

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE PLAGUE PIT

Seven long days had gone by and still Hugh and Grey Dick held out in their Tower fortress. Though as yet unhurt, they were weary indeed, since they must watch all night and could only sleep by snatches in the daytime, one lying down to rest while the other kept guard.

As they had foreseen, except by direct assault, the place proved impregnable, its moat protecting it upon three sides and the sheer wall of the old city terminating in the deep fosse upon the fourth. In its little armoury, among other weapons they had found a great store of arrows and some good bows, whereof Hugh took the best and longest. Thus armed with these they placed themselves behind the loopholes of the embattled gateway, whence they could sweep the space before them. Or if danger threatened them elsewhere, there were embrasures whence they could command the bases of the walls. Lastly, also, there was the central tower, whereof they could hold each landing with the sword.

Thrice they had been attacked, since there seemed to be hundreds of folk in Avignon bent upon their destruction, but each time their bitter arrows, that rarely seemed to miss, had repulsed the foe with loss. Even when an onslaught was delivered on the main gateway at night, they had beaten their assailants by letting fall upon them through the machicoulis or overhanging apertures, great stones that had been piled

up there, perhaps generations before, when the place was built.

Still the attacks did not slacken. Indeed the hate of the citizens of Avignon against these two bold Englishmen, whose courage and resource they attributed to help given to them by the powers of evil, seemed to grow from day to day, even as the plague grew in the streets of that sore-afflicted city. From their walls they could see friars preaching a kind of crusade against them. They pointed toward the tower with crucifixes, invoking their hearers to pull it stone from stone and slay the wizards within, the wizards who had conspired with the accursed Jews even beneath the eyes of his Holiness the Pope, to bring doom on Avignon.

The eighth morn broke at length, and its first red rays discovered Hugh and Dick kneeling side by side behind the battlements of the gateway. Each of them was making petition to heaven in his own fashion for forgiveness of his sins, since they were outworn and believed that this day would be their last.

"What did you pray for, Dick?" asked Hugh, glancing at his companion's fierce face, which in that half light looked deathlike and unearthly.

"What did I pray for? Well, for the first part let it be; that's betwixt me and whatever Power sent me out to do its business on the earth. But for the last--I'll tell you. It was that we may go hence with such a guard of dead French as never yet escorted two Englishmen from Avignon

to heaven--or hell. Ay, and we will, master, for to-day, as they shouted to us, they'll storm this tower; but if our strength holds out there's many a one who'll never win its crest."

"Rather would I have died peacefully, Dick. Yet the blood of these hounds will not weigh upon my soul, seeing that they seek to murder us for no fault except that we saved a woman and two children from their cruel devilries. Oh! could I but know that Red Eve and Sir Andrew were safe away, I'd die a happy man."

"I think we shall know that and much more before to-morrow's dawn, master, or never know anything again. Look! they gather yonder. Now let us eat, for perhaps later we shall find no time."

The afternoon drew on toward evening and still these two lived. Of all the hundreds of missiles which were shot or hurled at them, although a few struck, not one of them had pierced their armour so as to do them hurt. The walls and battlements or some good Fate had protected them. Thrice had the French come on, and thrice they had retreated before those arrows that could not miss, and as yet bridge and doors were safe.

"Look," said Dick as he set down a cup of wine that he had drained, for his thirst was raging, "they send an embassy," and he pointed to a priest, the same mad-eyed fellow who preached in the square when the

notary Basil led them into a trap, and to a man with him who bore a white cloth upon a lance. "Shall I shoot them?"

"Nay," answered Hugh; "why kill crazed folk who think that they serve God in their own fashion? We will hear what they have to say."

Presently the pair stood within speaking distance, and the priest called out:

"Hearken, you wizards. So far your master the devil has protected you, but now your hour has come. We have authority from those who rule this city and from the Church to summon you to surrender, and if you will not, then to slay you both."

"That, you shameless friar," answered Hugh, "you have been striving to do these many days. Yet it is not we who have been slain, although we stand but two men against a multitude. But if we surrender, what then?"

"Then you shall be put upon your trial, wizards, and, if found guilty, burned; if innocent, set free."

"Put upon our trial before our executioners! Why, I think those fires are alight already. Nay, nay, mad priest, go back and tell those whom you have fooled that if they want us they can come and take us, which they'll not do living."

Then the furious friar began to curse them, hurling at them the anathemas of the Church, till at length Dick called to him to begone or he would send an arrow to help him on the road.

So they went, and presently the sun sank.

"Now let us beware," said Dick. "The moon is near her full and will rise soon. They'll attack between times when we cannot see to shoot."

"Ay," answered Hugh, "moreover, now this gateway is no place for us. Of arrows there are few left, nor could we see to use them in the dark. The stones too are all spent and therefore they can bridge the moat and batter down the doors unharmed."

"What then?" asked Dick. "As we cannot fly, where shall we die?"

"On the roof of the old tower, I think, whence we can hurl ourselves at last and so perhaps escape being taken alive, and torment. Look you, Dick, that tower is mounted by three straight flights of steps. The first two of these we'll hold with such arrows as remain to us--there are three and twenty, as I think--and the last with axe and sword. Listen! They come! Take a brand from the hall hearth and let us go light the flambeaux."

So they went and set fire to the great torches of wood and tallow that were set in their iron holders to light the steps of the tower. Ere the

last of them was burning they heard their enemies ravaging without.

"Listen!" said Hugh as they descended to the head of the first flight of stairs. "They are across the moat."

As he spoke the massive doors crashed in beneath the blows of a baulk of timber.

"Now," said Hugh, as they strung their bows, "six arrows apiece here, if we can get off so many, and the odd eleven at our next stand. Ah, they come."

The mob rushed into the hall below, waving torches and swords and hunting it as dogs hunt a covert.

"The English wizards have hid themselves away," cried a voice. "Let us burn the place, for so we are sure to catch them."

"Nay, nay," answered another voice, that of the mad friar. "We must have them beneath the torture, that we may learn how to lift the curse from Avignon, and the names of their accomplices on earth and in hell. Search, search, search!"

"Little need to search," said Grey Dick, stepping out on to the landing.

"Devil, go join your fellow-devils in that hell you talk of," and he sent an arrow through his heart.

For a moment there followed the silence of consternation while the mob stood staring at their fallen leader. Then with a yell of rage they charged the stair and that fray began which was told of in Avignon for generations. Hugh and Dick shot their arrows, nor could they miss, seeing what was their target; indeed some of those from the great black bow pinned foe to foe beneath them. But so crowded were the assailants on the narrow stair that they could not shoot back. They advanced helpless, thrust to their doom by the weight of those who pressed behind.

Now they were near, the dead, still on their feet, being borne forward by the living, to whom they served as shields. Hugh and Dick ran to the head of the second flight and thence shot off the arrows that remained.

Dick loosed the last of them, and of this fearful shaft it was said that it slew three men, piercing through the body of one, the throat of the second and burying its barb in the skull of the third on the lowest step. Now Dick unstrung his bow, and thrust it into its case on his shoulder, for he was minded that they should go together at the last.

"Shafts have sung their song," he said, with a fierce laugh; "now it is the turn of the axe and sword to make another music."

Then he gripped Sir Hugh by the hand, saying:

"Farewell, master. Oh, I hold this a merry death, such as the Saints grant to few. Ay, and so would you were you as free as I am. Well, doubtless your lady has gone before. Or at worst soon she will follow after and greet you in the Gate of Death, where Murgh sits and keeps his count of passing souls."

"Farewell, friend," answered Hugh, "be she quick or dead, thus Red Eve would wish that I should die. A Cressi! A Cressi!" he cried and drove his sword through the throat of a soldier who rushed at him.

They fought a very good fight, as doubtless the dead were telling each other while they passed from that red stair to such rest as they had won. They had fought a very good fight and it was hard to say which had done the best, Hugh's white sword or Dick's grey axe. And now, unwounded still save for a bruise or two, they stood there in the moonlight upon the stark edge of the tall tower, the foe in front and black space beneath. There they stood leaning on axe and sword and drawing their breath in great sobs, those two great harvestmen who that day had toiled so hard in the rich fields of death.

For a while the ever-gathering crowd of their assailants remained still staring at them. Then the leaders began to whisper to each other, for they scarcely seemed to dare to talk aloud.



"What shall we do?" asked one. "These are not men. No men could have fought as they have fought us for seven days and at last have slain us like sparrows in a net and themselves remained unhurt."

"No," answered another, "and no mortal archer could send his shaft through the bodies of three. Still it is finished now unless they find wings and fly away. So let us take them."

"Yes, yes," broke in Grey Dick with his hissing laugh, "come and take us, you curs of Avignon. Having our breath again, we are ready to be taken," and he lifted his axe and shook it.

"Seize them," shouted the leader of the French. "Seize them!" echoed those who poured up the stairs behind.

But there the matter ended, since none could find stomach to face that axe and sword. So at length they took another counsel.

"Bring bows and shoot them through the legs. Thus we shall bring them living to their trial," commanded the captain of the men of Avignon. He was their fourth captain on that one day, for the other three lay upon the stairs or in the hall.

Now Hugh and Dick spoke together, few words and swift, as to whether they should charge or leap from the wall and have done with it. While

they spoke a little cloud floated over the face of the moon, so that until it had gone the French could not see to shoot.

"It's too risky," said Hugh. "If they capture us we must die a death to which I have no mind. Let us hurl our weapons at them, then leap."

"So be it," whispered Dick. "Do you aim at the captain on the left and I will take the other. Ready now! I think one creeps near to us."

"I think so, too," Hugh whispered back, "I felt the touch of his garments. Only he seemed to pass us from behind, which cannot be."

The cloud passed, and once again they were bathed in silver light. It showed the men of Avignon already bending their bows; it showed Hugh and Grey Dick lifting axe and sword to hurl them. But between them and their mark it showed also a figure that they knew well, a stern and terrible figure, wearing a strange cap of red and yellow and a cape of rich, black fur.

"O God of Heaven! 'tis Murgh the Helper," gasped Hugh.

"Ay, Murgh the Fire, Murgh the Sword," said Dick, adding quietly, "it is true I was wondering whether he would prove as good as his word. Look now, look! they see him also!"

See him they did, indeed, and for a moment there was silence on that

crowded tower top where stood at least a score of men, while their fellows packed the hall and stair below by hundreds. All stared at Murgh, and Murgh stared back at them with his cold eyes. Then a voice screamed:

"Satan! Satan come from hell to guard his own! Death himself is with you! Fly, men of Avignon, fly!"

Small need was there for this command. Already, casting down their bows, those on the tower top were rushing to the mouth of the stair, and, since it was blocked with men, using their swords upon them to hew a road. Now those below, thinking that it was the English wizards who slew them, struck back.

Presently all that stair and the crowded hall below, black as the mouth of the pit, for such lights as still burned soon were swept away, rang with the screams and curses and stifled groans of the trodden down or dying. In the pitchy darkness brother smote brother, friend trampled out the life of friend, till the steep steps were piled high and the doorways blocked with dead. So hideous were the sounds indeed, that Hugh and Grey Dick crossed themselves, thinking that hell had come to Avignon, or Avignon sunk down to hell. But Murgh only folded his white-gloved hands upon his breast and smiled.

At length, save for the moaning of those hurt men who still lived, the dreadful tumult sank to silence. Then Murgh turned and spoke in his slow

and icy voice:

"You were about to seek me in the fosse of this high tower, were you not, Hugh de Cressi and Richard Archer? A foolish thought, in truth, and a sinful, so sinful that it would have served you well if I had let you come. But your strait was sore and your faith was weak, and I had no such command. Therefore I have come to others whose names were written in my book. Ay, and being half human after all--for does not your creed tell you that I was born of Sin? I rejoice that it is given to me to protect those who would have protected me when I seemed to stand helpless in the hands of cruel men. Nay, thank me not. What need have I of your thanks, which are due to God alone! And question me not, for why should I answer your questions, even if I know those answers? Only do my bidding. This night seek whom you will in Avignon, but to-morrow ere the dawn ride away, for we three must meet again at a place appointed before this winter's snows are passed."

"O dread lord of Death, one thing, only one," began Hugh.

But Murgh held up his white-gloved hand and replied:

"Have I not said that I answer no questions? Now go forth and follow the promptings of your heart till we meet again."

Then gliding to the head of the stair he vanished in the shadow.

"Say, what shall we do?" asked Hugh in amazed voice.

"It matters little what we do or leave undone, master, seeing that we are fore-fated men whom, as I think, none can harm until a day that will not dawn to-morrow nor yet awhile. Therefore let us wash ourselves and eat and borrow new garments, if we can find any that are not soiled, and then, if the horses are still unharmed, mount and ride from this accursed Avignon for England."

"Nay, Dick, since first we must learn whether or no we leave friends behind us here."

"Ay, master, if you will. But since yonder Murgh said nothing of them, it was in my mind that they are either dead or fled."

"Not dead, I pray, Dick. Oh, I am sure, not dead, and I left living! When Red Eve and I met, Murgh had been with her and promised that she would recover and be strong," answered Hugh bravely, although there was a note of terror in his voice.

"Red Eve has other foes in Avignon besides the pest," muttered Grey Dick, adding: "still, let us have faith; it is a good friend to man. Did not yonder Helper chide us for our lack of it?"

They forced a way down the dead-cumbered tower stair, crawling through the darkness over the bodies of the fallen. They crossed the hall that

also was full of dead, and of wounded whose pitiful groans echoed from the vaulted roof, and climbed another stair to their chamber in the gateway tower. Here from a spark of fire that still smouldered on the hearth, they lit the lamps of olive-oil and by the light of them washed off the stains of battle, and refreshed themselves with food and wine. These things done, Dick returned to the hall and presently brought thence two suits of armour and some cloaks which he had taken either from the walls or from off the slain. In these they disguised themselves as best they could, as de Noyon had disguised himself at Crecy.

Then, having collected a store of arrows whereof many lay about, they departed by the back entrance. The great front doorway was so choked with corpses that they could not pass it, since here had raged the last fearful struggle to escape. Going to the little stable-yard, where they found their horses unharmed in the stalls, although frightened by the tumult and stiff from lack of exercise, they fed and saddled them and led them out. So presently they looked their last upon the Bride's Tower that had sheltered them so well.

"It has served our turn," said Hugh, glancing back at it from the other side of the deserted square, "but oh, I pray heaven that we may never see that charnel-house again!"

As he spoke a figure appeared from the shadow of a doorway, and ran toward them. Thinking it was that of some foe, Dick lifted his axe to cut him down, whereon a voice cried in English:

"Hold! I am David!"

"David!" exclaimed Hugh. "Then thanks be to God, for know, we thought you dead these many days."

"Ay, sir," answered the young man, "as I thought you. The rumour reached the Jews, among whom I have been hiding while I recovered of my hurts, that the Mad Monk and his fellows had stormed the tower and killed you both. Therefore I crept out to learn for myself. Now I have found you by your voices, who never again hoped to look upon you living," and he began to sob in his relief and joy.

"Come on, lad," said Grey Dick kindly, "this is no place for greetings."

"Whither go you, sir?" asked David as he walked forward alongside of the horses.

"To seek that house where we saw Sir Andrew Arnold and the lady Eve," answered Hugh, "if by any chance it can be found."

"That is easy, sir," said David. "As it happens, I passed it not much more than an hour ago and knew it again."

"Did you see any one there?" asked Hugh eagerly.

"Nay, the windows were dark. Also the Jew guiding me said he had heard that all who dwelt in that house were dead of the plague. Still of this matter he knew nothing for certain."

Hugh groaned, but only answered:

"Forward!"

As they went David told them his story. It seemed that when he was struck down in the square where the crazy friar preached, and like to be stabbed and trampled to death, some of the Jews dragged him into the shadow and rescued him. Afterward they took him to a horrid and squalid quarter called La Juiverie, into which no Christian dare enter. Here he lay sick of his hurts and unable to get out until that very afternoon; the widow Rebecca, whom they had saved, nursing him all the while.

"Did you hear aught of us?" asked Dick.

"Ay, at first that you were holding Dead Bride's Tower bravely. So as soon as I might, I came to join you there if I could win in and you still lived. But they told me that you had fallen at last."

"Ah!" said Dick, "well, as it chances it was not we who fell, but that tale is long. Still, David, you are a brave lad who would have come to die with us, and my master will thank you when he can give his mind to such things. Say, did you hear aught else?"



"Ay, Dick; I heard two days ago that the French lord, Cattrina, whom Sir Hugh was to have fought at Venice, had left Avignon, none knew why or whither he went."

"Doubtless because of the plague and he wished to go where there was none," answered Dick.

But Hugh groaned again, thinking to himself that Acour would scarcely have left Avignon if Eve were still alive within its walls.

After this they went on in silence, meeting very few and speaking with none, for the part of the great city through which they passed seemed to be almost deserted. Indeed in this quarter the pest was so fearful that all who remained alive and could do so had fled elsewhere, leaving behind them only the sick and those who plundered houses.

"One thing I forgot to say," said David presently. "The Jews told me that they had certain information that the notary knave Basil was paid by the lord Cattrina to lead us to that square where the fires burned in order that we might be murdered there. Further, our death was to be the signal for the massacre of all the Jews, only, as it chanced, their plan went awry."

"As will Basil's neck if ever I meet him again," muttered Grey Dick beneath his breath. "Lord! what fools we were to trust that man. Well,

we've paid the price and, please God, so shall he."

They turned the corner and rode down another street, till presently

David said:

"Halt! yonder is the house. See the cognizance above the gateway!"

Hugh and Dick leapt from their horses, the latter bidding David lead them into the courtyard and hold them there. Then they entered the house, of which the door was ajar, and by the shine of the moon that struggled through the window-places, crept up the stairs and passages till they reached those rooms where Sir Andrew and Eve had lodged.

"Hist!" said Dick, and he pointed to a line of light that showed beneath the closed door.

Hugh pushed it gently and it opened a little. They looked through the crack, and within saw a man in a dark robe who was seated at a table counting out gold by the light of a lamp. Just then he lifted his head, having felt the draught of air from the open door. It was the notary Basil!

Without a word they entered the room, closing and bolting the door behind them. Then Dick leapt on Basil as a wolf leaps, and held him fast, while Hugh ran past him and threw wide the door of that chamber in which Eve had lain sick. It was empty. Back he came again and in a terrible

voice, said:

"Now, Sir Notary, where are the lady Eve and Sir Andrew her guardian?"

"Alas, Sir Knight," began the knave in a quavering voice, "both of them are dead."

"What!" cried Hugh supporting himself against the wall, for at this terrible news his knees trembled beneath him, "have you or your patron Cattrina murdered them?"

"Murdered them, Sir Knight! I do murder? I, a Christian and a man of peace! Never! And the noble lord of Cattrina, Count de Noyon! Why, he wished to marry the lady, not to murder her. Indeed he swore that she was his wife."

"So you know all these things, do you, villain?" said Grey Dick, shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Sir Knight," went on the frightened fellow, "blame me not for the acts of God. He slew these noble persons, not I; I myself saw the lovely lady carried from this house wrapped in a red cloak."

"So you were in the house, were you?" said Grey Dick, shaking him again.

"Well, whither did they carry her, thief of the night?"

"To the plague pit, good sir; where else in these times?"

Now Hugh groaned aloud, his eyes closed, and he seemed as though he were about to fall. Grey Dick, noting it, for a moment let go of the notary and turned as though to help his master. Like a flash Basil drew a dagger from under his dirty robe and struck at Dick's back. The blow was well aimed, nor could an unprotected man on whom it fell have escaped death. But although Basil did not see it because of Dick's long cloak, beneath this cloak he wore the best of mail, and on that mail the slender dagger broke, its point falling harmless to the ground. Next instant Dick had him again in his iron grip. Paying no further heed to Hugh, who had sunk to the floor a huddled heap, he began to speak into the lawyer's ear in his slow, hissing voice.

"Devil," he said, "whether or no you murdered Red Eve and Sir Andrew Arnold the saint, I cannot say for certain, though doubtless I shall learn in time. At least a while ago you who had taken our money, strove to murder both of us, or cause us to be torn in pieces upon yonder square where the fires burned. Now, too, you have striven to murder me with that bodkin of yours, not knowing, fool, that I am safe from all men. Well, say your prayers, since you too journey to the plague pit, for so the gatherers of the dead will think you died."

"Sir," gasped the terrified wretch, "spare me and I will speak----"

"More lies," hissed Dick into his ear. "Nay, go tell them to the father

of lies, for I have no time to waste in hearkening to them. Take your pay, traitor!"

A few seconds later Basil lay dead upon the floor.

Grey Dick looked at him. Kneeling down, he thrust his hands into the man's pockets, and took thence the gold that he had been hiding away when they came upon him, no small sum as it chanced.

"Our own come back with interest," he said with one of his silent laughs, "and we shall need monies for our faring. Why, here's a writing also which may tell those who can read it something."

He cast it on the table, then turned to his master, who was awakening from his swoon.

Dick helped him to his feet.

"What has passed?" asked Hugh in a hollow voice.

"Murgh!" answered Dick, pointing to the dead man on the floor.

"Have you killed him, friend?"

"Ay, sure enough, as he strove to kill me," and again he pointed, this time to the broken dagger.

Hugh made no answer, only seeing the writing on the table, took it up, and began to read like one who knows not what he does. Presently his eyes brightened and he said:

"What does this mean, I wonder. Hearken."

"Rogue, you have cheated me as you cheat all men and now I follow her who has gone. Be sure, however, that you shall reap your reward in due season, de Noyon."

"I know not," said Dick, "and the interpreter is silent," and he kicked the body of Basil. "Perhaps I was a little over hasty who might have squeezed the truth out of him before the end."

"Her who is gone," reflected Hugh aloud. "'Tis Red Eve who is gone and de Noyon is scarcely the man to seek her among passed souls. Moreover, the Jews swear that he rode from Avignon two days ago. Come, Dick, let that carrion lie, and to the plague pit."

An hour later and they stood on the edge of that dreadful place, hearing and seeing things which are best left untold. A priest came up to them, one of those good men who, caring nothing for themselves, still dared to celebrate the last rites of the Church above the poor departed.

"Friends," he said, "you seem to be in trouble. Can I help you, for Jesus' sake?"

"Perchance, holy Father," answered Hugh. "Tell us, you who watch this dreadful place, was a woman wrapped in a red cloak thrown in here two or three days gone?"

"Alas, yes," said the priest with a sigh, "for I read the Office over her and others. Nay, what are you about to do? By now she is two fathoms deep and burned away with lime so that none could know her. If you enter there the guards will not let you thence living. Moreover, it is useless. Pray to God to comfort you, poor man, as I will, who am sure it will not be denied."

Then Dick led, or rather carried, Hugh from the brink of that awesome, common grave.