

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH WE SEEK A LOST LADY

BESIDE the minister and myself, nothing human moved in the crimson woods. Blue haze was there, and the steady drift of colored leaves, and the sunshine freely falling through bared limbs, but no man or woman. The fallen leaves rustled as the deer passed, the squirrels chattered and the foxes barked, but we heard no sweet laughter or ringing song.

We found a bank of moss, and lying upon it a chaplet of red-brown oak leaves; further on, the mint beside a crystal streamlet had been trodden underfoot; then, flung down upon the brown earth beneath some pines, we came upon a long trailer of scarlet vine. Beyond was a fairy hollow, a cuplike depression, curtained from the world by the red vines that hung from the trees upon its brim, and carpeted with the gold of a great maple; and here Fear became a giant with whom it was vain to wrestle.

There had been a struggle in the hollow. The curtain of vines was torn, the boughs of a sumach bent and broken, the fallen leaves grown underfoot. In one place there was blood upon the leaves.

The forest seemed suddenly very quiet, — quite soundless save for the beating of our hearts. On every side opened red and yellow ways, sunny glades, labyrinthine paths, long aisles, all dim with the blue haze like the cloudy incense in stone cathedrals, but

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nothing moved in them save the creatures of the forest. Without the hollow there was no sign. The leaves looked undisturbed, or others, drifting down, had hidden any marks there might have been; no footprints, no broken branches, no token of those who had left the hollow. Down which of the painted ways had they gone, and where were they now?

Sparrow and I sat our horses, and stared now down this alley, now down that, into the blue that closed each vista.

"The Santa Teresa is just off the big spring," he said at last. "She must have dropped down there in order to take in water quietly."

"The man that came upon her is still in town, — or was an hour ago," I replied.

"Then she has n't sailed yet," he said.

In the distance something grew out of the blue mist. I had not lived thirteen years in the woodland to be dim of sight or dull of hearing.

"Some one is coming," I announced. "Back your horse into this clump of sumach."

The sumach grew thick, and was draped, moreover, with some broad-leafed vine. Within its covert we could see with small danger of being seen, unless the approaching figure should prove to be that of an Indian. It was not an Indian; it was my Lord Carnal. He came on slowly, glancing from side to side, and pausing now and then as if to listen. He was so little of a woodsman that he never looked underfoot.

Sparrow touched my arm and pointed down a glade at right angles with the path my lord was pursuing. Up this glade there was coming toward us another figure, — a small black figure that moved swiftly, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Black Lamoral stood like a stone; the brown mare, too, had learned what meant a certain touch upon her shoulder. Sparrow and I, with small shame for our eavesdropping, bent to our saddlebows and looked sideways through tiny gaps in the crimson foliage.

My lord descended one side of the hollow, his heavy foot bringing down the dead leaves and loose earth; the Italian glided down the opposite side, disturbing the economy of the forest as little as a snake would have done.

"I thought I should never meet you," growled my lord. "I thought I had lost you and her and myself. This d—d red forest and this blue haze are enough to" — He broke off with an oath.

"I came as fast as I could," said the other. His voice was strange, thin and dreamy, matching his filmy eyes and his eternal, very faint smile. "Your poor physician congratulates your lordship upon the success that still attends you. Yours is a fortunate star, my lord."

"Then you have her safe?" cried my lord.

"Three miles from here, on the river bank, is a ring of pines, in which the trees grow so thick that it is always twilight. Ten years ago a man was murdered there, and Sir Thomas Dale chained the murderer to the tree beneath which his victim was buried, and left him to perish of hunger and thirst. That is the tale they tell at Jamestown. The wood is said to be haunted by murdered and murderer, and no one enters it or comes nearer to it than he can avoid: which makes it an excellent resort for those whom the dead cannot scare. The lady is there, my lord, with your four knaves to guard her. They do not know that the gloom and quiet of the place are due to more than nature."

My lord began to laugh. Either he had been drinking, or the success of his villainy had served for wine. "You are a man in a thousand, Nicolo!" he said. "How far above or below the ship is this fortunate wood?"

"Just opposite, my lord."

"Can a boat land easily?"

"A creek runs through the wood to the river. There needs but the appointed signal from the bank, and a boat from the Santa Teresa can be rowed up the stream to the very tree beneath which the lady sits."

My lord's laughter rang out again. "You're a man in ten thousand, Nicolo! Nicolo, the bridegroom's in town."

"Back so soon?" said the Italian. "Then we must change your lordship's plan. With him on the ground, you can no longer wait until nightfall to row downstream to the lady and the Santa Teresa. He'll come to look for her."

"Ay, he'll come to look for her, curse him!" echoed my lord.

"Do you think the dead will scare him?" continued the Italian.

"No, I don't!" answered my lord, with an oath. "I would he were among them! An I could have killed him before I went" —

"I had devised a way to do it long ago, had not your lordship's conscience been so tender. And yet, before now, our enemies — yours and mine, my lord — have met with sudden and mysterious death. Men stared, but they ended by calling it a dispensation of Providence." He broke off to laugh with silent, hateful laughter, as mirthful as the grin of a death's-head.

"I know, I know!" said my lord impatiently. "We are not overnice, Nicolo. But between me and those who then stood in my way there had passed no challenge. This is my mortal foe, through whose heart I would drive my sword. I would give my ruby to know whether he's in the town or in the forest."

"He's in the forest," I said.

Black Lamoral and the brown mare were beside them before either moved hand or foot, or did aught but stare and stare, as though men and horses had risen from the dead. All the color was gone from my lord's face, — it looked white, drawn, and pinched; as for his companion, his countenance did not change, — never changed, I believe, — but the trembling of the feather in his hat was not caused by the wind.

Jeremy Sparrow bent down from his saddle, seized the Italian under the armpits, and swung him clean from the ground up to the brown mare's neck. "Divinity and medicine," he said genially, "soul healer and body poisoner, we'll ride double for a time," and proceeded to bind the doctor's hands with his own scarf. The creature of venom before him writhed and struggled, but the minister's strength was as the strength of ten, and the minister's hand held him down. By this I was off Black Lamoral and facing my lord. The color had come back to his lip and cheek, and the flash to his eye. His hand went to his sword hilt.

"I shall not draw mine, my lord," I told him. "I keep troth."

He stared at me with a frown that suddenly changed into a laugh, forced and unnatural enough. "Then go thy ways, and let me go mine!" he cried. "Be complaisant, worthy captain of trainbands and Bur-

gess from a dozen huts! The King and I will make it worth your while."

"I will not draw my sword upon you," I replied, "but I will try a fall with you," and I seized him by the wrist.

He was a good wrestler as he was a good swordsman, but, with bitter anger in my heart and a vision of the haunted wood before my eyes, I think I could have wrestled with Hercules and won. Presently I threw him, and, pinning him down with my knee upon his breast, cried to Sparrow to cut the bridle reins from Black Lamoral and throw them to me. Though he had the Italian upon his hands, he managed to obey. With my free hand and my teeth I drew a thong about my lord's arms and bound them to his sides; then took my knee from his chest and my hand from his throat, and rose to my feet. He rose too with one spring. He was very white, and there was foam on his lips.

"What next, captain?" he demanded thickly. "Your score is mounting up rather rapidly. What next?"

"This," I replied, and with the other thong fastened him, despite his struggles, to the young maple beneath which we had wrestled. When the task was done, I first drew his sword from its jeweled scabbard and laid it on the ground at his feet, and then cut the leather which restrained his arms, leaving him only tied to the tree. "I am not Sir Thomas Dale," I said, "and therefore I shall not gag you and leave you bound for an indefinite length of time, to contemplate a grave that you thought to dig. One haunted wood is enough for one county. Your lordship will observe that I have knotted your bonds in easy reach

of your hands, the use of which I have just restored to you. The knot is a peculiar one; an Indian taught it to me. If you set to work at once, you will get it untied before nightfall. That you may not think it the Gordian knot and treat it as such, I have put your sword where you can get it only when you have worked for it. Your familiar, my lord, may prove of use to us; therefore we will take him with us to the haunted wood. I have the honor to wish your lordship a very good day."

I bowed low, swung myself into my saddle, and turned my back upon his glaring eyes and bared teeth. Sparrow, his prize flung across his saddlebow, turned with me. A minute more saw us out of the hollow, and entered upon the glade up which had come the Italian. When we had gone a short distance, I turned in my saddle and looked back. The tiny hollow had vanished; all the forest looked level, dreamy and still, barren of humanity, given over to its own shy children, nothing moving save the slow-falling leaves. But from beyond a great clump of sumach, set like a torch in the vaporous blue, came a steady stream of words, happily rendered indistinguishable by distance, and I knew that the King's minion was cursing the Italian, the Governor, the Santa Teresa, the Due Return, the minister, the forest, the haunted wood, his sword, the knot that I had tied, and myself.

I admit that the sound was music in mine ears.

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH WE FIND THE HAUNTED WOOD

ON the outskirts of the haunted wood we dismounted, fastening the horses to two pines. The Italian we gagged and bound across the brown mare's saddle. Then, as noiselessly as Indians, we entered the wood.

Once within it, it was as though the sun had suddenly sunk from the heavens. The pines, of magnificent height and girth, were so closely set that far overhead, where the branches began, was a heavy roof of foliage, impervious to the sunshine, brooding, dark and sullen as a thundercloud, over the cavernous world beneath. There was no undergrowth, no clinging vines, no bloom, no color; only the dark, innumerable tree trunks and the purplish-brown, scented, and slippery earth. The air was heavy, cold, and still, like cave air; the silence as blank and awful as the silence beneath the earth.

The minister and I stole through the dusk, and for a long time heard nothing but our own breathing and the beating of our hearts. But coming to a sluggish stream, as quiet as the wood through which it crept, and following its slow windings, we at last heard a voice, and in the distance made out dark forms sitting on the earth beside that sombre water. We went on with caution, gliding from tree to tree and making no noise. In the cheerless silence of that place any