

The Handsomest Man

Chapter Summary: The Handsomest Man

In Charleston, life continued seamlessly despite the looming civil war. The Battery's vibrant atmosphere included carriages, elegantly dressed men and women, and the occasional cannon blast signaling military preparations. Mary Chesnut, a prominent figure among the local elite, became the center of attention with her flirtation involving former Governor Manning, a wealthy man known for his handsome looks, who was also married. This playful engagement, termed a "flirtation" in Southern society, was viewed as a benign distraction from the turbulent times.

Mary and her husband journeyed to Charleston from their Mulberry plantation on March 25. The train was filled with attendees bound for the state's secession convention. Manning cleverly maneuvered to sit beside Mary on the train, pretending to be in charge of a young lady. Their interaction revealed Mary's delight in Manning's attention, which also sparked some jealousy in her husband—a dynamic she appeared to enjoy.

During their stay at the Gidiere boarding house, tensions arose at breakfast, particularly due to her uncle Judge Withers' sharp remarks about Mary's conversational style, which incorporated French phrases. This remark led to a humorous exchange involving William Henry Trescot, who noted their intent to keep their discussions hidden from enslaved staff.

Manning continued to engage Mary flirtatiously, even interrupting her during breakfast dressed in formal attire to request a photograph—an act indicative of the social rituals of the time. Mary, relishing the moment, brought her husband along on this endeavor. The day later shifted to a darker tone as Mary visited Magnolia Cemetery with friends, revealing the somber realities of death amid societal distractions.

That evening, her husband confronted Mary regarding her attention to Manning, accusing her of flirtation. Mary found the accusation amusing, dismissing it with laughter, signifying a complicated relationship dynamic where flirtation and societal expectations played a significant role amidst the backdrop of impending conflict .