

RED EVE

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

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

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CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

Rebecca, daughter of Onan and wife of Nathan, called down Hugh de Cressi, Richard Archer and David Day and on your children forever the blessing of Jehovah, because you have rescued the widow and her children from the fire and avenged the murder of the husband and the father. O God of my people, as Thou didst save Lot and his House from the flames of Sodom, so save these true-hearted and merciful men. Turn from them the sword of Thy wrath when it smites the sinful cities. Grant them Thy protection above them and all they love. Prosper their handiwork in peace and in war, and let them be full of Thy grace, and as last let them die full of Thy honor and be gathered into Thy eternal bosom. This prayer shall the daughter of Onan, and thus shall it be.

Then, leading her children, she turned and vanished into the darkness.

"Now," said Dick, when she had gone, "although they were spoken by a Jew, whom men call accursed because their forefathers, fulfilling prophecy, or some of them wrought a great crime when the world was young and thereby brought about the salvation of mankind, as we believe, those are the most comfortable words to which her ears have ever listened, especially such of them as deal with the fulfilling of our desire upon our enemies in war. Well, they are spoken and I doubt not registered in a book which will not be lost. So, master, let us seek a lodging in this city of Avignon, which for my part, I do with a light heart."

Hugh nodded and his heart also was lightened by those words of blessing and good omen. Mounting their horses, they took a street which led them past the great Rocher de Dom, on the crest of which stood the palace of the popes, as yet unfinished, but still one of the vastest buildings they had ever seen. Here on the battlements and in front of the gateway burned great fires, and the order of His Holiness to purify the air and protect him and his court from the plague.

Leaving this palace on their right, they rode slowly along one of the principal streets of the town, seeking an inn. Soon they found one, a large place that had a sign on which three shepherds were painted, and named by the name of "The Three Shepherds." Out of that gateway rushed a mob of frantic people waving swords and cudgels any saying that they would have no strangers there to bring the Death among them as were not welcome.

"Let us go on," said Hugh, "for here it seems we are not welcome."

So they went and tried three other inns in turn. At two of them they were refused, but the doors of the third were closed and the place was deserted. Then, for a crowd began to gather round them, nearly enough to surround them, and they were forced to turn back toward the great central rock thinking that there they might find some more hospitable tavern.

Following this street they reached a well crowded place, where the fine dwellings stood in their own gardens. One of these, as they saw by the flare of some of those fires which burned all about the city in this time of pestilence, was a small inn, for it had a moat round it and a drawbridge which was down. Seeing that lamps burned in its windows, Hugh, who was worn out with their surroundings, decided her house would be a good one. Doubtless, he said to his companions, "Let us go and declare our names and degree and by virtue of them claim the hospitality which is due to us."

"Be it so," grumbled Dick. "We cannot be worse treated there than we were at the inns, unless the owner adds arrows to the swords and cudgels."

David dismounted and knocked on it, but none answered.

"An empty house belongs to no one," said Dick; "at any rate in these times. Let us enter."

They did so and saw that the place was sumptuously appointed. Though ancient it was not large, having, as they afterwards discovered, been a fortification on an island wall now demolished. Leaving the hall out of which opened the refectory, they mounted a stone stair to the upper chambers, and entered one of them.

Then they saw a strange and piteous sight. On a bed, about which candles still burned, lay a young woman who had been very beautiful, arrayed in a bride's robe.

"Dead of the plague," said Hugh, "and deserted at her death. Well, she had better luck than many, since she was not left to die alone. Her dress and these candles show it."

"Aye," answered Dick, "but fear took the wretched at last and they are fled. Well, we will fill their place, and if we do not return tomorrow, give me a shroud. My wife has learned some fine lodgings for us, master, so let us bid in them until the rightful owners come to cast us out. Come, David, and help me raise that drawbridge."

Five lodgings there proved to be indeed, since, as they found no house in Avignon was better furnished with all things needed. But, and this will show how dreadfully they were treated during all the days that they made their home there never learned the name of its owner or of that poor lady arrayed in the bride's dress and laid out upon her marriage bed.

In the butchery and cellar were plentiful provisions of food, and having eaten out of that with thankfulness, they chose out one of the bedchambers and slept there quite undisturbed.

When the sun shone in at the window and awoke them. Then they arose and, digging a shallow grave in the courtyard with some garden tools which they found in a shed, they bore out the poor bride, and, removing only her jewels which were rich indeed, buried her there in her wedding dress. This sad duty finished, they washed themselves with water from the little keep beneath. Then they consulted as to what they should do next.

"We came here to lay a certain cause before His Holiness," said Hugh. "Let us go up to the palace, declare our business, and ask aid of the pope."

So leaving David in charge of the house which they named the Bride's Tower because of the dead lady and the little keep beneath, they went out and under their way to the great entrance of the Pope's palace. Here they found the

gates shut and barred, with a huge fire burning behind them.

Still they knocked until some guards appeared armed with crossbows, and asked their business. They said they desired to see His Holiness, or at least one of his secretaries, whereon the guards asked whence they came. They replied from Italy, and they told them that since the Death had come from Italy, Now Hugh gave his name and stated his business, on hearing which the guards laughed a little.

"Arrangement of a false marriage," said their captain. "Go lay your petition before Death, who will do your business swiftly if he has not done it already. Get you gone, you English knight, with you, and face your God. We want no English here at the best of times, and least of all if they hail from Italy."

"Come, master," said Dick, "there are more ways into a house than by the front door, and we don't want to leave our brains to grease its hinges."

So they went away, wondering whether they should do next. As it chanced, they did not long to wait for an answer. Presently a lantern-waived notary in a frayed russet gown must have been watching their movements, approached them and asked them what had been their business at the Pope's palace. Hugh told him, whereon the lawyer, frowning, became deferential in his manner. Moreover, he announced that he was notary named Basil of Tours and one of the legal secretaries of His Holiness was just now the living without the gates of the palace by express command in order to attend to the affairs of suitors at the Chapel during the Great Sick-time. He added, however, that he was not to doubtless it might be in his power to forward the cause of the noble knight Sir Hugh de Cressi, in which already he took much interest.

"What would be a fee?" suggested Dick, looking at the man coldly.

"Basil answered with a smirk that fees and legal affairs were matters that fell outside of his province. The matter that he cared for money, he remarked, especially in this time of general woe. Still, it would never do for a lawyer, however poor, to create a price for his services. He would be used against his craft in better days. Then he named a sum.

Hugh handed him double what he asked, whereon he began to manifest great respect for the fortified house which they had named the Bride's Tower, that he alleged, probably with truth, he had never seen before. He wrote down all particulars of the suit.

"Sir Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon, Seigneur of Catrina," he said presently. "Why, I think that a lie, the name which he had used with his Holiness some while ago just before the pest grew bad in Avignon, and the gates of the palace were ordered to be shut. I know not what part of the count's name he has retained in the cause, but I will find out and tell you tomorrow."

"Find out also, if it pleases you, learned knight," said Hugh, "whether or not the name of the three names is still or Avignon, since, if so, I have a will or two to say to him."

"I will," answered the lantern-waived notary, "though I think it most unlikely that any one who can buy or beg a horse to ride away on should stay in this old city just now, unless indeed the laws of their order bid them to stay. Doubtless, I have a note of the fact, which I will bring you to-morrow morning. I will be back here at this hour to tell you all that I can gather."

"How do the sickness begin here?" asked Gray Dick.

"Noble Squire, none know for certain, but in the autumn we had great rains, heavy mists and other things contrary to the usual course of nature, such as strange lights shining in the heavens, and so forth. Then after a day of much heat, one evening a man clad in red and yellow cap, with a sword and a thick black fur cloak, and a necklace of black pearls, was seen striding in the market place. Indeed, I saw him myself. There was something so strange and dreadful about the appearance of this man, although it is true that some say he was no more than a common mountebank arrayed thus to win people, that the people set upon him."

"Then he stretched out his arms and every other weapon, and thought that they had killed him, when suddenly he appeared under the throng unharmed. Then he stretched out his right hand toward them and melted into the gloom."

"Only," added Basil, nervously, "it was noted afterward that all those who were tried to injure the man were the first to die of the pest. Thank God I was not one of them. Indeed, I tried to hold them back which, perhaps, is the reason why I am alive today."

"A strange story," said Hugh, "though I have heard something like it in other cities through which we have passed. Well, tomorrow at this hour, friend Basil, I will have learned two things, master, said Dick, when the lawyer had bowed himself out. "First, that Acour is, or has been, in Avignon. Let us go seek for one or the other of them, since for my part I desire to meet them both."

So all that day they sought, but found none. Next morning Basil reappeared, according to his promise, and informed them that his business was on foot. Also he stated that it was likely to prove more difficult than he anticipated, since he understood that he who was named de Noyon and Catrina, having friends among the cardinals, had already obtained some very high rank in his marriage with the Lady Eve Clavering, which ratification it would be costly and difficult to set aside.

Hugh answered that it only could be granted an audience with his Holiness, but had evidence that would make the justice of his cause plain. What he sought was an audience.

The notary scratched his lantern jaw and asked how that could be brought about when every gate of the palace was shut because of the plague. Still, perhaps, it might be managed, he added, if a certain sum were forthcoming to bribe various courtiers and persons in authority.

Hugh gave him the sum out of the store of gold they had taken from the robber's den in the mountains, with the promise that he would be at hand to receive the benediction behind him and saying that he would return at the same hour on the morning, if the plague spared him and them, house to house to minister to the sick or

strings of great black pearls that, to tell Hugh, I coveted sorely," she asked, laughing a little. "No, no. If this were a physician, he would say that had I been a physician, that I think of it, when I asked him his name and business he answered that the first was the Helper and the second to bring peace to those in trouble."

"Well, Daughter, and what else did the man say?" asked Sir Andrew, soothingly.

"You think I wander," she answered, interpreting the tone of his voice and well his words, "but indeed it is not so. Well, he said little; only that I had been very ill, near to death, in truth, much nearer than I thought, but that now I should recover and within a day or two be quite well and strong again. I asked him why he came to tell this. He replied because he thought I should like to know that he had been once in your hands, and that he had been cured by your medicine. He said he was from Venice, in Italy, one who was named Hugh de Cressi. Yes, Father, he said Hugh de Cressi, who with his spouse, an archer, had been in your hands, and that Hugh de Cressi was well and would remain and that soon I should see him again. Also he added that he had met one whom I hated, who was named the Lord of Catrina, and that he thought he should go to England, since there I should find peace and safety. Then, suddenly, just before you came in, he was gone, and I have not seen him since."

"You have strange dreams, Eve," said Sir Andrew, "yet there is truth in their madness. Now be strong lest you should kill you, as it has done by many a one before."

Then he turned to the shadows behind him and said, "Come," and next instant Hugh was kneeling at Eve's bedside and pressing his lips upon her hand.

"Oh! they had much to say to each other, so much that the half of it remained unsaid. Still Hugh learned that she and Sir Andrew were to be married, and that the Pope's summons to lay the matter of her alleged marriage before him in person. When they reached the town they found it in the grip of the plague and that to see his Holiness was almost impossible, since he had shut himself up in his palace and would admit no one. Yet an interview was promised through Sir Andrew's well-placed friends, and then the sickness struck her and she could not go, nor was Sir Andrew allowed to do so, since he was nursing one who lay ill."

Then Hugh began to tell his tale, to which Eve and Sir Andrew Arnold listened greedily. Of Murgh, for sundry reasons, he said nothing and of the fight from which Acour had fled in Venice before the earthquake, he said nothing. He did say, however, that he had heard that this Acour had been here in Avignon and that he had learned from a notary named Basil, whom he had seen, that he had returned, that Acour had fled from the Pope a confirmation of his marriage.

"A lie!" interrupted Sir Andrew. "His Holiness caused me to be informed expressly that this would give me before him."

As he said the words a disturbance arose in the outer room and the harsh voice of Gray Dick heard saying:

"Basil, I have just seen a man thrust you into the chamber of the Lady of Clavering; back, or I will cast you to the street."

Sir Andrew went to see what was the matter, and caught sight of Hugh and Dick. "See!" he screamed. "There are the wizards who in Venice were seen in the company of the Enemy of mankind, clad in black and yellow cap, and with a Christian Basil has brought them face to face with you as he promised me that he would."

As he heard those words Hugh drew his sword and leaped at Basil, but the dog was watching, and with a yell of fear threw himself among the crowd and there vanished.

"Out weapons and back to back!" cried Hugh, "for we are snared."

So the three of them ranged themselves together facing outward. In front of them stood Gray Dick's sword and his hand on the hilt. In a moment the furious mob was surging round them like a sea, howling "Down with the wizards! Kill the friends of the Jews!" one solid wall of changing white faces, and a man struck at them with a halberd, but the blow fell short, for he was afraid to come too near. Gray Dick leaped forward, and in an instant was back again, leaving that man dead, smitten through the skull to chin. For a while there was silence, since this sudden death gave them pause and in it Hugh cried out:

"Are bladesmen, men who are murdered thus? Have we no friends in Avignon?"

"Some," answered a voice from the shadow, though who spoke they could not see. "See! the protectors of the Jews!" cried the voice again.

Then came a rush and a counter rush. Fighting began in them in which they took no share. When it was over, the man whom Gray Dick had struck, who had been killed or trodden down, as his companions thought.

"Now, master, we are alone," said Gray Dick. "Set your shoulders against mine, and let us die a death that shall do good to Avignon. Remember."

"Aye, aye!" answered Hugh. "But don't overreach Dick; 'tis ever the archer's fault."

The mob closed in on them, then rolled back like water from a rock, leaving some behind. Again they closed in and again rolled back.

"Bring bows!" they cried, widening out. "Bring bows and shoot them down!"

"Ah!" gasped Dick, "that is a game too. I can play now that I have a bow. I'll let his lips the great black bow he bore was out and strong. Next instant the shafts began to rush, piercing all before them, till the three arrows, those in front of him, melted away, save such as would stir no more. Only now missiles began to come in answer from this side and from that, although as yet none struck them, but they were charged," said Hugh, "and let us choose save fight. They'll pit us under."

Dick did not seem to hear. At least he shot on as one who was not minded of the unavenged. An arrow whistled through Hugh's cap, lifting it from his head, and almost glanced from the mail on his shoulder. He ground his teeth with rage for now none would come within reach of his long sword.

"Goodly, friend Dick," he said, "die charging," and with a cry of "A Cressi! A Cressi!" he sprang forward, and his bow melted away, save such as would stir no more. Only now missiles began to come in answer from this side and from that, although as yet none struck them, but they were charged," said Hugh, "and let us choose save fight. They'll pit us under."

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