

The Fever, Chapter 11: Anguish

By LON WAGNER, The Virginian-Pilot
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The Armstrongs were at home, packing for their trip to Hampton, when a letter arrived from Richmond.

The fever had come back on Mary and, as the letter was being written, she was throwing up the black vomit. George Armstrong thought that her case sounded fatal, not because of the vomit; in the past month, he had seen people get that and recover.

But most people could not survive a second attack. Mary had a shattered constitution, he knew, and would be too weak to fight the fever off again. His wife, Mehetable, couldn't concede as easily.

"The strong love of a mother's heart made her cling to the idea that, if she could but reach her child, and nurse her with her own hands, as she had through the first attack, she might yet live."

The Armstrongs changed their plans. Mehetable would set out for Richmond early the next morning, and her husband would go with Hatty, Cornelia and Grace to Hampton for a few days.

During the first week of autumn, to the surprise of many, the fever raged with wicked malignancy. On Sept. 22, five doctors died. Portsmouth's former mayor, Heseekiah Stoakes, was down because of fatigue. Since July, Stoakes had hammered together more than 19,000 board feet of coffins.

Norfolk's postmaster died. Benjamin Quick of O'Brien & Quick undertakers died.

Even without newspapers, the worst news residents had heard since Hunter Woodis' death spread fast. William B. Ferguson, president of the Norfolk Howard Association, was gone. The city, the Richmond Dispatch wrote, was "in a perfect stupor."

"His name will be remembered by old and young, rich and poor," the paper wrote. "The little ones, bereaved by the monster, will talk of his deeds of generosity and love and mercy for long years to come."

In remembrance of another downed hero, a Seaboard and Roanoke train ran its route shrouded in black cloth for its late president, Dr. William Collins.

Few were on the streets of either city, except for doctors, their couriers, nurses and ministers. As best anyone could tell, Portsmouth's population was down to 2,200 – 2,000 of whom were either battling the fever or recovering.

Those who were healthy were emotionally wrecked by what they had seen.



As a family would plan to leave town, the fever would strike one or two, the others would stay, then more would fall.

The Dispatch's new correspondent, OATS, wrote that "the doings of death around me ... unfit the mind for the exercise of calm thought, and unnerve the hand that would picture in appropriate language the scenes of woe, suffering and bereavement."

In New York churches that Sunday, hundreds turned out in black dresses.

"The fashionable stores up town," a correspondent wrote, "which deal exclusively in crapes and other 'weeds of woe,' it is said have done a large business the few weeks past."

A few hours after reading the letter about Mary, George Armstrong startled awake about midnight. He heard the wind picking up, felt the atmosphere change.

His nervous system was still frayed, and he couldn't get back to sleep. He worried that the fever was not done with his family.

About 3 a.m., Armstrong heard a door down the hallway open. It came from the room where Cornelia, his 8-year-old, was sleeping with her Aunt Hatty.

Even before rising from bed, Armstrong seemed to know what was coming. Cornelia had all the symptoms of the fever. By 10 a.m., both Cornelia and Hatty were back in bed.

The family changed plans again; Mehetable Armstrong would remain in Norfolk and nurse her daughter and sister, and they would put Mary's fate in God's hands.

George Armstrong had seen the fever drag down so many families like this. As they planned to flee town, it would strike one or two, the others would stay to tend to them, then more would fall.

The fever seized Hatty's mind immediately, and she fell into a stupor. For that Friday and Saturday, Hatty and Cornelia tried to fight through the fever as Mehetable Armstrong tended to them and, wracked with motherly guilt, wondered and worried about Mary.

It was chilly enough that Sunday morning for George Armstrong to light the fireplaces throughout the house. Yet again, winds had blown in from the northeast, the temperature peaked early at 66 then dropped.

On Sabbath days, children normally were seen dressed spryly and walking to church, but today only a few scurried on errands for sick parents, sent to the charity store for supplies.

No churches in either Portsmouth or Norfolk opened for service. Armstrong stayed at home, mired in his own Old Testament nightmare.

With two in the house sick and no one to supervise her, Grace had played all day Saturday, worn herself out and now the fever assailed her again. She and Cornelia were so weak that Armstrong was nearly resolved that they would succumb.

Then came news of Mary. A messenger arrived at the Armstrong house: Mary had died three days earlier.

Within hours, Hatty died.

Armstrong thought it must be the darkest day of his life, his eldest daughter dead, his other two fighting for their lives.

Then, it darkened more.