



THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

By VAUGHAN KESTER
Illustrations by D. MELVILLE



SYNOPSIS.

The scene at the opening of the story is laid in the library of an old worn-out southern plantation, known as the Barony. The place is to be sold, and its history and that of the owners, the Quintards, is the subject of discussion by Jonathan Crenshaw, a business man, a stranger known as Bladen, and Hans 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, Hannibal, and how he was adopted by him. The Quintards deny any knowledge of the boy. Yancy appears before Senator Murrell, a friend of the Quintards, and appears and asks questions about the Barony. Trouble at Baratch Hill, when Hannibal is kidnaped by Dave Blount, Captain Murrell's agent, Yancy overtakes Blount, gives him a thrashing and secures the boy. Yancy appears before Senator Blalaam, and is discharged with costs for the plaintiff. Betty Malroy, a friend of the Ferrises, has an encounter with Captain Murrell, who forces his attentions on her, and is rescued by Bruce Carrington. Betty sets out for her Tennessee home. Carrington takes the same stage. Yancy and Hannibal disappear, with Murrell on their trail. Hannibal arrives at the home of Judge Slosson. The Judge recognizes in the boy, the grandson of an old time friend. Murrell arrives at Judge's home. Carrington's family on raft rescues Yancy, who is apparently dead. Yancy breaks jail. Betty and Carrington arrive at Belle Plain. Hannibal's rifle discloses some startling things to the Judge. Hannibal and Betty meet again. Murrell arrives in Belle Plain. Is playing for big stakes. Yancy awakes from long dream-like sleep on the raft. Judge Price makes startling discoveries in looking up land titles. Charley Norton, a young planter, who assists the Judge, is mysteriously assassinated. Norton informs Carrington that Betty has promised to marry him. Norton is mysteriously shot. Murrell's light on Murrell's plot. He plans uprising of negroes. Judge Price visits Judge Price, visits Betty, and she keeps the boy as a companion. In a stroll Betty takes with Hannibal. The Judge's daughter, daughter of the overseer, who warns Betty of danger and counsels her to leave Belle Plain at once. Betty, terrified, acts on her advice. Betty escapes in her carriage. It is stopped by Slosson, the tavern keeper, and a confederate, and Betty and Hannibal are made prisoners. The pair are taken to Hicker's cabin. In an almost inaccessible spot, and there Murrell visits Betty and reveals his part in the plot and his object. Betty spurns his proffered love and the interview is ended by the arrival of Ware, terrified at possible outcome of the crime. Judge Price, hearing of the abduction, plans action. The Judge takes charge of the situation, and search for the missing ones is instituted. Carrington visits the Judge and allies are discovered. Judge Price visits Colonel Pentress, where he meets Yancy and Cavendish. Becoming enraged, Price dashes a glass of whiskey into the colonel's face and a duel is arranged. Murrell is arrested for negro stealing and his bubble bursts. The Judge and Mahaffy discuss the coming duel. Carrington makes frantic search for Betty and the boy.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—(Continued.)

"What have we between here and the river?" inquired the latter. It was best, he felt, not to give Slosson an opportunity to ask questions.

"It narrows considerably, pardner, but it's a straight course," said Slosson. "Black in yonder, ain't it?" he added, nodding ahead.

The shores drew rapidly together; they were leaving the lake-like expanse behind. In the silence, above the rustling of the trees, Carrington heard the first fret of the river against its bank. Slosson yawned prodigiously.

"I reckon you ain't needing me?" he said.

"Better go up in the bow and get some sleep," advised Carrington, and Slosson, nothing loath, clambered down from the roof of the cabin and stumbled forward.

The ceaseless murmur of the rushing waters grew in the stillness as the keel boat drew nearer the hurrying yellow flood, and the beat of the Kentuckian's pulse quickened. Would he find the raft there? He glanced back over the way they had come. The dark ranks of the forest walled off the clearing, but across the water a dim point of light was visible. He fixed its position as somewhere near the head of the bayou. Apparently it was a lantern, but as he looked a ruddy glow crept up against the skyline.

From the bow Bunker had been observing this singular phenomenon. Suddenly he bent and roused Slosson, who had fallen asleep. The tavern-keeper sprang to his feet and Bunker pointed without speaking.

"Mebby you can tell me what that light back yonder means?" cried Slosson, addressing himself to Carrington; as he spoke he snatched up his rifle.

"That's what I'm trying to make out," answered Carrington.

"Hell!" cried Slosson, and tossed his gun to his shoulder.

What seemed to be a breath of wind lifted a stray lock of Carrington's hair, but his pistol answered Slosson in the same second. He fired at the huddle of men in the bow of the boat and one of them pitched forward with his arms outspread.

"Keep back, you!" he said, and dropped off the cabin roof.

His promptness had bred a momentary panic, then Slosson's bull-like voice began to roar commands; but in that brief instant of surprise and shock Carrington had found and with drawn the wooden peg that fastened the cabin door. He had scarcely done this when Slosson came tramping aft supported by the three men.

Calling to Betty and Hannibal to eschew in the stiff which was towing astern the Kentuckian rushed toward the bow. At his back he heard the door creak on its hinges as it was

pushed open by Betty and the boy, and again he called to them to eschew by the skiff. The fret of the current had grown steadily and from beneath the wide-fung branches of the trees which here met above his head, Carrington caught sight of the star-specked arch of the heavens beyond. They were issuing from the bayou. He felt the river snatch at the keel boat, the buffeting of some swift eddy, and saw the blunt bow swing off to the south as they were plunged into the black shore shadows.

But what he did not see was a big muscular hand which had thrust itself out of the impenetrable gloom and clutched the side of the keel boat. Coincident with this there arose a perfect babel of voices, high-pitched and shrill.

"Sho!—I bet it's him! Sho!—It's Uncle Bob's nevy! Sho, you can hear 'em! Sho, they're shootin' guns! Sho!"

Carrington cast a hurried glance in the direction of these sounds. There between the boat and the shore the dim outline of a raft was taking shape. It was now canopied by a wealth of pale gray smoke that faded from before his eyes as the darkness lifted.

The light increased. From the flat stone hearth of the raft ascended a tall column of flame which rendered visible six pigmy figures, tow-headed and wonderfully vocal, who were tolling like mad at the huge sweeps. The light showed more than this. It showed a lady of plump and pleasing presence smoking a cob-pipe while she fed the fire from a tick stuffed with straw. It showed two bark shanties, a line between them decorated with the never-ending Cavendish wash. It showed a rooster perched on the ridge-pole of one of these shanties in the very act of crowing lustily.

Hannibal, who had climbed to the roof of the cabin, shrieked for help, and Betty added her voice to his.

"All right, nevy!" came the cheerful reply, as Yancy threw himself over the side of the boat and grappled with Slosson.

"Uncle Bob! Uncle Bob!" cried Hannibal.

Slosson uttered a cry of terror. He had a simple but sincere faith in the supernatural, and even with the Scratch Hiller's big hands gripping his throat, he could not rid himself of the belief that this was the ghost of a murdered man.

"You'll take a dog's licking from me, neighbor," said Yancy grimly. "I been saying it for you!"

Meanwhile Mr. Cavendish, whose proud spirit never greatly inclined him to the practice of peace, had prepared for battle. Springing aloft he knocked his heels together.

"Whoop! I'm a man as can slide down a thorny locust and never get scratched!" he shouted. This was equivalent to setting his triggers; then he launched himself nimbly and with enthusiasm into the thick of the fight. It was Mr. Bunker's unfortu-



He Launched Himself Nimbly and With Enthusiasm into the Fight.

nate privilege to sustain the onslaught of the Earl of Lambeth.

The light from the Cavendish hearth continued to brighten the scene, for Polly was recklessly sacrificing her best straw tick. Indeed her behavior was in every way worthy of the noble alliance she had formed. Her cob-pipe was not suffered to go out and with Connie's help she kept the six small Cavendishes from risking life and limb in the keel boat, toward which they were powerfully drawn. Despite these activities she found time to call to Betty and Hannibal on the cabin roof.

"Jump down here; that ain't no fittin' place for you-all to stop in with them gentlemen fightin'!"

An instant later Betty and Hannibal stood on the raft with the little Cavendishes flocking about them. Mr. Yancy's quest of his nevy had taken an enduring hold on their imagination. For weeks it had constituted their one vital topic, and the fight became merely a satisfying background for this interesting restoration.

"Sho, they'd got him! Sho!—he wa'n't no bigger than Richard! Sho!"

"Oh!" cried Betty, with a fearful glance toward the keel boat. "Can't you stop them?"

"What to?" asked Polly, opening her black eyes very wide. "Bless yo' tender heart!—you don't need to worry none, we got them strange gentlemen licked like they was a passel of children! Connie, you-all mind that fire!"

She accurately judged the outcome of the fight. The boat was little better than a shanties with the havoc that had been wrought there when Yancy and Carrington dropped over its side to the raft. Cavendish followed them, whooping his triumph as he came.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Raft Again.

Yancy and Cavendish threw themselves on the sweeps and worked the raft clear of the keel boat, then the turbulent current seized the smaller craft and whirled it away into the night; as its black bulk receded from before his eyes the Earl of Lambeth spoke with the voice of authority and experience.

"It was a good fight and them fellows done well, but not near well enough." A conclusion that could not be gainsaid. He added, "No one ain't hurt but them that had ought to have got hurt. Mr. Yancy's all right, and so's Mr. Carrington—who's mighty welcome here."

"Mr. Carrington's kin to me, Polly," explained Yancy to Mrs. Cavendish. His voice was far from steady, for Hannibal had been gathered into his arms and had all but wrecked the stow calm with which the Scratch Hiller was seeking to guard his emotions.

Polly smiled and dimpled at the Kentuckian. Trained to a romantic

point of view she had a frank liking for handsome, stalwart men. Cavendish was neither, but none knew better than Polly that where he was most lacking in appearance he was richest in substance. He carried scars honorably earned in those differences he had been prone to cultivate with less generous natures; for his scheme of life did not embrace the millennium.

"Thank God, you got here when you did!" said Carrington.

"We was some pushed fo' time, but we done it," responded the earl modestly. He added, "What now?—do we make a landing?"

"No—unless it interferes with your plans not. I want to get around the next bend before we tie up. Later we'll all go back. Can I count on you?"

"You shorely can. I consider this here as sociable a neighborhood as I ever struck. It pleases me well. Folks are up and doing hereabout."

Carrington looked eagerly around in search of Betty. She was sitting on an upturned tub, a pathetic enough figure as she drooped against the wall of one of the shanties with all her courage quite gone from her. He made his way quickly to her side.

"La!" whispered Polly in Chills and Fever's ear. "If that pore young thing yonder keeps a widow it won't be because of any encouragement she gets from Mr. Carrington. If I ever seen marriage in a man's eye I seen it in his this minute!"

"Bruce!" cried Betty, starting up as Carrington approached. "Oh, Bruce, I am so glad you have come—you are not hurt?" She accepted his presence without question.

"We are none of us hurt, Betty," he said gently, as he took her hand.

He saw that the suffering she had undergone during the preceding twenty-four hours had left its record on her tired face and in her heavy eyes. She retained a shuddering consciousness of the unchecked savagery of those last moments on the keel boat; she was still hearing the oaths of the men as they struggled together, the sound of blows, and the dreadful silences that had followed them. She turned from him, and there came the relief of tears.

"There, Betty, the danger is over now and you were so brave while it lasted. I can't bear to have you cry!"

"I was wild with fear—all that time on the boat, Bruce—" she faltered between her sobs. "I didn't know but they would find you out. I could only wait and hope—and pray!"

"I was in no danger, dear. Didn't the girl tell you I was to take the place of a man Slosson was expecting? He never doubted that I was that man until a light—a signal it must have been—on the shore at the head of the bayou betrayed me."

"Where are we going now, Bruce? Not the way they went—" and Betty glanced out into the black void where the keel boat had merged into the gloom.

"No, no—but we can't get the raft back up-stream against the current, so the best thing is to land at the Bates' plantation below here; then as soon as you are able we can return to Belle Plain," said Carrington.

There was an interval broken only by the occasional sweep of the great steering oar as Cavendish coaxed the raft out toward the channel. The thought of Charley Norton's murder rested on Carrington like a pall. Scarcely a week had elapsed since he quitted Thicket Point, and in that week the hand of death had dealt with them impartially, and to what end? Then the miles he had traversed in his hopeless journey up-river translated themselves into a division of time as well as space. They were just as much further removed from the past with its blight of tragic terror. He turned and glanced at Betty. He saw that her eyes held their steady look of wistful pity that was for the dead man; yet in spite of this, and in spite of the bounds beyond which he would not let his imagination carry him, the future, enriched with sudden promise, unfolded itself. The deep sense of recovered hope stirred within him. He knew there must come a day when he would dare to speak of his love, and she would listen.

"It's best we should land at Bates' place—we can get teams there," he went on to explain. "And, Betty, wherever we go we'll go together, dear. Cavendish doesn't look as if he had any very urgent business of his own, and I reckon the same is true of Yancy, so I am going to keep them with us. There are some points to be cleared up when we reach Belle Plain—some folks who'll have a lot to explain or else quit this part of the state! And I intend to see that you are not left alone until—until I have the right to take care of you for good and all—that's what you want me to do one of these days, isn't it, darling?" and his eyes, glowing and infinitely tender, dwelt on her upturned face.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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A VARIATION.

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