

CAMEO KIRBY

By Booth
Tarkington and
Harry Leon
Wilson

Adapted From
the Play of the Same
Name by W. B. M.
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The drifting smoke parted in shreds and streamed away. The startled crows had ceased cawing, and off somewhere a bluejay ventured to timidly call its mate. Once more the cool serenity had descended upon the dueling oak. Kirby was still advancing, but Colonel Moreau, giving a little cough, hesitated a moment, then fell prone, a small blue indentation disfiguring the purity of his lofty forehead.

Cameo Kirby looked gravely down upon the body of his late enemy; then as gravely he parted the trees and, with bowed head, slowly threaded his way toward the distant town.

Kirby had not long left the scene of conflict before Tom Randall, coming from an almost diametrically opposite direction, burst into the grove and tripped headlong over the lifeless form of Colonel Moreau. Recovering himself, the boy stared in horrified amazement at what he had never expected to see. That God should have thus defended the impious seemed impossible. Astonishment quickly gave place to a sense of burning outrage, a bitterness, abhorrence and vindictiveness which immeasurably overrode all previous feelings of treasured animosity and hatred. Now, Kirby must atone not only for the suicide of John Randall, but for the death of that gentleman's fancied protector and champion.

Swayed by his present emotions, balked of revenge and thirsting for some means of expressing it, young Randall now stooped to an action which dishonored his name, race and country. In cooler moments he would have repudiated an action which forfeited the respect of all decent men. But he was hostage to a tempestuous and violent passion which counted not the means to an end. Single handed he might not hope to hunt down Kirby, but if he could enlist the assistance of the authorities, make every man the gambler's enemy, the latter's capture would be assured.

With difficulty loosening Moreau's fast stiffening fingers from their death grip upon the pistol, young Randall hastily concealed the weapon upon his person and thus by a single movement transformed what had been an honorable and fair encounter into a seemingly deliberate and cold blooded murder. The fact that Moreau had used the late John Randall's weapon, leaving his own at Mme. Davezac's, would be but additional proof that Cameo Kirby had shot down an unarmed man. But one living witness other than Tom Randall had been present at this exchange of weapons, and he, Aaron, would be expected to keep silent. Revenge, may it ever be honorable, but, honorable or dishonorable, revenge at all costs—such was the boy's slogan.

He had hardly resumed possession of his father's weapon and thus cast the stigma of murder upon Kirby when several men, attracted by the shots and whose rapid approach had spurred the boy to instant action, came running into the grove. To them young Randall breathlessly recounted his version of the tragedy. "You see, the gentleman has no weapon," he concluded, pointing to Moreau's barren hands. "This, therefore, is a deliberate and carefully planned murder. Like yourselves, I was attracted by the shot."

"But there was two of 'em, for I counted," put in one of the newcomers. "The murderer evidently missed at his first fire," said Tom. "My name is Randall of Plaquemine, so you may accept by word that I found the gentleman as I have stated. This is a great and villainous outrage. I happen to know the victim, a most estimable and honorable gentleman, who had the misfortune to incur the enmity of the notorious river gambler Cameo Kirby. The latter swore to get even, and there is no doubt he has fulfilled his murderous and cowardly intention."

"I seen this Kirby in town yesterday," commented one of the men, examining with morbid curiosity Moreau's death wound. "He's a bad egg from all accounts. Done his job neat. Shot from ambush, I reckon."

"We passed him on the road as we come into the grove," added a second. "I know him by sight—a youngish looking, gray eyed blade with a sort of dandy getup to him. We asked him if there had been a dozel, and he said yes, he thought so."

"He lies, as you can see!" cried Tom, springing to his feet. "What road did he take?"

"He come from that a-way," interrupted the informant, pointing in the direction Kirby had taken. "But you all know the road forks farther down."

"Come! We'll separate, and he cannot escape!" cried Tom. "It's our duty to hunt the villain down, to add the law all we can. Duelling is one thing, but murder such as this deserves only lynch law. We'll show the scoundrel the same quality of mercy he meted out to this poor defenseless gentleman."

"That's right. Short shrift and a long rope!" cried the men.

Piloted by the member who had met

Kirby, the small impromptu posse quickly made its way through the underbrush, emerging on the road which the gambler, at a point below the fork, was even then traversing. When the fork of the road was reached Tom and two companions chose the right or southerly branch, while the man who had met Kirby, accompanied by a half grown youth, bore away to the left. Thus by another intervention of the fates young Randall's meeting with the gambler was again postponed. The former and his companions, alarming the countryside en route, reached town without overtaking or even sighting their quarry.

Meanwhile the other members of the posse had fared better—or worse. They had not long left their companions before Kirby was sighted, walking leisurely with bowed head and evidently preoccupied mind. Warned by the rapidly advancing steps of his self constituted judges and executioners, he turned in mild curiosity and awaited their approach.

The farmer and his son—for such was the relationship existing between this contingent of the pursuers—came up hot and panting from their exertions and, meeting Kirby's cool and pleasantly inquiring eyes, became for the moment nonplused and confused.

"Rather a warmish morning for such strenuous exercise, gentlemen," greeted the gambler. "It is obvious that your business is with me. Pray in what manner can I serve you?"

The youth's loutish bearing became the more evident in contradistinction to that of the elegant and courteous



LOOSENING MOREAU'S FAST STIFFENING FINGERS FROM THEIR DEATH GRIP.

gambler, and, with hanging lip, he fell back, overawed by the silent but compelling mastery of caste.

His parent, however—a stringy, drawing, malarial gentleman—was cast in a more determined and heroic mold. "Yuh all be the gambler they call Cameo Kirby," he exclaimed, pointing a threatening finger. "We seen yuh all come from the duelin' oaks, an' we all have just come from there. Yuh all have killed an unarmed man, an' we all are goin' to have yuh all up for murder."

"My dear sir," replied Kirby, arranging his cravat, "you all's intentions speak well for you all's respect for justice, but I assure you all there is some mistake. The gentleman I had the good fortune to kill entirely merited his end. Moreover, he was not unarmed, but made an earnest and sincere effort to settle me all. In short, ours was a fair and honorable meeting, and as such matters are not prohibited by the statutes I really fail to see how it concerns you all—comes within the scope of you all's worthy usefulness."

"Them big words and makin' fun of my language don't change the case," said the farmer grimly. "I seen yuh all's victim with my two eyes, an' so did my boy and a lot others. He didn't have no weapon of any kind, an' that we kin prove. Lynchin' is too good for you, Mr. Kirby, an' yuh all know it."

"The devil it is," replied Kirby. "You are the victim of a mistake, Mr. Farmer, and I'm evidently the victim of an enemy who has concealed his late opponent's weapon. I will not permit your ignorance to swing me from the end of a rope."

"Tom, run for help. I'll hold this fellow," cried the farmer. And as the boy ran off the malarial gentleman flung his wiry arms about Kirby.

A fierce and protracted struggle ensued, Kirby realizing that he was not only fighting for liberty, but life. In those days lynch law was only too common, and he knew what to expect at the hands of an infuriated, ignorant and unreasoning mob. And in the present instance all explanation would prove futile, for mob rule is not influenced by judgment, and he was already a dog with a bad name. They would hang him first and inquire into the merits of the case afterward, if possible prompt and ignominious flight was his only salvation.

True to his class, Kirby's opponent



A FIERCE STRUGGLE ENSUED.

possessed some knowledge of wrestling, but was totally ignorant of even the rudiments of pugilism, and the younger man confined his efforts to frustrating tripping attacks while at the same time striving to free his pinioned right arm. This at length he succeeded in doing. A vicious wrench, a clever feint, a smashing uppercut, and the malarial gentleman went down on his back, while Kirby, waving an airy adieu to the now advancing army of yelling pursuers, took nimble to his heels.

But, fleet and long winded runner though he was, capture was not thus to be lightly outfooted. The cry of "Catch the murderer!" is infinitely more potent than that of "Stop thief!" and pursuers were multiplying in his track at an alarming rate, adding at every step fresh runners to their ranks.

On sped Kirby, every variety and class of humanity at his heels. Once or twice his way was barred by some energetic and inquisitive newcomer, but a clever dodge or a well directed blow left him to swell the ever increasing army of impotents in the rear. No fox doubling and redoubling on his tracks while in full view of the pack owned a more keen delight in thus staking acumen and agility against overwhelming odds than did the young gambler. By now the city proper had been gained, and the pursued, dashing around the first opportune corner, became lost to his pursuers.

Kirby found himself in a quiet side street lined with aristocratic, fat little red brick houses whose drawing room balconies were little more than a man's height from the side path. He vaguely realized that he was in the heart of New Orleans' old French quarter. The street was not very long, and he did not know to where it led. Owing to the early hour the shutters of the houses were still closed, but one house seemed to be an exception, for his quick, searching eyes noted on his right a half open drawing room window with its gently flapping curtain.

He had dropped into a quick walk in order to gain a much needed breathing spell, but now as the hue and cry of his persistent pursuers became more insistent he again broke into a run. In a few moments they would turn the corner and sight their quarry. Almost at the same instant another chorus of cries came from the far end of the street toward which Kirby was hastening. He incontinently halted, realizing that the enemy, familiar with the neighborhood, had divided its army and sent one contingent around his flank to head him off. He was trapped, for it was impossible to advance or retreat. Louder and louder sounded the cries from front and rear. Another minute and the short street would be choked with the meeting mobs.

Without hesitation nor caring where it would lead, Kirby accepted the desperate and solitary chance that was offered him. Hastily returning to the house with the open window and ascending its steps, he leaped high in air, caught the overhanging balcony, drew himself up, leaped over the elaborately scrolled railing and, pushing aside the gently belying curtains, stepped quietly into the room.

CHAPTER VII.

THE General looked up gravely. "Dele, I wish you would read some more to me, for there are words here that are too long. Both the princes are just about the best heroes I ever heard of. One is a good prince and the other a bad prince. Which would you rather be, Anatole?"

"Oh, but the good prince, of course," replied M. Veaudry, good humoredly concealing his vexation at being constantly interrupted in his snatched tete-a-tete with the child's sister.

"Both of 'em have so many hairbreadth escapes I just can't tell whether I'd rather be the good one or the bad one," sighed the General. "Think of this: The good prince is in a secret passage, and the bad prince gets it walled up at both ends, but the good prince has got a slow fuse leading through a crack to a barrel of gunpowder under the bad prince's throne where he's sitting, but he doesn't know about it. What kind of time was that to tell anybody he couldn't hear the rick till after breakfast?"

"Drink your milk or you shall never hear any more," threatened Mme. Davezac. And the child obediently but unwillingly seized the huge glass and attempted to drain it at a draft.

"You are pale like the camellia," murmured M. Veaudry, resuming his tete-a-tete with Miss Randall. "It is only the air of the plantation you need to make you the rose, and we are goin'

to make you renounce these black; we goin' to persuade you to wear both the rose and the camellia in your dress once more."

"Not yet," said the girl sternly, fingering her black dress.

"I know what you mean," he returned, with deep significance. "Yet I tell you I think you are goin' to take off your mourning at the plantation. When you do then you will listen to what I have kep' in my heart so long—"

"I will not listen to any other man before then," she interrupted listlessly. "Why is Colonel Moreau not to come with us?" she asked abruptly, turning to her aunt. "I have such impatience to meet him. Are we not to see him?"

"Oh, yes. Possibly he may come in time to start with us," returned Mme. Davezac, rescuing the General from strangulation as he again attempted to drain his milk at a draft in order to the sooner return to "The Two Princes—A Romance."

"If Colonel Moreau doesn't come," said Ann Pleydell, "that leaves an empty seat in the carriage. Adele, won't you ask Anatole to take it instead of riding on horseback?"

"Certainly, I do," replied Miss Randall in the same pleasant, lifeless voice. And, although the young creole impulsively kissed her hand, she remained as strangely emotionless and expressionless.

"Come," she added colorlessly; "you and I, Ann, have our packing to finish."

"And there is a packing case in the courtyard," sighed Mme. Davezac. "Will you see for me if it is secure, dear Anatole?" Then as the two girls left the room she added gravely: "Adele has always been fonder of you, Anatole, than of any other man. You must help to rouse her from this gloom. She wears that mourning now more than a year. Ugh! She broods; she is so bitter, so strange, so impulsive, so full of morbid impulse. Because her father had no one to protect him the poor child thinks she should befriend all the world which is in trouble. Last week one day coming home from the cathedral she has given her warm cloak to a ragged woman in the street. That was in the rain. You must help to rouse her, cher Anatole, from this gloom."

"It is no secret from all what I would give to make 'er happy once more," he replied, with gloomy sincerity.

When the young creole and his hostess joined the others at their packing the General, unnoticed and temporarily forgotten, had taken his book and secreted himself under the table, in which city of refuge he hoped to follow without interruption the further adventures of his two heroes. With all a child's adaptation to environment it was not long before he became completely absorbed in the romance. Presently vague and disturbing cries came stealing in through the open window, and these he impatiently shook off, for natural inquisitiveness as to their origin was trivial compared to the fate of the two princes. But the voices refused to be thus lightly dismissed. Excited cries of: "He went this way! Look in that courtyard! He turned this corner!" certainly merited the earnest attention and searching inquiry of every healthy eight-year-old whose native inquisitiveness cannot be dampened by being dragged from bed before dawn or discouraged by the prospect of an all day journey. After all, exciting fact is superior to exciting fiction, for the former is but temporary, while the latter is comparatively permanent—to be used as a stimulant or sedative when real life is lacking in appeal.

Turning around and looking up from under the table, the General's inquiring eyes met those of Cameo Kirby, who, standing motionless by the curtains, was warily scanning the room. For a long moment man and boy mutely estimated each other, too surprised to speak. "Come; cheer up," said Kirby at length, unconsciously employing his characteristic phrase. "Don't be afraid."

"I—I'm not afraid," breathed the General, creeping cautiously from under the table.

"Does the roof of this house touch the roof of the house next door?" pursued the gambler, with a reassuring smile.

"No," said the child, round eyed.

"Are there people upstairs?"

"Yes, there are."

Kirby considered, no hint of his dilemma in voice or bearing. He felt that he could rely upon this child, who, with all the composure of a self possessed adult, evinced no alarm or amazement at the sight of an overheated and disarranged young man entering a strange house via the window.

"Does that lead to the street?" he asked, pointing to a door on his right.

The General nodded. He was breathless and terrified with joy. "Are you somebody making a hairbreadth escape?" he stated rather than asked.

"I hope so," admitted Kirby, with a smile. "Do you want to be somebody helping me to do it?"

"Yes, of course. What do I do?"

"Go out on the balcony," Kirby gravely explained, "and look as if nothing was the matter. Lean your elbow on the railing and tell me what you see." He drew aside the curtain as the child, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, obeyed.

"There are men up on that corner," announced the General at length.

"Don't point," warned the man in the room. "How many men?"

"Five. Two of them all got guns."

"All right. Don't turn your head when you speak to me."

"There's more men hunting through the garden across the street," piped up the boy, wallowing in the satisfying knowledge that at last, by some miraculous intervention of a beneficent providence, he had become an indispensable character in a very real adventure which promised to eclipse the

most thrilling hairbreadth escape he had ever read.

"Are any of the men looking up here?" whispered Kirby. "No? Come in, then—quick!" The boy obeying, he cautiously closed one part of the window, but refrained from drawing the curtain.

"I think," impressively announced the General, approving of these preliminary maneuvers, "that this is better than where the good prince's trusty friend cuts his bonds. Which one are you?"

"Which what am I?" asked Kirby, with a perplexed smile.

"I mean are you the good prince or the bad prince?"

"Oh, I see. Well, I'll try to be the good prince for a few minutes if you'll help me to get away. Suppose you find me a hat, eh?"

The General, with that lively disregard for another's property which every loyal servitor of unfortunate princes must possess, instantly seized M. Veaudry's hat, which was reposing on an adjacent chair.

"Thank you," said Kirby gravely, covertly examining the pistol in his breast pocket. "This door leads to the street, you say? And there are five men on the corner, two with guns?"

"Yes. What do we do now?" briskly asked the boy.

The other gravely offered his hand. "Why, now," he said gently, "we shake hands, and I say thank you. And next we say goodbye."

"All right. Wait till I get my hat."

"But we just said goodbye," remonstrated Kirby.

"Yes, but I'm going with you. You don't know what minute you may need a trusty friend. Besides, I've got to see what happens next."

"That's just what you mustn't," replied Kirby, shaking his head. "Don't you look out of that window when I've gone, and don't you come near the door. What do they call you?"

"General."

"Well, General, I've only known you about two minutes, but I'd hate to get you into any trouble. Now, we both would be in trouble if anybody came in here, so I've got to get out pretty quick, and we'll be in worse trouble if you try to follow me into the street. So I put it to you this way: If you really want to be my trusty friend just shake hands with me again and say goodbye."

"Will you promise I can be your trusty friend?" said the boy earnestly. "No matter whether you turn out to be the good prince or the bad prince, I'll always be your trusty friend—always."

"Always," pledged Kirby, with the utmost sincerity.

"Then shake hands," said the General.

They did so gravely. "Thank you, General," said Kirby. "I'll—"

He turned sharply at the sound of a softly closing door. A girl had entered the room, a girl whose clear pallor was accentuated by the deep black of dress and hair. She had overheard the boy's last words, had estimated the tableau, and now as Kirby's eyes met her own the warm blood crept into throat and cheek, and she said impulsively, a little catch in her voice:

"So it is the General who has had the honor of receiving you, after all. I am so glad you have again changed your plans. Now you can go in the carriage with us—"

"But you don't understand, Adele," cried her brother, while Kirby looked his astonishment. "His enemies are after him, and he had to make a hairbreadth escape through our window. He lost his hat in his flight from somewhere—"

"Wait, General. We'll finish the story after a while," she interrupted, smiling understandingly at Kirby.

"But I tell you he climbed in the window," persisted the excited boy. "I gave him Anatole's hat."

Kirby, his eyes still on the girl, bowed with courteous formality.

"It is entirely true, madam," he said lightly. Unhappily it isn't a story at all. I have not the honor to be here by appointment, as you evidently infer, but simply by accident—by virtue of the only open window in the street."

"And he doesn't know yet whether he's going to be the good prince or the bad prince," triumphantly added the General, proudly eying his hero.

Adele drew back, frightened, unnerved, her hand creeping to the door-knob. "It—it is a mistake," she breathed, wide eyed with sudden fear. "You are a stranger!"

"Please don't be afraid of my being the bad prince," smiled Kirby in his most reassuring and light hearted manner. "If you will permit me, madam, to take this hat, I will vanish as I intended—"

"There are men watching the streets," she said steadily, holding him with her eyes. "I saw them from my window. Is—is it that?"

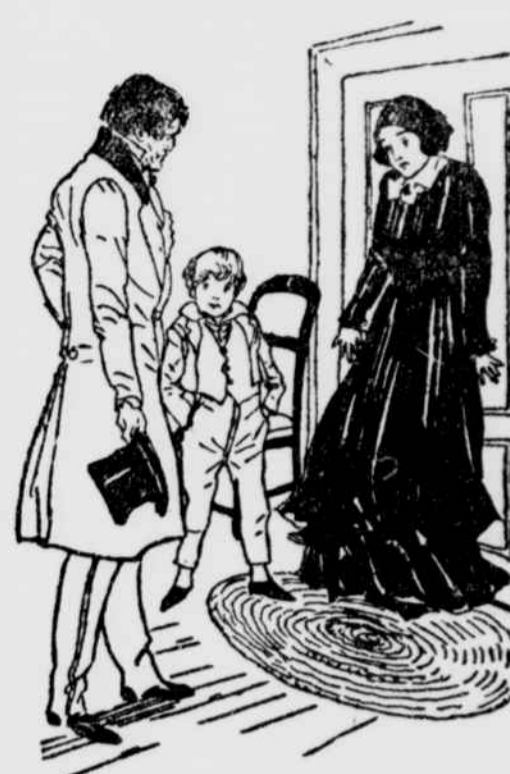
All fear had vanished, and in her voice there was but apparent a concern for him, the stranger and interloper.

He nodded and turned to the listening child. "General, do you want to be my trusty friend once more? Good! Then do just what you did before—out there on the balcony." When the child, with eager alacrity, had obeyed, Kirby added in an earnest and steady voice: "I don't know whether or not you can believe a stranger on his bare word, but I'll try. Last night I heard that the worst scoundrel I know was in New Orleans. I met him at sunrise this morning at the oaks. I went alone, and he came alone. It was a fair meeting. We fired together; he missed, but I didn't, so I had the good luck to come away. Ten minutes later they tried to arrest me for murder. I got away, but I didn't have a long start. When I turned into this street I heard them coming from both directions. There was only one chance to get out of sight—the open window of

a strange house. I took it and," he finished with a faint smile, "that's where I am."

She was silent. Then, "But you said it was a fair meeting. Why, then, should they—"

"I can't prove it was fair," he interrupted grimly. "I left him lying with his pistol in his hand, but it wasn't there when they found him. They



ADELE DREW BACK, FRIGHTENED, UNNERVED.

think I shot down an unarmed man because they found no weapon upon him."

"You mean it was stolen?" she asked wonderingly.

He smiled, shaking his head. "No common thief would have dared to. Whoever did it must hate me worse than did the dead man. Stealing that pistol finishes me if I don't get away. That's all, and all I can say. If you can't believe me," he added quietly, "there's only one thing for you to do—go to that window and call those men in here for me. But if you can believe me—well, permit me to take this hat."

There was a pause, during which they looked each other in the eye, he calmly waiting for her decision, she as calmly estimating him. Then she quietly left the room, quickly returning with a black felt planter's hat.

"Take this instead," she said evenly, tendering it. "It is my brother's."

Thanking her, he turned to go. But now she was at the window, and after one hurried glance she confronted him with white, drawn face and eager, restraining hand.

"Do you know they are still there, watching?" she cried. "How cruel to hunt a man down like that! You will never be able to get by them. They will kill you."

"If I start they'll know somebody tried to get by," he returned lightly, "and they'll probably finish me one way or the other. This way doesn't involve any legal procrastinations. That's why I prefer it."

"Don't try it, please don't," she whispered, pushing back her heavy hair. "I cannot let you make the attempt. It is suicide!"

"Why, that's about all that's left to me—to make a good try," he smiled. Then, suddenly serious and diffident, he added: "May I tell you something? Perhaps the circumstances might excuse it if it sounds overbold for a stranger to say. But it is something mighty precious that the last thing I heard before going out to make my try was the voice of a merciful lady speaking kindly to me and, more precious still, somehow, that it was you. I only wish I was going to have a chance to remember it longer."

"It isn't kindness," she returned simply. "I know that you told me the truth. I believe you are an honorable gentleman wrongly in great danger. I—I have suffered so much myself that it is enough for me to know about you. Listen! Would it be safe for you to cross from our front door to a carriage?"

"Don't try to do anything for me that—"

"If it were a closed traveling carriage—just by the door?" she persisted steadily.

"My story is true, and you have believed it—somehow. But nobody else would," he said grimly. "Please do not try to do anything for me. I don't know your family, but I'm mighty certain that they'd turn me over to—"

"You really must permit me to do as I think best," she interrupted, with an imperious little gesture softened by her eyes. "We must make the best plan possible under the circumstances. It is out of the question for you to boldly leave the house, and that settles it. I couldn't let you make the attempt if you were my worst enemy. Now, I will see that the General promises to keep entirely secret the method of your entrance and on no account to mention the word 'escape.' I know he will promise faithfully, and we can rely upon it. Meanwhile we must think of some plan. There must surely be some way"—She stopped and assumed an unconcerned expression as Poulette, one of the servants, entered.

The French mulatto hesitated and then, pointing straight at Kirby, inquired, "Shall I take the colonel gentleman's portmanteau to the carriage?"

Adele turned, sudden inspiration in her eyes. "Yes, yes!" she cried, breathless with excitement. "And, Poulette, tell them to lift the top and let the carriage be closed."

(To Be Continued.)

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