

RED EVE

MURGH THE DEATH

They knew nothing of it in England or all the Western countries 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 come 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 lands 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, of forest, and of savage-haunted plain. Yet if their eyes had been open so that they could see, well might they have trembled. King, prince, priest, merchant, captain, citizen and poor labouring 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 winter snows and 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 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-grey, an ashen countenance, deep-set, hollow eyes, a beetling, parchment-covered brow; lean shanks half hidden with a rotting rag, claw-like hands which clutched miserably at the air. Such was its awful fashion, that of new death in all its terrors.

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, intently, 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 ever the one upon whom it fell rose from the knee, made obeisance, and departed as though filled with some inspired purpose.

Down to the quay went the black priests, the white priests, and the red-cloaked man, preceded by rose life, followed by ashen death. Through the funeral fires they wended, and the 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 of the ashen countenance had fallen back. As the sun sank, standing on the lofty stern, he cried

aloud:

"Here the work is done. Now I, the Eating Fire, I the Messenger, get me to the West. Among you for a while I cease to burn; yet remember me, for I shall come 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. Then they 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 vapour, in which terrible shapes seemed to move dimly, that trailed after the departing, red-sailed ship.

The black priests and the white priests heard. Without struggle, without complaint, as though they were but taking part in some set ceremony, they 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 flowers 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 created; 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 ye fear."

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