

Richard the Brazen

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...By...
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Author of "For the Freedom of the Sea," "The Southerners," Etc.
AND
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Author of "A Broken Rosary," "The Prince Chap," Etc.

Continued from last week.

"Me!" cried Mr. Van der Awe, clutching at his benefactor's hand. "Oh, I say!"

"Wait," said Richard. "I haven't finished yet. A young man of your obvious histrionic talent ought fairly to glitter in a part like that, and, besides, it will give you a chance to do the devoted to your ladylove. Just as you are in the middle of it Miss Harriet sails in and denounces you. Oh, it's a bully little play, especially the denunciation! But you don't mind that on account of your great and glorious love for the bird. Miss Harriet's remarks just roll off you like water from a duck's back. Touching little scene! Hanged if I can see how I can give it up, but— He paused, sighed, then turned impulsively: "Shucks! I don't want to appear mean. The part is yours!"

For half a minute perhaps Mr. Van der Awe gazed in silence at his generous friend, beaming with gratitude.

"Lord Croyland," he murmured brokenly at last, "you're a good fellow! I'll try to do the part justice. I—I don't know how to thank you."

"I'm sure you will. Don't mention it," said Richard, with the wan smile of a complete martyr. "Let's play a game of billiards."

CHAPTER XII.

RICHARD, much to his chagrin and disgust, did not see Miss Harriet until the four ladies and the two gentlemen sat down to luncheon. To one thing he had made up his mind definitely—he would follow Mr. Carrigan's advice and brazen it out, putting his faith in luck, but helping luck along with assurance. From the opposite side of the table the fair Imogene cast languishing glances in his direction, while on his left the ancient Miss Schermerly grew positively sprightly and covered him with a Gatling gun of perplexing questions. She wanted authentic information regarding barons, earls and noble dukes, to all of which Richard gave ready but quaint answers—answers that might have caused the English aristocracy to rise in one vast, furious mass and lynch him without formalities of trial or benefit of clergy.

"How different it is from what we read in novels," said Mrs. Renwyck. "I'm afraid our American authors are ill informed. Really, they ought to travel more."

"They travel enough, but I fancy they do not get into the best society abroad," suggested Miss Schermerly. "I shall prepare a paper upon that very subject for the Woman's Literary league. Would you have any objection, Lord Croyland, if I quoted you as an authority?"

"Not in the least," said Richard gallantly. "In fact, my dear Miss Schermerly, I should be honored—vastly so." He smiled on himself at the thought of the real Lord Croyland should that gentleman ever chance to read the paper in question, but that was Croyland's affair, not his.

"I will bring my notebook into the library this afternoon," the ancient one stated, and, with a smile to Richard, "Could you help me then, do you think?"

"I should be most pleased," said Richard, with an answering smile, "but I fear I'm engaged to Miss Renwyck this afternoon for quite a long horseback ride. At another time I shall be charmed, I assure you."

Miss Harriet started. She was unaware of any such engagement, but somehow the idea did not displease her. She smiled and offered to release Lord Croyland, but that gentleman would not hear of it.

"By the way," said Miss Harriet in order to change the subject, "Imogene tells me that you have agreed to take part in our little play. It is awfully good of you to help us out."

"Not at all," answered Richard, with pronounced sadness. "It is a pleasure to serve you in any way."

Mr. Van der Awe in thunderstruck amazement stared blankly across the table, while his half raised fork fell clattering upon his plate.

"Oh, I say!" he began, but Richard arrested further speech by a swift glance. There was silence for a moment; then Miss Renwyck spoke:

"You don't seem to be overenthusiastic at the prospect, Lord Croyland. Don't you think the part would suit you?"

The Texan considered her words thoughtfully, fumbled for his monocle, got it into position after another gymnastic exercise with his left eye and sighed elaborately.

"The part," he stated, with a slow drawl, "is delightful as I understand it—but shall I be perfectly candid, Miss Renwyck?"

The ladies in a breath assured him that that was just what they wished, so he continued, struggling with embarrassment:

"I've never gone in for that sort of thing—er—but once and confess with regret that I caused a fiasco. I'm very

stupid at such things—really, you know, abominable. It is rather the duty of a guest to comply with the wishes of his hostess, and I feel it incumbent upon me to make a trial of the role, even if the outcome holds me up to open ridicule. We Englishmen appear a bit eccentric to Americans, I am fully aware, but nevertheless it hurts at times when—"

He paused and looked at his plate in deep confusion. Miss Harriet blushed furiously. She had wounded her guest unwittingly and was sincerely sorry. Lord Croyland, who thought, was acting very nobly in thus sacrificing himself for the sake of her foolish whims, and she ought to have consulted him first of all. She made up her mind at once and turned to him impulsively.

"Lord Croyland," she said, "I beg you to believe me when I say that I never thought for an instant of holding you up to ridicule. Won't you forgive me? It was splendid of you to agree, and—there—we won't have the play at all!"

"But, my dear Miss Renwyck," Richard protested, "I should feel frightfully cut up if you abandoned it on my account. Do go on with it. Perhaps I shan't be so jolly bad after all. I—"

All four ladies immediately took up the cudgels against him until his polite protests grew weaker and weaker, finally subsiding in a suggestion that relieved the situation from every point of view.

"Why not have Mr. Van der Awe do the part?" he asked, with a beaming smile directed at that young gentleman. "You'd do it splendidly, old chap, and I shall be uncommonly obliged to you."

Amid a chorus of approval the young lover accepted blushing, while Richard not only freed himself of a hateful task, but became a hero and a genius in the eyes of the entire party.

As they passed out of the dining room Cornelius plucked Richard's sleeve and whispered:

"See here; I thought you said you couldn't act?"

"Can't," returned the Texan, with a sly wink. "That was what you Americans call bluff, but if you let on I'll wring your neck."

The Earl of Croyland pro tem. proceeded to his rooms with the object of arraying himself in a certain riding suit in the wardrobe of the Earl of Croyland, in fact, which would have made a cow puncher snort with disdain, but which Richard in his present state of mind rather longed for. Certainly he had no fault to find either with his prototype's taste or tailor. On entering his dressing room he was greeted by a sight fairly took his breath away, and he was not easily surprised, either. In a corner opposite the door stood a handsome morris chair. In the chair sprawled Mr. Woolsey Bills holding a tumbler in one hand and Richard's brandy flask in the other. One-third of the original contents was still in the glass; the other two-thirds was obviously in Bills, for that worthy smiled pleasantly at his master and made no attempt to rise or to apologize for his extraordinary conduct.

Richard's first impulse was to take the offender by the scruff of the neck and kick him soundly through his host's baronial halls, repeating the attention until his valet reached a point somewhere beyond the Renwycks' front gate, but on second thought he changed his mind. First and foremost he wanted information. The kicking could be postponed. There would be time enough for that later.

"Well, Bills," he began, with a dash of sarcasm in his voice, "for a recently employed servant you seem to be doing remarkably well."

"Yes, sir," returned the valet, with the utmost complacency. "I'm doing nicely, thank you." He helped himself to another pabulum of liquid cheer and held the glass between his eye and the light.

"This 'ere brandy, sir, is equal good as what we 'as on the other side. Your judgment's better than the earl's, sir. You 'eath, sir."

Richard studied his attached hands deep into his pockets, striving with all his might to keep them from the impudent rascal's collar. What did it mean? However, there was nothing to be gained by violence, while much could be learned through the exercise of a little tact. Therefore he curbed his rage and spoke calmly. If Bills had known the Texan better he would have realized that when he was most quiet he was most dangerous.

"Might I inquire as to the reason of your present condition?" asked his master.

"Yes," answered Bills alight, but nevertheless in quite open defiance; "me an' you 'as got to part company, Mr. Williams."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir."

The murder was out. The man's manner of address implied many things which Richard was as quick to grasp as to appreciate their consequences. Bills might drop a bomb-

shell in the Renwyck household by a mere mention of the name of "Mr. Williams." A confession on Richard's part would be bad enough, but to be forced to admit the accusation of a servant would be infinitely worse. Bills, too, seemed aware of the situation and was determined to make the most of it, as was shown by his next remark.

"Mr. Williams," he began, with the confidence of holding the whip hand, "I'm not disposed to make trouble, sir, though it do go against me to be deceivin' people. I've got no complaint ag'inst my present dooties, Mr. Williams, sir, an' special so as they is light." Richard made no answer, and Bills continued, "I might—I say—I might—be induced to stay on, sir, for a small advance of two hundred pun, with a promise of another one to come."

"I dare say you might," assented Richard, with ironic calm quite lost upon the man. "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. I fancy Mr. Renwyck would do as well as that—maybe more."

"Probably," agreed Richard. "He's richer than I and inclined to be more generous. Try it by all means, Bills. I should hate to stand in the way of your making an honest penny or two."

The Texan began to undress, while the surprised valet stared at him in wonder. He had rather expected a scene, but his master's easy acceptance of the blackmailing scheme took him unawares. He was completely nonplussed by this seemingly indifferent reception of his statement. His bombshell, which he had charged so elaborately, seemed to be hanging fire. He was not so sure that Mr. Renwyck would pay for his information after all, and a bird in the hand is worth many on the wing, especially to an inebriate, whose facilities for bird catching are limited.

"I'd-I'd rather stay with you, sir," he faltered presently, with a suggestion of compromise; not to say surrender, in his tones.

"Suit yourself," smiled Richard generally, more indifferent than ever. "The matter is of too little importance to trouble over—really. Get me out that pair of dove colored riding breeches, so long as you are here, will you?"

The valet brought the desired article and, looking his master square in the face, summoned the last vestige of his artificially supplied courage and made a final bold attempt at blackmailing him:

"Will you give me two hundred pun, sir, or won't you, now?"

"Couldn't think of it," laughed the Texan lightly. "I made a bargain with you, and you break it at your own risk. Now, bring me Lord Croyland's second best pair of riding boots. The new ones are a trifle small and pinch my toes damnable. That's right. Thank you." He looked up with a happy smile. "It's your deal, Woolsey. What do you contemplate doing next?"

The valet had been thinking hard. He had one more shaft in his quiver and believed it would reach its mark.

"I've decided, sir," he stated as he swaggered across the room, "not to say nothing to Mr. Renwyck at all. The information might be worth a good deal more to Mr. Renwyck's daughter."

Richard wanted to strangle him on the spot; yet, strange to say, he acted very differently.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a look of open admiration. "I had thought of that, but forgot to mention it. Pardon my negligence. Really, Cardinal, you have a brilliant mind, so ecclesiastical

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of 'is mawkish smiles. No, sirree! I 'ave you 'ere I want you, an' you've got to pay. You got to make it three—an' cash down at that! Now, one last time—will you or won't you?"

"No, Woolsey," said Richard, calmly drawing on his boot, "I won't." Bills scowled at him angrily and turned toward the door. He was drunk enough to put his threat into execution, and well Richard knew that such an exposure would be a deathknell to his hopes of winning Harriet.

"Wait!" At the sharp command the valet turned suddenly; then his master changed his tone and continued in an even voice: "Miss Renwyck is dressing for a ride with me, and at present you can't see her. She will probably be down in twenty minutes, after which you may do as you like and be hanged to you! In the meantime I would be obliged if you would get me that small bottle of machine oil on the closet shelf; then find me a piece of soft white rag."

The valet wanted to refuse, but his servant's training, together with a certain compelling something in Richard's eye, enforced obedience. He brought one of Lord Croyland's handkerchiefs from the bureau drawer and laid it with the bottle of machine oil on a table in the center of the room. Richard thanked him, seated himself again and began tearing the handkerchief into narrow strips, while Bills stood watching him, his human curiosity beginning to get the better even of his anger.

"Sit down, Cardinal," said Richard pleasantly. "You have twenty minutes to wait, so why hurry? I have found that morris chair to be very comfortable indeed. You were enjoying it when I came in. Don't let me spoil your afternoon. Try it again."

The valet, still wondering and uncertain, took the indicated seat, narrowly watching his master while the Texan crossed the room, returning to the table with a small screwdriver and a formidable revolver. He seated himself and began taking the weapon to pieces, oiling each part carefully and then running a greasy rag through the barrel. Bills became more and more interested in this singular and to him unfamiliar proceeding, but Richard offered no explanation of his unusual occupation. After five minutes of utter silence the valet could stand the strain no longer.

"Er—beg pardon, sir," he asked, and the tremor in his voice indicated his uneasiness, "but wot are you a-doin' of, sir?"

"Cleaning my gun," returned Richard laconically. "What did you think I was doing—shaving?"

"O-oh!" said Bills and lapsed into silence.

Richard began to whistle. It was a merry, happy little tune, but somehow it got on the valet's nerves. His mind commenced to work and draw inferences. The gun had a very unsympathetic look, which was lessened in no degree by the six enormous cartridges that the worker placed before him on the table. He wished that the Texan had not placed himself so as to command the only exit from the room. Presently the nervous Bills spoke again. The effect of the brandy was wearing off rapidly on account of his growing fear.

"You—you don't expect to 'ave no innemitt use for that 'ere thing, do you, Mr. Williams?"

"Don't know," said Richard unconcernedly. "I might, and then, again, I might not. It depends. Pretty little toy, isn't it?" Bills licked his lips and said nothing. The Texan continued: "You see, I always try to keep it in working order, because you can never tell when you've got to whip it out and get down to real enjoyable work. Why, you really wouldn't believe it, Bills, but I haven't shot a man since I left Texas—two whole weeks, he added despondently, shook his head and then began dripping oil in the pistol's lock.

"I suppose," said the valet, by way of filling in the gap of another pause, "I suppose that down where you live, sir, they—they don't mind—er—murderin' of people, Mr. Williams, sir?"

"Shucks!" laughed Richard. "What's a man or two? A bang—a yell—and it's all over. Of course they did hard sometimes, but that's their affair."

The irresponsible person took up his whistling once more, while the muscle of his carelessly held gun seemed to point persistently at the pit of the valet's stomach, in which, by the way, there was growing a queerly responsive feeling.

"Beg pardon, sir, but—but it isn't loaded, is it?"

"Not yet," smiled Richard. "I'll attend to that later. Besides, I wouldn't hurt you, my boy; no, not for £300—cash down."

The sum was not a large one, yet the particular amount seemed to grate upon the servant's sensitiveness. He cast a longing glance toward the door, but the Texan was already filling the chambers of his revolver, so Bills perforce sat still and watched him, experiencing a separate and distinct spasm as each cartridge nestled into its crib. Richard laughed softly, as at some pleasurable memory.

"By the way, Friend Woolsey, I don't know why I think of it just now, but a mighty funny thing happened down in Texas a couple of years ago. I had a contract with a fellow—chap about your size and age as I remember him, with a charming disregard for keeping promises similar to yours. He broke his contract."

In the awkward pause which followed the surviving partner in the deal drew a fine bead on the tassel of the window curtain and smiled.

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