

## The Fever, Chapter 12: Heartbreak

By LON WAGNER, The Virginian-Pilot  
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Mehetable Armstrong had been her husband's strength throughout the epidemic. When the fever invaded Mary's system the first time, her mother had held her, fed her and encouraged her through it.

The fever continued to take its toll on those who had tempted fate by staying to care for others.

Often, George Armstrong thought, the wife and mother of a family outshined the husband with her fortitude.

Now she was face to face with the fever.

George Armstrong saw that his earlier devotion to the sick bought him respect and goodwill now that he most needed it. Dr. William Freeman, the first volunteer from Philadelphia, and Dr. William Moore, the Armstrongs' family physician, attended to Armstrong's wife and daughters.

"Give and it shall be given unto you," Armstrong thought.

He knew that his wife was ill, but her case did not seem fatal.

As the Armstrong family suffered, the cities showed early signs that they had punched through the worst of the epidemic. David Fiske, Portsmouth's mayor, planned to restart the Transcript at the end of the month.

Even with this optimistic event came a caveat: His only compositor would be his son, Charles, who had survived an attack.

Bob Butt turned up in downtown Portsmouth for the first time in weeks. Butt, a slave, and his crew of 10 gravediggers had buried many of the city's dead, and it was a good omen to see him not at work.

Volunteer physicians met and reported that some were now idle, and based on previous yellow fever outbreaks they expected an abatement of the epidemic in October. They petitioned the mayor to leave on Oct. 1.

Still, the cities were shrouded with images of death and sickness – buildings empty as though people fled from an invading army, the recovered looking frail and battered, ambling the streets.

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Dr. Henry Selden had already buried a child, then he and two other children came down with the fever. The Rev. William Jackson, minister of St. Paul's Episcopal, across the street from Armstrong's church, had spent too much time visiting in the infected district and became ill. The

Rev. William Jones of the African Methodist Church on Bute Street and his daughter died.

Cornelia and Grace seemed to be recovering, but Armstrong had already lost his nephew, a daughter and his sister-in-law, and his wife was in peril. On Monday, one of the physicians caring for Mehetable Armstrong began showing symptoms – Moore left to crawl into his own sick bed.

That evening, Mehetable Armstrong got the black vomit.

**Freeman came by** the next morning.

His next gesture flattered George Armstrong, and perhaps Freeman couldn't have made the offer earlier in the epidemic, but the physician said he would stay in the Armstrong home. They tended to her that Tuesday throughout the night and the next day, and the following night Freeman stayed at the house again.

Armstrong thought that Freeman's dedication would be futile. He had cared for so many of the sick that he had seen the fever assume different forms with different victims.

But never had he seen anyone more than 25 years old survive the black vomit, and Mehetable Armstrong was 31.

On Wednesday morning, George Armstrong brought Cornelia and Grace to their mother's bedside. She gave them mementos of herself and asked them a favor: In the future, when they spoke and thought of her, please don't picture her like this.

The girls left, and Armstrong sat by his wife's bed.

"It will be pleasant to meet again with your mother," he said, "and our dear little ones."

She said nothing for a moment, then agreed.

"A pleasanter prospect than that," she said, "as it now appears to me, is that I shall soon see Jesus and love him as I ought."

During the past six or seven weeks, George Armstrong had felt as though he stood in some nether world, offering little more than a string of "God speed you's" to one after another of his church members, friends and family.

In that time, his definition of a miracle had changed, and now he saw one. His wife was spared the physical suffering of most victims, and he knew that God must be with her.

She died the next morning. Armstrong located a coffin and that evening he again rode to Elmwood Cemetery. He stood and prayed as his wife was lowered into the earth.