

OLD JUDGE PRIEST

BY
IRVIN S. COBB

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
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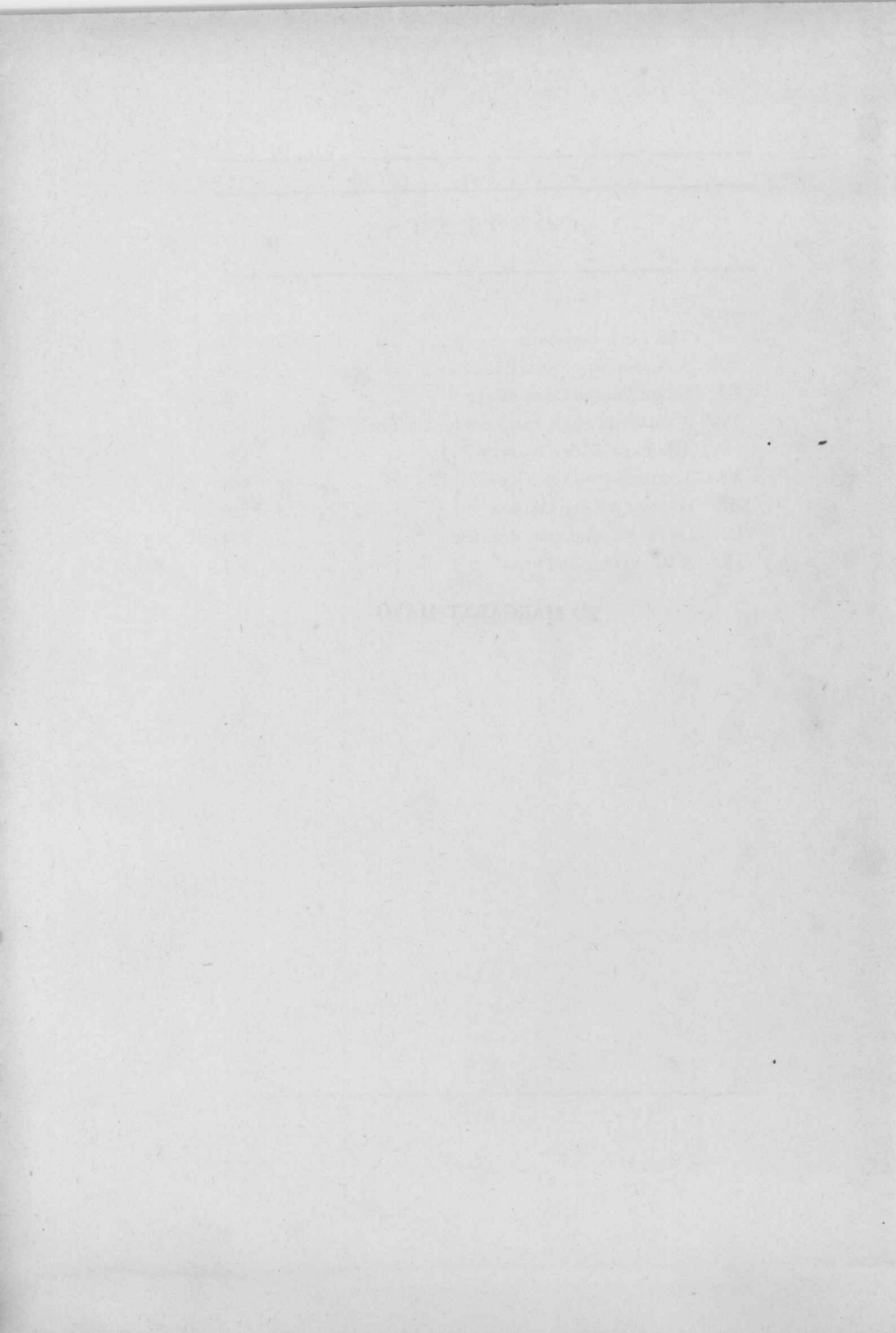
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OLD JUDGE PRIEST

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TO MARGARET MAYO

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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 hang-

ing 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 journey-men 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 you-all call that there little church-house down by the river Possum Trot?"

Jeff roused and grunted, shaking his head clear 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