

*Dick Daniels*

**TANGLED WEB**

DELICATE WOMEN OF THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH were placed on pedestals, confining their movements and making it scandalous to step down. Mary Katherine Cobb deserved to be on a pedestal—just not that one. She was beautiful, adept in the social graces, educated sufficiently to converse on a variety of topics, and dedicated to improving her community. Her father had been a conscientious physician, and she had grown up around the practice, watching his every move. When her mother passed at an early age, she became the Lady of the House—sometimes assisting with a difficult birth during the day and hosting a dinner party at night. She could easily have been a nurse with little additional training; in another age, she would have attended medical school herself. Unfortunately, she did not live long enough to see Clara Barton and thousands of women serving as nurses during the Civil War, forever opening up the field for future generations of their gender.

Since the medical profession was not an option for females as the nineteenth century dawned, Mary Kath would have to be content settling down to married life with a suitable husband. She found such a man, George Thomas, owner of forty-six slaves on a plantation north of Greenwood, Mississippi. During their courtship, he had shown himself to be an attentive listener, and his simple, no-nonsense manner mirrored her father's singleness of purpose. George's fields were located in the heart of the fertile Mississippi Delta, where the land produced cotton crops in abundance. Mississippi, as a result, had become the largest cotton-producing state in America. That also meant it was heavily dependent on slavery, and by the 1830s, the slave population outnumbered whites.

Mr. Thomas chose to work alongside his slaves and arose early to prepare the day's chores. He was exhausted by nightfall and turned in early; Mary Kath had no one but the household slaves for company. When her father died, she had inherited his small library of literary classics and the medical books she had studied in her youth. She began spending the evenings reading with Jessie, a house servant girl.

Anti-literacy laws throughout the South forbade teaching slaves to read. In Mississippi, Mrs. Thomas herself would have been required to spend up to a year in prison for the offense. Jessie would have been beaten severely. But Mary Kath was not one to be bound by convention or law. She taught her slave to read, and they discussed the literature from the library, along with the Bible. Jessie was fascinated by the heroes of the faith: Moses, Abraham, Joseph and Daniel. When the two had consumed every volume, Mary Kath opened the medical books, teaching Jessie first aid basics and the intricacies of child delivery—invaluable skills on the isolated plantations. They both brought children into the world, delivering for each other. There was an unlikely bond between the two women, and they enjoyed each other's company and intellect for many years.

The Thomases moved to Memphis when Mary Kath needed to be closer to skilled medical care, destined to die early like her mother. When her son Clinton took over the plantation with his frail wife Madeleine, Jessie was denied further access to literature. She couldn't help but be bitter

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toward the new woman who had relegated her to the wearying fields. Jessie's daughter, Lucy, had been assigned quarters in the house to be near at hand for Miss Madeleine. Lucy became pregnant about the same time as the lady she attended but was offered no allowances for her condition; her workload was unchanged. Both were due to deliver in September of 1843, meaning the worst part of their term would be suffered in the sweltering summer heat.

On a fall evening after three days of nonstop rains had transformed the roads into shallow tributaries, Madeleine went into labor. Jessie rehearsed her midwife training and helped get essentials ready before the doctor arrived. She had water boiling in large pots in the outside kitchen and rounded up clean linens and blankets. Madeleine wouldn't let her leave the room when the painful contractions started. The doctor elected to keep his buggy dry at home—aware Jessie was perhaps more capable—and Madeleine labored long into the night. Her husband had started drinking when her water broke and was passed out before the birthing process began.

Around midnight, Lucy started her labor. Shuffling from one room to another, Jessie was almost as exhausted as the straining mothers. Madeleine's labor was complicated by the position of the child, and considerable time and effort were expended turning the baby to avoid a breech birth. She was weakening by the minute and cursing everyone in sight, becoming particularly incensed when Jessie left the room to help her own daughter.

Luckily, Lucy's childbirth was an easy one, and both women delivered within minutes of each other in the early morning hours. Madeleine had immediately collapsed in exhaustion as Jessie clamped the umbilical cord with a piece of twine and cut the cord outside the tightened string. She did the same for Lucy and carried both male babies into a bathroom to clean them up before presenting them for the first time to their new mothers. As she checked the newborns for any defects, she could hardly tell them apart. The main difference was the quality of the blankets and baskets waiting to receive them.

Both Lucy and her husband Joe were one-fourth white. European genes could be introduced to slaves' blood through rape or romance. The forbidden fruit was sometimes too much for both sides to resist. Jessie was weighing all this, how her grandson would be denied an education and doomed to a life of servitude—like her. In an instant, before anyone else entered the room, she switched the babes.

As Jessie carried them to the mothers, she was haunted by a line from a Sir Walter Scott play Mary Kath had read to her years earlier, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive." Madeleine had not survived the delivery, and her husband never suspected the switch. The Thomas baby was christened Clinton Jr. Jessie told Lucy to name her child Moses—a strong biblical name and one with additional meaning understood only by Jessie. She would never tell anyone of her deceit.

The boys grew up with a simmering rivalry between them, competing in everything from picking cotton to racing back from the fields when the work was done. One day as they verged on manhood, it erupted into

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a full-scale tussle, and Moses got the better of Clinton. Mr. Thomas tied up Moses (his own son) and began to administer a severe lashing. As he tired from the exertion, he handed the whip to Clinton and demanded he finish the beating. Mercifully, it was soon over when Moses slumped unconscious to the ground. Jessie tended the deep cuts across his back and comforted him throughout the night. It hurt even more her true grandson had been forced to participate in the inhumane act. She wondered if she should try to untangle this mess she had created.

At this time, the United States was being torn apart by sectionalism; the North was intent on ending slavery, and the South was preparing to preserve it at all costs. Political compromises starting in 1820 had been unable to stop a movement leading the country to the brink of war. When Abraham Lincoln was elected, everyone assumed open conflict was inevitable. The new President was sworn in on March 4, 1861; Fort Sumter was attacked April 12th.

Some historians wrote that the Civil War wasn't about slavery, but rather "States' Rights" or a "Clash of Cultures." Robert E. Lee was the classic argument for the States' Rights advocates, a West Pointer resigning his commission and declining a position of high command in the Union Army in order to fight for his beloved Commonwealth of Virginia. The Clash of Cultures advocates contrasted the industrialized North and the agrarian South, urban North versus rural South, public education in the North and private tutors on the plantations, European immigrant descent up North versus English forefathers down South. The two sides had nothing in common and thus were bound to be separate.

On the Thomas Plantation, it was about slavery and nothing else. Clinton had left for Oxford to attend the University of Mississippi a year earlier. Jessie had been bursting with pride seeing her blood grandson head off to college and could hardly keep from telling someone. Less than a month after the bombardment of the South Carolina fort, all but four of the enrollees at Ole Miss had enlisted in the Confederate Army. A contingent including Clinton comprised the bulk of Company A of the 11th Mississippi Regiment, led by a nineteen-year-old student and known as the University Greys. Clinton wrote sporadic letters detailing their battles, some of the bloodiest in the war. The Greys fought at the first engagement, the Battle of Manassas, or Bull Run. Assigned to the Army of Northern Virginia, they distinguished themselves at the battles of Seven Pines and Gaines Mill, marching over two thousand miles since leaving the Mississippi campus.

Their most notable action came as a component of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, when at two o'clock on July 3, 1863, they started marching across three-fourths of a mile of open ground, enduring constant artillery fire. Breaching a low stone wall inside the Union lines, Clinton and his men advanced farther than any other unit, but couldn't hold the ground — with every man either killed or wounded. In a written battle report a few weeks later, Lee would say about his men, "More may have been required of them than they were able to perform." The bullet of a farmer's son from somewhere in Ohio or Pennsylvania dropped Clinton that day. The Northerner knew about the evils of slavery and why they were fighting, but mostly he was fighting to save his own life and the lives of the fellows

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beside him. A Northern boy was fighting to end slavery, not knowing he had just ended a slave's life—ironically, on Cemetery Ridge.

Meanwhile, Moses had stepped into the leadership role and was essentially running the plantation. Mr. Thomas seemed more interested in older whiskey than new crops, totally unlike his father who had worked beside the field hands. Moses was also holding church meetings in secret, sharing the Bible stories Jessie had read with the first Mrs. Thomas. He also had the hands singing Negro spirituals in the fields to set a steady work pace and escape the daily drudgery. Clinton had used the same technique with his troops, raising his voice with them in "Dixie's Land" to forget the tedium and fatigue of a long march.

News reached the plantation about Vicksburg falling a few days after the July 4th surrender. They didn't know about Gettysburg for nearly a week until newspapers published the casualty lists. Both Mr. Thomas and Jessie wept bitterly that night. She was paralyzed by this web of lies she had spun. It might have relieved the grief of the landowner to tell him the fallen soldier was not his "flesh and blood," but he had loved that boy as his own for twenty years. She didn't want to tell her daughter the child she had borne was lying beneath Pennsylvania sod. So, she steadfastly bore the pain for both herself and Lucy. It was almost more than she could bear. With the Confederate defeat now a foregone conclusion and Grant's Army prepared to confiscate his cotton crop in the fall, Mr. Thomas began to drink heavily as his fortunes were drained, and loss of the plantation was inevitable.

After the war, Mr. Robinson, a retired university professor from Massachusetts, paid enough for the house and land that Mr. Thomas could move to Jackson and steadily drown his sorrows there. Since Moses had been serving as the overseer, the new owner officially appointed him such and began to educate him in literature and math. The moves delighted Lucy, but she couldn't understand why Jessie took no joy in this new development. Moses proved to be a gifted student and progressed rapidly through every subject assigned. In due time, an admission to Harvard University was secured by Mr. Robinson in his former home state.

When Moses graduated with honors, Mr. Robinson offered to take both mother and grandmother to the ceremony. Jessie declined, her heart aching even more with this cruel twist of fate. Her physical health began its own decline, and by the time the group returned, she was perched on death's doorstep. Moses and Lucy sat by the bed comforting her. They knew death was near; she was talking incoherently about delivering babies—but it was not unusual for people at this stage to ramble. She drew Moses close and, in her last breath, told him, "I couldn't be prouder of you if you were my own grandson." Moses was confused. Had she mistaken him for Clinton? Or was it simply the delirium before impending death? No, Jessie had finally relieved herself of that burden of deceit, the tangled web she had woven and maintained his whole life.