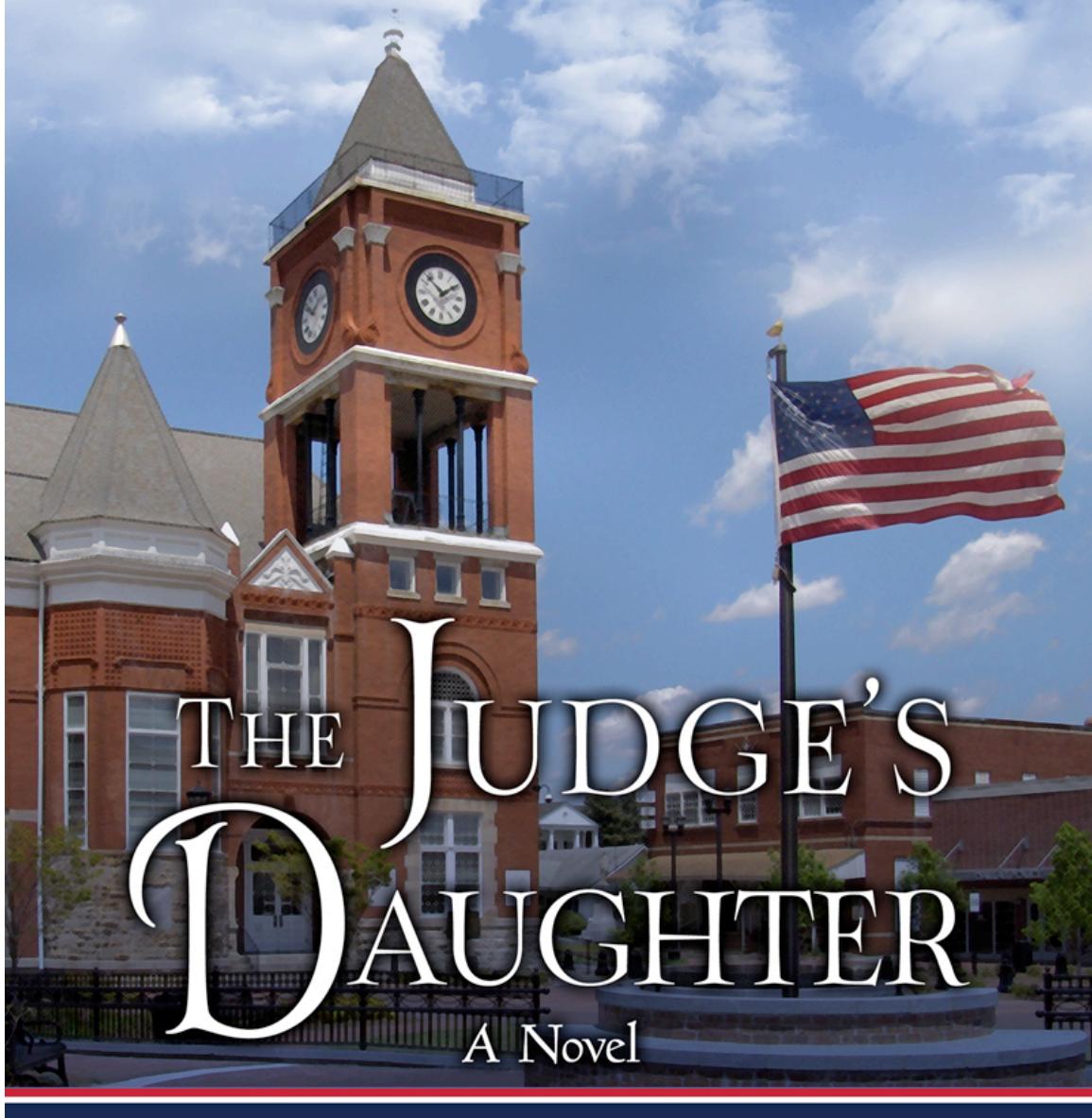


THOMAS T.
THOMAS

THE JUDGE'S
DAUGHTER
A Novel



THE JUDGE'S DAUGHTER
A Novel

by Thomas T. Thomas

Before the frenzied modern era of superhighways, television, and the internet, American life was lived in small towns, in places where families knew every neighbor; where the bonds of love and hatred, friendship and feud, were tightly woven across generations. In such a town lived Robert Wheelock. He was soft-spoken, intelligent, Harvard-educated, and seemingly destined from birth for great things. His father, the county judge and owner of the local railroad and electric company, was wealthy and respected. So Robert's own success appeared assured ... until the judge's sudden death dealt a blow to his expectations. In this kaleidoscopic book spanning three decades of American life, Robert Wheelock falls in love with his beautiful cousin and takes on his first clients as a lawyer with his own practice. He fights a series of bitter skirmishes with his stepmother, suffers personal tragedy and loss, and starts down the path of public life and civic duty first blazed by the judge. And then Robert commits an indiscretion that will haunt him for twenty years—an indiscretion that will jeopardize his marriage and his place in the community. *The Judge's Daughter* is the story of a man's conscience and his capacity for love, set in a time and place that will never exist again, but that will live forever in the American imagination.

THE JUDGE'S DAUGHTER

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To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

—*William Blake*

October 1948

1. Jane Dobray

Looking out the window of the Greyhound bus as it followed Route 6 into Pennsylvania, Jane amused herself by counting cows in the fields until she lost count. Next, she counted barns. Then, only the barns painted with Mail Pouch Tobacco signs. Finally, as the two-lane blacktop road climbed into the mountains and the forest closed in on both sides, she was left with nothing to count but the trees. And they were just plain uncountable.

Jane pulled the envelope out of her purse, just to hold it in her hand again and make sure it was real.

The letter had come from Pennsylvania three weeks after her mother died. From the outside it looked like a letter, anyway, but when Jane opened it, the only thing inside was a check. A check for two hundred dollars. It was drawn on the Bank of Roulette, which Jane Dobray had found irresistibly funny. Like the Bank of Craps. Or Black Jack's Bank. The date was just three days past, the first of the month. And the signature was that of a man named Robert W. Wheelock, which didn't ring any bells. His name was embossed on the check, too, with an "Esquire" after it. Like the magazine.

Two hundred dollars! Couldn't she use that!

Then Jane had realized she would not be able to cash the check, because it was made out to Margot. She briefly considered forging her mother's name and what the hell. It was not like stealing from anybody. But for that much money, the banks in Brooklyn would hold up the cash long enough to check out her identity. And Margot was officially dead, with a certificate from the New York Department of Health and everything.

The years since the war had been hard for her mother. After getting laid off at the Navy Yard, she had tried to go back on stage. But a lot of girls, younger girls, were now looking for work, too, and nobody seemed to be hiring. And, as Margot would admit after her second whiskey sour, she never had that much of a career, even in the good times. When Jane searched her childhood memories, she finally figured out the closest her mother ever came to working in the theater was six months as a cashier at the Radio City Music Hall.

Then the cough that Margot had, from working around the asbestos dust and paint fumes in the shipyard, started bringing up masses of bloody foam, and that was the end of the line. The kind of jobs Margot could get, mostly as a typist because she wasn't strong enough to wait tables, had kept them in a two-room flat with a narrow view of the East River and an occasional meal out at the Italian place around the corner. Money for a year at an upstate sanitarium didn't exist. Margot worked until she couldn't get out of bed and then died in the other room.

Even with her high school diploma, the best work Jane could find was sales clerk at the five and dime. On those wages, and after paying for her mother's medicines and the funeral, she could keep the apartment only by playing games with the rent money. Although the grocery bill was supposedly cut in half, Jane found more potatoes than meat on the table each day, and the Italians didn't see her anymore. So it was worth a couple of days and an eighteen-dollar bus ticket to someplace in Pennsylvania that she had never heard of to get her hands on two hundred dollars. Jane had called in sick and started this journey the next day.

When she turned to the window again, Jane could see the shadow-image of her mother's face reflected in her own. She certainly had Margot's lustrous, thick hair, which glowed like satin right after being washed, except that Jane's was an in-between reddish

brown, rather than Margot's raven black. And Jane had her mother's strong, somewhat pointed chin, always set and ready for a fight. What she lacked were the shelving cheekbones, which had given Margot's face and flashing black eyes their bold definition. Jane had the dark eyes but, set in a flatter face, they merely looked somber, not vibrant like her mother's. And she didn't have Margot's wide mouth, her lips curving with the arch and sweep of a bird's wing. By comparison with her mother, Jane believed her face was as plain and humdrum as a flour dumpling.

And then there was her jawbone. The defect was concealed at most angles, but when she turned full face to the window, as now, it became obvious. The lower part of her face was out of alignment, lopsided. The corner of her jawbone on the right stuck out an inch further and an inch higher than the corner on the left. It pulled out her cheek on one side and gave her face a tough look, like a prize fighter or a hoodlum.

When she first noticed the defect, at age fourteen, when girls start looking in mirrors, she had asked Margot about it. At first, her mother couldn't see the problem, and then she dismissed it. "You were a difficult birth, you know," she said at last. "I guess in his grappling the doctor pulled your face kind of sideways. Nobody will notice."

But Jane noticed. And ever since, she had been conscious that she carried only odd fractions of her mother's perfect looks.

Well, it was too late to go back and ask for anything better.

Eventually, the bus pulled up at Jane's destination. She was disappointed to find that Roulette was just like every other little town out here: a crossroads with a diner, stuck between the Burma-Shave signs. Except that Roulette, being the county seat, also had a two-story courthouse built out of big, square blocks of gray stone. And, gee, she'd only passed through three, maybe four, other county seats like this one on her trip to nowhere.

Halfway down a side street she found the Bank of Roulette. It was another substantial building, although only one story and the stonework was much whiter than on the courthouse. Maybe limestone, Jane guessed. Nothing like the marble you saw on buildings in New York—not as sparkling and translucent. The door was a heavy thing made of solid bronze, with the pull polished bright by hundreds of rough hands. Inside, a long counter flanked one whole side of the lobby, decorated with intricate brass tellers' cages. In the back, a big steel vault door was visible above the line of cages. It must have made the money feel very safe.

Jane approached the first cage and waited until the teller noticed her. Then she smiled, put down her suitcase, and took Robert Wheelock's check out of her purse.

"I have a check drawn on this bank that I want to cash."

"Certainly, ma'am," he said. "Of course, your own bank should be able to—"

"Well, there's a problem," Jane said. "You see, this check was made out to my mother, Margaret Dobray. But she's dead. So I wondered if you could give me the money instead." She slid the check through under the bars.

The teller studied it with a frown. "If she has died," he said at last, "her estate can cash this check. Then, after probate, if you are the rightful heir, the estate will pay you."

"My mother didn't have—" Jane stopped, not knowing how much to tell this stranger. "Sir, we are not rich people. Estates and probate are things beyond our means. Mother always said they were lawyer's tricks to get hold of your money. When she died, I just took her clothes and gave away what didn't fit. But this check is—"

"It's a legal matter," the teller finished for her. "The bank can't just make the check over to you. But ... I tell you what, why don't you go see the judge? He can decide what to do."

"The judge?" Jane was confused. Was this some special procedure they had in small towns? Apply in person for a legal shortcut?

"Over at the courthouse," the teller prompted. He leaned against the bars of his cage to point the way back up the street. "The bank will abide by his decision in the matter."

"I see." She took back the check and picked up her suitcase. "Thank you."

She cut across the courthouse lawn, which also seemed to be the town square, and climbed the wide, gray steps. The two facing doors were solid wood, weathered almost as dark as walnut, and bound with strips and studs of a green metal that might once have been red copper or bronze but now was badly discolored. On either side of the doorway were big oil lamps made of the same greenish metal and fitted with round globes of clear glass. Their design was more industrial—like great hurricane lamps with flat, conical shades—than the gothic style Jane would have expected to go along with the bleak stone and timber. She stood on tiptoe, to look inside these lamps, and saw that the oil wicks had been replaced with light bulbs. So they were fakes, too.

Jane pulled open one of the doors and stepped into a vestibule of frosted glass. Beyond was a foyer of checkerboard tiles, with stairs leading up to the second-floor landing. The woodwork in here was lighter colored than outside and had been recently varnished. She walked over to the nearest door, the only open door, under a sign that read "County Clerk's Offices - Records." She stuck her head inside.

The room was maybe fifteen feet by ten, taking up a corner of the building. Deep shelves lined each of the walls and framed the room's two windows, one in each outer wall, with the backs of leather-bound folios. From the short tags on their spines, Jane guessed they were the County Records, arranged by month and year. She tried to imagine birth certificates, death certificates, property deeds, and tax notices all jumbled together under this system. The only furniture was a roll-top desk, freestanding in the middle of the room, with a swivel chair behind it. A man was sitting there, apparently asleep, with his feet up on the desk, the chair tipped back as far as it would go, and his chin sunk on his breastbone. What she could see of him—the bald spot on top of his head, one ear and the side of his face, part of his neck—was brown and evenly creased, like a farmer's skin. Presumably, this was the County Clerk ... of Records.

"Excuse me?" she said.

He lifted his head and peered at her with dull eyes. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for the judge."

"Well ..." He yawned. "The judge's busy with a case."

"I can wait." Jane turned back toward the bench in the hallway. It was the same blond wood, with a dark patch where the varnish had rubbed off the seat.

"Be a while," the clerk called after her.

"Oh? How long do you think?"

The man squinted, as if calculating. "Trial's in the middle of testimony. He won't normally recess until four-thirty. After that, he may have to confer with counsel. Then he likes to write up his notes while they're still fresh. Could be six, seven o'clock before he comes down."

"I'll wait," she repeated.

"Courthouse closes to the public at five."

"Oh. Then ... could you ... interrupt him?"

"Not and keep my job."

Jane suddenly felt tired. She suspected she had come all this way on a fool's errand.

"Look," the man said, seeming to relent. "Why don't you tell me what you need? I'll see to it the judge sets aside some time on his calendar. Say, in the next day or two?"

"I wasn't going to be in town that long," Jane said.

He looked at the suitcase in her hand. "Well ... whatever."

"No, I should thank you. Probably not another bus today—is there?"

He looked at his watch. "Not until tomorrow morning."

She put the suitcase down. "You see, it's about this check ..." She took it out of her purse again and explained about her mother being dead and all.

The man squinted at the check. "Margot Dobray," he said. "Be damned!"

"You knew her?" Jane asked, because the check said "Margaret," her mother's given name.

"Knew of her. She was a bit before my time."

"She lived here?" Of all her mother's stories, Jane had never heard this one.

"Twenty years ago, just about."

"How did she—what did she do?" Jane didn't know quite where to begin. "Tell me everything about her."

"Not much to tell. She wasn't here long. She used to work for the judge, back before he *was* judge. Then she went away. No one knew where. ... Sorry to hear she's passed on."

"Thanks." Jane had a sudden idea. "If Mother worked for the judge, then maybe he will know this Wheelock fellow."

"Course he does." The man seemed perplexed. "Judge Wheelock must of wrote that check himself."

"Oh! Then I definitely want to meet him. Tomorrow, you say?"

"I'll tell him you're looking for him, first chance I get." Then he gave Jane the once-over. "You got a place to stay?"

"No, not really."

"The Allegheny Hotel is very good."

"I don't have the money for anything so grand as a hotel!" Jane said.

"Well then, my missus runs a boardinghouse, nothing expensive but a nice clean place all the same. Second house on your left, just a ways down Water Street. Normally, she'll only take a single woman with a letter of reference. But I'll vouch for you, seeing as you're Margot's kid."

"Thank you, Mr.—?"

"Burke. Harold Burke."

"Thank you again," she said.

He just nodded. "See you later."

2. The Judge

Robert Wheelock turned off the lights and locked up his courtroom. As he was coming down the stairs, Burke called out, "Evening, Judge!"

"You still here?" Wheelock asked, surprised. Usually, the county clerk was gone by the time Wheelock himself had disrobed, written up his personal notes on the day's cases, looked over the mail, and taken one drink of whiskey, for his health.

"Cold out there," Burke said, nodding at the evening dark outside.

"It is that," Wheelock agreed.

"Warm in here."

The Sylvan County Courthouse was a product of the Federal architecture programs of the 1930s, built of thick sandstone blocks and paneled in a rich red oak that Alfreda Burke waxed every spring until it shone like the sunrise. All that stone might have been cold and dank, except for the gas-fired furnace in the basement. Wheelock's courtroom was cozy enough to make the jurors nod off in the afternoon. But then, jury duty was popular in Sylvan County—at least once the snow started to fly.

"Remember to turn down the furnace."

"Aw, Judge! Don't I always?"

"Just checking."

"That reminds me." Burke snapped his fingers. "There was a girl here, looking for you. Said she was Margot Dobray's daughter."

"Really?" Wheelock's heart fluttered in his chest. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"Something about a check you had written—to her mother."

"I'll take care of it." He paused. "Anything else?"

"Just that Margot's died, so she said."

"I see. Too bad about that."

"Yes," Burke grinned.

"Well, good night."

Wheelock let himself out onto the wide steps and looked for his car. From the other side of the square, only the twinkle of its chrome showed in the shadows between the street lamps. It was more car than Wheelock needed, really, a new Chrysler Crown Imperial sedan. Wheelock's son had made him a good deal on the car—only insisting that he buy a black one, as befitting a judge's dignity. It ran smoothly enough and reliably took him the four blocks from his home to the courthouse and back.

Margot Dobray—dead. The thought came back at Robert as he was fishing for his keys. She had been young, in her twenties, when he knew her. So she would have to be—have been—at least forty by now. *Dead how?* he wondered. *Natural causes? Or misadventure?* Robert would bet on the latter.

Arriving at home, he turned into the driveway, drove down to park in the garage, and walked back up to the house, entering through the kitchen. From the sharp yeast smell, faint as it was this late in the evening, he knew that his wife had baked bread that afternoon. He took off his overcoat, hung it in the back hall, and called out, "I'm home!"

"Up here!" floated down from the second floor. "Dinner's in the oven."

Was Libby in bed already? Robert pulled out his watch: half past eight. Later than he thought. And he knew his son Willie would be out with friends—or maybe with that girl of his.

Robert went back into the kitchen and tested the heat of the oven door with the back of his hand. Just warm from the gas pilot light. He opened it and took out a napkin-wrapped plate. He lifted a corner of the napkin: glazed pork chop, fried apples, and a fresh roll, crusty now, cut and buttered so that the butter had melted into a glistening sheen on the bread's surface. He set the plate down and got himself silverware and a glass of water.

And now the daughter is in town. That thought gave Robert pause. She was probably using the Dobray name, too. How many people in Roulette would remember Margot? *Burke had remembered.* But then, how many would know, or even suspect, that there had been a daughter. *Well, the fact hadn't surprised Burke.*

Robert sat at the kitchen table and started eating.

Of course, Libby would remember the Dobray name.

He stopped with his mouth open, fork hanging in mid-flight.

Could the daughter possibly have stopped here—at the house—before going to the courthouse? That was an ominous thought, but it might explain Libby's going to bed early.

Robert tried to remember how he usually sent the checks. In a plain envelope, always, and not his personal stationery. And he did not use a return address. But could he, just once, have forgotten these precautions? It was possible. And, certainly, there would be a postmark, but that alone would not lead Margot's daughter to the house.

Next he tried to interpret the tone of Libby's voice, when she had called down a few minutes ago. Had she sounded angry? Not really. Upset? Hurt? Perhaps. And perhaps she was just tired, from baking, and so had turned in early.

Well, one way to find out how she was feeling would be to go upstairs and talk it out with her. But that would require a pretext, and Robert did not have one. Or none that he could use with Libby. And, after thirty years of marriage, he had learned that some questions were better left unasked. Time and a judicious amount of watching usually took better care of them. The morning would either bring its own confrontation and a dustup, or it would not.

When he had finished eating, he washed up his plate and silverware and set them in the rack on the drainboard. To his glass of water, he added a splash of whiskey from the bottle in the cupboard. Then he went out, down to the garage, where years ago he had built a windowed ell with a workshop and potting shed. The light of his work lamp reflected brightly off his tools, then lost itself among the burlap bags of peat moss and bushel baskets full of flower bulbs.

Robert turned up the gas stove until it made a cheerful red glow on the asbestos backboard. From his stock bin he pulled out a roll of six-gauge copper sheet and felt the weight of it. It was thin enough for his project tonight. With a pair of tin snips he cut a strip seven inches long and an inch wide. He flattened the piece with his hands, traced the diagonals from two directions to find its center, and made a tiny prick with one point of his metal-working compass to mark it. Then he measured off and made two more prick marks on either side, evenly spaced on one-inch centers.

During the past couple of months Robert had started collecting silver dimes of the type known as Winged Liberty Heads, pretty things with a face that reminded him of his wife's. He now had three of them: one dated to the year that he and Libby had been married, and one for each of the succeeding decades through 1938. He would have liked

to collect the current year, too, but they had stopped minting these dimes right after the war. He was going to braze the three coins onto the copper as a bracelet for her. Polished up, they would make a fine piece of jewelry. But first he had to prepare the metal surface.

He started working with his ball-peen hammer on the center of the copper strip. *Tap, tap, tap* ... light blows, spaced side by side, always hitting the same spot on the anvil, but moving the work, so the blows fell about a sixteenth of an inch apart, the dimples just overlapping. Each one bent the copper a little bit, curving it, thinning it, hardening it. *Tap, tap, tap* ... a rhythm to the blows, the hammer song that let his mind drift.

A bracelet for Libby.

Three Liberty Head dimes.

Three decades of marriage.

The years of his life with Libby.

How had it all begun?

Tap, tap, tap, tap ...