

...After a Few Words...

Randall Garrett



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ...AFTER A FEW WORDS... ***

... After a Few Words ...

by Seaton McKettrig

Illustrated by Summer

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This is a science-fiction story. History is a science; the other part is, as all Americans know, the most fictional field we have today.

He settled himself comfortably in his seat, and carefully put the helmet on, pulling it down firmly until it was properly seated. For a moment, he could see nothing.

Then his hand moved up and, with a flick of the wrist, lifted the visor. Ahead of him, in serried array, with lances erect and pennons flying, was the forward part of the column. Far ahead, he knew, were the Knights Templars, who had taken the advance. Behind the Templars rode the mailed knights of Brittany and Anjou. These were followed by King Guy of Jerusalem and the host of Poitou.

He himself, Sir Robert de Bouain, was riding with the Norman and English troops, just behind the men of Poitou. Sir Robert turned slightly in his saddle. To his right, he could see the brilliant red-and-gold banner of the lion-hearted Richard of England—*gules, in pale three lions passant*

guardant or. Behind the standard-bearer, his great war horse moving with a steady, measured pace, his coronet of gold on his steel helm gleaming in the glaring desert sun, the lions of England on his firm-held shield, was the King himself.

Further behind, the Knights Hospitallers protected the rear, guarding the column of the hosts of Christendom from harassment by the Bedouins.

"By our Lady!" came a voice from his left. "Three days out from Acre, and the accursed Saracens still elude us."

Sir Robert de Bouain twisted again in his saddle to look at the knight riding alongside him. Sir Gaeton de l'Arc-Tombé sat tall and straight in his saddle, his visor up, his blue eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun.

Sir Robert's lips formed a smile. "They are not far off, Sir Gaeton. They have been following us. As we march parallel to the seacoast, so they have been marching with us in those hills to the east."

"Like the jackals they are," said Sir Gaeton. "They assail us from the rear, and they set up traps in our path ahead. Our spies tell us that the Turks lie ahead of us in countless numbers. And yet, they fear to face us in open battle."

"Is it fear, or are they merely gathering their forces?"

"Both," said Sir Gaeton flatly. "They fear us, else they would not dally to amass so fearsome a force. If, as our informers tell us, there are uncounted Turks to the fore, and if, as we are aware, our rear is being dogged by the Bedouin and the black horsemen of Egypt, it would seem that Saladin has at hand more than enough to overcome us, were they all truly Christian knights."

"Give them time. We must wait for their attack, sir knight. It were foolhardy to attempt to seek them in their own hills, and yet they must stop us. They will attack before we reach Jerusalem, fear not."

"We of Gascony fear no heathen Musselman," Sir Gaeton growled. "It's this Hellish heat that is driving me mad." He pointed toward the eastern hills. "The sun is yet low, and already the heat is unbearable."

Sir Robert heard his own laugh echo hollowly within his helmet. "Perhaps 'twere better to be mad when the assault comes. Madmen fight better than men of cooler blood." He knew that the others were baking inside their heavy armor, although he himself was not too uncomfortable.

Sir Gaeton looked at him with a smile that held both irony and respect. "In truth, sir knight, it is apparent that you fear neither men nor heat. Nor is your own blood too cool. True, I ride with your Normans and your English and your King Richard of the Lion's Heart, but I am a Gascon, and have sworn no fealty to him. But to side with the Duke of Burgundy against King Richard—" He gave a short, barking laugh. "I fear no man," he went on, "but if I had to fear one, it would be Richard of England."

Sir Robert's voice came like a sword: steely, flat, cold, and sharp. "My lord the King spoke in haste. He has reason to be bitter against Philip of France, as do we all. Philip has deserted the field. He has returned to France in haste, leaving the rest of us to fight the Saracen for the Holy Land leaving only the contingent of his vassal the Duke of Burgundy to remain with us."

"Richard of England has never been on the best of terms with Philip Augustus," said Sir Gaeton.

"No, and with good cause. But he allowed his anger against Philip to color his judgment when he spoke harshly against the Duke of Burgundy. The Duke is no coward, and Richard Plantagenet well knows it. As I said, he spoke in haste."

"And you intervened," said Sir Gaeton.

"It was my duty." Sir Robert's voice was stubborn. "Could we have permitted a quarrel to develop between the two finest knights and warleaders in Christendom at this crucial point? The desertion of Philip of France has cost us dearly. Could we permit the desertion of Burgundy, too?"

"You did what must be done in honor," the Gascon conceded, "but you have not gained the love of Richard by doing so."

Sir Robert felt his jaw set firmly. "My king knows I am loyal."

Sir Gaeton said nothing more, but there was a look in his eyes that showed that he felt that Richard of England might even doubt the loyalty of Sir Robert de Bouain.

Sir Robert rode on in silence, feeling the movement of the horse beneath him.

There was a sudden sound to the rear. Like a wash of the tide from the sea came the sound of Saracen war cries and the clash of steel on steel mingled with the sounds of horses in agony and anger.

Sir Robert turned his horse to look.

The Negro troops of Saladin's Egyptian contingent were thundering down upon the rear! They clashed with the Hospitallers, slamming in like a rain of heavy stones, too close in for the use of bows. There was only the sword against armor, like the sound of a thousand hammers against a thousand anvils.

"Stand fast! Stand fast! Hold them off!" It was the voice of King Richard, sounding like a clarion over the din of battle.

Sir Robert felt his horse move, as though it were urging him on toward the battle, but his hand held to the reins, keeping the great charger in check. The King had said "Stand fast!" and this was no time to disobey the orders of Richard.

The Saracen troops were coming in from the rear, and the Hospitallers were taking the brunt of the charge. They fought like madmen, but they were slowly being forced back.

The Master of the Hospitallers rode to the rear, to the King's standard, which hardly moved in the still desert air, now that the column had stopped moving.

The voice of the Duke of Burgundy came to Sir Robert's ears.

"Stand fast. The King bids you all to stand fast," said the duke, his voice fading as he rode on up the column toward the knights of Poitou and the Knights Templars.

The Master of the Hospitallers was speaking in a low, urgent voice to the King: "My lord, we are pressed on by the enemy and in danger of eternal infamy. We are losing our horses, one after the other!"

"Good Master," said Richard, "it is you who must sustain their attack. No one can be everywhere at once."

The Master of the Hospitallers nodded curtly and charged back into the fray.

The King turned to Sir Baldwin de Carreo, who sat a horse nearby, and pointed toward the eastern hills. "They will come from there, hitting us in the flank; we cannot afford to amass a rearward charge. To do so would be to fall directly into the hands of the Saracen."

A voice very close to Sir Robert said: "Richard is right. If we go to the aid of the Hospitallers, we will expose the column to a flank attack." It was Sir Gaeton.

"My lord the King," Sir Robert heard his voice say, "is right in all but one thing. If we allow the Egyptians to take us from the rear, there will be no need for Saladin and his Turks to come down on our flank. And the Hospitallers cannot hold for long at this rate. A charge at full gallop would break the Egyptian line and give the Hospitallers breathing time. Are you with me?"

"Against the orders of the King?"

"The King cannot see everything! There are times when a man must use his own judgment! You said you were afraid of no man. Are you with me?"

After a moment's hesitation, Sir Gaeton couched his lance. "I'm with you, sir knight! Live or die, I follow! Strike and strike hard!"

"Forward then!" Sir Robert heard himself shouting. "Forward for St. George and for England!"

"St. George and England!" the Gascon echoed.

Two great war horses began to move ponderously forward toward the battle lines, gaining momentum as they went. Moving in unison, the two knights, their horses now at a fast trot, lowered their lances, picking their Saracen targets with care. Larger and larger loomed the Egyptian cavalymen as the horses changed pace to a thundering gallop.

The Egyptians tried to dodge, as they saw, too late, the approach of the Christian knights.

Sir Robert felt the shock against himself and his horse as the steel tip of the long ash lance struck the Saracen horseman in the chest. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Sir Gaeton, too, had scored.

The Saracen, impaled on Sir Robert's lance, shot from the saddle as he died. His lighter armor had hardly impeded the incoming spear-point, and now his body dragged it down as he dropped toward the desert sand. Another Moslem cavalryman was charging in now, swinging his curved saber, taking advantage of Sir Robert's sagging lance.

There was nothing else to do but drop the lance and draw his heavy broadsword. His hand grasped it, and it came singing from its scabbard.

The Egyptian's curved sword clanged against Sir Robert's helm, setting his head ringing. In return, the knight's broadsword came about in a sweeping arc, and the Egyptian's horse rode on with the rider's headless body.

Behind him, Sir Robert heard further cries of "St. George and England!"

The Hospitallers, taking heart at the charge, were going in! Behind them came the Count of Champagne, the Earl of Leister, and the Bishop of Beauvais, who carried a great warhammer in order that he might not break Church Law by shedding blood.

Sir Robert's own sword rose and fell, cutting and hacking at the enemy. He himself felt a dreamlike detachment, as though he were watching the battle

rather than participating in it.

But he could see that the Moslems were falling back before the Christian onslaught.

And then, quite suddenly, there seemed to be no foeman to swing at. Breathing heavily, Sir Robert sheathed his broadsword.

Beside him, Sir Gaeton did the same, saying: "It will be a few minutes before they can regroup, sir knight. We may have routed them completely."

"Aye. But King Richard will not approve of my breaking ranks and disobeying orders. I may win the battle and lose my head in the end."

"This is no time to worry about the future," said the Gascon. "Rest for a moment and relax, that you may be the stronger later. Here—have an *Old Kings*."

He had a pack of cigarettes in his gauntleted hand, which he proffered to Sir Robert. There were three cigarettes protruding from it, one slightly farther than the others. Sir Robert's hand reached out and took that one.

"Thanks. When the going gets rough, I really enjoy an *Old Kings*."

He put one end of the cigarette in his mouth and lit the other from the lighter in Sir Gaeton's hand.

"Yes, sir," said Sir Gaeton, after lighting his own cigarette, "*Old Kings* are the greatest. They give a man real, deep-down smoking pleasure."

"There's no doubt about it, *Old Kings* are a *man's* cigarette." Sir Robert could feel the soothing smoke in his lungs as he inhaled deeply. "That's great. When I want a cigarette, I don't want just *any* cigarette."

"Nor I," agreed the Gascon. "*Old Kings* is the only real cigarette when you're doing a real *man's* work."

"That's for sure." Sir Robert watched a smoke ring expand in the air.

There was a sudden clash of arms off to their left. Sir Robert dropped his cigarette to the ground. "The trouble is that doing a real he-man's work

doesn't always allow you to enjoy the fine, rich tobaccos of *Old Kings* right down to the very end."

"No, but you can always light another later," said the Gascon knight.

King Richard, on seeing his army moving suddenly toward the harassed rear, had realized the danger and had charged through the Hospitallers to get into the thick of the fray. Now the Turks were charging down from the hills, hitting—not the flank as he had expected, but the rear! Saladin had expected him to hold fast!

Sir Robert and Sir Gaeton spurred their chargers toward the flapping banner of England.

The fierce warrior-king of England, his mighty sword in hand, was cutting down Turks as though they were grain-stalks, but still the Saracen horde pressed on. More and more of the terrible Turks came boiling down out of the hills, their glittering scimitars swinging.

Sir Robert lost all track of time. There was nothing to do but keep his own great broadsword moving, swinging like some gigantic metronome as he hacked down the Moslem foes.

And then, suddenly, he found himself surrounded by the Saracens! He was isolated and alone, cut off from the rest of the Christian forces! He glanced quickly around as he slashed another Saracen from pate to breastbone. Where was Sir Gaeton? Where were the others? Where was the red-and-gold banner of Richard?

He caught a glimpse of the fluttering banner far to the rear and started to fall back.

And then he saw another knight nearby, a huge man who swung his sparkling blade with power and force. On his steel helm gleamed a golden coronet! Richard!

And the great king, in spite of his prowess was outnumbered heavily and would, within seconds, be cut down by the Saracen horde!

Without hesitation, Sir Robert plunged his horse toward the surrounded monarch, his great blade cutting a path before him.

He saw Richard go down, falling from the saddle of his charger, but by that time his own sword was cutting into the screaming Saracens and they had no time to attempt any further mischief to the King. They had their hands full with Sir Robert de Bouain.

He did not know how long he fought there, holding his charger motionless over the inert body of the fallen king, hewing down the screaming enemy, but presently he heard the familiar cry of "For St. George and for England" behind him. The Norman and English troops were charging in, bringing with them the banner of England!

And then Richard was on his feet, cleaving the air about him with his own broadsword. Its bright edge, besmeared with Saracen blood, was biting viciously into the foe.

The Turks began to fall back. Within seconds, the Christian knights were boiling around the embattled pair, forcing the Turks into retreat. And for the second time, Sir Robert found himself with no one to fight.

And then a voice was saying: "You have done well this day, sir knight. Richard Plantagenet will not forget."

Sir Robert turned in his saddle to face the smiling king.

"My lord king, be assured that I would never forget my loyalty to my sovereign and liege lord. My sword and my life are yours whenever you call."

King Richard's gauntleted hand grasped his own. "If it please God, I shall never ask your life. An earldom awaits you when we return to England, sir knight."

And then the king mounted his horse and was running full gallop after the retreating Saracens.

Robert took off his helmet.

He blinked for a second to adjust his eyes to the relative dimness of the studio. After the brightness of the desert that the televicaron helmet had projected into his eyes, the studio seemed strangely cavelike.

"How'd you like it, Bob?" asked one of the two producers of the show.

Robert Bowen nodded briskly and patted the televike helmet. "It was O.K.," he said. "Good show. A little talky at the beginning, and it needs a better fade-out, but the action scenes were fine. The sponsor ought to like it—for a while, at least."

"What do you mean, 'for a while'?"

Robert Bowen sighed. "If this thing goes on the air the way it is, he'll lose sales."

"Why? Commercial not good enough?"

"*Too* good! Man, I've smoked *Old Kings*, and, believe me, the real thing never tasted as good as that cigarette did in the commercial!"

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