

# THE COTTON PICKERS

By CLIFTON JOHNSON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

IT was early October. I had gone South at this season with the desire to see the cotton patch in harvest time and had selected at random a place in South Carolina a hundred miles or so from Charleston. This place proved to be a scattered, raw, half-wild little town.

And I did not have to go far to find cotton patches, varying from those containing an acre or two neighboring a negro cabin, up to fields of a hundred acres on some large plantation. The number of pickers in the different fields varied likewise. There might be only a single person picking, or there might be a scattered score or more. The crops were good, bad and indifferent—mostly depending on the care bestowed and the fertilizing. "That's a nigger's cotton," said a man to me when I asked him about some earth-hugging little stuff that had not attained one-fourth the normal growth. The really good crops grew waist high and the plants were snowflaked all over with the bursting bolls. Such fields were a sight to rejoice the eyes.

One day I rode with a negro driving a single ox harnessed like a horse and hitched between the cart shafts. The ox wore a bridle, had a bit in its mouth and was guided with rope reins. The negro kept gadding on the beast with the rope ends and we progressed at a brisk, jerky walk. The negro had only lived in this section a year. He had bought a piece of forest, built a cabin, cleared up a patch of "new ground" by grubbing out the underbrush and "deadening" the big trees and he had raised a crop of corn. Next year he would plant a portion of the land to cotton.

My ox cart ride coming to an end presently, I trudged on alone, and by the time I reached the pinelands the night shadows were beginning to thicken. Here were only half a dozen scattered homes, mostly out of sight of each other, set hit-or-miss in the thin pine woods. Where two roads met was a tiny church, but it stood as

isolated and lonely amid the trees as did the homes.

The interior of the little house in which I spent the night resembled a small barn, for it was a single apartment with timbers exposed, and open above to the roof. The walls were whitewashed and the apartment was roughly furnished for a combination chamber and schoolroom.

In a twelve-acre cotton patch in one of the forest clearings next morning, a few negro girls were picking. Each had come furnished with a bag which she suspended from her shoulders to receive the cotton as she plucked it from the bolls. Each picker also had a blanket or something of the sort spread in a convenient place, and on this from time to time, was emptied the contents of the bag. When the day's work was done the picker gathered the blanket up about the cotton and knotted the ends. Then all the parcels were taken in a cart or on the pickers' heads to the weighing place at the border of the field and later to the barn. But not much was doing in the cotton patch on this particular morning, for it was Saturday and colored help is always difficult to get on that day. They have a habit of reserving the final day of the week for work on their own little places. To one of these negro homes I presently wandered. Its surroundings were unusually neat. The hard beaten earth in front of the house, and the path that led to the road were swept very clean, and vines and shrubbery grew about the porch. A woman, a young girl and a boy come to the door and greeted me. The woman was anxious I should have no mistaken impression of them. "I was brought up in the house among quality," she explained, "and I learned manners and got some education. My ole man, he was a field worker. He's a good man, but he's rough and low down. I'm shore married to him though, and I got to make the bes' of a bad bargain."

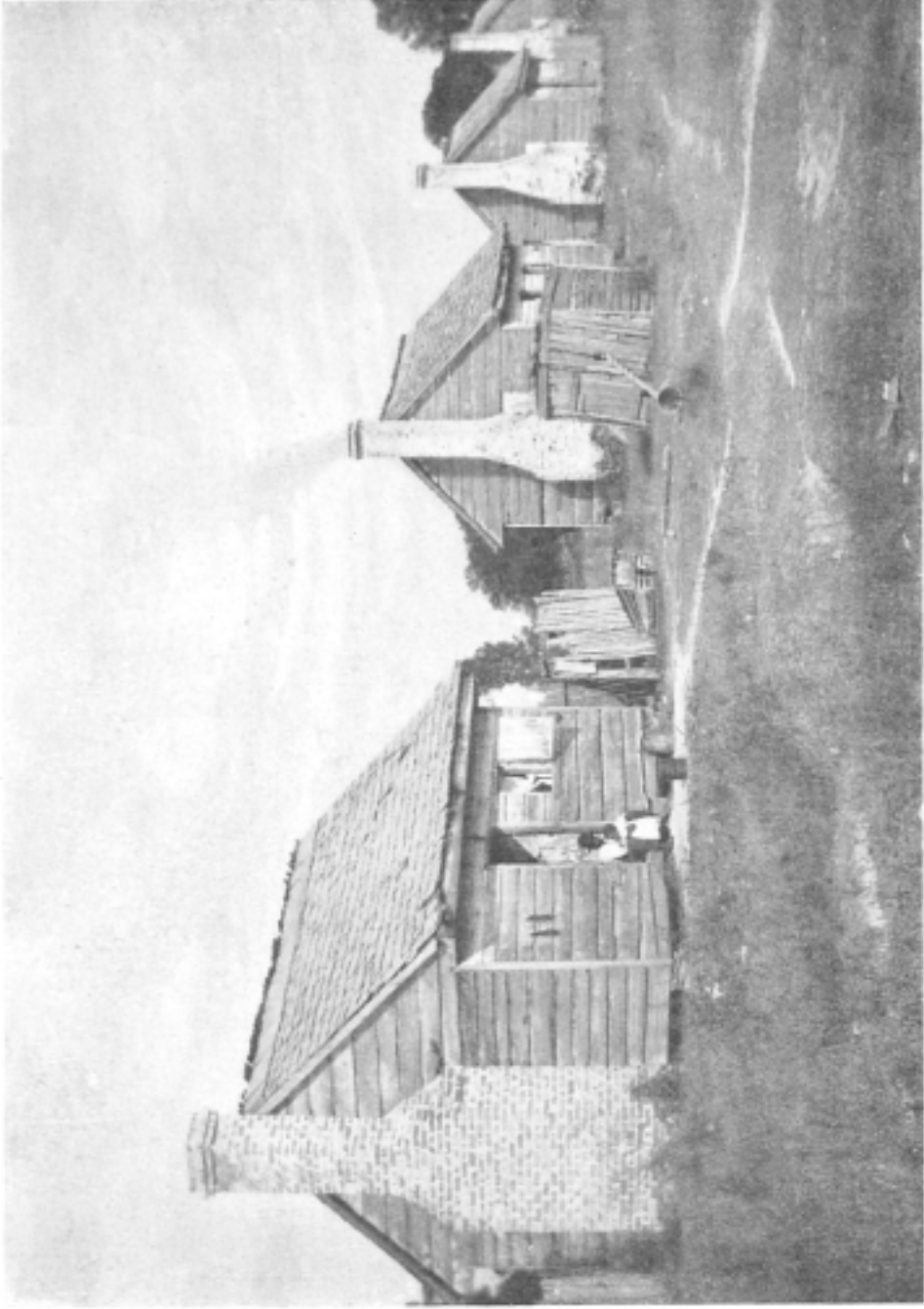
The woman carried her superior airs into her work; she picked cotton in a



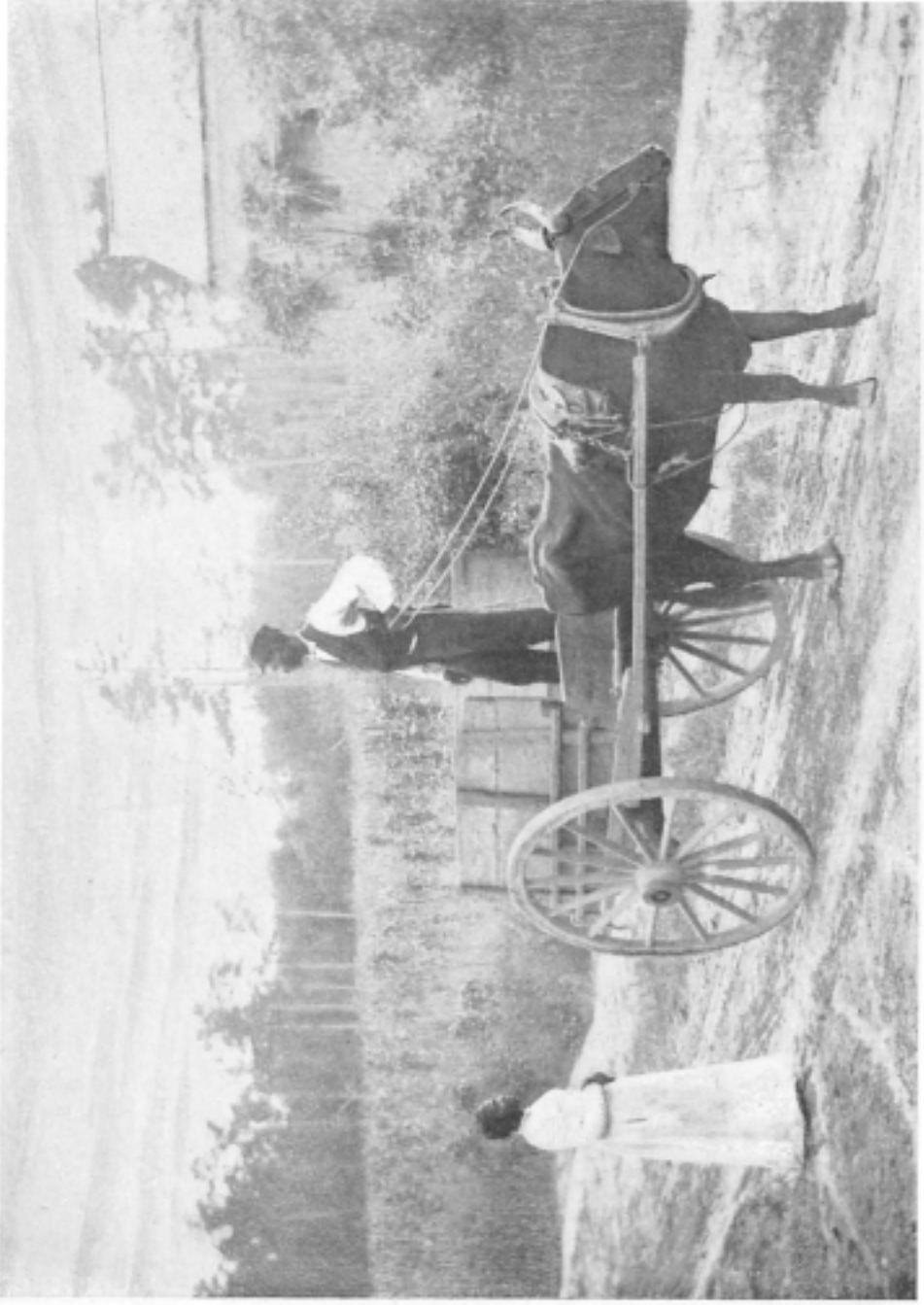
Digging Peanuts.



In the Cotton Patch



Old-time Plantation Quarters.



A Local Conveyance.



At His Cabin Well.



The Rice Mill.



**On the Way to Work.**



basket while everyone else picked it in a bag, and she never would use the rice mill or the rice fanner. When the rice had to be pounded and cleaned, her daughter did it. This work was done at the rear of the house where there was a section of a log about three feet long with one end scooped out into a bowl-like hollow. Into this mortar or "rice mill" the rice was put and then was crushed with a wooden pestle. That done, it was transferred to a shallow basket called the "rice fanner," and shaken free of hulls. The rice sheaves were stored in a barn about six feet square along with the cow peas and "blade fodder," the last being bundles of corn leaves pulled off while green from the stalks standing in the field. Adjoining the barn was a pig-pen of rails that barely allowed the porker room to turn around, and beside the pig-pen was a cart of aboriginal pattern, with wheels made of solid discs of wood sawed off the end of a large log.

The family raised cotton and corn as their chief crops, but I noticed they also had considerable patches of sweet potatoes and peanuts. Each peanut vine spread out in a close network over a three-foot circle. Some of the vines had been pulled and turned roots upward to allow the peanuts that clung to them to ripen and dry. Later these nuts would be picked off and those that remained in the ground dug. The crows like peanuts and had been making regular raids on the patch; "and while they were getting the peanuts," said the woman, "one ole fellow stay up in the top of that daid tree there, and soon as he see anybody comin'—'Awk!' he cry—and away they all go. But now we made this scarecrow yo' see hyar. We jes' set up a stake an' put a hat on top, an' to make the rest of the man we fasten together these New York Sunday papers my son in Brooklyn send us; an since that the crows come an' set on that daid tree and have their pow-pows, but they doan' dare come no maur. Yes, those Sunday papers from New York make the bes' scarecrow what ever there was."

While I was admiring the scarecrow, a hatless and patched old man came in from the field and I knew he must be the wo-

man's husband. He sat down on the porch and in a chat I had with him he gave me his impressions of freedom as compared with slavery.

"It was like this," he explained, "we wa'n't all equally please' to be free. Yo' take the kerridge drivers and house servants an' sech—they had an easy time in slavery, an' they was ve'y sorry to have freedom break up their kingdom. When they free they have to go to work for a livin' an' be no better off than the rest of us. But the people what work in the sun an' the rain in the cotton fiel', they all glad; and yet I seen some good times in slavery. You could get through your day's task by two or three o'clock, and if you were smart your master'd give you a piece of groun' to plant for yo'self. We each had jes' so much rashions ev'y week, and it was enough; but now there's a whole bunch of colored folks earn so little they have to live off of scraps. I done so well I was made lead hand, but when I was seventeen master whip me for stealing, and that taught me a lesson. I never give no mo' trouble an' if they jes' praise me I work myself to death. I reckon thar's some now that a whipping would do 'em good. They git as sassy as a cow-fly without it. But it's better that the whippings an' slavery are all gone. I like to think of what the Bible says that, 'the day will come when every tub shall set on its own bottom.' We're all free an' that day *has* come."

The plantation home was a colonial mansion of brick, large and imposing, standing amid some enormous live oaks on a knoll that commanded a fine view of the broad marsh-lands along the river. On these marshes the rice was raised and the planter had to keep up nine miles of levees. The land was ploughed with mules wearing broad shoes of wood on their hoofs to keep them from sinking into the mire. The reaping was done with sickles and the rice had to be carried by hand to the embankments where it was loaded on carts. Often the negroes had to work in mud up to their knees. They were considered immune to malaria. To a white man such labor would soon have proved fatal.