

EDGAR

Companion to “Want To Go West Lady?”

BEN STEINLAGE



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I want to dedicate this novel to a good friend of mine in Estancia named Barbara. Visiting with her one day, she asked me “Who is Edgar? You didn’t say much about him in your book *Want to Go West Lady?* Something tells me he might be interesting.”

I didn’t want to disappoint a favorite reader,
so I wrote this story.

I would also like to thank my wife for her input.

Introduction

As I said in “*Want to Go West Lady?*”, in the late eighteen-nineties and the early the twentieth century, my great-great-grandfather was a runner for a San Francisco newspaper. As a runner, he had dreams of being a reporter. Then in 1906, he found his subject. With the interest in the westward movement still being high, he decided to write about it, and it seemed that the best place to start was to find a couple who had made the move across the country and learn about their experience. His search led him to Matt and Ida Duncan, whom he interviewed.

I found the notes of his interview with the Duncan’s, labeled “Notes on a couple coming west,” in an old piece of luggage. It turned out that he never wrote his article. By chance, he had left the project to me to finish. The trouble was that the interview contained too much information for an article. I saw right away that the story of the Duncan’s needed to be written as a book, and I felt that I was the one to write it. The story this couple told my great-great-grandfather intrigued me, but it didn’t have an ending.

After some searching I found a relative of the couple, a woman named Clara Anderson (her maiden name was Clara Duncan) and

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she had had Ida Duncan's diary. When she gave me the diary, I learned the ending to the Duncan's' story.

Neither my great-great grandfather's Duncan interview, nor the diary told me much about Ida's first husband, Edgar. The little I did know piqued my interest, so I went to Clara for some answers. I was to find more than I could have expected

Clara told me, "I think I have something you might want to look at. As you know, the first diary I found in a box of books in my attic that belonged to my great-great-grandmother Ida."

Once again I thanked her for giving me the original diary. At the time she had gave it to me, she told me she hadn't known much about her great-great-grandmother and that finding it answered many questions. With the notes of the interview and the diary I went on to write the first book in this series.

When I went back to see her I hoped she had found something besides the diary, so I asked, "Have you have found anything else?"

"Yes, I have. Going through the trunks again, sorting out the stuff not worth keeping, I found a Civil War uniform wrapped up in a piece of canvas. It had a few small holes and a little dirt, but other than that it was in good shape. I figured it had to be the oiled canvas that had kept the moths from chewing it up. I wasn't sure where I would display it but I knew I'd find a place for it..." she began to answer.

Just the thought of seeing the uniform excited me. I had no idea whether the uniform belonged to Matt Duncan or Edgar Buchanan, but in any case it was exciting. Then her expression told me there was more.

"I knew it had to be my great-great-grandfather's," she continued, "but it surprised me that no one had taken it out to show and

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talk about it. I took it downstairs to show my husband. I knew his attitude would probably be like my parents' and theirs before them. I could hear him ask, 'Why do we need that old rag cluttering up the house?'

"Once I got the uniform downstairs, I laid it on the kitchen table. My plan was to take it to the museum first and then to the cleaners. I wanted to get it cleaned, but I decided to go to the museum to see what they might suggest. I gave it a gentle pat and as I brought my hand down, I felt something, like maybe a little book. Going through the pockets, I found a diary. To my great surprise, I realized I was looking at entries written by my great-great-grandfather, Edgar Buchanan," she said as she handed the diary to me.

"Thank you so much. This is wonderful, and I'll return it as soon as I'm through with it," I assured her. When I had first gone to see her I didn't expect to get anything that would tell me more about Edgar. How wrong I was! Full of excitement and anticipation, I went straight home to read the diary.

At my desk I removed the old rags from around the diary that had kept it together all these years. As I opened it I expected the binding to crack but it didn't. The yellowish water stained paper had a feel to it that said it was old. As I ran my fingers across the first page I felt a tear run down my cheek. I knew what I held in my hands were the dreams and sorrows of a man not that much different than myself.

The diary began:

"You can't go in right now," my mother shouted to me from the yard.

These words are from memories that I find myself smiling about, when I think back to my childhood. As the war rages on, my memories keep me going. After a

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while, I decided to write down some of the things I remember, so now I sit and write down these recollections in front of a campfire, while I wonder what the war will bring.

Hearing someone tell me I couldn't go into our house was a common event for the first few years of my life. It wasn't that I heard it every time I wanted to go inside, but I did hear it frequently. I never gave it much thought because I had too many interests outside to worry about going inside. My father owned the largest plantation for miles around. The only plantation that came close in size to ours was the Marsh place. At times we spent as much time there as at our own place.

Knowing what I knew about Edgar, I was surprised to see he signed the last page. I also found where pages had been torn out. I realized these pages were the ones I had gotten with Ida's. I found it interesting that they would have been removed as they had been.

I think you'll find his diary as interesting as I did. His viewpoint comes to us as that of a soldier in the field.

Footnote – Unlike Ida and Matt notes, Edgar did date some pages. I couldn't read all of the dates because of age and wear. All I can tell you for sure is that the story begins in 1860 and ends somewhere around 1873. Rather than worry about the dates I have concentrated on the story.

As you might guess, I have also filled in the blanks with what might have happened. For as secretive as Edgar was, his notes alone wouldn't tell the whole story. I wrote the first story from Great-Great-Grandfather's notes on his interview of the couple. Those who have read my first book know the interview was with Ida and

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Matt Duncan with no input from Edgar. This one is from Edgar's diary, so the details of the two books may not always agree.

Note from the real Author:

Some parts of the first book "*Want to Go West Lady?*" were based on actual events, but most of it was fiction. This book, including the introduction, is also fiction. The purpose of the introduction is to set the tone for the novel. What you are about to read comes from many years of research.

My formative years

*T*oday my teacher asked me to keep a diary. She said it would be a good experience for me to keep one. She also said it would be fun to read when I get older. With that, these are my first entries:

This is a scene that was repeated time after time:

“You can’t go in right now,” my mother shouted to me from the yard.

“I want to get a...,” I would shout back to her. I knew from her stern look what her answer would be without hearing it. As she watched me, she was sitting in her favorite position on a swing that hung from the tree in front of our house.

“Not right now..., Elsie can get you a drink.”

With that, she stopped swinging to say something to Elsie. Elsie would then head for the house to get me a drink.

“Yes, Mother,” I said. Then as I sat down I saw a colored man go into our house. This pattern repeated over and over, beginning when I was about ten years old. I began to think that if I needed a drink of water, all I had to do was threaten to go into the house.

I was born on June 3, 1847, on my father’s plantation eighteen miles northwest of Richmond, Virginia. Unlike most people, we didn’t live in the city or have a little town of any size nearby.

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I remember hearing people refer to our area as Buchanan, but it didn't have an official name. With the village of sorts only having a church, a one-room schoolhouse, Marsh Manufacturing and a few homes for the workers, there wasn't enough there to justify giving a name to the place. It didn't even have a general store or blacksmith shop that was worth mentioning.

We grew most of our food and made most of our clothing. Everything else we needed, we went to Richmond to get. A mile or two from their manufacturing place was the Marsh plantation.

Our house was on the road to Richmond so we could see everyone travel to and from the city. As people passed by and stopped to talk, we got the news faster than most.

What used to be the Slave Village was some distance behind the main house. Closer to the house was something most people didn't have, a kitchen behind the main building. In the South, baking was a problem during the summer because of the heat. The best place for the main oven was outside, about twenty feet from the main house. Our cook, Elsie, spent most of her time cooking and baking in this outside kitchen.

Starting when I was about nine or ten years old and continuing for the next four years, each time an unfamiliar colored man or couple would go into the house I was told not to go in. That must have happened twenty or thirty times. With our family having slaves, seeing colored people come and go from the place was common, although I never remembered seeing these particular men or women before. I would always ask the same question, "Who is that?"

"One of the workers from the field," whoever was with me would answer. They would follow it with a suggestion that I find something to do. It was obvious that they didn't want me asking questions. I always had more than enough to keep me busy. Even

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if I didn't find anything to do, something would come up that would keep me occupied. I would forget about my question about the colored people. Being young, I would let it go and go about whatever I was doing.

I followed my father and other workers around, interested in observing what they did and learning from them, and at other times I played with the children of our workers. When I was about eight years old I learned to ride horseback, and that became my favorite pastime. I also learned how to handle a team of horses, though my father thought I was too young for that.

"Joe sent me a letter saying he is coming for a visit," Father told Mother one afternoon.

Joe was my uncle who lived in Ohio.

"But he was just here," Mother said as she shook her head.

"You have something against him coming? I thought you enjoyed visiting with Edith."

"I do," she answered. "And I think Edgar enjoys having Joe Junior to play with. But I'm not sure I like how our conversations always turn to politics or the abuse the Quakers are getting."

"In his letter he mentioned they are thinking about moving, because of problems with neighbors they are having," Father told her.

"It doesn't surprise me, since most of your other relatives have already gone north...I'm surprised they didn't move with your cousin Henry and his family," she said.

"That surprised me, too. I miss having them around here. I have always had family that I could turn to," Father admitted to her.

I asked when they both stopped talking "Where are they going?"

Joe Junior was one of my best friends, other than Ida Marsh.

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For a girl, she wasn't bad looking and everyone noticed her. Like me, she had blonde hair and blue eyes. She wasn't a large girl. Thinking of her hair, I knew her mother liked to put her hair up in curls, but Ida didn't like it any way but natural. But most of my other friends were children that belonged to our workers.

"I don't know yet," Father said.

"Will they be staying here long?" Mother asked. As we walked, her attention seemed to drift to the weeping willow. At the top of the weeping willow in the yard a bird was singing. She paused a moment and listened to the bird. I had planted the willow a year or so earlier, and she called it "Edgar's tree."

When I was growing up in western Virginia, my grandmother (born 1802) and her mother before her would not allow a weeping willow to be planted. They believed the superstition that wherever a weeping willow grows will become a place of sorrow. In view of what happened to the Buchanan place, a weeping willow might be the proper tree to have there.

Turning back to Father, she said, "There's plenty of room. I don't know of anyone else coming this way for a while."

"He didn't say," Father told her.

"It might be a good idea to invite a few people over," Mother said as she got up.

"It wouldn't hurt..., I would rather he talked to someone other than me," Father said. "Contact the Marshes, of course. If Robert or Jefferson are around, we should invite them."

Once a month my parents held a garden party and invited their friends. Noted men like Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee came by, but we also entertained the Marshes, our relatives, and other neighbors. Now my parents wanted to include them in a meeting with my Uncle Joe.

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“Would you like me to invite Ida?” Mother asked me. “I’ll have to get the invitations out.”

“She’s just a girl,” I answered.

If it hadn’t been for the fussing Mother and Father did, I’d have told them I was looking forward to seeing Ida. She was the only person my age I knew who listened to me. She had a way of looking at life differently from anyone else I knew.

“That’s right, son, she’s just a girl,” Father replied with a smile and a wink.

At this, Mother told him, “William, that’s no way to raise your son.”

As he put his arm around her, he asked, “What do you mean, Janet?”

As Mother and Father left I wondered as I had before, what it was like being a Quaker. I didn’t know what a Quaker was except that they were a religious group. All I knew was that my Uncle Joe and his wife were good people. I didn’t see what anyone would have against them. It might be true they didn’t believe in God like some religions, but they were Christians. They had formed several relief programs that helped many people in need. From what Father had told me, they didn’t approve of slavery, so they moved north.

A few days later, Uncle Joe and his family arrived. Right away Joe Junior and I headed to the stable to look at the horses. I didn’t see anything different about Joe Junior, even though he was a Quaker. He seemed just like the rest of my friends. We laughed and enjoyed each other’s company.

The next day I was sitting on the porch in my white shirt, tie, and hat. I was waiting for Ida’s parents to show up and I wanted to look my best. With me on the porch were the men, talking about the change in the politics of the country.

“You know my feelings about slavery...,” Dad was telling Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Lee. “I can’t afford slaves, and it’s been that way for many years now. These people are free to go north any time they want... In fact, some of them have already left. The rest of them have stayed here out of loyalty to my family. Then others are staying here to work their land. If there are any slaves around here, they’re me and my family.”

“It might not be a major issue, but it is becoming one,” my Uncle Joe replied.

“It’s not our real issue with those northerners..., my issue as with most of us, is more financial. If we don’t band together, we will never get the money we need to eke out a living,” Mr. Davis told the men.

“I have to say I support many of the ideas of the northerners, but I don’t support the way they are pushing their ideas on everyone. I’m proud to say I have many friends in the North. However, if it comes to it, I’ll fight for our right to do what we want with our land,” Mr. Lee assured them.

Father asked him, “But what about your position in the Army?”

“I don’t care because my countrymen come first,” Mr. Lee said as he brought his fist down on a railing.

I saw a buggy coming up the drive and shouted out, “The Marshes are here..., they’re here, Father.”

“I appreciate your support,” Mr. Davis told Mr. Lee.

Father always referred to Mr. Davis as the politician who looked out for the people. I wondered how he could do that if Father was right about the war. How could he direct a war and look after the people at the same time?

Uncle Joe asked Father, “What’s got Edgar so excited?”

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“I think it’s because his little friend Ida is here. He says he’s not interested in her, but if he isn’t, there’s something wrong with my thinking,” Father replied.

“I remember being...,” I heard my uncle start to say.

I was more eager to meet Ida than to listen to their discussion. I ran to meet the buggy, and when it stopped, I reached my hand out to Ida to help her down. With the best smile, I could muster, I offered, “I’m glad you came. You look beautiful today.”

“I always worry when you are so polite. I don’t know if you are planning to hit me with a bucket of water..., or mud,” Ida said. She took my hand and looked around.

I looked back towards Father and saw him nod his approval as I was helping Ida down. He had a grin running from ear to ear and so did the rest of the men on the porch.

“He’s a gentleman’s gentleman,” Mr. Lee said as he gave me a salute.

My father greeted Ida’s parents, “Good to see you.” He turned to Ida’s mother. “Janet’s on the back porch driving Elsie crazy.”

“Thank you. I know how your wife is,” Mrs. Marsh said as she shook hands with Father.

“We can walk around and talk if you like,” Ida suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” I answered.

Some of the men were wearing tan suits, but most of them wore white suits and hats and carried a walking stick with a gold head. The women were wearing billowy dresses and hats of different shapes. Everyone was standing almost at attention, and it made my back hurt to watch them. The magnolia trees were in bloom and were the prettiest part of the scene, except for Ida.

Looking around at all the people, I saw that my parents were the most striking couple there. Father’s red hair and goatee were

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his most striking features, in contrast to his coarse facial features. He stood half a head taller than most of the men and he was in good shape for being a plantation owner. The fact that he had lost an arm from the elbow down didn't detract from his appearance. He had lost it fighting in the Mexican-American War, and Mr. Tyler, who lived nearby, had made him an artificial hand and arm. Mother, on the other hand, had fine features with blond wavy hair and blue eyes. She wasn't short but she still had a dainty figure. Most of the men gave her a long look when they came to our place.

Mrs. Marsh didn't have features as fine as Mother's, but she was still a beautiful woman. If Ida turned out like her, any man would be proud to call her a wife, my father always said. Mr. Marsh was a little taller than his wife and dark-haired.

In spite my excitement at being with Ida, my thoughts turned to Father and his friends. None of them said it outright, but I knew they were afraid war was about to break out between the North and the South. Mother and Father had told me the Southern States had voted to secede back in '31, but one vote had defeated the idea. Father was afraid that if the measure were to come up for a vote again, it would pass. Father feared that if the South were to secede, our lives would be in for a drastic change. I didn't fully understand what he was talking about, but it didn't sound good.

In my conversations with a few friends, that I did see occasionally, we talked about whether we would have to fight. My colored friend Raymond and I swore we would look after each other no matter what happened. Raymond lived with his mother, Elsie, in the main house, where we had grown up together. Most people laughed every time they saw us together, me with my light complexion compared with his dark skin. I was shorter than most boys

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my age, but he was even shorter. The only way he could match my height was by not cutting his hair.

Ida asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Her smile instantly made all of my fears disappear. I was honest and told her, "Dad thinks we might go to war with the North."

"My father has the same fear," she told me as her smile vanished. Looking down at her feet, she added, "I'm scared."

As we came around to the back porch, we saw the men were already there, getting ready to eat the dishes that Elsie had prepared. I heard Mr. Lee tell mother, "My wife Anne loves whatever your cook does to the chicken."

As the words came out of his mouth, Elsie was bringing out more food. Her tall, lean figure moved with determination. I had often wondered what her hair looked like, for I had never seen her without a scarf around her head.

"Thank you. I've been trying to get the recipe for years, but Elsie won't give it to me," Mother said.

"It looks like mud," Aunt Edith said with a smile. That got everyone's attention. Then she added, "It tastes good, whatever is in the mixture."

The party went on in the same way that our parties usually did. After everyone ate, the men went in one direction and the women in the other. The women talked about fashions and the men discussed war and cigars, while the young people played games and talked.

Even though Ida lived only a few miles away, I didn't see her very often. Our families seldom left our place just to visit. Though I certainly did enjoy seeing Ida again, I would never reveal that to my parents.

A few days later, one of our field workers, Jimmy (or "Pan Face," as we called him) and I were walking along the front fence

by the main road. We called him Pan Face because he looked as if his mother had hit him with a frying pan at birth. His face was black, flat (hardly any nose), and round. He was about the same height as Raymond and I, but he looked as if he outweighed us by a lot. Pan Face told me he had found a family of rabbits and we went to look for them.

Just in case we found any rabbits, I had brought one of Father's older rifles with me. I hadn't asked him for permission to bring the gun, but I didn't think he would mind. Pan Face and I had been hunting rabbits together two or three times, so I knew how to handle the rifle, but I was afraid that Father might think otherwise. I was in hopes of getting a rabbit and returning the gun to its place before he found out it was gone.

"Where did you find these rabbits?" I asked Pan Face.

He answered, "Between those bushes and rocks, as he pointed to bushes on our left.

As we got closer to the bushes, I could hear the sound of horses coming our way. We both stopped to see who might be coming. From our left, down the road that went along our fence, a team of four horses was pulling an open coach full of people. The driver and passengers waved as they went by.

"I wonder where they're going," Pan Face said as his eyes followed the coach.

"It might be fun to find out," I told him. I turned my attention back to where I often saw rabbits. "Let's find those rabbits. I promised your grandfather I'd bring him one." We called Pan Face's grandfather Old Raspberry, and sometimes joshed him about how he liked to eat rabbit for dinner.

As he watched the coach and walking towards me he said, "All right."

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Then from behind another bush, I heard, “Psst.”

I turned around to see who it might be. “What was that?”

“Psst...Over here,” an unfamiliar voice said.

I asked, “What do you want?”

A colored man came around the bush. “Is this the station? They told me there was a station here,” he said.

I knew there wasn’t a railroad station for miles. I began to tell him, “Not here...It’s...”

“Go behind the main house,” Pan Face told him.

“Thank you, sir,” the man said. He looked hesitant, uncertain. Then he asked, “Are the people here friendly?”

“Yeah,” Pan Face assured him. The man walked towards the house.

I asked Pan Face “What was that all about?”

“I don’t know. My father told me that if anyone was to ask about a station, I was to send him to our place,” he explained.

“Strange,” I said as I watched the man walk away from us.

Our house was larger than most. It was a two-story with six bedrooms upstairs. Above that was an attic where Elsie and her family lived. In front of the house were two rows of trees that blocked the wind. The windows to my room were over the center of the porch.

The grounds were a brilliant field of grass that stretched from the fence to the drive in front of the house. Sometimes when I saw my father walking or riding a horse across the grass, I thought he looked like one of the paintings that hung on his smoking-room wall.

I liked the windows we have in our house, compared to what my friend’s places have. When we opened our windows, the opening went from the floor almost to the ceiling. Father said he had

them designed that way to let the breeze through in the summer. I liked them, because I could run through the house and out the long windows without having to worry about opening a door.

As I looked around the land Father owned, I could see changes. The fields used to be full of cotton as far as the eye could see. Now, the summer I was thirteen, we still grew some cotton, but we didn't get nearly as big a crop as we had when I was younger. Our sharecroppers were growing corn, peas, and beans instead. Once they sold the crop, Father took a portion of the profits. Quite often he would remind us that if it weren't for the money they made, we would not be able to live here.

"I don't see the rabbits," Pan Face announced, interrupting my train of thought.

Pulling the bush back, I could see tracks that looked like they had been made by rabbits. "I guess you frightened them away."

"I didn't even get close to them," he said.

"You must have done something. They're not there." I threw my hands in the air. "We might as well go back. It doesn't look like we're getting any rabbits today."

"You're worried your father might catch you with the rifle," Pan Face said. He gave me an understanding smile.

"A little," I confessed. I didn't care if he caught me with the rifle that much. I realized that with the threat of war his attitude towards me had changed. It seemed to be secretive and he didn't answer questions. The change in him and everything else that was going on, was creating a bad attitude in me. I felt as if no one trusted me or talked to me. I couldn't get straight answers from anyone.

As I thought about the changes that were happening, my mind kept going back to the colored man who asked if our place was the

station. Most of the ones asking about the station asked one of our workers, not me, and like Father, they would quit talking when they saw me. The few times this had happened, I hadn't thought much about it, but with this man asking about a station, I was getting very curious. I wanted to find Father and ask him about it.

I heard Father shout from behind us "What are you boys doing out here?"

As I turned around, I set the rifle down barrel first, onto the ground. I didn't answer at first. Then I heard him ask, "What have I told you about handling a rifle?"

I looked down and saw the barrel was in the dirt. Looking up at him, I swallowed hard, knowing what was coming next. Lifting the rifle up, I answered sheepishly, "Never put the barrel into the dirt."

He asked, "Why?"

"Because it will damage the barrel, and it might plug it so that it wouldn't work right the next time I shoot it," I answered. I turned the rifle over and blew out the dust from the barrel.

"By the time I get into the house I want that rifle cleaned and put back where it belongs. Then I want you in your room for the rest of the afternoon," he told me sternly. As he turned his horse, around he added, "Then I'll decide whether I'll whip your backside or not for taking the rifle."

"Yes, Father."

He headed back towards the stables.

"I wouldn't want to be you right now," Pan Face said as we walked back toward the house.

I knew I would regret doing what I did.

"Yes, I'd rather be someone else right now," I said, as I picked up my pace. I didn't get into trouble with my father very often, but

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when he was mad, he became very stern and you knew, some punishment was coming. Pan Face went to the barn, as I went inside.

As Mother came into the house, she saw me and asked. "Why are you running?"

"Father is mad at me," I told her, as I went into the smoking room.

As she leaned against the doorframe, she asked, "What did you do this time?"

"I borrowed the rifle," I confessed.

"And you didn't ask him," she replied with a smile.

"No," I admitted.

"I guess you know what you can expect," she warned me.

"I know, Mother. I should have asked him first." I told her as I began to clean the rifle.

When Father came into the house, I had cleaned and put the rifle away. I was in my room, waiting to get my backside warmed. I had just sat on my bed when I heard his footsteps coming up the stairs and I stood up.

Father came into the room and said just one word. "Well?"

"I'm sorry. Old Raspberry says he would like a rabbit for dinner. Pan Face thought he knew where we might find some rabbits, so I thought I would get him one," I explained. I didn't think that explanation would do any good, but I thought I might as well tell him.

"You're referring to Mr. Tyler I suppose...No, I guess it wouldn't do any harm to get a rabbit for him. Still, you know the rules: You don't use my rifles without permission."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I'm getting tired and I guess I won't give you a whipping. Just remember the rules." He gave me a pat on the shoulder. He

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seemed to be thinking about other things, not about the rifle. As he got up he added, "I think we will be at war in a year or two... three at the most."

"Why? The northerners are no better than we are." I couldn't understand why we would have to go to war.

"Part of it is that up north there are more people in one city than there are in the entire area around here. All of them are crowded into an area no bigger than our place," he explained. He wiped his brow. "They're jealous because they think we have everything... if they only knew. When that man Whitney invented the cotton gin, it took our life away from us."

"That's not fair," I said.

"No it isn't. Men are never fair when it comes to money and war. When man has a problem, he doesn't correct it, but blames someone else for whatever is wrong." He looked sad, and defeated. Then walking over to one of my windows, he added, "All that you can see from here will be a battlefield. With that in mind, I think tomorrow I'll be teaching you how to use a rifle and pistol. Those two weapons might be all that you'll have to keep you alive."

"That sounds good to me." I was so happy that I wasn't getting a whipping that I couldn't worry about war. I looked out the window and I saw a beautiful blue sky.

"We're not going out there for fun. I plan to work you, until you can defend yourself," he warned me. Then looking back out the window he added, "Enjoy it as long as you can, for it'll be changing."

Hoping he would also teach them, I asked, "What about Raymond and Pan Face?"

"I don't see why not. They may be your only backup," he said as he left my room. Then sticking his head back into my room he

added, “We might even see what a dirty barrel does for you, and the rest of the day you can lie there and think about what you did.”

I was so happy to get out of the whipping, and so excited about his plans to teach us to shoot, that I forgot to ask Father what “station” meant. Looking out the window, I saw Raymond walking up to the house. When I heard his footsteps coming down the hall I called to him. “Hey, Raymond, guess what?”

“What, Master Edgar?”

“Father wants to teach you, Pan Face and me how to shoot tomorrow.”

He didn’t seem too impressed at my announcement, “I know how to shoot rabbits already.”

“He has more in mind than rabbits,” I told him.

“Like what?”

“You’ll find out in the morning,” I said.

“Then I’ll see you in the morning. I understand you’re in trouble,” he said with a grin.

“I borrowed Father’s rifle without asking him first,” I admitted.

“I know. Mammy told me all about it,” he said as he turned, still wearing the silly grin.

“You can lose that grin any time,” I told him.

“Not when it concerns you, I can’t,” he said as he went up the stairs.

The next morning I got up looking forward to a day of shooting lessons. As I walked past a window in my room, I saw Pan Face in the field not far away. I shouted out to him, “Hey, Pan Face.”

He waved at me and began to run towards the house. The two of us had talked in the past about going hunting, though yesterday was the closest he had ever come to hunting in his life. Knowing

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how he felt, I knew he would be happy to hear what Father wanted to teach us, and I couldn't wait to tell him the news.

When he got under the window, I called down to him, "Have anything planned for today?"

"I know we'll be doing some shooting," he answered.

"So he told you already." I had wanted to be the one to tell him, but Father had beaten me to it.

"That's what happens when you sleep in."

"Right," I called back to him. As I headed downstairs, I muttered, "Thanks, Father."

"You slept in, too," Raymond called to me as he started coming down the stairs.

"It appears that I did. Father has already told Pan Face what we're doing today."

"Oh well., what can I say," he returned as we headed for the kitchen where Elsie had breakfast waiting for us.

"If you don't eat now, you won't get anything for a while," Elsie warned us.

"She's mean this morning." I said as I gave Raymond a punch on the shoulder.

"I don't want Master Buchanan mad at me," she said.

"I doubt there is anything you could do that would make him mad at you. With your father being as big as he is, Father wouldn't have a chance," I said.

After breakfast, the three of us met in the smoking room to wait for Father. We were too excited to talk, so we sat in silence for a while. I could hear birds singing and I blurted out, "There are enough birds out there. It'll take all day to shoot them."

"I think you're right," Pan Face replied.

Then the birds quit singing and I knew why. The blacksmith

down in the stables was pounding on some horseshoes. I knew that if I could hear them, so could the birds.

“No, we won’t be shooting birds,” Father announced as he walked in and opened the gun cabinets. He turned back to us and said, “Grab one.”

He gave Raymond a Pennsylvania percussion long rifle, and Pan Face the Basler and Denk percussion rifle. He gave me his new Remington “Sniper” rifle. With them, he gave us powder flasks, a pouch of shots, wads, and percussion caps plus everything else we needed for a day of shooting. He gave us some basic safety instructions and finished with, “And may I stress, we do not put a rifle down barrel first.”

Once we had everything we needed, we were all as excited as we could be. The idea of doing some shooting with Father was especially exciting for me. Adding to the excitement was having two of the best friends at my side.

As we walked out to the field, Father explained his reason for wanting to make marksmen out of us. He told us again that war could break out at any time, and it was his duty to give us the training we would need to protect ourselves. He added that it didn’t matter what the women folks thought, the war was coming.

Once he had finished his speech, he began to show us the basics of handling a rifle. We paid close attention as he showed us how to take apart all three rifles and clean them. During the first two hours we never had a shell in our rifles. He was so intent with his lesson we paid close attention to him. At the time, I wondered if it was worth it but as time went by, I realized it was. Thinking about his sermons, I knew they had saved my life a couple of times. I was impatient to get to the best part, the actual shooting.

“I wish my hands were a little smaller. I have trouble holding

those little percussion caps and getting them onto the nipple,” Pan Face said.

“At the rate you’re going, the enemy will have you tarred and feathered before you get it loaded,” Raymond warned him. With a laugh, he added, “But I’m having the same problem myself.”

“And then who’ll protect my backside. Thanks, Pan Face,” I added to the conversation. I had used one of the newer rifles before, so I wasn’t having as much trouble as the others were.

“Now this is serious business, I want you three boys to relax and breathe as I showed you,” father shouted at us. Then looking around he called out, “Raymond... You try to hit the knothole.”

He finally let us shoot at rocks and at knots in trees to get the feel of the rifles. We did that for four or five days and Pan Face was the best at that of the three of us. Even Pan Face could only hit the target about forty percent of the time, and that wasn’t good enough for Father.

The noise of the guns had made our ears ring and made it harder for us to hear, but after giving us a few days off to get our hearing back, Father had us at it again. After another couple of weeks we were hitting the targets about ninety percent of the time.

After we had been shooting one entire day, Father told us, “Once you get the basics of shooting down, we’ll try moving targets.”

Apparently Pan Face was in hopes of getting his grandfather a rabbit for dinner when he asked, “What, deer or rabbits?”

“If any are available, you can. I know how your grandfather likes rabbit for supper,” Father said.

One day I said, “Mother hasn’t had anyone over for a while. Are we going to have a party soon?”

“Your mother and I have talked it over, and we both feel this is more important,” Father answered. With a hand on my shoulder, he added, “Miss seeing Ida?”

“I don’t know about that,” I lied. I wanted to tell her what we had been doing. I also wanted to see the other boys who came over so that I could tell them, too. They would probably like to learn how to shoot.”

“Once you get good at hitting moving targets, I have something else in mind,” Father told us.

“What’s that?”

“You’ll find out. When I get through with you, you will all be the best marksmen in the country,” he answered with a grin. “Even after years of practice, most are not as good as you three are.”

“We’re just special,” Raymond replied, sticking out his chest.

“Yeah... Especially dumb” as I gave him a playful shove.

“But I can shoot,” he said. He shoved me back.

“That’s not the way you act when you are carrying a rifle,” Father reminded us.

“Sorry, Father.”

“At least the weather has been good to us, Master Buchanan,” Pan Face observed

“That it has,” Father agreed.

Mother was on the porch waiting for us. She asked “How did it go today?”

“About the same,” Father answered. Turning back to us, he said, “I want all three of you in there cleaning and putting away those rifles.”

“I hope you boys are getting better. For all the shooting that you’ve been doing, it would be a waste of bullets if you’re not,” Mother said with a smile.

“They’re improving,” Father assured her. He turned and reminded us, “Cleaning.”

“Yes, sir,” we answered as we went into the smoking room.

“And what have you been doing...?” Father began to ask Mother, but we were soon out of earshot and didn’t hear the rest of their conversation.

As we were cleaning our rifles, Raymond asked, “Do you think the Master is right that we’ll be in a war soon?”

“From what I’ve overheard from Mr. Davis and Mr. Lee, I think so. If anyone would know, they would.” I answered as I wiped oil off the barrel of my rifle.

Pan Face asked, “Does the Master think we’ll be fighting in the war?”

“I doubt it. We’re too young to join an army. I don’t see why people want to fight anyway,” Raymond said.

“Father said the war might be right out the front door,” I said. “If that happens, we might have to defend ourselves. I agree with Mother. I don’t see any reason for everyone to fight. What would we be doing, fighting our friends and relatives?”

“I think it would be fun. I can think of a couple of people I wouldn’t mind fighting,” Raymond stated with a mischievous smile.

“It does sound like fun,” I said. But I wasn’t sure that I really agreed with him. The way Father talked, I got the idea that there wasn’t any fun fighting a war. I remembered him telling me he had fought in the Mexican-American war, and I figured he should know whether it was fun or not.

“I can’t fight in any war,” Pan Face replied with a sad look on his face. “Who would take care of my grandfather?”

At supper Father told me he was suspending our shooting lessons. He had to make a run up north, but when he got back, we would take up shooting again. I found it disappointing but I had plenty of chores to keep me busy while he was gone.

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Father went on his trip, bring secretive, he did not tell us where and came back as he promised a couple of days later. The next day all of us went out and shot at the rocks and trees again. I began to wonder if the trees might fall over from all the lead in them. Everybody laughed at the idea when I mentioned it.

“I don’t know. That tree over there might need another bullet in so it can fall over,” Raymond suggested as he fired a shot. His shot took off a branch and all of us laughed.

“The bullet has to go into the tree to make it heavier,” I told him.

“I was trying to take the weight off the one side,” he explained.

“Sounds good,” Pan Face replied.

“Let’s get serious,” Father told us. He began picking out the targets.

With the targets agreed on, we began taking turns shooting at them. We were improving, but not enough for us to brag about. We called it quits when we saw dark clouds building up in the sky.

After supper that night, we finished shooting at rocks and trees. We came back to the house, after we cleaned the guns, Father and I sat down on the front porch. I thought about the man looking for the station. I asked, “When people refer to a station, what are they talking about?”

Father took a puff on his cigar. “Well, there’s a railroad station twenty miles north of here.”

“I don’t think that’s what they are referring to,” I told him. From the way he looked, I knew he wasn’t being honest with me. He seemed afraid to tell me anything. Seeing his reaction made me more eager to learn what a station was.

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“I wonder what your mother is doing,” he said, getting up quickly.

He was obviously nervous. He flipped his half-finished cigar into the yard. I didn’t see why he found the question so difficult. The fact he didn’t give me an answer wasn’t my problem. It was as if he just didn’t want to confide in me. In the past, I had never had any problem getting him to answer my questions. I let him go inside and decided to ask Mother in the morning.

As I went to bed that night, my thoughts turned to what I wanted to tell Ida. I decided I would wait until I went hunting and then brag. I started wishing she had been part of the training with the rest of us. I wondered whether she might know what “station” meant. Not knowing was really beginning to bother me.

In the middle of the night something woke me, and I sat up and tried to figure out what it was. I went to the window by my bed and looked out. I saw an unfamiliar colored man coming towards the house from a wagon in the drive. I watched Father go out to the wagon and talk to the driver, but I couldn’t hear what they said. I went back to bed, thinking I would hear about it in the morning. Whenever Father woke up in the middle of the night, he always complained about it the following morning.

The next morning I got up with the crowing of the roosters. I was sleepy, but I wanted to find out about the colored man in the middle of the night. It made me feel good when I heard Father’s voice talking and laughing with Elsie in the kitchen. It sounded as if he was in a good mood.

“All I know is that son of mine is mighty proud that you are showing them how to shoot a rifle,” I heard Elsie tell Father.

“He’s a good lad. You may have to depend on his ability to hit something with a rifle before all of this is over,” Father told her.

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I didn't mean to listen in on their conversation, but they were speaking so loudly I couldn't help it. It appeared that Father wasn't upset about the man coming in last night, and something told me I wouldn't learn anything from him.

"Good morning, Master Edgar," Elsie greeted me.

"Good morning," I said, looking at Father. His back was to me and it appeared he was enjoying a morning cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Edgar." He turned around to look at me.

"Good morning, sir," I answered as I sat down at the table. My question was uppermost in my mind, so I didn't wait for him to say anything else. I asked, "Who was that man last night?"

"What man?"

"The man in the wagon last night, you went out and talked to the driver after the man came inside," I reminded him.

"You must have been dreaming." He put his cup down. Looking over at Elsie, he added, "I don't remember any man coming in last night. Do you remember a man coming here last night, Elsie?"

"No, Master," she answered, turning her head away.

"I had better go down to the stables. The stable boys have been having problems with a mare." Turning back to me he added, "I'll be back shortly."

"Yes, Father," I replied. Why had he denied that a man had come in the middle of the night? I just could not understand what was going on.

Elsie turned to me. "You ready for something to eat?"

"I guess so. I just wish I knew what a station meant," I muttered under my breath. At that, her eyes got wide like saucers. I knew she understood what I had said. I then asked, "What does station mean?"

She acted as if she hadn't heard.

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“I wish that boy of mine would get up,” she said.

“Elsie, tell me what it means,” I begged her.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she answered as she stirred some mush. Before I could say anything else, she asked, “Some mush?”

“Yes, please. But I can see it in your eyes. You know what it means,” I told her. From her reactions, I would have thought she had ants crawling all over her. I knew as well as what my name was she knew the answer to my question.

“It’s not for me to say anything,” she answered as she brought me a bowl of mush. “I know my place.”

“I understand. If you can’t tell me, you can’t,” I said.

Seeing I wouldn’t get any information out of her, I turned to my mush.

Instead of continuing to wonder why Father wouldn’t answer my question, I started thinking about the fact that he had only one arm, and how well he handled himself in spite of that. I wondered whether he would be as powerful in action if it wasn’t for the arm and hand old man Tyler made for him.

“Morning,” Raymond’s voice came from the hallway. Before his mother or I could say anything, he added, “Are we ready for another day of shooting?”

“Unless you have something better in mind,” I told him as I took my last bite of mush.

As he came back into the kitchen, Father asked, “Are the two of you ready?”

“I told you to get up early. You know the Master doesn’t wait till noon,” Elsie told Raymond.

“A shooter can’t shoot well on an empty stomach. Grab yourself a bite. We can wait,” Father said to Raymond.

“Thank you” Raymond grabbed a bowl and dished up some mush for himself.

We went out for the day and shot for another eight hours. During that time, Pan Face got his grandfather his rabbit. I had seen him with a smile on his face before but not as large as the one he had as he picked the rabbit up. His white teeth blended in with his eyes. If I hadn’t known, better I would have thought he was as white as I was. We gave him a bad time about it and he thought it was funnier than we did.

Off and on, this routine went on for months and all the shooting finally got boring. If it weren’t for the rocks, trees or the bottles thrown into the air it would have been worse. Father had us shooting at everything.

When Father saw us getting bored, he would tell us, “The life of a loved one and your own life may depend on your ability to shoot. The way it’s going, it won’t be long before we will be at war.”

During this time, I saw two more colored men going into our house. Once again I asked Father about them, and once again he told me nothing. One night I could have sworn that Samuel and Rachel from the Marsh Plantation came into our house, though it didn’t make any sense that they would be coming over here. When I didn’t hear any commotion downstairs, I figured there wasn’t any problem at the Marsh place. It still bothered me to think that they had come to our place; why would they do that, and risk being captured as runaway slaves? I looked out my window again and realized the man and woman might not have been who I thought they were. Still, I was pretty sure it had been Samuel and Rachel. Even if they weren’t from the Marsh place, a colored man and woman had come into the house. I decided to ask Ida if they were missing. If anyone would know if there were missing slaves, it would be her.

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When I thought of Ida, I smiled when I remembered her parents told me how every time she had a disagreement with them, she would tell them she was going to run away and marry me. She had been saying that for as long as I could remember. Even thinking about that part of her, I found myself smiling.

The next morning I went to look for Samuel and Rachel. I went around looking in all the places they should be, but I couldn't find them. When I asked about them, everyone looked at me as if I were crazy. By this time, I no longer found it surprising that no one was telling me anything.

A few days later I got my opportunity to ask about Samuel and Rachel, when we went to a party the Marshes were giving.

Once everyone had said their hellos, Ida gave me a wink as she turned to her parents and asked, "Can Edgar and I take a walk down to the pond and talk?"

"That's enough of that idea, Miss Ida," Mr. Marsh told her in a sharp tone of voice.

"Why not, Father? We can discuss the number of children we'll have, and where we'll live."

"Ida!" her father said sternly.

"I was only kidding," Ida said.

As they were talking, I was looking at the steps going up to their porch. I counted thirteen steps. Father had told me that our steps would have been thirteen also if it hadn't been for his father. He wouldn't have thirteen steps or thirteen of anything because of his superstition that thirteen was an unlucky number, so he had each step made an inch higher than it should be.

"Now, now, that's enough of that. I think the two of us should let the children go and we should join the rest of the party. The music has started. I bet everyone is dancing," Mrs. Marsh said.

Ida asked her father “You’re not going to make me dance or any of that stuff, are you?”

I stepped away to let Ida and her family have their discussion, as did my parents. Both sets of parents seemed to take us seriously. These little talks were one reason I enjoyed our trips to the Marshes’ place. My parents always had something to say about the two of us as we went home.

It wasn’t long before Ida came over to me.

She asked, “It might be wise for us to join the rest of the young people. I think they’re playing that game called baseball.”

“Let’s go and see what’s happening. I don’t feel like playing, but I’m willing to watch,” I told her as I took her hand. We walked slowly around the house, bypassing the rest of the guests. I glanced back at the adults and I knew they were talking about the coming war with the North. For the past six months, it seemed they had talked about nothing else. Ida and I had listened to enough conversations about war and didn’t want to hear any more.

“Edgar, you ought to be in on this conversation,” Mr. Lee shouted to me.

“Ida needs someone to keep her company,” I answered.

“I understand,” he said.

“I find you more interesting than that group,” I told her.

“Thank you...I think,” she replied.

“You’re welcome... I’ve had enough of their talk,” I told her.

Once we got to the knoll overlooking the meadow we sat down. Neither of us talked while we watched the people playing this new game of baseball. I told her, “Some guy named Doubleday supposedly invented the game.”

With a bored look she asked, “Oh, really?”

“Just thought I would start a conversation,” I answered.

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“I’m sorry, but I’ve listened too much to Mother and Father’s conversations lately. I’m tired of thinking about the war. I’m enjoying sitting here with you not worrying about what I should say,” she said.

“I understand.” I reached over and stroked her hand. As soon as I touched it, she pulled it away, but she gave me a smile.

We finally began talking about what we had been doing lately. I told her about my father’s growing fear of a war coming and his insistence that I learn how to shoot. When I was through, she had a sick look on her face. I wished I hadn’t told her.

“I’m afraid Father might join in the fight,” she said.

We continued to talk until it was finally time to eat.

It wasn’t until I was halfway home that I realized I had forgotten to ask about Samuel and Rachel. I was absorbed in thinking about that and wasn’t listening to Mother and Father. Then

Mother poked me in the ribs, and asked “Did you and Ida have a fight?”

“No.” I answered.

“You’re so quiet I thought the two of you might have had words,” she said, but she didn’t ask any more questions.

“Sometimes a man has to think,” Father said.

“So the rest of the time you can do nothing but talk,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

“We learn from our women folk,” Father told her.

A few days later Father had us in the field shooting again. This time he was throwing twigs in the air and having us shoot at them. We had done this before, but he added a twist to the game; he had us blindfold ourselves before shooting at the twigs. He said he wanted us to be able to hit a target by what we could hear and not see.

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Midmorning I had my blindfold off and was looking around the meadow. From the corner of my eye, I saw movement in some woods to my left. Looking closer, I saw a colored man. I wasn't sure, but I didn't think I had seen him before. As I watched him move through the woods, I prayed he wouldn't get in our line of fire. I heard the sound of gunfire, before I could say anything, I saw him fall. As I turned to my father, I saw smoke from a firearm rise in the air from behind a bush. I saw that Father had seen what I had, and he had a look of concern on his face.

"Give me your rifle," Father said in a hushed voice.

He took my rifle and stepped behind me. I could feel his breath on the back of my neck and wondered what he was doing.

"Don't breathe or move," he said in the same hushed voice.

I felt him rest the rifle on my shoulder. From the movement it was making, I knew he was having trouble getting it into position with just one hand. As I watched the area around the bush where the shot had come from, I didn't see any movement. After what seemed like hours, Father fired the rifle and a white man fell through the bush to the ground.

"Take it," Father said, shoving the rifle into my side.

I was in shock from what I had seen. I asked, "What?"

"Take it." He shoved the rifle at me again.

"Yes, sir," I took it from him.

With the rifle in my hand, I turned to look at Pan Face and Raymond. They were just taking their blindfolds off. Both of them looked over at me with a questioning look as they rubbed their eyes.

Raymond asked, "What happened?"

Then Pan Face asked, "Was that you shooting?"

"It was Father," I answered as I ran to catch up with my father.

Pan Face was doing his best to catch up with me. With a confused look, he asked, “You mean the Master?”

Raymond caught up with the rest of us. The four of us looked around but we didn’t see anything moving. Ahead of us lay the white man, face down. Beside him was the rifle he had used to kill the colored man.

I asked, “Who is he?”

With his foot Father rolled the man over. A hole in the man’s chest was oozing blood. His eyes were wide open, and I knew he was dead. A look of shock was in his eyes, as if when he felt the pain of the slug hitting him he suddenly knew what a bad mistake he had made. Although I had seen my grandfather dead, it wasn’t anything like looking down at this man. I wondered how many members of his family were waiting for him to come home. The thought made me feel a little sick to my stomach. Remembering it was my father who had shot him; I began to get sicker. I looked at his chest and saw a “Slave Police” badge pinned to it.

I pointed to the man’s badge and asked, “What are we going to do now?”

Father said “Billy is a trusted worker and would keep his mouth shut.” He then said,

“Raymond, I don’t want you to talk to anyone about this. I want you to get Billy and tell him to bring a shovel. I want him to bury this man and his victim over there in the woods,” Father said as he looked away from the body.

“Yes, Master... I’ll go get him for you right now,” Raymond handed me his rifle and went to find Billy.

“Take his rifle,” Father told Pan Face. He watched Pan Face reach down to pick it up. “We might as well go back to the house... and get cleaned up for supper.”