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[Mistress of Magnolia Hall]

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LIFE HISTORY

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Chalmers S. Murray

Edisto Island, S. C.

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MISTRESS OF MAGNOLIA HALL

Everything was quiet when I drove up. A few Negroes were moving listlessly about the cotton arbor, and a mangy, mouse-colored hound lay like dead on the ground by the whitewashed barn. I took my eyes from the creature lying there in the dust and looked instead at the tall pines, the great laurel tree and the grove of live oaks. Then my eyes, refreshed, wandered in a semi-circle and rested on the plantation dwelling - a large two and a half story structure, pointed battle ship grey, rising sheerly from the black dirt of the front yard.

The breeze died to a whisper. It was too tired even to rustle the pine needles. The September sun was hot on my cheeks, and I walked toward the dwelling, already picturing myself seated in one of the porch chairs in the deep shade.

Eight black forms were dragging themselves along the path leading to the platform where the cotton would soon be weighed, and later put out in the sun to dry. The figures were bearing burlap sacks, stuffed with cotton, on their heads. No words escaped from their thick lips. The last figure in the procession - a copper colored boy of about ten, was followed by a little black dog. I looked closely at the dog as it passed me. It seemed to have purple eyes.

2

The boy walked within a few feet of the spot where the hound was lying and the black dog trailed along. Slowly the hound raised up on its spindly legs and yawned. The black dog charged. In a twinkling the combatants were obscured by a cloud of grey dust. Their yowls cut sharply through the still air and the boy added his voice to the racket. He kept yelling:

“Go get un, Lion. Chew um up.”

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Suddenly a window in the big house was thrown open and the angry voice of a woman was heard above the hubbub: "What's going on down there? Stop that noise, stop it immediately."

The boy answered nothing. All of his attention was centered on the fight.

Again the woman's voice rang out: "You know full well I don't allow dogs in my yard. Dogs can't pick cotton. Get them both out of here or I will tell the magistrate.

The window was slammed shut.

I walked up the long stairway and rapped on the porch door. Mrs. James Devereux, a little woman with four score years plainly written on her face, admitted me. She made birdlike motions with her hands as if she was ready to take flight. I waited in embarrassment, scarcely knowing if I were welcome. The sight of a half smile relieved my nervousness. She was saying:

"Come on in, won't you, Chalmers? I declare I am all worn out. I always got this way during cotton picking season. Just don't seem to have any energy.

3

All of this business - " she waved her hand in the direction of the cotton arbor - "and the heat you know, and getting the children ready for college. So many dresses to make."

She led us across the porch into the sitting room and motioned me to a chair by a front window. It was a large room even for an old plantation house, with high ceiling and wide baseboards. Pictures of saints, done on wood, and an oil portrait of a handsome woman with jet black eyes and plump arms, relieved the whiteness of the plastered walls. There was a horse-hair sofa in one corner and a varied assortment of chairs and small tables. I noticed three colonial pieces - a chaise longue and two mahogany chairs - and a number of things belonging to the late Victorian period. The black marble fireplace of exquisite

Library of Congress

lines was the dominating feature of the room. On the mantelpiece were two ornate vases, a gift from the LaFayette family of France.

Mrs. Devereux sat on the edge of a straight chair. Again she seemed poised for flight. Her eyes roved to the dining room and then to the window on the porch side. She addressed me.

"I hear you are looking for histories and old stories for the government. My attic is ramjammed full of old books and letters and papers of all sorts. I think I have a set of McCrady and Ramsey - I am not sure - and a letter from Daniel Webster. My paternal grandmother kept open house in Philadelphia, you 4 know, and entertained many celebrated people. Webster, Clay and Jerome Bonaparte were among them. I hardly know what's in the attic myself. The children are always rummaging around."

I told her I was interested in any history connected with Etiwan and its families, but that I also wanted to talk with her about her life story. "Your experiences should make very interesting memoirs", I commented.

"My memory is still good, Chalmers, especially about the things that happened in my childhood," she said. The words poured out in a steady stream.

"The first thing I remember? Yes, it stands out very clearly. We were refugeeing in Abbeville near the close of the Civil War. The sea islands were not considered safe and we moved bag and baggage to the Up Country. I was sitting on a porch playing with a dish, pretending that it was a hat - trying it on, taking it off again. My little spinning wheel, the delight of my life, was close by. They said that the Yankees were coming through. I had heard them talking about Yankees before, it seemed. I did not know exactly what Yankees were, but I did know they were some kind of beast - animals certainly."

Mrs. Devereux paused for breath, got up and walked to the window, then sat down again. She resumed her narrative.

Library of Congress

"I had never seen a Yankee in a zoo, but I always thought that I would come across one of them there. I was convinced that they were animals with 5 horns. Today I tell every Yankee I meet about my childhood fancies - thinking they were animals with horns. It seems to amuse them."

The last sentence was spoken through her nose. She chuckled. "That's the way my relatives in Philadelphia talk," she said.

"The Yankees came marching through," she continued. "I was very much surprised to learn that they were not beasts. One of them gave me a dime and I was delighted. My ideas changed about them. After that I thought Yankees were fine. I wondered why my parents thought they were so awful.

"I can see that old house today. Years afterwards I visited Abbeville but I could not locate the place. I was very sorry for I would have dearly loved to have seen the old home where the Yankee gave me that dime. I treasured a dime more than those children treasure a five dollar bill. Children these days don't have any idea of the value of money."

I broke in with a question here for I knew she would wander further and further away from the subject, and I would have a hard time bringing her back.

"Please tell me about the time your mother was christened and the ball given in honor of General LaFayette. How did the famous Frenchman happen to visit Etiwan anyhow?"

"People often ask me why my grandfather happened to ask General LaFayette to Etiwan," Mrs. Devereux said, wiping the beads of perspiration from her forehead. "Well, he thought it would be a good idea to ask the General over so he could meet the people of the island. That was in 1825. Grandfather had sent his own steamboat to Charleston for him. On the return trip the boat landed in the creek right behind the house. Grandfather had prepared a ball in the great Frenchman's honor and had invited all of the people of the island. He owned a large number of slaves and they were busy for days getting everything

Library of Congress

ready. Before the boat landed, grandfather had a carpet laid from the wharf to the house, a distance of several hundred yards.”

“LaFayette stepped ashore and was warmly greeted by his host and the island guests. About five hundred people were present. Everyone had a merry time. Champagne flowed like water.

“After the ball, General Lafayette asked for my grandmother and was told that she was upstairs with her three weeks old infant. 'Could you not have the child brought down here?' LaFayette wanted to know. 'I would like to see her.' Grandfather said it could be arranged. LaFayette then suggested that since a clergyman was present, the child be christened the same evening. 'I want the privilege of naming her,' he said to my grandfather.

“The baby was brought into the room and my grandfather asked the General what name he had chosen for the child. 'I will name her, if you will allow, after the state and myself - Carolina LaFayette,' he answered. And this is how my mother got her name. Now if you will excuse me for a minute or two I will go upstairs and finish off a little job I promised to do for one of my granddaughters.”

7

While Mrs. Devereux was out of the room, I tried to recall what I knew about her life history. She was born on Etiwan Island in this same house, eighty-two years ago, the daughter of a Philadelphian and the girl whom LaFayette named. Her mother had inherited Magnolia Hall Plantation, and after she and her husband returned from an extensive tour of Europe, they settled on Etiwan. The man from Philadelphia knew nothing about the culture of sea island cotton, but he was willing to learn and with the assistance of an experienced overseer, he soon became a planter in his own right. In a couple of years he could “talk sea island cotton” with the best of them.

Hard times followed the Civil War and the family's income was sharply reduced. Mrs. Devereux education was cut short and the annual trips to Europe discontinued. But her

Library of Congress

father was able to borrow on the strength of his reputation as a cotton planter and by degrees recouped his fortune. Upon the death of her parents, Mrs. Devereux was left Magnolia Hall and a tidy sum beside.

In her thirties she had married James Devereux of Wando Island. Following her mother's example she insisted that he make his home at Magnolia Hall and plant sea island cotton. James Devereux, his neighbors said, loved the soil and the feeling of long staple fiber between his fingers. He could make two pounds grow where only one pound grew before. An authority on the subject of cotton culture, he was sent with a commission to the Barbadoes to study West Indian methods of production, near the turn of the century.

8

He had no liking for details. Mrs. Devereux managed the business end of the plantation. She kept the books, made the purchases and drew the checks. James would have given away everything he owned had it not been for his wife, the island people declared.

In his latter years he was often ill for months at a time and was forced to undergo an operation that cost him a three thousand dollar hospital bill at John Hopkins. He died about twenty-five years ago, leaving his wife and two daughters.

Mrs. Devereux continued to live at Magnolia Hall. Importing a young relative from another island, she made him her agent and the planting of sea island cotton was resumed on the place. The young man fell in love with her eldest daughter and married her. Then the youngest daughter married and moved to the next plantation. The eldest daughter and her husband were given an apartment in the Magnolia Hall dwelling. Of the union two girls were born. Almost in hailing distance, across a salt creek, lives the other daughter, her husband and two girls. A private telephone line connects the places. Thus the old lady can keep in close touch with every member of her immediate family.

Magnolia Hall is a gathering place for the clan. Nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles and cousins, pay extended visits and sometimes every bed in the house is occupied. Mrs.

Library of Congress

Devereux welcomes them all. She says she likes the lively air that the presence of half a dozen guests lends to her home.

9

She is a great traveler. After a few months at Magnolia Hall she becomes very restless and the daughters know what to expect. She complains about being out of contact with the world and says that she longs for her old friends in Philadelphia and New York. She tells her family that she is homesick for the theatres, the art galleries, museums, and the lights of the big city. Finally her daughters succumb. They pack Mrs. Devereux's bags, warn her about her heart, and kiss her good-bye.

In a few hours she is on King Street in Charleston, making the rounds of her favorite shops. The next week the people at home will get a letter saying that she is having a glorious time in New York, Toronto or Miami. The children sigh and say: "I swear you can't do a thing with Mama. Traveling all by herself at eighty-two with a weak heart. What if she should fall ill on the train or bus?"

But they know that somehow "Mama" always manages to reach her destination safely in spite of her advanced age and her weak heart.

Mrs. Devereux never appears to be worried about her health. Speaking of illness she says: "If you have an objective in life and keep busy, you won't have time to be sick. Now, these young people are forever sick, it seems to me. Flying to doctors every week, getting put to bed in hospitals, having their teeth straightened, letting some surgeon cut them up. I tell my doctor "No use to find anything wrong with me because I just won't put my foot in a hospital - I hate the things."

10

In recent years Mrs. Devereux has paid enormous dental and hospital bills for her children and grandchildren. She says that she does not believe in handicapping young people with debts, that her money is there for them to use as they think best. None of her daughters or

Library of Congress

granddaughters inherit strong constitutions. When a change of climate seems necessary she sends them away on long trips to Canada in the summer, and to Florida in the winter. "There's nothing like a trip to pick you up," she remarks.

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The door opened and in walked Sallie, one of the granddaughters. She regarded me with round, owl eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses - an intelligent looking girl of about twenty. Sallie is now completing her senior year at a state college, and expects to teach school next season.

"I heard granny tell you about all of those old letters and diaries, while I was in the dining room," she said, running her words together like so many of the islanders do. "I have rummaged through the attic many times, but found nothing like that. I am quite sure my Uncle Jake took the letters back north with him long ago."

"That's a pity," I told her. "They would have been valuable to historians and collectors no doubt. But right now I am trying to get something more about your grandmother's life. I wonder if you could induce her to write her memoirs. If she could write the way she talks her story should make a best seller - that is if the book could be illustrated with moving pictures 11 so as to catch her gestures."

The girl smiled. "I am afraid she would never write anything. She likes talking so much better. You couldn't make her sit still long enough to write."

The old lady re-entered the room. She had a worried preoccupied look on her face.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long," she said but you know how these young people are - never able to do anything for themselves. Only a week before college opens and dresses to finish and trunks to pack. Clothes, clothes, clothes. Their heads are full of everything but their studies."

Library of Congress

Mrs. Devereux has told her friends that she is anxious for all of her grandchildren to win college diplomas. Years ago, realizing that the expense was too heavy for their parents to bear without borrowing the money, she set aside a certain sum for their education.

Mrs. Devereux spends a considerable part of her income on charity, and is a strong supporter of the Etiwan branch of the King's Daughters Society and the Presbyterian church on the island. I remembered her remarking once: "We must support the church whether we like the minster or not. It is our church, not his. The Kings Daughters stand for practical Christianity. That is why I want to give what I can spare to the society.... Yet the church must go on. Old associations, old friends, you know. We can't afford to give up the old things."

12

She has befriended many a Negro on Etiwan, especially those living on her plantation. Her gifts are generally practical ones - food, clothing, medicine.

Before Mrs. Devereux could start on the subject of the younger generation again. I asked her to tell me about her experience during the hurricanes of 1893 and 1911.

"I suppose you know that there have been no hurricanes on the island since 1911," she began. "Oh, yes, minor blows - gentle little breezes like the one that knocked over a few pine trees several summers ago, but nothing that would hold a candle to the 1911 storm or the famous one of 1893.

How well I recall the storm of 1893. The instrument for measuring the velocity of the wind - I have forgotten what they call it - was torn to pieces, so they really didn't know how hard it was blowing.

Library of Congress

“We were living on the Point then. Our house stood on palmetto posts, six feet from the ground, and the pilings were sunk three or four feet below the surface. It made the house very steady.

“The blow came in August. The wind was behind the tide and it came rushing in - tearing in. The water was soon lapping under the house and pounding away at the sills. I believe it was a sort of tidal wave. The water rose suddenly as if it had been poured from a big bucket. Naturally we were nervous. Who wouldn't be with part of the Atlantic Ocean under them?

13

“I remember that the horses were stables under the house at that time. It was pitiful to hear them whinnying when the waves knocked them off their feet. But they managed to keep from drowning the Lord only knows how. We could hear them moving about all night long, trying to keep their footing.

“The house came through all right. It was firmly anchored. Of course, some of the pilings worked loose but most of them held.

“The next morning we found a huge piece of timber in our front yard. It must have come from a wrecked ship. If it had struck our house during the worse of the storm there is no telling what would have happened. Mercifully the timber was caught by palmetto trees in the front yard and came no further.

“During the night there was a lull. You could hear a pin drop. We held our breath, knowing that the storm was not over, no sir it wasn't. The wind had been blowing from the west for hours and hours. Before you could count ten, it came smashing in from the west and blew even harder than it had done before. When the storm finally died, the tail end of it was coming from due west. That's the way those hurricanes behave.”

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While Mrs. Devereux was finishing her story, Gerard Scarborough entered. He walked with short energetic strides, his small body held erect. This was the son-in-law who had married the eldest daughter and who ran the Plantation for Mrs. Devereux. Wisps of cotton were clinging to his coat and trousers. He was wearing a light-weight summer suit. Planters of Etiwan scorn overalls. He 14 greeted me cordially and asked me about the fishing in Seaside, and then sunk into an arm-chair.

Mrs. Devereux, asked: "Did you get through, Gerard?"

"Yes, we managed to pick in the heaviest blow, but there are still two fields to finish. Start on them tomorrow, I suppose, if the weather holds good," he answered. With a twinkle in his eye he said: " I suppose you have been telling some of your tall stories."

"I was telling about the 1893 storm, and you were too young to remember much about it, so you can't check up on me," his mother-in-law replied in a tart tone. "Talking about storms you better hurry and get that cotton in. The hurricane/ season is right at hand."

"Don't get nervous, Old lady, I will get it In by the end of the week."

"I can't help being nervous, Gerard." She was speaking in a serious voice now.

"Remember what the 1911 storm did for us, No factor to borrow from these days." Turning to me she said: "Those were the good old days, Chalmers. Sea island cotton bringing from sixty cents to one dollar a pound. If a storm came, you could always borrow enough money to start over again. We didn't have all of these comforts and conveniences then, but we were just as happy and it seemed that we could save more."

"Go on, Old lady," said Gerard grinning. "We were always in debt in those days if I remember right. I am glad that the factor system died out."

Library of Congress

Gerard Scarborough is a hard worker. He arises early and spends long, hot days in the field with the hands. There is much to do on a large plantation - machinery to be repaired, fences to be kept in order, animals to feed, accounts to be kept. In his spare time he acts as the magistrate's constable. Once a year he takes a vacation on one of the island beaches where he and a few cronies pass the entire time fishing for channel bass.

Mrs. Devereux was talking again, relating a story about Reconstruction days. Gerard broke in, "Can't you just let me say a few words?" he asked. This time he winked broadly at me.

"Everybody in this house thinks I talk too much," Mrs. Devereux remarked. "Well, God gave me a tongue and I expect to use it."

She was interrupted by groans and squeaks from the radio. She put her hands to her ears and said: "That plagued thing. Nobody can talk against it. Gerard I wish you would speak to Mary." Mary is the youngest granddaughter.

"Here, Mary stop that," Gerard yelled.

At this juncture Mrs. Scarborough burst into the room. She has sharp but pleasing features, and small bright brown eyes like her mother. Her blue-black hair was coiled in a kind of pompadour and pulled back from her ears. She said "Hello" to me and passed in a flash. Soon I heard her arguing with Mary about making too much noise with the radio.

Mrs. Scarborough has the reputation of being a fine manager. She runs the 16 big house on a strict schedule, looks after her mother's comfort, prepares school breakfasts and a sunrise meal for her husband, bosses the cook, sits on the board of trustees for the local school, assists the postmaster during rush periods, and coaches her daughters in Latin and French.

She is numbered among the famous talkers of the island

Library of Congress

"These children, these young people," I heard Mrs. Devereux saying, "I declare I don't know what is to become of them. All they think about is playing the radio, seeing moving pictures in Charleston and riding around in automobiles. It was different in my day. We were fond of books and good conversation. When I go north I hear grand opera and see the best plays on Broadway. I was brought up to appreciate such things.

"Have you been to New York lately?"

"Last year, I am going again this winter. Early winter will never catch me on Etiwan. Its too dead here. I love to travel to see something new, to broaden my mind. My great grandfather, Joseph Hopkinson designed the American flag, you know. Betsy Ross, (snort) was only a seamstress following directions. I inherit my ancestor's taste for the arts. I love to visit art galleries, spend hours roaming around in them. When I am up North I stop with friends. No hotel for me, thank you. We do the town up brown." She winked at me, then added: "I am very fond of Manhattan cocktails. They know exactly how to make them in New York."

17

"You were talking awhile ago about the children's fondness for riding in automobiles. I get awfully tired of them sometimes," I remarked.

"Don't talk to me about automobiles, Chalmers," she said. "We Southerners are a fool race of people - working to support automobile factories. Automobiles caused the depression. I wish we had our horses and buggies back. We had time to be sociable then. Now we get into these cars and rush around like we are crazy. We never spend a day with a friend anymore. Just pay a pop call and rush home again - for what?"

"You ride in automobiles sometimes?" I asked pretending innocence.

Library of Congress

“Of course,” she replied in a aggravated tone. “I have to ride in them or I would never get off of Etiwan.”

Her daughters have often asked her why she is willing to forsake her soft bed and the home cooked meals for the hardship of travel by bus and train. At Magnolia Hall she has everything to make her comfortable. Modern plumbing has been installed in recent years, and the house is adequately heated by fireplaces and oil stoves, and the porches screened. She has a large room to herself, filled with souvenirs and other treasures. From her window she can see the broad reaches of the Etiwan River, glittering in the sun, the bottle-green marshes, the woodlands and fields of her own domain.”

Mrs. Devereux answers her daughters: “Can't you-all understand? I must step out once in a while or I'll get rusty.”

18

While Mrs. Devereux was in the dining room, helping Mrs. Scarborough set the table for lunch, I talked with Gerard about the crop. He told me that he would come very nearly making a bale of cotton to the acre in spite of the boll-weevil, but that the prospects for a fair price were poor. The cabbage crop had been a failure; Irish potatoes had brought him out even. Yes, he supposed he would try his hand with tomatoes again next season.

The conversation drifted back to the sea island cotton days. Gerard recalled how much bother the staple had been. The average hand could pick about seventy pounds a day and the harvest season extended from early September to Christmas. The cotton must be thoroughly dried and sorted and sent to roller gins without visible blemish. Now long staple cotton was dead as indigo and rice, and short staple was barely bringing eleven cents a pound. Yet, a well equipped farmer could still come out ahead, even at that price, if he was careful and had a decent break of luck with the weather, Gerard observed.

Library of Congress

When Mrs. Devereux returned to the room, I asked her how she liked the new roads that they were building on the island.

“Don't like them at all,” she said. “After a while there will be nothing to Etiwan but roads - I never saw such a thing. The world has gone crazy on the subject of road building. Of course, Etiwan has to follow the fashion.” (She was talking through her nose). “Roads never bring in a desirable class of people. I can't see what is to be gained by paving the roads. More automobiles, 19 more smashes, more people killed - just for speed's sake.”

“Chalmers, we used to have a quiet, peaceful island. Where is it today?”

The question seemed to be a rhetorical one and I did not answer it. Besides there was hardly any use making a try. Mary was in the room, pulling at her grandmother's skirt, telling her something in a loud whisper. The radio was going full blast. From the next room came the sound of Mrs. Scarborough's voice. She was talking with her sister who had just driven up. talk eddied and flowed around me.

[md]

“I was bidding Mrs. Devereux good-bye. “I hope I can have another interview with you before long,” I said, my foot on the top step.

“Yes, I always enjoy talking about old times,” she replied, extending her hand. “Mary, let me alone a second won't you? But you had better make it soon. I may leave the island next week. I have a very urgent invitation from relatives in Philadelphia.”

I walked down the steps into the yard. The breeze had died completely during my absence and the silence was as heavy as before. No sounds came from 20 the cotton arbor. The eight black figures had left and with them the black dog with the sightless, purple eyes. In the dust lay the mangy mouse-colored hound, fast asleep.