

Chapter One of *The House and the Field* A Novel

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It was not until Penelope came into the house that Sunday evening and called me Master Phillip that I knew exactly how I was going to escape from slavery. It was a pleasant day—it was Spring—it was May. Everyone else had gone to church. Before leaving, my master Will told me that after services he and the rest of the family were going to Worthington's plantation which was about five miles South of us. He further instructed me that all the other servants had been given permission to leave the house, and passes to leave the plantation if they wished, but that he wanted me to stay at the house till he got back and not go wandering off anywhere.

"Yes, Master," I said.

He put his foot in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle as easily as Phillip could have done it. As soon as he had half way seated himself, Macho was ready to gallop off. Master Will held back on the reins and let Macho stand on his hind legs. He did it twice more and headed him toward the gate. In a moment he had overtaken the two buggies that were carrying the women and children to church. I saw my mistress turn her little yellow parasol toward my master to keep the dust out of her face. I could not hear her, but I could imagine her saying—"William, have you gone stone mad?" But my master did not pull back on Macho till he had caught up with Phillip who was riding his horse, Smoke, several paces ahead of the lead wagon. I watched them till they had made the bend, had gone behind the trees, then I turned to look at the river which lay just on the other side of the road. A light breeze stirred the water, and I could see the small white ripples flowing Eastwardly, and I could hear ducks and geese calling and answering one another at the edge of the bank. Farther down the river I saw a woman balancing a bundle of wood on her head, then taking a small child by the hand and leading him up the bank toward the quarters. When she came into the road she stopped a moment to look up the quarters, then she went into one of the cabins.

Left alone now in charge of the great house, I felt more like I was its master than its servant. I put my hands on my hips as Master Will or Phillip might have done and looked all round me. I made sure that no one was doing anything improper in the quarters, and that no one was disturbing the ducks and the geese in the river. I turned to my right now to see if I could catch anyone sneaking into the fruit orchard. I did not see a soul. Only the peach and orange trees covered with their pink and white blossoms.

I went back into the house. I stood in the parlor looking round me at the furniture—the dark high back chair of my master Will set over by the fireplace;

my mistress Helena's yellow cushion chair was by the window. I looked at the long golden drapes hanging at the windows on both sides of the room. Earlier that day I had pulled the drapes back and tied them to the wall so there would be more light in the house. I inspected the crystal chandeliers over my head for any sign of dust—but, of course, there wasn't any—and after glancing round me once more to make sure that everything was in order I went back into the dining room. The food had all been taken back to the kitchen—but, look, in the center of the dining table was a half bottle of Master Will's best whiskey. So that was the reason why he had taken so long coming out of the house. I jerked the stopper out of the bottle and raised the bottle to my lips, but I remembered that I was master of the house—if only for a few hours—and I must act like a gentleman. So I went to the cupboard for a glass. I inspected the glass to see if it was clean, then I poured in the amount of whiskey that a gentleman should pour. I took my glass and bottle to the table and sat down.

From where I sat I could see the door leading to my small room. Being the only manservant at the house, I was required to stay there so as to be at the side of my master Will or Phillip's whenever they needed anything. When I was unable to perform all my duties alone, I would go into the quarters and recruit further help. Across from my room was Penelope's room, and beside her room was Nat's and Leah's. Penelope was maid of the house, and Nat was her helper. Leah looked after the children. Jinks, a boy of ten, and who was everybody's helper, slept on a pallet in Penelope's room. When she was angry with him, then poor Jinks slept in any corner where he would not be disturbed. Us five were the servants who stayed at the great house. The cook, Juney; the washer woman, Met; the ostlers, Lem and Reese—who also acted as carpenter and blacksmith—lived in the quarters with the rest of the slaves who worked in the field.

But today I was at the great house alone, because even poor Jinks had been given permission to go into the quarters and play with the other children. I sat at the table now sipping from the whiskey and feeling it burning me inside, and feeling it making my head light and giddy.

I thought about Dotsy. What was she doing? Was she washing her clothes? Was she visiting someone else in the quarters, or was she lying down in her cabin resting from her labors in the field all week? Poor, sweet Dotsy. I treated her so bad—and still she loved me. I wished I was with her right now.

I got up from the table and went into my room. The little window in my room was opened, and I could see the quarters from here. But even if Dotsy would pass by, what good would it do me? I certainly could not bring her here, and my master had given me definite orders not to leave till he got back.

I stood at the window a while, but neither did Dotsy nor anyone else go by in the road. The quarters were quiet and still. It was Sunday, and most of the slaves in the quarters spent that day looking after their own personal needs which was in or round the cabin where they lived.

I lay on my bed against the wall and looked up at the ceiling. I felt my little book of poems under my head, and I picked it up and began reading. It was a book of English poetry, and it had been given to me by my master Will. He had come upon me looking at the book one day, and he asked me what did I think I was doing. I told him I wasn't doing anything. He asked me again and

again what did I think I was doing. I told him I wasn't doing anything. He said I was a damned liar, I was trying to read. He said the man he bought me from had told him that I was a smart little nigger, and now he wanted to know if that meant being able to read. I told him no. He told me he was going to get the truth out of me even if he had to beat me to within an inch of my life. Could I read or not? I told him yes. He told me to read a line. He opened the book at random, but it opened to Byron. I read it. He flipped over several pages till he reached Keats. He told me to read. I read. He snatched the book out of my hand and slammed it down on the table. Then he turned and walked out of the house. I thought he was going after the whip. I waited and waited, but he did not come back. My mistress came in and told me to stop standing there like a statue and go do my work. Two months later, I got the book as a Christmas gift. What made my master give it to me, I had no idea.

I lay on my bed now reading Byron's verses about beautiful ladies. But after a while I got tired of this and laid the book aside. I looked across the room at my clothes folded neatly on the shelf. I looked especially at my latest gift from Phillip, a blue velvet jacket, hanging on a peg against the wall. Phillip had torn one of the sleeves on a tree limb, and had given the jacket to me a week later. He had always given me his clothes when he got tired of them, but he had never given me anything like this before. The jacket was practically new; I doubt if he had worn it a half dozen times. But a gentleman like himself could hardly wear a coat that needed a patch on the sleeve.

Suddenly I had an urge to change clothes. I had worn the jacket twice before while serving the family, but I had never put it on when they were not at the house. Well, I would put it on now. If I was supposed to be the master of the house for the next few hours, then I ought to dress as the master would.

I leapt up off the bed and got out of the clothes that I had worn all week. I put on a pair of brown trousers and a brown shirt with ruffles. Of course, these were also hand-me-downs from Phillip. Now, I got the jacket and put it on—but as careful as if the jacket was made of crepe paper and might tear with any false move. I slipped on my other pair of shoes, my "dress up shoes," and I went to the window to look at myself in better light. I turned one way, I turned the other. I rubbed my hand over the sleeves and the side of the coat. Then I looked out of the window to see if Jinks was passing. I would call him to me and make him brush off my back and hold up the mirror for me.

"How do I look, Jinks?" I would say.

"Fine, Pins, fine," Poor Jinks would say.

"Fine, 'Master Pins'," I would say.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. Fine, *Master Pins*, fine," Jinks would say.

Jinks did not pass by the window, but I did not care. I knew that my clothes fitted me perfectly. The trousers were the right length, and not tight at all in the waist. The jacket could not have looked better on Phillip himself than it did on me. And the tear on the sleeve was almost unnoticeable.

After standing at the window admiring myself, I went out of the room. But my hat, my hat; a gentleman was not fully dressed till he wore a hat. I went back into the room to get it off the shelf. It was a light gray beaver hat with a black silk band. After blowing my breath on it and flickering at imaginary pieces of

lint, I cocked the hat on the side of my head, tapped it twice with the tips of my fingers, and went strutting out. Now for another drink—but be careful. Though I wore a gentleman's clothes, and indeed felt like a gentleman, I also knew what close attention my master paid to his whiskey bottle. With my glass, now, I went to the back door to look across the yard. A soft breeze from the West blew the fragrance of orange blossoms toward the door where I stood. Far back into the swamps, a mile or so away, I could hear the mournful call of an owl. He was quiet several minutes, then called again, but just as mournful as before. I sipped from my drink, looking cross the yard, feeling very much the master of all my surrounding.

I had been standing at the door no more than ten minutes when I heard Penelope saying—"Master Phillip, y'all back already?"

The blood shot up to my head. I nearly dropped the glass. I knew I would be whipped now. Not only did I have on clothes that I had not been given permission to wear, but I was standing at a pose no slave should ever try. To add even greater insult to the house, I was drinking out of the master's best whiskey. I waited for the orders to take off the clothes and come out into the yard. I could already feel the lash on my back.

"Master Phillip?" Penelope said again. She was much closer to me now. She could have been just on the other side of the dining table. "Where the rest of the family?" she said.

What? I thought. And jerked around.

"Pins?" Penelope screamed.

I was looking at Penelope, but I was not seeing her. I was thinking about something that had been happening ever since I came into this house. Penelope was not the first person to mistake me for Phillip; Master Will, Phillip's own father, had done it more than once. From a distance, the slaves in the quarters had often mistaken me for their young master, and white people coming to the house had always looked at me in a most curious way.

"What you acting like you Master Phillip for?" Penelope said.

"I wasn't acting like I was Master Phillip," I said.

"You most certainly was," she said. "In them good clothes. Standing there like you some kind o' gentleman. You ain't no gentleman, Pins. You just a plain nigger. And you better get out them clothes if you know what's good for you."

"I don't think I will," I said. "I think I'll go for a walk."

"Master Will say you stay at this house."

"You're here now."

"I ain't go'n be here long," she said. "Soon as I find that pass I'm going and see Lo. I don't know where I laid that thing."

"I'll give you a picayune if you stay," I said. "You can visit Aunt Lo next Sunday."

"Don't be telling me when I can visit Lo," Penelope said. "And you better get out them clothes if you know what's good for you. Let them catch you wearing them."

I drank the last of the whiskey from my glass.

"Lord, Pins, you done gone plumb crazy?" Penelope screamed. "You done gone and lost all your fac'ties? You know that's Master Will's best stock?"

"I know it," I said. "You want another drink?"

"Another one?" Penelope said. "I ain't had the first one?"

"Oh, yes, you had," I said. "You had two."

"You mean you been in that bottle—two times?"

"You been in that bottle—two times," I said. "Not me, Penelope. You."

"I'm getting out of here right now," she said, turning round.

"And you're going to get two more drinks before he gets back," I said.

She stopped. She looked at me over her shoulder.

"And you're going to start right now," I said, going toward the bottle.

Penelope beat me to the table. She snatched up the bottle and clutched it to her bosom with both arms.

"You might be white, Pins," she said. "But you ain't even a good nigger."

"That's better," I said.

I went to my room to get a picayune, and brought it back to her. She took the money from me with one hand, but at the same time holding the bottle close to her bosom with the other.

"No more drinking now," I said.

"You ain't nothing but a yellow dog, Pins."

"I'll be back in an hour," I said.

"Ain't you getting out them clothes?"

"No."

"What I'm go'n say if they come back?"

"Tell them I went walking."

"Yes sir, Master Pins."

I started to walk away, but now I stopped a moment to look at Penelope. I reached out my hand and laid it on her shoulder. She drew back from me, but not completely away, and questioned me with her eyes. Penelope was short, fat, and extremely black. Her prominent round jaws, her large dark eyes, gave her face a sweet and gentle expression. She was in her sixties, she had been with the family ever since she was a young woman, and I supposed she knew the family better than the members of the family knew one another. And that is why I had stopped a moment to look at her. If she mistook me for a gentleman of that house just because I wore a gentleman's clothes, stood in the door as a gentleman might stand, drunk whiskey from a gentleman's glass, then why couldn't I pass for a gentleman among total strangers?

"What you looking at me like that for, Pins?" Penelope asked. "Some more of your rascality?"

"Thanks for the pass," I said.

"Pins, you got my pass? Where you got it from? Give it back here."

I kissed her on the jaw before she could jerk back, then I went out.

"Pins?" she called. "That picayune good?"

"It's good," I said. "Thanks for the pass."

"Pins?" she said, coming after me. "Pins? Them paddy rollers know you ain't me."

I waved my hand over my shoulder, but I didn't look back. My escape plan had already begun to take root in my mind, and now I wanted to find a place where I could sit and think. I could not think of a better place than the field.