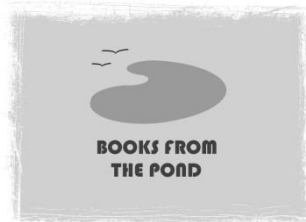


Сопесућ

A decorative flourish consisting of a thick, black, curved line that starts under the 'С', loops under the 'п', and ends under the 'ћ'.

Conecuh

Herb Hughes



Books From The Pond
2019

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, organizations, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner.

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*Dedicated to the memory of Pat Ryan, Portroe, Ireland,
a gentleman and a friend.*

Conecuh

Cah-NECK-ah.

August, 1861 ~ A Forest Near Sepulga, Alabama



The southern summer stilled the air around and between the trees, raising dust from the ground not by breeze but by the sheer will of the heat. The air was soaking humid, oppressive. The pines loved it. Caleb had never seen them so green.

Raising a hand in the air, Caleb motioned that they should hold their fire. He pointed toward Arlis then jerked his musket to the left. He pointed at himself and jerked his musket to the right. Arlis nodded his understanding. Caleb held up three fingers, the count of three. Arlis nodded again.

Moving in slow motion, the two men brought the barrels of their muskets up and over the bushes, brushing the top tips of the leaves to keep the barrels low and unseen. They took aim.

“One,” Caleb whispered under his breath.

His face nestled into the bushes, Arlis could not see Caleb. He could only smell the bitter sweetness of the leaves as he listened for his friend’s whisper.

“Two.”

Caleb flexed his fingers under the long, heavy barrel, steadying it for the shot. The wood of the stock was polished smooth from years of use, with slight indentations where his fingers came to rest.

“Three!” he said, almost out loud.

Two shots rang out at virtually the same instant, the sounds so close together that, if they had been heartbeats, the heart would have ruptured.

The bird to the right took to the sky, its wings taking it quickly away. A circular plume of black feathers meant the bird on the left would not escape. As the small, dark body at the center of the circle fell from the pine limb, the airborne feathers began their lazy, zig-zag fall to the earth, twirling around and around as they drifted downward.

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“Well, I’ll be,” Caleb said. “Your ball sent feathers a’flying, but I plumb missed. You always were a better shot.”

“I was trying to take his head off.”

Caleb raised an eyebrow. “Take his head off? I was just aiming for the middle and hoping.”

As they walked to where the blackbird lay on the ground, sweat beaded down their faces and ran along their chins in the afternoon heat.

“You sure done it!” Caleb said. “I wish I could shoot like that.”

The iridescent black feathers and soft, almost weightless down on the bird’s chest lay still in the stagnant heat. Blood oozed from the red stump where the head should have been, hiding the blue and green tints of the feathers around its neck.

“How do you do that?” Caleb asked. “I didn’t ruffle a feather, but you hit him right where you was aiming.”

“My eyes are pretty good, I reckon. I could always see far away stuff other folks couldn’t. But it might be more luck than anything.” Arlis shrugged.

“Twarn’t luck,” Caleb said as he leaned his musket against the trunk of the pine tree. “I’ve known you too long.” He unsheathed his hunting knife and bent over the bird.

“What are you doing?” Arlis asked.

Caleb glanced up with a quizzical look on his face. “Gutting him,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s a blackbird. It ain’t fit to eat.”

“It shouldn’t die for no reason. Maw taught me never to take one of God’s creatures without making good use of him. That’s the right of it.”

“You just go ahead then. I ain’t eating that awful thing. Blackbirds taste like liver. I hate liver.”

Caleb looked down at the small body in his hands. “We can’t walk off and leave him on the ground to rot.”

“Why not? If you shot a polecat, would you eat him, too?”

“That’s different,” Caleb protested. “I’d be protecting myself.”

“What? That polecat’s gonna raise a musket and shoot back?”

“No. Worse. If he squirts you with that stinky stuff, you’ll wish you’d been shot instead.”

With a smile and a shake of his head, Arlis turned away. He looked at the few puffs of white cloud drifting slowly across the sky and asked, “Are you going to fight?”

“The Yankees?”

“Yeah. The Conecuh Guards are in the thick of it up there in Virginia. Whipped them good at a place called Manassas. We lost several of our own, though.”

“I heard. They marched away in a parade last April like they was going on a picnic. The next thing you know, they’re getting shot full of holes.”

“And putting holes in the Yankees, too.” Arlis kicked the dirt a moment, sending up a small puff of dry dust. “So, are you going?”

“I don’t reckon I know. Maw and Paw need me here to work the farm, but lots of men from Conecuh have done joined already. The old folks are whispering, like those still here are cowards or something. I ain’t afraid. Maybe I’ll go ahead and enlist and show ‘em.”

“You’ll be marching away from Emily,” Arlis needled. His grin broadened.

Caleb’s hands stopped moving. He looked up at Arlis and said, “Emily Rose?”

“Only Emily under fifty years old around here, other than your sister.”

Caleb stared at the ground and thought a moment. “She wanted to sit beside me in church last Sunday.”

“I’ve seen her smiling at you. That girl’s smitten.”

“But she’s...” Caleb stuttered. “She’s, well... I’m just a farmer’s son. We don’t have nothing and ain’t likely ever gonna have nothing.”

“Your daddy’s a traveling preacher. Preacher’s son counts for something.”

“I don’t know. She makes me feel all messed up inside like my innards turned into jelly or something.”

“Uh, oh. You got it bad, Caleb. That’s exactly how it starts. My granddaddy told me. I ‘spect that’s the way Emily’s feeling, too. Maybe it’s time you started sparking that girl.”

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“Won’t matter none if I go off to war. She’ll have lots of time to find somebody else. Somebody with money. She’s pretty enough to have her pick. Any man in the county would jump at the chance to be sparking her.”

“Who’s she going to pick from? The way everybody’s going off to the war, there won’t be nothing left but old men and little boys.” Arlis looked back at the sky and the distant horizon. “I don’t know about the war. I’m no coward, but I ain’t too keen on getting myself killed so’s some rich cotton farmer can own slaves.”

“Me, neither.” Caleb opened the blackbird’s small body. “But what choice do we have? The Yankees are fighting against Alabama. We can’t stand against our home. We’ve got to stand up and protect it. Besides, the way you shoot, it’s the Yankees who need to worry about getting killed, not us.”

With a practiced hand, Caleb had the bird gutted in seconds, dropping the entrails to the warm dirt beside the pine tree. The bird’s body was lowered into his hunting bag.

“Let’s go,” Arlis said. “There’s got to be something else we can shoot for supper.” He took a couple of steps but realized Caleb was not following. Instead, Caleb was digging in the earth. “What?” Arlis asked as he shrugged his shoulders. “What are you doing now?”

“Gonna bury his innards by this root. They’ll go into the soil, feed this old pine.”

Arlis rolled his eyes back into his head. “What has gotten into you, Caleb?”

“Maw said the least we can do is make full use of any critter we kill. I don’t aim to eat the guts, so’s I’ll leave them for this here tree. It don’t care how it gets nourished. Besides, it don’t taste things. Leastways, I don’t think it does.”

“Your momma must have been raised by injuns. They say the Great Spirit tells them they have to use every part of anything they kill.”

“Injuns? I don’t know about no injuns. We’ve got to respect God’s critters. Think about it, Arlis. That’s the right of it. You know that’s what God would want.”

“I know no such a thing. What I do know is you’re having blackbird for supper because I ain’t eating that awful thing. If God wanted me to eat blackbirds, he would have made them taste like chicken breast, not chicken liver. That’s enough of this. Let’s go find something worth eating so I won’t starve tonight.”

“Just a second. This old orange Conecuh dirt is hard to turn up. Rocks all in it. I hate farming in this stuff.”

“Preacher Sam says the rocks help separate the soil and make it better.”

Caleb stopped digging and glanced at Arlis. “Absalom?” Caleb glanced back at the rocky soil, shrugged his shoulders, and said, “My daddy’s a better preacher than a farmer.” He stabbed at the dirt again.

“You go ahead and dull your knife. I’m going to find some real supper.” Arlis turned and walked off. He didn’t look back this time. If Caleb was not coming, he could darn well eat blackbird for supper.

HERB HUGHES

**March 9, 1862 ~ Rose Residence, Forks of Sepulga Community,
Alabama**



“Hurry, Momma,” Emily said as she sat in her chair and waited for her mother to finish braiding her hair. “Caleb’s going to be walking by any moment. It’s almost time for church.”

“There’s a little time, yet, Girl. My, but it’s shameful the way you run after that boy.”

“He’s not a boy, Momma. He’s a man. Full grown. And I’m a grown woman. Almost.”

“You’re as obvious as a cat in heat, Girl. You’ve got to be ladylike, coy.”

“He’s going off to war, Momma. I ain’t got time to be coy.”

Mary Rose looked at her daughter. Emily was no longer the little girl she had been a few short years ago. She was a young woman, slim and pretty. Mary glanced at the small mirror on the dresser. Her own face was thin and pinched. Her dark hair, pulled back in a simple bun, showed more than a few stripes of gray. She returned her gaze to her daughter. Emily Rose was every bit as pretty as Mary Rose was plain. But Mary remembered a time, many years ago, when she was considered one of the prettiest girls around. It seemed like only yesterday. Better to let her daughter enjoy life at this age, enjoy being one of the prettiest girls in the county. It would change soon enough.

Mary lifted the braid and inspected her handiwork. With a clip still hanging from the side of her mouth, she said, halfheartedly, “It’s still shameful for a young lady to chase after a man. You know that. I taught you that all your life.”

“Things are different from when you were young, Momma. What’s really shameful is this stupid war. Caleb has to go far away and get shot at. He could get hurt, even killed. That’s shameful. I ain’t got time for social quibbles right now.”

“The other ladies around here will sure have time. They’ll whisper their gossip long after Caleb’s gone.”

“Only rich folks gossip, Momma. We ain’t rich folks.”

“Girl, where have you been all your life? Rich folks only gossip about other rich folks. Poor folks are worse. They gossip about the rich folks *and* the poor folks. They even gossip about the poor folks’ animals.”

“Let them talk. I don’t care what they say. I’ll still walk around with my head held high.”

Thomas Rose, a smile on his face, appeared in the doorway. He took his floppy brown hat off, and said, “While you’ve got your head in the air, Girl, be careful you don’t trip on something. You might fall face first in a fresh cow patty. You best be listening to your momma.”

Emily looked up at her father. He was dressed in his usual homespun brown britches and shirt. He had a friendly smile, a plump face, rounded shoulders, and muscular arms that spoke of years of hard labor on a farm.

The family’s lone slave, Nathaniel Whiteeagle, walked in behind Thomas. The brown-skinned man wore his usual clothes as well, black pants and jacket. The jacket would give way to a dark shirt in warmer weather, but in mid-March, it was still cool enough to cover the shirt with his jacket. He also wore a black bowler with an eagle’s feather sticking out of the band, but as he stepped through the door, he reached up and lifted the hat from his head as Thomas had done. Men did not wear hats inside the Rose home.

Where Thomas was smiling, a little bulky, and stood with a slouch, Nathaniel stood tall and straight, his body slim but muscular. He held his countenance rigid, his lips giving away nothing. Emily knew when Nathaniel was smiling only by looking into his eyes. If it hadn’t been for the difference in the color of the two men’s skin, everyone would have assumed that Thomas was the slave and Nathaniel the slave owner.

Emily jumped up, one of her braids flying out of her mother’s hands, and wrapped her arms around her father. A great big smile was plastered onto her face. “Daddy! How long have you been listening to us?”

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The men hung their hats on wooden pegs in the wall by the front door. Thomas turned around and said, “Long enough to know that you’ve been embarrassing us by chasing after that farmer boy again.”

“Farmer boy? Now, just exactly what is it you do, Daddy?”

Thomas’ wrinkled his face.

“Ahhhh, words spoken with the thrust of a dagger,” Nathaniel said. There was no smile on his lips, but his eyes danced with humor. Thomas laughed out loud.

“Why, your daddy’s the best farmer in Conecuh County,” Mary said. “Leastways, to my way of thinking.”

“Caleb will get it all figured out,” Emily said. “He’s smart. I promise. He’ll be the best farmer in the county someday. Just like you, Daddy.”

“I don’t know for sure if I would say I was the best. There’s some who raise more crop, and some who’ve got larger herds. But I make us a decent living.”

“Those others have lots of slaves to do their work for them,” Emily said. “We don’t have no slaves.”

Nathaniel frowned. He cocked one brow and turned his head slightly sideways as he stared at Emily, his best menacing look pasted onto his brown face.

“You don’t count, Nathaniel. You’re more like family. Why, you even eat at the dinner table with us, like a brother would.” Emily threw her arms around Nathaniel and hugged him as well, but Nathaniel did not try to hug her back as Thomas had done. He stood rigid and endured the girl’s hug. Still, Emily could see a twinkle in his eye. *Am I the only one who notices?* she wondered.

“Yes, well, don’t be spreading that tale around none, Girl,” Mary said. “Nathaniel *is* like family, but some’s around here might get pretty upset if they knew.”

“Your momma’s right,” Thomas said. “Serious right.”

“I know, I know. I don’t tell nobody. I’ve never even told Caleb.”

“Speaking of Caleb,” Thomas said, “I saw him passing by, headed to church.”

“OH!” Emily screamed. “I’ve got to go. I’ve got to catch up.”

She turned toward the side table by the rocking chair. A small, worn black book rested on the lace cover that draped the table. Her mother had made the cover by hand, stitching the lace border all the way around. Emily had always marveled at her mother's handiwork. The small cover was so pretty, but there was no time to admire it as she hurriedly reached for her Bible. In her haste, she missed and knocked it to the floor.

"You might want to be a little gentler with the Lord's Word," Thomas said. The admonishment was accompanied with a smile.

Emily smiled back at her father. "Maybe He'll forgive me," she said. She picked the Bible up then burst through the front door as her mother shouted, "I need to pin those braids up."

"They'll have to hang down today," Emily shouted over her shoulder as she rushed into the road, quickly out of earshot.

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March 9, 1862 ~ Union Church, Forks of Sepulga Community, Alabama



“Caleb,” Emily called as she ran after him. “Caleb!”

Thomas and Nathaniel put on their hats and stepped outside, along with Mary. Thomas added his Sunday jacket then took his wife’s offered arm as they walked toward the road to join their daughter. They were quickly left behind by the running Emily.

Nathaniel walked behind them. Slaves were welcome at Union Church, but they stayed on their side, in pews designated for them. It was a good arrangement. Everyone got to hear the word of the Lord, and the slaves caught up with each other after a long week of serving their white owners.

“Caleb,” Emily shouted again as she continued to run, closing the distance between them.

Not too far ahead, Caleb stopped and turned around. As Emily came to a stop beside him, he said, “Good morning, Emily.”

“Walk me to church?”

Caleb glanced ahead at his family and motioned for them to go on. He turned back to Emily and said, “Sure. That would be nice. I looked for you when I walked by.” They started walking side-by-side, a respectable distance between them since there was family before and after. Besides, Caleb would never disrespect Emily by getting too close.

“Momma was still doing my braids.”

“She did a right nice job, too.”

Emily smiled and said, “Thank you. I heard something, Caleb. Arlis’ momma told my momma y’all are going to join the army.”

“That’s right. We’re going down to enlist next Saturday. We’ll train for a time then we’ll leave next month.”

Emily stopped and turned around to face Caleb. Her hand rushed to her mouth, so she spoke around it. “But, Caleb. I thought you and I... I mean. Why do you have to go? I want you here so I can see you.”

They faced each other and stared into each other's eyes, silent for several seconds. "I reckon I've got to," Caleb finally said. "Everybody else is gone or going. We've got to stand up for Alabama. Besides, Maw and Paw need the money." He could see tears forming at the edges of her eyes. "It won't be forever. I promise. Seeing you these last few months have been the best part of my life. By a long shot. But it's something I've got to do. I won't be gone too awful long. Only three years. That's if we don't win the war sooner. But..." He stammered to a stop, took a deep breath, and then continued, "If you can't wait for me, I'll understand."

"Of course I'll wait for you." Emily swiped at the corners of her eyes with the back of her hand, trying not to be too conspicuous about wiping away her tears. "Three years? That's forever. Please be careful. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I'll be fine," Caleb said. He wished he felt as strongly about it as he sounded. "Arlis will be with me. He's the best shot around these parts. Why, he'd kill any Yankee who got close to us."

Emily turned silent. Just the mention of the word 'kill' did something inside her. Caleb was walking straight into a war, a place where people killed other people. It seemed so bad, so useless, so wasteful.

She turned her head behind her enough to see her parents and Nathaniel closing the distance between them, so she started walking again. "Come on, Caleb. We don't want to be late to church."

The rough-sawn pew of the Union Church was worn slick-smooth with time. It was their favorite place to meet. Everybody from some distance around could see them, but no one could see the backs of Caleb's and Emily's hands touching at their sides. Emily's full and flowing Sunday dress hid where their hands rested.

Her soft skin stirred Caleb in ways he had never felt before. He began to wonder if going off to war was such a good idea after all. *Too late now*, he thought. He wasn't a blowhard, but he and Arlis had already told people they were going to join. They would look like deadbeats if they backed out now.

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It was Baptist week, the Methodist service having been the week before, and Caleb's father, Sam Garner, Absalom Garner to those more formal, was preaching this Sunday. Before he started the sermon, however, he said he wanted to make an announcement. That was unusual. Sam almost always went straight into talking about God and the Bible. He rarely discussed local news.

"You all know my oldest son, Willis, is in the Confederate cavalry," Sam said from the pulpit. He was not a large man, but his voice was deep and strong, perfect for a preacher. "I am not alone. Many of you have seen your sons going off to war. Now more of Conecuh's young men will be marching away. Two more of my sons will be a'going with them. Caleb and John are going to join next week. I want to pray for all three of my boys. And for your boys, too. But not just for them. My friends, let us pray hard for all of Conecuh County's sons, for all of Alabama's sons, and for all of the Confederacy's sons..." He hesitated as his eye roved over the crowd. "So that God will grant us a quick victory and bring our boys back home safe and sound." There was a chorus of 'amens.' "Please join me as we bow our heads in reverence to the Lord."

As they nodded their heads forward and closed their eyes, Emily's hand moved from barely touching the back of Caleb's hand to holding his hand, palm-to-palm. This was something new, something wonderful. She squeezed gently. A warm tremble worked its way through Caleb's body. He squinted his eyes open and looked around to make sure no one could see them then he squeezed back, being careful not to squeeze too hard.

As Sam was nearing the end of his prayer, requesting God's intervention on behalf of the great Confederate cause, Caleb saw Emily squinting her eyes open as well. They looked at each other and smiled. It was all he could do to keep from laughing out loud. In the middle of his father's prayer? That would have been a disaster. He almost choked himself in his effort to stay quiet.

Finally, Sam sealed the request to God with a firm 'Amen!' The congregation, both black and white, echoed the 'amen' as Emily slipped her hand out of Caleb's. Everyone lifted their heads. Reverend Garner

dove straight into his sermon, a lesson on how each person had to do their part to help God help them.

Eyes were no longer closed, and heads were no longer bowed so they could not hold hands, but they kept their hands back-to-back, touching ever so slightly. For once, Caleb wanted his father's sermon to last all day. It didn't.

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March 15, 1862 ~ Hawthorn Place, Sparta, Alabama



It was a fine day, a Saturday. The late winter sun filtered through the budding leaves of the grand old oaks that stood sentinel over the landscape. Abstract patches of sunlight swayed gently across the front lawn in the light breeze. There was a briskness in the air, but the walk to Sparta had lasted much of the morning. Jackets had long since been taken off.

“This is the place, sure enough,” Arlis said. “We might as well go on in. We’re later than I expected after you took so long to say goodbye to Emily.”

Caleb glanced at Arlis and said, “Saying goodbye was hard. I mite near changed my mind about joining.”

Arlis smiled but did not respond. The three young men climbed the few steps to the front lawn of Hawthorn Place. As they walked across the grass, they stared at the whitewashed clapboard rising high above them. None of them had ever been this close to a mansion, to a home so huge you could raise three or four families in it.

Caleb looked at his younger brother, John, then at Arlis before turning around and staring at the four large rectangular columns that reached up as high as the trees, holding the gabled roof so far above the ground that it provided no protection from any rain that rode the wind at an angle. They stared at the railed porch jutting out of the second floor. There was a door that opened onto the porch, a door with no other purpose on this Earth than to let the residents of the house stand on their perch high above the ground and look out over their lands.

“You gentlemen here to enlist, or inspect the building?”

The three of them lowered their gaze to see a Confederate officer standing on the front porch, smiling. He was not much older than they were.

“We heard tell you was paying a fifty dollar bounty to everyone who joins,” Arlis said.

“You heard right, young man,” the officer answered. He stepped down off the porch, walked over to where they were standing, and extended his hand. “I’m Second Lieutenant John Guice.”

“My name’s John, too, John Garner,” Caleb’s brother said as he extended his hand. “This here’s Caleb, my older brother.”

“And I’m Arlis Johnston,” Arlis said after Caleb and the Lieutenant finished their handshake.

“Welcome to Hawthorne Place,” Lieutenant Guice said. “I hope the building passed your inspection.”

The three of them gave an awkward smile then Caleb said, “We were thinking about joining the Conecuh Guards.”

“All three of you from Conecuh County, are you?” They nodded. “That’s real fine, men. I’ve got the papers inside. Come on in, and we’ll sign you up.” John Guice turned, but when he put his foot on the first step of the front porch, he realized the three young men had not moved. He turned and looked at them. “Sign up’s inside,” he said as he nodded toward the wide front door.

“We’re still thinking,” Arlis said. “What about the fifty dollars?”

“Yes, Sir,” Caleb said. “Could you tell us some more about that?”

“Why, of course,” Lieutenant Guice said as he took his foot off the step and turned around to face them. “You join today for three years of service, and we’ll train you right here before you leave. Bivouac’s out back. We’ll provide you with a tent so you can stay dry. You’ll stand beside your friends from right here in Conecuh County while all of you learn how to fight the Yankees. In a few weeks, when you’re ready, we’ll put you on a train to Virginia. You’ll ride along with the other new recruits from Conecuh County. When you get up there, you’ll be joined with the 4th Alabama infantry. That’s the Guards’ unit. Once you’ve settled in, you’ll be paid fifty dollars Confederate. Cash money.”

“Maw and Paw need the money here,” Caleb said. “Not in Virginia.” He had little feel for where Virginia was but understood that it was a long way from Conecuh County, Alabama.

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The Lieutenant nodded then said, “We can take care of that for you. Caleb, wasn’t it? The Confederacy will make sure that money gets to wherever you need it to go.”

“How can we be sure?”

A broad, friendly smile stretched across Lieutenant Guice’s face. “We need brave young men like you three. That’s why we’re offering the bounty. If we didn’t make sure you got the money fair and square, the word would get out and nobody else would join. That’s the last thing the Confederacy needs. You have my word as an officer, Caleb. I will personally make sure your bounty is delivered as you wish.”

Caleb thought about his father and mother, Sam and Sarah. Neither he nor John would keep any of the money. If they both joined, as they planned to do, their parents would receive a hundred dollars. It would be more money than they’d held at one time since Sam had a falling out with his father and left South Carolina, many years before Caleb was born. Maybe it would be enough to turn the farm around, make it productive. He glanced at John and nodded. When John nodded back, Caleb realized his brother was likely thinking the same thing.

“Tell you what,” Lieutenant Guice said. “Before we go inside, I’ll show you boys something that might help you make up your minds. Step this way. It’s on the chimney at the side of the house.”

Lieutenant Guice started walking along the front of Hawthorn Place, the three young men following. Caleb looked at the whitewashed clapboard siding. A mansion! It was right there, so close he could reach out and touch it. He wanted to but dared not.

Turning his head away from the house, Caleb looked out across the gently rolling fields. It was early spring, not yet fully turned to green. Shadows from the trees danced around in the light breeze. It was a beautiful setting.

Growing up he had heard stories about wealthy plantation owners sitting and sipping drinks in the late afternoon sun while black servants waited on them hand and foot. Any thought that the stories might be false flew away as he looked at the cultured grounds around him. Everything was too perfect. The stories had to be true. This was how rich folks lived.

Lieutenant Guice turned the corner and walked along the side of the country mansion. They could see tents set up in the backyard. There were other young men, rifles on their shoulders, walking along, their steps in perfect unison with each other.

Guice stopped beside a tall chimney covered with whitewashed plaster. He turned to face the three young men and said, "Here they are." He pointed at the chimney.

Caleb looked closely. There was writing on the whitewash, pencil writing. It was all over the lower part of the chimney. The writing meant nothing to him, strange symbols that had hidden meaning for other folks to share. Caleb could not share with them. He lowered his head and stared at the ground.

"These brave men..." Guice started. He stopped as he looked at Caleb. "Raise your head, Caleb. No need staring at the ground. Why, these brave men deserve your attention."

Caleb looked up but did not look at the chimney. He stared at the Confederate officer and said nothing.

"He don't mean no disrespect, Sir," Arlis said. "It's just, well... He don't read." Caleb frowned at his friend, but Arlis ignored the look and continued. "I read pretty good. Had four years of schooling. Them's names. I know the Thomas boys. And the Robinsons. It looks like they might have writ their names themselves."

"That's right," Lieutenant Guice said. "All of us volunteers signed this chimney last April when we first came together as a unit. I'll rejoin them as soon as this recruiting trip is over. These are your friends and neighbors here, a brave and fearless group. They're up in Virginia fighting for you right now."

Caleb wanted to say that the soldiers were not fighting for him. They were fighting for the slave owners. But he held his tongue. He knew that many of them were fighting for home, for Alabama. Like he would be when he joined.

"They've proven brave and strong in battle," the Lieutenant continued. "Why, if we had a few more like them this war would be over by now. You wouldn't have had your chance for glory." Lieutenant Guice placed his hand on the chimney and smiled. "You boys look like

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you're every bit as brave as these young men. We need more men like you. That's why we're offering a fifty dollar bounty. As soon as you report for duty in Virginia, you'll get paid fifty dollars Confederate. That's a lot of money. Are you ready to sign the papers? Are you ready to help us drive the Yankees out of our homeland?"

"Fifty dollars is fifty dollars," Arlis said. "Granddaddy and Granny sure need the money. I reckon I'm ready if you are, Caleb."

"But..." Caleb stammered as he hung his head again. "I can't sign no papers if I can't write."

"Hold your head up high, Caleb," Lieutenant Guice said. "I can tell by your hands you've worked hard all your life. You were working and taking care of your family while others were going to school. Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of. As a matter of fact, helping your family is something to be proud of. And you can help your larger family, your friends and relatives right here in Conecuh County, by joining the Confederacy."

Caleb glanced at the chimney, at the dozens of graphite signatures dashed across the whitewash.

"Not everybody has time for schooling," Guice continued. "Not being able to read or write is as common as dirt around here. But you were born an Alabamian, by God. And your state needs you to stand up and protect it." Guice rapped his knuckles against the signed chimney. "Like these men here are doing."

"Maw and Paw need the money," Caleb mumbled.

"All you have to do is join us," Lieutenant Guice said. "I can read the sign up papers to you. You make your mark and your friend, here, can witness it. When you do, you'll be standing tall as a sworn Confederate soldier. Why, you might be the very one who makes the difference, Caleb."

May 5, 1862 ~ Countryside Near Williamsburg, Virginia



Gray-brown mud splashed up from his pounding boots, splattering the legs of his uniform as he charged forward, toward the earthen wall of Fort Magruder. Corporal John Murray leaned this way and that to make sure he stayed behind those in the lead, avoiding an open firing lane that

might allow a ball to find his chest. The strategy had always worked before. Corporal Murray was not only alive, he had never been wounded.

The strategy broke down, however, when his fellow Union soldiers suddenly turned to retreat. The blue-clad soldiers in front of him were in full run to the rear, trying to get away from too many Confederate muskets. He turned and ran himself. From his rear position in the charge, he was now leading the retreat.

“They are too well entrenched,” he heard the Captain shout from somewhere behind him. “Fall back! Form a line along the road. We’ll hold there till the reserves arrive.”

The road? Murray thought. Out in the open? To hell with that.

The road the Captain referred to, the one the Union troops had crossed when the attack began, was a few steps in front of Murray. Beyond that, there was a field with a small patch of trees in the middle, an island of cover. That was his target. He could hide behind the trees as long as the Rebels didn’t get too close.

“The Rebs are leaving the fort,” a man immediately behind him shouted. “They’re coming!”

Things were confused, as retreats invariably were. Soldiers stumbled and fell. Others stopped to turn and fire then rejoin the helter-skelter running after their muskets were spent. This caused several collisions and more confusion.

Corporal Murray did not stop to fire as he continued to lead the retreat. He had but one objective. When he reached the edge of the road,

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he kept running the short distance across the field to the relative safety of the small clump of trees.

“Form a line and fire on my command,” the Captain shouted.

A ragged, haphazard line began to form. Soldiers stood in the face of greater Confederate fire and loaded their muskets. Some fell, moaning and rolling about on the ground. Others fell and stayed still. Corporal Murray continued to run.

Murray stumbled into the trees and slumped behind a thick trunk. He took several deep breaths then turned and peered around the edge of the bark, trying to see what was happening back at the road. There was too much smoke, too much confusion. Everyone was focused on the Rebs. He was sure that no one had seen him continuing into the trees.

The Union soldiers tried to follow orders, but the Confederate force greatly outnumbered them. Several men broke ranks and began to run for the trees. Corporal Murray saw them coming and decided he could not afford to be seen hiding behind his own lines. He could make excuses later, say he got lost in the smoke of battle and separated. He would even tell them he had somehow gotten behind the Confederates and had to weave his way back through the danger of enemy positions.

But right now he did not want to be found. He ran through the clump of trees, dodging trunks large and small. On the other side of the island of cover, the trees gave way to the field that surrounded them. It was a short distance across the open grassland to the larger forest. He never slowed down, crossing the open stretch in mere seconds.

As he once again caught his breath behind the trunk of a large tree, he looked back. He was sure he had gone unseen this time as well. The others who broke from the line had stopped as soon as they reached the small island of trees, where he had left only moments ago. No one was coming toward the forest. Time to find a safe spot until the reserves came in. Once the battlefield had been secured by the might of the Union, he would return, circling so that it would appear he was coming from the danger of enemy positions. He would claim that he charged ahead and became trapped when everyone behind him retreated.

To make sure he could not be found, he wandered deeper into the woods. Besides, he wanted to see what he could find in the relatively flat countryside of the James Peninsula.

On the other side of the forest, he looked out from the cover of the trees to a whitewashed house in the middle of a weedy field. The land was uncultivated, the spring weeds almost as high as his knees, but he could tell by the weathered furrows in the earth that the field had been cultivated at some time in the past. As he looked more closely, there were other tell-tale signs. He had no doubt this field had raised crops as recently as the previous year. Early May and it was abandoned to weeds? Why?

He looked back at the house. The whitewash appeared to be wearing thin in several places. It was not a grand plantation, but it was not a home for poor folks, either. The whitewash should have been newer, fresher. Was the house abandoned, left to suffer the ravages of war should a battle turn this way?

No. As he was watching, a colored girl carrying a pot came through the front door and ran to a small stone wall not far from the house. A well. She laid her pot on top of the wall and quickly jerked her head this way and that, looking all around. Too well hidden in the trees to be seen, he held himself rigidly still. Hidden or not, movement might catch her attention.

The dark-skinned girl pumped the crank hard, trying to lift the bucket as quickly as possible. Although the battle was some distance behind them, the sounds of cannon and musket were unmistakable. It was easy to see that this young colored girl was frightened.

She hurriedly filled the pot then let the wooden bucket drop back into the well, banging against the stone walls as it fell. His eyes followed the smooth, almost silky movements of her body as she ran back to the house and rushed through the door.

She wasn't the prettiest of girls, but she wasn't bad. He had always been intrigued by colored women's dark skin. He tried to imagine what she would look like naked. Would her nipples be reddish-pink like a white woman's? Or were they a different color? Would her body be

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shaped like a white woman's? Or were the darkies shaped differently somehow? There was only one way to find out.

He was well away from the battle, and there was no one in the open field, right or left. He hunched over to make himself less visible and ran through the tall weeds, stopping at a corner of the home, hiding behind the whitewashed wood as he took another look around. There was no one, not even livestock. In all likelihood, the stinking gray backs had long since appropriated the farm's animals to feed their pathetic soldiers.

Corporal Murray crept along the side of the home, tracing his fingers along the clapboard siding as he took small, quiet steps. The wood was cracked and rough, the whitewash old and in desperate need of a new coat. The home was as neglected as the uncultivated field that surrounded it. *No man at home*, he thought. *Probably gone off to war. Or already dead.*

He reached the first window and slowly raised his eye to the corner. When he peeked inside, he saw an older white woman, late thirties or early forties, brushing a young white girl's hair. The girl couldn't have been more than eight or nine. Possibly the older woman's daughter. They favored.

The colored girl, the slave, tended a pot in the fireplace. She was in her late teens, ripe, well built, not older than twenty at the most. He didn't expect to see a man. Judging from the small farm's condition, it was doubtful a man had lived here in months. But he looked around just in case. He saw no one else downstairs.

Staring at the slave's dark skin, John Murray wondered if it felt like a white woman's skin when you touched it. Would she sweat under a real man? Would she respond to him? He was determined to find out.

His army's commander, General Hooker, had a reputation as a drinker and a womanizer. Murray could identify with this man, even if he had never met him. But the whores who followed the camps, known as "Hooker's Division" or, simply, "The Division," were unattractive and too well used. They were useful only for scratching an itch that soldiers built up after days of marching and fighting. And they were all white girls. This colored girl was different. Her face was not painted in any way. She was naturally attractive. And her body was perfect!

Corporal Murray could see through the window that the front door was latched with a piece of wood that slid through a metal bracket. The wood bar was not wide enough or thick enough to stop him.

He ducked under the window and crept along the side of the building, around the corner then to the front door. After taking a couple of steps backward, John Murray lowered his shoulder and leaped toward the door. The simple wood latch gave way, the door flying open and slamming against the inside of the front wall. Splinters skittered across the floor as the women looked up in shock.

Murray moved quickly. He shut the front door. Since the latch was now broken, he pulled a table over to block it on the inside.

“Please,” the white woman begged, her eyes wide with fear. “We don’t want no trouble. Please.” She reached her arms around her daughter as though that might protect her.

Murray looked at the stairs, momentarily worrying about someone being on the second floor. He quickly realized there was no need to worry. When he burst through the door, neither woman had glanced at the stairs in hopes of help. They were alone.

Up close the slave girl looked even better as she stood there with her eyes wide, as filled with fear as the white woman’s. He drew his pistol and took a step toward her. She dropped the long wooden spoon she was holding. It clattered to the floor as she started to step backward. When she bumped into the wall, she stopped. Tears were forming around the edges of her eyes.

“Please don’t,” the white woman said. The little girl was too shocked to react as her mother continued to beg. “We don’t help the Confederates. I promise. We don’t do nothing for them...”

John Murray turned his pistol toward the white woman and little girl and said, “Shut up! You stay right there, the two of you. Keep your face turned toward me so I can watch you, make sure you don’t do something stupid. The little girl can turn away, but she stays. If you try to run, I’ll shoot both of you. The little girl first so you can watch her die.” It was a hollow threat. He would never hurt a child, but as long as the mother believed him, that was all that mattered.

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The mother turned the young girl's head around and held it so all the girl could see was the opposite wall. But she never took her eyes off the Union soldier as she did. The little girl heaved a couple of heavy sobs then started to cry loudly.

With her back to the wall, the slave began to slide down to the floor. Corporal Murray grabbed her and snatched her arm around violently, sending her sprawling across the floor.

"Stand up!" The pistol was spun around and pointed directly at her. She rolled over and slowly drew herself up to her feet, crying as she stood. Unlike the little girl, her crying was muted, more like muffled sobs from a heaving chest. Still, tears streamed down her face. "Pull your dress off," Murray commanded as he waved his pistol back and forth to make sure the colored girl wouldn't forget who was in command. Her tears only strengthened his resolve. "Let's see what a colored girl looks like when she's naked."

Murray whipped his arm back around and pointed the pistol toward the mother and daughter. "NOW! Or I shoot the little girl first."

Her face wrinkled in fear and shiny with tears, the slave pulled her dress up and over her head then let it fall to the floor at her feet. She stood there in her hand-sewn underwear, her head bent and her eyes cast down as teardrops fell onto the haphazard heap of cloth that was her dress.

"Get it all off! I want to see every inch of you." When the slave was completely naked, John Murray said, "Turn around. Let me see your ass." She complied. "Oh, yeah. You look real good, girl. Now, show me what you do for your white masters. Lay your back over that table."

The girl leaned against the table but had trouble getting on top. John Murray's drive had been watered. He wasn't in the mood to wait. He reached out and grabbed her arm then lifted her up and slammed her back onto the table. The slave screamed from the pain and reached around to rub the mistreated arm, but Murray slapped her arm away. It had blocked his view of her dark-skinned body. He smiled. This was going to be good.

Once again, he turned his pistol toward the white woman and her crying daughter. “Shut that girl up! Either of you move, you’re both dead. You understand?”

The white woman nodded in quick, short jerks of her head but said nothing as she tried to console her daughter. The little girl quieted but continued to sob as she stared at the opposite wall, eyes blank with incomprehension.

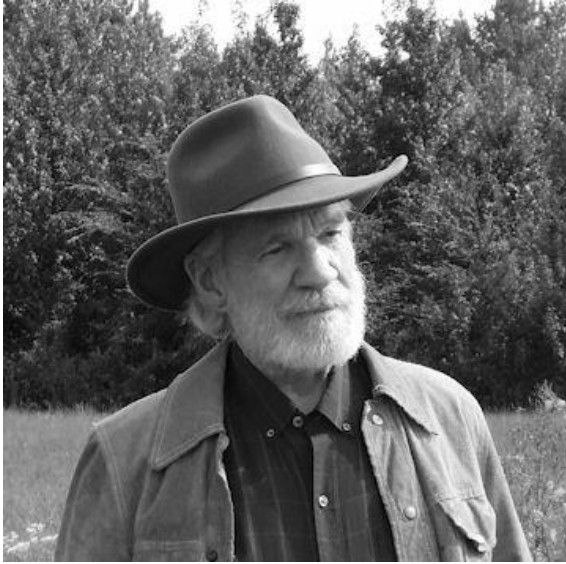
Murray slipped his belt off and unbuttoned his pants as quickly as he could. As he rammed himself into the slave, again and again, he continued to hold the pistol toward the mother and daughter. *This is so much better than the whores*, he thought.

The excitement of what he was doing swirled in his head. He didn’t last long. As soon as he finished, he pulled out and stood in plain view of the mother while he smiled. “If I didn’t have to leave,” he said, “I’d hang around and do the both of you just for the hell of it. But I can always come back. And if any of you ever breathe a word of this to anybody, that’s what I’ll do. I’ll come back at night and slit your throats, all of you. The little girl will go first, Momma, while you watch. Right after I rape her. I’ll rip her open then I’ll slice her up right in front of your eyes. Do you understand me?” There was only silence. “DO YOU?” he shouted.

The white woman was holding onto her little girl’s shoulders as the girl started crying out loud again. She squeezed them gently as she nodded. “We understand.”

John Murray turned to the slave and said, “You, too. You understand?” She nodded through her tears, which were coming hard and heavy. “Good. As far as all of you are concerned, this never happened. You’ll never talk about it again as long as you live.” He reached down and squeezed the slave’s nipple, hard. When she winced and jerked away, Murray said, “You’re a damned fine piece of tail, girl. You could make a good living with that thing.”

Then he was gone.



Author **HERB HUGHES** worked in the computer industry for over two decades then built a successful private business before retiring to write novels.

Conecuh is his fifth novel and second historical work set during the civil war. Earlier novels include:

TENNESSEE YANKEE – Historical fiction, civil war.

Killing Rhinos – Science fiction, prison colony planet.

The Joystick Murders – Detective novel, set in the year 2042.

A BLOODY WONDERFUL WAR – Humor/adventure.

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