

# The Girdle of the Great

## A STORY OF THE NEW SOUTH

By John Jordan Douglass

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(Chapter VI.—Continued.)

It was a white-faced, flustered little creature, vacillating between hope and fear, that awaited the tall, grizzled ferryman, when he opened the cottage door. "Mornin' Miss, mornin'," he cried cordially, swinging wide the door, "come in—the house is all tore up, but—"

"How is Jero—Mr. Watkins?" she broke in, with a shuddering gasp. Her heart throbbed like a trip-hammer in her ears. Dull gleams of uncertainty darted beneath the deep blue of her eyes. She unconsciously clutched at his sleeve, as if she would compel his answer to be favorable.

"In er mounty bad way, Miss," he took him home 'bout three o'clock. He was still unconscious. My! you order seed the ole man's face, he—"

"Is Mr. Jerome fatally injured?" she interrupted hoarsely, unable longer to stand the strain of suspense.

"Wal, he wuz mounty much bruised an' bloodied up. The Doc couldn't exactly tell 'bout intarnal injuries. I sed the boy was unconscious, but he had er callin' Max—Max somethin', I dunno what—what's the matter, Miss, you look sick?" he cried suddenly, catching at the girl's arm as she swayed slightly to one side.

"In all right now—can you ferry me across the river—I wish to go at once," she gasped, her face white to the lips, but her eyes shining with unbending purpose.

"Yes, when you've rested up er spell—er drinked er little brandy. I keeps hit fer sashobites," he added, as he led the way to one of the front rooms. "I'll be back in er minute," he said, indicating a chair.

Maxine was scarcely seated before she had repeated with a brimming smile of bravado, "I think some of this, he tried, with rough tenderness.

Maxine silently obeyed, and soon felt the warm blood surging back to her heart.

After a few moments she announced her readiness to cross the river in such earnest tones that the ferryman acquiesced.

"De you a frien' er the Watkinses, Miss?" he queried when they had entered the flat and were pushing off. "Yes—er Mr. Jerome Watkins."

"Wal, you're my frien' then," exclaimed the ferryman with a burst of enthusiasm. "Everybody what's er frien' ter Romey Watkins is er frien' ter me. I can't somehow never forgive him fer pullin' that Bruce er mine out in this rixle at the risk of his own life. Joe Jeffries ain't one ter fergit sich things. Poor Romey—I hope an' pray he won't make er die uv it."

Though Maxine's face fully approved his crude, heart-felt expression, she made no reply. And the ferryman lapsed into silence, giving his attention wholly to the management of the flat.

"What's your name, Miss—of you'll excuse an ole man fer axin'?" he queried when she had stepped ashore. "Maxine MacDonald."

"What! the one he wuz callin' fer? No, I won't take no pay," she insisted as she removed a coin from her purse, "when you're on your way ter see—"

"But you must," she urged, "I can't let you—"

He cut short all remonstrance by swiftly reversing his course. "The flat'll be ready whenever you want ter cross," he called back.

Then she gathered her skirts and bravely trudged up the half-mile slope to Riverwood.

At the door of the mansion she stood finally, maidenly modesty and a soft, strange glow in her blue eyes. Uncertainly master of all. Would they think her indecate? Her cheeks flamed at the thought. Would he think her overbold? She shuddered; alas, he might think again—coarsely. She raised her little clenched fist to rap on the door. A sudden longing to flee seized her. She half-turned. A footstep—a slow, lagging footstep—arrested her attention. She wheeled about to face an old negro who was coming in the walk. Dejection was discernible in the stoop of his powerful shoulders. Something more burdensome than the incubus of years was weighing him down.

"Mornin', Missy," he said, doffing his cap quickly, "how's Marse Romey?" He awaited her answer, cap in hand, the very soul of respect and courtesy.

"That's what I've come to find out, uncle," she replied kindly. She turned again to the door, giving it a sharp rap. "Oh, dat sinit Missy 't all," the old negro exclaimed as he drew nearer. "De ole nigger's cyestight an' sholy gittin' bad—sholy gittin' bad. Po' lil' Marse Romey," he ran on as if in soliloquy, "all moncked an' mud'ud up by dat debilish boss. De bes' chile ebber born on dis ribber. Dest ez sho' fer heaben ez de purly gates hangs on de golden hinges."

"Is he—?" Let Maxine did not finish the sentence. The door opened suddenly and she was face to face with an angelic-looking little woman whose gaze of Jerome's. The dark circles beneath them bespoke the struggles of a sleepless night.

"I am Miss MacDonald," Maxine faltered, striving hard to restrain the

question throbbing in her heart till she could catch it in composure. "And I am Jerome's mother," said the little woman, warmly grasping the girl's extended hand.

"Is Mr. Jerome seriously—fatally injured?" The question was out. And a mother's eyes could no more be deceived by the forced calmness with which it had been uttered than her eyes could fail to read in the younger woman's face the tell-tale tokens.

"We hope not," she replied quickly. "Dr. Allen"—she hesitated over the name—"says it will be some days before he can fully determine the extent of internal injuries."

Her eyes filled with tears, her voice became choked. "Missy, oh, Missy," broke in the old negro, who had all the while been standing impatiently at the foot of the steps, "how's Marse Romey dis mornin'?"

He shuffled his big feet from side to side in a very acorny of uneasiness. He hung on her words like a prisoner at the bar.

"Well, his mind's clear, Uncle Sam, but we don't know the extent of his injuries. He's badly bruised and shaken up."

"Tank God, tank God, he's still in de lan' ov de libin'," he ejaculated, "an' I see gwinter 'rassul wid de Lawd ter spare dat chile."

"Jerome has asked for you—you would see him, Miss MacDonald?" the mother queried half-hesitatingly.

"Yes," Maxine replied almost before she had thought.

The mother led the way across the wide, wainscotted hall, softly opened the door and beckoned Maxine into a large, old-fashioned room. The girl's gaze instantly travelled to a distant corner where a gray-haired man sat beside a low armchair, in which, with an attitude of utter pain, half reclined a blanketed, bandaged figure. The old man arose quickly and came forward, "an' I see gwinter 'rassul wid de Lawd ter spare dat chile."

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An exclamation of surprise rushed to his lips when he saw Maxine standing beside Jerome. His florid face assumed the hue of an overripe peach, but he almost instantly recovered his composure. "Why, Miss Maxine," he laughed, "you've turned trained nurse," and, "by the by," he ran on, feeling Jerome's pulse, "you've got his heart going like a well-oiled machine."

She blushed, murmured something, and left the room.

The doctor proceeded with his examination. "Doing pretty well, boy," he said, adjusting the bandages, "but you mustn't talk. And you must be careful next time about the sort of horses you ride."

Jerome essayed to reply. The doctor silenced him with a gesture. "No, no, my boy, you must keep quiet—your mind isn't exactly clear—a slight concussion—a slight clot on the brain—but you'll be all o. k. in a few days if your heart don't give you trouble."

With that he was gone, leaving Jerome staring at the wall in helpless misery.

Beyond a few pleasantries the doctor said little to Maxine as they drove back in his dog-cart to Rocky Heights—a fact for which she was profoundly grateful. Though conscious of no impropriety, she was nevertheless afflicted with a haunting fear lest Jerome should think her wanting in modesty. Yet, she argued to herself, that in his present state of mind—or, rather, to be more accurate, of heart—if he had sensed the only course to pursue. Then, if ever, she should strengthen him. Why not? He was to be her ideal of the New South—her soul's companion.

The doctor, too, had his reflections as the dog-cart bumped down the steep slope to the ferry.

In early manhood he had dreams of great wealth. Money was his God, and he had stooped to the lowest level to obtain it. Every energy of his virile nature had been consequently subverted to that end. He had studied the wiles of the charlatan and the ways of the clown. He possessed the faculty of making his patients believe they were well. His wealthy patients had every disease in the medical records (and many which were not) while the poor were always afflicted with trifles.

The doctor also made a specialty of shaving notes and lending money on "gilt-edge security." In the latter way he had gotten the estate of Riverwood in his octopus-like clutches, taking a cruel advantage of the Colonel's necessity. The doctor's immediate reason for desiring the match between Gabriel and Maxine was a valuable estate adjoining Rocky Heights. While this estate was at present in litigation, it remained in the possession of Mr. Hector MacDonald, the president of the Ansonville Bank. Maxine was Mr. MacDonald's natural heir. Before the suit had begun the doctor had vainly tried to purchase this estate for a secret purpose; he had attended in extremis, that the "Brandon Place" contained valuable deposits of gold-bearing ore.

The incident of the morning had therefore grated somewhat harshly on his gold nerves.

When they reached the ferry, the doctor had apparently regained his usual cheerfulness. He gave a merry, winding blast with the signature horn in a little while the ferry-flat put out from the opposite shore. The ferryman was not the one who had conveyed Maxine across in the morning. He was a tall, sunburnt youth of perhaps twenty. His face bespoke rural simplicity and rugged honesty, with a touch of native strength in the front of the mouth and chin. He saluted his passengers with an awkward bow as he drew near shore. He was evidently little used to society women.

"Good morning, Bruce," said the doctor, driving onto the flat. "Fine day."

"Yes, sir," responded the youth. "Any news," continued the doctor, warily.

"Nuthin' in pertickler, sir. How's Romey Watkins?"

"Oh, he's doing fairly well."

"Powerful glad ter hear it," said the youth. "It's queer, though, how the hoss cum ter run erway with him. Must er bin skeered bad by—"

The doctor cut him short by asking about the autumn horse-fair to be held at Ansonville. But Maxine's suspicions were aroused and she suspected that the doctor knew more than he cared to admit.

As they were passing the spot where the old road turned into the new, Maxine ventured a question about the rum, away, but the doctor adroitly conveyed the conversation into another channel.

When they arrived at Rocky Heights, Maxine was instantly borne off by Marjorie to a sheltered part of the veranda and assailed with a fusillade of questions. "Did he say anything about me?" she queried, after asking the extent of Jerome's injury.

"Well, no, I believe not," Maxine stammered.

"Not a word?"

"No."

"O, well, I think I can understand it then, Max," Marjorie said, with a poor little attempt at pleasantry. "You didn't give him the chance to say it."

"Indeed I did—I—"

The conversation was ended by the breakfast bell.

The meal passed silently—almost solemnly—save for an occasional witticism by the doctor, who feared lest his guest should become offended at any marked discourtesy on his part.

Gabriel was too chagrined at the affair of the morning to offer any remarks at all. His face betrayed only too plainly the gloomy nature of his thoughts. He had determined, however, to make a desperate effort to regain his standing with Maxine as he drove with her to Ansonville. Accordingly, he hastened the preparations for the departure. Unhappily for him, he

could not hasten Maxine. It was fully nine o'clock when they drove through the big gate. The train left Ansonville at ten-fifteen. Gabriel would, therefore, have less time than he had anticipated to present his case. He resolved to make the most of it. When they were well out of sight in a monotonous stretch of pine forest, he went at once to the heart of the matter—or the matter of the heart. (To be Continued Tomorrow.)

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### CHAPTER VII. Some Surprises.

Dr. Allen had a habit of entering the sick-room at unexpected hours, exercising the liberty on the plea that he wished to note the real condition of his patients before they could disorder their pulses. Being something of a hypocrite himself, he invariably looked for that element in the lives of others. The only redeeming quality about the Doctor's hypocrisy (if that vice can be said to possess mitigating circumstances) was its cheerfulness.