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Billy and the Big Stick

by Richard Harding Davis

May, 1999 [Etext #1764]

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BILLY AND THE BIG STICK

by Richard Harding Davis

Had the Wilmot Electric Light people remained content only to make light, had they not, as a by-product, attempted to make money, they need not have left Hayti.

When they flooded with radiance the unpaved streets of Port-au-Prince no one, except the police, who complained that the lights kept them awake, made objection; but when for this illumination the Wilmot Company demanded payment, every one up to President Hamilear Poussevain was surprised and grieved. So grieved was President Ham, as he was lovingly designated, that he withdrew the Wilmot concession, surrounded the power-house with his barefooted army, and in a proclamation announced that for the future the furnishing of electric light would be a monopoly of the government.

In Hayti, as soon as it begins to make money, any industry, native or foreign, becomes a monopoly of the government. The thing works automatically. It is what in Hayti is understood as BAUTE FINANCE. The Wilmot people should have known that. Because they did not as vice-consul, law and order were as solidly established as the stone jetties, and by contrast the eccentricities of the Black REPUBLIC baffled and distressed him.

"It can't be that you blackmail the president," said the consul, "because I understand he boasts he has committed all the known crimes.

"And several he invented," agreed Billy.

"And you can't do it with a gun, because they tell me the president isn't afraid of anything except a voodoo priestess. What is your secret?" coaxed the consul. "If you'll only sell it, I know several Powers that would give you your price. Billy smiled modestly.

"It's very simple," he said. "The first time my wages were shy I went to the palace and told him if he didn't come across I'd shut off the juice. I think he was so stunned at anybody asking him for real money that while he was still stunned he opened his safe and handed me two thousand francs. I think he did it more in admiration for my nerve than because he owed it. The next time pay-day arrived, and the pay did not, I didn't go to the palace. I just went to bed, and the lights went to bed, too. You may remember?" The consul snorted indignantly.

"I was holding three queens at the time," he protested. "Was it YOU did that?"

"It was," said Billy. "The police came for me to start the current going again, but I said I was too ill. Then the president's own doctor came, old Gautier, and Gautier examined me with a lantern and said that in Hayti my disease frequently proved fatal, but he thought if I turned on the lights I might recover. I told him I was tired of life, anyway, but that if I could see three thousand francs it might give me an incentive. He reported back to the president and the three thousand francs arrived almost instantly, and a chicken broth from Ham's own chef, with His Excellency's best wishes for the recovery of the invalid. My recovery was instantaneous, and I switched on the lights.

"I had just moved into the Widow Ducrot's hotel that week, and her daughter Claire wouldn't let me eat the broth. I thought it was because, as she's a dandy cook herself, she was professionally jealous. She put the broth on the top shelf of the pantry and wrote on a piece of paper, 'Gare!' But the next morning a perfectly good cat, who apparently couldn't read, was lying beside it dead."

The consul frowned reprovably.

"You should not make such reckless charges," he protested. "I would call it only a coincidence."

"You can call it what you please," said Billy, "but it won't bring the cat back. Anyway, the next time I went to the palace to collect, the president was ready for me. He said he'd been taking out information, and he found if I shut off the lights again he could hire another man in the States to turn them on. I told him he'd been deceived. I told him the Wilmot Electric Lights were produced by a secret process, and that only a trained Wilmot man could work them. And I pointed out to him if he dismissed me it

wasn't likely the Wilmot people would loan him another expert; not while they were fighting him through the courts and the State Department. That impressed the old man; so I issued my ultimatum. I said if he must have electric lights he must have me, too. Whether he liked it or not, mine was a life job."

"What did he say to that?" gasped the new consul.

"Said it wasn't a life job, because he was going to have me shot at sunset."

"Then you said?"

"I said if he did that there wouldn't be any electric lights, and you would bring a warship and shoot Hayti off the map."

The new consul was most indignant.

"You had no right to say that!" he protested. "You did very ill. My instructions are to avoid all serious complications."

"That was what I was trying to avoid," said Billy. "Don't you call being shot at sunset a serious complication? Or would that be just a coincidence, too? You're a hell of a consul!"

Since his talk with the representative of his country four months had passed and Billy still held his job. But each month the number of francs he was able to wrest from President Hamilcar dwindled, and were won only after verbal conflicts that each month increased in violence.

To the foreign colony it became evident that, in the side of President Ham, Billy was a thorn, sharp, irritating, virulent, and that at any moment Ham might pluck that thorn and Billy would leave Hayti in haste, and probably in hand-cuffs. This was evident to Billy, also, and the prospect was most disquieting. Not because he loved Hayti, but because since he went to lodge at the cafe of the Widow Ducrot, he had learned to love her daughter Claire, and Claire loved him.

On the two thousand dollars due him from Ham they plotted to marry. This was not as great an adventure as it might appear. Billy knew that from the Wilmot people he always was sure of a salary, and one which, with such an excellent housekeeper as was Claire, would support them both. But with his two thousand dollars as capital they could afford to plunge; they could go upon a honeymoon; they need not dread a rainy day, and, what was of greatest importance, they need not delay. There was good reason against delay, for the hand of the beautiful Claire was already promised. The Widow Ducrot had promised it to Paillard, he of the prosperous commission business, the prominent EMBONPOINT, and four children. Monsieur Paillard possessed an establishment of his own, but it was a villa in the suburbs; and so, each day at noon, for his DEJEUNE he left

his office and crossed the street to the Cafe Ducrot. For five years this had been his habit. At first it was the widow's cooking that attracted him, then for a time the widow herself; but when from the convent Claire came to assist her mother in the cafe, and when from a lanky, big-eyed, long-legged child she grew into a slim, joyous, and charming young woman, she alone was the attraction, and the Widower Paillard decided to make her his wife. Other men had made the same decision; and when it was announced that between Claire and the widower a marriage had been "arranged," the clerks in the foreign commission houses and the agents of the steamship lines drowned their sorrow in rum and ran the house flags to half-staff. Paillard himself took the proposed alliance calmly. He was not an impetuous suitor. With Widow Ducrot he agreed that Claire was still too young to marry, and to himself kept the fact that to remarry he was in no haste. In his mind doubts still lingered. With a wife, young enough to be one of his children, disorganizing, the routine of his villa, would it be any more comfortable than he now found it? Would his eldest daughter and her stepmother dwell together in harmony? The eldest daughter had assured him that so far as she was concerned they would not; and, after all, in marrying a girl, no matter how charming, without a dot, and the daughter of a boarding-house keeper, no matter how respectable, was he not disposing of himself too cheaply? These doubts assailed Papa Paillard; these speculations were in his mind. And while he speculated Billy acted.

"I know that in France," Billy assured Claire, "marriages are arranged by the parents; but in my country they are arranged in heaven. And who are we to disregard the edicts of heaven? Ages and ages ago, before the flood, before Napoleon, even before old Paillard with his four children, it was arranged in heaven that you were to marry me. So, what little plans your good mother may make don't cut enough ice to cool a green mint. Now, we can't try to get married here," continued Billy, "without your mother and Paillard knowing it. In this town as many people have to sign the marriage, contract as signed our Declaration of Independence: all the civil authorities, all the clergy, all the relatives; if every man in the telephone book isn't a witness, the marriage doesn't 'take.' So, we must elope!"

Having been brought up in a convent, where she was taught to obey her mother and forbidden to think of marriage, Claire was naturally delighted with the idea of an elopement.

"To where will we elope to?" she demanded. Her English, as she learned it from Billy, was sometimes confusing.

"To New York," said Billy. "On the voyage there I will put you in charge of the stewardess and the captain; and there isn't a captain on the Royal Dutch or the Atlas that hasn't known you since you were a baby. And as soon as we dock we'll drive straight to the city hall for a license and the mayor himself will marry us. Then I'll get back my old job from the Wilmot folks and we'll live happy

ever after!"

"In New York, also," asked Claire proudly, "are you directeur of the electric lights?"

"On Broadway alone," Billy explained reprovingly, "there is one sign that uses more bulbs than there are in the whole of Hayti!"

"New York is a large town!" exclaimed Claire.

"It's a large sign," corrected Billy. "But," he pointed out, "with no money we'll never see it. So to-morrow I'm going to make a social call on Grandpa Ham and demand my ten thousand francs." Claire grasped his arm.

"Be careful," she pleaded. "Remember the chicken soup. If he offers you the champagne, refuse it!"

"He won't offer me the champagne," Billy assured her. "It won't be that kind of a call."

Billy left the Cafe Ducrot and made his way to the water-front. He was expecting some electrical supplies by the PRINZ DER NEDERLANDEN, and she had already come to anchor.

He was late, and save for a group of his countrymen, who with the customs officials were having troubles of their own, the customs shed was all but deserted. Billy saw his freight cleared and was going away when one of those in trouble signalled for assistance.

He was a good-looking young man in a Panama hat and his manner seemed to take it for granted that Billy knew who he was. "They want us to pay duty on our trunks," he explained, "and we want to leave them in bond. We'll be here only until to-night, when we're going on down the coast to Santo Domingo. But we don't speak French, and we can't make them understand that."

"You don't need to speak any language to give a man ten dollars," said Billy.

"Oh!" exclaimed the man in the Panama. "I was afraid if I tried that they might arrest us."

"They may arrest you if you don't," said Billy. Acting both as interpreter and disbursing agent, Billy satisfied the demands of his fellow employees of the government, and his fellow countrymen he directed to the Hotel Ducrot.

As some one was sure to take their money, he thought it might as well go to his mother-in-law elect. The young man in the Panama expressed the deepest gratitude, and Billy, assuring him he would see him later, continued to the power-house, still wondering where he had seen him before.

At the power-house he found seated at his desk a large, bearded stranger whose derby hat and ready-to-wear clothes showed that he also had but just arrived on the PRINZ DER NEDERLANDEN.

"You William Barlow?" demanded the stranger. "I understand you been threatening, unless you get your pay raised, to commit sabotage on these works?"

"Who the devil are you?" inquired Billy.

The stranger produced an impressive-looking document covered with seals.

"Contract with the president," he said. "I've taken over your job. You better get out quiet," he advised, "as they've given me a squad of nigger policemen to see that you do."

"Are you aware that these works are the property of the Wilmot Company?" asked Billy, "and that if anything went wrong here they'd hold you responsible?" The stranger smiled complacently.

"I've run plants," he said, "that make these lights look like a stable lantern on a foggy night."

"In that case," assented Billy, "should anything happen, you'll know exactly what to do, and I can leave you in charge without feeling the least anxiety."

"That's just what you can do," the stranger agreed heartily, "and you can't do it too quick!" From the desk he took Billy's favorite pipe and loaded it from Billy's tobacco-jar. But when Billy had reached the door he called to him. "Before you go, son," he said "you might give me a tip about this climate. I never been in the tropics. It's kind of unhealthy, ain't it?"

His expression was one of concern.

"If you hope to keep alive," began Billy, "there are two things to avoid----" The stranger laughed knowingly.

"I got you!" he interrupted. "You're going to tell me to cut out wine and women."

"I was going to tell you," said Billy, "to cut out hoping to collect any wages and to avoid every kind of soup."

From the power-house Billy went direct to the palace. His anxiety was great. Now that Claire had consented to leave Hayti, the loss of his position did not distress him. But the possible loss of his back pay would be a catastrophe. He had hardly enough money to take them both to New York, and after they arrived none with which to keep them alive. Before the Wilmot Company could find a place for

him a month might pass, and during that month they might starve. If he went alone and arranged for Claire to follow, he might lose her. Her mother might marry her to Paillard; Claire might fall ill; without him at her elbow to keep her to their purpose the voyage to an unknown land might require more courage than she possessed. Billy saw it was imperative they should depart together, and to that end he must have his two thousand dollars. The money was justly his. For it he had sweated and slaved; had given his best effort. And so, when he faced the president, he was in no conciliatory mood. Neither was the president.

By what right, he demanded, did this foreigner affront his ears with demands for money; how dared he force his way into his presence and to his face babble of back pay? It was insolent, incredible. With indignation the president set forth the position of the government : Billy had been discharged and, with the appointment of his successor, the stranger in the derby hat, had ceased to exist. The government could not pay money to some one who did not exist. All indebtedness to Billy also had ceased to exist. The account had been wiped out. Billy had been wiped out. The big negro, with the chest and head of a gorilla, tossed his kinky white curls so violently that the ringlets danced. Billy, he declared, had been a pest; a fly that buzzed and buzzed and disturbed his slumbers. And now when the fly thought he slept he had caught and crushed it-so. President Ham clinched his great fist convulsively and, with delight in his pantomime, opened his fingers one by one, and held out his pink palm, wrinkled and crossed like the hand of a washerwoman, as though to show Billy that in it lay the fly, dead.

"C'EST UNE CHOSE JUGEE!" thundered the president. He reached for his quill pen.

But Billy, with Claire in his heart, with the injustice of it rankling in his mind, did not agree.

"It is not an affair closed," shouted Billy in his best French. "It is an affair international, diplomatic; a cause for war!"

Believing he had gone mad, President Ham gazed at him speechless.

"From here I go to the cable Office, "shouted Billy. "I cable for a warship! If, by to-night, I am not paid my money, marines will surround our power-house, and the Wilmot people will back me up, and my government will back me up!"

It was, so Billy thought, even as he launched it, a tirade satisfying and magnificent. But in his turn the president did not agree.

He rose. He was a large man. Billy wondered he had not previously noticed how very large he was.

"To-night at nine o'clock," he said, "the German boat departs for New York." As though aiming a pistol, he raised his arm and at Billy pointed a finger. "If, after she departs, you are found in Port-au-Prince, you will be shot! "

The audience-chamber was hung with great mirrors in frames of tarnished gilt. In these Billy saw himself reproduced in a wavering line of Billies that, like the ghost of Banquo, stretched to the disappearing point. Of such images there was an army, but of the real Billy, as he was acutely conscious, there was but one. Among the black faces scowling from the doorways he felt the odds were against him. Without making a reply he passed out between the racks of rusty muskets in the anteroom, between the two Gatling guns guarding the entrance, and on the palace steps, in indecision, halted.

As Billy hesitated an officer followed him from the palace and beckoned to the guard that sat in the bare dust of the Champ de Mars playing cards for cartridges. Two abandoned the game, and, having received their orders, picked their muskets from the dust and stood looking expectantly at Billy.

They were his escort, and it was evident that until nine o'clock, when he sailed, his movements would be spied upon; his acts reported to the president.

Such being the situation, Billy determined that his first act to be reported should be of a nature to cause the president active mental anguish. With his guard at his heels he went directly to the cable station, and to the Secretary of State of the United States addressed this message: "President refuses my pay; threatens shoot; wireless nearest war-ship proceed here full speed. William Barlow."

Billy and the director of telegraphs, who out of office hours was a field-marshal, and when not in his shirt-sleeves always appeared in uniform, went over each word of the cablegram together. When Billy was assured that the field-marshal had grasped the full significance of it he took it back and added, "Love to Aunt Maria." The extra words cost four dollars and eighty cents gold, but, as they suggested ties of blood between himself and the Secretary of State, they seemed advisable. In the account-book in which he recorded his daily expenditures Billy credited the item to "life-insurance."

The revised cablegram caused the field-marshal deep concern. He frowned at Billy ferociously.

"I will forward this at once," he promised. "But, I warn you," he added, "I deliver also a copy to MY president!"

Billy sighed hopefully.

"You might deliver the copy first," he suggested.

From the cable station Billy, still accompanied by his faithful retainers, returned to the power-house. There he bade farewell to the black brothers who had been his assistants, and upon one of them pressed a sum of money.

As they parted, this one, as though giving the pass-word of a secret society, chanted solemnly:

"A BUIT BEURES JUSTE!" And Billy clasped his hand and nodded.

At the office of the Royal Dutch West India Line Billy purchased a ticket to New York and inquired were there many passengers. "The ship is empty," said the agent.

"I am glad," said Billy, "for one of my assistants may come with me. He also is being deported."

"You can have as many cabins as you want," said the agent. "We are so sorry to see you go that we will try to make you feel you leave us on your private yacht."

The next two hours Billy spent in seeking out those acquaintances from whom he could borrow money. He found that by asking for it in homoeopathic doses he was able to shame the foreign colony into loaning him all of one hundred dollars. This, with what he had in hand, would take Claire and himself to New York and for a week keep them alive. After that he must find work or they must starve. The one whose features seemed familiar replied:

"Still, we are leaving to-night," he said; "not on a steamer, but on a war-ship."

"A war-ship?" cried Billy. His heart beat at high speed. "Then," he exclaimed, "you are a naval officer?"

The young man shook his head and, as though challenging Billy to make another guess, smiled.

"Then," Billy complied eagerly, "you are a diplomat! Are you our new minister?"

One of the other young men exclaimed reproachfully:

"You know him perfectly well!" he protested. "You've seen his picture thousands of times."

With awe and pride he placed his hand on Billy's arm and with the other pointed at the one in the Panama hat.

"It's Harry St. Clair," he announced. "Harry St.Clair, the King of the Movies!"

"The King of the Movies," repeated Billy. His disappointment was so keen as to be embarrassing.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "I thought you----" Then he remembered his manners. "Glad to meet you," he said. "Seen you on the screen."

Again his own troubles took precedence. "Did you say," he demanded, "One of our war-ships is coming here TO-DAY?"

"Coming to take me to Santo Domingo," explained Mr. St. Clair. He spoke airily, as though to him as a means of locomotion battle-ships were as trolley-cars. The Planter's punch, which was something he had never before encountered, encouraged the great young man to unbend. He explained further and fully, and Billy, his mind intent upon his own affair, pretended to listen.

The United States Government, Mr. St. Clair explained, was assisting him and the Apollo Film Company in producing the eight-reel film entitled "The Man Behind the Gun."

With it the Navy Department plotted to advertise the navy and encourage recruiting. In moving pictures, in the form of a story, with love interest, villain, comic relief, and thrills, it would show the life of American bluejackets afloat and ashore, at home and abroad. They would be seen at Yokohama playing baseball with Tokio University; in the courtyard of the Vatican receiving the blessing of the Pope; at Waikiki riding the breakers on a scrubbing-board; in the Philippines eating cocoanuts in the shade of the sheltering palm, and in Brooklyn in the Y. M. C. A. club, in the shadow of the New York sky-scrapers, playing billiards and reading the sporting extras.

As it would be illustrated on the film the life of "The Man Behind the Gun" was one of luxurious ease. In it coal-passing, standing watch in a blizzard, and washing down decks, cold and unsympathetic, held no part. But to prove that the life of Jack was not all play he would be seen fighting for the flag. That was where, as "Lieutenant Hardy, U. S. A.," the King of the Movies entered.

"Our company arrived in Santo Domingo last week," he explained. "And they're waiting for me now. I'm to lead the attack on the fortress. We land in shore boats under the guns of the ship and I take the fortress. First, we show the ship clearing for action and the men lowering the boats and pulling for shore. Then we cut back to show the gun-crews serving the guns. Then we jump to the landing-party wading through the breakers. I lead them. The man who is carrying the flag gets shot and drops in the surf. I pick him up, put him on my shoulder, and carry him and the flag to the beach, where----"

Billy suddenly awoke. His tone was one of excited interest.

"You got a uniform?" he demanded.

"Three," said St. Clair impressively, "made to order according to regulations on file in the Quartermaster's Department. Each absolutely correct. "Without too great a show of eagerness he inquired: "Like to see them?"

Without too great a show of eagerness Billy assured him that he would.

"I got to telephone first," he added, "but by the time you get your trunk open I'll join you in your room."

In the cafe, over the telephone, Billy addressed himself to the field-marshal in charge of the cable office. When Billy gave his name, the voice of that dignitary became violently agitated.

"Monsieur Barlow," he demanded, "do you know that the war-ship for which you cabled your Secretary of State makes herself to arrive?"

At the other end of the 'phone, although restrained by the confines of the booth, Billy danced joyously. But his voice was stern.

"Naturally," he replied. "Where is she now?"

An hour before, so the field-marshal informed him, the battle-ship LOUISIANA had been sighted and by telegraph reported. She was approaching under forced draft. At any moment she might anchor in the outer harbor. Of this President Ham had been informed. He was grieved, indignant; he was also at a loss to understand.

"It is very simple," explained Billy. "She probably was somewhere in the Windward Passage. When the Secretary got my message he cabled Guantanamo, and Guantanamo wired the war-ship nearest Port-au-Prince."

"President Poussevain, warned the field marshal, "is greatly disturbed."

"Tell him not to worry," said Billy. "Tell him when the bombardment begins I will see that the palace is outside the zone of fire."

As Billy entered the room of St. Clair his eyes shone with a strange light. His manner, which toward a man of his repute St. Clair had considered a little too casual, was now enthusiastic, almost affectionate.

"My dear St. Clair," cried Billy, "I'VE FIXED IT! But, until I was SURE, I didn't want to raise your hopes!"

"Hopes of what?" demanded the actor.

"An audience with the president!" cried Billy. "I've just called him up and he says I'm to bring you to the palace at once. He's heard of you, of course, and he's very pleased to meet you. I told him about 'The Man Behind the Gun,' and he says you must come in your makeup as 'Lieutenant Hardy, U.S.A.,' just as he'll see you on the screen."

Mr. St. Clair stammered delightedly.

"In uniform," he protested; "won't that be----"

"White, special full dress," insisted Billy. "Medals, side-arms, full-dress belt, and gloves. What a press story! 'The King of the Movies Meets the President of Hayti!' Of course, he's only an ignorant negro, but on Broadway they don't know that; and it will sound fine!" St. Clair coughed nervously.

"DON'T forget," he stammered, "I can't speak French, or understand it, either."

The eyes of Billy became as innocent as those of a china doll.

"Then I'll interpret," he said. "And, oh, yes," he added, "he's sending two of the palace soldiers to act as an escort- sort of guard of honor!"

The King of the Movies chuckled excitedly.

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "You ARE a brick!"

With trembling fingers he began to shed his outer garments.

To hide his own agitation Billy walked to the window and turned his back. Night had fallen and the electric lights, that once had been his care, sprang into life. Billy looked at his watch. It was seven o'clock. The window gave upon the harbor, and a mile from shore he saw the cargo lights of the PRINZ DER NEDERLANDEN, and slowly approaching, as though feeling for her berth, a great battle-ship. When Billy turned from the window his voice was apparently undisturbed.

"We've got to hurry," he said. "The LOUISIANA is standing in. She'll soon be sending a launch for you. We've just time to drive to the palace and back before the launch gets here."

From his mind President Ham had dismissed all thoughts of the war-ship that had been sighted and that now had come to anchor. For the moment he was otherwise concerned. Fate could not harm him; he was about to dine.

But, for the first time in the history of his administration, that solemn ceremony was rudely halted. An excited aide, trembling at his own temerity, burst upon the president's solitary state.

In the anteroom, he announced, an officer from the battle- ship LOUISIANA demanded instant audience.

For a moment, transfixed in amazement, anger, and alarm President Ham remained seated. Such a visit, uninvited, was against all tradition; it was an affront, an insult. But that it was against all precedent argued some serious necessity. He decided it would be best to receive the officer. Besides, to continue his dinner was now out of the question. Both appetite and digestion had fled from him.

In the anteroom Billy was whispering final instructions to St. Clair.

"Whatever happens," he begged, "don't LAUGH! Don't even smile politely! He's very ignorant, you see, and he's sensitive. When he meets foreigners and can't understand their language, he's always afraid if they laugh that he's made a break and that they're laughing at HIM. So, be solemn; look grave; look haughty!"

"I got you!" assented St. Clair. "I'm to 'register' pride."

"Exactly!" said Billy. "The more pride you register, the better for us."

Inwardly cold with alarm, outwardly frigidly polite, Billy presented "Lieutenant Hardy." He had come, Billy explained, in answer to the call for help sent by himself to the Secretary of State, which by wireless had been communicated to the LOUISIANA. Lieutenant Hardy begged him to say to the president that he was desolate at having to approach His Excellency so unceremoniously. But His Excellency, having threatened the life of an American citizen, the captain, of the LOUISIANA was forced to act quickly.

"And this officer?" demanded President Ham; "what does he want?"

"He says," Billy translated to St. Clair, "that he is very glad to meet you, and he wants to know how much you earn a week."

The actor suppressed his surprise and with pardonable pride said that his salary was six hundred dollars a week and royalties on each film. Billy bowed to the president.

"He says," translated Billy, "he is here to see that I get my ten thousand francs, and that if I don't get them in ten minutes he will return to the ship and land marines."

To St. Clair it seemed as though the president received his statement as to the amount of his salary, with a disapproval that was hardly flattering. With the heel of his giant fist the president beat upon the table, his curls shook, his gorilla-like shoulders heaved.

In an explanatory aside Billy made this clear.

"He says," he interpreted, "that you get more as an actor than he gets as president, and it makes him mad."

"I can see it does myself," whispered St. Clair. "And I don't understand French, either."

President Ham was protesting violently. It was outrageous, he exclaimed; it was inconceivable that a great republic should shake the Big Stick over the head of a small republic, and for a contemptible ten thousand francs.

"I will not believe," he growled, "that this officer has authority to threaten me. You have deceived him. If he knew the truth, he would apologize. Tell him," he roared suddenly, "that I DEMAND that he apologize!"

Billy felt like the man who, after jauntily forcing the fighting, unexpectedly gets a jolt on the chin that drops him to the canvas.

While the referee might have counted three Billy remained upon the canvas.

Then again he forced the fighting. Eagerly he turned to St. Clair.

"He says," he translated, "you must recite something." St. Clair exclaimed incredulously: "Recite!" he gasped.

Than his indignant protest nothing could have been more appropriate.

"Wants to see you act out," insisted Billy. "Go on," he begged; "humor him. Do what he wants or he'll put us in jail!"

"But what shall I----"

"He wants the curse of Rome from Richelieu, explained Billy. "He knows it in French and he wants you to recite it in English. Do you know it? "

The actor smiled haughtily.

"I WROTE it he protested. " Richelieu's my middle name. I've done it in stock."

"Then do it now!" commanded Billy. "Give it to him hot. I'm Julie de Mortemar. He's the villain Barabas. Begin where Barabas hands you the cue, 'The country is the king!' "

In embarrassment St. Clair coughed tentatively.

"Whoever heard of Cardinal Richelieu," he protested, "in a navy uniform?"

"Begin!" begged Billy.

"What'll I do with my cap?" whispered St. Clair.

In an ecstasy of alarm Billy danced from foot to foot. "I'll hold your cap," he cried. "Go on!"

St. Clair gave his cap of gold braid to Billy and shifted his "full-dress" sword-belt. Not without concern did President Ham observe these preparations. For the fraction of a second, in alarm, his eyes glanced to the exits. He found that the officers of his staff completely filled them. Their presence gave him confidence and his eyes returned to Lieutenant Hardy.

That gentleman heaved a deep sigh. Dejectedly, his head fell forward until his chin rested upon his chest. Much to the relief of the president, it appeared evident that Lieutenant Hardy was about to accede to his command and apologize. St. Clair groaned heavily.

"Ay, is it so?" he muttered. His voice was deep, resonant, vibrating like a bell. His eyes no longer suggested apology. They were strange, flashing; the eyes of a religious fanatic; and balefully they were fixed upon President Ham.

"Then wakes the power," the deep voice rumbled, "that in the age of iron burst forth to curb the great and raise the low." He flung out his left arm and pointed it at Billy.

"Mark where she stands!" he commanded.

With a sweeping, protecting gesture he drew around Billy an imaginary circle. The pantomime was only too clear. To the aged negro, who feared neither God nor man, but only voodoo, there was in the voice and gesture that which caused his blood to chill.

"Around her form," shrieked St. Clair, "I draw the awful circle of our solemn church! Set but one foot within that holy ground and on thy head----" Like a semaphore the left arm dropped, and the right arm, with the fore-finger pointed, shot out at President Ham. "Yea, though it wore a CROWN-- I launch the CURSE OF ROME!"

No one moved. No one spoke. What terrible threat had hit him President Ham could not guess. He did not ask. Stiffly, like a man in a trance, he turned to the rusty iron safe behind his chair and spun the handle. When again he faced them he held a long envelope which he presented to Billy.

"There are the ten thousand francs," he said. "Ask him if he is satisfied, and demand that he go at once!"

Billy turned to St. Clair.

"He says," translated Billy, "he's very much obliged and hopes we will come again. Now," commanded Billy, "bow low and go out facing him. We don't want him to shoot us in the back!"

Bowing to the president, the actor threw at Billy a glance full of indignation. "Was I as BAD as that?" he demanded.

On schedule time Billy drove up to the Hotel Ducrot and relinquished St. Clair to the ensign in charge of the launch from the LOUISIANA. At sight of St. Clair in the regalia of a superior officer, that young gentleman showed his surprise.

"I've been giving a 'command' performance for the president," explained the actor modestly. "I recited for him, and, though I spoke in English, I think I made quite a hit."

"You certainly," Billy assured him gratefully, "made a terrible hit with me."

As the moving-picture actors, escorted by the ensign, followed their trunks to the launch, Billy looked after them with a feeling of great loneliness. He was aware that from the palace his carriage had been followed; that drawn in a cordon around the hotel negro policemen covertly observed him. That President Ham still hoped to recover his lost prestige and his lost money was only too evident.

It was just five minutes to eight.

Billy ran to his room, and with his suit-case in his hand slipped down the back stairs and into the garden. Cautiously he made his way to the gate in the wall, and in the street outside found Claire awaiting him.

With a cry of relief she clasped his arm.

"You are safe!" she cried. "I was so frightened for you. That President Ham, he is a beast, an ogre!" Her voice sank to a whisper. "And for myself also I have been frightened. The police, they are at each corner. They watch the hotel. They watch ME! Why? What do they want?"

"They want something of mine," said Billy. "But I can't tell you what it is until I'm sure it is mine. Is the boat at the wharf?"

"All is arranged," Claire assured him. "The boatmen are our friends; they will take us safely to the steamer."

With a sigh of relief Billy lifted her valise and his own, but he did not move forward. Anxiously Claire pulled at his sleeve.

"Come!" she begged. "For what it is that you wait?"

It was just eight o'clock.

Billy was looking up at the single electric light bulb that lit the narrow street, and following the direction of his eyes, Claire saw the light grow dim, saw the tiny wires grow red, and disappear. From over all the city came shouts, and cries of consternation oaths, and laughter, and then darkness.

"I was waiting for THIS!" cried Billy.

With the delight of a mischievous child Claire laughed aloud.

"You-you did it!" she accused.

"I did!" said Billy. "And now-we must run like the devil!"

The PRINZ DER NEDERLANDEN was drawing slowly out of the harbor. Shoulder to shoulder Claire and Billy leaned upon the rail. On the wharfs of Port-au-Prince they saw lanterns tossing and candles twinkling; saw the LOUISIANA, blazing like a Christmas-tree, steaming majestically south; in each other's eyes saw that all was well.

From his pocket Billy drew a long envelope.

"I can now with certainty," said Billy, "state that this is mine-OURS."

He opened the envelope, and while Claire gazed upon many mille-franc notes Billy told how he had retrieved them.

"But what danger!" cried Claire. "'In time Ham would have paid. Your president at Washington would have made him pay. Why take such risks? You had but to wait!"

Billy smiled contentedly.

"Dear one!" he exclaimed, "the policy of watchful waiting is safer, but the Big Stick acts quicker and gets results!"

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