

## [Declaration of Independence]

[???

Alabama

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Editorial Department

### DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

“Take this load of wood in to Aunt Mary's, [?], and then go by [Emmetson's?] and get us something to eat. Tell Jeffers I'll go in one day next week and make a lien.” Papa spoke with a sort of ketch in his voice, and Mal knew what he was thinking; he got all choky mad himself.

But all he said, as he took up the lines and pulled gee on old Butler, was, “All right, Papa.”

With the gray mule solemnly pulling him and the load of wood, Mal had plenty of time to think on the three-mile trip to the village. But there was a bitter taste in his mouth, coming up from the feeling in his heart, and running plumb through his think-box as well.

On both sides of the road, the land was fresh-plowed, “To make crops for King George,” Mal thought. He had stuck the title on George Emmetson's name himself.

At Aunt Mary's he unloaded the wood, still [had?] enough to chew up sawdust and soit out scantlings. Aunt Mary asked about the family, and he couldn't even remember, later on, what he told her. He got back on the wagon and drove on up to the hitching rack where Main Street went to 2 seed in the west. But he didn't get off at once. He just sat there and boiled over with mad.

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Every spring it made him madder and madder for Papa to start his “run” at Emmetson's Store. Every fall he had seen all of the crop money go to pay off the lien, leaving nothing for food and clothes for the winter. This spring his begging had caused Papa Pap to wait two weeks late about opening his account but now the family was again where [Papa?] could see no other way to turn.

Mal couldn't see any way either; and they did have to eat. Folks just couldn't make a crop on a teetotally empty stomach.

Finally he sort of snorted and got out of the wagon. Might an well get it over with. He just couldn't think of any way to escape the clutches of King George.

He went into the long, barney barny -looking store with his feet.dragging like he was going to get a whipping. It was a whipping, only his spirit must take it instead of his hide. As he entered, Mr. Jeffers himself whisked by, bumping him, and did not even say “Excuse me;” just acted like Mal was a sack of nails or something.

He shut his hands tight, to hide the fury of their jerking, and went up to one of the clerks he knew pretty well.

“How much is flour in 24-pound sacks?” he 3 asked.

“Cash or time?” Gabe wanted to know.

“Both,” Mal answered.

“Seventy-five cents, cash; dollar and a quarter on time,” Gabe rattled.

Supplies bought on a crop lien are on the merchant's books less than three months, on the average. That meant, Mal figured quickly, more than [260%?] a year on the food people bought on time to make their crops.

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"We'll [?] hungry before I'll pay that much difference," he announced grimly, and marched back out. Then he stood on the sidewalk with his hands in his overall pockets and started all over again, figuring out what he maybe might do.

While he was standing there, George Emmetson himself parked his car and came toward the store.

"Hello, son," he greeted Mal smoothly, "where is that daddy of yours these days?"

"He's at home, working," Mal answered so short as to be almost disrespectful.

Mr. Emmetson didn't notice the shortness at all. "You tell him to come on in and start buying. He can't make a crop without supplies."

"He sure can't," Mal answered earnestly, but of course the man missed his real meaning.

Mal looked at all the storefronts in the village. He knew knew all the merchants, and they all knew him. Last of all his gaze lit on the little 4 stable-sized store right at the end of the street. It was where Jeb [Whitson?], the newest storekeeper in town, kept his little stock of goods. Jeb seemed to think a lot of Papa and him both, Mal thought, and began to feel a sort of glowing of hope again in his mind. Jeb had several times sold him little things and waited a week or so for his pay. Maybe—

The boy took one long breath, and sort of said a prayer to himself as he started the three hundred yards to Jeb Whitson's "shop." His heart [had?] got out of hand by the time he got there that if Jeb had had one customer, his resolution would have failed him completely.

But there was not one customer. The old man was sitting on his [pet?] apple box, whittling a stick.

"Howdy, Mal," he greeted warmly, "How's yer Pa and all the folks?"

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"They're all up and about," Mal said, "and how is Mrs. Whitson?"

"Oh, she's complaining about as [?] as usual," Jeb laughed.

Mal laughed too, then sucked in all the breath he could hold and started his speech:

"Oh—you know it's coldblooded robbery the way Emmetson holds people up. After a fellow works the whole year, it sure does hurt to have to hand it all to that bloodsucker in time charges." 5 "He certainly ia a bloodsucker, Mal. Why, the lowdown crook even tried to keep me from getting my ice dealer's license renewed this year. He is out to rule or ruin this whole country, and he has purty near ruined it now."

"Well, here's what I been thinking, Mr. Whitson: Papa told me to go over there and start an account today on our this year's crop. I went on in and asked some prices, and do you know he wants fifty cents advance on a sack of flour over cash prices? I just wouldn't get a thing."

"Fifty cents extra! Mal, you know if I had the money, I'd run your pa and a few other good men around here, and give 'em a chance to get away from that cutthroat. He ought to be put in jail!"

Mal scuffed the gray-black dirt with the toe of a ragged shoe. "Mr. Whitson I wonder if you could do this: Let us buy our stuff from you and pay you within two weeks? That is, Papa makes a little money, making fishnets, and I pick up a little work here in town after school. By fixing our crop work to give us a little time every week, we can manage to just about keep up with the account, I think."

The old man looked far out across the grove of pines beyond the town baseball diamond. "Mal," he said finally, "here is how I am fixed. I get my stuff on ten days' time. They call / it ten days, 6 but actually the salesman comes around every two weeks, and I pay for my last bill od of goods and order a new one. If you are sure you can hold it inside two weeks,

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I can carry you on a cash basis and you can tell Emmetson and Jeffers to go to hell. Just remember that if you fall down, I fall with you. What do you want to get today?’

Mal's heart leaped like a happy dog. The two went into the little store and filled the order given Mal at home. While the old grocer weighed coffee, Mal swallowed the happy choke in his throat enough so that he could say: “Mr. Whitson, we won't fail you. We will be able to work for ourselves this year.”

“You must remember one thing though, Mal. Don't let anybody know I am doing this. That infernal Emmetson would stop my credit with every commission house around here. People don't buck him and get away with it very often.”

“Shucks, Mr. Whitson, I'm not telling anybody but Mamma and Papa; and they sure won't broadcast it.”

“Just the same, son, be careful who you talk to.”

Mal's pride of accomplishment was tinged with fear. There were dark rumors going around of terrible things that had happened to those who bucked the power of “King George.” Men had been taken out and beaten; others had been ordered out of the district with such force that they had stood 7 not on the manner of their leaving. Two or three had vanished bodily, to furnish food for the river catfish, so these same rumors said.

The boy thought of all this, grimly, as he untied the hitchrope and drove old gray Butler by Whitson's shop to pick up [jis?] packages. But none of those known as the “Emmetson bunch” seemed to be noticing him. Emmetson's car, empty, still stood at the curb in front of his sore store .

On his way out of the village, Mal whirled fearfully each time he heard an unusual sound behind him. But as the gray mile put yard after yard behind them with his slow homeward walk, the boy gradually lost his feeling of terror. This was a civilized land, and no man

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would dare bother a person for trading with the merchant of his choice. He smiled, a shamed smile, at having allowed himself to believe there was danger in such a simple act as his.

Where the heavy timber growth of Black Swamp crowded close on each border of the roadway, about two miles out of the village, Mal pulled his mule courteously aside at the [?] request of an automobile horn behind him. The loaded car whisked around him, turned across the narrow road and stopped, blocking his way completely.

“Whatcha got in that wagon, Bub?” demanded the dirty, bearded driver as Mal pulled old Butler to a startled halt. 8 “Groceries,” Mal snapped. Somehow he was not at all scared now. One slight boy facing five big brutish men, he trembled but with a fury that was overwhelming him.

“Groceries, huh?” the man, followed by the other four was crowding up to the wagon. “We was sent to find a feller that robbed Old Man Beckman's Store a little while ago. Where'd you buy these things?”

Mal throttled his voice down to a very even tone as he answered, “Mister, I bought these things - and I don't know as it is one durned bit of your business where. Unless you're looking for more trouble than you ever thought could happen to you at one time, you better get yourself, your buddies, and your [stinkbuggy?] out of my way. It's getting right close to feed time, and I not only ain't used to [being?] late—I don't intend to start with tonight.”

The [big?] car driver threw back his head and laughed. “Hard little devil, hain't [you? Well?], we can soon soften you up. Git out of that wagon!” He lunged viciously at Mal.

Like most gray mules, old Butler had a definite personality. One of his strongest personality points was an extremely sensitive sensitive tail. A mere touch on that [appendage?] when he was not expecting it made him a snorting demon.

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Mal whose precise moment to punch Butler's tall, hard, with his small wagon switch, and at 9 the same time kick the burly man in the face, while he pulled hard on the left guide line. With a wild snort, the mule started. Men rolled like peas in a jolted jug. The frantic animal, forced in spite of his wildness to heed the tight guide line, turned the cumbersome wagon around on a dime and left seven cents change.

A plowman working near the woods heard the racket and looked up in time to see the mule going back toward the village, "traveling like hell after a yearling, and with Mal and the wagon floatin' along behind him in the air."

Another car which Mal recognized was racing to meet the runaway. King George was coming, really batting the ball. Mal clung to the sideboards of the wagon and did not try to turn the mule. At the last second, Emmetson's car flipped from the ruts of the road in a wild dive down some man's cotton rows.

Butler just about had his run out. In a few yards, he dropped to a sedate walk, then obediently stopped at Mal's shortwinded, "Whoa!" Carefully, Mal guided the mule around and drive him back to where Emmetson was backing cautiously into the road again. The time merchant was thoroughly upset, his always florid face now the color of scorched brick.

Leaving space for him to get the car back into the road, Mal stopped his wagon and waited. Then 10 he got out and went over to the man.

"Look here, Mrs. Emmetson," he said hotly, "you may be the big booger in this county. We all admit you are. You may have mortgages on all the land you don't own. I know you have a mortgage on our place. But that mortgage is not due for three more years, and there's nothing anywhere in it that says we've got to eat groceries out of your stores. And there's nothing in it that says your hired beat-uppers can stop our wagon on the road and threaten me. And I want you to please remember this: We will deal with anyone we please, any

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time we please, and any way we please, without regard to your wishes. And my mamma and my Papa and I are all sure shots, and we like each other. If anything happens to one of us, the others will be purty darned likely to return the favor to you, so you better take the hint and pick on a goose for awhile.”

“[?], son, you've got me all wrong. I don't know what got you all worked up this way, but I certainly haven't done anything to you. In fact I have a very high regard for all your family, and wouldn't think of doing any of you even the slightest injury.”

“Your words sound good mister Emmetson, but I've heard [?] words before that didn't mean a thing. You go on and collect your trash out of the way up yonder in the woods—and don't forget 11 what I told you. It is time for me to get on home.”

Something like respect shone in the eyes of the domineering time merchant as he started his motor up again. “I don't blame you for getting hot, son,” he said thoughtfully, “and from now on I'll keep to my own side of the road with you. But damn your hardheaded time, if that mortgage is not paid the day it is due, I'll sure get a lot of pleasure out of throwing you into the middle of the road.”

“Go to it and welcome,” Mal answered, as he picked up the lines and clucked to Old Butler.

“You know, Old Mule,” Mal said reflectively as the automobile sped away, “I've got a strong idea King George meant what he said!”

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