



Learning to Be a Slave Master



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 had a lot to learn about growing cotton and being a master, but mostly I had to learn the sorry truth about the white man, or in this case, my father, Doctor Pelham. And me and my boys sure learned to have some respect for old Uncle Baylor along the way.”

As the summer went on, John and his two bucks were becoming more than just a hoe gang; no matter what needed to be done on the farm, the three boys did it together. Even if he could never make amends with Aryanna, at least he could follow his father’s dictum when it came to Willis and Newton; he would be good and kind to them—and take responsibility for their welfare as long as they were in his possession.

Just when the heat of summer seemed endless, the cotton flowers started blooming, turning from almost ivory white to a pinkish hue and then falling to the ground, all in just a few days. What remained were the cotton bolls, like little pods, and finally the bolls opened to reveal the cotton, at long last ready for picking. It looked like a perfect light snow, the magic of God’s handiwork scattered as far as the eye could see. Even if the brightness came from the rising sun, the cotton bolls seemed to be glowing from within, an unseen power revealing the sun’s energy.

Just about every morning, now that it was picking season, Ned would lecture the hands about how much cotton they were expected to pick, anything less than forty pounds in a day being unacceptable. “You don’t want to come up short for Ned,” he said, a scary, threatening gleam in his eye. Ned never specified the punishment, and John couldn’t imagine him using the whip just for coming up short, but he certainly inspired fear in all the hands.

The branches of the cotton plants were rough and sharp, not the least bit like the soft, bright glow of the cotton bolls, as if the glorious appearance of the cotton fields were nothing but a grand deception. It was easy to cut your hands on the rough, fibrous stems—calyxes they were called, according to Doctor Pelham. Given that picking cotton required pulling the plant’s flower apart, was it any wonder that nature made it so painful for the perpetrator?

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At first, John and the boys had to use both hands for picking, one to bag the boll and the other to pull out the white fruit blossom, but in time they each learned to do it with one hand, speeding up considerably to Ned's pleasure. Like all the pickers, they hung their burlap sacks around their necks, but the way it nearly reached the ground still made for a cumbersome hazard.

Willis, especially, laughed each time a boll rolled away from him as if it had a mind of its own. "I never said I was no skilled cotton picker," he said. "Neither of us misrepresented ourselves to nobody."

"We need some of the farm cats out here to help us chase 'em down," Newton said. "You know, like they were mice."

"They've got enough mice to keep them busy as it is," John said, thinking of how Mammy accused the cats of laziness every time she saw vermin.

Newton generally showed less humor than Willis, maybe because he was still more afraid of being sold off to a sugar plantation. "If you can't pick tobacco because there's none left," he said, "they sell you south to pick cotton. And if you can't pick cotton 'cause you're no good at it, then they sell you south again to work in the sugar mills."

"What if you're no good in the sugar mills?" John asked, partly in jest.

"It don't matter nohow," Newton replied. "Even if they don't out and out kill you, nobody survives the mills for long."

"Don't worry," John said, feeling quite benevolent. "We aren't gonna sell you."

The cotton bolls kept opening for months, so picking went on well into the fall and continued even after the weather had begun to turn cooler. John's mama insisted that he be back in school along with his brothers and the younger children, but he still helped out in the afternoons and Saturdays, determined not to let his two bucks down.

Late one afternoon, when it was getting too dark to see, John stopped his picking and looked up at what was left of the western twilight. "I think we should call it a day," he said, looking back toward Willis and Newton. "I'm pretty sure most of the other teams already quit."

"I don't think we have enough," Newton said. He held out his burlap sack. "Feel this."

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Willis lifted the sack and shrugged. "I can't feel much difference," he said. "Either we both have enough, or we're both gonna get shown the lash."

John was losing his patience with their fear. "Nobody's gonna get shown the lash," he said. "Let me feel." John let his own sack flop to the ground and lifted each of theirs; indeed, they both felt a good deal lighter, although he wasn't expert enough to estimate the weight. There was just enough twilight for him to see the bucks' concerned faces as they awaited his verdict. "You can have some of mine," John said.

"I've heard that sometimes you can put rocks in your sack," Willis said. "They don't find out until it's all piled together in the ginhouse."

Putting rocks in a sack of cotton was the stupidest thing John had ever heard. "Where did you hear that?" he demanded, wondering if some of the hands behaved as badly as Ned claimed.

Willis looked like he'd been caught *spilling the beans*, as Mammy would say.

John sighed; one thing he'd learned was that Negroes protected each other at any cost. "It doesn't matter," he said. "But I can't imagine rocks would do the gin much good."

"The way I've heard it," Willis said, "the rocks don't actually make it into the gin."

John didn't have enough experience ginning cotton to know one way or the other. "I was just funnin' with you," he said, not wanting to give Willis a hard time.

Newton was looking at Willis like he was crazy, a "crazy nigger," as they liked to call each other. "I don't think it's a good idea to be messing with Ned; that's the sort of thing that would bring out the lash for certain."

"There isn't going to be any lash," John said. He spread his own sack open. "You take some of my cotton, and we'll put some rocks in my sack." He gave a quick, sharp laugh. "To hell with Ned!" John crouched down and felt around on the ground, scarcely able to distinguish rocks from dirt in the thickening darkness. "He'll never suspect one of the master's sons."

"Master John," Newton said, concern in his voice. "You don't have to do that."

John stood up with his two hands full of rocks. "Just like taking candy from a baby," he said, grinning, delighted at challenging the bucks' fear of Ned.

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The next day, as soon as he got back from the schoolhouse, John headed out to the cotton fields. He called out to Willis and Newton as he approached them, but instead of their usual hearty greeting, at best they only mumbled.

“Is something the matter?” John asked after a few moments of silence.

As was sometimes the case, the two boys refused to speak, as if once again he risked violating their sacred Negro code of silence. “You can tell *me*, dammit!” he burst out.

Willis took a deep breath. “This morning, when we went to get our sacks, Ned had his whip in his hand. I ain’t never seen him with his whip first thing in the morning like that.”

John sighed; he hated the two boys’ constant fear of the whip. “There’s no reason to think it had anything to do with you,” he said. “Don’t pay it any mind.”

“It sure did,” Willis said, a real whine in his voice. “Ned started shouting that someone had loaded their sack with rocks. He cracked that whip on the ground—”

“That’s something he never did before,” Newton broke in. “He said that anyone caught with rocks in his sack is going to get the lash.”

“And he was looking directly at *us* when he said it,” Willis added.

John hadn’t made the connection between Ned’s bringing out the whip and his adding rocks to his sack the previous night. He remembered what Doctor Pelham had said about Ned having to change his ways. “He isn’t going to whip anyone,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll tell him that I was the one who did it.”

Willis and Newton looked incredulous.

“Please don’t tell him you gave us your cotton,” Newton said, making more of a demand than a request.

“He’ll know that we were the ones who were short,” Willis said, taking on that frightened look that annoyed John to no end.

“And besides,” Newton said, “to Ned, *you* means us.”

Willis sighed. “And ol’ Ned don’t like *any* of us worth a damn.”

It was true that Ned blamed the Negroes for everything that went wrong on the farm and gave them credit for nothing. *That’s the nigger for you*, he’d say whenever something went wrong or wasn’t to his liking, including the

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weather. He talked about the whole race as if it were a disease, sometimes right to their faces. "It don't matter if he doesn't like you," John said, feeling determined. "He isn't gonna whip anybody!"

Newton shook his head. "You just don't understand, Master John."

"Don't call me that!"

The two bucks were wide-eyed. "We call you that all the time, Master..." Willis said.

"You've never said nothin' about it," Newton added.

"You both sound like Uncle Baylor," John said, almost yelling. "Is that what you want to be? A couple of old, broken-down subservient niggers like Uncle Baylor?"

Willis and Newton looked like they'd been slapped. "Who are you calling subservient?" Willis demanded as Newton looked on, appearing every bit as offended.

The two bucks didn't seem to mind being called niggers, but they sure as heck didn't like being compared to Uncle Baylor. There were probably Negroes on the farm who didn't even know what *subservient* meant, but Willis and Newton were decidedly not among them.

John gave them a strong, cold stare that as good as shouted Who do you think?

The two bucks stared back as if he were more villainous than Ned. They feared Ned's whip, but despite all their cockiness, they were also vulnerable to their master's opinion.

They'd reached a silent standoff in the middle of the cotton field. "Then stop worrying about Ned," John finally said, finding his usual calm voice. "I'll handle Ned if it comes to it."

Only a few days after Ned discovered the rocks, the two boys were sitting idle by the fence when Andrew came riding along the edge of the field. "How come you're doing all the work, little brother?" he called out at John. "You sure make a mighty fierce slave driver."

John was about to tell him off when he noticed Ned on his horse at the other side of the field. Ned tossed his reins and rode over to John, coming up so close that John thought he might be trampled. The big animal shook its head and snorted, spewing mucus on John's face. As much as John liked

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horses and took pride in his riding skills, Ned's horse seemed like a vile creature controlled by evil.

"Listen here," Ned said. "The reason you work so hard is because those two boys of yours don't." He was looking down at John with disgust. "Your job is to be a master, not a field hand."

John had never felt more the fool. He wanted to scream Hades at the dumb redneck, but there was no denying he was intimidated by the man's size, despite all John's growing of late.

"I know the nigger," Ned said, as if his worth as a man hinged on such knowledge. "Those two bucks are just taking advantage of you." He gazed over to where Willis and Newton were resting in the shade. "I wouldn't mind teaching them a lesson here and now."

John didn't dare argue but felt certain that Ned didn't understand the Negroes in the least. He shook his head, hoping the boys hadn't overheard Ned's blustering voice. "I'll handle it," he said.

Ned gave a quick nod and tossed his reins. "You just let me know if you need some help," he called back over his shoulder.

The fact was, as much as John had worked to gain the two bucks' trust and friendship, sometimes he resented them for taking advantage of his good nature and not working as hard as they could. It was just possible he'd made a mistake in treating them so kindly, including letting them have his cotton when they'd come up short.

"John," Doctor Pelham called out from his office the next morning. "Can I speak with you, please?"

John stepped inside the doctor's door. "Yes, Pa," he said, meeker than he'd intended.

The doctor was looking boldly across his desk. "I understand there's a problem with those two boys we brought back from New Orleans."

John approached the desk and took his usual seat. "There's no problem," he said.

"Ned doesn't think they're working hard enough," the doctor said flatly. "He thinks they're taking advantage of you."

"I don't see why Ned's picking on them," John said. "They're doing perfectly fine. We're getting our fields all picked before—"

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"It isn't just the cotton harvest, John. It sounds like you're back to that same old problem of trying to make friends with the Negroes."

John felt like a little boy again, the same boy who'd been chastised for not understanding what came naturally to his two brothers. No matter that Philip and Andrew were rapists, Doctor Pelham was concerned that *he* was fraternizing with the Negroes!

"I do understand," John said, pain and frustration in his voice. "Why doesn't anybody think I understand?"

"You're a very sweet boy, John; your natural inclination is kindness, but you have to understand that being a good master requires more than just kindness."

"You taught me we needed to be good and kind to our Negroes," John said.

"It's Ned's responsibility to make sure the farm runs efficiently and earns a profit," Doctor Pelham said, ignoring John's words. "That includes making sure everyone does their fair share."

"We're already doing our fair share," John said. "I think Willis and Newton have slowed down because they've learned the more work they do the more work we give them." John hadn't thought of it in such simple terms before, but it was undoubtedly true.

"You can't worry about that," the doctor said. "It's not as if they're paid laborers who can go work at another factory; they're our property. You shouldn't abuse them or be cruel, but you need to press them for all the work you can."

"If they finish picking in one field," John said, intent on making his point, "we just have them start picking in another field. Why should they work any harder when that's all they get for it?"

"Because they fear the consequences if they don't," the doctor replied, not missing a beat. "Unfortunately, that's the only way the Negro comes to respect you."

The doctor had finally spoken the truth: it all came down to fear. Without fear, what Ned liked to call respect, the Negroes didn't work hard enough, which meant the farm wasn't as profitable as it should be, and Ned's bonus wasn't as big as it could be.

"Is the threat of the whip the only way to earn respect?" John asked.

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“Hopefully it never comes to that. But you can’t let them take advantage of you.”

“But you always spoke of how *we* treated our Negroes on the—” John almost said “farm” but he caught himself; since they had started growing cotton, the Pelham farm had become Ned’s plantation, an entirely different place than it used to be.

“You can’t take over the business unless you’re a formidable master,” Doctor Pelham said before John could continue. “And no amount of hard work is a substitute for that.”

The warped rules of the Cotton Kingdom were all too clear: despite their laziness, his brothers were praised for their masterly attributes, while he was chastised for not being a formidable master, despite his hard work. And the farm that became a plantation had turned into a business. “Why would I take over...the business?” John asked innocently.

Doctor Pelham leaned forward. “I’m not sure Philip wants to be a planter,” he said, sounding disappointed. “I think he wants to go to college, maybe even become a lawyer like Cousin Henry.”

John tried to hide his shock. “Philip hasn’t mentioned it,” he said.

“Please don’t mention it either,” the doctor said. “I’m still hoping to change his mind.”

“Andrew,” the doctor continued thoughtfully. “Lord knows his heart is in it; he understands what Ned has taught him, but frankly I don’t know if he’s as smart as you, John.”

John couldn’t help but smile in response to the doctor’s flattery, but it only made him feel like more of a dupe. Despite the doctor rambling on about his prospects on the farm, John couldn’t get over what he had said about hard work, that it wasn’t a substitute for being a formidable master. All that mattered to Doctor Pelham was that his sons assert themselves over the Negroes, be strong enough to control them. Everything the doctor had taught him about responsibility for their welfare had fallen aside; Willis and Newton weren’t anything but a means to profit. Doctor Pelham had said he would change Ned’s ways, but Ned, or maybe the cotton business, had changed him instead.

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Throughout the fall months, the hands traded off between picking and ginning. The cotton was stacked in five-hundred-pound bales and bound in tightly woven burlap for the trip down the Coosa River to Wetumpka. Now that he knew how much cotton weighed, John wondered how those boats in the New Orleans harbor stayed afloat.

The new gin house was like a big barn where the cotton was cleaned and packed for shipping. It had its own dark, musty odor; it wasn't like the barn, where the mustiness was disguised by the smell of fresh hay, and it wasn't like the stagnant stable with its piles of horseshit. The ginhouse stank of human sweat, plain and simple, and no amount of cotton, even if it *was* supposedly a flower, could overcome the offensive odor. The cotton was beautiful from a distance, but it wasn't worth much for its scent—its perfume, as his mother liked to say when describing her roses that grew on the trellis by the back porch. Not even a full summer's worth of roses would have been strong enough to overcome the reality.

When it came their time to work in the ginhouse, the three boys laughed at what a bad job they did cleaning cotton—picking out the leaves and seeds and dirt—and how much they dropped on the floor. They got into cotton fights that were like snowball fights and didn't bother to pick up their mess. When some of the other hands gave them the evil eye—none quite as scary as Mammy's, but evil all the same—the boys laughed at that too. What did any of it matter if Ned wasn't around?

One day, however, Uncle Baylor, who spent most of his time in the ginhouse because of his advanced age, stared relentlessly at John, making it clear he disapproved of his behavior.

John had long since learned to separate Uncle Baylor from the monster on his back, but now he couldn't help but see him through the eyes of his two bucks. The sorrowful reverence he once held for Uncle Baylor had turned to anger—revulsion, really—at the man's subservient life.

"What are you looking at?" John asked with amused innocence.

"How dare you do that?" Uncle Baylor said, pointing at some of the dirty cotton on the floor. "Don't you know there'll be hell to pay if Ned catches it?"

Uncle Baylor suddenly seemed an entirely different person than the kindly old Negro who sat on the stoop whittling and happily greeting all the little masars when they passed by. John looked at Willis and Newton for support; imagine, a silly old slave talking that way to one of the master's sons!

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The two bucks snickered as if they were just as astounded by Uncle Baylor's behavior as he was; who did that broken-down old nigger think he was, anyway?

Incredulous that kindly old Uncle Baylor would suddenly be showing so much gumption, John shrugged playfully and threw a few bolls of cotton over his shoulder.

"You pick that up right now!" Uncle Baylor shouted. "Maybe *you* won't get a licking, but the rest of us sure will."

John was dumbstruck; it hadn't occurred to him that any of the hands might suffer because of his antics. After all, it was his papa's farm, and, just like eating Mammy's peaches, he could throw as much cotton on the floor as he darn well pleased. Not only that, just like he told Willis and Newton repeatedly, Ned would never give a licking to anyone the master's son didn't want licked.

Uncle Baylor refused to relinquish his scathing expression. "When you and those two boys of yours don't do your share," he said, "it just means the rest of us have to work harder."

It was downright scary to think what might happen if Uncle Baylor spoke to Philip or Andrew that way. If at least one of those bastards didn't smack the old man senseless right then and there, they'd likely demand that Ned give him a good whipping later on.

Willis and Newton wiped the smiles off their faces and looked at John.

John didn't know what to do. He hated to look weak in front of Willis and Newton, but he didn't want any of the hands to suffer on his account. Besides, if Doctor Pelham ever heard about his behavior, it would be one more strike against his prospects as a master.

After some deliberation, John decided that obeying Uncle Baylor would be the better part of valor. He retrieved the dirty cotton off the floor, and after making certain that it was clean as could be, held it up for Uncle Baylor's approval. But Uncle Baylor didn't even acknowledge him, didn't as much as glance up from his work. John shrugged and looked over at Willis and Newton, but they weren't taking their eyes off their task either. It was clear the two bucks had both gained some respect for the old man, just as he had.

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