

The Ne'er-Do-Well.

(Continued from page 6, Col. 4.)

of her breath. At any rate, he lost his head and knew nothing save that she was a woman and he a man. As for her, she offered no resistance, made no sign beyond a startled sigh as their lips came together.

But, impulsive as his action had been, it was no more sudden than his recoil. He released her and stepped back, crying:

"Oh, my God! I—I didn't mean that. Forgive me. Please." She said nothing, and he stammered desperately again: "You'll hate me now, of course, but I don't know what ails me. I forgot myself—you—everything. It was unpardonable, and I ought to be shot." He started off down the blind street, his whole body cold with apprehension and self disgust.

"Do you intend to leave me here in the middle of this?"

"No, no! Of course not. I'm rattled, that's all. I've just got a cowardly desire to flee and butt my head against the nearest wall. That's what I ought to do. I don't know what possessed me. I don't know what you'll think of me."

"We won't speak of it now. Try to compose yourself and find our lodging place."

"Why, yes, of course. I'll see that you're fixed up comfortably, and then I'll get out."

"Oh, you mustn't leave me!" she cried in a panic. "I couldn't stay in that awful place alone." She drew a little nearer to him, as if demanding his protection. A wave of tenderness swept over him. She was just a girl, after all, he reflected.

"I—I won't leave you. I'll stay near you," he stammered.

"I won't believe that you could have taken me for the kind of woman who—"

"No, no!" he cried in an anguish of self reproach. "I was a fool!"

"No," she said, "I don't—I couldn't bear to think that. Perhaps I was partly to blame. But I didn't think I ought to have known that no man can really be trusted. But I thought our friendship was so beautiful, and now you've spoiled it."

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Kirk. "Say you'll forgive me some time."

But instead of answering him directly she proceeded in the same strain, probing his wounded self respect to the quick, making his offense seem blacker every moment.

Although he assured her over and over that he had simply followed the irresponsible, unaccountable impulse of a moment—that he had regarded her only as the best of friends and respected her more than he could say—she showed him no mercy. The melancholy, regretful tone she adopted was ten times worse than anger, and by the time they reached the inn where they had dined he was sunk in the depths of self abasement.

In reply to his knock an old woman came to the door and sleepily admitted them. Edith said good night and, quietly entering, closed the door behind her.

Kirk experienced a sudden desire to escape. To remain where he was simply prolonged his humiliation. But evidently he could not desert Edith. He sat down upon the doorstep and gave himself up to bitter thoughts.

She was such a wonderful woman, he told himself; she had been such a true friend to him that he had been worse than criminal to lose her respect. And Cortlandt had been so decent to him! It was significant that this gave him the most discomfort of all. He had betrayed a man's friendship, and the thought was unbearable. No punishment could be too severe for that!

When the first faint flush of dawn stole over the hill crest behind him he rose to wander toward the water front. As the harbor assumed definite form he beheld a launch stealing toward the village and ten minutes later greeted Stephen Cortlandt as that gentleman stepped out of the tender.

"Where's Edith?" eagerly demanded her husband.

"She's asleep. I found a place for her!"

"Not at the sanitarium?"

"No, no. One of these houses, Lord. I'm glad to see you! We'd begun to feel like real castaways. I've been up all night."

"What happened?" It was plain that Mr. Cortlandt was deeply agitated.

"Our boatmen evidently got drunk and pulled out. I tried to get a sailboat, but there weren't any, and it was too rough to try crossing with a skiff." It took them but a moment to reach the house, and soon the three were back at the water front.

"What a miserable night!" Mrs. Cortlandt complained, stifling a yawn. "I thought you'd never come, Stephen!"

"I didn't get back to the Tivoli until midnight, and then I had trouble in finding a boat to bring me over."

"I suppose they were alarmed at the hotel?"

"I said nothing about it," he returned, quietly, at which his wife's face flushed. Seizing the first opportunity, he exclaimed, in a low voice: "God! How unfortunate—at this time. Were you mad?"

She looked at him and her eyes burned, but she said nothing.

CHAPTER XI.
Chiquita.

THE next day Kirk borrowed a shotgun and went hunting. He wanted to get away somewhere and collect his

thoughts. For the present, at least, he wished to avoid an interview with Mrs. Cortlandt.

At midday he paused in an open glade against a hillside to eat his lunch. Back of him the rising ground was heavily timbered; beneath him a confusion of thickets and groves and cleared fields led out of a green plain as clean as any golf links, upon which were scattered dwellings.

Evidently this was the Savannas of which he had heard so much, and these



"You must look where you go," she admonished.

foreign looking bungalows were the country homes of the rich Panamanians.

The wood was crowded with plant life utterly strange to him. Vines and creepers abounded, from the tiny honeysuckle that reared itself with feeble filaments, to the giant liana creeping through the forest like a python, throttling full grown trees in its embrace. On every side was the never ceasing battle for light and the struggle of the weak against the strong.

Tiring of the scene at last, Kirk stumbled out into a cleared space, where he paused with an exclamation of surprise.

A brook had been dammed and widened into a deep, limpid pool to which the clean, white sand of its bottom lent a golden hue. At the lower end it overflowed in a waterfall, the purling music of which filled the glade.

To step suddenly out of an uncut wilderness into such a scene was bewildering and made the American gasp with delight. The place had an air of strictest privacy. A spring board mirrored in the depths below invited one to plunge, a pair of iron gymnasium rings were swung by chains to a massive limb, a flight of stone steps led up the bank and into a hut artistically thatched and walled with palm leaves to harmonize with its setting.

After staring about him for a long time he took a lingering, farewell look and turned to retrace his steps, whereupon some one laughed at him softly. He paused abruptly, then turned around. Then with the sweetest foreign accent imaginable he heard some one say:

"You had better cross upon the waterfall, sir. There is no bridge above." After an instant, during which he strained his eyes to find the owner of the voice, she laughed again.

"Here I am in the tree across the pond."

"Oh!" Looking over the fork of a tree trunk, perhaps twice the height of his head above the ground, Anthony beheld a ravishing face and two very bright eyes. Without removing his gaze he leaned his gun carefully against a bush—firearms have an abominable effect upon hamadryads—and said, "How did you get up there?"

"I climbed up."

"Why didn't you hide under the waterfall?"

"I did not hide, senor. I am trying to reach my orchid."

A little hand appeared beside the face, and a finger pointed to one of the big air plants above her. Kirk beheld a marvelous white, dove shaped flower nodding upon a slender stalk.

"Do you wish to cross the stream?" she asked.

"If you please."

"Wait." The face disappeared. There was a sound from behind the twisted tree trunk; a twig fell, then a piece of bark, and the next instant the girl herself stepped into view.

"I was afraid you'd gone for good," acknowledged the young man gravely.

He took up his gun and stepped out upon the crest of the dam.

"You must look where you go," she admonished, "or you will fall—splash!"

She laughed delightedly at the thought.

"Will you promise not to whisk yourself away if I look down?" he asked.

"Yes."

But even with this assurance he found it difficult to remove his eyes from her even for the brief instant necessary for a safe passage, and when at last he stood beside her he felt an irresistible desire to seize her gently so that she could not escape.

"Well?" she said at length, and he

found he had been standing stock still staring at her for several seconds.

"Excuse me! I really took you for a wood nymph. I'm not sure yet. You see, the place is so well suited. It—

it was a natural mistake."

She dropped her eyes shyly and turned away at his look.

"It is only our swimming pool. There have been no fairies here since I was a very little girl. But once upon a time there were many—oh, a great many!" It was impossible to describe the odd, sweet sound her tongue gave to the English words. It was not a dialect, hardly an accent, just a delicious, hesitating mannerism born of unfamiliarity.

"Did you ever see them?"

"No! I arrived always a little too late. But there are such things."

She pointed to a path, saying:

"This way will bring you to the road, sir, if you wish."

"But—I don't wish—not yet." He sought wildly for an excuse to stay and exclaimed: "Oh, the orchid. I must get it for you."

"That will be very nice of you, sir. For two years I have awaited its blooming. If you had not arrived I would have got it anyhow."

"Girls shouldn't climb trees," he said severely. "It tears their dresses."

"Oh, one cannot tear a dress like this." She glanced down at her skirt. Allowing his eyes to leave her face for a moment, Kirk saw that she was clad, oddly enough, in a suit of denim which was buttoned snugly clear to her neck.

He broke his gun and removed the shells; then, leaving it beside the bath-house, went to the tree where he had first seen her. With one hand resting upon the trunk, he turned to say:

"Promise you won't disappear while I'm up there or change into a squirrel or a bird or anything like that."

"Yes, yes."

Then instead of beginning his climb the young man lounged idly against the tree.

(Continued next week.)

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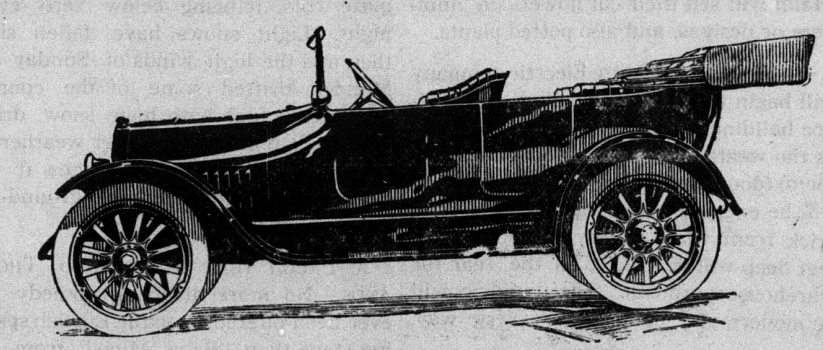
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