

CHAPTER II

THE FIGHT BY THE RIVER

For a while Hugh and Eve heard nothing, but Grey 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, followed by that of voices and the crackle of breaking reeds.

Two of the speakers appeared and pulled up their horses near by in a dry hollow that lay between them and the river bank. Peeping between 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 first impression of him. Broad shouldered, graceful, in age neither young nor old, clean featured, quick eyed, with a mobile mouth and a little, square-cut beard, soft and languid voiced, black haired, richly dressed in a fur robe, and mounted on a fine black horse, such was the man.

Staring at Acour, and remembering that he, too, loved Red Eve, Hugh grew

suddenly ashamed. How could a mere merchant compare himself with this magnificent lord, this high-bred, many-titled favourite of courts and of fortune? How could he rival him, he who had never yet travelled 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 from beneath its claws. Yes, he, Hugh, was the grey 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 the quarry 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 turning her beautiful face she 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 Clavinger, 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 son!"

"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 ill-omened 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.

Dick lifted his bow, but Hugh knocked the arrow aside ere he could loose it.

"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 which has turned to blood. Hark to the howl of the wind in the reeds and the cry of the birds we cannot see. Ay, and look at our shadows on the snow. Mine lies flat by a great hole, and yours rising against yonder bank is that of a hooded man with hollow eyes--Death himself as I should limn him! There, it is gone! What a fool am I, 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 now 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 Grey Dick too, for both were seen."

"I am glad there's a third," said Sir John drily, "though God save me from his arrows! This Grey 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--ay, 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 Grey Dick; he might be useful."

"Ay, 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 sister's 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 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 that 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 Grey 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 now we must 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 Grey Dick.

"This place will burn like tinder," he said, pointing to the dry reeds 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."

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

"If we could get into the 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 that plan, lady?"

"That it is 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 Grey 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.

"Neither one way nor the other," answered Eve. "Some may die to-night, but we shall not."

Hugh leapt 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 reeds. 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 Grey 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 the 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 leapt 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, whereupon the men, thinking that he was afraid, closed in upon him. Then in the silence the harsh, croaking voice of Grey 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. In the palm of his hand was 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! Grey Dick yonder has more arrows."

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

"Young sir, this merchant is in the right, and 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 down and whispered into John's ear:

"Your sword is longer than his. Make an end of him and of all his 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 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 farther 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 unknighthly blow and come thither."

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

"Ay," 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. "Who has shown you where you will sleep to-night?"

"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 this Frenchman will set on me, or raise a blood-feud against me. Tell me now, Sir John Clavering."

"If you kill my son in combat à 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 to-morrow 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 honour 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. As for your fine knightly honour, Sir Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon, Seigneur of Cattrina, what has a traitor to his

King to do with honour, one who is here as a spy of Philip of France, as the poor merchant's lad knows well? Oh, take you 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 clamour 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 daughter, but I am a loyal Englishman who have 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 than I do. The light begins to fail, there is no time for talk. Stand clear, all men, and let these two settle it."

"Ay," croaked Grey 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 Grey 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 a year, was thicker set and better trained in arms. But the sword of John was longer by a hand's breadth 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 armour, 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 these remain heedless, however, since, either to show his skill or for some other purpose of his own, Grey 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 a crest," said a voice. But at the moment none took much notice, except Grey 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 Acour 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, whereon 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.

"Ay," 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!"

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 fell sprawling on his back, for Hugh had caught his leg with his left arm and thrown him, so that they lay both together on the ground.

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

"Now good-night, John," said 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 his 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 he 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 Grey 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.

"I remember that he would have slain you," she answered; and leapt straight from the point into the icy flood, beneath which her head sank.

When it rose again there was another head beside it, that of dead John, who appeared for one moment, to be seen no more for ever, since ere morning the ocean had him.

Now Hugh leapt after her, and presently the pair of them were swimming side by side to the river's further shore. Then, as now, it was but a narrow stream. Yet they did not reach it easily, for, cumbered as they were with clothes, and numbed by the ice-cold water, the fierce tide caught them and carried them beyond the bend. There they were lost in the gathering darkness, so that most of those who watched believed that they had sunk and drowned. But it was not so, for after a long struggle they came safe to shore near to a clump of willows, and clambered over the frozen mud to the heath beyond.

"First fire, then water," said Hugh, in a mazed voice.

"You have missed out love and death," answered the girl--"a full feast for a day that is not done. But whither now?"

"To take sanctuary at the Preceptory and raise my kin. Forward, Eve, ere you freeze."

"I think there is that in me which will not freeze," she answered; and broke into a run.

Now night closed in, and the snow which had been threatening all day began to fall, making their path over the heath difficult.

"We need Grey Dick to guide us; but alack, I fear he is dead!" muttered Hugh.

"I think others will be dead, not Dick," she answered.

Just then they heard a footstep behind them.

Hugh wheeled round and drew his sword, but almost before it had left the scabbard a long figure glided out of the snow, and said:

"More to the left, master, more to the left, unless you would make your peace on Blythburgh bridge, where some would be glad to meet you."

"How went it?" asked Hugh shortly.

"Not well. I shot thrice and slew three men, two of the French knights, and Thomas of Kessland, against whom I had a score that now is settled.

But the fourth time I missed."

"Who?" asked Eve between her teeth as she ran beside him.

"The Frenchman who means to marry you. When the others fell back he came at me on his horse as I was setting a fresh arrow, thinking to get me. I had to shoot quick, and aimed low for his heart, because in that light I could not make certain of his face. He saw, and jerked up the horses head, so that the shaft took it in the throat and killed the beast without hurting its rider. He was off in an instant and at me, with others, before I could draw again. So I thought it time to go, which I did, backward, as he thrust. Perhaps he thinks he killed me, as I meant he should, only when he looks at his sword he'll find it clean. That's all."

And again Grey Dick chuckled.