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"As a train went out of Paddington station the other day," we are told, "there were in a third-class compartment two women smoking cigarettes and a man knitting."—London Punch.

THE

Ne'er-Do-Well

By

REX BEACH

Author of

"The Spoilers," "The Barrier," "The Silver Horde," Etc.

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again.

"I really didn't expect this," he began slowly as he rose. "Anthony exaggerates; he is too kind. But since he has chosen to publicly call attention to our relations, I will confess that what he tells you is all true. Through my assistance—partly, at any rate—he has made a man of himself. He has been welcome at my house, at my table; he has come and gone as he pleased, like one of the family, you might say. But those are little things; they count for nothing." His tone gripped his hearers, and Anthony stirred uneasily, thinking this an odd way of accepting a gift.

Unclasping his long, white fingers, Cortlandt held up the watch to public view.

"In payment for my poor friendship he has given me this magnificent thing of gold and jewels, the finest I ever saw. I never counted upon such gratitude. It is too much, and yet a man cannot refuse the gift of his friend and not seem ungracious, can he? Somewhere in the orient they have a custom of exchanging gifts. No man may accept a thing of value without making adequate return, and it has always struck me as a wise practice." He turned full upon Kirk for the first time since he had begun speaking, and his voice rose a tone as he said, "I can't let the obligation rest entirely upon me. We have been friends, Anthony, and I am going to give you something in return which I have prized highly. It would be counted of great value by some." Once more he paused and drew his lips back in that grimace of mockery. It could no longer be termed a smile. "It is this—I am going to give you—my wife. You have had her from the first, and now she is yours."

For one frightful moment there was no sound; even the men's breathing was hushed, and they sat slack jawed, stunned, half minded to believe this some hideous, incredible jest. Cortlandt turned away gloatingly.

Kirk was the last to recover his powers, but when they did revive they came with a prodigious rush. He plunged upward out of his chair with a cry like a wounded animal, and the others rose with him. The table rocked, something smashed, a chair was hurled backward. The room broke into instant turmoil. Kirk felt hands upon him, and then went blind with fury, struggling in a passion too strong for coherent speech. He was engulfed in chaos. He felt things break beneath his touch, felt bodies give way before him.

How or when Kirk left the room he never knew. Eventually he found himself pinned in his chair, with Runnels' white face close against his own and other hands upon his arms. His first frenzy quickly gave way to a sickening horror.

"It's a lie! The man's crazy!" he cried hoarsely; then, as his companions drew away from him, he rose to his feet. "Why are you looking at me like that? I tell you it's a d——d lie! I never"—

Runnels turned to the table and, with shaking hand put a glass to his lips and gulped its contents. Wade and Kimble exchanged glances, then, avoiding each other's eyes, took their hats from the hooks behind them.

"Wait! Bring him back!" Kirk mumbled. "I'll get him and make him say it's a lie." But still no one answered, no one looked at him. "God! You don't believe it?"

"I'm going home, fellows. I'm kind of sick," Kimble said. One of the others murmured unintelligibly, and, wetting a napkin, bound up his hand, which was bleeding. They continued to watch Kirk as if fearful of some insane action, yet they refused to meet his eyes squarely. There was no sympathy in their faces.

The knowledge of what these actions meant came to him slowly. Was it possible that his friends believed this incredible accusation? As he began to collect himself he saw his plight more clearly. His first thought had been that Cortlandt was insane, but the man's actions were not those of a maniac. No! He actually believed—and these fellows also. He wanted to shout his innocence at them, to beat it into their heads.

One by one they took their hats and went out, mumbling goodnight to one another, as if intending to go home singly in order to avoid all discussion of this thing that had fallen among them. Runnels alone remained.

"You don't believe I did—that?" Anthony asked in a strained voice.

"I—I think I do." There was a miserable silence, and then: "It isn't the thing itself, you know, so much as the rotten—underhanded advantage you took. If he'd been a stranger, now—Honestly, isn't it true?"

Kirk shook his head listlessly. "I wouldn't lie to you."

Runnels drew a deep breath. "Oh, come, now, the man must have known what he was saying. Men don't do things like that on suspicion."

"He misunderstood our friendship," said Kirk heavily, then roused himself for a last plea. "Look here!" he cried. "You know Cortlandt, and you know me. The man was insanely jealous. I know it sounds weak, but it's the truth, and it's all I can say. I'll go mad if you doubt me. And tonight of all"— He broke off sharply. "My God! I'd forgotten that I'm married. Suppose Gertrudis hears of this!" Anthony seized his temples in despair.

Runnels took a sudden illogical decision. He never knew exactly what had influenced him, but his whole past knowledge surged up in him with a force that he could not resist. He laid his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Take it easy, old man," he said. "I believe you. I've always known that they didn't get along together, although—well, I won't try to understand it. He may not do anything further, and these fellows won't mention what happened here. They can't."

"Women are apt to be jealous, aren't they, Runnels? What do you suppose she'd do?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm thinking about Cortlandt. If he finds out he's mistaken what will he do?"

"He'll have to find out. I'm going to tell him. His wife will tell him. Good God! Do you see what an awful light it puts me in? You don't doubt me, do you really, old man?"

"No, but what a night this has been! It seems a year old. Come along, now. You must get out of here. You must turn in. The waiters are wondering what this row is about. I think we'd better take a walk."

In passing through the deserted lobby of the hotel they saw Clifford idling about. But they were too much absorbed to wonder what had kept him up so late. By the clock across the plaza they saw it was two hours after midnight as they stepped into the street. Then, finding no coaches in sight, they set out to walk toward Ancon, both badly in need of the open air.

A moment later Clifford followed them, taking pains to keep at a distance.

Now that the full import of Cortlandt's accusation had sunk into his mind, Kirk lapsed into a mood of sullen bitterness. He said little, but his set face worried his companion, who was loath to bid him good night even when they were close to the Tivoli. After they had parted Runnels was upon the point of going back and offering to spend the night with him, but thought better of it.

Instead of passing through the office Kirk mounted to the porch of the Tivoli and entered his room from the outside, as he and Chiquita had done earlier that evening. He found Allan waiting and bursting with a desire to gossip, but cut him short.

"Get my street clothes. I'm going out." He tore the white tie from his throat as if it were choking him. "I've been hurt, Allan. I can't explain, for you wouldn't understand, but I've been hurt. Come along."

The negro's lips drew apart in an expression of apelike ferocity, and he be-

to shake and reverberate as No. 5 rolled in from Colon, bearing John Weeks, American consul, and Mr. Williams of St. Louis in one of the forward coaches. As the two hurried out through the turnstiles they found the street blocked by a considerable crowd, evidently interested in something quite apart from the arrival of the morning train. But before they could learn the cause out from the nearby building came Ramon Alfarez, accompanied by several policemen and a group of railroad employees, among whom was Kirk Anthony.

"There he is!" wheezed the consul, clutching at his companion's arm. "Get him now before his friends."

"You are arrest'!"

Williams thrust the policemen and the curious onlookers aside and, laying hold of Anthony, cried in triumph:

"Well, Mr. Jefferson Locke, I want you."

A little man in blue uniform was attempting to take the prisoner in charge, but the detective disregarded him.

Runnels elbowed his way forward with a question.

"Oh, I've got a warrant for him," Williams declared. "What for? Well, for one thing, he embezzled $80,000, and I'm going to take him back."

"Eh? W'at is this?" Alfarez bustled into the conversation. "Embezzle? He is then a t'ief?"

"Exactly. If you're the inspector I'll ask you to make this arrest for me. I believe we're on foreign ground."

"I regret you 'ave arrive' so late," smirked Alfarez. "The gentleman is already arrest' for the murder of Senor Cortlan'. He will first answer to that, I assure you."

It was during the lunch hour that Ramon Alfarez called at the Garavel home, finding the banker and his daughter still loitering over their midday meal and discussing the topic that had electrified the whole city.

"So fine a man," the father was saying. "He was, indeed, my good friend. It is shocking."

"Yes, and to think he should have been killed in this cowardly manner!"

"Killed! Is it believed that he was murdered? Caramba! I supposed he had shot himself. That was the gossip an hour ago."

"Upon leaving the Tivoli last night Senor Cortlan' dined with six of his friends at the Central. There was drinking. The waiters have been questioned; also one of the men who was present has recounted to me what occurred. It seems that for a long time Senor Cortlan' has been jealous of his wife. Cortlan' openly accused his enemy before all the others. It was most dramatic, it was terrible! There was a scene of violence. The other man made threats."

Garavel breathed an incredulous exclamation.

"Ah, but wait! It was Senor Cortlan's best friend, too, the man for whom he had accomplished many favors, whom he accused." He noted with mingled anger and satisfaction the pallor that was creeping into the girl's cheeks. "You would never guess. It was—I hesitate, and yet you are bound to learn, my dear friends—it was this Ant'ony."

"It is a lie!" said the girl quietly. "He loved no one but me."

"Gertrudis!" The banker was shocked beyond measure at what he considered his daughter's jealousy. "Those are not nice words."

"I do not believe it."

Ramon had not counted upon such a spirit, and, his anger getting the better of him, he sneered: "I should not have spoken. I did not know you still care."

"She does not care," Garavel declared loudly.

"Ah, but I do. I love him very dearly."

The two men were upon their feet in an instant, staring at her, the elder in amazement, the younger with rage and resentment blazing from his countenance.

"Silence!" thundered the banker. "Yonder stands your affianced husband."

"It is a mistake"— she persisted gently.

"No, no, no! There is no mistake," chattered Ramon. "Those other men have told all, and your Ant'ony is now in the carcel under guard. It was I who saw to his arrest. Nor is that all. He is not at all the man he pretended to be, even his name is false. This gan to chatter threats of vengeance, to which Kirk paid little heed. A few moments later they went out quietly, and together they took the rock road down toward the city, the one silent and desperate, the other whining like a hound nearing a scent.

* * * * * * *

Edith Cortlandt did not retire immediately upon her return from the ball. Her anger at Anthony's behavior kept her wakeful, and the night had turned off so dead and humid that sleep was in any case a doubtful possibility.

She was still sitting in her room at a late hour when she heard the outside door close and Cortlandt's footsteps mounting the stairs. She was glad he had his own room and never entered hers at such an hour, for even to talk with him in her present state of mind and body would have been more than she could bear.

She was unreasonably annoyed therefore, when he came boldly into her chamber without even knocking.

"Rather late for good night," she said coldly.

"I've just come from Anthony's supper party."

His voice made her look round sharply. She saw that his linen, ordinarily stiff and immaculate, was sodden and crumpled, his collar limp, his forehead glistening with drops of moisture.

"What ails you, Stephen?" she cried. "Have you been drinking?"

"No. I didn't drink much. I brought you something."

He took the loving cup from its flannel bag and set it upon the table. "They gave me this.

"And this too." He tossed the watch with its enameled monogram into her lap.

"Ah! That's very handsome."

"Yes. I thought you'd like it. It's from Anthony." He laughed, then shuddered.

"Why, you seem excited over these souvenirs. You surely expected"—

He broke in—a thing he rarely did while she was speaking:

"Anthony made a speech when he gave it to me—a very nice speech, full of friendship and love and gratitude." He repeated Kirk's words as he remembered them. "What do you think of that?"

Mrs. Cortlandt's eyes widened. This was not the man she knew. At this moment he was actually insistent, almost overbearing, and he was regarding her with that same ironical sneer that had roused her anger earlier in the evening.

He began to chuckle, apparently without reason. His shoulders shook feebly at first, then more violently. His flat chest heaved, and he hiccoughed as if from physical weakness. It was alarming, and she rose, staring at him affrightedly. He continued to shudder and shake in uncontrollable hysteria, but his eyes were bright and watchful.

"Oh, I—I—took it all in—I let him p-put the noose around his own neck and tie the knot. Then I hung him." His convulsive giggling was terrible, forecasting, as it did, his immediate breakdown.

"Stephen!" she exclaimed, in a shocked tone, convinced that his mind was going. "You are ill. You need a doctor. I will call Joceel." She laid her hand on his arm. "Won't you go to your room and let me call a doctor?"

"Not yet. Wait! He told them what I had done for him. I acknowledged it all and made them hear it from my lips too. Then"— He paused, and she steeled herself to witness another spectacle of his pitiable loss of self control. But instead he grew icy and corpselike, with lips drawn back in a grin. "I played with him the way you have played with me. Think!"

Her face went suddenly ashen.

"Well, I told him before them all that I intended to give him something in return, and I did. I—gave—him—you."

"God! You didn't tell him that? You didn't say that—before those men! Oh-h!" She shrank back, drawing the gauzy silk robe closer about her breast. Then she roused to sudden action. Seizing him by the shoulders she shook him roughly with far more than her natural strength, voicing furious words which neither of them understood.

"Oh, I did it," he declared. "He's yours now. You can have him. He's been your lover"—

"He's yours now. You can have him."

She flung him away from her so violently that he nearly fell.

"It's a lie! You know it's a lie!"

"It's true. I'm no fool."

She beat her hands together distractedly. "What have you done? What will those men think? Listen! You must stop them quickly. Tell them it's not so."

He seemed not to hear her. "I'm going away tomorrow," he said, "but I'll never divorce you, no matter what you do, and I won't let you divorce me either. No, no! Take him now if you want him, but you'll never be able to marry him until I'm gone. And I won't die soon—I promise you that. I'm going to live."

"You can't go"—

"There's a boat tomorrow."

"Don't you see you must stay and explain to those men? My God! They'll think you spoke the truth. They'll believe what you said."

"Of course they will," he chattered shrilly. "That's why I did it in that way. No matter what you or he or I can do or say now they'll believe it forever. It came to me like a flash of light, and I saw what it meant all in a minute. Do you understand what it means, eh? Listen! No matter how you behave they'll know. They won't say anything, but they'll know, and you can't stand that, can you?"

"You have no evidence."

"No? What about that night at Taboga? You were mad over the fellow then, but you didn't think I saw. That day I caught you together in the jungle—have you forgotten that? Didn't you think it strange that I should be the one to discover you? Oh, I pretended to be blind, but I followed you everywhere I could, and I kept my eyes open."

"You saw nothing, for there was nothing."

"I waited because I wasn't strong enough to revolt—until tonight. Oh, but tonight I was strong! Something gave me courage."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Question and the Answer.

IN all their married life Edith Cortlandt had never known her husband to show such stubborn force. Failing to dominate him as usual, she was filled with a strange feeling of helplessness and terror.

"You had no right to accept such evidence," she stormed.

"Bah! Why try to fool me? I have your own words for it. The other afternoon I came home sick—with my head. I was on the gallery outside when you were pleading with him, and I heard it all. But he was growing tired of you. That, you know, makes it all the more effective." He smiled in an agonized fury.

"You—cur!" she cried, with the fury of one beating barehanded at a barred door. "You had no right to do such a thing even if I were guilty."

"Right. Aren't you my wife?"

The look she gave him was heavy with loathing. "That means nothing with us. I never loved you, and you know it. You never could have succeeded without me. All you have is due to me—even your reputation in the service. Your success, your influence, it is all mine. The debt is all on your side, as you and I and all the world know."

"Who made me a manikin?" he demanded, with womanish fury, a fury that had been striving for utterance these many years. I had ambitions and hopes and ability once—not much perhaps, but enough—before you married me. I was nothing great, but I was getting along. I had confidence, too, but you took it away from me. You—you absorbed me. You had your father's brain, and it was too big for me. It overshadowed mine. In a way you were a vampire, for what I had you drained me of. But tonight, when he got up before those other men and dangled my shame before my eyes, I had enough manhood left in me to strike back. Thank God for that at least! Maybe it's not too late yet for me to be a man. Maybe if I get away from you and try"— His voice died out weakly. In his face there was a miserable half gleam of hope.

"I never knew you felt like that. I never knew you could feel that way," she said in a colorless voice. "But you made a terrible mistake."

"Do you mean to say you don't love him?"

"No, I have loved him for a long time. I can't remember when it began." She spoke very listlessly, looking past him as if at a long familiar picture which she was tired of contemplating. "I never knew what love was before; I never even dreamed. I'd give my life right now to undo what you have done, just for his sake, for he is innocent. Oh, don't sneer; it's true. He loves the Garavel girl and wants to marry her. I'm going to tell you the whole truth now without sparing myself. It began, I think, at Taboga, that night when he kissed me. It was the only time he ever did such a thing. It was dark, we were alone, I was frightened, and it was purely impulse on his part. But it woke me up, and all at once I knew how much he meant to me. When I discovered that he cared for that girl—well, if you overheard you must know. I frightened Garavel into dismissing him, and I set out to break him, just to show him that he needed me. Tonight he scorned me. That's the truth, Stephen. If we believed in oaths I would swear it."

"You are shielding him. You want to make me out wrong." But she knew he knew.

"Those are the facts. Heaven knows they are bad enough, but they are by no means so bad as you thought. And I'm your wife, Stephen. That thing you did was brutal. Those men will talk. I was guilty no doubt in my thoughts, but I'm young, and you have no right to blight my life and my reputation—yes, and yours—by a thing like that. We will have to meet those men. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "In all my life I never felt but one moment of power, and that, it seems, was false. For years I have longed to show myself a man, and now—what have I done? What have I done? I am no monster. Why couldn't you be consistent? Why did you go halfway? Why couldn't you be all good or all bad and save me this?"

"All women are half good and half bad."

"I can't blame you for not loving me, I suppose," he mumbled. "No woman of your kind could love a man like me."

"Those men!" she said in a way that made him writhe.

"Wait until I—think. I must think."

"Perhaps in the morning we can see a way out."

"That's it." He nodded. "You go to bed and I'll think. I'm trying to think now, but this heat is suffocating me and my head is tired."

Despite the breathless oppression of the night, she shivered. "I never can meet them now, and I don't see how you will dare to, knowing that you were wrong."

"Don't!" he pleaded. "The other was bad enough, but this— Tell me what to do!"

"I can't. I don't know myself. All I can see is that those men will never cease to believe, no matter what you tell them."

As she prepared for bed an hour later she heard him still stirring about in his quarters, but afterward she did not detect his cautious footsteps when he stole out of his chamber, closing the door softly behind him.

* * * * * * *

Kirk was roused from a heavy, senseless slumber the next morning by a vigorous rapping at his door. He opened the door and Runnels rushed in.

"Where did you go after I left you last night?"

"I came here, of course." As the memory of the previous night swept over Kirk he scowled.

"Did you stay here?"

"No. I went out again, and was out nearly all night trying to walk it off."

Runnels' face blanched, and he drew back.

"Then, of course, you know?"

"What?"

"About Cortlandt. He's dead!"

"Dead? When? Where? How did it happen?"

"Nobody knows just how. He was found on the sea wall near Alfarez's house, shot."

"Shot! Good Lord!"

"Did you see Cortlandt again after I left you?" Runnels swallowed hard.

Kirk whirled about and faced him. "Great heavens! No! See here, that idea is ridiculous!"

Runnels sank weakly into a chair and mopped his face. "When you said you'd gone out again it knocked me flat, understand?"

"I can prove where I was, for Allan was with me. I couldn't sleep, so I tried to walk off my excitement. No, no; I couldn't do a thing like that! I thought last night that I could, but—I couldn't, really."

"I'm afraid Wade will tell all about the party if we don't stop him."

"Then we'd better hunt him up." Kirk resumed his dressing, while Runnels consulted his watch.

"No. 5 is due in twenty minutes. We'll probably find him at the office."

Together they hastened to the railroad building, Runnels telling all he knew of the tragedy as they went along. Cortlandt's body, it seemed, had been found about daylight by a Spiggoty policeman, who had identified it. Becoming panic stricken at the importance of his discovery, he had sounded the alarm, then reported directly to the governor, whose house was close by. The whole city was alive with the news. The police were buzzing like bees. Rumors of suicide, murder, robbery, were about, but no one seemed to know anything definite.

"It was suicide," Kirk averred, with conviction. "The man was insane last night, and that accounts for what he said about me. He's been sick for a long time."

"If those boys will only keep their mouths shut," Runnels said anxiously. "There's no telling what these Spiggoties might do if they heard about that row."

"Cortlandt was an American."

"But it happened in Panama, and it would be their affair."

Although it was Sunday, the four young fellows who had taken part in the entertainment on the night before had gathered in the office and at the appearance of Runnels greeted him eagerly. Toward Kirk, however, they maintained a disheartening constraint.

The acting superintendent began to caution them tersely.

"It's a bad business," said Runnels, "and it's something I for one don't want to be mixed up in. I've heard rumors already about some sort of a quarrel at our party, so I'm afraid you fellows have been talking."

Wade acknowledged it recklessly. "Yes, I'll answer for my part, and I'm not going to make any promise of secrecy either."

Into the office behind them came Ramon Alfarez and two Panaman policemen, one evidently a sergeant.

"Eh, there you are!" Alfarez cried as he caught sight of Kirk. "You are arrest'!"

"What for?"

"Gentlemen, you will be so kind as

[CONTINUED NEXT WEEK]