RED EVE

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

A Great Story of Chivalry and Mystery and Love in the Middle Ages

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CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued.)

"Aye," answered the Man in a new voice, a great voice that semed to fill the air like the mutter of distant thunder, "I am Murgh, Gate of the Gods, and since you have striven to defend Murgh, he who is the friend of all men, although they know it not, will above all be your friend and the friend of those you love."

He stretched out his long arms and laid his white gloved hands for an instant, one of them upon Hugh's head and one on the shoulder of Gray Dick, who hat upon the pillar of stone.

Hugh muttered, "I thank you," not knowing what else to say, but in his heart he wondered what kind of friendship this mighty and awful being would show to him and his. Perhaps he might hold that the truest kindness would be to remove him and them from the miseries of a sinful world.

If Murgh read his thoughts he only answered them with that smile of his cold eyes which was more awful than the frown of any mortal man. Turning his head slowly he began to contemplate Dick sitting on his stone.

"If I had a son," he said, "by that face of yours you might be he."

"Perchance," answered Dick, "since I never knew for certain who my father was. Only I have always heard that Life begets, not Death."

"Death! You honor me with a great name. Well, life and death are one, and you and I are one with the moon and the stars above you and many other things and beings that you cannot see. Therefore, the begetter and the begotten are one in the Hand that holds them all."

"Aye," answered Dick, "and so my bow and I are one, I've often thought it. Only you nearly made me one with my own arrow, which is closer kinship than I seek," and he touched the cut upon his chin. "Since you are so wise, my father, or my son, tell me, what is the Hand that holds them all?"

"Gladly. Only if I do, first I must ask you to die, then—say in a minute or two—you shall know."

Dick peered at him doubtfully, and said:

"If that be so I think I'll wait for the answer, which I am sure to learn soon or late."

"Ah! Many men have thought the same, and you have sent some to seek it, have you not, being so good an archer? For instance, that was a long shaft you sent before Crecy fray at the filthy fool who mocked your English host and who doubtless now knows the answer to your riddle."

"Who told you of that?" asked Dick, springing up.

"A friend of mine who was in the battle. He said also that your name was Richard the Archer."

"A friend! I believe that you were there yourself, as, if you are Death, you may well have been."

"Perhaps you are right, Richard. Have I not just told you that we all are one; yes, even the slayer and the slain. Therefore, if my friend was there, I was there, and if you were there I was there, and it was my hand that drew yonder great black bow of yours, and my eye that guided the straight shaft which laid the foul mouthed jester low. Why, did you not say as much yourself when your master here bade farewell to his father on the ship at Calais? What were the words? Oh! I remember them. You wondered how One I may not name," and he bowed his solemn head, "came to make that black bow of yours and you 'the Death that draws it.'"

Now at length Gray Dick's courage gave out.

"Of no man upon earth am I afraid," he said, "but from you, O god or devil, who read the secret hearts of men and hear their secret words, my blood flows backward as it did when first my eyes fell on you. You would kill me because I dared to shoot at you. Well, kill, but do not torture. It is unworthy of a knight, even if he took his accolade in hell," and he placed his hands over his eyes and stood before him with bent head waiting for the end.

"Why give me such high names, Richard the fatherless, when you have heard two humbler ones? Call me Murgh, as do my friends. Or call me the Gate, as do those who as yet know me less well. But talk not of gods or devils, lest suddenly one of them should answer you. Nay, man, have no fear. Those who seek Death he often flees, as I think he flees from you tonight. Yet, let us see if we cannot send a longer shaft, you and I, than that which we loosed on Crecy field. Give me the bow."

Dick, although he had never suffered living man to draw it before, handed him the black bow, and with it a war shaft, which he drew from his quiver.

"Tell me, Archer Dick, have you any enemy in this town of Venice? Because, if so, we might try a shot at him."

"One or two, Gate Murgh," answered Dick, "but whatever your half of me may do, my bit of you does not love to strike down men by magic in the dark."

"Well said and better thought. Then bethink you of something that belongs to an enemy that will serve as well for a test of shooting. Ah! I thank you, well though again. Yes, I see the mark, though 'tis far, is it not? Now set your mind on it. But stay! First, will you know this arrow again?"

"Surely," answered Dick, "I made it myself; moreover, though two of the feathers are black, the third is white with four black spots and a little splash of brown. Look on it, Sir Hugh; it cannot be mistook."

Hugh looked and nodded; speak he could not for the life of him.

Then Murgh began to play a little with the bow, and, oh! strange and dreadful was the music that came from its string beneath the touch of his gloved fingers. It sung like a harp and wailed like a woman, so fearfully that the lad Day, who all this while stood by aghast, stopped his ears with his fingers and Hugh groaned. Then this awful archer swiftly set the arrow on the string.

"Now, think with your mind and shoot with your heart," he said in his cold voice, and, saying, drew and loosed as though at a hazard.

Out toward Venice leaped the shaft with a rushing sound like that of wings and, as it seemed to the watchers, light went with it, for it traveled like a beam of light. Far over the city it traveled, describing a mighty arc, such as no arrow ever flew before, then sank down and vanished behind some palace tower.

"A very good bow," said the shooter as he handed it back to Dick. "Never hav I known a better, who have used thousands made of many a substance. Indeed, I think that I remember it. Did you chance to find it many years ago by the seashore? Yes. Well, it was a gift of mine to a great archer who died upon a ship. Nay, it is not strained; I can judge of the breaking strength of a bow. Whether or not I can judge the flight of an arrow you will learn hereafter. But that this one flew fast and far cannot be doubted since—did you watchers note it?—its speed made it shine like fire. That is caused by the rubbing of the air when aught travels through it very quickly. This night you have seen a meteor glow in the same fashion only because the air fretted it in its passage. In the East whence I come we produce fire just so. But let us be going, for I have much to do tonight and would look upon this fair Venice ere I sleep. I'll lead the way, having seen a map of the town which a traveler brought to the East. I studied it and now it comes back to my mind. Stay, let that youth give me his garment," and he pointed to David Day, who wore a silk cloak like the others, "since my foreign dress might excite remark, as it did but now."

In a moment Day had stripped himself of his light silk-hooded gown, and in another moment it was on the person of Murgh, though how it got there, when they came to think of it afterward, none could remember. Still ,the yellow and red headdress, the coal black silky furs, the yellow skirt, the gleaming pearls, all vanished beneath it. Nothing remained visible except the white fingerless gloves—why they were fingerless and what lay beneath them Hugh wondered—and the white shoes.

Forward they went across the Place of Arms, past the timber stand ornamented with banners, which Murgh stayed to contemplate for an instant, until they came to the mouth of the street, up which men had followed them, apparently with evil intentions.

"Sir Murgh," said Hugh, stepping forward, "you had best let me and my companion, Gray Dick, walk first down this place lest you should come to harm. When we passed it a while ago we thought that we heard robbers behind us, and in Venice, as we are told, such men use knives."

"Thank you for your kind warning, Sir Hugh," and even beneath the shadow of the silk hood Hugh thought that he saw his eyes smile, and seeing remembered all the folly of his talk.

"Yet I'll risk these robbers. Do you two and the lad keep behind me," he added in a sterner voice

So they advanced down the narrow street, the man called Murgh going first, Hugh, Gray Dick and the lad following meekly behind him. As they entered its shadows a low whistle sounded, but nothing happened for a while. When they had traversed about half its length, however, men, five or six of them in all, darted out of the gloom of a gateway and rushed at them. The faint light showed that they were masked and gleamed upon the blue steel of the daggers in their hands. Two of these men struck at Murgh with their knives, while the others tried to pass him, doubtless to attack his companions, but failed. Why they failed Hugh and Dick never knew. All they saw was that Murgh stretched out his white gloved hand, and they fell back.

The men who had struck at him fell back also, their daggers dropping to the ground, and fled away, followed by their companions, all except one, whom Murgh had seized. Hugh noted that he was a tall, thin fellow and that, unlike the rest, he had drawn no weapon, although it was at his signal that the other bravoes rushed on. This man Murgh seemed to hold with one hand while with the other he ripped the mask off his face, turning him so that the light shone on him.

Hugh and Dick saw the face and knew it for that of the priest who had accompanied Acour to England, he who had drugged Red Eve and read the mass of marriage over her while she was drugged.

"Who are you?" asked Murgh, in his light, cold voice. "By your face a priest, I think, one who serves some God of love and mercy. And yet you come upon this ill errand as a captain of assassins. Why do you seek to do murder, O priest of the God of mercy?"

Now some power seemed to drag the answer from Father Nicholas.

"Because I must," he said. "I have sold myself and must pay the price. Step leads to step, and he who runs may not stop upon them."

"No, Priest Nicholas, since ever they grow more narrow and more steep. Yet at the foot of them is the dark abyss, and, Murderer Nicholas, you have reached the last of all your steps Look at me!" and with one hand he threw back his hood.

Next instant they saw Nicholas rush staggering down the street, screaming with terror as he went. Then, as all the bravoes had gone, they continued their march, filled with reflections, till they came to the little landing stage where they had left the boat. It was still there, though the boatman was not.

"Let us borrow this boat," said Murgh. "As from my study of the map I know these water paths, I will be steersman and that tongue-tied lad shall row and tell me if I go wrong. First I will take you to the house where I think you said you lodged, and thence go to seek friends of my own in this city who will show me hospitality."

They glided on down the long canals in utter silence that was broken only by the soft dipping of the oars. The night was somewhat cooler now, for the bursting of the great meteor seemed to have cleared the air, or perhaps the gentle breeze that had sprung up, blowing from the open sea, tempered its stifling heat.

So it came about that although it grew late many people were gathered on the rivas or on the balconies of the fine houses which they passed, for the most part doubtless discussing the travelling star that had been seen in the sky. Or perhaps they had already heard rumors of the strange visitor who had come to Venice, although, however fast such news may fly, this seemed scarcely probable. At the least there they were, men and women, talking earnestly, and about them the three Englishmen noted a strange thing.

As their boat slipped by some influence seemed to pass from it to the minds of all these people. Their talk died out and was succeeded by a morne and heavy silence. They looked at it as though wondering why a sight so usual should draw their eyes. Then after a few irresolute moments the groups on the footpaths separated and went their ways without bidding each other good night. As they went many of them made that sign with their fingers that these Italians believed could avert evil, which gave them the appearance of all pointing at the boat or its occupants. Those in the balconies did the same thing and disappeared through the open widow places. More than any of the wonderful things that he had done, perhaps, this effect of the Eastern stranger's presence struck terror and foreboding to Hugh's heart.

At length they came to the end of that little street where they had hired the boat, for, although none had told him the way, thither their dread steersman brought them without fault. The lad David laid down his oars and mounted the steps that led to the street, which was quite deserted, even the bordering houses being in darkness.

"Hugh de Cressi and Richard the Fatherless," said Murgh, "you have seen wonderful things this night and made a strange friend, as you may think by chance, although truly in all the wide universe there is no room for such a thing as chance. Now my counsel to you and your companion is that you speak no word of these matters lest you should be set upon as wizards. We part, but we shall meet again twice more, and after many years a third time, but that third meeting do not seek, for it will be when your last grains of sand are running from the glass. Also you may see me at other times, but if so unless I speak to you do not speak to me. Now go your ways, fearing nothing. However great may seem your peril, I say to you, fear nothing. Soon you will hear ill things spoken of me. yet"—and here a touch of human wistfulness came into his inhuman voice—"I pray you, believe them not. When I am named Murgh the Fiend and Murgh the Sword, then think of me as Murgh the Helper. What I do is decreed by That which is greater than I, and if you could understand it, leads by terrible ways to a goal of good, as all things do. Richard the Archer, I will answer the riddle that you asked yourself upon the ship at Calais. The strength that made your black bow an instrument of doom made you who loose its shafts and me who can outshoot you far. As an arrow travels whither it is sent and there does its appointed work, so do you travel and so do I, and many another thing, seen and unseen, and therefore I told you truly that although we differ in degree yet are we one. Yes, even Murgh the Sword, Murgh the Gate and that bent wand of yours are one in the Hand that shaped and holds us both."

Then divesting himself of the long robe which he had borrowed from the lad, he handed it to Hugh, and taking the oars, rowed away clad in his rich, fantastic garb, which now, as at first, could be seen by all. He rowed away, and for a while the three whom he had left behind heard the soughing of the innumerable winds that went ever with him, after which came silence.

Silence, but not for long, for presently from the borders of the great canal into which his skiff must enter rose shouts of fear and rage, nearby at first, then further and further off, till these too were lost in silence.

"Oh! Sir Hugh!" sobbed poor David Day, "who and what is that dreadful man?"

"I think his name is Death," answered Hugh solemnly, while Dick nodded his head but said nothing.

"Then we must die," went on David in his terror, "and I am not fit to die."

"I think not," said Hugh again. "Be comforted. Death has passed us by. Only be warned also and, as he bade you, say nothing of all that you have heard and seen."

"By Death himself I'll say nothing for my life's sake," he replied faintly, for he was shaking in every limb.

Then they walked up the street to the yard door. As they went Hugh asked Dick what it was that he had in his mind as a mark for the arrow that Murgh had shot, that arrow which to his charmed sight had seemed to rush over Venice like a flake of fire.

"I'll not tell you, Master," answered Dick, "lest you should think me madder than I am, which tonight would be very mad indeed. Stay, though; I'll tell David here, that he may be a witness to my folly," and he called the young man to him and spoke with him apart.

Then they unlocked the courtyard gate and entered the house by the kitchen door, as it chanced quite unobserved, for now all the servants were abed. Indeed, of that household none ever knew that they had been outside its walls that night, since no one saw them go or return, and Sir Geoffrey and his lady thought that they had retired to their chamber.

They came to the door of their room, David still with them, for the place where he slept was at the end of this same passage.

"Bide here a while," said Dick to him. "My master and I may have a word to say to you presently."

Then they lit tapers from a little Roman lamp that burned all night in the passage and entered the room. Dick walked at once to the windowplace, looked and laughed a little.

"The arrow has missed," he said, "or rather," he added doubtfully, "the target is gone."

"What target?" asked Hugh wearily, for now he desired sleep more than he had ever done in all his life. Then he turned, the taper in his hand ,and started back suddenly, pointing to something which hung upon his bedpost that stood opposite to the window.

"Who nails his helm upon my bed?" he said. "Is this a challenge from some knight of Venice?"

Dick stepped forward and looked.

"An omen, not a challenge, I think. Come and see for yourself," he said.

This was what Hugh saw. Fixed to the post by a shaft which pierced it and the carved olive wood from side to side, was the helm that they had stripped from the body of Sir Pierre de la Roche, the helm of Sir Edmund Acour which Sir Pierre had worn at Crecy and Dick had tumbled out of his sack in the presence of the Doge before Cattrina's face. On his return to the house of Sir Geoffrey Carleon Dick had set it down in the centre of the open windowplace and left it there when they went out to survey the ground where they must fight upon the morrow.

Having studied it for a moment, Dick went to the door and called to David.

"Friend," he said, standing between him and the bed, so that he could see nothing, "what was it that just now I told you was in my mind when yonder Murgh asked me at what target he should shoot with my bow on the Place de Arms?"

"A knight's helm," answered David, "which stood in the window of your room at the Ambassador's house—a knight's helmet that had a swan for its crest."

"You hear?" said Dick to Hugh; "now come, both of you, and see. What is that which hangs upon the bedpost? Answer you, David, for perhaps my sight is bewitched."

"A knight's helm," answered David, "bearing the crest of a floating swan and held there by an arrow which has pierced the swan."

"What was the arrow like which I gave to one Murgh, master?" asked Dick again.

"It was a war arrow having two black feathers and the third white but checkered with four black spots and a smear of brown," answered Hugh.

"Then is that the arrow, master, which this Murgh loosed from more than a mile away?"

Hugh examined it with care. Thrice he examined it, point and shaft and feathers. Then, in a low voice, he answered:

"Yes."

CHAPTER XIV.

At the Place of Arms.

Notwithstanding all that has been told, Hugh and Dick never slept more soundly than they did that night, nor was their rest broken by any dreams. At half-past five in the morning—for they must be stirring early—David came to call them. He, too, it seemed, had slept well. Also in the light of day the worst of his fear had left him.

"I am wondering, Sir Hugh," he said, looking at him curiously, "whether I saw certain things last night down yonder at the Place of Arms and in the boat, or whether I thought I saw them."

"Doubtless you thought you saw them, David," answered Hugh, adding with meaning, "and it is not always well to talk of things we think that we have seen."

The lad, who was sharp enough, nodded, but as he turned to hand Hugh some garment his eye fell upon the swan crested helm that was still nailed by the long war shaft with two black feathers and one white to the carved olive wood post of the bed.

"It must have been a mighty arm that shot this arrow, Sir Hugh," he said reflectively, "which could pierce a casque of Milan steel from side to side and a hardwood post beyond. Well for the owner of the helm that his head was not inside of it."

"Very well and a very mighty arm, David. So mighty that I should say nothing about it for fear it should set another arrow upon another string and shoot again."

"God's truth, not I!" exclaimed David. "And for your comfort, sir, know that none saw us leave this house or re-enter it last night."

Then Hugh and Dick clothed themselves and saw to their weapons and mail, but this they did not don as yet, fearing lest the weight of it should weary them in that great heat, for although the day was so young the heat was terrible, more oppressive indeed than any they had yet known in Venice.

When they were ready and David had left them to see to the horse which de Cressi would ride in his combat with Cattrina, Hugh, as became a God-fearing knight whom Sir Andrew Arnold had instructed from childhood, crossed himself, knelt down and said his prayers, which that morning were long and earnest. Indeed, he would have confessed himself also if he could, only there was no priest at hand who knew his language, Sir Geoffrey's chaplain being away. After watching him a while even Gray Dick, whose prayers were few, followed his example, kneling in front of his bow as though it were an image that he worshipped. When they had risen again he said:

"You grieve that there is none to shrive us, master, but I hold otherwise, since when it was told what company we kept last night absolution might be lacking, which would weigh on you if not on me, who, after what I have learned of Father Nicholas and others, love but one priest, and he far away."

"Yet it is well to have the blessing of Holy Church ere such a business as ours, Dick; that, if it can be come by."

"Mayhap, master. But for my part I am content with that of Murgh, which he gave us, you may remember, or so I understood him. Moreover, did he not teach that he and all are but ministers of Him above? Therefore I go straight to the head of the stair," and he nodded toward the sky, "and am content to skip all the steps which are called priests and altars and Popes and saints and suchlike folk, living or dead, for if Murgh's wisdom be true, as I think, these are but garnishings to the dish which can well be spared by the hungry soul."

"Mayhap," Hugh answered dubiously, for his faith in such matters was that of his time, "yet were I you, Dick, I'd not preach that philosophy too loud lest the priests and Popes should have something to say to it—and the saints also, for aught I know, since I have always heard that they love not to be left out of our account with heaven."

"Well, if so," answered Dick, "I'll quote St. Murgh to them, who is a very fitting patron for an archer," and once again he glanced at the helm and the arrow with something not unlike fear in his cold eye.

Then they went down to the eating chamber, where they had been told that breakfast would be ready for them at seven of the clock, and there found Sir Geoffrey awaiting them.

"I trust that you have slept well, Sir Hugh," he said. "You were a wise knight to go to rest so early, having before you such a trial of your strength and manhood, and, so to speak, the honor of our King upon your hands."

"Very well, indeed; thank you, sir," answered Hugh. "And you?"

"Oh, ill, extremely ill. I do not know what is the matter with me or Venice either, whereof the very air seems poisoned. Feel the heat and see the haze! It is most unnatural. Moreover, although in your bed doubtless you saw it not, a great ball of fire blazed and burnt over the city last night. So bright was it that even in a darkened room each of us could see the color of the other's eyes. Later, too, there came a thin streak of flame that seemed to alight on or about this very house, and indeed I thought I heard a sound as of iron striking upon iron, but could find no cause for it."

"Wondrous happenings, sir," said Gray Dick. "Glad am I that we were not with you, lest the sight of them should have made us fearful on this morning of the combat."

"Wondrous happenings indeed, friend Richard," said Sir Geoffrey excitedly, "but you have not heard the half of them. The herald, who has just been here with the final articles of your fray, signed by the Doge and Cattrina, has told me much that I can scarce believe. He says that the great galley from this port, which is called 'Light of the East,' drifted up to the quay at the Place of Arms last night on her return voyage from Cyprus filled with dead and with no living thing aboard her save the devil in a yellow robe and a many hued headdress like a cockscomb with a red eye in it. He swears that this fiend landed and that the mob set on him, whereon two, some say three, other devils, clad in long black gowns, appeared out of the water and drove them back. Also, it seems that this same cockscombed Satan stole a boat and rowed about the city afterward, but now none can find him, although they have got the boat."

"Then they can be well satisfied," said Hugh, "since its owner has lost nothing but the hire, which with Satan at the oars is better than might be hoped. Perhaps he was not there after all, Sir Geoffrey."

"I know not, but at least the galley 'Light of the East' is there, for ever since the dawn they have been taking the dead out of her to bury them, and of these they say things too terrible to repeat, for no doctor can tell of what sickness they died, never having seen its like. For my part I pray it may not be catching.

Were I the Doge I would have towed her out to sea and scuttled her, cargo and all. Well, well, enough of these wild tales, of which God alone knows the truth. Come, eat, if you can, in this heat. We must be on the Place of Arms by half-past eight. You and the captain go thither in my own boat, Sir Hugh; your horse David Day takes on presently. And now, while you breakfast, I'll explain to you these articles, one by one, for they are writ in Italian, which you cannot read. Oh! oh!" and he pressed his hand upon his heart.

"What's the matter, sir?" asked Hugh anxiously.

"A pain in my breast, that is all, as though some one drove a dager through me. There, there, 'tis gone—now for the articles, and see you forget them not, for these Venetians are punctilious of such forms and ceremonies, especially when the case is that of combat to the death, which is rare among them."

The articles, which were lengthy, had been read, and the breakfast, or so much as they could eat of it, consumed. At last Hugh, accompanied by a Venetian squire of high birth, sent by the Doge to bear his casque and other armor, and Gray Dick, accompanied by no one and carrying the mail shirt in which he was to fight, like a housewife's parcel beneath his arm, although he wore bow on back, axe and dagger at side and iron cap upon his head, stood in the vestibule waiting for the Ambassador's barge of state. Presently, while they lingered thus, out from a side door came Lady Carleon, clothed in a white garment such as women wear when their dressing is half done, down which her gray hair hung dishevelled.

"I am come thus unkempt, Sir Hugh," she said, "for, not feeling well, I could not rise early, to bid you goodby, since I am sure that we shall not meet again, and, however much that black browed Doge may press it, I cannot go down yonder to see my countryman butchered in this heat."

"This is indeed gracious of you, Lady Carleon," said Hugh; then paused, for he knew not what to add.

"Not so, Sir Hugh, not so; 'tis for your sakes, in truth, since you remember you never told me what you would wish done—afterward. Your possessions also—where are they to be sent? Doubtless you have money and other things of value. Be sure that they shall be sealed up, I'll see to it myself, but—how shall I dispose of them?"

"Madam, I will tell you when I return," said Hugh shortly.

"Nay, nay, Sir Hugh; pray do not return. Those who are gone had best keep gone, I think, who always have had a loathing of ghosts. Therefore, I pray you, tell me now, but do not come back shinning like a saint and gibbering like a monkey at dead of night, because if you do I am sure I shall not understand, and if there is an error who will set it right?"

Hugh leaned against a marble pillar in the hall and looked at his hostess helplessly, while Sir Geoffrey, catching her drift at length, broke in:

"Cease such ill omened talk, wife. Think you that it is of a kind to give brave men a stomach in a fight to the end?"

"I know not, Geoffrey, but sure 'tis better to have these matters settled, for, as you often say, death is always near us."

"Aye, madam," broke in Gray Dick, who could bear no more of it, "death is always near to all of us, and especially so in Venice just now. Therefore, I pray you tell me—in case we should live and you should die, you and all about you—whether you have any commands to give as to what should be done with your gold and articles of value, or any messages to leave for friends in England."

Then, having uttered this grim jest, Dick took his master by the arm and drew him through the door. But afterward, for a reason that shall be told, he was sorry that it had ever passed his lips, although in the boat Sir Geoffrey applauded him, saying that his lady's melancholy had grown beyond all bearing, and that she did little but prate to him about his will and what color of marble he desired for his tomb.

After a journey that seemed long to Hugh, who wished to have this business over, they came to the Place of Arms. Their route there, however, was not the same which they had followed on the previous night, since, leaving the short way through the low part of the town untraversed, they rowed from one of the canals into the harbor itself, where they were joined by many other boats which waited for them, and so on to the quay. Hugh saw at once that the death ship, Light of the East, was gone, and incautiously said as much to Sir Geoffrey.

"Yes," he answered, "one of my rowers tells me that they have towed her to an island out at sea, since the stench from her holds was more than could be borne. But how did you know that she lay at this particular quay, Sir Hugh?"

"I thought you said so," he answered, carelessly, adding, to change the subject, "Look, our fray will not lack for spectators," and he pointed to the thousands who were already gathered upon the great tilting ground.

"No, no, all Venice will be there, for those people love a show, especially if there be death in it."

"Mayhap they will see more of him than they wish before all is done," muttered Gray Dick, pausing from the task of whetting his axe's edge with a little stone he carried in his pouch. Then he replaced the axe in its hanger and, drawing Hugh's sword from its sheath, began to give some final touches to its razor edge, saying: "Father Sir Andrew Arnold blessed it, which should be enough, but Milan steel is hard and this old battle blade will bite none the worse for an extra sharpening. Go for his throat, master, go for his throat, the mail is always thinnest there."

"God's truth, what a grim man!" exclaimed Sir Geoffrey, and so thought all in that boat and in those around them. At least, they looked at him askance as he whetted and whetted and then, plucking out one of his pale hairs from his head, let it fall upon the edge of the steel, which severed it in twain.

"There! That'll do," said Gray Dick, cheerfully, as he returned the long sword to its sheath, "and God help this Cattrina, say I, for he comes to his last battle. That is, unless he runs away," he added, after reflection.

They landed and were received by heralds blowing trumpets, and conducted through a great multitude of people with much pomp and ceremony to a pavilion which had been pitched for them, where they must arm and make ready.

This then they did, helped or hindered by bowing squires whose language they could not understand.

At length when it lacked but a quarter to the hour of nine David Day led Hugh's horse into the wide entrance of the pavilion, where they examined its armor, bridle, selle and trappings.

"The beast sweats already," said Hugh, "and so do I, who, to tell the truth, dread this heat more than Cattrina's sword. Pray that they get to the business quickly, or I shall melt like butter on a hot plate."

Then his lance was given to him, a lance that was sharp and strong, and when that had been tested by them both Hugh mounted the gray and at the agreed signal of a single blast upon a trumpet walked it slowly from the pavilion, Dick going at his side on foot.

At their coming a shout went up from the assembled thousands, for in truth it seemed, as Sir Geoffrey had said, that all the folk in Venice were gathered on that place. When they had finished shouting the people began to criticize, finding much in the appearance of this pair that moved their ready wit. Indeed there was little show about them, for Hugh's plain armor, which lacked all ornament or inlay, was worn with war and travel, and his horse came along as soberly as if it were going out to plough. Nor was there anything fine about the apparel of Gray Dick, who wore a loose chain shirt much out of fashion—it was that which Sir Andrew had given to Hugh—an iron cap with ear pieces and leather buskins on his legs. In his hand was his axe, heavy but not overlarge; at his side hung a great knife, and on his back was the long black bow and a quiver of arrows.

Thus arrayed, taking no heed of the jests and chatter of the multitude, they were led to the front of the bedecked timber stand which they had seen on the previous night. In the centre of this stand, occupying a kind of tribune, sat the Doge Dandolo in state and with him many nobles and captains, while to right and left the whole length of the course, for the stand was very long, were packed a countless number of the best born men and women in Venice. These, however, were but a tithe of the spectators, who encircled the whole Place of Arms in one serried horde which was kept back by a line of soldiers.

Arriving in front of the Doge's tribune, the pair halted and saluted him, whereon he and his escort rose and saluted them in turn. Then another trumpet blew and from a second pavilion at the other end of the course appeared Cattrina, wearing a splendid suit of white armor, damascened with gold, with a silver swan upon the helm and a swan painted on his shield.

"Very fine, isn't it?" said Gray Dick to his master, "only this time I hope he's inside the steel. Ask to see his face before you fight, master."

On came Cattrina on a noble black horse, which pawed and caracoled notwithstanding the heat, while after him strode a gigantic figure, also clad from top to toe in white mail, who fiercely brandished a long-handled battleaxe.

"Ambrosio!" said Dick. "Now I ought to feel as much afraid as though that fellow wore a yellow cap and a fur cape and pearls like another warrior that we met last night. Yet, to speak the truth, I believe he has the fainter heart of the two. Also if he swings that chopper about so much he'll grow tired."

To the multitude, however, the gallant appearance of this pair, whom they looked on as the champions of Venice against foreigners, appealed not a little. Amid clapping of hands and "evvivas!" they advanced to the Doge's tribune and there made their salutations, which the Illustrious acknowledged as he had those of the Englishmen.

Then the heralds intervened and again all the articles of combat were read and translated, although to these, of which they were weary, Hugh and Dick listened little. Next they were asked if they had any objections to make, and with one voice answered, "None." But on the same question being put to their adversaries the Swiss, Ambrosio, said that he with whom he must fight appeared to be armed with a bow, which was against the articles. Thereon Dick handed the bow and quiver to David, bidding him guard them until he asked for them again as he would his own life. In the event of his death, however, David was to give them to Sir Hugh, or, if they both should die, to his own master, Sir Geoffrey. All of these things David promised to do.

Next followed a long discussion as to whether the four of them were to fight in pairs, Cattrina and Ambrosio against Hugh and Dick simultaneously, or whether Ambrosio was to fight alone with Dick and Cattrina with Hugh. Upon Cattrina and Ambrosio being asked their wishes the former said that he desired to fight alone, as he feared lest the English archer, if he overcame Ambrosio, should turn on him also or perhaps hamstring his horse.

Then the Englishmen were asked what they wished and replied that they did not care how it was arranged, being ready to fight either together or separately, as the Doge might decree.

The end of it was that after long consultations with sundry experts in such matters the Most Illustrious decided that the Captains Ambrosio and Richard the Archer should first engage on foot, and when that business was settled the two knights should take their places in the arena.

So the end of it was that more than half an hour after the combat should have begun Dick and the gigantic Ambrosio found themselves standing face to face waiting for the signal to engage, the Swiss shouting threats and defiance and Gray Dick grinning and watching him out of his half shut eyes.

At length it came in the shape of a single blast upon a trumpet. Now, seeing that Dick stood quite still, not even raising his axe, the Swiss advanced and struck a mighty blow at him, which Dick avoided by stepping aside. Recovering himself again, Ambrosio struck and this blow Dick caught upon his shield, then, as though he were afraid, began to retreat, slowly at first, but afterward faster till his walk broke into a run.

At this sight all that mighty audience set up a hooting. "Coward! Dog! Pig of an Englishman!" they yelled, and the louder they yelled the more quickly did Gray Dick run, till at last even Hugh grew puzzled, wondering what was in his mind and hoping that he would change it soon. So the audience hooted, and Gray Dick ran and the giant Swiss lumbered along after him, bellowing triumphantly and brandishing his battleaxe, which, it was noted, never seemed to be quite long enough to reach his flying foe.

When this had gone on for two or three minutes Gray Dick stumbled and fell, and the Swiss, who was following fast, tripped and fell over him heavily, whereon the multitude shouted:

"Foul play! A dirty foreign trick!"

In an instant Dick was up again and had leapt upon the prostrate Swiss, as all thought to kill him. But instead the only thing he did was to get behind him and kick him with his foot until he also rose, whereat some laughed and others, who had bet upon their champion, groaned.

Now the Swiss, having lost his shield in his fall, rushed at Dick, grasping his axe with both hands. As before the Englishman avoided the blow, but for the first time he struck back, catching the giant on the shoulder, though not very heavily. Then, with a shout of "St. George and England!" he went in at him.

Hither and thither sprang Dick, now out of reach of the axe of the Swiss, and now beneath his guard. But even as he sprang he delivered blow upon blow, each harder than the last, till there appeared scars and rents in the fine white mail. Soon it became clear that the great Swiss was overmatched and spent. He breathed heavily, his strokes grew wild, he overbalanced, recovered himself and at last in his turn began to fly in good earnest.

Now after him went Dick, battering at his back, but, as all might see, with the flat of his axe, not with its edge. Yes, he was beating him as a man might beat a carpet, beating him till he roared with pain.

"Fight, Ambrosio, fight. Don't fly!" shouted the crowd, and he tried to wheel round, only to be knocked prostrate by a single stroke upon the head, which the Englishman delivered with the hammer-like back of his axe.

Then Dick was seen to kneel upon him and cut the lashings of his helmet with his dagger, doubtless to give the coup de grace, or so they thought.

"Our man is murdered!" yelled the common people, while those of the better sort remained shamed and silent.

Dick rose, and they groaned, thinking that all was done. But lo! stooping down he helped the breathless Swiss, whom he had disarmed, to his feet. Then, taking him by the nape of the neck, which was easy as his helmet was off, with one hand, while in the other he held his bared knife, Dick thrust him before him till they reached the tribune of the Doge.

"Be pleased to tell the Illustrious," he said, to Sir Geoffrey, "that, this braggart having surrendered, I spared his life and return him to his brother the Page quite unharmed, since I did not wish to wound one who was in my power from the first. Only when he gets home I pray that he will look at his back in a glass and judge which of us it is that has been beaten to a pulp. Let him return thanks also to his patron saint, who put pity in my heart, so that I did not cut him into collops, as I promised; for know, sir, that when I walked out yonder it was my purpose to hew off his hands and shorten him at the knees. And stay—one word more. If yonder boaster has more brothers who really wish to fight, I'll take them one by one and swear to them that this time I'll not give back a step unless I'm carried."

"Do you indeed yield and accept the Englishman's mercy?" asked the Doge, in a stern voice.

The poor Ambrosio, making no answer, blundered forward among the crowd and there vanished, and this was the last time Dick ever saw or heard of him. But although he waited there a while, feeling the edge of his axe and glaring about him, none of the captain's companions came forward to accept his challenge.

At length, with a shrug of his shoulders, Dick turned, and, having taken back his bow and quiver from David, who could not conceal his indecent joy at the utter humiliation of Ambrosio, whom he hated with a truly British hate, he strolled to where Hugh sat upon his horse.

"The jest is done, master, and now for good earnest, for 'tis your turn. The saints save me such another cow hunt in this hell's heat. Had I killed him at once I should be cooler now, but it came into my mind to let the hound live. Indeed, to speak truth, I thought that I heard the voice of Murgh behind me, saying 'Spare,' and knew that I must obey."

"I hope he will say nothing of the sort to me presently," answered Hugh, "if he is here, which I doubt. Why, what is it now? Those gold coated marshals are talking again."

Talking they were, evidently at the instance of Cattrina, or his counsellors, who had raised some new objections, which Sir Geoffrey stepped forward to explain to them. But Hugh would not even hear him out.

"Tell the man and all whom it may concern," he said, in an angry voice, "that I am ready to fight him as he will, on horse or on foot, with lance or sword, or axe or dagger, or any or all of them, in mail or without it; or, if it pleases him, stripped to the shirt. Only let him settle swiftly, since unless the sweat runs into my eyes and dims them, it seems to me that night is coming before it is noon."

"You are right," answered Sir Geoffrey, "this gathering gloom is ominous and fearful. I think that some awesome tempest must be about to burst. Also it seem to me that Cattrina has no stomach for this fray, else he would not raise so many points of martial law and custom."

Then, wiping his brow with a kerchief, he returned to deliver the message.

Now Hugh and Dick, watching, saw that Cattrina and those who advised him could find no further loophole for argument. They saw, moreover, that the Doge grew angry, for he rose in his seat, throwing off his velvet robe of office, of which it appeared that he could no longer bear the weight, and spoke in a hard voice to Cattrina and his squires. Next, once more the titles of the combatants were read, and their cause of combat, and while this went on Hugh bade Dick bind about his right arm a certain red ribbon that Eve had given him, saying that he wished to fight wearing his lady's favor.

Dick obeyed, muttering that he thought such humors foolish and that a knight might as well wear a woman's petticoat as her ribbon, but by now, so dim had the light grown, he could scarce see to tie the knot.

Indeed, the weather was very strange. From the dark, lowering sky above a palpable blackness sank downward as though the clouds themselves were falling of their own weight, while from the sea great rolls of vapor came sweeping in like waves. Also this sea itself had found a voice, for, although it was so calm, it moaned as though in pain. The great multitude began to murmur, and their faces, lifted upward toward the sky, grew ghastly white. Fear, they knew not of what, had got hold of them. A voice cried shrilly:

"Let them fight and have done. We would get home ere the tempest bursts."

The first trumpet blew and the horses of the knights, which whinnied uneasily, were led to their stations. The second trumpet blew and the knights laid their lances in rest. Then ere the third trumpet could sound suddenly the darkness of midnight swallowed all the scene.

Dick groped his way to Hugh's side. "Bide where you are," he said, "the end of the world is here; let us meet it like men and together."

"Aye," answered Hugh, and his voice rang hollow through his closed visor, "without doubt it is the end of the world, and Murgh, the Minister, has been sent to open the doors of heaven and hell. God have mercy on us all!"

(To be continued.)

The Duke of Argyll on the 7th inst, performed the opening ceremony of the new wing of the Salvation Army home for men at Bermondsey, London, and spoke in appreciative terms of the work carried on by the Salvation Army.

The announcement is made that the king will visit Malta at the end of January.

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