

### **CHAPTER III. "FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD"**

"WE KEPT a-rambling all the time. I rustled grub, he rustled rhyme," quoted Billy Byrne, sitting up and stretching himself.

His companion roused and came to one elbow. The sun was topping the scant wood behind them, glinting on the surface of the little creek. A robin hopped about the sward quite close to them, and from the branch of a tree a hundred yards away came the sweet piping of a song bird. Farther off were the distance-subdued noises of an awakening farm. The lowing of cows, the crowing of a rooster, the yelping of a happy dog just released from a night of captivity.

Bridge yawned and stretched. Billy rose to his feet and shook himself.

"This is the life," said Bridge. "Where you going?"

"To rustle grub," replied Billy. "That's my part o' the sketch."

The other laughed. "Go to it," he said. "I hate it. That's the part that has come nearest making me turn respectable than any other. I hate to ask for a hand-out."

Billy shrugged. He'd done worse things than that in his life, and off he trudged, whistling. He felt happier than he had for many a day. He never had guessed that the country in the morning could be so beautiful.

Behind him his companion collected the material for a fire, washed himself in the creek, and set the tin can, filled with water, at the edge of the kindling, and waited. There was nothing to cook, so it was useless to light the fire. As he sat there, thinking, his mind reverted to the red mark upon Billy's wrist, and he made a wry face.

Billy approached the farmhouse from which the sounds of awakening still emanated. The farmer saw him coming, and ceasing his activities about the barnyard, leaned across a gate and eyed him, none too hospitably.

"I wanna get something to eat," explained Billy.

"Got any money to pay for it with?" asked the farmer quickly.

"No," said Billy; "but me partner an' me are hungry, an' we gotta eat."

The farmer extended a gnarled forefinger and pointed toward the rear of the house. Billy looked in the direction thus indicated and espied a woodpile. He grinned good naturedly.

Without a word he crossed to the corded wood, picked up an ax which was stuck in a chopping block, and, shedding his coat, went to work. The farmer resumed his chores. Half an hour later he stopped on his way in to breakfast and eyed the growing pile that lay beside Billy.

"You don't hev to chop all the wood in the county to get a meal from Jed Watson," he said.

"I wanna get enough for me partner, too," explained Billy.

"Well, yew've chopped enough fer two meals, son," replied the farmer, and turning toward the kitchen door, he called: "Here, Maw, fix this boy up with suthin' t'eat--enough fer a couple of meals fer two on 'em."

As Billy walked away toward his camp, his arms laden with milk, butter, eggs, a loaf of bread and some cold meat, he grinned rather contentedly.

"A year or so ago," he mused, "I'd a stuck 'em up fer this, an' thought I was smart. Funny how a feller'll change--an' all fer a skirt. A skirt that belongs to somebody else now, too. Hell! what's the difference, anyhow? She'd be glad if she knew, an' it makes me feel better to act like she'd want. That old farmer guy, now. Who'd ever have taken him fer havin' a heart at all? Wen I seen him first I thought he'd like to sic the dog on me, an' there he comes along an' tells 'Maw' to pass me a hand-out like this! Gee! it's a funny world. She used to say that most everybody was decent if you went at 'em right, an' I guess she knew. She knew most everything, anyway. Lord, I wish she'd been born on Grand Ave., or I on Riverside Drive!"

As Billy walked up to his waiting companion, who had touched a match to the firewood as he sighted the numerous packages in the forager's arms, he was repeating, over and over, as though the words held him in the thrall of fascination: "There ain't no sweet Penelope somewhere that's longing much for me."

Bridge eyed the packages as Billy deposited them carefully and one at a time upon the grass beside the fire. The milk was in a clean little graniteware pail, the eggs had been placed in a paper bag, while the other articles were wrapped in pieces of newspaper.

As the opening of each revealed its contents, fresh, clean, and inviting, Bridge closed one eye and cocked the other up at Billy.

"Did he die hard?" he inquired.

"Did who die hard?" demanded the other.

"Why the dog, of course."

"He ain't dead as I know of," replied Billy.

"You don't mean to say, my friend, that they let you get away with all this without sicing the dog on you," said Bridge.

Billy laughed and explained, and the other was relieved--the red mark around Billy's wrist persisted in remaining uppermost in Bridge's mind.

When they had eaten they lay back upon the grass and smoked some more of Bridge's tobacco.

"Well," inquired Bridge, "what's doing now?"

"Let's be hikin'," said Billy.

Bridge rose and stretched. "My feet are tired and need a change. Come on! It's up to you!" he quoted.

Billy gathered together the food they had not yet eaten, and made two equal-sized packages of it. He handed one to Bridge.

"We'll divide the pack," he explained, "and here, drink the rest o' this milk, I want the pail."

"What are you going to do with the pail?" asked Bridge.

"Return it," said Billy. "'Maw' just loaned it to me."

Bridge elevated his eyebrows a trifle. He had been mistaken, after all. At the farmhouse the farmer's wife greeted them kindly, thanked Billy for returning her pail--which, if the truth were known, she had not expected to see again--and gave them each a handful of thick, light, golden-brown cookies, the tops of which were encrusted with sugar.

As they walked away Bridge sighed. "Nothing on earth like a good woman," he said.

"'Maw,' or 'Penelope'?" asked Billy.

"Either, or both," replied Bridge. "I have no Penelope, but I did have a mighty fine 'maw'."

Billy made no reply. He was thinking of the slovenly, blear-eyed woman who had brought him into the world. The memory was far from pleasant. He tried to shake it off.

"'Bridge,'" he said, quite suddenly, and apropos of nothing, in an effort to change the subject. "That's an odd name. I've heard of Bridges and Bridger; but I never heard Bridge before."

"Just a name a fellow gave me once up on the Yukon," explained Bridge. "I used to use a few words he'd never heard before, so he called me 'The Unabridged,' which was too long. The fellows shortened it to 'Bridge' and it stuck. It has always stuck, and now I haven't any other. I even think of myself, now, as Bridge. Funny, ain't it?"

"Yes," agreed Billy, and that was the end of it. He never thought of asking his companion's true name, any more than Bridge would have questioned him as to his, or of his past. The ethics of the roadside fire and the empty tomato tin do not countenance such impertinences.

For several days the two continued their leisurely way toward Kansas City. Once they rode a few miles on a freight train, but for the most part they were content to plod joyously along the dusty highways. Billy continued to "rustle grub," while Bridge relieved the monotony by an occasional burst of poetry.

"You know so much of that stuff," said Billy as they were smoking by their camp fire one evening, "that I'd think you'd be able to make some up yourself."

"I've tried," admitted Bridge; "but there always seems to be something lacking in my stuff--it don't get under your belt--the divine afflatus is not there. I may start out all right, but I always end up where I didn't expect to go, and where nobody wants to be."

"'Member any of it?" asked Billy.

"There was one I wrote about a lake where I camped once," said Bridge, reminiscently; "but I can only recall one stanza."

"Let's have it," urged Billy. "I bet it has Knibbs hangin' to the ropes."

Bridge cleared his throat, and recited:

Silver are the ripples, Solemn are the dunes, Happy are the fishes, For they are full of prunes.

He looked up at Billy, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. "How's that?" he asked.

Billy scratched his head.

"It's all right but the last line," said Billy, candidly. "There is something wrong with that last line."

"Yes," agreed Bridge, "there is."

"I guess Knibbs is safe for another round at least," said Billy.

Bridge was eyeing his companion, noting the broad shoulders, the deep chest, the mighty forearm and biceps which the other's light cotton shirt could not conceal.

"It is none of my business," he said presently; "but from your general appearance, from bits of idiom you occasionally drop, and from the way you handled those two boes the night we met I should rather surmise that at some time or other you had been less than a thousand miles from the w.k. roped arena."

"I seen a prize fight once," admitted Billy.

It was the day before they were due to arrive in Kansas City that Billy earned a hand-out from a restaurant keeper in a small town by doing some odd jobs for the man. The food he gave Billy was wrapped in an old copy of the Kansas City Star. When Billy reached camp he tossed the package to Bridge, who, in addition to his honorable post as poet laureate, was also cook. Then Billy walked down to the stream, near-by, that he might wash away the grime and sweat of honest toil from his hands and face.

As Bridge unwrapped the package and the paper unfolded beneath his eyes an article caught his attention--just casually at first; but presently to the exclusion of all else. As he read his eyebrows alternated between a position of considerable elevation to that of a deep frown. Occasionally he nodded knowingly. Finally he glanced up at Billy who was just rising from his ablutions. Hastily Bridge tore from the paper the article that had attracted his interest, folded it, and stuffed it into one of his pockets--he had not had time to finish the reading and he wanted to save the article for a later opportunity for careful perusal.

That evening Bridge sat for a long time scrutinizing Billy through half-closed lids, and often he found his eyes wandering to the red ring about the other's wrist; but whatever may have been within his thoughts he kept to himself.

It was noon when the two sauntered into Kansas City. Billy had a dollar in his pocket--a whole dollar. He had earned it assisting an automobilist out of a ditch.

"We'll have a swell feed," he had confided to Bridge, "an' sleep in a bed just to learn how much nicer it is sleepin' out under the black sky and the shiny little stars."

"You're a profligate, Billy," said Bridge.

"I dunno what that means," said Billy; "but if it's something I shouldn't be I probably am."

The two went to a rooming-house of which Bridge knew, where they could get a clean room with a double bed for fifty cents. It was rather a high price to pay, of course, but Bridge was more or less fastidious, and he admitted to Billy that he'd rather sleep in the clean dirt of the roadside than in the breed of dirt one finds in an unclean bed.

At the end of the hall was a washroom, and toward this Bridge made his way, after removing his coat and throwing it across the foot of the bed. After he had left the room Billy chanced to notice a folded bit of newspaper on the floor beneath Bridge's coat. He picked it up to lay it on the little table which answered the purpose of a dresser when a single word caught his attention. It was a name: Schneider.

Billy unfolded the clipping and as his eyes took in the heading a strange expression entered them--a hard, cold gleam such as had not touched them since the day that he abandoned the deputy sheriff in the woods midway between Chicago and Joliet.

This is what Billy read:

Billy Byrne, sentenced to life imprisonment in Joliet penitentiary for the murder of Schneider, the old West Side saloon keeper, hurled himself from the train that was bearing him to Joliet yesterday, dragging with him the deputy sheriff to whom he was handcuffed.

The deputy was found a few hours later bound and gagged, lying in the woods along the Santa Fe, not far from Lemont. He was uninjured. He says that Byrne got a good start, and doubtless took advantage of it to return to Chicago, where a man of his stamp could find more numerous and safer retreats than elsewhere.

There was much more--a detailed account of the crime for the commission of which Billy had been sentenced, a full and complete description of Billy, a record of his long years of transgression, and, at last, the mention of a five-hundred-dollar reward that the authorities had offered for information that would lead to his arrest.

When Billy had concluded the reading he refolded the paper and placed it in a pocket of the coat hanging upon the foot of the bed. A moment later Bridge entered the room. Billy caught himself looking often at his companion, and

always there came to his mind the termination of the article he had found in Bridge's pocket--the mention of the five-hundred-dollar reward.

"Five hundred dollars," thought Billy, "is a lot o' coin. I just wonder now," and he let his eyes wander to his companion as though he might read upon his face the purpose which lay in the man's heart. "He don't look it; but five hundred dollars is a lot o' coin--fer a bo, and wotinell did he have that article hid in his clothes fer? That's wot I'd like to know. I guess it's up to me to blow."

All the recently acquired content which had been Billy's since he had come upon the poetic Bridge and the two had made their carefree, leisurely way along shaded country roadsides, or paused beside cool brooklets that meandered lazily through sweet-smelling meadows, was dissipated in the instant that he had realized the nature of the article his companion had been carrying and hiding from him.

For days no thought of pursuit or capture had arisen to perplex him. He had seemed such a tiny thing out there amidst the vastness of rolling hills, of woods, and plain that there had been induced within him an unconscious assurance that no one could find him even though they might seek for him.

The idea of meeting a plain clothes man from detective headquarters around the next bend of a peaceful Missouri road was so preposterous and incongruous that Billy had found it impossible to give the matter serious thought.

He never before had been in the country districts of his native land. To him the United States was all like Chicago or New York or Milwaukee, the three cities with which he was most familiar. His experience of unurban localities had been gained amidst the primeval jungles of far-away Yoka. There had been no detective sergeants there--unquestionably there could be none here. Detective sergeants were indigenous to the soil that grew corner saloons and poolrooms, and to none other--as well expect to discover one of Oda Yorimoto's samurai hiding behind a fire plug on Michigan Boulevard, as to look for one of those others along a farm-bordered road.

But here in Kansas City, amidst the noises and odors that meant a large city, it was different. Here the next man he met might be looking for him, or if not then the very first policeman they encountered could arrest him upon a word from Bridge--and Bridge would get five hundred dollars. Just then Bridge burst forth into poetry:

In a flannel shirt from earth's clean dirt,     Here, pal, is my calloused hand!  
Oh, I love each day as a rover may,     Nor seek to understand. To enjoy is good  
enough for me;     The gypsy of God am I. Then here's a hail to--

"Say," he interrupted himself; "what's the matter with going out now and wrapping ourselves around that swell feed you were speaking of?"

Billy rose. It didn't seem possible that Bridge could be going to double-cross him.

In a flannel shirt from earth's clean dirt, Here, pal, is my calloused hand!

Billy repeated the lines half aloud. They renewed his confidence in Bridge, somehow.

"Like them?" asked the latter.

"Yes," said Billy; "s'more of Knibbs?"

"No, Service. Come on, let's go and dine. How about the Midland?" and he grinned at his little joke as he led the way toward the street.

It was late afternoon. The sun already had set; but it still was too light for lamps. Bridge led the way toward a certain eating-place of which he knew where a man might dine well and from a clean platter for two bits. Billy had been keeping his eyes open for detectives. They had passed no uniformed police--that would be the crucial test, thought he--unless Bridge intended tipping off headquarters on the quiet and having the pinch made at night after Billy had gone to bed.

As they reached the little restaurant, which was in a basement, Bridge motioned Billy down ahead of him. Just for an instant he, himself, paused at the head of the stairs and looked about. As he did so a man stepped from the shadow of a doorway upon the opposite side of the street.

If Bridge saw him he apparently gave no sign, for he turned slowly and with deliberate steps followed Billy down into the eating-place.