



CAMEO KIRBY

BY BOOTH TARKINGTON AND HARRY LEON WILSON
NOVELIZED FROM THE PLAY BY W.B.M. FERGUSON



[CONTINUED.]
CHAPTER VI.

DESPITE his fifty odd years, Colonel Moreau set out for his destination at so rigorous a pace that Tom Randall, who confidently expected to dog the other's steps, was disagreeably disappointed, for by the time he had gained the first corner around which the estimable defender of the family had disappeared the latter was nowhere in sight. Familiar with the city and its environs, the boy possessed knowledge of several time saving short cuts to the dueling oaks, but this on the present occasion he considered useless, for, ignorant of the exact spot where the combatants were to meet, there existed no alternative but to press on in the wake of Moreau, who he had every reason to believe had taken the familiar and direct route. Thoroughly imbued with the desire and expectation of witnessing Kirby's death and thus in a measure glutting his vengeance, young Randall broke into a run, confident that on turning each successive corner he would come in sight of the serene and indomitable colonel. But time and distance flew by until at length the tall trees bordering the grove broke upon his vision, and as yet his quarry had not been run to earth. Momentarily perplexed and mystified, the boy turned and scanned the way by which he had come. Could he have in some cryptic manner passed the other on the road, or, contrary to all expectation, had Moreau taken the short cut, and was he even now in the grove face to face with Cameo Kirby? For immediate and conclusive answer two pistol shots rattled out, shattering the cool serenity of the morning and sending a bevy of frightened rooks circling and cawing high into the brooding blue dome of the heavens. Cursing his ill luck, young Randall raced furiously toward the distant grove.

Colonel Moreau, considerably more familiar with the town than Tom Randall, had indeed availed himself of the shortest cut possible and one which would lead him directly to that entrance the situation of which Larkin Bunce had been at pains to explain. No time could be wasted, for Kirby was already there, and to keep an adversary waiting smacked not only of cowardice, but was a direct breach of the code regulating such affairs of honor. It was characteristic of Moreau that if left to himself he would serenely outrage all codes by shooting a man in the back, but that when officially entered for a combat—such as on the present occasion—he punctiliously observed both the spirit and the letter.

Kirby living meant a serious menace; Kirby dead meant security and a tighter grip on the spoils of the river, a reoccupation of the premier position from which he had been ousted. Business interests and his own life clamored for Kirby's death. For Bunce, if he grew troublesome, he would account, and he could rely on the latter's remaining true to the code of their profession—carrying no tales to the Randall, but instead, if he considered fit, fighting out the issue with the slayer of his partner. It can thus be seen that Moreau in his usual optimistic fashion had the future arranged entirely to his satisfaction.

Meanwhile he had cautiously entered the shadow of the dueling oaks and, pistol in hand, was slowly threading his way down the path, the weapon cocked and resting across his left forearm. Flanked on either side by the

giant trees through which fugitive sunbeams flickered, shooting their small golden arrows of light into the dense and rank undergrowth, he found some difficulty in accurately discerning distant objects. Although the path was straight, thus obviating any turning of angles and a consequent sudden and unexpected meeting, he could not see Kirby, and for a moment the fears of an elaborately planned ambush arose in his unworthy mind. Indeed, the setting offered many inducements to one who, like himself, might entertain such a laudable purpose.

These momentary misgivings were, however, abruptly dispelled, for from far down the path Kirby's voice suddenly broke the silence:

"Good morning, colonel! Is that you? Are you quite ready? Stand by, for I'm coming!"

Moreau instantly turned until he faced the trees on his right. Thus he presented the smallest possible surface to his advancing foe. Although the articles of agreement called for a mutual and simultaneous advance, he was aware that it is easier to fire from a fixed platform, and he consequently deliberately halted, his left shoulder thrown forward and the pistol level with his eye. He could now discern Kirby, who, unmindful of all tactical or strategic advantage, came sauntering toward him, the right hand dangling carelessly at his side. He was whistling, but had Moreau been nearer he would have noted the sinister line running from nose to mouth and the fixity of purpose in the brooding eyes, all of which belied the cheery carol.

Moreau, standing like a rock which disputed the other's progress, waited and watched. Once he made a sudden, violent movement in the hope of drawing Kirby's fire, but the latter, never heeding, continued his seemingly careless advance. On he came, thirty paces; twenty, and still no sign from either man; fifteen, and Moreau's hand whitened at the knuckles and his head came slowly down as he impaled the other on the sights of his pistol. On came Kirby, still whistling, as if on a pleasure stroll, the right hand still dangling carelessly at his side.

The nervous tension was fast growing unbearable. Moreau's nose looked pinched, and the breath whistled through it. On came Kirby—ten paces, and a sudden throb of flame leaped from Moreau's pistol, followed by a whirling wreath of smoke and a reverberating crash. He reeled from the heavy charge. At the same moment Kirby's listless hand swept up, and without breaking step he fired.

The drifting smoke parted in shreds and streamed away. The startled crows had ceased cawing, and off somewhere a bluejay vented to timidly call its mate. Once more the cool serenity had descended upon the dueling oaks, Kirby was still advancing, but Colonel Moreau, giving a little cough, hesitated a moment, then fell prone, a small blue indentation disfiguring the purity of his lofty forehead.

Cameo Kirby looked gravely down upon the body of his late enemy; then as gravely he parted the trees and, with bowed head, slowly threaded his way toward the distant town.

Kirby had not long left the scene of conflict before Tom Randall, coming from an almost diametrically opposite direction, burst into the grove and tripped headlong over the lifeless form of Colonel Moreau. Recovering himself, the boy stared in horrified amazement at what he had never expected

to see. That God should have thus defused the impious seemed impossible. Astonishment quickly gave place to a sense of burning outrage, a bitterness, abhorrence and vindictiveness which immeasurably overrode all previous feelings of treasured autonomy and hatred. Now, Kirby must atone not only for the suicide of John Randall, but for the death of that gentleman's fancied protector and champion.

Swayed by his present emotions, balked of revenge and thirsting for some means of expressing it, young Randall now stooped to an action which dishonored his name, race and country. In cooler moments he would have repudiated an action which forfeited the respect of all decent men. But he was hostage to a tempestuous and violent passion which counted not the means to an end. Single handed he might not hope to hunt down Kirby, but if he could enlist the assistance of the authorities, make every man the gambler's enemy, the latter's capture would be assured.

With difficulty loosening Moreau's fast stiffening fingers from their death grip upon the pistol, young Randall hastily concealed the weapon upon his person and thus by a single movement transformed what had been an honorable and fair encounter into a seemingly deliberate and cold blooded murder. The fact that Moreau had used the late John Randall's weapon, leaving leisurely with bowed head and evidently preoccupied mind. Warned by the rapidly advancing steps of his self constituted judges and executioners, he turned in mild curiosity and awaited their approach.

The farmer and his son—for such was the relationship existing between this contingent of the pursuers—came up hot and panting from their exertions and, meeting Kirby's cool and pleasantly inquiring eyes, became for the moment nonplused and confused.

"Rather a warmish morning for such strenuous exercise, gentlemen," greeted the gambler. "It is obvious that your business is with me. Pray in what manner can I serve you?"

The youth's loutish bearing became the more evident in contrast to that of the elegant and courteous

gambler, and, with hanging lip, he fell back, overawed by the silent but compelling mastery of caste.

His parent, however—a stringy, sprawling, malarial gentleman—was cast in a more determined and heroic mold. "Yuh all be the gambler they call Cameo Kirby," he exclaimed, pointing a threatening finger. "We seen yuh all come from the duelling oaks, an' we all have just come from there. Yuh all have killed an unarmed man, an' we all are goin' to have yuh all up for murder."

"My dear sir," replied Kirby, arranging his cravat, "you all's intentions speak well for you all's respect for justice, but I assure you all there is some mistake. The gentleman I had the good fortune to kill entirely merited his end. Moreover, he was not unarmed, but made an earnest and sincere effort to settle me all. In short, ours was a fair and honorable meeting, and as such matters are not prohibited by the statutes I really fail to see how it concerns you all—comes within the scope of you all's worthy usefulness."

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"The devil it is," replied Kirby. "You are the victim of a mistake, Mr. Farmer, and I'm evidently the victim of an enemy who has concealed my late opponent's weapon. I will not permit your ignorance to swing me from the end of a rope."

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"He come from that a-way," interrupted the informant, pointing in the direction Kirby had taken. "But you all know the road forks farther down."

"Come! We'll separate, and he cannot escape!" cried Tom. "It's our duty to hunt the villain down, to aid the law all we can. Duelling is one thing, but murder such as this deserves only lynch law. We'll show the scoundrel the same quality of mercy he meted out to this poor defenseless gentleman."

"That's right. Short shrift and a long rope!" cried the men.

Piloted by the member who had met Kirby, the small impromptu posse quickly made its way through the underbrush, emerging on the road which the gambler, at a point below the fork, was even then traversing. When the fork of the road was reached Tom and two companions chose the right or southerly branch, while the man who had met Kirby, accompanied by a half grown youth, bore away to the left. Thus by another intervention of the fates young Randall's meeting with the gambler was again postponed. The former and his companions, alarming the countryside en route, reached town without overtaking or even sighting their quarry.

Meanwhile the other members of the posse had fared better—or worse. They had not long left their companions before Kirby was sighted, walking leisurely with bowed head and evidently preoccupied mind. Warned by the rapidly advancing steps of his self constituted judges and executioners, he turned in mild curiosity and awaited their approach.

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heart of New Orleans' old French quarter. The street was not very long, and he did not know to where it led. Owing to the early hour the shutters of the houses were still closed, but one house seemed to be an exception, for his quick, searching eyes noted on his right a half open drawing room window with its gently flapping curtain.

He had dropped into a quick walk in order to gain a much needed breathing spell, but now as the hue and cry of his persistent pursuers became more insistent he again broke into a run. In a few moments they would turn the corner and sight their quarry. Almost at the same instant another chorus of cries came from the far end of the street toward which Kirby was hastening. He incontinently halted, realizing that the enemy, familiar with the neighborhood, had divided its army and sent one contingent around his flank to head him off. He was trapped, for it was impossible to advance or retreat. Louder and louder sounded the cries from front and rear. Another minute and the short street would be choked with the meeting mobs.

Without hesitation nor caring where it would lead, Kirby accepted the desperate and solitary chance that was offered him. Hastily returning to the house with the open window and ascending its steps, he leaped high in air, caught the overhanging balcony, drew himself up, leaped over the elaborately scrolled railing and, pushing aside the gently billowing curtains, stepped quietly into the room.

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prove futile, for mob rule is not influenced by judgment, and he was already a dog with a bad name. They would hang him first and inquire into the merits of the case afterward. If possible prompt and ignominious flight was his only salvation.

True to his class, Kirby's opponent possessed some knowledge of wrestling, but was totally ignorant of even the rudiments of pugilism, and the younger man confined his efforts to frustrating tripping attacks while at the same time striving to free his pinioned right arm. This at length he succeeded in doing. A vicious wrench, a clever feint, a smashing uppercut, and the malarial gentleman went down on his back, while Kirby, waving an airy adieu to the now advancing army of yelling pursuers, took amble to his heels.

But, fleet and long winded runner though he was, capture was not thus to be lightly outfooted. The cry of "Catch the murderer!" is infinitely more potent than that of "Stop thief!" and pursuers were multiplying in his track at an alarming rate, adding at every step fresh runners to their ranks.

On sped Kirby, every variety and class of humanity at his heels. Once or twice his way was barred by some energetic and inquisitive newcomer, but a clever dodge or a well directed blow left him to swell the ever increasing army of impotents in the rear. No fox doubling and redoubling on his tracks while in full view of the pack owned a more keen delight in thus staking acumen and agility against overwhelming odds than did the young gambler. By now the city proper had been gained, and the pursued, dashing around the first opportune corner, became lost to his pursuers.

Kirby found himself in a quiet side street lined with aristocratic, fat little red brick houses whose drawing room balconies were little more than a man's height from the side path. He vaguely realized that he was in the

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"My dear sir," replied Kirby, arranging his cravat, "you all's intentions speak well for you all's respect for justice, but I assure you all there is some mistake. The gentleman I had the good fortune to kill entirely merited his end. Moreover, he was not unarmed, but made an earnest and sincere effort to settle me all. In short, ours was a fair and honorable meeting, and as such matters are not prohibited by the statutes I really fail to see how it concerns you all—comes within the scope of you all's worthy usefulness."

"Them big words and makin' fun of my langwidge don't change the case," said the farmer grimly. "I seen yuh all's victim with my two eyes, an' so did my boy and a lot others. He didn't have no weapon of any kind, an' that we kin prove. Lynchin' is too good for you, Mr. Kirby, an' yuh all know it."

"The devil it is," replied Kirby. "You are the victim of a mistake, Mr. Farmer, and I'm evidently the victim of an enemy who has concealed my late opponent's weapon. I will not permit your ignorance to swing me from the end of a rope."

"Tom, run for help, I'll hold this fellow," cried the farmer. And as the boy ran off the malarial gentleman lunged his wiry arms about Kirby.

A fierce and protracted struggle ensued, Kirby realizing that he was not only fighting for liberty, but life. In

those days lynch law was only too common, and he knew what to expect at the hands of an infuriated, ignorant and unreasoning mob. And in the present instance all explanation would

heart of New Orleans' old French quarter. The street was not very long, and he did not know to where it led. Owing to the early hour the shutters of the houses were still closed, but one house seemed to be an exception, for his quick, searching eyes noted on his right a half open drawing room window with its gently flapping curtain.

He had dropped into a quick walk in order to gain a much needed breathing spell, but now as the hue and cry of his persistent pursuers became more insistent he again broke into a run. In a few moments they would turn the corner and sight their quarry. Almost at the same instant another chorus of cries came from the far end of the street toward which Kirby was hastening. He incontinently halted, realizing that the enemy, familiar with the neighborhood, had divided its army and sent one contingent around his flank to head him off. He was trapped, for it was impossible to advance or retreat. Louder and louder sounded the cries from front and rear. Another minute and the short street would be choked with the meeting mobs.

Without hesitation nor caring where it would lead, Kirby accepted the desperate and solitary chance that was offered him. Hastily returning to the house with the open window and ascending its steps, he leaped high in air, caught the overhanging balcony, drew himself up, leaped over the elaborately scrolled railing and, pushing aside the gently billowing curtains, stepped quietly into the room.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

prove futile, for mob rule is not influenced by judgment, and he was already a dog with a bad name. They would hang him first and inquire into the merits of the case afterward. If possible prompt and ignominious flight was his only salvation.

True to his class, Kirby's opponent possessed some knowledge of wrestling, but was totally ignorant of even the rudiments of pugilism, and the younger man confined his efforts to frustrating tripping attacks while at the same time striving to free his pinioned right arm. This at length he succeeded in doing. A vicious wrench