

## CHAPTER XIII

### MURGH'S ARROW

Hugh and Dick came back. Something seemed to call them back, although no blow had been struck. The Man stood where they had left him, staring at nothing in particular. Apparently he was engaged in meditation.

"Thanking his gods because they have saved him from sudden death," muttered Grey Dick. "If he's got any gods!" he added doubtfully.

Now the three, or rather the four of them, for David Day had recovered, and once more stood upon his feet from time to time glancing at the stranger's costume with a frightened eye, were left alone upon the great place with no company save the shipful of dead behind them and the wild, white moon above. The silence that, save for the souging sound for which they could not account, was intense, oppressed them, as also did the heat.

Grey Dick coughed, but the Man took no notice. Then he dropped his axe with a clatter on the marble flooring of the quay and picked it up again, but still the Man took no notice. Evidently his Eastern imperturbability was not to be disturbed by such trifles. What was worse, or so thought Dick, his master Hugh had fallen into a very similar mood. He stood there staring at the Man, while the Man stared over or through him--at nothing in particular.

Grey Dick felt aggrieved. An arrow had burst to pieces unaccountably in his bow, numbing his arm and wounding him on the chin, and now he was outpaced at his own game of cold silence. He grew angry and dug David in the ribs with his elbow.

"Tell that foreigner," he said, "that my master and I have saved his life. Those Italian cut-throats have run away, and if he is a gentleman he should say 'thank you.'"

David hesitated, whereon Dick gave him another dig, harder than the first, and asked if he heard what he said. Then David obeyed, addressing the Man as "Most Illustrious" as though he were the Doge, and ending his speech with a humble apology in case he should have interrupted his pious thanksgiving.

The Man seemed to awake. Taking no notice of Day, he addressed himself to Dick, speaking in English and using just that dialect of it to which he, Dick, had been accustomed from his childhood in the neighbourhood of Dunwich. Not even the familiar Suffolk whine was forgotten.

"You and your master have saved my life, have you?" he said. "Well, neighbour, why did you try to save my life by shooting at me with that great black bow of yours, which I see is made of Eastern woods?" He stared at the case in which it was now again hidden as though tanned leather were no obstacle to his sight; then went on: "Do not answer:

I will tell you why. You shot at me because you were afraid of me, and fear is ever cruel, is it not? Only something happened to your arrow, something that has never happened to any arrow of yours before. Oh, yes, you have saved me from the Italian cut-throats, and being a gentleman I thank you very much. Only why did the arrow burst in your bow?" and he smiled with those dreadful eyes of his.

Now, feeling overwhelmed for the second time that night, Grey Dick sat himself down upon a quay post. It was clear to him that to argue with this person in a yellow cap who talked Suffolk so well was quite useless. Why, then, waste breath which was probably his last?

Everybody seemed to be falling into meditation again, when the Man, shifting his head slowly, began to consider Hugh.

"What is your name and which is your country, O my second saviour?" he asked, still speaking in English. Only now the English was of a different and more refined sort to that which he had used when he addressed Dick; such English, for instance, as came from the lips of Sir Geoffrey Carleon or from those of the lords of Edward's Court.

"I am Sir Hugh de Cressi of Dunwich, in the county of Suffolk, in England," answered Hugh slowly.

"England. I have heard of England, and Dunwich; I have heard of Dunwich. Indeed, I travel thither, having an appointment with an old friend in

that town."

Now a light came into Hugh's bewildered face, but he said nothing.

"I seem to have touched some chord of recollection in your mind, O my saviour of Dunwich," said the Man. "Look at me and tell me, who am I?"

Hugh looked, and shook his head.

"I never saw you before, nor any one at all like you," he answered.

"No, no; you never saw me, though I have been very near to you once or twice. Yet, your pardon, look again."

Hugh obeyed, and this time, for a second only, perceived that the Man's head was surrounded by a multitude of doves. Two endless lines of doves, one line black and the other line white, stretched from his right shoulder and from his left shoulder, till miles away they melted into the lofty gloom of the sky that was full of the soughing sound of their wings.

Now he knew, and for the first time in his life fell upon his knees to a man, or to what bore the semblance of man.

"You are named Murgh, Gate of the Gods," he said. "Murgh, whom old Sir Andrew saw in that courtyard over which the iron dragons watch in the

country called Cathay, that courtyard with the pool of water and the many doors."

"Ay," answered the Man in a new voice, a great voice that seemed to fill the air like the mutter of distant thunder. "I am Murgh, Gateway of the Gods, and since you have striven to defend Murgh, he who is the friend of all men, although they know it not, will above all be your friend and the friend of those you love."

He stretched out his long arms and laid his white-gloved hands for an instant, one of them upon Hugh's head and one on the shoulder of Grey Dick, who sat upon the pillar of stone.

Hugh muttered, "I thank you," not knowing what else to say. But in his heart he wondered what kind of friendship this mighty and awful being would show to him and his. Perhaps he might hold that the truest kindness would be to remove him and them from the miseries of a sinful world.

If Murgh read his thoughts he only answered them with that smile of his cold eyes which was more awful than the frown of any mortal man. Turning his head slowly he began to contemplate Dick sitting on his stone.

"If I had a son," he said, "by that face of yours you might be he."

"Perchance," answered Dick, "since I never knew for certain who my

father was. Only I have always heard that Life begets, not Death."

"Death! You honour me with a great name. Well, life and death are one, and you and I are one with the moon and the stars above us, and many other things and beings that you cannot see. Therefore the begetter and the begotten are one in the Hand that holds them all."

"Ay," answered Dick, "and so my bow and I are one: I've often thought it. Only you nearly made me one with my own arrow, which is closer kinship than I seek," and he touched the cut upon his chin. "Since you are so wise, my father, or my son, tell me, what is this Hand that holds them all?"

"Gladly. Only if I do, first I must ask you to die, then--say in a minute or two--you shall know."

Dick peered at him doubtfully, and said:

"If that be so, I think I'll wait for the answer, which I am sure to learn soon or late."

"Ah! Many men have thought the same, and you have sent some to seek it, have you not, being so good an archer. For instance, that was a long shaft you shot before Crecy fray at the filthy fool who mocked your English host. Doubtless now he knows the answer to your riddle."

"Who told you of that?" asked Dick, springing up.

"A friend of mine who was in the battle. He said also that your name was Richard the Archer."

"A friend! I believe that you were there yourself, as, if you are Death, you may well have been."

"Perhaps you are right, Richard. Have I not just told you that we all are one; yes, even the slayer and the slain. Therefore, if my friend--did you call him Death?--was there, I was there, if you were there I was there and it was my hand that drew yonder great black bow of yours and my eye that guided the straight shaft which laid the foulmouthed jester low. Why, did you not say as much yourself when your master here bade farewell to his father in the ship at Calais? What were the words? Oh, I remember them. You wondered how One I may not name," and he bowed his solemn head, "came to make that black bow and yours and you 'the death that draw it.'"

Now at length Grey Dick's courage gave out.

"Of no man upon earth am I afraid," he said. "But from you, O god or devil, who read the secret hearts of men and hear their secret words, my blood flows backward as it did when first my eyes fell on you. You would kill me because I dared to shoot at you. Well, kill, but do not torture. It is unworthy of a knight, even if he took his accolade in hell," and

he placed his hands before his eyes and stood before him with bent head waiting for the end.

"Why give me such high names, Richard the Fatherless, when you have heard two humbler ones? Call me Murgh, as do my friends. Or call me 'The Gate,' as do those who as yet know me less well. But talk not of gods or devils, lest suddenly one of them should answer you. Nay, man, have no fear. Those who seek Death he often flees, as I think he flees from you to-night. Yet let us see if we cannot send a longer shaft, you and I, than that which we loosed on Crecy field. Give me the bow."

Dick, although he had never suffered living man to shoot with it before, handed him the black bow, and with it a war shaft, which he drew from his quiver.

"Tell me, Archer Dick, have you any enemy in this town of Venice? Because if so we might try a shot at him."

"One or two, Gate Murgh," answered Dick, "Still whatever your half of me may do, my bit of you does not love to strike down men by magic in the dark."

"Well said and better thought. Then bethink you of something that belongs to an enemy which will serve as well for a test of shooting. Ah! I thank you, well thought again. Yes, I see the mark, though 'tis far, is it not? Now set your mind on it. But stay! First, will you know this



arrow again?"

"Surely," answered Dick, "I made it myself. Moreover, though two of the feathers are black, the third is white with four black spots and a little splash of brown. Look on it, Sir Hugh; it cannot be mistook."

Hugh looked and nodded; speak he could not for the life of him.

Then Murgh began to play a little with the bow, and oh! strange and dreadful was the music that came from its string beneath the touch of his gloved fingers. It sang like a harp and wailed like a woman, so fearfully indeed that the lad Day, who all this while stood by aghast, stopped his ears with his fingers, and Hugh groaned. Then this awful archer swiftly set the arrow on the string.

"Now think with your mind and shoot with your heart," he said in his cold voice, and, so saying, drew and loosed as though at a hazard.

Out toward Venice leaped the shaft with a rushing sound like to that of wings and, as it seemed to the watchers, light went with it, for it travelled like a beam of light. Far over the city it travelled, describing a mighty arc such as no arrow ever flew before, then sank down and vanished behind some palace tower.

"A very good bow," said the shooter, as he handed it back to Dick.

"Never have I used a better, who have used thousands made of many a

substance. Indeed, I think that I remember it. Did you chance to find it years ago by the seashore? Yes? Well, it was a gift of mine to a famous archer who died upon a ship. Nay, it is not strained; I can judge of the breaking strength of a bow. Whether or no I can judge of the flight of an arrow you will learn hereafter. But that this one flew fast and far

cannot be doubted since--did you watchers note it?--its speed made it shine like fire. This is caused by the rubbing of the air when aught travels through it very quickly. This night you have seen a meteor glow in the same fashion, only because the air fretted it in its passage.

In the East, whence I come, we produce fire just so. And now let us be going, for I have much to do to-night, and would look upon this fair Venice ere I sleep. I'll lead the way, having seen a map of the town which a traveller brought to the East. I studied it, and now it comes back to my mind. Stay, let that youth give me his garment," and he pointed to David Day, who wore a silk cloak like the others, "since my foreign dress might excite remark, as it did but now."

In a moment Day had stripped himself of his light silk-hooded gown, and in another moment it was on the person of Murgh, though how it got there, when they came to think of it afterward, none could remember. Still, the yellow and red head-dress, the coal-black silky furs, the yellow skirt, the gleaming pearls, all vanished beneath it. Nothing remained visible except the white fingerless gloves--why were they fingerless, and what lay beneath them? Hugh wondered--and the white shoes.

Forward they went across the Place of Arms, past the timber stand ornamented with banners, which Murgh stayed to contemplate for an instant, until they came to the mouth of the street up which men had followed them, apparently with evil intent.

"Sir Murgh," said Hugh, stepping forward, "you had best let me and my companion Grey Dick walk first down this place, lest you should come to harm. When we passed it a while ago we thought that we heard robbers behind us, and in Venice, as we are told, such men use knives."

"Thank you for your warning, Sir Hugh," and even beneath the shadow of the silk hood Hugh thought that he saw his eyes smile, and seeing, remembered all the folly of such talk.

"Yet I'll risk these robbers. Do you two and the lad keep behind me," he added in a sterner voice.

So they advanced down the narrow street, the man called Murgh going first, Hugh, Grey Dick and the lad following meekly behind him. As they entered its shadows a low whistle sounded, but nothing happened for a while. When they had traversed about half its length, however, men, five or six of them in all, darted out of the gloom of a gateway and rushed at them. The faint light showed that they were masked and gleamed upon the blue steel of the daggers in their hands. Two of these men struck at Murgh with their knives, while the others tried to pass him, doubtless

to attack his companions, but failed. Why they failed Hugh and Dick never knew. All they saw was that Murgh stretched out his white-gloved hands, and they fell back.

The men who had struck at him fell back also, their daggers dropping to the ground, and fled away, followed by their companions, all except one whom Murgh had seized. Hugh noted that he was a tall, thin fellow, and that, unlike the rest, he had drawn no weapon, although it was at his signal that the other bravoes had rushed on. This man Murgh seemed to hold with one hand while with the other he ripped the mask off his face, turning him so that the light shone on him.

Hugh and Dick saw the face and knew it for that of the priest who had accompanied Acour to England. It was he who had drugged Red Eve and read the mass of marriage over her while she was drugged.

"Who are you?" asked Murgh in his light, cold voice. "By your shaven head a priest, I think--one who serves some God of love and mercy. And yet you come upon this ill errand as a captain of assassins. Why do you seek to do murder, O Priest of the God of mercy?"

Now some power seemed to drag the answer from Father Nicholas.

"Because I must," he said. "I have sold myself and must pay the price. Step leads to step, and he who runs may not stop upon them."

"No, priest Nicholas, since ever they grow more narrow and more steep. Yet at the foot of them is the dark abyss, and, Murderer Nicholas, you have reached the last of all your steps. Look at me!" and with one hand he threw back the hood.

Next instant they saw Nicholas rush staggering down the street, screaming with terror as he went. Then, as all the bravoos had gone, they continued their march, filled with reflections, till they came to the little landing-stage where they had left the boat. It was still there though the boatman had gone.

"Let us borrow this boat," said Murgh. "As from my study of the map I know these water-paths, I will be steersman and that tongue-tied lad shall row and tell me if I go wrong. First I will take you to the house where I think you said you lodged, and thence to go seek friends of my own in this city who will show me hospitality."

They glided on down the long canals in utter silence that was broken only by the soft dipping of the oars. The night was somewhat cooler now, for the bursting of the great meteor seemed to have cleared the air. Or perhaps the gentle breeze that had sprung up, blowing from the open sea, tempered its stifling heat.

So it came about that although it grew late many people were gathered on the rivas or on the balconies of the fine houses which they passed, for the most part doubtless discussing the travelling star that had

been seen in the sky. Or perhaps they had already heard rumours of the strange visitor who had come to Venice, although, however fast such news may fly, this seemed scarcely probable. At the least there they were, men and women, talking earnestly together, and about them the three Englishmen noted a strange thing.

As their boat slipped by, some influence seemed to pass from it to the minds of all these people. Their talk died out, and was succeeded by a morne and heavy silence. They looked at it as though wondering why a sight so usual should draw their eyes. Then after a few irresolute moments the groups on the footpaths separated and went their ways without bidding each other good night. As they went many of them made the sign with their fingers that these Italians believed could avert evil, which gave them the appearance of all pointing at the boat or its occupants. Those in the balconies did the same thing and disappeared through the open window-places.

More than any of the wonderful things that he had done, perhaps, this effect of the Eastern stranger's presence struck terror and foreboding to Hugh's heart.

At length they came to the end of that little street where they had hired the boat, for, although none had told him the way, thither their dread steersman brought them without fault. The lad David laid down his oars and mounted the steps that led to the street, which was quite deserted, even the bordering houses being in darkness.

"Hugh de Cressi and Richard the Fatherless," said Murgh, "you have seen wonderful things this night and made a strange friend, as you may think by chance, although truly in all the wide universe there is no room for such a thing as chance. Now my counsel to you and your companion is that you speak no word of these matters lest you should be set upon as wizards. We part, but we shall meet again twice more, and after many years a third time, but that third meeting do not seek, for it will be when the last grains of sand are running from the glass. Also you may see me at other times, but if so, unless I speak to you, do not speak to me. Now go your ways, fearing nothing. However great may seem your peril, I say to you--fear nothing. Soon you will hear ill things spoken of me, yet"--and here a touch of human wistfulness came into his inhuman voice--"I pray you believe them not. When I am named Murgh the Fiend and Murgh the Sword, then think of me as Murgh the Helper. What I do is decreed by That which is greater than I, and if you could understand it, leads by terrible ways to a goal of good, as all things do. Richard the Archer, I will answer the riddle that you asked yourself upon the ship at Calais. The Strength which made your black bow an instrument of doom made you who loose its shafts and me who can outshoot you far. As the arrow travels whither it is sent, and there does its appointed work, so do you travel and so do I, and many another thing, seen and unseen; and therefore I told you truly that although we differ in degree, yet we are one. Yes, even Murgh the Eating Fire, Murgh the Gate, and that bent wand of yours are one in the Hand that shaped and holds us both."

Then divesting himself of the long robe which he had borrowed from the lad, he handed it to Hugh, and, taking the oars, rowed away clad in his rich, fantastic garb which now, as at first, could be seen by all. He rowed away, and for a while the three whom he had left behind heard the sougling of the innumerable wings that went ever with him, after which came silence.

Silence, but not for long, for presently from the borders of the great canal into which his skiff must enter, rose shouts of fear and rage, near by at first, then farther and farther off, till these too were lost in silence.

"Oh! Sir Hugh!" sobbed poor David Day, "who and what is that dreadful man?"

"I think his name is Death," answered Hugh solemnly, while Dick nodded his head but said nothing.

"Then we must die," went on David in his terror, "and I am not fit to die."

"I think not," said Hugh again. "Be comforted. Death has passed us by. Only be warned also and, as he bade you, say nothing of all that you have heard and seen."

"By Death himself, I'll say nothing for my life's sake," he replied



faintly, for he was shaking in every limb.

Then they walked up the street to the yard door. As they went Hugh asked Dick what it was that he had in his mind as a mark for the arrow that Murgh had shot, that arrow which to his charmed sight had seemed to rush over Venice like a flake of fire.

"I'll not tell you, master," answered Dick, "lest you should think me madder than I am, which to-night would be very mad indeed. Stay, though, I'll tell David here, that he may be a witness to my folly," and he called the young man to him and spoke with him apart.

Then they unlocked the courtyard gate and entered the house by the kitchen door, as it chanced quite unobserved, for now all the servants were abed. Indeed, of that household none ever knew that they had been outside its walls this night, since no one saw them go or return, and Sir Geoffrey and his lady thought that they had retired to their chamber.

They came to the door of their room, David still with them, for the place where he slept was at the end of this same passage.

"Bide here a while," said Dick to him. "My master and I may have a word to say to you presently."

Then they lit tapers from a little Roman lamp that burned all night

in the passage and entered the room. Dick walked at once to the window-place, looked and laughed a little.

"The arrow has missed," he said, "or rather," he added doubtfully, "the target is gone."

"What target?" asked Hugh wearily, for now he desired sleep more than he had ever done in all his life. Then he turned, the taper in his hand, and started back suddenly, pointing to something which hung upon his bed-post that stood opposite to the window.

"Who nails his helm upon my bed?" he said. "Is this a challenge from some knight of Venice?"

Dick stepped forward and looked.

"An omen, not a challenge, I think. Come and see for yourself," he said.

This is what Hugh saw: Fixed to the post by a shaft which pierced it and the carved olivewood from side to side, was the helm that they had stripped from the body of Sir Pierre de la Roche; the helm of Sir Edmund Acour, which Sir Pierre had worn at Crecy and Dick had tumbled out of his sack in the presence of the Doge before Cattrina's face. On his return to the house of Sir Geoffrey Carleon he had set it down in the centre of the open window-place and left it there when they went out to survey the ground where they must fight upon the morrow.

Having studied it for a moment, Dick went to the door and called to David.

"Friend," he said, standing between him and the bed, so that he could see nothing, "what was it that just now I told you was in my mind when yonder Murgh asked me at what target he should shoot with my bow on the Place of Arms?"

"A knight's helm," answered David, "which stood in the window of your room at the ambassador's house--a knight's helmet that had a swan for its crest."

"You hear?" said Dick to Hugh; "now come, both of you, and see. What is that which hangs upon the bed-post? Answer you, David, for perchance my sight is bewitched."

"A knight's helm," answered David, "bearing the crest of a floating swan and held there by an arrow which has pierced it through."

"What was the arrow like which I gave this night to one Murgh, master?" asked Dick again.

"It was a war shaft having two black feathers and the third white but chequered with four black spots and a smear of brown," answered Hugh.

"Then is that the same arrow, master, which this Murgh loosed from more than a mile away?"

Hugh examined it with care. Thrice he examined it, point and shaft and feathers. Then in a low voice he answered:

"Yes!"