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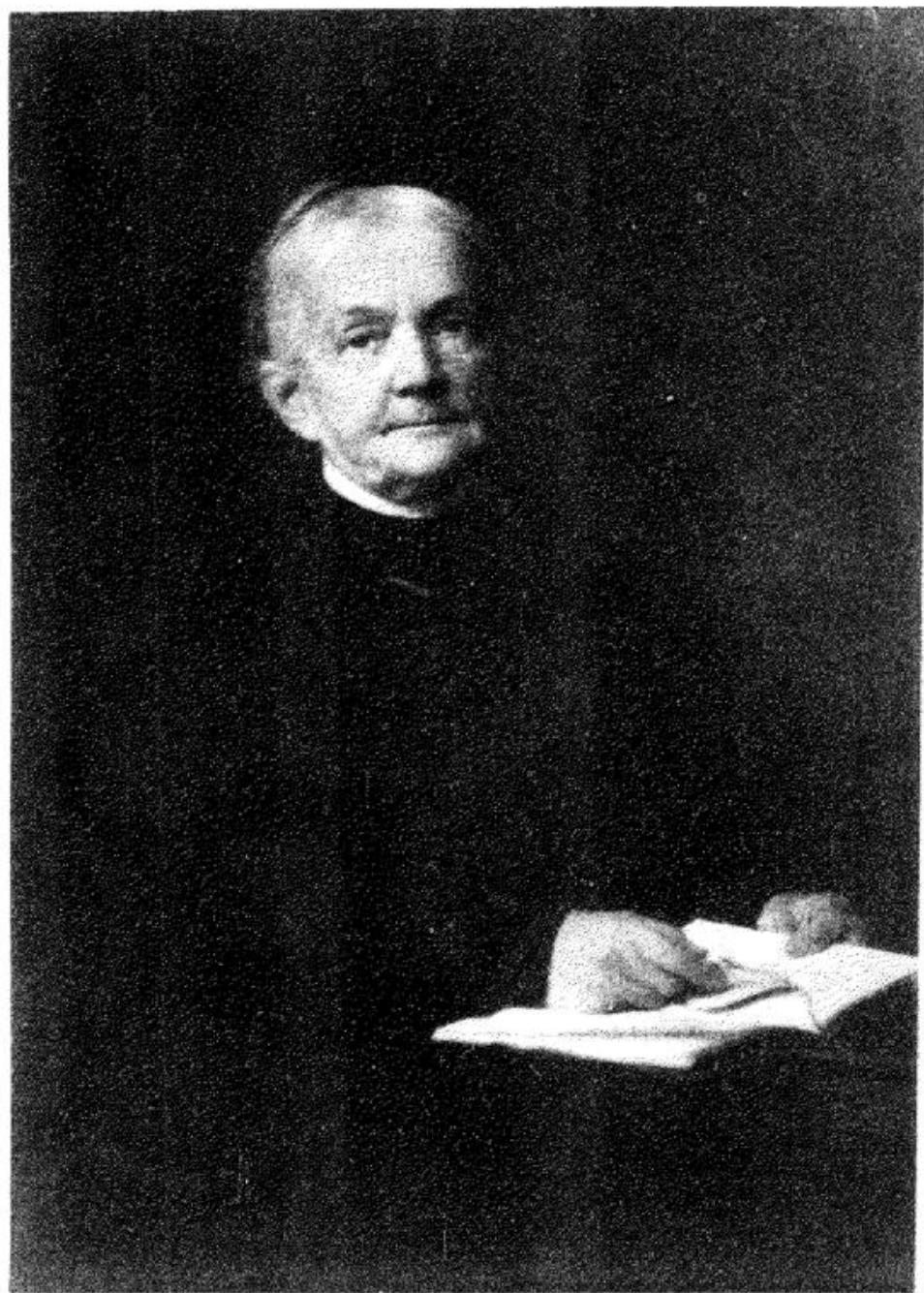
# *Mary Cyrene Breckinridge*

BY  
*MARY BRECKINRIDGE MALTBY*

*Illustrated with a  
Photogravure Portrait*

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## *Foreword*

I have been asked to write a sketch of my Mother's life for the Georgetown Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy, and as the request comes from one whom I find it hard to refuse, I will try to comply.

There are still those living among you who know more of the surroundings of her early life than I do, however, because I was separated from her so much of the time. As a result, I can give very little accurate information regarding the circumstances of her life till later years, though she spoke often and lovingly of the scenes and friends of her childhood. It is chiefly of what she was, therefore, rather than of what she did, that I feel qualified to speak.

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## *Mary Cyrene Breckinridge*

Mary Cyrene Breckinridge was born in Scott County, Ky., over eighty years ago. Her father, Clifton Rodes Burch, and her mother, Althea Viley, died when she was yet a child, leaving her to the care of relatives, though with means sufficient for an ample support.

Of her father, Gen. <sup>Wills</sup> ~~Gust~~ W. Smith said that he was one of the most respected men in his community. He died when she was quite young, but her mother's influence survived through life.

She was' brought up in the home of her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Milton Burch, of whom she always spoke with grateful love. When she grew older, she was sent to a boarding school in Georgetown, where her life seems to have been a very happy one.

While still under twenty years of age, she was married to John C. Breckinridge, and the first part of their married life was spent in Georgetown, in a house now occupied by one of the members of the Georgetown Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy.

Later, they moved to Lexington, and bought a pretty home in the suburbs of the town, where perhaps the happiest years of my Mother's life were spent. I think not more than ten years were spent there when, my Father's political duties calling him so much to Washington, the



sale of the place resulted, thus breaking up forever our family life. Never, to the end of her long life, did she cease to mourn over the loss of her home, though at the time it must have been difficult to decide on an alternative. She was so distinctly a home-maker and a home-lover, that I doubt if the life in Washington suited her much,—young and lovely as she was during the years she spent there. During her last years, when I saw most of her, she seldom referred to that time.

After those years came the War, and then the years of exile—and they were the ones that left a lasting impress on her soul.

I never knew any human love more devoted and loyal than that of my Mother for my Father. To be near him was all she asked, and to secure that end she would face any peril, or endure any hardship with the utmost cheerfulness, and I do not believe anyone ever heard her complain of her lot during the years of War and exile,—although she literally “suffered the loss of all things” for his sake, and did it gladly.

During the years she was in the Confederacy, it was her custom to remain as near as possible to the battlefield where her husband and sons were engaged, to do all that human love could do after the battle was over. At the Battle of Murfreesboro she remained near the army, in the face of positive orders to the contrary. Poor Mrs. Hanson obeyed those orders, so it was my Mother who received General Hanson when he was brought mortally wounded out of the battle, tearing up the clothing she had on for bandages for him, and remaining with him till Mrs. Hanson could come.

She nursed Major Graves, General Breckinridge's young chief of artillery when he was first wounded, and when he was wounded a second time and lay dying, he said he thought he would recover if he could be taken to Mrs. Breckinridge.

At the close of her life she would review those days, and tell me how she had given my Father and General Hanson coffee just before they went into battle, and how she gave up her "last pair of good scissors" to cut the boots off General Hanson when he was brought to her in a dying condition.

She was mercifully spared the loss of husband or sons in battle, though before the War was over her husband was wounded and her oldest son taken prisoner.

There was one time during the War when it looked as though her ministrations were over. She was staying on a plantation near Tuskegee, Alabama, with Mrs. Gilson Johnson, when she became so desperately ill with malarial fever that her life was despaired of. Quinine was scarce, and nothing fit for an invalid (except goat's milk) to be had, till her doctor brought her a little package of tea, which she treasured like gold. As she lay there, worn out with fever and starving for want of what in her condition were the necessities of life, she said she could hear the trains rolling by, carrying the Confederate wounded into Tuskegee. "And I couldn't complain," she told me long years afterward, "when I thought of the greater sufferings of our men."

When she seemed to be failing fast, Mrs. Johnson begged to be allowed to send for my Father, but she refused, saying, "Not yet—if he left

the army at this time General Bragg might use it as an occasion to injure him.”

Nothing ever appealed to her more than the sufferings of the soldiers, and when taking soup to the sick ones, she would share with the Northern soldiers, too, (if she had it to spare!) which it seems to me is all that even the Golden Rule demanded under such circumstances. One could hardly say that in doing what she did she sacrificed as much as a selfish person would have done, because it gave her such happiness to minister to the necessities of others.

On one occasion when travelling with one of her sons, she had to stop over at a town where some Confederate soldiers were quartered. It was bitterly cold, and she was installed in a room with an open fire, probably on the ground floor, while her son went to look after the baggage. On his return he found the room full of soldiers, wrapped in their blankets, stretched on the floor around the fire “like spokes in a wheel” to use his own words, while our Mother sat off in a corner of the room beaming with happiness. This state of things had not been brought about without difficulty. The landlord had remonstrated at the influx of soldiers, and she had threatened to give up her room if he interfered with her hospitality.

No one ever brought comfort and the home feeling out of bare surroundings more successfully than she did. Having had her home broken up, once and for all, she went on, making every place where her lot was cast, homelike, for the rest of her days, the instinct of home-making being too strong to be overcome by any outward circumstances.

She has often told me of a little cottage of two rooms and a gallery which she occupied somewhere in Tennessee, where the army was encamped. I never heard her say that it was inconveniently small, but always that "the roses about the porch were lovely," and that "there was a fine well of water," which she shared with the soldiers who would come and ask for it. My Father warned her that they would cause her great annoyance if she let them form the habit of coming into the yard for water, but she continued to do so, and in telling of it, would add that not one of them ever abused the privilege.

Sitting on the little gallery, she would greet them as they passed in and out of the yard where the roses grew so beautifully, and I can imagine what a picture of peace and home she must have made in the midst of War.

The account of that episode in her life would be incomplete if I left out the ending she added to it, which was, "And I took such care of the place that the lady to whom it belonged would take no rent for it"—a beautiful, but not unusual act of kindness in those days.

Perfect strangers would receive her into their homes as she travelled about, following the army, and treat her with the utmost kindness. On one occasion only, and that in a time of great stress, when falling back from the army, she, with my brother Clifton, and a sick soldier, were refused shelter one stormy night, and had to drive away in the darkness till they reached a house where doors and hearts were both flung wide to them, despite the danger of receiving such travellers.

On another occasion she took the carriage, horses, and driver of Mrs. Johnson to save them



(the horses) from capture, and with her cousin, Major Viley, left the army, to nurse him back to health. In addition to his bodily illness a deep depression and homesickness had taken possession of him, and the doctor said that capture and imprisonment would be fatal to him. With this heavy responsibility upon her, she began her journey with only the sick man and the negro driver for her companions. When night came, they stopped at a gentleman's house and were kindly entertained, but before they could continue their journey the next day the negro driver came to her with the awful news that "the Yankees are coming;" in fact, the Federal pickets were almost upon them. Their host and hostess took to the woods, probably not wanting to be found harboring a wounded Confederate officer. My Mother seized Major Viley's coat with the star on it, and, running into the room of the lady of the house, thrust it as far under the bed as she could. Major Viley gave her his watch, and she covered him up in bed, closed the door, and having begged their driver not to betray them, went forward and exchanged the compliments of the season with the soldiers, who were now on the porch.

Thinking they were to search the house, she told them there was a sick man in one of the rooms, and asked them please not to disturb him. Fortunately they wanted something to eat more than anything else, and asked her to send it to them out in the yard. She told them the lady of the house was away from home, but she would do the best she could, and after a talk with the cook, an abundant meal was sent out by the carriage driver. The cook told her that her

mistress had very few tumblers, and didn't know where she ever would get any more, so cups were sent instead. Presently the negro man came back and said they wanted tumblers. "So," said my Mother, "I very foolishly sent him back to explain why I hadn't sent tumblers." Presently he returned with the information that it made no difference about the tumblers, as they were thinking about burning the house down anyhow! After a while a message came, calling in the pickets, and they departed, carrying one of the beautiful carriage horses with them, though she begged it of the soldiers who took it. The horses' names were Star and Comet.

And speaking of names, I was told the other day that my peaceable little Mother had a cannon named for her! Probably her devoted friend, Major Graves, the young chief of artillery, paid her that compliment. Be that as it may, her namesake had the fate she always dreaded, for the two cannons, Lady Buckner and Lady Breckinridge, were captured at Missionary Ridge.

On one occasion, while in the valley of Virginia, her trunk was lost, and having nothing but the clothes she had on, she had to go to bed while they were being washed! Fortunately, she was in the lovely home of Cousin Letty Reeves where her wardrobe could be renewed. It was at this time, I think, that Col. Stoddard Johnston bought and presented her with clothing, a fact she loved to refer to. She said he was a good provider, and always had things in reserve, but when her back was turned would make such inroads on her provisions that before going to church she would hide any delicacies she had on hand! She also said that she was obliged at one

time, when their lot was cast together, to put a notice on the dining room door that no one was to go in there before breakfast, as he had a habit of going in and drinking up the cream!

During the latter months of the War she was in Richmond, where her husband's duties lay. And when Richmond fell, her agony and suspense were great when he left the city with the army, not knowing what his fate would be, or whether they would ever meet again. She knew the Federal government had branded him as a traitor, and that his peril was as great as that of President Davis. I think it was the belief that this enmity would be extended to herself that helped to drive her from Kentucky and followed her throughout the War.

Speaking of the fall of Richmond, she said with infinite pathos, "We sat in darkness that night." No one had the heart to light lamp or candle. After the Federal occupation, she went to General Lee and asked him how she could leave Richmond unobserved. He advised her to have her name removed from her trunks, and to go out of the city in company with others, as a member of their family. This she did, but with what a weight upon her did she return to Kentucky! Homeless—the Confederacy dead, her husband a fugitive, her children scattered, and no visible means of support. Her health was so broken by all she had undergone that it is a wonder she did not sink under the weeks of suspense she had to endure before she heard of my Father's safe arrival in Cuba. I remember two photographs of himself he sent her, one taken on his arrival, ghastly from starvation, and the other taken after food and rest had somewhat restored him.

On her return to Kentucky (where her younger children had been generously cared for in her absence) a home was offered her and them, in the house of a relative, Miss Martha McConnell of Woodford, and there she remained till she and they joined her husband in Canada. I would say here that no family ever received greater kindness at the hands of their relatives, both before, during and after the War, than our own.

The years of exile pressed harder upon my Father, I think, than upon her. Separated from the activities of life, and unable to do anything towards making a support for his family, he must have found it hard to bear, uncomplaining as he was. But to my Mother those five years were in blessed contrast to the horrors of War. Two of them were spent in Europe and three in Canada, and she found something to enjoy everywhere. Perhaps her happiest days were spent on the shores of Lake Ontario in Niagara Village, as it was then called, amid a colony of Southerners. Mr. and Mrs. James M. Mason of Virginia were of the number, and devoted friends of my Father and Mother,—Mrs. Mason taking the warmest interest in her housekeeping efforts.

A little cottage was rented for five dollars a month, furnished with odds and ends, and fondly remembered by my Mother for the rest of her life. As usual, she threw a halo over her surroundings, rejoicing in the beauty of the Lake, the fresh fish brought to her door, the economy of living, and the friends and kindred they were able to receive and entertain in that little home. No wonder her face was so serene,—when she made a practice of remembering and recording only the mercies of her life!



When my Father was at length able to return home, only a few more years were left them to be together. The effects of the wound he had received at the battle of Cold Harbor, complicated with pneumonia, caused his death in May, 1875, after an illness of eighteen months. During those eighteen months my Mother lived for him alone, and when the end came, we thought it would come to her also. To human eyes it would have seemed merciful had it been the end—so awfully bereft was she. With her, love was stronger than death, and at the age of fourscore she said of her husband, "I never saw him come without being glad, or leave without being sorry."

I think her love of flowers, of animals, and of little children, helped her to regain her hold on life. Many years after my Father's death she said to one of her granddaughters, "I am making you a list of old-fashioned flowers, and then, whatever comes to you, you will have your garden left."

Shortly after my Father's death, the cousin on whom she leaned above all others, and whose home had always been open to her, Mrs. George W. Johnson, was suddenly taken, after paying her a visit of consolation. But she was too stunned to realize the blow as she did in the years that followed,—for she never outlived the feeling of her loss.

Happily for her, some still lived who depended upon her. Her cousins, Mrs. John R. Viley, and Issie Desha Breckinridge, never could bear to be long separated from her; but they, too, were taken—and a little child upon whom her heart was centered was taken,—and her youngest

son died suddenly, far away from her. Still, she bravely rallied her forces, and tried to be something to somebody still—and always succeeded.

In the homes of her children her presence was a benediction, and now that she has passed beyond, I see more clearly than ever how her courtesy, unselfishness and self-control were daily object lessons to us all.

To her sisters, both present and absent, she was always loving, and her oldest son, who had been with her through the War and was in very feeble health, was the object of her ceaseless love and anxiety. When he was taken from her, something gave way—some vital force was weakened, for she was never the same afterwards.

I have never seen greater heroism under sorrow, and never thought that Motherhood at fourscore could suffer so acutely as in her case when that son was taken from her. Even after that, she would not darken the home, but constrained herself to take an interest in all the little interests of the household.

Then God raised up to her one who had long loved her, but now became a saving influence in her life. She induced my Mother to visit her among the New England hills, and kept her out-of-doors where her broken heart had a chance to heal: Miss Maltby's devotion brightened her last days, and the day she passed away she called for her picture and held it in her hands.

Her last effort was to get strong to return to Kentucky. That thought was an inspiration to her. The daughter in whose home most of her widowhood had been passed, and whose husband had been another son to her, was expecting her

constantly. To reach that home her last efforts were made, but it was not to be.

One day, having spent it in the same peaceful way as many preceding ones, she passed into unconsciousness towards nightfall, and awoke in Heaven. It was significant of her that that last day she divided something she had with those around her. Some fruit had been brought her and she shared it with others, as she had been doing with her possessions all through her life. And that final day she read, or tried to read, the last chapter of Roy Gilson's "In the Morning Glow," the record of the heart of a little child.

When Dr. Rout stood at the head of her coffin and thanked God for her loving life and for all that she had been to her husband in prosperity, in adversity and in the hour of death, the last and crowning tribute was paid by one who had known her for over half a century, and I think some of the old veterans who were present to pay the last honors to her echoed the praise in their hearts.

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University Heights,  
November, 1910.

As the Christmas season approaches, so dear to "Mammy's" heart, I want to place this little record in the hands of her grandchildren for whom she used to make "The Merry, Merry Christmas Time" so bright.

Not one of them but must have some memories of her happy ways and generous deeds at this season. Accordingly I caused to be printed this private edition of fifty copies of which this is number . . . . XV.

Mary Beckwith Maltby