

THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

By VAUGHAN KESTER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY D. MELVILLE

SYNOPSIS.

The scene of the opening of the story is laid in the library of an old southern plantation, known as the Barrony. The place is to be sold, and its history and the life of the owners, the Quaintards, is the subject of discussion by Jonathan Crosswhite, a business man, a stranger known as Blanton, and Harry Yancy, a farmer, when Hannibal Wayne Hazard, a mysterious child of the old southern family, makes his appearance. Yancy tells how he adopted the boy, named Harry, and how he later found out that the boy was the illegitimate child of the old family. The judge, who is the subject of the story, is a man of high character and is the subject of the story.

CHAPTER XVIII (Continued).

Whatever the protoplasm that inspired this warning, they plainly had nothing to do with either liking or sympathy. Her dominating emotion seemed to be a sudden sort of resentment which lit her glance with a dull fire; yet her feelings were so clearly and so keenly personal that Betty understood the motive that had brought her there. The explanation, she found, left her wondering just where and how her own fate was linked with that of this poor white.

"Ever since about noon."

"You were afraid to come to the house?"

"I didn't want to be seen there."

"And you knew I was alone."

"Alone—but how do you know who's watching the place?"

"Do you think there was reason to be afraid of that?" asked Betty.

Again the girl stamped her foot with angry impatience.

"You're just wasting time—just fooling it away—and you ain't got none to spare!"

"You must tell me what I have to fear—I must know more or I shall stay just where I am!"

"Well, then, stay!" The girl turned away, and Betty as quickly turned back and faced Betty once more. "I reckon he'd kill me if he knew—I reckon I've earned that already—"

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"He'll have you away from here to-night!"

"He? Who? ... and what if I refuse to go?"

"Did they ask Charley Norton whether he wanted to live or die?" came the sinister question.

A shiver passed through Betty. She was seeing it all again—Charley as he groped among the graves with the head of death heavy upon him.

A moment later she was alone. The girl had disappeared.

"Come—come quick, Hannibal!" she gasped out, and seized his hand.

"What is it, Miss Betty? What's the matter?" asked Hannibal as they fled peeping up the terraces.

"I don't know—only we must get away from here just as soon as we can!" Then, seeing the look of alarm on the child's face, she added more quietly, "Don't be frightened, dear, only we must get away from Belle Plain at once. But where they were to go, she had not considered.

Reaching the house, they stole to Betty's room. Her well-filled purse was the important thing; that, together with some necessary clothing, went into a small bundle.

"You must carry this, Hannibal; if any one sees us leave the house they'll think it something you are taking away," she explained. Hannibal nodded understandingly.

"Don't you trust your niggers, Miss Betty?" he whispered as they went from the room.

"I only trust you, dear!"

"What makes you go? Was it something that woman told you? Are they coming after us, Miss Betty? Is it Captain Murrell?"

"Captain Murrell?" There was less of mystery now, but more of terror, and her hand stole up to her heart, and, white and slim, rested against the black fabric of her dress.

"Don't you be scared, Miss Betty!" said Hannibal.

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"I don't know, dear!" She had an agonizing sense of the night's approach and of her own utter helplessness.

"I'll tell you what, Miss Betty, let's go to the judge and Mr. Mahaffy!" said Hannibal.

"Judge Price?" She had not thought of him as a possible protector.

"Why, Miss Betty, ain't I told you he ain't afraid of nothing? We could walk to Raleigh easy if you don't want your niggers to look up a team for you."

CHAPTER XVIII (Continued).

Betty suddenly remembered the carriage which had taken the judge into town; she was sure it had not yet returned.

"We will go to the judge, Hannibal!" George, who drove him into Raleigh, has not come back; if he hurry we may meet him on the road."

Screened by the thick shadows, they passed up the path that edged the bayou; at the head of the inlet they entered a clearing, and crossing this they came to the cornfield which lay between the house and the high-road. Following one of the neck roads they hurried to the mouth of the lane.

"Hannibal, I don't want to tell the judge why I am leaving Belle Plain—the woman, I mean," said Betty.

CHAPTER XVIII (Continued).

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He Was Looking Into the Face of Slosson, the Tavern-keeper.

"You reckon they'd kill her, don't you, Miss Betty, if they knew what she'd done?" speculated the boy. It occurred to him that an adequate explanation of their flight would require preparation, since the judge was at all times singularly alive to the slightest discrepancy of statement. They had issued from the corn-field and went along the road toward Raleigh. Suddenly Betty paused.

"Hark!" she whispered.

"It were nothing, Miss Betty," said Hannibal reassuringly, and they hurried forward again. In the utter stillness through which they moved Betty heard the beating of her own heart, and the soft and all but inaudible patter of the boy's bare feet on the warm dust of the road. Vague forms that resolved themselves into trees and bushes seemed to creep toward them out of the night's black uncertainty.

"It were nothing, Miss Betty," said Hannibal as before, and he returned to his consideration of the judge. He sensed something of that intellectual nimbleness which his patron's physical make-up in nowise suggested, since his face was a mask that usually left one in doubt as to just how much of what he heard succeeded in making its impression on him; but the boy knew that Slocum Price's blind side was a shelterless exposure.

"You don't think the carriage could have passed us while we were crossing the corn-field?" said Betty.

"No, I reckon we couldn't a-missed hearing it," answered Hannibal. He had scarcely spoken when they caught the rattle of wheels and the beat of hoofs. These sounds swept nearer and nearer, and the darkness disgorged the Belle Plain team and carriage.

"George!" cried Betty, a world of relief in her tones.

"Whoa, you!" and George reined in his horses with a jerk. "Who's dar?" he asked, bending forward on the box as he sought to pierce the darkness with his glance.

"George—"

"Oh, it you, Missy?"

"Yes, I wish you to drive me into Raleigh," said Betty, and she and Hannibal entered the carriage.

"All right, Missy. You all ready to me to go along out o' here?"

"Yes—drive fast, George!" urged Betty.

"It's right dark fo' fas' driving," Missy, with the road jes' almin' fo' to bus' yo' springs with chuckholes!" He had turned his horses' heads in the direction of Raleigh while he was speaking. "It's scandalous black in these heel hours, Missy—I 'clar I never seen it no blacker!"

The carriage swung forward for perhaps a hundred yards, then suddenly the horses came to a dead stop.

"Go along on, dar!" cried George, and struck them with his whip, but the horses only reared and plunged.

"Hold on, nigger!" said a rough voice out of the darkness.

"What yo' dolt?" the coachman gasped. "Don' yo' know dis de Belle Plain carriage? Take yo' han's offen dem hosses' bits!"

Two men stepped to the side of the carriage.

"Show your light, Bunker," said the same rough voice that had spoken before. Instantly a hooded lantern was

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"How dare you stop my carriage?" cried Betty, with a very genuine anger which for the moment dominated all her other emotions. She struggled to her feet, but Slosson put out a heavy hand and thrust her back.

"There now," he urged soothingly. "Why make a fuss? We ain't going to harm you, we wouldn't for no sum o' hell. Drive on, Jim—drive like money!" This last was addressed to the man who had taken George's place on the box, where a fourth member of Slosson's band had forced the coachman down into the narrow space between the seat and dashboard, and was holding a pistol to his head while he sternly enjoined silence.

With a word to the horses Jim swung about and the carriage rolled off through the night at a breakneck pace. Betty's shaking hands drew Hannibal closer to her side as she felt the surge of her terrors rise within her. Who were these men—and for what purpose? The events of the past week linked themselves in tragic sequence in her mind.

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"Get down, ma'am!" said the latter.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Betty, in a voice that shook in spite of her efforts to control it.

"You must hurry, ma'am," urged Slosson impatiently.

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Mr. Slosson laughed loudly and indulgently.

"You ain't. If you don't want to walk, I'm man enough fo' to tote you. We ain't far to go, and I've tackled jobs I'd a heap less heart fo' in my time," he concluded gallantly. From the opposite side of the carriage Bunker swore nervously. He desired to know if they were to stand there talking all night. "Shut your lippy mouth, Bunker, and see you keep tight hold of that young rip-staver," said Slosson. "He's a perfect eel—I've had dealings with him afore!"

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Slosson gave a start of astonishment at this.

"Why, ain't he hateful?" he exclaimed aghast. "See here, young feller, that's no kind of a way fo' you to talk to a man who has riz his ten children!"

Again Bunker swore, while Jim told Slosson to make haste. This popular clamor served to recall the tavern-keeper to a sense of duty.

"Ma'am, like I should tote you, or will you walk?" he inquired, and reaching out his hand took hold of Betty.

"I'll walk," said the girl quickly, shrinking from the contact.

"Keep close at my heels, Bunker, you tuck along after her with the boy."

"What about this nigger?" asked the fourth man.

"Fetch him along with us," said Slosson. They turned from the road while he was speaking and entered a narrow path that led off through the woods, apparently in the direction of the river. A moment later Betty heard the carriage drive away. They went onward in silence for a little time, then Slosson spoke over his shoulder.

"Yes, ma'am, I've riz ten children, but none of 'em was like him—I trained 'em up to the minute!" Mr. Slosson seemed to have passed completely under the spell of his domestic recollections, for he continued with just a touch of reminiscent sadness in his tone. "There was all told four Mrs. Slossons: two of 'em was South Carolinians, one was from Georgia, and the last was a widow lady out of east Tennessee. She'd buried three husbands, and I figured we could start perfectly even." The intrinsic fairness of this start made its strong appeal. Mr. Slosson swept up on it with satisfaction. "She had three to her credit, I had three to mine; neither could crow none over the other."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XIX.

Prisoners.

In the face of Betty's indignant protest Slosson and the man named Bunker climbed into the carriage.

"Don't you be scared, ma'am," said the tavern-keeper, who smelt strongly of whisky. "I wouldn't hit my hand ag'in no good-looking female except in kindness."

"How dare you stop my carriage?" cried Betty, with a very genuine anger which for the moment dominated all her other emotions. She struggled to her feet, but Slosson put out a heavy hand and thrust her back.

"There now," he urged soothingly. "Why make a fuss? We ain't going to harm you, we wouldn't for no sum o' hell. Drive on, Jim—drive like money!" This last was addressed to the man who had taken George's place on the box, where a fourth member of Slosson's band had forced the coachman down into the narrow space between the seat and dashboard, and was holding a pistol to his head while he sternly enjoined silence.

With a word to the horses Jim swung about and the carriage rolled off through the night at a breakneck pace. Betty's shaking hands drew Hannibal closer to her side as she felt the surge of her terrors rise within her. Who were these men—and for what purpose? The events of the past week linked themselves in tragic sequence in her mind.

They swept past the entrance at Belle Plain, past a break in the wall of the forest where the pale light of stars showed Betty the cornfield she and Hannibal had but lately crossed, and then on into pitchy darkness again. She clung to the desperate hope that they might meet some one on the road, when she could cry out and give the alarm. She held herself in readiness for this, but there was only the steady pounding of the big bays as Jim with voice and whip urged them forward. At last he abruptly checked them, and Bunker and Slosson sprang from their seats.

"Get down, ma'am!" said the latter.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Betty, in a voice that shook in spite of her efforts to control it.

"You must hurry, ma'am," urged Slosson impatiently.

"I won't move until I know where you intend taking me!" said Betty.

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