

**'ALEX WHEATLE WRITES FROM
A PLACE OF HONESTY AND PASSION'**

Steve McQueen

Director of 12 Years a Slave

CANE WARRIORS

ALEX WHEATLE

— WINNER OF THE GUARDIAN PRIZE —

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This story is based on true events.

I dedicate it to the mighty Tacky and his fellow cane warriors of 1760, Toussaint L'Ouverture and his brothers who led the Haitian revolution in 1791, Fédon's 1790s slave uprising in Grenada, the 1816 slave revolt led by Bussa in Barbados, Sam Sharpe's Baptist War slave rebellion in Jamaica 1832 and to freedom fighters all over the world.

Alex Wheatle, South London

1

A WHISPER IN THE NIGHT

FRONTIER PLANTATION,

ST MARY, JAMAICA 1760

Sleep was hard to catch on this humid night. I was listening to the chanting of tiny creatures in the fields when I felt a strong palm on my shoulder. I turned my head and opened my eyes. Louis stood over me. His top garment, the sleeves rolled up above his elbows, was stained with soil. His eyes had a red fire in them. Sweat dripped off his chin. Through the open window I saw a fat moon – only days ago full fat. Its pale light reflected off Louis' forehead.

He bent down and whispered into my ear, 'Moa, it's been agreed.'

'What's been agreed?' I asked.

Louis checked around the small room. Ten men slept around me. There was no space to stretch or roll over. Two of them snored. Like me, they had worked fourteen-hour shifts cutting the cane. The endless cane. Like me, their bodies were spent and roasted by a brutal sun. Harvest time was upon us. There'd be long days and weeks ahead of us.

Louis' thick fingers dug into my shoulder. I sensed the power in his forearms. I wanted to grow broad and strong like him. I hoped he could pass on his courage to me too. 'We is going to bruk outta here 'pon what de white mon call Easter Sunday,' he said. 'T'ree days' time.'

'White mon Easter Sunday?' I repeated. Something colder than blood flowed through my veins.

'Yes, mon, their Easter Sunday,' nodded Louis. 'De men and women cyan't tek it any more. Not after Miss Pam drop inna de field and lose her life. Everybody leggo some long, long eye-water. Me sure your eyes sore too. You know dat she was wid chile? Not even we gods - Asase Ya, Nyame or Abowie - coulda save her. Who gonna tell de liccle pickney Anancy stories now? They should know dat Anacy de son of Asase Ya and Nyame. Scallion Mon and me had to dig de hole and dem just fling her inside it. Dem would not allow us to bury her beside ah tree or de stream. Not one Akan song chant.'

I recalled the time when Miss Pam treated the blisters on my hands with some herbs she had boiled. Mama said she had learned tings from the Akan elders. She helped deliver my liccle sister, Hopie, and looked after Papa's wound when it became sore. We all loved her. Sadness shook my heart and rage filled my fists once again.

‘She was good to ever’body,’ I said. ‘Dem never let me say goodbye to her.’

Louis’ eyes burned into me. ‘Moa, you understand dat if we bruk outta here, somebody have to kill off Misser Master and him wife and all de overseer dem.’

My body begged for more rest but my heart punched rapid combinations. I felt the vibrations in my throat. ‘Do we really have to kill master wife too? Do we have to kill any of dem? We cyan’t just run off in de night-time?’

Louis shook his head. ‘We have to kill dem, Moa. Otherwise they will send more white people to hunt we down. You nuh hear from your mama about how master’s wife treat our people inna de big house?’

‘Yes.’ I nodded. ‘Mama always complaining. Somebody get lash just becah dem drop some food. Sometime Mama nuh finish work ’til de bird sing inna treetop.’

I had to take a moment. Louis, broad shoulders and thick leg-back, was one of the oldest men on the plantation. He was three years shy of forty. I was fourteen years old and my chances of counting my harvests to thirty-seven were slim like the weed leaf that children had to dig out from around the cane. Life was hard as a boy-child. But now me nearly come to me full size, me life gonna get tough like old tree root.

‘How?’ I asked. ‘When?’

Louis glanced over his shoulder. The green things in the field continued their debate. The smell of crushed cane, boiled sugar and smoke filled our nostrils. The mill never slept.

‘As me just done tell you,’ Louis replied. ‘T’ree days’ time – de white mon’s Easter Sunday. Misser Master will give some of de white overseer de day off so they cyan celebrate dis ting call Easter. They will be laughing and walking strange after dem drink de mad cane water. We have to tek we chance.’

‘Tacky going to lead us?’ I wanted reassurance. ‘Me will feel ah whole heap better if he did. His hand mighty and him have ah good head. Me mama say de gods walk wid him. She say him was born to back de evil against de wall.’

‘Yes, mon,’ Louis replied. ‘Of course. Don’t forget, Miss Pam was Tacky’s sister. Misser Master don’t even know dat. Tacky has to play dis pretend game becah he has to gain de trust from Misser Master. Sometimes you have to play fool to get wise. And Tacky playing it good. Tacky still remember de land at de other end of de blue waters. Dreamland him call it. Him still remember some words and ways dat de white mon don’t know about. Him cyan say someting right in front of Misser Master dat is ah message to we.’

‘Tacky have one fierce strong back,’ I said. ‘Me glad he will lead us.’

‘Moa, catch some sleep,’ Louis instructed. ‘You’re going to need it. Me will come tomorrow and give you more news. Don’t chat to anybody of dis except me – not even your papa.’

Louis checked the men around me before he left for his own hut. I peered out the window and he became a shadow in the steamy Jamaican night.

I thought of my father and hoped I’d see him in the morning when he finished his shift at the mill. I tried to guess how many moments of rest I could claim before the sun walked in the sky again. My limbs became weary as I thought about the day’s work ahead. I closed my eyes as my head hit the dusty floor.

The snorers continued.

2

CUTTING THE CANE

Miss Gloria wasn't smiling today. She dipped her spoon into the big cornmeal pot and served breakfast to the men. 'Me glad you're still living,' she said to Toolmon, the grey-bearded man who repaired and sharpened billhooks and other instruments we used in the field. She usually said her greeting with a grin. Not today. Maybe she missed Miss Pam too. Louis and de other elders had always instructed us not to '*leggo eye-water*' in front of the white overseers. *Nub let de white mon see de pain you carry inside.*

When it was my turn to be provided, Miss Gloria offered me a quick glance. Her eyes were sore but her cheeks were dry. Misser Donaldson, a white overseer, looked on from his cabin veranda behind the cookhouse. A wide hat topped his fair hair. It had a brown chicken feather sticking out of it. One side of his face was red with sunburn.

I sat down on the grass under the shade of a tree. I scraped every last drip of cornmeal into my mouth. It would

be six hours before my next meal, usually a piece of salted pork and a scrap of bread at lunchtime. I glanced at the high green hills to the east and wondered what was on the other side. Maybe there was ah land where there was no overseer or Misser Master. The dreamland that Tacky talked about. Maybe there were green fields where mudders didn't have to toil inna de fields and brudders aren't whipped if they catch long moments of rest inna de late afternoon. *One day, me will have to tek me good foot and see wid me own eye. Yes, Moa. Mek me promise meself dat before me good body return to de ground.*

I looked around for Papa but couldn't spot him. I guessed he must be eating at another breakfast station near the millhouse. Keverton sat beside me. He was two thumbs taller than me, one branch wider and two years older. He only had three fingers on his left hand after an accident with a billhook. His watchful eyes darted between me and Misser Donaldson.

'Moa, how are your arms keeping?' Keverton asked.

'Me don't even know,' I replied. 'Sometimes, when me finish work it's like me have no arms at all.'

Sometimes when de sun gets tired for de day, it feel like de billhooks we carry are heavy like fat donkey. Sometimes, when de sun climb to de middle of de great sky, it feels like it's roasting every liccle hair 'pon me headtop. Me surprise

it don't turn yellow. Sometimes when Misser Donaldson use him back-ripper 'pon me back, it feel like him cutting cane from me body.

Keverton spied a quick look at Misser Donaldson again and dropped his tone to a whisper. 'Did Louis talk to you last night?' he asked.

I didn't want to answer. Louis had warned me not to share any of Tacky's plans to anybody. Not even Keverton.

'Me nuh know what you're talking about, Keverton?'

'Moa, you cyan talk to me,' Keverton assured. 'Louis come to me last night too. On de white mon's Easter Sunday, we have ah big job to do.'

'Louis never told me about any job,' I said.

Keverton thought about something. 'He didn't? You sure? You cyan talk to me, Moa. Me know de plan.'

I turned to Keverton and gave him a long look. 'You do?' I said. 'Louis tell me not to leggo one word.'

Keverton nodded. 'And you did good.'

'Him shoulda tell me dat you know about Tacky's plan too.'

'Maybe he didn't want you to fill up your head about it and talk about it wid me too much,' Keverton said. 'Mek sure you don't give Misser Donaldson any problem today or tomorrow.'

'Me don't give Misser Donaldson any problem for a

long while,’ I said. ‘Me cut plenty, plenty cane since harvest start.’

‘Good,’ said Keverton. ‘Keep it up. Me nuh want him to suspect ah damn ting.’ He tipped the cornmeal into his mouth and stood up. ‘Come, mon. Let we start early today.’

We placed our bowls into a wooden box beside Miss Gloria’s serving station – later on she would take them down to the river to wash them. Her usual morning smile still hadn’t reached her lips. I guessed Miss Pam’s kind face was still behind her eyes. I felt the rise of eye-water but I managed to hold it back.

Keverton and I made our way to the cane field. We were the first to arrive. The sun had just peeped its crown over the eastern hills. There were no white puffs in the blue sky. We picked up our billhooks from a sack and started work.

We hacked the cane from about six inches above the ground and then chopped the leaves from the top. I gazed ahead and the pale stalks stretched out until they reached the horizon. My back already ached just above my behind and my palms were just as hard as the dried mud. A few naked pickney had already started pulling and picking out the weeds. I remembered when I filled my long days with that chore. It seemed like play when I first began – until the

overseers warned us we had to do the same thing every day, every week until the moon turned skinny and got fat again.

‘Dis is harder work than planting time,’ Keverton said. ‘Me just cyan’t tek de smell of de cow and donkey shit Misser Master tell we to use to mek de cane grow.’

‘Me cyan’t tek de bending down, standing up and de bending down again,’ I said. ‘It’s ah wonder me back don’t bruk yet.’

‘It *will* bruk if we don’t mek our move,’ replied Keverton.

I checked behind me and Misser Donaldson hadn’t yet arrived on his donkey to check us. ‘What’s dis job dat we have to do?’

‘Louis will tell you tonight,’ Keverton replied. ‘Me sure of dat.’

‘Why can’t you tell me?’ I urged.

More men had arrived for work. None of them looked forward to their day. Women and young girls pulled handcarts. They stopped here and there to pick up the fallen cane. They dragged it up the dirt path to the mill where it would be crushed. A dark smoke snorted out of the boilerhouse.

‘It’s not for me to tell you,’ Keverton finally replied. ‘Louis or Tacky have to do dat.’

‘Is it ah dangerous ting we have to do?’

I had a very good idea what my task was. I hoped

Keverton said it was something different. He stopped cutting and stared into the field before he turned to me. He nodded. ‘Everything is dangerous here, Moa. Even living ’til de next day. Even sleeping. Don’t ask me no more question. Just concentrate on your work while de sun walks de sky. Louis did ah warn me dat you will fling plenty question my way.’

‘But me have to know what kinda job dem want me to do,’ I said. ‘Me have to prepare my—’

A shooting pain spread from the top of my left shoulder down to my waist. I spun around and saw Misser Donaldson astride his donkey. I didn’t hear him approach. His hat shadowed his forehead and his right hand twirled his back-ripper. It was whispered that it was part bull’s tail, with hog-bone and goat hide. I remembered what it had felt like when I had been ‘seasoned’ – given my first lashes, no more than two moon cycles gone, and I had seen what it had recently done to Keverton as a punishment. It was one of the worse whippings we had seen. His back showed ridges of hard dried blood.

Misser Donaldson’s teeth were as dirty as the manure banking and his ginger beard had specks of grey in it. Hate rippled through me. His red neck was ripe for strangling. My fingers wanted to wreak revenge but I gripped the sides of my coarse pants instead.

‘You can’t work so hard when you talk,’ he said. ‘Work!’

He slapped his donkey on its neck with his back-ripper and moved on. In the distance, I spotted Misser Bolton, the other overseer on our section. He was already flogging somebody. Keverton turned away from me, gripped his billhook and chopped the cane in front of him. He didn’t say another word until we stopped for our next meal.

Could we really and truly tek dem on?

I wanted to hear Tacky’s voice to reassure me. I *needed* to see him.