

GONE TO TEXAS

**VOLUME ONE
JERICO D. McCAIN
TEXAS RANGER**

R. C. MORRIS

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

GONE TO TEXAS

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Published by Hellgate Press

(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)

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Hellgate Press

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Ashland, OR 97520

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Cover and Interior Design: L. Redding

ISBN: 978-1-954163-61-4

Printed and bound in the United States of America

First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Other Books Written by R.C. Morris:

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Detachment B-52, Project Delta*

Don't Make the Blackbirds Cry: A Novel

Tender Prey: A Novel

*When Legends Lived:
Vol. Two: Jericho D. McCain, Texas Ranger*

What Others Are Saying About *Gone to Texas*

“*Gone to Texas* by Raymond Morris is a remarkable work of fiction that harkens back to the ‘lawless west,’ in early Texas, a period that marks the first stage of what will be known in coming decades as the ‘Wild West.’ The hero’s journey begins when Jericho McCain, who has lost his parents and sisters, sets out to find his brother Taylor, a member of the Ranger unit in Texas, but the coming-of-age tale of a young Jericho is more than that. It’s a history of men called to use violence to remedy the acts of violent men. Jericho’s journey to manhood takes place as Texas and Zachary Taylor’s army are fighting the forces of Santa Ana. At the same time gangs of lawless men and Indian tribes ravage the countryside. Because the army of the Union is engaged in war and local law officials are inept, only an elite group of Rangers offer hope of interceding in the violence wrought by evil men.

Morris, a retired Army officer familiar with combat, captures the varied conflicting elements through often spare and stark scenes of violent battles that depict both courage and cowardice. Ultimately, as is the tradition in classic Westerns, Jericho’s story is a tale of honor. His is also a story that celebrates our deeper humanity as depicted in the honorable actions men perform in battle, as well as in the humor they express and the heartfelt emotions they mask in tragic moments. In the end, Jericho is a stronger and more poised man, and a humble hero as well who echoes the noble virtues embraced in traditional Western fiction, values that seem to have taken a hiatus in 21st Century America.”

—H. Lee Barnes, author of *The Lucky*,
a Spur Award Finalist

“If you liked the *Lonesome Dove* trilogy, you will love *GTT!*”

—Aaron Gritzmaker, U.S. Army Special Forces,
Texan and an avid Western reader

R.C. Morris

“In reading *Gone to Texas* it became quickly apparent that the author was writing about times, places, and people he identified with and wanted to portray well! I read the entire book, word by word, story by story, in less than two days. Each time I placed a bookmark between pages to take a break, I found myself being pulled back, almost needing to see where Ray was taking me next! His rich descriptions and well woven events are magic to those of us that love westerns! This book is already a hit for me and reminded me too why I have admired and had deep affection for its author for almost forty years!”

—Major Jerry R. Bailey, U.S. Army Special Forces (Ret)

“Powerful, gripping, suspenseful! This heart-warming and inspiring tale of a young man’s survival and success through hardships on the pre-Civil War frontier is a fast-paced, satisfying read. I’ve been a fan of the late Ray Morris’s writing for many years, be it crime novels or military non-fiction. *Gone To Texas* is perhaps his best yet, and will garner him many more fans!”

—Hank Cramer, retired soldier and singing cowboy,
Winthrop, WA

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Prologue

THE YEAR WAS 1845. It was Indian summer and deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains the entire McCain family was being buried – except for a lone survivor. One by one, Jericho McCain dug the holes and carried his baby sister, his mother, and finally his father to the shallow graves he had dug in the rocky soil and carefully covered them over. Jericho McCain was barely sixteen years old.

At this elevation, morning fog tended to hang in the hollows until almost noon. Warm left-over summer days and early cool fall nights intensely collided, with condensation in the low-lying areas and thick vapors cascading skyward as though the world had suddenly caught fire. Rangers who had never seen the phenomenon reacted in uniquely different ways. Some marveled at its beauty, while others shivered with foreboding and anxiety. The region's superstitious hill-folk, especially, tended not to stray far from their homes when conditions were such.

Millions of years of persistent glacial activity had gradually carved deep, ragged ravines through the granite rock. Subsequent volcanic eruptions formed curiously sharp peaks, towering majestically, forever standing sentinel over the eerie terrain. Near the top of one such peak, hidden by tall pines and thick vegetation, a twenty-acre plot of relatively level landscape had been created by some such natural force. It had once been encased within the thick brush and towering trees, but more recently someone had

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taken great effort to hack away the natural growth leaving a bald spot on the naturally green mountain slope. Several large stone piles dotted the clearing perimeter, removed when the rocky soil had been plowed to make room for the stand of potatoes and corn. Although the patch appeared to have been once well-tended, weeds sprouted between its long straight rows, burnt brown by hot sun-rays and lack of water.

At one corner of the field a narrow road wound up the mountain for nearly a mile, ending at another, smaller clearing. If standing in the exact center, one could see in any direction for a hundred miles. That is, if not for the dense fog – and the fact that a five-room cabin occupied the space. The dwelling, larger than most homes in the mountainous terrain, had been constructed of the same huge timbers from the steep slopes surrounding the site. An observer might speculate about the back-breaking effort that must have been involved in retrieving the logs and meticulously fitting them together. A master craftsman, proud of his work, had obviously built the sturdy cabin, for there were no jagged edges around the windows or doors, nor uneven chinks between the logs. Inside, with the same meticulous care, a large masonry rock fireplace centered along one wall while finely crafted shelves lined the log walls and handmade, intricately carved furniture was scattered throughout.

Several outbuildings dotted the landscape, erected at various intervals with the same precision and skill found within the cabin. Even the split rail fences were finished by someone who took extreme pride in their work. A small barn could be seen two hundred feet to the left of the main house, near a cleared tree line, its rail fence enclosing a graying mule and two large horses of fine bloodlines. Further to the rear, a chicken coop

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and hog pen in place, and a small fenced vegetable garden was evident, overtaken by weeds burnt brown from the sun.

Between the garden and the tall pine trees, two mounds of dark fresh dirt contrasted with the parched vegetation. A motionless figure sat on one mound. A boy, no more than sixteen, rested with his bowed head, staring vacantly into the deep hole. He had the appearance of someone who had been there for hours. Beyond the livestock, the only other living thing in sight was a lean blue-tick hound, languishing in the meager shade by the chicken coop. The dog's head rested on paws that seemed much too large for such a lean animal, a sorrowful, unwavering gaze fixed on the motionless boy as though sensing his anguish.

At last, the boy raised his head and stared toward the silent house. Noting the movement, the blue-tick also raised his head yet remained in the shade. The boy's face was lean, burned dark from countless hours of toiling in the hot sun. A film of dust and dirt coated his clothing, face and thick shoulder length hair; undoubtedly from the difficult chore of digging the rocky soil. Sweat and dried tears left muddy tracks down his cheeks. Though familiar with hard work, the laborious task of digging had worn blisters on his toughened hands and they'd broken and bled at some point. The boy appeared not to notice.

To the right of the two larger holes, a smaller mound was marked by a wooden cross, etched,

SARA McCAIN
Beautiful Child & Beloved Sister
Taken in her tender years
1840 - 1845

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He'd dug that grave three days previously when he'd buried his baby sister. His mother had passed the following night, but he'd had to leave her in her bed while he urgently labored for two more days to save his stricken father. Unsure of exactly what to do, he'd placed sheets and blankets over his father's fevered body then doused him with buckets of cold spring water to try to break the fever's hold. Exhausted, unable to function any longer, he'd finally collapsed on the cabin floor and slept for nearly five hours. He'd awakened to the crowing of roosters, only to discover his father had expired while he slept.

Jericho McCain could never understand why the fever claimed both of his parents and sister, but failed to take him. Grieving and exhausted, he didn't much care if the fever did consume him, but direly prayed to first finish the chore of burying his family.

The McCain family had come to these mountains seven years earlier after Thomas McCain heard about the federal government's new homesteading policy. Jericho had been only eight; Taylor, his older brother, fifteen. Their sister Sara was born three years later. Ruth McCain, a schoolteacher in Ireland before marrying Thomas, saw to it her family's education never suffered, although no school was within fifty miles of their new homestead. The nearest neighbor lived ten miles away; a strange bearded old man with a dozen dogs that shared his austere shack. He'd quickly let people know he wasn't friendly and didn't want company. Thomas McCain respected his privacy and went out of his way not to bother him. Their reclusive neighbor Hobbs was also dead of the fever.

* * *

Ruth McCain had proudly and repeatedly told her children

that their father had been a minister before the family's long journey to the United States of America, and if they didn't desert God after coming to this new world, God wouldn't desert them either. Jericho had believed her then. He didn't now.

* * *

Though not overly strict with his children, Thomas had insisted they study the Bible and participate in the family's prayer sessions. He'd also taught his sons to shoot - and shoot well. Thomas McCain didn't hold with the taking of human life, but he'd been a soldier in his youth and had seen awful injustices done toward those who couldn't defend themselves.

He'd told his children, "Never back down from what you believe is right, even if you're outnumbered. It's true you may die, but if branded a coward, the many small deaths you'll suffer from not standing up for your beliefs will be your own personal Hell on earth."

Thomas had felt it was a parent's responsibility to teach their children right from wrong, but if they failed to abide by his teachings after leaving home, it'd be on their own shoulders. Taylor, who had always been a little rebellious and a lot more adventurous than Jericho, mostly just heard the part about "leaving home." He did just that on his nineteenth birthday, two years ago. His only letter mentioned he'd settled in a place far to the west. Someplace called Texas.

Although Jericho had desperately longed to go with him, he considered himself more levelheaded than his impulsive older brother, and also knew how much the others depended upon him to help keep meat on the family table.

Thomas McCain, as a soldier before becoming a man of the

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cloth, had been noted for his marksmanship in the Royal British Army, serving with distinction during his country's many conflicts. His skill was such that Regimental Commanders had vied vigorously for his assignment to their units. The casual, disinterested manner, in which he fired both pistol and rifle with unerring accuracy was well known.

Fed up with the death and destruction he'd witnessed, Thomas had finally packed up his family and their meager belongings and sailed for the new world in search of a better life. Thereafter, he'd hated the thought of killing any animal, but knew well the necessity of hunting game for the table. It was for that reason alone that he began to teach his sons to shoot at a very tender age.

Taylor had quickly become a crack shot, seldom needing more than one round to bring home their evening meals. Thomas readily admitted his eldest son was nearly as good as he, but young Jericho McCain showed prowess of an entirely different caliber. When it came to shooting contests between the three, there was never a doubt as to the outcome. Jericho was simply the best. The best Thomas McCain had ever seen. While as fast and accurate as his father with a pistol, with a rifle no one could out-do him. He'd proudly boast, "If Jericho can see it, he can hit it."

Occasionally, they'd travel long distance to engage in turkey shoots. Jericho never failed to bring home the prize, and had won both of the fine-blooded horses in the McCain's corral. With his skill with a firearm, and Thomas's distaste for taking life, it made Jericho the primary family member responsible for keeping meat on the table.

* * *

It'd been a rare event a week earlier, while Jericho had finished up weeding the potato patch, his father had taken the old flintlock rifle he called his squirrel gun and slipped silently down to the creek where he'd noticed deer tracks in the spring. After a few hours of no luck, he'd followed the creek downstream to another clearing he'd remembered from an earlier hunt.

That's where he'd found old man Hobbs lying on the creek bank, ashen, drenched with sweat, gasping for breath. Thomas had carried him nearly a mile to the old man's one room shack and placed him on the bed. At that instant, the old man had opened his eyes and said the only words he'd ever spoken to a member of the McCain family.

“Fever...in the well water...git away...quick.”

He closed his eyes and never regained consciousness.

McCain had seen the fever during his European campaigns. The stacks of bodies, their blackened faces twisted and grotesque, would forever remain fresh in his memory. He backed away in horror, brushing at his clothing as if to dislodge any of the clinging invisible death. Outside, he'd paused only long enough to torch the old man's cabin, then stumbled to the stream and jumped in, fully clothed.

He'd frantically washed his face and hands, peeling away his clothing, scrubbing them until threadbare. Without lingering to allow his clothes to dry, McCain had hurried home. He'd ordered his family to stay away from him until he'd scrubbed down more with lye soap. Then he'd burned his clothing.

It was not enough. Within a week, baby Sara was dead and Ruth McCain mortally stricken. Jericho and his father had worked in vain to break the fever's hold on his mother and sister,

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and it looked miraculously as though the family's two males might be spared. But on the third day, while carrying water from the wellspring, Thomas McCain fell stricken to the ground, unconscious. Shortly afterward Jericho began digging the last two graves.

Jericho stood stiffly, ignoring his complaining joints and muscles, staring stoically at his raw, blistered hands as though noticing them for the first time. With dread, he walked slowly toward the house he'd called home. The blue-tick's eyes followed him as he entered briefly, then reemerged with a heavy, sheet wrapped bundle. Carrying his burden to the graves, he gently lowered it beside a hole and slowly rolled it in. His shoulders sagging, he paused briefly, returned to the cabin once more, reappeared with another bundle and repeated the process. When finished, he sagged to the ground, exhausted.

Thirty minutes passed before the youngster stirred again. Removing a red handkerchief from his pocket, he ripped it in half, wrapped each of his blistered hands, picked up his shovel and slowly began to fill the holes. His task finished, Jericho hammered wooden crosses into each of the fresh mounds. He'd constructed the crosses in the same precise manner as the dwellings had been, and as the one on his sister's grave, impeccably lettered:

BELOVED BELOVED

Thomas McCain Ruth McCain

1801 - 1845 1810 - 1845

Husband and Father Wife and Mother

He lingered, his head bowed, then looked toward the smallest mound of fresh dirt and spoke, his voice soft, raspy.

“Sis, I’ll always remember your bubbly little laugh. Every time I see a firefly in the evening or a bright butterfly in the afternoon, I’ll see you chasing them through the grass. I’ll always love you, Sis.”

He stared at the middle grave for just a moment, then spoke again. “You were the best Mom any boy ever had. You taught me how to read and write, sang songs with Sis and me and even when things was scarce, managed to cook the best food any family ever had. For whatever good I process, I have you to thank. I promise each day to try and remember your bible teachings, never hurt another person, and always stride for what’s good inside me. Ma...I love you.”

His soft voice was beginning to crack noticeably as he finally addressed the last grave. “Pa...you probably never knew you were a teacher, too...but I watched everything you ever did, and from that I learned how to be a man. I don’t remember you ever raising your voice, you never broke your word, and never walked away from what you knew was the right thing to do. I’ll always try to be the man you’d want me to be. I know this is probably the...the...last time...we’ll ever be together as a family. If Taylor had known, I know he’d be here too. I promise you that I will find Taylor and let...him know...about this. I will. You have my word. I love you, Pa.”

He stood, sniffed a couple of times, and wiped his eyes with a dirty sleeve.

“Goodbye.”

Removing the family bible from a canvas knapsack on the ground, Jericho McCain softly recited the Lord’s Prayer and read a familiar passage of the Psalms, then replaced it and

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solemnly walked toward the barn. The two horses watched unmoving as he opened the gate, saddled the stallion and tossed a rope over the mare's head. He effortlessly tossed another rope over the head of the mule. Tugging it outside, he heaved several canvas-wrapped bundles and canteens onto its back, securing them with hemp ties, then leading the animals to the front of the cabin, he entered for one last time.

Emerging quickly, his father's long-barreled squirrel gun was tied over his shoulder with a leather strap, his cap-and-ball pistol stuffed into the waistband of his trousers. Jericho led the animals toward the three mounds and paused silently. Then mounting, he stared down at the panting dog.

"Well, bonehead - you going or not?"

The blue-tick eagerly bounded to his feet, barked once and followed the boy down the narrow trail. Jericho never looked back as the flames began to flicker through the cabin's open doorway, nor did he notice the smoke lifting lazily into the afternoon sky. He knew where he was headed. He'd been thinking about it ever since Taylor left. He'd have gone to find his brother, even if he hadn't promised his father.

Texas – that's where Taylor said he was going.

* * *

Texas! The name had a good ring to it. A clean "starting over" kind of sound and that's what Jericho wanted - a clean start.

There was no other family he knew of because Thomas McCain had been the first of his kin to migrate to this new world. Jericho swore he'd be damned if he ever considered returning across the water. No, he'd go to Texas, wherever that

was, and try to find his brother, Taylor. Between them they could make a new life.

On his mother's old map, he'd often studied the small country people had been referring to as the Republic of Texas. Before leaving his cabin for the last time, he'd wrapped the old map in oilskin and stuffed it inside his shirt. It didn't look too far. Might take him a spell to find Taylor once he got there, but he'd find him! He was sure of that.

How big could Texas be, anyway?

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One

STARTLED, THE BIG RED stallion shied to the left, the mule and mare kicked up their heels and Blue went into one of his infrequent barking fits as a wild turkey suddenly took flight from beside the narrow trail to their left. Impatiently Jericho had jerked the reins hard, instantly sorry as he leaned forward to rub his mount's neck and speak softly. He was tired and hungry and his butt hurt from several weeks in the saddle. He wasn't in any mood to put up with pesky shenanigans from his animals, but to tell the truth, the turkey had startled him too. They were all jumpy and needed a rest. It was still early but he decided it best to find a camping spot for the night.

Mississippi sure is big, he thought, astonished at how long it'd taken him to reach just this point in his journey. According to the map, Texas looked to be even larger. It might prove harder to find Taylor than he'd first thought.

Mississippi.

That was what the man at the last farm had called this place. Indian for Watery Land. Jericho remembered seeing it briefly on his mother's oilskin map but couldn't recall much more about it. He'd been riding through for the past three days and if the farmer was to be believed, he wasn't even halfway across. Last night, after preparing for camp, he'd retrieved the old map from his canvas bag and studied it by the campfire's fading light. A big place on paper from the looks of it, you could still fit two of

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its size into the Texas space. For the first time, Jericho had serious misgivings about his venture.

The farmer and his skinny, pale wife had fed Jericho and his animals, letting him sleep in their dilapidated barn for two nights. During the first, a sudden thunderstorm hit in the middle of the night, soaking Jericho and all his belonging through a poorly patched roof. The second night, he'd waited until his benefactors had gone to sleep, then rigged a lean-to behind the barn. He'd arisen early the following morning to take it down so he wouldn't insult the couple's kindness. That had been the last night either he or his animals had a good night's rest. Also the last time they'd had a decent meal.

Ahead, the narrow trail suddenly opened into a wide arch of cleared areas overlooking a swift muddy river. Was this the mighty Mississippi River he'd heard about at the farm? This country was quite different from what he'd been riding through, until now mostly swamp and marshlands. Here was rich, lush land where supple crops and carefully sculptured timbered areas intermittently dotted the countryside. His interest peaked, he decided to ride a while longer before stopping. Within the hour, he topped a rise, and observed two groups of people working in a large cotton field. The nearest, only a quarter of a mile away; the other, a good mile in the distance. Guiding his mount closer, he saw they were colored folks and correctly assumed they were slaves, like the ones he'd seen at the Grouse Point auction block.

Bent low with their sacks over the cotton plants, they didn't glance up as the small column of rider, pack animal, riderless horse and skinny hound quietly passed. The women wore head-rags or tattered bonnets to shield them from the relentless afternoon sun. Only some of the men, bare from the waist up, their

backs shiny from the sweat of their toil, wore hats. Intent upon their task, none appeared to notice the lone white boy and his three animals, yet Jericho was sure they couldn't have missed him. He studied them as he passed, eager to question them about the countryside ahead. If nothing else, the sound of a human voice would've been welcome to his ears. Yet, not one of the workers acknowledged him in any way, much less made eye contact as he rode past. He recalled the strange language he'd heard at the auction block years before and wondered if they even spoke English.

This was only the second time he'd ever seen a black slave. His first experience had been at the age of eleven when his father took him to a shooting contest at Grouse Point. It was only his first match but his father had later told him he'd done well - high praise indeed, coming from Thomas McCain. The truth was he'd actually placed second, winning a pair of Dominick hens instead of the fat turkey awarded for first prize. He'd out-shot twenty-three men and boys and one woman. But the last contestant, a man named Wilson Pike, had cleanly out-matched him. Pike could eat an apple with his right hand while driving nails in a fence-post twenty feet away with the pistol in his left. He could toss small rocks in the air and pluck them out with single shots from the boxy stub-nosed pistol he carried in his waistband.

* * *

The Grouse Point shooting match was the biggest county event of the year, and it was there that just last year he'd won the stallion and mare. Folks came from as far away as Memphis to sell their wares and dance to the music. Jericho had listened

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to juice harps, fiddles, banjos, mandolins, French harps, washboards, spoons, and pot and pans played as drums, and other instruments he couldn't identify. All combined, the event had a carnival atmosphere. It was also where a few slave traders took the opportunity to display their products, hoping to turn a handsome profit. On that particular day, there had been four of them; a strong young man with blue-black skin, an older man who coughed incessantly, a fat woman and a beautiful young chocolate hued girl, about his own age. The only two sold had been the young man and girl. Jericho hadn't fully understood the implications, but remembered afterward how the fat woman wailed when the new owner led the sobbing girl away. The woman had called after them, pleading in a language he hadn't understood. She'd suddenly turned toward him, her eyes empty hysterical sockets. The scene had left him shaken for hours afterward. He also recollected how he'd searched his father's face for comfort, saw his clenched jaw and recoiled at his angry glare as they strode away through the crowd.

If what he'd seen had affected his aim that day he never knew, but it had truly bothered him for days afterward. During the months following the match, young Jericho's memory of the slaves being auctioned off slowly dimmed, until eventually he only recalled that he'd lost the shooting match to a tall, lanky Southerner who, between shooting matches, quietly sipped corn liquor in the shade of an apple tree. The image that hadn't diminished was his mental picture of Wilson Pike leaning lazily against a fence post, plunking rocks out of the air with his ugly little pistol. He'd been so impressed with Pike's accomplishment that he'd practiced hour-after-hour for the next six months, shooting at tossed rocks until he'd mastered the enviable feat.

It was only upon his arrival at Grouse Point the second time that he'd thought again about the wailing fat woman and the pretty slave girl. When he and his father returned the following year, Jericho was determined to beat the man named Pike, who many considered the best pistol shot in Tennessee - and this time to come home with first prize. But Wilson Pike hadn't shown up that year. According to the regulars, he was a man who couldn't hit a barn while sober, and required at least four straight sour mashes before becoming the calm, steady-handed shootist he'd proven to be the previous year. With glee, some of the old shooters told Jericho and his father of how, while he'd been preparing for a match in River Town the previous month, he'd consumed some bad sour mash whisky and died from convulsions, drowning in his own vomit.

Jericho had won his turkey prize and the horses that year, and it was only as they were leaving town that they'd passed by the auction block where the slaves had been sold. It was empty, but the scene from the previous year suddenly rushed over him, leaving him with the vision of the old woman's wild eyes. Winning the turkey hadn't seemed so important after that.

Jericho's attention was swiftly brought back to the present by movement in the next field. He was closer and could tell that this second group of workers was much larger than the first. From his height advantage on the stallion, he could count nearly a hundred backs a bobbing between the cotton rows. Disappointed with his initial encounter with the black field hands, he ventured even closer, cutting across the cotton field and riding right through their center. It had little effect, for this group also failed to respond. Only one, an old man with white scars crisscrossing the glistening skin on his dark back, met his

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eyes, then quickly averted them. In a split-instant, Jericho saw a hundred years of suffering and misery staring back at him. It was as if he were gazing again into the fat woman's frantic eyes at the auction block in Grouse Point. Shaken, he gazed at the horizon to compose himself.

Jericho's eyes shifted to a large man in a flat-top hat, sitting under a lone shade tree in the exact center of the cotton field. A horse was nearby, its reins dangling free, grazing on the small ring of close-cropped green grass under the huge oak. As Jericho angled toward him, the pot-bellied man stood, reaching for and picking up a ten-foot black snake whip from a nearby stool.

From a distance, the man had appeared well dressed and neat in his all-white attire. But upon closer inspection Jericho could tell he'd been mistaken. He was, in fact, disgustingly filthy. The hat that'd loomed so pure in the distant sunshine, was greasy up close, with large unsightly sweat stains around the band. Dirt and grass stains camouflaged his baggy pants, while tobacco stains dotted the front of his once white shirt-ruffle. Never intended to be white were his scuffed knee-high boots, and the black whip he held loosely as though an extension of his hands. The man grinned, his teeth crooked and stained. He cleared his throat and spit out a brownish-gob at the trunk of the large oak, already dotted from many such contacts.

"Hi pilgrim. Got some cool spring-water in the bucket yonder. Hep yoreself."

Jericho lowered himself gingerly to the ground and nodding his thanks, drank long and deeply from the metal dipper. The water was cool and sweet. He nodded approval and dropped the dipper back into the wooden bucket.

"Thank you, sir. I been hankering for that. Been a long dry ride."

“Where you bound, youngster?”

“Texas. My brother’s there. Know how far it is?”

The sloppy man placed his chubby hands on his hips, threw his head back and literally bellowed with laughter.

“Texas? Hell boy, Texas is a lifetime away. A good couple o’ months anyway. That is if’n Injuns or the greasers don’t getcha first. Then there’s the heat and lack o’water, rattlesnakes, bandits and deserters. If you do git lucky and actually make it to Texas, the carpetbaggers will skin ya outta them fine-looking animals the first hour. Take it from me son, stay in God’s country. Stay right here in Miss’sippi.”

Jericho decided right off that he didn’t much care for this coarse, unkempt individual, but his pa had raised him right and when the fat man stuck out his grimy hand, courtesy required he grasp it.

“Jasper Gates. Overseer for Pleasant Manor Plantation. Thomas Leonard and Betty Lou Harrington, proprietors. They live in that big place you’ll see in a couple ’a miles if ya stay on this road. Have two bright kids, Courtney and Susan. Court ain’t much punkin’, but that Susan is a mouth-watering little cookie, for sure.

Gates laughed again, winking lewdly this time.

Jericho was sure he didn’t like the man. Respect for women folks was something that had been drilled into him since the day he’d learned to walk and talk. “Treat every woman like she was your mother or sister,” he could still hear his father saying. It was with some amount of effort that Jericho held his tongue while climbing painfully into the saddle. Trying to hide his disgust, he said, “Is Mr. Harrington hiring? I need a few days work for food.”

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Gates spit out another gob of tobacco on the ground.

“Doubt it. They got more niggers than any white folks in the valley. Anything that needs doing...them niggers usually take care of it for them uppity Harringtons.”

Blue barked impatiently and bounded away, stopping fifty feet away to look back. Gates stared after the skinny blue tick hound for an instant, then said, “That’s a fine looking animal ya got there, youngster.”

Just as Jericho was about to respond politely, Gates went on. “What breed exactly is it anyhow?”

The fat man suddenly burst into loud wheezing laughter as Jericho angrily rode away without answering. Jericho wondered if Jasper Gates had ever shared his water with the suffering field hands; if any of those glistening backs in the hot sun had ever experienced the taste of cool delicious water from his wooden bucket.

The Harrington plantation was exactly where Overseer Gates had said it’d be. Mounting a rise, Jericho suddenly pulled on his reins, stunned motionless by the vastness of the wealth he saw before him. Like a massive compound, the huge white mansion with several large columnar pillars created the centerpiece, surrounded by stables, barns, gazebos, gardens, summer cottages, storage and tool sheds, all immaculately kept. In a small depression near a shallow creek, a quarter of a mile from the main house, it’s setting not nearly-so-fine, stood a half-dozen, unpainted, tin-roofed structures, wash drying on clotheslines. A goat and occasional chickens searching for food wandered between the shacks. Several dark-skinned women, each obviously pregnant, toiled over a steaming kettle. Even from a distance an acidic odor stung his nose - the pungent smell of lye soap fer-

menting in the afternoon air; the sounds of a baby loudly wailing while a woman sang a soft lullaby in another language. This was the slave quarters.

Jericho's gaze returned to the Harrington plantation and he sat quietly, pensive, drinking in the richness surrounding him. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined such wealth and luxury - or the vast poverty and suffering that could exist in close proximity. As he tried to reconcile his conflicted feelings, he suddenly yanked on his reins and headed back toward the river. He concluded he'd spend the evening there, rest, and settle his mind before deciding whether to seek employment at the Pleasant Manor. This place made him very uneasy.