

Hannah Dunstan

by Justin Watson, Asheville, NC

CHAPTER 1

The worst day God ever gave me began well enough. The fifteenth of March in the year 1697, a Monday. I woke as dawn came on and I remember hoping spring would not be far away. But a New England winter is an ill-mannered guest--slow to leave no matter that it has worn out its welcome. Through my window, I saw the bare trees shaking in a gusting cold wind, and patches of old snow still upon the ground.

I was in the bedchamber, still laying-in from the birth of my daughter, Martha, on the ninth of March--a day I cannot help but mark in my heart, and will to the day I die. My dear friend and neighbor, Goodwife Mary Neff, was with me. She was nursing me and seeing to the care of the child. Thomas, my husband of twenty years, had long since been up and about his many employments. My eldest daughter was taking care of the household and her six younger brothers and sisters, the youngest but two years of age.

The first sign of the terror to come was the distant sound a man crying out in pain, astonishment, and mortal dread. Close on this were gunshots and inhuman whoops of rejoicing. I did not have to look out a window to know what this meant. *Savages*.

I thrust little Martha, who had been sucking at my breast, into Mary's hands. I bid her make all haste, to save the child. The good woman said not a word. She took my Martha and fled out, holding the child close to her heart.

I was about to shout a warning to the rest of my family, telling them to flee, when I heard approaching hoof beats and then my husband's voice from without, "Come! We must go! Haste!" This was a great comfort to me. He would protect our children for I, in my weakness, could not.

As I listened to the awful cries of my terrified children running from our home, I slowly climbed from my bed. I had just gotten on my feet, when I heard my husband again, "Hannah! Where are you? Answer me!"

"I am here," I said.

"You must come! They are upon us!"

"Go. I will follow. See to the children."

For a long moment, he was silent, deciding. Then he said, "Make haste, Woman! I will come back for you!"

When the swift hoof beats of his horse faded, I was left alone in the strangely silent house wearing only a sleeping gown. Perhaps I should have fled as I was but decided to dress myself. Though my heart was sounding as a drum from urgency, I was weak and moved with an agony of slowness. I had succeeded in getting on my garments and my shoes, though not a cloak, when I heard it. The front door banged against the wall, thrust open by hostile hands. I heard dreadful shouts and sounds of destruction as they rushed in. The enemy was in my house. I would soon be in their hands.

For a terrible moment, what little strength I had drained from me and I fell to my knees. Before I could gather myself and rise, one of them came charging into my bedchamber. I had seen savages before but only from a distance, and only when they were peaceably among us, trading at market, traveling upon a road, or begging a drink outside a tavern. This one was so close his great stench near choked me. The first thing my eyes fixed upon was a large and terrible scar on the side of his face, close to his right eye. Some heavy blow must have fallen there years before. Would that it had killed him then.

Otherwise, his appearance, so singular to my eyes, proved typical of savage men. Rather than trousers, he wore leggings, made of hide, and a breechcloth, a kind of rough cloth apron covering his loins. His shirt was also of cloth and was filthy with dirt and grease. Across his breast was a leather strap, which held a musket upon his back. His face was painted a bright red and his long black hair was tied in a knot atop his head. From his neck hung a silver Romanist cross--bearing the idolatrous image of Jesus Christ crucified.

He towered over me and raised his fearsome hatchet to strike me dead. But he stopped. We looked at one another for a long terrible moment. It was like gazing into the eyes of a wild beast fresh from the kill, hot blood dripping from its fangs. I cannot say what he saw in my eyes. To my surprise, his gaze changed, becoming almost human. He lowered the weapon and, relenting, suffered me to live.

Presently, he shouted some words in his barbarous tongue, and another savage ran into the chamber. This one did not bother to even glance at me but fell to with his companion and together they began to tear apart the room, laughing as they looked for things of value to carry away.

I left them to their thievery and crawled toward the doorway, hoping to escape. This was foolish for I heard several of the heathen in the main chamber, smashing and tearing, and speaking one to another like a pack of distempered dogs, barking and snapping. I would have to pass among them to escape. Foolish, but that is what I hoped to do.

Before I had reached the door, I was clouted on the side of the head. I fell to the floor and, confused and in pain from the blow, I gazed up at the first savage. He pointed at me with one hand and uttered with great force a single word, "Stay."

I was much astonished by this. Not only did this murderous beast know something of English, he spoke to me as though I were a dog fit to be commanded. In that moment, I understood I was chattel to be used, sold, or slaughtered as he saw fit.

This man I shall henceforth call my master. I name him thus for that was the nature of our practical relations for a time, not that his claim over me was in any way rightful.

And I shall call him my master because I do not wish to use his name, which I soon learned. I wish his evil name to be forgotten, to be blotted out of all memory, and never to be used again until God calls him forth at the Final Judgment to answer for his foul deeds, condemning him to eternal torment.

Perhaps you cannot credit such hatred toward this savage. You may say, "He did spare your life."

In truth, I would rather he took my life than what he did.

So I tell you stay. Stay and you will see the cause.

For a time, I did as I was bid and remained on the floor, holding my painful head in my hands. Finally, my master seized me by the arm. He forced me to stand and drove me through the doorway, across the main chamber, and compelled me to sit at the hearth, almost in the ashes. He told me again, "Stay." There he left me and joined his fellow demons in plundering the house.

I sat, downcast with sorrow, unable to watch. As you would expect, my mind was clouded with fear for my dear children and husband. The savages might butcher them or, worse, carry them away as captives. My family was in peril and I could do not a thing to help. I could only weep, cling forlornly to hope, and plead with God for their protection.

Yet this last was difficult. You see, I held in my heart a bitter accusation against God. Foolish and faithless, I wanted to call the Lord of Heaven and Earth before my personal bar of justice and demand how He could permit this disaster to fall upon us. Was this evil a punishment for some great offense, some dark sin? What could we have done to bring such calamity upon our heads? How could a just God be so unjust?

Despair began to take me. Then I recalled the story of Job, an innocent man made to suffer. He too sat in the ashes of sorrow and loss, and said to those who counseled despair, "What? Shall we receive good at the hands of God, and shall we not receive evil?"

So I dried my tears on my sleeve and resolved to imitate Job, to remain steadfast and untroubled in the face of all hardship, to look upon all sorrow with faith in my heart.

This resolution was soon put to the test.

I was found wanting.

Presently, there came the sound of gunshots from outside the house. All the savages stopped and listened intently. Then my master shouted something in their tongue and led two of them, both whooping and brandishing their weapons, out of doors. (By this, I understood that he was a man of some authority among them.) The gunshots gave me much hope. Perhaps my husband and our neighbors were coming to drive away these heathen fiends. But soon the sounds of battle grew faint and distant. I understood. My husband was not coming. *No rescue.*

The savages remaining in the house had taken all wanted and so began to amuse themselves by breaking and tearing asunder what was left. They would look at me, joy upon their hideous red-painted faces, as they made a sport of this, enjoying my pain. So I endeavored to deny them this pleasure, to remain untouched by their cruelty.

At length, my master came back in the house. He shouted, and the others took up their plunder and began to depart. One of them, at my master's behest, seized me roughly by the arm and compelled me toward the door. As we went, I beheld another savage snatch a burning brand from the hearth. He rushed to a pile of splintered furniture and set it afire. They meant to leave my home in ashes, utterly destroyed. Only by recalling Job did I keep myself from falling into despair.

Outside, I beheld sights dreadful beyond imagination. As Scripture says, "Thou has shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment." Indeed, I was astonished.

The houses of my nearest neighbors were already in flames. Immense clouds of smoke, blown this way and that by cold gusts of wind, were rising toward heaven and drifting through the trees and across the fields. Through the smoke, I caught glimpses of one poor man running to and fro and screaming in agony, blood pouring down his face from where the savages had torn away a patch of scalp. All about, the shouting savages drove before them a scattering of my neighbors--chiefly women and children--as a pack of baying wolves might drive frightened sheep. I saw one old man, feeble with years, stumble and fall to the ground. The savage running behind him stopped and began striking with a hatchet, striking until he left the old man utterly still upon the earth. Then the savage ran on, whooping with delight, his hatchet dripping red.

All was confusion, alarms, and screams of terror, but I perceived the method of our enemies. They were driving the captives toward a body of woods where they would flee unseen, or perhaps wait to attack any Christians giving chase.

Despite all I saw, I remained firm in my resolution to show no fear or sorrow. I could do this only because my family was not among the captives I saw. I believed they had escaped.

Then I beheld the most terrible sight of all: Mary Neff clutching my infant Martha to her breast, trying to shield her from the storm of evil raging all about them. A savage pushed at her back with his hatchet to drive her toward my master. He stood a little distance from my house, next to an old apple tree, his thick arms crossed upon his chest. There was a great smile upon his face and a wicked light in his eyes as he surveyed the suffering of so many Christian souls.

I could only stand and watch, held fast by one of the savages, as poor Mary and my dear child drew closer. When Mary was but a step away, my master struck her aside the head and then began to rip the helpless infant from her arms. She turned this way and that, crying out in her distress and tried to keep hold of Martha. His strength was too great and soon he had my precious baby. I was frozen in place with dread and terror.

For a moment, my master looked upon the face of my child, only six days in this world. She began to wail, frightened, perhaps knowing in her heart the evil that held her in its power. My master frowned, looking displeased, and, after stripping away the cloth in which she was wrapped, grasped the child by one tiny leg.

Then he swung the wailing innocent at the length of his long arm until her head struck the trunk of the nearby tree.

The world went silent as her head burst open, pouring red.

He dropped her limp body into the dirt.

So now you see the cause, the root of my hatred.

I cannot remember clearly what happened then. I can only bring forth images as in paintings upon a wall. There is her blood, bright in the sun, upon the tree. There is my house, flames and smoke in every window, the roof ablaze. There is also Martha's torn and crumpled form almost at my feet. I see my hand reaching out to her.

Then I am upon the ground looking up at a savage reaching forth to seize me, to make me stand again. Behind him and above us both was the sky, its pure blue tainted by floating ash and smoke, and the barren branches of that tree of sorrow.

Through all, there is the memory of sound pouring forth through my throat, a wordless cry like that of a beast in pain.

Mary told me later I shouted and turned and jumped. I struggled forward, dragging the savage who held me toward my murdered baby until, at last, he struck me to the ground. Mary told me I was as near to madness as she had ever seen anyone become. Excepting those that remained mad.

Years before on the Newbury road, I once saw a madman. Everyone knew about him. He lived like an animal in the woods thereabouts--thus evading capture and help. He wore filthy rags and raved, shouting nonsense to persons or beings visible to him alone. I shuddered gazing upon him, and I pondered in my heart how it was the demons of madness had so entered and possessed him. It was through the power of his sin, I knew. Yet we are all under sin. As scripture says, "There is none righteous, no, not one." But how had this man's sin become so consuming? I pondered these things for a time and then left them in God's hands as beyond my understanding.

That morning, the fifteenth day of March in 1697, I understood, or began to. Perhaps that poor man had been struck such a blow, had lost so much so quickly, a crack opened in him--much as the flawed metal of a kettle will crack if struck just so. I was dealt such a blow that day and it is only by the grace of God that I did not break open and descend into darkness, into madness forever.

God preserved me, as you will see, for other work.

At length, I came to myself. I was walking. My hands were tightly bound by a cord of leather. Mary Neff was a few steps in front of me, her clothing soiled with dirt and ashes and blood. She was walking with an urgency I matched step for step. It was strange to come to myself that way, as if waking from a dream, walking forward rather than laying abed.

Yet in truth, I was not waking but entering a dream, a dark dream full of terrors.

On either side of us were two savages. Both were brandishing their hatchets and shouting commands at us in their strange tongue. I could not understand the words yet what they wanted was clear. *Make haste.*

I looked about me then. We were passing the first few scattered trees on the edge of the wood, going into the tangled forest, down a path to unknown perils. And the milk, which my murdered child had so lately been drawing from me, still seeped forth from my breast.