



THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

By VAUGHAN KESTER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY D. MELVILL



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 Bob Hazard, a mysterious child of the old southern family, makes his appearance. Yancy tells how he adopted the boy, Nathaniel Ferris, and the Barony, but the Quintards deny any knowledge of the boy. Yancy to keep Hannibal, Captain Murrell, a friend of the Quintards, appears and asks questions about the Barony. Trouble at Scratch 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 Squire Balsam, 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 Tennessee home. Carrington takes the same stage. Yancy and Hannibal disappear, with Murrell on their trail. Hannibal arrives at the home of Judge Stouven Price. The Judge recognizes in the boy, the grandson of an old-time friend. Murrell arrives at Judge's home. Cavendish family on raft rescue Yancy, who is apparently dead. Price 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 dreamless sleep on board the raft. Judge Price makes startling discoveries in looking up land titles. Charley Norton, a young planter, who assists the Judge, is mysteriously assaulted. Norton informs Carrington that Betty has promised to marry him. Norton is mysteriously shot. More light on Murrell's plot. He plans uprising of negroes. Judge Price, with Hannibal, visits Betty, and she keeps her boy as a companion. In a stroll Betty takes with Hannibal they meet Bess Hicks, daughter of the overseer, who warns Betty of danger and counsels her to leave Belle Plain at once. Betty, terrified, takes her carriage to the station, and the pair are taken to Hicks' 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, terms at possible outcome of the crime. Judge Price, hearing of the abduction, plans action.

"Please God, we may yet put our fingers on some villain who does," said the Judge.

Outside it was noised about that Judge Price had taken matters in hand—he was the old fellow who had been warned to keep his mouth shut, and who had never stopped talking since. A crowd collected beyond the library windows and feasted its eyes on the back of this hero's bald head.

One by one the house servants were ushered into the judge's presence. First he interrogated little Steve, who had gone to Miss Betty's door that morning to rouse her, as was his custom. Next he examined Betty's maid; then the cook, and various house servants, who had nothing especial to tell, but told it at considerable length; and lastly big Steve.

"Stop a bit," the Judge suddenly interrupted the butler in the midst of his narrative. "Does the overseer always come up to the house the first thing in the morning?"

"Why, not exactly, sah, but he come up this mornin', sah. He was talking to me at the back of the house, when the women run out with the word that Missy was done gone away."

"He joined in the search?"

"Yes, sah."

"When was Miss Malroy seen last?" asked the Judge.

"She and the young gemman you lotched heah were seen in the garden along about sundown. I seen them myself."

"They had had supper?"

"Yes, sah."

"Who sleeps here?"

"Just little Steve and three of the women; they sleeps at the back of the house, sah."

"No sounds were heard during the night?"

"No, sah."

from the room and the judge dismissed the servants.

"Well, what do you think, Price?" asked Mahaffy anxiously when they were alone.

"Rubbish! Take my word for it, Solomon, this blow is leveled at me. I have been too forward in my attempts to suppress the carnival of crime that is raging through west Tennessee. You'll observe that Miss Malroy disappeared at a moment when the public is disposed to think she has retained me as her legal adviser; probably she will be set at liberty when she agrees to drop the matter of Norton's murder. As for the boy, they'll use him to compel my silence and inaction." The Judge took a long breath. "Yet there remains one point where the boy is concerned that completely baffles me. If we knew just a little more of his antecedents it might cause me to make a startling and radical move."

Mahaffy was clearly not impressed by the vague generalities in which the Judge was dealing.

"There you go, Price, as usual, trying to convince yourself that you are the center of everything!" he said, in a tone of much exasperation. "Let's get down to business! What does this man Hicks mean by hinting at suicide? You saw Miss Malroy yesterday?"

"You have put your finger on a point of some significance," said the Judge. "She bore evidence of the shock and loss she had sustained; aside from that she was quite as she has always been."

"Well, what do you want to see Hicks for? What do you expect to learn from him?"

"I don't like his insistence on the idea that Miss Malroy is mentally unbalanced. It's a question of some

where he had said good-by to Betty scarcely a week before.

The two men had paused by the door. They now advanced. One was gaunt and haggard, his face disfigured by a great red scar; the other was a shock-headed individual who moved with a shambling gait. Both carried rifles and both were dressed in coarse homespun.

"Morning, sir," said the man with the scar. "Yancy's my name, and this gentleman 'lows he'd rather be known now as Mr. Cavendish."

The Judge started to his feet.

"Bob Yancy?" he cried.

"Yes, sir, that's me." The Judge passed nimbly around the desk and shook the Scratch Hiller warmly by the hand. "Where's my nevy, sir?—what's all this about him and Miss Betty?" Yancy's soft drawl was suddenly eager.

"Please God we'll recover him soon!" said the Judge.

"By the window Carrington moted impatiently. No harm could come to the boy, but Betty—a shudder went through him.

"They've stolen him," Yancy spoke with conviction. "I reckon they've started back to North Carolina with him—only that don't explain what's come of Miss Betty, does it?" and he dropped rather helplessly on a chair.

"Bob are just getting off a sick bed. He's been powerful poorly in consequence of having his head laid open and then being thrown into the Elk river, where I fished him out," explained Cavendish, who still continued to regard the judge with unmixed astonishment, first cocking his shaggy head on one side and then on the other, his bleached eyes narrowed to a slit. Now and then he favored the austere Mahaffy with a fleeting glance. He seemed intuitively to understand the comradeship of their degradation.

"Mr. Cavendish fetched me here on his raft. We tied up to the sho' this morning. It was there we met Mr. Carrington—I'd knowed him slightly back yonder in North Carolina," continued Yancy. "He said I'd find Hannibal with you. I was counting a heap on seeing my nevy."

Carrington, no longer able to control himself, swung about on his heel.

"What's been done?" he asked, with fierce repression. "What's going to be done? Don't you know that every second is precious?"

"I am about to conclude my investigations, sir," said the Judge with dignity.

Carrington stepped to the door. After all, what was there to expect of these men? Whatever their interest, it was plainly centered in the boy. He passed out into the hall.

As the door closed on him the judge turned again to the Scratch Hiller.

"Mr. Yancy, Mr. Mahaffy and I hold your nephew in the tenderest regard; he has been our constant companion ever since you were lost to him. In this crisis you may rely upon us; we are committed to his recovery, no matter what it involves." The judge's tone was one of unalterable resolution.

"I reckon you-all have been mighty good and kind to him," said Yancy huskily.

"We have endeavored to be, Mr. Yancy—indeed I had formed the resolution legally to adopt him should you not come to claim him. I should have given him my name, and made him my heir. His education has already begun under my supervision," and the judge, remembering the high use to which he had dedicated one of Peg-lee's trade labels, fairly glowed with philanthropic fervor.

"Think of that!" murmured Yancy softly. He was deeply moved. So was Mr. Cavendish, who was gifted with a wealth of ready sympathy. He thrust out a hardened hand to the judge.

"Shake!" he said. "You're a heap better than you look." A thin ripple of laughter espoused Mahaffy, but the judge accepted Chills and Fever's proffered hand. He understood that here was a simple genuine soul.

"Price, isn't it important for us to know why Mr. Yancy thinks the boy has been taken back to North Carolina?" said Mahaffy.

"Just what kin is Hannibal to you, Mr. Yancy?" asked the judge resuming his seat.

"Strictly speaking, he ain't none. That he come to live with me is all owing to Mr. Crenshaw, who's a good man when left to himself, but he's got a wife, so a body may say he never is left to himself," began Yancy; and then briefly he told the story of the woman and the child much as he had told it to Bladen at the Barony the day of General Quintard's funeral.

The judge, his back to the light and his face in shadow, rested his left elbow on the desk and with his chin sunk in his palm, followed the Scratch Hiller's narrative with the closest attention.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Judge Takes Charge.

All work on the plantation had stopped, and the hundreds of slaves—men, women and children—were gathered about the house. Among these moved the members of the dominant race. The judge would have attached himself to the first group, but he heard a whispered question, and the answer:

"Miss Malroy's lawyer."

Clearly it was not for him to mix with these outsiders, these curiosity seekers. He crossed the lawn to the house, and mounted the steps. In the doorway was big Steve, while groups of men stood about in the hall, the hum of busy purposeless talk pervading the place. The judge frowned. This was all wrong.

"Has Mr. Ware returned from Memphis?" he asked of Steve.

"No, sah; not yet."

"Then show me into the library," said the judge with bland authority, surrendering his hat to the butler. "Come along, Mahaffy!" he added. They entered the library, and the judge motioned Steve to close the door. "Now, boy, you'll kindly ask those people to withdraw—you may say it is Judge Price's orders. Allow no one to enter the house unless they have business with me, or as I send for them—you understand? After you have cleared the house, you may bring me a decanter of corn whisky—stop a bit—you may ask the sheriff to step here."

"Yes, sah." And Steve withdrew.

The judge drew an easy-chair up to the flat-topped desk that stood in the center of the room, and seated himself.

"Are you going to make this the excuse for another drunk, Price? If so, I feel the greatest contempt for you," said Mahaffy sternly.

The judge winced at this.

"You have made a regrettable choice of words, Solomon," he urged gently.

"Where's your feeling for the boy?"

"Here!" said the judge, with an eloquent gesture, resting his hand on his heart.

"If you let whisky alone, I'll believe you; otherwise what I have said must stand."

The door opened, and the sheriff slouched into the room. He was chewing a long wheat straw, and his whole appearance was one of troubled weakness.

"Morning," he said briefly.

"Sit down, sheriff," and the judge indicated a bleak seat for the official in a distant corner. "Have you learned anything?" he asked.

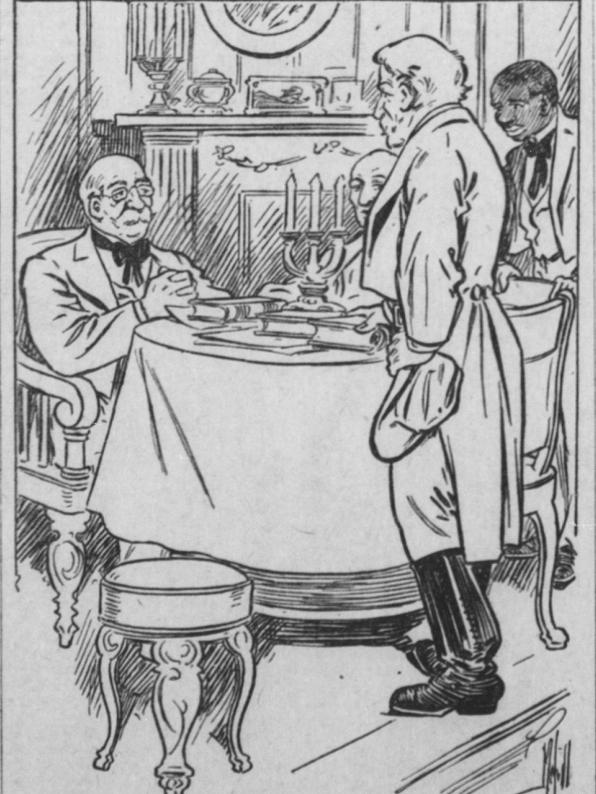
The sheriff shook his head.

"What you turning all these neighbors out of doors for?" he questioned.

"We don't want people tracking in and out the house, sheriff. Important evidence may be destroyed. I propose examining the slaves first—does that meet with your approval?"

"Oh, I've talked with them; they don't know nothing," said the sheriff.

"No one don't know nothing."



"Hicks Says Miss Malroy's Been Acting Queer Since Charley Norton Was Shot."

"I'll see the overseer—what's his name?—Hicks? Suppose you go for him!" said the judge, addressing the sheriff.

The sheriff was gone from the room only a few moments, and returned with the information that Hicks was down at the bayou, which was to be dragged.

"Why?" inquired the judge.

"Hicks says Miss Malroy's been acting mighty queer ever since Charley Norton was shot—distracted like! He says he noticed it, and that Tom Ware noticed it."

"How does he explain the boy's disappearance?"

"He reckons she throwed herself in, and the boy tried to drag her out, like he naturally would, and got drowed in."

"Humph! I'll trouble Mr. Hicks to step here," said the judge quietly.

"There's Mr. Carrington and a couple of strangers outside who've been asking about Miss Malroy and the boy; seems like the strangers knowed her and him back yonder in North Carolina," said the sheriff as he turned away.

"I'll see them." The sheriff went

delicacy—the law, sir, fully recognizes that. It seems to me he is over-anxious to account for her disappearance in a manner that can compromise no one."

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Judge Finds Allies.

They were interrupted by the opening of the door, and big Steve admitted Carrington and the two men of whom the sheriff had spoken.

"A shocking condition of affairs, Mr. Carrington!" said the judge by way of greeting.

"Yes," said Carrington shortly.

"You left these parts some time ago, I believe?" continued the judge.

"The day before Norton was shot. I had started home for Kentucky. I heard of his death when I reached Randolph on the second bluff," explained Carrington, from whose cheeks the weather-beaten bloom had faded. He rested his hand on the edge of the desk and turned to the men who had followed him into the room. "This is the gentleman you wish to see," he said, and stepped to one of the windows: It overlooked the terraces

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This is one use the steel trust makes of the tariff.

And the steel trust which does this comes whining to congress for "protection," and doesn't want the tariff revised save by a board of experts—steel trust experts.

Protection and Shipping.

A representative of the Cramp Shipbuilding company objects that the granting of American registry to foreign-built ships would be the application of free trade to a single industry, which strikes him as unjust. The fact is that the deep sea carrying trade is one to which the protective system cannot possibly be applied, either directly or through the protection of the shipyards.

Where both ends of a maritime route end in our own jurisdiction we can shut out foreign competition, and we do so; only ships of American registry can engage in the coastwise trade. Where one end is in our own and the other end in a foreign country we cannot apply the protective system, either by restricting the ships that may be employed, or by differential duties on the goods, or by flag duties, or differential port charges, on the vessels. It ought to be perfectly plain that any discrimination against foreign vessels will be retaliated against by foreign countries, and the logical result, and also the reductio ad absurdum, would be that all imports would come in our own vessels and all exports would go out in foreign vessels, and both domestic and foreign vessels would cross the ocean in one direction empty, and freight rates would have to be so high as to pay for the round trip with cargoes carried one way.

The deep sea carrying trade is inherently competitive, and we cannot possibly change it.

What good does it do the American shipbuilder to limit American registry to the products of his yard? Ships under foreign flags can bring goods to and take goods from our ports, and this must be so until we are willing to have our shipping barred from foreign ports. American registry is not necessary to enable a vessel to do business in our ports or even to be the property of our citizens, and Americans own a large amount of shipping under foreign flags.

If our yards are not now building vessels for the deep sea trade, how could their business be affected if American registry were granted to foreign-built ships? Our yards cannot lose anything they have not got, and never can get, until they can compete with foreign shipyards.

Colonel Roosevelt announces that it will take more than 50 years to put all his ideas into effect. He must not worry; the country will be willing to wait a great deal longer than that for most of them.—Philadelphia Press.

Taft Will Return the Call.

Gov. Wilson courteously visited President Taft when both were guests of the same Boston hotel. And we hazard nothing in saying that Mr. Taft will just as courteously visit President Wilson under similar conditions during the latter's administration. The amenities of life ought not to be lost in partisanship.

By "scientific revision of the tariff" the president is supposed to mean revision by the men who have made a science of plundering the public.

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