

**The Ne'er-Do-Well.**

[Continued from page 6, Col. 4.]  
 saw. I never counted upon such gratitude. It is too much, and yet a man cannot refuse the gift of his friend and not seem ungracious, can he? Somewhere in the orient they have a custom of exchanging gifts. No man may accept a thing of value without making adequate return, and it has always struck me as a wise practice. He turned full upon Kirk for the first time since he had begun speaking, and his voice rose a tone as he said, "I can't let the obligation rest entirely upon me. We have going to give you something in return which I have prized highly. It would be counted of great value by some." Once more he paused and drew his lips back in that grimace of mockery. It could no longer be termed a smile. "It is this—I am going to give you—my wife. You have had her from the first, and now she is yours."

For one frightful moment there was no sound; even the men's breathing was hushed, and they sat slack jawed, stunned, half minded to believe this some hideous, incredible jest. Cortlandt turned away gloatingly.

Kirk was the last to recover his powers, but when they did revive they came with a prodigious rush. He plunged upward out of his chair with a cry like a wounded animal, and the others rose with him. The table rocked, something smashed, a chair was hurled backward. The room broke into instant turmoil. Kirk felt hands upon him, and then went blind with fury, struggling in a passion too strong for coherent speech. He was engulfed in chaos. He felt things break beneath his touch, felt bodies give way before him.

How or when Kirk left the room he never knew. Eventually he found himself pinned in his chair, with Rannels' white face close against his own and other hands upon his arms. His first frenzy quickly gave way to a sickening horror.

"It's a lie! The man's crazy!" he cried hoarsely; then, as his companions drew away from him, he rose to his feet. "Why are you looking at me like that? I tell you it's a—d—d lie! I never—"

Rannels turned to the table and with shaking hand put a glass to his lips and gulped its contents. Wade and Kimble exchanged glances, then, avoiding each other's eyes, took their hats from the hooks behind them.

"Wait! Bring him back!" Kirk mumbled. "I'll get him and make him say it's a lie." But still no one answered, no one looked at him. "God! You don't believe it?"

"I'm going home, fellows. I'm kind of sick," Kimble said. One of the others murmured unintelligibly, and wetting a napkin, bound up his hand, which was bleeding. They continued to watch Kirk as if fearful of some insane action, yet they refused to meet his eyes squarely. There was no sympathy in their faces.

The knowledge of what these actions meant came to him slowly. Was it possible that his friends believed this incredible accusation? As he began to collect himself he saw his plight more clearly. His first thought had been that Cortlandt was insane, but the man's actions were not those of a maniac. No! He actually believed—and these fellows also. He wanted to shout his innocence at them, to beat it into their heads.

One by one they took their hats and went out, mumbling goodnight to one another, as if intending to go home singly in order to avoid all discussion of this thing that had fallen among them. Rannels alone remained.

"You don't believe I did—that?" Anthony asked in a strained voice. "I—I think I do." There was a miserable silence, and then: "It isn't the thing itself, you know, so much as the rotten—underhand advantage you took. If he'd been a stranger, now—Honestly, isn't it true?"

Kirk shook his head listlessly. "I wouldn't lie to you."

Rannels drew a deep breath. "Oh, come, now, the man must have known what he was saying. Men don't do things like that on suspicion."

"He misunderstood our friendship," said Kirk heavily, then roused himself for a last plea. "Look here!" he cried. "You know Cortlandt, and you know me. The man was insanely jealous. I know it sounds weak, but it's the truth, and it's all I can say. I'll go mad if you doubt me. And tonight of all— He broke off sharply. "My God! I'd forgotten that I'm married. Suppose Gertrudis hears of this!" Anthony seized his temples in despair.

Rannels took a sudden illogical decision. He never knew exactly what had influenced him, but his whole past knowledge surged up in him with a force that he could not resist. He laid his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Take it easy, old man," he said. "I believe you. I've always known that they didn't get along together, although—well, I won't try to understand it. He may not do anything further, and these fellows won't mention what happened here. They can't."

"Women are apt to be jealous, aren't they, Rannels? What do you suppose she'd do?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm thinking about Cortlandt. If he finds out he's mistaken what will he do?"

"He'll have to find out. I'm going to tell him. His wife will tell him. Good God! Do you see what an awful light it puts me in? You don't doubt me, do you really, old man?"

"No, but what a night this has been! It seems a year old. Come along, now. You must get out of here. You must turn in. The waiters are wondering what this row is about. I think we'd better take a walk."

In passing through the deserted lobby of the hotel they saw Clifford idling about. But they were too much absorbed to wonder what had kept him up so late. By the clock across the plaza they saw it was two hours after midnight as they stepped into the street. Then, finding no cabs in sight, they set out to walk toward Ancon, both badly in need of the open air.

A moment later Clifford followed them, taking pains to keep at a distance.

Now that the full import of Cortlandt's accusation had sunk into his mind, Kirk lapsed into a mood of sullen bitterness. He said little, but his set face worried his companion, who was loath to bid him good night even when they were close to the Tivoli. After they had parted Rannels was upon the point of going back and offering to spend the night with him, but thought better of it.

Instead of passing through the office Kirk mounted to the porch of the Tivoli and entered his room from the outside, as he and Chiquita had done earlier that evening. He found Allan waiting and bursting with a desire to gossip, but cut him short.

"Get my street clothes. I'm going out." He tore the white tie from his throat as if it were choking him. "I've been hurt, Allan. I can't explain, for you wouldn't understand, but I've been hurt. Come along."

The negro's lips drew apart in an expression of apellie ferocity, and he began to chatter threats of vengeance, to which Kirk paid little heed. A few moments later they went out quietly, and together they took the rock road down toward the city, the one silent and desperate, the other whining like a hound nearing a scent.

Edith Cortlandt did not retire immediately upon her return from the ball. Her anger at Anthony's behavior kept her awake, and the night had turned off so dead and humid that sleep was in any case a doubtful possibility.

She was still sitting in her room at a late hour when she heard the outside door close and Cortlandt's footsteps mounting the stairs. She was glad he had his own room and never entered hers at such an hour, for even to talk with him in her present state of mind and body would have been more than she could bear.

She was unreasonably, annoyed therefore, when he came boldly into her chamber without even knocking.

"Rather late for good night," she said coldly. "I've just come from Anthony's supper party."

His voice made her look round sharply. She saw that his linen, ordinarily

stiff and immaculate, was sodden and crumpled, his collar limp, his forehead glistening with drops of moisture.

"What ails you, Stephen?" she cried. "Have you been drinking?"

"No. I didn't drink much. I brought you something."

He took the loving cup from its fannel bag and set it upon the table. "They gave me this."

"And this too." He tossed the watch with its enameled monogram into her lap.

"Ah! That's very handsome."

"Yes. I thought you'd like it. It's from Anthony." He laughed, then shuddered.

"Why, you seem excited over these souvenirs. You surely expected?"

He broke in—a thing he rarely did while she was speaking: "Anthony made a speech when he gave it to me—a very nice speech, full of friendship and love and gratitude." He repeated Kirk's words as he remembered them. "What do you think of that?"

Mrs. Cortlandt's eyes widened. This was not the man she knew. At this moment he was actually insistent, almost overbearing, and he was regarding her with that same ironical sneer that had roused her anger earlier in the evening.

He began to chuckle, apparently without reason. His shoulders shook feebly at first, then more violently.

His flat chest heaved, and he hiccupped as if from physical weakness. It was alarming, and she rose, staring at him affrightedly. He continued to shudder and shake in uncontrollable hysteria, but his eyes were bright and watchful.

"Oh, I—I—took it all in—I let him p-put the noose around his own neck and tie the knot. Then I hung him." His convulsive giggling was terrible, forecasting, as it did, his immediate breakdown.

"Stephen!" she exclaimed, in a shocked tone, convinced that his mind was going. "You are ill. You need a doctor. I will call Jocel." She laid her hand on his arm. "Won't you go to your room and let me call a doctor?"

"Not yet. Wait! He told them what I had done for him. I acknowledged it all and made them hear it from my lips too. Then"— He paused, and she steeled herself to witness another spectacle of his pitiable loss of self control. But instead he grew icy and corpse-like, with lips drawn back in a grin. "I played with him the way you have played with me. Think!"

Her face went suddenly ashen. "Well, I told him before them all that I intended to give him something in return, and I did. I—gave—him— you."

"God! You didn't tell him that? You didn't say that—before those men! Oh-h!" She shrank back, drawing the gauzy silk robe closer about her breast. Then she roused to sudden action. Seizing him by the shoulders she shook him roughly with far more than her natural strength, voicing furious words which neither of them understood.

"Oh, I did it," he declared. "He's yours now. You can have him. He's been your lover!"

She flung him away from her so violently that he nearly fell.

"It's a lie! You know it's a lie!" "It's true. I'm no fool."

She beat her hands together distractedly. "What have you done? What will those men think? Listen! You must stop them quickly. Tell them it's not so."

[Continued next week.]

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**Information.**

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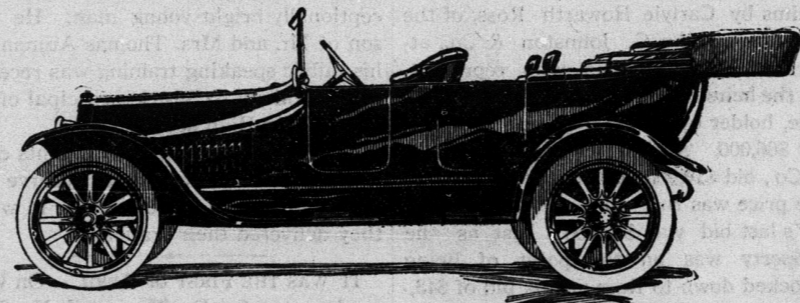
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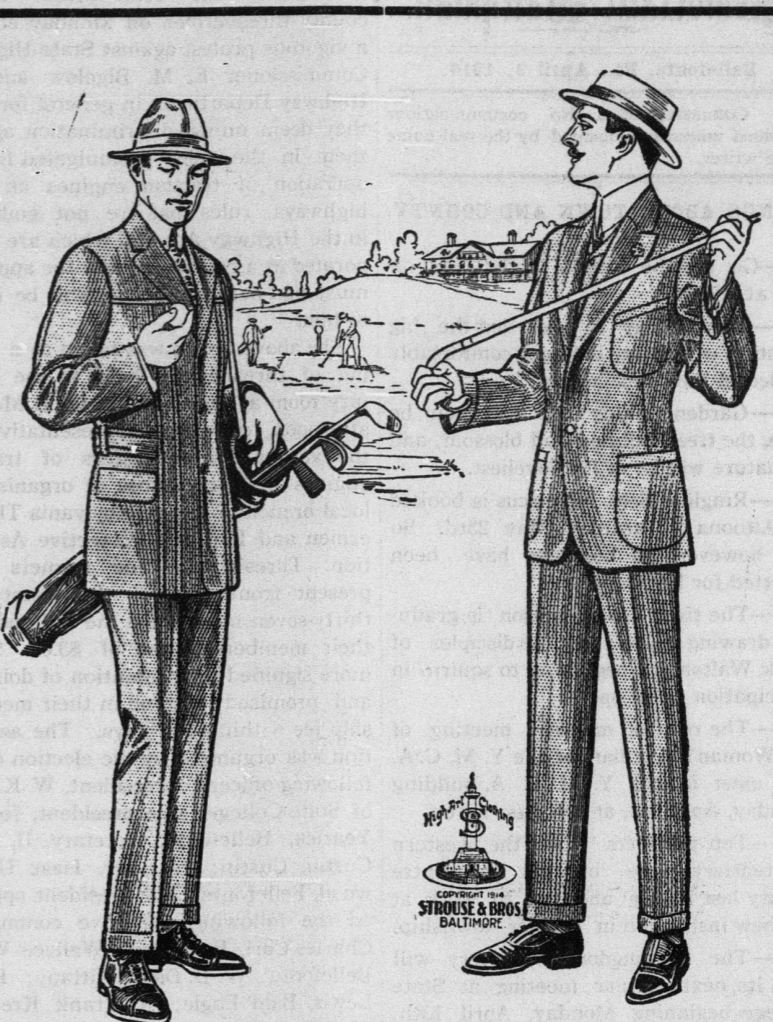
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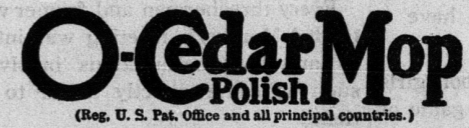
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