

WEBSTER—MAN'S MAN (Continued from page 6)

decidedly, not to join Stuart Webster's liking, for should he unfortunately, form such an alliance, he would be hailed into court as a witness and perhaps miss the steamer to San Buenaventura.

He had planned to spend an hour in the market, drink a cup of cafe noir, smoke a cigarette, and return to his hotel in time for a leisurely breakfast, but his recent hunt with grim reality had blunted the edge of romance. He ordered his driver to take him back to the hotel, sprang inside and congratulated himself on his lucky escape.

CHAPTER VIII.

Webster's trunk went aboard the steamer early the following morning, and at noon he entered a taxi with his hand baggage and was driven to the levee where La Estrellita lay tugging gently at her mooring lines. Owing to the congestion of freight and traffic the chauffeur stopped his cab a little distance from the gangplank, where Webster discharged him with a liberal tip.

The latter, however, swung his passenger's bag and suitcase to the ground, picked them up and started for the gangplank.

"Never mind my baggage, lad," Webster called after him, "One of the deck boys will care for it."

The chauffeur turned. "You've been generous with me, sir," he answered, "so I think I had better carry your baggage aboard. If you permit a deck boy to handle it, you merely have to give another tip, and that would be sheer wanton waste. Why shouldn't I earn the one you gave me?"

"I hadn't figured it out that way, son, so here's another half dollar for being the only existing specimen of your species in captivity. My stateroom is No. 34, upper deck, port side," Webster answered, smiling. The man took the tip eagerly and hurried toward the gangplank; the quartermaster on duty shouldered a way for him and he darted aboard.

Webster followed leisurely. At the gangplank the purser's clerk halted him, examined his tickets and punched them.

"Where is the other man?" he asked. "You have two tickets here."

"Oh, that blamed valet of mine," Webster answered, and glanced around as if in search of that mythical functionary. "It would be like the stupid fellow to miss the boat," he added.

"When he comes—" Webster ceased speaking abruptly. He was looking straight into the malevolent orbs of Pucker-eye, who was standing just behind the clerk at the foot of the gangplank.

"I wonder if Pop-eye's around, also," Webster thought, and he faced about. Pop-eye was standing in back of him, leaning over the railing of the gangway.

"Which is the valet?" the purser's clerk asked, scanning the names on the tickets.

"Andrew Bowers."

"All right, Mr. Webster," the other answered, with that genial camaraderie that seems inseparable from all of his calling. "When Andrew comes I'll send him aboard."

He started to pass the tickets back to Webster, but a detaining hand rested on his arm, while a dark thumb and forefinger lifted the trailing strips of tickets. Pucker-eye was examining them also.

The purser's clerk drove his elbow backward violently into Pucker-eye's midriff and shook him off roughly.

"What do you mean, you black-and-tan bound?" he demanded. "Since when did you begin to O. K. my work?"

Pucker-eye made no reply to this stern reproach. He accepted the elbow with equanimity and faced Webster with an evil smile that indicated mutual recognition.

"Buono," he said. "The senior hees sail on La Estrellita for San Buenaventura, no?"

"So you came nosing around to see about it, eh? Doing a little plain gumshoe work, I see."

Pucker-eye bowed. By the simple exercise of courage and bad manners he had looked at John Stuart Webster's ticket and was now familiar with his name and destination.

Webster glowered darkly at Pucker-eye and said:

"Well, you scoundrelly cutthroat, what are you going to do about it? Try a little of your knife work on me, I suppose?"

The fellow grinned—the kind of grin that is composed of equal parts of ferocity and knowledge of superior strength. That grin did more to disconcert Webster than the knowledge that he had earned for himself two bloodthirsty and implacable enemies, for Pucker-eye was the first of his breed that Webster had ever seen smile under insult. That cool smile infuriated him.

Pucker-eye took out a cigarette case, selected a cigarette and presented the case to Webster. His bad manners in selecting his own cigarette first was deliberate, as Webster knew. It was the Latin-American's method of showing his contempt.

"We shall meet again, meester Webster," he said. "May I offer a cigarette for the—what you Americans call—the keepsake? No?" He smiled brightly and closed his puckered eye in a knowing wink.

Webster took his tickets from the purser, folded them, placed them in his pocket and for a few seconds regarded Pucker-eye contemptuously.

"When we meet again, you scum," he retorted quietly, "you shall have no difficulty in remembering me. You may keep your cigarette."

His long, powerful right arm shot out like a forceps his thumb and forefinger closed over Pucker-eye's rather flat nose; he squeezed, and with a shrill scream of agony Pucker-eye went to his knees.

Still holding the wretch by his proboscis, Webster turned quickly in order that his face might be toward Pop-eye.

"Pop-eye," he said, "if you take a hand in this, I'll twist your nose, too, and afterward I'll throw you in the river."

He turned to Pucker-eye.

"Up, thou curious little one," he said in Spanish, and jerked the unhappy



"Up, Thou Curious Little One."

rascal to his feet. The latter clawed ineffectually at the terrible arm which held him, until, presently discovering that the harder he struggled the harder Webster pinched his nose, he ceased his struggles and hung limply, nosing with pain and rage in the grip of the American.

"Good!" Webster announced, slacking his grip a little. With his left hand he deftly extracted a hair from each flank of the screaming little scoundrel's scant mustache and held them before the latter's tear-filled eyes.

"My friend," he said gently, "mark how the gringo gives his little dark brother a lesson in deportment. Behold, if I have given thee a souvenir of our meeting, I also have taken one. By this pinched and throbbing nose shall I be reminded when I am gone; by these hairs from thy rat's mustache shall I remember thee. Go, and thrust that nose into the gringo's business again. It is unsafe."

He released Pucker-eye, made his way through the crowd to his room, looked in, saw that his baggage was there, and walked around on the starboard side in the general farewell of all on board to the crowd on the levee.

At the shore end of the gangplank Pucker-eye and Pop-eye still waited. The unfortunate Pucker-eye was weeping with pain and futile rage and humiliation, but Webster noticed that Pop-eye's attention was not on his friend but upon each passenger that boarded the ship, of which there were the usual number of late arrivals. As each passenger approached, Pop-eye scanned him with more than casual interest.

Webster smiled. "Looking for that valet he heard me talking about," he reflected. "Pop-eye, you're a fine, capable lad. I thought you had the brains of the two. You're not going away until you've had a chance to size up the reinforcements at my command, are you?"

He lighted a cigar and leaned over the rail as the steamer, gathering speed, swept down river.

"Good-by, you golden fizz and chicken gumbo," he called, as the city receded and the low, wooded shores below the city came into view.

When he had finished his cigar he cast the stump overboard, watched it until it disappeared astern, and then went around to stateroom No. 34. As he stepped in and closed the door a masculine voice said very pleasantly:

"How do you do?"

Mr. Webster looked up and beheld a young man, arrayed in a very fancy

pair of light blue— stretched at his ease in the upper berth.

John Stuart Webster stared at the stranger for several seconds and concluded he was invading the sanctity of another's stateroom. "Excuse me," he said, "I guess I'm in the right church but the wrong pew," and he stepped out and looked for the number on the stateroom. To his surprise it was No. 34 after all, so he stepped back into the stateroom and favored the stranger with another scrutiny.

"It does appear to me, my friend," he said presently, "that I detect something strangely familiar about your pajamas."

"I wouldn't be the least bit surprised Mr. Webster. I found them in your suitcase."

Fell a silence of perhaps half a minute. Then:

"I dislike to appear inquisitive," Webster began, "but the fact is, neighbor, I'm curious to know where you got that book. I observe you are reading Samuel Butler's 'Way of All Flesh,' and that the book is slightly damaged. Recently I purchased such a book in—"

"Pray do not take the trouble to explain," the other answered airily. "I discovered this excellent book in your suitcase also. In fact, for me, that suitcase has proved to be a repository of treasures."

John Stuart Webster's neck came out of his collar with the suddenness of a turtle snapping at a fly; he drew himself up beside the top berth until his face was on a level with his unbidden guest, upon whom he bent a look of mingled emotions.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

"I regret I have no card, but even if I had it would be no kindness to inflict upon an American gentleman the cognomen my parents honored me with, for it's long and many-jointed, like a peanut, and embodies the names of all the saints in the calendar. Moreover, just at present I am traveling under an alias. I am known as Mr. Andrew Bowers."

"And your occupation?" Webster managed to articulate.

"Valet de chambre to that prince of gentlemen, Mr. John S. Webster," the other replied with a mischievous gleam in his dark eyes.

Mr. Webster sat down limply on the settee. He was undecided whether to roar with laughter or shriek with rage; while he struggled for a decision Andrew Bowers blew smoke rings at the ceiling.

"Haven't I seen you before?" Webster queried presently.

"I wouldn't be surprised. I drove you down to the steamer in a taxi half an hour ago. You will recall that the taxi driver carried your luggage aboard."

Webster gazed around the stateroom. "Where have you hidden your livery?" he demanded.

"I wrapped it in a newspaper; then, seeking a moment when the deck outside was deserted, I stepped forth in my—I beg your pardon, your—pajamas and tossed it overboard."

"But apparently you did not bring aboard with you a suit of clothes to take the place of your livery?"

"Quite true—lamentably so, Mr. Webster. Perhaps you will accept my desperate need as an excuse for borrowing your pajamas. I notice you have another suit of them. Fortunate man!"

Andrew Bowers was a man of perhaps thirty years, five feet ten inches tall, and apparently in excellent health. He might have weighed a hundred and seventy-pounds and he was undeniably handsome.

While Webster was wondering whether his companion was merely a high-class tramp or an absconding bank cashier, a knock sounded on the stateroom door. He opened it and the purser stood in the entrance.

"Ticket, please," he announced.

Webster surrendered both tickets, receiving in turn two seat checks for the dining saloon, and the purser passed on to the next cabin.

Andrew Bowers smiled a small, present smile, but said nothing, and presently John Stuart Webster broke the silence. "Well," he ordered, "sing the song or tell the story."

"I noticed you surrendered my ticket to the purser," the young man answered irreverently, "and I am glad of that. I take it as prima facie evidence that you have made up your mind to accept my company."

"You're too infernally cool and cocksure, my friend," Webster warned him testily. "I pride myself on a sense of humor and I dearly love a joke until it's carried too far, but be advised in time, young man, and don't try to play horse with me. My acceptance or non-acceptance of you is a subject for future discussion, since at present we have some fiduciary matters before us. You owe me fifty dollars for your ticket. Andrew Bowers, and in view of the fact that I never saw you before today, suppose we start the voyage by squaring the account."

Andrew Bowers sat up in the berth and let his legs drape over the side.

"Mr. Webster," he began seriously, "I, prior to the arrival of the purser to collect the tickets, you had handed my ticket to me, saying: 'Here is your ticket, Mr. Bowers. Be kind enough to reimburse me to the extent of fifty dollars; I should have been compelled to admit then, as I do now, that I haven't fifty dollars. Fortunately for me, however, you surrendered the ticket to the purser before acquainting yourself with the state of my fortunes; the voyage has commenced and whether you like it or not, my dear sir, I am your guest from now until we reach San Buenaventura. Rather an interesting situation, don't you think?"

John Stuart Webster was of Scotch ancestry. He had a hereditary regard for honesties. He was a business man. Prodigal spender though he was and generous to a fault, the fact remained that he always made it a point to get value received, and he was prodigal with his own money; he preferred that the privilege of prodigality with the Websterian funds should remain an inalienable prerogative of the sole surviving member of the Webster family.

"I think you're too cool, young man," Webster retorted. "Just a trifle too cocksure. Up to the present moment you have proffered no evidence why you should not be adjudged a cad, and I do not like cads and must decline to permit one to occupy the same stateroom at my expense. You are clever and amusing and I laughed at you, but at the same time my sense of humor is not so great as to cause me to overlook your impudence and laugh with you. Now, if you have anything to say, say it quickly, because you're going to go away from here—in a hurry."

"I plead guilty to the indictment, Mr. Webster, and submit as an excuse the fact that desperate circumstances require desperate measures. I am not begging my way, neither am I venting it, for the reason that both forms of travel are repugnant to me. I am merely taking advantage of certain fortuitous circumstances to force you, an entire stranger, to extend to me a credit of fifty dollars until we reach San Buenaventura, when you will be promptly reimbursed."

"It is not my habit," Webster retorted stiffly, "to extend credit to strangers who demand it."

"I do not demand it, sir. I beg it of you, and because I cannot afford to be refused I took care to arrange matters so that you would not be likely to refuse my request. Really, I do not mean to be cocksure and impudent, but before you throw me out I'd like to let you in on a secret about yourself."

"Well?"

"You're not going to throw me out."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't."

"That's fighting talk. Now, just to prove to you the depth of error in which you flounder, young man, I am about to throw you out. And he grasped Andrew Bowers in the grip of a grizzly bear and whisked him out of the top berth.

"Wait one second," his helpless victim cried. "I have something to say before you go any further."

"Say it," Webster ordered. "Your tongue is the only part of you that I cannot control."

"When you throw me out on deck," Andrew Bowers queried, "do your pajamas go with me? Does the hat go with the hide?"

"They cost me sixteen dollars in Salt Lake City, but—good lord, yes. I can't throw you out mother naked; d—n it, I can't throw you out at all!"

"Didn't I tell you so? Be a good fellow and turn me loose."

"Certainly—for the time being. You'll stay locked in this stateroom while I have a talk with the captain. He'll probably dig up a shirt, a pair of dungarees and some old shoes for you and set you ashore before we get out of the river. If he doesn't do that he'll keep you aboard and you'll shovel coal for your passage."

"But I'm Andrew Bowers and the purser has collected my first-class ticket!"

"What of it? I shall declare—and

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with truth—that you are not Andrew Bowers; that you are not my valet, and that I did not buy the ticket for you. I dare you to face the captain in my pajamas and prove you aren't a slow-way."

"You would win on that point," the baffling guest admitted, "but it is a point you will not raise. Why? Because I have another trump up my sleeve." He climbed back into the upper berth and from that vantage point gazed down benevolently upon John Stuart Webster. "I'm disappointed in you," he continued sadly. "I thought you'd show a little normal human curiosity about me—and you haven't. You do not ask questions or I could explain, while I cannot volunteer information without seeming to seek your pity, and that of course would be repugnant to me. I am hoping you will accept my word of honor that you shall be reimbursed two hours after you land in San Buenaventura."

"New music to your song, my friend, but the same old words," Webster retorted, and stepped to the stateroom door. "You're doomed to shovel coal or go ashore."

"Listen. If I go ashore, your responsibility for my life ceases, Mr. Webster, but if the chief engineer happens to be short one coal-passer and the captain sends me down to the stove-hole, your responsibility for my death begins, for I'll be put ashore publicly at San Buenaventura and two hours later I'll be facing a firing squad in the cemetery at the Catedral de la Vera Cruz."

"Gosh," John Stuart Webster murmured dazedly, "I'm afraid I can't take a chance like that for fifty dollars. I'm whipped to a frazzle. Any time I'm sitting in back of a royal flush and the other fellow bluffs me out of the pot, I always buy the wine. When it arrives we shall drink to our better acquaintance. Pending its arrival, please be advised that you are welcome to my pajamas, my cigarettes, my book and my stateroom. You are my guest and you owe me nothing, except, perhaps, your confidence, although I do not insist upon that point. Where I come from every man kills his own snakes."

And he held up his hand for Andrew Bowers to shake.

"Mr. Webster," the latter declared feelingly, "I am not a lord of language, so I cannot find words to thank you. I agree with you that you are entitled to my confidence. My name is—"

"Tut, tut, my boy. Your name is Andrew Bowers, and that identifies you sufficiently for the time being. When I suggested that I was entitled to a measure of your confidence, I meant on a few minor points only—points on which my curiosity has been abnormally aroused."

"Very well, my friend. Fire away."

"Are you an American citizen?"

"No, I am a citizen of Sorbante."

"You had no money to pay for your passage to San Buenaventura so you schemed to make me pay your way. Hence I take it that your presence in the capital of your native country is a matter of extreme importance and that the clerk in the ticket office of the Caribbean Mail line is a friend of yours."

"Quite true. He knew my need."

"You were under surveillance and could not leave New Orleans for San Buenaventura unless you left secretly. When I purchased both berths in this stateroom and the ticket clerk knew I held a first-class ticket for a valet that was not, he decided to saw off on me a valet that was. Disguised in the livery of a chauffeur and carrying hand baggage you hoped to get aboard without being detected by your enemies who watched the gangplank."

Andrew Bowers nodded.

"Do you think you succeeded?" Webster continued.

"I do not know, Mr. Webster. I hope so. If I did not—well, the instant this steamer drops anchor in the roadstead at San Buenaventura, she will be boarded and searched by the military police, I will be discovered and—"

He shrugged.

"Lawn party in the cemetery, eh?" Webster suggested.

Andrew Bowers reached under his pillow and produced two heavy automatic pistols and a leather box containing five clips of cartridges. These he exhibited in silence and then thrust them back under the pillow.

"I see, Andrew. In case you're cornered, eh? Well, I think I would prefer to die fighting myself."

"I'm not worried, Mr. Webster. Somehow, I think I ran the gantlet safely."

"But why did you throw your livery overboard?"

"It was of no further use to me."

"But you'll have to have some clothes in which to go ashore, you amazing man."

"Not at all. The steamer will arrive in the harbor of San Buenaventura late in the afternoon—too late to be given pratique that day. After dark I shall drop overboard and endeavor to swim ashore, and in view of that plain clothes would only prove an embarrassment. I shall land in my own country naked and penniless, but once

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