

William Colbert

Interview with William Colbert

—*John Morgan Smith*

MY MASTER WAS A MEAN MAN

"Sho. I remember de slavery days. How could I forgits?"

Slowly Uncle Will spoke these words as he made his way up a few rickety steps with the aid of an old broomstick to his cabin door. "We can jes' set in de swing effen you wants to hear a little 'bout dem ole days, kaze I can sho tell it."

"Well, first, Uncle Will, what's your full name and where are you from?"

"My name am William Colbert and I'se fum Georgia. I was bawn in 1844 on my massa's plantation in Fort Valley. My massa's name was Jim Hodison. At one time he had 165 of us niggers."

Uncle Will, a gaunt, black figure with two weeks growth of gray hair upon his face, spoke in a soft, quaking voice scarcely audible ten feet away. His eyes had a far-off, sad expression of one who had known suffering. They were set deep back in bony caverns.

"Well, Uncle Will, tell me something about the slave days. Was your master good to you?"



William Colbert, [TR: Birmingham], Alabama

"Nawsuh, he warn't good to none of us niggers. All de niggers 'roun' hated to be bought by him kaze he was so mean. When he was too tired to whup us he had de oberseer do it; and de overseer was meaner dan de massa. But, Mister, de peoples was de same as dey is now. Dere was good uns and bad uns. I jus' happened to belong to a bad un. One day I remembers my brother, January was cotched ober seein' a gal on de next plantation. He had a pass but de time on it done gib out. Well suh, when de massa found out dat he was a hour late, he got as mad as a hive of bees. So when brother January he come home, de massa tookdown his long mule skinner and tied him wid a rope to a pine tree. He strip' his shirt off and said:

"'Now, nigger, I'm goin' to teach you some sense.'

"Wid dat he started layin' on de lashes. January was a big, fine lookin' nigger; de finest I ever seed. He was jus' four years older dan me, an' when de massa begin a beatin' him, January neber said a word. De massa got madder and madder kaze he couldn't make January holla.

"'What's de matter wid you, nigger' he say. 'Don't it hurt?'

"January, he neber said nothin', and de massa keep a beatin' till little streams of blood started flowin' down January's chest, but he neber holler. His lips was a quiverin' and his body was a shakin', but his mouf it neber open; and all de while I sat on my mammy's and pappy's steps a cryin'. De niggers was all gathered about and some uv 'em couldn't stand it; dey hadda go inside dere cabins. Atter while, January, he couldn't stand it no longer hissself, and he say in a hoarse, loud whisper:

"'Massa! Massa! have mercy on dis poor nigger.'

Will's eyes narrowed down to fine creases as his thick lips came together in smacking noises, and the loose skin beneath his chin, and jaws seemed to shake with the impact of dread memories.

"Den," he continued, after a brief pause in which time there was no sound except the constant drop of a bead of water in a lard bucket, "de war came. De Yankees come in and dey pulled de fruit off de trees and et it. Dey et de hams and cawn, but dey neber burned de houses. Seem to me lak dey jes' stay aroun' long enough to git plenty somp'n t'eat, kaze dey lef' in two or three days, an' we neber seed 'em since. De massa had three boys to go to war, but dere wasn't one to come home. All the chillun he had was killed. Massa, he los' all his money and de house soon begin droppin' away to nothin'. Us niggers one by one lef' de ole place and de las' time I seed de home plantation I was a standin' on a hill. I looked back on it for de las' time through a patch of scrub pines and it look' so lonely. Dere warn't but one person in sight, de massa. He was a-settin' in a wicker chair in de yard lookin' out ober a small field of cotton and cawn. Dere was fo' crosses in de graveyard in de side lawn where he was a-settin'. De fo'th one was his wife. I lost my ole woman too 37 years ago, and all dis time, I's been a carrin' on like de massa—all alone."