



# THE PRODIGAL JUDGE

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By the door stood Mahaffy with Yancy and Cavendish; they understood that what was obscure and meaningless to them held a tragic significance to these two men. The judge's heavy face, ordinarily battered and debauched, but infinitely good-natured, bore now the markings of deep passion, and the voice that rumbled forth from his capacious chest came to their ears like distant thunder.

"This friend of Gatewood's had a wife—" The judge's voice broke, emotion shook him like a leaf; he was tearing open his wounds. He reached over and poured himself a drink, sucking it down with greedy lips. "There was a wife—" he whirled about on his heel and faced Fentress again. "There was a wife, Fentress—" he fixed Fentress with his blazing eyes. "A wife and child. Well, one day Gatewood and the wife were missing. Under the circumstances Gatewood's friend was well rid of the pair—he should have been grateful, but he wasn't, for his wife took his child, a daughter; and Gatewood a trifle of thirty thousand dollars his friend had entrusted to him!"

There was another silence. "At a later day I met this man who had been betrayed by his wife and robbed by his friend. He had fallen out of the race—drink had done for him—there was just one thing he seemed to care about, and that was the fate of his child, but maybe he was only curious there. He wondered if she had lived, and married—" Once more the judge paused.

"What's all this to me?" asked Fentress. "Are you sure it's nothing to you?" demanded the judge hoarsely. "Understand this, Fentress, Gatewood's treachery brought ruin to at least two lives. It caused the woman's father to hide his face from the world; it wasn't enough for him that his friends believed his daughter dead; he knew differently, and the shame of that knowledge ate into his soul. It cost the husband his place in the world, too—in the end it made of him a vagabond and a penniless wanderer."

"This is nothing to me," said Fentress. "Wait!" cried the judge. "About six years ago the woman was seen at her father's home in North Carolina. I reckon Gatewood had cast her off. She didn't go back empty-handed. She had run away from her husband with a child—a girl; after a lapse of twenty years she returned to her father with a boy of two or three. There are two questions that must be answered when I find Gatewood: what became of the woman, and what became of the child; are they living or dead; did the daughter grow up and marry and have a son? When I get my answer it will be time enough to think of Gatewood's punishment!"

The judge leaped forward across the table, bringing his face close to Fentress' face. "Look at me—do you know me now?" But Fentress' expression never altered. The judge fell back a step. "Fentress, I want the boy," he said quietly.

"What boy?" "My grandson!" "You are mad! What do I know of him—or you?" Fentress was gaining courage from the sound of his own voice. "You know who he is and where he is. Your business relations with this man Ware have put you on the track of the Quintard lands in this state. You intend to use the boy to gather them in."

"You're mad!" repeated Fentress. "Unless you bring him to me inside of twenty-four hours I'll smash you!" roared the judge. "Your name isn't Fentress, it's Gatewood; you've stolen the name of Fentress, just as you have stolen other things. What's come of Turberville's money? Damn your soul! I want my grandson! I'll pull you down and leave you stripped and bare! I'll tell the world the false friend you've been—the thief you are! I'll strip you and turn you out of these doors as naked as when you entered the world!" The judge seemed to tower above Fentress; the man had shot up out of his deep debasement. "Choose! Choose!" he thundered, his shaggy brows bent in a menacing frown.

"I know nothing about the boy," said Fentress slowly. "By God, you lie!" stormed the judge. "I know nothing about the boy," and Fentress took a step toward the door. "Stay where you are!" commanded the judge. "If you attempt to leave this room to call your niggers I'll kill you on its threshold!"

But Yancy and Cavendish had

stepped to the door with an intention that was evident, and Fentress' thin face cast itself in haggard lines. He was feeling the judge's terrible capacity, his unexpected ability to deal with a supreme situation. Even Mahaffy gazed at his friend in wonder. He had only seen him spend himself on trifles, with no further object than



He Tossed the Glass and Contents in Fentress' Face.

the next meal or the next drink; he had believed that as he knew him so he had always been, lax and loose of tongue and deed, a noisy tavern hero, but now he saw that he was filling what must have been the measure of his manhood.

"I tell you I had no hand in carrying off the boy," said Fentress with a sardonic smile. "I look to you to return him. Stir yourself, Gatewood, or by God, I'll hold so fierce a reckoning with you—" The sentence remained unfinished, for Fentress felt his overwrought nerves snap, and, giving way to a sudden blind fury, struck at the judge.

"We are too old for rough and tumble," said the judge, who had displayed astonishing agility in avoiding the blow. "Furthermore we were once gentlemen. At present I am what I am, while you are a hound and a blackguard! We'll settle this as becomes our breeding." He poured himself a second glass of liquor from Fentress' decanter. "I wonder if it is possible to insult you," and he tossed glass and contents in Fentress' face. The colonel's thin features were convulsed. The judge watched him with a scornful curling of the lips. "I am treating you better than you deserve," he taunted.

"Tomorrow morning at sun-up at Boggs' race-track!" cried Fentress. The judge bowed with splendid courtesy. "Nothing could please me half so well," he declared. He turned to the others. "Gentlemen, this is a private matter. When I have met Colonel Fentress I shall make a public announcement of why this appeared necessary to me; until then I trust this matter will not be given publicity. May I ask your silence?" He bowed again, and abruptly passed from the room.

His three friends followed in his steps, leaving Fentress standing by the table, the ghost of a smile on his thin lips. As if the very place were evil, the judge hurried down the drive toward the road. At the gate he paused and turned on his companions, but his features wore a look of dignity that forbade comment or question. He held out his hand to Yancy.

"Sir," he said, "if I could command the riches of the Indies, it would tax my resources to meet the fractional part of my obligations to you."

"Think of that!" said Yancy, as much overwhelmed by the judge's manner as by his words. "His Uncle Bob shall keep his place in my grandson's life! We'll watch him grow into manhood together." The judge was visibly affected. A smile of deep content parted Mr. Yancy's lips as his muscular fingers closed about the judge's hand with crushing force.

"Whoop!" cried Cavendish, delighted at this recognition of Yancy's love for the boy, and he gleefully smote the austere Mahaffy on the shoulder. But Mahaffy was dumb in the presence of the deccencies; he quite lacked an interpreter. The judge looked back at the house.

"Mine!" he muttered. "The clothes he stands in—the food he eats—mine! Mine!"

## CHAPTER XXV.

The Bubble Bursts. At about the same hour that the judge was hurling threats and insults at Colonel Fentress, three men were waiting ten miles away at the head of

the bayou which served to isolate Hicks' cabin. Now to one of these three had ever heard of Judge Slocum Price; the breath of his fame had never blown, however gently, in their direction, yet they were preparing to thrust opportunity upon him. To this end they were lounging about the opening in the woods where the horses belonging to Ware and Murrell were tied.

At length the dip of oars became audible in the silence and one of the trio stole down the path, a matter of fifty yards, to a point that overlooked the bayou. He was gone but a moment.

"It's Murrell all right!" he said in an eager whisper. "Him and another fellow—the Hicks girl is rowing them." He glanced from one to the other of his companions, who seemed to take firmer hold of themselves under his eye. "It'll be all right," he protested lightly. "He's as good as ours. Wait till I give you the word." And he led the way into an adjacent thicket.

Meantime Ware and Murrell had landed and were coming along the path, the outlaw a step or two in advance of his friend. They reached the horses and were untying them when the thicket suddenly disgorged the three men; each held a cocked pistol; two of these pistols covered Murrell and the third was leveled at Ware.

"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 murrur.

"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 horse-man 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.

"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. The planter listened with an air of such abject misery that those who had neither liked nor respected him, were roused to a sudden generous feeling where he was concerned; they could not question but that he was deeply affected. After all the man might have a side to his nature with which they had never come in contact.

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, for every word he said would be remembered. In the present there was sympathy for him, but sooner or later people would return to their sordid unemotional judgments.

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 impunity, 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



The Planter's Knees Knocked Together.

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 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 pale 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."

He started and backed toward the door; but again his greed, the one dominating influence of his life, vanquished him.

He watched the sun sink. He watched the red splendor fade over the river; he saw the first stars appear. He told himself that Hicks would soon be gone—if the fire was not to be lighted he must act at once! He stole to the window. It was dusk now, yet he could distinguish the distant wooded boundaries of the great fields framed by the darkening sky. Then in the silence he heard the thud of hoofs.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

The Judge Names His Second. "Price—" began Mahaffy. They were back in Raleigh in the room the judge called his office, and this was Mahaffy's first opportunity to ease his mind on the subject of the duel, as they had only just parted from Yancy and Cavendish, who had stopped at one of the stores to make certain purchases for the raft.

"Not a word, Solomon—it had to come. I am going to kill him. I shall feel better then."

"What if he kills you?" demanded



"It Will Be Quite Informal, the Code Is Scarcely Applicable."

Mahaffy harshly. The judge shrugged his shoulders.

"That is as it may be."

"Have you forgotten your grandson?" Mahaffy's voice was still harsh and rasping.

"I regard my meeting with Fentress as nothing less than a sacred duty to him."

"We know no more than we did this morning," said Mahaffy. "You are mixing up all sorts of side issues with what should be your real purpose."

"Not at all, Solomon—not at all! I look upon my grandson's speedy recovery as an assured fact. Fentress dare not hold him. He knows he is run to earth at last."

"Price—" "No, Solomon—no, my friend, we will not speak of it again. You will go back to Belle Plain with Yancy and Cavendish; you must represent me there. We have as good as found Hannibal, but we must be active in Miss Malroy's behalf. For us that has an important bearing on the future, and since I cannot, you must be at Belle Plain when Carrington arrives with his pack of dogs. Give him the advantage of your sound and mature judgment, Solomon; don't let any false modesty keep you in the background."

"Who's going to second you?" snapped Mahaffy.

The judge was a picture of indifference. "It will be quite informal, the code is scarcely applicable; I merely intend to remove him because he is not fit to live."

"At sun-up!" muttered Mahaffy. "I intend to start one day right even if I never live to begin another," said the judge, a sudden fierce light flashing from his eyes. "I feel that this is the turning point in my career, Solomon!" he went on. "The beginning of great things! But I shall take no chances with the future; I shall prepare for every possible contingency. I am going to make you and Yancy my grandson's guardians. There's a hundred thousand acres of land hereabout that must come to him. I shall outline in writing the legal steps to be taken to substantiate his claims. Also he will inherit largely from me at my death."

Something very like laughter escaped from Mahaffy's lips. "There you go, Solomon, with your inopportune mirth! What in God's name have I if I haven't hope? Take that from me and what would I be? Why, the very fate I have been fighting off with tooth and nail would overwhelm me. I'd sink into unimportance—my unparalleled misfortunes would degrade me to a level with the commonest! No, sir, I've never been without hope, and though I've fallen I've always got up. What Fentress has is based on money he stole from me. By God, the days of his profit-taking are at an end! I am going to strip him. And even if I don't live to enjoy what's mine, my grandson shall! He shall wear velvet and a lace collar and ride his pony yet, by God, as a gentleman's grandson should!"

"It sounds well, Price, but where's the money coming from to push a lawsuit?"

The judge waved this aside. "The means will be found, Solomon. Our horizon is lifting—I can see it lift! Don't drag me back from the portal of hope! We'll drink the stuff that comes across the water; I'll warm the cockles of your heart with imported brandy. I carry twenty