

Yellow Railroad
by Dave McClain

A southern plantation owner will stop at nothing to keep his slaves from escaping.

FADE IN:

EXT. WOODEN BARN - DAY

CECIL, an 18-year-old slave, breathless and bleeding, stumbles through the woods running towards a barn. He collapses beside it. Three white men on horseback, MASTER COLTRANE, his son, JARRETT, and HENRY, an overseer, catch up to Cecil. MASTER COLTRANE dismounts and approaches Cecil.

MASTER COLTRANE

Where you goin', boy? North is that way and the plantation is over yonder. You lost or somethin'? Or maybe you callin' on an old friend? I hate to disappoint, but nobody been livin' here since the Hendersons just up and disappeared a few years ago.

Cecil, dazed, looks up at Master Coltrane, but can't really focus on the man's face. Master Coltrane notices a bullet wound in Cecil's abdomen. Cecil appears to be dying. JARRETT, one of the men still on his horse strains to see.

JARRETT

I told you I got 'im, pa. Told ya.

MASTER COLTRANE

You lookin' to be in a bad way, boy. A real bad way. But we can help ya. I'll make you a deal, being that I'm a God-fearing man and all. If'n you tell me why you was runnin' this way, why so many escaped nig-ras been runnin' this way... and I'll have Jarrett here take a look at ya'. He done been to medical school, ya know. Why, he can fix ya right up. Sure as shootin'.

JARRETT

(under his breath,
laughing)

Sure as shootin'. That's funny.

Cecil doesn't speak. Master Coltrane extends his arm and presses his hand on Cecil's wound. Cecil moans in pain.

MASTER COLTRANE

Damn, boy! That looks like it hurts sump'in fierce.

CECIL

I... I cay-unt... I cay-unt...

JARRETT

Ain't it funny the way he always says that? Cay-unt. I cay-unt.

Master Coltrane turns and glares at Jarrett, then slowly turns back towards Cecil.

MASTER COLTRANE

Why don't you let us help you? Just answer my question. Why - did you - come - this way?

CECIL

(gurgling)

It was...it was...

MASTER COLTRANE

Speak up, boy! Wadyya doin'? Prayin' to God? 'cause no one this side of heaven can hear a word you're sayin'!

CECIL

...the yellow... ribbon.

Cecil slumps over. Dead. Master Coltrane stands.

MASTER COLTRANE

Yellow ribbon? What the hell does that mean? Either of you boys see a yellow ribbon anywhere?

Master Coltrane looks back at the two men as they both shake their heads. He looks back at Cecil's lifeless body.

MASTER COLTRANE (cont'd)

Let's head back and talk to the others. We can always beat it out of 'em. If it even means anything.

Master Coltrane walks back to his horse and mounts up.

MASTER COLTRANE (cont'd)

String 'im up, boys.

JARRETT

String 'im up? But he's dead!

MASTER COLTRANE

To think you flunked out of medical school. I know he's dead, you idiot.

(MORE)

MASTER COLTRANE (cont'd)
String 'im up as a lesson to any
other runaways who may come this way.
I'll see you two back at the house.

Master Coltrane rides off. Henry and then Jarrett dismount.

EXT. WOODEN BARN - NIGHT

The same three men from the previous scene ride up to the same barn, just as the doors slam shut and the sound of a board placed across the inside of the door is heard.

JARRETT
Look, pa! There's a scrap of yellow
ribbon pinned up beside the door!

HENRY
This must be one of the stops on that
there underground railway. People
been talkin' like there were one of
those places 'round here.

JARRETT
(shouts at the doors)
We got you now, you good-for-nothing
runaway niggers!

Jarrett turns toward his father.

JARRETT (cont'd)
Waddya want us to do, pa?

Master Coltrane, emotionless stares straight ahead.

MASTER COLTRANE
Don't miss.

Jarrett looks at Henry. Henry nods at Jarrett. Both men raise their rifles and point them at the barn doors. Before they can shoot, the men hear a rustling beside the barn.

MASTER COLTRANE (cont'd)
Hold your fire.

The rustling grows louder and is now coming from both sides of the barn. Several ghostly figures emerge at the front of the barn. The figures each have a noose around their necks, with a rope trailing behind. They encircle the three men.

MASTER COLTRANE (cont'd)
What're you waiting for? SHOOT!

Jarrett and Henry shoot towards the figures, but they are unaffected. They stand and stare at the three men. The men stare in disbelief. The sound of the crossbar being lifted off the door from inside the barn is heard.

MASTER COLTRANE (cont'd)
Inside the barn!

The three men jump from their horses, run to the barn doors, and swing them open. The men run inside, slamming the doors.

EXT. WOODEN BARN - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Henry and Jarrett pick up the crossbar off of the ground and place it in its slots inside the door. They reload their guns. Master Coltrane looks around. Two lanterns hang nearby providing some light, but Master Coltrane strains to see.

MASTER COLTRANE
Where are they?

JARRETT
Who, pa?

HENRY
The darkies we saw runnin' in here.

MASTER COLTRANE
They ain't here.

The lanterns begin squeaking and swaying, then begin to shake violently from side to side. One of them falls from its hook and starts a fire. The other quickly does the same.

JARRETT
Let's get the hell outta here!

Jarrett and Henry lift the crossbar and throw it to the ground. They push the doors, but the doors won't move.

MASTER COLTRANE
What are you waiting for? Get those doors open!

JARRETT
We're trying, pa! They won't budge!

Master Coltrane helps push on the doors as the fire rapidly spreads from the back of the barn towards the front.

CECIL
(in a ghostly voice)
I cay-unt... I cay-unt..

Master Coltrane looks around, panicked, as all three men continue struggling to open the doors.

CECIL (cont'd)
I cay-unt... WAIT! I CAYUNT WAIT!!

EXT. WOODEN BARN - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The horses run away from the burning barn, over several empty nooses on the ground. The shouts of the men inside are drowned out by the raging inferno, and a ghostly laughter.

INT. WOODEN BARN - NIGHT - PRESENT DAY

Two men, JONATHAN AND ANDREW, shut the barn doors and put a crossbeam in its place. They enter a room full of men.

JONATHAN
Why do have to come all the way out here just to hold a meeting?

ANDREW
That's why my cousin rebuilt this old barn. Besides, we can't exactly prepare cross burnings in the city.

JONATHAN
Is that really the worst we can do? Too bad it's not like it was in my grandad's day. They DID things.

ANDREW
I hear ya. Hey, you know what the real problem with niggers is?

JONATHAN
No, what?

ANDREW
They ain't killin' 'me no more!

The two men laugh for a moment until Andrew grows serious.

Wait until this meetin' starts. I think you'll like what you hear.

Two lanterns in the back of the barn begin to sway.