



# WEBSTER -MAN'S MAN

Peter B. Kyne

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

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**SYNOPSIS.**

CHAPTER I.—John Stuart Webster, mining engineer, after cleaning up a fortune in Death Valley, Calif., boards a train for the East. He befriends a young lady annoyed by a man, thoroughly touncing the "peep."

CHAPTER II.—At Denver Webster receives a letter from Billy Geary, his closest friend. Geary urges him to come to Sobrante, Central America, to finance and develop a mining claim. He decides to go.

CHAPTER III.—Dolores Rucy, the young woman Webster befriended, and who has made a deep impression on him, as he has on her, is also on the way to Sobrante.

CHAPTER IV.—At Buenaventura, capital of Sobrante, Billy Geary, ill and penniless, is living on the charity of "Mother Jenks," keeper of a dramshop. She receives a cablegram from Dolores, telling of her coming.

CHAPTER V.—Dolores' father, Ricardo Rucy, president of Sobrante, had been killed in a revolution led by Sarrat, the present executive. Dolores, a child of eight, was smuggled out of the country by Mother Jenks and supported by her in the United States. The old woman, ashamed of her occupation and habits of life, fears to meet Dolores, and sends Geary to the boat to say she has gone to the United States.

**CHAPTER VI.**

The ancient bromide to the effect that man proposes but God disposes was never better exemplified than in the case of John Stuart Webster, who, having formulated certain daring plans for the morrow and surrendered himself to grateful slumber in his stateroom aboard the Gulf States Limited, awoke on that momentous morn to a distinct apprehension that all was not as it should be with him. His mouth reminded him vaguely of a bird-and-animal store, and riot and insurrection had broken out in the geometric center of his internal economy.

Webster was sufficient of a jack-leg doctor to suspect he was developing a splendid little case of ptomaine poisoning. He decided to go into executive session with the sleeping-car conductor, who wired ahead for a doctor to meet the train at the next station. And when the sawbones came and pawed Jack Webster over, he gravely announced that if the patient had the slightest ambition to vote at the next presidential election, he should leave the train at St. Louis and enter a hospital forthwith. To this heart-breaking program Webster entered not the slightest objection, for when a man is seriously ill, he is in much the same position as a politician—to-wit: He is in the hands of his friends.

However, life had the habit of going hard with Webster so frequently that fortunately he was trained to the minute, and after three days of heroic battling the doctor awarded Jack the decision. Thereafter they kept him in the hospital ten days longer, "feeding him up" as the patient expressed it at the end of which period Webster, some fifteen pounds lighter and not quite so fast on his feet as formerly, resumed his journey toward New Orleans.

In the meantime, however, several things had happened. To begin, Dolores Rucy spent two days wondering what had become of her quondam knight of the whiskers—at the end of which period she arrived in New Orleans with the conviction strong upon her that while her hero might be as courageous as a wounded lion when dealing with men, he was the possessor, when dealing with women, of about two per cent less courage than a cottontail rabbit. Being a very human young lady, however, she could not help wondering what had become of the ubiquitous Mr. Webster, although the fact that he had mysteriously disappeared from the train en route to New Orleans did not perturb her one-half so much as it had the appearance. She had this advantage over that unfortunate man, whereas he did not know she was bound for Buenaventura, she knew he was; hence, upon arrival in New Orleans she dismissed him from her thoughts, serene in abiding faith that sooner or later her knight would appear, like little Bo-Peep's lost sheep, dragging his tail behind him, so to speak.

Dolores spent a week in New Orleans renewing schoolgirl friendships from her convent days in the quaint old town. This stop-over, together with the one in Denver, not having been taken into consideration by Mr. William Geary when he and Mother Jenks commenced to speculate upon the approximate date of her arrival in Buenaventura, resulted in the premature flight of Mother Jenks to San Miguel de Padua; a fruitless visit on the part of Billy aboard the Cacique, of the United Fruit company's line, followed by a hurry call to Mother Jenks to return to Buenaventura until the arrival of the next steamer.

This time Billy's calculations proved correct, for Dolores did arrive on that steamer. The port doctor came aboard, partook of his customary

drink with the captain, received a bundle of the latest American newspapers and magazines, nosed around, asked a few perfunctory questions, and gave the vessel pratique.

Dolores observed a gasoline launch shoot up to the landing at the foot of the companion-ladder and discharge a well-dressed, youthful white man. As he came up the companion, the purser recognized him.

"Howdy, Bill," he called. "Hello, yourself." Mr. William Geary replied, and Dolores knew him for an American. "Do you happen to have as a passenger this trip a large, interesting person, by name John Stuart Webster?" asked Billy Geary.

"I don't know, Billy. I'll look over the passenger list," and together they moved off toward his office. Dolores followed, drawn by the mention of that tangle name Webster, and paused in front of the purser's office to lean over the rail, ostensibly to watch the cargadores in their fighters clustering around the great ship, but in reality to learn more of the mysterious Webster.

"Blast the luck," Billy Geary growled, "the old sinner isn't here. By the way, do you happen to have a Miss Dolores Rucy aboard?"

Dolores pricked up her little ears. What possible interest could this stranger have in her goings or comings?

"You picked a winner this time, Bill," she heard the purser say. "Stateroom sixteen, boat-deck, starboard side. You'll probably find her there, packing to go ashore."

"Thanks," Billy replied and stepped out of the purser's office. Dolores turned and faced him.

"I am Miss Rucy," she announced. "I heard you asking for me." Her eyes carried the query she had not put into words: "Who are you, and what do you want?" Billy saw and understood, and on the instant a wave of desolation surged over him.

So this was the vision he had volunteered to meet aboard La Estrellita, and by specious lie and hypocritical wiles, turn her back from the portals of Buenaventura to that dear old United States, which, Billy suddenly recalled with poignant pain, is a sizable country in which a young lady may very readily be lost forever. With the quick eye of youth, he noted that Dolores was perfectly wonderful in a white flannel skirt and jacket, white buck boots, white Panama hat with a gorgeous puggaree, a mannaish little linen collar, and a red four-in-hand tie. From under that white he peeped a profusion of crinkly brown hair with a slightly reddish tinge to its her eyes were big and brown and wide apart, with golden flecks in them; their glance met Billy's hungry gaze simply, directly, and with a curiosity there was no attempt to hide. Her nose was patrician; her beautiful short upper lip revealed the tips of two perfect, milk-white front teeth; she was, Billy Geary told himself, a goddess before whom all low, worthless, ornery fellows like himself should grovel and die happy, if perchance she might be so minded as to walk on their faces! He was aroused from his critical inventory when the hour spoke again: "You haven't answered my question, sir!"

"No," said Billy. "I didn't. Stupid of me, too. However, come to think of it, you didn't ask me any question. You looked it. My name is Geary—William H. Geary, by profession a mining engineer and by nature an ignoramus, and I have called to deliver some disappointing news regarding Henrietta Wilkins."

"Is she—"

"She is. Very much alive and in excellent health—or rather was, the last time it was my pleasure and privilege to call on the dear lady. But she isn't in Buenaventura now." Mentally Billy asked God to forgive him his black-hearted treachery to this winsome girl. He loathed the task he had planned and foisted upon himself, and nothing but the memory of Mother Jenks' manifold kindnesses to him in a day, thanks to Jack Webster, now happily behind him, could have induced him to go through to the finish.

"Why, where is she?" Dolores queried, and Billy could have wept at the sight in those lovely brown eyes. He waved his hand airily. "Queen sabe?" he said. "She left three weeks ago for New Orleans to visit you. I dare say you passed each other on the road—here, here, Miss Rucy, don't cry."

He took a recess of three minutes, while Dolores dabbed her eyes and went through sundry other motions of being brave. Then he proceeded with his nefarious recital.

"When your cablegram arrived, Miss Rucy, naturally Mrs. Wilkins was not here to receive it, and as I was the only person who had her address, the cable agent referred it to me. Under the circumstances, not knowing where

I could reach you with a cable informing you that Mrs. Wilkins was headed for California to see you, I had no other alternative but to let matters take their course. I decided you might arrive on La Estrellita, so I called to welcome you to our thriving little city, and, as a friend of about two minutes' standing, to warn you away from it."

Billy's mien, as he voiced this warning, was so singularly mysterious that Dolores' curiosity was aroused instantly and rose superior to her grief. "Why, what's the matter?" she demanded.

Billy looked around, as if fearful of being overheard. He lowered his voice. "We're going to have one grand little first-class revolution," he replied. "It's due to bust almost any night now, and when it does, the streets of San Buenaventura will run red with blood."

Dolores blanched. "Oh, dearie me," she quavered. "Do they still have revolutions here? You know, Mr. Geary, my poor father was killed in one."

"Yes, and the same old political ranc that shot him is still on deck," Billy warned her. "It would be highly dangerous for a Rucy, man or woman, to show his or her nose around Buenaventura about now. Besides, Miss Rucy, that isn't the worst," he continued, for a whole-hearted lad was Billy, who never did anything by halves. "The city is reeking with cholera," he declared.

"Cholera!" Dolores' big brown eyes grew bigger with wonder and concern. "How strange the port authorities didn't warn us at New Orleans!"

"Tish! Tush! Fiddlesticks and then some. The fruit company censors everything, Miss Rucy, and the news doesn't get out."

"But the port doctor just said the passengers could go ashore."

"What's a human life to a doctor? Besides, he's on the slush-fund pay roll and does whatever the higherups tell him. You be guided by what I tell you, Miss Rucy, and do not set foot on Sobrante soil. If you stay aboard La Estrellita, you'll have your nice clean stateroom, your well-ecoked meals, your bath, and the attentions of the stewardess. The steamer will be loaded in two days; then you go back to New Orleans, and by the time you arrive there I'll have been in communication by cable with Mother Jenks—I mean—"

"Mother who?" Dolores demanded. "A mere slip of the tongue, Miss Rucy. I was thinking of my landlady. I meant Mrs. Wilkins—"

"I'm so awfully obliged to you, Mr. Geary. You're so kind, I'm sure I'd be a most ungrateful girl not to be guided by you accordingly. You wouldn't risk any friend of yours in this terrible place, would you, Mr. Geary?"

"Indeed, I would not. By permitting anybody I thought anything of to come to this city, I should feel guilty of murder."

"I'm sure you would, Mr. Geary. Nevertheless, there is one point that is not quite clear in my mind, and I wish you'd explain—"

"I can't imagine what's become of him, Miss Rucy, did you ever go to meet the only human being in the world and discover that for some mysterious reason he had failed to keep the appointment? Miss Rucy, you'll have to meet old John Stuart the minute he lights in Buenaventura. He's some boy."

"Old John Stuart?" she queried. "How old?"

"Oh, thirty-nine or forty on actual count, but one of the kind that will live to be a thousand and then have to be killed with an axe. He's coming to Sobrante to help me put over a mining deal."

"How interesting, Mr. Geary! No wonder you were disappointed."

The last sentence was a shaft delightfully launched; to Dolores' delight it made a keyhole in Billy Geary's heart.

"Don't get me wrong, Miss Rucy," he hastened to assure her. "I have a good mine, but I'd trade it for a handshake from Jack! The good Lord only published one edition of Jack, and limited the edition to one volume; then the plates were melted for the junk we call the human race. Two weeks ago, when I was sick and penniless and despairing, the possessor of a concession on a fortune, but without a centavo in my pockets to buy a banana, when I was a veritable beach-comber and existing on the charity of Mother Jenks, I managed finally to communicate with old Jack and told him where I was and what I had. There's his answer, Miss Rucy, and I'm not ashamed to say that when I got it I cried like a kid." And Billy

"You Haven't Answered My Question."

"Command me, Miss Rucy."

"If this is such a frightful place, why are you so anxious, if I may employ such language, to horswoggle your dearest friend, Mr. John S. Webster, into coming down here? Do you want to kill him and get his money—or what?"

Billy's face flamed at thought of the embarrassing trap his glib tongue had led him into. He cursed himself for a star-spangled jackass, and while he was engaged in this interesting pastime Dolores spoke again.

"And by the way, which is it? Miss Wilkins or Mrs.? You're called her both, and when I reminded you she was a Miss, you agreed with me, whereas she is nothing of the sort. Something a Mrs. Then you blurted out something about a Mother Jenks, and finally, Mr. Geary, it occurs to me that for a complete stranger you are unduly interested in my welfare. I'm not such a goose as to assimilate your weird tales of death from disease. It occurs to me that if your friend John S. Webster can risk Buenaventura, I can also."

"You—you know that old tarantula?" Billy gasped. "Why I—I came out to warn him off the grass, too!"

Dolores walked a step closer to Billy and eyed him disapprovingly. "I'm so sorry I can't believe that statement,"

she replied. "It happens that I was standing by the companion-ladder when you came aboard and spoke to the purser; when you asked him if Mr. Webster was aboard, your face was alight with eagerness and anticipation, but when you had reason to believe he was not aboard, you looked so terribly disappointed I felt sorry for you."

"I'm going ashore, if it's the last act of my life, and when I get there I'm going to interview the cable agent; then I'm going to call at the steamship office and scan the passenger list of the last three north-bound steamers, and if I do not find Henrietta Wilkins' name on one of those passenger lists I'm going up to Calle de Concordia No. 19—"

"I surrender unconditionally," growled Billy. "I'm a liar from beginning to end. I overlooked my hand. I beg of you to believe me, however, when I tell you that I only told you those whoppers because I was in honor bound to tell them. Personally, I don't want you to go away—at least, not until I'm ready to go away, too! Miss Rucy, my nose is in the dust. There is a fever in my brain and a misery in my heart—"

"And contrition in your face," she interrupted him laughingly. "You're forgiven, Mr. Geary—on one condition."

"Name it," he answered.

"Tell me everything from beginning to end."

So Billy told her. "I would much rather have been visited with a plague of boils, like our old friend, the late Job, than have to tell you this, Miss Rucy," he concluded his recital. "Man proposes, but God disposes, and you're here and bound to learn the truth sooner or later. Mother isn't a lady and she knows it, but take it from me, Miss Rucy, she's a grand old piece of work. She's a second—a rag-tailed sport—a regular individual and game as a gander."

"And I mustn't call at El Buen Amigo, Mr. Geary?"

"Perish the thought! Mother must call on you. El Buen Amigo is what you might term a hotel for tropical tramps of the masculine sex. Nearly all of Mother's guests have a past, you know. They're the submerged white teeth of Sobrante."

"Then my benefactor must call to see me here?" Billy nodded. "When will you bring her here?"

Billy reflected that Mother Jenks had been up rather late the night before and that trade in the cantina of El Buen Amigo had been unusually brisk; so since he desired to exhibit the old lady at her best, he concluded it might be well to spar for wind.

"Tomorrow at 10," he declared. Dolores inclined her head. Something told her she had better leave all future details to the amiable William.

"I remember you inquired for your friend, Mr. Webster, when you came aboard the steamer."

"I remember it, too," Billy countered ruefully. "I can't imagine what's become of him, Miss Rucy, did you ever go to meet the only human being in the world and discover that for some mysterious reason he had failed to keep the appointment? Miss Rucy, you'll have to meet old John Stuart the minute he lights in Buenaventura. He's some boy."

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the other. Evidently once upon a time, as the story books have it, he had been shot. Webster suspected a Mauser bullet, fired at long range. It had entered his right cheek, just below the malar, ranged downward through his flesh and out through a fold of flabby flesh under his left jaw. It must have been a frightful wound, but it had healed well except at the point of entrance, where it had a tendency to pucker considerably, thus drawing the man's eyelid down on his cheek and giving to that visual organ something of the appearance of a bulldog's.

Webster gazed after them whimsically as he approached the counter.

"I'd hate to wake up some night and find that hombre with the puckered eye leaning over me. By the way," he continued, suddenly apprehensive, "do you get much of that parakeet travel on your line?"

"About 80 per cent, of it is off color, sir."

Webster pondered the 80-per-cent probability of being berthed in the same stateroom with one of these people and the prospect was as revolting to him as would be an uninvited negro guest at the dining table of a southern family. He had all a Westerner's hatred for the breed.

"Well, I want a ticket to San Buenaventura," he informed the clerk, "but I don't relish the idea of a Greaser in the same stateroom with me. I wonder if you couldn't manage to fix me with a stateroom all to myself, or at least arrange it so that in the event of company I'll draw a white man."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot guarantee you absolute privacy nor any kind of white man. It's pretty awkward travel to all Central America ports."

"How many berths in your first-class staterooms?"

"Two."

Webster stalled brightly. He had found a way out of the difficulty. "I'll buy 'em both, son," he announced.

"I cannot sell you an entire stateroom, sir. It's against the orders of the company to sell two berths to one man. The travel is pretty brisk and it's hardly fair to the public, you know."

"Well, suppose I buy one ticket for myself and the other for—well, for my valet, let us say. Of course," he added brightly, "I haven't engaged the valet yet and even should I do so I wouldn't be at all surprised if the rascal missed the boat!"

The clerk glanced at him with a slow smile, and pondered. "Well," he said presently, "if you care to buy a ticket for your valet, I'm sure I shouldn't worry whether or not he catches the boat. If my records show that the space is sold to two men and the purser collects two tickets, I think you'll be pretty safe from intrusion."

"To the harassed traveler," said Mr. Webster, "a meeting with a gentleman of your penetration is as refreshing as a canteen of cool water in the desert. Shoot!"