

❖ Two

PERCHED HIGH ON A CLIFF overlooking the Potomac, the main house was nearly a mile ahead. The boy strolled beneath a canopy of ancient, towering trees, choosing the most direct route over the wider path used by wagons. There was a peacefulness here, similar to what one would encounter in a small chapel. The day was warm, but the meager, lacy sunlight filtering down from above did not overheat him on his journey.

When he finally reached a clearing, an expansive meadow greeted him. The scents of wildflowers and grass assaulted his nostrils and replaced the musky smell of the woods. Heat radiated off the grass in waves, as he stepped out of the shadow of the trees. The main house, prominently showcased at the end of the greenbelt, appeared to be a mirage.

William could scarcely believe the glorious splendor of the estate and its surrounding gardens. He had heard his mother speak of the plantation, but mere words could not have prepared him for the beauty and elegance of the home of his father's friend. William was accustomed to a certain degree of opulence, but the vista as he stepped out of the woods took his breath away. His heart beat rapidly in trepidation, but he also felt oddly at peace. Gathering his courage, he followed the wider road leading to the house and the stables.

Leaving the road, he entered the English box tree gardens east of the main house. The grounds were meticulously maintained, very precise, he noted. Strolling toward the house, William encountered a small girl that greeted him with a warm, mischievous smile and demanded, "Please state your business here at Stratford Hall."

William thought this an odd reception, but played along with the girl, "My dear lady, I have come to call on the Lee family of Stratford Hall. I

would like to speak to Mr. Richard Henry Lee if you please. You may tell him that Master William Robinson of London is here to see him.”

The snippet giggled, pleased that William was playing along with her, “I’m sorry, sir, but Mr. Richard Henry Lee resides at Chantilly, a plantation just up that road. This is the residence of his brother, Mr. Philip Ludwell Lee.”

“In that case, would it be possible to speak with Mr. Philip Ludwell Lee?” inquired William.

“Daddy, I mean Mr. Philip Ludwell Lee, is surveying the grounds this afternoon, but you might speak with the mistress of the manner, Mrs. Elizabeth Steptoe Lee. She is inside, awaiting my appearance at dinner.”

“Then, indeed, it would be my great pleasure to speak to Mrs. Lee if that may be arranged,” William proclaimed as he offered the young lady his arm. “I fear I am at a disadvantage, Miss, for you know my moniker, but I do not know yours.”

“Matilda Lee, at your service” the girl smiled confidently as she took his arm, displaying poise beyond her years.

Matilda led William through the garden and around to the south stairway. Apparently, Matilda was still at her game and wanted her new friend to have the full effect of the glorious Great Hall. The hall was furnished in Queen Anne and Chippendale, in the most vibrant of fabrics. The seventeen-foot-high tray ceiling gave the room a feeling of breathtaking expanse and, nestled between applied pilasters, imposing portraits of the Lee family greeted guests. William’s home had always been furnished in the most fashionable decor that London could offer, yet this room was like no other room William had seen.

Departing the Great Hall, the pair found Mrs. Lee and Matilda’s three-year-old sister, Flora, in the Green Room. “This is Master William Robinson of London here to call on father or Uncle Richard,” Matilda announced.

Mrs. Lee looked at William as if he were a stray pup that her daughter had brought home. She was a bit annoyed at his sudden appearance

just as the main meal was about to be served, but her heartstrings were gently tugged by the lost soul before her eyes.

“And why is it you’ve come to speak with the gentleman of the Manor, young man?” she questioned.

“My father, Mr. John Robinson, was well acquainted with your husband, and he was a close friend of Mr. Richard Henry Lee while they studied in London. My parents have departed this Earth, and I have decided to try my fortune here in the colonies. I was hoping for some guidance in this endeavor from the prominent Lee brothers,” William respectfully submitted.

At that moment, Philip Ludwell Lee, known to his friends and family as Col. Phil, entered the room. His presence filled the room and made William feel like a small child. Flora and Matilda, however, were not intimidated and ran up to greet their Daddy. It was left to Mrs. Lee to explain the presence of the forlorn looking wayfarer.

“Yes, my boy, I knew your father. He was in the lower group at Eton and I was in the upper. It is unusual for an association to form amid the classes, as those junior, by custom, are kept in their place. But your father was quite exuberant, not one to keep his place. It made him a favorite of all, with the exception of the tutors.”

William had never heard the likes of this regarding his father, and was immediately reminded of the troubles with his stepfather. William had never been one to keep his place; he smiled to himself.

“Father, not behaving properly with the tutors?” he asked in awe.

“Don’t get me wrong, lad. Your father learned his lessons, so as not to endanger his lot at Eton, but he brought excitement to an otherwise dull term. By the time my brother, Richard Henry, entered Wakefield as a lower-classman, your father had been raised to legendary status in English Academia. I sent Richard along with a letter of introduction and I made certain that he call upon your father in London. John Robinson took good care of my little brother. He was a fine man, and our family mourned his passing. Your mother was the most kind and genteel of ladies. Theirs was a true love that was cut tragically short.”

William's heart soared at hearing the Colonel's kind remembrances. His mother had failed to impart knowledge of his father's mischievous side, perhaps to rein in the same tendencies she glimpsed in her son.

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