Capt. Velvet's Farewell

The Adventures of Three New Yorkers Who Tried to Run a Whole Republic

By Edgar Franklin

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Pollard, Ryan and Ryan, three New York men, had disappeared in the lands of Capt. Velvet, a shrewd and ruthless of fortune who is the power behind the throne in the South American republic of Santa Chansa. They have trailed to the cast to return Velvet and have found him, arriving at Bolamanga, capital of Santa Chansa, that are now there in his power. On their passage to "terra firma" he outlined them. A mysterious stranger who shadowed actually the crooks, gives them money, and bids them make to personal meeting of and Velvet consultation. They attend the meeting.

CHAPTER II.

(Continued.)

Out of Poverty.

THE ferocious parson rose and cleared his throat. The massive Senor Damba, glancing at him, also arose.

"I will speak first," he said flatly. "Heaven having sent these three, it is fitting that they should know all, and who so able to tell them as I?"

His hard, merciless gaze settled upon William Ryan for a second, and for no reason at all Mr. Ryan shuddered.

"Thus, senores!" he pursued, while Senor Aripo, having lighted another cigarette, permitted his eyes to snap angrily at the other wall and his fingers to tap upon the able. "You know our unhappy country, Mendez tells me. You know her sorrows under the iron rule, the implacable tyranny, the incredible domination of the indescribable thing they have named Captain Velvet!

"You know, senores, that here he is the government, whatever puppets he chooses to hold before our stricken people! You know as well that he is the money trust of Santa Chansa, grinding the impoverished through his wretched bank, wringing blood from the penniless!

"You know, senores, that here he holds all commerce, all industry by the throat—under the thin, the scurvy, the cowardly guise of laws which, he tells our deluded populace, he had passed solely to make business honest.

"Yet you do not know all, senores," Senor Damba assured them. "And before going further it is well that the smallest crime, the most contemptible iniquity, of the damnable Velvet should be carven into your shrinking, horrified minds. Hence for you I shall trace his whole career in Santa Chansa, step by step."

He drew a long, satisfied breath and prepared for the real speech.

"In the never-to-be-sufficiently-regretted year of 1898," he continued, "a steamer, entering our harbor one morning, signalled that she would land a passenger. She was, senores, an ordinary steamer, with no outward marks to indicate the blight she was placing upon our fair, our beloved land. She was, if I recall"——

"Well, what's it all leading to—revolution?" Mr. Pollard asked sharply.

Senor Damba, halted, glared at him. Senor Mendez shifted nervously.

"Far from that, senor," he said. "Perhaps, Damba, if you will"——

"Perhaps, if we eliminate Damba altogether for the present, business of the meeting will be expedited!" the gigantic Aripo said snappily as he shot to his feet. "See, senores! We, the five, have sworn to rid our republic of Capt. Velvet! I have suggested that we slay him in the open street and, having pinned his heart to the door of the palacio, lead out his President and Cabinet and burn them in the public square. It is good?"

"It sounds good to me," said Mr. Pollard. "Why don't you do it?"

Senor Aripo started violently and cleared his throat.

"We do not desire to—er—appear publicly in the matter," he stated.

"And, further," Senor Ferra said mildly, having returned from an apparently involuntary spell of listening at the trap-door as Senor Damba sat down with a snort—"further, as I hold, Velvet could be poisoned far less conspicuously; and as for Pacato—a knife in the heart as he sleeps and—pouff! It is done!"

Far away an innocent boy screamed at his play. Silence fell suddenly on the gathering. Only when Mendez had raised the trap and examined the lower floor with a pocket flashlight did he submit in a whisper:

"One must be cautious."

"Yet why?" Aripo demanded recklessly, albeit in carefully modulated tones. "Are we then insects, to fear this boisterous lout? Are we of the crawling things, senores, to tremble at the thought that we meet here and plan for the salvation of our land? I tell you, no! Again I tell you—no! Remember, senores, our watchword—blood! Remember, senores, that we, the five, have pledged our lives and our wealth, to the very last penny"——

"Are you all wealthy?" asked Mr. Pollard, pausing in a yawn.

"All, senor."

"Then—well, suppose we just sit around the table here and talk the whole thing over quietly?" the guiding mind asked happily. "Do I take it that you are the heads of a movement organized to dab Velvet off the map of this country?"

"We are the movement, senor!" Damba said heavily.

"And what are you going to do when you get rid of him—seize the government?"

"We shall cause to be elected persons who do not interfere with our business activities, senor," Perito said earnestly. "As things stand one cannot raise a price, one cannot impose a condition which gains one a few pennies but that this blatant curse must discover it and bawl to the people that they are being cheated! One cannot lower wages, one cannot"——

"Nor is it in these ways alone, senores," Senor Ferra put in angrily. "I, only last year, spent seventeen thousand dollars in bribing officials before the contracts for army supplies were granted me. And what happened? Dios! Just once this Velvet looked at"——

"And I—I!" Aripo cried. "Last year, too, I had all but sold the government an official mail steamer for a wretched million dollars, senores! It was a splendid steamer, too, which had cost me—oh, a little less, perhaps, for one must make a profit, and much money had been spent on new paint and metal polish for the machinery. Yet, even when the money"——

"Yet these things are but trifles to what I—" Mendez began.

They were all talking now with such utter caution that all within five squares must have heard. Mr. Pollard sat back and grinned his frank enjoyment. He did not understand at all, but he understood enough even now.

"And for these reasons, I say to you, he shall be dragged to the Plaza Libertad, and, with the cheering crowd around to watch, his arms shall be plucked out first, and then his legs shall be plucked out! I, Aripo, swear it!" that gentleman concluded triumphantly, having drowned out the rest.

The storm had subsided. Mr. Pollard leaned forward briskly.

"How long have you been meeting?" he asked.

"For three months, senor."

"How many ways have you attacked him and what happened?"

Senor Aripo scowled at his cigarette.

"He has not yet been attacked; there is much preliminary planning to be done," he said.

"And nobody willing to tackle him?" chuckled the guiding mind.

"You do not understand," Senor Damba said angrily. "We, senor, are prominent citizens. We do not wish to appear—until the crisis has passed at least—as being concerned in this matter."

"And here also it is very difficult to hire a really reliable assassin," Ferra confessed.

"So that when I met you"—— Mendez began with equal candor.

"All right; I understand," Mr. Pollard said crisply. "What do we get out of this when it's over?"

"If his death is sufficiently agonizing you shall be made president, senor," Aripo assured him.

"For mere money you shall have what you ask," Damba beamed. "But do this thing."

Mr. Pollard stretched comfortably.

"Very well," he said. "I'll have a fine, large bundle of mere money right now, and then go off somewhere to meditate. It'll be expensive. Well?"

He looked at Senor Mendez, and that gentleman nodded and sighed; so, indeed, did the other four sigh. And, as at a prearranged signal, all five reached for their inner pockets and brought out wallets. Silently, almost motion for motion, each counted out banknotes and piled them before him; until Mendez, smiling faintly, collected the whole and shoved it toward Mr. Pollard with:

"Twenty thousand dollars, senor. It is enough?"

"For the—present," Robert Pollard said thickly, and his hands trembled a little as he collected the wealth. "How much more are you willing to spend?"

Senor Aripo drew a long breath.

"We have discussed that, senor, before you came," he said. "One million dollars, we feel, would be a little price to pay, can we but be assured that Velvet has been swept from our path."

"For he is a dangerous man—a dangerous man," Ferra intoned dismally—"going ever armed, ever alert for the sudden fate he knows so well to be deserved. It were better, as I have said, to poison him quietly, and then, as regards Pacato, the dagger through the throat."

Mr. Pollard had risen, and as memories surged back to him there was a strange light in his eye.

"He's not too dangerous for me, and I'll find something better than poisoning him," he said quietly. "When do we meet again?"

"At midnight, senor," Aripo said eagerly. "Even then you may"——

"I'll have something ready long before midnight," said the guiding mind brightly.

CHAPTER III.

Capt. Velvet Entertains.

FOR the second time that warm and brilliant day Robert Pollard, William Ryan and the dapper Snake, once more as dapper as when at his best, walked through the little tobacco shop and into the burning street.

Silently they went, too, and with eyes straight ahead, lest some one of the five should come to his senses and stop them—or this, at least, was the personal view of the Snake and the Spanish Brute. They turned down the street and made the corner of the square before William Ryan's breathless:

"Robby, I wanter tell you I've known some of the best men in the con business ever since I was a little kid, but I've gotter hand it to you again! You've got the best of 'em skinned a mile!"

The Snake's admiration, too, was quite as genuine and ungrudging.

"Billy said it, Robby!" he contributed joyfully. "There isn't another man in the business that could have gone back and cleaned up like that. Why, we've got twenty-two thousand right here with us!"

"And we could live on that five years without turning a trick!" the Spanish Brute exulted further. "So now we drill out of this and down to that dear old Rio we never saw, and"——

"So now we do nothing of the sort, and please don't yell like that!" Mr. Pollard snapped. "That taxicab's waiting on the next block, and it's not necessary to tell your business to the driver."

"Well, we're going to leave here now, aren't we?" the Snake asked, plaintively. "I thought you—you smelled that money and wont back to get it so we'd have a decent stake in a decent place, Robby. I thought"——

"I can't control your thoughts, Snake," their leader said, coldly. "We are staying here for a while."

"But it's dangerous here and"——

Mr. Pollard turned on him with a vicious, vehement whirl that was not pleasant to see.

"You bet it's dangerous!" he cried, savagely. "But it isn't half as dangerous for us as it is for that swaggering old swashbuckler, believe me! I've got some old scores to pay him, Snake! They'd have been paid long before this if we'd had money enough to get away with it. We never did have it when we struck him, and he's laughed at us!" said Mr. Pollard, and grated his teeth audibly. "But we've got plenty of money behind us now, and before I'm done with that superannuated scoundrel"——

"You'll be dead!" supplied the Spanish Brute. "Robby"——

"I'll be a whole lot liveller and richer than I am now, and I feel pretty fit at this minute!" concluded their chief. "Shut up! We may as well ride back in his cab."

The light seemed to have gone out of the Snake's life.

"Back where?" he mumbled, miserably.

"Eh? I don't know," confessed Mr. Pollard, with his quick smile, and snapped his fingers at their taxicab chauffeur. "Best hotel in the city—get that?"

"Si, senor!" The driver bowed low. "Burn up a few streets getting there, then," said the leader of the trio, airily.

As through a thick, gray veil, the Snake observed that the old, luxurious languor had returned to Mr. Pollard's movements as he lolled back in the cracked, worn seat.

He smoked with the unconscious grace of a hereditary millionaire, at the very least; here and there, when some unique little native picture caught his aristocratic attention, he elevated his brows and studied it with a superior smile until they had rolled beyond.

Now, too, as they reached the business part of town again, a gunmaker's window attracted him, and he stopped their panting vehicle. At present they were quite unarmed, and it was an unwise condition for gentlemen engaged in a reasonably dangerous business.

Mr. Pollard, having caused the entire stock of small arms to be spread before his august eye, selected three exquisite automatic pistols of European make, and purchased ammunition enough to start a war. Thereafter, humming, he led them back to the cab with flat, weighty little bulges in their hip pockets and a package that was mainly lead.

Reisinpago's best in the hotel line proved considerably better than the revived leader had expected. It was a five-story affair, which had been white at some time past, and mainly it ran to red plush and hangings in which tarnished gold thread predominated.

But the manager of the house bowed and scraped in a fashion that soothed Mr. Pollard's esthetic soul past any consideration of mere color scheme; and when the key clerk had been summoned to display his dozen words of English and learn the millionaire visitors' wishes they were ushered to a really comfortable suite, with astonishingly white beds and great, cool, inviting chairs.

And there Mr. Pollard, having learned that their taxicab was one of the only three in town, sent down and engaged it for a week in advance, and leaning far back, with a excellent cigar, meditated.

Thus passed two calm hours. For a time the Snake and the Spanish Brute conferred in the adjoining room; later, Mr Ryan's voice died out, and the Snake seemed to be murmuring to himself, just grazing Mr Pollard's aloof consciousness now and then with an ejaculation.

Mr. Pollard, therefore, was mildly startled by the sudden appearance of the Snake and the brilliant, wondering smile he wore.

"Robby," he admitted, "maybe you're right."

"Eh?"

"I dunno where we get off—I'll say that. But I've told those cards eleven times in succession, and a different way each time—and they stick to it that we're all right." He pursed his lips and shook his head uncomprehendingly. "Every time it says: 'Great, good news is coming, and success will be yours,' and"——

He stopped, for William Ryan had entered; and, curiously and pleasantly, there was a light of relief in his eyes.

"We might not be killed before night, anyway," he conceded. "The crew of the Myra Burgess is gone!"

"Where?"

"Sailed back to New York on a fruit boat, Robby," the Spanish Brute grinned. "I just heard it, and I thought you'd like to know."

Mr. Pollard shaded a supercilious yawn.

"I don't know that it matters much," he said, "but if you two have found your wretched little nerves again, we'll start out."

"Where?"

"To dear Capt. Velvet's home!" snapped the leader. "The old beast must sleep there, and I want to look it over—outside, at least, and inside if he's away and we can manage to buy our way past his servants."

"Yes, and then?" the Snake asked breathlessly.

"Then, of course, I shall say, 'Oh, fudge!' and decide there's nothing in this stunt of winning a million dollars and get right out of the country," sneered Mr. Pollard. "I wish to Heaven you wouldn't turn white like that every time I mention the old fool. Bill. Stay here if you're going to faint and"——

"I ain't going to faint—not till I see the old guy put the last big finish on you!" Mr. Ryan said grimly, and darkly he added: "And that might not be so long!"

The Snake at his side, he followed the high-bred, insolent swaggerer to the red stairs and down them. A coal-black bellboy, racing ahead, shook their slumbering chauffeur into life, and Mr. Pollard said curtly:

"Capt. Velvet's house—his home—you know where that is? All right. Go to the corner and stop—not to the house itself!"

And again he settled back with a haughty smile, while the driver stirred up the vitals of his decrepit engine and leaped to his seat.

As a ride, it was short enough for Mr. Pollard and far too short for his friends. With an hour or so in which to ponder, they might have devised ways of steering Mr. Pollard in some other direction; as it was, neither had more than begun the process of careful thinking than the vehicle stopped and their driver pointed down one of the prettiest residential avenues in the city.

Two or three commodious houses were on one side of the square; alone in the centre of the other side, and well back from the street, stood a single big white house of somewhat jumbled architecture.

The inevitable patio seemed to be there, but a purely American front porch of Civil War pattern had been built on; a high, even hedge ran about the whole place, giving tiny glimpses here and there of thickly grown gardens, in which tropical foliage fairly piled.

There were palm trees, too, and arbors, and in the distance just the hint of a summer house roof; and having looked it all over swiftly, Mr. Pollard nodded to his friends to follow and started down the block at a saunter.

"Now, this isn't an assault and it isn't a cavalry charge, and, on the other hand, there's no reason for you to sneak along like a stage crook, Snake," he said impatiently. "We're simply three gentlemen out for a stroll. Try to understand what that word 'gentleman' means, Bill—will you—and when you grasp it, communicate it to your infernal feet, and don't shuffle along like that, with your hands jammed in your pockets.

"Look at his house without staring at it, and if there's anything else to be done, I'll give you the word. Now shut up and look cheerful or I'll yank out this gun and blow those scowls to Halifax!" concluded the master mind, smiling himself, although quite without mirth.

They tried to meet his wishes. If they did not appear quite cheerful, at least the more marked signs of gloom disappeared as they approached the mansion—and, the Snake reflected, if one came right down to cases, there was nothing to fear.

At this hour Captain Velvet would be asleep or somewhere else. And even now they were getting out of the danger zone, for they were abreast of the still porch and still moving and—William Ryan's snort might have come from a startled thoroughbred.

From one of the high windows Captain Velvet himself had stepped to the porch.

An instant he stared and stopped short; another instant he looked them over incredulously as his eye caught their altered appearance. And then—kindly soul that he was—a slow, broad smile came to the good captain's face. He leaned on the railing of his misplaced porch and regarded them with twinkling eyes as he called:

"Well—say! Come in a minute, boys!"

"Trapped!" breathed the Snake.

"Don't run; we're ambushed!" choked the Spanish Brute.

"Oh—bosh!" snarled Mr. Pollard's disgusted whisper as he opened the little gate in the hedge and faced the captain with a frank and honest eye. "Are we—forgiven, captain?"

Surveying him again, Captain Velvet chuckled pleasantly.

"I dunno's I'd go as far as all that, Robby," he said genially. "But I wouldn't say you wasn't on the way to it—mebbe. Come in and set down a while where it's cool."

He opened the high window in the most matter-of-fa manner possible and grinned hospitably at Mr. Pollard; and if it seemed to the Snake and William Ryan that certain disaster must lie in those cool shadows, the idea apparently did not even occur to their guiding intelligence.

Mr. Pollard, indeed, swaggered past the captain with the easy nod one might reserve for one's bosom friend, and all in one second his eyes shot about the simple drawing room and the library beyond and the room full of weapons; shot to the stairs and across the patio which the farther windows revealed; penetrated the dusky dining-room on the other side of the house, and even located the kitchen, and having accomplished so much he caught the good captain's innocently delighted:

"I never see the like of it! Inherit a fortune so soon, Robby?"

It was the same old simple tone. Mr. Pollard faced its owner squarely.

"I know you don't approve of gambling, captain," he said, "but we were in pretty bad shape and—why, we took what little we had and looked up one of your native gambling places and—oh, cleaned it up, sir." He permitted himself a contrite little smile. "We astonished them, I think, but it was a perfectly straight game."

"Laterno's joint, Robby?" the captain muttered.

"I believe that was the name," smiled Mr. Pollard.

"I'm glad to hear that some one broke him!" the good captain said heartily. "Sit down all of you."

If his pleased chuckle was not senile at least it was the chuckle of an aging man, and Mr. Pollard recognized it with a start of renewed pleasure.

"And then we all got dressed up, hey?" asked the captain genially.

"We were badly in need of some decent clothes, sir—yes," Mr. Pollard said as he lounged into the depths of a big chair. "We've decided to make a new start in life—down here—oh, we don't expect you to take that statement on faith, sir. We're going to prove to you and everybody else that it is a new start and that we're good for something besides the ridiculous and crooked work we've been wasting our lives over.

"You brought us to our senses that last time, captain, and we can't thank you enough for it. Some day—years from now—when we're worked up to the world a little and shown just what we can do in the way of making an honest living we'd like to hear you say that you're not sorry you hammered some sense into us!"

Mr. Pollard permitted himself one sharp sigh of regret for the wasted past. The excellent captain, looking from one to the other, blinked in the kindliest fashion.

"Why, I dunno's you'll have to wait years, Robby," said the good soul. "I can just see that you boys have changed a whole lot, the way you look. Why, I never saw a feller change as you've changed since morning—except once when I was in Algiers in the French Army.

"That—that—that was a funny case, too," the captain babbled contentedly. "I'll have to tell you about that, Robby. Y' see, in this regiment that I was commanding there was five fellers—four fellers about forty and one young chap not much more'n twenty, and they all hung out together. Well, sir, I saw from the first that them older men wasn't any kind of influence for that boy—I saw it right from the start.

"Later on we had a little argument one night and I—oh, I didn't have anything but my fists and that four had their sabres; and all the same they didn't answer roll-call next morning, and they'll never answer another till doomsday. But that ain't what I started to say.

"Y' see, the way I really got acquainted with this young chap was through hearing him holler one day help when I was riding along—'way forty miles from camp. Seems he'd gone shooting and thar was a shebion had him down and was gnawing his neck. Well, sir, I choked that lioness with my fingers and busted her spine, and after this young feller'd got up"——

Mr. Pollard lost all track of the narrative; he had heard enough. It was the same old tale of the glorious past in which the good captain, apparently, had slain most of the human race; but with a variation. This tale came near to babbling.

The familiar shouts of a year ago were missing; where the captain had splashed headlong through gore at their first acquaintance, he seemed merely to be puddling in a little, thin, lukewarm blood now!

It meant just what Mr. Pollard had suspected a number of times lately—Captain Velvet's years were really telling on him. He might grip himself now and then and present an excellent imitation of his former terrific force; but he could not fool a keen observer like Robert Pollard.

"He must have—have yelled some when you cut him like that?" the Snake was asking perfunctorily after a time.

"He shrieked something awful, Jimmy," the captain was saying earnestly. "But I remembered what he'd done to me and I never hesitated. Them shells was bursting all around my ears at the rate o' two to the second, but I ups with the axe, Jimmy, and swung it around my head, and when"——

Once more Mr. Pollard drifted away, with a half veiled smile of amused contempt. Even now his darting eyes had gained an excellent idea of the general plan of the house; and every detail fitted nicely with a certain wild scheme which was taking shape in his too active mind.

For the third time Captain Velvet yawned. He seemed to have leaped to another garden spot in the glorious past.

"Well, I won't tell you how I hacked my way through that sheik's guard, because it's never been told you how I got the princess away and never will be; nor I won't tell you how I got the princess away from him! But I done it, Bill, and when her father, the king, wanted to marry her to me and give me half the blamed country, I just took that cunnin' little kid by the hand and led her over to the young feller that was leaning on his sword and lookin' so glum, and I says: 'Sonny,' I says, 'here's your best girl, safe and sound, and take her with my compliments! Bless ye!' I says," chuckled Captain Velvet, and yawned again. "My land, but I get sleepy this time o' day," he said.

Why, the poor old man was actually babbling, Mr. Pollard decided as he leaped to his feet.

"We'll not keep you from your nap another minute, sir," he said. "We'll run along and"——

"You're not going anywhere!" Captain Velvet said firmly. "It's too hot to be out, and what's more, you're going to stay here with me for dinner. Yes, you are, Robby!" he insisted pettishly. "I wouldn't feel right if you didn't. I dunno's any man in the world's harder on sinners than I be, but I dunno's any man's any quicker to help a sinnin' feller being that's repented and wants to do the right thing. You're going to have dinner with me, and by that time I may be waked up enough to see what I can do to help you."

The last yawn all but bisected the good captain's head.

"Captain," Mr. Pollard cried, "you're too good!"

"I know I am, Robby," the captain said complacently, "but I can't help it. And now you boys just amuse yourselves for an hour or two—eh? I gotter go up and sleep!"

He went. Rigid as a steel man Mr. Pollard listened to the heavy steps ascending the stairs; heard them strike the upper floor; even heard a faint creak of springs as the good captains's heavy bulk settled somewhere. The utterly incredible had happened and—

"Say, did he really fall for all that?" the Snake breathed.

"Fall? He didn't fall! He's down already!" Mr. Pollard chuckled swiftly. And then his voice cracked with suppressed emotion. "I was right!" he said. "He has his good moments, but they're getting further apart every day. That man's breaking up!"

"I hope I ain't broke up any worse at his age," the Spanish Brute muttered.

"Well, you go on and croak and bite your nails and let off those shivery sighs!" their leader snapped disgustedly. "I'm going to get the lay of this place down to the last nail in the floor while we have a chance."

"For what, Robby?" the Snake asked fearfully.

"I might want to buy it some day and start a sanatorium for nerveless crooks," said Mr. Pollard as he rose. "You two'll get the royal suite!"

Silently they watched him go. They could have fled, yet were too faithful to flee. For one thing, each expected fully—as Mr. Pollard stepped into the sunshine of the patio—that a rain of bullets would come from above, and they would be there to drag him away and assure the good captain that his conflict with Mr. Pollard was over forever.

For another thing, Mr. Pollard's own nerve was not only in an impressively healthy state, but it was growing visible branches every minute, and there had been times in the past when that tremendous nerve had carried them through incredible messes and brought them out safely and with a margin of profit.

The Spanish Brute, therefore, discovering the good captain's humidor just as Mr. Pollard disappeared, selected a cigar and, lighting it, settled without comment on the long sofa. They had had a terrific night and a remarkable day, so far; the Brute, commending his safety to the mystic hand that guided them, dozed even before the second puff.

Mr. Evans, having watched him for a while, curled comfortably in his own big chair and draped his aching legs over the arm.

Thus it chanced that, in his next fully conscious moment, Mr. Pollard was lounging gracefully across the room and chatting with a refreshed Captain Velvet, who grinned at Mr. Evans and informed him that, his nap being over and the Brute just gone to pick up a little, Mr. Evans had better follow and then hurry back for dinner. The Snake, not yet awake, trudged away with shaking head.

Nor was he much less dazed as dinner progressed. Mr. Pollard, for example, seemed quite as much at ease as Capt. Velvet himself; they chatted comfortably and laughed occasionally, as if walking in here and dining with the man who should have slain all three of them long before this was the most natural thing in the world.

He watched William Ryan put his whole soul into the job of eating for a time, and then turned back to Mr. Pollard's artistic lying, which dealt with the sort of minor business openings they meant to find in Santa Chansa just now, and presently drifted to a sketch of Mr. Pollard's childhood days and the various horrible influences that had first pointed him toward now buried crime.

It was a sketch that would have brought tears to the eyes of a mummy, and several times Mr. Pollard seemed to have the captain on the verge of weeping.

Afterward a soundless brown man brought their coffee to the balcony which overlooked the gardens at the rear, and the captain began to yawn again and permit his chin to drop to his chest for brief intervals. He roused only when the brown man came and spoke softly, and he turned to the trio with:

"Boys, the neighbors drop in on me now and then. There's some inside now that you've met before. Come along!"

He chuckled to the point of cackling. Not without a hand on the flat pistol in his pocket, Mr. Pollard followed alertly, with his friends at his heels. And stopped as if shot and felt hot blood rushing to his face and his temples throbbing, for there in the drawing-room and looking at him, with the same fathomless light in her deep eyes and more beautiful than ever, stood Mercedes Rodriguez!

Further, with the most perfect friendliness, she was coming toward him with outstretched hand and a smile that stopped his heart; and for the moment Mr. Pollard lost track of Santa Chansa, the five, his plans, and everything else.

Once, a year ago, this particular young woman under amazing circumstances had impressed herself upon his gentler side as had no other young woman in his life. He had fancied that absurdity all forgotten—and it was not forgotten at all.

Yet if Mr. Pollard was absorbed with Mercedes, if he was holding her hand and looking at her and talking incoherently, the Snake and William Ryan were no more than aware of her existence. With a queer little yelp the Spanish Brute had fixed his gaze upon another, smaller, black-haired girl, who rose from the side of a very elderly, smiling lady.

"For the love of Mike! If it ain't little Carmen!" he said, politely.

And the Snake, on the other hand, had come magically face to face with a third wonderful girl, who owned deep brown eyes and gold-yellow hair, who smiled mischievously at him as he choked:

"Well, Miss—Miss Dolores, I—I dunno what we ever did to deserve this good luck." He turned hot and cold, and hot again, and drifted toward her with a wild and senseless grin as he exploded: "Say, take it from me, I'm glad to see you!"

A haze, sense-stifling and beautiful, seemed to have descended upon the wicked trio and swept them out of themselves. They chattered for a time without any definite idea of what they chattered; and then through the haze they caught Capt. Velvet's amused tones:

"I dunno when I've been so tickled to see anybody else tickled as I am just now!"

If there was an odd note to the words, it struck to Mr. Pollard's saner stratum only for an instant; he turned to the good captain just as the elder gentleman pursued:

"Why don't you young folks go out and take a stroll around my gardens? There's a whole city block of 'em, and a nice moon, too. It's better 'n stayin' in here with us old folks—hey?"

And they went, and the moon, rising, rose higher and shone upon them all in the same sanity-dispelling fashion she has used for so many ages.

It seemed to take place as naturally as water flows down-hill; within two minutes the Spanish Brute and Carmen Rodriguez had found a little settee that was quite out of hearing of the others. There they chatted for a long while, and slowly it came to William Ryan that this one of Santa Chanza's three prettiest girls was really interested in him; she had been asking him many questions about himself.

He looked at her, and was aware that within his crude bosom certain stirrings of a year ago were returning with renewed vigor. He saw visions of a vine-clad cottage somewhere outside the city, with a vine-clad garage out back and a neat picket fence and several inexpensive black gentlemen to tend the garden and keep the car clean.

He was at this point and breathing heavily when Carmen asked gently:

"And this time you are going to stay?"

"Say, are—are you going to be around this town?" the Spanish Brute asked, pointedly.

"But we live here!" the girl smiled.

"Say, y' gotter excuse my asking, but are you engaged to anybody?" William Ryan pursued, even more pointedly.

"But—senor!" protested Carmen, and averted her eyes. "I—no, senor."

"Then—listen!" choked the Spanish Brute. "If I was to stick right here and get a nice little pile together—money, y'understand—quick"——

"Money? Quick?"

The Spanish Brute looked about. They were alone. He hitched nearer and his voice sank to a thick whisper.

"Listen, kid!" he commanded.

(To Be Continued.)

At the Polls

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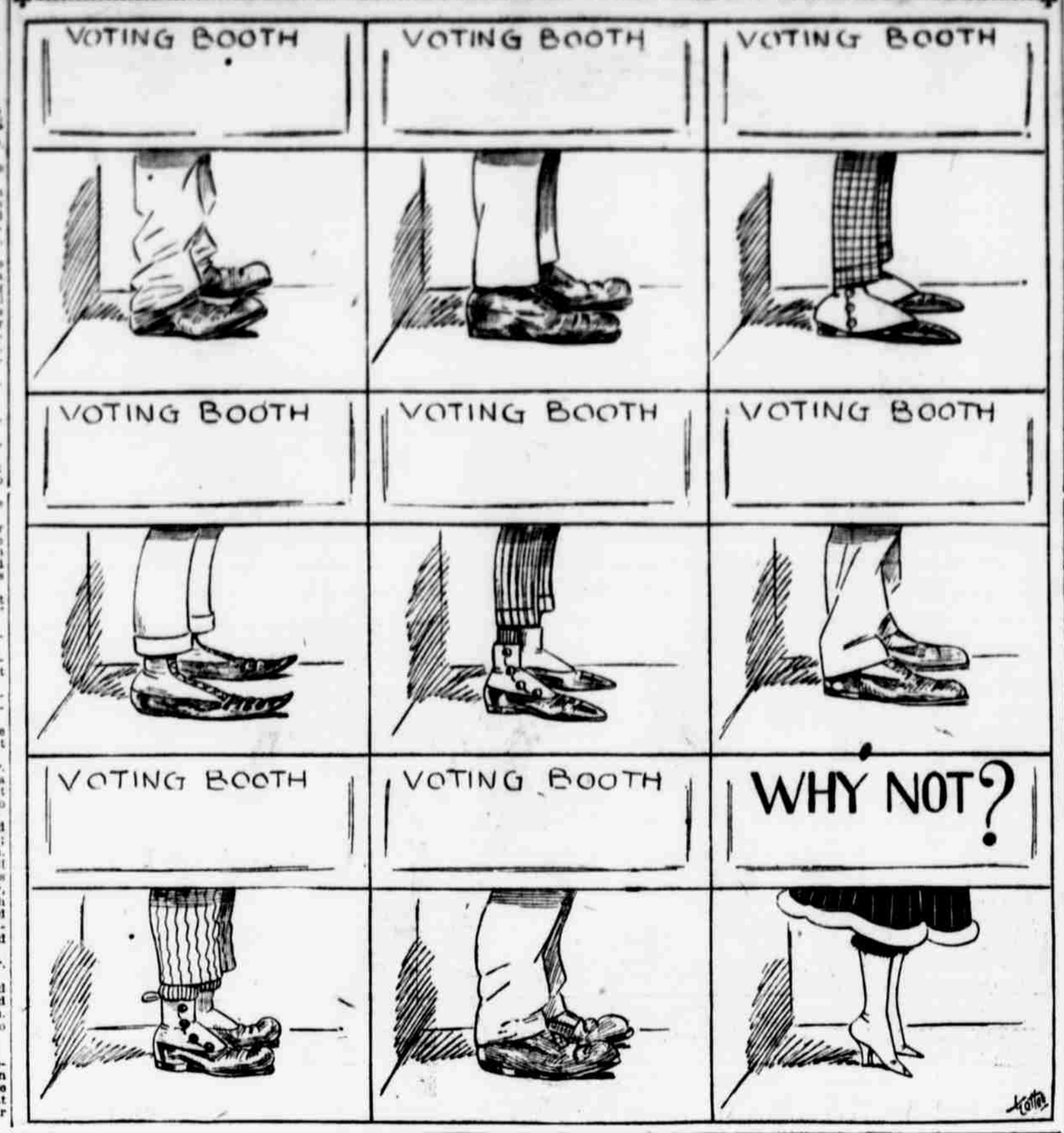
By Maurice Ketten



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