

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

sound would have shattered the stillness like a pistol shot.

Presently we came to a halt, and, ourselves hidden by a giant trunk, looked out on stealers and stolen. They were gathered on the bank of the stream, waiting for the boat from the Santa Teresa. The lady whom we sought lay like a fallen flower on the dark ground beneath a pine. She did not move, and her eyes were shut. At her head crouched the negress, her white garments showing ghostlike through the gloom. Beneath the next tree sat Diccon, his hands tied behind him, and around him my Lord Carnal's four knaves. It was Diccon's voice that we had heard. He was still speaking, and now we could distinguish the words.

"So Sir Thomas chains him there," he said,—"right there to that tree under which you are sitting, Jacky Bonhomme." Jacques incontinently shifted his position. "He chains him there, with one chain around his neck, one around his waist, and one around his ankles. Then he sticks me a bodkin through his tongue." A groan of admiration from his audience. "Then they dig, before his very eyes, a grave,—shallow enough they make it, too,—and they put into it, uncoffined, with only a long white shroud upon him, the man he murdered. Then they cover the grave. You're sitting on it now, you other Jacky."

"Godam!" cried the rascal addressed, and removed with expedition to a less storied piece of ground.

"Then they go away," continued Diccon in graveyard tones. "They all go away together,—Sir Thomas and Captain Argall, Captain West, Lieutenant George Percy and his cousin, my master, and Sir Thomas's men; they go out of the wood as though

it were accursed, though indeed it was not half so gloomy then as it is now. The sun shone into it then, sometimes, and the birds sang. You would n't think it from the looks of things now, would you? As the dead man rotted in his grave, and the living man died by inches above him, they say the wood grew darker, and darker, and darker. How dark it's getting now, and cold,—cold as the dead!"

His auditors drew closer together, and shivered. Sparrow and I were so near that we could see the hands of the ingenious story-teller, bound behind his back, working as he talked. Now they strained this way, and now that, at the piece of rope that bound them.

"That was ten years ago," he said, his voice becoming more and more impressive. "Since that day nothing comes into this wood,—nothing *human*, that is. Neither white man nor Indian comes, that's certain. Then why are n't there chains around that tree, and why are there no bones beneath it, on the ground there? Because, Jackies all, the man that did that murder *walks!* It is not always deadly still here; sometimes there's a clanking of chains! And a bodkin through the tongue can't keep the dead from wailing! And the murdered man walks, too; in his shroud he follows the other—Is n't that something white in the distance yonder?"

My lord's four knaves looked down the arcade of trees, and saw the something white as plainly as if it had been verily there. Each moment the wood grew darker,—a thing in nature, since the sun outside was swiftly sinking to the horizon. But to those to whom that tale had been told it was a darkening unearthly and portentous, bringing with it a colder air and a deepened silence.

"Oh, Sir Thomas Dale, Sir Thomas Dale!"

The voice seemed to come from the distance, and bore in its dismal cadence the melancholy of the damned. For a moment my heart stood still, and the hair of my head commenced to rise; the next, I knew that Diccon had found an ally, not in the dead, but in the living. The minister, standing beside me, opened his mouth again, and again that dismal voice rang through the wood, and again it seemed, by I know not what art, to come from any spot rather than from that particular tree behind whose trunk stood Master Jeremy Sparrow.

"Oh, the bodkin through my tongue! Oh, the bodkin through my tongue!"

Two of the guard sat with hanging lip and lack-lustre eyes, turned to stone; one, at full length upon the ground, bruised his face against the pine needles and called on the Virgin; the fourth, panic-stricken, leaped to his feet and dashed off into the darkness, to trouble us no more that day.

"Oh, the heavy chains!" cried the unseen spectre. "Oh, the dead man in his grave!"

The man on his face dug his nails into the earth and howled; his fellows were too frightened for sound or motion. Diccon, a hardy rogue, with little fear of God or man, gave no sign of perturbation beyond a desperate tugging at the rope about his wrists. He was ever quick to take suggestion, and he had probably begun to question the nature of the ghost who was doing him such yeoman service.

"D'ye think they've had enough?" said Sparrow in my ear. "My invention flaggeth."

I nodded, too choked with laughter for speech, and drew my sword. The next moment we were upon the men like wolves upon the fold.

They made no resistance. Amazed and shaken as they were, we might have dispatched them with all ease, to join the dead whose lamentations yet rang in their ears; but we contented ourselves with disarming them and bidding them begone for their lives in the direction of the Pamunkey. They went like frightened deer, their one goal in life escape from the wood.

"Did you meet the Italian?"

I turned to find my wife at my side. The King's ward had a kingly spirit; she was not one that the dead or the living could daunt. To her, as to me, danger was a trumpet call to nerve heart and strengthen soul. She had been in peril of that which she most feared, but the light in her eye was not quenched, and the hand with which she touched mine, though cold, was steady.

"Is he dead?" she asked. "At court they called him the Black Death. They said"—

"I did not kill him," I answered, "but I will if you desire it."

"And his master?" she demanded. "What have you done with his master?"

I told her. At the vision my words conjured up her strained nerves gave way, and she broke into laughter as cruel as it was sweet. Peal after peal rang through the haunted wood, and increased the eeriness of the place.

"The knot that I tied he will untie directly," I said. "If we would reach Jamestown first, we had best be going."

"Night is upon us, too," said the minister, "and this place hath the look of the very valley of the shadow of death. If the spirits walk, it is hard upon their time—and I prefer to walk elsewhere."

"Cease your laughter, madam," I said. "Should a boat be coming up this stream, you would betray us."

I went over to Diccon, and in a silence as grim as his own cut the rope which bound his hands, which done we all moved through the deepening gloom to where we had left the horses, Jeremy Sparrow going on ahead to have them in readiness. Presently he came hurrying back. "The Italian is gone!" he cried.

"Gone!" I exclaimed. "I told you to tie him fast to the saddle!"

"Why, so I did," he replied. "I drew the thongs so tight that they cut into his flesh. He could not have endured to pull against them."

"Then how did he get away?"

"Why," he answered, with a rueful countenance, "I did bind him, as I have said; but when I had done so, I bethought me of how the leather must cut, and of how pain is dreadful even to a snake, and of the injunction to do as you would be done by, and so e'en loosened his bonds. But, as I am a christened man, I thought that they would yet hold him fast!"

I began to swear, but ended in vexed laughter. "The milk's spilt. There's no use in crying over it. After all, we must have loosed him before we entered the town."

"Will you not bring the matter before the Governor?" he asked.

I shook my head. "If Yeardley did me right, he would put in jeopardy his office and his person. This is my private quarrel, and I will draw no man into it against his will. Here are the horses, and we had best be gone, for by this time my lord and his physician may have their heads together again."

I mounted Black Lamoral, and lifted Mistress Percy to a seat behind me. The brown mare bore the minister and the negress, and Diccon, doggedly silent, trudged beside us.

We passed through the haunted wood and the painted forest beyond without adventure. We rode in silence: the lady behind me too weary for speech, the minister revolving in his mind the escape of the Italian, and I with my own thoughts to occupy me. It was dusk when we crossed the neck of land, and as we rode down the street torches were being lit in the houses. The upper room in the guest house was brightly illumined, and the window was open. Black Lamoral and the brown mare made a trampling with their hoofs, and I began to whistle a gay old tune I had learnt in the wars. A figure in scarlet and black came to the window, and stood there looking down upon us. The lady riding with me straightened herself and raised her weary head. "The next time we go to the forest, Ralph," she said in a clear, high voice, "thou'lt show me a certain tree," and she broke into silvery laughter. She laughed until we had left behind the guest house and the figure in the upper window, and then the laughter changed to something like a sob. If there were pain and anger in her heart, pain and anger were in mine also. She had never called me by my name before. She had only used it now as a dagger with which to stab at that fierce heart above us.

At last we reached the minister's house, and dismounted before the door. Diccon led the horses away, and I handed my wife into the great room. The minister tarried but for a few words anent some precautions that I meant to take, and then betook

himself to his own chamber. As he went out of the door Diccon entered the room.

"Oh, I am weary!" sighed Mistress Jocelyn Percy. "What was the mighty business, Captain Percy, that made you break tryst with a lady? You should go to court, sir, to be taught gallantry."

"Where should a wife go to be taught obedience?" I demanded. "You know where I went and why I could not keep tryst. Why did you not obey my orders?"

She opened wide her eyes. "Your orders? I never received any, — not that I should have obeyed them if I had. Know where you went? I know neither why nor where you went!"

I leaned my hand upon the table, and looked from her to Diccon.

"I was sent by the Governor to quell a disturbance amongst the nearest Indians. The woods to-day have been full of danger. Moreover, the plan that we made yesterday was overheard by the Italian. When I had to go this morning without seeing you, I left you word where I had gone and why, and also my commands that you should not stir outside the garden. Were you not told this, madam?"

"No!" she cried.

I looked at Diccon. "I told madam that you were called away on business," he said sullenly. "I told her that you were sorry you could not go with her to the woods."

"You told her nothing more?"

"No."

"May I ask why?"

He threw back his head. "I did not believe the Paspahghs would trouble her," he answered, with

hardihood, "and you had n't seen fit, sir, to tell me of the other danger. Madam wanted to go, and I thought it a pity that she should lose her pleasure for nothing."

I had been hunting the day before, and my whip yet lay upon the table. "I have known you for a hardy rogue," I said, with my hand upon it; "now I know you for a faithless one as well. If I gave you credit for all the vices of the soldier, I gave you credit also for his virtues. I was the more deceived. The disobedient servant I might pardon, but the soldier who is faithless to his trust" —

I raised the whip and brought it down again and again across his shoulders. He stood without a word, his face dark red and his hands clenched at his sides. For a minute or more there was no sound in the room save the sound of the blows; then my wife suddenly cried out: "It is enough! You have beaten him enough! Let him go, sir!"

I threw down the whip. "Begone, sirrah!" I ordered. "And keep out of my sight to-morrow!"

With his face still dark red and with a pulse beating fiercely in his cheek, he moved slowly toward the door, turned when he had reached it and saluted, then went out and closed it after him.

"Now he too will be your enemy," said Mistress Percy, "and all through me. I have brought you many enemies, have I not? Perhaps you count me amongst them? I should not wonder if you did. Do you not wish me gone from Virginia?"

"So I were with you, madam," I said bluntly, and went to call the minister down to supper.