

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

# Old Judge Priest



Irvin Cobb  
**Old Judge Priest**

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**Cobb I.**

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# **Cobb Irvin S. Irvin Shrewsbury**

## **Old Judge Priest**

### **OLD JUDGE PRIEST**

#### **I. THE LORD PROVIDES**

THIS story begins with Judge Priest sitting at his desk at his chambers at the old courthouse. I have a suspicion that it will end with him sitting there. As to that small detail I cannot at this time be quite positive. Man proposes, but facts will have their way.

If so be you have read divers earlier tales of my telling you already know the setting for the opening scene here. You are to picture first the big bare room, high-ceiled and square of shape, its plastering cracked and stained, its wall cases burdened with law books in splotched leather jerkins; and some of the books stand straight and upright, showing themselves to be confident of the rectitude of all statements made therein, and some slant over sideways against their fellows to the right or the left, as though craving confirmatory support for their contents.

Observe also the water bucket on the little shelf in the corner, with the gourd dipper hanging handily by; the art calendar, presented with the compliments of the Langstock Lumber Company, tacked against the door; the spittoon on the floor; the steel engraving of President Davis and his Cabinet facing you as you enter; the two wide windows opening upon the west side of the square; the woodwork, which is of white poplar, but grained by old Mr. Kane, our leading house, sign and portrait painter, into what he reckoned to be a plausible imitation of the fibrillar eccentricities of black walnut; and in the middle of all this, hunched down behind his desk like a rifleman in a pit, is Judge Priest, in a confusing muddle of broad, stooped shoulders, wrinkled garments and fat short legs.

Summertime would have revealed him clad in linen, or alpaca, or ample garments of homespun hemp, but this particular day, being a day in the latter part of October, Judge Priest's limbs and body were clothed in woollen coverings. The first grate fire of the season burned in his grate. There was a local superstition current to the effect that our courthouse was heated with steam. Years before, a bond issue to provide the requisite funds for this purpose had been voted after much public discussion pro and con. Thereafter, for a space, contractors and journeymen artisans made free of the building, to the great discomfort of certain families of resident rats, old settler rats really, that had come to look upon their cozy habitats behind the wainscoting as homes for life. Anon iron pipes emerged at unexpected and jutting angles from the baseboards here and there, to coil in the corners or else to climb the walls, joint upon joint, and festoon themselves kinkily against the ceilings.

Physically the result was satisfying to the eye of the taxpayer; but if the main function of a heating plant be to provide heat, then the innovation might hardly be termed an unqualified success. Official dwellers of the premises maintained that the pipes never got really hot to the touch before along toward the Fourth of July, remaining so until September, when they began perceptibly to cool off again. Down in the cellar the darky janitor might feed the fire box until his spine cracked and the boilers seethed and simmered, but the steam somehow seemed to get lost in transit, manifesting itself on the floors above only in a metallic clanking and clacking, which had been known seriously to annoy lawyers in the act of offering argument to judge and jurors. When warmth was needed to dispel the chill in his own quarters Judge Priest always had a fire kindled in the fireplace.

He had had one made and kindled that morning. All day the red coals had glowed between the chinks in the pot-bellied grate and the friendly flames had hummed up the flue, renewing neighbourly acquaintance with last winter's soot that made fringes on the blackened fire brick, so that now the

room was in a glow. Little tiaras of sweat beaded out on the judge's bald forehead as he laboured over the papers in a certain case, and frequently he laid down his pen that he might use both hands, instead of his left only, to reach and rub remote portions of his person. Doing this, he stretched his arms until red strips showed below the ends of his wristbands. At a distance you would have said the judge was wearing coral bracelets.

The sunlight that had streamed in all afternoon through the two windows began to fade, and little shadows that stayed hidden through the day crawled under the door from the hall beyond and crept like timorous mice across the planking, ready to dart back the moment the gas was lit. Judge Priest strained to reach an especially itchy spot between his shoulder blades and addressed words to Jeff Poindexter, coloured, his body servant and house boy.

"They ain't so very purty to look at – red flannels ain't," said the judge. "But, Jeff, I've noticed this – they certainly are mighty lively company till you git used to 'em. I never am the least bit lonely fur the first few days after I put on my heavy underwear."

There was no answer from Jeff except a deep, soft breath. He slept. At a customary hour he had come with Mittie May, the white mare, and the buggy to take Judge Priest home to supper, and had found the judge engaged beyond his normal quitting time. That, however, had not discommoded Jeff. Jeff always knew what to do with his spare moments. Jeff always had a way of spending the long winter evenings. He leaned now against a bookrack, with his elbow on the top shelf, napping lightly. Jeff preferred to sleep lying down or sitting down, but he could sleep upon his feet too – and frequently did.

Having, by brisk scratching movements, assuaged the irritation between his shoulder blades, the judge picked up his pen and shoved it across a sheet of legal cap that already was half covered with his fine, close writing. He never dictated his decisions, but always wrote them out by hand. The pen nib travelled along steadily for awhile. Eventually words in a typewritten petition that rested on the desk at his left caught the judge's eye.

"Huh!" he grunted, and read the quoted phrase, "'True Believers' Afro-American Church of Zion, sometimes called – '" Without turning his head he again hailed his slumbering servitor: "Jeff, why do yourall call that there little church-house down by the river Possum Trot?"

Jeff roused and grunted, shaking his head dear of the lingering dregs of drowsiness.

"Suh?" he inquired. "Wuz you speakin' to me, Jedge?"

"Yes, I was. Whut's the reason amongst your people fur callin' that little church down on the river front Possum Trot?"

Jeff chuckled an evasive chuckle before he made answer. For all the close relations that existed between him and his indulgent employer, Jeff had no intention of revealing any of the secrets of the highly secretive breed of humans to which he belonged. His is a race which, upon the surface of things, seems to invite the ridicule of an outer and a higher world, yet dreads that same ridicule above all things. Show me the white man who claims to know intimately the workings of his black servant's mind, who professes to be able to tell anything of any negro's lodge affiliations or social habits or private affairs, and I will show you a born liar.

Mightily well Jeff understood the how and the why and the wherefore of the derisive hate borne by the more orthodox creeds among his people for the strange new sect known as the True Believers. He could have traced out step by step, with circumstantial detail, the progress of the internal feud within the despised congregation that led to the upspringing of rival sets of claimants to the church property, and to the litigation that had thrown the whole tangled business into the courts for final adjudication. But except in company of his own choosing and his own colour, wild horses could not have drawn that knowledge from Jeff, although it would have pained him to think any white person who had a claim upon his friendship suspected him of concealment of any detail whatsoever.

"He-he," chuckled Jeff. "I reckon that's jes' nigger foolishness. Me, I don' know no reason why they sh'd call a church by no sech a name as that. I ain't never had no truck wid 'em ole True Believers,

myse'f. I knows some calls 'em the Do-Righters, and some calls 'em the Possum Trotters." His tone subtly altered to one of innocent bewilderment: "Whut you doin', Jedge, pesterin' yo'se'f wid sech low-down trash as them darkies is?"

Further discussion of the affairs of the strange faith that was divided against itself might have ensued but that an interruption came. Steps sounded in the long hallway that split the lower floor of the old courthouse lengthwise, and at a door – not Judge Priest's own door but the door of the closed circuit-court chamber adjoining – a knocking sounded, at first gently, then louder and more insistent.

"See who 'tis out yonder, Jeff," bade Judge Priest. "And ef it's anybody wantin' to see me I ain't got time to see 'em without it's somethin' important. I aim to finish up this job before we go on home."

He bent to his task again. But a sudden draft of air whisked certain loose sheets off his desk, carrying them toward the fireplace, and he swung about to find a woman in his doorway. She was a big, upstanding woman, overfleshed and overdressed, and upon her face she bore the sign of her profession as plainly and indubitably as though it had been branded there in scarlet letters.

The old man's eyes narrowed as he recognised her. But up he got on the instant and bowed before her. No being created in the image of a woman ever had reason to complain that in her presence Judge Priest forgot his manners.

"Howdy do, ma'am," he said ceremoniously. "Will you walk in? I'm sort of busy jest at present."

"That's what your nigger boy told me, outside," she said; "but I came right on in any-way."

"Ah-hah, so I observe," stated Judge Priest dryly, but none the less politely; "mout I enquire the purpose of this here call?"

"Yes, sir; I'm a-goin' to tell you what brought me here without wastin' any more words than I can help," said the woman. "No, thank you, Jedge," she went on as he motioned her toward a seat; "I guess I can say what I've got to say, standin' up. But you set down, please, Jedge."!

She advanced to the side of his desk as he settled back in his chair, and rested one broad flat hand upon the desk top. Three or four heavy, bejewelled bangles that were on her arm slipped down her gloved wrist with a clinking sound. Her voice was coarsened and flat; it was more like a man's voice than a woman's, and she spoke with a masculine directness.

"There was a girl died at my house early this mornin'," she told him. "She died about a quarter past four o'clock. She had something like pneumonia. She hadn't been sick but two days; she wasn't very strong to start with anyhow. Viola St. Claire was the name she went by here. I don't know what her real name was – she never told anybody what it was. She wasn't much of a hand to talk about herself. She must have been nice people though, because she was always nice and ladylike, no matter what happened. From what I gathered off and on, she came here from some little town down near Memphis. I certainly liked that girl. She'd been with me nearly ten months. She wasn't more than nineteen years old.

"Well, all day yestiddy she was out of her head with a high fever. But just before she died she come to and her mind cleared up. The doctor was gone – old Doctor Lake. He'd done all he could for her and he left for his home about midnight, leavin' word that he was to be called if there was any change. Only there wasn't time to call him; it all came so sudden.

"I was settin' by her when she opened her eyes and whispered, sort of gaspin', and called me by my name. Well, you could 'a' knocked me down with a feather. From the time she started sinkin' nobody thought she'd ever get her senses back. She called me, and I leaned over her and asked her what it was she wanted, and she told me. She knew she was dyin'. She told me she'd been raised right, which I knew already without her tellin' me, and she said she'd been a Christian girl before she made her big mistake. And she told me she wanted to be buried like a Christian, from a regular church, with a sermon and flowers and music and all that. She made me promise that I'd see it was done just that way. She made me put my hand in her hand and promise her. She shut her eyes then, like she was satisfied, and in a minute or two after that she died, still holdin' on tight to my hand. There wasn't nobody else there – just me and her – and it was about a quarter past four o'clock in the mornin'."

“Well, ma’am, I’m very sorry for that poor child. I am so,” said Judge Priest, and his tone showed he meant it; “yit still I don’t understand your purpose in comin’ to me, without you need money to bury her.” His hand went toward his flank, where he kept his wallet.

“Keep your hand out of your pocket, please, sir,” said the woman. “I ain’t callin’ on anybody for help in a money way. That’s all been attended to. I telephoned the undertaker the first thing this mornin’.

“It’s something else I wanted to speak with you about. Well, I didn’t hardly wait to get my breakfast down before I started off to keep my word to Viola. And I’ve been on the constant go ever since. I’ve rid miles on the street cars, and I’ve walked afoot until the bottoms of my feet both feel like boils right this minute, tryin’ to find somebody that was fitten to preach a sermon over that dead girl.

“First I made the rounds of the preachers of all the big churches. Doctor Cavendar was my first choice; from what I’ve heard said about him he’s a mighty good man. But he ain’t in town. His wife told me he’d gone off to district conference, whatever that is. So then I went to all the others, one by one. I even went ‘way up on Alabama Street – to that there little mission church in the old Acme rink. The old man that runs the mission – I forget his name – he does a heap of work among poor people and down-and-out people, and I guess he might’ve said yes, only he’s right bad off himself. He’s sick in bed.”

She laughed mirthlessly.

“Oh, I went everywhere, I went to all of ‘em. There was one or two acted like they was afraid I might soil their clothes if I got too close to ‘em. They kept me standin’ in the doors of their studies so as they could talk back to me from a safe distance. Some of the others, though, asked me inside and treated me decent. But they every last one of ‘em said no.”

“Do you mean to tell me that not a single minister in this whole city is willin’ to hold a service over that dead girl?” Judge Priest shrilled at her with vehement astonishment – and something else – in his voice.

“No, no, not that,” the woman made haste to explain. “There wasn’t a single one of ‘em but said he’d come to my house and conduct the exercises. They was all willin’ enough to go to the grave too. But you see that wouldn’t do. I explained to ‘em, until I almost lost my voice, that it had to be a funeral in a regular church, with flowers and music and all. That poor girl got it into her mind somehow, I think, that she’d have a better chance in the next world if she went out of this one like a Christian should ought to go. I explained all that to ‘em, and from explainin’ I took to arguin’ with ‘em, and then to pleadin’ and beggin’. I bemeaned myself before them preachers. I was actually ready to go down on my knees before ‘em.

“Oh, I told ‘em the full circumstances. I told ‘em I just had to keep my promise. I’m afraid not to keep it. I’ve lived my own life in my own way and I guess I’ve got a lot of things to answer for. I ain’t worryin’ about that – now. But you don’t dare to break a promise that’s made to the dyin’. They come back and ha’nt you. I’ve always heard that and I know it’s true.

“One after another I told those preachers just exactly how it was, but still they all said no. Every one of ‘em said his board of deacons or elders or trustees, or something like that, wouldn’t stand for openin’ up their church for Viola. I always thought a preacher could run his church to suit himself, but from what I’ve heard to-day I know now he takes his orders from somebody else. So finally, when I was about to give up, I thought about you and I come here as straight as I could walk.”

“But, ma’am,” he said, “I’m not a regular church member myself. I reckon I oughter be, but I ain’t. And I still fail to understand why you should think I could serve you, though I don’t mind tellin’ you I’d be mighty glad to ef I could.”

“I’ll tell you why. I never spoke to you but once before in my life, but I made up my mind then what kind of a man you was. Maybe you don’t remember it, Judge, but two years ago this comin’ December that there Law and Order League fixed up to run me out of this town. They didn’t succeed, but they did have me indicted by the Grand Jury, and I come up before you and pleaded guilty – they

had the evidence on me all right. You fined me, you fined me the limit, and I guess if I hadn't 'a' had the money to pay the fine I'd 'a' gone to jail. But the main point with me was that you treated me like a lady.

"I know what I am good and well, but I don't like to have somebody always throwin' it up to me. I've got feelin's the same as anybody else has. You made that little deputy sheriff quit shovin' me round and you called me Mizzis Cramp to my face, right out in court. I've been Old Mallie Cramp to everybody in this town so long I'd mighty near forgot I ever had a handle on my name, until you reminded me of it. You was polite to me and decent to me, and you acted like you was sorry to see a white woman fetched up in court, even if you didn't say it right out. I ain't forgot that. I ain't ever goin' to forget it. And awhile ago, when I was all beat out and discouraged, I said to myself that if there was one man left in this town who could maybe help me to keep my promise to that dead girl, Judge William Pitman Priest was the man. That's why I'm here."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, sorry fur you and sorry fur that dead child," said Judge Priest slowly. "I wish I could help you. I wish I knew how to advise you. But I reckon those gentlemen were right in whut they said to you to-day. I reckon probably their elders would object to them openin' up their churches, under the circumstances. And I'm mightily afraid I ain't got any influence I could bring to bear in any quarter. Did you go to Father Minor? He's a good friend of mine; we was soldiers together in the war – him and me. Mebbe –"

"I thought of him," said the woman hopelessly; "but you see, Judge, Viola didn't belong to his church. She was raised a Protestant, she told me so. I guess he couldn't do nothin'." in.

"Ah-hah, I see," said the judge, and in his perplexity he bent his head and rubbed his broad expanse of pink bald brow fretfully, as though to stimulate thought within by friction without. His left hand fell into the litter of documents upon his desk. Absently his fingers shuffled them back and forth under his eyes. He straightened himself alertly.

"Was it stated – was it specified that a preacher must hold the funeral service over that dead girl?" he inquired.

The woman caught eagerly at the inflection that had come into his voice.

"No, sir," she answered; "all she said was that it must be in a church and with some flowers and some music. But I never heard of anybody preachin' a regular sermon without it was a regular preacher. Did you ever, Judge?" Doubt and renewed disappointment battered at her just-born hopes.

"I reckon mebbe there have been extraordinary occasions where an amateur stepped in and done the best he could," said the judge. "Mebbe some folks here on earth couldn't excuse sech presumption as that, but I reckon they'd understand how it was up yonder."

He stood up, facing her, and spoke as one making a solemn promise:

"Ma'am, you needn't worry yourself any longer. You kin go on back to your home. That dead child is goin' to have whut she asked for. I give you my word on it."

She strove to put a question, but he kept on: "I ain't prepared to give you the full details yit. You see I don't know myself jest exactly whut they'll be. But inside of an hour from now I'll be seein' Jansen and he'll notify you in regards to the hour and the place and the rest of it. Kin you rest satisfied with that?"

She nodded, trying to utter words and not succeeding. Emotion shook her gross shape until the big gold bands on her arms jangled together.

"So, ef you'll kindly excuse me, I've got quite a number of things to do betwixt now and suppertime. I kind of figger I'm goin' to be right busy."

He stepped to the threshold and called out down the hallway, which by now was a long, dim tunnel of thickening shadows.

"Jeff, oh Jeff, where are you, boy?"

"Comin', Jedge."

The speaker emerged from the gloom that was only a few shades darker than himself.

“Jeff,” bade his master, “I want you to show this lady the way out – it’s black as pitch in that there hall. And, Jeff, listen here! When you’ve done that I want you to go and find the sheriff fur me. Ef he’s left his office – and I s’pose he has by now – you go on out to his house, or wherever he is, and find him and tell him I want to see him here right away.”

He swung his ponderous old body about and bowed with a homely courtesy:

“And now I bid you good night, ma’am.” At the cross sill of the door she halted: “Judge – about gettin’ somebody to carry the coffin in and out – did you think about that? She was such a little thing – she won’t be very heavy – but still, at that, I don’t know anybody – any men – that would be willin’ – ”

“Ma’am,” said Judge Priest gravely, “ef I was you I wouldn’t worry about who the pallbearers will be. I reckon the Lord will provide. I’ve took notice that He always does ef you’ll only meet Him halfway.”

For a fact the judge was a busy man during the hour which followed upon all this, the hour between twilight and night. Over the telephone he first called up M. Jansen, our leading undertaker; indeed at that time our only one, excusing the coloured undertaker on Locust Street. He had converse at length with M. Jansen. Then he called up Doctor Lake, a most dependable person in sickness, and when you were in good health too. Then last of all he called up a certain widow who lived in those days, Mrs. Matilda Weeks by name; and this lady was what is commonly called, a character. In her case the title was just and justified. Of character she had more than almost anybody I ever knew.

Mrs. Weeks didn’t observe precedents. She made them. She cared so little for following after public opinion that public opinion usually followed alter her – when it had recovered from the shock and reorganised itself. There were two sides to her tongue: for some a sharp and acid side, and then again for some a sweet and gentle side – and mainly these last were the weak and the erring and the shiftless, those underfoot and trodden down. Moving through this life in a calm, deliberative, determined way, always along paths of her making and her choosing, obeying only the beck of her own mind, doing good where she might, with a perfect disregard for what the truly good might think about it, Mrs. Weeks was daily guilty of acts that scandalised all proper people. But the improper ones worshipped the ground her feet touched as she walked. She was much like that disciple of Joppa named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas, of whom it is written that she was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did. Yes, you might safely call Mrs. Weeks a character.

With her, back and forth across the telephone wire, Judge Priest had extended speech. Then he hung up the receiver and went home alone to a late and badly burnt supper. Aunt Dilsey Turner, the titular goddess of his kitchen, was a queen cook among cooks, but she could keep victuals hot without scorching them for just so long and no longer. She took pains to say as much, standing in the dining-room door with her knuckles on her hips. But the judge didn’t pay much attention to Aunt Dilsey’s vigorous remarks. He had other things on his mind.

Down our way this present generation has seen a good many conspicuous and prominent funerals. Until very recently we rather specialised in funerals. Before moving pictures sprang up so numerously funerals provided decorous and melancholy divertisement for many whose lives, otherwise, were rather aridly devoid of sources of inexpensive excitement. Among us were persons – old Mrs. Whitridge was a typical example – who hadn’t missed a funeral of any consequence for years and years back. Let some one else provide the remains, and they would assemble in such number as to furnish a gathering, satisfying in its size and solemn in its impressiveness. They took the run of funerals as they came. But there were some funerals which, having taken place, stood forth in the public estimation forever after as events to be remembered. They were mortuary milestones on the highway of community life.

For instance, those who were of suitable age to attend it are never going to forget the burial that the town gave lazy, loud-mouthed Lute Montjoy, he being the negro fireman on the ferryboat who jumped into the river that time, aiming to save the small child of a Hungarian immigrant family bound for somewhere up in the Cumberland on the steamer *Goldenrod*. The baby ran across the

boiler deck and went overboard, and the mother screamed, and Lute saw what had happened and he jumped. He was a good swimmer all right, and in half a dozen strokes he reached the strangling mite in the water; but then the current caught him – the June rise was on – and sucked him downstream into the narrow, swirling place between the steamboat's hull and the outside of the upper wharf boat, and he went under and stayed under.

Next morning when the dragnets caught and brought him up, one of his stiffened black arms still encircled the body of the white child, in a grip that could hardly be loosened. White and black, everybody turned out to bury Lute Montjoy. In the services at the church two of the leading clergymen assisted, turn and turn about; and at the graveside Colonel Horatio Farrell, dean of the local bar and the champion orator of seven counties, delivered an hour-long oration, calling Lute by such names as Lute, lying there cased in mahogany with silver trimmings, had never heard applied to him while he lived. Popular subscription provided the fund that paid for the stone to mark his grave and to perpetuate the memory of his deed. You can see the shaft to this day. It rises white and high among the trees in Elm Grove Cemetery, and the word *Hero* is cut deep in its marble face.

Then there was the funeral of old Mr. Simon Leatheritt, mightiest among local financiers. That, indeed, was a funeral to be cherished in the cranial memory casket of any person so favoured by fortune as to have been present; a funeral that was felt to be a credit alike to deceased and to bereaved; a funeral that by its grandeur would surely have impressed the late and, in a manner of speaking, lamented Leatheritt, even though its cost would have panged him; in short, an epoch-making and an era-breeding funeral.

In the course of a long married career this was the widow's first opportunity to cut loose and spend money without having to account for it by dollar, by dime and by cent to a higher authority, and she certainly did cut loose, sparing absolutely no pains in the effort to do her recent husband honour. At a cost calculated as running into three figures for that one item alone, she imported the prize male tenor of a St. Louis cathedral choir to enrich the proceedings with his glowing measures. This person, who was a person with eyes too large for a man and a mouth too small, rendered *Abide With Me* in a fashion so magnificent that the words were entirely indistinguishable and could not be followed on account of the genius' fashion of singing them.

By express, floral offerings came from as far away as Cleveland, Ohio, and New Orleans, Louisiana. One creation, sent on from a far distance, which displayed a stuffed white dove hovering, with the aid of wires, in the arc of a green trellis above a bank of white tuberose, attracted much favourable comment. A subdued murmur of admiration, travelling onward from pew to pew, followed after it as the design was borne up the centre aisle to the chancel rail.

As for broken columns and flower pillows with appropriately regretful remarks let into them in purple immortelle letterings, and gates ajar – why, they were evident in a profusion almost past individual recording.

When the officiating minister, reading the burial service, got as far as “Dust to dust,” Ashby Corwin, who sat at the back of the church, bent over and whispered in the ear of his nearest neighbour: “Talk about your ruling passions! If that's not old Uncle Sime all over – still grabbing for the dust!” As a rule, repetition of this sally about town was greeted with the deep hush of silent reproof. Our dead money-monarch's memory was draped with the sanctity of wealth. Besides, Ash Corwin, as many promptly took pains to point out, was a person of no consequence whatsoever, financial or otherwise. Mrs. Whitridge's viewpoint, as voiced by her in the months that followed, was the commoner one. This is Mrs. Whitridge speaking:

“I've been going to funerals steady ever since I was a child, I presume I've helped comfort more berefts by my presence and seen more dear departeds fittin'ly laid away than any person in this whole city. But if you're asking me, I must say Mr. Leatheritt's was the most fashionable funeral I ever saw, or ever hope to see. Everything that lavishness could do was done there, and all in such lovely taste, too! Why, it had style written all over it, especially the internment.”

Oh, we've had funerals and funerals down our way. But the funeral that took place on an October day that I have in mind still will be talked about long after Banker Leatheritt and the estate he reluctantly left behind him are but dim recollections. It came as a surprise to most people, for in the daily papers of that morning no customary black-bordered announcement had appeared. Others had heard of it by word of mouth. In dubious quarters, and in some quarters not quite so dubious, the news had travelled, although details in advance of the event were only to be guessed at. Anyhow, the reading and talking public knew this much: That a girl, calling herself Viola St. Claire and aged nineteen, had died. It was an accepted fact, naturally, that even the likes of her must be laid away after some fashion or other. If she were put under ground by stealth, clandestinely as it were, so much the better for the atmosphere of civic morality. That I am sure would have been disclosed as the opinion of a majority, had there been inquiry among those who were presumed to have and who admitted they had the best interests of the community at heart.

So you see a great many people were entirely unprepared against the coming of the pitifully short procession that at eleven o'clock, or thereabout, turned out of the little street running down back of the freight depot into Franklin Street, which was one of our main thoroughfares. First came the hearse, drawn by M. Jansen's pair of dappled white horses and driven by M. Jansen himself, he wearing his official high hat and the span having black plumes in their head stalls, thus betokening a burial ceremony of the top cost. Likewise the hearse was M. Jansen's best hearse – not his third best, nor yet his second best, but the splendid crystal-walled one that he ordered in the Eastern market after the relict of Banker Leatheritt settled the bill.

The coffin, showing through the glass sides, was of white cloth and it looked very small, almost like a coffin for a child. However, it may have looked so because there was little of its shape to be seen. It was covered and piled and banked up with flowers, and these flowers, strange to say, were not done into shapes of gates aswing; nor into shafts with their tops gone; nor into flat, stiff pillows of waxy-white tuberose, pale and cold as the faces of the dead. These were such flowers as, in our kindly climate, grew out of doors until well on into November: late roses and early chrysanthemums, marigolds and gladioluses, and such. They lay there loosely, with their stems upon them, just as Mrs. Weeks had sheared them, denuding every plant and shrub and bush that grew in her garden, so a girl whom Mrs. Weeks had never seen might go to her grave with an abundance of the blossoms she had coveted about her.

Behind the hearse came a closed coach. We used to call them coaches when they figured in funerals, carriages when used for lodge turnouts, and plain hacks when they met the trains and boats. In the coach rode four women. The world at large had a way of calling them painted women; but this day their faces were not painted nor were they garishly clad. For the time they were merely women – neither painted women nor fallen women – but just women.

And that was nearly all, but not quite. At one side of the hearse, opposite the slowly turning front wheels, trudged Judge Priest, carrying in the crook of one bent arm a book. It wouldn't be a law book, for they commonly are large books, bound in buff leather, and this book was small and flat and black in colour. On the other side of the hearse, with head very erect and eyes fixed straight ahead and Sunday's best coat buttoned tightly about his sparse frame, walked another old man, Doctor Lake.

And that was all. At least that was all at first. But as the procession – if you could call it that – swung into Franklin Street it passed by The Blue Jug Saloon and Short Order Restaurant. In the doorway here lounged Perry Broadus, who drank. The night before had been a hard night upon Perry Broadus, whose nights always were hard, and it promised to be a hard day. He shivered at the touch of the clear, crisp air upon his flushed cheek and slanted for support against a handy doorpost of the Blue Jug. The hearse turned the corner, and he stared at it a moment and understood. He straightened his slouched shoulders, and the fog left his eyes and the fumes of staling alcohol quit his brain. He pulled off his hat, twisted his wreck of a necktie straight with a hand that shook and, cold sober, he

ran out and caught step behind Judge Priest. Referring to pallbearers, Judge Priest had said the Lord would provide. But Perry Broadus provided himself.

I forget now who the next volunteer was, but I think possibly it was Sergeant Jimmy Bagby. Without waiting to analyse the emotions that possessed him in the first instant of realisation, the sergeant went hurrying into the road to fall in, and never thereafter had cause to rue his impulse, his one regret being that he had no warning, else he would have slipped on his old, grey uniform coat that he reserved for high occasions. I know that Mr. Napoleon B. Crump, who was active in church and charities, broke away from two ladies who were discussing parish affairs with him upon the sidewalk in front of his wholesale grocery, and with never a word of apology to them slipped into line, with Doctor Lake for his file leader. A moment later, hearing footfalls at his back, Mr. Crump looked over his shoulder. Beck Giltner, a man whom Mr. Crump had twice tried to have driven out of town and whom he yet hoped to see driven out of town, was following, two paces behind him.

I know that Mr. Joe Plumm came, shirtsleeved, out of his cooper shop and sought a place with the others. I know that Major Fair-leigh, who had been standing idly at the front window of his law office, emerged therefrom in such haste he forgot to bring his hat with him. Almost immediately the Major became aware that he was sandwiched in between the fat chief of the paid fire department and worthless Tip Murphy, who hadn't been out of the penitentiary a month. I know that old Peter J. Galloway, the lame Irish blacksmith, wore his leather apron as he limped along, bobbing up on his good leg and down on his short bent one.

I know that Mr. Herman Felsburg brought with him four of the clerks of Felsburg Brothers' Oak Hall Clothing Emporium. One of them left a customer behind, too, or possibly the customer also came. On second thought, I believe he did. I know that some men stood along the curbstones and stared and that other men, having first bared their heads, broke away to tail in at the end of the doubled lines of marching figures. And I know that of those who did this there were more than of those who merely stood and stared. The padding of shoe soles upon the gravel of the street became a steadily increasing, steadily rising thump-thump-thump; the rhythm of it rose above the creak and the clatter of the hearse wheels and the hoofs of the horses.

Lengthened and strengthened every few feet and every few yards by the addition of new recruits, the procession kept on. It trailed past shops and stores and jobbers' houses. It travelled by the Y. M. C. A. and by Fraternity Hall. It threaded its way between rows of residences. It must have been two hundred strong when the hearse horses came abreast of that stately new edifice, with its fine memorial windows and its tall twin spires, which the darkies called the Big Rock Church. They didn't stop here though. Neither did they stop at the old ivy-covered' church farther along nor at the little red-brick church in the middle of the next block.

The procession kept on. Growing and still growing, it kept on. By now you might have counted in its ranks fit representatives of every grade and class, every cult and every creed to be found in the male population of our town. Old men and young men marched; bachelors and heads of families; rich men and poor; men who made public sentiment and men who defied it; strict churchgoers and avowed sceptics; men called good and men called bad. You might have ticked off almost any kind of man in that line. Possibly the Pharisees were missing and the Scribes were served only in the person of the editor of the *Daily Evening News*, who appeared well up toward the front of one of the files, with a forgotten cedar lead pencil riding in the crotch of his right ear. But assuredly the Publican was there and the Sinner.

Heralded by the sound of its own thumping tread and leaving in its wake a stupefaction of astonishment, the procession kept straight on down Franklin Street, through the clear October sunshine and under the sentinel maples, which sifted down gentle showers of red and yellow leaves upon it. It kept on until it reached the very foot of the street. There it swung off at right angles into a dingy, ill-kempt little street that coursed crookedly along the water front, with poor houses rising upon one side and the raw mud banks of the river falling steeply away upon the other.

It followed this street until the head of it came opposite a little squat box-and-barn of a structure, built out of up-and-down planking; unpainted, too, with a slatted belfry, like an overgrown chicken coop, perched midway of the peak of its steeply pitched tin roof. Now this structure, as all knew who remembered the history of contemporary litigation as recorded in the local prints, was the True Believers' Afro-American Church of Zion, sometimes termed in derision Possum Trot, being until recently the place of worship of that newest and most turbulent of local negro sects, but now closed on an injunction secured by one of the warring factions within its membership and temporarily lodged in the custody of the circuit court and in the hands of that court's servant, the high sheriff, pending ultimate determination of the issue by his honour, the circuit judge. Technically it was still closed; legally and officially still in the firm grasp of Sheriff Giles Birdsong. Actually and physically it was at this moment open – wide open. The double doors were drawn back, the windows shone clean, and at the threshold of the swept and garnished interior stood Judge Priest's Jeff, with his broom in his hand and his mop and bucket at his side. Jeff had concluded his share of the labours barely in time.

As M. Jansen steered his dappled span close up alongside the pavement and brought them to a standstill, Judge Priest looked back and with what he saw was well content. He knew that morbid curiosity might account for the presence of some among this multitude who had come following after him, but not for all, and perhaps not for very many. He nodded to himself with the air of one who is amply satisfied by the results of an accomplished experiment.

For the bearers of the dead he selected offhand the eight men who had marched nearest to him. As they lifted the coffin out from the hearse it befell that our most honoured physician should have for his opposite our most consistent drunk-ard, and that Mr. Crump, who walked in straight and narrow paths, should rub elbows with Beck Giltner, whom upon any day in the year, save only this day, Mr. Crump would have rejoiced to see harried with hounds beyond the corporate limits.

Up the creaking steps and in between the lolling door-halves the chosen eight bore the dead girl, and right reverently they rested their burden on board trestles at the foot of the little box-pulpit, where shafts of sunshine, filtering through one of the small side windows, stencilled a checkered pattern of golden squares upon the white velvet box with its silver handles and its silver name plate. Behind the eight came others, bringing the flowers. It must have been years, I imagine, since the soiled hands of some of these had touched such gracious things as flowers, yet it was to transpire that none among them needed the help of any defter fingers. Upon the coffin and alongside it they laid down their arm loads, so that once more the narrow white box was almost covered under bloom and leaf; and then the yellow pencillings of sunlight made greater glory there than ever.

When the crowd was in and seated – all of it that could get in and get seated – a tall, white-haired woman in a plain black frock came silently and swiftly through a door at the back and sat herself down upon a red plush stool before a golden-oak melodeon. Stool and melodeon being both the property of the fractious True Believers, neglect and poor usage had wrought most grievously with the two of them. The stool stood shakily upon its infirm legs and within the melodeon the works were skewed and jangled. But Mrs. Matilda Weeks' finger ends fell with such sanctifying gentleness upon the warped keys, and as she sang her sweet soprano rose so clearly and yet so softly, filling this place whose walls so often had resounded to the lusty hallelujahs of shouting black converts, that to those who listened now it seemed almost as though a Saint Cecelia had descended from on high to make this music. Mrs. Weeks sang a song that she had sung many a time before – for ailing paupers at the almshouse, for prisoners at the county jail, for the motley congregations that flocked to Sunday afternoon services in the little mission at the old Acme rink. And the name of the song was Rock of Ages.

She finished singing. Judge Priest got up from a front pew where he had been sitting and went and stood alongside the flower-piled coffin, with his back to the little yellow-pine pulpit and his prayer book in his hands, a homely, ungraceful figure, facing an assemblage that packed the darky meeting house until it could hold no more. In sight there were just five women: the good woman

at the melodeon and four other women, dwellers beneath a sinful roof, who sat together upon what the pastor of the True Believers would have called the mourners' bench. And all the rest were men. Men sat, row on row, in the pews; men stood in the single narrow aisle and against the walls round three sides of the building; and men appeared at the doorway and on beyond the doorway, upon the porch and the steps.

I deem it to have been characteristic of the old judge that he made no explanation for his presence before them and no apology for his assumption of a role so unusual. He opened his black-bound volume at a place where his plump forefinger had been thrust between the leaves to mark the place for him, and in his high, thin voice he read through the service for the dead, with its promise of the divine forgiveness. When he had reached the end of it he put the book aside, and spoke to them in the fair and grammatical English that usually he reserved for his utterances from the bench in open court:

“Our sister who lies here asked with almost her last conscious breath that at her funeral a sermon should be preached. Upon me, who never before attempted such an undertaking, devolves the privilege of speaking a few words above her. I had thought to take for my text the words: ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.’

“But I have changed my mind. I changed it only a little while ago. For I recalled that once on a time the Master said: ‘Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of Heaven.’ And I believe, in the scheme of everlasting mercy and everlasting pity, that before the eyes of our common Creator we are all of us as little children whose feet stumble in the dark. So I shall take that saying of the Saviour for my text.”

Perhaps it would be unjust to those whose business is the preaching of sermons to call this a sermon. I, for one, never heard any other sermon in any other church that did not last longer than five minutes. And certainly Judge Priest, having made his beginning, did not speak for more than five minutes; the caressing fingers of the sunlight had not perceptibly shifted upon the flower-strewn coffin top when he finished what he had to say and stood with his head bowed. After that, except for a rustle of close-packed body and a clearing of men's huskened throats, there was silence for a little time.

Then Judge Priest's eyes looked about him and three pews away he saw Ashby Corwin. It may have been he remembered that as a young man Ashby Corwin had been destined for holy orders until another thing – some said it was a woman and some said it was whisky, and some said it was first the woman and then the whisky – came into his life and wrecked it so that until the end of his days Ashby Corwin trod the rocky downhill road of the profligate and the waster. Or it may have been the look he read upon the face of the other that moved Judge Priest to say:

“I will ask Mr. Corwin to pray.”

At that Ashby Corwin stood up in his place and threw back his prematurely whitened head, and he lifted his face that was all scarified with the blighting flames of dissipation, and he shut his eyes that long since had wearied of looking upon a trivial world, and Ashby Corwin prayed. There are prayers that seem to circle round and round in futile rings, going nowhere; and then again there are prayers that are like sparks struck off from the wheels of the prophet's chariot of fire, coursing their way upward in spiritual splendour to blaze on the sills of the Judgment Seat. This prayer was one of those prayers.

After that Judge Priest bowed his head again and spoke the benediction.

It turns out that I was right a while back when I predicted this chapter of this book might end with Judge Priest sitting at his desk in his room at the old courthouse. On the morning of the day following the day of this funeral he sat there, putting the last words to his decision touching upon the merits of the existing controversy in the congregation of the True Believers' Afro-American Church of Zion. The door opened and in walked Beck Giltner, saloon keeper, sure-thing gambler,

handy-man-with-a-gun, and, according to the language of a resolution unanimously adopted at a mass meeting of the Law and Order League, force-for-evil.

Beck Giltner was dressed in his best. He wore his wide-brimmed, black soft hat, with its tall crown carefully dented in, north, east, south and west; his long black coat; his white turn-down collar; his white lawn tie; and in the bosom of his plaited shirt of fine white linen his big diamond pin, that was shaped like an inverted banjo. This was Beck Giltner's attire for the street and for occasions of ceremony. Indoors it was the same, except that sometimes he took the coat off and turned back his shirt cuffs.

"Good mornin', Beck," said the judge. "Well?"

"Judge Priest," said Giltner, "as a rule I don't come to this courthouse except when I have to come. But to-day I've come to tell you something. You made a mistake yesterday!"

"A mistake, suh?" The judge's tone was sharp and quick.

"Yes, suh, that's what you did," returned the tall gambler. "I don't mean in regards to that funeral you held for that dead girl. You probably don't care what I think one way or the other, but I want to tell you I was strong for that, all the way through. But you made a mistake just the same, Judge; you didn't take up a collection.

"It had been a good many years since I was inside of a church, until I walked with you and the others to that little nigger meetin'-house yesterday – forty-odd years I reckon; not since I was a kid, anyway. But to the best of my early recollections they always took a collection for something or other every time I did go to church. And yesterday you overlooked that part altogether.

"So last night I took it on myself to get up a collection for you. I started it with a bill or so off my own roll. Then I passed the hat round at several places where you wouldn't scarcely care to go yourself. And I didn't run across a single fellow that failed to contribute. Some of 'em don't move in the best society, and there's some more of 'em that you'd only know of by reputation. But every last one of 'em put in something. There was one man that didn't have only seven cents to his name – he put that in. So here it is – four hundred and seventy-five dollars and forty-two cents, accordin' to my count."

From one pocket he fetched forth a crumpled packet of paper money and from the other a small cloth sack, which gave off metallic clinking sounds. He put them down together on the desk in front of Judge Priest.

"I appreciate this, ef I am right in my assumption of the motives which actuated you and the purposes to which you natchally assumed this here money would be Applied," said Judge Priest as the other man waited for his response. "But, son, I can't take your money. It ain't needed. Why, I wouldn't know whut to do with it. There ain't no out-standin' bills connected with that there funeral.

"All the expense entailed was met – privately. So you see –"

"Wait just a minute before you say no!" interrupted Giltner. "Here's my idea and it's the idea of all the others that contributed: We-all want you to take this money and keep it – keep it in a safe, or in your pocket, or in the bank to your credit, or anywheres you please, but just keep it. And if any girl that's gone wrong should die and not have any friends to help bury her, they can come to you and get the cash out of this fund to pay for puttin' her away. And if any other girl should want to go back to her people and start in all over again and try to lead a better life, why you can advance her the railroad fare out of that money too. You see, Judge, we are aimin' to make a kind of a trust fund out of it, with you as the trustee. And when the four seventy-five forty-two is all used up, if you'll just let me know I'll guarantee to rustle up a fresh bank roll so you'll always have enough on hand to meet the demands. Now then, Judge, will you take it?"

Judge Priest took it. He stretched out and scooped in currency and coin sack, using therefor his left hand only. The right was engaged in reaching for Beck Giltner's right hand, the purpose being to shake it.

## II. A BLENDING OF THE PARABLES

NEARLY every week – weather permitting – the old judge went to dinner somewhere. To a considerable extent he kept up his political fences going to dinners. Usually it was of a Sunday that he went.

By ten o'clock almost any fair Sunday morning – spring, summer or early fall – Judge Priest's Jeff would have the venerable side-bar buggy washed down, and would be leading forth from her stall the ancient white lady-sheep, with the unmowed fetlocks and the intermittent mane, which the judge, from a spirit of prideful affection and in the face of all visual testimony to the contrary, persisted in regarding as an authentic member of the equine kingdom.

Presently, in their proper combination and alignment, the trio would be stationed at the front gate, thus: Jeff in front, bracing the forward section of the mare-creature; and the buggy behind, its shafts performing a similar office for the other end of this unique quadruped. Down the gravelled walk that led from the house, under the water maples and silver-leaf poplars, which arched over to make a shady green tunnel of it, the judge would come, immaculate but rumply in white linens. The judge's linens had a way of getting themselves all rumped even before he put them on. You might say they were born rumped.

Beholding his waddlesome approach out of the tail of her eye, the white animal would whinny a dignified and conservative welcome. She knew her owner almost as well as he knew her. Then, while Jeff held her head – that is to say, held it up – the old man would heave his frame ponderously in and upward between the dished wheels and settle back into the deep nest of the buggy, with a wheeze to which the agonised rear springs wheezed back an anthem like refrain.

"All right, Jeff!" the judge would say, bestowing his cotton umbrella and his palm-leaf fan in their proper places, and working a pair of wrinkled buckskin gloves on over his chubby hands. "I won't be back, I reckon, till goin' on six o'clock this evenin', and I probably won't want nothin' then fur supper except a cold snack. So if you and Aunt Dilsey both put out from the house fur the day be shore to leave the front-door key under the front-door mat, where I kin find it in case I should git back sooner'n I expect. And you be here in due time yourse'f, to unhitch. Hear me, boy?"

"Yas, suh," Jeff would respond. "I hears you."

"All right, then!" his employer would command as he gathered up the lines. "Let loose of Mittie May."

Conforming with the accepted ritual of the occasion, Jeff would let loose of Mittie May and step ceremoniously yet briskly aside, as though fearing instant annihilation in the first resistless surge of a desperate, untamable beast. Judge Priest would slap the leathers down on Mittie May's fat back; and Mittie May, sensing the master touch on those reins, would gather her four shaggy legs together with apparent intent of bursting into a mad gallop, and then, ungathering them, step out in her characteristic gentle amble, a gait she never varied under any circumstances. Away they would go, then, with the dust splashing up from under Mittie May's flat and deliberative feet, and the loose rear curtain of the buggy flapping and slapping behind like a slatting sail.

Jeff would stand there watching them until they had faded away in the deeper dust where Clay Street merged, without abrupt transition, into a winding country road; and, knowing the judge was definitely on his way, Jeff would be on his way, too, but in a different direction. Of his own volition Jeff never fared countryward on Sundays. Green fields and running brooks laid no spell of allurements on his nimble fancy. He infinitely preferred metropolitan haunts and pastimes – such, for instance, as promenades along the broken sidewalks of the Plunkett's Hill section and crap games behind the coloured undertaker's shop on Locust Street.

The judge's way would be a pleasant way – a peaceful, easy way, marked only by small disputes at each crossroads junction, Mittie May desiring always to take the turn that would bring them back

home by the shortest route, and the judge stubborn in his intention of pushing further on. The superior powers of human obstinacy having triumphed over four-legged instinct, they would proceed. Now they would clatter across a wooden bridge spanning a sluggish amber-coloured stream, where that impertinent bird, the kingfisher, cackled derisive imitations of the sound given off by the warped axles of the buggy, and the yonkerpins – which Yankees, in their ignorance, have called water lilies – spread their wide green pads and their white-and-yellow cusps of bloom on the face of the creek water.

Now they would come to cornfields and tobacco patches that steamed in the sunshine, conceding the season to be summer; or else old, abandoned clearings, grown up rankly in shoe-make bushes and pawpaw and persimmon and sassafras. And the pungent scent of the wayside pennyroyal would rise like an incense, saluting their nostrils as they passed, and the grassy furrows of long-harvested grain crops were like the lines of graves on old battlegrounds.

Now they would come into the deep woods; and here the sunlight sifted down through the tree tops, making cathedral aisles among the trunks and dim green cloisters of the thickets; and in small open spaces the yellowing double prongs of the mullein stalks stood up stiff and straightly like two-tined altar candles. Then out of the woods again and along a stretch of blinding hot road, with little grey lizards racing on the decayed fence rails as outriders, and maybe a pair of those old red-head peckerwoods flickering on from snag to snag just ahead, keeping company with the judge, but never quite permitting him to catch up with them.

So, at length, after five miles, or maybe ten, he would come to his destination, which might be a red-brick house set among apple trees on a low hill, or a whitewashed double cabin of logs in a bare place down in the bottoms. Here, at their journey's end, they would halt, with Mittie May heaving her rotund sides in and out in creditable simulation of a thoroughbred finishing a hard race; and Judge Priest would poke his head out from under the buggy hood and utter the customary hail of "Hello the house!" At that, nine times out of ten – from under the house and from round behind it – would boil a black-and-tan ground swell of flap-eared, bugle-voiced hound dogs, all tearing for the gate, with every apparent intention of devouring horse and harness, buggy and driver, without a moment's delay. And behind them, in turn, a shirt-sleeved man would emerge from the shelter of the gallery and hurry down the path toward the fence, berating the belling pack at every step he took:

"You Sounder, you Ring, you Queen – consam your mangy pelts! Go on back yonder where you belong! You Saucer – come on back here and behave yourse'f! I bet I take a chunk some of these days and knock your fool head off!"

As the living wave of dogs parted before his advance and his threats, and broke up and turned about and vanished with protesting yelps, the shirt-sleeved one, recognising Mittie May and the shape of the buggy, would speak a greeting something after this fashion:

"Well, suh – ef it ain't Jedge Priest! Jedge, suh, I certainly am proud to see you out this way. We was beginnin' to think you'd furgot us – we was, fur a fact!"

Over his shoulder he would single out one of a cluster of children who magically appeared on the gallery steps, and bid Tennessee or Virgil or Dora-Virginia or Albert-Sidney, as the name of the chosen youngster might be, to run and tell their ma that Judge Priest had come to stay for dinner. For the judge never sent any advance notice of his intention to pay a Sunday visit; neither did he wait for a formal invitation. He just dropped in, being assured of a welcome under any roof-tree, great or humble, in his entire judicial district.

Shortly thereafter the judge, having been welcomed in due state, and provision made for Mittie May's stabling and sustenance, would be established on the gallery in the rocking-chair of honour, which was fetched out from the parlour for his better comfort. First, a brimming gourd of fresh spring water would be brought, that he might take the edge off his thirst and flush the dust out of his throat and moisten up his palate; and then would follow a certain elaborated rite in conjunction with sundry sprigs of young mint and some powdered sugar and outpourings of the red-brown contents of a wicker demijohn.

Very possibly a barefooted and embarrassed namesake would be propelled forward, by parental direction, to shake hands with the guest; for, except old Doctor Saunders, Judge Priest had more children named for him than anybody in our county. And very probably there would come to his ears from somewhere rearward the frenzied clamour of a mighty barnyard commotion – squawkings and cacklings and flutterings – closely followed by the poignant wails of a pair of doomed pullets, which grew fainter and fainter as the captives were borne to the sacrificial block behind the woodpile – certain signs, all these, that if fried chicken had not been included in the scope and plan of Sunday dinner, fried chicken would now be, most assuredly.

When dinner was over, small messengers would be sent up the road and down to spread the word; and various oldsters of the vicinity would leave their own places to foregather in the dooryard of the present host and pass the time of day with Judge Priest. Sooner or later, somehow, the talk would work backward to war times. Overhearing what passed to and fro, a stranger might have been pardoned for supposing that it was only the year before, or at most two years before, when the Yankees came through under Grant; while Forrest's Raid was spoken of as though it had taken place within the current month.

Anchored among the ancients the old judge would sit, doing his share of the talking and more than his share of the listening; and late in the afternoon, when the official watermelon, all dripping and cool, had been brought forth from the springhouse, and the shadows were beginning to stretch themselves slantwise across the road, as though tired out completely by a hard day's work in the broiling sun, he and Mittie May would jog back toward town, meeting many an acquaintance on the road, but rarely passing one. And the upshot would be that at the next Democratic primary the opposing candidate for circuit judge – if there was any opposing candidate – got powerfully few votes out of that neighbourhood.

Such Sunday excursions as these and such a Sunday dinner as this typical one formed a regular part of Judge Priest's weekly routine through at least nine months of the year. If unforeseen, events conspired to rob him of his trip to the country he felt the week had not rightly rounded itself out; but once a year he attended a dinner beside which all other dinner occasions were, in his estimation, as nothing at all. With regard to this particular affair, he used to say it took him a week to get primed and ready for it, one whole night to properly enjoy it, and another week to recover from the effects of it. I am speaking now of the anniversary banquet of the survivors of Company B – first and foremost of the home companies – which was and still is held always on a given date and at a given place, respectively, to wit: The evening of the twelfth of May and the dining room of the Richland House.

Company B held the first of its annual dinners at the Richland House away back in '66. That time sixty and more men – young men, mostly, in their mid-twenties and their early thirties – sat down together to meat and drink, and no less a personage than General Grider presided – that same Meriwether Grider who, going out in the first year of the war as company commander, came back after the Surrender, bringing with him the skeleton remnants of a battered and a shattered brigade.

General Meriwether Grider has been dead this many a year now. He gave his life for the women and the children when the *Belle of the Bends* burned up at Cottonwood Bar; and that horror befell so long ago that the present generation down our way knows it only as a thing of which those garrulous and tiresome creatures, the older inhabitants, are sometimes moved to speak. But the rules for the regulation and conduct of subsequent banquets which were adopted on that long-ago night, when the general sat at the head of the table, hold good, even though all else in our town has changed.

Of the ardent and youthful sixty-odd who dined with him then, a fading and aging and sorely diminished handful is left. Some in the restless boom days of the eighties moved away to other and brisker communities, and some have marched down the long, lone road that leads to a far country. Yet it abides as a bylaw and a precedent that only orthodox members of the original company shall have covers and places provided for them when anniversary night rolls round. The Richland House – always – must be the place of dining; this, too, in spite of the fact that the Richland House has been

gnawed by the tooth of time into a shabby old shell, hardly worthy to be named in the same printed page with the smart Hotel Moderne – strictly European plan; rates, three dollars a day and upward – which now figures as our leading hotel.

Near the conclusion of the feast, when the cloth has been cleared of the dishes and only the glasses are left, the rolls called by the acting top-sergeant – cholera having taken off the real top-sergeant in '75. Those who are present answer for themselves, and for those who are absent some other voice answers. And then at the very last, after the story-telling is done, they all stand and drink to Company B – its men, its memories, its most honourable record, and its most honourable dead.

They tell me that this last May just seven met on the evening of the twelfth to sit beneath the crossed battle-flags in the Richland House dining room, and that everything was over and done with long before eleven o'clock. But the annual dinner which I especially have in mind to describe here took place on a somewhat more remote twelfth of May, when Company B still might muster better than the strength of a corporal's guard. If I remember correctly, eighteen grizzled survivors were known to be alive that year.

In saying that, though, I would not have you infer that there were no more than eighteen veterans in our town. Why, in those times there must have been two hundred easily. Gideon K. Irons Camp could turn out upward of a hundred members in good standing for any large public occasion; but you understand this was a dinner limited to Company B alone, which restriction barred out a lot of otherwise highly desirable individuals.

It barred out Sergeant Jimmy Bagby, for the sergeant had served with King's Hellhounds; and Captain Shelby Woodward, who belonged to the Orphan Brigade, as you would have learned for yourself at first hand had you ever enjoyed as much as five minutes of uninterrupted conversation with the captain; and Mr. Wolfe Hawley, our leading grocer, who was a gunner in Lyon's Battery – and many another it barred out. Indeed, Father Minor got in only by the skin of his teeth. True enough he was a Company B man at the beginning; but he transferred early to another branch of the service and for most of the four years he rode with Morgan's men.

The committee in charge looked for a full attendance. It was felt that this would be one of the most successful dinners of them all. Certainly it would be by long odds the best advertised. It would seem that the Sunday editor of the *Courier-Journal*, while digging through his exchanges, came on a preliminary announcement in the columns of the *Daily Evening News*, which was our home paper; and, sensing a feature story in it, he sent one of his young men down from Louisville to spend two days among us, compiling facts, names and photographs. The young man did a page spread in the Sunday *Courier-Journal*, thereby unconsciously enriching many family scrapbooks in our town.

This was along toward the middle of April. Following it, one of the Eastern syndicates rewrote the piece and mailed it out to its constituent papers over the country. The Associated Press saw fit to notice it too; and after that the tale got into the boiler-plate shops – which means it got into practically all the smaller weeklies that use patent insides. It must have been a strictly non-newspaper-read-ing community of this nation which did not hear that spring about the group of old soldiers who for forty years without a break had held a dinner once a year with no outsiders present, and who were now, for the forty-first time, about to dine again.

Considering this publicity and all, the committee naturally counted on a fairly complete turnout. To be sure, Magistrate Matt Dallam, out in the country, could not hope to be present except in the spirit, he having been bedridden for years. Garnett Hinton, the youngest enlisted member of Company B, was in feeble health away off yonder in the Panhandle of Texas. It was not reasonable to expect him to make the long trip back home. On the tenth Mr. Napoleon B. Crump was called to Birmingham, Alabama, where a ne'er-do-well son-in-law had entangled himself in legal difficulties, arising out of a transaction involving a dubious check, with a yet more dubious signature on it. He might get back in time – and then again he might not.

On the other hand, Second Lieutenant Charley Garrett wrote up from his plantation down in Mississippi that he would attend if he had to walk – a mere pleasantry of speech, inasmuch as Lieutenant Garrett had money enough to charter for himself a whole railroad train should he feel so inclined. And, from his little farm in Mims County, Chickasaw Reeves sent word he would be there, too, no matter what happened. The boys could count on him, he promised.

Tallying up twenty-four hours or so ahead of the big night, the arrangements committee, consisting of Doctor Lake, Professor Lycurgus Reese and Mr. Herman Felsburg, made certain of fifteen diners, and possibly sixteen, and gave orders accordingly to the proprietor of the Richland House; but Mr. Nap Crump was detained in Birmingham longer than he had expected, and Judge Priest received from Lieutenant Charley Garrett a telegram reading as follows:

“May the Lord be with you! – because I can’t. Rheumatism in that game leg of mine, – it!”

The excisions, it developed, were the work of the telegraph company.

Then, right on top of this, another disappointment piled itself – I have reference now to the sudden and painful indisposition of Chickasaw Reeves. Looking remarkably hale and hearty, considering his sixty-eight years, Mr. Reeves arrived in due season on the eleventh, dressed fit to kill in his Sunday best and a turndown celluloid collar and a pair of new shoes of most amazing squeakiness. After visiting, in turn, a considerable number of old friends and sharing, with such as them as were not bigoted, the customary and appropriate libations, he dropped into Sherill’s Bar at a late hour of the evening for a nightcap before retiring.

At once his fancy was drawn to a milk punch, the same being a pleasant compound to which he had been introduced an hour or so earlier. This milk punch seemed to call for another, and that one for still another. As the first deep sip of number three creamily saluted his palate, Mr. Reeves’ eyes, over the rim of the deep tumbler, fell on the free lunch displayed at the far end of the bar. He was moved to step down that way and investigate.

The milk punches probably would not have mattered – or the cubes of brick cheese, or the young onions, or the pretzels, or the pickled beets and pigs’ feet. Mr. Reeves’ seasoned and dependable gastric processes were amply competent to triumph over any such commonplace combination of food and drink. Undoubtedly his undoing was directly attributable to a considerable number of little slickery fish, belonging, I believe, to the pilchard family – that is to say, they are pilchards while yet they do swim and disport themselves hither and yon in their native element; but when caught and brined and spiced and oiled, and put in cans for the export trade, they take on a different name and become, commercially speaking, something else.

Mr. Reeves did not notice them at first. He had sampled one titbit and then another; finally his glance was arrested by a dish of these small, dainty appearing creatures. A tentative nibble at the lubricated tail of a sample specimen reassured him as to the gastronomic excellence of the novelty. He stayed right there until the dish was practically empty. Then, after one more milk punch, he bade the barkeeper good night and departed.

Not until three o’clock the following afternoon was Mr. Reeves able to receive any callers – except only Doctor Lake, whose visits until that hour had been in a professional rather than in a social capacity. Judge Priest, coming by invitation of the sufferer, found Mr. Reeves’ room at the hotel redolent with the atmospheres of bodily distress. On the bed of affliction by the window was stretched the form of Mr. Reeves. He was not exactly pale, but he was as pale as a person of Mr. Reeves’ habit of life could be and still retain the breath of life.

“Well, Chickasaw, old feller,” said Judge Priest, “how goes it? Feelin’ a little bit easier than you was, ain’t you?”

The invalid groaned emptily before answering in wan and wasted-away tone.

“Billy,” he said, “ef you could ‘a’ saw me ‘long ‘bout half past two this mornin’, when she first come on me, you’d know better’n to ask sech a question as that. First, I wus skeered I wus goin’ to

die. And then after a spell I was skeered I wusn't. I reckon there ain't nobody nowheres that ever had ez many diff'runt kinds of cramps ez me and lived to tell the tale."

"That's too bad," commiserated the judge. "Was it somethin' you et or somethin' you drunk?"

"I reckon it wus a kind of a mixture of both," admitted Mr. Reeves. "Billy, did you ever make a habit of imbibin' these here milk punches?"

"Well, not lately," said Judge Priest.

"Well, suh," stated Mr. Reeves, "you'd be surprised to know how tasty they kin make jest plain ordinary cow's milk ef they take and put some good red licker and a little sugar in it, and shake it all up together, and then sift a little nutmaig seasonin' onto it – you would so! But, after you've drunk maybe three-four, I claim you have to be sorter careful 'bout whut you put on top of 'em. I've found that much out.

"I reckon it serves me right, though. A country-jake like me oughter know better'n to come up here out of the sticks and try to gormandise hisse'f on all these here fancy town vittles. It's all right, mebbe, fur you city folks; but my stomach ain't never been educated up to it. Hereafter I'm a-goin' to stick to hawg jowl and cawn pone, and things I know 'bout. You hear me – I'm done! I've been cured.

"And specially I've been cured in regards to these here little pizenous fishes that look somethin' like sardeens, and yit they ain't sardeens. I don't know what they call 'em by name; but it certainly oughter be ag'inst the law to leave 'em settin' round on a snack counter where folks kin git to 'em. Two or three of 'em would be dangerous, I claim – and I must 'a' et purty nigh a whole school."

Again Mr. Reeves moaned reminiscently.

"Well, from the way you feel now, does it look like you're goin' to be able to come to the blow-out to-night?" inquired Judge Priest. "That's the main point. The boys are all countin' on you, Chickasaw."

"Billy," bemoaned Mr. Reeves, "I hate it mightily; but even ef I wus able to git up – which I ain't – and git my clothes on and git down to the Richland House, I wouldn't be no credit to yore party. From the way I feel now, I don't never ag'in want to look vittles in the face so long ez I live. And, furthermore, ef they should happen to have a mess of them there little greasy minners on the table I know I'd be a disgrace to myse'f right then and there. No, Billy; I reckon I'd better stay right where I am."

Thus it came to pass that, when the members of Company B sat down together in the decorated dining room of the Richland House at eight o'clock that evening, the chair provided for Mr. Chickasaw Reeves made a gap in the line. Judge Priest was installed in the place of honour, where Lieutenant Garrett, by virtue of being ranking surviving officer, would have enthroned himself had it not been for that game leg of his. From his seat at the head, the judge glanced down the table and decided in his own mind that, despite absentees, everything was very much as it should be. At every plate was a little flag showing, on a red background, a blue St. Andrew's cross bearing thirteen stars. At every plate, also, was a tall and aromatic toddy. Cocktails figured not in the dinner plans of Company B; they never had and they never would.

At the far end from him was old Press Harper. Once it had been Judge Priest's most painful duty to sentence Press Harper to serve two years at hard labour in the state prison. To be sure, circumstances, which have been detailed elsewhere, interfered to keep Press Harper from serving all or any part of his punishment; nevertheless, it was the judge who had sentenced him. Now, catching the judge's eye, old Press waved his arm at him in a proud and fond greeting.

Father Minor beamingly faced Squire Futrell, whose Southern Methodism was of the most rigid and unbendable type. Professor Reese, principal of the graded school, touched elbows with Jake Smedley, colour bearer of the Camp, who just could make out to write his own name. Peter J. Galloway, the lame blacksmith, who most emphatically was Irish, had a caressing arm over the stooped shoulder of Mr. Herman Felsburg, who most emphatically was not. Doctor Lake, his own pet

crony in a town where everybody, big and little, was his crony in some degree, sat one seat removed from the judge, with the empty chair of the bedfast Chickasaw Reeves in between them and so it went.

Even in the matter of the waiters an ancient and a hallowed sentiment ruled. Behind Judge Priest, and swollen as with a dropsy by pomp of pride and vanity, stood Uncle Zach Mathews, a rosewood-coloured person, whose affection for the Cause that was lost had never been questioned – even though Uncle Zach, after confusing military experiences, emerged from the latter end of the conflict as cook for a mess of Union officers and now drew his regular quarterly pension from a generous Federal Government.

Flanking Uncle Zach, both with napkins draped over their arms, both awaiting the word from him to bring on the first course, were posted – on the right, Tobe Emery, General Grider’s one-time body servant; on the left, Uncle Ike Copeland, a fragile, venerable exhuman chattel, who might almost claim to have seen actual service for the Confederacy. No ordinary darkies might come to serve when Company B foregathered at the feast.

Uncle Zach, with large authority, had given the opening order, and at the side tables a pleasing clatter of china had arisen, when Squire Futrell put down his glass and rose, with a startled look on his face.

“Looky here, boys!” he exclaimed. “This won’t never do! Did you fellers know there was thirteen at the table?”

Sure enough, there were!

It has been claimed – perhaps not without colour of plausibility – that Southerners are more superstitious than Northerners. Assuredly the Southerners of a generation that is almost gone now uniformly nursed their private beliefs in charms, omens, spells, hoodoos and portents. As babies many of them were nursed, as boys all of them were played with, by members of the most superstitious race – next to actors – on the face of creation. An actor of Ethiopian descent should by rights be the most superstitious creature that breathes the air of this planet, and doubtlessly is.

No one laughed at Squire Futrell’s alarm over his discovery. Possibly excusing Father Minor, it is probable that all present shared it with him. As for Uncle Zach Mathews and his two assistants, they froze with horror where they had halted, their loaded trays poised on their arms. But they did not freeze absolutely solid – they quivered slightly.

“Law-zee!” gasped Uncle Zach, with his eyeballs rolling. “Dinner can’t go no fur’der twell we gits somebody else in or meks somebody leave and go ‘way – dat’s sartain shore! Whee! We kin all thank Our Maker dat dey ain’t been nary bite et yit.”

“Amen to dat, Brer Zach!” muttered Ike shakily; and dumbly Tobe Emery nodded, stricken beyond power of speech by the nearness of a barely averted catastrophe fraught with disaster, if not with death itself.

Involuntarily Judge Priest had shoved his chair back; most of the others had done the same thing. He got on his feet with alacrity.

“Boys,” he said, “the squire is right – there’s thirteen of us. Now whut d’ye reckon we’re goin’ to do ‘bout that?”

The natural suggestion would be that they send at once for another person. Three or four offered it together, their voices rising in a babble. Names of individuals who would make congenial table mates were heard. Among others, Sergeant Jimmy Bagby was spoken of; likewise Colonel Cope and Captain Woodward. But Judge Priest shook his head.

“I can’t agree with you-all,” he set forth. “By the time we sent clean uptown and roused one of them boys out, the vittles would all be cold.”

“Well, Billy,” demanded Doctor Lake, “what are you going to do, then? We can’t go ahead this way, can we? Of course I don’t believe in all this foolishness about signs myself; but” – he added – “but I must admit to a little personal prejudice against thirteen at the table.”

“Listen here, you boys!” said Judge Priest. “Ef we’re jest, obliged and compelled to break a long-standin’ rule of this command – and it looks to me like that’s whut we’ve got to do – let’s foller after a precedent that was laid down a mighty long time ago. You-all remember – don’t you – how the Good Book tells about the Rich Man that give a feast oncet? And at the last minute the guests he’d invited didn’t show up at all – none of ‘em. So then he sent out into the highways and byways and scraped together some hongry strangers; and by all accounts they had a purty successful time of it there. When in doubt I hold it’s a fairly safe plan to jest take a leaf out of them old Gospels and go by it. Let’s send out right here in the neighbourhood and find somebody – no matter who ‘tis, so long as he’s free, white and twenty-one – that looks like he could appreciate a meal of vittles, and present the compliments of Company B to him, and ast him will he come on in and jine with us.”

Maybe it was the old judge’s way of putting it, but the idea took unanimously. The manager of the Richland House, having been sent for, appeared in person almost immediately. To him the situation was outlined and the remedy for it that had been favoured.

“By gum, gentlemen,” said their host, instantly inspired, “I believe I know where I can put my hand on the very candidate you’re looking for. There’s a kind of seedy-looking, lonely old fellow downstairs, from somewhere the other side of the Ohio River. He’s been registered since yes’day morning; seems like to me his name is Watts – something like that, anyhow. He don’t seem to have any friends or no business in particular; he’s just kind of hanging round. And he knows about this dinner too. He was talking to me about it a while ago, just before supper – said he’d read about it in a newspaper up in his country. He even asked me what the names of some of you gentlemen were. If you think he’ll do to fill in I’ll go right down and get him. He was sitting by himself in a corner of the lobby not two minutes ago. I judge he’s about the right age, too, if age is a consideration. He looks to be about the same age as most of you.”

There was no need for Judge Priest to put the question to a vote. It carried, so to speak, by acclamation. Bearing a verbal commission heartily to speak for the entire assemblage, Manager Ritter hurried out and in less than no time was back again, escorting the person he had described. Judge Priest met them at the door and was there introduced to the stranger, whose rather reluctant hand he warmly shook.

“He didn’t want to come at first,” explained Mr. Ritter; “said he didn’t belong up here with you-all; but when I told him the fix you was in he gave in and consented, and here he is.”

“You’re mighty welcome, suh,” said Judge Priest, still holding the other man’s hand. “And we’re turribly obliged to you fur comin’, and to Mr. Ritter fur astin’ you to come.”

With that, he drew their dragooned guest into the room and, standing beside him, made formal presentation to the expectant company.

“Gentlemen of Company B, allow me to make you acquainted with Mr. Watts, of the State of Illinoy, who has done us the great honour of agreein’ to make fourteen at the table, and to eat a bite with us at this here little dinner of ours.” A stragglin’ outburst of greeting and approbation arose from twelve elderly throats. “Mr. Watts, suh, will you be so good as to take this cheer here, next to me?” resumed Judge Priest when the noise abated; and he completed the ceremonial by indicating the place of the absent Mr. Reeves.

What the stranger saw as he came slowly forward – if, indeed, he was able to see anything with distinctness by reason of the evident confusion that covered him – was a double row of kindly, cordial, curious faces of old men, all staring at him. Before the battery of their eyes he bowed his acknowledgments, but did not speak them; still without speaking, he slipped into the seat which Tobe Emery sprang forward to draw clear of the table for his easier admission to the group. What the others saw was a tall, stooped, awkward man of, say, sixty-five, with sombre eyes, set deep in a whiskered face that had been burned a leathery red by wind and weather; a heavy-footed man, who wore a suit of store clothes – clothes of a homely cut and none too new, yet neat enough; such a man, one might guess at a glance, as would have little to say and would be chary about saying that little until sure

of his footing and his audience. Judging by appearances and first impressions he did not promise to be what you might call exciting company, exactly; but he made fourteen at the table, and that was the main point, anyhow.

Now the dinner got under way with a swing and a clatter. For all the stitches and tucks that time had taken in their leg muscles, the three old negroes flitted about like flickery black shadows, bringing food to all and toddies to several, and just plain ice water to at least three of their white friends. Even Kentuckians have been known to be advocates of temperance. To learn how true a statement this is you must read, not the comic weeklies, but the official returns of local-option elections. Above the medley of commingling voices, some cracked and jangled with age, some still full and sonorous, and one at least as thin and piercing as the bleat of a reed flute – that would be Judge Priest’s voice, of course – sounded the rattling of dishes and glasses and plated silverware. Uncle Zach and his two aides may have been good waiters, but they were tolerably noisy ones.

Through it all the extra guest sat very quietly, eating little and drinking nothing. Sitting alongside him, Doctor Lake noticed that he fed himself with his right hand only; his left hand stayed in his lap, being hidden from sight beneath the table. Naturally this set afoot a train of mild professional surmise in the old doctor’s mind. The arm itself seemed sound enough; he vaguely wondered whether the Illinois man had a crippled hand or a deformed hand, or what. Judge Priest noticed it too, but subconsciously rather. At the beginning he tried to start a conversation with Watts, feeling it incumbent on him, as chief sponsor for the other’s presence, to cure him of his embarrassment if he could, and to make him feel more at home there among them; but his well-meant words appeared to fall on barren soil. The stranger answered in mumbled monosyllables, without once looking Judge Priest straight in the face. He kept his head half averted – a posture the judge ascribed to diffidence; but it was evident he missed nothing at all of the talk that ran up and down the long table and back and forth across it. Under his bushy brows his eyes shifted from face to face as this man or that had his say.

So presently the judge, feeling that he had complied with the requirements of hospitality, abandoned the effort to interest his silent neighbour, and very soon after forgot him altogether for the time being. Under the circumstances it was only to be expected of Judge Priest that he should forget incidental matters; for now, to all these lifelong friends of his, time was swinging backward on a greased hinge. The years that had lined these old faces and bent these old backs were dropping away; the memories of great and storied days were mounting to their brains like the fumes of strong wine, brightening their eyes and loosening their tongues.

From their eager lips dropped names of small country churches, tiny backwoods villages of the Southwest, trivial streams and geographically inconsequential mountains – names that once meant nothing to the world at large, but which, by reason of Americans having fought Americans there and Americans having died by the hundreds and the thousands there, are now printed in the school histories and memorised by the school children – Island Number 10 and Shiloh; Peachtree Creek and Stone River; Kenesaw Mountain and Brice’s Crossroads. They had been at these very places, or at most of them – these thirteen old men had. To them the names were more than names. Each one burned in their hearts as a living flame. All the talk, though, was not of battle and skirmish. It dealt with prisons, with hospitals, with camps and marches.

“By George, boys, will you ever forget the day we marched out of this town?” It was Doctor Lake speaking, and his tone was high and exultant. “Flags flying everywhere and our sweethearts crying and cheering us through their tears! And the old town band up front playing *Girl I Left Behind Me* and *Johnnie’s Gone for a Soger!* And we-all stepping along, feeling so high and mighty and stuck-up in our new uniforms! A little shy on tactics we were, and not enough muskets to go round; but all the boys wore new grey suits, I remember. Our mothers saw to that.”

“It was different, though, Lew, the day we came home again,” reminded some one else, speaking gently. “No flags flying then and nobody cheering, and no band to play! And half the women were in black – yes, more than half.”

“An’ dat’s de Gawd’s truth!” half-whispered black Tobe Emery, carried away for the moment.

“Well,” said Press Harper, “I know they run out of muskets ‘fore they got round to me. I call to mind that I went off totin’ an ole flintlock that my paw had with him down in Mexico when he was campin’ on ole Santy Anny’s trail. And that wus all I did have in the way of weepins, ‘cept fur a great big bowie knife that a blacksmith out at Massac made fur me out of a rasp-file. I wus mighty proud of that there bowie of mine till we got down yonder to Camp Boone and found a whole company, all with bigger knives than whut mine wus. Called themselves the Blood River Tigers, those boys did, ‘cause they came frum up on Blood River, in Calloway.”

Squire Futrell took the floor – or the table, rather – for a moment:

“I recollect’ one Calloway County feller down at Camp Boone, when we fust got there, that didn’t even have a knife. He went round ‘lowin’ as how he wus goin’ to pick him out a likely Yank the fust fight we got into, and lick him with his bare hands ef he stood still and fit, or knock him down with a rock ef he broke and run – and then strip him of his outfit.”

“Why, I place that feller, jest ez plain ez if he wus standin’ here now,” declared Mr. Harper. “I remember him sayin’ he could lick ary Yankee that ever lived with his bare hands.”

“I reckon mebbe he could, too – he wus plenty long enough,” said the squire with a chuckle; “but the main obstacle wus that the Yankees wouldn’t fight with their bare hands. They jest would insist on usin’ tools – the contrary rascals! Let’s see, now, whut wus that Calloway County feller’s name? You remember him, Herman, don’t you? A tall, ganglin’ jimpy jawed, loose-laiged feller he wus – built like one of these here old blue creek cranes.”

Mr. Felsburg shook his head; but Press Harper broke in again:

“I’ve got him! The boys called him Lengthy fur short; but his real name wus Washburn, same ez – ”

He stopped short off there; and, twisting his head away from the disapproving faces, which on the instant had been turned full on him from all along the table, he went through the motion of spitting, as though to rid his mouth of an unsavoury taste. A hot colour climbed to Peter J. Galloway’s wrinkled cheeks and he growled under the overhang of his white moustache. Doctor Lake pursed up his lips, shaking his head slowly.

There was one black spot, and just one, on the records of Company B. And, living though he might still be, or dead, as probably he was, the name of one man was taboo when his one-time companions broke bread at their anniversary dinner. Indeed, they went farther than that: neither there nor elsewhere did they speak by name of him who had been their shame and their disgrace. It was a rule. With them it was as though that man had never lived.

Up to this point Mr. Herman Felsburg had had mighty little to say. For all he had lived three-fourths of his life in our town, his command of English remained faulty and broken, betraying by every other word his foreign birth; and his habit of mixing his metaphors was proverbial. He essayed few long speeches-before mixed audiences; but now he threw himself into the breach, seeking to bridge over the awkward pause.

“Speaking of roll calls and things such as that,” began Mr. Felsburg, seeming to overlook the fact that until now no one had spoken of roll calls – “speaking of those kinds of things, maybe you will perhaps remember how it was along in the winter of ‘64, when practically we were out of everything – clothes and shoes and blankets and money – ach, yes; money especially! – and how the orderly sergeant had no book or papers whatsoever, and so he used to make his report in the morning on a clean shingle, with a piece of lead pencil not so gross as that.” He indicated a short and stubby finger end.

“Long ‘bout then we could ‘a’ kept all the rations we drew on a clean shingle too – eh, Herman?” wheezed Judge Priest. “And the shingle wouldn’t ‘a’ been loaded down at that! My, my! Ever’ time I think of that winter of ‘64 I find myse’f gittin’ hongry all over agin!” And the judge threw himself back in his chair and laughed his high, thin laugh.

Then, noting the others had not yet rallied back again to the point where the flow of reminiscences had been checked by Press Harper's labial slip-up, he had an inspiration.

"Speakin' of roll calls," he said, unconsciously parroting Mr. Felsburg, "seems to me it's 'bout time we had ours. The vittles end of this here dinner 'pears to be 'bout over. Zach" – throwing the suggestion across his shoulder – "you and your pardners'd better be fetchin' on the coffee and the seegars, I reckon." He faced front again, raising his voice: "Who's callin' the roll to-night?"

"I am," answered Professor Reese; and at once he got on his feet, adjusted his spectacles just so, and drew from an inner breast pocket of his long frock coat a stained and frayed scroll, made of three sheets of tough parchment paper pasted end to end.

He cleared his throat; and, as though the sound had been a command, his fellow members bent forward, with faces composed to earnestness. None observed how the stranger acted; indeed, he had been quite out of the picture and as good as forgotten for the better part of an hour. Certainly nobody was interested in him at this moment when there impended what, to that little group, was a profoundly solemn, highly sentimental thing.

Again Professor Reese cleared his throat, then spoke the name that was written in faded letters at the top of the roll – the name of him who had been their first captain and, at the last, their brigade commander.

"Died the death of a hero in an effort to save others at Cottonwood Bar, June 28, 1871," said Judge Priest; and he saluted, with his finger against his forehead.

One by one the old school-teacher called off the list of commissioned and noncommissioned officers. Squire Futrell, who had attained to the eminence of a second corporal's place, was the only one who answered for himself. For each of the others, including Lieutenant Garrett – he of the game leg and the plantation in Mississippi – somebody else answered, giving the manner and, if he remembered it, the date of that man's death. For, excepting Garrett, they were all dead.

The professor descended to the roster of enlisted men:

"Abner P. Ashbrook!"

"Died in Camp Chase as a prisoner of war."

"G. W. Ayres!"

"Killed at Baker's Creek."

"R. M. Bigger!"

"Moved to Missouri after the war, was elected state senator, and died in '89."

"Reuben Brame!"

"Honourably discharged after being wounded at Corinth, and disappeared. Believed to be dead."

"Robert Burnell!"

"Murdered by bushwhackers in East Tennessee on his way home after the Surrender."

So it went down the long column of names. They were names, many of them, which once stood for something in that community but which would have fallen with an unfamiliar sound upon the ears of the oncoming generation – old family names of the old town. But the old families had died out or had scattered, as is the way with old families, and the names were only pronounced when Company B met or when some idler, dawdling about the cemetery, deciphered the lichen-grown lines on gray and crumbly grave-stones. Only once in a while did a voice respond, "Here!" But always the "Here!" was spoken clearly and loudly and at that, the remaining twelve would hoist their voices in a small cheer.

By common consent certain survivors spoke for certain departed members. For example, when the professor came to one name down among the L's, Peter J. Galloway, who was an incorruptible and unshakable Roman of the party of Jefferson and Jackson, blared out: "Turn't Republikin in '96, and by the same token died that same year!" And when he reached the name of Adolph Ohlmann it was Mr. Felsburg's place to tell of the honourable fate of his fellow Jew, who fell before Atlanta.

The reader read on and on until his voice took on a huskened note. He had heard “Here!” for the thirteenth time; he had come to the very bottomest lines of his roster. He called one more name – Vilas, it was – and then he rolled up his parchment and put it away.

“The records show that, first and last, Company B had one hundred and seventy-two members, all regularly sworn into the service of the Confederate States of America under our beloved President, Jefferson Davis,” stated Professor Reese sonorously. “Of those names, in accordance with the custom of this organisation, I have just called one hundred and seventy-one. The roll call of Company B, of the Old Regiment of mounted infantry serving under General Nathan Bedford Forrest, is completed for the current year.” And down he sat.

As Judge Priest, with a little sigh, settled back in his chair, his glance fell on the face of the man next him. Perhaps the old judge’s eyes were not as good as once they had been. Perhaps the light was faulty. At any rate, he interpreted the look that was on the other’s face as a look of loneliness. Ordinarily the judge was a pretty good hand at reading faces too.

“Looky here, boys!” he called out, with such emphasis as to centre general attention on the upper end of the table. “We oughter be ‘shamed of ourselves – carryin’ on this way ‘mongst ourselves and plum’ furgittin’ we had an outsider with us ez a special guest. Our new friend here is ‘bout the proper age to have seen service in the war his own se’f – mebbe he did see some. Of all the states that fought ag’inst us, none of ‘em turned out better soldiers than old Illinoy did. If my guess is right I move we hear frum Mr. Watts, frum Illinoy, on some of his own wartime experiences.” His hand dropped, with a heartening thump, on the shoulder of the stranger. “Come on, colonel! We’ve had a word from ever’body exceptin’ you. It’s your turn – ain’t it, boys?”

Before his question might be answered, Watts had straightened to his feet. He stood rigidly, his hands driven wrist-deep into his coat pockets; his weather-beaten face set in heavy, hard lines; his deep eyes fixed on a spot in the blank wall above their heads.

“You’re right – I was a soldier in the war between the States,” he said in a thickened, quick voice, which trembled just a little; “but I didn’t serve with the Illinois troops. I didn’t move to Illinois until after the war. My regiment was as good a regiment, though, and as game a regiment, as fought in that war on either side.”

Some six or eight broke generously into a brisk patter of handclapping at this, and from the exuberant Mr. Galloway came:

“Whirroo! That’s right – stick up for yer own side always! Go on, me boy; go on!”

The urging was unnecessary. Watts was going on as though he had not been interrupted, as though he had not heard the friendly applause, as though his was a tale which stood in most urgent need of the telling:

“I’m not saying much of my first year as a soldier. I wasn’t satisfied – well, I wasn’t happily placed; I’ll put it that way. I had hopes at the beginning of being an officer; and when the company election was held I lost out. Possibly I was too ambitious for my own good. I came to know that I was not popular with the rest of the company. My captain didn’t like me, either, I thought. Maybe I was morbid; maybe I was homesick. I know I was disappointed. You men have all been soldiers – you know how those things go. I did my duty after a fashion – I didn’t skulk or hang back from danger – but I didn’t do it cheerfully. I moped and I suppose I complained a lot.

“Well, finally I left that company and that regiment. I just quit. I didn’t quit under fire; but I quit – in the night. I think I must have been half crazy; I’d been brooding too much. In a day or two I realised that I couldn’t go back home – which was where I had started for – and I wouldn’t go over to the enemy. Badly as I had behaved, the idea of playing the outright traitor never entered my mind. I want you to know that. So I thought the thing over for a day or two. I had time for thinking it over – alone there in that swamp where I was hiding. I’ve never spoken of that shameful thing in my life since then – not until to-night. I tried not to think of it – but I always have – every day.

“Well, I came to a decision at last. I closed the book on my old self; I wiped out the past. I changed my name and made up a story to account for myself; but I thank God I didn’t change flags and I didn’t change sides. I was wearing that new name of mine when I came out of those woods, and under it I enlisted in a regiment that had been recruited in a state two hundred miles away from my own state. I served with it until the end of the war – as a private in the ranks.

“I’m not ashamed of the part I played those last three years. I’m proud of it! As God is my judge, I did my whole duty then. I was commended in general orders once; my name was mentioned in despatches to the War Department once. That time I was offered a commission; but I didn’t take it. I bear in my body the marks of three wounds. I’ve got a chunk of lead as big as your thumb in my shoulder. There’s a little scar up here in my scalp, under the hair, where a splinter from a shell gashed me. One of my legs is a little bit shorter than the other. In the very last fight I was in a spent cannon ball came along and broke both the bones in that leg. I’ve got papers to prove that from ‘62 to ‘65 I did my best for my cause and my country. I’ve got them here with me now – I carry them with me in the daytime and I sleep at night with them under my pillow.”

With his right hand he fumbled in his breast pocket and brought out two time-yellowed slips of paper and held them high aloft, clenched and crumpled up in a quivering fist.

“One of these papers is my honourable discharge. The other is a letter that the old colonel of my regiment wrote to me with his own hand two months before he died.”

He halted and his eyes, burning like red coals under the thick brows, ranged the faces that looked up into his. His own face worked. When he spoke again he spoke as a prisoner at the bar might speak, making a last desperate appeal to the jury trying him for his life:

“You men have all been soldiers. I ask you this now, as a soldier standing among soldiers – I ask you if my record of three years of hard service and hard fighting can square me up for the one slip I made when I was hardly more than a boy in years? I ask you that?”

With one voice, then, the jury answered. Its verdict was acquittal – and not alone acquittal but vindication. Had you been listening outside you would have sworn that fifty men and not thirteen were yelling at the tops of their lungs, beating on the table with all the might in their arms.

The old man stood for a minute longer. Then suddenly all the rigidity seemed to go out of him. He fell into his chair and put his face in his two cupped hands. The papers he had brandished over his head slipped out of his fingers and dropped on the tablecloth. One of them – a flat, unfolded slip – settled just in front of Doctor Lake. Governed partly by an instinct operating automatically, partly to hide his own emotions, which had been roused to a considerable degree, Doctor Lake bent and spelled out the first few words. His head came up with a jerk of profound surprise and gratification.

“Why, this is signed by John B. Gordon him-self!” he snorted. He twisted about, reaching out for Judge Priest. “Billy! Billy Priest! Why, look here! Why, this man’s no Yankee! Not by a dam’ sight he’s not! Why, he served with a Georgia regiment! Why – ”

But Judge Priest never heard a word of what Doctor Lake was saying. His old blue eyes stared at the stranger’s left hand. On the back of that hand, standing out upon the corded tendons and the wrinkled brown skin, blazed a red spot, shaped like a dumb-bell, a birthmark of most unusual pattern.

Judge Priest stared and stared; and as he stared a memory that was nearly as old as he was crept out from beneath a neglected convulsion in the back part of his brain, and grew and spread until it filled his amazed, startled, scarce-believing mind. So it was no wonder he did not hear Doctor Lake; no wonder he did not see black Tobe Emery stealing up behind him, with popped eyes likewise fixed on that red dumb-bell-shaped mark.

No; Judge Priest did not hear a word. As Doctor Lake faced about the other way to spread his wonderful discovery down the table and across it, the judge bent forward and touched the fourteenth guest on the shoulder very gently.

“Pardner,” he asked, apparently apropos of nothing that had happened since the dinner started – “Pardner, when was the first time you heard about this here meetin’ of Company B – the first time?”

Through the interlaced fingers of the other the answer came haltingly:

“I read about it – in a Chicago Sunday paper – three weeks ago.”

“But you knew before that there was a Company B down here in this town?”

Without raising his head or baring his face, the other nodded. Judge Priest overturned his coffee cup as he got to his feet, but took no heed of the resultant damage to the cloth on the table and the fronts of his white trouser legs.

“Boys,” he cried out so shrilly, so eagerly, so joyously, that they all jumped, “when you foller after Holy Writ you can’t never go fur wrong. You’re liable to breed a miracle. A while ago we took a lesson from the Parable of the Rich Man that give a dinner; and – lo and behold! – another parable and a better parable – yes, the sweetest parable of ‘em all – has come to pass and been repeated here ‘mongst us without our ever knowin’ it or even suspectin’ it. The Prodigal Son didn’t enjoy the advantage of havin’ a Chicago Sunday paper to read, but in due season he came back home – that other Prodigal did; and it stands written in the text that he was furgiven, and that a feast was made fur him in the house of his fathers.”

His tone changed to one of earnest demand: “Lycurgus Reese, finish the roll call of this company – finish it right now, this minute – the way it oughter be finished!”

“Why, Judge Priest,” said Professor Reese, still in the dark and filled with wonderment, “it is already finished!”

As though angered almost beyond control, the judge snapped back:

“It ain’t finished, neither. It ain’t been rightly finished from the very beginnin’ of these dinners. It ain’t finished till you call the very last name that’s on that list.”

“But, Judge – ”

“But nothin’! You call that last name, Ly-curgus Reese; and you be almighty quick about it!”

There was no need for the old professor, thus roughly bidden, to haul out his manuscript. He knew well enough the name, though wittingly it had not passed his lips for forty years or more. So he spoke it out:

“Sylvester B. Washburn!”

The man they had called Watts raised in his place and dropped his clenched hands to his sides, and threw off the stoop that was in his shoulders. He lifted his wetted eyes to the cracked, stained ceiling above. He peered past plaster and rafter and roof, and through a rift in the skies above he feasted his famished vision on a delectable land which others might not see. And then, beholding on his face that look of one who is confessed and shriven, purified and atoned for, the scales fell away from their own eyes and they marvelled – not that they knew him now, but that they had not known him before now. And for a moment or two there was not a sound to be heard.

“Sylvester B. Washburn!” repeated Professor Reese.

And the prodigal answered:

“Here!”

### III. JUDGE PRIEST COMES BACK

FROM time to time persons of an inquiring turn of mind have been moved audibly to speculate – I might even say to ponder – regarding the enigma underlying the continued presence in the halls of our National Congress of the Honourable Dabney Prentiss. All were as one in agreeing that he had a magnificent delivery, but in this same connection it has repeatedly been pointed out that he so rarely had anything to deliver. Some few among this puzzled contingent, knowing, as they did, the habits and customs of the people down in our country, could understand that in a corner of the land where the gift of tongue is still highly revered and the golden chimings of a full-jewelled throat are not yet entirely lost in the click of cash registers and the whirl of looms, how the Honourable Dabney within his limitations might have been oratorically conspicuous and politically useful, not alone to himself but to others. But as a constructive statesman sent up to Washington, District of Columbia, and there engaged in shaping loose ends of legislation into the welded and the tempered law, they could not seem to see him at all. It was such a one, an editorial writer upon a metropolitan daily, who once referred to Representative Prentiss as *The Human Voice*. The title stuck, a fact patently testifying to its aptness. That which follows here in this chapter is an attempt to explain the mystery of this gentleman's elevation to the high places which he recently adorned.

To go back to the very start of things we must first review briefly the case of old Mr. Lysander John Curd, even though he be but an incidental figure in the narrative. He was born to be incidental, I reckon, heredity, breeding and the chance of life all conspiring together to fit him for that inconsequential rôle. He was born to be a background. The one thing he ever did in all his span on earth to bring him for a moment into the front of the picture was that, having reached middle age, he took unto himself a young wife. But since he kept her only long enough to lose her, even this circumstance did not serve to focus the attention of the community upon his uncoloured personality for any considerable period of time.

Considering him in all his aspects – as a volunteer soldier in the Great War, as a district schoolteacher, as a merchant in our town, as a bachelor of long standing, as a husband for a fleeting space, and as a grass widower for the rest of his days – I have gleaned that he never did anything ignoble or anything conspicuous. Indeed, I myself, who knew him as a half-grown boy may know a middle-aged man, find it hard after the lapse of years to describe him physically for you. I seem to recall that he was neither tall nor short, neither thick nor thin. He had the customary number of limbs and the customary number of features arranged in the customary way – I know that, of course. It strikes me that his eyes were mild and gentle, that he was, as the saying runs, soft-spoken and that his whiskers were straggly and thin, like young second growth in a new clearing; also that he wore his winter overcoat until the hot suns of springtime scorched it, and that he clung to his summer alpaca and his straw hat until the frosts of autumn came along and nipped them with the sweet-gum and the dogwood. That lets me out. Excusing these things, he abides merely as a blur in my memory.

On a certain morning of a certain year, the month being April, Judge Priest sat at his desk in his chamber, so-called, on the right-hand side of the long hall in the old courthouse, as you came in from the Jefferson Street door. He was shoulders deep down in his big chair, with both his plump legs outstretched and one crossed over the other, and he was reading a paper-bound volume dealing in the main with certain inspiring episodes in the spectacular life of a Western person known as Trigger Sam. On his way downtown from home that morning he had stopped by Wilcox & Powell's bookstore and purchased this work at the price of five cents; it was the latest production of the facile pen of a popular and indefatigable author of an earlier day than this, the late Ned Buntline. In his hours of leisure and seclusion the judge dearly loved a good nickel library, especially one with a lot of shooting and some thrilling rescues in it. Now he was in the middle of one of the most exciting

chapters when there came a mild rap at the outer door. Judge Priest slid the Trigger Sam book into a half-open drawer and called out:

“Come right on in, whoever ‘tis.”

The door opened and old Mr. Lysander John Curd entered, in his overcoat, with his head upon his chest.

“Good morning, Judge Priest,” he said in his gentle halting drawl; “could I speak with you in private a minute? It’s sort of a personal matter and I wouldn’t care to have anybody maybe overhearing.”

“You most certainly could,” said Judge Priest. He glanced through into the adjoining room at the back, where Circuit Clerk Milam and Sheriff Giles Birdsong, heads together, were busy over the clerical details of the forthcoming term of circuit court. Arising laboriously from his comfortable place he waddled across and kicked the open door between the two rooms shut with a thrust of a foot clad in a box-toed, low-quartered shoe. On his way back to his desk he brushed an accumulation of old papers out of a cane-bottomed chair. “Set down here, Lysandy,” he said in that high whiny voice of his, “and let’s hear whut’s on your mind. Nice weather, ain’t it?”

An eavesdropper trained, mayhap, in the psychology of tone and gesture might have divined from these small acts and this small utterance that Judge Priest had reasons for suspecting what was on his caller’s mind; as though this visit was not entirely unexpected, even though he had had no warning of it. There was in the judge’s words an intangible inflection of understanding, say, or sympathy; no, call it compassion – that would be nearer to it. The two old men – neither of them would ever see sixty-five again – lowered themselves into the two chairs and sat facing each other across the top of the judge’s piled and dusty desk. Through his steel-rimmed glasses the judge fixed a pair of kindly, but none-the-less keen, blue eyes on Mr. Lysander Curd’s sagged and slumped figure. There was despondency and there was embarrassment in all the drooping lines of that elderly frame. Judge Priest’s lips drew up tightly, and unconsciously he nodded – the brief nod that a surgeon might employ on privately confirming a private diagnosis.

The other did not detect these things – neither the puckering of the lips nor the small forward bend of the judge’s head. His own chin was in his collar and his own averted eyes were on the floor. One of his hands – a gnarly, rather withered hand it must have been – reached forth absently and fumbled at a week-old copy of the *Daily Evening News* that rested upon a corner of the desk. The twining fingers tore a little strip loose from the margin of a page and rolled it up into a tiny wad.

For perhaps half a minute there was nothing said. Then Judge Priest bent forward suddenly and touched the nearermost sleeve of Mr. Curd with a gentle little half-pat.

“Well, Lysandy?” he prompted.

“Well, Judge.” The words were the first the visitor had uttered since his opening speech, and they came from him reluctantly. “Well, sir, it would seem like I hardly know how to start. This is a mighty personal matter that I’ve come to see you in regards to – and it’s just a little bit hard to speak about it even to somebody that I’ve known most of my life, same as I’ve always known you. But things in my home have finally come to a head, and before the issue reaches you in an official capacity as the judge on the bench I sort of felt like it might help some – might make the whole thing pass off easier for all concerned – if I could have a few words with you privately, as a friend and as a former comrade in arms on the field of battle.”

“Yes, Lysandy, go ahead. I’m listenin’,” stated Judge Priest, as the other halted.

Old Mr. Curd raised his face and in his faded eyes there was at once a bewildered appeal and a fixed and definite resolution. He spoke on very slowly and carefully, choosing his words as he went, but without faltering:

“I don’t know as you know about it, Judge Priest – the chances are you naturally wouldn’t – but in a domestic way things haven’t been going very smoothly with me – with us, I should say – for quite a spell back. I reckon after all it’s a mistake on the part of a man after he’s reached middle age

and got set in his ways to be taking a young wife, more especially if he can't take care of her in the way she's been used to, or anyhow in the way she'd like to be taken care of. I suppose it's only human nature for a young woman to hanker after considerable many things that a man like me can't always give her – jewelry and pretty things, and social life, and running round and seeing people, and such as that. And Luella – well, Luella really ain't much more than a girl herself yet, is she?"

The question remained unanswered. It was plain, too, that Mr. Curd had expected no answer to it, for he went straight on:

"So I feel as if the blame for what's happened is most of it mine. I reckon I was too old to be thinking about getting married in the first place. And I wasn't very well off then either – not well enough off to have the money I should've had if I expected to make Luella contented. Still, all that part of it's got nothing to do with the matter as it stands – I'm just telling it to you, Judge, as a friend."

"I understand, Lysandy," said Judge Priest almost in the tone which he might have used to an unhappy child. "This is all a strict confidence between us two and this is all the further it'll ever go, so fur ez I'm concerned, without you authorise me to speak of it."

He waited for what would come next. It came in slow, steady sentences, with the regularity of a statement painfully rehearsed beforehand: "Judge Priest, I've never been a believer in divorce as a general thing. It seemed to me there was too much of that sort of thing going on round this country. That's always been my own private doctrine, more or less. But in my own case I've changed my mind. We've been talking it over back and forth and we've decided – Luella and me have – that under the circumstances a divorce is the best thing for both of us; in fact we've decided that it's the only thing. I want that Luella should be happy and I think maybe I'll feel easier in my own mind when it's all over and done with and settled up according to the law. I'm aiming to do what's best for both parties – and I want that Luella should be happy. I want that she should be free to live her own life in her own way without me hampering her. She's young and she's got her whole life before her – that's what I'm thinking of."

He paused and with his tongue he moistened his lips, which seemed dry.

"I don't mind telling you I didn't feel this way about it first-off. It was a pretty tolerably hard jolt to me – the way the proposition first came up. I've spent a good many sleepless nights thinking it over. At least I couldn't sleep very much for thinking of it," he amended with the literal impulse of a literal mind to state things exactly and without exaggeration. "And then finally I saw my way clear to come to this decision. And so –"

"Lysandy Curd," broke in Judge Priest, "I don't aim to give you any advice. In the first place, you ain't asked fur it; and in the second place, even ef you had asked, I'd hesitate a monstrous long time before I'd undertake to advice any man about his own private family affairs. But I jest want to ask you one thing right here: It wasn't you, was it, that first proposed the idea of this here divorce?"

"Well, no, Judge, I don't believe 'twas," confessed the old man whose misery-reddened eyes looked into Judge Priest's from across the littered desk. "I can't say as it was me that first suggested it. But that's neither here nor there. The point I'm trying to get at is just this:

"The papers have all been drawn up and they'll be bringing them in here sometime to-day to be filed – the lawyers in the case will, Bigger & Quigley. Naturally, with me and Luella agreeing as to everything, there's not going to be any fight made in your court. And after it's all over I'm aiming to sell out my feed store – it seems like I haven't been able to make it pay these last few months, the same as it used to pay, and debts have sort of piled up on me some way. I reckon the fellow that said two could live as cheap as one didn't figure on one of them being a young woman – pretty herself and wanting pretty things to wear and have round the house. But I shouldn't say that – I've come to see how it's mainly my fault, and I'm figuring on how to spare Luella in every way that it's possible to spare her. So as I was saying, I'm figuring, when it's all over, on selling out my interests here, such as they are, and going back to live on that little farm I own out yonder in the Lone Elm district. It's

got a mortgage on it that I put on it here some months back, but I judge I can lift that and get the place clear again, if I'm given a fair amount of time to do it in.

"And now that everything's been made clear to you, I want to ask you, Judge, to do all in your power to make things as easy as you can for Luella. I'd a heap rather there wouldn't be any fuss made over this case in the newspapers. It's just a straight, simple divorce suit, and after all it's just between me and my present wife, and it's more our business than 'tis anybody else's. So, seeing as the case is not going to be defended, I'd take it as a mighty big favour on your part if you'd shove it up on the docket for the coming term of court, starting next Monday, so as we could get it done and over with just as soon as possible. That's my personal wish, and I know it's Luella's wish too. In fact she's right anxious on that particular point. And here's one more thing: I reckon that young Rawlings boy, that's taken a job reporting news items for the *Daily Evening News*, will be round here in the course of the day, won't he?"

"He likely will," said Judge Priest; "he comes every day – purty near it. Why?"

"Well," said Mr. Curd, "I don't know him myself except by sight, and I don't feel as if I was in a position to be asking him to do anything for me. But I thought, maybe, if you spoke to him yourself when he came, and put it on the grounds of a favour to you, maybe he'd not put any more than just a little short piece in the paper saying suit had been filed – Curd against Curd – for a plain divorce, or maybe he might leave it out of his paper altogether. I'd like to see Luella shielded from any newspaper talk. It's not as if there was a scandal in it or a fight was going to be made." He bent forward in his eagerness. "Do you reckon you could do that much for me, Judge Priest – for old times' sake?"

"Ah-hah," assented Judge Priest. "I reckon part of it kin be arranged anyway. I kin have Lishy Milam set the case forward on the docket at the head of the list of uncontested actions. And I'll mention the matter to that there young Rawlings ef you want me to. Speaking personally, I should think jest a line or two ought to satisfy the readers of the *Daily Evenin' News*. Of course him bein' a reporter and all that, he'll probably want to know whut the facts are ez set forth in your petition – whut allegations are made in –"

He stopped in mid-speech, seeing how the other had flinched at this last. Mr. Curd parted his lips to interrupt, but the old judge, having no wish to flick wounds already raw, hurried on: "Don't you worry, Lysandy, I'll be glad to speak to young Rawlings. I jedge you've got no call to feel uneasy about whut's goin' to be said in print. You was sayin' jest now that the papers would be filed sometime to-day?" "They'll be filed to-day sure."

"And no defence is to be made?" continued Judge Priest, tallying off the points on his fingers. "And you've retained Bigger & Quigley to represent you – that's right, ain't it?"

"Hold on a minute, Judge," Mr. Curd was shaking his whity-grey head in dissent. "I've taken up a lot of your valuable time already, and still it would seem like I haven't succeeded in getting this affair all straight in your mind. Bigger & Quigley are not going to represent me. They're going to represent Luella."

He spoke as one stating an accepted and easily understood fact, yet at the words Judge Priest reared back as far as his chair would let him go and his ruddy cheeks swelled out with the breath of amazement.

"Do you mean to tell me," he demanded, "that you ain't the plaintiff here?"

"Why, Judge Priest," answered Mr. Curd, "you didn't think for a minute, did you, that I'd come into court seeking to blacken my wife's good name? She's been thoughtless, maybe, but I know she don't mean any harm by it, and besides look how young she is. It's her, of course, that's asking for this divorce – I thought you understood about that from the beginning." Still in his posture of astonishment, Judge Priest put another question and put it briskly: "Might it be proper fur me to ask on what grounds this lady is suin' you fur a divorce?"

A wave of dull red ran up old Mr. Curd's throat and flooded his shamed face to the hair line.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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