

CHAPTER VI. "BABY BANDITS"

IT WAS twenty-four hours before Detective Sergeant Flannagan awoke to the fact that something had been put over on him, and that a Kansas farmer's wife had done the putting.

He managed to piece it out finally from the narratives of the two tramps, and when he had returned to the Shorter home and listened to the contradictory and whole-souled improvisations of Shorter pere and mere he was convinced.

Whereupon he immediately telegraphed Chicago headquarters and obtained the necessary authority to proceed upon the trail of the fugitive, Byrne.

And so it was that Sergeant Flannagan landed in El Paso a few days later, drawn thither by various pieces of intelligence he had gathered en route, though with much delay and consequent vexation.

Even after he had quitted the train he was none too sure that he was upon the right trail though he at once repaired to a telegraph office and wired his chief that he was hot on the trail of the fugitive.

As a matter of fact he was much hotter than he imagined, for Billy and Bridge were that very minute not two squares from him, debating as to the future and the best manner of meeting it before it arrived.

"I think," said Billy, "that I'll duck across the border. I won't never be safe in little old U. S., an' with things hoppin' in Mexico the way they have been for the last few years I orter be able to lose myself pretty well.

"Now you're all right, ol' top. You don't have to duck nothin' for you ain't did nothin'. I don't know what you're runnin' away from; but I know it ain't nothin' the police is worryin' about--I can tell that by the way you act--so I guess we'll split here. You'd be a boob to cross if you don't have to, fer if Villa don't get you the Carranzistas will, unless the Zapatistas nab you first.

"Comin' or goin' some greasy-mugged highbinder's bound to croak you if you cross, from what little I've heard since we landed in El Paso.

"We'll feed up together tonight, fer the last time. Then I'll pull my freight." He was silent for a while, and then: "I hate to do it, bo, fer you're the whitest guy I ever struck," which was a great deal for Billy Byrne of Grand Avenue to say.

Bridge finished rolling a brown paper cigarette before he spoke.

"Your words are pure and unadulterated wisdom, my friend," he said. "The chances are scarcely even that two gringo hoboes would last the week out afoot and broke in Viva Mexico; but it has been many years since I followed the dictates of wisdom. Therefore I am going with you."

Billy grinned. He could not conceal his pleasure.

"You're past twenty-one," he said, "an' dry behind the ears. Let's go an' eat. There is still some of that twenty-five left."

Together they entered a saloon which Bridge remembered as permitting a very large consumption of free lunch upon the purchase of a single schooner of beer.

There were round tables scattered about the floor in front of the bar, and after purchasing their beer they carried it to one of these that stood in a far corner of the room close to a rear door.

Here Bridge sat on guard over the foaming open sesame to food while Billy crossed to the free lunch counter and appropriated all that a zealous attendant would permit him to carry off.

When he returned to the table he took a chair with his back to the wall in conformity to a habit of long standing when, as now, it had stood him in good stead to be in a position to see the other fellow at least as soon as the other fellow saw him. The other fellow being more often than not a large gentleman with a bit of shiny metal pinned to his left suspender strap.

"That guy's a tight one," said Billy, jerking his hand in the direction of the guardian of the free lunch. "I scoops up about a good, square meal for a canary bird, an' he makes me cough up half of it. Wants to know if I t'ink I can go into the restaurant business on a fi'-cent schooner of suds."

Bridge laughed.

"Well, you didn't do so badly at that," he said. "I know places where they'd indict you for grand larceny if you took much more than you have here."

"Rotten beer," commented Billy.

"Always is rotten down here," replied Bridge. "I sometimes think they put moth balls in it so it won't spoil."

Billy looked up and smiled. Then he raised his tall glass before him.

"Here's to," he started; but he got no further. His eyes traveling past his companion fell upon the figure of a large man entering the low doorway.

At the same instant the gentleman's eyes fell upon Billy. Recognition lit those of each simultaneously. The big man started across the room on a run, straight toward Billy Byrne.

The latter leaped to his feet. Bridge, guessing what had happened, rose too.

"Flannagan!" he exclaimed.

The detective was tugging at his revolver, which had stuck in his hip pocket. Byrne reached for his own weapon. Bridge laid a hand on his arm.

"Not that, Billy!" he cried. "There's a door behind you. Here," and he pulled Billy backward toward the doorway in the wall behind them.

Byrne still clung to his schooner of beer, which he had transferred to his left hand as he sought to draw his gun. Flannagan was close to them. Bridge opened the door and strove to pull Billy through; but the latter hesitated just an instant, for he saw that it would be impossible to close and bar the door, provided it had a bar, before Flannagan would be against it with his great shoulders.

The policeman was still struggling to disentangle his revolver from the lining of his pocket. He was bellowing like a bull--yelling at Billy that he was under arrest. Men at the tables were on their feet. Those at the bar had turned around as Flannagan started to run across the floor. Now some of them were moving in the direction of the detective and his prey, but whether from curiosity or with sinister intentions it is difficult to say.

One thing, however, is certain--if all the love that was felt for policemen in general by the men in that room could have been combined in a single individual it still scarcely would have constituted a grand passion.

Flannagan felt rather than saw that others were closing in on him, and then, fortunately for himself, he thought, he managed to draw his weapon. It was just as Billy was fading through the doorway into the room beyond. He saw the revolver gleam in the policeman's hand and then it became evident why Billy had clung so tenaciously to his schooner of beer. Left-handed and hurriedly he threw it; but even Flannagan must have been constrained to admit that it was a good shot. It struck the detective directly in the midst of his features, gave him a nasty cut on the cheek as it broke and filled his eyes full of beer--and beer never was intended as an eye wash.

Spluttering and cursing, Flannagan came to a sudden stop, and when he had wiped the beer from his eyes he found that Billy Byrne had passed through the doorway and closed the door after him.

The room in which Billy and Bridge found themselves was a small one in the center of which was a large round table at which were gathered a half-dozen men at poker. Above the table swung a single arc lamp, casting a garish light upon the players beneath.

Billy looked quickly about for another exit, only to find that besides the doorway through which he had entered there was but a single aperture in the four walls--a small window, heavily barred. The place was a veritable trap.

At their hurried entrance the men had ceased their play, and one or two had risen in profane questioning and protest. Billy ignored them. He was standing with his shoulder against the door trying to secure it against the detective without; but there was neither bolt nor bar.

Flannagan hurtling against the opposite side exerted his noblest efforts to force an entrance to the room; but Billy Byrne's great weight held firm as Gibraltar. His mind revolved various wild plans of escape; but none bade fair to offer the slightest foothold to hope.

The men at the table were clamoring for an explanation of the interruption. Two of them were approaching Billy with the avowed intention of "turning him out," when he turned his head suddenly toward them.

"Can de beef, you poor boobs," he cried. "Dere's a bunch o' dicks out dere--de joint's been pinched."

Instantly pandemonium ensued. Cards, chips, and money were swept as by magic from the board. A dozen dog-eared and filthy magazines and newspapers were snatched from a hiding place beneath the table, and in the fraction of a second the room was transformed from a gambling place to an innocent reading-room.

Billy grinned broadly. Flannagan had ceased his efforts to break down the door, and was endeavoring to persuade Billy that he might as well come out quietly and submit to arrest. Byrne had drawn his revolver again. Now he motioned to Bridge to come to his side.

"Follow me," he whispered. "Don't move 'til I move--then move sudden." Then, turning to the door again, "You big stiff," he cried, "you couldn't take a crip to a hospital, let alone takin' Billy Byrne to the still. Beat it, before I come out an' spread your beezer acrost your map."

If Billy had desired to arouse the ire of Detective Sergeant Flannagan by this little speech he succeeded quite as well as he could have hoped. Flannagan

commenced to growl and threaten, and presently again hurled himself against the door.

Instantly Byrne wheeled and fired a single shot into the arc lamp, the shattered carbon rattled to the table with fragments of the globe, and Byrne stepped quickly to one side. The door flew open and Sergeant Flannagan dove headlong into the darkened room. A foot shot out from behind the opened door, and Flannagan, striking it, sprawled upon his face amidst the legs of the literary lights who held dog-eared magazines rightside up or upside down, as they chanced to have picked them up.

Simultaneously Billy Byrne and Bridge dodged through the open doorway, banged the door to behind them, and sped across the barroom toward the street.

As Flannagan shot into their midst the men at the table leaped to their feet and bolted for the doorway; but the detective was up and after them so quickly that only two succeeded in getting out of the room. One of these generously slammed the door in the faces of his fellows, and there they pulled and hauled at each other until Flannagan was among them.

In the pitch darkness he could recognize no one; but to be on the safe side he hit out promiscuously until he had driven them all from the door, then he stood with his back toward it--the inmates of the room his prisoners.

Thus he remained for a moment threatening to shoot at the first sound of movement in the room, and then he opened the door again, and stepping just outside ordered the prisoners to file out one at a time.

As each man passed him Flannagan scrutinized his face, and it was not until they had all emerged and he had reentered the room with a light that he discovered that once again his quarry had eluded him. Detective Sergeant Flannagan was peeved.

The sun smote down upon a dusty road. A heat-haze lay upon the arid land that stretched away upon either hand toward gray-brown hills. A little adobe hut, backed by a few squalid outbuildings, stood out, a screaming high-light in its coat of whitewash, against a background that was garish with light.

Two men plodded along the road. Their coats were off, the brims of their tattered hats were pulled down over eyes closed to mere slits against sun and dust.

One of the men, glancing up at the distant hut, broke into verse:

Yet then the sun was shining down, a-blazing on the little town,
'way down the track a-dancing in the sun. But somehow, as I waited there,

there came a shiver in the air, "The birds are flying south," he said. "The winter has begun."

His companion looked up at him who quoted.

"There ain't no track," he said, "an' that 'dobe shack don't look much like a town; but otherwise his Knibbs has got our number all right, all right. We are the birds a-flyin' south, and Flannagan was the shiver in the air. Flannagan is a reg'lar frost. Gee! but I betcha dat guy's sore."

"Why is it, Billy," asked Bridge, after a moment's silence, "that upon occasion you speak king's English after the manner of the boulevard, and again after that of the back alley? Sometimes you say 'that' and 'dat' in the same sentence. Your conversational clashes are numerous. Surely something or someone has cramped your originalstyle."

"I was born and brought up on 'dat,'" explained Billy. "SHE taught me the other line of talk. Sometimes I forget. I had about twenty years of the other and only one of hers, and twenty to one is a long shot--more apt to lose than win."

"'She,' I take it, is PENELOPE," mused Bridge, half to himself. "She must have been a fine girl."

"'Fine' isn't the right word," Billy corrected him. "If a thing's fine there may be something finer, and then something else finest. She was better than finest. She--she was--why, Bridge, I'd have to be a walking dictionary to tell you what she was."

Bridge made no reply, and the two trudged on toward the whitewashed hut in silence for several minutes. Then Bridge broke it:

And you, my sweet Penelope, out there somewhere you wait for me
With buds of roses in your hair and kisses on your mouth.

Billy sighed and shook his head.

"There ain't no such luck for me," he said. "She's married to another gink now."

They came at last to the hut, upon the shady side of which they found a Mexican squatting puffing upon a cigarette, while upon the doorstep sat a woman, evidently his wife, busily engaged in the preparation of some manner of foodstuff contained in a large, shallow vessel. About them played a couple of half-naked children. A baby sprawled upon a blanket just within the doorway.

The man looked up, suspiciously, as the two approached. Bridge saluted him in fairly understandable Spanish, asking for food, and telling the man that they had money with which to pay for a little--not much, just a little.

The Mexican slowly unfolded himself and arose, motioning the strangers to follow him into the interior of the hut. The woman, at a word from her lord and master, followed them, and at his further dictation brought them frijoles and tortillas.

The price he asked was nominal; but his eyes never left Bridge's hands as the latter brought forth the money and handed it over. He appeared just a trifle disappointed when no more money than the stipulated purchase price was revealed to sight.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"We're looking for work," explained Bridge. "We want to get jobs on one of the American ranches or mines."

"You better go back," warned the Mexican. "I, myself, have nothing against the Americans, senior; but there are many of my countrymen who do not like you. The Americans are all leaving. Some already have been killed by bandits. It is not safe to go farther. Pesita's men are all about here. Even Mexicans are not safe from him. No one knows whether he is for Villa or Carranza. If he finds a Villa rancho, then Pesita cries Viva Carranza! and his men kill and rob. If, on the other hand, a neighbor of the last victim hears of it in time, and later Pesita comes to him, he assures Pesita that he is for Carranza, whereupon Pesita cries Viva Villa! and falls upon the poor unfortunate, who is lucky if he escapes with his life. But Americans! Ah, Pesita asks them no questions. He hates them all, and kills them all, whenever he can lay his hands upon them. He has sworn to rid Mexico of the gringos."

"Wot's the Dago talkin' about?" asked Billy.

Bridge gave his companion a brief synopsis of the Mexican's conversation.

"Only the gentleman is not an Italian, Billy," he concluded. "He's a Mexican."

"Who said he was an Eyetalian?" demanded Byrne.

As the two Americans and the Mexican conversed within the hut there approached across the dusty flat, from the direction of the nearer hills, a party of five horsemen.

They rode rapidly, coming toward the hut from the side which had neither door nor window, so that those within had no warning of their coming. They were

swarthy, ragged ruffians, fully armed, and with an equipment which suggested that they might be a part of a quasi-military organization.

Close behind the hut four of them dismounted while the fifth, remaining in his saddle, held the bridle reins of the horses of his companions. The latter crept stealthily around the outside of the building, toward the door--their carbines ready in their hands.

It was one of the little children who first discovered the presence of the newcomers. With a piercing scream she bolted into the interior and ran to cling to her mother's skirts.

Billy, Bridge, and the Mexican wheeled toward the doorway simultaneously to learn the cause of the girl's fright, and as they did so found themselves covered by four carbines in the hands of as many men.

As his eyes fell upon the faces of the intruders the countenance of the Mexican fell, while his wife dropped to the floor and embraced his knees, weeping.

"Wotinell?" ejaculated Billy Byrne. "What's doin'?"

"We seem to have been made prisoners," suggested Bridge; "but whether by Villistas or Carranzistas I do not know."

Their host understood his words and turned toward the two Americans.

"These are Pesita's men," he said.

"Yes," spoke up one of the bandits, "we are Pesita's men, and Pesita will be delighted, Miguel, to greet you, especially when he sees the sort of company you have been keeping. You know how much Pesita loves the gringos!"

"But this man does not even know us," spoke up Bridge. "We stopped here to get a meal. He never saw us before. We are on our way to the El Orobo Rancho in search of work. We have no money and have broken no laws. Let us go our way in peace. You can gain nothing by detaining us, and as for Miguel here--that is what you called him, I believe--I think from what he said to us that he loves a gringo about as much as your revered chief seems to."

Miguel looked his appreciation of Bridge's defense of him; but it was evident that he did not expect it to bear fruit. Nor did it. The brigand spokesman only grinned sardonically.

"You may tell all this to Pesita himself, senior," he said. "Now come--get a move on--beat it!" The fellow had once worked in El Paso and took great pride in his "higher English" education.

As he started to herd them from the hut Billy demurred. He turned toward Bridge.

"Most of this talk gets by me," he said. "I ain't jerry to all the Dago jabber yet, though I've copped off a little of it in the past two weeks. Put me wise to the gink's lay."

"Elementary, Watson, elementary," replied Bridge. "We are captured by bandits, and they are going to take us to their delightful chief who will doubtless have us shot at sunrise."

"Bandits?" snapped Billy, with a sneer. "Youse don't call dese little runts bandits?"

"Baby bandits, Billy, baby bandits," replied Bridge.

"An' you're goin' to stan' fer lettin' 'em pull off this rough stuff without handin' 'em a come-back?" demanded Byrne.

"We seem to be up against just that very thing," said Bridge. "There are four carbines quite ready for us. It would mean sudden death to resist now. Later we may find an opportunity--I think we'd better act simple and wait." He spoke in a quick, low whisper, for the spokesman of the brigands evidently understood a little English and was on the alert for any trickery.

Billy shrugged, and when their captors again urged them forward he went quietly; but the expression on his face might have perturbed the Mexicans had they known Billy Byrne of Grand Avenue better--he was smiling happily.

Miguel had two ponies in his corral. These the brigands appropriated, placing Billy upon one and Miguel and Bridge upon the other. Billy's great weight rendered it inadvisable to double him up with another rider.

As they were mounting Billy leaned toward Bridge and whispered:

"I'll get these guys, pal--watch me," he said.

"I am with thee, William!--horse, foot, and artillery," laughed Bridge.

"Which reminds me," said Billy, "that I have an ace-in-the-hole--the boobs never frisked me."

"And I am reminded," returned Bridge, as the horses started off to the yank of hackamore ropes in the hands of the brigands who were leading them, "of a touching little thing of Service's:

Just think! Some night the stars will gleam Upon a cold gray stone, And
trace a name with silver beam, And lo! 'twill be your own."

"You're a cheerful guy," was Billy's only comment.