

Webster=Man's Man

By PETER B. KYNE

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CHAPTER IV—Continued.

"Blast the luck," Billy Geary growled, "the old stunner isn't here. By the way, do you happen to have a Miss Dolores Ruey aboard?"

Dolores pricked up her little ears. What possible interest could this stranger have in her goings or comings?

"You picked a winner this time, Billy," she heard the pursuer say. "Stateroom sixteen, boat-deck, star-board side. You'll probably find her there, packing to go ashore."

"Thanks," Billy replied and stepped out of the pursuer's office. Dolores turned and faced him.

"I am Miss Ruey," she announced. "I heard you asking for me." Her eyes carried the query she had not put into words: "Who are you, and what do you want?" Billy saw and understood, and on the instant a wave of desolation surged over him.

So this was the vision he had volunteered to meet aboard La Estrellita, and by specious lies and hypocritical men, turn her back from the portals of Buenaventura to that dear old United States, which, Billy suddenly recalled with poignant pain, is a shabby country in which a young lady may very readily be lost forever. With the quick eye of youth, he noted that Dolores was perfectly wonderful in a white flannel skirt and jacket, white buck boots, white panama hat with a gorgeous puggaree, a mannish little linen collar, and a red four-in-hand tie. From under that white hat peeped a profusion of crinkly brown hair with a slightly reddish tinge to it; her eyes were big and brown and wide apart, with golden flecks in them; their glance met Billy's hungry gaze simply, directly, and with a curiosity there was no attempt to hide. Her nose was patrician; her beautiful short upper lip revealed the tips of two perfect, milk-white front teeth; she was, Billy Geary told himself, a goddess before whom all low, worthless, ornery fellows like himself should grovel and die happy, if perchance she might be so minded as to walk on their faces! He was aroused from his critical inventory when the hour spoke again: "You haven't answered my question, sir!"

"No," said Billy. "I didn't. Stupid of me, too. However, come to think of it, you didn't ask me any question. You looked it. My name is Geary—William H. Geary, by profession a mining engineer and by nature an ignoramus, and I have called to deliver some disappointing news regarding Henrietta Wilkins."

"Is she—"

"She is. Very much alive and in excellent health—or rather was, the last time it was my pleasure and privilege to call on the dear lady. But she isn't in Buenaventura now." Mentally Billy asked God to forgive him his black-hearted treachery to this winsome girl. He loathed the task he had planned and foisted upon himself, and nothing but the memory of Mother Jenks

"I'm sure you would, Mr. Geary. Nevertheless, there is one point that is not quite clear in my mind, and I wish you'd explain—"

"Command me, Miss Ruey."

"If this is such a frightful place, why are you so anxious, if I may employ such language, to horsewaggle your dearest friend, Mr. John S. Webster, into coming down here? Do you want to kill him and get his money—or what?"

Billy's face flamed at thought of the embarrassing trap his glib tongue had led him into. He cursed himself for a star-spangled jackass, and while he was engaged in this interesting pastime Dolores spoke again.

"And by the way, which is it? Miss Wilkins or Mrs.? You've called her both, and when I reminded you she was a Miss, you agreed with me, whereas she is nothing of the sort. She's a Mrs. Then you blurted out something about a Mother Jenks, and finally, Mr. Geary, it occurs to me that for a complete stranger you are unduly interested in my welfare. I'm not such a goose as to assimilate your weird tales of death from disease. It occurs to me that if your friend John S. Webster can risk Buenaventura, I can also."

"You—you know that old tarantula?" Billy gasped. "Why—I came out to warn him off the coast, too."

Dolores walked a step closer to Billy and eyed him disapprovingly. "I'm so sorry I can't believe that statement," she replied. "It happens that I was standing by the companion-ladder when you came aboard and spoke to the pursuer; when you asked him if Mr. Webster was aboard, your face was alight with eagerness and anticipation, but when you had reason to believe he was not aboard, you looked so terribly disappointed I felt sorry for you."

"I'm going ashore, if it's the last act of my life, and when I get there I'm going to interview the cable agent; then I'm going to call at the steamship office and scan the passenger list of the last three north-bound steamers, and if I do not find Henrietta Wilkins' name on one of those passenger lists I'm going up to Calle de Concordia No. 19—"

"When your telegram arrived, Miss Ruey, naturally Mrs. Wilkins was not here to receive it, and as I was the only person who had her address, the cable agent referred it to me. Under the circumstances, not knowing where

I could reach you with a cable informing you that Mrs. Wilkins was headed for California to see you, I had no other alternative but to let matters take their course. I decided you might arrive on La Estrellita, so I called to welcome you to our thriving little city, and, as a friend of about two minutes' standing, to warn you away from it."

Billy's men, as he voiced this warning, was so singularly mysterious that Dolores' curiosity was aroused instantly and rose superior to her grief. "Why, what's the matter?" she demanded.

Billy looked around, as if fearful of being overheard. He lowered his voice. "We're going to have one grand little first-class revolution," he replied. "It's due to bust almost any night now, and when it does, the streets of San Buenaventura will run red with blood."

Dolores blanched. "Oh, dearie me," she quavered. "Do they still have revolutions here? You know, Mr. Geary, my poor father was killed in one."

"Yes, and the same old political gang that shot him is still on deck," Billy warned her. "It would be highly dangerous for a Ruey, man or woman, to show his or her nose around Buenaventura about now. Besides, Miss Ruey, that isn't the worst," he continued, for a whole-hearted lad was Billy, who never did anything by halves. "The city is reeking with cholera." "Cholera!" Dolores' big brown eyes grew bigger with wonder and concern. "How strange the port authorities didn't warn us at New Orleans!"

"Tish! Tush! Fiddlesticks and then some. The fruit company censors everything, Miss Ruey, and the news doesn't get out."

"But the port doctor just said the passengers could go ashore."

"What's a human life to a doctor? Besides, he's on the slush-fund payroll and does whatever the higher-ups tell him. You be guided by what I tell you, Miss Ruey, and do not set foot on Sobrantean soil. If you stay aboard La Estrellita, you'll have your nice clean stateroom, your well-cooked meals, your bath, and the attentions of the stewardess. The steamer will be loaded in two days; then you go back to New Orleans, and by the time you arrive there I'll have been in communication by cable with Mother Jenks—I mean—"

"Mother who?" Dolores demanded. "A mere slip of the tongue, Miss Ruey. I was thinking of my landlady, I meant Mrs. Wilkins—"

"I'm so awfully obliged to you, Mr. Geary. You're so kind, I'm sure I'd be a most ungrateful girl not to be guided by you accordingly. You wouldn't risk any friend of yours in this terrible place, would you, Mr. Geary?"

"Indeed, I would not. By permitting anybody I thought anything of to come to this city, I should feel guilty of murder."

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"I surrender unconditionally," groaned Billy. "I'm a liar from beginning to end. I overlooked my hand. I beg of you to believe me, however, when I tell you that I only told you those whoppers because I was in honor bound to tell them. Personally, I don't want you to go away—at least, not until I'm ready to go away, too! Miss Ruey, my nose is in the dust. There is a fever in my brain and a misery in my heart—"

"And contrition in your face," she interrupted him laughingly. "You're forgiven, Mr. Geary—on one condition."

"Name it," he answered. "Tell me everything from beginning to end."

So Billy told her. "I would much rather have been visited with a plague of boils, like our old friend, the late Job, than have to tell you this, Miss Ruey," he concluded his recital. "Man proposes, but God disposes, and you're here and bound to learn the truth sooner or later. Mother isn't a lady and she knows it, but take it from me, Miss Ruey, she's a grand old piece of work. She's a scout—a ring-tailed sport—a regular individual and game as a gander."

"And I mustn't call at El Buen Amigo, Mr. Geary?"

"Perish the thought! Mother must call on you. El Buen Amigo is what you might term a hotel for tropical tramps of the masculine sex. Nearly all of Mother's guests have a past, you know. They're the submerged white tenth of Sobrante."

"Then my benefactor must call to see me here?" Billy nodded. "When will you bring her here?"

Billy reflected that Mother Jenks had been up rather late the night before and that trade in the cantina of El Buen Amigo had been unusually brisk; so since he desired to exhibit the old lady at her best, he concluded it might be well to spar for wind.

"Tomorrow at 10," he declared. Dolores inclined her head. Something told her she had better leave all future details to the amiable William.

"I remember you inquired for your friend, Mr. Webster, when you came aboard the steamer."

"I remember it, too," Billy countered ruefully. "I can't imagine what's become of him. Miss Ruey, did you ever go to meet the only human being in the world and discover that for some mysterious reason he had failed to keep the appointment? Miss Ruey, you'll have to meet old John Stuart the minute he lights in Buenaventura. He's a son of a—"

"Old John Stuart?" she queried. "How old?"

"Oh, thirty-nine or forty on actual count, but one of the kind that will live to be a thousand and then have to be killed with an axe. He's coming to Sobrante to help me put over a mining deal."

"How interesting, Mr. Geary! No wonder you were disappointed."

The last sentence was a shaft deliberately launched; to Dolores' delight it made a keyhole in Billy Geary's heart.

"Don't get me wrong, Miss Ruey," he hastened to assure her. "I have a good mine, but I'd trade it for a hand-shake from Jack! The good Lord only published one edition of Jack, and limited the edition to one volume; but the plates were melted for the junk we call the human race. Two weeks ago, when I was sick and penniless and despairing, the possessor of a concession on a fortune, but without a centavo in my pockets to buy a banana, when I was a veritable bescomber and existing on the charity of Mother Jenks, I managed finally to communicate with old Jack and told him where I was and what I had. There's his answer, Miss Ruey, and I'm not ashamed to say that when I got it I cried like a kid." And Billy handed her John Stuart Webster's remarkable cablegram, the receipt of which had, for Billy Geary, transformed night into day, purgatory into paradise. Dolores read it.

"No wonder you love him," she declared, and added artlessly: "His wife must simply adore him."

"He has no wife to bother his life, so he paddles his own canoe," Billy recited. "I don't believe the old sour dough has ever been in love with anything more charming than the goddess of fortune. He's woman-proof."

"About Mrs. Jenks," Dolores continued, abruptly changing the subject. "How nice to reflect that after she had trusted you and believed in you when you were penniless, you were enabled to justify her faith."

"You bet!" Billy declared. "I feel that I can never possibly hope to catch even with the old Samaritan, although I did try to show her how much I appreciated her."

"I dare say you went right out and bought her an impossible hat," Dolores challenged roguishly.

"No, I didn't, for a very sufficient reason. Down here the ladies do not wear hats. But I'll tell you what I did buy her, Miss Ruey—and oh, by George, I'm glad now I did it. She'll wear them tomorrow when I bring her to see you. I bought her a new black silk dress and an old-lace collar, and a gold breast pin and a tortoise shell hair comb and hired an open carriage

and took her for an evening ride on the Malecon to listen to the band concert."

"Did she like that?"

"She ate it up," Billy declared with conviction. "I think it was her first adventure in democracy."

Billy's pulse was still far from normal when he reached El Buen Amigo, for he was infused with a strange, new-found warmth that burned like malarial fever, but wasn't. He wasted no preliminaries on Mother Jenks, but bluntly acquainted her with the facts in the case.

Mother Jenks eyed him a moment wildly. "Gord's truth!" she gasped; she reached for her favorite elixir, but Billy got the bottle first.

"Nothing doing," he warned this strange publican. "Mother, you're faking it—and what would your sainted 'Enery say to that? Do you want that angel to kiss you and get a whiff of this brandy?"

Mother Jenks' eyes actually popped. "Gor, Willie," she gasped, "aven't I told ye she's a lady! Me kiss the lamb! El trust, Mr. Geary, as 'ow I knows my place an' can keep it."

"Yes, I know," Billy soothed the frightened old woman, "but the trouble is Miss Dolores doesn't know here—and something tells ye if she does, she'll forget it. She'll take you in her arms and kiss you, sure as death and taxes."

And she did! "My lamb, my lamb," sobbed Mother Jenks the next morning, and rested her old cheek, with its rum-begotten hue, close to the rose-tinted ivory cheek of her ward. "Me—wot I am—an' to think—"

"You're a sweet old dear," Dolores whispered, patting the gray head; "and I'm going to call you Mother."

"Mr. William H. Geary," the girl remarked that night, "I know now why your friend, Mr. Webster, sent that cablegram. I think you're a scout, too."

For reasons best known to himself Mr. Geary blushed furiously. "I—I'd better go and break the news to Mother," he suggested lamely. She held out her hand; and Billy, having been long enough in Sobrante to have acquired the habit, bent his malarial person over that hand and kissed it. As he went out it occurred to him that had the lobby of the Hotel Mateo been paved with eggs, he must have floated over them like a wraith, so light did he feel within.

CHAPTER VII.

Webster reached New Orleans at the end of the first leg of his journey, to discover that he was one day late to board the Atlanta—a banana boat of the Consolidated Fruit company's line plying regularly between New Orleans and San Buenaventura—which necessitated a wait of three days for the steamer La Estrellita of the Caribbean Mail line, running to Caracas and way ports.

He decided to visit the ticket office of the Caribbean Mail line immediately and avoid the rush in case the travel should be heavy.

The steamship office was in Canal street. The clerk was waiting on two well-dressed and palpably low-bred sons of the tropics, to whom he had just displayed a passenger list which the two were scanning critically. Their interest in it was so obvious that unconsciously Webster peeped over their shoulders (no difficult task for one of his stature) and discovered to be the passenger list of the steamer La Estrellita. They were conversing together in low tones and Webster, who had spent many years of his life following his profession in Mexico, recognized their speech as the bastard Spanish of the peon.

He sat down in the long wall seat and waited until the pair, having completed their scrutiny of the list, turned to pass out. He glanced at them casually. One was a tall thin man whose bloodshot eyes were inclined to "pop" a little—infallible evidence in the Latin-American that he is drinking more hard liquor than is good for him.

His companion was plainly of the same racial stock, although Webster suspected him of a slight admixture of negro blood. He was short, stocky, and aggressive looking; like his companion, bejeweled and possessed of a thin, carefully cultivated moustache that seemed to consist of about nineteen hairs on one side and twenty on the other. Evidently once upon a time, as the story books have it, he had been shot. Webster suspected a Mauser bullet, fired at long range, it had entered his right cheek, just below the malar, ranged downward through his mouth and out through a fold of flabby flesh under his left jaw. It must have been a frightful wound, but it had healed well except at the point of entrance, where it had a tendency to pucker considerably, thus drawing the man's eyelid down on his cheek and giving to that visual organ something of the appearance of a bulldog's.

Webster gazed after them whimsically as he approached the counter.

"I'd hate to wake up some night and find that hombre with the puckered eye leaning over me. By the way," he continued, suddenly apprehensive, "do you get much of that parakeet travel on your line?"

"About 80 per cent. of it is off color, sir."

Webster pondered the 80-per-cent. probability of being berthed in the same stateroom with one of these people and the prospect was as revolting to him as would be an uninvited negro guest at the dining table of a southern family. He had all a Westerner's hatred for the breed.

"Well, I want a ticket to San Buenaventura," he informed the clerk, "but I don't relish the idea of a Greaser in the same stateroom with me. I would

der if you couldn't manage to fix me with a stateroom all to myself, or at least arrange it so that in the event of company I'll draw a white man."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot guarantee you absolute privacy nor any kind of white man. It's pretty mixed travel to all Central American ports."

"How many berths in your first-class staterooms?"

"Two."

Webster smiled brightly. He had found a way out of the difficulty. "I'll buy 'em both, son," he announced.

"I cannot sell you an entire stateroom, sir. It's against the orders of the company to sell two berths to one man. The travel is pretty brisk and it's hardly fair to the public, you know."

"Well, suppose I buy one ticket for myself and the other for—well, for my valet, let us say. Of course," he added brightly, "I haven't engaged the valet yet and even should I do so I wouldn't be at all surprised if the rascal missed the boat!"

The clerk glanced at him with a slow smile, and pondered. "Well," he said presently, "if you care to buy a ticket for your valet, I'm sure I shouldn't worry whether or not he catches the boat. If my records show that the space is sold to two men and the purser collects two tickets, I think you'll be pretty safe from intrusion."

"To the harassed traveler," said Mr. Webster, "a meeting with a gentleman of your penetration is as refreshing as a canteen of cool water in the desert. Shoot!" and he produced a handful of gold.

"I will—provided I have one empty cabin," and the clerk turned from the counter to consult his record of berths already sold and others reserved but not paid for. Presently he faced Webster at the counter.

"The outlook is very blue," he announced. "However, I have one berth



"The Outlook is Very Blue."

In No. 34 reserved by a gentleman who was to call for it by two o'clock to-day." He looked at his watch. "It is now a quarter of one. If the reservation isn't claimed promptly at two o'clock I shall cancel it and reserve for you both berths in that room. If you will be good enough to leave me your name and address I will telephone you after that hour. In the meantime, you may make reservation of the other berth in the same stateroom. I feel very confident that the reservation in No. 34 will not be called for, Mr.—"

"Webster—John S. Webster. You are very kind, indeed. I'm at the St. Charles."

"Be there at a quarter after two, Mr. Webster, and you will hear from me promptly on the minute," the clerk assured him; whereupon Webster paid for one berth and departed for his hotel with a feeling that the clerk's report would be favorable.

True to his promise, at precisely a quarter after two, the ticket clerk telephoned Webster at his hotel that the berth in No. 34 had been canceled and the entire stateroom was now at his disposal.

"If you will be good enough to give me the name of your valet," he concluded, "I will fill in both names on my passenger manifest and send the tickets to your hotel by messenger immediately. You can then sign the tickets—I have already signed them as witness—and pay the messenger."

"Well, I haven't engaged that valet as yet," Webster began.

"What's the odds? He's going to miss the boat, anyhow. All I require is a name."

"That ought to be a simple request to comply with. Let me see!"

"I read a book once, Mr. Webster, and the valet in that book was called Andrew Bowers."

"Bowers is a fine old English name. Let us seek no further. Andrew Bowers it is."

"Thank you. All you have to do then is to remember to sign the name, Andrew Bowers, on one ticket. Don't forget your valet's name now, and ball everything up," and the clerk hung up, laughing.

Half an hour later a boy from the steamship office arrived with the tickets, collected for them, and departed, leaving John Stuart Webster singularly pleased with himself and at peace with the entire world.

A "large" dinner at Antoine's that night (Webster had heard of Antoine's dinners, both large and small and was resolved not to leave New Orleans until he had visited the famous restaur-

ant), and a stroll through the picturesque old French quarter and along the levee next day, helped to render his enforced stay in New Orleans delightful, interesting, and instructive. For Sunday he planned an early morning visit to the old French market, around which still lingers much of the picturesque charm and colorful romance of a day that is done—that echo of yesterday, as it were, which has left New Orleans an individuality as distinct as that which the olden, golden, goddess days have left upon San Francisco.

He rose before six o'clock, therefore; found a taxi, with the driver sound asleep inside at the curb in front of the hotel; gave the latter his instructions, and climbed in.

Opposite Jackson Square the cloying sweetness of palmetto, palm, and fig burdened the air. Above the rumble of the taxi he could hear the distant babel of voices in the French market across the square, so he halted the taxicab, alighted, and handed the driver a bill.

"I want to explore this square," he said. He had recognized it by the heroic statue of General Jackson peeping through the trees. "I'll walk through the square to the market, and you may proceed to the market and meet me there. Later we will return to the hotel."

A Creole girl—starry-eyed, beautiful, rich with the glorious coloring of her race—passed him bound for the cathedral across the square, as Webster thought, for she carried a large prayer book on her arm. His glance followed the girl down the walk.

Presently she halted. A young man rose from a bench where he evidently had been waiting for her, and bowed low, his hat clasped to his breast, as only a Frenchman or a Spanish grandee can bow. Webster saw the Creole girl turn to him with a little gesture of pleasure. She extended her hand and the young man kissed it with old-fashioned courtesy.

John Stuart Webster with reverent and wistful eyes watched their meeting.

"Forty years old," he thought, "and I haven't spoken to a dozen women that caused me a second thought, or who weren't postmistresses or biscuit shooters! Forty years old and I've never been in love! Springtime down that little path and Indian summer in my old fool heart. Why, I ought to be arrested for failure to live!"

The lovers were walking slowly, arm in arm, along the path by which the girl had come, so with a courtesy and gentleness that were innate in him, Webster stepped out of sight behind the statue of Old Hickory; for he did not desire, by his mere presence, to intrude a discordant note in the perfect harmony of those two human hearts. He knew they desired that sylvan path to themselves; that evidently they had sought their early morning tryst in the knowledge that the square was likely to be deserted at this hour.

The young man was speaking as they passed; his voice was rich, pleasant, vibrant with the earnestness of what he had to say; with a pretty little silver mounted walking stick he slashed at spears of grass alongside the path; the girl was crying a little. Neither of them had seen him, so he entered a path that led from them at right angles.

He had proceeded but a few feet along this trail when, through a break in the shrubbery ahead of him, he saw two men. Brief as was his glimpse of them, Webster instantly recognized the two Central Americans he had seen in the steamship ticket office two days previous.

They were not walking as walk two men abroad at this hour for a constitutional. Neither did they walk as walk men, churchward bound. A slight, skulking air marked their progress, and caused Webster to wonder idly what they were stalking.

He turned into the path down which the two men had passed, not with the slightest idea of shadowing them, but because his destination lay in that direction.

Both men had forsaken the gravelled path and were walking on the soft velvet of blue grass lawn that fringed it! "Perhaps I'd better deaden my hoof beats also," John Stuart Webster soliloquized, and followed suit immediately.

(To be continued)

Housekeeping.

We went housekeeping immediately upon our marriage, for mother said she despised these boarding people, she went to housekeeping when she was married, and she meant all her children should do the same; and if their husbands weren't able to go to housekeeping then they weren't able to be husbands, and there was an end of it; and no two people, she said brought up in different fashions, could unite their lives into one without some jarring, and a third party was sure to turn that jar into an earthquake; and if there were fewer third parties that the trouble would be done away with, for she believed half the divorces and separations and quarrels in the state were brought about by boarding house intimacies with third parties.—Harris Prescott Spofford.

Menace to Locusts.

Locusts in Algeria have found a dangerous enemy in a fly which follows them and lays its eggs where they lay theirs.

Good Reasons for Optimism.

The little world of ours is not growing worse to the men and women who are doing their best to make it better.



"You Haven't Answered My Question."