

CAMEO KIRBY

By Booth Tarkington
AND
Harry Leon Wilson
Adapted From the Play
of the Same Name by
W. B. M. Ferguson

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CHAPTER II.

"THIS is a private stateroom, sub," interrupted Moreau, glaring at the intruder.

"What—Why, as I live, it is Colonel Moreau—by all the saints, your admirable self, my dear fellow!" heartily exclaimed the younger man, slapping the other on the back. "These lights are so dashed disorienting I didn't recognize you. I have been watching the game for some time through that window," pointing to one on his right, "and you must remember that a stateroom isn't private so long as the curtains aren't drawn. If I had known you were aboard I would have hunted you up long ago, for you know how I love a game, colonel, and hence this ventured intrusion. Have you any objection to making it three cornered?" His bow included Mr. Randall, now blinking at the table.

"Sorry, but quite impossible, sub," replied Moreau shortly. "I am already this gentleman's master for a matter of ten thousand or so—he has been playing in dam pob luck—and our next wager is for fifty thousand. Too high for you, I calculate?"

"Not at all, I assure you," lightly replied the intruder, smiling into the other's venomous eyes. "Come; if your friend is willing, let me sit in. I really insist upon losing to you, colonel. Won't you introduce me?"

Moreau hesitated, trying to read the other's eyes. Then, apparently satisfied, he turned to the nodding Mr. Randall, saying: "Have you any objection, sub, to making it three? My friend, sub, Mr.—er—Mr. Jackson of New Orleans."

"Honored, sub! Honored!" replied the planter, arising and extending a frank hand. "I warn you, sub, that the Randall luck has turned and that you will surely lose. Stay out, sub; stay out!" he added impressively, patting the other's shoulder. "Foh I am about to make a killing, and I don't want you to be among the dead. The colonel and I are old men of the world, sub, but this is no place for a young man like you. I trust you will take my advice in the spirit in which it is offered, foh I am a father, sub, and I like you. By Gad, you remind me of a dear friend I once had—the Kirbys, sub, of Plaquemine."

"Come," interrupted Moreau, "let us resume our friendly hostilities, Mr. Randall, foh you make you landing, sub, in about half an hour."

"I thank you for your advice, sir," said the intruder, with sudden gravity, while gently and unobtrusively he steered Mr. Randall to his seat. "But I am afraid it has come too late, for card games of all kinds are my weakness. Perhaps if I had received it when I was younger—But I see our good colonel is impatient."

"I am," replied Moreau, shuffling the cards. "foh we have only half an hour, and it is to be the best out of six hands. Come, my money is up, as you see, sub, and Mr. Randall draws a deed for his plantation as his stakes, so we await you pleasure, Mr.—er—Jackson."

"I understand you to say that the stakes were fifty, not twenty thousand?" replied the other, casually glancing at the colonel's roll.

"I calculate my check is good for the balance," replied Moreau, signaling a warning with his eyes—"the National Bank of New Orleans, sub."

"Ah, a very sound institution, for I draw against it myself," observed the younger man. "As, of course, we do not carry such an amount with us," he added, with deference, turning to Mr. Randall, "Colonel Moreau and I must of necessity substitute our checks. We are strangers to you, sir, and—"

"Yoh word, sub, is entirely sufficient," interrupted the planter, waving his hand. "This is a question of honor between us, foh I might draw a deed to a plantation I never owned. I am a man of the world, sub; and I reckon we each can recognize a southern gentleman on sight."

"Yes, in the present company that is not a very difficult matter," gravely responded Mr. Jackson. "Shall we cut for the deal? The four best hands take all. Ah, luck is with me. I take the cards, sir."

"One moment," said Moreau, "as no stakes are up I reckon I'll give my check for the full amount should I lose." Pocketing his roll, he glanced satirically at Mr. Jackson.

If for a presumable amateur who occasionally indulged in a gentleman's game merely for the sake of passing the time Colonel Moreau had exhibited a wonderful aptitude at shuffling and dealing his performance was now completely overshadowed by that of the young intruder, whose lightning deftness was almost uncanny. Talking nonchalantly and brilliantly, he stacked the deck with a beautiful precision, fascinating in the extreme, even while the colonel's watchful and sus-

picious eyes never for a moment relaxed their vigil. Owing entirely to this marvelous and criminal skill Mr. Jackson won on his own deal and, luck following him, won also on that of Mr. Randall. As each and every one of the colonel's underlings were highly estimable he naturally held the best hand when, for a moment, the cards were in his power, and it speaks eloquently for Mr. Jackson's large charity of judgment that he refrained from criticism even when acutely aware that the middle aged creole had father clumsily garnered his third ace from the bottom of the deck. But as youth must be served, especially when possessor of such consummate skill as that owned by Mr. Jackson, the latter handsomely won his fourth show-down with surprising ease, verve and dash.

"Well, that winds her," airily remarked the colonel, arising and stretching his long arms. "One hundred thousand ain't such a bad cleanup, I reckon, but you always were lucky, yoh young scamp, and there's no playing against it. Yoh even topped my foh kings. I calculate the Randall luck finished a very pob last. How about you theory now, sub?"

The planter did not reply, for it is somewhat difficult for a but newly ruined man to sense the full humor of his condition. In silence he drew toward him the pen and ink, while for a long moment he stared at the white sheet of paper, upon which he was about to give title to all which he owned. He and his children were beggars, total and complete. This was the turning of the tide, his royal homecoming. For a moment he bowed his grizzled head; then, shutting his teeth against all thoughts of the future, seized the quill pen. For a Randall must show the world how it can lose. A Randall must be beaten at nothing—even at playing the fool.

"Yoh name, sub?" he courteously inquired, turning to the young stranger who had proved so fortunate.

"Eugene Kirby, sir."

"What?" exclaimed the planter in a dazed manner. "I thought, sub—"

"Oh, the colonel sometimes calls me Mr. Jackson because he thinks I resemble the general," lightly replied Cameo Kirby as, head between hands, he stared gravely at the table. "Any one will tell you my name is Eugene Kirby—even the Texas tender knows it."

"Ah, the General. I have a boy, sub, whom we affectionately call by that name," replied Mr. Randall irrelevantly, staring at the ceiling. "I have three children, sub. There is Tom and Adele and the General. Their mother is dead, sub. And yoh say yoh name is Eugene Kirby. Very strange, sub. I know the Kirbys of Plaquemine, sub. No relation, I suppose. But yoh pardon, sub."

And, with a hand now steady and firm, he wrote and signed the deed to the Randall plantation and, with a bow, handed it to the gambler whose father he had befriended; the gambler whose reputation was said to be the worst on the river; the son of the man who had been his nearest neighbor and closest friend.

This accomplished, Mr. Randall arose unsteadily and walked to the door, where he turned and for a moment surveyed the smoke fouled room with its litter of empty bottles. And if for a moment a fleeting realization of the very thorough manner in which he had been victimized permeated his throbbing brain no hint of it was depicted in face or bearing.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said gravely. "And thank you for the obligation. Good evening." Head erect, he walked out and very softly closed the door.

Kirby resumed his preoccupied attitude at the table, while Moreau, carelessly lighting a cheroot and pouring himself a drink, sprawled elegantly over an adjacent couch.

"Well, I calculate that's the easiest mark that ever came our way," he observed, with a laugh. "Green as the everlasting hills," quietly pocketing Mr. Randall's wallet, a delicate maneuver which Kirby neglected to note. "I calculate this is the first time yoh and I ever played together, eh? Yoh're a deuce of a hand at the cards, my boy—never saw you equal before. I take it, yoh partner, Mr. Larkin Bunce, is not with you this trip or yoh wouldn't have so unceremoniously doubled up with me. Or perhaps yoh two have fallen out, eh? If so, sub, I will be happy to make our impromptu partnership permanent."

Kirby swung slowly around and fixedly regarded his magnificent and amiable companion. "Since when have you contemplated such an admirable partnership?" he blandly inquired.

"Ever since I first saw you play, Kirby. Come; yoh partner, Bunce, is crude—a blubber faced Yankee, with no manners whatever, sub. But yoh and I are gentlemen and would make the best team on the river. I consider our play tonight the biggest haul in a decade, and I promise you mohl like it, foh I never go in foh pica-yow affairs. My fingers are growing a little too stiff foh skillful manipulation, and I frankly own I haven't yoh delicate and admirable finesse. But I have the manner, Kirby, and can rope the cattle for yoh to brand, sub. I'll guarantee yoh the biggest game on the river."

"Yoh will oblige me, sir," replied the other, carefully lighting a cheroot, "by employing the prefix to my name—if ever in the future I am unfortunate enough to have you address me. Permit me to inform you that you are a blank scoundrel, sir! I cannot be too emphatic concerning that statement. Whenever I form a partnership with you I will be more qualified for a front seat in hades than I am at the present moment. Why, you low, thiev-

ing swamp cat," he cried, losing all self control, "how dare you think I gamble like you—by getting unsuspecting victims drunk and then robbing them? I watched you outrageously cheat Mr. Randall and ply him with liquor in order to cover your characteristically clumsy manipulation of the cards, and if I stepped in tonight and stooped to emulate the type of game which you solely play it was in order to save your victim from complete and total ruin. It is unnecessary to say that when Mr. Randall is capable of estimating what has occurred and is once more himself this deed will be returned to him."

"Now, Kirby, yoh can't play that game on me," cried Moreau, jumping to his feet. "Yoh come in on my kill and then try to do me out of the spoils. That don't go, Kirby. I'm too old a hand. Keep that line of talk for saps. The Randall plantation is sold under the hammer, and I get two-thirds or—"

"Or what?" coldly demanded Kirby, carefully pocketing the deed. "You know me, Mr. Moreau, so don't try to pull a derring. It's considerably safer to wait until my back is turned. I say Mr. Randall himself will destroy this deed, and that his plantation will not be sold, and you may believe it or not, just as you like. That ten thousand you virtually stole I cannot, unfortunately, refund; but, believe me, that is the entire extent of your stealings. For once in your life you are going to release a victim before he has been completely sucked dry; for once in your life you are going to be half-way decent!"

"Decent?" bellowed the other. "That's a compliment from one of yoh standing!"

"Like yourself, I game for a living, Mr. Moreau," coldly interrupted Kirby; "but, unlike yourself, I endeavor to do so honestly, and I have never yet stooped to the methods which you exclusively employ. Although you are



MOREAU, CAREFULLY WIPING THE SMOKE PISTOL, RETURNED IT TO HIS POCKET.

seemingly not aware of the fact, there is a distinct difference between a gambler and a thief. Once I had the privilege of meriting the friendship and esteem of gentlemen like Mr. Randall, and I now warn you to keep your claws off him. If ever in the future I catch you bleeding him as you did this evening you and I will have a different sort of discussion. For your own sake I beg you to remember this."

Before Moreau could reply the sound of a single shot rang out from one of the staterooms and echoed itself over the river. Impulsively Kirby turned to the door, and as he did so Moreau quickly withdrew his hand from the breast of his long frock coat. A tongue of flame leaping from his Derringer shattered the stagnant tobacco fumes, and with the acrid bite of powder in his nostrils and a bullet through the lungs the younger man, fighting hard against his fall, slowly eased himself to the floor.

"For yoh, sub," courteously sneered Moreau, carefully wiping the smoking pistol and returning it to his breast pocket, while he coolly watched the writhing figure cough out its life. "I calculate, sub, yoh are now booked foh that front seat in hades which you declined. I'll teach you to play a low down game on a gentleman, sub."

As he turned to refill his glass the door was violently torn open and a large, florid faced man entered. Moreau turned, his hand slipping into his breast pocket. For a long moment the two confronted each other in silence.

"Mr. Randall has just blown out his brains," said the intruder slowly at length. "I guess that's your work, my fine old bucko. But I heard another shot. Where's my pal, Gene Kirby?" His eyes, restlessly searching the darkened corners, at length happened on the huddled thing, now lying very still. "Gene," he cried, stooping and raising the other's head to his knee. "Speak to me, boy. It's your old pal, Bunce."

"I calculate yoh friend is past speaking, sub," observed Moreau, backing toward the door and keeping a wary eye on the florid faced Yankee. "Mr. Kirby insulted me, sub, and has paid foh it with his life. I shot him in fair and honorable combat."

"Fair and honorable hades!" snarled Bunce, leaping to his feet. "Shot him in the back, yoh skunk—your usual fair and honorable manner! You haven't the nerve to stand up and face a crippled hen!"

"Stand back, sub!" warned the other, drawing his Derringer. "Yoh are naturally excited, and so I choose to overlook yoh words, which I will not do in the future. But don't push me too far, sub—don't push me too far, foh even a gentleman has his limits."

"No man ever double banked Gene Kirby twice," said Larkin Bunce, laconically, "and it'll be a good thing for you, Moreau, if he is past speaking, which, I guess, looks the case. If he happens to pull through you can ram-

ble he'll fix your case himself, but if he doesn't, my fine old bucko, I'll settle your honorable hash. Yoh've stunk up this river just about along enough."

"It will afford me considerable pleasure, sub," replied the pseudo colonel in his best manner. "To place yoh in the same position which yoh friend Mr. Kirby will shortly occupy. I refer, sub, to a front seat in the grill room of his most Satanic majesty. Yoh servant, sub, and a very good evening." Bowing, the flower of southern chivalry backed nimbly through the door and disappeared.

(To Be Continued.)

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