

WEBSTER —MAN'S MAN

by Peter B. Kyne

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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 promoter is, as all who know will certify, the pinnacle of epicurean delight in an old sour-dough coming out of the wilderness with a healthy bath-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 purchased obtaining from tobacconists with the same ease that 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 ensue 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 chuekwala hadn't cracked 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 ebullient that flagged the Limited the butterfly of fashion that was to be. As the ebullent George raised the vestibule platform, opened the car door and looked out, he had no confidence in the form, snatched big news standing by the train. Plainly the fellow was not a first-class passenger but a wandering prospector for he was dog-eared and a pair of rags and a hairy as a marmoset. The only clean thing about him was a heavy-saffroned paramatta pom of the army type, which he held in his left hand.

"Bye each one's name up in front," the Pullman porter called. "If you've got no objection, I'll call you by name and started to close when the platform opened.

"So I perceived," John Stuart Webster replied blandly, "I also observed that you failed to supply 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 Senegambian, or I'll make you a hard porter to catch."

"Yassah, yassah!" the porter spluttered 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 insist, of necessity, except 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 beehive." And with a whiskey grin which, under the circumstances, was charming in its absolute 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 mole-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 accommodations 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. Lean 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 gently, "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-generaled.

"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 young 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'm 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, combed his long hair and whiskers, unbuttoned his finger nails with a jack-knife, changed his shirt, provided five ounces of industry for George, with his whisker-brush and brush, and set himself patiently to await the first call to dinner.

Presently a pink-jacketed, well-dressed, 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, and I do not wish to know you, and it is best if you do not 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 newly grassed. She was as lovely as a royal flush. Her starry glance began at his minor's boots, traveled up his old soiled, whipcord 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 sneak 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 whale in—out of those that do not."

He reached into his stateroom and pressed 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 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 courteous gentleman."

very gravely: "You are—a very courteous gentleman, sir."

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 blamed disreputable. We were bad enough before that big swine hung 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 but 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 had 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, sir," 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:

"Dolores Ruoy, from Los Angeles, via San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake, to Salt Lake City, Denver & Rio Grande to Denver, Burlington to St. Louis, Illinois Central to New Orleans. Stop-over at Denver."

John Stuart Webster studied the name after the conductor withdrew. "That's a Spanish name," he soliloquized, "but for all that, she's not a parakeet. All things considered, I guess I'll take a chance and investigate."

Webster's dreams of bliss had, with very slight variations, come true as per schedule. In Salt Lake City he abandoned the beefsteak on his damaged eye for two businesslike leeches, which quickly reduced the nocturnal effect around his orb, enabling him, the third day, to saunter forth among his fellowmen. By the end of the week he was a being reborn, and so he packed a huge new wardrobe-trunk with his latest purchases and journeyed to Denver. Coincidentally with his arrival there, we again take up the thread of our story.

One hour after his trunk arrived the gentleman from Death Valley might have been observed standing before a cheval glass looking long and earnestly at the reflection of his middle-aged person, the while he marked the fit of his new raiment. John Stuart Webster was all dressed up for the first time in three long, labor-ridden years, and was tremendously glad of it. He lighted a cigar and stepped forth into Seventeenth street, along which he strolled until he came to a certain building into the elevator of which he entered and was whisked to the twelfth floor, where he alighted and found himself before a wide portal which bore in gold letters the words: "Engineers' Club."

stood within the portals of home and awaited the fatted calf.

Webster struck the upholstery of an adjacent chair a terrific blow with his stick—the effect of which was to cause everybody in the room to start and to conceal Mr. Webster momentarily in a cloud of dust, the while in a howling baritone he sang:

"His father was a hard-rock miner;
He comes from my home town—"

"Jack Webster! The devil's own kin!" shouted Noddy Jerome. He swept the cards into a heap and waddled across the room to meet this latest assailant of the peace and dignity of the Engineers' club. "You old, worthless, ornery, no-good son of a lizard! I've never been so glad to see a man that didn't owe me money. I've been combing the whole civilized world for you, for a month, at least. Where the devil have you been?"

John Stuart Webster beamed happily upon his friend. "Well, Noddy, you old stocking-knitter," he replied quizzically, "since that is the case, I'm not surprised at your failure to find me. You've known me long enough to have remembered to confine your search to the uncivilized reaches."

"Well, you're here, at any rate and I'm happy. Now you settle down."

"Hardly, Noddy. I'm young yet, you know—only forty. Still a real live man and not quite ready to degenerate into a card-playing, eat-drink-and-be-merry, die-of-inanition, sink-to-oblivion-and-go-to-h—fireplace spirit!" And he prodded Jerome in the short ribs with a tentative thumb that caused the old man to wince. He permitted his friend to drag him downstairs to the deserted lounge, where Jerome paused in the middle of the room and renewed his query:

"Where have you been, I ask?"

"Out in Death valley, California, trying to pry loose a fortune."

"Did you pry it?"

John Stuart Webster arched his eyebrows in mock reproach. "And you can see my new suit, Noddy, my sixteen-dollar, made-to-order shoes and my horny hoofs encased in silken hose—and ask that question? Freshly shaved and ironed and almost afraid to sit down and get wrinkles in my trousers! Smell that!" He blew a cloud of clear smoke into Jerome's smiling face. The latter sniffed. "It smells expensive," he replied.

"Yes, and you can bet it tastes expensive, too," Webster answered, handling his cigar-case to his friend.

Jerome lit the end of his cigar and spat derisively. "How much have you made?" he demanded bluntly.

"It's none of your business, but I'll tell you because I love you, Noddy, I've made one hundred thousand dollars."

"Chicken-feed!" Jerome retorted. "Johnny, I've been combing the numeral belt of North and South America for you for a month."

"Why this sudden belated interest in me?"

"I have a fine job for you, John—" "King's X," Webster interrupted, and showed both hands with the fingers crossed. "No plotting against my peace and comfort, Noddy. Haven't I told you I'm all dressed up for the first time in three years, that I have money in my pocket and more in bank? Man, I'm going to trend the primrose path for a year before I get back into the harness again."

Jerome waved a deprecatory hand, flamboyantly brushing aside such feeble and inconsequential argument. "Are you foot-loose?" he demanded.

"I'm not. I'm bound in golden chains—"

"Married, eh? Great Scott, I might have guessed it. So you're on your honeymoon, eh?"

"No such luck, you vichy-drinking monoclast. If you had ever gotten far enough from this club during the past fifteen years to get a breath of real fresh air, you'd understand why I want to enjoy civilization for a week or two before I go back to a mine superintendent's cabin on some bleak hill. No, sir-ee. Old Jeremiah Q. Work and I have had a falling out. Dad burn your picture, Noddy. I want some class! I've been listening to a dago shift-boss playing the accordion for three years—and he could only play three tunes. Now I want Sousa's band. I've been bathing in tepid, dirty water in a redwood sluice-box, and now I desire a steam room and a needle shower and an osteopath. I've been harassing Greasers and Italians and was forced to learn their language to get results, and now I want to speak my mother tongue to my old friends. By thunder I'm going to have a new deal all around."

"Very well, Jack. Don't excite yourself. I'll give you exactly thirty days to slicken of it all—and then I shall come and claim my property."

"Noddy, I'll not work for you. I'm mad. I won't play."

"You're it. I just tagged you."

"I require a rest—but unfold your proposition, Noddy. I was born a poor, weak vessel consumed with a curiosity that was ever my undoing. I can only protest that this is no way to treat a friend."

"Nonsense! My own brother wants this job, and I have refused to give it to him. Business is business—and I've saved it for you."

Jerome leaned forward and laid his finger confidentially on Webster's knee; whereat the light-hearted wanderer carefully lifted the finger, brushed an imaginary speck of dirt from it, and set it down again. "Be serious, you ingrate," Jerome protested. "Listen! I've been working for two years on a consolidation up near Telluride, and I've just put it across, Jack. It's the biggest thing in the country. Colorado Consolidated Mines Company, Limited. English stock. I Jack. Pay 'em 6 per cent, and they'll call you blessed. There's twenty-five thousand a year in it, with

a house and a good cook and an automobile and a chauffeur, and you can come to town whenever you please, provided you don't neglect the company's interests—and I know you're not that kind of an engineer."

"Do I have to put some money into it, Noddy?"

"Not necessarily, although I should advise it. I can let you in on the ground floor for that hundred thousand of yours, guarantee you a handsome profit and in all probability a big cleanup."

"I feel myself slipping, Noddy. Nevertheless, the tail goes with the hide. I'm not in the habit of asking my friends to guarantee my investments, and if you say it's right, I'll spread what I have left of the hundred thousand when I report for duty."

"It's been a tremendous job getting this consolidation over, Jack. When—"

"In pity's name! Spare me. I've heard all I want to hear about your confounded consolidation. News! News! Give me news! I have to beg for a drink— Mose, you black slimmer, how dare you appear before me without bringing a drink?"

Mose, the aged colored porter of the Engineers' club, flashed a row of ivories and respectfully returned the democratic greeting.

"Lester for you, sub. The secretary told me to give it to you, Mistah Webster."

"Thank you, Mose. Speak up, Noddy, and tell me something. Ever hear anything of Billy Geary?"

"He was tearing the edge of the envelope the while he gazed at Jerome, who was rubbing his fat hands together after the fashion of elderly men who are well pleased with themselves.

"You have a chance to become one of the greatest and richest mining engineers in the world, Jack," he answered, "now that you've cut loose from that young crook Geary. I don't know what's become of him, and neither does anybody else. For that matter, nobody cares."

"I do—and you can take the brief end of that bet for your last white chip. Don't let me hear you or anybody else say anything against Billy Geary. That boy goes for my money, every turn in the box. Don't make any mistakes about that, oldtimer."

Webster's face suddenly was serious; the bantering intonation in his voice was gone, and a new, slightly strident note had crept into it. But Jerome waved his hand soothingly.

"All right, old Johnny Peppers-box, have it your own way. Nevertheless, I'm a little mystified. The last I knew of you two, you had testified against him in the high-grader trials at Cripple Creek, and he had pulled out under a cloud, even after his acquittal."

"Give a dog a bad name, and it will stick to him," Webster retorted. "Of course I testified against him. As engineer for the Mine Owners' association, I had to. The high-grade ore was found in his assay office, and the circumstantial evidence was complete, and I admit Billy was acquitted merely because I and others could not swear positively that the ore came from any certain mine. It was the same old story, Noddy. You can be morally certain that high-grade ore has been stolen from your mine, but unless you catch the one thief in the net, how can you prove it? I suppose you read the newspaper reports and believed them, just as everybody else does."

"Well, forget it, Jack. It's all over long ago, and forgotten."

"It wasn't all over so long ago as you seem to think. I suppose you knew the Holman gang was afterward sent to the penitentiary for those same high-grade operations? Billy Geary's acquittal didn't end my interest in the case—not by a jugful! I fought the case against the friends of the Holman crew among the mine owners themselves; and it cost me my good job, my prestige as a mining engineer, and thirty thousand dollars of money that I'd slaved to get together. Of course you never knew this, Noddy, and for that matter, neither does Geary. I wish he did. We were good friends once. I certainly was mighty fond of that boy."

He drew the letter from the envelope and slowly opened it.

"And you never heard what became of Geary?"

"Not a word. I was too busy wondering what was to become of me. I couldn't get a job anywhere in Colorado, and I moved to Nevada. Made a million in Goldfield, dropped it in the panic of 1907, and had to start again—"

"What have you been doing lately?"

"Borax. Staked a group of claims down in Death valley. Bully ground, Noddy, and I was busted when I located them. Had to borrow money to pay the filing fees and incorporation, and did my own assessment work. Look! Webster held up his hands, still somewhat grimy and calloused. "The Borax trust knew I was busted, but they never could quite get over the fear that I'd dig up some backing and give them a run—so they bought me out."

"Somebody told me Geary had gone to Rhodesia," Jerome continued musingly, "or maybe it was Capetown. I know he was seen somewhere in South Africa."

"He left the Creek immediately after the conclusion of his trial. Poor boy! That dirty business destroyed the lad and made a tramp of him, I guess. I tell you, Noddy, no two men ever lived who came nearer to loving each other than Billy Geary and his old Jack-partner. We bunked the marts of men and went to sleep together—hangry many a time during our five-year partnership. Why, Bill—"

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