

THE Ne'er-Do-Well

By REX BEACH Author of 'The Spoilers,' '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.

[Continued from last week.]

It was too much for Kirk, and he deferred his trip over the "line," spending his time instead at the Wayfarers' club. In his daylight hours he listened to Weeks' unending dissertations upon the riches of the tropics. At night he played poker with such uniform bad luck that his opponents developed for him an increasing affection.

But all things have an end, and Friday morning broke clear and hot.

"Well, I'll be blanked!" he ejaculated. "This is a joke!"

Weeks was beginning to pant. "A joke, hey? I suppose it was a joke to impose on me?"

"Don't you believe I'm Kirk Anthony?"

"No, I do not. I just discovered today that your name is Jefferson Locke, Stein told me."

Anthony laughed lightly. "Oh, laugh if you want to. You're a smooth article, but you happened to select the wrong millionaire for a father this time, and I'm going to give you a taste of our Spizgoty jails."

"You can't arrest me. You offered to take me in."

"You can't get out of it that way," cried Weeks at the top of his little voice. "I've fed you for a week. I put you up at my club. That very suit of clothes you have on is mine."

"Well, don't burst a seam over the matter. My governor doesn't know the facts. I'll cable him myself this time."

"And live off me for another week, I suppose? Not if I know it! He says he has no son. Isn't that enough?"

"He doesn't understand. Will you lend me enough money to cable again?"

"More money? NO," fairly screamed the other. "You get out of my house, Mr. Kirk Anthony, and don't you show yourself around here again. I'll keep the rest of your wardrobe."

To the indignant amazement of Mr. Weeks, Kirk burst into a genuine laugh, saying:

"All right, landlord, keep my baggage. I believe that's the custom, but—oh, gee! This is funny." He was still laughing when he reached the public square, for at last he had begun to see the full humor of Adelbert Higgins' joke.

Facing for the first time in his life an instant and absolute need of money, Kirk found himself singularly lacking in resource, and a period of sober contemplation brought him no helpful thought. Perhaps, after all, he decided, his best course would be to seek relief from the Cortlandts. Accordingly he strolled into the offices of the steamship company near by and asked leave to telephone. But on calling up the Hotel Tivoli in Panama city he was told that his friends were out, nor could he learn the probable hour of their return.

It was growing dark. From farther down the water front the lights of the Wayfarers' club shone invitingly, and Kirk decided to appeal there for assistance. But as he neared the place he underwent a sudden change of heart. Slowly mounting the stairs ahead of him like a trained hippopotamus was the colossal, panting figure of the American consul, at sight of

which Kirk's pride rose up in arms and forbade him to follow.

A band was playing in the plaza when he came back—a very good band, too—and, finding a bench, he allowed his mind the relief of idly listening to the music. The square was filling with Spanish people, who soon caught and held his attention, for every imaginable variety of mongrel breed looked out from the loitering crowd. But no matter what the racial blend, black was the fundamental tone.

Round and round the people walked to the strains of their national music.



"You get out of my house!"

among them dozens upon dozens of the ever present little black and tan policemen, who constitute the republic's standing army.

As the evening drew on Kirk became conscious of an unwanted sensation. He began to wonder whether a fast twenty-four hours would seriously weaken a man, and, rather than make the experiment, he again called up the Tivoli, rejoicing anew in the fact that there was no toll on isthmian messages. But again he was disappointed. This time he was told that the Cortlandts were doubtless spending the night out of town with friends.

CHAPTER VI. The Reward of Merit.

SOON after Kirk's second return to the park the concert ended, the crowd melted away, and he found himself occupying a bench with a negro of about the same age as himself. For perhaps an hour the two sat there hearkening to the dying noises of the city; then Kirk, unable to endure the monotony longer, turned sharply on his companion and said:

"Why don't you go home?"

"Oh, boss, I got no home!"

Kirk reflected that he had found not only the right place, but also fitting company for his vigil.

"What does a person do in that case?" he asked.

"Oh, he goes to work, sar."

"For the night, I mean. Are you going to stay here until morning?"

"Yes, sar, if the policeman will h'admit of it."

The fellow's dialect was so strange that Kirk inquired, "Where did you come from?"

"Jamaica, sar. I was born on the north coast of the h'island, sar."

"Did you just arrive here?"

"Oh, Lard, no! I've been a liver here for two year. Sometimes I labor on the docks, again in the h'office. Last week lose I my position, and today my room h'also. Landladies is bad females, sar, very common."

"Well, it seems we're in the same boat this beautiful evening. I have no place to sleep, either."

"Oh, chot me true, mon."

"I am chatting you true. I'm an outcast of fortune like yourself."

"Such talk! You make I laugh this house. Praise God, you h'appear like a gentleman."

"I trust this little experience will not permanently affect my social standing. By the way, what is your name?"

"H'Allan."

"No, sar—h'Allan."

"Is that your first or last name?"

"Both, sar—h'Allan h'Allan."

"Mr. Allan Allan, you're unusually dark for a Scotchman," said Kirk gravely. "Now, speaking as one gentleman to another, do you happen to know where we can get a hand-out?"

"And-out?" inquired the puzzled negro.

"Yes: a lunch. Can't you lead me to a banana vine or a breadfruit bakery? I'm starving. I must get something into my stomach—it's as flat as a wet envelope."

The Jamaican rose, saying: "Step this way, please. I know the place where a very good female is. Perhaps she will make us a present."

"How far is it?"

"Oh, not too far," Allan replied optimistically, and Kirk hopefully followed him.

But at the opposite side of the square they were halted by a sudden commotion which drove all thoughts of food out of their minds. From a building across the street issued a bugle call, upon which an indescribable confusion broke forth. Men began running to

and fro; a voice in authority shouted orders, each of which was the signal for another bugle call. Through the wide open doors the Panamanians could be heard scurrying around a horse cart, apparently in search of clothes.

"Oh, look, boss!" Allan cried quickly. "There must be a 'flagration.'"

"It's a Spizgoty hose company, as I live. Come on!"

Already a glare could be seen above the crowded portion of the city, and the two set off in that direction at a run, leaving the bugle sounding in the rear and the callant firemen still wrestling with their uniforms. They had nearly reached the fire when around a corner back of them, with frightful speed and clangor, came a modern automobile fire truck, clinking to which was a swarm of little brown men in red shirts and helmets. Without a pause the Yankee machine whizzed on up the street, its gong clanging, its occupants holding on for dear life, the peaceful inhabitants of Colon fleeing from its path.

Kirk and his guide fell in behind and jogged to the scene of the conflagration.

A three storied building was already half gutted. Out of its windows roared long, fiery tongues. The structure snapped and rattled a chorus to theullen monotone of destruction. The street was littered with the household belongings of the neighborhood. On all sides was a bedlam which the arrival of the firemen only augmented. The fire captains shouted orders to the buglers, the buglers blew feebly upon their horns, the companies deployed in obedience to the buglers. Then everybody waited for further directions.

Again the trumpet sounded, whereupon each fireman began to interfere with his neighbor. A series of quarrels arose as couplings were made or broken. Then, after an interminable delay, water began to flow as if by a miracle; but, except in rare instances, it failed to reach the flames. A ladder ruck, drawn by another excited company, now rumbled upon the scene, its arrival adding to the general disorder. Meanwhile the steady trade wind fanned the blaze to ever growing proportions.

"Why the devil don't they get closer?" Kirk inquired of his Jamaican companion.

"Oh, Lard, my God, it is too 'ot, sar, greatly too 'ot! It would take a stout cart to do such a thing."

"Nonsense! They'll never put it out this way. Hey!" Kirk attracted the attention of a nearby nozzlemann.

"Walk up to it. It won't bite you." But the valiant fire fighter held stubbornly to his post, while the stream he directed continued to describe a graceful curve and spatter upon the sidewalk in front of the burning building.

"You're spolling that old woman's bed," Anthony warned him, at which a policeman with drawn club forced him back as if resentful of criticism.

For perhaps ten minutes there was no further change in the situation. Then a great shout arose as it was seen that the roof of an adjoining building had burst into flame. At this the fanfare of trumpets sounded again. Firemen rushed down the street, dragging a line of hose and drenching the onlookers. But, despite their hurry, they halted too soon, and their stream just failed to reach the blazing roof. By now the heat had grown really intense, and the more hardy heroes in the vanguard retreated to less trying positions. The voice of the crowd had arisen to a roar rivaling that of the tanks.

Kirk pointed to the nearest fireman. "If he'd get up under that wall he could save the roof and be out of the heat. I can't stand this. Let's give him a hand, Allan."

"Very well, sar."

"Here! Help me get a kink in this hose. There! Now you hold it until you feel me pull." Kirk forced his way out through the crowd to find the fireman holding the nozzle, from which a feeble stream was dribbling, and mechanically directing it at the fire.

Kirk laid hold of the canvas and, with a heave, dragged it along with its rightful guardian ten feet forward. But there had been no bugle blown in order for this, and the uniformed man pulled backward with all his might, chattering at Kirk in Spanish.

"Well, then, let go." Anthony shook the Panamanian loose, then ran forward across the street until he brought up at the end of the slack and felt the hose behind him writhe and swell as Allan released his hold. The next instant the negro was at his side, and the two found themselves half blotted by the heat that rolled out upon them. But the newly ignited roof was within range, and the stream they played upon it made the shingles fly.

The fireman they had despoiled began to drag at the hose from a safe distance, but when Kirk made as if to turn the nozzle upon him he scamped away amid the jeers of the crowd. A few moments later the American felt a hand upon his arm and saw an angry policeman who was evidently ordering him back. Behind him stood the excited nozzlemann with two companions.

"He says you should return the 'ose where you found it," Allan translated. "Leave us alone," Kirk replied. "You fellows help the others. We'll attend to this." More rapid words and gesticulations followed, in the midst of which a dapper young man in a uniform somewhat more impressive than the others dashed up, lunging himself upon Anthony and endeavoring to wrench the hose from his hands. Meanwhile he uttered epithets in broken English which the other had no difficulty in understanding. Kirk promptly turned the nozzle upon him, and the full force of Colon's water pressure struck him squarely in the stomach, doubling him up like the kick of a mule. Down the newcomer went,

then half rolled, half slid across the street as the stream continued to play upon him.

"I guess they'll keep away now," laughed Kirk, as he turned back to his self appointed task.

But an instant later a half dozen policemen advanced in a businesslike manner, and their leader announced, "Come, you are under arrest."

"Pinched—what for? We're doing a lot of good here."

"Come, queseck!"

"Oh, Lard, my God!" Allan mumbled. "I shall die and kill myself!"

"They won't do anything to us," Kirk assured him. "I've been pinched lots of times. We'll have to quit, though, and that's a pity. It was just getting good."

He surrendered the hose to a fireman, who promptly retreated with it to a discreet position, then followed his captors, who were now buzzing like bees.

"Don't get excited," he said to Allan, noting his frightened look. "They'll turn us loose all right."

But a moment after they were clear of the town he was surprised to see that the negro's captors had snapped "come alongs" upon him in spite of his repeated promises to go quietly. These handcuffs, Kirk saw, were of the type used upon desperate criminals, consisting of chains fitted with handles so contrived that a mere twist of the officer's hand would cut the prisoner's flesh to the bone. The men on each side of the Jamaican twisted stoutly, forcing the black boy to cry out in pain. He hung back, protesting: "All right, sar, I'll come. I'll come."

But again they tightened their instruments of torture and their victim began to struggle. At this an evil faced man in blue struck him brutally upon the head with his club, then upon the shoulders, as if to silence his groans. The boy flung up his manacled hands to shield himself, and the light from a

street lamp showed blood flowing where the chains had cut. The whole proceeding was so unprovoked, so sickening in its cruelty, that Kirk flew into a fury and, disregarding his own captors, leaped forward before the policeman could strike a third time. He swung his fist and the man with the club hurtled across the street as if shot from a bow, then lay still in the gutter. With another blow he felled one of the handcuff men, but at the same time other hands grasped at him and he was forced to lay about vigorously on all sides.

They rushed him with the ferocity of mad dogs, and he knocked them spinning, one after another. A whistle blew shrilly, other uniforms came running, more whistles piped and almost before he realized it he found himself in the center of a pack of lean faced brown men who were struggling to pull him down and striking at him with their clubs. With a sudden wild thrill he realized that this was no ordinary street fight; this was deadly; he must beat off these fellows or be killed. But, as fast as he cleared them away, others appeared as if by magic, until a dozen or more were swarming upon him like hungry ants. Time and again they dragged him off his feet, only to have him shake them loose. But he was felled at last, and a moment later, with head reeling and wits flickering, he was dragged to his knees by handcuffs like those on Allan's wrists. The pain as the chains bit into his flesh brought him to his feet despite the blows and kicks that were rained upon him, crying hoarsely: "Let me go, confound you! Let me go!"

But a wrench at the gyves took the fight out of him, for he felt that the bones in his wrists must surely be crushed. One side of his head was strangely big and numb. A warm stream trickled down his cheek, but he had no time to think of his condition for his assailants fell upon him with fresh fury and he reeled about, striving to shield himself. Every movement, however, was construed as resistance, and his punishment continued, until at last he must have fainted from pain or had his wits scattered by a blow on the head, for when he recovered consciousness he found himself in a filthy, ill lighted room, flung upon a wooden platform that ran along

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