

CHAPTER XV. THE RESCUE

AFTER Byrne had dropped the lifeless form of his enemy to the ground he turned and retraced his steps toward the island, a broad grin upon his face as he climbed to the girl's side.

"I guess I'd better overhaul this gat," he said, "and stick around home. It isn't safe to leave you alone here--I can see that pretty plainly. Gee, supposin' I'd got out of sight before he showed himself!" And the man shuddered visibly at the thought.

The girl had not spoken and the man looked up suddenly, attracted by her silence. He saw a look of horror in her eyes, such as he had seen there once before when he had kicked the unconscious Theriere that time upon the Halfmoon.

"What's the matter?" he asked, alarmed. "What have I done now? I had to croak the stiff--he'd have got me sure if I hadn't, and then he'd have got you, too. I had to do it for your sake--I'm sorry you saw it."

"It isn't that," she said slowly. "That was very brave, and very wonderful. It's Mr. Mallory I'm thinking of. O Billy! How could you do it?"

The man hung his head.

"Please don't," he begged. "I'd give my life to bring him back again, for your sake. I know now that you loved him, and I've tried to do all I could to atone for what I did to him; just as I tried to play white with Theriere when I found that he loved you, and intended to be on the square with you. He was your kind, and I hoped that by helping him to win you fairly it might help to wipe out what I had done to Mallory. I see that nothing ever can wipe that out. I've got to go through life regretting it because you have taught me what a brutal, cowardly thing I did. If it hadn't been for you I'd always have been proud of it--but you and Theriere taught me to look at things in a different way than I ever had learned to before. I'm not sorry for that--I'm glad, for if remorse is a part of my punishment I'll take it gladly and welcome the chance to get a little of what's coming to me. Only please don't look at me that way any more--it's more than I can stand, from you."

It was the first time that the man ever had opened his heart in any such whole-souled way to her, and it touched the girl more than she would have cared to admit.

"It would be silly to tell you that I ever can forget that terrible affair," she said; "but somehow I feel that the man who did that was an entirely different man from

the man who has been so brave and chivalrous in his treatment of me during the past few weeks."

"It was me that did it, though," he said; "you can't get away from that. It'll always stick in your memory, so that you can never think of Mr. Mallory without thinking of the damned beast that murdered him--God! and I thought it smart!

"But you have no idea how I was raised, Miss Harding," he went on. "Not that that's any excuse for the thing I did; but it does make it seem a wonder that I ever could have made a start even at being decent. I never was well acquainted with any human being that wasn't a thief, or a pickpocket, or a murderer--and they were all beasts, each in his own particular way, only they weren't as decent as dumb beasts.

"I wasn't as crafty as most of them, so I had to hold my own by brute force, and I did it; but, gad, how I accomplished it. The idea of fighting fair," he laughed at the thought, "was utterly unknown to me. If I'd ever have tried it I'd have seen my finish in a hurry. No one fought fair in my gang, or in any other gang that I ever ran up against. It was an honor to kill a man, and if you accomplished it by kicking him to death when he was unconscious it detracted nothing from the glory of your exploit--it was WHAT you did, not HOW you did it, that counted.

"I could have been decent, though, if I'd wanted to. Other fellows who were born and raised near me were decent enough. They got good jobs and stuck to them, and lived straight; but they made me sick--I looked down on them, and spent my time hanging around saloon corners rushing the can and insulting women--I didn't want to be decent--not until I met you, and learned to--to," he hesitated, stammering, and the red blood crept up his neck and across his face, "and learned to want your respect."

It wasn't what he had intended saying and the girl knew it. There sprang into her mind a sudden wish to hear Billy Byrne say the words that he had dared not say; but she promptly checked the desire, and a moment later a qualm of self-disgust came over her because of the weakness that had prompted her to entertain such a wish in connection with a person of this man's station in life.

Days ran into weeks, and still the two remained upon their little island refuge. Byrne found first one excuse and then another to delay the march to the sea. He knew that it must be made sooner or later, and he knew, too, that its commencement would mark the beginning of the end of his association with Miss Harding, and that after that was ended life would be a dreary waste.

Either they would be picked up by a passing vessel or murdered by the natives, but in the latter event his separation from the woman he loved would be no more

certain or absolute than in her return to her own people, for Billy Byrne knew that he "didn't belong" in any society that knew Miss Barbara Harding, and he feared that once they had regained civilization there would be a return on the girl's part to the old haughty aloofness, and that again he would be to her only a creature of a lower order, such as she and her kind addressed with a patronizing air as, "myman."

He intended, of course, to make every possible attempt to restore her to her home; but, he argued, was it wrong to snatch a few golden hours of happiness in return for his service, and as partial recompense for the lifetime of lonely misery that must be his when the woman he loved had passed out of his life forever? Billy thought not, and so he tarried on upon "Manhattan Island," as Barbara had christened it, and he lived in the second finest residence in town upon the opposite side of "Riverside Drive" from the palatial home of Miss Harding.

Nearly two months had passed before Billy's stock of excuses and delay ran out, and a definite date was set for the commencement of the journey.

"I believe," Miss Harding had said, "that you do not wish to be rescued at all. Most of your reasons for postponing the trip have been trivial and ridiculous--possibly you are afraid of the dangers that may lie before us," she added, banteringly.

"I'm afraid you've hit it off about right," he replied with a grin. "I don't want to be rescued, and I am very much afraid of what lies before--me."

"Before YOU?"

"I'm going to lose you, any way you look at it, and--and--oh, can't you see that I love you?" he blurted out, despite all his good intentions.

Barbara Harding looked at him for a moment, and then she did the one thing that could have hurt him most--she laughed.

The color mounted to Billy Byrne's face, and then he went very white.

The girl started to say something, and at the same instant there came faintly to them from the mainland the sound of hoarse shouting, and of shots.

Byrne turned and started on a run in the direction of the firing, the girl following closely behind. At the island's edge he motioned her to stop.

"Wait here, it will be safer," he said. "There may be white men there--those shots sound like it, but again there may not. I want to find out before they see you, whoever they are."

The sound of firing had ceased now, but loud yelling was distinctly audible from down the river. Byrne took a step down the bank toward the water.

"Wait!" whispered the girl. "Here they come now, we can see them from here in a moment," and she dragged the mucker down behind a bush.

In silence the two watched the approaching party.

"They're the Chinks," announced Byrne, who insisted on using this word to describe the proud and haughty samurai.

"Yes, and there are two white men with them," whispered Barbara Harding, a note of suppressed excitement in her voice.

"Prisoners," said Byrne. "Some of the precious bunch from the Halfmoon doubtless."

The samurai were moving straight up the edge of the river. In a few minutes they would pass within a hundred feet of the island. Billy and the girl crouched low behind their shelter.

"I don't recognize them," said the man.

"Why--why--O Mr. Byrne, it can't be possible!" cried the girl with suppressed excitement. "Those two men are Captain Norris and Mr. Foster, mate of the Lotus!"

Byrne half rose to his feet. The party was opposite their hiding place now.

"Sit tight," he whispered. "I'm goin' to get 'em," and then, fiercely "for your sake, because I love you--now laugh," and he was gone.

He ran lightly down the river bank unnoticed by the samurai who had already passed the island. In one hand he bore the long war spear of the head-hunter he had slain. At his belt hung the long sword of Oda Yorimoto, and in its holster reposed the revolver of the Count de Cadenet.

Barbara Harding watched him as he forded the river, and clambered up the opposite bank. She saw him spring rapidly after the samurai and their prisoners. She saw his spear hand go up, and then from the deep lungs of the man rose a savage yell that would have done credit to a whole tribe of Apaches.

The warriors turned in time to see the heavy spear flying toward them and then, as he dashed into their midst, Billy Byrne drew his revolver and fired to right and left. The two prisoners took advantage of the consternation of their guards to grapple with them and possess themselves of weapons.

There had been but six samurai in the party, two had fallen before Byrne's initial onslaught, but the other four, recovered from their first surprise, turned now to battle with all the terrific ferocity of their kind.

Again, at a crucial moment, had Theriere's revolver missed fire, and in disgust Byrne discarded it, falling back upon the long sword with which he was no match for the samurai. Norris snatched Byrne's spear from the ground, and ran it through the body of one of the Japs who was pressing Byrne too closely. Odds were even now--they fought three against three.

Norris still clung to the spear--it was by far the most effective weapon against the long swords of the samurai. With it he killed his antagonist and then rushed to the assistance of Foster.

Barbara Harding from the island saw that Byrne's foe was pressing him closely. The white man had no chance against the superior swordsmanship of the samurai. She saw that the mucker was trying to get past the Jap's guard and get his hands upon him, but it was evident that the man was too crafty and skilled a fighter to permit of that. There could be but one outcome to that duel unless Byrne had assistance, and that mighty quickly. The girl grasped the short sword that she constantly wore now, and rushed into the river. She had never before crossed it except in Byrne's arms. She found the current swift and strong. It almost swept her off her feet before she was halfway across, but she never for an instant thought of abandoning her effort.

After what seemed an eternity she floundered out upon the mainland, and when she reached the top of the bank she saw to her delight that Byrne was still on his feet, fighting. Foster and Norris were pushing their man back--they were in no danger.

Quickly she ran toward Byrne and the samurai. She saw a wicked smile upon the brown face of the little warrior, and then she saw his gleaming sword twist in a sudden feint, and as Byrne lunged out awkwardly to parry the expected blow the keen edge swerved and came down upon his head.

She was an instant too late to save, but just in time to avenge--scarcely had the samurai's sword touched the mucker than the point of Oda Yorimoto's short sword, wielded by the fair hand of Barbara Harding, plunged into his heart. With a shriek he collapsed beside the body of his victim.

Barbara Harding threw herself beside Byrne. Apparently life was extinct. With a little cry of horror the girl put her ear close to the man's lips. She could hear nothing.

"Come back! Come back!" she wailed. "Forgive me that cruel laugh. O Billy! Billy! I love you!" and the daughter of old Anthony Harding, multimillionaire and scion of the oldest aristocracy that America boasts, took the head of the Grand Avenue mucker in her arms and covered the white, bloody face with kisses--and in the midst of it Billy Byrne opened his eyes.

She was caught in the act. There was no escape, and as a crimson flush suffused her face Billy Byrne put his arms about her and drew her down until their lips met, and this time she did not put her hands upon his shoulders and push him away. "I love you, Billy," she said simply.

"Remember who and what I am," he cautioned, fearful lest this great happiness be stolen away from him because she had forgotten for the moment.

"I love you Billy," she answered, "for what you ARE."

"Forever?"

"Until death do us part!"

And then Norris and Foster, having dispatched their man, came running up.

"Is he badly hurt, madam?" cried Captain Norris.

"I don't know," replied Miss Harding; "I'm just trying to help him up, Captain Norris," she laboriously explained in an effort to account for her arms about Billy's neck.

Norris gave a start of surprise at hearing his name.

"Who are you?" he cried. "How do you know me?" and as the girl turned her face toward him, "Miss Harding! Thank God, Miss Harding, you are safe."

"But where on earth did you come from?" asked Barbara.

"It's a long story, Miss Harding," replied the officer, "and the ending of it is going to be pretty hard on you--you must try to bear up though."

"You don't mean that father is dead?" she asked, a look of terror coming to her eyes.

"Not that--we hope," replied Norris. "He has been taken prisoner by these half-breed devils on the island. I doubt if they have killed him--we were going to his rescue when we ourselves were captured. He and Mr. Mallory were taken three days ago."

"Mallory!" shouted Billy Byrne, who had entirely recovered from the blow that had merely served to stun him for a moment. "Is Mallory alive?"

"He was yesterday," replied Norris; "these fellows from whom you so bravely rescued us told us that much."

"Thank God!" whispered Billy Byrne.

"What made you think he was dead?" inquired the officer, looking closely at Byrne as though trying to place him.

Another man might have attempted to evade the question but the new Billy Byrne was no coward in any department of his moral or physical structure.

"Because I thought that I had killed him," he replied, "the day that we took the Lotus."

Captain Norris looked at the speaker in undisguised horror.

"You!" he cried. "You were one of those damned cut-throats! You the man that nearly killed poor Mr. Mallory! Miss Harding, has he offered you any indignities?"

"Don't judge him rashly, Captain Norris," said the girl. "But for him I should have been dead and worse than dead long since. Some day I will tell you of his heroism and his chivalry, and don't forget, Captain, that he has just saved you and Mr. Foster from captivity and probable death."

"That's right," exclaimed the officer, "and I want to thank him; but I don't understand about Mallory."

"Never mind about him now," said Billy Byrne. "If he's alive that's all that counts--I haven't got his blood on my hands. Go on with your story."

"Well, after that gang of pirates left us," continued the captain, "we rigged an extra wireless that they didn't know we had, and it wasn't long before we raised the warship Alaska. Her commander put a crew on board the Lotus with machinists and everything necessary to patch her up--coaled and provisioned her and then lay by while we got her in running order. It didn't take near as long as you would have imagined. Then we set out in company with the warship to search for the 'Clarinda,' as your Captain Simms called her. We got on her track through a pirate junk just north of Luzon--he said he'd heard from the natives of a little out-of-the-way island near Formosa that a brigantine had been wrecked there in the recent typhoon, and his description of the vessel led us to believe that it might be the 'Clarinda,' or Halfmoon.

"We made the island, and after considerable search found the survivors. Each of 'em tried to lay the blame on the others, but finally they all agreed that a man by the name of Theriere with a seaman called Byrne, had taken you into the interior, and that they had believed you dead until a few days since they had captured one of the natives and learned that you had all escaped, and were wandering in some part of the island unknown to them.

"Then we set out with a company of marines to find you. Your father, impatient of the seeming slowness of the officer in command, pushed ahead with Mr. Mallory, Mr. Poster, and myself, and two of the men of the Lotus whom he had brought along with us.

"Three days ago we were attacked and your father and Mr. Mallory taken prisoners. The rest of us escaped, and endeavored to make our way back to the marines, but we became confused and have been wandering aimlessly about the island ever since until we were surprised by these natives a few moments ago. Both the seamen were killed in this last fight and Mr. Foster and myself taken prisoners--the rest you know."

Byrne was on his feet now. He found his sword and revolver and replaced them in his belt.

"You men stay here on the island and take care of Miss Harding," he said. "If I don't come back the marines will find you sooner or later, or you can make your way to the coast, and work around toward the cove. Good-bye, Miss Harding."

"Where are you going?" cried the girl.

"To get your father--and Mr. Mallory," said the mucker.