

CHAPTER VI

THE SNARE

About noon of the day on which Hugh and his company had ridden for London, another company entered Dunwich--namely, Sir John Clavering and many of his folk, though with him were neither Sir Edmund Acour nor any of his French train. Sir John's temper had never been of the best, for he was a man who, whatever his prosperity, found life hard and made it harder for all those about him. But seldom had he been angrier than he was this day, when his rage was mingled with real sorrow for the loss of his only son, slain in a fight brought about by the daughter of one of them and the sister of the other and urged for honour's sake by himself, the father of them both.

Moreover, the marriage on which he had set his heart between Eve and the glittering French lord whose future seemed so great had been brought to naught, and this turbulent, hot-hearted Eve had fled into sanctuary. Her lover, too, the youngest son of a merchant, had ridden away to London, doubtless upon some mission which boded no good to him or his, leaving a blood feud behind him between the wealthy de Cressis and all the Clavering kin.

There was but one drop of comfort in his cup. By now, as he hoped, Hugh and his death's-head, Grey Dick, a spawn of Satan that all the country feared, and who, men said, was a de Cressi bastard by a witch, were

surely slain or taken by those who followed upon their heels.

Sir John rode to the Preceptory and hammered fiercely on its oaken door. Presently it was opened by Sir Andrew Arnold himself, who stood in the entrance, grey and grim, a long sword girt about his loins and armour gleaming beneath his monkish robe.

"What would you, Sir John Clavering, that you knock at this holy house thus rudely?" he asked.

"My daughter, priest, who, they say, has sheltered here."

"They say well, knight, she has sheltered here beneath the wings of St. Mary and St. John. Begone and leave her in peace."

"I make no more of such wings than if they were those of farmyard geese," roared the furious man. "Bring her or I will pluck her forth."

"Do so," replied Sir Andrew, "if you live to pass this consecrated sword," and he laid his hand upon its hilt. "Take with her also the curse of the Mother of God, and His beloved Apostle, and that of the whole Church of Christ, by me declared upon your head in this world and upon your soul in the world to come. Man, this is sanctuary, and if you dare to set foot within it in violence, may your body perish and your soul scorch everlastingly in the fires of hell. And you," he added, raising his voice till it rang like a trumpet, addressing the followers

of Sir John, "on you also let the curse of excommunication fall. Now slay me and enter if you will, but then every drop of blood in these veins shall find a separate tongue and cry out for vengeance on you before the judgment seat of God, where presently I summon you to meet me."

Then he crossed himself, drew the great sword, and, holding it in his left hand, stretched out his right toward them in malediction.

The Clavering men heard and saw. They looked at each other, and, as though by common consent, turned and rode away, crossing themselves also. In truth, they had no stomach for the curse of the Church when it was thundered forth from the lips of such a monk as Sir Andrew Arnold, who, they knew well, had been one of the greatest and holiest warriors of his generation, and, so said rumour, was a white wizard to boot with all the magic of the East at his command.

"Your men have gone, Sir John," said the old priest; "will you follow them or will you enter?"

Now fear drove out the knight's rage and he spoke in another voice.

"Sir Andrew, why do you bring all these wrongs upon me? My boy is dead at the hand of Hugh de Cressi, your godson, and he has robbed me of my daughter, whom I have affianced to a better and a nobler man. Now you give her sanctuary and threaten me with the curse of the Church because

I would claim her, my own flesh and blood; ay, and my heiress too to-day. Tell me, as one man to another, why do you do these things?"

"And tell me, Sir John Clavering, why for the sake of pelf and of honours that you will never harvest do you seek to part those who love each other and whom God has willed to bring together? Why would you sell your child to a gilded knave whom she hates? Nay, stop me not. I'd call him that and more to his face and none have ever known me lie. Why did you suffer this Frenchman or your dead son, or both of them, to try to burn out Hugh de Cressi and Red Eve as though they were rats in rubbish?"

"Would you know, Father? Then I'll tell you. Because I wish to see my daughter set high among lords and princes and not the wife of a merchant's lad, who by law may wear cloth only and rabbit fur. Because, also, I hate him and all his kin, and if this is true of yesterday, how much more true is it now that he has killed my son, and by the arrows of that wolf-man who dogs his heels, slain my guests and my grievance. Think not I'll rest till I have vengeance of him and all his cursed House. I'll appeal to the King, and if he will not give me justice I'll take it for myself. Ay, though you are old, I tell you you shall live to see the de Cressi vault crowded with the de Cressi dead."

Sir Andrew hid his eyes for a moment with his hand, then let it fall and spoke in a changed voice.

"It comes upon me that you speak truth, Sir John, for since I met a certain great Master in the East, at times I have a gift of foresight. I think that much sorrow draws near this land; ay, and others. I think that many vaults and many churchyards, too, will ere long be filled with dead; also that the tomb of the Claverings at Blythburgh will soon be opened. Mayhap the end of this world draws near to all men, as surely it draws near to you and me. I know not--yet truth was in your lips just now, and in mine as well, I think. Oh, man, man!" he went on after a pause, "appeal not unto the world's Cæsar lest Cæsar render different judgment to that which you desire. Get you home, and on your knees appeal unto God to forgive you your proud, vengeance-seeking heart. Sickness draws near to you; death draws near to you, and after death, hell--or heaven. I have finished."

As he heard these words Sir John's swarthy face grew pale and for a little while his rage died down. Then it flared up again.

"Don't dream to frighten me with your spells, old wizard," he said.

"I'm a hale man yet, though I do lose my breath at times when my mind is vexed with wrongs, and I'll square my own account with God without your help or counsel. So you'll not give me my daughter?"

"Nay, here she bides in sanctuary for so long as it shall please her."

"Does she in truth? Perhaps you married her to this merchant fellow ere he rode this morning."

"Nay, Sir John, they betrothed themselves before the altar and in presence of his kin, no more. Moreover, if you would know, because of your son's blood which runs between them I, after thought and prayer, speaking in the name of the Church, swore them to this penance--that for a year from yesterday they should not wed nor play the part of lovers."

"I thank you, priest, for this small grace," answered Sir John, with a bitter laugh, "and in my turn I swear this, that after the year they shall not wed, since the one of them will be clay and the other the wife of the man whom I have chosen. Now, play no tricks on me, lest I burn this sanctuary of yours about your head and throw your old carcass to roast among the flames."

Sir Andrew made no reply, only, resting his long sword on the threshold, he leant upon its hilt, and fixed his clear grey eyes upon Clavering's face. What Sir John saw in those eyes he never told, but it was something which scared him. At least that shortening of the breath of which he had spoken seemed to take a hold of him, for he swayed upon his horse as though he were about to fall, then, recovering, turned and rode straight for Blythburgh.

It was the second night after that day when Sir Andrew had looked John Clavering in the eyes.

Secretly and in darkness those three whom Grey Dick had killed were borne into the nave of Blythburgh church and there laid in the grave which had been made ready for them. Till now their corpses had been kept above ground in the hope that the body of John Clavering the younger might be added to their number. But search as they would upon seashore and river-bank, nothing of him was ever seen again. This funeral was celebrated in the darkness, since neither Sir John nor Acour desired that all men should see three bodies that had been slain by one archer, aided by a merchant's lad, standing alone against a score, and know, to say naught of the wounded, that there was yet another to be added to the tale. Therefore they interred them by night with no notice of the ceremony.

It was a melancholy scene. The nave of the great church, lighted only with the torches borne by the six monks of the black Augustines from the neighbouring priory of St. Osyth; the candles, little stars of light, burning far away upon the altar; the bearers of the household of the Claverings and the uncoffined corpses lying on their biers by the edge of the yawning graves; the mourners in their mail; the low voice of the celebrating priest, a Frenchman, Father Nicholas, chaplain to Acour, who hurried through the Latin service as though he wished to be done with it; the deep shadows of the groined roof whereon the rain pattered--such were the features of this interment. It was done at last, and the poor dead, but a few days before so full of vigour and of passion, were left to their last sleep in the unremembered grave. Then the mourners marched

back to the manor across the Middle Marsh and sought their beds in a sad silence.

Shortly after daybreak they were called from them again by the news that those who had followed Hugh de Cressi had returned. Quickly they rose, thinking that these came back with tidings of accomplished vengeance, to find themselves face to face with seven starved and miserable men who, all their horses being dead, had walked hither from Dunwich.

The wretched story was learned at length, and then followed that violent scene, which has been told already, when Acour cursed his followers as cowards, and Clavering, sobered perhaps by the sadness of the midnight burial or by the memory of Arnold's words, reproved him. Lastly, stung by the taunts that were heaped upon them, Sir Pierre de la Roche gave Hugh's message--that if they lifted hand against his love or his House he would kill them like ravening wolves, "which I think he certainly will do, for none can conquer him and his henchman," he added shortly.

Then Sir John's rage flared up again like fire when fresh fuel is thrown on ashes. He cursed Hugh and Grey Dick; he cursed his daughter; he even cursed Acour and asked for the second time how it came about that he who had brought all this trouble on him was given the evil name of traitor.

"I know not," answered Sir Edmund fiercely, and laying his hand upon his sword, "but this I know, that you or any man will do well not to repeat it if you value life."

"Do you threaten me?" asked Sir John. "Because, if so, you will do well to begone out of this house of shame and woe lest you be borne out feet first. Nay, nay, I forgot," he added slowly, clasping his head in his hands, "you are my daughter's affianced, are you not, and will give her high place and many famous titles, and her son shall be called Clavering, that the old name may not die but be great in England, in France, and in Italy. You must bide to marry her, lest that cuckoo, Hugh de Cressi, that cuckoo with the sharp bill, should creep into my nest. I'll not be worsted by a stripling clad in merchant's cloth who slew my only son. Take not my words ill, noble Noyon, for I am overdone with grief for the past and fear for the future. You must bide to marry her by fair means or by foul. Draw her from the sanctuary and marry her whether she say you yea or nay. You have my leave, noble Noyon," and so speaking he swayed and fell prone upon the floor.

At first they thought that he was dead. But the chaplain, Nicholas, who was a leech, bled him, and he came to himself again, although he still wandered in his talk and lay abed.

Then Acour and Nicholas took counsel together.

"What is to be done?" said Sir Edmund, "for I am on fire for this maid, and all her scorn and hate do but fan my flame. Moreover, she is now very rich, for that old hot-head cannot live long. His violent humours will kill him, and, as you know, Father, although I have great

possessions, my costs are large and I have still greater debts. Lastly, shall de Noyon and his knights be worsted by a wool-merchant's younger son, a mere 'prentice lad, and his henchman, a common archer of the fens? Show me how to get her, Nicholas, and I'll make an abbot of you yet. This sanctuary, now? will it hold? If we stormed the place and took her, would the Holy Father give us absolution, do you think?"

"No, my lord," answered the fox-faced Nicholas. "The Church is great because the Church is one, and what the priest does the Pope upholds, especially when that priest is no mean man. This holy monk, Sir Andrew Arnold, has reputation throughout Europe, and, though he seems so humble, because of his wisdom is in the counsel of many great men whose fathers or grandfathers were guided by him long ago. Commit what crime you will, dip yourself to the lips in blood, and you may find forgiveness, but touch not an ancient and acknowledged sanctuary of the Church, since for this offence there will be none."

"What then, Nicholas? Must I give up the chase and fly? To speak truth, things seem to threaten me. Why has that Hugh twice called me traitor? Have any of my letters fallen into strange hands, think you? I have written several, and you know my mission here."

"It is possible, lord; all things are possible, but I think not. I think that he only draws the bow at a hazard, which is more than Grey Dick does," he added with a chuckle. "These brute English hate us French, whom they know to be their masters in all that makes a man, and traitor

to their fool king is the least of the words they throw at us."

"Well, priest, my mother was English, as my wife will be. Therefore stay your tongue on that matter and tell me how I am to make her my wife," answered Acour haughtily.

The chaplain cringed and bowed, rubbing his thin hands together.

"I thought you wished to speak of the English, my lord, otherwise I should not have ventured--but as to the lady Eve, something comes to me. Why does she stay in sanctuary who herself has committed no crime? Is it not, such is her madness, because she would be out of reach of you and your endearments? Now if she believed you gone far enough away, let us say to France, and knew that her father lay ill, why then----" and he paused.

"You mean that she might come out of sanctuary of her own accord?"

"Yes, lord, and we might set a springe to catch this bird so rare and shy, and though she'd flutter, flutter, flutter, and peck, peck, peck, what could she do when you smoothed her plumage with your loving hand, and a priest was waiting to say the word that should cause her to forget her doubts and that merchant bumpkin?"

"Ah, Nicholas, you have a good wit, and if all goes well you shall certainly be an abbot. But would her father, do you think----"

"Lord, that beef-eating knight is in such a rage that he would do anything. What did he say just before the stroke took him? That you were to marry her by fair means or by foul. Yes, and he told me an hour ago that if only he knew she was your wife, he would die happy. Oh, you have his warrant for anything you do to bring about this end. Still there is no need to tell him too much lest it should cause his good name to be aspersed by the vulgar. Many, it seems, love this Red Eve for her high spirit, and are friends to the de Cressis, an open-handed race who know how to bind folk to them. Listen how it must be done."

That day it was given out that Sir Edmund Acour, those of his knights who remained alive and all his following were about to leave for London and lay their cause before the King, having learned that Hugh de Cressi had gone thither to prejudice his Grace on his own behalf. It was added, moreover, that they would not return to Suffolk, but proposed when they had found justice or the promise of it, to take ship at Dover for France. Next morning, accordingly, they rode away from Blythburgh Manor and passed through Dunwich with much pomp, where the citizens of that town, who were friends of the de Cressis, stared at them with no kind eyes. Indeed, one of these as they crossed the market-place called to them to be careful not to meet Hugh de Cressi and Grey Dick upon their journey, lest there should be more midnight burials and men-at-arms turned into foot-soldiers, whereat all about him laughed rudely.

But Acour did not laugh. He ground his teeth and said into the ear of Nicholas:

"Register this vow for me, priest, that in payment for that jest I'll sack and burn Dunwich when our army comes, and give its men and children to the sword and its women to the soldiers."

"It shall be done, lord," answered the chaplain, "and should your heart soften at the appointed time I'll put you in memory of this solemn oath."

At the great house of the Mayor of Dunwich Sir Edmund drew rein and demanded to see him. Presently this Mayor, a timid, uncertain-looking man, came in his robes of office and asked anxiously what might be the cause of this message and why an armed band halted at his gate.

"For no ill purpose, sir," answered Acour, "though little of justice have I found at your hands, who, therefore, must seek it at the Court of my liege lord, King Edward. All I ask of you is that you will cause this letter to be delivered safely to the lady Eve Clavering, who lies in sanctuary at the Preceptory of St. Mary and St. John. It is one of farewell, since it seems that this lady who, by her own will and her father's, was my affianced, wishes to break troth, and I am not a man who needs an unwilling bride. I'd deliver it myself only that old knave, half priest and half knight, but neither good----"

"You'd best speak no ill of Sir Andrew Arnold here," said a voice in the crowd.

"Only the master of the Preceptory," went on Acour, changing his tone somewhat, "might take fright and think I wished to violate his sanctuary if I came there with thirty spears at my back."

"And no fool either," said the voice, "seeing that they are French spears and his is an English sanctuary."

"Therefore," continued Acour, "I pray you, deliver the letter. Perchance when we meet again, Master Mayor," he added with a venomous glance of his dark eyes, "you will have some boon to ask of me, and be sure I'll grant it--if I can."

Then without waiting for an answer, for the mob of sturdy fishermen, many of whom had served in the French wars, looked threatening, he and his following rode away through the Ipswich gate and out on to the moorlands beyond, which some of them knew but too well.

All the rest of that day they rode slowly, but when night came, having halted their horses at a farm and given it out that they meant to push on to Woodbridge, they turned up a by-track on the lonely heath, and, unseen by any, made their through the darkness to a certain empty house in the marshes not far from Beccles town. This house, called Frog Hall,

was part of Acour's estate, and because of the ague prevalent there in autumn, had been long unattended. Nor did any visit it at this season of the year, when no cattle grazed upon these salt marshes.

Here, then, he and his people lay hid, cursing their fortunes, since, notwithstanding the provisions that they had conveyed thither in secret, the place was icy cold in the bitter, easterly winds which tore over it from the sea. So lonely was it, also, that the Frenchmen swore that their comrades slain by Grey Dick haunted them at nights, bidding them prepare to join the number of the dead. Indeed, had not Acour vowed that he would hang the first man who attempted to desert, some of them would have left him to make the best of their way back to France. For always as they crouched by the smoking hearth they dreamed of Grey Dick and his terrible arrows.

Sir Edmund Acour's letter came safely into the hands of Eve, brought to her by the Mayor himself. It read thus:

Lady,

You will no more of me, so however much you should live to ask it, I will have no more of you. I go hang your merchant lout, and afterward away to France, who wish to have done with your cold Suffolk, where you may buy my lands cheap if you will. Yet, should Master Hugh de Cressi chance to escape me, I counsel you to marry him, for I can wish you no worse fate, seeing what you will be, than to remember what you might

have been. Meanwhile it is my duty as a Christian to tell you, in case you should desire to speak to him ere it be too late, that your father lies at the point of death from a sickness brought on by his grief at the slaying of his son and your cruel desertion of him, and calls for you in his ravings. May God forgive you, as I try to do, all the evil that you have wrought, which, perhaps, is not done with yet. Unless Fate should bring us together again, for as aught I know it may, I bid you farewell forever. Would that I had never seen your face, but well are you named Red Eve, who, like the false Helen in a story you have never heard, were born to bring brave men to their deaths. Again farewell,

De Noyon.

"Who is this Helen?" asked Eve of Sir Andrew when the letter had been read.

"A fair Grecian, daughter, over whom nations fought when the world was young, because of her beauty."

"Ah, well! she did not make herself beautiful, did she? and, perchance, was more sinned against than sinning, since women, having but one life to live, must follow their own hearts. But this Helen has been dead a long while, so let her rest, if rest she may. And now it seems that Acour is away and that my father lies very sick. What shall I do? Return to him?"

"First I will make sure that the Frenchman has gone, and then we will see, daughter."

So Sir Andrew sent out messengers who reported it to be true that Acour had ridden straight to London to see the King and then sail for Dover. Also they said that no Frenchmen were left at Blythburgh save those who would never leave the place again, and that Sir John Clavering lay sick in his bed at the manor.

"God fights for us!" said Sir Andrew with a little laugh. "This Acour's greeting at Court may be warmer than he thinks and at the least you and Dunwich are well rid of him. Though I had sooner that you stayed here, to-morrow, daughter, you shall ride to Blythburgh. Should your father die, as I think he will ere long, it might grieve you in the after years to remember that you had bid him no farewell. If he recovers or is harsh with you it will be easy for you to seek sanctuary again."