

The Eastburns, Quakers, own a 500 acre farm that feeds the citizens of Philadelphia. After the redcoats murder a family member, their indentured servant, falls off the fence of neutrality and lands on her feet in the garden of revolution.

Eastburn

By W. Schildt

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EASTBURN

W. SCHILDT

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ISBN: 978-1-64719-935-7

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

This is a work of historical fiction based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2022

First Edition

Chapter 1

The long grass tickled my bare legs where I sat on the bank of the Delaware River. There was no longer anyone to watch. All the passengers and crew had disembarked. When would my daddy come? Now that my mum slept in the sea, my daddy would be sad. The sailors had left our trunk on the dock. I wished that it contained food. My stomach growled. I had survived the voyage by begging, but often those in the hull had nothing to give, having very little themselves.

This morning I was excited to feel the earth again after two months at sea. I no longer smelled the ocean. The smell of the earth was clean unlike the stench of the ship. After the people had left, it was quiet except for the call of a bird. No one yelled or sang. Only the captain remained on board. The wind was quiet, and the scent of wildflowers was pleasant. The river dark and muddy flowed through Philadelphia. It was a strange sounding name, unlike my home in London. Most of the people on the ship spoke English and looked like me, but I knew no one. My stomach growled again. I was used to it. My family rarely had full stomachs.

The leaves on the trees were small and just beginning new life. I had decided May in Philadelphia was like May in London. The air was warm. My shoes were tight. I hoped that I would be able to kick them off and go barefoot soon. I had not seen my daddy for two years. He left us to start a new life for my mum and me. I had trouble remembering his face. Would he remember mine?

The sun was high. Two men in a wagon pulled up to the dock. One went into the ship. The other man, dressed in a tricorne hat, a coat and clean stockings, walked over to me.

“What is your name?” he asked. His dark eyes and hair, neatly combed and pulled to the back of his head, gave him an air of elegance.

I replied, “Margaret Abraham, sir.”

“Why are you alone, Margaret?” he asked gently. “Where is your mother?”

“She went to sleep in the sea.”

He nodded and motioned to me. “Come, child. My name is Samuel Eastburn.” He bowed slightly. “We will take you home.”

When the other man, sunburned with sandy-colored hair and dirt under his fingernails, got into the wagon, he took the reins and the horses began to move away from the river. I watched the ship disappear behind trees. The wagon bed was empty except for me and the trunk. I noticed discarded pea pods, a crushed onion, and a few skinny asparagus stalks on the wagon’s wooden floor. The men seemed occupied, talking with one another, so I grabbed a pea pod and put it into my mouth. I chewed quickly and swallowed it. Then I grabbed another.

“Mr. Johnson, I believe the waif is hungry.”

Mr. Johnson, a man older than Samuel, wearing worker’s trousers and a shirt, turned and smiled. “I believe that you are correct, Master Samuel.”

“Margaret, would you like some cider?” asked Samuel. He filled a small wooden cup.

After inspecting the pale-looking drink, I noticed all the bubbles.

“It is made from our apples. What did you drink in London?”

“Tea...why does this have bubbles, sir?”

“To make it taste good Try it.”

I held the cup out after I had gulped the cider. “May I have more, sir?”

"When was the last time that you ate?" asked Mr. Johnson.

"Yesterday on the ship, sir"

"The cider may make you dizzy. You can eat as many vegetables as you can find. I wish that we had some bread for you," said Samuel.

"Thank you, sir."

"We will be at Eastburn Plantation by late afternoon. Cook will have supper for us."

I gobbled all the vegetables and drank more cider, as the wagon bumped along the rutted road away from the Delaware River and Philadelphia.

"Poor little thing, Master Samuel, her life is already planned for years to come."

"Better for her at Eastburn Hill than in the poorhouse, Mr. Johnson. Children generally do not thrive there."

Mr. Johnson nodded in agreement.

§

The wagon came to a stop in front of a three-story, stone farmhouse. The orange-red shutters matched the color in some of the fieldstone. On a clothesline near the door a green quilt with the log cabin motif flapped in the breeze. "Wake up, child, it is time to meet Master Eastburn." Samuel lifted me out of the wagon and set me on my feet.

I stumbled after Samuel to the staircase at the back of the house. There I climbed the steps and entered a small room with a desk and some papers. A man in a waistcoat and breeches, seated at a desk, looked me over. He and Samuel had the same dark-brown hair and brown eyes. Samuel handed the master a sack that jiggled with coin, as he said, "We sold everything and could have sold double."

"I have talked with Master Newton from Germantown Meeting. You will go there on Tuesday. He is interested in our produce, eggs and cider. Who is the child?"

Mr. Johnson now behind me, pushed me in front of the master, a man older than Mr. Johnson and much older than Samuel. "She came alone on the *Tranquility*. She is Charles Abraham's daughter. He is now joined by his wife."

"Just what we need, an orphan. Child..."

"Her name is Margaret," said Samuel.

I watched the men, as they discussed my predicament as though I was not present. "Eighteen, sir," I said.

All three looked at me in surprise.

"Eighteen," I said again. "I am six-years-old now and I will be eighteen in twelve years, sir."

"Margaret, you understand that your mother and father are together. They are happy, but they will not be able to raise you. Since they have not repaid their loans, you will have to take the responsibility of their indenture." Master Eastburn, with his clean dark hair and clean-shaven face, leaned forward in his chair as he talked. I never knew my grandparents, but I thought at that instant that the master looked like a rich grandfather.

I did not understand indenture or responsibility. "I wish to see my daddy, sir, and I am glad that my mum is not unhappy anymore."

"Margaret, who taught you to add?" asked Master Eastburn.

"My mum said that God gave me a gift for numbers and reading, sir."

"You can read?"

"Aye, Master Eastburn, my mum and I read the Bible, sir."

The three men glanced at one another.

"How old are you?"

"I am six, sir."

"You look younger than six-years-old, Margaret," said Master Eastburn.

"My birthday is the twenty-fifth of April. I was told that today is the fifth of May. That would make me six, sir."

"Margaret..."

"Sir, will you show me to my mum and daddy so I can visit with them?"

He sighed. "We will talk about this again. Tomorrow is Sunday. After we return from Meeting, I will take you to your father... and mother. I will need to quiz you myself on your letters and numbers. Very few servants are proficient. Then we will assign the work that you will be expected to do daily. Samuel, where are the women and children?"

"In warm weather they go to the Schuylkill every Saturday afternoon, Father."

"Of course. Samuel, walk the girl to the Schuylkill." He examined my filthy, ripped dress and greasy hair. "She needs it."

"Is there bread in the dining room? She has had nothing to eat since yesterday."

Master Eastburn nodded. Samuel climbed a steep step and went through a doorway from the office and into the dining room. He returned with a bread heel. The men smiled as I grabbed it and munched.

"Come along, Margaret. You need my mother's touch," observed Samuel with a funny, crooked smile. He walked from the house down a steep trail as birds called overhead. Soon I heard children laughing and ladies singing. "I can go no further, Margaret. All the ladies are bathing," explained Samuel. "Keep on this trail and you will come to the Schuylkill."

I walked ahead. This country was so green. I had grown up in dirt and grime. Try as my mother would, our room was always covered in a layer of filth. By the time that my dress had dried after a washing, it was covered in dust and dirt from the street.

Ahead of me a wide river ran swiftly. The children in their shifts were all wet as were the ladies. "You there, child, who are you?" asked a lady.

"I am Margaret Abraham, mistress. I was told to go to the Schuylkill."

"Well, you have found it, Margaret." She pointed toward the river. "But where is your mother?"

"Master Samuel told me that she is with my father."

The lady looked down at the ground and sighed, before she said, "My name is Mistress Eastburn. Welcome to Eastburn Plantation." She gave a short curtsy and I followed her lead. "Your father, although only with us for two years, was found to be a kind, loving man. He came to Meeting every week and prayed that you would arrive safely in Philadelphia. His prayers were answered."

"My mum said that I look like him, mistress."

The mistress, a large, handsome woman with gray-streaked light hair and blue eyes, smiled and agreed. "You will remove your dress so I can wash you. Your journey has left you soiled."

My dress, little more than a rag and my shift was yellowed and stunk. It was so tight that my mother had cut one side so I could continue to wear it even though it no longer covered my knees.

"How old are you, do you know?"

"I am six," I answered proudly.

“So is Benjamin. Come here, son.” She motioned to a boy with long, wet hair who was skipping stones in the river. His face was tanned by the sun.

“Welcome our new servant, son.”

“Yes, Mother,” Benjamin smiled and bowed. He did not seem to care that we were introduced, me wearing a ripped shift and he just a shirt that reached past his knees. I decided it must be normal here. I curtsied.

“Go play with your boat, Benjamin. Leave us.” He ran off at once with another child, as she removed my shift and washed me in the river. Some of the children watched and some snickered. The mistress gave them a sharp look

“Your skin is pearly white under the dirt. I imagine that you have spent little time outside.”

“I helped my mum clean the tavern some days, but all other days we stayed in our room so our things would not be stolen, mistress.”

After she had washed my hair and combed and braided it, she remarked, “Your hair is the color of the daffodils and your eyes are as blue as the sky. Your father was as handsome as you are pretty. But we are plain people, we do not look on the outside but rather on the heart.”

I was not sure what she meant. No one had ever said that I was pretty or that a person could see inside my body to my heart.

“Your father loved you.”

She picked up a dirty shirt and called to Benjamin. “Take off your shirt.” He did as she asked and then she tied the dirty shirt around his waist. “Run back to the house for a clean shirt,” she ordered as she slipped his shirt over my head.

Benjamin shrugged and was about to do as she commanded, but before he ran toward the house, he called, "Father said Emily is about to foal."

"Your brother is waiting for you in the barn," the mistress called back, "but first get a clean shirt and breeches and then go and tell Cook that we will be ready for supper."

"Yes, Mother," he said as he ran off.

"Mother, I want to see the foal too."

A thin girl with brown hair and round glasses came over to us. "Rachel, Margaret will be your charge after supper. Take her back to the house and find her a dress. She cannot eat in the kitchen in Benjamin's shirt, and she is so thin that I fear if we do not feed her soon, she will disappear."

Rachel, who was grown and plain as her mother, sighed and nodded. "I am to see Stephen at Meeting tomorrow. You have not forgotten that it is a special time for me."

"The wedding is three months away. You will have time for Margaret. Wait outside the paddock for your brother to bring out the foal."

"Yes, Mother"

The clean group of bathers put on their shoes. Most left the river to return on the path in the opposite direction of that which I had taken. I watched as they sang a song about birds calling to one-another. Rachel let the others pass and took my hand after I almost tripped and fell. "We will find a dress for you and then I will show you to the kitchen." She did not smile but seemed preoccupied with her plans.

Rachel took me through the front door of Eastburn Hill into a green-paneled parlor that smelled of woodsmoke. A two-sided stone fireplace connected the parlor and the dining room. Across from the parlor and the dining room, a circular staircase

curled to the second floor of the house. The stone fireplace in the dining room had two ovens, a warming shelf and a large kettle that hung over the fire. Both rooms were filled with orange-painted wooden furniture. The cabinet doors at the back of the dining room were edged in a robin's-egg-blue paint.

I followed Rachel up the circular staircase to a bedchamber that looked towards gardens at the back of the house. There were two beds and one closet in the room. She rooted through a wooden trunk at the foot of one bed and pulled out a faded blue smocked dress and a shift. She held it up and smiled. "My mother had this made for me. It was my favorite dress, the only gown that I had that was not gray."

Rachel helped me off with the shirt and I pulled on a large shift and the larger dress. Even though the clothes were too big, I felt like a princess. I never imagined that I would wear such a beautiful gown.

"The yellow in the smocking is the same color as your hair. You look lovely!" said Rachel.

"I cannot wait to show my mum, mistress."

Rachel looked into my eyes with a sad smile. She was about to say something but then shook her head. "You have had a long journey. I am sure it was not easy on the ship. At Eastburn Hill, you have a new home."

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The family ate a supper of vegetable soup, cornbread, honey-coated prunes and cider in the wood-paneled dining room next to the office. I had my supper in the basement's candlelit kitchen with Mr. Johnson, three boys, William, Matthew and Andrew and one girl, Patsy, a redhead. William, a skinny boy and Andrew, a boy with blonde hair as pale as mine but who

spoke no English, ate so fast that I put my hand over my food so they would not steal it. Matthew, who was older than me and tall, smiled.

After I had cleaned my wooden bowl, I frowned. I was still hungry. Mr. Johnson must have seen the hunger in my face so he had Cook give me another serving of the soup and cornbread. His hazel eyes sparkled in the candlelight. "Do you feel better, Margaret?"

I smiled contentedly. "Is the food here always so good, Mr. Johnson?"

He laughed. "We eat three times a day. Breakfast is at five in the morning, dinner at noon and supper at six o'clock. The food left from dinner is our supper. Because Master Samuel and I were selling today and not here, there was extra food tonight. I am glad that you have had your fill."

William, Matthew and Andrew, teenage boys, had looked at my second serving of food longingly but made no remark.

Mr. Johnson continued, "You will awake at four o'clock to help ready the breakfast meal. Then you will clean the kitchen and help Cook with the noon meal. Patsy will work with you and Cook. After dinner, Patsy cleans the house, helping Mistress Eastburn. You will go to the orchards or the gardens after you are finished here. We always have work."

I nodded, but had trouble stifling a yawn.

"Patsy works on her letters after supper. Mistress Eastburn is emphatic that she learn to read. You will join her. Mistress Rachel is the teacher. You will share a space with Patsy in the kitchen next to the fireplace where you will sleep. The boys sleep in the barn. Cook and I have a space in the corner," he pointed, "away from the kitchen noise."

When Mr. Johnson stood to leave the table, the others all stood and either bowed or curtsied. I followed Patsy's lead and did the same.

Patsy whispered, "Follow me. The sooner we say our letters, the sooner we can go to sleep."

She went up the curling stairs from the basement to the first floor of the house and knocked on the door at the landing. I followed but tripped on a step and bumped my leg. The last rays of sunlight shown through the large windows in the parlor. The family had finished their supper and the master, mistress and Samuel were reading. Rachel and Benjamin sat at the dining room table with chalk and slates. Patsy hurried to sit across from them and motioned for me to do the same. Andrew joined us.

Rachel read a Bible verse, 'The Lord is My Shepherd; I shall not want.'¹

"Margaret, I will say a word and you will write the beginning letter of the word on your slate." She said the word "the".

I wrote the word "the".

"Just write the first letter of the word." She looked at the others who had written a "T".

"The next word is 'Lord'".

I scribbled the word 'Lord' as she watched and then rubbed my hand on the slate to erase the word.

"Wait!" she said. "Write the word shepherd."

I did as she asked, but I could not fit the last two letters on my slate.

"Who taught you to write?" she asked.

"My mum, every night we would learn new words after I read the stories. My favorites are the stories of Joseph and Pharaoh and Jesus and the children, mistress."

¹ Psalm 23, verse 1

"Who are Joseph and Pharaoh?" asked Benjamin.

"Mister Johnson's name is Joseph," replied Patsy.

"No," said Benjamin, shaking his head. He thought for a moment. "Joseph, Mary and Jesus go together, but who is Pharaoh? The donkey?"

Master Eastburn walked into the room with amusement and amazement on his face as he gazed from his son to me. "We will read the story of Joseph and Pharaoh...or maybe Margaret will read the story. She is right. It is a wonderful story. Now it is time for our prayers and then all of you may go to bed."

Master Eastburn led us in evening prayer. He prayed for each of us at Eastburn Plantation, King George III, the weather and peace.

When I stood up to leave, he took my hand. "Margaret, tomorrow we go to Meeting. Did you go to Meeting in London?"

I shook my head. "What is meeting?"

"Very well, I know that it would have had to be secret there. It is not allowed. You will come with us but be advised, children, especially girls, do not speak at Meeting. You will sit quietly. If I am led to speak, I will. We are Quakers and believe every person is God's creation filled with God's light and as such, has value. This includes you. We strive for peace with our neighbors and in our country. We left England and came here, for we seek the freedom to believe as we see fit. We were not allowed to meet in London and our beliefs are scorned by the king. Still, we pray for him and wish him peace. You will begin to understand our beliefs and if you find they become your beliefs, we will welcome you as a Friend."

"Do Patsy and the boys go, master?"

"Yes, because they are indentured like you. William and Matthew have been here almost seven years and will have their

freedom papers in less than one year and Patsy in one year. Andrew just came to us. He is alone like you and will sit with other boys without families at the back of the meetinghouse. William's and Matthew's parents are now free and live in cabins on my land and work my fields. You have seen the women and young children at the Schuylkill. Their parents have joined our meetinghouse and will be at Meeting tomorrow. William, Matthew and Patsy sit with their families. You may sit with my family."

"Aye, Master Eastburn," I yawned.

"Go to bed now, child. I am pleased with you."

Chapter 2

Patsy blew out a candle and then another in a sconce on the wall, after she had helped me off with my dress. "Mistress Rachel must like you to give you such a dress."

It was then that I noticed Patsy's homespun gray dress.

"Someday I hope to have a dress as beautiful. Maybe when I wed, my mother will make me a beautiful dress. She sews all the clothes for Mistress Eastburn and Rachel."

In the warmth of the basement, I cuddled up next to Patsy on the cot and was about to go to sleep when candlelight lit the backdoor of the basement. Mistress Eastburn, followed by a person with skin so dark that I could not see him well, descended the steps and went to the larder. They gathered supplies and put them into a sack. Mistress hugged that person and whispered some words that I could not hear. Then Samuel called to them from outside and they left the basement by the same door that they had entered.

Then all was dark and with a full stomach I did not wake until Patsy nudged me. "Wake up! We have to help Cook." After we had dressed, Patsy handed me an apron that covered my whole dress. She wore one herself.

I met a sturdy woman in a clean apron with flour on her hands. Cook, a short, round woman, was cutting lard into flour with two knives.

"Patsy, take the new girl to the coop and show her how to gather eggs. Then come back and finish the crusts."

Patsy took me to the stone steps at the rear of the basement where I had seen the mistress and the other person the night before. As we climbed the steps, I tripped and fell, skinning my knee.

“We do not have time for you to fall. Cook wants eggs. Get up!”

I managed to hobble after her, up the steps, through the door to the outside of the house and then to the smelly coop. The chickens were quiet and did not seem to mind our intrusion into their space unaware that we would rob them. Patsy showed me how to reach under a hen and take its egg. At first it scared me and I dropped my egg on the floor. I could see that the round thing had cracked and goo slid from it.

“Have you never harvested eggs?”

“I have never seen an egg,” I answered. “How do you eat it, mistress?”

She sighed. “I will get the eggs; you hold the basket. On second thought, just watch.” After her basket was almost full, she had me slide my hand under a hen.

“Oh, the feathers are soft and warm.”

Then she held my hand, grasping the egg, and held it over the basket. “Gently, drop it onto the others. Do not break it!”

We hurried back to the kitchen where Cook handed Patsy a rolling pin. “Since it is Sunday and the hens are laying good, I am making custard pies for breakfast. While I make the custard, roll out the dough. Have the child crush the eggshells for the compost.”

“I think she will be able to do that quite nicely,” Patsy smirked.

While the pies baked, Cook sliced smoked trout and finely cut red onions and arranged them on a large platter. Then she sent Patsy and me to the root cellar for potatoes, onions and carrots. Again, we walked outside away from the house where we saw Samuel hanging the log-cabin-design quilt on the line.

As it was Sunday, I decided that maybe Quakers were allowed to do chores on the holy day unlike most other people.

Cook boiled the old potatoes and then Patsy and I slid off their skins and cut them into pieces while Cook made a dressing for potato salad. We cut up onions and carrots and left them in salted water. When we returned after Meeting, Cook said that she would fry them and make them into a ring around sliced ham. She said that the cows had extra milk so we were going to have a real treat, ice cream. I was not sure what it was, but Patsy was so excited that she jumped up and down. Of course, I had tasted potatoes and a few times I had eaten carrots but most of the food that this family ate was new to me. My mother and I had eaten gruel two or three times a day, if we were blessed.

Once the breakfast was almost ready to be served, I was handed a scrub brush and a bucket with soapy water. The slate floor of the hearth needed to be cleaned before we left for Meeting. Patsy had gone upstairs to set the dining room table and Cook worked on an inventory list. I liked cleaning the floor. The soapy water smelled nice and bubbles were fun. Everything at Eastburn Hill was clean.

While I was brushing the slate, I heard Mistress Eastburn and Rachel in the dining room. They were early. The pies were still baking. Patsy returned to the kitchen with wide eyes. "Mistress Rachel is sick and Mistress Eastburn is crying."

Cook shook her head. "That Rachel is a wild one. I knew this would happen when the wedding was postponed."

"But Mother Dickinson died. Rachel could not marry so soon after that," said Patsy.

"Mistress let Rachel and Stephen spend too much time together unchaperoned."

"I heard Rachel say that she and the Dickinson boy handfasted after the funeral. When Mistress asked who witnessed it, Rachel said, the trees and the sky."

"Ooh," said Cook, shaking her head again. "I am afraid Meeting will be a solemn affair today. Master Eastburn must tell the truth and the two lovers will be made to stand and ask the Friends for forgiveness."

"Will you still make ice cream?" asked Patsy with big eyes.

"I will. The little ice left in the ice house is almost melted. Ice cream may sooth tempers. And I will be called upon to make a menu for the wedding...probably next Sunday. We will be busy."

I was unsure of handfast and ice cream, but everything new so far had been good for me.

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We ate the most wonderful breakfast that I had ever tasted and even though no one talked or looked happy, I was. Then we took off our aprons and I put on my tight shoes. Mistress and Rachel wore gray bonnets with white lace ruffles under the brim. They put a white cap on my head. I climbed into the wagon with the others from the kitchen. The family left in a fine carriage. We were off to Meeting in Valley Forge.

It was an overcast day, the sky threatened rain and it was chilly. Matthew drove the wagon past a big house on Mount Joy and he said to me, "The owners, the Potts family who owned the iron forge, used to live there, but they had moved after the redcoats had burned the forge."

I think it meant that the Potts family would not be at Meeting.

The wagon stopped at a log cabin almost as long as Eastburn Hill. Many other wagons were parked there and all of the people wore the same dull-colored clothing as the

Eastburns. I was the only one in a colorful gown. Master and Mistress Eastburn greeted the congregants and I walked behind them. Patsy left to meet her parents as did the boys. I walked next to Benjamin, who was dressed like his father, wearing white stockings, black breeches, a clean white cravat around his neck, a black waistcoat, a black coat and a black tricorne. I followed him into the meetinghouse where Benjamin removed his tricorne as did his father and Samuel. We sat on a first-row bench. Many rows of benches were behind us. Three other rows of benches formed a square inside the unadorned room. The center was open. No one spoke.

Benjamin took my hand and put it and his hand into the pocket of his waistcoat. I felt a tiny wooden horse and then another. He looked at me and his lips stretched into a secret smile. I held the horse and moved it close to his. The horses raced and stopped and moved left and right.

The silence continued for some time before a man offered a biblical verse about loving one's neighbor. After he sat down, another man stood and seemed to accept the first man's apology. Then Master Eastburn stood and explained his new discovery and with fresh insight asked the Divine Spirit to help the Friends feel God's presence. Rachel and the Dickinson boy stood and the master announced the wedding would be held the following Sunday and invited all the Friends to celebrate the union.

We sat again in silence. Benjamin and I had exchanged horses in his pocket. With our heads down, we glanced at each other and almost giggled aloud. Then the two neighbors stood and shook hands and the gesture spread. Benjamin let go of his horse as did I and then he shook my hand still in his pocket.

We stayed at the meetinghouse long after the meeting was concluded, as the Friends exchanged conversations. I went outside and took off my shoes. I had no stockings so I could dig my toes into the soft dirt around the meetinghouse. I watched Mistress Eastburn in deep conversation with three ladies. They seemed distressed and one lady began to cry when she showed the other two some sort of talisman. Then Mistress Eastburn, with a stick, made a hole in the dirt and buried it.

We returned to Eastburn Hill in the early afternoon. After we finished the wonderful meal, Samuel put cream into the churn that was surrounded by last winter's ice. We went outside while he worked the churn and then we all got a taste of the sweetest, coldest dessert that existed. Benjamin and I sat on the grass by the pond next to the springhouse.

"Watch me eat this," said my new friend. He put a little pudding on his spoon and carefully licked it.

I took a lick and was so excited that I filled my spoon and filled my mouth. My head hurt! My eyes hurt!

Benjamin rolled on the grass laughing. "My father would say that you learned a lesson in gluttony."

Once my eyes no longer hurt, my spoonfuls of the heavenly pudding were small and I truly understood why Patsy had jumped when Cook said we would have ice cream.

While we sat there, Mistress Eastburn walked over to the clothesline and took down the quilt. She folded it and put it into a canvas bag.

"My mother says when the quilt leaves the line company comes. When I was little, I did not understand but now I do. Follow me!" Benjamin stood and ran around to the basement door and hid behind a bush as I followed.

We waited for a short time and then the mistress helped a bleeding person to the door. The man's skin was as black as the book cover on Master Eastburn's Bible. Samuel lifted the man's arm around his shoulder and helped him descend the steps.

Once they were gone, I asked, "Where are they going?"

Benjamin whispered, "There is a secret room. He will have to get well before he can cross the river."

"Why does he have to cross the river?"

"So he can go to the next house."

"What is a secret room?"

"I cannot find it, but I know that it is a place where he will hide inside my house."

"Is it a game?"

Benjamin shook his head. "They do not want me to know about it. I think that it is dangerous. Last time I asked about it, Father put hot chilies on my tongue and said never to mention it again."

"It scares me."

"I am not afraid of anything," boasted Benjamin.

We walked back towards the other side of the house for a drink of water from the springhouse. Afterwards Benjamin threw some stones into the pond. Tadpoles swam away as the stones fell to the bottom of the pond. Benjamin unbuttoned his breeches and peed. "I like to pee here. I like the splashes in the water."

"I wish that I could do that."

"Benjamin!" yelled his father. "Keep your breeches buttoned when you are with a girl."

First he finished and then he put his member inside his pants. "Sorry, Father."

"Tell Margaret that you are sorry not me."

"I am sorry, Margaret."

I shrugged. I had seen men do that on the street. They had never said that they were sorry to my mum or me.

"Margaret, we will pick some lilacs and visit your father." Master Eastburn took my hand and pulled me to a stand.

"Can I go too, Father?"

"No, this is something that Margaret and I must do alone."

The two of us broke lilacs branches from a tall bush on the path. From then on their sweetness would always smell of spring and pain. At the end of the path there was a log fence around stones stuck in the grass.

"Why are we here, master?"

"Margaret, your father was a valued member of this household. He worked hard and always tried to do his best. He used to go with Samuel to Philadelphia to sell our fruit and produce and it was there that he got sick as did Samuel and Mr. Johnson."

We sat next to a stone in the weeds with the name Charles Abraham carved into it. Master Eastburn took my hand and explained, "Your father, strong as he was, could not overcome the fever. His last words were of you and your mother. He loved you."

"Where are my mum and daddy, master?"

"His bones are here under the ground. Your mum's bones are in the sea. But both of them are together in God's heaven. They are happy and glad that you are here at Eastburn Hill."

I felt my eyes fill with tears. "You said that I could talk with them."

"Put the lilacs next to the stone. Then you can tell them about your new life. You can tell them that you are happy that they are together."

“No, they left me!”

“Margaret, they did not want to leave you, but it was their time. No one can change that. We are each given life by our Creator. But that life is finite. Some have days or months and some have years. We do not know how long each has. We can only be grateful for the time that we have and to thank God for it.”

Tears ran down my cheek. “But who will love me now? Who will take care of me?”

The master gathered me into his lap and held me close to his heart. “You are a valued member of the Eastburn family. We will love and take care of you.”

“Can they see me?”

“They know that you are safe and they are smiling.”

We stood up and I gazed at the lilacs in front of the stone.

“You can come and visit whenever you like and tell them about your life. My father is buried over there.” He pointed. “I often come here to tell him about the crops and sometimes I tell him about Benjamin. He is special to his mother and me. We never thought that we would have a son so late in life. I laugh about it with my father whenever I visit.”

I wiped my nose and eyes on my sleeve. “Can I visit next Sunday, master?”

Master Eastburn smiled. “They would like that.” He held my hand as we returned toward the house. It was dusk and it had started to rain.

Mistress Eastburn met us on the path. “John, we have a problem. Our guest needs help.”

Master Eastburn told me to run ahead. Before I left him, he smiled and hugged me.

Dressed in my shift, ready to lie down I heard Samuel call me from the top of the circular stairs. The dining room looked lonely in the candlelight. Samuel put his finger to his lips. I kept quiet, as we climbed the next set of curved steps to the room where Rachel had dressed me. As she slept, we walked past her and into the room above the parlor. One candle was lit and I could see a large bed and a small bed where Benjamin lay sleeping.

Mistress Eastburn, wearing her shift, waited for us. "Margaret, we need your help. You are the smallest person here," she whispered. "We want you to crawl through the opening behind the stove."

The room was so dark. Samuel pulled me toward the potbelly stove and had me crouch down. I waited while he moved the stove aside. "Our guest is in the next room. He needs help, but the room is so small and we are too big to go into the room with him."

Mistress Eastburn had a jug and some linen in her hand. "We want you to wash off his bruises and put this cool water on his head and chest to make him more comfortable. We think he has a fever. He does not answer us."

I looked at each of them and then crawled through the hole in the wall. "It is dark," I whispered.

I heard Master Eastburn's footfalls in the room. "Be brave, child," he whispered.

I managed to crawl over the man's back and shoulder and sat in a dark space by his head. Samuel passed the jug with water and the linen through the opening. "Wash him as well as you can."

I did as they asked. The man did not move, but I could hear his breathing.

"Is he alive?" asked the master.

"Aye, sir, he is breathing."

"Put more water on him."

I did my best. The injured man gave a grunt and soon after, he moved his arm so that I could not crawl over him and leave the space. "Help me! The space to leave is blocked."

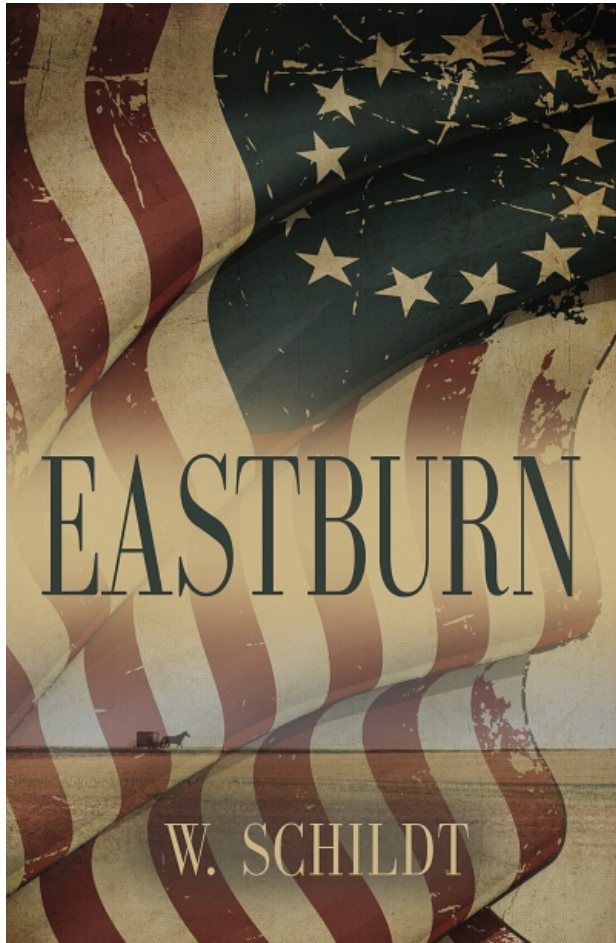
"We will wait here until our guest moves his arm so you can leave. Do not be afraid," urged Master Eastburn. "He will not hurt you."

I leaned on the man. He was warm. Raindrops patted against the roof. I remember how my mother used to sing to me when I was sick. It always made me feel better. So, I sang a lullaby,

"Sleep my child, and peace be with thee,
All through the night.
Guardian angels God will send thee,
All through the night.
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,
Hill and vale in slumber sleeping.
I, my loving vigil keeping,
All through the night."²

The thought of my mother filled me with sadness. I would never again hear her sing or feel her caress or feel her kiss on my cheek. "Mum," I cried. I started to sob and my tears fell onto the sick person's neck. "Mum." A hand touched my back and patted me gently. The soft touch soothed me and I fell asleep in the arms of the unnamed man.

² Traditional Welsh folk song.



The Eastburns, Quakers, own a 500 acre farm that feeds the citizens of Philadelphia. After the redcoats murder a family member, their indentured servant, falls off the fence of neutrality and lands on her feet in the garden of revolution.

Eastburn

By W. Schildt

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