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American Odyssey

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of the two opening chapters of *American Odyssey*, a nouveau plantation novel that has its roots in two American fiction traditions—the nineteenth-century plantation novel and the twentieth-century neo-slave narrative. It is 1855 and Charles DeCoeur’s only motivation to remain Riverwood’s owner and master is that his widowed mother and sickly sister rely on the profits of the estate. Charles chafes under the responsibility and physicality of plantation life, unable to reconcile himself to the role of master of a cotton estate in the forgotten heart of East Florida. Then a female Negro, Hellcat, wanders onto the Riverwood estate. Attracted to the woman’s unusual appearance and disposition, Charles readily claims her as his property. It is not long before Charles channels his ennui into a renewed interest in Riverwood’s workings, a thinly-veiled attempt to hide his growing obsession with the mysterious slave woman. However, tensions are mounting all around Charles. The estate is approaching bankruptcy, the overseer and slaves believe Hellcat has dark intentions, and Charles’ mother believes the slave is a bastard child from her husband’s scandalous past. But Charles refuses to listen to those around him and continues to let his desires guide his actions, while Hellcat’s presence at Riverwood opens new wounds that threaten everyone around her.

Preface:

My American Odyssey

My *American Odyssey* began like any other American dream: I aspired to a good education—and to fame and fortune—but I needed a strong incentive to get started. Thus I wrote the opening twenty pages of *American Odyssey* to present as my portfolio piece for my graduate school application. I pitched the piece as a heavy-hitting historical novel about slavery and antebellum life in Old Florida, which could only be written on Florida soil. The pitch worked and I got into graduate school on the promise that I would write a novel for my master's thesis.

As I started my graduate studies I felt bound to write the novel I had pitched (at the time titled *Legacy*) though I fancied myself a science fiction or satire writer. However, I already enjoyed reading historical nonfiction and my Bibliography class offered me the perfect opportunity to delve into the subject of slavery, without having to commit to writing anything more on the topic just yet. I undertook a comprehensive bibliography of slave narratives published by American slaves prior to 1820. I was mesmerized by these stories—Venture Smith, an African Prince who bought his way out of slavery and owned more than a hundred acres of land and a small trade business at his death; Joseph Mountain, a black MacHeath, who married a British white woman and robbed with aplomb until a lone turn as a seaman landed him on American soil where he was hanged within the week for talking to a young white debutante.

Intrigued and inspired by these men’s pamphlet narratives and court confessions (interestingly, there were no female narratives), I took a more serious interest in my own idea and sat down to flesh out the contours of my novel. I quickly realized *Legacy* was a classic case of aiming high without a parachute. The first hurdle was to examine the question of whose story I wanted to tell. I decided to tell *Legacy* as a story in three parts, from three different points of view—the master, the slave, and the African. I originally chose multiple racial viewpoints for two reasons. My first reason was to express my own mixed racial heritage. Second, I was afraid that by tackling a book about prejudice I would offend some readers (no small irony), but by letting multiple groups have a voice in the book I was hoping to cover all my political bases. As for the title *Legacy*, it was meant to symbolize that the emotional truth of each view point character was in how they negotiated their respective family legacies and also to symbolize that slavery was the “family” legacy of America.

It sounds simplistic in retrospect, but the case was this: having been born American, the daughter of a Caucasian mother from Missouri and an African father from the Democratic Republic of Congo, I of all people, I thought, could tell the story of slavery with attention to both sides, across the black-white, African-American, divide. My genetics guaranteed me access to the variegated racial complexity of slavery, my logic went. If I had not done more research before I sat down to write further, I might have petrified that attitude, much to the book’s detriment and my own embarrassment.

Luckily, my curiosity was piqued by the preliminary research I had done, but as a new writer I had not yet gathered my courage and still felt unable to competently write

tough emotional literary fiction. So I continued to go deeper into my research, focusing on acquiring the nuts-and-bolts details of life on a middling Florida plantation. A few months into the research, a second major hurdle reared its head. I had assumed (an increasingly apparent and frustrating habit) that researching slavery would be an exercise in unearthing details buried by a lack of records, especially concerning slave life. Instead, I quickly realized that there was a wealth of information about slavery, but that I had never bothered to take the time to look it up. Up to that point, the only history I had been interested in was that slavery was abolished, the civil rights movement had come and gone, and America had risen above most of its tendencies toward racial prejudice.

It perhaps does not sound like a hurdle, to be confronted with *more* information rather than *less*, but the presence of so much history felt like a death knell to *Legacy* for two reasons. The first was that I knew, as a writer, that I had to deliver something fresh. Yet all the stories and angles already were there in the diaries, pamphlets, legal documents, newspapers, academic journals and works of nonfiction housed in archival collections littered across the U.S. and digitized in Internet databases open to any elementary school child. The “fresh” was available on Google. The accessibility of slavery’s guts made it seem like day-old meat.

The second reason I found the wealth of information about slavery discouraging was more insidious and linked to my race. As I read the literature, I noticed a foregone agreement among modern scholars and writers of slavery—that slavery was not *American* history, it was *African American* history. This was the same presumption I had made when considering my “qualifications” as a writer of slavery. Seeing it on paper, in

the way that black authors held proprietorship of black life in the antebellum South while white authors held ownership of slavery's economics and political trends, illuminated the underlying mistake I had been making. I too had been treating slavery as African American history. I realized that researching slavery for me had meant researching slave life, the black experience. But my own family was partially white. So where were the masters? If slavery were my reality today, where would my mother be? My heritage was important, but for reasons other than I had thought.

At this point, I set all the research aside and I tried to open a dialogue with myself. Was I telling a story I was interested in if I used multiple points of view? Or was I writing the story how I thought it should be told, to be politically correct in the face of prejudiced history? I scrapped the idea of multiple points of view, honestly afraid that it would be perceived as a cheap attempt to mediate the brutality of the white master while celebrating the strength of the black slave. However, I could not wrap my mind around writing solely from the slave's point of view either.

They say "write what you know," and I knew nothing of the 19th-century African American experience or even the African American experience. I myself had returned to the U.S. at age twelve after living in Kenya, and often felt, even into my twenties, that the U.S. was a foreign country and its history a sordid oddity, not a personal inheritance. I decided to try and bypass the problem altogether by telling the story from the point of view of the African woman in my novel, who had joined the plantation to observe slavery, my own childhood in Africa making me suited to the tactic of writing from an "outsider's" perspective. It was a solution to the conundrum of writerly authority and

accountability and, I hoped, the final hurdle to opening up a space where I could just sit down and actually write.

At this stage, I signed up for an African American Literature class, thinking that it would help me acclimate myself to the task of writing about slavery as fiction and guiding me in the direction of historical details that might be good fodder for my own novel. By then, I might have guessed that another mental set-back was in the offing, but I went in bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and ready to start drafting *Legacy* in full. The class covered a literary tradition known as the neo-slave narrative, a genre of novels written to give voice to the hidden life of the slave and written almost exclusively by African American authors. I careened into another hurdle—the skeleton of slavery had been rattled by a generation of writers before me.

In the pages of Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, and other works, the suppressed voice of the slave already had been written with resounding clarity. Here were the hidden stories that the plethora of court documents, personal diaries, newspaper articles, and pamphlets of the antebellum days had left out. Here was the underdog of American history rising fierce. Not only that, but these authors had rattled the bones and rattled them brilliantly—the ultimate case in point, the success and honors earned by Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This left me with my *Legacy* and no idea how to move forward. At this point, I considered tossing out the idea all together and declaring slavery “not my field,” consigning *Legacy* to the circular file. I told myself my American dream still could be had with some other story—I could write something, get my graduate degree, publish my thesis novel, get famous, sit down with Oprah. Isn't

that the American way—it isn't the cost of how you achieve the dream that matters, but how far you rise with the dream you've got?

At last the research and reading paid off. That was the heart of the dream of slavery, I realized: the self-made man could be home grown on American soil. With slaves and white gold, Everyman could attain the heights in the Cotton Kingdom. It occurred to me that I had been approaching my novel of slavery from the wrong angle. I would not tell the story about race, which was already open to the public record, but about the price America paid for its greatest export—the American dream. I changed the novel's title from *Legacy* to *American Odyssey* to signify America's slave history, like a lost father riding out the eddies between Scylla and Charybdis—North-South, black-white, past-present. America was still unwilling to bring home a full awareness of the exploits of its forefathers and had settled instead for a dirty-war type policy of “limited situational intelligence” about the methodologies and practices of the peculiar institution. That was when I decided to write the novel in earnest and solely from a white male plantation owner's point of view, to explore the mechanics of how the American dream became embittered by allowing the self-made man to be made off the backs, bones, and blood of other men, women, and children.

That was when the business of writing got dicey. The reality of the writing for me was that I had been raised in an all-white household, and as I read the neo-slave narratives I became aware of how wide the gulf of cultural heritage could be, even when you shared a common national history. I ruled out the idea of writing from the slave's point of view because I was afraid that when I sat in that chair on the Oprah show (the

dream was still alive) I would be called to account for the reality of my experience. You can fake an accent, but not an attitude. Beyond that, I felt that writing from a particular point of view because I *should* defeated the purpose of *American Odyssey* and highlighted the very issues I wanted to tackle: What do I feel about slavery? What do I know? Who told me the story and why was it told that way? How did the American dream go so wrong?

Sentimental novels such as *Gone With the Wind* told me that slavery meant every man with grit and ambition could grow his own Tara. The neo-slave narratives told me that Tara was the Devil's Disneyland. But I felt these were *both my America*. So how could I put this unhappy family back together again, where I could see the history for myself, the real history and not the romanticized, demonized, or mythicized history? I challenged myself to try and open a dialogue with America about our history of slavery and let my reader join in that dialogue.

I decided that the best way to do it was to steal a page from history's book: black and white history are what make slavery a true American story, but the reality is that, even with the neo-slave narratives and the changes in scholarship, the history is still dominated by the specter of the white master. So the trick would be to frustrate the reader and myself with the sense of absence that official history leaves, without actually treating slavery like anything less than a racially integrated, American experience. I wanted to capture the idea that the Old South's American dream was built on black slavery, and that America's rise to a first-world nation was, in part, built on the Old South's dream.

However, I did not want my readers to feel that the white master was the “bad guy” in the novel, or that the black slaves were the “good guys.” It was too easy to play demons and angels. That was when I altered a character I already had in play, to fill in the necessary role of villain. It would be Hellcat, the African woman who had joined the plantation voluntarily—a demon seemingly incarnate—and the silent observer of American slavery. This was a character that would be so dark, mysterious, and unreadable that we would want to know her and wish that the voice of Charles, the white owner, was not the only one accessible. Here would be the sense of absence and withholding that I wanted to create. The ultimate catch—that Hellcat would represent Slavery in the novel. The master’s lust for her would be the master’s lust for the dream; the slaves’ rejection of her would be their rejection of enslavement; and her relationship with the children of both sides would be the specter of the father, American slave history, come to haunt the inheritors.

The premise was solid, the execution was more difficult. Although I had bypassed the need to focus solely on the antagonism between master and slave by giving them a common enemy in the form of the mysterious Hellcat, there were still moments in the novel where the tensions erupted and violence flared and there was still the matter of writing from a male point of view as a woman. I could not push the master too far or he became unsympathetic; I could not push the slaves too far or the delicate balance of power and authority became unimaginable. I was constantly baffled by unforeseen emotional conundrums—why didn’t the slaves all run? Why didn’t they murder the master in his bed? Why did the master continue in an industry that was more likely to

bankrupt him than make him rich? Could the master love or respect the slave? And what *do* men think about?

I answered the questions as best I could, but realized that the precedents for answers were few. The record was filled with demons and angels, but very few men and women like me or you. I made do with my own experiences, believing that the nation and slavery were built on individuals, most of whom were not Douglasses or Jeffersons. As for writing from the male point of view, it was easier than I expected. My character was a twenty-two-year-old male and I was a college student. Campus life and a few close male friends provided ample room for observation, and observation is what writers do best. Writing from the male point of view ended up being a blessing in disguise because I presumed nothing about Charles' emotions, reactions, or decisions and fought to let his character come through honestly, not as I wished him to be. If the protagonist had been a woman I think I would have presumed too much and used our shared gender as a trump card, much as I had mistaken race to give me insider knowledge of the black slave experience.

The writing of *American Odyssey* progressed, and mostly went well. I continued my research as needed. When people asked me what I was writing and the words "slavery" and "plantation owner's point of view" came together, the response was resoundingly, "Why?" Not the why of curiosity, I think, but the why of a skeleton rattling and the children trying to keep the door closed. The children, unable to make satisfactory reparations for the sins of the fathers, had granted the African American community racial proprietorship as the voice and judge of American slavery because the

price paid was higher for the slave than the master. The question people were asking me then was not “Why did you?” but “How dare you?” Their reaction highlighted one of the wounds that slavery left on the American conscience and I was willing to write it. Or salt it, as the case may be.

As a writer, I knew I had the novel in hand when the history came alive. I remember the day it all paid off—the research, the emotional tug of wars, the conversations within and without. I was listening to an African American hip hop artist singing a Billboard hit, in my car, at a red light. It was raining and the heat was blasting in the car. The singer was shouting out, “If niggas wanna act, we can act.” Instead of the “not really the n-word” n-word, I heard the voice of my white overseer, in a scene I had written earlier that day, bellowing, “Step lively, niggers,” heard the crack of the whip instead of the buzz of my rearview mirror. And I thought, If today we had slavery, *American Odyssey* would be a way of life, not a novel. It would be mother’s story at the big house, out of my reach instead of a phone call away; my story in the slave quarters, instead of on my way home from school; and my father’s story of Africa haunting us both. And the Master’s degree—well that would be just a dream.

Chapter One:

An Unexpected Acquisition

Charles DeCoeur adjusted himself in the saddle and spat on the ground. Grit still remained at the back of his jaw. He spat again, but the dust was lodged too deep in his teeth. He sighed and tugged on the reins to keep his mare from breaking into a trot. He was sure she was anxious to be rid of him because the heat was so cloying and wet. He compromised by pulling her toward the stripes of shade on the edge of the dusty drive to Riverwood.

The two-story white house, the peeling paint hidden from so far away, loomed in a mirage before him. This Sunday, early January of 1855, was the worst day of church he had been subjected to yet. He winced to remember the stares from Thompson and Koenig at the miserable service. Both men—wealthy men—had eyed the two empty seats in his reserved box. He was even more mortified to remember the gentle pats from Mrs. Koenig and the careless smiles from Thompson's two eligible daughters. Even the Koenig's deaf one had barely bothered to acknowledge him—and she should have been pining for his attention, as he was the only unmarried son in Conrad County.

He tried to imagine some appeasing fairytale to tell his mother when he reached home. Riverwood wavered nearer now, his mare whinnying in delight at the prospect of unburdening herself. He jerked the reins, halting her, and leaned down over the pommel, watching a drip of sweat splatter the dusted leather. His brother Henry's saddle, he

thought with a grunt. Henri, he should say. That was what was written on his brother's headstone, Henri DeCoeur, a name to recall their father's Louisiana French ancestry. But Floridians did not go in for fancy names and his brother, being Florida-born, had gone by Henry in life. If only the ambitious bastard hadn't died. Charles considered riding through the woods to delay the inevitable reunion with his mother, but the burning sensation on the back of his neck cautioned him. His mare shifted under him and he released his grip on the reins, allowing her to break into a trot and close the gap between himself and his home.

He rode to the front and dismounted. He waited for his boy, Tom, to come around and stable his horse, but minutes passed and he stood alone. He took out his kerchief and wiped the acrid sweat off his forehead, spitting futilely again, then tugged the mare's reins to stable her himself. He found himself glad his slaves had grown unresponsive since Henry died. It freed him to do little tasks himself, the better to keep him from the house. Henry would have made a show of having Tom whipped and a new boy placed with the horses. Charles shook his head, freeing more sweat from under his hairline. He truly was glad the bastard was dead. And he had no intention of bothering himself about some Negro. He patted the mare and placed her in her stall. He went to get her a handful of oats, but a weevil dipped beneath the surface of the feed, giving him pause. He stared into the sack for a moment longer before jamming his hands in his pockets and leaving the stables.

His mother called Conrad County the pestilent bosom of East Florida. He wandered across the lawn, listening to the chirp of crickets and the whine of mosquitoes

and gnats at the height of noon. The withered remains of the vegetable garden behind the house baked in the unusual January heat. He remembered that when he was young it had offered up strawberries, squash, and lettuces enough to feed the DeCoeur family of nine. Now it offered up stunted shoots that wilted and fed only his slaves' pickaninnies.

He stopped for a moment and debated between entering the house and going off somewhere else. Judging by the sun, it was just after noon. His mother still might be delivering her religious ravings in the quarters—if he were lucky. But he was never lucky these days, so she was surely in the house. He headed for the slaves' cabins. Perhaps Luke, his foreman, would humor him with a drink and a game of cards. The ledgers would wait until the heat subsided, he reasoned, or at least the sun went down and the heat stopped bringing out the smell of fish and salt water that scented the soil even so far inland. He knew what the books would say and he did not yet have the energy to read them.

As he neared the cluster of slaves' cabins, the sound of raised voices clamored over the hum of the woods, palms, and vines that contained Riverwood. They sounded excited to him, but not like the Negroes at church. They were angry, or frightened. He quickened his pace toward the cabin of Wills, one of his two Negro slave drivers. When he was near enough, he saw his group of twenty or so adult slaves and his mother, her pale blue Sunday church dress emphasized by their dark skins. Wills and Charles' mother were staring into the woods next to Wills' cabin as if they had spotted a bobcat. A few of the slave women were clutching their children. He spied the negligent Tom

toward the front of the group, standing in a half-circle before his mother's place on a pine chair from the kitchen.

Wills caught sight of Charles. "Massa going to look," he said, shooing a line through the slaves and pickaninnies to let Charles pass. The slaves spread and pressed toward a clump of fan palm at the edge of the woods, the little ones swaying to see past the thighs and hips of the older ones. "Let him through," Wills demanded. "Don't crowd round now like no vultures. Massa going to look."

Charles wished Luke were here to see to the upset. Later, he would have a few choice words with him. He freed his hands from his pockets to push a few stray bodies from his path. He came up to the edge of the woods and looked around, seeing nothing.

"Get Luke," he said.

"Yes, Massa," Tom said from behind him.

Wills waved Charles forward. Charles got close enough to see clearly, but careful to stand a little behind Wills. Brown eyes, the rest hidden behind the green fronds, looked at him over Wills' shoulder.

"Come forward," Charles said. His voice was too calm even in his own ears. He cleared his throat. "Come forward!" The eyes remained impassive. Charles motioned Wills to pull the individual forward. Wills pushed the palm leaves aside and hesitated when he saw the unclothed woman behind. She stood inches above Wills' six-foot frame. Her long limbs were thin, but proportionate, her breasts small and sagging. He thought her hair must have been covered with mud, until he saw that both the thicket at her hips and on her head were a dark cinnamon. Her features were broad, her eyes wide-

set like a fish and her lips full. She opened her mouth in a pant, revealing gums and teeth of a cayenne color. Charles waited for her to say something or Wills to pull her further forward, but Wills hesitated when he saw her nakedness. Charles cursed his luck that Wills was so much like him. Charles hesitated a moment more before he stepped forward and pulled her from the woods himself. Her skin was cool and soft, like a soap cake.

“Speak up, nigger! What are you doing here?” He shook her a little, his eyes wandering toward her breasts. A sharp gasp from behind him reminded him his mother was watching. He shifted his weight nearer to the stray woman to hide her body from his mother and allow himself to have a good look.

“For God’s sake, cover that nigger girl up!” his mother cried. “It’s disgraceful. That, that thing coming like that out of our woods!”

Charles saw Wills move away to get something to cover her up. The stray stared at him, mouth parted, eyes unblinking, until he felt goose chills, even in the sunlight. He detected no odor from her, over the scent of the woods. If he closed his eyes he could imagine he was holding a stone from the bottom of a river. Except that he could hear her breathing, a breezy sound. Perhaps she carried disease. He released his grip and stepped back quickly, cursing his imprudence. A white hand reached around him and took the woman’s wrist, sliding it to an awkward angle that caused her to cry out. Luke stepped around Charles, pushing the girl to her knees and examining her body and face.

“Where you from, nigger?” Luke asked. “You run away?”

The woman stayed silent, though her long fingers worked at Luke’s where he held her wrist.

“Ain’t you got no shame?” Luke asked.

Wills tossed ripped sacking at the woman’s feet. She ignored it and continued to work at freeing her wrist.

Charles stepped back. Luke was gripping the woman so tight that his knuckles were turning white, but the woman seemed determined only to free her wrist, insensible to the pain.

“You from one of them Seminole camps?” Luke demanded. “Got yourself a red husband and some half-breed pickaninnies?” The woman had succeeded in prying a finger loose. Luke looked at Charles and Wills, his mouth set in a frown more of bewilderment than anger. “She’s a ox this one,” he said in admiration as she pried another finger loose.

Charles felt a hand grip his shoulder, digging its nails into his skin.

“Charles,” his mother hissed from behind him, “do something, Charles!”

“Go inside, Mother.”

“This is an outrage, Charles. In the middle of my preaching! She’s one of those women from town, or a mongrel of the Indians. She’s rabid, I am sure of it. Look how her gums bleed,” she said, cutting into his shoulder so hard that he slapped her hand to free himself.

Luke gripped the woman’s mouth and shook her chin. “Open your mouth,” he said. The woman continued her singular attention to his fingers. Luke released her wrist and pulled her to her feet. Stepping closer, he was just shy of her full height. “Hold her, boy,” Luke said to Wills.

Wills picked up the sacking and draped it over her shoulders, trying to pull it loosely over her breasts, before he moved behind her.

Luke laughed. "Tiny! Get up here, nigger. We need a boy with some size to hold this here heifer."

Tiny, the other Negro slave driver at Riverwood, came up and exchanged places with Wills. He tried to get a grip on her arms, but she shrugged him off. The sacking fell away and she escaped half-way into the palms before Tiny got hold of one arm and pulled her back. He crossed her arms over her breasts to cover them. Charles shifted uncomfortably at a queasiness in his stomach. He had nearly forgotten the heat, but now his shoulders were on fire underneath his linen.

Luke forced the woman's mouth open. He scraped some of the red on her gums free and sniffed at it. "Not blood. Smells like some sort of thing the mammies get up to," he said. Then he looked closer into her mouth before stepping away and shrugging. "She ain't got no tongue neither," he said in disgust. "Might be Hamilton, over at New India's, work. Elsewise, might be a Indian runaway or one from up North." He shrugged again and crossed his arms.

Charles cleared his throat, running his tongue nervously over his teeth. "Put her in the stables. We'll see what to do about her tomorrow."

Luke raised his eyebrows. "You don't want her in with the rest?" he said, waving a hand at the crowd of slaves shifting from foot to foot and cutting their eyes between Charles, Luke, Tiny and the stray. "They can see to her until you've a mind what to do with her."

He couldn't change his mind now. Luke liked him well enough, but he followed his requests out of an amiable spirit, not respect, and Charles was tired of it.

“Do as I say, Luke.”

Luke shrugged and tipped his hat to Charles before turning away to the task. Charles started back to the house. A tongueless stray nigger woman. He wouldn't be rid of his mother for the rest of the day now, even if he pretended to be working on the ledgers.

Charles and his mother and younger sister, Delilah, were seated at dinner when his mother raised the subject of the Negro woman again.

“She's done something terrible, Charles. You should have had her taken into town,” his mother said, taking a sip from her third glass of wine and fussing with her napkin. “Any woman who brought that on herself is sinful, Charles. Your father would have given her to the jail and let them see to the rest of her punishment. You should take a lesson.” She dabbed at her lips in a nervous gesture, a remnant of the hysterical fits she used to feign when his father was still alive. “Henry would have done as your father did if he were alive.”

Delilah shifted in her chair, scratching at the table cloth with one finger. She looked up at him, her eyes wide with feminine dread and delight. “Supposing she was a prisoner of the Seminoles? Father has an account of a seaman that was captured by natives off the Gold Coast and they did such things and made delicacies—“

“Be quiet, silly girl,” his mother commanded. “It’s a wonder that you haven’t frightened yourself to death reading such vile nonsense.”

Delilah rubbed her arms gingerly and shivered. Charles smiled at her reassuringly and she smiled back before resuming her usual dreamy gaze, contorting her napkin in her hands. He stared at her youthful face of sixteen. A woman, he reminded himself. But for her naturally ill constitution he would have been anxious to save monies to send her to New Orleans, in proper style, for the season. His eyes drifted over her chestnut hair, which clung at her temples in fine wisps. His mother had given up pulling the fine hair back; Delilah could not withstand the pain on her scalp, which had not deterred his mother until Delilah had begun showing bald patches. A few months of freedom had healed the spots, but his mother had never forgotten it.

He was most fond of Delilah’s olive eyes, the hallmark of his family, though hers were flecked with apricot around the iris. So bright, curious, alive. So unlike the rest of her body. Her frame jutted out at inappropriate places beneath the layers of cloth that his mother had padded her in this evening: an edge of collarbone under her lace, a knob of wrist below the sleeve, a ripple of vertebra beneath bloomers and yellow linen. The soft colors that his mother used to try and hide Delilah’s translucent complexion only drew attention to it. The yellow framed the blue rivulets running along her neck and under her youthful hands.

Charles looked away from her to quell the rising ache in his chest. She had been born to illness. The past year she had suffered twice from fevers and once from a cough that had wilted her from slight to lean. She was too unwell to travel to White Sulphur

Springs where she might have been able to recoup her vitality. He grunted to himself. Even were she well enough, he could not afford to pay her passage.

“Don’t make such grotesque noises, Charles. I don’t know what I shall do with you. How shall I secure you a wife who will be mistress of Riverwood if you grunt like an Irish coachman?” His mother sighed heavily and dabbed at her lips again. “Dreadful creatures, lounging on every corner in New York. Such a shame that America is so rich, we’re quite overburdened with immigrants. You can’t imagine the winters in New York, Charles. Paddies, Krauts, and Jews begging on every corner. I should have thought all the factories would have been enough for the lot of them to find employment. But my poor New York was quite overburdened with them.”

He gritted his teeth against this reminder of his impoverishment. He should have been in Europe, taking a year’s travels to acquaint himself with France and Germany and to see London’s fine factories for himself. Damn Henry to hell. Charles felt he should have been dining in Madrid or some other city of quality. But Henry had died and left him master. Even one year later, he felt galled by his misfortune. And his mother’s reminders of her wealthy New York upbringing only made his acids churn more.

Charles pushed the first course of orange and grapefruit slices around his plate. Something would have to be done about the vegetable garden. The slaves had little to do in the cotton fields since planting season was some weeks away. He could make them irrigate the garden with water carried up from the pond.

His mother put a miniscule bite of fruit in her mouth. “Refreshing,” she said to no one in particular. She set down her knife and fork and rested her hands under her chin to look at him. “You cannot ignore me, Charles. You will take the girl away tomorrow?”

Charles followed Delilah’s dreamy gaze out the window. “You should eat something, Lilah,” he said gently.

She started and then smiled at him. “An Indian princess,” she said, taking a small bite of orange before putting her silverware down with finality.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Delilah,” his mother fumed, picking at her own salad. “She was a nigger if ever I have seen one. My God, the height of her. Like some sort of great beast. If her features weren’t so wide and unpleasant, I might almost have taken her for Spanish. We used to dine with the daughter of the Spanish ambassador. They were such a short ride from my family’s home in New York. On a good summer’s day, I would have one of my gentleman callers escort me.”

Charles sighed.

“In any case,” his mother continued, “the ambassador’s daughter used to hold her eyes just so. Nothing proper about the look of her either.” She sniffed. “My mother used to fret that they did not have the reserve and quality our New York girls did. So close to Paris, debauchery was only natural, she would say. I believe she quite nearly died when my brother took fancy to one of the ambassador’s daughters. Mind, they didn’t have the resources to suit my father’s requirements, so she had nothing to fret about. But she was a nervous woman and quite domineering. Rest her soul.” She took a

sip of wine before continuing. “But such a punishment for a Spanish woman, if she’s even that—”

Tilly, the cook, took away their salads and replaced them with the main course, a sort of roasted pork, fresh cucumbers—God help them, from the gardens in the slave quarters—and more citrus. The citrus wedges were honey striped where they had been roasted with slices of onion, in place of vegetables. He sighed and tried a slice of red grapefruit. It was warm and bitter.

“—I suppose such an ordeal wouldn’t drive them to madness like it would a proper woman. Spanish women are graced with a kind of unfortunate mettle.”

“Aggressive appetites,” he offered. The heat made each bite force a little more sweat to well on his upper lip.

His mother nodded in agreement. “They are still quite famous for the number of bastards they left in East Florida. It’s no surprise they forfeited the territory to us. It’s a wonder every nigger and half breed in the state wasn’t a relation of the old Spanish Governor. Imagine raising daughters in such a place,” she said, half laughing beneath the weight of her third glass of wine before eyeing Delilah.

“Or keeping husbands,” Charles said quietly.

His mother looked at him sharply before centering her attention on the remainder of her tenderloin. “Yes, well, we’ve begun bringing the Good Word to East Florida. Sodom and Gomorrah takes many forms,” she said—more to herself, he gathered from the way she picked up her wine glass and drained it before looking out the window. He

knew she was thinking about his father. “My God, the government allowing those marriages to Negroes before we were ceded to America,” she finished quietly.

They ate the rest of supper in silence, his mother occasionally giving Delilah a look, but saying nothing. Delilah ate nothing and Charles was too discomfited by the heat to care. Let his mother fuss over her or not, as she chose. Tilly brought out dessert and the fragrance of sweet acidity sent his stomach roiling. Unfortunately, it also seemed to displease his mother, who set to badgering him again.

“Really though, Charles, do you suppose it’s safe to keep something like her? Here at Riverwood? We have no idea why she was punished, but it *must* have been terrible. And,” she said slyly, “I saw the way Luke looked at her.”

Charles kept his eyes on his desert plate.

“Riverwood has always been a peaceable estate,” his mother went on. “We have never had troubles with our niggers. Your father managed with a firm hand and they’ve never carried on like some of them do.” As an afterthought she added, “And the estate hasn’t suffered too greatly under your hand. Though sometimes I wonder that I should have raised a man who thinks himself a boy at your age. I suppose I am too tender-hearted with you.”

“Perhaps they took out the woman’s tongue because they tired of her prattle,” he said, nearly toppling his chair as he backed away from the table.

He escaped the dining room into the open air of the hallway and went upstairs to his father’s study, locking himself inside. He opened the windows and poured himself a whisky. He took a long drink before sitting down at the desk and lighting a pipe. The

silence told him Luke and Wills had gotten all the slaves down for the night. An occasional whinny and the drone of insects was all he heard. He stood up again to gaze out the window. His father had been a competent merchant and an able captain, but his turn as a landed gent was grossly lacking. Charles blew out a stream of smoke, watching it whirl in the thick air.

Riverwood. An ironic misnomer, Charles thought bitterly. The plantation was some twenty miles or more from the Black River and the nearest, lucrative, timber lands were in Middle Florida, well to their north. Not that he truly cared. He found running the estate tedious and aggravating. Always, something was broken, something thieved by the dissolute slaves, some crop failing, some price dropping. The sheer volume of daily irritations and setbacks confounded him and cost him many a night's sleep. He had been prepared for the life of a gent in the North, perhaps a banker or partner in an investment firm. Anything that would have kept him in the city where he could have joined a men's club and read the newspaper at a café. He looked over the desk and the stack of planter's journals he had been avoiding. He had no desire to know the best use for horse offal or the quickest way to breed slaves with more submissive temperaments. And all the rumblings from the north, he certainly didn't wish to know about those. He supposed he should be grateful; the heat in Florida kept his slaves fairly docile. For months it had just been Charles, his mother, and sister. Never once had they feared from the forty or so slaves. No one had the energy. And they had lost few runaways because the woods were nearly impenetrable. Florida was the perfect state for plantation life—the very terrain prevented anything from escaping. His father and brother before him had been heavy-

handed with the slaves, for their own amusement. He saw no need to bother himself with them any more than necessary. Though the dense wall surrounding Riverwood, and Conrad County beyond, also meant nothing came in. Almost nothing, he corrected himself, thinking back to the dark giantess.

A soft knock came at the door. He opened it warily. Delilah stood in the hall.

“Company?” she inquired.

He pulled her into the study, locking the door behind her. “I’ve had enough of mother for one day,” he said.

“You can go into town,” Delilah said wistfully.

“I can only imagine, my poor dear sister,” he said, waiting for her to seat herself in an armchair before wrapping her legs for her in the grey wool cover he kept in the study just for her.

“Do you think she’s a savage princess?” she asked.

“Mother’s right, Lilah, don’t be a silly little girl.”

Delilah sighed. “The social season starts in a few months.”

He closed the windows. “You’ll have to rest up, Lilah. I imagine all the beaux will be exchanging blows for a place on your dance card. Your beauty is irresistible.”

She gave him a look, but he caught the sparkle in her eyes. “You tease, Charles, but it’s possible I’ll be more well by then. Mother says the Koenigs might be holding a ball in Conrad this year, instead of going North for the season.”

“They don’t have an eligible daughter left. I imagine they want a season of rest.”

“They still have Elizabeth.”

He frowned. "I don't imagine they have much hope for her. Pretty enough, but deaf. No, I don't think they plan to marry that one off."

Delilah was silent for a long moment. Charles lit another pipe and poured himself a second drink.

"I wish for her to marry," Delilah said.

Charles took a long drink. "I don't see how you would care, Lilah."

"It would be someone new. We don't have so many new people here Charles. None that visit me. But he might visit with his wife. It would be shameful not to visit his neighbors."

"It should be a very boring conversation with Elizabeth," he said, laughing.

"Women don't need as many words as men do," Delilah replied.

He sat on the arm of her chair and kissed her lightly on the head. "And what would you know of the ways of men and women, my dearest?"

"I am rather intelligent, Charles."

"Of course you are, dearest." He stroked her head mildly. "Mother was quite drunk at supper. Do you suppose you could speak with her?"

Delilah shook her head. "She's lonely, Charles, and frightened. All she does is talk about New York. She doesn't think Conrad is any place for women. Certainly not a widow. She doesn't listen to what I say, anyway." She stood up abruptly, throwing her cover to the floor and walking to the window to press her cheek against the open glass.

He gave her a moment before he pulled her gently away from the window, picking her up and setting her back in the chair, retrieving her cover and tucking her in again. She leaned back and closed her eyes. He closed the windows.

“You’ll tire yourself, Lilah,” he said gently, seating himself on the arm of the chair again to stroke her hair. “Just have a word with her. She’s been unbearable the past few weeks.”

“She’s not happy about the girl you found today. I don’t think she’ll sleep until she’s gone.”

“Nonsense.”

“She thinks it’s Daddy’s bastard come back to kill her.”

Charles laughed heartily. “Well, in that case, leave her be a few days and say nothing.”

Delilah frowned at him. “That’s cruel, Charles. We know she’s not Daddy’s bastard. Wills is Daddy’s mulatto.”

“And we both know why we don’t tell mother that,” he said, taking her chin gently in his hand.

“Of course, silly,” she said. She pulled away and jutted out her chin. “You can count on me Charles. I’m not one to talk. Mother would do something terrible if she knew.” She hummed for a moment. “And I like him. We can’t have that.”

“Of course not. We promised Daddy and Henry that we wouldn’t tell.” He rubbed his jaw. “She thinks the nigger is Daddy’s? Are you sure, Lilah?”

“She said so in the parlor before dinner. She was nearly in tears.”

“Imagine my luck,” he said.

“What will you do with the nigger?”

“If she isn’t a runaway, or at least not one who can be claimed, then I imagine I’ll keep her.”

Delilah looked at him for a long moment. “If the Koenigs have a ball you will convince mother to let me go, won’t you?”

He kissed her on the head again and stood up, yawning. “We’ll see, Lilah.”

“Oh please, Charles. I won’t dance too much—”

“Lilah.”

She compressed her mouth unhappily. “If she is a princess,” she said thoughtfully, “then would you keep her?”

“Good God no. Imagine the ransom,” he answered, giving her his best rogue’s grin.

She laughed in delight. “You are wicked, Charles!” She looked thoughtful again. “And if she did something terrible?”

“Don’t be silly, do you think I’d keep her if I thought she might do us harm?” he demanded. “I’m not a fool.”

“I suppose not,” Delilah said. She stood up and hugged him as tightly as her frailness allowed. “Good night, Charles.”

“Sleep well, Lilly,” he said.

Delilah shut the door softly behind her and he didn’t bother to lock it again. His mother would be in her room by now, worrying herself into a swoon. He opened the

windows again and looked toward the stables. It occurred to him that he hadn't asked Luke to post guard over the stray. Of course, Luke should have thought of it on his own.

He stared at the stables a moment longer before leaving the study to check the stables before retiring. He crossed the lawn and entered the stables, glad to see the silhouette of a figure seated at the far end.

"Who's that?" he called.

"Wills, Massa Charles."

He relaxed a little. "Luke put you here?" he said, looking past Wills at the stable stall, top and bottom doors closed, a few boards wedged against the planks to ensure nothing came out. "The window?"

"Boarded it up from the outside, sir. And got that girl some clothes. Wasn't no one who would clean her up, though. The women don't like her."

Charles shrugged. "I don't recall my niggers being cowards."

"Ain't been a good year, Massa. People's worried something more is coming down on them and she mighty big for a woman. Millie don't reckon it's natural."

"Old Mildred is more a witch than that girl in there, I'm sure."

Wills was quiet.

"Well, we'll see about her in the morning." He listened to the horses' heavy breathing. "Yes, we'll see about her in the morning."

"As you say, Massa."

Charles hesitated before continuing. “Mother thinks she’s Papa’s. The bastard from the St. John’s woman.” He felt Wills tense before white teeth flashed and a quiet laugh drifted in the half dark.

“That so, Massa. That so.”

Charles nodded. “Delilah and I didn’t venture to correct her. Not until I’ve cleared up the matter with the nigger.”

“You reckon that’s the best way?”

Charles frowned. “You don’t have anything to worry about, Wills. Mother could do with a good fright. She’s been dreadful lately. My God, she’s been living in the slaves’ quarters with that Bible of hers. Perhaps this way we can keep her in the stables and out of everyone’s way for a while.”

Wills said nothing, making Charles suddenly uncomfortable. He felt reprimanded. He turned and went back to the house. Damn them all. He was entitled to a bit of fun now and again.

The following morning was the coolest in weeks. Charles awoke to air that was breathable rather than edible. He inhaled with delight and scratched his chest idly. He would have to see to the woman this morning. It could wait until mid-morn, though. He would take his breakfast in the study and think on what he needed from town. He supposed he should think on how much he had to spend first. He would take Wills. Wills kept the estate’s numbers like a second skin. Charles’ father had raised him to it. And he would take the woman, of course. No sense in taking more trips than necessary.

He fully expected someone would know where she came from and reclaim her. Wills could see to the supplies and the woman while Charles visited Annabelle, one of the town prostitutes, and collected some special purchases. He got up and dressed slowly in a fresh shirt and pants—he could not stand to carry the scent of sex and a stale body at the same time. He splashed tepid water on his face and let the droplets dribble off his chin into the porcelain bowl on his washstand. He watched them splash into the creamy murk, flecks of black and brown detritus floating on the surface.

The Negro woman did have something Spanish about her, her demeanor perhaps, but certainly not her features. Those were wide and African, her jaw thrust forward, her forehead gliding back toward her cropped hair. He had seen a few pureblood Africans when he had studied at Dickinson, when he and his companions had passed by the weekly auction blocks. But this one was attractive in the way of Spanish women, that frankness and shameless sex. He sighed and scrubbed his face dry with a linen towel. He was past due for a visit to Annabelle and she was such an accommodating woman for a reasonable price. Though not as creative as the doxies near Dickinson.

He went out and looked down the back stairs, the clink of pans drifting up from the kitchen.

“I’ll have breakfast in the study! Biscuits, eggs, and coffee!”

He went into the study and sat down, looking over the latest figures on his accounts of credit with Harding & Sons Supply and Finch’s general store. He had enough to manage the few sundries his sister and mother usually asked for from the general store, but he was well short of what he needed to buy: meal, feed, bacon, and new

elements for the cotton gin and sugar cane press. He had put off replacing the pieces as long as possible, but he would need to purchase them soon, to leave enough time to hire out one of the other planter's mechanics to repair the machinery well before the harvest season arrived.

He tapped his lips thoughtfully, wondering if there was anything he could muster. Perhaps Harding would give him another advance against the fall yields. Luke could work the cane fields harder. The hogsheads had been selling at a high price since shipments from the islands had been irregular what with the Negro uprisings. He had not taken an advance yet this year and Harding knew he was a man to keep his debts. At least he had received word from Finch at the store that the special present he had ordered for Delilah had come in. A two-month-belated birthday gift. He smiled. She would be pleased nonetheless.

"Charles! Charles!" his mother called from downstairs.

He closed the ledger and left the study, taking the back stairs.

"Charles! For goodness sake, Charles, Wills is waiting!"

Charles stopped in the kitchen and plucked a biscuit out of the pan on the kitchen table. His eggs were still cooking and he stared at them over Tilly's shoulder for a moment before he took another biscuit and headed for the foyer, eating as he walked. His mother was fluttering back and forth in front of the open front door. He finished the first biscuit and picked up his hat off the table in the foyer.

"There you are! You're not five anymore, Charles, you're two and twenty. You can't hide in your room just because you don't want to attend to something in good time.

Run along. And here's a list of things I need from the general store while you're there. You can speak to the Sheriff while Wills picks up the necessities." She kissed him on the cheek, then wiped the spot with her fingers and frowned at him. "You should shave every day, Charles."

He shook his head and took the paper she held out, making his way out the door to Wills, who had brought a wagon up to the steps. Charles looked into the back of the wagon. The stray woman lay on the bed of the cart, hog trussed with a sturdy bale-rope, and clothed in a collection of old croker sacks sewn together. She lay on her side with her back to him, her calves and arms uncovered, one shoulder bared to the sun. Sunlight flecked her skin with the look of dusted gold.

He approached the side of the cart and leaned over to look at her skin more closely. It was a beautiful effect, even when he realized that it was the glint of sun on sand that was smeared across her shoulder and legs. Likely from getting her trussed, he realized. Still, she was built like no woman he had seen before. Though thin, her bones were invisible beneath the smoothness of her skin. He thought she must be near his age. As he let his eyes wander over her body again, he supposed she might be any age. How did one recognize such things in a woman like her, he wondered. He looked at her hair, which showed no grey. Perhaps the face. If he could look more closely at her face, or her hands. If they were as smooth and inviting as her shoulder he could be sure she was young. But doubtless, she carried that same freshness that all young women held, he thought; like blackberry sorbet and cream on a hot afternoon, his father used to say. He felt a flush of pleasure as he pressed against the side of the wagon and he pulled away

with the uncomfortable awareness that as he gazed at her he was drifting toward her over the side of the wagon. And Wills was watching him.

The woman, however, remained motionless, eyes closed, seemingly napping. That was just like a Negro, he thought. He snorted in disgust and got into the wagon, working on his crumbled second biscuit, which he had crushed in his hand.

“We go, sir?” Wills asked.

“Go on.”

They started out down the drive. Charles finished off his second biscuit and wiped his palms on his knees. The sun’s heat was already beginning to encroach on the cool morning. He waited for them to get out of sight of Riverwood before he took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, leaning his forearms on his knees. He should have thought to perfume his hair with a little *eau de milles fleurs* it was so slick.

“You think we have the monies to get the gin parts today, Wills?”

“Yessur.”

Charles nodded. The wagon jostled him and he shifted on the seat and braced a foot against the footboard. He fought the urge to turn around and see if the stray was awake. Instead, he tried to occupy himself by idling out at the wheel ruts in the road. He was only partly successful, glancing at her over his shoulder, ever asleep, at least four times on the lengthy trip.

They made it to town well before noon, for which Charles was grateful. The motions of the wagon and his attempts not to ruminate on the stray had left him discomfited. Wills let him out at the general store. Charles left his mother’s list with the

clerk, then made his way up the street to the dram-shop, going up the back stairs to Annabelle's. He knocked on her door and waited before she called out for him to enter.

He entered her small room and found her clad in nothing, as he liked it, and posed in the center of the bed. He removed his boots and she moved aside for him to lie down. He made himself comfortable in the center of the bed while she slowly removed his trousers. He was pleasantly surprised by the smell of clean bed linens. She laid his pants across the back of her only chair and moved back to the foot of the bed. She drew her nails up his legs, finally moving over him and pressing herself against him. He put his hands behind his head and smiled at her.

“Good and ready today, aren't you, Charlie,” she said. Her blond hair tickled at the side of his face and he pushed it behind her ears. He pulled her face toward him and stared at the crinkle of lines around her eyes, the whisper of creases on either side of her mouth. Her skin smelled of rose soap.

“How old are you, Annabelle?”

Her mouth parted in surprise and he kissed her before releasing her face so she could answer. She sat up and started to work his shirt up his chest.

“It's not the age that matters, is it, Charlie,” she said.

He sat up so she could pull his shirt over his head. He took her hands in his and pulled them to his lips, then held them a moment longer to look at them. She tugged them free. He looked up and saw that she was feigning a pretty pout, but the tightness around her eyes gave away that he had upset her somehow.

“Of course not,” he said. “But I wonder how many years it would take a wife before she would be as skilled with her hips as you are.”

“It’s not years she’d need more of, Charlie,” she answered, settling herself on him and starting a confident rhythm. He gripped her tighter and moved his hands down her sides to avoid the motions of her ribs beneath her skin, his hands seeking out the roundness of her hips. He closed his eyes and dug his fingers into her skin, freeing the memory of caramel skin, spattered with gold, a blackberry Cleopatra, before the thoughts washed out of his mind and he gave over to the motion of her hips.

When they were done, Charles dressed slowly, in no hurry to get to his other errands. He left his payment on her dresser and hesitated, listening to the sounds of her cleaning herself at the washstand, before he decided to say anything.

“That soap you use—”

Annabelle dried herself and put on the silk robe draped over the linen rack.

“What’s that?”

“That soap you use, does it come in other scents?”

She approached him and rested her chin on his shoulder, wrapping her hands around his arm. Her eyes flitted to the money on the stand and then back to him.

“Could you order something else?” he went on. “Perhaps something more to my tastes, blackberry perhaps?”

She cocked an eyebrow and nodded. “It’s your money, darlin’.”

He moved away from her and left her another few dollars. “See to it then.”

Charles made his way downstairs and left through the back of the dram-shop, walking a short ways down the back path, well-trod, before he headed back toward the main road, slipping back into town between the hotel and the apothecary. He made his way down the road, careful to stay out of the way of the wagons that were crowding the road and the niggers that were bustling along its edges, headed towards Harding & Sons. Only a few other planters passed him on foot; mostly they rode in wagons or coaches. A few of the lesser planters, farmers really, shook his hand as he passed, and a few even offered condolences on the loss of his brother. They had not been to town in some months they said, because the roads to the north had fallen into disrepair and were being reclaimed by the wilderness, barely passable. It was a hard season coming, they predicted.

Charles finally arrived at Harding's and saw that Riverwood's wagon sat outside in a line of five. He made his way inside, returning greetings as he worked his way toward the back of the large wood-frame warehouse, filled with the scrape of bales and hogsheads, the rain-like sound of bushels of rice being moved and loaded. Wills was talking with one of the warehouse foremen, head down, looking defeated. Charles joined the pair, but before he could speak Otto Koenig slapped him on the back. Charles smiled at the older man, some twenty years his senior, his hair still a vibrant sandy blond, though a small ring around his pate. His frame was taller than Charles' and thin with the energy that Koenig was known for.

“Charles,” he boomed, shaking his hand warmly, “glad you came when you did. I told your boy, Wills, I wanted a word with you. Come along. I’ve a cigar I’ve been keeping for you.”

Koenig pulled Charles up the stairs that led to the small loft offices. He picked one and ushered Charles in, closing the door behind them. He pulled a cigar from his pocket and handed it to Charles, lighting a match from the desk and helping Charles to it.

Charles took a deep breath and exhaled appreciatively as the woody sweetness filled the tiny room. “Yours?” he asked.

“Koenig’s best, straight from the estate in the Indies. Damn good choice to let my daughter Kate’s beau run it,” he said, smiling broadly. Charles nodded and returned the smile. Koenig seated himself on the edge of the small writing table.

“I know you won’t like it, Charles, but I’ll come straight to it. Seems your boy tried to collect some parts and other things, but Harding says your account is past credit.”

Charles breathed out another stream of smoke and looked at his cigar, rolling it between his fingers. “I’m sure it was a misunderstanding,” he said, looking up.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, my boy. God knows your father was a reasonable man and a hell of a sailor, but as good at running a plantation as a pony pulling a plow.”

Charles stiffened.

“You know I’ve nothing but respect for you, boy.” Koenig stared at his hands for a moment before continuing. “Seems Riverwood’s been straining its accounts more since Henry died.”

“It’s not—”

Koenig held up a hand to stop him. “There isn’t much in Conrad that doesn’t get to old Otto. I make it my business when it doesn’t. And I know you’ve been doing your best. Still, the seasons haven’t been kind to most of us. I can understand your situation completely and I want to make you an offer. I know you’re not keen on the business, but cattle are doing well in Middle Florida. Good land up there and plenty of quality stock left over from the Spanish days. Only useful thing they did in the territory.” Koenig cleared his throat. “I’ve a mind to try my hand at it, but I don’t want to spare many hands from New India.”

New India was the Florida estate that was the heart of Otto Koenig’s vast holdings, named as a tribute to his years as captain of a Dutch trader. Charles’ father had served as Koenig’s first mate and, later, they had become privateers in the Gulf trade together. Charles stared expectantly at Koenig, but the older man let the silence extend. Charles frowned, trying to guess at Koenig’s direction. Otto had always been close with his father. Charles could not remember whether Henry had ever dealt with the elder Koenig and he had never asked or cared. For his part, Charles had seen little of Otto Koenig since his brother had died, which was not surprising. Charles’ brother had died only a year before and Charles had still been at Dickinson. He had only been back to Riverwood for some six months now. However, the Koenigs had attended his brother’s funeral, a sign of respect, albeit expected. He took a deep inhale on the cigar. But he had always been inclined to like Koenig’s manner. An able man, he felt.

“I’d like to hire out your men, Charles,” Koenig finally said. “And your overseer Luke and that driver boy of yours, Wills. I’d pay you steady wages. No percentage of

the profits you understand. A man can only do so much in an arrangement like this. Your boys would help build the fences and drive the cattle down, oversee getting the herd settled . . . and I'd pay you fair wages for their labor.”

Charles stared at him for moment, unsure he had heard correctly. “How many men?”

“I think you have ten or so full hands and a few younger boys that might be able to do the work.”

“All my men? You want to hire out all of my Negroes?” Charles shook his head slowly. “I'd be a fool to agree to that.”

Koenig stood up and walked over to Charles, laying a hand on his shoulder. “My boy, Riverwood has a year, maybe two, left in her before the creditors who sold your father the land would do better to sue you for its title and sell it at a government auction than wait for you to pay the back interest and loans owed on the property. How long do you think the creditors will be patient with you? Many of them grew up with your father, God rest his soul, but now that Riverwood's in his son's hands, she's a matter of business.”

Charles turned away to give himself a moment to think. All this over a few sacks of meal that he could not afford. It was ridiculous for Koenig to imply that Riverwood was so far in debt that she was on the brink of being reclaimed by loan creditors, and insulting for him to insinuate that he was Riverwood's—Charles'—last ally against those creditors. No, Otto Koenig's offer was not charity, Charles thought. Otto Koenig saw an

opportunity and he meant to take it. Charles brooded over his cigar, at last making up his mind.

“Thank you for the cigar, Mr. Koenig, but I don’t need any more gifts at the moment.” Charles opened the door and walked onto the landing.

“Don’t let your pride get in the way, Charles,” Koenig said, stopping him with a hand on his arm. “I was young once and struggled with my own estates. I respected your father and your brother before you, and you’ve got the same grit in you that they had. I think of you like one of my own. I’m not trying to patronize you. I’m offering you and Riverwood a temporary solution. You need never see the wages. I can have them made out directly to your creditors. It will help fortify their confidence in you. The confidence that I have in you, Charles.”

Charles shrugged off Otto’s hand. “Perhaps I relish the thought of losing the estate.”

“No one relishes the prospect of losing their home.” Koenig patted him on the back. “Take your time with it, Charles. I wouldn’t need your boys for a few months and you would have them back on Saturdays and Sundays to see to whatever the women can’t keep up before the harvest season begins. Between men, Charles, we both know the expense of slaves is in keeping them, like any other stock. I would house and feed them during the work days. It’s too far to manage coffles or gangs anyhow. You get the full wages; the rest of the expense would be mine.” He stared at Charles for a minute before adding, “Like any hired-out Negroes.”

Charles took a deep breath and put the cigar in his mouth. It would be as if he had hired his estate out to Otto Koenig. Riverwood would be a farm, not a plantation. He exhaled and ran his teeth across the tip of his tongue.

“As I say, the offer is an open one, Charles. But you must manage Riverwood as you see fit. Meantimes, Sabbath dinner is always open to you and your mother and sister. We were sorry to miss them at the service on Sunday,” Otto said cheerily, slapping Charles on the back and leaving.

Charles watched him cross the warehouse floor and have a few words with a foreman and Wills. Men began to carry bags of meal out to the cart. Wills took a few bundles of sack cloth and followed them. Wills should have told him they didn't have enough money on the account to collect what they needed at the warehouse, Charles thought. Now he was bound to Koenig for a kindness that he didn't want to have to repay. Wills lied, he thought, just to embarrass me because he's not happy about that Negro woman. Or worse, he'd kept the numbers wrong, just like any common slave. But Wills had been raised better than that.

Charles waited until they had loaded the cart fully before leaving the loft to join Wills outside. The wagon bed was stacked to a man high with sacks of meal, minerals for the fields, new spades and parts, leather, and the rest of the items. Wills wiped his forehead. Charles moved to stand upwind of him.

“I thought an eighteen-hundred-dollar nigger like you could at least keep the figures in your head,” he said testily. “Why else did Daddy bother with all them lessons?”

Wills rested an arm on the edge of the cart, breathing deeply, his shirt stained at the chest, waist, and arms. “Yessur. But a po’ nigger like me don’t know nothing much ‘bout what Riverwood land costs. All I know is what my peoples need and what the horses and the oxes need and what all the plowing and seeding and repairing costs.”

Charles sighed. “Let’s go see about the woman.”

Wills nodded and got in the cart. They made their way to the jail on the other end of town, advantageously situated next to the dram-shop, at the edge of town. Wills stayed in the wagon while Charles went inside. He entered the jail and pulled out his handkerchief, dabbing at the sweat under his nose, but he held the kerchief in place as the odor of the place accosted his nose.

“Sorry about that there smell, Mr. DeCoeur,” the Sheriff bellowed. “Had me a bunch of soakers in town last night and had to keep ‘em overnight.”

Charles watched the Sheriff teeter at the edge of a crude pine and deerskin chair, his cotton overcoat liberally ripped and his undershirt and pants stained, his face flushed. Charles had no doubt that the Sheriff alone was enough to produce the odor of honeyed rot that permeated the building. The Sheriff stood up quickly, overturning his chair, and swept a glass and bottle off the pine table that served as his desk, secreting them away beneath the desk. The Sheriff facilely rustled papers scattered on the desk’s surface, before walking around the desk. Charles put away his handkerchief, careful to breath through his mouth as much as possible.

“Anything as of yet?” Charles inquired.

The Sheriff stopped next to Charles, too close for Charles' sensibilities, and shook his head. Charles looked around the jail house for the first time. Beyond the gallery that held the Sheriff's desk was a doorway that led to the cells. Charles took advantage of the chance to escape the stench of the man by moving into the back of the jail. He looked around, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim brown interior. There were four cells. He could see a few men, poor white farmers no doubt, lying in various poses of sleep in one cell, the door open, bottles scattered at its entrance. The Sheriff's "soakers," he imagined. Two other cells were empty and also stood open, but the fourth had its door closed. He moved toward this one and saw his Negro stray near the back of the cell. Her bale-rope had been exchanged for iron shackles that bound her wrists to her feet. The Sheriff came up behind Charles and edged him aside, opening the cell door with a set of keys and dragging his stench with him. Charles moved into the cell and the Sheriff followed. They stopped in front of the woman who was seated with her back against the corner of the cell, her mouth open, likely breathing through her mouth as well, Charles thought. Her knees were arranged to the side of her hips in an almost prim fashion. She stared up at the Sheriff then Charles, before returning her gaze to her fingers, picking at something beneath the nails.

"I ain't found nothing yet, Mr. Charles," the Sheriff said. "I asked around and don't nobody heard tell of any Indian raids on maroon camps or coffle breaks." He shrugged. "I reckon I can let you have her, long as you give me leeway to ask round some more. If I ain't heard anything by the end of a week or two, she's as good as yours."

Charles nodded. "That'll do." He waited for the Sheriff to free her and release her into his hands, but instead the noxious man put his hands in his pockets.

"Don't get many that look like her. I reckon if she belongs to someone they'd have an easy time of gettin' her back."

"Yes, well, you'll keep me informed," Charles answered. He swatted away a fly that landed on his cheek and took a step toward the cell door. Still, the Sheriff did not move.

"If you ever have a mind to sell her I don't reckon many 'round here would have her. Got a look about her."

"I have waiting engagements," Charles said.

The Sheriff nodded and yanked the woman to her feet by the slim bar that connected her wrist cuffs.

"Don't damage her," Charles said quickly.

"She's been as safe in my hands as if she were my own, Mr. DeCoeur." The Sheriff led her out of the cell, followed by Charles.

They did not stop until they stood outside the jail. Wills got down out of the wagon and nodded at the Sherriff and mumbled a greeting. Charles motioned for Wills to take charge of the woman, but the Sheriff ignored them both, retaining his hold on the Negro's bonds. A passing wagon threw up a spew of dust that forced them all to cough to clear out their lungs.

“Cussedest, goddamn country,” the Sheriff spat. The Sheriff stared at the negro woman’s face, while she blinked away the dust from her eyes, her hands still chained and the bar still in the Sheriff’s hands.

Charles itched to grab the keys out of the Sheriff’s hand and see to the woman himself.

“No tongue. Fancy a thing like that, eh, Mr. DeCoeur?” He didn’t wait for Charles answer. “No, I reckon if I seen her face on a runaway advert I’d know it anywhere, and you can’t get past her height neither.” He looked over at Charles. “If you ever have a mind to sell her at auction you just bring her to me first. I’ve a mind she’d be worth the price,” he said, spitting on the ground again. “Hell, she big enough to put my deputies to shame.”

“What you want me to do with her, Massa?” Wills asked from behind the Sheriff. “We ain’t got room on the cart.”

Charles adjusted his hat against the heat and got up on the wagon seat. He slid across to the far side. “Put her up in the middle,” he answered, patting the seat beside him.

The Sheriff grunted and at last freed the woman from her manacles, disappearing back into the jail without so much as a good day to Charles. Wills got the woman on the front seat and seated himself in the middle. Wills snapped the reins and the horses started out of town at a walk. When they were some ways out of sight of town, with not a wagon or rider in sight, Charles leaned forward to look past Wills at the stray. She pulled vigorously at her nose, before she blew her nose over the side of the cart.

“My lady has standards,” Charles said to Wills, who kept his eyes on the road.

Charles leaned back and drew his handkerchief out. Wills urged the horses into a trot. Charles wiped his face down again before blowing his own nose. He took in a deep breath of Florida air.

“We keepin’ her then?” Wills asked.

“Might be needing extra hands,” Charles said.

He thought back to Koenig’s offer. He had been too quick to refuse, he thought. Surely he could manage a few women and pickaninnies alone and he would have the men back on weekends. Koenig might let him keep a driver and he could keep the new boy his foreman, Luke, had hired on. Luke had acquired young Jed at the New Year’s auction in town, paying the boy’s bail, a fair price for the seven years of indentured servitude Jed had earned as penalty from the courts as a stowaway from Ireland. Charles’ thoughts wandered back to his overextended credit. If he lost Riverwood in a year . . . He shook his head to himself. He couldn’t imagine what he would do with Delilah. Or his mother. He could not take them to his father’s country, over in Louisiana. Surely a man would lose his credit twice as fast in Creole country as he would in Florida. And it would be no healthier for Delilah. He might consider New York, his mother’s place. But New York was a name, not a real place that came into his mind like Riverwood. He would need to find suitable employ. And he would have to eat at a table that hadn’t been in his family for generations. And there would be that infernal snow. He shook his head ruefully, knowing that was exactly what he wanted.

“I don’t reckon she’s field broke yet, Charles, sir,” Wills said, interrupting his reverie.

“You and Luke can see to it.” He heard Wills sigh. Charles slapped him on the back. “DeCoeur blood in you, boy. You can handle one little woman.” He grinned at Wills, who cut his eyes at him, making him laugh. “She’s only a mite bigger than you, boy.”

“It ain’t her I’s worried about. It’s your Mama.”

Charles grunted. Perhaps he could hire himself out to New India.

Chapter Two:

A Dubious Asset

Though glad for the dull ache that made the night before seem distant, Charles dressed slowly to avoid letting his head throb any further. He wiped his face with a wetted cloth, pressing it into his eyes to end the sensation that they were bulging from their sockets with each thrum of his temples. He took a deep breath and opened his door slowly, careful not to make a sound. He listened at the opening for a minute, and hearing nothing, shut the door behind him and went down to the kitchen. Tilly was seated at the large pine kitchen table, squeezing orange juice. She stood as he came in and curtsied half-heartedly. Charles waved a dismissive hand and sat down at the table, putting his head in his hands. Tilly started a kettle for coffee and put together a plate of cold salted pork, biscuits, and a pile of tomato slices generously peppered—the latter his father’s favored means to recover after such a night. He tried the pork, but the movement of his jaw was too much and he had to abandon it. He ate the tomatoes in silence, the only noise the gush of the orange flesh as Tilly filled a pitcher for the afternoon. He finished his biscuits and pushed the plate away, cradling his forehead in his palms again. A gentle thump told him Tilly had put coffee before him.

“How did you manage the tomatoes?” he asked, careful to keep his voice low.

“Tom went out for ‘em over at the Briar.”

A thrill of pain racked his head and he exhaled loudly to dispel it. “Briar?” he finally asked. “You mean Abe and Viv’s farm.”

“Yessur.”

Charles scraped his tongue with his teeth to clear the peppery warmth. He stood up slowly. “Send Tom to me.” He gripped the table until more paroxysms passed.

“Where is Luke?”

“North fields, Massa.”

“Send Tom up that way then.” He headed out to the back porch, but stopped in the doorway. “And Mama?” he asked.

Tilly kept her back to him. “She’s taking somethin’ in her room, Massa.”

Charles relaxed. “Fine, Tilly. Just fine.”

He went out onto the back veranda and stopped, shielding his eyes from the sun. He cursed his luck for not thinking to bring his hat with him. He could return upstairs, but his mother might hear him. He decided not to risk another meeting. Let her complain to Lilah for a few days about his keeping the Negro. He had more important things to tend to, he told himself, knowing the simple truth was that he had no desire to listen to his mother’s arguments or ravings. His father used to lock himself in his study on such occasions.

It was a nice day, however—the sun clear, the air crisp, the cottontails roaming the fields—and Charles, too, felt like roaming, even in his current state. He made his way to the stable, where the boys bade him good morning and saddled a mare for him. He mounted her gingerly and started out for the north fields, stroking her mane and

careful not to tighten his knees against the pain, willing her to walk leisurely to keep her from jarring him. He took the west path, past the front of the house, through the forest, and across the fallow fields that would be prepared for seeding in the coming weeks, but for now were dusty tracts flecked with pieces of shell and studded with weeds. He rode out to the northeast plot, but it was empty. He stopped to shut his eyes against a mild nausea and listened. He could hear shouts from the west. They must be in the cane fields, he realized. He cut across and found Luke, Jed, and the two drivers overseeing a gang of field slaves. He stopped at the outside edge of the field, waving at Luke to catch his eye, and holding up his reins. Luke sent one of the younger hands over to take Charles' horse. The boy led her to a copse of pine and brush and tied her up before returning to his row.

Charles strolled at the edge of the field, careful to stay back so that Luke knew he meant no interruption. Luke and Tiny were working the south half, their slaves digging up the remnant stumps of cane stalks from the previous season, readying the field for planting. Tiny was showing the stray woman how to wield a small pick in swift clean strokes, dredging up the soil around the stumps and then pulling them free from the earth. Piles of stalks lay at intervals across the field. Each time the stray tried, Tiny shook his head and showed her again, pointing at the soil and digging out roots she had missed, showing her again how cleanly he pulled the stalks free, removing the whole of the complex beneath the soil. The roots of an old season left in the soil could choke new growth before the planted Otaheite cane cuttings had a chance to thrive in the soil.

Luke shouted encouragements to the other slaves, careful to move back and forth between the old hands who would not slow until the noon meal was called, the younger boys and girls who frequently nicked themselves, and Tiny and the stray. The stray woman was clothed, Charles noted, in a faded calico dress that barely reached her knees. He would have to see about having a dress made especially for her, he thought. She continued to take comfortable strokes, but much too near the surface, missing the insidious roots that lay deep. Luke finally cursed her to high heaven and interceded. Charles watched as Luke yanked the pick from her hand and shoved Tiny aside before kneeling on the woman's back, pushing so that her face was nearly touching the ground. "Dig," Luke commanded. She worked at the soil around the stump with her hands, her long fingers clawing in at the soil and tossing it aside in handfuls. At last she pulled the stalk free, more slowly this time, and dropped it on the ground beside the hole. Luke took his knee off her back and squatted to examine the hole. Finally he nodded, retrieving her pick and shoving it back into her hand, before moving away, shouting at two other young girls, not yet with hips, who had stopped to watch them. Tiny just stood by the woman for a moment while she straightened herself and rolled her shoulders once. Then they moved to the next stump together, but Tiny only watched this time and said nothing.

Charles looked northward, where Wills and Jed were working their hands, and headed for the far quadrant.

"Wills," he called.

"Massa?" Wills said, meeting him.

“Why isn’t anyone carting the stumps away?” he asked, pointing at the piles.

“Mr. Luke got them working in the gin house and putting away the supplies mostly, Massa. These here,” Wills said, pointing at the hands, “gonna take it up, soon as we get it cleared.”

Charles nodded. “Who’s minding the gin house then?”

“Mr. Luke hired out Mr. Harding’s Negro, Tate, who overseeing the repairs hisself. Best mechanic east of the Suwannee.”

“Has Luke got someone for the cane press repairs?”

“No, Massa. Nearest boy been hired out to one of them factories over in Tampa and won’t be back this a way ‘til summer.”

Charles sighed and motioned Wills back to work. He watched the foreman’s indentured apprentice, Jed, walk the rows. The boy was barely growing his chin hairs, but already he held his shoulders proud and his voice had dropped to a pleasant baritone since he had arrived. Luke has a good eye for help, Charles thought, and it was nice to have another white face in the fields. Jed seemed to sense Charles’ thoughts because he turned to smile in his direction, waving his whip in the air like a cattleman. Charles gave him a short wave in return. The boy’s pale, freckled face was the color of young strawberries. No doubt he would be retching out his guts from the heat by late afternoon, which reminded Charles that he himself was without a hat.

The hot air and sweat itched between his shoulder blades and he knew it did not help that he had not changed his clothes from the day before. An unpleasant smell tickled his nose, and he recognized it as the stench of the pond off to the southwest, in a

clearing just behind the natural fence of palmetto, vines, and brush that encircled Riverwood's lands. Charles wandered down toward Luke's end again. The stray continued to work her own row. The other slaves continued to work, two to a row, ignoring Luke, but sneaking glances at the stray, he noticed.

"Luke!" he called.

The foreman made his way over to him, sniffing at the sweat on his face.

"How's she coming?" Charles asked, pointing at the stray Negro woman. Tiny was trailing her at a distance now, letting her work almost wholly alone.

"Can't make her out one way or t'other. Got a steady hand with the pick. I'd say she's done some kind of field work before, but she don't seem to know about taking orders."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't think she was any kind of slave. She 'bout acts like we're trying to help her with something. I can't say what I mean exactly, but I seen a lot of slaves and this one ain't got no fear in her, and no ornery."

"So you don't think she's dangerous?"

"No, no," Luke said, shaking his head. "I imagine somebody got heavy-handed with her. She might be pureblood African washed up from one of the slavers heading for the islands, if you asking my opinion. There's the port over on the Manatee. Maybe that's how come she got here naked. They don't worry about covering 'em up until they get them to auction. She might a washed in further south when her slaver ran afoul, though she ain't got a scratch on her, which I don't see how that's liable." Luke

scratched his neck. “My brother signed onto a slaver a few times before he settled down to plantation work up in Georgia. Accordin’ to him, the savages are harder on their own than what we think of to keep ‘em in line.”

“So you think she’s from the Slave Coast?” Charles asked. “They cut out her tongue?”

Luke shrugged. “They take fingers and pierce lips and put cuts in the skin when one of ‘em does something the rest of the ‘em don’t approve of.” He shrugged again. “They’s savages.”

“But you don’t think she’s escaped from a jail, or a runaway, or from a maroon camp down south?”

The sun was high now and the soil was starting to heat. A number of the slaves had begun to interrupt their work at intervals to wipe the sweat out of their eyes. Charles watched as the stray Negro woman stood up again and arched her back before walking over to the boy who was the gangs’ water-bearer. The boy set the bucket down on the ground and backed away from it as she approached. The woman stared at him before bending down to take some water in the cup of her palm, which she wiped down her face. She pointed at the boy’s hand. The boy tossed the tin cup he held at her feet. Another male slave approached the pair, while the stray woman scooped a cup of water from the bucket and drank. She looked at the man over her shoulder before holding the cup out to him. He took the cup out of her hand and stood back.

“Get along there, you lazy niggers!” Luke shouted. “It t’aint hardly hellish yet!”

The stray went back to her row. The man rinsed the cup out and gave it back to the boy, who dumped out the bucket of water and walked away toward the pond, likely to collect more. Charles started to ask about it, but Luke at last answered his earlier question.

“I don’t rightly know, sir, if she’s a runaway or a fugitive,” Luke said. “Wills weren’t too keen on putting her to work with the cane, but she’d have done something with that there pick by now if she was going to. She don’t look like she’s too keen to get somewhere else.”

Charles sighed heavily. “Is it worth the risk?”

“Built like a ox and didn’t cost no money.”

Charles nodded. “And how’s Jed?”

“Good boy, steady hand and a head for overseeing. He may be young, but he’s got steel in them shoulders.”

Charles nodded and slapped Luke on the back. “I’ll leave them to you then. You let me know if you have any trouble.” He headed for his horse.

“Mr. Charles?” Luke called after him.

Charles stopped and turned around.

“I gotta give that nigger a name. You want anything in particular?”

Charles frowned. A wavering memory of his mother’s pale face, the edge of the Bible weighing on the toe of his right boot, rose in his mind. *Demon, succubus, hellcat*, she had called her. Charles shook his head. Florida was taxing to his mother’s nerves.

“Hellcat,” he finally called back.

“Sir?”

“Hell-cat. She’s a mighty big stray,” he said, turning back toward his horse. As he skirted the edge of the field, the woman looked toward him. She wiped a hand down her face in that way the blacks did, sweeping the sweat away toward the ground. She would make quite the pet. For the man brave enough, he thought.

Luke was more than up to the job, reminding Charles that he was worth every penny of his two-hundred dollar yearly wages. Charles was so pleased that he was considering giving him a bonus for his efficient management—perhaps one of the pickaninnies as his own boy or to hire out. But as Charles mulled it over, it came to him that Luke would be more satisfied with the gift of Jed’s indenture papers. Over the weeks, the boy became Luke’s shadow, and Luke began to smile more with the young man present to hang on his every instruction and wisdom.

Charles remembered when he had followed Wills, five years his senior, in just the same way when they were boys. He had trailed him into the woods where the slave children built little camps from sticks and vines, fronds for the roofs, and made-up folktales about the wild hogs and cottontails that roamed the woods. Wills would usher Charles into the makeshift lair in front of him. *I’s watching Young Massa today*, he would announce. Those were the days that Charles’ father was home and his older siblings grew irritable and restless under his father’s sight, the days his mother was prone to fits at the slightest incident, and little Charles, but seven, was left to brood on his own.

Wills would find him on those days and Old Mildred, who was young enough then to be cook before her daughter Tilly had taken over the duties, would call Charles in for afternoon juice and cool cream and sweet biscuits, sometimes with molasses. He would sit on the back steps to the veranda and Wills would hover nearby until Charles felt the older boy had been patient long enough. *I reckon you've been a good boy, Wills,* he would say. *I treat my people well,* Charles would go on. *Come get a piece of this here biscuit,* he would say, handing Wills the bottom half that had the crusty edges he disliked. *This is the best biscuit Millie-girl's ever made,* Charles would say each time. Wills would nod slowly, like he was thinking, *We knows quality,* he would say. *And this here's quality,* Charles would finish.

Over the next week, while Luke was molding the new additions to the estate, Charles continued to avoid his mother. Tilly had learned to keep breakfast in the kitchen for him, though once his mother had sought him out there too and he had made a hasty retreat to the cane presses, which lay quiet, waving his hat as he stumbled off the veranda stairs, lying that he had to see how Jed and Hellcat were coming along. At lunch time he ate by the cotton gin, staring at the silent machinery, preferring the feelings of loneliness that sought him out at these times to the disapproving sulk or shrill blather of his mother. At dinner he took his meal in the study, telling his mother he was reviewing the accounts.

The fourth night of their silent cat and mouse game, his mother knocked at the study door. He sat quietly in hopes she would think him gone, but she tested the door.

“You must be in there, Charles. You never lock the door when you are not in there. Open the door, Charles. I will have a word with you.”

If only it would be a word and not a lecture, he wished. He heaved himself out of his chair and opened the door. His mother had a furious frown on her face, but she did not enter the study. She rearranged her clasped hands to her hips. He fought the urge to stare at the floor and bury his hands in his pockets like a child. Instead, he settled for leaning against the frame of the door with his arms crossed, though he still avoided her eyes.

“What on earth have you suddenly taken an interest in, Charles?” she asked, peering around him.

“I’m reviewing the ledgers,” he lied. “I thought it was time. It’s been nearly six months since anyone kept the accounts at Riverwood.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Nonsense. I think you are hiding away in there to read your silly books and pretend you are in knee-pants again, instead of a man of two-and-twenty with a six-hundred-acre estate and forty-odd Negroes to manage.”

He shrugged. “Believe what you will.”

She shifted her hands back to the front of her dress to fuss at the small band of ruffles that circled her waist. “I don’t know what to do with you, Charles.” She bit her lower lip. “I’ve even thought to talk to Otto about it. Perhaps you would be more comfortable with him—at least you might be more amenable to talking with a man. Surely you never listen to me.”

“Koenig and I have already spoken.”

Her eyes went wide and she clasped his crossed arms in her hands. A slow smile bloomed across her lips. “Spoke? You spoke with Otto? About what, my darling?”

“Business matters, Mother. Nothing that concerns you, as yet. Koenig has a new business in mind and he proposed that I might take an interest in the new venture.”

His mother squeezed his arms affectionately and gave them a light pat. “That is why you have been locked away then and taken those rides around the estate? Does it have something to do with Riverwood?”

“In a manner.”

“It must be quite an offer then,” she said, dropping her voice to a ridiculously conspiratorial whisper, “if you need to take so much time to consider it. You are reviewing the affairs of Riverwood then? Do you find Otto’s offer a good one?”

“Mother,” he said, standing up straight.

She shook her head and patted his arms again before letting them go. “I’ll keep out of it then.” She started to walk away, but stopped and turned back to him just as he put his hand on the door to close it. “Will you give me a hint, Charles? Is it a grand plan? Otto has always been very astute in these matters.”

“I shouldn’t like to tempt fate, Mother, by discussing it.”

“Oh,” she said, clasping her hands together over her chest in a delighted manner. He watched her nod as if all were right with the world.

He could hardly believe his luck that such a small lie had put him back in her good graces. “Don’t mention this to anyone, Mother,” he warned. “Not anyone. I

should hate to break Koenig's confidence while we are," he struggled to find a word to solidify the lie, "negotiating the matter."

"I'll leave you to it then. I shan't say a word more," she replied and left.

For a week more he kept up his pretense of industriousness, unable to quite believe he and his mother's war of wills had come to an end, until at last Lilah told him his mother had signified a truce by sitting a whole day without so much as a word or a sigh about Charles' behavior. That same evening Charles decided to brave the dinner table. In the midst of their first course, they received an unexpected caller.

"One of the Sheriff's patrollers is here, Massa," Tilly announced.

Charles set his napkin on the table and got up, going out to the main foyer. The front door stood open and a young man, by the name of Higgs, stood in the doorway. Higgs held out a piece of paper. Charles looked the young man over; he was not even Charles' age, nineteen perhaps, and painfully thin. He was the son of one of the nearby farmer families, Charles knew. Charles rarely saw him except when he went in and out of the dram-shop for his visits to Annabelle. Higgs was already a hearty drinker. He seemed sober enough now.

Charles took the paper from the boy and read it over. It was a bill of ownership for the stray negro woman, Hellcat, made out to Charles. When he had finished reading it, he smiled and held out his hand to Higgs who stared at his hand before finally realizing he was meant to shake it.

“Thank you, Higgs. You can tell the Sheriff I’m grateful for his prompt attention to the matter.” He released the boy’s hand.

“Sure ‘nough, sir, I’ll tell him. Sheriff says we got room at the whoopin’ post, if’n you need some help keepin’ her in line.”

“Well tell the Sheriff I appreciate the offer, but I think my man Luke has plenty of experience in managing Negroes.”

Higgs nodded. “Didn’t mean no offense, sir. No offense t’all. Sheriff said I should say.”

“You’re taking quite a bit of time, Charles,” his mother called from behind him. “Who is at the door? We’ve plenty for another—”

Charles turned aside to look at his mother, who stopped her speech as her eyes fell on Higgs.

Higgs smiled ruefully and took off his hat, giving an awkward bow. “Ma’am,” he said. “Didn’t mean to disturb your dinner. I just had to drop of that nigger’s bill for Mr. DeCoeur here. I won’t be taking none of your time now.” Higgs slipped his hat back on and turned away toward his horse.

“Higgs,” Charles called. “Mrs. DeCoeur is right. We have enough for one more. Join us for dinner.”

Higgs halted on the last step and stared at Charles as if he had not heard right.

“Well, don’t be rude, Higgs,” Charles said. “The ladies are waiting.”

Higgs slowly climbed the steps again and entered the house, taking off his hat. Charles took his hat and set it on the table in the foyer. He steered the boy into the dining

room by the shoulder. Tilly was already laying out a place at the table, across from Delilah. Charles sat back down at the head of the table, his mother already back in her seat at the far end. She stared stiffly into her soup and took small sips. Delilah smiled shyly at Higgs, who avoided looking at her and stared uncomfortably at the array of silverware on either side of his soup bowl.

“The less dinnerware you use, the easier it is,” Charles said.

Higgs nodded, picking up a tea spoon and delving into his bowl of soup. Delilah giggled.

“Delilah,” Charles’ mother said sharply. She put down her own spoon and waved at Tilly to take the bowl away. Charles’s watched his mother dab imperiously at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. “It has been some time since we had company at our table,” she said.

Higgs, unaware it was his turn to respond, continued to ravage his soup with the teaspoon.

Charles waved away his own soup, leaning back in his seat while they waited for Higgs to finish so that Tilly could bring the next course.

“How do you find the patrol, Higgs?” he asked.

Higgs stopped with his spoon halfway to his mouth, then set it back down reluctantly. Tilly tried to take the bowl, but Higgs stopped her with one hand to take back his spoon. Tilly gave him a disgusted look before retreating to the kitchen with the empty dishware.

“I reckon it’s honest work,” Higgs said. “We’re lucky here. Conrad hasn’t seen much nigger action like they have up North. I heard tell they had niggers as figure themselves for generals and all up in Louisiana. Led a uprising and tried to slaughter them poor people in their beds.”

Charles cleared his throat. “I believe that was some time ago and in Virginia, Higgs.”

“Reckon so,” Higgs said amiably.

Charles caught this mother’s eye. Her face had paled a shade or two. “But I hear they called in quite a militia and took care of the matter very efficiently,” Charles added.

“Just so, sir. Very efficiently. I reckon we’d be just as efficient. We got some good men. Just as good as any up in Virginny.”

“I’m sure we do, Higgs.”

Tilly returned and set out the dinner plates. She moved around the table serving them breaded chicken and sweet honeyed yams. Higgs sat with his spoon in hand, his eyes riveted to Tilly as he waited for her to finish her slow progression around the table and signal the all-clear to eat.

“If we have been so fortunate, what exactly is it that you do, Mr. Higgs?” Charles’ mother asked.

“We ride ‘round at night and make sure they ain’t getting up to nothin’. Most trouble we have is some of the boys sneaking off to see their women. And the widows ask us to help out with their niggers sometimes. Ain’t proper for a lady to have to whoop one of ‘em, is it, Ma’am?”

Charles mother nodded. "I should say not."

"You must be very brave," Delilah said.

"Nothin' on it, Miss. It's honest work and it needs doing."

"But at night and alone and there are the bobcats and the gators out there," Delilah said, staring at him. Higgs looked up and Charles could tell he was trying not to laugh.

"I'm afraid Delilah is quite taken with adventure stories, Mr. Higgs," Charles' mother said. "She quite believes there's something lurking at every corner."

"Some of the old nigger women'll get your hackles up at night with all their witchin'," Higgs offered.

"Perhaps we should discuss more suitable subjects," Charles' mother replied.

"Tell us, Higgs," Charles prodded, "what do you do about a witching woman?"

"Do?" Higgs asked. "I don't reckon much needs doing. They's harmless. Just scares theyselves and the other niggers. Ain't no real harm in all of it."

"I don't think many would agree with you," Charles mother countered.

"I don't reckon there's any harm in it," Higgs repeated. "And if'n they get too riled up, they owners usually just give 'em a good whoopin' so the others see they ain't no harm to anyone but theyselves. Sheriffs' done it a number of times for Widow Taylor. She got that one—" Higgs caught himself this time. "I reckon I said enough," he looked at Delilah, "in present company."

"I don't feel my confidence in the patrol much raised," Charles' mother said.

"Oh no, Ma'am, I reckon you ain't got nothing to worry about. Riverwood ain't never had no trouble with its niggers. Nothing unusual-like."

Charles' mother pursed her lips.

"Mrs. DeCoeur has some concerns about the new slave whose bill you brought," Charles said.

"I ain't seen her for myself, but I heard some," Higgs said. He finished the last bite of his meal and set down his spoon, leaning back in his chair. "You got Old Mildred. She'll let you know if you got anything to worry about. She knows everything there is to know about the niggers in Conrad. And she's level-headed. Can't do much better."

"Seems you know my Negroes better than I do," Charles said.

"Well, we pay most of 'em a visit at least once a month. Just so's they don't forget we got our eye on 'em." Higgs sat up suddenly. "I reckon if you're worried, we could come 'round your place a mite more often." He looked at Charles' mother. "If'n it would help the ladies."

Charles looked at his mother, who frowned at Higgs.

"It might do a bit of good," she finally said.

"It's settled then," Charles answered. He looked over Higgs' empty plate and cleared his throat, standing up. "We've kept you long enough," he said.

Higgs stood up quickly and gave a half-bow at both women over his plate. Charles motioned him out into the foyer. Higgs reclaimed his hat and started out the door.

"What will it cost for your extra services?" Charles asked from the doorway. Higgs turned around and shook his head.

“Reckon it’s settled,” he said, patting his stomach, “so long as you don’t mind if’n it’s just me as comes by on them extra visits?”

Charles nodded. “That will suit our needs.”

“Much obliged,” Higgs said, holding out his own hand this time.

Charles took it and they shook hands again before Higgs went down the stairs and out to the pickaninny, who had waited with Higgs’ horse.

Charles watched Higgs leave before closing the front door. He turned around and saw his mother standing at the foot of the stairs. Delilah came out of the dining room and quickly slipped between them and disappeared into the parlor.

“You have wholly made up your mind to keep her then?” his mother asked.

“I would be a fool not to, Mother. Free property does not fall into a man’s hands every day.” He had an idea of a sudden. “And if Koenig and I come to an agreement, Riverwood will need as many hands as she can muster.”

His mother stared at him and finally nodded. “You have made arrangements for the patrollers to keep extra watch on Riverwood?”

“Yes.”

“It will suffice for now. Until that nigger shows her true nature and you have no choice but to get rid of her.”

He shrugged.

“And I will have no more scruffy boys at my table, Charles.”

“Higgs looked quite underfed.”

“We are not a charity house, Charles. I won’t have it. Next time you can see that they get something from the kitchen if you wish.”

Charles nodded.

“Quite appalling, using a teaspoon for an entire meal,” she said, turning away and mounting the stairs.

Thereafter, Charles breathed a mental sigh at having had his way in the affair of Hellcat. As for his mother, their occasional conversations revolved comfortably around the prospect of a business alliance between the two families. It became the sole subject of his mother’s inquiry and he was careful to guard his responses, which only excited her further into believing the agreement was imminent. And though he had put the offer out of his mind as a distasteful one, the surprising arrival of an invitation to a small Valentine’s fête at New India, *of intimate acquaintances and neighbors*, was the final omen to both Charles and his mother that Riverwood had made her peace with Providence. Breakfast and dinner became idle events, filled with chatter about the divine prospect of an elegant evening at the Koenigs’. The rest of the day his mother retreated into the salon with her sewing and her usual ministrations to the ailing Delilah.

Freed to move about the house without fear, Charles found himself continuing to follow activity on his land. The house seemed somehow smaller and less interesting than the ordered motions of his slaves. A spell of afternoon rains at last purged the stench of the pond and the air at Riverwood began to ease as the pollen washed away and the forest succumbed to a renascent green. Charles was pleased. He felt unburdened and admitted

to himself that even he looked forward to an evening at the Koenigs' house, a two-tiered palace of wood, stone, and imported marble. The days rolled slowly toward the fête, still some weeks away, and the inhabitants of Riverwood found new pursuits to renew their attentions and structure their days. Luke was taken with Jed, and Wills and Tiny were occupied with overseeing a cleaning of the slave cabins, demanded by Charles' mother, who claimed she could not preach anymore in that stench.

It was now the first Sunday morning of his mother's absence from the quarters. Charles dressed and watched out his window, able to see the forms of the slaves moving in and around the cabins, dashing the sides of the log cottages with buckets of water and brushing down the sides with straw hand brooms. The children were carrying buckets of water back and forth from the pond, the littler ones playing with the mud clumps formed by the washing and getting underfoot of the adults. Luke's form was easily visible as he passed on the outside of the cabins, running along the west edge of the lawn, and inspected the slaves' work. He finished dressing and went down to breakfast. Delilah was absent, but his mother was already seated at the far end of the table.

"Where is Delilah?" he asked.

"She's taking tea in her room," his mother replied.

Tilly brought in two plates of griddle cakes, blissfully unadorned by citrus. Charles poured a helping of honey on his cakes and waited for Tilly to bring him his coffee. She reappeared and set a cup down beside him, leaving him a small coffee kettle, steaming at the spout. He poured himself a cup and took a leisurely drink.

"I do hope my absence from the quarters won't be a problem," his mother said.

Charles set down his cup and picked up his knife and fork, cutting into his griddle cakes.

“I imagine they’ll be thrilled that they should miss the good Lord’s word,” she continued. “They are so much like children.”

He took a bite, recognizing that he was not required for the conversation.

“I remember, once, you crept into your father’s personal toilet. I can’t imagine how long you searched through his patent medicines and what not, looking for something to take. You could not have been more than six years at the time and couldn’t read a word on the packets.”

He looked up at her and she smiled at him over the rim of her teacup.

“You settled for castor oil. I imagine you recognized the bottle. I often had cause to give it to you. You were a very irregular little boy.”

He washed down another bite of griddle cake with more coffee.

“Imagine, drinking a whole bottle of castor,” she said, laughing. She shook her head.

His stomach convulsed in involuntary remembrance.

“Quite a way to get out of church, Charles. You were always too bright to keep out of trouble,” she finished.

He heard Tilly laugh softly behind him. His mother looked past him and he knew they were sharing a smile. Charles and his mother finished their plates in silence and Tilly took away the plates, leaving them to finish their coffee and tea.

“It is Sunday, Charles. Why did you not go to church?”

“I was not in the mood.”

“Hmm,” his mother replied, but she left it at that. She stood up suddenly and brought her cup and teapot to his end of the table, seating herself in the chair to his right. She pulled the chair a little closer to him and poured herself another cup.

“I’ve been meaning to have a word with you about the fête, Charles.”

He nodded.

“Do you suppose we should let Delilah go? She has been better these past weeks. But the journey is quite far and coach rides are such torture on a woman’s constitution.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” he said.

“But she will never forgive us if we don’t let her go,” his mother said. “And I ache to see her so confined to the house.” She picked up her teacup and took a long sip, setting it back down to add more sugar to the cup.

He watched the back of her hands while she stirred in the sugar. Her hands were tracked with blue rivulets, like Delilah’s, only his mother’s were aged. Molasses-colored sun spots covered the blue veins that ran strong beneath her skin. He reached out suddenly and grasped her hand as she set down her teaspoon and squeezed it before he let go and poured himself another cup of coffee. His mother took up her tea with both hands and swirled the cup.

“I’m afraid that’s why Delilah is quite taken with your Negro,” she said.

He was confused at first, by what she meant.

“She asks me about her, you know. And when she comes to the vegetable garden Delilah stands at the parlor window and stares out at her. It’s not usual, Charles,” she said, gripping her cup more tightly. “I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all.”

“You mean she’s been watching the new slave woman?” he asked, to assure himself he understood.

“Of course, that is what I mean,” his mother replied irritably. “I think Delilah’s confinement has been hard on her of late. She’s getting quite grown up. This silly thing with your Negro, it’s a new distraction. Delilah is bright like you, Charles. She needs some new diversion. But that Negro—”

“Hellcat,” he interjected.

“What?”

“We named the Negro Hellcat.”

“How—you—it must be a joke, Charles, and in poor taste.”

“I rather thought you would appreciate the name,” he said.

She stared at him and set her cup back down, standing up. She paced along the side of the table. “I have too many other concerns to worry about your petty jibes at my heart, Charles.” For the moment, her look told him. “I think Delilah finds Hellcat’s presence as riveting as one of those stories of hers. I dare say you are both too much alike in that way.”

“I do not read adventure stories.”

His mother scowled at him. “No, but you take an easy fancy to things, Charles.” She waved a dismissive hand. “It’s all beside the point. My point is I think that it would

be best if Delilah had something to look forward to, to take her mind off this bastard woman who is plaguing our estate.”

“You don’t still think—”

“Say what you will, Charles. I have a woman’s intuition and none of your fancy. I know who she is.”

“How could she possibly be a bastard of father’s?” he demanded. “Be logical, Mother. She is too tall, too ungainly, her eyes are pure brown without a hint of green, and her features are decidedly of the black race. She has none of the pumpkin undertone that belies the mulatto and quadroon mixes.”

“Delilah has taken an unhealthy interest in this stray, whatever the case,” his mother replied.

He stared at her profile while she stood behind the chair she had occupied and gripped the back of the chair in her hands.

“You do agree with me, don’t you, Mother? It’s quite impossible that she’s our father’s. I should never have kept her in that case.”

His mother looked at him for a long time. “I suppose you are right,” she said sitting down again and pressing a hand to her forehead. “You would not keep her, then.”

“Of course not. Contrary to what you think of my character, I am not intrigued by the idea of incest.”

His mother reached out a hand to him. He took it and she squeezed his hand this time. “I am sorry, Charles. I have just been—” She sighed and let go of his hand.

“What shall we do about Delilah then? Do we let her attend?”

“I hope we may,” he said.

For her part, Delilah engaged in a silent battle to prove to their mother that she would be well enough to travel to the fête for the evening. To that end, she had taken up pinching her cheeks to improve her color and wearing more undergarments to plump her frame. To Charles, her efforts gave her the appearance of a grossly-padded porcelain baby doll. How she thought his mother would remain unaware of her tricks, he did not know, but he was glad to see her so preoccupied. And his belated gift of *Pride and Prejudice* had only added to her feminine frenzy, he thought. He had bought the book at the advice of Annabelle, having never read it himself, who said it was just the thing for a young girl of Lilah’s nature. *A rose in a dandelion bed*, Annabelle had called her, though they had never met.

Everything came along well, and Charles was relieved that Riverwood had been granted a reprieve and that he was not required, but in a token manner, to ensure that it progressed as it should. He had never spent much time out among the gangs or at the barns or the stables. He had occasionally seen them when he was younger, when he sought out Henry or some other sibling, but he had not taken an interest in them at all then. He had been drawn to letters, classical Greek works and Latin tracts—a remnant of his desire to carry some of his Dickinson education back with him. But reading had since become a triviality, as first his father passed, then his brother, and finally his sister Marianne shortly thereafter, leaving only the three DeCoeurs. The volumes in his father’s study and the few books he kept in his room became mementos instead of

diversions. It was this small realization of what he had forfeited when his elder brother died that drove him completely into the fields. He had a violent desire to shut out all traces of the culture he had lost and embrace the gross physicality of plantation life, the constant sweat between his shoulder blades, the grit that sat under his nails and at the back of his teeth, the extended burning on the back of his neck and hands when he braved the sun too long, the inescapable smell of soil and decaying vegetation without stone buildings and industry to temper the air's thickness.

He told himself his growing interest in the management of Riverwood was just that, an inevitable, inescapable, growing interest in Riverwood. That was why he had spoken to Old Mildred about a dress for Hellcat, to see to it himself, since Luke had said he would take care of it, and yet, Hellcat remained in the ill-fitting calico each time Charles observed her. Charles had talked to Old Mildred one day when she had been up at the house, sitting at the kitchen table, mending the underskirt of Delilah's party dress. He had forgotten how old she was, not having seen her much of late. Her face was so well-wrinkled that it reminded him of walnuts. She was mending the waist of Delilah's crinoline skirt, while Tilly worked on the day's orange juice. A bucket of orange rinds sat between them on the floor and as he sat down at the table a boy brought in another bucket of fresh oranges, which Tilly accepted with a scowl. He wondered that Old Mildred sat so close to Tilly as the juice from the cook's squeezing splattered dangerously close to the white crinoline. He supposed the skirt would be worn beneath the dress itself, in any case.

"Millie-girl, I need a dress made up for that new girl, Hellcat," he said.

Old Mildred barely spared him a glance. “Ain’t got no time with this here ladies work,” she said.

“When you’re done. I’ll have some cloth brought from town. She’s too tall for that calico you’ve got her in now.”

Old Mildred pursed her lips, but said nothing.

“It’s the same with all of us, Mass Charles,” Tilly replied for her. “Mr. Luke buys ‘em at the general come Christmas and we makes do.”

He looked over at her and she stopped her squeezing to wipe down her hands and knead one hand along her shoulder before she cut up another set of oranges and started to squeeze them.

“Well, Hellcat not’s a common size, is she,” he answered.

Old Mildred set down the skirt in her lap and smoothed out a crinkle, holding the needle between her gnarled fingers. “There be enough of this here cloth leftover for me to make somethin’ more? Tilly didn’t never have no new headkerchief for her wedding to our Tom, like I promised her. I ain’t never had enough saved up, Young Massa Charles.”

“Shush, Mama,” Tilly said, sweeping the empty rinds off the table and pulling fresh oranges from the bucket. The boy reappeared and placed a third set of oranges next to the first. Tilly muttered something under her breath and the boy took an orange off the top of the bucket before scampering out.

“You’re a common thief, Millie-girl,” Charles replied. “But I suppose I could manage a few yards extra, so long as you see you make her something pretty.”

Mildred narrowed her eyes at him and Tilly stopped her work to look at him.

“Fitting,” he corrected.

That was how he came to start the journal. The idea struck him that Hellcat’s inauguration was extraordinary. She took to the field work well enough, but the other slaves seemed loath to accommodate her. He supposed the other women were afraid that she was too tempting to their men. Especially when Old Mildred had given her the new dress—a pretty, light blue cotton. Though it still fell just barely below her knees, it showed her waist, hips, and breasts to good advantage, Charles thought. As he was suitably pleased with Hellcat’s new garment, he had been only mildly upset to see that all the women had acquired new head kerchiefs too, of the same light blue cotton.

The morning he had spied the new dress he had ridden back to the house and dug out the journal Delilah had given him some Christmases before, filled with heavy, cream-colored paper bound in a brown leather, imprinted with a *fleur de lis* on the cover. Inside, Delilah had written “To my dearest Charles and favorite brother” in her flowing script on the first page. He had begun it as a personal journal. But the more time he spent away from the house, the more he decided that his mother, or sister for that matter, were not to be trusted, and, hence, he had burned the pages revealing his inner thoughts and started the journal anew, as a record of his observations on the management of the slaves and the plantation, particularly Hellcat.

That Hellcat could not speak was deemed a benefit by all, but it meant too that they were unsure whether she understood or whether she also silently suffered from a

gross savagery and mental deficiency that would prevent her from learning. The unique difficulty of her teaching offered him an outlet to marry his northern education with his southern inheritance, by noting observations in his journal on the intimate workings of his plantation estate. All these little observations, gathered daily as Charles spent more time in the running of his plantation, began to intrigue him. He especially liked to follow the field gangs out after first bell, just after dawn when the light was rising in the sky, but the sun was not yet high. From afar, in the full twilight of morning, Hellcat seemed to him a mythic giantess among mortals. Her skin held a bronze undertone, like living armor, and she still carried herself tall, not yet subjected to the necessary punishments and corrections, though she had lost her cinnamon nap since they had shorn her to rid her of lice. He would watch until the day became too hot and then he would retreat to the veranda and record his observations in his journal. He had aspirations to make some example of Hellcat and publish it in *The Southern Cultivator*. They paid fair commissions on accepted pieces. Let Otto Koenig read *his* words while he perused the Middlemen's drivel about the value of cattle.

Charles was sitting at the small writing table in the parlor, drafting a clean copy of his first article, "On the Acclimation of a Negro Giantess to a Florida Plantation Gang: Accounting for the Special Management of a Mute Negro," when Tom sought him out. His mother was taking her afternoon refreshment, fanning herself out of ennui, and Delilah was curled on the settee with her book, grimacing and smiling to herself, punctuating the silence with little gasps beneath her breath.

“Massa Charles, Mr. Luke’s looking to have a word,” Tom said.

“Where’s your good Sunday shirt, Tom?” Charles’ mother inquired.

Tom smoothed down the front of his workaday shirt, liberally stained. “It’s bein’ washed, Missus. Tilly’s down at the pond having the girls wash all our clothes. Like you ask fo’ yesterday, Missus,” he added.

His mother quickened the pace of her fan. “Yesterday, Thomas. It should have been done yesterday. You darkies have grown sinfully lazy since I stopped preaching on Sundays. Perhaps I should see to it today,” she said with a martyred sigh. “One can never have enough of the good Lord’s words.”

Charles suppressed a smile.

Tom shook his head vigorously. “We praying every night, Missus, and we thankin’ the good Lord that Missus DeCoeur taking a good rest from our poor souls.” Charles’ mother frowned, causing Tom to add hastily, “Even the angels need to rest they weary feet from good works.”

Charles moved toward the doorway to relieve Tom from further fabrication.

“Just so,” his mother replied, with delight. “Even pious souls must be put upon.”

Charles followed Tom through the kitchen and outside where he allowed himself to laugh heartily. “A narrow escape, eh, Tom?” he asked.

“This way, Massa Charles. Mr. Luke’s overseein’ at the pond.”

They made their way to the pond. The slaves were gathered at its edge since it was Sunday and a day of rest from the field work. The women were scattered in the shallow water, dresses tied up between their legs, shaking clothes in the dark water,

twisting them and rubbing them down with soap cakes. Some of the men and older women were clustered in the shade of the royal palms and pines, smoking cob pipes, while others took turns throwing the little ones into the heart of the pond, sending up great splashes of water. A few were busy filling buckets, which they carried off in the direction of the house.

Charles found Luke seated on a crude stool under an old palmetto, Jed lying on the ground next to him with a hat to cover his face while he dozed. Luke stood up quickly, motioning Charles onto the stool and seating himself on the ground. He nudged Jed with his boot, rousing the boy, who sat up groggily and gave Charles a bleary grin. His bloodshot eyes told Charles that Luke had introduced the boy to the managers' penchant for drink. He took off the boy's hat and tousled his hair affectionately, earning another sheepish smile from young Jed.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Charles," Luke said.

"Took you too long," Charles said. He leaned back on the trunk, the tips of the platelets that covered the palm's trunk digging into his back. He moved a little from side to side to get a good scratch.

"I've had a few things on my mind, sir, and not being a man to hide, I wanted to bring 'em to you direct."

"Have at it, Luke. What's on your mind?"

"I figure I've seen you out at the work sites more in the last month than I seen you since I started as Mr. DeCoeur's foreman."

"And?"

“Well, if you’re not happy with my work, Mr. Charles, I’d prefer it if you told me so I can see about getting it done to your liking. I’m a reasonable man and I ain’t never had no complaints about my management yet.”

Charles shook his head. “I am not unhappy with your work, Luke. Not at all.” He was quiet for a moment before continuing. “It seems to me that after some months as Riverwood’s master, it is time I took an interest in her most intimate workings.” He watched another pickaninny sail through the air and land in the water in a flurry of spray. The girl tossed in the water buoyed to the surface and paddled toward the edge of the pond. Charles looked over at Luke, who was chewing on a short stick thoughtfully. At last Luke nodded.

“You eased my mind, Mr. Charles. Eased my mind.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Not at all, sir. I just thought you wasn’t the overseeing kind.” Luke cleared his throat. “I had something else weighing on my mind.” He spit out the tip of the stick and chewed on the remainder.

“Well? What is this other concern?” Charles asked.

Luke stood up. “I’ll show you, sir,” he said.

They took the path toward the house. Charles pointed at the slow line of buckets being carried away from the pond. “What are they doing? Cleaning cabins again?” he asked, as they followed behind one of the women who carried a full bucket, her hip overextended to accommodate the weight. They slowed their pace to stay well behind her.

Luke shook his head and motioned in the direction they were walking. "I'll show you, sir," he repeated.

They crossed the lawn, arriving at the vegetable garden where fresh, neat little rows had been dug in the dusty earth. Tom and Hellcat were planting tiny seedlings, loosely packed in soil held in glass preserve jars. The slave woman with the bucket poured out her water along a planted row, filling up the channels with a dark mud. As she passed him, he recognized her as Martha, the skin on her neck white where it disappeared into the front of her dress, a burn she had earned over a foolish incident with a boy from over at Briar, some years back.

"Where did you find them?" Charles said, squatting down to finger one of the small plant's leaves, covered in a soft fuzz that clutched at the tip of his fingers.

"The tomato shoots is from Abe," Luke replied. "Seems last time Tom was on a pass at the Briar he told 'em how our garden wasn't showing yet and things was getting desperate at the house."

Charles nodded and stood up. "How long?"

"Few weeks at most," Luke said. He moved closer to Charles. "This here's the other problem," he said in a low voice.

Charles followed his gaze to where Hellcat had tucked her extensive frame into a squat, digging into the dirt with her fingers and slipping a seedling into the ground, covering the roots and patting once before tottering toward the next hole and seedling.

"The slaves won't have her," Luke said quietly. "We been letting her sleep out by the pond. Don't seem to bother her, but it's got the slaves mighty upset."

“You mean they won’t let her in one of the cabins? Why not?”

Luke shrugged. “On account of her behavior.”

Charles frowned. “What behavior?”

“At night she hums. And,” Luke cleared his throat uncomfortably, “she hums,” he finished half-heartedly.

“Nonsense. Why would they be scared of humming?”

Luke avoided his eyes and shrugged. Charles stared at his profile in silence before turning his attention to another slave who brought more water. He stared at the face, but this boy was unknown to him.

“Cowards. Complete fools. I won’t hear of it. You said yourself she’s an ox. She is worth two female slaves, even one grown, well-fed man.” He looked at Luke to reassure himself of his train of thought.

The foreman only shrugged. “Still, I got to keep her somewhere and the slaves won’t have none of it. I ain’t put my foot down because it’s not like our people to cause problems. So I reckon they good an scared to make such a fuss.”

Charles crossed his arms and shook his head, not knowing what Luke thought he should say. It flitted through his mind that he almost wished Henry was here. “You sure they won’t take her into the cabins? What about Tilly and Tom? They were always level-headed niggers. Or Wills, have Wills taken her in?”

Luke shrugged. “I can have her *put* anywhere. I just ‘spect on there being some fussing and carrying on when I do it.”

“What other way around it is there?”

“We could build her a place out by the pond.”

Charles shook his head. “I won’t pay for lumber and all that for one Negro woman who hums at night. See to it, Luke. I don’t care where you put her, but she stays in the quarters. And unless she acts up during the workaday, I don’t care how she acts otherwise.”

Luke nodded. “Just as you say, Mr. Charles. Just as you say.” He cleared his throat again. “We could sell her. As you say, she’s as strong as field slaves come. Mind, as long as we talk around her tongue being gone, we could get a good price for her. Six hundred at least, maybe even eight-fifty.”

Charles shook his head.

“Six hundred would buy—”

“She is not for sale,” Charles said.

Luke shrugged and jammed his hands in his armpits. “This here plantation is a regular investment, Mr. Charles. All I’m asking is, she the kind of investment you want? Cause there’ll be trouble sure as I’m standing here.”

“The only trouble I see is a foreman who doesn’t have the stomach for doing his job as it should be. Break her in properly and you won’t have anything to worry about.”

Luke shrugged again. “I ain’t got no problem breaking in a nigger woman, even if she is a big’un.”

Charles looked over at him. “Whatever needs to be done. So long as it’s within reason.”

Luke gave him a searching look, but said nothing.

* * *

Charles tried to put the conversation out of his mind, but the more he thought on it, the more it intrigued him, and he began to follow the gangs religiously. He would approach the field from the south on his mare, in calm anticipation of the first glimpse of Hellcat among them. Like dark shadows, his slaves would appear at the periphery of his vision, filing northward from the hazy cabins and the dusty alley of the slaves' quarters and emerging into the open expanse of soil. The stable boys and Jed would cross the grassy lawn from the east, bringing the lumbering cows and the few old mares they had for plowing, Tiny following behind them weighted with tackle and the bow and crosspieces for the yokes. Luke would raise his whip. "Step lively, niggers," he would call and whirl the whip over his head, cracking it like a shot and lording between the plow gangs, the weed gangs, the seed gangs, like a bobcat tamer Charles had once seen at a fair. Then his Negroes would start up their singing, dipping up and down like dark birds as they pulled weeds to free the soil for rows of the white gold that would see Riverwood through another year, Charles was sure of it.

Try as he might to understand what Luke hinted, but was unwilling to say, he could see nothing troubling about Hellcat, but that she was a gang unto herself. She worked her rows alone and Luke or the drivers would yell at her, but the other Negroes never approached her. Occasionally she would wipe down the sweat on her face and stare at the other slaves. Still, Luke told Charles he let her be because her work was so steady that he thought better of it, reserving his lashes and cuffs for the other slaves that faltered in the heat, mostly the young ones who had yet to acquire grit. Charles liked to

watch Hellcat walk, her long unhurried strides; she did not shuffle like the other women, with their gnarled feet and heavy, awkward steps measured by missing toes and scarred welts. Never once did Charles see the squareness of Hellcat's shoulders falter or her back bend in a weary curve.

Luke, unable to convince the other slaves to house her, and Charles, unwilling to accommodate his instructions to the stalemate, allowed her to sleep by the pond. So Wills made her a small lean-to shack and Luke gave her an allotment of one pair of shoes, on which they had to cut out the toes to fit her broad feet, and two sacks for bedding, which she filled with Spanish moss and other woody stuffing. It occurred to Charles that she might as soon wander away one night as stay his slave, but they had no stockade and he did not wish to keep her in the stables. He solved his concerns by requiring Wills to check on her at intervals during the night. Wills reported nothing amiss, but Charles had the impression that the mulatto too, at Luke's instruction, was hiding something from him. Admittedly, had it been any other slave, he would not have worried himself with it, but Hellcat had become his curiosity and diversion.

He therefore decided to check on her himself one evening. He chose a full moon, to better avoid snakes and other critters on the walk to the pond. He took the long path to the pond, going not by way of the slaves' quarters, but around to the east, through the open fields, aware that Luke had developed the sudden habit of sitting outside his cabin to take his evening bottle. So Charles gave the quarters a wide berth and approached the pond through the woods, from the north, catching glimpses of the sparkle in the full

moonlight. When he arrived, Hellcat's place was empty, the pond deserted. He had stood, still hidden behind the palmettos, struck by a sudden realization.

It was the emptiness of the spot that pushed his mind into contemplation. He wondered what she did alone at night. Whether she stayed in the lean-to or if she didn't sometimes sit at the edge of the pond and smoke a pipe, like the other women did outside their cabins. Except she would be alone, no other women to laugh with her, or pull her nap into those strange braids. He could imagine her standing at the edge of the murky pond in the moonlight. How easy it would be to walk down to the edge of the pond if she were there, perhaps ten steps, eight by her long strides. His eyes closed involuntarily.

He could imagine her long frame, the light blue cotton clinging to her. There was no breeze, but it did not matter; she would shift, turn to watch him approach her, and the fabric would catch about her thighs. He would be almost to her, reach out a hand to catch her bare forearm, when she would step back from him, her steps swirling in the water as she backed into the pond. He would shake his head, hold out his palms to show that he meant no harm, smile at her and enter the water with her, the coolness of it causing his inflamed skin to ache. He would reach his hand out and touch that dark skin to trace one finger along that silent jaw of hers. Her dark eyes would reflect the moonlight as diamonds in the black of her eyes, glowing like her feline namesake's. She would know by his touch, by the way he held her, but did not grip her, by the way he pulled away the coarse blue cotton from her so-smooth skin, and put his lips to that exposed shoulder, the one that had held the gold, that his was a need, not a command. He would kiss her lips then and know what it was to taste blackberries in the dead of night. He would . . .

Something snapped in the darkness, recalling him to his surroundings. He turned around, blood rushing in his ears. Hellcat stood behind him, her eyes indeed glinting in the darkness, but with something that made his skin cold, not hot. She stared at him and he was sure she recognized his inflamed state, that she could see the hunger for her that had led him here. The longer she held his eyes, the more his heart pounded and it struck him as ridiculous that he did not move to her. But the buzzing of his ears created an eerie silence. She was just a woman, but they were alone, and she was looking at him in such a way . . .

She stepped toward him and it was as if a wall of air pressed against his chest. She took another step, now only a few inches away. Then she opened her mouth and her chest shuddered, her arms jangling from her shoulders and a soft sound like a blacksmith's bellows escaping her throat. She was laughing, he realized, and she continued to laugh as she walked around him, her low laughter floating past him. He listened to her feet crackle over the fallen pine needles and gritty soil as she made her way toward the pond.

Through the thin veil of trees, he saw a light flicker on in an upper room of the house. His mother's room. He roused himself and walked, then hurried, back to the house, trying to focus on his aching lungs and not what had happened, but he knew the burning could have been humiliation as easily as exertion. He slipped into the house through the kitchen, walking as silently as he could across the old wooden floor boards, passing over the second step on the back staircase so it would not give him away. He peered into the hall that led past his sister's and mother's rooms. An amber aura came

from under his mother's door, but there was no sound. He took a silent breath and stepped onto the landing. He walked down the hallway as quietly as his twitching thighs would allow.

A shuffling sound behind the door warned him that his mother was out of bed. He changed course and turned abruptly into the bathroom across from her room, pulling out his shirt haphazardly and bending over the porcelain bowl to splash his face with cold water from the ewer his grandmother had given to his parents for their wedding. He let the water drip off his nose, staring at the blue children seated in a wagon, merrily mocking him from the side of the pitcher.

“Charles?” his mother called from the doorway.

Seeking time to compose his lie, he avoided the doorway with his eyes, picking up a clean linen from the wash table and rubbing his face.

“Charles, I will have a word with you.”

He lowered the linen from his eyes and watched his mother's long grey hair flourish as she turned her back on him and left. He waited long enough to hear her steps on the main staircase, then tossed the linen in a corner of the bathroom and followed her.

“In the parlor, Charles.”

He made his way into the parlor where a small candle flickered on the letter desk. His mother stood by the window. He wandered toward one of the bookcases and stared at the leather-bound volumes gilded with flaking gold titles.

“This must stop. I will not allow my son to take up with a Negro.”

“I’m not taking up with her, Mother.” He fingered one of the volumes and pulled it out to give his shaking hands something to hold on to. “I only—”

“You do not think following her to the pond in the middle of the night, *watching* her,” she hissed the word as if it were dirty, “is acceptable for any son of mine? Or have you forgotten how much disgrace your father brought on this family by taking up with one of our slaves? Giving her that dirty backwater farm on the St. John’s?”

“How did you know I—”

“For God’s sake, Charles, you know Wills was watching after her at night, as you asked. I’m only thankful that he was a good boy and came straight away to tell me you had gone to see her.”

His mother compressed her lips and he slammed the book closed. “I am not my father.”

“And well you should see that you don’t become him, Charles! Leave this disgusting obsession behind. If it’s companionship you seek, then perhaps it’s time you took a trip to the North or I could have a word with the Thompsons about one of their daughters—”

He shoved the book back in place and headed for the door. “I don’t need you to worry about my needs, Mother.”

“And what about your soul? My God, if you were to bed her, being what she is to you—sin starts in the mind, Charles,” she called after him as he took the stairs, headed for the safety of his own bed.

He heard quick footsteps behind him and his mother's bony fingers clasped his arm, stopping him halfway up the stairs.

“Do you think I did not notice that dress? Do you think I did not guess at its meaning? You had clothing made for a *slave*, Charles. What will you buy her next? What pretty trinket will you bring her from town—a perfume, or perhaps a brooch? You see, I know how these things are. You will buy her little things and she will think she is better than the others. She will seduce you to earn herself a place at the house and then she will run to you every time Luke demands she be punished for what she has done wrong. And she will do wrong, Charles. Do not think these dark hussies look for affection in a master. She will use you to secure herself a place at Riverwood. She will let you bed her to get what she wants, Charles. Even though she likely shares your father's blood.”

He tried to shake his arm free of her.

“Listen to me, Charles! I have not seen this family through tremendous scandal and your father's incompetence just to watch you ruin it for some nigger woman! Even if your bed is not her aim, have you not seen the look in her eyes? There is murder there, Charles, and you are no son of mine if you cannot see it!”

He spun around, putting her off balance. She teetered dangerously for a moment, before he grabbed her and pulled her close to keep her from falling. She shook gently and he could hear the short gasps as the sobs came more freely. He pushed her a little away from him and she gripped his shirt.

“I won’t bankrupt Riverwood for a Negro, Mother. But she needs keeping an eye on—”

“Don’t lie to me, Charles. I am far too old and had too many boys of my own, even if they are mostly passed now,” she said. She sniffled, but stood up straighter.

“You cannot lie to me. Think of Delilah, Charles, if not of me. If your family’s reputation and—”

“Reputation?” he said releasing her and mounting the stairs again. “To hell with our reputation. Father destroyed that long before I had a chance to do the same.” He stopped and turned to look at her as she labored up the stairs with one hand on the banister, wiping her cheeks. “And how dare you bring Lilah into this?”

“She learns from you, Charles, like you learned from your father. When she marries? Would you stand for her husband to take up with a Negro? In her own house, before her own eyes?”

He grabbed her arm and shook her. “I am not bedding that woman!” he shouted.

His mother started to cry again and he let her go with disgust. He turned around and saw a shadow from Delilah’s doorway before the door closed with a soft click. He turned back around.

“Shush now, Mother,” he said softly. “We’ll wake Lilly.”

“Promise me, Charles.”

“There is nothing to promise.”

“Promise me, you’ll think of Riverwood first before you do anything. Promise me.”

He sighed. “Of course. I think of Riverwood first, always.”

His mother took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. “Promise me, Charles.”

She stared at him with an intensity that forced him to look away. “I have lost five children and a husband to this wilderness. I will not lose my home as well.” She kissed the back of his hand. “Promise me.”

He removed his hand from her grip. “I gave my word, Mother. That’s enough for any woman.”

He escaped to his room and slammed his door, locking it for good measure. He took off his shirt and dampened it in the bowl, wiping down his chest and face again, while he tried to settle his mind and think. Fool, he thought, and stood up abruptly throwing the linen at the washstand. It sent the porcelain bowl cracking into the wall behind and it shattered on the floor. He stalked around his room, finally throwing open the window and leaning his hands on the frame while he took deep measured breaths to calm himself. But his groin ached and his neck was hot with anger. This was ridiculous. *He* was master of Riverwood and his mother had no say in how he ran his estate or what he did with his niggers. He should not have let it go for so long. He should not have idled by six months while everyone around him determined that he was some boy to be reprimanded at every turn.

As for Hellcat, why in hell had he just stared at her? He should have had her if that was his wish. He worked his jaw, enjoying the way the grind of his teeth drowned out the echo of his mother’s words in his mind. A mild breeze cooled his temples and he closed his eyes against the moonlight. He had been a fool. With everyone. He leaned

out of the window and tried to see the beginning of the dirt road that led into the woods and toward the pond, but it was too far, he saw nothing but Wills' cabin. Even if he took the nigger woman it would not be like his father, he thought bitterly. His father had been fool enough to think he cared for Lorna. Charles knew his ache to be lust, and curiosity, to imagine what those wide shoulders and broad face would look like laid out underneath him.

He shook his head and went back to sit on the edge of the bed, before lying down and closing his eyes, not caring that his boots littered his bed with needles and debris from the pond. As much as he thought his mother was mad, slightly wild since she had been confined to Riverwood by widowhood, and relegated to a maternal martyrdom when Charles inherited the estate . . . he shook his head again. He supposed she might be right that Hellcat was a poor choice of bedmates, if he were to bed a Negress. *My God if you were to bed her, being what she is to you—sin starts in the mind Charles!* He opened his eyes and stared at the white ceiling above him. *Being what she is to you . . . My God,* he thought, and rubbed his face. His mother still thought she was Daddy's bastard. He sighed and rolled onto his side.

Imagine, bedding Daddy's mulatto. Ridiculous. It was no wonder his mother had avoided the cabins. He had thought she had believed his lie. That she still feared Hellcat's origins he had no idea. He supposed he had not been paying attention much since he had taken an interest in the plantation. As much as it irked him, his mother's ludicrous ideas were a blessing. Life had been, briefly, more bearable at Riverwood when she had relegated herself to matters of the house. And if believing Hellcat were an

avenging Negress ensured his mother's self-imposed confinement, then perhaps it was more to his advantage to leave the woman alone and let his mother pursue her fancies. Anything to be done with the arguments. And he would never be his father. His father was a fool. Charles would be no fool.

If only his mother were taken with something else and he were free to see to the estate as he chose. If she trusted him in business matters, perhaps. Not likely. Perhaps Luke was right and he should sell the woman. If she was worth six hundred or more . . . but it was not enough. Riverwood needed more, much more, to escape the debtors' snare that held his family. Charles had no idea how to overcome it. He had already sold slaves this year and now they would be pressed to work the fields with what they had. The estate would be as profitable as a park in Charleston without enough slaves to work it. It just came down to which price he would rather pay. Hellcat's or his mother's. At least Hellcat's had a market value, he thought wryly, whether he worked her or sold her. His mother was just an expense. He rubbed his eyes. That was unfair. So was Delilah, but he loved both women, much as they were financial nuisances and busybodies like all women. Imagine if he married. He would have three women to upkeep.