

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### IN WHICH WE LISTEN TO A SONG

It was like a May morning, so mild was the air, so gay the sunshine, when the mist had risen. Wild flowers were blooming, and here and there unfolding leaves made a delicate fretwork against a deep blue sky. The wind did not blow; everywhere were stillness soft and sweet, dewy freshness, careless peace.

Hour after hour I walked slowly through the woodland, pausing now and then to look from side to side. It was idle going, wandering in a desert with no guiding star. The place where I would be might lie to the east, to the west. In the wide enshrouding forest I might have passed it by. I believed not that I had done so. Surely, surely I should have known; surely the voice that lived only in my heart would have called to me to stay.

Beside a newly felled tree, in a glade starred with small white flowers, I came upon the bodies of a man and a boy, so hacked, so hewn, so robbed of all comeliness, that at the sight the heart stood still and the brain grew sick. Farther on was a clearing, and in its midst the charred and blackened walls of what had been a home. I crossed the freshly turned earth, and looked in at the cabin door with the stillness and the sunshine. A woman lay dead upon the floor, her outstretched hand clenched upon the foot of a cradle. I entered the room, and, looking within the cradle,

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found that the babe had not been spared. Taking up the little waxen body with the blood upon its innocent breast, I laid it within the mother's arms, and went my way over the sunny doorstep and the earth that had been made ready for planting. A white butterfly — the first of the year — fluttered before me; then rose through a mist of green and passed from my sight.

The sun climbed higher into the deep blue sky. Save where grew pines or cedars there were no shadowy places in the forest. The slight green of uncurling leaves, the airy scarlet of the maples, the bare branches of the tardier trees, opposed no barrier to the sunlight. It streamed into the world below the treetops, and lay warm upon the dead leaves and the green moss and the fragile wild flowers. There was a noise of birds, and a fox barked. All was lightness, gayety, and warmth; the sap was running, the heyday of the spring at hand. Ah! to be riding with her, to be going home through the fairy forest, the sunshine, and the singing! . . . The happy miles to Weyanoke, the smell of the sassafras in its woods, the house all lit and trimmed. The fire kindled, the wine upon the table . . . Diccon's welcoming face, and his hand upon Black Lamoral's bridle; the minister, too, maybe, with his great heart and his kindly eyes; her hand in mine, her head upon my breast —

The vision faded. Never, never, never for me a home-coming such as that, so deep, so dear, so sweet. The men who were my friends, the woman whom I loved, had gone into a far country. This world was not their home. They had crossed the threshold while I lagged behind. The door was shut, and without were the night and I.

With the fading of the vision came a sudden con-



sciousness of a presence in the forest other than my own. I turned sharply, and saw an Indian walking with me, step for step, but with a space between us of earth and brown tree trunks and drooping branches. For a moment I thought that he was a shadow, not substance; then I stood still, waiting for him to speak or to draw nearer. At the first glimpse of the bronze figure I had touched my sword, but when I saw who it was I let my hand fall. He too paused, but he did not offer to speak. With his hand upon a great bow, he waited, motionless in the sunlight. A minute or more thus; then I walked on with my eyes upon him.

At once he addressed himself to motion, not speaking or making any sign or lessening the distance between us, but moving as I moved through the light and shade, the warmth and stillness, of the forest. For a time I kept my eyes upon him, but soon I was back with my dreams again. It seemed not worth while to wonder why he walked with me, who was now the mortal foe of the people to whom he had returned.

From the river bank, the sycamore, and the boat that I had fastened there, I had gone northward toward the Pamunkey; from the clearing and the ruined cabin with the dead within it, I had turned to the eastward. Now, in that hopeless wandering, I would have faced the north again. But the Indian who had made himself my traveling companion stopped short, and pointed to the east. I looked at him, and thought that he knew, maybe, of some war party between us and the Pamunkey, and would save me from it. A listlessness had come upon me, and I obeyed the pointing finger.

So, estranged and silent, with two spears' length of earth between us, we went on until we came to a quiet

stream flowing between low, dark banks. Again I would have turned to the northward, but the son of Powhatan, gliding before me, set his face down the stream, toward the river I had left. A minute in which I tried to think and could not, because in my ears was the singing of the birds at Weyanoke; then I followed him.

How long I walked in a dream, hand in hand with the sweetness of the past, I do not know; but when the present and its anguish weighed again upon my heart it was darker, colder, stiller, in the forest. The soundless stream was bright no longer; the golden sunshine that had lain upon the earth was all gathered up; the earth was dark and smooth and bare, with not a flower; the tree trunks were many and straight and tall. Above were no longer brown branch and blue sky, but a deep and sombre green, thick woven, keeping out the sunlight like a pall. I stood still and gazed around me, and knew the place.

To me, whose heart was haunted, the dismal wood, the charmed silence, the withdrawal of the light, were less than nothing. All day I had looked for one sight of horror; yea, had longed to come at last upon it, to fall beside it, to embrace it with my arms. There, there, though it should be some fair and sunny spot, there would be my haunted wood. As for this place of gloom and stillness, it fell in with my mood. More welcome than the mocking sunshine were this cold and solemn light, this deathlike silence, these ranged pines. It was a place in which to think of life as a slight thing and scarcely worth the while, given without the asking, spent in turmoil, strife, suffering, and longings all in vain. Easily laid down, too, — so easily laid down that the wonder was —



I looked at the ghostly wood, and at the dull stream, and at my hand upon the hilt of the sword that I had drawn halfway from the scabbard. The life within that hand I had not asked for. Why should I stand like a soldier left to guard a thing not worth the guarding; seeing his comrades march homeward, hearing a cry to him from his distant hearthstone?

I drew my sword well-nigh from its sheath; and then of a sudden I saw the matter in a truer light; knew that I was indeed the soldier, and willed to be neither coward nor deserter. The blade dropped back into the scabbard with a clang, and, straightening myself, I walked on beside the sluggish stream deep into the haunted wood.

Presently it occurred to me to glance aside at the Indian who had kept pace with me through the forest. He was not there; he walked with me no longer; save for myself there seemed no breathing creature in the dim wood. I looked to right and left, and saw only the tall, straight pines and the needle-strewn ground. How long he had been gone I could not tell. He might have left me when first we came to the pines, for my dreams had held me, and I had not looked his way.

There was that in the twilight place, or in the strangeness, the horror, and the yearning that had kept company with me that day, or in the dull weariness of a mind and body overwrought of late, which made thought impossible. I went on down the stream toward the river, because it chanced that my face was set in that direction.

How dark was the shadow of the pines, how lifeless the earth beneath, how faint and far away the blue that showed here and there through rifts in the heavy

roof of foliage! The stream bending to one side I turned with it, and there before me stood the minister!

I do not know what strangled cry burst from me. The earth was rocking, all the wood a glare of light. As for him, at the sight of me and the sound of my voice he had staggered back against a tree; but now, recovering himself, he ran to me and put his great arms about me. "From the power of the dog, from the lion's mouth," he cried brokenly. "And they slew thee not, Ralph, the heathen who took thee away! Yesternight I learned that you lived, but I looked not for you here."

I scarce heard or marked what he was saying, and found no time in which to wonder at his knowledge that I had not perished. I only saw that he was alone, and that in the evening wood there was no sign of other living creature.

"Yea, they slew me not, Jeremy," I said. "I would that they had done so. And you are alone? I am glad that you died not, my friend; yes, faith, I am very glad that one escaped. Tell me about it, and I will sit here upon the bank and listen. Was it done in this wood? A gloomy deathbed, friend, for one so young and fair. She should have died to soft music, in the sunshine, with flowers about her."

With an exclamation he put me from him, but kept his hand upon my arm and his steady eyes upon my face.

"She loved laughter and sunshine and sweet songs," I continued. "She can never know them in this wood. They are outside; they are outside the world, I think. It is sad, is it not? Faith, I think it is the saddest thing I have ever known."

He clapped his other hand upon my shoulder.



“Wake, man!” he commanded. “If thou shouldst go mad now — Wake! thy brain is turning. Hold to thyself. Stand fast, as thou art soldier and Christian! Ralph, she is not dead. She will wear flowers, — thy flowers, — sing, laugh, move through the sunshine of earth for many and many a year, please God! Art listening, Ralph? Canst hear what I am saying?”

“I hear,” I said at last, “but I do not well understand.”

He pushed me back against a pine, and held me there with his hands upon my shoulders. “Listen,” he said, speaking rapidly and keeping his eyes upon mine. “All those days that you were gone, when all the world declared you dead, she believed you living. She saw party after party come back without you, and she believed that you were left behind in the forest. Also she knew that the George waited but for the search to be quite given over, and for my Lord Carnal’s recovery. She had been told that the King’s command might not be defied, that the Governor had no choice but to send her from Virginia. Ralph, I watched her, and I knew that she meant not to go upon that ship. Three nights ago she stole from the Governor’s house, and, passing through the gates that the sleeping warder had left unfastened, went toward the forest. I saw her and followed her, and at the edge of the forest I spoke to her. I stayed her not, I brought her not back, Ralph, because I was convinced that an I did so she would die. I knew of no great danger, and I trusted in the Lord to show me what to do, step by step, and how to guide her gently back when she was weary of wandering, — when, worn out, she was willing to give up the quest for the dead. Art following me, Ralph?”

“Yes,” I answered, and took my hand from my eyes. “I was nigh mad, Jeremy, for my faith was not like hers. I have looked on Death too much of late, and yesterday all men believed that he had come to dwell in the forest and had swept clean his house before him. But you escaped, you both escaped” —

“God’s hand was over us,” he said reverently. “This is the way of it. She had been ill, you know, and of late she had taken no thought of food or sleep. She was so weak, we had to go so slowly, and so winding was our path, who knew not the country, that the evening found us not far upon our way, if way we had. We came to a cabin in a clearing, and they whose home it was gave us shelter for the night. In the morning, when the father and son would go forth to their work we walked with them. When they came to the trees they meant to fell we bade them good-by, and went on alone. We had not gone an hundred paces when, looking back, we saw three Indians start from the dimness of the forest and set upon and slay the man and the boy. That murder done they gave chase to me, who caught up thy wife and ran for both our lives. When I saw that they were light of foot and would overtake me, I set my burden down, and, drawing a sword that I had with me, went back to meet them halfway. Ralph, I slew all three, — may the Lord have mercy on my soul! I knew not what to think of that attack, the peace with the Indians being so profound, and I began to fear for thy wife’s safety. She knew not the woods, and I managed to turn our steps back toward Jamestown without her knowledge that I did so. It was about midday when we saw the gleam of the river through the trees before us, and heard the sound of firing and of a great yell-



ing. I made her crouch within a thicket, while I myself went forward to reconnoitre, and well-nigh stumbled into the midst of an army. Yelling, painted, maddened, brandishing their weapons toward the town, human hair dabbled with blood at the belts of many — in the name of God, Ralph, what is the meaning of it all?"

"It means," I said, "that yesterday they rose against us and slew us by the hundred. The town was warned and is safe. Go on."

"I crept back to madam," he continued, "and hurried her away from that dangerous neighborhood. We found a growth of bushes and hid ourselves within it, and just in time, for from the north came a great band of picked warriors, tall and black and wondrously feathered, fresh to the fray, whatever the fray might be. They joined themselves to the imps upon the river bank, and presently we heard another great din with more firing and more yelling. Well, to make a long story short, we crouched there in the bushes until late afternoon, not knowing what was the matter, and not daring to venture forth to find out. The woman of the cabin at which we had slept had given us a packet of bread and meat, so we were not without food, but the time was long. And then of a sudden the wood around us was filled with the heathen, band after band, coming from the river, stealing like serpents this way and that into the depths of the forest. They saw us not in the thick bushes; maybe it was because of the prayers which I said with might and main. At last the distance swallowed them, the forest seemed clear, no sound, no motion. Long we waited, but with the sunset we stole from the bushes and down an aisle of the forest toward the

river, rounded a little wood of cedar, and came full upon perhaps fifty of the savages" — He paused to draw a great breath and to raise his brows after a fashion that he had.

"Go on, go on!" I cried. "What did you do? You have said that she is alive and safe!"

"She is," he answered, "but no thanks to me, though I did set lustily upon that painted fry. Who led them, d'ye think, Ralph? Who saved us from those bloody hands?"

A light broke in upon me. "I know," I said. "And he brought you here" —

"Ay, he sent away the devils whose color he is, worse luck! He told us that there were Indians, not of his tribe, between us and the town. If we went on we should fall into their hands. But there was a place that was shunned by the Indian as by the white man: we could bide there until the morrow, when we might find the woods clear. He guided us to this dismal wood that was not altogether strange to us. Ay, he told her that you were alive. He said no more than that; all at once, when we were well within the wood and the twilight was about us, he was gone."

He ceased to speak, and stood regarding me with a smile upon his rugged face. I took his hand and raised it to my lips. "I owe you more than I can ever pay," I said. "Where is she, my friend?"

"Not far away," he answered. "We sought the centre of the wood, and because she was so chilled and weary and shaken I did dare to build a fire there. Not a foe has come against us, and we waited but for the dusk of this evening to try to make the town. I came down to the stream just now to find, if I could, how near we were to the river" —



He broke off, made a gesture with his hand toward one of the long aisles of pine trees, and then, with a muttered "God bless you both," left me, and going a little way down the stream, stood with his back to a great tree and his eyes upon the slow, deep water.

She was coming. I watched the slight figure grow out of the dusk between the trees, and the darkness in which I had walked of late fell away. The wood that had been so gloomy was a place of sunlight and song; had red roses sprung up around me I had felt no wonder. She came softly and slowly, with bent head and hanging arms, not knowing that I was near. I went not to meet her, — it was my fancy to have her come to me still, — but when she raised her eyes and saw me I fell upon my knees.

For a moment she stood still, with her hands at her bosom; then, softly and slowly through the dusky wood, she came to me and touched me upon the shoulder. "Art come to take me home?" she asked. "I have wept and prayed and waited long, but now the spring is here and the woods are growing green."

I took her hands and bowed my head upon them. "I believed thee dead," I said. "I thought that thou hadst gone home, indeed, and I was left in the world alone. I can never tell thee how I love thee."

"I need no telling," she answered. "I am glad that I did so forget my womanhood as to come to Virginia on such an errand; glad that they did laugh at and insult me in the meadow at Jamestown, for else thou mightst have given me no thought; very heartily glad that thou didst buy me with thy handful of tobacco. With all my heart I love thee, my knight, my lover, my lord and husband" — Her voice broke, and I felt the trembling of her frame. "I love not

thy tears upon my hands," she murmured. "I have wandered far and am weary. Wilt rise and put thy arm around me and lead me home?"

I stood up, and she came to my arms like a tired bird to its nest. I bent my head, and kissed her upon the brow, the blue-veined eyelids, the perfect lips. "I love thee," I said. "The song is old, but it is sweet. See! I wear thy color, my lady."

The hand that had touched the ribbon upon my arm stole upwards to my lips. "An old song, but a sweet one," she said. "I love thee. I will always love thee. My head may lie upon thy breast, but my heart lies at thy feet."

There was joy in the haunted wood, deep peace, quiet thankfulness, a springtime of the heart, — not riotous like the May, but fair and grave and tender like the young world in the sunshine without the pines. Our lips met again, and then, with my arm around her, we moved to the giant pine beneath which stood the minister. He turned at our approach, and looked at us with a quiet and tender smile, though the water stood in his eyes. "'Heaviness may endure for a night,'" he said, "'but joy cometh in the morning.' I thank God for you both."

"Last summer, in the green meadow, we knelt before you while you blessed us, Jeremy," I answered. "Bless us now again, true friend and man of God."

He laid his hands upon our bowed heads and blessed us, and then we three moved through the dismal wood and beside the sluggish stream down to the great bright river. Ere we reached it the pines had fallen away, the haunted wood was behind us, our steps were set through a fairy world of greening bough and springing bloom. The blue sky laughed



above, the late sunshine barred our path with gold. When we came to the river it lay in silver at our feet, making low music amongst its reeds.

I had bethought me of the boat which I had fastened that morning to the sycamore between us and the town, and now we moved along the river bank until we should come to the tree. Though we walked through an enemy's country we saw no foe. Stillness and peace encompassed us; it was like a beautiful dream from which one fears no wakening.

As we went, I told them, speaking low, for we knew not if we were yet in safety, of the slaughter that had been made and of Diccon. My wife shuddered and wept, and the minister drew long breaths while his hands opened and closed. And then, when she asked me, I told of how I had been trapped to the ruined hut that night and of all that had followed. When I had done she turned within my arm and clung to me with her face hidden. I kissed her and comforted her, and presently we came to the sycamore tree reaching out over the clear water, and to the boat that I had fastened there.

The sunset was nigh at hand, and all the west was pink. The wind had died away, and the river lay like tinted glass between the dark borders of the forest. Above the sky was blue, while in the south rose clouds that were like pillars, tall and golden. The air was soft as silk; there was no sound other than the ripple of the water about our keel and the low dash of the oars. The minister rowed, while I sat idle beside my love. He would have it so, and I made slight demur.

We left the bank behind us and glided into the midstream, for it was as well to be out of arrowshot.

The shadow of the forest was gone; still and bright around us lay the mighty river. When at length the boat head turned to the west, we saw far up the stream the roofs of Jamestown, dark against the rosy sky.

"There is a ship going home," said the minister.

We to whom he spoke looked with him down the river, and saw a tall ship with her prow to the ocean. All her sails were set; the last rays of the sinking sun struck against her poop windows and made of them a half-moon of fire. She went slowly, for the wind was light, but she went surely, away from the new land back to the old, down the stately river to the bay and the wide ocean, and to the burial at sea of one upon her. With her pearly sails and the line of flame color beneath, she looked a dwindling cloud; a little while, and she would be claimed of the distance and the dusk.

"It is the George," I said.

The lady who sat beside me caught her breath. "Ay, sweetheart," I went on. "She carries one for whom she waited. He has gone from out our life forever."

She uttered a low cry and turned to me, trembling, her lips parted, her eyes eloquent. "We will not speak of him," I said. "As if he were dead let his name rest between us. I have another thing to tell thee, dear heart, dear court lady masking as a waiting damsel, dear ward of the King whom his Majesty hath thundered against for so many weary months. Would it grieve thee to go home, after all?"

"Home?" she asked. "To Weyanoke? That would not grieve me."

"Not to Weyanoke, but to England," I said. "The



George is gone, but three days since the *Esperance* came in. When she sails again I think that we must go."

She gazed at me with a whitening face. "And you?" she whispered. "How will you go? In chains?"

I took her clasped hands, parted them, and drew her arms around my neck. "Ay," I answered, "I will go in chains that I care not to have broken. My dear love, I think that the summer lies fair before us. Listen while I tell thee of news that the *Esperance* brought."

While I told of new orders from the Company to the Governor and of my letter from Buckingham, the minister rested upon his oars that he might hear the better. When I had ceased to speak he bent to them again, and his tireless strength sent us swiftly over the glassy water toward the town that was no longer distant. "I am more glad than I can tell you, Ralph and Jocelyn," he said, and the smile with which he spoke made his face beautiful.

The light streaming to us from the ruddy west laid roses in the cheeks of the sometime ward of the King, and the low wind lifted the dark hair from her forehead. Her head was on my breast, her hand in mine; we cared not to speak, we were so happy. On her finger was her wedding ring, the ring that was only a link torn from the gold chain Prince Maurice had given me. When she saw my eyes upon it, she raised her hand and kissed the rude circlet.

The hue of the sunset lingered in cloud and water, and in the pale heavens above the rose and purple shone the evening star. The cloudlike ship at which we had gazed was gone into the distance and the twi-

light; we saw her no more. Broad between its blackening shores stretched the *James*, mirroring the bloom in the west, the silver star, the lights upon the *Esperance* that lay between us and the town. Aboard her the mariners were singing, and their song of the sea floated over the water to us, sweetly and like a love song. We passed the ship unhailed, and glided on to the haven where we would be. The singing behind us died away, but the song in our hearts kept on. All things die not: while the soul lives, love lives: the song may be now gay, now plaintive, but it is deathless.



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