RED EVE

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

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

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MURGH THE DEATH.

They knew nothing of it in England or all the western lands in those days before Crecy was fought, when the third Edward sat upon the throne. There was none to tell them of the doom that the East, whence comes light and life, death and the decrees of God, had loosed upon the world. Not one in a multitude in Europe had ever even heard of those vast countries of far Cathay, peopled with hundreds of millions of cold-faced, yellow men, lands which had grown very old before our own familiar states and empires were carved out of mountain, or forest and of savage-haunted plain. Yet if their eyes had been opened so that they could see well might they have trembled. King, prince, priest, merchant, captain, citizen and poor laboring hind—well might they all have trembled when the East sent forth her gifts!

Look across the world beyond that curtain of thick darkness. Behold! A vast city of fantastic houses half buried in the winter snows, reddened by the lurid sunset breaking through a saw-toothed canopy of cloud. Everywhere upon the temple squares and open spaces great fires burning a strange fuel—the bodies of thousands of mankind. Pestilence was king of that city, a pestilence hitherto unknown. Innumerable hordes had died and were dying, yet innumerable hordes remained. All the patient East bore forth those still shapes that had been theirs to love or hate, and, their task done, turned to the banks of the mighty river and watched.

Down the broad street which ran between the fantastic houses advanced a procession toward the brown ice-flecked river. First marched a company of priests clad in plain black robes and carrying on poles lanterns of black paper, lighted, although the sun still shone. Behind marched another company of priests clad in white robes and bearing white lanterns, also lighted. But at these none looked, nor did they listen to the dirges that they sang, for all eyes were fixed upon him who filled the centre space and upon his two companions.

The first companion was a lovely woman, jewel-hung, wearing false flowers in her streaming hair and beneath her bared breasts a kirtle of white silk. Life and love embodied in radiance and beauty, she danced in front, looking about her with alluring eyes and scattering petals of dead roses from a basket which she bore. Different was the second companion, who stalked behind, so thin, so sexless that none could say if the shape were that of man or woman. Dry, streaming locks of iron gray, an ashen countenance, deep set, hollow eyes, a beetling, parchment-covered brow; lean shanks half hidden with a rotting ragf, clawlike hands which clutched miserably at the air. This was its awful fashion, that of new death in all his terror.

Between them, touched of neither, went a man, naked save for a red girdle and a long red cloak that was fastened round his throat and hung down from his broad shoulders. There was nothing strange about this man, unless it were perhaps the strength that seemed to flow from him and the glance of his icy eyes. He was just a burly yellow man whose age none could tell, for the hood of the red cloak hid his hair; one who seemed to be far removed from youth and yet untouched by time. He walked on steadily as though of set purpose, his face immovable, taking no heed. Only now and again he turned those long eyes of his upon one of the multitude who watched him pass crouched upon their knees in solemn silence, always upon one, whether it were man, woman or child, with a glance meant for that one and no other. And always the one upon whom it felt rose from the knee, made obeisance and, turning, departed as though filled with some inspired purpose.

Down to the quay went the black priests, the red cloaked man, preceded by rosy life and followed by ashen death. Through the funeral fires they wended and lurid sunset shone upon them all. To the pillars of this quay was fastened a strange, high-pooped ship, with crimson sails set upon her masts. The white priests and the black priests formed lines upon either side of the broad gangway of that ship and bowed as the red cloaked man walked over it between them quite alone, for now she with the dead roses and she with the ashen countenance had fallen back. As the sun sank he turned and, standing on the lofty stern, cried aloud:

"Here the work is done. Now I, the Eating Fire, I the Messenger, turn me to the West. Among you for a while I cease to burn, yet forget me not, for I return again."

As he spoke the ropes of the ship were loosened, the wind caught her crimson sails and she departed into the night, one blood red spot against its blackness.

The multitude watched until they could see her no longer and then flamed up with mingled joy and rage. They laughed madly. They cursed him who had departed.

"We live, we live, we live!" they cried. "Murgh is gone! Murgh is gone! Kill his priests! Make sacrifice of his shadows! Murgh is gone bearing the curse of the East into the bosom of the West. Look! it follows him," and they pointed to a cloud of smoke or vapor, in which terrible shapes seemed to move dimply, that trailed after the departing, red-sailed ship.

The black priests and the white priests heard, and without struggle, without complaint, as though they were but taking part in some set ceremony, kneeled down in lines upon the snow. Naked from the waist up, executioners with great swords appeared. They advanced upon the kneeling lines without haste, without wrath, and letting fall the heavy swords upon the patient, outstretched necks, did their grim office till all were dead. Then they turned to find her of the flower who had danced before and her of the tattered weeds who had followed after, purposing to cast them to the funeral flames. But these were gone though none had seen them go. Only out of the gathering darkness from some temple or pagoda top a voice spoke like a moaning wind.

"Fools," wailed the voice, "still with you is Murgh, the second thing create: Murgh, who was made to be man's minister. Murgh the Messenger shall reappear from beyond the setting sun. Ye cannot kill, ye cannot spare. Those priests you seemed to slay he had summoned to be his officers afar. Fools! Ye do but serve as serves Murgh, gateway of the gods. Life and death are not in your hands or in his. They are in the hands of the Master of Murgh. Helper of man, of that Lord whom no eye hath seen but whose behests all who are born obey, yes, even the mighty Murgh. Looser of burdens, whom in your foolishness you fear."

So spoke this voice out of the darkness, but that night the sword of the great pestilence was lifted from the Eastern land and there the funeral fires flared no more.

CHAPTER I.

The Trysting Place.

On the very day that Murgh the Messenger sailed forth into that uttermost sea a young man and a maiden met together in the Blythburg marshes near to Dunwich, on the eastern coast of England. In this, the month of February of the year 1346, hard and bitter frost held Suffolk in its grip. The muddy stream of Blyth, it is true, was frozen only in places, since the tide, flowing up from the Southwold Harbor, where it runs into the sea between that ancient town and the hamlet of Walberswick, had broken up the ice. But all else was set hard and fast, and now toward sunset the cold was bitter. Stark and naked stood the tall dry reeds. The blackbirds and starlings perched upon the willows seemed swollen into feathery balls, the fur started on the backs of hares and a four-horse wain could travel in safety over swamps where at any other time a schoolboy dared not set his foot.

On such an eve, with the snow threatening, the great marsh was utterly desolate, and this was why these two had chosen it for their meeting place. To look on them were a goodly pair—the girl, who was clothed in the red she always wore, tall, dark, well-shaped, with large black eyes and a determined face, one who would make a very stately woman; the man, broad-shouldered, with gray eyes that were quick and almost fierce, long limbed, hard, agile and healthy, one who had never known sickness, who looked as though the world were made for him to master. He was young, but one and twenty that day, and his simple dress, a tunic of thick wool, fastened round him with a leather belt, to which hung a short sword, showed that his degree was modest.

The girl, although she looked his elder, in fact was only in her twentieth year, though from her who had been reared in the hard school of that cruel age, childhood had long departed, leaving her a ripened woman before her time.

The pair stood looking at each other.

"Well, cousin Eve Clavering," said the man, in his clear voice, "why did your message bid me meet you in this cold place?"

"Because I had a word to say to you, cousin Hugh de Cressi," she answered boldly, "and the march being so cold and so lonesome I thought it suited to my purpose. Does Gray Dick watch yonder?"

"Aye, behind those windows, arrow on string, and God help him on whom Dick draws. But what was that word, Eve?"

"One easy to understand," she replied, looking him in the eyes. "Farewell!"

He shivered as though with the cold and his face changed.

"An ill birthday greeting, yet I feared it," he muttered huskily, "but why more now than at any other time?"

"Would you known, Hugh? Well, the story is short, so I'll set it out. Our great-grandmother, the heiress of the de Chenceys, married twice, did she not, and from the first husband came the de Cressis and from the second the Claverings. But in this way of it that we Claverings got the lands, or most of them, and you de Cressis, the nobler stock, took to merchandise. Now, since those days you have grown rich with your fishing fleets, your wool mart and your ferry dues at Walberswick and Southwold. We, too, are rich in manors and in land, counting our acres by the thousand, but yet poor, lacking your gold, though yonder manor," and she pointed to some towers which rose far away above the trees upon the high land, "has many mouths to feed. Also the sea has robbed us at Dunwich, where I was born, taking our great house and many a street that paid us rent, and your market of Southwold has starved out ours at Blythburgh."

"Well, what has all this to do with you and me, Eve?"

"Much, Hugh, as you should know who have been bred to trade," and she glanced at his merchant's dress. "Between de Cressi and Clavering there have been rivalry and feud for three long generations. When we were children it abated for a while, since your father lent money to mine, and that is why they suffered us to grow up side by side. But then they quarrelled about the ferry that we had set in pawn, and your father asked his gold back again and, not getting it, took the ferry, which I have always held a foolish and strife breeding deed, since from that day forward the war was open. Therefore, Hugh, if we meet at all it must be in these frozen reeds or behind the cover of a thicket, like a village slut and her man."

"I know that well enough, Eve, who have spoken with you but twice in nine months," and he devoured her beautiful face with hungry eyes. "But of that word farewell"——

Of that ill word, this, Hugh. I have a new suitor up yonder, a fine French suitor, a very great lord indeed, whose wealth, I am told, none can number. From his mother he has the Valley of the Mayeney up to Bungay town—aye, and beyond—and from his father a whole county in Normandy. Five French knights ride behind his banner, and with them ten squires and I know not how many men-at-arms. There is feasting at the castle, I can tell you. Ere his train leaves us our winter provender will be done and we'll have to drink small beer till the wine ships come in from France in spring.

"And what is this lord's name?"

"God's truth! he has several," she answered. "Sir Edmund Acour in England, and in France the high and puissant Count of Noyon, and in Italy, near to the city of Venice—for there, too, he has possessions which came to him through his grandmother—the Seigneur of Cattrina."

"And having so much, does he want you, too, Eve? And if so, why?"

"So he swears," she answered slowly; "and as for the reason, why, I suppose you must seek it in my face, which by ill fortune has pleased his lordship since first he saw it a month ago. At the least he has asked me in marriage of my father, who jumped at him like a winter pike, and so I am betrothed."

"And do you want him, Eve?"

"Aye, I want him as far as the sun is from the moon or the world from either. I want him in heaven or beneath the earth or anywhere away from me."

At these words a light shone in Hugh's keen gray eyes.

"I'm glad of that, Eve, for I have heard much of this fellow—among other things that he is a traitor come here to spy on England. But should I be a match for him, man to man, Eve?" he asked after a little pause.

She looked him up and down, then answered:—

"I think so, though he is no weakling; but not for him and the five knights and the ten squires, and my noble father and my brother and the rest. Oh, Hugh! Hugh!" she added bitterly, "cannot you understand that you are but a merchant's lad, though your blood be as noble as any in this realm—a merchant's lad, the last of five brothers. Why were you not born the first of them if you wished for Eve Clavering, for then your red gold might have bought me."

"Ask that of those who begot me," said Hugh. "Come, now, what's in your mind? You're not one to be sold like a heifer at a faring and go whimpering to the altar, and I am not one to see you led there while I stand upon my feet. We are made of a clay too stiff for a French lord's fingers, Eve, though it is true that they may drag you whither you would not walk."

"No," she answered. "I think I shall take some marrying against my wish. Moreover, I am Dunwich born."

"What of that, Eve?"

"Go, ask your godsire and my friend Sir Andrew Arnold, the old priest. In the library of the Temple there he showed me an ancient roll, a copy of the charter granted by John and other kings of England to the citizens of Dunwich."

"What said this writing, Eve?"

"It said, among many other things, that no man or maid of Dunwich can be forced to marry against their will, even in the lifetime of their parents."

"But will it hold today?"

"Aye, I think so. I think that is why the holy Sir Andrew showed it to me, knowing something of our case, for he is my confessor when I can get to him."

"Then, Sweet, you are safe!" exclaimed Hugh, with a sigh of relief.

"Aye, so safe that tomorrow Father Nicholas, the French chaplain in his train, has been warned to wed me to My Lord Acour—that is, if I am there to wed."

"And if this Acour is there I'll seek him out tonight and challenge him, Eve," and Hugh laid hand upon his sword.

"Doubtless," she replied, sarcastically, "Sir Edmund Acour, Count of Noyan, Seigneur of Cattrina, will feel it honor to accept the challenge of Hugh de Cressi, the merchant's youngest son. Oh, Hugh! with your wits frozen like this winter marsh? Not thus can you save me."

The young man thought a while, staring at the ground and biting his lips. Then he looked up suddenly and said:

"How much do you love me, Eve?"

With a slow smile she opened her arms, and next moment they were kissing each other as heartily as ever man and maid have kissed since the world began; so heartily, indeed, that when at length she pushed him from her, her lovely face was as red as the skirt she wore.

"You know well that I love you, to my sorrow and undoing," she said in a broken voice. "From childhood it has been so between us and till the grave turns one or both it will be so, and for my part beyond that the priests speak true. For whatever may be your case, I am not one to change my fancy. When I give, I give all, though it be of little worth. In truth, Hugh, if I could I would marry you tonight though you are naught but a merchant's lad, or even"——and she paused, wiping her eyes with the back of her slim, strong hand.

"I thank you," he answered, trembling with joy. "So it is with me. For you and no other woman I live and die, and though I am so humble I'll be worthy of you yet. If God keeps me in breath you shall not blush for your man, Eve. Well, I am not great at words, so let us come to deeds. Will you away with me now? I thing that Father Arnold would find you lodging for the night and an altar to be wed at and tomorrow our ship sails for Flanders and for France."

"Yes, but would your father give us passage in it Hugh?"

"Why not? It could not deepen the feud between our houses, which already has no bottom, and if he refused we would take one, for the captain is my friend. Also I have some little store set by; it came to me from my mother."

"You ask much," she said; "all a woman has, my life perchance as well. Yet there it is; I'll go because I am a fool, Hugh, and as it chances you are more to me than either, and I hate this fine French lord. I tell you, I sicken at his glance and shiver when he touches me. I'll go, though God alone knows the end of it."

"Our purpose being honest, the end will be good, Eve, though perhaps before all is done we may often think it evil. And now let's away, though I wish that you were dressed in another color."

"Red Eve they name me and red is my badge, because it suits my dark face best. Cavil not at my robe, Hugh, for it is the only dowry you will get with Eve Clavering. How shall we go? By the Walberwick ferry? You have no horses."

"Nay, I have a skiff hidden in the reeds five furlongs off. We must keep to the heath above Walberswick for there they know your red cloak even after dark, and I would not have you seen till we are safe with Sir Arnold in the Preceptory. Mother of Heaven what is that?"

"A peewit, no more," she answered indifferently.

"Nay, it is my man, Dick, calling like a peewit. That's his sign when trouble is afoot. Ah! here he comes."

As he spoke a tall, gaunt man appeared, advancing toward them. His gait was a shambling trot that seemed slow, although in truth he was covering the ground with extraordinary swiftness. Moreover, he moved so silently that even on the frost held soil his step could not be heard, and so carefully that not a reed stirred as he threaded in and out among their clumps like an otter, his head crouched down and his long bow pointed before him as though it were a spear. Half a minute more and he was before them, a very strange man to see. His years were not so many, thirty perhaps, and yet his face looked quite old because of its lack of coloring, its thinness and hard lines that marked where she muscles ran down to the tight, straight mouth and up to the big forehead, over which hung hair so light that at a little distance he seemed ashen gray. Only in this cold rock face, set very far apart, were two pale blue eyes, which, just now when he chose to lift their lids that generally kept near together, as though he were half asleep, were full of fire and quick cunning.

Reaching the pair this strange fellow dropped to his knees and raised his cap to Eve, the great lady of the Claverings—Red Eve, as they called her through the countryside. Then he spoke in a low, husky voice:

"They're coming, master! You and your mistress must to earth unless you mean to face them in the open," and the pale eyes glittered as he tapped his great black bow.

"Who are coming, Richard? Be plain, man."

"Sir John Clavering, my lady's father; young John, my lady's brother; the fine French Lord who wears a white swan for a crest; three of the knights his companions, and six—no seven—men at arms. Also from the other side the grieve, Thomas of Kessland, and with him his marsh men and verderers."

"And what are they coming for?" he asked again. "Have they hounds, and hawk on wrist?"

"Nay, but they have swords and knife on thigh, and he let his pale eyes fall on Eve.

"Oh, have done!" she broke in. "They come to take me and I'll not be taken. They come to kill you and I'll not see you slain and live. I had words with my father this morning about the Frenchman and I fear, let out the truth. He told me then that ere the Dunwich roses bloomed again she who loved you would have naught but bones to kiss. Dick, you know the fen, where can we hide till night?"

"Follow me," said the man, "and keep low."

Plunging into the dense brake of reeds, through which he glided like a polecat, Dick led them over ground on which save in times of hard frost no man could tread, heading toward the river bank. For two hundred paces or more they went thus, till, quite near to the lip of the stream, they came to a patch of reeds higher and thicker than the rest, in the centre of which was a little mound hid in a tangle of scrub and rushes. Once, perhaps a hundred or a thousand years before, some old marsh dweller had lived upon this mound or been buried in it. At any rate on its southern side, hidden by reeds and a withered willow, was a cavity of which the mouth could not be seen that may have once been a chamber for the living or the dead.

Thrusting aside the growths that masked it Dick bade them enter and lie still.

"None will find us here," he said as he lifted up the reeds behind them, "unless they chance to have hounds, which I did not see. Hist! be still; they come."

CHAPTER II.

The Fight by the River.

For a while Hugh and Eve heard nothing, for Gray Dick's ears were sharper than theirs, quick as these might be. About half a minute later, however, they caught the sound of horses' hoofs ringing on the hard earth and the crackle of breaking reeds, followed by that of voices.

Two of the speakers appeared and pulled up their horses near to them in a dry hollow that lay between them and the river bank. Peeping through the reeds that grew about the mouth of the earth-dwelling Eve saw them.

"My father and the Frenchman," she whispered. "Look," and she slid back a little so that Hugh might see.

Peering through the stems of the undergrowth, set as it were in a little frame against the red and ominous sky, the eyes of Hugh de Cressi fell upon Sir Edmund Acour, a gallant, even a splendid looking knight—that was his own impression of him. Broad shoulders, graceful, in age neither young nor old, clean featured, quick eyed, with a mobile mouth and a little, square cut beard, soft and even languid voiced, black haired, richly dressed in a fur robe and mounted on a fine black horse, such was the man.

Staring at him and remembering that he, too, loved Red Eve, Hugh grew suddenly ashamed. How could he, a mere merchant's lad, compare himself with this magnificent lord, this high bred, many titled favorite of courts and of fortune? How could he rival him, he who had never yet traveled a hundred miles from the place where he was born, save once when he sailed on a trading voyage to Calais? As well might a hooded crow try to match a peregrine that swooped to snatch away the dove beneath its claws. Yes, he was the gray crow, Eve was the dove whom he had captured, and yonder shifty eyed Count was the fleet, fierce peregrine who soon would tear out his heart and bear his quary far away. Hugh shivered a little as the thought struck him, not with fear for himself, but at the dread of that great and close bereavement.

The girl at his side felt the shiver, and her mind, quickened by love and peril, guessed its purport. She said nothing, for words were dangerous; only turned her beautiful face and pressed her lips upon her lover's hand. It was her message to him; thereby, as he knew well, humble as he might be, she acknowledged him her lord forever. I am with you, said that kiss; have no fear; in life or in death none shall divide us. He looked at her with grateful eyes and would have spoken had she not placed her hand upon his mouth and pointed.

Acour was speaking in English, which he used with a strong French accent.

"Well, we do not find your beautiful runaway, Sir John," he said, in a clear and cultivated voice, "and although I am not vain, for my part I cannot believe that she has come to such a place as this to meet a merchant's clerk, she who should company with kings."

"Yet I fear it is so, Sir Edmund," answered Sir John Clavering, a stout, dark man of middle age. "This girl of mine is very heady, as I give warning you will find out when she is your wife. For years she has set her fancy upon Hugh de Cressi; yes, since they were boy and girl together, as I think, and while he lives I doubt she'll never change it."

"While he lives—then why should he continue to live, Sir John?" asked the Count indifferently. "Surely the world will not miss a chapman's boy."

"The de Cressis are my kin, although I hate them, Sir Edmund. Also they are rich and powerful and have many friends in high places. If this young man died by my command it would start a blood feud of which none can tell the end, for, after all, he is nobly born."

"Then, Sir John, he shall die by mine. No, not at my own hands, since I do not fight with traders. But I have those about me who are pretty swordsmen and know how to pick a quarrel. Before a week is out there will be a funeral in Dunwich."

"I know nothing of your men and do not want to hear of their quarrels, past or future," said Sir John testily.

"Of course not," answered the Count. "I pray you, forget my words. Name of God! what an accursed and illomened spot is this! I feel as though I were standing by my own grave; it came upon me suddenly," and he shivered and turned pale.

"To those who talk of death, death often draws near," replied Clavering, crossing himself, "though I find the place well enough, seeing the hour and season."

"Do you, do you, Sir John? Look at that sky; look at the river beneath; that has turned to blood. Hark to the howl of the wind in the reeds and the cry of the birds we cannot see. Aye, and look at our shadows on the snow. Mine lies flat by a great hole, and your rising against yonder bank is that of a hooded man with hollow eyes—Death himself as I should liken him! There, it is gone! What a fool I am, or how strong is that wine of yours. Shall we be going also?"

"Nay, here comes my son with tidings. Well, Jack, have you found your sister?" he added, addressing a dark and somewhat saturnine young man who new rode up to them from over the crest of the hollow.

"No, sir, though we have beat the marsh through and through, so that scarce an otter could have escaped us. And yet she's here, for Thomas of Kessland caught sight of her red cloak among the reeds, and, what's more, Hugh de Cressi is with her, and Gray Dick, too, for both were seen."

"I am glad there's a third," said Sir John dryly, "though God save me from his arrows. This Gray Dick," he added to the Count, "is a wild, homeless half-wit, whom they call Hugh de Cressi's shadow, but the finest archer in Suffolk, with Norfolk thrown in; one who can put a shaft through every button on your doublet at fifty paces, aye, and bring down wild geese on the wing twice out of four times, for I have seen him do it with that black bow of his."

"Indeed. Then I should like to see him shoot—at somebody else," answered Acour, for in those days such skill was of interest to all soldiers. "Kill Hugh de Cressi if you will, friend, but spare Gray Dick; he might be useful."

"Aye, Sir Edmund," broke in the young man furiously, "I'll kill him if I can catch him, the dog, who dares to bring scandal on my sisters' name. Let the saints but give me five minutes face to face with him alone, with none to help either of us, and I'll beat him to a pulp and hang what's left of him upon the nearest tree to be a warning to all such puppies."

"I note the challenge," said Sir Edmund, "and should the chance come my way will keep the lists for you with pleasure, since whatever this Hugh may be I doubt me that from his blood he'll prove no coward. But, young sir, you must catch your puppy ere you hang him, and if he is in this marsh he must have gone to ground."

"I think so, too, Sir Edmund, but, if so, we'll soon start the badger. Look yonder," and he pointed to smoke rising at several spots half a mile or more away.

"What have you done, son?" asked Sir John anxiously.

"Fired the reeds," he said with a savage laugh, "and set men to watch the game does not break back. Oh! have no fear, father, Red Eve will take no harm. The girl ever loved fire. Moreover, if she is there she will run to the water before it and be caught."

"Fool!" thundered Sir John. "Do you know your sister so little? As like as not she'll stay and burn, and then I'll lose my girl who, when all is said, is worth ten of you. Well, what is done cannot be undone, but if death comes of this mad trick it is on your head, not mine. To the bank and watch with me, Sir Edmund, for we can do no more."

Ten minutes later and the fugitives in the mound, peeping out from their hole, saw clouds of smoke floating above them.

"You should have let me shoot, Master Hugh," said Gray Dick in his hard, dry whisper; "I'd have had these three at least and they'd have been good company on the road to hell, which we must now walk alone."

"Nay," answered Hugh, sternly, "I'll murder none, though they strive to murder us, and these least of all," and he glanced at Eve, who sat staring out of the mouth of the hole, her chin resting on her hand. "You had best give in, sweetheart," he said, hoarsely. "Fire is worse than foes, and it draws near."

"I fear it less," she answered; "moreover, marriage is worse than either—sometimes."

Hugh took counsel with Gray Dick.

"This place will burn like tinder," he said, pointing to the dry weeds which grew thickly all about them, and to the masses of brushwood and other rubbish that had drifted against the side of the little mound in times of flood. "If the fire reaches us we must perish of flame, or smoke, or both."

"Aye," answered Dick, "like old witch Sarah when they burned her in her house. And she screeched a lot, though some say it was her cat that screeched and she died mum."

"If we could get into water now, Dick?"

He shook his ash-hued head. "The pools are frozen. Moreover, as well die of heat as cold; I love not ice water."

"What counsel, then, Dick?"

"You'll not take the best, master—to loose my bow upon them. That fine fellow did well to be afraid, for had you not knocked up my hand, there'd be an arrow sticking in his throat by now. He was right, Death walked near to him."

"It must not be, Dick, unless they strike first. What else?"

"Perchance when the smoke begins to trouble them, which it must soon, they'll move. Then we will run for the river, 'tis but fifty yards. The lady Eve can swim like a duck, and so can you. The tide has turned and will bear you to the point, and I'll hold the bank against any who try to follow and take my chance. What say you of the plan, lady?"

"That it is as good as another, or as bad," she answered indifferently. "Let's bide where we are and do what we must when we must. Nay, waste no more breath, Hugh. I'll not yield and go home like a naughty child to be married. It was you who snatched away Gray Dick's shaft, not I, and now I'll save myself."

"Red Eve, that's Red Eve!" muttered the henchman with a dry chuckle of admiration. "The dead trouble neither man nor woman. Ah! she knows, she knows."

After this there was silence for a while, save for the roar of the fire that ever drew more near.

Eve held her cloak pressed against her mouth to filter the smoke, which grew thick.

"It is time to move," said Hugh, coughing as he spoke. "By Heaven's grace, we are too late! Look."

As he spoke, suddenly in the broad belt of reeds which lay between them and the river bank fire appeared in several places, caused doubtless by the flaming flakes which the strong wind had carried from behind the mound. Moreover, these new fires, burning up briskly and joining themselves together, began to advance toward the three in the hole.

"The wind has turned," said Dick. "Now it is fire, or water if you can get there. How do you choose to die?" and as he spoke he unstrung his bow and slipped it into its leathern case.

"Some may die tonight, but not us."

Hugh leaped up and took command.

"Cover your faces to the eyes and run for it," he said. "I'll go first, then you, Eve, and Dick behind. Make for the point and leap; the water is deep there."

They sprang to their feet and forward into the reds. When they were almost at the edge of the fire a shout told them that they had been seen. Eve, the swift of foot, outpaced Hugh and was the first to leap into that circle of tall flames. She was through it! They were all through it, scorched but unharmed. Thirty paces away was the little point of land where nothing grew, for the spring tides washed it, that jutted out into the waters of the Blythe, and perhaps a hundred to their right the Claverings poured down on them, foot and horse together.

Hugh caught his foot in a willow root and fell. Eve and Gray Dick sped onward unknowing. They reached the point above the water, turned and saw. Dick slipped his bow from its case, strung it and set an arrow on the string. Hugh had gained his feet, but a man who had come up sprang and cast his arms about him. Hugh threw him to the ground, for he was very strong, and shook himself free. Then he drew the short and heavy sword that he wore, and shouting out, "Make way!" to those who stood between him and the little promontory, started to run again.

These opened to right and left to let him pass, for they feared the look in his eyes and the steel in his hand. Only young John Clavering, who had leaped from his horse, would not budge. As Hugh tried to push past him he struck him in the face, calling out:

"We have caught the de Cressi thief! Take him and hang him."

At the insult of the blow and words Hugh stopped dead and turned quite white, whereon the men, thinking that he was afraid, closed in upon him. Then in the silence the harsh, croaking voice of Gray Dick was heard saying:

"Sir John of Clavering, bid your people let my master go or I will send an arrow through your heart," and he lifted the long bow and drew it.

Sir John muttered something, thinking that this was a poor way to die, and again the men fell back, except one French knight who perhaps did not catch or understand his words.

This man stretched out his hand to seize Hugh, but before ever it fell upon his shoulder the bow twanged and Acour's retainer was seen whirling round and round, cursing with pain, and in the palm of his hand an arrow that had sunk through it to the feathers.

"You are right, that knave shoots well," said the Count to Sir John, who made no answer.

Now again all fell back, so that Hugh might have run for it if he would. But his blood was up and he did not stir.

"John Clavering," he said, addressing the young man, "just now, when I lay hid in yonder hole I heard you say that if you had five minutes with me alone you'd beat me to a pulp and hang what was left of me on the nearest tree. Well, here I stand, and there's a tree. Having first tried to burn me and your sister, you have struck me in the face. Will you make good your words, or shall I strike you in the face and go my way? Nay, keep your dogs off me; Gray Dick yonder has more arrows."

Now a tumult arose, some saying one thing and some another, but all keeping an eye upon Gray Dick and his bent bow. At last Sir Edmund Acour rode forward, and in his polished and stately way said to John:

"Young sir, this merchant is in the right, as, whatever his trade may be, his blood is as good as your own. After your brave words either you should fight him or take back the blow you gave."

Then he leaned forward and whispered into John's ear:

"Your sword is longer than his. Make an end of him and of all this trouble, lest men should laugh at you as an empty boaster."

Now John, who was brave and needed but little urging, turned to his father and said:

"Have I your leave to whip this fellow, sir?"

"You should have asked that before you struck him in the face," replied the knight. "You are a man grown, do as best pleases you, only if you take back the blow begone from Blythburgh."

Then Eve, who all this time had been listening, called out from where she stood above the river.

"Brother John, if you fight your cousin Hugh, who is my affianced husband, and fall, on your own head be it, for know your blood shall not stand between him and me, since it was you who struck him and not he you. Be warned, John, and let him go, lest he should send you further than you wish to travel. And to you, Hugh, I say, though it is much to ask, if he throws down his sword, forget that unknightly blow and come hither."

"You hear," said Hugh shortly to John. "Now, because she is your sister, if it's your will I'll begone in peace."

"Aye," answered John, setting his thin lips, "because you are a coward, woman-thief, and seek to live that you may bring shame upon our house. Well that will pass when you die presently."

"John, John, boast not," cried Eve, "for who has shown you where you will sleep tonight?"

"Whether I shall live or die, God knows alone," said Hugh solemnly. "But what I seek to know is, should it chance to be your lot to die, whether your people or these Frenchmen will set on me, or raise a blood feud against me. Tell me now, Sir John Clavering."

"If you kill my son in combat a l'outrance, he being the challenger," answered the knight, "none shall lift hand against you for that deed if I can hold them back. But, know that I have other cause of quarrel against you," and he pointed to his daughter, "and that if you meddle more with her who is not for you, certainly you shall die."

"And, young sir," broke in Sir Edmund, "I pray you to understand that this lady Eve tomorrow becomes my wife with the will of her father and her kin, and that if you try to stand between us, although I may not fight you, seeing what I am and what you are, I'll kill you like a rat when and where I get the chance. Yes," he added in a savage snarl, "I pledge my knightly honor that I will kill you like a rat if I must follow you across the world to do so."

"You will not have need to travel far if I have my will," answered the young man sternly, "since Red Eve is mine, not yours, and, living or dead, mine she will remain. And as for your knightly honor, Sir Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon, Signeur of Cattrina, what has a traitor to his king to do with honor, one who is here as a spy of Philip of France, as the poor merchant's lad knows well? Oh! take your hand from your sword, of which you say I am not worthy, and since you say also that I have so many enemies, let me begin with a squire of my own degree."

Now at these bold words arose a clamor of voices speaking in French and English.

"What say you to this, Sir Edmund?" shouted Sir John Clavering above them all. "You are a great lord and a wealthy, beloved by me also as the affianced of my knightly honor that I will kill you like a rat if I no truck with traitors to my king."

"What say I?" asked Sir Edmund calmly. "I say that if this fellow can fight as well as he can lie, your son has but a poor chance with him. As you know well, I came hither from France to visit my estates, not to learn what strength his Grace of England, my liege lord, gathers for the new war with Philip."

"Enough," said Sir John, "though this is the first I have heard of such a war, for it would seem that you know more of King Edward's mind that I do. The light begins to fall, there is no time for talk. Stand clear, all men, and let these two settle it."

"Aye," croaked Gray Dick, "stand clear, all men, while my master cuts the throat of his cousin Clavering, since he who stands not clear shall presently lie straight," and he tapped his terrible bow with his right hand, then instantly seized the string again.

The two were face to face. Round them on horse and on foot, at a distance perhaps of twenty paces, were gathered the Clavering men and the French Count's troop, for now all had come up from the far parts of the marsh. Only toward the river side the ring was open, whether because those who made it feared Gray Dick's arrows or in order that he and Red Eve might see everything that chanced. The pair were well matched, for though Hugh was the taller, John, his senior by three years, was thicker set and better trained in arms. But the sword of John was longer by a handbreadth than that Hugh carried as a merchant, which was heavy, of such a make as the ancient Romans used and sharpened on either edge. Neither of them wore armor, since Hugh had no right to do so and John had not come out to fight.

They stood still for a moment in the midst of a breathless silence, the red light of the stormy sunset striking across them both. Everything was red, the smoke clouds rising from the sullen, burning marsh into which the fire was still eating far away, the waters of the Blythe brimful with the tide that had just turned toward the sea, the snow and ice itself. Even the triangle of wild swans brought by the hard weather from the northern lands looked red as they pursued their heavy and majestic flight toward the south heedless of man and his affairs beneath.

Not long did they remain heedless, however, since either to show his skill or for some other purpose of his own, Gray Dick lifted his bow and loosed an arrow, almost, it seemed, at hazard. Yet that arrow pierced the leader of the flock, so that down it came in wide circles and in a last struggle hovered for a moment over the group of men, then fell among them with a thud, the blood from its pierced breast bespattering Sir Edmund Acour and John Clavering's black hair.

"An ill omen for those two and especially for him who wears a white swan for crest," said a voice. But at the moment none took notice except Gray Dick, who chuckled at the success of his shot, since all were intent on greater matters, namely, which of those two young men should die.

Sir John, the father, rode forward and addressed them.

"To the death without mercy to the fallen," he said grimly.

They bent their heads in answer.

"Now!" he cried, and reined back his horse.

"The first home thrust wins," whispered Sir Edmund to him as he wiped the blood of the swan off his sleeve. "Thank God, your son's sword is the longer."

Perhaps the pair heard this whisper, or perhaps being without mail, they knew that it was so. At least for a while they circled round and round each other, but out of reach.

Then at length John Clavering rushed in and thrust. Hugh sprang back before his point. Again he rushed and thrust and again Hugh sprang back. A third time and Hugh fairly ran, whereupon a shout went up from the Claverings.

"The chapman's afraid!" cried one. "Give him a yard measure!" shouted another, "he cannot handle steel."

Eve turned her face and her very eyes were sick with doubt.

"Is it true?" she gasped.

"Aye," answered Dick the Archer, "it's true that he draws him to the river bank. Those who wait will learn why. Oh, the swan! He sees not the swan."

And as he spoke Hugh in his retreat before another of John Clavering's rushes, struck his foot against the great dead bird and staggered. John leapt upon him and he went down.

"Is he pierced?" muttered Eve.

"Nay, missed," answered Dick, "by half an inch. Ah! I thought so."

As the words left his lips Clavering went sprawling on his back, for Hugh had caught his leg with his left arm and thrown him, so that they lay both together.

There they closed, rolling over each other, but too close to stab.

"Now good night, John," cried Dick, with his hoarse chuckle. "Throat him, master; throat him!"

The flurry in the snow was at an end. John lay on his back; de Cressi knelt on him and lifted the short sword.

"Do you yield?" men heard him say.

"Nay," answered Clavering. Then suddenly Hugh rose and suffered his adversary to do likewise.

"I'll not stick you like a hog," he said, and some cried, "Well done!" for the act seemed noble. Only Acour muttered "Fool!"

Next instant they were at it again, but this time it was Hugh who attacked and John who gave back right to the river's edge, for skill and courage seemed to fail him at once.

"Turn your head, lady," said Dick, "for now one must die." But Eve could not.

The swords flashed for the last time in the red light. Then that of de Cressi vanished. Clavering threw his arms wide and fell backward. A splash as of a great stone thrown into water, and all was done.

Hugh stood a moment on the river's bank, staring at the stream beneath; then he turned and began to walk slowly toward the dead swan.

Ere ever he reached it Sir John Clavering fell from his horse in a swoon, and a shout of rage went up from all his people.

"Kill him!" they yelled, and leapt forward.

Now Hugh understood and ran for the point of land. One man, a Frenchman, got in front of him. He cut him down and sped on.

"What now?" said Eve, as she joined them.

He did not answer, only pointed first to the Clavering folk and next to the water, showing that she must choose between the two.

"Swim for it!" growled Gray Dick. "I'll hold them back a while and then join you," and as he spoke his bow twanged.

For an instant Eve paused, then threw off her scarlet cloak.

"Remember, I slew your brother," said Hugh hoarsely.

(To be continued.)

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