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“MORE POETICAL THAN TRUE”

FLORIDA, 1842–1850

Mary Edwards lived in Middle Florida’s Jefferson and Gadsden Counties until the age of 10. Born in the wake of an 1839 Indian attack, her earliest recollections easily qualified as dramatic ones. They commenced with a distraught young wife whose husband was to be hanged desperately seeking the comfort of Mary’s family amid calamity. Then, the terrified husband—a convicted accomplice to murder—appeared suddenly at the Edwards home seeking a haven from an angry mob’s fury. “Poor [Michael] Ledwith was innocent as a lamb,” Mary recollected, “and every thoughtful citizen was rejoiced when, at the very last moment, there came a pardon from the Governor.” She added, “But the crowd of sight-lovers who had ‘come to see the hanging’ considered themselves shamefully cheated and expressed their dissatisfaction so unpleasantly that the pardoned man escaped from the city and spent the day with my father at Castle Folly.”¹

Such recollections are not the ones usually expected of a privileged three-year-old daughter of planter parents living on an Old South cotton plantation, a circumstance that highlights the unusual nature of Mary’s childhood. The subjects and attitudes in which she took special interest necessarily differed in nature and quality from those of many contemporary female authors. True, she penned accounts of youthful joy. But those moments came at a very steep price. She proved not all hesitant to emphasize the dark side of her experience with honesty and realism that leapt over the decades.

Counter to that tendency, in later life Mary often found it useful, particularly in the mass-audience novels she penned following *Wild Work* (1881) and in the publicity connected with them, to re-create a past by which she could claim the mythic, romantic, and potentially lucrative mantle of untainted Old South respectability. Thus, she might characterize her lineage as "excellent and honorable." Her father ranked as "a respectable and influential planter," while all considered her mother Louisa to be "an accomplished and talented lady." The Edwards family home dominated the hilltop on which it sat as "a large, rambling country house." As one journalist wrote, "In this beautiful and picturesque old place, with its high, moss-grown walls, its stately rooms, with wain-scotted oak walls and rude carvings in mahogany, the velvet-eyed girl, always called 'Gypsy,' spent her childhood." Mary's early education, such accounts typically insisted, was learned from "a mother whose keen insight and ambition laid the foundation upon which, later on, the young girl built the structure of a brilliant and honored life." However much Mary appreciated Louisa's tutelage as "a gentle, loving daughter," the girl turned to her father for loving parenting. "In truth she was the son of her father," one sketch observed. Another added: "As he had no son, her father made a companion of his little daughter. She accompanied him on his hunting and fishing excursions, and in rowing on the waters of the Mexican Gulf, upon the coast of which the family spent some months of every year." Otherwise, the joys of a youth in a semi-tropical countryside prevailed. "Her childhood was much given to out-door sports and exercise, to horseback rides through the wild woods that surrounded her home, and dreamy roamings from one favorite haunt to another—face to face and heart to heart always with Nature," a biographer claimed. "To this free life and these healthful habits, she may trace, in a great measure, the sturdy vitality which marks her writings."²

Mary aimed through such projections to fashion a mask that would aid attempts to find needed markets for her work and in the process give her entree to social and business circles from which she otherwise might have been excluded. Her attempts did not always succeed, as a few perceptive biographers saw through the ruse. "Mary was a lonely, shy, sensitive child," one writer bluntly articulated. Her home constituted little more than "a large isolated plantation." Mary meanwhile longed to reveal her intimate self, doing so bit by bit, especially during her early years. Yearning to express herself realistically, she found no subject more appropriate than her own story. "My strange, shy childhood," she declared

as early as 1857, “passed in almost utter seclusion from the world in a great, gloomy castle-like home, with its three stories of spacious rooms and echoing passages, its one dark chamber, over whose dimly lighted threshold there fell a shadow and a fear, its broad, high steps and winding stair-cases and its arched basement, over whose brick walls clambered the dark leaves of the ivy.”³

As she ultimately disclosed, as a child, Mary sought “refuges” from her “gloomy” home. She reminisced particularly about the plantation’s barn as her “quiet and comfortable” place of retreat. “The dearest and sweetest recollections of my life cluster around the ample walls and hay-piled floor of an old barn in a country farm-yard,” she explained. “Oh, what blessed hours of solitude I have there enjoyed!” Mary continued:

What delicious reveries—what golden dreams I have there revealed in! What air castles I have built—what tears I have shed with my arm around my pet kitten and her pitying eyes raised to mine—those wonderful eyes! they had in them such a look of intelligence—such a depth of *human* feeling—and once nothing could have shaken my belief, that when I wept they were filled with tears—that my poor dumb companion understood and sympathized with me in my distress—yes, distress; for they err who believe that childhood has no real sorrow. It has griefs as intense and difficult to be borne as those of maturer age. The little heart is often swelled to bursting because it is so lightly regarded—so little understood,

“The tear down childhood’s cheek that flows,
Is like the dew drop on the rose”—

is a couplet often more poetical than true; for childish sorrows, unalleviated by tender sympathy, frequently rankle in the sensitive heart and cast a baneful blight over the young, unfolding nature.⁴

Other “refuges” sheltered the lonely child. The nearby home of her widowed grandmother, Mary Braddock Edwards, became one of them. “Oh! memories of . . . a brown cottage, with its trellised sword beans and morning glories, and of . . . a dear, blessed grandmother rise before me now,” she described. “That quiet, country home, with its mulberry trees, and the rich green fields lying around it,” Mary continued, “was the scene of many happy hours of my early life and my refuge in girlhood, when tired of gay company and idle flirtations.” She added, “The low meadow that lay just beyond the garden, and the creek that ran through it, fringed

with willows and rippling over half covered muscle shells, the mulberry trees in the front yard, beneath the shadow of whose broad leaves the rich butter was churned on summer mornings, the hay-stacks with their inexhaustible stores of hen's nests, and the dear little cottage, with its spotless floors, its white curtains and chintz lounges, and the mistress of this pleasant domain, flying her shining knitting needles in her snowy cap and gingham apron, as she sat in her usual seat by the doorway—all these are pictures of the past that will live in my memory forever."⁵

Where memory idealized a grandmother's modest cottage, similar words of praise for Castle Folly seemed beyond her creative power. Within its walls the precocious child idolized her father and hungered for his nurturing and companionship. John Edwards, though, could not satisfy those needs. Instead, in the 1840s Mary often confronted loneliness and disappointment alone as pressing business and personal affairs distracted her father and required his long absences from home. Similarly, Mary appreciated grand qualities in her mother but joy with life seemingly eluded the parent. Instead, Louisa kept to home and herself while possibly suffering, at least occasionally, from mental illness. She tutored her daughter, teaching the brilliant child to read and write. In Mary's subsequent attempts at re-creation, those lessons were translated into crediting Louisa for all of her early education, an achievement that—she insisted—came without formal schooling. Such had not been the case.⁶

Mary's home-life frustrations achieved partial release each year at another refuge, one that permitted her to retain childhood memories of life with her parents of a much happier nature than Castle Folly afforded. Typically, each September the Edwardses relocated for a month or two to the Florida coast south of Tallahassee. Locals called the place Chaires Island and, by the 1840s, James Island. Not an island in the traditional sense, this enclave of semi-tropical expanse and water lay at the confluence of the Ochlockonee and Sopchoppy Rivers. The Chaires family had erected several rough "summer houses" on Ochlockonee Bay. "I turned longing thoughts towards the safest retreat I knew of—a tiny island off the Florida coast—an oasis of cedar and palmetto dropped in the blue brine of the Mexic gulf, with never a track on the white sand-shore save the print of the pelican's feet or the trail of the oviparous turtle," Mary recalled lovingly. "There one might stoically endure the burden of life to the end in a seclusion which fellow-jackalls would hardly invade." In the seclusion, the little girl explored, fished the pond, prowled the wilderness, plaited palmetto fronds, dug vegetables from wild gardens, picked

flowers, played to her heart's content, and exhausted herself in adventures. At least temporarily she could purge her young soul of emotions she was too young to comprehend properly.⁷

At James Island, Mary also experienced an epiphany, stumbling as a child across her muse—at least her muse for poetry. “There are few things grander than a summer storm with lightning and rain and rolling thunder,” she reflected in 1883. “Tonight I recalled one stormy evening on James’ Island, off the Florida coast.” She continued: “The great cloud rose from the east as the sun dropped into the sea, wrapping, like Caesar, his bloody mantle (of cloud) about him. And when I heard the thunder and saw the electric fire lances, the gypsy in me sent me out from the home shelter, flying across the waste of sand and palmetto and sea-myrtle to an old deserted house—we had dubbed it haunted, because of finding there a horned owl and a black cat.” Mary added detail. “There on a high platform near the door, piled with rock-moss which had been a bed probably, I sat and luxuriated in the rain and the wind that tossed and bent the pines and lashed the waves flashing whitely in the illuminating lightning. I forgot darkness and night, and even supper and friend fish, till a hand fell on my shoulder and a tall figure—it seemed preternaturally tall in the dim light—stood beside me.” She added:

I was never “scary,” but my head was filled with wild visions just then, and a thought of the Father of Evil as painted by Milton, flashed upon me.

“He above the rest.

In Shape and gesture proudly eminent
Stood like a tower.”

Had Lucifer come to me in the lightnings?

“Child, what are you doing here?”

Never did spirit of evil have that deep, mellow-sweet voice. It could be only my uncle's [Louisa Houghton Edwards's brother and Florida senator Robert Barrett Houghton]. I clung to him nervously.

“I was only watching the lightning. It is making ladders of fire down from the castles and battlements of that cloud-city which you cannot see until there comes a flash. Just now I thought I saw an angel with white wings descend swift as thought on the ladder.”

He clasped me closer.

“Child, I am afraid you will be a——.”

"A what, uncle?" fearing he would say something dreadful.

"A poet."

"Oh!" The word thrilled me. "Oh, if I might be! They crowned poets,—in the old days, Sappho, Tasso, Homer and all those—their pictures wear laurel-crowns."

"Yet one of them flung herself from the rocks into the sea, another went mad in despair at the cruelty of fate, and the third you have named was a blind beggar, and like Christ—truest poet of them all—had not where to lay his head. The world gives crowns to her poets, but they are crowns of thorns."

That sad, rich voice! I can hear it now. Its slightest utterance could thrill an assembly. I felt as though the mantle of a great, sorrowful destiny had fallen upon me. Awed, yet thrilled, I whispered to my own heart.

"And shall I too be a poet?"⁸

Whether at James Island or Castle Folly, Mary depended upon the care and attention of slaves. If her relatively few subsequent references to them are any indication, the men, women, and children who filled her daily life and whose work made it possible posed a quandary to the young girl. Some of the memories were happy ones, but they also included little-understood emotions and emotional reactions that ranged, in her recollection, from mild concern to fear and abhorrence. She fondly recalled cook Aunt Allsie's "turkey bread" and other treats. Bodyguard Hamp, in contrast, "was the most arrant coward I ever saw." Daddy Jim might have been "good-natured to a fault" and "a gentle old man," but "he never saw a fat baby without having the feeling come over him that he would like to bake it 'like possum' and eat it." Clarissy seemed "little better than an animal." To Mary, these caregivers upon whom she depended were "an enigma—the most puzzling study that can be imagined." She observed: "[The negro's] nature is strangely contradictory. Good and bad elements meet and mingle in it, and one can never predict what his conduct will be under given circumstances."⁹

Mary's ambivalence toward the family slaves appeared evident when she recalled her nurse, Maum Nannie (sometimes Aunt Nanny or Maum Fannie). She could insist, on the one hand, that this primary caregiver appeared to her "the most devoted, affectionate and cheerful-spirited negro I ever knew." She could reminisce about how the slave's "big needle mended the rents in the new calico torn by riding pine-limb horses,