

## CHAPTER XI

### THE CHALLENGE

"How long is it since you have seen England, Sir Hugh?" asked Dame Carleon languidly.

"Some eighteen months, lady, although in truth it seems more, for many things have happened to me in that time."

"Eighteen months only! Why, 'tis four long years since I looked upon the downs of Sussex, which are my home, the dear downs of Sussex, that I shall see never again."

"Why say you so, lady, who should have many years of life before you?"

"Because they are done, Sir Hugh. Oh, in my heart I feel that they are done. That should not grieve me, since my only child is buried in this glittering, southern city whereof I hate the sounds and sights that men call so beautiful. Yet I would that I might have been laid at last in the kind earth of Sussex where for generations my forbears have been borne to rest," and suddenly she began to weep.

"What ails you, lady? You are not well?"

"Oh, I know not. I think it is the heat or some presage of woe to come,

not to me only, but to all men. Look, nature herself is sick," and she led him to the broad balcony of the chamber and pointed to long lines of curious mist which in the bright moonlight they could see creeping toward Venice from the ocean, although what wind there was appeared to be off land.

"Those fogs are unnatural," she went on. "At this season of the year there should be none, and these come, not from the lagoons, but up from the sea where no such vapours were ever known to rise. The physicians say that they foretell sickness, whereof terrible rumours have for some time past reached us from the East, though none know whether these be true or false."

"The East is a large place, where there is always sickness, lady, or so I have heard."

"Ay, ay, it is the home of Death, and I think that he travels to us thence. And not only I, not only I; half the folk in Venice think the same, though why, they cannot tell. Listen."

As she spoke, the sound of solemn chanting broke upon Hugh's ear. Nearer it grew, and nearer, till presently there emerged from a side street a procession of black monks who bore in front of them a crucifix of white ivory. Along the narrow margin which lay between the houses and the canal they marched, followed by a great multitude of silent people.

"It is a dirge for the dead that they sing," said Dame Carleon, "and yet they bury no man. Oh! months ago I would have escaped from this city, and we had leave to go. But then came orders from the King that we must bide here because of his creditors. So here we bide for good and all. Hush! I hear my husband coming; say nothing of my talk, it angers him. Rest you well, Sir Hugh."

"Truly that lady has a cheerful mind," grumbled Grey Dick, when she had gone, leaving them alone upon the balcony. "Ten minutes more of her and I think I should go hang myself, or squat upon these stones and howl at the moon like a dog or those whimpering friars."

Hugh made no answer, for he was thinking of his father's tale of the prophecies of Sir Andrew Arnold, and how they grew sad in Dunwich also. In truth, like Lady Carleon, he found it in his heart to wish that he too were clear of Venice, which he had reached with so much toil.

"Bah!" he said presently, "this place stinks foully. It puts me in mind of some woman, most beauteous indeed, but three days dead. Let us go in."

On the following morning, while they sat at breakfast, there came a messenger from the Doge of Venice, whose name Hugh learned was Andrea Dandolo, bearing a letter sealed with a great seal. This letter, when

opened, was found to be from some high officer. It stated that the Doge would hold a Court at noon, after which it was his pleasure to receive the English knight who came as a messenger from the mighty monarch, King Edward, and to talk with him on matters set out in the letter of Sir Geoffrey Carleon. The writing added that the Seigneur of Cattrina, who in France was known as the Count de Noyon and in England as Sir Edmund Acour, would be present at the Court and doubtless ready to answer all questions that might be put to him.

"Then at last we shall come face to face," said Hugh, with a fierce laugh.

"Yes, master," put in Dick, "but you've done that several times before and always ended back to back. Pray the Saints such may not be the finish of this meeting also."

Then he turned and went to clean his master's armour, for in this martial dress, notwithstanding the great heat, Hugh determined to appear before the Doge. It was good armour, not that, save for the sword, which Sir Arnold had given him, whereat the Court at Windsor had laughed as out of date, but mail of a newer fashion, some of it, from the bodies of knights who fell at Crecy, after which battle such wares had been cheap.

Still, Dick could have wished that it had been better for so fine an occasion, seeing that it was marked with many a battle dint and that right across the Cressi cognizance, which Hugh had painted on his shield

after he was knighted--a golden star rising from an argent ocean--was a scar left by the battle-axe of a Calais man-at-arms. Moreover Hugh, or rather Dick, took with him other armour, namely, that of the knight, Sir Pierre de la Roche, whom Hugh had killed at Crecy thinking that he was Edmund Acour, whose mail Pierre wore.

For the rest, Dick clad himself in his uniform of a captain of archers of King Edward's guard, wearing a green tunic over his mail shirt, and a steel-lined cap from which rose a heron's plume, pinned thereto with his Grace's golden arrow.

All being ready they started in a painted barge, accompanied by Sir Geoffrey Carleon, who wore his velvet robe of office, and grumbled at its weight and warmth. A row of some fifteen minutes along the great canal brought them to a splendid portal upon the mole, with marble steps. Hence they were conducted by guards across a courtyard, where stood many gaily dressed people who watched them curiously, especially Grey Dick, whose pale, sinister face caused them to make a certain sign with their fingers, to avert the evil eye, as Sir Geoffrey explained to them. Leaving this courtyard they went up more steps and along great corridors into the finest apartment that they had ever seen. It was a glitter of gold and marble, and rich with paintings.

Here on a kind of throne sat the Doge Dandolo, an imperial-looking man, magnificently attired. Guards stood like statues behind him, while in front, talking together and moving from place to place, were gathered

all the great nobles of Venice, with their beauteous ladies. From time to time the Doge summoned one or other of these, who was called to him by a black-robed secretary. Advancing with bows the courtier talked to him a while, then was dismissed by a gracious motion of the hand.

As the Englishmen entered this hall a herald called their names thus from a written slip of paper:

"The Cavalier Geoffrey Carleon, Ambassador of England. The Cavalier Hugh de Cressi, Messenger from the King of England, and the Captain Richard Archer, his companion."

Now all talk was hushed and every eye turned to scan these strangers of whose business, it would seem, something was already known.

"A fine man," said one lady to another of Hugh, "but why does he come here in dinted armour?"

"Oh! he is English and the English are barbarians who like to be ready to cut some one's throat," answered her companion. "But Holy Jesus! look at the long fellow with the death's head who walks behind him, and carries his luggage in a sack. His face makes my back creep."

Fortunately neither Hugh nor Dick understood these and other such sayings which Sir Geoffrey repeated to them afterward and therefore walked on with their host unconcerned. Once, however, Grey Dick nudged

his master and whispered in his ear:

"Be glad, our man is here. It is he who mocks us to those popinjays. Nay, turn not to look; you will see plenty of his sweet face presently."

Now they stood before the chair of state, from which the Doge rose, and advanced two steps to greet the Ambassador of England. When these courtesies were over Sir Geoffrey presented Hugh to him, to whom he bowed, and Dick, whose salute he acknowledged with a wave of his jewelled hand. Afterward they talked, all crowding round to listen, Sir Geoffrey himself, who spoke Italian well, acting as the interpreter.

"You come hither, Cavalier de Cressi," said the Doge, "on behalf of his royal Grace, King Edward, who speaks of you in his letter in terms of which any knight may well be proud. We understand that this captain with you is your companion," and he glanced curiously at Dick out of the corners of his dark eyes, adding, "If those are gifts which he bears in that leathern sack and the long case in his hand, let our servants relieve him of them."

"Let his servants leave me alone," growled Grey Dick when this was translated. "Say to this fine lord, Sir Knight, that the gifts in the sack are not for him, and that which the case scatters he would scarcely care to have."

Sir Geoffrey made some explanation in a low voice, and with a smile the

Doge waved the matter by, then said:

"Will the noble cavalier be so good as to set out his business, unless it is for our private ear alone?"

Hugh answered that it was for the public ear of all Venice, and especially for that of the lord who was called Sir Edmund Acour in England, the Count de Noyon in France, and the Seigneur of Cattrina in Italy.

"Will you pleased to point out this lord to us," said the Doge, glancing at the gorgeous throng which was gathered behind them.

"I cannot, illustrious Doge," answered Hugh, "that is, with certainty. As it chanced I have seen his face but twice--once in a marsh when I had other things to think of who must watch my enemy's sword, and once at eve in the corner of a dark chapel, where he had just gone through the rite of marriage with a lady whom he had drugged, which lady was my affianced wife. Often afterward I sought to see that face, especially in the great fray of Crecy, but failed, in a case which with your leave I will narrate to you."

Now when all that company understood the meaning of these outspoken words, they swayed to and fro and whispered like reeds in an evening wind. Presently above this whispering a soft yet penetrating voice was heard to say:



"If this English knight desires to study the poor face of Acour, de Noyon, and Cattrina, he who owns it is much honoured and prays your Excellency's leave to wait upon his pleasure."

So saying a tall and noble-looking man, who wore the badge of a white swan worked in pearls upon his rich tunic, stepped forward out of the ring of courtiers and bowed, first to the Doge and next to Hugh.

De Cressi looked at his handsome face with its quick dark eyes and little, square-cut, black beard, and answered:

"I thank you, Sir Edmund Acour, for I take it you are he. Now I shall never forget you again, for though a man may shift his armour he cannot change his countenance"--a saying at which de Noyon coloured a little and looked down uneasily.

"Cavalier de Cressi, he whom you seek is before you; we ourselves vouch for his identity," said the Doge. "Now be pleased to set out your case."

"My private case I thrust to one side," answered Hugh, Sir Geoffrey interpreting all the time, "for it is a matter between this Count, a certain lady and myself, and can wait. That which I have to lay before you, Illustrious, has to do with my master the King of England, as whose champion I am here to-day. I accuse this lord of the three names of black treachery to his august liege, Edward, all details of which

treason I am prepared to furnish, and on behalf of that most puissant monarch I challenge him to single combat, as I am empowered and commissioned to do."

"Why should I fight the King of England's bravo?" inquired Acour in a languid voice of those who stood about him, a question at which they laughed.

"If the charge of treason is not sufficient," went on Hugh, "I'll add to it one of cowardice. At the battle of Crecy, as a man here will bear me witness," and he pointed to Dick, "I overcame in single combat a knight who wore upon his shield the cognizance of a wolf and on his helm a wolf's head, which were the arms of Sir Pierre de la Roche. At this knight's prayer I spared his life, for that day we took no prisoners, and let him go. Afterward I fought with another knight carrying the cognizance of a white swan, the arms of the Count de Noyon, and slew him in fair and single fight. But before he died he told me that he bore that armour by command of his lord, the Count de Noyon, and that the said Count fought that day in his mail because he feared the vengeance of the King of England and my own. Thus it came about that the Wolf who fought paid the price for the Swan who fled away, hid in the armour of his friend, whom he left to die for him."

There followed a great silence, for all those noble lords and ladies who thought little of treason, which to most of them was a very familiar thing, were not a little stirred by this tale of cowardice and false

arms. The Doge said:

"Noble Cattrina, you have heard the story of the English knight. What do you answer to it?"

"Only that it is a lie, Illustrious, like everything else that he has told us," replied Acour with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"You said that you had a witness, Cavalier de Cressi," said the Doge.

"Where is he?"

"Here," answered Hugh. "Stand forward, Dick, and tell what you saw."

Dick obeyed, and in his low, rasping voice, with more detail than Hugh had given, set out the story of those two combats at Crecy, of the sparing of the wolf knight and the slaying of the swan knight.

"What say you now, noble Cattrina?" asked the Doge.

"I say that the man lies even better than his master," answered Acour coolly, and all the Court laughed.

"Illustrious," said Hugh, "doubtless you have some herald at your Court. I pray that he may fetch his book and tell us what are the arms of de Noyon and Cattrina, with all their colourings and details."

The Doge beckoned to an officer in a brodered tabard, who with bows, without needing to fetch any book, described the crest and arms of Cattrina in full particular. He added that, to his knowledge, these were borne by no other family or man in Italy, France, or England.

"Then you would know them if you saw them?" said Hugh.

"Certainly, cavalier. On it I stake my repute as a herald."

Now while all wondered what this talk might mean, the Doge and Acour most of any, although the latter grew uneasy, fearing he knew not what, Hugh whispered to Dick. Then Dick loosed the mouth of the leather sack he carried, and out of it tumbled on to the marble floor a whole suit of blood-stained armour.

"Whence came these?" asked Hugh of Dick.

"Off the body of the night, Sir Pierre de la Roche, whom you slew at Crecy. I stripped him of them myself."

"Whose crest and cognizance are these, herald?" asked Hugh again, lifting the helm and shield and holding them on high that all might see.

The herald stepped forward and examined them.

"Without doubt," he said slowly, "they are those of the lord of

Catrina. Moreover," he added, "five years ago I limned yonder swan upon this very shield with my own hand. I did it as a favour to Catrina there, who said that he would trust the task to none but an artist."

Now the silence grew intense, so much so that the rustle of a lady's dress sounded loud in the great hall.

"What say you now, my lord of Catrina?" asked the Doge.

"I say that there is some mistake, Illustrious. Even if there were none," he added slowly, "for their own good and lawful purposes knights have changed armour before to-day."

"There is no mistake!" cried Hugh in a ringing voice. "This signor of so many names is a signor of many coats also, which he can change to save his skin. He wore that of Sir Pierre de la Roche to protect himself from the vengeance of the King of England and of the English squire whom he had wronged. He took mercy from the hand of that squire, who, as he knew well, would have shown him none had he guessed the truth. He left the poor knight, whom he had bribed to be his double, to die beneath that same squire's hand who thought him named de Noyon. Therefore the blood of this de la Roche is on his head. Yet these are small matters of private conduct, and one that is greater overtops them. This false lord, as Sir Edmund Acour, swore fealty to Edward of England. Yet while he was bound by that sacred oath he plotted to depose Edward and to set up on his throne the Duke of Normandy.

"The King of England learned of that plot through me, and gave me charge to kill or capture the traitor. But when we came face to face in a consecrated church where I thought it sacrilege to draw sword, he, who had just done me bitter wrong, stayed not to answer the wrong. He slunk away into the darkness, leaving me felled by a treacherous blow. Thence he fled to France and stirred up war against his liege lord under the Oriflamme of King Philip. Now that this banner is in the dust he has fled again to Venice, and here, as I have heard, broods more mischief. Once, when after the sack of Caen I sent him my challenge, he returned to me an insolent answer that he did not fight with merchants' sons--he who could take mercy from the hand of a merchant's son.

"Now that for deeds done a King has made me knight, and now that this King under his seal and sign has named me his champion, in your presence, Illustrious, and in that of all your Court, I challenge Cattrina again to single combat to the death with lance and sword and dagger. Yes, and I name him coward and scullion if he refuses this, King Edward's gage and mine," and drawing the gauntlet from his left hand, Hugh cast it clattering to the marble floor at de Noyon's feet.

A babel of talk broke out in the great hall, and with it some vivas and clapping of hands, for Hugh had spoken boldly and well; moreover, the spectators read truth in his grey eyes. A dark figure in priest's robe--it was that of Father Nicholas, the secretary who had brewed Red Eve's potion--glided up to Cattrina and whispered swiftly in his ear.

Then the Doge lifted his hand and there was silence.

"My lord of Cattrina," he said, "Sir Hugh de Cressi, speaking as the champion of our ally, the King of England, has challenged you to single combat à outrance. What say you?"

"I, Illustrious?" he answered in his rich voice, drawling out his words like one who is weary. "Oh, of course, I say that if yon brawler wishes to find a grave in fair Venice, which is more than he deserves, I am not the man to thwart him, seeing that his cut-throat King----"

"As the ambassador of that King I protest," broke in Sir Geoffrey. "It is an insult that such a word should be used before me."

"I accept the protest of his Excellency, who forgot his noble presence," replied Cattrina bowing back. "Seeing that his King, who is not a cut-throat"--here a titter of laughter went through the company, though it was evident from the frown upon his face that the Doge liked the jest ill--"has chosen to make a knight of this de Cressi. Or so he says, which will show you, friends all, how hard it must be to find gentlemen in England."

Again the company tittered, though Dick's grey face turned scarlet and he bit upon his pale lip until the blood ran.

"As you accept the challenge," broke in the Doge shortly, "cease from

gibes, my lord, which more befit an angry woman's mouth than that of one whose life is about to be put to hazard, and take up the gage of his Grace of England."

Catrina looked round and bade a page who waited on his person obey the Doge's command, saying:

"Your pardon, most Illustrious, if I do not touch that glove myself, as it seems somewhat foul. I think it must have served its owner in his useful labours at the dyer's vat before his master made him noble."

Now it was Hugh's turn to colour, but when he understood the insult Grey Dick could contain himself no more.

"Ay, Sir Cheat and Traitor," he said in his hissing voice. "The vat in which it has been dipped was that of the life-blood of your dupe, Sir Pierre de la Roche, and of many a nobler Norman. Oh, did we not stand where we do I'd thrust it down your false throat, and with it twist out your slanderous tongue."

"Peace, peace!" cried the Doge, while those present who understood English translated Dick's wild words to their neighbours, and Catrina laughed mockingly at the success of his sneer. "Have I not said that such words are unseemly? Ah! I thought it; well, my lord, you have brought it on yourself."



For while he spoke, the page, a mincing young man tied up with bows and ribbon like a woman, had lifted the glove. Holding it between his thumb and forefinger, he returned it to Hugh with a low, mock bow, being careful as he did so, as all might see, to tread upon Dick's foot and hustle him. Next moment two things happened. The first was that, dropping his cased bow, Grey Dick seized that young in his iron grip and hurled him into the air so that he fell heavily on the marble floor and lay there stunned, the blood running from his nose and mouth. The second was that, seizing his gauntlet, Hugh strode to where Cattrina stood, and struck him with it across the face, saying:

"Let your lips kiss what your fingers are too fine to touch."

With an oath Cattrina drew his sword and out flashed Hugh's in answer, as he cried:

"Ay, here and now if you will! Here and now!"

Then the Guard rushed in and forced them apart.

"Is this a place for brawling?" cried Dandolo in wrath, adding: "Yet I cannot blame the Englishmen overmuch, seeing that they were sore affronted, as I saw with my eyes and heard with my ears. Be silent, my lord of Cattrina. After your fashion you make trouble at my Court. And--hearken all--blood so hot had best be quickly cooled lest one or other of these knights should take a fever. Moreover, the noble Cattrina

has but to-day asked my leave to ride from Venice to-morrow, having urgent business at Avignon at the Court of Pope Clement. So I decree that this combat à outrance shall take place in our presence on the Campo del Marte to-morrow, three hours before noon, ere the sun grows too hot. To all the details of the combat our heralds will attend forthwith. Officer, take soldiers and escort the Ambassador and the Champion of his Grace of England, together with this Captain of Archers, back to their own door. Set guards there and see that none molest them by word or deed under pain of fine and strait imprisonment. Sir Geoffrey Carleon, your requests are granted; be pleased to write it to the most puissant Edward, whom you serve, and for this time fare you well. Why, what is it, Captain Ambrosio?" he added irritably, addressing a raw-boned, lantern-jawed giant of a man clad in the splendid uniform of the Guard who stepped before his throne and saluted.

"Most Illustrious," said Ambrosio, in bad, guttural Italian, "my mother was a Swiss."

"Then congratulations to the Swiss, Ambrosio, but what of it?"

"Very Illustrious," replied the captain in his hollow voice, "the Swiss are brave and do not swallow insults. That lad whom the Englishman kicked, or smote, or tossed like a bull," and he pointed to the poor page, who, still senseless, was being carried from the hall, "is my youngest brother, who resembles our Venetian father somewhat more than I do."

"We see it, we see it. Indeed are you sure that the father was----" and the Doge checked himself. "The point, captain; we would dine."

"Illustrious, I would avenge my brother and myself on the Englishman, whom I will beat to a jelly," said the giant. "I crave leave to fight him to-morrow when the lord Cattrina fights his master," and advancing toward Grey Dick he made as though he would pull his nose.

"What is it he wants?" asked Grey Dick, staring up at the great fellow with a look in his eyes that caused Ambrosio to cease flourishing his fists.

The challenge was translated to him, and its reason. "Oh," said Dick, "tell him I am much obliged and that I will fight him with the bow or with the axe and dagger, or with all three. Then we will see whether he beats me to a jelly, or whether I cut him into collops, who, as I think, needs shortening."

Now the Captain Ambrosio consulted with his friends, who with much earnestness prayed him have nothing to do with arrows. They pointed out that there his bulk would put him at a disadvantage, especially in dealing with an English archer who had an eye like a snake and a face like that of death itself.

In short, one and all they recommended the battle-axe and the dagger as

his most appropriate weapons--since his adversary refused swords. The battle-axe with which to knock him down, as he could easily do, being so strong, and the dagger with which to finish him.

When this was explained to Grey Dick he assented to the proposal with a kind of unholy joy that was almost alarming to those who saw it. Moreover, as neither of them had gauntlets to throw down or pick up, he stretched out his hand to seal the bargain, which, incautiously enough, the huge, half-breed Swiss accepted.

Dick's grasp, indeed, was so firm and long that presently the giant was observed first to move uneasily, secondly to begin to dance and thirdly to shout out with pain.

"What is the matter?" asked his friends.

"The matter is," he groaned, as Dick let go, "that this son of Satan has a blacksmith's vise in place of a hand," and he showed his great fingers, from beneath the nails of which the blood was oozing.

His Venetian companions of the Guard looked at them, then they looked at Grey Dick and gave him a wide berth. Also Ambrosio said something about having offered to fight a man and not a fiend. But it was too late to retract, for the Doge, taking, as was natural, no share in this small matter, had already left his throne.

Then, escorted by Sir Geoffrey and the city Guards, Hugh and Grey Dick passed through that splendid company away home to dinner, Dick carrying his bow-case in one hand and the sack of armour which de Noyon had not thought fit to claim in the other.

In the midst of dead silence, they departed, for now no one seemed to find either of them a fit subject for jest. Indeed there were some who said, as they watched the pair pass the door, that Cattrina and the giant would do well to consult a lawyer and a priest that night.