

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH WE HAVE UNEXPECTED COMPANY

THE wind, which had heretofore come in fierce blasts, was now steadying to a gale. What with the flying of the heaped clouds, the slanting, groaning pines, and the rushing of the river, the whole earth seemed a fugitive, fleeing breathless to the sea. From across the neck of land came the long-drawn howl of wolves, and in the wood beyond the church a catamount screamed and screamed. The town before us lay as dark and as still as the grave; from the garden where we were we could not see the Governor's house.

"I will carry madam's bundle," said a voice behind us.

It was the minister who had spoken, and he now stood beside us. There was a moment's silence, then I said, with a laugh: "We are not going upon a summer jaunt, friend Sparrow. There is a warm fire in the great room, to which your reverence had best betake yourself out of this windy night."

As he made no movement to depart, but instead possessed himself of Mistress Percy's bundle, I spoke again, with some impatience: "We are no longer of your fold, reverend sir, but are bound for another parish. We give you hearty thanks for your hospitality, and wish you a very good night."

As I spoke I would have taken the bundle from him, but he tucked it under his arm, and, passing us,

opened the garden gate. "Did I forget to tell you," he said, "that worthy Master Bucke is well of the fever, and returns to his own to-morrow? His house and church are no longer mine. I have no charge anywhere. I am free and footloose. May I not go with you, madam? There may be dragons to slay, and two can guard a distressed princess better than one. Will you take me for your squire, Captain Percy?"

He held out his great hand, and after a moment I put my own in it.

We left the garden and struck into a lane. "The river, then, instead of the forest?" he asked in a low voice.

"Ay," I answered. "Of the two evils it seems the lesser."

"How about a boat?"

"My own is fastened to the piles of the old deserted wharf."

"You have with you neither food nor water."

"Both are in the boat. I have kept her victualed for a week or more."

He laughed in the darkness, and I heard my wife beside me utter a stifled exclamation.

The lane that we were now in ran parallel to the street to within fifty yards of the guest house, when it bent sharply down to the river. We moved silently and with caution, for some night bird might accost us or the watch come upon us. In the guest house all was darkness save one room,—the upper room,—from which came a very pale light. When we had turned with the lane there were no houses to pass; only gaunt pines and copses of sumach. I took my wife by the hand and hurried her on. A hundred

yards before us ran the river, dark and turbulent, and between us and it rose an old, unsafe, and abandoned landing. Sparrow laid his hand upon my arm. "Footsteps behind us," he whispered.

Without slackening pace I turned my head and looked. The clouds, high around the horizon, were thinning overhead, and the moon, herself invisible, yet lightened the darkness below. The sandy lane stretched behind us like a ribbon of twilight,—nothing to be seen but it and the ebony mass of bush and tree lining it on either side. We hastened on. A minute later and we heard behind us a sound like the winding of a small horn, clear, shrill, and sweet. Sparrow and I wheeled—and saw nothing. The trees ran down to the very edge of the wharf, upon whose rotten, loosened, and noisy boards we now trod. Suddenly the clouds above us broke, and the moon shone forth, whitening the mountainous clouds, the ridged and angry river, and the low, tree-fringed shore. Below us, fastened to the piles and rocking with the waves, was the open boat in which we were to embark. A few broken steps led from the boards above to the water below. Descending these I sprang into the boat and held out my arms for Mistress Percy. Sparrow gave her to me, and I lifted her down beside me; then turned to give what aid I might to the minister, who was halfway down the steps—and faced my Lord Carnal.

What devil had led him forth on such a night; why he, whom with my own eyes, three hours ago, I had seen drunken, should have chosen, after his carouse, cold air and his own company rather than sleep; when and where he first spied us, how long he had followed us, I have never known. Perhaps he

could not sleep for triumph, had heard of my impending arrest, had come forth to add to the bitterness of my cup by his presence, and so had happened upon us. He could only have guessed at those he followed, until he reached the edge of the wharf and looked down upon us in the moonlight. For a moment he stood without moving; then he raised his hand to his lips, and the shrill call that had before startled us rang out again. At the far end of the lane lights appeared. Men were coming down the lane at a run; whether they were the watch, or my lord's own rogues, we tarried not to see. There was not time to loosen the rope from the piles, so I drew my knife to cut it. My lord saw the movement, and sprang down the steps, at the same time shouting to the men behind to hasten. Sparrow, grappling with him, locked him in a giant's embrace, lifted him bodily from the steps, and flung him into the boat. His head struck against a thwart, and he lay, huddled beneath it, quiet enough. The minister sprang after him, and I cut the rope. By now the wharf shook with running feet, and the backward-streaming flame of the torches reddened its boards and the black water beneath; but each instant the water widened between us and our pursuers. Wind and current swept us out, and at that wharf there were no boats to follow us.

Those whom my lord's whistle had brought were now upon the very edge of the wharf. The marshal's voice called upon us in the name of the King to return. Finding that we vouchsafed no answer, he pulled out a pistol and fired, the ball going through my hat; then whipped out its fellow and fired again. Mistress Percy, whose behavior had been that of an angel, stirred in her seat. I did not know until the

day broke that the ball had grazed her arm, drenching her sleeve with blood.

"It is time we were away," I said, with a laugh. "If your reverence will keep your hand upon the tiller and your eye upon the gentleman whom you have made our traveling companion, I'll put up the sail."

I was on my way to the foremast, when the boom lying prone before me rose. Slowly and majestically the sail ascended, tapering upward, silvered by the moon, — the great white pinion which should bear us we knew not whither. I stopped short in my tracks, Mistress Percy drew a sobbing breath, and the minister gasped with admiration. We all three stared as though the white cloth had veritably been a monster wing endowed with life.

"Sails don't rise of themselves!" I exclaimed, and was at the mast before the words were out of my lips. Crouched behind it was a man. I should have known him even without the aid of the moon. Often enough, God knows, I had seen him crouched like this beside me, ourselves in ambush awaiting some unwary foe, brute or human; or ourselves in hiding, holding our breath lest it should betray us. The minister who had been a player, the rival who would have poisoned me, the servant who would have stabbed me, the wife who was wife in name only, — mine were strange shipmates.

He rose to his feet and stood there against the mast, in the old half-submissive, half-defiant attitude, with his head thrown back in the old way.

"If you order me, sir, I will swim ashore," he said, half sullenly, half — I know not how.

"You would never reach the shore," I replied.

"And you know that I will never order you again. Stay here if you please, or come aft if you please."

I went back and took the tiller from Sparrow. We were now in mid-river, and the swollen stream and the strong wind bore us on with them like a leaf before the gale. We left behind the lights and the clamor, the dark town and the silent fort, the weary *Due Return* and the shipping about the lower wharf. Before us loomed the *Santa Teresa*; we passed so close beneath her huge black sides that we heard the wind whistling through her rigging. When she, too, was gone, the river lay bare before us; silver when the moon shone, of an inky blackness when it was obscured by one of the many flying clouds.

My wife wrapped her mantle closer about her, and, leaning back in her seat in the stern beside me, raised her face to the wild and solemn heavens. Diccon sat apart in the bow and held his tongue. The minister bent over, and, lifting the man that lay in the bottom of the boat, laid him at full length upon the thwart before us. The moonlight streamed down upon the prostrate figure. I think it could never have shone upon a more handsome or a more wicked man. He lay there in his splendid dress and dark beauty, *Endymion*-like, beneath the moon. The King's ward turned her eyes upon him, kept them there a moment, then glanced away, and looked at him no more.

"There's a parlous lump upon his forehead where it struck the thwart," said the minister, "but the life's yet in him. He'll shame honest men for many a day to come. Your Platonists, who from a goodly outside argue as fair a soul, could never have been acquainted with this gentleman."

The subject of his discourse moaned and stirred. The minister raised one of the hanging hands and felt for the pulse. "Faint enough," he went on. "A little more and the King might have waited for his minion forever and a day. It would have been the better for us, who have now, indeed, a strange fish upon our hands, but I am glad I killed him not."

I tossed him a flask. "It's good aqua vitæ, and the flask is honest. Give him to drink of it."

He forced the liquor between my lord's teeth, then dashed water in his face. Another minute and the King's favorite sat up and looked around him. Dazed as yet, he stared, with no comprehension in his eyes, at the clouds, the sail, the rushing water, the dark figures about him. "Nicolo!" he cried sharply.

"He's not here, my lord," I said.

At the sound of my voice he sprang to his feet.

"I should advise your lordship to sit still," I said. "The wind is very boisterous, and we are not under bare poles. If you exert yourself, you may capsize the boat."

He sat down mechanically, and put his hand to his forehead. I watched him curiously. It was the strangest trick that fortune had played him.

His hand dropped at last, and he straightened himself, with a long breath. "Who threw me into the boat?" he demanded.

"The honor was mine," declared the minister.

The King's minion lacked not the courage of the body, nor, when passionate action had brought him naught, a certain reserve force of philosophy. He now did the best thing he could have done, — burst into a roar of laughter. "Zooks!" he cried. "It's as good a comedy as ever I saw! How's the play to

end, captain? Are we to go off laughing, or is the end to be bloody after all? For instance, is there murder to be done?" He looked at me boldly, one hand on his hip, the other twirling his mustaches.

"We are not all murderers, my lord," I told him. "For the present you are in no danger other than that which is common to us all."

He looked at the clouds piling behind us, thicker and thicker, higher and higher, at the bending mast, at the black water swirling now and again over the gunwales. "It's enough," he muttered.

I beckoned to Diccon, and putting the tiller into his hands went forward to reef the sail. When it was done and I was back in my place, my lord spoke again.

"Where are we going, captain?"

"I don't know."

"If you leave that sail up much longer, you will land us at the bottom of the river."

"There are worse places," I replied.

He left his seat, and moved, though with caution, to one nearer Mistress Percy. "Are cold and storm and peril sweeter to you, lady, than warmth and safety, and a love that would guard you from, not run you into, danger?" he said in a whisper. "Do you not wish this boat the Santa Teresa, these rude boards the velvet cushions of her state cabin, this darkness her many lights, this cold her warmth, with the night shut out and love shut in?"

His audacity, if it angered me, yet made me laugh. Not so with the King's ward. She shrank from him until she pressed against the tiller. Our flight, the pursuing feet, the struggle at the wharf, her wounded arm of which she had not told, the terror of the white sail rising as if by magic, the vision of the man she

hated lying as one dead before her in the moonlight, the cold, the hurry of the night, — small wonder if her spirit failed her for a time. I felt her hand touch mine where it rested upon the tiller. "Captain Percy," she murmured, with a little sobbing breath.

I leaned across the tiller and addressed the favorite. "My lord," I said, "courtesy to prisoners is one thing, and freedom from restraint and license of tongue is another. Here at the stern the boat is somewhat heavily freighted. Your lordship will oblige me if you will go forward where there is room enough and to spare."

His black brows drew together. "And what if I refuse, sir?" he demanded haughtily.

"I have rope here," I answered, "and to aid me the gentleman who once before to-night, and in despite of your struggles, lifted you in his arms like an infant. We will tie you hand and foot, and lay you in the bottom of the boat. If you make too much trouble, there is always the river. My lord, you are not now at Whitehall. You are with desperate men, outlaws who have no king, and so fear no king's minions. Will you go free, or will you go bound? Go you shall, one way or the other."

He looked at me with rage and hatred in his face. Then, with a laugh that was not good to hear and a shrug of the shoulders, he went forward to bear Diccon company in the bow.

CHAPTER XX

IN WHICH WE ARE IN DESPERATE CASE

"GOD walketh upon the sea as he walketh upon the land," said the minister. "The sea is his and we are his. He will do what it liketh him with his own." As he spoke he looked with a steadfast soul into the black hollow of the wave that combed above us, threatening destruction.

The wave broke, and the boat still lived. Borne high upon the shoulder of the next rolling hill, we looked north, south, east, and west, and saw only a waste of livid, ever forming, ever breaking waves, a gray sky streaked with darker gray shifting vapor, and a horizon impenetrably veiled. Where we were in the great bay, in what direction we were being driven, how near we might be to the open sea or to some fatal shore, we knew not. What we did know was that both masts were gone, that we must bail the boat without ceasing if we would keep it from swamping, that the wind was doing an apparently impossible thing and rising higher and higher, and that the waves which buffeted us from one to the other were hourly swelling to a more monstrous bulk.

We had come into the wider waters at dawn, and still under canvas. An hour later, off Point Comfort, a bare mast contented us; we had hardly gotten the sail in when mast and all went overboard. That had been hours ago.