

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

By

MARTIN COX

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assatiates@gmail.com

FADE IN:

SUPER: SOUTH CAROLINA 1860

INT. PLANTATION HOUSE - DINING ROOM - DAY

JEREMIAH OATES 30's, plantation owner, sharp featured, muttonchops, crisp white shirt, cream breeches, riding boots, sits at a table, finishing his breakfast.

He wipes his mouth with a napkin.

He looks across the table, addresses his wife EMILY 30's, delicate, crinolined from neck to ankle.

JEREMIAH

Very nice, as always my darlin'.

Emily tips her head in recognition of the compliment. Her ringlets bob. She smiles shyly.

EMILY

Why thank you Sir. Very kind of you to say so.

She glances at Jeremiah's empty plate.

EMILY (CONT'D)

You ate well my beloved.

Jeremiah stands, stretches.

JEREMIAH

Yes...This morning of all mornings I shall need my strength.

Emily looks embarrassed. She sips coffee from a porcelain cup.

Jeremiah walks over, places a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)

It has to be done...and the Good Lord knows, it has to be me.

Emily looks up at her husband sadly.

EMILY

But it's William---

Jeremiah points his finger in the air in emphasis.

JEREMIAH

Precisely my point! My best 'boy'
has violated The Black Code of
South Carolina and by God and all
that's Holy, today I will teach him
a stern lesson!

Emily rises, gently kisses Jeremiah on the cheek, turns
back, clutches herself and drops her head.

EMILY

As you wish my husband...I'll pray
for you...

Jeremiah, irked by her leniency, spins and leaves.

The door slams.

Emily jumps.

EMILY (CONT'D)

...for you both.

She begins to gently weep.

EXT. EDGE OF FOREST - DAY

Black slave WILLIAM 30's, stands tied, facing a tree, naked
from the waist up.

His wrists bleed from the rope bonds cutting into his flesh.

He trembles with a mixture of fear and fatigue.

Jeremiah arrives, cracks his bullwhip.

William jolts, petrified.

JEREMIAH

Good morning to you William...I
trust you had sufficient time
overnight to consider your
wrongdoings?

William shivers. No answer.

Jeremiah approaches, rams the handle of the bullwhip into
his throat and forces his head back.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)

Don't dare ignore me boy, else
it'll be the worst for you...you
hear?

He roughly pulls the bullwhip away. William gasps for air.

WILLIAM

Yes Masa...sorry Masa...I was
praying to The Lord.

Jeremiah smiles, circles William. Cracks his whip.

JEREMIAH

Well I sure hope you prayed good,
'cause when I've finished with
you...He just may have your soul.

WILLIAM

If that's His will---

JEREMIAH

No William...if it is my will!

Jeremiah readies himself for the first stroke.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)

You sure you're ready to die for a
fuckin' pickaninny?...You know you
can't fraternize with the
women...you broke the law!

WILLIAM

Sarah's my woman.

Jeremiah lashes William's back. He writhes, agonised.

JEREMIAH

I've about had enough of your back
talkin' boy

He whips him again, ignoring the cries.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)

But now I have a thought that
tonite 'your' Sarah may be my
woman. Yessir, maybe she'd like
some white meat, what say you?

William screams in pain and anger.

WILLIAM

Dear God! For one minute let Masa
be in my place...

Crack! William howls.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
One minute, Lord...is all I ask!

He closes his eyes.

DREAM SEQUENCE

Jeremiah is tied to the tree. Naked from the waist down. His back resembles a butcher's slab.

William stands behind him, eyes closed, bullwhip in hand.

His white shirt, breeches and boots are spattered with blood.

As Jeremiah speaks, William opens his eyes.

JEREMIAH
Masa, you can whip me, take my
woman...even my life...but you
can't never take my faith.

William snarls, raises the bullwhip, hesitates.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)
You say I broke the law...what law?
Your law? Written by men?

WILLIAM
I am the law!

JEREMIAH
No Massa you ain't...God is the
law...

William steps forward aggressively, raises his weapon again.

Once more he falters.

Jeremiah cries at the top of his lungs.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)
...Thou shalt have no other gods
before me...Thou shalt not
murder...Thou shalt not commit
adultery...

As if struck by lightning, William drops to his knees.

The whip falls from his grasp.

EMILY (O.S.)
Jeremiah? What's wrong?

BACK TO SCENE

Jeremiah kneels behind William, looks to the sky.

JEREMIAH
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's
house, his wife--

Emily rushes to him. She takes him in her arms.

EMILY
Dearest, what has overcome you?

She touches his forehead.

Jeremiah looks at his wife.

JEREMIAH
God knows...only God truly knows.

He attempts to rise. Emily helps him to his feet.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)
I came here today to teach William
a lesson...but sweet Jesus, it is I
who has learned.

With Emily's assistance he staggers over to William.

He begins to untie him.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)
I learned Emily that for all these
years I've been wrong.

William, released from his bonds falls to the ground.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)
We've all been wrong.

He screams at the sky.

JEREMIAH (CONT'D)
So damn wrong!...Dear God may you
forgive us for our sins! For this
lamentable evil we have
perpetrated!

EMILY
 Husband, just what is it you are
 saying?

Jeremiah takes Emily's hands in his.

JEREMIAH
 We will free these human
 beings...for that is what they
 are...human beings, as are we.

Emily kisses Jeremiah's hands.

EMILY
 Thank God...you are a good man
 Jeremiah Oates...and I am proud to
 be your wife...but you know this
 may be the beginning of the end?

JEREMIAH
 In my heart of hearts I pray that
 to be true...we must be strong, for
 others will despise us...Come,
 kneel with me.

He lowers her gently to the ground and kneels beside her.

WILLIAM (O.S.)
 Masa?

Jeremiah looks over.

JEREMIAH
 There is no 'Masa' now William.

William hauls himself across to the other two, tears stream
 down his face.

He drags himself to his knees and takes their hands in his.

WILLIAM
 Please...may I give thanks with
 you?

Jeremiah and Emily nod, squeeze his hands tight.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
 Our Father...

ALL
 Our Father, which art in Heaven....

FADE OUT:

THE END