

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH WE GO OUT INTO THE NIGHT

THE guest house was aflame with lights. As I neared it, there was borne to my ears a burst of drunken shouts accompanied by a volley of musketry. My lord was pursuing with a vengeance our senseless fashion of wasting in drinking bouts powder that would have been better spent against the Indians. The noise increased. The door was flung open, and there issued a tide of drawers and servants headed by mine host himself, and followed by a hail of such minor breakables as the house contained and by Olympian laughter.

I made my way past the indignant host and his staff, and standing upon the threshold looked at the riot within. The long room was thick with the smoke of tobacco and the smoke of powder, through which the many torches burned yellow. Upon the great table wine had been spilt, and dripped to swell a red pool upon the floor. Underneath the table, still grasping his empty tankard, lay the first of my lord's guests to fall, an up-river Burgess with white hair. The rest of the company were fast reeling to a like fate. Young Hamor had a fiddle, and, one foot upon a settle, the other upon the table, drew across it a fast and furious bow. Master Pory, arrived at the maudlin stage, alternately sang a slow and melancholy ditty and wiped the tears from his eyes with elaborate care.

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Master Edward Sharpless, now in a high voice, now in an undistinguishable murmur, argued some imaginary case. Peaceable Sherwood was drunk, and Giles Allen, and Pettiplace Clause. Captain John Martin, sitting with outstretched legs, called now for a fresh tankard, which he emptied at a gulp; now for his pistols, which, as fast as my lord's servants brought them to him new primed, he discharged at the ceiling. The loud wind rattled doors and windows, and made the flame of the torches stream sideways. The music grew madder and madder, the shots more frequent, the drunken voices thicker and louder.

The master of the feast carried his wine better than did his guests, or had drunk less, but his spirit too was quite without bounds. A color burned in his cheeks, a wicked light in his eyes; he laughed to himself. In the gray smoke cloud he saw me not, or saw me only as one of the many who thronged the doorway and stared at the revel within. He raised his silver cup with a slow and wavering hand. "Drink, you dogs!" he chanted. "Drink to the Santa Teresa! Drink to to-morrow night! Drink to a proud lady within my arms and an enemy in my power!"

The wine that had made him mad had maddened those others, also. In that hour they were dead to honor. With shameless laughter and as little spilling as might be, they raised their tankards as my lord raised his. A stone thrown by some one behind me struck the cup from my lord's hand, sending it clattering to the floor and dashing him with the red wine. Master Pory roared with drunken laughter. "Cup and lip missed that time!" he cried.

The man who had thrown the stone was Jeremy Sparrow. For one instant I saw his great figure, and

the wrathful face beneath his shock of grizzled hair; the next he had made his way through the crowd of gaping menials and was gone.

My lord stared foolishly at the stains upon his hands, at the fallen goblet and the stone beside it. "Cogged dice," he said thickly, "or I had not lost that throw! I'll drink that toast by myself to-morrow night, when the ship does n't rock like this d—d floor, and the sea has no stones to throw. More wine, Giles! To my Lord High Admiral, gentlemen! To his Grace of Buckingham! May he shortly howl in hell, and looking back to Whitehall see me upon the King's bosom! The King's a good king, gentlemen! He gave me this ruby. D'ye know what I had of him last year? I"—

I turned and left the door and the house. I could not thrust a fight upon a drunken man.

Ten yards away, suddenly and without any warning of his approach, I found beside me the Indian Nantauquas. "I have been to the woods to hunt," he said, in the slow musical English Rolfe had taught him. "I knew where a panther lodged, and to-day I laid a snare, and took him in it. I brought him to my brother's house, and caged him there. When I have tamed him, I shall give him to the beautiful lady."

He expected no answer, and I gave him none. There are times when an Indian is the best company in the world.

Just before we reached the market place we had to pass the mouth of a narrow lane leading down to the river. The night was very dark, though the stars still shone through rifts in the ever moving clouds. The Indian and I walked rapidly on,—my footfalls sounding clear and sharp on the frosty ground, he as noise-

less as a shadow. We had reached the further side of the lane, when he put forth an arm and plucked from the blackness a small black figure.

In the middle of the square was kept burning a great brazier filled with pitched wood. It was the duty of the watch to keep it flaming from darkness to dawn. We found it freshly heaped with pine, and its red glare lit a goodly circle. The Indian, pinioning the wrists of his captive with his own hand of steel, dragged him with us into this circle of light.

"Looking for simples once more, learned doctor?" I demanded.

He mowed and jabbered, twisting this way and that in the grasp of the Indian.

"Loose him," I said to the latter, "but let him not come too near you. Why, worthy doctor, in so wild and threatening a night, when fire is burning and wine flowing at the guest house, do you choose to crouch here in the cold and darkness?"

He looked at me with his filmy eyes, and that faint smile that had more of menace in it than a panther's snarl. "I laid in wait for you, it is true, noble sir," he said in his thin, dreamy voice, "but it was for your good. I would give you warning, sir."

He stood with his mean figure bent cringingly forward, and with his hat in his hand. "A warning, sir," he went ramblingly on. "Maybe a certain one has made me his enemy. Maybe I cut myself loose from his service. Maybe I would do him an ill turn. I can tell you a secret, sir." He lowered his voice and looked around, as if in fear of eavesdroppers. "In your ear, sir," he said.

I recoiled. "Stand back," I cried, "or you will cull no more simples this side of hell!"

"Hell!" he answered. "There's no such place. I will not tell my secret aloud."

"Nicolo the Italian! Nicolo the Poisoner! Nicolo the Black Death! I am coming for the soul you sold me. There is a hell!"

The thundering voice came from underneath our feet. With a sound that was not a groan and not a screech, the Italian reeled back against the heated iron of the brazier. Starting from that fiery contact with an unearthly shriek, he threw up his arms and dashed away into the darkness. The sound of his madly hurrying footsteps came back to us until the guest house had swallowed him and his guilty terrors.

"Can the preacher play the devil too?" I asked, as Sparrow came up to us from the other side of the fire. "I could have sworn that that voice came from the bowels of the earth. 'T is the strangest gift!"

"A mere trick," he said, with his great laugh, "but it has served me well on more occasions than one. It is not known in Virginia, sir, but before ever the word of the Lord came to me to save poor silly souls I was a player. Once I played the King's ghost in Will Shakespeare's 'Hamlet,' and then, I warrant you, I spoke from the cellarage indeed. I so frightened players and playgoers that they swore it was witchcraft, and Burbage's knees did knock together in dead earnest. But to the matter in hand. When I had thrown yonder stone, I walked quietly down to the Governor's house and looked through the window. The Governor hath the Company's letters, and he and the Council—all save the reprobate Pory—sit there staring at them and drumming with their fingers on the table."

"Is Rolfe of the Council?" I asked.

"Ay; he was speaking,—for you, I suppose, though I heard not the words. They all listened, but they all shook their heads."

"We shall know in the morning," I said. "The night grows wilder, and honest folks should be abed. Nantauquas, good-night. When will you have tamed your panther?"

"It is now the moon of cohonks," answered the Indian. "When the moon of blossoms is here, the panther shall roll at the beautiful lady's feet."

"The moon of blossoms!" I said. "The moon of blossoms is a long way off. I have panthers myself to tame before it comes. This wild night gives one wild thoughts, Master Sparrow. The loud wind, and the sound of the water, and the hurrying clouds—who knows if we shall ever see the moon of blossoms?" I broke off with a laugh for my own weakness. "It's not often that a soldier thinks of death," I said. "Come to bed, reverend sir. Nantauquas, again, good-night, and may you tame your panther!"

In the great room of the minister's house I paced up and down; now pausing at the window, to look out upon the fast darkening houses of the town, the ever thickening clouds, and the bending trees; now speaking to my wife, who sat in the chair I had drawn for her before the fire, her hands idle in her lap, her head thrown back against the wood, her face white and still, with wide dark eyes. We waited for we knew not what, but the light still burned in the Governor's house, and we could not sleep and leave it there.

It grew later and later. The wind howled down the chimney, and I heaped more wood upon the fire. The town lay in darkness now; only in the distance

burned like an angry star the light in the Governor's house. In the lull between the blasts of wind it was so very still that the sound of my footfalls upon the floor, the dropping of the charred wood upon the hearth, the tapping of the withered vines without the window, jarred like thunder.

Suddenly madam leaned forward in her chair. "There is some one at the door," she said.

As she spoke, the latch rose and some one pushed heavily against the door. I had drawn the bars across. "Who is it?" I demanded, going to it.

"It is Diccon, sir," replied a guarded voice outside. "I beg of you, for the lady's sake, to let me speak to you."

I opened the door, and he crossed the threshold. I had not seen him since the night he would have played the assassin. I had heard of him as being in Martin's Hundred, with which plantation and its turbulent commander the debtor and the outlaw often found sanctuary.

"What is it, sirrah?" I inquired sternly.

He stood with his eyes upon the floor, twirling his cap in his hands. He had looked once at madam when he entered, but not at me. When he spoke there was the old bravado in his voice, and he threw up his head with the old reckless gesture. "Though I am no longer your man, sir," he said, "yet I hope that one Christian may warn another. The marshal, with a dozen men at his heels, will be here anon."

"How do you know?"

"Why, I was in the shadow by the Governor's window when the parson played eavesdropper. When he was gone I drew myself up to the ledge, and with my knife made a hole in the shutter that fitted my

ear well enough. The Governor and the Council sat there, with the Company's letters spread upon the table. I heard the letters read. Sir George Yeardley's petition to be released from the governorship of Virginia is granted, but he will remain in office until the new Governor, Sir Francis Wyatt, can arrive in Virginia. The Company is out of favor. The King hath sent Sir Edwyn Sandys to the Tower. My Lord Warwick waxeth greater every day. The very life of the Company dependeth upon the pleasure of the King, and it may not defy him. You are to be taken into custody within six hours of the reading of the letter, to be kept straitly until the sailing of the Santa Teresa, and to be sent home aboard of her in irons. The lady is to go also, with all honor, and with women to attend her. Upon reaching London, you are to be sent to the Tower, the lady to Whitehall. The Court of High Commission will take the matter under consideration at once. My Lord of Southampton writes that, because of the urgent entreaty of Sir George Yeardley, he will do for you all that lieth in his power, but that if you prove not yourself conformable, there will be little that any can do."

"When will the marshal be here?" I demanded.

"Directly. The Governor was sending for him when I left the window. Master Rolfe spoke vehemently for you, and would have left the Council to come to you; but the Governor, swearing that the Company should not be betrayed by its officers, constrained him to remain. I'm not the Company's officer, so I may tell its orders if I please. A masterless man may speak without fear or favor. I have told you all I know." Before I could speak he was gone, closing the door heavily behind him.

I turned to the King's ward. She had risen from the chair, and now stood in the centre of the room, one hand at her bosom, the other clenched at her side, her head thrown up. She looked as she had looked at Weyanoke, that first night.

"Madam," I said under my breath.

She turned her face upon me. "Did you think," she asked in a low, even voice, — "did you think that I would ever set my foot upon that ship, — that ship on the river there? One ship brought me here upon a shameful errand; another shall not take me upon one more shameful still."

She took her hand from her bosom; in it gleamed in the firelight the small dagger I had given her that night. She laid it on the table, but kept her hand upon it. "You will choose for me, sir," she declared.

I went to the door and looked out. "It is a wild night," I said. "I can suit it with as wild an enterprise. Make a bundle of your warmest clothing, madam, and wrap your mantle about you. Will you take Angela?"

"No," she answered. "I will not have her peril too upon me."

As she stood there, her hand no longer upon the dagger, the large tears welled into her eyes and fell slowly over her white cheeks. "It is for mine honor, sir," she said. "I know that I ask your death."

I could not bear to see her weep, and so I spoke roughly. "I have told you before," I said, "that your honor is my honor. Do you think I would sleep to-morrow night, in the hold of the Santa Teresa, knowing that my wife supped with my Lord Cardinal?"

I crossed the room to take my pistols from the

rack. As I passed her she caught my hand in hers, and bending pressed her lips upon it. "You have been very good to me," she murmured. "Do not think me an ingrate."

Five minutes later she came from her own room, hooded and mantled, and with a packet of clothing in her hand. I extinguished the torches, then opened the door. As we crossed the threshold, we paused as by one impulse and looked back into the firelit warmth of the room; then I closed the door softly behind us, and we went out into the night.