

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### IN WHICH I GO UPON A QUEST

THROUGH a loophole in the gate of the palisade I looked, and saw the sandy neck joining the town to the main, and the deep and dark woods beyond, the fairy mantle giving invisibility to a host. Between us and that refuge dead men lay here and there, stiff and stark, with the black paint upon them, and the colored feathers of their headdresses red or blue against the sand. One warrior, shot through the back, crawled like a wounded beetle to the forest. We let him go, for we cared not to waste ammunition upon him.

I drew back from my loophole, and held out my hand to the women for a freshly loaded musket. A quick murmur like the drawing of a breath came from our line. The Governor, standing near me, cast an anxious glance along the stretch of wooden stakes that were neither so high nor so thick as they should have been. "I am new to this warfare, Captain Percy," he said. "Do they think to use those logs that they carry as battering rams?"

"As scaling ladders, your Honor," I replied. "It is on the cards that we may have some sword play, after all."

"We'll take your advice, the next time we build a palisade, Ralph Percy," muttered West on my other side. Mounting the breastwork that we had thrown

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up to shelter the women who were to load the muskets, he coolly looked over the pales at the oncoming savages. "Wait until they pass the blasted pine, men!" he cried. "Then give them a hail of lead that will beat them back to the Pamunkey!"

An arrow whistled by his ear; a second struck him on the shoulder, but pierced not his coat of mail. He came down from his dangerous post with a laugh.

"If the leader could be picked off"—I said. "It's a long shot, but there's no harm in trying."

As I spoke I raised my gun to my shoulder; but he leaned across Rolfe, who stood between us, and plucked me by the sleeve. "You've not looked at him closely. Look again."

I did as he told me, and lowered my musket. It was not for me to send that Indian leader to his account. Rolfe's lips tightened and a sudden pallor overspread his face. "Nantauquas?" he muttered in my ear, and I nodded yes.

The volley that we fired full into the ranks of our foe was deadly, and we looked to see them turn and flee, as they had fled before. But this time they were led by one who had been trained in English steadfastness. Broken for the moment, they rallied and came on yelling, bearing logs, thick branches of trees, oars tied together,—anything by whose help they could hope to surmount the palisade. We fired again, but they had planted their ladders. Before we could snatch the loaded muskets from the women a dozen painted figures appeared above the sharpened stakes. A moment, and they and a score behind them had leaped down upon us.

It was no time now to skulk behind a palisade. At all hazards, that tide from the forest must be

stemmed. Those that were amongst us we might kill, but more were swarming after them, and from the neck came the exultant yelling of madly hurrying reinforcements.

We flung open the gates. I drove my sword through the heart of an Indian who would have opposed me, and, calling for men to follow me, sprang forward. Perhaps thirty came at my call; together we made for the opening. A party of the savages in our midst interposed. We set upon them with sword and musket butt, and though they fought like very devils drove them before us through the gateway. Behind us were wild clamor, the shrieking of women, the stern shouts of the English, the whooping of the savages; before us a rush that must be met and turned.

It was done. A moment's fierce fighting, then the Indians wavered, broke, and fled. Like sheep we drove them before us, across the neck, to the edge of the forest, into which they plunged. Into that ambush we cared not to follow, but fell back to the palisade and the town, believing, and with reason, that the lesson had been taught. The strip of sand was strewn with the dead and the dying, but they belonged not to us. Our dead numbered but three, and we bore their bodies with us.

Within the palisade we found the English in sufficiently good case. Of the score or more Indians cut off by us from their mates and penned within that death trap, half at least were already dead, run through with sword and pike, shot down with the muskets that there was now time to load. The remainder, hemmed about, pressed against the wall, were fast meeting with a like fate. They stood no chance

against us; we cared not to make prisoners of them; it was a slaughter, but they had taken the initiative. They fought with the courage of despair, striving to spring in upon us, striking when they could with hatchet and knife, and through it all talking and laughing, making God knows what savage boasts, what taunts against the English, what references to the hunting grounds to which they were going. They were brave men that we slew that day.

At last there was left but the leader, — unharmed, unwounded, though time and again he had striven to close with some one of us, to strike and to die striking with his fellows. Behind him was the wall: of the half circle which he faced well-nigh all were old soldiers and servants of the colony, gentlemen none of whom had come in later than Dale, — Rolfe, West, Wynne, and others. We were swordsmen all. When in his desperation he would have thrown himself upon us, we contented ourselves with keeping him at sword's length, and at last West sent the knife in the dark hand whirling over the palisade. Some one had shouted to the musketeers to spare him.

When he saw that he stood alone, he stepped back against the wall, drew himself up to his full height, and folded his arms. Perhaps he thought that we would shoot him down then and there; perhaps he saw himself a captive amongst us, a show for the idle and for the strangers that the ships brought in.

The din had ceased, and we the living, the victors, stood and looked at the vanquished dead at our feet, and at the dead beyond the gates, and at the neck upon which was no living foe, and at the blue sky bending over all. Our hearts told us, and told us truly, that the lesson had been taught, that no more

forever need we at Jamestown fear an Indian attack. And then we looked at him whose life we had spared.

He opposed our gaze with his folded arms and his head held high and his back against the wall. Many of us could remember him, a proud, shy lad, coming for the first time from the forest with his sister to see the English village and its wonders. For idleness we had set him in our midst that summer day, long ago, on the green by the fort, and had called him "your royal highness," laughing at the quickness of our wit, and admiring the spirit and bearing of the lad and the promise he gave of a splendid manhood. And all knew the tale I had brought the night before.

Slowly, as one man, and with no spoken word, we fell back, the half circle straightening into a line and leaving a clear pathway to the open gates. The wind had ceased to blow, I remember, and a sunny stillness lay upon the sand, and the rough-hewn wooden stakes, and a little patch of tender grass across which stretched a dead man's arm. The church bells began to ring.

The Indian out of whose path to life and freedom we had stepped glanced from the line of lowered steel to the open gates and the forest beyond, and understood. For a full minute he waited, moving not a muscle, still and stately as some noble masterpiece in bronze. Then he stepped from the shadow of the wall and moved past us through the sunshine that turned the eagle feather in his scalp lock to gold. His eyes were fixed upon the forest; there was no change in the superb calm of his face. He went by the huddled dead and the long line of the living that spoke no word, and out of the gates and across the neck, walking slowly that we might yet shoot him down if we

saw fit to repent ourselves, and proudly like a king's son. There was no sound save the church bells ringing for our deliverance. He reached the shadow of the trees: a moment, and the forest had back her own.

We sheathed our swords and listened to the Governor's few earnest words of thankfulness and of recognition of this or that man's service, and then we set to work to clear the ground of the dead, to place sentinels, to bring the town into order, to determine what policy we should pursue, to search for ways by which we might reach and aid those who might be yet alive in the plantations above and below us.

We could not go through the forest where every tree might hide a foe, but there was the river. For the most part, the houses of the English had been built, like mine at Weyanoke, very near to the water. I volunteered to lead a party up river, and Wynne to go with another toward the bay. But as the council at the Governor's was breaking up, and as Wynne and I were hurrying off to make our choice of the craft at the landing, there came a great noise from the watchers upon the bank, and a cry that boats were coming down the stream.

It was so, and there were in them white men, nearly all of whom had their wounds to show, and cowering women and children. One boat had come from the plantation at Pasphegh, and two from Martin-Brandon; they held all that were left of the people. . . . A woman had in her lap the body of a child, and would not let us take it from her; another, with a half-severed arm, crouched above a man who lay in his blood in the bottom of the boat.

Thus began that strange procession that lasted

throughout the afternoon and night and into the next day, when a sloop came down from Henricus with the news that the English were in force there to stand their ground, although their loss had been heavy. Hour after hour they came as fast as sail and oar could bring them, the panic-stricken folk, whose homes were burned, whose kindred were slain, who had themselves escaped as by a miracle. Many were sorely wounded, so that they died when we lifted them from the boats; others had slighter hurts. Each boatload had the same tale to tell of treachery, surprise, and fiendish butchery. Wherever it had been possible the English had made a desperate defense, in the face of which the savages gave way and finally retired to the forest. Contrary to their wont, the Indians took few prisoners, but for the most part slew outright those whom they seized, wreaking their spite upon the senseless corpses. A man too good for this world, George Thorpe, who would think no evil, was killed and his body mutilated by those whom he had taught and loved. And Nathaniel Powel was dead, and four others of the Council, besides many more of name and note. There were many women slain and little children.

From the stronger hundreds came tidings of the number lost, and that the survivors would hold the homes that were left, for the time at least. The Indians had withdrawn; it remained to be seen if they were satisfied with the havoc they had wrought. Would his Honor send by boat — there could be no traveling through the woods — news of how others had fared, and also powder and shot?

Before the dawning we had heard from all save the remoter settlements. The blow had been struck, and

the hurt was deep. But it was not beyond remedy, thank God! It is known what measures we took for our protection, and how soon the wound to the colony was healed, and what vengeance we meted out to those who had set upon us in the dark, and had failed to reach the heart. These things belong to history, and I am but telling my own story, — mine and another's.

In the chill and darkness of the hour before dawn something like quiet fell upon the distracted, breathless town. There was a pause in the coming of the boats. The wounded and the dying had been cared for, and the noise of the women and the children was stilled at last. All was well at the palisade; the strong party encamped upon the neck reported the forest beyond them as still as death.

In the Governor's house was held a short council, subdued and quiet, for we were all of one mind and our words were few. It was decided that the George should sail at once with the tidings, and with an appeal for arms and powder and a supply of men. The Esperance would still be with us, besides the Hope-in-God and the Tiger; the Margaret and John would shortly come in, being already overdue.

"My Lord Carnal goes upon the George, gentlemen," said Master Pory. "He sent but now to demand if she sailed to-morrow. He is ill, and would be at home."

One or two glanced at me, but I sat with a face like stone, and the Governor, rising, broke up the council.

I left the house, and the street that was lit with torches and noisy with going to and fro, and went down to the river. Rolfe had been detained by the Governor, West commanded the party at the neck.

There were great fires burning along the river bank, and men watching for the incoming boats; but I knew of a place where no guard was set, and where one or two canoes were moored. There was no fire-light there, and no one saw me when I entered a canoe and cut the rope and pushed off from the land.

Well-nigh a day and a night had passed since Lady Wyatt had told me that which made for my heart a night-time indeed. I believed my wife to be dead, — yea, I trusted that she was dead. I hoped that it had been quickly over, — one blow. . . . Better that, oh, better that a thousand times, than that she should have been carried off to some village, saved to-day to die a thousand deaths to-morrow.

But I thought that there might have been left, lying on the dead leaves of the forest, that fair shell from which the soul had flown. I knew not where to go, — to the north, to the east, to the west, — but go I must. I had no hope of finding that which I went to seek, and no thought but to take up that quest. I was a soldier, and I had stood to my post; but now the need was past, and I could go. In the hall at the Governor's house, I had written a line of farewell to Rolfe, and had given the paper into the hand of a trusty fellow, charging him not to deliver it for two hours to come.

I rowed two miles downstream through the quiet darkness, — so quiet after the hubbub of the town. When I turned my boat to the shore the day was close at hand. The stars were gone, and a pale, cold light, more desolate than the dark, streamed from the east across which ran, like a faded blood stain, a smear of faint red. Upon the forest the mist lay heavy. When I drove the boat in amongst the sedge and

reeds below the bank, I could see only the trunks of the nearest trees, hear only the sullen cry of some river bird that I had disturbed.

Why I was at some pains to fasten the boat to a sycamore that dipped a pallid arm into the stream I do not know. I never thought to come back to the sycamore; I never thought to bend to an oar again, to behold again the river that the trees and the mist hid from me before I had gone twenty yards into the forest.