

THE NE'ER-DO-WELL

A Romance of the Panama Canal
BY
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"Why and you keep him locked up so long? Why didn't you try him?" said Cortlandt.

"Ah! For that I shall inquire also. I am informed, however, that the w'at you call lodge is seck."

"We'll look into that later. We're here now to arrange for Mr. Anthony's release."

"The alcalde will be please to accommodate at the earliest. I myself shall see to it. Tomorrow."

"There will be no tomorrow about it," Mrs. Cortlandt exclaimed, positively. "If you cannot arrange the bail yourself, my husband will take up the matter with the zone government, and Colonel Johnson will call upon the president of the republic within an hour. He is waiting word from us now."

Senior Ramon Alfares became suddenly galvanized. He broke into effusive apologies for even so small a delay as had already occurred. While, to be sure, no power was vested in him, and his willing hands were most miserably tied, nevertheless he would so far exceed his authority as to promise instant freedom to the prisoner. He hastened forth to set in motion the proper machinery, and while he was absent Kirk told his story. It left the woman white lipped and incoherent, and roused even the icy Cortlandt to genuine wrath.

"Of course," the latter said, "Alfares will prove by his men that it's all imagination on your part and that your injuries were sustained at the time of your arrest. He'll assume a righteous indignation and start a Spigoty investigation. You see, his father is the governor of Panama province and one of the strongest men in the republic, so Ramon will probably make good his position. Even so, you may recover damages."

"I don't want damages," Kirk replied. "I want to get him out alone some time."

"For heaven's sake, don't think of it!" Mrs. Cortlandt exclaimed. "All the American influence on the isthmus wouldn't help you then. Fifty men would perjure themselves to convict you."

"No. That method doesn't work here," her husband agreed. "You're likely to escape so easily. He will arrange bail, never fear, and you will probably not come to trial. He'll never forgive you, of course, but that won't matter to you."

The first part of Mr. Cortlandt's prediction was soon proved true, for the sick alcalde recovered sufficiently to appear on the scene within half an hour. Then, after much signing of official documents and certain other formalities, Kirk Anthony walked out of the Colon jail in company with his friends.

In the midst of Kirk's expressions of gratitude for the timely intercession of Cortlandt and his wife, the former surprised him by saying in a genuine ly hearty tone:

"My wife has told me all about you Anthony, and I want you to come over to Panama as my guest in the hotel until you hear from your father."

When Kirk informed him of the cablegram that had cast him adrift in Panama, Cortlandt replied reassuringly:

"Oh, well, your father doesn't understand the facts in the case, that's all. You sit down like a sensible person and write him fully."

Seeing a warm second to his invitation in Mrs. Cortlandt's eyes, Kirk accepted gracefully, explaining, "You know this is the first time I was ever up against hard luck, and I don't know just how to act."

"We've missed the 4:35, so we will have to return the way we came," said Cortlandt. "I'd like to stop at Gatun on a business matter of some importance, and if you don't mind a half hour's delay we'll do so."

They pursued their way to the station. But here an unexpected embarrassment arose. As they made ready to board Colonel Johnson's motor car they were annoyed to find that Allan insisted on going too. He insisted, moreover, in such extra-urgent fashion that Mrs. Cortlandt at last

was moved to say, "For heaven's sake let the poor thing come along." And thereafter the Jamaican boy sat on the step of the machine.

Once more the little automobile took on the dignity of a regular train and sped out of the network of tracks behind Colon. As it gained speed Mrs. Cortlandt, to divert her guest's mind from his recent ordeal, began to explain the points of interest as they passed. She showed him the old French workings where a nation's hopes lay buried, the mechanical ruins that had cost a king's ransom, the Mount Hope cemetery, whither daily trains had borne the sacrifice before science had robbed the fever of its terrors.

"Will they really finish the canal?" he asked. "Won't something happen?"

"It is already dug. The rest is merely a matter of excavation and concrete. The engineering difficulties have all been solved, and the big human machine has been built up. What is more important, the country is livable at last. Over at Ancon hospital there is a quiet, hard working medical man who has made this thing possible. When the two oceans are joined together, and the job is finished, his will be the name most highly honored."

"It must be nice to do something worth while," Anthony mused vaguely. "To do anything," his companion observed, with a shade of meaning; then "It is amusing to look back on the old Spanish statement that it would be impious to unite two oceans which the Creator of the world had separated."

As Kirk dropped asleep that night after the luxuries of a bath, clean clothes and a meal on white linen and china, he reflected contentedly that, after all, things have a way of coming right in this world for those who accept them cheerfully as they come.

On the following morning Kirk dispatched a long letter to his father, explaining, as well as he could, how he came to be in Panama and giving a detailed account of the events that had befallen him since his arrival. Although he took this means of relieving his father's anxiety, he was far from resigning himself to a further delay of his return. On the contrary, he at once began an inquiry as to sailing dates, discovering, to his intense disgust, that no ship was scheduled to leave for New York within several days. He planned to borrow the passage money from his friends when the time came, and accompany his letter northward. Meanwhile he devoted his time to slight seeing with his hostess.

Edith Cortlandt was a woman very sure of herself in most things. A situation that might have proved embarrassing to one less tactful she accepted quite as a matter of course, rather enjoying the exercise of her influence and never doubting her power to keep the friendship on any footing she chose. Kirk's frank, boyish gratitude for the favors he had received made it easy for her to encourage the growth of an intimacy that she acknowledged charming, while she sincerely believed that he would be helped by it. Finding him responsive, she deliberately set herself to please him. She was no longer brilliant and chilly, but gay, smiling and unaffected.

Once in a while Cortlandt went with them, but he was usually uncommunicative, and they scarcely felt his presence. When he did talk he talked easily and well.

Several days passed thus, during which Anthony fully recovered from his experience at Colon. Then a ship arrived from New York, but before he had summoned courage to ask his friends for a loan he received a letter forwarded from Colon by the American consul, a perusal of which not only dumfounded him, but entirely altered his plans.

It was typewritten on plain stationery; there was neither heading nor signature, yet he knew quite well from whom it came. It read as follows:

Don't cable again or the stupidity of the police may feel to protect you. The others got away safely, and you would be mad to return home. I can't and won't help you now. This time you went too far. You have made your bed, now lie in it. I don't believe in miracles, but if you can

self I'll help you face this trouble, otherwise don't call on me for anything. I'm through.

Kirk reread this amazing epistle several times before its full significance struck him; then, when he realized what it meant, he felt himself break into a sweat of apprehension. That plain clothes man had died! The police were looking for him. There could be no other explanation, else why had Higgins and the rest fled the country? Perhaps he was already indicted. Kirk saw himself accused of manslaughter, arrested and tried. What could he do if his father refused to help? Evidently the governor believed him guilty. In that case the young man knew that explanations would be futile. Even the letter he had sent would do no good. When Darwin K. Anthony said he was through he was through.

Finding a secluded corner of the veranda, he sat down to think this matter out, but the more he reflected on it the more serious it appeared. Of one thing he became quickly convinced: New York at present was no place for him. He rose quickly and entered the hotel, where he bought all the latest New York papers and found an account of Mr. Padden's efforts to disprove his connection with an assault upon the person of a detective named Williams, who had come from St. Louis. But nowhere was there a word about the present condition of the plain clothes man, nor the slightest hint toward explaining the conduct of the mysterious Jefferson Locke, for whom he had been searching. Who the devil was Locke, anyhow? The article did not even state the charge upon which he was to be arrested. In another paper Kirk found something that relieved his mind a bit. Evidently Williams had not died prior to the time of going to press, although he was reported in a critical condition.

One thing was clear, at least. He could stay here no longer as the Cortlandts' guest—he had already incurred an obligation which he would have difficulty in discharging.

Conquering his sense of humiliation as best he could, he called up the Cortlandts' suit.

Edith answered saying that her husband was out. Then, in response to his request, she came down herself.

"What has gone wrong? Why this face of tragedy?" she inquired as she seated herself beside him.

"I've received my declaration of independence. I've heard from my dad." He told her everything without reserve, then showed her the letter and the newspaper in his hand. She scrutinized them with a quiet seriousness that seemed to make his trouble her own. Turning her bright eyes upon him, she inquired, "How does it feel to be disinherited?"

"Blamed uncomfortable! I must tell Mr. Cortlandt at once."

"Let me," she offered, quickly. "I would not show any one that letter, if I were you, nor advertise the fact that you are in danger of arrest. It will be quite enough if I tell him that you have quarrelled with your father—he is a peculiar man."

Kirk signified his agreement.

"Now what do you intend doing?"

"I'm going to work."

"Good! Good!" She clapped her hands gleefully.

"Oh, I don't want to," he protested, "but the old gentleman thinks I'm no good, and I'd like to show him he's wrong. After I've done that, I intend to loaf again—yes, and I'll know how to loaf by that time. Of course, I'll have to pay my debts too. I'm going to hunt a job this afternoon."

"What sort?"

"Something with big pay and no responsibility."

"Those positions are taken—by the army," she laughed. "What can you do?"

"I can take an automobile apart."

"And put it together again?"

"Oh, no! I can sail a boat; I shoot pretty well; I waltz nicely; I row, swim and box indifferently; and I play an atrocious hand at poker. Am I hopeless?"

"Dear, no! Experience is a good thing, of course, and ability is even better, but neither is absolutely necessary in government work, if you have influence. I am trying to think of the niche into which you would best fit."

"When a fellow hasn't any of those qualifications, then what? Take me, for instance."

"You have at least one. Influence." He shook his head. "My father wouldn't help."

"We'll have no difficulty in finding you a position."

"Jove! That's good news. I had an idea that I'd be going from door to door."

He shook her hand warmly, that being the natural outlet for his gratitude, and she smiled at him. "I wonder where I'd better start in," he said.

"There's not the slightest choice. All paths lead up the mountain, and if you go far enough you will reach the top. It would be quite easy if you knew something about the railroad business for instance."

"Oh, I do. I've had that drilled into me ever since I was a child. I grew up with it—was washed in it. My father made me learn telegraphy before he

gave me a motorboat.

"Where in the world didn't you say so?"

"Well, I have forgotten most of it," he confessed. "I had a railroad of my own, too, when I was twelve years old. I was president."

"Unfortunately, the P. R. R. has a president, so we can't start you in where you left off."

"He might need an assistant."

Mrs. Cortlandt laughed lightly. "While we are finding that out," she said, "I think you had better go over the line in daylight and really see what this work is like. That glimpse you had at Gatun is only a small part. Now, will you trust me to manage this for you, Mr. Anthony?"

"I should say I would."

CHAPTER IX.

The Truth About Mrs. Cortlandt.

EDITH CORTLANDT was not the sort to permit delay. At lunch she introduced Kirk to the master of transportation of the Panama railroad, saying:

"Mr. Rannels has offered to take you out through the cut this afternoon and explain the work to you."

Rannels was a straight, well set up serious young man. Anthony was drawn to him instantly, for there was no affectation about him.

"She's wonderful," he remarked a moment later, as he and Kirk descended the hotel steps together. "She told Colonel Johnson he'd just have to find you a position, and I have been delegated to show you about."

"The Cortlandts seem to have considerable influence for outsiders. I thought I'd have to begin at the bottom."

Rannels glanced at his companion quickly.

"Outsiders! You don't call them outsiders? She knows everybody and everything in this country. She's the whole diplomatic service. Take the Colombian trouble, for instance."

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