

The Ne'er-Do-Well.

[Continued from page 6, Col. 4.]

Impious to unite two oceans which the Creator of the world had separated.

As Kirk dropped asleep that night after the luxuries of a bath, clean clothes and a meal on white linen and china, he reflected contentedly that after all things have a way of coming right in this world for those who accept them cheerfully as they come.

On the following morning Kirk dispatched a long letter to his father, explaining as well as he could, how he came to be in Panama and giving a detailed account of the events that had befallen him since his arrival. Although he took this means of relieving his father's anxiety, he was far from resigning himself to a further delay of his return.

Edith Cortlandt was a woman very sure of herself in most things. A situation that might have proved embarrassing to one less tactful she accepted quite as a matter of course, rather enjoying the exercise of her influence and never doubting her power to keep the friendship on any footing she chose.

Once in a while Cortlandt went with them, but he was usually uncommunicative, and they scarcely felt his presence. When he did talk he talked easily and well.

Several days passed thus, during which Anthony fully recovered from his experience at Colon. Then a ship arrived from New York, but before he had summoned courage to ask his friends for a loan he received a letter forwarded from Colon by the American consul, a perusal of which not only dumfounded him, but entirely altered his plans.

It was typewritten on plain stationery; there was neither heading nor signature, yet he knew quite well from whom it came. It read as follows:

Don't cable again or the stupidity of the police may fall to protect you. The others got away safely, and you would be mad to return alone. I can't and won't help you now. This time you went too far. You have made your bed, now lie in it. I don't believe in miracles, but if you can straighten up and make a man of yourself I'll help you face this trouble, otherwise don't call on me for anything. I'm through.

Kirk reread this amazing epistle several times before its full significance struck him; then, when he realized what it meant, he felt himself break into a sweat of apprehension. That plain clothes man had died! The police were looking for him. There could be no other explanation, else why had Higgins and the rest fled the country? Perhaps he was already indicted. Kirk saw himself accused of manslaughter, arrested and tried. What could he do if his father refused to help? Evidently the governor believed him guilty. In that case the young man knew that explanations would be futile. Even the letter he had sent would do no good. When Darwin K. Anthony said he was through he was through.

Finding a secluded corner of the veranda, he sat down to think this matter out, but the more he reflected on it the more serious it appeared. Of one thing he became quickly convinced: New York at present was no place for him. He rose quickly and entered the hotel, where he bought all the latest New York papers and found an account of Mr. Padden's efforts to disprove his connection with an assault upon the person of a detective named Williams, who had come from St. Louis. But nowhere was there a word about the present condition of the plain clothes man, nor the slightest hint toward explaining the conduct of the mysterious Jefferson Locke, for whom he had been searching. Who the devil was Locke, anyhow? The article did not even state the charge upon which he was to be arrested. In another paper Kirk found something that relieved his mind a bit. Evidently Williams had not died prior to the time of going to press, although he was reported in a critical condition.

One thing was clear, at least. He could stay here no longer as the Cortlandts' guest—he had already incurred an obligation which he would have difficulty in discharging. Conquering his sense of humiliation as best he could, he called up the Cortlandts' suit.

Edith answered saying that her husband was out. Then, in response to his request, she came down herself.

"What has gone wrong? Why this face of tragedy?" she inquired as she seated herself beside him.

"I've received my declaration of independence. I've heard from my dad." He told her everything without reserve, then showed her the letter and the newspapers in his hand. She scrutinized them with a quiet seriousness that seemed to make his trouble her own. Turning her bright eyes upon him, she inquired, "How does it feel to be disinherited?"

"Blamed uncomfortable! I must tell Mr. Cortlandt at once." "Let me," she offered, quickly. "I would not show any one that letter, if I were you, nor advertise the fact that you are in danger of arrest. It will be quite enough if I tell him that you have quarrelled with your father—he is a peculiar man."

Kirk signified his agreement. "Now what do you intend doing?" "I'm going to work."

"Good! Good!" She clapped her hands gleefully. "Oh, I don't want to," he protested, "but the old gentleman thinks I'm no good, and I'd like to show him he's wrong. After I've done that, I intend to loaf again—yes, and I'll know how to loaf by that time. Of course, I'll have to pay my debts too. I'm going to hunt a job this afternoon."

"What sort?" "Something with big pay and no responsibility."

"Those positions are taken—by the army," she laughed. "What can you do?"

"I can take an automobile apart."

"And put it together again?" "Oh, no! I can sail a boat; I shoot pretty well; I waltz nicely; I row, swim and box indifferently; and I play an atrocious hand at poker. Am I hopeless?"

"Dear, no! Experience is a good thing, of course, and ability is even better, but neither is absolutely necessary in government work, if you have influence. I am trying to think of the niche into which you would best fit."

"When a fellow hasn't any of those qualifications, then what? Take me, for instance."

"You have at least one. Influence." He shook his head. "My father wouldn't help."

"We'll have no difficulty in finding you a position."

"Jove! That's good news. I had an idea that I'd be going from door to door."

He shook her hand warmly, that being the natural outlet for his gratitude, and she smiled at him. "I wonder where I'd better start in," he said.

"There's not the slightest choice. All paths lead up the mountain, and if you go far enough you will reach the top. It would be quite easy if you knew something about the railroad business, for instance."

"Oh, I do. I've had that drilled into me ever since I was a child. I grew up with it—was soaked in it. My father made me learn telegraphy before he gave me a motorboat."

"Why in the world didn't you say so?"

"Well, I have forgotten most of it," he confessed. "I had a railroad of my own, too, when I was twelve years old. I was president."

"Unfortunately, the P. R. R. has a president, so we can't start you in where you left off."

"He might need an assistant."

Mrs. Cortlandt laughed lightly. "While we are finding that out," she said, "I think you had better go over the line in daylight and really see what this work is like. That glimpse you had at Gatun is only a small part. Now, will you trust me to manage this for you, Mr. Anthony?"

"I should say I would."

CHAPTER IX.

The Truth About Mrs. Cortlandt.

EDITH CORTLANDT was not the sort to permit delay. At lunch she introduced Kirk to the master of transportation of the Panama railroad, saying:

"Mr. Runnels has offered to take you out through the cut this afternoon and explain the work to you."

Runnels was a straight, well set up, serious young man. Anthony was drawn to him instantly, for there was no affectation about him.

"She's wonderful," he remarked a moment later, as he and Kirk descended the hotel steps together. "She told Colonel Jolson he'd just have to find you a position, and I have been delegated to show you about."

"The Cortlandts seem to have considerable influence for outsiders. I thought I'd have to begin at the bottom."

Runnels glanced at his companion quickly.

"Outsiders! You don't call them outsiders? She knows everybody and everything in this country. She's the whole diplomatic service. Take the Colombian trouble, for instance."

"What trouble?"

"When Panama seceded, she manipulated that, or at least Steve Cortlandt did under her direction. It was one of the cleverest exploits on record. Colombia wouldn't let us build the canal, so Panama seceded. War was declared, but the United States interfered in time to prevent bloodshed. By the time the excitement had died out we had begun digging. She knows Central America like the palm of her hand. When she says Kirk Anthony wants a position, we hirelings jump about and see that he gets it. Oh, you'll have any job you want."

The two passed through the railroad gates and took their places in the little car. When they were under way Runnels went on: "I am supposed to show you this end of the work and tell you what it all means. The ditch will be about fifty miles long, and, roughly speaking, the work is in three parts—the dredging and harbor building at sea level on each end of the canal, the lock work and the excavations on the upper levels. That dam you saw building at Gatun will form a lake about thirty miles long—quite a flashpond, eh? When a westbound ship arrives, for instance, it will be raised through the Gatun locks, three of them and then sail along eighty-five feet above the ocean, across the lake and into a channel dug right through the

hills until it reaches the locks at Pedro Miguel. Then it will be lowered to a smaller lake five miles long, then down again to the level of the Pacific. An eastbound ship will reverse the process. Get the idea?"

"Sure. It sounds easy."

"You will start in with the P. R. R., Mr. Anthony, under my despotic sway."

"I know a little about railroading."

"So much the better. There's a big railroad man by your name in the states. Are you related?"

"I believe so," Kirk answered, quietly. "Go ahead with the lesson."

"The canal zone is a strip of land ten miles wide running across the Isthmus—really an American colony, you know, for we govern it, police it and all that. As for the work itself, we'll get the two ends of the canal are dredging night and day to complete their part, the lock buildings are laying concrete like mad to get their share done first, the chain in the big cut are boring through the hills like moles and breaking steam shovel records every week, while we railroad men take care of the whole shooting match. Of course, there are other departments—sanitary, engineering, commissary, and so forth—all doing their share, but that is the general scheme. Everybody is trying to break records. Lord! It's fierce."

"Why didn't you quit?" suggested Anthony.

"Quit? What for? Good Lord! We like it. Here we are at Pedro Miguel, by the way. We'll be into the cut shortly."

To his left Anthony beheld another scene somewhat similar to the one at Gatun. Other movable steel cranes with huge wide flung arms, rose out of another chasm in which were extensive concrete workings. From a distance the towers resembled parts of a half constructed cantilever bridge of tremendous height. Another army was toiling at the bottom of the pit, more cars shunted back and forth, more rock crushers rumbled; but, before Kirk's eye had photographed more than a small part, the motor car had sped past and was rolling out upon a bridge spanning the canal itself. To the northward appeared an opening cut through the hills and Runnels said, simply:

"Celebra!"

A moment later he announced: "We leave the P. R. R. tracks here and switch in on the I. C. C. Now you'll begin to see something."

Down into the cut the little car went, and at last Anthony saw the active pulsating heart of this stupendous undertaking. The low range was severed by a gorge blasted out by human hands. It was a mountain valley in the making. High up on its sides were dirt and rock trains, dozens of compressed air drills, their spars resembling the masts of a fleet of catboats at anchor—behind these grimy, powerful steam shovels which rooted and grunted quite like iron hogs. Along the tracks at various levels flowed a constant current of traffic; long lines of empty cars crept past the shovels, then, filled to overflowing, sped away northward up the valley, to return again and again. Nowhere was there any idleness, nowhere a cold machine or a man at rest. On every hand was smoke and steam and sweat. The drills chugged steadily, the hungry iron hogs gouged out the trails the drills had loosened, the trains rolled past at intervals of a moment or so. Lines of electric wire, carried upon low wooden "shears," paralleled the tracks, bearing the white hot sparks that rent the mountain. At every switch a negro fireman, crouched beneath a slanting sheet of corrugated iron, seeking shelter alike from flying fragments and the blazing sun. From beneath the drills came occasional subterranean explosions; then geyzers of muddy water rose in the air. Under the snouts of the steam shovels "dobe" shots went off as bowlders were riven into smaller fragments. Now and then an excited tooting of whistles gave warning of a bigger blast as the flagmen checked the flow of traffic, indicating with arms upraised that the ground was "coming up." Thereupon a brief lull occurred; men hid themselves, the work held its breath, as it were. But while the detonations still echoed and before the flying missiles had ceased to shower the human ants were mulling at their hills once more, the wheels were turning again, the jaws of the iron hogs were clanking.

[Continued next week.]

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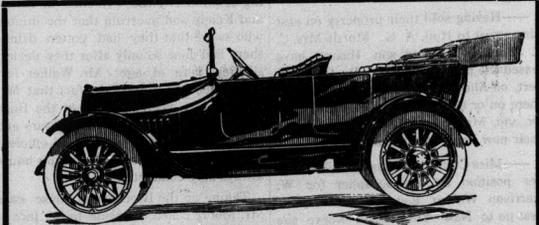
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