

The Troth of the Sword

By A. C. Benson

Sir Hugh was weary, for he had ridden far and fast that day, and ridden warily too, by bypaths and green forest roads, for the country was much harried by robbers at that time, under the grim chief that went by the name of the Red Hound: he was an outlaw that had been a knight; but for his cruelty and his blackness of heart and his pitiless wickedness he had been driven from his stronghold into the forest, where he lived a hunted life, rending hitherto all that were sent against him, a tenor in the land; writing his anger upon broken churches and charred farmsteads. Sparing none but the children whom he took to serve him, and maidens to please himself and his men.

But Sir Hugh had been safe enough; for the Red Hound was out northwards; and Sir Hugh was gallantly attended by a troop of jingling horse, that went swiftly before and behind him, while he rode in the midst, silent as was his wont, his eyes dwelling wistfully upon the green and lonely places of the forest, the bright faces of the flowers, and the woodland things that slipped away into the brake. For all his deeds of might—and Hugh though young in years was old in valour—he had a deep desire for peace and the fair and beautiful arts of life. He could sing tuneably to the lute; and he loved the delicate things of earth with a love of which he spoke to none.

At last they struck out of the forest into a firmer road; and here was a wall by the wayside and a towered gate; but the wood climbed steeply within. At the gate they halted, and presently Sir Hugh was admitted. The road within was paved with stone, and led to the left; and here Sir Hugh dismounted, and saying that he would stretch his limbs, left his horse to be led by the page that rode beside him, giving him a smiling glance, which had made the boy a willing and loving servant. The troop rode off among the copses; and Sir Hugh, taught by the porter, took a grassy path that led steeply through the wood to the right, the porter telling him that he would be the first at the castle gate; for the path was steep and direct, while the road wound at an easier slope, to the top of the hill where the Castle stood.

Sir Hugh unlaced his helmet, for the day had been still and hot. He was a very gracious youth to behold. His face was beardless and clean-cut. His skin was as the skin of a child, for he had lived a pure life, eating and drinking sparingly. Another might have been mocked for this; but Sir Hugh was so gallant a fighter, so courteous, so loving, that he was let to please himself. His eyes were large and quiet; his hair rippled into short brown curls. He had no signs of travel, save a little dust upon his brow; and this he washed off at a rill that fell clear through the wood, dripping from the rocks. And so he went up easily, and glancing about him. The oak-copse interlaced its boughs above his head; the sun had lately set, and there was a soft twilight in the forest. In the pale sky floated a few dark clouds, with rims of fire caught from the sinking sun; sometimes the wood was all about him, with close undergrowth and grassy paths. Sometimes he saw a pile of rocks, all overgrown with moss, indistinct in the gloom. Sometimes he saw a dell where a stream went murmuring down, hidden in climbing plants; sometimes a little lawn would open in the heart of the chase, where a deer stood to graze, leaping lightly into the brake at the sight of him.

He came very suddenly to the end of the path. Through the interlaced leaves of the copse a great bulk loomed up, that seemed strangely high and dark; the wood ended, and he saw the Castle before him, with its turrets and battlements showing black against the green sky; a light or two burnt with a fiery redness in some of the high windows.

He stepped out on to the wide platform of the Castle, and saw before him the wooded ridges of the lower hills, with light veils of mist lying among them, that had a golden hue from the setting sun; beyond, rose the shadowy shapes of mountains, that seemed to guard a sweet and solemn secret of peace in their midst, As he looked round, his troop rode briskly out of the wood, with a sudden clatter, and a sharp ringing of weapons, as they came out upon the paved space; and presently a warder looked out, and the great doors of the Castle were opened to them.

Sir Hugh bore with him a letter of great import.

The Lord whom he served, the Earl Fitz-Simon, was a man of haughty strength and great pride. His Countess was lately dead, and he had no son to bear his name. He was old and grizzled and brought a terror about with him. He was as powerful indeed as the King himself, of whom the Earl spoke scornfully, without concealment, doing him a scanty homage when they met. Sir Hugh was of distant kin to him, and had been brought up in his Castle; and the Earl went as near loving him as he had ever gone, wishing that he had him as his son, and indeed desiring that he should have the Earldom after him if he had no heir of his own, and marry his only daughter, a grim maiden. And Hugh loved the Earl very faithfully, giving him the worship of a son.

On the day before the Earl had sent for him; and Hugh had stood beside him as he sate and wrote in silence, watching his great bony hand and his knotted brow, bristled with stiff hair. Presently the Earl had thrown down his pen, and exclaiming that he was but an ill clerk, had smiled pleasantly upon Hugh, telling him in a few sour words that he meant to take another wife, and that his choice had fallen upon the Lady Mary, the daughter of the Lord Bigod (whose Castle it was that Sir Hugh now approached). "A goodly maiden, apt to bear strong children to my body." And as he said this he made a pause, and watched Hugh narrowly to see how he took the news, and whether he had hoped for the Earldom after him. But Hugh had given him an open smile in return, and said that he wished him much happiness, and heirs to rule after him. And the Earl had nodded well-pleased, knowing that Hugh had spoken what was in his heart, and that no other man that he knew would have so wished in Hugh's place; and then the Earl had sworn a coarse oath or two, saying that he was old and spent, and if he did not beget an heir, Hugh should come after him; but that if he did beget a man-child, then that Hugh should have the guarding of him after he himself was gone. And then he did up his letter roughly, splashed wax upon it, and pricked it with a signet; and bade Hugh ride in haste with a score of troopers, saying, "And I trust you with this because you do not turn your eyes aside to vanity, as the priests say, and care nothing for the looks of maidens; therefore you will be a safe messenger; and you will put my ring (he gave it him) upon the Lady Mary's finger before the priest, and kiss her on the lips if you have a mind; and bid her ride within the week to the wedding; and stay not for the Lord Bigod, for he is more maid than man, and will not willingly let his daughter go; but will fear to keep her from my behest."

And then he beat his hand on Hugh's shoulder, as his manner was when he was pleased; and then to Hugh's surprise bent and kissed his cheek, as a man might kiss his son, and then, as if ashamed, frowned upon him, and said "with haste!"—and in an hour Hugh was gone.

Now when they entered the Castle, which had a great court within, full of galleries, there was a great stir of people to see them; the horses were led away to the stables; the troopers passed into the guard room; and an old seneschal with a white staff asked Hugh courteously of his business, and then led him up a flight of steps, and into a long dark room, hung with a faded green arras.

Here sate a pale thin man at a table, looking upon a book, in a velvet gown; the seneschal cried out Hugh's name, who made an obeisance, and then advancing, put the letter in the hands of the

Lord Bigod, saying, "From the Earl Fitz-Simon; these." Then the Lord Bigod rent the paper, looking curiously upon it; and read therein. Hugh observed him closely; he looked more like a priest than a knight, but there was something very sweet and noble about his air, and he looked as a man might look who had known both sorrow and thought, and wished well to all the world. The Lord Bigod read the letter, and then grew somewhat pale; then he read it again, and walked to the window, turning it in his hands. He stood so long, holding the letter behind him, and looking out, that Hugh saw that he was wrestling in mind and ill-at-ease. Then he turned, and said very courteously to Hugh, though his voice trembled somewhat, "Know you what is within this letter?" And Hugh said, "Yea, sir." And the Lord Bigod said, "It is a great matter." And then, after another long silence, the Lord Bigod turned to the seneschal who waited at the door, and said, "See that Sir Hugh be well bestowed:" and then with an inclination of the head to Sir Hugh he added, "I will think hereon, and you shall hear my words to-morrow." Hugh turned and followed the seneschal out; and he felt a great pity for the kind Lord whom he had left, for he saw that he was in great sadness of mind and perplexity. The seneschal asked Hugh if he would join the knights, but Hugh said he was weary and would rest. So the seneschal led him to a spacious chamber, from which Hugh could see the tree-tops of the forest, and the mountains very black, with a great orange glow of sunset behind; food was served him, and his page came to him, to do off his armour. And presently, seeing that the page was very weary, he bade him lie down to sleep; so the page lay down upon a little bed that was in a turret opening on the room; and soon after Sir Hugh himself lay down upon a great pillared bed, made of oak, and hung with tapestries. But he could not sleep, but lay wearily gazing at the glimmering window and hearing the breathing of the boy in the turret hard by, till at last he too fell asleep.

The morning came with a great brightness and freshness, with the hoarse cries of the jackdaws that lived in the ledges of the tower; Sir Hugh dressed himself carefully and noiselessly, not to wake the page, who still slept deeply; then he stood beside the boy's bed; the boy stretched out his arms in slumber and then awoke, ashamed to be later than his master, and to find him apparelled.

Presently the seneschal came, and led Hugh to the Hall, where were the two sons of the Lord Bigod, with a large company of knights, that stood up at his appearing, and did him great honour; and then came a message for him to go to the Lord Bigod. Hugh saw at once that he was very weary and had not slept; the letter lay on the table beside him; and he said to Hugh that he had given the letter great thought, and that it was a very honourable behest: "And herewith I accept it for the Lady Mary," he said stammeringly, "who will do as my daughter and as the chosen of the honourable Earl should do." Then he was silent for a space, presently adding, "I have not told my daughter the tidings yet; I will tell her; and then you shall have speech with her; but I would," he added, "that there was not such haste in the matter; for a maiden is a tender thing and merits tender usage; do you think, sir"—and here he looked anxiously upon Hugh—"do you think that the Earl will consent to a longer delay, that the maiden may grow accustomed to the thought? She has as yet spoken to no man but myself and her brothers, and though she is fearless and of a high spirit"—he broke off suddenly, and then with a wistful glance at Sir Hugh, added, "Will the Earl delay awhile?" Sir Hugh felt a great pity for the man who stood so anxiously before him, but he hardened his heart and said, "I think that the Earl will not delay his purpose: he is swift to do his will." A great cloud of sadness came down on the Lord Bigod's face, and he said very low, "That is a good way, the way of a great warrior—so be it then, sir," and he softly withdrew, asking Hugh to wait for him.

Then fell a long silence; and Hugh, looking upon the folded letter on the table, felt it to be a cruel thing; but he never wavered in loyalty to the Earl, and thought to himself that the longer the maiden waited the more would she perchance be terrified; that great men must wed as they would—and other things with which he sought to excuse what seemed a harsh deed.

Suddenly he heard a footstep; a door opened; and the Lord Bigod appeared, leading a maiden into the room, who encircled his arm with her hands. She was tall and slender, appalled all in white, with a girdle of gold. She was very pale, but bore herself with a gentle and simple grace; and there fell upon Hugh a thought that he cast from him as it were with both his hands. He had never known love, and his heart was as pure as snow; the maidens that he had seen had appeared to him but as distant visions of tenderness and grace, stirring in his heart nothing but a sort of brotherly compassion for things so delicate and frail, and unfit for the hard world in which men must live. But at the sight of the Lady Mary, her great eyes, in which there seemed a trace of swimming tears, he felt suddenly a deep passionate hunger of the heart, as though a sweet and deep mystery, lying far-off, had been brought suddenly near to him. Was this love, that great power of which the poets sung; the power which had lost kingdoms and wrought the destruction of men? He feared it was so indeed. He felt as a poor man might, who had lived in pinching want, and had suddenly found a great treasure of gold, at the stroke of a mattock in his field. One glance passed between them; and it seemed as though some other thing had passed; as though their souls had leapt together. Then he dropped his eyes and stood waiting, while a faint fragrance seemed to pass upon the air. Then the Lord Bigod said very gravely, “Sir Hugh, I have told the Lady Mary of your errand; and she will do the bidding of the Earl in every point. To-day we will make preparation; to-morrow shall the betrothal be; and on the third day the Lady Mary shall ride with you; and now I will leave you together for awhile; for the Lady Mary would ask you many things, and you will be courteous and tell her all.” Then he kissed his daughter, and led her to a chair before the table, and motioned to Sir Hugh to be seated at the table-side; and then he went out of the room in haste.

Then the Lady Mary began to speak in a low clear voice that had no trembling in it; but her hands that were clasped together on the table trembled; and Hugh took courage, and told her of the greatness of the Earl and his high courage, praising him generously and nobly; he spoke of the Earl’s daughter, and of the kinsfolk that abode there; and of the priest of the Castle, and of the knights; and of the Castle itself, and its great woodland chase; and the Lady Mary heard him attentively, her eyes fixed upon his face, and her lips parted. And then she asked him one or two questions, but broke off, and said, “Sir Hugh, you will know that all this is very new and strange to me; but it is not the newness and strangeness that is most in my heart; but it is the thought of what I leave behind, this house and my kin; and my father who is above all things dear to me—for I know no other place but this, and no other faces have I seen.” Then Sir Hugh felt his whole heart melted within him at the sight both of her grief and of her high courage. And the thought that she should thus pass in all her stainless grace to the harsh embrace of the old and grim Earl, came like a horror into his heart; but he only said, “Lady, I have dwelt all my life with the Earl and he has ever used me gently and graciously, and he is as a father to me; I know that men fear him; yet I can but say that he has a true heart full of wisdom and might.” And the Lady Mary smiled faintly, and said, “I will be sure it is so indeed.” And so she rose, and presently withdrew.

The day passed like a swift dream for Sir Hugh. He could think of nothing but the Lady Mary, with a strange leaping of the heart; that she was in the Castle above him, hidden somewhere like a flower in the dark walls; that he would stand before her to plight his Lord’s troth; that he would ride with her through the forest; and that he would have her near him through the months, when

she was wedded to the Earl—all this was a secret and urgent joy to him; not that he thought ever to win her love—such a traitorous imagining never even crossed his mind—but he thought that she would be as a sweet sister to him, whom he would guard as he could from every shadow of care; the thought of her sadness, and of her fear of the Earl worked strongly in his heart; but he saw no way out of that; and indeed believed, or tried to believe in his heart, that she would love the Earl for his might, and that he would love her for her grace, and that so all would be well.

The next day he rose very early, and was soon summoned to the chapel. There were few present; there seemed indeed, from soft movements and whisperings, to be ladies in a gallery beside the altar, but they were hidden in a lattice. The sons of the Lord Bigod were there, looking full of joyful excitement; other lords and knights sate within the chapel, and an old priest, in stiff vestments, with a worn and patient face, knelt by the altar, his lips moving as in prayer. Presently the Lord Bigod came in, as pale as death and sore troubled, and with him walked the Lady Mary, who seemed to bring the very peace of God with her. She was pale, but clear of complexion, and with a great brightness in her eyes, as of one whose will was strong. Then Hugh drew near to the altar, and plighted the Earl's troth to her, putting the great ring, with its ruby as red as blood, upon her finger. He noticed, as he waited to put the ring upon her hand, that a ray of light from the window darted through the signet, and cast a light, like a drop of blood, upon the maiden's white palm; and then the voice of the priest, raised softly in blessing, fell upon his ear with a tender hope; and at the end he knelt down very gently, and kissed the Lady Mary's hand in token of fealty; and the thought of the Earl's jest about bidding him to kiss her on the lips came like a shameful thought into his mind.

Then the day passed slowly and sadly; but he saw not the Lady Mary save once, when, as he walked in the wood, trying to cool his hot brain with the quiet, he saw her stand on a balcony looking out over the forest with an infinite and patient sadness of air, as of one that bade farewell.

And again the sun went down, and the night passed; and at daybreak he heard the clatter of horsehoofs in the court, the jingling of the stirrups, and the voices of his troop, who made merry adieux to their new comrades.

Then he came down himself; and saw beside his horse a smaller horse richly caparisoned; then in a moment, very swiftly, came the Lady Mary down the stairs, with the Lord Bigod and her brothers; she kissed her brothers, who looked smilingly at her; and then her father, hanging for a moment on his neck, and whispering a word into his ear; and Hugh could see the Lord Bigod's face working, as he restrained his tears, in anguish of heart. Then she smiled palely upon Hugh; her father lifted her to her horse; and they rode out with a great waving of handkerchiefs and crying of farewells, the bell of the Castle ringing as sweet as honey in the tower

They rode all day in the green forest, with a troop in front and a troop behind. The air was cool and fresh, and the sun lay sweetly upon the glades and woodpaths. All things seemed to rejoice together; the birds sang out of their simple joy, and the doves cooed, hidden in the heart of great green trees; and the joy of being with the maiden outweighed all other thoughts in the mind of Sir Hugh. Sometimes they were silent, and sometimes they talked softly together like brother and sister. What pleased him best was that she seemed to have put all care and anxiety away from her mind; once or twice, after a silence, he saw a tear glisten on her cheek; but she spoke, with no show of courage, but as though she had formed a purpose, and would take whatever befel her with a gentle tranquillity. The little services that he was enabled to do her seemed to him like a treasure that he laid up for the days to come; and the love which he felt in his heart had no

shadow in it; it was simply as the worship of a pure spirit for the most delicate and beautiful thing that the world could hold.

At last the sun set when they were yet some miles from the Earl's Castle; and while Hugh was still counting up the minutes that remained to him, he saw the troop in front come to a halt; and presently one of them rode back, and told him with an uneasy air that there was a great smoke in the wood to the left; and that they thought they were not far from the haunts of the Red Hound. But Hugh said lightly, not to terrify the maiden, that the Red Hound was far to the north; to which the trooper replied with a downcast look, "It was so said, sir." "Ride on then warily!" said Hugh—and he bade the troop behind come up nearer. The Lady Mary presently asked him what the matter was; and though by this time a dreadful anxiety had sprung into Hugh's mind, he told her who the Red Hound was, and she replied that she had heard of him; but seeing that he was somewhat troubled she forbore to speak more of that, but pointed out to him a little tuft of red flowers that grew daintily in the crevice of a rock beside the path. He turned to look at it; and suddenly became aware that something, he could not clearly say what, had slipped away at that moment from the bushes beside the road; the thought came into his mind that this was a spy set to watch them; and so he bade the men draw their swords, and close about them in a ring.

They were now in the thickest of the wood. The green road in which they were riding dipped down to a low marshy place, where a stream soaked through the path. The rock, which seemed like a little pinnacle, rose sharply on their left clear of the bushes: all else was forest, except that a little path or clearing led up to the left, among the trees. There was an utter stillness in the air, which was all full of a golden light. The swords came merrily out of the scabbards with a sudden clang. The troopers closed in about them; but then, with a sudden dark rush out of the wood, there swept down the clearing a number of horsemen, roughly clad with leather cuirasses and gaiters, all armed with long pointed spears. It seemed as though they must have been ambushed there against them, they came on with such suddenness.

In a moment there was a scene of fierce confusion; swords flashed high; there were groans and shouts; a trooper, pierced by a lance, fell writhing at their feet; one of the enemy, cut down by a sword blow, fell to the earth and crouched there, blood dripping from his head and shoulder; but the armoured troopers, well drilled and trained, would have prevailed, had not a flight of arrows sung with a sharp rattle out of the thicket, and four of the men behind him fell, two of them instantly slain, and two grievously wounded. The riderless horses, wounded too, rushed snorting down the road, and another troop of men on foot poured out of the forest behind them.

In the middle of the enemies' lancers rode a tall man, red-haired and scowling, with yet something of a knightly air. Hugh recognised him at once as none other than the Red Hound himself, whom he had seen long ago before the days of his outlawry. He did not join in the fight, but sate on his horse a little apart, shouting a command from moment to moment.

Hugh cast a swift glance round; the men on foot were yet some little way off, running down the road; the troopers in front had pushed the lancemen a little way up the clearing; and Hugh determined to attempt a desperate rush with the Lady Mary up the road: desperate indeed it was, but he saw that if he could but get clear of the fight, there were none that could follow, except perhaps the chief himself; Hugh leant across his horse's neck; the Lady Mary sate still and silent, like the daughter of a line of knights, looking at the combat with a steady and unblenching look. He laid his hand on her bridle rein, and she turned and looked in his eyes; and he saw that therein which made him glad in the midst of the dangers—though he was too much accustomed to battle to have fear for himself—it was as a man, that had been long voyaging, might see, in a clear dawn, the cliffs of his home across the leaping seas.

He pointed, and said a word in her ear; she glanced at him, nodded, and drew up her rein; but at that moment his horse gave a short upward jerk, and then fell grovelling on his knees, an arrow sticking in his side, close to Sir Hugh's knee. He flung his foot clear, and leapt to the Lady's side; and then in a moment he saw that the battle was gone against him past mending. Another flight of arrows sang from the thicket, and four of the troopers in the glade fell from their horses, and the lancers, who were drawing back, pressed down upon them. Then Sir Hugh signed swiftly to the Lady that she should ride clear; but in that moment the Lady's horse fell too. Sir Hugh caught her in his arms, and dragged her free of the horse, tearing her gown by the knee, for the arrow that had slain the horse had pierced through the Lady's garment, though without wounding her. Then he saw that they were very hard beset, and that there was no way out; so he hastened to the rock, laid his hands upon a little ledge about as high as his head; leapt up, set his sword beside him, and then, stooping down, drew the Lady up beside him. Then he shouted to his men to come back to the rock; there were but a handful left; but they drew back slowly, and made a little ring about the base of the rock, while the others drew slowly in around them, but halted at a little distance, fearing the flashing swords.

The Red Hound himself stood near at hand; Hugh heard him shout his commands aloud, and heard him say that they should save the girl alive, and take the Knight captive if they could—and the Lady Mary heard it too, for she turned to Sir Hugh, and with a sudden look of entreaty, said, "Hugh, I must not fall into his hands." He looked at her smiling, and said, "Nay, dear, you shall not."

And then Hugh saw that it was indeed the end, and that his death was at hand; he had seen men in abundance die, and had often wondered how it was that death should come to him at the last. But now, instead of fear, there came to him a sort of fierce joy that he should die with her whom he was now not ashamed to love; and in the midst of the shouting and the tumult, he had a sudden vision of himself and her wandering away, two happy spirits, hand in hand, from the place of their passion.

And now the last of his troopers had fallen. Then the Lady Mary drew close to him, and said, "Is it time?" And he said, "Yes, dear, it is the time; fear nought—you will feel nothing—and you will wait for me, for I shall follow you close. And now, dear one, turn your face from me lest it unman me—there is nought to fear." So she smiled again, and he kissed her on the lips, and she turned from him; and he struck one stroke with his sword; she quivered once, and sinking down moved no more.

Then Sir Hugh prayed a prayer; and looking upon his sword, off which the blood now dripped, he poised it in his hand like a lance. The spearmen had closed in to the rock. But Hugh hurled his sword point foremost at the Red Hound, and saw it sink through his skull, till the hilt clattered on his brow; and then he cast one look upon the Lady; and, as a man might enter the gates of his home, he leapt very joyfully down among the spears.