

A Prodigal in Durham (1887)

Short Story

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(1887)

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Durham County Senior Games

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Jacob hitched his thumbs under the straps of his tattered overalls and considered the scene that confronted him. The network of streets in Durham, some brick-paved, most dirt, appeared to have been platted with no particular grid in mind, and it was difficult to know which one might lead to what he was looking for – a roadhouse featuring cheap whiskey and an informal, but high stakes game in the back room.

Traveling on foot from nearby Hillsborough had taken two days and had not been uneventful. First came the unexpected spring storm with its accompanying lightning and drenching rain that forced him under a railway trestle. Then there had been the unfortunate incident at the mill along a remote stretch of the Eno River. The rain made him hungry and what should have been an easy theft of a bag of corn meal ended with the mill operator spotting him and the sound of birdshot ripping through the leaves above Jacob as he fled downstream. Not long after turning south towards Durham, he was pursued by a pair of snarling brown dogs while passing through the ruinously sad northern outpost of Braggtown.

But now here he was, standing on a Durham street corner with fifty dollars carefully sewn in his cuffs, fifty dollars that he planned to turn into at least a hundred if he played his cards right. The corn liquor he consumed under the bridge the previous night caused his head to throb, and he knew that in this irritable state he should limit interactions with any town folk who might cross his path.

"Lookin' for work?" The wiry, middle-aged gentleman had just stepped out a side door of the RF Morris tobacco plant and lit his pipe.

"Yes, but not here," Jacob replied. He was well aware of what a starting position in tobacco plants would entail – hand labor in the dustiest section of the factory with long hours and low pay. "I guess you could say I'm on a sabbatical from any work for the time being".

"Well, I'm Ulysses Mangum, the plant manager here," said the man as he tamped his pipe and eyed Jacob's rucksack, which contained a change of clothes. "You look like a traveling man – what brings you to Durham?"

Jacob resented this intrusion into his personal business and stared up at the plant smokestack while thinking about whether the question even warranted a response. He considered the question in the back recesses of his mind. Jacob had been born in Alamance, the first of three sons raised by Henry and Elizabeth VanEsson, first generation Dutch immigrants who staked out a claim among other hardscrabble farms in the Piedmont territory of North Carolina. While his younger brothers relished the farm life, Jacob did not – often spending hours reading books or shuffling, then reshuffling decks of cards. The cards had to be kept on the down low, as any form of gambling was regarded as sinful by his devout parents. But with practice, Jacob found he possessed the rare skill of memorizing card distributions and was also adept at bottom dealing or hiding cards for use in a future hand. His reading convinced him that someone with this skill set could make a decent living away from dirt, dust and hard labor.

So, in the spring of his eighteenth year, just as the busy planting season was underway, he said a quick goodbye and set off for the bright lights of Durham. Looking over his shoulder as he hopped the boundary fence, he saw his father, still standing on the front porch where they parted. The momentary twinge of guilt passed quickly.

"Mr. Mangum, I'm going to be straight with you," replied Jacob. "I came to Durham for a good time. I've got some money set back, and what I'm really looking for is a place with serious poker players and top-shelf whiskey."

Mangum guffawed, "I'll be straight with you – you don't look like you even have the cash to buy the swill my janitors drink, let alone get into one of the games men like me have going

on." Jacob watched the smoke swirl around Mangum's hat, and then lowered his gaze eye to eye with the man.

"What does it take to be dealt a hand at one of your games?"

Mangum scuffed the dirt with the toe of his Cartwright boot, looked back up and said, "Ten dollar minimum just to be dealt in."

Jacob pretended to give this long consideration, and a few moments later shrugged and said, "It's a lot of money, but I can do it. When and where?"

"It's south of the tracks, down in Hayti, corner of South and Enterprise. If you go down that way, watch your back," Mangum replied. "Mention my name to get upstairs and be wearing something better than what you've got on."

Hours later, Jacob paused on Enterprise Street. The cheap suit he had purchased from FW Woolworth chafed against his neck and itched in the evening heat, but as he gazed at his reflection in the barbershop window, he felt his confidence building. Approaching the intersection Mangum had described, Jacob noted a rickety two-story structure at the northwest corner. He nodded curtly to a cruel-faced, squat man lounging at the entrance and made his way to the stairway unchallenged.

The narrow stairway led to a door, which when opened, yielded a large and ornately-furnished room. Although a chilly reception had been anticipated, Jacob was warmly welcomed by a man who introduced himself as Mr. Parrish. Jacob was aware that most activities in Durham and elsewhere in the south were strictly segregated, so he was surprised to see that this was not the case here. Each person at the table stood and shook his hand. There was Mr. Shepard, a large black man, and Mr. Carr, an equally large white man. On the back side of the table were a Mr. Watts and a Mr. Blackwell. Ulysses Mangum squinted at him from a corner

seat. Once the introductions were complete, Carr explained the rules of the game which was already in progress, and motioned Jacob to take the empty seat.

"Son, you've gotta pay to play. Let's see some cash," said Shepherd as he dealt out the cards.

"That's why I'm here" said Jacob, adding his ten-dollars bill to those in the center of the table.

As luck would have it, he won the first hand with a straight flush. Now that he had a small cushion, he could proceed with his original plan which was to play the country rube and lull the other players into higher stakes. A couple hands later he intentionally stayed in with a fistful of junk cards and lost twenty dollars. Moments later Jacob folded when he should have stayed in, but he had begun to count and categorize the cards yet to be played and had successfully placed a couple cards up the sleeve of his new suit coat.

Based on conversation around the table, Jacob deduced that he was in a high-stakes poker game with some of Durham's highest profile citizens. He heard mention of mill investments, large tobacco trade deals, inside gossip from the North Carolina Insurance company and the growing assets of Mechanics and Farmers Bank.

The game continued with Blackwell accumulating a substantial pile of cash. Jacob won a hand or two but lost most. In fact, he was down to his last ten dollars. But by now, he was in the flow. With a combination of card counting and bottom dealing he managed to win the pot four times in a row, which put him up two hundred dollars above his original fifty. One of the two attractive females who had been observing the game from along the back wall came to stand behind Jacob, even putting a soft hand on his shoulder. Knowing that her role was probably to keep an eye on his dealing and maybe even signal his cards to the other, Jacob ignored her.

Watts and Carr fell silent as they continued losing. Blackwell was jovial and ordered a round of drinks for all to be put on his tab. The drinks came around and Jacob decided to go for the kill before walking away from this game. He lost one hand, but then went on a winning streak, upping the ante each round. The last thing he remembered from the evening was reaching across the table with both arms to collect his winnings.

Jacob felt the warm sun on his back. A rooster crowed. Turning his head to the side, he noticed a family giving him wide berth as they walked by on the wooden sidewalk. Whatever had been put in his drink, left his dry mouth with an unpleasant and coppery taste. Pulling himself to his knees, and then his feet, he thrust a hand into his left pocket and pulled out a note tightly folded around one dollar. "I don't know what your game is, but don't bring it back to Durham. We left you four bits to get you on your way. U.M." Jacob smiled to himself at the qualifier – Durham. The lack of a blanket condemnation could almost be an endorsement, or at least acknowledgement of his acquired skills.

With the note tossed aside, and the dollar re-pocketed, Jacob trudged uphill toward the tracks and out of the Hayti neighborhood. Passing by the Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, he heard a church choir and a talented soprano through the opened stain glass windows:

"Why should I feel discouraged?
And why should the shadows come?
I sing because I'm happy,
I sing because I'm free.
Yes, his eye is on the sparrow
So I know he's watching me"

This music gave him the necessary strength to continue uphill, cross the tracks and arrive at the intersection of Geer Street and Raleigh Road. Turning left would bring him back to Alamance and the stability brought about by a family farm. To his right lay Raleigh. Further east, the sandhills and Cape Fear Valley. With a song in his heart and a quickening pace, Jacob turned east. He remembered hearing that the coast was nice this time of year.