

# CAMEO KIRBY

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



**CHAPTER XIV.**

**B**unce eventually found Kirby. From the balcony window the fat veteran had witnessed Adele's silent contempt, and he now laid a sympathetic hand upon his partner's shoulder.

"You see how you stand with her, don't you?" he said quietly. "I won't say she ain't a fine enough woman to make any man act the fool about her. But, Gene, you've got to hold up your head and git over it. It's too late for you to start your life again, and you can't drag her into it. Take one good look at yourself, Gene Kirby, then take another at her. But, say, she wouldn't take you if you was an angel stepped right out of the first front floor of heaven. What could you ever be to her? Nothin' but a d—d gambler. I seen the way she treated you."

"That's because she doesn't know what I'm going to do," replied Kirby, striving to convince himself. "Look at that paper."

Bunce examined the deed, then turned indignantly upon the signer thereof.

"I've seen you give some pore young feller his money back after you'd won it, but I never knowed you to do it if the feller slapped you in the face first," he said witheringly. "The girl won't stay long enough in the same room to wipe her shoes on you. Don't that hurt you?"

"It won't hurt so much after this," replied Kirby, indicating the paper.

"When the fool maker made you I reckon he quit work. He knowed he'd reached his high water mark," commented Bunce, with a despairing shrug. "Now, I'll make her speak to you."

Kirby shook his head, his relaxed figure stiffening with sudden resolution.

"No," he said quietly. "You and I'll get out of here. I won't see Miss Randall again."

But the other, giving no heed to the words, quietly left the room, while Kirby remained seated at the table abstractedly toying with the cards, utterly oblivious to surroundings. His steely resolution had already vanished. His grip on the present had relaxed. He felt singularly hopeless, heartsick and utterly alone.

He did not know—nor, knowing, would greatly have cared—that Judge Pleydell's plan was about to be executed. He did not know that Mrs. Davezac, Miss Pleydell and the General were already in the carriage waiting to be conveyed to their neighbor's plantation, waiting for the coming of Adele, who had been inexplicably delayed at the last minute—delayed by Bunce, who was putting forth every persuasive effort, pleading, coaxing, threatening all in one breath, in a desperate attempt to bring her back to the drawing room, to make her grant a farewell interview to his partner.

At length, in the midst of his broodings, a sound from the window attracted his attention, and, listlessly turning, he discerned young Randall, old Pleydell, Aaron and M. Veaudry, all scrutinizing him intently with a look there was no misinterpreting. They considered the ladies safely away, and the time had now come when a judicial murder might be perpetrated.

Before a word had been exchanged Kirby fathomed their purpose, but no hint of cognizance was evinced in his manner. He arose leisurely and with the courtesy of guest to host rather than with any intention of self-defense, alarm or even interest. And for a space and in silence the four men surveyed the one. Then young Randall spoke ominously and, for him, with admirable restraint.

"It's pretty dark outside, Mr. Kirby—too dark to shoot straight. Shall we settle it here? We are going to give you a chance, and you'd better get yourself ready to take it blanked quick unless you prefer to be shot like a rat."

"If you leave it to me," said Kirby mildly. "I prefer not to be shot at all."

"Do you realize that in giving you a fair show we do a common gambler an honor?" returned the boy, struggling hard against his passion. He resented Kirby's serene composure, for against it he was placed at a humiliating disadvantage.

"I am deeply sensible of your kindness to one of my profession," observed the "common gambler," bowing with courteous formality. "You seem to be making quite elaborate preparations, gentlemen, but I think you're putting yourselves to unnecessary trouble. Mr. Randall, you and your sister—"

"Don't you dare mention the name of any lady of my family!" menaced Tom.

"But that is necessary, sir," suavely murmured the other, "because you and your sister, Miss Adele Randall—"

"You wolf!" snarled the boy, and he struck with all his strength.

The alert and pacific M. Veaudry caught the descending arm, and before the outraged and now thoroughly incensed boy, furious at Kirby's deliberate repetition of Miss Randall's name, could wrest himself free and renew the attack Adele herself had entered the room, followed by the successful Bunce. Her presence instantly prohibited further hostilities, and young Randall sullenly turned away, raging against her delayed departure and unexpected intrusion. The self-satisfied and beaming glance cast upon him by the portly veteran Bunce did not improve his temper, although in a measure it afforded an explanation of Adele's presence.

"I have yielded to this gentleman's request," said the girl stonily, waving an ironic and contemptuous hand toward Bunce, while her eyes looked accurately through the top of Kirby's head. "I grant your interview. What is it you wish to say? Kindly be as explicit and terse as possible."

He handed her the slip of paper which before this he had sought to offer.

"I fear your brother may be too excited to read it," he said indifferently.

She eyed it wonderingly, scanning it twice over and yet again before digesting its brief contents. In silence she handed it to her brother, and he, after a long, incredulous stare, exclaimed:

"He gives it back to buy his safety?"

"Read the date," commanded Kirby, addressing the girl.

In the same mechanical manner she obeyed, spelling it out as if it were written in some strange language with which she was but vaguely familiar.

"He wrote that the first day the doctors let him set up to a table after Jack Moreau shot him," sharply explained Bunce, angered at the reception accorded what he considered a sublime act of generosity, forbearance and assiduity.

Slowly Adele raised her eyes from the paper and looked steadily at the "common gambler." "This was in remorse—for my father?" she whispered.

"No." It was said quite simply and emotionlessly, as if the question were too absurd to seriously consider. He would have employed the same tone in refusing the statement that he was a Chinaman.

"That doesn't agree very well with

Colonel Moreau's story," sneered young Randall, loath to credit such an enemy with one worthy motive.

"You bet your bottom dollar it don't," agreed Bunce.

"That will do, Larkin," said Kirby sharply. "There's nothing more to be said. We're through here."

Despite Adele's earnest request to remain and the plea that she had the right to know the meaning of this strange contradiction of evidence, he resolutely turned to leave the room, his partner obediently following.

But once again M. Veaudry, sinking his own interests in those of justice, stepped forward and detained his sometime rival.

"Make him speak, Tom!" he cried, turning to young Randall. "This miniature of your mother we found in Colonel Moreau's pertantean." And he handed the other the red morocco box.

"But—but my father lost it to you!" exclaimed the bewildered boy, turning to Kirby.

"No, not to me, Mr. Randall." Again that same patient, emotionless tone, totally devoid of resentment or even interest.

"If—if we've been in the wrong," tremulously whispered Adele, raising her head proudly, but pleading supplication speaking strongly from her eyes, "you will set us straight, you will be fair?"

For a long moment Kirby hesitated, then finally turned to the now eagerly waiting boy.

"Mr. Randall," he said, with elaborate irony, "the question involved in my conduct is so purely professional that it may be almost impossible to clear it up to the satisfaction of a layman. Mr. Bunce, being one of the brethren, would comprehend me perfectly, but I shall have to point out that in my profession there are separate castes, both high and low, each controlled by its own standards."

"You accuse Colonel Moreau of being a gambler?" said young Randall as the other paused.

"I regretfully admit that he had some claim to the title," replied Kirby, with intentional elegance of manner, "for the group to which the 'colonel' belonged countenances certain practices, such as the intoxication of opponents and the elimination of chance in the fall of the cards, and this, we feel, shows a lack of foresight tending to bring discredit on the entire profession, which might in time drive its followers from their legitimate field of industry. For that reason, when I discovered the late Colonel Moreau in a private stateroom of the Shotwell despoiling a gentleman who was—who was not himself, I took charge of the despoilation of what remained, intending to make restitution in the morning, when the victim should be in better condition."

Young Randall being one who cherished his hatreds and affections and renounced them with difficulty, this new and obviously accurate version of his father's suicide left him in a state of mental fog. Where Adele was only too willing and eager to believe, the boy was loath. To the girl Kirby had once appeared all that woman can think of man, but to her brother he had ever been the personification of evil. Tom had blindly nourished his hatred. Now he felt strangely bewildered, self-distrustful and unclean. His credulity had been shattered with his self respect. He flushed hotly at the thought of how implicitly and on such meager evidence he had believed the specious and totally unscrupulous Moreau, how from such a tissue of

falsehood he had carefully erected his elaborate feud. He had even stooped to the unutterably foul act of swearing a murder upon this man, who, rather than being an enemy, had stood his father's sole friend. To him it was difficult to relegate unto himself a new viewpoint with the "common gambler" as an object for admiration rather than vilification, to disinter and transfer the halo which Moreau had calmly appropriated and taken with him to the grave to this erstwhile master rogue, this arch fiend, titles for which his name of Cameo Kirby had been a synonym.

"You meant to protect my father?" he faltered at length.

"For the honor of the profession," said Kirby. "That's all right, Mr. Randall," he added gently as the boy, utterly crushed and filled with a bitter self hatred, strove to verbally interpret his abject thoughts, to frame some sort of fitting apology. "If you'll lend me a horse to get back to the city we'll call it square. I'm ready, Larkin."

He held out his hand, and young Randall, flushing hotly, grasped it firmly, then turned away and, sinking into a chair, buried his face in his arms.

Adele, placing her hand on her brother's shoulder as if he were a child, raised him gently and escorted him from the room. At the door she turned, looking steadily at Kirby.

"You waited for me this afternoon when there was danger," she said tremulously. "Won't you wait for me now, when there is none?"

(To be continued.)

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**HOT LAKE MAKES SICK PEOPLE WELL**

(Continued from first page.)

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