

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 police 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 sends him out as an impostor. Kirk meets Alvin, 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 intriguing 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. Kirk wins the capital prize, \$5,000, in the lottery. He and Runnels make plans for advancement. The Cortlandts, having turned from the older Alfarez, intend to make Senor Garavel, a banker, president of Panama. Alfarez's son, Kirk's foe, is engaged to Gertrudis, 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. Kirk receives permission to call on Chiquita. Young Alfarez challenges him to a duel. Kirk laughs at him. Mrs. Cortlandt asks Kirk to call on her. Cortlandt overhears his wife make love to Kirk, who tells her he loves and is engaged to Gertrudis. Prompted by Mrs. Cortlandt, Garavel forbids Kirk to call on his daughter. Kirk manages to see Chiquita. She loves him, but will obey her father. Mrs. Cortlandt blocks Kirk's and Runnels' path. Detective Williams seeks Kirk, known to him as Locke or Wellar. [Continued from last week.] But Mrs. Cortlandt checked him, saying quietly: "That is all right as far as it goes, but you forget the other young man." "Eh? How so? Gertrudis will not marry this Anthony." "Perhaps she loves him." "Love is a fancy, a something seen through a distant haze, an illusion which vanishes with the sun. In a month, in a year, she will have forgotten; but with me it is different. This is my life's climax; there will be no other." "But how will you handle Anthony?" Garavel looked at her blankly. "He is in my way. He is ended! Is not that all?" "I am glad you are practical; so many of you Latin-Americans are absurdly romantic." "And why should I not be practical? I am a business man. I love but two things, madame—no, three, my daughter, my success and my country. By this course I will serve all three." "Since you take this view of it, I am sure that with Ramon's help we can dissuade Don Anibal from his course. The general is sensible and doesn't want a fight any more than you do. If your daughter will consent?" "My dear lady, give yourself no uneasiness. She does not know the meaning of rebellion." "Then let me look up Ramon. He and I will approach the general together." She gave him her neatly

gloved hand. "Things are never so bad as they seem."

That afternoon Kirk received a formal communication from the banker which filled him with dismay. It ran: My Dear Mr. Anthony—To my extreme distress, I hear a rumor that Gertrudis is to become your wife. I assure you that neither she nor I blame you in the least for this unfortunate report, but since busy tongues will wag upon the slightest excuse, we feel it best that no further occasion for gossip should be given. I am sure you will co-operate with us. Sincerely and respectfully your friend, ANDRES GARAVEL.

A sense of betrayal crept over him as he read. What the letter signified, beyond the fact that Mr. Garavel had changed his mind, he could not make out, and he resolved to go at once and demand an explanation. But at the bank he was told that the proprietor had gone home, and he drove to the house only to learn that Senor Garavel and his daughter had left for Las Savannahs not half an hour before. So back through the city he urged his driver, across the bridge and out along the country road.

Darkness had settled when he returned, raging at the trickery that had been practiced upon him. If they thought to gain their point by sending him on wild goose chases like this they were greatly mistaken. He proposed to have Chiquita now, if he had to burst his way to her through barred doors. He had yielded to their left handed customs out of courtesy. It was time now to show his strength.

What folly he might have committed it is hard to tell, but he was prevented from putting any extravagant plan into operation by a message from the girl herself.

As he dismissed his coachman and turned toward his quarters Stephanie came to him out of the shadows. "Chiquita is at the house. She wants to see you."

"Of course she does. I knew this wasn't any of her doing. I've been hunting everywhere for her."

"At 9 o'clock she will be in the Plaza. You know the dark place across from the church? If we do not come wait."

Long before the appointed time Kirk was at the place of meeting, but scarcely had the city chimes rung out 9 when he saw two women emerge from the dark side street next the Garavel mansion and come swiftly toward him.

He refrained from rushing out to meet them, but when they were close to his place of concealment he stepped forward, with Chiquita's name upon his lips and his arms outstretched. She drew away.

"No, no, senor!" she cried. "I sent for you because there was no other way, that is all. My father would not let you come to the house. You will not think me bold?"

"Of course not." "I could not let you go until you knew the truth. You do not believe it was my fault?"

"I don't know what to believe, because I don't know what has happened. All I know is that I got a note from your father. But no matter what it is I'll never give you up," he declared stubbornly.

"Ah, I feared you would say those very words, but you must do it, just the same. It will be hard for us both, I know, but"—She choked and shook her head as the words refused to come.

"Tell me first why I must give you up?"

"Because in spite of all I am to marry Ramon," Gertrudis said wretchedly. "Who said so?"

"My father. He has forbidden me to think of you and ordered that I marry Ramon. Sick or well, living or dead, I must marry him."

"I'm hanged if you do!"

"It is those miserable politics again. If I do not obey, my father cannot be president, do you see? Senor Alfarez is terribly angry that I refused to marry his son, to whom since I was a little child I have been engaged. Ramon also is furious; he threatened to kill himself. So it comes to this then. If I will not bind myself to the agreement, Senor Alfarez will contest the election. I do not know how you say those things, but my father will be defeated. Perhaps he will be humbled."

"I won't stand for it. They're making you a sacrifice, that's all. What kind of a father is it who would sell his daughter?"

"No, no! You do not understand. He is proud; he cannot accept defeat; he would rather give his life than be humiliated. Furthermore, he wishes me to marry Ramon, and so that ends it." Her lips were trembling as she peered up at him to see if he really understood.

"Let them rave, dear. What does it matter who is president? What does anything matter to you and me?"

"He says I am too young to know my own mind, and—perhaps that is true, Senor Antonio; perhaps I shall soon forget you and learn to love Ramon as he loves me. I do not know!"

In spite of the pathetic quaver in her voice, Kirk cried with jealous bitterness: "You don't seem to object very strongly; you seem to care about as much for Alfarez as you do for me. Is that it?"

"Yes, senor," she said bravely. "You are lying!" declared Stephanie, suddenly.

The girl burst into a perfect torrent of weeping that shamed him. Then, without any invitation, she flung herself recklessly into his arms and lay there, trembling, palpitating like an imprisoned bird.

"Forgive me, dear," he exclaimed, softly. "I knew better all the time. You mustn't think of doing what they ask; I won't allow it." She looked up with eyes gleaming through her tears and said, brokenly:

"Senor, I love you truly. You see, I cannot lie."

Her breath intoxicated him, and he bent his head to kiss her, but Stephanie tore her roughly from his arms. The woman showed the strength of a man, and her vulture-like face was working fiercely as she cried:

"No! She is mine! She is mine! She is a good girl."

"Oh, I am wicked," Gertrudis said. "I love you, Keerk—yes, I love you very dearly, but my father—he refuses—I must obey—he has the right, and I must do as he wishes."

"Come with me now. We'll be married tonight," he urged, but she only clung to Stephanie more closely, as if to hold herself from falling.

"You are very sweet to me," she said, with piteous tenderness, "and I shall never forget the honor, but you see I cannot. This is more to my father than his life. It is the same to all our family, and I must do my duty. I could not let you go away thinking this was my doing, so I sent for you. No, one must obey one's people, for they are wise—and good. But one should be honest."

The tears were stealing down her cheeks, and she thrilled to his pleadings as to some wondrous music, yet she was like adamant, and all his lover's desperation could not shake her. Seeing that his urging only made matters worse, he said, more gently:

"You are exalted now with the spirit of self sacrifice, but later you will see that I am right. I am not discouraged. A thousand things may happen. Who knows what tomorrow may bring? Let's wait and see if we can't find a way out. Now that I know you love me I have the courage to face anything, and I am going to win you, Chiquita. I have never lost in all my life, and I don't intend to begin now."

"Kiss me once so that I may never forget."

"I'll see your father in the morning, and I'll be here again tomorrow night!"

But at this Gertrudis cried out: "No, no! I cannot meet you again in this manner." And Stephanie nodded her agreement.

"Then I'll see you the next night—that is, Saturday. You are coming to the big ball at the Tivoli with him and the Cortlandts. I must see you then, so make sure to be there, and meanwhile don't give up."

"Oh, there is no hope." "There is always hope. I'll think of something."

"We must go," said the Barbadian woman warningly. "Yes, yes! Is it of no avail to resist," came the girl's choking voice. She stretched out her little hand, and then, looking up at him, said uncertainly, "I—may never speak with you again alone, senor, and I must pray to—cease loving you; but will you—kiss me once, so that I may never forget?"

He breathed a tender exclamation and took her gently to his breast, while the negress stood by scowling and muttering. Even when she and Stephanie had melted into the shadows he stood motionless under the spell of that caress, its ecstasy still suffusing him. Then he turned and made his way up the street, but he went slowly, unseeing, as if he had beheld a vision.

CHAPTER XXI. A Business Proposition.

EDITH CORTLANDT'S interview with the rival candidates for the Panamanian presidency formed but a part of her plan. She next held a long conversation with Colonel Jolson, to the end that on Friday morning Runnels heard a rumor that threw him into the greatest consternation. It was to the effect that instead of his succeeding to the office of superintendent he was to retain his old post and that Colonel Jolson's brother-in-law was to supersede him. Although the word was not authoritative, it came with sufficient directness to leave him aghast. If true it was, of course, equivalent to his discharge, for it meant that he could not even continue in his former position without putting himself in a light intolerable to any man of spirit. If he did not resign voluntarily he knew that his new superior would eventually force him to do so, for Blakeley would build up an organization of his own. Inasmuch as his assistant was con-

cerned in his threatened calamity, Runnels made haste to lay the matter before him.

"Then this would seem to end our fine hopes, eh?" said Kirk. "Rather!" Runnels broke out bitterly. "I've worked hard, Kirk, and I deserve promotion if anybody ever did. This other fellow is a dub—he has proven that. Why, I've forgotten more railroading than he'll ever know. Every man on the system hates him and likes me; and on top of it all I was promised the job. It's tough on the wife and the kid."

He stopped to swallow his emotion and went on: "I gave this job the best I had in me, for I had the idea that I was doing something patriotic, something for my country. That's the way they used to talk about this canal, you know. I've put in four years of hell; I've lost step with the world; I've lost my business connections in the States, and I haven't saved up any money. I can't quit, and yet I'll have to, for if I'm fired it'll mean I'll have to go back there and start at the bottom again. Those people don't know anything about these blanketed politics. They'll think I made a failure here in government work, and I'll have to live it down. What are you going to do?"

Kirk started. "Oh, I don't know. I was thinking about you. I haven't spent much of that lottery coin. It's in the bank, all that Allan hasn't used, and half of it is yours if you'll take it. You and Mrs. Runnels and the kid and Allan and I—and one other party—will hike back home and get something else to do. What do you say?"

Runnels' voice shook as he answered: "By Jove! You're the—real stuff, Anthony. I'll think it over. Who is this 'other party'?"

"My wife." "Good Lord! You're not married?"

"No, but I'm going to be. You talk about your troubles. Now, listen to mine. I'll make you weep like a fog." Briefly he told his friend of the blow that had so suddenly fallen upon him.

"You are up against it, old man," agreed Runnels when he had heard all. "Garavel has set his heart on the presidency, and he'll pay any price to get it. It's the same all over Central America. These people are mad on politics."

"But the game isn't over. I carried the ball forty yards once for a touchdown in the last ten seconds of play, and Yale won. I had good 'interference' then, and I need it now. Somebody'll have to run ahead of me."

Runnels smiled. "I guess you can count on me. What is the plan?"

For the next half hour the two talked earnestly, their heads together, their voices low.

"I don't believe it will work, my boy," Runnels said at last. "I know these people better than you, and yet—Lord, if it does come off! Now, don't mention this rumor about Blakeley. I want to see Steve Cortlandt first."

"Cortlandt! By the way, do you happen to remember that he's to be our guest for supper tomorrow night? Kind of a joke now, trying to thank him for what he's done, isn't it?"

"Not at all. It may be our one chance of salvation; he may be the one person who can help us."

"Well," Kirk reflected, "I have a good deal to thank him for, I suppose, outside of this, and I'll go through with my part."

He proceeded at once to put his plan into execution, his first step being to rent a room at the Tivoli, taking particular care to select one on the first floor in the north wing. That evening he and Allan moved. Runnels telephoned during the evening that he had been equal to his part of the task, so there remained nothing to do but wait for the hour of the dance.

It was considerably after dark on Saturday evening that John Weeks, American consul at Colon, received a caller who came to him direct from the Royal Mail steamer just docked. At first sight the stranger did not impress Mr. Weeks as a man of particular importance. His face was insignificant, and his pale blue eyes showed little force. His only noticeable feature was displayed when he removed his hat. Then it could be seen that a wide, white scar ran from just over his temple to a point back of his right ear.

He made his name known as Williams, which, of course, meant nothing to the consul, and while drinking one of Weeks' highballs, inquired idly about the country, the climate and the people, as if in no hurry to come to his point. He studied the fat man and when he had satisfied himself, came out openly with these words: "I'm looking for a chap named Wellar. He landed here some time late in November."

"Friend of yours?" "Um—m—not exactly." Mr. Williams ran a hand meditatively over the ragged scar on his scalp, as if from force of habit.

"Wellar? I never heard of him." "He may have traveled under another name. Ever heard of a fellow called Locke?"

The consul's moist lips drew together, his red eyes gleamed watchfully. "Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't," said he. "Why do you want him?"

"I'm a detective, and I'm after Wellar, alias Locke, alias Anthony. He's wanted for embezzlement and assault and a few other things, and I'm going to take him." The indistinctive Mr. Williams spoke sharply, and his pale blue eyes were suddenly hard and bright.

Weeks stared open mouthed for an instant. "I knew he was wrong. Embezzler, eh? Well, well!"

[Continued on page 7 Col. 1.]



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