

***SUTTON  
E. GRIGGS***



***IMPERIUM  
IN IMPERIO***

**Sutton E. Griggs**

# **Imperium in Imperio**

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## TO THE PUBLIC

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The papers which are herewith submitted to you for your perusal and consideration, were delivered into my hands by Mr. Berl Trout.

The papers will speak for themselves, but Mr. Trout now being dead I feel called upon to say a word concerning him.

Mr. Berl Trout was Secretary of State in the Imperium In Imperio, from the day of its organization until the hour of his sad death. He was, therefore, thoroughly conversant with all of the details of that great organization.

He was a warm personal friend of both Bernard and Belton, and learned from their own lips the stories of their eventful lives.

Mr. Trout was a man noted for his strict veracity and for the absolute control that his conscience exercised over him.

Though unacquainted with the Imperium In Imperio I was well acquainted with Berl, as we fondly called him. I will vouch for his truthfulness anywhere.

Having perfect faith in the truthfulness of his narrative I have not hesitated to fulfil his dying request by editing his Ms., and giving it to the public. There are other documents in my possession tending to confirm the assertions made in his narrative. These documents were given me by Mr. Trout, so that, in case an attempt is made to pronounce him a liar, I might defend his name by coming forward with indisputable proofs of every important statement.

Very respectfully,  
Sutton E. Griggs,  
March 1, 1899. Berkley, Va.

# BERL TROUT'S DYING DECLARATION

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I am a traitor. I have violated an oath that was as solemn and binding as any ever taken by man on earth.

I have trampled under my feet the sacred trust of a loving people, and have betrayed secrets which were dearer to them than life itself.

For this offence, regarded the world over as the most detestable of horrors, I shall be slain.

Those who shall be detailed to escort my foul body to its grave are required to walk backwards with heads averted.

On to-morrow night, the time of my burial, the clouds should gather thick about the queenly moon to hide my funeral procession from her view, for fear that she might refuse to longer reign over a land capable of producing such a wretch as I.

In the bottom of some old forsaken well, so reads *our* law, I shall be buried, face downward, without a coffin; and my body, lying thus, will be transfixed with a wooden stave.

Fifty feet from the well into which my body is lowered, a red flag is to be hoisted and kept floating there for time unending, to warn all generations of men to come not near the air polluted by the rotting carcass of a vile traitor.

Such is my fate. I seek not to shun it. I have walked into odium with every sense alert, fully conscious of every step taken.

While I acknowledge that I am a traitor, I also pronounce myself a patriot.

It is true that I have betrayed the immediate plans of the race to which I belong; but I have done this in the interest of the whole human family — of which my race is but a part.

My race may, for the time being, shower curses upon me; but eventually all races, including my own, shall call me blessed.

The earth, in anger, may belch forth my putrid flesh with volcanic fury, but the out-stretched arms of God will receive my spirit as a token of approval of what I have done.

With my soul feasting on this happy thought, I  
send this  
revelation to mankind and yield my body to the  
executioner to  
be shot until I am dead.

Though death stands just before me, holding  
before my eyes my  
intended shroud woven of the cloth of infamy  
itself, I shrink  
not back.

Yours, doomed to die,  
BERL TROUT.

# CHAPTER I

## A SMALL BEGINNING

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"Cum er long hunny an' let yer mammy fix yer 'spectabul, so yer ken go to skule. Yer mammy is 'tarmined ter gib yer all de book larning dar is ter be had eben ef she has ter lib on bred an' herrin's, an' die en de a'ms house."

These words came from the lips of a poor, ignorant negro woman, and yet the determined course of action which they reveal vitally affected the destiny of a nation and saved the sun of the Nineteenth Century, proud and glorious, from passing through, near its setting, the blackest and thickest and ugliest clouds of all its journey; saved it from ending the most brilliant of brilliant careers by setting, with a shudder of horror, in a sea of human blood.

Those who doubt that such power could emanate from such weakness; or, to change the figure, that such a tiny star could have dimensions greater than those of earth, may have every vestige of doubt removed by a perusal of this simple narrative.

Let us now acquaint ourselves with the circumstances under which the opening words of our story were spoken. To do this, we must need lead our readers into humble and commonplace surroundings, a fact that will not come in the nature of a surprise to those who have traced the proud, rushing, swelling river to the mountain whence it comes trickling forth, meekly and humbly enough.

The place was Winchester, an antiquated town, located near the northwestern corner of the State of Virginia.

In October of the year 1867, the year in which our story begins, a white man by the name of Tiberius Gracchus Leonard had arrived in Winchester, and was employed as teacher of the school for colored children.

Mrs. Hannah Piedmont, the colored woman whom we have presented to our readers as addressing her little boy, was the mother of five children, — three girls and two boys. In the order of their ages, the names of her children were: James Henry, aged fifteen, Amanda Ann, aged thirteen, Eliza Jane, aged eleven, Belton, aged eight, and Celestine, aged five. Several years previous to the opening of our history, Mr. Piedmont had abandoned his wife and left her to rear the children alone.

School opened in October, and as fast as she could get books and clothing Mrs. Piedmont sent her children to school. James Henry, Amanda Ann, and Eliza Jane were sent at about a week's interval. Belton and Celestine were then left — Celestine being regarded as too young to go. This morning we find Belton's mother preparing him for school, and we shall stand by and watch the preparations.

The house was low and squatty and was built of rock. It consisted of one room only, and over this there was a loft, the hole to climb into which was in plain view of any one in the room. There was only one window to the house and that one was only four feet square. Two panes of this were broken out and the holes were stuffed with rags. In one corner of the room there stood a bed in which Mrs. Piedmont and Amanda Ann slept. Under this was a trundle bed in which Eliza Jane and Celestine slept at the head, while Belton slept at the foot. James Henry climbed into the loft and slept there on a pallet of straw. The cooking was done in a fireplace which was on the side of the house opposite the window. Three chairs, two of which had no backs to them, completed the articles in the room.

In one of these chairs Mrs. Piedmont was sitting, while Belton stood before her all dressed and ready to go to school, excepting that his face was not washed.

It might be interesting to note his costume. The white lady for whom Mrs. Piedmont washed each week had given her two much-torn pairs of trousers, discarded by her young



son. One pair was of linen and the other of navy blue. A leg from each pair was missing; so Mrs. Piedmont simply transferred the good leg of the linen pair to the suit of the navy blue, and dressed the happy Belton in that suit thus amended. His coat was literally a conglomeration of patches of varying sizes and colors. If you attempted to describe the coat by calling it by the name of the color that you thought predominated, at least a half dozen aspirants could present equal claims to the honor. One of Belton's feet was encased in a wornout slipper from the dainty foot of some young woman, while the other wore a turned over boot left in town by some farmer lad who had gotten himself a new pair. His hat was in good condition, being the summer straw last worn by a little white playfellow (when fall came on, this little fellow kindly willed his hat to Belton, who, in return for this favor, was to black the boy's shoes each morning during the winter).

Belton's mother now held in her hand a wet cloth with which she wished to cleanse his face, the bacon skin which he gnawed at the conclusion of his meal having left a circle of grease around his lips. Belton did not relish the face washing part of the programme (of course hair combing was not even considered). Belton had one characteristic similar to that of oil. He did not like to mix with water, especially cold water, such as was on that wet cloth in his mother's hand. However, a hint in reference to a certain well-known leather strap, combined with the offer of a lump of sugar, brought him to terms.

His face being washed, he and his mother marched forth to school, where he laid the foundation of the education that served him so well in after life.

A man of tact, intelligence, and superior education moving in the midst of a mass of ignorant people, oftentimes has a sway more absolute than that of monarchs.

Belton now entered the school-room, which in his case proves to be the royal court, whence he emerges an

uncrowned king.

## **CHAPTER II THE SCHOOL**

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The house in which the colored school was held was, in former times, a house of worship for the white Baptists of Winchester. It was a long, plain, frame structure, painted white. Many years prior to the opening of the colored school it had been condemned as unsafe by the town authorities, whereupon the white Baptists had abandoned it for a more beautiful modern structure.

The church tendered the use of the building to the town for a public school for the colored children. The roof was patched and iron rods were used to hold together the twisting walls. These improvements being made, school was in due time opened. The building was located on the outskirts of the town, and a large open field surrounded it on all sides.

As Mrs. Piedmont and her son drew near to this building the teacher was standing on the door-steps ringing his little hand bell, calling the children in from their recess. They came running at full speed, helter skelter. By the time they were all in Mrs. Piedmont and Belton had arrived at the step. When Mr. Leonard saw them about to enter the building an angry scowl passed over his face, and he muttered half aloud: "Another black nigger brat for me to teach."

The steps were about four feet high and he was standing on the top step. To emphasize his disgust, he drew back so that Mrs. Piedmont would pass him with no danger of brushing him. He drew back rather too far and began falling off the end of the steps. He clutched at the door and made such a scrambling noise that the children turned in their seats just in time to see his body rapidly disappearing in a manner to leave his feet where his head ought to be.

Such a yell of laughter as went up from the throats of the children! It had in it a universal, spontaneous ring of savage delight which plainly told that the teacher was not beloved by his pupils.

The back of the teacher's head struck the edge of a stone, and when he clambered up from his rather undignified position his back was covered with blood. Deep silence reigned in the school-room as he walked down the aisle, glaring fiercely right and left. Getting his hat he left the school-room and went to a near-by drug store to have his wounds dressed.

While he was gone, the children took charge of the school-room and played pranks of every description. Abe Lincoln took the teacher's chair and played "'fessor."

"Sallie Ann ain't yer got wax in yer mouf?"

"Yes sar."

"Den take dis stick and prop yer mouf opun fur half hour. Dat'll teach yer a lesson."

"Billy Smith, yer didn't know yer lessun," says teacher Abe. "Yer may stan' on one leg de ballunce ob de ebenning."

"Henry Jones, yer sassed a white boy ter day. Pull off yer jacket. I'll gib yer a lessun dat yer'll not furgit soon. Neber buck up to yer s'periors."

"John Jones, yer black, nappy head rascal, I'll crack yer skull if yer doan keep quiut."

"Cum year, yer black, cross-eyed little wench, yer. I'll teach yer to go to sleep in here." Annie Moore was the little girl thus addressed.

After each sally from Abe there was a hearty roar of laughter, he imitated the absent teacher so perfectly in look, voice, manner, sentiment, and method of punishment.

Taking down the cowhide used for flogging purposes Abe left his seat and was passing to and fro, pretending to flog those who most frequently fell heir to the teacher's wrath. While he was doing this Billy Smith stealthily crept to the

teacher's chair and placed a crooked pin in it in order to catch Abe when he returned to sit down.

Before Abe had gone much further the teacher's face appeared at the door, and all scrambled to get into their right places and to assume studious attitudes. Billy Smith thought of his crooked pin and had the "cold sweats." Those who had seen Billy put the pin in the chair were torn between two conflicting emotions. They wanted the pin to do its work, and therefore hoped. They feared Billy's detection and therefore despaired.

However, the teacher did not proceed at once to take his seat. He approached Mrs. Piedmont and Belton, who had taken seats midway the room and were interested spectators of all that had been going on. Speaking to Mrs. Piedmont, he said: "What is your name?"

She replied: "Hannah Lizabeth Piedmont."

"Well, Hannah, what is your brat's name?"

"His name am Belton Piedmont, arter his grandaddy."

"Well, Hannah, I am very pleased to receive your brat. He shall not want for attention," he added, in a tone accompanied by a lurking look of hate that made Mrs. Piedmont shudder and long to have her boy at home again. Her desire for his training was so great that she surmounted her misgivings and carried out her purposes to have him enrolled.

As the teacher was turning to go to his desk, hearing a rustling noise toward the door, he turned to look. He was, so to speak, petrified with astonishment. There stood on the threshold of the door a woman whose beauty was such as he had never seen surpassed. She held a boy by the hand. She was a mulatto woman, tall and graceful. Her hair was raven black and was combed away from as beautiful a forehead as nature could chisel. Her eyes were a brown hazel, large and intelligent, tinged with a slight look of melancholy. Her complexion was a rich olive, and seemed especially adapted to her face, that revealed not a flaw.

The teacher quickly pulled off his hat, which he had not up to that time removed since his return from the drug store. As the lady moved up the aisle toward him, he was taken with stage fright. He recovered self-possession enough to escort her and the boy to the front and give them seats. The whole school divided its attention between the beautiful woman and the discomfited teacher. They had not known that he was so full of smiles and smirks.

"What is your name?" he enquired in his most suave manner.

"Fairfax Belgrave," replied the visitor.

"May I be of any service to you, madam?"

At the mention of the word madam, she colored slightly. "I desire to have my son enter your school and I trust that you may see your way clear to admit him."

"Most assuredly madam, most assuredly." Saying this, he hastened to his desk, opened it and took out his register. He then sat down, but the next instant leapt several feet into the air, knocking over his desk. He danced around the floor, reaching toward the rear of his pants, yelling: "Pull it out! pull it out! pull it out!"

The children hid their faces behind their books and chuckled most gleefully. Billy Smith was struck dumb with terror. Abe was rolling on the floor, bellowing with uncontrollable laughter.

The teacher finally succeeded in extricating the offending steel and stood scratching his head in chagrin at the spectacle he had made of himself before his charming visitor. He took an internal oath to get his revenge out of Mrs. Piedmont and her son, who had been the innocent means of his double downfall that day.

His desk was arranged in a proper manner and the teacher took his pen and wrote two names, now famous the world over.

"Bernard Belgrave, age 9 years."

"Belton Piedmont, age 8 years."

Under such circumstances Belton began his school career.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE PARSON'S ADVICE**

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With heavy heart and with eyes cast upon the ground, Mrs. Piedmont walked back home after leaving Belton with his teacher. She had intended to make a special plea for her boy, who had all along displayed such precociousness as to fill her bosom with the liveliest hopes. But the teacher was so repulsive in manner that she did not have the heart to speak to him as she had intended.

She saw that the happenings of the morning had had the effect of deepening a contemptuous prejudice into hatred, and she felt that her child's school life was to be embittered by the harshest of maltreatment.

No restraint was put upon the flogging of colored children by their white teachers, and in Belton's case his mother expected the worst. During the whole week she revolved the matter in her mind. There was a conflict in her bosom between her love and her ambition. Love prompted her to return and take her son away from school. Ambition bade her to let him stay. She finally decided to submit the whole matter to her parson, whom she would invite to dinner on the coming Sunday.

The Sabbath came and Mrs. Piedmont aroused her family bright and early, for the coming of the parson to take dinner was a great event in any negro household. The house was swept as clean as a broom of weeds tied together could make it. Along with the family breakfast, a skillet of biscuits was cooked and a young chicken nicely baked.

Belton was very active in helping his mother that morning, and she promised to give him a biscuit and a piece of chicken as a reward after the preacher was through eating his dinner. The thought of this coming happiness



buoyed Belton up, and often he fancied himself munching that biscuit and biting that piece of chicken. These were items of food rarely found in that household.

Breakfast over, the whole family made preparations for going to Sunday school. Preparations always went on peacefully until it came to combing hair. The older members of the family endured the ordeal very well; but little "Lessie" always screamed as if she was being tortured, and James Henry received many kicks and scratches from Belton before he was through combing Belton's hair.

The Sunday school and church were always held in the day-school building. The Sunday school scholars were all in one class and recited out of the "blue back spelling book." When that was over, members of the school were allowed to ask general questions on the Bible, which were answered by anyone volunteering to do so. Everyone who had in any way caught a new light on a passage of scripture endeavored, by questioning, to find out as to whether others were as wise as he, and if such was not the case, he gladly enlightened the rest.

The Sunday school being over, the people stood in groups on the ground surrounding the church waiting for the arrival of the parson from his home, Berryville, a town twelve miles distant. He was pastor of three other churches besides the one at Winchester, and he preached at each one Sunday in the month. After awhile he put in his appearance. He was rather small in stature, and held his head somewhat to one side and looked at you with that knowing look of the parrot. He wore a pair of trousers that had been black, but were now sleet from much wear. They lacked two inches of reaching down to the feet of his high-heeled boots. He had on a long linen cluster that reached below his knees. Beneath this was a faded Prince Albert coat and a vest much too small. On his head there sat, slightly tipped, a high-topped beaver that seemed to have been hidden between two mattresses all the week and taken out and

straightened for Sunday wear. In his hand he held a walking cane.

Thus clad he came toward the church, his body thrown slightly back, walking leisurely with the air of quiet dignity possessed by the man sure of his standing, and not under the necessity of asserting it overmuch in his carriage.

The brothers pulled off their hats and the sisters put on their best smiles as the parson approached. After a cordial handshake all around, the preacher entered the church to begin the services. After singing a hymn and praying, he took for his text the following "passage of scripiter:"

"It air harder fur a camel to git through de eye of a cambric needle den fur a rich man to enter de kingdom of heben."

This was one of the parson's favorite texts, and the members all settled themselves back to have a good "speritual" time.

The preacher began his sermon in a somewhat quiet way, but the members knew that he would "warm up bye and bye." He pictured all rich men as trying to get into heaven, but, he asserted, they invariably found themselves with Dives. He exhorted his hearers to stick to Jesus. Here he pulled off his collar, and the sisters stirred and looked about them. A little later on, the preacher getting "warmer," pulled off his cuffs. The brethren laughed with a sort of joyous jumping up and down all the while — one crying "Gib me Jesus," another "Oh I am gwine home," and so on.

One sister who had a white lady's baby in her arms got happy and flung it entirely across the room, it falling into Mrs. Piedmont's lap, while the frenzied woman who threw the child climbed over benches, rushed into the pulpit, and swung to the preacher's neck, crying — "Glory! Glory! Glory!" In the meanwhile Belton had dropped down under one of the benches and was watching the proceedings with an eye of terror.