

## CHAPTER XVII

### A MEETING

Hugh, Grey Dick, and David, trudged up and down through the streets of Avignon. All that long day they trudged seeking news and finding little. Again and again they asked at the inns whether a knight who bore the name of Acour, or de Noyon, or Cattrina, was or had been a guest there, but none whom they asked seemed to know anything of such a person.

They asked it of citizens, also of holy priests, good men who, careless of their own lives, followed biers or cartloads of dead destined to the plague pit or the river that they might pronounce over them the last blessings of the Church. They asked it of physicians, some few of whom still remained alive, as they hurried from house to house to administer to the sick or dying. But all of these either did not answer at all or else shrugged their shoulders and went on their melancholy business. Only one of them called back that he had no time to waste in replying to foolish questions, and that probably the knight they sought was dead long ago or had fled from the city.

Another man, an officer of customs, who seemed half dazed with misery and fear, said that he remembered the lord Cattrina entering Avignon with a good many followers, since he himself had levied the customary tolls on his company. As for how long it was ago he could not say, since his recollection failed him--so much had happened since. So he bade them

farewell until they met in heaven, which, he added, doubtless would be soon.

The evening drew on. Wearily enough they had trudged round the great Roche des Doms, looking up at the huge palace of the Pope, where the fires burned night and day and the guards watched at the shut gates, that forbidden palace into which no man might enter. Leaving it, they struck down a street that was new to them, which led toward their borrowed dwelling of the Bride's Tower. This street was very empty save for a few miserable creatures, some of whom lay dead or dying in the gutters. Others lurked about in doorways or behind the pillars of gates, probably for no good purpose. They heard the footsteps of a man following them who seemed to keep in the shadow, but took no heed, since they set him down as some wretched thief who would never dare to attack three armed men. It did not occur to them that this was none other than the notary Basil, clad in a new robe, who for purposes of his own was spying upon their movements.

They came to a large, ruinous-looking house, of which the gateway attracted Grey Dick's sharp eyes.

"What does that entrance remind you of, master?" he asked.

Hugh looked at it carelessly and answered:

"Why, of the Preceptory at Dunwich. See, there are the same arms upon

the stone shield. Doubtless once the Knights Templar dwelt there. Sir Andrew may have visited this place in his youth."

As the words left his lips two men came out of the gateway, one of them a physician to judge by the robe and the case of medicines which he carried; the other a very tall person wrapped in a long cloak. The physician was speaking.

"She may live or she may die," he said. "She seems strong. The pest, you say, has been on her for four days, which is longer than most endure it; she has no swellings, and has not bled from the lungs; though, on the other hand, she is now insensible, which often precedes the end. I can say no more; it is in the hands of God. Yes, I will ask you to pay me the fee now. Who knows if you will be alive to do so to-morrow? If she dies before then I recommend you to throw her into the river, which the Pope has blessed. It is cleaner burial than the plague pit. I presume she is your grand-daughter--a beautiful woman. Pity she should be wasted thus, but many others are in a like case. If she awakes give her good food, and if you cannot get that--wine, of which there is plenty. Five gold pieces--thank you," and he hurried away.

"Little have you told me, physician, that I did not know already," said the tall hooded figure, in a deep voice the sound of which thrilled Hugh to his marrow. "Yet you are right; it is in the hands of God. And to those hands I trust--not in vain, I think."

"Sir," said Hugh addressing him out of the shadow in which he stood, "be pleased to tell me, if you will, whether you have met in this town a knight of the name of Sir Edmund Acour, for of him I am in search?"

"Sir Edmund Acour?" answered the figure. "No, I have not met him in Avignon, though it is like enough that he is here. Yet I have known of this knight far away in England."

"Was it at Blythburgh, in Suffolk, perchance?" asked Hugh.

"Ay, at Blythburgh in Suffolk; but who are you that speak in English and know of Blythburgh in Suffolk?"

"Oh!" cried Hugh, "what do you here, Sir Andrew Arnold?"

The old man threw back his hood and stared at him.

"Hugh de Cressi, by Christ's holy Name!" he exclaimed. "Yes, and Richard the archer, also. The light is bad; I did not see your faces. Welcome, Hugh, thrice welcome," and he threw his arms about him and embraced him.

"Come, enter my lodgings, I have much to say to you."

"One thing I desire to learn most of all, Father; the rest can wait.

Who is the sick lady of whom you spoke to yonder physician--she that, he thought, was your grand-daughter?"

"Who could it be, Hugh, except Eve Clavering."

"Eve!" gasped Hugh. "Eve dying of the pest?"

"Nay, son: who said so? She is ill, not dying, who, I believe, will live for many years."

"You believe, Father, you believe! Why this foul plague scarce spares one in ten. Oh! why do you believe?"

"God teaches me to do so," answered the old knight solemnly. "I only sent for that physician because he has medicines which I lack. But it is not in him and his drugs that I put my trust. Come, let us go in and see her."

So they went up the stairs and turned down a long passage, into which the light flowed dimly through large open casements.

"Who is that?" asked Hugh suddenly. "I thought that one brushed past me, though I could see nothing."

"Ay," broke in the lad David, who was following, "and I felt a cold wind as though some one stirred the air."

Grey Dick also opened his lips to speak, then changed his mind and was silent, but Sir Andrew said impatiently:

"I saw no one, therefore there was no one to see. Enter!" and he opened the door.

Now they found themselves in a lighted room, beyond which lay another room.

"Bide you here, Richard, with your companion," said Sir Andrew. "Hugh, follow me, and let us learn whether I have trusted to God in vain."

Then very gently he opened the door, and they passed in together, closing it behind them.

This is what Hugh saw. At the far end of the room was a bed, near to which stood a lamp that showed, sitting up in the bed, a beautiful young woman, whose dark hair fell all about her. Her face was flushed but not wasted or made dreadful by the sickness, as happened to so many. There she sat staring before her with her large dark eyes and a smile upon her sweet lips, like one that muses on happy things.

"See," whispered Sir Andrew, "she is awakened from her swoon. I think I did not trust in vain, my son."

She caught the tones of his voice and spoke.

"Is that you, Father?" she asked dreamily. "Draw near, for I have such a

strange story to tell you."

He obeyed, leaving Hugh in the shadow, and she went on:

"Just now I awoke from my sleep and saw a man standing by my bed."

"Yes, yes," Sir Andrew said, "the physician whom I sent for to see you."

"Do physicians in Avignon wear caps of red and yellow and robes of black fur and strings of great black pearls that, to tell truth, I coveted sorely?" she asked, laughing a little. "No, no. If this were a physician, he is of the sort that heals souls. Indeed, now that I think of it, when I asked him his name and business, he answered that the first was the Helper, and the second, to bring peace to those in trouble."

"Well, daughter, and what else did the man say?" asked Sir Andrew, soothingly.

"You think I wander," she said, interpreting the tone of his voice and not his words, "but indeed it is not so. Well, he said little; only that I had been very ill, near to death, in truth, much nearer than I thought, but that now I should recover and within a day or two be quite well and strong again. I asked him why he had come to tell me this. He replied, because he thought that I should like to know that he had met one whom I loved in the city of Venice in Italy; one who was named Hugh

de Cressi. Yes, Father, he said Hugh de Cressi, who, with his squire, an archer, had befriended him there--and that this Hugh was well and would remain so, and that soon I should see him again. Also he added that he had met one whom I hated, who was named the lord of Cattrina, and that if this Cattrina threatened me I should do wisely to fly back to England, since there I should find peace and safety. Then, suddenly, just before you came in, he was gone."

"You have strange dreams, Eve," said Sir Andrew, "yet there is truth in their madness. Now be strong lest joy should kill you, as it has done by many a one before."

Then he turned to the shadow behind him and said, "Come." Next instant Hugh was kneeling at Eve's bedside and pressing his lips upon her hand.

Oh! they had much to say to each other, so much that the half of it remained unsaid. Still Hugh learned that she and Sir Andrew had come to Avignon upon the Pope's summons to lay this matter of her alleged marriage before him in person. When they reached the town they found it already in the grip of the great plague, and that to see his Holiness was almost impossible, since he had shut himself up in his palace and would admit no one. Yet an interview was promised through Sir Andrew's high-placed friends, only then the sickness struck Eve and she could not go, nor was Sir Andrew allowed to do so, since he was nursing one who



lay ill.

Then Hugh began to tell his tale, to which Eve and Sir Andrew Arnold listened greedily. Of Murgh, for sundry reasons, he said nothing, and of the fight from which Acour had fled in Venice before the earthquake but little. He told them, however, that he had heard that this Acour had been or was in Avignon and that he had learned from a notary named Basil, whom he, Hugh, had retained, that Acour had won from the Pope a confirmation of his marriage.

"A lie!" interrupted Sir Andrew. "His Holiness caused me to be informed expressly that he would give no decision in this cause until all the case was before him."

As he said the words a disturbance arose in the outer room, and the harsh voice of Grey Dick was heard saying:

"Back, you dog! Would you thrust yourself into the chamber of the lady of Clavering? Back, or I will cast you through the window-place."

Sir Andrew went to see what was the matter, and Hugh, breaking off his tale, followed him, to find the notary, Basil, on his knees with Grey Dick gripping him by the collar of his robe.

"Sir Knight," said Basil, recognizing Hugh, "should I, your faithful agent, be treated thus by this fierce-faced squire of yours?"

"That depends on what you have done, Sir Lawyer," answered Hugh, motioning to Dick to loose the man.

"All I have done, Sir Knight, is to follow you into a house where I chanced to see you enter, in order to give you some good tidings. Then this fellow caught me by the throat and said that if I dared to break in upon the privacy of one whom he called Red Eve and Lady Clavering, he would kill me."

"He had his orders, lawyer."

"Then, Sir Knight, he might have executed them less roughly. Had he but told me that you were alone with some lady, I should have understand and withdrawn for a while, although to do so would have been to let precious moments slip," and the lean-faced knave leered horribly.

"Cease your foul talk and state your business," interrupted Sir Andrew, thrusting himself in front of Hugh, who he feared would strike the fellow.

"And pray, who may you be?" asked the lawyer, glancing up at the tall figure that towered above him.

Sir Andrew threw back his hood, revealing his aged, hawk-like countenance, his dark and flashing eyes and his snow-white hair and

beard.

"If you would learn, man," he said, in his great voice, "in the world I was known as Sir Andrew Arnold, one of the priors of the Order of the Templars, which is a name that you may have heard. But now that I have laid aside all worldly pomp and greatness, I am but Father Andrew, of Dunwich, in England."

"Yes, yes, I have heard the name; who has not?" said the lawyer humbly; "also you are here as guardian to the lady Eve Clavering, are you not, to lay a certain cause before his Holiness? Oh! do not start, all these matters came to my knowledge who am concerned in every great business in Avignon as the chief agent and procurator of the Papal Court, though it is true that this tidings has reached me only within the last few minutes and from the lips of your own people. Holy Father, I pray your pardon for breaking in upon you, which I did only because the matter is very pressing. Sir Hugh de Cressi here has a cause to lay before the Pope with which you may be acquainted. Well, for two days I have striven to win him an audience, and now through my sole influence, behold! 'tis granted. See here," and he produced a parchment that purported to be signed by the Pope's secretary and countersigned by a cardinal, and read:

"If the English knight, Sir Hugh de Cressi, and his squire, the captain Richard, will be in the chamber of audience at the palace at seven of the clock this evening' (that is, within something less than half an

hour), 'his Holiness will be pleased to receive them as a most special boon, having learned that the said Sir Hugh is a knight much in favour with his Grace of England, who appointed him his champion in a combat that was lately to be fought at Venice.'

"That's true enough, though I know not how the Pope heard of it," interrupted Hugh.

"Through me, Sir Knight, for I learn everything. None have so much power in Avignon as I, although it often pleases me to seem poor and of no account. But let that pass. Either you must take this opportunity or be content not to see his Holiness at all. Orders have been issued because of the increase of this pest in Avignon, that from to-night forward none shall be admitted to the palace upon any pretext whatsoever; no, not even a king."

"Then I had best go," said Hugh.

"Ay," answered Sir Andrew, "and return here with your tidings as soon as may be. Yet," he added in a low voice to Grey Dick, "I love not the look of this scurvy guide of yours. Could not your master have found a better attorney?"

"Perhaps," answered Dick, "that is if one is left alive in Avignon. Being in haste we took the first that came to hand, and it seems that he will serve our turn. At least, if he plays tricks, I promise it will be

the worse for him," and he looked grimly at the rogue, who was talking to David Day and appeared to hear nothing.

So they went, and with them David, who had witnessed the confession of Father Nicholas. Therefore they thought it best that he should accompany them to testify to it if there were need.

"Bid my lady keep a good heart and say that I will be with her again ere long," said Hugh as they descended the stairs in haste.

Following the guidance of Basil, they turned first this way and then that, till soon in the gathering darkness they knew not where they were.

"What was the name of the street in which Sir Andrew had his lodging?" asked Hugh, halting.

"Rue St. Benezet," answered Basil. "Forward, we have no time to lose."

"Did you tell Sir Andrew where we dwelt, master?" said Dick presently, "for I did not."

"By my faith, Dick, no; it slipped my mind."

"Then it will be hard for him to find us if he has need, master, in this rabbit warren of a town. Still that can't be mended now. I wish we were clear of this business, for it seems to me that yon fellow is not

leading us toward the palace. Almost am I minded----" and he looked at Basil, then checked himself.

Presently Dick wished it still more. Taking yet another turn they found themselves in an open square or garden that was surrounded by many mean houses. In this square great pest-fires burned, lighting it luridly. By the flare of them they saw that hundreds of people were gathered there listening to a mad-eyed friar who was preaching to them from the top of a wine-cart. As they drew near to the crowd through which Basil was leading them, Hugh heard the friar shouting:

"Men of Avignon, this pest which kills us is the work not of God, but of the Jew blasphemers and of the sorcerers who are in league with them. I tell you that two such sorcerers who pass as Englishmen are in your city now and have been consorting with the Jews, plotting your destruction. One looks like a young knight, but the other has the face of Death himself, and both of them wrought murders in a neighbouring town to protect the Jews. Until you kill the accursed Jews this plague will never pass. You will die, every one of you, with your wives and children if you do not kill the Jews and their familiars."

Just then the man, rolling his wild eyes about, caught sight of Hugh and Dick.

"See!" he screamed. "There are the wizards who in Venice were seen in the company of the Enemy of Mankind. That good Christian, Basil, has

brought them face to face with you, as he promised me that he would."

As he heard these words Hugh drew his sword and leapt at Basil. But the rogue was watching. With a yell of fear he threw himself among the crowd and there vanished.

"Out weapons, and back to back!" cried Hugh, "for we are snared."

So the three of them ranged themselves together facing outward. In front of them gleamed Grey Dick's axe, Hugh's sword and David's great knife. In a moment the furious mob was surging round them like the sea, howling, "Down with the foreign wizards! Kill the friends of the Jews!" one solid wall of changing white faces.

A man struck at them with a halbert, but the blow fell short, for he was afraid to come too near. Grey Dick leapt forward, and in a moment was back again, leaving that man dead, smitten through from skull to chin. For a while there was silence, since this sudden death gave them pause, and in it Hugh cried out:

"Are blameless men to be murdered thus? Have we no friends in Avignon?"

"Some," answered a voice from the outer shadow, though who spoke they could not see.

"Save the protectors of the Jews!" cried the voice again.

Then came a rush and a counter-rush. Fighting began around them in which they took no share. When it had passed over them like a gust of wind, David Day was gone, killed or trodden down, as his companions thought.

"Now, master, we are alone," said Grey Dick. "Set your shoulders against mine and let us die a death that these dogs of Avignon will remember."

"Ay, ay!" answered Hugh. "But don't overreach, Dick, 'tis ever the archer's fault."

The mob closed in on them, then rolled back like water from a rock, leaving some behind. Again they closed in and again rolled back.

"Bring bows!" they cried, widening out. "Bring bows and shoot them down."

"Ah!" gasped Dick, "that is a game two can play, now that I have arm room."

Almost before the words had left his lips the great black bow he bore was out and strung. Next instant the shafts began to rush, piercing all before them, till at the third arrow those in front of him melted away, save such as would stir no more. Only now missiles began to come in answer from this side and from that, although as yet none struck them.



"Unstring your bow, Dick, and let us charge," said Hugh. "We have no other chance save flight. They'll pelt us under."

Dick did not seem to hear. At least he shot on as one who was not minded to die unavenged. An arrow whistled through Hugh's cap, lifting it from his head, and another glanced from the mail on his shoulder. He ground his teeth with rage, for now none would come within reach of his long sword.

"Good-bye, friend Dick," he said. "I die charging," and with a cry of "A Cressi! A Cressi!" he sprang forward.

One leap and Dick was at his side, who had only bided to sheath his bow. The mob in front melted away before the flash of the white sword and the gleam of the grey axe. Still they must have fallen, for their pursuers closed in behind them like hunting hounds when they view the quarry, and there were none to guard their backs. But once more the shrill voice cried:

"Help the friends of the Jews! Save those who saved Rebecca and her children!"

Then again there came a rush of dark-browed men, who hissed and whistled as they fought.

So fierce was the rush that those who followed them were cut off, and

Dick, glancing back over his shoulder, saw the mad-eyed priest, their leader, go down like an ox beneath the blow of a leaded bludgeon. A score of strides and they were out of the range of the firelight; another score and they were hidden by the gloom in the mouth of one of the narrow streets.

"Which way now?" gasped Hugh, looking back at the square where in the flare of the great fires Christians and Jews, fighting furiously, looked like devils struggling in the mouth of hell.

As he spoke a shock-headed, half-clad lad darted up to them and Dick lifted his axe to cut him down.

"Friend," he said in a guttural voice, "not foe! I know where you dwell; trust and follow me, who am of the kin of Rebecca, wife of Nathan."

"Lead on then, kin of Rebecca," exclaimed Hugh, "but know that if you cheat us, you die."

"Swift, swift!" cried the lad, "lest those swine should reach your house before you," and, catching Hugh by the hand, he began to run like a hare.

Down the dark streets they went, past the great rock where the fires burned at the gates of the palace of the Pope, then along more streets and across an open place where thieves and night-birds peered at them

curiously, but at the sight of their drawn steel, slunk away. At length their guide halted.

"See!" he said. "There is your dwelling. Enter now and up with the bridge. Hark! They come. Farewell."

He was gone. From down the street to their left rose shouts and the sound of many running feet, but there in front of them loomed the Tower against the black and rainy sky. They dashed across the little drawbridge that spanned the moat, and, seizing the cranks, wound furiously. Slowly, ah! how slowly it rose, for it was heavy, and they were but two tired men; also the chains and cogs were rusty with disuse. Yet it did rise, and as it came home at last, the fierce mob, thirsting for their blood and guessing where they would refuge, appeared in front of it and by the light of some torches which they bore, caught sight of them.

"Come in, friends," mocked Grey Dick as they ran up and down the edge of the moat howling with rage and disappointment. "Come in if you would sup on arrow-heads such as this," and he sent one of his deadly shafts through the breast of a red-headed fellow who waved a torch in one hand and a blacksmith's hammer in the other.

Then they drew back, taking the dead man with them, but as they went one cried:

"The Jews shall not save you again, wizards, for if we cannot come at you to kill you, we'll starve you till you die. Stay there and rot, or step forth and be torn to pieces, as it pleases you, English wizards."

Then they all slunk back and vanished, or seemed to vanish, down the mouths of the dark streets that ran into the open place in front of the dwelling which Hugh had named the Bride's Tower.

"Now," said Dick, wiping the sweat from his brow as they barred the massive door of the house, "we are safe for this night at least, and can eat and sleep in peace. See you, master, I have taken stock of this old place, which must have been built in rough times, for scarce a wall of it is less than five feet thick. The moat is deep all round. Fire cannot harm it, and it is loop-holed for arrows and not commanded by any other building, having the open place in front and below the wide fosse of the ancient wall, upon which it stands. Therefore, even with this poor garrison of two, it can be taken only by storm. This, while we have bows and arrows, will cost them something, seeing that we could hold the tower from stair to stair."

"Ay, Dick," answered Hugh sadly, "doubtless we can make a fight for it and take some with us to a quieter world, if they are foolish enough to give us a chance. But what did that fellow shout as to starving us out? How stand we for provisions?"

"Foreseeing something of the sort, I have reckoned that up, master.

There's good water in the courtyard well and those who owned this tower, whoever they may have been, laid in great store, perchance for the marriage feast, or perchance when the plague began, knowing that it would bring scarcity. The cupboards and the butteries are filled with flour, dried flesh, wine, olives and oil for burning. Even if these should fail us there are the horses in the stable, which we can kill and cook, for of forage and fuel I have found enough."

"Then the Pope should not be more safe than we, Dick," said Hugh with a weary smile, "if any are safe in Avignon to-day. Well, let us go and eat of all this plenty, but oh! I wish I had told Sir Andrew where we dwelt, or could be sure in which of that maze of streets he and Red Eve are lodged. Dick, Dick, that knave Basil has fooled us finely."

"Ay, master," said Dick, setting his grim lips, "but let him pray his Saint that before all is done I do not fool him."