

## CHAPTER X

### THE KING'S CHAMPION

Back over that fearful field, whereof the silence was broken only by the groans of the wounded and the dying, walked Hugh and Grey Dick. They came to the great rampart of dead men and horses that surrounded the English line, and climbed it as though it were a wall. On the further side bonfires had been lit to lighten the darkness, and by the flare of them they saw Edward of England embracing and blessing his son, the Black Prince, who, unhelmeted, bowed low before him in his bloodstained mail.

"Who were they besides, Sir Robert Fitzsimmon and Richard de Beaumont who helped you when you were down, my son?" asked the King.

The Prince looked about him.

"I know not, Sire. Many, but here is one of them," and he pointed to Hugh, who just then appeared within the circle of the firelight. "I think that he slew the Count Louis of Flanders."

"Ah!" said the King, "our young merchant of Dunwich--a gallant man. Kneel you down, merchant of Dunwich."

Hugh knelt, and the King, taking the red sword from his hand, struck him

with it on the shoulder, saying:

"Rise, Sir Hugh de Cressi, for now I give you that boon which your deathfaced servant asked before the battle. You have served us, or rather England well, both of you. But whose armour is that the archer carries, Sir Hugh?"

"Sir Edmund Acour's, lord de Noyon, Sire, only, alack! another man was within the armour."

"Your meaning?" said the King briefly, and in few words Hugh told the tale.

"A strange story, Sir Hugh. It would seem that God fought against you in this matter. Also I am wroth; my orders were that none of my men should sally out, though I fear me that you are not the only one who has broken them, and for your great deeds I forgive you."

"Sire," said Hugh, dropping to his knee again, "a boon. This de Noyon, your enemy and mine, has cheated and mocked me. Grant to me and my servant, Richard the archer, permission to follow after him and be avenged upon him."

"What is this you ask, Sir Hugh? That you and your brave henchman should wander off into the depths of France, there to perish in a dungeon or be hanged like felons? Nay, nay, we need good men and have none to spare

for private quarrels. As for this traitor, de Noyon, and his plot, that egg is broken ere it was hatched, and we fear him no more. You follow me, Sir Hugh, and your servant with you, whom we make a captain of our archers. Until Calais is taken, leave not our person for any cause, and ask no more such boons lest you lose our favour. Nay, we have no more words for you since many others seek them. Stand back, Sir Hugh! What say you, my lord of Warwick? Ay, it is a gruesome task, but let the Welshmen out, those wounded will be well rid of their pain, and Christ have mercy on their souls. Forget not when it is finished to gather all men that they may give thanks to God for His great mercies."

Well nigh a year had gone, for once again the sun shone in the brazen August heavens. Calais had fallen at last. Only that day six of her noblest citizens had come forth, bearing the keys of the fortress, clad in white shirts, with ropes about their necks, and been rescued from instant death at the hands of the headsman by the prayer of Queen Philippa.

In his tent sat Hugh de Cressi, who, after so much war and hardship, looked older than his years, perhaps because of a red scar across the forehead, which he had come by during the siege. With him was his father, Master de Cressi, who had sailed across from Dunwich with a cargo of provisions, whereof, if the truth were known, he had made no small profit. For they were sold, every pound of them, before they left

the ship's hold, though it is true the money remained to be collected.

"You say that Eve is well, my father?"

"Aye, well enough, son. Never saw I woman better or more beautiful, though she wears but a sad face. I asked her if she would not sail with me and visit you. But she answered: 'Nay, how can I who am another man's wife? Sir Hugh, your son, should have killed the wolf and let the poor swan go. When the wolf is dead, then, perchance, I will visit him. But, meanwhile, say to him that Red Eve's heart is where it always was, and that, like all Dunwich, she joys greatly in his fame and is honoured in his honour.' Moreover, to Grey Dick here, she sends many messages, and a present of wines and spiced foods for his stomach and of six score arrows made after his own pattern for his quiver."

"But for me no gift, father?" said Hugh.

"Nothing, son, save her love, which she said was enough. Also, in all this press of business and in my joy at finding you safe I had almost forgotten it, there is a letter from the holy Father, Sir Andrew. I have it somewhere in my pouch amid the bills of exchange," and he began to hunt through the parchments which he carried in a bag within his robe.

At length the letter was found. It ran thus:

To Sir Hugh de Cressi, knight, my beloved godson:

With what rejoicings I and another have heard of your knightly deeds through the letters that you have sent to us and from the mouths of wounded soldiers returned from the war, your honoured father will tell you. I thank God for them, and pray Him that this may find you unhurt and growing ever in glory.

My son, I have no good news for you. The Pope at Avignon, having studied the matter, (if indeed it ever reached his own ears) writes by one of his secretaries to say that he will not dissolve the alleged marriage between the Count of Noyon and the lady Eve of Clavering until the parties have appeared before him and set out their cause to his face. Therefore Eve cannot come to you, nor must you come to her while de Noyon lives, unless the mind of his Holiness can be changed. Should France become more quiet, so that English folk can travel there in safety, perchance Eve and I will journey to Avignon to lay her plaint before the Holy Father. But as yet this seems scarcely possible. Moreover, I trust that the traitor, Acour, may meet his end in this way or in that, and so save us the necessity. For, as you know, such cases take long to try, and the cost of them is great. Moreover, at the Court of Avignon the cause of one of our country must indeed be good just now when the other party to it is of the blood of France.

Soon I hope to write to you again, who at present have no more to say, save that notwithstanding my years I am well and strong, and would that I sat with you before the walls of Calais. God's blessing and mine be on

you, and to Richard the archer, greetings. Dunwich has heard how he shot the foul-tongued Frenchman before the great battle closed, and the townsfolk lit a bonfire on the walls and feasted all the archers in his honour.

Andrew Arnold.

"I have found another letter," said Master de Cressi, when Hugh had finished reading, "which I remember Sir Andrew charged me to give to you also," and he handed him a paper addressed in a large, childish hand.

Hugh broke its silk eagerly, for he knew that writing.

"Hugh," it began simply, "Clement the Pope will not void my false marriage unless I appear before him, and this as yet I cannot do because of the French wars. Moreover, he sets the curse of the Church upon me and any man with whom I shall dare to re-marry until this be done. For myself I would defy the Church, but not for you or for children that might come to us. Moreover, the holy father, Sir Andrew, forbids it, saying that God will right all in His season and that we must not make Him wroth. Therefore, Hugh, lover you are, but husband you may not be while de Noyon lives or until the Pope gives his dispensation of divorce, which latter may be long in winning, for the knave de Noyon has been whispering in his ear. Hugh, this is my counsel: Get you to the King again and crave his leave to follow de Noyon, for if once you twain can come face to face I know well how the fray will end. Then, when

he is dead, return to one who waits for you through this world and the next.

"Hugh, I am proud of your great deeds. No longer can they mock you as 'the merchant's son,' Sir Hugh. God be with you, as are my prayers and love.

"Eve Clavering."

"I forgot to tell you that Sir Andrew is disturbed in heart. He looks into a crystal which he says he brought with him from the East, and swears he sees strange sights there, pictures of woe such as have not been since the beginning of the world. Of this woe he preaches to the folk of Dunwich, warning them of judgment to come, and they listen affrighted because they know him to be a holy man who has a gift from God. Yet he says that you and I, Eve, need fear nothing. May it be so, Hugh.--E."

Now when he had thought awhile and hidden up Eve's letter, Hugh turned to his father and asked him what were these sermons that Sir Andrew preached.

"I heard but one of them, son," answered Master de Cressi, "though there have been three. By the Holy Mother! it frightened me so much that I needed no more of that medicine. Nor, to tell truth, when I got home again could I remember all he said, save that it was of some frightful

ill which comes upon the world from the East and will leave it desolate."

"And what think folk of such talk, father?"

"Indeed, son, they know not what to think. Most say that he is mad; others say that he is inspired of God. Yet others declare that he is a wizard and that his familiar brings him tidings from Cathay, where once he dwelt, or perchance, from hell itself. These went to the bishop, who summoned Sir Andrew and was closeted with him for three hours. Afterward he called in the complainers and bade them cease their scandal of wizardry, since he was sure that what the holy Father said came from above and not from below. He added that they would do well to mend their lives and prepare to render their account, as for his part he should also, since the air was thick with doom. Then he gave his benediction to the old knight and turned away weeping, and since that hour none talk of wizardry but all of judgment. Men in Dunwich who have quarrelled from boyhood, forgive each other and sing psalms instead of swearing oaths, and I have been paid debts that have been owing to me for years, all because of these sermons."

"An awesome tale, truly," said Hugh. "Yet like this bishop I believe that what Sir Andrew says will come to pass, for I know well that he is not as other men are."

That night, by special leave, Hugh waited on the King, and with him Grey



Dick, who was ever his shadow.

"What is it now, Sir Hugh de Cressi?" asked Edward.

"Sire, after the great battle, nigh upon a year ago, you told me that I must serve you till Calais fell. I have served as best I could and Calais has fallen. Now I ask your leave to go seek my enemy--and yours--Sir Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon."

"Then you must go far, Sir Hugh, for I have tidings that this rogue who was not ashamed to wear another man's armour, and so save himself from your sword, is away to Italy this six months gone, where, as the Seigneur de Cattrina, he has estates near Venice. But tell me how things stand. Doubtless that Red Eve of yours--strangely enough I thought of her at Crecy when the sky grew so wondrous at nightfall--is at the bottom of them."

"That is so, Sire," and he told him all the tale.

"A strange case truly, Sir Hugh," said the King when he had heard it out. "I'll write to Clement for you both, but I doubt me whether you and your Eve will get justice from him, being English. England and Englishmen find little favour at Avignon just now, and mayhap Philip has already written on behalf of de Noyon. At the best His Holiness will shear you close and keep you waiting while he weighs the wool. No, Red Eve is right: this is a knot soonest severed by the sword. If you should

find him, de Noyon could scarce refuse to meet you, for you shall fight him as the champion of our cause as well as of your own. He's at Venice, for our Envoy there reported it to me, trying to raise a fresh force of archers for the French.

"You have leave to go, Sir Hugh, who deserve much more, having served us well," went on the King. "We'll give you letters to Sir Geoffrey Carleon, who represents us there, and through him to the Doge. Farewell to you, Sir Hugh de Cressi, and to you, Captain Richard the Archer. When all this game is played, return and make report to us of your adventures, and of how de Noyon died. The Queen will love to hear the tale, and your nuptials and Red Eve's shall be celebrated at Westminster in our presence, for you have earned no less. Master Secretary, get your tools, I will dictate the letters. After they are signed to-morrow, see them into the hands of Sir Hugh, with others that I will give him for safe carriage, for alas I have creditors at Venice. Make out an open patent also to show that he and this captain travel as our messengers, charging all that do us service to forward them upon their journey."

Three days later Hugh and Grey Dick, in the character of royal messengers from the King of England to the Doge of Venice, took passage in a great vessel bound for Genoa with a cargo of wool and other goods. On board this ship before he sailed Hugh handed to his father letters for Eve and for Sir Andrew Arnold. Also he received from him money in

plenty for his faring, and bills of exchange upon certain merchants of Italy, which would bring him more should it be needed.

Their parting was very sad, since the prophecies of Sir Andrew had taken no small hold upon Master de Cressi's mind.

"I fear me greatly, dear son," he said, "that we part to meet no more. Well, such is the lot of parents. They breed those children that heaven decrees to them; with toil and thought and fears they rear them up from infancy, learning to love them more than their own souls, for their sakes fighting a hard world. Then the sons go forth, north and south, and the daughters find husbands and joys and sorrows of their own, and both half forget them, as is nature's way. Last of all those parents die, as also is nature's way, and the half forgetfulness becomes whole as surely as the young moon grows to full. Well, well, this is a lesson that each generation must learn in turn, as you will know ere all is done. Although you are my youngest, I'll not shame to say I have loved you best of all, Hugh. Moreover, I've made such provision as I can for you, who have raised up the old name to honour, and who, as I hope, will once more blend the de Cressis and the Claverings, the foes of three generations, into a single House."

"Speak not so, father," answered Hugh, who was moved almost to tears.

"Mayhap it is I who shall die, while you live on to a green old age.

At least know that I am not forgetful of your love and kindness, seeing that after Eve you are dearer to me than any on the earth."

"Ay, ay, after Eve and Eve's children. Still you'll have a kind thought for me now and then, the old merchant who so often thwarted you when you were a wayward lad--for your own good, as he held. For what more can a father hope? But let us not weep before all these stranger men. Farewell, son Hugh, of whom I am so proud. Farewell, son Hugh," and he embraced him and went across the gangway, for the sailors were already singing their chanty at the anchor.

"I never had a father than I can mind," said Grey Dick aloud to himself, after his fashion, "yet now I wish I had, for I'd like to think on his last words when there was nothing else to do. It's an ugly world as I see it, but there's beauty in such love as this. The man for the maid and the maid for the man--pish! they want each other. But the father and the mother--they give all and take nothing. Oh, there's beauty in such love as this, so perhaps God made it. Only, then, how did He also make Crecy Field, and Calais siege, and my black bow, and me the death who draws it?"

The voyage to Genoa was very long, for at this season of the year the winds were light and for the most part contrary. At length, however, Hugh and Dick came there safe and sound. Having landed and bid farewell to the captain and crew of the ship, they waited on the head of a great trading house with which Master de Cressi had dealings.

This signor, who could speak French, gave them lodging and welcomed them well, both for the sake of Hugh's father and because they came as messengers from the King of England. On the morrow of their arrival he took them to a great lord in authority, who was called a Duke. This Duke, when he learned that one was a knight and the other a captain archer of the English army and that they both had fought at Crecy, where so many of his countrymen--the Genoese bowmen--had been slain, looked on them somewhat sourly.

Had he known all the part they played in that battle, in truth his welcome would have been rough. But Hugh, with the guile of the serpent, told him that the brave Genoese had been slain, not by the English arrows, for which even with their wet strings they were quite a match (here Dick, who was standing to one side grinned faintly and stroked the case of his black bow, as though to bid it keep its memories to itself), but by the cowardly French, their allies. Indeed Hugh's tale of that horrible and treacherous slaughter was so moving that the Duke burst into tears and swore that he would cut the throat of every Frenchman on whom he could lay hands.

After this he began to extol the merits of the cross-bow as against the long arm of the English, and Hugh agreed that there was much in what he said. But Grey Dick, who was no courtier, did not agree. Indeed, of a sudden he broke in, offering in his bad French to fight any cross-bow man in Genoa at six score yards, so that the Duke might learn which was

the better weapon. But Hugh trod on his foot and explained that he meant something quite different, being no master of the French tongue. So that cloud passed by.

The end of it was that this Duke, or Doge, whose name they learned was Simon Boccanera, gave them safe conduct through all his dominion, with an order for relays of horses. Also he made use of them to take a letter to the Doge of Venice, between which town and Genoa, although they hated each other bitterly, there was at the moment some kind of hollow truce. So having drunk a cup of wine with him they bade him farewell.

Next morning the horses arrived, and with them two led beasts to carry their baggage, in charge of a Genoese guide. So they departed on their long ride of something over two hundred English miles, which they hoped to cover in about a week. In fact, it took them ten days, for the roads were very rough and the pack-beasts slow. Once, too, after they had entered the territory of Venice, they were set on in a defile by four thieves, and might have met their end had not Grey Dick's eyes been so sharp. As it was he saw them coming, and, having his bow at hand, for he did not like the look of the country or its inhabitants, leaped to earth and shot two of them with as many arrows, whereon the other two ran away. Before they went, however, they shot also and killed a pack-beast, so that the Englishmen were obliged to throw away some of their gear and go on with the one that remained.

At length, on the eleventh afternoon, they saw the lovely city of

Venice, sparkling like a cluster of jewels, set upon its many islands amid the blue waters of the Adriatic. Having crossed some two miles of open water by a ferry which plied for the convenience of travellers, they entered the town through the western gate, and inquired as best they could (for now they had no guide, the Genoese having left them long before) for the house of Sir Geoffrey Carleon, the English Envoy. For a long while they could make no one understand. Indeed, the whole place seemed to be asleep, perhaps because of the dreadful heat, which lay over it like a cloud and seemed to burn them to the very bones.

Perplexed and outworn, at last Hugh produced a piece of gold and held it before a number of men who were watching them idly, again explaining in French that he wished to be led to the house of the English ambassador. The sight of the money seemed to wake their wits, for two or three of the fellows ran forward quarrelling with each other, till one of them getting the mastery, seized Hugh's tired horse by the bridle and dragged it down a side street to the banks of a broad canal.

Here he called something aloud, and presently two men appeared rowing a large, flat-bottomed punt from a dock where it was hidden. Into this boat the horses and pack-beast were driven, much against their will. Hugh and Dick having followed them, the three Italians began to punt them along the canal, which was bordered with tall houses. A mile or so farther on it entered another canal, where the houses were much finer and built in a style of which they had never seen the like, with beautiful and fantastic arches supported upon pillars.

At length to their great joy they came opposite to a house over the gateway of which, stirless in the still air, hung a flag whereon were blazoned the leopards of England. Here the boatmen, pulling in their poles, save one to which they made the punt fast in mid-stream, showed by their gestures that they desired to be paid. Hugh handed the piece of gold to the man who had led them to the boat, whereon he was seized with a fit of uncontrollable fury. He swore, he raved, he took the piece of gold and cast it down on the bilge-boards, he spat on it and his two companions did likewise.

"Surely they are mad," said Hugh.

"Mad or no, I like not the looks of them," answered Dick. "Have a care, they are drawing their knives," and as he spoke one of the rogues struck him in the face; while another strove to snatch away the pouch that hung at his side.

Now Grey Dick awoke, as it were. To the man who had tried to take his pouch he dealt such a buffet that he plunged into the canal. But him who had struck him he seized by the arm and twisted it till the knife fell from his hand. Then gripping his neck in an iron grasp he forced him downward and rubbed his nose backward and forward upon the rough edge of the boat, for the Italian was but as a child to him when he put out his strength.



In vain did his victim yell for mercy. He showed him none, till at length wearying of the game, he dealt him such a kick that he also flew over the thwarts to join his fellow-bully in the water.

Then seeing how it had gone with his companions who, sorely damaged, swam to the farther side of the canal and vanished, the third man, he whom they had first met, sheathed his knife. With many bows and cringes he pulled up the pole and pushed the punt to the steps of the house over which the flag hung, where people were gathering, drawn by the clamour.

"Does Sir Geoffrey Carleon dwell here?" asked Hugh in a loud voice, whereon a gentleman with a pale face and a grizzled beard who appeared to be sick, for he was leaning on a staff, hobbled from out the porch, saying:

"Ay, ay, that is my name. Who are you that make this tumult at my gates? Another turbulent Englishman, I'll be bound."

"Ay, sir, an Englishman called Sir Hugh de Cressi, and his companion, Richard the Archer, whom these rogues have tried to rob and murder, messengers from his Grace King Edward."

Now Sir Geoffrey changed his tone.

"Your pardon if I spoke roughly, Sir Hugh, but we poor Envoys have to do with many rufflers from our own land. Enter, I pray you. My servants

will see to your gear and horses. But first, what is the trouble between you and these fellows?"

Hugh told him briefly.

"Ah!" he said, "a common trick with foreigners. Well for you that night had not fallen, since otherwise they might have rowed you up some back waterway and there done you to death. The canals of Venice hide the traces of many such foul deeds. Mother of Heaven!" he added, "why, this boatman is none other than Giuseppe, the noted bravo," and he turned and in Italian bade his servants seize the man.

But Giuseppe had heard enough. Springing into the water he swam like a duck for the farther bank of the canal, and, gaining it, ran swiftly for some alley, where he vanished.

"He's gone," said Sir Geoffrey, "and as well hunt with a lantern for a rat in a sewer as for him. Well, we have his boat, which shall be sent to the magistrate with letters of complaint. Only, Sir Hugh, be careful to wear mail when you walk about at night, lest that villain and his mates should come to collect their fare with a stiletto. Now, enter and fear not for your goods. My folk are honest. God's name! how fearful is this heat. None have known its like. Steward, give me your arm."

An hour later and Hugh, clad in fresh garments of sweet linen, bathed and shaved, sat at table in a great, cool room with Sir Geoffrey and his lady, a middle-aged and anxious-faced woman, while Grey Dick ate at a lower board with certain of the Envoy's household.

"I have read the letters which concern the business of his Grace the King," said Sir Geoffrey, who was toying languidly with some Southern fruits, for he would touch no meat. "They have to do with moneys that his Grace owes to great bankers of this city but does not yet find it convenient to discharge. I have seen their like before, and to-morrow must deal with them as best I may--no pleasant business, for these usurers grow urgent," and he sighed. "But," he added, "the King says that you, Sir Hugh de Cressi, whom he names his 'brave, trusty and most well beloved knight and companion in war,'" and he bowed courteously to Hugh, "have another business which he commands me to forward by every means in my power, and that without fail. What is this business, Sir Hugh?"

"It is set out, Sir Geoffrey, in a letter from his Grace to the Doge of Venice, which I am to ask you to deliver. Here it is. Be pleased to read it, it is open."

The Envoy took the letter and read it, lifting his eyebrows as he did so.

"By St. Mark,--he's the right saint to swear by in Venice"--he exclaimed

when he had finished, "this is a strange affair. You have travelled hither to offer single combat to Edmund Acour, Count of Noyon and Seigneur of Cattrina. The Doge is urged by his friendship to the throne of England to bring about this combat to the death, seeing that de Noyon has broken his oath of homage, has plotted to overthrow King Edward, has fought against him and that therefore you are his Grace's champion as well as the avenger of certain private wrongs which you will explain. That's the letter. Well, I think the Doge will listen to it, because he scarce dare do otherwise who wishes no quarrel with our country just now when it is victorious. Also this de Noyon, whom we call Cattrina here, has allied himself with certain great men of the Republic, with whom he is connected by blood, who are secret enemies to the Doge. Through them he strives to stir up trouble between Venice and England, and to raise mercenaries to serve the flag of France, as did the Genoese, to their sorrow. Therefore I think that in the Doge you will find a friend. I think also that the matter, being brought forward with such authority, the Seigneur de Cattrina will scarcely care to refuse your challenge if you can show that you have good cause for quarrel against him, since in such affairs the Venetians are punctilious. But now tell me the tale that I may judge better."

So Hugh told him all.

"A strange story and a good cause," said Sir Geoffrey when he had done.

"Only this Cattrina is dangerous. Had he known you came to Venice, mayhap you had never lived to reach my house. Go armed, young knight,

especially after the sun sinks. I'll away to write to the Doge, setting out the heads of the matter and asking audience. The messenger shall leave ere I sleep, if sleep I may in this heat. Bide you here and talk with my lady, if it so pleases you, for I would show you my letter ere we bid good-night, and the thing is pressing. We must catch Cattrina before he gets wind of your presence in Venice."