River Wedding

August 1936

Tom Beggs moved to the side of the river when he was twenty, and every year he looked more and more as if he belonged there. His wife and his house too looked as if they belonged at the river, though in different ways.

The house was a variable mixture of white and gray, the white from the whitewash that Tom brushed on about once a year and the gray the patches where the whitewash flaked off. The gray wood under the whitewash seemed to become more and more part of the river bank, giving the appearance that if Tom neglected the whitewashing long enough, a person looking for the house might have to put out his arms and feel for it.

There was no trace of whitewash about Tom's wife, but where the house under the whitewash looked as if it were fading into the river bank, she seemed to become more and more an entity, separate from everything around her. And yet she appeared more and more to belong at the river. She was like a redbird in a green woods – clearly at home but not likely to go unnoticed.

Tom sold fish in town. Every day, he would walk up the hill to town, and about three times a week he would take his fish into different residential sections. He knew which people liked which kinds of fish, and he would sometimes give his customers large mussel shells that he or his wife would find along the bank of the river. On the days when he didn't go into residential sections, he took his fish to restaurants in town.

When Tom and his wife met, she was working as a sandwich cook on a

steamboat that ran up and down the river, stopping at towns along the way and having excursions. The boat, "The Star," would start loading at noon, leave about about one o'clock, and cruise up and down the river until midnight. The fare was $1.25 per person. Most of the towns along the river were "dry," and once the boat pulled out into the river, the doors to a saloon, a beer garden, a slot machine room, and a dance hall were opened, and for the next eleven hours, "The Star"was a ship of golden sin. About the only ones who remained sober on the excursions were the employees of the boat – who did so for their own safety – and the few innocents who had read the circulars and took the promise of a summer afternoon and evening on the beautiful river at face value. Among the latter were a schoolteacher here and there who believed that it was the duty of schoolteachers to partake of unique experiences offered to the residents of the quiet towns along the river; and quiet, parsimonious middle-aged couples who kept to themselves behind neat picket fences and who ventured out only as necessary to buy food, go to banks, pharmacies, and post offices, and who otherwise keep themselves alive and within the law and who saw the excursion advertisements and almost generously decided to lend their rare public presences to the gala goings-on. Also sober were those people – mostly young people – who came to sin but found when they were at the line they could not cross it. Of these three groups of sober excursions, the members of the latter group were the most uncomfortable on the excursions. The teachers could feel embarrassment for the revelers, the parsimonious couples could feel shock at the conduct aboard the boat and reinforced in their beliefs about the human race going to Hell, whereas the would-be sinners had to spend eleven hours wrestling between temptation and conscience.

Anyway, Tom's wife, Virginia, was a cook at the lunch counter on "The Star"

when she and Tom met. She was a farm girl who had joined the boat's crew about 40 miles downriver from Jessup, which was the town uphill from Tom's house.

When “The Star” tied up at Jessup, it was within 150 feet of Tom's house, and Virginia had been working on the boat for three days and had gone through three excursions. The sight of the little white house on the river bank caught her eye, and when Tom came out through the front door, the contrast between him and his house and the excursion people and the boat was such that she felt as if she were standing in a prison looking at the outside. She was standing alone on the boat's upper deck, and she knew that in about an hour the boat would start loading for the excursion from Jessup. She watched Tom and saw him look toward the boat. He reminded her of her father, and she waved to him.

Now despite his choosing his private life, Tom didn't find it easy to turn away when a woman waved to him, and her being aboard a boat made her seem to be a river person like himself. He returned the wave and stood in front of his house looking at her. Then he walked down to where some men were setting up the boat's gangplank on the river bank.

“Howdy,” he said to the men. “Mind if I look her over?”

One of the men motioned toward a point on the lower deck where Tom saw a man in a white boatman's hat. The man was looking at him.

“Howdy, cap'n,” Tom said. “Mind if I look her over?”

“Just a minute,” the man said. “I'll be right down.”

While he waited, Tom looked up to the upper deck and saw Virginia. She was watching him and he waved to her again. This time, she turned away, but not without first smiling at him and lifting her hand from the rail with a small gesture of greeting. In

the background she saw the little white house, and she thought of her own family's farmhouse. She watched Tom talking to the boat officer, who had walked down the gangplank, and she was reminded of the circumstances under which she had become a part of the boat's staff three days before.

She and her father had been driving to the town of Simpson, which was about six miles from their farm and they had seen the boat from the bridge as they crossed the river into Simpson. Instead of going into town immediately, they had turned down a little dirt road near the bridge and driven down to look at the boat. The man to whom Tom was now talking had jokingly asked her and her father if she would like a job making sandwiches and her lather had jokingly said it might be a good idea, and within a few minutes the deal was made and she had stood there feeling half stunned beyond knowing what was going on and half as if her father had suddenly picked her up and thrown her out of the family and left her to find her way. Not that her father didn't cry a little when he stopped back by the boat around noon on his way home from town, and not that he didn't tell her to be sure and take care of herself and save her money; he also told her he would come back to pick her up in six weeks, which was when the man said the boat would be back at Simpson. Her father even gave the man a dollar and asked him to send him a telegram two days before the boat came back to Simpson. Then he got into his truck and was gone up the little dirt road and onto the bridge.

Now Virginia looked at Tom talking to the boat man and she looked at the little white house and she thought of the three days of the smell of beer and the making of greasy hamburgers and the wiping and mopping up of vomit and the boatmen eying her after the excursion people left at midnight and the boy who worked behind the counter with her who had told her he thought they should sleep together while they were on the

boat since it was such a rare opportunity to each other and no nosey neighbors or things like that. She had understood him, and shocked as she was she thought there was some sense in what he said but now thinking of all those things she wished that the town where they were tied up was Simpson and that the man walking up the gangplank now was her father instead of the man from the little white house on the river bank.

When Tom was walking up the gangplank, Virginia thought of going to the little room where she slept and staying there until he left, but before she could decide, he had already come up to the top deck where she stood. He walked right up to her and spoke.

“Howdy, Ma'am. This is a might fine boat. Are you a passenger or do you work here?”

“I've got a job here.” she said. “I'm a cook.”

“Is it fun, working on the river?”

“Sometimes,” she said, thinking she should say “excuse me” and leave him now.

“Been working on the boat long?” he asked.

She started to say “a while” and she saw something in Tom's face that made him seem more an outsider than ever to the boat and the beer and the three days, and she said, “I've been here three days and it's awful.” Then she was crying and he pulled a red handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her and she could tell it had been washed in the river but she wiped her eyes with it anyway and said she was sorry to be crying and he said it was all right for her to cry and then she finally stopped crying and told him how much she hated the boat and wanted to go home and he told her that nobody could make her do something she didn't want to do and she said she didn't know what to do and he told her if she wanted to quit to just tell the man who hired her that she was quitting and that if she needed help he'd help her and she thanked him and told

him she would never forget what he had done for her and that she would tell her folks how nice he had been to her and she told him she was going to quit and go home on the bus, and then he finished his tour of the boat and went back to his house and got his trot line ready to take out into the river.

When Tom came back from putting his trot line out, “The Star” was gone on its excursion and there was nobody around. He wondered whether the woman was headed back to Simpson.

Around midnight, Tom heard the boat pull in, and for about an hour he tried to get back to sleep while he heard yelling and singing and laughing and automobiles starting and horns blowing and a lot of other noises. Then it must have gotten quiet, because he went to sleep and he didn't wake up again until around sunrise. When he look out through the window, he saw that “The Star: was gone, and when he opened the front door of the house, he saw the woman asleep on the porch, lying on her side with her head resting on one of her arms and her coat spread over her like a blanket.

Tom looked at her for a moment and then he closed the door quietly and returned to the inside of his house. It was plain that she had left the boat after it returned from its excursion, and perhaps because it was late she was afraid to go to town alone. Perhaps she had been frightened by the drunken townspeople and had intended to hide near his house until they were gone and then to walk up the hill to town and the bus station. She must have fallen asleep while waiting.

Tom sat inside his house until it was full daylight and time to go out for his trot line. He remembered how he had at one time made coffee every morning before going out for the line, and he thought of doing that this morning. He lit the one-burner oil

stove and put on the coffee and then opened the front door again. She had changed positions since he saw her earlier, and now she was moving. She opened her eyes and looked around and saw him. She sat up quickly.

"Good morning," Tom said.

"My land!" she said. "I'm sorry. I wanted to be gone before you got up." She had remembered him as being close to her father's age; now she saw that he was about the same age as her older brother. The youthfulness she saw in him made her feel uneasy.

"You fell asleep, I guess," Tom said.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I wanted to go to the bus station, but I wanted to wait till the people got away."

"There probably wouldn't have been a bus to Simpson that early anyway. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No. That's all right. I'll be getting on now."

"I'm making the coffee anyway. Have a cup. Say, did the man give you any argument?"

"Which man?" she asked.

"The man on the boat. When you told him you were quitting."

"Oh, some. He said some bad things to me."

"Did he give you your pay?"

"He finally did. He gave me twenty dollars. He said it was five dollars a day."

"You see. Can't nobody make you do what you don't want to do," Tom said.

"Thank you for helping me. My papa wouldn't have let me go on that boat if he had known what it was like."

“I smell the coffee,“ Tom said. “It'll be ready in a minute now. If you want to wash up or anything, there's a bathroom inside. I have to go down to the river and see to my minnow bucket.”

“Thank you, Mr.....”

“Beggs. Tom Beggs, ma'am.”

“My name is Virginia Stapleton. Thank you Mr. Beggs. If you don't mind, I will wash up a little.”

When Tom came back from the river, she was sitting on the porch step with two tin cups of coffee already poured and also on the step a small can of Carnation milk and an opened bag of Domino sugar with the top rolled down. “I found the milk and sugar in the cabinet, but I didn't open the milk and I couldn't find the spoons,” she said.

“I'll get 'em,” Tom said, picking up the milk can. "You sure set a pretty table." I've got used to just sitting by the stove or just standing up.”

“It's pretty out here by the river,” she said when Tom had returned with the milk and spoons and sat down on the step.

“It's a kind of farming,” Tom said. “That's my fields,” he said, motioning toward the river. “Course I don't own it, but nobody ever told me to get off it.: He put some sugar and milk into his coffee. “I do own the land we're sitting on, he said. “All the way from about 50 feet behind this house to about 30 feet from the edge of the river. It's eleven years this summer that I've owned it.”

“It sure is pretty, “ Virginia said.

“Is your pa's place pretty?” Tom asked.

“Yes, it's very pretty. We live on a farm and he raises mostly cotton. My brother helps him.”

"My pa used to raise cotton right here," Tom said. "He used to own all this bottomland from where the bridge is to the bank of that creek that runs into the river about a half mile that way," he said, pointing along the river bank away from the bridge. "Right after the first world war, he got mixed up with some folks from New York who were going to turn this bottom into some kind of paradise. He deeded the whole thing to them except for where we are right now and they gave him money and notes – enough money right off to buy a house up in town and I was born up there. He gave me this land on my 19th birthday, and I moved down here ten years ago when I was 20. He and my ma lived in town until he died about four years ago, and then my ma went to live with my sister in Chattanooga."

"It sure is pretty here," she said again.

"When you finish your coffee, I'll show you something."

When they finished their coffee, Tom led Virginia across the flat bottomland, through knee-high grass, to a 3-inch steel pipe planted in ground, with two signs mounted at right angles at the top. One read "Beggs Street," the other read "Washington Boulevard." He showed her the concrete sidewalk, hidden from casual view by grass that grew around it and through the seams in the concrete. He showed her similar signposts and sidewalks placed in a grid over the whole bottom. "They sold lots in New York for seven hundred dollars apiece. I don't know how many they sold, but they began to go on the tax auction block about two years after the sidewalks were put in. 'Some of the people who bought lots came to look at them and they'd find out that the development plan had busted up and they'd ask around town about the possibility of getting together with other owners and starting it going again, but when they'd find out

about the flooding they'd give up the idea. The whole bottom floods in the early spring sometimes. Some years it lasts a day or two, some years it doesn't happen at all; some years it happens more than once. You see the boat tied to the back of the house When the floods come, I throw my outboard in and paddle for the bridge road. The floods are never more than a foot or two deep, but I like to get to dry land and wait it out. Anyway, most of this land has gone to the county for taxes. I'm glad the deal went busted. Pa was happy enough with what he had and I like the bottom the way it is now."

They walked back to the house. "I've got to go run my trot line and then I'll be going to town," Tom said. "If you want to wait, I'll walk you up there, or you can head up this road toward the bridge and turn left at the road and follow it up to town." The road to the bridge was little more than a pair of paths made by automobile tires. It reminded Virginia of the road she and her father had taken to "The Star" in Simpson. "Anybody in town can tell you where the bus station is," Tom said.

"I'll wait if you don't mind. I'll wash up these cups while I'm waiting."

"No, you just sit here on the porch. Don't worry about the cups."

"I don't mind. I like to keep busy," she said.

"I'll be back in about a half-hour," Tom said. He went around to the back of the house and took an outboard motor from a small cabinet and put it into a rusty toy wagon that he kept near the cabinet. Then he went down to the river bank and mounted the motor on the boat that he kept tied at the river bank. He started the motor and waved to Virginia as he headed toward the middle of the river.

Tom began to look for Virginia as soon as he could make out the details of his house. As the boat came closer to the house and he didn't see her, he began to worry that

perhaps she had decided not to wait for him. Then he saw her come out of the house and empty a bucket of water over the side of the porch. She looked out toward the river and he waved to her and she waved back and sat down on the porch step to wait for him.

While Tom loaded the motor into the wagon, Virginia walked down to the river bank, and they walked to the back of the house together. After Tom put the motor away, he took a long pole from against the house and returned to the boat.

"How was the farming?" Virginia asked.

"Not bad. Take a look," he said, motioning toward the bottom of the boat.

Virginia watched while Tom laid the pole on the river bank and slipped the strings that he had tied through the gills of the fish over the ends of the pole and into notches that were cut into the pole. He left about two feet of space in the middle of the pole, and when he had all the fish strung on the pole, he lifted it and let the vacant part rest on his shoulder, the fish handing like pendants.

"About sixty pounds," Tom said. "That's about twelve dollars."

"My land! Is that one day's catch?"

"Yep, and just a fair one. I don't meant to brag, mind you."

"You've got a right to be proud," she said.

"When I didn't see you, I got worried you'd gone," Tom said. "You've been might good company."

"If it wasn't for you, I'd still be on that old boat," she said.

"I'll be ready to go to town in about five minutes," he said. "I've got to wash up a little." He went to the side of the house and hung the pole and fish across two pieces of two-by-four that were attached to the side of the house. Then he walked into the house. "My Lord," he called out. "What did you do? Why, I don't think this place has ever

looked as clean as this."

Virginia stood at the door, looking proud and embarrassed.

"This place looks like one of those new houses they're building in town," Tom said.

"No it don't. It just looks clean."

"It looks mighty nice to me and I'm much obliged. I'll be out in a minute." He went into the bathroom and turned on the water." Virginia went to the side of the house and looked at the fish. She put her hand out and carefully touched one of them. She was still standing there when Tom came out.

"Think you pa will be surprised to see you?" Tom asked.

"Reckon he will," she said. "He don't expect to see me for a while."

"I think he'll be glad to have you home," Tom said, picking up a sprinkling can from the ground and walking to the river. When he came back, he walked along the pole, wetting the fish. Then he hoisted the pole to his shoulder.

Neither of them talked as they walked up the hill. Tom occasionally shifted the pole from one shoulder to the other. When they got to town, they turned down a side street to the bus station.

"I'd better not go in with you with these fish,: "Tom said. "I'll wait out here and you go in and find out when the next bus goes to Simpson."

A few minutes later Virginia came out. "There's one at two-thirty," she said. "I'll just sit here till then. They've got seats in there and a place to buy sandwiches. I'll eat lunch here and after that it will be almost time to get on the bus."

"I hope you;ll have a nice trip," Tom said. "I should have given you some breakfast, but I don't ever eat any. I eat lunch at home after I get out from under these

fish."

"I'm all right, " she said. "I had the coffee and that did me fine," She was quiet for a moment without speaking. Then he said, "This has been the nicest morning I've had in a long time." He held out his hand. "Take care of yourself," he said. He started to leave and then he stopped. "Look," he said; "If what happened is that your pa put you out ….. I mean if you don't think you want to go home, you're welcome to...." He was having difficulty speaking to her and he felt that what he was saying was not clear. "What I mean is... you know what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes, I believe I do," she said. "And I'm obliged to you. You've been mighty nice to me.":

"Well, these fish are getting heavy," he said. "I'd better get going."

"Thank you again for everything, Mr. Beggs," she said.

"You're mighty welcome," he said. "I hope you have a good trip."

"Goodbye," she said.

"Goodbye," Tom said, and he walked back to Main Street and turned toward the northern part of town.

"It was around noon when Tom left the last house on his route, and he walked back toward town rapidly. He had four fish left – two big catfish, a big buffalo carp, and a small drum. In town, he went up an alley to the back door of the Wanger Hotel and went into the hotel's kitchen. The hotel always took whatever fish he had left and paid him five cents per pound less than what he usually charged. The kitchen manager weighed the fish, and while he was gone to get Tom's money, the Negro woman cook gave Tom a piece of cold apple pie from the refrigerator. Tom was still eating it when

the man returned with his money.

"Mighty good, Bess. Mighty good. Thank you." He took his money and left. He walked rapidly toward the bus station, holding the empty pole in his hand, keeping it level with the ground. Maybe he was a few years older than she, he thought. Maybe he was just a fisherman, but what was she but just a farm girl who'd been practically put out her her house by her father. Anyway, none of these things made any real difference. What did make a difference was that he had let himself think of her leaving and he had known as soon as he realized what her leaving would mean that he wanted to try to stop her. Then he told himself that stopping her would be a foolish thing to do – a thing that might be pleasant to think about but a thing that would change everything, and that seemed foolish, changing everything when everything was fine the way it was. But he decided that he was going to do it, foolish or not. It was the kind of thing that wasn't to be put to the kind of tests that other things – like what kind of motor should he buy – are put to. It didn't even have a test; either you wanted to or didn't want to. The only reason for not doing it was that it would change things, something he had always been afraid to do. He remembered when he finally moved to the river he had spent weeks trying to decide and one day picked up and moved. Now he wasn't going to stand by and see her leave while he was trying to make up his mind. He would try to stop her from leaving.

When he turned the corner of the block with the bus station, he thought he saw her standing in front of the building, but when he got closer, he saw that it was not Virginia and he became afraid that she might have gone. Sometimes the bus company ran specials, and they might have announced a special going through Simpson and she would have got on it. Then he saw that there was a bus loading under the shed at the side of the building and he thought that that might be a special. He walked rapidly.

When he got to the station, he saw that the sign on that bus said Nashville, and he knew that bus would not go though Simpson. He went into the station and saw her sitting on a bench near the door to the loading shed.

Inside the bus station he walked more slowly, hoping that she would see him before he got to where she was sitting. She turned and saw him, and by the time he got to where she was sitting, she was smiling at him.

"Miss Stapleton," he said, planning to talk about the bus schedule. Then he blurted out, "Look, is all right if I call you Virginia?"

"Why, yes! You can call me Ginnie if you want to. That's what they call me at home."

"All right. Well, Ginnie, there's something I want to ask you." He realized that he was talking sternly, as if he were about to lecture her, and it crossed his mind that he should kneel down to let her know he wasn't about to rebuke her. Instead, he sat next to her on the bench and spoke quietly. "Ginnie, I don't want you to get on the bus. Will you stay here?"

"Do you mean here in Jessup?" she asked. "You mean not go home?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"Are you thinking that Pa wouldn't want me to come home?"

"No, that's not it." He was silent for a moment. "Look, Gennie. What I'm saying is that this morning was one of the nicest mornings I can remember, and when I thought about your getting on the bus, I felt like part of me was being pulled away. I like you, Gennie. That's what I'm saying, and I want you to stay with me."

"It was about the nicest morning I can remember too," she said. "But wouldn't I get in your way?"

“Ginnie, I want you to marry me, “ he said.

Ginnie felt the awful question mark inside her suddenly shrink to nothing, and she wanted to throw her arms around him and thank him and kiss him and tell him that he was handing her about the nicest thing she could ask for, but she just put her hand out to his and said, “Why thank you, Mr. Beggs. I will stay here and marry you.”

They bought sandwiches in the bus station and they ate them sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree in a vacant lot nearby. Afterward they went to the courthouse and got a marriage license. The woman in charge of licenses knew Tom and explained the rules to them. Ginnie had to swear to her age, name, and place of birth, but Tom didn't, because the woman went to another room and came back with a copy of his birth certificate. The woman told them they would have to get blood tests and wait until the next day to get married, so they went to the health department for their blood tests and then walked down to the river and sat on the porch step for a while. Then Ginnie cooked supper and Tom put his trot line out. After it was dark, Tom showed Ginnie how he took his soap and clean clothes to the creek and took a bath. She looked the other way while he took a bath and he looked the other way while she took a bath. When she was dressed, she told Tom she would like to spend her twenty dollars on clothes the next morning.

Tom slept on the porch that night and Ginnie slept inside. Around midnight, after waking several times, Tom got up and walked inside, where he found Ginnie awake.

“How do you feel about this waiting until after folks are married?” he asked.

She sat up in bed. “I don't know,” she said. “I guess it's the right thing to do. At least I've always believed that. I guess it's not that long to wait.” She thought of his trying to sleep on the porch and she started to tell him that she didn't see any harm in their just being in the bed together, but before she could say it he said he was going to

try some more to sleep and she thought if he could go to sleep out there it would be better.

Until she went to sleep, Ginnie tried to figure what would be wrong with their not waiting. She tried to think of who might be hurt – her father and mother, herself, Tom, and it didn't seem that any of them would actually be hurt unless it was because not waiting was a sin and being part of a sin would hurt them. Several times she had a sudden idea that it would be all right not to wait and she would decide to get up and call Tom in, but before she did call him, the idea would fade and she would be back at feeling that it would be wrong not to wait.

As for Tom, after the first time that he asked Ginnie what she thought about the need to wait, he decided it was better to wait than to give Ginnie an idea that he wasn't able to be patient. He thought it was important to let her know that he could be depended upon to do the right thing even when it wasn't easy.

The next morning, Ginnie cooked breakfast while Tom went out to run the trot line, and it was the biggest breakfast he had eaten since he had moved to the river. He kept trying not to look at Gennie, afraid that he would want to reach out for her. After breakfast, they went up the hill to town, this time Tom pulling the harvest of fish in the toy wagon, the way he always did when it wasn't a house-to-house day. They went to two restaurants and the hotel, and at each place Gennie waited outside while Tom sold the fish. At the hotel, Tom asked the kitchen manager if they could leave the wagon there, and then he and Ginnie went to the health department to pick up their blood test certificates. At the Globe department store, Gennie bought three dresses, a nightgown, underwear, bed sheets, a bottle of perfume and some talcum powder. They picked up the wagon, bought some things at the A & P, and went back to the courthouse.

The woman who knew Tom was one of the witnesses, and another woman who worked in the courthouse was another witness. The judge who performed the ceremony said he knew Tom's father when they were boys together. After the ceremony, they went home to the river, stopping at a gas station to drink Coca Colas.

Ginnie made lunch, and they got into bed together and made love. Ginnie was surprised that it worked so well. When she was eleven years old, she and another eleven-year-old girl and three eleven-year-old boys – all in the same grade at school – had tried it and couldn't get it to work.

Ginnie and Tom stayed in bed all afternoon, catching up on the sleep that they had missed the night before, twice waking up to make love. Around sundown, Tom got up to put out his trot line. When he got back, they waited until it was dark and went to the creek and came home and made love again, falling asleep and waking up around midnight. They got up and Ginnie made a supper. They ate and sat on the porch step for a while, getting into bed again and both of them sleeping until morning.