



The Monster on Uncle Baylor's Back

You might say I sold my soul to the devil.

I was dubbed the “gallant Pelham” by General Robert E. Lee of the Confederate States of America, and subsequently got myself killed fighting for that terrible cause, maybe the worst cause that ever was. We can all thank God it became known as the “lost cause.”

History remembers me as a hardcore rebel fighter and even “the stud of the Confederacy,” but the truth is more complicated than that. Despite being an abolitionist sympathizer who knew the Cotton Kingdom’s war on behalf of slavery was evil, I sold my soul to the devil in exchange for fame, glory and sexual conquest. By the time I died a so-called hero, I had become the Confederacy’s poster boy and was anointed a veritable “prince of the South.” In truth, I was a deeply flawed young man struggling with my own demons—some of the same demons that are still afflicting America today.

This is one in a collection of excerpts from an upcoming series of historical fiction that tells my life story and confronts the darkest side of the antebellum South: how slavery and the sexual exploitation of the antebellum plantation system defined manhood for generations and led to the death and destruction of the Civil War.

“Aryanna, a little mulatto girl who lived on our farm, was my first friend when my mammy let me out in the yard to play. We’d been keeping each other company for maybe close to a year when my world was shaken.”

Given that Mammy forbade them from venturing near the pond until they were older, John and Aryanna decided their own favorite place to play was the peach orchard, a small but undoubtedly enchanted forest of pink blossoms that slowly filled with fruit as the days got warmer. Mammy’s peach pies and cobbles were mighty good, but they didn’t begin to compare to biting into those juicy peaches right off the tree. John would toss the fruit down to Aryanna as if he were a conquering hero looting his own private treasure, and she seemed to enjoy her peaches every bit as much as she’d cherished her snow flowers.

“Don’t you go eating those peaches!” Mammy hollered the first time she came out to do her picking and caught John up in a tree.

“They’re my peaches,” John shot back, remembering his status as a little master.

Mammy came into the shadow of the tree and glared up at him. “Don’t you sass me! And don’t go thinking your papa owns some big cotton plantation where such things don’t matter. Where do you think those jars of peaches come from? They need to last us all year.”

John wasn’t sure how big a big plantation was, or how raising cotton instead of corn, oats, and alfalfa gave one the right to eat an unlimited number of peaches, but he was thankful that Mammy couldn’t reach the branch where he’d perched himself.

Summarily evicted from the peach orchard but determined to avoid Mammy’s gazing eyes, John and Aryanna started playing out past the barn along the first cornfield. As the weeks passed and the corn grew taller, the only way they could see across the field was to climb up to the top fence rail, preferably in one of the few shady spots. From their perch they’d watch the field hands working in the distance, part of the scenery, just like the line of trees on the horizon. Usually the Negroes would be singing among themselves, but their words were as imperceptible as the hissing summer air, that strange sound Doctor Pelham insisted was nothing more than insects and seemed like part of the haze itself.

On the hottest day so far that summer—so hot that John considered swallowing his pride and begging his brothers to let him come down to the pond, no matter if it riled Mammy—they spotted a group of hands working on the far side of the field, too far away to tell if they were men or women, young or old. John wasn’t sure what

THE MONSTER ON UNCLE BAYLOR'S BACK

they were doing or why it had to be done right then, but it was hard to imagine how they were surviving; he could hardly endure sitting there in the shade, let alone working in the sun. The hands gradually made their way closer until it was apparent they were men, their bare torsos glistening with sweat like the wet paint he'd seen on the barn back in spring.

When they reached earshot of the fence, one of them raised his hand in a slow, deliberate wave. "If it's not my favorite lil masar," Uncle Baylor called out, barely managing his usual smile. Yes, it was definitely Uncle Baylor, the same old Negro man who was usually sitting out on his stump, whittling.

As the men came closer, John saw Uncle Baylor had strange, mottled letters on his back that looked like hideous burned growths or, maybe, huge black beetles crawling all over each other. And all around, crisscrossing the letters as if they formed the beetles' cage, were what looked like the scars and scabs of big, long gashes.

John usually tried to avoid looking foolish in Aryanna's eyes, but he was too frightened to think. "What's that on Uncle Baylor?" he blurted out, terrified of what he feared might be a man-eating monster.

Aryanna looked at John with puzzled innocence that implied the answer was as obvious as the burning sun in the blue sky. "You mean those brands he's got on him, or the scars?"

John didn't know that people had brands like cattle and horses. And how did someone get scars as big as that? Mammy had a scar on her hand from where she'd cut herself with a knife, but it wasn't anything like that monster on Uncle Baylor's back. John took off running for his life, desperate to escape.

"What's the matter?" Aryanna called after him. "Where you going?"

John wasn't thinking about Aryanna or if she'd fall into the monster's clutches; he was sure that monster was only after him, Uncle Baylor's favorite lil masar. He ran all the way back to the house, never glancing over his shoulder for fear the monster was right behind him.

John was so out of breath that he could barely climb the porch steps; either those steps were getting higher or he was getting smaller. He tried to open the kitchen door, but the handle wouldn't turn, as if Mammy had locked him out. He pounded as hard as he could. "Let me in!" he screamed, expecting to feel Uncle Baylor's hand on his shoulder, terrified that he would be consumed by the monster. "Let me in!"

When Mammy opened the door, John couldn't get words to come out of his mouth. As hard as he tried to speak, he just gasped, strangling pain rising from his chest and clutching his throat until he all but choked on his own breath and spittle.

THE GALLANT PELHAM

Mammy had never looked so bewildered. "Are you hurt, child?"

She started to reach out, maybe feel his forehead for fever, but John ran past her and all the way up to his room until he was safely under the bedcovers.

It wasn't long before Mammy's heavy footsteps shuffled across the upstairs hall, coming closer until there was silence and John knew she was standing over him. She pulled the quilt back until their eyes met. "What's gotten into you, child? You're gonna roast like a chicken under there."

John couldn't stop crying. He didn't know why he was so frightened or how to tell Mammy. Why did Uncle Baylor have a brand like that? Did Mammy have a monster of her own hidden beneath those calico dresses she wore?

"You can't go around throwing fits like this," Mammy said. "Fits is for babies, not big boys wearing trousers."

John wanted to explain himself, but he didn't know how; the monster was more unspeakable than where babies came from or why his mama became hysterical at that thing of his, maybe something that neither God nor modern science could answer.

"Miss Aryanna came to the door looking for you just now," Mammy persisted. "Why'd you run away from her like that?"

John rolled over and buried his face in the pillow, ashamed for running, for leaving Aryanna behind while he saved himself.

Mammy gave one of her big, tired sighs. "You've gone and got her all upset."

As much as John tried to forget the monster, it loomed larger and larger in his mind, as if it were the essence of something all around him that was wrong, something about the Negroes that nobody would tell him because he was supposed to know it for himself. Whenever he saw Uncle Baylor, he ran away, terrified that the monster might reach out and grab him.

"What's wrong with you lately, Masar John Pelham?" Mammy asked him one afternoon when he was watching her get the stove fired up. "Uncle Baylor says his favorite lil masar isn't his friend anymore. Philip and Andrew are his friends, but not Masar John."

John tried to hide his shock; he hadn't realized Uncle Baylor paid him any mind. "Why wouldn't I be his friend?" he asked in his most innocent voice.

Mammy gave him one of those looks that meant she had no intention of giving up easy. "Why is it that you don't like Uncle Baylor anymore?"

"I love Uncle Baylor," John said, trying to mean it with all his heart, even if he wasn't sure why.

THE MONSTER ON UNCLE BAYLOR'S BACK

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The more John thought about it, the less anything about the Negroes made sense. In particular, he couldn't get Aryanna's words out of his mind: "They sold me off." And despite believing her stories about that plantation on the Georgia coast, he still didn't understand why she didn't have a mama and a papa. More and more, the question of where she came from seemed like a riddle.

John and Aryanna didn't play together much during the winter, but by the time spring came and the cornstalks were coming up fresh green, John's curiosity had grown painful. "I still don't understand about your mama and papa," he all but cried out one day when they were sitting on their favorite shady fence rail. "Where are they?"

Aryanna gave an exasperated sigh. "I think my mama's back in Georgia," she said, faltering a little. "I'm not sure where my papa is; they sold him off just like they did me."

"How can they sell you?" John blurted out.

"I told you before; white people sell us black people whenever they want to."

"I know," John mumbled, feeling too foolish to persist.

Aryanna gripped the rail, as if she might lose her balance and fall. "Well then I wish you'd stop asking me so many questions. I don't ask you questions like that, do I?"

John shook his head, unable to imagine what questions she could possibly have; he lived there on the farm with his mama and papa, his brothers and sister, and all the Negroes.

"I gotta be getting back," Aryanna said, jumping down from the fence.

"I promise not to ask you any more questions," John said.

Aryanna took a few steps before looking up at him. "It's not that; I just gotta be getting back to the quarters."

John wandered back to the house before it got dark. Maybe Aryanna was telling the truth about her mama and papa, but what he really wanted to know was if white people owned black people and how that could possibly have come about.

Nearing the kitchen door, he considered asking Mammy about it but feared she might get upset with him for asking too many questions, especially about something that everyone seemed so sensitive about. Given that Philip and Andrew enjoyed nothing more than an opportunity to tell him he was stupid and tease him for his ignorance, he'd learned not to ask them anything. It was hard to know if white people owning black people was the responsibility of God or modern science, but

THE GALLANT PELHAM

since Doctor Pelham devoted more time to running the farm and managing the Negroes than Mama did, John reasoned that he was the best place to start.

That night, before Mammy took him and his brothers up to bed, John knocked on the door to Doctor Pelham's study. Sometimes Doctor Pelham called it his office and other times his library, but Mama and everyone else called it his study, as if that were the proper, pleasing term.

"Come in," Doctor Pelham, called out.

John turned the knob and pushed the heavy wooden door open, making a long, slow squeak until Doctor Pelham's mysterious chamber was revealed. John had peeked inside before, but it had always been in the daytime, with the sun shining across the rug and all over the countless books that lined the opposite wall. Now, in the dim light, the colorful rug was a faded blur and the towering bookshelves loomed; maybe those books held dark secrets as frightening as the brand on Uncle Baylor's back.

Doctor Pelham was sitting behind his desk smoking his pipe, a single oil lamp lighting his face. Mama liked to say that Doctor Pelham was a distinguished-looking gentleman whom God had intended to be a doctor, and John had no reason to question her description, assuming that some graying hair and reading spectacles were marks of distinguishment.

"What is it?" Doctor Pelham asked in his kindest voice, a smile coming over his face. "To what do I owe a visit from my favorite master John?"

John blushed and took a few steps forward. "That's what Mammy Katie calls me."

"As rightly she should." Doctor Pelham motioned him towards the straight-backed chair that faced the desk. "So have a seat, Master John."

John scooted up onto a satiny cushion that felt nothing like the wooden chairs in the kitchen. He could barely see over the desk, and his legs didn't come close to reaching the floor; maybe he was a big boy who wore trousers, but he'd never felt smaller.

"You'd better tell me what's on your mind before Mammy comes looking for you," Doctor Pelham said.

John smiled, comforted by the doctor's understanding of his world. "Is it true that white people...sell black people?"

The doctor hesitated, and John thought he might be scolded. "Sometimes," he said.

THE MONSTER ON UNCLE BAYLOR'S BACK

"How is that possible?" John asked, devastated that his father hadn't called it downright nonsense.

"Well, son, the Negroes are our property. They're what you call slaves."

The word sounded vaguely familiar, but John wasn't sure when he'd heard it before. He looked at his father, confused and overwhelmed. "What's a slave?"

"A slave is someone who works for you, someone you own."

John shifted on his cushion, feeling as though he might fall off. "You mean we own Mammy Katie...and all the farmhands who live out in the quarters?"

The doctor nodded. "That's right, son."

"Why should they do all that work for us?"

"That's the only reason they were brought here from Africa, the reason they live among us as they do."

It was all a devastating discovery; no wonder Mammy was always complaining about how much work she had. "What if they don't want to be our slaves?" he asked, barely holding back tears.

The doctor gave a slight shrug. "I'm afraid they don't have any choice in the matter. It's the only place for them in the civilized world."

John's throat tightened, and he began to cry. Why didn't they have any choice and what was the civilized world? Was there an uncivilized world somewhere, maybe in that mysterious place called Africa where the Negroes came from?

The doctor smiled sympathetically. "It's only natural for a sweet soul like yours to take pity on them."

"Why?" John asked through his tears. "Why don't they have a choice?"

"Because it's God's will," Doctor Pelham said. "But in exchange for their labor we must be good and kind to them. They're our responsibility, Master John. We must care for them and look out for them as best we can...their whole lives."

John was baffled; Mammy looked out for him and the rest of the children, not the other way around. And then he remembered the monster on Uncle Baylor's back. "Why do some of the Negroes have brands?" he asked. "Because we own them and want everyone to know it?"

Doctor Pelham sighed. "You mean Uncle Baylor, don't you? Unfortunately, in earlier times some slave owners used brands to identify their property. But that was a long time ago, before Uncle Baylor ever came to this farm. We would never do anything like that to one of our Negroes."

"He has terrible scars too."

"We don't apply the lash to our Negroes, either."

John wasn't sure, but he guessed the lash was like a whipping. Again, something seemed backwards. Mammy gave him and his brothers whippings all the time, but

THE GALLANT PELHAM

no one ever gave Mammy a whipping. It was hard to imagine; surely she wouldn't stand for it. But it certainly explained a lot, including why she never wanted Mama or Doctor Pelham to become displeased with her. John knit his brow. "Never?"

"Never, Master John. I promise."

John wanted to believe his father, but he wondered whether all the Negroes might not risk the same fate that had befallen Uncle Baylor. "Why are mulattoes slaves if they're half-white?" he asked, his thoughts jumping to Aryanna.

"A person with any Negro blood is still considered a Negro."

"Why?"

Doctor Pelham looked flustered. "Because that's the way it is," he said, "how it has to be. Perhaps someday things will be different, but that's a long time off, Master John. For the time being, the races must remain separate."

John shook his head, not wanting to believe his ears about any of it.

"Now run along and find your brothers," the doctor said, "before Mammy finds you."

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