

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH I AM RID OF AN UNPROFITABLE SERVANT

THE next day, Governor and Councilors sat to receive presents from the Paspaheghs and to listen to long and affectionate messages from Opechancanough, who, like the player queen, did protest too much. The Council met at Yeardley's house, and I was called before it to make my report of the expedition of the day before. It was late afternoon when the Governor dismissed us, and I found myself leaving the house in company with Master Pory.

"I am bound for my lord's," said that worthy as we neared the guest house. "My lord hath Xeres wine that is the very original nectar of the gods, and he drinks it from goblets worth a king's ransom. We have heard a deal to-day about burying hatchets: bury thine for the nonce, Ralph Percy, and come drink with us."

"Not I," I said. "I would sooner drink with — some one else."

He laughed. "Here's my lord himself shall persuade you."

My lord, dressed with his usual magnificence and darkly handsome as ever, was indeed standing within the guest-house door. Pory drew up beside him. I was passing on with a slight bow, when the Secretary caught me by the sleeve. At the Governor's house wine had been set forth to revive the jaded Council,

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and he was already half seas over. "Tarry with us, captain!" he cried. "Good wine's good wine, no matter who pours it! 'S bud! in my young days men called a truce and forgot they were foes when the bottle went round!"

"If Captain Percy will stay," quoth my lord, "I will give him welcome and good wine. As Master Pory says, men cannot be always fighting. A breathing spell to-day gives to-morrow's struggle new zest."

He spoke frankly, with open face and candid eyes. I was not fooled. If yesterday he would have slain me only in fair fight, it was not so to-day. Under the lace that fell over his wrist was a red cirque, the mark of the thong with which I had bound him. As if he had told me, I knew that he had thrown his scruples to the winds, and that he cared not what foul play he used to sweep me from his path. My spirit and my wit rose to meet the danger. Of a sudden I resolved to accept his invitation.

"So be it," I said, with a laugh and a shrug of my shoulders. "A cup of wine is no great matter. I'll take it at your hands, my lord, and drink to our better acquaintance."

We all three went up into my lord's room. The King had fitted out his minion bravely for the Virginia voyage, and the riches that had decked the state cabin aboard the Santa Teresa now served to transform the bare room in the guest house at Jamestown into a corner of Whitehall. The walls were hung with arras, there was a noble carpet beneath as well as upon the table, and against the wall stood richly carved trunks. On the table, beside a bowl of late flowers were a great silver flagon and a number of goblets, some of chased silver and some of colored

glass, strangely shaped and fragile as an eggshell. The late sun now shining in at the open window made the glass to glow like precious stones.

My lord rang a little silver bell, and a door behind us was opened. "Wine, Giles!" cried my lord in a raised voice. "Wine for Master Pory, Captain Percy, and myself! And Giles, my two choice goblets."

Giles, whom I had never seen before, advanced to the table, took the flagon, and went toward the door, which he had shut behind him. I negligently turned in my seat, and so came in for a glimpse, as he slipped through the door, of a figure in black in the next room.

The wine was brought, and with it two goblets. My lord broke off in the midst of an account of the morning's bear-baiting which the tediousness of the Indians had caused us to miss. "Who knows if we three shall ever drink together again?" he said. "To honor this bout I use my most precious cups." Voice and manner were free and unconstrained. "This gold cup" — he held it up — "belonged to the Medici. Master Pory, who is a man of taste, will note the beauty of the graven mænads upon this side, and of the Bacchus and Ariadne upon this. It is the work of none other than Benvenuto Cellini. I pour for you, sir." He filled the gold cup with the ruby wine and set it before the Secretary, who eyed it with all the passion of a lover, and waited not for us, but raised it to his lips at once. My lord took up the other cup. "This glass," he continued, "as green as an emerald, freckled inside and out with gold, and shaped like a lily, was once amongst a convent's treasures. My father brought it from Italy, years ago.

I use it as he used it, only on gala days. I fill to you, sir." He poured the wine into the green and gold and twisted bauble and set it before me, then filled a silver goblet for himself. "Drink, gentlemen," he said.

"Faith, I have drunken already," quoth the Secretary, and proceeded to fill for himself a second time. "Here's to you, gentlemen!" and he emptied half the measure.

"Captain Percy does not drink," remarked my lord.

I leaned my elbow upon the table, and, holding up the glass against the light, began to admire its beauty. "The tint is wonderful," I said, "as lucent a green as the top of the comber that is to break and overwhelm you. And these knobs of gold, within and without, and the strange shape the tortured glass has been made to take. I find it of a quite sinister beauty, my lord."

"It hath been much admired," said the nobleman addressed.

"I am strangely suited, my lord," I went on, still dreamily enjoying the beauty of the green gem within my clasp. "I am a soldier with an imagination. Sometimes, to give the rein to my fancy pleases me more than wine. Now, this strange chalice, — might it not breed dreams as strange?"

"When I had drunken, I think," replied my lord. "The wine would be a potent spur to my fancy."

"What saith honest Jack Falstaff?" broke in the maudlin Secretary. "Doth he not bear testimony that good sherris maketh the brain apprehensive and quick; filleth it with nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes, which being delivered by the tongue become

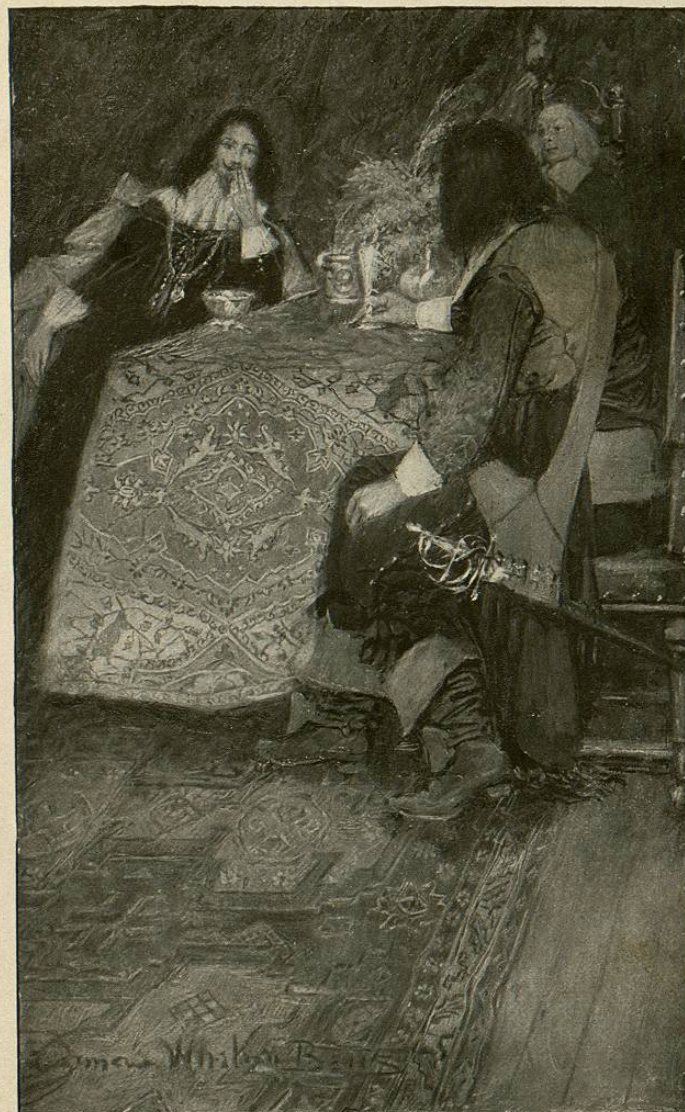
excellent wit? Wherefore let us drink, gentlemen, and beget fancies." He filled for himself again, and buried his nose in the cup.

"'T is such a cup, methinks," I said, "as Medea may have filled for Theseus. The white hand of Circe may have closed around this stem when she stood to greet Ulysses, and knew not that he had the saving herb in his palm. Goneril may have sent this green and gilded shape to Regan. Fair Rosamond may have drunk from it while the Queen watched her. At some voluptuous feast, Cæsar Borgia and his sister, sitting crowned with roses, side by side, may have pressed it upon a reluctant guest, who had, perhaps, a treasure of his own. I dare swear René, the Florentine, hath fingered many such a goblet before it went to whom Catherine de' Medici delighted to honor."

"She had the whitest hands," maundered the Secretary. "I kissed them once before she died, in Blois, when I was young. René was one of your slow poisoners. Smell a rose, draw on a pair of perfumed gloves, drink from a certain cup, and you rang your own knell, though your bier might not receive you for many and many a day,—not till the rose was dust, the gloves lost, the cup forgotten."

"There's a fashion I have seen followed abroad, that I like," I said. "Host and guest fill to each other, then change tankards. You are my host to-day, my lord, and I am your guest. I will drink to you, my lord, from your silver goblet."

With as frank a manner as his own of a while before, I pushed the green and gold glass over to him, and held out my hand for the silver goblet. That a man may smile and smile and be a villain is no new doctrine. My lord's laugh and gesture of courtesy



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were as free and ready as if the poisoned splendor he drew toward him had been as innocent as a pearl within the shell. I took the silver cup from before him. "I drink to the King," I said, and drained it to the bottom. "Your lordship does not drink. 'Tis a toast no man refuses."

He raised the glass to his lips, but set it down before its rim had touched them. "I have a headache," he declared. "I will not drink to-day."

Master Pory pulled the flagon toward him, tilted it, and found it empty. His rueful face made me laugh. My lord laughed too,—somewhat loudly,—but ordered no more wine. "I would I were at the Mermaid again," lamented the now drunken Secretary. "There we did n't split a flagon in three parts. . . . The Tsar of Muscovy drinks me down a quartern of aqua vitæ at a gulp,—I've seen him do it. . . . I would I were the Bacchus on this cup, with the purple grapes adangle above me. . . . Wine and women—wine and women . . . good wine needs no bush . . . good sherris sack" . . . His voice died into unintelligible mutterings, and his gray unreverend head sank upon the table.

I rose, leaving him to his drunken slumbers, and, bowing to my lord, took my leave. My lord followed me down to the public room below. A party of up-river planters had been drinking, and a bit of chalk lay upon a settle behind the door upon which the landlord had marked their score. I passed it; then turned back and picked it up. "How long a line shall I draw, my lord?" I asked with a smile.

"How does the length of the door strike you?" he answered.

I drew the chalk from top to bottom of the wood.

"A heavy score makes a heavy reckoning, my lord," I said, and, leaving the mark upon the door, I bowed again and went out into the street.

The sun was sinking when I reached the minister's house, and going into the great room drew a stool to the table and sat down to think. Mistress Percy was in her own chamber; in the room overhead the minister paced up and down, humming a psalm. A fire was burning briskly upon the hearth, and the red light rose and fell, — now brightening all the room, now leaving it to the gathering dusk. Through the door, which I had left open, came the odor of the pines, the fallen leaves, and the damp earth. In the churchyard an owl hooted, and the murmur of the river was louder than usual.

I had sat staring at the table before me for perhaps half an hour, when I chanced to raise my eyes to the opposite wall. Now, on this wall, reflecting the fire-light and the open door behind me, hung a small Venetian mirror, which I had bought from a number of such toys brought in by the Southampton, and had given to Mistress Percy. My eyes rested upon it, idly at first, then closely enough as I saw within it a man enter the room. I had heard no footfall; there was no noise now behind me. The fire was somewhat sunken, and the room was almost in darkness; I saw him in the glass dimly, as shadow rather than substance. But the light was not so faint that the mirror could not show me the raised hand and the dagger within its grasp. I sat without motion, watching the figure in the glass grow larger. When it was nearly upon me, and the hand with the dagger drawn back for the blow, I sprang up, wheeled, and caught it by the wrist.

A moment's fierce struggle, and I had the dagger in my own hand and the man at my mercy. The fire upon the hearth seized on a pine knot and blazed up brightly, filling the room with light. "Diccon!" I cried, and dropped my arm.

I had never thought of this. The room was very quiet as, master and man, we stood and looked each other in the face. He fell back to the wall and leaned against it, breathing heavily; into the space between us the past came thronging.

I opened my hand and let the dagger drop to the floor. "I suppose that this was because of last night," I said. "I shall never strike you again."

I went to the table, and sitting down leaned my forehead upon my hand. It was Diccon who would have done this thing! The fire crackled on the hearth as had crackled the old camp fires in Flanders; the wind outside was the wind that had whistled through the rigging of the Treasurer, one terrible night when we lashed ourselves to the same mast and never thought to see the morning. Diccon!

Upon the table was the minister's inkhorn and pen. I drew my tablets from the breast of my doublet and began to write. "Diccon!" I called, without turning, when I had finished.

He came slowly forward to the table, and stood beside it with hanging head. I tore the leaf from the book and pushed it over to him. "Take it," I ordered.

"To the commander?" he asked. "I am to take it to the commander?"

I shook my head. "Read it."

He stared at it vacantly, turning it now this way, now that.

"Did you forget how to read when you forgot all else?" I said sternly.

He read, and the color rushed into his face.

"It is your freedom," I said. "You are no longer man of mine. Begone, sirrah!"

He crumpled the paper in his hand. "I was mad," he muttered.

"I could almost believe it," I replied. "Begone!"

After a moment he went. Sitting still in my place, I heard him heavily and slowly leave the room, descend the step at the door, and go out into the night.

A door opened, and Mistress Jocelyn Percy came into the great room, like a sunbeam strayed back to earth. Her skirt was of flowered satin, her bodice of rich taffeta; between the gossamer walls of her French ruff rose the whitest neck to meet the fairest face. Upon her dark hair sat, as lightly as a kiss, a little pearl-bordered cap. A color was in her cheeks and a laugh on her lips. The rosy light of the burning pine caressed her, — now dwelling on the rich dress, now on the gold chain around the slender waist, now on rounded arms, now on the white forehead below the pearls. Well, she was a fair lady for a man to lay down his life for.

"I held court this afternoon!" she cried. "Where were you, sir? Madam West was here, and my Lady Temperance Yeardley, and Master Wynne, and Master Thorpe from Henricus, and Master Rolfe with his Indian brother, — who, I protest, needs but silk doublet and hose and a month at Whitehall to make him a very fine gentleman."

"If courage, steadfastness, truth, and courtesy make a gentleman," I said, "he is one already. Such an one needs not silk doublet nor court training."

She looked at me with her bright eyes. "No," she repeated, "such an one needs not silk doublet nor

court training." Going to the fire, she stood with one hand upon the mantelshelf, looking down into the ruddy hollows. Presently she stooped and gathered up something from the hearth. "You waste paper strangely, Captain Percy," she said. "Here is a whole handful of torn pieces."

She came over to the table, and with a laugh showered the white fragments down upon it, then fell to idly piecing them together. "What were you writing?" she asked. "'To all whom it may concern: I, Ralph Percy, Gentleman, of the Hundred of Weyanoke, do hereby set free from all service to me and mine' —"

I took from her the bits of paper, and fed the fire with them. "Paper is but paper," I said. "It is easily rent. Happily a man's will is more durable."