

CHAPTER VII. IN PESITA'S CAMP

PESITA was a short, stocky man with a large, dark mustache. He attired himself after his own ideas of what should constitute the uniform of a general--ideas more or less influenced and modified by the chance and caprice of fortune.

At the moment that Billy, Bridge, and Miguel were dragged into his presence his torso was enwrapped in a once resplendent coat covered with yards of gold braid. Upon his shoulders were brass epaulets such as are connected only in one's mind with the ancient chorus ladies of the light operas of fifteen or twenty years ago. Upon his legs were some rusty and ragged overalls. His feet were bare.

He scowled ferociously at the prisoners while his lieutenant narrated the thrilling facts of their capture--thrilling by embellishment.

"You are Americanos?" he asked of Bridge and Billy.

Both agreed that they were. Then Pesita turned toward Miguel.

"Where is Villa?" he asked.

"How should I know, my general?" parried Miguel. "Who am I--a poor man with a tiny rancho--to know of the movements of the great ones of the earth? I did not even know where was the great General Pesita until now I am brought into his gracious presence, to throw myself at his feet and implore that I be permitted to serve him in even the meanest of capacities."

Pesita appeared not to hear what Miguel had said. He turned his shoulder toward the man, and addressed Billy in broken English.

"You were on your way to El Orobo Rancho, eh? Are you acquainted there?" he asked.

Billy replied that they were not--merely looking for employment upon an American-owned ranch or in an American mine.

"Why did you leave your own country?" asked Pesita. "What do you want here in Mexico?"

"Well, ol' top," replied Billy, "you see de birds was flyin' south an' winter was in de air, an a fat-head dick from Chi was on me trail--so I ducks."

"Ducks?" queried Pesita, mystified. "Ah, the ducks--they fly south, I see."

"Naw, you poor simp--I blows," explained Billy.

"Ah, yes," agreed Pesita, not wishing to admit any ignorance of plain American even before a despised gringo. "But the large-faced dick--what might that be? I have spend much time in the States, but I do not know that."

"I said 'fat-head dick'--dat's a fly cop," Billy elucidated.

"It is he then that is the bird." Pesita beamed at this evidence of his own sagacity. "He fly."

"Flannagan ain't no bird--Flannagan's a dub."

Bridge came to the rescue.

"My erudite friend means," he explained, "that the police chased him out of the United States of America."

Pesita raised his eyebrows. All was now clear to him.

"But why did he not say so?" he asked.

"He tried to," said Bridge. "He did his best."

"Quit yer kiddin'," admonished Billy.

A bright light suddenly burst upon Pesita. He turned upon Bridge.

"Your friend is not then an American?" he asked. "I guessed it. That is why I could not understand him. He speaks the language of the gringo less well even than I. From what country is he?"

Billy Byrne would have asserted with some show of asperity that he was nothing if not American; but Bridge was quick to see a possible loophole for escape for his friend in Pesita's belief that Billy was no gringo, and warned the latter to silence by a quick motion of his head.

"He's from 'Gran' Avenoo,'" he said. "It is not exactly in Germany; but there are a great many Germans there. My friend is a native, so he don't speak German or English either--they have a language of their own in 'Gran' Avenoo'."

"I see," said Pesita--"a German colony. I like the Germans--they furnish me with much ammunition and rifles. They are my very good friends. Take Miguel and the gringo away"--this to the soldiers who had brought the prisoners to him--"I will speak further with this man from Granavenoo."

When the others had passed out of hearing Pesita addressed Billy.

"I am sorry, senor," he said, "that you have been put to so much inconvenience. My men could not know that you were not a gringo; but I can make it all right. I will make it all right. You are a big man. The gringos have chased you from their country as they chased me. I hate them. You hate them. But enough of them. You have no business in Mexico except to seek work. I give you work. You are big. You are strong. You are like a bull. You stay with me, senor, and I make you captain. I need men what can talk some English and look like gringo. You do fine. We make much money--you and I. We make it all time while we fight to liberate my poor Mexico. When Mexico liberate we fight some more to liberate her again. The Germans they give me much money to liberate Mexico, and--there are other ways of getting much money when one is riding around through rich country with soldiers liberating his poor, bleeding country. Sabe?"

"Yep, I guess I savvy," said Billy, "an' it listens all right to me's far's you've gone. My pal in on it?"

"Eh?"

"You make my frien' a captain, too?"

Pesita held up his hands and rolled his eyes in holy horror. Take a gringo into his band? It was unthinkable.

"He shot," he cried. "I swear to kill all gringo. I become savior of my country. I rid her of all Americanos."

"Nix on the captain stuff fer me, then," said Billy, firmly. "That guy's a right one. If any big stiff thinks he can croak little ol' Bridge while Billy Byrne's aroun' he's got anudder t'ink comin'. Why, me an' him's just like brudders."

"You like this gringo?" asked Pesita.

"You bet," cried Billy.

Pesita thought for several minutes. In his mind was a scheme which required the help of just such an individual as this stranger--someone who was utterly unknown in the surrounding country and whose presence in a town could not by any stretch of the imagination be connected in any way with the bandit, Pesita.

"I tell you," he said. "I let your friend go. I send him under safe escort to El Orobo Rancho. Maybe he help us there after a while. If you stay I let him go. Otherwise I shoot you both with Miguel."

"Wot you got it in for Mig fer?" asked Billy. "He's a harmless sort o' guy."

"He Villista. Villista with gringos run Mexico--gringos and the church. Just like Huerta would have done it if they'd given him a chance, only Huerta more for church than for gringos."

"Aw, let the poor boob go," urged Billy, "an' I'll come along wit you. Why he's got a wife an' kids--you wouldn't want to leave them without no one to look after them in this God-forsaken country!"

Pesita grinned indulgently.

"Very well, Senor Captain," he said, bowing low. "I let Miguel and your honorable friend go. I send safe escort with them."

"Bully fer you, ol' pot!" exclaimed Billy, and Pesita smiled delightedly in the belief that some complimentary title had been applied to him in the language of "Granavenoo." "I'll go an' tell 'em," said Billy.

"Yes," said Pesita, "and say to them that they will start early in the morning."

As Billy turned and walked in the direction that the soldiers had led Bridge and Miguel, Pesita beckoned to a soldier who leaned upon his gun at a short distance from his "general"--a barefooted, slovenly attempt at a headquarters orderly.

"Send Captain Rozales to me," directed Pesita.

The soldier shuffled away to where a little circle of men in wide-brimmed, metal-encrusted hats squatted in the shade of a tree, chatting, laughing, and rolling cigarettes. He saluted one of these and delivered his message, whereupon the tall, gaunt Captain Rozales arose and came over to Pesita.

"The big one who was brought in today is not a gringo," said Pesita, by way of opening the conversation. "He is from Granavenoo. He can be of great service to us, for he is very friendly with the Germans--yet he looks like a gringo and could pass for one. We can utilize him. Also he is very large and appears to be equally strong. He should make a good fighter and we have none too many. I have made him a captain."

Rozales grinned. Already among Pesita's following of a hundred men there were fifteen captains.

"Where is Granavenoo?" asked Rozales.

"You mean to say, my dear captain," exclaimed Pesita, "that a man of your education does not know where Granavenoo is? I am surprised. Why, it is a German colony."

"Yes, of course. I recall it well now. For the moment it had slipped my mind. My grandfather who was a great traveler was there many times. I have heard him speak of it often."

"But I did not summon you that we might discuss European geography," interrupted Pesita. "I sent for you to tell you that the stranger would not consent to serve me unless I liberated his friend, the gringo, and that sneaking spy of a Miguel. I was forced to yield, for we can use the stranger. So I have promised, my dear captain, that I shall send them upon their road with a safe escort in the morning, and you shall command the guard. Upon your life respect my promise, Rozales; but if some of Villa's cutthroats should fall upon you, and in the battle, while you were trying to defend the gringo and Miguel, both should be slain by the bullets of the Villistas--ah, but it would be deplorable, Rozales, but it would not be your fault. Who, indeed, could blame you who had fought well and risked your men and yourself in the performance of your sacred duty? Rozales, should such a thing occur what could I do in token of my great pleasure other than make you a colonel?"

"I shall defend them with my life, my general," cried Rozales, bowing low.

"Good!" cried Pesita. "That is all."

Rozales started back toward the ring of smokers.

"Ah, Captain!" cried Pesita. "Another thing. Will you make it known to the other officers that the stranger from Granavenoo is a captain and that it is my wish that he be well treated, but not told so much as might injure him, or his usefulness, about our sacred work of liberating poor, bleeding unhappy Mexico."

Again Rozales bowed and departed. This time he was not recalled.

Billy found Bridge and Miguel squatting on the ground with two dirty-faced peons standing guard over them. The latter were some little distance away. They made no objection when Billy approached the prisoners though they had looked in mild surprise when they saw him crossing toward them without a guard.

Billy sat down beside Bridge, and broke into a laugh.

"What's the joke?" asked Bridge. "Are we going to be hanged instead of being shot?"

"We ain't goin' to be either," said Billy, "an' I'm a captain. Whaddaya know about that?"

He explained all that had taken place between himself and Pesita while Bridge and Miguel listened attentively to his every word.

"I t'ought it was about de only way out fer us," said Billy. "We were in worse than I t'ought."

"Can the Bowery stuff, Billy," cried Bridge, "and talk like a white man. You can, you know."

"All right, bo," cried Billy, good-naturedly. "You see I forget when there is anything pressing like this, to chew about. Then I fall back into the old lingo. Well, as I was saying, I didn't want to do it unless you would stay too, but he wouldn't have you. He has it in for all gringos, and that bull you passed him about me being from a foreign country called Grand Avenue! He fell for it like a rube for the tapped-wire stuff. He said if I wouldn't stay and help him he'd croak the bunch of us."

"How about that ace-in-the-hole, you were telling me about?" asked Bridge.

"I still got it," and Billy fondled something hard that swung under his left arm beneath his shirt; "but, Lord, man! what could I do against the whole bunch? I might get a few of them; but they'd get us all in the end. This other way is better, though I hate to have to split with you, old man."

He was silent then for a moment, looking hard at the ground. Bridge whistled, and cleared his throat.

"I've always wanted to spend a year in Rio," he said. "We'll meet there, when you can make your get-away."

"You've said it," agreed Byrne. "It's Rio as soon as we can make it. Pesita's promised to set you both loose in the morning and send you under safe escort--Miguel to his happy home, and you to El Orobo Rancho. I guess the old stiff isn't so bad after all."

Miguel had pricked up his ears at the sound of the word ESCORT. He leaned far forward, closer to the two Americans, and whispered.

"Who is to command the escort?" he asked.

"I dunno," said Billy. "What difference does it make?"

"It makes all the difference between life and death for your friend and for me," said Miguel. "There is no reason why I should need an escort. I know my way throughout all Chihuahua as well as Pesita or any of his cutthroats. I have come and gone all my life without an escort. Of course your friend is different. It might be well for him to have company to El Orobo. Maybe it is all right; but wait until

we learn who commands the escort. I know Pesita well. I know his methods. If Rozales rides out with us tomorrow morning you may say good-bye to your friend forever, for you will never see him in Rio, or elsewhere. He and I will be dead before ten o'clock."

"What makes you think that, bo?" demanded Billy.

"I do not think, senor," replied Miguel; "I know."

"Well," said Billy, "we'll wait and see."

"If it is Rozales, say nothing," said Miguel. "It will do no good; but we may then be on the watch, and if possible you might find the means to obtain a couple of revolvers for us. In which case--" he shrugged and permitted a faint smile to flex his lips.

As they talked a soldier came and announced that they were no longer prisoners--they were to have the freedom of the camp; "but," he concluded, "the general requests that you do not pass beyond the limits of the camp. There are many desperadoes in the hills and he fears for your safety, now that you are his guests."

The man spoke Spanish, so that it was necessary that Bridge interpret his words for the benefit of Billy, who had understood only part of what he said.

"Ask him," said Byrne, "if that stuff goes for me, too."

"He says no," replied Bridge after questioning the soldier, "that the captain is now one of them, and may go and come as do the other officers. Such are Pesita's orders."

Billy arose. The messenger had returned to his post at headquarters. The guard had withdrawn, leaving the three men alone.

"So long, old man," said Billy. "If I'm goin' to be of any help to you and Mig the less I'm seen with you the better. I'll blow over and mix with the Dago bunch, an' practice sittin' on my heels. It seems to be the right dope down here, an' I got to learn all I can about bein' a greaser seein' that I've turned one."

"Good-bye Billy, remember Rio," said Bridge.

"And the revolvers, senor," added Miguel.

"You bet," replied Billy, and strolled off in the direction of the little circle of cigarette smokers.

As he approached them Rozales looked up and smiled. Then, rising, extended his hand.

"Senor Captain," he said, "we welcome you. I am Captain Rozales." He hesitated waiting for Billy to give his name.

"My monacker's Byrne," said Billy. "Pleased to meet you, Cap."

"Ah, Captain Byrne," and Rozales proceeded to introduce the newcomer to his fellow-officers.

Several, like Rozales, were educated men who had been officers in the army under former regimes, but had turned bandit as the safer alternative to suffering immediate death at the hands of the faction then in power. The others, for the most part, were pure-blooded Indians whose adult lives had been spent in outlawry and brigandage. All were small of stature beside the giant, Byrne. Rozales and two others spoke English. With those Billy conversed. He tried to learn from them the name of the officer who was to command the escort that was to accompany Bridge and Miguel into the valley on the morrow; but Rozales and the others assured him that they did not know.

When he had asked the question Billy had been looking straight at Rozales, and he had seen the man's pupils contract and noticed the slight backward movement of the body which also denotes determination. Billy knew, therefore, that Rozales was lying. He did know who was to command the escort, and there was something sinister in that knowledge or the fellow would not have denied it.

The American began to consider plans for saving his friend from the fate which Pesita had outlined for him. Rozales, too, was thinking rapidly. He was no fool. Why had the stranger desired to know who was to command the escort? He knew none of the officers personally. What difference then, did it make to him who rode out on the morrow with his friend? Ah, but Miguel knew that it would make a difference. Miguel had spoken to the new captain, and aroused his suspicions.

Rozales excused himself and rose. A moment later he was in conversation with Pesita, unburdening himself of his suspicions, and outlining a plan.

"Do not send me in charge of the escort," he advised. "Send Captain Byrne himself."

Pesita pooh-poohed the idea.

"But wait," urged Rozales. "Let the stranger ride in command, with a half-dozen picked men who will see that nothing goes wrong. An hour before dawn I will send two men--they will be our best shots--on ahead. They will stop at a place we

both know, and about noon the Captain Byrne and his escort will ride back to camp and tell us that they were attacked by a troop of Villa's men, and that both our guests were killed. It will be sad; but it will not be our fault. We will swear vengeance upon Villa, and the Captain Byrne will hate him as a good Pesitista should."

"You have the cunning of the Coyote, my captain," cried Pesita. "It shall be done as you suggest. Go now, and I will send for Captain Byrne, and give him his orders for the morning."

As Rozales strolled away a figure rose from the shadows at the side of Pesita's tent and slunk off into the darkness.