

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN WHICH I HEAR ILL NEWS

WHEN I awoke from the sleep or stupor into which I must have passed from that swoon, it was to find myself lying upon a bed in a room flooded with sunshine. I was alone. For a moment I lay still, staring at the blue sky without the window, and wondering where I was and how I came there. A drum beat, a dog barked, and a man's quick voice gave a command. The sounds stung me into remembrance, and I was at the window while the voice was yet speaking.

It was West in the street below, pointing with his sword now to the fort, now to the palisade, and giving directions to the armed men about him. There were many people in the street. Women hurried by to the fort with white, scared faces, their arms filled with household gear; children ran beside them, sturdily bearing their share of the goods, but pressing close to their elders' skirts; men went to and fro, the most grimly silent, but a few talking loudly. Not all of the faces in the crowd belonged to the town: there were Kingsmell and his wife from the main, and John Ellison from Archer's Hope, and the Italians Vincencio and Bernardo from the Glass House. The nearer plantations, then, had been warned, and their people had come for refuge to the city. A negro passed, but on that morning, alone of many days, no Indian aired his paint and feathers in the white man's village.

I could not see the palisade across the neck, but I knew that it was there that the fight — if fight there were — would be made. Should the Indians take the palisade, there would yet be the houses of the town, and, last of all, the fort in which to make a stand. I believed not that they would take it. Long since we had found out their method of warfare. They used ambuscade, surprise, and massacre; when withstood in force and with determination they withdrew to their stronghold the forest, there to bide their time until, in the blackness of some night, they could again swoop down upon a sleeping foe.

The drum beat again, and a messenger from the palisade came down the street at a run. "They're in the woods over against us, thicker than ants!" he cried to West as he passed. "A boat has just drifted ashore yonder, with two men in it, dead and scalped!"

I turned to leave the room, and ran against Master Pory coming in on tiptoe, with a red and solemn face. He started when he saw me.

"The roll of the drum brought you to your feet, then!" he cried. "You've lain like the dead all night. I came but to see if you were breathing."

"When I have eaten, I shall be myself again," I said. "There's no attack as yet?"

"No," he answered. "They must know that we are prepared. But they have kindled fires along the river bank, and we can hear them yelling. Whether they'll be mad enough to come against us remains to be seen."

"The nearest settlements have been warned?"

"Ay. The Governor offered a thousand pounds of tobacco and the perpetual esteem of the Company to the man or men who would carry the news. Six vol-

unteered, and went off in boats, three up river, three down. How many they reached, or if they still have their scalps, we know not. And awhile ago, just before daybreak, comes with frantic haste Richard Pace, who had rowed up from Pace's Pains to tell the news which you had already brought. Chanco the Christian had betrayed the plot to him, and he managed to give warning at Powel's and one or two other places as he came up the river."

He broke off, but when I would have spoken interrupted me with: "And so you were on the Pamunkey all this while! Then the Paspaheghs fooled us with the simple truth, for they swore so stoutly that their absent chief men were but gone on a hunt toward the Pamunkey that we had no choice but to believe them gone in quite another direction. And one and all of every tribe we questioned swore that Opechancanough was at Orapax. So Master Rolfe puts off up river to find, if not you, then the Emperor, and make him give up your murderers; and the Governor sends a party along the bay, and West another up the Chickabominy. And there you were, all the time, mewed up in the village above the marshes! And Nantauquas, after saving our lives like one of us, is turned Indian again! And your man is killed! Alackaday! there's naught but trouble in the world. 'As the sparks fly upwards,' you know. But a brave man draws his breath and sets his teeth."

In his manner, his rapid talk, his uneasy glances toward the door, I found something forced and strange. "I thought Rolfe was behind me," he said, "but he must have been delayed. There are meat and drink set out in the great room, where the Governor and those of the Council who are safe here with us are

advising together. Let's descend; you've not eaten, and the good sack will give you strength. Wilt come?"

"Ay," I answered, "but tell me the news as we go. I have been gone ten days, — faith, it seems ten years! There have no ships sailed, Master Pory? The George is still here?" I looked him full in the eye, for a sudden guess at a possible reason for his confusion had stabbed me like a knife.

"Ay," he said, with a readiness that could scarce be feigned. "She was to have sailed this week, it is true, the Governor fearing to keep her longer. But the Esperance, coming in yesterday, brought news which removed his Honor's scruples. Now she'll wait to see out this hand at the cards, and to take home the names of those who are left alive in Virginia. If the red varlets do swarm in upon us, there are her twelve-pounders; they and the fort guns" —

I let him talk on. The George had not sailed. I saw again a firelit hut, and a man and a panther who went down together. Those claws had dug deep; the man across whose face they had torn their way would keep his room in the guest house at Jamestown until his wounds were somewhat healed. The George would wait for him, would scarcely dare to sail without him, and I should find the lady whom she was to carry away to England in Virginia still. It was this that I had built upon, the grain of comfort, the passionate hope, the sustaining cordial, of those year-long days in the village above the Pamunkey.

My heart was sore because of Diccon, but I could speak of that grief to her, and she would grieve with me. There were awe and dread and stern sorrow in the knowledge that even now in the bright spring

morning blood from a hundred homes might be flowing to meet the shining, careless river; but it was the springtime, and she was waiting for me. I strode on toward the stairway so fast that when I asked a question Master Pory, at my side, was too out of breath to answer it. Halfway down the stairs I asked it again, and again received no answer save a "Zooks! you go too fast for my years and having in flesh! Go more slowly, Ralph Percy; there's time enough, there's time enough!"

There was a tone in his voice that I liked not, for it savored of pity. I looked at him with knitted brows; but we were now in the hall, and through the open door of the great room I caught a glimpse of a woman's skirt. There were men in the hall, servants and messengers, who made way for us, staring at me as they did so, and whispering. I knew that my clothing was torn and muddied and stained with blood; as we paused at the door there came to me in a flash that day in the courting meadow when I had tried with my dagger to scrape the dried mud from my boots. I laughed at myself for caring now, and for thinking that she would care that I was not dressed for a lady's bower. The next moment we were in the great room.

She was not there. The silken skirt that I had seen, and — there being but one woman in all the world for me — had taken for hers, belonged to Lady Wyatt, who, pale and terrified, was sitting with clasped hands, mutely following with her eyes her husband as he walked to and fro. West had come in from the street and was making some report. Around the table were gathered two or three of the Council; Master Sandys stood at a window, Rolfe beside Lady

Wyatt's chair. The room was filled with sunshine, and a caged bird was singing, singing. It made the only sound there when they saw that I stood amongst them.

When I had made my bow to Lady Wyatt and to the Governor, and had clasped hands with Rolfe, I began to find in the silence, as I had found in Master Pory's loquaciousness, something strange. They looked at me uneasily, and I caught a swift glance from the Treasurer to Master Pory, and an answering shake of the latter's head. Rolfe was very white and his lips were set; West was pulling at his mustaches and staring at the floor.

"With all our hearts we welcome you back to life and to the service of Virginia, Captain Percy," said the Governor, when the silence had become awkward.

A murmur of assent went round the room.

I bowed. "I thank you, sir, and these gentlemen very heartily. You have but to command me now. I find that I have to-day the best will in the world toward fighting. I trust that your Honor does not deem it necessary to send me back to gaol?"

"Virginia has no gaol for Captain Percy," he answered gravely. "She has only grateful thanks and fullest sympathy."

I glanced at him keenly. "Then I hold myself at your command, sir, when I shall have seen and spoken with my wife."

He looked at the floor, and they one and all held their peace.

"Madam," I said to Lady Wyatt, "I have been watching your ladyship's face. Will you tell me why it is so very full of pity, and why there are tears in your eyes?"

She shrank back in her chair with a little cry, and Rolfe stepped toward me, then turned sharply aside. "I cannot!" he cried, "I that know" —

I drew myself up to meet the blow, whatever it might be. "I demand of you my wife, Sir Francis Wyatt," I said. "If there is ill news to be told, be so good as to tell it quickly. If she is sick, or hath been sent away to England" —

The Governor made as if to speak, then turned and flung out his hands to his wife. "'T is woman's work, Margaret!" he cried. "Tell him!"

More merciful than the men, she came to me at once, the tears running down her cheeks, and laid one trembling hand upon my arm. "She was a brave lady, Captain Percy," she said. "Bear it as she would have had you bear it."

"I am bearing it, madam," I answered at length. "'She was a brave lady.' May it please your ladyship to go on?"

"I will tell you all, Captain Percy; I will tell you everything. . . . She never believed you dead, and she begged upon her knees that we would allow her to go in search of you with Master Rolfe. That could not be; my husband, in duty to the Company, could not let her have her will. Master Rolfe went, and she sat in the window, yonder, day after day, watching for his return. When other parties went out, she besought the men, as they had wives whom they loved, to search as though those loved ones were in captivity and danger; when they grew weary and fainthearted, to think of her face waiting in the window. . . . Day after day she sat there watching for them to come back; when they were come, then she watched the river for Master Rolfe's boats. Then came word down the river

that he had found no trace of you whom he sought, that he was on his way back to Jamestown, that he too believed you dead. . . . We put a watch upon her after that, for we feared we knew not what, there was such a light and purpose in her eyes. But two nights ago, in the middle of the night, the woman who stayed in her chamber fell asleep. When she awoke before the dawn, it was to find her gone."

"To find her gone?" I said dully. "To find her dead?"

She locked her hands together and the tears came faster. "Oh, Captain Percy, it had been better so! — it had been better so! Then would she have lain to greet you, calm and white, unmarred and beautiful, with the spring flowers upon her. . . . She believed not that you were dead; she was distraught with grief and watching; she thought that love might find what friendship missed; she went to the forest to seek you. They that were sent to find and bring her back have never returned" —

"Into the forest!" I cried. "*Jocelyn, Jocelyn, Jocelyn, come back!*"

Some one pushed me into a chair, and I felt the warmth of wine within my lips. In the moment that the world steadied I rose and went toward the door to find my way barred by Rolfe.

"Not you, too, Ralph!" he cried. "I will not let you go. Look for yourself!"

He drew me to the window, Master Sandys gravely making place for us. From the window was visible the neck of land and the forest beyond, and from the forest, up and down the river as far as the eye could reach, rose here and there thin columns of smoke. Suddenly, as we stared, three or four white smoke puffs,

like giant flowers, started out of the shadowy woods across the neck. Following the crack of the muskets — fired out of pure bravado by their Indian owners — came the yelling of the savages. The sound was prolonged and deep, as though issuing from many throats.

I looked and listened, and knew that I could not go, — not now.

“She was not alone, Ralph,” said Rolfe, with his arm about me. “On the morning that she was missed, they found not Jeremy Sparrow either. They tracked them both to the forest by the footprints upon the sand, though once in the wood the trail was lost. The minister must have been watching, must have seen her leave the house, and must have followed her. How she, and he after her, passed through the gates, none know. So careless and confident had we grown — God forgive us! — that they may have been left open all that night. But he was with her, Ralph; she had not to face it alone” — His voice broke.

For myself, I was glad that the minister had been there, though I knew that for him also I should grieve after a while.

At the firing and the shouting West had rushed from the room, followed by his fellow Councilors, and now the Governor clapped on his headpiece and called to his men to bring his back-and-breast. His wife hung around his neck, and he bade her good-by with great tenderness. I looked dully on at that parting. I too was going to battle. Once I had tasted such a farewell, the pain, the passion, the sweetness, but never again, — never again.

He went, and the Treasurer, after a few words of comfort to Lady Wyatt, was gone also. Both were merciful, and spoke not to me, but only bowed and

turned aside, requiring no answering word or motion of mine. When they were away, and there was no sound in the room save the caged bird's singing and Lady Wyatt's low sobs, I begged Rolfe to leave me, telling him that he was needed, as indeed he was, and that I would stay in the window for a while, and then would join him at the palisade. He was loath to go; but he too had loved and lost, and knew that there is nothing to be said, and that it is best to be alone. He went, and only Lady Wyatt and I kept the quiet room with the singing bird and the sunshine on the floor.

I leaned against the window and looked out into the street, — which was not crowded now, for the men were all at their several posts, — and at the budding trees, and at the smoke of many fires going up from the forest to the sky, from a world of hate and pain and woe to the heaven where she dwelt, and then I turned and went to the table, where had been set bread and meat and wine.

At the sound of my footstep Lady Wyatt uncovered her face. “Is there aught that I can do for you, sir?” she asked timidly.

“I have not broken my fast for many hours, madam,” I answered. “I would eat and drink, that I may not be found wanting in strength. There is a thing that I have yet to do.”

Rising from her chair, she brushed away her tears, and coming to the table with a little housewifely eagerness would not let me wait upon myself, but carved and poured for me, and then sat down opposite me and covered her eyes with her hand.

“I think that the Governor is quite safe, madam,” I said. “I do not believe that the Indians will take the palisade. It may even be that, knowing we are

prepared, they will not attack at all. Indeed, I think that you may be easy about him."

She thanked me with a smile. "It is all so strange and dreadful to me, sir," she said. "At my home, in England, it was like a Sunday morning all the year round, — all stillness and peace; no terror, no alarm. I fear that I am not yet a good Virginian."

When I had eaten, and had drunk the wine she gave me, I rose, and asked her if I might not see her safe within the fort before I joined her husband at the palisade. She shook her head, and told me that there were with her faithful servants, and that if the savages broke in upon the town she would have warning in time to flee, the fort being so close at hand. When I thereupon begged her leave to depart, she first curtsied to me, and then, again with tears, came to me and took my hand in hers. "I know that there is naught that I can say. . . . Your wife loved you, sir, with all her heart." She drew something from the bosom of her gown. "Would you like this? It is a knot of ribbon that she wore. They found it caught in a bush at the edge of the forest."

I took the ribbon from her and put it to my lips, then unknotted it and tied it around my arm; and then, wearing my wife's colors, I went softly out into the street, and turned my face toward the guest house and the man whom I meant to kill.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IN WHICH MY LORD AND I PART COMPANY

THE door of the guest house stood wide, and within the lower room were neither men that drank nor men that gave to drink. Host and drawers and chance guests alike had left pipe and tankard for sword and musket, and were gone to fort or palisade or river bank.

I crossed the empty room and went up the creaking stairway. No one met me or withstood me; only a pigeon perched upon the sill of a sunny window whirred off into the blue. I glanced out of the window as I passed it, and saw the silver river and the George and the Esperance, with the gunners at the guns watching for Indian canoes, and saw smoke rising from the forest on the southern shore. There had been three houses there, — John West's and Minifie's and Crashaw's. I wondered if mine were burning, too, at Weyanoke, and cared not if 't was so.

The door of the upper room was shut. When I raised the latch and pushed against it, it gave at the top and middle, but there was some pressure from within at the bottom. I pushed again, more strongly, and the door slowly opened, moving away whatever thing had lain before it. Another moment, and I was in the room, and had closed and barred the door behind me.

The weight that had opposed me was the body of