RED EVE

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

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

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CHAPTER IX.—(Continued).

"Who are those who wear such fine feathers?" asked the King.

"One is the Lord of Bazeilles," answered a voice. "I can see the monk upon his crest, but the blazons of the others I cannot read. They spy upon us, Sire; may we sally out and take them?"

"Nay," answered Edward, "their horses are fresher than ours; let them go, for pray God we shall see them closer soon."

So the French knights, having stared their full, turned and rode away slowly. But one of their squires did otherwise. Dismounting from his horse, which he left with another squire to hold, he can forward a few paces to the crest of a little knoll. Thence he made gestures of contempt and scorn toward the English army, as he did so shouting foul words of which a few floated to them in the stillness.

"Now," said Edward, "if I had an archer who could reach that varlet, I'll swear that his name should not be forgotten in England. But alas! it may not be, for none can make an arrow fly true so far."

Instantly Gray Dick stepped forward.

"Sire, may I try?" he asked, stringing his great black bow as he spoke.

"Who are you," said the King, "who seem to have been rolled in ashes and wear my own gold arrow in your cap? Ah! I remember. The Suffolk man who showed us all how to shoot at Windsor; he who is called Gray Dick. Yes, try, Gray Dick, try, if you think that you can reach so far, but for the honor of St. George, man, do not miss, for all the host will see fate riding on your shaft."

For one moment Dick hesitated, for such awful words seemed to shake even his iron nerve.

"I've seen you do as much, Dick," said the quiet voice of Hugh de Cressi behind him; "still, judge you."

Then Dick ground his heels into the turf and laid his weight against the bow. While all men watched breathless he drew it to an arc, he drew it till the string was level with his ear. He loosed, and slewing round straightened himself and stared down at the earth, as he said afterward, he feared to watch that arrow.

Away it sped while all men gazed. High, high it flew, the sunlight glinting on its polished barb. Down it came at length and one muttered: "Short!" But as the word passed his lips the shaft seemed to recover itself, as though by magic, and again rushed on. He of the foul words and gestures saw it coming and turned to fly. But as he leapt forward the war arrow struck him full in the small of the back, just where the spine ends, and severed it, so that he fell all of a heap like an ox beneath the axe and lay there a still and huddled shape.

From all the English right who saw this wondrous deed there went up such a shout that their comrades to the left and rear thought for a moment that battle had been joined. The King and the Prince stared amazed. Hugh flung his arms about Dick's neck and kissed him. Jack Green cried:

"No archer, but a wizard! Mere man could not have sent a shaft so far."

"Then would to God I had more such wizards," said the King. "God be with you, Gray Dick, for you have put new heart into me and all our host. Mark, all of you, that he smote him in the back, smote him running! What reward would you have, man?"

"None," answered Dick in a surly voice. "My reward is that whatever happens yon filthy French knave will never mock honest English folk again, or so I think, though the arrow barely reached him. Yet, Sire," he added after a pause, "you might knight my master, Hugh de Cressi, if you will, since but for him I should have feared to risk that shot," and turning aside, Dick unstrung his bow, and pulling the remains of the apple out of his pounch, began to munch it unconcernedly.

"Hugh de Cressi!" said the King. "Ah! yes, I mind me to him and of the rogue, Acour, and the maid Red Eve. Well, Hugh, I am told you fought gallantly at Blanche-Tague two days gone and were among the last to cross the Somme. Also, we have other debts to pay you. Come hither, sir, and give me your sword."

"Your pardon, my liege," said Hugh, coloring, "but I'll not be knighted for my henchman's feats or at all until I have done some of my own."

"Ah, well, Master Hugh," said the King, "that's a right spirit. After the battle, perhaps, if it should please God that we live to meet again in honor. De Cressi," he added, musingly; "why, this place is called Crecy, and here, I think, is another good omen. At Crecy shall de Cressi, gain great honor for himself and St. George of England. You are luck bringers, you two. Let them not be separated in the battle lest the luck should leave them. See to it, if it please you my lord of Warwick. Young de Cressi can draw a bow—let him fight amongst the archers and have liberty to join the men-at-arms when the time comes. Or stay; set them near my son the Prince, for there sure the fight will be hottest.

"And now, you men of England, whatever your degree, my brothers of England, gentle and simple, Philip rolls down upon us with all the might of France, our heritage which he has stolen, our heritage and yours. Well, well, show him today, or tomorrow, or whenever it may be, that Englishmen put not their faith in numbers but in justice and their own great hearts. Oh, my brothers and my friends, let not Edward, whom you are pleased to serve as your lawful King, be whipped off the field of Crecy and out of France. Stand to your banners, stand to your King, stand to St. George and God! Die where you are, if need be, as I will. Never threaten and then show your backs like that knave the archer shot but now. Look, I give my son into your keeping," and he pointed to the young prince, who all this while sat upon his horse upright and silent. "The Hope of England shall be your leader, but if he flies, why, then, cut him down and fight without him. Oh, he'll not fly and you'll not fly; no, you and he together will this day earn a name that shall be told of when the world is gray with age. Great is the chance that life has given you; pluck it, pluck it from the hand of opportunity and, dead or living, become a song forever in the mouths of men unborn. Think not of prisoners; think not of ransoms and of wealth. Think not of me or yourselves, but think of England's honor and for that strike home, for England watches you today."

"We will, we will! Fear not, King, we will!" shouted the host in answer.

Then, with a glad smile, Edward took his young son's hand and shook it and rode away followed by his marshals.

"De Cressi," he said as he passed Hugh, "the knave Acour, your fee and mine, is with Philip of France. He has done me much damage, de Cressi, more than I can stop to tell. Avenge it if you can. Your luck is great, you may find the chance. God be with you and all. My lords, farewell. You have your orders. Son Edward, fare you well also. Meet me again with honor or never more."

It was not yet noon when King Edward spoke these words and long hours were to go by before the battle joined. Indeed, most thought that no blow would be struck that day, since it was known that Philip had slept at Abbeyville, whence for a great army the march was somewhat long. Still, when all was made ready the English set them down in their ranks, bows and helmets at side, ate their midday meal with appetite and waited whatever fate might send them.

In obedience to the King's command Hugh and Gray Dick had been attached to the immediate person of the Prince of Wales, who had about him, besides his own knights, a small band of chosen archers and another band of men-at-arms picked for their strength and courage. These soldiers were all dismounted since the order had gone forth that knight and squire must fight afoot, every horse having been sent to the rear, for that day the English expected to receive charges, not to make them. This, ideed, would have been impossible, seeing that all along their front the wild Welsh had labored for hours digging pits into which horses might plunge and fall.

There then the Prince's battle sat, a small force after all, perhaps twelve hundred knights and men-at-arms with three or four thousand archers and to their rear as many of the savage, knife-armed Welsh, who fought that day under the banner of their country, the red dragon of Merlin. Gray Dick's place was on the extreme left of the archer bodyguard and Hugh's on the extreme right of that of the men-at-arms, so that they were but a few yards apart and could talk together. From time to time they spoke of sundry things, but mostly of home, for in this hour of danger, through which both of them could hardly hope to live, even if one did, their thoughts turned thither, as was but natural.

"I wonder how it fares with the lady Eve," said Hugh with a sigh, for of her no news had come to him since they had parted some months before after he recovered from the wound which Clavering gave him.

"Well enough, doubtless. Why not?" replied Dick. "She is strong and healthy, she has many friends and servants to guard her and no enemy there to harm her, for her great foe is yonder," and he nodded toward Abbeville. "Oh, without doubt, well enough. It is she who should wonder how it fares with us. Let us hope that, having naught else to do, she remembers us in her prayers, since in such a case even one woman's prayers are worth something, for does not a single feather sometimes turn the scale?"

"I think that Eve would rather fight than pray," answered Hugh with a smile, "like old Sir Andrew, who would give half his remaining days to sit here with us this afternoon. Well, he is better where he is. Dick, that knave Acour sent no answer to my challenge, which I despatched to him by the knight I took and spared at Caen."

"Why should he, master? He can find plenty of ways of dying nowadays without risking a single combat with one whom he has wronged, and who is therefore very dangerous. You remember his crest, master—a silver swan painted on his shield. I knew it, and that is why I shot that poor fowl just before you killed young Clavering on the banks of Blythe, to teach him that swans are not proof against arrows. Watch for the swan crest, master, when the battle joins, and so will I, I promise you."

"Aye, I'll watch," said Hugh grimly. "God help all swans that come my way. Let us pray that this one has not taken wing, for if so, I, too, must learn to fly."

Thus they talked of these and other things amongst the hum of the great camp, which was like the hum of bees in a lime tree in summer, and whilst they talked the blue August sky became suddenly overcast. Dense and heavy clouds hid up its face, a cold and fitful wind began to blow, increasing presently to a gale which caused the planted standards, blazoned with lions rampant and with fleur-de-lis, and the pennons of a hundred knights set here and there among the long battle lines, first to flap and waver and then to stand out straight as though they were cut of iron.

A word of command was called from rank to rank.

"Sheath bows," is said, and instantly thousands of slender points were lifted and sank again, vanishing into the leathern cases which the archers bore.

Scarcely were these snug when the storm broke. First fell a few heavy drops, to be followed by such a torrent that all who had cloaks were glad to wear them. From the black clouds above leaped lightnings that were succeeded by the deep and solemn roll of thunder. A darkness fell upon the field so great that men wondered what it might portend, for their minds were strained. That which at other times would have passed without remark now became portentous; indeed, afterward some declared that through it they had seen angels or demons in the air, and others that they had heard a voice prophesying woe and death, to whom they knew not.

"It is nothing but a harvest tempest," said Dick, presently, as he shook the wet from him like a dog and looked to the covering of his quiver. "See, the clouds break."

As he spoke a single red ray from the westering sun shot through a rift in the sky and lay across the English host like a sword of light, whereof the point hung over the eastern plain. Save for this flaming sword all else was dark, and silent also, for the rain and thunder had died away. Only thousands of crows, frightened from the woods, wheeled to and fro above, their black wings turning to the redness of blood as they crossed and recrossed that splendid path of light and their hoarse cries filling the solemn air with clamor. The sight and sounds were strange nor did the thickest headed fellow crouched upon Crecy's fateful plain ever forget them till his dying day.

The sky cleared by slow degrees, the multitudes of crows wheeled off toward the east and vanished, the sun shone out again in quiet glory.

"Pray God the French fight us today," said Hugh, as he took off his cloak and rolled it up.

"Why, master?"

"Because, Dick, it is written that the rain falls on the just and the unjust, and the unjust—that is the French, or rather the Italians whom they hire—use these new-fangled crossbows, which, as you know, cannot be cased like ours and therefore stretch their strings in wet."

"Master," remarked Dick, "I did not think you had so much wit—that is, since you fell in love, for before then you were sharp enough. Well, you are right, and a little matter like that may turn a battle. Not but what I had thought of it already."

Hugh was about to answer with spirit, when a sound of distant shouting broke upon their ears, a very mighty sound, and next instant some outposts were seen galloping in, calling: "Arm! Arm! The French! The French!"

Suddenly they appeared, thousands of crossbow men, in thick, wavering lines, and behind them the points of thousands of spears, whose bearers as yet were hidden by the living screen of the Italian archers. Yes, there before them was the mighty host of France glittering in the splendid light of the westering sun, which shone full into their faces.

The irregular lines halted. Perhaps there was something in the aspect of those bands of Englishmen still seated in silence on the ground, with never a horse among them, that gave them pause. Then, as though at a word of command, the Genoese crossbow men set up a terrific shout.

"Do they think to make us run at a noise, like hares?" said Hugh contemptuously.

But Gray Dick made no answer, for already his pale eyes were fixed upon the foe with a stare that Hugh thought was terrible, and his long fingers were playing with the button of his bow case. The Genoese advanced a little way, then again stood and shouted, but still the English sat silent.

A third time they advanced and shouted more loudly than before, then began to wind up their crossbows.

From somewhere in the English centre rose a heavy, thudding sound which was new to war. It came from the mouths of cannon now for the first time fired on a field of battle, and at the report of them the Genoese, frightened, drew back a little. Seeing that the balls fell short and did but hop toward them slowly, they took courage again and began to fire their bolts.

"You're right, master," exclaimed Gray Dick in a fierce chuckle, "their strings are wet," and he pointed to the quarrels that, like the cannon balls, struck short, some within fifty paces of those who shot them, so that no man was hurt.

Now came a swift command and the English ranks rose to their feet, uncased their bows and strung them all as though with a single hand. A second command and every bow was bent. A third and with a noise that was half hiss and half moan thousands of arrows leapt forward. Forward they leapt and swift and terrible they fell among the ranks of the advancing Genoese. Yes, and ere ever one had found its billet its quiver mate was hastening on its path.

Then—oh! the sunlight showed it all—the Genoese rolled over by scores, their frail armor bitten through and through by the gray English arrows, by scores that grew to hundreds, that grew till the poor, helpless men who were yet unhurt among them wailed out in their fear and, after one short, hesitant moment, surged back upon the long lines of men-at-arms behind.

From these arose a great shout: "Trahison! Trahison! Tue, tue!" and next instant the appalling sight was seen of the chivalry of France falling upon their friends, whose only crime was that their bow strings were wet, and butchering them where they stood. So awful and unexpected was this spectacle that for a little while the English archers, all except Gray Dick and a few others cast in the same iron mould, ceased to ply their bows and watched amazed.

The long shafts began to fly again, raining alike upon the slaughterers and the slaughtered. A few minutes, five perhaps, and this terrible scene was over, for of the seven thousand Genoese but a tithe remained upon their feet, and the interminable French lines, clad in sparkling steel and waving lance and sword, charged down upon the little English band.

"Now for the feast!" screamed Gray Dick. "That was but a snack to sharp the appetite," and a gorgeous knight died with his arrow through the heart.

It came—the charge came. Nothing could stop it. Down went man and horse, line upon line of them swept to death by the pitiless English arrows, but still more rushed on. They fell in the pits that had been dug; they died beneath the shafts and the hoofs of those that followed, but still they struggled on, shouting, "Philip and St. Denis!" and waving their golden banner and the Oriflamme of France.

The charge crept up as some reluctant, outworn wave creeps to a resisting rock. It foamed upon the rock. The archers ceased to shoot and drew their axes. The men-at-arms leapt forward. The battle had joined at last! Breast to breast they wrestled now. Hugh's sword was red, and red was Grey Dick's axe. Fight as they would, the English were borne back. The young Prince waved his arm, screaming something, and at the sight the English line checked its retreat, stood still and next instant plunged forward with a roar of:

"England and the Prince!"

That assault was over. Backward rolled the tide of men, those who were left living. After them went the wild Welsh. Their commanders ordered them to stand. The Earl of Warwick ordered them to stand. The Prince himself ordered them to stand, running in front of them, only to be swept aside like a straw before a draught of wind. Out they broke, grinning and gnashing their teeth, great knives in their hands.

The red Dragon of Merlin which a giant bore led them on. It sank, it fell, it rose again. The giant was down, but another had it. They scrambled over the mass of dead and dying. They got among the living beyond. With eerie screams they houghed the horses and, when the riders fell, hacked open the lacings of thir helms and, unheeding any cries for mercy, drove the great knives home. At length all were dead and they returned again, waving those red knives and singing some fierce chant in their unknown tongue.

The battle was not over yet. Fresh hordes of Frenchmen gathered out of arrow range and charged again under the banners of Blois, Alencon, Lorraine and Flanders. Forward they swept, and with them came one who looked like a king, for he wore a crown upon his helm. The hawk-eyed Dick noted him and that his brille was bound to those of the knights who rode upon his either side. On them he rained shafts from his great black bow, for Grey Dick never shot without an aim, and after the battle one of his arrows was found fixed in the throat of the blind King of Bohemia.

This second charge could not be stayed. Step by step the English knights were beaten back; the line of archers was broken through; his guard formed round the Prince, Hugh among them. Heavy horses swept on to them. Beneath the hoofs of one Hugh was felled, but, stabbing it from below, caused the poor best to leap aside. He gained his feet again. The Prince was down. A splendid knight—it was the Count of Flanders—who had sprung from his horse, stood over him, his sword point at his throat, and called on him to yield. Up ran Robert Fitzsimmon, his standard bearer, shouting:

"To the son of the King! To the son of the King!"

He struck down a knight with the pole of his standard. Hugh sprang like a wildcat at Louis of Flanders and drove his sword through his throat. Richard de Beaumont flung the great banner of Wales over the Prince, hiding him till more help came and beat back the foe. Then the Prince struggled from the ground, gasping:

"I thank you friends," and once more the French retreated. The Welsh banner rose again and that danger was over.

The Earl of Warwick ran up. Hugh noted that his armor was covered with blood.

"John of Norwich," he cried to a knight who stood leaning on his sword, "take one with you, away to the King and pray him for aid. The French gather again; we are outworn with blows; the young Prince is in danger of his life or liberty. Begone!"

Old John's eyes fell on Hugh.

"Come with me, you Suffolk man," he said, and away they went.

"Now what would you give," he gasped as they ran, "to be drinking a stoup of ale with me in my tower of Mettingham, as you have done before this red day dawned? What would you give, young Hugh de Cressi?"

"Nothing at all," answered Hugh. "Rather would I die upon this field in glory than drink all the ale in Suffolk for a hundred years."

"Well said, young man," grunted John. "So do I think would I, though I have never longed for a quart of liquor more."

They came to a windmill and climbed its steep stairs. On the top stage, amid the corn sacks, stood Edward of England looking through the window place.

"Your business, Sir John?" he said, scarcely turning his head.

The old knight told it shortly.

"My son is not dead and is not wounded," replied the King, "and I have none to send to his aid. Bid him win his spurs; the day shall yet be his. Look," he added, pointing through the window place, "our banners have not given back a spear's throw, and in front of them the field is paved with dead. I tell you the French break. Back, de Norwich! Back, de Cressi! and bid the Prince to charge."

Some one thrust a cup of wine into Hugh's hand. He swallowed it, glancing at the wild scene below, and presently was running with Sir John toward the spot where they saw the Prince's banner flying. They came to Warwick and told him the King's answer.

"My father speaks well," said the Prince. "Let none share our glory this day. My Lord, form up the lines, and when my banner is lifted thrice give the word to charge. Linger not; the dark is near and either France or England must go down ere night."

Forward rolled the French in their last desperate onset; horse and foot mingled together. Forward they rolled almost in silence, the arrows playing on their dense host, but not as they did at first, for many a quiver was empty. Once, twice, thrice the Prince's banner bowed and lifted, and as it rose for the third time there rang out a shout of, "Charge for St. George and Edward!"

Then England, that all these long hours had stood still, suddenly hurled herself upon the foe. Hugh, leaping over a heap of dead and dying, saw in front of him a knight who wore a helmet shaped like a wolf's head and had a wolf painted upon his shield. The wolf knight charged at him as though he sought him alone. An arrow from behind it was Gray Dick's—sank up to the feathers in the horse's neck and down it came. The rider shook himself clear and they began to fight. Hugh was beaten to his knee beneath a heavy blow that his helm turned. He rose unhurt and rushed at the knight, who in avoiding his onset caught his spur on the body of a dead man and fell backward.

Hugh leaped on to him, striving to thrust his sword up beneath his gorget and make an end of him.

"Grace!" said the knight in French, "I yield me."

"We take no prisoners," answered Hugh as he thrust again.

"Pity then!" said the knight. "You are brave. Would you butcher a fallen man? Show mercy; some day your case may be mine and it will be repaid to you."

Hugh hesitated, although now the point of his sword was through the lacing of the gorget.

"For your lady's sake, pity!" gasped the knight as he felt its point.

"You know by what name to conjure," said Hugh doubtfully. "Well, get you gone if you can and pray for one Hugh de Cressi, for he gives you life."

The knight seemed to start, then struggled to his feet and seizing a loose horse by the bridle swung himself to the saddle and galloped off into the shadows.

"Master," croaked a voice into Hugh's ear, "I've seen the swan! Follow me. My arrows are all gone or I'd have shot him."

"God's truth! show him to me," gasped Hugh, and away they leaped together.

Soon they had outrun even the slaughtering Welsh and found themselves mingled with fugitives from the French army. But in the gathering twilight none seemed to take any note of them, for indeed every man was engaged in saving his own life and thought that this was the purpose of these two also. Some three hundred yards away certain French knights, mounted often two upon one horse, or afoot, were flying from that awful field striking out to the right in order to clear themselves of the cumbering horde of fugitives. One of these knights lagged behind, evidently because his horse was wounded. He turned to look back and a last ray from the dying sun lit upon him.

"Look," said Dick, and Hugh saw that on the knight's shield was blazoned a white swan and that he wore upon his helmet a swan for a crest. The knight, who had not seen them, spurred his horse, but it would not or could not move. Then he called to his companions for help, but they took no heed. Finding himself alone, he dismounted, hastily examined the horse's wound and, having unbuckled a cloak from his saddle, cast down his shield in order that he might run more lightly.

"Thanks to God he is mine," muttered Hugh. "Touch him not, Dick, unless I fall, and then do you take up the quarrel till you fall."

So speaking, he leapt upon the man out of the shadow of some thorn that grew there.

"Lift your shield and fight," said Hugh, advancing on him with raised sword. "I am Hugh de Cressi."

"Then, sir, I yield myself your prisoner," answered the knight, "seeing that you are two and I but one."

"Not so. I take no prisoners who seek vengeance, not ransom, and yours least of all. My companion shall not touch you unless I fall. Swift now, the light dies and I would kill you fighting."

The knight picked up his shield.

"I know you," he said. "I am not he you think."

"And I know you," answered Hugh. "Now, no words—of them there have been enough between us," and he smote at him.

For two minutes or more they fought, for the armor of both was good and one was full of rage and the other of despair. There was little fine sword play about this desperate duel; the light was too low for it. They struck and warded, that was all, while Gray Dick stood by and watched grimly. Some more fugitives came up, but seeing that blows passed veered off to the left, for of blows they had had enough that day. The Swan knight missed a great stroke, for Hugh leapt aside, then, as he staggered forward, struck at the Frenchman with all his strength. The heavy sword, grasped in both hands, for Hugh had thrown aside his shield, caught his mail where neck joins shoulder and sank through his mail deep into the flesh beneath. Down he went. It was finished.

"Unlace his helm, Dick," gasped Hugh. "I would see his face for the last time, and if he still lives"——

Dick obeyed, cutting the lashings of the helm.

"God's truth!" he said presently in a startled voice, "if this be Sir Edmund Acour he has strangely changed.

"I am not Acour, Lord of Noyon," said the dying man in a hollow voice. "Had you given me time I would have told you so."

"Then, in Christ's name, who are you," asked Hugh, "that wear de Noyon's cognizance?"

"I am Pierre de la Roche, one of his knights. You may have seen me in England. I was with him on the marsh and in the chapel. He bade me change arms with him before the battle, promising me great reward, because he knew that if he were taken prisoner Edward of England would hang him as a traitor, whereas me they would ransom."

"Well, of a truth, you have the reward," said Dick, looking at his ghastly wound.

"Where, then, is Acour?" gasped Hugh.

"I know not. He fled from the battle an hour ago with the King of France, but I who was doomed would not fly. Oh, that I could find a priest to shrive me!"

"Whither does he fly?" asked Hugh again.

"I know not. He said that if the battle went against us he would seek his castle in Italy where Edward cannot reach him."

"What armor did he wear?" asked Dick.

"Mine, mine—a wolf upon his shield, a wolf's head for crest."

Hugh reeled as though an arrow had passed through him.

"The Wolf knight, Acour!" he groaned. And I spared his life!"

"A very foolish dead, for which you now pay the price," said Dick, as though to himself.

"We met in the battle and he told me," said de la Roche, speaking very slowly, for he grew weak. "Yes, he told me and laughed. Truly we are Fate's fools, all of us," and he smiled a ghastly smile and died.

Hugh hid his face in his hands and sobbed in his helpless rage.

"The innocent slain," he said, "by me, and the guilty spared—by me. O God! my cup is full. Take his arms, man, that one day I may show them to him, and let us be going ere we share this poor knight's fate."

CHAPTER X.

The King Makes Hugh His Champion.

Back over that fearful field, whereof the silence was broken only by the groans of the wounded and the dying, walked Hugh and Gray Dick. They came to the great rampart of dead men and horses that surrounded the English line, and climbed it as though it were a wall. On the further side bonfires had been lit to lighten the darkness, and by the flare of them they saw Edward of England embracing and blessing his son, the Black Prince, who, unhelmeted, bowed low before him in his bloodstained mail.

"Who were they beside Sir Robert Fitzsimmon and Richard de Beaumont who helped you when you were down, my son?" asked the King.

The Prince looked about him.

"I know not, Sire. Many, but here is one of them," and he pointed to Hugh, who just then appeared within the circle of the firelight. "I think that he slew the Count Louis of Flanders."

"Ah!" said the King. "Our young merchant of Dunwich—a gallant man. Kneel you down, merchant of Dunwich."

Hugh knelt and the King taking the red sword from his hand, struck him with it on the shoulder, saying:

"Rise, Sir Hugh de Cressi, for now I give you that boon which your death-faced servant asked before the battle. You have served us, or rather England, well, both of you. But whose armor is that the archer carries, Sir Hugh?"

"Sir Edmund Acour's, Lord de Noyon, sire; only, alack! another man was within the armor."

"Your meaning?" said the King briefly, and in a few words Hugh told the tale.

"A strange story, Sir Hugh. It would seem that God fought against you in this matter. Also I am wroth; my orders were that none of my men should sally out, though I fear me that you are not the only one who has broken them, and for your great deeds I forgive you."

"Sire," said Hugh, dropping to his knee again, "a boon. This de Noyon, your enemy and mine, has cheated and mocked me. Grant to me and my servant, Richard the Archer, permission to follow him and be avenged upon him."

"What is this, you ask, Sir Hugh? That you and your brave henchman should wander off into the depths of France, there to perish in a dungeon or be hanged like felons? Nay, nay, we need brave men and have none to spare for private quarrels. As for this traitor, de Noyon, and his plot, that egg is broken ere it was hatched, and we fear him no more. You follow me, Sir Hugh, and your servant with you, lais is taken leave not our person for any cause, and ask no more such boons lest you lose our favor. Nay, we have no more words for you, since many others seek them. Stand back, Sir Hugh! What say you, my Lord of Warwick? Aye, it is a grewsome task, but let the Welshmen out; those wounded will be well rid of their pain, and Christ have mercy on their souls! For get not when it is finished to gather all men that they may give thanks to God for His great mercies."

Well nigh a year had gone, for once again the sun shone in the brazen August heavens. Calais had fallen at last. Only that day six of her noblest citizens had come forth, bearing the keys of the fortress, clad in white shirts, with ropes about their necks, and been rescued from instant death at the hands of the headman by the prayer of Queen Phillippa. In his tent sat young Sir Hugh de Cressi, who, after so much war and hardship, looked older than his years, perhaps because of a red scar across the forehead, which he had come by during the siege. With him was his father, Master de Cressi, who had sailed across from Dunwich with a cargo of provisions, whereof, if the truth be known, he had made no small profit, for they were sold, every pound of them, before they left the ship's hold, though it is true the money remained to be collected.

"You say that Eve is well, my father?"

"Aye, well enough, Son. Never saw I woman better or more beautiful, though she wears but a sad face. I asked her if she would not sail with me and visit you. But she answered: 'Nay, how can I, who am another man's wife?' Sir Hugh, your son, should have killed the wolf and let the poor swan go. When she wolf is dead, then, perchance, I will visit him. But, meanwhile, say to him that Red Eve's heart is where it always was and that, like all Dunwich, she joys greatly in his fame and is honored in his honor. Moreover, to Gray Dick I ere she send many messages and a present of wines and spiced foods for his stomach and of six score arrows made after his own pattern for his quiver.'

"But for me nothing, Father?" said Hugh.

"Nothing, Son, save her love, which she said was enough. Also, in all this press of business and in my joy at finding you safe I had almost forgotten it. Here is a letter from the holy father, Sir Andrew. I have it somewhere in my pouch amid the bills of exchange," and he began to hunt through the parchments which he carried in a bag within his robe.

At length the letter was found. It ran thus:

"To Sir Hugh de Cressi, knight, my beloved god-son: With what rejoicings I and another have heard of your knightly deeds through the letters that you have sent to us and from the mouths of wounded soldiers returned from the war your honored father will tell you. I thank God for them and pray Him that this may find you unhurt and growing ever in glory.

"My son, I have no good news for you. The Pope at Avignon, having studied the matter (if indeed it ever reached his own ears), writes by one of his secretaries to say that he will not dissolve the alleged marriage between the Count of Noyon and the Lady Eve of Clavering until the parties have appeared before him and set out their cause to his face. Therefore Eve cannot come to you, nor must you come to her while de Noyon lives, unless the mind of His Holiness can be changed. Should France become more quiet, so that English folk can travel there in safety, perchance Eve and I will journey to Avignon to lay her plaint before the Holy Father. But as yet this seems scarcely possible. Moreover, I trust that the traitor, Acour, may meet his end in this way or that and save us such necessity. For, as you know, such cases take long to try and the cost of them is great. Moreover, at the court of Avignon the cause of one of our country must indeed be good just now when the other party to it is of the blood of France.

"So I hope to write to you again, who at present have no more to say, save that notwithstanding my years I am well and strong and would that I sat with you before the walls of Calais God's blessing and mine be on you, and to Richard the Archer greetings. Dunwich has heard how he shot the Frenchman before the great battle closed and the townsfolk lit a bonfire on the walls and feasted all the archers in his honor.

"ANDREW ARNOLD."

"Here is another letter," said Master de Cressi, when Hugh had finished reading, "which Sir Andrew charged me to give to you also," and he handed him a paper addressed in a large, childish hand.

Hugh broke its silk eagerly, for he knew that writing.

"Hugh," it began simply, "Clement the Pope will not void my false marriage unless I appear before him, and this as yet I cannot do because of the French wars. Moreover, he sets the curse of the Church upon me and any man with whom I shall dare to remarry until this be done. For myself I would defy the Church, but not for you or for children that might come to us. Moreover, the holy father, Sir Andrew, forbids it, saying that God will right all in His season and that we must not make Him wroth. Therefore, Hugh, lover you are but husband you may not be while de Noyon lives or until the Pope gives his dispensation of divorce, which latter may be long in winning, for the knave de Noyon has been whispering in his ear. Hugh, this is my counsel: Get you to the King again and crave his leave to follow de Noyon, for if once you twain come face to face I know well how the fray will end. Then, when he is dead, return to one who waits for you through this world and the next.

"Hugh, I am proud of your great deeds. No longer can they call you the 'merchant's son,' Sir Hugh. God be with you, as are my prayers and love.

"EVE OF CLAVERING."

"I forgot to tell you that Sir Andrew is disturbed in heart," said Master de Cressi presently. "He looks into a crystal which he says he brought with him from the East, and swears he sees strange sights there, pictures of woe such as have not been since the beginning of the world. Of this woe he preaches to the folk of Dunwich, warning them of judgment to come, and they listen affrighted because they know him to be a holy man who has the gift of God. Yet he says that you and I need fear nothing. May it be so, Hugh."

Now when he had thought a while and hidden up Eve's letter, Hugh turned to his father and asked him what were these sermons that Sir Andrew preached.

"I have heard but one of them, Son," answered Master de Cressi, "though there have been three. By the Holy Mother, it frightened me so much that I needed no more of that medicine. Nor, to tell truth, when I got home again could I remember all he said, save that it was of some frightful ill that comes upon the world from the East and will leave it desolate."

"And what think folk of such talk, Father?"

"Faith, Son, they know not what to think. Most say that he is mad; others that he is inspired of God. Yet others declare that he is a wizard and that his familiar brings him tidings from Cathay, where once he dwelt, or, perchance, from hell itself. These went to the Bishop, who summoned Sir Andrew and was closeted with him for three hours. Afterward he called in the complainers and bade them cease their scandal of wizardry, since he was sure that what the holy father said came from above and not from below, and that they would do well to mend their lives and prepare to render their account, as for his part he should also, since the air was thick with doom. Then he gave his benediction to the old knight and turned away weeping, and since that hour none talk of wizardry but all of judgment. Men in Dunwich who have quarrelled for years forgive each other and sing psalms instead of swearing oaths, and I have been paid debts that have been owing to me for years all because of these sermons."

"An awesome tale, truly," said Hugh. "Yet, like that Bishop, I believe that what Sir Andrew says will come to pass, for I know that he is not as other men are."

That night, by special leave, Hugh waited on the King, and with him Gray Dick, who was ever his shadow.

"What is it, now, Sir Hugh de Cressi?" asked Edward.

"Sire, after the great battle, nigh upon a year ago, you told me that I must serve you till Calais fell. I have served as best I could, and Calais has fallen. Now I ask your leave to go seek my enemy—and yours—Sir Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon."

"Then you must go far, Sir Hugh, for I have tidings that this rogue who was not ashamed to wear another man's armor, and to save himself from your sword, is away to Italy this six months gone, where as the Seigneur de Cattrina, he has estates near Venice. But tell me how things stand. Doubtless that Red Eve of yours—strangely enough I thought of her at Crecy when the sky grew so wondrous at night fall—is at the bottom of them."

"That is so, Sire," and he told him all the tale.

"A strange case truly, Sir Hugh," said the King when he heard it out. "I'll write to Clement for you both, but I doubt me whether you and your Eve will get justice from him, being English, for England and Englishmen find little favor at Avignon just now, and mayhap Philip has already written on behalf of de Noyon. At the best His Holiness will shear you close and keep you waiting while he weighs the wool. No, Red Eve is right: this is a knot soonest severed by the sword, and if you can find him de Noyon can scarce refuse to fight you, for you shall fight him as the champion of our cause as well as of your own. He's at Venice, for our envoy there reported it to me, trying to raise a fresh force of archers for the French.

"You have leave to go, Sir Hugh, who deserve much more who have served us well," went on the King. "We'll give you letters to Sir Geoffrey Carleon, who represents us there, and through him to the Doge. Farewell to you, Sir Hugh de Cressi, and to you, Captain Richard the Archer. When all this game is played return and make report to us of your adventures and of how de Noyon died. The Queen will love to hear the tale and your nuptials and Red Eve's shall be celebrated at Westminster in our presence, for you have earned no less. Master Secretary, get your tools; I will dictate these letters. After they are signed tomorrow, see them into the hands of Sir Hugh with others that I will give him for safe carriage, for alas! I have creditors at Venice. Make out an open patent also to show that he and this captain travel as our messengers, charging all that do us service to forward them upon their journey."

Three days later Hugh and Gray Dick in the character of royal messengers from the King of England to the Doge of Venice took passage in a great vessel bound for Genoa with a cargo of wool and other goods. On board this ship before he sailed Hugh handed to his father letters for Eve and for Sir Andrew Arnold, and received from him money in plenty for his fares and bills of exchange upon certain merchants of Italy, which would bring him more should it be needed.

Their parting was very sad since the prophecies of Sir Andrew had taken no small hold upon Master de Cressi's mind.

"I fear me greatly, dear son," he said, "that we part to meet no more. Well, such is the lot of parents. They breed those children that heaven decrees to them: with toil and thought and fears they rear them up from infancy, learning to love them more than their own souls; for their sakes fighting a hard world. Then the sons go forth, north and south, and the daughters find husbands and joys and sorrows of their own, and both half forget them, as is Nature's way. Last of all those parents die, as also is Nature's way, and the half forgetfulness becomes whole, as surely as the young moon grows to full. Well, well, this is a lesson that each generation must learn in turn, as you will know ere all is done. Although you are my youngest, I'll not shame to say I have loved you best of all, Hugh, and made such provision as I can for you, who have once more raised up the old name to honor, and who, as I hope, will once more blend the de Cressis and the Clavergings, the foes of three generations, into a single House."

"Speak not so, Father," answered Hugh, who was moved almost to tears. "Mayhap it is I who shall die, while you live on to a green old age. At least know that I am not forgetful of your love and kindness, seeing that after Eve you are dearer to me than any on the earth."

"Aye, aye, after Eve and Eve's children. Still, you'll have a kind thought for me now and then—the old merchant who so often thwarted you when you were a wayward [illegible]—for your own good, as he held. For what more can a father hope? But let us not weep before all these strange men. Farewell, son Hugh, of whom I am so proud. Farewell, son Hugh," and he embraced him and went across the gangway, for the sailors were already singing their chanty at the anchor.

"I never had a father that I can mind," said Gray Dick aloud to himself, after his fashion, "yet now I wish I had, for I'd like to think on his last words when there was nothing else to do. It's an ugly world as I see it, but there's beauty in such love as this. The man for the maid and the maid for the man—pish! they want each other. But the father and the mother—they give all and take nothing. Oh, there's beauty in such love as this, so perhaps God made it. Only, then, how did He make Crecy Field and Calais siege and my black bow, and me the Death who draws it?"

The voyage to Genoa was very long, for at this season of the year the winds were light, and for the most part contrary. At length, however, Hugh and Dick came there safe and sound, and having landed and bid farewell to the captain and crew of the ship, waited on the head of a great trading house with which Master de Cressi had dealings. This signor, who could speak French, gave them lodging and welcomed them well, both for the sake of Hugh's father and because they came as messengers from the King of England. On the morrow of their arrival he took them to a great lord in authority, who was called a Duke. This Duke, when he learned that one was a knight and the other a captain archer of the English army, and that they both had fought at Crecy, where so many of his countrymen—this Genoese bowmen—had been slain, looked on them somewhat sourly.

Had he known all the part they played in that battle, in truth his welcome would have been a rough one. For Hugh, with the guile of a serpent told him that the brave Genoese had been slain, not by the English arrows, for which even with their wet strings they were quite a match (here Dick, who was standing to one side, grinned faintly and stroked the case of his black bow, as though to bid it keep its memories to itself), but by the cowardly French, their allies. Indeed, his tale of that horrible and treacherous slaughter was so moving that the Duke burst into tears and swore that he would cut the throat of every Frenchman whom he could lay hands on.

After this he began to extol the merits of the cross bow as against the long arm of the English, and Hugh agreed that there was much in what he said. But Gray Dick, who was no courtier, did not agree, offering to fight any cross bowman in Genoa at six score yards, so that the Duke might learn which was the better weapon. But Hugh trod on his foot and explained that he meant something quite different, being no master of the French