

## CHAPTER XII

### THE MAN FROM THE EAST

In a great, cool room of his splendid Venetian palace, Sir Edmund Acour, Seigneur of Cattrina sat in consultation with the priest Nicholas.

Clearly he was ill at ease; his face and his quick, impatient movements showed it.

"You arrange badly," he said in a voice quite devoid of its ordinary melodious tones. "Everything goes wrong. How is it you did not know that this accursed Englishman and his Death's-head were coming here? What is the use of a spy who never spies? Man, they should have been met upon the road, for who can be held answerable for what brigands do? Or, at the least, I might have started for Avignon two days earlier."

"Am I omnipotent, lord, that I should be held able to read the minds of men in far countries and to follow their footsteps?" asked the aggrieved Nicholas. "Still it might have been guessed that this bulldog of a Briton would hang to your heels till you kick out his brains or he pulls you down. Bah! the sight of that archer, who cannot miss, always gives me a cold pain in the stomach, as though an arrow-point were working through my vitals. I pity yonder poor fool of a Swiss to-morrow, for what chance has he against a fish-eyed wizard?"

"Ten thousand curses on the Swiss!" said Acour. "He thrust himself into

the affair and will deserve all he gets. I pity myself. You know I am no coward, as not a few have learned before to-day, but I have little luck against this Englishman. I tell you that there at Crecy I went down before him like a ninepin, and he spared my life. My God! he spared my life, being a fool like all his breed. And now the tale is known against me and that of the changed armour, too. Why could not de la Roche die without speaking, the faithless hound whom I had fed so well! So, so, regrets are vain; de Cressi is here, and must be faced or I be shamed."

"You may be killed as well as shamed," Nicholas suggested unpleasantly.

"It is certain that either you or that Englishman will die to-morrow, since he's set for no fancy tilting with waving of ladies' kerchiefs and tinsel crowns of victory, and so forth. Merchant bred or not, he is a sturdy fighter, as we all learned in France. Moreover, his heart is full with wrong, and the man whose quarrel is just is always to be feared."

"A pest on you!" snarled Cattrina. "Have you the evil eye that you then croak disaster in my ears? Look you, priest, I must come through this game unharmed. Death is a companion I do not seek just yet, who have too much to live for--power and wealth and high renown, if my plans succeed; and as you should know, they are well laid. Moreover, there is that English girl, Red Eve, my wife, from whose sweet side you made me flee. I tell you, Nicholas, I burn for her and had rather taste her hate than the love of any other woman on the earth. Now, too, the Pope has summoned me to Avignon, and her also, to lay our causes before him. Being bold, mayhap she will come, for his Holiness has sent her

safe-conduct under his own hand. Nor has he mentioned--for I saw a copy of the brief--that the same business will take me to Avignon about this time. Well, if she comes she will not go away again alone; the French roads are too rough for ladies to travel unescorted. And if she does not come, at least our marriage will be declared valid and I'll take her when and where I can, and her wealth with her, which will be useful."

"Only then, lord, you must not die, nor even be wounded, to-morrow. It is the Englishman who should die, for whatever the Pope may decree I think that while de Cressi lives the slumbrous eyes of that Eve of yours will find a way to charm you to a sleep that has no waking. She is not a fair-haired toy that weeps, forgets and at last grows happy in her babe. She's a woman to make men or break them. Oh, when her sense came back to her, for a flash she looked me cold yonder in that English chapel, and it seemed to me that God's curse was in her stare."

"You've caught the terror, Nicholas, like so many just now in Venice. Why, to-day I've not met a man or woman who is not afraid of something, they know not what--save the Englishman and his death's-head. I think 'tis the unwholesome air of this strange season, and all the signs and omens we hear of on every side that conjure vapours to the brain."

"Yes, I've the terror," said Nicholas with something like a groan.

"Every sin I ever did--and most of them have been for you, lord--seems to haunt my sleep. Yes, and to walk with me when I wake, preaching woe at me with fiery tongues that repentance or absolution cannot quench or

still."

"Yet, Nicholas, I think that you must add one more to their count, or a share of it, which should weigh light among so many. Either I or de Cressi must pack for our last journey, and if we meet face to face to-morrow, how know I that it will be de Cressi? Better far that we should not meet."

"Lord, lord, you cannot fly! He is King Edward's champion, so proclaimed before all whose names are written in the Golden Book of Venice. He would cry your shame in every Court, and so would they. There's not a knight in Europe but would spit upon you as a dastard, or a common wench but would turn you her back! You cannot fly!"

"Nay, fool, but he can die--and before to-morrow. What makes your brain so dull, Nicholas? It is not its wont."

"Ah, I see--not flight, murder. I had forgotten; it is not a usual sauce to a banquet of honour even in Italy, and therefore, perhaps, the safer to serve. But how is it to be done? Poison? He is in Carleon's house; Carleon has faithful servants. Though perhaps a basket of rare fruits--but then he might not eat them; those Englishmen live mostly on half-raw meat. The signora would probably eat them, and the others."

"Nay, no more of your drugs; your skill in them is too well known. Come, these men have been watched since they set foot in Venice. Have they

offended none besides myself and the Swiss?"

A look of intelligence crept into the eyes of Nicholas.

"Now that you mention it, lord, they have. There is a certain boatman and bravo called Giuseppe. With him and his mates they quarrelled about their fare and threw them into the canal in front of the ambassador's house, just because they drew a knife or two. A woman I know told me of it. He's a great villain, this Giuseppe, who would do anything for ten pieces, also revengeful and a hater of cold water."

"Send for him, Nicholas, or send this woman to him--that may be safer. Ten pieces! I'll pay him fifty."

"Ay, lord, but the Englishman may not give him a chance. Only fools would go out walking in Venice along after dark if they should happen to have enemies here, and the house is watched by the Doge's Guards. Yet one can try. Fortune loves the brave, and Englishmen are very great fools. They might stroll abroad to see the moon rise over the Adriatic."

"Try, Nicholas, try as you never tried before. Succeed, too, lest you and I should part company and you never be named abbot after all."

The afternoon of the day of their reception by the Doge was well filled

for Hugh and Dick. Scarcely had they eaten with their host when the Marshal and his officers arrived with the articles of the Morrow's combat very fully drawn up, each of which must be considered with the help of Sir Geoffrey Carleon, lest they should hide some trick, before they confirmed them with their signatures. Not that Hugh was over-anxious about the details. As he said to Sir Geoffrey, all he sought was to come face to face with his enemy, even if he had but a club for a weapon.

At length these articles were signed and the Marshal departed with his fee, for they must be paid for as though they were a legal document. Next Hugh must try various horses from Sir Geoffrey's stable, and choose one of them as his war steed for the morrow, since the beast he had ridden to Venice was in no condition to bear a full-armed knight. In the end he selected a grey gelding, quiet of temperament and rather heavy of build, which it was reported had been used by its former owner in several tournaments and there borne itself handsomely. This done, well or ill, his armour must be seen to, and Dick's also, such as it was; his lance tested, and all their other weapons sharpened on a whetstone that Sir Geoffrey borrowed. For this was a task that Grey Dick would leave to no other hand.

At length all was prepared as well as possible in such haste, and they went to supper with Lady Carleon, who, now she understood that they were to fight for their lives on the morrow, was more mournful even than she had been on the previous night. When at last she asked what they desired

as to their funerals and if they had any tokens to be sent to friends in England, Hugh, whose thoughts were already sad enough, could bear no more of it. So he rose, saying that he would seek Sir Geoffrey, who was already in his cabinet engaged upon a letter to King Edward descriptive of these events and other business. But when they were out of the room he said that he must have fresh air or he would faint, which was not strange, seeing that heat prevailed on this night in Venice of an intensity unknown there at this season of the year.

"Whither shall we go?" asked Dick, mopping his brow. "Guards stand at the door and, I doubt, will not let us pass."

"I wish to see the place where we are to fight to-morrow," answered Hugh, "so as to form my judgment of it, if only we may come there."

At this moment an English lad of Sir Geoffrey's household chanced to pass by, having come to ask as to the feeding of the horse which Hugh should ride. Dick caught him by the arm and asked whether he could get them out of the house secretly, so that the Guards would not see them, and conduct them to the spot called the Place of Arms, where they understood they were to fight.

The lad, whose name was David Day, replied somewhat doubtfully that he could do so by a back door near the kitchen, and guide them also, but that they must protect him from the anger of Sir Geoffrey. This Hugh promised to do. So presently they started, carrying their weapons, but

wearing no mail because of the intense heat, although Dick reminded his master how they had been told that they should not venture forth without body armour.

"I have a sword and you have bow and axe," answered Hugh, "so we'll risk it. In leather-lined mail we should surely melt."

So they put on some light cloaks made of black silk, with hoods to them, such as the Venetians wore at their masques, for David knew where these were to be found. Slipping out quite unobserved by the kitchen door into a little courtyard, they passed into an unlighted back street through a postern gate whereof the lad had the key. At the end of the street they came to a canal, where David, who talked Italian perfectly, hailed a boat, into which they entered without exciting remark. For this sharp youth pointed to their cloaks and told the boatman that they were gallants engaged upon some amorous adventure.

On they rowed down the silent lanes of water, through the slumbrous city of palaces, turning here, turning there, till soon they lost all knowledge of the direction in which they headed. At length David whispered to them that they drew near the place where they must land. Everybody seemed to speak in a whisper that heavy night, even the folk, generally so light of heart and quick of tongue, who sat on the steps or beneath the porticoes of their houses gasping for air, and the passers-by on the rivas or footwalks that bordered the canals. At a sign from David the boat turned inward and grated against the steps of



a marble quay. He paid the boatman, who seemed to have no energy left to dispute the fare, telling him in the same low voice that if he cared to wait he might perhaps row them back within an hour or so. Then they climbed steps and entered a narrow street where there was no canal, on either side of which stood tall houses or dark frowning gateways.

Just as they stepped into the shadow of this street they heard the prow of another boat grate against the marble steps behind them and caught the faint sound of talk, apparently between their rower and others in the second boat.

"Forward, Sir Hugh," said Day a little nervously. "This part of Venice has no good name, for many wicked deeds are done here, but soon we shall be through it."

So they stepped out briskly, and when they were about half-way down the street heard other steps behind them. They turned and looked back through the gloom, whereon the sound of the following steps died away. They pushed on again, and so, unless the echo deceived them, did those quick, stealthy steps. Then, as though by common consent, though no one gave the word, they broke into a run and gained the end of the street, which they now saw led into a large open space lit by the light of the great moon, that broke suddenly through the veil of cloud or mist. Again, as though by common consent, they wheeled round, Hugh drawing his sword, and perceived emerging from the street six or seven cloaked fellows, who, on catching sight of the flash of steel, halted and melted

back into the gloom.

"Who follow us so fast?" asked Hugh.

"Thieves, I think," answered David, even more nervously than before, adding, "but if so, we are safe from them here."

"Yes, sure enough," said Grey Dick, "for I can shoot by moonlight," and, drawing the black bow from its case, which he threw to the lad to carry, he strung it, after which they saw no more of their pursuers.

Having waited a while, they began to examine the spot where they found themselves, which Day told them was that Place of Arms where they must fight on the morrow. It was large and level, having been used as a drilling ground for generations. Perhaps it measured four hundred yards square, and almost in the centre of it rose a stand of painted timber roofed with canvas, and ornamented with gilded flagstaffs, from which hung banners. On this stand, David said, the Doge and nobles would take their seats to see the fray, for in front of it the charging knights must meet.

They walked up and down the course taking note of everything, and especially of how the sun would shine upon them and the foothold of the soil, which appeared to be formed of fine, trodden sand.

"I ask no better ground to fight on," said Hugh at length, "though it is

strange to think," he added with a sigh, "that here within a dozen hours or so two men must bid the world farewell."

"Ay," answered Dick, who alone seemed untouched by the melancholy of that night. "Here will die the knave with three names and the big fool of a half-bred Swiss, and descend to greet their ancestors in a place that is even hotter than this Venice, with but a sorry tale to tell them. By St. George! I wish it were nine of the clock to-morrow."

"Brag not, Dick," said Hugh with a sad smile, "for war is an uncertain game, and who knows which of us will be talking with his ancestors and praying the mercy of his Maker by this time to-morrow night?"

Then, having learned all they could, they walked across the ground to the quay that bordered it on the seaward side. Here, as they guessed from the stone pillars to which ships were made fast, was one of the harbours of Venice, although as it happened none lay at that quay this night. Yet, as they looked they saw one coming in, watched curiously by groups of men gathered on the wall.

"Never knew I vessel make harbour in such a fashion," exclaimed Dick presently. "See! she sails stern first."

Hugh studied her and saw that she was a great, decked galley of many oars, such as the Venetians used in trading to the East, high-bowed and pooped. But the strange thing was that none worked these oars, which,

although they were lashed, swung to and fro aimlessly, some yet whole and some with their blades broken off and their shafts bundles of jagged splinters. Certain sails were still set on the ship's mast, in tatters for the most part, though a few remained sound, and it was by these that she moved, for with the moonrise a faint wind had sprung up. Lastly, she showed no light at peak or poop, and no sound of officer's command or of boatswain's whistle came from her deck. Only slowly and yet as though of set purpose she drifted in toward the quay.

Those who watched her, sailors such as ever linger about harbours seeking their bread from the waters, though among these were mingled people from the town who had come to this open place to escape the heat, began to talk together affrightedly, but always in the dread whisper that was the voice of this fearful knight. Yes, even the hoarse-throated sailormen whispered like a dying woman.

"She's no ship," said one, "she's the wraith of a ship. When I was a lad I saw such a craft in the Indian seas, and afterward we foundered, and I and the cook's mate alone were saved."

"Pshaw!" answered another, "she's a ship right enough. Look at the weed and barnacles on her sides when she heaves. Only where in Christ's name are her crew?"

"Yes," said a third, "and how could she win through all the secret channels without a pilot?"

"What use would be a pilot," said a fourth, "if there are none to work the rudder and shift the sails? Do I not know, who am of the trade?"

"At least she is coming straight to the quay," exclaimed a fifth, "though what sends her Satan alone knows, for the tide is slack and this wind would scarce move a sponge boat. Stand by with the hawser, or she'll swing round and stave herself against the pier."

So they talked, and all the while the great galley drifted onward with a slow, majestic motion, her decks hid in shadow, for a sail cut off the light of the low moon from them. Presently, too, even this was gone, for the veil of cloud crept again over the moon's face, obscuring everything.

Then of a sudden a meteor blazed out in the sky, such a meteor as no living man had ever seen in Venice, for the size of it was that of the sun. It seemed to rise out of the ocean to the east and to travel very slowly across the whole arc of the firmament till at last it burst with a terrible noise over the city and vanished. While it shone, the light it gave was that of mid-day, only pale blue in colour, turning all it touched to a livid and unnatural white.

It showed the placid sea and fish leaping on its silver face half-a-mile or more away. It showed the distant land with every rock and house and bush. It showed the wharf and the watchers on it; among them Hugh noted

a man embracing his sweetheart, as he thought under cover of the cloud. But most of all it showed that galley down to her last rope and even the lines of caulking on her deck. Oh, and now they saw the rowers, for they lay in heaps about the oars. Some of them even hung over these limply, moving to and fro as they swung, while others were stretched upon the benches as though they slept. They were dead--all dead; the wind following the meteor and blowing straight on shore told them that they were certainly all dead. Three hundred men and more upon that great ship, and all dead!

Nay, not all, for now on the high poop stood a single figure who seemed to wear a strange red head-dress, and about his shoulders a black robe. Straight and silent he stood, a very fearful figure, and in his hand a coil of rope. The sight of him sent those watchers mad. They ceased from their whisperings, they raved aloud.

"It is Satan!" they shouted, "Satan, who comes to drag the folk of Venice down to hell. Kill him ere he lands. Kill him!"

Even Grey Dick went mad like a dog when he meets a ghost. His pale hair rose upon his head, his cold, quiet eyes started. He set an arrow on the string of the black bow, drew it to his ear and loosed at the figure on the poop. But that arrow never left the string; it shattered to flinders where it was and fell tinkling to the marble floor. Only the barb of it turned and wounded Grey Dick in the chin, yes, and stuck there for a while, for his right arm was numbed so that he could not lift his hand

to pull it forth.

"Truly, I have shot at the Fiend and hit that at which I did not aim," muttered Grey Dick, and sat himself down on a post of the quay to consider the matter. Only, as it seemed to him, he who stood on the poop of the ship not ten yards away smiled a little.

Unheeding of the clamour, this man upon the poop suddenly lifted the coil of rope and threw it shoreward. It was a thick and heavy rope, with a noose at its end, so heavy that none would have believed that one mortal could handle it. Yet it shot from him till it stood out stiff as an iron bar. Yes, and the noose fell over one of the stone posts on the quay, and caught there. Now the rope grew straighter still, stretching and groaning like a thing in pain as it took the weight of the great, drifting ship. She stayed; she swung round slowly and ranged herself broadside on against the quay as a berthed ship does. Then down the ladder on her side came the Man. Deliberately he set his white-sandalled feet upon the quay, advanced a few paces into the full light of the bright moon and stood still as though to suffer himself to be seen of every eye.

Truly he was worth the seeing. Hugh noted his garments first, and particularly the head-dress, which caught his glance and held it, for never had he known such a one before. It was a cap fitting tight to the skull, only running across the crown of it was a stiff raised ridge, of leather perhaps, jagged and pointed something like the comb of a cock.

This comb, of brilliant red, was surmounted at its highest point by a ball of black of the size of a small apple. The cap itself was yellow, except its lowest band, which stood out from it and was also black. In the centre of this band upon the forehead glowed a stone like a ruby.

Such was the head-dress. The broad shoulders beneath were covered with a cape of long and glossy fur blacker than coal, on to either shoulder of which drooped ear-rings made of rings of green stone which afterward Hugh came to know was jade. The cape of fur, which hung down to the knees and was set over a kind of surplice of yellow silk, was open in front, revealing its wearer's naked bosom that was clothed only with row upon row of round gems of the size of a hazel nut. These like the fur were black, but shone with a strange and lustrous sheen. The man's thick arms were naked, but on his hands he wore white leather gloves made without division like a sock, as though to match the white sandals on his feet.

This was the Man's attire. Now for him who wore it. He was tall, but not taller than are many other men; he was broad, but not broader than many other men, and yet he looked stronger than all the men in the world. On his brow, which was prominent, smooth black hair parted in the middle was plastered back as that of women sometimes is, making hard lines against the yellow skin below. He had very thin eyebrows that ran upward on either side of a bow-shaped wrinkle in the centre of his forehead. The eyes beneath were small and pale--paler even than those of Grey Dick--yet their glance was like the points of thrusting swords.



With those little eyes alone he seemed to smile, for the rest of his countenance did not move. The nose was long and broad at the end with wide spreading nostrils and a deep furrow on either side. The mouth was thin-lipped and turned downward at the corners, and the chin was like a piece of iron, quite hairless, and lean as that of a man long dead.

There he stood like some wild vision of a dream, smiling with those small unblinking eyes that seemed to take in all present one by one. There he stood in the moonlit silence, for the mob was quiet enough now for a little while, that yet was not silence because of a soughing noise which seemed to proceed from the air about his head.

Then suddenly the tumult broke out again with its cries of "Kill the devil! Tear the wizard to pieces! Death is behind him! He brings death! Kill, kill, kill!"

A score of knives flashed in the air, only this time Grey Dick set no arrow on his string. Their holders ran forward; then the Man lifted his hand, in which was no weapon, and they stopped.

Now he spoke in a low voice so cold that, to Hugh's excited fancy, the words seemed to tinkle like falling ice as one by one they came from his lips. He spoke in Italian--perfect Italian of Venice--and young Day, whose teeth were chattering with fear, translated his words.

"Is this your welcome to a stranger," he said, "the companions of whose

voyage have unhappily met with misfortune?" Here with a faint motion of his fingerless glove he indicated the dead who lay all about the decks of that fatal ship. "Would you, men of Venice, kill a poor, unarmed stranger who has travelled to visit you from the farthest East and seen much sorrow on his way?"

"Ay, we would, sorcerer!" shouted one. "Our brothers were in that ship, which we know, and you have murdered them."

"How did you learn Italian in the farthest East?" asked another.

Then for the second time, like hounds closing in on a stag at bay, they sprang toward him with their poised knives.

Again he lifted his hand, again the semi-circle halted as though it must, and again he spoke.

"Are there none here who will befriend a stranger in a strange land? None who are ashamed to see a poor, unarmed stranger from the East done to death by these wolves who call themselves children of the white Christ of Mercy?"

Now Hugh touched Dick upon the shoulder.

"Rise and come," he said, "it is our fate"; and Dick obeyed.

Only after he had translated the Man's words, David fell down flat upon the quay and lay there.

They stepped to the yellow-capped Man and stood on each side of him, Hugh drawing his sword and Dick the battle-axe that he carried beneath his robe of silk.

"We will," said Hugh shortly, in English.

"Now there are three of us," went on the Man. "The stranger from the East has found defenders from the West. On, defenders, for I do not fight thus," and he folded his arms across his broad breast and smiled with the awful eyes.

Hugh and Dick knew no Italian, yet they both of them understood, and with a shout leaped forward toward those hungry knives. But their holders never waited for them. Some sudden panic seized them all, so that they turned and ran--ran straight across the wide Place of Arms and vanished into the network of narrow streets by which it was surrounded.