

The Colonel's Visit

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An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning

will not be blessed at the end.

Proverbs 20:21

May 13, 1773. The river grows louder at twilight. The fading light amplifies the noises that go unnoticed when all your senses are about you. The lull of creaking ships and the waves that softly crash about them are clearest when your eyes cannot see them.

Will Harding stands on Cannon Street, leaning with one hand on a post, patiently waiting. Five men on horses round the corner of Princess Street, and continue toward the servant man along an impressive new brick tenement, attaching to an older, similarly remarkable brick home. They stop along the home's southwest entrance, where two of the men quickly dismount to tend to the other men's horses with Will. The others step down and move towards the door. The third is much taller than the other two, and lowers his head, as not to hit it on the doorframe. He straightens his neck and looks up at the beautiful home he has just entered.

A pair of stairs flanks the guests, ascending to a landing that further leads to the sleeping quarters. There is a Persian rug that had been ordered from a friend of the owner—another merchant—that not only softens steps but also pleases the eye. The room has a muted glow from the candles that rest upon two tables, placed next to both stairways. Two small paneled doors, one at each side of the entrance, are used to store hats and sometimes coats when the weather calls for it.

The tall visitor is greeted by the son and namesake of a late friend and business acquaintance named Thomas Ringgold and his young wife, Mary Galloway Ringgold originally of Tulip Hill. The visitor is familiar with the young Mrs. Ringgold, as he also did business with her father and welcomed him, along with the elder Ringgold, at his home in Virginia. The tall visitor had even been entertained at Mary's childhood home, but not as much as the visitor's teenage step-son, who had seen many celebrations in the

Galloway household in Annapolis, for he wished to see more of Mary's young sister, Anne.

A servant named Sue entered the room through a hallway to the visitor's left to take his hat. Without as much as a word, the visitor bent his wrist, angling it out to the servant who does not lift her eyes from the floor as she collects the hats, placed them in the right closet and disappeared back down the northeast corridor. The Ringgolds' young children poured down the stairs, closely shadowed by their old nurse named Betty, looking curiously at the large man who stands in their home. Even children were awed by the presence this man possesses—his ability to attract all attention to wherever he stands. The visitor offers them a half-smile and compliments Mr. Ringgold on his home.

“It truly is a magnificent place we have constructed here,” Mr. Ringgold said. “We have held this home for six years though the room we stand in now was erected only two years prior. My father acquired what is the original structure from one Dr. William Murray who constructed the first section facing the Chester in 1743,” though the young Ringgold dared not to brag about the price—a hefty 800 pounds sterling—in front of the visitor, who is a far wealthier man than Ringgold. He dismisses the thought and continues, “when our family refashioned it, besides adding these wings, the center wall dividing the original northeast rooms had to be felled, along with the joint fireplace. We then bricked the garden door, and constructed a new fireplace along the rear wall. It was quite a task but well worth the effort. The home was pleasant, but not marvelous. To speak plainly, the prior conditions were not as *wide* as I would have liked, but I enjoy it presently.”

“Certainly,” said the visitor's stepson with the overdone charm of a young man.

Mary invites, "Please, you must see for yourself and join us in the parlor." The group obliges and walks through the doorway on the right, as Thomas notes that it was once the stairwell to Murray's home. After the Ringgolds fashioned a doorframe to the extension (another for the tall visitor to duck through) and fixed the ceiling, they had patched the cellar door with brick and lined the attic with wood panels. The servants did not dare not to use the main stairs, and now use a passage along the northeast side of Ringgold's new building to a staircase that takes them to the cellar to fetch goods or to the attic to fetch sleep.

Moving through another similarly decorated but smaller entryway with a door facing the Chester River, the company enters the northeast parlor. The visitor thinks it is beautifully paneled, admires the large windows and decoration in the fashion a man of his wealth is accustomed to. His eyes then fix upon Mary's garden with spring's flowers still in bloom and ballast stones resting against the property wall facing the river. As close as the water is to the home, the visitor thinks of the wall's protective purpose, imagining water crashing up against it in a storm. In a short while, the talk turns to the reason the men were passing through: to see the visitor's young stepson off to King's College in New York. Education becomes the subject, which the visitor does not have much knowledge of, but leads into a discussion of the Kent County Free School and its former instructor, who happens to be the father of a favored painter of his.

"We all do admire Mr. Peale very much so," mentions Mary.

"I sat for him in full colonel's dress less than a year ago," says the visitor. "I was very well pleased with the result."

Mr. Ringgold then invites the colonel and his party to the southwest parlor, to enjoy some drinks and another room. It has grown dark out, and two women servants silently move about, drawing the striped imported curtains and lighting more candles. The group continues their conversation past them, seemingly oblivious to the servants who scurry by.

Decorated in a similar style, the southwest parlor is also paneled and painted with a golden tint, a color that pleases the colonel. Through the large windows, the party can hear the day's end at the wharf, as men return further into town along Cannon Street's dirt path. One of the two cupboards is open, displaying the latest trend in glassware on its shelves—well, that is to say, the second latest trend, for the plates that are usually in the other cupboard and presently setting the dining room table are the newest and fanciest style to be had anywhere in Maryland.

After a short time, a servant named Milford enters and stands to the right of the doorframe to signal the party that their dinner is prepared and ready. Led by Milford, they exit the parlor and return to the Ringgold's constructed building. They walk past the antler stairs, named for their likeness when fully taken in, enter a hallway, and after a few steps, enter a doorway on the left.

To the colonel's surprise, this room is modestly decorated, or at least he first thinks it is. It is much darker than the parlor rooms, and he cannot see very well. Only two imported candelabras sit atop the table covered by a superfine diaper tablecloth. The colonel is impressed but not surprised by the silver Mr. Ringgold owns or his affluence in general, due to the man his father was.

He could remember the elder Ringgold's ambition and drive. In his memory, Thomas Ringgold was an attorney who eagerly participated in the Stamp Act Congress and more so a merchant who expanded his fortunes through his keen senses for networking and trading. In his presence, Thomas Ringgold is the heir to a name and fortune, but not a spirit. The colonel takes a sip of his wine and makes a silent toast for a man departed, dismissing the saddening thought.

"Please, sit," the young Ringgold invites. "Let us give thanks for our blessings here today." Thomas becomes enveloped in the recitation of a psalm, which, probably due to the parlor drinks, becomes another psalm that becomes another psalm. Just as the guests are oblivious to the servants who pass through a door on the rear wall, presumably leading to a kitchen, they are similarly oblivious to the eyes the visitor's young stepson is making with the young Mary. If the room had more light in it, the other guests could see the reddening blush of Mary's cheek and the growing excitement of the college-bound teen.

The group settles down to dine on Eastern Shore waterfowl and drink the colonel's favorite Lisbon wine. The colonel listens to Thomas talk on and on about the dealings with his father's real estate and trade. He boasts of a business trip he made to Baltimore while still under his father's supervision. The colonel nods his head to indicate he is listening but it is actually simply minding his manners and attempting to not fall asleep. The dim lighting, wine, and especially the conversation did not help to keep him awake.

After a short supper, the colonel decides it is best to retire for the evening. The long day of travel is making its presence known on his senses, for even though he is not

much in the mood for talking, he can no longer listen to Ringgold's stories. The colonel wishes to seem appreciative of his hosts, so he stands and offers them thanks for their hospitality. He then expresses his wishes to sleep, and decides his stepson, still distant in his excitement with Mary, will do the same.

Will Harding now stands at the northeast door of the dining room. The colonel thanks his hosts again and follows Will through the hallway and up the antler stairs. This second floor is identical to the first but too dark to see much detail, and the colonel is led to the room above the northeast parlor. His first impression is that the bed is smaller than he would like but the room is quiet, so it is good. There is an enameled snuffbox made from what appears to be shells on a small table next to the bed. The colonel runs his hand across the silk sheet and is very pleased.

He disrobes, leaving his garments on standing blinds in the far corner of the room. It is dark, and the colonel can now only faintly hear the sounds of the river out his window. He cannot see the water, but can only imagine.

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