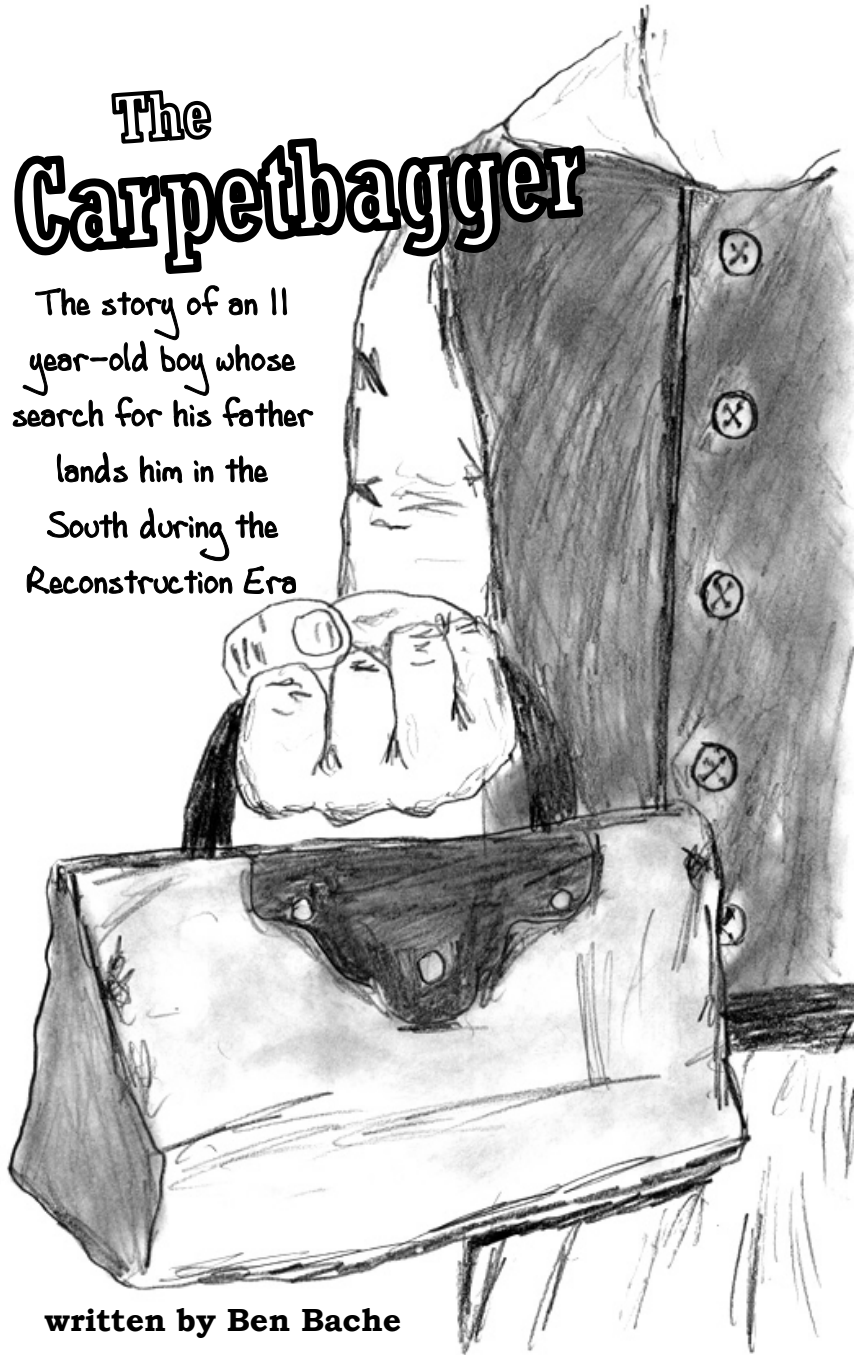


The Carpetbagger

The story of an 11
year-old boy whose
search for his father
lands him in the
South during the
Reconstruction Era



written by Ben Bache

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The South seemed no different than my home at first, but then I started to notice the cotton fields.

3 - Welcome to the South

There were no fireworks or banging drums when we entered the South. The horses kept on trudging down the dirt road, just as they always did.

It wasn't until two days of riding that I started to notice the cotton fields – they were everywhere. When I rode in the wagon for a long time in the North, it seemed like I just went from one town to another, some bigger than others. It didn't seem that way in the South. Instead, it was one *cotton field* after another.

At one point, we drove for a day through the sea of white cotton before finally entering a downtown area. I had heard horror stories of the South, but the town struck me as very normal. There were a few

13 — The Carpetbagger

shops, along with a post office and a courthouse. People were walking on the streets, and they didn't seem to be the "backwards rebels" that I had heard about since I was a small child.

Everything seemed ordinary – for the most part. It might have been my imagination, but there was a *feeling* in the town that I couldn't shake. And it wasn't a good one.

Grandfather had always said, "When you ride into a town you can feel its energy." This Southern town seemed to have the opposite effect. It *lacked* energy in a way that made you think that it was past its prime and had seen better days. It was like walking into a ghost town.

I didn't have much time to ponder the feeling because the town was soon behind us and we were lost among the cotton fields once again.

Uncle Samuel and I passed a few more small towns along the way, and they all gave me that same eerie "feeling," like they were merely a shadow of what they had once been. It was about noon when we rode into another town that looked very similar to all of the others.

"This is it," Uncle Samuel said. His voice was shaking, and I wasn't sure if those were actual tears in his eyes. He finished his statement: "This is my hometown."

The town's name was Winnsboro, South Carolina. I had heard that name mentioned many

We finally made it to Winnsboro,
South Carolina – which was once
the hometown of my family.



times. My mother had talked about it when I was a small boy. Grandfather mentioned it when he told stories of his "old plantation", and Uncle Samuel brought it up when he talked about his childhood.

They never spoke an unkind word about Winnsboro, although I could tell it was never an easy subject.

The town center actually seemed well-kept. Like the other towns we had passed, there were a few shops and businesses along the streets, along with a few government offices.

"I thought you said this town was destroyed during the war," I said to Uncle Samuel as we passed through.

15 — The Carpetbagger

He nodded, obviously taking it all in just as I was. "It was destroyed — General Sherman's troops left the place in shambles," he said. "But that was more than ten years ago. The people have been rebuilding ever since. All of this is new — it doesn't even look like the same town to me." He smiled as he said this, almost as if he was proud of that the town had recovered from the destruction.

We drove out of the downtown area and were once again surrounded by cotton fields. At one point we stopped and Uncle Samuel said, "This is Grandfather's old plantation. Our house used to sit right over there." I followed to where he pointed, but there was nothing in sight. All I could see was an unkempt field that had been long forgotten.

We continued on for miles before coming to another cotton plantation. They all looked the same to me, but I guess that Uncle Samuel could tell one from another. There were several black men picking cotton in the fields. We stopped the wagon.

Uncle Samuel got out of the wagon, and I followed. We walked into the field until we were just a few feet away from the laborers. "Are they slaves?" I asked in a whisper.

"No," Uncle Samuel replied. "There are no more slaves in the South. There haven't been since the end of the war."

We stood silently for a moment, and the Negro men ignored us as they worked. Finally, Uncle Samuel



There were no more slaves in the South. The man picking cotton was a "sharecropper."

said very loudly, "Is this still Joshua Bragg's plantation?"

The men looked up. One of them began to approach. He was an old, fragile man with dark, wrinkled skin. I wondered how he was able to survive picking cotton all day. He squinted as he came closer, and then surprised me by what he said, "Mr. Samuel? Is that really you?"

Uncle Samuel seemed shocked only for a second, then he realized who he was speaking to. "Jimmy, I can't believe it. I haven't seen you in fifteen years. You look exactly the same."

I had trouble believing that this man looked so old fifteen years ago, but Jimmy just nodded. Uncle Samuel continued, "Why are you here picking cotton? You're not a slave — you are a free man. You don't have to tend to Mr. Bragg's fields anymore."

17 — The Carpetbagger

Jimmy shook his head slowly. "Picking cotton is all I know, sir," he said. "Being a free man ain't easy. I couldn't make it in this world, so Mr. Bragg let me come back. We all came back. Now we got a place to live and something we can do."

"Does he pay you?" Uncle Samuel asked, and I was wondering the same thing.

"No sir, not really," Jimmy replied. "It's his land and his tools, and we just work here. If the crops come in like they should, he lets us keep some of them."

Uncle Samuel nodded, "You're a sharecropper." Jimmy nodded, but I don't think he recognized the term. I had never heard it before, either.

The old man was turning around to go back to work when Uncle Samuel said, "Jimmy, do you mind taking me to see Mr. Bragg."

I could tell that Jimmy was a little shocked by the request, but he agreed to do so.

We drove the wagon through what seemed like an endless pasture of cotton, and out of nowhere appeared one of the finest homes I had ever seen. I was surprised by the size of Mr. Bragg's home because I was always being told how poor people were in the South. I guess that wasn't true for the men who owned the cotton fields.

Jimmy knocked on the door and we waited. With a house that big, I was halfway expecting a servant girl to answer. Instead, the door was opened

18 — The Carpetbagger

by a gruff looking old man. He certainly did not fit the picture of the “gentleman” that I expected to own the place.

He saw me first. After enduring his nasty stare for a few seconds, I moved until I was hiding behind Uncle Samuel. Then the old man’s stare shifted to him.

“Samuel Hill,” he said, “Is that you?” My uncle nodded.

Mr. Bragg’s scowl got even nastier, if that were possible, and he said, “You’ve got a lot of nerve showing your face around here.”

His gaze shifted to what was behind us and he continued, “That’s a pretty fancy wagon you’re driving. Are you another Yankee Carpetbagger who has come south to loot whatever the Union soldiers left behind?”

“The war’s been over for more than ten years,” was all that Uncle Samuel replied.

“Oh, I know,” Mr. Bragg said quickly. “I’ve been here that whole time. I watched the Union Soldiers come through in 1865. Were you with them, Samuel?”

Uncle Samuel shook his head, but his face made no expression.

“Oh, were you off killing the men who used to be your neighbors? Were you off disgracing your home state of South Carolina? Well, I’ve been here since the end of the war. I watched this town burn to



Uncle Samuel had fought with the Union Army during the war, and it was clear that he wasn't welcome in the South.



the ground. I've worked with the few survivors to build it up again so it is fit for human beings to live."

Jimmy and I took a step back, leaving Mr. Bragg and Uncle Samuel to fight their own battle. "You look like you're doing okay," Uncle Samuel said, motioning towards the house.

Mr. Bragg made a noise that was similar to a growl. "You think I'm doing okay? Why – because my house wasn't burned down by General Sherman? My three boys were killed in the war. I haven't made a dime of profit on my cotton in the past ten years. Nobody around here has. The only people to make money are you carpetbaggers."

There was that word again – "carpetbaggers." Uncle Samuel shrugged, not showing any signs of sympathy. He said in a very flat tone, "I'm not here to talk about you or listen to you complain. I came here

20 — The Carpetbagger

to find my brother. Do you know anything about Ollie?"

Mr. Bragg seemed stunned for a moment, and then his normal scowl returned. "You're coming to ask me about Ollie? I haven't seen him in over a decade. You're his brother, why don't you know where he is?"

I knew that the question must have stung when Uncle Samuel heard it, but he calmly said, "We've had our differences."

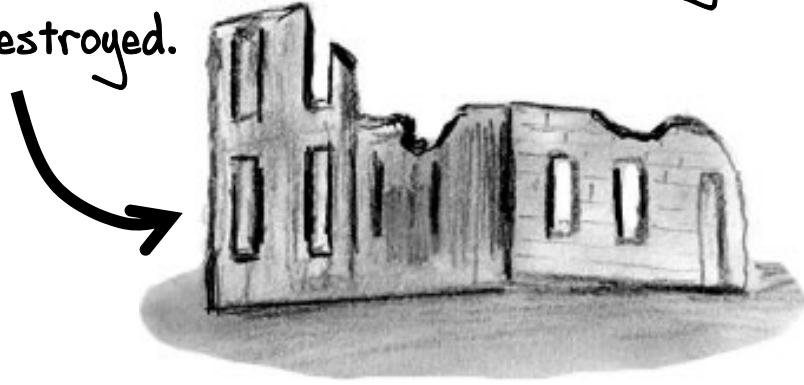
"I bet you have," said Mr. Bragg, and I was certain that he believed he had struck an open wound. He continued, "Ollie was a good man, and I'm sure that he never wants to see you again. You turned your back on him — on all of us — headed North and joined the Union Army. You tried to kill him on the battlefield. Why should he want to see you again?"

At that point, I would have been happy to see Uncle Samuel throw a punch right at Mr. Bragg's face. But he didn't. Instead, he grabbed my arm and pulled me forward. He said, "This is Oliver, Jr. He's Ollie's son, and I think it's time for him to meet his father. Please, tell me what you know about Ollie."

To my surprise, Mr. Bragg didn't mumble some bad words and then slam the door. He looked at me, and there was no scowl. I had a feeling that he was thinking about his own boys who were killed in the war.

"I don't know much," he finally said. "I saw him when he returned to town, after General Sherman had come through. His wife was gone, and Ollie

My father returned from the war to find that his hometown had been completely destroyed.



thought she must have been killed by the Union soldiers." I thought of my mother, and how she, too, had wondered whether or not my father was alive.

"His house and farm were all destroyed," Mr. Bragg was saying. "I've never seen a man so broken. I promised to help him rebuild, but he said he was done with farming. He said it was time to move on. That's the last I saw of him."

Uncle Samuel placed his hand over his eyes as he heard the story. I could tell that it was difficult for him to imagine his brother returning home from a war only to find that everything he cared about was gone. He muttered, "Thank you for your time," and turned to walk away without shaking Mr. Bragg's hand.

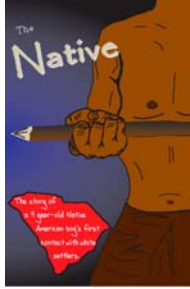
Mr. Bragg stood at the door and watched us drive away in the wagon. I almost think he wanted to say, "Good luck." But he didn't.



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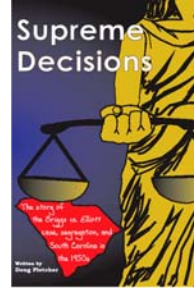
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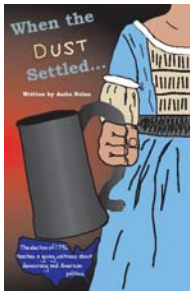
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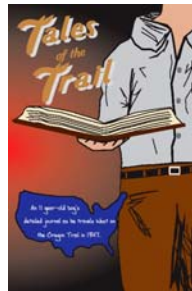
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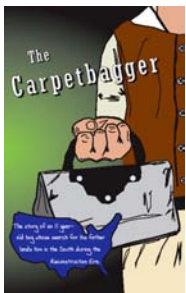
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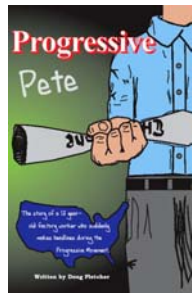
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