

# *THE LAST SLAVE*

## *HAL AMES*



The War between the States was over and life on the plantation had changed. The troops from the Northern Army were everywhere. They told the farmers that their slaves were now free. They told them that keeping slaves was now against the law, and this made them very angry.

The plantation owners were confused. Now they had no one to work for them.

The slaves were confused as well. They had nowhere to go. The only lives they had known were on the plantation. They couldn't read, they couldn't write, they didn't have any skills except to work on the farm.

Many of the slaves ran away, knowing that the owners of the farms could no longer capture them and bring them back. Some of the slaves stayed on the farm and worked for their former owners. They had no place to go.

One such former slave was named Jeremiah. He was born on the farm. His father was sold when he was very young and moved to another farm far away. His mother was a kind woman. She worked in the main house as a cook and laundry woman.

He grew up playing with the children of the plantation owner. The family was kind and took good care of the farm and the workers.

After the war it took a long time to rebuild the farm. The soldiers had taken most the valuable things from the house and had destroyed the crops. The family was strong and promised to remain on the land and begin again. Any slaves that agreed to stay would be taken care of and given money.

Although he was young, Jeremiah was a big part in the rebuilding of the plantation. He worked hard every day. He never complained and helped everyone he could. He didn't have much of an education, but he was very good with money. When he went to town to buy things for the plantation, some of the merchants would try to cheat him, but he knew better, and he made them give him the right price.

Jeremiah had never married. He was ready to marry, but she died during the war. It was a very difficult time for everyone.

Jeremiah's owner, Mr. Garnes, died when he was fifty-five years old. His son inherited the land and had the same ideas as his father. He wanted the plantation to be prosperous and grand. He was a fair man and treated his workers with respect.

Jeremiah stayed on the farm with the son. Everyone respected him. Jeremiah and John had played together as children, so they were good friends.

Many of the people in the town thought it was wrong for Jeremiah to be trusted with so many responsibilities. After all he was just the son of a slave, and an ex-slave himself. It didn't matter to Jeremiah or to John. They were working together to build a better life.

The house and the old slave shacks were in bad repair. It would take time to rebuild them. Jeremiah had learned many skills as a boy. The one he liked the best was carpentry. He was excellent at building things. Day after day Jeremiah could be seen cutting wood, climbing ladders and using a hammer to nail the boards into place. If he wasn't doing that he was painting, farming or cleaning. He was always busy.

Jeremiah loved to whistle. He would whistle the old spiritual songs he learned in church. People loved it when he was around because the old songs were so comforting. His whistling sounded as good as an organ or any other musical instrument for that matter. People always knew he was coming just by listening to his whistle.

When he walked to town he would whistle and sing. He would dance and spin and do things that showed how much he loved his life. He was such a happy person.

As time went by, the people of the town grew more and more angry. The soldiers from the north were unkind. They would take things and demand food and housing. The people began to blame the ex-slaves for their problems. Life became very difficult for

them.

One day as Jeremiah was walking to town, some young boys began to tease him. They called him names and began to throw stones at him. Jeremiah just ignored them and continued on his way to the store.

When he got to the store there was a new sign hanging in the window. Jeremiah did not know how to read so he walked in.

The owner of the store yelled at him to get out.

“Your kind is not welcome here anymore! Get out!” the owner yelled at Jeremiah.

Jeremiah thought, “‘Your kind’, what did the owner mean by ‘Your kind’?”

He left the store very confused. What happened? Why was he not welcome anymore?

Jeremiah went to the stable to check on the horse he had taken there a few days before to get new horseshoes. When he walked into the stable the blacksmith told him to leave.

“Your kind is not welcome here anymore,” the blacksmith said to him.

Jeremiah left and returned to the farm. The boys he saw earlier followed him and yelled things at him. Jeremiah started to run. He had no idea what was going on.

When he got back to the farm he saw something terrible. Someone had painted words on the house in red paint. The white house had looked so beautiful when he finished painting it only a month ago.

The sign said, ‘Ex-slaves are not welcome here!’

He went into the house. Everyone was upset. John called Jeremiah into his office.

“Sit down Jeremiah. I have something I need to talk to you about,” he said. “Times have changed around here. People are angry and they are pointing the finger at the ex-slaves saying that if we had not lost the war you would all still be working for us. Now it’s hard to make money.

“I’m afraid for you Jeremiah. I’m not sure what to do. I’m afraid that you might get hurt. I want to send you away. Tell me where you want to go and I’ll provide the money to get you there,” Jeremiah’s friend and boss explained to him.

Jeremiah did not know what to say. He did not want to leave the farm. It was his only home.

“I’ll have to think about it and let you know later,” Jeremiah answered.

That night Jeremiah did not sleep well. He could not understand why the people in the town were so mean to him. They had always been so nice to him before.

The next day as he was preparing to go to town, John approached him.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go to town today. There’s a big meeting and it’ll be very dangerous for you. Stay here. I’ll go to town and I’ll tell you what I find out when I get back,” he told Jeremiah.

Jeremiah stayed at the house all day. He climbed the ladder and started to paint over the red words that were on the house. It was a hot day and the sun was high in the sky. Jeremiah liked days like this. He felt like he was really doing a day’s work when the sweat was running down his brow.

He ran out of paint and so he had to go down the ladder to get more. Just as he got to the bottom, three men on horses rode up to the house.

“Jeremiah, you need to come with us,” one of the men said.

Another man reached down and pulled Jeremiah onto his horse behind him.

“Hold on Jeremiah, we’ve got to get out of here fast,” he said as he dug his heels into the horse’s ribs and sent the horse running across the grass out to the road.

As they came to the road, they saw another group of men was approaching from the town. The horse Jeremiah was sharing turned up the road and away from the crowd that was coming down the road from the town.

The horses ran until they were too tired to run anymore. The men stopped and they got off of their horses.

“Jeremiah, those men we saw back there were coming to get you. They want to hurt you. They don’t like that you are so independent. Mr. Garnes gave us money to give to you so that you can get away. You need to go fast, they’re not far behind,” the man who had picked him up warned him.

“But where will I go? I don’t know anyone. What am I to do?” Jeremiah was

completely confused.

“Just get out of here now. We don’t have all day to stand here and talk with you. Those men are not happy with us either. Now go!” the leader of the group ordered Jeremiah.

Jeremiah ran into the woods. All he had with him was what he was wearing and the money the men had given him.

He ran until he could run no more. He stopped along a small creek and drank some water. He poured some over his head to cool him off. He looked around. All he could see were trees. He had no idea where he was going.

It was getting dark so he found a log he could lean against and fell asleep.

In the morning he found some berries and caught some crawdads in the creek which he ate.

He walked toward the sun as its rays came through the tall trees. He walked for several hours and then came to a road.

Standing at side of the road, he threw a stick into the air to decide which way to go. It pointed to the left, so he decided to go that way.

While he was walking he began to whistle. He was enjoying the warmth of the sun. Even though he did not know where he was going he remained in good spirits.

He walked for several days, eating whatever he could find along the way. A few people passed him. He greeted them, but they just ignored him

He heard the sound of a wagon behind him. He turned around and saw a man with his son sitting in the front talking to each other. The horse was old and walked slowly.

When the wagon caught up with Jeremiah the man in the wagon greeted him.

“Howdy, how are you today?” the man asked.

“I’ve been better,” Jeremiah answered.

“I sure like the way you whistle. It’s real pretty,” the man said.

“Thank you. I like to whistle the songs I learned as a boy in church,” Jeremiah responded.

“Would you like a ride somewhere?” the man asked.

“I would if I knew where I was going,” Jeremiah replied.

“I’m going up to Franksville. I’ll give you a ride to there if you like,” the nice man offered.

“Alright, I’d be obliged if you’d give me a ride,” Jeremiah replied, and then he climbed into the back of the wagon.

“So, what’s your name?” the man asked.

“I’m Jeremiah, Jeremiah Garnes, sir,” he answered.

Well, I’m Josh Bailey and this is my son Noah,” Josh introduced himself and his son.

“Nice to meet you both,” Jeremiah said, as he shook the hand of the stranger.

The ride to town took a couple of hours. The horse was slow but steady. Jeremiah fell asleep in the back of the wagon.

When they got to the town, Jeremiah jumped out and thanked Josh for the ride.

“Anytime,” Josh said and shook Jeremiah’s hand. “Where are you going from here?”

“I don’t really know. I guess I’ll look for work here, if anyone will have me,” Jeremiah stated.

“I have some work I need to have done at my place. Do you know carpentry? I’ve got some fences and a barn that need fixing up. I can’t pay much, but you can stay in the barn up in the loft, and my wife will fix some food for you,” Josh offered.

“I don’t have any other offers, so I guess I accept,” Jeremiah replied.

“Wait here by the wagon. My son and I have to get some supplies. We’ll be right back,” Josh told Jeremiah.

Jeremiah waited like he was told. As he looked around it seemed like a nice town.

It was not long before Josh and Noah came out of the store. Jeremiah helped load the supplies into the wagon, and then he jumped in for the ride to the farm.

The trip to the farm was very peaceful. Since it was early summer, the birds were singing and the flowers were in full bloom. It was wonderful day, except for the fact that Jeremiah was far from his home. He was lonesome for his family and friends, but he knew

it would be dangerous to go back.

When they arrived at the farm and while they unloaded the wagon, Josh's wife came out to greet them.

"Jeremiah, this is my wife Susan," Josh introduced his wife. "And this is Jeremiah. He's going to stay with us for a while and help us fix up the farm."

Susan greeted Jeremiah and then told them that she had supper ready. She invited Jeremiah into the house to join them at the table.

Everyone washed up and then went into the house. The evening meal smelled delicious, and it tasted just as good.

After the meal Jeremiah told the story of what happened to him. The family was amazed. They had heard stories of things like that happening, but they did not understand how people could be so mean.

Jeremiah stayed on with the family and worked hard. Josh was impressed with the work he did, but soon there was not much left to do. Josh was sorry that Jeremiah had to leave. They had become very good friends.

Jeremiah decided to go to the town to find work. People knew how hard he worked from what Josh had told them, and many wanted to hire him, but they were afraid. People had come from his old town looking for him. He was told it would be best if he left and found work elsewhere.

Jeremiah was not happy about this, but he understood. He said goodbye and walked out of the town with a few dollars in his pocket and no place to go.

He walked for days and then came to a city. He had never been in a place like this. It scared him. He saw so many people and when he greeted them they turned away. No one was friendly there.

He asked where he might stay and finally someone pointed to an old building in the center of the town. When he walked in the entrance, the man there told him he would give him a room in exchange for work. Jeremiah agreed. The man showed him his room. It was only big enough for a blanket on the floor. There were holes in the walls and the window was very small.

Jeremiah put his money under one of the boards in the floor, a hiding place in the room. He then went to see the owner. He was given a list of duties, but since he could not read he had to ask the owner to tell him what to do.

He did repairs, washed floors and windows, swept the floors and cleaned the rooms when people left. That was the bad part of the job. People would leave their rooms in such a mess, but Jeremiah did not care. He was working and he had a place to sleep.

One day one of the people in the rooming house observed Jeremiah and how hard he was working. He invited Jeremiah to go with him to his place of work. Jeremiah agreed and the next day he went with him.

He was given a job. The work was hard, and the days were long, but Jeremiah was earning money. Every pay day he would hide his money in the floor. When he was not at the factory, he would work for the owner of the inn.

The owner of the factory noticed how hard Jeremiah worked. He offered him a new position where he would be working with seven other men. The owner told him that if he was going to be promoted to a better position he would have to learn to read.

Jeremiah asked many people how he could learn to read. One day a young lady agreed to help him. They met after work in the cafeteria at the factory every night.

Jeremiah was a fast learner. His teacher, Miss Rebecca taught him from the Bible. He had heard many of the stories in his youth at church, but now he could read them for himself. The language was funny, but he was learning to read.

The owner observed Jeremiah and noticed that he was able to read the instructions for each day's work. Soon he offered him a better position with better pay. Jeremiah thought about moving to a better place to live, but he decided to save his money instead.

Month after month it was the same. He worked at the factory, studied reading in the cafeteria after his shift, and worked for the owner of the inn.

As he studied reading, he began to have feelings for Miss Rebecca. One day he asked if she would have dinner with him. She accepted. They began to court each other and soon they decided to get married.

Jeremiah realized that he needed to improve his living arrangements. He looked for



a new place to live, but he was not having much luck. Miss Rebecca suggested that they live with her parents until they were able to find a new home. Her parents agreed. After the wedding Jeremiah moved into her parent's house with her.

Jeremiah continued to save his money by hiding it in a box. He worked hard at the factory and he found other work when he could.

One day, Miss Rebecca found the money that Jeremiah had been saving.

"What are you going to do with all of this money? Where did it come from?" she asked him.

"I've been saving it. I'm not sure what to do with it. I just don't want to be poor again," he responded.

The next day Miss Rebecca gave Jeremiah a newspaper.

"Look on page two. There is something there that might be of interest to you," She said with a smile, as she handed him the paper.

Jeremiah read the paper. There was an advertisement that a construction company was for sale.

"Why did you show this to me?" he asked.

"I think you should buy it," she answered.

"Do I have enough money for that?" he inquired.

"You have more than enough. Why don't you and my dad go and ask about buying that business. You are a good builder. You can do a good job with this," she encouraged him.

The next day Jeremiah and his father-in-law went to the company and asked about the advertisement. To everyone's surprise, when Jeremiah came home, he was the new owner of the business.

Over the next several years the business grew and Jeremiah became well known and respected in the city. His work was the finest anyone had ever seen and his prices were fair.

He hired mostly ex-slaves, like himself, to work for him. He gave them an education and trained them with skills he had learned as a boy.

He worked long hours, but it was worth it. The business grew, and life became more comfortable. They bought a large house and brought Miss Rebecca's parents to live with them.

He had two sons and a daughter. They all joined the business as well. Miss Rebecca became the head bookkeeper and made sure that all the bills were paid.

Over time the business expanded into other cities. His sons took over those companies and were very successful.

As Jeremiah got older he began to slow down. Miss Rebecca noticed that he did not have the energy he once had. She told him to let the boys do the work and that he should slow down and to rest.

Jeremiah did not want to stop working, but he knew his wife was right. He spent his time reading and walking in the park.

One day Jeremiah called his family to the house. He had something he wanted to tell them.

"We're going on a trip. We are going to visit my birthplace. I want you to see where I grew up," Jeremiah surprised the family.

As far as anyone could remember, Jeremiah had never taken a vacation. The family was excited. They would take a train to his hometown.

The day came for the trip. The family was packed and ready to go. They hired a coach to carry their bags to the train station.

It was exciting waiting for the train to come. Jeremiah's grandchildren were running back and forth playing tag. They had on their nicest clothes for the journey. Their mothers told them to stop or their clothes would get ruined.

The train arrived. The family members gave their tickets to the conductor and took their seats.

The train would take several hours to arrive. The family enjoyed singing and telling stories. The food in the dining car was very good.

It was evening when the train arrived at the station. The family got off the train and asked about a hotel. They were told they would have to go to the hotel on the far side of

the town. The other hotels did not allow people of their kind to stay there.

The town had not changed much since he left. The general store and the stable were still there. A few more houses and shops he did not recognize had been built along the road toward the old hotel.

Over the years the farmers learned how to raise their crops using machines instead of people. Many of the former slaves moved to the cities to look for work. A few stayed on the farms and did small jobs, especially the older workers.

As he looked around, Jeremiah thought to himself, “Things have not changed much since I left.”

The carriage took them to the hotel. The building was not pretty. It needed paint, but once inside, it was nice. The clerk at the desk was a kind young man and he helped them get all their luggage to the rooms. Each family had their own rooms next to each other.

After putting their things in the rooms and changing their clothes, they met in the dining hall for dinner. They sat around a big table in the corner. The restaurant was comfortable, and the food was delicious. The cook made food Jeremiah remembered from when he was a boy. His family enjoyed the meal as well.

Jeremiah had not talked much about his past. The family began to question him about what it was like in this town as a boy.

He told them about being a slave and how he grew up with his mother in the big house. He went on to tell them about the soldiers and how they came and told all the farmers that the slaves were now free. He spoke of how the farmers were angry about that.

Jeremiah shared how he stayed after his family left. He remained at the house and helped the son of his former owner repair the old house and make the farm work again. He explained how the people of the town became angry and because of that he had to leave.

He had hoped that the people in the town had changed since he left, but he was afraid that things were the same. He was sorry that his hometown was not like where they lived now.

The next day the family went for a walk. As they walked through the town there were many people staring at them. They had never seen such fine clothes, especially on

their kind.

Jeremiah whistled as they walked through the town and then out to the farm. He remembered this road. He had walked to and from town a thousand times.

He remembered the boys throwing rocks at him and the men coming to take him away. He was lucky. He had heard about others who had been beaten and whipped or even killed.

When they got to the entrance of the farm Jeremiah was very sad. The house was in bad repair. The grass and the flowers were dead. It looked like no one lived there anymore.

Jeremiah told the family to wait. He would go to the door to see if anyone was there. He walked up the road to the house, climbed the steps of the porch and then knocked on the door.

There was silence.

Just as he turned to walk away, the door opened. An older man answered the door. He looked like he had not changed his clothes in some time. His hair was long and unkempt. His beard was gray and thin. His eyes were dim.

“Hello, May I help you?” the man asked.

Jeremiah turned around.

“Is Mr. Garnes at home?” he asked.

“I’m Mr. Garnes, who may I ask are you?” the old man inquired.

“I’m Jeremiah. I’ve come home to visit,” Jeremiah replied.

“JEREMIAH!” the old man’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. “I cannot believe it. Come in!” he said with excitement.

Jeremiah waved at his family to come to the house. They went inside and Jeremiah showed them the old house where he had grown up. He sat in the parlor for a long time talking to John and sharing how his life had gone.

John had fallen on hard times after Jeremiah left. He was unable to take care of the farm alone. He had sold much of the property in order to survive. He was now trying to sell the last of his land and the house.

Jeremiah offered to buy the land and the house. John was happy to sell it to

Jeremiah.

It was agreed that John would remain in the house as long as he wanted.

Jeremiah brought one of his construction crews to the house and they restored it to its original beauty.

This was not easy. The people of the town were not happy that Jeremiah had bought the farm. Once, a group of people came and put a burning cross in the yard and threw rocks at the windows. Jeremiah did not give up. He was not going to leave.

He hired many people to work the farm, and on weekends, they would be actors and portray what it was like to live on a plantation.

Not long afterwards, John died, and Jeremiah had him buried in the family cemetery near the old church. Many people came to his funeral and spoke very well of him.

Jeremiah had come home, and he helped the people who helped him. Jeremiah spent his last days in that house with his wife Miss Rebecca. He was buried alongside his mother in the family burial plot along the edge of the forest.

Later, it became a museum where people from far and wide came to see life as it was before the war in the south.