

CAMEO KIRBY

By Booth Tarkington
AND
Harry Leon Wilson

Adapted From the Play
of the Same Name by
W. B. M. Ferguson

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his nostrils and a bullet through the lungs the younger man, fighting hard against his fall, slowly eased himself to the floor.

"For yoh, sub," courteously sneered Moreau, carefully wiping the smoking pistol and returning it to his breast pocket, while he coolly watched the writhing figure cough out his life. "I calculate, sub, yoh are now booked foh that front seat in hades which yoh declined. I'll teach yoh to play a low down game on a gentleman, sub."

As he turned to refill his glass the door was violently torn open and a large, florid faced man entered. Moreau turned, his hand slipping into his breast pocket. For a long moment the two confronted each other in silence.

"Mr. Randall has just blown out his brains," said the intruder slowly at length. "I guess that's your work, my fine old bucko. But I heard another shot. Where's my pal, Gene Kirby?" His eyes, restlessly searching the darkened corners, at length happened on the huddled thing, now lying very still. "Gene," he cried, stooping and raising the other's head to his knee. "Speak to me, boy. It's your old pal, Bunce."

"I calculate yoh friend is past speaking, sub," observed Moreau, backing toward the door and keeping a wary eye on the florid faced Yankee. "Mr. Kirby insulted me, sub, and has paid foh it with his life. I shot him in fair and honorable combat."

"Fair and honorable hades!" snarled Bunce, leaping to his feet. "Shot him in the back, yoh skunk—your usual fair and honorable manner! Yoh haven't the nerve to stand up and face a crippled hen!"

"Stand back, sub!" warned the other, drawing his Derringer. "Yoh are naturally excited, and so I choose to overlook yoh words, which I will not do in the future. But don't push me too far, sub—don't push me too far, foh even a gentleman has his limits."

"No man ever double banked Gene Kirby twice," said Larkin Bunce ironically, "and it'll be a good thing for you, Moreau, if he is past speaking, which, I guess, locks the case. If he happens to pull through you can gamble he'll fix your case himself, but if he doesn't, my fine old bucko, I'll settle your honorable hash. Yoh've stunk up this river just about long enough."

"It will afford me considerable pleasure, sub," replied the pseudo colonel in his best manner, "to place yoh in the same position which yoh friend Mr. Kirby will shortly occupy. I refer, sub, to a front seat in the grill room of his most Satanic majesty. Yoh servant, sub, and a very good evening." Bowing, the flower of southern chivalry backed nimbly through the door and disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

COLONEL JACQUES GASPARD DESCHAMPS MOREAU, to give him his full title, doing all things thoroughly, as befitted one of his honorable character, was not satisfied with, as he thought, disposing of Kirby's physical existence, but considered it his pleasurable duty to effectually ruin whatever little reputation had survived during the other's downward career.

Kirby, presumably fatally wounded, had been carried ashore by Bunce at the next landing, and, in those days shooting and stabbing affrays emanating from card games being only too common, but little attention had been paid to the affair. Cameo Kirby was notorious the length of the river, and such an abrupt and tragic termination of his career had not only been frequently and cheerfully predicted, but was, moreover, expected of all such members as graced his questionable profession. Indeed, for them a sober and respectable death would have been considered bad form. Among the gambling profession there existed a certain code, which in a manner served to link those at the top, who, like Kirby and Bunce, wooed fortune honestly, to the Moreau type, gracing and disgracing the lowest rung in the gamblers' social ladder. This code, if so it may be termed, was an understanding to the effect that in no instance, however great the provocation, should the law be invoked. Wrongs, fancied or authentic, were to be redressed solely by the bearers thereof, the joint office of judge and executioner being vested in each separate and distinct individual.

In view of this accepted understanding, Larkin Bunce had accordingly made no mention of the fact that a probable murder had been committed, and, the passengers and steamship officials dismissing it as a gamblers' quarrel, which was none of their affair, no stigma or notoriety was attached to the good Colonel Moreau, who, claiming to be an old and valued friend of Mr. Randall, had gone to the latter's stateroom and brazenly assumed charge of the body. Bunce's laconic statement was too pitifully true, for the old planter had effectually ended his life.

Again referring to Colonel Moreau's heavy pockets, it is to be noted that

it was quite characteristic that to complete his revenge against Cameo Kirby he now did not hesitate to assume charge of Mr. Randall's body, did not hesitate to meet the son of the man for whose death he had been directly and shamefully responsible, for young Tom Randall had ridden over to the Plaquemine landing in order to greet his father, while over at the old homestead all was bustle and excitement in honor of the master's homecoming.

Anxiously Tom Randall waited to see the jovial and well known figure of his father march down the gangplank, waited to catch a glimpse of the familiar and weather beaten green portmanteau which the planter always carried. The moments passed. Other and numerous passengers stepped ashore, to be eagerly welcomed and claimed by their own, but John Randall was not among them. A curious and seemingly pregnant hush had succeeded the landing of the freight, and off somewhere in the darkness a child whimpered shrilly. The boy's nerves were set on edge. Perhaps his father was having a farewell talk with the captain and would come dashing out at the last moment with all his old disregard for time and place. It was time the bell was clanging, the signal for backing away, for by now the landing of passengers and freight appeared to be terminated. And still no John Randall. The boy walked along the string-piece until the Texas deck came more prominently into view, the glow from the open windows of the port staterooms silhouetting the lean visaged pilot, absolute monarch of his realm, who now that an easy stretch of the river had been entered loafed about while his cub took the wheel.

"Hello, on board the Shotwell!" shouted young Randall, looking up at the pilot-house. "Is that you, Mr. Bixby? This is Tom Randall. Do you know if my father is on board? We were expecting him by your boat, sir."

For reply Mr. Bixby, usually the pattern of courtesy, offered a memorably affirmative and turned from the window.

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"THE SCOUNDREL HAS ALREADY PAID FOH IT WITH HIS LIFE."

at last, his father had come ashore, borne on the shoulders of two roustabouts, while the captain and officers stood with bared heads and thankfully left the unwelcome task of explaining the tragedy to the amiable and willing Colonel Moreau.

"My boy," said the latter, now laying a fatherly hand on young Randall's heaving shoulder, "although I am a stranger to yoh, sub, I have ventured to assume temporary control of this terrible affair, foh I am a southern gentleman, as was Mr. Randall, and I feel bound to yoh all by the ties of sympathy and country. I was a witness, sub, to the events which preceded and prompted this outrage, and, although I am aware it is but poh satisfaction, still it is something to know that the scoundrel who was instrumental in causing yoh poh father's death has already paid foh it with his life. My name, sub, is Colonel Moreau, and if I can be of any further service to yoh all in this dark hour of tribulation pray command me, sub. As an old soldier I beg of yoh to meet this calamity with the fortitude of a Christian gentleman," with which admirable and pious adjuration the good colonel flourished his handkerchief and helped himself to a generous snuff.

"I thank you, Colonel Moreau, for all you have done," said young Randall stonily, looking on the huddled thing at his feet. "You—you say you witnessed my father's death?"

"Not exactly, sub, foh he shot himself in his stateroom. However hard to bear, I think yoh should know who and what prompted his death. The scoundrel, sub, was the notorious Cameo Kirby, of whom, perhaps, yoh have heard."

Young Randall nodded dully, and Moreau, entering into the spirit of the tale, continued: "I formed an acquaintance, sub, with yoh poh father when he came aboard at New Orleans. He confided to every one that he had sold his sugar crop foh ten thousand and had the cash with him, and he was in mighty high spirits because he was on his way back home to see his children. Poh gentleman! As delicately as I can I must state that he was not quite himself, and by that, sub, I mean that he had been imbibing a little too freely. I don't have to tell yoh, sub, that there are certain characters on all the big boats who keep a pretty sharp lookout foh gentlemen with money who are in the condition yoh poh father, sub, was in tonight, and I expect there was more than one river gambler on board who would have liked to get his

hands on Mr. Randall. But the one who got him was the slickest and clearest of the lot, the Cameo Kirby whom I have mentioned. This rascal, sub, inveigled yoh poh father into a private stateroom, plied him with moh liquor and won from him not only all his money and personal effects—even including a miniature of yoh dead mother, sub—but also a deed to his entire plantation and all his slaves, everything which he owned. I was too late to save Mr. Randall, but I knew Kirby by repute, and I was so screamingly outraged by the whole affair that I denounced him foh the low scoundrel he was. Thereupon he drew on me, but I was the quicker and shot him down like a dog. They carried him ashore, sub, at the landing below this, and the river is cleaner foh his death."

"You have taken vengeance out of my hands," said young Randall unsteadily. "The coward and villain! For a stranger, sir, the attitude which you have displayed toward my family has been most considerate, and I will never forget it. The—the hospitality of a house in mourning!"

"No, no, my boy," interrupted Moreau, again employing his fatherly hand. "I am sensible of the honor, but I couldn't think of it. This is a time when yoh all must wish to be alone, and business calls me north. I merely stepped ashore in yoh interests as any gentleman would have done. There goes the bell, and I must run for it. Honored, sub, to have made yoh acquaintance, though of co'se I deeply deplore the necessity which occasioned it. I will venture to pay my respects to yoh family when I return south, and pray command me in any occasion yoh may have. Yoh servant, sub." And with a magnificent bow the colonel turned and raced for the gangplank, boarding the Shotwell with a leap that shamed his fifty odd years.

Meanwhile Cameo Kirby, a bullet through his right lung, was making a desperate battle against death, fighting for the life which he had considered little better than worthless. In his efforts he was materially assisted by the crude but faithful Bunce, his gambling partner, with whom he had played up and down the Mississippi for years. For two weeks this combat raged, Kirby hovering between life and death, but at the end he emerged triumphant as, over the gaming table when the odds were as heavily against him, he had emerged from many a hotly contested conflict.

To those who judged Kirby's character from the evil reports which gossip had spread concerning him and to others who, in their righteous ignorance, considered all gamblers legitimate children of the devil his remarkable recovery would have been accepted merely as another proof that the evil one favors his own, that the mills of the gods grind slowly, that justice is blind and that a scoundrel is difficult to kill, together with many similar ancient and redoubtable maxims which ignorance and self righteousness love to distribute on every fitting occasion.

Among possessors of the last mentioned attribute Eugene Kirby was regarded as a black sheep who, religiously avoiding the whitewash brush, was deemed beyond redemption, for what man worthy of the name would have acted as had the last of the Kirbys? What if he had been but fifteen when his father died a bankrupt? What if he had been left an orphan, a pauper, with no immediate relative to care how he acted? Wasn't the heritage of an ancient and honorable name, the knowledge that some of the oldest and best blood in all the south flowed in his veins, enough to keep him straight? Most assuredly it was. There was absolutely no excuse for his drifting in with wild and dissolute companions, becoming a common river gambler and rendering notorious and obnoxious a name which had hitherto been the synonym for honor and integrity.

Kirby had been kept in ignorance of Mr. Randall's suicide, but when at length he became convalescent Larkin Bunce, harking back to the events of that memorable night, informed him, and the invalid, on his part, recounted the occurrences preceding Colonel Moreau's precipitation of the "honorable" combat.

"The news of Mr. Randall's death is a great shock," he added, greatly moved. "He was my father's friend, Bunce, and when the devil played havoc with our affairs did all in his power to be of assistance. But for

Kirby had but vaguely heard of the unjust accusation and, having been long since case-hardened to calumny in all its phases, paid little if any attention. Had any member of the Randall family sought him out he would, as a matter of duty, have proved his innocence. But they, believing him dead, had not done so, and he refused to take the initiative, partly because he could not give absolute credence to the rumor, but in a greater measure because of the demands upon his time. After all, it did not matter. It meant only another tally to the score of Jack Moreau, and all would be wiped out by that gentleman's death, an undertaking upon which he had definitely decided. What stood between them could be eradicated only by the bullet.

Meanwhile the passing year had brought with it many changes for the surviving members of the Randall family. Life is tenacious, and they had persisted in surviving as best they could the shock incident upon their father's suicide. The one small measure of satisfaction in the whole terrible affair was the knowledge that the despoiler of their home had promptly met his death and that in consequence they were at least saved from pauperization, for they were entirely ignorant of Kirby's recovery or the measures he had voluntarily taken for their protection.

To the only girl, Adele, had fallen the brunt of suffering. The General, a child of eight, was too young to fully comprehend his loss, while Tom, a hot headed youth in his early twenties, occupied all his time with the plantation and devoted all spare moments to nursing his hatred against Kirby's memory. While glorying in the latter's supposed death he deplored that his hand had not effected it. Where grief had paralyzed Adele it had but further aroused the boy's militant and aggressive nature, adding, moreover, a veneer of youthful and bitter egotism.



"I'LL SCARE UP A PRAYER OR TWO FOH JACK MOREAU'S SOUL."

my great pride I would have accepted his offer of guardianship and, under his supervision, I should have been

a credit to the name instead of the disgrace I am."

"Now, you quit these here postmortems," remonstrated Bunce good naturedly, but firmly. "You don't call me a disgrace, do you? And ain't I your old side partner? Bosh, if you play the game straight I guess there's lots of worse ways of making a living than gambling. The sawbones said a lot of rest was coming your way, so just turn over on the other side and forget it."

"No, I can't, Bunce. Don't you realize the position in which I am placed by Mr. Randall's death? I hold a deed to his entire plantation, and I must sign a release without delay. What if it should ever be thought that I entered the game in earnest, with the deliberate intention of robbing Mr. Randall? You know my reputation," he added bitterly, "and how easy it is for a dog to earn a bad name. Bring me pen and ink at once, Larkin, if you please, for I won't have a moment's peace until I sign that paper."

Propped up on the pillows and supported by the still grumbling Bunce, he wrote the following:

I hereby surrender the absolute possession of all the property herein described to the child or children of John Randall.

EUGENE KIRBY.

"There!" he exclaimed. "Now I feel better, and there is no chance of my old neighbor's children being defrauded out of their inheritance."

"You worry a heap more about them than yourself," observed Bunce, "and there's no call for it. Even if they knew yoh had got this deed yoh're reckoned as a dead man by everybody. I heard from one of the boys that Moreau had skipped to Mexico, but you know how the river calls, and he'll answer sooner or later. When the fine old bucko does return don't be fool enough to give him another chance at your back, for he's a painfully modest cuss and prefers to stay in the rear. By rights he ought to get the same dose he gave you, and I'd do it for the asking."

"You know yoh wouldn't," said Kirby simply. "The moment I learn that Moreau has returned you may arrange a meeting for us. You can leave the rest to me."

Bunce nodded. "I guess there ain't any one who could get the better of you, Gene, face to face. I ain't much of a hand at the gospel, but I'll scare up a prayer or two for Jack Moreau's soul."

CHAPTER IV.

ALMOST one year elapsed before Colonel Moreau, harkening at length to the call of the river, returned to his old haunts in New Orleans. When he did so it was to learn that his supposed victim had entirely recovered from the effects of the "honorable combat" and, in conjunction with his partner, had recaptured his old niche of fame—premier professional gambler of the Mississippi. Quite aside from all financial reasons—the fact that a more skillful and successful rival was garnering the major spoils of the river—the news of his victim's recovery was seriously disquieting to the honorable colonel, and had he been forewarned he might have indefinitely prolonged his acquaintance with the more healthful climate of Mexico. He knew that Kirby was not the type of man to forget or condone a bullet in the back or the smirchling of whatever little remained of his once fair reputation, and had he even remotely suspected that he would recover he (Moreau) would not have prevaricated so cheerfully and with such abandon to young Randall. How much did the boy now know? That was the all important question. Kirby, of course, had learned that he stood accused of the late John Randall's suicide, but had he taken the trouble to refute it? Moreau did not think so, and Moreau was right.

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He abhorred Kirby's memory with an intensity passing the hatred of man and, even had he been a stranger to the then prevailing and primitive notions of justice, would, had he known the other lived, have immediately sought him out and killed him. If his father's memory demanded that no resistance should be made to the gambler's claim it likewise demanded that the latter should not live overlong to enjoy his newly acquired property.

More than once, as if uneasy intuition sought to prompt the truth, the boy had suggested to his sister the possibility of Kirby having survived Moreau's sincere attentions. Then he would break out in an unprovoked fit of fury and hatred.

"Supposing that scoundrel has lived and intends reaping the reward of his crime?" he would cry. "He gained that deed by the vilest scoundrelism ever practiced. Well, let him make good his claim if he can."

"But who will dispute it?" Adele would lifelessly inquire, plucking at her black dress, while twin patches of scarlet would begin to burn in the dead white of her face. "Do you think we could stoop to ask mercy from a man of that stamp? Whether the deed was gained honestly or not, it does not matter. Father's signature is on the paper, and we must stand by it, Tom. You know that. Anyway," she would finish drearily, "what does it matter? What does it matter where we go, what we become? Let this Mr. Kirby—if that be his name—finish the work he began so well."

"I wish you could pluck up a little more spirit, Dele," he would return, solicitous and resentful in the one breath. "Doesn't the thought of that scoundrel's possible recovery make your blood boil? Don't you ever

perception, rendered her indifferent to everything, she would instantly have suspected her brother's incenseness, for, hot headed and impulsive, he was not one to heed advice, accept the passive course that she had outlined.

As the months passed and nothing was heard of Kirby the possibility of his being alive and ever claiming the plantation was finally abandoned by Adele. But young Randall, although carefully professing to the contrary, still entertained the suspicion that his enemy lived. In time the thought became so insistent that he determined to quietly set on foot a thorough investigation. Visiting in person the town in which Kirby had fought his victorious battle against death, he eventually succeeded in tracing the physician who had attended the wounded gambler, and by him the boy's suspicions were verified beyond the possibility of a doubt. His intuition was vindicated. Kirby lived and, so far as the doctor knew, was at that moment busily engaged with his chosen profession.

Young Randall returned home, carefully concealing from his sister all hint of his mission. The girl had but lately expressed a desire to visit their aunt in New Orleans, for the plantation was pregnant with memories and sorrows that were fast growing unbearable. Taking advantage of this opportune desire and keeping his real purpose in the background, Tom now suggested that the house be temporarily closed and the long contemplated visit paid.

To be continued

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