



A Discovery in the Stable





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.

“I learned about sex in the worst way, which was learning about what was at the core of the plantation system—the sexual exploitation and domination of black women, with a little sadism mixed in just for good measure. No question about it, those two brothers of mine were born to be plantation masters.”

Late one afternoon, when he was fetching Mammy some beets from the root cellar, John heard a strange noise—neither human nor animal, or maybe a little of both—coming from the stable. He could only hope that some wild beast from the woods, like a bear or a cougar, wasn't attacking the horses.

He ran to the barn for help but found only dark silence; everyone must have been out in the fields. Although he had more than a tinge of fear at what he might discover, John grabbed a pitchfork and rushed towards the stable. Not only did he feel duty-bound to investigate, but he couldn't have his brothers knowing he'd been frightened.

Finding the doors barely cracked open, John gave one of them a careful pull, thankful the hinges didn't reveal his presence with their usual squeak. The noise, an odd rhythm of painful grunts and squeals coming from the far end of the stable, was now distinctly human—and suddenly more frightening than the most vicious animal he might have discovered.

John walked slowly, cautiously, between the stalls, pondering how he might thrust his pitchfork into an adversary to strike a fatal blow. The horses seemed peculiarly undisturbed given the commotion in their midst, but it was impossible to ignore the apprehension in their big dark eyes, their silent warning that he best turn back. Their odor was all but overpowering, no doubt the result of his brothers' failure to keep up with their chores. According to Mammy, if there was anything that could make a stable smell like a dirty chicken coop, it was his brothers' lack of responsibility.

John's fear of the unknown was interrupted by the sight of Andrew, first his profile and bare shoulders, and then his buttocks, visible through the

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wooden slats of the farthest stall; he was as naked as when he went swimming in the pond. But Andrew was silent, motionless; something else was making the noise—whatever Andrew was watching.

The sight of his brother turned John into a defenseless little boy, all the strength and courage dissipating from his body until the pitchfork in his hand was useless. Maybe Andrew wasn't as threatening as a bear or a cougar, but his presence signaled danger far more complex and not so easily scared away.

John unlatched the gate to the closest stall, once again hoping a squeaky hinge wouldn't make his presence known. A pretty light-brown mare that Mama had named Bette—after one of Mr. Balzac's characters—swung her head towards him in friendly greeting. Normally he would have patted her reassuringly, but instead he put his finger to his lips. "Shush," he blew faintly, hoping the horse would understand.

As he turned toward the neighboring stall, John's bare feet sank into a thick mound of horseshit, but he was too shocked at what he saw through the slats to care. What Andrew was watching with approving awe, the source of the strange noise, was Philip and Aryanna, as clear as day despite the dim light. Aryanna was bent over a bale of hay with her skirt pulled up over her back, and Philip, buck naked as Andrew, was thrusting his doodle into her from behind, his face contorted with demonic pleasure. But unlike what it said in Doctor Pelham's book, Aryanna didn't seem to be enjoying sexual intercourse in the least; she was suffering, enduring pain, and certainly not experiencing great physical enjoyment.

Part of the peculiar noise, a cross between a moan and a high-pitched whimper, was coming from Aryanna and was growing more desperate with each of Philip's thrusts. The other part was Philip's grunting mastery of his victim, his maleness put to nature's ultimate purpose. What Philip was doing to Aryanna seemed violent and hateful, and was nothing like the grand descriptions of sexual intercourse contained in Doctor Pelham's books.

John could barely stop himself from jumping out of the darkness with his pitchfork and screaming at Philip to stop, but he was too frightened and confused, and afraid of looking like a fool. It was hard to believe that Aryanna would consent to such an act, that she was willing to suffer like that on behalf of Philip's pleasure, but neither was she putting up a struggle or trying to get away. He knew there was something called rape, but he wasn't

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sure if that's what Philip was doing or not. Not knowing what to think, John crouched down and stayed hidden.

Philip threw his head back and closed his eyes before glancing back down at that point of relentless friction. He grabbed Aryanna's hips and began to thrust harder and faster, all his limbs and muscles devoted to that single purpose, his entire body taken over by that machine fulfilling its intended function. And all the while he didn't have the least bit of inhibition in Andrew's presence.

Aryanna cried out repeatedly but remained an obedient receptacle to Philip's thrusts. It hadn't been that long ago that his mama had warned him against fraternizing with Aryanna, and now his brother was happily breeding her! Maybe it hadn't been love that Mama feared but sexual acts of the sort Philip was committing.

Philip gave several deep sighs, and it was over; the deed was done. After seeming to catch his breath he stepped backwards, his doodle flopping down, red and swollen, but no longer the spiked weapon it had been. He looked over at Andrew with a confused, self-deprecating smile, as if to say that was the best he could do, that's all he was.

Aryanna hardly moved, didn't even try to cover herself with her skirt. John almost called out to her to run while she could, but he didn't want her to know he'd seen her that way, degraded and desecrated. But the opportunity had passed; it was Andrew's turn to have his way with her.

Upon pushing his doodle into Aryanna, Andrew's face took on a vain, rapturous expression. Then, with a single thrust, he pushed deep inside her and held steady, no doubt savoring the interior of the flower. Just when John suspected the worst was over, Andrew pulled part way out of her, spread his legs until he was squatting forward, and let loose with a series of violent thrusts that belied his slender little body. "Take it all!" he growled. "You take it all!"

As violent as Philip had been, he wasn't nearly as frightening as Andrew's single-minded determination to bury his doodle. If Philip didn't care if he caused pain, Andrew's pleasure came from turning his organ into a weapon—and outdoing his older brother. But despite the violence he was unleashing, the pain he must have been inflicting, Aryanna seemed resigned to endure it. Then all at once, as if Andrew's brutality had finally jarred his mind, John realized how horribly she was being forced against her will; Aryanna couldn't

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run, had no place to run, because she was a slave to their lust, just as she was a slave on the farm.

Andrew looked down to survey his progress, his face contorted with anger, and gave a final unrelenting push until his hips looked to be firmly up against Aryanna's bottom. "I'm fucking her with the whole thing!" he cried out. Andrew had always been a cruel bully, but now his voice seemed to come from a different person, maybe the devil himself. He cried out for dear Jesus, his contorted face looking toward the heavens, then back down again with a sweet, innocent sigh. Despite all the violence he had unleashed, he looked shaken, actually trembling.

Aryanna glanced back at the two brothers, as if waiting to see if they were done with her.

Philip seemed to be debating whether he would have at her again, if he would accept Andrew's unsaid challenge to do him one better. "We're through with you for now," he said, probably motivated by fatigue rather than mercy.

"For now," Andrew added, the usual arrogant strength returning to his voice.

Aryanna turned around and faced her attackers without really looking at them. She leaned against the hay, ravaged and exhausted.

John had been crouching in his hiding place for so long that he'd all but forgotten where he was, how easily he could be discovered now that the noise had ended. One of his legs had fallen asleep, and he remembered he was standing in shit. Again he considered using the pitchfork to strike out at his brothers, but mere physical retribution seemed inadequate for their crime, nothing but a futile gesture.

Suddenly Aryanna rushed across the stall and pulled the gate open. Philip reached out to grab her, his vaguely compassionate expression implying that he wished to comfort her, but she got past him and ran out the back of the stable.

Once his brothers were safely gone, John leaned on his pitchfork to stand up on his numb leg and struggled to walk. As he made his way back to the house, he pondered how he would be able to look at Philip and Andrew across the supper table that night or sleep in the same room with them ever again. He couldn't get over his brothers' lack of shame at watching each other commit such a barbarous act. It was more than vicarious pleasure; they had

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never been more at one with each other, as if, indeed, theirs was a single purpose.

It wasn't until he came in the kitchen door and met Mammy's accusatory eyes that he remembered what he'd set out for. "You best have a good excuse for bein' gone so long," she said without humor. "And for coming back empty-handed on top of it."

"After a good deal of procrastination, I finally got up the courage to tell Doctor Pelham what had happened, and I can hardly begin to tell you my puzzlement at his reaction. It would be a while longer before I understood what was really going on, and to this day I wish I'd never found out. If there's anything I learned growing up on that cotton farm, it's that life is like one big rotten onion waiting to be pulled apart."

It had never been clearer where mulattoes like Aryanna came from, or why his mama didn't want him fraternizing with Negro girls. The sexual act, which Doctor Pelham's books had portrayed as nothing short of glorious, had become horribly evil, something capable of destroying everything he thought was true. Had it always been there, inevitable, waiting to swallow him up? He felt alone in a godless land and didn't know where to turn; his only home was suddenly dangerous and wild, and would never be safe again.

John wondered if anyone else knew about his brothers and Aryanna, whether the secret was as dark as he suspected. Mammy Katie always seemed to know everything that went on with the Negroes, but John didn't have the courage to broach the unspeakable subject of what he had witnessed in the stable. And as much as he wanted to stop his brothers from abusing Aryanna, he was afraid to tell Doctor Pelham what had happened. He not only feared his brothers' reprisals—certainly against Aryanna, if not himself—but he was terrified of revealing his knowledge of such sinful things, as if he would also fall from grace in his father's eyes.

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After almost a week of stomach-churning procrastination, John paid Doctor Pelham a visit, taking his usual seat in the big chair that still made him feel so small.

“What is it?” the doctor asked, his slight smile conveying a gentleness of spirit that had always encouraged John’s trust. “Lately I’ve had the feeling that something’s on your mind.”

Despite having rehearsed the conversation repeatedly in his mind, John found himself unable to devise acceptable words; anything that conveyed the reality of his brothers’ crimes was unspeakable. “Ph...Philip...and Andrew,” he managed to say, his chest tightening.

“What about them?” Doctor Pelham asked, his brow furrowing with concern. “Are they all right? I just saw them this morning.”

John shook his head, annoyed that his brothers’ safety would be the doctor’s first concern. “Nothing’s happened to them. But...well...they... they’ve been forcing themselves on Aryanna.”

“That mulatto girl you used to play with?”

John was struck by his father’s vague confusion; there weren’t that many Negroes on the farm, at least not yet. “Yes,” he said, feeling a stab of shame for what had happened.

Doctor Pelham remained silent, not showing the slightest bit of anger or surprise, as if he failed to grasp the meaning of John’s words.

“You can’t imagine what Philip and Andrew did to her,” John said, determined to communicate the magnitude of his brothers’ villainy.

“How do you know?” Doctor Pelham asked, finally understanding.

John hesitated, not wanting the doctor to know that he’d stayed to watch. “It was in the stable,” he said. “I heard noises when I was going to the root cellar for Mammy. I thought it might be an animal attacking the horses.”

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said, a little perplexed. “You’re too young for such things.”

John didn’t understand why the doctor wasn’t outraged by his brothers’ crime. “You should stop them from doing it again,” he said. He took a deep breath. “I think they’re doing it all the time.”

“Do you know that for certain? I mean, is that what Aryanna told you?”

“You know I’m not supposed to talk to her,” John said, a little anger rising up in him. “But I haven’t seen her, at least not since then.”

The doctor hesitated. “You did right in telling me about it, John.”

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John recognized that phrase as a signal the conversation was drawing to a close. “What about Philip and Andrew?” he asked, a whine in his voice. “You need to make sure they never do anything like that again.”

“I’ll talk to them, definitely.”

“And you need to protect Aryanna. If they think she was the one who told, who knows what they’ll do to her. And if they think it was me—”

“Don’t worry,” the doctor interrupted, shaking his head. “I’ll tell them one of the hands saw them in the stable.”

John sat motionless, stewing over everything the doctor had said.

“Is something wrong?” the doctor asked.

“Why don’t you care?” John all but shouted at his father, shocked by his own outburst.

The doctor looked flustered, overwhelmed, as if an honest explanation were unspeakable.

John considered whether his outburst may have inadvertently given him the upper hand. “Wouldn’t the pastor care?” he demanded, his voice shrill. “If the man is so concerned about us practicing self-abuse, wouldn’t he care if we abused a girl?”

John couldn’t believe the words had come from his mouth. What he really wanted to ask was why the sexual act, something depicted as nothing short of glorious in the doctor’s books, had turned out to be so inglorious in the flesh. He glanced up at the top shelf; if only he could cite those books straight out and demand an explanation for his brothers’ behavior.

“The pastor mustn’t know!” the doctor burst out, looking like he immediately regretted his own words. He stared at John intently, maybe not so much angry as concerned that John knew things he shouldn’t, things he was, no doubt, still too young to understand.

“Why not?” John demanded, more an assertion than a question. “And what about Mama? Shouldn’t she know what her sons have been doing?”

“Certainly not!” the doctor shot back. “Your mother mustn’t hear of such things.”

“Why not? If she didn’t want me fraternizing with Aryanna, it’s unlikely she wants *them* breeding with her!”

“That’s enough!” the doctor shouted, louder than he’d ever shouted, loud enough for the whole house to hear. “There are things beyond our power, things that can’t be helped.”

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John was frightened by the doctor's anger but also invigorated; if he hadn't gotten to the core of the matter, the doctor wouldn't be so upset.

Having reached a standoff, John and his father stared at each other. John couldn't believe he'd been so bold and didn't know what the repercussions might be, if the doctor might whip him something fierce, or even worse.

"I promise to check on Aryanna," the doctor said after a moment, looking at John in that manner of his that meant the conversation was over.

"I think you should," John said flatly, without a hint of his usual reverence.

When the doctor said nothing more, John started to get up from his chair.

"You were right to tell me, son," the doctor said, as if admitting a mistake. "But please keep it to yourself."

John stewed over Doctor Pelham's lack of concern at his brothers' sexual escapades. He had envisioned the severest punishments and condemnation, but it was hard to know if the doctor had as much as mentioned it to them, let alone taken the slightest action to make sure it didn't happen again. Despite having stood up to the doctor for the first time, John felt powerless and defeated.

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