

Second Place Fiction

Sam, Jack, Eliza, and Mary

By Daniel England

I can't remember the last time I heard the chains. Even so, when I heard them that morning a few days ago, it seemed like no time at all since I heard them last. They didn't make as much noise as the harnesses and the hooves of the team, but even when it ain't loud, it's something you hear good anyhow.

The black wagon looked like the one where white folks carry dead people, but instead of glass there was bars. I'd never seen uniforms like these men had. Not like the ones I'd heard called Federals or the grey ones I'd heard called Confederates, but dark green trousers with black stripes down the sides and light grey shirts with brown, tall boots, looking more like jailors than soldiers. And they had big keys hanging next to their guns.

They showed the oldest son papers, and he called out to Sam, Jack, and Eliza. Eliza came from the house, and when she saw the wagon she screamed and fell to the ground. Jack froze in the door of the barn, and couldn't move, even when one of them yelling that he'd better not make him come over there. The man walked to him, hit him with his pistol and told him he wasn't used to no nigger making him walk, and didn't care if he was a old man, he'd whoop the fire out of him with his Navy six, if it happened again.

Jack got up, and held out his hands, not stopping to wipe the blood from his scalp. As the chains snapped shut on his wrists and ankles, one man said to Master John that's why he was told to have the niggers locked up so we didn't have to go through all this. Master John looked down, and said he being the oldest son he should have knowd better, but couldn't bring himself to do it.

The other men chained Eliza and dragged her to the wagon. The more she screamed and fought, the more they laughed saying how they liked the scrappy ones, and how much fun it'd be getting to her once they got her in the wagon.

Sam came from behind the corncrib driving a team of mules and a wagon loaded with tobacco. The men had heard him coming and waited for him to round the corner, with their guns out. He looked like he was fixing to running, but was too surprised to do anything other than give up.

I seen him a long ways off and wanted to yell at him, but he was so concentrating on that ornery team (Master Daddy John was the only one they'd really listen to) he wouldn't have heard me. Besides, I'm an old woman and I seen this so often that nobody never gets away, and it's just so bad once they do catch you just as soon ought to give up right off. Sam's a big man, big acrosst his chest, but when they put the irons on him it's like he shrunk down into the ground. He walked slow to the wagon, and one of the men pushed him w/ the butt on his shotgun, telling him to hurry up, just cause he could.

All during this commotion, family started showing up. Master Lewis and Master William and their wives and children watched. Master Lewis laughed whooped and waved his hat while Eliza was dragged off. He acted kind of strange for a man who I know used to be with Eliza so often in the barn, after he'd drag her from her bed during the night. Master Lewis's wife, Missus Alta looked at him real cold.

Master William told his children to go back in the house. His wife was crying pretty loud, and I swear I saw him wipe a tear from his eye. I saw a quick look at a boy inside the wagon, but as soon as he saw me looking back, he turned his head straight in front.

I stood still as I could, cause I didn't want any trouble. Master John signed papers with the leader of the men, he gave Master a bag from a strong box behind the wagon seat, and they drove off. I didn't know what was going on that they left me, and nobody said nothing. I waited until all the dust from the wagon was gone, and wanted to stay there until there was no sound other than the cicadas and red wing blackbirds by the cattle tank. Master Lewis saw me and yelled that there wasn't no time left for a stupid old nigger woman to stand around doing nothing.

We were afraid something would happen, since Daddy John died. They say it was the consumption, but it didn't look like when I'd seen it before with other folks. He just seemed to waste to nothing, but didn't do much coughing, least not as much as I expected. Anyway, lots of slaves got sold when someone died, but the farm was still going good, and plenty of work for all of us.

It didn't make any sense, them being sold, and then not selling me as well. Maybe I just wasn't worth much. But, not much seemed to make sense those early days of the war, in the "Border State" of Missouri.

This morning, I was kind of sick, and had lots of work to do anyhow, so I stayed home from church. It was the first time I could remember ever being alone, and the quiet of the house was kind of spooky, even on a bright, hot summer day. I was cleaning the parlor, and found papers in the desk where Master Daddy John used to do his business, but now was taken over by his oldest son.

I looked at a paper, which must have been very important, cause there were different places for folks to write their names, and circles with book writing, but not black, just raised places in the paper. I never seen anything like this close up.

Even though I wasn't supposed to know how to read, I'd been taught by the child of the master I had then on the horse farm in Kentucky. I was a little girl then, and part of my job was to be her friend. We loved each other, but when she died of the yellow fever, I was sold, and sold a couple more time, till I ended up in Missouri.

I sneaked some books time to time, and had a Bible, so I was still pretty good at reading. The paper had fancy writing, so fancy at the top it was hard to make out. "Last Will and Testament of John Thomas Jefferson Barnes. Sr." I read about who was supposed to get the pastures; the tobacco, cotton, and corn row crop fields; the timber; the buildings and the house; and access to the spring and the far timber patches.

Then the third part said "I will that my wife Polly have her side saddle, the loom and the apparatus attached to it, and one bed and furniture. I give and bequeath to all my children by my first wife Alice my four negroes To Wit: Sam, Jack, Eliza, and Mary. I will that said negroes be sold and the proceeds thereof be distributed equally between all my children by my first wife Alice. Nevertheless I will that my wife Polly have the aforesaid girl Mary to stay with her and wait upon her and my daughter Martha until Martha shall either arrive at Full Age or Marry, then Mary is to be sold that the proceeds to be distributed equally between all my children aforesaid by my first wife Alice."

So, now I knew why the others had been sold, and why I was to stay. I'm here 'til a crazy old lady dies, or her mean as a snake, sneaky daughter got older or married. She's sneaky enough to grab herself a man, so looks like I'll be in that wagon soon enough. That's unless President Lincoln can come to Lafayette County and rescue me. Maybe he'll come riding in on the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad. More likely maybe I'll hear the rattle of the chains first.