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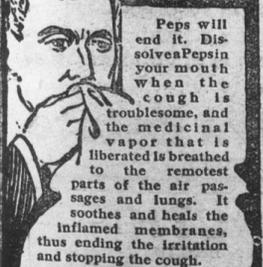
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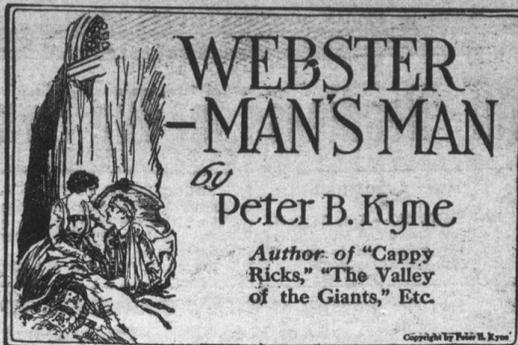
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PEPS



WEBSTER - MAN'S MAN

Peter B. Kyne

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

CHAPTER I.

When John Stuart Webster, mining engineer and kicker-up-of-dust on distant trails, flagged the S. P. L. A. & S. L. Limited at a blistered board station in Death valley, California, he had definitely resolved to do certain things. To begin, he would invade the dining car at the first call to dinner and order approximately twenty dollars' worth of ham and eggs, which provender is, as all who know will certify, the panacea of epicurean delight to an old sour-dough coming out of the wilderness with a healthy bank-roll and a healthier appetite.

Following the ham and eggs, Mr. Webster planned to saturate himself from soul to vermiform appendix with nicotine, which he purposed obtaining from tobacco with nicotine in it. It was a week since he had smoked anything with an odor even remotely like tobacco, for the August temperature in Death valley is no respecter of moisture in any man or his tobacco. Upon arrival in Salt Lake City his spree would really begin. Webster designed chartering a taxicab and proceeding forthwith to a hotel where he would engage a sunny room with a bath, fill the bathtub, climb blithely in and soak for two hours at least, for it was nearly eight months since he had had a regular bath and he purposed making the most of his opportunity. His long-drawn ablutions at length over, he would don a silken dressing gown and slippers, order up a barber and proceed to part with enough hair and whiskers to upholster an automobile, and upon the completion of his tonsorial adventures he would encase his person in a suit of mauve-colored silk pajamas, climb into bed and stay there for forty-eight hours, merely waiting long enough to take another bath, order up periodical consignments of ham and eggs, and incidentally make certain that a friendly side-winder or chuckwalla hadn't crawled under the blanket with him.

So much for John Stuart Webster's plans. Now for the gentleman himself. No one—not even the Pullman porter, shrewd judge of mankind that he was—could have discerned in the chrysalis that flagged the Limited the butterfly of fashion that was to be. As the ebony George raised the vestibule platform, opened the car door and looked out, he had no confidence in the lean, sun-baked big man standing by the train. Plainly the fellow was not a first-class passenger but a wandering prospector, for he was dog-dirty, a rule of rags and hairy as a tarantula. The only clear thing about him was a heavy-caliber automatic pistol of the army type, swinging at his hip.

"Day coach" tourist up in front," the knight of the whisker-broom announced in disapproving tones and started to close down the platform.

"So I perceived," John Stuart Webster replied blandly. "I also observed that you failed to employ the title 'sir'—when addressing a white man. Put that platform back and hop out here with your little stool, you saddle-colored son of Senegambia, or I'll make you a hard porter to catch."

"Yassah, yassah!" the porter sputtered, and obeyed instantly. Mr. Webster handed him a disreputable-looking suitcase and stepped aboard in state, only to be informed that there wasn't a vacant first-class berth on the train.

"Yes, I know I'm dirty," the late arrival announced cheerfully, "but still, as Bobby Burns once remarked, 'a man's a man for a' that'—and I'm not unsanitary."

"I'm very sorry," the conductor replied perfunctorily and endeavored to pass on, but Webster secured a firm grip on his lapel and frustrated the escape.

"You're not sorry," the ragged wanderer declared, "not one little bit. You're only apprehensive. However, you needn't be. There is no wild life on me, brother, I assure you."

"But I tell you, the train is full up. You'll have to roost in the day coach or the tourist. I'm very sorry—"

"Nevertheless, despite your deep grief, something tells me you're spoofing, so while I must, of necessity, accept your suggestion, said acceptance will be but temporary. In about two hours, young fellow, you're going to make the alarming discovery that you have bats in your belfry." And with a whiskey grin which, under the circumstances, was

charming in its associate freedom from malice, Mr. Webster departed for the day coach.

Two hours later the conductor found him in the aforementioned day coach, engaged in a mild game of poker with a mule-skinner, a Chinaman, an aged prospector, and a half-breed Indian, and waited until Mr. Webster, on a bob-tailed flush, bluffed the Chinaman out of a dollar-and-a-half pot.

"Are you Mr. John S. Webster?" "Your assumption that I am that person is so eminently correct that it would be a waste of time for me to dispute it," Webster replied quizzically.

"However, just to prove that you're not the only clairvoyant on this train, I'm going to tell you something about yourself. In your pocket you have a telegram; it is from Chicago, where your pay-check originates; it is short, sweet and comprehensive, containing an order which you are going to obey. It reads somewhat as follows:

"My friend, John S. Webster, wires me from Blank that he boarded train at Blank and was refused first-class accommodation because he looked like a hobo. Give him the best you have in stock, if you have to throw somebody off the train to accommodate him." Signed, "Sweeney."

"Do I hit the target?" The conductor nodded. "You win, Mr. Webster," he admitted. "Occasionally I lose, old timer. Well!"

"No offense, Mr. Webster, no offense. I can let you have a stateroom—"

"That's trading talk. I'll take it." The conductor gave him his receipt and led him back to the stateroom in the observation car. At the door Webster handed him a five-dollar bill. "For you, son," he said gruffly, "just to take the sting out of what I'm about to tell you. Now that I possess your receipt and know that ten men and a boy cannot take it away from me, I'm going to tell you who Sweeney is."

"Who is he?" the conductor queried. Already he suspected he had been out-general.

"Sweeney," said Mr. Webster, "is the chief clerk in one of Chicago's most pretentious hotels and a young man who can find all the tangles of a situation without working it out in logarithms. I wired him the details of my predicament; he heard the Macedonian cry and kicked in. Next, is it not?"

The conductor grinned. "I hate to take your money," he declared. "Don't. Just at present I'm very flush. Yes, sir, I'm as prosperous as a yearling burro up to his ears in alfalfa and the only use I have ever found for money is to make other people happy with it, thereby getting some enjoyment out of it myself. When I broke I'll make some more."

And Mr. Webster retired to his hard-won sanctuary, where he removed as much alkali and perspiration as he could, carded his long hair and whiskers, manicured his finger nails with a jack-knife, changed his shirt, provided five minutes of industry for George, with his whisker-broom and brush, and set himself patiently to await the first call to dinner.

Presently a pink-jowled, well-carried, flashily dressed big man, of about Webster's age, passed in the corridor, going toward the head of the train. An instant later a woman's voice said very distinctly:

"I do not know you, sir; I do not wish to know you, and it is loathsome of you to persist in addressing me. If you do not stop your annoying attentions, I shall call the conductor."

"Ah! Beauty in distress," John Stuart Webster soliloquized. "I look so much like an Angora goat I might as well butt in." He stepped to the door of his stateroom. A girl stood in the vestibule, confronting the man who had just passed Webster's door. Webster bowed.

"Madame, or mademoiselle, as the case may be," he said, "unlike this other male biped, my sole purpose in presuming to address you is to suggest that there is not the slightest necessity for taking this matter up with the conductor. I am here and very much at your service."

The girl turned—and John Stuart Webster's heart flopped twice in rapid succession, like a trout never grassed. She was as lovely as a royal flush. Her starry glance began at his miler's

boots, traveled up his old soles, wrapped trousers, over his light blue chambray shirt and found the man behind the whiskers. She favored him with a quick, curious scrutiny and a grave, sweet smile. "Thank you so much, sir," she answered, and passed down the corridor to the observation car.

"Well, old-timer," Webster greeted the fellow who had been annoying her, "how about you? What do you think we ought to do about this little affair?"

"The sensible thing would be to do nothing. You might start something you couldn't finish."

"That's a dare," Webster declared brightly, "and wasn't it the immortal Huckleberry Finn who remarked that anybody that'd take a dare would suck eggs and steal sheep?" He was silent a few seconds, appraising his man. "I suppose you commenced operations by moving into her section and asking if she would like to have the window open and enjoy the fresh air. She rebuffed you, but being a persistent devil, you followed her into the observation car, and in all probability you ogled her at luncheon and ruined her appetite. And just now, when you met her in this vestibule, you doubtless jostled her, begged her pardon and without waiting to be introduced asked her to have dinner with you this evening."

"Well?" the fellow echoed belligerently. "It's all bad form. You shouldn't try to make a mash on a lady. I don't know who she is, of course, but she's not common and for the sake of the mother that bore me I always respect and protect a good woman and while he—out of those that do not."

He reached inside his stateroom and crossed the bell. The porter arrived on the run.

"George," said Mr. Webster, "in a few minutes we're due at Smithville. If my memory serves me aright, we stop five minutes for water and orders."

"Yassah."

"Remain right here and let me off as soon as the train comes to a stop."

When the train slid to a grinding halt and the porter opened the car door, Webster pointed. "Out!" he said. "This is no nice place to pull off a scrap."

"See here, neighbor, I don't want to have any trouble with you—"

"I know it. All the same, you're going to have it—or come with me to that young lady and beg her pardon."

"All right. I'll apologize," and he started forward as if to pass Webster in the vestibule, on his way to the observation car, whither the subject of his annoying attention had gone. Two steps brought him within striking distance of his enemy, and before Webster could dodge, a sizzling right-handed blow landed on his jaw and set him back on his haunches in the vestibule.

It was almost a knockout—almost, but not quite. As Webster's body struck the floor of the big automatic came out of the holster; swinging in a weak circle, it covered the other.

"That was a daisy," Webster mumbled. "If you move before my head clears, I'll put four bullets into you before you reach the corridor."

He waited about a minute, then with the gun he pointed to the car door and the masher stepped out. Webster handed the porter his gun and followed; two minutes later he returned, dragging his assailant by the collar. Up the steps he jerked the big battered hulk and tossed it in the corner of the vestibule, just as the girl came through the car, making for the diner up ahead.

Again she favored him with that calm, grave, yet vitally interested gaze, nodded appreciatively, made as if to pass on, changed her mind, and said

"You are a very courtly gentleman."

"You are—"

gentleman. He bowed. There was nothing else to do, nothing that he could say under the circumstances. To use his chivalry as a wedge to open an acquaintance never occurred to him—but his whiskers did occur to him. Hastily he backed into his stateroom and closed the door, presently he rose and surveyed himself critically in the small mirror over the washstand.

"No, Johnny," he murmured, "we can't go into the diner now. We're too blanned disreputable. We were bad enough before that big swine lunged the shanty on our right eye, but whatever our physical and personal feelings, far be it from us to parade our iridescent orb in public. Besides, one look at that queen is enough to do us for the remainder of our natural life, and a second look, minus a proper introduction, would only drive us into a suicide's grave." He sighed, rang for the porter and told him to send a waiter for his order, since he would faint break his fast in the privacy of his stateroom. And when the waiter came for the order, such was Mr. Webster's mental perturbation that ham and eggs were furthest from his thoughts. He ordered a steak with French fried potatoes.

John Stuart Webster passed a restless night. Sleep came to him in hourly installments, from which he would rouse to ask himself whether it was worth while to continue to go through the motions of living, or alight at the next station, seek a lonely and unrequited spot and there surrender to outrageous fortune. It was altogether damnable. In a careless moment, Fate had accorded him a glimpse of the only woman he had ever met and desired to meet again—for Webster was essentially a man's man, and his profession and environment had militated against his opportunities for meeting extraordinary women; and extraordinary women were the only kind that could hope to challenge his serious attention. Fate had accorded him a signal opportunity for knightly combat in the service of this extraordinary woman, and in the absence of a formal introduction, what man could desire a finer opportunity for getting acquainted! If only their meeting had not been delayed two weeks, ten days, a week! Once free of his ugly cocoon of rags and whiskers, the butterfly Webster would not have hesitated one brief instant to inform himself of that young lady's address, following his summary disposal of her tormentor.

But in all things there is a limit, and John Stuart Webster's right eye constituted a deadline beyond which, as a gentleman, he dared not venture; so with a heavy heart he bowed to the inevitable. Brilliant and mysterious as a meteorite she had flashed once across his horizon and was gone. In the privacy of his stateroom Webster had ham and eggs for breakfast. He was lighting his second cigar when the porter knocked and entered with an envelope.

"Lady in the observation-car asked me to deliver this to you, sah," he announced importantly.

It was a note, freshly written on the train stationery. Webster read:

"The distressed lady desires to thank the gentleman in stateroom A for his chivalry of yesterday. She is profoundly sorry that in her service the gentleman in stateroom A was so unfortunate as to acquire a red eye with blue trimmings."

John Stuart Webster swore his mightiest oath. "By the twelve apostles, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, Jude and Simon, and not omitting Judas Iscariot, the scaly scoundrel who betrayed his Lord and Master!" He searched through an old wallet until he discovered a fairly clean professional card, across the bottom of which he wrote, "Thank you, J. S. W." and sent it to the no-longer-distressed lady.

"The most signal adventure of my life is now over," he soliloquized and turned to his cigar. "For the sake of my self-respect, I had to let her know I'm not a hobo! And now to the task of framing up a scheme for future acquaintance. I must learn her name and destination; so as a preliminary I'll interview the train conductor."

He did and under the ameliorating influence of a five-dollar bill the conductor bent a respectful ear to the Websterian message.

"In Car Seven," he began, "there is a young lady. I do not know what section she occupies neither do I know her name and destination. I only know what she looks like."

The conductor nodded. "And you want to ascertain her name and destination?"

"I do."

"All right. I have the unused portion of her transportation to return to her before we hit Salt Lake; her name is on the ticket and the ticket indicates her destination. I'll make a mental note of both as soon as I've identified her ticket."

A few hours later the conductor came to Webster's stateroom and handed him a card upon which was written:

"You are—"

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