The Prodigal Judge

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CHAPTER I

THE BOY AT THE BARONY

The Quintards had not prospered on the barren lands of the pine woods whither they had emigrated to escape the malaria of the low coast, but this no longer mattered, for the last of his name and race, old General Quintard, was dead in the great house his father had built almost a century before and the thin acres of the Barony, where he had made his last stand against age and poverty, were to claim him, now that he had given up the struggle in their midst. The two or three old slaves about the place, stricken with a sense of the futility of the fight their master had made, mourned for him and for themselves, but of his own blood and class none was present.

Shy dwellers from the pine woods, lanky jeans-clad men and sunbonneted women, who were gathering for the burial of the famous man of their neighborhood, grouped themselves about the lawn which had long since sunk to the uses of a pasture lot. Singly or by twos and threes they stole up the steps and across the wide porch to the open door. On the right of the long hall

another door stood open, and who wished could enter the drawing-room, with its splendid green and gold paper, and the wonderful fireplace with the Dutch tiles that graphically depicted the story of Jonah and the whale.

Here the general lay in state. The slaves had dressed their old master in the uniform he had worn as a colonel of the continental line, but the thin shoulders of the wasted figure no longer filled the buff and blue coat. The high-bred face, once proud and masterful no doubt, as became the face of a Quintard, spoke of more than age and poverty--it was infinitely sorrowful. Yet there was something harsh and unforgiving in the lines death had fixed there, which might have been taken as the visible impress of that mystery, the bitterness of which had misshaped the dead man's nature; but the resolute lips had closed for ever on their secret, and the broken spirit had gone perhaps to learn how poor a thing its pride had been.

Though he had lived continuously at the Barony for almost a quarter of a century, there was none among his neighbors who could say he had looked on that thin, aquiline face in all that time. Yet they had known much of him, for the gossip of the slaves, who had been his only friends in those years he had chosen to deny himself to other friends, had gone far and wide over the county.

That notable man of business, Jonathan Crenshaw--and this superiority was especially evident when the business chanced to be his own--was closeted in the library with a stranger to whom rumor fixed the name of Bladen, supposing him to be the legal representative of certain remote connections of the old general's.

Crenshaw sat before the flat-topped mahogany desk in the center of the room with several well-thumbed account-books open before him. Bladen, in riding dress, stood by the window.

"I suppose you will buy in the property when it comes up for sale?" the latter was saying.

Mr. Crenshaw had already made it plain that General Quintard's creditors would have lean pickings at the Barony, intimating that he himself was the chiefest of these and the one to suffer most grievously in pocket. Further than this, Mr. Bladen saw that the old house was a ruin, scarcely habitable, and that the thin acres, though they were many and a royal grant, were of the slightest value. Crenshaw nodded his acquiescence to the lawyer's conjecture touching the ultimate fate of the Barony.

"I reckon, sir, I'll want to protect myself, but if there are any of his own kin who have a fancy to the place I'll put no obstacle in their way."

"Who are the other creditors?" asked Bladen.

"There ain't none, sir; they just got tired waiting on him, and when they began to sue and get judgment the old general would send me word to settle with them, and their claims passed into my hands. I was in too deep to draw out. But for the last ten years his dealings were all with me; I furnished the supplies for the place here. It didn't amount to much, as there was only him and the darkies, and the account ran on from year to year."

"He lived entirely alone, saw no one, I understand," said Bladen.

"Alone with his two or three old slaves--yes, sir. He wouldn't even see me; Joe, his old nigger, would fetch orders for this or that. Once or twice I rode out to see him, but I wa'n't even allowed inside that door; the message I got was that he couldn't be disturbed, and the last time I come he sent me word that if I annoyed him again he would be forced to terminate our business relations. That was pretty strong talk, wa'n't it, when you consider that I could have sold the roof from over his head and the land from under his feet? Oh, well, I just put it down to childishness." There was a brief pause, then Crenshaw spoke again. "I reckon, sir, if you know anything about the old general's private affairs you don't feel no call to speak on that point?" he observed, and with evident regret. He had hoped that Bladen would clear up the mystery, for certainly it must have been some sinister tragedy that had cost the general his grip on life and for twenty years and more had made of him a recluse, so that the faces of his friends had become as the faces of strangers.

"My dear sir, I know nothing of General Quintard's private, history. I am even unacquainted with my clients, who are distant cousins, but his nearest kin--they live in South Carolina. I was merely instructed to represent them in the event of his death and to look after their interests."

"That's business," said Crenshaw, nodding.

"All I know is this: General Quintard was a conspicuous man in these parts fifty years ago; that was before my time, Mr. Crenshaw, and I take it, too, it was before yours; he married a Beaufort."

"So he did," said Crenshaw, "and there was one child, a daughter; she married a South Carolinian by the name of Turberville. I remember that, fo' they were married under the gallery in the hall. Great folks, those Turbervilles, rolling rich. My father was manager then fo' the general--that was nearly forty years ago. There was life here then, sir; the place was alive with niggers and the house full of guests from one month's end to another." He drummed on the desktop. "Who'd a thought it wa'n't to last for ever!"

"And what became of the daughter who married Turberville ?"

"Died years ago," said Crenshaw. "She was here the last time about thirty years back. It wa'n't so easy to get about in those days, no roads to speak of and no stages, and besides, the old general wa'n't much here nohow; her going away had sort of broken up his home, I reckon. Then the place stood empty fo' a few years, most of the slaves were sold off, and the fields began to grow up. No one rightly knew, but the general was supposed to be traveling up yonder in the No'th, sir. As I say, things ran along this way quite a while, and then one morning when I went to my store my clerk says, 'There's an old white-headed nigger been waiting round here fo' a word with you, Mr. Crenshaw.' It was Joe, the general's body servant, and when I'd shook hands with him I said, 'When's the master expected back?' You see, I thought Joe had been sent on ahead to open the house, but he says, 'General Quintard's at the Barony now,' and then he says, 'The general's compliments, sir, and will you see that this order is filled?' Well, Mr. Bladen, I and my father had factored the Barony fo' fifteen years and upward, but that was the first time the supplies fo' the general's table had ever been toted here in a meal sack!

"I rode out that very afternoon, but Joe, who was one of your mannerly niggers, met me at the door and says, 'Mr. Crenshaw, the general appreciates this courtesy, but regrets that he is unable to see you, sir.' After that it wa'n't long in getting about that the general was a changed man. Other folks came here to welcome him back and he refused to see them, but the reason of it we never learned. Joe, who probably knew, was one of your close niggers; there was, no getting anything out of him; you could talk with that darky by the hour, sir, and he left you feeling emptier than if he'd kept his mouth shut."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Crenshaw, a trifle impatiently, and in response to his bidding the door opened and a small boy entered the room dragging after him a long rifle. Suddenly overcome by a speechless shyness, he paused on the threshold to stare with round, wondering eyes at the two men. "Well, sonny, what do you want?" asked Mr. Crenshaw indulgently.

The boy opened his mouth, but his courage failed him, and with

his courage went the words he would have spoken.

"Who is this?" asked Bladen.

"I'll tell, you presently," said Crenshaw. "Come, speak up, sonny, what do you want?"

"Please, sir, I want this here old spo'tin' rifle," said: the child. "Please, sir, I want to keep it," he added.

"Well, you run along on out of here with your old spo'tin' rifle!" said Crenshaw good-naturedly.

"Please, sir, am I to keep it?"

"Yes, I reckon you may keep it--least I've no objection." Crenshaw glanced at Bladen.

"Oh, by all means," said the latter. Spasms of delight shook the small figure, and with a murmur that was meant for thanks he backed from the room, closing the door. Bladen glanced inquiringly at Crenshaw.

"You want to know about him, sir? Well, that's Hannibal Wayne Hazard."

"Hannibal Wayne Hazard?" repeated Bladen.

"Yes, sir; the general was the authority on that point, but who Hannibal Wayne Hazard is and how he happens to be at the Barony is another mystery--just wait a minute, sir--" and quitting his chair Mr. Crenshaw hurried from the room to return almost immediately with a tall countryman. "Mr. Bladen, this is Bob Yancy. Bob, the gentleman, wants to hear about the woman and the child; that's your story."

"Howdy, sir," said Mr. Yancy. He appeared to meditate on the mental effort that was required of him, then he took a long breath. "It was this a-ways--" he began with a soft drawl, and then paused. "You give me the dates, Mr. John, fo' I disremember."

"It was four year ago come next Christmas," said Crenshaw.

"Old Christmas," corrected Mr. Yancy. "Our folks always kept the old Christmas like it was befo' they done mussed up the calendar. I'm agin all changes," added Mr. Yancy.

"He means the fo'teenth of December," explained Mr. Crenshaw.

"Not wishin' to dispute your word, Mr. John, I mean Christmas," objected Yancy.

"Oh, very well, he means Christmas then!" said Crenshaw.

"The evening befo', it was, and I'd gone to Fayetteville to get my Christmas fixin's; there was right much rain and some snow falling." Mr. Yancy's guiding light was clearly accuracy. "Just at sundown I hooked up that blind mule of mine to the cart and

started fo' home. As I got shut of the town the stage come in and I seen one passenger, a woman. Now that mule is slow, Mr. John; I'm free to say there are faster mules, but a set of harness never went acrost the back of a slower critter than that one of mine." Yancy, who thus far had addressed himself to Mr. Crenshaw, now turned to Bladen. "That mule, sir, sees good with his right eye, but it's got a gait like it was looking fo' the left-hand side of the road and wondering what in thunderation had got into it that it was acrost the way; mules are gifted with some sense, but mighty little judgment."

"Never mind the mule, Bob," said Crenshaw.

"If I can't make the gentleman believe in the everlasting slowness of that mule of mine, my story ain't worth a hill of beans," said Yancy.

"The extraordinary slowness of the mule is accepted without question, Mr. Yancy," said Bladen.

"I'm obliged to you," rejoined Yancy, and for a brief moment he appeared to commune with himself, then he continued. "A mile out of town I heard some one sloshing through the rain after me; it was dark by that time and I couldn't see who it was, so I pulled up and waited, and then I made out it was a woman. She spoke when she was alongside the cart and says, 'Can you drive me on to the Barony?' and it came to me it was the same woman I'd seen leave the stage. When I got down to help her into the cart I saw she was toting a child in her arms."

"What did the woman look like, Bob?" said Crenshaw.

"She wa'n't exactly old and she wa'n't young by no manner of means; I remember saying to myself, that child ain't yo's, whose ever it is. Well, sir, I was willing enough to talk, but she wa'n't, she hardly spoke until we came to the red gate, when she says, 'Stop, if you please, I'll walk the rest of the way.' Mind you, she'd known without a word from me we were at the Barony. She give me a dollar, and the last I seen of her she was hurrying through the rain toting the child in her arms."

Mr. Crenshaw took up the narrative.

"The niggers say the old general almost had a fit when he saw her. Aunt Alsidia let her into the house; I reckon if Joe had been alive she wouldn't have got inside that door, spite of the night!"

"Well?" said Bladen.

"When morning come she was gone, but the child done stayed behind; we always reckoned the lady walked back to Fayetteville sometime befo' day and took the stage. I've heard Aunt Alsidia tell as how the old general said that morning, pale and shaking like, 'You'll find a boy asleep in the red room; he's to be fed and cared fo', but keep him out of my sight. His name is Hannibal Wayne Hazard.' That is all the general ever said on the matter. He never would see the boy, never asked after him even, and the boy lived in the back of the house, with the niggers to

look after him. Now, sir, you know as much as we know, which is just next door to nothing."

The old general was borne across what had once been the west lawn to his resting-place in the neglected acre where the dead and gone of his race lay, and the record of the family was complete, as far as any man knew. Crenshaw watched the grave take shape with a melancholy for which he found no words, yet if words could have come from the mist of ideas in which his mind groped vaguely he would have said that for themselves the deeds of the Quintards had been given the touch of finality, and that whether for good or for evil, the consequences, like the ripple which rises from the surface of placid waters when a stone is dropped, still survived somewhere in the world.

The curious and the idle drifted back to the great house; then the memory of their own affairs, not urgent, generally speaking, but still of some casual interest, took them down the disused carriage-way to the red gate and so off into the heat of the summer day. Crenshaw's wagon, driven by Crenshaw's man, vanished in a cloud of gray dust with the two old slaves, Aunt Alsidia and Uncle Ben, who were being taken to the Crenshaw place to be cared for pending the settlement of the Quintard estate. Bladen parted from Crenshaw with expressions of pleasure at having had the opportunity of making his acquaintance, and further delivered himself of the civil wish that they might soon meet again. Then Crenshaw, assisted by Bob Yancy, proceeded to secure the great house against intrusion.

"I make it a p'int to always stay and see the plumb finish of a thing," explained Yancy. "Otherwise you're frequently put out by hearing of what happened after you left; I can stand anything but disapp'intment of that kind."

They passed from room to room securing doors and windows, and at last stepped out upon the back porch.

"Hullo!" said Yancy, pointing.

There on a bench by the kitchen door was a small figure. It was Hannibal Wayne Hazard asleep, with his old spo'tin' rifle across his knees. His very existence had been forgotten.

"Well, I declare to goodness!" said Crenshaw.

"What are you going to do with him, Mr. John?"

This question nettled Crenshaw.

"I don't know as that is any particular affair of mine," he said. Now, Mr. Crenshaw, though an excellent man of business, with an unblinking eye on number one, was kindly, on the whole, but there was a Mrs. Crenshaw, to whom he rendered a strict account of all his deeds, and that sacred institution, the home, was only a tolerable haven when these deeds were nicely calculated to fit with the lady's exactions. Especially was he aware that Mrs. Crenshaw was averse to children as being inimical to cleanliness and order, oppressive virtues that drove Crenshaw himself in his hours of leisure to the woodshed, where he might spit freely.

"I reckon you'd rather drop a word with yo' missus before you toted him home?" suggested Yancy, who knew something of the nature of his friend's domestic thraldom.

"A woman ought to be boss in her own house," said Crenshaw.

"Feelin' the truth of that, I've never married, Mr. John; I do as I please and don't have to listen to a passel of opinion. But I was going to say, what's to hinder me from toting that boy to my home? There are no calico petticoats hanging up in my closets."

"And no closets to hang 'em in, I'll be bound!" rejoined Crenshaw. "But if you'll take the boy, Bob, you shan't lose by it."

Yancy rested a big knotted hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Come, wake up, sonny! Yo' Uncle Bob is ready fo' to strike out home," he said. The child roused with a start and stared into the strange bearded face that was bent toward him. "It's yo' Uncle Bob," continued Yancy in a wheedling tone. "Are you the little nevvy what will help him to hook up that old blind mule of hisn ? Here, give us the spo'tin' rifle to tote!"

"Please, sir, where is Aunt Alsidia?" asked the child.

Yancy balanced the rifle on his great palm and his eyes assumed a speculative cast.

"I wonder what's to hinder us from loading this old gun, and firing this old gun, and hearing this old gun go-bang! Eh?"

The child's blue eyes grew wide.

"Like the guns off in the woods?" he asked, in a breathless whisper.

"Like the guns a body hears off in the woods, only louder--heaps louder," said Yancy. "You fetch out his plunder, Mr. John," he added in a lower tone.

"Do it now, please," the child cried, slipping off the bench.

"I was expectin' fo' to hear you name me Uncle Bob, sonny; my little nevvies get almost anything they want out of me when they call me that-a-ways."

"Please, Uncle Bob, make it go bang!"

"You come along, then," and Mr. Yancy moved off in the direction of his mule, the child following. "Powder's what we want fo' to make this old spo'tiu' rifle talk up, and I reckon we'll find some in a horn flask in the bottom of my cart." His expectations in this particular were realized, and he loaded the rifle with a small blank charge. 'Now," he said, shaking the powder into the pan by a succession of smart taps on the breech, "sometimes these old pieces go off and sometimes they don't; it depends on the flint, but you stand back of your Uncle Bob, sonny, and keep yo'

fingers out of yo' ears, and when you say--bang!-- off she goes."

There was a moment of delightful expectancy, and then--

"Bang!" cried the child, and on the instant the rifle cracked.
"Do it againQ Please, Uncle Bob!" he cried, wild with delight.

"Now if you was to help yo' Uncle Bob hook up that old mule of hisn and ride home with him, fo' he's going pretty shortly, you and Uncle Bob could do right much shootin' with this old rifle." Mr. Crenshaw had appeared with a bundle, which he tossed into the cart. Yancy turned to him. "If you meet any inquiring friends, Mr. John, I reckon you may say that my nevvy's gone fo' to pay me a visit. Most of his time will be agreeably spent shootin' with this rifle at a mark, and me holdin' him so he won't get kicked clean off his feet."

Thereafter beguiling speech flowed steadily from Mr. Yancy's bearded lips, in the midst of which relations were established between the mule and cart, and the boy quitted the Barony for a new world.

"Do you reckon if Uncle Bob was to let you, you could drive, sonny?"

"Can she gallop?" asked the boy.

Mr. Yancy gave him a hurt glance.

"She's too much of a lady to do that," he said. "No, I 'low this ain't 'so fast as running or walking, but it's a heap quicker than standing stock-still." The afternoon sun waned as they went deeper and deeper into the pine woods, but at last they came to their journey's end, a widely scattered settlement on a hill above a branch.

"This," said Mr. Yancy, "are Scratch Hill, sonny. Why Scratch Hill? Some say it's the fleas; others agin hold it's the eternal bother of making a living here, but whether fleas or living you scratch fo' both."

CHAPTER II

YANCY TELLS A MORAL TALE

In the deep peace that rested like a benediction on the pine-clad slopes of Scratch Hill the boy Hannibal followed at Yancy's heels as that gentleman pursued the not arduous rounds of temperate industry which made up his daily life, for if Yancy were not completely idle he was responsible for a counterfeit presentment of idleness having most of the merits of the real article. He toiled casually in a small cornfield and a yet smaller truck patch, but his work always began late, when it began at all, and he was easily dissuaded from continuing it; indeed, his attitude toward it seemed to challenge interference.

In the winter, when the weather conditions were perfectly adjusted to meet certain occult exactions he had come to require, Yancy could be induced to go into the woods and there labor with his ax. But as he pointed out to Hannibal, a poor man's capital was his health, and he being a poor man it behooved him to have a jealous care of himself. He made use of the dull days of mingled mist and drizzle for hunting, work being clearly out of the question; one could get about over the brown floor of the forest in silence then, and there was no sun to glint the brass mountings of his rifle. The fine days he professed to regard with keen suspicion as weather breeders, when it was imprudent to go far from home, especially in the direction of the Crenshaw timber lands, which for years had been the scene of all his gainful industry, and where he seemed to think nature ready to assume her most sinister aspect. Again in the early spring, when the young oak leaves were the size of squirrel's ears and the whippoorwills began calling as the long shadows struck through the pine woods, the needs of his corn ground battled with his desire to fish. In all such crises of the soul Mr. Yancy was fairly vanquished before the struggle began; but to the boy his activities were perfectly ordered to yield the largest return in contentment.

The Barony had been offered for sale and bought in by Crenshaw for eleven thousand dollars, this being the amount of his claim. Some six months later he sold the plantation for fifteen thousand dollars to Nathaniel Ferris, of Currituck County.

"There's money in the old place, Bob, at that figure," Crenshaw told Yancy.

"There are so," agreed Yancy, who was thinking Crenshaw had lost no time in getting it out.

They were seated on the counter in Crenshaw's store at Balaam's Cross Roads, where the heavy odor of black molasses battled with the sprightly smell of salt fish. The merchant held the Scratch Hiller in no small esteem. Their intimacy was of long standing, for the Yancys going down and the Crenshaws coming up had for a brief space flourished on the same social level. Mr. Crenshaw's rise in life, however, had been uninterrupted, while Mr. Yancy, wrapped in a philosophic calm and deeply averse to industry, had permitted the momentum imparted by a remote ancestor to carry him where it would, which was steadily away from that tempered prosperity his family had once boasted as members of the land-owning and slaveholding class.

"I mean there's money in the place fo' Ferris," Crenshaw explained.

"I reckon yo're right, Mr. John; the old general used to spend a heap on the Barony and we all know he never got a cent back, so I reckon the money's there yet.

"Bladen's got an answer from them South Carolina Quintards, and they don't know nothing about the boy," said Crenshaw, changing the subject. "So you can rest easy, Bob; they ain't going to want him."

"Well, sir, that surely is a passel of comfort to me. I find I got all the instincts of a father without having had none of the instincts of a husband."

A richer, deeper realization of his joy came to Yancy when he had turned his back on Balaam's Cross Roads and set out for home through the fragrant silence of the pine woods. His probable part in the young life chance had placed in his keeping was a glorious thing to the man. He had not cared to speculate on the future; he had believed that friends or kindred must sooner or later claim Hannibal, but now he felt wonderfully secure in Crenshaw's opinion that this was not to be.

Just beyond the Barony, which was midway between Balaam's and the Hill, down the long stretch of sandy road he saw two mounted figures, then as they drew nearer he caught the flutter of skirts and recognized one of the horsewomen. It was Mrs. Ferris, wife of the Barony's new owner. She reined in her horse abreast of his cart.

"Aren't you Mr. Yancy?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, that's me--Bob Yancy." He regarded her with large gray eyes that were frankly approving in their expression, for she was more than commonly agreeable to look upon.

"I am Mrs. Ferris, and I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

"The same here," murmured Yancy with winning civility.

Mrs. Ferris' companion leaned forward, her face averted, and stroked her horse's neck with gloved hand.

"This is my friend, Miss Betty Malroy."

"Glad to know you, ma'am," said Yancy.

Miss Malroy faced him, smiling. She, too, was very good to look upon, indeed she was quite radiant with youth and beauty.

"We are just returning from Scratch Hill--I think that is what you call it?" said Mrs. Ferris.

"So we do," agreed Yancy.

"And the dear little boy we met is your nephew, is he not, Mr. Yancy?" It was Betty Malroy who spoke.

"In a manner he is and in a manner he ain't," explained Yancy, somewhat enigmatically.

"There are quite a number of children at Scratch Hill?" suggested Mrs. Ferris.

"Yes, ma'am, so there are; a body would naturally notice that."

"And no school--not a church even!" continued Mrs. Ferris in a

grieved tone.

"Never has been," rejoined Yancy cheerfully. He seemed to champion the absence of churches and schools on the score of long usage.

"But what do the people do when they want to go to church?" questioned Mrs. Ferris.

"Never having heard that any of 'em wanted to go I can't say just offhand, but don't you fret none about that, ma'am; there are churches; one's up at the Forks, and there's another at Balaam's Cross Roads."

"But that's ten miles from Scratch Hill, isn't it?"

"It's all of that," said Yancy. He sensed it that the lady before him, was a person of much force and energy, capable even of reckless innovation. Mr. Yancy himself was innately conservative; his religious inspiration had been drawn from the Forks and Balaam's Cross Roads. It had seemed to answer very well. Mrs. Ferris fixed his wavering glance.

"Don't you think it is too bad, Mr. Yancy, the way those children have been neglected? There is nothing for them but to run wild."

"Well, I seen some right good children fetched up that-a-ways --smart, too. You see, ma'am, there's a heap a child can just naturally pick up of himself."

"Oh!" and the monosyllable was uttered rather weakly. Mr. Yancy's name had been given her as that of a resident of weight and influence in the classic region of Scratch Hill. Miss Malroy came to her friend's rescue.

"Mrs. Ferris thinks the children should have a chance to learn at home. Poor little tots!--they can't walk ten or fifteen miles to Sunday-school, now can they, Mr. Yancy ?"

"Bless yo' heart, they won't try to!" said Yancy reassuringly. "Sunday's a day of rest at Scratch Hill. So are most of the other days of the week, but we all aspire to take just a little mo' rest on Sunday than any other day. Sometimes we ain't able to, but that's our aim."

"Do you know the old deserted cabin by the big pine?--the Blount place?" asked Mrs. Ferris.

"Yes, ma'am, I know it."

"I am going to have Sunday-school there for those children; they shan't be neglected any longer if I can help it--I should feel guilty, quite guilty! Now won't you let your little nephew come? Perhaps they'll not find it so very terrible, after all." From which Mr. Yancy concluded that when she invaded it, skepticism had rested as a mantle on Scratch Hill.

"Every one said we would better talk with you, Mr. Yancy, and we were hoping to meet you as we came along," supplemented Miss

Malroy, and her words of flattery were wafted to him with so sweet a smile that Yancy instantly capitulated.

"I reckon you-all can count on my nevvy," he said.

When he reached Scratch Hill, in the waning light of day, Hannibal, in a state of high excitement, met him at the log shed, which served as a barn.

"I hear you-all have been entertaining visitors while Uncle Bob was away," observed Yancy, and remembering what Crenshaw had told him, he rested his big hand on the boy's head with a special tenderness.

"There's going to be a school in the cabin in the old field!" said the boy. "May I go?--Oh, Uncle Bob, will you please take me?"

"When's this here school going to begin, anyhow?"

"To-morrow at four o'clock, she said, Uncle Bob."

"She's a quick lady, ain't she? Well, I expected you'd be hopping around on one leg when you named it to me. You wait until Sunday and see what I do fo' my nevvy," said Yancy.

He was as good as his implied promise, but the day began discouragingly with an extra and, as it seemed to Hannibal, an unnecessary amount of soap and water.

"You owe it to yo'self to show a clean skin in the house of worship. Just suppose one of them nice ladies was to cast her eye back of yo' ears! She'd surely be put out to name it offhand whether you was black or white. I reckon I'll have to barber you some, too, with the shears."

"What's school like, Uncle Bob?" asked Hannibal, twisting and squirming under the big resolute hands of the man.

"I can't just say what it's like."

"Why, didn't you ever go to school, Uncle Bob?"

"Didn't I ever go to school! Where do you reckon I got my education, anyhow? I went to school several times in my young days."

"On a Sunday, like this?"

"No, the school I tackled was on a week-day."

"Was it hard?" asked Hannibal, who was beginning to cherish secret misgivings; for surely all this soap and water must have some sinister portent

"Well, some learn easier than others. I learned middling easy --it didn't take me long--and when I felt I knowed enough I just naturally quit and went on about my business."

"But what did you learn?" insisted the boy.

"You-all wouldn't know if I told you, because you-all ain't ever been to school yo'self. When you've had yo' education we'll talk over what I learned--it mostly come out of a book." He hoped his general statement would satisfy Hannibal, but it failed to do so.

"What's a book. Uncle Bob?" he demanded.

"Well, whatever a body don't know naturally he gets out of a book. I reckon the way you twist, Nevvy, mebby you'd admire fo' to lose an ear!" and Mr. Yancy refused further to discuss the knowledge he had garnered in his youth.

Hannibal and Yancy were the first to arrive at the deserted cabin in the old field that afternoon. They found the place had been recently cleaned and swept, while about the wall was ranged a row of benches; there was also a table and two chairs. Yancy inspected the premises with the eye of mature experience.

"Yes, it surely is a school; any one with an education would know that. Just look!--ain't you glad yo' Uncle Bob slicked you up some, now you see what them ladies has done fo' to make this place tidy?"

Shy children from the pine woods, big brothers with little sisters and big sisters with little brothers, drifted out of the encircling forest. Coincident with the arrival of the last of these stragglers Mrs. Ferris and Miss Malroy appeared, attended by a colored groom.

"It was so good of you to come, Mr. Yancy! The children won't feel so shy with you here," said Mrs. Ferris warmly, as Yancy assisted her to dismount, an act of courtesy that called for his finest courage.

Mrs. Ferris' missionary spirit manifested itself agreeably enough on the whole. When she had ranged her flock in a solemn-faced row on the benches, she began by explaining why Sunday was set apart for a day of rest, touching but lightly on its deeper significance as a day of worship as well; then she read certain chapters from the Bible, finishing with the story of David, a narrative that made a deep impression upon Yancy, comfortably seated in the doorway.

"Can't you tell the children a story, Mr. Yancy? Something about their own neighborhood I think would be nice, something with a moral," the pleasant earnest voice f Mrs. Ferris roused the Scratch Hiller from his meditations.

"Yes, ma'am, I reckon I can tell 'em a story." He stood up, filling the doorway with his bulk. "I can tell you-all a story about this here house," he said, addressing himself to the children. He smiled happily. "You-all don't need to look so solemn, a body ain't going to snap at you! This house are the old Blount cabin, but the Blounts done moved away from it years and years ago. They're down Fayetteville way now. There was a passel of 'em and they was about as common a lot of white folks as you'd find anywhere; I know, because I come to a dance here

once and Dave Blount called me a liar right in this very room." He paused, that this impressive fact might disseminate itself. Hannibal slid forward in his seat, his earnest little face bent on Yancy.

"Why did he call you a liar, Uncle Bob?" he demanded.

"Well, I scarcely know, Nevvy, but that's what he done, and he stuck some words in front of it that ain't fitten I should repeat."

Miss Malroy's cheeks had become very red, and Mrs. Ferris refused to meet her eye, while the children were in a flutter of pleased expectancy. They felt the wholly contemporary interest of Yancy's story; he was dealing with forms of speech which prevailed and were usually provocative of consequences more or less serious. He gave them a wide, sunny smile.

"When Dave Blount called me that, I struck out fo' home." At this surprising turn in the narrative the children looked their disgust, and Mrs. Ferris shot Betty a triumphant glance. "Yes, ma'am, I struck out across the fields fo' home, I didn't wish to hear no mo' of that loose kind of talk. When I got home I found my old daddy setting up afo' the fire, and he says, 'You come away early, son.' I told him what Dave Blount had called me and he says, 'You acted like a gentleman, Bob, with all them womenfolks about.'"

"You had a very good and sensible father, Mr. Yancy. How much better than if--" began Mrs. Ferris, who feared that the moral might elude him.

"Yes, ma'am, but along about day he come into the loft where I was sleeping and says to me, 'Sun-up, Bob--time fo' you to haul on yo' pants and go back yonder and fetch that Dave Blount a smack in the jaw.'" Mrs. Ferris moved uneasily in her chair: "I dressed and come here, but when I asked fo' Dave he wouldn't step outside, so I just lost patience with his foolishness and took a crack at him standing where I'm standing now, but he ducked and you can still see, ma'am"--turning to the embarrassed Mrs. Ferris--"where my knuckles made a dint in the door-jamb. I got him the next lick, though!"

Mr. Yancy's moral tale had reached its conclusion; it was not for him to boast unduly of his prowess.

"Uncle Bob, you lift me up and show me them dints!" and Hannibal slipped from his seat.

"Oh, no!" said Betty Malroy laughing. She captured the boy and drew him down beside her on a corner of her chair. "I am sure you don't want to see the dents--Mr. Yancy's story, children, is to teach us how important it is to guard our words--and not give way to hasty speech--"

"Betty!" cried Mrs. Ferris indignantly.

"Judith, the moral is as obvious as it is necessary."

Mrs. Ferris gave her a reproachful look and turned to the children.

"You will all be here next Sunday, won't you?--and at the same hour?" she said, rising.

There was a sudden clatter of hoofs beyond the door. A man, well dressed and well mounted had ridden into the yard. As Mrs. Ferris came from the cabin he flung himself out of the saddle and, hat in hand, approached her.

"I am hunting a place called the Barony; can you tell me if I am on the right road?" he asked. He was a man in the early thirties, graceful and powerful of build, with a handsome face.

"It is my husband you wish to see? I am Mrs. Ferris."

"Then General Quintard is dead?" His tone was one of surprise.

"His death occurred over a year ago, and my husband now owns the Barony; were you a friend of the general's ?"

"No, Madam; he was my father's friend, but I had hoped to meet him." His manner was adroit and plausible.

Mrs. Ferris hesitated. The stranger's dress and bearing was that of a gentleman, and he could boast of his father's friendship with General Quintard. Any doubts she may have had she put aside.

"Will you ride on with us to the Barony and meet my husband, Mr. --?" she paused.

"Murrell--Captain Murrell. Thank you; I should like to see the old place. I should highly value the privilege," then his eyes rested on Miss Malroy.

"Betty, let me present Captain Murrell."

The captain bowed, giving her a glance of bold admiration.

By this time the children had straggled off into the pine woods as silently as they had assembled; only Yancy and Hannibal remained. Mrs. Ferris turned to the former.

"If you will close the cabin door, Mr. Yancy, everything will be ready for next Sunday," she said, and moved toward the horses, followed by Murrell. Betty Malroy lingered for a moment at Hannibal's side.

"Good-by, little boy; you must ask your Uncle Bob to bring you up to the big house to see me," and stooping she kissed him. "Good-by, Mr. Yancy, I liked your story."

Hannibal and Yancy watched them mount and ride away, then the boy said:

"Uncle Bob, now them ladies have gone, won't you please show me them dints you made in the doorjamb?"

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE AT SCRATCH HILL

Captain Murrell had established himself at Balaam's Cross Roads. He was supposed to be interested in the purchase of a plantation, and in company with Crenshaw visited the numerous tracts of land which the merchant owned; but though he professed delight with the country, he was plainly in no haste to become committed to any one of the several propositions Crenshaw was eager to submit. Later, and still in the guise of a prospective purchaser, he met Bladen, who also dealt extensively in land, and apparently if anything could have pleased him more than the region about the Cross Roads it was the country adjacent to Fayetteville.

From the first he had assiduously cultivated his acquaintance with the new owners of the Barony. He was now on the best of terms with Nat Ferris, and it was at the Barony that he lounged away his evenings, gossiping and smoking with the planter on the wide veranda.

"The Barony would have suited me," he told Bladen one day. They had just returned from an excursion into the country and were seated in the lawyer's office.

"You say your father was a friend of the old general's?" said Bladen.

"Years ago, in the north--yes," answered Murrell.

"Odd, isn't it, the way he chose to spend the last years of his life, shut off like that and seeing no one?"

Murrell regarded the lawyer in silence for a moment out of his deeply sunk eyes.

"Too bad about the boy," he said at length slowly.

"How do you mean, Captain?" asked Bladen.

"I mean it's a pity he has no one except Yancy to look after him," said Murrell, but Bladen showed no interest and Murrell went on. "Don't you reckon he must have touched General Quintard's life mighty close at some point?"

"Well, if so, it eluded me," said Bladen. "I went through General Quintard's papers and they contained no clue to the boy's identity that I could discover. Fact is, the general didn't leave much beyond an old account-book or two; I imagine that before his death he destroyed the bulk of his private papers; it looked as if he'd wished to break with the past. His mind must have been affected."

"Has Yancy any legal claim on the boy?" inquired Murrell.

"No, certainly not; the boy was merely left with Yancy because Crenshaw didn't know what else to do with him."

"Get possession of him, and if I don't buy land here I'll take him West with me," said Murrell quietly. Bladen gave him a swift, shrewd glance, but Murrell, smiling and easy, met it frankly. "Come," he said, "it's a pity he should grow up wild in the pine woods--get him away from Yancy--I am' willing to spend five hundred dollars on this if necessary."

"As a matter of sentiment?"

"As a matter of sentiment."

Bladen considered. He was not averse to making five hundred dollars, but he was decidedly averse to letting slip any chance to secure a larger sum. It flashed in upon him that Murrell had uncovered the real purpose of his visit to North Carolina; his interest in land had been merely a subterfuge.

"Well?" said Murrell.

"I'll have to think your proposition over," said Bladen.

The immediate result of this conversation was that within twenty-four hours a man driving two horses hitched to a light buggy arrived at Scratch Hill in quest of Bob Yancy, whom he found at dinner and to whom he delivered a letter. Mr. Yancy was profoundly impressed by the attention, for holding the letter at arm's length, he said

"Well, sir, I've lived nigh on to forty years, but I never got a piece of writing befo'--never, sir. People, if they was close by, spoke to me, if at a distance they hollered, but none of 'em ever wrote." After gazing at the written characters with satisfaction Mr. Yancy made a taper of the letter and lit his pipe, which he puffed meditatively. "Sonny, when you grow up you must learn so you can send writings to yo' Uncle Bob fo' him to light his pipe with."

"What was in the paper, Uncle Bob?" asked Hannibal.

"Writin'," said Mr. Yancy, and smoked.

"What did the writin' say, Uncle Bob?" insisted the boy.

"It was private," said Mr. Yancy, "very private."

"What's your answer?" demanded the stranger.

"That's private, too," said Mr. Yancy. "You tell him I'll be monstrous glad to talk it over with him any time he fancies to come out here."

"He said something about some one I was to carry back with me," objected the man.

"Who said that?" asked Mr. Yancy.

"Bladen did."

"How's a body to know who yore talking about unless you name him?" said Yancy severely.

"Well, what am I to tell him?"

"It's a free country and I got no call to dictate. You-all can tell him whatever you like." Further than this Mr. Yancy would not commit himself, and the man went as he came.

The next day Yancy had occasion to visit Balaam's Cross Roads. Ordinarily Hannibal would have gone with him, but he was engaged in digging out a groundhog's hole with Oglethorpe Bellamy, grandson of Uncle Sammy Bellamy, the patriarch of Scratch Hill. Mr. Yancy forbore to interrupt this enterprise which he considered of some educational value, since the ground-hog's hole was an old one and he was reasonably certain that a family of skunks had taken possession of it. When Yancy reached the Cross Roads, Crenshaw gave him a disquieting opinion as to the probable contents of his letter, for he himself had heard from Bladen that he had decided to assume the care of the boy.

"So you reckon it was that--" said Yancy, with a deep breath.

"It's a blame outrage, Bob, fo' him to act like this!" said the merchant with heat.

"When do you reckon he's going to send fo' him?" asked Yancy.

"Whenever the notion strikes him."

"What about my having notions too?" inquired Yancy, flecked into passion, and bringing his fist down on the counter with a crash.

"You surely ain't going to oppose him, Bob?"

"Does he say when he's going to send fo' my nevvy ?"

"He says it will be soon."

"You take care of my mule, Mr. John," said Yancy, and turned his back on his friend.

"I reckon Bladen will have the law on his side, Bob!"

"The law be damned--I got what's fair on mine, I don't wish fo' better than that," exclaimed Yancy, over his shoulder. He strode from the store and started down the sandy road at a brisk run. Miserable forebodings of an impending tragedy leaped up within him, and the miles were many that lay between him and the Hill.

"He'll just naturally bust the face off the fellow Bladen sends!" thought Crenshaw, staring after his friend.

That run of Bob Yancy's was destined to become a classic in the annals of the neighborhood. Ordinarily a man walking briskly might cover the distance between the Cross Roads and the Hill in

two hours. He accomplished it in less than an hour, and before he reached the branch that flowed a full quarter of a mile from his cabin he was shouting Hannibal's name as he ran. Then as he breasted the slope he came within sight of a little group in his own dooryard. Saving only Uncle Sammy Bellamy, the group resolved itself into the women and children of the Hill, but there was one small figure he missed, and the color faded from his cheeks while his heart stood still. The patriarch hurried toward him, leaning on his cane, while his grandson clung to the skirts of his coat, weeping bitterly.

"They've took your nevvy, Bob!" he cried, in a high, thin voice.

"Who's took him?" asked Yancy hoarsely. He paused and glanced from one to another of the little group.

"Hit were Dave Blount. Get your gun, Bob, and go after him--kill the miserable sneaking cuss!" cried Uncle Sammy, who believed in settling all difficulties by bloodshed as befitted a veteran of the first war with England, he having risen to the respectable rank of sergeant in a company of Morgan's riflemen; while at sixty-odd in '12, when there was recruiting at the Cross Roads, his son had only been able to prevent his tendering his services to his country by hiding his trousers. "Fetch his rifle, some of you fool women!" cried Uncle Sammy. "By the Fayetteville Road, Bob, not ten minutes ago--you can cut him off at Ox Road forks!"

Yancy breathed a sigh of relief. The situation was not entirely desperate, for, as Uncle Sammy said, he could reach the Ox Road forks before Blount possibly could, by going as the crow flies through the pine woods.

"Hit wouldn't have happened if there'd been a man on the Hill, but there was nothing but a passel of women about the place. I heard the boys crying when Dave Blount lifted your nevvy into the buggy," said Uncle Sammy; "all I could do was to cuss him across two fields. I hope you blow his hide full of holes!" for a rifle had been placed in Yancy's hands.

"Thank you-all kindly," said Yancy, and turning away he struck off through the pine woods. A brisk walk of twenty minutes brought him to the Ox Road forks, as it was called, where he could plainly distinguish the wheel and hoof marks left by the buggy and team as it went to Scratch Hill, but there was only the single track.

This important point being settled, sense of sweet peace stole in upon Yancy's spirit. He stood his rifle against a tree, lit his pipe with flint and steel, and rested comfortably by the wayside. He had not long to wait, for presently the buggy hove in sight; whereupon he coolly knocked the ashes from his pipe, pocketed it, and prepared for action. As the buggy came nearer he recognized his ancient enemy in the person of the man who sat at Hannibal's side, and stepping nimbly into the road seized the horses by their bits. At sight of him Hannibal shrieked his name in an ecstasy of delight.

"Uncle Bob--Uncle Bob--" he, cried.

"Yes, it's Uncle Bob. You can light down, Nevvy. I reckon you've rid far enough," said Yancy pleasantly.

"Leggo them horses!" said Mr. Blount, recovering somewhat from the effect of Yancy's sudden appearance.

"Light down, Nevvy," said Yancy, still pleasantly. Blount turned to the boy as if to interfere. "Don't you put the weight of yo' finger on the boy, Blount!" warned Yancy. "Light down, Hannibal!"

Hannibal instantly availed himself of the invitation. At the same moment Blount struck at Yancy with his whip and his horses reared wildly, thinking the blow meant for them. Seeing that the boy had reached the ground in safety, Yancy relaxed his hold on the team, which instantly plunged forward. Then as the buggy swept past him he made a dexterous grab at Blount and dragged him out over the wheels into the road, where, for the second time in his life, he proceeded to fetch Mr. Blount a smack in the jaw. This he followed up with other smacks variously distributed about his countenance.

"You'll sweat for this, Bob Yancy!" cried Blount, as he vainly sought to fend off the blows.

"I'm sweating now--scandalous," said Mr. Yancy, taking his unhurried satisfaction of the other. Then with a final skilful kick he sent Mr. Blount sprawling. "Don't let me catch you around these diggings again, Dave Blount, or I swear to God I'll be the death of you!"

Hannibal rode home through the pine woods in triumph on his Uncle Bob's mighty shoulders.

"Did you get yo' ground-hog, Nevvy?" inquired Mr. Yancy presently when they had temporarily exhausted the excitement of Hannibal's capture and recovery.

"It weren't a ground-hog, Uncle Bob--it were a skunk!"

"Think of that!" murmured Mr. Yancy.

CHAPTER IV

LAW AT BALAAM'S CROSS-ROADS

But Mr. Yancy was only at the beginning of his trouble. Three days later there appeared on the borders of Scratch Hill a lank gentleman armed with a rifle, while the butts of two pistols protruded from the depths of his capacious coat pockets. He made his presence known by whooping from the edge of the branch, and his whoops shaped themselves into the name of Yancy. It was Charley Balaam, old Squire Balaam's nephew. The squire lived at the crossroads to which his family had given its name, and dispensed the little law that found its way into that part of the

county. The whoops finally brought Yancy to his cabin door.

"Can I see you friendly, Bob Yancy?" Balaam demanded with the lungs of a stentor, sheltering himself behind the thick bole of a sweetgum, for he observed that Yancy held his rifle in the crook of his arm and had no wish to offer his person as a target to the deadly aim of the Scratch Hiller who was famous for his skill.

"I reckon you can, Charley Balaam, if you are friendly," said Yancy.

"I'm a family man, Bob, and I ask you candid, do you feel peevish?"

"Not in particular," and Yancy put aside his rifle.

"I'm a-going to trust you, Bob," said Balaam. And forsaking the shelter of the sweetgum he shuffled up the slope.

"How are you, Charley?" asked Yancy, as they shook hands.

"Only just tolerable, Bob. You've been warranted--Dave Blount swore hit on to you." He displayed a sheet of paper covered with much writing and decorated with a large seal. Yancy viewed this formidable document with respect, but did not offer to take it.

"Read it," he said mildly. Balaam scratched his head.

"I don't know that hit's my duty to do that, Bob. Hit's my duty to serve it on to you. But I can tell you what's into hit, leavin' out the law--which don't matter nohow."

At this juncture Uncle Sammy's bent form emerged from the path that led off through the woods in the direction of the Bellamy cabin. With the patriarch was a stranger. Now the presence of a stranger on Scratch Hill was an occurrence of such extraordinary rarity that the warrant instantly became a matter of secondary importance.

"Howdy, Charley. Here, Bob Yancy, you shake hands with Bruce Carrington," commanded Uncle Sammy. At the name both Yancy and Balaam manifested a quickened interest. They saw a man in the early twenties, clean-limbed and broad-shouldered, with a handsome face and shapely head. "Yes, sir, hit's a grandson of Tom Carrington that used to own the grist-mill down at the Forks. Yo're some sort of wild-hog kin to him, Bob--yo' mother was a cousin to old Tom. Her family was powerful upset at her marrying a Yancy. They say Tom cussed himself into a 'pleptic fit when the news was fetched him."

"Where you located at, Mr. Carrington?" asked Yancy. But Carrington was not given a chance to reply. Uncle Sammy saved him the trouble.

"Back in Kentucky. He tells me he's been follerin' the water. What's the name of that place where Andy Jackson fit the British?"

"New Orleans," prompted Carrington good naturedly.

"That's hit--he takes rafts down the river to New Orleans, then he comes back on ships to Baltimore, or else he hoofs it no'th overland." Uncle Sammy had acquired a general knowledge of the stranger's habits and pursuits in an incredibly brief space of time. "He wants to visit the Forks," he added.

"I'm shortly goin' that way myself, Mr. Carrington, and I'll be pleased of your company--but first I got to get through with Bob Yancy," said Balaam, and again he produced the warrant. "If agreeable to you, Bob, I'll ask Uncle Sammy, as a third party friendly to both, to read this here warrant," he said.

"Who's been a-warrantin' Bob Yancy?" cried Uncle Sammy, with shrill interest.

"Dave Blount has."

"I knowed hit--I knowed he'd try to get even!" And Uncle Sammy struck his walking-stick sharply on the packed earth of Yancy's dooryard. "What's the charge agin you, Bob?"

"Read hit," said Balaam. "Why, sho'--can't you read plain writin', Uncle Sammy?" for the patriarch was showing signs of embarrassment.

"If you gentlemen will let me--" said Carrington pleasantly. Instantly there came a relieved chorus from the three in one breath.

"Why, sure!"

"Would my spectacles help you any, Mr. Carrington ?" asked Uncle Sammy officiously.

"No, I guess not."

"They air powerful seein' glasses, and I'm aweer some folks read a heap easier with spectacles than without 'em." After a moment's scrutiny of the paper that Balaam had thrust in his hand, Carrington began:

"To the Sheriff of the County of Cumberland: Greetings."

"He means me," explained Balaam. "He always makes 'em out to the sheriff, but they are returned to me and I serve 'em." Carrington resumed his reading

"Whereas, It is alleged that a murderous assault has been committed on one David Blount, of Fayetteville, by Robert Yancy, of Scratch Hill, said Blount sustaining numerous bruises and contusions, to his great injury of body and mind; and, whereas, it is further alleged that said murderous assault was wholly unprovoked and without cause, you will forthwith take into custody the person of said Yancy, of Scratch Hill, charged with having inflicted the bruises and contusions herein set forth in the complaint of said Blount, and instantly bring him into our presence to answer to these various and several crimes and misdemeanors. You are empowered to seize said Yancy wherever he

may be at; whether on the hillside or in the valley, eating or sleeping, or at rest.

"De Lancy Balaam, Magistrate.

"Fourth District, County of Cumberland, State of North Carolina. Done this twenty-fourth day of May, I835.

"P.S. Dear Bob: Dave Blount says he ain't able to chew his meat. I thought you'd be glad to know."

Smilingly Carrington folded the warrant and handed it to Yancy.

"Well, what are you goin' to do about hit, Bob?" inquired Balaam.

"Maybe I'd ought to go. I'd like to oblige the squire," said Yancy.

"When does this here co't set?" demanded Uncle Sammy.

"Hit don't do much else since he's took with the lumbago," answered Balaam somewhat obscurely.

"How are the squire, Charley?" asked Yancy with grave concern.

"Only just tolerable, Bob."

"What did he tell you to do?" and Yancy knit his brows.

"Seems like he wanted me to find out what you'd do. He recommended I shouldn't use no violence."

"I wouldn't recommend you did, either," assented Yancy, but without heat.

"I'd get shut of this here law business, Bob," advised Uncle Sammy.

"Suppose I come to the Cross Roads this evening?"

"That's agreeable," said the deputy, who presently departed in company with Carrington.

Some hours later the male population of Scratch Hill, with a gravity befitting the occasion, prepared itself to descend on the Cross Roads and give its support to Mr. Yancy in his hour of need. To this end those respectable householders armed themselves, with the idea that it might perhaps be necessary to correct some miscarriage of justice. They were shy enough and timid enough, these remote dwellers in the pine woods, but, like all wild things, when they felt they were cornered they were prone to fight; and in this instance it was clearly iniquitous that Bob Yancy's right to smack Dave Blount should be questioned. That denied what was left of human liberty. But beyond this was a matter of even greater importance: they felt that Yancy's possession of the boy was somehow involved.

Yancy had declared himself simply but specifically on this point. Law or no law, he would kill whoever attempted to take the boy

from him, and Scratch Hill believing to a man that in so doing he would be well within his rights, was prepared to join in the fray. Even Uncle Sammy, who had not been off the Hill in years, announced that no consideration of fatigue would keep him away from the scene of action and possible danger, and Yancy loaned him his mule and cart for the occasion. When the patriarch was helped to his seat in the ancient vehicle he called loudly for his rifle.

"Why, pap, what do you want with a weapon?" asked his son indulgently.
"If there air shootin' I may take a hand in it. Now you-all give me a fair hour's start with this mule critter of Bob's, and if nothin' busts I'll be at the squire's as soon as the best of you."

Uncle Sammy was given the time allowance he asked and then Scratch Hill wended its way down the path to the branch and the highroad. Yancy led the straggling procession, with the boy trotting by his side, his little sunburned fist clasped in the man's great hand. He, too, was armed. He carried the old spo'tin' rifle he had brought from the Barony, and suspended from his shoulder by a leather thong was the big horn flask with its hickory stopper his Uncle Bob had fashioned for him, while a deerskin pouch held his bullets and an extra flint or two. He understood that beyond those smacks he had seen his Uncle Bob fetch Mr. Blount, he himself was the real cause of this excitement, that somebody, it was not plain to his mind just who, was seeking to get him away from Scratch Hill, and that a mysterious power called the Law would sooner or later be invoked to this dread end. But he knew this much clearly, nothing would induce him to leave his Uncle Bob! And his thin little fingers nestled warmly against the man's hardened palm. Yancy looked down and gave him a sunny, reassuring smile.

"It'll be all right, Nevvy," he said gently.

"You wouldn't let 'em take me, would you, Uncle Bob?" asked the child in a fearful whisper.

"Such an idea ain't entered my head. And this here warranting is just some of Dave Blount's cussedness."

"Uncle Bob, what'll they do to you?"

"Well, I reckon the squire'll feel obliged to do one of two things. He'll either fine me or else he won't."

"What'll you do if he fines you?"

"Why, pay the fine, Nevvy--and then lick Dave Blount again for stirring up trouble. That's the way we most in general do. I mean to say give him a good licking, and that'll make him stop his foolishness."

"Wasn't that a good licking you gave him on the Ox Road, Uncle Bob?" asked Hannibal.

"It was pretty fair fo' a starter, but I'm capable of doing a

better job," responded Yancy.

They overtook Uncle Sammy as he turned in at the squire's.

"I thought I'd come and see what kind of law a body gets at this here co't of yours," the patriarch explained to Mr. Balaam, who, forgetting his lumbago, had hurried forth to greet him.

"But why did you fetch your gun, Uncle Sammy?" asked the magistrate, laughing.

"Hit were to be on the safe side, Squire. Where air them Blounts?"

"Them Blounts don't need to bother you none. There air only Dave, and he can't more than half see out of one eye to-day."

The squire's court held its infrequent sittings in the best room of the Balaam homestead, a double cabin of hewn logs. Here Scratch Hill was gratified with a view of Mr. Blount's battered visage, and it was conceded that his condition reflected creditably on Yancy's physical prowess and was of a character fully to sustain that gentleman's reputation; for while he was notoriously slow to begin a fight, he was reputed to be even more reluctant to leave off once he had become involved in one.

"What's all this here fuss between you and Bob Yancy?" demanded the squire when he had administered the oath to Blount. Mr. Blount's statement was brief and very much to the point. He had been hired by Mr. Bladen, of Fayetteville, to go to Scratch Hill and get the boy who had been temporarily placed in Yancy's custody at the time of General Quintard's death.

"Stop just there!" cried the magistrate, leveling a pudgy finger at Blount. "This here co't is already cognizant of certain facts bearing on that p'int. The boy was left with Bob Yancy mainly because nobody else would take him. Them's the facts. Now go on!" he finished sternly.

"I only know what Bladen told me," said Blount sullenly.

"Well, I reckon Mr. Bladen ought to feel obliged to tell the truth," said the squire.

"He done give me the order from the judge of the co't--I was to show it to Bob Yancy--"

"Got that order?" demanded the squire sharply. With a smile, damaged, but clearly a smile, Blount produced the order. Hmm --app'inted guardeen of the boy--" the squire was presently heard to murmur. The crowded room was very still now, and more than one pair of eyes were turned pityingly in Yancy's direction. When the long arm of the law reached out from Fayetteville, where there was a real judge and a real sheriff, it clothed itself with very special terrors. The boy looked up into Yancy's face. That tense silence had struck a chill through his heart.

"It's all right," whispered Yancy reassuringly, smiling down upon him. And Hannibal, comforted, smiled back, and nestled his head

against his Uncle Bob's side.

"Well, Mr. Blount, what did you do with this here order?" asked the squire.

"I went with it to Scratch Hill," said Blount.

"And showed it to Bob Yancy ?" asked the squire.

"No, he wa'n't there. But the boy was, and I took him in my buggy and drove off. I'd got as far as the Ox Road forks when I met Yancy--"

"What happened then?--but a body don't need to ask! Looks like the law was all you had on your side!" and the squire glanced waggishly about the room.

"I showed Yancy the order--"

"You lie, Dave Blount; you didn't!" said Yancy. "But I can't say as it would have made no difference, Squire. He'd have taken his licking just the same and I'd have had my nevvy out of that buggy!"

"Didn't he say nothing about this here order from the colt, Bob?"

"There wa'n't much conversation, Squire. I invited my nevvy to light down, and then I snaked Dave Blount out over the wheel."

"Who struck the first blow?"

"He did. He struck at me with his buggy whip."

"What you got to say to this, Mr. Blount?" asked the squire.

"I say I showed him the order like I said," answered Blount doggedly. Squire Balaam removed his spectacles and leaned back in his chair.

"It's the opinion of this here co't that the whole question of assault rests on whether Bob Yancy saw the order. Bob Yancy swears he didn't see it, while Dave Blount swears he showed it to him. If Bob Yancy didn't know of the existence of the order he was clearly actin' on the idea that Blount was stealin' his nevvy, and he done what any one would have done under the circumstances. If, on the other hand, he knowed of this order from the co't, he was not only guilty of assault, but he was guilty of resistin' an officer of the co't." The squire paused impressively. His audience drew a long breath. The impression prevailed that the case was going against Yancy, and more than one face was turned scowlingly on the fat little justice.

"Can a body drap a word here?" It was Uncle Sammy's thin voice that cut into the silence.

"Certainly, Uncle Sammy. This here co't will always admire to listen to you."

"Well, I'd like to say that I consider that Fayetteville co't

mighty officious with its orders. This part of the county won't take nothin' off Fayetteville! We don't interfere with Fayetteville, and blamed if we'll let Fayetteville interfere with us!" There was a murmur of approval. Scratch Hill remembered the rifles in its hands and took comfort.

"The Fayetteville co't air a higher co't than this, Uncle Sammy," explained the squire indulgently.

"I'm aweer of that," snapped the patriarch. "I've seen hit's steeple."

"Air you finished, Uncle Sammy?" asked the squire deferentially.

"I 'low I am. But I 'low that if this here case is goin' agin Bob Yancy I'd recommend him to go home and not listen to no mo' foolishness."

"Mr. Yancy will oblige this co't by setting still while I finish this case," said the squire with dignity. "As I've already p'inted out, the question of veracity presents itself strongly to the mind of this here colt. Mr. Yancy has sworn to one thing, Mr. Blount to another.
Now the Yancys air an old family in these parts; Mr. Blount's folks air strangers, but we don't know nothing agin them--"

"And we don't know nothing in their favor," Uncle Sammy interjected.

"Dave's grandfather came here from Virginia about fifty years back and settled near Scratch Hill--"

"We never knowed why he left Virginia or why he came here," said Uncle Sammy, and knowing what local feeling was, was sure he had shot a telling bolt.

"Then, about twenty-five years ago Dave's father pulled up and went to Fayetteville. Nobody ever knowed why--and I don't remember that he ever offered any explanation--" continued the squire.

"He didn't--he just left," said Uncle Sammy.

"Consequently," pursued the squire, somewhat vindictively, "we ain't had any time in which to form an opinion of the Blounts; but for myself, I'm suspicious of folks that keep movin' about and who don't seem able to get located permanent nowheres, who air here to-day and away tomorrow. But you can't say that of the Yancys. They air an old family in the country, and naturally this co't feels obliged to accept a Yancy's word before the word of a stranger. And in view of the fact that the defendant did not seek litigation, but was perfectly satisfied to let matters rest where they was, it is right and just that all costs should fall on the plaintiff."

CHAPTER V

THE ENCOUNTER

Betty Malroy had ridden into the squire's yard during the progress of the trial and when Yancy and Hannibal came from the house she beckoned the Scratch Hiller to her. She was aware that Mr. Yancy, moving along the line of least industrial resistance, might be counted of little worth in any broad scheme of life. Nat Ferris had strongly insisted on this point, as had Judith, who shared her husband's convictions; consequently, the rumors of his present difficulty had merely excited them to adverse criticism. They had been sure the best thing that could happen the boy would be his removal from Yancy's guardianship, but this was not at all her conclusion. She considered Mr. Bladen heartless and his course without justification, and she regarded Yancy's affection for the boy as in itself constituting a benefit that quite outweighed his unprogressive example.

"You are not going to lose your nephew, are you, Mr. Yancy?" she asked eagerly, when Yancy stood at her side.

"No, ma'am." But his sense of elation was plainly tempered by the knowledge that for him the future held more than one knotty problem.

"I am very glad! I know Hannibal will be much happier with you than with any one else," and she smiled brightly at the boy, whose small sunburned face was upturned to hers.

"I think that-a-ways myself, Miss Betty, but this trial was only for my smacking Dave Blount, who was trying to steal my nevvy," explained Yancy.

"I hope you smacked him well and hard!" said the girl, whose mood was warlike.

"I ain't got no cause to complain, thank you," returned Mr. Yancy pleasantly.

"I rode out to the Hill to say good-by to Hannibal and to you, but they said you were here and that the trial was today."

Captain Murrell, with Crenshaw and the squire, came from the house, and Murrell's swarthy face lit up at sight of the girl. Yancy, sensible of the gulf that yawned between himself and what was known as "the quality," would have yielded his place, but Betty detained him.

"Are you going away, ma'am?" he asked with concern.

"Yes--to my home in west Tennessee," and a cloud crossed her smooth brow.

"That surely is a right big distance for you to travel, ma'am," said Yancy, his mind opening to this fresh impression. "I reckon it's rising a hundred miles or mo'," he concluded, at a venture.

"It's almost a thousand."

"Think of that! And you are that ca'm!" cried Yancy admiringly, as a picture of simply stupendous effort offered itself to his mind's eye. He added: "I am mighty sorry you are going. We-all here shall miss you--specially Hannibal. He just regularly pines for Sunday as it is."

"I hope he will miss me a little--I'm afraid I want him to!" She glanced down at the boy as she spoke, and into her eyes, very clear and very blue and shaded by long dark lashes, stole a look of wistful tenderness. She noted how his little hand was clasped in Yancy's, she realized the perfect trust of his whole attitude toward this big bearded man, and she was conscious of a sudden feeling of profound respect for the Scratch Hiller.

"But ain't you ever coming back, Miss Betty?" asked Hannibal rather fearfully, smitten with the awesome sense of impermanence which dogs our footsteps.

"Oh, I hope so, dear--I wish to think so. But you see my home is not here." She turned to Yancy, "So it is settled that he is to remain with you?"

"Not exactly, Miss Betty. You see, there's an order from the Fayetteville co't fo' me to give him up to this man Bladen."

"But Uncle Bob says--" began Hannibal, who considered his Uncle Bob's remarks on this point worth quoting.

"Never mind what yo' Uncle Bob said," interrupted Yancy hastily.

"Oh, Mr. Yancy, you are not going to surrender him--no matter what the court says!" cried Betty. The expression on Yancy's face was so grim and determined on the instant with the latent fire that was in him flashing from his eyes that she added quickly, "You know the law is for you as well as for Mr. Bladen!"

"I reckon I won't bother the law none," responded Yancy briefly. "Me and my nevvy will go back to Scratch Hill and there won't be no trouble so long as they leave us be. But them Fayetteville folks want to keep away--" The fierce light slowly died out of his eyes. "It'll be all right, ma'am, and it's mighty good and kind of you fo' to feel the way you do. I'm obliged to you."

But Betty was by no means sure of the outcome Yancy seemed to predict with such confidence. Unless Bladen abandoned his purpose, which he was not likely to do, a tragedy was clearly pending for Scratch Hill. She saw the boy left friendless, she saw Yancy the victim of his own primitive conception of justice. Therefore she said:

"I wonder you don't leave the Hill, Mr. Yancy. You could so easily go where Mr. Bladen would never find you. Haven't you thought of this?"

"That are a p'int," agreed Yancy slowly. "Might I ask what parts you'd specially recommend?" lifting his grave eyes to hers.

"It would really be the sensible thing to do!" said Betty. "I am

sure you would like West Tennessee--they say you are a great hunter." Yancy smiled almost guiltily.

"I like a little spo't now and then yes, ma'am, I do hunt some," he admitted.

"Miss Betty, Uncle Bob's the best shot we got! You had ought to see him shoot!" said Hannibal.

"Mr. Yancy, if you should cross the mountains, remember I live near Memphis. Belle Plain is the name of the plantation--it's not hard to find; just don't forget--Belle Plain."

"I won't forget, and mebby you will see us there one of these days. Sho', I've seen mighty little of the world--about as far as a dog can trot it a couple of hours!"

"Just think what it will mean to Hannibal if you become involved further with Mr. Bladen." Betty spoke earnestly, bending toward him, and Yancy understood the meaning that lay back of her words.

"I've thought of that, too," the Scratch Hiller answered seriously. Betty glanced toward the squire and Mr. Crenshaw. They were standing near the bars that gave entrance to the lane. Murrell had left them and was walking briskly down the road toward Crenshaw's store where his horse was tied. She bent down and gave Yancy her slim white hand.

"Good-by, Mr. Yancy--lift Hannibal so that I can kiss him!" Yancy swung the child aloft. "I think you are such a nice little boy, Hannibal--you mustn't forget me!" And touching her horse lightly with the whip she rode away at a gallop.

"She sho'ly is a lady!" said Yancy, staring after her. "And we mustn't forget Memphis or Belle Plain, Nevvy."

Crenshaw and the squire approached.

"Bob," said the merchant, "Bladen's going to have the boy--but he made a mistake in putting this business in the hands of a fool like Dave Blount. I reckon he knows that now."

"I reckon his next move will be to send a posse of gun-toters up from Fayetteville," said the squire.

"That's just what he'll do," agreed Crenshaw, and looked disturbed.

"They certainly air an unpeaceable lot--them Fayetteville folks! It's always seemed to me they had a positive spite agin this end of the county," said the squire, and he pocketed his spectacles and refreshed himself with a chew of tobacco. "Bladen ain't actin' right, Bob. It's a year and upwards since the old general 'died. He let you go on thinking the boy was to stay with you and now he takes a notion to have him!"

"No, sir, it ain't right nor reasonable. And what's more, he shan't have him!" said Yancy, and his tone was final.

"I don't know what kind of a mess you're getting yourself into, Bob, I declare I don't!" cried Crenshaw, who felt that he was largely responsible for the whole situation.

"Looks like your neighbors would stand by you," suggested the squire.

"I don't want them to stand by me. It'll only get them into trouble, and I ain't going to do that," rejoined Yancy, and lapsed into momentary silence. Then he resumed meditatively, "There was old Baldy Ebersole who shot the sheriff when they tried to arrest him for getting drunk down in Fayetteville and licking the tavern-keeper--"

"Sho', there wa'n't no harm in Baldy!" said the squire, with heat. "When that sheriff come along here looking for him, I told him p'inted that Baldy said he wouldn't be arrested. A more truthful man I never knowed, and if the damn fool had taken my word he'd be living yet!"

"But you-all know what trouble killing that sheriff made fo' Baldy!" said Yancy. "He told me often he regretted it mo' than anything he'd ever done. He said it was most aggravatin' having to always lug a gun wherever he went. And what with being suspicious of strangers when he wa'n't suspicious by nature, he reckoned in time it would just naturally wear him out."

"He stood it until he was risin' eighty," said Crenshaw.

"His, father lived to be ninety, John, and as spry an old gentleman as a body'd wish to see. I don't uphold no man for committing murder, but I do consider the sheriff should have waited on Baldy to get mo' reasonable, like he'd done in time if they'd just let him alone--but no, sir, he reckoned the law wa'n't no respecter of persons. He was a fine-appearin' man, that sheriff, and just elected to office. I remember we had to leave off the tail-gate to my cart to accommodate him. Yes, sir, they pretty near pestered Baldy into his grave--and seein' that pore old fellow pottering around year after year always toting a gun was the patheticest sight I most ever seen, and I made up my mind then if it ever seemed necessary for me to kill a man, I'd leave the county or maybe the state," concluded the squire.

"Don't you reckon it would be some better to leave the state afo' you. done the killing?" suggested Yancy.

"Well, a man might. I don't know but what he'd be justified in getting shut of his troubles like that."

When Betty Malroy rode away from Squire Balaam's Murrell galloped after her. Presently she heard the beat of his horse's hoofs as he came pounding along the sandy road and glanced back over her shoulder. With an exclamation of displeasure she reined in her horse. She had not wished to ride to the Barony with him, yet she had no desire to treat him with discourtesy, especially as the Ferrises were disposed to like him. Murrell quickly gained a place at her side.

"I suppose Ferris is at the Barony?" he said, drawing his horse

down to a walk.

"I believe he is," said Betty with a curt little air.

"May I ride with you?" he gave her a swift glance. She nodded indifferently and would have urged her horse into a gallop again, but he made a gesture of protest. "Don't--or I shall think you are still running away from me," he said with a short laugh.

"Were you at the trial?" she asked. "I am glad they didn't get Hannibal away from Yancy."

"Oh, Yancy will have his hands full with that later--so will Bladen," he added significantly. He studied her out of those deeply sunken eyes of his in which no shadow of youth lingered, for men such as he reached their prime early, and it was a swiftly passing splendor. "Ferris tells me you are going to West Tennessee?" he said at length.

"Yes."

"I know your half-brother, Tom Ware--I know him very well." There was another brief silence.

"So you know Tom?" she presently observed, and frowned slightly. Tom was her guardian, and her memories of him were not satisfactory. A burly, unshaven man with a queer streak of meanness through his character. She had not seen him since she had been sent north to Philadelphia, and their intercourse had been limited to infrequent letters. His always smelled of strong, stale tobacco, and the well-remembered whine in the man's voice ran through his written sentences.

"You've spent much of your time up North?" suggested Murrell.

"Four years. I've been at school, you know. That's where I met Judith."

"I hope you'll like West Tennessee. It's still a bit raw compared with what you've been accustomed to in the North. You haven't been back in all those four years?" Betty shook her head. "Nor seen Tom--nor any one from out yonder?" For some reason a little tinge of color had crept into Betty's cheeks. "Will you let me renew our acquaintance at Belle Plain? I shall be in West Tennessee before the summer is over; probably I shall leave here within a week," he said, bending toward her. His

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