The Sons of Adam

Harry Bingham

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination, other than the names of certain historical characters from the early days of the oil industry. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2003
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Harry Bingham 2003

The Author asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 0 00 715792 4

Typeset in Sabon
by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

1

Whitcombe House, Hampshire, 23 August 1893

The beginning?

To hell with beginnings. Beginnings are excuses, apologies for failure. If things turned out disastrous – and they did – then that had everything to do with the way three young men chose to behave, nothing to do with the way things started out.

On the other hand, people are only human. Once a ball starts rolling it's hard to stop it. A beginning is a beginning, and on this occasion, the beginning wasn't just bad.

It was awful.



It happened like this.

A small boy, a seven-year-old, stands in a kitchen. He's building himself a blackberry pudding as big as his head. The cook stands by, face red in the firelight, managing pots of water boiling on the stove, a newly made pot of coffee steaming to the side. The scene is domestic, quiet, happy.

Upstairs, the little boy's mother, Lady Pamela Montague, is in labour for the fourth time. Of her first three children, only one – the blackberry-pudding-guzzling Guy – survived more than a few weeks. She and her husband, Sir Adam, are understandably

anxious this time, but everything is proceeding normally. The doctor and midwife are in attendance.

So far, so nothing.

No births. No deaths. No hatreds. And best of all: no beginnings.

But, in a second, that changed.

All of a sudden there was a bang at the door, the jiggle of a latch, a blast of cool air. A tiny girl flitted in, as though blown by the wind. A sweep of rain washed the step behind her.

'Please miss, please sir, please help.' The tiny girl bobbed and curtsied, desperate with anxiety. 'My ma's ill. She's having a baby, only it's got stuck, and she says she can't, and she's gone as white as anything, and my dad said to run to the big house for help as fast as I could, and please miss, please miss, please miss.'

Mrs White, the cook, brought the girl further into the light.

'Are you Jack Creeley's little girl, dear?'

'Please, miss. Yes, miss. Sally Creeley, and my ma's having a baby and –'

'Well, dear, it never rains but it pours. You just pop yourself down while I go and speak to Sir Adam. If you want you can –'

Guy stopped her.

It wasn't a big interruption, but it was a decisive one. He raised his hand, like a man stopping a horse.

'No need, Cookie. I shall tell him myself.' He lifted his pudding, the coffee for his father, then turned to the little girl. 'You can go back home and when the doctor is no longer wanted here, he can come to you. For the time being, he's required here.'

He set off up the stairs. As he did so, he muttered to himself, 'Oh, and it's five guineas the visit, by the way, and someone to take care of his horse.'

Once upstairs, he set down his trophies. Coffee for his father, blackberry pud for himself. He said nothing about Sally Creeley. He said nothing about the little girl's mother.

In the seven years he'd been alive in the world, Guy Montague had learned that there are two sorts of people: those who can afford doctors and those who can't. It seemed like a simple lesson, the most obvious thing in the world.

He finished his pudding, concealed a belch, and went to bed.



That night, after a twelve-hour labour, Pamela Montague gave birth to a healthy baby boy, a bawling little bundle with lungs like steam-bellows. The birth proved to be perfectly simple. No complications. No difficulties at all.

The same night, in one of the short rows of cottages that housed the estate workers, a young man, Jack Creeley, was forced to watch as his wife screamed through the night, helped only by a couple of untrained girls from the village. In the end, Creeley himself ran up to the big house and begged to speak to Sir Adam. As soon as Sir Adam heard the man's story, he sent doctor and midwife racing across to the cottages.

Too late. A simple breech birth, which any doctor or any midwife could have simply and speedily corrected, had exhausted the mother and complicated the baby's position. The doctor, acting quickly, made the incisions that enabled him to deliver the baby by Caesarean section. The doctor was a good one, skilled and decisive. A baby boy was delivered, healthy and screaming, into the little cottage bedroom.

Healthy but motherless.

Poor Betsy Creeley, just twenty-six years old, was exhausted even before the operation began. She lost too much blood and never recovered consciousness. By the time dawn broke on 24 August, the little boy's mother was dead.

And there it was.

Two births.

One death.

One selfish act with terrible consequences.

A beginning.

2

Jack Creeley couldn't keep his son, of course.

He was a single working man with a little girl already dependent on him. In the short term, there were local women happy to help out, but in the longer term, he could see no option other than to ask his sister – now living ninety miles away in Devon – to take both the girl and the baby. His sister would certainly agree, but Devon might as well have been the other side of the world for all that Jack would ever see them. He felt like a man living with the pain of a triple bereavement.

But help was closer than he thought.

Up at the big house, Sir Adam and Lady Pamela had a worry of their own. Their new-born son, Alan, had a cough. Not a big one. In fact, it was quite definitely a minor one. The midwife said the cough was normal. The doctor agreed. Sir Adam agreed. But it was a cough. Pamela had already lost two children under the age of six weeks and she was terrified of losing a third.

Sir Adam spent a day thinking things through before making his suggestion. His wife agreed instantly and Sir Adam went to approach Jack Creeley. His proposal was this.

Jack Creeley's young boy, christened Thomas after his maternal grandfather, would be taken in by the Montagues.

He and the tiny Alan Montague would grow up as brothers. They would share rooms, toys, schooling – everything. In Sir Adam's words, the infant Tom 'would grow up as one of our own. He would in all ways be brother to our own son Alan. You, of course, will still be his father. He'll call you Father and me Uncle. You'll see Tom whenever you wish, just say the word.'

For Jack Creeley, the offer was far too good to refuse. It meant his son would grow up in sight and sound of his father. It gave the poor man some good thing to snatch from the wreckage his life had so suddenly become. He said yes.

For the Montagues, the new arrangement brought only benefits. There was guilt, of course. Guy's behaviour had been unforgivable – and he had been well beaten for it. On a more constructive side, offering a home to Tom seemed like the least they could do.

But it was more than that. Pamela loved babies, and the borrowed child went some way to make up for the two she had lost. But what was more, something about Tom's arrival seemed to work like a charm on the infant Alan. From the moment Tom's crib arrived in the big house, Alan's cough went away, never to return. All through the dangerous first years of childhood, neither Alan nor Tom was once affected by any serious illness.

Even better, and from the very first months, it became clear that the two boys were unusually close. As babies, their cribs stood in the same room. If, for any reason, one of the cribs were moved, the other baby would instantly wake up and scream. Likewise, when they were toddlers Tom began to be taken down to his father, Jack's, cottage for regular visits. At first it was thought that Tom would prefer to go by himself, but any time the experiment was tried, the little boy would turn black in the face and knot his fists until Alan was allowed to come along too.

By the end of the century, the two boys were six and a half years old. They were thriving, happy, and healthy.

Alan had grown a fraction taller, Tom a fraction broader than the other. Alan was pale-haired, with eyebrows so blond you could hardly see them. Tom was already developing dramatic good looks: glossy, dark, curly hair with eyes of a startling blue. The boys were infinitely close. They went everywhere together. Their communication was so close, they often appeared to read each other's thoughts.

Visitors to the house invariably mistook them for twins (not identical, of course), and after a while the Montagues stopped bothering to correct them. The boys *were* twins. Born the same night, reared in neighbouring cribs, suckled at the same breasts. The boys *were* twins. The only difference was that one called Sir Adam 'Father', the other referred to him as 'Uncle'. The difference is a small one, even tiny. But that wasn't the point.

Even the smallest things can grow big enough to kill.