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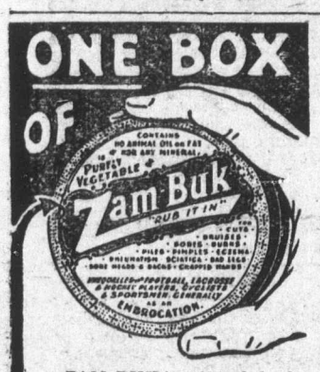

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WEBSTER —MAN'S MAN

by Peter B. Kyne

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

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CHAPTER IV.

Day was dawning in Buenaventura, republic of Sobrante, as invariably it dawns in the tropics—without extended preliminary symptoms. The soft, silvery light of a full moon that had stayed out scandalously late had merged imperceptibly into gray; the gray was swiftly yielding place to a faint crimson that was spreading and deepening upward athwart the east.

In the patio of Mother Jenks' establishment in the Calle de Concordia, No. 19, the first shafts of morning light were filtering obliquely through the orange trees and creeping in under the deep, Gothic-arched veranda flanking the western side of the patio. Presently, through the silent reaches of the Calle de Concordia, the sound of a prodigious knocking and thumping echoed, as of some fretful individual seeking admission at the street door of El Buen Amigo, by which euphonious designation Mother Jenks' caravansary was known to the public of Buenaventura. In the second story, front, a window slid back and a woman's voice, husky with that huskiness that speaks so accusingly of cigarettes and alcohol, demanded:

"Quien es? Who is it? Que quiere usted? Wot do yer want?"

"Ye might dispinse wit' that paraqueet conversation whin addhressin' the likes av me," a voice replied. "'Tis me—Cafferty. I have a cablegram Leber give me to deliver——"

"Gawd's truth! Would yer wake the 'ole 'ouse with yer 'ammering?"

"All right. I'll not say another worrd!"

Without the portal stood Don Juan Cafetero, of whom a word or two before proceeding.

To begin, Don Juan Cafetero was not his real name, but rather a free Spanish translation of the Gaelic, John Cafferty. Mr. Cafferty was an exile of Erin with a horrible thirst. He had first arrived in Sobrante some five years before, as section boss in the employ of the little foreign-owned narrow-gauge railway which ran from Buenaventura on the Caribbean coast to San Miguel de Padua, up-country where the nitrate beds were located. Prior to his advent the railroad people had tried many breeds of section boss without visible results, until a Chicago man, who had come to Sobrante to install an inter-communicating telephone system in the government buildings, suggested to the superintendent of the road, who was a German, that the men made for bosses come from Erin's isle; wherefore Mr. Cafferty had been imported at a price of $5 a day gold. Result—a marked improvement in the road bed and consequently the train schedules, and the ultimate loss of the Cafferty soul.

Something in the climate of Sobrante must have appealed to a touch of laissez faire in Don Juan's amiable nature, for in the course of time he had taken unto himself, without bell or book, after the fashion of the proletariat of Sobrante, the daughter of one Esteban Manuel Enrique Jose Maria Pasqual y Miramontes, an estimable peon who was singularly glad to have his daughter off his hands and no questions asked. Following the fashion of the country, however, Esteban had forthwith moved the remainder of his numerous progeny under the mantle of Don Juan Cafetero's philanthropy, and resigned a position which for many years he had not enjoyed—to-wit: salting and packing green hides at a local abattoir. This foolhardy economic move had so incensed Don Juan that in a fit of pique he spurned his father-in-law (we must call Esteban something and so why split hairs?) under the tails of his camisa, with such vigor as to sever forever the friendly relations hitherto existing between the families. Mrs. Cafferty (again we transgress, but what of it?) subsequently passed away in child birth, and no sooner had she been decently buried than Don Juan took a week off to drown his sorrows.

In this condition he had encountered Esteban Manuel Enrique Jose Maria Pasqual y Miramontes and called him out of his name. In the altercation that ensued Esteban, fully convinced that he had received the nub end of the transaction from start to finish, cut Don Juan severely; Don Juan had thereupon slain Esteban with a .44-caliber revolver and upon emerging from the railroad hospital a month later had been tried by a Sobrantean magistrate and fined the sum of $20,000, legal tender of the republic of Sobrante. Of course, he had paid it off within six months from his wages as section boss, but the memory of the injustice always rankled him, and gradually he moved down the scale of society from section boss to day laborer, day laborer to tropical tramp, and tropical tramp to beach comber, in which latter state he had now existed for several months.

To return to Mother Jenks.

Before Don Juan could even utter a matutinal greeting, Mother Jenks laid finger to lip and silenced him. "Go back to Leber's and return in an hour," she whispered. "I 'ave my reasons for wantin' that bloomin' cablegram delivered later."

Don Juan hadn't the least idea what Mother Jenks' reasons might be, but he presumed she was up to some chicanery, and so he winked his bloodshot eye very knowingly and nodded his acquiescence in the program.

When he had gone, Mother Jenks went behind the bar and fortified herself with her morning's morning—which rite having been performed, her sleep-benumbed brain livened up immediately.

"Gord's truth!" the lady murmured. "An' me about to turn him adrift for the lawst fortnight! Well for 'im 'e allers hadmired the picture o' my sainted 'Enery, as was the spittin' image of his own fawther. 'Evings! 'Ell's bells! But that was a bit of a tight squeak! Just as I'm fully convinced 'e's beat it an' I'm left 'oldin' the sack, all along o' my kindness of 'eart, 'e gets the cablegram 'e's been lookin' for this two months past; an' 'e allers claimed as 'ow any time 'e got a cablegram it'd be an answer to 'is letter, with money to foller! My word but that was touch an' go!"

Still congratulating herself upon her good fortune in intercepting Don Juan Cafetero, Mother Jenks proceeded upstairs to her chamber, clothed herself, and adjourned to the kitchen. After giving orders for an extra special breakfast for two, Mother Jenks returned to her cantina, and formally opened the same for the business of that day and night.

To her came presently, via the tiled hallway, the object of her solicitude, a young man on the sunny side of thirty. He was thin for one of his height and breadth of chest; in color his countenance resembled that of a sick Chinaman. His hair was thick and wavy, but lusterless; his dark blue eyes carried a hint of jaundice; and a generous mouth, beneath an equally generous upper lip, gave ample ground for the suspicion that while Mr. William Geary's speech denoted him an American citizen, at least one of his maternal ancestors had been wooed and won by an Irishman. An old Panama hat, sad relic of a prosperous past, a pair of soiled buck skin pumps, a suit of unbleached linen equally befouled, and last but not least, the remnants of a smile that much hard luck could never quite obliterate, completed his attire—and to one a stranger in the tropics would appear to constitute a complete inventory of Mr. Geary's possessions.

"Dulce corazon mio, I extend a greeting," he called at the entrance. "I trust you rested well last night, Mother Jenks, and that no evil dreams were born of your midnight repast of frijoles refritos, marmalade, and arf-an'-arf!"

"Chop yer spoofin', Willie," Mother Jenks simpered. "My heye! So I'm

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"Chop Your Spoofin', Willie.

yer sweet'eart, eh? Yer wheedlin' blighter, makin' love to a girl as is old enough to be yer mother!"

"A woman," Mr. Geary retorted sagely and not a whit abashed, "is at the apex of her feminine charms at thirty-seven."

He knew his landlady to be not a day under fifty, but such is the ease with which the Irish scatter their blarney that neither Billy Geary nor Mother Jenks regarded this pretty speech in the light of an observation immaterial, inconsequential and not germane to the matter at issue. Nevertheless, there was a deeper reason for his blarney. This morning, watching the telltale tinge of pleasure underlying the alcohol-begotten hue of the good creature's face, he felt almost ashamed of his own heartlessness—almost, but not quite.

For two months he had existed entirely because of the leniency of Mother Jenks in the matter of credit. He could not pay her cash, devoutly as he hoped to do some day, and he considered it of the most vital importance that in the interim he should somehow survive. Therefore, in lieu of cash he paid her compliments, which she snapped up greedily.

An inventive genius was Billy. He never employed the same defensive tactics two days in succession, and when personal flattery threatened to fail him, a large crayon reproduction of the late Henry Jenks, which hung over the back bar, was a never-failing source of inspiration.

This was the "sainted 'Enery" previously referred to by Mother Jenks. He had been a sergeant in Her Britannic Majesty's Royal Horse artillery, and upon retiring to the reserve had harkened to a proposition to emigrate to Sobrante and accept a commission as colonel of artillery with the government forces then in the throes of a revolutionary attack. The rebels had triumphed, and as a result 'Enery had been sainted via the customary expeditious route; whereupon his wife had had recourse to her early profession of barmaid, and El Buen Amigo had resulted.

However, let us return to our sheeps, as Mr. Geary would have expressed it. Seemingly the effect of Billy's compliment was instantly evident, for Mother Jenks set out two glasses and a bottle.

"I know yer a trifler, Willy Geary," she simpered, "but if I do s'y it as shouldn't, I was accounted as 'andsome a barmaid as you'd find in Bristol town. I've lost my good looks, what with grief an' worritin' since losin' my sainted 'Enery, but I was 'andsome oncet."

"I can well believe it, Mother—since you are handsome still! For my part," he continued confidentially, as with shaking hand he filled his brandy-glass, "you'll excuse this drunkard's drink, Mother, but I need it; I had the shakes again last night—for my part, I prefer the full-blown rose to the bud."

Mother Jenks fluttered like a debutante as she poured her drink. They touched glasses, calloused worldlings that they were.

He tossed off his drink. It warmed and strengthened him, after his night of chills and fever, and brazenly he returned to the attack.

"Changing the subject from feminine grace and charm to manly strength and virtue, I've been marking lately the resolute poise of your martyred husband's head on his fine military shoulders. There was a man, if I may judge from his photograph, that would fight a wildcat."

"Oh, m'ybe 'e wouldn't!" Mother Jenks hastened to declare. "You know, Willie, I was present w'en they shot 'im, a-waitin' to claim 'is body. 'E kisses me good-bye, an' says 'e: 'Brace up, ol' girl. Remember your 'usband's been a sergeant in 'Er Majesty's Royal 'Orse artillery, an' don't let the bloody blighters see yer cry.' Then 'e walks out front, with 'is fine straight back to the wall, draws a circle on 'is blue tunic with white chalk an' says: 'Shoot at that, yer yeller-bellied bounders, an' be d——d to yer!'"

"To be the widow of such a gallant son of Mars," Billy declared, "is a greater honor than being the wife of a duke. Ah, Mother," he added with a note of genuine gratitude and sincerity, "you've been awfully good to me. I don't know what I'd have done without you." He laid his hand on her fat arm. "Mother, one of these days I'll get mine, and when I do I'm going to stake you to a nice little pub back in Bristol."

She smiled at him with motherly tenderness and shook her head. In a concrete niche in the mortuary of the Catedral de la Vera Cruz the bones of her sainted 'Enery reposed, and when her hour came she would lie beside him.

"Yer a sweet boy, Willie," she told him, "an' I'd trust yer for double the score, s'help me. 'Eving knows I 'aven't much, but wot I 'ave I shares freely with them I likes."

Mother Jenks preceded him into the shady side of the veranda, where ordinarily she was wont to breakfast in solitary state. Her table was set for two this morning, however. Billy flipped an adventurous cockroach off the table and fell to with fine appetite.

He was dallying with a special brew of coffee, with condensed milk in it, when the Jamaica negro entered from the cantina to announce Don Juan Cafetero with a cablegram.

"A cablegram!" Mother Jenks cried. "Gord's truth! I'll wager the pub it's for you, Willie. Bob"—turning to the negro, and addressing him in her own private brand of Spanish—"give Don Juan a drink, if 'e 'asn't helped 'imself while yer back is turned, an' bring the cablegram 'ere."

Within the minute Bob returned with a long yellow envelope, which he handed Mother Jenks. Without so much as a glance at the superscription, she handed it to Billy Geary, who tore it open and read:

"Los Angeles, Cal., U. S. A., August 16, 1913.

"Henrietta Wilkins, Calle de Concordia, No. 19, Buenaventura, Sobrante, C. A.

"Leaving today to visit you. Will cable from New Orleans exact date arrival. DOLORES."

The shadow of deep disappointment settled over Billy's face as he read. Mother Jenks noted it instantly.

"Wot's 'e got to s'y, Willie?" she demanded.

"It isn't a he. It's a she," Billy replied. "Besides, the cablegram isn't for me at all. It's for one Henrietta Wilkins, Calle de Concordia, No. 19, and who the devil Henrietta Wilkins may be is a mystery to me. Ever have any boarder by that name, Mother?"

Mother Jenks' red face had gone white. "'Enrietta Wilkins was my maiden nyme, Willie," she confessed soberly, "an' there's only one human as 'ud cable me or write me by that nyme. Gord, Willie, wot's 'appened?"

"I'll read it to you, Mother."

Billy read the message aloud, and when he had finished, to his amazement, Mother Jenks laid her head on the table and began to weep.

CHAPTER V.

Without quite realizing why he did so, Billy decided that fear and not grief was at the bottom of the good creature's distress, and in his awkward, masculine way he placed his arm around Mother Jenks' shoulders, shook her gently, and bade her remember that chaos might come and go again, but he, the said William Geary, would remain her true and steadfast friend in any and all emergencies that might occur.

"Gor' bless yer heart, Willie," Mother Jenks sniffled. "I dunno wot in 'ell yer ever goin' to think o' me w'en I tell wot I've been up to this past fifteen year."

"Whatever you've been up to, Mother, it was a kind and charitable deed—of that much I am certain," Billy replied loftily and—to his own surprise—sincerely.

"As Gord is my judge, Willie, it started out that w'y," moaned Mother Jenks, and she squeezed Billy's hand as if from that yellow, shaking member she would draw aid and comfort. "'Er nyme is Dolores Ruey. 'Er father was Don Ricardo Ruey, president av this blasted 'ell on earth w'en me an' my sainted 'Enery first come to Buenaventura. 'E was too good for the yeller-bellied beggars; 'e tried to do somethink for them an' run the

(Continued on Page Seven)

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