

A Gentleman From Mississippi

By THOMAS A. WISE

Novelized From the Play by Frederick R. Toombs

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CHAPTER XIII.

AN OLD FASHIONED FATHER. CONGRESSMAN NORTON was startled visibly at the sight of Carolina and Haines apparently so wrapped up in each other. Perhaps she was getting interested in the handsome, interfering secretary. That a woman sometimes breaks her promise to wed he well knew. Plainly Carolina was carrying things too far for a girl who was the promised wife of another.

Carolina and Haines showed surprise at Norton's entrance.

The congressman advanced and spoke sneeringly, his demeanor marking him to be in a dangerous mood.

"Do I intrude?" he drawled deliberately.

Carolina drew away her hands from Haines and faced the newcomer.

"Intrude!" she exclaimed contemptuously, a tone that Norton construed as in his favor and Haines in his own.

"Intrude!" Haines laughed sarcastically, feeling that now he was leader in the race for love against this Mississippi representative, who was, he knew, a subservient tool and a taker of bribes. "You surely do intrude, Norton. Wouldn't any man who had interrupted a tete-a-tete another man was having with Miss Langdon be intruding?"

"I suppose I can't deny that," he replied.

The secretary smiled again.

"I'll match you to see who stays," he said.

But Norton's turn to defeat his rival had come. He held out a paper to Haines.

"Senator Langdon gave me this for you. I reckon I don't have to match."

The secretary opened the note to read:

"Where in thunder does that hydrate come from—South America or Russia? How much off on the tariff on the creature do we want? Come over to the committee room, where I am, right away. Say it's an urgent message and get in with a tip."

The secretary looked up, with a laugh.

"You win, Norton. I'm off. Good-by." And he started on a run to the senator's aid.

Norton turned angrily on the girl as the door closed.

"See here, Carolina," he cried, "what do you mean by letting that fellow make love to you?"

Carolina Langdon would not permit rebuke, even from the man she cared for. She tossed back her head and said coolly:

"Why shouldn't I let him make love to me if I choose?"

"You know why," exclaimed Norton, his dark face flushing sullenly. "Because I love you and you love me!"

And he seized her and pressed her to him. "That is why!" he cried, and he kissed her again and again.

"Yes, I love you, Charlie; you know that," Carolina said simply. She was conquered by the southerner's masterfulness.

"Then why do you stand for that whippersnapper's talk?" asked Norton perplexedly.

Carolina laughed.

"Don't you see, Charlie, I have to stand for it? I have to stand for it for your sake, for Randolph's sake, for my own sake, for all our sakes. You know the influence he has over father."

"He can make father do anything he wants, and suppose I don't lead him on? Where's our project? Let him suspect a thing and let him go to father, and you know what will happen. Father would turn against that Altacoola scheme in a moment. He'd beggar himself, if it were necessary, rather than let a single one of us make a dollar out of a thing he had to decide."

"You're right, I reckon, Carolina," said Norton dejectedly. "Your father is a real type of the southern gentleman. He hasn't seen any real money in so long he can't even bear to think of it. Somebody's got to make money out of this, and we should be the ones."

"We'd lose frightfully, Charlie, if they changed to Gulf City, wouldn't we?" said the girl apprehensively.

"I'm horribly afraid sometimes, Charlie. That's why I came here today. I wanted to influence Haines, to keep him straight. Is there any danger that they'll change? You don't think there is, do you?"

"Of course not, child. Stevens has got his money in, and Peabody. There are only five on the committee. It's bound to go through."

"Then why is father so important to them?" asked Carolina.

"It's past my understanding, Carolina. I don't see how he's done it, but the whole country has come to believe whatever your father does is right, and they've got to have him."

"And father is completely under the domination of this secretary," murmured the girl thoughtfully.

Norton nodded.

"We've got to get rid of him, Carolina. That's all there is to it. He has to go! When it comes to bossing the senator and making love to you, too, he's getting too strong."

"How can you do it?" she asked.

"You know when father likes any one he won't believe a thing against him." Norton agreed sorrowfully.

"That's right. Seems like the senator's coming to think more of this fellow than he does of his own family."

"Why don't you put your money into Gulf City and lose it, then?" replied Norton, nodding his head scornfully.

"That'd be a good lesson for a rising young politician like you."

Senator Langdon's secretary peered straight into Norton's eyes.

"Because, congressman," he said, "if I were to put my money in Gulf City perhaps I wouldn't lose it."

The southerner took a step forward, leaned over and glared angrily at Haines. His face whitened.

"You don't mean that you could swing Langdon into Gulf City?" he gasped.

Haines smiled.

"I can't say that, Norton, but I guess people interested in Altacoola would hate to have me try."

"I didn't know you were that kind, Haines," said Norton, his virtue

aroused at the thought of losing his money. "So you're playing the game like all the rest?"

"Why shouldn't I?" shrugged the secretary. "I guess perhaps I'm a little sore because the Altacoola people haven't even paid me the compliment of thinking I had any influence, so they can't expect me to work for them. The Gulf City people have. As things stand, Gulf City looks pretty good to me."

"Is this straight talk?" exclaimed Norton.

"Take it or leave it," retorted Bud. The Mississippian leaned with his hands on the desk.

"Well, Haines, if you're like the rest and are really interested in Altacoola, I don't know that you'd have to go very far to talk."

"You know something of Altacoola lands, then, Norton?" said Robert, tingling with suppressed excitement. He felt that he was getting close to real facts in a colossal "deal."

Norton was sure of his man now.

"Well, I am in touch with some people who've got lands and options on more. I might fix it for you to come in," he whispered.

Haines shook his head.

"You know I haven't much money, Norton. All I could put in would be my influence. Who are these people? Are they cheap little local folks or are they real people here who have some power and can do something that is worth while?"

"Do I look like I'd fool with cheap skates, Haines? They're the real people. I think, Haines, that either Senator Stevens or Senator Peabody would advise you that you are safe."

"Ah! Then Stevens and Peabody are the ones. They'll make it Altacoola, then sell to the government at a big advance and move to 'Easy street.'"

"That's right," agreed Norton.

Bud Haines straightened abruptly. The expression on his face gave Norton a sudden chill—made him tremble.

"Now I've got you," cried the secretary. "You've given yourself dead away. I've known all along you're a d—d thief, Norton, and you've just proved it to me yourself."

"What do you mean?" Norton was clenching his fist. Words like that mean fight to a southerner!

"I mean that before Senator Langdon goes one step further in this matter he shall know that his colleagues and you are thieves, Mr. Norton, trying to use him for a cat's paw to steal for them from the government. I suspected something this morning when Gulf City tried to bribe me and a visitor from there gave me what turns out to be a pretty good tip."

"So that was your dirty trick," exclaimed the congressman as he regained his composure.

"Set a make believe thief to catch a real one," laughed the secretary. "Very good trick, I think."

"I'll make you pay for that!" cried Norton, shaking his fist.

"All right. Send in your bill any old time," laughed Haines. "The sooner the better. Meantime I'm going to talk to Langdon."

He had started for the door when Carolina Langdon re-entered, followed by her brother Randolph.

"Wait a minute," said Norton, with unexpected quietness. "I wouldn't do what you're about to do, Mr. Haines."

"Of course you wouldn't," sneered Haines.

"I mean that you will be making a mistake, Haines, to tell the senator

what you have learned," rejoined the southerner, struggling to keep calm at this critical moment when all was at stake. He realized, further, that now

was the time to put Haines out of the way—if that were possible. "A mistake, Mr. Haines," he continued, "because, you see, you don't know as much as you think. I wouldn't talk to Langdon if I were you. It will only embarrass him and do no good, because Langdon's money is in this scheme too, and Langdon's in the same boat with the rest of us."

Haines stopped short at this astounding charge against his chief.

"Norton, you lie! I'll believe it of Langdon when he tells me so; not otherwise."

Norton turned to Randolph.

"Perhaps you'll believe Mr. Langdon's son, Mr. Haines?"

Randolph Langdon stepped forward.

"It's true, Haines," he said; "my father's money is in Altacoola lands."

Haines looked him up and down, with a sneer.

"Your money may be," he said. "I don't think you're a bit too good for it, but your father is a different kind."

Haines shook his head.

"No, I can't say that I'm for Altacoola. Fellow who was in here this morning put up a pretty good argument to my mind, for Gulf City—in fact, he made it pretty strong. Seemed to show it was all to my interest to go in with Gulf City. Think I'll have to investigate a little more. I tell you, Norton," spoke Haines in a confidential manner, "this land speculation fever is a frightful thing. While I was talking to this fellow from Gulf City I almost caught it myself. Probably if I met the head of the Altacoola speculation I might catch the fever from him too."

"Why don't you put your money into Gulf City and lose it, then?" replied Norton, nodding his head scornfully.

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"Your money may be," he said. "I don't think you're a bit too good for it, but your father is a different kind."

Haines looked at him appealingly as she eyed very softly. "And easier for me, Mr. Haines."

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"Easier for her?" he said. "Very well, I'll do it that way."

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The secretary stepped slowly to his desk, sat down and started to write the note. Carolina watched him curiously.

"What will you do," she asked, "now that you have given up this position?"

"Oh, I can always go back to newspaper work," he answered without looking up.

The term "newspaper work" gave Carolina a shock. She had forgotten that this man had been a reporter. Here he was turned loose with the knowledge of this "deal," which she knew would be popular material for newspapers to print. She must gain still another point, and she felt that she had enough

power to win against him.

"I'm going to ask you still another favor," she said.

Bud returned her look with a bitter smile.

"What is it?"

"You have learned about this—this land matter and—"

"Oh, yes! I can guess. You want me to keep quiet about it—to hush it up, a shade of scorn in his tone."

"I only asked this so that you would not disgrace me," she pleaded.

Disillusioned at last, robbed of his lifelong optimism, shorn of his ideals, even his love—for he began to despise this beautiful, misguided woman—Haines sat broken in spirit, thinking how quickly the brightness of life fades to blackness.

"Very well," he said sadly. "I suppose you are innocent. I'll save you. If they're all—your father, too—crooked, why shouldn't I be crooked? All right; I won't say anything."

"I only ask you not to disgrace me," pleaded the girl. "You will promise that?"

"It's a promise."

She sighed in relief.

"Father will be coming back soon," she said.

"My father—is—in—the deal."

"I have tried to explain to him how it will needlessly embarrass the senator and spoil his own future. He won't believe me. He won't believe your brother. Perhaps you can make it clear."

At last Carolina nerved herself to speak.

"You had better not go to my father, Mr. Haines. It will do no good. He—is—in—the deal! You must believe me when I tell you so."

The girl took her eyes from the secretary. He was plainly suffering.

CHAPTER XV.

CAROLINA LANGDON'S ADVICE.

LET me speak to Mr. Haines alone," said Carolina to Norton and her brother.

Norton turned a triumphant grin at Randolph as he beckoned him out and whispered: "Leave him to her. It's all right. That New York dude has been riding for a fall—he's going to get it now."

"I am sorry, so sorry this should have occurred, Mr. Haines," Carolina said gently.

The secretary looked up slowly, his face drawn. It was an effort for him to speak.

"I can't understand it," he said. "I mightn't have thought so much of this a month ago, but I have come to love the senator almost as a son, and to think that he could be like the rest of that bunch is awful."

"You are too much of an idealist, Mr. Haines," said the girl.

"And you? What do you think of it?" he demanded.

The girl's glance wavered.

"Don't idealize me too much, either, Mr. Haines. I didn't think it was much. Perhaps I don't understand business any too well."

"But you see now?" insisted the man.

The girl looked up at him sorrowfully.

"Yes; I see at least that you and father can never work together now."

Haines nodded affirmatively.

"I suppose so. I'm thinking of that. How am I to leave him? We've been so close. I've been so fond of him. I don't know how I could tell him."

In girlish, friendly fashion Carolina rested her hand on his arm.

"Won't you take my advice, Mr. Haines? Go away without seeing him. Just leave a note to say you have gone. He will understand. It will be easier for both that way—easier for him, easier for you." She paused,

looking at him appealingly as she eyed very softly. "And easier for me, Mr. Haines."

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