

WEBSTER—MAN'S MAN

By PETER B. KYNE

Author of "Cappy Ricks," "The Valley of the Giants," Etc.

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CHAPTER XI—Continued.

"This is more comfort than I had hoped for when I came here, gentlemen. I am very grateful, I assure you. Of course this little revolution you're cooking up is no affair of mine, and I trust I need not assure you that your confidence is quite safe with me."

The Doctor and the Colonel immediately rose and bowed like a pair of marionettes. Webster turned to Ricardo.

"Have you had any experience in revolutions, my son?" he asked.

Ricardo nodded. "I realized I had to have experience, and so I went to Mexico. I was with Madero through the first revolution."

"How are you arming your men?"

"Mannlichers. I've got 20,000,000 rounds of cartridges, 25 machine guns, and a dozen three-inch field guns. I have also engaged 200 American ex-soldiers to handle the machine guns and the battery. These rascals cost me \$5 a day gold, but they're worth it; they like fighting and will go anywhere to get it—and are faithful."

"You are secretly mobilizing in the mountains, eh?" Webster rubbed his chin reflectively. "Then I take it you'll attack Buenaventura when you strike the first blow?"

"Quite right. We must capture a seaport if we are to revolute successfully."

"I'm glad to know that. I'll make it my business to be up in the mountains at the time. I'm for peace, every rattle out of the box. Gentlemen, you've cheered me wonderfully. I will now go home and leave you to your evil machinations; and, the good Lord and the jiggers willing, I shall yet glean a night's sleep."

Mother Jenks was waiting for Webster at the foot of the stairs. He paused on the threshold.

"Mrs. Jenks," he said, "Billy tells me you have been very kind to him. I want to tell you how much I appreciate it and that I stand willing to reciprocate any time you are in need."

Mother Jenks fingered her beard and reflected. "Ave you met Miss Dolores Ruy, sir?" she queried.

"Your ward? Yes."

"Ow does the lamb strike you, Mr. Webster?"

"I have never met many women; I have known few intimately; but I should say that Miss Dolores Ruy is the marvel of her sex. She is as beautiful as she is good, and is as intelligent as she can be."

"She's a lily, sir," Mother Jenks affirmed proudly. "An I done it. You can see with art a heyve wot I am, but for all that, I've done my duty by her. From the day my sainted 'Bery'—e was a colonel o' artillery under President Ruy, Dolores' father—hescaped from the burnin' palace with 'er an' told me to raise 'er a lily for the syke of her father, as was the finest gentleman this rotten country'll ever see, she's been my guidin' star. She's self-supportin' now, but still I ain't done my whole duty by her. I want to see 'er married to a gentleman as'll maintain 'er like a lily."

"Well, Mrs. Jenks, I think you will live to see that worthy ambition attained. Mr. Geary is head over heels in love with her."

"Aye. Willie's a nice lad—I could wish no better; but wot 'e's got 'e got from you, an' where'll 'e be if 'is mine doesn't p'y big? Now, with you, sir, it's different. You're a bit older'n Billy, an' more settled an' serious; you've made yer fortune, so Willie tells me, an' 'ot to go beatin' about the bally bush, I s'y, wot's the matter with you an' her steppin' over the broomstick together? You might go a bloomin' sight farther an' fare wuss."

"Too old, my dear schemer, too old!" John Stuart replied smilingly. "And she's in love with Billy. Don't worry. If he doesn't make a go of this mining concession, I'll take care of his finances until he can do so himself. I do not mind telling you, in strictest confidence, that I have made my will and divided my money equally between them."

"Gord bless you, for a sweet, kind gentleman," Mother Jenks gulped, quite overcome with emotion. Hastily Webster bade Mother Jenks good night and hurried away to escape a discussion on such a delicate topic with Billy's blunt and single-minded landlady. His mind was in a tumult. So it was that he paid no attention to a vehicle that jogged by him with the cochoero sagging low in his seat, half asleep over the reins, until a quick command from the closed interior brought the vehicle to an abrupt halt, half a block in advance of Webster.

Save for an arc light at each end of the block, the Calle de Concordia was dim; save for Webster, the carriage and the two men who piled hurriedly out at the rear of the conveyance, the Calle de Concordia was devoid of life. Webster saw one of the men hurriedly toss a coin to the cochoero; with a fervent "Gracias, mi capitan," the driver chuckled to his horse, arched the corner into the Calle Elisavinda and disappeared, leaving his passengers facing Webster and calmly waiting his approach. He was within

20 feet of them when the taller of the two men spoke.

"Good evening, my American friend. This meeting is a pleasure we scarcely hoped to have so soon. For the same we are indebted to Lieutenant Arredondo, who happened to look back as we passed you, and recognized you under the arc light."

Webster halted abruptly; the two Sobrantean officers stood smiling and evidently enjoying his discomfiture. Each carried a service revolver in a closed holster fastened to his sword-belt, but neither had as yet made a move to draw—seeing which, Webster felt sufficiently reassured to accept the unwelcome situation with a grace equal to that of his enemies.

"What? You two had little boys up this late! I'm surprised," he replied in Spanish. He folded his arms, struck an attitude and surveyed them as might an indignant father. "You kids have been up to some mischief," he added, as his right hand closed over the butt of his automatic, where it lay slung in the open holster under his left arm between his shirt and coat. "Can it be possible you are going to take advantage of superior numbers and the fact that you are both armed, to force me into a duel on your terms, my dear Captain Benavides?"

By a deferential bow, the unwholesome Benavides indicated that such were his intentions. "Then," said Webster, "as the challenged party I have the choice of weapons. I choose pistols."

"At what range?" the Lieutenant asked with mock interest.

"As we stand at present. I'm armed. Pull your hardware, you pretty pair of polecats, and see if you can beat me to the draw."

Captain Benavides' jaw dropped slightly; with a quiet, deliberate motion his hand stole to his holster-flap. Lieutenant Arredondo wet his lips and glanced so apprehensively at his companion that Webster was aware that there was a situation not to his liking. "You should use an open holster," Webster taunted. "Come, come—unbutton that holster-flap and get busy."

Benavides' hand came away from the holster. He was not the least bit frightened, but his sense of proportion in matters of this kind was undergoing a shake-up.

"In disposing of any enemy in a gun fight, so a professional killer once informed me," Webster continued, "it is a good plan to put your first bullet anywhere in the abdomen; the shock of a bullet there paralyzes your opponent for a few seconds and prevents him from returning the compliment, and in the interim you blow his brains out while he lies looking at you. I have never had any practical experience in matters of this kind, but I don't mind telling you that if I must practice on somebody, the good Lord could not have provided two more delightful subjects."

He ceased speaking, and for nearly half a minute the three men appraised each other. Benavides was smiling slightly; Arredondo was fidgeting; Webster's glance never faltered from the captain's nervous hand.

"You would be very foolish to draw," Webster then assured Benavides. "If I am forced to kill you, it will be with profound regret. Suppose you two dear, sweet children run along home and think this thing over. You may change your mind by tomorrow morn—"

The captain's hand, with the speed of a juggler's, had flown to his holster; but quick as he was, Webster was a split second quicker. The sound of his shot roared through the silent calle, and Benavides, with his pistol half drawn, lifted a bloody, shattered hand from the butt as Webster's automatic swept in a swift arc and covered Arredondo, whose arms on the instant went skyward.

"That wasn't a half bad duel," Webster remarked coldly. "Are you not obliged to me, Captain, for not blowing your brains out—for refraining from shooting you first through the abdomen? Bless you, my boy, I've been stuck for years in places where the only sport consisted in seeing who could take a revolver, shoot at a tin can and roll it farthest in three seconds. Let me see your hand."

Benavides sullenly held up that dripping member, and Webster inspected it at a respectful distance. "Steel jacket bullet," he informed the wounded man. "Small hole—didn't do much damage. You'll be just as well as ever in a month."

He helped himself to Arredondo's gun, flipped out the cylinder, and slipped all six cartridges into his palm. Similarly he disarmed Benavides, expressed his regret that circumstances had rendered it imperative to use force, and strolled blithely down the calle. In the darkened path he groped along the wall until he found the swinging rope by which he had descended from his room—whereupon he removed his shoes, tied the laces together, slung them around his neck, dug his toes into the adobe wall and climbed briskly to his room.

The next morning Webster waited until Dolores appeared and then accompanied her into the dining room for breakfast.

"Well, how did you pass your first night in Buenaventura?" she inquired, in the manufacture of breakfast conversation.

"Not very well. Jiggers bit me and woke me up, and finally I fell into a trance and had a vision—about you. After that I couldn't go to sleep again. I was fairly bursting to see you at breakfast and read your palm. I've just discovered a wonderful system. 'Show me,' she flashed back at him and she extended her little hand. He picked it up gravely and with the dull tinge of a fork made a great show of tracing the lines on her palm.

"You are about twenty-four years old, and your ancestors were pure-bred Castilians who came from Madrid, crossing the Atlantic in caravels. Ever since the first Ruy landed on this coast the family has been identified with the government of the country in one way or another. When you were quite a little girl, your father, Don Ricardo Ruy, at that time president of Sobrante, failed to suppress a revolution and was cornered in the government palace, which was set afire.

"Through the bravery and devotion of a cockney gentleman, Colonel Henry Jenks, an artillery officer in your father's army you were saved from perishing in the burning palace. Colonel Jenks turned you over to his spouse, now known as Mother Jenks, with instructions to raise you a lily, and Mother Jenks has carried out those instructions. Colonel Jenks and your father were executed, and Mother Jenks sent you to the United States to be educated. You had a brother, Ricardo Luis Ruy, older than yourself by seven or eight years, I should judge. In some mysterious manner you and your brother lost track of each other, and at the present moment he believes you perished in the flames that gutted the government palace.

"You are of a proud, independent nature; you work at something for a living, and inasmuch as you haven't been able to set aside a great deal of money from your earnings, you are planning to terminate your visit to your native land at an early date and return to the United States for the purpose of getting back to work. These plans, however, will never be consummated.

"Why? Because you are to be married to a nice man and live happily ever afterward, and about sixty days from now, if all goes well, I, John S. Webster, am going to introduce you to your long-lost brother Ricardo. You will first see Ricardo riding at the head of his victorious rebel troops as he enters Buenaventura. He will be the next president of this wretched country, if, fortunately, he is not killed in the revolution he is now fomenting against his father's ancient enemy. Your brother does not know you are living and it will be a proud and happy day for me when I bring him to you. In the interim, what do you purpose having for breakfast? Ham and eggs sunny side up, an omelette or a cereal?"

He released her hand and favored her with the boyish grin that always had the effect of stripping the years from him as one strips the husk from a ripe ear of corn. She was gazing at him in wide-eyed amazement. "Is my brother really alive?" "He was as late as midnight last night. Do you recall the chap I saved from being assassinated in New Orleans?" "Yes."

"Your worthy brother. And do you recall the chauffeur whose passage to this port I was forced to pay?" "Yes."

"The same individual. I sent him ashore in the launch with Billy, and he has been housed at El Buen Anillo, but left early this morning for the back country to open a recruiting office."

She reached across the little table and squeezed his big brown hand impulsively. "You're the most wonderful man I ever knew. And does my poor brother know I am living, Mr. Webster?" "Yes."

"No—and I'm not going to tell him. I think it will be much nicer to restore you to each other on the steps of the government palace on the day when the Ruy faction comes into its own again. That will make his victory all the sweeter. By the way, where was Ricardo when your father's ship of state went on the rocks?" "At school in a military academy in Kentucky."

"It is a marvelous mix-up, which Ricardo can doubtless explain, Miss Ruy. I know he believes his sister perished with her father. Mother Jenks didn't know where he was and couldn't communicate with him—and there you are. However, little old Jack Fix-it will bring you together again in due course. In the interim, how about those eggs? Straight up—or flip 'em?"

She beamed across at him. "We are going to be such good, true friends, aren't we?" she urged. He almost shivered, but managed a hypocritical nod. "While we have only known each other twenty-four hours, it seems a great deal longer than that—probably because Billy has told me so much

about you, and you're—so comfortable and easy to get acquainted with, and I—I can't very well express my gratitude for what you've done—for what you're going to do." Her voice faltered; she smiled roguishly through the tears of her emotion. "If I were only Billy, now, I could put my arm across your shoulders and settle the matter by saying: 'Johnny, you old horse-thief, you're all right.'"

"The best thing to do would be to cease pulling me up with importance. And now, before we climb out of the realm of romance and the improbable to the more substantial plane of things for breakfast, just one brief word of caution. Now that I have told you your brother lives and is in Buenaventura, forget it until I mention it again, because his presence here is his secret, not ours."

"All right, Caliph," she agreed. "I think I shall call you that hereafter. Like the late Caliph Haroun Al Raschid, it appears you have a habit of prowling around o' nights in queer places, doing good deeds for your subjects. But tell me about my brother. Describe him to me."

"Not now. Here comes the head waiter with a cablegram for me, I think."

That functionary came to their table and handed one of the familiar yellow envelopes to each of them.

"We'll excuse each other," Dolores suggested. She read:

"Go you if I lose. You are a good, game little scout, and I like you fine. "JEROME."

She glanced across at Webster, whose face was a conflating study of emotions in which disappointment and amazement appeared to predominate.

"You ancient scoundrel," she heard him murmur.

"What ho, Caliph! Unpleasant news?" she ventured.

"Yes—and no. I had one of the finest jobs in the world all staked out—and now the boss cables me it's filled—by a better man."

"What are you going to do about it?" "Well—as soon as I've had my breakfast, I'm going to cable Neddy Jerome and tell him I'm satisfied—satisfied to stay here and satisfied



"You Ancient Scoundrel!"

he's a liar. You see, Miss Ruy, he objected vigorously to my coming here in the first place—wanted me to take a 30-day vacation and then manage the Colorado Consolidated Mines company, Ltd., for him. I like Neddy and would have been glad to go to work for his company, but, of course, Billy comes first, and so I declined the offer. Later I changed my mind, and last night I cabled him I'd accept if he'd wait 60 days—possibly 90; and now he replies that he's sorry, but the job is filled by a better man. That's why I know he's a liar."

"I see. You figure there isn't a better mining engineer than you—eh, Caliph?"

He looked at her reproachfully. "No, but Neddy Jerome does, and I know he does because he has taken the trouble to tell me so more than once. And as a rule Neddy inclines toward the truth. However, it's just as well—". He paused, staring hard at her. "By the way, you foretold this! Why, this is amazing."

"She could have wept with laughter. "Well"—sincerely—"I told you some other things equally amazing, did I not?"

"Yes, you told me other things more or less interesting, but you foretold this. How do you account for that?"

"The witness declines to answer on the ground that she may incriminate herself and be burned for a witch."

"Remarkable woman!" "You were about to remark that it is just as well—"

"That Neddy's reconciled to losing me, because since cabling him yesterday evening I've changed my mind

again. I'm going to stay here now."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Just to be obstinate. Apparently I'm not wanted here by the powers that be; so just to rile them I'm going to hang around Sobrante and argue the question with them. By the way, I see you received a cablegram also. Better news than mine, I hope."

She nodded. "I have a little business deal on back home. Haven't got a great deal invested, but it looks as if I might make \$10,000."

He arched his eyebrows and favored her with a little disapproving grunt. Somed like the prospectus of a false mining promoter—yes, by thunder, that was it. Dolores was a school teacher, and school teachers and doctors are ever the mainstay of a swindler's sucker list.

"You won \$10 from me yesterday," he challenged. "Bet you another ten I can tell you the nature of your investment."

"Go you, if I lose!" Unconsciously she was learning the argot of the male of the species, as exemplified in Neddy Jerome's cablegram.

"It's a mining property."

"You win. It is," she answered truthfully, starting to open her purse. "Quartz or placer?"

"I don't know. Explain."

"Quartz is gold-bearing rock, and placer is gold-bearing gravel."

"Then my mining property is placer, because it has lots of sand."

"I knew it, I knew it," she warned her solemnly, and he shook an admonitory finger at her. "Black sand, eh? Is the gold very fine?"

"I think it is."

"Then you're stung good and deep—so don't delude yourself into thinking you have \$10,000 coming. I never knew a proposition for saving the fine gold in black sand that didn't turn out to be a fizzle. It's the hardest thing in the world to save. Now, listen, you tell me the name of the film-fixer artist that got you into this deal, and when I get back to the United States I'll investigate the company; if it's an out-and-out swindle, I'll take that promoter by the throat and choke your money out of him, the scoundrel! It is just these fly-by-night fellows that ruin the finest gambling game in the world and scare off investors in legitimate mining propositions."

"Oh, you mustn't—really, Caliph. He's an old man, and I only did it to help him out."

"There should be no sentiment in business, Miss Ruy."

"Oh, well, let's be cheerful and hopeful, Caliph, and discuss a more important subject."

She was very serious now, for by her meddling she had, she realized, so arranged matters that at a time when John Stuart Webster's very life depended upon his immediate departure from Buenaventura, he was planning to stay and face the music, just to be obstinate. "You must reconsider your decision to remain in this country," she insisted. "Your life may be the price of liberty of action, you know. Isn't Billy capable of developing the mine after you advance the cash?"

"I wouldn't advance him a cent for his mine until I had investigated it myself."

"Then you should make some arrangements to safeguard yourself while making the investigation, and before Sobrante immediately therefor isn't that a sensible proposition?"

"Very—if I felt like leaving Sobrante. But I do not. If that mining concession is a potential winner, I'll have to stick around and make a winner out of it before I go away and leave Bill in charge. Besides, I'm worried about Bill. He's full of malarial fever, and last night I got thinking about him and decided to send him back to the Colorado mountains for a few months. I want some regular doctors to work on Bill so he'll be fit when he gets back on the job."

As a matter of fact, this idea of sending Billy to the United States had but that moment occurred to Jack Webster; he reflected now that this plan was little short of an inspiration. It would give Billy and Dolores an opportunity to marry and have a honeymoon; it would leave him free of her disturbing presence, and enable him to leave Sobrante when the Gearys should return. He resolved to speak to Billy about it.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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