

The Mucker

By

Edgar Rice Burroughs

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PART I.

CHAPTER I. BILLY BYRNE

BILLY BYRNE was a product of the streets and alleys of Chicago's great West Side. From Halsted to Robey, and from Grand Avenue to Lake Street there was scarce a bartender whom Billy knew not by his first name. And, in proportion to their number which was considerably less, he knew the patrolmen and plain clothes men equally as well, but not so pleasantly.

His kindergarten education had commenced in an alley back of a feed-store. Here a gang of older boys and men were wont to congregate at such times as they had naught else to occupy their time, and as the bridewell was the only place in which they ever held a job for more than a day or two, they had considerable time to devote to congregating.

They were pickpockets and second-story men, made and in the making, and all were muckers, ready to insult the first woman who passed, or pick a quarrel with any stranger who did not appear too burly. By night they plied their real vocations. By day they sat in the alley behind the feedstore and drank beer from a battered tin pail.

The question of labor involved in transporting the pail, empty, to the saloon across the street, and returning it, full, to the alley back of the feed-store was solved by the presence of admiring and envious little boys of the neighborhood who hung, wide-eyed and thrilled, about these heroes of their childish lives.

Billy Byrne, at six, was rushing the can for this noble band, and incidentally picking up his knowledge of life and the rudiments of his education. He gloried in the fact that he was personally acquainted with "Eddie" Welch, and that with his own ears he had heard "Eddie" tell the gang how he stuck up a guy on West Lake Street within fifty yards of the Twenty-eighth Precinct Police Station.

The kindergarten period lasted until Billy was ten; then he commenced "swiping" brass faucets from vacant buildings and selling them to a fence who ran a junkshop on Lincoln Street near Kinzie.

From this man he obtained the hint that graduated him to a higher grade, so that at twelve he was robbing freight cars in the yards along Kinzie Street, and it was about this same time that he commenced to find pleasure in the feel of his fist against the jaw of a fellow-man.

He had had his boyish scraps with his fellows off and on ever since he could remember; but his first real fight came when he was twelve. He had had an altercation with an erstwhile pal over the division of the returns from some freight-car booty. The gang was all present, and as words quickly gave place to blows, as they have a habit of doing in certain sections of the West Side, the men and boys formed a rough ring about the contestants.

The battle was a long one. The two were rolling about in the dust of the alley quite as often as they were upon their feet exchanging blows. There was nothing fair, nor decent, nor scientific about their methods. They gouged and bit and tore. They used knees and elbows and feet, and but for the timely presence of a brickbat beneath his fingers at the psychological moment Billy Byrne would have gone down to humiliating defeat. As it was the other boy went down, and for a week Billy remained hidden by one of the gang pending the report from the hospital.

When word came that the patient would live, Billy felt an immense load lifted from his shoulders, for he dreaded arrest and experience with the law that he had learned from childhood to deride and hate. Of course there was the loss of prestige that would naturally have accrued to him could he have been pointed out as the "guy that croaked Sheehan"; but there is always a fly in the ointment, and Billy only sighed and came out of his temporary retirement.

That battle started Billy to thinking, and the result of that mental activity was a determination to learn to handle his mitts scientifically--people of the West Side do not have hands; they are equipped by Nature with mitts and dukes. A few have paws and flippers.

He had no opportunity to realize his new dream for several years; but when he was about seventeen a neighbor's son surprised his little world by suddenly developing from an unknown teamster into a locally famous light-weight.

The young man never had been affiliated with the gang, as his escutcheon was defiled with a record of steady employment. So Billy had known nothing of the sparring lessons his young neighbor had taken, or of the work he had done at the down-town gymnasium of Larry Hilmore.

Now it happened that while the new light-weight was unknown to the charmed circle of the gang, Billy knew him fairly well by reason of the proximity of their respective parental back yards, and so when the glamour of pugilistic success haloed the young man Billy lost no time in basking in the light of reflected glory.

He saw much of his new hero all the following winter. He accompanied him to many mills, and on one glorious occasion occupied a position in the coming

champion's corner. When the prize fighter toured, Billy continued to hang around Hilmore's place, running errands and doing odd jobs, the while he picked up pugilistic lore, and absorbed the spirit of the game along with the rudiments and finer points of its science, almost unconsciously. Then his ambition changed. Once he had longed to shine as a gunman; now he was determined to become a prize fighter; but the old gang still saw much of him, and he was a familiar figure about the saloon corners along Grand Avenue and Lake Street.

During this period Billy neglected the box cars on Kinzie Street, partially because he felt that he was fitted for more dignified employment, and as well for the fact that the railroad company had doubled the number of watchmen in the yards; but there were times when he felt the old yearning for excitement and adventure. These times were usually coincident with an acute financial depression in Billy's change pocket, and then he would fare forth in the still watches of the night, with a couple of boon companions and roll a souse, or stick up a saloon.

It was upon an occasion of this nature that an event occurred which was fated later to change the entire course of Billy Byrne's life. Upon the West Side the older gangs are jealous of the sanctity of their own territory. Outsiders do not trespass with impunity. From Halsted to Robey, and from Lake to Grand lay the broad hunting preserve of Kelly's gang, to which Billy had been almost born, one might say. Kelly owned the feed-store back of which the gang had loafed for years, and though himself a respectable businessman his name had been attached to the pack of hoodlums who held forth at his back door as the easiest means of locating and identifying its motley members.

The police and citizenry of this great territory were the natural enemies and prey of Kelly's gang, but as the kings of old protected the deer of their great forests from poachers, so Kelly's gang felt it incumbent upon them to safeguard the lives and property which they considered theirs by divine right. It is doubtful that they thought of the matter in just this way, but the effect was the same.

And so it was that as Billy Byrne wended homeward alone in the wee hours of the morning after emptying the cash drawer of old Schneider's saloon and locking the weeping Schneider in his own ice box, he was deeply grieved and angered to see three rank outsiders from Twelfth Street beating Patrolman Stanley Lasky with his own baton, the while they simultaneously strove to kick in his ribs with their heavy boots.

Now Lasky was no friend of Billy Byrne; but the officer had been born and raised in the district and was attached to the Twenty-eighth Precinct Station on Lake Street near Ashland Avenue, and so was part and parcel of the natural possession of the gang. Billy felt that it was entirely ethical to beat up a cop,

provided you confined your efforts to those of your own district; but for a bunch of yaps from south of Twelfth Street to attempt to pull off any such coarse work in his bailiwick--why it was unthinkable.

A hero and rescuer of lesser experience than Billy Byrne would have rushed melodramatically into the midst of the fray, and in all probability have had his face pushed completely through the back of his head, for the guys from Twelfth Street were not of the rah-rah-boy type of hoodlum--they were bad men, with an upper case B. So Billy crept stealthily along in the shadows until he was quite close to them, and behind them. On the way he had gathered up a cute little granite paving block, than which there is nothing in the world harder, not even a Twelfth Street skull. He was quite close now to one of the men--he who was wielding the officer's club to such excellent disadvantage to the officer--and then he raised the paving block only to lower it silently and suddenly upon the back of that unsuspecting head--"and then there were two."

Before the man's companions realized what had happened Billy had possessed himself of the fallen club and struck one of them a blinding, staggering blow across the eyes. Then number three pulled his gun and fired point-blank at Billy. The bullet tore through the mucker's left shoulder. It would have sent a more highly organized and nervously inclined man to the pavement; but Billy was neither highly organized nor nervously inclined, so that about the only immediate effect it had upon him was to make him mad--before he had been but peeved--peeved at the rank crust that had permitted these cheap-skates from south of Twelfth Street to work his territory.

Thoroughly aroused, Billy was a wonder. From a long line of burly ancestors he had inherited the physique of a prize bull. From earliest childhood he had fought, always unfairly, so that he knew all the tricks of street fighting. During the past year there had been added to Billy's natural fighting ability and instinct a knowledge of the scientific end of the sport. The result was something appalling--to the gink from Twelfth Street.

Before he knew whether his shot had killed Billy his gun had been wrenched from his hand and flung across the street; he was down on the granite with a hand as hard as the paving block scrambling his facial attractions beyond hope of recall.

By this time Patrolman Lasky had staggered to his feet, and most opportunely at that, for the man whom Billy had dazed with the club was recovering. Lasky promptly put him to sleep with the butt of the gun that he had been unable to draw when first attacked, then he turned to assist Billy. But it was not Billy who needed assistance--it was the gentleman from Bohemia. With difficulty Lasky dragged Billy from his prey.

"Leave enough of him for the inquest," pleaded Lasky.

When the wagon arrived Billy had disappeared, but Lasky had recognized him and thereafter the two had nodded pleasantly to each other upon such occasions as they chanced to meet upon the street.

Two years elapsed before the event transpired which proved a crisis in Billy's life. During this period his existence had been much the same as before. He had collected what was coming to him from careless and less muscular citizens. He had helped to stick up a half-dozen saloons. He had robbed the night men in two elevated stations, and for a while had been upon the pay-roll of a certain union and done strong arm work in all parts of the city for twenty-five dollars a week.

By day he was a general utility man about Larry Hilmore's boxing academy, and time and time again Hilmore urged him to quit drinking and live straight, for he saw in the young giant the makings of a great heavy-weight; but Billy couldn't leave the booze alone, and so the best that he got was an occasional five spot for appearing in preliminary bouts with third- and fourth-rate heavies and has-beens; but during the three years that he had hung about Hilmore's he had acquired an enviable knowledge of the manly art of self-defense.

On the night that things really began to happen in the life of Billy Byrne that estimable gentleman was lolling in front of a saloon at the corner of Lake and Robey. The dips that congregated nightly there under the protection of the powerful politician who owned the place were commencing to assemble. Billy knew them all, and nodded to them as they passed him. He noted surprise in the faces of several as they saw him standing there. He wondered what it was all about, and determined to ask the next man who evinced even mute wonderment at his presence what was eating him.

Then Billy saw a harness bull strolling toward him from the east. It was Lasky. When Lasky saw Billy he too opened his eyes in surprise, and when he came quite close to the mucker he whispered something to him, though he kept his eyes straight ahead as though he had not seen Billy at all.

In deference to the whispered request Billy presently strolled around the corner toward Walnut Street, but at the alley back of the saloon he turned suddenly in. A hundred yards up the alley he found Lasky in the shadow of a telephone pole.

"Wotinell are you doin' around here?" asked the patrolman. "Didn't you know that Sheehan had peached?"

Two nights before old man Schneider, goaded to desperation by the repeated raids upon his cash drawer, had shown fight when he again had been invited to

elevate his hands, and the holdup men had shot him through the heart. Sheehan had been arrested on suspicion.

Billy had not been with Sheehan that night. As a matter of fact he never had trained with him, for, since the boyish battle that the two had waged, there had always been ill feeling between them; but with Lasky's words Billy knew what had happened.

"Sheehan says I done it, eh?" he questioned.

"That's what he says."

"I wasn't within a mile of Schneider's that night," protested Billy.

"The Lieut thinks different," said Lasky. "He'd be only too glad to soak you; for you've always been too slick to get nicked before. Orders is out to get you, and if I were you I'd beat it and beat it quick. I don't have to tell you why I'm handing you this, but it's all I can do for you. Now take my advice and make yourself scarce, though you'll have to go some to make your get-away now--every man on the force has your description by this time."

Billy turned without a word and walked east in the alley toward Lincoln Street. Lasky returned to Robey Street. In Lincoln Street Billy walked north to Kinzie. Here he entered the railroad yards. An hour later he was bumping out of town toward the West on a fast freight. Three weeks later he found himself in San Francisco. He had no money, but the methods that had so often replenished his depleted exchequer at home he felt would serve the same purpose here.

Being unfamiliar with San Francisco, Billy did not know where best to work, but when by accident he stumbled upon a street where there were many saloons whose patrons were obviously seafaring men Billy was distinctly elated. What could be better for his purpose than a drunken sailor?

He entered one of the saloons and stood watching a game of cards, or thus he seemed to be occupied. As a matter of fact his eyes were constantly upon the alert, roving about the room to wherever a man was in the act of paying for a round of drinks that a fat wallet might be located.

Presently one that filled him with longing rewarded his careful watch. The man was sitting at a table a short distance from Billy. Two other men were with him. As he paid the waiter from a well-filled pocketbook he looked up to meet Billy's eyes upon him.

With a drunken smile he beckoned to the mucker to join them. Billy felt that Fate was overkind to him, and he lost no time in heeding her call. A moment later he was sitting at the table with the three sailors, and had ordered a drop of red-eye.

The stranger was very lavish in his entertainment. He scarcely waited for Billy to drain one glass before he ordered another, and once after Billy had left the table for a moment he found a fresh drink awaiting him when he returned--his host had already poured it for him.

It was this last drink that did the business.