

CHAPTER XVII. HOME AGAIN

BILLY BYRNE continued to fire intermittently for half an hour after the two men had left him. Then he fired several shots in quick succession, and dragging himself to his hands and knees crawled laboriously and painfully back into the jungle in search of a hiding place where he might die in peace.

He had progressed some hundred yards when he felt the earth give way beneath him. He clutched frantically about for support, but there was none, and with a sickening lunge he plunged downward into Stygian darkness.

His fall was a short one, and he brought up with a painful thud at the bottom of a deer pit--a covered trap which the natives dig to catch their fleet-footed prey.

The pain of his wounds after the fall was excruciating. His head whirled dizzily. He knew that he was dying, and then all went black.

When consciousness returned to the mucker it was daylight. The sky above shone through the ragged hole that his falling body had broken in the pit's covering the night before.

"Geel!" muttered the mucker; "and I thought that I was dead!"

His wounds had ceased to bleed, but he was very weak and stiff and sore.

"I guess I'm too tough to croak!" he thought.

He wondered if the two men would reach Barbara in safety. He hoped so. Mallory loved her, and he was sure that Barbara had loved Mallory. He wanted her to be happy. No thought of jealousy entered his mind. Mallory was her kind. Mallory "belonged." He didn't. He was a mucker. How would he have looked training with her bunch. She would have been ashamed of him, and he couldn't have stood that. No, it was better as it had turned out. He'd squared himself for the beast he'd been to her, and he'd squared himself with Mallory, too. At least they'd have only decent thoughts of him, dead; but alive, that would be an entirely different thing. He would be in the way. He would be a constant embarrassment to them all, for they would feel that they'd have to be nice to him in return for what he had done for them. The thought made the mucker sick.

"I'd rather croak," he murmured.

But he didn't "croak"--instead, he waxed stronger, and toward evening the pangs of hunger and thirst drove him to consider means for escaping from his hiding place, and searching for food and water.

He waited until after dark, and then he crawled, with utmost difficulty, from the deep pit. He had heard nothing of the natives since the night before, and now, in the open, there came to him but the faint sounds of the village life across the clearing.

Byrne dragged himself toward the trail that led to the spring where poor Theriere had died. It took him a long time to reach it, but at last he was successful. The clear, cold water helped to revive and strengthen him. Then he sought food. Some wild fruit partially satisfied him for the moment, and he commenced the laborious task of retracing his steps toward "Manhattan Island."

The trail that he had passed over in fifteen hours as he had hastened to the rescue of Anthony Harding and Billy Mallory required the better part of three days now. Occasionally he wondered why in the world he was traversing it anyway. Hadn't he wanted to die, and leave Barbara free? But life is sweet, and the red blood still flowed strong in the veins of the mucker.

"I can go my own way," he thought, "and not bother her; but I'll be dinged if I want to croak in this God-forsaken hole--Grand Avenue for mine, when it comes to passing in my checks. Gee! but I'd like to hear the rattle of the Lake Street 'L' and see the dolls coming down the station steps by Skidmore's when the crowd comes home from the Loop at night."

Billy Byrne was homesick. And then, too, his heart was very heavy and sad because of the great love he had found--a love which he realized was as hopeless as it was great. He had the memory, though, of the girl's arms about his neck, and her dear lips crushed to his for a brief instant, and her words--ah, those words! They would ring in Billy's head forever: "I love you, Billy, for what you ARE."

And a sudden resolve came into the mucker's mind as he whispered those words over and over again to himself. "I can't have her," he said. "She isn't for the likes of me; but if I can't live with her, I can live for her--as she'd want me to live, and, s'help me, those words'll keep me straight. If she ever hears of Billy Byrne again it won't be anything to make her ashamed that she had her arms around him, kissing him, and telling him that she loved him."

At the river's edge across from the little island Billy came to a halt. He had reached the point near midnight, and hesitated to cross over and disturb the party at that hour. At last, however, he decided to cross quietly, and lie down near HER hut until morning.

The crossing was most difficult, for he was very weak, but at last he came to the opposite bank and drew himself up to lie panting for a few minutes on the sloping

bank. Then he crawled on again up to the top, and staggering to his feet made his way cautiously toward the two huts. All was quiet. He assumed that the party was asleep, and so he lay down near the rude shelter he had constructed for Barbara Harding, and fell asleep.

It was broad daylight when he awoke--the sun was fully three hours high, and yet no one was stirring. For the first time misgivings commenced to assail Billy's mind. Could it be possible? He crossed over to his own hut and entered--it was deserted. Then he ran to Barbara's--it, too, was unoccupied. They had gone!

All during the painful trip from the village to the island Billy had momentarily expected to meet a party of rescuers coming back for him. He had not been exactly disappointed, but a queer little lump had risen to his throat as the days passed and no help had come, and now this was the final blow. They had deserted him! Left him wounded and dying on this savage island without taking the trouble to assure themselves that he really was dead! It was incredible!

"But was it?" thought Billy. "Didn't I tell them that I was dying? I thought so myself, and there is no reason why they shouldn't have thought so too. I suppose I shouldn't blame them, and I don't; but I wouldn't have left them that way and not come back. They had a warship full of blue jackets and marines--there wouldn't have been much danger to them."

Presently it occurred to him that the party may have returned to the coast to get the marines, and that even now they were searching for him. He hastened to return to the mainland, and once more he took up his wearisome journey.

That night he reached the coast. Early the next morning he commenced his search for the man-of-war. By walking entirely around the island he should find her he felt sure.

Shortly after noon he scaled a high promontory which jutted out into the sea. From its summit he had an unobstructed view of the broad Pacific. His heart leaped to his throat, for there but a short distance out were a great battleship and a trim white yacht--the Alaska and the Lotus! They were steaming slowly out to sea.

He was just in time! Filled with happiness the mucker ran to the point of the promontory and stripping off his shirt waved it high above his head, the while he shouted at the top of his lungs; but the vessels kept on their course, giving no answering signal.

For half an hour the man continued his futile efforts to attract the attention of someone on board either craft, but to his dismay he saw them grow smaller and

smaller until in a few hours they passed over the rim of the world, disappearing from his view forever.

Weak, wounded, and despairing, Billy sank to the ground, burying his face in his arms, and there the moon found him when she rose, and he was still there when she passed from the western sky.

For three months Billy Byrne lived his lonely life upon the wild island. The trapping and fishing were good and there was a plentiful supply of good water. He regained his lost strength, recovering entirely from his wounds. The natives did not molest him, for he had stumbled upon a section of the shore which they considered bewitched and to which none of them would come under any circumstances.

One morning, at the beginning of his fourth month of solitude, the mucker saw a smudge of smoke upon the horizon. Slowly it increased in volume and the speck beneath it resolved itself into the hull of a steamer. Closer and closer to the island it came.

Billy gathered together a quantity of dry brush and lighted a signal fire on the lofty point from which he had seen the Alaska and the Lotus disappear. As it commenced to blaze freely he threw fresh, green boughs upon it until a vertical column of smoke arose high above the island.

In breathless suspense Billy watched the movements of the steamer. At first it seemed that she would pass without taking notice of his signal, but at last he saw that she was changing her course and moving directly toward the island.

Close in she came, for the sea was calm and the water deep, and when Billy was sure that those on board saw him and his frantic waving, he hurried, stumbling and falling, down the steep face of the cliff to the tiny beach at its foot.

Already a boat had been lowered and was putting in for land. Billy waded out to the end of the short shelving beach and waited.

The sight that met the eyes of the rescuers was one that filled them with awe, for they saw before them a huge, giant of a white man, half-naked except for a few tattered rags, who wore the long sword of an ancient samurai at his side, a modern revolver at his hip, and bore in his brawny hand the heavy war spear of a head-hunter. Long black hair, and a huge beard covered the man's head and face, but clean gray eyes shone from out of the tangle, and a broad grin welcomed them.

"Oh, you white men!" shouted the mucker. "You certainly do look good to me."

Six months later a big, smooth-faced giant in ill-fitting sea togs strolled up Sixth Avenue. It was Billy Byrne--broke, but happy; Grand Avenue was less than a thousand milesaway!

"Gee!" he murmured; "but it's good to be home again!"

There were places in New York where Billy would find acquaintances. One in particular he recalled--a little, third-floor gymnasium not far distant from the Battery. Thither he turned his steps now. As he entered the stuffy room in which two big fellows, stripped to the waist, were sparring, a stout, low-browed man sitting in a back-tilted chair against one wall looked up inquiringly. Billy crossed over to him, with outstretched hand.

"Howdy, Professor!" he said.

"Yeh got me, kid," replied Professor Cassidy, taking the proffered hand.

"I was up here with Larry Hilmore and the Goose Island Kid a year or so ago--my name's Byrne," exclaimed Billy.

"Sure," said the professor; "I gotcha now. You're de guy 'at Larry was a tellin' me about. He said you'd be a great heavy if you'd leave de booze alone."

Billy smiled and nodded.

"You don't look much like a booze fighter now," remarked Cassidy.

"And I ain't," said the mucker. "I've been on the wagon for most a year, and I'm never comin' down."

"That's right, kid," said the professor; "but wots the good word? Wot you doin' in little ol' Noo York?"

"Lookin' for a job," said Billy.

"Strip!" commanded Professor Cassidy. "I'm lookin' for sparrin' partners for a gink dat's goin' to clean up de Big Smoke--if he'll ever come back an' scrap."

"You're on," said Billy, commencing to divest himself of his outer clothing.

Stripped to the waist he displayed as wondrous a set of muscles as even Professor Cassidy had ever seen. The man waxed enthusiastic over them.

"You sure ought to have some wallop up your sleeve," he said, admiringly. He then introduced Billy to the Harlem Hurricane, and Battling Dago Pete. "Pete's de guy I was tellin' you about," explained Professor Cassidy. "He's got such a wallop dat I can't keep no sparrin' partners for him. The Hurricane here's de only bloke

wit de guts to stay wit him--he's a fiend for punishment, Hurricane is; he jest natchrly eatsit.

"If you're broke I'll give you your keep as long as you stay wit Pete an' don't get cold feet, an' I'll fix up a mill for you now an' then so's you kin pull down a little coin fer yourself. Are you game?"

"You know it," said Billy.

"All to the good then," said the professor gaily; "now you put on the mitts an' spell Hurricane for a couple o' rounds."

Billy slipped his huge hands into the tight-fitting gloves.

"It's been more'n a year since I had these on," he said, "an' I may be a little slow an' stale at first; but after I get warmed up I'll do better."

Cassidy grinned and winked at Hurricane. "He won't never get warmed up," Hurricane confided; "Pete'll knock his block off in about two minutes," and the men settled back to watch the fun with ill-concealed amusement written upon their faces.

What happened within the next few minutes in the stuffy little room of Professor Cassidy's third-floor "gymnasium" marks an epoch in the professor's life--he still talks of it, and doubtless shall until the Great Referee counts him out in the Last Round.

The two men sparred for a moment, gaging one another. Then Battling Dago Pete swung a vicious left that landed square on Billy's face. It was a blow that might have felled an ox; but Billy only shook his head--it scarce seemed to jar him. Pete had half lowered his hands as he recovered from the blow, so sure he was that it would finish his new sparring partner, and now before he could regain his guard the mucker tore into him like a whirlwind. That single blow to the face seemed to have brought back to Billy Byrne all that he ever had known of the manly art of self-defense.

Battling Dago Pete landed a few more before the fight was over, but as any old fighter will tell you there is nothing more discouraging than to discover that your most effective blows do not feeze your opponent, and only the knowledge of what a defeat at the hands of a new sparring partner would mean to his future, kept him plugging away at the hopeless task of attempting to knock out this mountain of bone and muscle.

For a few minutes Billy Byrne played with his man, hitting him when and where he would. He fought, crouching, much as Jeffries used to fight, and in his size

and strength was much that reminded Cassidy of the fallen idol that in his heart of hearts he still worshiped.

And then, like a panther, the mucker sprang in with a vicious left hook to the jaw, followed, with lightning rapidity, by a right upper cut to the chin that lifted Battling Dago Pete a foot from the floor to drop him, unconscious, against the foot of the further wall.

It was a clean knock-out, and when Cassidy and Hurricane got through ministering to the fallen man, and indications of returning consciousness were apparent, the professor turned to Billy.

"Got any more 'hopes' lyin' around loose?" asked the mucker with a grin. "I guess the big dinge's safe for a while yet."

"Not if you'll keep on stayin' away from the booze, kid," said Professor Cassidy, "an' let me handle you."

"I gotcha Steve," said Billy; "go to it; but first, stake me to a feed. The front side of my stomach's wrapped around my back bone."