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Irvin S. Cobb & the Judge Priest Stories

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Logsdon,

Katherine

1936

IRVIN S. COBB
AND
THE JUDGE PRIEST STORIES

BY

MATHERINE LOGSDON

A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

WESTERN KENTUCKY STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE

AUGUST, 1936

Approved: -

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for
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PREFACE

The following study deals with that phase of the life of Irvin S. Cobb that had direct bearing on his creation of Judge Priest; with the causes that influenced him to write the Judge Priest stories; with the life of William Sutton Bishop, who was the original of the fictitious character Judge Priest; and with the stories of Judge Priest and his people.

I am deeply indebted to Mr. Fred G. Neuman, of Paducah, Kentucky, for his kind consideration of my efforts and for the many courtesies he has shown me in the preparation of the thesis.

I appreciate the gracious consent of Mr. Cobb to my request to use him and his Judge Priest stories as the subject of this thesis, and I am grateful for his interest and help in its preparation.

To Dr. Gordon Wilson, of the Department of English in Western Kentucky State Teachers College, I wish to express my deep appreciation for his sincere criticism of this study.

Western Kentucky State Teachers College

Bowling Green, Kentucky

August, 1936.

CHAPTER I

IRVIN S. COBB

As the author of more than three hundred short stories, many of which stand foremost in the realm of sustained fiction, Irvin S. Cobb has made a notable contribution to the development of that phase of literature.

Born at Paducah, Kentucky, on Friday, June 23,¹ 1876, in one of the most pretentious houses of a small city, which then consisted of eight thousand inhabitants, Irvin Shrewsbury Cobb was the first son and second child among four children born to Joshua Clark Cobb and Manie Saunders Cobb.² The middle name, Shrewsbury, was given to him in honor of Major Joel Shrewsbury, who was an intimate friend of Irvin Cobb's father.³ This name has been abbreviated merely to the letter "S," and the famous writer is known simply as Irvin S. Cobb, humorist, short-story writer, and novelist.

Mr. Cobb was educated in the public and private schools of Paducah, followed by a year and a half at Cade's Academy,⁴ but a crisis in his father's affairs prevented him from going to college. Though his schooling ceased when he was scarcely sixteen, that is, his public and private schooling, he has made millions think, laugh, and admire. Although not a college

¹ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb 1876-1922," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (January, 1929), 46.

² Fred G. Reuman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements (Paducah, Ky., Young Publishing Co., 1934), p. 17.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert H. Davis, Who's Cobb and Why (New York, George H. Doran Co., 1916), p. 18.

man, Mr. Cobb received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from the University of Georgia in 1918 and from Dartmouth College in 1919.⁵

On January 16, 1893, at the age of seventeen Irvin S. Cobb went into the old News office at Paducah, now the News Democrat, as a cub reporter.⁶ Two years later he became editor of the Paducah Daily News.⁷ Mr. Cobb remained in newspaper work for eighteen and one half years; he spent a little more than eight of these with Paducah newspapers, three with Louisville newspapers, and seven with New York newspapers.

Early in the year 1911 Mr. Cobb left the newspaper field to become staff contributor for The Saturday Evening Post. His first work as staff contributor for this magazine began in January, 1911, when he joined the weekly and went permanently into the magazine field.⁸ Already well known through his syndicated newspaper features, the formal entrance of Irvin S. Cobb into the magazine field was welcomed all over the United States.

The Saturday Evening Post of October 14, 1911, carried an amusing article by Cobb entitled "The Open Season for Ancestors," and two weeks later inaugurated the now famous Judge Priest narratives.⁹

In 1922, at the age of forty-six, Irvin S. Cobb was famous, the creator of twenty-four books, ten of which contained humor comparable with that of Mark Twain; seven short stories, including four horror tales that have com-

⁵ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb 1876-1922," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (January, 1929), 48.

⁶ Neuman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements, p. 18.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

pelled comparison with "The Fall of the House of Usher" and other stories by Edgar Allan Poe; and twenty-nine narratives of his greatest character, Judge Priest, whose life and background caused critics to link Cobb's name with Bret Harte's; three volumes on the world war; and J. Poindexter, Colored, his first novel. He wound up the year by winning the O'Henry Memorial Award with the first short story he wrote for the Cosmopolitan Magazine, "Snake Doctor."¹⁰

It is rather remarkable that every one of Irvin Cobb's books except his novel, J. Poindexter, Colored, have been fashioned from stories and articles first published in The Saturday Evening Post and other periodicals.¹¹

Of the fifty-odd books Mr. Cobb has written to date, nearly all of them deal in one way or another with his home state.¹² More than thirty Judge Priest stories dealing with Kentucky lore and set in Kentucky scenes are bound in books. The merits of these stories may well be seen, when it is learned that they, along with other stories of the Bluegrass, are largely responsible for Mr. Cobb's reputation of being the highest-paid short-story writer in the world.¹³ The most favored collection of Judge Priest stories are found in such books as Back Home, Old Judge Priest, Those Times and These,

¹⁰ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb 1876-1922," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (January, 1929), 36.

¹¹ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb 1876-1922," Kentucky Progress Magazine, II (February, 1930), 48.

¹² Fred C. Neuman, "Irvin Cobb Kentuckian," Kentucky Progress Magazine, IV (September, 1931), 23.

¹³ Ibid.

and Down Yonder with Judge Priest and Irvin S. Cobb.

The most caricatured writing man in America,¹⁴ Mr. Cobb is frequently pictured in reference to his loyal attitude toward Kentucky.

It is singularly true that a native-born Kentuckian holding undisputed primacy among present-day humorists and short-story writers is likewise the state's chief advocate and most devoted citizen. It has been something like a score of years since the prolific writer introduced Old Judge Priest. Since that time a regular stream of literature has poured from his pen dealing with Kentucky and her people.

Irvin Cobb's humor is never personal nor cruel. It just bubbles out spontaneously, joyously, and cheerfully. He has the ability to impale things instead of people, to squeeze fun out of a situation instead of out of the heart of a friend; these are the traits which will give his work permanence.

"Beneath Mr. Cobb's fun is a mass of ripe experience and sagacity, however playful he may be on the surface, one is aware of an almost Johnsonian universality beneath. It would not be extravagant to call his humor the bloom on the fruit of the tree of knowledge."¹⁵

As a short-story writer Mr. Cobb has clung to the theory that the play is not the whole thing, that character is the backbone of every narrative. He has not written so many stories as O. Henry, but, unlike that fictionist,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ E.V. Lucas, "From an American Note-Book," Outlook, XV (September 15, 1920), 100.

he has created a character in Judge Priest that will be named in the same breath with himself as long as he lives and after his death. The chief characters of his first novel come from the land of his birth, the land of his best short stories and humorous articles, the land of his people, his long-loved Kentucky. Mr. Cobb's best short stories were carefully composed, and he did not begin to write until the facts were all at command.¹⁶ The Paducah wields with ease something like one hundred and thirty thousand words.¹⁷

The Judge Priest tales have given Paducah much prestige, and Paducah is justly proud of the Hotel Irvin Cobb, named in honor of the famous author and humorist who refers to Paducah as "back home." The Irvin Cobb, an eight-story structure, was opened in April, 1929.¹⁸

Mr. Cobb's versatility is evidenced by his success as a short-story writer, novelist, war-correspondent, speaker, radio star, and motion-picture actor.

"Being a movie star is just pure vanity on my part. I'm just conceited enough to wait until I'm danged near sixty years old before starting a totally new career."¹⁹

Mr. Cobb is about to sign a new contract with the Twentieth Century-Fox Studios calling him to star in two more pictures.²⁰ This is on the

¹⁶ Fred G. Neuman, "Random Book Talk," The Sun-Democrat, February 4, 1936.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sidney Snook, "Paducah a Convention City," Kentucky Progress Magazine, IV (July, 1932), 14.

¹⁹ "Irvin Cobb Plans a Film Career," Courier-Journal, March 10, 1936.

²⁰ Ibid.

strength of his most recent film, Everybody's Old Man, along with Steam-boat 'Round the Bend, in which he appeared with Will Rogers.

His theory is that writing and acting are both efforts to put down something we think, see, or feel.

"Writing is a lonely thankless job. When you're an actor, you're with people. There's a heap of fun connected with the work. I wish I'd started forty years ago."²¹

For many years Irvin Cobb maintained an apartment on Park Avenue in New York, retiring to his summer home at East Hampton, New York, during the warm months. Since going into the moving-picture field, he has purchased the former estate of Greta Garbo in Santa Monica.²² Irvin Cobb is very fond of the West, but those who know him best say his heart will always be in old Kentucky.

²¹
Ibid.

²²
Fred G. Leuman, "Celebrities of the Purchase," Kentucky Progress Magazine, VII (Winter, 1936), 97.

CHAPTER II

JUDGE PRIEST ARRIVES

Judge Priest comes to mind as the most clear type of character that Mr. Cobb has given us. He abounds in the grandeur of simplicity and in the romance of Kentucky sentiment and has become a contribution to literature, where he belongs so perfectly.

Mr. Cobb created Judge Priest, a character that has made him famous, for The Saturday Evening Post.¹ and he has written a group of stories about and around this leading citizen of his own Paducah. At the suggestion of George Horace Lorimer, editor of The Saturday Evening Post, Mr. Cobb undertook to invent for the purpose of fiction a new type of Southern darkey.² The result was Jeff Poindexter, who in later years, as narrated in J. Poindexter, Colored, made a memorable visit to New York, rescued his master from the wiles of crooked speculators, and was on the way to becoming a prominent figure in the moving-picture industry as J. Exter Poindexter. In the original design, however, Jeff was merely a servant of the old South and its old ideals. Inventing Jeff, Mr. Cobb had to find a master for him; and of that need Judge Priest was born.³ The first story glorifying the old judge appeared in the October 28, 1911, issue of The Saturday Evening Post⁴ and was called "Fords and Music."

¹ Fred C. Neuman, Irvin S. Cobb, His Life and Achievements, p. 91.

² Arthur B. Maurice, "The History of Their Books, VII. Irvin S. Cobb," The Bookman, X (July, 1929), 511.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Neuman, Irvin Cobb His Life and Achievements.

It met with instant favor, possessing a tang which appealed to both the young and the old. It has been followed by half a hundred Judge Priest stories.

Irvin Cobb at the age of thirty-six had been living in the north eight years. This residence, along with the fiction he had been reading, convinced him that the average Southerner was plainly misrepresented in many of the stories that were written above the Mason and Dixon line. In the preface to Back Home the author speaks of the well-meaning but imaginary Southern dramas dispensed by writers foreign to the soil.

"After I came North to live it seemed to me that the Southerner of fiction as met with in the North was generally just that--fiction and nothing else; a type that had no just claim on existence and yet a type that was currently accepted as a verity."⁵

Irvin Cobb broke from the traditional Southern type and introduced the actual. He wrote of women and men in the South as he knew them in an average community.

"I wanted, if I could, to describe what I believed to be an average Southern community so that others might see it as I had seen it. For my material I drew upon the life of that community as I remembered it.

"Having such an aim I wrote what I considered to be a series of pictures, out of the life of a town in the Western part of Kentucky."⁶

It was to correct the twisted conception of the Kentuckian as it existed in the minds of the New York people that Cobb began his true narratives of a noble people.⁷ For this reason, too, he gave us Judge Priest

⁵ Irvin S. Cobb, Back Home (New York, George H. Doran Co., 1912), p. vii.

⁶ Ibid., p. ix.

⁷ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (May, 1929), 57.

of Back Home and succeeding volumes as the best representative Southerner ever found in literature.⁸

There are in all forty-six Judge Priest stories:

- 1 in The Escape of Mr. Trim
- 10 in Back Home
- 9 in Old Judge Priest
- 4 in Sundry Accounts
- 1 in Pros and Cons
- 2 in Snake Doctor
- 2 in From Place to Place
- 5 in Those Times and These
- 12 in Born Yonder with Judge Priest
and Irvin S. Cobb

The two books Back Home and Born Yonder with Judge Priest and Irvin S. Cobb consist entirely of Judge Priest stories. While some of these stories have appeared in magazines, they have all been published later in books.⁹

Many of the anecdotes and incidents related in the Judge Priest tales were heard by the author as a boy, when he went with Major Joel Shrewsbury to the home of Judge Priest. In the opening paragraph of "A Dogged Under Dog" Irvin Cobb speaks of these memorable visits.

"One or two nights a week my uncle used to take me with him when he went to spend the evening with Old Judge Priest. There were pretty sure to be a half dozen gray heads there; and if it were good out-door weather, they would sit in a row on the low wide veranda, smoking their pipes and cigars. Every little while conceding the night too hot, Judge Priest's Jeff would come bringing a tray with drinks- toddies or else mint juleps. And they would sit and smoke and talk, and I would perch on the top step of the porch, hugging my bare knees together and listening."¹⁰

⁸ Blanche C. Williams, Our Short Story Writers (New York, Moffat, Yard and Co., 1920), p. 80.

⁹ Fred C. Neuman, Letter to Writer, February 26, 1936.

¹⁰ Cobb, Back Home, p. 264.

It must have been worth any boy's while to listen to the company that assembled on Judge Priest's front porch. Irvin Cobb sat at the feet of that company and harbored wisdom for the future years.

CHAPTER THREE

JUDGE WILLIAM SUTTON BISHOP ALIAS JUDGE WILLIAM PITMAN PRIEST

"In that corner of the Valhalla of fiction, in which congregate the heroes and heroines of contemporary American writers, a not conspicuous figure is Judge Priest."¹

Who is, or, rather, who was, Judge Priest? Actually, he was a composite character, with traits drawn from four different men, one of them Irvin Cobb's father, and two others who were prominent citizens of Paducah in the years of the author's boyhood.² But the basis of the character was the jurist Judge William Sutton Bishop, well known to Kentuckians of a generation ago.

During the years of Cobb's childhood and youth Judge William S. Bishop was the legal oracle of his home community.

"A tall, portly, slow-moving human being, who always carried a huge cotton umbrella, wore a well educated goatee, and white ducks in the summer. Bald-headed, florid, poor, with the independence and the courage of a lion, he appeared sometimes childlike, sometimes masterful, always kind."³

He died before he became distinguished in the world as the much-loved Judge Priest, as Cobb christened him, calling him Priest because, as his name was Bishop, it seemed appropriate.⁴

Judge Bishop was born in Trigg County, Kentucky, July 18, 1839, and was the youngest son of seven children born to Joseph and Elizabeth

¹ Arthur Bartlett Maurice, "The History of Their Books, VII, Irvin S. Cobb," The Bookman, X (July 1929), 511.

² Ibid., p. 512.

³ "Pendennis," "My Types - Irvin S. Cobb," The Forum, XIV (October, 1917), 471.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bishop. His father died at Columbus, Kentucky, while in the Confederate army, and his mother passed away a week later.⁶ In the schools of his native county William Bishop was prepared for Transylvania College, at Lexington, which he entered in 1856.⁷ On his return home from that institution in 1859 he began the study of law under Oscar Turner, in Ballard County.⁸ He was admitted to the bar two years later, in his twenty-second year.

At the outbreak of the Civil War William S. Bishop enlisted in Company F, Seventh Kentucky Confederate Infantry, on November 7, 1861,⁹ serving under Colonel Edward Crossland, who is frequently mentioned in the Judge Priest stories.¹⁰ Bishop was in the battles of Corinth, Brazos Creek Roads, Baton Rouge, and the bombardment of Port Hudson.¹¹ Shortly before Lee's surrender he was taken captive on the Big Black River, near Vicksburg. He was paroled in the spring of 1865 and returned to west Kentucky and began teaching school alternately in McCracken and Ballard Counties. In 1870 he formed a law partnership with E.L. Sugg and began practice at Blandville, Ballard County, about twenty-five miles from

⁵ Fred G. Neuman, Packmans in History, p. 74.

⁶ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb 1876-1922," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (May, 1929), 60.

⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁸ Neuman, Packmans in History.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Fred G. Neuman, "Many of Cobb's Most Celebrated Characters Taken From Life Here," News-Democrat, June 23, 1924.

¹¹ Neuman, Packmans in History, p. 74.

Paducah.¹²

Two years after returning from the Federal prison he was married to Miss Mary A. Hart, a native of Tennessee but a resident of McCracken County. The marriage occurred January 29, 1867.¹³ Four children were born to the couple: Henry L., Emma E., William R., and Joe Bishop.

In 1879, when he was forty years of age, William S. Bishop was elected common pleas judge of the first judicial district of Kentucky and shortly afterwards moved to Paducah.¹⁴ In 1891 he was re-elected, but the new Kentucky Constitution had changed the title of "common pleas" to circuit judge.¹⁵ In 1896 he was defeated for the Democratic nomination for the judge of the State Circuit Court of Appeals.¹⁶ It was both as common pleas judge and circuit judge that Irvin S. Cobb found the courteous, wise character around whom he has woven his stories of fact and fancy.

Following the expiration of his term as circuit judge the old jurist resumed the practice of law, in which he engaged until three months before his death at the age of sixty-three, May 23, 1902.¹⁷ He had been at the home of his sister, Mrs. Allen Banks, two miles from Hinkleville, in Bellara County, for a month before his death. He had been in

¹² John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb 1876-1922," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (May, 1929), 66.

¹³ Leuman, Paduchans in History, p. 76.

¹⁴ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (May, 1929), 66.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Leuman, Paduchans in History, p. 77.

failing health for two years and thought perhaps the rural surroundings might induce a favorable change in his condition. Grief over the death of his wife, who preceded him to the grave by eighteen months, and the shock of his young daughter's death, March 19, 1893,¹⁶ hastened his death. He was buried in Oak Grove Cemetery, Paducah.

An hour before Judge Bishop's funeral the bar association of Paducah held a solemn meeting at the city hall and adopted resolutions of condolence and regret at the passing of one whose career added lustre to the already noted profession in Kentucky: one who, as a jurist, evinced an honesty of purpose and clearness seldom equalled and never surpassed.

¹⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

THE STORIES OF JUDGE PRIEST AND HIS PEOPLE

In these partly fictitious tales of Judge Priest and his people the chief role, of course, is taken by Judge Priest, who with his straw hat and baggy umbrella, sitting casually on a porch under the sycamores or jogging about Kentucky holding court, represents the kindness and the vigor of the plain, homely, every-day American. These stories are local in setting and character and are filled with interesting incidents that in many cases really occurred in Paducah. Every individual Cobb describes was a real person. The names of the characters are slightly changed in spelling and sometimes removed to another part of town for convenience in telling. The fact that so many places pictured in the stories are so readily distinguished even now gives Irvin S. Cobb's Judge Priest stories an added charm.

Cobb's first story of Judge Priest, "Words and Music," printed in The Saturday Evening Post, is a story, not a caricature, of a man of flesh and blood. "Words and Music," besides presenting for the first time the noble character of Judge Priest, also introduced many of the other characters that have grown familiar to the admirers of the quaint, kindly, keen jurist. Breck Tandy, in real life Jacob C. Dudley, was born near Blandville, Kentucky, in 1860 and has been a portrait painter in Memphis for many years.¹ He painted Judge Bishop's portrait for the Mayfield, Kentucky, courthouse.² He does not appear again in any of Cobb's

¹John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (May, 1929), 66.

²Ibid.

stories. The negro mouth-organ artist, a Paducah character who was, really, white not black, was a composite character made up from two clothing merchants of Paducah: Herman Wallerstein and Joseph Ullmann; both were born in Germany.³ Congressman Durham was Judge Hal S. Corbett, of New York.⁴

The basis for the story "Words and Music" was a murder trial in which Judge Hal Corbett defended a county judge in the state of Tennessee.⁵ The defendant, Jake Dudley, had formerly resided in Paducah; and when Judge Corbett was employed to defend him, he took Judge William Sutton Bishop with him to prove the good character of the defendant during his residence in Paducah.⁶ The case was a bad one until Judge Priest in a voice that was high and whiny took the witness stand and began to ramble of his recollections of the army of the Southern Confederacy and as a follower of Forrest. Most of the jurors and spectators were ex-Confederates or sons of ex-Confederates. At the psychological moment the negro outside the courtroom with his Jew's harp, sleigh bells, and bones began playing the opening bars of the marching song of Forrest's men. The effect was magical; the jury was out less than six minutes, coming back with the verdict of acquittal.

The trial took place in Ripley, Lauderdale County, Tennessee,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fred C. Leuman, "Many of Cobb's Most Celebrated Characters Taken From Life Here," Knox-Democrat, June 22, 1924.

⁵ John Wilson Townsends, "Irvin S. Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (August, 1929), 40.

⁶ Ibid.

March, 1899,⁷ which is Hattsville, Forked Deer County, in "Words and Music." It is 114 miles south of Paducah and is very hilly and picturesque. But it is the McCracken County courthouse in Paducah and not the courthouse at Ripley that Cobb describes in the opening paragraphs of the story.⁸ "Words and Music" is included in The World's 100 Best Short Stories (1928) and other collections of short story classics.⁹

The second Judge Priest tale, "A Judgment Come to Daniel," was based in part on an actual occurrence of Cobb's boyhood in Paducah. This story introduced the fine character of Doctor Lew Lake, who appears in many of the Judge Priest stories and who in real life was Doctor John Gaunt Brooks. Doctor Brooks (1840-1915) was a native of Montgomery, Tennessee, a private in the Confederate army, and for five years a physician in Paducah.¹⁰ He is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery, Paducah, as are nearly all of Cobb's 'characters.'

"The County Trot," the only race-horse story Cobb has written, presented the two biggest characters in the Judge Priest tales after the hero himself, Sergeant Jimmy Bagby, who was William Gaston Whitefield (1838-1915), was born in North Carolina.¹² He was a Confederate soldier and after the war settled in Paducah and engaged in the tobacco business.

⁷ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (August, 1929), 40.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Newman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements, p. 96.

¹⁰ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin S. Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (August, 1929), 40.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 42.

Jefferson Pointexter (Connie Lee) was a Paducah darkey. Jeff, as he is called, was the old Judge's "nigger boy," his body servant, faithful and true to his white master with that devotion that once marked the Southern Negro's attitude toward the Southern white man. Connie Lee was born in Savannah, Tennessee, about 1879.¹³ He is the only original of the stories now living and is a chiropodist in Paducah.¹⁴ He was ice-wagon helper at Fowler-Crumbaugh Boat Store at First and Broadway, of which Cobb's father was manager and at which the youthful Cobb spent much of his time.¹⁵ Connie Lee was famous for years as the original Jeff before he found out the fact for himself.¹⁶ In the second chapter of Back Home the author gives a matchless description of Jeff Pointexter, who always had the ability to rise to the crisis when he was needed.

The author pictures Jeff in preparation for the County Trot as follows:

"Judge Priest's Jeff was a small, jet-black person, swift in his gait and wise in his generation. He kept his wool cropped close and made the part in it with a razor. By some subtle art of his own he could fall heir to somebody else's old clothes and, wearing them, make them look newer and better than when they were new.

"For this special gala occasion Jeff wore a blue-serge coat that had been given to him in consideration of certain acts of office tending by Attorney Clay Saunders. Attorney Clay Saunders weighed two hundred and fifty pounds if he weighed an ounce, and Jeff would never see one hundred and twenty-five; but the blue-serge was draped upon Jeff's frame with just the fashionable looseness. The sleeves, though a trifle long, hung most beautifully.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fred C. Neuman, letter to writer, February 19, 1936.

¹⁵ John Wilson Townsend "Irvin S. Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, 1 (August, 1928), 42.

¹⁶ Ibid.

"Jeff's trousers were of a light nearly gray... and were pressed until you could have peeled peaches with their creases and turned up at the bottoms at a rakish and sporty length....

"This was Judge Priest's Jeff whose feet would not fit anybody's shoes and whose head would fit anybody's hat." ¹⁷

This was the first of Cobb's stories that James Lane Allen read, and it so delighted him that he wrote the author:

"There are many pages that are away ahead of anything done by any short story writer in this country... known to me. There are little single sentences scattered through... usually of observation not on things within but things without... that reek with sheer genius." ¹⁸

This first trio of stories appeared in The Saturday Evening Post during the last three months of 1911; seven were printed in this weekly during the following year. ¹⁹ The first of these was the "Mob from Massac," based on an actual occurrence at Bowling Green, Kentucky, but reset in Paducah. Massac is a settlement near Paducah, on Massac Creek. ²⁰ In this story Judge Priest turns back the mob from Massac Creek and saves the life of an innocent negro boy. "The Mob from Massac" is reproduced in Edith Ronald Merrielle's anthology, Significant Contemporary Stories (1929). ²¹

"Stratagem and Spoils" is notable as the only narrative of the series that shifts the scene, even in part, from the South. After a los -

¹⁷ Cobb, Back Home, p. 47.

¹⁸ Robert H. Davis, Who's Cobb and Why, p. 28.

¹⁹ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (August, 1929), 42.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Neuman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements, p. 97.

ing battle with northern owners of the town's gas works, Judge Priest, as representative of the old stockholders goes to New York. On account of his personality, his Southern accent, and his quaintness, in the end he recovers the money and starts back home in a high good humor.

Another surpassingly good story is entitled "Up Clay Street," wherein a boy who lay dying of an incurable disease wanted to see for the last time the circus parade. Judge Priest hears of the lad's predicament and manages to have the puzzled parade led off the main street and by the weather-beaten shack where the boy lay propped in the front window. This is one of the tenderest of the Judge Priest stories.

"When Fightin' was Good," "A Dogged Under Dog," "Black and White," and "Five Hundred Dollars Reward" are all based on actual occurrences. "Black and White" was suggested by a true happening in Lyon County, Kentucky,²² but transferred by its actual hero, Uncle Ike Copeland, an aged Negro, to the hall of Gideon Irons Camp, Paducah. "Five Hundred Dollars Reward" introduces the outstanding female characters of these ten Judge Priest Narratives, Miss Puss Whitley and little Emmy Hardin. Judge Priest again by his wisdom and kindness saves an innocent boy from death at the hands of the law.

In November, 1912, the ten narratives mentioned above of Judge Priest and his people were collected and published in book form under the title of Back Home. This was Cobb's first book. Back Home, as a

²² John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (August, 1929), 46.

play, opened in October, 1915, at the Plymouth Theatre, in Boston²³ and was enthusiastically received. It appeared for the first time in New York on the evening of November 15, 1915, at George M. Cohan's Theatre.²⁴ The comedy was in three acts, with John W. Cope as Judge Priest and Willis P. Sweatman as Jeff Poindexter.²⁵

"Words and Music," the first story of the Back Home narratives, furnished Mr. Viller with the central idea of his play. The trial scene coming in the third act was reproduced in full. The play ran one week in New York.²⁶

In these ten stories Cobb has struck the true note of Southern life, taking the Southerner as he finds him to represent him as he is. One feels that he knows these people perfectly and loves them as well. More than sixty thousand copies of Back Home have been sold, and it is still selling steadily.²⁷ This book has also had an impressive sale in England, where it was published simultaneously with the American edition.²⁸

Mr. Cobb wrote another series of Judge Priest stories in 1915. This second collection of Judge Priest tales was published in book form in April, 1916, under the title of Old Judge Priest. Like Back Home, it contains nine stories of the famous Judge Priest and has had a large

²³ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, II (January, 1930), 110.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 47

²⁸ Leuman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements, p. 93.

and continuous sale. The opening story, "The Lord Provides," was suggested by a real occurrence in a Nevada town as told to Cobb by Robert H. Davis.²⁹ He proved in this story that he could create female characters as lifelike as his men characters. How the Judge arranged a church funeral for an unfortunate girl is feelingly recorded in this story.

"Judge Priest got up from a front pew where he had been setting 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....

"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."³⁰

Old Judge Priest is full of fine stories: "Sergeant Jimmy Bagby's Feet," "According to Code," "Forrest's Last Charge," "Judge Priest Comes Back," "Double-Barreled Justice," and "A Beautiful Evening." All give vivid pictures of Judge Priest and his people. "Sergeant Jimmy Bagby's Feet," the fifth tale in the collection, affords an excellent example of Cobb's adherence to minute details, a characteristic manifest in most of his writings. The beginning paragraphs present a portrait of the sergeant.

"Sergeant Jimmy Bagby sat on the front porch of the First Presbyterian parsonage with an arched framing of green vines about his head. His broad form reposed in a yet broader porch chair... his bare feet in a foot-tub of cold water.

²⁹ John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, II (January, 1930), 111.

³⁰ Irvin S. Cobb, Old Judge Priest (New York, George H. Doran Co., 1926), p. 42.

"The sergeant's trousers were turned up on his shanks; his shoes reposed side by side alongside him on the floor, each with a white yarn sock crammed into it and overflowing it. They were new shoes, but excessively dusty and seamed with young wrinkles...with his elbows on his thighs and his hands clasped loosely about his knees, Sergeant Bagby bent forward, looking first up the street and then down it."³¹

"Sergeant Jimmy Bagby's Feet" was made into a one-act play by Bozeman Bulger, a friend of Cobb's, and was produced on the Keith Vaudeville Circuit for more than a year. It was revised in 1916 and was again successful.³²

The first, third, and last stories of the series: "The Lord Provides," "Judge Priest Comes Back," and "A Beautiful Evening," display the superlative qualities of the old Judge and his resourcefulness, while the others deal equally well with the kindly people with whom he mingled.³³

In July, 1917, came another collection of short-stories, published under the title of Those Times and These, ten stories, five of which are Judge Priest stories: "Ex-Fightin' Billy," the opening story of the book; "Mr. Felsburg Gets Even;" "Hark from the Tombs;" "A Kiss For Kindness;" and "The Cure for Lonesomeness;" all are full of tenderness and fine feeling. The most outstanding story of the five is "Hark! from the Tombs," a forty-page account of the New Year party Jeff Poindexter and other darkies attended, which ended in a near stampede when ghastly sounds were heard at the midnight hour.

³¹ Ibid., 198.

³² John Wilson Townsend, "Irvin Cobb," Kentucky Progress Magazine, I (September, 1929), 39.

³³ Ibid.

In the spring of 1920 the George H. Doran Company picked up nine of Cobb's principal short stories that had run in The Saturday Evening Post and bound them into Cobb's eighteenth book, calling it From Place to Place. Judge Priest figures in two of these: "Boys Will Be Boys" and "Quality Folks."

The principal character in "Boys Will Be Boys" is Peep O'Day, to whom the pleasures of boyhood were denied because of poverty, but who in later life inherits a large sum of money and then lives the life for which he has always longed. Judge Priest counsels the old fellow against the machinations of those eagerly striving for his newly acquired wealth.

Sundry Accounts, ten short stories of diverse nature and various localities was published in 1922 and dedicated to John Wilson Townsend.³⁴ Four Judge Priest stories appear in this book, among them "The Cater-Cornered Sex," perhaps the most fascinating story in the book, which shows the old jurist's ability to adapt himself to simple or formal ways, as the occasion required. Off the bench Judge Priest was the homeliest and simplest of men; on the bench he wore his baggy old alpaca coat as though it were a silken robe. He had for his official and his private lives two modes of speech.³⁵ "Alas, Poor Whifflelit," "Havelin' Wolf," and "Darkness" attracted wide attention in magazine form. "Darkness" was included in The Best Short Stories of 1921, chosen by Edward

³⁴ Fred G. Neuman, "Life and Works of Irvin S. Cobb," News-Democrat, June 22, 1924.

³⁵ Neuman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements, p. 95.

G.O'Brien.³⁶ The editor, Tompkins, of whom Mr. Cobb speaks in this story was in reality Colonel Henry E. Thompson, under whose tutelage Cobb received his first newspaper experience.³⁷

In 1923 two more Judge Priest stories appeared in Snake Doctor: "That Shall He Also Reap" and "His Mother's Apron Strings." In "His Mother's Apron Strings" Mr. Cobb gives us a glimpse of Judge Priest as he sat, one warm day in late spring, in his chamber back of the circuit courtroom at the old courthouse.

"I wish I could draw for you an accurate picture of him as he sat there-- his mussed, but clean, white linen shirt, with its broad plaits and its big, flat, gold studs; his black string tie, threatening now, as it always did, to come undone any minute; his little, white paint-brush of a chin beard, his corn-cob pipe, his broad-toed shoes; the United Confederate Veterans' button in the lapel of his loose, black alpaca coat, and so on and so forth."³⁸

A stray Judge Priest story is found in Pros and Cons, published in 1926, entitled "The Last of the Bourbons." This brought the total number of stories of the Judge Priest variety up to thirty-five.

So popular had the Judge Priest stories become that the author was prevailed upon to write another series. He responded in 1930,³⁹ and the June number of Hearst's International and Cosmopolitan Magazine for that year featured "Judge Priest's Funeral," which was changed to "April Fool" in book form.⁴⁰ The old Judge, as shrewd as ever, sees that justice is

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Irvin S. Cobb, Snake Doctor (New York, George H. Doran Co., 1923), p. 226.

³⁹ Neuman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements, p. 105.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

done the girl next door to his Clay Street home. Ray Long, who until October, 1931, was editor of the magazine, hailed Judge Priest's return as a literary event and pronounced him the most lovable old man in American fiction.⁴¹ The first story brought more than three thousand letters to the magazine and to Mr. Cobb, applauding the reappearance of the character Judge Priest.⁴²

The new series, twelve in number, ran through the next year and in the spring of 1932 was brought out in book form. Since all the scenes were laid in Kentucky and the characters were stout adherents of that commonwealth, the book was given the title Louis Vonder With Judge Priest and Irvin B. Cobb. It featured the following stories of Judge Priest and his people:

"April Fool"
 "The Sun Shines Bright"
 "Treeful of Hoot Owls"
 "Great Day in the Morning"
 "Bre'er Fox and the Brier Patch"
 "The King of Licks"
 "A Colonel of Kentucky"
 "Khole Sam Collaborating"
 "The Dark Horse"
 "Ole Miss"
 "An Incident of the Noble Experiment"
 "Aged Local Vets Hold Final Rally"

Typical of Mr. Cobb's dialogue is the conversation which ensues when Jeff Poindexter reaches the Judge's side after several calls, as found in the first story, "April Fool." Receiving no response, Judge Priest is irritable when Jeff finally appears.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

"'Where the devil've you been?' demanded Judge Priest irritably.

"'Who, Judge -- me?' parried Jeff.

"'Yes -- you! How many no-count triflin' darkey boys name Jeff have I got hangin' 'round here besides you?'

"'I reckon I'se the onliest one. _

"'Where I been? Been getting 'vere fast as my legs'd carry me.'"

"'I hollowed three sep'rate times fur you, top of my voice.'

"'I didn't heah you fust time, Judge; didn't heah you 'twell third time.'

"'Is that so? How did you know 'twas the third time then?'" ⁴³

All of these twelve stories have the plot, setting, atmosphere, and action to make them plausible. Judge Priest is just as wise, just as human, just as far-seeing as in his earlier days. This collection of stories carries Judge Priest away from his local setting into the great Northwest, where his shrewdness helps to solve a problem that has baffled local lawyers, but several of the stories have the old familiar setting in Western Kentucky, and here the good Judge deals out law and justice with impartiality. In this book we follow Judge Priest to the time that he retires from the bench.

"Beneath the soft accent of the Kentucky temperament of Judge Priest is a lawyer of the same tough fiber to be found in Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee and in many of the Westerners drawn by Bret Harte. The character reflects an underlying shrewdness which is not regional."⁴⁴

There are some few characters in this book, besides Judge Priest, that Mr. Cobb used in the preceding Judge Priest stories, but most of them are new. All of them are typical, and all of them are enjoyable.

⁴³ Irvin S. Cobb, Down Yonder With Judge Priest and Irvin S. Cobb (New York, Ray Long and Richard R. Smith Inc., 1932), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁴ Book Review Digest 1932, p. 129.

Answering a demand for still more Judge Priest stories, Mr. Cobb began writing a series in 1934 which introduced a new character as the hero, Billy Priest, Jr.⁴⁵ Following publication in magazine form, the stories will appear as a book.⁴⁶ They have not yet appeared in print.

The characteristics of Judge Priest brought out in the stories are significant. Though other characters are introduced who are outstanding, Judge Priest always towers above all the rest. In contrast to his size, which was considerable, Judge Priest had a voice that was high and whiny. He also had the trick of being purposely ungrammatical at times. This mannerism led many people to think that the judge must be an uneducated man until they heard him charging a jury or reading one of his rulings. The old jurist's ability to adapt himself to simple or formal ways as the occasion required is forcefully brought out in the trial scene of "Words and Music" and in the "Cater-Cornered Sax."

The judge had other peculiarities. In conversation he always called men younger than himself "son." He drank a little too much sometimes. Nobody had ever beaten him for any office he really wanted. At times he seemed simple-minded almost to the point of childishness.

In appearance Judge Priest looked the image of a scatter-witted old man, who would potter around a long time and never come to the point on anything. He wore a black alpaca coat that hung upon him in folds. His shapeless gray trousers were short for him and fitted his pudgy legs closely. His white shirt was always clean but wrinkled. His white straw

⁴⁵ Newman, Irvin S. Cobb His Life and Achievements, p. 106.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

hat had a string band around the crown. His white cotton socks ended in low-quarter black shoes. Though he was large in size and conservative as to bodily movements, he never seemed in a hurry; and yet when he set out to arrive at a given place at a given time, he would always be there in due season. This characteristic as well as his manner of dress is forcefully brought out in "The County Trot," "Words and Music," "Quality Folks," "Up Clay Street," and "A Dogged Under Dog."

Judge Priest's attitude toward women was always one of reverence, kindness, tenderness, sympathy, and understanding, as portrayed in "Five Hundred Dollars Reward" toward little Emory Harwin and Miss Puss Whitney; in "April Fool," where his kindness and understanding caused him to see that justice is done the girl next door to his home on Clay Street; and in "The Lord Provides," where he arranges a church funeral for an unfortunate girl and preaches the sermon himself.

Nearly every week the judge went somewhere to dinner; usually it was on Sunday. He left home early in the morning and returned late in the afternoon. This custom is brought out in "A Blending of Parables." Such Sunday excursions, as the typical one described in this story, formed a regular part of Judge Priest's weekly routine through at least nine months of the year.

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 escapes. Often, as told in "Judge Priest Comes Back," he would be in the middle of one of the most exciting chapters when some client rapped at his door.

Judge Priest's methods as a lawyer and as a judge were always honest and straightforward, but he was shrewd and far-seeing, as in "The Lord Provides," "His Mother's Apron Strings," "Forrest's Last Charge," and "Double-Barrelled Justice," where he brings his clients out victorious.

Not until Judge Priest resigned from the bench... and that was when he was in his early eighties... did the masses of his people begin to realize how efficient a political dictator he had been.

For nearly forty years this man had been running conventions and guiding elections, and nobody, it seemed, except a few distant lieutenants had known much about it. His had been almost a one-man machine, a beneficent single-handed despot. He headed no visibly functioning organization, had none of the showy tricks of the average local boss. Except from the bench he rarely made speeches.

Even on those infrequent occasions when he had opposition for renomination to succeed himself, he avoided all efforts on the part of ambitious rivals to lure him into debates. He was content to ride about the country in his old buggy, taking potluck at some farmhouse, halting beside the road to talk with any ruralist who at the sound of Judge Priest's falsetto voice had come hurrying forth from his tobacco barn or corn patch.

At another stop Judge Priest would remember to ask So and So how his little daughter, who got hurt last year, had come out of it. For the moment it was as though he had lost interest in his political fortunes.

It would seem that he never forgot a face or a name or a historical fact associated with the owner of the face or name. He knew what woman was a master hand at making rag quilts and would halt to admire her handiwork. He knew which man was champion ham-curer and would stop to question him on his art.

The stories "Old Miss," "The Dark Horse," "A Treefull of Hoot Owls," "A Colonel of Kentucky," "The Sun Shines Bright" especially bring out these characteristics of the old judge.

When Judge Priest finally gives up his work, it is with regret.

"Son I'm slippin off the harness. After forty years of bein' Circuit Judge of this district, I reckon I need a rest. But oh, son --its hard --after forty years."

Irvin Cobb's stories of Judge Priest and his people get at the very essence of daily life in the region south of the Ohio River. The stories are worthwhile. They reveal the temperament of real American people. Judge Priest is a lovable character, and the stories are filled with unforced humor and with real sympathy.

⁴⁷ Down Yonder, p. 298.

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"A Colonel of Kentucky"	"	"	"	"	"
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