

Revelation

Excerpted from the novel *God's Red Clay*

Elaine Ford

IT'S JUNE. JOHN AND PA ARE RIDING THE FOURTEEN MILES FROM Kosciusko to Attalaville. Although when they start out the air is comfortable and there's dew on the fields, soon enough the Mississippi sun is a fiery furnace at their backs, and John's hair is soaked with sweat. Pa sets in to singing as they trot along.

*Abraham, when severely tried,
his faith by obedience showed,
he with the harsh command complied,
and gave his Isaac back to God.*

Pa knows a hymn to suit every occasion. In his mind, John is Isaac being led to the sacrificial altar. However, it doesn't seem to John that Pa is grieving any over the prospect of giving up his son—not in this case to God, but to his mother-in-law.

Country air for his weak chest, that's the reason John is being banished to his grandmother's plantation for the summer. In fact, the country will be every bit as stifling and choked with dust as the town. This was his mother's idea, but Grandmother must have had a hand in it. Ma told him that Grandmother bought a cow with especially rich milk to build him up.

After about five miles, Pa stops under a tree by the side of the road. Dismounted, he empties his bladder into the weeds and then takes a flask out of his saddlebag and has himself a sip of whiskey. In chapel

the parson preaches temperance. Pa chooses what parts of Methodism to take to heart and what parts not. He looks at John gazing down at him from the saddle. No doubt aware of his son's disapproval, he says, "*Est modus in rebus*. There is a measure in all things. That's Horace, my boy. I learned about moderation at the knee of an itinerant preacher when I was younger than you." He plugs the flask, hoists himself onto his horse with a grunt—he has the corpulence and luxuriant mustache befitting the proprietor of a substantial hotel—and they're on their way again, clopping westward on the dusty red-clay road.

The cotton plants have "squares" on them now, fat green buds speckled with pink. Negroes in straw hats are cultivating the stands with hoes, clawing out pigweed and grass from between the plants. Otherwise the cotton would soon be strangled and there'd be no crop.

In a mile or so they come to the village of McAdams. Sneeze and you miss it. Here there's naught but a general store, a church, and a graveyard. "What more does any man need," Pa shouts to John, "in this life and the next?" It's one of Pa's dumb jokes. Of course he aspires to more than the meager stock on the shelves of a country store and a plot in the ground. Pa's feeling chipper today, glad to be away from the hotel for half a day. He calls it his shackles, his ball and chain. The truth is, though, Ma does most of the day-to-day work of managing the hotel, as far as John can see. His father launches into another hymn.

*Come let us anew,
our journey pursue,
with vigor arise . . .*

When they reach his grandmother's house, Brownie bursts out from under the veranda and circles their horses, barking in frenzied welcome. His father hitches the horses to the fence by the kitchen garden. Ma and Zilpah, when she still belonged to the family, planted that garden, and some of the old stumps remain. It will take them a while more to rot, but vegetables are growing up around them. Somebody must be seeing to the garden, planting the seeds, hoeing out the weeds. Grandmother's house Negro, Parthena, he guesses.

Alerted by the dog, John's grandmother comes onto the veranda to greet them. Her hair's mostly gray now, and she stoops a little.

She's aged a good deal in the three and a half years since they came to Mississippi from Alabama. "How is custom at the hotel?" she asks Pa.

"Booming," Pa says, though that's not exactly true. "Couldn't be better." His grandmother invites them to rest on the veranda, and old Hetty hobbles out of the house, carrying a pitcher of cool mint tea on a tray. Pretty soon, however, Pa gets up from his rocker and wanders off down the steps. John notices a kind of mewling sound out in the yard. Parthena is hanging up laundry on lines tied between poles. She's got a tiny baby in a sling on her back. Now Pa's saying something to her—what, John doesn't know.

Meantime, his grandmother is telling John all about how Silas Clark's brother-in-law is finally going to remove to Attalaville, and a big new house for him and his family is being built down the road.

"Those elegant mansions will surely put Attalaville on the map, if it isn't already." Scarcely pausing for breath, she moves on to a new topic. "Last week one of Wash Stringley's boys broke his leg," she says, "running away from a swarm of bees. He jumped in the well and had to be hauled out. Blessed if I can recall which Stringley boy it was. They all look exactly like Wash, no chin to speak of."

She sighs, folds her fan, and lays it on the little table next to the pitcher of mint tea, which has already reached the temperature of bathwater. "Doc Hammon came out from Kosciusko to set it, said it was such a bad break the boy's leg won't ever be quite right. Of course, that boy had no business messing with bees in the first place."

"Maybe he just happened to be walking past their hive and they swarmed him for no reason."

"Don't be silly, John Nicholas. He was after honey. That's how boys are."

Pa returns to the veranda and bids them farewell, thanking John's grandmother for her generous hospitality and cautioning his son to mind his manners and behave himself. Pa's taking both horses back with him to the hotel, leading John's behind his. The nags belong to the hotel's stable. John is now stranded.

Out onto the veranda comes his cousin Mary Ann Howard. She's sixteen, nine months older than John. Thick-boned, overlarge mouth.

Clumsily, Mary Ann backs into the rocker his father has recently vacated, hiking her hoop over the chair's short arms.

"It certainly is kind of Cousin John Nicholas," his grandmother says, "to keep you company this summer, Bettie. Don't you agree?"

In the last few years Mary Ann has somehow become Bettie. Perhaps Grandmother fancied the name would make the girl more marriageable, though it scarcely suits her. He thinks she'd be more at home tending barn animals than flirting in a parlor.

"Indeed, Grandmother."

John and his cousin have never had much to do with each other, despite the fact that she lived for a time in his household in Limestone County when his sister Jennie was born, and his family spent a year in this house before Pa was hired to manage the hotel. If John focused on her at all, it was to pity her. An orphan, bossed about by Grandmother, not especially quick-witted. But chatty, in an aimless sort of way.

"I expect John Nicholas would like to unpack his case," his grandmother says. "Why don't you show him his room, Bettie dear?"

It's strange to be treated like a guest in a place that's so familiar. Carrying his hat and carpetbag, he follows his cousin into the dark house and up the stairs. The smell of the place returns to him powerfully: the sap of the raw-hewn logs and also something mushroomy, like things decomposing in the woods. How quiet and empty the house seems without his five brothers and sisters and his parents crammed into these small, rude rooms, along with his grandmother and cousin. "Grandmother sleeps downstairs now," Bettie says. "On account of her rheumatism. You'll be in the room that used to be hers."

After some more prattle, to which he makes little effort to respond, she leaves him to unpack. He hasn't brought much with him: a few changes of clothes, a good suit for the Sabbath, his Bible, a volume of Shakespeare's history plays, and a book of poems by Reverend Charles Deems, which his mother tucked in his bag this morning. John stows his belongings in the bureau and cupboard. From the cupboard it's only a step to the window. There's a cobweb in the corner of the frame, with a dried-out fly and a sprinkling of gnats caught in it. Outside, Parthena is still hanging laundry, bending to the wash basket, her baby in the

sling, then stretching her arms up to the line. Bending and stretching, over and over. He gazes at her breasts, like great moons straining against gingham, the cloth of the sling parting them. Then, ashamed, he opens the cupboard and reaches for his Bible.

NEXT MORNING his grandmother has an errand for John and Bettie: they are to walk down the road to Silas Clark's plantation and deliver eight jars of mayhaw jelly.

"Your Aunt Louisa dotes on mayhaw jelly," his grandmother tells them. "It's a particular favorite of hers. Take care you don't drop the basket and smash the jars."

Actually, Louisa Clark isn't blood kin to John, or to Bettie, either. She's an honorary aunt by proclamation of Grandmother, and no more than five or six years older than they are.

"Cousin John Nicholas doesn't need to go, if he'd rather not," Bettie says. "I can manage very well by myself."

"Give dear Louisa my kindest regards," Grandmother says.

He has no choice. They head down the road into the sun, Bettie lifting her skirts to avoid red dust, John carrying the basket. Bettie says, "I reckon she wanted to get us out of the house, so she could go back to bed."

"Is she unwell?"

"It's the laudanum she takes at night, for the rheumatism, you know. It makes her slow to wake up."

Their grandmother's fields are on the north side of the road. The overseer, on his horse, rides between the stands of cotton, watching the Negroes, who are bent over the plants, wielding short hoes. This morning they're working near the road. John doesn't recognize any of the men from two years ago. Except for guttural grunts and the hoes rhythmically whacking the clay, there's no sound. No singing. On the bare back of one of the men John notices scars from a lash, crisscrossed on his eggplant-colored skin, which is glistening with sweat.

"He looks a hard taskmaster, that overseer."

Instead of a bonnet Bettie is wearing a straw hat, not so different from those of the field hands, except that it has a plaid ribbon round

the crown. "Grandmother says it's necessary to be hard. There's rumors of rebellion, John Nicholas. Surely you've heard about that."

"Rebellion? No."

"Oh, of course, you don't have many Negroes, living in town. Here we're surrounded. Far more of them than there are of us. They're sly, Grandmother says. They sneak around in the night in spite of the curfew."

"Really?" John doesn't recall anything like that happening when he lived here.

"You see, it's the abolitionists who've got them riled up. A Northern lady wrote a book about how cruelly we treat our Negroes. It's all lies, of course, but everybody's reading it. If it wasn't for the Yankee trouble-makers, our people would be content."

"How do the Negroes know what the abolitionists are saying?"

"They have their ways, Grandmother says."

John feels blisters popping out wherever his shoes chafe. He's lost the habit of walking on hard clay, and his feet have grown too long for the country shoes he left behind when they moved to the hotel. In addition, the shoes have stiffened, mildewed, curled up at the toes. "I guess the overseer wouldn't hesitate to use his gun, if he had to."

"Oh, yes, if he had to." They walk on awhile before she adds, "He's not here at night, though. He's got his own farm, near to Sallis."

"Then you and Grandmother shouldn't be living alone, with no menfolk to protect you."

"She's got a pistol hidden in her room that used to be Grandfather's. She says she knows how to use it."

"I can believe she does."

"Grandmother's fixing on building her mansion any time now."

"Pa doubts her house will ever be built," John says, shifting the basket from one hand to the other. The jars of mayhaw jelly click together.

"Well, I don't know about that. She's always talking about how her family's just as good as the Clarks. Better. Her great-granddaddy owned a thousand acres of land in King William County, Virginia, and too many slaves to count."

And he was coroner. And county sheriff. Like all his grandmother's

descendants, John knows the history of Colonel James Quarles backwards and forwards. He learned that name before he learned his own.

Grandmother's too old to be building a big new house. It will be the end of Bettie's dowry if she does. The girl's no beauty, and she'll need a dowry if she hopes to marry anyone other than an elderly widower encumbered with a passel of children. Her father died of consumption, penniless. John's heard more than once about his father's twenty-seven and a half barrels of corn—*all I had left to show for fifteen years of farming in Alabama*—which kept Will Howard and his second wife from starving. That may have been one of Pa's exaggerations. Anyway, all Bettie can expect for a dowry will have to come from her grandmother.

They're passing the Ashleys' fields now. Negroes working in them, too, but farther away from the road. The sun is higher in the sky. Again John shifts the basket to his other hand.

"Shall I carry it for a while?"

Embarrassed, John says, "I'm managing fine, thank you."

"Grandmother says you have a weak chest."

For all her aristocratic airs, his grandmother didn't raise her ward very well. Bettie ought not to be so blunt in her speech.

"Please let me worry about my chest."

"I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn, John Nicholas."

Silas's mansion, at the end of a long drive, has four enormous square columns that reach from the floor of the downstairs veranda all the way to the roof. Inside is a wide hall, with a winding staircase that John knows his grandmother covets.

Aunt Louisa welcomes them warmly, exclaiming over the beautiful mayhaw jelly. "Why, that color is just as clear and red as rubies!"

She offers them refreshment, but it's really Zilpah John wants to see. While Bettie and Aunt Louisa settle themselves in the front parlor, he walks around back to the summer kitchen.

There he finds Zilpah scurrying about. Looks like she and the other Negroes are in the midst of fixing a feast for some occasion or other. Platters bearing cold hams, chickens, and a gigantic roast turkey crowd the plank table. Zilpah's hands are floury, the bandana on her kinky hair frayed.

“Oh, Marse John, I ain’t got time fo’ a chat right now.”

“I can see how busy you are.”

She lifts the hem of her apron, wipes the sweat from her gleaming face, and gives him the broad smile that reveals her snagged front teeth. “You come back soon, heah?”

Instead of returning to the parlor he sits on the porch of a cabin, the last of a row of five. Because this cabin has the neatest garden behind it, he reckons it’s the one where Zilpah lives with her husband, Isaiah, the blacksmith. He thinks about how Zilpah used to sing to him and the other children at night. Comfort Ben when he had nightmares, give John herb medicine she’d concocted herself when he was complaining of a fever, carry Jennie about when she had the croup. He thought Zilpah would always be with them, but when the family moved to the hotel, suddenly she wasn’t. At the age of forty or so she’d astonished everyone by jumping the broomstick with Isaiah, and Silas Clark bought her of Pa, so husband and wife wouldn’t have to be separated.

On the way home he mentions to Bettie that out in the summer kitchen they appeared to be preparing food for a large gathering.

“Yes, Aunt Louisa told me about it. It’s an affair in honor of General Winfield Scott.”

“Silas is a Whig?”

“All the big planters are Whigs, Grandmother says.”

The road ahead seems long, curving just enough so you can’t see to the end of it, a deep ditch on either side to catch rainwater or anything else that might happen to fall in. It’s so hot every creature has crawled into a hole or is stunned into silence. Except for the hectoring horseflies.

“Grandmother’s sure to ask for news of the Clarks. Please don’t mention the party, John Nicholas. She’d be sorely wounded over not being invited to meet a famous general who’s going to be president.”

“I don’t care to lie.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

Stoically he marches on, his feet a torment. So much for Grandmother’s currying favor with Aunt Louisa, he thinks. Eight jars of mayhaw jelly, wasted.

ON THE SABBATH, Reverend Wilkerson preaches from the text Revelation 3:10.

*Because thou hast kept the word of my patience,
I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation,
which shall come upon all the world,
to try them that dwell upon the earth.*

Insofar as John understands it, the sermon is about temptation and sin, and the reassurance that, with the help of Jesus, a steadfast Methodist has the capacity to survive tests of character and personal honor. “God’s reward for patiently enduring a trial,” Reverend Wilkerson says, “is to be given the grace to endure a trial patiently.” Or that’s what John thinks he said. An infant behind him has begun to squall. His grandmother and cousin, wedged on the bench to either side of him, are whipping the dank air with their fans. John fears he’s lost the thread of the preacher’s message.

However, he does truly desire to be a steadfast Methodist like his mother and to survive dangerous temptation. He spends the afternoon in the hot, stuffy parlor reading the Book of Revelation. He can’t make much sense of it, except that Jesus promises to come again, and soon. But when was this book written? Must be the best part of two thousand years ago.

JOHN HOLDS A CANDLE in a brass holder. The light splashes onto the plank door. He knocks softly and then thinks better of what he’s doing. He turns away, but the door opens and she’s standing there in her night-shift, her long, lank hair falling down in an untidy braid.

“What is it?” she asks. “Is something the matter?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Today Grandmother said something . . .”

“You’d better come in,” she whispers, “so Hetty doesn’t hear us and come clambering up the stairs.”

Bettie’s room is even smaller than his, her cot half the size. In the flickering candlelight he can see a quilt turned back from the bedding, an old trunk. There’s a single straight-backed chair.

“What did Grandmother say?” she asks.

“An offhand remark, just part of her chatter, I wasn’t paying much

attention. It was about the boy, Major, who happened to be running by the veranda. 'Will you look at that chile's hair,' she said. 'No mystery where that comes from.'

Bettie's homely face is solemn, guileless. She's standing so close to him he can smell her breath.

"Grandmother's overseer, back in Alabama. He was a Choctaw half-breed. His hair was black."

"Yes, it was."

"So who *did* she mean?"

Bettie shrugs. "Your pa used to visit Parthena at our house in Alabama—you know, after your sister was born and Parthena came back to us. Once in a while he comes here."

"You must be mistaken. When Pa leaves the hotel he has business to attend to, or he goes hunting with his shotgun. He brings home 'possum, or . . ."

"He finds a way to make the time, I reckon."

The new baby must be his father's, as well. How could John have been so stupid? Grandmother must have known all along. Everyone in the world knew about his father's disgusting disgrace, except him. His eyes fill with angry tears.

"Oh, John Nicholas, don't take it so to heart. People disappoint you in life, and that's a fact. It can't be helped. Go back to bed now."

OF COURSE IT'S TRUE. Yet the insult torments him. He is bound to defend his father's honor, but where is the honor in what his father did? How dare his father quote Horace, or anybody else for that matter, on the subject of moderation! Why didn't God smite him with a thunderbolt right there by the side of the road?

And he's tormented by the memory of his cousin's ample body under her white nightshift.

His head aches. His chest feels tight. He sits on the veranda listening to the dull murmur of the servants, the buzzing of flies. Hetty brings him a bowl of clabber sweetened with sugar. One spoonful sickens him. When she has limped back into the house, he empties the bowl over the porch railing. The yellowish globs cling to a bush.

IN THE NIGHT his cousin slips into his room. She sets her candlestick on his bureau and blows out the flame.

“You need comforting, John Nicholas,” she whispers. The mattress sinks under her. The bedstead creaks. “Sometimes I need comforting, too.”

They lie side by side under the quilt. Neither sleeps. He hears a snuffly tick in her nose with each breath. Before dawn she steals back to her own room and at breakfast, eating Hetty’s biscuits and gravy, they talk about the weather, the lame mare, the burgeoning cotton crop. Grandmother, foggy with laudanum, doesn’t arise until the sun is high in the sky.

John tries to read his Bible and Reverend Deems’s poems, but all he can think about is his father’s sin and the hot pressure of his cousin’s body next to his. The devil has many disguises. He prays for God’s help.

THE COTTON SQUARES BURST INTO BLOOM, then slowly ripen into bolls, then begin to be ready for picking. Heat rises from the fields in shimmering waves.

At night he churns restlessly in his bed, praying for relief from his misery.

Her door hinge squeals. His chest is so tight he can scarcely breathe. His candle makes a sudden flash of light against the wall, then a little pool of light spills around it onto the trunk. Beneath the quilt he feels the bumps on her spine, tastes her warm mouth and worms his tongue into it, smells the sour oiliness of her hair, shoves his hand under her shift to knead her breasts and the layer of fat on her belly. She makes hungry, whimpering sounds. She’s as strong as he as they wrestle in the bed, rubbing against each other. The itch in his groin becomes unbearable. When he can stand it no more, she pulls down her shift and turns her back to him. He stumbles from the cot. Grabs the candle from the trunk. Shuts the squealing door behind him. Lies splayed out on his bed, exhausted.

He doesn’t love her. He could never marry her. Why in the name of God are they doing this, night after night after night?

ON HIS WAY TO THE PRIVY he passes the two urchins playing in the dirt

outside their cabin and tries not to stare at their faces. He remembers the day they were born, on the road between Alabama and Mississippi. He remembers Parthena's cries. He remembers watching the old Negress Hetty climb down from the wagon, hobble to the edge of the road, and toss a bloody bundle into the polecat weed.

And now there's another mongrel. So this is what his father has done.

John walks in the woods, struggles to parse the tiny inexplicable print in his Bible, with gritty patience endures his grandmother's rambling conversation. He thinks his chest is weaker, dust clogging his lungs. He can summon no appetite. His own lust is no more forgivable than his father's. The devil has him in his grip.

Grandmother talks of the yellow-fever epidemic in New Orleans. Thousands dead. Too many to bury in any proper fashion. The authorities are burning tar to fight the disease, the newspapers say. "Must smell nasty," Grandmother says.

Every night after Hetty has locked the downstairs door and gone off to bed, after there's no sound except for the shrieking of foxes or owls, or Brownie barking at some unseen threat, he creeps into his cousin's room and his candlelight splashes against her wall.

HIS GRANDMOTHER DAWDLES over her late breakfast, biscuit crumbs down the front of her dressing gown, on the tablecloth, on the carpet. He's trapped here, in the chair across the table from hers, his own breakfast untouched. Already, the day is suffocatingly hot.

"You'd better eat that clabber," Grandmother says. "I bought the cow especially for you, you know. Paid twenty-four dollars for her."

He pushes his spoon around the curdled mess in the bowl.

"... and your half-sister Sarah is poorly, I'm told ... Consumption, God help her, poor thing ... Always had a weak chest, same as yours ... You both have your father to thank, I suppose ... It's all in the blood ..."

Weak with fatigue, starved for sleep, John hears drumming in his ears, drowning out his grandmother's voice. In the blood ... In the blood ... The drumming grows louder. He thinks his head is going to explode.

. . . and lo, there was a great earthquake;
and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair,
and the moon became as blood;
and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth,
even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs,
when she is shaken of a mighty wind . . .

If nothing happens to end this insanity he will kill his cousin, drown her in the well or smother her in the quilt or brain her with a heavy stone or find his grandmother's pistol and shoot her dead.

AT LAST Pa comes to Attalaville leading a horse for John to ride. All this is over, John thinks, watching Pa ride up the path. Yet not over, ever, even when Pa unbuckles the tether that binds the horses and looks up to him on the veranda, his grin half hidden under his soiled slouch hat.

When they take their leave, Grandmother and Bettie are sitting on the veranda, rocking, sipping mint tea. Along the way home Negroes in the fields are plucking bolls to fill their sacks, which they drag behind them like long white shrouds.

Pa's singing. The weary Negroes don't seem surprised to hear him—or, come to that, pay him any regard whatsoever.

*When high the storms of passion rise,
And half o'erwhelm my sinking soul,
My soul a sudden calm shall feel,
And hear a whisper, "Peace, be still."*

"Always liked that tune," Pa says. "Good old Methodist tune. Not as rousing as some, but a comfort."

The fields are scorched in the late August heat. The plants have begun to drop their leaves. By now they've produced the best part of their hard, black seed, and so have little more call to live. The sun is low in the sky.

"Had a passable summer, did you, John?"

"Yes, Pa." ◇