

Richard the Brazen

...By...
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AND
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Continued from last week.

"Oh, what is he going to do?" Miss Imogene began to whimper. "Oh, please, Lord Croylund, won't you let him go? He's my friend. We let him in the library window, and if you let him up everybody will know all about it. Oh, oh, oh!"

Once more sharp symptoms of hysteria threatened to develop, and Miss Harriet's most persuasive powers were taxed to avert an alarming outbreak.

"Hush, dear, hush!" she whispered soothingly, then turned to Richard. "Lord Croylund," she said, "there are circumstances connected with this strange affair which prevent me from explaining fully. Tomorrow, when Imogene and I are less nervous, perhaps we can make you acquainted with the reasons. For the present I beg you to let this man go quietly. We have nothing more to fear from him."

Richard hesitated, glancing from Miss Harriet to the prisoner.

"Of course, Miss Renwyck," he answered regretfully, "I must bow to your judgment, though in my opinion you would better allow me to turn this fellow over to the police. I imagine they would be inordinately glad to see him. But—just as you like. There is one more little matter, however, which I must insist upon." He turned to the prisoner. "This young lady," he said, quietly pointing to Miss Imogene, "has paid you a somewhat exorbitant price for her own rightful property. Oblige me by returning the amount."

"Oh, no, no; let him keep it!" begged the victim, but Richard was obdurate upon this point.

Mr. Roderick Fitzgeorge, having accomplished the real object of his visit, was glad to be released at any price, especially as the disposal of the letters was merely a device for entering the house and holding the ladies while his confederate rifled the safe. Without more ado he took the money from his pocket, tossed it upon the billiard table and turned to the library door.

"One moment," Richard demanded. "Miss Renwyck, turn this light upon him, please. Thank you. Now on me. I want this gentleman to know me if we chance to meet again."

After a moment's silent scrutiny the Texan spoke in a stern but level voice: "My friend, I am forced to let you go this time, though sadly against my inclination. You owe your release to the kindness of the ladies. The next time the affair will be mine. If you ever molest them again in any way I'll settle with you in a way we make use of in Texas. You understand? You are marked, my friend. I'd know your bad eye in Jericho. Yes, and I'd follow you there, too, for the pleasure of wringing your worthless neck. Now apologize to these ladies, then git!"

In Richard's present tone there was no suspicion of an English drawl, and Harriet marked it joyously, though half unconsciously, for the strain of fear and anxiety was now beginning to tell upon her nerves. Miss Imogene was ready for complete collapse, and the two stood trembling in each other's arms.

The burglar mumbled a stumbling apology, then passed into the library through the door which Richard opened for his exit. He lost no time in stepping through the still open window and in a moment more was skulking across the lawn.

"Lord Croylund," began Miss Harriet, who had followed from the billiard room with Imogene clinging hopelessly to her arm—"Lord Croylund, I want to thank you for—"

The words died suddenly upon her lips, and she leaned for support against the wall.

"Who's there?" called a voice in the darkness from the stairs in the hall.

"Quick!" whispered Richard to the terror-stricken girls. "It's your father! Go back into the billiard room and slip upstairs when you get the chance. There! It's all right. Leave it to me."

He gave them no chance to disobey, but pushed them through the door, while he spurred his brain for some good excuse to account for his presence in the library at this unseemly hour.

"Who's there?" Mr. Renwyck called, and this time Richard answered back: "Hello! It is I! Wh—er—I mean Croylund. Is that you, Mr. Renwyck?"

He grabbed a book at random from one of the shelves, then drew the hall portieres aside, to discover his host, revolver in hand, on the dim lit stairs, arrayed in a long white night robe, which made him look more gaunt and angular than ever.

"Oh, it's you!" said Mr. Renwyck in great surprise. "I thought I heard a noise—a shot or something—and got up to investigate. Why in the name of heaven aren't you in bed?"

"I'm awfully sorry to have disturbed you," the Texan answered easily. "I—stumbled over a beastly chair in the dark. Too bad, upon my word! You see," he explained, "I couldn't sleep, so I came down here to take a liberty and a book."

Mr. Renwyck glanced at his costume, which, with the exception of his dress coat, which had been exchanged for a house jacket, was the same his guest had worn earlier in the evening. The financier thought for a moment, then descended the stairs, entered the library and switched on the electric light. The first thing to catch his eye was an open window, which Richard in his haste had failed to close.

The Texan interpreted the blank astonishment so clearly written on Mr. Renwyck's face and proceeded to enlighten him.

"Fresh air," he murmured easily; "it's so beastly warm, you know. I rather fancy I'm a bit feverish, really."

Mr. Renwyck frowned thoughtfully. "Lord Croylund," he asked, "did you open that window yourself?"

"To be sure," lied Richard suavely, while he screwed in his ever ready monocle, thanking God that he had not laid it aside. Somehow the thing seemed to give him confidence now. It was something to cling to. "No harm, I trust?"

"Well, no," returned Mr. Renwyck slowly, "only I don't understand why it didn't raise a hullabaloo. I'm positive I set the burglar alarm, and"—He took a step toward the wall. "By George! It's turned off!"

Now, Richard knew nothing what-

ever about the burglar alarm and began to feel icy beads of perspiration gathering on his brow, the more so as Mr. Renwyck was gazing at him in ill disguised and increasing suspicion.

"Oh, that!" he laughed. "I turned the lever before I raised the sash. Miss Renwyck explained it to me yesterday. Jolly little contrivance, 'pon my word. I should like immensely to have the system installed at Croylund Park."

The bogus earl looked innocent to the point of childishness, and the mystified host was forced to accept the very inadequate explanation of the episode. Without comment he closed the window, set the alarm once more, switched off the lights and silently, not to say grimly, led the way upstairs, meekly followed by the Texan, glad to have escaped further inquiry.

"I'm awfully sorry to have caused you all this bother," Richard apologized again as they reached the upper landing. "I'm no end of a nuisance, really."

"Don't mention it, I beg you," answered the financier, with forced courtesy. "I hope you will sleep now. Good night." Then the two parted and entered their respective rooms.

"Strange," muttered Mr. Renwyck as he pulled the sheet about his chin. "A peculiar lot, these Englishmen. But I dare say I appear just as peculiar to them."



"Lord Croylund," he asked, "did you open that window yourself?"

them. He acted so strangely, too, about that check the other night. One hundred thousand dollars! Humph! I wonder if he has a hundred thousand dollars. I begin to doubt it—doubt it exceedingly."

Meanwhile the Texan reached his room, mopped his brow and hunted for his brandy flask. It seemed to him that he wanted a good stiff drink as he wanted nothing else in all the world. He failed to find his flask in its accustomed place and surmised accurately that if he found Woolsey Bills he might strike its trail. The valet's sleeping room was next his own, so without ceremony the master pushed open the door, admitting a flood of light. He did not find his flask, nor did he find his servant either, for the room was deserted, and the bed had not been occupied.

"Ah!" observed the Texan thoughtfully. "Bre' Fox has changed masters for the second time. Humph! A little awkward to explain—for me, I mean."

On Restmore a heavy silence fell again, which was broken, as before, only by that antique clock and its soft chime as it struck another quarter hour. Then two dim, ghostly figures crept slowly up the stairs and entered Miss Harriet Renwyck's room. In a little while they were safely tucked in bed and lay whispering in each other's arms.

"Oh, Harriet, darling," breathed Miss Imogene, "wasn't he—er—just splendid when he told that bounce? I don't believe he's an Englishman at all."

"Nonsense!" the other laughed. "Of course he's an Englishman. Now try to go to sleep."

It would be discourteous in the extreme to state that a lady had been guilty of another "bounce," but at any rate Miss Harriet clasped a drowsy little figure to her breast, thought of Texas and smiled into the darkness happily.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT 7 o'clock the next morning Mr. Renwyck had a telephone call from his partner in New York. It was of such a serious nature as to cause him to dress hurriedly and leave without waiting for his breakfast, though Mrs. Renwyck followed him to the front veranda, begging him to wait for a cup of coffee.

"No; haven't time!" he snapped as he climbed into the waiting trap. "Go along, Walters. Whoa! Wait a minute. By George," he exclaimed, with a frown of annoyance. "I forgot about those jewels!" He fumbled in his pocketbook, produced a memorandum and handed it to his wife.

"Julia," he said hurriedly, "this is the combination of the safe. Telephone to Michael, will you, and ask him to come over before he leaves for town? Get him to unlock the safe and bring the diamonds with him to my office. I'll put them in the safety deposit vault. There—haven't time to explain any more. My train is due in three

minutes. Goodby. Now, Walters, let Molly have her head."

In a moment the trap had whirled through the open gates, and Mrs. Renwyck, marveling at what could take her lord away so suddenly, turned and went into the house, where she obediently telephoned her husband's message to her brother Michael.

Breakfast was late that morning, as two at least of the inmates of the house showed unmistakable signs of loss of sleep.

"How lovely!" exclaimed Miss Harriet as she glanced through a delicately tinted note, then turned to Richard. "Such a dear friend of mine is coming out this morning to stay over Sunday. I know you will be charmed to meet her."

"Delighted, I'm sure," drawled Richard indolently.

"Who is it, Harriet?" Mrs. Renwyck asked.

"Nellie Sempton."

Richard's indolence departed instantly. The name recalled several things.

"Er—beg pardon," he questioned, "is the lady rather tall and blond—about twenty-two or thereabout, with a rippling figure?"

"Why, yes!" cried Imogene delightedly. "Do you know her?"

"Well, no, not exactly," returned the smiling Texan. "She has—er—been pointed out to me." He screwed in his monocle and picked up a letter from Lord Croylund's mail which lay beside his plate. "I'm awfully sorry that I shan't be here when Miss Sempton arrives, but I find I shall have to go to New York this morning. Too bad, really."

"But you haven't even read your letters yet," chirped Miss Imogene.

"Can you tell from the outside that it's some horrid business?"

Richard nodded sadly and tapped a formidable official envelope.

"Too true," he murmured. "It's business and, as you aptly express it, horrid."

In one sense the Texan spoke the plain, unvarnished truth, for business of an unpleasant character called him in several directions. He had entirely forgotten until the mention of Miss Sempton's name recalled it to him that he had a smashed automobile on his hands, not to mention a prospective lawsuit from a justly irate farmer. Then, too, it would be most awkward to have the charming Miss Sempton extend her hand and say, with a most engaging smile: "How do you do, Mr. Peter Wilson? I knew you were not a chauffeur. How many other names do you happen to possess?"

Yes, "horrid business" called him away from Irvington at once and bade fair to keep him away until Miss Sempton departed.

"Woolsey and I," he muttered to his inward, disgusted self, "must seek seclusion in some faroff, happier clime."

Breakfast was scarcely over when Mr. Corrigan was announced. He entered with a cheery good morning to every one, then went with Mrs. Renwyck to the library. Miss Schermerly strove with all her crafty wiles to lure Lord Croylund away for a morning walk and a chat on the superior advantages of being a nobleman, but the nobleman in question met guile with guile and pleaded an excuse of having to catch the next train. He said he would walk to the station, especially as on foot he might dodge Miss Sempton if she happened to come earlier than expected, and started across the lawn.

On the lawn he lingered in the hope of seeing Miss Harriet once more, for he did not wish to leave Irvington without confessing his deception and declaring himself her humble worshipper from the Lone Star State. He had almost given up hope when he spied her coming from the house toward him. She, too, had been dodging difficulties in the path of a meeting with him alone. And now as she tripped across the grass he saw in her eyes a light, on her cheeks a color which caused his heart to bound, while the warm blood tingled through his veins.

"Lord Croylund," she said, "before you go I want to thank you for what you did for Imogene and me last night. It was splendid of you to take the blame, and—"

"But how do you know what I did?" he asked her laughingly.

"Because," she stammered, "we—we didn't go upstairs when you told us. We stayed in the billiard room—and—and listened." She finished with a violent blush, which made her irresistible in the Texan's biased eyes.

"Oh!" he laughed. "I see."

Miss Harriet did not join in his merriment. She looked up earnestly and asked:

"Why didn't you tell the whole truth and explain to father?"

"Explain to father?" he echoed, mistaking her meaning. "Good Lord! How could I?"

Miss Harriet nodded, smiling happily.

"I think I understand. You wanted to save her?"

"Of course," answered Richard, relieved again. Really, these sudden shocks almost broke his nerve.

"Now, tell me one thing more," continued the girl. "You are not an Englishman, I suspected it before, and last night I knew it. Who are you?"

Richard gasped and took a backward step, while the hot blood mounted to his cheeks and tinged the dusky bronze.

"Who am I?" he repeated earnestly. "A man who loves you with his heart and mind and soul—a man who has deceived you only that he might be near you, to touch your hand and look

into your eyes—a man who has followed you from Tex!"

"Harriet, Harriet!" came a cry of shrill distress from the front veranda. "Harriet, the diamonds! They are gone!"

Mrs. Renwyck clung limp and disheveled to the railing, while Mr. Corrigan strove to hold her up and at the same time murmur words of comfort in her ear, a task in which he was greatly handicapped by shortness of stature and disproportionate rotundity.

"Gone?" cried Harriet, whitening to the lips. "Gone where?"

Mrs. Renwyck immediately forgot family traditions, etiquette and everything else beside the crushing loss and her rising Irish blood.

"Don't be a fool!" she shrieked. "How do I know where they've gone? Do you think I've got 'em in my pocket? Police! Fire!"

With this dramatic finish Mrs. Renwyck promptly fainted, sinking down into a huddled heap and dragging little Uncle Michael with her.

The household was already in an uproar. With Richard's assistance Mrs. Renwyck was laid upon a sofa, and smelling salts were administered in such generous quantities that she returned to consciousness with gasping protests and gusts of rage. Miss Schermerly offered consolation in the form of various questions and was so offended by the answers she received that she retired to her room in righteous indignation. Miss Chittendon crept close to the edge of the circle of excitement and listened as one in a frozen trance. Both she and Miss Harriet, to say nothing of Richard himself, had worked out a solution of the problem by the simple process of deduction, and three hearts sank to the utmost depths of despondency. Uncle Michael added to the depression by a cheerful statement which gave at least a clew to the robbery.

"I'm not a bit surprised at this," he said, "and it's all Jacob's fault for being so puffed up and bullet-headed," which was truly an Irish mixture of adjectives.

"What do you mean?" demanded Mrs. Renwyck, instantly taking the side of her abused husband.

"Why, simply this," said the little lawyer coolly. "There was a cock-eyed vagrant nosing around the place several days ago, and I warned Jacob to place a detective in the house while the diamonds were in this toy safe of his, but he wouldn't do it."

Harriet flushed and bit her lips. Imogene gave evidence of approaching hysteria, and Richard listened, while ice cold shivers frolicked up and down his spine. The Texan could place the "cock-eyed vagrant," and also feared he could place the confederate who had evidently helped himself to the contents of the safe while Mr. Roderick Fitzgeorge engaged the ladies in the billiard room. It was all so simple, so pitifully simple! The diamonds were gone, and so was Woolsey Bills.

Richard's trip to New York was now out of the question. He must stay and face the music, though the price he must pay the fiddler was a question he dared not dwell upon. He could only hope Miss Sempton would not appear until it was all over. He was now burning to get hold of Harriet and confess everything and then to

more serious. Mr. Corrigan advised his brother-in-law of the true condition of affairs and offered to do anything in his power to help matters along. Mr. Renwyck, while very much engaged over his harbor scheme, concluded to drop business for the morning and hasten out to Irvington with two experienced detectives.

"Good!" applauded Uncle Michael. "The more the merrier. I believe I can furnish these gentlemen with several valuable clues. I hate to say 'Told you so!' Jake, but if you had listened to me—what? No, I won't! It's hot enough out here. Goodby."

(To Be Continued)

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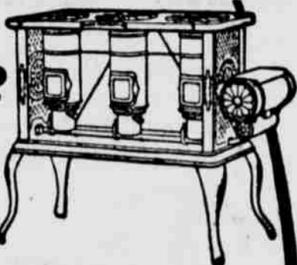


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