

## CHAPTER XVIII. THE GULF BETWEEN

FOR three months Billy met has-beens, and third- and fourth-rate fighters from New York and its environs. He thrashed them all--usually by the knockout route and finally local sports commenced talking about him a bit, and he was matched up with second-raters from other cities.

These men he cleaned up as handily as he had the others, so that it was apparent to fight fandom that the big, quiet "unknown" was a comer; and pretty soon Professor Cassidy received an offer from another trainer-manager to match Billy against a real "hope" who stood in the forefront of hopedom.

This other manager stated that he thought the mill would prove excellent practice for his man who was having difficulty in finding opponents. Professor Cassidy thought so too, and grinned for two hours straight after reading the challenge.

The details of the fight were quickly arranged. In accordance with the state regulations it was to be a ten round, no decision bout--the weight of the gloves was prescribed by law.

The name of the "white hope" against whom Billy was to go was sufficient to draw a fair house, and there were some there who had seen Billy in other fights and looked for a good mill. When the "coming champion," as Billy's opponent was introduced, stepped into the ring he received a hearty round of applause, whereas there was but a scattered ripple of handclapping to greet the mucker. It was the first time he ever had stepped into a ring with a first-rate fighter, and as he saw the huge muscles of his antagonist and recalled the stories he had heard of his prowess and science, Billy, for the first time in his life, felt a tremor of nervousness.

His eyes wandered across the ropes to the sea of faces turned up toward him, and all of a sudden Billy Byrne went into a blue funk. Professor Cassidy, shrewd and experienced, saw it even as soon as Billy realized it--he saw the fading of his high hopes--he saw his castles in Spain tumbling in ruins about his ears--he saw his huge giant lying prone within that squared circle as the hand of the referee rose and fell in cadence to the ticking of seconds that would count his man out.

"Here," he whispered, "take a swig o' this," and he pressed a bottle toward Billy's lips.

Billy shook his head. The stuff had kept him down all his life--he had sworn never to touch another drop of it, and he never would, whether he lost this and

every other fight he ever fought. He had sworn to leave it alone for HER sake! And then the gong called him to the center of the ring.

Billy knew that he was afraid--he thought that he was afraid of the big, trained fighter who faced him; but Cassidy knew that it was a plain case of stage fright that had gripped his man. He knew, too, that it would be enough to defeat Billy's every chance for victory, and after the big "white hope" had felled Billy twice in the first minute of the first round Cassidy knew that it was all over but the shouting.

The fans, many of them, were laughing, and yelling derogatory remarks at Billy.

"Stan' up an' fight, yeh big stiff!" and "Back to de farm fer youse!" and then, high above the others a shrill voice cried "Coward! Coward!"

The word penetrated Billy's hopeless, muddled brain. Coward! SHE had called him that once, and then she had changed her mind. Theriere had thought him a coward, yet as he died he had said that he was the bravest man he ever had known. Billy recalled the yelling samurai with their keen swords and terrible spears. He saw the little room in the "palace" of Oda Yorimoto, and again he faced the brown devils who had hacked and hewed and stabbed at him that day as he fought to save the woman he loved. Coward! What was there in this padded ring for a man to fear who had faced death as Billy had faced it, and without an instant's consciousness of the meaning of the word fear? What was wrong with him, and then the shouts and curses and taunts of the crowd smote upon his ears, and he knew. It was the crowd! Again the heavy fist of the "coming champion" brought Billy to the mat, and then, before further damage could be done him, the gong saved him.

It was a surprised and chastened mucker that walked with bent head to his corner after the first round. The "white hope" was grinning and confident, and so he returned to the center of the ring for the second round. During the short interval Billy had thrashed the whole thing out. The crowd had gotten on his nerves. He was trying to fight the whole crowd instead of just one man--he would do better in this round; but the first thing that happened after he faced his opponent sent the fans into delirious ecstasies of shouting and hooting.

Billy swung his right for his foe's jaw--a terrible blow that would have ended the fight had it landed--but the man side-stepped it, and Billy's momentum carried him sprawling upon his face. When he regained his feet the "white hope" was waiting for him, and Billy went down again to lie there, quite still, while the hand of the referee marked the seconds: One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Billy opened his eyes. Seven. Billy sat up. Eight. The meaning of that monotonous count

finally percolated to the mucker's numbed perceptive faculties. He was being counted out! Nine! Like a flash he was on his feet. He had forgotten the crowd. Rage--cool, calculating rage possessed him--not the feverish, hysterical variety that takes its victim's brains away.

They had been counting out the man whom Barbara Harding had once loved!--the man she had thought the bravest in the world!--they were making a monkey and a coward of him! He'd show them!

The "white hope" was waiting for him. Billy was scarce off his knees before the man rushed at him wickedly, a smile playing about his lips. It was to be the last of that smile, however. Billy met the rush with his old familiar crouch, and stopped his man with a straight to the body.

Cassidy saw it and almost smiled. He didn't think that Billy could come back--but at least he was fighting for a minute in his old form.

The surprised "hope" rushed in to punish his presuming foe. The crowd was silent. Billy ducked beneath a vicious left swing and put a right to the side of the "hope's" head that sent the man to his knees. Then came the gong.

In the third round Billy fought carefully. He had made up his mind that he would show this bunch of pikers that he knew how to box, so that none might say that he had won with a lucky punch, for Billy intended to win.

The round was one which might fill with delight the soul of the fan who knows the finer points of the game. And when it was over, while little damage had been done on either side, it left no shadow of a doubt in the minds of those who knew that the unknown fighter was the more skilful boxer.

Then came the fourth round. Of course there was no question in the minds of the majority of the spectators as to who would win the fight. The stranger had merely shown one of those sudden and ephemeral bursts of form that occasionally are witnessed in every branch of sport; but he couldn't last against such a man as the "white hope"--they looked for a knock-out any minute now. Nor did they look in vain.

Billy was quite satisfied with the work he had done in the preceding round. Now he would show them another style of fighting! And he did. From the tap of the gong he rushed his opponent about the ring at will. He hit him when and where he pleased. The man was absolutely helpless before him. With left and right hooks Billy rocked the "coming champion's" head from side to side. He landed upon the swelling optics of his victim as he listed.

Thrice he rushed him to the ropes, and once the man fell through them into the laps of the hooting spectators--only now they were not hooting Billy. Until the gong Billy played with his man as a cat might play with a mouse; yet not once had he landed a knock-out blow.

"Why didn't you finish him?" cried Professor Cassidy, as Billy returned to his corner after the round. "You had 'im goin' man--why in the world didn't yeh finish him?"

"I didn't want to," said Billy; "not in that round. I'm reserving the finish for the fifth round, and if you want to win some money you can take the hunch!"

"Do you mean it?" asked Cassidy.

"Sure," said Billy. "You might make more by laying that I'd make him take the count in the first minute of the round--you can place a hundred of mine on that, if you will, please."

Cassidy took the hunch, and a moment later as the two men faced each other he regretted his act, for to his surprise the "white hope" came up for the fifth round smiling and confident once more.

"Someone's been handin' him an earful," grumbled Cassidy, "an' it might be all he needed to take 'im through the first minute of the round, and maybe the whole round--I've seen that did lots o' times."

As the two men met the "white hope" was the aggressor. He rushed in to close quarters aiming a stinging blow at Billy's face, and then to Cassidy's chagrin and the crowd's wonder, the mucker lowered his guard and took the wallop full on the jaw. The blow seemed never to jar him the least. The "hope" swung again, and there stood Billy Byrne, like a huge bronze statue taking blow after blow that would have put an ordinary man down for the count.

The fans saw and appreciated the spectacular bravado of the act, and they went wild. Cheer on cheer rose, hoarse and deafening, to the rafters. The "white hope" lost his self-control and what little remained of his short temper, and deliberately struck Billy a foul blow, but before the referee could interfere the mucker swung another just such blow as he had missed and fallen with in the second round; but this time he did not miss--his mighty fist caught the "coming champion" on the point of the chin, lifted him off his feet and landed him halfway through the ropes. There he lay while the referee tolled off the count of ten, and as the official took Billy's hand in his and raised it aloft in signal that he had won the fight the fickle crowd cheered and screamed in a delirium of joy.

Cassidy crawled through the ropes and threw his arms around Billy.

"I knew youse could do it, kid!" he screamed. "You're as good as made now, an' you're de next champ, or I never seen one."

The following morning the sporting sheets hailed "Sailor" Byrne as the greatest "white hope" of them all. Flashlights of him filled a quarter of a page. There were interviews with him. Interviews with the man he had defeated. Interviews with Cassidy. Interviews with the referee. Interviews with everybody, and all were agreed that he was the most likely heavy since Jeffries. Corbett admitted that, while in his prime he could doubtless have bested the new wonder, he would have found him a tough customer.

Everyone said that Byrne's future was assured. There was not a man in sight who could touch him, and none who had seen him fight the night before but would have staked his last dollar on him in a mill with the black champion.

Cassidy wired a challenge to the Negro's manager, and received an answer that was most favorable. The terms were, as usual, rather one-sided but Cassidy accepted them, and it seemed before noon that a fight was assured.

Billy was more nearly happy again than he had been since the day he had renounced Barbara Harding to the man he thought she loved. He read and re-read the accounts in the papers, and then searching for more references to himself off the sporting page he ran upon the very name that had been constantly in his thoughts for all these months--Harding.

Persistent rumor has it that the engagement of the beautiful Miss Harding to Wm. J. Mallory has been broken. Miss Harding could not be seen at her father's home up to a late hour last night. Mr. Mallory refused to discuss the matter, but would not deny the rumor.

There was more, but that was all that Billy Byrne read. The paper dropped from his hand. Battles and championships faded from his thoughts. He sat with his eyes bent upon the floor, and his mind was thousands of miles away across the broad Pacific upon a little island in the midst of a turbulent stream.

And far uptown another sat with the same paper in her hand. Barbara Harding was glancing through the sporting sheet in search of the scores of yesterday's woman's golf tournament. And as she searched her eyes suddenly became riveted upon the picture of a giant man, and she forgot about tournaments and low scores. Hastily she searched the heads and text until she came upon the name--"Sailor' Byrne!"

Yes! It must be he. Greedily she read and re-read all that had been written about him. Yes, she, Barbara Harding, scion of an aristocratic house--ultra-society girl, read and re-read the accounts of a brutal prize fight.

A half hour later a messenger boy found "Sailor" Byrne the center of an admiring throng in Professor Cassidy's third-floor gymnasium. With worshiping eyes taking in his new hero from head to foot the youth handed Byrne a note.

He stood staring at the heavy weight until he had perused it.

"Any answer?" he asked.

"No answer, kid," replied Byrne, "that I can't take myself," and he tossed a dollar to the worshiping boy.

An hour later Billy Byrne was ascending the broad, white steps that led to the entrance of Anthony Harding's New York house. The servant who answered his ring eyed him suspiciously, for Billy Byrne still dressed like a teamster on holiday. He had no card!

"Tell Miss Harding that Mr. Byrne has come," he said.

The servant left him standing in the hallway, and started to ascend the great staircase, but halfway up he met Miss Harding coming down.

"Never mind, Smith," she said. "I am expecting Mr. Byrne," and then seeing that the fellow had not seated her visitor she added, "He is a very dear friend." Smith faded quickly from the scene.

"Billy!" cried the girl, rushing toward him with out-stretched hands. "O Billy, we thought you were dead. How long have you been here? Why haven't you been to see me?"

Byrne hesitated.

A great, mad hope had been surging through his being since he had read of the broken engagement and received the girl's note. And now in her eyes, in her whole attitude, he could read, as unmistakably as though her lips had formed the words that he had not hoped in vain.

But some strange influence had seemed suddenly to come to work upon him. Even in the brief moment of his entrance into the magnificence of Anthony Harding's home he had felt a strange little stricture of the throat--a choking, half-suffocating sensation.

The attitude of the servant, the splendor of the furnishings, the stateliness of the great hall, and the apartments opening upon it--all had whispered to him that he did not "belong."

And now Barbara, clothed in some wondrous foreign creation, belied by her very appearance the expression that suffused her eyes.

No, Billy Byrne, the mucker, did not belong there. Nor ever could he belong, more than Barbara ever could have "belonged" on Grand Avenue. And Billy Byrne knew it now. His heart went cold. The bottom seemed suddenly to have dropped out of his life.

Bravely he had battled to forget this wonderful creature, or, rather, his hopeless love for her--her he could never forget. But the note from her, and the sight of her had but served to rekindle the old fire within his breast.

He thought quickly. His own life or happiness did not count. Nothing counted now but Barbara. He had seen the lovelight in her eyes. He thanked God that he had realized what it all would have meant, before he let her see that he had seen it.

"I've been back several months," he said presently, in answer to her question; "but I got sense enough to stay where I belong. Gee! Wouldn't I look great comin' up here buttin' in, wit youse bunch of highlifes?"

Billy slapped his thigh resoundingly and laughed in stentorian tones that caused the eyebrows of the sensitive Smith on the floor above to elevate in shocked horror.

"Den dere was de mills. I couldn't break away from me work, could I, to chase a bunch ofskirts?"

Barbara felt a qualm of keen disappointment that Billy had fallen again into the old dialect that she had all but eradicated during those days upon distant "Manhattan Island."

"I wouldn't o' come up atal," he went on, "if I hadn't o' read in de poiper how youse an' Mallory had busted. I t'ought I'd breeze in an' see wot de trouble was."

His eyes had been averted, mostly, as he talked. Now he swung suddenly upon her.

"He's on de square, ain't he?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Barbara. She was not quite sure whether to feel offended, or not. But the memory of Billy's antecedents came to his rescue. Of course he didn't know that it was such terribly bad form to broach such a subject to her, she thought.

"Well, then," continued the mucker, "wot's up? Mallory's de guy fer youse. Youse loved him or youse wouldn't have got engaged to him."

The statement was almost an interrogation.

Barbara nodded affirmatively.

"You see, Billy," she started, "I have always known Mr. Mallory, and always thought that I loved him until--until--" There was no answering light in Billy's eyes--no encouragement for the words that were on her lips. She halted lamely. "Then," she went on presently, "we became engaged after we reached New York. We all thought you dead," she concluded simply.

"Do you think as much of him now as you did when you promised to marry him?" he asked, ignoring her reference to himself and all that it implied.

Barbara nodded.

"What is at the bottom of this row?" persisted Billy. He had fallen back into the decent pronunciation that Barbara had taught him, but neither noticed the change. For a moment he had forgotten that he was playing a part. Then he recollected.

"Nothing much," replied the girl. "I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that they had murdered you, by leaving you back there alone and wounded. I began to think 'coward' every time I saw Mr. Mallory. I couldn't marry him, feeling that way toward him, and, Billy, I really never LOVED him as--as--" Again she stumbled, but the mucker made no attempt to grasp the opportunity opened before him.

Instead he crossed the library to the telephone. Running through the book he came presently upon the number he sought. A moment later he had his connection.

"Is this Mallory?" he asked.

"I'm Byrne--Billy Byrne. De guy dat cracked your puss fer youse on de Lotus."

"Dead, hell! Not me. Say, I'm up here at Barbara's."

"Yes, dat's wot I said. She wants youse to beat it up here's swift as youse kin beat it."



Barbara Harding stepped forward. Her eyes were blazing.

"How dare you?" she cried, attempting to seize the telephone from Billy's grasp.

He turned his huge frame between her and the instrument. "Git a move!" he shouted into the mouthpiece. "Good-bye!" and he hung up.

Then he turned back toward the angry girl.

"Look here," he said. "Once youse was strong on de sob stuff wit me, tellin' me how noble I was, an' all de different tings youse would do fer me to repay all I done fer youse. Now youse got de chanct."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, puzzled. "What can I do for you?"

"Youse kin do dis fer me. When Mallory gits here youse kin tell him dat de engagement is all on again--see!"

In the wide eyes of the girl Billy read a deeper hurt than he had dreamed of. He had thought that it would not be difficult for her to turn back from the vulgar mucker to the polished gentleman. And when he saw that she was suffering, and guessed that it was because he had tried to crush her love by brute force he could carry the game no further.

"O Barbara," he cried, "can't you see that Mallory is your kind--that HE is a fit mate for you. I have learned since I came into this house a few minutes ago the unbridgeable chasm that stretches between Billy Byrne, the mucker, and such as you. Once I aspired; but now I know just as you must have always known, that a single lifetime is far too short for a man to cover the distance from Grand Avenue to Riverside Drive.

"I want you to be happy, Barbara, just as I intend to be. Back there in Chicago there are plenty of girls on Grand Avenue as straight and clean and fine as they make 'em on Riverside Drive. Girls of my own kind, they are, and I'm going back there to find the one that God intended for me. You've taught me what a good girl can do toward making a man of a beast. You've taught me pride and self-respect. You've taught me so much that I'd rather that I'd died back there beneath the spears of Oda Iseka's warriors than live here beneath the sneers and contempt of servants, and the pity and condescension of your friends.

"I want you to be happy, Barbara, and so I want you to promise me that you'll marry Billy Mallory. There isn't any man on earth quite good enough for you; but Mallory comes nearer to it than anyone I know. I've heard 'em talking about him around town since I came back--and there isn't a rotten story chalked up against

him nowhere, and that's a lot more than you can say for ninety-nine of a hundred New Yorkers that are talked about at all.

"And Mallory's a man, too--the kind that every woman ought to have, only they ain't enough of 'em to go 'round. Do you remember how he stood up there on the deck of the Lotus and fought fair against my dirty tricks? He's a man and a gentleman, Barbara--the sort you can be proud of, and that's the sort you got to have. You see I know you.

"And he fought against those fellows of Yoka in the street of Oda Iseka's village like a man should fight. There ain't any yellow in him, Barbara, and he didn't leave me until there seemed no other way, even in the face of the things I told them to make them go. Don't harbor that against him--I only wonder that he didn't croak me; your dad wanted to, and Mallory wouldn't let him."

"They never told me that," said Barbara.

The bell rang.

"Here he is now," said Billy. "Good-bye--I'd rather not see him. Smith'll let me out the servants' door. Guess that'll make him feel better. You'll do as I ask, Barbara?"

He had paused at the door, turning toward her as he asked the final question.

The girl stood facing him. Her eyes were dim with unshed tears. Billy Byrne swam before them in a hazy mist.

"You'll do as I ask, Barbara!" he repeated, but this time it was a command.

As Mallory entered the room Barbara heard the door of the servants' entrance slam behind Billy Byrne.