

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

the Italian, lying face downwards, upon the floor. I stooped and turned it over, and saw that the venomous spirit had flown. The face was purple and distorted; the lips were drawn back from the teeth in a dreadful smile. There was in the room a faint, peculiar, not unpleasant odor. It did not seem strange to me to find that serpent, which had coiled in my path, dead and harmless for evermore. Death had been busy of late; if he struck down the flower, why should he spare the thing that I pushed out of my way with my foot?

Ten feet from the door stood a great screen, hiding from view all that might be beyond. It was very quiet in the room, with the sunshine coming through the window, and a breeze that smelt of the sea. I had not cared to walk lightly or to close the door softly, and yet no voice had challenged my entrance. For a minute I feared to find the dead physician the room's only occupant; then I passed the screen and came upon my enemy.

He was sitting beside a table, with his arms outstretched and his head bowed upon them. My footfall did not rouse him; he sat there in the sunshine as still as the figure that lay before the threshold. I thought with a dull fury that maybe he was dead already, and I walked hastily and heavily across the floor to the table. He was a living man, for with the fingers of one hand he was slowly striking against a sheet of paper that lay beneath them. He knew not that I stood above him; he was listening to other footsteps.

The paper was a letter, unfolded and written over with great black characters. The few lines above those moving fingers stared me in the face. They ran

thus: "*I told you that you had as well cut your throat as go upon that mad Virginia voyage. Now all's gone, — wealth, honors, favor. Buckingham is the sun in heaven, and cold are the shadows in which we walk who hailed another luminary. There's a warrant out for the Black Death; look to it that one meets not you too, when you come at last. But come, in the name of all the fiends, and play your last card. There's your cursed beauty still. Come, and let the King behold your face once more*" — The rest was hidden.

I put out my hand and touched him upon the shoulder, and he raised his head and stared at me as at one come from the grave.

Over one side of his face, from temple to chin, was drawn and fastened a black cloth; the unharmed cheek was bloodless and shrunken, the lip twisted. Only the eyes, dark, sinister, and splendid, were as they had been. "I dig not my graves deep enough," he said. "Is she behind you there in the shadow?"

Flung across a chair was a cloak of scarlet cloth. I took it and spread it out upon the floor, then unsheathed a dagger which I had taken from the rack of weapons in the Governor's hall. "Loosen thy poniard, thou murderer," I cried, "and come stand with me upon the cloak."

"Art quick or dead?" he answered. "I will not fight the dead." He had not moved in his seat, and there was a lethargy and a dullness in his voice and eyes. "There is time enough," he said. "I too will soon be of thy world, thou haggard, bloody shape. Wait until I come, and I will fight thee, shadow to shadow."

"I am not dead," I said, "but there is one that is.

Stand up, villain and murderer, or I will kill you sitting there, with her blood upon your hands!"

He rose at that, and drew his dagger from the sheath. I laid aside my doublet, and he followed my example, but his hands moved listlessly and his fingers bungled at the fastenings. I waited for him in some wonder, it not being like him to come tardily to such pastime.

He came at length, slowly and with an uncertain step, and we stood together on the scarlet cloak. I raised my left arm and he raised his, and we locked hands. There was no strength in his clasp; his hand lay within mine cold and languid. "Art ready?" I demanded.

"Yea," he answered in a strange voice, "but I would that she did not stand there with her head upon your breast. . . . I too loved thee, Jocelyn, — Jocelyn lying dead in the forest!"

I struck at him with the dagger in my right hand, and wounded him, but not deeply, in the side. He gave blow for blow, but his poniard scarce drew blood, so nerveless was the arm that would have driven it home. I struck again, and he stabbed weakly at the air, then let his arm drop to his side, as though the light and jeweled blade had weighed it down.

Loosening the clasp of our left hands, I fell back until the narrow scarlet field was between us. "Hast no more strength than that?" I cried. "I cannot murder you!"

He stood looking past me as into a great distance. He was bleeding, but I had as yet been able to strike no mortal blow. "It is as you choose," he said. "I am as one bound before you. I am sick unto death."

Turning, he went back, swaying as he walked, to

his chair, and sinking into it sat there a minute with half-closed eyes; then raised his head and looked at me, with a shadow of the old arrogance, pride, and disdain upon his scarred face. "Not yet, captain?" he demanded. "To the heart, man! So I would strike an you sat here and I stood there."

"I know you would," I said, and going to the window I flung the dagger down into the empty street; then stood and watched the smoke across the river, and thought it strange that the sun shone and the birds sang.

When I turned to the room again, he still sat there in the great chair, a tragic, splendid figure, with his ruined face and the sullen woe of his eyes. "I had sworn to kill you," I said. "It is not just that you should live."

He gazed at me with something like a smile upon his bloodless lips. "Fret not thyself, Ralph Percy," he said. "Within a week I shall be gone. Did you see my servant, my Italian doctor, lying dead upon the floor, there beyond the screen? He had poisons, had Nicolo whom men called the Black Death, — poisons swift and strong, or subtle and slow. Day and night, the earth and sunshine have become hateful to me. I will go to the fires of hell, and see if they can make me forget, — can make me forget the face of a woman." He was speaking half to me, half to himself. "Her eyes are dark and large," he said, "and there are shadows beneath them, and the mark of tears. She stands there day and night with her eyes upon me. Her lips are parted, but she never speaks. There was a way that she had with her hands, holding them one within the other, thus" —

I stopped him with a cry for silence, and I leaned

trembling against the table. "Thou wretch!" I cried. "Thou art her murderer!"

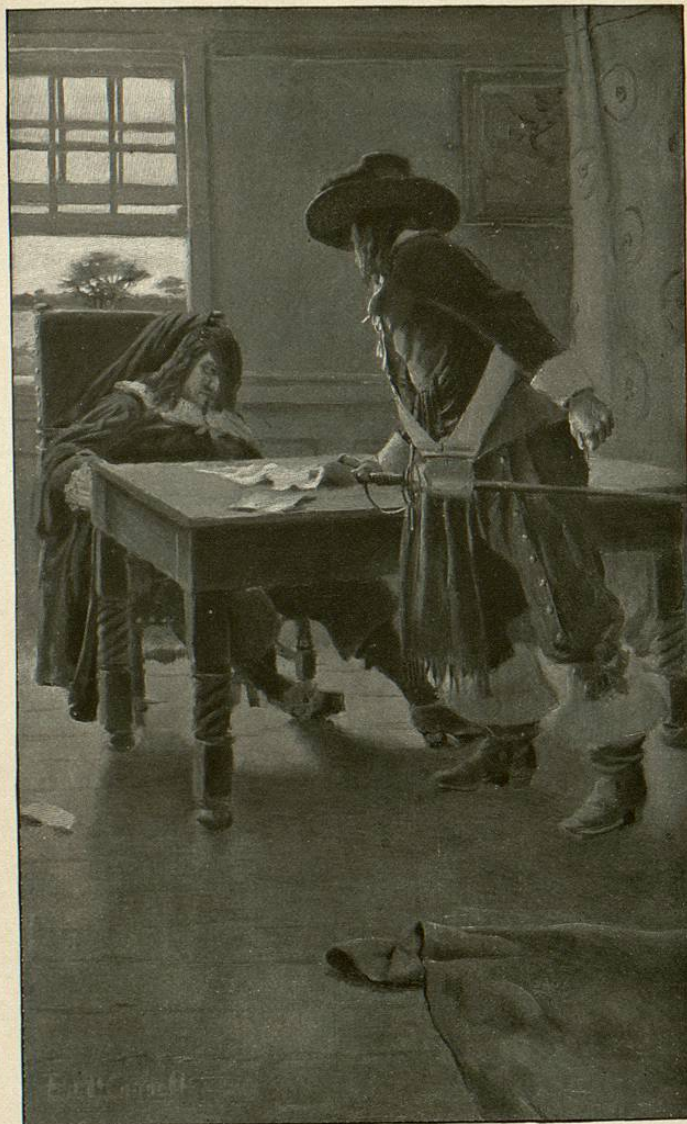
He raised his head and looked beyond me with that strange, faint smile. "I know," he replied, with the dignity which was his at times. "You may play the headsman, if you choose. I dispute not your right. But it is scarce worth while. I have taken poison."

The sunshine came into the room, and the wind from the river, and the trumpet notes of swans flying to the north. "The George is ready for sailing," he said at last. "To-morrow or the next day she will be going home with the tidings of this massacre. I shall go with her, and within a week they will bury me at sea. There is a stealthy, slow, and secret poison. . . . I would not die in a land where I have lost every throw of the dice, and I would not die in England for Buckingham to come and look upon my face, and so I took that poison. For the man upon the floor, there, — prison and death awaited him at home. He chose to flee at once."

He ceased to speak, and sat with his head bowed upon his breast. "If you are content that it should be as it is," he said at length, "perhaps you will leave me? I am not good company to-day."

His hand was busy again with the letter upon the table, and his gaze was fixed beyond me. "I have lost," he muttered. "How I came to play my cards so badly I do not know. The stake was heavy, — I have not wherewithal to play again."

His head sank upon his outstretched arm. As for me, I stood a minute with set lips and clenched hands, and then I turned and went out of the room and down the stair and out into the street. In the dust beneath the window lay my dagger. I picked it up, sheathed it, and went my way.



"THOU ART HER MURDERER!"

The street was very quiet. All windows and doors were closed and barred; not a soul was there to trouble me with look or speech. The yelling from the forest had ceased; only the keen wind blew, and brought from the *Esperance* upon the river a sound of singing. The sea was the home of the men upon her decks, and their hearts dwelt not in this port; they could sing while the smoke went up from our homes and the dead lay across the thresholds.

I went on through the sunshine and the stillness to the minister's house. The trees in the garden were bare, the flowers dead. The door was not barred. I entered the house and went into the great room and flung the heavy shutters wide, then stood and looked about me. Naught was changed; it was as we had left it that wild November night. Even the mirror which, one other night, had shown me *Diceon* still hung upon the wall. Master *Bucke* had been seldom at home, perhaps, or was feeble and careless of altering matters. All was as though we had been but an hour gone, save that no fire burned upon the hearth.

I went to the table, and the books upon it were *Jeremy Sparrow's*: the minister's house, then, had been his home once more. Beside the books lay a packet, tied with silk, sealed, and addressed to me. Perhaps the Governor had given it, the day before, into Master *Bucke's* care, — I do not know; at any rate, there it lay. I looked at the "*By the Esperance*" upon the cover, and wondered dully who at home would care to write to me; then broke the seal and untied the silk. Within the cover there was a letter with the superscription, "To a Gentleman who has served me well."

I read the letter through to the signature, which

was that of his Grace of Buckingham, and then I laughed, who had never thought to laugh again, and threw the paper down. It mattered naught to me now that George Villiers should be grateful, or that James Stewart could deny a favorite nothing. "*The King graciously sanctions the marriage of his sometime ward, the Lady Jocelyn Leigh, with Captain Ralph Percy ; invites them home*" —

She was gone home, and I her husband, I who loved her, was left behind. How many years of pilgrimage . . . how long, how long, O Lord ?

The minister's great armchair was drawn before the cold and blackened hearth. How often she had sat there within its dark clasp, the firelight on her dress, her hands, her face ! She had been fair to look upon ; the pride, the daring, the willfulness, were but the thorns about the rose ; behind those defenses was the flower, pure and lovely, with a heart of gold. I flung myself down beside the chair, and, putting my arms across it, hid my face upon them, and could weep at last.

That passion spent itself, and I lay with my face against the wood and well-nigh slept. The battle was done ; the field was lost ; the storm and stress of life had sunk into this dull calm, as still as peace, as hopeless as the charred log and white ash upon the hearth, cold, never to be quickened again.

Time passed, and at length I raised my head, roused suddenly to the consciousness that for a while there had been no stillness. The air was full of sound, shouts, savage cries, the beating of a drum, the noise of musketry. I sprang to my feet, and went to the door to meet Rolfe crossing the threshold.

He put his arm within mine and drew me out into

the sunshine upon the doorstep. "I thought I should find you here," he said ; "but it is only a room with its memories, Ralph. Out here is more breadth, more height. There is country yet, Ralph, and after a while, friends. The Indians are beginning to attack in force. Humphry Boyse is killed, and Morris Chaloner. There is smoke over the plantations up and down the river, as far as we can see, and awhile ago the body of a child drifted down to us."

"I am unarmed," I said. "I will but run to the fort for sword and musket" —

"No need," he answered. "There are the dead whom you may rob." The noise increasing as he spoke, we made no further tarrying, but, leaving behind us house and garden, hurried to the palisade.