Title: Spears of destiny
A story of the first capture of Constantinople

Author: Arthur D. Howden Smith

Release Date: May 27, 2023 [eBook #70872]

Language: English

Produced by: Al Haines

SPEARS OF DESTINY

A STORY OF THE FIRST CAPTURE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

BY

ARTHUR D. HOWDEN SMITH

AUTHOR OF "THE AUDACIOUS ADVENTURES OF MILES McCONAUGHY," ETC.

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

TO

ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN

IN A SPIRIT SOMEWHAT MALICIOUS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

SPEARS OF DESTINY

CHAPTER I

IN CROWDEN WOOD

"Harrow! On, hounds! On, hounds! Take him, dogs! Out, harrow!"

The aisles of Crowden Wood rang to the clamour of voices and the belling of shaggy hounds. Through the budding foliage of beech and oak and ash the spring sunlight streamed upon the leaf-brown mould that floored a winding ride. Around one end of this leafy tunnel scampered a fox, nose close to the ground, brush held high. His pink tongue dripped over slavering jaws and his little eyes were very bright, but his stride was tireless. One look he cast over his shoulder as he turned the corner--and as he saw the leading hounds leap into view, he stretched his pace until he seemed a red shadow

flickering through the golden-greens of sunshine and foliage.

"Harrow! Harrow!"

Two mounted figures swept into the ride on the heels of the galloping hounds. Side by side they rode--a girl in a green doublet and soft deerskin breeches, astride a gallant black mare, and a tall youth, also in forest-green, upon a great grey stallion. Behind them followed a third horseman, a gigantic figure of a man, young, red-faced, intensely serious, above whose shoulder rose the end of a six-foot bow stave.

"The scent is fresh," cried the youth. "Hear them give tongue, Edith."

The girl nodded merrily. She was a slim, lissome creature, who might have seemed a boy had it not been for the exquisite fineness of her features and her crown of sun-pierced yellow hair, scarce covered by a jaunty little hunting-cap. She was Saxon, beyond a doubt. The youth beside her, a lean-flanked stripling of twenty, was as plainly Norman. His face was dark and narrow and his nose aquiline. His black hair already was clipped close for the helmet. He held his stallion as easily as the girl controlled her mare.

"We are fair on him now," she answered. "But look you, Hugh, he makes toward the London road, and if he wins across we may lose him in the wilds beyond."

"He'll not go far, except the Saints speed him, with this handicap," retorted the young man confidently. He turned in his saddle. "How far hence is the London Road, Ralph?" he called back.

The giant with the long-bow pressed his steed closer and peered ahead.

"'Tis closer than I like to think of, Messer Hugh," he said. "There is another long ride, and then----"

They spoke in that peculiar dialect of Norman French which was the language of the ruling class in England and of its retainers.

The girl interrupted with an exclamation, pointing her hunting-spear toward the far distance where the ride ended in an arched opening that showed dusty-white. Midway of it trembled the red brush of Dan Russell, and hard after him raced the hounds. Hugh stood up in his short stirrups.

"On, Pelleas! On, Hector!" he cried. "Bravely, hounds! Harrow! Out, harrow!"

He touched his heels ever so lightly to the grey stallion's flanks, and the big horse flew over the leaf-strewn ground like an arrow from a long-bow. The black mare closed up to the stallion's flank, and hung there, graceful as a swallow in flight. With a despairing yell, Ralph was left far behind. His lumbering war-horse, good only for joust or battle-charge, was hopelessly out-classed.

That was a brave race. Dan Russell forgot to flick his tail, and put every ounce of his plucky heart into out-distancing the hounds. Across the white highroad, he knew, there was a wilderness untracked by winding rides, virgin forest that rolled away across several shires, peopled by the red deer, charcoal-burners, the forest's wild things and out-laws. Foot by foot, yard by yard, the hounds overhauled him, but Dan Russell kept his lead. He might have kept

his freedom and his life, too, but when he burst from the ride onto the highroad, scrambling up the embankment the Romans had raised when they built it, he found himself in a confused huddle of horsemen, who shouted and reined back and spurred ahead and blocked his escape effectually.

Into this turmoil leaped the hounds, their fangs flashing. There was one yelp, a flurry of bloody fur, and Dan Russell's last race was run. The youth and the girl pounded out of the ride in the midst of the confusion, and reined in their horses barely in time to avoid riding down a couple of pack-mules and a frightened servant who cowered in the dust.

"By the Bodyless Ones, but you ride hard, gentles!" drawled a voice in Norman French with a sibilant lisp.

Hugh pulled his stallion around on its haunches. The speaker was a man of his own height, dark with a Latin darkness quite unlike Hugh's Northern tincture, clothed richly in stuffs that even Hugh's untutored eye identified as the fabrics of Eastern looms. He might have been anywhere from thirty to forty years in age, and he had an assurance of manner that indicated wide experience. Involuntarily, Hugh hated the man, hated him coldly, but implacably, for his cruel thin-lipped mouth and inscrutable eyes that hinted at grim secrets within and greedily fastened on Edith's flushed face.

But Hugh was an English gentleman, this man was a stranger, and the courtesies of the day were just beginning to elaborate into the full-flowered perfection of the age of chivalry. Off came Hugh's cap, and he bowed to his saddle-bow.

"I crave your pardon, sir, if my hounds disturbed your servants," he apologised. "We are not wont to kill in the highroad. 'Twas a mischance."

"Say no more," replied the stranger, forced to withdraw his eyes from the girl's face. "You ran your quarry well, young sir. In sooth, you took us by surprise. One moment, and we plodded calmly along, dull as pilgrims. The next, and I feared me some robber baron was worrying my train."

He spoke with a tentative lilt of humour, his eyes again fastened on the girl's face, as if to force her into the conversation. But Hugh refused to be drawn.

"Give you god-den, Messer," he said curtly. "Come, hounds! Good dogs!"

A lift of his eyebrows, and Edith reined around and backed her mare into the shadows of the ride. Hugh was about to follow, when the stranger interposed.

"May I crave your indulgence further?" he asked, pressing his horse forward. "I seek Blancherive, a castle of Sir Godwin Halcroft. Can you direct me towards it?"

"Blancherive!"

Hugh's jaw dropped.

"Yes. Do you know it?"

"'Tis on the first road beyond the wood, turning off the highroad,"

answered Hugh, ignoring the last question, and without giving the stranger opportunity to speak again he wheeled his stallion and dashed up the ride, the hounds a silent pack at his heels, the girl beside him all curiosity.

"He asked for Blancherive," she exclaimed. "Why, Hugh, who can he be? No friend of Uncle Godwin's that I wot of."

"No, the man is new to me," Hugh agreed. "You heard him ask his way. A stranger. No Frenchman by his talk, either. It may be he is from Italy."

"From Italy? But who would come seeking Uncle Godwin from Italy?"

"Would that I knew, Edith. Well, shall we head back to the Castle and find out?"

She considered, her face of a sudden very grave.

"No, I have a feeling bids me not, Hugh," she decided. "Let us make the most of this day while we have it. What next?"

"First pick up Ralph. Then--what say you to flushing Prior Thomas? I am starved, and there is always good food at the Priory."

"Excellent," she applauded. "'Tis better far than the Castle hall and company manners, if strangers be there. Yonder is Ralph. I'll race you to him."

"Done!"

Away galloped the two steeds, neck and neck, and Ralph, seeing them coming, drew aside. They thundered up to him and reined to a halt.

"Who won?" demanded Edith.

"Nay, mistress, I did not see," stammered the giant. "There was not a whisker between the noses of the two. But this long time past I have thought ye dead or broken."

"We have had an adventure, Ralph," Hugh told him. "We have met strangers for Blancherive on the highroad."

"Not the King's heralds from London?"

"Nay, fool! King John is too concerned with his own affairs to waste heralds on us. They were strangers--from Outremer, mayhap."

Ralph's eyes grew big.

"From Outremer? Belike they have seen the heathen lands, where the Paynims and the man-eaters live."

"Well, of that we shall learn more anon," returned Hugh, by no means sceptical. "For this present, Ralph, we seek the Prior and food. Canst lead us thither the shortest way?"

"Ay, and that readily."

It was a half-hour's canter to Crowden Priory on the near edge of the Wood, and they rode as youth loves to ride: a headlong gait. Crupper to crupper, the black mare and the grey stallion kept even pace, with never a snort of fatigue from distended nostrils.

For a time they rode in silence, each buried in thoughts that had risen since the odd meeting in the highroad. Then Hugh said abruptly to his comrade:

"I shall ask this man if he wots aught of my father."

Her eyes met his.

"You are still of a mind to go knight erranting, Hugh?"

"Ay, naught shall shake me," he answered gloomily. "'tis a mystery ill likes me. I have a mind to know: Have I a father or have I not? It seems there is none can tell me. I shall go and search for myself when I am free."

"And that will be a year's time hence?"

"'Tis so set down in the deed in Prior Thomas's chest. The day I shall be one-and-twenty I shall be free of the Chesby lands, free of myself, free to do as I list, go as I list, come as I list."

He straightened in his saddle.

"Ah, that day is long in coming, Edith! I find no fault with Prior Thomas. Fair he hath been with me always, and lenient. But these two years now, I have longed to be up and doing, riding with the King or for my own hand. The world goes on apace, and I must sit home here and play at jousting in the Castle yard or----"

"Or ride in Crowden Wood with me," she finished for him reproachfully. "Nay, Hugh, you are not gallant."

"'Twas not what I meant to say," he retorted. "And in sooth, I can find fault with you no more than with Prior Thomas. But you are growing fast to womanhood, and----well, I marked your uncle cast dubious eyes at those breeches as we rode forth this morning."

She laughed.

"Bless his dear old heart! That will have been Dame Alicia, dropping words of wisdom in his ear. Can I not hear her! 'But my lord, she grows over-old for such pranks! 'Tis time a stop was put to such hoydenish ways!' Oh, I know her! Soon, Hugh, they will have me in bounds worse than ever were set for you."

Her voice took on a melancholy note, and Hugh involuntarily stretched out his hand to pat her shoulder.

"But I shall be ready to squire you," he said. "Have we not planned that I shall be your knight?"

"Ay, but mayhap you will be far away." She spoke quite seriously, her eyes fixed on the distance where the spire of Crowden Priory soared above the opening fields. "Do not forget, Hugh, that my way lies toward Outremer, no less than yours. Some day my father will send for me, and that day must I go. He has lacked me over-long."

"That is all settled," declared Hugh. "Have we not agreed that my errantry lies eastward into Outremer, to Constantinople and Byzantium, as well as to the Holy Land?"

She looked at him shyly, half-woman, half-child; underneath the

soberness of maidenhood, the gaiety of childhood only half-suppressed.

"Dame Alicia says that men are prodigal of words, and loath to make them good," she answered.

"A plague on her for a sour old maid!" cried Hugh. "Here, there shall be no doubt of this! Wilt have me for your knight, Edith?"

Her cheeks reddened, her eyes suffused and dropped, at the note of mastery ringing in his voice.

"Yes, Hugh," she murmured so low he scarce could hear her above the thudding of hoofs on the leaf-mould.

"Then 'tis fitting you give me a badge to wear for you as my lady," he pressed.

"Art in earnest, Hugh?"

"Never was I more so."

"What--what shall it be?" she asked faintly.

He surveyed her swiftly.

"It must be something I can wear on my helm without fear of its tattering," he explained. "I know not----"

"My glove?" she offered.

"Ay, the very thing!"

She stripped it from her right hand and gave it to him. Hugh bent low as he received it, then stood in his stirrups and waved it high in air.

"A pledge to you, Edith," he cried. "I swear to you by St. James, my father's patron saint and mine, that whilst I have this token no barriers shall keep me from you, if you call me to your aid. I will be a true knight to you, and serve you diligently in all that you require."

Her eyes shone.

"That was finely spoken, Hugh, and I know there was never knight so true as you will be."

"Ay, when I have won knighthood," rejoined Hugh, a trifle moodily, his first enthusiasm past. "We forget I have yet to earn the accolade--at an age when many men are warriors of name and fame."

"Fear not," she reassured him. "You will make your name, Hugh. How often have Uncle Godwin and Robin Fletcher said you would turn out such a man of your hands as your father was?"

"Ay, but----"

He broke off, and thrust the glove into his doublet.

"I trust not words," he went on presently. "And I shall trust myself better after I have been put to the proof. Who can trust an unbloodied sword?"

"I trust you," she answered. "And so does Ralph. Do you not?" she demanded of the huge follower who had closed up on their heels.

"Whatever you say, Lady," he returned simply. "So be it is what Messer Hugh wishes."

She laughed merrily and, despite himself, Hugh joined in.

"I am a churl," he said. "Forgive me, Edith."

"Right willingly. And here is the Priory."

Prior Thomas was standing on the porch of the Prior's Lodge as his visitors rode up. He was a round, merry little man, with shrewd, twinkling eyes and the imperious manner of a great administrator, upon whose shoulders rested the burden of vast interests. No baron of the surrounding shires bulked grander in importance. Crowden Priory boasted twenty knights' fees, maintained its own feudal retainers and exerted a sway that was reckoned with by the King--and respectfully, at that.

"How now, my children?" exclaimed the Prior jovially. "What do you clattering in my close in this worldly fashion, disturbing my monks in their orisons and dazzling the lay-brothers with your pomp and circumstance? A penance on you, naughty ones!"

"And what may that be, Father Thomas?" inquired Edith, as she slipped lithely from her saddle and handed her bridle to Ralph.

"A fine, fat carp," whispered Prior Thomas. "If Brother Engild has done as I directed him, it should be a morsel of a daintiness equal to yourself. Will you join me, the two of you?"

"'Twas what we had determined upon," announced Hugh frankly, as he, too, dismounted. "Ralph, do you take the dogs back to Chesby. Anon, ride on to Blancherive and await me there. Ay, Father Thomas, I would best warn you that we are sore hungered, for all morning we have ridden the Wood."

"Hunting the King's deer, I'll be bound!" exclaimed the Prior. "Now, what ado is this? If the Wardens----"

"Nay, 'twas only Red Dan, and your pullets will flourish the safer for our work."

"Humph," grunted the Prior. "And even so I am somewhat of a mind to turn you over to the King's Verderers. It is not so many years since the fox was made a beast of the chase and reserved."

"I'll chance it," laughed Hugh. "Sir Godwin hath told me of Canute's law, which gives all a free hand at Red Dan, and his Saxon spirit will not put up with any other. I'm with him in that, Father Thomas."

"A naughty fellow, indeed!" protested the Prior, as he led them into the great hall of the Lodge. "Well, you shall have my protection, Hugh, and you have well-earned your meal if you have helped us preserve those pullets. Sit ye down, children, sit ye down. What news do ye bring?"

"We met strangers on the London Road who asked the way to Blancherive," said Edith.

"Strangers? Humph! What manner of strangers?"

"Dark, ill-favoured," volunteered Hugh. "Oh, well enough dressed, I grant you"--this in reply to an objection from Edith--"but I liked not the looks of their leader."

"Whence come they?" inquired Prior Thomas. Foreigners were seldom seen in that out-of-the-way corner of England.

"They did not say."

"No clue to their race?"

"The leader swore 'by the Bodyless Ones,'" suggested Edith.

Hugh gave her an admiring glance.

"Now, that is a clever maid," he said. "I never remembered it."

"It sounds schismatical," commented Prior Thomas doubtfully. "Ay, I suspect that to be a wickedness of the heretics of the Eastern church. Too bad! When you first spoke I had hoped they might be travellers from Rome, who could give us word of the Holy Apostle and his Cardinals. Ah, well, 'tis passing strange if they have come all this way to England from Outremer."

A light flooded Edith's face.

"Oh," she exclaimed, leaping to her feet, "and if they are come from Constantinople, do you think it may be they bring word of my father?"

Prior Thomas stroked his clean-shaven face in reflection.

"Belike, belike," he assented slowly. "It may be, my maid. 'Tis all of a year since last Sir Cedric wrote. Had he known these travellers would venture so far he might well have entrusted them with letters."

"And you will read them to me?"

"What need, with Scholar Hugh to help you?" Prior Thomas laughed. "Ah, Hugh, some day wilt thou give thanks that I made a clerk out of you, for all your arrogant Norman blood."

"In sooth, I see cause for thankfulness already," admitted Hugh a trifle shame-facedly. "This last year I have found it easier to keep my accounts, and there are fewer rents scamped for the records I have writ on my scrolls."

"Good youth," approved the Prior. "'Tis a meritable combination, Hugh, clerkship and swordcraft. Some day, I say--but here comes the carp. To your trenchers, my children."

CHAPTER II

STRANGERS AT BLANCHERIVE

The courtyard at Blancherive was thronged and noisy, as Hugh and Edith rode across the drawbridge and through the passage under the gate-tower. Men-at-arms, grooms and servants swarmed about a group of swarthy, bright-garbed men, who lounged by the Castle stables. Voices clacked high in speculation over these mysterious persons who

could not understand either of the tongues known to the Castle's company--that is, Norman French and the Saxon dialect. So great was the turmoil that Hugh must needs force a path for Edith to the steps that led up to the entrance to the Great Hall in the Keep.

There they dismounted, and leaving their horses with Ralph, who awaited them, Hugh and Edith entered the rush-strewn Hall. It stretched before them, high-ceiled, gloomy, its bareness scarce concealed by flapping tapestries and the long tables that reached from the door to the platform reserved for the Lord of the Manor and his family and guests. In one corner a fire blazed dimly in a huge, open hearth. Otherwise the only illumination was the scant sunlight that crept through loopholes in the massy walls.

On the dais sat Sir Godwin and the man they had met that morning on the London Road. The Lord of Blancherive sprang to his feet as they entered. He was a small man, very wiry, with immensely broad shoulders; but he carried himself with a dignity that enhanced his stature.

"What ado we have had!" he called in a deep, brazen voice--the voice of a warrior. "Could you not have done your hunting some other time, my children? But no--I am unfair. You could have done it no other time. You did right to pleasure yourselves, whilst you could."

"Why, Uncle Godwin, what do you mean?" cried Edith.

"Anon, anon," he answered, and turned to Hugh. "I have had great need of you, Hugh," he went on. "You are our clerk, and without you I have been helpless."

He held up several rolls of parchment, tied with parti-coloured silk and decorated with elaborate pendant seals.

"Is it from father?" exclaimed Edith.

"It is. Sore news, my maid. Nay, do not weep. 'Tis fine news for you. For me it spells loneliness, an Hugh makes good his threat and leaves me, too."

Both Hugh and Edith regarded him in bewilderment. Hugh shifted his gaze suddenly to the stranger, and met a stare focussed on his own face. But the man from Outremer looked quickly away.

"But I do not understand," said Hugh.

"'Tis simply that my brother hath sent for Edith, as we knew he must when it seemed him best," answered Sir Godwin. "He hath sent word by the Most Noble Messer Andrea Mocenigo, Special Ambassador to King John, who, he hath been telling me, journeyed hither in one of the dromons of the Emperor of Constantinople, all the way by the Inner Sea, past the country of the Soldan of Babylon, the country of the man-eating people and around the land of the Moors through the Great Ocean. Truly a marvellous venture!"

The stranger bowed.

"You exalt me unduly, my lord," he said.

"And Edith must go by the same way?" asked Hugh, turning the parchments in his hands.

Sir Godwin looked to his guest.

"'Tis so," replied Mocenigo. "But fear not, Sir Englishman. My ship is large, my crew brave and well-armed. I have done the journey before this."

"I like it not," said Hugh stubbornly.

"Indeed, lordling, you concern yourself over nothing," the stranger insisted suavely. "The Most Noble Grand Acolyth, Commander of the Varangian Guard of his Most Eminent, Holy and Christian Majesty, the Emperor of Constantinople, deigned to commission me especially for this task, under the Emperor's sanction, and all arrangements have been made to insure the protection of the young maid. Off Sicily we shall pick up a squadron of escort galleys, but without help we can easily beat off the corsairs of the Narrow Seas."

From the rear of the platform came the sound of weeping. Hugh turned and strove to peer through the shadows.

"'Tis Dame Alicia," said Sir Godwin. "She goes with the maid."

Hugh fumbled with the seals of the parchments.

"When?" he asked.

"So soon as may be," returned the Ambassador. "I must make haste. 'Tis many months since I left my master, the Emperor. I have fulfilled my mission at London, and I must lose no time in carrying back the message of your King. We should ride hence to-morrow."

"But I could never make ready in that short time," protested Edith.

"All is ready for you, lady," answered Mocenigo. "Your father, the Grand Acolyth, requested that you bring with you your old nurse, but he was at pains to provide me with several dames to keep you company on the voyage. They have brought with them dress-stuffs, everything needful."

Edith stood staring into the depths of the hall for a moment. Then she made a little gesture of assent.

"'Tis right I should go, is it not, Uncle Godwin?" she questioned.

"Yes, my maid--but first I would have Hugh read us these letters. It may be they contain further instructions."

Hugh broke the seals and unrolled the first parchment. It was writ fairly in Latin, a tongue the monks had taught him, and dated at Constantinople four months before. It began:

"Sir Cedric Halcroft, known as the Grand Acolyth of the Empire, Commander of the Varangian Guard, from the Palace of the Bucoleon in Constantinople to his brother Godwin, Lord of Blancherive, a Castle which is in England beyond the Great Sea and the Land of the French:

"Brother Godwin, I write this by the pen of one Dominick, a holy monk sojourning at the Hospice of the Knights of St. John, to say to you that I have grown lonely for the maid, my daughter, and it is my desire that you send her, with Dame Alicia, her nurse, in the custody of the bearer of this, one Messer Andrea Mocenigo, Ambassador of my master, the Emperor, and a man learned in travel and the ways of the sea, who hath been commissioned particularly for this task. He is to be trusted. Accept my thanks for the care you have taken of the

maid. All goes well with me, and I pray God and His Blessed Saints daily that your lot may be happy."

The other was the most beautiful parchment Hugh had ever seen. It was inscribed in vermillion ink, bedight with gilding and the capitals of the Latin letters all enscrolled with gold.

"To all strangers in all lands," it read. "Be it known that the Most Sacred, Holy and Christian Sovereign, Alexius, Emperor of Rome, Lord of Constantinople, Thrace, Macedonia, Greece, Scythia, Hungary, Bithynia, Armenia, Anatolia, Cappadocia, Paphlagonia, Mesopotamia, the Islands of the Sea, Jerusalem and the lands beyond, Augustus, hath commissioned his trusty servant, Andrea Mocenigo, to fare forth from the harbour of the Golden Horn in the Imperial dromon Kyrie Eleison and to sail the seas to the realm of England, there to deliver the Emperor's message to the King who hath succeeded him men called Lion-Heart and to bring back with him the daughter of the Emperor's right trusty servant, the Grand Acolyth of the Empire, Sir Cedric Halcroft, in such state as would be accorded a daughter of the Imperial Court. Christ save us all!"

"Well-spoken, well-spoken," cried Sir Godwin warmly. "His Majesty doth my brother great honour."

"None stands higher in the confidence of the Augustus than the Grand Acolyth," replied Mocenigo, with a low bow to Edith. "And all the Court await with expectation the coming of Sir Cedric's daughter."

Hugh glared at the Emperor's Ambassador, wroth at the flush that tinted Edith's cheek.

"After all, 'tis no more than is fitting for her," he said haughtily. "I have heard you say often, Sir Godwin, that she hath in her veins the blood of King Harold and the Sainted Edmund."

Sir Godwin laughed.

"True, lad, but it ill becomes your Norman blood to prate of our Saxon lineage."

It was Hugh's turn to flush.

"Good blood is good blood," he muttered. "No Norman denies it. How many lords of my race have wooed your womankind?"

"Nay, now, that issue is buried, Hugh." Sir Godwin banished the argument with a wave of the hand. "In the haste of our greetings I have forgotten to present you to my guest. Messer Mocenigo, I make known to you my neighbour, the Lord Hugh de Chesby. His lands march with mine."

"Young sir, I am honoured." Mocenigo bowed from his supple hips, his cap sweeping the rushes. To Hugh it seemed there was a touch of irony in the exaggerated courtesy. But his resentment was forgotten in the man's next words. "De Chesby? Surely, that is a name familiar to the folk of Outremer!"

"You know my father, Messer Mocenigo?" asked Hugh eagerly.

"Not the great Sir James?"

"Yes, Sir James de Chesby--'the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre' he was called in the Holy Land."

The Italian gave Hugh a sidelong look out of his heavy-lidded eyes.

"It was never my fortune to know your father," he answered. "But he was indicated to me once in the streets of Tripoli. A stout knight and of matchless fame! The jongleurs still sing of his deeds. 'Tis a vast pity, young sir, he is not with us to-day to fend off the Paynims."

Hugh stepped closer on the dais.

"Do you think him dead?" he asked tensely.

Mocenigo made a gesture of surprise.

"But is not that accepted?" he returned. "It is a part of the story, a legend of itself. I, myself, the time I speak of, saw Sir James de Chesby going down to his galley to start upon his last voyage from Tripoli."

"He is not dead," declared Hugh.

The Italian laughed uneasily.

"Not dead? But----"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, the jongleurs have that tale, too," he went on. "The heroes of Outremer never die, you know. They say that even Barbarossa, the German Emperor, who perished in the last Crusade, is not dead, but sleeps in a cavern in the mountains of his own land, and that some day he and all his knights will wake up again."

"But none saw my father die," insisted Hugh. "He sailed away from Tripoli. His galley reached Constantinople. Some say he was then on board of her; some say he was not. But nobody saw him die. He disappeared."

Mocenigo raised his eyebrows.

"There is the Grand Acolyth," he suggested. "Has he not----"

"Sir Cedric made inquiries," interposed the Lord of Blancherive. "He could learn nothing. The galley Sir James sailed upon had disappeared from those seas. There was no trace of him in Constantinople, nor was he ever seen or heard of in any other part of the Empire or in the Holy Land."

"He might have been taken by the Saracens," said Mocenigo.

"Think you they would have let pass the chance to boast of such a prisoner?" retorted Hugh. "Or the ransom he would have brought?"

"Lion-heart, himself, bade the Templars and Hospitallers make inquiries of the Emirs of his fate," added Sir Godwin. "King Richard loved Sir James, and would have given much to ransom him, had it been possible."

The Italian shrugged his shoulders again.

"Sirs, you baffle me," he said. "I can make no suggestions in face of what you say. In Outremer Sir James has become a memory, a

stirring echo from the past, a shadowy figure in a tale men gather to hear. I have not thought of him as living this many a year."

"He lives," said Hugh stoutly. "And I shall find him--or make certain of his fate."

A startled look came into Mocenigo's face.

"You would seek him out?" he questioned.

"Yes," answered Hugh shortly.

"'Tis a far journey from England to Outremer."

"Yet you have made it."

"True, lordling. But the way was smoothed for me." The Italian wetted his lips nervously. "There are many dangers in Outremer, dangers on sea and dangers on land. The Saracens pin the Franks closer and closer to their few castles on the seaboard of the Holy Land. The Old Man of the Mountains sends his Assassins to slay whom he pleases. Corsairs ravage the shipping. Men slay the stranger first, and empty his wallet and strip off his armour, afterward. When the Franks are not fighting one another or the Emirs, they are quarrelling with my master. Few men live long in Outremer."

A slight smile twisted Hugh's mouth.

"What you say hath interested me still more in my purposed venture, Sir Ambassador," he said quietly. "And if I find only peril and no aid in the Holy Land, I may come to Constantinople, where all is peace and order."

"To Constantinople?" Mocenigo leaned forward, sweat beading out on his face. "But why Constantinople, young sir?"

"Did not my father's galley sail for Constantinople from Tripoli?"

"Ay, but if there was trace of him in the realms of the Augustus, the Grand Acolyth would have found it by this."

Mocenigo settled back in his seat as he spoke, and smiled palely.

"I must go everywhere," answered Hugh steadily. "I may leave no spot untouched in my quest. I have sworn it."

"If my advice had weight with you, lordling, you would abandon your venture. 'Tis more promising of danger than glory."

Hugh looked at him, but said nothing, and after the silence had grown embarrassing, Mocenigo turned to Edith, who stood quietly by her uncle's chair.

"Perchance, you would care to hear of the life at my master's court--the centre of the world, it hath been called," he proposed.

"With your leave, Messer Mocenigo, she must put off that pleasure to relieve the tedium of the voyage," interrupted Sir Godwin. "Dame Alicia hath need of her to settle many matters ere morning."

The Italian bowed his assent.

"Rest assured, lady, no step has been left untaken to secure your

comfort," he said.

Hugh felt the hot blood surge through his veins at the hint of devotion in Mocenigo's voice. But to his surprise Edith accepted it with queenly indifference. An hour before she would have blushed and known not what to do. Now, already, she had learned her first lesson in the higher school of life, had leaped at a single bound from the hoyden to the threshold of womanhood.

"I must ride back to Chesby," he said, fighting down the heart-soreness that was growing within him. "Give you god-den, Messer Mocenigo. Sir Godwin, I shall come to bid you god-speed to-morrow, and you ride hence with Edith."

"Do so, lad, do so," boomed Sir Godwin. "St. Edmund willing, I ride with our maid to Hastings port, where the dromon awaits her."

Mocenigo gave Hugh a sinister look from the corner of his eye.

"Forget not my advice, young sir," he said. "Toward Outremer lies danger. Here in England is all that man may desire."

"I know my path," answered Hugh coldly. "I must journey it."

He held back the curtain over the door to the living quarters of the Keep, so that Edith might pass out, then followed her. As the arras fell into place, Mocenigo leaned toward Sir Godwin, his fingers gripping tight hold of the arms of his chair.

"A sturdy youth and a bold," he remarked with studied calm. "How is it he hath not yet set forth upon this quest he speaks of?"

"No fault of his," laughed Sir Godwin. "By the terms of his father's charter, left with the monks of Crowden, Hugh must bide by his lands under tutelage of the Prior until he is one-and-twenty. Then he is his own master. He hath a year to wait."

"I knew not Sir James de Chesby had a son---or if I did, it slipped my mind," replied Mocenigo.

"He was married but a year. His wife died at the birth of Hugh. Sir James conceived the idea that he could help to win her eternal joy in Paradise by a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He set forth ere Hugh was a year old."

"On his way he stopped at Constantinople, I believe?"

"Ay, he was much thought of by the Emperor Andronicus. But he went on to the Holy Land. He fought at Hattin, when King Guy and the Holy Cross were taken. He was of those few who escaped, and he reached the Holy City with Balian d'Ibelin and helped in its last defence. Saladin so admired him, as you must know, that he granted him freedom and presented him with a purse of gold. When our King Lion-heart crossed to Outremer on crusade, Sir James joined him and fought at Acre and Arsouf. When Lion-heart left and the Crusade broke up, Sir James stayed on and fought as chance allowed. He was the best knight ever I knew. We were lads together. Many a spear I have shivered with him."

Mocenigo listened to this with an air of interest that masked his burning desire to get away. He was on his feet so soon as Sir Godwin had spoken the last word.

"If it pleases you, my lord," he said, "I must instruct my men for the night."

"Ay, do so," agreed Sir Godwin. "Whatever they require they shall have. My household are at your disposal, Sir Ambassador."

CHAPTER III

THE KNIFE IN THE TWILIGHT

Hugh paused at the foot of the stairs that led through the thickness of the wall to the upper stories of the Keep.

"We have ridden farther than to Crowden Wood this day," he said sombrely.

Edith's fingers picked at the lacings of her jerkin.

"Yes, Hugh, and we are at the parting of the ways."

"You seem not over-burdened with grief at the thought," he exclaimed bitterly.

She raised her eyes to his with new-found shyness.

"I do not grieve, because it is my thought that your path will follow mine," she answered. "If you went adventuring to Outremer, and I stayed home in England, our parting would be longer than 'tis like to be as things have fallen out."

"I am a churl," said Hugh remorsefully. "Forgive me!"

"Nay, this time I shall not forgive," she teased. "Hast beat me with a stick in years past, Hugh. Hast ordered me about as man-at-arms and squire. Always have I forgiven you. But this time I have a mind to hold my anger over your head."

Hugh's stern young face relaxed into a boyish grin.

"And now I know you for the same old lass," he cried. "Ever ready with words and---- But this talk serves naught. Wilt name me always your knight?"

"Always, Hugh."

"One thing more." He lowered his voice. "Trust not this man Mocenigo. He hath an evil manner."

"He is my father's friend, it seems," she replied.

"Friend or not, he----"

"Trust him I must, Hugh," she rebuked. "He bears my father's warrant as well as that of his Emperor. A great man he must be."

"A great man, indeed!" scoffed Hugh. "An Italian swaggerer, some cut-throat expelled his own country!"

"If you do not like him, I am sorry," answered Edith, with dignity. "But I must travel with him, and I intend that he shall be quick to

serve me."

Hugh gnashed his teeth.

"I believe you," he snapped.

He turned on his heel and strode down the corridor. He had gone but half-a-dozen steps, when there came a rush of feet behind him and two arms encircled his neck.

"Great silly!" whispered a voice in his ear. "An you are my knight, what matters any one else?"

He felt something brush his cheek, then was pushed violently from behind. When he regained his balance the corridor was empty, but his ears caught an echo of elfin laughter that floated down the corkscrew stairs.

Probably he would have pursued the laughter up the staircase, but at that moment appeared Dame Alicia, a buxom creature who had nursed Edith from babyhood. She was wiping her eyes and occasionally emitted a rasping sob.

"Take heart, good dame," said Hugh, smiling involuntarily at her lugubrious air. "'Tis not every one goes travelling through the world the guest of the Emperor of Constantinople."

"Oh, Messer Hugh, Messer Hugh!" she wailed. "And if we ever come to Constantinople, it will not be so bad--although how am I to talk with the strangers in the land for want of knowing their tongue? But I doubt sorely we will get there, sailing all those leagues in the Great Ocean, where they say if the mariners be not careful they are like to slide off the edge of the world. And if we do not fall over the edge, then there will be the Moors and the black men that eat people and the Saracens and the pirates and the strange animals that come out of the deep to devour whole ships that pass by! Well-away and alas! Sorrow on the day that brought me to this!"

She stumbled up the stairs after Edith, utterly unconsolable.

Hugh felt no disposition to laugh at the woman's fears. He did not think that she exaggerated the perils of the voyage. But he was convinced that a vessel equipped by so mighty a sovereign as the Emperor of Constantinople must be reckoned able to beat off all except the most determined attacks and capable of withstanding the ordinary perils of the sea.

It was growing toward dusk and he did not linger. He gained the courtyard by a side passage, and sent a varlet to summon Ralph with his horse. Whilst he waited he noticed Mocenigo descend the steps from the main entrance to the Keep and a bustle amongst the stranger's swarthy attendants. But his mind gave the matter no second thought, and he thrust his foot in the grey stallion's stirrup and swung into saddle without a word.

They had ridden over the drawbridge and placed some distance betwixt themselves and Blancherive, when Ralph urged his horse alongside his master's.

"Messer Hugh," he said eagerly. "Did you learn aught of these queer people behind us? They do say they come from Constantinople and the lands of Outremer."

"They are from Sir Cedric," returned Hugh briefly.

"Did they have word for Lady Edith?"

"She sets out with them to-morrow."

Hugh strove to speak as if it mattered nothing to him, but the effort pained.

"Ah, Messer Hugh, this is great dolour for us," cried Ralph. "We shall have no more fine rides in Crowden Wood. Who would have thought this morning she would be----"

Hugh cursed impatiently.

"Ralph," he said, "'tis a matter I like not to think over any more. I would be alone for a space. Do you drop back and follow at a distance."

"Ay, Messer Hugh."

Ralph touched his cap and reined in his mount, an ache in his honest heart at the thought that his idol did not want him.

Hugh rode on slowly, the reins loose on the stallion's neck, his head drooped in meditation. He tried not to think of the events of the afternoon. He tried to fasten his mind upon the accounts he must go over that evening with old Robin Fletcher, Ralph's father and the bailiff of the Chesby lands. He tried, when he was convinced that accounts held no interest for him, to recall the verses of some brave chanson and hum them to himself. He tried to think of the new harness he meant to order in London town against his own journey over-seas. He tried a dozen ways of diverting his mind, all equally without success.

The sky darkened in the west and the shadows lengthened. The trees that lined the narrow track cast a weaving shuttle of shade, as the wind brushed their tops. But Hugh was heedless of all about him. The stallion knew the homeward path and was safe to follow it. Hugh was enwrapped in gloomy consideration of his own affairs. He never saw the slinking figure that crept among the trees, gained the roadside copse and stole slowly nearer as the light waned.

Hugh's first warning was the sudden swerving of the stallion. Out of the tail of his eye he had a momentary vision of a compact object that hurled itself across the road at him, of a knife that flashed in air. Then came the impact. Hugh half-turned in his saddle, and struck out with the hunting-spear he held in his right hand. The blow served to deflect the knife, but his assailant caught him about the waist with one arm and dragged him, tussling, to the dust of the path. The spear flew from Hugh's hand. The stallion snorted and reared, hesitated and galloped back along the way they had come.

Hugh found strength for one despairing cry.

"Ralph!" he shouted. "Ralph! To----"

The threatening knife cut short his words. The man he had to contend with was squat and immensely agile, and very slippery to hold. Time and again in that brief struggle in the dust Hugh thought he had pinned him down, only to find the dark, villainous face, with deep-set, wicked eyes, leering at him from above, the knife barely held off by such a grip as Hugh had secured on the assassin's wrist.

It was a battle fought in silence. Hugh was too busy to speak after his first frantic cry. The assailant grunted a few exclamations in some language Hugh did not understand, but he, too, had no wind to spare.

Over and over they rolled, the knife circling and stabbing, slicing and cutting. Hugh's doublet was cut to ribbons, a long scratch on his shoulder bled freely. But always he managed to ward off the point in time to avert a deadly blow. He was tiring fast, however, and a look of ferocious satisfaction was dawning in the squat man's eyes, when the thunder of hoofs resounded in the narrow way.

"Messer Hugh, Messer Hugh!" came Ralph's voice.

The squat man raised his head, sniffed with his nostrils like a wild animal, launched one more desperate blow, and without warning leaped clear and darted along the road. Hugh scrambled to his feet as Ralph galloped up, leading the stallion.

Hugh caught the bridle of his mount.

"Shoot me a shaft at yon knave," he commanded grimly. "See, he runs in the shadows of the wood."

Ralph leaped from his horse, nicked the string of his long-bow and drew a shaft from the quiver at his belt. But the squat man, after a look over his shoulder, swerved abruptly into the woods.

"He is gone from us," said Hugh regretfully.

"Nay, Messer Hugh. I think I know how he must head. Ride after me, an it please you."

Hugh led Ralph's horse between the trees, find followed the archer's footsteps. They travelled swiftly in a direction at right angles to the road, and presently emerged upon an open meadow, surprisingly clear in the twilight. Against the farther wall of woodland showed a running figure.

"I thought so," said Ralph with satisfaction.

He stepped into the clearing, raised his bow and drew the string to his ear.

"Allow a scant foot for windage," he muttered to himself. "Ay, that will be it. So!"

As he loosed, the assassin looked behind in time to see the clothyard shaft winging toward him. And so swift was the arrow's flight that before the man could move, whilst his head was still turned, the arrow pierced his back and stood forth a foot beyond his chest. He shrieked once and fell.

"Bravely shot, Ralph," applauded Hugh.

"It might have been worse," admitted Ralph. "'Tis the first time I have shot a man."

"'Twas more than a good shot," returned Hugh, "In this light, too! An the King's Verderers saw you, Ralph, I should not keep you long."

"'Twill take more than the King to pry me away from you, Messer Hugh," replied Ralph simply. "Did that dog stab you?"

"'Tis of no consequence. Come, let us look at him. By his dress he was none of the Greenwood Men."

"Greenwood Men!" exclaimed Ralph. "Yon was no Greenwood Man. He ran like a lumbering bull in the very way I thought he would. We would not have caught one of the Merry Men in that fashion, Messer Hugh."

"He is some landless fellow, mayhap," said Hugh as they rode across the meadow.

When they reached the body, Ralph drew out the arrow and turned it over so that the face was revealed in the dwindling light.

"That is no Englishman--or Frenchman, either," declared Hugh.

A vague feeling of uneasiness stirred him.

"Have a look at his pockets," he directed.

Ralph made a methodical search of the man's clothing. Except the knife, some leather string and one silver penny there was nothing to show for his trouble.

But in examining the jerkin of rain-soaked, tarnished leather, the front of it tore apart.

"St. Mark aid us!" murmured Ralph. "Do but see the markings on his chest, Messer Hugh!"

Hugh dismounted from the stallion and bent close over the body. Daubed on the man's hairy chest in lurid colours were pictures of weird animals and a crucifix.

"They will not come off," said Ralph after an unsuccessful attempt with a moistened thumb. "It will be witchcraft, mayhap."

"Nay, I think not, Ralph," answered Hugh. "It is some seaman's trick--but this man is far from the sea for one of his trade. 'Tis a matter will bear investigation. Do you say nothing of it to any one. I will hold council with Prior Thomas, and we will search the roads to find if the fellow has been hereabouts."

Ralph frowned down at the dead man.

"I like it not," he growled. "What enemy have you, Messer Hugh, would wish to have a knife stuck in you?"

"None that I know of," returned Hugh, but the feeling of uneasiness which had irked him before made his answer seem a mockery to him.

That squat figure, the bestial, sullen face, the tarnished, cast-off tinsel of its garments--with or without cause, they brought to his mind the gaudy array of strangers he had last seen ducking and scraping before Mocenigo in Blancherive courtyard.

He cast the idea from him as preposterous.

"Come," he said abruptly. "We have to talk with Prior Thomas, and the hour grows late."

Throughout their ride to the Priory gates, Ralph kept his horse at his master's cropper and his longbow was bent and ready at his back.

But they met no one, until the porter at the gate hailed them and asked their business, for monasteries, like castles and walled towns, were chary of admitting callers from the night.

Prior Thomas listened to Hugh's account and questioned Ralph.

"There was naught upon him, you say, save these markings, that he might be known by?" he ended.

"Naught," replied Hugh.

"Are there strangers in these parts---- But yes. You yourself told me of meeting them this morning on the road for Blancherive."

Hugh assented and, of course, was obliged to narrate the message brought by Mocenigo.

"Ah, that is sad hearing," exclaimed the Prior, with tears in his eyes. "The little maid is to leave us so soon! I must ride thither with you, Hugh, after Matins. And what sort were these strangers?"

"Foreign, like their lord," answered Hugh. "I have had the same thought as mayhap troubles you, Father Prior."

"We must not leap to conclusions in such a grave matter," cautioned Prior Thomas. "In such an assemblage of men, roysterers and mariners, I take it, there are always some unheedful of God. It may be such an one marked you ride from the Castle and planned to line an empty wallet from your person."

"That is true," agreed Hugh.

"In any case," continued the Prior, "we must think of Edith. No harm has come of this and if there be no reason for it, 'twere well nothing was said to cast a shadow over her journey."

"There is shadow enough," said Hugh gloomily.

Prior Thomas put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hugh," he said, "thou hast been almost mine own son to me. I could not have pleaded with Our Lady for a dearer one. When I was Master of the Novices your father deeded to the Priory the lands of Greenmere and Hautepuisse, and in return asked that we care for your upbringing and guard your interest against wicked barons. Prior Hubert gave you to my especial charge that day, and in it have you been ever since. I know well, dear lad, this is a night of sorrow for you. But I would have you remember that you have vowed yourself to a high quest, and until that quest is achieved you have no right to give your thoughts to any other object."

Hugh raised his eyes very humbly to the Prior.

"Father Thomas, you have taught me a lesson I required," he admitted. "I thank you. I will try to win my first victory over myself."

He choked and blinked his eyes hard.

"It is very long to wait," he added.

"It is very long," answered Father Thomas gently, "but the good knight schools himself to place his faith in Our Lady and studies how he may achieve merit in Her blessed sight. Doubt not, Hugh, an you

strive lustily and with perfect faith, in the end you shall win to content."

"Must I tarry here the whole of another year?" pleaded Hugh.

"You must," said Prior Thomas firmly. "We dare not ignore the bond our brethren made with Sir James on the sacred bones of St. Cuthbert of Crowden."

"A year," groaned Hugh.

Yet the next morning he contrived to present a smiling face to veil his discontent, as he bade farewell to Edith on the London Road.

"A year hence you will be following me," she laughed to him, for she seemed as carefree as he.

"Ay, you may look for me," he answered steadily.

"In Outremer?"

Hugh turned to find the sardonic features of Mocenigo at his elbow.

"In Outremer, Messer Mocenigo," he repeated.

Mocenigo eyed him as Hugh had seen knights watch each other in the lists.

"Mayhap I, too, shall have the pleasure of meeting you there," said the Italian smoothly--"if you come."

"I shall come."

Mocenigo smiled and kneed his horse forward. There was that in his smile which was an answer--and might have been a threat.

The cavalcade began to move.

"God keep you, Hugh," said Edith hastily. "If I hear of Sir James, you shall know."

"Our Lady guard you," returned Hugh.

He kissed her hand and pulled the grey stallion back. She rode past him, a brave figure, slender and straight, fearless eyes fixed on the dusty road ahead--that road which led on to the sea and beyond to the fabled lands of Outremer, lands of magic and sorcery, of great deeds and wickedness, of romance and mystery, where the battered Empire of the Eastern Rome and the fringe of crusading states fought to keep back the onrushing Moslem waves that threatened to engulf all Christianity.

CHAPTER IV

THE JONGLEUR AND THE GREENWOOD MEN

"Ay, 'tis clerkly done, Hugh," approved Prior Thomas, as he conned the spotless rolls of parchment. "With these at my hand it will go hard an I do not keep your lands in as good order as when you were a witless babe."

He drew his chair closer to the brazier that warmed the room.

"One week more," he mused. "And then you, too, dear lad, will be gone hence, leaving only a memory in our hearts."

"I fear me there will be much for you to do," said Hugh.

"Nay, an the King leave us be--." The Prior shook his head. "Even King John will think twice ere he assails the protection of St. Cuthbert of Crowden."

"Small chance of that," agreed Hugh. "But Robin Fletcher grows old, and he must be watched in little things."

"Brother Henri, the keenest of our clerks, shall follow his affairs. But now, Hugh, tell me--hast planned the journey to Outremer?"

"That have I!" Hugh's voice rang with satisfaction. "Every ell of the way, me seems, Ralph and I have plotted over."

"And where is Ralph?"

"He is gone to London town to fetch back the new harness Master Martin the Armourer in East Cheap hath forged for me."

"You will go bravely as becomes your father's son. That is right. As to funds, Hugh, all that you require shall be sent by trusty hands to Messer Tiepolo Aldobrandini in Venice. He is a right trusty banker who traffics through all the lands of Outremer. You have only to acquaint him as to its disposition. The Venetians are godless people, lacking in respect for the Holy Apostle of Rome, but they are to be trusted in business matters."

"You think of everything, Father Prior," acknowledged Hugh. "An I live through my venturing to return to Chesby, Crowden Priory shall be the richer by a saintly relic."

"'Twill not be declined, Hugh, but I would have you believe I think for you because I love you. Betwixt us and Lord Godwin we shall hold Chesby safe against quarrelling barons and the greenwood men."

Hugh rose with a clang of metal.

"You are armed, fair son?"

Hugh flushed.

"For practice sake," he explained. "Soon I must wear armour by day and night. I accustom myself to it with this light suit of mail beneath my surcoat."

Prior Thomas crossed himself involuntarily.

"Our Lady guard you," he exclaimed. "'Tis sober truth few of those who pass to Outremer come home again."

"With Ralph at my back I may go anywhere and return safe," answered Hugh. "I would I had another as brave and sturdy as he."

"Certes, you will take a foison of men-at-arms!" expostulated the Prior.

"That is not my mind."

"But, fair son, you must needs have a few spears behind you! The dangers----"

"Dangers do not court the traveller who travels simply," asserted Hugh. "Nay, Father Thomas, an I do not change my mind, Ralph and I fare forth alone upon this quest. It were not right to risk my men. The King hath not approved a crusade in England, and the mission is my own."

He spoke quietly, with a strange, suppressed dignity that Prior Thomas noticed with a sigh.

"How much you have aged in the year just past!" said the priest. "I think of the day you rode in with Edith, a twelve-month gone, the sparkle of spring in your eyes and cheeks, youthful, carefree, happy. And to-day--fair son, you are no longer a youth! Hast become a man."

"I pray so," answered Hugh soberly. "An St. James aid me, I shall prove it anon. Give you god-den, holy father. I must ride for Chesby."

In the Priory courtyard he mounted the grey stallion that one of the lay brothers brought forward, and rode slowly through the gateway, past the plantations and Priory farms into the bosky shades of Crowden Wood. His thoughts were busy with old memories, and he gave no heed to the grey stallion's pace. The wise horse tossed his head as he felt the loose rein, peered sideways, then trotted toward the London Road.

In his mind's eye Hugh saw the last ride he had taken with Edith. Every scene stood forth--the wild scamper after the fox, the baying hounds, the dank smell of the mould underfoot, the plunge into the sunlight when the hounds killed--and the sudden meeting with Mocenigo. Since then no word had reached them of Edith, save only a brief scrawl on parchment left at Blancherive by a wandering palmer. She was safe. So much it said; no more. Hugh caught himself wondering if she was as happy as she had been at Blancherive.

The palmer was an uncouth, hairy fellow, not over-clean; but after a hearty meal and a horn of heated ale, he had been induced to recount his travels to a small circle of gentlefolk and a larger ring of men-at-arms, squires and bailiffs. Hugh had listened eagerly to his description of Constantinople.

"Ah, Lords, there is a city! A city, said I? Beshrew me, fair sirs, 'tis an empire in itself. It is set at the very centre of the earth, so they say. The great Emperor Constantine, first of the Roman Cæsars to adopt Christ, by some art-magic, or perchance a vision of the Virgin--he was oft favoured by Our Lady, we are told--was brought to knowledge that here was the precise central spot of mankind. And here he determined to plant a city which should out-do Rome. He commanded that the city should be built. He brought artisans, merchants, nobles, soldiers, masons, all men needful for a great city. So grew Constantinople."

"Is it larger than the Holy City?" had asked Sir Godwin.

"Larger? My lord, Jerusalem would not fill one of the outer wards of Constantinople. 'Tis larger than any other four cities in the world."

"And it is strong?" questioned Hugh.

"Lordling," returned the palmer, "'tis girt about by land and sea with the hugest walls men ever reared. On two sides these walls are washed by the sea. On the third side, which faceth toward Europe, there is a moat as wide and deep as a river and three walls rise one above the other. In a thousand years no enemy hath forced it."

"It is very rich?" pressed Hugh.

"All the wealth of the world, but for what little trickles through their fingers, have the Greeks amassed in Constantinople. Never were there such riches. Gold and gems and silks and spices--everything that men set store by flows to Constantinople from the East and the West, from the North and the South. The heathen of Russia, the Bulgarians, the Hungarians, the Saracens, the Turks, the Moors, the Mongols, the Franks--all these and many more people come to Constantinople to traffic or send thither their wares. Within the walls the Emperor hath two great palaces, each as large as a city, and all of the nobles have palaces builded of stone, each as strong as a fortress and as fair as a dream. It hath churches greater than were builded by the giants of old. Of relics there is a profusion like unto nothing imaginable."

And with the light of fanaticism blazing in his eyes the palmer had launched into a harangue on the priceless contents of the treasure chests of Constantinople's scores of churches. To this phase of the pilgrim's narrative Hugh paid slight attention. What he remembered was the glowing account of riches and magnificence beyond anything he had ever known. In such surroundings, flattered by a brilliant court, made much of by the facile Greek nobles, what chance was there that Edith would remember old friends in far-off, savage England? Already, mayhap, he was become a hazy memory, to be thrust hastily aside as an intruder upon the festivals of the present.

At the thought, Hugh drove his spurs involuntarily into the grey stallion's flanks. The horse bounded forward, and Hugh snatched up the reins, for the first time aware of his surroundings. He was in the ride through which he and Edith had chased the fox that day they blundered upon Mocenigo's company. In the distance the dusty white surface of the London Road gleamed in its setting of greenery.

Hugh stroked the stallion's neck.

"Steady, Beosund," he rebuked. "I meant not the pricks. Nay, lad----"

But the horse reared on his hind-legs, pawing frantically, as a swarm of silent figures rushed from the trees. Hands grasped the bridle, tore at the stirrups. A lithe fellow in woodland green leaped astride the stallion's back behind Hugh, grinding a dagger into his ribs. Hugh struggled to cast the man off, but a sinewy arm bound him helpless. He felt his feet withdrawn from the stirrups, saw hot eyes glistening at him on every side, knives slicing at his surcoat.

"Curse the Norman dog! He's armoured," growled the fellow who had been exploring Hugh's ribs.

He spoke in the Saxon dialect, of which Hugh had a fair understanding.

"Slit his throat, then," ordered a burly ruffian, who seemed to direct operations.

Hugh made a frantic effort, and tore loose one foot, bringing the

heavy spur hard against the grey stallion's satin side. Frantic with pain, the great horse plunged and kicked, tossing the attackers right and left. In the confusion Hugh rolled clear, dragging with him the man who clung to his back. Over and over they spun, stabbing and pummelling in the soft forest-mould, and suddenly Hugh found himself stumbling to his feet on the edge of the London Road, the whole pack of the woodland men close on his heels.

Flight was impossible, so Hugh drew his sword and set his shoulders against a tall oak that thrust its roots deep under the Roman embankment.

"How, knaves," he panted, "art balked? Come, try me in the front. My back you have missed."

They circled him warily, a hangdog crew of landless men and wastrels, some minus ears or hands, others with slit noses, several cruelly branded. All were clothed in woodland green, and each wielded a long, sinister knife. There were eight or nine of them, but they seemed none too eager to come to close quarters.

"I say the Norman dog is armoured," repeated the man who had leaped up behind Hugh. "Why waste lives on him? A clothyard shaft will do the trick, and no blood spilled."

"Ay," returned the fellow who had ordered the slitting of Hugh's throat, "and if he dies by the arrow we shall have the Sheriff and the King's Verderers out to take vengeance on us. The greenwood will be too hot for comfort, my word on't. A knife, now--that's another matter. One knife is the same as the next, and there be a-many weasand-slitters are not killers of the King's deer."

"I like it not," objected a third fellow. "I came not here to be killed in a stranger's quarrel."

"We came to earn good ale and bread," returned the leader. "One charge and he falls."

They strung out and advanced cautiously. At a cluck from the lips of their chief they came together in a group, and whilst Hugh's attention was diverted by this manoeuvre, one of them made a quick dash, ducking and aiming to strike under his guard. But Hugh saw the trick and cut downward, severing the man's head from his shoulders. The rest of the band recoiled.

"Hast had enough?" demanded Hugh.

They yelped at him like so many wolves.

"What said I?" howled their leader. "We must all at him together. Every blade, lads. And if some die, why, there will be more ale for the rest."

They answered with a long-drawn yelp of hatred and, stirred to madness by the spouting blood of their comrade, closed around Hugh in a rancid, furry tangle of knotted limbs and shifting knives. In a minute he was down in the dust of the road, and they were falling over him, cutting each other in their fury, snarling and gnashing their teeth, screaming curses and scratching and pounding when their knives were useless.

Hugh fought as best he could, twisting and turning behind their bodies to dodge the knife-thrusts at throat and face, shortening his

sword to fend off blows under his hauberk. But the struggle was hopeless. He knew he must weary and falter, and in that moment die. But the realisation steeled him to fresh efforts. He tore loose from a man who grappled his sword-arm, stabbed into the groin of a second, and shook off a third who pinned his legs. He was almost free, and staggered to his feet--only to be overwhelmed again under a wave of sweating, evil faces. Filthy hands groped at his throat; a knife flashed in his eyes.

"Edith," he gasped. "St. James! My soul----"

There was a rattle of hoofs on the roadway, a sharp cry and clang of steel.

"Christ and the Sepulchre! Forward! Out upon you, knaves!"

The greenwood men turned like bayed wolves on the rescuer, but he hacked a path through them and won to Hugh's side. He was a quaint contrast to that ring of forest outlaws, tired in a flaring surcoat of bright colours over silvered mail, his red cap peaked by a trailing feather. He was slim in build, with a dark, hawk-nosed face and eyes that smouldered on far-away visions. But what caught Hugh's eye at once was the sword that he wielded so skilfully, a strange, curved blade, wholly unlike the straight sword of Western Europe. In his left hand, too, the stranger carried a dagger, long and somewhat curved, and this served him as a shield to parry the blows that rained upon him.

As Hugh scrambled to his feet, the leader of the outlaws leaped in to close quarters, endeavouring to strike behind the rescuer's back and catch Hugh unawares. But the stranger warded him off, and in retaliation sliced him down the arm with a peculiar side-long stroke.

"Hast gained your breath, lord?" he asked Hugh casually. "Ay? Then shall we charge this rabble?"

Hugh nodded, and the two sprang forward, side by side, blades whistling. The stouter of the greenwood men stood their ground until the steel bit flesh. Then they scattered and ran.

Hugh paused at the wood's edge.

"No farther?" enquired his rescuer.

"It is not safe," answered Hugh. "These woodland men carry bows, and if they should undertake to loose shafts at us all our armour might not withstand them."

"So? Then why did they not slay you out of hand?"

"That is what I would find out," returned Hugh grimly.

He sought the roadside where lay one of hid assailants, bleeding freely from a deep wound in the groin.

"Make haste," advised the stranger. "The rascal will be sped an you tarry."

Hugh nodded and knelt at the man's side.

"Hark to me," he commanded. "I am the Lord of Chesby. Dost know that, fellow?"

"Yes," groaned the man.

"Why would you have slain me? Tell me true and a Mass shall be said for your soul's rest."

"We were paid."

"By whom?"

"I know him not."

"You lie." Hugh frowned down at him. "Tell me the truth."

"It is the truth, lord. He was known to none of us. He rode up from the sea."

"From the sea?" An idea entered Hugh's head. "What manner of man was he?"

"Short--swart--pockmarks on his face." The robber talked with difficulty. "He--was--from--the--sea."

Hugh rose.

"Do you make aught of this gibberish?" enquired the stranger, wiping his sword with a handful of grass.

"Enough to set me thinking, sir knight."

"Ah, an old enemy hath hired them?"

"I am disposed to think so."

"An you seek him out later, I should be pleased to attend you," proffered the stranger eagerly.

"I thank you, sir knight," answered Hugh, "but if he be the man I suspect, he himself is a-many leagues distant from this."

"That is bad," deplored the other. "Quick vengeance is always the best. But I would have you know, lord, that I am no knight, although I wear harness."

Hugh looked his surprise.

"By Our Lady, sir," he returned, "you fight like a paladin from Outremer."

The stranger smiled.

"Sir," said he, "you do me too much honour. It is true that I come from over-sea and that I have served my apprenticeship to battle in the Holy Land, but I am no more than a poor wandering jongleur, going from land to land and from court to court and from castle to castle, wherever gentlefolk love to hear brave tales and stirring songs. And when I may not sing--why, then, I am pleased to fight, and the odds be good enough."

"Is it permitted to enquire your name, Messer Jongleur?" asked Hugh.

The stranger bowed.

"I am known as Matteo of Antioch," he said.

"And I," said Hugh, "am Hugh de Chesby."

"De Chesby? You are of the same stock as the great Sir James?"

"He was my father," replied Hugh proudly.

The jongleur extended his hand.

"That is brave news! A son of the great Sir James! Do you but sit by the roadside a moment, lordling, and I will sing you a romaunt of Sir James that hath pleased the Lords of Toulouse and Provence--ay, and the mighty Lion-Heart, your own King."

Before Hugh could say a word the jongleur crossed the road to a palfrey that browsed on the grass, and from behind the saddle took a bulky package, which contained a stringed instrument called a gittern. He swept his fingers over the strings with practiced ease.

"Now, they say and tell and relate," he began.

But Hugh interrupted.

"I crave your pardon, Messer Matteo," he said, "but the spot is not one I should select for entertainment, in view of the recent diligence hereabouts of my enemies. An I have your leave, I would suggest we delay the romaunt until we reach my castle of Chesby, which is but a short ride hence. There I shall be pleased to have you for my guest, an you will honour me."

The jongleur quickly disposed of his instrument in its wrappings.

"Messer Hugh," he said, "it was indeed thoughtless of me to risk your safety again. But that is a romaunt I am more proud of than any other I have composed, and I am most anxious to have your opinion concerning its presentation of the facts. For, by all the Saints, none should be better qualified than the son of your father to judge if I have done full justice to Sir James's memory."

"His memory!" repeated Hugh. "Sure, you do not deem him dead?"

The jongleur gave him a swift look.

"That is a long story," he answered. "But let us put off this talk until we be safe from the arrows of yon knaves."

CHAPTER V

HUGH GAINS A FRIEND

The jongleur softly fingered the strings of his instrument. He sat with Hugh on the dais of the Great Hall in the keep of Chesby Castle, a counterpart of Blancherive, solidly-built in the Norman way, but crude and comfortless. The evening shadows lengthened on the rush-strewn floor. The ale-horns stood filled on the table before them.

"I would not have you take my word for gospel, Messer Hugh," he said slowly, as he put aside the gittern. "But what you say stirs echoes in my memory. In Outremer men sing and talk of Sir James as dead,

but in their hearts they think of him as living. The jongleurs always say that he is gone, but will return to perform deeds of greater worth than those which won him deathless fame. In my romaunt, which you shall hear anon, I, too, sing of him as one over whom for a little space the curtain of time is drawn. Many proud lords have applauded me that song--and with cause, for I feel in my bones there is truth in the story. Sir James cometh again in his own good hour."

Hugh leaned forward in his chair, face tense with interest.

"You feel it, you say," he broke in. "Ay, but how? What reason have you?"

Matteo stared into the nut-brown ale.

"No reason that would justify my words, mayhap," he answered after a pause. "Hast ever tracked a deer in a well-worn slot, and sensed of a sudden the quarry had broached to right or left? Well, deem it so. But dismiss instinct, an you will. Consider this, lordling. I am a wanderer. My home is anywhere I am welcome. I sing my romaunts, tell my gests. In return men sing me songs, recount the stories they know. I have heard many a strange tale in many a strange place.

"When I was composing my romaunt of Sir James, I had heed for any bit of castle gossip or galley rumour that would shed light upon his life. Full oft I encountered men who told me there was more to the story of Sir James than his disappearance. 'Mark you,' quoth one, 'hast ever seen the master of the galley that bore him his last voyage? No, nor hath any mortal.' 'If he was drowned,' said a second, 'why heard we not so from a member of his company?'"

"The galley he sailed upon vanished from those seas," interrupted Hugh. "So much have I learned."

"Ay, with all her company," agreed the jongleur. "Passing strange, is it not? She was the _Holy Dove_, of Venetian registry, Messer Bartolommeo master, a craft well-known in the coasting-trade. She was accepted for entry by the Prefect of the Golden Horn the first Tuesday in Lent, 1196. Some time thereafterward she left Constantinople, and has not been seen since. But of Sir James we can say only that he sailed upon her from Tripoli, being escorted to his berth by the Master of the Hospitallers and other knights, who were loath to see him leave the Holy Land. If he ever landed at Constantinople, it is not known. It is not even known if he continued on the galley to the Golden Horn."

"In sooth, 'tis a sorry case you make out for me," said Hugh bitterly.

"Have patience," answered Matteo. "I am not ended, fair sir. It was told me by a knight who was of those who went down to the quay with the Master of the Hospitallers and Sir James--his bones lie now beyond Jordan, God rest his soul!--that when the Master remonstrated with Sir James at leaving them in such an hour, Sir James waxed very dolorous and made answer that it was not of his own choosing that he went. 'I am going in answer to a summons I may not disobey,' he said, 'since in a manner it nearly concerneth one who is dead and hath laid a task upon me.' The knights were very curious of his meaning, but he said nothing further. He kissed them right heartily, commended their souls to the protection of the Holy Virgin and Our Lord, and went to his seat in the stern-castle. Now, Messer Hugh, know you aught that would explain those last words of his?"

Hugh shook his head.

"They mean as little to me as they do to you," he replied.

Matteo dabbled his finger thoughtfully in the ale-lees on the table.

"You know that Sir James, on his first journey to the Holy Land, tarried in Constantinople some months and was made much of by the Emperor Andronicus Comnenus, who then sat on the throne?" he asked.

"Yes, he was there a year or close thereto," returned Hugh. "The Emperor pressed him to remain, but my father had taken a vow that he would serve Christ against the Paynims for the greater rest of my mother's soul."

"Ay, so it was. But it was passing strange for any man to win the friendship of Andronicus as did Sir James. You must know that Andronicus was one of the bloodiest tyrants who ever sat on the blood-stained throne of the Eastern Rome. But there is this to be said for him: he oppressed, robbed and tortured the noble and the rich amongst his subjects; the poor he cherished and honoured. He found corruption wide-spread, and he did what he could to cut it out, taking the ill-gotten gains of the officials to spend upon the Empire's needs. He lived only a few months after your father left him. He died by assassination, as he had lived by assassination."

"Interesting, but I see not where it leads us," returned Hugh.

"Only thus far," said Matteo quietly. "I have been told by one--who had it from another--that your father set sail from Tripoli in response to a message from the Emperor Isaac. Isaac was shortly afterward dethroned and blinded by his brother Alexius and rests now in the dungeons of the Tower of Anemas under the Palace of Blachernae. And 'twas Isaac who slew Andronicus, and so won to the throne."

"But the Emperor Alexius hath denied all knowledge of my father's fate," cried Hugh. "He hath offered his help--hath rendered it. Our King Lion-Heart himself pressed the case. And the Commander of the Emperor's Varangian Guards is Sir Cedric Halcroft, brother of my neighbour, the Lord of Blancherive and a boyhood friend of my father. He hath interested the Emperor in our suit. In all sooth, he must have heard if trickery bested my father."

"Not so," the jongleur disagreed. "I know Sir Cedric, and a braver, stouter heart never wore mail, but he is a soldier, bluff and honest--a thought dull-witted, too, like all your Saxons. By the very nature of his office he mixes not in the politics of the Court. He stands apart. A more unlikely aid you cannot find. He would believe whatever he was told. For the rest--fair sir, you know not these Greeks. A treacherous race, without honour, chivalry or virtue, and none of them more conscienceless than their Emperor, who reached the throne by overthrowing and blinding the brother who ransomed him from the Saracens."

"Then you think----"

Hugh hesitated.

"I would recommend that you begin your quest in Constantinople," said Matteo. "The road to the Holy Land leads through Byzantium. From there you can journey at need to Tripoli and Antioch, to the Land of the Assassins, to Jerusalem and Damascus, Emissa and Baalbec. But go

first to Constantinople."

Hugh sat hunched down in his chair, twisting the alehorn on the table in front of him, his brows bent in thought. It was many minutes before he spoke, and whilst he thought, Matteo the jongleur watched him betwixt draughts of ale.

"I like your advice," said Hugh suddenly. "You are frank to say you are guided by instinct, and I trust you for it. Now, I would crave your opinion in another matter."

"Such as it is, you may have it, lord," the jongleur answered.

"I spoke to you on the road of an enemy who sent yon varlets against me. Hast ever heard in Outremer of one Andrea Mocenigo, who holdeth the confidence of the Emperor Alexius?"

"Andrea Mocenigo!" repeated Matteo. "There is no strangeness about that name, Messer Hugh. A greater rascal--and a defter--never drew breath."

"You know him, too?"

There was astonishment in Hugh's voice. Matteo laughed.

"I would not have you think me a boaster, fair sir," he said quaintly. "I have lived but some thirty years, 'tis true, but in that time I have travelled Outremer from Babylon to Constantinople. There are few men of note I have not sung before or exchanged gests with, and we jongleurs soon learn the inner natures of those we meet.

"This man, Mocenigo, is a renegade Venetian, exiled for stabbing the nephew of a Doge. He should have died for such a crime, but he hath powerful relatives, and so gained liberty. He is an agent of the Emperor Alexius, and if rumour is truth, a spy of the Sultan of Babylon at times. In sooth, he is no one to put your trust in."

"He is the enemy I spoke of," said Hugh.

The jongleur made a gesture of amazement.

"By Our Lady of Tortosa, this hath the makings of a pretty tale!" he exclaimed. "Tell me more."

So Hugh told at length of Mocenigo's coming to take Edith to Constantinople, of their meeting on the London Road, of Mocenigo's veiled warnings to him, of the attempt to knife him as he rode home from Blancherive that evening. The jongleur followed the story with an interest that never flagged.

"And see you not," he cried when Hugh had finished, "that this bears out fully what I have said to you?"

"How is that?"

"That your quest begins of right in Constantinople."

"I do not follow you, sir jongleur."

"But, Messer Hugh, here is an attempt, repeated, to keep you from setting forth upon your quest, and in it you think you trace the hand of one who is no less than the shadow of the Emperor Alexius. What more would you have?"

"True," admitted Hugh reflectively, "an your suspicions be justified."

"Have you a more definite plan to work upon?"

"No."

"Then why not accept them, failing somewhat more definite to follow? But I fear me, fair sir, I am over-bold in my interest. I cry your pardon, an you deem it impertinent----"

"Not so," protested Hugh warmly. "Messer Matteo, I take kindly all that you have said. I know not why it is, but by St. James, I have talked to you more freely than to any man, save it be my guardian, the Prior of Crowden. I like your counsel. You came to my aid when I was in mortal peril, and stood by me loyally until I was safe. Why should I not trust you?"

The jongleur's thin face flushed.

"Right knightly said, fair sir," he acknowledged. "You give me courage to ask of you a boon that I crave more than anything else in the world."

"It shall be yours, if it is within my power to grant it," answered Hugh.

He felt very lordly, for this was the first time a man his equal in rank had sought a boon from him.

"First, I shall burden your ears a little longer," said Matteo. "It is meet that before you undertake to grant the boon you should know somewhat of him who asks it."

He put down the alehorn, and picked up his gittern, and as he talked he plucked now and then at the strings, so that, although he played no set melody, there was an effect of accompanying music to the words that he recited, after the manner of the jongleurs, in a clear, bell-like voice, that was exquisitely sweet.

"Know, lordling," he began, "that your servant, Matteo of Antioch, is the son of a Christian knight and a Saracen lady, who was of the lineage of the Paynim Princes of Emessa. I was born in one of the Frank castles on the edge of the desert beyond the Dead Sea, a child of love and sorrow. In those days, before Jerusalem had fallen to the infidel, there was endless war between the Franks of the Holy Land and Saladin, and it chanced that in a foray into Saracen country a party of Christian knights captured a convoy of high-born Saracen maidens on their way from Emessa and the cities of Roum to Damascus. My father's share of the spoils was the lady who became my mother.

"Now, it chanced when I was a few years old that some of my mother's brethren learned of her fate, and they laid plans with Saladin for vengeance. My father's castle was built in a place whence it commanded the caravan routes of the Saracens from the north and the south, and Saladin was glad to help any effort to capture it. My mother's brethren concerted in secret, and when the time was ripe they swept down upon the castle in the dead of night. They climbed the walls whilst the warder slept--he may have been bribed--and the first the garrison knew of them was the sight of their bloodied scimiters.

"My father fought to his death with only his sword for armour, and

when my mother spurned his murderers they slew her over his body, for a shame to their house and a reproach to Islam. I was saved by the diligence of a squire of my father's, who let me down from the wall and fled with me to Antioch. There I was taken under the protection of the Prince, who reared me with his pages and saw to my schooling in arms. But the story of my birth had reached his ears, and when I attained the grade of squire, I found that knighthood was denied me, for that I was but half of Christian blood and there was a blot on my name."

The eyes of the jongleur smouldered with that fire Hugh had seen in them when he first burst his way through the greenwood men. His fingers smote the strings with gusty passion. Through all his words there ran the soul-torn resentment of the outcast, who felt himself wronged and powerless to resent it.

"It is not for me to chant of my deeds," he went on, "I bore lance and sword in the last fights for the Holy Sepulchre. I learned the arts of war and music under the great Lion-Heart. 'Twas an idle word of praise from him made me resolve to wipe out the stigma put upon me by practising arms as a jongleur, instead of as an unsuccessful aspirant for knighthood. Messer Hugh, you may ask any knight of Outremer, the Grand Masters of the Templars and Hospitallers, any lord of the land--and he will tell you there is no shame in the past of Matteo of Antioch."

Hugh reached out his hand.

"I need not ask," he said. "The answer is in your face, Messer Matteo. And now your boon?"

The jongleur thrust aside his instrument and leaned forward across the table, his eyes fixed earnestly upon Hugh's.

"'Tis this: I would have your leave to travel with you on your quest. Not as a paid retainer, fair sir, but as a friend and comrade. I knew not why I ever came to England, until I saw your face amidst that crowd of knaves this afternoon. I crossed the Narrow Seas from France, because I had some vague wish to see the realm that bred a king like Lion-Heart. He was the friend and patron of jongleurs, a lover of brave songs and brave men! In my ignorance I thought to find many like him here. But you English lords consider me a travelling minstrel, to be seated below the salt and called upon for a song to pay for my meat.

"Your story hath interested me strangely, Messer Hugh. As you have heard, 'tis one not altogether new to me. I have seen your father and applauded him from afar--ay, ridden at the tail of his charger in more than one shock with the Paynims. It is my thought that I may be of use to you on a path sure to be set with pit-falls at every step. All the reward I seek is leave to turn your deeds into a romaunt that shall endure whilst men sing of brave ventures."

He looked Hugh squarely in the eye, and Hugh met his gaze. So they regarded each other for as long a space as men may without blinking. Then Hugh said, wonderingly:

"If a man had told me yestereve I would be eager to ride on my quest with one I knew not then I would have laughed him to scorn. Now, I can only say that St. James himself must have sent you hither, Messer Matteo."

"You grant my boon?"

"Ay, gladly. This day week we ride hence for Outremer."

Matteo tossed his gittern to the ceiling and caught it again.

"What a tale it will make!" he cried. "By Our Lady of Tortosa, Messer Hugh, this is a decision you shall never regret! Men will sing the romaunt of Sir Hugh the Venturous when Roland and Sir Huon of Bordeaux are forgotten!"

"I have yet to become Sir Hugh," returned Hugh, laughing.

"Have patience, fair sir. Knighthood should be the smallest reward in the path you have to travel."

CHAPTER VI

THE SWART SHIPMAN

From Chesby and Blancherive, all the way to the gate of Crowden Priory, the way was lined with villagers, hinds, franklins, men-at-arms, castle and Priory servants and the riff-raff of the countryside, gathered to wave farewell to Hugh and his comrades. Stout old Sir Godfrey Halcroft stood at the Priory gate with Prior Thomas, before whom Hugh knelt for a final blessing.

"Our Lady keep you," said the Prior with a choke in his voice. "I pray not for your soul, Hugh, for that is as safe as human soul may be; but for your life. Be not over-venturous."

He cast an appealing eye upon Matteo and Ralph, who knelt a pace in rear of Hugh.

"To you, also, fair sons, I give the same advice," he added. "And I pray you, be careful, one of another."

"That will we right heartily, Holy Prior," returned Matteo, rising and dusting his knees. "And we shall be watchful to guard the back of our young lord here."

Ralph mumbled an inaudible assent. To say truth, Ralph was more than a little woebegone at the prospect of leaving solid English earth for the uncertain substance of the sea and the vague lands of Outremer--not to speak of the flaxen-haired daughter of one of the franklins of Chesby. He was of two minds, was Ralph, honestly zestful of the great adventures Hugh had promised him, and secretly hopeful that some mishap might put off their departure.

Sir Godfrey was openly jealous of the comrades.

"Such luck it is to be a stripling!" he clamoured. "Unskilled and unschooled, and all must come your way! A tried man-at-arms, and I am doomed to sit close in Blancherive, guard my lands and play the King's man! Welladay, what use to complain? Be of good cheer, Hugh. Hast good company, a valiant purpose and the world before you. An you see Edith, bid her remember there is always a home awaiting her in Blancherive."

And the old knight put both arms around Hugh's neck and embraced him.

"There is a rheum in the air this morning," he complained. "Beshrew me, but I weep."

Hugh wiped his own eyes as he mounted the grey stallion, and struck hands for the last time with Sir Godfrey and Prior Thomas.

"Fear not," he said. "I shall return."

"Ay, that he shall," reiterated Matteo.

There was a chorus of blessings and outcries, and the little cavalcade clattered off into the forest depths on their way to Hastings and the sea. The group by the Priory gate watched them as long as the glint of armour shone between the trees, for the comrades made a brave show.

Hugh and Matteo rode side by side. Hugh wore the new armour Ralph had fetched from London, a cunningly-wrought, double-linked suit of chainmail that had cost the worth of four hides of lands. The hauberk, or mail coat, protected his arms to the wrists and fell to the knees, being slit behind for greater ease in riding. Under it he wore a gambeson, or quilted jacket, to keep the mail from chafing the skin. Mittens of chain-mail swung at his wrists, ready to be donned for fighting use. Below the waist he was protected by leggins of chain-mail, which were fastened at the waist to the underside of the hauberk. They terminated in mail-shoes, so that from head to neck he was guarded by flashing steel.

Over his armour he wore a surcoat of heavy linen, embroidered by the monks of Crowden with his own device of an open eye, signifying his quest. On his head perched a light cap of cloth, but a massive square helmet hung at his saddle-bow. Plate-armour was then unknown, but the science of tempering and fashioning steel had made tremendous strides since the Crusades had introduced Western Europe to the tricks of Asiatic smiths, and the chain-mail was both lighter and in some ways stronger, than plate-armour, for it lacked the tricky joints that were the weakness of plated suits.

On his left arm Hugh carried a small triangular shield, an evolution from the big kite-shaped shield which the Norsemen had brought to Southern Europe. His right arm supported an ashwood lance, unpennoned. To his side was strapped a great war-sword, a mighty, broad-bladed, two-edged weapon, with a blunted point, so delicately balanced that it swung in the wielder's hand as easily as a wooden ferule, despite its ponderous weight.

Matteo was armed in much the same fashion, save that his armour was Eastern-wrought and showed such novel features as fingered mail gloves and a loose hood of mail that could be thrown back over the shoulders or drawn at will around the head under the conical helmet, with nasal, that formed his headgear in action. And instead of the war-sword of Frankish Europe, the jongleur bore the scimiter of the Saracens, a weapon distinguished as much by its exquisite keenness as by its peculiar facility for slashing in-fighting. He also carried a steel mace, hung by a thong from his saddle. His lance, too, was of lighter structure than Hugh's, and could be thrown like a javelin at close quarters.

Ralph rode behind the two others, leading a pack pony. He wore a short mail-jacket, made over by a local armourer from an old suit of Hugh's, the length having gone into patches to broaden the shoulders and chest. To his back was strapped his long-bow, unstrung. His armament was completed by a sword and well-filled quiver.

The comrades rode in silence until they had reached the highroad. Then Matteo struck up a lilting song, and Hugh's melancholy took flight at the visions conjured up before his eyes anew.

Passing fair was Mellisante,
Passing fair and right content.
Never wooed a gentler knight
Than Sir Gui de Bras.

In the darkened forest-glade
Oft she waited unafraid,
Starry-eyed and maiden-white--
For Sir Gui de Bras.

Matteo broke off with a little laugh.

"We might better be singing the Benedicite than such love verses," he jibed. "What say you, Hugh, shall we go upon our way pilgrim-solemn or shall we take joy in the wine of life and let all the world know of it?"

"No pilgrim-gait for me," answered Hugh lightly. "I am all for music and laughter. How now, Ralph, what say you?"

Ralph heaved a deep sigh.

"There is that in the song Messer Matteo was singing that makes my heart ache all the more, Messer Hugh," he said. "An it please you, let us sing and talk of arms and battle, for I have many sad thoughts I would forget."

"Well spoken, Ralph," applauded Matteo. "That is the proper spirit for such a venture as ours. Of arms and battles, of sieges and splendid deeds, then, shall we debate and sing. Hark ye to this."

And leaning back in his saddle, he raised his voice in the full-throated burden of a Burgundian tilting song, savage and challenging, punctuated with the crashing of chargers, the blasts of the heralds' trumpets and the clash of armour. This brought Ralph out of the dumps, and for the rest of that day they rode carefree, finding entertainment in the sights of the roadside and in discussion of future plans. At night they lay at the castle of a knight who was a distant cousin of Hugh's.

So they journeyed for three days, and in the afternoon of the third day they reached Hastings port, and from the uplands behind the town saw the blue waters of the Narrow Seas rolling before them.

"It looks to be a vast deal of water," said Ralph dubiously. "There is an end to the land hereabouts, 'twould seem. I doubt me there is more water than land."

"Art frighted, Ralph?" mocked Matteo. "Take heart, man, for an you could see a few miles farther you would find the water giving way to land again. Straight ahead of you is France, and it is a country that could take your England into one corner of it and still have enough over to make a puissant realm."

"That I do not believe, saving your grace," retorted Ralph. "Bigger than England? Sure, and he does but taunt me, Messer Hugh?"

"Not so, Ralph," replied Hugh, smiling. "You have yet to learn that our England is but a little sliver of land beside the bulk of the world. We shall soon be riding over countries as large as Messer Matteo says--into which you could slip all England and Scotland, too--ay, and wild Ireland--and not diminish materially the power of their lords."

"It must be a big place, this world," said Ralph, in an awe-struck voice.

"It is," rejoined Matteo. "Do but wait until you have seen the snow mountains beyond France, Ralph. That is a sight like none other. You would not believe me if I told you of it. Rivers of ice and snow and mountains that reach beyond the sky."

"God save us!" muttered Ralph devoutly.

As they rode into the town, Matteo's keen eyes examined the vessels in the harbour.

"There is little shipping," he said with disappointment. "See, there are no more than two of a size to venture across the Narrow Seas."

He pointed to a high-built cog, with flapping purple sails, that rode close inshore, and to a long, lean craft, low in the waist, with a single mast supporting a slanting yard.

"That galley is not of these parts," he went on, shading his eyes with his hand. "She hath a look of the Inner Sea to me. But the cog is as plainly English as Ralph here. Mayhap one or other will serve our purpose."

They sought an inn within the walls of the little town, and Hugh explained to the landlord their desire for conveyance over-sea.

"And where would you be going, lords?" he enquired.

"To France," answered Hugh. "An it be possible, we prefer to land at one of the northern ports."

The landlord stroked his bristly chin.

"At most times you might have your pick of any port on the Narrow Seas," he said. "But what with the King's new port-dues and the hiring of shipping in Flanders for the Crusade, there are but two vessels here such as your lordships would care to sail in."

"Do you know aught about them?"

"Little enough. The cog there belongs to one Messer Nicholas Dunning, a worshipful mariner of Dover. He may be for France, and he may be for Flanders. I will make inquiry for you. The galley is a Cypriot, come hither some two weeks or more agone, with a cargo of wine. He hath lain here since, but what is his business and the port he sails for next I cannot say. Shall I enquire of him, too?"

"Ay, do so."

The landlord withdrew, and the comrades set themselves to the supper of roast fowl, bread and ale that was served by his wife. They were in the midst of the meal, when Ralph happened to look up at a nearby window and exclaimed:

"Marry, there is a tarry son of the sea for you, Messer Hugh!"

Hugh glanced through the window in time to see a swart, pock-marked face, with beady black eyes under a gaudy kerchief that was wound around sinister brows. The owner of the face bowed profusely, and disappeared in the direction of the inn-door. A moment later he entered the room, still bowing and scraping. In stature he was very squat and broad, with a huge barrel-chest and short, sinewy legs. He was clad in baggy white trousers and a dingy red jacket.

"It has come to my ears that your lordships are awaiting passage across the Narrow Seas," he said in passable French.

"That is true," answered Hugh.

The swart man bowed again.

"I am a merchant of Cyprus," he said. "I am but recently come north with a cargo of wine. Now my cargo is unloaded and I am preparing to sail home. I shall be glad to take you wherever you will."

Hugh hesitated and looked at Matteo. Seeing his indecision, the shipman continued:

"And you journey to Outremer, how much easier it will be to sail thither all the way in a good stout galley than to travel over-land for weary months, facing robbery and danger at every step. My galley is well-armed, lords, and if the corsairs attack us you shall have pleasant fighting, without danger to yourselves. What say you?"

"How know you we journey to Outremer?" asked Matteo sharply.

The man made a gesture very like an Eastern salaam.

"There is a Crusade being preached," he answered innocently. "Many stalwart knights are sailing from Flanders. I thought two such well-appointed lords would be journeying in the same direction. But if I am wrong I beg you will consider the words unsaid."

"We do not seek passage to Outremer," returned Matteo.

"Ah, but wherever you wish to go, there I will gladly carry you," returned the swart shipman quickly. "Name the port, lords, and it shall be done."

"You are very anxious to have us, 'twould seem," interjected Hugh.

"I am not too anxious to prevent me from driving a good bargain with your lordships," answered the man with a leer. "I would not have you think me careless of my pocket. But for the money you will be more comfortably lodged than on any other vessel, I pledge you the word of Bartolommeo Caraducci."

"What would you call a fair price?"

"Name me your port, and I will make you an offer," countered the man.

"Let us say Rouen," spoke up Matteo.

The shipman considered.

"There will be three horses with you? Horses are the devil at sea, lords. Let us say two silver pennies for each of you, a penny for

your servant and three pennies each for the horses."

There was a bustle at the inn-door, and the landlord entered, escorting a bluff giant of a man whose ruddy face was flushed with haste.

"What's this?" bellowed the giant. "Did I hear this Italian knave--or Cypriot or whatever he calls himself--asking three pennies each for horses? To Rouen, said you? Marry, but the man is as dishonest as he looks! Now, I----"

The swart shipman scowled at him.

"I will take your horses for two pennies each, lords," he offered.

"That is more like it," said the giant. "But I am an Englishman, mark you, and I will take you all, bag and baggage, horses and man, to Rouen for ten silver pennies in hand at Rouen quayside."

The swart shipman pushed forward.

"Heed him not, lords," he shouted. "I will take you for nine pennies!"

"You are too eager," said Hugh haughtily.

"Eager, say you? Marry, lord, I am but eager to do what I may for the rescue of the Holy Sepulchre and----"

The English sailor laughed heartily.

"He eager to rescue the Sepulchre! St. Edward, 'tis good hearing! Why, the fellow's crew are three-quarters hang-dog Saracen hounds or I never stopped a corsair in the Inner Sea!"

"'Tis a lie, fair sirs," pleaded the swart shipman, his ugly face crimson with rage. "Look you, and----"

"Enough," answered Hugh. "We are done with you, fellow. Ralph, open him the door."

Ralph heaved up his impressive bulk, and advanced ruthlessly upon the man. The Cypriot's eyes lit up with rage, but he controlled himself, and made another low bow.

"You do greatly wrong me, lords," he said protestingly. "But I pray for you a safe journey."

As the door closed behind him, Hugh turned to the English shipman.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Nicholas Dunning, shipman, of Dover. My cog, the _Alice_, lies in the harbour yonder, lordling. As for that rogue----" he gestured out the window toward the retreating form of the swart shipman--"my guess is that he is a pirate when he is not trading. An I were a citizen of Hastings I would take heed to my gates when he was about. There is no good in him, I'll warrant you, with his swaggering blackamoor crew."

"Be that as it may, we are through with him," said Hugh, amused by the man's manner. "Now, what terms do you make to carry us to Rouen, sailing not later than the morrow?"

The English shipman's lips shut tight.

"I never make but the one offer, and that is an honest offer," he asserted. "Ten pennies I named it, and ten pennies I bide by. If there were more of you I might shave it down, but for your number that is a fair charge."

Matteo leaned forward and whispered in Hugh's ear:

"The fellow speaks truth. Moreover, he hath us at advantage, for save our friend of the galley, there is none here to compete with him."

"Then shall we accept?" asked Hugh.

Matteo shrugged his shoulders.

"Hast any desire to sail with the Cypriot?"

Hugh shook his head.

"I know not why, yet----"

Matteo leaned closer.

"Dost mind what the greenwood man said as he died?" he whispered.

A light of understanding leaped into Hugh's face.

"'Twas a swart, pock-marked man from the sea hired them!" he exclaimed.

"Ay!"

Hugh drew a deep breath.

"Then we must away from here," he said. He turned to Nicholas Dunning. "Messer Nicholas," he went on, "we accept your offer. An you start with the morn, it were best we came aboard your vessel to-night."

"All shall be ready for you, lords," assented the shipman. "We sail with the morrow's tide. And you will be in honest English company, fair sirs, and not with slit-nosed mongrel scourings of the Inner Sea."

He sniffed with contempt of his rival as he left the room.

"A monstrous brave man, by Our Lady," remarked Ralph admiringly.

CHAPTER VII

THE SEA-WOLVES

"The galley is gone!" exclaimed Matteo, as he emerged from the stern-castle.

"Ay, and a good riddance," returned the master of the cog.

Messer Nicholas was holding the tiller of his craft, steering her out of the harbour entrance. The spring breeze blew rich and warm off the land behind them. Below the little poop on which the comrades stood, the sailors ran to and fro about their duties, hauling at ropes, stacking cordage and dressing sails. Hastings port already was become a toy town set on the harbour's rim.

"You seem not to like our Cypriot friend," remarked Hugh with a smile.

"Marry, and why should I, fair sir?" retorted the shipman fiercely. "A runagate knave, you may swear. What business has he trading in these seas? Let him keep to his own preserves, say I. The Inner Sea for his kidney, and the Narrow Seas and the North Ocean for us of the Cinque Ports. 'Tis sorry enough having to contend with the Frenchmen and the Flemings--let alone our good King John!"

It was evident that Messer Nicholas liked the sound of his own voice, especially when it dealt with his own affairs, and Matteo hastened to Hugh's rescue.

"How long is the passage to Rouen?" he enquired.

"That is a question no wise shipman would answer on the very morn of his setting forth upon the voyage," replied Messer Nicholas importantly. "For, look you, lords, how can mortal man prophesy the course of the wind an hour hence?"

"We will cry your pardon for the absurdity of that question," interceded Hugh, "an you tell us at least the distance betwixt the two ports."

"Ah, fair sir, that is a different matter. I make the distance betwixt Hastings port and Rouen quay a matter of fifty leagues or maybe sixty, depending, as I said, on the wind and the course we take. It hath been sailed by the _Alice_ in three days, and I venture to predict she will do it again."

"So, good shipman, you are not above prophecy, after all?" jeered Matteo.

"In my own terms--no; that is true," acknowledged Messer Nicholas composedly.

And he took advantage of the opportunity unwisely afforded by Matteo, to launch into a lengthy disquisition on the mystery of navigation--to which craft, he asserted, St. Peter had belonged, with conspicuous success, as well as divers other distinguished and saintly characters. Matteo and Hugh were forced to flee to escape the deluge of words. In the waist of the ship they sought out Ralph to inquire the condition of their horses. But they were more speedily interested in Ralph himself. He was leaning over the bulwarks amidships, his head hanging on his hand, and a pasty green look upon his face. At sight of them he gasped and sank down on the deck.

"Oh, Messer Hugh," he moaned. "St. Cuthbert be my witness, y'have brought me to my death! Only this morning I was mine old self. Now, I am ridden with the plague or some such parlous complaint I make no doubt. My end is on me. Would there be a priest on board, do you think?"

Hugh was much concerned by this plaint, but Matteo laughed and clapped Ralph on the shoulder.

"An you suffer never any illness more dangerous than this you must burn an hundred candles at your name-altar," he said. "Take heart, man. 'Tis naught but the sickness of the sea. You have been below in the stenches of the hold, and that, with the motion of the ship, hath disturbed the comfort of your stomach. Let the clean breeze fan your face, and you will be whole anon."

"Mayhap, mayhap," answered Ralph, "but I am mortal weak in my body for a hale man, Messer Matteo. Could you not be having the shipman turn about and leave me behind? I have no bowels for this kind of venturing."

"There will be shame in your heart for those words in a few hours, Ralph," said Hugh sternly. "Do you come up to the poop with us and lie out there in the open. Perchance that chicken-heart of yours will win back the allegiance of your belly."

Groaning and protesting, Ralph suffered himself to be led up the steep ladder-stairs to the narrow space in front of the stern-castle, where the rudder-post came up through the deck-planking. Here he was deposited in a recumbent position, and very shortly, lulled by the rocking of the cog and the creak of the rigging, he dropped off to sleep--to the great relief of Hugh, who was half-inclined to believe him really smitten by one of the little-known epidemic diseases which ravaged the mediæval world.

"But an it be the sea-illness you speak of," remonstrated Hugh, "why have I escaped? I am as new to it as Ralph, and must as surely succumb."

"Not so," objected Matteo. "There are men who never feel the ship-nausea, and there are others--stout captains of the Venetians, Pisans, Genoese and other seafaring races, I have known--must always inure themselves anew to the experience at the start of each voyage."

"They must be greatly wedded to the sea to suffer such discomfort."

"Ay, that they are. You will comprehend it when you meet the Venetians and see their wonderful city. Ah, Hugh, there are a people for you! They have made the sea their servant, and on it they traffic to the ends of the world. Kings and Empires fear them. Without them our barons of Outremer could not stand a month against the Saracens."

"Ay, they have the idea of it," chimed in Messer Nicholas from his post by the tiller, now in the hands of one of his subordinates. "With them merchants are nobles. To be great, in their estimation, is to be successful in trade. They have none of your finicking notions of gentilesse."

"But surely, good Messer Shipman, you will admit that a strong feudal structure is necessary to the welfare of any state," said Hugh haughtily. "A community of merchants could never last long, if it came to a question of the sword."

"Ah, lordling, but that's where you are wrong," returned the shipman. "The Venetians are warriors, as well as traders. They fight for what they want, and they will fight anybody to keep what they once get their hands upon. Is it not so, fair sir?" he appealed to Matteo.

"Ay, Hugh, that is the right of it," agreed Matteo. "They are a peculiar people. There are none like them, save it be some of the

free cities of Germany and the Flemings."

"I have had some small dealings with the Venetians," boasted Messer Nicholas. "By St. Edward, they should know me!" He gave a jaunty twist to his moustaches. "Warriors though they are, they met their match when they tried to tell Nicholas Dunning where he could not trade. I am a bad man to threaten, lords. I will not down my head for any man on the seas. Wherever I go, I am an Englishman, and I say to all shipmen, of every tongue: Sirs, I say----"

A cry of alarm rose from the forecastle.

"What's that? What's that?" demanded Messer Nicholas.

He ran to the larboard rail and peered under the edge of the great square-sail on the mizzen-mast.

"Oh, 'tis the galley," he said carelessly. "But what does the fellow on this course? He makes back for Hastings." Of a sudden his face went ashen grey. "The Red Crescent! By Our Lady, a Saracen corsair in the Narrow Seas!"

He wept and wrung his hands.

"Oh, lords, I never thought to see this! And there is great store of wealth in the hold. What shall I do? I am a peaceful shipman, and yon varlets will have me at their mercy. What shall I do?"

"Put your ship in order for defence," directed Hugh. "St. James, man, are you sunk before you are come to battle?"

"Take advantage of this wind," suggested Matteo. "Bear away, so that you have them over your stern."

A flicker of hope lighted the shipman's face, and he bellowed an order to the sailor at the tiller. The cog heeled and bore off across the wind, as it were. The galley was plainly revealed by this manoeuvre to the comrades on the poop. The lean, slender craft, half as long again as the cog, but less than half as high out of the water, raced along, with foaming oars. Steel flashed on fore and stern castles and amongst the rowers. From her mast floated the dreaded ensign of the Moslem rovers.

"He gains on us still," whined Messer Nicholas. "We shall be butchered like sheep."

"Ay, and you bestir not yourself to give the Paynims a warm greeting," returned Matteo.

The jongleur swept a calculating eye over the two speeding vessels. Aboard the galley all was quiet. The decks of the cog were crowded with disorderly groups whose lamentations rose momentarily louder.

"We have some small chance, Hugh," he said calmly. "The galley is swift and in this light wind will easily overtake us. 'Tis a question only of time, to be protracted somewhat by skill in ship-handling."

Hugh nodded.

"We are beginning our adventures earlier than had been my expectation. To say truth, I see not what we may do, save it be to make a good end."

"Nay, we are not yet in that plight. I have a plan. Messer Shipman, bid one of your fellows bring me a half-keg of tar, and you have such a commodity in your stores. Eke a barrel of oil."

The shipman goggled at him.

"It shall be done, fair sir," he answered finally. "Ah, good my lords, I pray you save us from these demons of corsairs. They will flay us alive, an we do not accept their Al-Koran--or belike they will slay us anyway for sufficiency of slaves to pull at their oars. Do but----"

"Silence," interrupted Matteo. "You talk like a woman--or a Greek. Have you arms for your crew?"

"Some few."

"Then do you serve them out. Make haste. And fetch me the tar and oil."

As Messer Nicholas disappeared down the poop-ladder, Hugh turned to his friend in amazement.

"Tar and oil!" he exclaimed. "What engine of defence are you devising, Matteo?"

For answer, Matteo led him inside the stern-castle, where a bed of coals glowed in a stone oven. On it their breakfast had been cooked by Ralph.

"Here we have fire," announced Matteo, "When I have procured the oil and tar I shall compound a very fair copy of the famed Greek fire--a most deadly compound, Hugh, and a weapon these corsairs will not be expecting from a peaceful merchantman. 'Tis a surprise they will not relish, or I know not the breed."

Hugh clapped him on the back.

"Hast a most fertile brain," he cried. "There is a plan, indeed. But what is my part therein?"

"Your part is to put some spirit into these scurvy shipmen, and nerve them to come to blows with the Saracens. 'Tis vital for my plan that we should be close aboard the galley before I launch my stroke."

"Trust me," responded Hugh heartily. "I will keep them to it, an I have to slay them myself. Now, whilst you brew your witches' draught, I will see if the prospect of a fight hath medicinal powers on Ralph's carcass."

Worn out by his retching nausea, Ralph had slumbered through all the uproar on the cog's decks, and Hugh found waking him no easy task.

"What ado now, Messer Hugh?" he protested. "A-hum! Can't you let a body be? My stomach is clean dropped down through my heels, and the top of my head is gone."

"Alas, then, you may have no share in the fight," said Hugh with studied indifference.

Ralph interrupted a leisurely stretch to glance sharply upward at his master.

"A fight, say you? Certes, Messer Hugh, you are jesting."

"Never a jest."

"What manner of fight can men have out on this wobbly water that will not let a body stand steady on the two legs under him?" returned Ralph sceptically.

"If you would but stand on those two legs of yours, you might see the beginning of such a fight," answered Hugh.

His curiosity at last aroused, Ralph caught hold of a piece of rigging beside him and made shift to struggle to his knees.

"I see no fight," he complained. "There is naught but another devil's machine like to this bouncing over the water."

"Ay, Ralph, and 'tis full of hairy blackamoors and bloody Saracens with a mind to cut your heart out."

"Saracens, Messer Hugh? What do they hereabouts?"

Hugh became serious.

"They are sent by my enemy you wot of--he who sent the fellow with the knife and the greenwood men. This is an ill day for us, Ralph, and if we are to win forth from it we must fight as becomes Englishmen."

Silently, Ralph clambered to his feet and stood swaying against the rail.

"I will seek out my bow and mail," he said. "My muscles seem flabby as a babe's, Messer Hugh, but I will do what I may."

In the waist of the cog Messer Nicholas dealt out a sparse supply of bows, hangers and spears to the trembling crew. But Hugh realised that the shipmen were so chicken-hearted the weapons were of little use to them. Messer Nicholas, himself, shuddered as he fingered the blade he had allotted to his own portion.

"What now, merry men all," Hugh addressed them cheerily. "Take heart o' grace! Bethink you, we are in a sad pickle, but an we do not make it easier, 'tis like to be worse. The Saracens will see to it none gets back to Hastings port to tell of a lost cargo. There is but one safe path, wot you all, and that is to hurl the villains into the sea when they would come aboard."

"Brave words, lordling," snarled Messer Nicholas, "but you are clad in steel. We have no hauberks to protect us against arbalests and arrows. What shall we do?"

"Fear naught," answered Hugh good-temperedly. "I have by me a longbowman can stand off all the archers in Paynimry. What ho, Ralph?"

The giant descended the poop ladder with compressed lips and a very white face. He lurched a little in his gait, but he tried hard to smile in reply.

"Why, Messer Hugh," he said, "an I ever get the hang of the crooked lifts of this cursed sea, I shall contrive somewhat with my bow. But

this illness which hath gripped me is no friend of the belly. And----"

"A truce to your belly, Ralph," Hugh broke in. "Take station beside me here at the foot of the poop-ladder. Messer Nicholas, bid your varlets spread out under the rail, and place those with bows on the forecastle."

When these dispositions were made, Hugh looked over-side to see the galley dashing towards them only a bowshot distant. Her decks, crammed with men, were absolutely quiet. Not an arrow or bolt heralded her advance. Every sail of the cog was drawing, but, propelled by her swinging oars, the galley overhauled the sailing ship almost as if she had been standing still. As the Saracen's bow came abreast of the stern-castle, Matteo stepped out on the cog's poop beside the helmsman, who crouched low in fear of the arrow-hail which he knew would first be aimed at him.

"Art prepared, Hugh?" Matteo called down.

Hugh waved his hand along the deck.

"You see," he returned. "And you?"

"The brew is in the cauldron."

Before Hugh could answer, the galley drew alongside some twenty ells away. Her oars churned the water into foam that splashed up to the oar-lock ports. Her decks were abristle with pointed Saracen helms and gleaming scimiters. In a cage atop of her one mast amidships three or four archers lurked. At a word of command shouted from her stern-castle, the oars were backed and her headway checked until she was travelling at the same pace as the cog.

Dark, ferocious faces stared across the narrow gap of water at the helpless merchantman, but not a hand was raised to hurl a spear or draw a bow. The silence was broken by a hail.

"Ho, Englishmen, is Messer Nicholas Dunning there?"

A swart, stocky figure stepped to the railing of the galley's stern-castle. It was Messer Bartolommeo Caraducci. He waited expectantly, but Messer Nicholas cowered abjectly behind a water-butt under the stairs to the fore-castle. It was Hugh forced him from cover.

"What would you, noble sir?" he quavered.

"This: I am after a bigger prize than your beggarly cargo or the lives of your rascal crew. Give me what I want, and I let you go free."

Messer Nicholas picked up courage.

"I will pay any price in reason," he replied.

"I want no price," the corsair roared back. "You have three voyagers on board. They are no friends of yours. I have an interest in them. Deliver them to me--or suffer me to come and take them--and I will do you no harm."

Messer Nicholas hesitated and cast an evil look at his three passengers.

"Careful, Messer Nicholas," said Hugh softly. "You are on dangerous ground."

"Fair sir, I would do you no harm," clamoured the shipman. "Indeed, and I would not. But what choice is a man to make in such a case? I cannot sacrifice the lives of all my crew."

At these words, his men rallied around him, obviously in complete agreement with his sentiments. Hugh tried again.

"Your names would be infamous an it became known you had driven such a bargain," he declared. "More, you would be hung by the King's men."

Messer Nicholas shook his head stubbornly.

"I would rather chance that than certain death and torture. And we are not giving you up. It is only that we cannot protect you."

The galley still kept abreast of the cog, gradually narrowing the distance between them. Her commander hailed impatiently.

"Well, what say you, English dogs?" he cried. "Death and torment--by the Prophet's Beard, I will flay you alive, inch by inch!--or a fair bargain?"

"We ag----"

Messer Nicholas broke off his acceptance, as Matteo appeared on the poop, with a flaming torch in his hand.

"The Saracen does well to call you English dogs," shouted the jongleur scornfully. "Dogs you would be to give up your own countrymen to the Paynim hounds! See you this torch? With it--and what I have by me--I could kindle your ship in flames at one stroke. I give you a new choice: fight off the corsairs or else prepare to perish like rats. I swear I will put this torch to the cog, an you refuse to stand by us."

A new chorus of protests went up at this threat. Messer Nicholas fell upon his knees, hands raised imploringly.

"Spare my beautiful ship, fair sir," he begged. "Bethink you, is it not more Christian to give up your own few lives and save ours, than to drag us all down to death together?"

"You fools!" snapped Matteo. "Do you believe the Saracens would keep the bargain, if you made it? They would come aboard, and once aboard they would massacre all at will. Stand to your arms, and fight like men. We will aid you, an you do as I say. We shall beat the corsairs yet."

Hugh seized the moment for definite action.

"Shoot me that swart fellow on the galley's stern-castle," he whispered to Ralph. "Quick, man, before they suspect!"

Ralph notched his arrow, drew the bow-string to his shoulder and loosed. But the arrow slipped over Messer Bartolommeo's shoulder and sank to the feathers in the breast of a man behind him. A yell of anger rose from the galley. Her commander stepped back from his exposed position, and a cloud of arrows and cross-bow bolts tore through the cog's sails or spatted into her planking. One of the

sailors was pierced in the throat and fell choking.

"A sad miss, Ralph," rebuked his master.

"Ay, that it was," the giant agreed shamefacedly. "But my muscles are that flabby I am not myself. Give me time, Messer Hugh."

He drew again, and the arrow found its mark in the crowded mass on the galley's stern-castle. Encouraged by his example and enraged by the discharges against themselves, the archers on the cog's fore-castle also loosed a feeble flight of arrows that took toll in the galley's runway between the rowing-benches.

There was no longer any doubt of the galley's intentions. Urged on by her scores of rowers, she surged against the cog's hull, her starboard oars allowed to hang loose as she jammed alongside. Her archers shot fast and thick; her boarding-parties hung poised on rails. The war-cries of the East came shrill and challenging from the throats of her crew.

With a shock the two craft drove together, and the advance-guard of the Paynims leaped to the cog's deck. Hugh sprang at them, sword in hand, shield on arm, shouting his war-cry:

"A Chesby! St. James!"

But his onset was almost unsupported. The English shipmen, unmailed and crudely armed, shrank before the ready steel of the attackers. They were beaten back to the stern-castle. For a time Ralph's arrows helped to hold off the advance. Then they ceased, and Hugh fought sternly with shut lips, never looking behind him, for always he had at least three foes to contend with at once. He prayed in his heart that whatever Matteo's plan might be it would be tried soon.

He had his back to the poop-stairs and was wondering how he could climb them in full armour and harassed by a swarm of foes, when he was conscious of a bright flame that soared high overhead and a wild screaming from the galley. Simultaneously, the pressure in front slackened. He eased his sword by slaying the enemy nearest to him, and looked across the railing toward the galley. It was afire just under the stern-castle. Whilst he looked, the cog began slowly to forge ahead, and there was another flash of light above him. A flaming barrel curved down from the poop and fell amongst the galley's rowers, spitting fire to right and left.

"Shoot me that helmsman, Ralph!" he heard Matteo cry. "Ay, so!"

At the foot of the mizzenmast an isolated group of Saracens were struggling for their lives against the cog's crew, now fighting like men-at-arms. The rest of those who had boarded the cog were dead or thrown overboard. Hugh turned and climbed wearily to the poop, where Ralph was just loosing an arrow as he appeared.

"I have made amends, Messer Hugh," exclaimed the giant happily. "That is the third heathen I have shot at the galley's helm."

"He hath done wonders for a sick man," applauded Matteo, who stood beside him. "But where had we all been without your sword, Hugh?"

"Not so," said Hugh, bewildered. "'Twas your fire-trick beat them off. Where are they?"

Matteo pointed toward the galley, rolling broadside onto the waves,

flames rising from her in two places.

"'Tis an old trick in Outremer," he exulted. "But like most old tricks it works. An they have no sand in their ballast or vinegar, I fear me the Paynims will all perish, Hugh. Water will not quench the flames I launched upon them."

Hugh looked his admiration.

"You should be a great captain some day, Matteo," he said.

"Where would I have been without your sword or Ralph's bow?" replied the jongleur. "A trick is a trick, comrades; but behind it there must be courage and sharp steel. This hath been a fight worth remembering. How now, Ralph? Shall we set you ashore?"

Ralph grinned sheepishly.

"I cannot just say why it is, lords," he answered, "but the sickness in my belly hath left me and now I am a-hungered for food."

"A-hungered, quotha?" panted the blustering voice of Messer Nicholas, as he stepped on the poop. "You shall be satisfied, sir archer, for bravely have you shot. Ay, lords, it hath been a good fight, well-fought on all sides. Never have I seen better. There hath been goose-flesh on my chest ere this, but now----"

"Look you, an you would not have goose-flesh on every limb, do you bring hither the best your miserable larder affords," threatened Matteo. "A good fight, quotha!" he mimicked.

"Your hunger for bargaining with Saracens will make a brave tale in Rouen, Messer Shipman," gibed Hugh.

"Oh, fair sirs! I pray you, fair sirs! Prithee, do you----"

The comrades lay flat on the heaving deck, and roared their satisfaction at his discomfiture.

CHAPTER VIII

SPEARS OF DESTINY

In Rouen for the first time the comrades saw signs of the Crusade which was being preached throughout Europe. As they rode past the Cathedral on their way to the town gates, several hungry-eyed friars rushed at them, brandishing crosses and demanding that they take the pledge of service.

"Gladly would I do so, reverend sirs," answered Hugh courteously, "but I am under a vow to complete a certain task, which taketh me to Outremer, and peradventure to the Holy Land. If so it falls out, I shall endeavour to do my devoir as becomes a servant of Christ."

One of the friars turned away, but the elder raised his right hand in a threatening gesture, dangling the cross aloft.

"Beware and ye set the affairs of this life before those of the life everlasting," he cried. "Small good will attend the efforts of those who put off the service of Christ for the satisfaction of their own

ends. Think well, sir squire, if you can afford to risk failure on earth and after death. The Cross comes first."

"A pest on you, sir friar," exclaimed Matteo cheerfully. "Why must you nag on strangers, when I'll warrant there are a-many of your townsfolk here are not coming forward? Be off with you."

He tossed the man a coin, which the friar pouched with ludicrous haste.

"Little fear those alms will be applied to pilgrims' wants," continued Matteo. "These preaching fellows are a veritable nuisance. Yon knave saw that you liked not to be singled out in public, and would have pursued you in hopes of a larger gift."

"Are they so venal?" asked Hugh in amazement.

"Some. They are not all such hypocrites. A Crusade is a strange business, like the men who throng its ranks and lead its fortunes, a mingling of good aims and wickedness. No longer will people go forth because they feel that they must. Nowadays the Holy Apostle of Rome must promise them all manner of indulgences, absolutions, remissions of sins and rewards, spiritual and temporal."

"We hear little of this Crusade in England," remarked Hugh thoughtfully, as they passed out of the gate and took the road to the east.

"Ay, like enough. Had Lion-Heart lived 'twould have been otherwise, I trow. But King John is just come to peace with King Philip of France, after all these years of wars, and he is in no mind to begin another quarrel. Nor is King Philip, for that matter. The German Emperor is at swords' points with Rome, so that none but the chief vassals of France and Flanders, Lorraine, Burgundy, Provence and Lombardy are left to perform the task which falls rightly to the share of their lords."

"But such a Crusade, wanting some great Prince to lead it, must surely fail," objected Hugh.

"Mayhap," returned Matteo. "But 'twill not fail for lack of trained men-at-arms. The ceasing of the wars in Normandy, Aquitaine and Poitou hath left thousands of the brethren without a profession. They will be blithe to take service in a new cause, which promiseth booty and assortment of their multitudes of sins."

"I would I might see somewhat of their venture," mused Hugh. "Hast made me long for a charge at Saladin's chivalry with all your wild tales."

"Who knows? Our quest may lead us thither," replied Matteo. "What say you, Ralph, who ride so primly wordless?"

"Marry, Messer Matteo, I am that happy to feel solid earth beneath my feet I cannot give thought to anything but the goodness of all about me," answered Ralph, grinning broadly. "'Tis a fair land, this France, more like unto our England than I had supposed. But I cannot see that it is larger, as you told me."

"Didst think to measure it all at a glance?" retorted Matteo. "But I spoke of whither our quest might lead us. Art ready to venture the sea again that we may reach Paynimry?"

"Ay, if must be," Ralph sighed dolefully. "But I slew Paynims enough in the sea-fight to satisfy me a while, an it please you, lords."

Hugh and Matteo laughed at this naïve admission, and so the comrades jogged along their road. They crossed the frontier of the Duchy without difficulty, and passed into the beautiful country of the Isle of France. That night they lay at the castle of a lord who welcomed them eagerly as strangers from a far land. Hugh was received for his name's sake; Matteo won loud applause from knight and lady, squire and men-at-arms, by his chants and romaunts. The best the castle had was theirs, and they resumed their journey the next morning mightily refreshed.

Spring was in the air. The trees were leafing; birds sang by the wayside; in the depths of the forests sometimes they could catch the far-off note of hunting-horns; fine lords and gay ladies, sober burgesses, portly priests and prelates, parties on pilgrimages, passed them by, with all the pomp and pageantry of life. Once a small clump of spears showed on the skyline and galloped swiftly toward them, but when the men-at-arms, hardy, whiskered Free Companions, viewed the comrades at close quarters, they circled and drew off. Little booty and hard blows were not to the liking of such gentry.

Day by day they travelled, and each day seemed more eventful, more diverse in its surprises, than its predecessor. By Beaumont, in the Isle of France, they rode more than thirty leagues to Soissons on the marches of Champagne. Several times they overtook troops of men on horseback and afoot, bound southward into Italy to embark for the Crusade. Hugh looked longingly at the crosses proudly borne on the Crusaders' breasts.

From Soissons they made a long day's journey to Reims. Here they turned southward, and rode by Epernay to Sezanne. Beyond Sezanne the road to Troyes led through a vast forest, wild and tenantless, save for the occasional smokes of charcoal-burners. When they halted at midday the forest still stretched before them, seemingly endless and without sign of human habitation. They were obliged to satisfy their hunger with such food as Ralph had brought in a wallet on the packhorse.

"A fit setting for a romaunt," said Hugh, as they mounted again.

"I like it not," answered Matteo, shuddering. "My body craves the sun. Here, where the trees tower so high and arch overhead, it is all shadow, all evil. I like it not."

"Y'are unwonted dolorous, comrade," smiled Hugh.

"Ay, and of a mood to take precautions," Matteo assented, drawing the mail hood about his ears.

"Why, dost fear----"

"In these forest ways foes may come secretly upon us."

"What foes?"

"It matters not who they may be," returned the jongleur. "We wear two suits of armour that would be worth a score of forest varlets' lives. That is sufficient temptation."

Hugh sobered.

"Art in the right," he said.

And he donned the casque of plate that hung at his saddle-bow. Gradually, too, he became possessed by the same spirit of melancholy that oppressed Matteo. Of the three only Ralph rode cheerful and happy, a lusty whistle on his lips. But the hours passed and nothing happened. 'Twas late afternoon when Matteo reined in abruptly and laid his hand on Hugh's arm.

"Dost hear?" he asked.

"What?"

"Yes, there it is again!"

"What?" repeated Hugh. "In this helm I hear naught a few feet distant."

Matteo beckoned Ralph to them.

"Hark," he said. "Give ear ahead, Ralph. Dost hear aught else than the whispering of leaves?"

Ralph inclined his head.

"Ay, that do I!" he exclaimed. "Shouts and it may be the clang of steel."

"I thought so," cried the jongleur triumphantly. "Come, Hugh, there is mischief under way along the road."

A great joy sprang up in their hearts as they spurred eagerly forward betwixt thick walls of greenery, the thudding of the horses' hoofs deadening all other sounds.

"Hast banished gloom?" shouted Hugh above the thunder of the hoofs.

Matteo flung his spear in air and caught it again.

"I shall burn a candle to Our Lady of Tortosa for this," he answered. "My bones have been aching for a fight--and I care not for odds. The greater----"

The road curled around a projecting bank, and without warning they burst from the wood onto the edge of a cleared space, where another road crossed the one by which they were travelling. Midway of this space in front of a wayside shrine, a group of ragged knaves swirled about a knot of serving men, who fell rapidly before the clubs and long knives of the attackers. Beside the shrine a second group of robbers guarded a man and woman on horseback.

"Forest runners," said Matteo.

"St. James, but we are in luck!" exulted Hugh. "There are more than a score of the rogues. Ralph, do you stand by to cover our charge. We shall surprise them right merrily."

Ralph dismounted, nimbly notched his string and knocked an arrow.

"Spears?" questioned Matteo.

"No," Hugh decided. "No knightly weapons for such enemies. The

sword shall be their portion."

They drew their blades and charged. The outlaws set up a shrill screaming, and scattered loosely. But they were no cowards, those forest ruffians. Light-footed and agile, they ran to meet the mailed horsemen, trying to leap up behind and stab under the folds of the hauberk or to hock the horses in passing. But Hugh and Matteo were ready for them, and Ralph, from the forest edge, sent his deadly arrows hissing through the air whenever one of the comrades was in danger.

Back and forth swayed the fight, the grey stallion and Matteo's Arab bearing their full share of the conflict with pawing hoofs and champing jaws. Hugh fought as he had been taught, thrusting ahead by main strength, cutting down whoever stepped in his path. Matteo fought after the Saracen fashion, manoeuvring his horse to right or left, avoiding blows and seeking to deal them where they were least expected.

The comrades hacked a bloody path in the outlaws' ranks, but try as they might, they could not win to the prisoners. The most they could achieve was to drive the enemy steadily before them until the two hostile groups were united by the shrine. Then Hugh called a halt.

"Curse this helm!" he cried. "I cannot see for it! Prithee, Matteo, help me unbuckle it. 'Twas not intended for such a bicker."

When it was off he sat bare-headed, inhaling the fragrant forest air and studying the situation which confronted them. Half-a-dozen outlaws lay with the dead servants of the two prisoners, around whom clustered the remnant of the band. Whilst Hugh looked, the woman waved her hand to him and smiled. She was clad in a close-fitting green habit that emphasised the flowing lines of her tall figure. Her face Hugh saw vaguely to be very beautiful. The man was huddled in his saddle, apparently cowed by the savagery of his captors. His rich dress, no less than hers, bespoke their exalted degree.

"Best not charge the knaves, Hugh," urged Matteo. "Stir their anger and make them break toward us. So we may ride them down easier."

"Good counsel," Hugh approved. "What ho, varlets!" he hailed the outlaws. "Hast had enough?"

They snarled, and formed their ranks closer. Hugh laughed.

"Prick them up, Ralph," he ordered.

The longbow twanged, and clothyard shafts flew over the grass like angry hornets; but each buzz ended in a shriek of agony, as the arrows drove through leather jerkin and flesh. A hoarse voice rasped from the unkempt ranks.

"Enough, lords! Have mercy on your poor slaves! Do not slay us!"

"What is this?" demanded Hugh, surprised. "Do you yield to our mercy?"

A frowsy fellow, armed like his mates with a knotted club and a knife, stood forth from the group and flung himself on his knees.

"We ask only that you let us go free, lords," he pleaded. "Do not send us back to the seigneur to be branded and whipped. We will die first!"

"What mean you?"

Hugh rode forward to the man's side, moved to pity.

"We are masterless men, lord. We have no homes, no food or cattle. We were hungry. But we meant no harm."

"The corpses of those you slew prove that," agreed Hugh grimly. "Think of a better reason for mercy."

The man crawled closer.

"There are those who love us, lord," he cried. "We are men, even if we are serfs. We love those who love us and look to us for care. We seek to satisfy their wants. Yet we are satisfied with a mud hut, where you have a castle. We wear only coarse clothes, where you wear camlet and cendal. We do not ask for fowls and fair white bread, with rich wines; but we must have some meat to keep us from starving. Our lot is hard, lord. We do but try to find that which will keep our loved ones alive. Spare us for them!"

"You speak like a clerk, fellow!" exclaimed Hugh. "'Twas well-argued. What think you, Matteo? Shall----"

"Look behind you!" shrieked the woman prisoner from the outlaw ranks.

Hugh turned to see a party of the forest rogues creeping from the protection of a thicket in their rear. At the same moment the fellow at his feet leaped up and swung knife and club at his throat. But Beosund, the grey stallion, saved his master's life. The brave horse reared high on his hindlegs so that the blows only numbed Hugh's arm, curvetted in a demi-volte and galloped clear of the trap after Matteo.

No outlaw dared to press the pursuit in face of Ralph's bow.

"How now," panted Hugh angrily, as they reined in at the forest edge. "Are we to be balked by such rascals?"

"Not so, an you follow my counsel," replied Matteo. "Let us do this wise. Ralph, do you shoot fast as you may, aiming all your shafts at one point in their ranks. So you shall make a gap, and into this we will gallop, and if Our Lady aids us, perchance seize the prisoners and lead them to safety. Are you agreed?"

"Ay, 'tis a good plan."

"In God's name, then, let us charge!"

The grey stallion and the Arab thundered forward again, and the forest runners, despite their terrible punishment, met the attack like wolves too hungry to know fear. They bit at the steel that slew them, twisting their taloned-hands in the horses' manes in desperate efforts to drag their enemies down. The comrades hewed until their arms were weary, but always there seemed to be more of the outlaws eager to die. It was Ralph's shooting that turned the tide. He ran hither and yon, speeding his shafts where they would do the most good, and the certain death they carried was more fearsome than the thirsty swords.

Hugh thought the fight would never end. A dying outlaw clinging to his stirrup, a second man hacking at his back for a weak spot in the mail, he found himself facing a third enemy who belaboured his

unshielded side with a huge club. Matteo was busied with other adversaries. Hugh had to save himself, for so closely was he engaged that Ralph did not dare to shoot.

But Hugh rallied to the emergency with all his remaining strength, kicked free of the clutching hands on his stirrup, smashed in the face of the man behind him with the pommel of his sword, and by a back-hand blow slashed the club from the hands of the third varlet. The fellow dodged and ran. Hugh spurred on in a bloodshot mist, until a white hand was laid upon his rein.

"You have won, sir knight," said a deep voice that thrummed like harp-strings. "They have fled."

Slowly the mist was dissipated, and Hugh looked into a pair of splendid black eyes, eyes of midnight darkness, exquisitely lashed, gems in a face of haughty loveliness under a coronet of raven hair. Heavy-lidded and languorous, they aroused in him a faint uneasiness, fear of he knew not what.

"Fled?" he heard himself croak.

"They fled from your swords," answered the wonderful voice.

Hugh rubbed his eyes with the back of a mailed glove and looked about him. Matteo was riding towards them, escorting the lady's companion. Ralph was leading the pack-horse across the clearing as unconcerned as if their journey had not been interrupted, stopping now and then to retrieve his arrows from the bodies that littered the ground in front of the shrine. Of living outlaws there was not a trace. The survivors of the band had melted into the forest.

"From our swords?" repeated Hugh. "Yet----" he broke off and called to Matteo--"what make you of our victory?"

"'Twas a good fight, Hugh, and we won; but there ride certain allies who contributed in some measure, or I guess wrongly."

He pointed up the cross-road. The westering sun shone full upon a great foison of spears, pennoned and unpennoned, that blocked it like a moving hedge.

"Who are they?" asked Hugh in bewilderment.

Matteo shrugged his shoulders.

"I know not. Spears of destiny, mayhap. In sooth, a mighty company."

CHAPTER IX

THE COMRADES TAKE THE CROSS

"Kyrie Eleison!" wailed the man Matteo had rescued. "We are delivered from one set of thieves to fall into the clutches of another band more numerous."

Hugh eyed him with some amusement, noting, too, the flush that stained the dusky cheeks of the girl in the green habit. He was a well-made man, plump, with the air of a personage used to good service and soft beds. His coat of rich eastern cloth was trimmed

with beaver. His face was handsome, even scholarly, but marred by a certain petulant arrogance.

"Your fears are reasonless, father," said the girl sharply. "And rather than bemoan our fate, we should thank these gallant knights for their aid. But for them we should be on our way to the lair of the outlaws."

"Indeed, lady, you make much of what is of no moment," remonstrated Hugh. "And we are not knights, but plain squires."

"You fight like paladins, Messers," she returned with a flash of eyes and teeth.

"My daughter saith truth," approved the man. "Squires you may be, but knights you will become, an you perform many such deeds of arms. I would it were in my power to recompense you as befits your prowess and my degree, but I am an exile from my home, fair sirs, and my means are limited. In so far as I may, I am at your command."

"There is no thought of debt," answered Hugh. "But I would I knew who these men-at-arms may be. What think you, Matteo?"

"We shall learn anon," said the jongleur sententiously. "See!"

The forest of spears had halted in the entrance to the clearing, and two men rode forward from the serried ranks. One wore the habiliments of a priest, and his mount was a quick-footed mule. His dress was mean, but the grim face that peered out from the wide cowl challenged instant attention. Gaunt to the verge of emaciation and seared with deep-riven lines, its mobile lips firm-shut, the outstanding feature was the eyes that blazed with almost maniacal brilliance in their hollow sockets.

The other rider was far different in aspect. He bestrode a broad-flanked war-horse, and was sheathed in mail of proof. A blood-red cross barred the left breast of his surcoat. All his appointments were those of a warrior. He was of a middle-height, apparently about forty years old, and his head, under its cap of state, was large and finely shaped. He had a jutting beaked nose and brown eyes that might look merry, but were now hard and stern. Hugh knew this man for a leader, accustomed to command and to be obeyed.

But it was the priest who spoke first.

"What means this slaughter?" he cried threateningly, as he picked his way amongst the bodies that cluttered the grass of the crossroads. "Know ye not that knight-errantry is forbid? The Holy Apostle of Rome hath banned all such who shed the blood of fellow-Christians rather than go to slay the Infidels. Speak ere I curse you, and your souls are condemned to Hell!"

"Curse, and 'tis to your liking, holy friar," returned Matteo, who had been more directly addressed. "I never yet knew that the Church countenanced robbery and murder."

The priest glared at him, and Hugh hastened to intervene.

"This hath been no fight of our choosing, fair sirs," he said. "In passing this spot we found this lord and his lady daughter in the power of a band of forest runners, who were murdering their servants. We charged the varlets for the sake of kindliness, and were like to have been killed ourselves, for they were exceeding desperate."

"Why, that is a reasonable tale," spoke up the knight who rode by the friar.

The priest scowled.

"This man is a jongleur," he said, pointing accusingly to Matteo's gittern, which was fastened to the back of his saddle.

"That is so," assented Matteo. "'Tis no crime in the Holy Land whence I come, sir friar."

"Hast been in Outremer?" enquired the knight eagerly.

"Even so, lord."

The priest scowled fiercer still.

"Y'are no respecter of God's servants, 'twould seem," he snapped. "Why left you the Holy Land? What better place to live than the scene of Our Saviour's passion?"

"As to that, sir friar," answered Matteo coolly, "I came even to see how it was the Christians of the West were so long in mustering to the rescue of the Holy Sepulchre."

The priest gnashed his teeth.

"Ay, 'tis true," he cried, "and even this jongleur, this panderer to the sinfulness of man, this singer of lewd songs and love rhymes--even he taunteth us with our wickedness, for that we have forgotten Our Lord who died for us! Woe, woe unto all je who turn not into the narrow path! Woe, I say, unto ye, all ye who do not abandon the work of the world for the work of God! The sinful have taunted us, and we may not answer! So far have we strayed from the way our feet were set upon!"

He tossed his arms wildly overhead and rode on alone, heedless of the rest of the company.

"A pleasant fellow," quoth Matteo. "He liked not the manner of my face, I take it."

The knight laughed.

"'Tis Messer Fulke of Neuilly. He is the preacher of the Crusade by the Holy Apostle's own writ. He is like unto the Sainted Peter the Hermit, who preached the First Crusade to our fathers. A most pious man, Messers, but certes, one not over-comfortable to live with. I am glad he hath passed on before. I had wished myself a Paynim an I had been afflicted much longer with his company."

He hesitated and regarded them enquiringly, his gaze sweeping from Hugh and Matteo to the strange lord and his daughter, who had sat quietly throughout the conversation.

"I, lords," he said courteously, bowing to the lady, "am the Lord Geoffrey de Villehardouin, Marshal of Champagne, and I ride with the knights and men-at-arms of my master, the Count of Champagne, to join the Crusade which sails from Venice after Easter. Prithee, can I be of service to you?"

"Lord Marshal," replied the strange lord pompously, "I am one unknown

to you, although perchance you have heard of my ill fate. I am the Cæsar Michael Comnenus, an exile from Constantinople, and this is my daughter the Lady Helena. We are riding from Germany into Italy to seek news of our affairs. Of these brave squires I know not even their names, but I can vouch for their gallantry. It had gone hard with us had they not ridden to our rescue."

"Certes, I have heard of the troubles of the Cæsar Michael Comnenus," answered the Marshal of Champagne. "Yours is a sad story, lord, and one all too common in these days in Byzantium, if the tales we hear are true. I pray you, sir, do you and your daughter ride with us south into Italy. So you shall be guarded against other mishaps. And now, young sirs, may I have the pleasure of knowing you?"

"I am Hugh, lord of Chesby in England," returned Hugh. "I ride on a quest to Outremer. This is Messer Matteo of Antioch, my friend and comrade, who journeys with me."

"Chesby!" exclaimed the Marshal.

Even the Cæsar and his daughter leaned forward in their saddles at the name.

"You are of the blood of Sir James?" asked Villehardouin.

"I am his son. I go to seek him."

"To seek him? But, lordling, he is----"

"He lives," interrupted Hugh coldly.

"Lives?" protested the Greek. "Sir James de Chesby lives? Where heard you that, Messer Englishman?"

"It matters not, fair sir. I know."

The Lady Helena interposed.

"Is it not right and just that a son should seek news of a father who hath been lost to him?" she said softly. "A brave quest, Lord Hugh. May the Immaculate One walk beside you."

For an instant the long lashes lifted and her eyes beamed into his. Then they were decorously veiled. Hugh's heart thumped faster, and he pressed one hand against his hauberk where a hunting-glove nestled beneath the mail.

"You are very kind, lady," he muttered.

But the Cæsar was not so readily satisfied. A weak man, he was unconscionably stubborn.

"It is because I admire the courage and chivalry of the young English lord that I would convince him of the uselessness of his search," he persisted. "Sir James--the Panagia rest his soul!--is dead these many years. Turn your arms to the task of the Crusade, Lord Hugh. There you shall win honours to match your merit."

Hugh listened gravely. The man was his senior in age and of exalted rank.

"I will consider your counsel, lord," he answered, and turned away.

Despite Hugh's reserve, Comnenus would have said more. But Villehardouin picked up his reins.

"Your pardon, lords," he apologised, "but it is a long ride yet to Troyes. We must be on our way. An you do me the honour, I would fain have your company. I must hear more of this quest of yours, Lord Hugh."

He raised in his stirrups and flung a bellow of command behind him. The forest of lances stirred into motion and flowed after them.

As the column proceeded, other knights rode forward and joined the group attending the Marshal. These new-comers gathered thickest about the Lady Helena, and Hugh found occasion for a word in private with Matteo.

"Hast any key to these Greeks?" he questioned.

Matteo's brows were furrowed by a puzzled frown.

"Only this: they are of the Comnenoi, an Imperial house, and they were forced into exile after the death of Andronicus, your father's friend, last of that line to sit on the throne of Byzantium. He was assassinated by one of the Angeloi, and 'tis the brother of that Angelos, you will remember, who rules now in Constantinople. This pair are on some errand of intrigue."

"But why is this man so sure of my father's death?"

"Would that I knew, comrade! Why are all those with the taint of the Greek Court so sure of it?"

"Ay, that is true," Hugh admitted sombrely. "Yet these two are exiles. What interest can they have?"

"They are Greeks--and they hope some time to rule in Constantinople. There are two causes for any lie."

"'Tis passing strange," Hugh conceded, "but mayhap I suffer from the canker of suspicion. I will strive to banish it. I must not suspect every stranger from Outremer of being an enemy to me."

"Banish it not, Hugh," advised Matteo earnestly. "Be ever on your guard. Certes, it was more than strange our meeting here in France with these two from Constantinople. Be on your guard against all Greeks. A slippery, treacherous race!"

Before Hugh could answer the Marshal rode to his side.

"That was a pretty bicker you fought by the crossroads," Villehardouin said warmly. "These forest varlets are no mean foes. Where got you those huge arrows I marked sticking in some of the rogues?"

"My follower here shot them from his long-bow," explained Hugh. "Ralph, do you show how 'tis done."

The Marshal cried out in wonder at the great yew bow, a man's-length tall.

"Never have I seen such a weapon," he exclaimed. "Certes, it must be stronger than a cross-bow. Is it common in England?"

"Not so, Lord Marshal," returned Hugh, while Ralph grinned sheepishly, proud to have his pet noticed by the French knight. "Ralph's father served in the wars on the Welsh March. The Welsh are a mountain people, very nimble and swift of foot, and they make bows somewhat like this, but not so big. Ralph's father took the Welsh bow and made it longer and stouter, until he had this."

The Frenchman shook his head as he tried to draw the strung bow to his shoulder.

"Never saw I the like," he repeated. "Arm a peasantry with it, and they would be invincible."

"Mayhap some day we shall," said Hugh lightly.

"I would we had some companies of your archers for service against the Paynims," replied the Marshal. "Our ranks are none too full, Messers."

"How is that?"

"One accident or another--and all the Kings stand aside. But we are not cast down, and 'tis a sturdy host will sail for Babylon. The Venetians are lending us a fleet of war-galleys, and the picked men-at-arms of Flanders, Champagne, Burgundy, Germany, Tuscany, Lombardy and the Southern marches are riding in our train. What we lack most are funds and in sooth, Messers, the Holy Apostle and his Cardinals are not so generous as they might be with the pittances they have collected from the stay-at-homes."

"I would we might ride with you," said Hugh.

"And why not?" Villehardouin proposed. "Every strong arm counts, and you, Messer Matteo, would be invaluable to us, with your knowledge of Outremer and the Saracens. Come, now, Messers. Consider the opportunity. I do not boast when I say that you would ride in good company."

"Ah, Lord Marshal," said Hugh sadly, "but you forget my quest. I may not depart from that."

"Your quest takes you to Outremer. We voyage thither, too."

"But I must go first to Constantinople."

"Ah, so!" Villehardouin considered. "I would not have on my soul the breaking of any man's vow. Yet I pray you, fair sirs, think well of what I have said. It may be that we can compound the matter, so that Messer Hugh will do no violence to his conscience. You, Messer Matteo, will not part from your friend?"

"Where he rides, there I ride also," returned Matteo steadily.

"Well spoken!" applauded the Marshal. "By St. Remigius of Reims, y'are a staunch pair, and I would I might have you by me! At the least, ride with us into Italy. If you would journey to Constantinople, you must take ship from Venice for Genoa, and it may be I can assist you in some sort, for the Doge Dandolo is friendly to me."

With the keen tact that characterised him, Villehardouin dropped the subject there; but he talked on tirelessly, for he was a man insatiable in his pursuit of knowledge. He asked Matteo concerning

the Saracens and their mode of warfare, and he was equally curious regarding Hugh's training in England.

"An you have been well-exercised in arms, y'are no worse off for delay in taking the field," he asserted. "Many a boy is thrown and crippled in his first tourney for lack of strength to stand the blows."

But what caused him to marvel most was the fact that Hugh had been taught to read and write.

"What," he cried, "you can write fair script like the holy fathers? 'Tis wellnigh beyond belief, lordling. And you read? Latin, too, say you? St. Remigius aid me! Ah, I would I had the art. All my life have I longed for it, but the toil of arms and my seigneury have left me no opportunity--or perchance furnished my idleness an excuse. But in my embassages and visits to courts and parliaments of barons, how great an aid would it have been to me had I been able to set down that which happened in writing that it might never have been lost. Ah, God, fair sirs, this is a matter very close to my heart!"

"If I can be of service to you on the journey. Lord Marshal, I shall count it an honour," proffered Hugh.

"That is right courteously said," Villehardouin responded with boyish alacrity. "Doubt not I shall make use of you, with your permission. I like not to use the monkish scribes. They are too foreign in their understanding. An you will bear with me, I shall have much for your hand to write."

The pleasant company and the ceaseless clatter of thousands of hoofs at their heels made the ride into Troyes seem very short; but it was dusk when they entered the gates and passed up the main street, torch and cresset glaring on hauberk and byrnie, shield and lance-point, sword and battle-axe. From the marketplace came the clamour of a crowd hysterically excited.

"Messer Fulke has aroused the good people again," commented Villehardouin, with the cynicism of the great noble, to whom the Crusade, first and last, was mainly an opportunity for adventure in a good cause. "Lord Hugh, Messer Matteo, I shall meet you anon."

He turned into an inn courtyard, leaving the comrades in the street.

"Shall we seek quarters?" asked Matteo.

"Ay," said Hugh, "but first I would see this mad priest, an you favour it. Ralph can find us an inn."

"Oh, if you will," agreed Matteo resignedly. "Belike he will curse me in earnest this time."

A myriad torches illuminated the crowd that surged and swayed from wall to wall across the market-place. In the centre, upon a heap of faggots, stood the lean figure of the preacher, a crucifix in one hand. He shook the holy emblem at his listeners as if it was a weapon, and whenever he raised it in anger the people groaned and whined like beaten dogs. Those nearest to him continually snatched at his garments, content if they could kiss a fold of his robe or the sandals on his feet. It was to these that Messer Fulke addressed himself, as the comrades slowly forced their way through the throng.

"Ah, what fools ye be!" he shouted in his deep, ringing voice. "You

seek virtue in my garments, say you? Well, I will not guarantee that you shall find what you seek there. But this I will warrant you: Behold!"

He leaned down and plucked at the cloak of a man in the front rank of those around him.

"On this I make the sign of the Cross--and it hath a virtue which shall assoil all sins."

He caught the cloak from its owner and tore it into strips, talking as he worked. From the strips he fashioned rude crosses, and the thousands in the square fought to claim one.

"Here I can assure you the peace of Heaven and forgiveness of sins," he proclaimed, as he cast the crosses to all within reach. "By the virtue they possess, if ye make good the obligation they carry with them, your sins shall be assoiled. But think not to lay aside the burden once assumed. There is a mighty task awaiting you, and Christ calls upon you to begin. Rich and poor, old and young, merchant and seigneur, serf and villein, all of ye hear Christ's call. Go forth in his service, and ye shall win everlasting life."

The crowd were in a frenzy, moaning and weeping and beating their breasts, calling upon saints, praying in the gutters.

"Show us a miracle, Messer Fulke," cried an hysterical voice from the fringes of the throng.

The appeal was taken up and tossed about, until a chorus of voices were demanding it.

"Show us a miracle, Messer Fulke! A miracle such as you showed the people of Paris! Give us a miracle!"

The priest raised his gaunt arms in a magnificent gesture of command. Instantly the crowd sobered into silence.

"A miracle ye call for!" he said slowly, his words falling distinct as the tolling of a bell. "Oh, ye foolish ones, ye of little faith! A miracle ye must have in order that ye shall believe!"

His tones became scornful.

"When did Fulke of Neuilly ever claim to be a worker of miracles? But I will show you that which is all but a miracle, an ye ask for it. I will show ye the haughty and highly-placed brought to serve God's purpose against their will. Look carefully, oh, people!"

There was a deadly hush, and Fulke leaned forward from his heap of faggots.

"Ride near, sir knights," he called to Hugh and Matteo. "Ay, to my feet, an it please you."

By magic a lane opened before their horses, there was a pressure of bodies from the rear, and the comrades found themselves immediately under the preacher's stand.

"I thought I knew ye, slayers of outlaws, players of light music, doers of errant deeds," he exclaimed sarcastically. "Here I give you a chance to redeem your souls from the burden of sin that rests upon them."

And before they could protest, he took strips from the citizen's cloak and pinned crosses to their surcoats.

"There is a miracle for you," he shouted to the crowd, and a din of rejoicing arose from the packed ranks.

The people pressed closer, not only kissing Fulke's clothing, but striving to snatch bits of the comrades' surcoats, in which they fancied some sure virtue to have been embodied. Hugh and Matteo were forced to fight their way out of the throng. It was impossible for them to protest against the priest's act. Had they done so they would have been torn to pieces. As it was, they did not feel safe until they were swallowed in the shadows of a side-street.

"Do you believe in God?" asked Hugh, as he fingered the coarse cloth of the cross that sprawled across his breast.

"Sometimes," answered Matteo quietly. "And sometimes I believe in the Fate of which the Saracens teach."

"Which brought this about?"

"God knows," said the jongleur.

And involuntarily he crossed himself.

CHAPTER X

HOW HUGH WAS TESTED

As the comrades were mounting their horses the next morning, there was a commotion at the inn gate and Fulke of Neuilly entered the courtyard. He waved back the crowd of curious folk who always followed at his heels and strode across to Hugh's side.

He looked, if possible, more gaunt than he had the night before. His eyes burned like coals. Twin patches of vivid scarlet capped his cheekbones. But there was a restraint in his manner which had been lacking when he harangued the crowd in the marketplace.

"It has come to my ears that I did ye twain an injustice," he began curtly. "Fair sirs, none is more humble than I in acknowledging a wrong done. I cry your pardon. But I would have ye believe that I have found so much of wickedness and evil broadcast in the land that it is become hard to see that any goodness may prevail--more particularly among the young and hot-blooded."

Hugh regarded him in bewilderment, but Matteo answered as curtly as he had spoken.

"Of a truth, Messer Fulke, there are few of your cloth would own to a fault. Prithee, what has turned your heart toward us?"

The preacher surveyed the jongleur steadily for a long moment.

"Doth anti-Christ reign in your soul?" he demanded abruptly.

Matteo raised his eyes.

"No more than in yours, Messer Priest. But I have seen more than I care to remember of clerkly hypocrisy, and I cannot abide smugness in place of virtue."

Fulke heard him out quietly.

"That is true, Sir Jongleur," he admitted. "There are a-many of God's servants in this land unworthy of their livery, and it may be such are to be found otherwhere. I have laboured to point out all who came in my way. Hell hath hotter fires for them than for the laity. But I came not hither to argue with ye, fair sirs. I mocked ye for idlers and made use of my power over the people in the market-place to compel ye to a purpose ye did not intend. Thereby I did wrong. You, Messer Englishman, go upon a good quest, and this jongleur, your companion, doth as well as he may in that he aids you. The crosses I put upon ye are meaningless, but I would have ye not forget them."

His eyes flared with a sudden lustre.

"Ay," he continued tensely, "forget them not, for I say to ye, that though ye be not vowed for the Crusade, yet shall your fate be cast with that of the host."

Hugh gasped.

"How know ye this?" he cried.

"I cannot say," answered Messer Fulke, his eyes strangely dulled. "But tongues speak in me over which I have no control. Think well of my words, fair sirs."

He raised his hand in a gesture of blessing, and turned to leave the courtyard. But presently, whilst they watched him, dumbfounded, he retraced his steps.

"Messer Jongleur," he said to Matteo with sad wistfulness, "hast seen the Holy Sepulchre?"

Matteo nodded, too surprised to speak.

"With thine own eyes?"

"Yes."

Fulke sighed.

"Ah, lucky youth! That precious sight upon which mine eyes may never dwell!"

"Surely, you go with the host, Messer Fulke?" asked Hugh kindly.

The priest shook his head.

"I go upon my Father's business," he said. "My path lies otherwhere. God keep you, fair sirs."

Before they could question him further, his quick, nervous stride had carried him into the midst of the crowd at the inn gateway, whose ranks closed around him in a tempest of adulation.

"In sooth, this Fulke is a great priest," said Hugh, as they rode slowly after him to join the column of Crusaders.

"And a sick man," added Matteo thoughtfully.

"Sick?"

"Yes, his days are numbered, or I have never seen the sickness of the lungs. Also, Hugh, he knoweth it."

Matteo spoke no more than the truth. Messer Fulke was too ill to journey on with the host that day. He tarried for a while at Troyes, rallying his strength, and then rode forth to castigate certain dilatory persons who had taken the Cross, and in the heat of his labour perished as he had foreseen, unable to witness the fruit of his own mighty efforts.

The knights and leaders of the host were not sorry to miss Fulke. They had a strong contingent of churchmen for the necessary masses and other holy services, jolly, live-at-your-ease clerks, who kept sermons for sermon time; and the hard-fighting men-at-arms preferred the counsels of such to the relentless, austere piety of the priest of Neuilly, who was swift to seize every opportunity for admonition and who spared none from prince to varlet.

The host was like a snowball that starts an avalanche. Every league that the column traversed brought some addition to it. Perhaps it was the following of a petty baron; perhaps a single adventurer, armoured knight or leather-coated burgher; perhaps the imposing array of a province or town. From day to day the numbers grew, and long before they had traversed Burgundy and reached the pass over Mont Cenis they had attained the proportions of an army.

Geoffrey the Marshal made much of Hugh and Matteo, and they rode with the great lords and barons. Knights famous throughout Europe companioned them--Manasses de l'Lisle, Macaire de Sainte-Menehould, Miles le Brabant, Reginald de Dampierre, Geoffrey de Joinville, Payen d'Orleans, Peter de Bracieux, Matthew de Montmorency, Conon de Béthune, James d'Avesnes, Anseau de Cayeaux and many more, noted for skill in tourney and the field. Villehardouin had not boasted when he claimed that the best men-at-arms of Western Europe were joining the host.

Previous Crusades had enlisted larger armies, but in none had the organisation been so precise. Each lord and baron, in accordance with his degree, had made himself the captain of a company of men-at-arms and foot-sergeants who owned his leadership. The lesser barons, in turn, were leagued under the great lords of their localities, and these, likewise, ranged themselves under one or another of the princes at the head of the host, the Marquis Boniface de Montferrat, who had been elected general of the Crusade; Count Baldwin of Flanders and Hainault, Count Louis of Blois, Count Walter de Brienne, Count Hugh de St. Paul, Count Simon de Montfort or Count Bertrand von Katzenelenbogen who led the German Crusaders.

In this task of organisation Villehardouin had played the principal part. Indeed, no other man had borne so considerable a share of the burden of planning the details of mobilising and moving the Crusaders from widely-scattered countries across Europe and the Mediterranean, and now that his dream was approaching fulfilment he was happy as a lad.

"Ah, lordling, little may you guess the toils and anxieties which have been my lot," he said to Hugh, as they rode with the immense white skyline of the Alps before them. "Two and a half years have I

laboured since my late lord, the Count Thibaut--God rest his soul!--and his cousin, the Count of Blois, took the cross at the tournament at Ecri and so set an example to all hardy Christians. Many a night have I lain sleepless, fearing the Crusade would never start; but always God hath stepped down and helped us when human aid was not.

"'Tis now more than a year gone since I treated with the Venetians to carry us over-sea, and there were times then when it seemed impossible we could come to terms. But the worst blow ever was struck at me was when I journeyed home, with fair terms gained, to find my lord, Count Thibaut, dying. Never lived there gentler knight! The barons had picked him for their leader, and when he died we were like children without a father.

"Time pressed, and none would fill his place. Duke Odo of Burgundy and Count Thibaut of Bar-le-duc refused. My heart weakened. I lost faith. But as a last resort we sent messages to the Marquis Boniface de Montferrat, begging him to lead us, and at a parliament held at Soissons he gave his consent. Ah, Messer Hugh, I cannot speak of our joy, for we knew him for a lord, bold and fearless and a right trusty knight."

"Well may you say so, Lord Marshal," agreed Matteo, who rode at Villehardouin's other bridle-rein. "There is no better general in all the world than the Marquis. He hath battled in the Holy Land and couched his spear against Saladin himself. The blood of Crusaders runs in his veins. And he hath a ready ear for knightly tales or polished chansons. Greeks and Saracens both he knoweth well."

"A good lord to follow in a good cause," added Hugh.

Matteo drummed with his fingers on his shield, and burst into the "Chanson of William of the Long Sword," elder brother of the Marquis Boniface, whose son was titular King of Jerusalem. The knights urged their horses closer, and when he came to the clamorous chorus they roared it after him, so that the Burgundian peasants by the wayside dropped their tools of husbandry and fled in panic fear:

Bloody-red from helm to heel,
William Long Sword swung his steel!
Round him many a Paynim lance
Sought to ward him, to advance.
But he slew them all.
'Gainst his arm could naught avail--
Scimiter or Damascus mail--
Crushed to earth they fall!

Matteo was always in demand amongst the knights of the several companies, and Hugh found himself thrown into increasing intimacy with the Cæsar Michael and his daughter--or rather, with the Lady Helena. How it began Hugh could not say. But early in the march it was settled that he was to ride with her for certain periods each day. At first it seemed that he met her as they were starting forth in the morning or after the midday rest or perhaps in the midst of a stroll about a village, in which the camp was pitched for the night. Accident was the cause of these early encounters, and loneliness and curiosity stimulated others.

She repelled him, whilst she attracted him. There was something of Oriental mystery, as well as languor, in her character. He was conscious that the face she opposed to him was a mask behind which

another personality--he suspected a more fiery, intense, tigerish self, capable of immense selfishness and gusty passions--lurked in enforced concealment. Once he surprised this self, when he looked up to see her eyes blazing under their heavy lids as if they would read the inmost secrets of his heart. But it fled instantly to cover.

"You are so strange-, Messer Hugh," she smiled. "I was wondering if you were really so good and generous?"

There was an under-current of mockery in her words that put Hugh upon the defensive.

"You would make fun of me," he reproached her.

"No," she asserted. "I was thinking of how you listened to the outlaw who argued the wrongs of his kind. It was as if you credited him."

"I did," said Hugh simply. "There is much evil in the world--as Messer Fulke says--and most of it falls upon the peasants."

"But what else are they made for? It is their portion to serve, even as it is the portion of the horse or the dog or the oxen."

"They have souls," answered Hugh, puzzled. "They are people like us, are they not?"

"Oh, have your western monks decided so?" she said carelessly. "'Twas a point I thought otherwise upon."

So she tricked him out of the question he would have asked, at the same time involuntarily exposing a view of her own soul, the driving power of that hidden personality.

She was more than ordinarily interesting to talk to, for she had known exile since she was a child and had travelled in many countries--over practically all the known world. To Hugh, fresh from his quiet backwater in far-away England, she was a mine of information. He listened breathless to her off-hand stories of courts and rulers and tourneys. But of Constantinople she seldom spoke.

"'Tis a subject that irks me," she replied when he would have questioned her. "Forbear, Messer Hugh. An you were an exile seeing all that you loved and treasured seized by others, the glory and power that was rightfully yours in the possession of a usurper, you would know the sorrow that embitters me."

Then her big eyes flamed and her hand opened and shut, as she dropped her horse's rein.

"Oh, that I were a man!" she cried. "With a few stout knaves at my back I would storm the Triple-Wall and cast Alexius from his ill-gotten throne. I would bind him and his sycophants, tear out their eyes, and leave them to drag out their days with the rats in the dungeons of Blachernae."

"Are they very terrible dungeons?" asked Hugh idly.

The mask dropped across her face.

"All dungeons are terrible," she answered colourlessly.

She paused as if she expected him to ask more; but he said nothing, vaguely uneasy, with the feeling that comes when a hostile swordsman is faced.

For all his reticence, his secret distrust, he could not escape entirely the subtle spell she wove around him. She was beautiful; she was interested in him; she made herself attractive to him. Often he pressed the hunting-glove that he carried beneath his hauberk, and breathed a quiet prayer. He was a simple lad, untaught in the world's ways, only his native honesty and singleness of purpose betwixt him and temptation.

He required all his strength one night when she surprised him as he sat against a boulder on an Alpine hillside, the frosty stars twinkling overhead and a vasty silence below, wrestling with the contending forces in his heart.

The first he knew of her was her hand on his mailed arm.

"Ah, Messer Hugh, you are thinking of your love at home in England," she said softly.

"Love? No--'tis not so," stumbled Hugh.

"Then you have no lady you are pledged to?"

Hugh held silent, and the fingers on his arm seemed to burn through the mail.

"You do not answer," she sighed reproachfully.

"There is nobody in England," he muttered.

She laughed in a way she had, the persuading trill of lapping water in her voice.

"Nobody? That is because there are so many."

He did not answer, and she came closer.

"Do the hills make you lonely, too?" she whispered.

He shivered. It was uncanny.

"Yes," he jerked betwixt clicking teeth.

She waited, still very close to him.

"You do not ask me to sit by you, Hugh," she suggested.

"I--I----"

He rose stiffly.

"Let us seek a fire," he said, mastering himself by a supreme effort. "I am cold."

She walked beside him without a word.

Later that night, whilst Hugh vainly longed for sleep, Matteo came to him.

"Hugh," began the jongleur, "are we comrades?"

"Yes," said Hugh, surprised.

"And betwixt us there are no secrets?"

"I know of none."

"That is well, comrade. Now, prithee, bear with what I say. I speak as becomes a friend. Hugh, I have watched the Lady Helena's interest in you, and it hath seemed to me that she worked with some end in view. I know not what it may be, any more, perchance, than yourself. But we have a quest, you and I; and I feel that she is concerned in it. So my counsel is to discover to her naught of our plans and to remember always that she is a suspected foe."

Hugh clasped the jongleur's hand.

"That is good counsel," he said gratefully. "Doubt not I will heed it."

Matteo's few words proved the necessary alchemy to clear the confusion of Hugh's thoughts. Weaker impulses he put resolutely aside, facing squarely the issues of right and duty. He spent more time in Matteo's company, chatted with knights and lords of tricks of arms, brave deeds in the past, exploits of venery or falconry. At night he slept peacefully again.

If Helena Comnena entertained resentment for Hugh's rebuff, she concealed it easily during the days in which the Crusaders pressed on across the plains of Lombardy toward the head of the Adriatic Sea, where Venice ruled unchallenged from her citadel in the centre of the lagoons. Her manner toward him was precisely the same, a mingling of friendliness and mockery. But she never reverted to their old intimacy until the afternoon the host halted by a sedgy shore and stared over the waters at a silhouette of sparkling domes and towers that marked the Island City.

Huge flat-bottomed boats for the horses and galleys to tow them and carry the knights were in waiting. On all sides rose the bustle of embarkation. Several knights had bidden her adieu, and Hugh rode up in his turn.

"Here we part, lady," he said, and he could not be sure whether he spoke in regret or satisfaction.

"Not so," she denied, and momentarily her eyes swept up to his. "We drift from each other for a little space, Messer Hugh. But--read me for a fortune-teller an you will--Fate hath woven the strands of our lives into the same pattern."

"What mean you?"

"An I knew it all, still I should not tell you," she replied. "Yet here is one crumb for you, confident youth: be jealous how you relate your quest to strangers."

Her father cried out to her, and she turned her horse to ride on board the barge reserved for them.

"Also, I think that you will travel to Constantinople in good company," she flung over her shoulder.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREEN GONDOLA

By the arrangements of the Venetians, the bulk of the Crusaders were transferred to a camp prepared for them on the island of San Nicolo. Villehardouin and the leaders and chief barons were carried on the Doge's state barge to the Palace of St. Mark. As the Marshal went aboard, he called to the comrades standing on the bank:

"Give me the pleasure of your company to-morrow noon, fair sirs. I will make you known to His Magnificence the Doge. It may be he can aid you on your way."

"We will not forget, Lord Marshal," answered Hugh.

With a chorus of farewell shouts from the other knights, the barge shoved off, and the comrades were left surrounded by the ferrymen, each one vociferously demanding the task of carrying them across the lagoons to the city.

"What are we to do?" asked Hugh of Matteo in bewilderment. "Know you where we may come by a night's lodging?"

"That do I," returned the jongleur promptly. "Be at your ease."

He snapped an order in the lingua franca--that polyglot tongue which was the universal medium of intercourse along the polyglot shores of the Mediterranean,--cuffed one ferryman out of the path, thrust the butt of his lance at a second. A way was cleared for them, and they rode to where the various craft were drawn up against the bank. Matteo studied the boats separately, and finally selected one which looked a trifle less shabby than its rivals.

"This will do," he announced. "Come, varlet, be about your business. We have tarried over-long."

The ferryman jumped to obey, drove off his jealous fellows with a wide sweep of his long oar, and then assisted Ralph to lead the horses on board. Presently, they floated from the bank and began to creep over the placid water towards the glowing outline of Venice.

As they drew near the city, and its colours and architecture became distinct, Hugh exclaimed in admiration:

"Never thought I there could be aught so beautiful as this! And the churches! They are frequent as inns."

"It is a great city," agreed Matteo. "After Constantinople, mayhap, the richest in the world. Here you will find men from every country, even the Saracens--yes, and from beyond their lands--and all men meet here in peace to trade and exchange their goods."

"Where are we going?"

"To the fondaco of one Messer Annibale Ziniani, who tradeth with the merchants of Tripoli and Antioch. I am not unknown to him. He will give us right good shelter, and perchance can find us a ship for Constantinople. These merchants each know what the other does. 'Tis their way."

The ferryman and his crew pushed lustily at their huge sweeps, and the flat-bottomed craft forged ahead at a surprising pace. They struck across the lagoons at right angles to the course taken by the flotilla which had borne the Crusaders to San Nicolo, and soon made the entrance to a lane of water which led between the outer groups of buildings in what might be termed the suburbs of the island city.

"They have no walls!" marvelled Hugh.

"What want they of walls?" answered Matteo. "Their stout galleys are walls enough for them, and the water which rings them round is sufficient moat. No enemy ever has dared to strike at the Venetians. His fate would be certain."

"And have they no streets?" demanded Hugh, as the ferry swept along between lines of houses, built flush to the water's edge, allowing room only for shallow flights of landing-stairs.

"Yes, in some sections of the city. 'Tis built not directly in the water, as you might suppose, but on a series of islands and islets, great and small. On the larger islands there are a few streets, but the principal avenues are made of water, and the people vastly prefer to ride hither and yon in their small boats."

As the ferry neared the centre of the city, the traffic on the water increased until it crowded the canal. The boats were all quite small--gondolas, Matteo called them--and the boatmen were exceedingly dexterous in their management, guiding them through the throng with a mere twist of the wrist on the single oar trailing astern. Occasionally a barge of six oars or one of the State galleys used for the patrol of the city clove a path through the swarm of light craft. Hugh could not understand why accidents did not occur when boats dashed out of side canals apparently without any heed to the craft navigating the main waterway. But the boatmen never lost their heads, no matter how loud the clamour of voices or how dense the press.

It was almost dark, when the ferryman turned east from the Grand Canal into one of the waterways which crossed it and brought his unwieldy craft to rest against a flight of steps leading up to a ponderous castellated structure, with grated windows on its lower stories and massive, iron-scrolled doors guarding the entrance.

"This is the fondaco Ziniani," said Matteo.

"I should call it a palace or a castle," returned Hugh doubtfully, craning his head back to observe the tiers of windows and the tall tower that rose at one corner of the pile.

"You would not be wrong, comrade," laughed Matteo. "'Tis both, and I can promise you a fair lodging. Come, let us ascend. Ralph, do you remain in the ferry. The man will take you around to the garden-gate, where you may leave the horses. All things are comprised in this building, Hugh, even to a grassy garden, where Beosund may crop to his belly's content."

He put his hand in Hugh's arm, and they ran swiftly up the steps. As they approached the door it swung inward, admitting them to a hall of tremendous dimensions, lighted by lamps which hung by bronze chains from the roof and by innumerable torches of resinous wood stuck in bronze holders on the walls. The smoky light made the interior of the building more mysterious, more shadowy, to Hugh's dazed eyes.

He was conscious of a hearty voice which spoke in Italian. It changed to French, and he became aware of a very fat man, dressed in gorgeous velvet, with a heavy gold chain, set with brilliants, around his neck, bowing courteously in the shadows by the door.

"A friend of Messer Matteo," the fat man was saying, "not to speak of a son of the great Sir James de Chesby, is doubly welcome to my poor home. Pray make use of it as you choose whilst you stay in Venice, and you condescend to recognise me, fair sir. All that I have is at your disposal."

"Certes, you are more than kind, Messer Ziniani," answered Hugh.

They had some more conversation, couched in terms of flattering amiability, and then the merchant ushered them to an upper story. Past room after room heaped with Eastern clothes, rugs, spices, incenses, gold, silver- and steel-ware they strode through endless corridors, until at last they reached a suite of apartments opening upon a courtyard. Below in the growing moonlight, Hugh saw a fountain playing silvery-bright against a fretted stone portico.

"Food shall be served to you at once," Messer Ziniani informed them. "Now, I go to see that your horses are well cared for. Have you any further wishes?"

"Only to ask, an you will favour me so greatly, that you send my servant hither," replied Hugh.

Messer Ziniani bowed to the floor and left them.

"Why, this man waits upon us like an inn-keeper," cried Hugh, as soon as the door had closed upon his back. "And he is noble, you say, and by Our Lady, he lives in a castle built like a palace and crammed with riches!"

"So the Venetians do," assented Matteo. "They are proud of their merchantry, and 'tis likewise their pride to put themselves to every trouble for their guests. Doubt not, he will spare no effort of his own hands to make you comfortable."

"A very gentle person," quoth Hugh. "And a most gentle habitation. I would I might dwell here always."

That night they slept upon silken couches, lulled by the lapping waters against the foundations of the fondaco and the faint clanging of church-bells. It was difficult to realise that they were in the midst of a populous city, so silent was all about them.

In the morning Messer Ziniani appeared again, bearing handsome suits of velvet slashed with cendal. Everything was complete, even to soft leather shoes and taffeta caps after the Italian fashion.

"With your favour, fair sirs," he explained, bowing before them, "'tis not the custom to wear mail in Venice. Moreover, there is danger that so heavily weighted you might fall into the water, in which case 'twould be next to impossible for you to be saved. I have brought these garments for your approval."

The comrades were not sorry to be rid of their cumbersome armour, and whilst they attired themselves in the clothes their host's forethought had made available they plied him with questions.

"You go to Constantinople?" he exclaimed. "That is bad. Ordinarily,

there would be no difficulty, but the mustering of shipping for the Crusade has withdrawn so many vessels from the merchant service that sailings are few and at long intervals. You must give me time, Messers. I will cast about and endeavour to learn if any of my friends hath induced the Seignory to permit him to load a galley for Constantinople. Then, too, there is always the chance that the Crusade may not start."

"Not start?" replied Hugh. "Why, how may that be, Messer Ziniani?"

The merchant shrugged his shoulders.

"I tell no State secrets," he answered. "If you attend the Doge's parliament with the Barons at noon to-day in the Square of St. Mark, you will discover more than I know, an all I hear be true."

"What hath happened?" asked Matteo.

"No more than that the Crusaders guaranteed to the Seignory a certain number of knights, squires, foot sergeants and horses to be transported to Outremer. On that guarantee the Seignory proceeded to build and contract for the stipulated number of vessels. Now, the Crusaders find that many of their number are missing, and mayhap they will be unable to pay their debts, and so the Crusade will never start."

Their curiosity spurred by Messer Ziniani's gossip, the comrades left Ralph to attend to the horses and furbish up their armour, and departed in one of the gondolas attached to the fondaco to keep their rendezvous with Villehardouin. Scores of other boats were travelling in the same direction, and it was only by appealing to a police-galley that Matteo was enabled to secure for them a landing at the steps by the Doge's Palace, where thousands of nobles and crusading knights already were gathered.

A space on the Square of St. Mark in front of the Palace had been blocked off by guards, and at one end the throne of the Doge was set up. Around it were clustered the patricians of the Republic, all dressed gaily in parti-coloured silks and satins. Opposite them stood the barons and captains of the host, still clad in their mail, the stalwart figure of the Marshal of Champagne to the fore. It was obvious that the Crusaders were ill at ease. Their faces were overcast with sadness, and they talked together by twos and threes, looking often toward the vacant throne.

Hugh succeeded in attracting the Marshal's attention, and by his orders the comrades were admitted to the Crusaders' ranks.

"By St. Remigius, y'are come in a bad hour," said Villehardouin, as they approached him. "Ill fortune hath welcomed us hither. But by your looks, fair sirs, you have gained a good greeting from the Venetians."

"Even so," assented Hugh. "But what is this ill fortune you speak of, Lord Marshal?"

Villehardouin's face twitched with rage.

"We are betrayed by our friends," he rasped. "Ay, by our brethren whom we trusted. Of the lords and barons who signed the covenant to sail with the host full one-third and more have not appeared, and but last night upon our arrival we had word that the Flanders fleet, under orders from Count Baldwin to join us here, had put in at

Marseilles, with intent to sail thence direct to Outremer. Great store of men and treasure had we embarked on that fleet, and now we are in evil case, indeed. I know not what we may do."

"But, certes, the Venetians will be reasonable," replied Hugh. "This is no ordinary transaction. The service of Our Lord Jesus Himself is at stake. They will cheerfully compound with you, an they learn of your sore troubles."

"Mayhap," answered the Marshal doubtfully. "But the Venetians are men of business, Messer Hugh. Good fighters and right lusty men of their hands, I grant you; but----"

"They care less for Holy Church than any Christian people I know," interrupted Matteo. "Their love centres in their Republic. In so far as their interests ride with the course of the Church they will follow it. But not all the powers of the Holy Apostle of Rome will drive them to take any course they deem to be to their disadvantage."

Villehardouin nodded.

"They have us at their mercy," he said hopelessly. "Alas, that I must say it! Never will I trust knightly word again! Men I have known since first they wore hauberk have deceived me, broken the oaths they swore on holy relics. What more----"

A fanfare of trumpets sounded at the Palace entrance.

"The Doge cometh!" exclaimed Matteo.

Villehardouin broke off abruptly and left them, making his way to his place at the head of the deputation of barons of the host, as an imposing procession emerged upon the Square.

First came the trumpeters and heralds, then the members of the Council of Ten, and after them the most impressive figure Hugh had ever seen. Very tall and gaunt, with a dead-white face and silvery hair, this man gave the appearance of great age, but he walked with the splendid, upright carriage of youth. He wore a long loose robe of black velvet and on his head a peculiar cap resembling a bishop's mitre. His eyes were closed, and he rested one hand lightly on the arm of a page.

"Who is he?" whispered Hugh.

"The Doge," Matteo whispered back, "Henry Dandolo."

"Why are his eyes closed?"

"He is blind. His eyes were seared by the Greeks long ago when he went to Constantinople on an embassy for the Republic. 'Tis said he sees a little, but not much."

"He is very old, is he not?"

"He is one of the oldest men in the world," returned Matteo. "He is ninety-two years old."

"By St. James!" gasped Hugh. "He walks as would you or I!"

With firm, confident steps, Dandolo passed from the Palace entrance to the throne which had been prepared for him. Instinctively, as he was seated, the crowd in the Square of St. Mark pressed closer, and

the guards gave way to the people, so that all might be within earshot of the council which was to be held. Hugh and Matteo were driven forward with the crowd, and when the confusion was adjusted, as the Doge began to speak, found themselves parted from the Crusaders and wedged amongst the inner circle of patricians.

"God's blessing and St. Mark's on all of you, good people," began the Doge in a clear sonorous voice which carried across the Square almost to where the gondoliers squatted by the poles to which their craft were fastened. "You know that we are gathered here to welcome to Venice the lords and barons of the Crusading host who are come to us, in accordance with the agreement made by them with the Republic, to secure their passage to Outremer that they may battle for Christ's Sepulchre. What say you, lords? Do you meet your bargain?"

Villehardouin stepped forth from the ranks of the mailed knights.

"Be it known to you, Lord Doge," he answered, "that we, whom you behold, are come in accordance with our bond, delivered and sealed. But certain of our brethren whose words are less sacred, have chosen to depart for Outremer by other means, and we may not muster the number we fixed upon."

"But you can satisfy us for the sum pledged for your transport?" questioned the Doge coldly.

"Not so, Lord Doge." Villehardouin flushed. "We have taken stock amongst us, and by pledging each his plate and the last penny in his purse we are short 34,000 marks of the 85,000 promised to your people."

Dandolo leaned his chin on his hand, and looked across the sea of heads below him, out over the lagoons toward the Adriatic. He pondered a moment.

"The bargain we made was this," he propounded slowly. "We promised to build transports to carry 4,500 horses and 9,000 squires and ships for 4,500 knights and 20,000 sergeants of foot. You promised us to supply these numbers of passengers, and to pay us for them at the rate of four marks for each horse and two marks for each man, or 85,000 silver marks of Cologne standard. And furthermore we agreed to provide food for nine months for man and horse, and to transport you to the land of Babylon or wherever else you sought to go in Outremer, and for the love of God we agreed further to add to the fleet fifty armed galleys, on condition that so long as we acted in company, of all conquests on land or sea, one-half should go to us."

He paused.

"Lords, we have fulfilled our part of the agreement. The vessels and the stores lie awaiting you. We have builded as never even Venice built ships before. In the Arsenal and out by the Lido are moored the fifty galleys, with 70 store ships, 120 palendars and 240 transports. What say you to this?"

"What can we say?" countered Villehardouin. "Lord Doge, we have done what we may. We lack more than a third of the number of men who agreed to sail with the host. For Christ's gentle sake have pity on us, and do not prevent us from doing our devoir against the Saracens. It would be foul shame an such a well-appointed host were to be held back for want of but 34,000 marks."

A murmur of assent rose from the crowd.

"You say rightly," approved the Doge. "'Twere ill to have the world think Venice close as a Jew money-lender to the letter of her bargains. Now, look you, my lords and barons, I have somewhat to put before you. 'Tis plain you cannot pay more than you have, and it is no fault of yours that you have been betrayed by those you thought your friends. We would not be the means of defrauding you from carrying out your service to God, but we must gain back the money we have expended for naught."

"That is reasonable, Lord Doge," agreed Villehardouin, seeing that some answer was expected.

"We are of the same mind, then," the Doge replied. "Here are our terms: Know, lords of the host, that the King of Hungary has taken from us Zara in Sclavonia on the opposite shore of the Adriatic Sea, which is a fair, strong city. Do you, therefore, tarry on your way to Outremer and lend us your aid to reconquer the city for us, seeing that it is rightfully ours. For this we will remit to you the 34,000 marks."

An outburst of comment by many tongues greeted this proposition. The Crusaders closed around Villehardouin in an animated discussion, some plainly favourably disposed, others rebellious and perturbed. The Venetians swayed back and forth to the accompaniment of a low murmur of excited speculation. But amid all the contentious clamour of debate, the old Doge sat erect on his throne, his sightless eyes staring across the thronged Square as though he dwelt detached in some other world. The calm, impassive face, with its air of high purpose and proud confidence, fascinated Hugh. He was brought back to the present by Matteo's fist in his ribs.

"To your left," hissed the jongleur in his ear. "Over those heads there are some old friends of ours."

Hugh looked and saw Helena Comnena and her father, standing in a group of richly-garbed Venetian nobles. Her long-lashed eyes were raised to his, and she gave him a quizzical smile, half monkery, half recognition.

"I see naught extraordinary in their being here," he answered curtly, "By St. James, I would take oath the one-half of Venice is about us!"

But he could not keep his eyes from wandering back to the dark, stately figure a few ells distant. He was pondering again her farewell to him, when a man stepped from behind the Cæsar and spoke to Helena. Hugh felt a quiver run through him from heel to crown. The new-comer was Mocenigo.

"Quick!" he cried to Matteo. "Do my eyes see true? Is not that Andrea Mocenigo, the Emperor's----"

Matteo compressed his lips in a low whistle.

"'Tis so! By Our Lady, what does he here? The fellow is outlawed. If the Seignory laid hands upon him 'twould go hard against him, I trow."

"No matter for that," returned Hugh fiercely. "I must have speech with him."

And he started to force his way through the close-packed crowd.

"Take care," cautioned Matteo. "You will fright your quarry. He hath cause enough to fear detection. Also, an you start sword-play in St. Mark's Square before the Doge you are like to end in the dungeons of the Republic."

"I care not," snapped Hugh.

And he spoke to the persons about him.

"Your pardon, Messers, I would pass. And you----"

The courteous Venetians strove to make room for him, but their effort created a bulge in the crowd and attracted the notice of Helena. She touched Mocenigo on the shoulder, and the Italian looked up into Hugh's eyes.

Not a muscle quivered in Mocenigo's face, but he began to back away, his gaze still fixed on Hugh, who flung himself forward with a curse, Matteo behind him pacifying many an angry patrician by assurances that his friend pursued a deadly enemy.

They had not passed the last row of curious citizens, however, when Mocenigo reached the landing-steps and leaped into a green gondola, which flashed across the Grand Canal and disappeared down one of the narrow alleys of the city's watery maze. Hugh would have followed, but Matteo restrained him.

"Wait," advised the jongleur. "If Mocenigo is in Venice--and certes, 'tis not I will deny it!--it shall be poor luck an we do not ferret him out: Let us consult with Messer Ziniani. He will have knowledge where such an one might hide, for depend upon it the rascal does not wish his presence to be known. My counsel is that we watch his friends, the Comnenoi, before we do aught else."

"That is good counsel," admitted Hugh. "I was over-heated at spying the man, Matteo. I have a long account to settle with him, and my suspicions are correct. Moreover, I desire to know how fares it with my lady Edith of whom I spoke to you in England."

Matteo gave his friend a shrewd glance, which brought the colour to Hugh's face. But nothing more was said, for the crowd in the Square behind them raised a sudden tumult of cheers.

"What is it? What hath happened?" cried Matteo to the first man who came running toward them.

"The barons of the host have agreed to go to Zara," he shouted back. "I go to carry the word to the Arsenal to make ready the fleet."

CHAPTER XII

THE ISLE OF RABBITS

In the confusion caused by the dispersal of the crowd in the Square it was useless for the comrades to attempt to follow the Comnenoi or to remind Villehardouin of his promise to present them to the Doge. They made the best of a bad bargain and returned to the fondaco Ziniani as rapidly as their gondolier could contrive a passage through the teeming canals.

Messer Ziniani heard their story with interest, not unmixed with amazement.

"Say you Mocenigo was in the Square of St. Mark, and undisguised?" he exclaimed. "Now, there is more to this than appears upon the surface. He is a bold rascal, but this passes boldness. There are families in Venice would risk outlawry, root and branch, could they dirk him; and the Council of Ten do not love to have their decrees of banishment ignored."

"Will you report it?" asked Hugh.

"No, fair sir. 'Tis an ill task mingling in that which doth not concern one. Also, an you take my counsel, you will be slow to make a declaration to the State."

"Messer Ziniani speaks sober sense," interposed Matteo. "Let us, at least, first corroborate our evidence by finding where Mocenigo is hiding."

"There I can give you some assistance," offered Ziniani. "If he was with the Comnenoi, they should be connected with the reasons which bring him hither, and I will wager the Eastern convoy they are stopping with Zachario Pisano. All the Byzantines traffic with him, and of late he hath come into trouble with the Angeloi in Constantinople. That would be why they are here. Ay, so it must be! Depend upon it, Messers, there is some intrigue afoot."

"I would give much to uncover it," said Hugh, his old hatred of Mocenigo welling up strong in his breast.

"Easier said than done, Messer Englishman," retorted Ziniani. "But my aid, such as it is, is at your disposal. You shall have my own cabined gondola for your search; there are few swifter on the canals."

"Why a cabin?" questioned Hugh curiously.

Messer Ziniani smiled.

"It will be necessary for you to watch the fondaco Pisano, and perhaps to follow people. It would never do if you yourselves were to be seen. You will sit in the curtained cabin, and the gondoliers will pilot you whither you will."

He clapped his hands thrice, and to a servant who appeared in the doorway said:

"Bid Beppo and Giacomo bring the cabined gondola to the garden gate!"

The man bowed and disappeared.

"Beppo and Giacomo are trusty fellows," Ziniani continued. "They will serve you diligently, and if you come to a fight they can make play with their oars and knives. But I pray you, fair sirs, be cautious in your conduct."

"We will be careful," Matteo assured him. "To say truth," the jongleur added with a smile at Hugh, "my comrade hath a reason for desiring speech with this rogue before we slit his throat--if slit it we must."

Ziniani wagged his head reprovingly.

"Talk not to me of slitting throats," he said. "I am a peaceable merchant, and such subjects consort not with my degree. Short of that, you may command me in all things."

"Heard you of any shipping for Constantinople?" enquired Hugh.

"No, Messer Englishman, and after the outcome of to-day's counsel in the Square, I doubt if there will be any for some time. All craft will be used for the Crusade, now that the Republic hath an interest of its own in the affair."

The servant returned to say that the gondola was ready, and the comrades took their leave of the hospitable merchant. On their way through the garden, which stretched behind the fondaco, they met Ralph, very lonely and downcast. His face brightened at sight of them.

"I thought you would never be home, Messer Hugh," he cried. "St. Cuthbert be my witness, I have been like to go mad for want of a human being to talk with! These folk understand less than do the horses. An you please, Messer Hugh, do not leave me again."

Hugh looked at Matteo.

"I see no harm in taking him," replied the jongleur to the unspoken question. "But you must rid yourself of that armour, Ralph, and leave behind your bow. We go upon secret business, which wants not the intrusion of weight or the questionable length of your goose-feathered shafts. So be about your preparations, lad, an you are coming with us."

"That will I, gentles!" exclaimed Ralph with glee. "A minute, by your leave, and I shall be garbed to suit."

He set off at a run towards the stables, and Hugh and Matteo proceeded to the gate in the wall, where the gondola awaited them by the landing-steps. The gondoliers lounged beside it. One was enormous, a giant in stature, thick-thewed and massive. The other was almost a dwarf, nearly as broad as he was tall, but with a chest development equal to his companion's.

"Which is Beppo?" asked Matteo.

The dwarf touched his gaudy cap.

"I am Beppo, lord," he replied, "and I steer. Giacomo, here, pulls the fore-oar."

Giacomo ducked in what he intended for a bow, but it seemed more like the toppling of a stricken pine-tree. He said nothing.

"Has your master told you what we require?" questioned Matteo.

"Only that we are to obey your Magnificences' orders."

"Do you like to fight?"

Beppo grinned from ear to ear.

"We always enjoy a good fight, don't we, Giacomo?" he answered.

Giacomo's face was convulsed by what must have been meant for a grin of approbation, and one hand caressed the hilt of the knife stuck in

his sash.

"Well, you are like to get all the fighting you care for," said Matteo. "We have a dangerous venture. Know you the fondaco Pisano?"

"Yes, lord. It is east beyond the Rio di Santa Polo."

"Good. We watch the fondaco Pisano for one who travels in a green gondola. When he appears we follow him wherever he may go. If we can, we will seize him. Is it understood?"

"Perfectly, lord. We are used to all kinds of work, are we not, Giacomo?"

Giacomo bowed and wrinkled up his face, both at the same time, with frightful effect.

"I see you are dependable varlets," remarked Matteo. "You shall not lose by good service."

"Trust us, Magnificence," returned Beppo composedly. "Do we start now?"

"Anon. We must wait--Ah, here he comes."

Ralph ran through the gate, and halted on the landing, somewhat ill at ease in a flat cap and dark cloak such as were worn by the servants of the fondaco.

"Will this do, Messer Hugh?" he panted.

Hugh laughed.

"Well enough," he approved. "What say you, Matteo?"

"By Our Lady, he looks the part better than do we," protested the jongleur. "But in with you, Ralph. It draws toward evening, and we must survey our ground before the light fails."

The comrades settled themselves in the cabin, and the gondola sped over the canals, propelled by the strong arms of the boatmen. It was still sunlight when Beppo parted the aft curtains.

"The fondaco Pisano is ahead, lords," he announced.

Hugh and Matteo peered through the curtains at a gloomy structure, windowless on the ground level and barred at every opening above, which was almost identical in architecture with the fondaco Ziniani--or, for that matter, with scores of houses in Venice.

"Hist, lords," came Beppo's voice behind them, sibilantly imperative. "Lie close. Bide but a moment. So!"

The gondola shot past the fondaco Pisano, and then, in obedience to the pressure of the stern oar, swung to the left and glided into the mouth of a shadow-filled canal which slit a mass of buildings opposite. It came to rest against the dripping, mossy wall of the house on the right of the opening.

"Now, lords, you may study Messer Pisano as you will," chuckled Beppo. "Few come hither, and such as pass will be none the wiser of our purpose."

The comrades applauded his device. But for more than an hour they watched without result. Not a sign of life was visible in the fondaco Pisano. Two gondolas were moored to the landing-steps, but neither was green. No porters or servants gossiped before the broad, brass-bound door. The windows were tenantless.

The sun dropped lower, and Hugh grew discouraged. Soon it would be too dark to see. But in the very moment when he was prepared to give up hope the green gondola came into view on the main canal, and veered across to the landing-steps. Mocenigo sprang out, and ran lightly up the steps to the great door, which opened as he neared it.

"Note, Hugh, his gondolier bides without," said Matteo.

The twilight deepened, turned to dusk. The gondolas that passed now carried flaming torches or cressets to guide them.

"Can you see, lords?" questioned Beppo in a husky whisper.

"Sufficiently," answered Matteo. "What is that?"

A flare of light illumined the portico of the building they were Batching.

"They have opened the door," breathed Hugh.

Torches wove a whimsical pattern on the steps; shadows criss-crossed in a grotesque dance macabre; voices faintly called. As through a veil, the comrades glimpsed several figures that descended to where the gondolas lay.

The lights dimmed and the form of a gondola--without a guiding torch--floated away from the steps of the fondaco. It stole by them, ghost-like, leaving hardly a ripple in its wake. When it had almost vanished Beppo and Giacomo backed their craft out upon the main canal, and bent to the oars in swift pursuit. Keen-eyed and vigilant, when the quarry slowed, they slowed. When it sped forward, they put all their energy into the work.

The chase took them through the network of canals in the city proper and out past the Punta della Salute and the Dogana del Mare, then southeast across the Canal della Giudecca and between La Giudecca and San Giorgio Maggiore. The lagoons stretched before them and tiny wavelets slapped against their bow; behind, the lights of Venice gleamed very softly against the purple sky.

Here on the open water they could see much farther than in the huddled canals, and as the gondola ahead turned to the southward, Beppo clucked with his lips.

"Now I know where they are going!" he exclaimed.

"Where?" asked Hugh eagerly.

"They are bound for the Isle of Rabbits, which is the other side of Malamocco, Magnificence. It is a sandbank where the smugglers and pirates meet for trade with the fishermen, when the Lords of the Night are not too vigilant. A bad place, and one where a law-keeping man may come by much harm."

"Are you afraid to go there?"

Beppo chuckled.

"Afraid? Giacomo, the foreign lord asks if we are afraid to go to the Isle of Rabbits."

A grim noise which might have been laughter grated from the unseen bow of the gondola.

"You hear?" said Beppo. "Giacomo says with me, lords, that he will ask nothing better than a fight on the Isle of Rabbits this night."

"You may be assured of your desire," retorted Matteo. "But shall we not be visible to our enemies out here on the expanse of the lagoons?"

"Not so, lord. We will drop behind and approach the Isle from the west. They will expect nobody from that quarter."

Presently, the blurr that was the green gondola disappeared altogether, swallowed in the darkness, and the comrades were alone. It was a calm night, and the water was scarcely ruffled. Once they passed a group of shipping, lying at anchor with riding-lights showing. After that they saw nothing until a long, ragged shadow loomed across their course.

"The Isle of Rabbits," whispered Beppo to the jongleur, who crouched beside him on the raised deck aft.

They approached slowly, never a sound as the gondoliers dipped their sweeps. A belt of reeds fringed the shore, and the gondola slid through these with a gentle hiss.

"So," said Beppo, as the bow ran up on the sand. "We have done our part, lords. We have brought you hither. Now do you give us that fight you spoke of."

"Fear not," answered Matteo. "You shall have your belly-full. But we are not yet at our journey's end."

"Ay, lord. We know the way, Giacomo and I. Follow me."

He led them into a depression between the dunes, where a faint path was trodden in the dank growth of beach-grass.. Winding and twisting amongst the miniature sand mountains, this path debouched at last upon a central hollow, in which the comrades descried vaguely a crude structure which seemed to lean against the shoulder of an overhanging dune. Dim rays of light shone through chinks in the boarded walls.

They stole forward, bared blades ready to meet attack, until they were just outside the ill-fitting door, with the murmur of voices distinct in their ears. There were no windows in the hut, but the gaping cracks afforded excellent opportunities for studying the interior.

Hugh peered in with bated breath. Immediately in front stood Mocenigo, a brace of villainous-looking bravos at his back. On the opposite side of a rough table sat three other men clad in the loose, flowing garments and white turbans of the East. By their fierce, black-bearded faces and jewelled scimiter hilts Hugh knew them for Saracens of high degree, Emirs of one or another of the Sultans who ruled the disjointed Moslem world.

He had no time to consider the mystery of their presence, for the leader of the three was speaking in the lingua franca.

"But we must have certain knowledge of this, Messer Mocenigo. Our lord the Sultan will not put up with rumours."

"And I do not bring you rumours, Sead Eddin," answered Mocenigo. "The Crusade will not sail for Babylon this year--or next."

"It sails first for Zara," replied Sead Eddin. "That much all men know. But after Zara?"

"It will not sail for any port in the Holy Land."

Matteo nudged Hugh and both strained forward.

"Allah!" exclaimed the Saracen impatiently. "A straight answer to a straight question! Can a Christian never tell the truth?"

"I have told you the truth, my head on it," returned Mocenigo. "More I cannot tell."

Sead Eddin shrugged his shoulders and from the folds of his robe produced a weighty bag which he clinked suggestively on the table.

"Malek-Adel pays well for what he needs," he said sternly. "But he pays nought for service which is grudging and incomplete."

"What he asked for I have told you," protested Mocenigo. "Be content with that. I cannot----"

"You cannot serve other masters before my master--and yours."

Mocenigo hesitated. The Moslem returned the bag to its hiding-place.

"Be it so," he commented. "We will seek elsewhere. There is always a Christian who will sell his soul for gold."

By the flickering torch-light in the hut Hugh could see the Italian's face torn by conflicting emotions. Reluctance, hate, fear, desperation, pride and greed struggled one with the other to the end ordained by human weakness.

"Give me the gold," said Mocenigo, and he reached out his hand.

"You will tell?"

"Yes."

Sead Eddin drew forth the bag once more and dropped it on the table so that it sent a mellow clang, like the chiming of mass-bells, through the hut. Whatever reluctance persisted in Mocenigo's mind was banished by that sound.

"The Crusade will sail against Constantinople," he said.

"By the Prophet's Beard!" exclaimed the Saracen. "How know you this?"

"It matters not, save that I do know it," replied Mocenigo shortly.

"In sober truth doth Allah watch over his own! When Christian might becomes too great for the Faithful to resist, he sets them to fighting against each other. God is great!"

"Is great! Is great!" echoed his companions.

There was a moment's silence broken only by the clinking of the gold as the Italian thrust the bag into his jupon.

"You are sure of this?" demanded the Moslem with sudden ferocity.

"Would I dare to lie to Malek-Adel?" returned Mocenigo. "How long would I last after he discovered it?"

"Perchance long enough to order your shroud. But what madness hath possessed the Frank that----"

There was a crash as Ralph, wearied of standing in one position, tripped over a tussock of grass and fell against the hut wall. The men inside leaped to their feet with a flash of steel. But before they could recover from their surprise Matteo had flung wide the door.

"In upon them," he cried. "Christ and the Sepulchre!"

"A Chesby! A Chesby!" shouted Hugh.

He caught a brief glimpse of Mocenigo. Then the torches went out in a shower of sparks, and the darkness was filled with the clash of swordplay.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE POWER OF THE DOGE

Hugh fought his way forward in the confusion until he encountered a blade which pressed him back with supple cunning. It curled serpent-wise about his sword, hissing venomously as it menaced head and throat and loins. Almost he fancied he could see its flashing circles, and he divined that his opponent must be one of the Saracen Emirs, skilled in the Eastern tricks of fencing with the curved-bladed scimiter. The sweat beaded his forehead, his breath came short, for his heavy weapon was ill-adapted for such work.

Then, when the darkness danced before his eyes and a dizziness came over him, he felt a squat figure that brushed between his outspread legs and the terrible sword fell away.

"So, lord," rasped Beppo's voice. "One Paynim dog the less."

All around him Hugh heard the gasping breaths of struggling men, prayers, curses, threats, the whirr of flailing blades. It was impossible to distinguish friend from foe.

"Mocenigo!" he cried. "Mocenigo! Stand forth and meet me!"

A mocking laugh was his answer.

"It may not be, good youth, it may not be!"

"Coward!" taunted Hugh.

Again the mocking laughter.

"Too late, boy."

The words came hollow as from a vault, and Hugh hurled himself in the

direction of the voice; but at the first step he ran against the table which barred the hut midway from the entrance. A red mist of anger enveloped him. He hacked and slashed and hewed at the empty air. It was Matteo's voice which brought him back to sanity.

"They have gone," panted the jongleur.

"Whither?" shouted Hugh. "They could not have passed us. A light, make a light!"

"Here, lord," exclaimed Beppo, and the gondolier struck flint and steel above a pitch-pine torch.

The wood flared smokily, revealing the shattered interior of the hut, a single white-robed figure sprawling in a pool of blood where Beppo's knife had dropped him. In the end wall, which backed against the overhanging dune, a door gaped open.

"After them," commanded Hugh, and he started to lead the way.

But Beppo caught his sleeve.

"With permission, Magnificence," said the gondolier. "That is no more than a passage through the sand which comes out by the water. They will be in their gondolas by now."

"Then in St. Cuthbert's name, let us follow as quick as we may."

The comrades ran from the hut along the path they had come by betwixt the dunes. They had reached the edge of the reeds before the gondoliers overtook them, puffing heavily.

"It is right to hurry, lords," remarked Beppo, as he and Giacomo shoved off. "But we should not miss the favours God sends us. The Paynim had a full purse."

"It is yours," said Matteo. "You are good varlets. Now, do you come up with our foes, and there will be yet more gold in your pockets."

"We will, St. Mark helping us," returned Beppo.

They swept forth from the shadow cast by the Isle of Rabbits, and emerged upon the surface of the lagoons, faintly lit by the starshine from the lowering purple sky. The comrades strained their eyes in every direction, but it was Giacomo who first saw the quarry. He pointed to the eastward with a grunt.

Barely discernible in the darkness, two dots were speeding over the water. One, at right angles to their course, made in the direction of the open sea. The other, slightly in advance, was heading towards Venice.

"'Tis they," said Beppo. "See, lords. The Saracens are bound out from the lagoons. No doubt they have a galley lying in wait for them. The others would return to the fondaco Pisano."

"Can you catch up with them?" asked Matteo.

"Do but watch us, Magnificence."

The gondola seemed almost to fly, as Beppo and Giacomo bent their backs to the oars and the ripples purred under the cleaving bow. But for some minutes, despite this pace, the green gondola held its own.

Mocenigo's crew were seasoned oarsmen, and they rowed like demons. Yet desperate though they were, they could not hope to match strength with the redoubtable pair who pursued them.

A half hour went by, and the green gondola's lead was reduced to a matter of yards. The comrades could see Mocenigo and his bravos standing on the deck with swords drawn. But the lights of Venice gleamed very close, barred at intervals by the dark mouths of the canals, and once in that network of tangled waterways the task of the pursuers would be redoubled.

"Up with them," cried Matteo. "A Byzant apiece to you, lads."

"Trust us, lord," gasped Beppo.

The gap was spanned as he spoke and their bow overlapped the green gondola's stern.

"Close in, close in," ordered Hugh.

The green gondola made shift to sheer off, but the attempt was hopeless; and in self-defence, Mocenigo's gondoliers were forced to withstand the attack of Beppo and Giacomo. The crack of meeting oars resounded with the clash of swords. Gunwale to gunwale the two craft lay, bobbing at every shock, and it required a clear head and a nimble foot to keep one's balance. But no thought of danger was in Hugh's mind when his blade crossed Mocenigo's.

"At last," he exulted. "I have seen more of your back than your face, Messer Assassin."

"It may be we will amend that, Messer Hugh," rejoined the Italian, fencing cautiously.

"It seems you fear me."

"Not so, good youth. But you have a way of being inconvenient--for a lad unspurred."

"Ay, 'twas you warned me of the dangers of Outremer," retorted Hugh. "Does it surprise you to find me alive?"

Mocenigo laughed grimly.

"Be not too sure of life. My arm is long."

"And mine!"

Mocenigo slipped to the deck to avoid a swinging cut, and Hugh gathered himself to leap the green gondola's rail. One of Mocenigo's bravos was down, and the sole remaining one had all he could do to resist Matteo and Ralph. The gondoliers were waging an independent battle. But in the very moment of victory a hail rang out of the darkness.

"In the name of the Republic!"

And a lean, twelve-oared galley ranged alongside the comrades' gondola.

"In the name of the Republic!" the hail was repeated. "Put down your arms."

"The Lords of the Night!" cried Beppo.

"The Lords of the Night!" was the echo from the green gondola.

Mocenigo sprang to his feet at the cry.

"To your sweeps, knaves," he shouted. "Be swift, and you would escape."

His gondoliers already were thrusting out their oars, and their craft gained headway rapidly. Mocenigo waved his sword to Hugh as the shadows closed round it.

"May the Panagia guard you against the hour I give you the end I have in mind," he called.

Hugh turned in baffled rage to Matteo.

"What fools are these who aid the foes of Venice?" he exclaimed. "Bid them pursue before it is too late."

"They are the police," said Matteo. "The Lords of the Night, who have jurisdiction over Venice from sunset to dawn. I know not what it means, Hugh, but be calm. Here comes one who will answer us."

An officer, handsomely garbed in black velvet slashed with vermeil samite, climbed from the stern of the galley to the deck of the gondola beside them.

"Your names, Messers?" he demanded sternly.

"This is Messer Hugh de Chesby, an English lord, and I am Matteo of Antioch, a jongleur," answered Matteo. "We are in Venice seeking shipping for Outremer. But your business is not with us, noble sir. In that gondola which flees toward La Giudecca is one Messer Mocenigo, who is outlawed from Venice and a spy of the Saracens."

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"Say you so? Well, Messer, he cannot escape for long, an the Republic chooses to spread her nets for him. But you are caught red-handed in the act of disobeying the laws of the Grand Council against broiling in the city. You must go with me to the Palace for trial."

Matteo affected to be unconcerned.

"Have it your own way, Magnificence," he returned. "We have just overheard this Mocenigo plotting with three Saracen envoys on the Isle of Rabbits. The matter touches narrowly the honour of the Republic. If you will not pursue him, the least we demand is that we be taken straight to the Doge to tell the facts to His Highness in person."

The officer was impressed.

"To the Palace you shall go," he said. "And if his Highness the Doge cares to investigate your story doubt not that you will be arraigned before him."

Matteo saw that no more was to be gained and he bowed assent.

"We are at your disposal, Messer," he said. "Do you wish our swords?"

"No, you may keep them, an you give your words to make no effort to escape."

"We do."

"That is well. Now, Messers, do you and your servants come aboard my galley. We will tow your gondola to the Palace of St. Mark."

It was nearly midnight when the police galley rounded to the landing-steps on the Square of St. Mark, and the comrades, with Beppo and Giacomo--now vastly sobered and no little troubled--were led into the vestibule of the Doge's Palace. There seats were given to them, and they waited for what seemed a long time, until a Chamberlain brought word that the Doge would see them. Even at that hour Dandolo was still engaged in official business. As the two comrades went up the stairs to the audience chamber, they passed a group of chief artisans of the Arsenal, who had been receiving instructions for the work remaining to be done to make ready the armament for the Crusade.

The ruler of Venice sat in a high-backed chair--almost a throne--behind a wide table heaped with parchments, books, maps, writing materials, models of vessels and samples of weapons and armour. He was fingering a miniature petrary when they entered. Half a dozen secretaries, shaven clerics for the most part, bustled around him.

"You must increase the length of the casting arm," he directed a bearded artisan, who stood on the opposite side of the table from him. "I will have it throw the missile as far as a land machine. If the weight must be reduced to fit it on the forecastle of the galleys, then you must save on other parts."

"But, your Highness, if we lighten the other parts it will not rest solid on the deck," objected the artisan.

"Fool!" snapped the Doge. "Bolt it to the deck with iron nails. Do not come to me again until you have succeeded."

The artisan retired, and Dandolo swept the room with his strange, wellnigh sightless eyes.

"Who else?" he asked sharply.

There was no trace of fatigue in his voice, no stoop in his thin shoulders. He carried his ninety-two years as though he had been a man of forty.

"Your Highness," said the police officer, stepping forward, "these are the prisoners, foreigners, who have demanded to be brought before you."

"Crusaders?" expostulated Dandolo. "All such are to be brought before their own chiefs on St. Nicolo. So it has been arranged. You know that."

"But these are not Crusaders, your Highness. They say they have information for the Republic."

"Humph! What are they?"

"They are an English lord and a jongleur of Antioch, with three servants, who were found fighting with a gondola which escaped on the

lagoons."

"Yes," broke in Matteo, "and that gondola which escaped contained an enemy of the Republic, an outlaw of Venice, who was trafficking with the Saracens."

The Doge turned quickly toward the jongleur.

"You speak boldly, Messer," he said. "Who was this man?"

"His name is Mocenigo, and he is in the employ of the Greek Emperor."

"So?" Dandolo's dead-white face was emotionless. "Yes, it comes to our memory that Mocenigo was outlawed for debauchery. But what is that to you, Messer? Are you a relative of a family he has aggrieved?"

"No."

"Then could you not have left justice to the duly authorised officers of the Republic?"

"Yes, your Highness. Ordinary justice. But this man is more than outlaw."

"What then?"

"I have said it. He trafficks with the Saracens. We pursued him, without his knowledge, to the Isle of Rabbits, where he met three Emirs, who landed from a galley which lay outside the lagoons. They came to ask him of the Crusade and where it was going, and----"

"Stay," said Dandolo.

He beckoned to his secretaries.

"Clear the room. I wish nobody to remain except these strangers. The guards may wait without."

Dandolo sat silent, his chin cupped in one hand, his eyes staring in front of him in the uncanny direct way which was one of his traits, until the fluttering of robes and the pattering of feet had ended with the shutting of the door.

"Draw nearer," he ordered abruptly. "Both of you. Stand by my side here."

He directed them to a position close to his chair.

"Who are you who have talked thus far?" he asked, peering at them out of eyes which were clouded by a slight film.

"I am called Matteo of Antioch, a jongleur."

The Doge leaned forward and studied his face.

"And you?"

He turned to Hugh.

"Hugh de Chesby, lord of Chesby in England."

"Chesby? That is a name passing well-known in Outremer."

"Sir James de Chesby is my father," answered Hugh steadily.

The Doge's dim old eyes examined his features at close range.

"Both honest faces," was the verdict. "I give frequent thanks to Our Lord Jesus Christ that my sight still serves me on occasion. Well, and what say you, Messer Matteo? These Saracens asked the man Mocenigo of the Crusade?"

"Ay, your Highness. And he told them it would not sail for Babylon or any port in Paynimry."

"This year?" amended the Doge.

"Nay, any year," he said.

"Said he so?" Dandolo murmured. "And then?"

"He said it would sail against Constantinople."

The Doge's gaunt frame snapped upright in his chair, and a light seemed to flash from his face.

"Why did you conceive it necessary to tell me this?"

"Because it seemed to me, your Highness, that it touched the honour of the Republic--ay, of all Christendom."

"You have repeated it to no one else?"

"No."

"You have said nothing of your suspicions to the leaders of the host?"

"Fair sir, we had no suspicions before to-night."

Dandolo drummed on the arm of his chair and stared over the comrades' heads.

"Look you, Messers," he said suddenly. "You have been taken by the officers of the Republic in the violation of her laws. You are strangers here, and none will take interest in your fate--nay, none will know of it. A word from me, and you will disappear."

Hugh frowned in anger at this speech, but Matteo motioned to him to hold his temper.

"What you have said is sufficiently clear, Lord Doge," replied the jongleur placidly. "But I have yet to hear that justice is departed from Venice."

"And I propose to give you justice," retorted Dandolo. "'Tis because you are both plainly honourable and well-intentioned in your blunderings."

"Blunderings, sire? Where have we blundered?"

"You have blundered into that which doth not concern you, into matters of great import. But you gained the knowledge through no fault of your own, and so I would help you to escape the consequences."

"You speak to us in riddles, your Highness," said Hugh impatiently. "In God's name, tell us what you mean! We fear naught! We have no sin upon our souls!"

Not a line quivered in Dandolo's imperturbable face.

"Right knightly spoken!" he approved. "I see that you are men of spirit as well as honour. That is well, for we need such. Messers, all unwittingly you have stumbled upon the most valuable secret in the world. Your possession of it is dangerous to myself and to other people. Therefore I give you the choice of pledging me your word by the Body of Christ that you will speak naught of it to others and that you will agree to accompany the Crusade until I release you from your promise, or--the dungeons of St. Mark. Choose!"

Matteo and Hugh exchanged glances.

"That is really no choice, fair sir," said Hugh. "As it happens, I go upon a private quest to Outremer, and my affairs take me first to Constantinople."

"So much the better for you," returned the Doge. "Do you give your word?"

"Ay, fair sir."

"And for your servants?"

"For them, too."

"I rejoice, Messers. Think not that I have been unjust to you. You shall share in an exploit that will be remembered through the ages, and sung of, Messer Jongleur, wherever brave men love brave songs."

Dandolo's voice clanged like a trumpet and a fire of enthusiasm burned lambently over his waxen features.

"Then it is true what Mocenigo said?" asked Hugh.

"Ay, true, Messer Englishman. Mocenigo was permitted to come to Venice in secret to make certain arrangements for us. He is a spy in our interest in Constantinople. He gave the information you overheard to-night to the envoys of the Sultan of Babylon, in order that the property of Christians in Paynimry might be assured safety against measures of vengeance such as the Saracens take when Crusades are dispatched to their shores. I like not to use such dogs as he, but in affairs of state we accept the tools God gives us. 'Twas no more than to be expected that he should sell additional information together with that which he was charged to impart."

"But, Lord Doge," exclaimed Hugh, "what will Holy Church, what will the Apostle of Rome say to the employment of a Crusade against another Christian country?"

Once more the light of enthusiasm flamed in Dandolo's face.

"What will they say? God knows, young Englishman! He who plans for the future must always face the slurs of the blind who cannot see ahead. But I see, and I am not afraid to venture. Byzantium! What is she to-day? An empty mockery, a worn-out husk, a figment of pomp and blazonry! Her Emperors win the throne by assassination, mutilation, parricide and fratricide. Yet she purports to rule the world!

"I tell you, Messers, we will take her, and on the ruins of her ancient might we will erect a state which will be able to beat back the Saracens and carry Christian arms and commerce to the farthest ends of the earth. What use is any Crusade which chops out a little block of Paynimry, and then collapses for want of support? It is impossible to wage such wars from over-seas. But from Constantinople it will be a different task. With those giant walls to protect us, we will build up anew the Empire of the East, reconquer the provinces of Asia, win back the Holy Land.

"What if the Pope of Rome derides us? What if he excommunicates us? Long after he is dead men will remember us and bless us for our work. The Pope! Bah! He hath not even the address to see to it that these poor, misguided Crusaders receive the funds the holy friars have ransacked Europe for! He and Holy Church have lost the right to dictate the conduct of the Crusade. They should have provided for the welfare of their charges, materially as well as spiritually. But they did not, and so, Messers, this Crusade will fight for something better than relics and holy places. It will fight for the good of mankind!"

The Doge tossed up his arms in a gesture of defiance, and exhausted by the vehemence of his passion, sank down in his chair. The comrades stood silent and ill at ease. They knew not what to say. They were abashed, stupefied. They realised something in this man which was extraordinary, incalculable, a driving force of unearthly energy.

Presently, Dandolo brushed his hand before his face as if to wipe away a veil which hindered him.

"Now you know all there is to know," he said kindly. "Remember your promise, and if I can help you in aught, be sure to come to me. I like not to threaten, but bear my words in mind."

As the comrades were seating themselves in their gondola again, after passing out from the Palace, Ralph heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"I do not mind saying, Messer Hugh, that I was never more frightened in my life than when we came before that terrible old man in there," he said. "It made me think that if only you had let me bring my bow with me to-night, I might have shot this Mocenigo and all his crew and the police would not have captured us."

"And we would not have been taken to the Palace," added Matteo. "True, Ralph, but I am not sure that I regret it. What say you, Hugh?"

"Regret it? I would not have had it happen otherwise for many gold pieces!" returned Hugh. "Do you remember what Messer Fulke, the priest, told us, Matteo?"

"Ay," said Matteo. "And Crusaders--of sorts--we become."

CHAPTER XIV

THE BARGAIN OF THE HOST

Never since the infant days of the Republic had Venice floated such

an armada as that which put out from the Lido in the octave of the Feast of St. Remigius. More than 85,000 warriors and mariners manned the gigantic fleet of 50 galleys, 70 store-ships, 120 palendars and 240 transports. From the foremost galley floated the standard of St. Mark, and beneath its folds stood Dandolo himself, High Admiral of the Venture. The rails of each galley and transport were lined with the shields of the goodliest knights in Europe, whilst thousands of tall warhorses were housed in the roomy palendars built for the purpose by clever Venetian shipwrights. On board the store-ships were also 800 mangonels, petraries, cats, arbalests and other engines of war.

To Hugh, standing with Matteo and Ralph on the poop of the galley _Paradise_, it seemed as if the lagoons were floored with ships. The hue and sheen of their sails dazzled the eye from the remotest distance. The clang of cymbals, the screaming of trumpets, the clamour of nakirs, the rattle of drums, came from far and near. In the stern-castles the priests celebrated mass, and tinkling bells gave warning of the elevation of the Sacrament. The shouting of war-songs, the intoning of psalms and prayers, the neighing of chargers, the creak of cordage, the rattle of oars,--these were but a few of the sounds that blended together in the wildest confusion.

"St. Cuthbert be my witness!" protested Hugh. "Never thought I to see the like! Can all these vessels be the property of the Venetians?"

"Ay, these and more," answered Matteo.

"It passeth comprehension. Truly, this Dandolo is a wonderful man! To have raised the host--that was a feat worth mentioning, and I say naught to decry the Marshal of Champagne. But to have brought together all these vessels, to have equipped them, ordered their crews and engaged them to work in common--that is close to black magic!"

"Dandolo hath a great stake to play for," returned Matteo.

Hugh looked quickly behind him.

"Hast noted the rumours these past weeks?" he asked.

"Who has not? Be sure, Hugh, a man may not plot to upset the world and no word of it reach mankind."

"I would not have the Doge suspect us of broken faith," said Hugh musingly. "If for no other reason than that it means our heads."

"This talk that hath sprung up is not from any one source," objected Matteo. "It is universal. It permeates all ranks of the host. Lords and knights, sergeants and varlets, all say that they will never reach Jerusalem."

"Ay, Dandolo failed to reckon with the priests. It may be there he erred lamentably. The shaven-heads have great power over simple men."

"Power, belike!" rejoined Matteo scornfully. "Mayhap. But your shaven-head is human, even as you and I, Hugh, and there be a-many shaven-heads will cry 'Out! Harrow!' for such an understanding, with thought of fat abbacies, bishoprics and even cardinal's caps in mind."

Hugh would have answered him, but at that moment the great galley _Pilgrim_, flying the gonfalon of St. Mark, swept by, her oars

beating the sea to foam, and all eyes were riveted upon the splendid pageant on her decks. The fore-castle was a mass of gleaming armour and waving pennons. The waist was thick with foot-sergeants and Venetian bowmen. On the stern-castle Dandolo stood, austere in his long black robe and mitred cap, a flaming group of nobles around him. But what held Hugh's attention was not this lordly picture. It was the dark, passionate face of Helena Comnena, standing by her father close under the bracket of the stern-lantern.

She saw Hugh as the vessels passed. A slow smile parted her lips, and she waved him a satirical greeting. Why, he did not know, but every nerve tingled, as he doffed his cap in acknowledgment.

"A fair sight, Messers," said Villehardouin's voice at his elbow. "It bodes well for a prosperous voyage."

The bluff features of the Marshal of Champagne belied his words, for they were worn and harassed by the worries which had multiplied since the host arrived at Venice.

"Well said, Lord Marshal," replied Matteo. "But whither do we voyage? There is open debate on all sides."

Villehardouin shook his head.

"Of that I may not speak," he said simply. "Nay, what use? 'Tis in my mind you have more knowledge than you admit. Else why do you sail with us, when first you would have none of our venture?"

"Knowledge or no, Messer, we will stand by you, and you come to want friends," answered Hugh, with ready sympathy. "If the talk we hear be true, there will be divided counsels ere the fleet sails from Zara."

"God grant you may be wrong!" Villehardouin spoke with genuine emotion. "I call all to witness I have laboured, head and hand, as hath no other lord of the host; and if all comes to naught at the end, then do I hold myself absolved from responsibility, and I will fare on alone, if need be, and do my devoir in the Holy Land as Heaven wills it. The burden grows over-heavy, and I could wish my Lord Boniface would come to take it from my shoulders."

"An honest man," said Hugh, as he walked away.

"Ay, but he nor any of them is the match of Dandolo," returned Matteo. "That man is power incarnate. By Our Lady of Tortosa, what a king he would make--or, perchance, a Master of the Templars! Ninety-two, Hugh, and in the prime of his years!"

Whilst the comrades watched from the poop of the _Paradise_, the domes and towers of Venice faded against the western sky. Only the low marshes of the coast remained to show the host that land existed. But the weather was calm and gentle, and the fleet made good progress, sailing on from day to day and skirting the shoreline of the Adriatic, until St. Martin's Eve brought the leading vessels in sight of the crowded battlements of Zara.

And now the sedition that had spread through the host first raised its head in open rebellion. The people of Zara were panic-stricken at sight of the force that had come against them, and sent envoys to arrange terms of surrender before the leaders' tents had been pitched. But the Abbot of Vaux, a monk of the order of the Cistercians, and the Lord Robert of Boves, with other priests and

knights, met the envoys at the outskirts of the camp and said:

"Messers, why do you surrender your city? The Crusaders will not attack you. They dare not. The Holy Apostle of Rome has forbidden it. All you have to fear are the Venetians."

When these words came to the ear of the Doge he was white-lipped with rage. He sent hastily through the camp and summoned to a parliament all the principal barons of the host. There were many who sided secretly with the Abbot of Vaux, but of these most were afraid to speak out. Only the Abbot stood his ground and said sturdily:

"Lords, I forbid you to attack this city. The Holy Apostle of Rome gives me my authority, and if you disobey you will risk the terrors of the excommunicate. For these people in Zara are Christians, and you, too, are Christians, pledged to wage war against the Paynims."

Dandolo stood forward, tall and menacing.

"Signers," he cried hotly, "what manner of talk is this? The people of Zara were ready to yield themselves to the authority from which they had rebelled, and that without bloodshed. And now these mischief-makers have taken it upon themselves to stimulate anew the fray. I say that every drop of blood that is shed shall be upon the souls of those who bred rebellion. You, lords of the host, have covenanted to aid me in taking the city, and I call upon you to fulfil your words."

As it happened, many of the barons who opposed the diversion of the Crusade against the fiat of the Church, felt that those who had encouraged the citizens to resist had done wrong. And for this reason there was little opposition to Dandolo's plea. To staunch upholders of the feudal system, there was, after all, nothing very heinous in the assertion by a great feudal lord of his dominion over a feudatory--and this was precisely what Dandolo was doing.

The sentiment of the majority was expressed by Count Baldwin of Flanders, a tall, blonde young prince, who was, after Boniface of Montferrat, the most powerful leader in the host.

"We wot well that you mean only that which is good and worthy by what you have said, Holy Abbot," he declared. "But we have made a bargain to help the Venetians, so that they may help us to go to the aid of Christ's Sepulchre. That is all. If the host accomplishes its purpose, what matter is it that we subdue a city that has rebelled against its rightful lord?"

"Ay, if ye go in sooth to the Holy Land!" flashed the Abbot. "Think well of what ye do, fair sirs! Satan's hands are reaching out to cling to the heels of those of ye who do his bidding."

"What is this that ye say now?" exclaimed Count Baldwin. "If we go, in sooth, to the Holy Land! Know, Holy Sir, that everything we do is aimed to the one end: the greater glory of Christ and the fuller recovery of His country."

The matter ended there in the defeat of the opposition, and the siege was begun. As a military operation it served mainly to train the green men-at-arms. Within five days the hail of stones cast by the engines and the threat of assault by land and sea reduced the inhabitants of Zara to despair. They surrendered on condition that their lives and homes be spared. In return the town was to shelter the Crusaders during the approaching winter, the immanence of which

forbade the departure of the expedition on the next stage of the long voyage to Outremer.

To Hugh and Matteo these were dull days, although Ralph covered himself with glory by his feats with the longbow in clearing the walls. Afterwards they settled down to the routine of winter quarters, broken occasionally by tumultuous riots between the Venetian seamen and the Frankish soldiers. For the rest, they rode and hunted in the neighbouring country and practised at arms. In the evenings they joined some body of knights around a fire, and shared in the mirth as the wine-cups went from hand to hand and Matteo strummed his gittern whilst he narrated romaunts and gests--or perhaps some other jongleur bore the burden of entertainment.

It was a care-free life and pleasant, such as was found at any popular court save for the scarcity of high-born ladies. Helena Comnena had few rivals and the younger knights made much of her. Many a lance was broken over her favours in the improvised lists which were erected under the city walls. For Hugh she had ever a mocking smile or gibe, but little else--never a word of the confidences she had been wont to bring to him. Once only, as he rode in the fields, with a falcon he had borrowed from a Flemish knight, he heard the thud of galloping hoofs behind him, and Helena drew rein at his side.

"You thought you would never see me again," she challenged him. "But I knew better."

"How so, Lady?" he asked, surprised.

"I know many things," she returned evasively. "For one thing, I know why you come to be here at Zara--and mayhap, too, I know why Constantinople lures you so."

Hugh flushed.

"There is but one object leads me to Constantinople, and that----"

"I know that, too," she interrupted impatiently. "Others know, also. Give heed, Lord Hugh, for you have enemies--more than you wot of."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because you are a youth and innocent and because--because I wish to."

"I thank you," said Hugh gravely.

He was at a loss for words, as always with her. She, for a wonder, was silent likewise, and they rode so for the space of the sun's crossing the roadside tree-tops.

"You have been very kind to me," he said at last to break the silence.

"Doubt not I have an object in view," she replied cynically.

"What?"

"Think not I will tell you. I am a Greek, Lord Hugh, and Greeks have keener wits than you Northern people."

She laughed abruptly.

"Remember I have told you to beware of enemies," she went on,

gathering up her reins. "Any one may be an enemy--even I. Keep silent."

She was gone like a flash, flogging her horse unmercifully.

It was three days after this that Matteo broke in upon Hugh as he conned over certain memoranda of counsels which he had writ down for Villehardouin.

"Who think you hath just arrived?" cried the jongleur.

"Who?"

"The Young Alexius--Alexius Angelos."

"And who is he, Matteo?"

"Who but Dandolo's lure--or I never saw a hawk flown! Nay, put down your parchments. This is most important. It means much to us. It tells us why that fat-faced wolf Michael Comnenus hath been hanging about Dandolo. It tells us how Dandolo intends to swing the Crusade towards Constantinople."

"Tell, then, Messer Oracle," said Hugh, laughing.

"Be serious," adjured Matteo. "This Alexius--the young Alexius they call him that he may be distinguished from his uncle, the Emperor who reigns in Constantinople--is the son of the Emperor Isaac, brother of this Emperor Alexius, whom Alexius blinded and cast into prison. The Young Alexius was imprisoned with his father, but he escaped. He is come now, I will warrant you, to appeal to the Crusade to put his father back on the throne, promising in return the support of Byzantium for a descent upon the Holy Land."

"That is fair enough," said Hugh slowly. "But I had thought Dandolo intended no such legalised expedition."

"Oh, the old eagle talked to us in an unguarded moment as he really felt, but he is far too cautious to move in such a matter without ample justification."

Matteo laughed.

"Can you not imagine the twitter the Pope and all his Holy Cardinals will be in?" continued the jongleur. "A Crusade which they preached being used to put a new Emperor on the throne of the schismatic Eastern Empire! I will wager you, Hugh, more than one fat priest dies of the swelling sickness."

"You seem to mock at religion," Hugh reproached him.

"Not so, Hugh," answered Matteo, laughing again. "But I have seen much of the world and of priests, and a-many of them do not merit their priesthood. In the Holy Land they quarrelled over every shrine that should have been sacred, until their bickering was a scandal. But let be. We must be off to the Parliament, which is summoned to meet in the lists. The Lord Marshal and all have gone. I came hither that you might know of it."

In the lists outside the Hungarian Gate were gathered all the men of consequence who had embarked upon the Crusade, and on the hills around stood thousands of the common men and Venetian seamen of the fleet. At one end three thrones had been set up, and the eyes of the

throng were centred upon the three men who occupied them. In the centre sat Dandolo, waxen of feature, impassive as ever. On his right was a gangling lad of eighteen or nineteen, sallow-faced, lank-haired, with shifty, uncertain eyes.

"The Young Alexius," was the name murmured by all as Hugh and Matteo circled the outer barriers, seeking a point nearer to the three thrones, whence they might hear what was said.

"Who is the other?" Hugh asked Matteo.

He pointed to the occupant of the third chair, a splendid-looking man, well on in middle-age, lion-faced, dark and mighty in frame, who sat easily listening to the talk of a group of nobles around him.

"That? Oh, that is the Marquis Boniface," answered Matteo. "I forgot to tell you that he came with Alexius."

"That must mean that he is a party to this plan," said Hugh.

"So 'twould seem. Make haste, Hugh, or we shall be too late to hear what is said. See, Dandolo is going to speak."

The aged Doge stood erect, a page at his elbow, as the comrades forced their way into the ranks just behind the thrones.

"Lords of the host," he said, "I greet you well. The dear God Himself must have sent this day, for it is a right happy one. See, first of all, I present to you your chief, the commander of us all, the Marquis Boniface of Montferrat, who hath come to us at last after many toils to insure the success of our enterprise."

There was a sharp clanging of swords on shields at this, and the common men on the outskirts of the throng shouted lustily; for Boniface was a popular noble, and the prestige of his lineage carried weight. Men said to each other: "It is well to have a lord like this. He will outwit our enemies, for he is a great captain."

Dandolo raised his hand for silence, and Boniface smiled proudly at his followers.

"But there is more to say--much more," continued the Doge. "Here, likewise is come the young Prince Alexius, son of Isaac Angelos, the rightful Emperor of Constantinople. He greets you by me and says that your efforts are very close to his heart. Know, Messers, that his father, who should be Emperor, some years ago ransomed from the Saracens a brother whom the Paynims had captured in a border foray. That brother, Alexius by name, in return for this kindness, overthrew Isaac the Emperor, caused his eyes to be seared with white-hot irons--ay, Messers, even as those fiends tried to sear my eyes, when I was a young man and went on embassage from the Republic!--and threw him into prison."

A hiss of execration burst from the crowded lists.

"Rightly do you give voice to your horror, Messers," approved Dandolo. "Never was there a more dastardly deed performed in Christendom. Even the barbarians of the East and the Saracens of Paynimry were shocked by it. The Lord God in His Divine Wisdom did not send down a bolt of fire to blast the impious prince. Heaven provided other means of vengeance. This youth, whom men call the Young Alexius, was cast into prison with his father, but succeeded in escaping. He bears an offer from his tortured father, which he hath

charged me to convey to you.

"Know, lords, that having heard of the ordering of this Crusade, he begs that you will lend your power to throw this monster, the false Emperor Alexius, from his throne and restore the Emperor Isaac. If you will do this for him, he engages that he will place the whole Empire of Byzantium in obedience to the Church of Rome, whence it hath strayed these many centuries since. Moreover, he will give you 200,000 marks of silver and food for the host for the term of the venture, and to show his interest more, he will continue with you into the land of Babylon or wherever else in Paynimry you strike--or, if you think better of it, he will send instead 10,000 men with you at his own charges. And in addition to all this, he engages to maintain at his own charges, all the days of his life, 500 knights in the Holy Land for the protection of our Lord's Sepulchre."

Dandolo had scarce finished when a hum of comment rose from the thousands of men who packed every inch of ground within hearing distance. Several would have spoken at once, but the Abbot of Vaux forced his way to the front.

"Anti-Christ hath spoken!" shouted the white monk. "God help all here. On your knees and pray, ye wicked! Would you scout the commands of the Holy Apostle himself? Would you sin against the indulgences that have been granted you for a certain cause? Would you turn from the pursuit of righteousness and go in the path of the evil-doers? You are sworn to serve Christ against the enemies of Christendom, and now you are asked to fight in a private quarrel. Was it for this that the Church fed you and protected you, guarded your souls against damnation in eternity? Think well over what ye do, for I say unto ye that woe waits for him who transgresses the Holy Apostle's commands!"

"Woe! Woe!" shrieked his supporters. "Down with Anti-Christ! To the devil with Byzantium! Heed the Holy Apostle's word! The Doge lies! The Holy Spirit speaks in our Abbot!"

But just as frenzied and prolonged was the shout that answered this storm. It was Boniface who secured temporary silence.

"Lose not your minds, Messers," he cried. "This is a Parliament. We are come hither to debate this or any question. Every man hath his say, and afterwards we vote as seems us best. Let not his lordship the Abbot of Vaux or any other man, noble or common, fill your ears with phrases. What we have here is an offer, which, if it seems best to you, may be turned to account in our Lord Christ's service. The Abbot of Vaux shouts of Anti-Christ, but this offer places in your hands the opportunity to redeem from schismatic heresy the fairest realm in all the world. Think well on it, fair sirs."

He sat down, and Count Baldwin of Flanders strode out before the thrones.

"The Lord Boniface hath argued to the point, Messers," he said, and his fair, open face won him instant attention. "My counsel is that you follow him. He knows of old the conditions in Outremer."

Villehardouin stood forth next and a deep cheer greeted him, for the Marshal was liked by all by reason of his justice and tact.

"If it were not for this chance which hath come to us," he said, "I know not what the Crusade might do. A full third of those who bargained to accompany us have gone otherwhere, and our ranks have

been filled by the kindness of the Venetians. We would be as a drop in the ocean in the wastes of Outremer. We might struggle a while and die, but what good would come of it? Our families would mourn us, and Holy Church would preach another Crusade--and mayhap hold back her stipend of the funds, as hath happened in this venture."

A howl of anger from the Abbot of Vaux and his followers answered this bold charge. But Villehardouin refused to be daunted.

"I do not speak idly," he declared. "The Holy Apostle himself and his Cardinals are as much to blame as any for that the Crusade failed to sail this summer according to plan. Had they seen to it that the funds were put to the right purposes all would have been well. But enough of that. What we have to do is not to revile those who disagree with us, but to make the best use of what means we have. And for this reason I say to you, Messers, that you can do no better than accept the offer of Prince Alexius. With Byzantium as a base for our efforts and the treasure with which he promises to aid us, we can achieve much more against the Saracens than if we land in any part of Paynimry, with only ourselves to reckon upon. In this all warriors of experience will agree."

"He says no more than the truth," muttered Matteo in Hugh's ear. "I say naught of the honesty of the plan, for I know naught about it, but by Our Lady, the one way to crush the Saracens is to come at them steadily and without let-up, so that they may not recover from year to year."

Others seemed to have the same point-of-view, and the applause for the Marshal's speech drowned out any dissenting cries.

"What other churchmen wish to be heard?" asked Dandolo, when the shouting had died down.

Another white monk, the Abbot of Loos, was shoved to the front.

"My lords and people," he said, "I cannot agree with my holy brother of Vaux. He is led astray by excess of zeal. The one object we have is to regain the Holy Land, and if we can regain it best by fighting elsewhere first--and best of all, if in doing so we can redeem from schism a nation of our fellow-Christians--then I say that we should do so without fear. Let him hesitate who would sow dissension in the host, for by such means is Anti-Christ served."

There was more applause at this, for it convinced many who had been swayed by fear of the Pope's anathema.

"Who will take the oath to covenant with the Prince Alexius?" questioned Dandolo.

"I," said the Marquis Boniface.

"I," said Count Baldwin.

"I," said Count Louis of Blois.

"I," said the Count of St. Paul.

"I," said Count Bertrand von Katzenellenbogen.

"And I, for the men of Champagne," said Villehardouin.

"And I, and I, and I, and I!"

The barons crowded forward, eager to register their assent.

"Well-played," whispered Matteo, with a cynical smile. "He is a master, that old Venetian eagle."

"It may well be he serves God better than those who oppose him," answered Hugh.

"Oh, ay, mayhap! But I warrant you first of all he serves Venice."

"But never himself," protested Hugh.

"Nay, there you are right. He is better than these barons who are thinking on the principalities and duchies they hope to carve out for themselves in Outremer."

CHAPTER XV

HUGH'S ENEMIES STRIKE AGAIN

The comrades stood once more on the stern-castle of the galley _Paradise_, and watched the ruined walls of Zara dwindle in the distance. From below came the hoarse "Ha-hee-ho-ha!" of the galeotti as the long oars lifted, feathered and bit the water. In the distance frowned the savage mountains of the Sclavonian coast. All around them the pageantry of the Venetian fleet painted the sea a myriad hues--crimson and purple, Tyrian blue, orange-yellow, green and gold and silver, the colours clashed and blended in one gorgeous sheen of dazzling brilliance out of which leaped an occasional escutcheon or a saintly figure blazoned on a sail.

"Right glad I am to be no longer idle," said Hugh contentedly.

Matteo was silent for a space, his eyes drinking in the wonder of the spectacle.

"I would not have missed this," he answered at last. "No, Hugh, not for anything would I have missed this. Ha, comrade, think on the songs men will sing of what we do."

"Songs?" repeated Hugh. "Belike. But I think more of the mission we take up. Hast not forgot our quest, Matteo?"

The jongleur's hand dropped on Hugh's mail-clad shoulder.

"Nay, you are unjust," he said, with smiling eyes. "I forget not, and I rejoice with you that our course is eastward again. Bethink you, too, it is better to go as we go, with an army of friends, than to enter Byzantium alone, and mayhap dare the anger of the Emperor unaided."

"So I have thought," Hugh acquiesced. "It puts my mind at ease. And yet--" he swept one arm around the compass of the horizon, embracing the hundreds of bobbing ships--"great as is our force, we go against the mightiest lord in the world, if all we hear be true."

"Ay, the struggle will be worth while--and the glory will be all the more for the victors. We ride with the best knights that ever entered lists, but I wish I could be as sure of those who intrigue

above our heads as I am of our good lord, Villehardouin."

"How say you?"

Matteo looked over his shoulder. Barring the helmsman at the unwieldy rudder and Ralph beside them, none else occupied the poop.

"Hast watched this rat, Comnenus?" asked the jongleur.

Hugh shook his head. Of a truth, he had steered a course wide of the Cæsar and his daughter.

"Then heed my advice and attend him in future. By Our Lady of Tortosa, Hugh, I have seen that which interested me! He is high in the confidence of the Doge; he sits at meat one night in three with Boniface; he is always by the side of Alexius; never a council is held without his presence. Heart and soul he seems to work in the interest of the Angeloi. And he is the heir of the Comnenoi! Ay, this Emperor Isaac, father of the Young Alexius, whom we go to restore, cast out and slew the last Comnenian Emperor, Andronicus, he who befriended your father. It is a sorry mess, Hugh."

"Mayhap, but he says that he is weary of exile, and he hopes that by aiding the Angeloi they will restore his estates and permit him to end his days in peace."

"So he says!" commented Matteo. "'Tis a tale put out for innocents to mouth. But in Outremer men say: 'Beware the promise of a Greek, for that which he promiseth is the opposite of what he intends.'"

"You are bitter, comrade."

"I am suspicious, an you like: It is as natural for a lion to befriend a lamb as for the Comnenoi to work for the profit of the Angeloi. Depend upon it, the Cæsar hath some plan at the back of his brain which none other knows--save it be his tigerish daughter."

"What make you of your suspicions?" demanded Hugh.

"Nought precise, I grant you; but much food for thought. I believe Comnenus works with the host for his own end, and that it is a different end from the one he trumpets."

"But how can that concern you and me?"

"An he were to become Emperor of Byzantium, even under Dandolo's tutelage, that would concern us, would it not?"

"Ay, but you grow over-subtle for me," laughed Hugh. "I cannot follow this reasoning. Bethink you, Matteo, we go upon a Crusade to establish one Emperor for the sake of the Faith and Christ's Sepulchre, and now, without consultation or counsel, you would set up another. 'Tis treason to the host."

"Treason? Mayhap there will be talk of such before our prows point westward again."

Hugh would have answered him with a friendly gibe, but at that moment Villehardouin and several other knights ascended the ladder-stairs to the poop.

"Ha, Messers," the Marshal greeted them. "We are well quit of that cold Sclavonian land. Now we may look forward to such opportunities

as all puissant knights must crave."

"It is said there are pirates in these seas," returned Hugh. "Dost think there is any chance we may happen upon them, Lord Marshal?"

"Nay, I fear we may expect no affair of arms until we enter the realms of the Emperor. By St. Remigius, no pirate that was whole in his wit would think to assail such a foison of ships as we see about us!"

Hugh felt a hand on his arm, and turned to look into the anxious face of Ralph.

"An it please you, Messer Hugh," said the bowman, with an obeisance to the group of lords and knights, "I heard you speak of pirates. But in Zara they told me that the rocks hereabouts are occupied by hordes of harpies and sea-demons in the shape of wondrously beautiful women, who come out to lure ships to destruction and in the night draw men down to their caves under the sea."

An outburst of exclamations greeted this statement, and Villehardouin and his companions crossed themselves hastily.

"I will make note of this," said the Marshal earnestly. "I take it kindly of you, good varlet, that you brought such a danger to my attention. We will have the priests exorcise the demons, and at evening the bulwarks shall be sprinkled with holy water so that they may not climb into our midst. There be many dangers for those who would venture across the world, Messers, but an the Saints aid us we shall outface all the Powers of Darkness."

Despite Ralph's fears, the fleet passed unhindered along the forbidding coasts of the Adriatic and reached in safety the island of Corfu, off the western coast of Greece--or Roumania, as it was called in those days, when it constituted the most western province of the crumbling Empire of the New Rome, inheritor of the traditions, the language, the laws and pretensions, but not the virile power, of the Elder Rome. Here at Corfu the host tarried for three weeks, making such final preparations as were deemed necessary for the great task ahead of them. The delay was unavoidable, but it gave opportunity for a new outburst of dissension amongst the Crusaders.

How it began no man could say. Jealousy played a considerable part; gossip and rumour did the rest. The smaller lords resented the centralisation of authority in the hands of a narrow group of powerful barons. They found sympathisers amongst the considerable numbers of masterless men and the burgher companies. Discontented, uncertain of their leaders' actual intentions, it needed only the whisper of religious outlawry to develop open mutiny in the ranks of this minority.

Men told each other with bated breaths that Pope Innocent had despatched against them the ban of excommunication. All the terrible weapons which the superstition of the Middle Ages placed in the hands of the Church were supposed to hang over the heads of the host. A species of hysteria possessed the camp. Men who feared nothing physical trembled before these spiritual forces. The more ignorant expected that they might be struck by lightning bolts or devastated by plagues or perhaps paralysed in their limbs. Matters went from bad to worse.

One day, several weeks after the arrival at Corfu, the comrades found Villehardouin in his tent, wringing his hands in despair. The

pressure was most severe upon him, for he was in fact, if not in title, Marshal of the entire host, as well as of the men of Champagne.

"Now, at last, I am prepared to believe that the Holy Saints and Our Lord Christ Jesus have turned their faces from us," he cried. "Never was such a sorry end to so brave an enterprise!"

"What is it, Lord Marshal?" exclaimed Hugh. "Hath some new uproar arisen?"

"In sore truth, yes. I have but just received word that a group of barons, men I have known since first we wore hauberk, have banded together to secure shipping from Count Walter de Brienne, who holds Brindisi in Apulia, so that they may leave us and return home."

"That is bad news, indeed," conceded Matteo. "Who hath done this?"

"The chief is Ode de Champlitte, a lord of Champagne, of my own country, Messers. Others are James d'Avesnes, Peter d'Amiens, Guy the Castellan of Coucy, Oger de St. Chéron, Guy de Conflans, Odo de Dampierre--I cannot repeat all the names. More than half the host--nigh all the lesser barons--are with them."

"What is to be done?" enquired Hugh.

"We hold a Parliament this day after nones, but what will come of it I do not know. I tell you, Messers, for the first time since I put my hand to this undertaking, I feel that God is not with us. I could despair."

Villehardouin had not exaggerated. The barons met that afternoon in two separate and opposing Parliaments, one determined to continue the expedition, the other firm set in their intention to abandon it and return home, if they could not secure shipping direct to Syria. Negotiations were hopeless. The host had come to the diverging of the ways.

But Boniface of Montferrat, the greatest uncrowned lord in southern Europe, one of the best generals and statesmen of his time--and with the keen brain of Dandolo behind him--was not the man to allow himself to be daunted by any obstacle. He met the situation by taking the line which his opponents did not expect, and as is usual when a leader does the unexpected, he achieved amazing success.

Accompanied by Count Baldwin, Count Louis, Count Hugh, the Marshal of Champagne and the remaining lords and prelates who adhered to him, he rode to the valley outside the camp where the rival Parliament had assembled. And there, in the face of all the chief men of the host, those who opposed him and those who held true to him, he dismounted from his horse and fell on his knees, with hands clasped, before the rebellious barons.

"Ah, lords!" he cried. "Think well what you do! Now are we in evil case, for if you depart from us, like others who departed aforetime, the numbers of the host will be so diminished that we may make no conquests nor do aught for the deliverance of the lands of Outremer. For God's sake, then, dear lords, have compassion upon us and upon yourselves, and suffer yourselves not to be led lightly astray. We must keep covenant with each Other or we shall all be dishonoured."

The tears came to his eyes as he talked. His voice shook with emotion. The barons who supported him echoed his words. They, too, dismounted and knelt on the ground, clasping their hands and weeping.

"You fear that which is not, Messers," the Marquis continued. "Ask any of our churchmen, and they will tell you that the Holy Apostle has forbidden nothing we do or seek to do, since our object has been made clear to him. Those who tell you otherwise wish to break up our enterprise, so that the Crusade may be averted and the friends of Anti-Christ rejoiced."

The ranks of mailed men quivered in response to his appeal. Some had put hands to their sword-hilts when they saw his cavalcade approaching. Many had whispered together, eyeing him askance. But as he spoke on they answered him with shouts of assent. Tears splashed on their hauberks. They wept louder and louder. An ecstasy of passion caught up the assemblage of grim warriors, tore apart their constraint and broke down the barriers of resentment. They protested incoherently that they did not wish to abandon old comrades or to disrupt the host.

"What do you wish, then?" asked Boniface.

Odo de Champlitte stepped forward from his fellows.

"Lord Marquis, we wish only this," he answered: "That you make agreement with us that if we go with you on this venture, you will promise to allow any body of men to depart for the Holy Land at any time, within fifteen days after they have announced their intention so to do, and further, that you, as commander of the host, will provide shipping for them to go in."

"How say you, lords?" said Boniface, turning to his followers. "These terms seem fair and generous to me."

"Right fair!" the lords answered him.

A wave of joy rolled over the host. Men cheered and shouted as never before. The two opposing parties surged together. Lines were broken. Old friends sought each other out and embraced. Dissension was ended, once and for all.

Of those who rejoiced at the happy issue of the trouble none was more sincere than Hugh and Matteo. For a brief period they had feared that they must find some other means of reaching Constantinople; and the day after the reconciliation of the barons they prepared to wait upon Villehardouin, as was their custom, intending to accompany him to the pavilion of Boniface and offer renewed homage and congratulations to the leader of the Crusade.

But they had not yet left their quarters in the _Paradise_, when the tramp of steel-shod feet resounded on the gangplank, and one of the knights of the Marquis, accompanied by a squad of foot-sergeants, appeared in the doorway of the tiny cabin.

"You will come with me, Messers," he said briefly.

"Gladly, sir knight," answered Hugh. "But what causes the summons?"

"I know not. I am ordered to bring you before the lords in council."

Hugh looked inquiringly at Matteo.

"It passeth my understanding," said the jongleur. "But we had best go swiftly." He turned to the strange knight, "Are we prisoners, Messer?"

"Yes."

Nothing more was said, and the comrades left the ship, swordless and surrounded by the sergeants. They were not bound, and their passage through the camp was unnoticed in the bustle of the morning's occupations. But when they entered the pavilion of Boniface a changed atmosphere confronted them.

On a dais sat the Marquis, with Dandolo on his right and the Young Alexius--scrawny, furtive-eyed--on his left. Comnenus stood behind the chair of Alexius, and the chief barons of the host were ranged on either hand. Every face was stern and threatening, save only Villehardouin's. The Marshal looked worried and perplexed.

The comrades were marched to the foot of the dais, and halted there in the midst of their guards.

"At the request of His Grace the Doge, I have placed the disposition of your case in his hands," said Boniface coldly. "He tells me he hath had some responsibility for your presence here."

"Nay, my fair lord," interposed Villehardouin. "It is no more than truth that I first suggested to these two that they should accompany the Crusade. And they have formed a part of my company since they joined us."

Boniface waved his hand.

"No doubt, Lord Marshal. But the Doge knows whereof he speaks. Let be, I pray you."

Villehardouin stepped back. He had done what he could.

There was an instant's silence. Dandolo sat bolt upright, his eyes staring over the prisoners' heads, a scroll of parchment in his hand. Suddenly he extended the scroll to Hugh.

"What make you of this?" he asked abruptly.

Hugh took the parchment and unrolled it. It was dated at Corfu the day previous and addressed to: "The Most Holy Apostle, Innocent, Pope of Rome, Apostolic Vicar," and it was signed Hugh de Chesby. Its contents purported to be a report of the dissensions in the host and concluded with a recommendation for action by the Pope to divert the Crusade from Constantinople. Hugh read it blankly, scarce comprehending what the situation implied.

"But--but--I know naught of this," he said dazedly.

"It is signed with your name--so the clerks say," answered Dandolo.

"I did not write it."

"You have had clerkly training?"

"Yes, but----"

Dandolo cut him off with a gesture and addressed Villehardouin.

"This young lord has performed clerkly services for you, has he not, Lord Marshal?"

"Yes, Your Grace," replied the Marshal reluctantly.

Dandolo levelled his blind old eyes full upon Hugh's face.

"Once before this I warned you that you were in my power for an indiscretion you had committed," he said, speaking in dry, clipped tones. "Then you heeded my warning. Yet it seems you had not learned your lesson, for now I find you committing such a black treason as might ruin the expedition we are embarked upon. Coming, as it doth, hard on the heels of the clamour but recently stilled, it is so peculiarly villainous that we may not pass it over, even if we would. All that remains for us is to decide how you shall die."

He paused.

"An I have my way," he went on, implacable, thin-lipped, his white features dominating the dim interior of the tent, "you will be hauled under the keel of one of my galleys, you and the miserable wretches who accompanied you."

"With permission, Lord Doge."

It was Matteo who spoke. Hugh was too stunned to make any answer. He was thinking of Edith, of Crowden Wood, of Prior Thomas, of Chesby Castle and the fair English countryside, just turning green under the persuasive breath of spring.

"An it please Your Magnificence," Matteo pursued calmly, "I am not a clerk, and my word will not go far in this matter. But seeing that my head seems to be at stake, with that of my comrade and dear lord, Messer Hugh, I hope you will not take it ill if I say somewhat concerning this charge."

"Speak on," said the Doge curtly.

"Who makes the charge? Who presents the evidence?"

"The scroll was picked up at the entrance of this pavilion by one of the varlets in attendance here."

"Touching that point, Lord Doge, I can say that neither Messer Hugh nor I was present near this pavilion yesterday or during the night just passed."

"True, mayhap," remarked a querulous voice. "But perchance a messenger was despatched with the scroll and dropped it."

Hugh looked up in surprise. The speaker was Comnenus.

Dandolo nodded his head.

"The Cæsar speaks justly," he said. "It might have happened so. Is that all you have to say?"

"Nay, Lord Doge. I have viewed this scroll--" Matteo drew the parchment from Hugh's limp fingers--"and whilst I cannot read it, still I know that 'tis not written as my Lord Hugh writes. Is it not so, Lord Marshal?" he appealed to Villehardouin.

Villehardouin studied the parchment with wrinkled brows.

"Ay," he exclaimed joyfully. "'Tis as Messer Matteo says. Messer Hugh writes in a fair enough hand, but large and round. This is writ

small and sharp, so that I can make naught of the letters in it. But mayhap a clerk can testify to better advantage."

Bishop Nevelon of Soissons, the most famous warrior-prelate of the host, came forward and took the parchment.

"Ay," he agreed after a minute's examination, "this is writ in the form used by the clerks of South Europe and the East. It hath a likeness to Greek script, it is so sharp-drawn. But where is a sample of Messer Hugh's writing that we may compare the two?"

"I have a piece with me," said Villehardouin eagerly. "Here. 'Tis notes of a council Messer Hugh writ down for me from my dictation but yestereve."

The Bishop put the two parchments side by side, and instantly he extended them to Boniface.

"There can be no question," he exclaimed. "This lord, as is to be expected, writes in the large, round hand which is practised in England and North Europe. 'Tis impossible he could have composed the other parchment."

Boniface and his attendant barons--none of whom could do more than sign his name--scrutinised the two parchments closely; and all admitted the difference. It was so marked that it was palpable to the most unlettered man. There was no similarity betwixt the two writings whatsoever.

"This clears Messer Hugh of all suspicion," announced Boniface courteously. "How say you, Lord Doge?"

Dandolo had not pretended to examine the parchments, for his faint sight was a defect which it irked him to demonstrate in company.

"It pleases me to hear a unanimous verdict in the young lord's favour," he said readily. "In particular, because I could not comprehend how one of his promise could be guilty of such a crime. Messer Hugh, in common with all these lords, I cry your pardon. It seems that some one who is your enemy hath attempted to befool us. Have you any key to this person?"

"Nay, Lord Doge," answered Hugh, still bewildered by his rapid shifts of fortune. "I cannot say."

"Hast been attacked before?"

"Ay."

"By whom?"

"I know not--that is, I know not beyond question."

"An you accept my counsel, you will not wait to establish your enemy beyond question," remarked Boniface. "I cry your pardon, fair sir, for the inconvenience you have been put to. Guards, release the young lord and his friend. I beg you will sup at my board to-night, Messer Hugh, and drown your memory of this error in my wine."

The Marquis rose as sign that the audience was over, and Villehardouin and other friends pressed close around the comrades. But before they passed out of the pavilion Hugh looked back once over his shoulder. The Young Alexius was resting his dark, shaggy head on

the palm of one hand, elbow propped on the arm of the chair. Close by his shoulder leaned Comnenus whispering in his ear. Whether by accident or design, the eyes of both met Hugh's glance, and his spine tingled as though he had received an actual physical shock. Mere boy that he was, Alexius had in his sullen face all the inherent evil that was his heritage from the bloody license which had attended the ill-starred house of the Angeloi.

CHAPTER XVI

THE IMPERIAL CITY

"The city, signori! Behold the city!"

The cry rang from the mastheads of the fleet. Men dropped their shipboard occupations and ran to the rails. Lord and knight, sailor and sergeant, squire and varlet, all heeded the magic words. After months of travel and toil and sorrow and heartache and disappointment, the goal of their efforts was at hand. Constantinople lay before them, a bright blur across the level surface of the Sea of Marmora, where the European and Asiatic coasts approach to form the gorge of the Bosphorus, through which the waters of the Black Sea escape to mingle with the Mediterranean. Majestic and serene on her unrivalled seat, she viewed these newcomers with the calm dignity that had been born of nine centuries of imperial rule.

Since Constantine first traced the boundaries of the destined capital of the Eastern half of the Roman world, in the year 328 A.D., a score of conquerors had dared to assail the mighty walls that had been strengthened and extended by Emperor after Emperor. The barbarian hordes which submerged Europe in the latter days of Roman dominion in the West, when the old Latin civilisation was tottering to its fall--Huns, Avars, Gepidi, Goths, Vandals, Varings, Tartars, Vlachs--and the later half-savage Slavic races, which absorbed the Asiatic flood and with it the lust for conquest--the Russians, the Bulgarians, the Serbs--had stormed against Constantinople time and time again. In the first dawn of Islam's might, when the hardy Arab tribes swept all before them in a mad rush of fanatic faith in victory, Constantinople hurled them back--twice. The rude Western warriors of the first three Crusades viewed with jealous awe the tremendous fortifications which girdled the Imperial City's matchless wealth.

Save only the capitals of the two Moslem Caliphates, Bagdad and Cordova, no cities of the Middle Ages approached it in grandeur, size or riches, and it exceeded these two even as they exceeded such huddled towns as London and Paris. A million people worked and lived within its municipal jurisdiction. All that was precious, all that was worth while in the literature and philosophy of Imperial Rome and Republican Greece, was collected in its libraries and monasteries. The art of Phidias, of Praxiteles and a long line of men not unworthy to call them masters, embellished its streets and palaces. Here only in the tumultuous mediæval world the lofty principles of Roman law were the accepted guide to justice. The cramping hand of the feudal system had not been permitted to thwart trade and commerce. Schools, police, posts, theatres, organised machinery for charitable and benevolent work, the requisites of an established society, were present and in being.

But there was a reverse to this picture of orderly magnificence. Like so many states which had preceded it, like the Elder Rome, whose name and prestige it had inherited, Constantinople was suffering from the decay of age, and this decay was working from the top downwards. With the tightening of the Imperial power and the relaxation of the supervision of the Senate, the way had been made easy for the despot. If an able Emperor assumed the purple buskins, the Empire prospered. If a sot, a degenerate, a fool or a selfish man won the Imperial dignity, the Empire crumbled. For several centuries now Byzantium had been crumbling. An Emperor occasionally arrested the slow deterioration, but the dry rot of over-centralised authority was spreading its contamination with inexorable virulence.

The Empire was dying, slowly but surely. The hammer-blows of the Saracen states on the East were driving in its boundaries in Asia Minor and blotting out the sturdy peasantry, who had been the mainstay of armies that had upheld the traditions of the Roman legions for centuries after the Roman Eagles had given way to the Cross. The line of the northern frontier, fixed by Trajan at the Danube, long since had receded to the Rhodopes, and year by year the vigorous Slav peoples pushed farther and farther into the domains of the Empire. On the shores of the Marmora and in the surrounding country in Europe and Asia Minor there still remained a belt of prosperous towns and farming communities. And no amount of misgovernment and incapacity could take away from Constantinople itself the commercial supremacy which came from its situation at the juncture of the trade routes between Asia and Africa and Europe.

But this Empire, against which was launched the comparatively feeble forces of the Fourth Crusade, was a husk, a sham, a thing of empty pomp, massive and imposing to outward seeming, inwardly a rotten core ready to fall to pieces at the first vigorous push which pierced the exterior covering. It seemed incredible that such could be the case. The knights and soldiers of the host experienced the same dumb awe which gripped the Crusaders of Godfrey de Bouillon and Frederick Barbarossa. As the vast skyline of the city loomed clearer and clearer over the water, their astonishment was changed to fear. For the first time they appreciated the full extent of their undertaking.

"St. Cuthbert be my guardian, Messer Hugh!" gasped Ralph. "But that is no city! It is a whole country by itself!"

"Ay, Ralph, never saw I the like!" assented Hugh. "Venice is but a village compared to this. There must be as many people in it as in all England."

"You say truth, Hugh," said Matteo, beside them. "I doubt if England--ay, or Northern France, holds more souls than you could count in Constantinople and its suburbs."

Their galley was close in-shore, and the panorama of the Marmoran coast unrolled itself before them. For miles back they had passed a succession of well-built towns and villages, the larger ones walled and gated against attack. Interspersed between were villas and palaces, farmsteads and monasteries. Hugh noted that none of the frequent churches had towers such as were common in France and England. Instead there were light, soaring domes, which gave an effect of ease and spaciousness to the smallest structure. People clustered on the shore to watch the fleet pass, but there were no evidences of panic fear. Farmers worked in the fields and fishermen cast their nets. Now and then the sweet chime of church-bells came to their ears, and sometimes they saw religious processions passing along the roads.

"It would seem that they set much store by religion," observed Hugh.

"Sure, Messer Hugh, I thought they were idolaters or somewhat of that like," said Ralph. "They are never Christians, are they?"

Matteo laughed.

"Your view would please the Pope and his Cardinals, I make no doubt, Ralph," he answered. "But I hold it is as needful to be fair in matters of religious controversy as in, let us say, a question of knightly deportment. The Greeks are schismatics, in sooth; yet the practise of their version of Christianity is as the breath of life to them. They like nothing better than a close dispute over some item of the Creed or mayhap the definition of a phrase that will help nobody nearer to Heaven by knowing."

"What is the chief difference between their belief and ours?" asked Hugh.

"Nay, there you would draw me beyond my depth," laughed the jongleur. "Seriously, comrade, as near as I could ever make out, 'tis largely in the question of their worship of pictures--ikons they call them--of the Blessed Virgin and Our Lord and His Saints. And of course, there is the matter of their claim to be independent of the Holy Apostle of Rome."

"Beyond question, they are in gross error," said Hugh seriously. "Let us hope we may succeed in winning them to perceive the light of grace. But when I look at those walls and towers I could doubt that even so puissant a host as ours may ever pass them."

Before Hugh, as he spoke, loomed the White Castle, the immense fortification which linked the land walls of Constantinople with the sea walls fronting the Bosphorus. Above the frowning barriers, crowded with people, showed a mass of towers and pinnacles, stretching away as far as the eye could see. In this end of the city were the poorer quarters, the slums and the haunts of the lowly. Their houses were jammed close together, and off the main thoroughfares the streets were narrow and dark. Yet there were frequent open spaces. Here a church, there a monastery, beyond a nunnery or a tree-bordered cistern fed by aqueducts which were laid under-ground from the distant hills of Thrace. Beyond all these again showed the eastern quarters of the city, perched on their six hills and the valleys between. The seventh hill--for like Imperial Rome, Imperial Constantinople boasted her seven hills--was in the southwestern quarter.

It was impossible for the eye to take in everything, but Hugh saw all that he could. What caught his attention first was the walls, ponderous, girt with hundreds of towers. To the landward they rose tier above tier, three lines of impenetrable bulwarks, fronted by a moat as broad and deep as a river. On the seaward face they were built at the water's edge with ledges of boulders to guard their foundations from the dash of the waves. At intervals, too, the serried array of the seaward towers was broken by the gap of a harbour, protected by a jetty and guarded by fortifications constructed in the sea with the same careful weight as those which owned a firm bed on land.

Hugh had never seen such walls. In France, England and Italy he had seen castles built in the new fashion of splendour combined with strength which men had brought home with them from the Holy Land

after contact with the master-masons of the Saracens. But neither in Western Europe nor in Paynimry were there walls like those which encircled Constantinople. They were the outstanding achievement of engineering in mediæval times. For fourteen miles they marched, from forty to more than one hundred feet high, and on the land side presenting a series of defences two hundred feet wide. They were like cliffs, giving an effect of permanence and endurance, monuments of the skill and pertinacity of man. When Hugh saw them they had lasted for nine hundred years, and although he did not know it, they were to last seven hundred years longer.

His wonderment showed in his face.

"By St. James!" he said reverently. "They were men who built thus! How can our puny numbers avail against such barriers?"

"I know not, Hugh," returned Matteo. "An God wills us victory, it may be! But I have seen the walls of Antioch, and I tell you that though men say they could not be built again in our day, they are as nothing to what you see. Constantinople is a virgin city. No enemy hath ever forced her."

"What is that yon?"

Hugh pointed across the houseroofs to a towering structure which dwarfed the nearby buildings. In front of it a slender column of stone soared aloft like an upraised finger, crowned by a brazen statue which must have been more than lifesize to show at that distance.

"That is the Gate of the Forerunner, for so the Greeks call St. John the Baptist. It is an arch so wide and high that a galley such as ours could pass through it with sail spread and oars pulling. Before it is the Column of Constantine, erected to the memory of the great Emperor who founded the city anew. And beyond the Column is the Forum of Arcadius, whereon is the Church of the Forerunner. Look! You may see the dome sparkle in the sun. On the left hand, that enormous building is the Baths of Arcadius. You may not see it from here for the houses but close by the Forum of Arcadius there is a wondrous statue of the Lady Helen of Troy, a demoiselle of the old Greeks about whom they sing a romaunt that is right pleasant to hear. It is a statue older even than the city, they say."

The fleet drew in closer to the walls, keeping just out of range of the military engines that stood ready on every tower and curtain. Sometimes the Greeks who watched the hundreds of ships shook their swords and shouted hoarse challenges, to which the host gave answer in expressions of defiance. For the most part the passage was made in silence. Hugh looked and looked to his heart's content, and so did every man in the fleet who had energy to drag himself to the rail. Even those unfortunates who were sick with scurvy begged their comrades to help them to a view of the marvellous spectacle.

As they passed on, the buildings within the walls became less dense. Open spaces were more numerous. Groves of trees, tall, stately cypresses and cedars, grew about palaces as fair as the visions of a dream. Marble, onyx, jacinth, porphyry, sandstone, granite, picked out with copper, bronze, silver and gold, these buildings gleamed as though they were encrusted with jewels. Fountains played in their gardens, for aqueducts built by many Emperors since the days of Old Rome insured Constantinople a bountiful supply of water, and an elaborate system of stone-walled sewers laid underground furnished ample drainage and guarded the city from the terrible epidemics which

at intervals decimated the insanitary cities of the West.

Hugh pointed to building after building, fascinated as a child, and Matteo described them to him. That was the Church of the Theotokos Hodegetria, founded by the Empress Pulcheria, where was treasured the ikon of the Virgin painted by the hand of St. Luke, the palladium of the city, which was brought out in times of crisis to lead the armies and revivify the failing spirits of the citizens. Involuntarily, Hugh bowed his head and crossed himself.

"God send Our Lady has turned against these people," he said devoutly. "Else we may fight in vain."

"An relics will win for them, the Greeks must be invincible," replied Matteo. "It has been said that the reason why their city hath always withstood siege is that the number and sacredness of the relics furnish a Divine aid which transcends the might of men."

The jongleur continued, and pointed out the Church of St. George, with its monastery, a rambling collection of buildings set in the midst of broad grounds; the Atrium of Justinian, a beautiful marble portico on the hill overlooking the Bosphorus and the Marmora, enshrining a porphyry statue of the Emperor's wife, Theodora, which he had erected as a memorial to her and a lounge whence the citizens might view the sunsets and in which they might seek relief from the heat of the sun. Church and palace and bath, one succeeded another.

"But that pile ahead! See, on the summit of the next hill!" cried Hugh. "It is greater than them all!"

"It is, indeed," responded Matteo. "That is the Palace of the Bucoleon, and it is the richest palace in all the world. In plain truth, it is not one palace, but a group of palaces, with pleasure gardens all about them. Moreover, it is in a way a fortress by itself, for it is surrounded by a wall, and if the Emperor wishes, he can shut himself off in it and at need defy the whole city. And besides its several palaces, it hath quarters for soldiers, stables built of marble, chapels and baths. It is a city in itself."

Hugh marvelled, but wonders crowded upon him afresh. In the distance he saw St. Sophia, the Great Church or Cathedral of the city, its high-flung dome poised in air as light as a bubble. Later he was to marvel afresh at this glorious building, the most perfect religious edifice which Christians ever built, already then more than six hundred years old and destined to last like the city's bulwarks through an additional seven hundred years of oppression, neglect and abomination.

"The open space on which it stands," Matteo told him, "is called the Augustaion. This side of it you behold the Palace of the Senate, the building with the tall pillars. Beyond that again is the Palace of the Patriarch, he who is, in a manner of speaking, the Pope of the Greeks. On the southern side that long, flat structure is the Baths of Zeuxippus. It contains pools of water as long as this ship, and in winter it can be heated so that the cold does not penetrate. The great roofless building at the opposite end of the Augustaion from St. Sophia is the Circus, where the Greeks hold their sports and games. All the people of the host might find seats in it, and there would be room for as many more."

"Is there much more of the city than we can see from here?" asked Hugh.

Matteo laughed.

"Hugh," he said, "we have not seen the half of it--nay, not the quarter of it. Look away, and you will not be able to see across the hills to the land walls, for they go inland from the White Castle, where we first viewed them. So far you have passed along but one face of the city. You will barely see the third as we round this point."

Whilst he was speaking the fleet bore out from the shore in order to pass the point of land which projects into the channel of the Bosphorus to protect the entrance of the Golden Horn. On the top of this point, a rugged hill covered with the palaces of patrician families, stood the Column of Claudius Gothicus, its brazen plates, chased in bas-relief, flaming back the rays of the sun, a mute testimonial to the more virile days of the Empire, when subject peoples bowed their necks to the Emperors and Triumphs passed through the Golden Gate and up the colonnaded length of the Mesé to the Augustaion. Round and round the column twisted the story of the battles Claudius had won, the nations he had conquered, the benefits he had showered upon Rome. Never a man who stared up at it from the decks of the fleet far below perceived the ironic message which was flashed from the brazen plates, the message of defiance of an Empire which had ceased to conquer, which had ceased even to be Roman.

Around the point a new view burst upon Hugh. He found himself looking down the close-built shores of the Golden Horn, that matchless natural harbour which had done so much to facilitate the commercial pre-eminence of the city. On either bank at the entrance was planted a squat tower, and between the two was stretched a weighty chain, which blocked the channel to hostile shipping. Beyond the chain Hugh had a brief glimpse of another succession of walls and towers, fronted by wharves packed with shipping. The perspective seemed endless. As far as he could see the city filled the distance, dense, populous, sullenly perturbed. Trails of smoke arose from countless fires and chimneys: a bodyless, indescribable hum echoed over the water; on the walls there was a gleam of arms and armour.

It was not until the fleet had come about and was making for the opposite shore of the Bosphorus that Hugh bethought him of Edith. In his wonder at the marvellous sights spread out before him, he had forgotten for a moment that she was now separated from him only by that narrow current of water and those grim walls that seemed to threaten by their immobility. What was she doing? Had she stood, perchance, in a window of her father's apartment in some wing of the huge Palace of the Bucoleon, watching the fleet pass by? Had her eyes, mayhap, been fixed on the tiny, crawling hull of the _Paradise_, all unknowing of his presence? Did she still think of him at all? Or had she become immersed in the brilliant life around her to a point which shut out memories of the past?

An ache he had not felt in many a day began to gnaw at Hugh's heart, but his mind was snatched back to the present by the splash of the anchor overside and the shouts of the shipmen. The fleet had come to rest in a cove on the Asiatic bank. Atop of a gentle slope which ascended from the beach stood the Imperial palace of Chalcedon, a resort of the Byzantine Emperors in summer or when they sought relaxation in hunting. In the distance were tilled fields with the corn unshocked.

Hugh turned for one last look across the strait at the outline of Constantinople, dimming in the twilight. The city appeared to grow as the light diminished, casting a monstrous shadow athwart the world.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW HUGH WON KNIGHTHOOD

For nine days the host tarried on the Asiatic shore, collecting stores of food in preparation for undertaking the siege of the city. A mile away on the opposite side of the strait lay the army of the Greeks, five times as numerous, gaily caparisoned, well-drilled, equipped with all the arms and engines of warfare. And behind this army were ten times as many more soldiers, if they were needed. By losses at Zara and the desertion of the malcontents the host had shrunk to some 20,000 fighting men. In Constantinople, alone, there were 200,000 men of arms-bearing age, and the populations of the suburbs, flowing in to take refuge behind the impregnable walls, added considerably to this total. In Adrianople, Messinopolis, Tchorlu, Salonika, Nicea and many another city there were hundreds of thousands more. The Crusaders were as a chip of wood beside an oak-tree in comparison to the Empire they had attacked.

On the tenth day a Parliament was held after mass in the open fields by Scutari. It was attended by every knight and baron, fully armoured and horsed. Boniface, Dandolo and the Young Alexius sat their saddles in the centre of a horse-shoe of steel-clad men and chargers. A forest of lances ringed them round. The words of counsel were punctuated by the clatter of hoofs, the jingling of bits and the clank of shields on hauberks. Fierce-visaged, eager, the knights cried with one voice to be led to the attack. Alexius, sumptuously clad in silks and velvets, seemed ill at ease in such martial surroundings, but Dandolo and Boniface surveyed the glittering ranks with the exultant eyes of leaders who know themselves staunchly served.

"Forward, lords!" shouted the host. "Let the lances be couched! Out swords!"

Pennons and banners fluttered like the beating wings of birds of prey, and a storm of war-cries rose from the ranks. Boniface raised his hand in a sign for silence.

"I wot well what ye seek, Messers," he said. "And it is my hope that every valiant knight and brave sergeant shall have full opportunity to prove his metal. We have now gained such store of food that our wise ally, the magnificent Lord Doge, advises we may pass over the straits and show the enemies of the Lord Alexius here that Our Lady of Heaven fights on our side. To the ships, Messers!"

The host moved in seven battalions in orderly array, as became veteran men-at-arms. The vanward was commanded by Count Baldwin, because among his Flemings there were plenty of archers and crossbowmen. The five divisions of the centre were led by Count Baldwin's brother, Henry; by Count Hugh, by Count Louis, by the Lord Matthew de Montmorency--in this battalion were the men of Champagne; and by Odo de Champlitte. Boniface himself led the rearward, the largest body of all, composed of all those peoples who were not of the north of France.

The Venetian shipmasters directed the embarkation. The knights and squires and mounted sergeants went on board the horse-transports, with their chargers. The footmen boarded the great ships and

galleys. And when the last man had been assigned his place, the galleys took the transports and ships in tow and began the passage of the strait. It was a fair summer's day, with a gentle breeze blowing out of the Black Sea, and the sun shone on the armour and weapons, whilst trumpets sounded gaily from sterncastles and the coats-of-arms on shields and surcoats glowed with vivid colour.

Hugh and Matteo were aboard the transport which carried the Marshal of Champagne. They stood with other knights and squires in the hollow waist of the ship, beside their chargers, all saddled and ready to leap into the water the instant the keel struck ground. In front of them the shipmen crouched along the transport's side, waiting to unfasten the great doors, which dropped down and became bridges over which the horses could be led.

In the depths of the hold they could see nothing of the fleet's progress, but as they approached the European shore they heard the trumpets of the Greeks, shrill and challenging, and presently enormous stones, flung by petraries and mangonels, commenced to drop in the water beside them. Cross-bow bolts hissed through the air and struck the transport's hull with a vicious "ts-ss-st!" On the high forecastle the Venetian shipmen laboured at the machinery of a mangonel, which presently answered the missiles of the Greeks. The air was full of arrows and hurtling stones.

"Ha, Messers," said Villehardouin, patting the flank of his charger, "this promiseth to be a joyous enterprise. Steady, there!"

An arrow, shot high, dropped to the planks betwixt the horse's hoofs, and stuck upright, its feathers quivering.

"And do they call that an arrow, Messer Hugh?" demanded Ralph, stooping over it. "St. Cuthbert be my witness, I gave over playing with such toys before I left the village butts."

"Mayhap, Ralph," said Hugh, amidst the general laughter of the knights, "yet even so, it might have caused the death of Beosund or another."

"Nay, Messer Hugh," protested the archer, "no war-horse could come by his death from such a toy. But I will teach them a thing or two, an they will but bide in bowshot of me."

"I will warrant you do," assented Villehardouin. "St. Remi guide your shafts, brave varlet. But what says the shipmaster?"

The Venetian captain leaned over the rail of the sterncastle and shouted down to them:

"Be prepared, lords! We approach the shore. Ho, there, varlets, draw the door-pins."

The galley which had been towing them sheered to one side, casting off the tow-rope, and their keel ran into the soft sand of the beach. The shipmen let the side-doors drop, and the knights and squires led the horses down the inclined bridges which were formed by this manoeuvre. Hugh found himself splashing along in water up to his middle, clutching Beosund's bridle in one hand and his lance in the other. Matteo was beside him and Ralph a pace or two behind, holding his precious bow overhead to protect its string from the water that was boiling under the tumult of men and beasts.

"Form ranks, Messers," ordered Villehardouin, as the transport's

company gained the beach. "So! With the lance! St. Remi be our guardian!"

They galloped forward in line with other units of their battalion, but the Greeks would not withstand them. Before they came to the shock the enemy had scattered and retired under shelter of a hail of arrows.

"Hold!" called Villehardouin. "We must not outrun our archers."

"Nay, Lord Marshal, but there is one with you," said Ralph, dismounting from his horse.

The Greeks had halted just out of what they deemed safe bowshot and were occupied in rearranging the dense ranks of their companies. Ralph flicked a blade of grass into the air, marked the drift of the wind, and nocked a shaft.

"The tall knight in the green surcoat, Ralph," suggested Hugh.

"Ay, Messer Hugh. Here is a message for him."

The bowstring hummed, and whilst the company breathed twice nothing happened. Then the green knight fell from his horse. There was a riffle of panic in the Greek ranks, and they retired hastily a considerable distance farther to the rear.

"Well shot," approved Villehardouin. "Here come our foot-sergeants. Now we may prick up these people again."

The seven battalions of the host were duly arrayed in line, archers in front and the main strength of mailed horsemen and footmen bringing up the rear. But the Greeks would not stay to meet the onset. Five times as strong though they were, the enemy retired slowly, pausing only occasionally to harry the Crusaders' advance. The pursuit continued all day, until the host were in sight of the walls and towers of Constantinople on the other side of the Golden Horn, and the camp of the Greeks on the near shore was occupied, including the pavilion of the Emperor Alexius, who had come forth from the city to encourage his troops.

But his presence was of no avail. The Greeks would not close battle, and the Crusaders were exasperated at the illusiveness of the enemy. Whilst their footmen and archers kept the advancing host in play, the knights and men-at-arms of the Greek army were ferried across the Golden Horn to Constantinople or else sought shelter in the fortress of Galata, which guarded the chain barring the entrance to the city's port.

"Truly such people are scarce worthy to bear arms," said Hugh scornfully. "They could have surrounded us on all sides after we left the shore, yet they were afraid to come to blows."

"Be not so sure of that, Hugh," returned Matteo. "I grant you the Greeks are not such hardy men of their hands as our people, but they are very shrewd enemies, and it is their wont to fight more with their heads. According to their rule, they came out against us in order that they might test our strength and valour. When they saw how orderly was our array and how ready we were to give battle, they reasoned that it would be foolish for them to risk fighting in the open, where if they were defeated, they must have heavy losses. Rather, they will wait behind their walls, where they will have us at a great disadvantage."

Dandolo and Boniface had come up with Villehardouin, whilst the jongleur was speaking, and the Doge nodded his head.

"You speak wisely, Messer Matteo," he agreed. "It is as you say. Lords, I acquaint you that we have not yet begun our enterprise."

There was a moment's silence and Hugh and the others within hearing of this declaration experienced a feeling of disappointment.

"What do you suggest now, Lord Doge?" asked Boniface.

"Let the men make camp in front of Galata. They have the tents left by the Greeks. There is naught to be done before night. In the morning we will bring the galleys and the ships to this place, land the machines and assail Galata. For know, lords, that we may do nothing against Constantinople itself until we have possession of the Golden Horn."

A vigilant watch was kept all night; but in the morning the men of the host became interested in the possibilities of loot in the surrounding country, and the guard on Galata was relaxed. Hugh and Matteo were returning from a ride up the shore of the Golden Horn, whence they had studied that aspect of Constantinople, when Ralph met them, flogging his horse along the road.

"Oh, Messers!" cried the archer. "Make haste! The Greeks have come out of Galata, and they are assailing our people right bloodily."

The comrades put spurs to their horses, and galloped to the verge of the open space betwixt the walls of Galata and the Jewry of Stenon and adjoining suburbs. Here the fight raged bitterly, and there was no doubt that the Crusaders were getting the worst of it. James D'Avesnes, who had commanded the gate-guard, was down; his men had been separated into isolated groups, and many of them were in flight.

The Greeks were elated by the easy victory they had won. Instead of pushing on to take the main body of the host by surprise, as they had the gate-guard, they were stopping to slaughter the remnants of the guard. They gave no heed to their flanks or rear. In the meantime, too, groups of Crusaders were coming up continually and gathering behind the comrades in the main street of Stenon. There were belted knights among these reinforcements, but in the heat of the moment none thought to question the leadership which Hugh assumed by instinct.

"This is no time for arrows, Messers," he said curtly. "Nor may we await the coming of more of our friends. Lances and swords! Forward with God!"

"Forward!" they echoed him. "Our Lady of Mercy!" "St. Remi for Champagne!" "St. Nicholas to the rescue!" "Hola, men of Burgundy!" "St. Mark for Venice!" "Hainault! Hainault!"

Matteo, at Hugh's elbow, started to whisper in his ear; but as the jongleur saw Hugh's eye sweep the field, he settled in his saddle with a smile of content.

Hugh couched his lance.

"Follow me, Messers!" he flung over his shoulder.

Like a landslide that mass of armoured men and horses shot down the

slope of the hill and smote the unprotected flank of the Greeks, slicing through opposition as a sword slices through a leather doublet. On the farther side of the field they turned and charged back into the melee, emerging finally at the spot where they had first struck. Behind them was a wide swath of dead men and horses.

The Greeks were checked. The captains of the bandoi were rallying their men for a withdrawal. But Hugh was not satisfied. He led his column around again, and charged the enemy from the front.

This time the blow was expected, and the charge met a wall of spears. Arrows hissed and stung. Sling-stones rapped on helms. Holes gaped in the charging ranks. But still the Crusaders won through, and the Greeks, threatened with disintegration, closed around them in one swirling, milling medley of death and agony. The column was split asunder, disintegrated in its turn, and became a series of independent groups, each fighting to save itself or clear the press.

Hugh, with Matteo and Ralph, was completely separated from the rest. So desperate was their onset that they plunged beyond the enemy ranks and were caught up in the stream of retreating Greeks and carried with them toward the gate of Galata. Enemies surrounded them, but the comrades struggled on. Hugh's lance had been shivered early in the fray. He fought now with his sword and Beosund's high-flung heels, for the good horse loved the combat as did his master.

"On, comrades!" he cried hoarsely. "They must not bar the gate!"

"On!" croaked Matteo and Ralph behind him.

They slashed their way through the intervening ranks of fugitive Greeks, cut down the warders who were endeavouring hastily to swing the ponderous doors in place, and then rested on their arms for one precious minute. Within Galata all was disorder, and few knew that the enemy was actually across the threshold. Outside, the remaining Greeks were hotly engaged with the men of Hugh's company.

"Hugh," said Matteo. "This has been a brave venture. But we three cannot hope to stand for long by ourselves."

"Nay, then, Matteo, we will perish as must be."

"We need not perish," returned the jongleur. "Let us two bide here and hold the gate, whilst Ralph rides at speed to summon aid. Our people are fighting with the Greeks outside, unwitting where we are. But let them know, and we shall soon have aid in plenty."

"You speak sooth," agreed Hugh. "Ralph, off with you, and be swift, if you would see us alive again."

"But, Messer Hugh----"

"Off with you! 'Tis our one chance."

Ralph shot out of the archway like one of his own arrows from its bow. And the vaulted roof still resounded with the thunder of his departure when a flight of real arrows tinkled on the stones and the comrades' armour. Hugh looked along the arch of the gateway. At the farther end he saw a squad of Greeks, who dodged this way and that, seeking to get a good shot at him.

"We shall never live to see our friends," he exclaimed, leaping from his horse, "if we bide here in the open. We must have cover."

Matteo pointed to a doorway, scarce wide enough to permit of the horses' passage.

"Ay, that will do," said Hugh, and led in Beosund.

The scant light that straggled through the loopholes revealed the emptiness of the room, a chamber evidently reserved for the warders of the gate. The comrades stabled their horses, and then returned to the archway, in time to witness a shower of arrows, followed by an outburst of shrill Greek war-cries and the thudding of feet on the stone floor of the passage.

Hugh took a firmer hold on the hand-grips of his shield.

"There is more space for sword-play in the open. What say you, comrade?"

"Ay, Hugh. Back to back."

Side by side the comrades stepped out to meet the rush. Then, as the Greeks flowed around them, attacking from every angle, with sword and mace, axe and javelin, they set shoulders together and fought desperately to ward off the terrible pressure. Hugh, as of old, slew by sheer muscle and might, shattering helms and byrnies with his great sword. Matteo, hampered as he was by the press of foes, still contrived to swing his curved blade with all the trickery of the Saracens. They exacted a fearful toll, but despite themselves the comrades were obliged to give ground before this weight of men. They were forced backward, steadily, inexorably, toward the patch of sunshine that marked the outer exit of the gateway. There came a moment, when Matteo, who faced that way, saw that they might not retreat another step, else the enemy's purpose was achieved.

"Side by side again, Hugh," he gasped between thrusts. "Together--now! Ha! Christ and the Sepulchre!"

"St. James!" panted Hugh. "A Chesby for St. James!"

They cast off the leaden weight of weariness which bowed down their limbs. Reckless of all, save the need for victory, they turned and chopped a path in their enemies' ranks, until they stood safely inside the barrier. But they could do no more. Hugh reeled under the blows that rang on helm and hauberk, unable even to raise his sword to guard his head. His strength was gone, and suddenly behind him he felt Matteo's body sag and give.

"This is the end," he thought. "Dear Christ, receive my soul! Edith----"

A chorus of shouts filled the archway, and the entrance was darkened by a rush of tall figures. Vaguely, Hugh heard well-remembered battle-cries, the names of Saints of the Western Church, the full-throated roar of Frankish voices. Then his ears seemed to close and his eyes were dimmed.... When he came to himself, he was leaning against the wall of the gateway supported on Ralph's shoulder. Matteo hung limp between two knights. The floor was littered with bodies. In the midst of the carnage stood Boniface and Dandolo, the old Doge in full armour like those around him.

"Messers," said Boniface, "this is a right knightly exploit that you have done. It is my pleasure that you kneel before me to receive the accolade."

Hugh knelt stumblingly in the blood and slime, but Matteo made a gesture of protest.

"It may not be, Lord Marquis," he said weakly. "I am not---- It is forbidden."

"Then is knighthood the loser thereby," answered the Marquis courteously, "for, save this young English lord, there is no knight in the host could match you for deserving honour and credit. However, Messer Matteo, an you may not receive knighthood, yet you shall have my favour and all service that I can render you, and certes, no man will esteem you less for that you are not knight."

He turned to Hugh.

"It is in my mind that you will become as good a knight as your father," he continued. "Rise, Sir Hugh."

The light stroke of the sword inspired Hugh with new strength. He seemed to look along a corridor of blazing light, at the end of which stood the sweet-faced Lady of Heaven herself, extending her hands in a gesture of beneficence. St. Michael and the brave St. James stood beside her, holding sword and shield. The vision faded, but his dolour had vanished with it. He rose up, a whole man again, little the worse for the fighting.

The knights thronged around him, questioning and congratulating; but Matteo was first to clutch his hand.

"Ah, Hugh," said the jongleur earnestly. "God knows that I am glad of your great joy this day, and if ever knight won to honour, then have you."

"But you, Matteo? What I did, you did--and more!"

Matteo shook his head.

"We are at odds on that point, comrade, and so shall ever be. But I quarrel not with you now. I ask a boon."

"A boon to you! All that I have is yours!"

The tears came in Matteo's eyes.

"It is like you to say so! But all I would crave is that you take me for esquire of your body."

"You my esquire?"

Hugh laughed.

"Comrade, it is I who should buckle your armour, not you mine. Nay, Matteo, in this I have my way. Comrades we remain. There is no such thing as knight and squire between us two."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STORMING OF THE WALLS

The capture of Galata permitted the Crusaders to break the chain which guarded the entrance to the Golden Horn, and the next morning the Venetian fleet sailed triumphantly into the sheltered waters of the port of the Imperial City. Constantinople was now definitely cut off from communication by sea, but as much could not be said for the land blockade established by the host. Boniface led his battalions around the head of the Golden Horn to the hill which rises above its waters opposite the imposing bulk of the Palace of Blachernae, that forward-jutting bastion at the junction of the land walls with the barriers protecting the Golden Horn frontage of the city.

It was impossible for the Crusaders to attempt to hem in the capital. Their numbers were wholly inadequate to the task of warding the line of the land walls stretching for three leagues from the Golden Horn to the shore of the Marmora. The best that Boniface could do was to concentrate his attack upon one section of the walls, and the manifest course for him to follow was to select a section adjoining the scene of the marine operations of his allies. There was also to be considered the circumstance that the walls surrounding the Palace and quarter of Blachernae, strong though they were, lacked the outer bulwark which the great moat provided for the walls that ran southwest ward from the adjoining Palace of the Parphyrogenitus. This ditch, 61 feet broad and from 80 to 50 feet deep, scarped and counter-scarped with masonry, would have required the undisturbed efforts of an army to fill or bridge over.

As a matter of fact, the position of the host was anything but an enviable one. The Venetians on their ships were safe because of the total collapse of the Imperial navy. But the Crusaders ashore soon discovered that while they were besieging Constantinople, none the less was Constantinople besieging them. So frequent were the alarms, outfalls and forays that it became necessary for the host to fortify their camp, for the vast numbers of the Greeks enabled the enemy to advance simultaneously from three or four gates and from the open country as well. The collection of provisions was thwarted, and as the days went by the confidence of the Greeks increased.

But there was no slackening of determination on the part of the leaders of the host. On the morning of Thursday, July 17, 1203, ten days after the seizure of Galata, they launched their crucial effort. Boniface, with the men of Champagne and the Burgundians, mounted guard over the camp, whilst Count Baldwin led the other divisions to assail the walls between the Gate of Blachernae and the Golden Horn, and the fleet of the Venetians attacked the walls covering the quarter of the Petrion that lay between the Palace of Blachernae and the Gate of Platea on the side of the port.

The comrades were riding out from the camp to seek places in the assaulting columns, when they were hailed by Villehardouin.

"With your favour, Messers," he said. "The Marquis Boniface sends word by me to ask if you will remain at his side for the nonce. It may be that he will have need of messengers to pass betwixt the fleet and the shore, and seeing that you are known to the Doge he would rather have you do this service than others."

"We will serve him right gladly, Lord Marshal, thus or otherwise," rejoined Hugh.

"Then follow me."

Villehardouin led them to the brow of the hill in front of the camp, overlooking the valley, on the farther side of which rose the walls

of Blachernae, and the waters of the Golden Horn. From this point Boniface and a group of attendant lords and knights watched the development of the attack. The comrades could see the whole panorama of the action spread out beneath them--the line of the Venetian fleet, full half a league from wing to wing, bearing down upon the harbour walls, and the phalanxes of knights and sergeants on foot, advancing toward the land walls, carrying with them wide scaling ladders that two men abreast might climb and hide-covered mantlets to protect the climbers against arrows, stones and the dreaded Greek fire.

The sun was shining brightly, and the warm air was filled with hurtling missiles from the mangonels, petraries and ballistæ, which were used in hundreds by both sides. Men were falling continually on the walls and amongst the ranks of the Crusaders, but many more were lost by the attackers than by the defenders. The shouts of the combatants came faintly across the intervening distance.

"Look, Matteo," said Hugh. "Who are those tall, bearded men with axes who hold the wall so manfully?"

"They are no less than countrymen of yours," returned Matteo with a laugh. "They are the Varangian Guard of the Emperor, and those few who are not Englishmen are Danes or mayhap Russians. And there is one you should note especially, Hugh. The officer in full armour with the scarlet surcoat and the winged helm. He is Sir Cedric Halcroft, brother to your neighbour, the Lord of Blancherive, commander of the Varangians--Great Acolyth is his Court title."

Hugh's eyes were fastened upon the far-off figure. So that was Edith's father! She seemed nearer with the thought, and his gaze shifted across the miles of house-roofs beyond the walls, as he speculated in what nook or corner she might be hidden. It was difficult to understand that he had come at last to the threshold of her new home, so many long, long leagues from Crowden Wood.... He looked up to meet Matteo's quizzical smile.

"You spoke, comrade?" he asked.

"Our people have two ladders on the wall. See! To the left of the gate. By Our Lady! Do but watch them swarm up! Ay, naught shall stop them! Brave hearts! A-aah!"

A huge stone rolled down the close-packed ladder and swept the rungs clean. All that it left was a heap of shattered bodies and splintered timbers.

"But they try again," exclaimed Hugh excitedly. "Beyond the round tower! There are three ladders placed--no, four! Others are coming. Mark how our archers shoot! I would we had a company of men like Ralph. Then--St. Cuthbert, but that is too bad!"

A petrary farther down the wall had jerked a stone fairly into another crowded ladder, which, in overturning, had upset a second one.

"It is those cursed Englishmen of yours," said Matteo gloomily. "The Greeks would never fight like that. There are no men-at-arms in the world better than the Varangian Guard."

"So much the more glory for us if we vanquish them," replied Hugh. "You are impatient, comrade. Ay, by St. James, 'tis so! We have the wall! We have won!"

There was a murmur of comment in the group surrounding Boniface. What had begun to seem impossible was actually happening under their eyes. A dozen or more of the assailants were on the wall, their swords clashing on the axes of the sturdy Varangians. The ladders behind them creaked with hurrying reinforcements; they had almost cleared the curtain between two towers. But in the very moment of victory the scarlet surcoat of Sir Cedric appeared in the ranks of the Varangians. The defence tensed, contracted and pushed back the invaders. The Varangian axes rose and fell resistlessly; the curtain was reconquered; one by one the Crusaders were thrust over the battlements or slain.

Undaunted by the defeat, the attacking battalions of the host recoiled only long enough to secure fresh ladders and mantlets. Then, shouting their war-cries, they returned to the hazardous assault of those mighty walls, beside whose massy cliffs men looked insignificant as flies. But a look of deep concern clouded the face of the Marquis of Montferrat.

"I like it not, Messers," he said uneasily. "We have lost many good knights, and naught gained thereby. Messer Hugh, I prithee take boat to Messer Dandolo. Tell him that we of the host have done all that men may, and unless his people can exert some diversion in our favour it is like to go hard with us."

"Ay, Lord Marquis," answered Hugh, and saluting with his lance, he rode off with Matteo to the basin behind the hill where certain of the smaller craft of the Venetians were beached. One of these he secured, together with the necessary shipmen, and, leaving Ralph in charge of their horses, the comrades bade the mariners row them down the Golden Horn to the fleet.

The ships and galleys were drawn so close to the shore that the boarding-parties on the flying-bridges which were rigged from the mast-heads were able to cross lances with the Greeks behind the battlements of the towers. But notwithstanding the clamour of the fighting and the volumes of arrows and other missiles, the Venetians were no farther forward in their project of seizing the harbour walls than were the Crusaders on the landward side. So much Hugh and Matteo saw for themselves in their progress behind the line of the fleet.

They found Dandolo on the prow of his galley _Pilgrim_, with the gonfalon of St. Mark beside him. Despite the burden of the day and the weight of his full armour, the gaunt, white face of the Doge gave no sign of fatigue, fear or other emotion. He stood serene amidst all the uproar and confusion, looking away over the masts and the city walls, seeming to scrutinise some vision that was only for him to see.

He received the comrades courteously, and heard their message without comment.

"I warned the lords of the host that we should risk failure if we divided our forces," was all he said when Hugh had finished. "But they would insist that your people could not fight to advantage on shipboard. Now it is for us to save the situation. Messers, I crave your attendance. Do you follow where I lead, and after, if there be question amongst the lords, tell them Dandolo did not fear to risk all for victory."

He summoned his officers to his side with one masterful gesture.

"Signori, so far our attack hath failed of its purpose," he said calmly. "The lords of the host have called upon us to relieve them. It is not enough to work the engines and exchange thrusts from the boarding bridges. Run the galleys ashore at the foot of the walls and set up the scaling-ladders."

The order was repeated from ship to ship of the line, and the oars urged the galleys closer. Ship after ship ran her bow into the mud of the bank or berthed beside the shallow wharves that stood in front of gates in the walls. The _Pilgrim_ was the first to take ground, and Dandolo, with an agility almost unbelievable in a man of his age, caught hold of a rope that hung over the bowsprit and leaped ashore.

"Bring on the gonfalon," he called to his standard-bearer. "Let the Lion of St. Mark wave beside me."

A cry of amazed protest went up from the Venetian captains. Riniero Buondelmonti, one of the Vice-Admirals, ran to the prow of the _Pilgrim_ and begged the Doge to return on board.

"You bear the fate of Venice on your shoulders, Magnificence," he pleaded. "Bethink you before it is too late. Without you we are lost."

"Without victory the Republic will be lost indeed," returned Dandolo firmly. "I have led you so far, Signori, for all my years. Now do you come at least as far, and the Greeks will see that you are people who may not be scorned."

The galley next in line to the _Pilgrim_ was slow to move up to the foot of the walls, and when Dandolo saw this, his dim eyes blazed with rage. He ran to the edge of the bank, heedless of the bolts and arrows that hissed and spat around him, and shouted to the vessel's master:

"Come hither to my side or I will do justice on you with my own sword! Is this the time to tarry when the Republic is at stake?"

The gonfaloniere beside him waved the standard overhead, so that the crews of the shipping might see where it stood by the walls, and a wave of enthusiasm possessed the Venetians. Officers who had fought half-heartedly, holding that it was impossible for sailors afloat to capture walls on land, now plucked up their courage and followed the lead of the Doge. The ships spewed forth men by thousands. Ladders were reared against the walls; the flying-bridges were flung out from the mast-heads so close that the bolder spirits might jump from their ends upon the battlements. The archers, slingers and engineers at the machines worked tirelessly to keep down the hail of missiles which came from the walls. And through it all, Dandolo stood by the Gate of the Diplophanarion, guarded by the shields of Hugh and Matteo, overseeing everything with his wellnigh sightless eyes, directing and controlling the progress of the attack.

The battle which had been waged so languidly of a sudden flared into a conflagration of the utmost violence. The Greeks on the walls were bewildered by the abrupt change. As the attack waxed bolder and more desperate, their bewilderment became panic. Scores of ladders were raised from the shore; gigantic cats or rams made their appearance and commenced to pick at the foundations, already jarred by the blows of stones from the catapults on the ships. There were no Varangians here to brace the resistance. The defence had been entrusted to troops of the Scholarii, or Noble Guard,--a very different body from the Varangians,--and the train-bands of the city, together with

certain mercenary corps. These fought well enough so long as the combat went their way, but courage deserted them at first sight of the banner of St. Mark waving on one of the towers.

The Venetians themselves were surprised at the ease of their victory, and once they had gained a footing on the walls, they pushed ahead at will. Twenty-five towers were taken; the gate was thrown open and the Doge entered the city. The Greeks fled before them. From the streets that led away from the walls there came the wailing and lamentation of the people, who feared the ruthless hand of an enemy and the tortures of the sack. But there was only brief opportunity for looting. The Venetians were still exploring the possibilities of the warehouses which filled the water-front streets when the look-outs posted on towers gave warning of the approach of fresh bodies of Greeks.

So soon as word had reached the Emperor Alexius at Blachernae of the success of the Venetians, he had withdrawn the Varangian Guard and other bodies of picked troops from the land walls and hastened as fast as he could to repair the situation on the Golden Horn. After leaving enough men to hold in check the disheartened attacks of the Crusaders, he was yet able to bring against the Venetians an overwhelming body of tried troops. But in Dandolo he had to reckon with a captain who was second to none in the wiles of warfare.

The Doge heard of the approach of the Greek reinforcements with perfect equanimity.

"Bid the men withdraw to the wall and the towers," he directed. "But first they are to fire the houses in their front betwixt them and the Greeks."

The wind was blowing across the Golden Horn on the backs of the Venetians and drove the flames southward into the faces of the Greeks. Their advance was halted immediately, and their efforts diverted to the essential task of checking the fire. But notwithstanding all the toil of the troops, assisted by the citizens, who were fearful of the destruction of the entire city, it burned over an area of many blocks on the waterfront of the Petrion and wrought untold damage before it was finally stayed by the dying of the wind and the wrecking of buildings in its path. It was the first of many scourges which were to descend upon the Imperial City for its sins, a mere foretaste of the doom to come. But it was no small tribute to the splendour of the New Rome that even those of its attackers who were obliged in self-protection to give it to the torch experienced a sensation of remorseful compunction at the immolation of so much that was beautiful and worth while.

Both Hugh and Matteo were grieved by the spectacle of warehouses, monasteries, churches and mansions, to say nothing of hundreds of meaner buildings, disappearing in clouds of smoke and pillars of flame. They stood behind Dandolo on the tower above the Gate of Petrus, waiting to take from him a report of his operations to Boniface. He brooded over the scene of destruction he had created, remote, unimpassioned, the incarnate spirit of judgment.

"It awes you, Messers?" he said suddenly, stretching out one hand toward the sea of flames.

"Ay, Lord Doge," answered Hugh.

Matteo could not find words. His artist's soul was enthralled by the horrible magnificence of the picture.

"There are as many houses burning here mayhap as there are in all Venice, Pisa or Florence," continued Dandolo detachedly. "Well may you be awed, young sirs. It is seldom given to us to witness Divine retribution administered to the culpable, yet I say to you that that which you see here is just so surely the vengeance of God as though St. Mark himself had descended from Heaven to scatter brands. Woe to the wicked city! Woe to the oppressor! Woe to the selfish! Woe to the monarch who set pleasure and luxury on a pedestal, and neglected the well-being of those he was charged to protect!"

He was silent a moment. Then his hand struck out again in a gesture of denunciation.

"This that you see here is the healing of a sore, for it is often necessary in healing evil to sweep clean the seat of the affliction, in order that healthiness may take root and grow. We will purge Constantinople, and make it whole. We----"

A messenger panted up the stairs of the tower.

"Lord Doge! Lord Doge!"

"Well?"

"A messenger from the lords of the host. The Emperor Alexius is issuing from the gates of the land walls. A hundred thousand men march with him. The host are surrounded, and in sore peril. They cry your aid and counsel."

"Say to them---- But hold!" He turned to Hugh and Matteo. "Messers, you will favour me by carrying the message. Tell the Lord Boniface that I am coming. They have but to stand firm. The Greeks fear us."

They left him on the tower despatching orders to captains, still standing on his feet in full armour as he had stood all day since dawn, wearing the mantle of his ninety-two years like a demi-god.

"Is he human?" asked Matteo with a shiver.

"Truly I know not," answered Hugh. "I could hope he is not, for in sooth we are in a sad plight. The day goes badly, after all."

CHAPTER XIX

HOW THE FALSE ALEXIUS FLED

The fate of the host hung poised in the balance for several hours that afternoon whilst the sun sank slowly in the west. When Hugh and Matteo reached the camp the leaders were in desperate straits to know what to do to avert being submerged by the apparently endless armies of enemies who continued to pour out of the gates in the land walls. Thousands of armoured horsemen, tens of thousands of steel-clad footmen and scores of thousands of light-armed skirmishers, archers and slingers were forming their array in the plains north of the Gate of St. Romanus. It was the supreme effort of the Emperor--he whom the Crusaders called the False Alexius to distinguish him from the youth whose cause they had espoused. Stung by the menace of the Venetians' success on the Golden Horn walls, he had determined to put

his fortune to the touch in one smashing blow at the army of the Crusaders, without whose aid, he knew, the Venetians would be helpless.

His strategy met with instant success. Dandolo was obliged to relinquish his grip on the Golden Horn walls and throw every man who could be spared from the crews of the fleet into the camp of the Crusaders. The wise old Doge was quick to understand that this was no time for half-measures. He was loath to abandon the fruits of the day's fighting, but he knew they would be useless to him if his allies were crushed. And what had been won that day, he reasoned, might be won another day, providing the enemy was thwarted in this new attack. So the Venetians moved to the aid of the Crusaders fast on the heels of the messengers who announced their coming. Hugh and Matteo had scarce delivered their assurances of succour when the galleys were spied rowing up the Golden Horn.

Upon Dandolo's landing, he found the Crusaders already heartened by the news of the successes he had won. They had reaped nothing but losses by their efforts, and it encouraged them to know that the Venetians had disproved the traditional impregnability of those tremendous walls.

"It goeth sore against our pride, Lord Doge, that we have had to call upon you so and compel you to abandon that which you have won right hardily," Boniface greeted him. "But you may see before you the powers that move against us."

Dandolo's eyes were not equal to spanning the distance which separated the camp from the Greek army, but his uncanny knack of envisaging a situation which he could not see permitted him to gauge the relative facts. One division of the Crusaders, commanded by the Lord Henry, brother of Count Baldwin of Flanders, were mounting guard over the machines erected by the host in front of the Gate of Blachernae. The remaining six battalions were formed in front of the palisades of the camp--the archers and cross-bowmen in front; behind them the mounted knights and sergeants; and in the rear of all the sergeants and squires on foot. One division of 800 knights who had lost their horses fought likewise afoot, being held in reserve as a force to be used to close any gap or seize upon an unlooked-for advantage.

The Doge conned over the arrangements in silence, and then asked for the disposition of the Greeks.

"There are some forty divisions of them, Lord Doge," returned Boniface. "And this is without counting a foison of their people who have but now issued forth from the Gate of Blachernae and are assailing the guards upon our machines."

"Do they prevail against the Lord Henry?"

"Not so, by God's grace. We hold our own. An we made a sharp assault upon them I think we might do them great hurt."

"Nay, do not quit your ranks," answered Dandolo sharply. "If you take my counsel you will not stir a step from this place where you stand. For know, lords, if you do move hence it is likely that you will be swallowed up in the Greeks as a sinking galley is swallowed by the waves of the sea. Never before this did so few people venture against so many, and I advise you with all the wit that I have to do nothing to make it easier for the Greeks to encompass you round about. Bide here, and with such help as my people can give, it may

be we may withstand the enemy until they weary of their efforts."

The barons of the host all approved of Dandolo's suggestion, more especially because he assured them in no uncertain words that he was determined to cast in his lot with them no matter what happened. The host joined its ranks in close order and stood motionless whilst the Greeks drew nearer. Old men-at-arms who had fought on many fields, at Acre and Ascalon with Lion-Heart, watched that approaching horde with wondering eyes. More than a hundred thousand strong, the Greeks spread over hill and plain and menaced the host on every side, except toward the Golden Horn. Thousands of other Greeks watched the manoeuvres of their brethren from the walls, expecting to witness the final humiliation of the invaders whom they looked upon as barbarians.

But there was something forbidding in the quiet, vigilant ranks of the Crusaders which quenched the ardour of the attackers. The battalions on the hill stood firm in their positions. When columns of Greek horsemen galloped to the front and sought to draw them into separate combats they lowered their lances to meet a charge--and remained where they were. Perceiving that they could not lure the Crusaders into breaking formation, the Greeks next sought to induce them to advance as a body. The forty divisions of the enemy surged forward, trumpets blowing, cymbals clashing and drums thudding. Hundreds of banners waved. The Greek archers darkened the sky with their arrow-flights. But still the Crusaders clung to the hill and refused to be drawn down to the plain. Their archers and crossbowmen answered the discharges of the Greeks, but that was as far as they would go.

The confidence of the Greeks seemed to wane as twilight came on. Several times they made preparations to deliver a charge, but when they were about to come to the shock they drew off. Those bristling lances, those tall, armoured men on the gigantic horses of Western Europe, exerted a grim spell upon the Greek chivalry, and when the Greek footmen saw that their lords would not endure a charge, they, too, weakened and held back. With the gathering darkness the Greeks began a slow withdrawal toward the farther gates in the land-walls, and Dandolo and Boniface gave order for the host to follow them. Slowly and cautiously, the Crusaders and Venetians advanced from the camp, gained the foot of the hill and passed out upon the plain. But now the Greeks refused to come forward. They followed their Emperor in precipitate flight.

There was no elation in the Crusaders' camp. The men of the host were too weary and dispirited from their toil and the loss of many brave comrades. The Venetians nourished the bitter memory of the victory they had been compelled to sacrifice. Moreover, no man could be sure what the morrow would bring forth. It might be that the Greeks would come out again with still greater numbers and force battle with disastrous results to the host. And to crown all, there was but little food for the hungry men. Provisions were running low, and the rations served out consisted of a handful of mouldy flour and a slice of bacon.

Matteo summed up the situation in a single sentence.

"We are come hither to conquer," he said, "and we are now come to the point that we must conquer or perish. For we cannot go back."

None disputed him, and many thought that he was over-confident in presuming they had left even a chance of conquest. But in the night whilst the tired warriors of the host slept in their tents on the hill over against Blachernae, a panic was let loose behind the

bulwarks which had hurled back each assault by daylight. The comrades were awakened in the morning by loud shouts and hurrying feet.

"Is it an attack?" exclaimed Hugh, struggling into his hauberk.

"Belike," returned Matteo. "We must----"

The curtain of the tent was torn away as Ralph stumbled in.

"A miracle, Messers," he cried. "The False Alexius is fled. Messengers have come from the city. The Emperor Isaac, he that is father to our Lord, the Young Alexius, is made Emperor, and he hath invited the barons to come to him with his son."

The comrades stared at him unbelieving.

"Nay, Ralph, you dream," said Matteo, shaking his head. "Or mayhap some camp scoundrel hath----"

"Were you struck in the fighting yesterday?" demanded Hugh, afraid lest his follower might be suffering from some unknown injury.

But Ralph denied stoutly these and other imputations.

"Do you but come with me to the Lord Marshal's pavilion, and you will see that I speak no more than truth," he declared. "For he hath the messengers there, entertaining them the while the Marquis Boniface and the Doge deliberate on their words."

He assisted the comrades in buckling on their armour, and then they hurried with him to Villehardouin's quarters. There they found full confirmation of his news.

"The varlet hath put it straightly when he calls it a miracle," said the Marshal soberly. "I have been low in my mind these many hours past, fair sirs. But now we are safe from all trouble. These Greek lords within--" he waved his hand towards three Greeks dressed with the regal magnificence which was the common standard of the nobility of Constantinople, who sat in his pavilion eyeing curiously the motley throng of knights and Venetian shipmasters who pressed about the entrance--"are come bearing an invitation for the barons to enter the city with Alexius the Younger. It seems there hath been a revolution over-night. The False Alexius fled under cover of darkness with what treasure he could carry and those who would accompany him. The partisans of our Lord Alexius went to the Prisons of Anemas and there released the blind Emperor Isaac and him they crowned and he now awaits us in Blachernae."

"I will vow a prime relic to the shrine of St. Cuthbert of Crowden for this aid which Heaven hath vouchsafed us," quoth Hugh.

"And I one to St. Remi at Rheims," asserted Villehardouin. "But nay, I may not. Good St. Remi hath been ever the patron of my house, but I bethink me that on retiring last night, I repeated St. Denis his orison, which hath been cited to me as a prayer of great worth when danger threatens: 'Lord God, grant that we may despise the prosperity of this world, and not stand in fear of any adversity.' It is in my mind that St. Denis heard my words, more by reason mayhap that I never appealed to him before. I will build me a chapel in his honour at Villehardouin that he may have more merit in Champagne."

"It is a sad pity that we may not take Constantinople by assault, if

many such vows are to be made," said Matteo, laughing. "For it possesseth a vaster store of relics than did Jerusalem, before Saladin captured the Holy City. But see who approaches!"

Winding through the streets of the camp came an imposing procession, including the chief barons of the host, the principal churchmen, and the leaders of the Venetians. In front of all rode Boniface and Dandolo, with the Young Alexius between them, his dark, sullen face for once lighted up with savage joy.

"To horse, Messers," exclaimed Villehardouin. "We are to enter the city, it seems."

The comrades fell in with the Marshal's company, congratulating themselves on their luck in being included in the small escort, as the Greeks had stipulated that the main strength of the Crusaders should remain without the walls, urging with evident sense, that to admit so many armed foreigners would be tempting the self-restraint of both sides, in view of the hostilities just concluded.

The column descended the hill, crossed the valley before the walls and entered the Gate of Blachernae. Hugh stared around him with unaffected wonder. The fortifications were even more imposing at close range than when seen from a distance. Wall rose behind wall. They left the gateway in the outer wall only to traverse a series of courtyards which brought them to a second and higher barrier. Beyond this was situated the Palace of Blachernae, itself a fortress, built upon a terrace, partly artificial and buttressed by masonry, girded by an enceinte that dwarfed all adjoining structures and embracing within its precincts churches, barracks, storehouses, baths and pleasure-fields.

The way along which the Crusaders rode was lined by files of the Varangian Guard, immense, upstanding men in complete mail, leaning upon their huge, double-headed axes. Two out of three, Hugh noted, were of the same blonde Saxon type as Ralph. They bore themselves with the conscious pride of men who know their own worth, and met the glances of the Frankish knights with level eyes.

On the walls above were other soldiers, Greeks who shouted and sang as the Young Alexius passed by. In the windows of the buildings were many ladies, gaily dressed and debonair, who waved their hands and flung down flowers to the knights.

Hugh let the reins lie loose on Beosund's crupper, and raised his eyes to study each fair face. Time and again hope leaped high in his heart, but always disappointment smothered it. Edith was nowhere. Once he was all but certain she had smiled from an overhanging balcony; again he saw one like her on a terrace crammed with beauty. He could have sworn for an instant that her golden head peered from behind a group of dark Armenians. Each time he had to own himself mistaken.

"Be not so disturbed, comrade," said Matteo softly beside him. "Remember that she whom you seek knows not of your coming. Also, it is likely that all the great ladies of the court will be awaiting us in the Emperor's Hall of Audience."

Hugh turned gratefully to the jongleur. He had not spoken of what was irking him, yet Matteo had read his thoughts and known when to drop the needed word of sympathy. A lion in battle, Matteo was gentle and kindly as a woman in ministering to a friend.

"It is feckless of me to chafe so," Hugh admitted. "But I have a fear that the maid has been harmed by this idle court life--and I grew up with her as with a sister."

Matteo smiled discreetly.

"As the daughter of the Grand Acolyth," he replied, "she will be one of the principal dames of the Court. Her father's office is to follow the Emperor wherever he goes. Therefore she should be in close attendance upon the Empress."

The cavalcade was halted presently in the outer courtyard of the Imperial residence. The lords and knights dismounted, formed their ranks anew, and under the guidance of Court chamberlains, marched through the inner courtyard, paved with marble and decorated with flowering trees and spouting fountains, up a broad flight of tesselated steps, past a portico of granite monoliths and so into the Hall of Audience. Hugh caught his breath at the first glimpse of that gorgeous vista.

"May the Virgin aid me!" he stammered. "'Tis as long as a jousting-field!"

Columns of Parian marble, onyx, jasper, malachite, jade, polished granite, supported the lofty roof. The walls and floor were covered with mosaics of contrasting stones, cunningly carved and blended. The effect of the whole was a dazzling perspective of glowing colours, interspersed with portraits of Emperors, Empresses and generals. From the roof hung bronze lamps, supported by golden chains and burning scented oil. At the farther end, on an elevated throne that blazed with jewels, sat the Emperor Isaac, a frail, quavering, white-haired old man, who trembled under the weight of the crown that mocked the contrast of his gaudy vestments with his senile lips and seared-out eyes. His Empress, the Augusta Margaret, sister of King Emeric of Hungary, a stately dame who had been spared the rigours of his captivity, sat on a slightly lower throne beside him. Around them were clustered a brilliant court, and at the doddering Emperor's elbow Hugh marked the scarlet surcoat and winged helm of Sir Cedric. But of Edith he saw no trace amongst the bevy of beautiful ladies who attended the Empress.

The Crusaders, so different in their stained and rusty armour and tattered surcoats from the richness of the Greeks, paused in front of the steps to the throne; and Boniface stood forward with the Young Alexius.

"Fair lord," he said, "behold, we bring back to you your son!"

"Eh? Eh?" mumbled the Emperor. "My--my son? Yes, yes. My son."

One of the group of courtiers behind the Emperor leaned over and whispered in his ear. Hugh nudged Matteo. The courtier was the Cæsar Michael Comnenus.

"Eh? Yes, yes," Isaac continued as Comnenus stepped back. "You have brought my son. I thank you, lords. I have been sorely tried. The majesty of Cæsar's heir hath been set at naught. The wicked have prevailed a while. But God hath--hath----" He seemed to fumble for words and turned the hollow cavities that were his eyes from side to side.--"Where is my son?" he ended querulously.

Alexius knelt on the topmost step of the throne, and kissed his father's limp hand. Neither one of the pair showed any emotion, but

they spoke rapidly together in Greek.

"What do they say?" Hugh whispered to Matteo.

"The old Emperor is not such a fool as he looks," returned the jongleur. "He asks what brings these Franks in his son's train, and how much their services cost."

"They find no joy in each other's company," commented Hugh. "Nay, not even the Empress shows pleasure that her son is returned to her safe and whole."

"The Angeloi are a cold-blooded race," replied Matteo. "They have no affection. Fathers murder sons; sons blind fathers. It is all one to them, so be it there are power and luxury for them after the crime. As to the Empress, she is not this youth's mother. He was born of an earlier marriage."

Alexius rose from his knees, and faced the Crusaders.

"Lords of the host," he said in his harsh, unpleasant voice, "my father thanks you by me for the great services you have done him, and he bids me say that he wots well that these services are such that he could not reward you too much an he gave you the whole of his empire. But he craves now that you will permit him to withdraw with the chiefs of the host and his own counsellors that they may devise means whereby all shall be satisfied. And he bids those other Frankish lords and knights here present to take their pleasure as they will during the conclave and to treat his palace as their home."

The Emperor tottered to his feet, and leaning on the arms of his son and Comnenus, who came promptly to his side, led Boniface and Dandolo through a doorway which communicated with the private Imperial apartments. The remaining lords and knights stood about the hall, either talking among themselves or with such of the Greek nobles as understood the lingua franca. Pages appeared with goblets and jars of wine, offering to serve all who were thirsty.

Hugh surveyed the room again, and in despair came to a sudden determination.

"I will present myself to Sir Cedric," he said to Matteo. "Certes, he will know who I am, and can tell me of----"

"Ay, do so, comrade," returned Matteo, smiling merrily. "It may be she is not so far away as it seemeth you."

"I misdoubt she is wed or gone hence," said Hugh gloomily.

He swung his shield to his back, and started to walk toward the dais where Sir Cedric stood in converse with Villehardouin and Count Baldwin. But he had not walked three steps when a silvery voice saluted him.

"By your leave, sir knight! Pray do not haste so! And have you no thought for old friends of the days before you had golden spurs to your heels?"

"Edith!" exclaimed Hugh.

He turned, with a clash of arms, and stared uncomprehendingly at the elegant, slim figure in the clinging silken draperies and high conical headdress. Could this be the Edith he had known? The

comrade of boyish escapades, the breeched and jerkined rider of the black mare, the woman-child, hoydenish and demure, creature of tears and smiles? This wondrously beautiful person, with the haughty manner of a princess born to command?

"It is even I, oh, conqueror of Galata!"

"You knew me?" he gasped.

"Ay, verily, sir knight. I waited long for you to step up and greet me, and in the end I cast away my poor pride and sought you, supposing that perchance you had dropped me from your memory."

"I forget you?" said Hugh bewildered. "Nay, Edith. Hast--hast----"

His fingers sought instinctively the place under his hauberk where there nestled--had nestled for two years now--a frayed and soiled little glove.

"Do you seek for somewhat else than memory, Messer Hugh?" she questioned.

"It is a glove--you gave me," answered Hugh stumblingly.

She flushed.

"We will not speak of that now. Hast no curiosity to learn how I heard of you?"

"And Galata? Ay."

"There came one hither in the night--oh, a lady most fair to see, a very queen!--she and her father compassed the downfall of that clown Alexius. When the Empress made us known to one another she asked me if I knew of you. She sang your praises like a jongleur, Hugh. No knight in all the Frankish host to rival you. You must have served her well."

Hugh frowned.

"You mean the Lady Helena Comnena?" he said coldly. "She----"

"Who speaks my name?"

The dark, smiling face of Helena emerged from the nearby circle of courtiers.

"Ha, by the Panagia, 'tis my Lord Hugh! And hast found your old friend, Messer Hugh? Right glad she was of the news I gave her of you! You must come and see me, Hugh. We lodge in the Palace of the Porphyrogenitus beyond the Tower of Anemas. God keep you!" Still smiling, she was gone.

"You saved her from robbers in France, did you not?" asked Edith negligently.

"Ay," said Hugh dully. "She told you that?"

"Even so. Ah, Hugh, I dare wager there are a-many ladies to sing the praises of such a knight!"

Hugh shook his head stiffly.

"You mock me. Before I go hence, may I present to you my comrade, Messer Matteo of Antioch?"

"The jongleur? Ay, that may you! I have heard reports of his skill."

Matteo bowed low before her when Hugh beckoned him forward.

"May the Virgin guard you, lady," said the jongleur. "It is right pleasant for me to meet so staunch a friend of Hugh's--and those who are friends to him are friends to me."

"Is he so true a friend, this Hugh, Messer Matteo?" she asked.

Matteo's face lighted with the glow of an affection that was almost feminine in its intensity.

"He is as true a friend as the Lord God may give to a poor wanderer on this earth," he said simply.

"I hear great things of him," replied Edith. "I would all I heard came from lips like yours. You----"

The trumpets of the Court heralds brayed to announce the return of the Emperor and the chiefs of the host.

CHAPTER XX

TREACHERY

Search as he might, Hugh found no trace of his father in Constantinople. Through Villehardouin he obtained the interest of Boniface and Dandolo, and with their aid he brought his quest to the attention of the Emperor. But the brief audience with the blind Isaac was no more satisfying than his researches in other directions.

"Messer de Chesby, say you?" gabbled the old man. "Hee, hee, hee! Yes, yes, yes! He came hither before misfortune overcame me. I was a power in those days. By the Panagia, but men feared me! An I raised my finger they trembled. I remember I said to him----"

Comnenus, standing vigilantly at the Emperor's elbow, interrupted suavely.

"With favour, Augustus! The English knight asks not what you said to Sir James, but if you know what happened to him."

"I should be right glad to hear what the Augustus was pleased to tell my father," said Hugh curtly.

"Nay, 'twas naught," the Emperor answered hastily. "Some talk of my predecessor on the throne, belike. Men feared me, but they feared Andronicus more! Hee, hee, hee! There was a merry soul for you! And a quaint! He had vast love for the common people, and hate for the nobles! Not a senatorial family but felt his arm. He amassed great wealth, but there was naught to be had of it when I made search. The foul offspring of the Evil One! May the demons rend his limbs! May he broil on hell's coals! May he be in torment for water and shivering with cold! May the Panagia----"

Isaac rocked with emotion. A slight froth gathered on his lips that

were drawn tight over gaping yellow teeth.

"Be calm, Augustus," adjured Comnenus. "You will do yourself harm an you yield to this excitement. Messer Hugh, I like not to seem rude, but the Augustus hath suffered much, and he is not overstrong. An you will permit me to suggest----"

"All I seek from the Emperor is his aid in my search," snapped Hugh, conscious of a growing feeling of resentment against this sly, oily creature, so ready of tongue, so elusive of facts.

"The Augustus is only too happy to aid one of his deliverers, Lord Hugh. I do not overstate, I trust, Great Sovereign?"

"Yes, yes--give him my aid--tell him what you please--what matter?" mumbled the Emperor. "I like not to talk of Sir James. I disappeared myself. Hee, hee, hee! Strange things happen to men who disappear."

Comnenus struck a silver bell in token that the audience was over, but Hugh held his ground.

"Hast undertaken, then, to furnish me with a charter from the Emperor certifying to my right to question any and all in Constantinople?" he pressed.

"Ay, Lord Hugh, that may be arranged, an you will. Certes, there will be no difficulty. 'Tis no light task to rearrange the affairs of an Empire brought nigh to ruin, but an you will have patience, you shall have every help we may summon for you."

He raised his hand to strike the gong again, but still Hugh refused to move.

"One question more. What hath become of one Mocenigo, a Venetian renegade who was in the service of the False Alexius?"

"Mocenigo?" fenced Comnenus, blinking owlishly.

"Ay, Andrea Mocenigo," returned Hugh impatiently. "You knew him, Lord Cæsar. He was in your company at Venice."

"Oh, ay, now I remember the fellow," Comnenus agreed quickly. "The name is a common one, fair sir. But the man you mean--yes, I recall him. It is said in Constantinople that he hath fled with the False Alexius. At least, he hath gone hence. Mayhap there were enemies he feared an he had ventured to remain."

"Mayhap," said Hugh drily, and withdrew.

He repeated the conversation to Matteo, as they rode back to the Crusaders' camp, now re-established at Galata.

"There is somewhat strange in all this," assented the jongleur thoughtfully. "Ay, Hugh, Mocenigo was a spy for Venice, and Dandolo did not lie to us--which I do not credit for an instant. And we know that he consorted with Comnenus, who beyond question hath had a considerable hand in this business and is now the chief counsellor of Isaac. To be sure, there is the chance that Mocenigo feared to meet you."

"But why?" returned Hugh. "I like him not, but the man is no coward. And 'tis to be remembered that he hath the friendship of Dandolo.

Nay, I see it not. There is more to this than appears on the surface."

During the ensuing weeks, Hugh pressed his search without encouragement. Sir Cedric Halcroft, a bluff, plain-spoken man, in every detail like his brother, the Lord of Blancherive, gave such aid as he could, but said frankly that the quest was hopeless.

"Bethink you, Hugh," he declared kindly, "these many years I have quartered the ground you seek to cover, and I took up the scent when it was still fresh! I talked with men who had seen Sir James in Constantinople, but you will find such scarce to-day. Nobody knew aught of him or where he had gone. Nor is this strange. Constantinople is a vast place, compared to our western cities. It is no uncommon thing for a man--even a great man--to walk forth into its streets and not return. It may be he hath offended some noble or it may be he hath been overcome by a band of robbers or it may be that black magic or witchcraft have been called upon to do away with him. Among so many people who heeds it if one man--a stranger--disappears? There are miles of streets to search, thousands of houses to enter. I wish you all success, and what I may do for you that will I do right joyfully; but I counsel you not to build false hopes."

In the end, Hugh was compelled to agree that Sir Cedric had been right. He visited and questioned the chief officials of the city--the Prefects of the quarters, the Senators and Judges, the commanders of the municipal police; the Patriarch and the lesser clergy; the monks in charge of the rest-house maintained by the Hospitallers, where Crusaders journeying to and from the Holy Land were wont to stay; the officials in charge of the Posts; the asylums and hospitals. Nowhere did he find a hint of evidence to go upon. As Sir Cedric had warned him was probable, he did not even find a single person who professed to having seen his father in Constantinople, seven years before last mid-Lent. He had run up against a blank wall.

And to add to his disappointment he was constrained to the belief that his worst fears about Edith had been realised. He saw her frequently after their first meeting in the Hall of Audience, but they never came any nearer to their old footing. She was capricious, contemptuous, aloof, spontaneously friendly, mischievous, domineering and patronising by turns, but she was never the good comrade of the days in Crowden Wood. It almost seemed to Hugh that she feared he might demand a return to their former comradeship, and in his stubborn pride he adopted an attitude more unyielding than her own. Yet it puzzled him that she should constantly be twitting him on his knight-errantry for Helena Comnena.

The daughter of the Cæsar shared with Edith the attention of the varied Court that grew up about the Young Alexius, who, by reason of his father's infirmity, became the governing force of the Empire. They formed a startling contrast, the dark beauty and the fair; and each had her circle of admirers. When Edith frowned, Helena smiled; and more than once Hugh asked himself why he declined to develop a friendship proffered so openly as Helena's. But some instinct taught him to beware the subtly passionate advances of the Greek.

He would have been miserable, indeed, had it not been for the staunch devotion of Matteo, and the rapid progress of developments which permitted no man to mope over his own troubles. When he had satisfied himself that his search for his father was unavailing, and he was convinced that Edith would have none of him, he made up his

mind to push on ahead of the host to Palestine, intending to make inquiry of the Saracens if they knew aught of his father's fate. He was aware that this was a line of investigation which had been worked unsuccessfully hitherto, but in his unsettled state he was eager for anything which promised action.

But Villehardouin, to whom he broached his project, persuaded him to remain.

"It is not alone in selfishness that I say this, Hugh," said the Marshal. "In sooth, I know not what I should do without your cheerful aid and your ready pen. But setting that aside, there are reasons why every lance should remain with the host. Art young, lad, and hast a future before you. This venture of ours is not ended yet. I can say no more--ay, and I know no more. But in any case we are bound to remain here until the Emperor fulfils his treaty with us."

Alexius was then on progress through the Empire, attended by the Marquis Boniface of Montferrat and other lords, both Frankish and Greek, making arrangements with the local governments for the collection of the funds to defray the expenses of his undertakings with the host and showing himself to his subjects. He had made an initial payment toward the 200,000 marks he was pledged for, but thereafter he had fallen short consistently in the sums he had promised to deliver, and in answer to the protest of Boniface and Dandolo he had begged them to remain at Galata until the following spring, offering to provide the necessary provisions for the host and alleging that it would require at least that much time to collect the money he owed them. He also contended that the presence of the host would strengthen him against any disaffection which might be raised by the party of his uncle, the False Alexius, and would render easier the conclusion of the negotiations for the return of the Empire to religious subservience to Rome.

But the effect of the continued presence of the host was exactly the opposite to that which Alexius had anticipated. No two peoples could have been more opposed in their manners and habits than the Greeks and the rugged, impulsive French, Flemish and Italian warriors. One disagreement led to another, the knowledge of the Greeks that they must pay heavier taxes to reward the invaders of their country being no palliative for the misunderstandings that arose. Finally, the resentment of the Greeks flared up in an attempt to massacre the Latin colonists of the commercial and trading quarters within the walls--for the most part Pisans, Genoese, Florentines and other Italians, in no way allied to the French or Venetians.

In the street-fighting which ensued, one of the Latins started a fire near the Golden Horn walls, in the region which had been ravaged by the Venetians during the siege, and, fanned by a strong gale, the flames raged for two days and two nights, sweeping a broad belt of devastation across the city as far as the Marmora shore and narrowly missing the quarter surrounding the Augustaion, including the Great Church of the Divine Wisdom of the Incarnate Word--Justinian's St. Sophia; the Palace of the Senate, the Palace of the Patriarch, the Law Courts and the Palace of the Bucoleon.

The Greeks were frenzied with rage, and the first result of the catastrophe was to cement them all into one firm bond of hatred for the Crusaders, to whom they ascribed all their troubles. The survivors of the Latin colonies, some 15,000 in number, fled across the Golden Horn and took refuge in the camp of the host. Alexius hastened his return to the city, urged on by the news which reached him of the existing situation. He came back apparently more devoted

than ever to the cause of his Western friends, but within a week he had changed his outlook completely.

Instead of friendship, pleasant words and free promises, the leaders of the host met with coldness and ill-concealed displeasure when they visited the Palace. More significant still, it began to be difficult to secure the provisions needed for the maintenance of so many men. The money payments dwindled and stopped. The steps taken for raising a force of 10,000 Greeks to assist the Crusaders against the Saracens were abruptly rescinded. The negotiations between the Patriarch and the clergy of the host for the reconciliation of the Greek Church with Rome were dragged out until they became a dawdling bicker. Winter was approaching, and the lords of the host understood that they were facing a new crisis.

So matters stood at the end of November. The barons acted with their accustomed decision. A parliament was summoned and the situation was discussed in open assembly, for no modern republic is more independent and self-governing than was that feudal army. The cardinal principles of its government were that the leaders could act only with the consent of the rank and file and that the majority must always rule. In fact, the expedition was so democratic in character that it must have fallen apart from lack of cohesion and discipline had it not been for the outstanding personality of Dandolo. The barons, who were jealous of one another as equals, were willing to serve him and take his advice, partly because of his age and undoubted wisdom, and partly because he was an independent sovereign, with no feudal position.

It was Dandolo who dominated this parliament at Galata, exactly as he had dominated other gatherings of the host. He waited until the other chiefs had spoken. Then, without rising from his seat, he began:

"Lords, we are again come to a place where two roads divide before us. If we take one we shall leave here, denouncing the Greeks to the world as forsworn and take up our voyage at a time when it is difficult to travel on the sea and when we may not fight in Outremer. If we take the other, we shall call upon the Greeks to say what they mean to do, telling them that if they abide by their oaths we will continue in friendship with them and do all that men may to live in amity, but that if they do not, then shall we war upon them until they admit we are masters."

"How should we advantage ourselves thereby?" questioned a knight.

"We have taken their city once, lords," returned Dandolo coolly. "Certes we may take it again."

"Well spoken! Well spoken, Lord Doge!" applauded the barons. "What is done once may be done a second time! Let the Greeks look to themselves! We have condoned much! A just cause--God will aid us!"

When the clamour had died down Conon de Béthune, the Marshal of Champagne and Miles the Brabant were chosen to represent the host, with three captains of the Venetians to speak for the Doge. As the Ambassadors filed out of the pavilion in which the parliament was held, Villehardouin beckoned to Hugh.

"Art armoured, lad?" he whispered. "'Tis well. Ride with me into Constantinople. I shall be right glad to have another good sword by my side."

Whilst Hugh mounted Beosund, Matteo hurried up and pleaded with the Marshal to take him, too. But Villehardouin was adamant.

"There is naught would please me more, Messer Matteo," he said. "But the only reason I take Hugh is that we may have one amongst the embassy who can write down afterwards what passes. Art ready, lords? Then prick on, and St. Remi guide our way."

The ambassadors rode from Galata, crossed the head of the Golden Horn by the Bridge of the Camels and halted at the Gate of Blachernae. Here, when they announced their purpose, the warders admitted them, but insisted that they must leave their horses. They were conducted under guard through the outworks of the precincts of the palace, and after some delay were ushered into the Hall of Audience. The gorgeous room was crammed with nobles and their ladies dressed in the shimmering stuffs of the East; on the dais sat the Emperor Isaac and the Young Alexius. Comnenus, as Chancellor, stood before the throne. But instead of the smiles and pleasant greetings that hailed their first entrance into Constantinople, now the ambassadors encountered sour looks, muttered threats and disdain.

Hugh searched the throng for familiar faces. He saw Sir Cedric, resplendent as ever in scarlet surcoat and silvered mail, standing like a hoary old pine-tree at the Emperor's back, his face wooden in its impassivity. He saw Helena Comnena flitting through the group of ladies about the Empress. And despite himself, his glance was drawn to Edith's face that eyed him sadly from under her immense draped head-dress. His heart beat faster as her eyes met his. He hoped--he dared to think--that they were kinder than they had ever been, reminiscent of---- But Comnenus was speaking, and he forced himself to wrench his attention back to the weighty affairs of the moment.

"The Augustus greets you, lords, by me," said the Cæsar smoothly. "He asks the object of your visit, unannounced?"

"The Augustus has been wont to talk to us direct and not through his underlings," answered Conon de Béthune, who had been nominated spokesman of the embassy. "Why doth he change his policy?"

A rustle of anger shook the Court, and Alexius flushed on his throne. The blind Isaac only nodded his head and mumbled to himself, unheeding and unheeded.

"It is not for the Augustus to explain his policy," replied Comnenus coldly. "He withholds his favour for those he deems worthy of it."

"If he is a just prince, then why doth he not bestow his favour on those to whom he owes his power?" retorted Béthune. He turned directly to the two Emperors, ignoring the Chancellor. "Sires, we have come to you on the part of the barons of the host and the Doge of Venice. They would put you in mind of the great service they have done for you--a service known to the people and manifest to all men. You have sworn, father and son, to fulfil the promised covenants, and we have your charters in hand. But you have not fulfilled your covenants. Many times have we called upon you to do so, and now again we call upon you, in the presence of your barons, to make good your oaths.

"Should you do so, all will be well. The barons of the host and the Doge of Venice will hold you as lords and friends. But if you do not do so, they will cease to hold you as lords and friends, and they will endeavour to obtain their due from you by all the means in their power. And of this they give you warning, seeing that they would not

injure you, nor any one, without first defiance and challenge given; for never have they acted treacherously, nor in their land is it customary to do so. Now, Sire, you have heard what we have said. It is for you to take counsel and decide on your answer thereto."

Alexius leaped to his feet.

"A madness hath possessed you, Franks," he shouted furiously. "Take counsel on your words? I hurl them in your teeth! Think you that the Augustus, my father, must rely upon your arms for strength to-day? An you do not mend your manners we will show you the might of Rome; we will crush you, dogs; we will scatter your bones and throw them into the Bosphorus! Get hence! You try me over-much. Think well on your evil deeds and seek my pardon, else you may be food for ghouls and vampires. Get hence, I say!"

"Away with them!" howled the Court in ready anger. "Tear them asunder! Stab them!"

A swirling mob of Greeks closed around the little group of Franks, but at a wave of the hand from Sir Cedric Halcroft, the Varangian Guards lowered their axes and surrounded the ambassadors with a barrier of steel. Isaac mumbled and gibbered on his throne; Alexius cursed and threatened. It was Comnenus, white-faced and trembling, who managed to keep his head.

"Ay, protect them, Guards," he called. "Nay, lords, hold back. Let the barbarians depart in peace. It is not for senators and patricians of New Rome to forget themselves under insult."

Proudly erect, as became men who had bearded a ruler on his throne, the ambassadors passed from the Hall of Audience, leaving behind them a tempest of hate and baffled rage. Only the giant figures and sharp axes of the Varangians had stood betwixt them and death.

In the inner courtyard the Guards were replaced by under-chamberlains, who hurried them through a labyrinth of unfrequented passages toward the gate. They had not proceeded very far on their way when a page slipped up and touched Hugh on the arm.

"A lady must see you, Messer," he whispered.

Hugh thrilled. He had not been deceived; he had read Edith's eyes aright.

"How----" he started to ask.

"Follow me."

The boy turned and scuttled into the shadows. Hugh, after a brief hesitation, dropped out of the line and followed him. If Edith had sent for him, she must have some message she wished to give him before they were parted again by hostile arms. And with her father's influence he did not doubt she could see him safe out of the palace.

Presently, they came to a door heavily curtained, and the boy stepped aside.

"Enter, Messer."

Hugh found himself in a room dimly lighted, carpeted and hung with Saracen rugs. He looked around him--but saw no one. Then, of a sudden, two arms stole around his neck from behind; his head was

drawn back.

"So you came, Hugh," a voice whispered softly.

He twisted around, and caught her to him.

"Edith!"

Then he started back.

"St. Cuthbert! 'Tis you!"

Helena Comnena looked at him with eyes still moist and lustrous. Her breast rose and fell.

"Are you so disappointed, Hugh?"

Hugh found himself breathing no less hard.

"Disappointed? Nay. Why would you make me out uncouth? But----"

"But!" she mocked him.

"I expected not you."

"Ah, you expected not me! What----"

"What right had I to suppose that the message came from you?" said Hugh. "You wrong me, lady. I am beholden to you for your kindness, but my comrades----"

"They are gone! Do not trouble about them. We speak now of you and myself. Hugh, am I fair?"

He regarded her, wondering.

"Very fair, lady."

"Is there one fairer?"

"Nay, I think not."

"Would you like to have me, Hugh?" She came closer to him, and it seemed as though she imparted a fluid quality to the atmosphere, as though they two existed in some impalpable, shadowy essence which must dissolve them into one. "Would you like to hold me--as you held me a moment since? Would you like to feel my arms around you--so?" Her arms went around him again, and he stood motionless, paralysed. "Would you like to feel my lips on yours--so?" Her lips burned his, clung, caressed. She threw back her head a little, and looked up at him out of bold, blazing eyes that dared and questioned. "No woman can delight you as can I, Hugh. No woman can----"

Hugh fought his way blindly back to self-control. He pushed her from him.

"Nay," he whispered hoarsely. "It may not be. I want you not."

Her eyes darkened; a terrible light flashed in them. But he met their gaze full and square, thankful for his newfound manhood.

"You fool," she hissed.

She wound herself around him with a strength more than human.

"Ho, guards!" she called in a high, shrill voice, vibrant with hate. "Ho, guards! Take him!"

Hugh was too bewildered to struggle. A hand jerked his sword from his side; other hands lashed bonds about his arms.

Across the room from him stood Helena Comnena, her hair blown loose, her eyes twin hells, her hands opening and shutting spasmodically.

"You fool," she said to him again. "You might have had--anything. Now you shall have nothing. You will be begging me on your knees to save you from the torture, to spare you one eye of your two, to have you killed quickly. Oh, you poor fool! You could have had Helena Comnena and an Empire! Now you shall have a dungeon--like that other fool who spawned you!"

CHAPTER XXI

HOW HUGH'S QUEST WAS ENDED

The black mutes who had answered Helena's call stood back when their captive was trussed helpless. With arms folded across their chests, they waited like bronze statues in the flickering light of the resin torches set in brackets on the walls. There were six of them, Ethiopian slaves of the palace, who were employed on matters where their dumb loyalty could be turned to account, imperturbably cruel and merciless.

Hugh drew himself erect. He was disappointed, not fearful. He had come expecting to meet Edith, and instead he had met treachery and hatred.

"You serve me most unkindly, lady," he said with simple dignity.

Helena laughed harshly.

"I serve you unkindly? Man, I tell you you know not what awaits you. What I have done will mean nothing. 'Tis but the beginning."

"You have betrayed a friend," replied Hugh steadily. "Certes, that is naught to boast of."

Again she laughed, shrilly, almost hysterically.

"Oh, you fool! What do your Western notions of chivalry mean to me? I am a Greek! I am a woman! When they decided to trap you, I bade them let me try other means first. I thought to save you--ay, to put you in the way of power and might above all other men. And you--you--poor blind worm that you are!--you scorn me--scorn Helena Comnena!"

"It is in my mind that did I accept your means of saving me, I would lose my honour thereby," answered Hugh. "But 'tis a matter we need not argue. If you will but give thought to what you have done, lady, I trow you will see that you may gain naught by imprisoning me or slaying me. My comrades without will ask swift accounting and exact a vengeance upon the Emperor and the city."

"Faugh!" She snapped her fingers in his face. "That for your comrades! Fools they are, as blind as you yourself. Why, my first aim was to save you from their fate! 'Twas so I planned. What can they do against Constantinople? They are helpless; anon they will come crawling on their knees begging food."

"They prevailed against the city once," returned Hugh calmly.

"They? You deceive yourself! 'Twas not they, but I. Oh, I wot well old Dandolo stormed a few towers, but what did he gain thereby? Naught but dead men and sore wounds. 'Twas all you could do with his aid to withstand the Greeks who came against you from the city. Had there been any one but the False Alexius, craven hound, to lead our people, they, would have torn you in pieces. Even so, 'twas my father and I turned the city from Alexius, and put Isaac back on the throne--and when the time is ripe we will put another in his place."

Hugh shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it as you will, lady. I will abide in patience whatever end God hath for me."

"'Tis a sorry end," she flashed. "A puling, bloody, tortuous end of whining misery. We will make use of you--as we made use of your host--and when we have that which we seek, we will cast you in a dungeon to die--as those of the host will die from battle and hunger and thirst."

Hugh held silent. By speech, he perceived, he only inflamed still further the woman's hatred. But she was not finished with him. She came close to him, so close that her breath fanned his cheek.

"As for that trumpery, white-and-gold demoiselle you thought to find, Messer Hugh, know that I shall make it my especial charge to see that she comes to no less pleasant an end than yours. Ah, that hurts, doth it? I have touched your fears. Be assured I will have her in mind. For the present, 'tis true, I may not touch her. But a time is coming when she will be in my power. Then----" She laughed again that shrill, hysterical peal, fraught with madness--"then, I say, I may choose to place the wreckage that was you so that you may see the sport these black men make of her."

Hugh's face grew purple; the veins swelled out on his forehead. Even Helena shrank back before the hatred in his face.

"You are not a woman," he said hoarsely. "You are a devil. May God condemn you to the depths of hell! May the Virgin turn her face from you and mark your wickedness before the world! May the Fore-runner and He who came after him condemn you in the Court of Heaven! May Holy Peter at the Gate----"

Helena clasped her hands over her ears.

"Take him away," she screamed to the blacks. "Take him to the Cæsar!"

As his guards hustled him from the room he had his last sight of her, collapsed in a chair. The fire had gone out of her; she was a mediæval woman, trembling before curses that she knew were justified.

The blacks conducted him through a long series of passages, continually descending into the foundations of the palace enclosure, deep down under the terrace upon which it was built. Torches or lamps lighted the way, and the guards encountered at intervals were

all Æthiopians, for not even the Varangians were admitted to this secluded part of the palace beneath the Imperial residence. It seemed to Hugh that they walked an interminable distance before they reached a heavy door which swung open to the tap of one of his guards.

The room inside was stone-walled and scantly furnished. In one corner gleamed a brazier heaped with lighted coals in which were thrust long-handled iron contrivances. About the walls were ranged other machines, the use of which Hugh understood at a glance. There were a rack, a wheel, a machine for stretching apart the legs to cause a rupture, an iron boot for crushing the leg-bones, thumb-screws, a chair from the seat of which sharp spikes could be shot upward and divers other fiendish tools. It was probably the most perfectly equipped torture-chamber in the world.

After one swift glance around the room, Hugh's eyes fastened on the table at the farther end. On the opposite side of it sat Comnenus and Mocenigo. The face of the Italian was creased by a tigerish grimace.

"Ha, Messer de Chesby," he said with mock courtesy. "I greet you well. Belike, fair sir, you will recall the farewell I gave you upon the occasion of our last meeting? I have been looking forward to this day these many months past."

Hugh eyed him with contempt and turned upon the Cæsar, who affected to be deeply engrossed in a scroll of parchment.

"A right knightly rôle you play, Lord Cæsar," said Hugh cuttingly. "You set your daughter to trap a man who saved your lives, and then prepare to torture him--to gratify what spite I know not, save it be to satisfy the outcast beside you."

Comnenus ruffled the parchment abstractedly.

"'Tis not a pleasure to be compelled to seem ungrateful in your eyes," he answered. "But 'twould seem, Messer Hugh, that you are that type of impetuous youth who refuses to heed good advice. Do you bear in mind the warning I gave you not to venture to Constantinople?"

"That do I."

"But you would not heed me. I bade you forget your mad quest for your father. Again you would not heed me. Constantinople beckoned to you like an evil charm. Perchance, though, 'twas not Constantinople but the Treasure of the Bucoleon?"

He shot the words rapidly at Hugh, eyeing him keenly from under bushy brows.

"I know not what you mean," said Hugh indifferently.

"You know not of the Treasure of the Bucoleon?"

"Nay."

"Think well, Messer Hugh. An we use force upon you, you will have great dolour."

"I do not know even what it is. The Treasure of the Bucoleon? What may it be?"

Mocenigo intervened impatiently.

"Why debate with him, Cæsar? Let us show him first what suffering means."

Comnenus looked questioningly toward the instruments that surrounded them.

"Ay, we might give him a lesson. Summon Bartolommeo and bid him fetch in some wretch who awaits punishment."

Comnenus nodded approval.

"That is worth trying."

He touched a bell, and a door behind the table opened to admit another man, very short and broad in stature. There was something familiar about his pock-marked face and barrel-like chest, and when he squinted his eyes about the room Hugh recognised him for the swart shipman who had beset the cog _Alice_ in the Narrow Seas, after striving unsuccessfully to induce the comrades to take passage with him.

"Hast seen this springald before, Bartolommeo," said Mocenigo.

"Ay, Magnificence. 'Tis a lusty youth and a wary."

"We have hopes to induce him to hold speech with us, Bartolommeo."

"That may be, lord, that may be."

"I dare swear you can manage it."

"Mayhap, mayhap."

Bartolommeo turned to Hugh.

"Dost bear me in mind, fair sir?"

"Right well," returned Hugh drily. "Satan must have come to your aid, for I had hoped you were drowned ere this."

Bartolommeo burst into a roar of laughter that echoed through the chamber.

"Said I not 'twas a lusty cock--ay, and can crow to perfection! Know, good youth, that I am dowered with as many lives as a cat! It takes more than a dose of the Greek fire to send me to my spit in hell. And whilst we speak of that, I beseech you, tell me was the device yours or that apple-faced English shipman's?"

"'Twas my comrade's," replied Hugh amusedly.

"The jongleur?"

"Ay."

"A wise man of his hands, by St. Bacchus. Well, lords, what am I to do for the young knight?"

"Show him upon another what may happen to himself, an he doth not tell what he knows," directed Mocenigo.

Bartolommeo pursed up his lips.

"As you will, fair sir, as you will," he assented doubtingly. "But I know this breed. 'Tis a stubborn one, a desperate one, a strong-backed one! Hast knowledge of----"

"Have done," said Mocenigo. "'Tis no pleasant thought--the prospect of looking forward to having his eyes burned out. Doubt not he will weaken."

"As ordered, Magnificence, as ordered," assented Bartolommeo. "Bide but a moment."

He withdrew through the door by which he had entered, to return immediately dragging a miserable young Greek, whose arms and legs were fettered together.

"There is naught about this to be sorry for," he remarked cheerfully, as he deposited his victim on the floor beside the brazier and beckoned several of the guards to his side. "He hath a foul record as an iconoclast, and is charged with conspiring against our good lord, the Emperor. So!"

He removed one of the long-handled irons from the fire, and the guards pinned down the hapless wretch upon the floor. Hugh shut his eyes and gripped his teeth together.... There was an awful wail of agony ... a smell of burning ... a meaningless babble of pain and expostulation.

"Neatly done, and I do claim credit for myself," said Bartolommeo, as he thrust the iron back into the brazier. "Take him forth, guards. An he doth not confess whence he had the poison found in his possession, he is to have his right hand lopped off this day week."

The pitiful figure was carried out, and Mocenigo addressed Hugh again.

"You did not enjoy that sight, Messer Hugh?"

Hugh took a step nearer to the table, so that his face was clear in every feature to his interrogators.

"Mark me well in what I say," he answered evenly. "An you venture to torment me in any way, by fire, by the rack, by bone-crushing, what you will, I will make an end of myself--I will strangle myself, if I may. If I may not, I will starve myself to death. And what I know--whether it is what you seek or otherwise--will die with me."

"Well spoken, well spoken," commented Bartolommeo impersonally. "Said I not so, Magnificence?"

"'Tis the answer the other made," agreed Mocenigo in a puzzled tone. "Strange, is it not? The same answer from both. What doth it mean?"

"Nay, then, they must have had intercourse," rejoined Comnenus, fretfully. "'Tis manifest. This is not accident. 'Tis the same attitude--identical."

"In that case, we may move slowly," said Mocenigo. "Ha, by the Panagia, I have an idea! How if----"

He inclined his head to the Cæsar's ear, and murmured rapidly in Greek. Whilst they talked, Bartolommeo leaned against the wall close by the brazier and whistled to himself.

"Ay, 'tis as good a plan as any," approved Comnenus at last. "There is much to be said for it. Let one work upon the other. 'Twill be an incentive to each. So be it, then."

Mocenigo turned to Hugh.

"For the time-being, Messer Hugh, you shall taste the pleasures of a dungeon under Blachernae. You have seen the fate we may give you, and doubt not we shall give it to you, an we see fit, despite your threats. But in the meantime we will let you think of it, turn it over in your mind, dwell upon the life of a blind man and the sensations of being chopped slowly apart, limb by limb. Bartolommeo!"

"Magnificence!"

"Take the Englishman to the Tower of Anemas. Put him in with the old one."

"With the old one?" Bartolommeo threw back his head and gave vent to another roar of his bull-like laughter. "Ha, ha, ha! By St. Bacchus, but that is a dainty play! No one hath the wit for devising pleasantries like Messer Mocenigo. May the devil smile upon me, but I would have looked forward to this, had I but known! Come, Messer Hugh, come with me! I will guide you. An you but knew, mayhap you would think fit to bestow a small dole upon one who hath guided you to your journey's end--as, belike, he may guide you yet to the end of a greater journey! A great guide is old Bartolommeo!"

The black guards closed around them, and once more Hugh found himself in the draughty passages under the Palace. But presently they ascended a flight of stairs, and emerged into a narrow, high-walled courtyard. Overhead the early stars were twinkling frostily in the wintry sky.

"Look your last on Heaven, Messer Hugh," counselled Bartolommeo as they hurried along. "Ay, by Bacchus, His like to be your last look! Tarry a moment--I do not grudge it to you!--'tis a fair sight, is it not? To be young, and to have the stars to look upon! Ha, I would I had not a life of joyous sin behind me! How much more merrily might I have sinned had I had the experience I now possess! This way, good youth. To your right--up these steps. So! The stars are gone."

An Ethiopian guard opened a metal gate, and swung it shut on their heels. They descended a corkscrew stair in the hollow of an immensely thick wall, their footsteps echoing hollowly in the cavernous space. At the lowest level, they came out upon a corridor as black as night, and the guards were forced to halt and light a lamp which was ready in a niche of the wall. A few paces on, and Bartolommeo stopped at a metal-bound door.

"May the devil smile upon me, but 'tis like visiting an old friend," he remarked, as he fumbled with a bunch of keys. "I must have a look before you go in. Belike, he will be pleased to see me again."

He opened the door and peered within.

"Ha, Magnificence, how pass the days?" he called. "'Tis Bartolommeo Caraducci asks. We have not met in many a long day."

"Doth the devil yet spare you, Bartolommeo?" replied a deep, ringing voice that sent a thrill up Hugh's spine. "How lonesome must be all the fiends!"

Bartolommeo chuckled.

"A rare spirit, by St. Bacchus! A rare spirit! We were talking of you but now. How you keep up I cannot see, fair sir. Never knew I one like you, and God knows I have served the devil over-long. But we have a change for you, a diversion, ay, a companion. How will it seem after--ha, 'tis seven years now, is it not?--ay, going on eight? I wish you joy of one another. There will be much to talk over. It may be---- But I talk too long. In with you, Messer Hugh."

He gave Hugh a push and the door slammed shut.

"Rest well, fair sirs. Bartolommeo will not forget you."

A roar of hoarse laughter, and footsteps retreating in the distance. Then--silence.

But gradually Hugh became conscious of a man's laboured breathing. In the pitch-darkness of the dungeon it was impossible to see the stranger, yet his presence was as palpable as though verified by touch. He stood a few feet distant, almost within reach, drawing in breaths in great, gusty sobs, uncannily speechless. At last Hugh could stand it no longer. Was the man, perchance, a lunatic, despite that resonant voice and quick reply to Bartolommeo? Was it Mocenigo's subtle purpose to subject him to the ravings of a madman, hoping thereby to wear down his spirit?

"Who are you?" he asked abruptly, scarce recognising his own voice as it rolled back and forth betwixt the stone walls of the dungeon. "Are you knight or common man?"

The stranger gasped. "You speak the lingua franca? Art not a Greek? My God, art really human? I forbore to speak when that demon left. I was afraid to. I was afraid it was but another of his tricks. But you are really there? Let me touch you, Messer. Ay, I can feel you. Armour? Art a knight! St. James, 'tis impossible to believe! Nay, but I wrong you foully thus to rejoice when you are brought down to this bitter captivity! Ha, fair sir, I cry your pardon. Prithee, believe I am nigh mad with joy at possessing human company. 'Tis years--I forget how long; that fiend told us; but I forget--since last I clasped a human hand. Ah, God, sweet Christ is my witness I have longed for this!"

Hugh felt the man's fingers wandering over his surcoat and mail, and when they came to the bonds which ill fastened his arms behind him, the prisoner exclaimed in quick pity:

"I will release you, Messer. You must be in sore pain to be so constrained in armour. By your favour! There, 'tis done."

The loosened cords fell to the floor, and Hugh was able cautiously to move his arms back into their normal position, strained joints creaking protestingly.

"I give you thanks, Messer," he said. "Are you French or Italian?"

"I am English."

A myriad lights danced in the darkness before Hugh's eyes.

"English? I--I, too, fair sir, am English."

"Then doth my pity for you grow, Messer," answered the ringing voice

gravely. "'Twere doubly bad fortune that a fellow-countryman should come to this low estate. They have a saying in Constantinople that he who is sent to the Tower of Anemas comes forth a corpse."

Hugh reached out and gripped the stranger's shoulders.

"Your name?" he rasped betwixt gritted teeth.

"My name?" The stranger laughed pleasantly, and laid a soothing hand over one of Hugh's. "Certes, 'tis so long since I thought of myself by name that I am like to forget it. In the days when I lived, fair sir, I was called James de Chesby."

Hugh sank on his knees, dragging the other with him.

"Father, father," he cried brokenly. "I am Hugh! I am your son!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE TREASURE OF THE BUCOLEON

A shudder wrenched Sir James's body.

"It cannot be! It cannot be!" he groaned. "Nay, I go mad. 'Tis as I feared. At last it hath come. Oh, Holy Lady of Heaven, I conjure you by my sweet wife, take pity on this poor sufferer, and----"

For the first time Hugh knew tears.

"But it is I, Hugh, father," he insisted. "Be not disturbed. You do not dream. I am Hugh that you left with Prior Thomas as a little babe."

"Hugh? But how come you here?"

"I came seeking you." Hugh laughed bitterly. "I had hoped to save you, mayhap, or bring you such succour as you needed. Well, at the least, I may share your prison with you--thanks to the craft of my enemies."

"And mine, fair son. But prithee tell me how knew you where to seek me?"

Sir James's voice had steadied. He sat by Hugh on the dungeon floor, one arm encircling his shoulders.

"Nay, I knew not. But I have a friend, one Matteo of Antioch, a jongleur, a man wise and cunning in the affairs of Outremer, and from him and others I heard how you had disappeared in Constantinople. By his advice I journeyed hither, trusting that I might learn what had become of you. I had no settled plan. My one thought was to find you."

"But you took great risk, Hugh."

"Nay, for I came with the host."

"The host!" repeated Sir James. "What host, fair son?"

"Know you not----"

Hugh's heart leaped into his throat as he grasped the fact of the awful isolation in which his father had lain.

"I know naught," answered Sir James sadly. "For nigh eight years, Hugh, the world hath gone its way, and James de Chesby ignorant thereof. What kings have passed, who reigneth upon earth, what wars have been fought and lost and won--I know not. I have bided here in my dungeon, living in the memories of the past and in the hope that some day Heaven would welcome me none the less for a shameful end."

The tears came again to Hugh's eyes.

"There is much to tell," he began.

"Nay, it can wait," interrupted his father. "Before all else, I would hear of you yourself, Hugh. You completed your twenty-one years at Chesby, as my charter provided?"

"Ay, father, but with an ill grace."

"I doubt not, but I am glad of it, Hugh. It gave you a few years more of English freedom and the sunlight ere you came to this."

"But what avails this, an I have found you!"

Sir James hugged Hugh's mailed shoulders.

"Selfish I am, God wot," he said. "But I cannot find it in my heart to grieve. Ah, Hugh, for a score of years I have thought of you and wondered how you fared--ay, if you lived. I dealt ill by you, fair son. I was wrong to allow my sore dolour for her that was your mother to sway me from the duty of a parent. But St. James be my witness that I intended to return ere you came to manhood. When I voyaged to Constantinople for the last time 'twas with intent to fulfil my errand there and then return to England."

"If only you had!"

"God did not will it so. Doubt not, Hugh, our Lord dealt wisely when he brought me this suffering. Perchance, I had grown selfish in my quest for fame. But enough of this. I must have your story. 'Twill seem like a breath of the free world outside. This host you speak of, fair son--how came it hither?"

So Hugh recounted the history of the Crusade, and its diversion from Babylon, first to Zara, and then to Constantinople, and the falling-out between the Crusaders and the Greeks. He was interrupted frequently, for Sir James must ask questions as to the leaders and questions of policy, and how battles had turned. And after these had been explained, they came back to Hugh's own story, and Hugh detailed his adventures, beginning with the coming of Mocenigo to Blancherive.

"Mocenigo!" exclaimed his father. "That foul knave! Was there with him a swart, squat shipman----"

"Bartolommeo?"

"Ay, Bartolommeo Caraducci, he who brought you hither?"

"Nay, I met not Bartolommeo at that time. But after, when I came to sail for Outremer, he crossed my path."

Hugh told the story of the sea-fight in the Narrow Seas, and Sir James listened with keen relish.

"Ay, 'twas well-contrived," he applauded. "This Matteo is a man-at-arms of worth. I would I might meet with him. As for Bartolommeo, scoundrel that he is, I have a friendly regard for him, if only that he is no hypocrite and sins openly for the love of sinning. 'Twas he captained the galley _Holy Dove_, which brought me to Constantinople, and he, acting under Mocenigo's instructions, trapped me here."

"But how was that, father?" asked Hugh, amazed.

"'Tis a long story. But first we must have yours. Then I will make all clear to you."

So Hugh resumed the interrupted thread of his narrative, and described the journey across France, with the rescue of the Comnenoi in the forest near Troyes.

"This Comnenus, also, warned you not to journey to Constantinople?" exclaimed Sir James. "Then he is in it, too!"

"In what?"

"Nay, I will tell all, fair son, when the time comes. Do you finish first your tale. By St. James, 'tis one the jongleurs will make much of, or I do not know the breed of chivalry!"

Hugh described the meeting with the Marshal of Champagne, the passage overland into Italy, the arrival at Venice and the reappearance of Mocenigo. Sir James gave eager attention to every statement, but was especially interested in the sidelights Hugh was able to cast upon the intrigues underlying the conduct of the Crusade.

"And where was Lion-Heart all this time?" he broke in impatiently. "I say naught against Boniface of Montferrat. He comes of a good house. But there should have been a prince of kingly rank to lead such a host, and of all princes who is there like Lion-Heart?"

"But--but--" Hugh choked, knowing how hard the blow he must deal, "but Lion-Heart is dead--long since."

"Dead? Lion-Heart dead?"

Sir James was silent a long time, and when he aroused himself it was to sigh deeply:

"It brings home to me that I am become an ancient man, fair son. Lion-Heart is dead, and you are grown to manhood and the world goes well without my aid! Why should I fret for liberty?"

"Because there is many a good stroke to be given," replied Hugh. "I marvel at the breadth and thickness of your shoulders yet, fair lord. We shall win free. I was hopeless, but now I am resolved to be free. Ah, do not despair! Bethink you how much worse would be our lot, an we were separated in our captivity."

"Well spoken, Hugh! The true knight never falters. Let it be so. We will proclaim ourselves unconquered, and hope to the end. To say truth, 'tis only this feeling which hath kept me alive. I have said to myself that I would not yield, that I would keep my body strong and my heart clean and my head clear, so that if God in His infinite

wisdom saw fit to recall me to the world, I might take my place without men saying: 'He was James de Chesby.'"

"But how have you kept your body strong?" asked Hugh.

"By labour. This dungeon is sufficiently large. For their own reasons, my captors have sought to protect my health. Therefore I have had sufficient food and covering. I have devised for myself numerous exercises and bodily contortions, which make pliable the muscles and preserve strength. I walk, run, leap and dance for hours in the day, until weariness assails me. For the result do but feel of my limbs."

Indeed, Hugh was amazed at the hardness of the knotted muscles on his father's gaunt body.

"You are a lesson to me," he acknowledged humbly. "An I had been in your place, the desolation would have driven me mad in a year."

"Ay, for you are but a youth, with all life before you," returned Sir James. "My life is behind me. I have memories to dwell upon, and the future holds few worries. Nay, for me the future is only death, and there are times when I would welcome it, an it would but come to me on a hard-fought field, with brave knights at my side. But enough of myself. Tell me more of this venture of yours."

Hugh took up his story, and sketched in detail how the comrades had followed Mocenigo to the Isle of Rabbits and what they had heard there. Sir James could not contain himself.

"The foul hound! So he would do. Not content with playing for two sides, he must try a third. Certes, he is in the pay of the Saracens and the Greeks, as well as the Venetians; and when the time comes he will sell out those two of the three who promise him least profit. I know him--and if I have one prayer I press beyond all others, 'tis that I may be permitted to send him to his doom in hell. But I prick you from your path, Hugh. What of this Comnenus and his daughter whom you met again?"

Hugh told of the Parliament held at Zara, and the introduction of the Young Alexius; the gradual growth of the Comnenian interest with the Prince and the Cæsar's eventual rise to be Chancellor of the Empire.

"Ha, there is another evil plotter!" Sir James interrupted again. "I place him now. He is a cousin of the Emperor Andronicus. I dare swear that he nurseth a hope of obtaining the vermillion buskins. 'Tis a pretty cross-work of villainy."

"Ay, his daughter boasted to me after I was made prisoner that they could place whom they wished upon the throne," volunteered Hugh.

"His daughter? What manner of woman is she?" enquired Sir James with reawakened interest.

Hugh blushed in the darkness.

"Most fair," he answered briefly.

"You have not told me how you were made prisoner, fair son?"

"'Tis not a story I am proud of," replied Hugh. And in as few words as possible he described the coming of the embassy, and the message which had been whispered to him by the page as they withdrew.

"Stay," exclaimed his father. "Who was this maid you thought had sent the page? Oh, a daughter of Sir Cedric Halcroft? She that you mentioned Mocenigo was sent for? Sir Godfrey's niece? Ha, I see. You have an interest in the maid, Hugh?"

Hugh picked at the straps of his armour.

"Ere she left England she gave me her gage to wear," he admitted slowly.

"You still wear it?"

"Ay."

"And she?"

"Nay, I know not."

"She is a good maid?"

"There never lived a sweeter."

"Ha, so, fair son. The Virgin guard her. Now, do you finish your tale."

Sir James sat speechless until Hugh came to the account of the scene in the torture-chamber and Comnenus's question about the Treasure of the Bucoleon.

"And then?" he pressed.

"He would not believe me when I told him I knew not even what it was."

"And you did not?"

"Nay, how should I?"

Sir James drew a deep breath of relief.

"You had no thought of gain in coming hither?" he asked almost jealously.

"Nay, fair lord, I wished only to seek you out, for I was sure always that you lived. I know not why I was so certain, but in my heart there was never doubt. It was as if a voice spoke in my ear, saying: 'Your father lives.' I was wroth with those who doubted it. I have thought--" Hugh hesitated, then plunged on--"I have thought my lady mother, watching over us twain from Heaven, hath whispered the message in my ear."

"Doubt not that she did," affirmed Sir James solemnly.

Both were silent for a space, murmuring prayers upon their knees, for they lived in the Age of Faith and they believed that they had experienced what was close to a miracle.

"Did Comnenus threaten you with torture?" asked Sir James after he had risen from his knees.

"Ay, and at Mocenigo's suggestion they demonstrated it to me on the body of a prisoner."

"What said you?" questioned Sir James eagerly.

"I told them an they tormented me in any way, I would kill myself."

"Said you so, indeed? By St. James, fair son, you are as I would have you! 'Twas so I have answered them, each time the threat was made, and because they knew I meant what I said and that if I died my secret would perish with me, they forbore to make good the threat."

"They said as much, but I did not then know whom they meant," replied Hugh. "Prithee, fair lord, an I do not ask what is forbidden, what is this Treasure of the Bucoleon? Is it the cause of your imprisonment?"

"Ay, so, Hugh. But that you may understand the matter wholly, I will tell my story from the beginning. 'Tis a long tale, and a fair bargain, mayhap, for the entertainment you have given me. Ah, God, Hugh, if you only knew what these hours have meant to me! My own son by my side, his love for me made known, brave tales of knightly venture in my ears and new hope for the future! It gives strength to my right arm again."

"God send that you may yet use your sword on these knavish Greeks," declared Hugh impetuously.

"An He wills it, doubt not 'twill come to pass! But to my tale. Hugh, as I have said, I owe you amends for the injustice I did you in leaving you to the upbringing of priests and strangers; but if you have known love for a woman you will understand the passion of desolation that possessed me when your mother died. I loved her not as many lords love wives. She was not a plaything, a toy, a source of diversion when I returned weary from the chase or the lists. I loved her with all my soul; she was everything to me. She seemed to represent life itself.

"When she died, I even hated you for being the cause of her death, and I could not bear to look upon your face. Prior Thomas knew my trouble, and his advice was that I should fare forth to Outremer, seeking in action surcease from the pain which threatened the welfare of my soul and eke the greater ease of my gracious lady. He offered to protect you and guard my lands. I accepted his advice, hoping that in service against the infidel I might not only win relief from the burden of sorrow I bore, but induce God to forgive me for the blasphemies I had been guilty of in the first realisation of my loss.

"It is not necessary, Hugh, that I should tell you now everything which occurred in the years that followed, but on my way to the Holy Land I visited Constantinople. In those days the Emperor who ruled was Andronicus Comnenus, a man of advanced years, but indomitable courage and enterprise. He had been an exile most of his life, and had suffered much. It was his policy to bear down upon the nobles and the clergy and to exalt the common people. Much ill is said against him now. He is accused of grave crimes and wickednesses, many of which--God rest his soul!--I doubt not he committed.

"But in the main he strove for justice for the oppressed, and that was something the nobles and the priests could not forgive him. They resisted as best they could, and he dealt with them heavy-handedly, slaying, torturing, mutilating and despoiling, and amassing vast treasures thereby. He was hated and feared. I cannot tell you how terribly he was hated. There was a fierceness in his temper which was almost inhuman. Mayhap, suffering in youth and over-indulgence had injured his mind. Howbeit he had few friends, and when I came to

Constantinople he conceived a liking for me. Ere long he could not bear that we should be separated.

"Ask not why this was so. For one thing, I did not fear him. For another thing, being not a Greek, he had no cause for doubting my faithfulness. But I do not profess to penetrate the interior of his dark soul. Only God can know the reasons which actuated him. At his solicitation, I prolonged my stay and dwelt in a suite of rooms in the Great Palace. He was a true friend to me. He sympathised with me in my loss. He respected my endeavour to make reparation for the blasphemy of my grief. He trusted in me absolutely.

"One night when we sat together alone, he told me that he was convinced he should not reign long. The nobles were too eager in their hatred of him, and the Angeloi were then already lifting up their heads, anxious to seize the throne. The priests, too, were against him, and the common people would side with whoever gained success, forgetting quickly the justice he had given them. He asked me if I would assist him in a certain matter, and when he assured me that it would not involve the shedding of blood, I assented.

"Then he told me that all the treasure he had amassed from the nobles he had punished--truly, Hugh, a sum passing belief, millions of Byzants--he had set aside to constitute a fund for the rebuilding of the Empire. But he could not trust the rulers who came after him, and therefore he had hidden it in a certain place in the confines of the Palace of the Bucoleon. It was his desire that I should consent to have the secret of its location imparted to me, and after he was dead exert my own judgment as to whether the treasure should be revealed or not. It was his wish, in this respect, that I should carry the secret with me to my grave, an I had any doubt that whoever was entrusted with the wealth would employ it for aught save the advancement of the Empire.

"Shortly thereafter by the terms of my vow I was obliged to depart for the Holy Land, and not many months had passed when Andronicus was assassinated, as he had foreseen, and Isaac Angelos took his place. In some way--I know not how--the story of the Treasure of the Bucoleon had become known to the inner circle of Greeks who ruled the Empire. Isaac knew of it, and sent to me repeatedly, bidding me come and reveal it to him. But I was fighting lustily to preserve the Holy Sepulchre and, afterwards, to save what we could of the Kingdom of Jerusalem from Saladin, and moreover I doubted always Isaac's right to the treasure, for report said of him that he was more concerned with dissipation and pleasure than with the well-being of his subjects.

"But in Lent of the year 1196, he sent me a most urgent request, placing it in the light of a favour to him and pointing out that under the terms of my obligation to Andronicus I owed it to him to give him the opportunity of proving his right and claim. As I have told you, I was then hungering for a sight of you, the babe I had so unjustly hated, and it was in my mind to return to England. Therefore I resolved to go to Constantinople, saying naught as to my purpose to the knights of my acquaintance in Tripoli, where I then dwelt, and if, as I supposed, I was unable to agree to Isaac's claims, intended to journey on home.

"In some manner, it was arranged privily that I should sail to Constantinople in the _Holy Dove_, a Venetian galley, commanded by Messer Bartolommeo Caraducci. I learned afterward that Mocenigo was present in Tripoli at the time, and oversaw the plot, sailing on ahead of us by a swifter craft. Arriving in Constantinople, Mocenigo

met me, and advised me that the Emperor wished to keep secret the purpose of my coming, lest some unscrupulous persons might attempt to secure my person and hold me for the ransom of the treasure. I thought little of such a danger, but I agreed to accept the advice, and so went by night to the Palace of Blachernae, where Isaac lodged. Here he spoke me fair, until I told him that I could not give up the secret to him, for in my bare passage through the Palace and my brief intercourse with him I saw sufficient to prove that he would misuse the treasure.

"When he understood that I would not give up the secret he waxed furious and threatened me with divers punishments. I laughed in his face, reminding him of his invitation, which amounted to a safe conduct. And he laughed back at me, telling me that he thought nothing of deceiving me an I would not give him what was rightfully his. I was carried by guards, as you were, to the torture chamber, and when I convinced Mocenigo, the Emperor's agent, that I could not be forced thus to reveal the treasure, I was brought hither to this dungeon. Here have I been since. Many times they have examined me; again and again they have threatened me. But I have never told, as I never shall."

"You have never been out of this place?" asked Hugh in horror.

"Never, save to go to the torture-chamber. I knew not even that Isaac had been dethroned until you told me, even as I knew not that his despoiler had been cast forth by your comrades of the host. They hold me here in hopes that some day my spirit will break, and it is to the interest of any Emperor of any party to keep me. 'Tis one point they agree upon. I am a stake in the game they play, as is the city itself--and the Empire."

CHAPTER XXIIII

HOW BARTOLOMMEO TRUSTED A STRANGE JAILER

It was morning before Hugh and his father grew weary of talking. Hugh looked up in amazement at the beam of sunlight that straggled through a narrow loophole in the wall.

"I had thought we were far underground," he exclaimed.

"Nay, fair son. This chamber is on the first floor of the Tower of Anemas in the outer walls of Blachernae. Betwixt us and freedom is naught but those stones."

Hugh examined the wall with interest. It was tremendously thick. Looking out through the loopholes was like peering through a tunnel, and midway of the space massy iron bars criss-crossed in an impenetrable barrier.

"Anemas and the nearby towers and walls," his father continued, "were built in part to buttress the terrace on which the Palace is placed. Hence they are vastly heavier than any other section of the fortifications. Around the base of the Tower of Anemas there is a counterfort, and this dungeon is constructed behind the protection of the counterfort as well as within the wall of the tower itself. Nay, Hugh, be not concerned with it. Escape lies not in that direction. An you had all the contrivances of a mason, still you must labour undisturbed for weeks to bore a path through the wall."

"Mayhap we can fall upon our guard when he comes with food," suggested Hugh.

Sir James shook his head.

"Three of the blacks come always together. Now that you are here, I make no doubt that six will come--and they are lusty knaves. Hugh, I like not to stifle your ambitions, but escape from Anemas is no light task."

"Art in the right, fair lord," assented Hugh gloomily. "But, by St. Cuthbert, it should be easier for two than one! And I would fain die striving for freedom, rather than exist at the sufferance of enemies."

His father smiled gently.

"Hast some understanding now, Hugh, of what I have suffered. But I would not hamper you. We will cast about and see what devices we may hit upon. You are like a draught of heady wine, sweet son. I am uplifted even now. Only, I prithee, be patient, for I am old and you are young."

Indeed, Hugh was obliged to commit himself to the routine of the dungeon. Study of the situation convinced him that his father was not exaggerating the difficulties of forcing an escape. The walls were impassable. The guards, who visited them twice a day to bring food and sweep out the dungeon, were alert and powerful, and even if they could be subdued, Hugh had a vivid recollection of the other gates and sentinels who must be overcome before the upper air was reached--and then their troubles would be just begun.

No, he agreed, escape by force was impossible under the present circumstances. He swallowed this unpleasant fact as readily as he could, and set himself to vie with Sir James in keeping his body strong and healthy, in spite of the inevitable languor of confinement. The two wrestled and contended, walked and danced. They had sufficient rough food to eat, and if the chill winter air found access to their chamber, it was proof against dampness. Save on days when the sun never shone they were not uncomfortable.

Hugh had been a prisoner two days when his guards forced him to remove his armour and accept in its stead a woollen cloak to cover his gambeson and quilted drawers. They searched him carefully from head to foot, and took every piece of metal in his possession, even to a medallion of St. Cuthbert which Prior Thomas had given him as a charm to ward off evil. His chief cause for regretting this deprivation was the disappointment his father experienced. Sir James had taken a child-like pleasure in donning the mail and accustoming his muscles to exercise again under the weight of armour. But it showed that their enemies were not forgetting them, and spurred Hugh on to seek a means of escape.

Several weeks passed without incident. Then one evening the door clashed open and Bartolommeo strode in, the six tongueless Ethiopians at his heels.

"Ha, fair sirs," he cried. "How like you this unwonted comradeship? Do you not owe old Bartolommeo a blessing for the service he hath done you? Ay, many folk have said that Bartolommeo had no heart and served the devil! Mayhap, mayhap! But certes he played the rôle of guardian angel when he brought you twain together. How now? How now? Hast talked things over? Art in better frame of mind, Messer

Hugh? And you, Sir James--art prepared to be communicative? I have an offer for you, a pledge, an undertaking--ay, a veritable bargain such as one trader makes to another. Belike, you will chaffer with me."

"With you, Bartolommeo, or with your master?" asked Sir James drily.

"A shrewd wit, oh, a shrewd wit," chuckled Bartolommeo. "Ay, you are never sleeping when there is craft afoot. Well, what say you, Messers?"

"There is naught to go upon save Mocenigo's word, then?" said Sir James.

Bartolommeo cocked his head on one side.

"Hast clapped your finger on the worm-hole in the apple," he assented. "Ay, but beggers may not be choosers, an you please, Sir James; and we have you, as I might say, with a dagger to your throat and your helmet-laces cut."

"'Twas so I deemed it," returned Sir James. "There is naught to answer. You know me by now, Bartolommeo, and you know, too, that if you have me here, no less have I that which you seek here."

He touched his head.

"So you have, so you have," Bartolommeo agreed cheerfully. "Ay, and so hath the good youth, your son. 'Tis a tender morsel this sweet chit, Sir James, not used to dungeon fare or the torments of the rack. Mayhap, you would prefer to save him from the torment."

"I would rather he were torn limb from limb than that the secret you seek were imparted to your masters," replied Sir James shortly. "But an you tortured him you would gain naught. You know this, knave, so why clamour uselessly? 'Tis a false scent."

Bartolommeo chuckled again.

"Bravely answered. 'Tis as I expected. Well, Messers, we are busy in the world above, and we may not attend to you as your deserts warrant. But bide in patience. We shall yet give you good entertainment."

It was two weeks before he appeared again. They were weeks of the same dreary routine, the same conscientious exercise, the same utter silence save for what the prisoners said to one another. Yet Hugh did not find it so wearing as he had feared it might be. There was so much to tell his father, there was so much for his father to tell him, that the hours passed rapidly. The only times when his courage failed him were in the night whilst Sir James slept and he conned over Helena's threats and the danger in which Edith might stand. He wondered often if Edith thought of him, if his comrades had any idea of what had become of him, if any one still cared for him or missed him or strove for his release. One night he walked the dungeon until dawn.

The next morning Bartolommeo bustled in.

"I give you greeting, fair lords," the ruffian hailed them jovially. "We must part for a time. I am engaged upon other duties, the import of which I may not tell you. Ha, ha, ha! But I have a choice varlet to take my place. He will watch over you like a mother--ay, like a

dam over its kid. Belike, you will regret Bartolommeo even so. Come within, Messer Ranulphio!"

A slender, hairy, little man stole into the dungeon, rubbing his hands together with a certain evil joyousness. His face bristled with a tangled beard, through which stared the sallow skin, and his eyes were very sharp. Hugh started at sight of him. He seemed vaguely familiar, uncannily suggestive of another personality. But there could be no mistake about the wickedness with which he eyed the prisoners.

"At your pleasure, Messer Caraducci," he answered in a cracked, high-pitched voice, with a malignant whine. "Are these the charges I am to take under my care? Ay, they will remember me. They will heed me. I have had knights in my care ere this, and they came to have high respect for me."

Bartolommeo regarded him with affectionate respect.

"Is he not a pleasant bit of a man?" he appealed to Sir James and Hugh. "A very trustworthy fellow, I can tell you. Ere he was fifteen he cut his mother's throat. A year later he slew the household of a noble in Florence for whom he worked, and made off with their ducats. He hath been outlawed from four cities, and hath been a pirate ten years. Oh, we are careful whom we select, Messer Mocenigo and I. We specialise in cut-throats. But this knave is after my own heart. I could envy him some of his deeds, and I take pride that he is a Venetian."

The new jailer bowed with mock humility.

"Two brave bodies for the torment," he whined. "They are no crook-boned scarecrows to fall apart at a twist of the rack. Nay, they will live long and suffer well. I will hold them in good care, Messer Bartolommeo."

"Why do you leave us, Bartolomeo?" enquired Hugh.

"A fair question, Messer Hugh, and I take it kindly that you ask it. Ay, it shows that you are not unmindful of old Bartolommeo's worth. Why, the truth is, there are affairs toward of which I may not speak. But the world will know in time, and Bartolommeo will be rewarded."

"How goes the siege?"

"Siege, say you? Nay, 'tis little enough of a siege. 'Tis more like a fly biting at the back of a bull. The bull flicks his tail, and the fly hangs on. But I say naught against the skill of my countrymen. Ay, I take pride in that I am a Venetian. For first, I have this incomparable compatriot here, Ranulphio, and next, I have those hardy varlets without the walls."

"What have they done?"

"The other night we launched fire-ships against them, planning to destroy their whole fleet. But think you they were dismayed or afraid? Not so. They sallied out in small boats to meet the fire-ships, turned them from their course and did not lose a single galley. A right seaman-like exploit. I am proud of such shipmasters."

"Art in a proudful mood, Bartolommeo," said Sir James. "And the priests say that pride cometh before a fall."

Bartolommeo roared with laughter and clapped his fellow-jailer on the back so hard that Ranulphio sputtered.

"What a treat you will have, Ranulphio! Now do you gauge my trust in you--ay, and my affection--that I turn over to you two such rare souls! I would I might increase our acquaintance, Sir James. But 'tis not every day I may strangle an---- But I say too much. Be assured, fair sirs, I would not leave you, save there was greater game in sight. Pride cometh before a fall! Ay, there is to be a fall for the proud--such a fall as will shake the world."

Ranulphio cackled shrilly in applause, and the two scoundrels left the dungeon arm in arm.

"Now what meant he by that?" said Sir James wonderingly. "But, certes, 'tis strange enough they should trust another with me--the first time in all these years. They must be very sure of us."

"There is some deep villainy afoot," replied Hugh. "Doubt it not, fair lord. Bartolommeo is the chief rogue of Mocenigo, and Mocenigo is the chief rogue of--well, whoever it may be hath paid him most. But tell me: hast ever seen this Ranulphio ere this?"

"Nay, Hugh, he is a stranger, a rat of a man, 'twould seem."

"Ay, but it sticks in my mind he is not a stranger to me. I would I might see clearly. But I may not. It is not the way he looks, but somewhat I cannot put my finger to."

Three nights later the door of the dungeon clanged open, and a lighted torch was thrust inside.

"Hugh!"

Hugh bounded to his feet, blinded by the sudden light, dazed, unbelieving. He put out one hand and touched his father, who had risen at his side.

"Who--who----" he faltered.

"Hugh, it is I."

The torch-flame etched clearly the hooded, muffled figure. Of face and hair there was not a sign. Betrayed once before in this wise, he could scarce trust his ears, scarce dared to credit his tingling senses.

"You--Edith----"

"Yes, it is I, Hugh."

"Who is with you?"

She turned and the light of the torch fell upon the figure of the man behind her who upheld it.

"Ranulphio!" cried Hugh. "Then they have----"

He leaped with hands outstretched, furious, intent to kill. But Edith forced him back. Her hood fell off in the struggle, and her golden hair, gleaming in the scanty light, was tangled in his hands. Perforce he hesitated.

"Hugh, are you mad?" she panted. "Do you not know him?"

"Who?" rasped Hugh.

She nodded behind her.

"Nay, I----"

Ranulphio stepped forward, a broad smile on his bearded face.

"'Twas well played, old comrade," he said. "Ha, to think that I have fooled you! 'Twas more than I expected."

The voice was the voice of Matteo. But still Hugh could not believe.

"Who is he?" he appealed to Edith.

"'Tis Messer Matteo in marvellous disguise. Ay, in sooth, Hugh. Doubt him not."

Hugh drew one hand across his eye.

"Father," he called abruptly. "Fair lord, art here?"

"I am here, Hugh."

"Do you see two figures as I see them?" questioned Hugh.

"I see them, fair son."

"Then am I sane. But----"

"There is no time for buts, Hugh," Matteo interrupted. "Hell bubbles overhead. Comnenus tries his skill once more at overturning a throne. In the confusion we dared to descend here, but if you are to escape we must hurry. There is no time to lose."

"Do you order us. We will obey. But how knew you where to find me?"

"Anon, comrade. For the nonce we have much to do. Follow me."

He led them out into the passageway, sweeping his torch overhead to light them, and barred the door of the empty dungeon. Then they traversed the corridors Hugh remembered on the lower level, until they came to a point where the passage divided. Here lay one of the black guards, stabbed to death.

"We have left a trail of blood," said Matteo with grim satisfaction over his shoulder. "The maid held the torch; I swung the knife. 'Tis a fit ending for such dogs. I would their master might have come within my ken."

"Where is he?" asked Hugh.

"He lurks above. Comnenus employs him with Mocenigo to do his killing. Old Isaac, they say, hath died of sheer fright. Alexius is seized and by now blinded or dead. In the Palace--all through the city--the contending parties riot over who shall be Emperor. But Comnenus and that tigress daughter of his pull the strings."

All this time Edith had been silent, walking at Hugh's side, betwixt him and Sir James. Now Hugh turned to her again.

"How come you hither?"

"'Tis a long story, Hugh. When the lords of the host sent word to the Emperors after your seizure, bidding them give you up or assume the consequences of treachery, I set to work to learn what had been done with you. My father hath ever stayed clear of the intrigue in the Palace, but I have friends of my own. 'Twas not difficult to learn how you had been trapped. The rest is Matteo's doing."

"Nay, she robs herself of merit," Matteo broke in. "All I have done she helped me to do. I was like a madman, Hugh, when Villehardouin came back without you. So were all of us. The Marshal went to Boniface and demanded permission to storm the walls that night, but Dandolo held us back. He counselled us to wait. If they meant to slay you, he said, they would do it before we could reach you. If you were a prisoner, we could afford to await a sure opportunity for your release. So we dispatched a cartel to the Emperors, and for answer came to me a message from your lady here, who bade me come to her in the city, prescribing the disguise I should assume and the part I was to play."

Hugh saw that Edith blushed red as the torch-flame, whose resinous light betrayed her confusion.

"Messer Matteo is over-modest," she insisted. "All I did was to advise him. He acted for himself. He entered the city; he came to Mocenigo as an outcast from the Venetian fleet, begging for service, convincing Mocenigo he was as great a villain as ever lived, and so obtained employment in the political prison. After that, 'twas only necessary to learn where you were imprisoned and await a favourable opportunity to set you free. To-night was made for us."

"Knew you of my imprisonment, my maid?" asked Sir James.

"Not so, fair lord--not until Bartolommeo took Messer Matteo to your dungeon. He was greatly surprised to learn who you were--as was I. My father hath always been told that none knew what had become of you."

Sir James sighed as he walked along.

"I grow bitter when I think of all the years I have languished here," he said, "and 'twas so easy to break loose when the right time came. Ah, well, the Virgin be thanked that there was a maid as brave and true as you, Mistress Edith, and a comrade as staunch and valorous as Messer Matteo. Lion-Heart would have loved a man like you, Sir Jongleur. God knows that without your aid we must have stayed in the hands of our enemies."

Matteo halted in front of a door set deep in the rocky walls of the passage.

"Is this the gate, lady?" he asked.

"Ay," she answered. "This is the postern of Anemas. 'Tis set in the angle of the tower where it joins the walls and is fronted with stone so that it may not be discerned from the outside. There is no moat to cross here, and you will find no further obstacles betwixt you and your friends."

"But you?" exclaimed Hugh.

"I must say farewell, Hugh. My place is here."

"Nay, that cannot be," he denied passionately. "Here you are in danger, Edith. Helena Comnena is your enemy. She hath sworn to me that she will----"

Edith smiled in the torchlight--and Hugh wondered why there was contentment in her smile.

"She may threaten, Hugh, but she cannot harm me. I am the daughter of the Grand Acolyth."

"Be not so sure, lady," intervened Sir James. "The Court is not as it used to be. The adventurers have the upper hand. The Comnenoi are the most powerful family in Constantinople to-day by all we hear. An they mean to injure you, doubt not they will achieve their purpose."

"I thank you, fair lord, for your warning," replied Edith with quiet dignity, "but an the danger were so great as you say, still is my place by my father's side. He hath none but me, and certes, the danger is as great to him."

Sir James bowed before her.

"Right knightly spoken, sweet maid," he said, "Hugh, we may not, with honour, plead further. She hath the right of us."

Hugh looked at her sorrowfully.

"But how will you regain your apartments from here?" he demanded.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"There is naught betwixt me and my chamber but dead men. Messer Matteo hath seen to that."

"Ay, she will be safe an she goes quickly," agreed Matteo. "There is a privy way from the wing of the Palace over our heads to the Grand Acolyth's apartments."

He fumbled at the bars of the door and made ready to swing it open.

"With your favour, Sir James, we must make haste."

"I follow you."

They put their shoulders to the postern-door, and for a brief minute Hugh and Edith stood face to face, alone. His fingers 'were searching in the breast of his gambeson; her cheeks were pink and her eyes very bright.

"Here is your glove," he said. "Wilt have it back, Edith, or am I still your knight?"

"Art still my knight, Hugh," she answered steadily. "There is none other--nor ever will be. And for that I wronged you when first we met in the Audience Hall above, I cry your pardon. Hast been true to me as I have been true to you."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. The postern-door creaked open behind them.

"Prithee, take the torch, lady," said Matteo. "Come, Hugh."

She stooped quickly and kissed Hugh fair on the lips. Then, before he could say anything, she pushed him through the postern and the stone-fronted door swung shut.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW THE COMRADES RODE TO BLACHERNAE

The barons of the host made much of Sir James, and Boniface offered him command of the battalion left leaderless by the illness of Count Louis of Blois. But Sir James declined.

"To say truth, fair lord," he explained, "I have a matter of privy vengeance in hand. There is no want of puissant knights in this host, so prithee give the post to some other."

To the great satisfaction of the comrades, Sir James elected to cast in his lot with them, serving as a simple volunteer in the company of the Marshal of Champagne. But it was impossible for him to cast off the honours which were showered upon him. No feast was complete without him; no decision was reached by the chiefs without his advice. The pavilion which he shared with Hugh and Matteo was thronged daily with the best knights of the host.

The weather was still too severe to permit the resumption of active prosecution of the siege, but the news which came out of the city was encouraging to the Crusaders. Comnenus, after bringing about the overthrow of the Angeloi, had endeavoured to promote the selection as Emperor of Nicholas Canabus, a patrician of unblemished reputation, but colourless and weak. He had actually succeeded in having Canabus crowned in St. Sophia, when the other nobles, already jealous of the Chancellor's power, raised a counter-revolution in favour of Alexius Ducas, member of a family that had worn the purple in the past.

This movement demonstrated so much strength that Comnenus, in panic lest he lose his pre-eminence at Court, turned to the side of the Dukai and assisted the revolt which drove Canabus from the city and elevated in his place their candidate, who was known popularly as Murtzuphlus, because of his thick black eyebrows, which formed a solid ridge above his jutting nose. Murtzuphlus proved a leader of some ability, possessing his full share of the cruelty and selfish ambition which were the outstanding traits of practically all the Greek nobles.

He retained Comnenus as Chancellor, but on learning that the unfortunate Young Alexius had been permitted to live, after his eyes had been seared out, he directed that poison be administered. When this failed to remove the victim, the Emperor himself went to the youth's dungeon and strangled him with his own hands, remarking that in a matter of such importance it was well to leave nothing to chance.

This act of hideous cruelty removed the last scruples about the justice of their enterprise which lingered in the hearts of any of the Crusaders, and united the host in the determination to tear down the blood-stained Empire of the Eastern Rome. The bishops and abbots announced that the abolition of such wicked tyranny was a Christian duty, and warranted the granting of all the extraordinary privileges and remissions which were the ghostly rewards of Crusaders.

The situation was discussed, according to custom, in open parliament, and it was decided to restrict the attack of the city to the walls along the Golden Horn.

"By death, disease and accident, our numbers are now smaller than ever," Dandolo pointed out, "whilst our enemies are more numerous, and we may not reckon upon friendly interest within the walls. We are too few to make more than one attack. Moreover, you may recall, when we laid siege to the city before, the knights of the host were unable to carry the Blachernae walls, but from their ships the Venetians succeeded in seizing a stretch of the Golden Horn walls. It behooves us, lords, to concentrate our effort upon one spot."

There was no opposition to this strategy. The barons had learned by now that mounted knights could not ride over the walls of the strongest fortress in the world, and they had formed a high opinion of the seamanship and engineering skill of their Venetian allies. They joined heartily in the elaborate preparations, and in the meantime they established a loose blockade of the city by a series of forays on every side.

Lent came, and brought with it the moderating touch of spring. Icy winds blew no longer from the frost-bound waters of the Euxine. At last all was ready. The fleet was divided into squadrons, to each of which was assigned a battalion of the host, and on Thursday, April 8th, 1204, Boniface gave the order for embarkation. The galleys took the transports and ships in tow, and the long line, half a league from wing to wing, moved slowly across the harbour toward the crowded walls of the city.

Evening shut down as the fleet reached position just out of bowshot of the walls, and the anchors were lowered. The last rays of the sun were caught on waving banners and pennons, the blazonry of armorial shields, the polished tips of weapons. Trumpets brayed from ship to ship. Gittern, rubible, cymbal, nakir and drum taunted the proud, wicked city. Priestly voices chanted the order for vespers.

From the crowded walls there came a strident answer. There, too, processions of priests, bearing holy relics and ikons, marched along the battlements, imploring the powers of Heaven to guard the Imperial City--the city which had meant so much to mankind, for all its dark present, which had been the bulwark of Christianity since Constantine first traced its limits with his spear, whilst the Archangel walked before him. There, too, trumpets clanged, cymbals clashed and men shouted defiance.

Night quelled the tumult, but it could not erase hate from the hearts of men. They slept dreaming only of the death they hoped to deal to others on the morrow.

With the first hint of dawn, the fleet moved forward. Stones, nets of forged bolts, casks of Greek fire, arrows, cross-bow bolts, jagged balks of timber, huge javelins, whirling pieces of chain, whistled and droned and blazed through the air. Ships were crushed and battered, forced out of line; but all those that could pressed on into the hail of missiles. Each ship or galley that survived ran up to a tower and landed men on the bank at its foot or assailed the garrison from flying bridges and belfreys. The horse-transports lay off out of range, waiting until an entrance should be forced. But they waited in vain. Frequently the besiegers thought they were on the brink of victory, but every time the Greeks were reinforced and the assault pushed back.

Villehardouin's company on the _Paradise_ were directed against a tower near the Gate of St. Theodosia, which was fronted by a broad strip of land. It was necessary for them to go ashore under the fire of catapults and archers, carry ladders across the open space and then endeavour to climb to the battlements. The task was hopeless, for they were always outnumbered three or four to one. Their ladders were swept by monstrous stones; their eyes were filled with quicklime; Greek fire boiled them in their armour. They returned to the attack again and again, but they knew they could not succeed. And when the signal for retirement was displayed from Dandolo's galley at nones, they collected their dead and wounded and withdrew sullenly with the rest of the host, the cheers of the exultant Greeks resounding in their ears.

It was a defeat, the bitterest the host had experienced, and the Doge summoned a parliament to meet at vespers in the church of Galata for consideration of their plight. The barons came, sore in pride, bleeding from wounds, disappointed and morose. Again dissension raised its head.

"We are well-punished for our sins," cried a German knight in the company of Boniface. "This is the judgment of Heaven upon us for our failure to go on to Outremer. We are under God's disfavour. Let us----"

"You speak like a child, Messer," interrupted Dandolo coldly. "We are fighting the battles of Heaven here just as much as if we levelled lances against the Saracens. We are fighting to bring back the Eastern Christians to acknowledge that the Holy Apostle of Rome holds Peter's keys. We are fighting to redeem a rich land from injustice and tyranny. We are fighting to erect a base whence greater armies may come after us and engage in the conquest of Jerusalem and all Outremer, with some hope of success."

A murmur of comment greeted this.

"It may be that all your Magnificence says hath truth in it," spoke up a Burgundian boldly. "Yet certes no man will deny we failed miserably where all thought victory would be easily won."

"Fools!" snarled Dandolo. "'Twas for that you were defeated!"

Those blind eyes hovered over the room, cowing the disaffected who had not spoken. But the Burgundian persisted.

"Mayhap, Lord Doge," he kept on doggedly. "But there were other reasons. We attacked where the Greeks were ready for us. Belike, we should have gone otherwhere. Why were we not led against the sea-walls? They are the lowest of all, and the Greeks were not there in force."

"If you had listened in our councils, you would not have asked that question," replied the Doge wearily. "Know, sir knight, that the current through the strait which washes the land walls is so swift that no vessel can remain stationary opposite the walls without risking being dashed to pieces against them."

The Burgundian and his friends were silenced, but the blanket of gloom was not lifted from the assembly. And when Sir James rose in his place, all eyes turned hopefully to his lean figure, erect and vigorous as a youth's, despite the snow-white hair which crowned his splendid head. Hugh, sitting beside him, wondered if others there

were as proud as he was of this knight who had stepped so debonairly from the oblivion of the tomb back to the life of men.

"With your favour, Lord Doge," began Sir James.

"I speak for all the lords of the host when I say we are right glad to hear your counsel, sir knight," replied Dandolo courteously.

"I cry you thanks, Magnificence. I have listened here to what hath been said and it hath come to me that there is somewhat of justice in the complaint that our attack was ill-conceived--for which are we all to blame, in that we did not prepare as we should have done."

"How so?" asked Dandolo with interest.

"Thus. I noted that the galley upon which I fought was called upon to fight alone against a tower, and there were in that tower many times the men in our company. So ran the order all along the line. We were assailing, ship by ship, an hundred towers. But how had it been, fair lords, had we tied ship to ship, and every twain of us come against one tower? Bethink you, lords, by such means may we prevail."

There was a stir of interest.

"Messer James hath the right of it," said Boniface.

"Ay, so."

Villehardouin, Count Baldwin and a dozen others echoed the words. Dandolo nodded.

"'Tis a simple plan and well-conceived," he agreed. "Mayhap much can be achieved by it. How say you, lords? We are not yet defeated. Shall we accept Sir James's advice and show the Greeks they do exult too much?"

He inclined his head as he spoke, and in the momentary silence all could hear the far-off clamour of church-bells, ringing in Constantinople to celebrate the retreat of the besiegers.

"Forward! Lead us again! Victory for the host! Let us go back!"

Like the challenge of a tempest, the hoarse shouts reverberated through the stone aisles of the church. Sword-hilts rattled against shields. Wounds, weariness, losses of friends were forgotten. The knights surged around their leaders, clamouring to be led back to the attack. But Dandolo quieted the din with his first words.

"The spirit that you show doth do you honour, Messers," he said. "But you must be guided by wisdom, not anger. To-day you have done all that men may. Now do you rest at your ease. To-morrow and the next day we will spend in repairing our vessels, for certes they have suffered no less than you. On the third day we will attack again, and prove to the Greeks how the men-at-arms of the West can fight against odds."

The parliament broke up in a mood of hope and confidence which had seemed impossible to expect when it began. The following day was a Saturday, and all ranks of the host laboured from morning until night to make good damages to armour and equipment, whilst the Venetians hammered and sawed at the repairs to the fleet. On Sunday all rested, and the clerks shrived such as had cause to plead for Divine

mercy. In the twilight of early morning, on Monday, April 12th, the armament moved from its moorings on the Galata shore, stealing through the wreathing mists, so that the Greeks might have no warning in advance of the new tactics which had been adopted.

The ships and galleys went two and two, bound rigidly together. The front of attack was reduced by half, and some fifty towers were singled out for assault, care being taken wherever possible to pick those which could be boarded directly from the vessels. But the Greeks were not caught unprepared. The walls were heavily garrisoned, and in an open space in the rear, swept bare by the two disastrous fires of the preceding summer, the Emperor Murtzuphlus waited at the head of a body of armoured knights equal in strength to the entire muster of the host.

From the flying bridge swung from the mainmast of the _Paradise_, the comrades had a clear view of the whole line of battle. Miles and miles of walls, hundreds of machines, a sky darkened by the flights of missiles, a deafening clamour of voices, and behind all the bulk of the mighty city, street after street, hill after hill, smoking and steaming and bellowing defiance at the puny array that threatened it.

"By St. Cuthbert, but 'tis a marvellous spectacle!" exclaimed Hugh.

"I saw the hordes of Saladin stream over the Mount of Olives against the Holy City," answered his father. "'Twas not like this. How say you, Matteo?"

"Ay, indeed, fair lord. I have heard men tell of that scene, and I doubt not this surpasses it."

"'Tis monstrous distressing to think how easy it makes the slaying of a body," remarked Ralph, as he pulled an arrow from his quiver and straddled his feet to meet the swaying of their perch.

"Art not afraid, Ralph?" queried Matteo humorously. "Belike the sea-sickness is gripping you again?"

"Art always poking fun, Messer Matteo," reproached the archer. "Certes, you know well I have never suffered from the sea-sickness since that first voyage over the Narrow Seas."

"Then it must be plain fear that hath gripped you, Ralph," said Hugh, mock-solemnly.

"Fear?" returned Ralph indignantly. "I should like to see anybody else telling me so! But I will admit, Messer Hugh, I am often giving up hope we shall ever see England again, what with all the ventures we run into."

Sir James laughed.

"Talk not to me of Ralph's fears," he said. "How many varlets would fare as far as hath he, and never know a qualm for home--ay, or what knight, either?"

He clapped Ralph on the back. "Fear naught, lad. An I still live, after eight years entombed, doubt not you shall win home. And when you do, Ralph, 'tis in my mind to make you constable of Chesby Castle and appoint you to the raising of a company of bowmen like yourself. How now, Hugh? What lord would hunger for our lands, an we had such a guard for them?"

"You say sooth, sweet lord," replied Hugh. "But--Ha!"

He raised his shield and deflected a crossbow quarrel which was aimed at his father's shoulder.

"Shoot fast, Ralph," he cried. "An you may, keep down the fire of yon archers!"

The _Paradise_, buckled by stout cables to the hull of the _Pilgrim_, Dandolo's flagship, was rowing clumsily toward a tower near the Gate of Ispigas, where there was almost no land betwixt the foot of the tower walls and the water. A constantly freshening wind had sprung up since the fleet began its advance, blowing against the sterns of the vessels and driving the water upon the city shore of the harbour, with the effect of deepening the channel adjacent to the walls. With this fortuitous circumstance to aid them the Venetians were able to approach closer than ever before.

Ralph shot as rapidly as he could nock his arrows and aim, and his clothyard shafts wrought havoc with the tower's defenders. They drove through mantlets, shields and armour, and the comrades gave him good cover with their shields when the Greek archers sought to answer him. Nearer and nearer rowed the _Paradise_. She was so close now that the catapults on the walls could not be brought to bear upon her. The stones and other missiles flew over the vessel and splashed harmlessly into the water.

The comrades, with Villehardouin and other knights, stepped out upon the flying bridge, which Venetian shipmen lowered by ropes and pulleys from the masthead to the level of the tower's top. Sir James and Hugh, leaning against the webbed ropes which guarded the end of their frail foot rest, crossed lances with the Greeks on the tower. Strange faces frowned at them; strange war-cries rang in their ears. Ralph shot his arrows between their shoulders, sometimes transfixing two and three of the enemy at one discharge. Nearer and nearer crept the _Paradise_ and her mate the _Pilgrim_. Looking down for a fleeting instant from the dizzy height of the flying-bridge, Hugh saw the armoured figure of the Doge, the gonfalon of St. Mark beside him, standing impassively on the stern-castle of their companion-vessel.

Suddenly Hugh heard his father's voice through the eye-holes of his helm.

"Art ready, Hugh?"

He nodded for answer, and turned to see if Matteo was poised behind him. The jongleur's eyes met his with a cool smile. The next instant the end of the flying-bridge touched the tower's battlements, and Sir James leaped high in air. For the space of a breath Hugh hesitated, conscious though he was of others jostling his heels for the next chance. The tower looked so small, the ground and water so far below. But he shut his eyes and leaped.

He landed in a press of bodies, and caught a sword-stroke on his shield. There were Greeks all around him, and a few feet distant he saw his father similarly encompassed. But while he looked Matteo joined him. Then came Villehardouin and others. Soon there were as many Crusaders as Greeks on the tower. The Greeks began to cast down their arms and flee. The Crusaders leaped forward and quickly won the postern giving upon the wall. Villehardouin led a rush to the street behind the walls and flung open the nearby gate. A signal was displayed from the _Pilgrim_, and the horse-transports trimmed their sails to the favouring breeze and headed for the shore.

Demoralisation spread rapidly amongst the Greeks. Tower after tower was carried; gate after gate was opened. And presently columns of mounted knights were riding into the water-front streets of Constantinople.

Villehardouin's troop swung northward as soon as their horses were landed. They were directed to seize the Palace of Blachernae, and in advance of the column, rode the comrades, shoulder to shoulder, hoofs thundering on the cobbled way. Such Greeks as they encountered fled up the side-streets. They saw no soldiers all the way to the great gate of the Palace, which a parcel of frightened varlets were trying to shut.

These scurried off at first sight of the invaders, but Hugh ran down one in the courtyard and his father cross-questioned the man. The Court had gone, the fellow quavered. Everybody but the servants had left for the Palace of the Bucoleon--except those who were fighting upstairs.

"Who?" demanded Sir James.

"Nay, lord, I know not. I saw the black mutes on the stairs, and I fled."

The man was obviously hysterical with fright, and Sir James let him go.

"Put up your horses," he ordered. "We must look into this."

With swords drawn, they passed the outer courtyard and explored the vast emptiness of the Palace, hundreds of gorgeous rooms and corridors, scores of buildings and gardens. They did not find a trace of human existence until they came upon the body of a dead Varangian at the foot of the steps leading to the Hall of Audience. Farther up the steps, under the columned portico, lay a heap of Varangians and mutes of the Ethiopian Guard.

As they cautiously entered the doorway of the Hall itself a cry of horror escaped the lips of every one of them. The magnificent chamber, floored and walled and roofed with semi-precious stones, carpeted with ancient rugs and tapestries, was a shambles running blood. Dead men lay in windrows and scattered piles, and on the steps of the Imperial throne a wall of corpses was reared, topped by one body half-erect. The helmet had been hacked off; the gilded armour and scarlet surcoat were rent and torn and stained with blood; the grey beard was flecked with gore.

"Sir Cedric!" exclaimed Hugh in awe.

"Ay, 'tis the Grand Acolyth," said Sir James. "Here is foul work!"

They lifted the body from the corpses that cumbered it, and stretched it in a clear corner beside the dais. As they stood back, Sir Cedric's eyes flickered open.

"Mocenigo," he gasped, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Hugh's face was twisted with pain.

"Edith!" he cried. "Ah, I knew he intended evil! 'Tis he and Helena Comnena, I will warrant!"

There was a wild shriek from the recess behind the throne. A fat, shapeless figure staggered out, and swayed back and forth, arms upraised.

"Oh, Messer Hugh! Is it you? In sooth, is it you? And Ralph Fletcher of Chesby that I knew as a babe--ay, from suckling-time, and the mother that bore him! Is it you? Say, is it you? By the Holy Virgin and all the company of blessed saints,--by St. Cuthbert of Crowden and the Blessed Cedric and Edward, Ethelreda and Swithin, Hubert and Agnes, St. Cornelia, St. Martha, St.----"

"Messer Hugh, 'tis Dame Alicia," shouted Ralph. "Now, is that not a favour from Heaven that----"

But Hugh had ears for none of them. He took the old nurse by the shoulders and shook her gently.

"'Tis I, in sooth, good dame," he assured her. "Prithee, calm yourself. Be at ease. You are safe. Naught shall harm you. Do but tell us what hath become of the Lady Edith?"

"Oh, sorry is the day that ever we came into this land of wicked, un-Christian people! I had warning of our doom ere we sailed, and certes, I told my lady, but----"

"Whither hath she gone?" insisted Hugh.

"Gone? Why, with that false Italian hound, Mocenigo--and Messer Comnenus and his harlot of a daughter. Sir Cedric was to garrison the Palace here after the Court left; and this morning Messer Comnenus and Mocenigo came hither with their black men and demanded of Sir Cedric that he give up my lady to them--and they fought."

"Ay," said Hugh, unable to check her flow of words. "But whither did they carry her?"

"I heard talk of a galley--ay, and as they left the room Messer Comnenus called back to Mocenigo: 'We meet at the Kontoscalion.'"

"The Harbour of the Kontoscalion!" exclaimed Sir James. "'Tis on the Marmora shore, west of the Bucoleon. They must be planning to slip across to Asia. We must hasten, Hugh, an we would catch them."

CHAPTER XXV

VENGEANCE

Dame Alicia twisted her fingers in the folds of Hugh's surcoat.

"Art never going off to leave me again, Messer Hugh?" she pleaded. "Ah, fair sir, the sight of English faces is like home! Certes, you will not abandon me in this awful place. They will come and cut my throat, the wretches. They will----"

Hugh contrived to wriggle free as gracefully as possible.

"Peace, peace," he adjured her. "There is no more to fear, good dame. The Greeks are fled. The French are occupying the Palace, and with them you are safe. Now, do you bestir yourself to see what may be done for your lord. He is sore wounded, but he still breathes."

"Harrow and alas that he should come to his end afar among strangers," she wailed. "Do but look at the blood on him! Oh, Messer Hugh, do not leave me with all these dead men. Alack for that I ever came hither, and a fool I was to listen to Sir Godfrey when he----"

But Hugh could stand no more. He turned and fled, his father and the others at his heels. In the courtyard outside they met Villehardouin and a party of knights, to whom Sir James reported the desertion of the Palace and the intention of the comrades to pursue the Comnenoi.

"I would lend you a foison of spears, an I had the men to spare," said Villehardouin, "but I have few enough to hold the Palace, and we can not risk its capture. May St. Remi aid you, sweet friends."

"Our numbers will serve--an we are in time," replied Sir James grimly. "In God's keeping, friends!"

They galloped out of the Palace gate and turned westward through a tangle of narrow streets, lined with high-built houses, interspersed with monasteries and nunneries. This route brought them to the Mesè, the main thoroughfare of Constantinople, a wide, handsome avenue, set with trees and terraced porticos. They passed the gigantic Cistern of Aspar on their left and began to meet advanced parties of the Crusaders and Venetians, plundering the fine buildings on either hand.

A horde of foot-sergeants had battered their way into the Church of the Apostles, whose gilded bronze roof sheltered the mausoleums of the most famous Emperors of the East--Constantine the Great, Justinian, Heraclius and dozens of others, with their Empresses. The rabble of the camp, composed mainly of the Latin colonists who had been driven from the city by the Greeks, were tearing open the tombs in search of jewelry and valuables. The contents of the vestry was scattered about the church, pearl-embroidered copes, dalmatics, chasubles and vestments, gold and silver relic-cases, the prey of whoever coveted them.

Beyond the Church of the Apostle the comrades rode under the shadow of the Aqueduct of Valens, whose sturdy arches marched across the valley between two of the city's seven hills. The street was crowded with people, Greeks and Crusaders, all in apparent amity. Indeed, the inhabitants of the city were forming processions to greet the conquerors, saluting the Franks and Venetians with songs and speeches of welcome.

But the comrades never stayed their pace to note what happened beside them, and those who stood in their path risked death. They thundered through the huge Forum of Theodosius, rimmed with palaces, baths, public buildings and luxurious shops. A short distance farther on they entered the Forum of Constantine, a beautiful elliptical space, surrounded by double tiers of marble porticos, crowned by verdant terraces, and pierced at either end by a marble arch. In the centre stood the statue of Constantine the Great in the rôle of Apollo, crowned with seven golden rays, high aloft on a soaring pedestal of porphyry. On the north side rose the Palace of the Senate, its broad flights of steps and columned porch, which had seen eight hundred years of history, jammed with curious Greeks, who watched the hurried passage of the little knot of Frankish warriors.

Ahead of them, as they emerged from the forum, loomed the white dome of St. Sophia, floating like a bubble above the houseroofs. To their right the stone walls of the Hippodrome, bristling with statues, cut

off the view. Sir James turned here from the Mesè into a meaner street running southward. After passing the gates of the Hippodrome they saw in the distance, across a maze of smaller palaces, homes of merchants and better-class citizens, the far-flung walls of the Palace of the Bucoleon, the traditional residence of the Byzantine Emperors.

Onward they raced at headlong gait. People shouted to them as they went by. Parties of Greek soldiers scurried to cover. In the distance appeared a streak of silver--the waters of the Marmora glimpsed between the houses. Sir James spurred on. They came to a church on a hill, St. Thomas's, and there, drawing rein for an instant, the comrades saw below them a crescent indentation in the sea-walls, where the Imperial galleys lay in ordered ranks beside stone wharves.

"The Kontoscalion!" said Sir James.

Down the hill at a mad gallop, horses foaming and reeking with bloody sweat, and out upon the level again. The harbour gate gaped wide. Customs officers, naval guards and police had disappeared. There was nobody to halt the comrades as they rode through the gateway.

"See!" cried Matteo, pointing with his scimiter.

At the far end of the harbour a twelve-oared galley was backing from its slip. In order to reach the sea the vessel had to traverse the length of the basin and then row out through the narrow entrance between the mole which guarded the harbour and the tower at the apex of the sea-wall. Sir James grasped the situation in a single glance.

"Hither, Ralph!" he shouted. "'Tis for you to stop them. We must rely on your yew-bow this day. Pull string, lad, and St. Cuthbert be your aid!"

Ralph slipped from his horse and ran to the edge of the quay, notching his string with one crook of his knee. He loosed his first arrow whilst the galley was swinging around to set its head for the harbour entrance. The shaft quivered in the planking of the deck below the stern-castle.

Ralph pursed his lips.

"An my father hears of that shoot he will tan me with my own bow, belike," he muttered. "Steady arm, now. Ha!"

"Harrow! Harrow!" cheered Hugh. "Well shot!"

The galley's helmsman had pitched forward with a shaft in his breast. Another sprang to catch the tiller before the vessel yawed seriously, but Ralph was ready for him. The long bow twanged and the arrows buzzed like angry hornets. The second helmsman sank to the deck, pierced through the thigh. An oarsman choked and fell over his sweep. Another dropped his oar and leaped overboard in fright when a shaft drummed into the wood of his rowing-bench.

Mocenigo, in full armour, with shield upraised, sprang from the protection of the stern-castle to take the helm, but he was too late. The confusion amongst the rowers and the swaying rudder had thrown the galley off her course. She veered, even whilst Mocenigo tugged at the tiller, and drove her sharp bow amongst the boulders which were strewn about the base of the mole. The rowers backed water and strove to work her off; but the bow was anchored fast.

"Hast done right well, Ralph," said Sir James. "It will go hard with us, an we do not punish these caitiffs. Comrades, here is required an escalade. Forward!"

They left their horses on the quay, and clambered out over the slippery boulders of the mole. Mocenigo and Bartolommeo, with a handful of the Ethiopians, were bracing the crew to meet the attack. But when Ralph began to loose again, the shipmen broke and dived overboard, swimming for the quay across the harbour.

"Ralph," commanded Sir James gently, "do you wreak what harm you may on the blacks, but an you graze Mocenigo or his familiar I will leave you behind us when we fare home."

Ralph grinned and extended his quiver. Only two arrows remained.

"So!" exclaimed Sir James. "That is better, for I have a fancy for sword-play. The more knaves slain, the greater shall be our glory. But see that you make both shafts count."

They gained the cluster of rocks in which the galley's bow was wedged, and paused to study the approach to her deck.

"Ha, messers," Mocenigo hailed them ironically. "You are welcome guests. An you will come aboard we will do what we may to put you at your ease. Mayhap we have some small surprise in store for you."

"Mayhap," rejoined Sir James. "I have looked forward long to this day. What, Bartolommeo, hast no word for me?"

"Words in plenty when I have you on the rack," replied the ruffian composedly. "For the nonce, Messer James, I will trust to my sword."

Hugh surveyed the bare well of the galley, cluttered with oars and ropes and deserted save for the group of six Ethiopians headed by the renegades. There was no sign of Edith or Comnenus and his daughter.

"She that you seek is safe," jeered Mocenigo, noticing his glance. "But we hold her hostage for your retreat. An you threaten us, her fate will not be a pretty one."

Hugh jumped blindly from his boulder, a bleak fury gripping his soul. By sheer luck he dropped in the midst of the enemy, his mail shoes staving in the ribs of one of the blacks and the force of his impact scattering the others to right and left. But they picked themselves up and closed around him. Mocenigo hewed at him with a sword; Bartolommeo pounded him with a mace; the Ethiopians stabbed and slashed with their javelins and knives.

This moment of diversion was Ralph's opportunity. At such close range he could not miss. The first arrow drilled a black throat and lodged in the thigh of another man. The second went clean through the body of an Ethiopian and spattered on the deck. The pressure on Hugh was eased at once, as his opponents opened their ranks in fear of the deadly archer. Before they could surround him again Sir James and Matteo had gained his side.

The comrades were still outnumbered five to three, but their heavy armour was an advantage which the three surviving black men did not share. Ralph had disappeared after loosing his last arrow. Hugh wondered what had become of the archer, but Bartolommeo's mace allowed him scant time for reflection. If that spiked steel knob

ever struck his helm with the muscles of those knotted arms behind it, he knew his skull must be shattered.

Sir James was fencing with Mocenigo, his wondrous dexterity matching the Italian's vigour. Matteo kept two of the blacks in play. But the third hovered near Hugh, darting in for a vicious stab whenever Bartolommeo had the upper hand. Hugh was menaced from groin to head, and to protect himself he must shift his guard with lightning rapidity. His shield dragged down his arm; his sword seemed burdened with lead. But at all costs he must ward off that terrible mace. When weariness slowed his guard and he could not counter two blows at once, he accepted the thrusts of javelin or knife, trusting to the strength of his mail.

He found himself despairing of being able to shake off these persistent foes. His shield-arm ached from the blows of the mace it had turned; his sword-hand tingled from the parries it had made. His whole body was sore from the thrusts of the Ethiopian's weapons. To keep his footing he was obliged to give ground, and he was out of touch with his father and Matteo.

Then, without any warning, Ralph came bounding over the rowing-benches in the rear of the enemy. The bowman lopped off the head of the black who had been menacing Hugh, and proceeded to relieve Matteo of half of his task. A weight seemed to be lifted from Hugh's shoulders. His mind cleared. Instead of standing on the defensive under Bartolommeo's hail of blows, he began to advance and delivered strokes as stout as those he had received. The burly ruffian roared with ferocious amazement.

"How now, my cockerel! Would you take liberties with old Bartolommeo that nursed you and fed you--ay, and treasured you safely? What gratitude is this? By the three-horned devil of Calabria, I never saw such a boy! Heaven opens wide its gates; the angels are tuning up to welcome him; he must have had a vision of the splendour ahead--an he tries to turn from the path! Have a care, Messer Hugh. You will lose your chance, an you disappoint Peter again. You will be going down to Hell to tend the spit that waits for old Bartolommeo. What! You never think to master me? Alackaday, what folly! Know, good youth, I have made a bargain with the Devil, and he must protect me. Ay, in sooth, he----"

Bartolommeo leaped backward with a lightness extraordinary in a man of his bulk, and retreated aft along the deck. Hugh glanced around, and saw the explanation. Mocenigo lay in a huddle across a rowing-bench, a cruel gash draining his side, and Matteo stood over the last of the Ethiopians. Bartolommeo was alone.

"Are you whole, fair lord?" Hugh called to his father.

"Ay, Hugh, and happier than I have been in many a day. I did not dwell those years in Blachernae without avail, now that I have slain this hound."

"Is he dead, indeed?"

"He soon will be."

Mocenigo's eyes fixed on Hugh's in a glare of baffled hate.

"The--end--is--not--yet," he gasped. "Shalt--not--have--your----"

He mouthed a word of vile import, the bloody foam on his lips mocking

the bestiality of his tongue.

"Ay--you--shall--not--have---her! Curse----"

He died.

Bartolommeo, standing beyond the galley's single mast, raised his visor.

"Is he sped?" he called.

"Ay. Prepare to follow him."

"Mayhap, but not alone."

Bartolommeo turned as he spoke and ran toward the stern-castle. He wrenched at the door of the cabin, and when it refused to open, raised his mace to shatter the panels.

"Quick, Messer Hugh!" shrieked Ralph. "He would murder Lady Edith!"

The mace rose and fell, but before it could achieve Bartolommeo's purpose the comrades were upon him. He ran to meet them, roaring like a bull.

"Out of my path! Who seeks to stay Bartolommeo? By St. Bacchus, a few have sought to do that who did not tell their fate in the wine-shops! Back! Back, there! Bartolommeo comes!"

He gained the rail and mounted it, clinging to the rigging of the mast with one hand.

"Spare your swords, fair sirs," he said, bowing courteously. "I have a mind to test the accomplishment of that sorcerer who bargained for my soul. An he spoke sooth, doubt not the Devil will save me. Farewell! Sir James, I had ever a warm place in my heart for you! Messer Hugh, you had the makings of a youth who would give fine sport on the rack. May you come to a good end."

He leaped, mace in hand, into the water. The ripples closed over him, as Ralph reached the railing where he had stood.

"Certes, my masters, he hath gone," said the bowman in an awed tone.

"A right valiant rogue," remarked Sir James.

"A rare treat he will provide for his master in hell," quoth Matteo.

"How was it that he failed to open the cabin-door?" demanded Hugh. "An he had won in there, he must have defied us, whilst he might----"

He shuddered.

"He did not get in for that I had entered before him," replied Ralph cheerfully. "And I bade Lady Edith bar the door after me when I left her."

The comrades stared at Ralph.

"When was this done?" asked Hugh.

"Whilst you and Sir James and Messer Matteo were fighting by your lone," explained Ralph. "I thought Messer Mocenigo might have some

deviltry in store for your lady, so I ran along beside the galley as far as I might under the rocks, and clambered aboard behind those who contended with you. They did not see me, and I entered the stern-castle, where Messer Comnenus and the Lady Helena were watching the fray. Lady Edith was bound helpless; but I released her and set her to watch them whilst I went to your aid."

Sir James took Ralph's hand.

"The glory of this bicker belongs to you," he said solemnly. "Hast conducted in right knightly fashion. When we return to Chesby, Ralph, you shall have a quarter-hide of land in the beechwood next the forest and a halfling of pigs to stock it with."

"Nay, fair lord, 'twas naught," stammered Ralph.

"Naught!" repeated Hugh. "Perchance it meant the Lady Edith's life. But come. Let us have her forth of the cabin."

He pounded the door with his sword-hilt.

"Open, Edith! 'Tis Hugh!"

There was a noise of shifting bars, and the door was thrown back. Edith stood in the low portal, starry-eyed, cheeks aflame, her hair in tumbled masses.

"Is it you, in sooth, Hugh?" she whispered.

"Ay, sweet friend," he answered, and knelt before her.

But she placed her hands under his arms and raised him to his feet.

"Kneel not to me," she said. "I am not worthy. No woman may be so proud as I am of you, for none was ever served so nobly. Art my own knight and lord, faithful and always true."

For the second time she raised her lips to his, and Hugh's heart hammered so that it seemed it must burst through gambeson and hauberk. The domes and towers of Constantinople danced before his eyes. But he cast down his sword and caught her to him, straining her in his mailed arms until she sobbed:

"Oh, Hugh, have done! Prithee! I may not breathe."

As he let her go, a cold voice sneered close by:

"A touching sight! Ay, by the Panagia! The parted lovers meet at last!"

Helena Comnena swept out of the cabin, her lithe figure erect in a clinging gown of apple-green, her eyes blazing with a venom that belied her calm, still face. Behind her shambled her father, cringing and fearful, despite his fur-trimmed garments and the jewels that flashed in cap and chain and rings.

Hugh drew back to the rail.

"In you we are not interested," he answered civilly. "You have most foully wronged me and mine, lady. Certes, you deserve death. But we do not war on women. You are free to go whither you will outside of Constantinople. Here you may not stay. But as for you--" he turned upon Comnenus--"you, knave that you are, base-born for all your high

estate, ingrate who turned against the hand that saved him, coward withal, you shall we deliver up to the lords of the host for judgment. Perchance they will see that you taste of the torment you devised for others."

Comnenus waved his hands before his face.

"No--no--no!" he screamed. "Never that! Save me--save me--save me--save me! I cannot! I----"

The words seemed to stick in his throat; he beat the air with his clenched fists, choked and crumpled in a motionless heap of silk and satin on the deck.

"He hath fainted from fright," said Sir James contemptuously.

"Nay," said Matteo, stooping to feel the man's heart. "He hath died of it."

There was a pause. Helena Comnena did not look at her father. From the time he had emerged from the cabin until he sank almost at her feet her eyes were fastened upon the face of Hugh.

"You think that you have won!" she mocked him now. "You think that you have beaten Helena Comnena--scorned her! You think that all hath been done, all hath been said! You fool! I do not know whether I pity you or hate you or love you most! But you shall not exult in your victory!"

She flashed across the deck like a green flame. She wound her supple body about Hugh, pinning his arms and legs, and fell with him over the rail. So swiftly did she move that Hugh had no inkling of her purpose. He was helpless, for the momentum of her rush threw him off his balance the instant she struck him and her garments and twining limbs restricted his movements. He had a brief sensation of falling, with her face pressed close to his, her eyes shining with insane brilliancy--then came a splash. His last thought was that he must perish exactly as Bartolommeo had perished, for he knew that no man weighted down with armour could hope to keep himself afloat. He felt himself sinking--sinking. Helena's limbs clung to him like cramping bands of ice. There was a deafening clamour in his ears....

When he came to himself he lay on the deck of the galley, his armour stripped off, wrapped around with rugs. His chest burned as though it had been seared with fire. Over him crouched Edith, the water dripping from her hair and gown, her hands chafing at his.

"See, his eyes are open," she cried. "Oh, the Virgin be praised! Certes, you will not die now that we have found one another, Hugh? Speak to me!"

"How came I here?" he croaked.

"Nay, I know not. It hath been all one nightmare to me."

"Nightmare, saith she!" It was Sir James who spoke, kneeling opposite Edith. "Belike! But you had been at the bottom of the Kontoscalion now, but for her brave self, Hugh."

Hugh's eyes mirrored his unspoken question.

"We none of us could aid you, for that we were in armour," explained Sir James, "but she leaped straight-way overside, snatching a rope

from the ship's gear as she ran. In the water she tore off that she-devil's grip from you, and fastened the rope about your waist so that we might haul you on board."

"She is as brave as she is beautiful," said Matteo's voice at Hugh's feet. "Ah, comrade, there is not in all the world another lady it would be worth crossing the world to find."

Hugh looked up at the face that hung over him, tender as a mother's.

"Ay, she is, indeed," he said contentedly. "Now am I happy, for I have my dear lady and you, fair lord, my father, and the best comrades that ever a man knew."

CHAPTER XXVI

LORDS OF THE WORLD

Constantinople had fallen. Murtzuphlus abandoned his first intention of holding the Palace of the Bucoleon as a citadel of last resort and fled in the night. The next day the entire city was occupied by the Crusaders. From the Golden Horn to the Golden Gate the capital of the Eastern Empire--by actual fact the capital of the Christian world--was in their possession. The prize was the richest won by any army of their time--money, jewels, vessels of gold and silver, the costliest cloths and furs, works of art such as existed nowhere else in Europe, all the hoarded accumulation of centuries of conquest and security.

Every lord of the host had a palace assigned to him for his residence; every knight won a fortune; every sergeant and shipman of the fleet received enough to make him independent. The chiefs gave strict commands that order should be established and the lives and property of citizens respected; but it was impossible immediately to secure full recognition of this obligation. Only when punishments were inaugurated for those who abused their power was anarchy at an end. The Count of St. Paul hung one of his knights with his shield around his neck as a lesson to other marauders, and sergeants and camp followers were flogged.

So complete was the triumph of the host that men were bewildered by it. They wandered through the miles of streets of the city, gazing at the public parks, the cisterns like lakes, the hundreds of stately churches, the baths fitted up with a luxury unknown in the West, the palaces of the nobles and merchant-princes, the schools and colleges, and most of all at the tremendous walls. It was size and grandeur which impressed these rude Frankish warriors. Few among them had any conception of the store of art and learning at their feet, which outweighed in value the material wealth which committees of Crusaders and Venetians were reckoning and distributing.

Now and then a churchman joined with Hugh in admiration of a statue showing that pure outline of form which distinguished Greek sculpture of the golden age. There were thousands of statues, marble, porphyry, granite and bronze, scattered about the city. Every square or forum, the porticoes which lined the principal thoroughfares and market-places, the fountains, the public buildings, were decorated with them. Some were monumental in proportions like the bronze equestrian statue of Justinian, mounted on a structure of seven arches, in the Augustaion. Some were exquisite miniature

representations of Pagan gods and goddesses.

Hugh found more among the clerks who appreciated the contents of the libraries of the palaces, the Senate, the churches and monasteries. Constantinople was the treasure-house of the learning of the ancient world. The complete works of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, poets, mathematicians, dramatists and historians were ranged on the library shelves of the capital. Manuscripts of priceless worth were common in the schools. Hugh could scarcely restrain his delight when he found himself able to secure the books of men of the past whom he had known only by their names or monkish corruptions of their liquid texts.

It was natural, perhaps, that the essentially sensuous beauty of Greek art and architecture should not appeal to the great body of the Crusaders, men whose own national souls were to find expression in the massive dignity of Gothic art. But it was deplorable. The whole artistic development of Western Europe, as well as the history of the world, might have been changed and human progress advanced centuries ahead of time, had the lords of the host perceived the full measure of their opportunity. They did not, and for that they cannot be blamed.

They rejoiced in the splendour of St. Sophia and the vast harmony of its echoing interior, decked with mosaics and frescoes, whose melting polychromes were brought out in fascinating detail by the myriad lamps of silver that hung on golden chains from the roof. They rioted in the fastidious comfort of the palaces, fitted with conveniences which were not to be common in Europe for six centuries to come. They regarded with respect the huge dimensions of the Hippodrome, with its tens of thousands of marble seats and the hundreds of statues that decorated it, including bronzes depicting the winners of the chariot races, standing in their chariots, life-size, beside the eastern goals.

But they could go no farther in their appreciation of the wonders which surrounded them. Statues to them were stone and bronze, and the value of the metal consisted in the possibility of melting it down to turn into so many denarii. The statue of Helen, the colossal figure of Juno from Samos, Paris presenting the apple of discord to Venus, the Hercules of Lysippus which had been brought from Tarentum, the ass and rider which had been cast by Augustus to commemorate his reception of the news of the battle of Actium, and, most precious of all, the very group of the wolf suckling Romulus and Remus, founders of the Elder Rome, which had been brought by Constantine from the Palatine--all these and many more as notable were consigned to the melting-pot.

Hugh saved what he could of the smaller objects which appealed to him. The Venetians reserved for themselves the four bronze horses which the Emperor Theodosius had brought from Chios and shipped them home to adorn the front of their new cathedral church of St. Mark. An occasional churchman, broader-minded than his fellows, obtained a bust of Emperor or general; but the delicate nude figures of old Greece were ruthlessly banished from view.

What did appeal to churchman, soldier and shipman alike was the remarkable accumulation of holy relics in Constantinople. It was by long odds the largest collection extant in Christendom. Its dispersal served to stock the churches and shrines of Western Europe. Spurious as it undoubtedly was in great part, nevertheless it exerted an influence of inestimable proportions. Not a saint recognised by the Eastern church was unrepresented in it. All the greater apostles

and disciples were perpetuated by some garment or mortal fragment. There was not a knight in the host who did not send home some relic, more or less miraculous in its properties, to the church or monastery of the district whence he had come.

After the distribution of the booty, the question which confronted the host was the selection from among their number of a new Emperor. All were agreed that the rule of the Greeks must be ended, that for the sake of Western Christianity and the redemption of the Holy Land, the empire must be reorganised under Latin dominion.

"You are the lords of the world, Messers," declared Dandolo in the parliament which met in the Palace of the Bucoleon to decide the matter. "An you use rightly the power which God hath conferred upon you, it will multiply and increase a thousand fold. Certes, no empire was ever so powerful as this one in its prime. It hath fallen because of the wickedness of its rulers and the schism which its people affected. Now do you set about to rear it again, in accordance with Christian rule, giving justice to all and promoting commerce, for 'tis only by commerce that the best empire may prosper."

They debated the question this way and that, and in the end it was decided that twelve electors should be nominated from the host, six by the Crusaders and six by the Venetians. And lest there should be any question of feudal influence in the voting of the Crusaders' representatives, it was decreed that these six should all be churchmen, who were not bound by ties of service or blood to any of the lords of the host. The twelve, after attending high mass in St. Sophia on the morning of May 9th, 1204, were led into the Church of Our Lady the Illuminator, which was situated within the walls of the Palace of the Bucoleon, and the door was locked behind them.

All day the lords and knights thronged the halls and courts of the Palace, whilst the deliberation of the electors went on. Excitement filled the air and partisanship ran high. The Lombards and Italians, other than the Venetians, favoured the Marquis Boniface; the northern French were for Count Baldwin of Flanders; the Burgundians and Germans demanded that the sovereignty of the Eastern Roman Empire should be given to Philip, King of Suabia, who, in defiance of Pope Innocent, had claimed the title of Western Roman Emperor. The Venetians said little, and a rumour grew that the Doge was likely to be the choice of their electors. During the afternoon this rumour became so pronounced that Dandolo himself went to the door of the Church where the electors were sitting and in the presence of all who could crowd within hearing expressly forbade his election.

"I am a citizen of the Republic," he said. "By the suffrage of my fellow-citizens I have been elected to rule over them. But it would not be fitting for any Venetian to accept an Imperial crown. The Republic cannot permit it; I, as Doge, must forbid it."

"Who think you will receive it?" asked Hugh of Villehardouin after this renunciation had thrilled the thousands who heard of it.

"Messer Dandolo can tell you better than I," replied the Marshal shrewdly. "There can be no doubt he might have had it an he wished. There is no man in the host like him in wisdom."

"But why is there so little talk of Lord Boniface?" urged Hugh. Both Villehardouin and Sir James, who stood by, laughed at this question.

"Set a man over others and he makes enemies," said Sir James. "How say you, Lord Marshal?"

"Ay, you have put your finger on it," Villehardouin agreed. "Moreover--I say this of my own judgment--it is not to the interest of the Venetians to have Boniface for Emperor. His lands of Montferrat are too close for comfort to the confines of their state."

"Who then?" asked Hugh.

Count Baldwin of Flanders, tall, handsome in figure, in the flower of youth, a merry smile on his blonde face, made his way by them. He did not force others aside, as many a great noble might have done, but stepped slowly and with a pleasant word for all he met.

"By your leave, Messer! Ha, Sir James, I greet you well! Messer Fulk, we have not met this week past; prithee dine with me at Blachernae. Messer, I regret to trouble you, but----"

Villehardouin did not answer, but Matteo, who had been silent hitherto, raised his hand in a slight gesture.

"There walks a _man_" he said.

"God send that you be right, Messer," added Villehardouin.

The afternoon passed, and evening came on. Still the Bucoleon was crowded by all who had the right of admittance. The excitement increased. From the tensity in the atmosphere it might have been supposed that each knight anticipated his own election. Men forbore to eat and drink. The court in front of the Church of Our Lady the Illuminator was packed to suffocation. More rumours filled the air. It was said that the electors could not agree.

But at midnight the doors of the church were thrown open. Nevelon, Bishop of Soissons, appeared on the topmost step. He raised his arms in a benediction, and a hush fell upon the sea of faces upturned in the light of the torches.

"Messers," he said slowly, "thanks be to God, we are all agreed upon our choice. Ye have sworn that ye would accept him whom we should elect to be Emperor, and that you would support him against all opponents. This hour of the night, which saw the birth of God, sees also the birth of a new Empire. We proclaim as Emperor Count Baldwin of Flanders and Hainault."

For the space of a man's breath silence lasted, drawn taut as a bowstring to the breaking point. Then cheers rent the night, such cheers as had greeted no new Emperor of Rome since the legions elected their chosen generals.

"Harrow! Harrow! Long life to Emperor Baldwin! Success to him! Harrow! Harrow! Baldwin reigns!"

They tore him from his knights, and Boniface, Count Louis of Blois, Count Hugh of St. Paul, Villehardouin, Sir James and the chief lords of the host made a throne for him of their shields, then swung him up on it, shoulder-high above the throng. And an Emperor he looked, with his yellow beard sweeping his hauberk and his youthful face glowing with pride and satisfaction.

When Dandolo came to greet him, he leaped down from his shield-throne, and met the old Doge with arms spread wide.

"God keep and cherish you, Sire," the Doge said. "You are the best

man of us all."

"Nay," protested Baldwin. "Certes, there is no one of us the equal of you."

"I am old," returned Dandolo. "My course is run. 'Tis for you, fair lord, to build up from the foundations we have laid for you. An you succeed, your children will sit upon a throne above all others."

"An you help me, I will," said Baldwin.

"That will I right cheerfully. And I pray for you the spiritual help of St. Mark, even as I promise you the physical help of the Republic."

On Sunday, May 16th, Baldwin was crowned in St. Sophia. The Papal Legate placed the Imperial crown on his head, saying: "He is worthy."

"He is worthy!" thundered back the knights.

The lords of the host elevated him again upon their shields. The Greek Empire of Constantinople was at an end.

On the following day Hugh and Edith were married in the Church of Our Lady of Blachernae. Sir Cedric had recovered sufficiently from his wounds to be present, and all the barons came to wish the couple happiness. The Emperor Baldwin himself stood at Hugh's elbow, and when the service was ended drew him to one side.

"The Marshal of Champagne is a close friend to me, Messer Hugh," he said, "and he has told me much of your merit. It is my desire that you will remain here and assist me in the work of conquering my Empire, for there is much to be done before we may move against the Saracens. How say you if I give you the Duchy of Adrianople?"

Duke of Adrianople! Hugh's head swam at the thought.

"Prithee, give me leave to think upon it for a day, Augustus," he answered.

The Emperor nodded.

"Be it so. I need a young, active lord to be Warden of the Bulgarian March. There will be great glory for you, Messer Hugh."

That night Hugh told Edith.

"What think you of becoming Duchess of Adrianople?" he asked.

She looked at him, troubled and uncertain.

"Whatever you wish, Hugh, that is my wish, too. But----"

She hesitated.

"But what?"

"I love our England."

"Ay, so do I," admitted Hugh.

He could not make up his mind, and in the middle of the night he sought his father's chamber. Sir James listened to his tale in silence.

"Duke of Adrianople," he repeated when Hugh had finished. "Ay, 'tis a vast honour. Boniface is to be King of Salonica, and chief feudatory of the Imperial Crown, but you would press him close. You should win great place and power, fair son. But----"

He hesitated as Edith had done.

"My mind is open, lord," said Hugh.

"Then hear my counsel," replied Sir James, with sudden decision. "Hugh, I would not have you make the mistake I made. 'Tis well enough for a man to go upon Crusade or aventuring to fulfil a vow, mayhap. But he who severs himself from home loses more than place and power can supply. Get you to England, Hugh. In England lies your lot. There will you be Lord of Chesby soon--ay, and of Blancherive, too, I make no doubt. England is your home. For England should you work. I say naught of those who remain here. But for myself----"

"Ay?" Hugh prompted.

"Nay, Hugh, I will do that which you do."

"You will stay, if I stay?"

"Ay, there must be work for old knights like me."

"Work!" retorted Hugh. "For you, with the Treasure of the Bucoleon in your power to disclose! You may have what you will!"

Sir James buried his face in his hands.

"It may not be," he answered tonelessly. "You know not what you say, fair son."

"But why?"

"For that this treasure is not mine. It belongs to a dead man--who trusted me. I may not betray his trust. My honour would be soiled thereby. It was his wish that this wealth, which he wrung from those he deemed to have defrauded their fellows, should be put to use to build up anew this broken Empire."

"Is not that what we do?" cried Hugh.

"Ay, but do we?" replied Sir James. "Bethink you, fair son. Our people are drunk with victory. Lords of the world, Dandolo called them, and lords of the world they may become, if they are content to serve as well as conquer, to deal righteously with those beneath them. I hope for much from Baldwin. I fain would see him succeed. But I will not give up to him the treasure that Andronicus amassed. 'Twould do no more than create discontent and grumbling because it might not be divided. And certes, he hath enough problems on his back, without that added to them. Let Baldwin--let the host--prove their worth. Let them make the most of the tools they have in hand. Then will I give up to them the secret--or if I am dead, 'twill be for you to do so, for ere I pass it is my purpose to render it to you."

Hugh stood up, a light shining in his face.

"I have learned my lesson," he said. "You have taught it to me, fair

lord. I would have put place and power before all else. But you set honour over all, and I prefer to walk as you have walked."

"And England, Hugh?"

"I am for England--England and Chesby. I would rather hold one knight's fee in England than be Duke of Adrianople. Certes, and we labour aright, we may erect in England an Empire no less rich and powerful than this, which we have helped to conquer."

"That may we, fair son!" exclaimed Sir James. "Right knightly spoken! I rejoice in my heart at your decision. Doubt not you will never regret it."

But Hugh did find cause to regret--and almost to cancel his determination--when he told his decision to Matteo.

"So we sail for home by the first galley which leaves the Golden Horn," he concluded. "Ha, Matteo, think on the times we shall have at Chesby and in Crowden Wood! We shall live over again every venture we have made, and you shall sing gests and romaunts of them which will bring lords from all the country round."

"Nay, Hugh," said Matteo sadly. "I do not sail with you."

"Not sail with me? St. Cuthbert! comrade, dost think I'll be content to part with you?"

Matteo threw his arm around Hugh's shoulders. There were tears in his eyes.

"Ah, I would that I might cast in my lot with you until eternity! Art more than friend, Hugh--ay, more than brother! But this that you ask of me, I may not do. I have no place in England, save that which you make for me. I do not belong there. Your English lords care not for the jongleur's company. They seek the gleeman and juggler. An I went with you, I should be no more than a hanger-on in your train."

Hugh cried out in protest.

"Oh, well I know 'twould never seem so to you, Hugh! But my pride might not suffer it. In England you have a high rank to fill. You must take your part with the other barons of the realm. You will have your wife--children, in time. You do not need me--or I would come, ay, an it were to clean your stables! Nay, my place is here in Constantinople, or belike, in Outremer. My blood calls me here. Here there is work for me to do. Here men count it not against me that I am a jongleur or that my birth was unhallowed by wedlock.

"There is a rift in my heart at thought of losing you; but certes, you will treasure me in your memory, as I will treasure you in mine. And I will make a chanson of your deeds that men shall sing all the way from Outremer to the land of the Scots. Mayhap you will tell your sons of Matteo, and if you have friends who voyage to Outremer, you will bid them seek me out that I may know you are in life. And always, Hugh, there will be none other in my heart save you."

Hugh bowed his head in mute acceptance.

"Let it be as you wish, Matteo," he answered. "An I do not hold with all that you say, still I know right well that you would do naught which was not worthy and honourable. Only, prithee, take my sword and Beosund as keepsakes of the days we rode together."

"Gladly, Hugh."

That day week, Hugh, with Sir James, Edith, Sir Cedric and Ralph, set sail from the Golden Horn in the galley _Good Adventure_, Messer Contarini, Master.

A charter in the possession of the Abbey Church of St. Cuthbert of Crowden, bearing date of All Hallows, A.D. 1204, provides for the celebration of a mass weekly for the salvation of the soul of a Paynim lady, mother of the jongleur, Matteo of Antioch, who perished in mortal sin.

There are still Chesbys in England, and men still find friends loyal and unselfish in adversity--and England is a greater Empire to-day than ever was the Eastern Rome.

EPILOGUE

From its very inception the Fourth Crusade was marred by an evil destiny. Born of the pangs of rivalry betwixt Church and State, its object was distorted by ambition, avarice, politics and misfortune. Dandolo utilised it to lay the foundations of Venetian greatness. No other State or people gained anything from it of permanent value. Instead of heeding the advice of the wise old Doge to encourage commerce and bulwark their Empire with trade, the barons of the conquered realm crushed the inhabitants under the iron heel of feudalism. Within a year of his election the Emperor Baldwin was dead, slain by the Bulgarians who had burst the frontiers his knights were too weak to defend. Dandolo died not long afterward, exhausted by the marvellous exertions he had undertaken.

Had Western Europe backed the new Empire, had the Papacy lent it ungrudging support, Baldwin's successors might have triumphed, despite their mistaken policies. But the West remained occupied with its own affairs. The religious fervour which had conceived the Crusades was fast expiring. Rulers and peoples were engaged in beating out the groundwork of civilisation from the brutishness of the Middle Ages. There was a dying flicker of fanaticism under the lash of St. Louis's personality a half-century later, but like others which preceded and followed this, it gained no material purpose, it did not better the lot of the Eastern Christians or redeem the dwindling territory of the Holy Land that yet remained in Christian hands.

Perhaps it is too much to say that the Latin conquest of Constantinople benefited nobody but the Venetians. Perhaps it had some value in that it breathed life into the decaying national spirit of the Greeks. They were stirred to fresh exertions by the humiliations put upon them. They waged relentless warfare upon the Latin Empire, and finally, on the night of July 24th, 1261, taking advantage of the absence of the reigning Emperor, Baldwin II, and the Venetian fleet, a Greek force of 1,000 men led by Alexis Strategopoulos Cæsar entered the Gate of the Pegé by treachery and brought the Latin Empire to an inglorious close. The dynasty of the Palaeologoi supplanted the house of Hainault.

It was a brave effort misdirected. That is the most charitable

judgment which can be pronounced on it. Had it succeeded in the genuine ambition of its leaders--that is, had they been able enough men to contrive the accomplishment of such far-reaching schemes--it might very well have achieved the lasting junction of the Eastern and Western Churches, reared a great, progressive Christian state athwart the path of Islam and redeemed once and for all the Holy Land.

But it failed to accomplish any of these objects. Venice alone turned to account the spoils which fell to her portion to check the Moslem sweep, in the Eastern Mediterranean. It failed, and as a failure it is remembered.

THE END

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

• You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

• You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

• You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

• You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you “AS-IS”, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.