

CHAPTER XVI

AT AVIGNON

Hard upon two months had gone by when at length these three, Hugh, Grey Dick, and David Day, set eyes upon the towers of stately Avignon standing red against the sunset and encircled by the blue waters of the Rhone. Terrible beyond imagination had been the journey of these men, who followed in the footsteps of Murgh. They saw him not, it is true, but always they saw his handiwork. Death, death, everywhere death, nothing but death!

One night they supped at an inn with the host, his family and servants, twelve folk in all, in seeming health. When they rose in the morning one old woman and a little child alone remained; the rest were dead or dying. One day they were surprised and taken by robbers, desperate outcasts of the mountains, who gave them twenty-four hours to "make their peace with heaven"--ere they hanged them because they had slain so many of the band before they were overpowered.

But when those twenty-four hours of grace had elapsed, it would have been easy for them to hang all who remained of those robbers themselves. So they took the best of their horses and their ill-gotten gold and rode on again, leaving the murderers murdered by a stronger power than man.

They went through desolate villages, where the crops rotted in the

fields; they went through stricken towns whereof the moan and the stench rose in a foul incense to heaven; they crossed rivers where the very fish had died by thousands, poisoned of the dead that rolled seaward in their waters. The pleasant land had become a hell, and untouched, unharmed, they plodded onward through those deeps of hell. But a night or two before they had slept in a city whereof the population, or those who remained alive of them, seemed to have gone mad. In one place they danced and sang and made love in an open square. In another bands of naked creatures marched the streets singing hymns and flogging themselves till the blood ran down to their heels, while the passers-by prostrated themselves before them. These were the forerunners of the "Mad Dancers" of the following year.

In a field outside of this city they came upon even a more dreadful sight. Here forty or fifty frenzied people, most of them drunk, were engaged in burning a poor Jew, his wife and two children upon a great fire made of the staves of wine-casks, which they had plundered from some neighbouring cellars. When Hugh and his companions came upon the scene the Jew had already burned and this crowd of devils were preparing to cast his wife and children into the flames, which they had been forced to see devour their husband and father. Indeed, with yells of brutal laughter, they were thrusting the children into two great casks ere they rolled them into the heart of the fire, while the wretched mother stood by and shrieked.

"What do you, sirs?" asked Hugh, riding up to them.

"We burn wizards and their spawn, Sir Knight," answered the ringleader. "Know that these accursed Jews have poisoned the wells of our town--we have witnesses who saw them do it--and thus brought the plague upon us. Moreover, she," and he pointed to the woman--"was seen talking not fourteen days ago to the devil in a yellow cap, who appears everywhere before the Death begins. Now, roll them in, roll them in!"

Hugh drew his sword, for this sight was more than his English flesh and blood could bear. Dick also unsheathed the black bow, while young David produced a great knife which he carried.

"Free those children!" said Hugh to the man with whom he had spoken, a fat fellow, with rolling, bloodshot eyes.

"Get you to hell, stranger," he answered, "or we'll throw you on the fire also as a Jew in knight's dress."

"Free those children!" said Hugh again in a terrible voice, "or I send you before them. Be warned! I speak truth."

"Be you warned, stranger, for I speak truth also," replied the man, mimicking him. "Now friends," he added, "tuck up the devil's brats in their warm bed."

They were his last words, for Hugh thrust with his sword and down he

went.

Now a furious clamour arose. The mob snatched up burning staves, bludgeons, knives or whatever they had at hand, and prepared to kill the three. Without waiting for orders, Dick began to shoot. David, a bold young man, rushed at one of the most violent and stabbed him, and Hugh, who had leapt from his horse, set himself back to back with the other two. Thrice Dick shot, and at the third deadly arrow these drunken fellows grew sober enough to understand that they wished no more of them.

Suddenly, acting on a common impulse, they fled away, every one, only leaving behind them those who had fallen beneath the arrows and the sword. But some who were so full of wine that they could not run, tumbled headlong and lay there helpless.

"Woman," said Hugh when they had departed, "your husband is lost, but you and your children are saved. Now go your ways and thank whatever God you worship for His small mercies."

"Alas! Sir Knight," the poor creature, a still young and not unhandsome Jewess, wailed in answer, "whither shall I go? If I return to that town those Christian men will surely murder me and my children as they have already murdered my husband. Kill us now by the sword or the bow--it will be a kindness--but leave us not here to be tortured by the Christian men according to their fashion with us poor Jews."

"Are you willing to go to Avignon?" asked Hugh, after thinking awhile.

"Ay, Sir Knight, or anywhere away from these Christians. Indeed, at Avignon I have a brother who perchance will protect us."

"Then mount my horse," said Hugh. "Dick and David, draw those two youngsters from the tubs and set them on your beasts; we can walk."

So the children, two comely little girls of eight and six years of age, or thereabout, were dragged out of their dreadful prisons and lifted to the saddle. The wretched widow, running to the bonfire, snatched from it her husband's burnt-off hand and hid it in the bosom of her filthy robe. Then she took some of the white ashes and threw them toward that city, muttering curses as she did so.

"What do you?" asked Hugh curiously.

"I pray, sir, to Jehovah, the God of the Jews, that for every grain of these ashes He may take a life in payment for that of my murdered husband, and I think that He will listen."

"Like enough," answered Hugh, crossing himself, "but, woman, can you wonder that we Christians hold you sorcerers when we hear such prayers from your lips?"

She turned with a tragic motion, and, pointing to the bones of her husband smouldering in the fire, answered:

"And can you wonder, sir, that we wretched creatures utter such prayers when you, our masters, do such deeds as this?"

"No," answered Hugh, "I cannot. Let us be going from this shambles."

So they went, a melancholy procession if ever there one was seen upon this earth. As the three Englishmen marched behind the horses with their weeping burdens Grey Dick reflected aloud after his fashion.

"Jew and Christian!" he said. "The Jews killed one Man who chanced to be a God, though they knew it not, and ever since the Christians have killed thousands of the Jews. Now, which is the most wicked, those Jews who killed the Man Who was a God, because He said He was a God, or those Christians who throw a man into a fire to burn before his wife's and children's eyes? A man who never said that he was a god, but who, they said, put poison into their wells, which he did not do, but which they believed he did because he was one of the race that thirteen hundred years ago killed their God? Ah, well! Jew and Christian, I think the same devil dwells in them all, but Murgh alone knows the truth of the matter. If ever we meet again, I'll ask him of it. Meanwhile, we go to Avignon in strange company, whereof all the holy priests yonder, if any of them still live, to say nothing of the people, may demand an account of us."

So spoke Dick as one who seeks an answer, but neither of his companions gave him any.

On they went through the ruined land unpursued, although they had just brought sundry men to their deaths. For now neither law nor justice was left and those killed who could and those died who must, unwept and unavenged. Only certain travellers, flying they knew not whither, flying from doom to doom, eyed them with hate and loathing because of their companions. Those who consorted with Jews must, they thought, be the enemies of every Christian soul.

Well was it for them perhaps that the early winter night was closing in when they reached the wonderful bridge of St. Bénézet, now quite unguarded, since a worse foe reigned in Avignon than any that it could fear from without. They crossed it, unnoted, for here none lingered in the gloom and rain save one poor woman, who called out to them that all she loved were dead and that she went to seek them. Then, before they could interfere, she scrambled to the parapet of the bridge and with a wild cry leapt into the foaming waters that rushed beneath.

"God forgive and rest her!" muttered Hugh, crossing himself. The others only shrugged their shoulders. Such dreadful sights fed their eyes daily till they learned to take little note of them.

In a deserted place on the farther side of the bridge they halted, and

Hugh said to the Jewish widow:

"Woman, here is Avignon, where you tell us there are those who will befriend you, so now let us part. We have done what we can for you and it is not safe either for you or for us that we should be seen together in this Christian city."

"Sir, you speak well," she answered. "Be pleased ere we separate, to meet no more perchance, to tell me your names that I may remember them and hand them down among my people from generation to generation."

So he told her, and thrust onto her a gift of money and the most of such food as remained to them. Then the poor woman lifted up her arms and said:

"I, Rebecca, daughter of Onias and wife of Nathan, call down on you, Hugh de Cressi, Richard Archer and David Day, and on your children forever, the blessings of Jehovah, because you have rescued the widow and her children from the fire and avenged the murder of the husband and the father. O God of my people, as Thou didst save Lot and his house from the flames of Sodom, so save these true-hearted and merciful men! Turn from them the sword of Thy wrath when it smites the sinful cities! Cast the cloak of Thy protection about them and all they love! Prosper their handiwork in peace and in war, fulfil their desire upon their enemies, and at last let them die full of years and honour and so be gathered into Thy eternal bosom! Thus prayeth Rebecca, the daughter of

Onias, and thus shall it be."

Then, leading her children, she turned and vanished into the darkness.

"Now," said Dick when she had gone, "although they were spoken by a Jew whom men call accursed because their forefathers, fulfilling prophecy, or some few of them, wrought a great crime when the world was young and thereby brought about the salvation of mankind, as we believe, those are among the most comfortable words to which my ears have listened, especially such of them as dealt with the fulfilling of our desire upon our enemies in war. Well, they are spoke, and I doubt not registered in a book which will not be lost. So, master, let us seek a lodging in this city of Avignon, which, for my part, I do with a light heart."

Hugh nodded, and his heart also was lightened by those words of blessing and good omen. Mounting their horses, they took a street that led them past the great Roches des Doms, on the crest of which stood the mighty palace of the Popes, as yet unfinished, but still one of the vastest buildings they had ever seen. Here on the battlements and in front of the gateway burned great fires, lit by order of his Holiness to purify the air and protect him and his Court from the plague.

Leaving this place on their right they rode slowly along one of the principal streets of the town, seeking an inn. Soon they found one, a large place that had a sign on which three shepherds were painted, and turned to enter its gateway. But, when they saw them, out of that

gateway rushed a mob of frantic people waving swords and cudgels, and saying that they would have no strangers there to bring the Death among them.

"Let us go on," said Hugh, "for here it seems we are not welcome."

So they went and tried three other inns in turn. At two of them they met with a like greeting, but the doors of the third were closed and the place was deserted. Then, for a crowd began to gather round them, wearily enough they turned up another street at hazard. Thus they wended their way back toward the great central rock, thinking that there they might find some more hospitable tavern.

Following this new street, they reached a less crowded suburb of the town, where large dwellings stood in their own gardens. One of these, they saw by the flare of some of those fires which burned all about the city in this time of pestilence, seemed to be a small castle. At least it had a moat round it and a drawbridge, which was down. Seeing that lamps burned in its windows, Hugh, who was worn out with their long journeyings, took a sudden resolution.

"Doubtless some knight dwells in this fine house," he said to his companions. "Let us go up and declare our names and degree and by virtue of them claim the hospitality which is our right."

"Be it so," grumbled Dick. "We cannot be worse treated there than

we were at the inns, unless the owner adds arrows to the swords and cudgels."

They rode across the drawbridge to the gateway of the little castle, which was open, and finding no one there, through a small courtyard to the door, which also was open.

David dismounted and knocked on it, but none answered.

"An empty house belongs to no one," said Dick; "at any rate in these times. Let us enter."

They did so, and saw that the place was sumptuously appointed. Though ancient, it was not large, having, as they afterward discovered, been a fortification on an outer wall now demolished, which had been turned to the purposes of a dwelling. Leaving the hall out of which opened the refectory, they mounted a stone stair to the upper chambers, and entered one of them.

Here they saw a strange and piteous sight. On a bed, about which candles still burned, lay a young woman who had been very beautiful, arrayed in a bride's robe.

"Dead of the plague," said Hugh, "and deserted at her death. Well, she had better luck than many, since she was not left to die alone. Her dress and these candles show it."

"Ay," answered Dick, "but fear took the watchers at last and they are fled. Well, we will fill their place, and, if they do not return to-morrow, give her honourable burial in her own courtyard. Here be fine lodgings for us, master, so let us bide in them until the rightful owners cast us out. Come, David, and help me raise that drawbridge."

Fine lodgings these proved to be indeed, since, as they found, no house in Avignon was better furnished with all things needful. But, and this will show how dreadful were the times, during these days that they made this their home they never so much as learned the name of that poor lady arrayed in the bride's dress and laid out upon her marriage bed.

In the butteries and cellar were plentiful provisions of food. Having eaten of it with thankfulness, they chose out one of the bed-chambers and slept there quite undisturbed till the morning sun shone in at the window-places and awoke them. Then they arose, and, digging a shallow grave in the courtyard with some garden tools which they found in a shed, they bore out the poor bride, and, removing only her jewels, which were rich enough, buried her there in her wedding dress. This sad duty finished, they washed themselves with water from the well, and breakfasted. After they had eaten they consulted as to what they should do next.

"We came here to lay a certain cause before his Holiness," said Hugh.

"Let us go up to the palace, declare our business and estate, and ask

audience."

So, leaving David in charge of the house, which they named the Bride's Tower because of the dead lady and the little keep which rose above it, and of the horses that they had stalled in the stable, they went out and made their way to the great entrance of the Pope's palace. Here they found the gates shut and barred, with a huge fire burning behind them.

Still they knocked until some guards appeared armed with cross-bows, and asked their business. They said they desired to see his Holiness, or at least one of his secretaries, whereon the guards asked whence they came. They replied from Italy, and were told that if so they would find no entrance there, since the Death had come from Italy. Now Hugh gave his name and stated his business on hearing which the guards laughed at him.

"Annulment of a false marriage!" said their captain. "Go lay your petition before Death, who will do your business swiftly if he has not done it already. Get you gone, you English knight, with your white-faced squire. We want no English here at the best of times, and least of all if they hail from Italy."

"Come on, master," said Dick, "there are more ways into a house than by the front door--and we won't want to leave our brains to grease its hinges."

So they went away, wondering whither they should betake themselves or

what they could do next. As it chanced, they had not long to wait for an answer. Presently a lantern-jawed notary in a frayed russet gown, who must have been watching their movements, approached them and asked them what had been their business at the Pope's palace. Hugh told him, whereon the lawyer, finding that he was a person of high degree, became deferential in his manner. Moreover, he announced that he was a notary named Basil of Tours and one of the legal secretaries of his Holiness, who just now was living without the gates of the palace by express command in order to attend to the affairs of suitors at the Papal Court during the Great Sickness. He added, however, that he was able to communicate with those within, and that doubtless it might be in his power to forward the cause of the noble knight, Sir Hugh de Cressi, in which already he took much interest.

"There would be a fee?" suggested Dick, looking at the man coldly.

Basil answered with a smirk that fees and legal affairs were inseparable; the latter naturally involved the former. Not that he cared for money, he remarked, especially in this time of general woe. Still, it would never do for a lawyer, however humble, to create a precedent which might be used against his craft in better days. Then he named a sum.

Hugh handed him double what he asked, whereon he began to manifest great zeal in his case. Indeed, he accompanied them to the fortified house that they had named the Bride's Tower, which he alleged, with or without

truth, he had never seen before. There he wrote down all particulars of the suit.

"Sir Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon, Seigneur of Cattrina?" he said presently. "Why I think that a lord of those names had audience with his Holiness some while ago, just before the pest grew bad in Avignon and the gates of the palace were ordered to be shut. I know not what passed on the occasion, not having been retained in the cause, but I will find out and tell you to-morrow."

"Find out also, if it pleases you, learned Basil," said Hugh, "whether or no this knight with the three names is still in Avignon. If so, I have a word or two to say to him."

"I will, I will," answered the lantern-jawed notary. "Yet I think it most unlikely that any one who can buy or beg a horse to ride away on should stay in this old city just now, unless indeed, the laws of his order bind him to do so that he may minister to the afflicted. Well, if the pest spares me and you, to-morrow morning I will be back here at this hour to tell you all that I can gather."

"How did this sickness begin in Avignon?" asked Grey Dick.

"Noble Squire, none know for certain. In the autumn we had great rains, heavy mists and other things contrary to the usual course of nature, such as strange lights shining in the heavens, and so forth. Then after

a day of much heat, one evening a man clad in a red and yellow cap, who wore a cloak of thick black furs and necklaces of black pearls, was seen standing in the market-place. Indeed, I saw him myself. There was something so strange and dreadful about the appearance of this man, although it is true that some say he was no more than a common mountebank arrayed thus to win pence, that the people set upon him. They hurled stones at him, they attacked him with swords and every other weapon, and thought that they had killed him, when suddenly he appeared outside the throng unhurt. Then he stretched out his white-gloved hand toward them and melted into the gloom.

"Only," added Basil nervously, "it was noted afterward that all those who had tried to injure the man were among the first to die of the pest. Thank God, I was not one of them. Indeed I did my best to hold them back, which, perhaps, is the reason why I am alive to-day."

"A strange story," said Hugh, "though I have heard something like it in other cities through which we have passed. Well, till to-morrow at this hour, friend Basil."

"We have learned two things, master," said Dick, when the lawyer had bowed himself out. "First, that Acour is, or has been, in Avignon, and secondly, that Murgh the Messenger, Murgh the Sword, has been or is in Avignon. Let us go seek for one of the other of them, since for my part I desire to meet them both."

So all that day they sought but found neither.

Next morning Basil reappeared, according to his promise, and informed them that their business was on foot. Also he said that it was likely to prove more difficult than he anticipated. Indeed, he understood that he who was named de Noyon and Cattrina, having friends among the cardinals, had already obtained some provisional ratification of his marriage with the lady Eve Clavering. This ratification it would now be costly and difficult to set aside.

Hugh answered that if only he could be granted an audience with his Holiness, he had evidence which would make the justice of his cause plain. What he sought was an audience.

The notary scratched his lantern jaws and asked how that could be brought about when every gate of the palace was shut because of the plague. Still, perhaps, it might be managed, he added, if a certain sum were forthcoming to bribe various janitors and persons in authority.

Hugh gave him the sum out of the store of gold they had taken from the robbers in the mountains, with something over for himself. So Basil departed, saying that he would return at the same hour on the morrow, if the plague spared him and them, his patrons, as he prayed the Saints that it might do.

Hugh watched him go, then turned to Dick and said:

"I mistrust me of that hungry wolf in sheep's clothing who talks so large and yet does nothing. Let us go out and search Avignon again. Perchance we may meet Acour, or at least gather some tidings of him."

So they went, leaving the Tower locked and barred, who perchance would have been wiser to follow Basil. A debased and fraudulent lawyer of no character at all, this man lived upon such fees as he could wring without authority from those who came to lay their suits before the Papal Court, playing upon their hopes and fears and pretending to a power which he did not possess. Had they done so, they might have seen him turn up a certain side street, and, when he was sure that none watched him, slip into the portal of an ancient house where visitors of rank were accustomed to lodge.

Mounting some stairs without meeting any one, for this house, like many others, seemed to be deserted in that time of pestilence, he knocked upon a door.

"Begone, whoever you are," growled a voice from within. "Here there are neither sick to be tended nor dead to be borne away."

Had they been there to hear it, Hugh and Dick might have found that voice familiar.

"Noble lord," he replied, "I am the notary, Basil, and come upon your

business."

"Maybe," said the voice, "but how know I that you have not been near some case of foul sickness and will not bring it here?"

"Have no fear, lord; I have been waiting on the healthy, not on the sick--a task which I leave to others who have more taste that way."

Then the door was opened cautiously, and from the room beyond it came a pungent odour of aromatic essences. Basil passed in, shutting it quickly behind him. Before him at the further side of the table and near to a blazing fire stood Acour himself. He was clothed in a long robe and held a piece of linen that was soaked in some strong-smelling substance before his nose and mouth.

"Nay, come no nearer," he said to the clerk, "for this infection is most subtle, and--be so good as to cast off that filthy cloak of yours and leave it by the door."

Basil obeyed, revealing an undergarment that was still more foul. He was not one who wasted money on new apparel.

"Well, man," said Acour, surveying him with evident disgust and throwing a handful of dried herbs upon the fire, "what news now? Has my cause been laid before his Holiness? I trust so, for know that I grow weary of being cooped up here like a falcon in a cage with the dread of a

loathsome death and a handful of frightened servants as companions who do nothing but drone out prayers all day long."

"Yes, lord, it has. I have it straight from Clement's own secretary, and the answer is that his Holiness will attend to the matter when the pest has passed away from Avignon, and not before. He adds also that when it does so, if ever, all the parties to the cause, by themselves or by their representatives, must appear before him. He will give no ex parte judgment upon an issue which, from letters that have reached him appears to be complicated and doubtful."

"Mother of Heaven!" exclaimed Acour, "what a fool am I to let you in to tell me such tidings. Well, if that is all you have to say the sooner I am out of this hateful city the better. I ride this afternoon, or, if need be, walk on foot."

"Indeed," said Basil. "Then you leave behind you some who are not so frightened of their health, but who bide here upon a very similar errand. Doubtless, as often happens to the bold, they will find a way to fulfil it."

"And who may these be, fellow?"

"A bold and warlike knight, a squire with hair like tow and a face that might be worn by Death himself, and a young English serving man."

Acour started up from the chair in which he had sat down.

"No need to tell me their names," he said, "but how, by hell's gate, came de Cressi and his familiar here."

"By the road, I imagine, lord, like others. At least, a few days ago they were seen travelling toward the bridge of St. Bénézet in the company of certain Jews, whom, I am informed, they had rescued from the just reward of their witchcraft. I have a note of all the facts, which include the slaying of sundry good Christians on behalf of the said Jews."

"Jews? Why, that is enough to hang them in these times. But what do they here and where do they lodge?"

"Like your lordship they strive to see the Pope. They desire that an alleged marriage between one Sir Edmund Acour, Count of Noyon and Seigneur of Cattrina, and one lady Eve Clavering, an Englishwoman, may be declared null and void. As they have been so good as to honour me with their confidence and appoint me their agent, I am able to detail the facts. Therefore I will tell you at once that the case of this knight de Cressi appears to be excellent, since it includes the written confession of a certain Father Nicholas, of whom perhaps you have heard."

"The written confession of Nicholas! Have you seen it?"

"Not as yet. So far I have been trusted with no original documents. Is it your will that I should try to possess myself of these? Because, if so, I will do my best, provided----" and he looked at the pocket of Acour's robe.

"How much?" asked Acour. The man named a great sum, half to be paid down and half on the delivery of the papers.

"I'll double it," said Acour, "if you can bring it about that these insolent Englishmen die--of the pest."

"How can I do that, lord?" asked Basil with a sour smile. "Such tricks might work backward. I might die, or you. Still these men have committed crimes, and just now there is a prejudice against Jews."

"Ay," said Acour, "the Englishmen are sorcerers. I tell you that in Venice they were seen in the company of that fiend of the yellow cap and the fur robe who appears everywhere before the pest."

"Prove it," exclaimed Basil, "and the citizens of Avignon will rid you of their troubling."

Then they debated long together and the end of it was that Basil departed, saying that he would return again on the morrow and make report as to certain matters.