

THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

By VAUGHAN KESTER
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CHAPTER XXI.

The Cabin Across the Bayou.

Tom Ware was seated alone over his breakfast. He had left his bed as the pale morning light crept across the great fields that were once his pride and his despair—what was the use of trying to sleep when sleep was an impossibility? He was about to quit the room to say there was a white fellow at the door.

"Fetch him along in here," said Ware.
The white fellow delivered a penciled note from Murrell. When he was gone, the planter ordered his horse. As Ware rode away from Belle Plain he cursed Murrell under his breath. His own inclination toward evil was never robust; he could have connived over a long period of years to despoil Betty of her property, but murder and abduction was quite another thing.

Three miles from the bayou the road turned toward the water's edge, but as he drew nearer, those betterments which the resident of that lonely spot had seen fit to make for his own convenience, came under his scrutiny; these consisted of a log cabin and several lesser sheds.

Landing, he advanced toward the cabin. As he did so he saw two women at work heaving fax under an open shed. They were the wife and daughter of George Hicks, his overseer's brother.

"Morning, Mrs. Hicks," he said, addressing himself to the mother, a hulking ruffian of a woman. "Anybody with the captain?"
"Colonel Pentress is."

"Humph!" muttered Ware. He moved to the door of the cabin and entered the room where Murrell and Pentress were seated facing each other across the breakfast table.

"Well, what the devil do you want of me, anyhow?" demanded the planter.
"How's your sister, Tom?" inquired Murrell.

"I reckon she's the way you'd expect her to be." Ware dropped his voice to a low tone.
"John, you'll ruin yourself with your damned crazy infatuation!" it was Pentress who spoke.

"No, I won't, Colonel, but I'm not going to discuss that. All I want is for Tom to go to Memphis and stay there for a couple of days. When he comes back Belle Plain and its niggers will be as good as his, I am going to take the girl away from there tonight. How soon can you get away from here, Tom?" he asked abruptly.

"By God, I can't go too soon!" cried the planter, staggering to his feet. He gave Pentress a hopeless beaten look.
"You're my witness that first and last I have no part in this!"
The colonel shrugged his shoulders. Murrell reached out a hand and rested it on Ware's arm.

"Keep your wits, Tom, and within a week people will have forgotten all about Norton and your sister. I am going to give them something else to worry over."
Ware went from the cabin.

"Look here, now about the boy—are you ready?" he said. "I can get my hands on him! I'll send him either up or down the river and place him in safe keeping where you can get him at any time you want."
"This must be done without violence, John!" stipulated Pentress.

"Certainly, I understand. Which shall it be—up or down the river?"
"Could you take care of him for me below at Natchez?" inquired Pentress.
"As well there as anywhere."
"Good!" said Pentress, and took his leave.

The waters of an hour stopped by, then, the silence. Murrell heard the faint whistle; it was twice repeated as he saw Beans go down to the landing. A half hour elapsed and a man came from the scattering growth bushes that screened the shore. He crossed the clearing and entered the cabin. He was a young man of twenty-four or five, whose broad face wore a reckless expression.

their hands or they are likely to help the nigger swallow his medicine. I look for nothing else than considerable of a shake-up along the Mississippi. . . . what with lynchers and regulators a man will have to show a clean bill of health to be allowed to live, no matter what his color—just being white won't help him any!"

"No, you're right it won't!" and again Hues gave way to easy laughter. "When you've done your work you strike south as I tell you and join me. I'm going to keep New Orleans for myself—it's my ambition to destroy the city Old Hickory saved!"

"And then it's change your name and strike out for Texas with what you've picked up!"
"No, it isn't! I'll have my choice of men—a river full of ships. LoLok here, there's South America, or some of those islands in the Gulf with a black-and-tan population and a few white mongrels holding on to civilization by their eye-teeth; what's to hinder our setting up shop for ourselves? Two or three hundred Americans could walk off with an island like Hayti, for instance—and it's black with niggers. What we'd done here would be just so much capital down there. We'd make it a stamping ground for the Can! in the next two years we could bring in a couple of thousand Americans and then we'd be ready to take over their government, whether they liked it or not, and run it at a profit. We'd put the niggers back in slavery where they belong, and set them at work raising sugar and tobacco for their new bosses. Man, it's the richest land in the world, I tell you—and the mountains are full of gold!"

Hues had kindled with a ready enthusiasm while Murrell was speaking. "That sounds right, Captain—we'd have a country and a flag of our own—and I look at those free niggers as just so much boot!"

"I shall take only picked men with me—I can't give ship room to any other—but I want you. You'll join me in New Orleans?" said Murrell.
"When do you start south?" asked Hues, quickly.

"Inside of two days. I've got some private business to settle before I leave. I'll hang round here until that's attended to."

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Judge Extends His Credit.

That afternoon Judge Price walked out to Belle Plain. Solomon Mahaffy had known that this was a civility Betty Malroy could by no means escape. He had been conscious of the judge's purpose from the moment it existed in the germ state, and he had striven to divert him, but his striving had been in vain, for though the judge valued Mr. Mahaffy because of certain sterling qualities which he professed to discern beneath the hard crust that made up the external man, he was not disposed to accept him as his mentor in nice matters of taste and gentlemanly feeling. He owed it to himself personally to tender his sympathy.

Miss Malroy must have heard something of the honorable part he had played; surely she could not be in ignorance of the fact that the lawless element, dreading his further activities, had threatened him. She must know, too, about the reward of five thousand dollars. Certainly her grief could not be blind to the fact that he had met the situation with a largeness of public spirit that was an impressive lesson to the entire community.

These were all points over which he and Mahaffy had wrangled, and he felt that his friend, in seeking to keep him away from Belle Plain, was standing squarely in his light. He really could not understand Solomon or his objections. He pointed out that Norton had probably left a will—no one knew yet—probably his estate would go to his intended wife—what more likely? He understood Norton had cousins somewhere in middle Tennessee—there was the attractive possibility of extended litigation. Miss Malroy needed a strong, clear brain to guide her past those difficulties his agile fancy assembled in her path. He beamed on his friend with a wide sunny smile.

"You mean she needs a lawyer, Price?" inquired Mahaffy.
"That slap at me, Solomon, is unworthy of you. Just name some one, will you, who has shown an interest comparable to mine? I may say I have devoted my entire energy to her affairs, and with disinterestedness. I have made myself felt. Will you mention who else these cutthroats have tried to browbeat and frighten? They know that my theories and conclusions are a menace to them! I got 'em in a panic, sir—presently some fellow will lose his nerve and light out for the tall timber—and it will be just Judge Slocum Price who's done the trick—no one else!"

"Are you looking for some one to take a pot shot at you?" inquired Mahaffy sourly.
"Your remark uncovers my fondest hope, Solomon—I'd give five years of my life just to be shot at—that would round out the episode of the letter nicely," again the judge beamed on Mahaffy with that wide and sunny smile of his.

"Why don't you let the boy go alone, Price?" suggested Mahaffy. He lacked that sense of sublime confidence in the judge's tact and discretion of which the judge, himself, entertained never a doubt.

"I shall not obtrude myself, Solomon; I shall merely walk out to Belle Plain and leave a civil message. I know what's due Miss Malroy in her bereaved state—she has sustained no ordinary loss, and in no ordinary fashion. She has been the center of a striking and profoundly moving tragedy! I would give a good deal to know

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If my late client left a will—"You might ask her," said Mahaffy cynically. "Nothing like going to headquarters for the news!"

"Solomon, Solomon, give me credit for common sense—go further, and give me credit for common decency! Don't let us forget that ever since we came here she has manifested a charmingly hospitable spirit where we were concerned!"

"Wouldn't charity hit nearer the mark, Price?"
"I have never so regarded it, Solomon," said the judge mildly, "I have read a different meaning in the beef and flour and potatoes she's sent here. I expect if the truth could be known to us she is wondering in the midst of her grief why I haven't called, but she'll appreciate the considerate delicacy of a gentleman. I wish it were possible to get out flowers in this cursed wilderness!"

The judge had been occupied with a simple but ingenious toilet. He had trimmed the frayed skirts of his coat; then, by turning his cuffs inside out and upside down a fresh surface made its first public appearance. Next his shoes had engaged his attention. They might have well discouraged a less resolute and resourceful character, but with the contents of his ink-well he artfully colored his white yarn socks where they showed through the rifts in the leather. This the judge did gaily, now humming a snatch of song, now listening civilly to Mahaffy, now replying with undisturbed cheerfulness.

Last of all he clapped his dingy beaver on his head, giving it an indescribably jaunty slant, and stepped to the door.
"Well, wish me luck, Solomon, I'm off—come, Hannibal!" he said.

At heart he cherished small hope of seeing Betty, advantageous as he felt an interview might prove. However, on reaching Belle Plain, he and Hannibal were shown into the cool parlor by little Steve. It was more years than the judge cared to remember since he had put his foot inside such a house, but with the true grandeur of soul he rose to the occasion; a sublimated dignity shone from every battered feature, while he fixed little Steve with so fierce a glance that the grin froze on his lips.

"You are to say that Judge Slocum Price presents his compliments and condolences to Miss Malroy—have you got that straight, you pinch of snoot?" he concluded affably. Little Steve, impressed alike by the judge's air of confidence and his easy flow of words, signified that he had. "You may also sign that Judge Price's ward, young Master Hazard, presents his compliments and condolences." What more the judge might have said was interrupted by the entrance of Betty, herself.

"My dear young lady—" the judge bowed, then he advanced toward her with the solemnity of carriage and countenance he deemed suitable to the occasion, and her extended hand was engulfed between his two plump palms. He rolled his eyes heavenward.

"It's the Lord's will to deal with us as His own inscrutable wisdom dictates," he murmured with pious resignation. "We are all poorer, ma'am, than he has bid. Just as we were richer while he lived!" The rich cadence of the judge's speech fell sonorously on the silence, and that look of horror which had never quite left Betty's eyes since they saw Charley Norton fall, rose out of their clear depths again. The judge, instantly stricken with a sense of the inadequacy of his words, doubled on his spiritual tracks. "In round-about way, ma'am we're bound to believe in the omnipresence of Providence—we must think it—though a body might be disposed to hold that west Tennes-

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