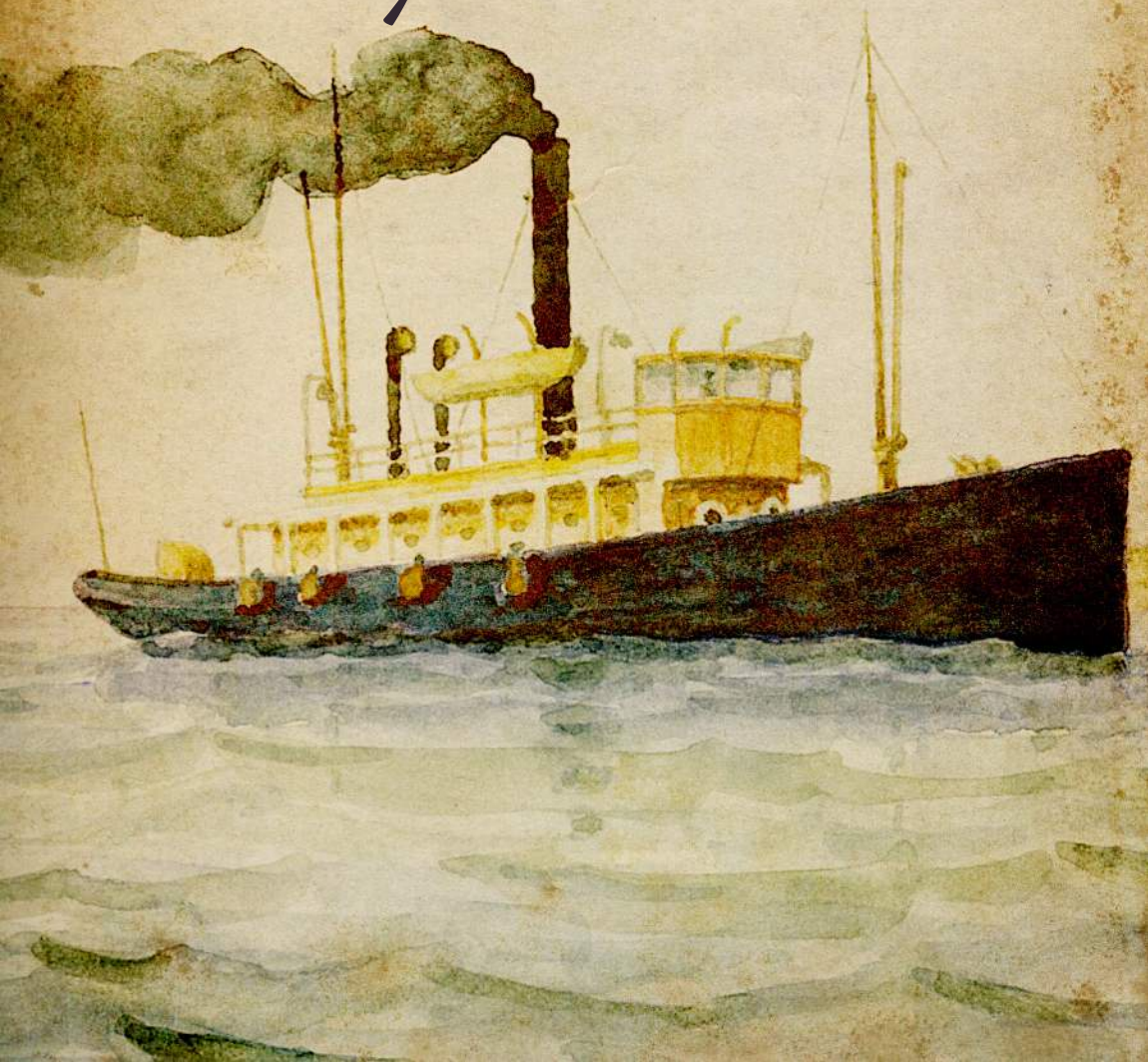




The Trip Home from the Gotham Bawdyhouse





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.

“What can I say about these three dudes I came to know during the war? Just listen in on their conversation—talk about white MALE privilege! As it happens, one became my rival for the affection of Richmond’s most famous wartime belle, another my infatuated admirer, and another my commanding officer and, very probably, my infatuated admirer.”

Stuart was a regular little braggadocio during the trip back up the river to the Point, and Custis was in no mood to hear any of it. Stuart could be so very charming when he was with Mary Custis or the other young ladies, or certainly when he was in the presence of the superintendent, but when he was with his friends it was often a different story.

Custis just wanted to forget about what had happened at the bawdyhouse. If only he’d really lost his innocence. Now it would have to wait for another time, always hanging over him despite his year of triumph. He would try to be an optimist, as his father had always encouraged, but there was no reason to think he’d do any better next time; the burdens resting on the shoulders of George Washington Custis Lee were simply too great.

Just when it seemed that Stuart had nothing left to gloat about, he started spouting off again about Southern superiority.

Pegram, who had been rather quiet, took on an amused smile. “From what I hear,” he said, “some of our Yankee friends got their adolescent satisfaction from upstairs maids.”

Stuart gave Pegram a quizzical look. “What do you mean ‘upstairs maids?’”

“Apparently,” Pegram said, “wealthy families in the North hire attractive young women to work as maids and be available for their adolescent sons.”

“That’s nonsense!” Stuart said “Where did you hear such a thing?”

“I’m not going to say who,” Pegram said, “but I know of at least one Yankee cadet—”

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“Whoever told you that is full of shit!” Stuart blurted out, loud enough for other passengers to hear, rattling Custis. “That’s just some virginal Yankee nance trying to impress you. I can’t believe you’d fall for something like that.”

“I’ve heard it as well,” Custis said. “Apparently it’s a custom borrowed from the British aristocracy.”

Stuart seemed to ponder whether he should capitulate. “That’s awful,” he said after a moment, the young blade having turned into a prudish old hen. “You honestly mean those girls allow themselves to be used like common prostitutes?”

“It does seem an undignified existence,” Pegram said thoughtfully, glancing out at the water and back again.

“What about the girls at the bawdyhouse?” Custis asked. “*They* certainly sacrificed their dignity, and neither of you seemed to think there was anything wrong with *that*.”

“But to work in a household where everyone knows that you’re there to serve the sexual needs of the male children,” Stuart said. “Think how humiliating that would be.”

Custis shrugged. “Maybe it’s like Southerners going out to the slave quarters; no one seems to notice when mulatto children start popping up all over.”

“But slaves don’t have any choice in the matter,” Stuart said. “It’s not like a prostitute who accepts money for sex based on her own free will.”

“Just because a woman accepts money in exchange for sexual favors,” Custis countered, determined to win the exchange, “it doesn’t mean she has a choice in the matter. Those girls at the bawdyhouse might starve if they couldn’t sell themselves that way. How many options do they have besides becoming servants or working in some awful factory?”

“Think how much safer it is,” Pegram said. “They don’t have to worry about violence to their person, and what are the chances of contracting venereal disease from a schoolboy?”

Just then the conversation was interrupted by a man walking along the deck, selling ice cream out of a little cart. Wearing a baggy, clown-like suit and singing to himself between customers, for a moment he made the boat seem like a carnival of sorts. Custis considered buying himself a treat but decided against it when his two friends politely turned the man down.

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“For my part I always hoped my father would see fit to send me to the Quadroon Ball in New Orleans,” Stuart spoke up with a small chuckle after the man had passed. “That would solve my problems.”

Pegram looked at Stuart as if he were mad. “Quadroon Ball? —You mean you dance with mixed-race women?”

“It isn’t just a dance,” Custis said, confident he could explain the matter more discreetly than Stuart. “It’s an opportunity for wealthy young men to meet beautiful quadroons, and even octoroons, to take as their mistresses.”

“They say you can hardly tell if most of them have any Negro blood at all,” Stuart said, as if giving the practice his personal seal of approval. “Fancy girls, they call them.”

Pegram took on a look of indignant shock. “I *have* heard of those,” he said.

“Supposedly,” Custis said, “they enter into lifelong contractual arrangements whereby any offspring are sure to be cared for by the family.”

Stuart flashed his devilish smile. “If I had a girl like that, I wouldn’t need to visit the houses.”

“Perhaps you could convince your father that a prudent investment in a mistress would save him money in the long run,” Custis said dryly.

“We don’t have that kind of money,” Stuart said, oblivious to his friend’s sarcasm. “What about you, though, being the heir to Arlington Plantation and all?”

“Hell is likely to freeze over before anyone buys me a mistress,” Custis said, remembering his father’s warnings to avoid the slave quarters. “Besides, my family can’t afford such things; the Quadroon Ball is for boys whose families have made their fortunes in cotton or sugar.” He glanced between his friends. “If only *we* were all heirs to the Cotton Kingdom.”

“We’re just three poor aristocrats,” Stuart said, sounding sorry for himself.

“I would never participate in such a moral cesspool,” said Pegram. “I think it’s terrible.”

“You have to admit,” Stuart said, “it’s a lot more civilized than going whoring with a bunch of common girls, immigrants, most of them—German, Irish, every sort of mongrel race.”

“For God’s sake, keep your voice down!” Custis reminded Stuart again, concerned at how many people of German or Irish descent might be within

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earshot. "Besides," he added, only partly in jest, "Christian gentlemen from the Point don't go whoring; *we go sporting.*"

"It's not as if we have much choice in the matter," Pegram said, his voice becoming unusually shrill. "We're taught to respect Southern womanhood, never deflower it in any way; proper young ladies won't submit to sexual relations prior to marriage; we're told it's wrong to have relations with Negroes; and they start preaching at us not to abuse ourselves almost as soon as we can walk. What's left for us to do?"

"The only reason the Point discourages us from visiting the houses," Custis said, "is because the whole corps is liable to get gonorrhoea and syphilis; otherwise they wouldn't care."

"If we weren't all driven to prostitutes," Stuart said, "who'd spread the clap?"

Custis laughed; whatever his faults, nobody thought quite like Stuart.

"What I don't understand," Stuart said, crossing his arms and seeming to ponder the shoreline, "is why our needs are unspeakable." He turned to Custis. "*You're* graduating first in the class. Why do you think that is?"

Custis had always taken such things for granted, but, indeed, it was more than a little odd that young men, especially if they were wellborn, were forced to satisfy their needs in sleazy bordellos with the most foul women. "We live in a civilized society," he replied, thinking of the chaste, upper-class belles who visited the Point and paraded on the plain in the sunshine.

"Despite all the rules imposed on us," Pegram said, "there's no reason we should deny ourselves. At least we're not having sexual relations with Negroes."

"Do you really think there's much difference between those whores and a Negro?" Stuart said. "If anything, the girls at the Quadroon Ball probably come from much finer stock."

"God never intended us to have sex with Negroes!" Pegram almost shouted, his face reddening. He was usually a reserved gentleman; such an outburst seemed out of character.

"How do you know what God intended?" Custis said. "There are people in the North who think all slavery is sinful."

"You mean the abolitionists?" Pegram said. "They're the ones disturbing God's ways."

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Now it was Pegram who needed to keep his voice down. There were bound to be people on the boat with abolitionist sympathies, and once again they hardly needed to be getting themselves into a fix. "But they don't see it that way," Custis said, hoping to apply reason. "A good many of them are clergymen themselves. In fact, most of their leaders—"

"The abolitionists," Pegram said, "those so-called reformers, they're the ones challenging God's sovereignty. They want to change the preordained way of things with their notions of free labor—getting immigrants to work in the awful factories they have up here in the North."

"You don't mind when those immigrants are forced to work as whores," Stuart said, those twinkly eyes lighting up as he enjoyed his wit.

The way Pegram was glaring at Stuart, Custis feared there might be a physical confrontation. "No one's saying the North's free-labor ways are right," Custis said, choosing his words carefully. "But surely you can see that slavery presents a moral conundrum."

Pegram sighed. "There'd be no conundrums if people treated their Negroes properly. It's the will of providence that the Negroes be our slaves, but not our concubines." He glanced out over the water and back again. "Most Southerners are good Christians, but by condoning such practices, Quadroon Balls and the like, we play directly into the abolitionists' hands. It won't be long before we have to defend our Christian civilization on the battlefield."

"Don't even say that," Custis said. "You sound like one of those crazy fire-eaters."

"I can't help it," Pegram said. "Things are as they are for a reason, dammit, and people shouldn't try to change them."

"There are reasons things are as they are," Stuart said. "Only it has nothing to do with God's will." He gave one of his little guffaws that never failed to annoy Custis. "The planters brought the Negroes from Africa in order to profit from their slave labor. It's no accident of nature, or God, that we are where we are."

"Many of the slave traders were actually Yankees," Custis said, his Southern loyalties aroused to defend Pegram. Despite Stuart's delusions of Southern superiority, he could be amazingly clear-sighted when it suited him.

Stuart nodded. "Even so, we shouldn't pretend it was God's will that brought us to this point. Certain mortals acted in their own best interests."

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“Obviously the Negroes didn’t fall from the sky,” Pegram said, “but everything’s God’s will. In the South we have a true Christian society, and slavery is a part of that society, just as it is in the Bible.”

“Slavery is more about the physical than the spiritual,” Stuart said. “We shouldn’t delude ourselves that it’s anything more than one race having power over another, one group of people profiting from the other.”

Pegram turned away; it was hard to tell whether he was devising a retort or about to storm off to the other end of the boat. What a shame that a trip to the bawdyhouse had turned into a row.

After a minute or so, Stuart decided to visit the refreshment stand, but Pegram just sat there, gazing out across the water, his tranquility slowly returning. It was a funny thing how beautiful people, or handsome men, leastwise, stirred one’s imagination. Was Pegram pondering great philosophical questions, perhaps visions of the future rarely dreamed by mortal men, or was he just considering whether he wanted to follow Stuart and get something to eat?

Custis suddenly realized he was imagining Pegram naked, something he was almost certain he’d never done before. At first he thought it was his imagination playing tricks on him, his mind giving him a hard time over his failure at the bawdyhouse, but how could someone imagine imagining something? How very odd—he’d seen other cadets naked in the boiler room countless times, but he had no recollection of envisioning them in a state of undress afterward. In fairness, of course, he’d never witnessed any of *them* engaged in the sex act. Besides, Pegram was no ordinary fellow; surely a virtual Greek god such as Pegram was bound to have special powers over his fellow men that were likely to manifest themselves in peculiar ways.

“My father was killed on a steamboat,” Pegram said out of the blue, just as Stuart returned with some sort of miserable-looking little sandwich. “It was a horrible explosion on the Ohio River. They never even recovered his body.”

“I had no idea,” Stuart said with sincere, wide-eyed sadness. “We could have taken the train, John, really.”

Custis nodded, trying to recall if Pegram had ever mentioned it before. What a painfully jarring reminder that Pegram was, in fact, a mere mortal.

“No, it’s perfectly all right,” Pegram said. “For some reason it just came into my mind.”

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“They say the boats are getting safer all the time,” Stuart said with his usual optimism.

Despite his melancholy thoughts that morning, it hadn't occurred to Custis that he might be killed on the river, that he and his friends were risking their lives in pursuit of sex. “Wouldn't it be awful to get blown up on the way back from...”

Stuart rolled his eyes. “Would you prefer to die on the way back from church?”

“That's not what I meant,” Custis said firmly, not quite sure what he meant, whether he was more concerned about embarrassing his father or dying before he had lost his virginity.

“You mean no chance for redemption,” Pegram said; “no time to—”

“Put some distance between yourself and what you've done,” Stuart interrupted with an ironic laugh. “Do you think God forgets your sins over time?”

“You can joke about it,” Pegram said, “but I know what he means. You're the one who's lacking a conscience.”

“There's nothing wrong with my conscience,” Stuart said. “I simply acknowledge that God sees everything; there's no fooling him.”

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