

**THE
PRODIGAL PRO TEM**

*BY
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SOMETHING

THE PRODIGAL PRO TEM



“I am to do the library. The servants are all busy.”

“There is nothing like giving the servants a great deal of work,” he declared enthusiastically.

TO
DAN

**THE
PRODIGAL PRO TEM**

CHAPTER I

BARNES—THE PREPOSTEROUS

If Barnes had been asked to define the one thing lacking in the scene before him, he would probably have answered sentimentally, "A woman—a young and very fair woman," not that he had any definite figure in mind, but simply because from an artist's view point the picture, wonderful as it was, seemed now like a marvelous setting without its jewel.

A light breeze from the West, heavy with summer incense, wafted through a golden-moted silence and across a turquoise sky with cotton-blossom clouds. Dense, yet of gossamer fineness; massive, yet light as thistledown, they took their course placidly without disturbing the perfect serenity of their background. In their constant changing, they appeared at times like Spanish galleons with every full-bellied sail straining at its ropes. But they cut no churning path; they left no oily wake. They only cast calm shadows which in their turn swept majestically over the green valley below them. The heavy-leaved trees, the fat grasses, the daisies and roadside ferns found themselves first in the stark sunlight, then in the quiet shade, then in the brazen sun again.

If Barnes had not been in tune with it all, he would have felt out of place here on the top of the long hill up which he had just climbed by the saffron road. As it was, he surveyed the scene with an air of easy content. To a passer-by he might have given the impression of being a large proprietor. In his heavy walking-boots, his belted trousers, his flannel shirt gathered in at the throat with a light tie, his checked English cap, and his walking-stick, he looked as

though he might be making a walking tour of his landed estates. He had a comfortable air of princely sovereignty. His even features, his tall erect frame, his gray-blue eyes, and above all his thin, straight nose carried out the illusion. He had an air more of Bavaria than New England. But his firm lips, surmounted by a bristling blonde mustache, trimmed short and in a straight line, together with his Saxon hair, marked him of a hardier race. He might have been a Dane, but his cheek bones were too high for that, and there was too much good humor written large about the mouth. As a matter of fact he was from New York state and his ancestors had fought under Schuyler. His great grandfather was quoted as having said, "I'd rather be killed as a private under Schuyler than live, a captain, under Gates." A sentiment his father had paraphrased when he raged at the walking delegate who tried to unionize his shops, "I'll go broke by myself before I'll get rich under you." From that day Barnes, Sr., had moved from one apartment house to another in New York city in a steady crescendo of advancing rentals until now he needed a secretary to look after the tipping alone. And "The Acme Manufacturing Co." was wrought in iron scrolls across the oven doors of half the cook-stoves in the United States.

This fact, however, had less to do with Barnes to-day than the more romantic one that his father in the days of beginnings, married his book-keeper, a fine-souled English girl, niece of the late Lord Dunnington. Her father, a younger son, came to America to make his fortune, died soon after, and left the girl penniless. To-day the one romantic spot left in Barnes, Sr., was his ambition to accumulate a fortune so vast that it might overawe his caddish English relatives. It was the mother in Barnes, Jr., and not the

father who now stood upon the top of the hills dreaming into the cotton-blossom clouds.

His pose was misleading. Barnes was proprietor of nothing but himself. That was much or little as you happened to feel about it. To himself it was enough to make him glad that he stood here to-day even with only a trifle over ten round dollars to his name. The position was of his own choosing. He might have been secretary to the Acme Manufacturing Co. had he wished, instead of a painter of very good water-colors which as yet, however, had not found so ready a market as the cook-stoves.

The father put it bluntly when he declared, "People must eat to live; they can worry along without pictures." Perhaps. But he couldn't. He could worry along better without cook-stoves, as he was proving.

But when a gay shaded patch of blue seen through the straggling cloud-mist made him think of his mother's wet eyes as they were when in something of a temper he had quit the gorgeous apartment house for good, it occurred to him that his father might have been less irascible about the matter. The man had some grounds for temper to be sure. In college Barnes had devoted himself to Fine Arts and similar subjects when the elder, not recognizing the courses as expressed in the University cipher code, had thought him working assiduously at economics and other useful branches of manufacturing. Then, too, instead of studying the market conditions of Europe when abroad, he had used the opportunity for living a bit in the Latin quarter and visiting the galleries. He reported home that so far as he could see, people over there had to have pictures; they could worry along without cook-stoves. But even so, he couldn't stand being browbeaten like an errant

schoolboy, and therefore when matters came to a crisis he packed up his sketch-book and started on a jaunt through the Catskills, where Rip Van Winkle had found surcease before him.

Below him stretched acre after acre of farm lands made rich by three generations of toilers. Gray stone walls told bluntly what the task had been. They gave the scene a history such as crumbling castle walls lend to English landscapes. The farms swept down a valley cut by a lazy lowland stream, which looked as though it might furnish good trout fishing. He turned to the left and saw through the birches bordering the road what he had not before noticed—a red brick house half hidden behind a row of elms. Just above, a wagon track led to it. He took a position where he could see the house more in detail. He caught a glimpse of a white-pillared porch and a Dutch door, the upper part swung open. The brass handle shone brightly in the sunshine. To the left there was a capacious barn with chickens scratching industriously before the open door. From somewhere came the coppersy tinkle of homing cows. It looked like a place where for the asking one could get milk and honey and good rye bread.

The rural free delivery carrier jogged up the hill and, stopping to drop some mail in a letter-box out of sight behind the hedge, nodded a cheery “Howdy” to Barnes and jogged on again. This man in his officious Federal uniform destroyed something of the sleepy atmosphere of the place. “Here I am,” he seemed to declare as boisterously as the circular letters of the Acme Manufacturing Co. “Here I am, dear sir or madame, and beg to remain most respectfully yours, the United States of America.”

Barnes, who had opened his portfolio with an idea of sketching the spot, closed it again, tying it in one of those hard knots which

invariably in the end he had to cut. But he was checked by a sound from the direction of the letter-box. At first he thought it was a distant whip-poor-will. It was low and had the same note of subdued pathos. Then he concluded that it was a straggling brook running with gentle sobbing among the ferns. But the peculiar sound soon became more individualized. It took on a human note; then a feminine. Finally he awoke to the fact that it was nothing else but the sobbing of a woman. He strode up the grass-grown road to the hidden stretch beyond the fringe of trees. There he found himself confronting a young woman who was kneeling upon the grass, bowed above an open letter in her lap.

She was not over twenty, but tall and lithe. Her heavy hair, black and silken, lay coiled about her head in heavy braids. She was dressed in white with a collar of exquisite lace fastened at her throat with a turquoise pendant. A great orange-colored cat arched its back in apparent sympathy against her skirt. The soft grass had muffled his approach so that for a moment she was unaware that she was not alone.

“I beg your pardon,” he apologized, hat in hand, now not at all sure that he ought to be here.

She was upon her feet in an instant. She looked as though about to run. The cat challenged him with a little spit.

“I didn’t know,” he hastened to explain, “but what you had met with an accident.”

She looked whole enough. He surmised that the letter was the cause of her agitation. If so, he certainly was intruding. Her black eyes, full, Italian, swept by long lashes, seemed to tell him so.

“No,” she murmured, “it is nothing; just bad news. It came so unexpectedly.”

Her lips moved rhythmically to the music of a sweetly lyrical voice. Her teeth were as white as those of the orange-colored cat. She fitted marvelously well into the scene above the valley. Consequently he parried a little to prolong an interview to which he knew he had no right.

“Luckily, bad news generally does come unexpectedly,” he said.

She flashed a look at him as though to fathom his intent. Then she glanced swiftly towards the brick house and seemed instantly in her grief to forget that he was there.

“It will kill him,” she exclaimed below her breath.

Still he hesitated, impressed by the weight of her sorrow.

“If I may be of any service,” he ventured, “I’m on my way to the next village. Any letter or wire—”

She looked up.

“No! No! Such news travels only too quickly,” she answered. Her brows contracted. She went on more to herself than to him, “If I could only check it before it reaches him.”

“He,” mused Barnes, is at once the most personal and impersonal of pronouns. Next to “She” it is the most pregnant with possibilities of all human utterances.

He wondered, too, how it would be possible to paint a black that had gold in it; an ivory that had rose in it; a pure white that had blue in it. It was not possible. And yet there they were in her hair,

her brow, and the setting of her pupils. The tawny cat pressed close to her skirt.

“Then I fear,” he said half in apology, half in hope, as he prepared to leave, “that I can’t help you. And yet,” he reflected aloud, “it seems as though when ill fortune hits hard at anyone the rest of the world ought to club in to help. There ought to be a bad news insurance.”

Her face brightened. But instantly it clouded again as she turned half away.

“But instead of that,” he went on, “the world only raises barriers.”

She recognized his implied offer of help. If her instinct bade her turn from it, there was something in his sturdy presence, above all in his frank eyes, which made him seem to stand for just some such kind-hearted insurance as he had whimsically suggested. It was possible that he from his impersonal point of view might be able to see more clearly than she just what in such a crisis as hers was wisest. At any rate, she said,

“It’s about my brother. He won’t come home.”

Barnes suppressed a smile. He had been prepared for sudden death. He shifted his eyes from her to the brick house now growing more mellow in the softening twilight.

“That is his home?” he asked.

She nodded, watching him curiously.

“I should think a man ought to be eager to return to such a home as that,” he said.

“He ran away,” she explained with some embarrassment at expressing the more intimate details. “He is somewhere in Alaska.”

Barnes acknowledged her confidence with a sympathetic nod of his head.

“If he is in Alaska,” he suggested, “it will be only a matter of time.”

“That is just the trouble,” she exclaimed impulsively. “That is the pity of it. It will be too late!”

He saw that the boy himself was a mere episode in some more poignant grief. He waited for her to proceed. She said,

“I don’t know why I should tell you this—except that it’s a relief to tell anyone. Father is up there waiting for him—with not long to live. If he hears this—his heart—”

Her fingers closed convulsively over the letter.

“That *is* tough,” he murmured. “Your father expected to see the boy himself to-day?”

“Not to see him, but to hear him, to feel him. Father is blind.”

“That’s still worse. The boy knows of his trouble?”

She nodded.

“Then why won’t he come?”

“Because of a quarrel. He wrote this.”

She handed the letter to Barnes with a quick motion as though in sudden hope that he might be able to gather from it something she herself had missed. He glanced it through. It was a thoughtless letter. Its whole tone was one of boyish bravado. Barnes flushed as he read it.

“What the boy seems to need,” he commented, “is a cowhiding.”

“I’m afraid he has fallen into bad company,” she apologized for him, but none too heartily.

He checked his own opinion.

“Joe seems almost like a stranger to me,” she confided further. “He has been gone five years now. And the last few years he *was* at home, I was away at school.”

Barnes refrained from congratulating her. He realized how really serious an affair she had upon her hands.

“And you—you must tell your father this yourself?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, “and it’s like being ordered to kill him.”

She drew in a deep breath that was half a gasp.

Barnes thought a moment.

“The first thing I should do,” he advised, “would be to tear up the letter.”

“You mean—?”

“I should never let him see that.”

She hesitated a moment and then still half dazed tore it into little bits. She tossed the fragments to the ground. They were harried about the greensward by a light sunset breeze. The yellow cat began to play with them.

“Now,” he advised, “I shouldn’t tell your father anything.”

“But he expected Joe to-day! That would leave him to wait.”

“Isn’t that better?” he asked.

“Ah,” she exclaimed, “the blind wait so hard. There is nothing else for them.”

“But they suffer hard, too. While waiting he could at least—hope.”

She shook her head quickly.

“He would guess.”

“A guess is never a certainty,” he persisted.

“It would be certainty enough to break down his poor heart. Dr. Merriweather said that Joe alone could keep him with us another week.”

Barnes glanced again at the brick house. It scarcely seemed possible that so grim a crisis as this could center there. The situation struck home. In some way he felt the responsibility of this unknown young man’s action resting upon his own shoulders. He, too, in a fit of anger had left a father behind him.

At that moment Barnes was inspired by an idea—a preposterous idea to be sure, but the present situation was preposterous and so was Barnes himself if his father was to be believed. Furthermore

most inspired ideas *are* preposterous. It depends a good deal on how they turn out whether or not that adjective clings to them forever. But this one made even Barnes catch his breath. He had to look again at the blue sky, at the gold in her hair, at her eyes now misted like Loch Lomond at dawn.

“There is just one other course for us,” he announced deliberately. “We might deceive him.”

She started back.

“I don’t understand.”

“How many up there must know of this?” he inquired.

“There is only Aunt Philomela,” she managed to answer.

“The servants?”

“They have heard of Joe but never seen him.”

“The neighborhood?”

“We moved here after Joe left.”

She answered his questions mechanically with no suspicion as to what he was leading.

“The boy was young? You say this was five years ago?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“A lad changes a good deal in that time. Do I resemble him—even remotely?”

“You?”

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