

CHAPTER VIII

TOO LATE

It was past three o'clock on this same day when Eve had drunk the milk and some hours after she began to dream, that Hugh de Cressi and his men, safe and sound but weary, halted their tired horses at the door of the Preceptory of the Templars in Dunwich.

"Best go on to his worship the Mayor and serve the King's writ upon him, master," grumbled Grey Dick as they rode up Middlegate Street. "You wasted good time in a shooting bout at Windsor against my will, and now you'll waste more time in a talking match at Dunwich. And the sun grows low, and the Frenchmen may have heard and be on the wing, and who can see to lay a shaft at night?"

"Nay, man," answered Hugh testily, "first I must know how she fares."

"The lady Eve will fare neither better nor worse for your knowing about her, but one with whom you should talk may fare further, for doubtless his spies are out. But have your way and leave me to thank God that no woman ever found a chance to clog my leg, perhaps because I was not born an ass."

It is doubtful if Hugh heard these pungent and practical remarks, for ere Dick had finished speaking them, he was off his horse, and hammering

at the Preceptory door. Some while passed before any answer came, for Sir Andrew was walking in the garden beyond the church, in no happy mind because of certain rumours that had reached him, and the old nun Agnes, spying armed men and not knowing who they were, was afraid to open. So it came about that fifteen minutes or more went by before at length Hugh and his godsire stood face to face.

"How is Eve and where? Why is she not with you, Father?" he burst out.

"One question at a time, son, for whose safe return I thank God. I know not how she is, and she is not with me because she is not here. She has returned to her father at Blythburgh."

"Why?" gasped Hugh. "You swore to keep her safe."

"Peace, and you shall learn," and as shortly as he could he told him.

"Is that all?" asked Hugh doubtfully, for he saw trouble in Sir Andrew's face.

"Not quite, son. Only to-day I have learned that Acour and his folk never went to London, and are back again at Blythburgh Manor."

"So much the better, Father, for now I have the King's warrant addressed to the Mayor and all his Grace's subject in Dunwich, to take these Frenchmen, living or dead."

"Ah! But I have learned also that her father holds Eve a prisoner, suffering her to speak with none, and--one lamb among those wolves--Oh! God! why didst Thou suffer my wisdom to fail me? Doubtless for some good purpose--where is my faith? Yet we must act. Hie, you there," he called to one of the men-at-arms, "go to Master de Cressi's house and bid him meet us by the market-cross mounted and armed, with all his sons and people. And, you, get out my horse. Mother Agnes, bring my armour, since I have no other squire! We'll go to the Mayor. Now, while I don my harness, tell me all that's passed, wasting no words."

Another half-hour almost had gone by before Hugh met his father, two of his brothers and some men riding into the market-place. They greeted in haste but thankfulness, and something of the tale was told while they passed on to the house of the Mayor, who, as they thought, had already been warned of their coming by messengers. But here disappointment awaited them, for this officer, a man of wealth and honour, was, as it chanced, absent on a visit to Norwich, whence it was said that he would not return for three full days.

"Now what shall we do?" asked Sir Andrew, his face falling. "It is certain that the burgesses of Dunwich will not draw sword in an unknown quarrel, except upon the direct order of their chief, for there is no time to collect them and publish the King's warrant. It would seem that we must wait till to-morrow and prepare to-night."

"Not I," answered Hugh. "The warrant is to me as well as to the Mayor. I'll leave it with his clerk, which is good delivery, and away to Blythburgh Manor on the instant with any who will follow me, or without them. Come, Dick, for night draws on and we've lost much time."

Now his father tried to dissuade him, but he would not listen, for the fear in his heart urged him forward. So the end of it was that the whole party of them--thirteen men in all, counting those that Master de Cressi brought, rode away across the heath to Blythburgh, though the horses of Hugh's party being very weary, not so fast as he could have wished.

Just as the sun sank they mounted the slope of the farther hill on the crest of which stood the manor-house backed by winds.

"The drawbridge is down, thanks be to God!" said Sir Andrew, "which shows that no attack is feared. I doubt me, son, we shall find Acour flown."

"That we shall know presently," answered Hugh.

"Now, dismount all and follow me."

They obeyed, though some of them who knew old Sir John's temper seemed not to like the business. Leaving two of their people with the horses, they crossed the bridge, thinking to themselves that the great house seemed strangely silent and deserted. Now they were in the outer court,

on one side of which stood the chapel, and still there was no one to be seen. Dick tapped Hugh upon the shoulder, pointing to a window of this chapel that lay in the shadow, through which came a faint glimmering of light, as though tapers burned upon the altar.

"I think there's a burying yonder," he whispered, "at which all men gather."

Hugh blanched, for might it not be Eve whom they buried? But Sir Andrew, noting it, said:

"Nay, nay, Sir John was sick. Come, let us look."

The door of the chapel was open and they walked through it as quietly as they could, to find the place, which was not very large, filled with people. Of these they took no heed, for the last rays of the sunlight flowing through the western window, showed them a scene that held their eyes.

A priest stood before the lighted altar holding his hands in benediction over a pair who kneeled at its rail. One of these wore a red cloak down which her dark hair streamed. She leaned heavily against the rail, as a person might who is faint with sleep or with the ardour of her orisons.

It was Red Eve, no other!

At her side, clad in gleaming mail, kneeled a knight. Close by Eve stood

her father, looking at her with a troubled air, and behind the knight were other knights and men-at-arms. In the little nave were all the people of the manor and with them those that dwelt around, every one of them intently watching the pair before the altar.

The priest perceived them at first just as the last word of the blessing passed his lips.

"Why do armed strangers disturb God's house?" he asked in a warning voice.

The knight at the altar rails sprang up and turned round. Hugh saw that it was Acour, but even then he noted that the woman at his side, she who wore Eve's garment, never stirred from her knees.

Sir John Clavering glared down the chapel, and all the other people turned to look at them. Now Hugh and his company halted in the open space where the nave joined the chancel, and said, answering the priest:

"I come hither with my companions bearing the warrant of the King to seize Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon, and convey him to London, there to stand his trial on a charge of high treason toward his liege lord, Edward of England. Yield you, Sir Edmund Acour."

At these bold words the French knights and squires drew their swords and ringed themselves round their captain, whereon Hugh and his party also

drew their swords.

"Stay," cried old Sir Andrew in his ringing voice. "Let no blood be shed in the holy house of God. You men of Suffolk, know that you harbour a foul traitor in your bosoms, one who plots to deliver you to the French. Lift no hand on his behalf, lest on you also should fall the vengeance of the King, who has issued his commands to all his officers and people, to seize Acour living or dead."

Now a silence fell upon the place, for none liked this talk of the King's warrant, and in the midst of it Hugh asked:

"Do you yield, Sir Edmund Acour, or must we and the burgesses of Dunwich who gather without seize you and your people?"

Acour turned and began to talk rapidly with the priest Nicholas, while the congregation stared at each other. Then Sir John Clavering, who all this while had been listening like a man in a dream, suddenly stepped forward.

"Hugh de Cressi," he said, "tell me, does the King's writ run against John Clavering?"

"Nay," answered Hugh, "I told his Grace that you were an honest man deceived by a knave."

"Then what do you, slayer of my son, in my house? Know that I have just married my daughter to this knight whom you name traitor, and that I here defend him to the last who is now my kin. Begone and seek elsewhere, or stay and die."

"How have you married her?" asked Hugh in a hollow voice. "Not of her own will, surely? Rise, Eve, and tell us the truth."

Eve stirred. Resting her hands upon the altar rails, slowly she raised herself to her feet and turned her white face toward him.

"Who spoke?" she said. "Was it Hugh that Acour swore is dead? Oh! where am I? Hugh, Hugh, what passes?"

"Your honour, it seems, Eve. They say you are married to this traitor."

"I married, and in this red robe! Why, that betokens blood, as blood there must be if I am wed to any man save you," and she laughed, a dreadful laugh.

"In the name of Christ," thundered old Sir Andrew, "tell me, John Clavering, what means this play? Yonder woman is no willing wife. She's drugged or mad. Man, have you doctored your own daughter?"

"Doctored my daughter? I! I! Were you not a priest I'd tear out your tongue for those words. She's married and of her own will. Else would

she have stood silent at this altar?"

"It shall be inquired of later," Hugh answered coldly. "Now yield you, Sir Edmund Acour, the King's business comes first."

"Nay," shouted Clavering, springing forward and drawing his sword; "in my house my business comes first. Acour is my daughter's husband and so shall stay till death or Pope part them. Out of this, Hugh de Cressi, with all your accursed chapman tribe."

Hugh walked toward Acour, taking no heed. Then suddenly Sir John lifted his sword and smote with all his strength. The blow caught Hugh on the skull and down he fell, his mail clattering on the stones, and lay still. With a whine of rage, Grey Dick leapt at Clavering, drawing from his side the archer's axe he always wore. But old Sir Andrew caught and held him in his arms.

"Vengeance is God's, not ours," he said. "Look!"

As he spoke Sir John began to sway to and fro. He let fall his murdering sword, he pressed his hands upon his heart, he threw them high. Then suddenly his knees gave beneath him; he sank to the floor a huddled heap and sat there, resting against the altar rail over which his head hung backward, open mouthed and eyed.

The last light of the sky went out, only that of the tapers remained.

Eve, awake at last, sent up shriek after shriek; Sir Andrew bending over the two fallen men, the murderer and the murdered, began to shrive them swiftly ere the last beat of life should have left their pulses. His father, brothers, and Grey Dick clustered round Hugh and lifted him. The fox-faced priest, Nicholas, whispered quick words into the ears of Acour and his knights. Acour nodded and took a step toward Eve, who just then fell swooning and was grasped by Grey Dick with his left hand, for in his right he still held the axe.

"No, no," hissed Nicholas, dragging Sir Edmund back, "life is more than any woman." Then some one overset the tapers, so that the place was plunged in gloom, and through it none saw Acour and his train creep out by the chancel door and hurry to their horses, which waited saddled in the inner yard.

The frightened congregation fled from the nave with white faces, each seeking his own place, or any other that was far from Blythburgh Manor. For did not their dead master's guilt cling to them, and would they not also be held guilty of the murder of the King's officer, and swing for it from the gallows? So it came about that when at last lights were brought Hugh's people found themselves alone.

"The Frenchmen have fled!" cried Grey Dick. "Follow me, men," and with most of them he ran out and began to search the manor, till at length they found a woman who told them that thirty minutes gone Acour and all his following had ridden through the back gates and vanished at full

gallop into the darkness of the woods.

With these tidings, Dick returned to the chapel.

"Master de Cressi," said Sir Andrew when he had heard it, "back with some of your people to Dunwich and raise the burgesses, warning them that the King's wrath will be great if these traitors escape the land. Send swift messengers to all the ports; discover where Acour rides and follow him in force and if you come up with him, take him dead or living. Stop not to talk, man, begone! Nay, bide here, Richard, and those who rode with you to London, for Acour may return again and some must be left to guard the lady Eve and your master, quick or dead."

De Cressi, his two sons and servants went, and presently were riding for Dunwich faster than ever they rode before. But, as it proved, Acour was too swift for them. When at length a messenger galloped into Lynn, whither they learned that he had fled, it was to find that his ship, which awaited him with sails hoisted, had cleared the port three hours before, with a wind behind her which blew straight for Flanders.

"Ah!" said Grey Dick when he heard the news, "this is what comes of wasting arrows upon targets which should have been saved for traitors' hearts! With those three hours of daylight in hand we'd have ringed the rogues in or run them down. Well, the devil's will be done; he does but spare his own till a better day."

But when the King heard the news he was very wroth, not with Hugh de Cressi, but with the burgesses of Dunwich, whose Mayor, although he was blameless, lost his office over the matter. Nor was there any other chosen afterward in his place, as those who read the records of that ancient port may discover for themselves.

When Master de Cressi and his people were gone, having first searched the great manor-house and found none in it save a few serving-men and women, whom he swore to put to death if they disobeyed him, Grey Dick raised the drawbridge. Then, all being made safe, he set a watch upon the walls and saw that there was wood in the iron cradle on the topmost tower in case it should be needful to light the beacon and bring aid.

But it was not, since the sun rose before any dared to draw near those walls, and then those that came proved to be friendly folk from Dunwich bearing the ill news that the Frenchmen were clean away.

About midnight the door of the chamber in which Sir Andrew knelt by a bed whereon lay Hugh de Cressi opened and the tall Eve entered, bearing a taper in her hand. For now her mind had returned to her and she knew all.

"Is he dead, Father?" she asked in a small, strange voice; then, still as any statue, awaited the answer that was more to her than life.

"Nay, daughter. Down on your knees and give thanks. God, by the skill I gained in Eastern lands, has stayed the flow of his life's blood, and I say that he will live."

Then he showed her how her father's sword had glanced from the short hood of chain-mail which he had given Hugh, stunning him, but leaving the skull unbroken. Biting into the neck below, it had severed the outer vein only. This he had tied with a thread of silk and burned with a hot iron, leaving a scar that Hugh bore to his death, but staunching the flow of blood.

"How know you that he will live?" asked Eve again, "seeing that he lies like one that is sped."

"I know it, daughter. Question me no more. As for his stillness, it is that which follows a heavy blow. Perhaps it may hold him fast many days, since certainly he will be sick for long. Yet fear nothing; he will live."

Now Eve uttered a great sigh. Her breast heaved and colour returned to her lips. She knelt down and gave thanks as the old priest-knight had bidden her. Then she rose, took his hand and kissed it.

"Yet one more question, Father," she said. "It is of myself. That knave drugged me. I drank milk, and, save some dreams, remember no more till I heard Hugh's voice calling. Now they tell me that I have stood at the

altar with de Noyon, and that his priest read the mass of marriage over us, and--look! Oh! I never noted it till now--there is a ring upon my hand," and she cast it on the floor. "Tell me, Father, according to the Church's law is that man my--my husband?"

Sir Andrew's eloquent dark eyes, that ever shadowed forth the thoughts which passed within him, grew very troubled.

"I cannot tell you," he answered awkwardly after thinking a while. "This priest, Nicholas, though I hold him a foul villain, is doubtless still a priest, clothed with all the authority of our Lord Himself, since the unworthiness of the minister does not invalidate the sacrament. Were it otherwise, indeed, few would be well baptized or wed or shriven. Moreover, although I suspect that himself he mixed the draught, yet he may not have known that you were drugged, and you stood silent, and, it would appear, consenting. The ceremony, alas! was completed; I myself heard him give the benediction. Your father assisted thereat and gave you to the groom in the presence of a congregation. The drugging is a matter of surmise and evidence which may not be forthcoming, since you are the only witness, and where is the proof? I fear me, daughter, that according to the Church's law you are de Noyon's lawful wife----"

"The Church's law," she broke in; "how about God's law? There lies the only man to whom I owe a bond, and I'll die a hundred deaths before any other shall even touch my hand. Ay, if need be, I'll kill myself and reason out the case with St. Peter in the Gates."

"Hush! hush! speak not so madly. The knot that the Church ties it can unloose. This matter must to his Holiness the Pope; it shall be my business to lay it before him; yea, letters shall go to Avignon by the first safe hand. Moreover, it well may happen that God Himself will free you, by the sword of His servant Death. This lord of yours, if indeed he be your lord, is a foul traitor. The King of England seeks his life, and there is another who will seek it also ere very long," and he glanced at the senseless form of Hugh. "Fret not yourself overmuch, daughter. Be grateful rather that matters are no worse, and that you remain as you always were. Another hour and you might have been snatched away beyond our finding. What is not ended can still be mended. Now go, seek the rest you need, for I would not have two sick folk on my hands. Oh, seek it with a thankful heart, and forget not to pray for the soul of your erring father, for, after all he loved you and strove for your welfare according to his lights."

"It may be so," answered Eve, "and I'll pray for him, as is my duty. I'll pray also that I may never find such another friend as my father showed himself to me."

Then she bent for a moment over Hugh, stretching out her hands above him as though in blessing, and departed as silently as she had come.

Three days went by before Hugh found his mind again, and after that for two weeks he was so feeble that he must lie quite still and scarcely talk at all. Sir Andrew, who nursed him continually with the help of Grey Dick, who brought his master possets, bow on back and axe at side but never opened his grim mouth, told his patient that Eve was safe and sound, but that he must not see her until he grew strong again.

So Hugh strove to grow strong, and, nature helping him, not in vain. At length there came a day when he might rise from his bed, and sit on a bench in the pleasant spring sunshine by the open window. Walk he could not, however, not only on account of his weakness, but because of another hurt, now discovered for the first time, which in the end gave him more trouble than did the dreadful and dangerous blow of Clavering's sword. It seemed that when he had fallen suddenly beneath that murderous stroke all his muscles relaxed as though he were dead, and his left ankle bent up under him, wrenching its sinews in such a fashion that for the rest of his life he walked a little lame. Especially was this so in the spring season, though whether because he had received his hurt at that time or owing to the quality of the air none could ever tell him.

Yet on that happy day he thought little of these harms, who felt the life-blood running once more strongly through his veins and who awaited Eve's long-promised advent. At length she came, stately, kind and beautiful, for now her grief and terror had passed by, leaving her as she was before her woes fell upon her. She came, and in Sir Andrew's presence, for he would not leave them, the tale was told.

Hugh learned for the first time all the truth of her imprisonment and of her shameful drugging. He learned of the burying of Sir John Clavering and of her naming as sole heiress to his great estates. To these, however, Acour had not been ashamed to submit some shadowy claim, made "in right of his lawful wife, Dame Eve Acour, Countess de Noyon," which claim had been sent by him from France addressed to "all whom it might concern." He learned of the King's wrath at the escape of this same Acour, and of his Grace's seizure of that false knight's lands in Suffolk, which, however, proved to be so heavily mortgaged that no one would grow rich upon them.

Lastly he learned that King Edward, in a letter written by one of his secretaries to Sir Andrew Arnold and received only that morning, said that he held him, Hugh de Cressi, not to blame for Acour's escape. It commanded also that if he recovered from his wound, for the giving of which Sir John Clavering should have paid sharply if he had lived, he and the archer, his servant, should join him either in England or in France, whither he purposed shortly to proceed with all his host. But the Mayor and men of Dunwich he did not hold free of blame.

The letter added, moreover, that the King was advised that Edmund Acour on reaching Normandy had openly thrown off his allegiance to the crown of England and there was engaged in raising forces to make war upon him. Further, that this Acour alleged himself to be the lawfully married husband of Eve Clavering, the heiress of Sir John Clavering, a point

upon which his Grace demanded information, since if this were true he purposed to escheat the Clavering lands. With this brief and stern announcement the letter ended.

"By God's mercy, Eve, tell me, are you this fellow's wife?" exclaimed Hugh.

"Not so," she answered. "Can a woman who is Dunwich born be wed without consent? And can a woman whose will is foully drugged out of her give consent to that which she hates? Why, if so there is no justice in the world."

"'Tis a rare jewel in these evil days, daughter," said Sir Andrew with a sigh. "Still fret not yourself son Hugh. A full statement of the case, drawn by skilled clerks and testified to by many witnesses, has gone forward already to his Holiness the Pope, of which statement true copies have been sent to the King and to the Bishops of Norwich and of Canterbury. Yet be warned that in such matters the law ecclesiastic moves but slowly, and then only when its wheels are greased with gold."

"Well," answered Hugh with a fierce laugh, "there remains another law which moves more swiftly and its wheels are greased with vengeance; the law of the sword. If you are married, Eve, I swear that before very long you shall be widowed or I dead. I'll not let de Noyon slip a second time even if he stands before the holiest altar in Christendom."

"I'd have killed him in the chapel yonder," muttered Grey Dick, who had entered with his master's food and not been sent away. "Only," he added looking reproachfully at Sir Andrew, "my hand was stayed by a certain holy priest's command to which, alack, I listened."

"And did well to listen, man, since otherwise by now you would be excommunicate."

"I could mock at that," said Dick sullenly, "who make confession in my own way, and do not wish to be married, and care not the worth of a horseshoe nail how and where I am buried, provided those I hate are buried first."

"Richard Archer, graceless wight that you are," said Sir Andrew, "I say you stand in danger of your soul."

"Ay, Father, and so the Frenchman, Acour, stood in danger of his body. But you saved it, so perhaps if there is need at the last, you will do as much for my soul. If not it must take its chance," and snatching at the dish-cover angrily, he turned and left the chamber.

"Well," commented Sir Andrew, shaking his head sadly, "if the fellow's heart is hard it is honest, so may he be forgiven who has something to forgive like the rest of us. Now hearken to me, son and daughter. Wrong, grievous and dreadful, has been done to you both. Yet, until death or the Church levels it, a wall that you may not climb stands between you,

and when you meet it must be as friends--no more."

"Now I begin to wish that I had learned in Grey Dick's school," said Hugh. But whatever she thought, Eve set her lips and said nothing.