

freedom. "Come back here!", a call came from the plantation owner. "We have not stolen anything". The owner continued, "I know a man from Tennessee Iron and Coal Company, came to the plantation, a recruiter seeking negro workers for the mines. They will pay \$1.00 a ton for mining coal. Paydays are once a month, and there are cabins to live in. Old Zack is going into town for supplies, if you wait you can ride with him in the back of the wagon."

John Hale and his brother Tom went to work in a coal mine in Tennessee. They had never been underground before and they did not know how to shovel coal into the cars. The jobs were not particularly likable. We had to be car loaders, timber packers, and before the second week, we were laying track in the mine. The coal vein was only three feet high, so we had to get on our knees alot. When he was asked to recall the coal mines, he said, "I was not on my knees a-praying; I was digging the black coal." We had to push the coal cars to the entrance; the mules could pull them from there. The men who drove the mules were called mule skimmers. The days were ten and twelve hours long, and our pay was one dollar a day redeemable with a coupon.

When John Hale and his brother learned to dig coal, they went to work where they could make the most money. The farther north they went the more pay they got. The coal operators would work the mines in the winter and lay off in the summer.

John Hale picked up his last day's pay and headed for Knoxville, Tennessee. He wasn't expecting anything special just a warm day. Another lay off for the summer! Oh well, he could hustle some kind of job to keep from starving. Barefoot and shirtless he walked down the quiet street leading to the town water pump. Fannie Gray had her apron full of feed to throw to the restless chickens scratching in the barnyard. She had lovely almond eyes and a straight nose. She walked gracefully about, her back was toward the chicken coop. John Hale watched her. As beautiful as a morning bird, he thought. She did not turn around, but she could feel his presence, and she rather liked it.

Fannie Gray emptied her apron of chicken feed. With a flip the kernels fell from her apron. The chickens found it, scratching the well trampled barnyard. Fannie Gray turned toward the road and blinked in the sunshine. "Morning, Miss. I am not down on my luck; I just need a drink of water." "I didn't think you were a vagrant. Come on, the water pump is round the back." John Hale followed the swishing of Miss Gray's skirt and apron. She reached for the pump handle. "No, I can do that." With a strong arm he filled the cup and almost overflowed the bucket underneath. "I work in the coal mines - layed off for the summer. Can't imagine Jehovah letting me starve in the summer when He

knows I have to work in the winter."

I am sure there are chores a-plenty for me in the house, candles to dip and mending. I'll go now." "Say, would there be any work around here?" "There is work picking fruit hereabouts. You can sleep under the stars; the owners let you have the most grassy hillside." "Sounds good. Goodbye now, Miss." "Fannie Gray is my given name." John started toward the garden gate, "Miss Gray." A silent small figure sitting in the high branches put a long green hollow stem into his mouth, and with a ping, he shot John Hale in the backside. All concerned turned their eyes upward to the tree. "All right now, Samson Johnson, come down from there." "His name fits him." John Hale rubbed his backside. A long legged boy of ten, with only the barest amount of clothing to cover him, climbed down and stood before his accusers. There was not a bit of repentance in his spirit. "I can spit farther than you can too." John Hale picked him up with one hand and let him dangle in mid air. "Say that again" "I can spit farther than you can!" "All right, Mr. Samson Johnson! You can prove it, and if you do spit farther, I will buy you some penny candy from a store." "Real store bought; not some your mother made?" "Just what I said." John made two marks in the dust in the chicken yard. "You have to wet the dust on the mark. You say one, two, three, Miss Gray. When she says three, we will spit." Samson Johnson rolled his tongue around, trying to work up a mouthful of water. "I should have got a drink first." "No, the rules are set." "But you have a bigger mouth." "But you challenged me. I didn't say I could spit farther." With a "slish" John Hale let his go. It made a nice arc and missed the mark by a foot. "Now, Mr. Samson Johnson"... "Well, I'll try the fast straight way." The dust moved. John Hale had lost and his new friend followed him out of the yard and down the road to his reward. "Is you really going to buy a penny bag?" "Come on." John Hale bent down and Samson Johnson got on his shoulders. Together they went, the boy bouncing high in the air. "Do you like it up there?" Two brown dirty feet dangled. "You need a dunkun in some river; you should have a bath." John Hale touched the bottom of the small calloused foot that had never known shoes. His feet were so tough he could walk across hot coals, but John Hale was not about to challenge him.

"Do you know the man that owns the fruit orchards?" "Sure, I knows everyone. Are you sweet on Miss Gray? Is that why you were in the yard?" "You ask too many questions for a youngun." "If my mama saw me now I would have to say my catechism many times, the Ten Commandments, and three times the Lords Prayer. I never go to a store; I don't know how to buy anything." "Stay with me." The high counter was filled with food Samson Johnson had never seen before; barrels of apples, pickles, and flour, and three jars of