



THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

By VAUGHAN KESTER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY D. MELVILLE



CHAPTER I.

The Boy at the Barony.

The Quintards had not prospered on the barren lands of the pine woods whither they had emigrated to escape the malaria of the low coast, but this no longer mattered, for the last of his name and race, old General Quintard, was dead in the great house his father had built almost a century before and the thin acres of the Barony, where he had made his last stand against age and poverty, were to claim him, now that he had given up the struggle in their midst.

Though he had lived continuously at the Barony for almost a quarter of a century, there was none among his neighbors who could say he had looked on that thin, aquiline face in all that time. Yet they had known much of him, for the gossip of the slaves, who had been his only friends in those years he had chosen to deny himself to other friends, had gone far and wide over the country.

That notable man of business, Jonathan Crenshaw, was closeted in the library with a stranger to whom rumor fixed the name of Bladen, supposing him to be the legal representative of certain remote connections of the old general's.

Crenshaw sat before the flat-topped mahogany desk with several account-books before him. Bladen stood by the window.

"I suppose you will buy in the property when it comes up for sale?" the latter was saying.

Crenshaw nodded.

"He lived entirely alone, saw no one, I understand?" said Bladen.

"Alone with his two or three old slaves—yes, sir. He wouldn't even see me."

There was a brief pause, then Crenshaw spoke again. "I reckon, sir, if you know anything about the old gentleman's private affairs you don't feel no call to speak on that point?" he observed.

"All I know is this: General Quintard was a conspicuous man in these parts fifty years ago; he married a Beaufort."

"So he did," said Crenshaw, "and there was one child, a daughter; she married a South Carolinian by the name of Turberville. Great folks, those Turbervilles, rolling rich."

"And what became of the daughter who married Turberville?"

"Died years ago," said Crenshaw.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Crenshaw. The door opened and a small boy entered the room dragging after him a long rifle. Suddenly overcome by a shyness, he paused on the threshold to stare with round, wondering eyes at the two men. "Well, sonny, what do you want?" asked Mr. Crenshaw indulgently.

"Please, sir, I want this here old spo'tin' rifle," said the child.

"I reckon you may keep it—at least I've no objection," Crenshaw glanced at Bladen.

"Oh, by all means," said the latter. Spasms of delight shook the small figure. With a murmur that was meant for thanks he backed from the room, closing the door. Bladen glanced inquiringly at Crenshaw.

"You want to know about him, sir? Well, that's Hannibal Wayne Hazard. But who Hannibal Wayne Hazard is—just wait a minute, sir—and quitting his chair Mr. Crenshaw hurried from the room to return almost immediately with a tall countryman. "Mr. Bladen, this is Bob Yancy. Bob, the gentleman wants to hear about the woman and the child; that's your story."

"Howdy, sir," said Mr. Yancy. He appeared to meditate on the mental effort that was required of him.

"It was four years ago come next Christmas," said Crenshaw.

"Old Christmas," corrected Mr. Yancy. "The evening befo', it was, and I'd gone to Fayetteville to get my Christmas fixin's. Just at sundown I hooked up that blind mule of mine to the cart and started fo' home. A mile out of town I heard some one sloshing through the rain after me. I pulled up and waited, and then I made out it was a woman. She spoke when she was alongside the cart and says, 'Can you drive me on to the Barony?' When I got down to help her into the cart I saw she was totting a child in her arms. Well, sir, she hardly spoke until we came to the red gate, when she says, 'Stop, if you please; I'll walk the rest of the way.' The last I seen of her she was hurrying through the rain totting the child in her arms."

Mr. Crenshaw took up the narrative. "When morning come she was gone, but the child done stayed behind. I've heard Aunt Alsidia tell as how the old general said that morning, pale and shaking like, 'You'll find a boy asleep in the red room; he's to be fed and cared fo', but keep him out of my sight. His name is Hannibal Wayne Hazard.' That is all the general ever said on the matter."

The old general was borne across what had once been the west lawn to his resting-place in the neglected acre where the dead and gone of his race lay, and the record of the family was complete, as far as any man knew. Then Crenshaw, assisted by Bob Yancy, proceeded to secure the great house against intrusion.

They passed from room to room securing doors and windows, and at last stepped out upon the back porch. "Hullo!" said Yancy, pointing. There on a bench by the kitchen door was Hannibal Wayne Hazard asleep, with his old spo'tin' rifle across his knees.

"Well, I declare to goodness!" said Crenshaw.

"I reckon you'd rather drop a word with yo' missus before you toted him home?" suggested Yancy, who knew something of the nature of his friend's domestic thralldom.

"A woman ought to be boss in her own house," said Crenshaw.

"Feell'n' the truth of that, I've never married, Mr. John. But I was going to say, what's to hinder me from totting that boy to my home?"

"If you'll take the boy, Bob, you shan't lose by it."

Yancy rested a big knotted hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Come, wake up, sonny!" The child roused with a start and stared into the strange bearded face that was bent toward him. "It's yo' Uncle Bob," continued Yancy in a wheedling tone. "Here, give us the spo'tin' rifle to tote!"

Yancy balanced the rifle on his great palm and his eyes assumed a speculative cast.

"I wonder what's to hinder us from

of Scratch Hill the boy Hannibal followed at Yancy's heels as that gentleman pursued the not arduous rounds of temperate industry which made up his daily life, for if Yancy were not completely idle he was responsible for a counterfeited presentment of idleness having most of the merits of the real article.

The Barony had been offered for sale and bought in by Crenshaw for eleven thousand dollars, this being the amount of his claim. Some six months later he sold the plantation for fifteen thousand dollars to Nathaniel Ferris, of Currituck county.

"There's the money in the old place, Bob, at that figure," Crenshaw told Yancy.

"Bladen's got an answer from them South Carolina Quintards, and they don't know nothing about the boy," added Crenshaw. "So you can rest easy, Bob; they ain't going to want him."

"Well, sir, that surely is a passel of comfort to me. I find I got all the instincts of a father without having had none of the instincts of a husband."

A richer, deeper realization of his joy came to Yancy when he had turned his back on Balaam's Cross Roads and set out for home through the fragrant silence of the pine woods.

Just beyond the Barony, which was midway between Balaam's and the Hill, down the long stretch of sandy road he saw two mounted figures, then as they drew nearer he caught the flutter of skirts and recognized one of the horsewomen. It was Mrs. Ferris, wife of the Barony's new owner. She reined in her horse abreast of his cart.

"Aren't you Mr. Yancy?" she asked.

"I am Mrs. Ferris, and I am very

"Betty, let me present Captain Murrell."

The captain bowed, giving her a glance of bold admiration.

By this time the children had straggled off into the pine woods as silently as they had assembled; only Yancy and Hannibal remained. Mrs. Ferris turned to the former.

"If you will close the cabin door, Mr. Yancy, everything will be ready for next Sunday," she said, and moved toward the horses, followed by Murrell. Betty Malroy lingered for a moment at Hannibal's side.

"Good-by, little boy; you must ask your Uncle Bob to bring you up to the big house to see me," and stooping she kissed him. "Good-by, Mr. Yancy."

CHAPTER III.

Trouble at Scratch Hill.

Captain Murrell had established himself at Balaam's Cross Roads. He was supposed to be interested in the purchase of a plantation, and in company with Crenshaw visited the numerous tracts of land which the merchant owned.

"The Barony would have suited me," he told Bladen one day. They had just returned from an excursion into the country and were seated in the lawyer's office.

"You say your father was a friend of the old general's?" said Bladen.

"Years ago, in the north—yes," answered Murrell.

Murrell regarded the lawyer in silence for a moment out of his deeply sunk eyes.

"Too bad about the boy," he said at length slowly.

"How do you mean, Captain?" asked Bladen.

"I mean it's a pity he has no one except Yancy to look after him," said Murrell; but Bladen showed no interest and Murrell went on: "Has Yancy any legal claim on the boy?"

"No, certainly not; the boy was merely left with Yancy because Crenshaw didn't know what else to do with him."

"Get possession of him, and if I don't buy land here I'll take him west with me," said Murrell quietly. "I am willing to spend five hundred dollars on this if necessary."

"I'll have to thank your proposition over," said Bladen.

The immediate result of this conversation was that within twenty-four hours a man driving two horses hitched to a light buggy arrived at Scratch Hill in quest of Bob Yancy, whom he found at dinner and to whom he delivered a letter. Mr. Yancy was profoundly impressed by the attention, for holding the letter at arm's length, he said:

"Well, sir, I've lived nigh on to forty years, but I never got a piece of writing befo'—never, sir. People, if they was close by, spoke to me, if at a distance they hollered, but none of 'em ever wrote."

"What's your answer?" demanded the stranger.

"You tell him I'll be monstrous glad to talk it over with him any time he fancies to come out here."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

loading this old gun, and firing this old gun go—bang! Eh?"

The child's blue eyes grew wide.

"Please, Uncle Bob, make it go bang!"

"You come along, then," and Mr. Yancy moved off in the direction of his mule, the child following.

Thereafter beguiling speech flowed steadily from Mr. Yancy's bearded lips, in the midst of which relations were established between the mule and cart, and the boy quitted the Barony for a new world.

The afternoon sun waned as they went deeper and deeper into the pine woods, but at last they came to their journey's end, a widely scattered settlement on a hill above a branch.

"This," said Mr. Yancy, "are Scratch Hill, sonny. Why Scratch Hill? Some say it's the seas; others agin hold it's the eternal bother of making a living here, but whether seas or living you scratch to both."

CHAPTER II.

Captain Murrell Asks Questions.

In the deep peace that rested like a benediction on the pine-clad slopes

of Scratch Hill the boy Hannibal followed at Yancy's heels as that gentleman pursued the not arduous rounds of temperate industry which made up his daily life, for if Yancy were not completely idle he was responsible for a counterfeited presentment of idleness having most of the merits of the real article.

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Hannibal and Yancy were the first to arrive at the deserted cabin in the old field Sunday afternoon. Shy children from the pine woods, big brothers with little sisters and big sisters with little brothers, drifted out of the encircling forest.

Mrs. Ferris's missionary spirit manifested itself agreeably enough on the whole. She read certain chapters from the Bible, finishing with the story of David, a narrative that made a deep impression upon Yancy, comfortably seated in the doorway.

"You will all be here next Sunday, won't you?—and at the same hour," she said, rising.

There was a sudden clatter of hoofs beyond the door. A man, well dressed and well mounted had ridden into the yard. As Mrs. Ferris came from the cabin he flung himself out of the saddle and, hat in hand, approached her.

"I am hunting a place called the Barony; can you tell me if I am on the right road?" he asked. He was a man in the early thirties, graceful and powerful of build, with a handsome face.

"It is my husband you wish to see? I am Mrs. Ferris."

"Then General Quintard is dead?" His tone was one of surprise.

"His death occurred over a year ago, and my husband now owns the Barony; were you a friend of the general's?"

"No, madam; he was my father's friend, but I had hoped to meet him." His manner was adroit and plausible.

"Will you ride on with us to the Barony and meet my husband, Mr. —?" she paused.

"Murrell—Captain Murrell. Thank you; I should like to see the old place. I should highly value the privilege," then his eyes rested on Miss Malroy.

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