

THE Ne'er-Do-Well
By **REX BEACH**
Author of "The Spoilers," "The Barrier," "The Silver Horde," Etc.
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CHAPTER XXII. Checkmate!

ANTHONY had no partner for the eighth dance and was very glad of it, for he could not have carried off the necessary small talk.

As the music ceased and the dancers came pouring into the cool night air Rannels approached with his wife. Together they strolled off through the crowd, disappearing in the direction of the north wing of the hotel.

It seemed ages before the orchestra struck up. Kirk began to fear that something had happened to the musicians. He edged closer to the door and searched out Chiquita with his eyes.

There she was seated with her father, Colonel Bland from Gatun and some high officer or other—probably an admiral.

Kirk heard the orchestra leader tap his music stand; then as the first strains of the waltz floated forth he stepped into the ballroom and made toward his sweetheart.

All at once he found that his brain was clear, his heart beats measured.

Of course she saw him coming. She had waited all the long evening for this moment. He saw her hand flutter uncertainly to her throat; then as he paused before her she rose without a word.

His arm encircled her waist, her little cold palm dropped into his as lightly as a snowflake, and they glided away together. He found himself whispering her name over and over again passionately.

"Why—why did you do this, senior?" she protested faintly. "It is very hard for me."

"It is the last time I shall ever hold you—this way."

She faltered, her breath caught. "Please! My father is looking. Ramon!"

"Have you agreed to marry him?" "Yes—no, no! Oh, I have prayed to the Virgin every hour. I cannot, and yet I must. See! I cannot waltz, senior; I have stepped upon you. Don't—esquizee—me—so!" she exclaimed.

"I cannot hold back—the tears. I am so unhappy. If I could die quickly—now." "Let us go out on the porch."

"No, no! We must remain in my father's sight. Will you take me to my seat?"

"No. I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to say and be calm. He spoke low and earnestly.

"Don't stop dancing now, when I tell you. Chiquita dear, you must marry me tonight, right away! I have arranged everything. No, don't look up at me until I have finished. Try to smile. I've planned it all out and everything is in readiness. I have a room just around the corner of the veranda; there's a judge waiting for us, and Rannels and his wife."

"You are mad!" she gasped. "No, no. We'll slip through one of the French windows, and we'll be back again before they miss us. Nobody will know. I tell you they're waiting. If we are missed they'll think—it doesn't matter what they think—it doesn't matter what they think—you'll be my wife, and Ramon can't marry you then. We'll say nothing about it until your father is elected president."

"Senior, one cannot be married in a moment. I am Catholic—the bans—" "I've thought of all that, but a civil marriage is binding. We'll have the religious ceremony afterward; meanwhile this will stop Ramon, at least. I promise not to see you again until you send for me—until your father's hopes are realized. You may wait as long as you wish, and nobody will know. They tricked you, Chiquita dear; I can't explain, but it wasn't all politics; by any means. Oh, girl! Don't you understand; I love you—love you! It's our only chance." The words were tumbling from his lips incoherently; he was pleading as if for his life, while she clung to him to support herself.

Through it all their feet moved rhythmically, their bodies swayed to the cadences of the waltz as they circled the ballroom.

He knew it was her lifelong loyalty, her traditional sense of obedience that made her hesitate. "Mother of God!" she exclaimed faintly. "Is it that I am dreaming?" "They are waiting for us; the dance is half over already. I love you—better than all the world. Do you remember two nights ago? You kissed me then, and—I—I—can't live without you."

"He is looking for you." "One would think him a jealous husband already," she exclaimed lightly. Then extending her hand coolly to Kirk, "I thank you, senior, for the dance."

Her husband bowed. "I shall not soon forget it." To the father he added in a low voice: "I thank you also for your courtesy. We have been discussing your daughter's marriage during the dance, and it is my one greatest hope that she will never regret it."

The banker acknowledged the words ceremoniously. "Love is a thing that comes and goes. Marriage alone can bind it. Some day you will thank me, and then perhaps you will honor our house again, eh?"

"I shall be happy to come whenever you wish." As he walked away the banker said, with relief: "He takes it well. He is proud—almost like a Spaniard."

Kirk moved through the crowd as if in a trance, but he was beginning to realize the truth now. It surged over him in great waves of gladness. He longed to shout his news aloud. What lack was his! The world was made for him. There was no such thing as adversity or failure—Chiquita was his wife! All Christendom might go to pot for all he cared.

In the midst of his rhapsody he heard a bellboy speaking his name and smiled at him vacantly as he turned away. But the negro followed him persistently, saying something about a letter.

"It is important, sar." "Very well." He opened the envelope and pretended to read, but in reality the sheet held nothing for him but a ravishing, mischievous face with pansy eyes. He must have stood staring unseeing at it for several seconds. Then the dancing vibrations faded and the scrawl stood out plainly:

Williams, detective, St. Louis, arrived at Colon this evening on the Prince Joachim. You'd better take it on the run.

It was written upon Tivoli paper, but the hand was strange, and it was not signed.

"Well!" Kirk came suddenly to himself, and a spasm of disgust seized him. "What a rotten inconvenience!" he said aloud. But before he had time to measure the effect of this new complication the swelling music reminded him that this dance belonged to Mrs. Cortlandt and that her answer was due.

She was waiting for him in the gallery and motioned him to the chair adjoining hers.

"I can't two step and talk at the same time," she said, "and here we'll be quite private."

Kirk remained standing. "What I have to say won't take long. I've made up my mind, and I cannot give up Chiquita."

"You know what it means?" She stared at him with hard, level eyes. "I'm not a moderate person—I can't do things by halves. No! I see you are mad over this Garavel girl. But you can't get her." Something in his dazzled, love foolish smile enraged her.

"So! you are planning even now. Well, then, understand I can build, and I can destroy."

"There's nothing more to say," he interrupted her quietly, "so I'd better excuse myself."

"Yes! I would prefer to be alone." When he had bowed himself away she crushed the fan in her hand, staring out across the lights of the city below, and it was thus that Cortlandt found her a few moments later. He dropped into the empty chair beside her, saying:

"Hello! Thought you had this with Anthony?" "I had."

"What's the trouble?" "There is no trouble." She began to rock, while he studied her profile; then, conscious of his look, she inquired, "Aren't you dancing?"

"No, just looking on, as usual. I prefer to watch. You have broken your fan, it seems." He flung his cigarette into the darkness and, reaching out, took the fan from her hand. She saw that his lips were drawn back in a peculiar smile.

"Well! Is that so strange?" she answered sharply. "You seem"—she broke off and looked deliberately away from him.

"Row, eh?" he inquired softly. She could barely hold back her hatred of the man. He had worked powerfully upon her nerves of late, and she was half hysterical.

"Why do you take pleasure in annoying me?" she cried. "What ails you these last few weeks? I can't stand it—I won't!"

"Oh! Pardon! One quarrel an evening is enough. I should have known better. Too bad you and he don't hit it off better; he likes me. He's giving me a party after the dance, a sort of gratitude affair. A delicate way to acknowledge a debt, eh?"

"You know very well it is Rannels' doing," she said. "Oh, there are six of them in it altogether, but Anthony originated the little surprise. It's intended for you, of course."

"I don't see it. Are you going?" "I accepted. Funny spectacle, eh? Me the guest of—Anthony?"

There was a trace of anxiety in her voice as she answered, and, though she spoke carelessly, she did not meet his eyes.

"I'd rather you'd make an excuse. I'll have to go home alone, you know." He raised his brows mockingly. "My dear! I'm to be the honored guest."

"Suit yourself, of course." A marine officer approached, mopping his face, and engaged her in conversation, whereupon Cortlandt rose languidly and strolled away through the crowd that came eddying forth from the ballroom.

Meanwhile Kirk had found Rannels,

"We'll go away together, you and I, through all the world—just we two." She gave a hysterical, choking sob that was half a sigh. Then her eyes flashed upward to his—they were wide and bright and shining—her lips were parted, her body was lithe and full of life. She slipped from his embrace, whispering:

"Yes, yes! Quickly, senior!" And the next instant they were out upon the wide gallery with the dance behind them. "Hurree, hurree, or they will follow!" Together they fled along the north wing of the hotel. The girl was panting, with one hand held to her bare throat. But she ran like a fawn.

"Here!" He swung her around the corner and rapped sharply at a door. "Quickly! Quickly!" she moaned. "For the love of—"

With terrific force the door was fairly jerked from its hinges and slammed to behind them. The next moment Allan's big body was leaning against it, as if the wall were about to fall inward upon him. Rannels leaped forward with an exclamation; his wife stood staring, her face as white as snow. With them was the genial Gray haired judge from the club on the night of his arrival.

"You made it!" Rannels cried triumphantly.

"Miss Garavel!" his wife echoed. "Thank heaven you came!"

"Quick, the music will stop! Judge, this is Miss Garavel. You must marry us just as fast as you can."

"I presume you consent?" the judge asked.

"I—I want to be happy," she said simply.

"You understand, judge, she's of age. So am I. They want to force her to marry a man she doesn't!"

The muffled strains of music ceased. There came the faint clapping of hands.

"Madre de Dios!" Miss Garavel cried. "We are too late!" She beat her little palms together in desperation.

There was a breathless interval. Then the music began again, and to

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who was looking for him, eager to express his congratulations and to discuss their exploit in detail.

Now that he had some one to whom Kirk could talk freely, he let himself go, and he was deep in conversation when Stephen Cortlandt strolled up and stopped for an instant to say:

"Quite a lively party, isn't it?" Kirk noticed how hollow he had grown in the past few months and how he had fallen off in weight. He looked older, too. His cheeks had sunken in until they outlined his jaws sharply. He seemed far from well.

A nervous twitching of his fingers betokened the strain he had been under. He was quite as immaculate, polished and collected as usual, however.

"How is our little 'stag' coming on?" he asked.

"Fine! Everything is ready," said Rannels. "You won't expect an elaborate layout. It's mostly cold storage, you know, but we'll at least be able to quench our thirst at the Central."

"Then it's really coming off? I was afraid you'd forgotten it." Cortlandt cast a curious glance at Kirk, who exclaimed heartily:

"Well, hardly!" Then, as their prospective guest moved off, "What a strange remark!"

"Yes," said Rannels, "he's a queer fellow; but, then, you know, he's about as emotional as a toad."

CHAPTER XXIII. The Crash.

KIRK had no further chance of speaking with his wife, for after the dance she was whisked away, leaving him nothing but the memory of an adoring, blissful glance as she passed. With Rannels and Cortlandt and the rest he was driven to the Hotel Central, where they found a very attractive table set in a private dining room. It was a lively party, and Kirk's secret elation enabled him to play the part of host with unforced geniality. The others joined him in a hearty effort to show their guest the high regard in which they held him, and if Cortlandt did not enjoy himself it was entirely his own fault.

Toward Kirk, however, he preserved a peculiar attitude, which only the young man's self-absorption prevented him from noticing. If he had been less jubilant he must have felt the unnatural aloofness of the other man's bearing. But even had he done so he would doubtless have attributed it to Cortlandt's well recognized frigidity.

At the propitious moment Rannels, who had reluctantly agreed to share the social responsibility, made a little speech, explaining that he and his boys had been sensible from the first of their guest's interest in them and were deeply grateful for it. They now tendered him a token of their regard in a form which he could preserve.

He handed a handsome loving cup to Cortlandt, who thanked him appropriately, then waited courteously for the party to break up. But Anthony rose, saying:

"I simply have to say a word on my own account, fellows, for I owe Mr. Cortlandt more than any of you."

The object of these remarks shot a swift, questioning glance from his stony eyes and raised a hand as if to check him. But Kirk ran on unheeding:

"I want to thank him before all of you for what he has done for me personally. When I landed in Panama I got into trouble of the worst sort, and Mr. Cortlandt got me out. He was my bail bond, he put me up at his hotel, gave me clothes and paid my way until I got started. I was a stranger, and you, but he's been just like one of my own people, and if I ever succeed in doing anything really worth while it will be due to the start he gave me."

Though the words were commonplace enough, they carried a sincere message, and Cortlandt saw by the faces about him that the others were pleased. His own gaunt features turned more hollow than ever. The memory of what he had heard on the porch of his own house a few afternoons ago, of what he had seen at other times, of his wife's telltale behavior on this very evening, swept over him, fanning anew the sullen emotions he had cherished all these months. How far would this fellow dare to go, he wondered? He dropped his eyes to hide the fury in them.

"I want to give you a little remembrance of my own," Anthony was speaking directly to him. "It isn't much, but it means a good deal to me, and I hope it will have some sort of personal association for you, Mr. Cortlandt." He drew from his pocket a plush case and took from it a very handsome thin Swiss watch with the letters "S. C." artfully enameled upon the back.

Cortlandt accepted the gift mechanically; then, as it touched his flesh, a sudden color mounted to his cheeks, only to recede, leaving them bloodless again.

"I really didn't expect this," he began slowly as he rose. "Anthony exaggerates; he is too kind. But since he has chosen to publicly call attention to our relations, I will confess that what he tells you is all true. Through my assistance—partly, at any rate—he has made a man of himself. He has been welcome at my house, at my table; he has come and gone as he pleased, like one of the family, you might say. But those are little things; they count for nothing." His tone gripped his hearers, and Anthony stared uneasily, thinking this an odd way of accepting a gift.

Unclasping his long, white fingers, Cortlandt held up the watch to public view.

"In payment for my poor friendship he has given me this magnificent thing of gold and jewels, the finest I ever

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