo, which he sought in vain, hearing of it often, now here, now there, till at last he and the shepherd lad ventured into a dangerous country in search of it and remained there till news of their absence reached Magdala and Dan set out in great alarm with an armed escort to recover his son. He was very angry when he came upon him, but the trouble he had been put to and the ransom he had had to pay were very soon forgotten, so great was his pleasure at the strong healthy boy he brought back with him, and whose first question to Rachel was: are there cuckoos in Magdala?—father doesn't know. His grandmother could not tell him, but she was willing to make inquiries, but before any news of the egg had been gotten the hope to possess it seemed to have drifted out of Joseph's mind and to seem even a little foolish when he looked into his box, for many of his egg shells had been broken on the journey. See, Granny, he said, but on second thoughts he refused to show his chipped possessions. But thou wast once as eager to learn Hebrew, his grandmother said, and the chance words, spoken as she left the room, awakened his suspended interests. As soon as she returned, she was beset by questions, and the same evening his father had to promise that the best scribe in Galilee should be engaged to teach him: a discussion began between Dan and Rachel as to the most notable and trustworthy, and it was followed by Joseph so eagerly that they could not help

laughing; the questions he put to them regarding the different accomplishments of the scribes were very minute, and the phrase — But this one is a Greek scholar, stirred his curiosity. Why should he be denied me because he knows Greek? he asked, and his father could only answer that no one can learn two languages at the same time. But if he knows two languages, Joseph insisted. I cannot tell thee more, his father answered, than that the scribe I've chosen is a great Hebrew scholar.

He was no doubt a great scholar, but he was not the man that Joseph wished for: thin and tall and of gentle appearance and demeanour, he did not stir up a flame for work in Joseph, who, as soon as the novelty of learning Hebrew had worn off, began to hide himself in the garden. His father caught him one day sitting in a convenient bough, looking down upon his preceptor fairly asleep on a bench; and after this adventure he began to make a mocking stock of his preceptor, inventing all kinds of cruelties, and his truancy became so constant that his father was forced to choose another. This time a younger man was chosen, but he succeeded with Joseph not very much better than the first. After the second there came a third, and when Joseph began to complain of his ignorance his father said:

Well, Joseph, you said you wanted to learn Hebrew, and you have shown no application, and three of the most learned scribes in Galilee have been called in to teach you.

Joseph felt the reproof bitterly, but he did not know how to answer his father and he was grateful to his grandmother for her answer. Joseph isn't an idle boy, Dan, but his nature is such that he cannot learn from a man he doesn't like. Why don't ye give him Azariah as an instructor? Has he been speaking to thee about Azariah? Dan asked. Maybe, she said, and Dan's face clouded.

CHAPTER II

WE are to understand, Son, Dan said, on hearing that the fourth preceptor whom he had engaged to teach his son Hebrew had failed to give satisfaction, that you cannot learn from anybody but Azariah. Now, will you tell us what there is in Azariah more than in Shimshai, Benaiah or Zebad? and he waited for his son to speak, but as Joseph did not answer he asked: is it because he looks more like a prophet than any of the others? And Joseph, who still dreaded any allusion to prophets, turned into his corner mortified. But Rachel came forward directly and taking the child by the shoulders led him back to his father, asking Dan with a trace of anger in her voice why he should think it strange that the child should prefer to learn from Azariah rather than from a withered patriarch who never could keep his eyes open but always sat dozing in his chair like one in a dream.

It wasn't, Granny, because he went to sleep often; I could have kept him awake by kicking him under the table. Joseph stopped suddenly and looked from one to the other. Why then? his father asked, and on being pressed to say why he didn't want to learn Hebrew he said he had come to hate Hebrew, an admission which rendered his parents speechless for a moment. Come to hate Hebrew, they repeated one after the other, till frightened by their solemnity Joseph blurted out: you wouldn't like Hebrew if the scholar's fleas jumped on to you the moment you began. And pulling up his sleeves Joseph exhibited his arms. How could I learn Hebrew with three

fleas biting me and all at one time, one here, another there and a third down yonder. He always has three or four about him. No, Father, don't, don't ask me to learn Hebrew any more. But, Joseph, all Hebrew scholars haven't fleas about them. An unbelieving face confronted them, and Joseph looked as if he were uncertain whether he should laugh or cry: but seeing that his parents liked his story he began to laugh. We've tried several preceptors but you're hard to please, Joseph. Now what fault did you find with — and while Dan searched his memory for the name Joseph interjected that the little fellow whose back bulged like Granny's chest wouldn't let him read the interesting parts of the Scriptures but kept him always at the Psalms and the Proverbs. And he was always telling me about Hillel, who was a good man, but good men aren't as interesting as prophets, Joseph rapped out. And wilt thou tell us what he told thee about these pious men? Dan asked, a smile playing about his long thin mouth. That the law didn't matter as long as we were virtuous, Joseph muttered, and he was always explaining the stories that I understood quite well when Granny told them. So it was Hiram that confirmed you in your distaste for Hebrew, Dan said, and the child stood looking at his father, not quite sure if it would be in his interest to accept or repudiate the suggestion. He would have refused to give a direct answer (such is the way of children) but the servant relieved him of his embarrassment: Azariah was at the gate asking for shelter from the rain.

From the rain! Dan said, rising suddenly. It is coming down very fast, Mother, but we were so engaged in listening to Joseph that we didn't hear it. Shall we ask him in, Joseph? The child's face lighted up. Now isn't it strange, Rachel said he should be here to-day? We haven't seen him for months, and now in the middle of a talk about tutors — aren't you going to ask him in? Of course,

Dan said, and he instructed the servant to ask the scribe to come upstairs. And now, Joseph, I hope you'll listen to all that Azariah says, giving quiet and reasonable answers. And not too many questions, mind!

Joseph promised to be good and quiet and to keep himself from putting questions. I will listen attentively, he said, and he seized on the last chance available to his tongue to tell that he had often seen Azariah in the lanes. He doesn't see us, he walks like one in a dream, his hair blowing in the wind. But when he does see us he speaks very kindly . . . I think I'd like to learn Hebrew from him. Rachel laid her finger on her lips; the door opened and Azariah advanced into the room with a long grave Jewish stride, apologising to Dan as he came for his sudden intrusion into their midst, mentioning the heavy rain in a graceful phrase. Joseph, who was on the watch for everything, could see that his father was full of respect for Azariah, and hearing him say that it was some years since Azariah had been in his house he began to wonder if there had been a quarrel between them; it seemed to him that his father was a little afraid of Azariah, which was strange, for he himself did not feel in the least afraid of Azariah but an almost uncontrollable desire to go and sit on his knee.

Here is my boy Joseph: and, Azariah, you will be interested to hear that we were talking about you for the last quarter of an hour.

Azariah raised his thick eyebrows and waited to be told how he had come to be the subject of their talk, though he half knew the reason, for in a village like Magdala it soon gets about that four preceptors have been sent away unable to teach the rich man's son. He has made up his mind, Dan said, to learn Hebrew and Greek from none but you. No, Father, I didn't make up my mind. But I couldn't learn from the others and I told you why. Are you sure that you can learn from me? Azariah asked. Joseph

became shy at once, but he liked to feel Azariah's friendly hand upon his shoulder, and when Dan asked the scribe to be seated Joseph followed him, and standing beside his chair asked him if he would teach him Hebrew, a question Azariah did not answer. You will teach me, he insisted, and Dan and Rachel kept silence, so that they might better observe Joseph working round Azariah with questions; and they were amused, for Joseph's curiosity had overcome his shyness; and, quite forgetful of his promise to listen and not to talk, he had begun to beg the scribe to tell him if the language they spoke had been brought back from Babylon, and how long it was since people had ceased to speak Hebrew. Azariah set himself to answer these questions; Joseph gave him close attention, and when Azariah ceased speaking he said: when may I begin my lessons? And he put the question so innocently that his father could not help laughing. But, Joseph, he said, Azariah has not yet promised to teach you, and I wouldn't advise him to try to teach a boy that has refused to learn from four preceptors. But it will be different with you, Sir, Joseph murmured, taking Azariah's hand. You will teach me, won't you? When will you begin?

Azariah answered that it could not be this week, for he was going to Arimathea. The town we came from, Dan said. I am still known as Dan of Arimathea, though I have lived here twenty years. I too shall be known as Joseph of Arimathea, Joseph interjected. I'd like to be Joseph of Arimathea much better than Joseph of Magdala.

You needn't shake your head at Magdala, Dan said. Magdala has done well for us. To which Joseph answered nothing, but it was not long, however, before he went to his father saying that he would like to go to Arimathea, and in charge of Azariah.

You are asking too much, Joseph, his father answered him. No, I don't think I am, and his honour Azariah