



# Escaping the Godless “Cotton Kingdom”

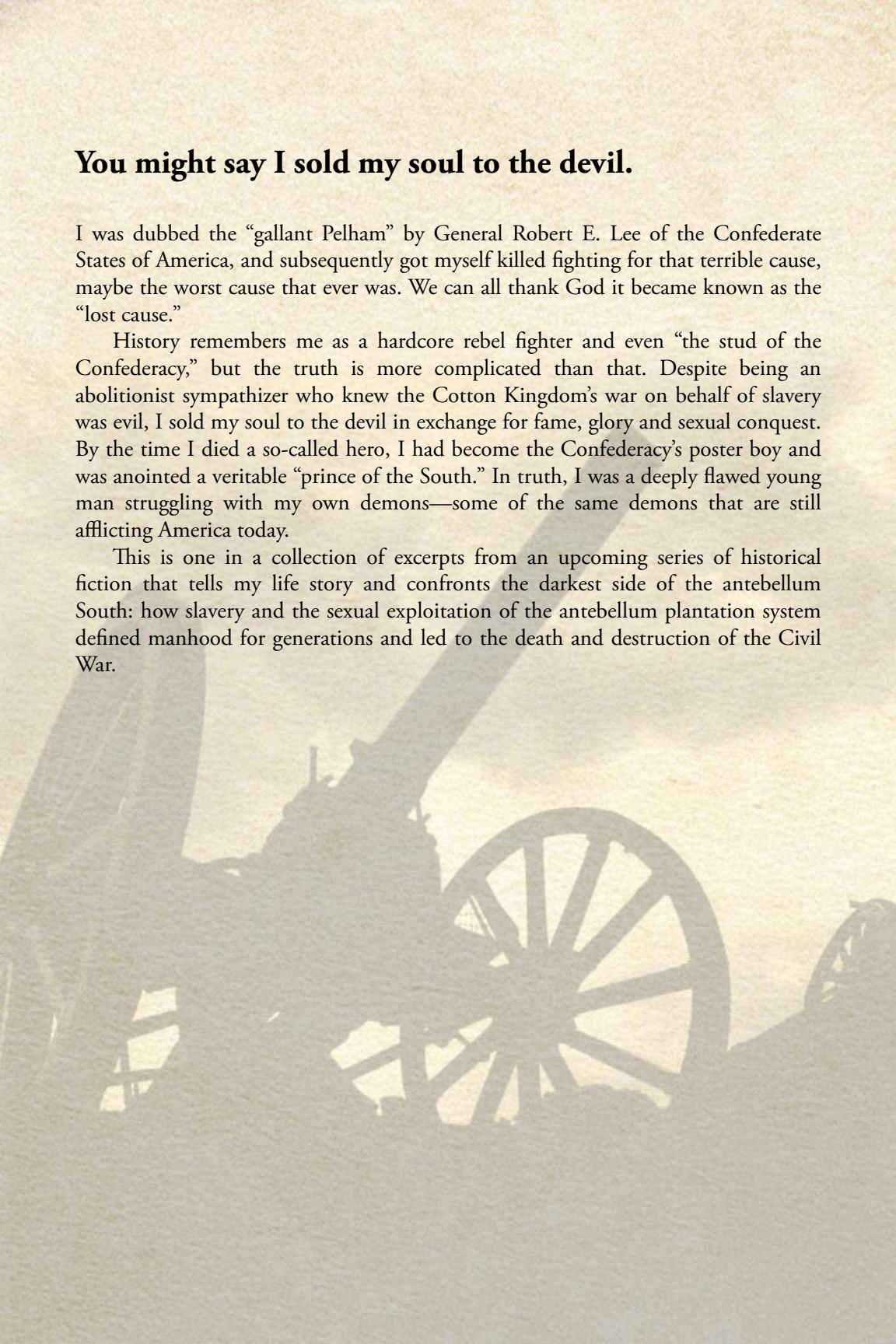


## **You might say I sold my soul to the devil.**

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.





**“Me and my two bucks learned the hard way that the Cotton Kingdom was a godless, cruel place ruled by godless, cruel men like my father, who could not be trusted.”**

John found Ned in the toolshed, carefully taking inventory as if everything on the farm were his own.

“Why’d you tell Doctor Pelham that Andrew had a bigger crop than me?” John demanded before Ned had chance to look his way.

Ned shook his head. “I said no such thing. I said his crop was more profitable; there’s a difference.”

“Weren’t we being judged based on pounds per acre?” John said. “Isn’t that how profitability is measured?”

“What your papa hasn’t taught you is that your profit is based on the slave hours it takes to produce a bale of cotton, from planting it to picking it; that’s the only way to calculate your cash value per slave.”

Cash value per slave? John was incredulous. “You always said thirty-five pounds of cotton a day was good work for a hand. My team all did well over forty, Willis and Newton included.”

“Young bucks like them,” Ned said, “should do close to fifty. You can’t just figure pounds per hand; you’ve got to consider the cost of the hands. Your papa didn’t pay a thousand a piece for them two bucks so they could work like a couple of old men. If all the niggers on this farm were producing the same cash value they do, you’re papa would go broke.”

“We still had more pounds per worker than the rest of the farm,” John persisted; “Certainly a lot more than in Andrew’s fields.”

“It don’t matter, John; those two bucks are pulling down your profit.”

“So you’re saying it doesn’t matter if we delivered the most pounds per acre or the most pounds per worker because of what Willis and Newton cost.” Considering he was the dumbest, crudest man in the world, Ned was mighty sophisticated when it came to the profitability of slaves. “Wouldn’t you have to amortize their cost over their whole lives?” John asked, struggling

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to remember what he'd read in Doctor Pelham's accounting book, hoping to intimidate Ned.

“You're letting them get the better of you,” Ned said, avoiding John's question and finally getting to what irked him the most. “They're not your friends; they're just taking advantage of you.”

“How are they taking advantage of me?”

“You're assuming they're like white folks,” Ned said, “but they're not. They don't think like white folks; they don't care about the same things white folks do.”

“What does it matter how they think? Why should people who'll be slaves for the rest of their lives—”

“I see you talking to them,” Ned said. “They'll say or do anything to get away with doing less work.”

“I'll admit that Willis and Newton didn't work as hard as they could their first year on the farm. But that all changed; I was with them every day, and I'll swear to it.”

“If you're not pushing them, you're not getting all they're worth.”

“They do good work. What does it matter if I'm pushing them?”

“Don't you see?” Ned said, becoming exasperated. “The only thing that pushes Negroes is fear. It's the only way to be sure you're getting everything out of them that you can.”

“You know what I think?” John said. “I think every word out of your mouth is bullshit.”

Ned looked more disappointed than angry. “I assure you, Master John, it's not bullshit. It's nothing but—”

“I think Andrew has you wrapped around his little finger.”

“Now *that's* bullshit!”

“I think Andrew charged you with making sure that he won.”

“How dare you!” Ned growled, any trace of disappointment having turned to rage.

“How dare *I*? You put the whole farm at risk with those cotton caterpillars. Do you have any idea how much my father owes the bank for all the land and the Negroes? Don't go talking to me about cash value per slave.”

“If anyone put those caterpillars in your fields it was those damn niggers; they're liable to do anything.” Ned was red faced, as if he were about to



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explode, all the bullshit in him flying every which way. "I'm telling you, they're not your friends."

"You're nothing but a dumb, lying son of a bitch!"

Ned had never looked angrier. "If you weren't the master's son, you'd be good as dead!"

John didn't flinch, didn't take his eyes away from Ned's. "If you weren't a head taller than me, *you'd* be as good as dead!"

Having reached a standoff, John turned and left the shed. Just like Doctor Pelham, Ned had finally spoken the blatant truth: what he desired above all else, regardless of whether the work got done or the crop was profitable, was that the Negroes fear their master; if they didn't, something far more important than the cotton crop was at stake.

Losing out on the feast was a matter of pride to John, and it came as a profound insult that a lazy bastard like Andrew had been judged the victor. A part of him wanted to crawl up to the attic and hide forever, but he refused to give Andrew the satisfaction. Besides, he still had Willis and Newton to look out for, and he didn't want to let them down.

He had no choice but to tell Willis and Newton the truth, but how could he tell them they had cost too much at the slave auction, that according to Ned they had to work harder than the other Negroes to earn their keep? The worst part was admitting he was powerless, that white trash Ned had held sway with Doctor Pelham. As many times as he had told them not to fear Ned's lash, it looked like Ned was running the farm, all-powerful.

The real problem was Andrew, but John was loath to admit it to his bucks. He didn't want them knowing what Philip had told him and risk getting them all stirred up, but that was where things seemed to be heading. Maybe they'd already figured out that the cotton caterpillars were no accident, but indeed, there was a difference between assuming something and knowing it for certain.

"There's not going to be any feast," he finally told Willis and Newton that afternoon after a good deal of procrastination.

"There's gonna be a feast," Willis said, "only it ain't gonna be for us."

Newton looked at John dead on. "We already heard that Andrew's team is getting it."

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There was no point in asking how they knew; Andrew had probably told his hands first thing that morning, and if there was one thing you could count on from the Negroes, it was talking to each other about things you didn't want talked about. John wasn't sure if it was Ned who had said that or Mammy—most likely both, if for different reasons.

“I hate those dumb niggers,” Willis muttered. “They let that brother of yours treat them like shit, but it don't stop them from rubbing shit in our face the first chance they get.”

“They're worse than any yard niggers,” Newton added. “Every damn one of them is gonna wind up like Uncle Baylor.”

John considered telling them they'd best not talk that way, but he knew it was pointless. “We've just gotta work harder next year,” he said, feeling dumb for not offering anything better.

“What do you mean, *harder*?” Newton asked.

“We're already working harder than the other teams,” Willis said. “How hard do Ned and your papa expect us to work?”

John looked down at the ground and sighed. “I don't know,” he said, lifting his gaze up to the horizon and avoiding their eyes. “I just don't know.”

Newton looked at Willis. “The harder we work the more work they give us,” he said.

“And why should we work for *you*, anyway?” Willis added, “When *you* make all the profits and live in the big house, besides.”

A part of John wanted to lash out, remind them he was one of the master's sons, but he knew he'd once asked Mammy pretty much the same question when he was a baby. “That's how it's always been,” he said, remembering Mammy's answer.

Willis shot Newton a glance and then looked at John. “What nobody understands,” he said, “but seems pretty simple to us, is that we'd work a whole lot harder if we were working toward our freedom.”

“I heard about that,” Newton said, like someone who'd rehearsed his lines but was trying to sound casual. “Instead of receiving wages for our labor, we earn our freedom.”

“Or another way to look at it,” Willis said, sounding even more rehearsed than Newton. “We earn wages until we can finally purchase ourselves.” He glanced over at Newton. “It don't matter which, we still end up free.”



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John didn't know what to say; he'd heard of arrangements of that sort, but not recently or in the Cotton Kingdom, where the price of Negroes was soaring and the state legislatures were making it harder to free slaves almost every day. Coming from Willis and Newton, it sounded perfectly reasonable, but Doctor Pelham would surely consider it out of the question, nothing short of unthinkable. And Ned would most likely think it no less threatening than an escape plot, or even a slave insurrection. John understood their wanting to be free, that working for nothing but their survival and an annual feast was no life for a man, but his father had paid good money for them, and he could hardly afford to let them go. "I don't see how," he said feebly.

"Your papa needs to consider how much more productive we'd be if we had a chance at freedom," Newton said. "We could even earn him the cost of some new hands to replace us."

"So, you see," Willis chimed back in, "we'd earn our freedom in a profitable manner."

The two Negroes' expressions were like nothing John had seen. They weren't sad or angry or disrespectful; they were strong and courageous. If only they weren't expecting him to plead their case to Doctor Pelham.

That evening before the sun went down John sat on his favorite rock under the sycamore tree and pondered the boys' words. It was nearly Thanksgiving and too cold to go in the pond, but it was still the place John liked to go when he wanted to think. The sycamore leaves had already turned and were starting to fall across the pond, all flowing southward ever so slowly with that imperceptible current. Sometimes, when there was a windstorm around this time of year, so many leaves came down at once that it was almost impossible to tell where the rocks ended and the pond began.

There was unquestionably some truth to what the boys had said; trying to motivate people with nothing but the lash and a feast seemed a losing proposition. After all, who could blame them for not wanting to work their lives away for the master's profit? Despite all his arguing with Doctor Pelham, none of it had seemed so simple since his days as a fairy prince who asked Mammy too many questions.

Still, as much as John sympathized with their plight, it irked him that Willis and Newton had all but straight-out admitted that Ned was right—

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they *could* work much harder if they put their minds to it. Even then, could they be trusted to deliver on their promise? Maybe *he* was the only one who would ever be motivated by this proposition of theirs.

No matter how much John mulled it over in his mind, he couldn't imagine Doctor Pelham entertaining such a thing; even the mention of free Negroes was blasphemous in the Cotton Kingdom. The doctor was likely to think him utterly daft for even suggesting it—worse than daft, a complete and utter failure as a master, someone on whom every rule of the Cotton Kingdom had gone wasted.

John stewed over the bucks' proposition all winter. When the weather allowed it, which, according to Ned, was most of the time, he and the bucks kept working on clearing the woodlands. Willis and Newton didn't much like having to work when the other teams didn't, but they came right out and said they'd rather be cutting trees with John than as much as move a toe for that bastard Andrew within their lifetime. Every so often they asked John if he'd done any more thinking about how they might earn their freedom, but what they were really asking was if he had spoken to Doctor Pelham.

John hadn't spoken to Doctor Pelham, but he'd done a lot of thinking on the subject, especially when he was in Mammy's kitchen on those days when there was too much snow or ice to be working outdoors. He was staring into the fiery insides of Mammy's big iron stove when he reached his decision: if the Negroes knew they would be slaves until they died, why should they work hard or give a damn about the success of the farm? Although Ned's answer was the lash, John felt certain there was a better solution.

John found the door to the doctor's study slightly ajar, and suddenly the notion of Willis and Newton earning their freedom had never seemed more unthinkable. John summoned his courage and knocked. “Can I speak with you, Pa?” he asked.

Doctor Pelham looked up from whatever he was reading. Sometimes John wondered where all the doctor's papers came from and if they were really important enough to justify the time he devoted to them. “Come in, John,” the doctor said. “What can I do for you?”

Approaching the desk felt different from when the doctor just raised corn and attended to his medical practice. As evidenced by all the ledgers stacked



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on the credenza behind his desk, the man was running a cotton plantation now. The place where John had first sat with his father and learned about comets was now the hub of a large business enterprise, one that sold its cotton to the mills up north and across the Atlantic to England. Doctor Pelham had assumed the aura of a king on his throne, granting or denying his subjects' requests.

"From what Ned tells me, you're doing very well," the doctor said as John sat down. "I'm very proud of you."

John hid his puzzlement; there was nothing to do well or not well; the new planting season was still a ways off and the weather had been so bad the past couple of weeks that he and the bucks hadn't even done any clearing. Maybe the doctor had a guilty conscience for cheating him out of the feast. John barely managed a polite smile.

"I'm serious, John," the doctor said. "Just because your cash value per slave was less than Andrew's doesn't mean you didn't do an outstanding job last year."

His father's remark made his task only more difficult. "That's what I want to talk to you about," he said. "Well, actually, the field hands."

The doctor looked as if he intended to grant John's every request.

"You remember Willis and Newton, don't you?" John asked.

"Certainly. They're the two boys who rode back with us from New Orleans. They work in your fields now."

John nodded. "They're two of our best hands," he said, remembering the incident with the rocks and how much the two bucks had improved since then. He glanced nervously at the book shelves before facing his father's gaze. "They want the opportunity to earn their freedom...as I'm sure many of the other hands would as well."

The doctor stared at John, maybe more confused than angry. "What do you mean?"

"Please don't misunderstand," John said, raising his hand defensively. "I don't mean just setting them free. I'm talking about letting all the Negroes on the farm work toward their freedom over a period of years."

Doctor Pelham had never looked more incredulous. "How can we afford to set them free?" he asked as if the wind had been taken out of him. "I still owe the bank for most of them, Willis and Newton included."

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John explained his plan, stressing that it would not represent a financial loss because none of the Negroes would get their freedom until they earned back their purchase price in cotton profits; if the farm had good years they would earn their freedom faster, but if the farm wasn't profitable, it would take longer.

Utter bafflement was hardly adequate to describe the doctor's expression as he no doubt struggled to digest everything his crazy, Negro-loving son had said. Still, not having been shouted at or ordered to leave the room, and determined not to let Willis and Newton down, John held firm. "You said we were each responsible for the profitability of our own fields," he added. "Starting this year, that's how I plan to do it. With your permission, of course."

The doctor nodded with a slight sigh and gazed past John, maybe out the window and across the gleaming snow.

"We'll make more profit in the long run if the hands work harder," John said, suspecting the doctor had missed the point. "And the best way to get them to work harder is if they have something to work *for*—besides just fear of Ned's whip."

The doctor took on a look of sympathetic condescension. "They have a good life here with us," he said. "And they *don't* have to fear the whip."

"Yes, they do, Pa. I've heard that Ned's used it on more than one occasion."

"That's just those darkies putting fear into each other's heads," the doctor said. "Unless you actually see him use the whip, I wouldn't pay any attention to them."

Nothing was more frustrating than the doctor's refusal to acknowledge Ned's use of the whip. He considered arguing but surmised it would only serve to doom his proposition. "Will you at least think about it? If we're each responsible for our own fields, I think we should run them as we see fit."

The doctor raised his hands a little and smacked them down on the desk. "You and the Negroes," he said fondly, a little dreamily. "My son the born abolitionist." He stood up and reached out to shake John's hand, something he had never done before. "I'll think about it."

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There was a commotion in the direction of the outbuildings, the sound taking a moment to break into John's consciousness. Now he was listening, running toward the sound of Ned's whip as fast as he could. He was still too far away to bring the little human figures into focus, but there was no denying it was the whip, crisp and cutting on human flesh. It felt like a terrible dream, where the more he tried to run the more impossible it became.

He was finally close enough to make out Ned cracking his whip. Willis and Newton were on the ground, their backs bare, kneeling as if praying to the Cotton Kingdom's God. As much as the two boys surely dreaded showing their pain and giving Ned the satisfaction of obliterating their dignity, they cried out with every lash, their strength having gone by the wayside. The bucks' cries sounded like Philip and Andrew when they discovered the sex in themselves. Only, for Willis and Newton, the power wasn't coming from inside of them; it was being inflicted upon them, just as his brothers had inflicted their power on Aryanna.

"No!" John yelled as loud as he could. "You have no right!"

But Ned didn't stop; maybe he could no more stop the rhythm of his whip than Philip and Andrew had been able to stop their sexual rage. "The hell if I don't have the right!" he shouted back before taking an exceptionally violent swipe at Newton, obviously relishing the pain he caused. The mulatto's whole body seemed to jerk involuntarily, like a chicken after its head was cut off.

"What did they do?" John demanded, finally coming up beside Ned and struggling to catch his breath. "What did they do that was so terrible?"

He realized that Andrew was standing directly behind Ned, literally hiding in his shadow, looking on with his usual smug expression. There was no question that he enjoyed seeing Willis and Newton safely under Ned's control, his rivals for the young black women on the plantation all but castrated. John wanted to rip into Andrew then and there, but Ned was his brother's protector.

"This is *your* fault!" Ned shouted at John. "They turned bad because you didn't keep them in their place; you wouldn't make them respect you."

John tried grabbing at Ned's arm. "This isn't how we treat our Negroes. Whatever I've done, you shouldn't punish *them* for it."

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Ned pulled away, almost knocking John to the ground. “Your father told me what those two niggers have been feeding into your head, all that bullshit about earning their freedom! What kind of bullshit is that?”

“It isn’t bullshit!” John shouted back. “Why shouldn’t they have a reason to live?” The bucks had never put it quite that way, but that was what it really came down to—a reason to live.

“How dare they threaten us!” Ned screamed, the fury in his eyes seeming to intensify. There had never been more passion in that hideous man’s voice; nothing had brought out his rage more than the possibility of the two bucks earning their freedom, their dignity as men. He cracked his whip on the ground between Willis and Newton. “They’ll work as hard as they can work. They don’t get any choice in the matter.”

“They didn’t threaten us,” John yelled, trying to match the seemingly endless strength of Ned’s voice. “They’ve done nothing to deserve punishment. Nothing.”

Ned cracked his whip again. “I know about them stealing that food for those goings-on down at the quarters. You don’t think I know everything that goes on around here?”

“I took that food,” John said, remembering Mammy’s warnings, and what he’d heard about Ned having spies among the Negroes. “But that’s between me and my father.”

Ned’s expression implied that John was a complete failure as a master, a pitiful disgrace to everything that was sacred in the Cotton Kingdom. And all the while Andrew stood there scoffing at him, enjoying his humiliation, his powerlessness to protect the two bucks. Andrew was a conniving bastard and a rapist, and not even Doctor Pelham entertained any illusions about his intelligence, but if there was one thing he was good at, it was following the unsaid rules of the Cotton Kingdom, never transgressing against the sacred way of things.

For a moment John thought Ned might bring the whip down on him, too, but instead he turned away and stalked silently off, as if that raging evil force inside him was suddenly retreating back into the fires of hell. All that had protected him from Ned’s fury was his being one of the master’s sons, his birthright serving as a cross held up to the devil.

It was a couple of minutes before Willis and Newton made it to their feet, Newton being in worse shape and having a tougher time of it, reaching out



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for Willis's arm to keep from falling back down. John tried to help him, but Newton still had enough strength to push him away.

The two bucks looked at John, their eyes conveying more than mere hurt or anger, a look of disappointment and betrayal that was unlike anything John had witnessed before or since he let his brothers force him on Aryanna. Their sad, dark eyes unflinchingly demanded: How could you let this happen, Master John, you stupid little fool of a white boy?

John wanted to comfort them, but any words seemed ludicrous, just as he had had no words for Aryanna. What could serve as adequate repentance for all the times he had promised them they didn't have to fear the lash? There was nothing he could do to soothe the bloody gashes across their backs, the first evidence of their inevitable metamorphosis into Uncle Baylor.

John knew that something would never be the same between him and his bucks. He had seen them humiliated and helpless at the hands of the white man. And they, in turn, had seen him helpless to protect them, ridiculed by Ned like a stupid child. He couldn't imagine ever looking them in the eye quite the same, just as he and Aryanna could never have looked at each other the same.

In his way, Ned had once again been truthful; he wasn't enraged by anything that Willis or Newton had done, but rather that John, one of the master's sons, had failed to assert his power over them. The farm's survival wasn't based on the success of the cotton crop but on enforcing the master's power. Maybe abusing the Negroes had been essential to earning a profit for so long that it had become more important than the profit itself.

John caught Doctor Pelham in his office that evening before supper. "You always promised that we'd never use the lash," he blurted out as he approached the desk, too consumed with anger to show the usual respect. "You always said we didn't treat our Negroes that way."

"What do you mean?" the doctor asked, more confused than shocked at John's tone.

"I watched Ned whip Willis and Newton with my own eyes."

"What did they—"

"They didn't do anything except ask for their freedom."

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For a moment the doctor looked as if he would put John in his place, scream all Hades at him, but he didn't. “You have my word, John,” he said, sounding remorseful. “I never told him to whip those two boys...or anybody else.”

“And when I told him to stop, he refused.”

The doctor shook his head. “Please believe me; I never wanted that to happen.”

“Now you have to let them work for their freedom,” John demanded. “How else do you expect them to go on if they have no hope, if they know they'll spend their whole life here, unless they're so unfortunate that we sell them off to a sugar plantation?”

“Don't you see, John,” the doctor said, “if I offer *your* hands their freedom, I have to offer it to all of them...and I just can't do that.”

John felt like he'd been smacked, not by the rebuke itself, but by his father's weakness, his submission to Ned's ways in the name of earning a profit. John wanted to believe the doctor finally understood that entrusting management of the farm to Ned had been a mistake, but there was no point in pretending he would ever lift a hand to protect Willis and Newton, or any of the Negroes on the farm. The father he had trusted was gone. Doctor Pelham was a plantation master.

Planting season was in full swing, with John and his two bucks lined up and making their way slowly across the fields, drilling and planting and covering, drilling and planting and covering, their rhythm from the previous year coming back to them without the slightest effort. John could only hope that such hard-learned efficiencies would serve them well for the duration of the growing season. Even if Ned changed the rules again, the team still had to increase its output.

Newton suddenly stopped and took on a thoughtful expression. “Maybe one day,” he said to Willis, “we'll make it to Liberia.”

Willis looked a little startled by his friend's open declaration in John's presence. “How we gonna do that?” he said with a somber laugh. He moved on ahead with his drilling, as if Newton's fantasies weren't worth his time.

John remembered that Liberia was a place in Africa where Negro slaves went to be free; it was founded by the American Colonization Society, that



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group Cousin Henry had started way back when. He didn't know what to say, or if he should say anything. Liberia was only a dream, something akin to his own notion of going out west and living on the frontier, but he resented it. Gaining freedom in Western civilization was one thing, but Liberia represented a wanton rejection of the white man's world.

John put his hand on Newton's shoulder, careful not to disturb the wounds that were still healing. "You've come this far," he said. "Why would you want to go back to Africa?"

"I never came from Africa," Newton said, flashing John one of those looks meant to remind him they were slaves and he was their master. "I came from the Chesapeake, and now I'm in Alabama. But it don't matter cause there's no place for Negroes in the white man's world."

Willis, who was several yards ahead of them now, looked back over his shoulder. "I don't want any part of it," he said, not making it clear whether he was referring to Newton's fantasy or the white man's world.

"The Negroes are free up north," John said. "And some have gone out West."

Newton grinned with satisfaction. "I could be what they call a cowboy."

"You can barely ride a horse," Willis said, rolling his eyes.

"I always wanted to go out West," John said. "That's what I was planning on doing before my father bought the cotton farm."

Willis shook his head. "It's like Aunt Katie says—no good ever came from growing cotton."

"I think you should come out West with me," John said, thinking about how he'd always wanted off that farm. "We could all be cowboys, free to let fortune smile on us as God sees fit."

Newton looked rather taken with the idea, but Willis looked troubled. "What about those Indians?" he asked. "I hear they'd just as soon scalp a black man as a white man."

The possibility of defeat on the frontier, let alone a grisly death, had never entered John's mind. "I wouldn't worry about it," he said. "Ned'll probably come shoot you before the Injuns ever get chance to scalp you."

Newton gave John a pained look. "I wonder if you wouldn't like that, Master John."

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John felt badly for making light of their pain and the hopelessness of their situation. “I wouldn’t like that,” he said. “But I still don’t think you should go to Liberia.”

The three boys continued working, John last in line doing the covering. It was a good thing that throwing dirt on top of cotton seeds didn’t require much concentration, because his mind was spinning with thoughts about the two bucks. His brothers had driven Aryanna away, and now Ned would drive Willis and Newton away, finally driving them to be runaways for the pleasure of tracking them down and shooting them like animals, no doubt. Indeed, nothing was protecting them from Ned’s wrath except how much they cost and what their labor was worth.

John could see Ned sitting on his horse, probably watching them the whole time they were talking about Liberia and the western frontier. If Willis and Newton earned their freedom—even if they were replaced by other Negroes as the plantation and the Cotton Kingdom grew—it threatened his power. Ned’s power was only secure if he controlled their fate to the end, until their lives were gone and they had become Uncle Baylor.



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