

The Prodigal Judge

Illustration by D. Schell

By Vaughan Kester

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CHAPTER XVIII.

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 'lows the man who done that will keep pretty mum—he just d'xessent 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 baffled 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 Slocum 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,

for quite different reasons, was equal to 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 lick, 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 tattered demagogues.

"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. Ferris' 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 'lows 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 revulsion 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's I can see it good, and he's learning me that a 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 grogingly 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—unwittingly 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 sadly.

"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 know it!"

"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 hour!"

"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 palpating 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, sullen beauty and that physical attraction which

er! He done struck out for Memphis two hours after sun-up, and what's more, he ain't coming back here to-night—" There was a moment of silence. The girl looked about apprehensively. She continued, fixing her black eyes on Betty: "You're here alone at Belle Plain—you know what happened when Mr. Tom started for Memphis last time—I reckon you-all ain't forgot that!"

Betty felt a pallor steal over her face. She rested a hand that shook on the trunk of a tree to steady herself. The girl laughed shortly.

"Don't be so scared; I reckon Belle Plain's as good as his if anything happened to you?"

By a great effort Betty gained a measure of control over herself. She took a step nearer and looked the girl steadily in the face.

"Perhaps you will stop this sort of talk, and tell me what is going to happen to me—if you know?" she said quietly.

"Why do you reckon Mr. Norton was shot? I can tell you why—it was all along of you—that was why!" The girl's furtive glance, which searched and watched the gathering shadows, came back as it always did to Betty's pale face. "You ain't no safer than he was, I tell you!" and she sucked in her breath sharply between her full red lips.

"What do you mean?" faltered Betty.

"Do you reckon you're safe here in the big house alone? Why do you reckon Mr. Tom cleared out for Memphis? It was because he couldn't be around and have anything happen to you—that was why!" and the girl sank her voice to a whisper. "You quit Belle Plain now—tonight—just as soon as you can!"

"This is absurd—you are trying to frighten me!"

"Did they stop with trying to frighten Charley Norton?" demanded Bess, with harsh insistence.

Whatever the promptings that inspired this warning, they plainly had nothing to do with either liking or sympathy. Her dominating emotion seemed to be a sullen sort of resentment which lit up her glance with a dull fire; yet her feelings were so clearly and so keenly personal that Betty understood the motive that had brought her there. The explanation, she found, left her wondering just where and how her own fate was linked with that of this poor white.

"You have been waiting some time to see me?" she asked.

"Ever since about noon."

"You were afraid to come to the house?"

"I didn't want to be seen there."

"And yet you knew I was alone."

"Alone—but how do you know who's watching the place?"

"Do you think there was reason to be afraid of that?" asked Betty.

Again the girl stamped her foot with angry impatience.

"You're just wastin' time—just foolin' in it away—and you ain't got none to spare!"

"You must tell me what I have to fear—I must know more or I shall stay just where I am!"

"Well, then, stay!" The girl turned away, and then as quickly turned back and faced Betty once more. "I reckon he'd kill me if he knew—I reckon I've earned that already—"

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"He'll have you away from here to-night!"

"He? . . . who . . . and what if I refuse to go?"

"Did they ask Charley Norton whether he wanted to live or die?" came the sinister question.

A shiver passed through Betty. She was seeing it all again—Charley as he groped among the graves with the hand of death heavy upon him.

A moment later she was alone. The girl had disappeared. There were only the shifting shadows as the wind tossed the branches of the trees, and the bands of golden light that stunted along the empty path. The fear of the unknown leaped up afresh in Betty's soul; in an instant flying feet had borne her to the boy's side.

"Come—come quick, Hannibal!" she gasped out, and seized his hand.

"What is it, Miss Betty? What's the matter?" asked Hannibal as they fled panting up the terraces.

"I don't know—only we must get away from here just as soon as we can!" Then, seeing the look of alarm on the child's face, she added more quietly, "Don't be frightened, dear, only we must get away from Belle Plain at once." But where they were to go, she had not considered.

Reaching the house, they stole to Betty's room. Her well-filled purse was the important thing; that, together with some necessary clothing, went into a small hand-bag.

"You must carry this, Hannibal; if any one sees us leave the house they'll think it something you are taking away," she explained. Hannibal nodded understandingly.

"Don't you trust your niggers, Miss Betty?" he whispered as they went from the room.

"I only trust you, dear!"

"What makes you go? Was it something that woman told you? Are they coming after us, Miss Betty? Is it Captain Murrell?"

"Captain Murrell!" There was less of mystery now, but more of terror, and her hand stole up to her heart, and, white and slim, rested against the black fabric of her dress.

"Don't you be scared, Miss Betty!" said Hannibal.

They went silently from the house and again crossed the lawn to the terrace. Under the leafy arch which canopied them there was already the deep purple of twilight.

"Do you reckon it were Captain Murrell shot Mr. Norton, Miss Bet-

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