

# HIGH COTTON

BY PJ DUNN

## Chapter 1, West Africa, May, 1855.

Twelve-year-old Manni helped his mother, Mala, as she was stripping bark from a eucalyptus tree, then winding the fibers into strands that she would later weave into flat sheets for Manni and his brother to use as sleeping mats. It was a very hot and humid day in the West African Empire of Yoruba. Manni's younger brother, Jalani, was playing with some of the other younger children, next to the riverbank. Manni called to Jalani to get away from the riverbank, it was very dangerous. Just last week, one of Jalani and Manni's friends was attacked and killed by a crocodile. Danger was

always lurking somewhere in the bush of Nigeria or as Manni realized, next to the riverbank, waiting its opportunity to create havoc for the villagers.

Manni was quite a seasoned hunter. As he did many mornings, Manni would wake just at dawn and leave before Mala and Jalani awoke. He would go upriver, where the waters were shallow and were a safe place to cross to the other side. In the shallow water, Manni didn't have to worry about hippos hiding. Hippos were very aggressive and very deadly. He also didn't have to be concerned about an attack from deadly pirhanas. In the shallow water a school of pirhanas was easy to see, and simply beating on the surface of the water would frighten the school away and since the water was moving, the chances of walking up on wildlife was slim. Once across, Manni would move

stealthily up the river a short distance, to a favorite watering hole of the local wildlife. The pool of water was about 100 feet across, and had some very deep holes next to the bank and sheer rock sides. There was however, a rather shallow beach-like area where the animals would come to get water. Manni hid himself among some high grass and brush close to the water's edge. This morning, Manni was in for a special surprise. A small herd of gazelle wandered up to the watering hole. A large male ventured over near where Manni was hiding. He readied his spear and at the right moment he thrust the sharp point of the spear into the side of the gazelle. The commotion frightened the rest of the herd and they ran. The male tried to run also but didn't go far. Manni gave chase, caught up with the gazelle, pulled his knife from his side and finished

the kill. Manni made his way back to the village with his prize gazelle. This would provide food for the family for several days.

The rainy season was beginning in West Africa and Manni's family would try to shelter themselves from the rain, just as most animals would do. Mala and the boys remained inside their hut, playing, and singing, assured that the dangers of the forest were far away.

But, today, danger would come from an unusual source. Manni heard a commotion. People were screaming and running as Yoruba warriors stormed the village, rounding up all who appeared to be in good health and physically able to work. The young men, and the young women, were especially valuable to the Yoruba King. They would bring a good price with the Dutch slave traders. The

warriors took Manni and Jalani, but their mother was too old and was left at the village. About twenty people were herded together; their hands tied, and then tied in a chain formation as they were taken toward the boats moored at the riverbank. Many of the villagers knew what was happening and the uncertainty of their future as slaves was terrifying.

The captors were ruthless, and to them the villagers were simply captured prey, animals being taken to the market. Loaded into the boats, the villagers were taken down river, about eighty miles, to Lagos, a seaport where slave traders anxiously awaited their arrival. The trip was nine hours of pure torture. No food, no water, no stops to care for personal needs, beatings with whips for those who would cause trouble, and abuse occurred constantly. The younger of the females were not

molested because that would then damage the goods and reduce the price the King could receive. The more mature women, however were subjected to horrible abuse. Small children and babies would not survive. The crack of the bullwhip was a reminder. They were now enslaved, and subject to the will of others.

Upon their arrival at Lagos, Manni and Jalani could see the large ships anchored in the harbor. A sight they had never seen. About eight other boats were also docked ready to sell their slaves. There were men on the docks watching as the people were removed from the boats. Manni was amazed to see so many with white skin. The only other white skin he had seen was a missionary who came to the village. The slave traders immediately began an attempt to buy those they perceived as prime slave

material. Manni realized they were nothing but a product being sold for money.

One of the buyers stood out from the others. He was a Dutchman with long black curly hair and an almost clean appearance. His speech and mannerisms were father-like as he took part in the bidding for the twenty slaves. Manni thought he looked kind, but that was all a facade. Hannibal was his name and he was known by the other slave traders as one of the most brutal of all. Two others stood with Hannibal, as he surveyed the new crop of potential slaves. He walked over to several young males and females grouped together, in an attempt to comfort each other and hoping the buyers would ignore them. Hannibal pulled one young female from the group. Holding her by her hair at arms length he looked her over. He then shoved her

toward the other two men who began to strip her clothing and left her standing in front of all, naked. Hannibal turned back to her, looked once again, and pushed her away. She was rejected.

Hannibal reached out to the same group, taking a male, then pushing him toward the other two men, who immediately stripped him. The men then began to make gross comments, bringing laughter from the buyers huddled around. Hannibal moved him to the side with the slaves he wished to purchase. Hannibal looked at a woman standing alone. She was probably 18 or 19 years old, and was holding a small child. He knew the child would never survive the journey to America. Hannibal signaled to one of his men and pointed to the baby. The man grabbed the child from the mother and amid her screams and protests, drew a knife and

slaughtered the child. There was no use wasting time, space or food on one who would not survive anyway. The two men then pulled the woman over behind some crates, where she was beaten and abused. and then left her lying on the ground. The woman began to crawl out from behind the crates. Manni, Jalani, and another man, helped the woman up and quickly surrounded her by the other men and women in the group of 50 or more that Hannibal had selected.

Manni saw Hannibal reach out his hand to one of the warrior captors, and then they were all herded toward one of the large ships next to the dock. They were led up the gangway to the deck of the ship called the Albatross. There they were stripped naked and forced down some steps into a dark, damp, area in the hold of the ship. The space

had only four feet of head space, and most of the captives could not stand upright. Manni and the other men and older mature women were placed in one compartment and the young women were placed in another, for their safety. The smell was horrible. The heat was almost unbearable. The only light came from three small openings near the ceiling of the compartment. Manni could see to the outside through these openings. Inside the compartment, Manni saw there were others already there. Manni and Jalani looked for a place where they could sit on the floor. Scared and hungry, the boys huddled in a small corner space. The compartment was very crowded. There was only room to sit and not to lie down. Manni discovered five wooden barrels near the door opening of the compartment. These barrels contained the only

water source for all the captives. A short while later, Manni heard a noise and the door to the compartment opened and two men came in, each carrying a wooden bucket. There was a stirring among the slaves as the two men pushed and kicked their way over to where the barrels stood. No one moved, as the men poured the contents of the buckets onto the floor. They turned to walk to the door, but still no one moved. They only looked intently at what the men had poured in the floor. When the men reached the door, the slaves all converged on the food the men had poured out. Manni realized he and Jalani had to push their way through the mass of people to get the food they needed. Therefore, they joined in scratching and fighting for just a morsel of food. When the food was gone, the boys made their way through the people

back to the corner.

## **CHAPTER 2, Tamar, June, 1855**

A few moments later, a woman crawled up to Manni and Jalani. In the dim light she stayed there on her hands and knees, staring at them. When she finally spoke, it was a dialect the boys didn't

understand. She appeared very frustrated. A man sitting nearby leaned over and spoke, “she wishes to thank you for saving her life.” Manni and Jalani could not speak, but just looked at her. The man nearby spoke again, “she may regret you saving her, if she ends up in a Jamaican seasoning camp.” “What is a Jamaican seasoning camp?” Jalani asked. “Shhh. Be quiet Jalani.” Manni said. The woman spoke again and the man listened, then he spoke. “She says her name is Tamar. Her baby is now dead and she doesn’t know where her husband is. She wants to know your names. My name is Autu.” “We are Manni and Jalani.” Manni told Autu. Everything was quiet. Tamar began to lie down, as much as possible, curling into a ball, and placing her arms and head across the laps of the boys. Then she began to cry, and cried for a long

time. Manni rubbed her hair as she lay there, but that wasn't much comfort. Tamar tried to stay near the boys. She tried to comfort them, and would try to grasp handfuls of food to give to the boys when the food was poured on the floor.

Manni and Jalani could sense the motion and knew the ship was no longer moored to the dock. They could barely see out the three small openings. They could no longer see the masts of other ships or any structures on the dock. They were underway. Manni and Jalani could not imagine where they might be going. The only way to determine day and night was light coming through the three small openings above. Manni tried to keep count of the days they were in this horrible place. Several days after leaving Lagos, three of the slaves in the compartment became violently ill and subsequently

died. That seemed to be a regular occurrence.

Occasionally, someone would come into the compartment and take three or four of the slaves to the deck above where they would perform menial tasks such as mopping, sweeping, and just general cleaning. If they performed well, they would receive extra food and be taken back up to the deck again. Poor performance would get the slave beatings, or whippings. Sometimes those taken to the deck did not return. Manni heard some of the men say those that did not return were shark food. Manni and Jalani had never seen a shark, but the stories they had heard were terrifying.

One day, a man came to take three slaves to the deck. Manni was chosen. It had been over a week since Manni had seen the outside or sunlight except through the three small openings. When he

emerged from the compartment, the sun was so bright; he had to shade his eyes. The ocean breeze was wonderful. He was given clothes to put on, and instructed as to what to do. Manni was assigned the task of cleaning the floors in the Captain's cabin. Captain Hannibal expected perfection. Manni was instructed well and began his task. He worked hard, and was doing a good job. He was busily scrubbing the floor on his hands and knees, when Captain Hannibal came in. He was yelling loudly at a man who followed him through the door. Not at all the father-like man Manni first saw on the dock several weeks ago. Manni came to realize the man Hannibal was yelling at was the Captain's cabin boy. Manni did not know what a cabin boy was. He pretended not to listen to their argument, but he hung on every word. Manni learned that the work he

was doing was what the cabin boy should have been doing and instead of doing his job himself, the cabin boy had Manni brought in to do it. He could then go to entertain himself drinking and gambling with the other crewmembers.

“Maybe this slave boy here should have your job,” the Captain said. “You are of no use to me. Go to the Mate and he will reassign you to another job.” The man left the cabin. Captain Hannibal looked at Manni, “Do you think you could handle the job of keeping my quarters clean and orderly?” the Captain barked. Manni could not believe what he just heard. But, what about Jalani? He couldn’t leave him in that hell hole. Manni responded to Captain Hannibal, “Yes sir. I know I could perform the job. But I have a younger brother, who is still in the hold of the ship with the other slaves.” The

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