

# RED EVE

BY H. RIDER HAGGARD

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MURGH THE DEATH

THEY knew nothing of it in England or all the western lands in those days before Crecy was fought, when the third Edward sat upon the throne. There was none to tell them of the doom that the east, whence comes light and life, death and the decrees of God, had loosed upon the world. Not one in a multitude in Europe had ever heard of those vast countries of far Cathay, peopled with hundreds of millions of cold faced, yellow men, lands which had grown very old before our own familiar states and empires were carved out of mountain, of forest and of savage haunted plain. Yet, if their eyes had been opened so that they could see well might they have trembled. King, prince, priest, merchant, captain, citizen and poor laboring hind—well might they have all trembled when the east sent forth her gifts!

Look across the world beyond that curtain of thick darkness. Behold! A vast city of fantastic houses half buried in the winter snows, reddened by the lurid sunset breaking through a saw toothed canopy of cloud. Everywhere upon the temple squares and open spaces great fires burning a strange fuel—the bodies of thousands of mankind. Pestilence was king of that city, a pestilence hitherto unknown. Innumerable hordes had died and were dying, yet innumerable hordes remained. All the patient east bore forth those still shapes that had been theirs to love or hate, and, their task done, turned to the banks of the mighty river and watched.

Down the broad street which ran between the fantastic houses advanced a procession toward the brown, ice flecked river. First marched a company of priests clad in plain black robes and carrying on poles lanterns of black paper, lighted, although the sun still shone. Behind marched another company of priests clad in white robes and bearing white lanterns, also lighted. But at these none looked, nor did they listen to the dirges that they sang, for all eyes were fixed upon him who filled the center space and upon his two companions.

The first companion was a lovely woman, jewel-hung, wearing false flowers in her streaming hair and beneath her bared breasts a kirtle of white silk. Life and love embodied in radiance and beauty, she danced in front, looking about her with alluring eyes and scattering petals of dead roses from a basket which she bore. Different was the second companion, who stalked behind, so thin, so sexless that none could say if the shape were that of man or woman. Dry, streaming locks of iron gray, an ashen countenance, deep set, hollow eyes, a beetling, parchment covered brow; lean shanks half hidden with a rotting rag, clawlike hands which clutched miserably at the air. This was its awful fashion, that of new death in all his terror.

Between them, touched of neither, went a man, naked save for a red girdle and a long red cloak that was fastened round his throat and hung down from his broad shoulders. There was nothing strange about this man, unless it were, perhaps, the strength that seemed to flow from him and the glance of his icy eyes. He was just a burly yellow man whose age none could tell, for the hood of the red cloak hid his hair; one who seemed to be far removed from youth and yet untouched by time. He walked on steadily as though of set purpose, his face immovable, taking no heed. Only now and again he turned those long eyes of his upon one of the multitude who watched him pass crouched upon their knees in solemn silence, always upon one, whether it were man, woman or child, with a glance meant for that one and no other. And always the one upon whom it fell rose from the knee, made obeisance, and, turning, departed as though filled with some inspired purpose.

Down to the quay went the black priests, the white priests, the red cloaked man, preceded by rosy life and followed by ashen death. Through the funeral fires they wended and the lurid sunset shone upon them all. To the pillars of this quay was fastened a strange, high pooped ship, with crimson sails set upon her masts. The white priests and the black priests formed lines upon either side of the broad gangway of that ship and bowed as the red cloaked man walked over it between them quite alone, for now she with the dead roses and she with the ashen countenance had fallen back. As the sun sank he turned, and, standing on the lofty stern, cried aloud:

"Here the work is done. Now I, the Eating Fire, I the Messenger, turn me to the west. Among you for a while I cease to burn, yet forget me not, for I return again."

As he spoke the ropes of the ship were loosened, the wind caught her crimson sails and she departed into the night, one blood red spot against its blackness.

The multitude watched until they could see her no longer and then flamed up with mingled joy and rage. They laughed madly. They cursed him who had departed.

"We live, we live, we live!" they cried. "Murgh is gone! Murgh is gone! Kill his priests! Make sacrifice of his shadows! Murgh is gone bearing the curse of the east into the bosom of the west. Look! it follows him," and they pointed to a cloud of smoke or vapor, in which terrible shapes seemed to move dimly, that trailed after the departing, red-sailed ship.

The black priests and the white priests heard, and without struggle, without complaint, as though they were but taking part in some set ceremony, knelt down in lines upon the snow. Naked from the waist up executioners with great swords appeared. They advanced upon the kneeling lines without haste, without wrath, and letting fall the heavy swords upon the patient, outstretched necks, did their grim office till all were dead. Then they turned to find her of the flowers who had danced before and her of the tattered weeds who had followed after, purposing to cast them to the funeral flames. But these were gone, though none had seen them go. Only out of the gathering darkness from some temple or pagoda top a voice spoke like a moaning wind.

"Fools," galed the voice, "still with you is Murgh,



Next moment they were kissing each other.

the second thing create; Murgh, who was made to be man's minister. Murgh the Messenger shall reappear from beyond the setting sun. Ye can not kill, ye can not spare. Those priests you seemed to slay he had summoned to be his officers afar. Fools! Ye do but serve as serves Murgh, gateway of the gods. Life and death are not in your hands or in his. They are in the hands of the Master of Murgh. Helper of man, of that Lord whom no eye hath seen but whose bequests all who are born obey, ye, even the mighty Murgh, Looser of burdens, whom in your foolishness you fear."

So spoke this voice out of the darkness, but that night the sword of the great pestilence was lifted from the eastern land and there the funeral fires flared no more.

## CHAPTER I. The Trysting Place.

ON the very day that Murgh the Messenger sailed forth into that uttermost sea a young man and a maiden met together in the Blythburgh marshes near to Dunwich, on the eastern coast of England. In this, the month of February of the year 1346, hard and bitter frost held Suffolk in its grip. The muddy stream of Blyth, it is true, was frozen only in places, since the tide, flowing up from the Southwold harbor, where it runs into the sea between that ancient town and the hamlet of Walberswick, had broken up the ice. But all else was set hard and fast, and now toward sunset the cold was bitter. Stark and naked stood the tall dry reeds. The blackbirds and starlings perched upon the willows seemed swollen into feathery balls, the fur started on the backs of hares and a four horse wain could travel in safety over swamps where at any other time a schoolboy dared not set his foot.

On such an eve, with the snow threatening, the great marsh was utterly desolate, and this was why these two had chosen it for their meeting place. To look on they were a goodly pair—the girl, who was clothed in the red she always wore, tall, dark, well shaped, with large black eyes and a determined face, one who would make a very stately woman; the man, broad shouldered, with gray eyes that were quick and almost fierce, long limbed, hard, agile and healthy, one who had never known sickness, who looked as though the world were made for him to master. He was young, but one and twenty that day, and his simple dress, a tunic of thick wool, fastened around him with a leather belt, to which hung a short sword, showed that his degree was modest.

The girl, although she looked his elder, in fact was only in her twentieth year, though from her who had been reared in the hard school of that cruel age, childhood had long departed, leaving her a ripened woman before her time.

The pair stood looking at each other.

"Well, cousin Eva Clavering," said the man, in his

clear voice, "why did your message bid me meet you in this cold place?"

"Because I had a word to say to you, cousin Hugh de Cressi," she answered boldly, "and the marsh being so cold and so lonesome I thought it suited to my purpose. Does Gray Dick watch yonder?"

"Aye, behind those willows, arrow on string, and God help him on whom Dick draws. But what was that word, Eve?"

"One easy to understand," she replied, looking him in the eyes, "farewell!"

He shivered as though with the cold and his face changed.

"An ill birthday greeting, yet I feared it," he muttered huskily, "but why more now than at any other time?"

"Would you know, Hugh? Well, the story is short, so I'll let it out. Our great-grandmother, the heiress of the de Cheneys, married twice, did she not, and from the first husband came the de Cressis and from the second the Claverings. But in this way or in that we Claverings got the lands, or most of them, and you de Cressis, the nobler stock, took to merchandise. Now, since those days you have grown rich with your fishing fleets, your wool mart and your ferry deeds at Walberswick and Southwold. We, too, are rich in manors and in land, counting our acres by the thousand, but yet poor, lacking your gold, though yonder manor," and she pointed to some towers which rose far away above the trees upon the high land, "has many mouths to feed. Also the sea has robbed us at Dunwich, where I was born, taking our great house and many a street that paid us rent, and your market of Southwold has starved out ours at Blythburgh."

"Well, what has all this to do with you and me, Eve?"

"Much, Hugh, as you should know, who have been bred to trade," and she glanced at his merchant's dress. "Between de Cressi and Clavering there have been rivalry and feud for three long generations. When we were children it abated for a while, since your father lent money to mine, and that is why they quarreled about the ferry that we had set in pawn, and your father asked his gold back again and, not getting it, took the ferry, which I have always held a foolish and strife breeding deed, since from that day forward the war was open. Therefore, Hugh, if we meet at all it must be in these frozen reeds or behind the cover of a thicker, like a village slut and her man."

"I know that well enough, Eve, who have spoken with you but twice in nine months," and he devoured her beautiful face with hungry eyes. "But of that word 'farewell'—"

"Of that ill word, this, Hugh. I have a new suitor yonder, a fine French suitor, a very great lord, indeed, whose wealth, I am told, none can number. From his mother he has the Valley of the Waveney up to Bungay town—aye, and beyond—and from his

father a whole county in Normandy. Five French knights ride behind his banner, and with them 10 squires and I know not how many men at arms. There is feasting yonder at the castle, I can tell you. Ere his train leaves us our winter provender will be done and we'll have to drink small beer till the wine ships come in from France in spring."

"And what is this lord's name?"

"God's truth! he has several," she answered. "Sir Edmund Acour in England, and in France the high and puissant Count of Noyon, and in Italy, near to the city of Venice—for there, too, he has possessions which came to him through his grandmother—the Seigneur of Cattrina."

"And having so much, does he want you, too, Eve? And if so, why?"

"So he swears," she answered slowly, "and as for the reason, why, I suppose you must seek it in my face, which by ill fortune has pleased his lordship since first he saw it a month ago. At the least he has asked me in marriage of my father, who jumped at him like a winter pike, and so I am betrothed."

"And do you want him, Eve?"

"Aye, I want him as far as the sun is from the moon or the world from either. I want him in heaven or beneath the earth or anywhere away from me."

At the words a light shone in Hugh's keen gray eyes.

"I'm glad of that, Eve, for I have heard much of this fine fellow—among other things that he is a traitor come here to spy on England. But, should I be a match for him, man to man, Eve?" he asked after a little pause.

She looked him up and down, then answered: "I think so, though he is no weakling; but not for him and the five knights and the 10 squires, and my noble father and my brother and the rest. Oh, Hugh! Hugh!" she added, bitterly, "can not you understand that you are but a merchant's lad, though your blood be as noble as any in this realm—a merchant's lad, the last of five brothers. Why were you not born the first of them if you wished for Eve Clavering, for then your red gold might have bought me?"

"Ask that of those who begot me," said Hugh. "Come, now, what's in your mind? You're not one to be sold like a heifer at a faring and go whimpering to the altar, and I am not one to see you led there while I stand upon my feet. We are made of a clay too stiff for a French lord's fingers, Eve, though it is true that they may drag you whither you would not work."

"No," she answered, "I think I shall take some marrying against my wish. Moreover, I am Dunwich born."

"What of that, Eve?"

"Go, ask your godsire and my friend Sir Andrew Arnold, the old priest. In the library of the temple there he showed me an ancient roll, a copy of the charter granted by John and other kings of England to the citizens of Dunwich."

"What said this writing, Eve?"

"It said, among many other things, that no man or maid of Dunwich can be forced to marry against their will, even in the lifetime of their parents."

"But, will it hold today?"

"Aye, I think so. I think that is why the holy Sir Andrew showed it to me, knowing something of our case, for he is my confessor when I can get to him."

"Then, Sweet, you are safe!" exclaimed Hugh, with a sigh of relief.

"Aye, so safe that tomorrow Father Nicholas, the French chaplain in his train, has been warned to wed me to my lord Acour—that is, if I am there to wed."

"And if this Acour is there I'll seek him out tonight and challenge him, Eve," and Hugh laid hand upon his sword.

"Doubtless," she replied, sarcastically, "Sir Edmund Acour, Count of Noyon, Seigneur of Cattrina, will find it honor to accept the challenge of Hugh de Cressi, the merchant's youngest son. Oh, Hugh! Hugh! Are your wits frozen like this winter marsh? Not thus can you save me."

The young man thought a while, staring at the ground and biting his lips. Then he looked up suddenly and said:

"How much do you love me, Eve?"

With a slow smile she opened her arms, and next moment they were kissing each other as heartily as ever man and maid have kissed since the world began; so heartily, indeed, that when at length she pushed him from her, her lovely face was as red as the cloak she wore.

"You know well that I love you, to my sorrow and undoing," she said in a broken voice. "From childhood it has been so between us and till the grave takes one or both it will be so, and for my part beyond it if the priests speak true. For whatever may be your case, I am not one to change my fancy. When I give I give all, though it be of little worth. In truth, Hugh, if I could I would marry you tonight, though you are naught but a merchant's lad, or even"—and she paused, wiping her eyes with the back of her slim, strong hand.

"I thank you," he answered, trembling with joy. "So it is with me. For you and no other woman I live and die, and though I am so humble I'll be worthy of you yet. If God keeps me in breath you shall not blush for your man, Eve. Well, I am not great at words, so let us come to deeds. Will you away with me now? I think that Father Arnold would find you lodging for the night and an altar to be wed at, and tomorrow our ship sails for Flanders and for France."

"Yes, but would your father give us passage in it, Hugh?"

"Why not? It could not deepen the feud between our houses, which already has no bottom, and if he refused we would take one, for the captain is my friend. Also I have some little store set by; it came to me from my mother."

"You ask much," she said; "all a woman has, my life, perchance, as well. Yet there it is; I'll go because I am a fool, Hugh, and as it chances you are more to me than either, and I hate this fine French lord, I tell you, I sicken at his glance and shiver when he touches me. I'll go, though God alone knows the end of it."

"Our purpose being honest, the end will be good, Eve, though, perhaps, before all is done we may often think it evil. And now let's away, though I wish that you were dressed in another color."

"Red Eve they name me and red is my badge, because it suits my dark face best. Cavel not at my robe, Hugh, for it is the only dowry you will get with Eve Clavering. How shall we go? By the Walberswick ferry? You have no horses."

"Nay, I have a skiff hidden in the reeds five furlongs off. We must keep to the heath above Walberswick, for there they know your red cloak even after dark, and I would not have you seen till we are safe with Sir Arnold in the preceptory. Mother of Heaven! what is that?"

"A peewit, no more," she answered indifferently. "Nay, it is my man Dick, calling like a peewit. That's his sign when trouble is afoot. Ah! here he comes."

As he spoke a tall, gaunt man appeared, advancing toward them. His gait was a shambling trot that seemed slow, although in truth he was covering the ground with extraordinary swiftness. Moreover, he moved so silently that even on the frostheld soil his steps could not be heard, and so carefully that not a reed stirred as he threaded in and out among their clumps like an otter, his head crouched down and his long bow pointed before him as though it were a spear. Half a minute more and he was before them, a very strange man to see. His years were not so many, 30 perhaps, and yet his face looked quite old because of its lack of coloring, its thinness and the hard lines that marked where the muscles ran down to the tight, straight mouth and up to the big forehead, over which hung hair so light that at a little distance he seemed ashen gray. Only in this cold, rocky face, set very far part, were two pale blue eyes, which, just now when he chose to lift their lids that generally kept near together, as though he were half asleep, were full of fire and quick cunning.

Reaching the pair this strange fellow dropped to his knee and raised his cap to Eve, the great lady of the Claverings—Red Eve, as they called her through that countryside. Then he spoke in a low, husky voice:

"They're coming, master! You and your mistress must to earth unless you mean to face them in the open," and the pale eyes glittered as he tapped his great black bow.

"Who are coming, Richard? Be plain, man."

"Sir John Clavering, my lady's father; young John, my lady's brother; the fine French lord who wears a white swan for a crest; three of the knights of his command and six—no, seven—men at arms. Also from the other side the grievous Thomas of Kessland, and with him his marshmen and verderers."

"And what are they coming for?" he asked again. "Have they hounds, and hawk on wrist?"

"Nay, but they have swords and knife on thigh, and he let his pale eyes fall on Eve.

"Oh, have done!" she broke in. "They come to take me and I'll not be taken. They come to kill you and I'll not see you slain and live. I had words with my father this morning about the Frenchman and, I fear, let out the truth. He told me then that ere the Dunwich roses bloomed again she who loved you would have naught but bones to kiss. Dick, you must keep us hidden until nightfall."

"Follow me," said the man, "and keep low."

(To be continued.)