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THE Ne'er-Do-Well

By
REX BEACH
Author of
"The Spoiler," "The Barrier,"
"The Silver Horde," Etc.

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SYNOPSIS.

Kirk Anthony, son of a rich man, with college friends, gets into a fracas in a New York resort. A detective is hurt. Jefferson Locke insinuates himself into the college men's party.

Locke, aided by Kirk's friend Higgins, who thinks it a joke, drugs Kirk and puts him aboard a ship bound for Colon. Kirk is on the passenger list as Locke.

"Broke" and without baggage, aboard the ship Kirk makes the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Cortlandt.

Cortlandt is in the American diplomatic service and is going to Panama on a mission. In Colon Kirk, as the son of a big railroad man, is taken up by Weeks, American consul.

Kirk's father repudiates him, and Weeks casts him out as an impostor. Kirk meets Allan, a Jamaican negro canal worker out of a job. The two are arrested by Colon police for helping to put out a fire.

Kirk and Allan are treated brutally in a Colon jail by young Alfarez, commandant of police. Allan's release is obtained by the British consul, but Weeks refuses to aid Kirk. Mrs. Cortlandt gets a phone call.

Mrs. Cortlandt obtains Kirk's release by using influence with Colonel Jolson, head of the canal. The Cortlandts are intruding to make Alfarez's father president of Panama.

Kirk's father casts him off finally, and Mrs. Cortlandt obtains for him a position on the Panama railroad under Runnels, master of transportation.

The Cortlandts and Kirk plan a picnic on the island of Taboga, near Panama. Cortlandt is detained and his wife and Kirk are marooned on the island.

Kirk kisses Mrs. Cortlandt and is then ashamed to think he has violated Cortlandt's trust in him. Cortlandt, alarmed by his wife's absence, rescues her and Kirk from the island in the country near Panama. Kirk meets a charming Spanish girl.

The girl tells him her name is "Chiquita." He learns later that that means only "little one." Kirk begins his work. Mrs. Cortlandt has learned who Jefferson Locke is.

Locke (real name Wellar) is a swindler and has disappeared. His description fits Kirk. The latter tries in vain in Panama to learn something of Chiquita and meets Alfarez again.

Alfarez's son, Kirk's foe, is engaged to Gertrude, Garavel's daughter. She is Kirk's "Chiquita." He meets her again at the opera through Mrs. Cortlandt's aid.

Kirk makes love to Chiquita. Edith Cortlandt, infatuated with Kirk, goes riding with him frequently.

She avows her love for him. Their ride and talk are interrupted by her husband. Kirk asks Garavel for his daughter's hand. The banker wishes her to marry Alfarez to advance his own ambitions. Clifford, a man from the States, asks Runnels about Kirk.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Challenge and a Confession.

IT was very trying to be the target of so many glances. Instead of resuming their conversation the entire assemblage of Garavels waited calmly for their caller to begin, and he realized in a panic that he was expected to make conversation. He cast about madly for a topic.

His host helped him to get started, and he did fairly well until one of the Misses Garavel began to translate his remarks to the old lady and the ferocious cousin from Guatemala. As their replies were not rendered into English, he was left stranded. He knew that his whole salvation lay in properly impressing his auditors, so he began again and floundered through a painful monologue.

The night suddenly turned off sweetly hot, perspiration began to trickle down his brow, his collar became a tourniquet, and he cast appealing glances at the silent figure hidden demurely behind the rusty old lady in the black harness. The look of mingled pity and understanding she gave him somewhat revived his fainting spirit, and he determined to stick it out until the family were ready to retire and allow him a word with her alone. But idle hope! Gradually it dawned upon him that they had no such intention.

By now his collar had given up the struggle and lain limply down to rest. The whole experience was hideous.

Working Out Industrial Fair Program.

C. R. Stahlman went to Eugene last week to meet with Superintendent E. J. Moore and Supervisors Miss Goldie Van Bibber, C. H. Aylesworth and A. I. O'Reilly to work out a program for the industrial fair which is to be held in Eugene May 16. This is the date of the final county spelling contest and it is planned to make an industrial exhibit which will demonstrate the other lines of work the children are doing at the same time.

The exhibits will include specimens of manual training work, agriculture, domestic arts, entomological, botanical and Oregon wood collections.

yet he understood quite well that these people were not making sport of him. All this was only a part of their foreign customs. They were gentlefolk, reared to a different code from his—that was all—and since he had elected to come among them he could only suffer and be strong.

What he ever talked about during that evening he never quite remembered. When it came time to leave he expected at least to be allowed a farewell word or two with Gertrude, but instead he was bowed out as ceremoniously as he had been bowed in and, finding himself at last in the open, sighed with relief. He felt like a paroled prisoner, but he thought of the girl's glance of sympathy and was instantly consoled. He crossed slowly to the plaza, pausing a moment for a good night look at the house, then, as he turned, he caught a glimpse of a figure sinking into the shadows of the side street and smiled indulgently. Evidently Allan had been unable to resist the temptation to follow him. But when he had reached his quarters he was surprised to find the boy there ahead of him.

"How did you beat me home?" he inquired.

"I have been waiting h'impatiently ever since you went out. To be sure, I have had one little dream—"

"Didn't you follow me to the Garavels'?"

"Oh, boss! Never would I do such."

Seeing that the negro was honest, Kirk decided that somebody had been spying upon him, but the matter was of so little consequence that he dismissed it from his mind.

Although Runnels had spoken with confidence of the coming shakeup in the railroad organization, it was not without a certain surprise that he awoke one morning to find himself actively in charge of the entire system. He lost no time in sending for Kirk, who took the news of their joint advancement with characteristic equanimity.

"Now, there is nothing cinched yet, understand," the acting superintendent cautioned him. "We're all on probation, but if we make good I think we'll stick."

"I'll do my best to fill your shoes."

"And I have the inside track on Blakeley, in spite of Colonel Jolson, so I'm not alarmed. The break came sooner than I expected, and now that we chaps are in control it's the chance of our lifetimes."

Kirk nodded. "You're entitled to all you get, but I've never quite understood how I managed to forge ahead so fast. I've been mighty lucky."

"You don't really call it luck, do you?" Runnels looked at him curiously.

"I'm not conceited enough to think I'm a downright genius."

"Why, the Cortlandts engineered everything. It was they who arranged your promotion to the office in the first place, and they're behind this last affair. They have stood back of you at every step and, incidentally, back of me and the other boys."

"When you say 'they' you of course mean 'she.'"

"Of course. One has to recognize him, though, as the head of the family. And he really did have a part in it too. At least if he had been against us we never would have won."

"I'd like to show the Cortlandts that we appreciate what they've done, but we can't openly thank her without humiliating him. I'd like to give him something."

"Suppose we give him a quiet little supper some night and tell him frankly how grateful we are. He's the sort to appreciate a thing like that, and it would be a delicate way of thanking his wife too."

"Good! I'll speak to the other fellows, and now the acting master of transportation is going to shake with the new acting superintendent and wish him every success."

Runnels grasped the outstretched hand.

"Say, Anthony," he said, "we're young and we have a start. I have what you lack, and you have what I lack. If we stick together, we'll own a railroad some day. Is it a go?"

"You bet!"

With a warm glow in his breast the new master of transportation plunged into his duties. He really was making a success, it seemed, although it was a bit disappointing to learn that he owed so much of it to Edith Cortlandt. But this last advancement, too, was very timely, for it would surely have its effect upon Andres Garavel.

But his new work brought new troubles and worries. He began to sleep shorter hours; he concentrated with every atom of determination in him; he drove himself with an iron hand. He attacked his task from every angle, and with his fine constitution and unbounded youthful energy he covered an amazing quantity of work. He covered it so well, moreover, that Runnels complimented him.

This stress of labor served one purpose for which he was very grateful: it separated him from Edith Cortlandt and took his mind from that occurrence in the jungle.

Soon after his promotion he received from Andres Garavel a warmly worded note of congratulation, and some few days later an invitation to dine, which he accepted eagerly.

The dinner proved to be another disappointing ordeal, for again he was allowed no opportunity of speaking with Gertrude and had to content himself with feasting his eyes upon her. But, although the family were present en masse, as on the former occasion, they absent to a surprising degree, and he found them truly gracious and delightful.

Later in the evening he found himself alone with Chiquita and the old Spanish lady, and, knowing that the

latter could not understand a word of his tongue, he addressed himself to the girl with some degree of naturalness.

"I was sorry for you the last time, señor," she said, in reply to his half-humorous complaint, "and yet it was funny; you were so frightened."

"It was my first memorial service. I thought I was going to see you alone."

"Oh, that is never allowed."

"Never? How am I going to ask you to marry me?"

Miss Garavel hid her blushing face behind her fan. "Indeed! You seem capable of asking that absurd question under any circumstances."

"I wish you would straighten me out on some of your customs."

She gave him an odd look, smiling timidly.

"As for tonight, do you attribute any meaning to my father's request that you dine with us?"

"Of course. It means I wasn't black balled at the first meeting, I suppose."

She blushed delightfully again.

"Since you are so ignorant of our ways you should inquire at your earliest convenience. I would advise you, perhaps, to learn Spanish."

"Will you teach me? I'll come every evening."

She did not answer, for the old lady began to show curiosity, and a conversation in Spanish ensued which Kirk could not follow. He departed with a feeling of exaltation. Beyond doubt his suit was progressing—slowly, perhaps, but still progressing.

His understanding of Spanish customs received a considerable enlargement on the following day, when he met Ramon Alfarez outside the railroad office. Ramon had evidently waited purposely for him, and now began to voice a protest in the greatest excitement.

"You've insulted me," he cried furiously, "and now you've the inso-

lence to interfere in my affairs." He paused dramatically. "Make it yourself ready to fight on tomorrow."

"What's the use of putting it off? I couldn't make your weight in that time. I'll do it now, if you say."

"No, no! Understand, we shall fight like gentlemen. I shall keep you with any weapon you prefer."

"By Jove!" Kirk exclaimed in amazement. "This is a challenge. You want to fight a duel! Why, this reads like a book!" He began to laugh, at which Ramon became white and calm. "Listen, Kirk went on, 'I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll fight with fire hose again. I suppose you want satisfaction for that ducking.'"

"I prefer to shoot you, señor," the other declared quietly. "Those marriage shall never occur until first I walk upon your dead body. As matter of honor I offer you this opportunity before it is too late. All Panama is speaking of those engagements to Senorita Garavel. Come, then, must I insult you further?"

CHAPTER XIX.

"What About Me?"

KIRK replied dryly, looking the Spaniard over with cold blue eyes. "No! I think you've gone about far enough."

"You refuse!" exclaimed Ramon triumphantly.

"Look here!" said Kirk. "I've had enough of this." He advanced threateningly, and the Spaniard nervously gave way. "I don't fight duels. It's against the law. In my country it's a crime to kill a man in cold blood, and we don't tie a fellow up and beat him when he's helpless and then offer him the honorable satisfaction of either committing murder or being killed. They're not wearing duels this season." His hands clinched involuntarily. "I don't want to hurt you, Alfarez, but I may not be able to help it if you don't keep out of my way."

He left the fiery little Panamanian still scowling and muttering threats and went his way, wondering vaguely how his attentions to Chiquita had become so quickly known. He was informed later in the afternoon.

As he left the office for the day he was handed a note from Mrs. Cortlandt requesting him to call at once, and, summoning a coach, he was driven directly to her house. Unlike the Garavel home, the house which the Cortlandts had leased was set upon the water front, its rear balcony overlook-

ing the sea where it lapped the foundation of the city wall.

Edith kept him waiting a moment before she descended, dressed for her afternoon ride.

"You got my note?"

"Yes, and I came straight from the office."

"I suppose you know what it is about and are wondering how I heard the news."

"What news?"

"Your 'engagement.'"

She laughed with an amusement that did not ring quite true.

"You're the second one to speak about that. I'm not engaged."

"Of course not. Don't think for a moment I believed it. I was calling on some Spanish people this afternoon and heard the report. I admit it was a shock. When I learned the details I knew at once you ought to be told before it developed into something embarrassing. Come into the other room, there is a breeze from the water."

She led him into the parlor, from which the open windows, shielded now by drawn shutters, gave egress to the rear porch with its chairs and hammock.

"Dear, dear! You foolish boy, you're always in trouble, aren't you? You really don't deserve to be helped. Why, you have avoided me for weeks."

"The new arrangement has swamped us with work. I have had no time to go out."

"Indeed! You had time to run after the first pretty Spanish face you saw."

"You mean Miss Garavel?"

"Yes. Didn't you realize what you were doing?"

"I realized what I was trying to do. But I could understand better what you are talking about if I knew just what this difficulty is."

"Why, this silly 'engagement' of yours. Don't pretend to be so stupid."

"Ramon Alfarez heard that same report and very courteously invited me to wait a few minutes while he killed me. It's tremendously flattering to be linked up with Miss Garavel, of course, but I haven't asked her to marry me."

"But you've seen her. You have called at her house."

"Sure! Twice, at the invitation of the old gentleman. All the little Garavels were lined up like mourners."

"And you dined there last night. Is that all you have seen of her?"

"No. I've seen her at Las Savannas. That's why I went hunting so often."

At this confession, which Kirk delivered with sheepish reluctance, Mrs. Cortlandt drew herself up with an expression of anger.

"Then this has been going on for some time!" she cried. "Why, Kirk, you never told me."

"Why should I?"

She flushed at this unconscious brutality, but after a moment ran on bravely: "But why did you let it go so far? Why did you let them commit you?"

"Am I committed?"

Her look was half offended, half incredulous. "Are you trying to be disagreeable, or is it possible you don't know the meaning of those invitations to call and to dine with the family, and all that? Why, they expect you to marry her. It is all settled now, according to the Spanish custom. The whole town is talking about it."

"I hope you're not joking," said Kirk. "Jove! I'm knocked clear off my pins. A tremendous wave of excitement surged over him. "So that's what Alfarez meant. That's what she meant last night when she told me to look up"— He broke off suddenly, for Edith's face had gone chalk white.

"But, Kirk, what about me?" she asked in a strained voice.

There was deathlike silence in the room.

"You can't love her," said the woman. "Why, she's only a child, and she's—Spanish."

They stood motionless, facing each other. At last Kirk said gravely and deliberately:

"Yes, I love her better than anything in the world, and I want to marry her. I could give up my country, my dad—anything for her."

Pressing her gloved fingers to her temples, she turned her head blindly from side to side, whispering as if to herself.

"What will become of me?"

"Don't!" he cried in a panic and cast a hurried look over his shoulders.

"You'll be overheard. Where's Cortlandt?"

"At his club, I suppose. I don't know—I don't care. You've been dishonest with me, Kirk."

"Don't act this way," he ordered roughly. "I'm terribly fond of you, but I never knew—"

"You must have known."

"I knew nothing. I chose not to think. What I saw I forgot. I supposed you merely liked me as I liked you."

"You say you didn't know. Then what about that afternoon in the jungle? Oh, you're not blind. You must have seen a thousand times. Every hour we've been alone together I've told you, and you let me go on believing you cared. I have no pride. I am not ashamed. It's too late for shame now. Why, even my husband knows."

With an exclamation he seized her by the arm. "You don't mean that!" he cried fiercely. But she wrenched herself away.

"Why do you think I made a man of you? Why did I force you up and over the heads of others? Why are you in line for the best position on the railroad? Did you think you had made good by your own efforts?" She laughed harshly. "I took Runnels and Wade and Kimble and the others that you liked and forced them up with you, so you'd have an organization that couldn't be pulled down?"

"Did—did you do all that?"

(Continued next week.)