The "Cotton Kingdom" Comes to the Pelham Farm

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.

“In 1853, when I was fourteen, the Cotton Kingdom was booming across the Deep South, all the way from South Carolina to Texas, and the price of land and slaves soaring. With the price of cotton so high that it finally became profitable to grow in the upcountry, my father, Doctor Pelham, decided to become a cotton planter. Not only would it be a lucrative venture for him and the family, but being cotton planters would confer the title of “gentleman” on his sons, something that was all important in the antebellum South.”

Other than the demise of Cousin Henry, the most frequent topic of conversation at suppertime was Doctor Pelham’s plan to buy an adjacent thousand acres of land stretching east toward Jacksonville, much of it already planted with cotton. It wasn’t only a question of whether the escalating price of cotton would allow him to pay off the bank-note while the remaining woods were being cleared and planted, but so much acreage would require a significant investment in additional hands. And he would have to hire an overseer, as managing a thousand acres of cotton was a much greater challenge than a few hundred acres of corn, oats, and alfalfa. Mama and Doctor Pelham had been going round and round with no clear resolution for so long that John was almost certain they were really debating something of far greater import than merely buying more land and growing cotton on it.

Philip and Andrew, who were growing up now and beginning to see themselves as *real masters* of the farm, showed great enthusiasm for the venture, talking as if it were their own little piece of Manifest Destiny. “We’ll be plantation owners,” they both enjoyed repeating with glowing smiles, “real planters like in the low country.”

John wasn’t sure how much acreage made a farm a plantation, or why low-country planters were better than high-country planters, but as usual he kept quiet to avoid looking foolish. Fortunately, land and cotton were

subjects in which Mammy was proudly well-versed, so he could generally rely on her to explain it to him when nobody was around.

It was Mama who had yet to be convinced and seemed less agreeable with each passing day. "Do we really know how well cotton does in these parts?" she asked again one evening. "It wasn't that long ago that it was barely profitable in the river valleys, let alone up here in the hills. If prices go down, for whatever reason, we would most likely be the first to suffer."

"So we'll go back to raising corn," Doctor Pelham responded dismissively. "By that time we'll have paid off the land and the Negroes, and we won't be any worse off than we are now."

The doctor's argument obviously pleased Philip and Andrew but failed to satisfy Mama. "You're assuming we have at least several good years to start," she said. "This is hill country; the growing season is shorter, and the whole crop might freeze. You remember what happened to that French writer I'm so fond of, Mr. Balzac; how he lost all his money when his crop froze." She looked contemplatively sad. "Then he died."

Doctor Pelham often backed down when Mama cited something she'd read in one of her books about far-away places, but merely referencing Mr. Balzac was hardly sufficient. "Good gracious, Martha," he said. "The man was trying to grow pineapples in southern France, not cotton in northeast Alabama. And I'm sure his death was unrelated to his pineapples freezing."

"You don't know for certain," Mama countered with a slight shrug. "It bankrupted him."

"What's a pineapple?" John asked.

Andrew made one of his sour expressions and rolled his eyes. As John's brothers got older, they seemed to act less like adults and more like children, but Doctor Pelham attributed such phenomena to a phase they were going through, an appraisal with which Mama concurred.

"A pineapple is a fruit that grows in the tropics, where the temperature never gets below freezing," Doctor Pelham explained. "They sell them at the markets in New Orleans and Charleston. I've never had one myself, but supposedly they're very delicious."

"Is it like an apple?" John asked.

"You're so stupid," Andrew said, flashing John another sour look.

"He isn't stupid in the least!" Doctor Pelham said. "And that's hardly an appropriate manner to speak to your brother. John is simply inquisitive, a

quality you sometimes lack and would be better off to emulate instead of criticize. That's why he does so much better in school—because he's eager to learn."

"It isn't anything like an apple," Mama said. "I guess the closest thing would be a watermelon, but a pineapple is bright yellow inside and pointy on the outside." She frowned and turned to Doctor Pelham. "How would you even begin to describe it, Atkinson? Do you have an illustration of one in your books?"

"I'm sure that I do," the doctor replied, proud as always of his library.

"You know how the price of cotton fell a few years back," Mama persisted, not allowing herself to be sidetracked by a discussion of pineapples. "It took this part of the country, the whole lower South, into a depression."

John didn't know what a depression was, but his mother made it sound like something horrible, a fate worse than death.

"From what I hear," Philip chimed in, trying to sound like a worldly businessman, "cotton prices are rising nowadays."

"When did they ever go down?" Andrew asked.

"The late thirties," Doctor Pelham said. "You boys were little and wouldn't remember, but things were bad for a number of years."

John couldn't hide his apprehension. "What do you mean, *bad*?"

Doctor Pelham hesitated, considering his words. "People didn't have any money. They couldn't sell their crops because no one had money to buy them."

"Cotton is much more speculative than corn or oats," Mama said.

Doctor Pelham sighed, deeper than usual.

"Crops like that," Mama said, raising her voice slightly and sounding defensive, "don't depend upon factories in England or the North."

"Which is precisely why they will never be as profitable, Martha."

"It isn't just a matter of cotton mills and textiles."

But what *was* the matter? Clearly there was something else, something unsaid, behind Mama's reluctance to give the venture her blessing.

Doctor Pelham swallowed another bite. "Cotton is pushing farther and farther north across the whole South," he said. "If it can grow in the foothills of Georgia and South Carolina, there's no reason it shouldn't grow here."

"I still say there's a reason they're selling the land," Mama said. "If there was so much potential, why is it for sale?"

"We've been through that, Martha. By that logic no one would ever buy anything. I know they've had successful crops, because I've seen them for myself. Right now those fields look like a sea of snow, white flowers as far as the eye can see. If you want, we can ride out in the buggy, and I'll show you."

"We'll own dozens more Negroes," Mama said, changing the subject, as if she knew she'd lost that portion of the argument. "You know what a tremendous responsibility they are."

It wasn't the first time that one of his parents had used the word *responsibility* when talking about the Negroes, but John suspected his mama was really talking about something else, a fear she hesitated to put into words.

"That's something else we've been through again and again," Doctor Pelham said, taking on a harsh tone that wasn't like him, and certainly not when he spoke to Mama. "Almost every cotton farm in the South has more Negroes than we have, and they're all doing fine, making more money every year as the prices for cotton, land, and slaves keep going up."

Philip and Andrew looked ready to burst out with frustration at the prospect of losing money every day Doctor Pelham held off buying the cotton farm.

"We're going to need more cabins for them," Mama said, ignoring the doctor's tone.

"There are some on the property already," Philip said.

Mama shot him a cross look that implied he was too young to understand and had best keep quiet.

"You're right, son," Doctor Pelham said. "There *are* some cabins on the property. But we'll need more Negroes if we're going to clear the rest of the land and get it planted."

"Why can't we hire white people?" John asked, hoping he didn't sound foolish.

"The yeoman farmers want to work their own land," Doctor Pelham said. "It costs a lot of money to hire free men."

If John understood correctly, it turned out there were some distinct advantages in having brought the Negroes from Africa—they cost money to buy, but it was a lot less than white people's wages.

"And don't forget the overseer," Mama said. "You're not going to be able to manage all of those people by yourself. A thousand acres of cotton is quite an enterprise."

"We don't need an overseer," Doctor Pelham said, his annoyance showing. "The boys are getting old enough to take on some of the responsibility themselves."

Philip and Andrew smiled glowingly in perfect unison.

"Are they really old enough to be ordering Negroes about?" Mama countered.

The doctor gazed fondly at Philip and Andrew. "It's a role masters have to learn."

Mama looked like someone searching for God's guidance. "Is it?" she asked. "Are those the kind of men we want them to be?"

"I don't like slavery any more than you do," Doctor Pelham said, his voice lowering, becoming solemn. "But if this venture succeeds, it can mean a future for our sons as planters. Don't you see? They'll be able to live the lives of gentlemen."

Mama shook her head. "By that logic, the only way for a man to succeed in this world—to be a gentleman, as you're so fond of saying—is to be a slave owner."

Doctor Pelham took on a slight but distinctly satisfied and prideful smile. "There's some truth to that," he said. "A man's place in society is dependent upon his owning land and slaves, and there's no more profitable combination of the two than a cotton plantation."

"Our mother wasn't the only one in the family with reservations about the Pelhams becoming cotton planters. Apparently Mammy had spent the first part of her life on a low-country cotton plantation and knew the evils of the "Cotton Kingdom," including the effect it was likely to have on men, all too well."

Just in case Mammy hadn't been listening at the door like she usually did, when John got home from school the next day, he filled her in on the latest developments in the cotton farm debate. It had been clear from the start that Mammy wasn't in favor of Doctor Pelham buying the cotton acreage, and now that it looked like he was finally prevailing over Mama, John felt duty-bound to share the news.

"I think Papa's gonna buy it," he said, sitting backward on his usual chair, as he always did when it came to serious discussion with Mammy.

Mammy smacked one of her pots down hard, splashing a little water out on the floor. "I just knew it," she said. "I knew that man would fall victim to white men's weakness."

Mammy had said a lot of things over the years, and John had learned more about the world from her than anyone, but this was the first time he'd heard about white men's weakness.

"Don't look at me that way," she said, catching John's puzzlement. "It ain't nothin' personal about your papa. I just have reason to think that he's no less susceptible than the rest of his kind."

Mammy was an expert in many things, but was she really an authority on the inner workings of white men? After all, she often said she'd never understand white folks' ways. "Susceptible to what?" he asked, motivated more by curiosity than any desire to defend his papa.

"White men can never have enough," she said. "Everything can be just fine as it is, but they always want more."

Philip and Andrew certainly showed evidence of white men's weakness, a lot of it, and at an early age. "Is it wrong to want more?" John asked, thinking about the doctor's ambition for his sons.

Mammy looked in no mood to back down. "It depends what you're wanting," she said. "One's intentions don't always matter. Trust me, Masar John; no good ever came from cotton."

John wasn't sure what she meant. "Is growing cotton that much harder than growing corn?" he asked. "I mean, planting it and picking it and all."

Mammy shook her head as if losing her patience with his ignorance. "It's way different, sweet thing," she said. "Much harder. So much harder there ain't no comparison."

John remembered that awful, hot day when he first caught sight of the monster on Uncle Baylor's back; he couldn't imagine anyone working harder than that.

"And it's a lot more delicate," Mammy added. "It gets a fungus if the weather is too dry, and it gets a different fungus if it rains too much. And the bugs eat it like you wouldn't believe."

"Then why do they call it King Cotton?" John asked, a whine coming into his voice. "There must be something good about it."

“Good for some, bad for others,” Mammy said.

John knew she meant it was bad for the Negroes. “Doctor Pelham wants more Negroes, but Mama doesn’t,” he blurted out.

He got the impression that Mammy appreciated his forthrightness but didn’t know what to say. “It goes back to always wanting more,” she said after a moment.

“And needing more Negroes to help you get it?”

“Pretty much,” Mammy said.

Mama talked about pineapples, and Mammy talked about fungus, but it all came back to the same thing—black people working for white people who profited from their labor.

“I came from a cotton plantation,” Mammy added after a brief silence, “and I ain’t got no desire to go back.” She looked at him directly. “But then maybe I don’t have much choice, now do I?”

John just stared back at her, not knowing what to say.

“If I had my way, the cotton gin would never have been invented, pure and simple.”

If John remembered correctly, the cotton gin was what made growing cotton so profitable, something about making it a lot easier to clean.

Mammy turned around as if she were finished talking. John considered asking her more questions, but he could tell she was getting exasperated and maybe feeling nervous about speaking that much truth. He might ask her about high-country planters and low-country planters and what in heck made growing cotton so darn special, but it was clear that talking about the Negroes’ situation in the white man’s world crossed the line.

“Philip and Andrew were thrilled at the prospect of becoming cotton planters and perhaps gaining the title of gentleman, no matter what came with it. In particular, they took an immediate liking to Ned, the vile redneck cracker of an overseer Doctor Pelham hired to run the farm. I think that’s when they first got the idea that manliness was associated with abuse of the Negroes, that the former was based on the latter.”

THE "COTTON KINGDOM" COMES TO THE PELHAM FARM

After much deliberation, Doctor Pelham bought the cotton farm, including the previous owner's Negroes who'd been working the fields. Mama had objected one last time, insisting that the necessary investment in land and Negroes would leave them owing the bank too much money— "overly extended on credit" was how she put it. After all, there was always the possibility of a panic such as had occurred in 1837, the year before John was born.

Doctor Pelham remained resolute. "All plantation owners buy Negroes on credit," he said proudly, as if his indebtedness testified to his having joined the planter class.

Philip and Andrew were overjoyed, no doubt certain their lives would change for the better because their father was a cotton planter, and presumably one day they would become planters as well. The prospect of owning more Negroes didn't seem to bother them in the least. Quite the contrary, unless John missed his mark, having more slaves was at the core of their joy, something far more significant than monetary wealth.

In fairness to his brothers, though, if there wasn't anything wrong with keeping Negroes in bondage, then owning a few dozen more shouldn't matter. It was almost as puzzling as why slavery was the acceptable way of things, just as long as it didn't flourish out West. Maybe it all came back to what Mammy had said about white men wanting more—and needing more Negroes to help them get it.

Soon after taking ownership of the cotton farm, Doctor Pelham hired an overseer, a grizzly-looking redneck named Ned. He was rarely clean-shaven and had a peculiar odor, although Philip and Andrew proudly insisted he smelled of alcohol, evidence of manly tendencies that would surely prove his value to the farm. He also chewed tobacco and spit it out continually, a habit John had witnessed among some of the trashiest townsfolk in Jacksonville—the trashiest of the lot, as Mama and Mammy both liked to say. Mama made it clear that she found him nothing short of vile, but Doctor Pelham insisted that his type was necessary if the family was going to succeed in the cotton business.

“He talks about breaking slaves,” Doctor Pelham let slip at supper one night, unable to hide his own concern any longer. “I think sometimes he gets awfully rough with them.”

Mama was wide-eyed, looking ready to demand that Ned be thrown off the premises.

“I told him we wouldn’t have any of that on this farm,” Doctor Pelham said, sounding apologetic. “I think he understands that now.”

“He’d better,” Mama said. “I won’t have our people subjected to that sort of barbarism.”

Philip and Andrew kept quiet, no doubt intrigued by Ned’s violent nature. Indeed, as repellent as Ned was, Philip and Andrew clearly viewed him with growing fascination.

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The "Cotton Kingdom" Comes to the Pelham Farm

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