

# The Girdle of the Great

## A STORY OF THE NEW SOUTH

By John Jordan Douglass

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### CHAPTER I.

#### A Youthful Orator.

In the heart of a great Southern plantation, on a hill overlooking the golden waters of the Pee Dee, guarded by gigantic oaks, and begirt with rose-bushes and honeysuckles, stood some years ago a stately white-and-green house. Its broad verandas, massive fluted columns and airy rooms all marked it an ante-bellum mansion.

A certain bright April morn'g, quivering in the violet veil of the dawn, suddenly sent a stream of soft, silvery light through the wide east windows. With-out, in highway, byway, orchard and open, numerous feathered songsters trilled and piped in a merry matinee.

The smell of new-turned earth and bursting blossom, mingled with the delicate and delightful aroma of tea-leaf vines, was in the air. Along the broad river meadows ragged gray wisps of mist rose, and, curling smoke-like toward the turquoise sky, left for the gaze a splendid stretch of dew-washed emerald, flecked here and there with snowy sheep.

As if to drink the wine of beauty from the chalice of the morning, a tall, spare-built, dark-eyed, dark-haired youth hurried down the mansion steps, and entered a road, which led through the plantation to the river. His brisk, elastic step betrayed a rich fund of nervous energy, as did also the rather restless—though altogether determined—expression of his thin, tanned face.

His Indian-like cheekbones, prominent nose and snarling Scotch chin conspired to impose an insuperable barrier to his admission within the charmed circle of "Masceline Beauties." But in the breadth of his forehead, in the beam of his bright eyes, no less than in the quiet strength of his firmly moulded mouth, were written mystery and living fire. In fact, Jerome Watkins' extraordinary character had early won for him, in the Pee Dee country, the sobriquet of "Steady Romey." (And, if it is not too painful to the memory of one rollicking rustic, it might be delicately added that a neighbor who once unwittingly placed a bare No. 10 foot on a yellow-jacket's nest, and, in the morning, found that "the darned, pesky little critter wuz blamed high ez busy as Romey Watkins.")

There was an unwonted seriousness in the youth's face as he continued his course toward the river. He seemed almost oblivious of his surroundings. The brimming melody of the morning failed to arouse the ardor of his spirits. He knit his brows and passed his hand across his forehead in a manner which bespoke a struggle with perplexing problems, or a frantic mental-clutching at the coat-tails of a fleeting idea.

The prodigant spender of life would have marvelled that one so youthful, indeed, he was scarcely one-and-twenty—should harbor a serious thought. Nevertheless, it was true; Jerome was troubled. He could draw near enough to a certain coveted goal, only to realize that, like the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow in the story-books, it was just beyond his grasp.

Suddenly the tense muscles of his face relaxed. Snatching off his broad-brimmed palmetto hat, he sat in spinning upward. "Whoopie, that'll do 'em!" he cried ecstatically.

that the commotion had been created by a nervous member of that raucous tribe.

Nevertheless, he decided to discontinue his speech.

Entering the plot where the old negro was plowing, he cried: "What were you throwin' at, Uncle Sam?"

"Frownin' at?" queried the old negro, giving the mule a peremptory jerk. "I ain't bin frownin' at nuffin, 'cept at dis debbilish an' deceasin' mule. Whatch'er mean, Marsa Romey?"

"Oh, nothin'—did you hear me speakin'?" asked the youth, dropping with evident relief his oratorical "ings."

"Co'se I did, chile, co'se I did, w'en you wuz er' foppin', erron' in yo' gwinecan lak er bullfrog wid de brown skeeters (bronchitis)—des erbusin' an' er runnin' down an' er scann'izin' po' ole hones' niggers."

"I haven't been doin' that, Uncle Sam," replied the young man, a fond light in his dark eyes. "I think too much of you for that; we have a Debatin' Society up at the Academy, and a gold medal is to be awarded to the boy who makes the best speech Commencement night. Your race is to be the subject of the Debate. I will say that you can be made better by religion, and that millions of—"

"Dat's de tru'—dat's de Gawd's tru'—Marsa Romey," ejaculated the old man, with a grin which set his teeth agleam like white seed in a red-meat watermelon. "des tek de Medofis praar-book in one han' an' er water-millio un'er de'er arm, an' you kin led dis heah nigger clean ter de deb—"

"I mean ter de peary gales, Marsa Romey," he corrected quickly. "What 'tha' you mean? With that old man re-said the burden and the mule, leaving Jerome fairly bent double with laughter.

"Don't mention what I've said to a livin' soul, Uncle Sam," said Jerome earnestly when the old negro had returned to the end of the row, "special-ly to Gabe Allen; he's on the other side."

Presently, in the confusion and commingling of the departing crowd, Jerome found himself near her. In a moment the banker, recognizing the son of an old patron, had presented Jerome to Miss Maxine MacDonald.

Jerome heard the announcement that she would visit Marjorie Allen with a sharp pang of disappointment; and remembered only, as they passed on, that the girl's wonderful blue eyes had looked into his with a sweet, half-startled expression, and that a wave of rich color had flooded her fair cheeks.

He found it extremely difficult—well-nigh impossible—that afternoon to confine his thoughts to the query of the coming debate, especially since he frequently saw Gabriel Allen and the banker's niece together.

The President of the Debate had rapped for order. The judges of the contest, including Mr. MacDonald, had taken their places. When quiet was obtained, the secretary rose and read the query. "Resolved, That the Emancipation of the negro has been injurious to the South," and announced that the first speaker on the affirmative, Then Gabriel Allen, tall, heavily built and handsome, rose amid a hearty round of applause. His fair, smooth face was flushed with anticipated success; a gleam of victory shone in his eyes.

He began in a mellifluous, well-modulated tone, to recite the cause which led up to the Emancipation of the Negro. Then little by little, with the soft, confidential strides of the tiger, he approached Jerome's speech, till suddenly he sprang upon it and punctured it with the sharp teeth of stinging satire.

Jerome's face went white as death. He leaned far over, a startled, mystic expression in his dark eyes. Had old Sam betrayed him? If not, by some machivellian art or instinct, Gabe Allen was making his speech—and making it ridiculous before the one to whom, above all others, he wished for some reason to present a fine appearance.

"He will tell you," continued the speaker, "that the negro can, by morality and religion, be made a better citizen; but I know you know and everybody knows that more stealing is done during a negro camp-meeting 'nan at any other time (laughter and great applause), and that the biggest shelters are the biggest stealers."

"Give us the good old ante-bellum days," he concluded, "with the niggers happier, healthier and less criminal; but the Lord deliver us from a New South with an old sore."

He resumed his seat amid thunderous applause. Then the bank struck up "Dixie," and the crowd went wild.

had practiced for the debate. As he was passing the little cabin, a short distance below the house, a familiar voice called out: "Lors-a-massey, is dat you, Marsa Romey, gwine a-fishin' in de cool w'at de mawin'?"

"No, no, for suckers," cried the youth, quickening his pace, without looking back at the black face framed in the cabin window.

"Fer cats den, Marsa Romey?" "Yes, for black cats that scratch their friends," retorted Jerome, turning angrily to confront the negro. "Why did you tell Gabe Allen about my speech? I lost the medal!"

The old negro's countenance fell beneath the sudden weight of surprise. He frowned, fared with his elbows upon the narrow windowsill, in an attitude of utter pain.

"Fo' Gawd, I ain't tol' him nuffin, Marsa Romey," he exclaimed, brokenly.

"Well, come and go with me then; maybe you didn't," said Jerome, relenting. (The negro instantly obeyed.) "But there's some mystery here."

"Dat I didn't, kase I lubb you mos' lak I do dem dar niggers," the old man continued, with a toss of his head toward two ebony-headed boys sitting in the doorway. Jerome could not repress a smile at the ludicrous but innocent comparison in which the old negro classed him with Bill and Ben.

When they reached the desired spot, Jerome revealed his purpose. They accordingly climbed down to the river edge of the great rock, screened from landward by a thick cluster of reeds, and began their search. At first it seemed destined to prove fruitless; there was no evidence of espionage. Finally Jerome turned to leave. He had almost cleared the rock, when he noticed that a fragment, where it was scamed and cracked, had been recently broken off. Strooping to examine this more closely, he caught from below at the left base of the reeds a swift flash of something white. Bending over, he was startled to behold that it was an envelope thus inscribed: "Miss Maxine MacDonald."

The town and state were so blurred by a recent rain that he could not decipher them. Jerome hastily picked up the envelope and thrust it in his pocket, saving nothing to old Sam, who was now some distance away.

Suddenly the sound of voices and the rhythmic splash of paddles broke on the air. They came nearer and nearer. Then, as a boat rounded a bend in the river, and swept in sight, Jerome retreated behind the reeds, and motioned to the negro to remain quiet.

In a few moments the voices could be plainly distinguished.

"That is the place—yonder where the big rock juts out into the water. I was fishing. Maybe I lost it there!" "At any rate," continued the speaker, "it contained a photograph and a prophecy that came true—that I'd win the Debater's medal."

"So I see that a prophet is honored in his own country." "And, by the way," continued the feminine voice, "I was so sorry for the young man who failed; he has such a fine face; he made a splendid speech."

"'Eeemph! he has a poor way of showing it," exclaimed her companion in a tone of irritation.

By this time the keel of the boat had grated on the rock, and, throwing the anchor-chain around a projecting stump, Gabriel Allen for it was he—had landed. "I'll be back in a moment," he called to his companion.

"I hope you will find it," she replied, as she playfully ran her fingers through the water on either side of the boat.

Suddenly, before Jerome could interfere, old Sam rushed forward and confronted Gabriel, crying, with all the family pride of the ante-bellum attaché ringing in his voice: "Git off'n dis heah plantashum; git off'n de Kuml's lan', rite heah whar you dun stol' Marsa Romey's speech. Whatch'er doin' on dis side of de rive!"

"Shut up, you black scoundrel, or I'll make you shut up!" cried Gabriel purple with passion. He clenched his fist and glared savagely at the old negro.

"Won't you love me, Maxine?" he pleaded.

"Why, I—I never thought of—of you asking me that," she faltered. "We have known each other such a short while; and Marjorie loves—"

"Well, what difference does that make?" he interrupted. "I have known Marjorie for years, and yet I do not love her." There was naive honesty rather than unfeeling cruelty in his low tones. "I loved you at first sight."

"But you said that a college education was very great aim and ambition. Education is the Girdle of the Great; you must have it. Ten many in our Southland esteem it but a foolish bubble. Even if I loved you I could not mar your splendid future."

Jerome felt the fountain of hope wither within his heart.

"Then you cast me off?" he said bitterly, with a dead white despair in his face—for all time.

"No, I'll eternally you are my superior."

"Then I shall be," he said with a steel-strong look about the mouth, "if I must walk through them and live." (To be Continued Monday.)



Jimmie Rosen as Buster Brown, Mattie and Night, Thursday, April 9.

### SCHOOL CHILDRE MENACED BY GRIP EPIDEMIC.

The prevalence of La Grippe and the alarming increase of the disease among school children has perceptibly reduced the attendance at both public and private schools.

Many parents labor under the delusion that by simply keeping their children at home these are amply safeguarding them against the disease.

While there is no question that the child's greatest danger lies in the personal methods of infection, the fact remains that many of the worst cases of La Grippe and Pneumonia in adults as well as children, are the direct results of neglected colds.

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### AMUSEMENTS

The biggest, best and most pleasing of all the cartoon comedy plays is billed for the Academy next Thursday matinee and night. It is perhaps needless to state that the name of this coming attraction is "Buster Brown," the master effort of that king of cartoonists, R. F. Outcault, whose clever drawings in the metropolitan journals have won unprecedented praise from the fun-loving public.

"Buster" this season is impersonated by Master Jimmie Rosen, the cleverest lilliputian actor on the American stage. This little actor is a Russian by birth, having first seen the light in St. Petersburg. He was brought to this country early in life and adopted the stage while still a child. He was the star of the Royal Lilliputians and the hit of "A Son of Rest" with Nat M. Wills. He speaks seven languages and is an accomplished musical scholar.

For the current season this play has been equipped with an entirely new scenic outfit, new and elaborate costumes and popular songs that are the latest and most pleasing throughout. The cast which includes Al Grady, Mattie Lockett, John Dove, Leo Hayes, Harry M. Price, Leonard Delmore, Fannie Thatcher, Minnie Lee, Frances Francis, Fred Wilson and others of equal note and prominence.

The play is in two pretty scenes, one of which portrays the lawn of "Buster's" home and the other on the beach at the seashore. Among the singing hits may be mentioned "Come Down Susie," "Molly from Mayo," "Old Bill Oliver," "Rose Bud," "Buster Brown," "Woo' 'er Be My Baby Boy," and others of catchy merit and tuneful excellence.

The special features are numerous and pleasing headed by The Bobby Burns Brigade, a Scotch military feature in full Highland costume. This specialty is composed exclusively of young ladies, who drill in a manner that would make the oldest U. S. regular sit up and take notice.

The spectacular effects are excellent and electrical illuminations more than ordinarily brilliant.

The story of "Buster Brown" is too well known to need repetition, but a synopsis may be interesting. "Buster" is informed that his grandpa has come to spend a few weeks with them and his father zeekly intimates that there will be something in the reward line doing for "Buster" if he succeeds in bringing grandpa's visit to a speedy close. The previous youngster sets about his task with ready wit and what he and his dog, "Tige," do to grandpa's happiness and comfort is good and plenty. They play every imaginable sort of prank on her and evoke paroxysms of laughter in a twinkling. They make life miserable for her in many ways and finally she takes her departure much to the older Brown's satisfaction. Much in the novelty line has been added to the play and the general interest of the production has been much enhanced.

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