

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

SEWANEE, MARION COUNTY, TENNESSEE 1846

John Hale isn't here to smile at the remembrance of his life being written on pages of a book. I turn those pages now, seeing the words by the light from the log still burning in my fireplace. My eyes fill with tears wanting to spill down my face. I can hear him say in a matter of fact way, "Ernest my grandson, I was born a slave about the time the flowers of May came into bloom. May 21 it was told to me — the year was 1846."

After breath was given John Hale it didn't take long for the sentence of born slave to be pronounced upon him. Any brown baby born in the slave cabins could be snatched from a warm breast to have his mother work and toil for her owner. Only the faint cry of the baby could be heard as his mother disappeared into the fields and owners houses, sometimes forever if they were sold to another plantation. John Hale could truly say, "I never knew you." His parents were sold to another owner.

A slave, he would learn, is a person held legally in bondage to another to work and toil unremittingly. To not know who gave you life can only be justified by the knowledge that God keeps the records, and John Hale, child of God, will some day know his mother and father. John Hale had a brother and sister, but he was the oldest and strongest. That fact didn't always bring rewards. "I got most of the whippings. Only strong muscles could help the blacksmiths shoe horses, and I was chosen."

Only in the human world do we sell mothers and fathers. The parents in the animal kingdom rear the young and send them out when the time is right. "My grandparents," said John Hale, "raised me. They brought me up at least until I was fifteen."

He spoke with a bit of sadness and some excitement. A sparkle of remembrance came into his face. He lifted his head and stared with a faraway look, as if he could see the raising up and the young boy going to war again. "The plantation owner knew the colonel in the Confederate Army. They needed men and boys to do work shoeing horses for the cavalry. I was sent to South Carolina and put in a regiment of 150 men."

A civil war is a killing war between citizens of the same country. The Battle of Shiloh, Grant's triumph in Tennessee, The Battle of Chickamauga, The River of Blood War, and The Battle Above the Clouds. A little drum, through with the battle now, can tell of its pain as it marched with its drummer boy to war. The time was 1861. The guns loudly roar and steel clanks on steel, while thousands fall and die.

*On a rusty nail a little drum dangled
on a wall.
Dusty leaves and ragged flags
Round the parchment fall.
A soldier youth on Shiloh's hills
Watched the lamb whose skin
A clever workman wrought, and
Gave the covered sphere its din.
Through groaning men and dying men
The drummer found his way,
And many a man by honor lured
Did curse the dawn that day.
Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat the drummer
Thumped aloud,
The soldier died and in the morn
The cold ground was his shroud.
Ah, this is glory - sure, and still
Will men the drum beat follow,
Nor learn that glory, like its
Drum, is but a sound and hollow.*

For want of a horseshoe, the soldiers couldn't race across the battlefields of the Civil War. John Hale was a part of the war.

A part of childhood was left on the plantation. When he went to war he was a slave, but there was a bit of security in his family and the shack that was his home. John Hale's strong brown arms gleamed in the Tennessee sunshine. At fifteen he could hammer iron into shape. The red hot iron gave way to bend at the hammer blows.

The sparks flew as the hammer banged away. A confederate officer pointed to young John Hale working in the blacksmith shack. "What did you do", he was asked years later, "when you were told to report for duty in the army?" "Well, I smiled and cried inside me, where no one could see me. With the whippings, I learned to cry inside. It was a great help".

When the war was over, John Hale stood by the dusty road and watched his company move out for the last time. "I was freed, but had no place to go. I went back to the plantation, caught a ride on a couple of hay wagons. The riding got me home sooner. I wanted to see if my grandfather was still on the plantation. They were all there, still planting cotton. The owner told us we were free to go. We had a meeting in the shack, and when all of our rags and a few cooking pots were bundled and tied, we walked down the road to our life of