

CHAPTER IV. ON THE TRAIL.

AS THEY entered the place Billy, who was ahead, sought a table; but as he was about to hang up his cap and seat himself Bridge touched his elbow.

"Let's go to the washroom and clean up a bit," he said, in a voice that might be heard by those nearest.

"Why, we just washed before we left our room," expostulated Billy.

"Shut up and follow me," Bridge whispered into his ear.

Immediately Billy was all suspicion. His hand flew to the pocket in which the gun of the deputy sheriff still rested. They would never take him alive, of that Billy was positive. He wouldn't go back to life imprisonment, not after he had tasted the sweet freedom of the wide spaces--such a freedom as the trammled city cannot offer.

Bridge saw the movement.

"Cut it," he whispered, "and follow me, as I tell you. I just saw a Chicago dick across the street. He may not have seen you, but it looked almighty like it. He'll be down here in about two seconds now. Come on--we'll beat it through the rear--I know the way."

Billy Byrne heaved a great sigh of relief. Suddenly he was almost reconciled to the thought of capture, for in the instant he had realized that it had not been so much his freedom that he had dreaded to lose as his faith in the companion in whom he had believed.

Without sign of haste the two walked the length of the room and disappeared through the doorway leading into the washroom. Before them was a window opening upon a squalid back yard. The building stood upon a hillside, so that while the entrance to the eating-place was below the level of the street in front, its rear was flush with the ground.

Bridge motioned Billy to climb through the window while he shot the bolt upon the inside of the door leading back into the restaurant. A moment later he followed the fugitive, and then took the lead.

Down narrow, dirty alleys, and through litter-piled back yards he made his way, while Billy followed at his heels. Dusk was gathering, and before they had gone far darkness came.

They neither paused nor spoke until they had left the business portion of the city behind and were well out of the zone of bright lights. Bridge was the first to break the silence.

"I suppose you wonder how I knew," he said.

"No," replied Billy. "I seen that clipping you got in your pocket--it fell out on the floor when you took your coat off in the room this afternoon to go and wash."

"Oh," said Bridge, "I see. Well, as far as I'm concerned that's the end of it--we won't mention it again, old man. I don't need to tell you that I'm for you."

"No, not after tonight," Billy assured him.

They went on again for some little time without speaking, then Billy said:

"I got two things to tell you. The first is that after I seen that newspaper article in your clothes I thought you was figurin' on double-crossin' me an' claimin' the five hun. I ought to of known better. The other is that I didn't kill Schneider. I wasn't near his place that night--an' that's straight."

"I'm glad you told me both," said Bridge. "I think we'll understand each other better after this--we're each runnin' away from something. We'll run together, eh?" and he extended his hand. "In flannel shirt from earth's clean dirt, here, pal, is my calloused hand!" he quoted, laughing.

Billy took the other's hand. He noticed that Bridge hadn't said what HE was running away from. Billy wondered; but asked no questions.

South they went after they had left the city behind, out into the sweet and silent darkness of the country. During the night they crossed the line into Kansas, and morning found them in a beautiful, hilly country to which all thoughts of cities, crime, and police seemed so utterly foreign that Billy could scarce believe that only a few hours before a Chicago detective had been less than a hundred feet from him.

The new sun burst upon them as they topped a grassy hill. The dew-bespangled blades scintillated beneath the gorgeous rays which would presently sweep them away again into the nothingness from which they had sprung.

Bridge halted and stretched himself. He threw his head back and let the warm sun beat down upon his bronzed face.

There's sunshine in the heart of me, My blood sings in the breeze; The mountains are a part of me, I'm fellow to the trees. My golden youth I'm

squandering, Sun-libertine am I, A-wandering, a-wandering, Until the day I die.

And then he stood for minutes drinking in deep breaths of the pure, sweet air of the new day. Beside him, a head taller, savagely strong, stood Billy Byrne, his broad shoulders squared, his great chest expanding as he inhaled.

"It's great, ain't it?" he said, at last. "I never knew the country was like this, an' I don't know that I ever would have known it if it hadn't been for those poet guys you're always spouting.

"I always had an idea they was sissy fellows," he went on; "but a guy can't be a sissy an' think the thoughts they musta thought to write stuff that sends the blood chasin' through a feller like he'd had a drink on an empty stomach.

"I used to think everybody was a sissy who wasn't a tough guy. I was a tough guy all right, an' I was mighty proud of it. I ain't any more an' haven't been for a long time; but before I took a tumble to myself I'd have hated you, Bridge. I'd a-hated your fine talk, an' your poetry, an' the thing about you that makes you hate to touch a guy for a hand-out.

"I'd a-hated myself if I'd thought that I could ever talk mushy like I am now. Gee, Bridge, but I was the limit! A girl--a nice girl--called me a mucker once, an' a coward. I was both; but I had the reputation of bein' the toughest guy on the West Side, an' I thought I was a man. I nearly poked her face for her--think of it, Bridge! I nearly did; but something stopped me--something held my hand from it, an' lately I've liked to think that maybe what stopped me was something in me that had always been there--something decent that was really a part of me. I hate to think that I was such a beast at heart as I acted like all my life up to that minute. I began to change then. It was mighty slow, an' I'm still a roughneck; but I'm gettin' on. She helped me most, of course, an' now you're helpin' me a lot, too--you an' your poetry stuff. If some dick don't get me I may get to be a human bein' before I die."

Bridge laughed.

"It IS odd," he said, "how our viewpoints change with changed environment and the passing of the years. Time was, Billy, when I'd have hated you as much as you would have hated me. I don't know that I should have said hate, for that is not exactly the word. It was more contempt that I felt for men whom I considered as not belonging upon that intellectual or social plane to which I considered I had been born.

"I thought of people who moved outside my limited sphere as 'the great unwashed.' I pitied them, and I honestly believe now that in the bottom of my heart I considered them of different clay than I, and with souls, if they possessed such things, about on a par with the souls of sheep and cows.

"I couldn't have seen the man in you, Billy, then, any more than you could have seen the man in me. I have learned much since then, though I still stick to a part of my original articles of faith--I do believe that all men are not equal; and I know that there are a great many more with whom I would not pal than there are those with whom I would.

"Because one man speaks better English than another, or has read more and remembers it, only makes him a better man in that particular respect. I think none the less of you because you can't quote Browning or Shakespeare--the thing that counts is that you can appreciate, as I do, Service and Kipling and Knibbs.

"Now maybe we are both wrong--maybe Knibbs and Kipling and Service didn't write poetry, and some people will say as much; but whatever it is it gets you and me in the same way, and so in this respect we are equals. Which being the case let's see if we can't rustle some grub, and then find a nice soft spot whereon to pound our respective ears."

Billy, deciding that he was too sleepy to work for food, invested half of the capital that was to have furnished the swell feed the night before in what two bits would purchase from a generous housewife on a near-by farm, and then, stretching themselves beneath the shade of a tree sufficiently far from the road that they might not attract unnecessary observation, they slept until after noon.

But their precaution failed to serve their purpose entirely. A little before noon two filthy, bearded knights of the road clambered laboriously over the fence and headed directly for the very tree under which Billy and Bridge lay sleeping. In the minds of the two was the same thought that had induced Billy Byrne and the poetic Bridge to seek this same secluded spot.

There was in the stiff shuffle of the men something rather familiar. We have seen them before--just for a few minutes it is true; but under circumstances that impressed some of their characteristics upon us. The very last we saw of them they were shuffling away in the darkness along a railroad track, after promising that eventually they would wreak dire vengeance upon Billy, who had just trounced them.

Now as they came unexpectedly upon the two sleepers they did not immediately recognize in them the objects of their recent hate. They just stood looking

stupidly down on them, wondering in what way they might turn their discovery to their own advantage.

Nothing in the raiment either of Billy or Bridge indicated that here was any particularly rich field for loot, and, too, the athletic figure of Byrne would rather have discouraged any attempt to roll him without first handing him the "k.o.", as the two would have naively put it.

But as they gazed down upon the features of the sleepers the eyes of one of the tramps narrowed to two ugly slits while those of his companion went wide in incredulity and surprise.

"Do youse know dem guys?" asked the first, and without waiting for a reply he went on: "Dem's de guys dat beat us up back dere de udder side o' K. C. Do youse get 'em?"

"Sure?" asked the other.

"Sure, I'd know dem in a t'ous'n'. Le's hand 'em a couple an' beat it," and he stooped to pick up a large stone that lay near at hand.

"Cut it!" whispered the second tramp. "Youse don't know dem guys at all. Dey may be de guys dat beats us up; but dat big stiff dere is more dan dat. He's wanted in Chi, an' dere's half a t'ou on 'im."

"Who put youse jerry to all dat?" inquired the first tramp, skeptically.

"I was in de still wit 'im--he croaked some guy. He's a lifer. On de way to de pen he pushes dis dick off'n de rattler an' makes his get-away. Dat peter-boy we meets at Quincy slips me an earful about him. Here's w'ere we draws down de five hundred if we're cagey."

"Whaddaya mean, cagey?"

"Why we leaves 'em alone an' goes to de nex' farm an' calls up K. C. an' tips off de dicks, see?"

"Youse don't tink we'll get any o' dat five hun, do youse, wit de dicks in on it?"

The other scratched his head.

"No," he said, rather dubiously, after a moment's deep thought; "dey don't nobody get nothin' dat de dicks see first; but we'll get even with dese blokes, annyway."

"Maybe dey'll pass us a couple bucks," said the other hopefully. "Dey'd orter do dat much."

Detective Sergeant Flannagan of Headquarters, Chicago, slouched in a chair in the private office of the chief of detectives of Kansas City, Missouri. Sergeant Flannagan was sore. He would have said as much himself. He had been sent west to identify a suspect whom the Kansas City authorities had arrested; but had been unable to do so, and had been preparing to return to his home city when the brilliant aureola of an unusual piece of excellent fortune had shone upon him for a moment, and then faded away through the grimy entrance of a basement eating-place.

He had been walking along the street the previous evening thinking of nothing in particular; but with eyes and ears alert as becomes a successful police officer, when he had espied two men approaching upon the opposite sidewalk.

There was something familiar in the swing of the giant frame of one of the men. So, true to years of training, Sergeant Flannagan melted into the shadows of a store entrance and waited until the two should have come closer.

They were directly opposite him when the truth flashed upon him--the big fellow was Billy Byrne, and there was a five-hundred-dollar reward out for him.

And then the two turned and disappeared down the stairway that led to the underground restaurant. Sergeant Flannagan saw Byrne's companion turn and look back just as Flannagan stepped from the doorway to cross the street after them.

That was the last Sergeant Flannagan had seen either of Billy Byrne or his companion. The trail had ceased at the open window of the washroom at the rear of the restaurant, and search as he would be had been unable to pick it up again.

No one in Kansas City had seen two men that night answering the descriptions Flannagan had been able to give--at least no one whom Flannagan could unearth.

Finally he had been forced to take the Kansas City chief into his confidence, and already a dozen men were scouring such sections of Kansas City in which it seemed most likely an escaped murderer would choose to hide.

Flannagan had been out himself for a while; but now he was in to learn what progress, if any, had been made. He had just learned that three suspects had been arrested and was waiting to have them paraded before him.

When the door swung in and the three were escorted into his presence Sergeant Flannagan gave a snort of disgust, indicative probably not only of despair; but in a manner registering his private opinion of the mental horse power and efficiency of the Kansas City sleuths, for of the three one was a pasty-faced, chestless

youth, even then under the influence of cocaine, another was an old, bewhiskered hobo, while the third was unquestionably a Chinaman.

Even professional courtesy could scarce restrain Sergeant Flannagan's desire toward bitter sarcasm, and he was upon the point of launching forth into a vitriolic arraignment of everything west of Chicago up to and including, specifically, the Kansas City detective bureau, when the telephone bell at the chief's desk interrupted him. He had wanted the chief to hear just what he thought, so he waited.

The chief listened for a few minutes, asked several questions and then, placing a fat hand over the transmitter, he wheeled about toward Flannagan.

"Well," he said, "I guess I got something for you at last. There's a bo on the wire that says he's just seen your man down near Shawnee. He wants to know if you'll split the reward with him."

Flannagan yawned and stretched.

"I suppose," he said, ironically, "that if I go down there I'll find he's corraled a nigger," and he looked sorrowfully at the three specimens before him.

"I dunno," said the chief. "This guy says he knows Byrne well, an' that he's got it in for him. Shall I tell him you'll be down--and split the reward?"

"Tell him I'll be down and that I'll treat him right," replied Flannagan, and after the chief had transmitted the message, and hung up the receiver: "Where is this here Shawnee, anyhow?"

"I'll send a couple of men along with you. It isn't far across the line, an' there won't be no trouble in getting back without nobody knowin' anything about it--if you get him."

"All right," said Flannagan, his visions of five hundred already dwindled to a possible one.

It was but a little past one o'clock that a touring car rolled south out of Kansas City with Detective Sergeant Flannagan in the front seat with the driver and two burly representatives of Missouri law in the back.