

CAMEO

By Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson

KIRBY

Adapted From the Play of the Same Name by W. B. M. Ferguson

"In his absence I would protect you I would act for him," he protested desperately.

"You may when you have his authority. Until then I bid you adieu!" And, with an elaborate courtesy and pleasant smile she vanished through the window, while the gentleman remained on the balcony, a prey to the most disquieting thoughts.

"You see how she has changed—this one day—with time," thought the old man, looking through the open window to where in a dim corner of the room Kirby sat at the card table. Mr. Randall merely nodded and gloomily chewed his cigar. He was facing a difficult problem and praying for the arrival of young Randall.

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CHAPTER X.

DUE in a great measure to Kirby's and Adele's high spirits, which infected all but three members of the company, the dinner in honor of Colonel Moreau was an entire success and, in fact, could not have been surpassed had that unfortunate gentleman himself been present. Judge Pleydell, believing that he was assisting to entertain one who by championing the cause of the Randalls, while at the same time ridding the community of the notorious Cameo Kirby, had earned his lasting esteem and gratitude, told his best stories in his happiest vein, and Mme. Davezac, together with Ann Pleydell, suffering under the same delusion, put forth every effort to charm, even going to the length of heartily applauding the judge's most venerable and most ravaged yarns.

No mean raconteur himself, Kirby ransacked his vast store of personal experience for interesting topics of conversation that would bear rehearsal in the present company, and even Bunce, finally and unwillingly drawn by some mysterious spell into the vortex of small talk, carefully selected, as befitted a "secretary," the least innocuous of his many escapades and ventured to confide in the demure ear of his dinner partner, Miss Pleydell. This heroic action of the old river gubler—for he was desperately embarrassed at the honor shown him and thoroughly cognizant what must be the inevitable and tragic ending of his partner's reckless action—is sufficient testimony to the fact that the preoccupied manner of M. Veaudry, coupled with Mr. Randall's grave silence and studied courtesy toward Kirby, had no effect upon the spirits of the company, if, indeed, their demeanor was even noted by the majority.

Before entering the house the two gentlemen in question had come to an understanding regarding the status of their guest, concurring in the opinion that he was impersonating the gentleman in whose honor the dinner had been planned. But Aaron alone had found a sinister significance in the General's observation to the effect that Kirby wore a quantity of cameos, and, although he lacked authentic evidence upon which to erect his suspicions, while likewise granting that it was an amazing and unbelievable action for one to deliberately walk into the house of his enemies, he vaguely sensed that the pseudo Colonel Moreau was none other than the notorious Eugene Kirby.

Still, Aaron Randall was a strictly just and upright man, who was fully aware of the many crimes committed in the name of circumstantial evidence. Slow to pronounce judgment, he was quick to act when once assured that in no sense would justice be violated. Moreover, Adele, in whose integrity and force of character he had the firmest belief and for whom he had the highest regard and proof of whose acumen he had had ample testimony, vouched for the imposture and even confessed complicity if not actual initiative in the same. In the absence of Tom Randall she was absolute mistress, with the right to act as she deemed fit, and had, moreover, exacted his word of honor that he would trust her until the arrival of her brother. Even had he been satisfied with the truth of his conjectures regarding Kirby's identity this promise to Adele would have pledged Aaron to secrecy, and M. Veaudry, being subsequently acquainted with the compact, likewise agreed that it could not be violated.

For the young creole this passive role was extremely difficult, and it was eloquent proof of his self command and personal integrity, coupled with those refined instincts bestowed by gentle birth and breeding, that he considered Aaron's promise equally binding upon himself and, repressing all promptings of jealousy, refrained from denouncing Kirby as an impostor. The successful suit of an honorable rival would have been difficult enough to recognize, but this encroachment of a stranger who at the best was a masquerader if not a character more sinister and disreputable was intolerable, for M. Veaudry had gathered from Mr. Randall's manner that he suspected their guest of being guilty of something more criminal than assuming a name to which he had no right.

Thus, even while the young creole and Aaron prayed that Tom Randall's arrival would be hastened and coincident with it free vent could be given to their suspicions, Larkin Bunce earnestly hoped to the contrary—hoped that Kirby would suddenly realize his danger, growing the more deadly and certain as every minute passed, and would ride for the river before the coming of Nemesis.

But evidently nothing was more remote from that reckless young gentle-

man's intention, for, un mindful of his partner's increasing uneasiness and that both were the object of watchful, hostile eyes, he continued to act as if time and opportunity had been created solely for Adele and himself. Dinner finally at an end, he and his young hostess, entirely absorbed in each other's society, sought the drawing room balcony, while the others, with the exception of Bunce, indulged in a game of piquet, M. Veaudry proving a wretched partner, his entire attention being occupied with the couple on the balcony.

M. Veaudry, owing to his preoccupation, proving such a thankless partner, Mme. Davezac at last turned to Bunce and suggested that he and Kirby join the game in lieu of the young creole and the judge.

"Eh, truly, Anatole," she added, with some asperity, tapping the other's arm with her fan, "you cannot keep your mind on the game, and so we are unable to play. Will you surrender your place to Colonel Moreau?"

"It seems to me that I have already done that," he responded gloomily.

With as good grace as possible yielding to the dictates of courtesy, Kirby unwillingly terminated his tete-a-tete with Adele, and as he approached the card table his place was promptly preempted by the young Creole, who followed Miss Randall to the balcony. It was the first time he had been alone with Adele, and his long repressed emotion and bitterness found vent.

"Ah, manzelle, it is true," he said reproachfully. "You are changed—so quickly. Yes, you will say I wanted to see you happier, but I also had wished to be the one to make you so. Adele," he added earnestly, striving to take her hand, "if this difference in you comes only from the gratitude you feel to—Colonel Moreau because he tried to protect your father I shall be happy. But how have this man bewitched you that?"

"I don't understand you, Anatole," she said quietly, drawing away.

"'Tis I that do not understand you, Adele. I think you know from the first he is not Colonel Moreau. I have some very strange suspicion of him."

Instantly the woman in her was up in arms, seeking to defend, eager to do battle for the object it sought to shield. "It is enough that I know he is a man who has had a great wrong done him. That's one way of making a woman believe that you love her—when she's trying to help some one in trouble, make it harder for her—be jealous," she finished, with a bitter laugh.

"I am jealous—I do not deny that. But I am, first of all things, a man of honor," he said quietly enough, although white with anger. His voice trembled with emotion as he added, with simple dignity: "Do you think a man of honor have suspicion of a rival only because he is jealous? Do you think I would suspect him only for that?"

"I can't discuss it with you," she returned coldly. Leaning on the balcony railing, she promptly became absorbed in the wonders of the night.

Recognizing the sign of dismissal, he yet hesitated, miserably conscious that he had offended, but still feeling justified in the position he had assumed, still holding that those emotions which had prompted his words were but natural, impersonal and sincere. It was his right to protect the girl he loved from the wiles of a nameless adventurer, of whose integrity he had the gravest doubts. It was his right to protect her from herself, for, deny it as she might, it was all too bitterly apparent that this debonaire impostor had succeeded where others had failed and that Adele had discarded all sorrow with her mourning and was yielding to a fascination that he firmly believed would prove her ruin.

While he still hesitated, afraid to make an enemy of the girl he loved, yet stubborn in his resolution to thwart Kirby, Aaron Randall, suspecting some such controversy as had taken place, joined them on the balcony and Anatole, with evident relief, turned again to Adele.

"Madenzelle, here is your cousin. He will not be thought to be jealous," he said gravely. "I ask him to tell you what he will not tell me. I ask him to tell you what he thinks about this gentleman."

"Cousin Aaron," replied the girl, turning and confronting the two from whom she had most to fear, "in my brother's absence you respect my authority here, do you not? Very well, then. My introduction of this gentleman as Colonel Moreau is enough for you."

"It must be, Cousin Adele," replied Aaron, evidently greatly perplexed and troubled.

"And I am responsible for my actions only to my brother," added the girl, looking directly at M. Veaudry. He flushed under the scrutiny of her eyes and the significant infection of her voice.

Presently from the music room there came the subdued harmony of a guitar and harp, and when the soft strains had finished Adele's fine contralto took up the theme, singing, "I sent thee into a rose wreath, not so much honoring thee." It was Kirby's favorite song, snatches of which Anatole had heard the other humming at intervals since his arrival. Clearer, sweeter, purer sounded the words until the music ascended like an anthem and came stealing out of the window to mingle with the soft murmur of the night, to blend with the unheard, far distant harmony of the stars. Anatole stood transfixed, a prey to the bitterest emotions to which man was ever hostage.

"You hear?" he cried passionately, turning to Aaron. "For the first time since how long? Now she wears no more black. Now she is no more silent. Now she sings, not for her brother, not for those who love her, not for me!"

"No; it's for Colonel Moreau," finished the older man, throwing away his cigar.

The creole laughed harshly, contemptuously, his black eyes snapping with passion. "For 'Colonel Moreau?' I dare you—look me in the face and say that man is Colonel Moreau," waving a trembling hand to the window.

"I shall tell you nothing," replied Aaron sternly. "No matter what I suspect, I don't know. And I won't let a man be killed until I do know."

"When you met this man you did not know him," said Anatole, with slow significance. "I think to myself—who can he be? I make a guess and another guess and another guess, but I am not sure."

"Exactly," commented Mr. Randall, with some sharpness. "There you are. You are not sure. Neither am I. There is nothing to do but to await Tom Randall's arrival or, failing that, some authority from him, instructing us how to act; otherwise our honor binds us, and we must meet this difficult matter with such patience and fortitude as we may possess. At the same time I thoroughly understand your feelings, and you have my entire sympathy. Let us pray this unbearable suspense will soon be terminated, for I make a poor and unwilling conspirator."

Meanwhile, at the card table, Messrs. Kirby and Bunce had been acting, for the benefit of the audience, a farce comedy bordering on the burlesque. Two seasoned gamblers, men who knew every game and trick embraced in cards and to whom the pasteboards were as familiar as one's knife and fork, it was somewhat difficult to simulate that chronic state of ignorance for which their self-relegated position in society should attest.

Moreover, Kirby's native histrionic ability was badly handicapped by his thoughts being solely centered upon the now absent Adele, while the worthy Bunce's natural clumsiness was greatly enhanced by anxiety over their mutual safety, re-enforced by a perspiring embarrassment at finding himself a unit of such society. Happily for them their partners were not of a suspicious or inquiring turn of mind and were entirely engrossed with the game.

"You gentlemen know the cards a little?" Mme. Davezac had ventured, with a charming and guileless belief in their ignorance. "Well, we shall teach you something new of the game, maybe."

"I'll be glad to learn something new about it," Kirby replied, with gravity and perfect truth.

Mme. Davezac, with sadly amateurish fingers, assisted with many a flourish, intended to impress the presumable tyros with a fitting admiration for her skill, proceeded to cut the deck, while Bunce eyed her gloomily and mentally criticized what he termed a "dirty rifle." His professional dignity was outraged by the fact that she had cut to the last card and then serenely reunit the deck, and forgetting himself, he was about to assert his rights and demand a new shuffle when a warning kick from Kirby checked him.

"Ah, 'tis your deal," Mme. Davezac at length exclaimed, tendering the cards to Bunce. "First you must make the cards well—mix them, so—like you saw me. See, you sur-fel, as they call it. You think you can do that?"

"Yes'm, I reckon I can git that fur," he ventured modestly. Taking the deck, he promptly forgot his role and proceeded to give a very fine demonstration of the professional shuffle, spreading the cards in the air between

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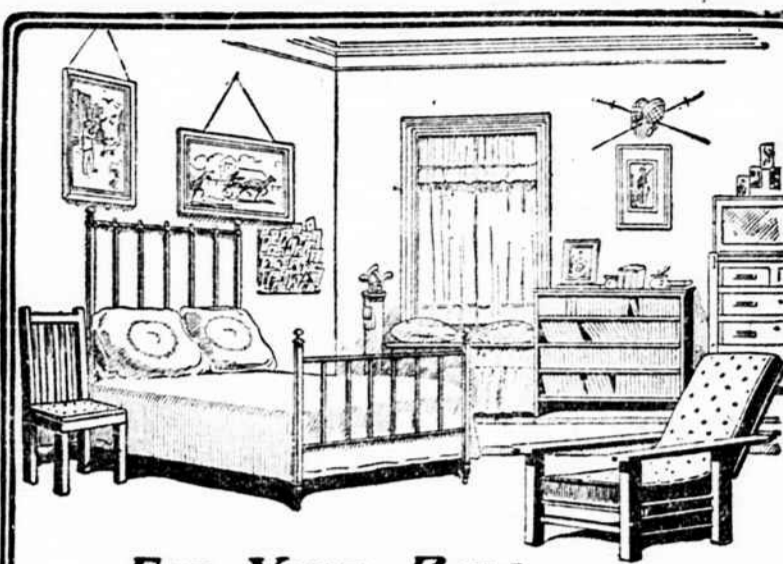
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