RED EVE

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

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

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CHAPTER X.—(Continued).

At last, on the eleventh afternoon, they saw the lovely city of Venice, sparkling like a cluster of jewels, set upon its many islands amid the blue water of the Adriatic. Having crossed some two miles of open water by a ferry which plied for the convenience of travellers, they entered the town through the western gate and inquired as best they could (for now they had no guide, the Genoese having left them long before) for the house of Sir Geoffrey Carleon, the English Envoy. For a long while they could make no one understand. Indeed the whole place seemed to be asleep, perhaps because of the dreadful heat, which lay over it like a cloud and seemed to burn them to the very bones.

Perplexed and outworn, at last Hugh produced a piece of gold and held it before a number of men who were watching them idly, again explaining in French that he wished to be led to the house of the English Ambassador. The sight of the money seemed to wake their wits, for two or three of the fellows ran forward quarrelling with each other, till one of them, getting the mastery, seized Hugh's tired horse by the bridle and dragged it down a side street to the banks of a broad canal. Here he called something aloud, and presently two men appeared rowing a large, flat bottomed punt from a dock where it was hidden. Into this boat the horses and pack beats were driven, much against their will, and Hugh and Dick having followed them, the three Italians began to punt them along the canal, which was bordered with tall houses. A mile or so further on it entered another canal, where the houses were much finer and built in a style of which they had never seen the like, with beautiful and fantastic arches supported upon pillars.

At length to their great joy they came opposite to a house over the gateway of which, stirless in the still air, hung a flag whereon were blazoned the leopards of England. Here the boatmen, pulling in their poles, save one to which they made the punt fast in midstream, showed by their gestures that they desired to be paid. Hugh handed the piece of gold to the man who had led them to the boat, whereon he was seized with a fit of uncontrollable fury. He swore, he raved, he took the piece of gold and cast it down on to the bilge boards, he spat on it and his two companions did likewise.

"Surely they are mad," said Hugh.

"Mad or no, I like not the looks of them," answered Dick. "Have a care, they are drawing their knives," and as he spoke one of the rogues struck him in the face, while another strove to snatch away the pouch that hung at his side.

Now Gray Dick awoke, as it were. To the man who had tried to take his pouch he dealt such a buffet that he plunged into the canal. But he who had struck him he seized by the arm and twisted it till the knife fell from his hand. Then gripping his neck in an iron grasp he forced him downward and rubbed his nose backward and forward upon the rough edge of the boat, for the Italian was but as a child to him when he put out his strength. In vain did his victim yell for mercy. He showed him none till at length, wearying of the game, he dealt him such a kick that he also flew over the thwarts to join his fellow bully in the water.

Seeing how it had gone with his companions who, sorely damaged, swam to the further side of the canal and vanished, the third man, he whom they had first met, sheathed his knife. With many bows and cringes he pulled up the pole and pushed the punt to the steps of the house over which the flag hung, where people were gathering, drawn by the clamor.

"Does Sir Geoffrey Carleon dwell here?" asked Hugh in a loud voice, whereon a gentleman with a pale face and a grizzled beard who appeared to be sick, for he was leaning on a staff, hobbled from out the porch, saying:

"Aye, aye, that is my name. Who are you that make this tumult at my gates? Another turbulent Englishman, I'll be bound."

"Aye, sir, an Englishman called Sir Hugh de Cressi and his companion, Richard the Archer, messengers from His Grace, King Edward, whom these rogues have tried to rob and murder."

Now Sir Geoffrey changed his tone.

"Your pardon if I spoke roughly, Sir Hugh, but we poor envoys have to do with many ruffiers from our own land. Enter, I pray you. My servants will see to your gear and horses. But first, what is the trouble between you and these fellows?"

Hugh told him briefly.

"Ah!" he said, "a common trick with foreigners. Well for you that night had not fallen, since otherwise they might have rowed you up some back waterway and there done you to death, for the canals of Venice hide the traces of many such foul deeds. Mother of Heaven!" he added, "why this boatman is none other than Giuseppe, the noted brave," and he turned and in Italian bade his servants seize the man.

But Giuseppe had heard enough. Springing into the water he swam like a duck for the further bank of the canal, and, gaining it, ran swiftly for some alley, where he vanished.

"He's gone," said Sir Geoffrey, "and as well hunt for a rat with a lantern in a sewer as for him. Well, we have his boat, which shall be sent to the magistrate with letters of complaint. Only, Sir Hugh, be careful to wear mail when you walk about at night, lest that villain and his mates should come to collect their fare with a stiletto. But enter and fear not for your goods. My folk are honest. God's truth! how fearful in this heat! None have known its like. Steward, give me your arm."

An hour later and Hugh, clad in fresh garments of sweet linen, bathed and shaved, sat at table in a great, cool room with Sir Geoffrey and his lady, a middle-aged and anxious faced woman, while Gray Dick ate at a lower board with the English staff of the envoy's household.

"I have read the letters which concern the business of His Grace, the King," said Sir Geoffrey, who was toying languidly with some Southern fruits, for he would touch no meat. "They have to do with moneys that His Grace owes to certain bankers of this city, but does not yet find it convenient to discharge. I have seen their like before, and tomorrow must deal with them as best I may—no pleasant business, for these usurers grow urgent," and he sighed. "But," he added, "the King says that you, Sir Hugh de Cressi, whom he names his 'brave, trusty and most well beloved knight and companion in war,'" and he bowed courteously to Hugh, "have another business which he commands me to forward by every means in my power, and that without fail. What is this business, Sir Hugh?"

"It is set out, Sir Geoffrey, in a letter from His Grace to the Doge of Venice, which I am to ask you to deliver. Here it is. Be pleased to read it; it is open."

The envoy took the letter and read it, lifting his eyebrows as he did so.

"By St. Mark—he's the right saint to swear by in Venice"—he exclaimed when he had finished, "this is a strange affair. You have travelled hither to offer single combat to Edmund Acour, Count of Noyon and Seigneur of Cattrina. The Doge is urged by his friendship to the Throne of England to bring about this combat to the death, seeing that de Noyon has broken his oath of homage, has plotted to overthrow King Edward, has fought against him and that therefore you are His Grace's champion as well as the avenger of certain private wrongs which you will explain. That's the letter. Well, I think the Doge will listen to it, because he scarce dare do otherwise who wishes no quarrel with our country just now when it is victorious. Also this de Noyon, whom we call Cattrina here, has allied himself with certain great men of the Republic, with whom he is connected by blood, who are secret enemies to the Doge. Through them he strives to stir up trouble between Venice and England and to raise mercenaries to serve the flag of France, as did the Genoese, to their sorrow. Therefore I think that in the Doge you will find a friend. I think also that the matter, being brought forward with such authority, the Seigneur de Cattrina will scarcely care to refuse your challenge if you can show that you have good cause for quarrel against him, since in such affairs the Venetians are punctilious. But now tell me the tale that I may judge better."

So Hugh told him all.

"A strange story and a good cause," said Sir Geoffrey when he had done. "Only this Cattrina is dangerous. Had he known you came to Venice, mayhap you had never lived to reach my house. Go armed, young knight, especially after the sun sinks. I'll away to write to the Doge, setting out the heads of the matter and asking audience. The messenger shall leave ere I sleep, if sleep I may in this heat. Bide you here and talk with my lady, if it so pleases you, for I would show you my letter ere we bid good night, and the thing is pressing. We must catch Cattrina before he gets wind of your presence in Venice."

CHAPTER XI.

The Challenge.

"How long is it since you have seen England, Sir Hugh?" asked Dame Carleon languidly.

"Some eighteen months, Lady, although in truth it seems more, for many things have happened to me in that time."

"Eighteen months only! Why, 'tis four long years since I looked upon the Downs of Sussex, which are my home, the dear Downs of Sussex, that I shall never see again."

"Why say you so, Lady, who should have many years of life before you?"

"Because they are done, Sir Hugh. Oh, in my heart I feel that they are done. That should not grieve me, since my only child is buried in this glittering, southern city whereof I hate the sounds and sights that men call so beautiful. Yet I would that I might have been laid at last in the kind earth of Sussex, where for generations my forbears have been borne to rest," and suddenly she began to weep.

"What ails you, Lady? You are not well?"

"Oh, I know not. I think it is the heat or some presage of woe to come, not to me only, but to all men. Look, Nature is sick," and she led him to the broad balcony of the chamber and pointed to long lines of curious mist which in the bright moonlight they could see creeping toward Venice from the ocean, although what wind there was appeared to be off land.

"These fogs are unnatural," she said. "At this season of the year there should be none, and these come not from the lagoons, but up from the sea, where no such vapors were ever known to rise. The physicians say that they foretell sickness, whereof terrible rumors have for some time past reached us from the East, though none know whether these be true or false."

"The East is a large place, where there is always sickness, Lady, or so I have heard."

"Aye, aye, it is the home of Death, and I think that he travels to us thence. And not only I, not only I; half the folk in Venice think the same, though why they cannot tell. Listen!"

As she spoke the sound of solemn chanting broke upon Hugh's ear. Nearer it grew, and nearer, till presently there emerged from a side street a procession of black monks, who bore in front of them a crucifix of white ivory. Along the narrow margin which lay between the houses and the canal they marched, followed by a great multitude of silent people.

"It is a dirge for the dead that they sing," said Dame Carleon, "and yet they bury no man. Oh! months ago I would have escaped from this city, and we had leave to go. But then came orders from the King that we must bide here because of his creditors. So here we bide for good and all. Hush! I hear my husband coming; say nothing of my talk; it angers him. Rest you well, Sir Hugh."

"Truly that lady has a cheerful mind," grumbled Gray Dick when she had gone, leaving them alone upon the balcony. "Ten minutes more of her and I think I should go hang myself, or squat upon these stones and howl at the moon like a dog or those whimpering friars."

Hugh made no answer, for he was thinking of his father's tale of the prophecies of Sir Andrew Arnold and how they grew sad in Dunwich also. In truth, like Lady Carleon, he found it in his heart to wish that he also was clear of Venice, which he had reached with so much toil.

"Bah!" he said presently, "this place stinks foully. It puts me in mind of some woman, most beauteous, indeed, but three days dead. Let us go in."

On the following morning, while they sat at breakfast, there came a messenger from the Doge of Venice, whose name Hugh learned was Andrea Dandolo, bearing a letter sealed with a great seal. This letter, when opened, was found to be from some high officer. It stated that the Doge would hold a court at noon, after which it was his pleasure to receive the English knight who came as a messenger from the mighty monarch King Edward, and to talk with him on the matters set out in the letter of Sir Geoffrey Carleon. The writing added that the Signor Cattrina, who in France was known as the Count de Noyon and in England as Sir Edmund Acour, would be present at the court and doubtless ready to answer all questions that might be put to him.

"Then at last we shall come face to face," said Hugh, with a fierce laugh.

"Yes, master," put in Dick, "but you've done that several times before and aways ended back to back. Pray the saints such may not be the finish of this meeting also."

Then he turned and went to clean up his master's armor, for in this martial dress, notwithstanding the great heat, Hugh determined to appear before the Doge. It was good armor, not that, save for the sword, which Sir Arnold had given him, whereat the court at Windsor had laughed as out of date, but mail of a newer fashion, taken, some of it, from the bodies of knights who fell at Crecy, after which battle such wares had been cheap. Still Dick could have wished that it had been better for so fine an occasion, seeing that it was marked with many a battle dint and that right across the Cressi cognizance, which Hugh had painted on the shield after he was knighted—a golden star rising from an argent ocean—was a scar by the battle axe of a Calais man-at-arms. Moreover Hugh, or rather Dick, took with him other armor, namely, that of the knight, Pierre de la Roche, whom Hugh had killed at Crecy, thinking that he was Edmund Acour, whose mail he wore. For the rest Dick clad himself in his uniform of a captain of archers of King Edward's guard, wearing a green tunic over his mail shirt and a steel lined cap, from which rose a heron's plume, pinned thereto with His Grace's golden arrow.

All being ready they started in a painted barge, accompanied by Sir Geoffrey Carleon, who wore his velvet robe of office, and grumbled at its weight and warmth. A row of some fifteen minutes along the great canal brought them to a splendid portal upon the mole, with marble steps. Hence they were conducted by guards across the courtyard, where stood many gayly dressed people who watched them curiously, especially Gray Dick, whose pale, sinister face caused them to make a certain sign with their fingers to avert the evil eye, as Sir Geoffrey explained to them. Leaving this courtyard they went up more steps and along great corridors into the finest apartment that they had ever seen. It was very vast, a glitter of gold and marble, and rich with paintings.

Here on a kind of throne sat the Doge Dandolo, an imperial-looking man, magnificently attired. Guards stood like statues behind him, while in front, talking together and moving from place to place, were gathered all the great nobles of Venice, with their beauteous ladies. From time to time the Doge summoned one or other of these, who was called to him by a black robed secretary. Advancing with bows the courtier talked with him a while, then was dismissed with a gracious motion of the hand.

As the Englishmen entered this hall a herald called their names thus from a written slip of paper:

"The Cavalier Geoffrey Carleon, Ambassador of England. The Cavalier Hugh de Cressi, Messenger from the King of England, and the Captain Richard Archer, his companion."

Now all talk was hushed and every eye turned to scan these strangers of whose business, it would seem, something was already known.

"A fine man," said one lady to another of Hugh, "but why does he come here in dinted armor?"

"Oh! he is English and the English are barbarians who like to be ready to cut one's throat," answered her companion. "But Holy Jesus! look at the long fellow with the death's head who walks behind him and carries his luggage in a sack. His face makes my back creep."

Fortunately neither Hugh nor Dick understood these and other such sayings which Sir Geoffrey repeated to them afterward and therefore walked on with their host unconcerned. Once, however, Gray Dick nudged his master and whispered in his ear:

"Be glad, our man is here. It is he who mocks us to those popinjays. Nay, turn not to look; you will see plenty of his sweet face presently."

Now they stood before the chair of state, from which the Doge rose and advanced two steps to greet the Ambassador of England. When these courtesies were over Sir Geoffrey presented Hugh to him, to whom he bowed, and Dick, whose salute he acknowledged with a wave of his jewelled hand. Afterwards they talked, all crowding round them to listen, Sir Geoffrey himself, who spoke Italian well, acting as their interpretter.

"You come hither, Cavalier de Cressi, on behalf of his royal Grace, King Edward, who speaks of you in his letter in terms of which any knight may well be proud. We understand that this captain with you is your companion," and he glanced at Dick out of the corners of his dark eyes, adding: "If those are gifts which he bears in that leathern sack and the long case in his hand, let our servants relieve him of them."

"Let his servants leave me alone," growled Gray Dick when this was translated. "Say to this fine lord, Sir Knight, that the gifts in the sack are not for him and that which the case scatters he would scarcely care to have."

Sir Geoffrey made some explanation in a low voice and with a smile the Doge waved the matter by, then said:

"Will the high-born cavalier be so good as to set out his business, unless, indeed, it is for our private ear alone?"

Hugh answered that it was for the public ear of all Venice, and especially for that of the noble who was called Sir Edmund Acour in England, the Count of Noyon in France and the Seigneur de Cattrina in Italy.

"Will you be pleased to point out this lord to us?" said the Doge, glancing at the gorgeous throng which was gathered behind them.

"I cannot, my lord Doge," answered Hugh; "that is, with certainty. As it chances, I have seen his face but twice—once in a marsh when I had other things to think of and must watch my enemy's sword, and once at eve in the corner of a dark chapel, where he had just gone through the rite of marriage with a lady whom he had drugged, which lady was my affianced wife. Often afterward I sought to see that face, especially in the great fray of Crecy, but failed, in a case which with your leave I will narrate to you."

Now when all the company understood the meaning of these outspoken words, they swayed to and fro and whispered like reeds in an evening wind, till above this whispering a soft yet penetrating voice was heard to say:

"If this English knight desires to study the poor face of Acour, de Noyon and Cattrina, he who owns it is much honored and prays Your Excellency's leave to wait upon his pleasure."

So saying, a tall and noble looking man, who wore the badge of a white swan worked in pearls upon his rich tunic, stepped forward out of the ring of courtiers and bowed, first to the Doge and next to Hugh.

De Cressi looked at his handsome face with its quick, dark eyes and little square-cut black beard, and answered:

"I thank you, Sir Edmund Acour, for I take it you are he. Now I shall never forget you again, for though a man may shift his armour he cannot change his countenance"—a saying at which de Noyon colored a little and looked down uneasily.

"Cavalier de Cressi, he whom you seek is before you; we ourselves vouch for his identity," said the Doge. "Now be pleased to set out your case."

"My private case I thrust to one side," answered Hugh, Sir Geoffrey interpreting all the time, "for it is a matter between this Count, a maiden lady and myself, and can wait. That which I have to lay before you, illustrious, has to do with my master, the King of England, as whose champion I am here today. I accuse this lord of three names of black treachery to his liege, Edward, all details of which treason I am prepared to furnish, and on behalf of that most puissant monarch I challenge him to single combat, as I am empowered and commissioned to do."

"Why should I fight the King of England's bravoes?" inquired Acour in a languid voice of those who stood about him, a question at which they laughed.

"If the charge of treason is not sufficient," went on Hugh, "I'll add to it one of cowardice. At the battle of Crecy, as a man here will bear me witness," and he pointed to Dick, "I overcame in single combat a knight who wore upon his shield the cognizance of a wolf and on his helm a wolf's head, which were the arms of Sir Pierre de la Roche. At this knight's prayer I spared his life, for that day we took no prisoners, and let him go. Afterward I fought with another knight carrying the cognizance of a white swan, the arms of the Count de Noyon, and slew him in fair and single fight. But before he died he told me that he bore that armor by command of his lord, the Count de Noyon, and that the said Count fought that day in his mail because he feared the vengeance of the King of England. Thus it came about that the Wolf, who fought paid the price for the Swan who fled away, hid in the armor of his friend, whom he left to die for him."

There followed a great silence, for all those noble lords and ladies who thought little of treason, which to most of them was a very familiar thing, were not a little stirred by this tale of cowardice and false arms. Then the Doge said:

"Noble Cattrina, you have heard the story of the English knight. What do you answer to it?"

"Only that it is a lie, Illustrious, like everything else that he has told us," replied Acour with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"You said that you had a witness, Cavalier de Cressi," said the Doge. "Where is he?"

"Here," answered Hugh. "Stand forward, Dick, and tell what you saw."

Dick obeyed, in his low, rasping voice, with more detail than Hugh had given, set out the story of those two combats at Crecy, of the sparing of the Wolf knight and the slaying of the Swan knight.

"What say you now, noble Cattrina?" asked the Doge.

"I say that the man lies even better than his master," answered Acour coolly, and all the Court laughed.

"Illustrious," said Hugh, "doubtless you have some herald at your Court. I pray that he may fetch his book and tell us what are the arms of de Noyon and Cattrina, with all their colorings and details."

The Doge beckoned to an officer in a broidered tabard, who, with bows, without needing to fetch any book, described the crest and arms of Cattrina in full particular, adding that, to his knowledge, these were borne by no other family or man in Italy, France or England.

"Then you would know them if you saw them?" said Hugh.

"Certainly, Cavalier. On it I stake my repute as a herald."

Now while all wondered what this talk might mean, the Doge and Acour most of any, although the latter grew uneasy, fearing he knew not what, Hugh whispered to Dick, who loosed the mouth of the leather sack he carried, and out of it tumbled onto the marble floor a suit of bloodstained armor.

"Whence came these?" asked Hugh of Dick.

"Off the body of the knight Sir Pierre de la Roche, whom you slew at Crecy, for I stripped him of them myself."

"Whose crest and cognizance is this, Herald?" asked Hugh again, lifting the helm and shield and holding them on high that all might see.

The herald stopped forward and examined them.

"Without doubt," he said slowly, "they are those of the lord of Cattrina. Moreover," he added, "five years ago I limned yonder swan upon this very shield with my own hand, as a favor to Cattrina there, who said that he would trust the task to none but an artist."

Now the silence grew intense, so much so that the rustle of a lady's dress sounded loud in the great hall.

"What say you now, my lord of Cattrina?" asked the Doge.

"I say that there is some mistake, Illustrious. Even if there were none," he added slowly, "for their own good and lawful purposes knights have changed harness before today."

"There is no mistake," cried Sir Hugh in a ringing voice. "This Signor of many names is a Signor of many coats also which he can change to save his skin. He wore that of Sir Pierre de la Roche to protect himself from the vengeance of the King of England and of the English squire whom he had wronged. He took mercy from the hand of that squire, who, as he knew well, would have shown him none had he guessed the truth. He left the poor knight, whom he had bribed to be his double, to die beneath that same squire's hand because he thought him named de Noyon. Therefore the blood of this de la Roche is on his head. Yet these are small matters of private conduct, and one that is greater overtops them. This false lord, as Sir Edmund Acour, swore fealty to Edward of England, and while he was yet bound by that sacred oath plotted to depose Edward and to set upon his throne the Duke of Normandy.

"The King of England learned of that plot through me and gave me charge to kill or capture the traitor. But when we came face to face in a consecrated church, where I thought it sacrilege to draw sword, he, who had just done me bitter wrong, stayed not to answer the wrong, but slunk away into the darkness, leaving me felled by a treacherous blow. Thence he fled to France and stirred up war against his liege lord under the Oriflamme of King Philip. Now that this banner is in the dust he has fled again to Venice, and here, as I have heard, broods more mischief. Once when after the sack of Caen I sent him my challenge he returned to my messenger an insolent answer that he did not fight merchants' sons, he who could take mercy from the hand of a merchant's son. Now that for deeds done a king has made me knight and now that this king under his seal and sign has named me his champion, in your presence, Illustrious, and in that of all your Court, I challenge Cattrina again to single combat to the death with lance and sword and dagger, naming him coward and scullion if he refuses this, King Edward's gage and mine," and drawing the gauntlet from his left hand Hugh cast it clattering to the marble floor at de Noyon's feet.

Now a babel of talk broke out in the great hall, and with it some vivvas and clapping of hands, for Hugh had spoken boldly and well; moreover, the spectators read truth in his gray eyes. A dark figure in a priest's robe—it was that of Father Nicholas, the secretary who had brewed Red Eve's potion—glided up to Cattrina and whispered swiftly in his ear. Then the Doge lifted his hand and there was silence.

"My lord of Cattrina," he said, "Sir Hugh de Cressi, speaking as the champion of our ally, the King of England, has challenged you to single combat a l'outrance. What say you?"

"I, Illustrious," he answered in his rich voice, drawing out his words like one who is weary, "oh, of course, I say that if yon brawler wishes to find a grave in fair Venice, which is more than he deserves, I am not the man to thwart him, seeing that his cut-throat King—"

"As the Ambassador of that King, I protest," broke in Sir Geoffrey. "It is an insult that such a word should be used before me."

"I accept the protest of His Excellency, who forgot his noble presence," replied Cattrina, bowing back, "seeing that his King, who is not a cut-throat"—here a titter of laughter went through the company, though it was evident from the frown upon his face that the Doge liked the jest ill—"has chosen to make a knight of this de Cressi, or so he says, which will show you, friends all, how hard it must be to find gentlemen in England."

Again the company tittered, though Dick's gray face turned scarlet and he bit upon his pale lip until the blood ran.

"As you accept the challenge," broke in the Doge shortly, "cease from gibes, my Lord, which more befit an angry woman's mouth than that of one whose life is about to be put to hazard, and take up the gage of His Grace of England."

Cattrina looked around and bade a page who waited on his person obey the Doge's command, saying:

"Your pardon, most Illustrious, if I do not touch that glove myself, as it seems somewhat foul. I think it must have served its owner in his useful labors at the dyer's vat before his master made him noble."

Now it was Hugh's turn to color, but when he understood the insult Gray Dick could contain himself no more.

"Aye, Sir Cheat and Traitor," he said in his hissing voice, "and the vat in which it has been dipped was that of the life blood of your dupe, Sir Pierre de la Roche, and that of many a nobler Norman. Oh, did we not stand where we do I'd thrust it down your false throat and with it twist out your slanderous tongue."

"Peace, peace," cried the Doge, while those present who understood English translated Dick's wild words to their neighbors, and Cattrina laughed mockingly at the success of his sneer. "Have I not said that such words are vuse mly? Ah! I thought it; Well, my Lord, you have brought it on yourself."

For while he spoke the page, a mincing young man tied up with bows and ribbon like a woman, had lifted the glove and, holding it between his thumb and forefinger, returned it to Hugh with a low, mock bow, being careful as he did so, as all might see, to tread upon Dick's foot and hustle him. Next moment two things happened. The first was that, dropping his cased bow, Gray Dick seized that youth in his iron grasp and hurled him into the air so that he fell heavily on the marble floor and lay there stunned, the blood running from his nose and mouth. The second was that, seizing his gauntlet, Hugh strode to where Cattrina stood and struck him with it across the face, saying:

"Let you lips kiss what your fingers are too fine to touch."

With an oath Cattrina drew his sword, and out flashed Hugh's in answer, as he cried:

"Aye, here and now if you will! Here and now!"

Then the guard rushed in and forced them apart.

"Is this a place for brawling?" cried Dandolo in wrath, adding, "Yet I cannot blame the Englishmen overmuch, seeing that they were sore affronted, as I saw with my eyes and heard with ears. Be silent, my lord of Cattrina. After your fashion you make trouble at my court, and—hearken all—blood so hot had best be quickly cooled, lest one or other of these knights should take a fever. Moreover, the noble Cattrina has but today asked my leave to ride from Venice tomorrow, having urgent business at Avignon at the court of Pope Clement. So I decree that this combat a l'outrance shall take place in our presence on the Campo del Marte tomorrow, three hours before noon, ere the sun grows too hot. To all the details of the combat our heralds will attend forthwith. Officer, take the soldiers and escort the Ambassador and the champion of His Grace of England, together with this Captain of Archers, back to their own door. Set the guards there and see that none molest them by word or deed under pain of fine and strait imprisonment. Sir Geoffrey Carleon, your requests are granted; be pleased to write it to the most puissant Edward, whom you serve, and for this time fare you well. Why, what is it, Captain Ambrosio?" he added, irritably addressing a raw-boned, lantern-jawed giant of a man clad in the splendid uniform of the Guard, who stepped before the throne and saluted.

"Most Illustrious," said Ambrosio in bad, guttural Italian, "my mother was a Swiss."

"Then congratulations to the Swiss, Ambrosio. But what of it?"

"Very Illustrious," replied the Captain in his hollow voice, "the Swiss are brave and do not swallow insults. That lad whom the Englishman kicked, or smote, or tossed like a bull," and he pointed to the poor page, who, still senseless, was being carried from the hall, "is my youngest brother, who resembles our Venetian father somewhat more than I do."

"We see it, we see it. Indeed, are you sure that the father was"—and the Doge checked himself. "The point, Captain, we should dine."

"Illustrious, I would avenge my brother and myself on the Englishman, whom I will beat to a jelly," said the giant. "I crave leave to fight him tomorrow when the lord Cattrina fights his master," and advancing toward Gray Dick he made as though he would pull his nose.

"What is it he wants?" asked Gray Dick, staring up at the great fellow with a look in his eyes that caused Ambrosio to cease flourishing his fists.

The challenge was translated to him, and its reason. "Oh," said Dick, "tell him I am much obliged and that I will fight him with the bow or with the axe and dagger, or with all three, and we will see whether he beats me to a jelly or whether I cut him into collops, who, as I think, needs shortening."

Now the Captain Ambrosio consulted with his friends, who with much earnestness prayed him to have nothing to do with arrows, seeing that there his bulk would put him at a disadvantage, especially in dealing with an English archer who had an eye like a snake and a face like that of death itself.

In short, one and all they recommended the battle axe and the dagger as his most appropriate weapons—since his adversary refused swords—the battle axe with which to knock him down, as he could easily do, being so strong, and the dagger with which to finish him.

When this was explained to Gray Dick he assented to the proposal with a kind of unholy joy that was almost alarming to those who saw it. Moreover, as neither of them had gauntlets to throw down or pick up, he stretched out his hand to seal the bargain, which, incautiously enough, the huge, half-bred Swiss accepted.

Dick's grasp, indeed, was so firm and long that presently the giant was observed first to move uneasily, secondly to begin to dance and thirdly to shout out with pain.

"What is the matter?" asked his friends.

"The matter is," he groaned, as Dick let go, "that this son of Satan has a blacksmith's vise in place of a hand," and he showed his great fingers, from beneath the nails of which the blood was oozing.

His Venetian companions of the Guard looked at them, then they looked at Gray Dick and gave him a wide berth, while Ambrosio said something about having offered to fight a man and not a fiend. But it was too late to retract, for the Doge, taking, as was natural, no share in this small matter, had already left his throne.

Then, escorted by Sir Geoffrey and the city guards, Hugh and Gray Dick passed through that splendid company away home to dinner, Dick carrying his bow case in one hand and the sack of armor which de Noyon had not thought fit to claim in the other.

In the midst of dead silence they departed, for now no one seemed to find either of them a fit subject for jest. Indeed, there were some who said, as they watched the pair pass the door, that Cattrina and the giant would do well to consult a lawyer and a priest that night.

CHAPTER XII.

The Man From the East.

In a great cool room of his splendid but somewhat dilapidated palace Sir Edmund Acour, Seigneur of Cattrina, sat in consultation with the priest Nicholas. Clearly he was ill at ease; his face and his quick, impatient movements showed it.

"You arrange badly," he said in a voice quite devoid of its ordinary melodious tones. "Everything goes wrong. How is is that you did not know that this accursed Englishman and his Death's-head were coming here? What is the use of a spy that never spies? Man, they should have been met upon the road, for who can be held answerable for what brigands do? Or, at the least, I might have started for Avignon two days earlier."

"Am I omnipotent, Lord, that I should be held able to read the minds of men in far countries and to follow their footsteps?" asked the aggrieved Nicholas. "Still, it might have been guessed that this bulldog of a Briton would hang to your heels till you kick out his brains or he pulls you down. Bah! the sight of that archer, who cannot miss, always gives me a cold pain in the stomach, as though an arrow point were working through my vitals. I pity yonder poor fool of a Swiss tomorrow, for what chance has he against a fish-eyed wizard?"

"Ten thousand curses on the Swiss!" said Acour. "He thrust himself into the affair and will deserve all he gets. I pity myself. You know I am no coward, as not a few have learned before today, but I have little luck against this Englishman. I tell you that there at Crecy I went down before him like a ninepin, and he spared my life. My God! he spared my life, being a fool like all his breed. And now the tale is known against me and that of the changed armor, too. Why could not de la Roche die without speaking, the faithless hound whom I had fed so well! So, so, regrets are vain; de Cressi is here and must be faced or I be shamed."

"You may be killed as well as shamed," Nicholas suggested unpleasantly. "It is certain that either you or that Englishman must die tomorrow, since he's set for no fancy tilting with waving of ladies' kerchiefs and tinsel crowns of victory, and so forth. Merchant bred or not, he is a sturdy fighter, as we all learned in France. Moreover, his heart is fierce with wrong, and the man whose quarrel is just is always to be feared."

"A pest on you!" snarled Cattrina. "Have you the evil eye that you should croak disaster in my ears? Look you, priest: I must come through this game unharmed. Death is a companion I do not seek just yet, who have too much to live for—power and wealth and high renown, if my plans succeed; and as you should know, they are well laid. Moreover, there is that English girl, Red Eve, my wife, from whose sweet side you made me flee. I tell you, Nicholas, I burn for her and had rather taste her hate than the love of any other woman on the earth. And now the Pope has summoned me to Avignon, and her also, to lay our causes before him. Being bold, mayhap she will come, for His Holiness has sent her safe conduct under his own hand, and has not mentioned—for I saw a copy of the brief—that the same business will take me to Avignon about that time. Well, if she comes she will not go away again alone, for the times are too rough for ladies to travel unescorted. And if she does not come, at least our marriage shall be declared valid, and I'll take her when and where I can, and her wealth with her, which will be useful."

"Only, then, Lord, you must not die, or even be wounded, tomorrow. It is the Englishman who should die, for whatever the Pope may decree I think that while he lives the slumbrous eyes of that Eve of yours will find a way to charm you to a sleep that has no wakening. She is not a fair haired toy that weeps, forgets and at last grows happy in her babe. She's a woman to make men or break them. Oh, when her sense came back to her for a flash she looked me cold yonder in that English chapel, and it seemed to me that God's curse was in her stare."

"You got the terror, Nicholas, like so many just now in Venice. Why, today I've not met a man or woman who is not afraid of something, they know not what—save the Englishman and his death's head. I think 'tis the unholy air of this strange season, and all the signs and omens we hear of on every side that conjure vapors to the brain."

"Yes, I've got the terror," said Nicholas with something like a groan. "Every sin I ever did—and most of them have been for you, Lord—seems to haunt my sleep—yes, and to walk with me when I wake preaching woe at me with fiery tongues that repentance or absolution cannot quench or still."

"Yet, Nicholas, I think that you must add one more to their count, or a share of it, which should weigh light among so many. Either I or de Cressi must pack for our last journey, and if we meet face to face tomorrow how know I that it will be de Cressi? Better far that we should not meet."

"Lord, Lord, you cannot fly! He is King Edward's champion, so proclaimed before all whose names are written in the Golden Book of Venice. He would cry your shame in every court, and so would they. There's not a knight in Europe but would spit upon you as dastard or common wench but would turn you her back. You cannot fly!"

"Nay, fool, but he can die—and before tomorrow. What makes your brain so dull, Nicholas? It is not its wont."

"Ah, I see—not flight, murder. I had forgotten, it is not a usual sauce to a banquet of honor even in Italy, and therefore, perhaps, the safer to serve. But how is it to be done? Poison? He is in Carleon's house, Carleon has faithful servants, though perhaps a basket of rare fruits but then he might not eat them; those Englishmen live mostly on half raw meat. The Signora would probably eat them, and the others."

"Nay, no more of your drugs; your skill in them is too well known. Come, these men have been watched since they set foot in Venice. Have they offended none besides myself and the Swiss?"

A look of intelligence crept into the eyes of Nicholas.

"Now that you mention it, Lord, they have. There is a certain boatman and bravo called Giuseppe. With him and his mates they quarrelled about their fare and threw them into the canal in front of the Ambassador's house, just because they drew a knife or two. A woman I know told me of it. He's a great villain, this Giuseppe, who would do anything for ten pieces, also revengeful and a hater of cold water."

"Send for him, Nicholas; or send this woman to him—that may be safer. Ten pieces! I'll give him fifty."

"Aye, Lord, but the Englishman may not give him a chance. Only fools would go out walking alone in Venice after dark if they should happen to have enemies here, and the house is watched by the Doge's guards. Yet one can try. Fortune loves the brave, and Englishmen are very great fools. They might stroll abroad to see the moon rise over the Adriatic."

"Try, Nicholas, try as you never tried before, and succeed, lest you and I should part company and you never be named abbot after all."

The afternoon of the day of their reception by the Doge was well filled for Hugh and Dick. Scarcely had they eaten with their host when the Marshal and his officers arrived with the articles of the morrow's combat very fully drawn up, each of which must be considered with the help of Sir Geoffrey Carleon, lest they should hide some trick, before they confirmed them with their signatures. Not that Hugh was over-anxious about these details, since, as he said to Sir Geoffrey, all he sought was to come face to face with his enemy; even if he had but a club for a weapon.

At length these articles were signed and the Marshall departed with his fee, for they must be paid for as though they were a legal document. Next Hugh must try various horses from Sir Geoffrey's stable and choose one of them as his war steed for the morrow, since the beast he had ridden into Venice was in no condition to bear a full-armed knight. In the end he selected a gray gelding, quiet of temperament and rather heavy of build, which it was reported had been used by its former owner in several tournaments and there borne itself handsomely. This done, well or ill, his armor must be seen to, and Dick's also, such as it was; his lance tested and all their other weapons sharpened on a whetstone that Sir Geoffrey borrowed, for this was a task that Gray Dick would leave to no other hand.

At length all was prepared as well as was possible in such haste and they went to supper with Lady Carleon, who, now that she understood that they were to fight for their lives on the morrow, was more mournful than she had been on the previous night. When at last she asked what they desired as to their funerals and if they had any tokens to be sent to friends in England, Hugh, whose thoughts were already sad enough, could bear no more of it. So he rose, saying that he would seek Sir Geoffrey, who was already in his cabinet engaged upon a letter to King Edward descriptive of these events and other business. But when they were out of the room he said that he must have fresh air or he should faint, which was not strange, seeing that heat prevailed on this night in Venice of an intensity unknown there at this season of the year.

"Whither shall we go?" asked Dick, mopping his brow. "Guards stand at every door and, I doubt, will not let us pass."

"I wish to see the place where we are to fight tomorrow," answered Hugh, "so as to form my judgment of it, if only we may come there."

At this moment an English lad of Sir Geoffrey's household chanced to pass by, having come to ask as to the feeding of the horse which Hugh should ride. Dick caught him by the arm and asked whether he could get them out of the house secretly, so that the guards would not see them, and conduct them to the spot called the Place of Arms, where they understood they were to fight.

The lad, whose name was David Day, replied somewhat doubtfully that he could do so by a back door near the kitchen and guide them also, but that they must protect him from the anger of Sir Geoffrey. This Hugh promised to do. So presently they started, carrying their weapons, but wearing no mail because of the intense heat, although Dick reminded his master that they had been told they should not venture forth without body armor.

"I have a sword and you have bow and axe," answered Hugh, "so we'll risk it, for in leather lined mail we should surely melt."

So they put on some light cloaks made of black silk with hoods to them, such as the Venetians wore at their Masques, for David knew where they were to be found. Slipping out quite unobserved by the kitchen door into a little courtyard, they passed into an unlighted back street through a little postern gate, whereof the lad had the key. At the end of this street they came to a canal, where David, who talked Italian perfectly, hailed a boat, into which they entered without exciting remark since this sharp youth pointed to their cloaks and whispered to the boatman that they were gallants engaged upon some amorous adventure.

On they rowed down the silent lanes of water through the slumbrous city of palaces, turning here, turning there, till soon they lost all knowledge of the direction in which they headed. At length David whispered to them that they drew near the place where they must land. Everybody seemed to speak in a whisper that heavy night, even the folk, generally so light of heart and quick of tongue, who sat on the steps or beneath the porticoes of their houses gasping for air, and the passers