



The New Orleans Slave Market





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.

“My father, Doctor Pelham, thought taking me to the slave market in New Orleans, the very center of the Cotton Kingdom in more ways than one, would help make me a master. Besides learning even more terrible things, I got to know my two new brothers, Willis and Newton, two of the young Negroes we purchased at the market.”

As soon as they turned the corner, John saw dozens of Negroes standing out along the street, chained together at the ankles and displayed like merchandise. They were mostly dressed like house servants, but there were scantily clad field hands as well. A few white men were calling out to passersby, hawking the slaves’ exceptional qualities and bargain prices.

John followed Doctor Pelham and Ned along the sidewalk, trying not to look at the shackled Negroes. The brick buildings that lined the street had barred windows and signs that advertised “slaves” and “Negroes.” In between the ugly, fortress-like structures were some courtyards enclosed by high walls and gates.

“Those are the pens,” Ned said with satisfaction when John paused to peer through the iron bars. “That’s where they keep the niggers at night.”

Pens? Maybe slavery was the only way for Negroes to live in the civilized world, but putting them in shackles and making them sleep in pens hardly seem very civilized.

Toward the end of the block, at what seemed the hub of activity, Doctor Pelham led them into the largest brick fortress. Inside, it was like an oversized barn but with a platform at one side that resembled a crude stage. It smelled sour and stale, the odor undoubtedly enhanced by clouds of cigar smoke. There were some benches spread out on the dirty concrete floor, but most of the buyers were milling about, happily conversing before the auction started.

They made their way through the crowd out to the pen, where, like a slow current moving along the aisles, potential buyers were inspecting rows

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and rows of shackled Negroes. Given that most of the slaves weren't wearing uniforms, John assumed they were field hands rather than house servants. The women were only partially clad in smocks and skirts, and some of the men were entirely naked.

John followed Ned and the doctor down the first aisle. Although Doctor Pelham was relatively discreet, most of the buyers inspected the Negroes' bodies without the slightest regard for their dignity. It was hard to believe how they poked and fondled them, all under the watchful gaze of the traders, who stood ready to punish any Negro who resisted. The women were sent behind a curtain to be examined below the waist, but the men's sex organs were handled like cows being milked.

"They need to inspect for disease," Doctor Pelham said, apparently noticing John's puzzlement. "There are diseases that might be contagious or interfere with breeding capacity."

John nodded, pretending to take it all in stride.

The buyers discussed the Negroes' sexual parts and reproductive capabilities as if they were livestock, happily joking and amusing themselves, not the least bit concerned that the slaves could hear every word. One man explained to his companion that large breasts were superior for suckling babies, while a large penis signified a more aggressive breeder who would pay off for the owner by producing more offspring.

As disturbing as it all was, John was glad that Doctor Pelham didn't try to shield his eyes, that he acknowledged his impending manhood. Indeed, despite the human degradation, John couldn't help his sexual excitement. Aryanna's little budding breasts were nothing like the tremendous bosoms now before him.

A mulatto boy, probably not much older than John but appearing a good deal stronger, stood stoically at the end of the first aisle wearing nothing but a loin cloth. Except for his light-brown skin, he didn't look like a Negro; if he had blond hair, he would have looked like one of John's brothers after a summer spent swimming in the pond.

As John passed by, the trader blurted out the boy's name—Newton—to a potential buyer. John turned around; he'd never known someone named Newton before.

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“He’s the dumbest Negro,” the trader said, as if stupidity were a desirable quality for a slave. “He may look part white, but he’s as dumb as they come. Newton,” he commanded, “talk for the man, why don’t you?”

Newton stammered and stuttered, uttering something about his “ol’ masar being a good ol’ masar” before staring blankly ahead.

“This boy won’t give you any trouble,” the trader said. “I’m tellin’ you, sir, he’s one dumb nigger boy.”

John pondered Newton’s situation, why mulattoes were considered Negroes and treated as such. Then the two boys’ eyes met, and John was almost positive the mulatto was putting on an act, playing the fool because he had no choice in the matter. Newton’s eyes conveyed far too much intelligence; John even suspected he’d found a kindred spirit in those eyes. Besides, it was hard to believe that God had created such an extraordinary-looking fellow, saw to it that his name was Newton, just like Sir Isaac, and then made him an idiot.

But no one else appeared suspicious; they had fallen for his act. And then John was struck by the oddest thought: perhaps all the Negroes were acting, all the time.

John’s mind was reeling when a bell clanged, and there were shouts announcing the start of the auction. He glanced at Newton, and their eyes met again; yes, there was a kindred spirit in those eyes that had already grown sadder with the clang of the bell. John wanted to let him know he saw through the act, but he didn’t know how.

When they came back inside, the warehouse was billowing with cigar smoke. John was accustomed to tobacco smoke, but that much of it made his eyes water and got him coughing. Indeed, suffocating smoke seemed to be the very essence of the slave market.

John sat between Ned and Doctor Pelham, craning his neck to see over a big fat man sitting on the bench in front of them. He couldn’t get over Newton’s performance, or the haunting possibility that Negroes were always acting as if that were the only way they could survive their bondage.

After a few minutes, the first group of shackled Negroes was led up onto the platform—all women, probably field hands, none of them wearing anything more than they had out in the pen. They tried to hide themselves, but the auction workers pulled their arms out of the way to the delight of the buyers, who chuckled and grinned. The auctioneer used a long pointer—like

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the one John's teacher used to explain things on the schoolhouse blackboard—to help extol their fitness for labor and suitability for breeding.

After several groups of women had been sold off, the first group of men appeared on the platform, chained together, some of them still naked. The auctioneer touted the young bucks' strength and muscularity with great enthusiasm, implying that any man who purchased them would be controlling that power for himself. When he noticed that one of them had an especially large penis, he looked at the audience and chuckled. "You can see what a good breeder this one will make," he called out, tapping the organ with his pointer.

John cringed. That young buck didn't even have rights to his own phallus. If the women were subject to rape, the men were turned into breeding bulls.

An enthusiastic bidding war ensued, as though the crowd not only recognized a good investment but associated owning such a man with evidence of their own superiority and strength.

When the next batch of men was led up onto the platform, their jangling chains serving to announce their entrance, John spotted Newton right in the center, gazing out at the buyers as if challenging anyone to purchase him.

"And what a handsome mulatto we have here," the auctioneer said, wielding his pointer but fortunately refraining from touching Newton's person.

John wanted to scream in Newton's defense, protect him from the humiliation of the auctioneer, when suddenly he had the most wonderful idea. Was anything stopping him from buying this mulatto fellow? Not only would he have the chance to know this kindred spirit, but he might very well save him from a worse fate.

John tugged at Doctor Pelham's arm. "I think we should buy that mulatto," he said, pointing. "His name is Newton."

Doctor Pelham shrugged his agreement and opened the bidding. When it came to the field hands, at least, young bucks like Newton generally commanded the highest prices, but fortunately the doctor seemed determined to grant John's wish. "Well," he said to John after the gavel came down, "I certainly hope this Newton of yours proves to be a good investment."

In addition to Newton, Doctor Pelham purchased five more field hands, not all that many considering how far they had come, but a respectable

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purchase nonetheless. At first Ned seemed a little perturbed that Newton had consumed a disproportionate amount of his budget, but he was easily placated when the doctor gave him free rein to pick the other hands for the farm.

Once all the field hands had been sold, the first group of house servants, noticeably unchained, was led onto the platform, each dressed appropriately to perform his or her appointed tasks in a master's household. One by one, the auctioneer told delightful little stories about where they'd come from and who they had worked for. He spoke of the culinary expertise of a woman dressed as a cook, a supposed mammy's extraordinary way with children, and the gentlemanly ways of a man dressed as a butler. Very few of his stories rang true, but it didn't seem to matter to the eager buyers, who snatched them up for prices well above those paid for the field hands.

John had to look twice at the next group; was that Mammy Katie up there on the platform? It took him a moment to realize that it was only a stocky Negro woman who looked like Mammy, someone else dressed up to play the same part. Maybe Mammy Katie, the person he thought he'd known ever since he was a baby, was only an illusion, nothing more than someone in chattel bondage dressed up and playing the role of Mammy in order to survive. The only question was if she still knew it, or if she had long since fooled herself into believing her own performance.

"Look at the fancy girls!" a man sitting directly behind John exclaimed.

John looked over to see several lovely-looking mulatto girls about to make their way up onto the platform, as finely dressed as any of the ladies he'd seen in New Orleans, perfectly coiffed as if on their way to a ball. It was hard to imagine them being suited for any sort of work.

"What's a fancy girl?" he asked Ned, hoping he didn't sound too ignorant.

"A fancy girl is for the master's personal pleasure," Ned responded, an insidious grin coming across his face. "They're not meant for field work or housework, but just look at them; they're certainly good for strenuous labor of a different sort."

John was incredulous; maybe his brothers' sexual escapades weren't an ugly anomaly but the way of things everywhere. No wonder Doctor Pelham hadn't been surprised to learn what was going on in the stable!

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“Every gentleman wants the best one for himself,” Ned added, gesturing with his cigar. “Once the bidding starts, I promise, it’ll be like nothing you’ve ever seen.”

“You mean they pay a lot for them?” John asked, still trying to make sense of it all.

“They sure as hell do,” Ned replied with a chuckle. “A good fancy girl can cost as much as five thousand dollars. They even print the selling prices in the newspaper so everyone can see who bought the most expensive girl.”

Before John could ask him if Ned’s story was true, the doctor excused himself; either he had to use the facilities or he’d overheard the conversation and wanted to avoid John’s questions.

“Usually,” Ned continued, talking as if he were an authority on the subject, “the best girls are offered at fancy trade slave markets, where there’s nothing for sale but beautiful mulatto and octoroon girls.”

John’s eyes were drawn to the girl at the far end of the platform; she had the most extraordinary Oriental-looking eyes, and a complexion so perfect she looked like a painting. He was admiring her appearance, thinking how much she resembled Aryanna, when she suddenly looked his way and their eyes met, just like his eyes used to meet Aryanna’s at the cornhusking. John blushed, but something stopped him from looking away, as though he had discovered another kindred spirit.

“Don’t go thinking your father will buy you another present,” Ned spoke up as if reading John’s thoughts. “The likes of her is for some wealthy New Orleans gentleman, or maybe a planter down from Natchez.”

John was aghast that Ned had noticed his longing for that loveliest of the fancy girls but pleased that he considered him in need of a man’s sexual gratification. “Besides,” Ned continued, “you and your brothers already had one of your own.”

John looked at him, baffled.

“You know,” Ned said, “that girl who ran off a while back, Aryanna.”

Again, John struggled to hide his shock. “How could Aryanna be a fancy girl?”

“She was such a beautiful little girl that your papa bought her for when you and your brothers grew up. Being she was a child, she hardly cost him a thing.”

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“Who told you that?” John asked as calmly as possible, trying to hide his devastation.

Ned shrugged. “Just about all the niggers,” he said.

“Which nig—Negroes?” John asked, his world once again turned upside down.

“I think your papa was right disappointed to lose her too,” Ned said, avoiding John’s question. “I think he blames those two brothers of yours.”

John remembered Aryanna telling him she had come from the coast of Georgia. “Where did he get her?” he asked, thinking he’d try to test out Ned’s story.

“That was before my time with you people, but I got the impression she didn’t come from the traders.” Ned said something about her being the daughter of a cotton planter, but John could hardly hear him over the excitement of the crowd as the first fancy girl came up for bid.

“Where do you think she went?” John asked, raising his voice over the hubbub.

“If I knew, I’d bring her back; claim that reward your papa’s offering. I wouldn’t be surprised if she makes her way to New Orleans. I half expected to find her here.”

John’s mind raced as that loveliest of the fancy girls was sold to the highest bidder. Aryanna, the first friend he’d found in the world, the person he had trusted the most in the safest place he could remember, had turned out to be nothing but an illusion. As much as he had loved her, maybe just like Mammy, she had never been quite real; everything that happened between them had only been a meaningless diversion, a sideshow of sorts. But it wasn’t *her* fault; she was the victim born into bondage. Aryanna’s role was having her costume ripped off so she could endure the sexual fury and pitiful desperation of another generation of masters.

On their way back to the hotel, John studied the Negroes’ titles, documents similar to those of a horse: “The right and title of said slave we warrant and defend against the claims of all persons whatsoever, and likewise warrant them sound and healthy.” Doctor Pelham seemed quite proud to share the Negroes’ titles with him, as if John might become a man, a true master, merely by holding proof of their ownership in his hand.

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The Negroes they had purchased rode chained together in a separate car, along with the baggage and various shipments. John couldn't stop thinking about them, Newton in particular; what would it be like to be shackled in a dark train car, having no idea where you were headed to spend the rest of your life, no idea what the future held?

When the train reached Huntsville, Doctor Pelham hired a second wagon for the ride back to Benton County. John rode in the back of Doctor Pelham's wagon with Newton and another young buck that Ned had picked out, a fellow by the name of Willis, who was black as the coal in Mammy's stove. Ned followed with the other four Negroes they had purchased.

After everything he had witnessed at the auction, John couldn't help wondering who Willis and Newton really were. They remained silent and expressionless, as if unwilling to reveal the slightest part of themselves, or maybe waiting for their new master to explain what parts they were expected to play.

"My name is John," he finally said, feeling rather a simpleton.

Neither of the bucks gave any acknowledgement, remaining stone-faced.

John looked at Newton, fascinated by his perfect melding of black and white; he was unquestionably beautiful, like Aryanna.

"Were you named for Sir Isaac Newton?" he asked, cocking his head with a smile and aiming for one of those endearing expressions he still used on Mammy from time to time.

Newton shook his head, his face showing obvious fear, but Willis perked up.

"Do you recognize the name?" John asked him.

"Maybe," Willis said, looking nervous. "Who is he?"

"He was an astronomer and a mathematician," John said, "back in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Among other things, he proved the laws of gravity."

The two Negroes glanced at each other as though sizing John up, deciding what sort of threat he posed, this white boy who was their new master.

"But it's a nice name, regardless," John added, not sure if they knew what gravity was.

"I don't know if I was or not," Newton finally spoke up, demonstrating excellent diction.

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"Maybe you were born the same day he was," John suggested, just as quickly remembering that Negroes didn't always know exactly when they were born, or even their age. "I only asked because he's my hero," he said. "I never met anyone named Newton before."

Newton shrugged, still looking intimidated.

Feeling thwarted, John turned his attention to Willis. "Were you named after anyone?"

At first Willis kept silent. "I was named after Nat Turner's friend," he finally replied, speaking every bit as well as Newton.

"Who's Nat Turner?" John asked, only vaguely recalling the name.

"He ain't nobody," Newton said, glaring at Willis. "And besides, his name was Will, not Willis," he muttered, turning away.

Whatever was so important about Nat Turner, John was determined not to pay it any mind. "Where did you come from?" he asked, looking first at Willis and then at Newton.

"You mean in Africa?" Willis asked.

It hadn't occurred to John that Negroes thought of themselves as coming from someplace in Africa. "Just here in America," he said, hoping to make the question easier.

"The Virginia Tidewater," Newton mumbled. "Near the Chesapeake."

Willis glanced at him. "That's near where I came from," he said, sounding surprised by the coincidence. "A plantation on the Eastern Shore."

To think how far they'd both come, only to end up in the same place—as slaves. "Tell me about the Chesapeake," he said quickly, pretty sure the sad irony of their situation wasn't lost on the two bucks. "What's it like up there? Have they really worn out the soil like I've heard?"

Willis began to say something, but it turned into a mumble and faded away.

John was getting frustrated. "You don't have to keep playing dumb on my account," he said, shocked by his own frankness.

Willis's face froze in shock, but Newton took on a knowing smile, as if he acknowledged that, unlike the other buyers at the auction, John wasn't a fool. "It's true," he said. "The land around the Chesapeake has long since been exhausted from tobacco."

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“Since farming is no longer profitable,” Willis chimed in, “they try and make some money by selling us off.” He glanced at Newton. “And down south is where all the money is.”

John didn’t know that Negroes could speak in such an educated fashion. He burst out with a laugh and looked over at Newton. “How come you were acting like such a dumb nigger back at the market?”

“That trader told me I had to act dumb because I wasn’t dark enough. He said he’d show me the lash if I didn’t act like the sort folks were looking to buy. But why so many white folks want dumb niggers is beyond me, Masar John.”

John was struck that Newton called him *masar*, as though it were a God-given title every Negro used by second nature. “Call me John,” he said, thinking about Aryanna. “That’s my name. Or at least *Master* John. But don’t say *masar* like you’re doing dumb nigger imitations.”

Newton shrugged his agreement. “What do you grow on your plantation?” he asked, as if ready to pass judgment on the venture’s viability.

“Cotton,” John replied, “along with corn and oats, and some alfalfa. But I wouldn’t call it a plantation; it’s just a big farm.” John could see the look of relief on their faces. “What did you think we’d be growing?”

“Sugar,” Newton replied.

“We’ve heard awful stories come back from the sugar-cane plantations,” Willis said. “If they send you there, you don’t live long.”

“What’s so terrible about sugar plantations?” John asked.

“They work you to death is what,” Willis replied as Newton nodded.

All John knew about sugar was that it grew in Louisiana and Florida, where it was suitably hot and wet. “How do you fellows know all this?”

John caught the two Negroes glancing at each other. Just like Mammy, clearly there were things they wouldn’t share with their white master.

“Word travels,” Willis finally said.

“And more of us can read and write than you might think,” Newton said, as if John had implied otherwise. “That’s how we know.”

“Can you each read and write?” John asked, glancing between them.

“I can read and write as good as anyone,” Willis asserted. He looked over at Newton, obviously hoping he’d say the same.

“I can read pretty well,” Newton said, not conveying much confidence.

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"I'll teach you," John offered with sincere enthusiasm, a little surprised by his own words. Teaching slaves to read and write was illegal in Alabama; there was a fine of at least \$100, but he'd never heard of it being rigorously enforced. He wasn't sure if Doctor Pelham approved of educating the Negroes, but he didn't have to know.

Newton looked defensive. "I read fine as it is."

After some silence, John's eyes drifted down to the chains around the two Negroes' ankles. It was hard to imagine being someone else's property, to be denied any will of your own.

"I don't suppose you would see fit to unlock these chains," Willis said, apparently catching John's stare. He moved his foot so that the chain tugged at Newton's leg. "It's getting mighty uncomfortable not being able to move."

"I feel like I'm back on that boat," Newton said, tugging back at Willis.

John was shocked by their audacity. Did they think that because he showed an interest in their welfare he would let them escape? Did they take him for a fool? Surely Doctor Pelham would think him a fool for unchaining them.

"I don't have the key," John said. "Our overseer has it." He motioned toward the wagon behind them, with Ned at the reins.

Neither of the bucks said anything more about the key, as if one look at Ned, even from a distance, told them everything they needed to know.

As the little caravan made its way into the Alabama foothills, the two bucks told John about their ancestors, where they had really come from. John was fascinated; the notion of Negroes having memories and connections among themselves came as a revelation.

Willis seemed to think that his ancestors came from a place called Angola, far down the western coast of Africa. He talked about his great-grandparents living in the Caribbean before ever coming to America. His knowledge of how his people were dispersed across the Americas, from Brazil to the Chesapeake, seemed nothing short of ingrained.

Newton said his ancestors were Igbos, who came from farther up the West African coast. He wouldn't even speak of his European ancestors, as if he refused to acknowledge his white origins. Just like Aryanna, always denying she had a father, maybe the other part of his self would never quite be there.

"So tell him how you got to be a yard nigger," Willis snickered.

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Newton shot him an angry look.

“What’s a yard nigger?” John asked.

“Don’t you pay him no mind, Master John,” Newton said, shaking his head.

John looked at Willis. “Come on, tell me.”

“A yard nigger is a slave whose father is the master,” Willis said, lowering his voice.

“I ain’t no yard nigger!” Newton snapped. “My father was black as you are.”

“Then your mama or your mama’s mama was a yard nigger,” Willis said and pointed at John. “Cause you aren’t much blacker than he is.”

Despite his shackles, Newton lunged at him. John tried to intervene but fell clumsily forward between the two bucks. Although Newton clearly meant to hit Willis, he accidentally struck John on the jaw and knocked him to the floor.

“What’s going on back there?” Doctor Pelham called out.

“Nothing, Father,” John responded, “Nothing at all.”

“Are you all right, Masar?” Willis asked, lowering his voice again.

Newton looked terrified, his newfound confidence gone. “I’m sorry, Masar John,” he said, trembling with acknowledgment that he had committed the unthinkable—striking a white person, his new master. “I didn’t mean to hit you. Honestly I didn’t.”

John struggled to pick himself up. “That’s all right,” he said, rubbing his sore face. “My brothers hit me all the time, or leastwise they did when we were younger.”

John wanted to put them at ease again, but he didn’t know how. Well, fortunately, there would be plenty of time for that in the days ahead. Despite the monster on Uncle Baylor’s back and everything that had happened to Aryanna, John felt certain the two bucks were lucky to be coming to the Pelham farm.

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