

## *Time and the Mississippi River*

---

## *Chapter Fifteen*

It was that summer of 1916 when my dad took me and my little brothers down home to see his folks. Time has a different shape in Grand Tower, Illinois, and so when we got there, Dad was “young Bill,” and we were young Bill’s boys.

Summer afternoons are longer in Southern Illinois than anywhere else, and hotter. The sun hangs eternally just off-center in the blinding sky. Dad spent the afternoons mostly up in Great-aunt Delphine’s room. He sat at her bedside by the window that looks out across the river to where the wedding party drowned long ago.

As one afternoon folded into the next, I began to see this was another reason for our visit. His aunt Delphine was dying.

Would she become another Grand Tower haunt, like the ghost woman with the flying gray hair who darted across the road and into the Mississippi? Like that ghost who grieved the loss of a son, though he was still alive?

My little brothers, Raymond and Earl, trailed Great-uncle Noah on all his afternoon chores. They'd never seen a one-armed man before. And this one could do what other people needed both hands for. He could peel an apple, kill a rat, bait a hook—all kinds of things deeply interesting to five-year-old boys. They had no idea he was entertaining them. They thought he was just going about his business.

The only one of us who napped was old Dr. Hutchings. He sat in his porch rocker, transparent with age, courteous even in drooping sleep. He had the dignity I saw in my dad. His clean white hands were folded neatly in his lap. These were the hands that had amputated Noah's arm in the first year of the war, after the Battle of Belmont. And how many more arms and legs, how many thousands, through all the blood-slick years of war?

I knew the story because Grandma Tilly told me. She was a talker when she got going, and could bring it all back for you. I saw for myself the amputated arm sinking in the churning river as they brought the wounded back to Cairo. I still see it.

Neither age nor the weather slowed Grandma Tilly. She was a whirlwind from early morning on, cooking and baking for extra mouths. She was up and down the stairs, fetching and carrying for Aunt Delphine, and not letting anyone

else do it. Carrying her slops too because there was no plumbing in the house.

But she found a corner of every afternoon to round me up and lead me to the crest of the Devil's Backbone, to a flat rock they called the devil's footstool, just among themselves. It had aeroplane views out over the river and Tower Rock. There we sat, both of us barefoot, while she brought back the old times for me. She handed over the past like a parcel, seizing these days to do it.

She couldn't sit there idle, of course. She didn't know how to be idle. She brought an old sewing basket with pearls and little shells on the lid, and her mending. She darned over a milkglass egg and spun out her yarns.

At first I didn't know how to listen to tales that old. But we began to edge across the years toward each other, Grandma Tilly and I. I began to see the yellow lamplight on their faces, just a flicker at first. I heard calliope music wavering over the water.

At every turn the story took, I remembered I was just about the age now they were then. Except for Cass. She was younger.

"What happened to Cass?"

"She's down there." Grandma Tilly pointed a bent finger to a long dip between the Backbone and another outcropping called Oven Rock. It looked like overgrown wilderness.

"It was a graveyard, but they didn't keep it up."

By then I knew how she worked to keep the sentiment out of her voice. Still, it was about to break through.



“She died young?”

“She died the year after the war. 1866. She was seventeen. Dr. Hutchings called it diphtheria.” She always spoke of him as Dr. Hutchings. She addressed him as Dr. Hutchings.

“If it hadn’t been diphtheria, it would have been something else. I washed her poor bird-body and dressed her in the sprigged dimity she’d worn that night to the showboat. I put her in her coffin and wouldn’t let nobody near her. I held her in my arms one last time, and then I let her go again. She give up on life after Calinda left us.”

I waited for more and then said, “Why did Calinda leave?”

“Well, she was too dark to stay, wasn’t she? She couldn’t pass. I always thought she was the color of honey at the bottom of the jar. I expect she thought people would put two and two together, and it would give Delphine away. You know how there was always rumors about them.

“No, she had it in her mind to go out to California. She said out there she’d be light enough to be Spanish. And she was good with money. She always had some put by, for the journey. She was a true bird of passage, always ready to take flight.”

Grandma Tilly looked out across the river, to the west. “A hard journey in them days, before there was a train to take you all the way to California. We knew she’d go, and I was scared Cass would go with her. I though the trip might

kill her. But of course staying behind is what finally done her in.

“Calinda was what they call a conjure woman, down yonder in New Orleans. She could tell your fortune, you know, and there’d have been a market for that in the more built-up areas. Cass had the gift too. It’s what drewed them together, closer than sisters. But I suppose it was too late for Cass. I think she’d been wore out by her visions before Calinda come among us.”

A hot breeze stirred the trees.

“We never heard tell of Calinda again. I expect she prospered. She had all those talents, didn’t she? But we never heard. They had a brother too, remember. In Paris, France. But they were the free people of color. And after the war they had to find new selves. I suppose it was just better to cut their ties and go it alone. Think how many more there must be like them—perched very quiet up on people’s family trees. Safe now from being called ugly names.”

That was the last afternoon of our visit. It had taken Grandma Tilly the week to tell her story. She bit off a thread—she didn’t have all her teeth, not nearly all. Then she stole another look at where the graveyard had been. Down where Cass was.

“And your paw,” I said. “He’s down there?”

“Yes, he’s down there. We didn’t bury Cass next to him. There wasn’t any point to that. And of course Mama’s not

there.” Grandma Tilly turned away from me. “Mama went in the river.”

It was time to leave then, and somehow I wasn’t ready. We climbed up off our rock, the devil’s footstool, for the last time. Grandma Tilly had to look way up at me. I was getting to be what she called a big, tall galoot. We started down the Backbone to the house.

“They never did get married, you know,” she said, almost offhand. “You’re old enough to hear it.”

“Who didn’t?”

“Delphine and Noah.”

“They never got married? But—”

“Oh, we put it around that they were married. We said they went up to Centralia or somewhere to tie the knot. I forget now where we said they went. But they never did. It liked to break Noah’s heart. But Delphine wouldn’t have it. She said her kind didn’t marry white men. And she was passing for white! She said it would betray all her traditions, said her mother—her *maman*—would turn over in her grave. Her mother died during the war, when New Orleans was occupied by our troops. We got that word.

“But anyway, Delphine never would marry Noah, though they’re more married than most. But you know how she is. If she makes up her mind to something, or lapses into the French language, you just as well get out of her road. She’d make a mule look agreeable.”

I remember one more thing Grandma Tilly told me. She said that time was like the Mississippi River. It only flows in one direction. She meant you could never go back. But of course we had. She'd taken me back.

We went on down to the house. She had a way of telling you so much, you thought you'd heard it all. And I knew where she'd learned that.

The night before we left Grand Tower, Great-uncle Noah wrung the neck off a fat fryer, to my little brothers' great excitement. Grandma Tilly fried it in batter for our picnic hamper. She loaded us down with deviled eggs and buttermilk biscuits. She piled us high with jars of her rhubarb preserves and looked around and around herself to see what else we ought to have.

We filled our bottles from their well. Dad personally filed down the points on the spark plugs, and we made an early start the next day. The three old folks were on the porch to see us go. We'd said our good-byes to Great-aunt Delphine the night before, up in her cluttered room under the portrait of her yellow-haired father. She couldn't speak, but those great fringed violet eyes ate us alive. The touch of her little pillowed hand lingered on mine long after.

We left in the cool of the morning. Being parked on the Backbone helped because the Ford started better on a slant. I got the engine to catch after no more than five minutes. We'd settled the little boys, brown as berries now, on the backseat. Then, in this miraculous morning, Dad climbed

up into the heaving car on the passenger's side. He was letting me drive. My heart sang.

I was to drive, and let out the brake, and fiddle with the gas lever, so that Dad could turn back and wave to them up on the porch. He waved until the house and then the hill and then the town were swallowed in our dust.

We made good time going home, keeping the river on our left, retracing our route, though we had more flats. Raymond and Earl wanted to stop the night and make our camp where we had before. They wanted this trip to have an exact shape.

Dad pretty well convinced them that we'd found our original campground when it was time to pull off that evening, though we never found a trace of the old campfire. We built another one, and ate better that night than wienies on sticks.

After the dust of the day, there were circles around our eyes where the goggles had been. The twins were nodding off against each other before the dying fire. I sat next to Dad on the running board.

As if he'd waited for this moment, he said, "I've been thinking of getting into the war, if the country does." It shook me. Then I saw this was another reason for the trip.

"You'll think I'm too old for a soldier," he said, "and maybe I am. But they'll need doctors. I didn't want to spring it on you at the last minute. You'd have to take over at home till I got back, be there for your mother and the boys."

In the quiet, I heard my dad waiting. He wanted it to be

all right with me. He wanted my approval. Nothing this grown-up had happened to me before. This was something Grandma Tilly couldn't understand—how war promises a boy it can make a man out of him.

“Well, your dad went to the war, didn't he?” I said.

“Yes, he did.”

“They can't fight a war without doc—”

“My father isn't Dr. Hutchings,” Dad said. “Noah's my father.”

I grabbed hold of the running board. The night revolved around me.

“And Delphine's my mother. She's slipping away, and I wanted this time with her. We couldn't be mother and son, you see. She didn't trust the world. She didn't trust the town. She never knew when somebody would . . . see her for who she was and turn on her. She wouldn't hand that on to me. It could have closed too many doors in my face. So I was named for Dr. William Hutchings. They had no other children, the doctor and your grandma Tilly, none of their own, so I was their son too. As you said, I had four parents.”

He didn't mention love. It wasn't a word they used. But there was plenty they didn't mention.

“I'm proud of every drop of blood in me,” Dad said, quiet to keep from waking the boys. “One day when you've had time to think it over, I hope you'll be proud too.”

I remembered Grandma Tilly speaking of the blood hurrying through her veins. Now I felt the blood hurry through mine, flowing like the Mississippi River, as my dad

and I sat there on the running board under a sky crowded with stars.

I didn't have to think it over. I was proud of anything that made me his son. I was proud of being Noah's grandson. And Delphine's grandson. I was older now too, a lot older than when this trip began, older and looking ahead. One day I'd tell a son of my own this story of who we were. A son, or a daughter with enormous violet eyes.

## *A Note on the Story*

Researching the Civil War is enough to swamp any novelist's boat. That war remains the pivot on which all American history turns. It ground on for four endless years, raging on a thousand fronts. I could have spent the rest of my life researching that time. People do. But I had to carve out a place for my young characters to stand.

Because it's a story of two mysterious young women who come north from New Orleans, the focus of the story is upon the war on the Mississippi River. Since they needed a northern destination, I borrowed the hometown of my friend Richard Hughes, because all my stories are set in real places.



“Egyptians,” as Southern Illinoisans still call themselves, were deeply divided, though mainly Southern in their sympathies in the first spring of the war. Raising enough Egyptian men and boys to form two Illinois infantry regiments, the Twenty-ninth and the Thirty-first, was the great achievement of John A. “Black Jack” Logan. His speeches repeated the battle cry, “The Union must be preserved, join the army and save the nation,” never mentioning slavery or emancipation. He referred mildly to those like Curry Marshall who went south to join the rebel forces as “misguided boys.”

The story of Noah’s soldiering follows the history of that first year of war. The initial engagement on the Mississippi was the Battle of Belmont, meant to win the river and cut the Confederacy in two. U. S. Grant conducted it from his command post at Cairo (pronounced then and now as “Kay-row”).

Nobody, including me, has ever had a positive word to say about Cairo, Illinois. Charles Dickens had been appalled by it on a visit before the war. It figures in the darkest moment of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when Huck and Jim float past the town in the night and are swallowed by the slave-owning South.

But it was thought to be strategically located for the Union’s grip on the river. At the time, it was the great metropolis of Southern Illinois with a population of twenty-four hundred—the largest city Tilly ever saw and a great factor in her decision never to leave home again.

The Battle of Belmont, Missouri, was only a skirmish, though costly, and it left the Southern forces in control. It could have stood for every battle ever fought in every war ever waged in that neither side really won. On the following day, November 8, 1861, the *Chicago Tribune* called it a “bad defeat” for the North. But it revised the reputation of U. S. Grant and gave him his first experience of command. By the following April, Delphine’s beloved New Orleans was in the hands of Union troops.

A soldier’s war is over on the day he loses a limb, and so Noah’s Civil War lasted only weeks, not years. Like soldiers down the ages, he had to find his own way home, and a way to his future.

But what of those two young women who waft up the river from New Orleans in a scented cloud of mystery?

When Delphine says that her free people of color lived on a kind of island, lapped by a sea of slavery, she doesn’t overstate the case. From the city’s eighteenth-century beginnings, first as a French colony and then a Spanish colony, a society of free people of color, mainly people of mixed race, formed the beating heart of New Orleans.

Elsewhere in America and the Caribbean were black people who had won or paid for their freedom. But in New Orleans they founded a community that gathered economic clout and considerable—though precarious—social prominence . . . and inspiration for writers.

New Orleans hardly existed before 1718, but as early as

1724, the French issued *Le Code Noir*, the Black Code, an attempt to define and control a free black local populace. They were to have all the rights of any citizen with three crucial exceptions: They couldn't vote, hold public office, or marry a member of the white race.

The *gens de couleur* were even then developing into the artisan and mercantile class of the city. Having arrived early, many of them owned prime real estate. Theirs became an urban society that adopted and adapted the ways of their white neighbors. They were family-centered and Roman Catholic, and continued speaking French throughout the forty years of Spanish occupation—and a century beyond that.

By the time of Spain's rule, the free women of color had developed such a reputation for style, glamour, and disrespect for authority that the governor, Don Estaban Miro, issued in 1786 the most futile of all laws.

He forbade free women of color to wear hats. Since decency and etiquette dictated that a woman had to wear something on her head, the free women of color adapted the kerchiefs—"tignons" in New Orleans French—worn by slave women. But on the heads of the free women of color these tignons were apt to flaunt feathers and drip with precious gems. The "tignon" law lapsed at the end of Spanish rule, but in the American century that followed, the tignon lingered on as both a symbol of racial pride and a reminder of prejudice.

After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, New Orleans

found itself a part of the United States, and ruled by Americans—often Southerners—who showed less tolerance than the Spanish and French. They were shocked at the amount of property owned by free people of color, and most of the owners were single women.

The custom of *plaçage*, of white men fathering families with their mistresses who were free women of color, shook the American newcomers to their shoes. How this arrangement began is shrouded in history and mystery. It may have come from the Caribbean, where women of color were often the mistresses of Spanish or French colonials, then encouraged in early New Orleans by the scarcity of European women.

Not every free woman of color became the mistress of a white man she couldn't legally marry. Those who did enter into this became famous as "quadroons," an elastic term that came to refer specifically to those mixed-race mistresses.

Their ranks were increased at the time of the Louisiana Purchase when free black people fled the slave uprising in Santo Domingo, the French colony that became independent Haiti. A number of these women, who were known in story and song as the "sirens," were renowned for their beauty.

The journalist Lafcadio Hearn described them in trembling prose: "Uncommonly tall were these famous beauties—citrine-hued, elegant of stature as palmettos. . . . Never organized to enter the iron struggle for life unassisted and

unprotracted, they vanished forever with the social system that made them a place apart.”<sup>1</sup>

But only the outcome of the Civil War erased them. The system of *plaçage* flourished through the American nineteenth century in New Orleans. The American regime that imposed new strictures on the free people of color—curfews and identity cards—was silent on the subject.

The loss of the Civil War destroyed New Orleans’s economy. President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 gave the free people of color a crisis of identity, since they were themselves often slave owners.

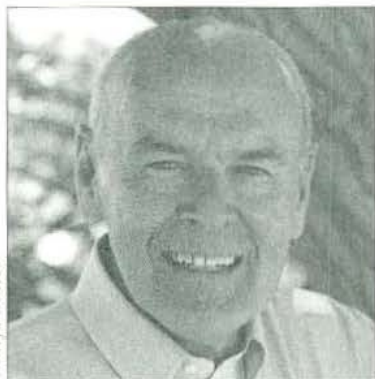
Most stayed on in New Orleans to rebuild. The system of *plaçage*, hardly mentioned in polite society, went further underground and was largely eliminated by the financial disaster of the war.

An unknown number of the women and girls who had been the quadroons—daughters and granddaughters of the sirens—went north if they could pass for white. Others who appeared Spanish were said to have gone to California. Some went to Mexico. They vanished from view to live among strangers, silent about their origins—leaving writers to imagine their fates.

<sup>1</sup>*Creole Sketches*, 1904.

## *Acknowledgments*

I am grateful to Eordonna D'Andrea  
for helping me find Calinda's song,  
to Berthe and Jimmy Amoss of New Orleans  
and  
Patsy and Ron Perritt of Baton Rouge  
for shelter and hospitality,  
to Susan Overstreet Stevens  
for direction,  
and to Richard Hughes  
for his hometown, Grand Tower.



Richard Peck is the celebrated author of over thirty novels. He is the recipient of the prestigious Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in children's literature. *A Long*

*Way from Chicago* is a Newbery Honor Book, and *A Year Down Yonder*, its sequel, is a Newbery Medal winner. In 2002, Richard Peck was awarded a National Humanities Medal by the President and First Lady Laura Bush.





# THE YEAR IS 1861, AND TILLY PRUITT'S LIFE IS ABOUT TO CHANGE.

**C**ivil war is imminent and her brother, Noah, is eager to go and fight on the side of the North. With her father long gone, Tilly, her sister, and their mother struggle to make ends meet and hold the dwindling Pruitt family together.

Then one night a mysterious girl arrives on a steamboat bound for St. Louis. Delphine is elegant and beautiful and outspoken...and unlike anyone the small river town of Grand Tower has ever seen. Mrs. Pruitt agrees to take Delphine and her dark, silent traveling companion in as boarders. No one in town knows what to make of the two strangers, and so the rumors fly. Is Delphine's companion a slave? Could they be spies for the South? Are the Pruitts traitors?

Within a masterful tale of mystery and war, Richard Peck has spun a breathtaking portrait of the lifelong impact one person can have on another.

★“Peck’s spare writing has never been more eloquent than in this powerful mystery...”  
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

“Boosts Peck’s credentials as America’s best living author for young adults.”  
—*The Washington Post*

**A National Book Award Finalist**  
**Winner of the Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction**  
**An ALA Notable Book**  
**An ALA Best Book for Young Adults**



Cover art copyright  
© Kamil Vojnar, 2004