

CHAPTER V

THE COMING OF BLANCHE

One day, it was the last of the year, the anniversary of the death of my uncle whose goodness and wisdom I pondered on more and more as time went

by, having a little time to spare from larger affairs, I chanced to be in the shop in the front of the house, which, as John Grimmer had said, he kept as a trap to "snare the ladybirds," and I continued, because I knew that he would not wish that anything should be changed. Here I was pleasing myself by looking over such pieces as we had to sell which the head craftsman was showing to me, since myself I knew little of them, except as a matter of account.

Whilst I was thus engaged there entered the shop a very fine lady accompanied by a still finer lordling arrayed so similarly that, at first sight, in their hooded ermine cloaks it was difficult to know which was man and which was woman. When they threw these aside, however,

for the shop was warm after the open air, I knew more than that, since with a sudden stoppage of the heart I saw before me none other than the lady Blanche Aleys and her relative, the lord Deleroy.

She, who in the old days of the Hastings burnings had been but a lily bud, was now an open flower and beautiful exceedingly; indeed in her own fashion the most beautiful woman that ever I beheld. Tall she was and

stately as a lily bloom, white as a lily also, save for those wondrous blue eyes over which curled the dark lashes. In shape, too, she was perfect, full-breasted, yet not too full, small-waisted, and with delicate limbs, a very Venus, such an one as I had seen in ancient marble brought in a ship from Italy and given, as I believe, to the King, who loved such things, to be set up in his palace.

My lord also was yet handsomer than he had been, more set and manly, though still he affected his coxcomb party-coloured dress with the turned-up shoes of which the points were fastened by little golden chains beneath the knee. Still he was a fine man with his roving black eyes, his loose mouth and little pointed beard from which, as from his hair, came an odour of scents. Seeing me in my merchant's gown, for I remained mindful of my uncle's advice as regards attire, he spoke to me as great men do to shop-keepers.

"Well met, Goldsmith," he said in his round, well-trained voice, "I would make a new-year gift to the lady here, and I am told that you have plate-wares of the best; gold cups and jewels of rich and rare design, stamped all of them with the image of the sun which one would wish to remember on such a day as this. But hearken, let John Grimmer himself come to serve me for I would treat with no underlings, or take me to him where he is."

Now I bowed before him, rubbing my hands, and answered, for so the humour led me: "Then I fear that I must take my lord farther than my

lord would wish to travel just at present, though who knows? Perchance, like the rest of us, he may take that journey sooner than he thinks."

Now at the sound of my voice I saw the lady Blanche stare at me, trying to catch sight of my face beneath the hood which I wore on this cold day, while Deleroy started and said briefly:

"Your meaning?"

"It is plain, my lord. John Grimmer is dead and I know not where he dwells at present since he took that secret with him. But I, who unworthily carry on his trade, am at your lordship's service."

Then I turned and bade the shopman command Kari to come hither and bring with him the choicest of our cups and jewels.

He went and I busied myself in setting stools for these noble customers to rest on before the fire. As I did so by chance my hand touched that of the lady Blanche, whereat once more she strove to peer beneath my hood. It was as though the nature in her knew that touch again, as by some instinct every woman does, if once the toucher's lips have been near her own, though it be long ago. But I only turned my head away and drew that hood the closer.

Now Kari came and with him the shopman, bearing the precious wares. Kari

wore a wool-lined robe, very plain, which yet became him so well that with his fine-cut face and flashing eyes he looked like an Eastern prince disguised. At him this fine pair stared, for never had they seen such a man, but taking no note, with many bows he showed the jewels one by one. Among these was a gem of great value, a large, heart-shaped ruby that Kari had set in a surround of twisted golden serpents with heads raised to strike and little eyes of diamonds. Upon this brooch the lady Blanche fixed her gaze and discarding all others, began to play with it, till at length the lord Deleroy asked the price. I consulted with Kari, explaining that myself I did not handle this branch of my business, then named it carelessly; it was a great sum.

"God's truth! Blanche," said Deleroy, "this merchant thinks I am made of gold. You must choose a cheaper ornament for your new year's gift, or he will have to wait for payment."

"Which mayhap I should be willing to do from one of your quality, my lord," I interrupted, bowing.

He looked at me and said:

"Can I have a word apart with you, merchant?"

Again I bowed and led him to the eating-room where he gazed about him, amazed at the richness of the furnishings. He sat him down upon a carven chair while I stood before him humbly and waited.

"I am told," he said at length, "that John Grimmer did other business besides that of selling jewels."

"Yes, my lord, some foreign trade."

"And some home trade also. I mean that he lent money."

"At times, my lord, and on good security, if he chanced to have any at command, and at a certain interest. Perhaps my lord will come to his point."

"It is short and clear. Those of us who are at Court always want money where it is needful if we would have advancement and earn the royal favour of one who does not pay, at least in gold."

"Be pleased to state the amount and the security offered, my lord."

He did so. The sum was high and the security was bad.

"Are there any who would stand surety for my lord?"

"Yes, one of great estate, Sir Robert Aleys, who has wide lands in Sussex."

"I have heard the name, and if my lord will bid his lawyers put the

matter in writing, I will cause the lands to be valued and give an answer as quickly as may be."

"For a young man you are careful, merchant."

"Alas! such as I need to be who must guard our small earnings in these troublous times of war and tumult. Such a sum as you speak of would take all that John Grimmer and I have laid by after years of toil."

Again he looked at the furnishings of the room and shrugged his shoulders, then said:

"Good, it shall be done for the need is urgent. To whom is the letter to be sent?"

"To John Grimmer, at the Boat House, Cheapside."

"But you told me that John Grimmer was dead."

"And so he is, my lord, but his name remains."

Then we returned to the sop and as we went I said,

"If your lordship's lady should set her heart upon the ruby the cost of it can stand over a while, since I know that it is hard for a husband to disappoint a wife of what she desires."

"Man, she is my distant cousin, not my wife. I would she were, but how can two high-placed paupers wed?"

"Perhaps it is for this reason that my lord wishes to borrow money."

Again he shrugged his shoulders, and as we entered the shop I threw back the hood from off my head upon which I wore a merchant's cap of velvet. The lady Blanche caught sight of me and started.

"Surely, surely," she began, "you are he who shot the three arrows at the cave's mouth at Hastings."

"Yes, my lady, and did your hawk escape the dogs upon the London road?"

"Nay, it was crippled and died, which was the first of many troubles, for I think my luck rode away with you that day, Master Hubert of Hastings," she added with a sigh.

"There are other hawks and luck returns," I replied, bowing. "Perhaps this trinket will bring it back to you, my lady," and taking the snake-surrounded ruby heart, I proffered it to her with another bow.

"Oh!" she said, her blue eyes shining with pleasure, "oh! it is beautiful, but whence is the price to come for so costly a thing?"

"I think the matter is one that can wait."

At that moment the lord Deleroy broke in, saying,

"So you are the man who slew the French knight with an ancient sword, and afterwards shot three other Frenchmen with three shafts, sending one of them through shield and mail and body, a tale that was spoken of afterwards, even in London. God's truth! you should be serving the King in the wars, not yourself behind the counter."

"There are many ways of serving, my lord," I answered, "by pen and merchandise as well as by steel and shafts. Now with me it is the turn of the former, though perhaps the ancient sword and the great black bow wait till their time comes again."

He stared at me and muttered, half to himself:

"A strange merchant and a grim, as those dead Frenchmen may have thought. I tell you, Sir Trader, that your talk and the eyes of that tall Moor of yours turn my back cold; it is as though someone walked over my grave. Come, Blanche, let us begone ere our horses be chilled as I am. Master Grimmer, or Hastings, you shall hear from me, unless I can do my business otherwise, and for the trinket send me a note at your leisure."

Then they went, but as the lady Blanche left the shop she caught her

robe and turned to free it, while she did so flashing at me one of her sweet looks such as I remembered well.

Kari followed to the door and watched them mount their horses at the gate, then he searched the ground with his eyes.

"What was it hooked her cloak?" I asked.

"A dream, or the air, Master, for there is nothing else to which it could have hung. Those who would throw spears behind them must first turn round."

"What think you of those two, Kari?"

"I think that they will not pay for your jewel, but perhaps this was but a bait upon the hook."

"And what more, Kari?"

"I think that the lady is very fair and false, and that the great lord's heart is as black as are his eyes. Also I think that they are dear to each other and well matched. But it seems that you have met them both before, Master, so you will know better about them than your slave."

"Yes, I have met them," I answered sharply, for his words about Blanche angered me, adding, "I have noted, Kari, that you have never a good word

for any one whom I favour. You are jealous-natured, Kari, especially of women."

"You ask, I answer," he replied, falling into broken English, as was his fashion when moved, "and it is true that those who have much love, are much jealous. That is a fault in my people. Also I love not women. Now I go make another piece for that which Master give the lady. Only this time it all snake and no heart."

He went, taking the tray of jewels with him, and I, too, went to the eating-room to think.

How strange was this meeting. I had never forgotten the lady Blanche, but in a sense I had lived her memory down and mindful of my uncle's counsel, had not sought to look upon her again, for which reason I kept away from Hastings where I thought that I should find her. And now here she was in London and in my house, brought thither by fate. Nor was that all, since those blue eyes of hers had re-lighted the dead fires in my heart and, seated there alone, I knew that I loved her; indeed had never ceased to love her. She was more to me than all my wealth, more than anything, and alas! between us there was still a great gulf fixed.

She was not wed, it was true, but she was a highly placed lady, and I but a merchant who could not even call myself a squire, or by law wear garments made of certain stuffs which I handled daily in my trade. How might that gulf be crossed?

Then as I mused there rose in my mind a memory of certain sayings of my wise old uncle, and with it an answer to the question. Gold would bridge the widest streams of human difference. These fine folk for all their flauntings were poor. They came to me to borrow money wherewith to gild their coronets and satisfy the importunate creditors at their door, lest they should be pulled from their high place and forced back into the number of the common herd as those who could no longer either give or pay.

And after all, was this difference between them and me so wide? The grandsire of Sir Robert Aleys, I had been told, gathered his wealth by trade and usury in the old wars; indeed, it was said that he was one who dealt in cattle, while Lord Deleroy was reported to be a bastard, if of the bluest blood, so blue that it ran nigh to the royal purple. Well, what was mine? On the father's side, Saxon descended from that of Thanes who went down before the Normans and thereafter became humble landed folk of the lesser sort. On the mother's, of the race of the old sea-kings who slew and conquered through all the world they knew. Was I then so far beneath these others? Nay, but like my father and my uncle I was one who bought and sold and the hand of the dyer was stained to the colour of his vat.

Thus stood the business. I, a stubborn man, not ill-favoured, to whom Fortune had given wealth, was determined to win this woman who, it seemed to me, looked upon me with no unkind eye since I had saved her

from certain perils. To myself then and there I swore I would win her. The question was--how could it be done? I might enter the service of the King and fight his battles and doubtless win myself a knighthood, or more, which would open the closed gate.

Nay, it would take too long, and something warned me that time pressed. That strange foreign man, Kari, said that Blanche was enamoured of this Deleroy, and although I was wrath with him, setting his words down to jealousy of any on whom I looked with kindness, I knew well that Kari saw far. If I tarried, this rare white bird would slip from my hand into another's cage. I must stir at once or let the matter be. Well, I had wealth, so let wealth be my friend. Time enough to try war when it failed me.

On the third day of the new year, which at this time of Court revelry showed that the matter must indeed be pressing, I received those particulars for which I had asked, together with a list of the lands and tenements that Sir Robert Aleys was ready to put in pawn on behalf of his friend and relative, the lord Deleroy. Why should he do this, I wondered? There could only be one answer: because he and not Deleroy was to receive the money, or most of it.

Nay, another came into my mind as probable. Because he looked upon Deleroy as his heir, which, should he marry the lady Blanche, he would

become. If this were so I must act, and quickly, that is, if I would ever see more of the lady Blanche, as perchance I might do by treading this gold-paved road, but not otherwise. I studied the list of lands. As it chanced I knew most of them, for they lay about Pevensey and Hastings, and saw that they were scarcely worth the moneys which were asked of me. Well, what of it? This matter was not one of trade and large as the sum might be, I would risk it for the chance of winning Blanche.

The end of it was that waiting for no valuing I wrote that on proof of title clean and unencumbered and completion of all deeds, I would pay over the gold to whoever might be appointed to receive it.

This letter of mine proved to be but the beginning of a long business whereof the details may be left untold. On the very next day indeed I was summoned to the house of Sir Robert Aleys which was near to the palace and abbey of Westminster. Here I found the gruff old knight grown greyer and having, as it seemed to me, a hunted air, and with him the lord Deleroy and two foxy lawyers of whom I did not like the look. Indeed, for the first, I suspected that I was being tricked and had it not been for the lady Blanche, would have broken off the loan. Because of her, however, this I did not do, but having stated my terms anew, and the rate and dates of interest, sat for a long while saying as little as possible, while the others unfolded parchments and talked and talked, telling tales that often contradicted each other, till at length the lord Deleroy, who seemed ill at ease, grew weary and left the chamber.

At last all was done that could be done at that sitting and it being past the hour of dinner, I was taken in to eat, consenting, because I hoped that I should see the lady Blanche.

A butler, or chamber-groom, led me to the dining-hall and sat me with the lawyers at a table beneath the dais. Presently on this dais appeared Sir Robert Aleys, his daughter Blanche, the lord Deleroy, and perhaps eight or ten other fine folk whom I had never seen. She, looking about her, saw me seated at the lower table, and spoke to her father and Deleroy, reasoning with the latter, as it would appear. Indeed, in a sudden hush I caught some of her words. They were, "If you are not ashamed to take his money, you should not be ashamed to sit at meat with him."

Deleroy stamped his foot, but the end of it was that I was summoned to the high table where the lady Blanche made place for me beside her, while Deleroy sat himself down between two splendid dames at the other end of the board.

Here, then, I stayed by Blanche who, I noted, wore the ruby heart encircled by serpents. Indeed, this was the first thing of which she spoke to me, saying,

"It looks well upon my robe, does it not, and I thank you for it, Master Hubert, who know surely that it is not my cousin Deleroy's gift, but yours, since for it you will never see your money."

By way of answer I looked at the sumptuous plate and furnishings, the profusion of the viands, and the number of the serving-men. Reading my thought, she replied,

"Aye, but pledged, all of it. I tell you, Master Hubert, that we are starved hounds, though we live in a kennel with golden bars. And now they would pawn you that kennel also."

Then, while I wondered what to say, she began to talk of our great adventure in bygone years, recalling every tiny thing that had happened and every word that had been spoken between us, some of which I had forgotten. Of one thing only she said nothing--the kisses with which we parted. Amongst much else, she spoke of how the ancient sword had shorn through the armour of the French knight, and I told her that the sword was named Wave-Flame and that it had come down to me from my ancestor, Thorgrimmer the Viking, and of what was written on its blade, to all of which she listened greedily.

"And they thought you not fit to sit at meat with them, you whose race is so old and who are so great a warrior, as you showed that day. And it is to you that I owe my life and more than life, to you and not to them."

So saying she shot a glance at me that pierced me through and through, as my arrows had pierced the Frenchmen, and what is more beneath the

cover of the board for a moment let her slim hand rest upon my own.

After this for a while we were silent, for indeed I could not speak.

Then we talked on as we could do well enough, since there was no one on my left where the board ended, and on Blanche's right was a fat old lord who seemed to be deaf and occupied himself in drinking more than he should have done. I told her much about myself, also what my mother had said to me on the day of the Burning, and of how she had prophesied that I should be a wanderer, words at which Blanche sighed and answered:

"Yet you seem to be well planted in London and in rich soil, Master Hubert."

"Aye, Lady, but it is not my native soil and for the rest we go where Fate leads us."

"Fate! What does that word bring to my mind? I have it; yonder Moor of yours who makes those jewels. He has the very eyes of Fate and I fear him."

"That is strange, Lady, and yet not so strange, for about this man there is something fateful. Ever he swears to me that I shall accompany him to some dim land where he was born, of which land he is a prince."

Then I told her all the story of Kari, to which she listened open-eyed and wondering, saying when I had finished,

"So you saved this poor wanderer also, and doubtless he loves you well."

"Yes, Lady, almost too well, seeing that at times he is jealous of me, though God knows I did little for him save pick him from a crowd upon the quay."

"Ah! I guess it, who saw him watching you the other day. Yet it is strange, for I thought that only women could be jealous of men, and men of women. Hush! they are mocking us because we talk so friendly."

I looked up, following her glance, and saw that Deleroy and the two fine ladies between whom he sat, all of whom appeared to have had enough of wine, were pointing at us. Indeed, in a silence, such as now and again happens at feasts, I heard one of them say,

"You had best beware lest that fair white dove of yours does not slip your hand and begin to coo in another's ear, my Lord Deleroy," and heard his answer,

"Nay, I have her too fast, and who cares for a pining dove whereof the feathers adorn another's cap?"

Whilst I was wondering what this dark talk might mean the company broke up, the lady Blanche gliding away through a door at the back of the dais, followed, as I noted, by Deleroy who seemed flushed and angry.

Many times I visited that prodigal house which seemed to me to be the haunt of folk who, however highly placed and greatly favoured at Court, were as loose in their lives as they were in their talk. Indeed, although I was no saint, I liked them not at all, especially the men with their scented hair, turned-up shoes, and party-coloured clothes. Nor as I thought, did Sir Robert Aleys like them, who, whatever his faults, was a bluff knight of the older sort, who had fought with credit in the French wars. Yet I noted that he seemed to be helpless in their hands, or rather in those of Deleroy, the King's favourite, who was the chief of all the gang. It was as though that gay and handsome young man had some hold over the old soldier, yes, and over his daughter also, though what this might be I could not guess.

Now I will move on with the tale. In due course the parchments were signed and delivered, and the money in good gold was paid over on my behalf, after which the great household at Westminster became more prodigal than before. But when the time came for the discharge of the interest due not a groat was forthcoming. Then afterwards there was talk of my taking over certain of the pledged lands in lieu of this interest. Sir Robert suggested this and I assented, because Blanche had told me that it would help her father. Only when the matter was set on foot by my lawyers was it found that these lands were not his to transfer, inasmuch as they had been already mortgaged to their value.

Then there was a fierce quarrel between Sir Robert Aleys and the lord

Deleroy, at which I was present. Sir Robert with many oaths accused his cousin of having forged his name when he was absent in France, while Deleroy declared that what he did was done with due authority. Almost they drew swords on each other, till at length Deleroy took Aleys aside and with a fierce grin whispered something into his ear which caused the old knight to sink down on a stool and call out,

"Get you gone, you false rogue! Get out of this house, aye, and out of England. If I meet you again, by God's Blood I swear that King's favourite or no King's favourite, I'll throat you like a hog!"

To which Deleroy mocked in answer:

"Good! I'll go, my gentle cousin, which it suits me well to do who have certain business of the King's awaiting me in France. Aye, I'll go and leave you to settle with this worthy trader who may hold that you have duped him. Do it as you will, except in one fashion, of which you know. Now a word with my cousin Blanche and another at the Palace and I ride for Dover. Farewell, Cousin Aleys. Farewell, worthy merchant for whose loss I should grieve, did I not know that soon you will recoup yourself out of gentle pockets. Mourn not over me over much, either of you, since doubtless ere so very long I shall return."

Now my blood flamed up and I answered:

"I pray you do not hurry, my lord, lest you should find me waiting for

you with a shield and a sword in place of a warrant and a pen."

He heard and called out, "Fore God, this chapman thinks himself a knight!"

Then with a mocking laugh he went.