THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

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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 Yancy, a farmer, whose Hannibal Wayne Bizzard, a mysterious child of the old southern family, makes his appearance. Yancy tells how he adopted the boy. Nathaniel Ferris buys 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 Ferrisses, has an encounter with Captain Murrell, who forces his attentions on her, and is rescued by Bruce Carrington. Betty sets out for her Tennessee home. Carrington takes the same stage. Yancy and Hannibal disappear, with Murrell on their trail. Hannibal arrives at the home of Judge Slocum Price. The Judge recognizes in the boy a 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 the 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, acts on Bess' advice, and on their way their carriage is stopped by Slosson, the tavern keeper, and a confederate, and Betty and Hannibal are made prisoners. 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, terrified at possible outcome of the crime. Judge Price, hearing of the abduction, plans action. The Judge takes charge of the situation, and search for the missing ones is instituted. Carrington visits the judge and allies are discovered. Judge Price visits Colonel Fentress, where he meets Yancy and Cavendish. Becoming enraged, Price dashes a glass of whisky into the colonel's face and a duel is arranged.

CHAPTER XXV. (Continued.)

"Hues!" cried Murrell in astonishment, for the man confronting him was the Clan's messenger who should have been speeding across the state.

"Toss up your hands, Murrell," said Hues quietly.

One of the other men spoke.

"You are under arrest!"

"Arrest!"

"You are wanted for nigger-stealing," said the man. Still Murrell did not seem to comprehend. He looked at Hues in dull wonder.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Waiting to arrest you—ain't that plain?" said Hues, with a grim smile.

The outlaw's hands dropped at his side, limp and helpless. With some idea that he might attempt to draw a weapon one of the men took hold of him, but Murrell was nerveless to his touch; his face had gone a ghastly white and was streaked with the markings of terror.

"Well, by thunder!" cried the man in utter amazement.

Murrell looked into Hues' face.

"You—you—" and the words thickened on his tongue, becoming an inarticulate murmur.

"It's all up, John," said Hues.

"No," said Murrell, recovering himself. "You may as well turn me loose—you can't arrest me!"

"I've done it," answered Hues. "I've been on your track for six months."

"How about this fellow?" asked the man whose pistol still covered Ware. Hues glanced toward the planter and shook his head.

"Where are you going to take me?" asked Murrell quickly. Again Hues laughed.

"You'll find that out in plenty of time, and then your friends can pass the word around if they like; now you'll come with me."

Ware neither moved nor spoke as Hues and his prisoner passed back along the path, Hues with his hand on Murrell's shoulder, and one of his companions close at his heels, while the third man led off the outlaw's horse.

Presently the distant clatter of hoofs was borne to Ware's ears—only that; the miracle of courage and daring he had half expected had not happened. Murrell, for all his wild boasting, was like other men, like himself. His bloodshot eyes slid around in their sockets. There across the sunlit stretch of water was Betty—the thought of her brought him to quick choking terrors. The whole fabric of crime by which he had been benefited in the past or had expected to profit in the future seemed toppling in upon him, but his mind clutched one important fact. Hues, if he knew of Betty's disappearance, did not connect Murrell with it. Ware sucked in comfort between his twitching lips. Stealing niggers! No one would believe that he, a planter, had a hand in that, and for a brief instant he considered signaling Bess to return. Slosson must be told of Murrell's arrest; but he was sick with apprehension, some trap might have been prepared for him, he could not know; and the impulse to act forsook him.

He smote his hands together in a hopeless, beaten gesture. And Murrell had gone weak—with his own eyes he had seen it—Murrell—whom he believed without fear! He felt that he had been grievously betrayed in his trust and a hot rage poured through him. At last he climbed into the saddle and, swaying like a drunken man, galloped off.

When he reached the river road he paused and scanned its dusty surface. Hues and his party had turned south when they issued from the wood path. No doubt Murrell was being taken to Memphis. Ware laughed harshly. The outlaw would be free before another dawn broke.

He had halted near where Jim had turned his team the previous night after Betty and Hannibal had left the carriage; the marks of the wheels were as plainly distinguishable as the more recent trail left by the four men, and as he grasped the significance of that wide half circle his sense of injury overwhelmed him again. He hoped to live to see Murrell hanged!

He was so completely lost in his bitter reflections that he had been unaware of a mounted man who was coming toward him at a swift gallop, but now he heard the steady pounding of hoofs and, startled by the sound, looked up. A moment later the horseman drew rein at his side.

"Ware!" he cried.

"How are you, Carrington?" said the planter.

"You are wanted at Belle Plain," began Carrington, and seemed to hesitate.

"Yes—yes, I am going there at once—now—" stammered Ware, and gathered up his reins with a shaking hand.

"You've heard, I take it?" said Carrington slowly.

"Yes," answered Ware, in a hoarse whisper. "My God, Carrington, I'm heart sick; she has been like a daughter to me—I—" he fell silent, mopping his face.

The Planter's Knees Knocked Together.

"I think I understand your feeling," said Carrington, giving him a level glance.

"Then you'll excuse me," and the planter clapped spurs to his horse. Once he looked back over his shoulder; he saw that Carrington had not moved from the spot where they had met.

At Belle Plain, Ware found his neighbors in possession of the place. They greeted him quietly and spoke in subdued tones of their sympathy.

When he could he shut himself in his room. He had experienced a day of maddening anxiety; he had not slept at all the previous night; in mind and body he was worn out; and now he was plunged into the thick of this sensation. He must keep control of himself.

He sought to forecast the happenings of the next few hours. Murrell's friends would break jail for him, that was a foregone conclusion; but the insurrection he had planned was at an end. Hues had dealt its death blow. Moreover, though the law might be impotent to deal with Murrell, he could not hope to escape the vengeance of the powerful class he had plotted to destroy; he would have to quit the country. Ware gloated in this idea of craven flight. Thank God, he had seen the last of him!

But, as always, his thoughts came back to Betty. Slosson would wait at Hicks' place for the man Murrell had promised him, and, failing the messenger, for the signal fire, but there would be neither; and Slosson would be left to determine his own course of action. Ware felt certain that he would wait through the night, but as sure as the morning broke, if no word had reached him, he would send one of his men across the bayou, who must learn of Murrell's arrest, escape, flight—for in Ware's mind these three events were indissolubly associated. The planter's teeth knocked together. He was having a terrible acquaintance with fear, its very depths had swallowed him up; it was a black pit in which he sank from horror to horror. He had lost all faith in the Clan which had terrorized half a dozen states, which had robbed and murdered with apparent immunity, which had marketed its hundreds of stolen slaves. He had utterly collapsed at the first blow dealt the organization, but he was still seeing Murrell, pallid and shaken.

A step sounded in the hall and an instant later Hicks entered the room without the formality of knocking. Ware recognized his presence with a glance of indifference, but did not speak. Hicks slouched to his employer's side and handed him a note which proved to be from Fentress. Ware read and tossed it aside.

"If he wants to see me why don't he come here?" he growled.

"I reckon that old fellow they call Judge Price has sprung something sudden on the colonel," said Hicks. "He was out here the first thing this morning; you'd have thought he owned Belle Plain. There was a couple of strangers with him, and he had me in and fired questions at me for half an hour; then he hiked off up to The Oaks."

"Murrell's been arrested," said Ware in a dull level voice. Hicks gave him a glance of unmixed astonishment.

"No!"

"Yes, by God!"

"Who'd risk it?"

"Risk it? Man, he almost fainted dead away—a damned coward. Hell!"

"How do you know this?" asked Hicks, appalled.

"I was with him when he was taken—it was Hues—the man he trusted more than any other!" Ware gave the overseer a ghastly grin and was silent, but in that silence he heard the drumming of his own heart. He went on. "I tell you, to save himself, John Murrell will implicate the rest of us; we've got to get him free, and then, by hell—we ought to knock him in the head; he isn't fit to live!"

"The jail ain't built that'll hold him!" muttered Hicks.

"Of course, he can't be held," agreed Ware. "And he'll never be brought to trial; no lawyer will dare appear against him, no jury will dare to find him guilty; but there's Hues, what about him?" He paused. The two men looked at each other for a long moment.

"Where did they carry the captain?"

"I don't know."

"It looks like the Clan was in a hell-fired hole—but, shucks! What will be easier than to fix Hues?—and while they're fixing folks they'd better not overlook that old fellow Price. He's got some notion about Fentress and the boy." Mr. Hicks did not consider it necessary to explain that he was himself largely responsible for this.

"How do you know that?" demanded Ware.

"He as good as said so." Hicks looked uneasily at the planter. He knew himself to be compromised. The stranger named Cavendish had forced an admission from him that Murrell would not condone if it came to his knowledge. He had also acquired a very proper and wholesome fear of Judge Slocum Price. He stepped close to Ware's side. "What'll come of the girl, Tom? Can you figure that out?" he questioned, sinking his voice almost to a whisper. But Ware was incapable of speech, again his terrors completely overwhelmed him. "I reckon you'll have to find another overseer. I'm going to strike out for Texas," said Hicks.

Ware's eyes met his for an instant. He had thought of flight, too; was still thinking of it, but greed was as much a part of his nature as fear; Belle Plain was a prize not to be lightly cast aside, and it was almost his. He lurched across the room to the window. If he were going to act, the sooner he did so the better, and gain a respite from his fears. The road down the coast slid away before his heavy eyes; he marked each turn, then a palsy of fear shook him, his heart beat against his ribs, and he stood gnawing his lips while he gazed up at the sun.

"Do you get what I say, Tom? I am going to quit these parts," said Hicks. Ware turned slowly from the window.

"All right, Hicks. You mean you want me to settle with you, is that it?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm going to leave while I can; maybe I can't later on," said Hicks stolidly. He added: "I am going to start down the coast as soon as it turns dark, and before it's day again I'll have put the good miles between me and these parts."

"You're going down the coast?" and Ware was again conscious of the quickened beating of his heart. Hicks nodded. "See you don't meet up with John Murrell," said Ware.

"I'll take that chance. It seems a heap better to me than staying here."

Ware looked from the window. The shadows were lengthening across the lawn.

"Better start now, Hicks," he advised.

"I'll wait until it turns dark."

"You'll need a horse."

"I was going to help myself to one. This ain't no time to stand on ceremony," said Hicks shortly.

"Slosson shouldn't be left in the lurch like this—or your brother's folks—"

"They'll have to figure it out for themselves, same as me," rejoined Hicks.

"You can stop there as you go by."

"No," said Hicks. "I never did believe in this damn foolishness about the girl, and I won't go near George's—"

"I don't ask you to go there; you can give them the signal from the head of the bayou. All I want is for you to stop and light a fire on the shore. They'll know what that means. I'll give you a horse and fifty dollars for the job."

Hicks' eyes sparkled, but he only said:

"Make it twice that and maybe we can deal."

Racked and tortured, Ware hesitated; but the sun was slipping into the west; his windows blazed with the hot light.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Their Romance.

"He loves me, he loves me not," said Maud Muller, as she went through the garden picking potato bugs off the potato plants.

"He loves me."

She picked a potato bug.

"He loves me not."

She gathered another potato bug.

"A thrifty girl, forsooth," declared the judge. "Instead of playing that game with daisy petals, she plays it with potato bugs."

He proposed, they were married, and if the recall does not go into effect they will doubtless live happily.

The SUITORS OF Mrs. MERRIWID

BY KENNETT HARRIS

MELISSA ABHORS A VOCAL VOLCANO.

Almost immediately after the street door closed Mrs. Merriwid tottered into the room where her maternal maiden aunt Jane was sitting at a little tea table. There she collapsed in a gradual Delsartean movement at the foot of an easy chair, allowing her head to droop weakly against its cushion.

"Get up, Melissa, and don't make a fool of yourself," said Aunt Jane.

"Tea, give me tea!" murmured Mrs. Merriwid, faintly.

"You might have had it before it got cold if you had been a little more hospitable," Aunt Jane remarked, as she poured.

"He didn't give me a chance to invite him," said Mrs. Merriwid, scrambling to a more conventional posture. "He was so much occupied with our pleasant little chat that I couldn't have interjected an invitation to partake of a glass of water. He's a great little monologue artist, Mr. Prollicks is. I'll bet you could use his vocal chords for an elevator cable and get past the inspector."

"He certainly has a command of language," Aunt Jane agreed.

"He hasn't any control of it," said Mrs. Merriwid. "It runs away with him every time and the great trouble is it never gets any place in particular. Talk about speaking volumes! That man will speak a congressional library during a morning call and never bat an eye. If I had a dear little lap dog whose hind leg I had any regard for, I'd certainly tie him up in the basement when Prolly called. My own understanding—"

"Melissa!" said Aunt Jane, reprovingly.

"Pardon me, dearie," said Mrs. Merriwid, plucking down her skirt. "It was careless of me. I mean to say it passes my comprehension how any creature that hasn't a red beak and green feathers can make such a conversational nuisance of himself. I'm a pretty good single handed talker, me, when I get an intelligent and appreciative listener—like you, dearie—but Mr. Prollicks could fill his mouth with hot mush and make me seem tongue-tied. If he'd only whistle once in a while, he'd be so much better company."

"Well," observed Aunt Jane, "there are some men who never have a chance to say for themselves."

"I doubt it," replied Mrs. Merriwid. "When it comes to themselves, they are all, more or less, loquacious; it's when you try to switch to a less interesting subject that they fall back on grunts. Women have wider concerns. They'll extend the discussion to their husbands and the servant problem and infant culture and chiffons at least. Mr. Prollicks doesn't confine himself to anything, however. If anybody started the idiosyncracies of ichthyosauri as a topic, he'd butt in and hold the floor indefinitely explaining how it came that he had never devoted any time to that branch of information."

"What did he talk about this afternoon?" asked Aunt Jane.

Mrs. Merriwid cast her eyes upward. "Let me see," she began. "The weather first, I think, then other predictions and fortune telling and clairvoyance and esoteric Buddhism and Mr. Isaacs. From Isaacs to Oppenheim was a natural transition, and detective stories carried him to science, which embraced wireless telegraphy and aeroplanes. Then he volplaned to earth and automobiles in wide and fluent spirals and, by way of country roads, he arrived at bungalows and from bungalows to cottages and from cottages to love."

"Oh, he!" said Aunt Jane, rubbing her sapient nose with her forefinger and smiling.

"Ah ha!" Mrs. Merriwid mimicked. "Yes, he said that after all it was love that made the world go round. I suggested that at times it was an injudicious indulgence in cocktails and such, but he didn't hear me because he was busy explaining his theory at length. It seems that he had imagined several times that he had been in love only to discover that it was a passing fancy, and he thought it not improbable that marriages had been made on equally baseless suppositions. (Foxy Prolly!) It was there he paused for the first time and gave me my opportunity.

"'I love a good game of bridge whist,' I said, 'and I love to fish where you have to be very quiet, and I love the reading rooms in the public libraries and desert solitudes and dumb animals and watch cases and clams.'

"'Why clams?' says he. 'Because they're happy?'

"'No,' says I, sweetly. 'For another reason altogether.'

"He seemed a little bewildered and mechanically pulled out his watch.

"'Good gracious!' I said. 'Is it really as late as that?'

"Well, he thought he would have to be going. He didn't even ask about the watch case."

"What was there about it?" inquired Aunt Jane.

"Oh, nothing, but they're generally easy to shut up," replied Mrs. Merriwid.

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"Good Gracious! Is It Really as Late as That?"

Mistaken Identity.

The A English class of a Louisville school, says a writer in the Courier Journal, formed a basket ball team. It was wholly composed of girls and practice work began with vigor. It was the intention of the team after it became proficient to challenge the players of several other classes. No member of the A English class was over twelve years of old, and Marion, who was being tried out for a position on the team, was only ten. She was quick and athletic, but all the hard knocks in the practice work seemed to come her way.

On one afternoon one of her teachers found her in a hallway off the gymnasium crying bitterly.

"What is it, Marion?" she asked. "Don't you like the practice work? What is your position on the team, dear?"

"I—don't—don't—know, ma'am," blubbered Marion, "but the way they—they," a storm of sobs, "treat me, I think I'm the basket."—Mother's Magazine.

Nothing Doing There.

"A persistent insurance agent had long been pestering a certain engine driver to take out a policy on his life. Meeting with little success, he called at the works where the man was employed and endeavored to work on his fears.

"Now, look there," said the agent, pointing to a couple of huge boilers close at hand. "If they were to explode, where would you be?"

"There's no knowin'," was the reply. "I might be anywhere at the time—safe t' bed for choice!"

"Yes, yes," said the agent; "but that isn't what I mean. If they were to blow up now—at this identical moment——"

"Well, t' that case," replied the other, quietly, "I reckon me an' thee 'ud finish our little argyment up t' the clouds!"

Then the agent gave it up.—Tit-Bits.

A Drawback.

"Sea vessels are different from anything else in the world."

"How so?"

"They can't make knots when they're tied up."