

EZEKIEL PROMISES

BY

LUCY PRATT

AUTHOR OF "THE ENTRANCE OF EZEKIEL," "THE COLOR-BEARER," ETC.

ILLUSTRATION BY FREDERIC DORR STEELE

WITH her conscience working in insistent thumps, Miss Jane Lane stepped down from her clean white veranda and looked through the trees to the house of her neighbor. Across the well-kept lawn in front of the house she watched a small figure move slowly. That it was Ezekiel there seemed to be not a reasonable doubt; and with another insistent, conscientious reminder, she again realized that she was losing track of her former protégé. Why, it was more than two weeks since she had *seen* Ezekiel! As she moved on across the green lawn to the neighboring house, she still looked through the trees at the small, slowly moving figure. Then she wound into the yard by way of a curved path and stood before him.

"Why, Ezekiel!" she began, "what *are* you doing?" For at the very moment of her arrival he had taken an unexpected leap into the air, with some ultimate purpose, apparently, of soaring away to the clouds quite beyond her reach.

Just at this moment there was a step behind her, and Miss Jane turned and recognized her neighbor, Mr. Jonas Rankin. Now, Mr. Jonas Rankin, like Miss Jane, was a New Englander. In fact, Miss Jane had known him in New England before she had known him in Virginia. To be even more explicit, although Miss Jane and Mr. Rankin, as she called him, had known each other many years, neither one had the slightest affection for the other. And though Miss Jane would not admit that she entertained the least rancor toward her neighbor, she did acknowledge that at times his views and expressions of opinion were certainly very peculiar and exasperating. She was even forced to recall that more than once, in talking with him, she had become so wroth that the only safe thing had been to discontinue the conversation. It was with a perceptible slight straightening in gen-

eral carriage, then, that Miss Jane turned and recognized her neighbor.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Rankin," she began, in a well-directed attempt at affability combined with dignity, "good morning! Yes, I was just having a little conversation with Ezekiel. You know, I am always interested in Ezekiel, and he seemed to be acting so very strangely as I came in. I was just questioning him as to what he was doing."

"Doing!" interrupted Mr. Jonas Rankin, without introductory parley of any sort. "Doing! Good Lord! If you can find out one thing that he has done in the last hour and a half, Miss — Miss Lane, I'll be much obliged!"

Miss Jane glanced around the yard with evident hopes of obliging Mr. Rankin, and, not being immediately successful, glanced at Ezekiel, who, having alighted from his brief flight, was standing smilingly before them.

"Doing!" put in Mr. Rankin again, while his naturally red face seemed to deepen in hue with repetition. "I put him out here, Miss Lane, to pick up a few leaves and sticks. By the looks now, I should say he might get through by the end of next week!"

"Why, Ezekiel!" began Miss Jane, feeling really mortified as well as apologetic, "do you call this *work*?"

"Yas'm," agreed Ezekiel, still smiling amiably. "I'se jes a-chasin' a leaf, Miss Jane. Yer see, Mister Rankin he tole me ter git all de leaves 'n' sticks 'n' any udder li'l ole fings I seen layin' aroun'." Just here he took another leap after another elusive leaf, and Miss Jane involuntarily reached up a detaining arm.

"Why, Ezekiel!" she began, when he was on land once more, "how you do act this morning! Now, please don't go careering up like that again! You have work to do here which you must finish. And not only that, but when you get through here, I have something which I

should like to have you do for me. Now, think. Can you come and do a little work for me this afternoon, after school?"

"Af' school -- dis evenin'?" ruminated Ezekiel. "Yas'm, I kin do a li'l wuk fer yer af' school, Miss Jane."

"Now, see here," put in Mr. Rankin, "excuse me, Miss Lane, but no, you can't, either, you young rascal. You promised to come back here again after school and finish your work here. You know you did, now, so what are you talking about?"

"Yas, sir, I'se comin' back 'gin af' school -- ter finish my wuk yere, Mister Rankin."

"But then why did you say that you would come to me, Ezekiel?" objected Miss Jane. "Because, of course, you can't be in two places at once. I am sorry that you can't, because I need you very much -- right after school."

Miss Jane looked perplexed, and Ezekiel looked up at her comfortingly.

"Yas'm, I'll come aroun' right after school, Miss Jane, jes soon's I kin git dere; yas'm -- I'll --"

"Why, you young weathercock!" expostulated Mr. Rankin, flourishing his cane around excitedly, "didn't you just tell me that you were coming here right after school?"

"Yas, sir -- yas, sir," corrected Ezekiel confusedly, "I -- I tole yer I'se comin' yere right af' school, cuz co'se -- yas, sir, I'se a-comin' yere right af' school, Mister Rankin --"

"But, Ezekiel," concluded Miss Jane gently, "then, of course, you *can't* come to me."

"Yas'm, I -- I'll come ter --" he began unsteadily, while his words caught confusedly in his throat, "I'll --"

"No," went on Miss Jane, gentleness still dropping through her reserve, "no, Ezekiel, you can't. You see, he naturally is of a very -- a very *obliging* disposition, Mr. Rankin."

"Obliging!" snorted Mr. Rankin. "I should say he naturally was a dirty little liar!"

Miss Jane was shocked into ramrod stiffness.

"Of course, of course," Mr. Rankin briskly apologized, "I don't wish to be offensive, but -- oh, it's the same old thing, Miss Lane! Their word's nothing; you can't trust 'em, you can't believe 'em, and then you make all this hullabaloo about *educating* them! Boo!"

"It would never occur to me that the reasons you give are particularly good ones for *not* educating them," responded Miss Jane icily.

"Educate that young prevaricator!" went on Mr. Rankin, half humorously, half stormily. "Why, you can't believe a word he says!"

"And that, even if it were so, would argue that he does *not* need educating? It would never occur to me to reason in that way."

Miss Jane's words might have been dropping in little icy balls at Mr. Rankin's feet.

"Bosh! Reason! Education! He isn't capable of receiving it. That boy, now! He isn't capable of receiving information of any variety."

"On the contrary, Miss North says she finds him exceptionally capable."

"And who is Miss North, pray tell?"

"Miss North is his teacher. She has really had more experience with him than you have, Mr. Rankin."

"She's welcome to it," he grunted.

"By the way, Ezekiel," Miss Jane went on, quite ignoring petty retorts, "isn't it almost time for school?"

"I suppose so, I suppose so," agreed her friend. "Just observe how much he's accomplished this morning, Miss Lane! But run along to school, boy! Miss -- Miss North's waiting for you and I'm glad to get rid of you! But remember that you come back here again after school or you'll hear from *me*!"

"Yas, sir," assured Ezekiel modestly; "I'se gwine come right back yere af' school."

"And, Ezekiel," concluded Miss Jane, bound to have the last word, "when you are through with Mr. Rankin, perhaps there will still be time to come to me."

"Yas'm," came the willing answer, "I -- I'll come ter you, too, Miss Jane!"

As he traveled on to school, his small dusty brown face looked listlessly irresponsive and passive until his eyes, wandering away down the long road, rested on one moving object among many others. Then his steps quickened, and, passing other children on the road, he came up with hurried, short breaths beside Miss North.

"I'll ca'y yer books fer you, Miss No'th!" he panted, and dropped into a slower walk beside her.

"Oh -- yes, thank you," she said abstractedly. "Just see those lovely violets down there, Ezekiel. I was just thinking how neglected my own garden-bed at the Institute is. Don't you think you could come around after school this afternoon and weed it for me, Ezekiel? It troubles me to have it so neglected."

Ezekiel looked up, momentarily perplexed, at Miss North; his brown face softened a shade, and then his eyes dropped.

"Yas'm, Miss No'th," he answered softly, "yas'm; I kin come roun' af' school -- an' -- an' weed it fer you!"

It had been a long, bright, uneventful day at school, and Miss North looked at her children with the satisfied feeling of another day done,

and raised her hand to the bell. But the door opened, and her hand stopped, arrested for a moment, while Miss Jane Lane walked into the room.

"Oh, how do you do?" smiled Miss North, dropping her voice to that lower note conventional between a teacher and visitor, as she tapped the bell.

"I just want to see Ezekiel one moment," explained Miss Jane, coming nearer, and dropping into the lower note, too.

"Will you remain a moment, Ezekiel?" asked Miss North, and the other children passed out.

He stood before them waiting, and Miss Jane explained:

"I find I can't get home again until after six, Ezekiel; but I want to tell you just what you are to do in the garden when you get there."

Ezekiel glanced a bit evasively at Miss North; but she was listening to something which sounded like a brisk peremptory tapping on her school-room door, and did not notice.

"Come!" said Miss North, believing herself mistaken, and Mr. Jonas Rankin walked into the room. Both Miss Jane and Ezekiel looked momentarily startled at this new arrival, and Miss North, not being actually acquainted with the gentleman, looked at him with an expression of polite interrogation.

"Miss North? Yes, yes," he puffed. (Ezekiel concluded that Mr. Rankin "mus' 'a' been a-runnin'.") "I'm Mr. Rankin. How do you do, Miss Lane? I just dropped in to leave a message with this — this feller here. I was going by, and thought probably I'd just catch him."

Ezekiel looked pleasantly expectant.

"H'm, yes; I've got to go out of town for a few hours, and I sha'n't be on hand to tag you round when you come over to finish up. He's promised to do some little odds and ends for me this afternoon," he explained briefly to Miss North. "Now, just listen, won't you, and see if you can't do it just as I tell you."

Miss North looked suddenly down at Ezekiel and opened her lips to say something — and changed her mind. Mr. Rankin went on with quick, concise explanations:

"Now, see that you do it, boy! Will you?" he concluded, not unkindly.

"Yas, sir," and Ezekiel's look hovered in some distress between Miss Jane and Miss North. Miss Jane glanced at her old neighbor and felt a sudden warm glow of aggressiveness.

"And you know you are promised to me, Ezekiel, when you are through with Mr. Rankin. My work must be done before night, too."

Again Miss North's eyes dropped quickly on

Ezekiel, and again her lips opened in surprise; and then again Miss North, still looking inscrutably down at Ezekiel, changed her mind.

"He won't be through at my place before dark, I'm afraid, Miss Lane," went on Mr. Rankin briskly; "but, if he is, all right. Now you understand, don't you, boy?"

Ezekiel looked unhappily up at Miss North, whose eyes were still resting on him in silent inscrutability, and miserably realized that an explanation was absolutely called for.

"Yas, sir — yas'm — yas, sir —" he stammered; "I reckon I — I'll be right busy dis evenin'." He smiled a little wildly, and picked confusedly at one short trouser-leg. "Cuz" — he looked appealingly at Miss North — "cuz I tole Miss — Miss No'th — I — I'se gwine do a li'l wuk af' school — fer — fer her, too!"

His three employers gazed down at him for a moment, and the young employee, wretched with self-abasement, made no show of gazing back.

"Well!" Mr. Rankin was the first to speak. "I wish you success! You've engaged yourself to three distinct persons at the same time. Oh, Lord! isn't that the race all over? The amount of it'll be, he won't get one thing done for any one of us — not one thing! If that's not the truth, I've nêver spoken it. I give up!"

Mr. Rankin wheeled suddenly around and departed, and Ezekiel stood glancing at brief intervals at his two remaining employers.

"I'm afraid there is something in it, Ezekiel," began Miss Jane dolorously, after the silence; "you don't think what you are saying, and you make promises that — that you really *can't* fulfil."

Ezekiel's eyes, burning with consciousness, gazed immovably down at the floor.

"I don't know what to expect of you in this case, I'm sure. Of course, you can't do all that you have promised. Well, all I can say is — I hope you will do as well as you can."

And, too much burdened even to say good night to Miss North, Miss Jane turned and walked away, and closed the door behind her.

The final employer and employee stood alone.

Ezekiel was still looking so hard at one particular board in the floor that he couldn't possibly look at Miss North, too; but suddenly he thought he heard her move. Slowly he raised his eyes. It wasn't so bad, after all, to be just — just alone with Miss North. He had been left alone with Miss North before.

"Well, Ezekiel," she began calmly, as she sat down at her desk, "it looks as if you were going to have rather a full evening, doesn't it?"

"Yas'm," began Ezekiel; but his voice was such a husky apology, it seemed better not to continue.

Miss North leaned lightly on her arms, which rested on her desk, her fingers clasped.

"Oh, Ezekiel!" she began suddenly, and Ezekiel looked up again with a startled feeling of not knowing just what she was going to do. Laugh? No. "Oh, Ezekiel, *Ezekiel*, why do you?"

"I dunno'm," he murmured vaguely, contritely.

"I don't know, either, I'm sure." And her eyes stopped again on the small brown face as if she were trying to read through to that strange little bundle of shifting thoughts and feelings inside.

"Well, Ezekiel," she finally went on, moving quickly in her chair, as if she were waking up and realized that there were things to be accomplished, "it's just this! Come right here, so that you can understand every word I say."

Ezekiel moved slowly nearer, looking very much as if he were seeking protection from her because she frightened him!

"Now, look at me and listen," she began, as one small hand sought waveringly a fold in her dress. "You have promised Mr. Rankin that you will do what he has told you to do in his yard this afternoon; you have promised Miss Jane that you will do what she has told you to do in her garden; and — I don't know that you have *promised* — but you certainly have given me to understand that you will also do what I asked you to do in my garden. Now, Ezekiel, if I were you, I should do all those things, if it took me *all night*."

Ezekiel had apparently decided to be only frightened.

"Of course, it won't take you all night," she added more gently, looking at him; "of course, if you hurry, and work just as hard as you can, you will probably get through with it all — before supper-time, won't you? You see, the point is, Ezekiel, you must — not — get into the habit of promising things you can't do."

"I — I'se gwine do it all, Miss No'th," he began in a small, far-away voice; "I knowed all de time — I'se 'blige do all — all I say I would!"

"Why, yes, of course you're going to do it all, because you said you would. Mr. Rankin said you wouldn't, didn't he? But you will, won't you? Yes, yes; go on, Ezekiel, go on and see how quickly you can get it done."

Ezekiel went on, his eyes fixed steadily on a distant green lawn.

"Co'se, w'en I say — I'se gwine do it — w'y, co'se I is," he ruminated as he ran.

On the green lawn by Mr. Rankin's house, and on the more ragged brown lawn behind the house, and in the garden-beds at the side of the house, things seemed to grow and multiply and grow again as he worked on. . . .

Dusty and tired, he shuffled out of the yard and moved on, looking at the western sky, where only a few faint suggestions of the departing sun remained.

"I wisht I ain't say I'd do — quite ser much!" he soliloquized just audibly, and he looked down at the thick, small weeds in Miss Jane's chrysanthemum-bed, "cuz I — I ain't 'ad no supper — yit, an' I'se — kine o' tired, too! Seem like I — ain' nuver been — ser tired befo'!" Then he looked back at the still more dimly streaked sky, and a real fear took possession of him. It was growing dark.

"I didn' reckon — 'twas gwine tek me ser long at Mr. Rankin's," he argued wearily, "but seem like it allays teks me r'al long — ter do jes — a li'l'!"

He let himself drop gently down on to the soft earth and looked up at the darkening sky. Already he thought he saw a star twinkling away up there above him, and he looked at it steadily until, far away on the horizon, something else caught his eye. It was an early-evening moon climbing slowly up and looking strangely round and dim in the half dark.

"Cert'nly is pretty," he soliloquized, "an' I jes wish I could go right ter sleep, too. But I reckon I cyan't, cuz I mus' git right up an' go 'long wid my wuk 'gin." He raised himself to his knees, and then he bent down over the chrysanthemum-bed. Suddenly he straightened himself up and looked around in a queer, dazed way at numberless other beds around him.

"Miss Jane didn' — didn' finish *tellin'* me!" he gasped. "I wonder did she — did she want me — *ter weed de whul gyarden!*"

Miss North found it hard to go to sleep that night. Bygone scenes of the day persistently came back to her. First it was the long road and Ezekiel, with her books under his arm, trudging at her side. "Yas'm — I kin come roun' — af' school," his small voice began again; and then the scene shifted, and, standing between Miss Jane Lane and Mr. Rankin, she was again looking down on Ezekiel. Pleadingly his eyes were seeking hers while she stood silent between his two other accusers. Again she heard Mr. Rankin's voice vibrating coarsely, uncompromisingly: "Oh, Lord! isn't that the race all over? . . . Not one thing! . . . I give up!"



"OH, MY POOR LITTLE BOY! YOU MUST GET UP; YOU ARE
COLD AND—AND SICK!"

But he had understood so well — Ezekiel — after she had talked with him! He would get everything done, *everything* that he had promised! And Mr. Rankin should know about *that*, too! She hoped it hadn't taken too long, though. It did take Ezekiel so long — sometimes. Her eyes closed sleepily. He didn't really seem to understand — very well — about work. She turned over with her face to the light, and her eyes opened and closed again.

How long afterward it was that the moon-flooded room faded into nothingness she couldn't have told. The next thing she knew, she was sitting up in bed and looking around in bewilderment. The light was so vivid that she got up to draw her curtain, and stopped at the window a moment, looking down. Suddenly a sharp sound caught in her throat, and she leaned over the window-sill, peering through the brightness. Below her, huddled over a violet-bed, a little figure crouched close to the ground, while with slow, weary, machinelike movements a hand still fumbled among the violets and pulled up weeds in the moonlight. There was a cold, sharp wind blowing from the water, and she saw him stop and put both his hands together and blow on them. Then, slowly and fumblingly, he began pulling again at the weeds.

"Ezekiel!" she called in a quick, sharp whisper; but he did not hear.

With rapid movements she began to dress. Through the long dim corridors she made her way down-stairs, out, down the path, until she stood beside the violet-bed.

"Ezekiel, Ezekiel!" she began, putting out her hand unsteadily.

He turned quickly, and looked up at her with tired, frightened eyes.

"I'se a-doin' it, Miss No'th!" he began, almost in a sob. "I'se a-doin' it — jes de way I say I would! Only — Miss Jane's gyarden wuz — s-ser b-big! An' I been wukkin' — right smart long!" With an effort, he shifted his sore, aching knees and slid wearily down to the cold earth.

Miss North, with a bitter, accusing conscience, bent over him.

"Oh, my child, my poor little boy! Ezekiel, what have you been trying to do? What have you — Ezekiel! don't you hear me? You must get up; you are cold and — and sick! Oh, what have I done?" she mumbled.

He dragged himself to his feet and held on loosely by one of her shoulders.

"No'm, I ain' sick — Miss No'th," he assured her faintly, "an' I reckon I kin git it — all done, only yer mus' gib me — jes a — li'l' mo' time!" He turned mechanically again to the weeds.

"No, Ezekiel, no! I didn't mean that! You must get to — somewhere to bed. I didn't *mean* that you were to stay out like this — Ezekiel; I didn't mean — like this. Come with me! Miss Jane wants to see you — Miss *Jane* wants to see you now!"

"Mr. Rankin'll say — I didn' git it — done. An' I ain't, is I? I ain' did w'at I — I say I would, Miss No'th — is I? But I reckon I could, too — ef yer could only jes gib me — jes gib me — a li'l' mo' time!"

"No, you didn't — you didn't," she muttered. "Mr. Rankin — never mind — oh, I'm glad you didn't, Ezekiel — I'm *glad you — didn't get it done!*"

He put his hand passively in hers and unresistingly followed her as she led him to Miss Jane's door.

THE STATUES IN THE MUSEUM

BY FLORENCE WILKINSON

Statues of fauns and wrestlers,
Marble-chill nereids,
Centaur and bacchanals,
Aloof you look and lonely,
Stripped exiles from those sapphire coasts
Of long ago.

Ye carven gods and symbols
Of occult things and awful,
Serapis, Pallas, Peitho,
Speechless you stand and humbled,
Without one kneeling suppliant
Or votive lamp aglow.

Where are your fluted temples,
Blue Paestum and Girgenti,
Altars and wreathèd oxen,
Veiled whirling priestesses
And the urn-bearing worshippers
Shouting Io?

Instead, a rigid hallway
Where, pagan, antique, wistful,
You stand, stared at and jostled
By mad new hurrying peoples
With pinched and smileless visages
You do not know.