

'WEBSTER—MAN'S MAN' CHAPTER X.

Dolores had been gone an hour before Webster roused from his bitter introspection sufficiently to glance at his watch. "Hum-m-m!" he grunted disapprovingly.

"Oh, I've been here fully half an hour," Dolores' voice assured him. He turned guiltily and found her leaning against the jamb in a doorway behind him and farther down the veranda. She was gazing at him with that calm, impersonal yet vitally interested glance that had so captivated him the first time he saw her. "Are you quite finished talking to yourself and fighting imaginary enemies? If so, you might talk to me for a change; I'll even disagree with you on any subject, if opposition will make you any happier."

He rose and indicated the chair. "Please sit down, Miss Ruey. You are altogether disconcerting—too comfoundedly smart. I fear I'm going to be afraid of you until I know you better."

She shrugged adorably and took the proffered chair. "That's the Latin in her—that shrug," Webster thought. "I wonder what other mixtures go to make up that perfect whole."

Aloud he said: "So you wanted to study me in repose? Why waste your time? I am never in repose."

"Feminine curiosity, Mr. Webster. Billy has talked so much of you that I wanted to see if you measured up to the specifications. Just let me have your hand, and I'll tell you all about yourself."

"Is there any charge?"

"Yes, a nominal one. However, I guarantee a truthful reading; if, when I am through, you are not wholly satisfied, you do not have to pay the price. Is that a satisfactory arrangement?"

"Right as a fox," he declared, and held out his great calloused hand. He thrilled as she took it in both of hers, so soft and beautiful, and flattened it out, palm upward, on her knee. "A fine, large, useful hand," she commented musingly. "The callouses indicate recent hard manual toll with a pick and shovel; despite your recent efforts with soap and brush and pumice-stone, there still remain evidence of some foreign matter ingrained in those callous spots. This line indicates that you are very brave, gentle, and courteous. You are quick and firm in your decisions, but not always right, because your actions are governed by your heart instead of your head. Once you have made a decision, you are reckless of the consequences. Your lifeline tells me you are close to fifty-three years of age."

"Seeress, you're shooting high and to the right," he interrupted, for he did not relish that jab about his age. "I'll have you know I was forty years old last month, and that I can still do a hundred yards in twelve seconds flat—in my working clothes."

"Well, don't feel peeved about it, Mr. Webster. I am not infallible; the best you can hope for from me is a high percentage of hits, even if I did shoot high and to the right that time. In point of worldly experience you're a hundred and six years old but I lopped off fifty per cent. to be on the safe side. To continue. You are of an extremely chivalrous nature—particularly toward young ladies traveling without chaperons; you are kind, affectionate, generous to a fault, something of a spendthrift. One may safely depend upon you to do the unexpected. Your matrimonial line is unbroken, proving you have never married, although right here the line is somewhat dim and frayed." She looked up at him suddenly. "You haven't been in love, have you?" she queried with childlike innocence. "In love—and disappointed?"

He nodded, for he could not trust himself to speak.

"How sad!" she cooed sympathetically. "Did she marry another, or did she die?"

"She—she—yes, she died."

"Cautious tongue, in all probability, carried her off, poor thing! However, to your fortune: You are naturally truthful and would not make a deliberate misstatement of fact unless you had a very potent reason for it. You have a strong sense of sportsmanship, and when fairly defeated, whether in a battle of fists or a battle of wits, you never hold a grudge, which is one of the very nicest characteristics a man can have."

"Or a woman," he suggested feebly. "Quite right. Few women have a sense of sportsmanship. You stand a very good chance of becoming a millionaire in Sobrante, but you must beware of a dark man who has crossed your path."

"Which one?" Webster queried mirthfully. "All coons look alike to me—Greasers also."

"More patter of our profession, Mr. Webster," she admitted, "tossed in to build up the mystery element and stimulate wisdom. Fortune, awaited you in the United States, but you put it behind you, at the call of friendship, for a fortune in Sobrante. Now you have reconsidered that foolish action and at this moment you are contemplating sending a cablegram to a fat old man who waddles when he walks, recalling your decision not to accept a certain proposition of a business nature. However, you are too late. The fat old man with the waddle has made other arrangements, and if you want to make money, you'll remain in Sobrante. I think that is all, Mr. Webster."

He was gazing at her with an expression composed of equal parts of awe, amazement, consternation, adoration, and blank stupidity.

"Well," she queried innocently, "to

After dinner you may hire an open victoria with two little white horses and drive me around the Malecon. There is a band concert to-night."

"If it's the last act of my wicked life!" he promised fervently. "Strange to relate, in that ecstatic moment no thought of Billy Geary marred the perfect serenity of what promised to be the most perfectly serene night in history."

They were seated at the tiny tea table when the sound of feet crunching the little shell-paved path through the patio caused Webster and Dolores to turn their heads simultaneously. Gliding toward them was an individual who wore upon a head of flaming red a disreputable, conical-crowned straw sombrero; a soiled cotton camisa with the tails flowing free of his equally soiled khaki trousers, and sandals of the kind known as alpargates—made from the tough fibre of a plant of the cactus family and worn only by the very lowliest peons—completed his singular attire.

"One of Billy's friends and another reason why he has no social standing," Dolores whispered. "I believe he's going to speak to us."

Such evidently appeared to be the man's intention. He came to the edge of the veranda, swept his ruin of a hat from his red head and bowed with Castilian expansiveness.

"Yer pardon, Miss, for appearin' before you."

She smiled her forgiveness to what Webster now perceived to be an alcoholic wreck. He was about to dismiss the fellow with scant ceremony, when Dolores, with that rich sense of almost masculine humor—a humor that was distinctly American—said sweetly:

"Mr. Webster, shake hands with Don Juan Cafetero, bon vivant and man about town. Don Juan, permit me to present Mr. Webster, from somewhere in the United States. Mr. Webster is a mining partner of our mutual friend Mr. William Geary."

A long, sad descent into the pit had, however, imbued Don Juan with a sense of his degradation; he was in the presence of a superior, and he acknowledged the introduction with a respectful inclination of his head.

"I've called to see, Mister Webster, sor," he explained.

"Very well, old-timer. In what way can I be of service to you?"

"Tis the other way around, sor, if ye please, an' for that same there's no

quote Billy's colloquial style: did I put it over?"

"You did very well for an amateur, but I'm a doubting Thomas. About this fat old man who waddles when he walks: a really topnotch palmist could tell me his name."

"Well, I'm only an amateur, but still I think I might, to quote Billy again, make a stab at it. Do you care to bet me about ten dollars I cannot give you the fat party's initials—all three of them?"

He gazed at her owlishly. She was the most perfectly amazing girl he had ever met; he was certain she would win the ten dollars from him, but then it was worth ten dollars to know for a certainty whether she was perfect or possessed of a slight flaw; so he silently drew forth a wallet that would have choked a cow and skinned off a ten-dollar gold certificate of the United States of America.

"I'm game," he mumbled.

"The fat gentleman's initials are B. P. J."

"By the twelve apostles, Peter, Simon—"

"Don't blaspheme, Mr. Webster."

He stood up and shook himself. "When you order the tea," he said very distinctly, "please have mine cold. I need a bracer after that. Take the ten. You've won it."

"Thanks, ever so much," she answered in a matter-of-fact tone, and tucked the bill inside her shirtwaist. "I am a very poor woman, and—"

"Every little bit added to what you've got makes just a little bit more," she crooned, swaying her lithe, beautiful body and snapping her fingers like a cabaret dancer.

He could have groaned with the futility of his overwhelming desire for her; it even occurred to him what a shame it was to waste a marvel like her on a callow young pup like Billy, who had fought so many deadly skirmishes with Dan Cupid that a post-impressionistic painting of the Geary heart must resemble a pincushion. Then he remembered that this was an ungenerous, a traitorous thought, and that he had not paid the lady her fee.

"Well, what's the tariff?" he asked.

"You really feel that I have earned a professional's fee?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"Since you have taken Billy away from me this evening, I shall make you take Billy's place this evening."

After dinner you may hire an open victoria with two little white horses and drive me around the Malecon. There is a band concert to-night."

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"Beyond a doubt."

"Since you have taken Billy away from me this evening, I shall make you take Billy's place this evening."

Also he do have charge of the cable office, an' when I'm sober enough, I deliver cablegrams for Leber. Now, then, ye'll recall we had a bit of a shower to-day at noon?"

Dolores and Webster nodded. Don Juan, after glancing cautiously around, lowered his voice and continued: "I was deliverin' a cablegram for Leber, an' me course took me past the palace gate—which, be the same token, has sinthry-boxes both inside an' out, wau on each side av the gate. The sinthry was not visible as I came along, an' what wit' the shower comin' as a sud-dint as that, an' me wit' a wardrobe that's not so extensive I can afford to get it wet, I shepped into wan av the outside sinthry-boxes till the rain should be over, an' what wit' a drinkin av aguardiente I'd took to brace me for the trip, an' the mimory av auld times, I fell asleep."

"Dear knows how long I sat there napping; all I know is that I was awakened by the sound av three men talkin, at the gate, an' divil a word did they say but what I heard. They were talkin' in Spanish, but I understood thim well enough. 'He's at the Hotel Mateo,' says wan voice, 'an' his name is Webster—Jawn Webster. He's an American, an' a big, savage-lookin' lad at that, so take me advice an' be careful. Do ye two keep an eye on him wherever he goes, an' if he should step out at night an' wander t'rough a dark street, do ye two see to it that he's put where he'll not interfere again in Don Felipe's affairs. No, damn' gringo—begin' yer pardon, Miss—can inthefere in the wurk av the intelligence bureau at a time like this, in addition to insulk'in our honored chief, wit'out the necessity av bein' measured for a coffin. 'Si, mi general,' says another lad, an' 'To be sure, mi general,' says a third; an' wit' that the general, bad cess to him, wint back to the palace an' the other two walked on up the calle an' away from the sinthry-box."

"Did you come out and follow them?" Webster demanded briskly.

"Faith, I did. Wan av them is Francisco Arredondo, a young cavalry footmint, an' the other wan is Captain Jose Benavides, him that do be the best pistol-shot an' swordsman in the spigwoty army."

"What kind of looking man is this Benavides, mi friend?"

"A tall, thin young man, wit' a dude's moustache an' a diamond ring on his right hand. He do be whiter nor most. Have a care would ye meet him around the city an' let him pick a fight wit' ye. An' have a care, sor, would ye go out av a night."

"Thank you, Don Juan. You're the soul of kindness. What else do you know?"

"Well," Don Juan replied with a naive grin, "I did know somethin' else, but shure, Mister Geary advised me to forget it. I was wit' him in the launch last night."

Webster stepped out of the veranda and laid a friendly hand on Don Juan Cafetero's shoulder. "Don Juan," he said gently, "I'm going back to the United States very soon. Would you like to come with me?"

Don Juan's watery eyes grew a shade mistier, if possible. He shook his head. "Whin I'm drunk here, sor," he replied, "no wan pays any attention to me, but in America they'd give me ten days in the hoosegown wanst a week. Thank you, sor, but I'll stay here till the finish."

He knew the strength of the Demon and had long since ceased to fight even a rear-guard action. Webster put a hand under the stubby chin and tilted Don Juan's head sharply. "Hold up your head," he commanded. "You're the first of your breed I ever saw who would admit he was whipped. Here's five dollars for you—five dollars gold. Take it and return with the piece intact to-morrow morning, Don Juan Cafetero."

Don Juan Cafetero's wondering glance met Webster's directly, wavered, sought the ground, but at a jerk on his chin came back and stayed. Thus for at least ten seconds they gazed at each other; then Webster spoke. "Thank you," he said.

"Me name is John J. Cafferty," the lost one quavered.

"Round one for Cafferty," Webster laughed. "Good-bye now, until nine to-morrow. I'll expect you here, John, without fail." And he took the dervish's hand and wrung it heartily.

"Well," Webster remarked humorously to Dolores as he held out his cup for more tea, "if I'm not the original Tumble Tom, I hope I may never see the back of my neck."

"Do you attach any importance to Don Juan's story?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, but not so much as Don Juan does. I greatly fear I have managed to snarl myself up in a Sobrantean political intrigue, when I haven't the slightest interest either way. However, that's only one more reason why I should finish my work here and get back to Denver."

"But how did all this happen, Mr. Webster?"

"Like shooting fish in a dry lake, Miss Ruey," Webster replied, and re-

lated to her in words the story of his adventure with the Sobrantean assassins in Jackson square and his subsequent meeting with Andrew Bowers aboard La Estrellita.

Dolores laughed long and heartily as Webster finished his humorous recital. "Billy told me God only made one Jack Webster and then destroyed the mold; I believe Billy is right. But do tell me what became of this extraordinary and unbidden guest."

"The night the steamer arrived in port, Billy and Don Juan came out in a launch to say 'Hello,' so I seized upon the opportunity to tell Andrew the launch. Gave him a little note to Billy—carried it in his mouth—instructing Billy to do the right thing by him—and Billy did it. I don't know what Andrew is up to and I don't care. Where I was raised we let every man roll his own hoop. All I hope is that they don't shoot Andrew. If they do, I fear I'll weep. He's certainly a skookum lad. Do you know, Miss Ruey, I love anybody that can impose on me—make a monkey out of me, in fact—and make me like it?"

"That's so comforting," she remarked dryly.

Webster looked at her sharply, suspiciously; her words were susceptible of a dual interpretation. Her next sentence, however, dissipated this impression. "Because it confirms what I told you this afternoon when I read your palm," she added.

"You didn't know how truly you spoke when you referred to the dark man that had crossed my path. He's uncomfortably real—drat him!"

"Then you are really concerned?"

"Not at all, but I purpose sleeping with one eye open. I shan't permit myself to feel concerned until they send more than two men after me—say eight or ten."

His indifference appalled her; she leaned forward impulsively and laid a hand on his forearm. "But you must heed Don Juan's warning," she declared seriously. "You must not go out alone at night."

He grinned boyishly. "Of course not, Miss Ruey. You're going to ride out with me this evening."

"I'm not. I'll not subject you to risk."

"Very well; then I shall drive out alone."

"You're a despot, Mr. Webster—a regular despot."

"Likewise a free agent."

"I'll go with you."

"I thought so. For what hour shall I order the carriage?"

"Seven-thirty. After all, they'll not dare to murder you on the Malecon."

"I agree with you. It will have to be done very quietly, if at all. You've been mighty nice to me this afternoon, seeress; I shall be grateful right up to the moment of dissolution."

"Speak softly but carry a big stick," she warned him.

"A big gun," he corrected her, "—two of them, in fact."

"Sensible man! I'm not going to worry about you, Mr. Webster." She nodded her permission for him to retire, and as he walked down the veranda and into the hotel, her glance followed him with pardonable feminine curiosity, marking the breadth of his shoulders, the quick, springy stride, the alert, erect poise of his head on the powerful neck.

"A doer of deeds are you, John Stuart Webster," she almost whispered. "As Kipling would say: 'Wallah! But you are a man!'"

A stealthy footstep sounded below the veranda; she turned and beheld Don Juan Cafetero, his hat in his left hand, in his right a gold-piece which he held toward her.

"Take it, allanah," he wheezed in his hoarse, drunkard's whisper. "Keep it for me till to-morrow, for sorra wan av me can I trust to do that same—un be the same token I can't face that big man wit'out it."

"Why not, Don Juan?"

He hung his red head. "I dunno, Miss," he replied miserably. "Maybe 'tis on account av him—the eye av him—the way av him—divil such a man did I ever meet—God bless him! Shure, Mister Geary do be the fine lad, but he—"

"Mr. Geary never put a big forefinger under your chin and bade you hold up your head. Is that it?"

"Tis not what he did, Miss but the way he did it. All the fiends av hell 'il be at me this night to spend what he give me—and I—I'm afraid."

He broke off, mumbling and chattering like a man in the grip of a great terror. In his agony of body and spirit, Dolores could have wept for Don Juan Cafetero, for in that supreme moment the dervish's soul was bare, revealing something pure and sweet and human, for all his degradation. How did Jack Webster know? wondered Dolores. And why did he so confidently give an order to this human flotsam and expect it to be obeyed? And why did Don Juan Cafetero come whining to her for strength to help him obey it?

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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