

THE NE'ER-DO-WELL

A Romance of the Panama Canal
BY
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PROLOGUE.

Panama as the home of the great canal we all know about, and now here's the zone as the scene of a rattling good romance.

It's by Rex Beach, who jumps from Alaska to the tropics to tell about a young American and his friends and foes in the zone. The hero of this tale is the sort of fellow you like to read about—one who has the hard luck to get into all kinds of scrapes and the nerve and courage and wit to get himself out of them. And the heroine—there are two of her. One's an American, and the other's a member of a proud, haughty family of the upper native classes of the canal zone. Both are worth reading about.

Of course the other characters help along the yarn. If you have paid any sort of attention to the story of the digging of the "big ditch" you will recognize some of them.

CHAPTER I.

The Trail Divides.

It was a crisp November night. The artificial brilliance of Broadway was rivalled by a glorious moonlit sky. From the city's canyons came an incessant clanging roar.

In the lobby of one of the playhouses a woman paused to adjust her wraps, and, hearing the cries of the newsboys, petulantly exclaimed:

"I'm absolutely sick of football. That performance during the third act was enough to disgust me."

Her escort smiled. "Oh, you take it too seriously," he said. "Those boys don't mean anything. That was merely youth—irrepressible youth—on a tear."

The doors belched forth the football players and their friends. Out they came, tumbling, pushing, jostling, greeting scowls and smiles with grins of insolent good humor. The twenty athletes dodged in through the revolving doors of a cafe, leaving Broadway rocking with the tumult. All the city was football mad, it seemed, for no sooner had the newcomers entered the restaurant than the diners rose to wave napkins or to cheer. One said to his companions:

"That is Anthony—the big chap. He's Darwin K. Anthony's son. You've heard about the Anthony bill at Albany?"

"Yes, and I saw this fellow play football four years ago. Say! That was a game."

"He's a worthless sort of chap, isn't he?" remarked one of the women, when the squad had disappeared up the stairs.

"Just a rich man's son, that's all. He's twenty-six."

"Didn't I read that he had been sent to jail recently?"

"No doubt. He was given thirty days."

"What—in prison?" questioned another in a shocked voice.

"Only for speeding. It was his third offense, and his father let him take his medicine."

Up in the banquet hall, however, it was evident that Kirk Anthony was more highly esteemed by his mates than by the public at large. He was their hero, in fact, and in a way he deserved it. For three years before his graduation he had been the heart and sinew of the university team, and for the four years following he had coached them, preferring the life of an athletic trainer to the career his father had offered him. And he had done his chosen work well, his team winning the day's game against great odds.

It had been a tremendous spectacle, and when the final whistle blew for the multitude to come roaring down across the field, the cohorts had paid homage to Kirk Anthony, the coach to whom they knew the honor belonged.

Naturally, the newspapers gave the young man's story as well as a history of the game. They told of his estrangement from his father, of the Anthony anti-football bill which the old man in his rage had driven through the legislature and up to the governor himself. Some of them even printed a rehash of the railroad man's famous magazine attack on the modern college.

The fact was that Kirk's associates were of a sort to worry any observant parent. In particular Anthony senior

was prejudiced against a certain Adelbert Higgins, who, of course, was his son's boon companion, admirer, aid and abettor. This young gentleman was a lean, horse-faced senior, whose unbroken solemnity of manner had more than once led strangers to mistake him for a divinity student, though closer acquaintance proved him wholly unamoral and rattle-brained.

It was Higgins this evening who, after the "cripples" had deserted and the supper party had dwindled to perhaps a half dozen, proposed to make a night of it, beginning with a visit to the Austrian Village. The college men selected a table and, shouldering the occupants aside without ceremony, seated themselves and pounded for a waiter.

Padden, the proprietor, came toward them, and, after greeting Anthony and Higgins by a shake of his left hand, ducked his round gray head in acknowledgment of an introduction to the others.

"Glad you dropped in," Mr. Padden assured them. "Anything you boys want and can't get let me know."

When he had gone Higgins averred: "There's a fine man—peaceful, refined—got a lovely character too. Let's be gentlemen while we're in his place."

Ringold rose. "I'm going to dance, fellows," he announced, and his companions followed him, with the exception of the cadaverous Higgins, who maintained that dancing was a pastime for the frivolous and weak.

When they returned to their table they found a stranger seated with him, who rose as Higgins made him known.

"Boys, meet my old friend, Mr. Jefferson Locke of St. Louis. He's all right."

The college men treated this new recruit with a hilarious cordiality, to which he responded with the air of one quite accustomed to such reunions. "I was at the game this afternoon," he explained when the greetings were over, "and recognized you chaps when you came in. I'm a football fan myself. I just got into town this morning, and I'm sailing tomorrow. I couldn't catch a boat today, so I'm having a little blowout on my own account. When I recognized you all I just butted in. New York is a lonesome place for a stranger. Hope you don't mind my joining you."

"Not at all!" he was assured.

When he came to pay the waiter he displayed a roll of yellow backed bills that caused Anthony to caution him.

Locke only laughed. "There's more where this came from. However, that's one reason I'd like to stick around with you fellows. I have an idea I've been followed, and I don't care to be tapped on the head. If you will let me trail along I'll foot the bills. That's a fair proposition."

"Oh, come now," Anthony struck in. "You're more than welcome to stay with us if you like, but we can't let you put up for it."

The stranger, despite his avowedly festive spirit, showed a certain reserve. When the music again struck up he declined to dance, preferring to remain with Higgins in their inconspicuous corner.

"There's a fine fellow," the latter remarked, following his best friend's figure with his eyes, when he and Locke were once more alone. "Sweet nature."

"Anthony? Yes, he looks it."

"He's got just two faults. I always say—he's too modest by far, and he's lazy—won't work."

"He doesn't have to work. His old man has plenty of coin, hasn't he?"

"Yes, and he'll keep it too. Heartless old wretch!"

The dancers came crowding up to the table at the moment, and Ringold suggested loudly: "I'm hungry. Let's eat again."

"I just fixed it with Padden for a private room upstairs," Anthony said. "All the cafes are closed now, and this is the best place in town for chicken creole anyhow."

Accordingly he led the way, and the rest fled out after him. But as they left the ballroom a medium sized man who had recently entered from the street caught a glimpse of them, craned his neck for a better view, then fled along behind.

Anthony played the part of host more lavishly. Mr. Locke, however, insisted that his friends should partake of a kind of drink previously unheard of and with this in view had a confidential chat with the waiter, to whom he unostentatiously handed a five dollar retainer.

The meal was at its noisiest when the man whom Locke had so generously tipped spoke to him quietly. His

companions were too well occupied, however, to notice this byplay even when the waiter continued in a low tone:

"He slipped me a ten spot, so I thought it must be something worth while."

"He—he's alone, you say?"

"Seems to be. What shall I do sir?" Locke took something from his pocket and thrust it into the fellow's hand, while the look in his eyes changed to one of desperation.

"Step outside and wait. Don't let him come up. I'll call you in a minute."

Anthony caught a glimpse of Locke's eyes and inquired in surprise: "What's wrong, old man? Are you sick?"

Locke shook his head. "I told you fellows I'd been followed this evening. Remember? Well, there's a man downstairs who has given the waiter \$10 to let him have his coat and apron so he can come in here. I think it's part of a plan to rob me."

Kirk Anthony rose suddenly, moving as lightly upon his feet as a dancer, and rang for the waiter.

"Give that chap your coat and apron," he ordered when the attendant answered, "and when I ring next send him up. Pass the word to Padden and the others not to notice any little disturbance. I'll answer for results."

The white faced Locke sank back into his chair, while Anthony directed sharply:

"Now, gentlemen, be seated. Here, Locke, your back to the door; your



Seized the Masquerader by the Throat.

face looks like a chalk mine. There! Now don't be so nervous; we'll cure this fellow's ambition as a gin slinger. I'll change names with you for a minute." He pushed the button twice, and a moment later the door opened quietly to admit a medium sized man in white coat and apron.

The man allowed his eyes to shift uncertainly from one to another as if in doubt as to which was his quarry. Anthony did not dream that it was his own resemblance to the Missourian that led to this confusion; but, in fact, while he and Locke were totally unlike when closely compared, they were of a similar size and coloring, and the same general description would have fitted both.

Having allowed the intruder a moment in which to take in the room, Kirk leaned back in his chair and nodded for him to approach.

"Are you Mr. Locke, sir?" inquired the new waiter.

"Yes," said Kirk.

"Telephone message for you, Mr. Locke," the waiter muttered. "They're holding the wire outside. I'll show you the booth."

"Oh, will you?" Kirk Anthony's hands suddenly shot out and seized the masquerader by the throat. The man uttered a startled gasp, but simultaneously the iron grip of Marty Ringold fell upon his arms and doubled them behind him. The rest of the party were on their feet instantly, watching the struggle and crowding forward with angry exclamations.

"All the way from St. Louis for a telephone call, eh?" Anthony sank his thumbs into the stranger's throat; then, as the man's face grew black and his contortions diminished, added, "We're going to make a good waiter out of you."

Jefferson Locke broke in excitedly: "Choke him good! Choke him! That's right. Put him out for keeps. For God's sake, don't let him go!"

But it was not Kirk's idea to strangle his victim beyond a certain point. He relaxed his grip after a moment and, nodding to Ringold to do likewise, took the fellow's wrists himself, then swung him about until he faced the others. The man's lungs filled with fresh air, he began to struggle once more, and when his voice had returned he gasped:

"I'll get you for this. You'll do a trick!" He mumbled a name that did not sound at all like Jefferson Locke, whereupon the Missourian made a rush at him that required the full strength of Anthony's free hand to thwart.

"Let me go," the stranger gasped. "I'll take you all in. I'm an officer."

"It's a lie!" shouted Locke. "He's a thief."

"I tell you I'm—an officer. I arrest this!"

The words were cut off abruptly by a loud exclamation from Higgins and a crash of glass. Kirk Anthony's face was drenched, his eyes were filled with a stinging liquid; he felt his prisoner sink limply, back into his arms and beheld Higgins struggling in the grasp of big Marty Ringold, the foil covered neck of a wine bottle in his fingers.

The foolish fellow had been hovering uncertainly round the edges of the crowd, longing to help his friends and crazily anxious to win glory by some deed of valor.

"I've got him!" he cried joyously. "He's out!"

"Higgins!" Anthony exclaimed sharply. "What the devil!" Then the dead weight in his arms sobered him like a deluge of ice water.

"You've done it this time," he muttered.

"Good God!" Locke cried. "Let's get away! He's hurt!"

"Here, you!" Anthony shot a command at the speaker that checked him half way across the room. "Ringold, take the door and don't let anybody in or out. We're in bad now. I want Padden!" He stepped to the door and signaled a passing waiter. A moment later the proprietor knocked and Ringold admitted him.

"What the—" Padden started at sight of the motionless figure on the floor and, kneeling beside it, made a quick examination, while Anthony explained the circumstances leading up to the assault.

"Thief, eh? I see."

"Is he badly hurt?" queried Locke, bending a pale face upon them.

"Eh! I guess he's due for the hospital," the owner of the Austrian Village announced. "He had his nerve, trying to turn a trick in my place. I thought I knew all the dips, but he's a stranger." With nimble fingers he ran through the fellow's pockets, then continued:

"I'm glad you got him, but you'd better get together and rehearse before the police"—He stopped abruptly once more, then looked up curiously.

"What is it?" questioned the man from Missouri.

Padden pointed silently to the lapel of the fellow's vest, which he had turned back. A nicked badge was pinned upon it. "He's no thief; he's a detective—a plain clothes man!"

The crowd looked nonplused, with the exception of Jefferson Locke, who became calmer than at any time since the waiter had first whispered into his ear.

"We didn't know who he was," he began hurriedly. "You must square it for us, Padden. I don't care what it costs." He extended a bulky roll of banknotes toward the gray haired man. "These boys can't stand this sort of thing and neither can I. I've got to sail at 10 o'clock this morning."

"Looks to me like you've croaked him," said the proprietor, ignoring the proffered money.

"It's worth \$1,000 to me not to miss my boat."

"Wait a minute," Padden emptied the unconscious man's pockets, among other things of some telegrams and a legally folded paper. The latter he opened and scanned swiftly, then turned his little eyes upon Locke without a word, whereupon that gentleman, with equal silence, took from his inside pocket a wallet and selected a bill, the denomination of which he displayed to the proprietor before folding it inside the bundle he held.

"Here! It may cost you something."

CHAPTER II.

A Gap.

PADDEN nodded and accepted the money, saying:

"Oh, I guess I can fix it. I know the right doctor. But you'll have to keep your traps closed, understand?"

"Will he die?" asked Ringold fearfully, his back still against the door.

"Not a chance. But if he does he'll never know who bit him. You see, we picked him up in the alley and brought him in." Padden winked meaningly. "It happens right along in this part of town."

"You chaps have done me a big favor tonight," said Locke a little later, when he and his companions were safely out of the Austrian Village. "And I won't forget it either. Now, let's finish the evening the way we began it."

Anderson, Rankin and Burroughs, to conceal their nervousness, pleaded bodily fatigue, while Anthony also declared that he had enjoyed himself sufficiently for one night and intended to go home and to bed. "That episode rather got on my nerves," he acknowledged.

"Mine too," assented Locke. "That's why you mustn't leave me. I just won't let you. Remember, you agreed to see me off."

"S'right, fellows," Higgins joined in. "We agreed to put him aboard and we must do it. Don't break up the party, Kirk."

"I don't want to go home," Ringold muttered.

"It's a breach of hospitality to go home," Higgins insisted. "Besides, after my bloody encounter with that limb of the law I need a stimulant. You must look after me."

Numbed as they were by the excesses of the evening, it did not take the young men long to lose all clear and vivid remembrance of this recent experience, for the time had come when nature was offering her last resistance, and their brains were badly awl-ripped. Of all the four, Jefferson Locke was the only one who retained his wits to the fullest—a circumstance that would have proved him the owner of a remarkably steady head had it not been for the fact that he had cur-

(Continued on page 7, Col. 1.)

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