

The Fever, Chapter 7: Orphaned

By LON WAGNER, The Virginian-Pilot
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On the first Sunday of September, George Armstrong planned to hold a service, if anyone showed up. But early in the day, he headed out to visit sick parishioners.

His first stop was a Main Street home, where the fever had already killed a widow and two of her children. Her sister had been staying there with the orphaned siblings.

They were all sick the day before when Armstrong had visited. Now, the children had recovered, but Armstrong saw that their aunt was taking her last breaths. “The physical agony of death has passed,” Armstrong knew, “and life is going out like a flickering candle in its socket.”

A third sister had slipped away from her own sick son and daughter to close the woman’s eyes. Armstrong could do only one more thing for her: try to secure a coffin.

He walked on to the next house. This woman had been a strange case, with hardly a fever but with a frayed central nervous system. When he entered the room, she seemed much better. She smiled and reached out an arm. Her voice, he thought, was unearthly, hollow yet sweet.

She spoke of herself as though she was speaking of someone else.

“She expected from the time the fever appeared in Norfolk that she would die of it,” she told Armstrong.

“She had wished to live a few years longer for her husband’s sake,” she added, “but God’s will be done.”

A New Orleans physician treating her said she would be dead by morning. Armstrong prayed, and moved on.

He walked in to his church and looked over those gathered. His was one of the three largest Presbyterian congregations in Virginia, and only 27 had turned out. But of all the city’s churches, only his and one other opened that morning.

The parishioners moved up into the eight front pews, and Armstrong left the pulpit and stood among them. As far as he knew, all who could had turned out. The rest were either far away, sick, with the sick, or dead.

“Though absent from us in body, in spirit they are with us,” Armstrong said, “and their prayer and ours is one – that God would say to this wasting pestilence, ‘It is enough.’”



Now, even the children were left to battle the pestilence themselves.

Of this small number, he wondered who would come to God's house next Sunday.

After church, Armstrong went back into the city to comfort the sick.

At his first stop, five had been down when he had visited the day before. He entered and saw that people were in different rooms now. He approved of the sorting, which kept the frantic wailing and violent thrashing of the sickest from exciting those who were on the mend.

The night before, he was told, one of the sick girls dreamed that a monster was about to seize her. She jumped out of bed, ran downstairs screaming and headed for the front door. One of a nurse's chief tasks, and toughest, was to guard against such outbursts.

Armstrong moved to the next house. Because few houses had a healthy resident to answer the door, no one knocked anymore. He walked in and came face to face with a fierce watch dog. The dog didn't move, didn't growl.

A piercing shout came from upstairs, and Armstrong knew at once why the dog was quiet. In one room, a boy lay dying. In agony, the boy had a ruptured blood vessel, and his pale arm stood out against the blood on his pillow.

Yesterday, Armstrong had had a sensible talk with him, but now the boy babbled and his extremities were cold. The scream had come from his sister, in the next room, being held by her mother. The husband and father was in another room, also down with the fever.

"What can we do for this household?" Armstrong wondered. "I know not, but to assist in having Mr. B removed to the hospital, and to secure a coffin for Eugene. Florence will probably not need hers before morning."

Armstrong saw what had happened to Norfolk. House by house, street by street, the fever had crumbled so many pillars that the city collapsed upon itself. Now even the children were left to battle the pestilence themselves, to try to survive.

The city street inspector had come across three children, with dirty hair and tattered clothes, rolling on the ground on Charlotte Street.

Where is your father? the inspector asked.

"Pa-pa is dead," a child said.

Then where is your mother?

"Ma-ma is dead, too."

Good God, the inspector said, who is taking care of you?

“Mary, the colored woman next door, gives us some bread every day.”

With too few coffins, bodies were being wrapped in rugs, bound together and put in the ground. Reports were that some graves were less than 2 feet deep.

Richmond sent down a steamer stacked with 125 coffins, and the commander of the Navy Yard in Portsmouth put every carpenter to work building more. A letter from the commander’s office warned Norfolk not to expect many.

“We find it difficult to supply the demand on us from Portsmouth and the hospital.”

The Richmond relief committee wrote to say that it had secured Catholic College, and it requested that Norfolk and Portsmouth send their orphans to stay there. The city sent six horses for the physicians, along with 25 bales of hay, 100 bushels of oats and 40 barrels of crackers.

The workers at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia gathered \$2,300, which brought the city’s total to nearly \$10,000, and it was sent down along with 100 ounces of quinine and 50 boxes of lemons.

Baltimore shipped four dozen mattresses and pillows, two dozen cots, 12 boxes of candles, four barrels of shoulder bacon, four bags of coffee, two barrels of sugar, six kegs each of lard and butter, two barrels of porter and two of ale, six dozen kegs of brandy and promised a daily supply of 100 pounds of bread for the hospital .

The Destroyer now had a grip on a quarter of the 5,000 people who were left in Norfolk, including the Catholic priest and the president of the railroad.

One day, the Richmond Dispatch came out with a thin Norfolk report. The pestilence had struck VERDAD’s entire family, and he was at home caring for them.

At a meeting in Hampton, people discussed a plan to remove the entire remaining populace of the infected cities to Old Point Comfort. Others thought a better spot would be Craney Island. The Baltimore relief group donated tents for 4,000 people for the relocation and would send them on a steamer.

Norfolk established martial law in order to confiscate horses for the doctors and considered forcing black women to serve as nurses. Physicians reported 12 daily deaths to the Howard Association, but all order was gone, filing death certificates was not a priority and most thought 40 or 50 a day were dying.

One newspaper reported that about 400 people, many of them blacks, had died because of a lack of care.

G.W. Peete of the Portsmouth relief group wrote to a counterpart in Baltimore: “We are so stricken that we know not what to do, save to suffer, and hope in God.”

Armstrong made one more stop that Sunday. A woman who had recovered sat by her husband

and father. Armstrong saw perspiration beading on the husband's forehead and knew he would soon be dead.

The family, in normal times, spent many hours visiting the church's elderly and sick. Now they sat, alone, waiting to die. He had heard no question more depressing than what the wife asked him:

"All our pleasant things are laid to waste," she said. "Can you get someone to help us lay him out?"

Armstrong shut his eyes and quietly prayed: "Wilt thou refrain thyself from these things, O Lord?"

It wouldn't take many more weeks like this, he thought, to leave the city entirely without people.