

ESTHER
THE GENTILE

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Esther the Gentile by Mary W. Hudson

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MARY W. HUDSON

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BY

MRS. MARY W. HUDSON. ✓

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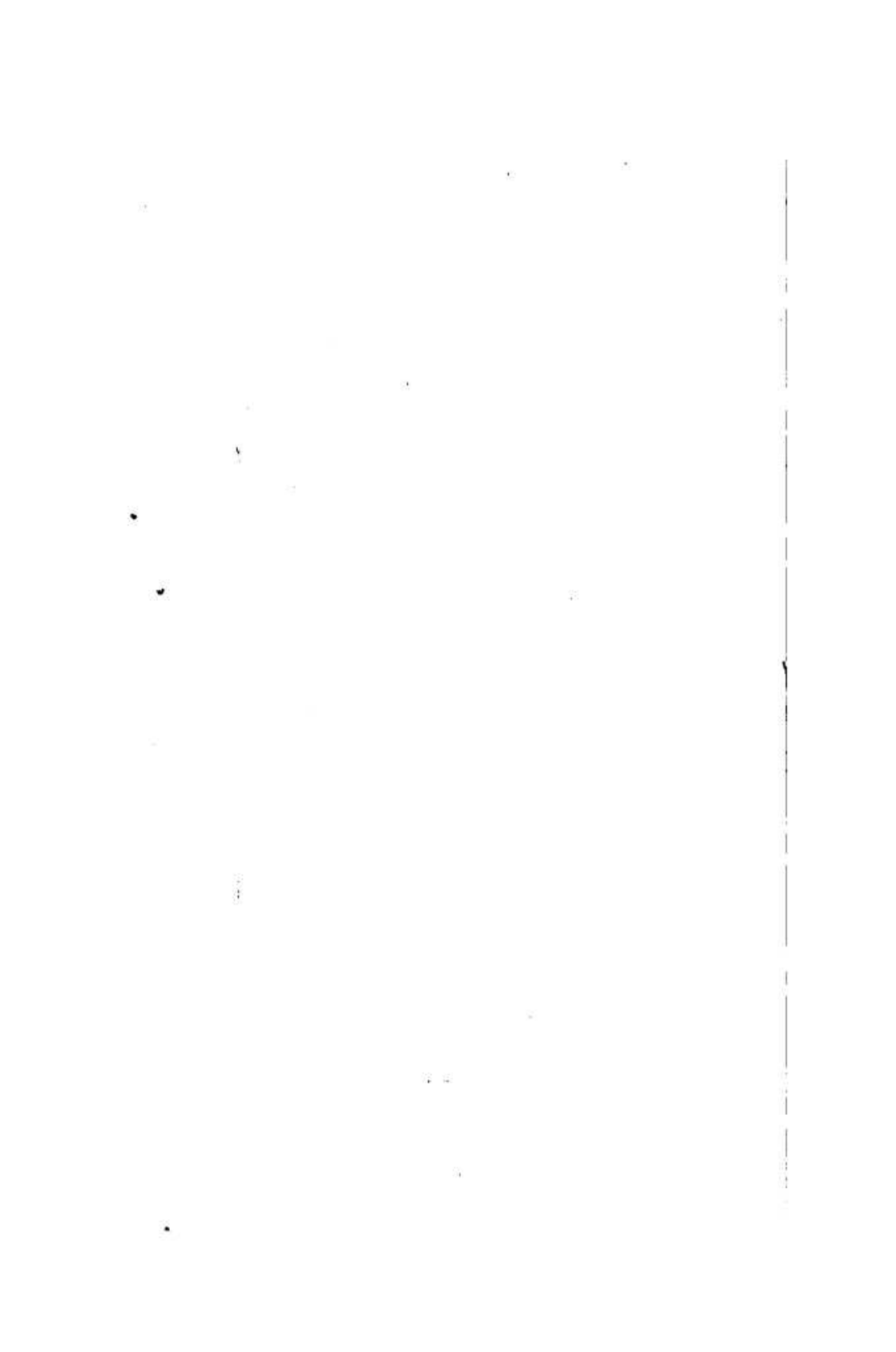


By J. E. HUDSON, TOPEKA, KAN.

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TO MY HUSBAND,
J. K. HUDSON,

WHOSE ENCOURAGEMENT AND APPRECIATION HAVE BEEN THE MAIN-SPRINGS OF
THIS EFFORT, AND IN WHOSE COMPANIONSHIP I HAVE LEARNED
THE BLESSINGS OF A HAPPY HOME—A
WOMAN'S BEST INSPIRATION.



ESTHER THE GENTILE.

CHAPTER I.

IN an out-of-the-way community like Pineborough there are not many students of character, but there are always to be found some odd people who are interesting studies themselves, and who immediately attract the attention of men of the world when they come in contact with them.

Ezekiel Blounce, the teacher of the district school, was one of these. He had neither family nor home, though everybody was his friend. He had taught the Pineborough school for many years, and during all the time had "boarded round," in the fashion that had long before been abandoned in more enterprising districts, except one summer when he was sick and Betty Wainwright nursed him in her spare room, and one other summer when he went away on an unannounced and mysterious visit, carrying with him only a change of linen tied up in a bandana handkerchief and his staff. When his neighbors and the school boys whom he passed on the road that summer morning asked where he was going, he only answered, "On a little jaunt; I'll be back before you want to see me."

But he was gone three months, and the district

had about made up its official mind that a new teacher must be secured for the winter term, when Ezekiel Blounce trudged back again, deposited his bundle, apparently neither increased nor diminished by an ounce weight, in his small "black chest," as it was familiarly known, stood his stout staff in the corner of the kitchen which came next in turn as his home, and, at the proper time, called school as if nothing had happened.

All the surmises that had been made by the quiet country folk concerning his absence were wasted, and they had had so little else to think and talk about than the routine of the days, the weeks, and the crop seasons, that the old man's unexplained return seemed almost an affront. For a time he did not seem to be the man they had in turn imagined murdered, and drowned, and restored to a lost inheritance and a grief-stricken family. The closest scrutiny of his large-featured, unimpassioned face failed to make a hero or a martyr of him in these good people's eyes, and they respected him too highly to ask any questions. He had been the architect of every barn erected in that region since his advent there. He had estimated all the crops and introduced all the innovations in rotation that the fields thereabout had known for years, and the people trusted him wholly. But now he had presumably been out in the world where he had seen and heard much that would be new to them, but of which he told them nothing, and time alone could heal their wounded feelings.

Mr. Blounce had hardly yet recovered from this disturbance of the estimation in which he had so long been held in Pineborough, when something else occurred which made it impossible for him ever to regain his old interest in the community.

One pleasant afternoon in early springtime a young man strolled up to the little school house and stepped to the door to ask for a cup in which to take a drink from the brook close by.

A little pool had been scooped out in the pebbly bed and a rough shelter of stones built up on the sunward side so that the water was clean and cool and quiet, and as the young man stooped over to fill his cup he caught sight of his reflected self and hesitated an instant to look, perhaps to admire, when the thought must have come to him that that was a girlish trick, for he dashed the cup into the mirroring surface. When he returned to the door Mr. Blounce invited him in to rest, but he was not tired, he said, and preferred to sit outside, which he would do if it was nearly time for school to close, and if the teacher would then have leisure to give him a little information about the surrounding country. Of course Ezekiel Blounce had both time and inclination to impart any knowledge, or give any help, he could, and the stranger accordingly took a seat on a log near by and waited for the school to be dismissed.

He had not long to wait. A general shuffling of books and slates and feet, announced the day's tasks done, and a huddling group of little girls came out,