OPIE PERCIVAL READ

AN ARKANSAS PLANTER

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An Arkansas Planter

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THE END.

CHAPTER I.

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Lying along the Arkansas River, a few miles below Little Rock, there is a broad strip of country that was once the domain of a lordly race of men. They were not lordly in the sense of conquest; no rusting armor hung upon their walls; no ancient blood-stains blotched their stairways—there were no skeletons in dungeons deep beneath the banquet hall. But in their own opinion they were just as great as if they had possessed these gracious marks of medieval distinction. Their country was comparatively new, but their fathers came mostly from Virginia and their whisky came wholly from Kentucky. Their cotton brought a high price in the Liverpool market, their daughters were celebrated for beauty, and their sons could hold their own with the poker players that traveled up and down the Mississippi River. The slave trade had been abolished, and, therefore, what remained of slavery was right; and in proof of it the pulpit contributed its argument. Negro preachers with wives scattered throughout the community urged their fellow bondsmen to drop upon their knees and thank God for the privilege of following a mule in a Christian land. The merciless work of driving the negroes to their tasks was performed by men from the North. Many a son of New England, who, with emotion, had listened to Phillips and to Garrison, had afterward hired his harsh energies to the slave owner. And it was this hard driving that taught the negro vaguely to despise the abolitionist. But as a class the slaves were not unhappy. They were ignorant, but the happiest

song is sometimes sung by ignorance. They believed the Bible as read to them by the preachers, and the Bible told them that God had made them slaves; so, at evening, they twanged rude strings and danced the "buck" under the boughs of the cottonwood tree.

On the vine-shaded veranda the typical old planter was wont to sit, looking up and down the road, watching for a friend or a stranger—any one worthy to drink a gentleman's liquor, sir. His library was stocked with romances. He knew English history as handed down to him by the sentimentalist. He hated the name of king, but revered an aristocracy. No business was transacted under his roof; the affairs of his estate were administered in a small office, situated at the corner of the yard. His wife and daughters, arrayed in imported finery, drove about in a carriage. New Orleans was his social center, and he had been known to pay as much as a thousand dollars for a family ticket to a ball at the St. Charles hotel. His hospitality was known everywhere. He was slow to anger, except when his honor was touched upon, and then he demanded an apology or forced a fight. He was humorous, and yet the consciousness of his own dignity often restrained his enjoyment of the ludicrous. When the cotton was in bloom his possessions were beautiful. On a knoll he could stand and imagine that the world was a sea of purple.

That was the Arkansas planter years ago, before the great sentimental storm swept down upon him, before an evening's tea-table talk in Massachusetts became a tornado of iron in Virginia. When ragged and heart-sore he returned from the army, from as brave a fight as man ever engaged

in, he sat down to dream over his vanished greatness. But his dream was short. He went to work, not to re-establish his former condition of ease—for that hope was beyond him—but to make a living for his family.

On a knoll overlooking the Arkansas River stood the Cranceford homestead. The site was settled in 1832, by Captain Luke Cranceford, who had distinguished himself in an Indian war. And here, not long afterward, was born John Cranceford, who years later won applause as commander of one of the most stubborn batteries of the Confederate Army. The house was originally built of cypress logs, but as time passed additions of boards and brick were made, resulting in a formless but comfortable habitation, with broad passage ways and odd lolling places set to entrap cool breezes. The plantation comprised about one thousand acres. The land for the most part was level, but here and there a hill arose, like a sudden jolt. From right to left the tract was divided by a bayou, slow and dark. The land was so valuable that most of it had been cleared years ago, but in the wooded stretches the timber was thick, and in places the tops of the trees were laced together with wild grape vines. Far away was a range of pine-covered hills, blue cones in the distance. And here lived the poorer class of people, farmers who could not hope to look to the production of cotton, but who for a mere existence raised thin hogs and nubbins of corn. In the lowlands the plantations were so large and the residences so far apart that the country would have appeared thinly settled but for the negro quarters here and there, log villages along the bayous.

In this neighborhood Major John Cranceford was the most prominent figure. The county was named in honor of his family. He was called a progressive man. He accepted the yoke of reconstruction and wore it with a laugh, until it pinched, and then he said nothing, except to tell his neighbors that a better time was coming. And it came. The years passed, and a man who had been prominent in the Confederate council became Attorney-General of the American Nation, and men who had led desperate charges against the Federal forces made speeches in the old capitol at Washington. And thus the world was taught a lesson of forgiveness—of the true greatness of man.

In New Orleans the Major was known as a character, and his nerve was not merely a matter of conjecture. Courage is supposed to hold a solemn aspect, but the Major was the embodiment of heartiness. His laugh was catching; even the negroes had it, slow, loud and long. Sometimes at morning when a change of season had influenced him, he would slowly stride up and down the porch, seeming to shake with joviality as he walked. Years ago he had served as captain of a large steamboat, and this at times gave him an air of bluff authority. He was a successful river man, and was therefore noted for the vigor and newness of his profanity. His wife was deeply religious, and year after year she besought him to join the church, pleaded with him at evening when the two children were kissed good night—and at last he stood the rector's cross-examination and had his name placed upon the register. It was a hard struggle, but he weeded out his oaths until but one was left—a bold "by the blood." He said that he would part even with this safety valve but that

it would require time; and it did. The Major believed in the gradual moral improvement of mankind, but he swore that the world intellectually was going to the devil. And for this conviction he had a graded proof. "Listen to me a minute," he was wont to say. "I'll make it clear to you. My grandfather was graduated with great honors from Harvard, my father was graduated with honor, I got through all right, but my son Tom failed."

CHAPTER II.

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One hot afternoon the Major sat in his library. The doors were open and a cool breeze, making the circuitous route of the passage ways, swept through the room, bulging a newspaper which he held opened out in front of him. He was scanning the headlines to catch the impulsive moods of the world. The parlor was not far away, down the hall, and voices reached him. And then there came the distressing hack, hack, of a hollow cough. He put down the newspaper, got up, and slowly strode about the room, not shaking with joviality as he walked. In the parlor the voices were hushed, there was a long silence, and then came the hollow cough. He sat down and again took up the newspaper, but the cough, hack, hack, smote him like the recurrence of a distressing thought, and he crumpled the paper and threw it upon the floor. Out in the yard a negro woman was singing; far down the stream a steamboat whistled. And again came the hollow cough. There was another long silence, and then he heard light footsteps in the hall. A young woman halted at the door and stood looking at him. Her face was pale and appeared thin, so eager was her expression. She was slight and nervous.

"Well," he said. She smiled at him and said, "Well." Then she slowly entered the room, and with a sigh took a seat near him. The cough from the parlor was more distressful, and she looked at him, and in her eyes was a beseeching sadness.

"Louise."

"Yes, sir."

"What did I tell you?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Don't say that, for you do know."

"You've told me so many things—"

"Yes, I know. But what did I tell you about Carl Pennington?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Yes you do. I told you that I didn't want him to come here. Didn't I?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why is he here?"

"I met him and invited him to come."

"Ah, ha. But I don't want him here; don't want you to see him."

She sat looking at him as if she would study every line of his face. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and looked down. The cough came again, and he looked at the girl. "You know the reason I don't want you to see him. Don't you?"

"Yes, sir, and I know the reason why I do want to see him."

"The devil—pardon me," he quickly added, withdrawing his hands from his pockets and bowing to her. She slightly inclined her head and smiled sadly. He looked hard at her, striving to read her thoughts; and she was so frail, her face was so thin and her eyes so wistful that she smote him with pity. He reached over and took one of her hands, and affectionately she gave him the other one. She tried to laugh. The cough came again, and she took her hands away.

He reached for them, but she put them behind her. "No, not until I have told you," she said, and he saw her lip tremble. "He was afraid to come in here to see you," she went on, speaking with timid slowness. "He is so weak and sick that he can't stand to be scolded, so I have come to—" She hesitated. He shoved himself back and looked hard at her, and his eyebrows stuck out fiercely.

"To ask me what?" His voice was dry and rasping. "What can you ask me? To let him come here to see you? No, daughter. I can't permit that. And I don't intend to be cruel when I say this. I am sorry for him, God knows I deeply sympathize with him, but he must not hope to—"

"I was not going to ask you to let him come," she broke in. "I am going to ask you to let me go—go with him."

"By the blood!" the Major exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "What do you mean? Marry him?"

"Yes, sir," she quietly answered. He looked at her, frowning, his face puffed, his brows jagged. And then appearing to master himself he sat down and strove to take her hand, but she held it behind her. "My daughter, I want to talk to you, not in anger, but with common sense. It actually horrifies me to think of your marriage—I can't do it, that's all. Why, the poor fellow can't live three months; he is dead on his feet now. Listen at that cough. Louise, how can you think of marrying him? Haven't you any judgment at all? Is it possible that you have lost—but I won't scold you; I must reason with you. There is time enough for you to marry, and the sympathetic fancy that you have for that poor fellow will soon pass away. It must. You've got plenty of chances. Jim Taylor—"

"Why do you speak of him, father?"

"I speak of him because he loves you—because he is as fine a young fellow as walks the face of the earth."

"But, father, he is so big and strong that he doesn't need any one to love him."

At this the Major appeared not to know whether to laugh or to frown. But he did neither; he sat for a time with his hands on his knees, looking wonderingly, almost stupidly at her; and then he said: "Nonsense. Where did you pick up that preposterous idea? So strong that he doesn't need love! Why, strength demands love, and to a big man the love of a little woman—" She drew back from him as he leaned toward her and he did not complete the sentence. Her impatience made him frown. "Won't you let me reason with you?" he asked. "Won't you help me to suppress all appearance of displeasure?"

"It is of no use," she replied.

"What is of no use? Reason?"

"Argument."

"What! Do you mean—"

"I mean that I am going to marry him."

In her eyes there was no appeal, no pleading, for the look that she gave him was hard and determined. Harsh words flew to the Major's mind, and he shook with the repression of them; but he was silent. He shoved his hands into his pockets and she heard his keys rattling. He arose with a deep sigh, and now, with his hands behind him, walked up and down the room. Suddenly he faced about and stood looking down upon her, at the rose in her hair.

"Louise, one night on a steamboat there was a rollicking dance. It was a moonlight excursion. There was a splash and a cry that a woman had fallen overboard. I leaped into the river, grasped her, held her head above the stream, fighting the current. A boat was put out and we were taken on board, and then by the light of a lantern I found that I had saved the life of my own daughter. So, upon you, I have more than a father's claim—the claim of gallantry, and this you cannot disregard, and upon it I base my plea."

She looked up straight at him; her lips were half open, but she said nothing.

"You don't seem to understand," he added, seeming to stiffen his shoulders in resentment at the calmness with which she regarded him. "I tell you that I waive the authority of a father and appeal to your gratitude; I remind you that I saved your life—leaped into the cold water and seized you, not knowing whose life I was striving to save at the risk of losing my own. Isn't that worth some sort of return? Isn't it worth even the sacrifice of a whim? Louise, don't look at me that way. Is it possible that you don't grasp—" He hesitated and turned his face toward the parlor whence came again the cough, hollow and distressing. The sound died away, echoing down the hall, and a hen clucked on the porch and a passage door slammed.

"Louise," he said, looking at her.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you catch—"

"I catch everything, father. It was noble of you to jump into the river when you didn't know but that you might be drowned, and recognizing that you risked your life, and

feeling a deep gratitude, it is hard to repay you with disobedience. Wait a moment, please. You must listen to me. It is hard to repay you with disobedience, but it cannot be helped. You say that Mr. Pennington is dying and I know that you speak the truth. He knows that he is dying, and he appeals to me not to let him die alone—not alone in words," she quickly added, "but with something stronger than words, his helplessness, his despair. Other people have appeared to shun him because he is dying, but—"

"Hold on," he broke in. "I deny that. No one has shunned him because he is dying. Everybody is sorry for him, and you know that I would do anything for him."

"Would you? Then let him die under this roof as my husband. Oh, look how poor and thin he is, so helpless, and dying day by day, with no relatives near him, with nothing in prospect but long nights of suffering. Please don't tell me that I shan't take care of him, for I feel that it is the strongest duty that will ever come to me. Listen how he coughs. Doesn't it appeal to you? How can you refuse—how can you remind me of the gratitude I owe you?"

Tears were streaming down her face. He bent over her, placed his hands upon her cheeks and kissed her, but instantly he drew back with his resentful stiffening of the shoulders.

"Louise, it can't be. No argument and no appeal can bring it about. It makes me shudder to think of it. Really I can't understand it. The situation to me is most unnatural. But I won't be harsh with you. But I must say that I don't know where you get your stubbornness. No, I won't be harsh. Let me tell you what I will agree to do. He may come to this

house and stay here until—may stay here and the best of care shall be taken of him, and you may nurse him, but you must not bear his name. Will you agree to this?"

She shook her head. She had wiped away her tears and her eyes were strong and determined. "After conceding so much I don't see why you should refuse the vital point," she said.

"I can tell you why, and I am afraid that I must."

"Don't be afraid; simply tell me."

"But, daughter, it would seem cruel."

"Not if I demand it."

"Then you do demand it? Well, you shall know. His father served a term in the Louisiana penitentiary for forgery. And now you may ask why I ever let him come into this house. I will tell you. He had been teaching school here some time and I said nothing. One day during a rainstorm he stopped at the gate. He was sick and I invited him to come in. After that I could not find enough firmness to tell him not to come, he was so pale and weak. I see now that it was a false sympathy. Do you understand me? His father was a convict."

"Yes, I understand. He told me."

"By the blood on the Cross! Do you mean to say—Louise," he broke off, gazing upon her, "your mind is unsettled. Yes, you are crazy, and, of course, all your self-respect is gone. You needn't say a word, you are crazy. You are—I don't know what you are, but I know what I am, and now, after the uselessness of my appeal to your gratitude, I will assert the authority of a father. You shall not marry him."

"And would you kill a dying man?" she quietly asked.

The question jolted him, and he shouted out: "What do you mean by such nonsense? You know I wouldn't."

"Then I will marry him."

For a moment the Major's anger choked him. With many a dry rasp he strove to speak, and just as he had made smoother a channel for his words, he heard the hollow cough drawing nearer. He motioned toward a door that opened in an opposite direction, and the girl, after hesitating a moment, quickly stepped out upon a veranda that overlooked the river. The Major turned his eyes toward the other door, and there Pennington stood with a handkerchief tightly pressed to his mouth. For a time they were silent, one strong and severe, the other tremulous and almost spectral in the softened light.

"There is a chair, sir," said the Major, pointing.

"I thank you, sir; I don't care to sit down. I—I am very sorry that you are compelled to look upon me as—as you do, sir. And it is all my fault, I assure you, and I can't defend myself."

He dropped his handkerchief and looked down as if he were afraid to stoop to pick it up. The Major stepped forward, caught up the handkerchief, handed it to him and stepped back.

"Thank you, sir," Pennington said, bowing, and then, after a short pause, he added: "I don't know what to say in explanation of—of myself. But I should think, sir, that the strength of a man's love is a sufficient defense of any weakness he may possess—I mean a sufficient defense of any indiscretion that his love has led him to commit. This

situation stole upon me, and I was scarcely aware of its coming until it was here. I didn't know how serious—" He coughed his words, and when he became calmer, repeated his plea that love ought to excuse any weakness in man. "Your daughter is an angel of mercy," he said. "When I found myself dying as young as I was and as hopeful as I had been my soul filled up with a bitter resentment against nature and God, but she drew out the bitterness and instilled a sweetness and a prayer. And now to take her from me would be to snatch away the prospect of that peaceful life that lies beyond the grave. Sir, I heard you tell her that she was crazy. If so, then may God bless all such insanity."

He pressed the handkerchief to his mouth, racking, struggling; and when the convulsive agony had passed he smiled, and there in the shadow by the door the light that crossed his face was ghastly, like a dim smear of phosphorus. And now the Major's shoulders were not stiffened with resentment; they were drooping with a pity that he could not conceal, but his face was hard set, the expression of the mercy of one man for another, but also the determination to protect a daughter and the good name of an honored household.

"Mr. Pennington, I was never so sorry for any human being as I am for you at this moment, but, sir, the real blessings of this life come through justice and not through impulsive mercy. In thoughtless sympathy a great wrong may lie, and out of a marriage with disease may arise a generation of misery. We are largely responsible for the ailments of those who are to follow us. The wise man looks to the future; the weak man hugs the present. You say that

my daughter is an angel of mercy. She has ever been a sort of sister of charity. I confess that I have never been able wholly to understand her. At times she has even puzzled her mother, and a daughter is odd, indeed, when a mother cannot comprehend her. I am striving to be gentle with you, but I must tell you that you cannot marry her. I don't want to tell you to go, and yet it is better that this interview should come to a close."

He bowed to Pennington and turned toward the veranda that overlooked the river, but a supplicating voice called him back. "I wish to say," said the consumptive, "that from your point of view you are right. But that does not alter my position. You speak of the misery that arises from a marriage with disease. That was very well put, but let me say, sir, that I believe that I am growing stronger. Sometimes I have thought that I had consumption, but in my saner moments I know that I have not. I can see an improvement from day to day. Several days ago I couldn't help coughing, but now at times I can suppress it. I am growing stronger."

"Sir," exclaimed the Major, "if you were as strong as a lion you should not marry her. Good day."

CHAPTER III.

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Slowly and heavily the Major walked out upon the veranda. He stood upon the steps leading down into the yard, and he saw Louise afar off standing upon the river's yellow edge. She had thrown her hat upon the sand, and she stood with her hands clasped upon her brown head. A wind blew down the stream, and the water lapped at her feet. The Major looked back into the library, at the door wherein Pennington had stood, and sighed with relief upon finding that he was gone. He looked back toward the river. The girl was walking along the shore, meditatively swinging her hat. He stepped to the corner of the house, and, gazing down the road, saw Pennington on a horse, now sitting straight, now bending low over the horn of the saddle. The old gentleman had a habit of making a sideward motion with his hand as if he would put all unpleasant thoughts behind him, and now he made the motion not only once, but many times. And it seemed that his thoughts would not obey him, for he became more imperative in his pantomimic demand.

At one corner of the large yard, where the smooth ground broke off into a steep slope to the river, there stood a small office built of brick. It was the Major's executive chamber, and thither he directed his steps. Inside this place his laugh was never heard; at the door his smile always faded. In this commercial sanctuary were enforced the exactions that made the plantation thrive. Outside, in the yard, in the "big house," elsewhere under the sky, a plea of distress might

moisten his eyes and soften his heart to his own financial disadvantage, but under the moss-grown shingles of the office all was business, hard, uncompromising. It was told in the neighborhood that once, in this inquisition of affairs, he demanded the last cent possessed by a widowed woman, but that, while she was on her way home, he overtook her, graciously returned the money and magnanimously tore to pieces a mortgage that he held against her small estate.

Just as he entered the office there came across the yard a loud and impatient voice. "Here, Bill, confound you, come and take this horse. Don't you hear me, you idiot? You infernal niggers are getting to be so no-account that the last one of you ought to be driven off the place. Trot, confound you. Here, take this horse to the stable and feed him. Where is the Major? In the office? The devil he is."

Toward the office slowly strode old Gideon Batts, fanning himself with his white slouch hat. He was short, fat, and bald; he was bowlegged with a comical squat; his eyes stuck out like the eyes of a swamp frog; his nose was enormous, shapeless, and red. To the Major's family he traced the dimmest line of kinship. During twenty years he had operated a small plantation that belonged to the Major, and he was always at least six years behind with his rent. He had married the widow Martin, and afterward swore that he had been disgracefully deceived by her, that he had expected much but had found her moneyless; and after this he had but small faith in woman. His wife died and he went into contented mourning, and out of gratitude to his satisfied melancholy, swore that he would pay his rent, but failed. Upon the Major he held a strong hold, and this was a

puzzle to the neighbors. Their characters stood at fantastic and whimsical variance; one never in debt, the other never out of debt; one clamped by honor, the other feeling not its restraining pinch. But together they would ride abroad, laughing along the road. To Mrs. Cranceford old Gid was a pest. With the shrewd digs of a woman, the blood-letting side stabs of her sex, she had often shown her disapproval of the strong favor in which the Major held him; she vowed that her husband had gathered many an oath from Gid's swollen store of execration (when, in truth, Gid had been an apt pupil under the Major), and she had hoped that the Major's attachment to the church would of necessity free him from the humiliating association with the old sinner, but it did not, for they continued to ride abroad, laughing along the road.

Like a skittish horse old Gid shied at the office door. Once he had crossed that threshold and it had cost him a crop of cotton.

"How are you, John?" was Gid's salutation as he edged off, still fanning himself.

"How are you, sir?" was the Major's stiff recognition of the fact that Gid was on earth.

"Getting hotter, I believe, John."

"I presume it is, sir." The Major sat with his elbow resting on a desk, and about him were stacked threatening bundles of papers; and old Gid knew that in those commercial romances he himself was a familiar character.

"Are you busy, John?"

"Yes, but you may come in."

"No, I thank you. Don't believe I've got time."

"Then take time. I want to talk to you. Come in."

"No, not to-day, John. Fact is I'm not feeling very well. Head's all stopped up with a cold, and these summer colds are awful, I tell you. It was a summer cold that took my father off."

"How's your cotton in that low strip along the bayou?"

"Tolerable, John; tolerable."

"Come in. I want to talk to you about it."

"Don't believe I can stand the air in there, John. Head all stopped up. Don't believe I'm going to live very long."

"Nonsense. You are as strong as a buck."

"You may think so, John, but I'm not. I thought father was strong, too, but a summer cold got him. I am getting along in years, John, and I find that I have to take care of myself. But if you really want to talk to me about that piece of cotton, come out under the trees where it's cool."

The Major shoved back his papers and arose, but hesitated; and Gid stood looking on, fanning himself. The Major stepped out and Gid's face was split asunder with a broad smile.

"I gad. I've been up town and had a set-to with old Baucum and the rest of them. Pulled up fifty winner at poker and jumped. Devilish glad to see you; miss you every minute of the time I'm away. Let's go over there and sit down on that bench."

They walked toward a bench under a live-oak tree, and upon Gid's shoulder the Major's hand affectionately rested. They halted to laugh, and old Gid shoved the Major away from him, then seized him and drew him back. They sat down, still laughing, but suddenly the Major became serious.

"Gid, I'm in trouble," he said.

"Nonsense, my boy, there is no such thing as trouble. Throw it off. Look at me. I've had enough of what the world calls trouble to kill a dozen ordinary men, but just look at me—getting stronger every day. Throw it off. What is it, anyway?"

"Louise declares that she is going to marry Pennington!"

"What!" old Gid exclaimed, turning with a bouncing flounce and looking straight at the Major. "Marry Pennington! Why, she shan't, John. That's all there is of it. We object and that settles it. Why, what the deuce can she be thinking about?"

"Thinking about him," the Major answered.

"Yes, but she must quit it. Why, it's outrageous for as sensible a girl as she is to think of marrying that fellow. You leave it to me; hear what I said? Leave it to me."

This suggested shift of responsibility did not remove the shadow of sadness that had fallen across the Major's countenance.

"You leave it to me and I'll give her a talk she'll not forget. I'll make her understand that she's a queen, and a woman is pretty devilish skittish about marrying anybody when you convince her that she's a queen. What does your wife say about it?"

"She hasn't said anything. She's out visiting and I haven't seen her since Louise told me of her determination to marry him."

"Don't say determination, John. Say foolish notion. But it's all right."

"No, it's not all right."

"What, have you failed to trust me? Is it possible that you have lost faith in me? Don't do that, John, for if you do it will be a never failing source of regret. You don't seem to remember what my powers of persuasion have accomplished in the past. When I was in the legislature, chairman of the Committee on County and County Lines, what did my protest do? It kept them from cutting off a ten-foot strip of this county and adding it to Jefferson. You must remember those things, John, for in the factors of persuasion lie the shaping of human life. I've been riding in the hot sun and I think that a mint julep would hit me now just about where I live. Say, there, Bill, bring us some mint, sugar and whisky. And cold water, mind you. Oh, everything will come out all right. By the way, do you remember that Catholic priest that came here with a letter of introduction to you?"

"Yes, his name is Brennon."

"Yes, that's it. But how did he happen to bring a letter to you?"

"He came from Maryland with a letter given him by a relative of mine."

"Yes, and he has gone to work, I tell you. Do you know what he's doing? Reaching out quietly and gathering the negroes into his church. And there are some pretty wise men behind him. They didn't send an Irishman or a Dutchman or an Italian, but an American from an old family. He's already got three negroes on my place, and Perdue tells me that he's nipping one now and then over his way. There's a scheme in it, John."