

The Turning Point

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By September of 1864, the South was visibly beaten, but it would not lie down because its spirit had not yet been crushed. There had been so many casualties that not one single Confederate regiment had enough men to make a full company to send into battle. Now, all the remaining old men and boys who had not yet gone went up to Virginia to fight with Lee.

Elizabeth's father, John Grenville, had not gone to war as long as he had been needed to run the barges up and down the river, but the time came when there was nothing left to transport. No supplies, no troops, no more machines of war remained. Each and every resource was now being used on the front in Virginia. On the plantation, only four slaves remained out of the one hundred thirty he had owned at the beginning of the war—Toby, his woman, Nellie, and two women field workers. There was nothing to plant or to harvest except for the few greens and

sweet potatoes in the kitchen garden. There was nothing to keep him at Mockingbird Hill any longer. John knew that he must go to Lee in Virginia. There, he might be able to do some good. As he readied himself to join General Lee, he arranged for Elizabeth to go to her husband's family home in Charleston. There with the two Perry sisters, she could await the birth of the child and remain until the war ended and he returned, if he was lucky enough to come home. Toby would be left in charge of the plantation.

Margaret went to Mockingbird Hill to help Elizabeth pack and to set everything right at the plantation before Elizabeth left.

As they were in Elizabeth's dressing room filling the trunks, Elizabeth pleaded once more: "Margaret won't you reconsider and come with me? You won't be safe here."

"I can't, Elizabeth. I can't leave Ma. She needs me."

"Won't they take care of her at Tally's Nook? Surely Mrs. Tally will care for her?"

"We sometimes care for Mrs. Tally now. You know she's blind—well, almost anyway. And for some reason, Ma and Mrs. Tally get along. Most all the blacks are gone. Aunt Leah's the only one left in the house, and she can't do anything. Keeps saying she's a cook and don't know how to do anything outside."

"Doesn't know," corrected Elizabeth.

"Doesn't know," Margaret repeated. "Uncle Ned and Young Ned do all the outside work. They got

lots to look after.” She looked up at Elizabeth with a smile. “Besides, you know how Ma is. She’s old and getting crankier, but she depends on me. I’d best stay here.”

“Well, I’ll give you the address in Charleston where I will be staying. If you need me, just post the letter with Mrs. Mills at the post office in Maclin. She’ll make sure I get it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t say ‘ma’am’ to me. You’ve become like my own sister,” she said gently. Then, in a stronger tone, she admonished, “You continue with your reading, and write in the diary every chance you can. Write everything that happens!” Then she cautioned, “Don’t forget to practice proper grammar and sentence structure. And don’t let yourself slip in diction either!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep up with it all, even though now I’m reading the same books over and over,” she laughed.

“I know ... it’s this war. Won’t it ever end!” Elizabeth sighed. “Til it’s over, there won’t be new ones.”

Everything was packed and loaded on the rear of the buggy. It was time to say farewell. Margaret stood in the yard and shivered in the early autumn air. She watched with tears in her eyes, as John helped his daughter up into the buggy. Elizabeth waved her handkerchief as Toby climbed up to the driver’s seat. The two women were still waving when the buggy, pulled by the lone horse remaining on the plantation, drove

out of sight.

Margaret continued through her long and exhausting days of going to the woods for game, doing the work of a man, and trying to care for both herself and her mother. She was lonely. There was no one to talk with, no one to read with, no one to feel civilized with. The only things that meant much to her was her diary and the books Elizabeth had left with her to read. In the past, since Elizabeth had given it to her, she had written in the diary many times, but not every day as Elizabeth had suggested. Now, she turned to it as a dear companion. Sylvie still would not allow idle reading in the cabin, so Margaret would take the books with her when she went into the woods. There, she had a favorite tree by a grassy clearing down by the river. She would prop up her shotgun and lay down her sack of birds or squirrels. In the clearing, she could take time for herself and simply read ... so, that fateful day in October arrived. She did not hear or see Thad Ball follow her into the woods. She did not see him drop to his knees behind a cypress stump to watch her take her book out of her coat pocket and lie down on her belly to read. She was so engrossed in the pages that she did not know he was there until he was standing over her, looking down with a drawn, ugly face.

Before she could get up, he was on her. Strad-

dling her back, he pinned her to the ground and grabbed her wrists in his big rough hands. She struggled, trying to dig her toes into the soft ground, but her shoes kept slipping on the wet grass. She tried to turn over so she could get her knee into his groin, but she could not. Screaming at him, she kicked her heels into his back, uselessly. He knew nothing but the rush of wild passion as he felt her helplessness. He was silent. Shifting position, he slammed his knee in the middle of her back, shutting off her breath in mid scream. He let go her wrists, took her shoulders and flipped her over on her back. Then, with all the force he could muster, he hit her across her face with the back of his hand. His palm came down again. The second blow left her dazed—her eyes blurred and her body limp. He grabbed both her wrists with one hand and placed them above her head, then—with his free hand—he reached under her skirt and ripped at her underclothes. He ripped the waist loose and pulled it down to her knees, then all the way off. She tried to move, to fight him, but her body would not obey her. She tried to scream, but no sound came. She felt the cold air on her bottom as her dress was flipped up over her face. She fought to sit up, to get her arms free, but he hit her again with his fist ... and then there was darkness.

When he finished with her, he got up and stumbled off into the woods, leaving her lying on the soft damp ground—bruised, battered,

bleeding and practically senseless. She tried to move, but pain shot through her body, so she lay still with the foul odor of his filthy body still all around her.

Minutes that seemed like hours passed as she lay there fighting nausea. She struggled to her hands and knees, vomited and then fell over. She lay still again until her senses slowly came back and her breathing become normal. She shut her eyes in shame, recalling in anger the horror of what he had done to her ... recalling it again and again. Remembering her shotgun, she pushed her hair away from her face. With relief, she saw that it was where she had left it—propped up against the tree. There was only one thing she wanted to do with that shotgun. Hunt him down and kill him, but she knew that she could not. She must hide what had happened to her. No one must ever know. Not her mother—because she would surely marry her off to the monster. Not Miss Elizabeth, nor Mrs. Dellinger—because if they knew that she had been touched by that vile creature, she would never be given a teaching position. She would never be a wife to a decent man.

Margaret limped to the water's edge and splashed river water over her face. Ripples in the water distorted her face and her disheveled hair. She stared at her moving reflection and wretched again. All she could think about was her mother's reaction, if she ever found out. Sylvie would never cease to blame her, just as she

blamed herself. She would say it had been Margaret's fault. And her mother would be right. She should never have been so relaxed under the circumstances. If not Thad, it might have been a deserter, or even a Yankee. **It was her fault. It was her fault.** The thought kept going around in her head as she stood up and began to straighten her clothes. She must go home and into the house as though nothing serious had happened to her. Never again would she put her gun down.

She could hardly walk. Her body ached, her head seemed ready to burst and her belly flamed with pain, but when she got close to the cabin she did her best to walk straight, showing nothing amiss. Sylvie was sweeping the yard and hardly looked up as her daughter approached.

"You late comin' in," her mother observed, continuing with the chore.

"Yes, ma'am." Her voice was shaky enough that Sylvie looked sharply at her.

Seeing the muddy dress and boots and the general disarray of her daughter she asked, "What happened to you? Fall in the river?"

"Almost," replied Margaret, thinking quickly. "Got my foot caught on a root, dropped the bag of birds in the river and tried to grab it. Got all wet and muddy trying."

"Did ya git 'em?"

"No, ma'am. They fell too far out. Didn't bring nothing home. I'm sorry. I'll go out again tomorrow and for sure I'll bring something back."

“Well, they’ll only be biscuits and ‘lasses for supper tonight and breakfast tomorrey. I wuz looking forard to a mess of quail tonight with gravy for the biscuits.”

“I’m sorry, Ma.” She was sorry indeed, but not for her failure to bring home supper. She was sorry that she could not even tell her mother what happened to her. It was bad enough for it to have happened. To have no one in whom she could confide and find solace was more than anyone should have to bear. Later, she took out her diary—feeling that just telling something, if not someone, would help. And so she wrote about what had happened to her. Her face flamed as she wrote the descriptive words, her eyes burned as she wrote the name Thad Ball. She wrote that no one must know—not ever, but she still did not cry.

Sometimes promises have to be broken—even those made to one’s self. Three and a half weeks from the day of the rape, Margaret became aware that she had passed her monthly time and nothing had happened. She had hoped that she could forget the incident and put it behind her, but now she could not. Sylvie also noticed that her daughter was late.

“You late,” she stated matter of factly one evening as she sat in front of the fireplace, mending her stocking. Margaret was putting away the supper plates. When she heard her mother’s statement, she knew exactly to what she was referring.

“Yes, ma’am,” she quickly admitted. Then added, “But my back is feeling poorly and I think it’s coming.”

“Why?” her mother asked.

“Don’t know, exactly. Maybe ‘cause Miss Elizabeth left. I’m missing her something awful,” was her lame explanation.

“Ain’t never heard of no reason like that one. You been doin’ somethin’ you shouldn’t oughta, girl?”

“No, ma’am! I ain’t!” Then under her breath she corrected herself. “I haven’t.”

“Ain’t come by tomorrey, you gits a dose of castor oil. That’ll bring it on.”

The next morning before daybreak, Margaret made a show of getting out of bed, stripping the sheet and placing it with her nightgown in a tub of water. She vigorously washed and rinsed the

sheet and garment, and hung them on the line. When Sylvie awoke Margaret informed her, “It came this morning. I had to get up and take care of things.”

Margaret kept pretending that her period had come, used the cloths, washed them, and hung them on the line as she did every month. During the next few days, she did not throw up, but noticed that she could no longer bear the odor of the chicory that they used in place of coffee. The taste of the beans they had put up from summer harvest began to leave her mouth tasting of acid. She might be able to fool her mother for a few weeks, but not much longer. Margaret knew. She wrote about it in her diary, which she had hidden behind a board in her wall. At first, the thought that she might be with child by that monster made her angry. It could not be! But as the time passed and certain things occurred, Margaret knew the horrible truth.

Margaret needed Elizabeth now. She was frightened and knew that no one else could help her. No one else would know what to do. Only Elizabeth would believe that Thad had taken her against her will. Most of their neighbors would not believe that he had forced her. Everyone would simply consider that she had done as all white trash do. Also, she could not bear for Elizabeth and John—her new friends—to imagine that horrid man so close to her. It must be faced. Elizabeth would have to be told, but she would not tell who had violated her. She would

tell Elizabeth that a Yankee deserter had come on her in the woods. Now, she must have a husband, or she would be ruined for life—but it would never, ever be Thad Ball. Suddenly, she thought of him as a mad dog. He was violent, sick, cowardly, skulking and without regard for decent human feelings. He had stalked her, caught her, and violated her, thinking to make her his own.

“Never,” she thought, “never will I be so careless again!” She tore a page from the back of the diary, got her pen and ink pot from the top drawer of her clothes chest and sat down to compose a letter. It had to go to Elizabeth by the very next post. She wrote:

“My dear Miss Elizabeth,

I know you are in Charleston till after the baby comes, but please tell me if you can come back for a little while. Something very bad has happened to me and you are the only one who can tell me what to do. I am very desperate. It is important. Please let me know soon if you can come home. I can't tell you in the letter. I have to see you. Please.

Margaret O'Donnell

Fally's Nook

November 30, 1864

She folded the paper, melted the sealing wax with her candle, sealed and addressed the letter to Elizabeth at the address where she could be reached in Charleston. Early the next morning,

she walked the two miles to the village to deliver the letter to the post office.

Mrs. Wills was now acting as postperson while her husband was away fighting. Mr. Wills had been one of the few who had not yet been killed in battle. Each time a new list of “Killed in Action or Missing in Action, or Taken Prisoner” notice came, Mrs. Wills waited for someone else to come by the general store and post office to read the names for her. She would not look until she was assured that her Mr. Wills was not on it.

When Margaret opened the door, she saw Mrs. Wills standing on a ladder cleaning an empty shelf. Hearing the door squeak, Mrs. Wills turned to see which of her neighbors had entered. She was ready for a rest and a bit of a gossip. She was both surprised and disappointed to see that it was only Margaret O'Donnell, who, she thought, had begun to act too uppity for her station.

“I have a letter to go down to Charleston. Will it go out today?” Margaret asked Mrs. Wills, walking toward her proffering her letter. Mrs. Wills took it and read the addressee.

“Oh, I see it's a note to Miss Elizabeth,” she said, turning the note over in her hand inquisitively. Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she continued, “Hope she's well down there in Charleston. Good thing, too, with her baby coming and all. Yep, this should go out before evening. Now, in Charleston they take the mail right up to her house, so she'll likely get it to-

morrow. That soon enough for you?”

“Yes, ma’am, Mrs. Wills. That’s soon enough, ma’am,” replied Margaret. She gave a little curtsy as she had been taught by Miss Elizabeth. Turning quietly, she left the store and began the long walk home, with Mrs. Wills staring contemptuously after her.

“Puttin’ on airs,” Mrs. Wills said to no one in particular. “Puttin’ on airs. Just white trash, puttin’ on airs.”

Ellen Perry Radley and Alice Perry Beton were still called The Perry Sisters. They lived in the Perry family townhouse in Charleston just off Tradd Steet. They had never lived anywhere else, although they had both been married. War was declared one day and on the next morning they stood together with their young men in the chapel at St. Philips and were married in a joint ceremony. Cadet Beton and Cadet Radley, both upperclassmen at The Citadel, were more interested in the war and fighting the Yankees than in romance and the begetting of sons. They enlisted directly after the wedding ceremony and went directly to their regiment. The young wives returned to their house off Tradd Street. On their wedding night, they slept in the same bed while they held and comforted each other as they cried themselves to sleep. Within weeks they received news of the death of Lt. Beton, killed at Haws Shop. On the following Wednesday, Lt. Radley was killed at the battle of Cold

Harbor. The Perry sisters— Alice, aged sixteen, and Ellen, aged seventeen— donned widows' black. They were still virgins.

When the sisters heard that Elizabeth was expecting a child, they had been filled with joy, wanting nothing more than for Elizabeth to come and live with them so that the child would be born in the Perry home. After several letters of invitation, Elizabeth had written to accept, believing that her father was going off to war also.

It had been a special reunion of the three young women when Elizabeth arrived in Charleston. Ellen and Alice were excited to see their sister-in-law and had taken turns sitting beside the front room window watching for the buggy all afternoon. Finally it came into view.

Ellen called out to Alice: "It's here! I see the buggy. It has to be her."

"You certain?" Alice ran breathlessly to the window and pulled the other side of the curtain away to look. "Oh, Ellen, I do believe it is her. Let's go out." She ran to the door and threw it open, just as the buggy stopped in front of the half-circle stair steps. With Alice directly behind her, she ran to the buggy door and opened it.

"Alice!" greeted Elizabeth as Alice reached in to help her sister-in-law climb down.

"You're so big!" she said with youthful vigor, to the consternation of her elder sister.

"Alice! Your manners! You shouldn't say such things to Elizabeth!" she reprimanded.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, Ellen," said Elizabeth.

“I’m just so happy to be here and out of that cramped buggy seat that Alice could call me anything.” Turning to Toby, she instructed, “Toby, tie the horse up to the hitching post and come inside for supper before you go back. I wanted you to stay to rest overnight, but Father said you must return immediately. I don’t know why, but there you have it.”

“Yas’um, Mizz Elizabeth. Just ‘low me to tie on de nose bag full o’grain fo de hoss. You go on in. I’ll come up to de kitchen direcly.”

“Oh, yes, Elizabeth,” said Alice tugging at her hand. “Come on up into the parlor. Ellen, call for Matthew to come down and help Toby get the trunks,” she ordered. Matthew was their house slave.

Later that evening, after Toby had been fed and sent on his way, the trunk was placed in the room and supper was finished. The three women then sat together and talked.

“Ellen,” asked Elizabeth, “why are you both still wearing black? It’s been a long time. No one would expect you still to wear widow’s weeds.”

“Alice and I decided to wear black until the war is over,” the elder sister explained. “It just seemed the right thing to do. With all the men gone, there’s nothing to dress up for—no one to try to be pretty for. There’s just sadness everywhere we turn.”

“Yes,” chimed in Alice, “we almost changed our minds once, but then Andy got killed and we just kept on wearing it ... but you know,” she

added excitedly, “I might just go back to colors when the babe comes. That would be all right, wouldn’t it, Ellen?”

“Yes, I think be all right ... and so will I!” Hugging her sister-in-law carefully, she said, “You don’t know what this means to us, your coming and having the baby here. He’ll be a Perry! It will be so good to have a new Perry in the house. It will make it seem like life can go on after all. He will give us something to look forward to.”

“I can’t wait to hold him,” gushed Alice.

“You know it will be a ‘him’?” laughed Elizabeth.

“Oh, yes! I just know it,” Alice laughed as she danced around the room. Then, city girl that she was, she asked, “Now tell us, Elizabeth, what do you do up there in the swamps to keep busy.”

Thus, throughout the following weeks, the three young widows kept each other company and waited for the birth of the child until the afternoon that Margaret’s letter arrived. They were having a special tea that had been brought to Charleston by blockade runners when the postman dropped the letter through the slot. Alice ran to get it.

“It’s for you, Elizabeth. From Maclin. Maybe it’s from your Father?” she asked as she handed the folded note to Elizabeth.

“Maybe,” answered Elizabeth. “Let’s see.” She took the letter, read the address and turned it over. “No, this is not from Father. I know this handwriting. It is from my young friend, Marga-

ret.”

“Margaret who?” queried Ellen.

“Margaret O’Donnell,” answered Elizabeth

“O’Donnell? We don’t know any O’Donnells. Where did you meet a family of O’Donnells?” asked Ellen.

Elizabeth smiled and explained, “She is sort of a young protégé. She reads to me ... and she reads beautifully.”

“What about her parents?” asked Ellen again.

“No, only Margaret reads to me. She goes to the poor school in Maclin and her teacher pointed her out to me as being worthwhile to work with.”

“Oh, Elizabeth, you were ever the soft-hearted one. But you must be careful of choosing friends,” admonished the younger woman. “You know you have to have friends from your class. Just make sure you keep her in her place!”

Not wanting to argue with the girls, knowing they would never understand—having been reared in Charleston society—she said nothing more.

“What’s in the letter?” asked inquisitive Alice. “Read it out loud. We haven’t had a letter in a long while.”

“All right,” agreed Elizabeth, as she opened the note, smoothed it out and began to read Margaret’s impassioned plea for her to return to Mockingbird Hill.

“But, you can’t! You just came,” Alice cried out.

“Something is dreadfully wrong for her to summon me home now,” Elizabeth said.

“But nothing can be that bad! You can’t travel now! You’re seven months along,” pleaded Alice, running to place her arms around Elizabeth’s shoulders.

“I know Margaret,” she explained. “She wouldn’t ask this of me unless it were absolutely necessary. I fear I will have to go.”

“But the roads, they’re so dangerous now. There are Yankee’s, deserters and all sorts of bad men out there. We hear about it!” Ellen tried her best to dissuade Elizabeth from taking this journey.

“I’ll send a note tomorrow that I will be there within seven days. I must.”

“But ...” continued Alice, and Elizabeth interrupted.

“I know. I know what you’re thinking ... and I know the dangers ... but it might be Father ... something might have happened to him.”

“She would have said, wouldn’t she?” Ellen demanded to know. “She would have said!”

“Maybe. Maybe not. All I know is that I will have to return to see. But don’t worry. I’ll come back. Just as soon as I take care of whatever it is, I will come back. I promise.”

The promise mollified the sisters somewhat. They were not happy to see Elizabeth plan to return, but insisted that Mathew drive her to Maclin in their coach.

For Margaret, waiting for Elizabeth’s return

was torture. It seemed that ages had passed before Margaret went to the post office again and asked Mrs. Wills if a letter had come for her. She didn't really expect an answer so soon, but was hopeful.

"Nothin' yet, girl. Might be tomorrow. Today is only Monday and she ain't hardly had time to get a letter to the post office yet. You in a mighty hurry, ain't you?" pried Mrs. Wills. "Must be somethin' real important."

Margaret replied, "Yes, ma'am, kind of," and walked away.

Margaret came again on Tuesday, her heart pounding and her palms sweaty, She asked her question again, "Morning, Mrs. Wills. Did a letter come for me yet?"

"Why, yes, Margaret. One did come from Mrs. Perry," she purred, hoping to find out what was in the message. Reaching to the shelf for the letter, she continued. "Mrs. Perry doin' all right? Must be somethin' mighty important—all this mail goin' back and forth."

Margaret answered as politely as she could, "Yes, Ma'am, I think she's doing all right. I must hurry home now. Please, can I have my letter?"

Mrs. Wills reluctantly handed over the mail and watched Margaret turn and walk out of sight before she moved. "Somethin's going on ... for sure," she mused.

Once out of sight of the store and after checking to see that no one was watching, Margaret opened the letter, pulled out the thin elegant

stationery and read:

"Dearest Margaret,

I will be home within 7 days. I had planned to stay here until the child comes, but that is two months off and if you need me as much as you say, I will come. Then mayhap, you can return with me to Charleston for Christmas. Would you like that? Whatever is the problem, I am sure we will be able to find a solution. The journey is not far and I am in good condition.

Your friend,

Elizabeth Perry

Charleston, Sunday Afternoon

December 4, 1864

"The tenth," Margaret thought, placing her hands on her still small belly. "By then I will be almost two months along ... seven weeks, anyway." She was becoming more and more afraid that Sylvie would notice. They lived closely together in their little cabin, and Sylvie's eyes were always prying, waiting to see if something like this would happen. She could wait the seven days, but no longer. Then she would have to go to Charleston. Remembering that the postman came back by the general store after he had his dinner at the boarding house, she ran back to Mrs. Mills and asked if she could write a note quickly and have the postman take it back with him.

Her curiosity totally piqued, Mrs. Mills fetched

Margaret a scrap of paper and an old quill pen with a pot of ink. Trying to peek over her shoulder, she only saw Margaret bend low over the paper to write. She could not see the words:

Dear Miss Elizabeth,

I will wait till you come, but I have to tell you that my emergency is great. Something that should not happen to a girl has happened to me, and I cannot tell a soul except to you. You are the only one who can tell me what to do. I fear I am ruined. I know I should not write about this in my little book but it is the only thing I can do till you come.

Margaret,

December 6, 1864

Margaret quickly folded the paper and asked for sealing wax.

“Don’t trust me, huh? That it? Think I’d read your little old letter?” Mrs. Mills said under her breath as she fetched the sealing wax, lit the candle and watched Margaret as she poured hot wax on the fold.

Handing the letter to Mrs. Mills, Margaret asked, “Can I bring money for the stamp tomorrow? I didn’t bring any money today. I promise I’ll bring it in the morning.”

Mrs. Wills pursed her lips disapprovingly and thought to refuse, but her generally bad nature was tempered with an overwhelming curiosity as to what was going on, so she relented. “All right, but I’ll see you here with the postage money first thing or I’ll speak with your Ma!”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Margaret assured her. “I’ll be here.”

As soon as she got home, Sylvie began to whine.

“Ain’t got much to eat left,” she complained, scraping the end of her snuff stick in the bottom of the tin. “This the last of my bacca. Ain’t much to eat,” she repeated.

“We got cornmeal and some flour left. There’s lard and grits,” said Margaret.

“No more fatback, hocks is gone ... and here’s the last of the chicory.” Sylvie shook the almost empty sack.

Margaret thought to herself, “Ma’s right. Food is scarce and supplies are dwindling. There isn’t much left for us to eat.”

“Them two scraggly hens is barely able to give one egg each a week. Seems like they could find ‘nough to eat scratching around like they do,” Sylvie continued to complain. “Ain’t had no rabbits or squirrels for days. When you gonna go huntin’?”

“I’ll make cornbread tonight, Ma, and tomorrow I’ll go out. I’ll bring in something.”

Margaret knew that she had to go searching for game, but now found that she was afraid of going into the woods alone. He had done that to her, also. Once totally confident and unafraid, enjoying being in the woods alone, now she found herself looking over her shoulder in fear of being hurt again. She would have to go past the Ball place to either set her snares or to fish. She

knew that the following ten days would be the longest through which she had ever lived.

Early the next morning, she picked up the old shotgun, got her knapsack and slung it over her shoulder. She pulled one of her father's old hats down over her ears and left the house. Keeping her gun ready and scanning the woods on both sides of the road, she walked in the direction of the river. As she came near the mill and stopped to listen, she heard no noise of chopping or sawing. She could see neither Thad nor his father out working. Still, as she warily passed by and continued down the road toward the river, she looked back over her shoulder at every sound. At the clearing, rain had washed away all signs of the struggle, but Margaret shivered nevertheless.

She walked down the path that went along the riverbank, by each place where she had placed her snares and checked them. They were all empty and had to be baited again and set up. Edgy and nervous, she looked over her shoulder at every tiny noise and kept her shotgun in the crook of her arm while she followed the path. If followed far enough, this river path led to Mockingbird Hill. Knowing that, she felt safer and began to count the days before her friend would return.

She finished her work, returned to the clearing, and found her fishing pole still propped up in the branches of a young pine where she had

left it. She dug for worms in the soft, wet earth and baited her hook with several of the wet squirming creatures, then dropped the others in the old rusty can she kept by her tree. She sat down on the bank close to the edge of the water. Slinging out her line, she let the current take it downstream as the cork bobbed gently on the surface of the water. Enjoyment of the quiet and solitude of this place had always soothed her troubled soul ... and it did so again as she sat watching the sunshine glistening off the ripples in the water. The soft calls of the whippoorwills and the multitude of songs from the mockingbirds kept her company. Here, she was away from the troubles of her home. Before, she had always felt safe, but no more. Now that she knew better, she kept her shotgun close by her side. When the better part of two hours had passed, she had caught a mess of bream—enough for two days. She would cook these fish over an open fire, saving the small bit of lard remaining for making bread. There would be enough for her mother and herself for today and tomorrow.

The day that Elizabeth was to arrive, Margaret awoke early. She gathered her knapsack and shotgun, then dressed warmly against the December chill and left the cabin without disturbing Sylvie. Her plan was to check her traps, catch enough fish to last two or three days, then return home and wait for Toby to come from Mockingbird Hill telling her that her friend had

arrived. Finished by late morning, she tried to calm herself while waiting. Afternoon had come before a wagon was finally heard approaching. Rushing to the front door, she saw Toby mounted on the seat of the old buggy, pulled by a mule, slowly coming into the yard. She opened the door and stepped out into the bright cold sunshine, hugging her arms to ward off the chill.

“Howdy, Miss Margret. How’s you t’day?” drawled Toby. He pulled on the old mule’s reins to bring him to a stop, which the animal seemed all too willing to do.

“I’m fine, Toby. Miss Elizabeth arrive yet?”

“Yasum, she here. Dat’s what I’s s’pose to tell you. Miss Lizbeth’s here. And she say I’m s’posed to fetch you over to de house soon’s I can. So, you betta hop on up heah, and we’uns’ll go. Take a while cause dis ole mule, he done seed his young years and he can’t go too fast.”

“All right, Toby. Let me get my shawl and tell Ma. I’ll be right back.” She closed the door, grabbed her wrap off the wooden peg by the door and went to look for her mother. Sylvie was in the back yard, in the now frostbitten garden, digging in the dirt, looking for old carrots and turnips that may have been missed last week when she had done this same thing. Under her poke bonnet, the old face was wrinkled and pinched. Dark saliva dribbled down her chin from the snuff stick stuck in the corner of her mouth.

“Ma,” Margaret called, “Miss Elizabeth’s back

and she sent Toby to fetch me. It's early, so I suppose I'll be back before too late. If what she needs me for takes a long time, I'll stay overnight and come back tomorrow. There's fish in the cupboard left from this morning and there's enough cornbread left 'til tomorrow. By then, I'll be back."

With that, waiting for no answer or response from Sylvie, she turned and walked around the cabin to the waiting wagon and Toby. She climbed in alone, because Toby knew he was not allowed to touch her. He did manage to hold the old wagon steady while she climbed aboard, even though the mule—knowing that he was now going home—was showing signs of a vigor that he had not shown going away from home.

"He know he goin' home now, Miss Margret," Toby chuckled. "Giddyup, ole mule. Le's go home."

They rode in silence. Usually Margaret would have asked after Nellie, Toby's woman, but today she was deep in thought. Toby seemed to sense her troubled mind and—with the wisdom of the old—respected her wish for silence. She was wondering how she would find Miss Elizabeth, how she would tell her what had happened, how Elizabeth would respond, and what they could do about her terrible situation. She wrestled with guilt at having to recall her friend from Charleston. At the same time, she knew that there had been nothing else that she could have done. She also felt guilty because she was afraid

she would not—could not—tell Elizabeth the whole truth. If she did tell her the true name of the one who violated her, what would be her reaction? Would she really believe her or would she feel disgust? How could she help Margaret to find a willing husband if she knew that Margaret carried a child of that creature, Thad Ball? It would be best for Elizabeth to think that by a Yankee deserter had violated her. Telling her the truth was a risk she could not take.

Shadows were lengthening as the wagon pulled up to the front entrance of the house at Mockingbird Hill. Toby didn't have to pull on the reins to stop the tired old mule when he drove the wagon up to the front steps. The old mule stood still, his head low and long ears turned back to hear any command that Toby might make. Dropping the reins, Toby jumped down from the driver's seat and waited as Margaret climbed down from the back of the wagon. She thanked Toby for fetching her and looked up to see John Grenville standing at the top of the steps. She was surprised to see him, for she thought that he would have been away in Virginia still. As she walked toward the steps, her eyes met his. She thought that she saw a brief smile flicker about his mouth and a new sparkle enter his eyes. Margaret considered that he was still a very handsome man, even if he was so old. He started down the steps and greeted her.

"Afternoon, Margaret. It's good to see you. We've missed you here." He reached out his

hand to help her up the steps. “You should have come to visit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Grenville, but Miss Elizabeth was away, and I thought you were in Virginia with General Lee.”

John allowed her to lead them into the front hall. “I didn’t go at all. Received a telegram from General Lee’s headquarters telling me that I was too old.” John chuckled, laughing at himself. “Seems they can’t use me. Elizabeth is resting in the parlor. There’s a nice fire there. Hurry on in and say hello to her, then warm your hands. I have evening chores to which I must attend, so I will see you both at supper.” Shooing Margaret in toward the parlor, he gave her a warm smile. Much to her surprise, he said, “To have both of you back at the same time is very good. I missed you both. The house has been dead since Elizabeth went to Charleston and you stopped coming. Go on in now. She’s waiting for you.” He turned and left.

Margaret stared after him for a brief moment before turning into the parlor. This was the warmest welcome she had ever received from John Grenville, but she did not believe for a minute his story about being too old. Older men than he had gone off to fight. She was sure there was some other reason. Maybe, he was still needed here.

Elizabeth was lying on her favorite blue velvet settee. It had been pulled close to the fireplace where a lovely, small fire flickered cheerfully.

The candles had not yet been lit and shadows of the fire danced across the room. Hearing her father and Margaret at the door, Elizabeth opened her eyes and called out to her. “In here, Margaret. I am just resting from the journey. Come in and let me see you.”

Margaret swiftly walked over to the settee and grasped Elizabeth’s outstretched hand. “Oh, Miss Elizabeth, I’m so glad to see you. I’m so sorry that I had to ask you to come home. I feel so guilty, but I need you. I don’t know who else can help me.” She began to cry as she knelt down on the floor beside her friend. She could see immediately, even under the heavy wool throw, that Elizabeth’s belly was much bigger with child than before. She repressed a feeling of guilt again for having had to trouble her.

Elizabeth kissed her cheek and said, “Come now, Maggie girl. Let’s have a cup of hot tea and then we can talk. Nellie has had a fever, so I sent her to her cabin. I’ll get the tea. She’s left a few coals in the stove for us. You wait here by the fire and warm yourself. I’ll just be a minute.” She started to get up from the settee, but Margaret would not let her.

“No, please, ma’am. I need to talk now, before Mr. John gets finished. I don’t want any tea and I’m not cold. I just need to talk to you,” Margaret pleaded, her face white.

“All right child.” For the first time, Elizabeth actually sensed the extreme mental anguish of the girl and the urgency of the, as yet, untold

problem. “If that’s what you need, then that is what you shall have. Tell me what it is. What has happened that is so bad? Is it about your father? Have you bad news?”

Margaret’s hold on Elizabeth’s hand tightened and she dropped her head. This was the moment she had waited for and also dreaded. She had to tell—yet, how could she? How could she relive that awful scene? The words did not come, but tears began to run down her cheeks.

“Margaret,” Elizabeth said with authority. “Tell me. How can I help if you don’t tell me? Speak up child.” She lowered her legs from the settee and held Margaret in her arms.

“Are we alone?” Margaret quietly asked.

“Yes, totally alone. Father’s out, Toby’s in the barn, Nellie is in her cabin and I didn’t bring a maid with me. I came home alone, so there is no one here but you and me. Now talk,” she commanded.

Margaret turned her tear-stained face to Elizabeth and said, “Almost two months ago I was ...,” she hesitated before blurting out, “violated.”

“Violated?” asked Elizabeth. “What do you mean, violated? How were you violated and by whom?”

“He held me down and did THAT to me,” Margaret replied slowly—not wanting to say the awful words.

“Who? Where?” Elizabeth asked, as she gripped Margaret tighter.

Thoughts tumbled in Margaret's mind as she struggled with the truth, knowing she should name Thad Ball. She opened her mouth, but the whole truth failed to come out. "I don't know who he was. I think he was a Yankee deserter."

"And he violated you? You mean he did something to your body?" Elizabeth could not bring herself to say the awful words either, but she thought she knew what Margaret meant. "Did he hurt you?"

"Yes, ma'am. He did hurt me. Hurt me bad," sobbed Margaret.

"Where did he hurt you, child?" she demanded.

"He hurt me down there," came the reply, and with this said—here in the protection of Elizabeth's arms—Margaret began to feel herself lose the tight control she had maintained these nearly two months. As Elizabeth held her tightly and stroked her hair, she let the last, painful, terrible words out. "And I've missed my monthly. I know what that means." She felt Elizabeth's body go rigid and felt herself being held tighter.

"Oh, you poor child, my poor little Maggie. You should have told me sooner. You should have told me soon after. You should have gotten word to me then. I would have come then. You needed me then." Elizabeth held Margaret as she sobbed. She would not ask her the details now—the where and the when. That would come later, when the tears stopped.

"What can I do? What will happen to me?"

sobbed Margaret. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Now? Just cry. Just cry and let me think.” Elizabeth replied. She rocked Margaret back in forth in her arms and continued to stroke her hair, trying hard to comfort her. “Let me think.”

As Elizabeth continued to hold Margaret, the sobs began to subside and she became quieter. Shudders went through her body—shudders of relief ... relief that the horrible words had been said. Now that Elizabeth knew, she would be here to tell her what to do and to help her think clearly when she herself could think of nothing.

“Have you told anyone else about this? Sylvie, your mother, does she know?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, no one knows. I told no one. Only you,” replied Margaret.

“Well, there is only one thing we can do. We will have to find you a husband. We will have to find you a husband,” she repeated. Disengaging herself from Margaret, she instructed her: “You lie down here where I was. You lie down here. Now I will go to the kitchen and fetch some tea. Even if you don’t need it, I certainly do!”

“No, ma’am. You shouldn’t have to wait on me. It’s not fitting. I should get the tea.”

“Nonsense, Maggie. I’m not crippled. Do as I say. You rest here and I’ll be right back,” Elizabeth said. She gently pushed Margaret down on the settee, tucked the soft quilted blanket around her and pulled her handkerchief from her pocket. “Wipe your eyes, child. I’ll get the tea

and after we drink it, we will talk. We will think of how to go about this.” She left Margaret alone with the fire and went to make the tea.

The wood-burning stove in the large kitchen was one of the modern additions at Mockingbird Hill. John Grenville had brought it home by barge one fine day several years ago from Charleston and had installed it in the kitchen, telling Nellie that now she could learn to use it and not need to cook in the fireplace. Of course, Nellie did not want it. She preferred the familiarity of the fireplace and the wall oven to make her superb dishes, saying that she didn't hold with new-fangled things. Eventually, she did use it. A small box holding slivers of pine kindling—called fat wood—and a bigger box of slower burning hard wood was kept beside the stove. Toby kept both of them full. Lifting the round, iron lid of the stove, Elizabeth saw that there were a few red coals left inside from the noon cooking. She rummaged through the kindling box and found some small, thin pieces. These she added to the glowing coals and watched as the resin from the pine splinters began to bubble and spit, then catch afire. When the fire was going strongly, before the small pieces of wood burned up, she added larger pieces of hard wood to the flames. Replacing the lid over the fire, she put the kettle of water on to heat. While the water heated, she got cups and saucers from the cupboard and laid them on the table. Her thoughts were concerned with the

plight of poor young Maggie. Questions bombarded her mind. Who was he? Was he really a deserter, one of the roving ne'er-do-wells? Where did it happen? Why was Margaret out alone? Elizabeth really knew the answer to that. She knew that Margaret had done the hunting and fishing for herself and her mother ever since Charlie had gone off to war. She had constantly worried about Margaret's doing this, so she began to blame herself. She had thought of having Margaret live with them, but there was no way she could have endured Margaret's mother. Because of this dislike of her mother, she had not asked Margaret to stay. Suddenly, she remembered something that might do them both a world of good—a small bottle of brandy that she had hidden on the top cupboard shelf away from Nellie. She pulled a chair over toward the cupboard so that she could stand on it and reach the brandy, which she had pushed to the rear of the cabinet. She felt clumsy and uncomfortable with her large belly, but she lifted one foot and placed it on the seat of the chair. Holding the edge of the countertop, she pulled herself up until she was standing on the chair. She opened the cupboard door and reached in to find the brandy bottle. Not finding it, she groped farther toward the right, realizing that it might have been pushed aside when other jars had been added. Suddenly, she felt herself losing her balance. There was too much weight on the right. Her thigh was pushing on the back of the chair

and causing it to tilt over. She was suddenly falling and screaming and feeling herself going through the air toward the floor. She grabbed for something to hold on to, but there was nothing. She hit the floor, her head striking the edge of the wood box with considerable force on the way down ... and then, there was blackness.

From the parlor, Margaret heard Elizabeth scream, then heard a loud thud and clatter as the chair and Elizabeth fell. She jumped up from the settee, ran out into the long hallway and back to the kitchen. What she saw as she entered the kitchen paralyzed her. Elizabeth was lying on the floor by the overturned chair, not moving. As Margaret stared, she saw a pool of dark red blood slowly spreading from Elizabeth's head. She broke through her own paralysis to run to Elizabeth and knelt down.

"Elizabeth," she called. She picked up her hand, then noticed the absolute stillness of her. Elizabeth was unconscious, at the very least. She must get help!

"Mr. Grenville!" she screamed. "Toby!"

No one came.

She would have to go out to fetch someone. Her friend was badly hurt. Margaret ran out the kitchen door. From the steps, she could see the barn where old Toby was feeding the mules and finishing his evening chores. She called to him: "Toby, come quickly! Miss Elizabeth has fallen! Hurry! Mr. John. Where is he?"

"Whas dat you say, Miss Margret? Cain't heah

ya so good. Sumpin wrong?” Toby stopped with the bridle in his hands.

“Yes, oh yes, Toby. Mr. John, where is he? Come quickly. Get Nellie. Miss Elizabeth’s had a fall. She’s hurt bad. She’s not moving. Oh, please come quickly,” Elizabeth pleaded. “She fell in the kitchen.”

“Yassum, I’sse comin, I’sse comin, I’sse comin,” he said. Then he called to her. “You go get Nellie. Tell her to come quick. Go git her, now,” he yelled as he hobbled as quickly as he could toward the kitchen. Margaret ran toward the tiny cabin that Toby shared with Nellie.

Nellie had heard Margaret’s screams for help. She was already out of bed and was throwing on her shawl when Margaret reached the door. Pounding with both small fists, she called to Nellie. “Nellie, come quick. Miss Elizabeth’s fallen.” Nellie was through the door before Margaret finished speaking and ran ahead toward the kitchen.

“Come on, chile. Hurry! What happen to Miss Elizabeth?” Nellie asked as they ran.

“She fell, Nellie. She hit her head,” Margaret said as she caught her breath. “She won’t answer or move.”

They entered the kitchen and saw Toby kneeling over the still form of Elizabeth, and could tell by the look on his face that they were too late. He was shaking his head from side to side, and tears were in his eyes. He held Elizabeth’s hand and stroked it as an old father might stroke the

hand of a beloved daughter. He looked up at Nellie and said, “She jes’ went. Jes’ stopped breathin. She gone.”

At that instant John Grenville burst into the kitchen. “I heard the commotion. What’s happened?” he asked at the same time that his eyes stopped on the still form of Elizabeth on the floor, the pool of blood around her head mixing with the pool of blood that was soaking her skirts. Before they could answer, he whispered, “Elizabeth? The child?”

Toby answered his master. “She gone, massah. Like I tole Nellie. She gone,” Toby shuddered. “Po li’l thing.” He rocked back and forth on his knees, still patting the white limp hand.

Suddenly, Nellie, with the wisdom of age, spoke up, “The chile, Massah John, he might be alive, but he gonna die real soon if’n he don’ git out.”

Seconds passed before John Grenville was able to focus on her words. He stood speechless and motionless while he struggled to comprehend all that had happened and was still happening. Then he was staring at Nellie with something akin to horror as the meaning of Nellie’s words entered his mind. Elizabeth was about seven months or more along. Many people had babies at seven months, he knew, and many of them lived. This one might live also, if they could get to it before too late. It was then that he realized the extreme urgency facing them all.

“But we would have to ... you’ll...” He could not finish.

“Yes, Massah John,” Nellie sternly prodded. “You got no time for feelin’ sorry now. You gots to tell me what you wants. You wants me to git dat chile or not? Ain’t no time for cogitatin. Effen you wants it, say so now,” she demanded.

John Grenville went to his daughter and felt for her pulse. There was none. There was no breathing. She had the still, quiet look of death. He knew that she would never open her eyes again. Turning to Nellie he asked, “You can do it? You’re sure?”

“Massah, deys a chanct. Das all. I kin git de chile,” She was afraid to give him too much assurance. “I cain’t say he’ll live ... but dis way, we all know he ain’t a-gonna live. He yo granchile. Tell me quick!”

“Get the child,” John Grenville ordered.

“All right, sir. Now y’all git outa here. All o’ ya. Out!” she demanded.

And they obeyed. The entire exchange had lasted only a few brief seconds. Toby went out the back door and sat on the steps in the evening cold. John and Margaret left the kitchen—now dark with evening shadows and pungent with the sickening odor of blood—and went into the parlor. They were both in a state of shock, each not able to accept what had happened and what was happening. Moving as though sleep walking, John turned to her and she could see that he was crumbling. The pain on his face was almost unbearable to see. She opened her arms and he came into them. She

held him and he grasped her tightly as he loosed his emotions. Oddly, at that moment, with all the insane tragedy around her and within her, what came foremost to her mind was her first realization that the great John Grenville was human ... a very human man. This aristocrat whom she had admired and worshipped from afar—this blue blood with his great family, his estate, and his background—needed her strength. He needed her.

Huddled together, they waited, trying not to think about what Nellie was doing in the kitchen. Then they heard slaps and waited for the wailing of an infant. Nothing came. There were more slaps but no other sound. John held her tighter fearing that the infant was beyond help, but suddenly there was a noise—not the healthy wailing of a full term babe, but a sound like the soft cry of a kitten. John held her away from him and listened, then they both went into the hallway to see Nellie emerge from the kitchen, a small bloody, living thing wrapped in her shawl. She walked up to John and held out the bundle.

“You gots a li’l grandson, Massah John. He tiny, but he alive. He gonna need lotsa’ care.”

John took the infant from Nellie’s arms and felt how extraordinarily light and tiny he was. Nellie pulled the shawl away from the baby’s face and showed John Grenville his grandson. The babe was bloody— covered with a white, pasty goo—and so tiny that the he was not a pretty

thing. John did not know how to hold it. He turned to Margaret and silently handed her the child. Plainly, he could not speak.

Nellie said softly, “Massah John, now we gots to take care of Miss Elizabeth. Leave the babe with Miss Margret. She can take him into the parlor by the fire for a little bit so’s we can take care of Miss Elizabeth. We gots to git her up to her room and git her cleaned up. I done tole Toby to git the fire going and heat up some water. I’ll take care of things, but I needs you to take her up the stairs. It ain’t pretty, Massah John. It ain’t pretty,” she repeated, closing her eyes and shaking her head wearily.

While Nellie and John took care of Elizabeth, Toby cleaned the kitchen floor. Margaret sat on the settee by the fire and held the babe. He made no noise. He did not squirm or even move. He was helpless and she loved him. Loving him caused her to begin to love her own unborn babe. Babies were the most helpless creatures of all and there were so many harmful things. Those harmful things came in more shapes than she had ever dreamed.

After that horrible day, Margaret stayed at Mockingbird Hill to help Nellie care for the family and the baby boy who had not yet been named. Tiny and weak, he was kept alive by sucking on a rag dipped in goat’s milk mixed with molasses. There was no sugar to be had. It was offered to him every time he awakened or stirred. He

sometimes sucked on the molasses tit without ever opening his eyes, as though he knew he must conserve all of his energy just to live. He was a most tenacious child.

John remained in a daze, hardly able to function. He depended on Toby and Nellie for care and on Margaret to make his daughter's funeral arrangements.

The funeral was a pitiful affair. The service took place during morning church on the following Sunday. There was no circuit-riding preacher to attend to the service and the words had to be read by the head deacon. When the service was over, the few neighbors who had been able to come gathered for Elizabeth's burial in the small cemetery yard behind the old Methodist-Episcopal church. A biting, cold drizzle fell from gray skies. Margaret sat under an umbrella holding the babe. It was difficult for her to believe that they were here to bury her best friend in the world. She sat beside the grave holding the baby, who was holding onto life by the barest of threads. Here in her arms, he was still and quiet as they laid his mother to rest in an open grave, already muddy from the rain. There were few men at the graveside—an old grandfather and two young crippled men back from war. Most of the neighboring women had come.

Toby and Nellie stood together at the back of the crowd, holding on to each other, both crying as the young woman, whom they had help to rear, was laid to rest. As the coffin was lowered

into the grave, Nellie turned to Toby.

“I knows why she was up on dat chair,” she whispered between sobs. “She lookin’ fo’ dat bottle o’ brandy I put back on de shelf. I knowed it was there and when I come down wit de fever, I took some o’ dat brandy. Den I puts it back, but I musta pushed it too far. ‘Cause sho’ as anything, Miss Elizabeth was a-lookin’ for dat bottle. What I cain’t figure out is, why?” Her voice was changing from sadness to perplexity. “Why she in there makin’ tea and huntin’ dat brandy? Why Miss Margaret ain’t in dere doin’ dat?”

Toby softly punched Nellie in the shoulder. “Hush up woman. Don’t go aksin’ no questions. We don’ know, and ain’t no way we gonna know. It’s done and over. Leave sleepin’ dogs lie.”

Someone had gotten word to Sylvie as soon as possible about the tragedy, so she walked to church to witness the burial. Seeing her daughter seated by John Grenville with the brand new infant in her arms had caused her to see Margaret in a new light. She spoke to Margaret and to Mr. Grenville, but did not linger with them, preferring to remain in the background. In her own mind, Margaret had crossed the line. Her daughter had gone into another world where Sylvie could never go, had never been accepted, and would never be accepted. Margaret had gotten what Sylvie had always wanted and had never realized. Never having achieved her dream had been the cause of all of her pain in life. After

the coffin had been lowered into the ground, she followed the small crowd—now soaking wet and cold—as they quickly left the churchyard for their homes.

John and Margaret, holding the quiet babe, rode back to Mockingbird Hill in the back of the buggy. Nellie sat on the driver's seat with Toby. No one spoke. The quiet was heavy and nothing broke it except the sound of the buggy wheels squishing the soft, wet earth and the patter of rain on the buggy top. Back at the house, Toby cared for the horse and put the buggy away. Nellie, her fever now a forgotten thing of the past, went into the kitchen to prepare the mid-day meal. Margaret prepared the milk and molasses for the child and took him into the kitchen by the fire to feed him. John silently went into his study and stayed there until the household was asleep. This is where he stayed each evening until his candle burned down. No one disturbed him. They left him to his grief and private thoughts. A few nights after the funeral, John left the study door open. Margaret saw him retrieve the big family Bible from the bookshelf in his study and write in it. She supposed that he was finally able to record the sad event and the happy one, the death and birth ... the continuation of life.