



WEBSTER -MAN'S MAN

by
Peter B. Kyne

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

CHAPTER XVII.

"Come, come, buck up," Webster soothed her, and helped himself to a long whiff of her fragrant hair. "Old man Webster had one leg in the grave, but they've pulled it out again."

Still she sobbed. "Now, listen to me, lady," he commanded with mock severity. "You just stop that. You're wasting your sympathy; and while, of course, I enjoy your sympathy a heap, just pause to reflect on the result if those salt tears should happen to drop into one of my numerous wounds."

"I'm so sorry for you, Calliph," she murmured brokenly. "You poor, harmless boy! I don't see how any one could be so flimsy as to hurt you when you were so distinctly a non-combatant."

"Thank you. Let us forget the Hague conference for the present, however. Have you met your brother?" he whispered.

"No, Calliph."

"Ricardo."

"Yes, Jack."

"Come here. Rick, you scheming, unscrupulous, blood-thirsty adventurer, I have a tremendous surprise in store for you. The sweetest girl in the world—and she's right here—"

Ricardo laughingly held up his hand. "Jack, my friend," he interrupted, "you're too weak to make a speech. Don't do it. Besides, you do not have to." He turned and bowed gracefully to Dolores. "I can see for myself she's the sweetest girl in the world, and that she's right here." He held out his hand to her. "Jack thinks he's going to spring a surprise," he continued maliciously, "quite forgetting that a good soldier never permits himself to be taken by surprise. I know all about his little secret, because I heard you mourning for him when you thought he was dead." Ricardo favored her with a knowing wink. "I am delighted to meet the future Mrs. Webster. I quite understand why you fell in love with him, because, you see, I love him myself and so does everybody else."

With typical Castilian courtliness he took her hand, bowed low over it, and kissed it. "I am Ricardo Ruiz Ruy," he said, anxious to spare his friend the task of further exhausting conversation. "And you are—"

"You're a consummate jacks!," groaned Webster. "I'm only a dear old family friend, and Dolores is going to marry Billy Geary. You impetuous idiot! She's your twin sister, Dolores Ruy. She, Mark Twain, and I have ample cause for common complaint against the world because the reports of our death have been grossly exaggerated. She didn't perish when your father's administration crumbled. Miss Ruy, this is your brother, Ricardo. Kiss her you damn fool—forgive me, Miss Ruy—oh, Lord, nothing matters any more. He's gummed everything up and ruined my party. I wish I were dead."

Ricardo stared from the outraged Webster to his sister and back again. "Jack Webster," he declared, "you aren't crazy, are you?"

"Of course, he is—the old dear," Dolores cried happily, "but I'm not." She stepped up to her brother, and her arms went around his neck. "Oh, Rick," she cried, "I'm your sister. Truly, I am."

"Dolores. My little lost sister, Dolores? Why, I can't believe it!"

"Well, you'd better believe it!" John Stuart Webster growled feebly. "Of course, you can doubt my word and get away with it, now that I'm flat on my back, but if you dare cast aspersions on that girl's veracity, I'll murder you a mouth from now."

He closed his eyes, feeling instinctively that he ought not to spy on such a sacred family scene. When, however, the affecting meeting was over and Dolores was ruffling the Websterian foretop while her brother pressed the Websterian hand and tried to say all the things he felt, but couldn't express, John Stuart Webster brought them both back to a realization of present conditions.

"Don't thank me, sir," he piped in pathetic imitation of the small boy of melodrama. "I have only done my duty, and for that I cannot accept this purse of gold, even though my father and mother are starving."

"Oh, Calliph, do be serious," Dolores pleaded.

He looked up at her fondly. "Take your brother out to Mother Jenks and prove your case, Miss Ruy," he advised her. "And while you're at it, I certainly hope somebody will remember I'm not accustomed to reposing on a center table. Rick, if you can persuade some citizen to put me to bed, I'd be obliged. I'm dead tired, old horse. I'm—ah—sleepy—"

His head rolled weakly to one side, for he had been playing a part and had nerved himself to finish it gracefully, even in his weakened condition. He sighed, moaned slightly, and slipped into unconsciousness.

Throughout the night there was sporadic firing here and there in the city, as the Ruy followers relentlessly hunted down the isolated detachment of government troops which had escaped annihilation and capture in the final rout and fallen back on the city, where, concealing themselves according to their nature and inclination, they indulged in more or less sniping from windows and the roofs of buildings. The practice of taking no prisoners was an old one in Sobrante, and few presidents had done more than Sarros to keep that custom alive; ergo, firm in the conviction that to surrender was tantamount to facing a firing squad at daylight, the majority of these stragglers, with consummate courage, fought to the death.

The capture of Buenaventura was alone sufficient to insure a brief revolution, but the capture of Sarros was ample guarantee that the resistance to the new order of things was already at an end. However, Ricardo Ruy felt that the prompt execution of Sarros would be an added guarantee of peace by effectually discouraging any opposition to the rebel cause in the outlying districts, where a few isolated garrisons still remained in ignorance of the momentous events being enacted in the capital. For the time being, Ricardo was master of life and death in Sobrante, and all of his advisers and supporters agreed with him that a so-called trial of the ex-dictator would be a rather useless affair. His life was forfeit a hundred times for murder and treason, and to be ponderous over his elimination would savor of mockery. Accordingly, at midnight, a priest entered the room in the arsenal where Sarros was confined, and shrived him. Throughout the night the priest remained with him, and when that early morning march to the cemetery commenced, he walked beside Sarros, repeating the prayers for the dying.

Upon reaching the cemetery there was a slight wait until a carriage drove up and discharged Ricardo Ruy and Mother Jenks. The sergeant in command of the squad saluted and was briefly ordered to proceed with the matter in hand; whereupon he turned to Sarros, who with the customary sang froid of his kind upon such occasions was calmly smoking, and bowed deprecatingly. Sarros actually smiled upon him. "Adios, amigos," he murmured. Then, as an afterthought and probably because he was sufficient of an egoist to desire to appear a martyr, he added heroically: "I die for my country. May God have mercy on my enemies."

"If you'd cared to play a gentleman's game, you blighter, you might 'ave lived for your hally country," Mother Jenks reminded him in English. "Wonder if the beggar'll wilt or will 'e go through smil'n' like my salnted 'Enery on the syme spot."

She need not have worried. It requires a strong man to be dictator of a roman candle republic for 15 years, and whatever his sins of omission or commission, Sarros did not lack animal courage. Alone and unattended he limped away among the graves to the wall on the other side of the cemetery and placed his back against it, negligently, in the attitude of a devil-may-care fellow without a worry in life. The sergeant waited respectfully until Sarros had finished his cigarette; when he tossed it away and straightened to attention, the sergeant knew there was a sudden rattle of bolts as the cartridges slid from the magazines into the breeches; there followed a momentary halt, another command; the squad was aiming when Ricardo Ruy called sharply:

"Sergeant, do not give the order to fire."

The rifles were lowered and the men gazed wonderingly at Ricardo. "He's too brave," Ricardo complained. "D—him, I can't kill him as I would a mad dog. I've got to give him a chance."

The sergeant raised his brows expressively. Ah, the ley fuga, that popular form of execution where the prisoner is given a running chance, and the firing squad practices wing shooting. If the prisoner manages, miraculously, to escape, he is not pursued!

A doubt, however, crossed the sergeant's mind. "But my general," he expostulated, "Senor Sarros cannot accept the ley fuga. He is very lame. That is not giving him the chance your Excellency desires he should have."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Ricardo replied. "I was thinking I'm killing him without a fair trial for the reason that he's so infernally ripe for the gallows that a trial would have been a joke. Nevertheless, I am really killing him because he killed my father—and that is scarcely fair. My father was a gentleman. Sergeant, is your pistol loaded?"

"Yes, General."

"Give it to Senor Sarros."

As the sergeant started forward to supply Ricardo drew his own service revolver and then motioned Mother Jenks and the firing squad to stand aside while he crossed to the center of the cemetery. "Sarros," he called, "I am going to let God decide which one of us shall live. When the sergeant gives the command to fire, I shall open fire on you, and you are free to do the same to me. Sergeant, if he kills me and escapes unhurt, my orders are to escort him to the bay in my carriage and put him safely aboard the steamer."

Mother Jenks sat down on a tombstone. "Gord's truth!" she gasped, "but there's a rare plucked 'un." Aloud she croaked: "Don't be a bally ass, sir."

"Silence!" he commanded.

The sergeant handed Sarros the revolver. "You heard what I said?" Ricardo called.

Sarros bowed gravely.

"You understand your orders, Sergeant?"

"Yes, General."

"Very well. Proceed. If this prisoner fires before you give the word, have your squad riddle him."

The sergeant backed away and gazed owlishly from the prisoner to his captor. "Ready!" he called. Both revolvers came up. "Fire!" he shouted, and the two shots were discharged simultaneously. Ricardo's cap flew off his head, but he remained standing, while Sarros staggered back against the wall and there recovering himself gamely, fired again. He scored a clean miss, and Ricardo's gun barked three times; Sarros sprawled on his face, rose to his knees, raised his pistol halfway, fired into the sky and slid forward on his face. Ricardo stood beside the body until the sergeant approached and stood to attention, his attitude saying:

"It is over. What next, General?"

"Take the squad back to the arsenal, Sergeant," Ricardo ordered him coolly, and walked back to recover his uniform cap. He was smiling as he ran his finger through a gaping hole in the upper half of the crown.

"Well, Mrs. Jenks," he announced when he rejoined the old lady, "that was better than executing him with a firing squad. I gave him a square deal. Now his friends can never say that I murdered him."

He extended his hand to help Mother Jenks to her feet. She stood erect and felt again that queer swelling of the heart, the old feeling of suffocation.

"Steady, lass!" she mumbled. "Old to me, sir. It's my bally haneurism. Gor—I'm—chokin'—"

He caught her in his arms as she lurched toward him. Her face was purple, and in her eyes there was a queer fierce light that went out suddenly, leaving them dull and glazed. When she commenced to sag in his arms, he eased her gently to the ground and laid her on her back in the grass.

"The nipper's safe, 'Enery," he heard her murmur. "I've raised 'er a ldy, 'elp me—she's back where you found 'er—'Enery—"

She quivered, and the light came creeping back into her eyes before it faded forever. "Comin', Enery—darlin'," she whispered; and then the soul of Mother Jenks, who had a code and lived up to it (which is more than the majority of us do), had departed upon the ultimate journey. Ricardo gazed down on the hard old mouth, softened now by a little half-smile of mingled yearning and gladness; "What a wonderful soul you had," he murmured, and kissed her.

In the end she slept in the niche in the wall of the Cathedral de la Vera Cruz, beside her sainted 'Enery.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Three days passed. Don Juan Cafetero had been buried with all the pomp and circumstance of a national hero; Mother Jenks, too, had gone to her appointed resting place, and El Buen Amigo had been closed forever. Ricardo had issued a proclamation announcing himself provisional president of Sobrante; a convention of revolutionary leaders had been held, and a provisional cabinet selected. A day for the national elections had been named; the wreckage of the brief revolution had been cleared away, and the wheels of government were once more revolving freely and noiselessly. And while all of this had been going on, John Stuart Webster had lain on his back, staring at the palace ceiling and absolutely forbidden to receive visitors. He was still engaged in this mild form of gymnastics on the third day when the door of his room opened and Dolores looked in on him.

"Good evening, Calliph," she called. "Aren't you dead yet?"

It was exactly the tone she should have adopted to get the best results, for Webster had been mentally and physically ill since she had seen him last, and needed some such pleasantry as this to lift him out of his gloomy mood. He grinned at her boyishly.

"No, I'm not dead. On the contrary, I'm feeling real chirpy. Won't you come in and visit for a while, Miss Ruy?"

"Well, since you've invited me, I shall accept." Entering, she stood beside his bed and took the hand he extended toward her. "This is the first opportunity I've had, Miss Ruy," he began, "to apologize for the shock I gave you the other day. I should have come back to you as I promised, instead of getting into a fight and sending you half to death. I hope you'll forgive me, because I'm paying for my fun now—with interest."

"Very well, Calliph. I'll forgive you—on one condition."

"Who am I to resist having a condi-

tion imposed upon me? Name your terms. I shall obey."

"I'm weary of being called Miss Ruy. I want to be Dolores—to you."

"By the toe nails of Moses," he reflected, "there is no escape. She's determined to rock the boat." Aloud he said: "All right, Dolores. I guess Bill won't mind."

"Billy hasn't a word to say about it," she retorted, regarding him with that calm, impersonal, yet vitally interested look that always drove him frantic with the desire for her.

"Well, of course, I understand that," he countered. "Naturally, since Bill is only a man, you'll have to manage him and he'll have to take orders."

"Calliph, you're a singularly persistent man, once you get an idea into your head. Please understand me, once for all; Billy Geary is a dear, and it's a mystery to me why every girl in the world isn't perfectly crazy about him, but every rule has its exceptions—and Billy and I are just good friends. I'd like to know where you got the idea we're engaged to be married."

"Why—why—well, aren't you?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, you—er—you ought to be. I expected—that is, I planned—I mean Bill told me and—and—er—it never occurred to me you could possibly have the—er—crust—to refuse him. Of course, you're going to marry him when he asks you?"

"Of course I am not."

"Ah-h-h-h!" John Stuart Webster gazed at her in frank amazement. "Not going to marry Billy Geary!" he cried, highly scandalized.

"I know you think I ought to, and I suppose it will appear quite incomprehensible to you when I do not—"

"Why Dolores, my dear girl! This is most amazing. Didn't Bill ask you to marry him before he left?"

"Yes, he did me that honor, and I declined him."

"You what?"

She smiled at him so maternally that his hand itched to drag her down to him and kiss her curving lips.

"Do you mind telling me just why you took this extraordinary attitude?"

"You have no right to ask, but I'll tell you. I refused Billy because I didn't love him enough—that way. What's more, I never could."

He rolled his head to one side and softly, very softly, whistled two bars of "The Spanish Cavalier" through his teeth. He was properly thunder-struck—so much so, in fact, that for a moment he actually forgot her presence while he pondered this most incredible state of affairs.

"I see it all now. It's as clear as mud," he announced finally. "You refused poor old Bill and broke his heart, and so he went away and hasn't had the courage to write me since. I'm afraid Bill and I both regarded this fight as practically won—all over but the wedding march, as one might put it. I might as well confess I hustled the boy down from the mine just so you two could get married and light out on your honeymoon. I figured Bill could kill two birds with one stone—have his honeymoon and get rid of his malaria, and return here in three or four months to relieve me, after I had the mine in operation. Poor boy. That was a frightful song-and-dance you gave him."

"I suspected you were the match-maker in this case. I must say I think you're old enough to know better, Calliph John."

"You did, eh? Well, what made you think so?"

She chuckled. "Oh, you're very obvious—to a woman."

"I forgot that you reveal the past and foretell the future."

"You are really very clumsy, Calliph. You should never try to direct the destiny of any woman."

"I'm on the sick list," he pleaded, "and it isn't sporting of you to discuss me. You're healthy—so let us discuss you. Dolores, do you figure Bill's case to be absolutely hopeless?"

"Absolutely, Calliph."

"Hum-m-m!"

Again Webster had recourse to meditation, seeing which, Dolores walked to the pier glass in the corner, satisfied herself that her coiffure was just so and returned to his side, singing softly a little song that had floated out over the transom of Webster's room door, into the hall one night:

A Spanish cavalier
Went out to ride a steer,
Along with his paper cigar-rol
"Caramba!" said he,
"Manana you will be
Mucho bueno carne por mio!"

He turned his head and looked up at her suddenly, searchingly. "Is there anybody else in Bill's way?" he demanded. "I admit it's none of my business, but—"

"Yes, Calliph, there is some one else."

"I thought so." This rather viciously. "I'm willing to gamble 100 to 1, sight unseen, that whoever he is, he isn't half the man Bill is."

"That," she replied coldly, "is a matter of personal opinion."

"And Bill's clock is fixed for keeps?"

"Yes, Calliph. And he never had a chance from the start."

"Why not?"

"Well, I met the other man first, Calliph."

"Oh! Do you mind telling me what this other man does for a living?"

"He's a mining man, like Billy."

"All right! Has the son of a horse thief got a mine like Billy's? That's something to consider, Dolores."

"He has a mine fully as good as Billy's. Like Billy, he owns a half interest in it, too."

"Hum-m-m! How long have you known him?"

"Not very long."

"Be sure you're right—then go ahead," John Stuart Webster warned her. "Don't marry in haste and repent

at leisure, Dolores. Know your man before you let him buy the wedding ring. There's a heap of difference, my dear, between sentiment and sentimentality."

"I'm sure of my man, Calliph."

He was silent again, thinking rapidly. "Well, of course," he began again presently, "while there was the slightest possibility of Bill winning you, I would have died before saying that which I am about to say to you now, Dolores, because Bill is my friend, and I'd never double cross him. With reference to this other man, however, I have no such code to consider. I'm pretty well convinced I'm out of the running, but I'll give that lad a race if it's the last act of my life. He's a stranger to me, and he isn't on the job to protect his claim, so why shouldn't I stake it if I can? But are you quite certain you aren't making a grave mistake in refusing Billy? He's quite a boy, my dear. I know him from soul to suspenders, and he'd be awfully good to you. He's kind and gentle and considerate, and he's not a molly-coddle, either."

"I can't help it, Calliph. Please don't talk about him any more. I know somebody who is kinder and nobler and gentler." She ceased abruptly, fearful of breaking down her reserve and saying too much.

"Well, if Bill's case is hopeless—his hand came groping for hers, while he held her with his searching, wistful glance—"I wonder what mine looks like. That is, Dolores, I—I—"

"Yes, John?"

"I've played fair with my friend," he whispered eagerly. "I'm not going to ask you to marry me, but I want to tell you that to me you're such a very wonderful woman I can't help loving you with my whole heart and soul."

"I have suspected this, John," she replied gravely.

"I suppose so. I'm such an obvious old fool. I've had my dream, and I've put it behind me, but I—I just want you to know I love you; so long as I live, I shall want to serve you. When you're married to this other man, and things do not break just right for you both—if I have something he wants in order to make you happy, I want you to know it's yours to give to him. I—I—guess that's all, Dolores."

"Thank you, John. Would you like to know this man I'm going to marry?"

"Yes, I think I'd like to congratulate the scoundrel."

"Then I'll introduce you to him, John. I first met him on a train in Death valley, California. He was a shaggy old dear, all whiskers and rags, but his whiskers couldn't hide his smile, and his rags couldn't hide his manhood, and when he thrashed a drummer because the man annoyed me, I just couldn't help falling in love with him. Even when he fibbed to me and disputed my assertion that we had met before—"

"Good land of love—and the calves get loose!" he almost shouted as he held up his one sound arm to her. "My dear, my dear—"

"Oh, sweetheart," she whispered laying her hot cheek against his. "It's taken you so long to say it, but I love you all the more for the dear thoughts that made you hesitate."

He was silent a few moments, digesting his amazement, speechless with the great happiness that was his—and then Dolores was kissing the back of the hand of that helpless, bandaged arm lying across his breast. He had a tightening in his throat, for he had not expected love; and that sweet, benignant, humble little kiss spelled adoration and eternal surrender; when she looked at him again the mists of joy were in his eyes.

"Dear old Calliph John!" she crooned. "He's never had a woman to understand his funny ways and appreciate them and take care of him, has he?" She patted his cheek. "And bless his simple old heart, he would rather give up his love than be false to his friend. Yes, indeed, Johnny Webster respects 'No Shooting' signs when he sees them, but he tells fibs and pretends to be very stupid when he really isn't. So you wouldn't be false to Billy—eh, dear? I'm glad to know that, because the man who cannot be false to his friend can never be false to his wife."

"All's well with the world," John Stuart Webster announced when he could use his lips once more for conversation. "And," he added, "owing to the fact that I started a trifle late in life, I believe I could stand a little more of the same."

The door opened and Ricardo looked in on them.

"Killjoy!" Webster growled. "Old Killjoy the Thirteenth, King of Sobrante. Is this a surprise to you?"

"Not a bit of it, Jack. I knew it was due."

"Am I welcome in the Ruy family?" Ricardo came over and kissed his sister. "Don't be a lobster, Jack," he protested. "I dislike foolish questions." And he pressed his friend's hand with a fervor that testified to his pleasure.

"I'm sorry to crowd in at a time like this, Jack," he continued, with a hug for Dolores, "but Mr. What-you-may-call-him, the American consul, has called to pay his respects. As a fellow citizen of yours, he is vitally interested in your welfare. Would you care to receive him for a few minutes?"

"One minute will do," Webster declared with emphasis. "Show the human slug up, Rick."

Mr. Lemuel Tolliver tripped breezily in with outstretched hand. "My dear Mr. Webster," he began, but Webster cut him short with a peremptory gesture.

"Listen, friend Tolliver," he said. "The only reason I received you was to tell you I'm going to remain in this country awhile and help develop it."

I may even conclude to grow up with it. I shall not, of course, renounce my American citizenship; and of course, as an American citizen, I am naturally interested in the man my country sends to Sobrante to represent it. I might as well be frank and tell you that you won't do. I called on you once to do your duty, and you weren't there; I told you then I might have something to say about your job later on, and now I'm due to say it. Mr. Tolliver, I'm the power behind the throne in this little Jim-crow country, and to quote your own elegant phraseology, you, as American consul, are aux vomica to the Sobrantean government. Moreover, as soon as the Sobrantean ambassador reaches Washington, he's going to tell the president that you are, and then the president will be courteous enough to remove you. In the meantime, fare thee well, Mr. Consul."

"But, Mr. Webster—"

"Vaya!"

Mr. Tolliver, appreciating the utter futility of argument, bowed and departed.

"Verily, life grows sweeter with each passing day," Webster murmured whimsically. "Rick, old man, I think you had better escort the consul to the front door. Your presence is nux vomica to me also. See that you back me up and dispose of that fellow Tolliver, or you can't come to our wedding—can he, sweetheart?"

When Ricardo had taken his departure John Stuart Webster looked up quite seriously at his wife-to-be. "Can you explain to me, Dolores," he asked, "how it happened that your relatives and your father's old friends here in Sobrante, whom you met shortly after your arrival, never informed you that Ricardo was living?"

"They didn't know any more about him than I did, and he left here as a mere boy. He was scarcely acquainted with his relatives, all of whom bowed quite submissively to the Sarros yoke. Indeed, my father's half-brother, Antonio Ruy, actually accepted a portfolio under the Sarros regime and held it up to his death. Ricardo has a wholesome contempt for his relatives, and as for his father's old friends, none of them knew anything about his plans. Apparently his identity was known only to the Sarros intelligence bureau, and it did not permit the information to leak out."

"Funny mix up," he commented. "And by the way, where did you get all the inside dope about Neddy Jerome?"

She laughed and related to him the details of Neddy's peritidy.

"And you actually agreed to deliver me, hog-tied and helpless, to that old schemer, Dolores?"

"Why not, dear. I loved you; I always meant to marry you, if you'd let me."

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