

Webster —Man's Man

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"Cappy Ricks," "The Valley
of the Giants," etc.

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CHAPTER XI.

For fully an hour after retiring John Stuart Webster slept the deep, untroubled sleep of a healthy unworried man; then one of the many species of "jigger" which flourish just north and south of the equator crawled into bed with him and promptly proceeded to establish its commissary on the inner flank of the Websterian thigh, where the skin is thin and the blood close to the surface. As a consequence, Mr. Webster awoke suddenly, obliterated the intruder and got out of bed for the purpose of anointing the injured spot with alcohol—which being done, an active search of the bed resulted in the discovery of three more jiggers and the envelopment of John Stuart Webster's soul in the fogs of apprehension.

"Tis an evil land, filled with trouble," he mused as he lighted a cigaret. "I wish Bill were here to advise me. He ought to be able to straighten this deal out and assure the higher-ups that I'm not butting in on their political affairs. But Bill's up-country and here I am under surveillance and unable to leave the hotel to talk it over with Andrew Bowers, the only other white expert I know of in town. And by the way, they're after Andrew, too! I wonder what for."

He smoked two cigarets, the while he pondered the various visible aspects of this dark mess in which he found himself floundering. And finally he arrived at a decision. "These chaps aren't thorough," Webster decided. "They'll see me safely to bed and pick me up again in the morning—so I'll take a chance that the coast is clear, slip out now and talk it over with Andrew."

He looked at his watch—eleven-thirty. Hurriedly he dressed, strapped on his automatic pistol, dragged his bed noiselessly to the open window and tied to the bed-leg the rope he used to lash his trunk; then he low-



He Lowered Himself Out of the Window.

ered himself out the window. The length of rope permitted him to descend within a few feet of the ground.

Webster made his way to the street unnoticed, and ten minutes later appeared before the entrance of El Buen Amigo just as Mother Jenks was barring it for the night.

"I am Mr. Webster," he announced. "Mr. Geary's friend from the United States."

Mother Jenks, having heard of him, was of course profoundly flustered to meet this toff who so carelessly wired his down-and-out friends pesos ore in lots of a thousand. Cordially she invited him within to stow a peg of her best, which invitation Mr. Webster promptly accepted.

"To your beautiful eyes," Webster boasted her. "And now would you

mind lending me to the quarters of Billy's friend Mr. Bowers?"

She shuffled away, to return presently with the news that Mr. Bowers was in his room and would be delighted to receive Mr. Webster. Mother Jenks led Webster to the door, knocked, announced him and discreetly withdrew.

"My dear Webster!" cried Andrew Bowers enthusiastically, and he drew his late fellow-passenger into the room. Webster observed that Andrew was not alone. "I want to see you privately," he said. "Didn't know you had company, or I wouldn't have intruded."

"Well, I knew I had company, didn't I? Come in, you crazy fellow, and meet some good friends of mine who are very anxious to meet you." He turned to a tall, handsome, scholarly looking man of about forty, whose features, dress and manner of wearing his whiskers proclaimed him a personage. "Dr. Eliseo Pacheco, I have the honor to present Mr. John S. Webster, the American gentleman of whom you have heard me speak."

Doctor Pacheco promptly leaped to his feet and bowed with ostentatious reverence then suddenly, with Latin impulsiveness, he advanced upon Webster, swept aside the latter's outstretched hand, clasped John Stuart Webster in fraternal embrace, and to the old sour-dough's inexpressible horror, kissed him upon the right cheek—after which he backed off, bowed once more, and said in Spanish:

"Sir, my life is yours."

"It is well he gave it to you before you took it," Andrew said in English, and he laughed, noting Webster's confusion. "And this gentleman is Colonel Pablo Caraveo."

"Thunder, I'm in for it again," Webster thought—and he was, for the amiable colonel embraced Webster and kissed his left cheek before turning to Andrew.

"You will convey to our guest, in English, Don Ricardo, assurances of my profound happiness in meeting him," he said in Spanish.

"The Colonel says you're all to the mustard," Andrew at once interpreted merrily.

"Rather a liberal translation," Webster retorted in Spanish, whereat Colonel Caraveo sprang up and clapped his hands in delight.

"Your happiness, my dear Colonel," Webster continued, "is extravagant grief compared with my delight in meeting a Sobrantean gentleman who has no desire to skewer me." He turned to Andrew. "While introductions are in order, old son, suppose you complete the job and introduce yourself. I'm always suspicious of a man with an alias."

"Then behold the death of that impudent fellow Andrew Bowers, late valet de chambre to this eminent mining engineer and prince of gentlemen, Mr. John Stuart Webster. Doctor Pacheco, will you be good enough to perform the operation?"

"This gentleman," said the doctor, laying his hand on Andrew's shoulder, "is Don Ricardo Luiz Ruey, a gentleman, a patriot, and the future president of our unhappy country."

Webster put his hands on the young man's shoulders. "Ricardo, my son," he asked earnestly, "do you think you could give me some little hint of the approximate date on which you will assume office? By the nice gods of war, I never wanted a friend at court so badly as I want one tonight."

Webster sat down and helped himself from a box of cigars he found on Ricardo's bureau. "I feel I am among friends at last," he announced between preliminary puffs "so listen while I spin a strange tale. I've been the picture of bad luck ever since I started for this infernal—this wonderful country of yours. In New Orleans I took a Sunday morning stroll in Jackson square and came across two men trying to knife another. In the interest of common decency I interfered and won a sweeping victory, but to my amazement the prospective corpse took to his heels and advised me to do the same."

Ricardo Ruey sprang for John Stuart Webster. "By George," he said in English. "I'm going to hug you, too. I really ought to kiss you, because I'm that man you saved from assassination, but—too long in the U. S. A. I suppose; I've lost the customs of my country."

"Get out," yelled Webster, fending him off. "By the way, Ricardo—I'm going to call you Rick for short—do you happen to have any relatives in this country?"

"Yes, a number of second and third cousins."

"Coming down on the steamer, I didn't like to appear curious, but all the time I wanted to ask you one question."

"Ask it now."

"Are you a Sobrantean?"

"I was born in this country and raised here until I was fourteen."

"But you're—why, hang it, you're not a Latin?"

"No, I'm a mixture, with Latin predominating. My forebears were pure Castilians from Madrid, and crossed the Western ocean in caravels. It's

been a matter of pride with the house of Ruey to keep the breed pure, but despite all precautions, the family tree has been grafted once with a Scotch thistle, twice with the lily of France, and once with the shamrock of Ireland. My mother was an Irish woman."

"You alibi yourself perfectly, Ricardo, and my curiosity is appeased. Permit me to continue my tale," he added in Spanish, and forthwith he related with humorous detail his adventure at the gangplank of the steamer that had borne him and Ricardo Ruey south. Ricardo interrupted him. "We know all about that, friend Webster, and we knew the two delightful gentlemen had been told off to get you—unofficially. The Sobrantean revolutionary junta has headquarters in New Orleans. It is composed of political exiles, for Sarros, the present dictator of Sobrante, rules with an iron hand, and has a cute little habit of railroadng his enemies to the cemetery via the treason charge and the firing squad. He killed my father, who was the best president this benighted country ever had, and I consider it my Christian duty to avenge my father and a patriotic duty to take up the task he left unfinished—the task of making over my country."

"In Sobrante, as in most of the countries in Central America, there are two distinct classes of people—the aristocrats and peons—and the aristocrat fattens on the peon, as he has had a habit of doing since Adam. We haven't any middle class to stand as a buffer between the two—which makes it a sad proposition. My father was an idealist and a dreamer and he dreamed of reform in government and a solution of the agrarian problem which confronts all Latin-America. He trusted one Pablo Sarros, an educated peon, who had commanded the government forces under the regime my father overthrew. My tender-hearted parent discovered that Sarros was plotting to overthrow him; but instead of having him shot, he merely removed him from command. Sarros gathered a handful of bandits, joined the old government forces my father had conquered, hired a couple dozen Yankee artillerymen and—he won out. My father was captured and executed; the palace was burned, and my sister perished in the flames. I'm here to pay off the score."

"A worthy ambition! So you organized the revolutionary junta in New Orleans, eh?"

Ricardo nodded. "Word of it reached Sarros, and he sent his brother Raoul, chief of the intelligence bureau, to investigate and report. As fast as he reported, Colonel Caraveo reported to me. My father's son possesses a name to conjure with. Consequently it was to the interest of the Sarros administration that I be eliminated. They watched every boat; hence my scheme for eluding their vigilance—which, thanks to you, worked like a charm."

"But," Webster complained, "I'm not sitting in the game at all, and yet I'm caught between the upper and nether millstones."

"That is easy to explain. You interfered that morning in Jackson square; then Raoul Sarros met you going aboard the steamer for Buenaventura and you manhandled him, and naturally, putting two and two together, he has concluded that you are not only his personal enemy but also a friend and protector of mine and consequently an enemy of the state."

"And as a consequence I'm marked for slaughter?"

"It would be well, my friend," Doctor Pacheco suggested, "to return to the United States until after Ricardo and his friends have eliminated your Nemesis."

"How soon will that happy event transpire?"

"In about sixty days we hope to be ready to strike, Mr. Webster."

Colonel Caraveo cleared his throat. "I understand from Ricardo that you and another American are interested in a mining concession, Mr. Webster."

Webster nodded.

"Is this a concession from a private landholder or did your friend secure it from the Sarros government?"

"From the government. We pay ten per cent. royalty, on a ninety-nine-year lease, and that's all I know about it. I have never seen the property, and my object in coming was to examine it and, if satisfied, finance the project."

"If you will return to your hotel, my dear sir," Colonel Caraveo suggested, "and remain there until noon tomorrow, I feel confident I can guarantee you immunity from attack thereafter. I have a plan to influence my associates in the intelligence office."

"Bully for you, Colonel. Give me sixty days in which to operate, and I'll have finished my job in Sobrante and gotten out of it before that gang of cut-throats wakes up to the fact that I'm gone. I thank you, sir."

"The least we can do, since you have saved Ricardo's life and rendered our cause a great service, is to save your life," Colonel Caraveo replied.

"This is more comfort than I had hoped for when I came here, gentlemen. I am very grateful, I assure you. Of course this little revolution you're cooking up is no affair of mine,

and I trust I need not assure you that your confidence is quite safe with me."

The Doctor and the Colonel immediately rose and bowed like a pair of marionettes. Webster turned to Ricardo.

"Have you had any experience in revolutions, my son?" he asked.

Ricardo nodded. "I realized I had to have experience, and so I went to Mexico. I was with Madero through the first revolution."

"How are you arming your men?"

"Mannlichers. I've got 20,000,000 rounds of cartridges, 25 machine guns, and a dozen three-inch field guns. I have also engaged 200 American ex-soldiers to handle the machine guns and the battery. These rascals cost me \$5 a day gold, but they're worth it; they like fighting and will go anywhere to get it—and are faithful."

"You are secretly mobilizing in the mountains, eh?" Webster rubbed his chin ruminatively. "Then I take it you'll attack Buenaventura when you strike the first blow?"

"Quite right. We must capture a seaport if we are to revolute successfully."

"I'm glad to know that. I'll make it my business to be up in the mountains at the time. I'm for peace, every rattle out of the box. Gentlemen, you've cheered me wonderfully. I will now go home and leave you to your evil machinations; and, the good Lord and the jiggers willing, I shall yet glean a night's sleep."

He shook hands all around and took his departure.

Mother Jenks was waiting for Webster at the foot of the stairs. He paused on the threshold.

"Mrs. Jenks," he said, "Billy tells me you have been very kind to him. I want to tell you how much I appreciate it and that I stand willing to reciprocate any time you are in need."

Mother Jenks fingered her beard and reflected. "Ave you met Miss Dolores Ruey, sir?" she queried.

"Your ward? Yes."

"Ow does the lamb strike you, Mr. Webster?"

"I have never met many women; I have known few intimately; but I should say that Miss Dolores Ruey is the marvel of her sex. She is as beautiful as she is good, and is as intelligent as she can be."

"She's a lady, sir," Mother Jenks affirmed proudly. "An' I done it. You can see with art a heve wot I am; but for all that, I've done my dooty by her. From the day my sainted 'Emery—'e was a colonel o' artillery under President Ruey, Dolores' father—'e escaped from the burnin' palace with 'er an' told me to raise 'er a lady for the syke of her father, as was the finest gentleman this rotten country'll ever see, she's been my guidin' star. She's self-supportin' now, but still I ain't done my whole dooty by her. I want to see 'er married to a gentleman as'll maintain 'er like a lady."

"Well, Mrs. Jenks, I think you will live to see that worthy ambition attained. Mr. Geary is head over heels in love with her."

"Aye. Willie's a nice lad—I could wish no better; but wot 'e's got 'e got from you, an' where'll 'e be if his mine doesn't p'y big? Now, with you, sir, it's different. You're a bit older'n Billy, an' more settled an' serious; you've made yer fortune, so Willie tells me, an' not to go beatin' about the bally bush, I s'y, wot's the matter with you an' her steppin' over the broomstick together? You might go a bloom'n' sight farther an' fare wuss."

"Too old, my dear schemer, too old!" John Stuart replied smilingly.

"And she's in love with Billy. Don't worry. If he doesn't make a go of this mining concession, I'll take care of his finances until he can do so himself. I do not mind telling you, in strictest confidence, that I have made my will and divided my money equally between them."

"Gord bless you, for a sweet, kind gentleman," Mother Jenks gulped, quite overcome with emotion.

Hastily Webster bade Mother Jenks good night and hurried away to escape a discussion on such a delicate topic with Billy's blunt and single-minded landlady. His mind was in a tumult. So it was that he paid no attention to a vehicle that jogged by him with the cochero sagging low in his seat, half asleep over the reins, until a quick command from the closed interior brought the vehicle to an abrupt halt, half a block in advance of Webster.

Save for an arc light at each end of the block, the Calle de Concordia was dim; save for Webster, the carriage and the two men who plied hurriedly out at the rear of the conveyance, the Calle de Concordia was devoid of life. Webster saw one of the men hurriedly toss a coin to the cochero; with a fervent "Gracias, mi capitán," the driver clucked to his horse, turned the corner into the Calle Elizondo and disappeared, leaving his late passengers facing Webster and calmly awaiting his approach. He was within 20 feet of them when the taller of the two men spoke.

"Good evening, my American friend."

This meeting is a pleasure we scarcely hoped to have so soon. For the same we are indebted to Lieutenant Arredondo, who happened to look back as we passed you, and recognized you under the arc light."

Webster halted abruptly; the two Sobrantean officers stood smiling and evidently enjoying his discomfiture. Each carried a service revolver in a closed holster fastened to his sword-belt, but neither had as yet made a move to draw—seeing which, Webster felt sufficiently reassured to accept the unwelcome situation with a grace equal to that of his enemies.

"What? You two bad little boys up this late! I'm surprised," he replied in Spanish. He folded his arms, struck an attitude and surveyed them as might an indignant father. "You kids have been up to some mischief," he added, as his right hand closed over the butt of his automatic, where it lay snuggled in the open holster under his left arm between his shirt and coat. "Can it be possible you are going to take advantage of superior numbers and the fact that you are both armed, to force me into a duel on your terms, my dear Captain Benavides?"

By a deferential bow, the unwholesome Benavides indicated that such were his intentions. "Then," said Webster, "as the challenged party I have the choice of weapons. I choose pistols."

"At what range?" the lieutenant asked with mock interest.

"As we stand at present. I'm armed. Pull your hardware, you pretty pair of polecats, and see if you can beat me to the draw."

Captain Benavides' jaw dropped slightly; with a quiet deliberate motion his hand stole to his holster, and Lieutenant Arredondo wet his lips and glanced so apprehensively at his companion that Webster was aware that here was a situation not to his liking.

"You should use an open holster," Webster taunted. "Come, come—unbutton that holster-flap and get busy."

Benavides' hand came away from the holster. He was not the least bit frightened, but his sense of proportion in matters of this kind was undergoing a shake-up.

"In disposing of any enemy in a gun fight, so a professional killer once informed me," Webster continued, "it is a good plan to put your first bullet anywhere in the abdomen; the shock of a bullet there paralyzes your opponent for a few seconds and prevents him from returning the compliment, and in the interim you blow his brains out while he lies looking at you. I have never had any practical experience in matters of this kind, but I don't mind telling you that if I must practice on somebody, the good Lord could not have provided two more delightful subjects."

He ceased speaking, and for nearly half a minute the three men appraised each other. Benavides was smiling slightly; Arredondo was fidgeting; Webster's glance never faltered from the captain's nervous hand.

"You would be very foolish to draw," Webster then assured Benavides. "If I am forced to kill you, it will be with profound regret. Suppose you two dear, sweet children run along home and think this thing over. You may change your mind by tomorrow morn—"

The captain's hand, with the speed of a juggler's, had flown to his holster; but quick as he was, Webster was a split second quicker. The sound of his shot roared through the silent calle, and Benavides, with his pistol half drawn, lifted a bloody, shattered hand from the butt as Webster's automatic swept in a swift arc and covered Arredondo, whose arms on the instant went skyward.

"That wasn't a half bad duel," Webster remarked coldly. "Are you not obliged to me, Captain, for not blowing your brains out—for disregarding my finer instincts and refraining from shooting you first through the abdomen? Bless you, my boy, I've been stuck for years in places where the only sport consisted in seeing who could take a revolver, shoot at a tin can and roll it farthest in three seconds. Let me see your hand."

Benavides sullenly held up that dripping member, and Webster inspected it at a respectful distance. "Steel jacket bullet," he informed the wounded man. "Small hole—didn't do much damage. You'll be just as well as ever in a month."

He helped himself to Arredondo's gun, flipped out the cylinder, and slipped all six cartridges into his palm. Similarly he disarmed Benavides, expressed his regret that circumstances had rendered it imperative to use force, and strolled blithely down the calle. In the darkened patio he groped along the wall until he found the swinging rope by which he had descended from his room—whereupon he removed his shoes, tied the laces together, slung them around his neck, dug his toes into the adobe wall and climbed briskly to his room.

The next morning Webster waited until Dolores appeared and then accompanied her into the dining room.

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