

CHAPTER XIII. A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

AT THE sound of the harsh voices so close upon her Barbara Harding was galvanized into instant action. Springing to Byrne's side she whipped Theriere's revolver from his belt, where it reposed about the fallen mucker's hips, and with it turned like a tigress upon the youth.

"Quick!" she cried. "Tell them to go back--that I shall kill you if they come closer."

The boy shrank back in terror before the fiery eyes and menacing attitude of the white girl, and then with the terror that animated him ringing plainly in his voice he screamed to his henchmen to halt.

Relieved for a moment at least from immediate danger Barbara Harding turned her attention toward the two unconscious men at her feet. From appearances it seemed that either might breathe his last at any moment, and as she looked at Theriere a wave of compassion swept over her, and the tears welled to her eyes; yet it was to the mucker that she first ministered--why, she could not for the life of her have explained.

She dashed cold water from the spring upon his face. She bathed his wrists, and washed his wounds, tearing strips from her skirt to bandage the horrid gash upon his breast in an effort to stanch the flow of lifeblood that welled forth with the man's every breath.

And at last she was rewarded by seeing the flow of blood quelled and signs of returning consciousness appear. The mucker opened his eyes. Close above him bent the radiant vision of Barbara Harding's face. Upon his fevered forehead he felt the soothing strokes of her cool, soft hand. He closed his eyes again to battle with the effeminate realization that he enjoyed this strange, new sensation--the sensation of being ministered to by a gentle woman--and, perish the thought, by a gentlewoman!

With an effort he raised himself to one elbow, scowling at her.

"Gwan," he said; "I ain't no boob dude. Cut out de mush. Lemme be. Beat it!"

Hurt, more than she would have cared to admit, Barbara Harding turned away from her ungrateful and ungracious patient, to repeat her ministrations to the Frenchman. The mucker read in her expression something of the wound his words had inflicted, and he lay thinking upon the matter for some time, watching her deft, white fingers as they worked over the scarce breathing Theriere.

He saw her wash the blood and dirt from the ghastly wound in the man's chest, and as he watched he realized what a world of courage it must require for a woman of her stamp to do gruesome work of this sort. Never before would such a thought have occurred to him. Neither would he have cared at all for the pain his recent words to the girl might have inflicted. Instead he would have felt keen enjoyment of her discomfiture.

And now another strange new emotion took possession of him. It was none other than a desire to atone in some way for his words. What wonderful transformation was taking place in the heart of the Kelly gangster?

"Say!" he blurted out suddenly.

Barbara Harding turned questioning eyes toward him. In them was the cold, haughty aloofness again that had marked her cognizance of him upon the Halfmoon--the look that had made his hate of her burn most fiercely. It took the mucker's breath away to witness it, and it made the speech he had contemplated more difficult than ever--nay, almost impossible. He coughed nervously, and the old dark, lowering scowl returned to his brow.

"Did you speak?" asked Miss Harding, icily.

Billy Byrne cleared his throat, and then there blurted from his lips not the speech that he had intended, but a sudden, hateful rush of words which seemed to emanate from another personality, from one whom Billy Byrne once had been.

"Ain't dat boob croaked yet?" he growled.

The shock of that brutal question brought Barbara Harding to her feet. In horror she looked down at the man who had spoken thus of a brave and noble comrade in the face of death itself. Her eyes blazed angrily as hot, bitter words rushed to her lips, and then of a sudden she thought of Byrne's self-sacrificing heroism in returning to Theriere's side in the face of the advancing samurai--of the cool courage he had displayed as he carried the unconscious man back to the jungle--of the devotion, almost superhuman, that had sustained him as he struggled, uncomplaining, up the steep mountain path with the burden of the Frenchman's body the while his own lifeblood left a crimson trail behind him.

Such deeds and these words were incompatible in the same individual. There could be but one explanation--Byrne must be two men, with as totally different characters as though they had possessed separate bodies. And who may say that her hypothesis was not correct--at least it seemed that Billy Byrne was undergoing a metamorphosis, and at the instant there was still a question as to which personality should eventually dominate.

Byrne turned away from the reproach which replaced the horror in the girl's eyes, and with a tired sigh let his head fall upon his outstretched arm. The girl watched him for a moment, a puzzled expression upon her face, and then returned to work above Theriere.

The Frenchman's respiration was scarcely appreciable, yet after a time he opened his eyes and looked up wearily. At sight of the girl he smiled wanly, and tried to speak, but a fit of coughing flecked his lips with bloody foam, and again he closed his eyes. Fainter and fainter came his breathing, until it was with difficulty that the girl detected any movement of his breast whatever. She thought that he was dying, and she was afraid. Wistfully she looked toward the mucker. The man still lay with his head buried in his arm, but whether he were wrapped in thought, in slumber, or in death the girl could not tell. At the final thought she went white with terror.

Slowly she approached the man, and leaning over placed her hand upon his shoulder.

"Mr. Byrne!" she whispered.

The mucker turned his face toward her. It looked tired and haggard.

"Wot is it?" he asked, and his tone was softer than she had ever heard it.

"I think Mr. Theriere is dying," she said, "and I--I-- Oh, I am so afraid."

The man flushed to the roots of his hair. All that he could think of were the ugly words he had spoken a short time before--and now Theriere was dying! Byrne would have laughed had anyone suggested that he entertained any other sentiment than hatred toward the second officer of the Halfmoon--that is he would have twenty-four hours before; but now, quite unexpectedly, he realized that he didn't want Theriere to die, and then it dawned upon him that a new sentiment had been born within him--a sentiment to which he had been a stranger all his hard life--friendship.

He felt friendship for Theriere! It was unthinkable, and yet the mucker knew that it was so. Painfully he crawled over to the Frenchman's side.

"Theriere!" he whispered in the man's ear.

The officer turned his head wearily.

"Do youse know me, old pal?" asked the mucker, and Barbara Harding knew from the man's voice that there were tears in his eyes; but what she did not know was

that they welled there in response to the words the mucker had just spoken--the nearest approach to words of endearment that ever had passed his lips.

Theriere reached up and took Byrne's hand. It was evident that he too had noted the unusual quality of the mucker's voice.

"Yes, old man," he said very faintly, and then "water, please."

Barbara Harding brought him a drink, holding his head against her knee while he drank. The cool liquid seemed to give him new strength for presently he spoke, quite strongly.

"I'm going, Byrne," he said; "but before I go I want to tell you that of all the brave men I ever have known I have learned within the past few days to believe that you are the bravest. A week ago I thought you were a coward--I ask your forgiveness."

"Ferget it," whispered Byrne, "fer a week ago I guess I was a coward. Dere seems to be more'n one kind o' nerve--I'm jest a-learnin' of the right kind, I guess."

"And, Byrne," continued Theriere, "don't forget what I asked of you before we tossed up to see which should enter Oda Yorimoto's house."

"I'll not ferget," said Billy.

"Good-bye, Byrne," whispered Theriere. "Take good care of Miss Harding."

"Good-bye, old pal," said the mucker. His voice broke, and two big tears rolled down the cheeks of "de toughest guy on de Wes' Side."

Barbara Harding stepped to Theriere's side.

"Good-bye, my friend," she said. "God will reward you for your friendship, your bravery, and your devotion. There must be a special honor roll in heaven for such noble men as you." Theriere smiled sadly.

"Byrne will tell you all," he said, "except who I am--he does not know that."

"Is there any message, my friend," asked the girl, "that you would like to have me deliver?"

Theriere remained silent for a moment as though thinking.

"My name," he said, "is Henri Theriere. I am the Count de Cadenet of France. There is no message, Miss Harding, other than you see fit to deliver to my relatives. They lived in Paris the last I heard of them--my brother, Jacques, was a deputy."

His voice had become so low and weak that the girl could scarce distinguish his words. He gasped once or twice, and then tried to speak again. Barbara leaned closer, her ear almost against his lips.

"Good-bye--dear." The words were almost inaudible, and then the body stiffened with a little convulsive tremor, and Henri Theriere, Count de Cadenet, passed over into the keeping of his noble ancestors.

"He's gone!" whispered the girl, dry-eyed but suffering. She had not loved this man, she realized, but she had learned to think of him as her one true friend in their little world of scoundrels and murderers. She had cared for him very much--it was entirely possible that some day she might have come to return his evident affection for her. She knew nothing of the seamy side of his hard life. She had guessed nothing of the scoundrelly duplicity that had marked his first advances toward her. She thought of him only as a true, brave gentleman, and in that she was right, for whatever Henri Theriere might have been in the past the last few days of his life had revealed him in the true colors that birth and nature had intended him to wear through a brilliant career. In his death he had atoned for many sins.

And in those last few days he had transferred, all unknown to himself or the other man, a measure of the gentility and chivalry that were his birthright, for, unrealizing, Billy Byrne was patterning himself after the man he had hated and had come to love.

After the girl's announcement the mucker had continued to sit with bowed head staring at the ground. Afternoon had deepened into evening, and now the brief twilight of the tropics was upon them--in a few moments it would be dark.

Presently Byrne looked up. His eyes wandered about the tiny clearing. Suddenly he staggered to his feet. Barbara Harding sprang up, startled by the evident alarm in the man's attitude.

"What is it?" she whispered. "What is the matter?"

"De Chink!" he cried. "Where is de Chink?"

And, sure enough, Oda Iseka had disappeared!

The youthful daimio had taken advantage of the preoccupation of his captors during the last moments of Theriere to gnaw in two the grass rope which bound him to the mucker, and with hands still fast bound behind him had slunk into the jungle path that led toward his village.

"They will be upon us again now at any moment," whispered the girl. "What can we do?"

"We better duck," replied the mucker. "I hates to run away from a bunch of Chinks, but I guess it's up to us to beat it."

"But poor Mr. Theriere?" asked the girl.

"I'll have to bury him close by," replied the mucker. "I don't tink I could pack him very fer tonight--I don't feel jest quite fit agin yet. You wouldn't mind much if I buried him here, would you?"

"There is no other way, Mr. Byrne," replied the girl. "You mustn't think of trying to carry him far. We have done all we can for poor Mr. Theriere--you have almost given your life for him already--and it wouldn't do any good to carry his dead body with us."

"I hates to tink o' dem head-huntin' Chinks gettin' him," replied Byrne; "but maybe I kin hide his grave so's dey won't tumble to it."

"You are in no condition to carry him at all," said the girl. "I doubt if you can go far even without any burden."

The mucker grinned.

"Youse don't know me, miss," he said, and stooping he lifted the body of the Frenchman to his broad shoulder, and started up the hillside through the trackless underbrush.

It would have been an impossible feat for an ordinary man in the pink of condition, but the mucker, weak from pain and loss of blood, strode sturdily upward while the marveling girl followed close behind him. A hundred yards above the spring they came upon a little level spot, and here with the two swords of Oda Yorimoto which they still carried they scooped a shallow grave in which they placed all that was mortal of the Count de Cadenet.

Barbara Harding whispered a short prayer above the new-made grave, while the mucker stood with bowed head beside her. Then they turned to their flight again up the wild face of the savage mountain. The moon came up at last to lighten the way for them, but it was a rough and dangerous climb at best. In many places they were forced to walk hand in hand for considerable distances, and twice the mucker had lifted the girl bodily in his arms to bear her across particularly dangerous or difficult stretches.

Shortly after midnight they struck a small mountain stream up which they followed until in a natural cul-de-sac they came upon its source and found their farther progress barred by precipitous cliffs which rose above them, sheer and unscalable.

They had entered the little amphitheater through a narrow, rocky pass in the bottom of which the tiny stream flowed, and now, weak and tired, the mucker was forced to admit that he could go no farther.

"Who'd o' t'ought dat I was such a sissy?" he exclaimed disgustedly.

"I think that you are very wonderful, Mr. Byrne," replied the girl. "Few men could have gone through what you have today and been alive now."

The mucker made a deprecatory gesture.

"I suppose we gotta make de best of it," he said. "Anyhow, dis ought to make a swell joint to defend."

Weak as he was he searched about for some soft grasses which he threw in a pile beneath a stunted tree that grew well back in the hollow.

"Here's yer downy," he said, with an attempt at jocularly. "Now you'd better hit de hay, fer youse must be dead fagged."

"Thanks!" replied the girl. "I AM nearly dead."

So tired was she that she was asleep almost as soon as she had found a comfortable position in the thick mat of grass, so that she gave no thought to the strange position in which circumstance had placed her.

The sun was well up the following morning before the girl awakened, and it was several minutes before she could readjust herself to her strange surroundings. At first she thought that she was alone, but finally she discerned a giant figure standing at the opening which led from their mountain retreat.

It was the mucker, and at sight of him there swept over the girl the terrible peril of her position--alone in the savage mountains of a savage island with the murderer of Billy Mallory--the beast that had kicked the unconscious Theriere in the face--the mucker who had insulted and threatened to strike her! She shuddered at the thought. And then she recalled the man's other side, and for the life of her she could not tell whether to be afraid of him or not--it all depended upon what mood governed him. It would be best to propitiate him. She called a pleasant good morning.

Byrne turned. She was shocked at the pallor of his haggard face.

"Good morning," he said. "How did yeh sleep?"

"Oh, just splendidly, and you?" she replied.

"So-so," he answered.

She looked at him searchingly as he approached her.

"Why I don't believe that you have slept at all," she cried.

"I didn't feel very sleepy," he replied evasively.

"You sat up all night on guard!" she exclaimed. "You know you did."

"De Chinks might o' been shadowin' us--it wasn't safe to sleep," he admitted; "but I'll tear off a few dis mornin' after we find a feed of some kind."

"What can we find to eat here?" she asked.

"Dis crick is full o' fish," he explained, "an' ef youse got a pin I guess we kin rig up a scheme to hook a couple."

The girl found a pin that he said would answer very nicely, and with a shoe lace for a line and a big locust as bait the mucker set forth to angle in the little mountain torrent. The fish, unwary, and hungry thus early in the morning proved easy prey, and two casts brought forth two splendid specimens.

"I could eat a dozen of dem minnows," announced the mucker, and he cast again and again, until in twenty minutes he had a goodly mess of plump, shiny trout on the grass beside him.

With his pocketknife he cleaned and scaled them, and then between two rocks he built a fire and passing sticks through the bodies of his catch roasted them all. They had neither salt, nor pepper, nor butter, nor any other viand than the fish, but it seemed to the girl that never in her life had she tasted so palatable a meal, nor had it occurred to her until the odor of the cooking fish filled her nostrils that no food had passed her lips since the second day before--no wonder that the two ate ravenously, enjoying every mouthful of their repast.

"An' now," said Billy Byrne, "I tink I'll poun' my ear fer a few. You kin keep yer lamps peeled fer de Chinks, an' de first fony noise youse hears, w'y be sure to wake me up," and with that he rolled over upon the grass, asleep almost on the instant.

The girl, to while away the time, explored their rock-bound haven. She found that it had but a single means of ingress, the narrow pass through which the brook

found outlet. Beyond the entrance she did not venture, but through it she saw, beneath, a wooded slope, and twice deer passed quite close to her, stopping at the brook to drink.

It was an ideal spot, one whose beauties appealed to her even under the harrowing conditions which had forced her to seek its precarious safety. In another land and with companions of her own kind she could well imagine the joy of a fortnight spent in such a sylvan paradise.

The thought aroused another--how long would the mucker remain a safe companion? She seemed to be continually falling from the frying pan into the fire. So far she had not been burned, but with returning strength, and the knowledge of their utter isolation could she expect this brutal thug to place any check upon his natural desires?

Why there were few men of her own station in life with whom she would have felt safe to spend a fortnight alone upon a savage, uncivilized island! She glanced at the man where he lay stretched in deep slumber. What a huge fellow he was! How helpless would she be were he to turn against her! Yet his very size; yes, and the brutality she feared, were her only salvation against every other danger than he himself. The man was physically a natural protector, for he was able to cope with odds and dangers to which an ordinary man would long since have succumbed. So she found that she was both safer and less safe because the mucker was her companion.

As she pondered the question her eyes roved toward the slope beyond the opening to the amphitheater. With a start she came to her feet, shading her eyes with her hand and peering intently at something that she could have sworn moved among the trees far below. No, she could not be mistaken--it was the figure of a man.

Swiftly she ran to Byrne, shaking him roughly by the shoulder.

"Someone is coming," she cried, in response to his sleepy query.