

CHAPTER XIV. THE MUCKER SEES A NEW LIGHT

TOGETHER the girl and the mucker approached the entrance to the amphitheater. From behind a shoulder of rock they peered down into the forest below them. For several minutes neither saw any cause for alarm.

"I guess youse must o' been seein' things," said Byrne, drily.

"Yes," said the girl, "and I see them again. Look! Quick! Down there--to the right."

Byrne looked in the direction she indicated.

"Chinks," he commented. "Gee! Look at 'em comin'. Dere must be a hundred of 'em."

He turned a rueful glance back into the amphitheater.

"I dunno as dis place looks as good to me as it did," he remarked. "Dose yaps wid de toad stabbers could hike up on top o' dese cliffs an' make it a case o' 'thence by carriages to Calvary' for ours in about two shakes."

"Yes," said the girl, "I'm afraid it's a regular cul-de-sac."

"I dunno nothin' about dat," replied the mucker; "but I do know dat if we wants to get out o' here we gotta get a hump on ourselves good an' lively. Come ahead," and with his words he ran quickly through the entrance, and turning squarely toward the right skirted the perpendicular cliffs that extended as far as they could see to be lost to view in the forest that ran up to meet them from below.

The trees and underbrush hid them from the head-hunters. There had been danger of detection but for the brief instant that they passed through the entrance of the hollow, but at the time they had chosen the enemy had been hidden in a clump of thick brush far down the slope.

For hours the two fugitives continued their flight, passing over the crest of a ridge and downward toward another valley, until by a small brook they paused to rest, hopeful that they had entirely eluded their pursuers.

Again Byrne fished, and again they sat together at a one-course meal. As they ate the man found himself looking at the girl more and more often. For several days the wonder of her beauty had been growing upon him, until now he found it difficult to take his eyes from her. Thrice she surprised him in the act of staring intently at her, and each time he had dropped his eyes guiltily. At length the girl became nervous, and then terribly frightened--was it coming so soon?

The man had talked but little during this meal, and for the life of her Barbara Harding could not think of any topic with which to distract his attention from his thoughts.

"Hadn't we better be moving on?" she asked at last.

Byrne gave a little start as though surprised in some questionable act.

"I suppose so," he said; "this ain't no place to spend the night--it's too open. We gotta find a sort o' hiding place if we can, dat a fellow kin barricade wit something."

Again they took up their seemingly hopeless march--an aimless wandering in search of they knew not what. Away from one danger to possible dangers many fold more terrible. Barbara's heart was very heavy, for again she feared and mistrusted the mucker.

They followed down the little brook now to where it emptied into a river and then down the valley beside the river which grew wider and more turbulent with every mile. Well past mid-afternoon they came opposite a small, rocky island, and as Byrne's eyes fell upon it an exclamation of gratification burst from his lips.

"Jest de place!" he cried. "We orter be able to hide dere forever."

"But how are we to get there?" asked the girl, looking fearfully at the turbulent river.

"It ain't deep," Byrne assured her. "Come ahead; I'll carry yeh acrost," and without waiting for a reply he gathered her in his arms and started down the bank.

What with the thoughts that had occupied his mind off and on during the afternoon the sudden and close contact of the girl's warm young body close to his took Billy Byrne's breath away, and sent the hot blood coursing through his veins. It was with the utmost difficulty that he restrained a mad desire to crush her to him and cover her face with kisses.

And then the fatal thought came to him--why should he restrain himself? What was this girl to him? Had he not always hated her and her kind? Did she not look with loathing and contempt upon him? And to whom did her life belong anyway but to him--had he not saved it twice? What difference would it make? They'd never come out of this savage world alive, and if he didn't take her some monkey-faced Chink would get her.

They were in the middle of the stream now. Byrne's arms already had commenced to tighten upon the girl. With a sudden tug he strove to pull her face down to his; but she put both hands upon his shoulders and held his lips at arms' length. And her wide eyes looked full into the glowing gray ones of the mucker. And each saw in the other's something that held their looks for a full minute.

Barbara saw what she had feared, but she saw too something else that gave her a quick, pulsing hope--a look of honest love, or could she be mistaken? And the mucker saw the true eyes of the woman he loved without knowing that he loved her, and he saw the plea for pity and protection in them.

"Don't," whispered the girl. "Please don't, you frighten me."

A week ago Billy Byrne would have laughed at such a plea. Doubtless, too, he would have struck the girl in the face for her resistance. He did neither now, which spoke volumes for the change that was taking place within him, but neither did he relax his hold upon her, or take his burning eyes from her frightened ones.

Thus he strode through the turbulent, shallow river to clamber up the bank onto the island. In his soul the battle still raged, but he had by no means relinquished his intention to have his way with the girl. Fear, numb, freezing fear, was in the girl's eyes now. The mucker read it there as plain as print, and had she not said that she was frightened? That was what he had wanted to accomplish back there upon the Halfmoon--to frighten her. He would have enjoyed the sight, but he had not been able to accomplish the thing. Now she not only showed that she was frightened--she had admitted it, and it gave the mucker no pleasure--on the contrary it made him unaccountably uncomfortable.

And then came the last straw--tears welled to those lovely eyes. A choking sob wracked the girl's frame--"And just when I was learning to trust you so!" she cried.

They had reached the top of the bank, now, and the man, still holding her in his arms, stood upon a mat of jungle grass beneath a great tree. Slowly he lowered her to her feet. The madness of desire still gripped him; but now there was another force at work combating the evil that had predominated before.

Theriere's words came back to him: "Good-bye, Byrne; take good care of Miss Harding," and his admission to the Frenchman during that last conversation with the dying man: "--a week ago I guess I was a coward. Dere seems to be more'n one kind o' nerve--I'm just a-learnin' of the right kind, I guess."

He had been standing with eyes upon the ground, his heavy hand still gripping the girl's arm. He looked into her face again. She was waiting there, her great eyes upon his filled with fear and questioning, like a prisoner before the bar awaiting the sentence of her judge.

As the man looked at Barbara Harding standing there before him he saw her in a strange new light, and a sudden realization of the truth flashed upon him. He saw that he could not harm her now, or ever, for he loved her!

And with the awakening there came to Billy Byrne the withering, numbing knowledge that his love must forever be a hopeless one--that this girl of the aristocracy could never be for such as he.

Barbara Harding, still looking questioningly at him, saw the change that came across his countenance--she saw the swift pain that shot to the man's eyes, and she wondered. His fingers released their grasp upon her arm. His hands fell limply to his sides.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Please don't be afraid o' me. I couldn't hurt youse if I tried."

A deep sigh of relief broke from the girl's lips--relief and joy; and she realized that its cause was as much that the man had proved true to the new estimate she had recently placed upon him as that the danger to herself had passed.

"Come," said Billy Byrne, "we'd better move in a bit out o' sight o' de mainland, an' look fer a place to make camp. I reckon we'd orter rest here for a few days till we git in shape ag'in. I know youse must be dead beat, an' I sure am, all right, all right."

Together they sought a favorable site for their new home, and it was as though the horrid specter of a few moments before had never risen to menace them, for the girl felt that a great burden of apprehension had been lifted forever from her shoulders, and though a dull ache gnawed at the mucker's heart, still he was happier than he had ever been before--happy to be near the woman he loved.

With the long sword of Oda Yorimoto, Billy Byrne cut saplings and bamboo and the fronds of fan palms, and with long tough grasses bound them together into the semblance of a rude hut. Barbara gathered leaves and grasses with which she covered the floor.

"Number One, Riverside Drive," said the mucker, with a grin, when the work was completed; "an' now I'll go down on de river front an' build de Bowery."

"Oh, are you from New York?" asked the girl.

"Not on yer life," replied Billy Byrne. "I'm from good ol' Chi; but I been to Noo York twict wit de Goose Island Kid, an' so I knows all about it. De roughnecks belongs on de Bowery, so dat's wot we'll call my dump down by de river. You're a highbrow, so youse gotta live on Riverside Drive, see?" and the mucker laughed at his little pleasantry.

But the girl did not laugh with him. Instead she looked troubled.

"Wouldn't you rather be a 'highbrow' too?" she asked, "and live up on Riverside Drive, right across the street from me?"

"I don't belong," said the mucker gruffly.

"Wouldn't you rather belong?" insisted the girl.

All his life Billy had looked with contempt upon the hated, pusillanimous highbrows, and now to be asked if he would not rather be one! It was unthinkable, and yet, strange to relate, he realized an odd longing to be like Theriere, and Billy Mallory; yes, in some respects like Divine, even. He wanted to be more like the men that the woman he loved knew best.

"It's too late fer me ever to belong, now," he said ruefully. "Yeh gotta be borned to it. Gee! Wouldn't I look funny in wite pants, an' one o' dem dinky, little 'Willie-off-de-yacht' lids?"

Even Barbara had to laugh at the picture the man's words raised to her imagination.

"I didn't mean that," she hastened to explain. "I didn't mean that you must necessarily dress like them; but BE like them--act like them--talk like them, as Mr. Theriere did, you know. He was a gentleman."

"An' I'm not," said Billy.

"Oh, I didn't mean THAT," the girl hastened to explain.

"Well, whether youse meant it or not, it's so," said the mucker. "I ain't no gent--I'm a mucker. I have your word for it, you know--yeh said so that time on de Halfmoon, an' I ain't fergot it; but youse was right--I am a mucker. I ain't never learned how to be anything else. I ain't never wanted to be anything else until today. Now, I'd like to be a gent; but it's too late."

"Won't you try?" asked the girl. "For my sake?"

"Go to't," returned the mucker cheerfully; "I'd even wear side whiskers fer youse."

"Horrors!" exclaimed Barbara Harding. "I couldn't look at you if you did."

"Well, then, tell me wot youse do want me to do."

Barbara discovered that her task was to be a difficult one if she were to accomplish it without wounding the man's feelings; but she determined to strike while the iron was hot and risk offending him--why she should be interested in the regeneration of Mr. Billy Byrne it never once occurred to her to ask herself. She hesitated a moment before speaking.

"One of the first things you must do, Mr. Byrne," she said, "is to learn to speak correctly. You mustn't say 'youse' for 'you,' or 'wot' for 'what'---you must try to talk as I talk. No one in the world speaks any language faultlessly, but there are certain more or less obvious irregularities of grammar and pronunciation that are particularly distasteful to people of refinement, and which are easy to guard against if one be careful."

"All right," said Billy Byrne, "youse--you kin pitch in an' learn me wot--whatever you want to an' I'll do me best to talk like a dude--fer your sake."

And so the mucker's education commenced, and as there was little else for the two to do it progressed rapidly, for once started the man grew keenly interested, spurred on by the evident pleasure which his self-appointed tutor took in his progress--further it meant just so much more of close companionship with her.

For three weeks they never left the little island except to gather fruit which grew hard by on the adjacent mainland. Byrne's wounds had troubled him considerably--at times he had been threatened with blood poisoning. His temperature had mounted once to alarming heights, and for a whole night Barbara Harding had sat beside him bathing his forehead and easing his sufferings as far as it lay within her power to do; but at last the wonderful vitality of the man had saved him. He was much weakened though and neither of them had thought it safe to attempt to seek the coast until he had fully regained his old-time strength.

So far but little had occurred to give them alarm. Twice they had seen natives on the mainland--evidently hunting parties; but no sign of pursuit had developed. Those whom they had seen had been pure-blood Malays--there had been no samurai among them; but their savage, warlike appearance had warned the two against revealing their presence.

They had subsisted upon fish and fruit principally since they had come to the island. Occasionally this diet had been relieved by messes of wild fowl and fox that Byrne had been successful in snaring with a primitive trap of his own

invention; but lately the prey had become wary, and even the fish seemed less plentiful. After two days of fruit diet, Byrne announced his intention of undertaking a hunting trip upon the mainland.

"A mess of venison wouldn't taste half bad," he remarked.

"Yes," cried the girl, "I'm nearly famished for meat--it seems as though I could almost eat it raw."

"I know that I could," stated Billy. "Lord help the deer that gets within range of this old gat of Theriere's, and you may not get even a mouthful--I'm that hungry I'll probably eat it all, hoof, hide, and horns, before ever I get any of it back here to you."

"You'd better not," laughed the girl. "Good-bye and good luck; but please don't go very far--I shall be terribly lonely and frightened while you are away."

"Maybe you'd better come along," suggested Billy.

"No, I should be in the way--you can't hunt deer with a gallery, and get any."

"Well, I'll stay within hailing distance, and you can look for me back any time between now and sundown. Good-bye," and he picked his way down the bank into the river, while from behind a bush upon the mainland two wicked, black eyes watched his movements and those of the girl on the shore behind him while a long, sinewy, brown hand closed more tightly upon a heavy war spear, and steel muscles tensed for the savage spring and the swift throw.

The girl watched Billy Byrne forging his way through the swift rapids. What a mighty engine of strength and endurance he was! What a man! Yes, brute! And strange to relate Barbara Harding found herself admiring the very brutality that once had been repellent to her. She saw him leap lightly to the opposite bank, and then she saw a quick movement in a bush close at his side. She did not know what manner of thing had caused it, but her intuition warned her that behind that concealing screen lay mortal danger to the unconscious man.

"Billy!" she cried, the unaccustomed name bursting from her lips involuntarily. "In the bush at your left--look out!"

At the note of warning in her voice Byrne had turned at her first word--it was all that saved his life. He saw the half-naked savage and the out-shooting spear arm, and as he would, instinctively, have ducked a right-for-the-head in the squared circle of his other days, he ducked now, side stepping to the right, and the heavy weapon sped harmlessly over his shoulder.

The warrior, with a growl of rage, drew his sharp parang, leaping to close quarters. Barbara Harding saw Byrne whip Theriere's revolver from its holster, and snap it in the face of the savage; but to her horror the cartridge failed to explode, and before he could fire again the warrior was upon him.

The girl saw the white man leap to one side to escape the furious cut aimed at him by his foe, and then she saw him turn with the agility of a panther and spring to close quarters with the wild man. Byrne's left arm went around the Malay's neck, and with his heavy right fist he rained blow after blow upon the brown face.

The savage dropped his useless parang--clawing and biting at the mighty creature in whose power he found himself; but never once did those terrific, relentless blows cease to fall upon his unprotected face.

The sole witness to this battle primeval stood spellbound at the sight of the fierce, brutal ferocity of the white man, and the lion-like strength he exhibited. Slowly but surely he was beating the face of his antagonist into an unrecognizable pulp--with his bare hands he had met and was killing an armed warrior. It was incredible! Not even Theriere or Billy Mallory could have done such a thing. Billy Mallory! And she was gazing with admiration upon his murderer!