

## THE PROMISE

A short story by Alison Stuart

Ben had come home at last. Sally had heard the men talk of a terrible battle at a place called Fredricksburg. They called it the last great battle of the war and talked in anxious tones about the advance of the northern soldiers into Louisiana.

Ben had come home. Not as he had left, riding his grey gelding with his hair bright in the sun as he doffed his hat to her, but wrapped in filthy blankets in the back of an old wagon. The slaves gathered in a subdued circle by the front steps of the big house. The men, their hats in hand, and the women, their faces grave, watched as Big Joshua carried his master inside followed by Miss Amelia and the old slave, Marie.

Sally followed them up the stairs but the door to the bed chamber closed, leaving her alone in the wide corridor. She watched, helpless and ignored as the doctor came and left, shaking his head and talking in a hushed voice to Miss Amelia.

The front door closed behind the doctor and Miss Amelia, her skirts in her hand and her brow furrowed, climbed the stairs, one at a time, like an old woman. Sally put her hand on Miss Amelia's arm but Miss Amelia just shook her head, brushing the hand away.

Sally waited beneath the ancient oak tree. Planted by a forgotten hand a hundred years or more before the big house was built, it dominated the garden. In the shadow of this tree Ben had taken Sally in his arms and kissed her for the first time. Beneath this oak he had asked her to be his bride and she had said 'yes', a thousand times 'yes' as he placed the emerald ring on her finger.

Beneath this oak Ben had told her he was going to war and asked her to wait for him. She had said 'yes', a thousand times 'yes'.

Sally looked up at the lighted window of the bed chamber and watched the shadowy figures of Miss Amelia and Marie, pass and repass behind the open window until Marie pulled the shutters and drew the curtains.

Sally waited until the house was still and the light in the bed chamber had dimmed to a single candle. Miss Amelia had left the door to Ben's bed chamber ajar and Sally could hear her in her own bed chamber talking softly to Marie. Ben was alone at last.

For a brief moment she thought she had come too late. He was so still, so pale. She leaned over and kissed his forehead feeling the faintest pulse of life still present. His eyelids fluttered open and she waited for the slow, familiar smile of recognition.

"Sally."

Her fingers caressed his temple. "I waited, Ben, just as I promised."

Beyond the bedroom door she heard Miss Amelia's footsteps in the hall. They had so little time. She threw open the high doors that opened out on to the broad verandah. The soft breeze from the river rushed in lifting the curtains and stirring the air. She looked at Ben and held out her hand to him.

Miss Amelia gave a sharp cry. The sheets she carried tumbled to the ground unheeded as she crossed to the bed.

Marie, following her, looked not at the bed but at the billowing curtains. She stepped out on to the verandah and looked down into the garden. In the shadow of the oak tree she saw two figures. For a brief moment the lovers looked up and she saw their faces.

The old slave crossed herself, shook her head and stepped back into the room, pulling the doors shut behind her. She turned to the woman who sat weeping by the bed and put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right Miss 'Melia. He's with Miss Sally now, where he belongs."

Miss Amelia looked up. "Sally?"

Marie nodded. "I told you when she died of the fever her soul didn't pass to the other side. She's been here all this time waiting for him, just as she promised. They're together now, Miss 'Melia."

Miss Amelia rose to her feet, straightening her skirt. She looked down into her son's peaceful face. Gently she picked up his right hand and as she did so, an emerald ring tumbled from his fingers.

THE END