

The Prodigal Judge

Illustrations by D. McNeil
By Vaughan Kester

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CHAPTER XVII.

Betty Leaves Belle Plain.

Hannibal had devoted himself loyally to the judge's glorification, and Betty heard all about the letter, the snuffing of the candles and the reward of five thousand dollars. It vastly increased the child's sense of importance and satisfaction when he discovered she had known nothing of these matters until he told her of them.

"Why, where would Judge Price get so much money, Hannibal?" she asked, greatly astonished.

"He won't have to get it, Miss Betty; Mr. Mahaffy says he don't reckon no one will ever tell who wrote the letter—he 'ows the man who done that will keep pretty mum—he just doesn't tell!" the boy explained.

"No, I suppose not—" and Betty saw that perhaps, after all, the judge had not assumed any very great financial responsibility.

"He can't be a coward, though, Hannibal," she added, for she understood that the risk of personal violence which he ran was genuine. She had formed her own unsympathetic estimate of him that day at Boggs' race-track; Mahaffy in his blackest hour could have added nothing to it. Twice since then she had met him in Raleigh, which had only served to fix that first impression.

"Miss Betty, he's just like my Uncle Bob was—he ain't afraid of nothing! He totes them pistols of his—loaded—if you notice good you can see where they bulge out his coat!" Hannibal's eyes, very round and big, looked up into hers.

"Is he as poor as he seems, Hannibal?" inquired Betty.

"He never has no money, Miss Betty, but I don't reckon he's what a body would call poor."

It might have babbled a far more mature intelligence than Hannibal's to comprehend those peculiar processes by which the judge sustained himself and his intimate fellowship with adversity—that it was his magnificence of mind which made the squalor of his daily life seem merely a passing phase—but the boy had managed to point a delicate distinction, and Betty grasped something of the hope and faith which never quite died out in Siecum Price's indomitable breast.

"Put you always have enough to eat, dear?" she questioned anxiously. Hannibal promptly reassured her on this point. "You wouldn't let me think anything that was not true, Hannibal—you are quite sure you have never been hungry!"

"Never, Miss Betty; honest!"

Betty gave a sigh of relief. She had been reproaching herself for her neglect of the child; she had meant to do so much for him and had done nothing! Now it was too late for her personally to interest herself in his behalf, yet before she left for the east she would provide for him. If she had felt it was possible to trust the judge she would have made him her agent, but even in his best aspect he seemed a dubious dependence. Tom,

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A man doesn't necessarily have to be sharp to have his good points. Some fellows spend all of their time trying to prove that luck is against them.

for quite different reasons, was equally out of the question. She thought of Mr. Mahaffy.

"What kind of a man is Mr. Mahaffy, Hannibal?"

"He's an awful nice man, Miss Betty, only he never lets on; a body's got to find it out for his own self—he ain't like the judge."

"Does he drink, too, Hannibal?" questioned Betty.

"Oh, yes; when he can get the liquor, he does." It was evident that Hannibal was cheerfully tolerant of this weakness on the part of the austere Mahaffy. By this time Betty was ready to weep over the child, with his knowledge of shabby vice, and his fresh young faith in those old tatterdemalions.

"But, no matter what they do, they are very, very kind to you!" she continued tremulously.

"Yes, ma'am—why, Miss Betty, they're lovely men!"

"And do you ever hear the things spoken of you learned about at Mrs. Farris' Sunday-school?"

"When the judge is drunk he talks a heap about 'em. It's beautiful to hear him then; you'd love it, Miss Betty," and Hannibal smiled up sweetly into her face.

"Does he have you go to Sunday school in Raleigh?"

The boy shook his head.

"I ain't got no clothes that's fitten to wear, nor no pennies to give, but the judge, he 'ows that as soon as he can make a raise I got to go, and he's learning me my letters—but we ain't a book. Miss Betty, I reckon it'd stump you some to guess how he's fixed it for me to learn!"

"He's drawn the letters for you, is that the way?" In spite of herself, Betty was experiencing a certain revision of feeling where the judge and Mahaffy were concerned. They were doubtless bad enough, but they could have been worse.

"No, ma'am; he done soaked the label off one of Mr. Pegloe's whisky bottles and pasted it on the wall just as high as my chin, so I can see it good, and he's learning me that-way! Maybe you've seen the kind of bottle I mean—Pegloe's Mississippi Pilot; Pure Corn Whisky?" But Hannibal's bright little face fell. He was quick to see that the educational system devised by the judge did not impress Betty at all favorably. She drew him into her arms.

"You shall have my books—the books I learned to read out of when I was a little girl, Hannibal."

"I like learning from the label pretty well," said Hannibal loyally.

"But you'll like the books better dear, when you see them. I know just where they are, for I happened on them on a shelf in the library only the other day."

After they had found and examined the books and Hannibal had gladly admitted that they might possess certain points of advantage over the label, he and Betty went out for a walk. It was now late afternoon and the sun was sinking behind the wall of the forest that rose along the Arkansas coast. Their steps had led them to the terrace—where they stood looking off into the west. It was here that Betty had said good-by to Bruce Carrington—it might have been months ago, and it was only days. She thought of Charley—Charley, with his youth and hope and high courage—unwillingly enough she had led him on to his death! A sob rose in her throat.

Hannibal looked up into her face.

The memory of his own loss was never very long absent from his mind, and Miss Betty had been the victim of a similarly sinister tragedy. He recalled those first awful days of loneliness through which he had lived when there was no Uncle Bob—soft voiced, smiling and infinitely companionable.

"Why, Hannibal, you are crying—what about, dear?" asked Betty suddenly.

"No, ma'am; I ain't crying," said Hannibal stoutly, but his wet lashes gave the lie to his words.

"Are you homesick—do you wish to go back to the judge and Mr. Mahaffy?"

"No, ma'am—it ain't that—I was just thinking—"

"Thinking about what, dear?"

"About my Uncle Bob." The small face was very wistful.

"Oh—and you still miss him so much, Hannibal?"

"I bet I do—I reckon anybody who knew Uncle Bob would never get over missing him; they just couldn't, Miss Betty! The judge is mighty kind, and so is Mr. Mahaffy—they're awful kind, Miss Betty, and it seems like they get kinder all the time—but with Uncle Bob, when he liked you, he just laid himself out to let you what was said."

"That does make a great difference, doesn't it?" agreed Betty sadly, and two piteous tearful eyes were bent upon him.

"Don't you reckon if Uncle Bob is alive, like the judge says, and he's ever going to find me, he had ought to be here by now?" continued Hannibal anxiously.

"But it hasn't been such a great while, Hannibal; it's only that so much has happened to you. If he was very badly hurt it may have been weeks before he could travel; and then when he could, perhaps he went back to that tavern to try to learn what had become of you. But we may be quite certain he will never abandon his search until he has made every possible effort to find you, dear! That means he will sooner or later come to west Tennessee, for there will always be the hope that you have found your way here."

"Sometimes I get mighty tired waiting, Miss Betty," confessed the boy.

"Seems like I just couldn't wait no

longer—" He sighed gently, and then his face cleared. "You reckon he'll come most any time, don't you, Miss Betty?"

"Yes, Hannibal; any day or morn!"

"Whoop!" muttered Hannibal softly under his breath. Presently he asked: "Where does that branch take you to?" He nodded toward the bayou at the foot of the terraced bluff. "It empties into the river," answered Betty.

Hannibal saw a small skiff beached among the cottonwoods that grew along the water's edge and his eyes lighted up instantly. He had a juvenile passion for boats.

"Why, you got a boat, ain't you, Miss Betty?" This was a charming and an important discovery.

"Would you like to go down to it?" inquired Betty.

"Deed I would! Does she leak any, Miss Betty?"

"I don't know about that. Do boats usually leak, Hannibal?"

"Why, you ain't ever been out rowing her, Miss Betty, have you?" and there ain't no better fun than rowing a boat!" They had started down the path.

"I used to think that, too, Hannibal; how do you suppose it is that when people grow up they forget all about the really nice things they might do?"

"What use is she if you don't go rowing in her?" persisted Hannibal.

"Oh, but it is used. Mr. Tom uses it in crossing to the other side where they are clearing land for cotton. It saves him a long walk or ride about the head of the bayou."

"Like I should take you out in her, Miss Betty?" demanded Hannibal with palpitating anxiety.

They had entered the scattering timber when Betty paused suddenly with a startled exclamation, and Hannibal felt her fingers close convulsively about his. The sound she had heard might have been only the rustling of the wind among the branches overhead in that shadowy silence, but Betty's nerves, the placid nerves of youth and perfect health, were shattered.

" Didn't you hear something, Hannibal?" she whispered fearfully.

For answer Hannibal pointed mysteriously, and glancing in the direction he indicated, Betty saw a woman advancing along the path toward them. The look of alarm slowly died out of his eyes.

"I think it's the overseer's niece," she told Hannibal, and they kept on toward the boat.

The girl came rapidly up the path, which closely followed the irregular line of the shore in its windings. Once she was seen to stop and glance back over her shoulder, her attitude intent and listening, then she hurried forward again. Just at the boat the three met.

"Good evening!" said Betty pleasantly.

The girl made no reply to this; she merely regarded Betty with a fixed stare. At length she broke the silence abruptly.

"I got something I want to say to you—you know who I am, I reckon?" She was a girl of about Betty's own age, with a certain dark, sultry beauty and that physical attraction which

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