

A Training College Trickster

A shiver of excitement coursed through Lottie as her bare feet touched the cool, smooth floorboards. She felt her way to the chair where her coat was waiting. Then she tugged the blankets off her bed, gathered them up, and slipped out into the pre-dawn darkness.

It was April Fool's Day, 1855, and fourteen-year-old Lottie crept across the dewy lawn toward the bell tower that controlled the every move of the girls enrolled at the Virginia Female Seminary. She slipped into the building and climbed the rickety wooden staircase. Adjusting her awkward armful of bedclothes, Lottie started up the ladder that led to the bell itself. At the top of the ladder, Lottie slid precariously onto the rafters, carefully balancing her load.

She reached out to the massive bell and grasped the clapper that hung from the center.

"Don't look down," she whispered into the moonlit tower. "Don't look down and you'll be fine."

Lottie wrapped her sheets and blankets around the clapper again and again until it was swaddled in a huge, soft mass of wool and cotton. Then she tied it all together with the belt from her coat. Mission accomplished!

She nimbly scrambled back along the rafters and down the ladder. She raced out of the tower and across the lawn. Catching her breath outside the dorm room door, Lottie slipped silently back into bed and lay grinning into the darkness. Eyes wide, she waited for the six o'clock wake up bell that she knew would not ring. As the darkness outside grayed to dawn and then full sunlight spilled into the room, Lottie's grin widened in triumph.

Just after seven o'clock, the bell finally rang. Lottie's roommate, Cary Ann, lifted her head and rubbed her eyes in confusion.

"Wasn't that the wake up bell? Why is it so light outside?" She glanced sleepily at Lottie, lying fully clothed on a bare mattress. Cary Ann sat up in surprise. "And what happened to all the blankets from your bed?"

Lottie just giggled.

Cary Ann shook her head, trying to suppress a smile. "Oh, Lottie," she said in mock exasperation, "what have you done this time?"

Charlotte Digges Moon—better known as Lottie Moon—was practically famous for her pranks and practical jokes, both at school and back home on the sprawling grounds of Viewmont, Lottie's childhood home. As a little girl, Lottie lived a carefree life among the 1500 rolling acres of one of the largest plantations in Albemarle County, Virginia. Nestled between the estates of two former presidents, and once a favorite retreat of the Governor of Virginia, Viewmont was

a study in old southern luxury. But to Lottie, the rambling house and endless fields and orchards were the perpetual playground she called home.

For the first twelve years of her life, Lottie spent her days reading and running, wandering through her wide world with few rules and restrictions. Surrounded by six siblings and countless cousins, there was never a dull moment. Life was a whirlwind of carriage rides and crazy adventures, house guests and hide-and-seek. As for education, Lottie had all the knowledge she could desire in her father's extensive library, and she was largely left to educate herself. Faith was one of the few constants in the household, and adherence to biblical principles came above all other priorities.

Just weeks after her twelfth birthday, however, Lottie's life changed forever. Recently recovered from a life-threatening illness, Lottie's father headed for New Orleans and Memphis on business. As he traveled, the steamboat he was on caught fire, forcing the passengers to jump from the ship into the chilly January river water. Edward Moon jumped with the other passengers, dragging his heavy trunk of gold behind him. He managed to pull the trunk to shore and hoisted it onto his back, but it was more than his weakened body could handle. He collapsed on the shore and died.

When news of her father's death reached Viewmont a few days later, Lottie knew her world would never be the same. The house was wrapped in a blanket of

grief—dark and uncertain. But as the days turned to weeks and then months, things began to come together again, and sunshine seeped back into Lottie's life. Edward Moon had always believed in the concept of higher education for all of his children, and he had left money in his will to make sure each of his children could pursue their dreams and attend any school they chose.

Formal education was a rarity for young ladies in the South at that time, and Lottie was ready for the adventure it would bring. So in the fall of 1854, a few months before her fourteenth birthday, Lottie joined nearly 100 other girls at the Virginia Female Seminary.

As she entered the large hall on her first day, Lottie felt very small. It was her first time away from home, and even though girlish chatter surrounded her, she felt very alone. But Lottie soon made friends and became known as a good student. She was especially bright in language studies, including English, French, and Latin. She also became editor of one of the school newspapers.

Students were allowed painfully little free time, a restriction that choked Lottie's carefree spirit. In rebellion, she developed a quick wit and a talent as a trickster, culminating in the April Fool's Day prank in the bell tower. Lottie's classmates loved her as a constant source of laughter and unexpected amusement, but her grades in behavior and deportment suffered as a result.

Despite her behavioral challenges and a bad habit of skipping required worship services during her

last quarter of school, Lottie graduated on July 3rd, 1856. As she squirmed on the hard wooden bench and tugged impatiently at her itchy lace dress during the long graduation ceremony, Lottie looked at the eager faces of her classmates. Most of them would return to their fancy homes, eventually have fancy weddings, and begin fancy lives of their own. But Lottie wanted so much more than that!

She was nearly sixteen years old, full of life and energy, and armed with a good education. She felt like she was teetering on the edge of a promising future. All she lacked was direction. What should she do next?