



# God of the “Cotton Kingdom”



A large, detailed photograph of a green leaf with a brown and white striped caterpillar crawling on it. The caterpillar is positioned diagonally across the leaf, moving from the upper left towards the lower right. The leaf's veins are clearly visible, and the background is a soft, out-of-focus light green.

## **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.

**“You would not believe the crap the Negroes were taught in the name of Jesus Christ, and you would not believe the level my brother Andrew sank to in his quest to become master of the farm, to become a lord and master of the Cotton Kingdom.”**

**B**efore Doctor Pelham bought the cotton acreage, the little group of Negroes on the farm had seemed like an extension of the family, but now there were many families of Negroes, along with numerous unattached young bucks like Willis and Newton. John had always been a little intimidated by the quarters, sensing it was a place he didn't belong and wasn't wanted, but now he hesitated to venture out there without Mammy, and Mammy hardly went out there herself anymore. He couldn't imagine anyone daring to harm one of the master's sons, but there was no question the Negroes' enmity was increasing every day that Ned ran the farm.

Doctor Pelham said it was his responsibility to provide the Negroes with instruction in Christianity, and Mama believed, with time, Christian teachings might even allow them to go to heaven. As for Ned, he didn't give a damn if the Negroes went to heaven and, all things being equal, probably preferred they went to hell. He was firmly convinced, however, that the Negroes worked harder if they were promised an abundant afterlife, and he especially liked the Christian notion that obeying one's master was a virtue.

Prior to the Cotton Kingdom coming to Benton County, the Negroes had attended Sunday church services with the family, riding into Jacksonville in their own wagons and sitting in the balcony. But with the slave population burgeoning and the church balcony looking ready to collapse, the pastor had started coming out to the farm to conduct a separate service for the Negroes. And as the acreage planted with cotton grew exponentially, it had resulted in the need for several pastors to serve the area.

It wasn't long before Willis and Newton started complaining that the Negro sermons sounded more like Ned than the Lord Jesus.

## GOD OF THE "COTTON KINGDOM"

"You're making that up!" John finally snapped at Willis, who'd just recited the gist of a long sermon on the virtues of hard work, contentment, and good behavior.

"No I ain't!" Willis said, turning to Newton for support. "According to the pastor, we're supposed to be content no matter what."

"Content to be subservient," Newton said.

"I was taught to be a good Christian," Willis said, "but the Christianity you've got down here is of a whole different sort."

John decided to do some investigating, and the best place to start was Mammy. She had never seemed all that religious, but most Sundays she made sure to attend both services, accompanying the family to church in the morning and then going out to worship with the field hands in the afternoon. Besides, between his work in the fields and his shame over Aryanna, lately John had neglected spending his usual time with her in the kitchen, so a visit was in order.

"Aren't you supposed to be workin'?" Mammy asked when she realized he was sitting in his old spot at the table.

"I'm pretending I'm one of my brothers," he said.

"Just don't fall asleep like they do," she said. "We wouldn't want you falling off your chair onto the floor."

John smiled at good ol' Mammy. "I want to ask you about church," he said.

Mammy's face indicated that church was the last thing she'd expected to be on his mind. "What about it?"

"I mean the sermons; are the ones we get at church in Jacksonville different from the ones the Negroes get on the farm?"

Mammy looked at him as if that were the silliest question she'd ever heard. "Of course they're different," she said. "One is for white folks, and the other is for black folks."

"And what's different about them?"

Mammy rolled her eyes, looking just as impatient as when she had to explain that growing cotton was harder than growing corn. "Just about everything," she said.

"Such as?" John was so anxious to hear what she was going to say that he nearly toppled his chair over and fell on his face.

## THE GALLANT PELHAM

“According to the pastor who comes out to the farm,” Mammy said, “it’s God’s will that white folks own us black folks.”

Doctor Pelham had pretty much told John the same thing, but that was many years ago, and he’d long since ceased believing it. After all, it wasn’t God’s will for free black folks in New Orleans, or a lot of other places.

“And to be dissatisfied with working for white folks is a sin,” Mammy continued.

“How come you never told me this?” John all but demanded, as though he was indeed her master and she was obliged to inform him of everything that happened on the farm.

It was one of those rare times that Mammy looked defensive. “I thought everybody knew,” she said, shrugging. “And besides, I think the new pastor, that man down from Huntsville, is just a drunkard that nobody pays much attention to anyway.”

John looked at her like a parent disappointed with his naughty child. “Do you think anyone would mind if I came out to the Negro service this Sunday?”

“I don’t know who’s gonna stop you. Besides, Ned is there every week.”

John didn’t know why he was surprised that Ned would be there spying on his field hands and butting into their spiritual enlightenment, but it came as one more sorry revelation.

“If you ask me,” Mammy added, “that pastor don’t say nothin’ Ned don’t want him to.”

Now that the weather had cooled off, Doctor Pelham let the Negroes conduct their service in the barn, its high-pitched roof serving as a steeple. John stood just inside the door, impressed by how spick-and-span the Negroes looked, all done up in their Sunday best, lined up on benches and facing forward, perfectly willing to be subjected to their master’s God.

Unless he was mistaken, Mammy was right; the pastor was drunk as a skunk. To think that just that morning the white folks’ pastor had been talking about some new kind of alcohol called beer, making it out to be one more evil that was plaguing the North, and advising the good people of Benton County to help prevent its scourge. He’d failed to mention, of course,

## GOD OF THE “COTTON KINGDOM”

that he and the rest of the pastors would likely be first to try it out for themselves.

Ned stood off to the side, looking quite pleased to see the Negroes all lined up on their benches respecting God’s word, or at least this new pastor’s word. The silly redneck clenched his eyes shut as he sang along with a glorious smile wrapped across his face, no doubt relieved the Negroes’ heathen impulses were safely under control, the burden temporarily lifted from his shoulders.

In all his years going to church, John had never heard anything like what that drunken pastor was spouting at the Negroes. He recognized a few passages, but mostly it was a bunch of mumbo jumbo extolling the virtues of hard work and good behavior versus the sins of disobedience and rebelliousness. The pastor even implied that Doctor Pelham, being their master, was God himself. And, indeed, above all else, it was God’s will for them to be enslaved. There was no doubt about it; Christ’s teachings had definitely been replaced by Ned’s.

John wanted to scream it was all a lie, that the drunken pastor was altering the Bible’s teachings for the sake of the Cotton Kingdom, but he refrained for fear of being called into Doctor Pelham’s office for another lecture. Maybe all he could do was start bringing Willis and Newton along with him to church in Jacksonville and let them sit up in the balcony with Mammy. Ned was bound to resent losing some of his congregation, and there was always the risk he might take it out on the two bucks, but Ned could go fuck himself with whatever happened to be lying around the tool shed, just as long as it was sharp and had a long handle.

When Ned and Doctor Pelham determined the ground was warm enough for planting, the hands were divided into teams of three—a driller to make the hole, a planter to drop in the seed, and a coverer to fill in the dirt on top of it. Although Doctor Pelham suggested that he start working with some different hands, John insisted that Willis and Newton were his team; he planted while the two Negroes took turns drilling and covering.

The weather wasn’t all that hot yet, but it got warm in the fields as it got closer to noon and the sun rose in the sky. At first the work didn’t seem too hard, but as they made their ever-so-slow progression across the field it wasn’t

## THE GALLANT PELHAM

long before the stooping became tiresome, and John felt the first pain in his back.

"It still ain't as bad as pickin' is," Newton said, just like he was reading John's mind.

About midmorning John heard some of Andrew's Negroes in the next field singing and started humming along. At first Newton just hummed, too, but then he started singing, obviously mimicking some of the old Negroes on the farm, and Willis laughed so loud that John was afraid they'd attract attention, most especially Ned's. Newton's singing got shriller and shriller: "My ol' masar is a good ol' masar..."

"That song is disgusting," John said. "And besides, you don't even have a master."

Newton stopped short and turned around. "I got you, don't I?"

John almost bumped into him. "I'm no master," he said, more determined than ever to prove himself the most profitable planter without resorting to Ned's barbaric ways.

"You're *our* master all the same," Newton said. "At least as far as Ned and your papa are concerned."

Indeed, from their standpoint he was undeniably their master. And learning to be a slave master was his foremost charge from Doctor Pelham, what might ultimately determine his future. "If I'm your master," he said, pushing Newton forward with a boisterous laugh, "you get to work, boy, you hear!"

Newton let himself be pushed and resumed his singing, with Willis joining in whenever he was so inspired.

"If you keep singing like that, I'm gonna be sick," John said.

Willis laughed. "We don't want our good ol' masar to be sick on our account."

At first John thought it might only be his imagination, but then Willis and Newton noticed it as well; some sort of caterpillars were all over the cotton bolls, eating them. John had noticed the caterpillars before, but he had assumed they were harmless creatures that would turn into butterflies and disappear. But there they were, devouring the cotton before his eyes, relentlessly.

## GOD OF THE “COTTON KINGDOM”

Ned was sitting atop his horse on the dirt path between John's last field and the cow pasture, and John ran toward him, shouting about the caterpillars destroying the whole crop.

“Whatever it is,” Ned said, “it sure sounds like you've got a real bad infestation on your hands.”

“I know that,” John said, desperately out of breath. “What can we do to stop them?”

“Not much you can do,” Ned replied, acting like he didn't much care.

John's heart sank. “We have to do something; they'll eat the whole crop.”

“I haven't seen 'em in your brothers' fields,” Ned said calmly, as if to imply John was having visions or that *his* fields didn't matter. “I was out there just this morning and didn't see a thing.”

Ned tossed his reins and left John behind in the dust.

“What about my crop?” John called after him. “Isn't there anything we can do?”

Ned rode away, not seeming to hear him.

Thinking that he couldn't very well cover the whole farm on foot, John ran for the stable. As he passed the barn and the other outbuildings he called out to Doctor Pelham, but then he remembered the doctor was planning on visiting one of his patients that afternoon. The silence reminded John of the afternoon he found his brothers having their way with Aryanna.

He threw a saddle on one of the horses and rode out to his brothers' fields, his mind racing about Ned's lack of concern. Seeing Philip and Andrew astride their horses along the slight ridge where their fields met, he galloped toward them at full speed.

“Some sort of caterpillars are in the cotton!” he shouted when he was within earshot. “They're eating the whole crop.”

John had expected his brothers to show alarm, maybe even jump from their horses and examine their own plants, but they didn't show the slightest concern.

Andrew spat out some tobacco just as John drew rein before him. Both of John's brothers had been chewing more and more despite their mother's admonishments, but out in the fields they were free to do as they wished. Chewing tobacco seemed one more way that Ned had influenced the Pelham family rather than the other way around.

“Ain't that a shame,” Andrew said, shaking his head.



## THE GALLANT PELHAM

“Don’t you see?” John cried. “This could mean the end of us. And for some reason, Ned doesn’t seem to care.”

Andrew took on his obnoxious grin and looked over at Philip. “Sounds mighty bad, don’t it?”

“I’ll show you.” John jumped down from his horse and started picking through the first row of Philip’s cotton. But as hard as he looked he couldn’t find a single caterpillar. “I don’t understand,” he shouted at his brothers. “They’re all over *my* plants.”

Philip shrugged. “So far it’s your fields, little brother, not ours.”

“They’ll be in your fields soon enough,” John said, bewildered and frustrated. He wasn’t all that surprised that his brothers would enjoy seeing his fields destroyed, but why didn’t they realize theirs could be next? They could be dumb as stumps sometimes but not that dumb.

John jumped back on his horse and rode toward the big house, desperately hoping that Mammy might know what to do. He was so upset about the caterpillars that he was nearly at the porch before he realized how easily riding high in the saddle came to him now.

Breathless, John climbed the porch steps. He hoped Mama wasn’t around to see him in such a state about the cotton; he didn’t want her to think of Mr. Balzac’s pineapples and panic.

When John barged in the door Mammy Katie turned around from the stove. “What is it, Masar John?” she asked, as if she’d read his desperation in a single glance. John hadn’t heard that sweet concern in her voice for quite a while.

“There’s a problem with the cotton,” he said, breathing hard, almost gasping.

A serious expression came over Mammy’s round face. “What sort of problem?”

“Caterpillars are eating the cotton bolls; they’ll probably spread all across the farm and Ned says there isn’t anything we can do.”

Mammy frowned. “Ned said that?”

John nodded. He realized he’d been shouting and hoped Mama hadn’t heard him. “He doesn’t even seem to care,” he said, lowering his voice.

“Sounds like plain old cotton caterpillars to me.”

“Is there a way to stop them?”

“Sure is. You just get birds to eat ’em.”

## GOD OF THE "COTTON KINGDOM"

John looked at her, wondering if she knew what she was talking about. "How do I do *that*?"

"Not *bird* birds," Mammy said, motioning at the window. "I mean farm fowl, chickens and turkeys, especially those turkeys. And we've got plenty of turkeys on this farm if we just put 'em to work eating."

"Are you sure?" John asked, concerned that Mammy's solution was too simple to work. He never questioned Mammy's knowledge about anything, least of all cotton, but he wondered if caterpillar-eating turkeys weren't just an old wives' tale, maybe just wishful thinking on Mammy's part. "Why didn't Ned tell me that?"

Mammy shook her head. "I don't know, Masar John. I don't know. But we've got to get those turkeys out in that field right now." She glanced at her stove as if assessing whether there was anything to catch the house on fire, and pulled off her apron.

With Mammy moving as fast as she could and John feeling the pull of the harness, they made their way across the yard to the turkey pens behind the barn. Throngs of the silly-looking birds were milling about aimlessly like big ugly chickens; could such brainless creatures be coaxed into doing anything besides peck at their corn?

"We can load 'em up in the wagons," Mammy said. "Go and get some of the hands to help us."

As John rode out to find Willis and Newton and as many of the other hands as he could, he couldn't stop wondering why Ned and his brothers had reacted as they had; even if they wanted his fields destroyed, why didn't they fear for the rest of the farm?

By the time John got back Mammy had already hitched up a couple of wagons. Willis and Newton didn't much like having to chase down a bunch of feather-flying turkeys, but Mammy's evil eye made it clear they didn't have any choice in the matter. One by one they caught the turkeys and flung them onto the wagons until the pens were empty except for a few of the largest, most ornery turkey cocks.

Mammy drove one wagon while John drove the other. When they got out into the fields, John jumped down among the plants and started searching for the worst infestations.

All the hands started pulling the turkeys off the wagons and tossing them onto the ground in a cackling flurry of feathers. At first the silly creatures

## THE GALLANT PELHAM

looked confused and disoriented, not doing much but strutting aimlessly about among the cotton plants. But as soon as they discovered the caterpillars they helped themselves to the tender little morsels with greedy and merciless efficiency.

John looked around the field, wondering how long those turkeys' appetites would hold out. "You sure this is going to work?" he called to Mammy, who was still sitting up on the wagon.

"Have I ever told you anything that was wrong?" she hollered back, a little displeased that he would question her knowledge of anything related to growing cotton.

John shook his head and smiled. "If we'd known what was coming, we might have starved them for a couple days."

Mammy gazed out across the fields. "Just as long as they eat those darn caterpillars faster than the caterpillars eat the cotton we can leave 'em out here as long as it takes."

As thrilled as he was at the prospect of saving his crop, John could just imagine the stupid things wandering off into the woods in every direction—easy pickings for the foxes and wildcats—before they could get them back on the wagons. "But how are we going to get 'em back in the pens?" he called to Mammy.

"Don't worry about that now. The cotton crop is worth more than those turkeys anyhow."

Ned, seeming to come out of nowhere in the midst of the ruckus, rode up alongside Mammy's wagon.

"What the hell do you think you're doing out here?" he shouted at Mammy.

"Mammy says the turkeys will eat those caterpillars," John shouted back, pointing at the nearest birds, their necks darting out and back again. "So far it looks like it's working."

"You get those fucking birds out of this field!" Ned bellowed.

"We'll do no such thing!" Mammy shouted back before John could think of a reply.

Ned took on an expression John hadn't seen before, his face looking like simmering, burning hatred itself. He reached down for his whip, but then he looked at John, maybe realizing he best not strike Mammy in his presence.

## GOD OF THE "COTTON KINGDOM"

All of the hands were silent, but Mammy didn't show the slightest fear. "You know full well those caterpillars would destroy this crop," she said, looking at him intently, half out of her seat, as if about to pull the whip from his hand. "Would you risk the whole crop just to see Masar John lose out to his brothers?"

Ned's hand clutched the whip. "You watch your tongue, nigger," he said. "These fields ain't your business."

"I'm of half a mind to tell Doctor Pelham," Mammy shot back, shaking her finger at him. "You start lookin' out for Masar John's crops or there'll be hell to pay, you hear!"

Ned flinched, as though he'd been hit.

"Now get out of our way or I'll set those turkeys pecking at *you!*"

Ned looked at her with one last gleam of fury before riding off.

John walked over to Mammy, so struck by what he'd witnessed that he hardly knew what to say. He'd never seen her that angry or shaken; now that Ned was gone, she looked like she might faint. "Are you all right, Mammy?"

"You watch out for him, John Pelham," she said. "He knows well enough to try and stop cotton caterpillars before they destroy a whole crop."

Ned's fleeting figure was still visible in the distance; John's mind raced as to why the man didn't want to kill the caterpillars, and what the consequences of the altercation might be.

"I don't know what all has been going on, Masar John," Willis said, walking up behind him, "but I think Ned wanted our fields destroyed. He was going to let those caterpillars eat half the cotton crop before he'd do anything about it. I don't know if it's possible, but I wouldn't be surprised if he spread those caterpillars on purpose."

"That's nonsense," John responded, almost without thinking, wondering whether, like some people said, the Negroes got silly things into their heads.

"It isn't any such thing," Newton said. "If you ask me, he's in cahoots with those two brothers of yours."

John sighed and shook his head, but Mammy's merciless stare made it clear that she agreed. There was silence except for the garbling and pecking of the turkeys, spreading out across the field in every direction, getting lost as fast as you could spot them.

"If it takes till Christmas," Mammy said after a moment, "you make sure they eat all those caterpillars."

## THE GALLANT PELHAM

John bit his lip. For someone who extolled the value of every peach in the orchard, Mammy was suddenly awfully willing to sacrifice the family's food supply; but, like she said, the cotton crop was worth a lot more than a bunch of turkeys.

Mammy caught his hesitation. "If your papa asks about the turkeys, you just tell him what happened. And if he don't like it, you send him to me." She looked around for the sun in the sky. "It's getting late," she said. "I need to be getting back to fixin' supper."

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*God of the "Cotton Kingdom"*

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