

CHAPTER IV

THE PENANCE

The tale was done, and these two stood staring at one another from each side of the glowing hearth, whose red light illumined their faces. At length the heavy silence was broken by Sir Andrew.

"I read your heart, Hugh," he said, "as Murgh read mine, for I think that he gave me not only strength, but something of his wisdom also, whereby I was able to win safe back to England and to this hour to walk unharmed by many a pit. I read your heart, and in its book is written that you think me mad, one who pleases his old age with tales of marvel that others told him, or which his own brain fashioned."

"Not so, Father," answered Hugh uneasily, for in truth some such thoughts were passing through his mind. "Only--only the thing is very strange, and it happened so long ago, before Eve and I were born, before those that begot us were born either, perchance."

"Yes; more than fifty years ago--it may be sixty--I forget. In sixty years the memory plays strange tricks with men, no doubt, so how can I blame you if you believe--what you do believe? And yet, Hugh," he went on after a pause, and speaking with passion, "this was no dream of which I tell you. Why do you suppose that among all those that have grown up about me I have chosen you out to love, you and your Eve? Not because

a chance made me your godsire and her my pupil. I say that from your infancy your faces haunted me. Ay, and when you had turned childhood's corner and once I met the pair of you walking hand in hand, then of a sudden I knew that it was you two and no others whom that god or devil had showed to me standing by the open grave upon the banks of Blythe. I knew it of Dick the Archer also, and can I be mistaken of such a man as that who has no fellow in England? But you think I dreamed it all, and perhaps I should not have spoken, though something made me speak. Well, in a day to come you may change your mind, since whatever dangers threaten you will not die yet, Hugh. Tell me now, what is this Frenchman like who would marry Eve? I have never seen him."

Hugh, who was glad to get back to the things of earth, described Acur as best he could.

"Ah!" said Sir Andrew. "Much such a man as stood face to face with you by the grave while Murgh watched; and you are not likely to be friends, are you? But I forgot. You have determined that it was but a dream and now you are wondering how he who is called Gate of the Gods in Cathay could come to Blythburgh. Well, I think that all the world is his garden, given to him by God, but doubtless that's only another face of my dream whereof we'll speak no more--at present. Now for your troubles, which are no dream. Lie you down to sleep on the skin of that striped beast. I killed it in Cathay--in my day of dreams, and now it shall serve for yours, from which may the dead eyes of John Clavering be absent! I go forth to seek your father and to arrange certain matters.

With Grey Dick at the door you'll be safe for a while, I think. If not, here's a cupboard where you may hide." And, drawing aside the arras, he showed him a certain secret place large enough to hold a man, then left the room.

Hugh laid himself upon the skin of the beast, which had been a tiger, though he did not know it by that name. So weary was he that not all he had gone through that day or even the old warrior-priest's marvellous tale, in which he and Eve played so wonderful a part, could keep his eyes from closing. Presently he was fast asleep, and so remained until, four hours later, something disturbed him, and he awoke to see Sir Andrew writing at a desk.

"Rise, my son," said the old priest without looking up from his paper. "Early as it is you must be stirring if you would be clear of Dunwich by daybreak and keep a whole skin. I have set a taper in my sleeping-closet yonder, and there you'll find water to wash with and a stool to kneel on for your prayers, neither of which neglect, since you have blood on your hands and great need for Heaven's help."

So Hugh arose, yawning, and stumbled heavily to the chamber, for he was still faint with sleep, which would not leave him till he had plunged his head into a basin of icy water. This done, he knelt and prayed as he had been bidden, with a very earnest heart, and afterward came back to the guest-hall.

Seeing folk gathered there as he entered he laid hand on sword, not his own with which he had killed his cousin, but a long and knightly weapon that Sir Andrew had given him with the armour. Drawing it, he advanced boldly, for he thought that his enemies might have found him out, and that his best safety lay in courage. Thus he appeared in the ring of the lamplight clad in gleaming steel and with raised weapon.

"What, son!" asked a testy voice which he knew for that of his own father, "is it not enough to have killed your cousin? Would you fall on your brothers and me also, that you come at us clad in mail and with bare steel in hand?"

Hearing these words Hugh sheathed the sword, and, advancing toward the speaker, a handsome, portly man, who wore a merchant's robe lined with rich fur, sank to his knee before him.

"Your pardon, my father," he said. "Sir Andrew here will have told you the story; also that I am not to blame for this blood-shedding."

"I think you need to ask it," replied Master de Cressi, "and if you and that lean henchman of yours are not to blame, then say who is?"

Now a tall, slim figure glided up to them. It was Eve, clothed in her own robe again, and beautiful as ever after her short rest.

"Sir, I am to blame," she said in her full, low voice. "My need was sore

and I sent a messenger to Hugh bidding him meet me in the Blythburgh Marsh. There we were set on, and there John Clavering, my brother, smote Hugh in the face. Would you, a de Cressi, have had him take the blow and yield me up to the Frenchman?"

"By God and my forefathers, no! least of all from one of your stock--saving your presence," answered the merchant. "In truth, had he done so, dead or living from that day I would have called him no son of mine. Yet, Red Eve, you and he and your love-makings have brought much trouble on me and my House. Look now what it means. A feud to the death between our families of which no man can foresee the end. Moreover, how can you marry, seeing that a brother's blood runs between you?"

"It is on John's head," she answered sadly, "not on Hugh's hand. I warned him, and Hugh spared him once. What more could we do?"

"I know not, Eve; I only know what you have done, you and Hugh and Grey Dick. Four dead and two wounded, that's the bill I must discharge as best I may. Doubtless too soon there will be more to follow, whether they be Claverings or de Cressis. Well, we must take things as God sends them, and leave Him to balance the account.

"But there is no time to lose if Hugh's neck is to escape a halter. Speak you, Father Andrew, who are wise and old, and have this matter in hand. Oh! Hugh, Hugh, you were born a fighter, not a merchant like your brethren," and he pointed to three young men who all this while had

stood silently behind him looking upon their youngest brother with grave disapproval. "Yes, the old Norman blood comes out in you, and the Norman mail suits you well," he added with a flash of pride, "and so there's an end--or a beginning. Now, Sir Andrew, speak."

"Master de Cressi," said the old priest, "your son Hugh rides to London on an errand of mine which I think will save his neck from that halter whereof you spoke but now. Are those four mounted men that you promised me ready to companion him?"

"They will be within an hour, Father, but not before, since six good horses cannot be laid hands on in the dead of night, being stabled without the gates. But what is this message of yours, and to whom does Hugh go?"

"To his Grace Edward the King, none less, Geoffrey de Cressi, with that which shall earn pardon for him and Dick the Archer, or so I believe. As for what it is I may not tell you or any man. It has to do with great matters of State that are for the King's ear alone; and I charge you, every one, on your honour and your safety, to make no mention of this mission without these walls. Do you swear, Geoffrey de Cressi, and you, his sons?"

Then one by one they swore to be secret as the grave; and Eve swore also, though of her he had sought no promise. When this was finished Sir Andrew asked if any of his brothers accompanied Hugh, saying that if so

they must arm.

"No," answered Master de Cressi, "one of the family is enough to risk as well as four of our best servants. My sons bide here with me, who may need their help, though they are not trained to arms."

"Perhaps it is as well," said Sir Andrew drily, "though were I their age--well, let that be. Now, son Hugh, before you eat do you and Eve come with me into the church."

At these words Hugh flushed red with joy, and opened his lips to speak.

"Nay, nay," broke in Sir Andrew, with a frown; "for a different purpose to that which is in your mind. Man, is this a time for marrying and giving in marriage? And if it were, could I marry you who are stained with new-shed blood? 'Tis that you both may be absolved from the guilt of that blood and learn the penance which God decrees to you through the mouth of me, His unworthy minister, in payment of its shedding. Thus you, son, may go forth upon your great adventure with a clean heart, and you, daughter, may await what shall befall with a quiet mind. Say, are you willing?"

Now they bowed their heads and answered that they were, though Eve whispered to Hugh that she misdoubted her of this talk of penance.

"So do I," he replied, beneath his breath, "but he is a merciful

confessor and loves us. From some it might be harder."

They passed down the stairs, followed by Master de Cressi and his sons, into the entrance hall, where Grey Dick stood watching by the door.

"Whither go they?" he asked of Sir Andrew, "for their road is mine."

"To confession at God's altar," answered the old priest. "Do you come also, Richard?"

"Oh!" he replied, "I hoped it had been to breakfast. As for confession I have naught upon my soul save that I shot too low at the Frenchman."

"Bide where you are, O man of blood," said Sir Andrew sternly: "and pray that a better mood be given to you before it is too late."

"Ay, Father," he answered unabashed. "I'll pray, and it is as well that one should wait to watch the door lest you should all presently become men of blood against your will."

Turning to the right, Sir Andrew led them down steps to a passage underground that joined the Temple to the Church of the Holy Virgin and St. John. It was but short, and at the end of it they found a massive door which he unbolted, and, passing this door, entered the great building, whereof the silence and the icy cold struck them like blows. They had but two lanterns between them, one of which Master de Cressi

and his elder sons took with them to the nave of the church. Bearing the other, Sir Andrew departed into the vestry, leaving Hugh and Eve seated together in the darkness of the chancel stalls.

Presently his light reappeared in the confessional, where he sat robed, and thither at his summons went first Hugh and then Eve. When their tales were told, those who watched in the nave of the splendid building--which, reared by the Knights Templar, was already following that great Order to decay and ruin--saw the star of light he bore ascend to the high altar. Here he set it down, and, advancing to the rail, addressed the two shadowy figures that knelt before him.

"Son and daughter," he said, "you have made confession with contrite hearts, and the Church has given you absolution for your sins. Yet penance remains, and because those sins, though grievous in themselves, were not altogether of your own making, it shall be light. Hugh de Cressi and Eve Clavering, who are bound together by lawful love between man and woman and the solemn oath of betrothal which you here renew before God, this is the penance that I lay upon you by virtue of the authority in me vested as a priest of Christ: Because between you runs the blood of John Clavering, the cousin of one of you and the brother of the other, slain by you, Hugh de Cressi, in mortal combat but yester eve, I decree and enjoin that for a full year from this day you shall not be bound together as man and wife in the holy bonds of matrimony, nor converse after the fashion of affianced lovers. If you obey this her command, faithfully, then by my mouth the Church declares that after

the year has gone by you may lawfully be wed where and when you will. Moreover, she pronounces her solemn blessing on you both and her dreadful curse upon any and upon all who shall dare to sunder you against your desires, and of this blessing and this curse let all the congregation take notice."

Now Hugh and Eve rose and vanished into the darkness. When they had gone the priest celebrated a short mass, but two or three prayers and a blessing, which done, all of them returned to the Preceptory as they had come.

Here food was waiting for them, prepared by the old Sister Agnes. It was a somewhat silent meal of which no one ate very much except Grey Dick, who remarked aloud that as this might be his last breakfast it should be plentiful, since, shriven or unshriven, it was better to die upon a full stomach.

Master de Cressi called him an impious knave. Then he asked him if he had plenty of arrows, because if not he would find four dozen of the best that could be made in Norwich done up in a cloak on the grey horse he was to ride, and a spare bow also.

"I thank you for the arrows, Master, but as for the bow, I use none but my own, the black bow which the sea brought to me and death alone shall part from me. Perchance both will be wanted, since the Claverings will scarcely let us out of the sanctuary if they can help it. Still, it is

true they may not know where we lie hid, and that is our best chance of eating more good breakfasts this side the grave."

"A pest on your evil talk," said de Cressi with an uneasy laugh, for he loved Hugh best of all his sons and was afraid of him. "Get through safely, man, and though I like not your grim face and bloody ways you shall lose little by it. I promise you," he added in a whisper, "that if you bring my boy safe home again, you shall not want for all your life; ay, and if there is need, I'll pay your blood-scot for you."

"Thank you, master, thank you. I'll remember, and for my part promise you this, that if he does not return safe, Dick the Archer never will. But I think I'll live to shoot more than your four dozen of arrows."

As he spoke there came a knock upon the outer door and every one sprang up.

"Fear not," said Sir Andrew; "doubtless it will be the men with the horses. I'll go look. Come you with me, Richard."

Presently he returned, saying that it was so, and that Master de Cressi's servants were waiting with the beasts in the courtyard. Also that they brought tidings that some of the Clavering party were now at the Mayor's house, rousing him from his sleep, doubtless to lay information of the slayings and ask for warrant to take those who wrought them, should they be in the borough.

"Then we had best be going," said Hugh, "since soon they will be here with or without their warrant."

"Ay," answered Sir Andrew. "Here are the papers. Take them, Hugh, and hide them well; and if any accident should befall you, try to pass them on to Richard that they may be delivered into the King's hands at Westminster. Say that Sir Andrew Arnold sends you on business that has to do with his Grace's safety, and neither of you will be refused a hearing. Then act as he may command you, and maybe ere long we shall see you back at Dunwich pardoned."

"I think it is the Claverings and their French lord who need pardon, not I," said Hugh. "But be that as it may, what of Eve?"

"Fear not for Eve, son, for here she bides in sanctuary until the Frenchman is out of England, or perchance," he added grimly, "under English soil."

"Ay, ay, we'll guard the maid," broke in Master de Cressi. "Come! to saddle ere you be trapped."

So they descended to a back entrance, and through it into the courtyard, where the four armed men waited with six good horses, one of them Hugh's own. Here he bade farewell to his brothers, to his father, who kissed him on the brow, and to Sir Andrew, who stretched his hand above his

head in blessing. Then he turned to Eve and was about to embrace her even before that company, when Sir Andrew looked at him, and, remembering the penance that had been laid upon him, he but pressed her hand, whispering:

"God be with you, sweetheart!"

"He is with us all, but I would that you could be with me also," she answered in the same low voice. "Still, man must forth to battle and woman must wait and watch, for that is the world's way. Whate'er befalls, remember that dead or living I'll be wife to no man but you. Begone now ere my heart fails me, and guard yourself well, remembering that you bear in your breast not one life, but two."

Then Hugh swung himself to the saddle of which Grey Dick had already tested the girths and stirrup leathers. In another minute the six of them were clattering over the stones of Middlegate Street, while the burgesses of Dunwich peeped from their window places, wondering what knight with armed men rode through their town thus early.

Just as the grey dawn broke they passed the gate, which, there being peace in the land, was already open. Fifteen minutes later they were on the lonely Westleton Heath, where for a while naught was to be heard save the scream of the curlew and the rush of the wings of the wild-duck passing landward from the sea. Presently, however, another sound reached their ears, that of horses galloping behind them. Grey Dick pulled rein

and listened.

"Seven, I think, not more," he said. "Now, master, do you stand or run, for these will be Clavering horses?"

Hugh thought for a moment. His aim was not to fight, but to get through to London. Yet if he fled the pursuers would raise the country on them as they came, so that in the end they must be taken, since those who followed would find fresh horses.

"It seems best to stand," he said.

"So say I," answered Grey Dick; and led the way to a little hillock by the roadside on which grew some wind-bent firs.

Here they dismounted and gave their horses into the keeping of one man, while Grey Dick and the others drew their bows from the cases and strung them. Scarcely had they done so when the mist, lifting in the morning breeze, showed them their pursuers--seven of them, as Dick had said--headed by one of the French knights, and riding scattered, between two and three hundred yards away. At the same moment a shout told them that they had been seen.

"Hark now all!" said Hugh. "I would shed no more blood if it may be so, who have earned enough of penance. Therefore shoot at the horses, not at the riders, who without them will be helpless. And let no man harm a

Clavering unless it be to save his own life."

"Poor sport!" grunted Grey Dick.

Nevertheless, when the Norman knight who led came within two hundred yards, shouting to them in French to surrender, Dick lifted his great bow, drew and loosed carelessly, as though he shot at hazard, the others holding their bows till the Claverings were nearer. Yet there was little of hazard when Grey Dick shot, save to that at which he aimed. Away rushed the arrow, rising high and, as it seemed, bearing somewhat to the left of the knight. Yet when it drew near to that knight the wind told on it and bent it inward, as he knew it would. Fair and full it struck upon the horse's chest, piercing through to the heart, so that down the poor beast came, throwing its rider to the ground.

"A good shot enough," grumbled Grey Dick. "Still, it is a shame to slay nags of such a breed and let the rogues who ride them go."

But his companions only stared at him almost in awe, while the other Clavering men rode on. Before they had covered fifty paces, again the great bow twanged, and again a horse was seen to rear itself up, shaking the rider from its back, and then plunge away to die. Now Hugh's serving-men also lifted their bows, but Grey Dick hissed:

"Leave them to me! This is fine work, and you'd muddle it!"

Ere the words had ceased to echo another horse was down.

Then, as those who remained still came on, urged by the knight who ran shouting behind them, all loosed, and though some arrows went wide, the end of it was that ere they reached the little mound every Clavering horse was dead or sore wounded, while on the heath stood or lay seven helpless men.

"Now," said Grey Dick, "let us go and talk with these foot-soldiers."

So they went out, all of them, except he who had the horses, and Hugh called aloud that the first man of the Claverings who lifted a bow or drew a sword should die without mercy. And he pointed to Grey Dick, who stood beside him, arrow on string.

The Claverings began to talk together excitedly.

"Throw down your weapons!" commanded Hugh.

Still they hesitated. Then, without further warning Dick sent an artful arrow through the cap of one of them, lifting it from his head, and instantly set another shaft to his string. After this, down went the swords and bows.

"Daggers and knives, too, if it please you, masters!"

Then these followed.

Now Hugh spoke a word to his men, who, going to the dead and dying horses, took from them the stirrup-leathers and bridle-reins and therewith bound the Claverings back to back. But the French knight, in acknowledgment of his rank, they trussed up by himself, having first relieved him of his purse by way of fine. As it chanced, however, Hugh turned and saw them in the act.

"God's truth! Would you make common thieves of us?" he said angrily. "Their weapons and harness are ours by right of war, but I'll hunt the man who steals their money out of my company."

So the purse was restored. When it was safe in the knight's pouch again Hugh saluted him, begging his pardon that it should have been touched.

"But how are you named, sir?" he added.

"Sir Pierre de la Roche is my name," replied the knight sadly, and in French.

"Then, Sir Pierre de la Roche," said Hugh, "here you and your people must bide until some come to set you free, which, as this place is lonely and little crossed in winter, may be to-day or may be to-morrow. When at length you get back to Blythburgh Manor, however, or to Dunwich town, I trust it to your honour to declare that Hugh de Cressi has dealt

well with you. For whereas he might have slain you every one, as you would have slain him and his if you could, he has harmed no hair of your heads. As for your horses, these, to his sorrow, he was obliged to kill lest they should be used to ride him down. Will you do this of your courtesy?"

"Ay," answered the knight, "since to your gentleness we owe our lives. But with your leave I will add that we were overcome not by men, but by a devil"--and he nodded toward Grey Dick--"since no one who is only man can have such hellish skill in archery as we saw yesterday, and now again this morning. Moreover," he went on, contemplating Dick's ashen hair and cold eyes set wide apart in the rocky face, like to those of a Suffolk horse, "the man's air shows that he is in league with Satan."

"I'll not render your words into our English talk, Sir Pierre," replied Hugh, "lest he of whom you speak should take them amiss and send you where you might learn them false. For know, had he been what you say, the arrow that lies in your horse's heart would have nailed the breastplate to your own. Now take a message from me to your lord, Sir Edmund Acour, the traitor. Tell him that I shall return ere long, and that if he should dare to attempt ill toward the Lady Eve, who is my betrothed, or toward my father and brethren, or any of my House, I promise, in Grey Dick's name and my own, to kill him or those who may aid him as I would kill a forest wolf that had slunk into my sheepfold. Farewell! There is bracken and furze yonder where you may lie warm till some pass your way. Mount, men!"

So they rode forward, bearing all the Clavering weapons with them, which a mile or two further on Grey Dick hid in an empty fox's earth where he knew he could find them again. Only he kept the French knight's beautiful dagger that was made of Spanish steel, inlaid with gold, and used it to his life's end.

Here it may be told that it was not until thirty-six hours had gone by, as Hugh learned afterward, that a countryman brought this knight and his companions, more dead than alive, to Dunwich in his wain. As he was travelling across Westleton Heath, with a load of corn to be ground at the Dunwich mill, it seemed that he heard voices calling feebly, and guided by them found these unhappy men half buried in the snow that had fallen on that day, and so rescued them from death.

But when Sir Edmund Acour knew the story of their overthrow and of the message that Hugh had sent to him, he raved at them, and especially at Sir Pierre de la Roche, saying that the worst of young de Cressi's crimes against him was that he had left such cowardly hounds alive upon the earth. So he went on madly till Sir John Clavering checked him, bidding him wait to revile these men until he, and not his horse, had met Grey Dick's arrows and Hugh de Cressi's sword.

"For," he added, "it may happen then that you will fare no better than they have done, or than did John, my son."

On the morning of the third day after they left Dunwich, having been much delayed by foul weather and fouler roads, Hugh de Cressi and his company came at length to London. They had suffered no further adventure on their way for, though the times were rough and they met many evil-looking fellows, none ventured to lift hand against six men so well armed and sturdy. Guided by one of their number who had often been to London on Master de Cressi's business, they rode straight to Westminster. Having stabled their horses at an inn near by, and cleaned the mire of the road from their mail and garments, they went up to the palace, where Hugh told his errand to an officer whom he found on duty at the gate.

"Then it is a fool's errand," said the captain, "seeing that his Grace rode yesterday to his castle at Windsor to hunt and revel, and will be gone eight days at the least."

"Then to Windsor I must follow," answered Hugh.