

A River in Flood

THE TWO DOGS STARE DOWN into the river. In their intense concentration, they neither move nor whimper while their brown fur, wet and bemired with hunting, appears all of one color with the earth like two animate objects formed from the flinty Pennsylvania soil. The older dog shivers and finally relinquishes his post, curling himself into a woeful ball on the frost-hardened hilltop, but the pup remains seated, gazing fixedly at the turbulent rapids as they roar past the riverbanks below, sending up mud-filled foam and sprays of dirt-gray water that almost scream out power and vengeance. The Schuylkill in flood is a terrible place: twice as broad as it should be, the waves so relentless they appear likely to crest over the high hill itself. The island that sits in the midst of this part of the stream is already drowned; only the top halves of its trees remain, leafless black limbs like arms thrust upward in

supplication.

As the young dog watches, entire tree trunks and mangled fence rails thunder past, the power of the surge so great that each sodden piece of wood is repeatedly plunged below the surface to then repeatedly shoot back up into the air. The pup scans these projectiles with apprehensive eyes, although he never follows their course for more than a yard or two. What he desperately searches for should be directly below his resting place.

He sniffs the air, briefly pricks up his ears, then flattens them again. It is bitterly cold, and the dogs have remained atop the steep rise for a long time. Their coats no longer emanate heat or the steamy moisture of warm bodies accustomed to racing across fields at their master's call. The old dog groans from his icy bed, then closes his eyes. The pup turns briefly toward his companion, his allegiance torn between love and duty. Then he also whimpers and lies down.

“WE REALLY SHOULD CONSIDER PROCEEDING with luncheon, Mr. Simms. I'm sure Father simply lost track of the time.” It's Martha Beale who makes these twin

statements, although her tone lacks conviction. Her stance is also hesitant: a tall figure cloaked in a blue cashmere gown. Despite its lilac satin trim, its tight bodice and white lace, its long sleeves equipped with two *à la mode* pouffings, Martha is scant competition for the opulent red velvet swags that drape the parlor's cherrywood portal. Not that it would enter her mind to attempt such an outrageous act. Ladies, she's been taught, must be discreet additions to their habitations, speaking only when necessary - and then with decorum and tact.

As a result of this rigorous schooling, even the requisite underwiring of her costume, the whalebone corset and stiff crinoline underskirts fail to make her an impressive figure when compared to the excesses of Beale House: its room upon room overflowing with torcheres of bronze and alabaster, with Turkey carpets, marble urns, and dense suites of black walnut furniture. All new, of course, just as the country estate in the wooded and ravined land that stretches west of the city of Philadelphia is new, and built in the most fashionable and ornate of Gothic styles.

“You know how unhappy Cook becomes when the

schedule is forsaken...” Martha adds, keeping her polite gaze upon her father’s confidential secretary who remains seated beside one of the parlor tables, his attention devoted to the newspaper in his hands.

“As you say, Martha” is Simms’s sole response.

“Surely, Father won’t mind if we commence without him.” She attempts a small laugh, hoping to sound assured and competent, but the effort merely makes her seem younger and less experienced than her twenty-six years would suggest. “Especially if he’s had a successful morning’s hunting. Besides, he must have packed some nourishment in his creel. Biscuits and cheese, at least...”

She pauses, again at a loss. How long has it been, she wonders, that Owen Simms has been part of the household? Fifteen years? Sixteen? She knows it was well before she achieved adulthood, and because of this fact it seems that he has always been here, and that her behavior with him has never climbed out of an uncomfortable and tongue-tied infancy. Or perhaps, her reaction simply reflects the great man he serves. “... And we both know how fond Father is of tramping into the deepest reaches of the forest - ”

“As you say.”

Martha suppresses a sigh as she considers the response. *As you say*, not *as you wish*. And *Martha*, rather than *Miss Beale* which would be fitting and right given her age. If she were married, perhaps... but no, there's no use in starting down that long and tortured road. At her advanced years, it's doubtful she'll ever participate in wedded life. The rules of social conduct are strict in 1842, but doubtless they've always been so. “I'll inform Cook, then, shall I...?”

Owen Simms merely nods. Seated within a pool of light cast from a nearby paraffin lamp, he should appear lesser than the standing Martha, but the very opposite is true; and he seems as authoritative and commanding as the granite bust of a Roman senator: each chiseled curl in place, the watchful eyes full of self-satisfaction and pride. “The decision is yours, of course, Martha. This is your father's house, after all. And you, naturally, are its hostess. Matters of dining and so forth must be left in your capable hands.” With that remark, Simms returns to his newspaper. He doesn't wait to see if his master's only child stays or leaves, and so Martha Beale makes one more foray into

conversation, affixing a masterful smile she doesn't remotely feel. *Capable hands!* she thinks, and her cheeks involuntarily redden. She has no idea whether Simms means the words as a compliment or a critique.

“Good. Let us dine. Father certainly wouldn't wish us to go hungry.”

Then she walks away to tell Cook that they will sup without awaiting her father's return. But this small moment of autonomy doesn't engender a sense of dignity or ownership. Instead, Martha feels utterly immaterial; and her body as she crosses the broad foyer and turns down the corridor that leads to the kitchens and pantries is self-conscious and stiff.

IT'S THE HEAD GARDENER, Jacob Oberholtzer, who finds the dogs, so cold the old male can scarcely move, while the pup recognizes the servant and barks often and noisily without once forsaking his sentry station on the hill. Oberholtzer drags the old dog up by the scruff of his neck, and propels him forward by pumping his shivering sides as though they were bellows. “Come,” he orders in English, although that's not his native tongue. “Come, dog.”

The old male weaves unsteadily forward. The pup remains behind. “Dog, come!” Oberholtzer yells, but the pup refuses to move. The gardener swears in *Plattdeutsch*; the pup barks; the old dog wavers, and Jacob, his teeth chattering viciously, his hands and nose nearly numb storms back to the site overlooking the swollen Schuylkill. He makes a grab for the pup, but the pup leaps away, whining and nearly plunging backward down into the madly rushing river.

The value his master places upon these two makes Oberholtzer hesitate; he can’t risk losing one of them to the gray-brown waves that tumble past the rock-strewn bank. In pausing, Jacob looks beyond the recalcitrant animal, beyond the frost-flattened scrub of the hillside, beyond the tangled trees that lead into the wilder parts of the forest. The daylight is fading fast, and the landscape and waterscape taking on a leaden hue: sky, earth, water, river boulders of the same dead color that presages snow. Oberholtzer swears again, and in giving voice to his frustration and his wrath finally sees the creel and rifle dropped among the stones at the Schuylkill’s swollen edge. Premonition paralyzes him. His legs, accustomed to hours

tramping the Beale estate, refuse to move. His mind, trained to take orders without asking questions, panics. He stares down at the valuable gun, shouts his master's name, turns his head from the roaring river to the nervous dogs then nearly runs from the scene.

MARTHA IS READING IN THE parlor when Oberholtzer barrels through the front door of Beale House. Naturally, she assumes it's her father, at long last returned from his shooting excursion. She thinks the noise and the stomping, the rush of servants clattering into the foyer are in answer to his immediate needs: a warm jacket to replace his cold outer coat, slippers in place of boots, a soothing glass of port wine. She never imagines it's Oberholtzer who has engendered this commotion; servants enter through the rear of the house, and a gardener, rarely at all. Only people approaching the Beales' social status are admitted through the main door. With her book resting on her lap, she composes herself in the attitude of calm and cheerful expectation her father would expect.

But it's not Lemuel Beale who enters the room; rather, it's Owen Simms. "Your father seems to be

missing,” is what he tells her; his tone is as measured as always. “Oberholtzer found the two dogs, and then spotted your father’s hunting equipment at the river’s edge.”

“Missing?” is all Martha can think to reply. “But that’s impossible, Mr. Simms. Father cannot be *missing*. He must have walked further upriver, or down. Or perhaps he entered a crofter’s cottage to escape the chill, or found a farm wagon to carry him home. Late as it’s become, Father would never - ”

“And left his dogs behind? And his percussion rifle?”

Martha has no response to these queries other than to utter a gentle “But there must be a logical explanation...” Then she attempts a lighter tone. “And you know how fond Father is of logic - ”

“Martha, the Schuylkill’s in full spate, and with the river flooded, the current is exceedingly treacherous. If your father slipped on the rocks - ”

Martha sits straight in her chair; the book is now clenched in her fingers, and her breathing has grown shallow and quick. “I’m sure that as soon as Father returns home, he’ll be able to provide us with a - ”

But Simms interrupts her. “If he lost his balance and

fell, Martha, the current would - ” He doesn’t complete the sentence, and Martha stares into his eyes. Her ears buzz with noise while her mind’s eye begins to create an awful picture: the rapids, the treacherous terrain, her father venturing one precarious and fatal step... Then her brain blacks out the image; and she pinches her lips, and wills her breaths to slow.

“Did Jacob search the shore?”

“He called your father’s name repeatedly. There was no reply to his entreaties. The light had grown exceedingly dim which prevented him seeing into the distance.”

“And where is Jacob now?” She stands, all at once galvanized into action. Her rise is awkward, far too unrehearsed and ill-considered to be the graceful motion of a proper lady, but the change of posture surprises both her and her father’s secretary with its unaccustomed vigor.

“In the servants’ kitchen.”

“And Father’s dogs?”

“Surely, we should not fret over mere beasts at a critical time like this, Martha.”

Her shoulders stiffen, and her longish face with its aquiline nose also hardens while her gray-green eyes turn

dark as slate. She resembles her father at this moment; a younger version, naturally, but someone equally tenacious.

“The dogs were out all day, Mr. Simms. They must have become quite chilled, especially old Tip who’s grown so lame.”

Martha takes a firm step forward, and is again astonished at her own resolve. “We must gather a search party, and plenty of lanterns and torches to light our way through the wooded terrain. I’ll fetch my mantle and bonnet while you assemble the servants.” She turns to leave him, but Simms stops her.

“I cannot permit you to endanger yourself in such a fashion, Martha. Your father would never forgive me. It’s exceedingly cold; the icy ground is treacherous; you’re liable to do yourself harm. We’ll search tomorrow when we can better watch our footing. And as you yourself just now stated, he may have taken refuge, or found a wagoneer - ”

“It’s my father’s safety and not his daughter’s that’s at issue here, Mr. Simms,” she counters with the same determination. “You’re the one who employed the term ‘missing’. My father’s only fifty-one, as you well know.

He's in the best of health. If he fell into the water as you just suggested, he would swim; he would call out; he would save himself." Martha stops herself. She can hear how emotional she's grown. Such a display would not please Lemuel Beale. "And my father will never forgive *me*, Mr. Simms, if I neglect my filial duties. Now, please assemble the servants. And let us bring some fortified wine and warm clothes with us, should we find he has endured an unfortunate accident."

THE CRUNCH OF BOOTS ON frozen earth is the dominant sound. There are no words, no coughing, no whistling, no throats cleared, just the slap of leather marching across the ice-coated soil. Accompanying this merciless noise is the quick chuff of wool rubbed against similar pieces of cloth: knees and cuffs of trousers, coat sleeves, and Martha's long pelisse hurrying over the ground. Like the others, she grips a lantern whose flame sizzles and flares in the bitter air. Beside her is Jacob, leading the party. "There, Miss Beale." He points to the rise. "Dogs there. Basket, rifle below." It's the first time since departing Beale House that anyone has spoken.

They descend to the river's edge, stumbling and slipping on the bank's slick stones. The lanterns bob uneasily as arms and bodies struggle to keep balance. The fires hiss, adding to the noisy suck and pull of the water speeding past. Martha finds herself forced to shout. "Show us the place, Jacob."

Sure enough, there's the creel. Jacob points to it proudly. "And the rifle?" Owen Simms asks, but Jacob's hand merely indicates an empty nest of rocks.

"There's nothing there, man!" Simms's sharp inflection bears the mark of his anxiety.

Martha turns to Jacob, lowering her light so that it won't glare into his eyes. "I know you to be a loyal servant to my father, Jacob. Perhaps you were mistaken about seeing the weapon?"

"Jacob see." He points again. Martha follows the gesture.

"Perhaps a wave carried it off?" she offers.

"And not the creel, Martha?" Simms interjects. "Surely, the water would more readily sweep away a wicker-work object than one fashioned of metal."

Martha has no response; Simms is correct, of course.

She studies the forsaken creel, the empty rocks; beyond them the night-cloaked river seems to spread out endlessly, an ocean of murderous rapids and currents without landfall or hope of salvation. She feels as though she were standing at the last known edge of the universe. Tears start into her eyes, then freeze upon her cheeks.

Shakily she lifts her lamp and extends her arm, hoping its gleam may cast light farther afield, but the fire cannot penetrate the inky blackness. She sees only the chilblained faces and frightened eyes of her father's servants.

“And the dogs were up on the hillock, Jacob?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Not here beside the water?”

Jacob glances at the promontory. “Watching.”

Martha turns her back to the hilltop, staring riverward as she imagines the dogs did. What did they see? she wonders. What might they have heard? Why would they so diligently wait if it were not for the imminent return of their master?

“This is a futile effort, Martha,” Simms tells her as he pushes through the huddled throng. “It's far too dark. We

will continue our hunt tomorrow.”

“No, Mr. Simms. We must search the shoreline tonight - all night, if need be. If Father did lose his footing... if... if he were carried downstream before struggling free of the current- ”

“Martha, I beseech you; listen to reason - ”

“I am, Mr. Simms!” Martha fights back. “I am heeding the voice of my own heart.”

“Then let me go on alone with the other men, and you return to the warmth and comfort of your father’s house.”

“I cannot permit that, Mr. Simms.” Then she adds a more diplomatic “Surely, you must understand my sentiments.”

Martha doesn’t wait for a reply. Instead, the grim party moves forward one by one, boots bumping over the riverine rocks while the lights jostle flame into the night. The color is a vibrant white, and in the frigid air seems to become compacted and brilliant like molten glass thrust into chilled water. There’s little sound save for the searchers’ nervous breaths, the course chafe of their clothing, their shoes abrading the ground, and, far off from

Martha, a number of grumbled curses. Her father might give employment to many, but he's not a man blessed with either love or fidelity in return.

She walks apart from Owen Simms, urging the others on by example as they scan the water's edge, the lesser streams that cut a meandering path into the larger river, the glades that suddenly appear within the forest, the underbrush where a spent body might lie in exhaustion and desolation. Nothing. No sign of dislodged creek pebbles, no clutched at and broken branches. As far as they tramp there's no sign of Lemuel Beale.

Finally, Martha stands erect. The little group has traveled a mile and a half only, an arduous journey that has consumed half the night. "We'll go home," she announces in a subdued and hopeless voice. "Perhaps my father did gain the opposite shore. Perhaps the current was running so fast he was carried several miles toward Philadelphia before freeing himself. Mr. Simms and I will contact the local constabulary in the morning. They will have further plans, I'm sure." Then she extends her hand to each of the servants. "I thank you," she tells them in a somber tone. "You have performed a great service tonight. I will make

certain my father learns of your generosity.”

DAWN APPEARS GRAY AND BLEAK. Above the fanciful turrets and gables of Beale House, above its freshly quarried stone and tall tracery windows, its balconies, its verandas and parterre gardens, the threat of snow lowers in the sky. Martha rises after a brief and sleepless night, although she doesn't ring for her maid to assist her in her morning ablutions. Instead, she laces her corset herself, slips into her endless underskirts, and pulls on the same cashmere dress she wore the day before. Owen Simms will remark upon her negligence, but Martha doesn't care. In fact, she experiences a brief glow of rebellious anger at her daring.

Then her mind immediately retreats to duty; and she picks up the silver-handled tortoise-shell brush, and begins attending to the long, chestnut-colored hair that's her secret pride. She counts the strokes as she goes: ten... twelve... twenty... before her hand stops midair. *What use is dressing my hair?* she demands in growing bitterness and wrath. *What use is a silk cap trimmed with lace and flowers? Or finding my satin slippers? Or donning the gold*

locket Father gave me? What use is breakfast, or conversation, or practicing my daily notes on the piano? What use is this room? This handsome house?

Martha stares at the brush in her hand, then swiftly returns it to its mates: the comb, the buttonhook, the pot of lavender-scented cream. Her fingers are shaking uncontrollably. Her chest is now heaving also, and she places a hand above her heart to steady herself. *Father doesn't approve of theatrics*, she repeats under her breath.

Then she walks to the frost-clouded windows. The vista of frozen lawns and fields marching imperiously toward the river is absolute. In the somber light, the Schuylkill's frenzied state lies hidden beneath a veneer as slick and brutal as steel.

"Father," Martha murmurs at length; as she speaks the name she realizes that it's inconceivable that Lemuel Beale should be gone.

end of chapter one

Cordelia Frances Biddle
www.cordeliafrancesbiddle.com