

CHAPTER VII

THE LOVE PHILTRE

So it came about that on the morrow Eve and Sir Andrew, accompanied only by a single serving man, fearing no guile since it seemed certain that the Frenchmen were so far away, rode across the moor to Blythburgh. At the manor-house they found the drawbridge up. The watchman at the gate said also that his orders were to admit none, for the Frenchmen being gone, there were but few to guard the place.

"What, good fellow," asked Eve, "not even the daughter of the house who has heard that her father lies so sick?"

"Ay, he lies sick, lady," the man replied, "but such are his orders. Yet if you will bide here a while, I'll go and learn his mind."

So he went and returned presently, saying that Sir John commanded that his daughter was to be admitted, but that if Sir Andrew attempted to enter he should be driven back by force.

"Will you go in or will you return with me?" asked her companion of Eve.

"God's truth!" she answered, "am I one to run away from my father, however bad his humour? I'll go in and set my case before him, for after all he loves me in his own fashion and when he understands will, I

think, relent."

"Your heart is your best guide, daughter, and it would be an ill task for me to stand between sire and child. Enter then, for I am sure that the Saints and your own innocence will protect you from all harm. At the worst you can come or send to me for help."

So they parted, and the bridge having been lowered, Eve walked boldly to her father's sleeping chamber, where she was told he lay. As she approached the door she met several of the household leaving it with scared faces, who scarcely stayed to salute her. Among these were two servants of her dead brother John, men whom she had never liked, and a woman, the wife of one of them, whom she liked least of all.

Pushing open the door, which was shut behind her, she advanced toward Sir John, who was not, as she had thought, in bed, but clad in a furred robe and standing by the hearth, on which burnt a fire. He watched her come, but said no word, and the look of him frightened her somewhat.

"Father," she said, "I heard that you were sick and alone----"

"Ay," he broke in, "sick, very sick here," and he laid his hand upon his heart, "where grief strikes a man. Alone, too, since you and your fellow have done my only son to death, murdered my guests, and caused them to depart from so bloody a house."

Now Eve, who had come expecting to find her father at the point of death and was prepared to plead with him, at these violent words took fire as was her nature.

"You know well that you speak what is not true," she said. "You and your Frenchmen strove to burn us out of Middle Marsh; my brother John struck Hugh de Cressi as though he were a dog and used words toward him that no knave would bear, let alone one better born than we are. Moreover, afterward once he spared his life, and Grey Dick, standing alone against a crowd, did but use his skill to save us. Is it murder, then to protect our honour and to save ourselves from death? And am I wrong to refuse to marry a fine French knave when I chance to love an honest man?"

"And, pray, am I your father, girl, that you dare to scold at me thus?" shouted Sir John, growing purple with wrath. "If I choose a husband for you, by what right do you refuse him, saying that you love a Dunwich shop-boy? Down on your knees and beg my pardon, or you shall have the whipping you have earned."

Now Eve's black eyes glittered dangerously.

"Ill would it go with any man who dared to lay a hand upon me," she said, drawing herself up and grasping the dagger in her girdle. "Yes, very ill, even though he were my own father. Look at me and say am I one to threaten? Ay, and before you answer bear in mind that there are those at my call who can strike hard, and that among them I think you'll find

the King of England."

She paused.

"What hellish plot is this that you hatch against me?" asked Sir John, with some note of doubt in his voice. "What have I to fear from my liege lord, the King of England?"

"Only, sir, that you consort with and would wed me to one who, although you may not know it, has, I am told, much to fear from him, so much that I wonder that he has ridden to seek his Grace's presence. Well, you are ill and I am angered and together we are but as steel and flint, from the meeting of which comes fire that may burn us both. Therefore, since being better than I thought, you need me not and have only cruel words for greeting, I'll bid you farewell and get me back to those who are kindlier. God be with you, and give you your health again."

"Ah!" said or rather snarled Sir John, "I thought as much and am ready for the trick. You'd win back to sanctuary, would you, and the company of that old wizard, Andrew Arnold, thence to make a mock of me? Well, not one step do you take upon that road while I live," and pushing past her he opened the door and shouted aloud.

Apparently the men and woman whom Eve had met in the passage were still waiting there, for instantly they all reappeared.

"Now, fellows," said Sir John, "and you, Jane Mell, take this rebellious girl of mine to the chamber in the prisoners' tower, whence I think she'll find it hard to fly to sanctuary. There lock her fast, feeding her with the bread and water of affliction to tame her proud spirit, and suffering none to go near her save this woman, Jane Mell. Stay, give me that bodkin which she wears lest she, who has learned bloody ways of late, should do some of you or herself a mischief."

As he spoke one of the men deftly snatched the dagger from Eve's girdle and handed it to Sir John who threw it into the farthest corner of the room. Then he turned and said:

"Now, girl, will you go, or must you be dragged?"

She raised her head slowly and looked him in the eyes. Mad as he was with passion there was something in her face that frightened him.

"Can you be my father?" she said in a strained, quiet voice. "Oh! glad am I that my mother did not live to see this hour."

Then she wheeled round and addressed the men.

"Hearken, fellows. He who lays a finger on me, dies. Soon or late assuredly he dies as he would not wish to die. Yes, even if you murder me, for I have friends who will learn the truth and pay back coin for coin with interest a hundredfold. Now I'll go. Stand clear, knaves,

and pray to God that never again may Red Eve cross the threshold of her prison. Pray also that never again may you look on Hugh de Cressi's sword or hear Grey Dick's arrows sing, or face the curse of old Sir Andrew."

So proud and commanding was her mien and so terrible the import of her words, that these rough hinds shrank away from her and the woman hid her face in her hands. But Sir John thundered threats and oaths at them, so that slowly and unwillingly they ringed Eve round. Then with head held high she walked thence in the midst of them.

The prisoners' chamber beneath the leads of the lofty tower was cold and unfurnished save for a stool and a truckle-bed. It had a great door of oak locked and barred on the outer side, with a grille in it through which the poor wretch within could be observed. There was no window, only high up beneath the ceiling were slits like loopholes that not a child could have passed. Such was the place to which Eve was led.

Here they left her. At nightfall the door was opened and Jane Mell entered, bearing a loaf of bread and a jug of water, which she set down upon the floor.

"Would you aught else?" she asked.

"Ay, woman," answered Eve, "my thick red woollen cloak from my chamber, and hood to match. Also water to wash me, for this place is cold and

foul, and I would die warm and clean."

"First I must get leave from my lord your father," said the woman in a surly voice.

"Get it then and be swift," said Eve, "or leave it ungotten; I care little."

Mell went and within half an hour returned with the garments, the water and some other things. Setting them down without a word she departed, locking and bolting the door behind her.

While there remained a few rays of light to see by, Eve ate and drank heartily, for she needed food. Then having prayed according to her custom, she laid herself down and slept as a child sleeps, for she was very strong of will and one who had always taught herself to make the best of evil fortune. When she woke the daws were cawing around the tower and the sun shone through the loopholes. She rose refreshed and ate the remainder of her bread, then combed her hair and dressed herself as best she could.

Two or three hours later the door was opened and her father entered. Glancing at him she saw that little sleep had visited him that night, for he looked old and very weary, so weary that she motioned to him to sit upon the stool. This he did, breathing heavily and muttering something about the steepness of the tower stairs. Presently he spoke.

"Eve," he said, "is your proud spirit broken yet?"

"No," she answered, "nor ever will be, living or dead! You may kill my body, but my spirit is me, and that you will never kill. As God gave it so I will return it to Him again."

He stared at her, with something of wonder and more of admiration in his look.

"Christ's truth," he said, "how proud I could be of you, if only you'd let me! I deem your courage comes from your mother, but she never had your shape and beauty. And now you are the only one left, and you hate me with all your proud heart, you, the heiress of the Claverings!"

"Whose estate is this," she answered, pointing to the bare stone walls.

"Think you, my father, that such treatment as I have met with at your hands of late would breed love in the humblest heart? What devil drives you on to deal with me as you have done?"

"No devil, girl, but a desire for your own good, and," he added with a burst of truth, "for the greatness of my House after I am gone, which will be soon. For your old wizard spoke rightly when he said that I stand near to death."

"Will marrying me to a man I hate be for my good and make your House

great? I tell you, sir, it would kill me and bring the Claverings to an end. Do you desire also that your broad lands should go to patch a spendthrift Frenchman's cloak? But what matters your desire seeing that I'll not do it, who love another man worth a score of him; one, too, who will sit higher than any Count of Noyon ever stood."

"Pish!" he said. "'Tis but a girl's whim. You speak folly, being young and headstrong. Now, to have done with all this mummer's talk, will you swear to me by our Saviour and on the welfare of your soul to break with Hugh de Cressi once and forever? For if so I'll let you free, to leave me if you will, and dwell where it pleases you."

She opened her lips to answer, but he held up his hand, saying:

"Wait ere you speak, I have not done. If you take my offer I'll not even press Sir Edmund Acour on you; that matter shall stand the chance of time and tide. Only while you live you must have no more to do with the man who slew your brother. Now will you swear?"

"Not I," she answered. "How can I who but a few days ago before God's altar and His priest vowed myself to this same Hugh de Cressi for all his life?"

Sir John rose from the stool and walked, or, rather, tottered to the door.

"Then stay here till you rot," he said quite quietly, "for I'll give you no burial. As for this Hugh, I would have spared him, but you have signed his death-warrant."

He was gone. The heavy door shut, the bars clanged into their sockets. Thus these two parted, for when they met once more no word passed between them; and although she knew not how these things would end, Eve felt that parting to be dreadful. Turning her face to the wall, for a while she wept, then, when the woman Mell came with her bread and water, wiped away her tears and faced her calmly. After all, she could have answered no otherwise; her soul was pure of sin, and, for the rest, God must rule it. At least she would die clean and honest.

That night she was wakened from her sleep by the clatter of horses' hoofs on the courtyard stones. She could hear no more because a wind blew that drowned all sound of voices. For a while a wild hope had filled her that Hugh had come, or perchance Sir Andrew, with the Dunwich folk, but presently she remembered that this was foolish, since these would never have been admitted within the moat. So sighing sadly she turned to rest again, thinking to herself that doubtless her father had called in some of his vassal tenants from the outlying lands to guard the manor in case it should be attacked.

Next morning the woman Jane Mell brought her better garments to wear, of her best indeed, and, though she wondered why they were sent, for the lack of anything else to do she arrayed herself in them, and braided

her hair with the help of a silver mirror that was among the garments. A little later this woman appeared again, bearing not bread and water, but good food and a cup of wine. The food she ate with thankfulness, but the wine she would not drink, because she knew that it was French and had heard Acour praise it.

The morning wore away to noon, and again the door opened and there stood before her--Sir Edmund Acour himself, gallantly dressed, as she noticed vaguely, in close-fitting tunic of velvet, long shoes that turned up at the toes and a cap in which was set a single nodding plume. She rose from her stool and set her back against the wall with a prayer to God in her heart, but no word upon her lips, for she felt that her best refuge was silence. He drew the cap from his head, and began to speak.

"Lady," he said, "you will wonder to see me here after my letter to you, bidding you farewell, but you will remember that in this letter I wrote that Fate might bring us together again, and it has done so through no fault or wish of mine. The truth is that when I was near to London I heard that danger awaited me there on account of certain false accusations, such danger that I must return again to Suffolk and seek a ship at some eastern port. Well, I came here last night, and learned that you were back out of sanctuary and also that you had quarrelled with your father who in his anger had imprisoned you in this poor place. An ill deed, as I think, but in truth he is so distraught with grief and racked with sickness that he scarce knows what he does."

Now he paused, but as Eve made no answer went on:

"Pity for your lot, yes, and my love for you that eats my heart out, caused me to seek your father's leave to visit you and see if perchance I could not soften your wrath against me."

Again he paused and again there was no answer.

"Moreover," he added, "I have news for you which I fear you will think sad and which, believe me, I pray you, it pains me to give, though the man was my rival and my enemy. Hugh de Cressi, to whom you held yourself affianced, is dead."

She quivered a little at the words, but still made no answer, for her will was very strong.

"I had the story," he continued, "from two of his own men, whom we met flying back to Dunwich from London. It seems that messengers from your father reached the Court of the King before this Hugh, telling him of the slaying in Blythburgh Marsh. Then came Hugh himself, whereon the King seized him and his henchman, the archer, and at once put them on their trial as the murderers of John Clavering, of my knights, and Thomas of Kessland, which they admitted boldly. Thereon his Grace, who was beside himself with rage, said that in a time of war, when every man was needed to fight the French, he was determined by a signal example to put a stop to the shedding of blood in these private feuds. So he

ordered the merchant to the block, and his henchman, the archer, to the gallows, giving them but one hour to make their peace with God. Moreover," he went on, searching her cold impassive face with his eyes, "I did not escape his wrath, for he gave command that I was to be seized wherever I might be found and cast into prison till I could be put upon my trial, and my knights with me. Of your father's case he is considering since his only son has been slain and he holds him in regard. Therefore it is that I am obliged to avoid London and take refuge here."

Still Eve remained silent, and in his heart Acour cursed her stubbornness.

"Lady," he proceeded, though with somewhat less assurance--for now he must leave lies and get to pleading, and never did a suit seem more hopeless, "these things being so through no fault of mine whose hands are innocent of any share in this young man's end, I come to pray of you, the sword of death having cut all your oaths, that you will have pity on my love and take me as your husband, as is your father's wish and my heart's desire. Let not your young life be swallowed up in grief, but make it joyous in my company. I can give you greatness, I can give you wealth, but most of all I can give you such tender adoration as never woman had before. Oh! sweet Eve, your answer," and he cast himself upon the ground before her, and, snatching the hem of her robe, pressed it to his lips.

Then at length Eve spoke in a voice that rang like steel:

"Get you gone, knave, whose spurs should be hacked from your heels by scullions. Get you gone, traitor and liar, for well I know that Hugh de Cressi is not dead, who had a certain tale to tell of you to the King of England. Get you back to the Duke of Normandy and there ask the price of your betrayal of your liege lord, Edward, and show him the plans of our eastern coast and the shores where his army may land in safety."

Acour sprang to his feet and his face went white as ashes. Thrice he strove to speak but could not. Then with a curse he turned and left the chamber.

"The hunt's up," said Father Nicholas when he had heard all this tale a little later, "and now, lord, I think that you had better away to France, unless you desire to stop without companions in the church yonder."

"Ay, priest, I'll away, but by God's blood, I'll take that Red Eve with me! For one thing she knows too much to leave her behind. For a second I mean to pay her back, and for a third, although you may think it strange, I'm mad for her. I tell you she looked wondrous standing with her back against that wall, her marble face never wincing when I told her all the lie about young de Cressi's death--which will be holy truth

when I get a chance at him--watching me out of those great, dark eyes of hers."

"Doubtless, lord, but how did she look when she called you knave and traitor? I think you said those were her wicked words. Oh!" he added with a ring of earnestness in his smooth voice, "let this Red Eve be. At bed or board she's no mate for you. Something fights at her side, be it angel or devil, or just raw chance. At the least she'll prove your ruin unless you let her be."

"Then I'll be ruined, Nicholas, for I'll not leave her, for a while, at any rate. What! de Noyon, whom they call Danger of Dames, beaten by a country girl who has never seen London or Paris! I'd sooner die."

"As well may chance if the country lad and the country archer come back with Edward's warrant in their pouch," answered the priest, shrugging his lean shoulders. "Well, lord, what is your plan?"

"To carry her off. Can't we manage nine stone of womanhood between us?"

"If she were dead it might be done, though hardly--over these Suffolk roads. But being very much alive with a voice to scream with, hands to fight with, a brain to think with and friends who know her from here to Yarmouth, or to Hull, and Monsieur Grey Dick's arrows pricking us behind perchance--well, I don't know."

"Friend," said Acour, tapping him on the shoulder meaningly, "there must be some way; there are always ways, and I pray you to hunt them out. Come, find me one, or stay here alone to explain affairs, first to this Dick whom you have so much upon the brain, and afterward to Edward of England or his officers."

Father Nicholas looked at the great Count's face. Then he looked at the ground, and, having studied it a while without result, turned his beady eyes to the heavens, where it would seem that he found inspiration.

"I am a stranger to love, thank the Saints," he said, "but, as you know, lord, I am a master leech, and amongst other things have studied certain medicines which breed that passion in the human animal."

"Love philtres?" queried Acour doubtfully.

"Yes, that kind of thing. One dose, and those who hate become enamoured, and those who are enamoured hate."

"Then in God's or Satan's name, give her one. Only be careful it is the right sort, for if you made a mistake so that she hated me any more than she does at present, I know not what would happen. Also if you kill her I'll dig a sword point through you. How would the stuff work?"

"She'll seem somewhat stupid for a while, perhaps not speak, but only smile kindly. That will last twelve hours or so, plenty of time for you

to be married, and afterward, when the grosser part of the potion passes off leaving only its divine essence, why, afterward she'll love you furiously."

"A powerful medicine, truly, that can change the nature of woman. Moreover, I'd rather that she loved me--well, as happy brides do. Still I put up with the fury provided it be of the good kind. And now how is it to be done?"

"Leave that to me, lord," said Nicholas, with a cunning smile. "Give me a purse of gold, not less than ten pieces, for some is needed to melt in the mixture, and more to bribe that woman and others. For the rest, hold yourself ready to become a husband before sunset to-morrow. Go see Sir John and tell him that the lady softens. Send men on to King's Lynn also to bid them have our ship prepared to sail the minute we appear, which with good fortune should be within forty-eight hours from now. Above all, forget not that I run great risk to soul and body for your sake and that there are abbeyes vacant in Normandy. Now, farewell, I must to my work, for this medicine takes much skill such as no other leech has save myself. Ay, and much prayer also, that naught may hinder its powerful working."

"Prayer to the devil, I think," said his master looking after him with a shrug of his shoulders. "God's truth! if any one had told me three months gone that de Noyon would live to seek the aid of priests and potions to win a woman's favour, I'd have named him liar to his face."

What would those who have gone before her think of this story, I wonder?"

Then with a bitter laugh he turned and went about his business, which was to lie to the father as he had lied to the daughter. Only in this second case he found one more willing to listen and easier to deceive.

On the following morning, as it chanced, Eve had no relish for the food that was brought to her, for confinement in that narrow place had robbed her of her appetite. Also she had suffered much from grievous fear and doubt, for whatever she might say to Acour, how could she be sure that his story was not true? How could she be sure that her lover did not, in fact, now lie dead at the headsman's hands? Such things often happened when kings were wroth and would not listen. Or perhaps Acour himself had found and murdered him, or hired others to do the deed. She did not know, and, imprisoned here without a friend, what means had she of coming at the truth? Oh! if only she could escape! If only she could speak with Sir Andrew for one brief minute, she, poor fool, who had walked into this trap of her own will.

She sent away the food and bade the woman Mell bring her milk, for that would be easy to swallow and give her sustenance. After some hours it came, Mell explaining that she had been obliged to send for it to the farmsteading, as none drank milk in the manor-house. Being thirsty, Eve

took the pitcher and drained it to the last drop, then threw it down, saying that the vessel was foul and made the milk taste ill.

The woman did not answer, only smiled a little as she left the chamber, and Eve wondered why she smiled.

A while later she grew very sleepy, and, as it seemed to her, had strange dreams in her sleep. She dreamed of her childhood, when she and Hugh played together upon the Dunwich shore. She dreamed of her mother, and thought dimly that she was warning her of something. She heard voices about her and thought that they were calling her to be free. Yes, and followed them readily enough, or so it seemed in her dream, followed them out of that hateful prison, for the bolts clanged behind her, down stairs and into the courtyard, where the sun's light almost blinded her and the fresh air struck her hot brow like ice. Then there were more voices, and people moving to and fro and the drone of a priest praying and a touch upon her hand from which she shrank. And oh! she wished that dream were done, for it was long, long. It wearied her, and grasped her heart with a cold clutch of fear.