

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DOOM

It was the last night of February, the bitterest night perhaps of all that sad winter, when at length Hugh de Cressi, Grey Dick, and David Day rode into the town of Dunwich. Only that morning they had landed at Yarmouth after a long, long journey whereof the perils and the horrors may be guessed but need not be written. France, through which they had passed, seemed to be but one vast grave over which the wail of those who still survived went up without cease to the cold, unpitying heavens.

Here in England the tale was still the same. Thus in the great seaport of Yarmouth scarcely enough people were left alive to inter the unshriven dead, nor of these would any stay to speak with them, fearing lest they had brought a fresh curse from overseas. Even the horses that they rode they took from a stable where they whinnied hungrily, none being there to feed them, leaving in their place a writing of the debt.

Betwixt Yarmouth and Dunwich they had travelled through smitten towns and villages, where a few wandered fearfully, distraught with sorrow or seeking food. In the streets the very dogs lay dead and in the fields they saw the carcasses of cattle dragged from the smokeless and deserted steadings and half hidden in a winding-sheet of snow. For the Black Plague spared neither man nor beast.

At the little port of Lowestoft they met a sullen sailorman who stood staring at the beach whereon his fishing boat lay overturned and awash for lack of hands to drag it out of reach of the angry sea. They asked him if he knew of how it fared with Dunwich.

By way of answer he cursed them, adding:

"Must I be forever pestered as to Dunwich? This is the third time of late that I have heard of Dunwich from wandering folk. Begone thither and gather tidings for yourselves, which I hope will please you as well as they do me."

"Now, if I were not in haste I would stay a while to teach you manners, you foul-mouthed churl," muttered Grey Dick between his teeth.

"Let the fellow be," said Hugh wearily; "the men of Lowestoft have ever hated those of Dunwich, and it seems that a common woe does not soften hearts. Soon enough we shall learn the truth."

"Ay, you'll learn it soon enough," shouted the brute after them.

"Dunwich boats won't steel Lowestoft herrings for many a year!"

So they rode on through Kessland, which they reached as night was closing in, through Benacre and Wrentham, also past houses in which none seemed to dwell.

"Murgh has been here before us, I think," said Dick at length.

"Then I hope that we may overtake him," answered Hugh with a smile, "for I need his tidings--or his rest. Oh! Dick, Dick," he added, "I wonder has ever man borne a heavier burden for all this weary while? If I were sure, it would not be so bad, for when earthly hope is done we may turn to other comfort. But I'm not sure; Basil may have lied. The priest by the pit could only swear to the red cloak, of which there are many, though few be buried in them. And, Dick, there are worse things than that. Perchance Acour got her after all."

"And perchance he didn't," answered Dick. "Well, fret on if you will; the thing does not trouble me who for my part am sure enough."

"Of what, man, of what?"

"Of seeing the lady Eve ere long."

"In this world or the next, Dick?"

"In this. I don't reckon of the next, mayhap there we shall be blind and not see. Besides, of what use is that world to you where it is written that they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels? You'll make no good angel, I'm thinking, while as for the lady Eve, she's too human for it as yet."

"Why do you think we shall see her on earth?" asked Hugh, ignoring these reflections.

"Because he who is called the Helper said as much, and whatever he may be he is no liar. Do you not remember what Red Eve told you when she awoke from that dream of hers, which was no dream? And do you not remember what Sir Andrew told you as to a certain meeting in the snow--pest upon it!" and he wiped some of the driving flakes from his face--"Sir Andrew, who is a saint, and, therefore, like Murgh, can be no liar?"

"If you think thus," said Hugh in a new voice, "why did you not say so before?"

"Because I love not argument, master, and if I had, you would ever have reasoned with me from Avignon to Yarmouth town and spoilt my sleep of nights. Oh! where is your faith?"

"What is faith, Dick?"

"The gift of belief, master. A very great gift, seeing what a man believes is and will be true for him, however false it may prove for others. He who believes nothing, sows nothing, and therefore reaps nothing, good or ill."

"Who taught you these things, Dick?"

"One whom I am not likely to forget, or you, either. One who is my master at archery and whose words, like his arrows, though they be few, yet strike the heart of hidden truth. Oh, fear not, doubtless sorrow waits you yonder," and he pointed toward Dunwich. "Yet it comes to my lips that there's joy beyond the sorrows, the joy of battle and of love--for those who care for love, which I think foolishness. There stands a farm, and the farmer is a friend of mine, or used to be. Let us go thither and feed these poor beasts and ourselves, or I think we will never come to Dunwich through this cold and snow. Moreover," he added thoughtfully, "joy or sorrow or both of them are best met by full men, and I wish to look to your harness and my own, for sword and axe are rusted with the sea. Who knows but that we may need them in Dunwich, or beyond, when we meet with Murgh, as he promised that we should."

So they rode up to the house and found Dick's friend, the farmer, lying dead there in his own yard, whither his family had dragged him ere they determined to fly the place. Still, there was fodder in the stable and they lit a fire in the kitchen hearth and drank of the wine which they had brought with them from the ship, and ate of the bacon which still hung from the rafters. This done, they lay down to sleep a while. About one in the morning, however, Hugh roused Dick and David, saying that he could rest no more and that something in his heart bade him push on to Dunwich.

"Then let us follow your heart, master," said Dick, yawning. "Yet I wish

it had waited till dawn to move you. Yes, let us follow your heart to good or evil. David, go you out and saddle up those nags."

For Dick had worked late at their mail and weapons, which now were bright and sharp again, and was very weary.

It was after three in the morning when at length, leaving the heath, they rode up to Dunwich Middlegate, expecting to find it shut against them at such an hour. But it stood open, nor did any challenge them from the guardhouse.

"They keep an ill watch in Dunwich now-a-days," grumbled Dick. "Well, perchance there is one here to whom they can trust that business."

Hugh made no answer, only pressed on down the narrow street, that was deep and dumb with snow, till at length they drew rein before the door of his father's house, in the market-place, the great house where he was born. He looked at the windows and noted that, although they were unshuttered, no friendly light shone in them. He called aloud, but echo was his only answer, echo and the moan of the bitter wind and the sullen roar of the sea.

"Doubtless all men are asleep," he said. "Why should it be otherwise at such an hour? Let us enter and waken them."

"Yes, yes," answered Dick as he dismounted and threw the reins of his horse to David. "They are like the rest of Dunwich--asleep."

So they entered and began to search the house by the dim light of the moon. First they searched the lower chambers, then those where Hugh's father and his brothers had slept, and lastly the attics. Here they found the pallets of the serving-folk upon the floor, but none at rest upon them.

"The house is deserted," said Hugh heavily.

"Yes, yes," answered Dick again, in a cheerful voice; "doubtless Master de Cressi and your brothers have moved away to escape the pest."

"Pray God they have escaped it!" muttered Hugh. "This place stifles me," he added. "Let us out."

"Whither shall we go, master?"

"To Blythburgh Manor," he answered, "for there I may win tidings. David, bide you here, and if you can learn aught follow us across the moor. The manor cannot be missed."

So once more Hugh and Dick mounted their horses and rode away through the town, stopping now and again before some house they knew and calling

to its inmates. But though they called loudly none answered. Soon they grew sure that this was because there were none to answer, since of those houses many of the doors stood open. Only one living creature did they see in Dunwich. As they turned the corner near to the Blythburgh Gate they met a grey-haired man wrapped up in tattered blankets which were tied about him with haybands. He carried in his hand a beautiful flagon of silver. Doubtless he had stolen it from some church.

Seeing them, he cast this flagon into the snow and began to whimper like a dog.

"Mad Tom," said Dick, recognizing the poor fellow. "Tell us, Thomas, where are the folk of Dunwich?"

"Dead, dead; all dead!" he wailed, and fled away.

"Stay! What of Master de Cressi?" called Hugh. But the tower of the church round which he had vanished only echoed back across the snow, "What of Master de Cressi?"

Then at last Hugh understood the awful truth.

It was that, save those who had fled, the people of Dunwich were slain with the Sword of Pestilence, and all his kin among them.



They were on the Blythburgh Marshes, travelling thither by the shortest road. The moon was down and the darkness dense, for the snow-clouds hid the stars.

"Let us bide here a while," said Grey Dick as their horses blundered through the thick reeds. "It will soon be sunrise, and if we go on in this gloom we shall fall into some boghole or into the river, which I hear running on our left."

So they halted their weary horses and sat still, for in his wretchedness Hugh cared not what he did.

At length the east began to lighten, turning the sky to a smoky red. Then the rim of the sun rising out of the white-flecked ocean, threw athwart the desolate marsh a fierce ray that lay upon the snows like a sword of blood. They were standing on the crest of a little mound, and Dick, looking about him, knew the place.

"See," he said, pointing toward the river that ran near by, "it is just here that you killed young Clavering this day two years ago. Yonder also I shot the French knights, and Red Eve and you leapt into the Blythe and swam it."

"Ay," said Hugh, looking up idly, "but did you say two years, Dick? Nay, surely 'tis a score. Why," he added in a changed voice, "who may that be

in the hollow?" and he pointed to a tall figure which stood beneath them at a distance, half-hidden by the dank snow-mists.

"Let us go and see," said Dick, speaking almost in a whisper, for there was that about this figure which sent the blood to his throat and cheeks.

He drove the spurs into his tired horse's sides, causing it to leap forward.

Half a minute later they had ridden down the slope of the hollow. A puff of wind that came with the sun drove away the mist. Dick uttered a choking cry and leapt from his saddle. For there, calm, terrible, mighty, clothed in his red and yellow cap and robe of ebon furs, stood he who was named Murgh the Fire, Murgh the Sword, Murgh the Helper, Murgh, Gateway of the Gods!

They knelt before him in the snow, while, screaming in their fright, the horses fled away.

"Knight and Archer," said Murgh, in his icy voice, counting with the thumb of his white-gloved right hand upon the hidden fingers of his left. "Friends, you keep your tryst, but there are more to come. Have patience, there are more to come."

Then he became quiet, nor dared they ask him any questions. Only at a

motion of his arm they rose from their knees and stood before him.

A long while they stood thus in silence, till under Murgh's dreadful gaze Hugh's brain began to swim. He looked about him, seeking some natural thing to feed his eyes. Lo! yonder was that which he might watch, a hare crouching in its form not ten paces distant. See, out of the reeds crept a great red fox. The hare smelt or saw, and leaped away. The fox sprang at it, too late, for the white fangs closed emptily behind its scut. Then with a little snarl of hungry rage it turned and vanished into the brake.

The hare and the fox, the dead reeds, the rising sun, the snow--oh, who had told him of these things?

Ah! he remembered now, and that memory set the blood pulsing in his veins. For where these creatures were should be more besides Grey Dick and himself and the Man of many names.

He looked toward Murgh to see that he had bent himself and with his gloved hand was drawing lines upon the snow. Those lines when they were done enclosed the shape of a grave!

"Archer," said Murgh, "unsheath your axe and dig."

As though he understood, Dick obeyed, and began to hollow out a grave in the soft and boggy soil.

Hugh watched him like one who dreams, wondering who was destined to fill that grave. Presently a sound behind caused him to turn his head.

Oh! certainly he was mad, for there over the rise not a dozen yards away came the beautiful ghost of Eve Clavering, clad in her red cloak. With her was another ghost, that of old Sir Andrew Arnold, blood running down the armour beneath his robe and in his hand the hilt of a broken sword.

Hugh tried to speak, but his lips were dumb, nor did these ghosts take any heed of him, for their eyes were fixed elsewhere. To Murgh they went and stood before him silent. For a while he looked at them, then asked in his cold voice:

"Who am I, Eve Clavering?"

"The Man who came to visit me in my dream at Avignon and told me that I should live," she answered slowly.

"And who say you that I am, Andrew Arnold, priest of Christ the God?"

"He whom I visited in my youth in far Cathay," answered the old knight in an awed whisper. "He who sat beside the pool behind the dragon-guarded doors and was named Gateway of the Gods. He who showed to me that we should meet again in such a place and hour as this."

"Whence come you now, priest and woman, and why?"

"We come from Avignon. We fled thence from one who would have done this maiden grievous wrong. He followed us. Not an hour gone he overtook us with his knaves. He set them on to seize this woman, hanging back himself. Old as I am I slew them both and got my death in it," and he touched the great wound in his side with the hilt of the broken sword. "Our horses were the better; we fled across the swamp for Blythburgh, he hunting us and seeking my life and her honour. Thus we found you as it was appointed."

Murgh turned his eyes. Following their glance, for the first time they saw Hugh de Cressi and near him Grey Dick labouring at the grave. Eve stretched out her arms and so stood with head thrown back, the light of the daybreak shining in her lovely eyes and on her outspread hair. Hugh opened his lips to speak but Murgh lifted his hand and pointed behind them.

They turned and there, not twenty paces from them, clad in armour and seated on a horse was Edmund Acour, Count de Noyon, Seigneur of Cattrina.

He saw, then wheeled round to fly.

"Archer, to your work!" said Murgh, "you know it."

Ere the words had left his lips the great black bow was bent and ere the echoes died away the horse, struck in its side by the keen arrow, sank dying to the ground.

Then Murgh beckoned to the rider and he came as a man who must. But, throwing down the bow, Grey Dick once more began to labour at the grave like one who takes no further heed of aught save his allotted task.

Acour stood before Murgh like a criminal before his judge.

"Man," said the awful figure addressing him, "where have you been and what have you done since last we spoke together in the midday dark at Venice?"

Now, dragged word by slow word from his unwilling lips, came the answer of the traitor's heart.

"I fled from the field at Venice because I feared this knight, and you, O Spirit of Death. I journeyed to Avignon, in France, and there strove to possess myself of yonder woman whom here in England, with the help of one Nicholas, I had wed, when she was foully drugged. I strove to possess myself of her by fraud and by violence. But some fate was against me. She and that aged priest bribed the knave whom I trusted. He caused a dead man and woman dressed in their garments to be borne from their lodging to the plague pit while they fled from Avignon disguised."

Here for a moment Grey Dick paused from his labours at the grave and looked up at Hugh. Then he fell to them again, throwing out the peaty soil with both hands.

"My enemy and his familiar, for man he can scarcely be," went on Acour, pointing first to Hugh and then to Dick, "survived all my plans to kill them and instead killed those whom I had sent after them. I learned that the woman and the priest were not dead, but fled, and followed them, and after me came my enemy and his familiar. Twice we passed each other on the road, once we slept in the same house. I knew them but they knew me not and the Fate which blinded me from them, saved them also from all my plots to bring them to their doom. The woman and the priest took ship to England, and I followed in another ship, being made mad with desire and with jealous rage, for there I knew my enemy would find and win her. In the darkness before this very dawn I overtook the woman and the priest at last and set my fellows on to kill the man. Myself I would strike no blow, fearing lest my death should come upon me, and so I should be robbed of her. But God fought with His aged servant who in his youth was the first of knights. He slew my men, then fled on with the woman, Eve of Clavering. I followed, knowing that he was sore wounded and must die, and that then the beauty which has lured me to shame and ruin would be mine, if only for an hour. I followed, and here at this place of evil omen, where first I saw my foe, I found you, O Incarnate Sword of Vengeance."

Murgh unfolded his bare arms and lifted his head, which was sunk upon

his breast.

"Your pardon," he said gently, "my name is Hand of Fate and not Sword of Vengeance. There is no vengeance save that which men work upon themselves. What fate may be and vengeance may be I know not fully, and none will ever know until they have passed the Gateway of the Gods. Archer the grave is deep enough. Come forth now and let us learn who it is decreed shall fill it. Knights, the hour is at hand for you to finish that which you began at Crecy and at Venice."

Hugh heard and drew his sword. Acour drew his sword also, then cried out, pointing to Grey Dick:

"Here be two against one. If I conquer he will shoot me with his bow."

"Have no fear, Sir Thief and Liar," hissed Grey Dick, "for that shaft will not be needed. Slay the master if you can and go safe from the squire," and he unstrung his black bow and hid it in its case.

Now Hugh stepped to where Red Eve stood, the wounded Sir Andrew leaning on her shoulder. Bending down he kissed her on the lips, saying:

"Soon, very soon, my sweet, whom I have lost and found again, you will be mine on earth, or I shall be yours in heaven. This, then, in greeting or farewell."



"In greeting, beloved, not in farewell," she answered as she kissed him back, "for if you die, know that I follow hard upon your road. Yet I say that yonder grave was not dug for you."

"Nay, not for you, son, not for you," said Sir Andrew lifting his faint head. "One fights for you whom you do not see, and against Him Satan and his servant cannot stand," and letting fall the sword hilt he stretched out his thin hand and blessed him.

Now when Acour saw that embrace his jealous fury prevailed against his fears. With a curse upon his lips he leapt at Hugh and smote, thinking to take him unawares. But Hugh was watching, and sprang back, and then the fray began, if fray it can be called.

A wild joy shining in his eyes, Hugh grasped his long sword with both hands and struck. So great was that blow that it bit through Acour's armour, beneath his right arm, deep into the flesh and sent him staggering back. Again he struck and wounded him in the shoulder; a third time and clove his helm so that the blood poured down into his eyes and blinded him.

Back reeled Acour, back to the very edge of the grave, and stood there swaying to and fro. At the sight of his helplessness Hugh's fury seemed to leave him. His lifted sword sank downward.

"Let God deal with you, knave," he said, "for I cannot."

For a while there was silence. There they stood and stared at the smitten man waiting the end, whatever it might be. They all stared save Murgh, who fixed his stony eyes upon the sky.

Presently it came. The sword, falling from Acour's hand into the grave, rested there point upward. With a last effort he drew his dagger. Dashing the blood from his eyes, he hurled it with all his dying strength, not at Hugh, but at Red Eve. Past her ear it hissed, severing a little tress of her long hair, which floated down on to the snow.

Then Acour threw his arms wide and fell backward--fell backward and vanished in the grave.

Dick ran to look. There he lay dead, pierced through back and bosom by the point of his own sword.

For one brief flash of time a black dove-shaped bird was seen hovering round the head of Murgh.

"Finished!" said Dick straightening himself. "Well, I had hoped to see a better fight, but cowards die as cowards live."

Leaning on Red Eve's shoulder Sir Andrew limped to the side of the grave. They both looked down on that which lay therein.

"Daughter," said the old man, "through many dangers it has come about as I foretold. The bond that in your drugged sleep bound you to this highborn knave is severed by God's sword of death. Christ have pity on his sinful soul. Now, Sir Hugh de Cressi, come hither and be swift, for my time is short."

Hugh obeyed, and at a sign took Eve by the hand. Then, speaking very low and as quickly as he might for all his life was draining from him through the red wound in his side, the old priest spoke the hallowed words that bound these two together till death should part them. Yes, there by the graveside, over the body of the dead Acour, there in the red light of the morning, amidst the lonely snows, was celebrated the strangest marriage the world has ever seen. In nature's church it was celebrated, with the grim, grey Archer for a clerk, and Death's own fearful minister for congregation.

It was done and with uplifted, trembling hands Sir Andrew blessed them both--them and the fruit of their bodies which was to be. He blessed them in the name of the all-seeing God he served. He bade them put aside their grief for those whom they had lost. Soon, he said, their short day done, the lost would be found again, made glorious, and with them himself, who, loving them both on earth, would love them through eternity.

Then, while their eyes grew blind with tears, and even the fierce archer turned aside his face, Sir Andrew staggered to where he stood who in the

Land of Sunrise had been called Gateway of the Gods. Before him he bent his grey and ancient head.

"O thou who dwellest here below to do the will of heaven, to thee I come as once thou badest me," he said, and was silent.

Murgh let his eyes rest on him. Then stretching out his hand, he touched him very gently on the breast, and as he touched him smiled a sweet and wondrous smile.

"Good and faithful servant," he said, "thy work is done on earth. Now I, whom all men fear, though I be their friend and helper, am bidden by the Lord of life and death to call thee home. Look up and pass!"

The old priest obeyed. It seemed to those who watched that the radiance on the face of Murgh had fallen upon him also. He smiled, he stretched his arms upward as though to clasp what they might not see. Then down he sank gently, as though upon a bed, and lay white and still in the white, still snow.

The Helper turned to the three who remained alive.

"Farewell for a little time," he said. "I must be gone. But when we meet again, as meet we shall, then fear me not, for have you not seen that to

those who love me I am gentle?"

Hugh de Cressi and Red Eve made no answer, for they knew not what to say. But Grey Dick spoke out boldly.

"Sir Lord, or Sir Spirit," he said, "save once at the beginning, when the arrow burst upon my string, I never feared you. Nor do I fear your gifts," and he pointed to the grave and to dead Sir Andrew, "which of late have been plentiful throughout the world, as we of Dunwich know. Therefore I dare to ask you one question ere we part for a while. Why do you take one and leave another? Is it because you must, or because every shaft does not hit its mark?"

Now Murgh looked him up and down with his sunken eyes, then answered:

"Come hither, archer, and I will lay my hand upon your heart also and you shall learn."

"Nay," cried Grey Dick, "for now I have the answer to the riddle, since I know you cannot lie. When we die we still live and know; therefore I'm content to wait."

Again that smile swept across Murgh's awful face though that smile was cold as the winter dawn. Then he turned and slowly walked away toward the west.

They watched him go till he became but a blot of fantastic colour that soon vanished on the moorland.

Hugh spoke to Red Eve and said:

"Wife, let us away from this haunted place and take what joy we can. Who knows when Murgh may return again and make us as are all the others whom we love!"

"Ay, husband won at last," she answered, "who knows? Yet, after so much fear and sorrow, first I would rest a while with you."

So hand in hand they went till they, too, grew small and vanished on the snowy marsh.

But Grey Dick stayed there alone with the dead, and presently spoke aloud for company.

"The woman has him heart and soul," he said, "as is fitting, and where's the room between the two for an archer-churl to lodge? Mayhap, after all, I should have done well to take yonder Murgh for lord when I had the chance. Man, or god, or ghost, he's a fellow to my liking, and once

he had led me through the Gates no woman would have dared to come to part us. Well, good-bye, Hugh de Cressi, till you are sick of kisses and the long shafts begin to fly again, for then you will bethink you of a certain bow and of him who alone can bend it."

Having spoken thus in his hissing voice, whereof the sound resembled that of an arrow in its flight, Grey Dick descended into the grave and trod the earth over Acour's false and handsome face, hiding it from the sight of men forever.

Then he lifted up the dead Sir Andrew in his strong arms and slowly bore him thence to burial.