

RED EVE

BY H. RIDER HAGGARD

CHAPTER IV.—(CONTINUED.)

The Penance.

HUGH laid himself down upon the skin of the beast, which had been a tiger, though he did not know it by that name. So weary was he that not all he had gone through that day or even the old warrior priest's marvelous tale, in which he and Eve played so wonderful a part, could keep his eyes from closing. Presently he was fast asleep and so remained until, four hours later, something disturbed him and he awoke to see Sir Andrew writing at a desk.

"Rise, my son," said the old priest, without looking up from his paper. "Early as it is you must be stirring if you would be clear of Dunwich by daybreak and keep a whole skin. I have set a taper in my sleeping closet yonder, and there you'll find water to wash with and a stool to kneel on for your prayers, neither of which neglect, since you have blood on your hands and great need for Heaven's help."

So Hugh arose yawning and stumbled heavily to the chamber, for he was still faint with sleep, which would not leave him till he had plunged his head into a basin of icy water. This done he knelt and prayed as he had been bidden, with a very earnest heart and afterward came back to the guest hall. Seeing folk gathered there as he entered he laid hand on sword, not his own with which he had killed his cousin, but a long and knightly weapon that Sir Andrew had given him with the armor. Drawing it, he advanced boldly, for he thought that his enemies might have found him out and that his best safety lay in courage, and thus appeared clad in gleaming steel and with raised weapon in the ring of the lamplight.

"What, son!" said a testy voice which he knew for that of his own father, "is it not enough to have killed your cousin? Would you fall on your brothers and me also that you come at us clad in mail and with bare steel in hand?"

Hearing these words Hugh sheathed the sword, and, advancing toward the speaker, a handsome, portly man, who wore a merchant's robe lined with rich fur, sank to his knee before him.

"Your pardon, father," he said. "Sir Andrew here will have told you the story; also that I am not to blame for this blood shedding."

"I think you need to ask it," replied Master de Cressi, "and if you and that lean henchman of yours are not to blame, then say who is."

Now a tall, slim figure glided up to them. It was Eve, clothed in her own robe again and beautiful as ever after her short rest.

"Sir, I am to blame," she said, in her full, low voice. "I sent a messenger to Hugh bidding him meet me in the Blythburgh marsh. There we were set on and there John Clavering, my brother, smote Hugh in the face. Would you, a de Cressi, have had him take the blow and yield me up to the Frenchman?"

"By God and my forefathers, not least of all from one of your stock—saving your presence," answered the merchant. "In truth, had he done so, dead or living from that day I would have called him no son of mine. Yet, Red Eve, you and he and your love making have brought much trouble on me and my house. Look now what it means. A feud to the death between our families of which no man can foresee the end. Moreover, how can you marry, seeing that a brother's blood runs between you?"

"It is on John's head," she answered sadly, "not on Hugh's hand. I warned him and Hugh spared him once. What more could we do?"

"I know not, Eve; I only know what you have done, you and Hugh and Gray Dick; five dead and one wounded, that's the bill I must discharge as best I may, and doubtless soon there will be more to follow, whether they are Claverings or de Cressis. Well, we must take things as God sends them and leave Him to balance the account. And now there is no time to lose if Hugh's neck is to escape a halter. Speak you, Father Andrew, who are wise and old and have this matter in hand. Oh! Hugh, Hugh, you were born a fighter, not a merchant like your brethren," and he pointed to three young men who all this while had stood silently with grave disapproval. "Yes, the old Norman blood comes out in you, and the Norman mail suits you well," he added with a flash of pride, "and so there's an end—or a beginning. Now, Sir Andrew, speak."

"Master de Cressi," said the old priest, "your son Hugh rides to London on an errand of mine which I think will save his neck from that halter wherewith you spoke to now. Are those four mounted men that you promised me ready to accompany him?"

"They will be within an hour, Father, but not before, since six good horses can not be laid hands on in the dead of night, being stabled without the gates. But what is this message of yours, and to whom does Hugh go?"

"To his grace, Edward the king, none less, Geoffrey de Cressi, with that which shall earn pardon for him and Dick the archer, or so I believe. As for what it is I may not tell you or any man, since it has to do with great matters of state that are for the king's ear alone, and I charge you, every one, on your honor and your safety, to make no mention of this mission without these walls. Do you swear, Geoffrey de Cressi, and you, his sons?"

Then one by one they swore to be secret as the grave, and Eve swore also, though of her he had sought no promise. When this was finished Sir Andrew asked if any of his brothers accompanied Hugh, saying that if so they must arm.

"Nay," answered Master de Cressi, "one of the family is enough to risk with four of our best servants. They bide here with me, who may need their help, though they are not trained to arms."

"Perhaps it is as well," said Sir Andrew dryly, "though were I their age—well, let that be. Now, son Hugh, before you eat do you and Eve come with me into the church."

At these words Hugh flushed red with joy and opened his lips to speak.

"Nay, nay," broke in Sir Andrew, with a frown, "I have a different purpose to that which is in your mind. Man, is this a time for marrying and giving in marriage? And if it were, could I marry you who are stained with new shed blood? 'Tis that you both may be absolved from the guilt of that blood and learn the penance which God decrees to you through the mouth of me, his unworthy minister, in payment of its shedding. Thus you, son, may go forth upon your great adventure with a clean heart, and you, daughter, may



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await what shall befall with a quiet mind. Say, are you willing?"

Now they bowed their heads and answered that they were, though Eve whispered to Hugh that she misdoubted her of this talk of penance.

"So do I," he replied, beneath his breath, "but he is a merciful confessor and loves us. From some it might be harder."

They passed down the stairs, followed by Master de Cressi and his other sons, into the entrance hall, where Gray Dick stood watching by the door.

"Whither go they?" he asked of Sir Andrew, "for their road is mine."

"To confession at God's altar," answered the old priest. "Do you come also, Richard?"

"Oh!" he replied, "I hoped it had been to breakfast. As for confession, I have naught upon my soul save that I shot too low at the Frenchman."

"Bide where you are, O man of blood," said Sir Andrew sternly, "and pray that a better mood be given to you before it is too late."

"Aye, Father," he answered unabashed, "I'll pray, and it is as well that one should wait to watch the door lest you should all presently become men of blood against your will."

Turning to the right, Sir Andrew led them down steps to a passage under ground that joined the temple to the Church of the Holy Virgin and St. John. It was but short, and at the end of it they found a massive door which he unbolted, and passing this door entered the great building, wherewith the silence and the icy cold struck them like blows. They had but two lanterns between them, one of which Master de Cressi and his elder sons took with them to the nave of the church. Bearing the other, Sir Andrew departed into the vestry, leaving Hugh and Eve seated together in the darkness of the chancel stalls.

Presently his light reappeared in the confessional, where he sat robed, and thither at his summons went first Hugh and then Eve. When their tales were told those who watched in the nave of the splendid building, which, reared by the Knights Templar, was already following that great order to decay and ruin, saw the star of light he bore ascend to the high altar. Here he set it down, and, advancing to the rail, addressed the two shadowy figures that knelt before him.

"Son and daughter," he said, "you have made confession with contrite hearts and the church has given you absolution for your sins. Yet penance remains, and because those sins, though grievous in themselves, were not altogether of your own making, it shall be light. Hugh de Cressi and Eve Clavering, who are bound together by lawful love between man and woman and the solemn oath of betrothal which you here renew before God, this is the penance that I lay upon you by virtue of the authority in me vested as a priest of Christ. Because between you runs the blood of John Clavering, the cousin of one of you and the brother of the other, slain by you, Hugh de Cressi, in mortal combat but yesterday eve, I decree and enjoin that for a full year from this day you shall not be bound together as man and wife in the holy bonds of matrimony, nor converse after the fashion of affianced lovers. If you obey this, her command, faithfully, then by my mouth the church declares that when the year has gone by you may lawfully be wed how and when you will. Moreover, she pronounces her solemn blessing on you both and her dreadful curse upon any and upon all who shall dare to sunder you against your wills, and of this blessing and this curse let all the congregation take notice."

Now Hugh and Eve rose and vanished into the darkness. When they had gone the priest celebrated a short mass, but two or three prayers, and a blessing, which done all of them returned to the preceptory as they had come.

Here food was waiting for them, prepared by the old Sister Agnes. It was a somewhat silent meal, of which no one ate very much except Gray Dick, who remarked aloud that as this might be his last breakfast it should be plentiful, since shrunken or unshriven, it was better to die upon a full stomach.

Master de Cressi called him an impious knave and then asked him if he had plenty of arrows, because if not he would find a hundred of the best that could be made in Norwich done up in a cloak on the gray horse he was to ride, and a spare bow also.

"I thank you for the arrows, Master, but as for the bow I use none but my own, the black bow which the sea brought to me, and death alone shall part from me. Perchance both will be wanted, since the Claverings will scarcely let us out of sanctuary if they can help it. Still, it is true they may not know where we lie hid, and that is our best chance of eating more good breakfasts this side the grave."

"A pest on your evil talk," said de Cressi with an uneasy laugh, for he loved Hugh best of all his sons and was afraid for him. "Get through safely, man, and though I like not your grim face and bloody ways you shall lose little by it. I promise you," he added in a whisper, "that if you bring my boy safe home again you shall not want for all your life; aye, and I'll pay your blood scot for you."

"Thank you, Master, thank you. I'll remember and for my part promise you this, that if he does not return safe Dick the archer never will, but I think I'll live to shoot more than your hundred arrows yet."

As he spoke there came a knock upon the outer door and every one sprang up.

"Fear not," said Sir Andrew, "doubtless it will be the men with the horses. I'll go look. Come you with me, Richard."

Presently he returned, saying that it was so and that Master de Cressi's servants were waiting with the beasts in the courtyard. Also that they brought tidings that some of the Clavering party were now at the mayor's house, rousing him from his sleep, doubtless to lay information of the slayings of yester eve and ask for a warrant to take those who wrought them should they be in the borough.

"Then we had best be going," said Hugh, "since soon they will be here with or without their warrant."

"Aye," answered Sir Andrew. "Here are the papers. Take them, Hugh, and hide them well, and if any accident should befall you, try to pass them on to Richard, that they may be delivered into the king's hand at Westminster. Say that Sir Andrew Arnold sends you on business that has to do with his grace's safety and neither of you will be refused a hearing. Then act as he may command you, and maybe ere long we shall see you back at Dunwich pardoned."

"I think it is the Claverings and their French lord who need pardon, not I," said Hugh. "But be that as it may, what of Eve?"

(To Be Continued.)



Advancing to the rail, addressed the shadowy figures that knelt before him.