

THE Ne'er-Do-Well

By
REX BEACH

Author of
"The Spoilers," "The Barren,"
"The Silver Horde," Etc.

Copyright, 1916, 1917, by Harper & Brothers.

"What trouble?"

"When Panama seceded. She manipulated that, or at least Steve Cortlandt did under her direction. It was one of the cleverest exploits on record. Colombia wouldn't let us build the canal so Panama seceded. War was declared, but the United States interfered in time to prevent bloodshed. By the time the excitement had died out we had begun digging. She knows Central America like the palm of her hand. When she says Kirk Anthony wants a position, we hirelings jump about and see that he gets it. Oh, you'll have any job you want."

The two passed through the railroad gates and took their places in the little car. When they were under way Runnels went on: "I am supposed to show you this end of the work and tell you what it all means. The ditch will be about fifty miles long, and, roughly speaking, the work is in three parts—the dredging and harbor building at sea level on each end of the canal, the lock work and the excavations on the upper levels. That dam you saw building at Gatun will form a lake about thirty miles long—quite a fishpond, eh? When a westbound ship arrives, for instance, it will be raised through the Gatun locks, three of them and then sail along eighty-five feet above the ocean, across the lake and into a channel dug right through the hills until it reaches the locks at Pedro Miguel. Then it will be lowered to a smaller lake five miles long, then down again to the level of the Pacific. An eastbound ship will reverse the process. Get the idea?"

"Sure. It sounds easy."

"You will start in with the P. R. R., Mr. Anthony, under my despotic sway."

"I know a little about railroading."

"So much the better. There's a big railroad man by your name in the states. Are you related?"

"I believe so," Kirk answered, quietly. "Go ahead with the lesson."

"The canal zone is a strip of fourteen miles wide running across the isthmus—really an American colony you know, for we govern it, police it and all that. As for the work itself, well, the fellows at the two ends of the canal are dredging night and day to complete their part, the lock builders are laying concrete like mad to get their share done first, the chaps in the big cut are boring through the hills like moles and breaking steam shovel records every week, while we railroad men take care of the whole shooting match. Of course, there are other departments—sanitary, engineering, commissary, and so forth—all doing their share, but that is the general scheme. Everybody is trying to break records. Lord! It's fierce."

"Why didn't you quit?" suggested Anthony.

"Quit! What for? Good Lord! We like it. Here we are at Pedro Miguel, by the way. We'll be into the cut shortly."

To his left Anthony beheld another scene somewhat similar to the one at Gatun. Other movable steel cranes with huge wide flung arms, rose out of another chasm in which were extensive concrete workings. From a distance the towers resembled parts of a half constructed cantilever bridge of tremendous height. Another army was toiling at the bottom of the pit, more cars shunted back and forth, more rock crushers rumbled; but, before Kirk's eye had photographed more than a small part, the motor car had sped past and was rolling out upon a bridge spanning the canal itself. To the northward appeared an opening cut through the hills and Runnels said, simply:

"Culebra!"

A moment later he announced: "We leave the P. R. R. tracks here and switch in on the I. C. C. Now you'll begin to see something."

Down into the cut the little car went, and at last Anthony saw the active pulsating heart of this stupendous undertaking. The low range was severed by a gorge blasted out by human hands. It was a mountain valley in the making. High up on its sides were dirt and rock trains, dozens of compressed air drills, their spurs resembling the masts of a fleet of carbons at anchor—

behind these grimy, powerful steam shovels which rooted and grunted quite like iron hogs. Along the tracks at various levels flowed a constant current of traffic; long lines of empty cars crept past the shovels, then, filled to overflowing, sped away northward up the valley, to return again and again. Nowhere was there any idleness, nowhere a cold machine or a man at rest. On every hand was smoke and steam and sweat. The drills chugged steadily, the hungry iron hogs gouged out the trails the drills had loosened, the trains rolled past at intervals of a moment or so. Lines of electric wire, carried upon low wooden "shears," paralleled the tracks, bearing the white hot sparks that rent the mountain. At every switch a negro fireman, crouched beneath a slanting sheet of corrugated iron, seeking shelter alike from flying fragments and the blazing sun. From beneath the drills came occasional subterranean explosions; then geysers of muddy water rose in the air. Under the snouts of the steam shovels "dobe" shots went off as bowlders were riven into smaller fragments. Now and then an excited tooting of whistles gave warning of a bigger blast as the flagmen checked the flow of traffic, indicating with arms upraised that the ground was "coming up." Thereupon a brief lull occurred; men hid themselves, the work held its breath, as it were. But while the detonations still echoed and before the flying missiles had ceased to shower the human ants were molling at their hills once more, the wheels were turning again, the jaws of the iron hogs were clanking.

Through this upheaval the motorcar penetrated, dodging trains of "flats," which moved sluggishly to afford them passage up and down over the volcanic furrows at the bottom of the gorge or along some shelf beneath which the foundations were being dug. At times a shovel reached out its five yard steel jaw and gently cleared the rails of debris, or boosted some bowlder from the path with all the skill of a giant hand and fingers. Up and down the canyon rolled spasmodic rumblings, like broadsides from a fleet of battleships.

Half a mile after the sightseers rolled on, past scenes of never varying activity—past more shovels, more groups of drills, more dirt trains, more regiments of men—Runnels explaining, Kirk marveling until he was forced to exclaim:

"I had no idea it was so big. It doesn't seem as if they'd ever finish it."

"Oh, we'll finish it if we're let alone. You see there is too much politics in it; we never know how long our jobs will last. If some senator whose vote is needed on an administration matter wanted my position for his wife's brother, he could get it."

"I suppose I'm an example."

Runnels looked at him squarely before answering. "You are," said he, "although I wasn't thinking of you when I spoke. It's something we all feel, however."

Anthony flushed as he answered: "I don't remember ever taking anything I wasn't entitled to, and I didn't think when I was shoved in here that I'd shove some other fellow out. I suppose there is room at the bottom, and a fellow can work up?"

"If he has it in him."

"I think I'll start there."

"I'm afraid you're a poor business man," said Runnels.

"Rotten!" Kirk admitted. "But I've an idea I can make good if I try."

"If you feel that way I certainly will help you," said the other warmly. "Of course I'll try to help you anyhow, but—I like your spirit. With Mrs. Cortlandt to back me up, I'll see you go forward as fast as you deserve."

By now they were out of the cut and once more upon the main line at Bas Obispo, heading back toward the Pacific.

"You asked me to tell you something about her," Runnels continued. "I'm not sure my information is entirely correct, but, knowing who she is, I think I understand why she is in Panama. It is politics—big politics. The Spiggotties have an election next year, and it is necessary to get our wires well laid before it comes off. General Alfarez will probably be the next president."

"Alfarez! Not Ramon?"

"His father. You know we Americans occupy a peculiar position here, set down as we are in the midst of an alien people who hate us. Oh, they hate us, all right—all except a few of the better class."

"Why?"

"There are a good many reasons. For one thing, there's a sort of racial antipathy. Besides, when we stole Panama we made the Colombians sore, and all Central America besides, for they realized that once we Yankees got a foothold here we'd hang on and not only dominate this country, but all the neighboring republics as well."

"I had gathered something of the sort—but I had no idea there was so much in it. But we don't want these jungle countries," said Kirk.

"That's where you're wrong. By and by we'll need room to expand, and when that time comes we'll move

south. Means—the our farsighted government is smoothing the way, and there's nobody better fitted for the preliminary work than Mr. Stephen Cortlandt of Washington, D. C., husband and clerk of the smartest woman in the business of chaperoning administrations. He's the figurehead behind which she works. She's a rich woman, she loves the game—her father was the greatest diplomat of his time, you know—and she married Cortlandt so she could play it. Any other man would have served as well, though I've heard that he showed promise before she blotted him out and absorbed him. But now he's merely her power of attorney."

Anthony pursed his lips into a whistle of astonishment.

"It's been a good thing for him," Runnels ran on, evidently warmed to his subject. "She's made his reputation; he has money and position. For my part, I'd rather remain insignificant and have a real wife."

"Don't they love each other?"

"Nobody knows. She's carved out of ice, and as for him, well, gratitude is a good deal like rust—in time it destroys the thing it clings to. I suppose I'm talking too much, but others would tell you the same things."

It was with quite a different eye that Kirk looked upon his host and hostess that evening. To his genuine liking for the latter was now added a worshipful admiration and a boyish gratification at her regard, which rather put her at a distance.

"It's all settled," said he. "I'm going to work in a few days as train collector."

"What?" Mrs. Cortlandt turned upon him sharply. "Runnels didn't offer you that sort of position?" Her eyes were dark with indignation. Kirk promptly came to the defense of his new friend.

"No, I asked for it."

"Oh, I see. Well, he will do much better by you than that."

"I don't want anything better to start with."

"But, my dear boy, a collector is merely a conductor. He takes tickets."

"Sure! I can do that. I might fall at something hard."

"No, no, no! I'll see that you don't fall. Don't you understand?"

"I understand a lot more than I did, Mrs. Cortlandt. That's why I don't want to rob some chap of a job he's entitled to, and I sha'n't. There's a collector quitting shortly."

"Is that really the reason, or do you think the work will be easier?"

Kirk stirred uncomfortably. "Oh, I'm not trying to dodge anything," he maintained. "On the contrary, the most amazing thing has happened—something I can't quite understand. I—I really want to work. Funny, isn't it? I didn't know people ever got that way, but—I'd like to help build this canal."

"But a conductor! Why, you're a gentleman."

"My dad was a brakeman."

Continued next week

We Repair All Kinds of MACHINERY AUTOS and GAS ENGINES

We are equipped with steel drilling outfits, turning lathe, furnace, etc.

GASOLINE, DRY BATTERIES, AUTO SUPPLIES ALWAYS ON HAND AT THE

INDEPENDENCE GARAGE & MACHINE SHOP

EDWARDS & BALL, Proprietors

FOR SALE: Stock Hogs that averages 75 pounds. A cheap work horse or two, a good young milk cow, short time fresh, one horse wagon, heavy wagon.

ENDOLANE ORCHARDS

Phone Farm 2514, Independence

Burk's Cafe

In Gain's Pool Hall

The Best Meal in Polk County for 25c. Quick Service and Plenty to eat. Try our Dinner meal when in Town

Remember the Place "C" Street
Next Door to Monitor Office

Are You Looking for a Reliable Drug Store?

If you want good Service, good Drugs and Reasonable Prices, you will find them at our store.

We have everything that is needed in the sick room and can secure in the shortest time possible any preparation or appliance that may be suggested by a doctor.

Remember Our Prices are as Low as Consistent with good drugs

THE RED CROSS PHARMACY

V. J. BROWN, Propr., Independence, Oregon