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XI

The Slave Foreman¹

WELL, sir, if I live to see the first day of May, I'll be eighty-one years old. I was thirty when the battle of Antietam was fought. My home hyar in Sharpsburg is only about two miles from Calamus Run where I was born. When I was ten months old my mother and I was bought by Mr. Otto, who lived a little outside of the town down toward Antietam Creek, and I've worked for the Otto family ever since.

My boss was a slaveholder. Yes, he belonged to that sec', but he was a good man to his black people. I'll tell any one that. I was foreman on his place for twenty-odd years. His colored people lived in the same house the white people did, and they e't the same food as the white people did. But we had our table in the kitchen, and they had theirs in the dining-room. When I worked in harvest all day cradling wheat I was paid as much as anybody else, and if I went with the horses to do teaming for a neighbor the money for what I done was mine. That's the kind of a boss I had. There was not many like that — no, sir, not in this country.

After emancipation his son said to me, "Now, Hilary, you're your own man. Pap wants to hire you, but you can go and work wherever you please. If you decide to go away, and it happens that by and by you have nothin' to do, come back and make your home with us."

I stayed there, and later, when I was draughted to be a soldier, my boss said, "Do you want to go?" and I told him, "No, sir."

So me 'n' him went to Frederick and he paid three hundred dollars to keep me out of the army.

John Brown, at the time he was condemned to death, said, "You Southern people can hang me, but the cause I die for is goin' to win, and there'll soon be a man hyar for every strand of hair I got in my head fightin' to free the slaves."

That was the truth. There's a good many strands of hair in a man's head, but a right smart of Union men left their homes to fight in the war.

Early in the morning of the Monday before the battle of Antietam the Rebels come in hyar, and the hill at our place was covered with 'em. They'd walk right into the house and say, "Have you got anything to eat?" like they was half starved.

We'd hardly fix up for a couple when a lot mo' would come in. The white people and my mother was in the kitchen givin' 'em bread and bacon. They was great fellers for milk, too. Some sat down at table, and some would just take a chunk of food in their hands. They e't us out directly.

The Union troops, who come onto our place a few days later, wasn't so hongry. That was the difference between the two armies. The Rebels was always hongry, and the men were miserable dirty. They certainly looked pretty rough.

Monday night I went up to the village to see my wife who was workin' for a family there. She was skeered up a little but hadn't got into no trouble.

When I went back home the Rebels was sleepin' along the edge of the road same as a lot of hogs might. I stumbled over some of 'em, but they didn't say anything. Their guns was laid aside, and they didn't know they had 'em, I reckon.

On Tuesday all the Otto family left and went down country for safety. I stayed on the place. Once I fastened up the house tight and walked up in the field. By and by I had a feelin' that I'd better go back, and I went. I found some one had broke a pane of glass in a window and reached in and took out the nail that kept the sash down. Then he'd raised the window and crawled in. Close by, inside of the room, was a washbench, and he'd set a crock of preserves and a crock of flour on it ready to carry away. I took the things and put 'em where they belonged and started on the trail of the thief. It was easy follerin' him, for he left all the doors open which he went through. In the dining-room he'd poured out a lot of sugar on a handkercher to take along, and he'd gone into my old boss's room and strewed his papers around over the floor. Next he'd gone upsteps, and I went up 'em, too, and hyar he was in a little pantry. He was a Rebel soldier — a young feller — and not very large. I was skeered, but he was mo' skeered than I was — certainly he was; and I said, "You dirty houn' you, I have a notion to take you and throw you down those steps."

Oh! I could have mashed him, for I saw he had no revolver. He didn't say anything. He left. I reckon I was too big for him.

"I'm goin' to have a guard hyar befo' night," I said, and pretty soon an officer come down there and I told him how one of his men had been carryin' on after we'd give the soldiers so much to eat. So he sent three men with guns to guard the place.

That evening the old boss come in and said, "General Toombs is goin' to be hyar over night, and he will be up to supper."

"Who in the name of the Lord will get the supper?" I asked.

"You and his waiter will have to get it some way or 'nother," he said.

Well, we fried some meat and made some biscuit, and the old general got his supper, but he didn't get no breakfast there. The firin' commenced so strong on Wednesday morning that he had to hurry to his post, and the waiter took his breakfast out to him.

My boss went down in the country to get under the hill where they wouldn't shoot him. The shells soon begun flyin' over the house and around hyar, and while I was out in the yard there was one that 'peared like it went between our house and the next, and busted. I could see the blue blaze flyin', and I jumped as high as your head, I reckon. I've ploughed up a many a shell in our fields since the battle. You'd find 'em most anywheres. Often, I've broke 'em in two. It's a wonder I wasn't killed. There was balls inside and brimstone and stuff.

I didn't like those shells a-flyin', and I got on one of the horses and led some of the others and went off across the Potomac to the place of a man who was a friend of my boss. There I stayed all day listenin' to the cannon.

Thursday I come home. Befo' I got there I began to see the Johnnies layin' along the road, some wounded and some dead. Men was goin' over the fields gatherin' up the wounded, and they carried a good many to our barn, and they'd pulled unthreshed wheat from the mow and covered the floor for the wounded to lay on. In the barnyard I found a number of Rebels laid in

our straw pile and I told 'em the Yankees was comin' to ketch 'em. But they said that was what they wanted — then they'd get a rest.

I was goin' over a stone wall on my way to the house, and there, leanin' against the wall was a wounded Yankee. I asked him when the Rebs left him.

“Last night about twelve o'clock,” he said.

I asked him how they'd treated him, and he said: “They found me wounded, and I reckon they did the best they could, but that wasn't much. They didn't have much to do with.”

For a while I carried water to the wounded in the barn, and then I went on to town. I wanted to see where my wife was, and after I found she hadn't been hurt I felt considerable better.

A week later the wounded was moved off our place to a camp hospital, and the family come home. The house, as well as the barn, had been used as a hospital, and whatever had been left in it was gone. Besides, every bit of our hay and stuff had been taken to feed the army horses. We didn't lose any of our own horses, but the next year some Rebel raiders got 'em all except two blind ones.

¹ As I saw him he was a white-haired patriarch who lived in a log cabin on a narrow, uncared-for back lane. On the same lane were numerous other rude negro homes and a primitive little church, I visited with the old man in his dirty, odorous kitchen where he was working at a broom machine.