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THE RED SAIL

By CHARLES HILAN CRAIG

*Through life after life he experienced that terrible drowning episode—
tale of reincarnation*

HILGARD THE MIGHTY stood proud and slim and straight in the bow of his ship while the red sail cracked in the breeze and the brawny oarsmen bent to their work. The tiny ship went through the water like a live thing and the coast of Norway was far, far behind and the coast of Britain was ahead, a fair mark in a purple sea under a cloudless blue sky.

When they had ravaged the town the Norse carried away the best of the plunder to their ship and were bent on turning about to return again to the country they loved so dearly. Hilgard the Mighty, always first ashore, always last to go on board, stood knee-deep in the flood and looked back again on the ruined town.

Hilgard called upon his men to await him and strode back to the shore through threatening surf. A maiden stood there.

Hilgard, heretofore impervious to the wiles of women, looked deep into the blue eyes of the Saxon girl. Those eyes were alluring and beautiful, albeit very troubled. The stern set of her lips alone marred an unescapable beauty. She looked at him without malice, without hatred, but her lips curled in scorn.

"Beast!" she said in a low tone, but the beauty of her voice roared in his ears as would the dull and distant thunder of a thousand sails. He looked still into her eyes and there arose in him an alien desire.

"This woman goes with me," he roared back across the water to Old Eric, who was minding the helm.

Old Eric came to his side, bounding through the waves, his harsh face set in still harsher mold.

"She does not go," cried Old Eric.

"She goes with me," answered Hilgard stubbornly.

"Hilgard," said Old Eric, "the strain of Loki is upon you. She goes not, else tonight you feast with your fathers in Valhalla and the curse be upon you forever."

In the woman's face there was no semblance of fear when Hilgard drew her roughly to him and lifted her in his arms and carried her through the surf to the ship.

The red sail groaned in the wind and the men bent to their oars and the ship leaped through the water. Night came upon them, black and ominous, and the storm came and ere dawn Hilgard the Mighty was with his fathers in Valhalla.

2

THE captain was a cold harsh man who had early made his mark as a warrior in Cæsar's army. He was a fighting man who would have none of woman, but held aloof from her as one accursed; but when his ship crossed from Gaul to the shore of Britain and he stood watching the flames which were eating out the guts of the town he looked twice into the eyes of another woman.

Her eyes were blue like the sky and her hair was golden like the sand and her skin compared to the skin of the Roman beau-

ties as would the white rose compare with the pink. Her brow was very fair, her nose straight, her lips rich and inviting.

He came to her and looked deep into her eyes and the harsh masque of his face softened a little.

"You are . . . who are you?"

"Feldah, my name."

"Have I seen you then in Rome?"

Her terror and hatred melted under his eyes.

"I have never traveled so far as Rome."

"Was it then in Gaul?"

"I have never been across the sea."

"Where then have I seen you?"

"I know not. I have never been from this place."

He looked at her and cursed under his breath. She was lying. He knew he had seen her, yet this was his first trip to Britain.

"Have you seen aught of me before?"

She shook her head.

Puzzled, he frowned and bit his lip. It was a deep matter to fathom. He carried her with him to the ship in the grim darkness that was falling. Standing under the sail when a haggard moon was risen he held her close to him and looked at her.

"Where?"

She raised her eyes to his suddenly, fear showing in them.

"I remember—oh, so vaguely. There was a Viking ship with a red sail. There were many oarsmen. You—and I. Then a storm . . ."

Driving up into the North Sea the ship perished and all on board.

3

CAPTAIN DE CRIE of Bonaparte's army landed with his small group of men on the British coast to lay certain devious

plans for the approaching invasion. DeCrie was among Napoleon's most trusted lieutenants, for none other could be given this most important mission. In the guise of peasants they set about their work so effectually that they had finished within the week.

In the tavern on the night they were to leave, DeCrie first saw the little girl of the blue eyes and golden hair. It came upon him at once that the maid was known to him, and he turned his eyes away from her and looked only to his drink.

When he had got outside he stood for a moment inadvertently near the lighted window. She walked past him and saw his face and exclaimed involuntarily. Like a flash DeCrie, who was a man used to emergencies, clapped his hand over her mouth and carried her with him into the darkness.

"*Mon Dieu*," he kept whispering over and over to himself.

At the appointed place a small boat awaited him. The men cried out at the sight of the woman, but they rowed them to the larger boat and got under way toward France.

When the maid was quieted DeCrie went to her and laughed triumphantly and said, "Your tale was not to be told."

"What do you mean?"

"You would have betrayed me."

"I? No!"

"But yes. You recognized me."

"No," she said levelly. "I do not know you. I thought I did, but I do not."

"But I have seen you before. Was it in Paris?"

"No."

She looked at him. He was staring out to sea.

"There is a memory," he whispered, "a bitter sweet memory of a ship rolling under a red sail and the oars of many men, of a blue-eyed maiden on the sands

of an ancient Britain; of death. There is a memory of Cæsar's host, again of a blue-eyed maid on a newer England. And death yet again . . ."

Wide eyed with wonder she looked at him—and remembered.

"Always a ship," she whispered. "And always death."

Captain DeCrie did not live to report to Napoleon.

4

JOHN ROBERTSON saw her first when she was shown to the chair opposite him in the crowded dining-car on the way to the pleasure resort. He had just started to attack the slender fish course when she sat down. At first he paid her no attention, but noting the beauty of her hand his gaze followed up a slender white arm to her shoulder, to her chin, to her eyes of a lustrous blue.

"Why, hello," he said.

She hesitated before answering and then presently said, "Hello."

"Oh. I thought at first that I knew you," he said half apologetically. "But perhaps I haven't had the pleasure."

Her eyes threw him a puzzled glance.

"It is very strange," she said. "But I had the same feeling—that I know you, that I have known you somewhere, sometime in the past."

"I live in America," he said. "This is my first trip abroad."

"And I live in London. I never have been to America."

"Better come over," he told her.

"No," she smiled. "I fear that I never could stand the trip. You see I'm terribly afraid of the sea."

His eyes widened.

"Sometimes," he said, "I have dreams about Vikings and a ship with a red sail and sailors and a watery death—silly rot."

"I have had the same dreams," she said quietly.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" he asked suddenly.

"No."

"Then how do you account for our knowing each other—for our dreams?"

"I can't account for them. It is all so strange—those dreams of a powerful man carrying me away to sea. And always there is storm and battle and death."

He looked at her, a grim tightening gripping his heart.

They spent the afternoon together when they had reached the resort, and in the early evening he drew her down to the side of the water.

"Let's take a ride in the boat."

She drew back in dismay.

"I—I'm afraid."

Laughing he lifted her in his arms and put her in the boat and gripped the oars and rowed away from the bank. The water was remarkably free of boaters, and despite the falling darkness her fear died. Under his stroke the lights of the boat-house fell far behind.

It came to them both at the same instant.

The rock tore a deep gash in the bottom of the craft and the water swirled through.

She was brave. There was in her voice no note of hysteria as she said, "It has come. Always, always it has come. Always, dear, it must come. Water . . . together a moment . . . then death . . ."

Robertson saw it too at the same moment, but he laughed aloud.

"It is fate," she said.

"Fate be damned. We'll beat fate," he told her.

He gripped her as the boat sank from beneath them, churning the water. She remained very quiet as he started to swim.

(Please turn to page 432)

The Red Sail

(Continued from page 405)

He cried out for aid, but there was no one to hear. The lake seemed deserted now. It was as if a grim and inexorable master of destiny were guiding them to doom. He held her up in the water so that her face was above it, and laughed defiance at the gathering darkness. He swam, she with her hand on his shoulder, cutting through the water slowly, hauling her. In an hour his muscles seemed bursting, but the lights were far distant.

Presently she sensed his fatigue and said, "Let me go and you swim on alone. You could get there."

He laughed in his weariness.

"I love you," he said.

Another hour. The lights were torturing phantoms in a vague and incredible distance. The canopy of stars hung like a grotesque ceiling. The wind caressed the surface of the water, fanning up gentle waves. Through all of John Robertson's being there came a wave of nostalgia, deadening and terrifying. A moment he was ready to give up, then felt her hand press harder on his shoulder.

"Can we do it?" she asked in a dull voice.

"Yes," he said harshly. "Yes, yes!"

He fought on and on in despair, his heart breaking, till with a hoarse cry he felt his feet touch the bottom. He stood up and carried her ashore and stood with her in his arms, stood looking out over the water, his clothes streaming, his lips bloody, his heart pounding, his hair soaked, his eyes flashing despite his deathly weariness.

For the barest fraction of a second, then, it seemed to him that far out in the darkness he saw the red sail of a Viking ship dip to him in proud and triumphant salute.