

CHAPTER I

THE TRYSTING-PLACE

On the very day when Murgh the Messenger sailed forth into that uttermost sea, a young man and a maiden met together at the Blythburgh 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 harbour, 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 snow threatening, the great marsh was utterly desolate, and this was why these two had chosen it for their meeting place.

To look on they 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 grey 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 his own to master. He was young, but three-and-twenty that day, and his simple dress, a tunic of thick wool fastened round him with a leathern belt, to which hung a short sword, showed that his degree was modest.

The girl, although she seemed his elder, in fact was only in her twentieth year. Yet 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.

This 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 marsh being so cold and so lonesome I thought it suited to my purpose. Does Grey Dick watch yonder?"

"Ay, behind those willows, 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 know, Hugh? Well, the story is short, so I'll let it out. Our great-grandmother, the heiress of the de Cheneys, married twice, did she not, and from the first husband came the de Cressis, and from the second the Claverings. But in this way or in 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 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 sundry streets 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

has 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 Waveney up to Bungay town--ay, 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 yonder at the manor, 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 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, as I have heard, 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'm betrothed."

"And do you want him, Eve?"

"Ay, 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 grey eyes.

"I'm glad of that, Eve, for I've been told much of this fine fellow--amongst 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 Clavinger, 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 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 to-day?"

"Ay, 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.

"Ay, so safe that to-morrow Father Nicholas, the French chaplain in his train, has been warned to wed me to my lord Acour--that is, if I'm there to wed."

"And if this Acour is here, I'll seek him out to-night and challenge him, Eve," and Hugh laid hand upon his sword.

"Doubtless," she replied sarcastically, "Sir Edmund Acour, Count of Noyon, Seigneur of Cattrina, will find it honour to accept the challenge of Hugh de Cressi, the merchant's youngest son. Oh, Hugh, Hugh! are 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 cloak 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 takes one or both it will be so, and for my part beyond it, if 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 to-night, though you are naught but a merchant's son, 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 think that Father Arnold would find you

lodging for the night and an altar to be wed at, and to-morrow 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. And 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'm a fool, Hugh; and, as it chances, you are more to me than aught, and I hate this fine French lord. I tell you I sicken at his glance and shiver when he touches me. Why, if he came too near I should murder him and be hanged. 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 colour."

"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 Walberswick ferry? You have no horses."

"Nay, but I have a skiff hidden in the reeds five miles furlongs off. We must keep to the heath above Walberswick, for there they might 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 is his sign when trouble is afoot. Ah, here he comes."

As he spoke a tall, gaunt man appeared, advancing towards 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 colouring, its thinness, and the hard lines that marked where the 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-grey. Only in this cold, rocky 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 knee and raised his cap to Eve, the great lady of the Claverings--Red Eve, as they called her through that country-side. 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, Dick? 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 nights, his companions; and six--no seven--men-at-arms. Also from the other side of 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 nightfall?"

"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 whereon, 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 might have 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!"