

THE STORY OF FAIRVIEW

by

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The story goes that during the Revolutionary War the English General Cornwallis passed through the up-country of South Carolina after the Battle of King's Mountain. Surveying the area near Winnsboro, he commented, "These be fair fields!" Hence the name of Fairfield County. When the war was over a Sergeant John Means of the Continental forces brought his family to settle in South Carolina and eventually bought a 400-acre plantation reaching from the Ashford-Ferry road to the Broad River. The home he built on the highest hill in that part of Fairfield County was called Fairview. Begun in 1805 and completed in 1808, it was a handsome Federal style house with plastered brick walls 18 inches thick. The shingled roof was laid on hand-hewn beams and put together with handmade nails. Over the front door, molded in the plaster, hovered the proud symbol of the new republic, an eagle whose wings spread the width of the door. The many windows looked out over a flower garden full of moss roses, violets, tuberoses and crepe myrtle. The front stoop led to a walkway down to the garden gate. Fruit trees and kitchen garden were planted on two other sides and at the back were found the separate kitchen, smoke house, hen house and farther away the barn and other outbuildings. Water came from a deep well in the side yard sheltered by tall old cedar trees. The wooden well bucket on a windlass dropped 83 feet to draw up cold crystal clear water.

The rooms inside the house were large and elegant although there were not many of them. To the right and left of the entrance hall were two imposing high-ceilinged rooms dominated by massive fireplaces over 8 feet wide, large enough to burn logs of cordwood without cutting them. One bedroom upstairs over the parlor was the same size with an equally huge fireplace. In the parlor the walls were wainscoted in imported wood with white plaster above it. A large molded plaster laurel wreath encircling a petaled flower occupied most of the ceiling. It was a home of simple elegance.

John Means did not get to enjoy his new home for long. Three years after the building was finished he died and was buried in a plot a few hundred yards from the walls of the house.

In 1841 the Means' home and plantation were purchased by William Blair who moved his family from Virginia to South Carolina. The fertile river lands produced corn and the uplands cotton, worked by 100 slaves. Among them was "Aunt Nellie," a house servant and cook who had come from Virginia with the Blair family and lived to be 100 years old. Another valued servant was Dick, a sort of majordomo who had been raised in "the big house" and was a man of dignified presence. During the dark days of the Civil War when all the men were away fighting, Dick managed Fairview plantation and those of two or three Blair relatives.

Fairview's hospitable roof sheltered all who came, not only friends and family, but many strangers who needed shelter and care. Mary Blair Frazier, a daughter of William Blair, made her home here with her little son, James Blair Frazier, whose father had died two months before his birth. Life moved as normally as possible during the war as the plantation was relatively isolated from the main paths taken by the battling armies. On Friday, February 17, 1865, William Blair, now an elderly man unable to enlist in the Confederate Army, had gathered his family and some neighbors around him. All day the gusty wind had moaned around

the walls of the big house on the hill. Faces were serious and conversation subdued. The Union Army under General Sherman was reported to be near Columbia, just 40 miles to the south. As the sun set behind ragged wind-torn clouds, the children in a group, including 7-year-old Jimmie, sought the comfort of the yawning fireplace out in the log kitchen where Aunt Nellie was cooking over the spits and coals. The children's questions this evening failed to bring the usual cheerful response from the old woman. She shook her grizzled white head and poked in the ashes and muttered under her breath from time to time. Restlessly she pattered over to the door and peered out into the night.

"Luk deh!" she exclaimed pointing a shaking finger toward the south.

The children crowding behind her into the doorway, frightened without knowing why, saw a strange light glowing far away and reflecting lurid orange flashes in the clouds.

"Dat whut I tell you, hits him, dat ole Sherman, him de debbil! He in de saddle and he ridin hard. He gonna bun up de wyte foks - all un um!"

The children burst out the door and ran terror stricken toward the back door of the house. Little Jimmie was pushed down and left behind by the fleeing older children. Then a strange thing happened--as if pulled by an unseen hand, Jimmie found himself drawn toward the wooden door that led down under the house into the muddy, dark cellar where the milk crocks were kept in a pool of always-cool-water at the back. Right down into the fearful blackness Jimmie went, back into the farthest corner where he fell on his knees in terror. His 7-year-old mind flew to the God his mother often talked to him about and he called to Him for protection from a danger he didn't fully understand. Suddenly he seemed to hear a voice telling him he was safe and a soft light glowed around him. Jimmie wasn't afraid any longer and got up and went quietly into the house.

There was very little sleep in "the big house" that night. In a window upstairs, Grandfather Blair watched the rise and fall of the fiery light as it spread in the south. All the women and children pressed around him, the little ones sitting on the wide window sills and pressing their faces against the panes. They sensed the horror the grown-ups tried to suppress as they realized that the Union forces were burning their capital city, Columbia. Up from the servant quarters came an increasing volume of lamentations and frantic calls for Heaven's mercy. They fully believed old Aunt Nellie's warning that the Devil was setting the earth on fire. Once William Blair went down to his servants to try to reassure them. All night the red glare lit the scene around the house and inside the upper rooms.

Next day came the reports rolling from plantation to plantation--Sherman not only burned Columbia's beautiful old homes, public buildings but even the Ursaline Convent. His soldiers had pillaged and destroyed, insulted black and white alike especially women and girls. And now they were heading for Fairfield County. The day dragged on with increasing reports of vandalism and robbery. Wild stories spread among the slaves, and among the whites crept the fear of that unspoken horror, a slave uprising. However, the faithful Dick took over and early in the morning called some of the field hands to take the cattle to the river and hide them on an island. Meat from the smoke house was hidden in the woods and the household silver turned over to Dick to bury in a safe place.

Dread had no time to cool, the Yankees came, but not exactly as expected. At mid-morning the sound of hoofs thudding along the Strother Road came closer and closer--a cavalry troop was coming at a gallop! Out of the woods they swept. The horsemen in two columns circled the hill and rode up to Fairview's garden gate. Little Jimmie was agog at the sight of the splendidly mounted soldiers whose jingling spurs and blue uniforms flashing with brass buttons were the finest he had ever seen. A big handsome officer resplendent in gold braid rode forward. Grandfather Blair came out the front door and with unbending dignity walked slowly down the path to the gate while the ladies watched fearfully from the upstairs windows. The officer and the planter faced each other and somehow they looked strangely alike. There was a tense moment of silence as the two men took measure of each other. The officer broke the silence.

"I saw your house from the ridge over yonder," he tapped the field glasses at his belt and pointed to the hills across the river, "when I inquired, I was told it was the Blair home. Are you Mr. Blair?"

"I am," was the curt reply.

"I am General Frank Blair of Pennsylvania," continued the officer in an affable tone. "I am very much interested in Blair history. We Pennsylvania Blairs are related to the Virginia Blairs. Your family came from Virginia, I believe."

The northern Blair gazed in astonishment at the change his words brought about in the planter. The old man straightened his aging body, his eyes flashed and his firmly pressed lips curled in scorn. Like bolts of summer lightning the memories of four long years of deprivations, death and danger flashed through his mind. Deliberately his hand went to his waistcoat pocket and drew out his pearl handled knife. Slowly opening the blade, he held it up before the General's eyes.

"Do you see this knife?" he asked scornfully. "If I thought I had a single drop of Yankee blood in my veins, I'd take this knife and cut them open and let every last drop run out on the ground!" (This cultivated Christian gentleman would never have used the word "damn" to preface "Yankee.")

There was an ominous hush. Jimmie's heart beat hard as he watched from the path behind his Grandfather. He was holding his breath in anticipation of what would come next. Saddles creaked in the silence and then the General's horse pranced and did a double spin. Reining him back under control, General Blair said, "I suppose some people might feel that way about it." Then he added, "The foragers will be coming this way soon--they might start a fire up there," indicating the house. "Will you have a guard?"

Indignation had thrown caution to the wind as the old man retorted, "Nothing from you! If you want to burn it, then burn it! Your scoundrels have burned everything else in their path!"

The General lifted his eyes to the facade of the house as the owner pointed and there rested on the proud eagle of his country's seal standing out in bold relief above the lintel of the door. He gazed for a moment then wheeled his horse and touching spurs to its flanks galloped back down the hill as his troop followed in an orderly double column behind him. Jimmie stared fascinated as they departed down the road to Rock Creek.

At the edge of the woods the General reined his horse under a big pine. His officers gathered around him, faces grim with indignation. "General, are you going to stand for talk like that? Let's go back and burn the old Rebel out." General Blair lifted his eyes to the house on the hill, then turned to his men, half frowning, half grinning, "Listen here, if he had talked any other way he would not have been a Blair. He's my kin, all right." Then he called to his aide, "Major, send a man back up there with orders that the first man who puts a torch to that house will be court-martialed!" and off he rode.

The foragers did come. They found and drove off the stock from the island. They found the meat and took it all. Their horses trampled the kitchen garden as they looked for the kegs of molasses in the kitchen shed. They couldn't take them away on horseback, so they poured sand through the bungholes and left them. They searched the house for valuables, but found none. Then one of the "hands" told on Dick--he had hidden "Marse William's stuff" and also that of several other nearby families. Single handed he had put it in a safe place and not a soul, white or black, knew what he had done with it. Dick took great pride in being steward of all his master owned. He was easily found as he made no attempt to hide. When the soldiers surrounded him he readily admitted having hid the valuables, in fact he bragged about it. All they could get out of him by cajolery was that the belongings of different families were in "different places."

Then they tried bribery. "Didn't we come down here to set you people free? Is this the way you are going to repay us?"

Apparently it was. Another horseman made another try. "If you want a good job, and a good house to live in, and a chance to make plenty of money go dig up that stuff and come go with us."

All they got in return for their efforts was, "Ise satisfied with what I got. 'Dis my home."

The leader of the troop lost his patience. His hand went to the hilt of his sabre and the blade flashed from the scabbard. "Look here, you old black fool, if you don't tell us where those things are, I'll cut your kinky head off." With a dextrous backhand move the blade swished over Dick's bare head and although his heart was pounding, he didn't flinch. "Now where's those things?" his tormentor demanded.

"I dun tol yuh I ain't gonna tel yuh--kill me if yuh wanna, dat won't get you nuttin." The black man stood his ground stubbornly.

Once more the trooper, raising the blade high and standing up in his stirrups demanded, "Where'd you hid that stuff?"

The slave's lips were visibly pressed together as he stood in silence. Down came the sabre in a sweeping, hissing curve over Dick's head. A finger breadth of miscalculation and his scalp and skull would have been severed. The watching troopers flinched at the rashness of the slash.

"Aw, leave him alone, Bill," blurted one of the men, "you are going to get us all in trouble with the Provost."

With one baleful look at the brave black man whose secrets of the whereabouts of the white folks' treasures were still buried in his sturdy chest, the would-be robber angrily spurred his horse and went in pursuit of the fast retreating raiders. The household silver was saved by loyal Dick and the house itself by the fierce eagle over the door.

Fairview remained in the Frazier family as Jimmie inherited it when Grandfather Blair died. The plantation fell on hard times when the slaves left and Jimmie, with the help of only a few who remained as hired hands, continued to raise cotton and a little corn and prize watermelons, which were shipped to Washington by the freight car load. The hospitable home often echoed to the laughter and running feet of children and young people. Jimmie Frazier had married Marian Mobley Willingham, a school teacher. She lovingly took care of her mother-in-law, Mary Blair Frazier, who lived with the couple until her death. At Fairview the Fraziers raised their own two children and three of the orphaned children of Minnie's brother, putting each of them through college in turn.

Jimmie Frazier's only son Jim inherited Fairview in the 1950's but never lived there. Now the fourth generation owners have abandoned it to fall into ruins haunted perhaps by the ghosts of the Means and Blairs who treasured it.