

## **CHAPTER XVI. THE SUPREME SACRIFICE**

THROUGH the balance of the day and all during the long night Billy Byrne swung along his lonely way, retracing the familiar steps of the journey that had brought Barbara Harding and himself to the little island in the turbulent river.

Just before dawn he came to the edge of the clearing behind the dwelling of the late Oda Yorimoto. Somewhere within the silent village he was sure that the two prisoners lay.

During the long march he had thrashed over again and again all that the success of his rash venture would mean to him. Of all those who might conceivably stand between him and the woman he loved--the woman who had just acknowledged that she loved him--these two men were the most to be feared.

Billy Byrne did not for a moment believe that Anthony Harding would look with favor upon the Grand Avenue mucker as a prospective son-in-law. And then there was Mallory! He was sure that Barbara had loved this man, and now should he be restored to her as from the grave there seemed little doubt but that the old love would be aroused in the girl's breast. The truth of the matter was that Billy Byrne could not conceive the truth of the testimony of his own ears--even now he scarce dared believe that the wonderful Miss Harding loved him--him, the despised mucker!

But the depth of the man's love for the girl, and the genuineness of his new-found character were proven beyond question by the relentless severity with which he put away every thought of himself and the consequences to him in the matter he had undertaken.

FOR HER SAKE! had become his slogan. What though the results sent him to a savage death, or to a life of lonely misery, or to the arms of his beloved! In the face of duty the result was all the same to Billy Byrne.

For a moment he stood looking at the moon-bathed village, listening for any sign of wakefulness or life, then with all the stealth of an Indian, and with the trained wariness of the thief that he had been, the mucker slunk noiselessly across the clearing to the shadows of the nearest hut.

He listened beneath the window through which he and Barbara and Theriere had made their escape a few weeks before. There was no sound from within. Cautiously he raised himself to the sill, and a moment later dropped into the inky darkness of the interior.

With groping hands he felt about the room--it was unoccupied. Then he passed to the door at the far end. Cautiously he opened it until a narrow crack gave him a view of the dimly lighted chamber beyond. Within all seemed asleep. The mucker pushed the door still further open and stepped within--so must he search every hut within the village until he had found those he sought?

They were not there, and on silent feet that disturbed not even the lightly slumbering curs the man passed out by the front entrance into the street beyond.

Through a second and third hut he made his precarious way. In the fourth a man stirred as Byrne stood upon the opposite side of the room from the door--with a catlike bound the mucker was beside him. Would the fellow awake? Billy scarce breathed. The samurai turned restlessly, and then, with a start, sat up with wide-open eyes. At the same instant iron fingers closed upon his throat and the long sword of his dead daimio passed through his heart.

Byrne held the corpse until he was positive that life was extinct, then he dropped it quietly back upon its pallet, and departed to search the adjoining dwelling. Here he found a large front room, and a smaller chamber in the rear--an arrangement similar to that in the daimio's house.

The front room revealed no clue to the missing men. Within the smaller, rear room Byrne heard the subdued hum of whispered conversation just as he was about to open the door. Like a graven image he stood in silence, his ear glued to the frail door. For a moment he listened thus and then his heart gave a throb of exultation, and he could have shouted aloud in thanksgiving--the men were conversing in English!

Quietly Byrne pushed open the door far enough to admit his body. Those within ceased speaking immediately. Byrne closed the door behind him, advancing until he felt one of the occupants of the room. The man shrank from his touch.

"I guess we're done for, Mallory," said the man in a low tone; "they've come for us."

"Sh-sh," warned the mucker. "Are you and Mallory alone?"

"Yes--for God's sake who are you and where did you come from?" asked the surprised Mr. Harding.

"Be still," admonished Byrne, feeling for the cords that he knew must bind the captive.

He found them presently and with his jackknife cut them asunder. Then he released Mallory.

"Follow me," he said, "but go quietly. Take off your shoes if you have 'em on, and hang 'em around your neck--tie the ends of the laces together."

The men did as he bid and a moment later he was leading them across the room, filled with sleeping men, women, children, and domestic animals. At the far side stood a rack filled with long swords. Byrne removed two without the faintest suspicion of a noise. He handed one to each of his companions, cautioning them to silence with a gesture.

But neither Anthony Harding nor Billy Mallory had had second-story experience, and the former struck his weapon accidentally against the door frame with a resounding clatter that brought half the inmates of the room, wide-eyed, to sitting postures. The sight that met the natives' eyes had them on their feet, yelling like madmen, and dashing toward their escaping prisoners, in an instant.

"Quick!" shouted Billy Byrne. "Follow me!"

Down the village street the three men ran, but the shouts of the natives had brought armed samurai to every door with a celerity that was uncanny, and in another moment the fugitives found themselves surrounded by a pack of howling warriors who cut at them with long swords from every side, blocking their retreat and hemming them in in every direction.

Byrne called to his companions to close in, back to back, and thus, the gangster in advance, the three slowly fought their way toward the end of the narrow street and the jungle beyond. The mucker fought with his long sword in one hand and Theriere's revolver in the other--hewing a way toward freedom for the two men whom he knew would take his love from him.

Beneath the brilliant tropic moon that lighted the scene almost as brilliantly as might the sun himself the battle waged, and though the odds were painfully uneven the white men moved steadily, though slowly, toward the jungle. It was evident that the natives feared the giant white who led the three. Anthony Harding, familiar with Japanese, could translate sufficient of their jargon to be sure of that, had not the respectful distance most of them kept from Byrne been ample proof.

Out of the village street they came at last into the clearing. The warriors danced about them, yelling threats and taunts the while they made occasional dashes to close quarters that they might deliver a swift sword cut and retreat again before the great white devil could get them with the sword that had been Oda Yorimoto's, or the strange fire stick that spoke in such a terrifying voice.

Fifty feet from the jungle Mallory went down with a spear through the calf of his leg. Byrne saw him fall, and dropping back lifted the man to his feet, supporting him with one arm as the two backed slowly in front of the onpressing natives.

The spears were flying thick and fast now, for the samurai all were upon the same side of the enemy and there was no danger of injuring one of their own number with their flying weapons as there had been when the host entirely surrounded the three men, and when the whites at last entered the tall grasses of the jungle a perfect shower of spears followed them.

With the volley Byrne went down--he had been the principal target for the samurai and three of the heavy shafts had pierced his body. Two were buried in his chest and one in his abdomen.

Anthony Harding was horrified. Both his companions were down, and the savages were pressing closely on toward their hiding place. Mallory sat upon the ground trying to tear the spear from his leg. Finally he was successful. Byrne, still conscious, called to Harding to pull the three shafts from him.

"What are we to do?" cried the older man. "They will get us again as sure as fate."

"They haven't got us yet," said Billy. "Wait, I got a scheme. Can you walk, Mallory?"

Mallory staggered to his feet.

"I'll see," he said, and then: "Yes, I can make it."

"Good," exclaimed Byrne. "Now listen. Almost due north, across this range of hills behind us is a valley. In the center of the valley is a river. It is a good fifteen-hour march for a well man--it will take Mallory and you longer. Follow down the river till you come to a little island--it should be the first one from where you strike the river. On that island you will find Miss Harding, Norris, and Foster. Now hurry."

"But you, man!" exclaimed Mallory. "We can't leave you."

"Never!" said Anthony Harding.

"You'll have to, though," replied Billy. "That's part of the scheme. It won't work any other way." He raised his revolver and fired a single shot in the direction of the howling savages. "That's to let 'em know we're still here," he said. "I'll keep that up, off and on, as long as I can. It'll fool 'em into thinking that we're all here, and cover your escape. See?"

"I won't do it," said Mallory.

"Yes you will," replied the mucker. "It's not any of us that counts--it's Miss Harding. As many as can have got to get back to her just as quick as the Lord'll let us. I can't, so you two'll have to. I'm done for--a blind man could see that. It wouldn't do a bit of good for you two to hang around here and get killed, waitin' for me to die; but it would do a lot of harm, for it might mean that Miss Harding would be lost too."

"You say my daughter is on this island you speak of, with Norris and Foster--is she quite safe and well?" asked Harding.

"Perfectly," said Byrne; "and now beat it--you're wasting a lot of precious time."

"For Barbara's sake it looks like the only way," said Anthony Harding, "but it seems wicked and cowardly to desert a noble fellow like you, sir."

"It is wicked," said Billy Mallory. "There must be some other way. By the way, old man, who are you anyhow, and how did you happen to be here?"

Byrne turned his face upward so that the full moon lighted his features clearly.

"There is no other way, Mallory," he said. "Now take a good look at me--don't you recognize me?"

Mallory gazed intently at the strong face looking into his. He shook his head.

"There is something familiar about your face," he said; "but I cannot place you. Nor does it make any difference who you are--you have risked your life to save ours and I shall not leave you. Let Mr. Harding go--it is not necessary for both to stay."

"You will both go," insisted Byrne; "and you will find that it does make a big difference who I am. I hadn't intended telling you, but I see there is no other way. I'm the mucker that nearly killed you on board the Lotus, Mallory. I'm the fellow that man-handled Miss Harding until even that beast of a Simms made me quit, and Miss Harding has been alone with me on this island for weeks--now go!"

He turned away so that they could no longer see his face, with the mental anguish that he knew must be writ large upon it, and commenced firing toward the natives once more.

Anthony Harding stood with white face and clinched hands during Byrne's recital of his identity. At its close he took a threatening step toward the prostrate man, raising his long sword, with a muffled oath. Billy Mallory sprang before him, catching his upraised arm.

"Don't!" he whispered. "Think what we owe him now. Come!" and the two men turned north into the jungle while Billy Byrne lay upon his belly in the tall grass firing from time to time into the direction from which came an occasional spear.

Anthony Harding and Billy Mallory kept on in silence along their dismal way. The crack of the mucker's revolver, growing fainter and fainter, as they drew away from the scene of conflict, apprised the men that their rescuer still lived.

After a time the distant reports ceased. The two walked on in silence for a few minutes.

"He's gone," whispered Mallory.

Anthony Harding made no response. They did not hear any further firing behind them. On and on they trudged. Night turned to day. Day rolled slowly on into night once more. And still they staggered on, footsore and weary. Mallory suffered excruciating agony from his wound. There were times when it seemed that it would be impossible for him to continue another yard; but then the thought that Barbara Harding was somewhere ahead of them, and that in a short time now they must be with her once more kept him doggedly at his painful task.

They had reached the river and were following slowly down its bank. The moon, full and gorgeous, flooded the landscape with silvery light.

"Look!" exclaimed Mallory. "The island!"

"Thank God!" whispered Harding, fervently.

On the bank opposite they stopped and hallooed. Almost instantly three figures rushed from the interior of the island to the shore before them--two men and a woman.

"Barbara!" cried Anthony Harding. "O my daughter! My daughter!"

Norris and Foster hastened through the river and brought the two men to the island. Barbara Harding threw herself into her father's arms. A moment later she had grasped Mallory's outstretched hands, and then she looked beyond them for another.

"Mr. Byrne?" she asked. "Where is Mr. Byrne?"

"He is dead," said Anthony Harding.

The girl looked, wide-eyed and uncomprehending, at her father for a full minute.

"Dead!" she moaned, and fell unconscious at his feet.