HIS OPPORTUNITY

by MARGARET ~ SUTTON ~ BRISCOE

WHAT was known as the "Judge's Court" was in session. Six days in each week, at noon precisely, the session was called by the appearance of a waiter at the door of Judge Wells's office, bearing on a tray a smoking bowl of milk-toast — the Judge's inevitable luncheon.

"I never intend," the Judge would assert over his innocent bowl, "to lose my stomach. I know when to stop, and you will never catch me tottering into the club, pressing the juice from unfortunate canvas-backs because I can't digest anything else. No, I know my capacity."

And it would seem that he did, for he was still each day at his office, eating his simple, milk-toast luncheon, spiced by conversation.

No one knew how it was first found out that he liked to have the legal fledglings of the building drop in at his luncheon hour, but it gradually came to pass that a small circle of aspirants was always to be found hanging about the toast-bowl for half an hour at noon—composing the Judge's Court.

"You don't say so!" said the Judge. "Pussy Varden gone! It doesn't seem possible. What vitality he had. You remember that curly white head of his, Mr. Courtney?"

Young Courtney—otherwise Joe—assented. No one ever called him Mr. Courtney but Judge Wells, who called most men by their surnames, with an old-fashioned courtesy and formality.

"His hair didn't save him this time," said Joe. Then he added, as if by an absent-minded afterthought, "Old devil!"

The Judge looked down thoughtfully at the bit of toast on his fork and dipped it again in the hot milk and butter on his plate.

"I wonder how we are to break ourselves of that habit," he said. "I suppose we can't go on calling a dead man names. He *was* a character."

"I thought a character was just his lack," said Joe, with a chuckle.

The Judge had taken a bit of toast into his lips and could not at the moment speak the reproof his eyes foretold.

"My necessity was your opportunity, Mr. Courtney," he said, presently, with his little sidewise, sarcastic bow.

He looked off into the distance, reminiscently, and broke then into a sudden laugh. "That reminds me," he said, and laughed again.

His listeners settled back in their chairs and waited. A story was coming, as it generally came at this hour, but, as always, in the Judge's own time and way.

"Pussy Varden," mused the Judge, "and his necessity. That was an odd tale. I promised George I would never tell it while Pussy lived. I never have. George seemed to feel there was a kind of tacit bargain between him and Pussy to that effect.

"I doubt if any of you young gentlemen knew Pussy before he was so generally called by that name. Of course his sponsors in baptism never gave it to him. His sponsors on the Street called him Pussy because—well, for the same reason, perhaps, that the name, once given, stuck to him. He was always a brilliant-looking, handsome man, but his hair began to turn white when he was quite young. He was younger than I, and I recall perfectly the first time I ever saw him. He had then gray locks here and there in his black hair, and he looked more like a circus horse than anything else. He seemed doomed to look like some animal. Later, when all his hair was white, and he acquired that courtly, delightful, silken manner, every one called him Pussy—behind his back."

The Judge paused, and then added, reflectively,

"There was never a smudge on his white fur—not a speck!"

Joe Courtney laughed. "I wish I knew his process!"

The Judge never liked to be interrupted, but Joe was privileged as the youngest and the cleverest of the coterie, and a spontaneous creature, difficult to repress. He went on unreproved:

"Pussy could have doubled his big fortune any day by the sale of his white-dye secret. Wicked old White Thomas! Many's the morning I've watched him picking his way down town, bent on his schemes. Handsome, clever, immaculate old beau to the last. You'd never have guessed what wickedness was in him."

"No," said the Judge, indulgently; "he was 'Pussy Varden.' There was a young man in my office some ten or fifteen years ago who felt towards him exactly as you seem to, Mr. Courtney, with perhaps a better reason. He was quite a remarkable man in some ways—was George. He came in here to my private room one day —a few days before Christmas it was—jubilant, and, without seeming to realize in the least the serious effect it might have on his own prospects, told me he had beaten Pussy Varden, hands down. Pussy was a power to be considered in those days, both on the Street and politically.

"I looked at George in amazement, and was yet more astonished when I found he seemed to have done what he claimed.

"It appeared that he and Pussy had come to be on the same board of directors for some mill property that George was interested in through an uncle's estate, lately inherited. Pussy had run the corporation with his little finger, as it were, for years. He was so able, he had been allowed to do as he chose.

"George had waked to sudden suspicions, and, unknown to any one, had informed himself, and decided that the Swampside Mill, which we were on the verge of absorbing, had been unfairly dealt with. He had unfolded his views at a committee meeting called to consider this purchase, and, I think, rather to his own astonishment, made a stump-speech that stampeded the meeting. The committee, in spite of a hot fight by the minority, had voted not to press the Swampside people at present, and to give them a chance to recuperate. Pussy, it chanced, was away at the time—out of town. I don't suppose he ever contemplated such a surprising thing as a revolt, and George was not exactly the man one would have picked out for an eruption of that kind. I confess I was greatly surprised myself. I had put him more on cases that required tenacity than where brilliancy was needed. I knew he had stuff in him, and that as a reliable, clear-sighted, common-sense man one might depend on him. These things and a pleasant, boyish manner that put him in touch with all kinds of men were what I had supposed responsible for the measure of his success. He was young to be already a fairly successful young lawyer and a growing politician.

"If he were going to have it in him to fight Pussy Varden,—I began to look closer at the young man. He was a handsome, frank-eyed young fellow, clean-shaven, and younger looking than he actually was.

"'Was your committee with power?' I asked.

"'No, it wasn't a committee with power. He'll fight it at the annual meeting, of course. It comes in a few days. I'm going to beat him there, too. It's a good cause. His plan is to buy in the Swampside people at a ruinous rate to them. They can't refuse us, and they have been deliberately squeezed into this corner by us."

"'You don't know anything of the kind,' I said. 'I'm a stockholder in your company myself, and I don't know it.'

"'Pussy knows it,' said George. 'It will be a nice Christmas for the Swampside investors if this deal goes through, won't it?'

"'I looked up at him again. Boys have an odd way of growing up when you aren't taking any particular notice of them, and some fine day when you glance up and see a grim-looking man you think you never saw before—it's the boy.

"'And you think you can meet Pussy Varden on the forum?' I asked. 'Did you never hear him speak?'

"Then I saw where it was that this man, whom I thought a boy, was going to show his best powers. A just, but apparently, losing fight might call out the unreckoned elements in him. It was in his eyes at that moment as he looked at me—the dedicated ferocity of the born reformer of abuses. I knew then he was a man bound to raise his own banner and have his own following. I never saw that curious, beaconlike, yet smouldering, fire in the eyes of an insignificant man.

"'Well,' I said, 'I wish you luck. So far as my vote goes, you have it, but I warn you Pussy is invulnerable. I have never seen him thrown down. I don't know of a weakness in his chain-armor—unless it be a peculiarly developed sense of humor, and I fancy he is a bit sensitive to ridicule. I have seen Pussy yield a point to a man who made him laugh, and I never saw him yield to any other emotion. He knows no fear—no pity."

"'I'm no humorist,' said George, 'and there is nothing funny in this affair—it's dead earnest to the Swampside Mill people. Well, I've got it to do.'

"Then he bade me good-by and left. I wasn't any less sure of his defeat because I saw his fighting blood, for I also knew Pussy, but I was sure there was going to be a good fight, and I wouldn't have missed that meeting for a good deal.

"I went to the annual meeting, which came a few days later, on Christmas eve, as it happened, and I went at the expense of some comfort, for it was the worst day, I think, I was ever out-of-doors in—regular Christmas weather, snow, wind, rain, hail—and there was no fight at all! The committee on the Swampside Mill matter presented their report, one or two spoke—George was the first speaker—and it went through, like a Christmas love-feast of peace and good-will, in favor of giving the Swampside people another chance. No friction of any kind—a positively dull meeting. I did not see George so much as glance at Pussy Varden. He was there, and sat on the other side of the room from me, his sleepy eyes half shut, apparently, but I saw he was watching George in his keen, catlike way, and, as I thought, a bit uneasily. Every now and then a queer, surprised, yet intensely amused, look came over his face. It was as if his own amusement surprised him. I saw plainly that he was relieved when George sat down and the next speaker arose. I expected each moment to see Pussy rise, and sway the meeting his way. Nothing of the kind happened. He did not speak at all. When the meeting was over he crossed the room and, as if casually, joined me. We had political affiliations at the time, and more interests in common than later. Well, we talked over some matters, and then I saw that same queer look of amusement creeping again over Pussy's face.

"'Judge Wells,' he said, 'that young man over there,—you

know him, I think—the one who spoke first to-night,—isn't he in your office?'

"'He is,' I answered.

"'A very remarkable young fellow,' said Pussy, slowly, his eyes still on George.

"'He never impressed me so,' I replied. Indeed, I had been thinking that George had made a rather banal, not to say sentimental, speech that night.

"'Put it to yourself' had been the keynote. 'Suppose yourself in a place where your necessity is the opportunity for some one else. Suppose yourself so cornered that you are obliged to sell for fifty cents what you know is worth ten dollars, or forced to pay ten dollars when you know the market price is fifty cents. How would you feel towards those taking that advantage of you? What would your first instinct tell you to reply to them? I think I know. I think all the manhood in you would surge up in protest. I think you would cry out—

"'But why do I put words into your mouths? You might surrender for one good reason or another, yet each of you knows what your first instinctive reply would be to such a proposition. Put it to yourself! Wouldn't you call it plain highway robbery?'

"That was about his line, something we had all heard repeatedly in Sunday-school—or its downtown equivalent.

"'No,' I replied, 'I never thought the young man remarkable. But lately I have wondered—'

"Varden opened his eyes and shot a look at me. He wanted, I saw, to know what I knew, and he was afraid—a little—that I knew something and was laughing at him. What he might be afraid of I could not imagine. He was in no sense timid. I had always suspected that his personal dignity was one of his assets, and that he was, as I had told George, a bit sensitive to ridicule, fond as he was of a joke on some one else. But of anything of this kind I was so utterly innocent that I must have shown something of my surprise in my face, for he laughed outright, suddenly, as if relieved—an odd, intensely amused chuckle.

"'Did you see him before the meeting opened?' he asked.

"'Yes, for a few moments.'

"'And he had nothing to tell you?'

"'No.'

"'Keep your eye on that young man,' said Varden. 'He knows how to handle men and to hold his tongue. You watch him. He's not quick—not always—but when he is—He's getting rather deep in politics, isn't he? It's going to be wise to get him on our side or'—he laughed again—'for us to get on his side! I tell you, Wells, we are going to hear from him.'

"He chuckled again, and yet again, until the tears rolled down his face and his eyes shut in enjoyment of his private joke. Then he wiped his eyes and went off; and what it all meant I had no idea for some time, for that same night George went away for the Christmas holidays and was gone for several weeks."

The Judge paused in his story, and sat playing with the spoon in his empty bowl, as if he had forgotten his audience.

"Well?" asked Joe Courtney.

He had an impatient way of hurrying a story that interested him. The Judge would not have tolerated it for a moment from any one else.

"I was thinking, Mr. Courtney," said the Judge, "that I would let George tell you the rest of the story as he told it to me. I believe I can recall almost his words. I sent for him as soon as he came back, and he came here into my private office and sat down in the chair by my desk.

"'Sit you down there, young man,' I said, 'and tell me all about your Pussy Varden-Swampside deal. I've been waiting long enough.'

"He seemed to have forgotten the affair for the time being, and as I reminded him of it he laughed.

"'Oh that!' he said. 'I can't tell you about it now. My old schoolmaster, Father Howard, is in town, and I've promised to go out with him.' He paused a moment, and then said, with a boyish awe in his voice, 'Do you know, I find that if that Swampside deal had gone through, Father Howard would have been ruined—simply ruined! He had

most of his savings in the mill. I didn't know he had any interest in it until half an hour before the meeting.

"'It was the oddest thing. I was on my way to the meeting, when I ran across Father Howard's old gardener—a crusty old fellow, named Silas. I hadn't see him since I was a boy. He told me that Father Howard had money in the mill; he didn't know how much, but he himself was in the greatest distress, for he'd put in every cent of his savings. Wasn't it strange—my meeting him just then? The last person in the world I was thinking of. You remember what a stormy, snowy day Christmas eve was? I was a little late for the meeting, and I knew Pussy would be on time. I was hurrying across the street when a big white horse bore down on me. He almost demolished me before I saw him. He was just the color of the weather. I suppose I was irritable. I'd been working hard over the Swampside Mill affair—to no purpose that I could see—Pussy was working too, and when that old white horse banged into me it seemed a bit too much. I caught at his bridle, saved myself from a fall, and shouted to the driver why the devil didn't he paint his horse such weather. He pulled up and promptly swore back at me, and I recognized his swearing at once—quantity and quality. I hadn't heard anything like it since I was a boy, stealing his fruit. It took me back ten or fifteen years. I crawled up on the shaft and told him who I was, and he drove me up town on the seat beside him and poured out all his troubles. I hadn't known he was in the city. He was working for a contractor, and had his cart piled with ladders he was carting home from a building. In the country he had owned his own team and worked for himself. He'd made a mistake coming to the city and a worse mistake in his investment. The Swampside Mill had paid no interest at all through the year, and Christmas had come and his children had no Christmas tree. He had never failed to give them one before—never. They were crying over it, he said, when he left home, and his heart was broken by it, the way crusty old fellows do go to pieces over a little thing like that. Altogether, he was the bluest man I ever saw in a holiday season.'

"What's that, Mr. Courtney? Yes, that was exactly my own remark.

"'George,' I said, 'will you be kind enough to leave the tragic history of Silas and his children's Christmas tree to another day, and answer the question I asked you? How did you draw Pussy's claws?'

"'I can't stop to tell you all that now. I told you Father Howard was waiting. I'll come in again. But I can finish the story of Silas in a word. I scolded him, and tried to encourage him, and I didn't tell him that, bad as his outlook was, it might be worse for him by night. I asked him why he didn't get out and make some more money. If he had lost money that was the one way to get it back. All the time I was wondering how to get those forlorn little country children a Christmas tree. It did seem pretty hard—their first Christmas in a city. We had been caught in a block under the Elevated road, and while we waited I had been looking up through the storm at the train standing on the track ahead of us.

"'There's good money now,' I said, 'right before you. Look up there, man, at all those people on the Elevated. Can't you see for yourself something's wrong? The train's stalled between station and station, and there they are, held up in this storm on Christmas eve! There isn't one of them—if I know this town—that wouldn't pay, and pay handsomely, to be taken down, and there you sit with ladders as long as Jacob's and say you never had a chance!'

"I interrupted George: 'Why, that story was in the papers the next morning! The engine broke in the storm, and two enterprising workmen, passing with ladders in a cart, took off the passengers, and charged each one fifty cents a fare down the ladder. That wasn't you, George!'

"'Twas I,' said George. 'Silas and I did it. He got one hundred and ten fifty-cent fares towards his children's Christmas tree! Pretty good half-hour's work, wasn't it? Fifty-five dollars. And then, besides that, there was one man we wouldn't take down under ten dollars for his single fare. When Silas told him what his fare would be—"What!" he shouted, "What—" He was a hot-tempered and amazingly profane person. He leaned down towards us, and the profanity fairly pattered on the pavement. He called it "highway robbery"—with several minor embellishments. But Silas was his match at that—and more. He seemed in a particular hurry to get somewhere, and he paid his ten dollars and came down. Silas drove home with the whole sum—sixty-five dollars—in his pocket. I declined to divide with him. I thought that would buy several Christmas trees. I took it upon myself to speak a word to our ten-dollar fare when he stepped off the ladder. I lifted my hat and I walked up close to him.

"'Your sentiments do you honor,' I said. 'It *was* highway robbery, and I thank you for that word.'

"'He was so astonished he couldn't reply, and I left him staring at me and went on my way to the meeting. That's all.'

"I sat staring at George, and he sat looking at me, with his hands on his knees and with no expression whatever on his good-looking young face, save an absolutely preternatural gravity.

"'Well,' he said, 'I must go. As I have remarked before, Father Howard is waiting.'

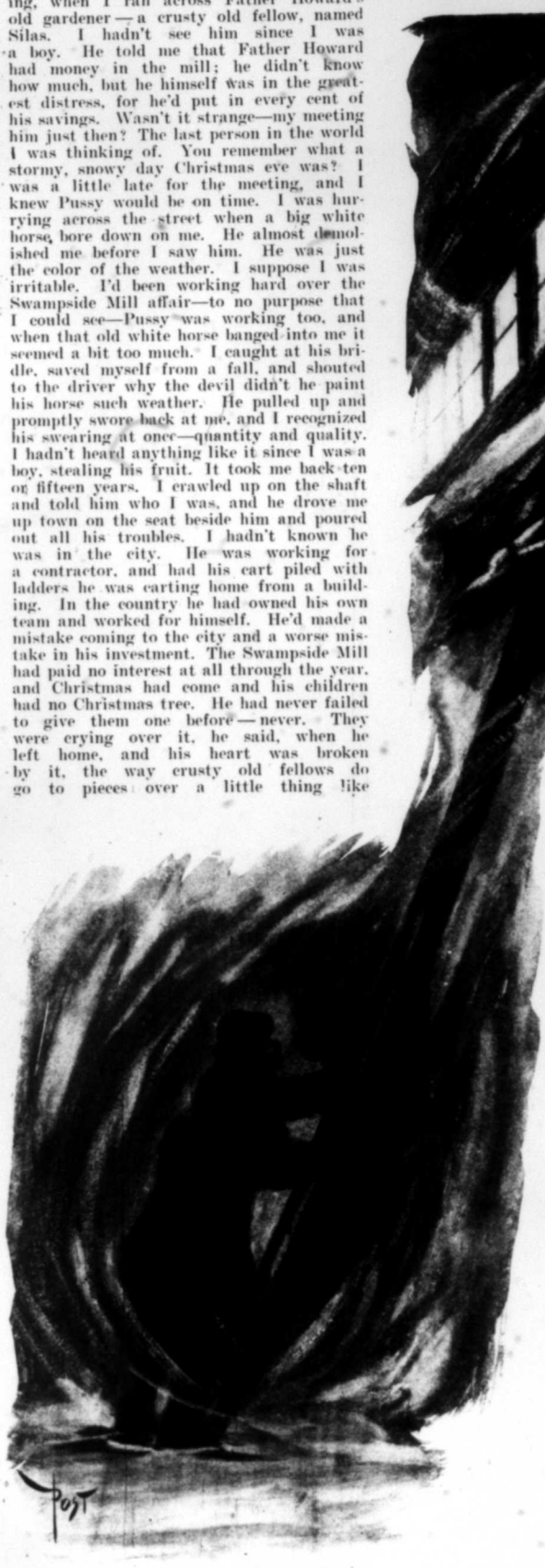
"I jumped up from my chair and laid my hand on the boy's arm. 'George!' I said. 'You villain—'"

Joe Courtney, who had been bending forward, listening more and more intently, burst into his sudden, high, crowing laugh.

"Judge," he said, "it was old Pus—"

The Judge half arose, bowing low and repeatedly across his emptied bowl, until his laughing audience arose perforce.

"Good-day, gentlemen," he said, as they trooped by him like boys after recess, hustling Courtney along with them.



"There was one man we wouldn't take down under ten dollars"